

Jenny  
Han

To  
all the  
boys  
I've  
loved  
before

Complete  
Collection



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From the author of *The Summer I Turned Pretty*

To all the boys I've loved before

Jenny Han



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To  
all the  
boys  
I've  
loved  
before

*Also by Jenny Han*

Shug

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It's Not Summer Without You

We'll Always Have Summer

*Cowritten with Siobhan Vivian*

Burn for Burn

Fire with Fire

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To  
all the  
boys  
I've  
loved  
before  
Jenny Han

SCHOLASTIC

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For my sister, Susan –

Han girls for ever

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I like to save things. Not important things like whales or people or the environment. Silly things. Porcelain bells, the kind you get at souvenir shops. Cookie cutters you'll never use, because who needs a cookie in the shape of a foot? Ribbons for my hair. Love letters. Of all the things I save, I guess you could say my love letters are my most prized possession.

I keep my letters in a teal hatbox my mom bought me from a vintage store downtown. They aren't love letters that someone else wrote for me; I don't have any of those. These are ones I've written. There's one for every boy I've ever loved – five in all.

When I write, I hold nothing back. I write like he'll never read it. Because he never will. Every secret thought, every careful observation, everything I've saved up inside me, I put it all in the letter. When I'm done, I seal it, I address it, and then I put it in my teal hatbox.

They're not love letters in the strictest sense of the word. My letters are for when I don't want to be in love any more. They're for goodbye. Because after I write my letter, I'm no longer consumed by my all-consuming love. I can eat my cereal and not wonder if he likes bananas over his Cheerios too; I can sing along to love songs and not be singing them to him. If love is like a possession, maybe my letters are like my exorcisms. My letters set me free. Or at least they're supposed to.

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Josh is Margot's boyfriend, but I guess you could say my whole family is a little in love with him. It's hard to say who most of all. Before he was Margot's boyfriend, he was just Josh. He was always there. I say always, but I guess that's not true. He moved next door five years ago but it feels like always.

My dad loves Josh because he's a boy and my dad is surrounded by girls. I mean it: all day long he is surrounded by females. My dad is an ob-gyn, and he also happens to be the father of three daughters, so it's like girls, girls, girls all day. He also likes Josh because Josh likes comics and he'll go fishing with him. My dad tried to take us fishing once, and I cried when my shoes got mud on them, and Margot cried when her book got wet, and Kitty cried because Kitty was still practically a baby.

Kitty loves Josh because he'll play cards with her and not get bored. Or at least pretend to not get bored. They make deals with each other – if I win this next hand, you have to make me a toasted crunchy-peanut-butter-sandwich, no crusts. That's Kitty. Inevitably there won't be crunchy peanut butter and Josh will say too bad, pick something else. But then Kitty will wear him down and he'll run out and buy some, because that's Josh.

If I had to say why Margot loves him, I think maybe I would say it's because we all do.

We are in the living room. Kitty is pasting pictures of dogs to a giant piece of cardboard. There's paper and scraps all around her. Humming to herself, she says, "When Daddy asks me what I want for Christmas, I am just going to say, 'Pick any one of these breeds and we'll be good'."

Margot and Josh are on the couch; I'm lying on the floor, watching TV. Josh popped a big bowl of popcorn, and I devote myself to it, handfuls and handfuls of it.

A commercial comes on for perfume: a girl is running around the streets of Paris in an orchid-coloured halter dress that is thin as tissue paper. What I wouldn't give to be that girl in that tissue-paper dress running around Paris in springtime! I sit up so suddenly I choke on a kernel of popcorn. Between coughs I say, "Margot, let's meet in Paris for my spring break!" I'm already



picturing myself twirling with a pistachio macaron in one hand and a raspberry one in the other.

Margot's eyes light up. "Do you think Daddy will let you?"

"Sure, it's culture. He'll have to let me." But it's true that I've never flown by myself before. And also I've never even left the country before. Would Margot meet me at the airport, or would I have to find my own way to the hostel?

Josh must see the sudden worry on my face because he says, "Don't worry. Your dad will definitely let you go if I'm with you."

I brighten. "Yeah! We can stay at hostels and just eat pastries and cheese for all our meals."

"We can go to Jim Morrison's grave!" Josh throws in.

"We can go to a *parfumerie* and get our personal scents done!" I cheer, and Josh snorts.

"Um, I'm pretty sure 'getting our scents done' at a *parfumerie* would cost the same as a week's stay at the hostel," he says. He nudges Margot. "Your sister suffers from delusions of grandeur."

"She is the fanciest of the three of us," Margot agrees.

"What about me?" Kitty whimpers.

"You?" I scoff. "You're the *least* fancy Song girl. I have to beg you to wash your feet at night, much less take a shower."

Kitty's face gets pinched and red. "I wasn't talking about that, you dodo bird. I was *talking* about Paris."

Airily, I wave her off. "You're too little to stay at a hostel."

She crawls over to Margot and climbs in her lap, even though she's nine and nine is too big to sit in people's laps. "Margot, you'll let me go, won't you?"

"Maybe it could be a family vacation," Margot says, kissing her cheek. "You and Lara Jean and Daddy could all come."

I frown. That's not at all the Paris trip I was imagining. Over Kitty's head Josh mouths to me, *We'll talk later*, and I give him a discreet thumbs-up.

It's later that night; Josh is long gone. Kitty and our dad are asleep. We are in the kitchen. Margot is at the table on her computer; I am sitting next to her, rolling cookie dough into balls and dropping them in cinnamon and sugar. Snickerdoodles to get back in Kitty's good graces. Earlier, when I went in to say good night, Kitty rolled over and wouldn't speak to me because she's still convinced I'm going to try to cut her out of the Paris trip. My plan is to put the snickerdoodles on a plate right next to her pillow so she wakes up to the smell of fresh-baked cookies.

Margot's being extra quiet, and then, out of nowhere, she looks up from her computer and says, "I broke up with Josh tonight. After dinner."

My cookie-dough ball falls out of my fingers and into the sugar bowl.

"I mean, it was time," she says. Her eyes aren't red-rimmed; she hasn't been crying, I don't think. Her voice is calm and even. Anyone looking at her would think she was fine. Because Margot is always fine, even when she's not.

"I don't see why you had to break up," I say. "Just 'cause you're going to college doesn't mean you have to break up."

"Lara Jean, I'm going to Scotland, not UVA. Saint Andrews is nearly four thousand miles away." She pushes up her glasses. "What would be the point?"

I can't even believe she would say that. "The point is, it's Josh. Josh who loves you more than any boy has ever loved a girl!"

Margot rolls her eyes at this. She thinks I'm being dramatic, but I'm not. It's true – that's how much Josh loves Margot. He would never so much as look at another girl.

Suddenly she says, "Do you know what Mommy told me once?"

"What?" For a moment I forget all about Josh. Because no matter what I am doing in life, if Margot and I are in the middle of an argument, if I am about to get hit by a car, I will always stop and listen to a story about Mommy. Any detail, any remembrance that Margot has, I want to have it too. I'm better off than Kitty, though. Kitty doesn't have one memory of Mommy that we haven't given her. We've told her so many stories so many times that they're hers now. "Remember that time..." she'll say. And then she'll tell the story like she was there and not just a little baby.

“She told me to try not to go to college with a boyfriend. She said she didn’t want me to be the girl crying on the phone with her boyfriend and saying no to things instead of yes.”

Scotland is Margot’s yes, I guess. Absently, I scoop up a mound of cookie dough and pop it in my mouth.

“You shouldn’t eat raw cookie dough,” Margot says.

I ignore her. “Josh would never hold you back from anything. He’s not like that. Remember how when you decided to run for student-body president, he was your campaign manager? He’s your biggest fan!”

At this, the corners of Margot’s mouth turn down, and I get up and fling my arms around her neck. She leans her head back and smiles up at me. “I’m OK,” she says, but she isn’t, I know she isn’t.

“It’s not too late, you know. You can go over there right now and tell him you changed your mind.”

Margot shakes her head. “It’s done, Lara Jean.” I release her and she closes her laptop. “When will the first batch be ready? I’m hungry.”

I look at the magnetic egg timer on the fridge. “Four more minutes.” I sit back down and say, “I don’t care what you say, Margot. You guys aren’t done. You love him too much.”

She shakes her head. “Lara Jean,” she begins, in her patient Margot voice, like I am a child and she is a wise old woman of forty-two.

I wave a spoonful of cookie dough under Margot’s nose, and she hesitates and then opens her mouth. I feed it to her like a baby. “Wait and see, you and Josh will be back together in a day, maybe two.” But even as I’m saying it, I know it’s not true. Margot’s not the kind of girl to break up and get back together on a whim; once she’s decided something, that’s it. There’s no waffling, no regrets. It’s like she said: when she’s done, she’s just done.

I wish (and this is a thought I’ve had many, many times, too many times to count) I was more like Margot. Because sometimes it feels like I’ll never be done.

Later, after I’ve washed the dishes and plated the cookies and set them on Kitty’s pillow, I go to my room. I don’t turn the light on. I go to my window. Josh’s light is still on.

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The next morning, Margot is making coffee and I am pouring cereal in bowls, and I say the thing I've been thinking all morning. "Just so you know, Daddy and Kitty are going to be really upset." When Kitty and I were brushing our teeth just now, I was tempted to go ahead and spill the beans, but Kitty was still mad at me from yesterday, so I kept quiet. She didn't even acknowledge my cookies, though I know she ate them because all that was left on the plate were crumbs.

Margot lets out a heavy sigh. "So I'm supposed to stay with Josh because of you and Daddy and Kitty?"

"No, I'm just telling you."

"It's not like he would come over here that much once I was gone anyway."

I frown. This didn't occur to me, that Josh would stop coming over because Margot was gone. He was coming over long before they were ever a couple, so I don't see why he should stop. "He might," I say. "He really loves Kitty."

She pushes the start button on the coffee machine. I'm watching her super carefully because Margot's always been the one to make the coffee and I never have, and now that she's leaving (only six more days), I'd better know how. With her back to me she says, "Maybe I won't even mention it to them."

"Um, I think they'll figure it out when he's not at the airport, Gogo." Gogo is my nickname for Margot. As in go-go boots. "How many cups of water did you put in there? And how many spoons of coffee beans?"

"I'll write it all down for you," Margot assures me. "In the notebook."

We keep a house notebook by the fridge. Margot's idea, of course. It has all the important numbers and Daddy's schedule and Kitty's carpool. "Make sure you put in the number for the new dry cleaners," I say.

"Already done." Margot slices a banana for her cereal: each slice is perfectly thin. "And also, Josh wouldn't have come to the airport with us anyway. You know how I feel about sad goodbyes." Margot makes a face, like *Ugh, emotions*.

I do know.

When Margot decided to go to college in Scotland, it felt like a betrayal. Even though I knew it was coming, because of course she was going to go to college somewhere far away. And of course she was going to go to college in Scotland and study anthropology, because she is Margot, the girl with the maps and the travel books and the plans. Of course she would leave us one day.

I'm still mad at her, just a little. Just a teeny-tiny bit. Obviously I know it's not her fault. But she's going so far away, and we always said we'd be the Song girls for ever. Margot first, me in the middle, and my sister Kitty last. On her birth certificate she is Katherine; to us she is Kitty. Occasionally we call her Kitten, because that's what I called her when she was born: she looked like a scrawny, hairless kitten.

We are the three Song girls. There used to be four. My mom, Eve Song. Evie to my dad, Mommy to us, Eve to everyone else. Song is, was, my mom's last name. Our last name is Covey – Covey like lovey, not like cove. But the reason we are the Song girls and not the Covey girls is my mom used to say that she was a Song girl for life, and Margot said then we should be too. We all have Song for our middle name, and we look more Song than Covey anyway, more Korean than white. At least Margot and I do; Kitty looks most like Daddy: her hair is light brown like his. People say I look the most like Mommy, but I think Margot does, with her high cheekbones and dark eyes. It's been almost six years now, and sometimes it feels like just yesterday she was here, and sometimes it feels like she never was, only in dreams.

She'd mopped the floors that morning; they were shiny and everything smelled like lemons and clean house. The phone was ringing in the kitchen, she came running in to answer it, and she slipped. She hit her head on the floor, and she was unconscious, but then she woke up and she was fine. That was her lucid interval. That's what they call it. A little while later she said she had a headache. She went to lie down on the couch, and then she didn't wake up.

Margot was the one who found her. She was twelve. She took care of everything: she called 911; she called Daddy; she told me to watch over Kitty, who was only three. I turned on the TV for Kitty in the playroom and I sat

with her. That's all I did. I don't know what I would have done if Margot hadn't been there. Even though Margot is only two years older than me, I look up to her more than anybody.

When other adults find out that my dad is a single father of three girls, they shake their heads in admiration, like, *How does he do it? How does he ever manage that all by himself?* The answer is Margot. She's been an organizer from the start, everything labelled and scheduled and arranged in neat, even rows.

Margot is a good girl, and I guess Kitty and I have followed her lead. I've never cheated or gotten drunk or smoked a cigarette or even had a boyfriend. We tease Daddy and say how lucky he is that we're all so good, but the truth is, we're the lucky ones. He's a really good dad. And he tries hard. He doesn't always understand us, but he tries, and that's the important thing. We three Song girls have an unspoken pact: to make life as easy as possible for Daddy. But then again, maybe it's not so unspoken, because how many times have I heard Margot say, "Shh, be quiet, Daddy's taking a nap before he has to go back to the hospital," or "Don't bother Daddy with that; do it yourself"?

I've asked Margot what she thinks it would have been like if Mommy hadn't died. Like would we spend more time with our Korean side of the family and not just on Thanksgiving and New Year's Day? Or—

Margot doesn't see the point in wondering. This is our life; there's no use in asking what if. No one could ever give you the answers. I try, I really do, but it's hard for me to accept this way of thinking. I'm always wondering about the what-ifs, about the road not taken.

Daddy and Kitty come downstairs at the same time. Margot pours Daddy a cup of coffee, black, and I pour milk in Kitty's cereal bowl. I push it in front of her, and she turns her head away from me and gets a yogurt out of the fridge. She takes it into the living room to eat in front of the TV. So she's still mad.

"I'm going to go to Costco later today, so you girls make a list for whatever you need," Daddy asks, taking a big sip of coffee. "I think I'll pick up some New York strips for dinner. We can grill out. Should I get one for Josh too?"

My head whips in Margot's direction. She opens her mouth and closes it. Then she says, "No, just get enough for the four of us, Daddy."

I give her a reproving look, and she ignores me. I've never known Margot to chicken out before, but I suppose in matters of the heart, there's no predicting how a person will or won't behave.

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So now it's the last days of summer and our last days with Margot. Maybe it's not altogether such a bad thing that she broke up with Josh; this way we have more time with just us sisters. I'm sure she must have thought of that. I'm sure it was part of the plan.

We're driving out of our neighbourhood when we see Josh run past. He joined track last year, so now he's always running. Kitty yells his name, but the windows are up, and it's no use anyway – he pretends not to hear. “Turn around,” Kitty urges Margot. “Maybe he wants to come with us.”

“This is a Song-girls-only day,” I tell her.

We spend the rest of the morning at Target, picking up last-minute things like Honey Nut Chex mix for the flight and deodorant and hair ties. We let Kitty push the cart so she can do that thing where she gets a running start and then rides the cart like she's pushing a chariot. Margot only lets her do it a couple of times before she makes her stop, though, so as not to annoy other customers.

Next we go back home and make chicken salad with green grapes for lunch and then it's nearly time for Kitty's swim meet. We pack a picnic dinner of ham-and-cheese sandwiches and fruit salad and bring Margot's laptop to watch movies on, because swim meets can go long into the night. We make a sign too, that says *Go Kitty Go!* I draw a dog on it. Daddy ends up missing the swim meet because he is delivering a baby, and as far as excuses go, it's a pretty good one. (It was a girl, and they named her Patricia Rose after her two grandmothers. Daddy always finds out the first and middle name for me. It's the first thing I ask when he gets home from a delivery.)

Kitty's so excited about winning two first-place ribbons and one second place that she forgets to ask where Josh is until we're in the car driving back home. She's in the backseat and she's got her towel wrapped around her head like a turban and her ribbons dangling from her ears like earrings. She leans forward and says, “Hey! Why didn't Josh come to my meet?”

I can see Margot hesitate, so I answer before she can. Maybe the only thing I'm better at than Margot is lying. “He had to work at the bookstore tonight.

He really wanted to make it though.” Margot reaches across the console and gives my hand a grateful squeeze.

Sticking out her lower lip, Kitty says, “That was the last regular meet! He promised he’d come watch me swim.”

“It was a last-minute thing,” I say. “He couldn’t get out of working the shift because one of his co-workers had an emergency.”

Kitty nods begrudgingly. Little as she is, she understands emergency shifts.

“Let’s get frozen custards,” Margot says suddenly.

Kitty lights up, and Josh and his imaginary emergency shift is forgotten. “Yeah! I want a waffle cone! Can I get a waffle cone with two scoops? I want mint chip and peanut brittle. No, rainbow sherbet and double fudge. No, wait —”

I twist around in my seat. “You can’t finish two scoops and a waffle cone,” I tell her. “Maybe you could finish two scoops in a cup, but not in a cone.”

“Yes, I can. Tonight I can. I’m *starving*.”

“Fine, but you better finish the whole thing.” I shake my finger at her and say it like a threat, which makes her roll her eyes and giggle. As for me, I’ll get what I always get – the cherry chocolate-chunk custard in a sugar cone.

Margot pulls into the drive-thru, and as we wait our turn, I say, “I bet they don’t have frozen custard in Scotland.”

“Probably not,” she says.

“You won’t have another one of these until Thanksgiving,” I say.

Margot looks straight ahead. “Christmas,” she says, correcting me. “Thanksgiving’s too short to fly all that way, remember?”

“Thanksgiving’s gonna suck.” Kitty pouts.

I’m silent. We’ve never had a Thanksgiving without Margot. She always does the turkey and the broccoli casserole and the creamed onions. I do the pies (pumpkin and pecan) and the mashed potatoes. Kitty is the taste tester and the table setter. I don’t know how to roast a turkey. And both of our grandmothers will be there, and Nana, Daddy’s mother, likes Margot best of all of us. She says Kitty drains her and I’m too dreamy-eyed.

All of a sudden I feel panicky and it's hard to breathe and I couldn't care less about cherry chocolate-chunk custard. I can't picture Thanksgiving without Margot. I can't even picture next Monday without her. I know most sisters don't get along, but I'm closer to Margot than I am to anybody in the world. How can we be the Song girls without Margot?

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My oldest friend Chris smokes, she hooks up with boys she doesn't know hardly at all, and she's been suspended twice. One time she had to go before the court for truancy. I never knew what truancy was before I met Chris. FYI, it's when you skip so much school you're in trouble with the law.

I'm pretty sure that if Chris and I met each other now, we wouldn't be friends. We're as different as different can be. But it wasn't always this way. In sixth grade Chris liked stationery and sleepovers and staying up all night watching John Hughes movies, just like me. But by eighth grade she was sneaking out after my dad fell asleep to meet boys she met at the mall. They'd drop her back off before it got light outside. I'd stay up until she came back, terrified she wouldn't make it home before my dad woke up. She always made it back in time though.

Chris isn't the kind of friend you call every night or have lunch with every day. She is like a street cat, she comes and goes as she pleases. She can't be tied down to a place or a person. Sometimes I won't see Chris for days and then in the middle of the night there will be a knock at my bedroom window and it'll be Chris, crouched in the magnolia tree. I keep my window unlocked for her in case. Chris and Margot can't stand each other. Chris thinks Margot is uptight, and Margot thinks Chris is bipolar. She thinks Chris uses me; Chris thinks Margot controls me. I think maybe they're both a little bit right. But the important thing, the real thing, is Chris and I understand each other, which I think counts for a lot more than people realize.

Chris calls me on the way over to our house; she says her mom's being a beotch and she's coming over for a couple hours and do we have any food?

Chris and I are sharing a bowl of leftover gnocchi in the living room when Margot comes home from dropping Kitty off at her swim team's end-of-season barbecue. "Oh, hey," she says. Then she spots Chris's glass of Diet Coke on the coffee table, sans coaster. "Can you please use a coaster?"

As soon as Margot's up the stairs, Chris says, "Gawd! Why is your sister such a beotch?"

I slide a coaster under her glass. “You think everyone’s a beotch today.”

“That’s because everyone is.” Chris rolls her eyes towards the ceiling. Loudly, she says, “She needs to pull that stick out of her ass.”

From her room Margot yells, “I heard that!”

“I meant for you to!” Chris yells back, scraping up the last piece of gnocchi for herself.

I sigh. “She’s leaving so soon.”

Snickering, Chris says, “So is Joshy, like, going to light a candle for her every night until she comes back home?”

I hesitate. While I’m not sure if it’s still supposed to be a secret, I *am* sure that Margot wouldn’t want Chris knowing any of her personal business. All I say is, “I’m not sure.”

“Wait a minute. Did she dump him?” Chris demands.

Reluctantly I nod. “Don’t say anything to her though,” I warn. “She’s still really sad about it.”

“Margot? Sad?” Chris picks at her nails. “Margot doesn’t have normal human emotions like the rest of us.”

“You just don’t know her,” I say. “Besides, we can’t all be like you.”

She grins a toothy grin. She has sharp incisors, which make her look always a little bit hungry. “True.”

Chris is pure emotion. She screams at the drop of a hat. She says sometimes you have to scream out emotions; if you don’t, they’ll fester. The other day she screamed at a lady at the grocery store for accidentally stepping on her toes. I don’t think she’s in any danger of her emotions festering.

“I just can’t believe that in a few days she’ll be gone,” I say, feeling sniffly all of a sudden.

“She’s not *dying*, Lara Jean. There’s nothing to get all boo-hoo about.” Chris pulls at a loose string on her red shorts. They’re so short that when she’s sitting, you can see her underwear. Which are red to match her shorts. “In fact, I think this is good for you. It’s about time you did your own thing and stopped just listening to whatever Queen Margot says. This is your junior year, beotch. This is when it’s supposed to get good. French some guys, live a little, you know?”

“I live plenty,” I say.

“Yeah, at the nursing home.” Chris snickers and I glare at her.

Margot started volunteering at the Belleview Retirement Community when she got her driver’s licence. It was her job to help host cocktail hour for the residents. I’d help sometimes. We’d set out peanuts and pour drinks and sometimes Margot would play the piano, but usually Stormy hogged that. Stormy is the Belleview diva. She rules the roost. I like listening to her stories. And Miss Mary, she might not be so good at conversation due to her dementia, but she taught me how to knit.

They have a new volunteer there now, but I know that at Belleview it really is the more the merrier, because most of the residents get so few visitors. I should go back soon; I miss going there. And I for sure don’t appreciate Chris making fun of it.

“Those people at Belleview have lived more life than everyone we know combined,” I tell her. “There’s this one lady, Stormy, she was a USO girl! She used to get a hundred letters a day from soldiers who were in love with her. And there was this one veteran who lost his leg – he sent her a diamond ring!”

Chris looks interested all of a sudden. “Did she keep it?”

“She did,” I admit. I think it was wrong of her to keep the ring since she had no intention of marrying him, but she showed it to me, and it was beautiful. It was a pink diamond, very rare. I bet it’s worth so much money now.

“I guess Stormy sounds kind of like a badass,” Chris says begrudgingly.

“Maybe you could come with me to Belleview sometime,” I suggest. “We could go to their cocktail hour. Mr Perelli loves to dance with new girls. He’ll teach you how to foxtrot.”

Chris makes a horrible face like I suggested we go hang out at the town dump. “No, thanks. How about I take *you* dancing?” She nudges her chin towards upstairs. “Now that your sister’s leaving, we can have some real fun. You know I always have fun.”

It’s true, Chris does always have fun. Sometimes a little too much fun, but fun nonetheless.

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The night before Margot leaves, all three of us are in her room helping pack up the last little things. Kitty is organizing Margot's bath stuff, packing it nice and neat in the clear shower caddy. Margot is trying to decide which coat to bring.

"Should I bring my peacoat and my puffy coat or just my peacoat?" she asks me.

"Just the peacoat," I say. "You can dress that up or down." I'm lying on her bed directing the packing process. "Kitty, make sure the lotion cap is on tight."

"It's brand-new – course it's on tight!" Kitty growls, but she double-checks.

"It gets cold in Scotland sooner than it does here," Margot said, folding the coat and setting it on top of her suitcase. "I think I'll just bring both."

"I don't know why you asked if you already knew what you were going to do," I say. "Also, I thought you said you were coming home for Christmas. You're still coming home for Christmas, right?"

"Yes, if you'll stop being a brat," Margot says.

Honestly, Margot isn't even packing that much. She doesn't need a lot. If it was me, I'd have packed up my whole room, but not Margot. Her room looks the same, almost.

Margot sits down next to me, and Kitty climbs up and sits at the foot of the bed. "Everything's changing," I say, sighing.

Margot makes a face and puts her arm around me. "Nothing's changing, not really. We're the Song girls for ever, remember?"

Our father stands in the doorway. He knocks, even though the door is open and we can clearly see it is him. "I'm going to start packing up the car now," he announces. We watch from the bed as he lugs one of the suitcases downstairs, and then he comes up for the other one. Drily he says, "Oh no, don't get up. Don't trouble yourselves."

"Don't worry, we won't," we sing out.



For the past week our father has been in spring-cleaning mode, even though it isn't spring. He's getting rid of everything – the bread machine we never used, CDs, old blankets, our mother's old typewriter. It's all going to Goodwill. A psychiatrist or someone could probably connect it to Margot's leaving for college, but I can't explain the exact significance of it. Whatever it is, it's annoying. I had to shoo him away from my glass-unicorn collection twice.

I lay down my head in Margot's lap. "So you really are coming home for Christmas, right?"

"Right."

"I wish I could come with you." Kitty pouts. "You're nicer than Lara Jean."

I give her a pinch.

"See?" she crows.

"Lara Jean will be nice," Margot says, "as long as you behave. And you both have to take care of Daddy. Make sure he doesn't work too many Saturdays. Make sure he takes the car in for inspection next month. And make sure you buy coffee filters – you're always forgetting to buy coffee filters."

"Yes, drill sergeant," Kitty and I chorus. I search Margot's face for sadness or fear or worry, for some sign that she is scared to go so far away, that she will miss us as much as we will miss her. I don't see it though.

The three of us sleep in Margot's room that night.

Kitty falls asleep first, as always. I lie in the dark beside her with my eyes open. I can't sleep. The thought that tomorrow night Margot won't be in this room – it makes me so sad I can hardly bear it. I hate change more than almost anything.

In the dark next to me Margot asks, "Lara Jean ... do you think you've ever been in love before? Real love?"

She catches me off guard; I don't have an answer ready for her. I'm trying to think of one, but she's already talking again.

Wistfully, she says, "I wish I'd been in love more than once. I think you should fall in love at least twice in high school." Then she lets out a little sigh

and falls asleep. Margot falls asleep like that – one dreamy sigh and she's off to never-never land, just like that.

I wake up in the middle of the night and Margot's not there. Kitty's curled up on her side next to me, but no Margot. It's pitch dark; only the moonlight filters through the curtains. I crawl out of bed and move to the window. My breath catches. There they are: Josh and Margot standing in the driveway. Margot's face is turned away from him, towards the moon. Josh is crying. They aren't touching. There's enough space between them for me to know that Margot hasn't changed her mind.

I drop the curtain and find my way back to the bed, where Kitty has rolled farther into the centre. I push her back a few inches so there will be room for Margot. I wish I hadn't seen that. It was too personal. Too real. It was supposed to be just for them. If there was a way for me to unsee it, I would.

I turn on my side and close my eyes. What must it be like, to have a boy like you so much he cries for you? And not just any boy. Josh. Our Josh.

To answer her question: yes, I think I have been in real love. Just once though. With Josh. Our Josh.

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This is how Margot and Josh got together. In a way I heard about it from Josh first.

It was two years ago. We were sitting in the library during our free. I was doing math homework; Josh was helping because he's good at math. We had our heads bent over my page, so close I could smell the soap he'd used that morning. Irish Spring.

And then he said, "I need your advice on something. I like someone."

For a split second I thought it was me. I thought he was going to say me. I hoped. It was the start of the school year. We'd hung out nearly every day that August, sometimes with Margot but mostly just by ourselves, because Margot had her internship at the Montpelier plantation three days a week. We swam a lot. I had a great tan from all the swimming. So for that split second I thought he was going to say my name.

But then I saw the way he blushed, the way he looked off into space, and I knew it wasn't for me.

Mentally, I ran through the list of girls it could be. It was a short list. Josh didn't hang out with a ton of girls; he had his best friend Jersey Mike, who had moved from New Jersey in middle school, and his other best friend, Ben, and that was it.

It could have been Ashley, a junior on the volleyball team. He'd once pointed her out as the cutest of all the junior girls. In Josh's defence, I'd made him do it: I asked him who was the prettiest girl in each grade. For prettiest freshman, my grade, he said Genevieve. Not that I was surprised, but it still gave me a little pinch in my heart.

It could have been Jodie, the college girl from the bookstore. Josh often talked about how smart Jodie was, how she was so cultured because she'd studied abroad in India and was now Buddhist. Ha! I was the one who was half-Korean; I was the one who'd taught Josh how to eat with chopsticks. He'd had kimchi for the first time at *my* house.

I was about to ask him who when the librarian came over to shush us, and then we went back to doing work and Josh didn't bring it up again and I

didn't ask. Honestly, I didn't want to know. It wasn't me, and that was all I cared about.

I didn't think for one second that the girl he liked was Margot. Not that I didn't see her as a girl who could be liked. She'd been asked out before, by a certain type of guy. Smart guys who would partner up with her in chemistry and run against her for student government. In retrospect, it wasn't so surprising that Josh would like Margot, since he's that kind of guy too.

If someone were to ask me what Josh looks like, I would say he's just ordinary. He looks like the kind of guy you'd expect would be good at computers, the kind of guy who calls comic books graphic novels. Brown hair. Not a special brown, just regular brown. Green eyes that go muddy in the centre. He's on the skinny side, but he's strong. I know because I sprained my ankle once by the old baseball field and he piggybacked me all the way home. He has freckles, which make him look younger than his age. And a dimple on his left cheek. I've always liked that dimple. He has such a serious face otherwise.

What was surprising, what was shocking, was that Margot would like him back. Not because of who Josh was, but because of who Margot was. I'd never heard her talk about liking a boy before, not even once. I was the flighty one, the flibbertigibbet, as my white grandma would say. Not Margot. Margot was above all that. She existed on some higher plane where those things – boys, make-up, clothes – didn't really matter.

The way it happened was sudden. Margot came home from school late that day in October; her cheeks were pink from the cold mountainy air and she had her hair in a braid and a scarf around her neck. She'd been working on a project at school. It was dinnertime, and I'd cooked chicken parmesan with thin spaghetti in watery tomato sauce.

She came into the kitchen and announced, "I have something to tell you." Her eyes were very bright; I remember she was unspooling the scarf from around her neck.

Kitty was doing her homework at the kitchen table, Daddy was on his way home, and I was stirring the watery sauce. "What?" Kitty and I asked.

"Josh likes me." Margot gave a pleased kind of shrug; her shoulders nearly went up to her ears.

I went very still. Then I dropped my wooden spoon into the sauce. “*Josh Josh? Our Josh?*” I couldn’t even look at her. I was afraid that she would see.

“Yes. He waited for me after school today so he could tell me. He said—” Margot grinned ruefully. “He said I’m his dream girl. Can you believe that?”

“Wow,” I said, and I tried to communicate happiness in that word, but I don’t know if it came out that way. All I was feeling was despair. And envy. Envy so thick and so black I felt like I was choking on it. So I tried again, this time with a smile. “Wow, Margot.”

“Wow,” Kitty echoed. “So are you boyfriend and girlfriend now?”

I held my breath, waiting for her to answer.

Margot took a pinch of parmesan between her fingers and dropped it in her mouth. “Yeah, I think so.” And then she smiled, and her eyes went all soft and liquid. I understood then that she liked him too. So much.

That night I wrote my letter to Josh.

*Dear Josh...*

I cried a lot. Just like that, it was over. It was over before I even had a chance. The important thing wasn’t that Josh had chosen Margot. It was that Margot had chosen him.

So that was that. I cried my eyes out; I wrote my letter; I put the whole thing to rest. I haven’t thought of him that way since. He and Margot are meant to be. They’re MFEO. Made for each other.

I’m still awake when Margot comes back to bed, but I quickly shut my eyes and pretend to be asleep. Kitty’s cuddled up next to me.

I hear a snuffly sound and I peek out of one eye to look at Margot. Her back is to us; her shoulders are shaking. She’s crying.

Margot never cries.

Now that I’ve seen Margot cry over him, I believe it more than ever – they’re not over.

The next day, we drive Margot to the airport. Outside, we load up her suitcases on a luggage carrier – Kitty tries to get on top and dance, but our father pulls her down right away. Margot insists on going in by herself, just like she said she would.

“Margot, at least let me get your bags checked,” Daddy says, trying to manoeuvre the luggage carrier around her. “I want to see you go through security.”

“I’ll be fine,” she repeats. “I’ve flown by myself before. I know how to check in a bag.” She stretches up on her toes and puts her arms around our dad’s shoulders. “I’ll call as soon as I get there, I promise.”

“Call every day,” I whisper. The lump in my throat is getting bigger, and a few tears leak out of my eyes. I’d hoped I wouldn’t cry, because I knew Margot wouldn’t, and it’s lonely to cry alone, but I can’t help it.

“Don’t you dare forget us,” Kitty warns.

That makes Margot smile. “I could never.” She hugs us each one more time. She saves me for last, the way I knew she would. “Take good care of Daddy and Kitty. You’re in charge now.” I don’t want to let go, so I hold on tighter; I’m still waiting and hoping for some sign, some indication that she will miss us as much as we’ll miss her. And then she laughs and I release her.

“Bye, Gogo,” I say, wiping my eyes with a corner of my shirt.

We all watch as she pushes the luggage carrier over to the check-in counter. I’m crying hard, wiping my tears with the back of my arm. Daddy puts one arm around me and one around Kitty. “We’ll wait until she’s in line for security,” he says.

When she’s done checking in, she turns back and looks at us through the glass doors. She lifts one hand and waves, and then she heads for the security line. We watch her go, thinking she might turn around one more time, but she doesn’t. She already seems so far away from us. Straight-A Margot, ever capable. When it’s my time to leave, I doubt I’ll be as strong as Margot. But, honestly, who is?

I cry all the way home. Kitty tells me I'm a bigger baby than she is, but then from the backseat she grabs my hand and squeezes it, and I know she's sad too.

Even though Margot isn't a loud person, it feels quiet at home. Empty, somehow. What will it be like when I'm gone in two years? What will Daddy and Kitty do then? I hate the thought of the two of them coming home to an empty, dark house with no me and no Margot. Maybe I won't go away far; maybe I'll even live at home, at least for the first semester. I think that would be the right thing to do.

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Later that afternoon Chris calls and tells me to meet her at the mall; she wants my opinion on a leather jacket, and to get the full effect I have to see it in person. I'm proud she's asking for my sartorial advice, and it would be good to get out of the house and not be sad any more, but I'm nervous about driving to the mall alone. I (or anyone, really) would consider myself a skittish driver.

I ask her if she'll just send me a picture instead, but Chris knows me too well. She says, "Nuh-uh. You get your ass down here, Lara Jean. You'll never get better at driving if you don't just suck it up and do it."

So that's what I'm doing: I'm driving Margot's car to the mall. I mean, I have my licence and everything; I'm just not very confident. My dad has taken me for lessons numerous times, Margot too, and I'm basically fine with them in the car, but I get nervous when I drive alone. It's the changing-lanes part that scares me. I don't like taking my eyes away from what's happening right in front of me, not for a second. Also I don't like going too fast.

But the worst thing is I have a tendency of getting lost. The only places I can get to with absolute certainty are school and the grocery store. I've never had to know how to get to the mall, because Margot always drove us there. But now I have to do better, because I'm responsible for driving Kitty around. Though truthfully, Kitty is better with directions than I am; she knows how to get to loads of places. But I don't want to have to hear her tell me how to get somewhere. I want to feel like the big sister; I want her to relax in the passenger seat, safe in the knowledge that Lara Jean will get her where she needs to go, just like I did with Margot.

Sure, I could just use a GPS, but I would feel silly putting in directions to go to the mall when I've been there a million times. It should come to me intuitively, easy, where I don't even have to think about it. Instead I worry over every turn, second-guess every highway sign – is it north or is it south, do I turn right here or is it the next one? I've never had to pay attention.

But today, so far so good. I'm listening to the radio, bopping along, even driving with just one hand on the wheel. I do this to feign confidence, because the more I fake it, the more it's supposed to feel true.



Everything is going so well that I take the shortcut way instead of the highway way. I cut through the side neighbourhood, and even as I'm doing it, I'm wondering if this was such a great idea. After a couple of minutes things aren't looking so familiar, and I realize I should have taken a left instead of a right. I push down the panic that's rising in my chest and I try to backtrack.

*You can do it, you can do it.*

There's a four-way stop sign. I don't see anyone, so I zip ahead. I don't even see the car on my right; I feel it before I see it.

I scream my head off. I taste copper in my mouth. Am I bleeding? Did I bite my tongue off? I touch it and it's still there. My heart is racing; my whole body feels wet and clammy. I try to take deep breaths, but I can't seem to get air.

My legs shake as I get out of the car. The other guy is already out, inspecting his car with his arms crossed. He's old, older than my dad, and he has grey hair, and he's wearing shorts with red lobsters on them. His car is fine; mine has a huge dent in the side. "Didn't you see the stop sign?" he demands. "Were you texting on your phone?"

I shake my head; my throat is closing up. I just don't want to cry. As long as I don't cry ...

He seems to sense this. The irritated furrow of his brow is loosening. "Well, my car looks fine," he says reluctantly. "Are you all right?"

I nod again. "I'm so sorry," I say.

"Kids need to be more careful," the man says, as if I haven't spoken.

The lump in my throat is getting bigger. "I'm very, very sorry, sir."

He makes a grunty sound. "You should call someone to come get you," the man says. "Do you want me to wait?"

"No, thank you." What if he's a serial killer or a child molester? I don't want to be alone with a strange man.

The man drives off.

As soon as he's gone, it occurs to me that maybe I should have called the police while he was still here. Aren't you always supposed to call the police when you're in a car accident, no matter what? I'm pretty sure they told us that in driver's ed. So that's another mistake I made.

I sit down on the kerb and stare at Margot's car. I've only had it for two hours and I've already wrecked it. I rest my head in my lap and sit in a tight bundle. My neck is starting to ache. This is when the tears start. My dad is not going to be happy. Margot is not going to be happy. They'll both probably agree that I have no business driving around town unsupervised, and maybe they're right. Driving a car is a lot of responsibility. Maybe I'm not ready for it yet. Maybe I'll never be ready. Maybe even when I'm old, my sisters or my dad will have to drive me around, because that's how useless I am.

I pull out my phone and call Josh. When he answers, I say, "Josh, can you do me a f-f-favour?" and my voice comes out so wobbly I'm embarrassed.

Which of course he hears, because he's Josh. He comes to attention immediately and says, "What's wrong?"

"I just got into a car accident. I don't even know where I am. Can you come get me?" *Wobble wobble.*

"Are you hurt?" he demands.

"No, I'm fine. I'm just—" If I say another word, I will cry.

"What street signs do you see? What stores?"

I crane my neck to look. "Falstone," I say. I look for the closet mailbox. "I'm at 8109 Falstone Road."

"I'm on my way. Do you want me to stay on the phone with you?"

"No, that's OK." I hang up and start to cry.

I don't know how long I've been sitting there crying when another car rolls up in front of me. I look up, and it's Peter Kavinsky's black Audi with the tinted windows. One of them rolls down. "Lara Jean? Are you OK?"

I nod my head yes and make a motion like he should just go. He rolls the window back up, and I think he's really going to drive off, but then he pulls over to the side and parks. He climbs out and starts inspecting my car. "You really messed it up," he says. "Did you get the other guy's insurance info?"

"No, his car was fine." Furtively, I wipe my cheeks with my arm. "It was my fault."

"Do you have Triple A?"

I nod.

“So you called them already?”

“No. But someone’s coming.”

Peter sits down next to me. “How long have you been sitting here crying by yourself?”

I turn my head and wipe my face again. “I’m not crying.”

Peter Kavinsky and I used to be friends, back before he was Kavinsky, when he was Peter K. There was a whole gang of us in middle school. The boys were Peter Kavinsky and John Ambrose McClaren and Trevor Pike. The girls were Genevieve and me and Allie Feldman who lived down the block, and sometimes Chris. Growing up, Genevieve lived two streets away from me. It’s funny how much of childhood is about proximity. Like who your best friend is is directly correlated to how close your houses are; who you sit next to in music is all about how close your names are in the alphabet. Such a game of chance. In eighth grade Genevieve moved to a different neighbourhood, and we stayed friends a little while longer. She’d come back to the neighbourhood to hang out, but something was different. By high school Genevieve had eclipsed us. She was still friends with the boys, but the girls’ crew was over. Allie and I stayed friends until she moved last year, but there was always something just a little bit humiliating about it, like we were two leftover heels of bread and together we made a dry sandwich.

We’re not friends any more. Me and Genevieve or me and Peter. Which is why it’s so weird to be sitting next to him on somebody’s kerb like no time has passed.

His phone buzzes and he takes it out of his pocket. “I’ve gotta go.”

I snifle. “Where are you headed?”

“To Gen’s.”

“You’d better get going then,” I say. “Genevieve will be mad if you’re late.”

Peter makes a *ppft* sound, but he sure does get up fast. I wonder what it’s like to have that much power over a boy. I don’t think I’d want it; it’s a lot of responsibility to hold a person’s heart in your hands. He’s getting into his car when, as an afterthought, he turns around and asks, “Want me to call Triple A for you?”

“No, that’s OK,” I say. “Thanks for stopping though. That was really nice of you.”

Peter grins. I remember that about Peter – how much he likes positive reinforcement. “Do you feel better now?”

I nod. I do, actually.

“Good,” he says.

He has the look of a Handsome Boy from a different time. He could be a dashing World War I soldier, handsome enough for a girl to wait years for him to come back from war, so handsome she could wait for ever. He could be wearing a red letterman’s jacket, driving around in a Corvette with the top down, one arm on the steering wheel, on his way to pick up his girl for the sock hop. Peter’s kind of wholesome good looks feel more like yesterday than today. There’s just something about him girls like.

He was my first kiss. It’s so strange to think of it now. It feels like for ever ago, but really it was just four years.

Josh shows up about a minute later, as I’m texting Chris that I’m not going to make it to the mall after all. I stand up. “It took you long enough!”

“You told me 8109. This is 8901!”

Confidently I say, “No, I definitely said 8901.”

“No, you definitely said 8109. And why weren’t you answering your phone?” Josh gets out of his car, and when he sees the side of my car, his jaw drops. “Holy crap. Did you call Triple A yet?”

“No. Can you?”

Josh does, and then we sit in his car in the air-conditioning while we wait. I almost get into the backseat, when I remember. Margot isn’t here any more. I’ve ridden in his car so many times, and I don’t think I’ve ever once sat up front in the passenger seat.

“Um ... you know Margot’s going to kill you, right?”

I whip my head around so fast my hair slaps me in the face. “Margot’s not going to find out, so don’t you say a word!”

“When would I even talk to her? We’re broken up, remember?”

I frown at him. “I hate when people do that – when you ask them to keep something a secret and instead of saying yes or no, they say, ‘Who would I tell?’”

“I didn’t say, ‘Who would I tell?’!”

“Just say yes or no and mean it. Don’t make it conditional.”

“I won’t tell Margot anything,” he says. “It’ll just be between you and me. I promise. All right?”

“All right,” I say. And then it gets quiet with neither of us saying anything; there’s just the sound of cool air coming out of the A/C vents.

My stomach feels queasy thinking about how I’m going to tell my dad. Maybe I should break the news to him with tears in my eyes so he feels sorry for me. Or I could say something like, I have good news and bad news. The good news is, I’m fine, not a scratch on me. The bad news is, the car is wrecked. Maybe “wrecked” isn’t the right word.

I’m mulling over the right word choice in my head when Josh says, “So just because Margot and I broke up, you’re not going to talk to me any more either?” Josh sounds jokingly bitter or bitterly joking, if there is such a combination.

I look over at him in surprise. “Don’t be dumb. Of course I’m still going to talk to you. Just not in public.” This is the role I play with him. The part of the pesky little sister. As if I am the same as Kitty. As if we aren’t only a year apart. Josh doesn’t crack a smile, he just looks glum, so I bump my forehead against his. “That was a joke, dummy!”

“Did she tell you she was going to do it? I mean, was it always her plan?” When I hesitate, he says, “Come on. I know she tells you everything.”

“Not really. Not this time anyway. Honestly, Josh. I didn’t know a thing about it. Promise.” I cross my heart.

Josh absorbs this. Chewing on his bottom lip he says, “Maybe she’ll change her mind. That’s possible, right?”

I don’t know if it’s more heartless for me to say yes or no, because he’ll be hurt either way. Because while I’m 99.99999 per cent sure that she will get back together with him, there’s that tiny chance she won’t, and I don’t want to get his hopes up. So I don’t say anything.

He swallows, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down. "No, you're right. When Margot makes up her mind, she doesn't go back on it."

*Please please please don't cry.*

I rest my head on his shoulder and say, "You never know, Joshy."

Josh stares straight ahead. A squirrel is darting up the big oak tree in the yard. Up and down and back up again. We both watch. "What time does she land?"

"Not for hours."

"Is ... is she coming home for Thanksgiving?"

"No. They don't get off for Thanksgiving. It's Scotland, Josh. They don't celebrate American holidays, hello!" I'm teasing again, but my heart's not in it.

"That's right," he says.

I say, "She'll be home for Christmas though," and we both sigh.

"Can I still hang out with you guys?" Josh asks me.

"Me and Kitty?"

"Your dad too."

"We're not going anywhere," I assure him.

Josh looks relieved. "Good. I'd hate to lose you too."

As soon as he says it, my heart does this pause, and I forget to breathe, and just for that one second I'm dizzy. And then, just as quickly as it came, the feeling, the strange flutter in my chest, is gone, and the tow truck arrives.

When we pull into my driveway, he says, "Do you want me to be there when you tell your dad?"

I brighten up and then I remember how Margot said I'm in charge now. I'm pretty sure taking responsibility for one's mistakes is part of being in charge.

Daddy isn't so mad after all. I go through my whole good news–bad news spiel and he just sighs and says, “As long as you're all right.”

The car needs a special part that has to be flown in from Indiana or Idaho, I can't remember which. In the meantime I'll have to share the car with Daddy and take the bus to school or ask Josh for rides, which was already my plan.

Margot calls later that night. Kitty and I are watching TV and I scream for Daddy to come quick. We sit on the couch and pass the phone around and take turns talking to her.

“Margot, guess what happened today!” Kitty shouts.

Frantically, I shake my head at her. *Don't tell her about the car*, I mouth. I give her warning eyes.

“Lara Jean got into ...” Kitty pauses tantalizingly. “A fight with Daddy. Yeah, she was mean to me and Daddy told her to be nice, so they had a fight.”

I grab the phone out of her hand. “We didn't have a fight, Gogo. Kitty's just being annoying.”

“What did you guys have for dinner? Did you cook the chicken I defrosted last night?” Margot asks. Her voice sounds so far away.

I push the volume up on the phone. “Yes, but never mind about that. Are you settled into your room? Is it big? What's your room-mate like?”

“She's nice. She's from London and she has a really fancy accent. Her name is Penelope St. George-Dixon.”

“Gosh, even her name sounds fancy,” I say. “What about your room?”

“The room is about the same as that dorm we saw at UVA; it's just older.”

“What time is it over there?”

“It's almost midnight. We're five hours ahead, remember?”

*We're* five hours ahead, like she's already considering Scotland her home, and she's only been gone a day, not even! “We miss you already,” I tell her.

“Miss you too.”

After dinner I text Chris to see if she wants to come over, but she doesn't text back. She's probably out with one of the guys she hooks up with. Which is fine. I should catch up on my scrapbooking.

I was hoping to be done with Margot's scrapbook before she left for college, but as anyone who's ever scrapbooked knows, Rome wasn't built in a day. You could spend a year or more working on one scrapbook.

I've got Motown girl-group music playing, and my supplies are laid out all around me in a semicircle. My heart hole punch, pages and pages of scrapbook paper, pictures I've cut out of magazines, glue gun, my tape dispenser with all my different coloured washi tapes. Souvenirs like the playbill from when we saw *Wicked* in New York, receipts, pictures. Ribbon, buttons, stickers, charms. A good scrapbook has texture. It's thick and chunky and doesn't close all the way.

I'm working on a Josh-and-Margot page. I don't care what Margot says. They're getting back together, I know it. And even if they aren't, not right away, it's not like Margot can just erase him from her history. He was such a big part of her senior year. And, like, her life. The only compromise I'm willing to make is, I was saving my heart washi tape for this page, but I can just do a regular plaid tape instead. But then I put the plaid tape up against the pictures and the colours don't look as good.

So I go ahead and use the heart tape. And then, swaying to the music, I use my heart template to cut out a picture of the two of them at prom. Margot's going to love this.

I'm carefully gluing a dried rose petal from Margot's corsage when my dad raps on the door. “What are you up to tonight?” he asks me.

“This,” I say, gluing another petal. “If I keep at it, it'll probably be done by Christmas.”

“Ah.” My dad doesn't move. He just hovers there in the doorway, watching me work. “Well, I'm going to watch that new Ken Burns documentary in a bit, if you want to join me.”

“Maybe,” I say, just to be nice. It'll be too much of a pain to bring all my supplies downstairs and get set up again. I'm in a good rhythm right now. “Why don't you get it started without me?”



“All righty. I’ll leave you to it then.” Daddy shuffles down the stairs.

It takes me most of the night, but I finish the Josh-and-Margot page, and it comes out really nice. Next is a sister page. For this one I use flowered paper for the background, and I glue in a picture of the three of us from a long time ago. Mommy took it. We’re standing in front of the oak tree in front of our house in our church clothes. We’re all wearing white dresses, and we have matching pink ribbons in our hair. The best thing about the picture is Margot and I are smiling sweetly and Kitty is picking her nose.

I smile to myself. Kitty’s going to pitch a fit when she sees this page. I can’t wait.

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Margot says that junior year is the most important year, the busiest year, a year so crucial that everything else in life hinges upon it. So I figure I should get in all the pleasure reading I can before school starts next week and junior year officially begins. I'm sitting on my front steps, reading a 1980s romantic British spy novel I got for seventy-five cents at the Friends of the Library sale.

I'm just getting to the good stuff (Cressida must seduce Nigel to gain access to the spy codes!) when Josh walks out of his house to get the mail. He sees me too; he lifts his hand like he's just going to wave and not come over, but then he does.

"Hey, nice onesie," he says as he makes his way across the driveway.

It's faded light blue with sunflowers and it ties around the neck. I got it from the vintage store, seventy-five per cent off. And it's not a onesie. "This is a *sunsuit*," I tell him, going back to my book. I try to subtly hide the cover with my hand. The last thing I need is Josh giving me a hard time for reading a trashy book when I'm just trying to enjoy a relaxing afternoon.

I can feel him looking at me, his arms crossed, waiting. I look up. "What?"

"Wanna see a movie tonight at the Bess? There's a Pixar movie playing. We can take Kitty."

"Sure, text me when you want to head over," I say, turning the page of my book. Nigel is unbuttoning Cressida's blouse and she's wondering when the sleeping pill she slipped in his Merlot will kick in, while simultaneously hoping it won't kick in too soon, because Nigel is actually quite a good kisser.

Josh reaches down and tries to get a closer look at my book. I slap his hand away, but not before he reads out loud, "Cressida's heart raced as Nigel moved his hand along her stockinged thigh." Josh cracks up. "What the heck are you reading?"

My cheeks are burning. "Oh, be quiet."

Chuckling, Josh backs away. "I'll leave you to Cressida and Noel then."

To his back, I call out, "For your information, it's *Nigel!*"

Kitty's over the moon about hanging out with Josh. When Josh asks the girl at the concession stand to layer the butter on the popcorn (bottom, middle, top), we both give an approving nod. Kitty sits in the middle of us, and at the funny parts she laughs so hard she kicks her legs up in the air. She weighs so little that the seat keeps tipping up. Josh and I share smiles over her head.

Whenever Josh, Margot, and I went to the movies, Margot always sat in the middle too. It was so she could whisper to both of us. She never wanted me to feel left out because she had a boyfriend and I didn't. She was so careful about this that it made me worry at first, that she sensed something from before. But she's not someone to hold back or pretty up the truth. She's just a really good big sister. The best.

There were times I felt left out anyway. Not in a romantic way, but a friend way. Josh and I had always been friends. But those times when he'd put his arm around Margot when we were in line for popcorn, or in the car when they'd talk softly to each other and I felt like the kid in the backseat who can't hear what the adults are talking about, it made me feel a little bit invisible. They made me wish I had someone to whisper to in the backseat.

It's strange to be the one in the front seat now. The view isn't so different from the backseat. In fact, everything feels good and normal and the same, which is a comfort.

Chris calls me later that night while I'm painting my toenails different-coloured pinks. It's so loud in the background she has to yell. "Guess what!"

"What? I can barely hear you!" I'm doing my pinky toe a fruit-punch colour called Hit Me with Your Best Shot.

"Hold up." I can hear Chris moving rooms, because it gets quieter. "Can you hear me now?"

"Yes, much better."

"Guess who broke up."

I've moved on to a mod pink colour that looks like Wite-Out with a drop of red in it. "Who?"

"Gen and Kavinsky! She dumped his ass."

My eyes go huge. "Whoa! Why?"

“Apparently, she met some UVA guy at that hostessing job she had. I guarantee you she was cheating on Kavinsky the whole summer.” A guy calls Chris’s name, and Chris says, “I gotta go. It’s my turn at bocce.” Chris hangs up without saying goodbye, which is her way.

I actually met Chris through Genevieve. They’re cousins: their moms are sisters. Chris used to come over sometimes when we were little, but she and Gen didn’t get along even back then. They’d argue over whose Barbie had dibs on Ken, because there was only one Ken. I didn’t even try to fight for Ken, even though he was technically mine. Well, Margot’s. At school some people don’t even know Gen and Chris are cousins. They don’t look alike, like, at all: Gen is petite with fit arms and sunny blond hair the colour of margarine. Chris is blond too, but peroxide blond, and she’s taller and has broad swimmer’s shoulders. Still, there is a sameness to them.

Chris was pretty wild our freshman year. She went to every party, got drunk, hooked up with older boys. That year a junior guy from the lacrosse team told everyone that Chris had sex with him in the boys’ locker room, and it wasn’t even true. Genevieve made Peter threaten to kick his ass if he didn’t tell everybody the truth. I thought it was a really nice thing Genevieve did for Chris, but Chris insisted that Gen had only done it so people wouldn’t think she was related to a slut. After that Chris stopped hanging out and pretty much did her own thing, with people from another school.

She still has that freshman-year reputation though. She acts like she doesn’t care, but I know she does, at least a little.

On Sunday, Daddy makes lasagna. He does that thing where he puts black-bean salsa in it to jazz it up, and it sounds gross but it's actually good and you don't notice the beans. Josh comes over too, and he has three helpings, which Daddy loves. When Margot's name comes up over dinner, I look over at Josh and see how stiff he gets, and I feel sorry for him. Kitty must notice too, because she changes the subject over to dessert, which is a batch of peanut-butter brownies I baked earlier in the afternoon.

Since Daddy cooked, us kids have kitchen duty. He uses every pot in the kitchen when he makes lasagna, so it's the worst clean-up, but worth it.

After, the three of us are relaxing in the TV room. It's Sunday night, but there's not that Sunday night feeling in the air, because tomorrow is Labor Day and we have one last day before school starts. Kitty's working on her dog collage, *quelle surprise*.

"What kind do you want most of all?" Josh asks her.

Kitty answers back lightning fast. "An Akita."

"Boy or girl?"

Again her answer is prompt. "Boy."

"What'll you name him?"

Kitty hesitates, and I know why. I roll over and tickle her bare foot. "I know what you'll name him," I say in a singsong voice.

"Be quiet, Lara Jean!" she screeches.

I have Josh's full attention now. "Come on, tell us," Josh begs.

I look at Kitty and she is giving me evil glowy red eyes. "Never mind," I say, feeling nervous all of a sudden. Kitty might be the baby of the family, but she is not someone to trifle with.

Then Josh tugs on my ponytail and says, "Aw, come on, Lara Jean! Don't leave us in suspense."

I prop myself up on my elbows, and Kitty tries to put her hand over my mouth. Giggling, I say, "It's after a boy she likes."

"Shut up, Lara Jean, shut up!"

Kitty kicks me, and in doing so she accidentally rips one of her dog pictures. She lets out a cry and drops to her knees and examines it. Her face is red with the effort of not crying. I feel like such a jerk. I sit up and try to give her an *I'm sorry* hug, but she twists away from me and kicks at my legs, so hard I yelp. I pick the picture up and try to tape it back, but before I can, Kitty snatches it out of my hands and gives it to Josh. "Josh, fix it," she says. "Lara Jean ruined it."

"Kitty, I was only teasing," I say lamely. I wasn't going to say the name of the boy. I would never ever have said it.

She ignores me, and Josh smooths the paper back out with a coaster, and with the concentration of a surgeon he tapes the two pieces together. He wipes his brow. "Phew. I think this one will make it."

I clap, and I try to catch Kitty's eye, but she won't look at me. I know I deserve it. The boy Kitty has a crush on – it's Josh.

Kitty whisks her collage away from Josh. Stiffly she says, "I'm going upstairs to work on this. Good night, Josh."

"Night, Kitty," Josh says.

Meekly, I say, "Good night, Kitty," but she's already running up the stairs, and she doesn't reply.

When we hear the sound of her bedroom door closing, Josh turns to me and says, "You're in so much trouble."

"I know," I say. I've got a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach. Why did I do that? Even as I was doing it, I knew it was wrong. Margot would never have done that to me. That's not how big sisters are supposed to treat their little sisters, especially not when I'm so much older than Kitty.

"Who's this kid she likes?"

"Just a boy from school."

Josh sighs. "Is she really old enough to have crushes on boys? I feel like she's too young for all that."

"I had crushes on boys when I was nine," I tell him. I'm still thinking about Kitty. I wonder how I can make it so she isn't mad at me any more. Somehow I don't think snickerdoodles will cut it this time.

"Who?" Josh asks me.

“Who what?” Maybe if I can somehow convince Daddy to buy her a puppy...

“Who was your first crush?”

“Hmm. My first *real* crush?” I had kindergarten and first- and second-grade crushes aplenty, but they don’t really count. “Like, the first one that really mattered?”

“Sure.”

“Well ... I guess Peter Kavinsky.”

Josh practically gags. “Kavinsky? Are you kidding me? He’s so obvious. I thought you’d be into someone more ... I don’t know, subtle. Peter Kavinsky’s such a cliché. He’s like a cardboard cut-out of a ‘cool guy’ in a movie about high school.”

I shrug. “You asked.”

“Wow,” he says, shaking his head. “Just ... wow.”

“He used to be different. I mean, he was still very Peter, but less so.” When Josh looks unconvinced, I say, “You’re a boy, so you can’t understand what I’m talking about.”

“You’re right. I don’t understand!”

“Hey, you’re the one who had a crush on Ms Rothschild!”

Josh turns red. “She was really pretty back then!”

“Uh-huh.” I give him a knowing look. “She was really ‘pretty’.” Our across-the-street neighbour Ms Rothschild used to mow her lawn in terry-cloth short shorts and a string bikini top. The neighbourhood boys would conveniently come and play in Josh’s yard on those days.

“Anyway, Ms Rothschild wasn’t my first crush.”

“She wasn’t?”

“No. You were.”

It takes me a few seconds to process this. Even then, all I can manage is, “Huh?”

“When I first moved here, before I knew your true personality.” I kick him in the shin for that, and he yelps. “I was twelve and you were eleven. I let you

ride my scooter, remember? That scooter was my pride and joy. I saved up for it for two birthdays. And I let *you* take it for a ride.”

“I thought you were just being generous.”

“You crashed it and you got a big scratch on the side,” he continues. “Remember that?”

“Yeah, I remember you cried.”

“I didn’t *cry*. I was justifiably upset. And that was the end of my little crush.” Josh gets up to go and we walk to the foyer.

Before he opens the front door, Josh turns around and says to me, “I don’t know what I would’ve done if you hadn’t been around after ... Margot dumped me.” A blush blooms pink across his face, underneath each sweetly freckled cheek. “You’re keeping me going, Lara Jean.” Josh looks at me and I feel it all, every memory, every moment we’ve ever shared. Then he gives me a quick, fierce hug and disappears into the night.

I’m standing there in the open door and the thought flies in my head, so quick, so unexpected, I can’t stop myself from thinking it: *If you were mine, I would never have broken up with you, not in a million years.*



This is how we met Josh. We were having a teddy-bear tea-party picnic on the back lawn with real tea and muffins. It had to be in the backyard so no one would see. I was eleven, way too old for it, and Margot was thirteen, way, way too old. I got the idea in my head because I read about it in a book. Because of Kitty I could pretend it was for her and persuade Margot into playing with us. Mommy had died the year before and ever since, Margot rarely said no to anything if it was for Kitty.

We had everything spread out on Margot's old baby blanket, which was blue and nubby with a squirrel print. I laid out a chipped tea set of Margot's, mini muffins studded with blueberries and granules of sugar that I made Daddy buy at the grocery store, and a teddy bear for each of us. We were all wearing hats, because I insisted. "You have to wear a hat to a tea party," I kept saying until Margot finally put hers on just so I'd stop. She had on Mommy's straw gardening hat, and Kitty was wearing a tennis visor, and I'd fancied up an old fur hat of Grandma's by pinning a few plastic flowers on top.

I was pouring lukewarm tea out of the thermos and into cups when Josh climbed up on the fence and watched us. The month before, from the upstairs playroom, we'd watched Josh's family move in. We'd hoped for girls, but then we saw the movers unload a boy bike and we went back to playing.

Josh sat up on the fence, not saying anything, and Margot was really stiff and embarrassed; her cheeks were red, but she kept her hat on. Kitty was the one to call out to him. "Hello, boy," she said.

"Hi," he said. His hair was shaggy, and he kept shaking it out of his eyes. He was wearing a red T-shirt with a hole in the shoulder.

Kitty asked him, "What's your name?"

"Josh."

"You should play with us, Josh," Kitty commanded.

So he did.

I didn't know it then, how important this boy would become to me and to the people I love the most. But even if I had known, what could I have done

differently? It was never going to be me and him. Even though.

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I thought I was over him.

When I wrote my letter, when I said my goodbyes, I meant it, I swear I did. It wasn't even that hard, not really. Not when I thought about how much Margot liked him, how much she cared. How could I begrudge Margot a first love? Margot, who'd sacrificed so much for all of us. She always, always put Kitty and me before herself. Letting go of Josh was my way of putting Margot first.

But now, sitting here alone in my living room, with my sister four thousand miles away and Josh next door, all I can think is, *Josh Sanderson, I liked you first. By all rights, you were mine. And if it had been me, I'd have packed you in my suitcase and taken you with me, or, you know what, I would have stayed. I would have never left you. Not in a million years, not for anything.*

Thinking these kinds of thoughts, feeling these kinds of feelings, it's more than disloyal. I know that. It's downright traitorous. It makes my soul feel dirty. Margot's been gone less than a week and look at me, how fast I cave. How fast I covet. I'm a betrayer of the worst kind, because I'm betraying my own sister, and there's no greater betrayal than that. But what now? What am I supposed to do with all these feelings?

I suppose there's only one thing I *can* do. I'll write him another letter. A postscript with as many pages as it takes to X away whatever feelings I have left for him. I'll put this whole thing to rest, once and for all.

I go to my room and I find my special writing pen, the one with the really smooth inky-black ink. I take out my heavy writing paper, and I begin to write.

*P.S. I still love you.*

*I still love you and that's a really huge problem for me and it's also a really huge surprise. I swear I didn't know. All this time, I thought I was over it. How could I*

*not be, when it's Margot you love? It's  
always been Margot...*

When I'm done, I put the letter in my diary instead of in my hat box. I have a feeling I'm not done-done yet, that there's still more I need to say, I just haven't thought of it yet.

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Kitty's still mad at me. In the wake of the Josh revelation, I'd forgotten all about Kitty. She ignores me all morning, and when I ask if she wants me to take her to the store for school supplies, she snaps, "With what car? You wrecked Margot's."

Ouch. "I was going to take Daddy's when he comes back from Home Depot." I back away from her, far enough away that she can't lash out at me with a kick or a hit. "There's no need to be nasty, Katherine."

Kitty practically growls, which is exactly the reaction I was hoping for. I hate when Kitty goes mad and silent. But then she flounces away, and with her back to me, she says, "I'm not speaking to you. You know what you did, so don't bother trying to get back on my good side." I follow her around, trying to provoke her into talking to me, but there's really no use. I've been dismissed. So I give up and go back to my room and put on the *Mermaids* soundtrack. I'm organizing my first-week back-to-school outfits on my bed when I get a text from Josh. A little thrill runs up my spine to see his name on my phone, but I sternly remind myself of my vow. *He is still Margot's, not yours.* It doesn't matter that they're broken up. He was hers first, which means he's hers always.

#### **Wanna go for a bike ride on that trail by the park?**

Biking is a Margot-type activity. She loves going on trails and hikes and bikes. Not me. Josh knows it too. I don't even own my own bike any more, and Margot's is too big for me. Kitty's is more my size.

I write back that I can't; I have to help my dad around the house. It's not a total lie. My dad did ask me to help him repot some of his plants. And I said only if he was making me and if I had no say in the matter, then sure.

#### **What does he need help with?**

What to say? I have to be careful about my excuses; Josh can easily look out the window and see if I'm home or not. I text back a vague *Just some random chores.* Knowing Josh, he would show up with a shovel or a rake or whatever tool the chore entailed. And then he'd stay for dinner, because he always stays for dinner.

He said I was keeping him going. Me, Lara Jean. I want to be that person for him, I want to be the one who keeps him going during this difficult time. I want to be his lighthouse keeper while we wait for Margot's return. But it's hard. Harder than I thought.

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I wake up happy because it's the first day of school. I've always loved the first day of school better than the last day of school. Firsts are best because they are beginnings.

While Daddy and Kitty are upstairs washing up, I make wholewheat pancakes with sliced bananas, Kitty's favourite. First-day-of-school breakfast was always a big thing with my mom, and then Margot took over, and now I guess it's my turn. The pancakes are a little dense, not quite as light and fluffy as Margot's. And the coffee ... well, is coffee supposed to be light brown like cocoa? When Daddy comes down, he says in a merry voice, "I smell coffee!" And then he drinks it and gives me a thumbs-up, but I notice he only has the one sip. I guess I'm a better baker than I am a cook.

"You look like a farm girl," Kitty says with a touch of meanness, and I know she's still at least a little bit mad at me.

"Thank you," I say. I'm wearing faded shortalls and a scoop-neck floral shirt. It does look farm-girlish, but I think in a nice way. Margot left her brown lace-up combat boots, and they're only a half size too big. With thick socks, they're a perfect fit. "Will you braid my hair to the side?" I ask her.

"You don't deserve a braid from me," Kitty says, licking her fork. "Besides, a braid would take it too far."

Kitty is only nine, but she has good fashion sense.

"Agreed," my dad says, not looking up from his paper.

I put my plate in the sink and then put Kitty's bag lunch down next to her plate. It's got all her favourite things: a Brie sandwich, barbecue chips, rainbow cookies, the good kind of apple juice.

"Have a great first day," my dad chirps. He pops out his cheek for a kiss, and I bend down and give him one. I try to give Kitty one too, but she turns her cheek.

"I got your favourite kind of apple juice and your favourite kind of Brie," I tell her pleadingly. I really don't want us to start the school year off on a bad note.

"Thank you," she sniffs.

Before she can stop me, I throw my arms around her and squeeze her so tight she yelps. Then I get my new floral back-to-school book bag and head out the front door. It's a new day, a new year. I have a feeling it's going to be a good one.

Josh is already in the car, and I run over and open the door and slide inside.

"You're on time," Josh says. He lifts his hand up for a high five, and when I slap it, our hands make a satisfying smack. "That was a good one," he says.

"An eight at least," I agree. We whizz past the pool, the sign for our neighbourhood, then past the Wendy's.

"Has Kitty forgiven you yet for the other night?"

"Not quite, but hopefully soon."

"Nobody can hold a grudge like Kitty," Josh says, and I nod wholeheartedly. I can never stay mad for long, but Kitty will nurse a grudge like her life depended on it.

"I made her a good first-day-of-school lunch, so I think that'll help," I say.

"You're a good big sister."

I pipe up with "As good as Margot?" and together we chorus, "Nobody's as good as Margot."



School has officially begun and found its own rhythm. The first couple of days of school are always throwaway days of handing out books and syllabuses and figuring out where you're sitting and who you're sitting with. Now is when school really begins.

For gym, Coach White set us loose outside to enjoy the warm sun while we still have it. Chris and I are walking the track field. Chris is telling me about a party she went to over Labor Day weekend. "I almost got into a fight with this girl who kept saying I was wearing extensions. It's not my fault my hair is fabulous."

As we round the corner for our third lap, I catch Peter Kavinsky looking at me. I thought I was imagining it at first, him staring in my direction, but this is the third time. He's playing ultimate Frisbee with some of the guys. When we pass them, Peter jogs over to us and says, "Can I talk to you for a minute?"

Chris and I look at each other. "Her or me?" she asks.

"Lara Jean."

Chris puts her arm around my shoulder protectively. "Go ahead. We're listening."

Peter rolls his eyes. "I want to talk to her in private."

"Fine," she snaps, and she flounces away. Over her shoulder she looks back at me with wide eyes, like *What?* I shrug back, like, *I have no idea!*

In a low, quiet voice, Peter says, "Just so you know, I don't have any STDs."

*What in the world?* I stare at him, my mouth open. "I never said you had an STD!"

His voice is still low but actually furious. "I also don't always take the last piece of pizza."

"What are you talking about?"

"That's what you said. In your letter. How I'm an egotistical guy who goes around giving girls STDs. Remember?"

"What letter? I never wrote you any letter!"

Wait. Yes I did. I did write him a letter, about a million years ago. But that's not the letter he's talking about. It couldn't be.

"Yes. You. Did. It was addressed to me, from you."

Oh, God. No. No. This isn't happening. This isn't reality. I'm dreaming. I'm in my room and I'm dreaming and Peter Kavinsky is in my dream, glaring at me. I close my eyes. Am I dreaming? Is this real?

"Lara Jean?"

I open my eyes. I'm not dreaming, and this is real. This is a nightmare. Peter Kavinsky is holding my letter in his hand. It's my handwriting, my envelope, my everything. "How – how did you get that?"

"It came in the mail yesterday." Peter sighs. Gruffly he says, "Listen, it's no big deal; I just hope you're not going around telling people—"

"It came in the mail? To your house?"

"Yeah."

I feel faint. I actually feel faint. Please let me faint right now, because if I faint I will no longer be here, in this moment. It will be like in movies when a girl passes out from the horror of it all and the fighting happens while she is asleep and she wakes up in a hospital bed with a bruise or two, but she's missed all the bad stuff. I wish that was my life instead of this.

I can feel myself start to sweat. Rapidly I say, "You should know that I wrote that letter a really long time ago."

"OK."

"Like, years ago. Years and years ago. I don't even remember what I said." *Up close, your face wasn't so much handsome as beautiful.* "Seriously, that letter's from middle school. I don't even know who would have sent it. Can I see it?" I reach for the letter, trying to stay calm and not sound desperate. Just casual cool.

He hesitates and then grins his perfect Peter grin. "Nah, I want to keep it. I never got a letter like this before."

I leap forward, and quick like a cat I snatch it out of his hand.

Peter laughs and throws up his hands in surrender. "All right, fine, have it. Geez."

“Thanks.” I start to back away from him. The paper is shaking in my hand.

“Wait.” He hesitates. “Listen, I didn’t mean to steal your first kiss or whatever. I mean, that wasn’t my intention—”

I laugh, a forced and fake laugh that sounds crazy even to my own ears. People turn around and look at us. “Apology accepted! Ancient history!” And then I bolt. I run faster than I’ve ever run. All the way to the girls’ locker room.

How did this even happen?

I sink to the floor. I’ve had the going-to-school-naked dream before. I’ve had the going-to-school-naked-forgot-to-study-for-an-exam-in-a-class-I-never-signed-up-for combo, the naked-exam-somebody-trying-to-kill-me combo. This is all that times infinity.

And then, because there’s nothing left for me to do, I take the letter out of the envelope and I read it.

*Dear Peter K.,*

*First of all I refuse to call you Kavinsky. You think you’re so cool, going by your last name all of a sudden. Just so you know, Kavinsky sounds like the name of an old man with a long white beard.*

*Did you know that when you kissed me, I would come to love you? Sometimes I think yes. Definitely yes. You know why? Because you think EVERYONE loves you, Peter. That’s what I hate about you. Because everyone does love you. Including me. I did. Not any more.*

*Here are all your worst qualities:*

You burp and you don't say excuse me. You just assume everyone else will find it charming. And if they don't, who cares, right? Wrong! You do care. You care a lot about what people think of you.

You always take the last piece of pizza. You never ask if anyone else wants it. That's rude.

You're so good at everything. Too good. You could've given other guys a chance to be good, but you never did.

You kissed me for no reason. Even though I knew you liked Gen, and you knew you liked Gen, and Gen knew you liked Gen. But you still did it. Just because you could. I really want to know: Why would you do that to me? My first kiss was supposed to be something special. I've read about it, what it's supposed to feel like – fireworks and lightning bolts and the sound of waves crashing in your ears. I didn't have any of that. Thanks to you it was as unspecial as a kiss could be.

The worst part of it is, that stupid nothing kiss is what made me start liking you. I never did before. I never even

thought about you before. Gen has always said that you are the best-looking boy in our grade, and I agreed, because sure, you are. But I still didn't see the allure of you. Plenty of people are good-looking. That doesn't make them interesting or intriguing or cool.

Maybe that's why you kissed me. To do mind control on me, to make me see you that way. It worked. Your little trick worked. From then on, I saw you. Up close, your face wasn't so much handsome as beautiful. How many beautiful boys have you ever seen? For me it was just one. You. I think it's a lot to do with your lashes. You have really long lashes. Unfairly long.

Even though you don't deserve it, fine, I'll go into all the things I like(d) about you:

One time in science, nobody wanted to be partners with Jeffrey Suttleman because he has BO, and you volunteered like it was no big deal. Suddenly everybody thought Jeffrey wasn't so bad.

You're still in chorus, even though all the other boys take band and orchestra now.

You even sing solos. And you dance, and you're not embarrassed.

You were the last boy to get tall. And now you're the tallest, but it's like you earned it. Also, when you were short, no one even cared that you were short – the girls still liked you and the boys still picked you first for basketball in gym.

After you kissed me, I liked you for the rest of seventh grade and most of eighth. It hasn't been easy, watching you with Gen, holding hands and making out at the bus loop. You probably make her feel very special. Because that's your talent, right? You're good at making people feel special.

Do you know what it's like to like someone so much you can't stand it and know that they'll never feel the same way? Probably not. People like you don't have to suffer through those kinds of things. It was easier after Gen moved and we stopped being friends. At least then I didn't have to hear about it.

And now that the year is almost over, I know for sure that I am also over you. I'm immune to you now, Peter. I'm really

proud to say that I'm the only girl in this school who has been immunized to the charms of Peter Kavinsky. All because I had a really bad dose of you in seventh grade and most of eighth. Now I never ever have to worry about catching you again. What a relief! I bet if I did ever kiss you again, I would definitely catch something, and it wouldn't be love. It would be an STD!

*Lara Jean Song*

*OceanofPDF.com*

If I could crawl into a hole and burrow in it comfortably and live out the rest of my days in it, well, then that is what I would do.

Why did I have to bring up that kiss? Why?

I still remember everything about that day at John Ambrose McClaren's house. We were in the basement, and it smelled like mildew and laundry detergent. I was wearing white shorts and an embroidered blue-and-white halter top I stole out of Margot's closet. I had on a strapless bra for the first time ever. It was one of Chris's, and I kept adjusting it because it felt unnatural.

It was one of our first boy-girl hangouts on a weekend and at night. That was a weird thing too, because it felt purposeful. Not the same as going over to Allie's house after school and neighbourhood boys are there hanging out with her twin brother. Also not the same as going to the arcade at the mall knowing we would probably run into boys. This was making a plan, getting dropped off, wearing a special bra, all on a Saturday night. No parents around, just us in John's ultra-private basement. John's older brother was supposed to be watching us, but John paid him ten dollars to stay in his room.

Not that anything exciting happened, for instance an impromptu game of spin the bottle or seven minutes in heaven – two possibilities for which us girls had prepared for with gum and lip gloss. All that happened was the boys played video games and us girls watched and played on our phones and whispered to each other. And then people's moms and dads were picking them up, and it was so anticlimactic after all that planning and anticipation. It was disappointing for me, not because I liked anyone, but because I liked romance and drama and I was hoping something exciting would happen to someone.

Something did.

To me!

Peter and I were downstairs alone, the last two people to be picked up. We were sitting on the couch. I kept texting my dad, **Where are uuuuuu?** Peter was playing a game on his phone.



And then, out of nowhere, he said, “Your hair smells like coconuts.”

We weren’t even sitting that close. I said, “Really? You can smell it from there?”

He scooted closer and took a sniff, nodding. “Yeah, it reminds me of Hawaii or something.”

“Thanks!” I said. I wasn’t positive it was a compliment, but it seemed like enough of one to say thanks. “I’ve been switching between this coconut one and my sister’s baby shampoo, to do an experiment on which makes my hair softer—”

Then Peter Kavinsky leaned right in and kissed me, and I was stunned.

I’d never thought of him any kind of way before that kiss. He was too pretty, too smooth. Not my type of boy at all. But after he kissed me, he was all I could think about for months after.

What if Peter is just the beginning? What if ... what if my other letters somehow got sent too? To John Ambrose McClaren. Kenny from camp. Lucas Krapf.

Josh.

Oh my God, Josh.

I leap up off the floor. I’ve got to find that hatbox. I’ve got to find those letters.

I go back outside to the track. I don’t see Chris anywhere, so I guess she is smoking behind the field house. I go straight over to Coach, who is sitting on the bleachers with his phone.

“I can’t stop throwing up,” I whimper. I double over and cradle my arms to my stomach. “Can I please go to the nurse’s office?”

Coach barely looks up from his phone. “Sure.”

As soon as I’m out of his eye line, I make a run for it. Gym’s my last period of the day, and my house is only a couple of miles from school. I run like the wind. I don’t think I’ve ever run so hard or so fast in my life, and I likely never will again. I run so hard, a couple of times I have to stop because I feel like I really am going to throw up. And then I remember the letters, and Josh,

and *Up close, your face wasn't so much handsome as beautiful*, and I'm off and running again.

As soon as I get home, I dash upstairs and go into my closet for my hatbox. It's not sitting on the top shelf where it usually sits. It's not on the floor, or behind my stack of board games. It's not anywhere. I get on my hands and knees and start rifling through piles of sweaters, shoe boxes, craft supplies. I look in places it could not possibly be, because it's a hatbox and it's big, but I look anyway. My hatbox is nowhere.

I collapse on to the floor. This is a horror movie. My life has become a horror movie. Next to me my phone buzzes. It's Josh. **Where are you? Did you get a ride home with Chris?**

I turn my phone off and go down to the kitchen and call Margot on the house phone. It's still my first impulse, to go to her when things get bad. I'll just leave out the Josh part of it and focus on the Peter part. She'll know what to do; she always knows what to do. I'm all set to burst out, *Gogo, I miss you so much and everything's a mess without you*, but when she picks up the phone, she sounds sleepy, and I can tell that I've woken her up. "Were you sleeping?" I ask.

"No, I was just lying down," she lies.

"Yes you *were* sleeping! Gogo, it's not even ten o'clock over there! Wait, is it? Did I calculate wrong again?"

"No, you're right. I'm just so tired. I've been up since five, because..." Her voice trails off. "What's wrong?"

I hesitate. Maybe it's better not to burden Margot with all of this. I mean, she just got to college: this is what she's worked for; this is her dream come true. She should be having fun and not worrying over how things are going back home without her. Besides, what would I even say? *I wrote a bunch of love letters and they got sent out, including one I wrote to your boyfriend?* "Nothing's wrong," I say. I'm doing what Margot would do, which is figure it out on my own.

"It definitely sounds like something's wrong." Margot yawns. "Tell me."

"Go back to sleep, Gogo."

"OK," she says, yawning again.

We hang up and I make myself an ice-cream sundae right in the carton: chocolate sauce, whipped cream, chopped nuts. The works. I take it back up to my room and eat it lying down. I feed it to myself like medicine, until I've eaten the whole thing, every last bite.

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A little while later I wake up to Kitty standing at the foot of my bed. “You’ve got ice cream on your sheets,” she informs me.

I groan and turn over to my side. “Kitty, that’s the least of my problems today.”

“Daddy wants to know if you want chicken for dinner or hamburgers. My vote is chicken.”

I sit straight up. Daddy’s home! Maybe he knows something. He was on that cleaning binge, throwing things away. Maybe he’s spirited my hatbox away somewhere safe, and the Peter letter was just an unfortunate fluke!

I jump out of bed and run downstairs, my heart thumping hard in my chest. My dad’s in his study, wearing his glasses and reading a thick book on Audubon paintings.

All in one breath I ask, “Daddy-have-you-seen-my-hatbox?”

He looks up; his face is hazy and I can tell he is still with Audubon’s birds and not at all focused on my frenzied state. “What box?”

“My teal hatbox Mommy gave me!”

“Oh, that. ... he says, still looking confused. He takes off his glasses. “I don’t know. It might have gone the way of your roller skates.”

“What does that mean? What are you even saying?”

“Goodwill. There’s a slight possibility I took them to Goodwill.”

When I gasp, my dad says defensively, “Those roller skates don’t even fit you any more. They were just taking up space!”

I sink to the floor. “They were pink and they were vintage and I was saving them for Kitty ... and that’s not even the point. I don’t care about the roller skates. I care about my hatbox! Daddy, you don’t even know what you’ve done.” My dad gets up and tries to pull me off the floor. I resist him and flop on to my back like a goldfish.

“Lara Jean, I don’t even know that I got rid of it. Come on, let’s have a look around the house, all right? Don’t let’s panic yet.”

“There’s only one place it could be, and it’s not there. It’s gone.”

“Then I’ll check Goodwill tomorrow on my way to work,” he says, squatting down next to me. He’s giving me that look – sympathetic but also exasperated and mystified, like *How is it possible that my sane and reasonable DNA created such a crazy daughter?*

“It’s too late. It’s too late. There’s no point.”

“What was in that box that’s so important?”

I can feel my ice-cream sundae curdling in my stomach. For the second time today I feel like I’m going to be sick. “Only everything.”

He grimaces. “I really didn’t realize your mother had given it to you or that it was so important.” As he retreats off to the kitchen, he says, “Hey, how about an ice-cream sundae before dinner? Will that cheer you up?”

As if dessert before dinner would be the thing that cheers me up, as if I am Kitty’s age and not sixteen going on seventeen. I don’t even bother dignifying it with an answer. I just lie there on the floor, my cheek against the cool hardwood. Besides, there isn’t any ice cream left anyway, but he’ll find that out soon enough.

I don’t even want to think about Josh reading that letter. I don’t even want to think it. It’s too terrible.

After dinner (chicken, per Kitty’s request), I’m in the kitchen doing dishes when I hear the doorbell ring. Daddy opens the door, and I hear Josh’s voice. “Hey, Dr Covey. Is Lara Jean around?”

Oh, no. No no no no. I can’t see Josh. I know I have to at some point, but not today. Not right this second. I can’t. I just can’t.

I drop the plate back into the sink and make a run for it, out the back door, down the porch steps, across the backyard to the Pearces’ yard. I scramble up the wooden ladder and into Carolyn Pearce’s old tree house. I haven’t been in this tree house since middle school. We used to hang out up here sometimes, at night – Chris and Genevieve and Allie and me. The boys a couple of times.

I peek through the wooden slats, crouched in a ball, waiting until I see Josh walk back to his house. When I’m sure he’s inside, I climb down the ladder and run back to mine. I sure have been doing a lot of running today. I’m exhausted, now that I think of it.

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I wake up the next morning renewed. I am a girl with a plan. I'm just going to have to avoid Josh for ever. It's as simple as that. And if not for ever, then at least until this dies down and he forgets about my letter. There's still the tiny chance he never even got it. Perhaps whoever mailed Peter's only sent the one! You never know.

My mom always said optimism was my best trait. Both Chris and Margot have said it's annoying, but to that I say, looking on the bright side of life never killed anybody.

When I get downstairs, Daddy and Kitty are already at the table eating toast. I make myself a bowl of cereal and sit down with them.

"I'm going to stop by Goodwill on my way to work," my dad says, crunching on his toast from behind his newspaper. "I'm sure the hatbox will turn up there."

"Your hatbox is missing?" Kitty asks me. "The one Mommy gave you?"

I nod and shovel cereal into my mouth. I have to leave soon or else I'll risk running into Josh on my way out.

"What was in the box, anyway?" Kitty asks.

"That's private," I say. "All you need to know is the contents are precious to me."

"Will you be mad at Daddy if you never get the hatbox back?" Kitty answers her own question before I can. "I doubt it. You never stay mad for long."

This is true. I never can stay mad for long.

Peering over his newspaper, he asks Kitty, "What in the world was in that hatbox?"

Kitty shrugs. Her mouth full of toast, she says, "Probably more French berets?"

"No, not more berets." I give them both a mean look. "Now if you'll excuse me, I don't want to be late for school."

"Aren't you leaving a little early?"

“I’m taking the bus today,” I say. And probably every day until Margot’s car is fixed, but they don’t need to know that.

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The way it happens is a strange sort of serendipity. A slow-motion train wreck. For something to go this colossally wrong, everything must intersect and collide at the exact right, or in this case, wrong, moment.

If the bus driver hadn't had trouble backing out of the cul-de-sac, taking four extra minutes to get to school, I never would have run into Josh.

If Josh's car had started up and he hadn't had to get a jump from his dad, he wouldn't have been walking by my locker.

And if Peter hadn't had to meet Ms Wooten in the guidance office, he would not have been walking down the hallway ten seconds later. And maybe this whole thing would not have happened. But it did.

I'm at my locker; the door is jammed, and I'm trying to yank it open. I finally get the door loose and there's Josh, standing right there.

"Lara Jean..." He has this shell-shocked, confused expression on his face. "I've been trying to talk to you since last night. I came by, and nobody could find you..." He holds out my letter. "I don't understand. What is this?"

"I don't know. ... I hear myself say. My voice feels far away. It's like I'm floating above myself, watching it all unfold.

"I mean, it's from you, right?"

"Oh, wow." I take a breath and accept the letter. I fight the urge to tear it up. "Where did you even get this?"

"It got sent to me in the mail." Josh jams his hands into his pockets. "When did you write this?"

"Like, a long time ago," I say. I let out a fake little laugh. "I don't even remember when. It might have been middle school." Good job, Lara Jean. Keep it up.

Slowly he says, "Right ... but you mention going to the movies with Margot and Mike and Ben that time. That was a couple of years ago."

I bite my bottom lip. "Right. I mean, it was *kind* of a long time ago. In the grand scheme of things." I can feel tears coming on, so close that if I break

concentration even for a second, if I waver, I will cry and that will make everything worse, if such a thing is possible. I must be cool and breezy and nonchalant now. Tears would ruin that.

Josh is staring at me so hard I have to look away. “So then... Do you ... or did you have feelings for me or ... ?”

“I mean, yes, sure, I did have a crush on you at one point, before you and Margot ever started dating. A million years ago.”

“Why didn’t you ever say anything? Because, Lara Jean... God. I don’t know.” His eyes are on me, and they’re confused, but there’s something else too. “This is crazy. I feel kind of blindsided.”

The way he’s looking at me now, I’m suddenly in a time warp back to a summer day when I was fourteen and he was fifteen, and we were walking home from somewhere. He was looking at me so intently I was sure he was going to try to kiss me. I got nervous, so I picked a fight with him and he never looked at me like that again.

Until this moment.

*Don’t. Just please, don’t.*

Whatever he’s thinking, whatever he wants to say, I don’t want to hear it. I will do anything, literally anything, not to hear it.

Before he can, I say, “I’m dating someone.”

Josh’s jaw goes slack. “What?”

*What?*

“Yup. I’m dating someone, someone I really really like, so please don’t worry about this.” I wave the letter like it’s just paper, trash, like once upon a time I didn’t literally pour my heart on to this page. I stuff it into my bag. “I was really confused when I wrote this; I don’t even know how it got sent out. Honestly, it’s not worth talking about. So, please, please don’t say anything to Margot about it.”

He nods, but that’s not good enough. I need a verbal commitment. I need to hear the words come out of his mouth. So I add, “Do you swear? On your life?” If Margot was to ever find out ... I would want to die.

“All right, I swear. I mean, we haven’t even spoken since she left.”

I let out a huge breath. “Great. Thanks.” I’m about to walk away, but then Josh stops me.

“Who’s the guy?”

“What guy?”

“The guy you’re dating.”

That’s when I see him. Peter Kavinsky, walking down the hallway. Like magic. Beautiful, dark-haired Peter. He deserves background music, he looks so good. “Peter. Kavinsky. Peter Kavinsky!” The bell rings, and I sail past Josh. “I’ve gotta go! Talk later, Josh!”

“Wait!” he calls out.

I run up to Peter and launch myself into his arms like a shot out of a cannon. I’ve got my arms around his neck and my legs hooked around his waist, and I don’t even know how my body knows how, because I’ve for sure never touched a boy like this in my life. It’s like we’re in a movie and the music is swelling and waves are crashing around us. Except for the fact that Peter’s expression is registering pure shock and disbelief and maybe a drop of amusement, because Peter likes to be amused. Raising his eyebrows, he says, “Lara Jean? What the—?”

I don’t answer. I just kiss him.

My first thought is: I have muscle memory of his lips.

My second thought is: I hope Josh is watching. He has to be watching or it’s all for nothing.

My heart is beating so fast I forget to be afraid of doing it wrong. Because for about three seconds, he’s kissing me back. Peter Kavinsky, the boy of every girl’s dreams, is kissing me back.

I haven’t kissed that many boys before. Peter Kavinsky, John Ambrose McClaren, Allie Feldman’s cousin with the weird eye, and now Peter again.

I open my eyes and Peter’s staring at me with that same expression on his face. Very sincerely I say, “Thank you.” He replies, “You’re welcome,” and I hop out of his arms and sprint off in the opposite direction.

It takes all of history class and most of English for my heart rate to slow down. I kissed Peter Kavinsky. In the hallway, in front of everybody. In front of Josh.

I didn't think this thing through, obviously. That's what Margot would say, including and especially the "obviously". If I *had* thought it through, I would have made up a boyfriend and not picked an actual person. More specifically, I would not have picked Peter K. He is literally the worst person I could have picked, because everybody knows him. He's Peter Kavinsky, for Pete's sake. Kavinsky of Gen and Kavinsky. It doesn't matter that they're broken up. They're an institution at this institution.

I spend the rest of the day hiding out. I even eat my lunch in the girls' bathroom.

My last class of the day is gym. With Peter. Coach White gives us a reintroduction to the weight room, and we have to practise using the machines. Peter and his friends already know how to use them, so they separate off from the group and have a free-throw contest, and I don't get a chance to talk to him. At one point he catches me looking at him and he winks, which makes me want to shrivel up and die.

After class is over, I wait for Peter outside the boys' locker room, planning out what I'm going to say, how I'm going to explain it. I'll start out with, "So about this morning..." and then I'll give a little laugh, like, *HOW hilarious was that!*

Peter's the last one to come out. His hair is wet from a shower. It's weird that boys take showers at school, since girls never do. I wonder if they have stalls in there, or just a bunch of shower heads and no privacy.

"Hey," he says when he sees me, but he doesn't stop.

To his back I hurriedly say, "So about this morning..." I laugh, and Peter turns around and just looks at me.

"Oh yeah. What was that all about?"

"It was a dumb joke," I begin.

Peter crosses his arms and leans against the lockers. "Did it have anything to do with that letter you sent me?"

"No. I mean, yes. Tangentially."

“Look,” he says kindly. “I think you’re cute. In a quirky way. But Gen and I just broke up, and I’m not in a place right now where I want to be somebody’s boyfriend. So...”

My mouth drops. Peter Kavinsky is giving me the brush-off! I don’t even like him, and he’s giving me the brush-off. Also, “quirky”? How am I “quirky”? “Cute in a quirky way” is an insult. A total insult!

He’s still talking, still giving me the kind eyes. “I mean, I’m definitely flattered. That you would like me all this time – it’s flattering, you know?”

That’s enough. That’s plenty enough. “I don’t like you,” I say, loudly. “So there’s no reason you should feel flattered.”

Now it’s Peter’s turn to look taken aback. He quickly looks around to see if anyone heard. He leans forward and whispers, “Then why did you kiss me?”

“I kissed you *because* I don’t like you,” I explain, like this should be obvious. “See, my letters got sent out by someone. Not me.”

“Wait a minute. ‘Letters’? How many of us are there?”

“Five. And the guy I *do* like got one too—”

Peter frowns. “Who?”

Why should I tell him anything? “That’s ... personal.”

“Hey, I think I have a right to know, since you pulled me into this little drama,” Peter says with a pointed look. I suck in my top lip and shake my head and he adds, “If there even really is a guy.”

“There is so a guy! It’s Josh Sanderson.”

“Doesn’t he go out with your sister?”

I nod. I’m surprised he even knows this. I didn’t think Josh and Margot would be on his radar. “They’re broken up now. But I don’t want him to know I have feelings for him ... for obvious reasons. So ... I told him you were my boyfriend.”

“So you used me to save face?”

“I mean, basically.” Basically exactly.

“You’re a funny girl.”

First I’m cute in a quirky way; now I’m a funny girl. I know what that means. “Anyway, thanks for going along with it, Peter.” I flash him what I

hope is a winning smile and turn on my heel to go. “See ya!”

Peter reaches out and grabs me by the backpack. “Wait – so Sanderson thinks I’m your boyfriend now, right? So what are you going to tell him?”

I try to shrug him loose, but he won’t let go. “I haven’t figured that part out yet. But I will.” I lift my chin. “I’m quirky like that.”

Peter laughs out loud, his mouth open wide. “You really are funny, Lara Jean.”

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My phone vibrates next to me. It's Chris.

"Is it true?" I can hear her puffing on her cigarette.

"Is what true?"

I'm lying on my bed, on my stomach. My mom told me that if my stomach hurt, I should lie on my stomach and it would warm up and feel better. I don't think it's helping though. My stomach's been in knots all day.

"Did you run up to Kavinsky and kiss him like a maniac?"

I close my eyes and whimper. I wish I could say no, because I'm not the kind of person to do that. But I did do it, so I guess I am. But my reasons were really good! I want to tell Chris the truth, but the whole thing is just so embarrassing. "Yeah. I went up to Peter Kavinsky and kissed him. Like a maniac."

Chris exhales. "Damn!"

"I know."

"What the hell were you thinking?"

"Honestly? I don't even know. I just ... did it."

"Shit. I didn't know you had it in you. I'm kind of impressed."

"Thanks."

"But you know Gen's gonna come after you, right? They may be broken up, but she still thinks she owns his ass."

My stomach lurches. "Yeah. I know. I'm scared, Chris."

"I'll do my best to protect you from her, but you know how she is. You better watch your back." Chris hangs up.

I feel even worse than before. If Margot was here, she'd probably say that writing those letters was pointless in the first place, and she'd get on me about telling such a big lie. Then she'd help me figure out a solution. But Margot's not here, she's in Scotland – and even bigger than that, she's the one person I can't talk to. She can never-never-never know how I feel about Josh.

After a while I get out of bed and wander into Kitty's room. She's on the floor riffling through her bottom drawer. Without looking up, she says, "Have you seen my pyjamas with the hearts?"

"I washed them yesterday, so they're probably in the dryer. Tonight do you wanna watch a movie and play Uno?" I could use a cheer-up night.

Kitty scrambles up. "Can't. I'm going to Alicia Bernard's birthday. It's in the schedule notebook."

"Who's Alicia Bernard?" I plop down on Kitty's unmade bed.

"She's the new girl. She invited all the girls in our class. Her mom's making us crepes for breakfast. Do you know what a crepe is?"

"Yes."

"Have you ever had one? I heard they can be salty or sweet."

"Yes, I had one with Nutella and strawberries once." Josh and Margot and I drove down to Richmond because Margot wanted to go to the Edgar Allan Poe museum. We ate lunch at a café downtown and that's what I had.

Kitty's eyes go big and greedy. "I hope that's the kind her mom makes." Then she dashes off, I guess to find her pyjamas in the laundry room downstairs.

I pick up Kitty's stuffed pig and cuddle it in my arms. So even my nine-year-old sister has plans on a Friday night. If Margot was here, we'd be going to the movies with Josh, or stopping by the cocktail hour at the Belleview Retirement Home. If my dad was home, I could maybe get up the courage to take his car or have him drop me off, but I can't even do that.

After Kitty gets picked up, I go back to my room and organize my shoe collection. It's a little early in the season to switch out my sandals for my winter shoes, but I go ahead and do it because I'm in the mood. I think about doing my clothes too, but that's no small undertaking. Instead I sit down and write Margot a letter on stationery my grandma bought me in Korea. It's pale blue with a border of fluffy white lambs. I talk about school, and Kitty's new teacher, and a lavender skirt I ordered from a Japanese website that I'm sure she'll want to borrow, but I don't tell her any of the real things.

I miss her so much. Nothing's the same without her. I'm realizing now that the year is going to be a lonely one, because I don't have Margot, and I don't



have Josh, and it's just me alone. I have Chris, but not really. I wish I'd made more friends. If I had more friends, maybe I wouldn't have done something as stupid as kiss Peter K. in the hallway and tell Josh he's my boyfriend.

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I wake up to the sound of the lawn mower.

It's Saturday morning and I can't fall back to sleep, so now I'm lying in my bed staring at my walls, at all the pictures and things I've saved. I'm thinking I want to shake things up. I'm thinking maybe I should paint my room. The only question is, what colour? Lavender? Cotton-candy pink? Something bold, like turquoise? Maybe just an accent wall? Maybe one marigold wall, one salmon pink. It's a lot to consider. I should probably wait for Margot to come home before I make such a momentous decision. Plus I've never painted a room before, and Margot has, with Habitat for Humanity. She'll know what to do.

On Saturdays we usually have something good for breakfast, like pancakes or frittata with frozen shredded potato and broccoli. But since there's no Kitty and no Margot, I just eat cereal instead. Who ever heard of making pancakes or frittata for just one person? My dad's been awake for hours; he's outside mowing the lawn. I don't want to get roped into helping him do yard work, so I make myself busy in the house and clean the downstairs. I Swiffer and DustBust and wipe the tables down, and all the while my wheels are turning about how I'm going to get myself out of this Peter K. situation with even a sliver of dignity. The wheels turn and turn, but no good solutions come to mind.

When Kitty gets dropped off, I'm folding laundry. She plops down on the couch on her belly and asks me, "What'd you do last night?"

"Nothing. I just stayed home."

"And?"

"I organized my closet." It's humiliating to say that out loud. Hastily I change the subject. "So did Alicia's mom make sweet crepes or salty ones?"

"She made both. First we had ham and cheese and then we had Nutella. How come we never have any Nutella?"

"I think maybe because hazelnuts make Margot's throat itch."

"Can we get some next time?"

“Sure,” I say. “We’ll just have to eat the whole jar before Margot comes home.”

“No problem,” Kitty says.

“On a scale of one to ten, how badly do you miss Gogo?” I ask her.

Kitty thinks this over. “A six point five,” she says at last.

“Only a six point five?”

“Yeah, I’ve been really busy,” she says, rolling over and kicking her legs up in the air. “I’ve hardly had time to miss Margot. You know, if you got out more, maybe you wouldn’t miss her so much.”

I boomerang a sock at her head and Kitty explodes into a giggle fit. I’m tickling her armpits when Daddy comes in from outside with a stack of mail. “Something came back return to sender for you, Lara Jean,” he says, handing me an envelope.

It’s got my handwriting! I scramble up and snatch it out of his hands. It’s my letter to Kenny from camp. It came back to me!

“Who’s Kenny?” Daddy wants to know.

“Just a boy I met at church camp a long time ago,” I say, tearing the envelope open.

*Dear Kenny,*

*It’s the last day of camp and possibly the last time I will ever see you because we live so far apart. Remember on the second day, I was scared to do archery and you made a joke about minnows and it was so funny I nearly peed my pants?*

I stop reading. A joke about *minnows*? How funny could it have been?

*I was really homesick but you made me feel better. I think I might’ve left camp early if it hadn’t been for you, Kenny. So,*

*thank you. Also you're a really amazing swimmer and I like your laugh. I wish it had been me you kissed at the bonfire last night and not Blaire H.*

*Take care, Kenny. Have a really good rest of the summer and a really good life.*

*Love, Lara Jean*

I clutch the letter to my chest.

This is the first love letter I ever wrote. I'm glad it came back to me. Though I suppose it wouldn't have been so bad if Kenny Donati got to know that he helped two people at camp that summer – the kid who almost drowned in the lake and twelve-year-old Lara Jean Song Covey.

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When my dad has a day off, he cooks Korean food. It's not exactly authentic, and sometimes he just goes to the Korean market and buys ready-made side dishes and marinated meat, but sometimes he'll call our grandma for a recipe and he'll try. That's the thing: Daddy tries. He doesn't say so, but I know it's because he doesn't want us to lose our connection to our Korean side, and food is the only way he knows how to contribute. After Mommy died, he used to try to make us have play dates with other Korean kids, but it always felt awkward and forced. Except I did have a crush on Edward Kim for a minute there. Thank God the crush never escalated into full-on love – or else I'd have written him a letter too, and that'd be just one more person I'd have to avoid.

My dad's made *bo ssam*, which is pork shoulder you slice up and then wrap in lettuce. He brined it last night in sugar and salt and it's been roasting in the oven all day. Kitty and I keep checking on it; it smells so good.

When it's finally time to eat, my dad has everything laid out on the dining room table so pretty. A silver bowl of butter-lettuce leaves, just washed, with the water beads still clinging to the surface; a cut-glass bowl of kimchi he bought from Whole Foods; a little bowl of pepper paste; soy sauce with scallions and ginger.

My dad's taking arty pictures of the table. "I'm sending a pic to Margot so she can see," he says.

"What time is it over there?" I ask him. It's a cozy day: it's nearly six o'clock, and I'm still in my pjs. I'm hugging my knees to me, sitting in the big dining-room chair with the armrests.

"It's eleven. I'm sure she's still up," my dad says, snapping away. "Why don't you invite Josh over? We're going to need help finishing all this food."

"He's probably busy," I say quickly. I still haven't figured out what I'm going to say to him about me and Peter, much less me and him.

"Just try him. He loves Korean food." Daddy moves the pork shoulder so it's more centred. "Hurry, before my *bo ssam* gets cold!"

I pretend to text him on my phone. I feel a tiny bit guilty for lying, but Daddy would understand if he knew all the facts.

“I don’t understand why you kids text when you could just call. You’d get an answer right away instead of waiting for one.”

“You’re so old, Daddy,” I say. I look down at my phone. “Josh can’t come over. Let’s just eat. Kitty! Dinner bell!”

“Co-ming!” Kitty screams from upstairs.

“Well, maybe he’ll come over later and take some leftovers,” Daddy says.

“Daddy, Josh has his own life now. Why would he come over when Margot’s not here? Besides, they’re not even together any more, remember?”

My dad makes a confused face. “What? They’re not?”

I guess Margot didn’t tell him after all. Though you’d have thought he could have sussed it out for himself when Josh didn’t come with us to the airport to drop Margot off. Why don’t dads know anything? Does he not have eyes and ears? “No, they’re not. And by the way, Margot is at college in Scotland. And my name is Lara Jean.”

“All right, all right, your dad is clueless,” Daddy says. “I get it. No need to rub it in.” He scratches his chin. “Geez, I could have sworn Margot never mentioned anything...”

Kitty comes crashing into the dining room. “Yum yum yum.” She slams into her chair and starts spearing pork on to her plate.

“Kitty, we have to pray first,” my dad says, settling into his chair.

We only ever pray before we eat when we eat in the dining room, and we only ever eat in the dining room when Daddy cooks Korean or on Thanksgiving or Christmas. Mommy used to take us to church when we were little, and after she died, Daddy tried to keep it going, but he has Sunday shifts sometimes and it became less and less.

“Thank you, God, for this food you have blessed us with. Thank you for my beautiful daughters, and please watch over our Margot. In Jesus’s name we pray, amen.”

“Amen,” we echo.

“Looks pretty great, right, girls?” My dad is grinning as he assembles a lettuce leaf with pork and rice and kimchi. “Kitty, you know how to do it, right? It’s like a little taco.”

Kitty nods and copies him.

I make my own lettuce-leaf taco and nearly spit it out. The pork is really really salty. So salty I could cry. But I keep chewing, and across the table Kitty's making a horrible face at me, but I give her a *shush* look. Daddy hasn't tried his yet; he's taking a picture of his plate.

"So good, Daddy," I say. "It tastes like at the restaurant."

"Thanks, Lara Jean. It came out just like the picture. I can't believe how beautiful and crispy the top looks." My dad finally takes a bite, and then he frowns. "Is this salty to you?"

"Not really," I say.

He takes another bite. "This tastes really salty to me. Kitty, what do you think?"

Kitty's chugging water. "No, it tastes good, Daddy."

I give her a secret thumbs-up.

"Hmm, no, it definitely tastes salty." He swallows. "I followed the recipe exactly ... maybe I used the wrong kind of salt for the brine? Lara Jean, taste it again."

I take a teeny-tiny bite, which I try to hide by putting the lettuce in front of my face. "Mmm."

"Maybe if I cut more from the centre..."

My phone buzzes on the table. It's a text from Josh. **Was coming back from a run and saw the light on in the dining room.** A totally normal text, as if yesterday never happened.

**Korean food??**

Josh has some sixth sense of when my dad's cooking Korean food, because he'll come sniffing around right when we're sitting down to eat. He loves Korean food. When my grandma comes to visit, he won't leave her side. He'll even watch Korean dramas with her. She cuts him pieces of apple and peels clementines for him like he's a baby. My grandma likes boys better than girls.

Now that I think of it, all the women in my family really do love Josh. Except for Mommy, who never got to meet him. But I'm sure she'd love him too. She'd love anyone who's as good to Margot as Josh is, was.

Kitty cranes her neck to look over my shoulder. “Is that Josh? Is he coming over?”

“No!” I set down my phone and it buzzes again. **Can I come over?**

“It says he wants to come over!”

My dad perks up. “Tell him to come over! I want to get his opinion on this bo ssam.”

“Listen, everyone in this family needs to accept that Josh is no longer a part of it. He and Margot are donzo—” I hesitate. Does Kitty still not know? I can’t remember if it’s still supposed to be a secret. “I mean now that Margot’s at college and they’re long distance ...”

“I know they’re broken up,” Kitty says, making a lettuce wrap with just rice. “Margot told me over video chat.”

Across the table my dad makes a sad face and stuffs a piece of lettuce in his mouth.

Her mouth full, Kitty continues, “I just don’t see why we can’t still be friends with him. He’s all of our friend. Right, Daddy?”

“Right,” my dad agrees. “And look, relationships are incredibly amorphous. They could get back together. They could stay friends. Who’s to say what will happen in the future? I say we don’t count Josh out just yet.”

We’re finishing up dinner when I get another text from Josh. **Never mind**, it says.

We are stuck eating that salty pork shoulder for the rest of the weekend. The next morning, my dad makes fried rice and cuts the pork into tiny pieces and says to “think of it like bacon”. For dinner I test that theory by mixing it with Kraft macaroni and cheese, and I end up throwing out the whole batch because it tastes like slop. “If we had a dog...” Kitty keeps saying. I make a batch of regular macaroni instead.

After dinner I take Sadie the Sweetheart for a walk. That’s what my sisters and I call Sadie; she’s a golden retriever that lives down the street. The Shahs are out of town for the night, so they asked me to feed her and walk her. Normally, Kitty would beg to be the one to do it, but there’s some movie on TV that she’s been waiting to see.



Sadie and I are doing the usual route around our cul-de-sac when Josh jogs up to us in his running clothes. Crouching down to pet Sadie, he says, “So how are things going with Kavinsky?”

Funny you should bring that up, Josh. ‘Cause I’ve got my story locked and loaded. Peter and I had a fight via video chat this morning (in case Josh has noticed I haven’t left the house all weekend), and we broke up, and I’m devastated about the whole thing, because I’ve been in constant love with Peter Kavinsky since the seventh grade, but *c’est la vie*.

“Actually, Peter and I broke up this morning.” I bite my lip and try to look sad. “It’s just, really hard, you know? After I liked him for so long and then finally he likes me back. But it’s just not meant to be. I don’t think he’s over his break-up yet. I think maybe Genevieve still has too strong a hold on him, so there’s no room in his heart for me.”

Josh gives me a funny look. “That’s not what he was saying today at McCalls.”

What in the world was Peter K. doing at a bookstore? He’s not the bookstore type. “What did he say?” I try to sound casual, but my heart is pounding so loudly I’m pretty sure Sadie can hear it.

Josh keeps petting Sadie.

“What did he say?” Now I’m just trying not to sound shrill. “Like, what was said exactly?”

“When I was ringing him up, I asked him when you guys started going out, and he said recently. He said he really liked you.”

*What...*

I must look as shocked as I feel, because Josh straightens up and says, “Yeah, I was kind of surprised too.”

“You were surprised that he would like me?”

“Well, kind of. Kavinsky just isn’t the kind of guy who would date a girl like you.” When I stare back at him, sour and unsmiling, he quickly tries to backtrack. “I mean, because you’re not, you know...”

“I’m not what? As pretty as Genevieve?”

“No! That’s not what I’m saying. What I’m trying to say is, you’re like this sweet, innocent girl who likes to be at home with her family, and I don’t

know, I guess Kavinsky doesn't strike me as someone who would be into that."

Before he can say another word, I grab my phone out of my jacket pocket and say, "That's Peter calling me right now, so I guess he does like homely girls."

"I didn't say homely! I said you like to be at home!"

"Later, Josh." I speed walk away, dragging Sadie with me. Into my phone I say, "Oh hey, Peter."

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In chem, Peter sits a row in front of me.

I write him a note. *Why would you tell Josh that we're—* I hesitate and then finish with *a thing?*

I kick the back of his chair, and he turns around and I hand him the note. He slouches in his seat to read it; then I watch as he scribbles something. He tips back in his chair and drops the note on my desk without looking at me.

*A thing? Haha.*

I press down so hard my pencil tip chips off. *Please answer the question.*

*We'll talk later.*

I let out a frustrated sigh and Matt, my lab partner, gives me a funny look.

After class Peter is swept away with all his friends; they leave in a big group. I'm packing up my backpack when he returns, alone. He hops up on the table. "So let's talk," he says, super casual.

I clear my throat and try to gather my bearings. "Why did you tell Josh we were—" I almost say "a thing" again, but then change it to "together?"

"I don't get what you're so upset about. I did you a favour. I could have just as easily blown up your spot."

I pause. He's right. He could have. "So why didn't you?"

"You've sure got a funny way of saying thank you. You're welcome, by the way."

Automatically I say, "Thank you." Wait. Why am I thanking him? "I appreciate you letting me kiss you, but—"

"You're welcome," he says again.

Ugh! He's so insufferable. Just for that I'm going to toss a little dig his way. "That was ... really generous of you. To let me do that. But I've already explained to Josh that it's not going to work out with us because Genevieve has you whipped, so it's all good. You can stop pretending now."

Peter glares at me. "I'm not whipped."

“But aren’t you, though? I mean, you guys have been together since the seventh grade. You’re basically her property.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” Peter scoffs.

“There was a rumour last year that she made you get a tattoo of her initials on your butt for her birthday.” I pause. “So did you?” I reach around him and fake try to lift up the back of his shirt. He yelps and jumps away from me, and I collapse in a fit of giggles. “So you *do* have a tattoo!”

“I don’t have a tattoo!” he yells. “And we’re not even together any more, so can you stop with this shit? We broke up. We’re over. I’m done with her.”

“Wait, didn’t *she* break up with *you*?” I ask.

Peter shoots me a dirty look. “It was mutual.”

Hastily I say, “Well, I’m sure you’ll get back together soon. You’ve broken up before, right? Only to get back together again, like immediately. It’s probably because you were each other’s firsts. That’s why you can’t let each other go. I’ve heard that’s how it is with firsts, especially with guys.”

Peter’s mouth drops. “How do you know—”

“Oh, everybody knows. You guys did it freshman year in her parents’ basement, right?”

He gives a grudging nod.

“See? Even I know, and I’m a nobody. Even if you do stay broken up for real this time, which I doubt, it’s not like any other girl can date you.” Meaningfully I say, “Let’s not forget what happened to Jamila Singh.”

Peter and Genevieve broke up for a month last year, so Peter started dating Jamila Singh. Jamila might even be prettier than Genevieve – a different kind of pretty, anyway. More like hot. She has long, wavy black hair and a little waist and a big butt. Let’s just say it didn’t end well for her. Not only did Genevieve cut her out of the group, but she told everyone that Jamila’s family had an Indonesian slave living with them, when really it was just her cousin. And I’m pretty sure it was Genevieve who started a rumour online that Jamila washed her hair only once a month. The final straw was when Jamila’s parents got an anonymous e-mail saying that she was having sex with Peter. Her parents transferred her right out and put her in private school. Genevieve and Peter were back together by spring formal.

“Gen says she didn’t have anything to do with that.”

I give him a *get real* look. “Please, Peter. I know her well and so do you. Well, I did know her well. But I don’t think people change at the core. They are who they are.”

Slowly Peter says, “That’s right. You two were BFFs back in the day.”

“We were friends,” I agree. “I wouldn’t call us BFFs, but...” Wait a minute, why are we talking about me again? “Everybody knows it was Genevieve who told Jamila’s parents. You don’t have to be a detective to figure out that Genevieve was jealous of her. Jamila was the prettiest girl in our grade, next to Genevieve. Gen was always a very jealous person. I remember this one time my dad bought me a...”

Peter’s staring at me in a thoughtful way, and it’s all of a sudden making me nervous.

“What?”

“Let’s just do this for a little while.”

“Do what?”

“Let’s let people think we’re a couple.”

Wait ... what?

“It’s driving Gen crazy not knowing what’s up with you and me. Why don’t we let her sit with it a little longer? It’s actually kind of perfect. You date me first, and then Gen will get it that we’re over. You’ll be breaking the seal.” He raises an eyebrow at me. “Do you even know what breaking the seal means?”

“Yes, of course I know what that means.” I have no idea what that means. I make a mental note to ask Chris the next time I see her.

Peter comes up close to me, and I scoot backward. He laughs and cocks his head to the side and puts his hands on my shoulders. “So then break my seal.”

I let out a nervous laugh. “Ha-ha, sorry, Peter, but I’m not interested. In you.”

“Well, yeah. That’s the whole point. I’m not interested in you, either. Like, at all.” Peter shudders. “So what do you say?”

I shrug my shoulders so his hands fall away. "Hello, I just got through explaining to you how Gen will kill any girl that goes near you!"

Peter dismisses this. "Gen's all talk. She'd never do anything to anybody. You just don't know her like I do." When I don't say anything, he takes my silence as encouragement, and he says, "It would help you out too, you know. With that kid Josh. Weren't you so worried about losing face in front of him? This could save you from more humiliation. Because why would you be with him when you could be with me? Well, pretend be with me. Strictly business though. I can't have you falling in love with me too."

It gives me great pleasure to look up into his Handsome Boy face and sweetly say, "Peter, I don't even want to be your pretend girlfriend, much less your real one."

He blinks. "Why not?"

"You read my letter. You're not my type. Nobody would ever believe I would like you."

"It's up to you. I'm just trying to do us both a favour." Then he shrugs and looks over my shoulder, like he's bored with this conversation. "But Josh definitely believed it."

In a flash, without even thinking, I say, "OK. Let's do it."

Hours later, I'm lying in bed that night still marvelling about it all. What people will say when they see me walking down the hall with Peter Kavinsky.

The next morning, Peter is waiting in the parking lot for me when I get off the bus. “Hey,” he says. “Are you seriously taking the bus every day?”

“My car is being fixed, remember? My accident?”

He sighs like this is somehow offensive to him, me taking the bus to school. Then he grabs my hand and holds it as we walk into school together.

This is the first time I’ve walked down the school hallway holding hands with a boy. It should feel momentous, special, but it doesn’t, because it’s not real. Honestly, it feels like nothing.

Emily Nussbaum does a double take when she sees us. Emily is Gen’s best friend. She’s staring so hard I’m surprised she doesn’t take a quick pic on her phone to send to Gen.

Peter keeps stopping to say hi to people, and I stand there smiling like it’s the most natural thing in the world. Me and Peter Kavinsky.

At one point I try to let go of his hand, because mine is starting to feel sweaty, but he tightens his grip. “Your hand is too hot,” I hiss.

Through clenched teeth he says, “No, your hand is.”

I’m sure Genevieve’s hands are never sweaty. She could probably hold hands for days without getting overheated.

When we get to my locker, we finally drop hands so I can dump my books inside. I’m shutting my locker door when Peter leans in and tries to kiss me on the mouth. I’m so startled I turn my head, and we hit foreheads.

“Ow!” Peter rubs his forehead and glares at me.

“Well, don’t just sneak up on me like that!” My forehead hurts too. We really banged them hard, like cymbals. If I looked up right now, I would see blue cartoon birdies.

“Lower your voice, dummy,” he says through clenched teeth.

“Don’t you call me a dummy, you dummy,” I whisper back.

Peter heaves a big sigh like he’s really annoyed with me. I’m about to snap at him that it’s his fault, not mine, when I catch a glimpse of Genevieve

gliding down the hallway. “Gotta go,” I say, and I dart off in the opposite direction.

“Wait!” Peter calls out.

But I keep darting.

I’m lying on my bed with my pillow over my face reliving the horrible kiss-that-wasn’t. I keep trying to block it out, but it just keeps coming back.

I put my hand to my forehead. I don’t think I can do this. It’s all so... I mean, the kissing, the sweaty hands, everybody looking. It’s too much.

I’m just going to have to tell him I changed my mind, and I don’t want to do this any more, and that’ll be that. I don’t have his number, and I don’t want to say any of this in an e-mail either. I’ll have to go to his house. It’s not far; I still remember the way.

I run downstairs, passing Kitty, who is balancing a plate of Oreos and a glass of milk on a tray. “I’m borrowing your bike!” I yell as I fly past her. “I’ll be back soon!”

“You better not let anything happen to it!” Kitty yells back.

I grab her helmet and the bike and tear out of the yard, pedalling as fast as I can. My knees hit my chest a little, but I’m not that much taller than Kitty, so it isn’t so bad. Peter lives two neighbourhoods away. It takes me less than twenty minutes to get there.

When I do, there aren’t any cars in the driveway. Peter’s not home. My heart sinks to the pavement. What do I do now? Sit and wait for him on the front porch like some kind of stalker? What if his mom comes home first?

I take off my helmet and sit for a minute so I can rest. My hair is damp and sweaty from the ride over, and I’m exhausted. I try to run my fingers through my hair, smooth it out. It’s a lost cause.

As I’m contemplating texting Chris and seeing if she can come get me, Peter’s car comes roaring down the street and up the driveway. I drop my phone and then scramble to pick it up.

Peter climbs out of his car and raises his eyebrows at me. “Look who’s here. My adoring girlfriend.”



I stand up and wave at him. “Can I talk to you for a minute?”

He slings his backpack over his shoulder and takes his time sauntering over. He sits down on the front step like a prince on his throne, and I stand in front of him, my helmet in one hand and my phone in the other. “So what’s up?” he drawls. “Let me guess. You’re here to back out on me, am I right?”

He’s so smug, so sure of himself. I don’t want to give him the satisfaction of being right.

“I just wanted to go over our game plan with you,” I say, sitting down. “Get our story straight before people start asking questions.”

He raises his eyebrows. “Oh. OK. Makes sense. So how *did* we get together?”

I clasp my hands in my lap and recite, “When I got in that car accident last week, you happened to be driving by, and you waited for Triple A with me and then you drove me home. You were really nervous the whole time, because you’ve actually had kind of a thing for me since middle school. I was your first kiss. So this was your big chance—”

“*You* were *my* first kiss?” he interrupts. “How about *I* was *your* first kiss. That’s a lot more believable.”

I ignore him and continue on. “This was your big chance. So you took it. You asked me out that very day and we’ve been hanging out ever since and now we’re basically a couple.”

“I don’t think Gen’s going to buy this,” he says, shaking his head.

“Peter,” I say in my most patient voice, “the most believable lies are the ones that are at least a little bit true. I did get into a car accident; you did stop and sit with me; we did kiss in middle school.”

“It’s not that.”

“Then what?”

“Gen and I hooked up that day after I saw you.”

I sigh. “OK. Spare me the details. My story still works though. After the car accident, you couldn’t get me out of your mind, so you asked me out as soon as Genevieve dumped – I mean, as soon as you guys broke up.” I clear my throat. “Since we’re on the topic, I’d also like to set some ground rules.”

“What kind of ground rules?” he asks, leaning back.

I press my lips together and take a breath. “Well ... I don’t want you trying to kiss me again.”

Peter curls his lip at me. “Trust me, I don’t want to do it either. My forehead still hurts from this morning. I think I have a bruise.” He pushes his hair off his forehead. “Do you see a bruise?”

“No, but I see a receding hairline.”

“*What?*”

Ha. I knew that would get him. Peter’s so vain. “Calm down, I’m only kidding. Do you have a piece of paper and a pen?”

“You’re gonna write this down?”

Primly I say, “It’ll help us remember.”

Rolling his eyes, Peter reaches into his backpack, pulls out a notebook, and hands it to me. I turn to a clean page and write at the top, *Contract*. Then I write *No kissing*.

“Are people really gonna buy it if we never touch each other in public?” Peter asks, looking skeptical.

“I don’t think relationships are just about physicality. There are ways to show you care about someone, not just using your lips.” Peter’s smiling, and he looks like he’s about to crack a joke, so I swiftly add, “Or any other body part.”

He groans. “You’ve gotta give me something here, Lara Jean. I have a reputation to uphold. None of my friends will believe I suddenly turned into a monk to date you. How about at least a hand in your back jean pocket? Trust me, it’ll be strictly professional.”

I don’t say what I’m thinking, which is that he cares way too much what people think about him. I just nod and write down, *Peter is allowed to put a hand in Lara Jean’s back jean pocket*. “But no more kissing,” I say, keeping my head down so he can’t see me blush.

“You’re the one who started it,” he reminds me. “And also, I don’t have any STDs, so you can get that out of your head.”

“I don’t think you have any STDs.” I look back up at him. “The thing is ... I’ve never had a boyfriend before. I’ve never been on a real date before, or held hands walking down the hallway. This is all new for me, so I’m sorry

about the forehead thing this morning. I just ... wish all of these firsts were happening for real and not with you.”

Peter seems to be thinking this over. He says, “Huh. OK. Let’s just save some stuff then.”

“Yeah?”

“Sure. We’ll save some stuff for you to do when it’s the real thing and not for show.”

I’m touched. Who knew Peter could be so thoughtful and generous?

“Like, I won’t pay for stuff. I’ll save that for a guy who really likes you.”

My smile fades. “I wasn’t expecting you to pay for anything!”

Peter’s on a roll. “And I won’t walk you to class or buy you flowers.”

“I get the picture.” It seems to me like Peter’s less concerned about me and more concerned about his wallet. He sure is cheap. “So when you were with Genevieve, what kinds of things did she like you to do?”

I’m afraid he’s going to take this opportunity to make a joke, but instead he stares off into space and says, “She was always bitching at me to write her notes.”

“Notes?”

“Yeah, at school. I didn’t get why I couldn’t just text her. It’s immediate, it’s efficient. Why not use the technology that’s available to us?”

This I understand perfectly. Genevieve didn’t want notes. She wanted letters. Real letters written in his handwriting on actual paper that she could hold and keep and read whenever the mood struck her. They were proof, solid and tangible, that someone was thinking about her.

“I’ll write you a note a day,” Peter says suddenly, with gusto. “That’ll drive her ass crazy.”

I write down, *Peter will write Lara Jean one note every day.*

Peter leans in. “Write down that you have to go to some parties with me. And write down no rom coms.”

“Who said anything about rom coms? Not every girl wants to watch rom coms.”

“I can just tell that you’re the kind of girl who does.”

I'm annoyed that he has this perception of me, and even more annoyed that he's right. I write, *NO DUMB ACTION MOVIES*.

"Then what does that leave us with?" Peter demands.

"Superhero movies, horror movies, period films, documentaries, foreign films—"

Peter makes a face, grabs the pen and paper from me, and writes down, *NO FOREIGN FILMS*. He also writes, *Lara Jean will make Peter's picture her phone wallpaper*. "And vice versa!" I say. I point my phone at him. "Smile."

Peter smiles, and ugh, it's annoying how handsome he is. Then he reaches for his phone and I stop him. "Not right now. My hair looks sweaty and gross."

"Good point," he says, and I want to punch him.

"Can you also write down that under no circumstances can either of us tell anyone the truth?" I ask him.

"The first rule of Fight Club," Peter says knowingly.

"I've never seen that movie."

"Of course you haven't," he says, and I make a face at him. Also: mental note, watch *Fight Club*.

Peter writes it down, and then I sit next to him and take the pen and underline "under no circumstances" twice. "What about an end date?" I ask suddenly.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, how long are we going to do this for? Like, two weeks? A month?"

Peter shrugs. "For as long as we feel it."

"But – don't you think we should have something set –"

He cuts me off. "You need to relax, Lara Jean. Life doesn't have to be so *planned*. Just roll with it and let it happen."

I sigh and say, "Words of wisdom from the great Kavinsky," and Peter wiggles his eyebrows at me. "Just as long as it's over by the time my sister comes back for Christmas break. She can always tell when I'm lying."

"Oh, we'll definitely be done by then," he says.

“Good,” I say, and then I sign the paper, and so does he, and we have our contract.

I’m too proud to ask for a ride, and Peter doesn’t offer, so I put my helmet back on and ride Kitty’s bike back home. I’m halfway there when I realize we never exchanged phone numbers. I don’t even know my own supposed boyfriend’s phone number.

*OceanofPDF.com*

I'm at McCalls bookstore, picking up a copy of *The Glass Menagerie* for English and scanning the store for Josh. Now that Peter and I have everything worked out, I can triumphantly crow all about it. That'll show him for thinking I'm just a homebody no boy would want to date.

I spot him setting up a display of new books in the non-fiction section. He doesn't see me, so I sneak up behind and yell, "Boo!"

He jumps and drops a book on the floor. "You scared the crap out of me!"

"That was the point, Joshy!" I'm having a giggle fit. The look on his face! I wonder, why is it so deliciously funny to sneak up on people?

"All right, all right. Quit laughing. What are you here for?"

I hold up my book and wave it in his face. "I have Mr Radnor for English. You had him, right?"

"Yeah, he's good. He's strict but fair. I still have my notes if you want them."

"Thanks," I say. Brightly I add, "So guess what. Peter and I aren't broken up after all. It was just a misunderstanding."

"Oh yeah?" Josh starts stacking books into a column.

"Mm-hmm. I saw him yesterday and we talked and talked, for hours. I feel like I could talk to him about anything, you know? He just really gets me."

Josh's forehead wrinkles. "What do you guys talk about?"

"Oh, everything. Movies, books, the usual stuff."

"Huh. I never saw him as the reading type." He squints and looks over my shoulder. "Hey, I've gotta go help Janice out at the counter. When you're ready to check out, come to my register so I can give you my discount."

Hmm, this isn't exactly the reaction I was hoping for. I barely even got a chance to crow. "Sounds good," I say, but he's already walking away.

I hug my book to my chest. Now that Josh knows I'm not in love with him any more and I'm with Peter, I guess everything will slide right back into place and be normal again. Like my letter never happened.

*OceanofPDF.com*

“Margot called when you were out today,” my dad says over dinner.

Dinner is just salad. Salad for me and Daddy and cereal for Kitty. There were supposed to be chicken breasts, but I forgot to take them out of the freezer this morning, so there’s just lettuce and carrot with balsamic dressing. Daddy’s supplementing his with two boiled eggs, and I have a piece of buttered toast. Some dinner. Cereal and lettuce. I need to get to the grocery store stat.

Since Margot left, I’ve only spoken to her twice, and once was over video chat with all of us crowded around my laptop. I didn’t get to ask her about the good stuff – the real deal, all the adventures she’s been going on and the people she’s been meeting. I think I heard that British people drink absinthe at pubs. I wonder if she’s tried it by now. I’ve emailed Margot so many times and have only gotten back one email in return so far. I understand that she is busy, but the least she can do is email back once a day. For all she knows, I could be dead in a ditch. “What did she say?” I ask as I cut my carrot into tiny pieces.

“She’s thinking about trying out for the shinty club team,” my dad says, wiping salad dressing off his chin.

“What’s shinty?” Kitty asks me, and I shrug.

“It’s a Scottish sport that’s similar to field hockey,” Daddy explains. “It started out as safe swordfight practice in medieval Scotland.”

Boring. Before Daddy can get started on telling us more about medieval Scotland, I say, “Let’s send Gogo a care package! Stuff she can’t get over there.”

“Yeah!” Kitty cheers.

“What should we send?” I ask. “I say we all contribute something.”

Daddy chews and taps his finger to his chin. “I’ll send gummy vitamins,” he says. “And Advil. I think she only took a small bottle of Advil, and you know how she gets migraines sometimes.”

“I approve.” I point my fork at Kitty. “And what about you?”

“I’ve got something I could send,” Kitty says. “Should I go get it?”



Daddy and I look at each other and shrug. "Sure."

Kitty comes running back with a picture she's drawn of Margot. Petting a dog. The exact breed of dog Kitty wants. Akita. I have to laugh.

Kitty frowns. "What's so funny?"

"Nothing," I say.

"Do you think it's good enough?" Kitty asks me. "Good enough to hang up on her wall?"

"Definitely," I say.

"No, I want you to really look at it," she says. "Critique it. I can always do better. Margot won't want it if it's not my best work."

"Kitty, it definitely is," I say. "Why would I lie?"

She sighs. "I just don't know if it's finished yet."

"Only the artist knows," Daddy says with a sage nod.

"What do you think about the dog?" she asks him. "Isn't it cute?"

Daddy takes the picture from me and looks at it closely. "Yes, the dog is undeniably a good-looking dog."

"I'm Asian too," Kitty says. She sits back down and takes a bite of cereal and tries not to smile. She is doing her inception thing. Planting positive associations about dogs in Daddy's head. The kid never rests. She always has an angle.

"What else is going in the care package?" Kitty wants to know.

I start ticking off with my fingers. "Tampons because I don't know if they have our brand in Scotland, flannel pj's, thick socks, Girl Scout cookies—"

"Where are we going to get Girl Scout cookies this time of year?" Daddy asks.

"I have a box of Thin Mints hidden in the freezer," I say.

He gives me a hurt look. "Hidden from who?" Thin Mints are his favourite. If there are Thin Mints in the house, forget about it. Daddy is a Thin Mint Monster.

I give an enigmatic shrug. "Also I'm sending Margot's favourite kind of roller-ball pen, and ... I think that's it."

“Don’t forget her brown boots,” my dad reminds me. “She specifically requested we send her brown boots with the laces.”

“Did she?” I was hoping Margot hadn’t noticed she’d left them behind. “When did she say that?”

“She emailed me yesterday.”

“I’ll see if I can find them.”

My dad says, “Weren’t you wearing them this weekend?” and at the same time Kitty says, “They’re in your closet.”

I throw up my hands. “All right, all right!”

“If you get the box together tonight, I can drop it off at the post office tomorrow morning on my way to work,” Daddy offers.

I shake my head. “I want to send the scarf I’ve been knitting, and it won’t be ready in time. Maybe in another week or two?”

Slurping her milk, Kitty waves a hand at me and advises, “Just give up on the scarf already. Knitting isn’t your thing.”

I open my mouth to argue and then close it. Maybe she’s right. If we wait for my scarf to be done to send the care package, Margot will probably be out of college already. “All right,” I say. “We’ll send the care package sans scarf. I’m not saying I’m giving up on knitting though. I’ll keep chugging along on it and have it ready for you for your Christmas gift, Kitty.” I smile at her sweetly. “It’s pink. Your favourite.”

Kitty’s eyes go wide with horror. “Or Margot. You could also give it to Margot.”

Kitty slides a piece of paper under my door that night. It’s her Christmas list. It’s only September – Christmas is still months away! “Puppy” is written at the top in capital block letters. She also wants an ant farm and a skateboard and a TV in her room. Yeah, that TV’s not going to happen. I could buy her the ant farm though. Or maybe I could talk to Daddy about the puppy. She hasn’t said so, but I think she misses Margot a lot. In a way, Margot is the only mother she’s known. It must be hard for Kitty having her so far away. I’ll just have to remind myself to be more patient with her, more attentive. She needs me now.

I go to her room and climb into her bed. She's just turned the lights off and is already halfway to sleep. "What if we got a kitten?" I whisper.

Her eyes fly open. "No way in heck."

"Don't you think we're more of a kitten family?" Dreamily I say, "A fluffy grey-and-white kitten with a bushy tail. We could name him Prince if it's a boy. Ooh, or Gandalf the Grey! Wouldn't that be cute? Or if it's a girl, maybe Agatha. Or Tilly. Or Boss. It really depends on her personality."

"Quit it," Kitty warns. "We're not getting a cat. Cats are blah. They're also very manipulative."

Impressed, I say, "Where'd you learn that word?"

"TV."

"A puppy is a lot of work. Who's going to feed him and walk him and house-train him?"

"I'll do it. I'll do it all. I'm responsible enough to take care of it on my own."

I snuggle closer to her. I love the way Kitty's head smells after she's had a bath. "Ha! You don't even do the dishes ever. And you never clean your room. And when have you ever helped fold laundry even once in your life? I mean, really, if you don't do any of those things, how you can be responsible for another living creature?"

Kitty shoves me off. "Then I'll help more!"

"I'll believe it when I see it."

"If I help out more, will you help me convince Daddy about the puppy?"

"If you help out more," I agree. "If you can prove to me you're not a baby any more." Kitty will be ten in January. That's plenty old enough to help out around the house. Margot babies her too much, I think. "I'm putting you in charge of emptying the upstairs trash cans once a week. And helping with the laundry."

"So ... would I get a raise in my allowance?"

"No. The incentive is me helping you convince Daddy to get a dog, and also you not being so babyish any more." I fluff up my pillow. "By the way, I'm sleeping in here tonight."

Kitty gives me a swift kick and I almost fall out of the bed. “You’re the babyish one, not me, Lara Jean.”

“Just let me sleep in here one night!”

“You take up all the covers.”

Kitty tries to kick me again, but I make my body heavy and pretend I’m already asleep. Soon we both fall asleep for real.

Sunday night I’m doing my homework in bed when I get a call from a number I don’t recognize. “Hello?”

“Hey. What are you doing?”

“Um ... sorry, but who’s this?”

“It’s Peter!”

“Oh. How did you get my number?”

“Don’t worry about it.”

There’s a longish silence. It’s agonizing, every millisecond that ticks by with neither of us talking, but I don’t know what to say. “So, what did you want?”

Peter laughs. “You’re so awkward, Covey. Your car’s in the shop, right? So how about I pick you up for school?”

“OK.”

“Seven thirty.”

“OK.”

“OK...”

“Bye,” I say, and I hang up.

The next morning, I wake Kitty up early so she can braid my hair. “Leave me alone,” she says, rolling on to her other side. “I’m sleeping.”

“Please please please can I get a braid crown?” I ask her, squatting in front of her bed.

“No. You can have a side braid and that’s it.”

Swiftly Kitty braids my braid, and then she falls right back to sleep and I’m on my way to figure out clothes. Now that Peter and I are official, people will be noticing me more, so I should wear something good. I try on a polka-dot puffy-sleeved dress with tights, but it doesn’t look right. Neither does my favourite heart sweater with the little pom-poms. Everything looks so kiddish all of a sudden. I finally settle on a floral babydoll dress I ordered off a Japanese street fashion site, with ankle boots. Sort of a seventies London look.

When I run downstairs at seven twenty-five, Kitty is sitting at the kitchen table with her jean jacket on waiting for me. “Why are you downstairs already?” I ask her. Her bus doesn’t come until eight.

“I have my field trip today, so I have to go to school early. Remember?”

I run and look at the calendar on the refrigerator. There it is, in my handwriting: *Kitty’s Field Trip*. Shoot.

I was supposed to drive her, but that was before my car accident. Daddy had an overnight shift at the hospital and he’s not home yet, so I don’t have a car. “Can one of the carpool moms come get you?”

“It’s too late. The bus leaves at seven forty.” Kitty’s face is getting splotchy and her chin is starting to quiver. “I can’t miss the bus, Lara Jean!”

“OK, OK. Don’t get upset. I’ve got a ride coming for us right now. Don’t worry, OK?” I pluck a greenish banana from the banana hammock. “Let’s go outside and wait for him.”

“Who?”

“Just hurry.”

Kitty and I are waiting on the front steps sharing the greenish banana. We both prefer an unripe, greenish banana to a brown speckled one. It's Margot who likes the speckled ones. I'll try to save them for banana bread, but Margot gobbles them up, mushy bruised parts and all. I shudder to even think of it.

There's a chill in the air, even though it's still September and therefore practically still summer. Kitty rubs her legs to keep warm. She says she'll wear shorts all the way to October; that's her plan.

It's past seven thirty now and no Peter yet. I'm starting to get nervous, but I don't want Kitty to worry. I decide that if he's not here in exactly two minutes, I'll go next door to Josh's and ask him to run Kitty over to school.

Across the street, our neighbour Ms Rothschild waves at us as she locks her front door, a big coffee thermos in her hand. She dashes towards her car.

"Good morning, Ms Rothschild," we chorus. I elbow Kitty and say, "Five, four, three—"

"Damn it!" Ms Rothschild shrieks. Ms Rothschild has spilled coffee on her hand. She does this at least twice a week. I don't know why she doesn't just slow down or maybe just put the top on the thermos or not fill it up so high.

Just then Peter drives up, and his black Audi is even shinier in the daylight. I get up and say, "Come on, Kitty," and she trails behind me.

"Who's that?" I hear her whisper.

His windows are down. I come up close to the passenger side and stick my head in. "Is it OK if we drop my little sister off at the elementary school?" I ask. "She has to be there early today for a field trip."

Peter looks annoyed. "Why didn't you mention it yesterday?"

"I didn't know about it yesterday!" Behind me I can feel rather than hear Kitty fidgeting.

"This is a two-seater," Peter says, as if I can't see with my own two eyes.

"I know that. I'll just put Kitty in my lap and the seat belt over us." Which my dad would kill me for if he knew, but I'm not telling, and neither will Kitty.

"Yeah, 'cause that sounds really safe." He's being sarcastic. I hate when people are sarcastic. It's so cheap.

“It’s two miles!”

He sighs. “Fine. Get in.”

I open the door and slide in, laying my bag at my feet. “Come on, Kitty.” I make space for her between my legs, and she climbs in. I strap us in tight, my arms around her. “Don’t tell Daddy,” I say.

“Duh,” she says.

“Hey. What’s your name?” Peter asks her.

Kitty hesitates. More and more this happens. With new people she has to decide if she’ll be Kitty or Katherine.

“Katherine.”

“But everyone calls you Kitty?”

“Everyone who knows me,” Kitty says. “You can call me Katherine.”

Peter’s eyes light up. “You’re tough,” he says admiringly, which Kitty ignores, but she keeps sneaking peeks at him. He has that effect on people. On girls. Women, even.

We drive through the neighbourhood in silence. At last Kitty says, “So who are you?”

I look over at him and he’s looking straight ahead. “I’m Peter. Your sister’s, um, boyfriend.”

My mouth drops. We never said anything about lying to our families! I thought this was going to be an at-school-only thing.

Kitty goes completely still in my arms. Then she twists around to look at me and shrieks, “*He’s your boyfriend? Since when?*”

“Since last week.” At least that much is the truth. Sort of.

“But you never said anything! Not one frigging word, Lara Jean!”

Automatically I say, “Don’t say ‘frig’.”

“Not one frigging word,” Kitty repeats with a shake of her head.

Peter cracks up, and I give him a dirty look. “It all happened really fast,” he offers. “There was barely time to tell anybody—”

“Was I talking to you?” Kitty snaps. “No, I don’t think so. I was talking to my sister.”

Peter's eyes widen, and I can see him trying to keep a straight face.

"Does Margot know?" she asks me.

"Not yet, and don't you go mentioning it to her before I have a chance to."

"Hmph." This seems to appease Kitty a tiny bit. Knowing something first, before Margot, is a big deal.

Then we're at the elementary school, and thank God the bus is still there in the parking lot. All the kids are lined up in front of it. I let out the breath I've been holding the whole way over, and Kitty is already untangling herself from me and bounding out of the car. "Have a good time on the field trip!" I call out.

She spins back around and points an accusing finger at me. "I want to hear the *whole* story when I get home!" With that decree she's off running for the bus loop.

I rebuckle my seat belt. "Um, I don't remember us deciding to tell our families that we're boyfriend-girlfriend."

"She was going to have to find out at some point, with me chauffeuring you and her around town."

"You didn't have to say 'boyfriend'. You could've just said 'friend'." We're getting close to school now, just two more lights. I give my side braid a nervous tug. "Um, so have you talked to Genevieve at all?"

Peter frowns. "No."

"She hasn't said a word to you about it?"

"Nope. But I'm sure she will soon."

Peter speeds into the parking lot and zooms into a space. When we get out of the car and head for the entrance, Peter's fingers lace through mine. I think he's going to drop me off at my locker like he did before, but he leads us in the opposite direction.

"Where are we going?" I ask him.

"Cafeteria."

I'm about to protest, but before I can, he says firmly, "We need to start hanging out in public more. The caf is where we'll get the most bang for our buck."



Josh won't be in the cafeteria – that's for popular people – but I know who will most certainly be there: Genevieve.

When we walk in, she's holding court at their lunch table – her and Emily Nussbaum and Gabe and Darrell from the lacrosse team. They're all eating breakfast and drinking coffee. She must have a sixth sense where Peter is concerned, because she beams lasers at us immediately. I start slowing down, which Peter doesn't seem to notice. Peter makes a beeline for the table, but at the last second I chicken out. I tug on his hand and say, "Let's sit over here," and point to an empty table in their line of vision.

"Why?"

"Just – please." I think fast. "Because, you see, it would be too blatantly jerky of you to bring a girl to the table after you've only been broken up for, like, a minute. And this way Genevieve can watch from afar and wonder for just a little bit longer." And also, I'm terrified.

As I drag Peter over to the table, he waves to his friends, shrugging his shoulders like *Whaddareyougonnado?* I sit down and Peter sits down next to me. He pulls my chair closer to his. Raising his eyebrows, he asks, "Are you that afraid of her?"

"No." Yes.

"You're going to have to face her sometime." Peter leans forward and grabs my hand again and starts tracing the lines on my palm.

"Quit," I say. "You're creeping me out."

He flashes me a hurt look. "Girls love it when I do that."

"No, *Genevieve* loves it. Or she pretends to love it. You know, now that I think of it, you actually don't have *that* much experience when it comes to girls. Just one girl." I take my hand away from his and perch it on the table. "I mean, everybody thinks you're this big ladies' man, when in reality you've only ever been with Genevieve and then Jamila for, like, a month—"

"OK, OK. I get it. Enough already. They're watching us."

"Who is? Your table?"

Peter shrugs. "Everyone."

I do a quick look around. He's right. Everyone is watching us. Peter's so used to people watching him, but I'm not. It feels funny, like a new sweater

that makes my skin feel itchy. Because no one ever watches me. It's like being onstage. And the funny thing, the really strange thing is, it's not an altogether unpleasant feeling.

I'm pondering this when my eyes meet Genevieve's. There's this very brief moment of recognition between us, like, *I know you*. Then she looks away and whispers something to Emily. Genevieve is looking at me like I am a tasty morsel and she is going to eat me alive and then spit out my bones. And then, just as quickly, the look is gone and she's smiling.

I shiver. The truth is, Genevieve scared me even when we were kids. One time I was playing at her house, and Margot called looking for me to come home for lunch, and Genevieve told her I wasn't there. She wouldn't let me leave because she wanted to keep playing dollhouse. She kept blocking the door. I had to call for her mom.

The clock reads five minutes past eight. The bell's going to ring soon. "We should get going," I say, and when I stand up, my knees feel shaky. "Ready?"

He's distracted because he was looking over at his table of friends. "Yeah, sure." Peter gets up and propels me towards the door; he keeps one hand on the small of my back. With his other hand he waves at his friends. "Smile," he whispers to me, so I do.

I have to admit, it's not a bad feeling, having a boy sweep you along, usher you through crowds. It's the feeling of being cared for. It's kind of like walking in a dream. I'm still me and Peter's still Peter, but everything around me feels fuzzy and unreal, like the time Margot and I snuck champagne on New Year's Eve.

I never knew it before, but I think maybe all this time I've been invisible. Just someone who was there. Now that people think I'm Peter Kavinsky's girlfriend, they're wondering about me. Like, why? What about me made Peter like me? What do I have? What makes me so special? I would be wondering too.

I am now a Mysterious Girl. Before I was just a Quiet Girl. But becoming Peter's girlfriend has elevated me to Mysterious Girl.

I take the bus home from school because Peter has to go to lacrosse practice. I sit in the front the way I've been doing, but today people have

questions for me. Underclassmen, mostly, because hardly any upperclassmen take the bus.

“What’s with you and Kavinsky?” a sophomore girl named Manda asks me. I pretend like I don’t hear her.

Instead I sink lower into my seat and open up the note Peter left for me in my locker.

*Dear Lara Jean,  
Good job today.  
Peter*

I start to smile and then I hear Manda whisper to her friend, “It’s so weird that Kavinsky would like her. I mean ... look at her and then look at Genevieve.” I can feel myself shrink. Is that what everyone thinks? Maybe it’s not that I’m a Mysterious Girl. Maybe it’s that I’m a Not Good Enough Girl.

When I get home, I go straight to my room, put on a soft nightgown, and release my braid. It’s sweet relief to let it out. My scalp is tingling with gratitude. Then I lie in my bed and stare out the window until it gets dark. My phone keeps buzzing, and I’m sure it’s Chris, but I don’t lift my head to look.

Kitty barges in at one point and says, “Are you sick? Why are you still lying in bed like you have cancer like Brielle’s mom did?”

“I need peace,” I say, closing my eyes. “I need to replenish myself with peace.”

“Well ... then what are we eating for dinner?”

I open my eyes. That’s right. It’s a Monday. I’m in charge of dinner on Mondays now. Ugh, Margot, where *are* you? It’s dark already, there’s not enough time to defrost anything. Maybe Mondays should be pizza nights. I eye her. “Do you have any money?”

We both get an allowance – Kitty gets five dollars a week and I get twenty, but Kitty always has more money than me. She saves everything like a wily squirrel. I don’t know where she keeps it, because she locks the door whenever she goes to take any out of her stash. And she’ll lend it, but she charges interest. Margot has a credit card that she’s allowed to use for

groceries and gas, but she took that with her. I should probably ask Daddy about getting me one too, now that I'm the oldest sister.

"Why do you need money?"

"Because I want to order a pizza for dinner." Kitty opens her mouth to negotiate, but before she can get a word in, I say, "Daddy will pay you back when he gets home, so don't even think about charging me interest. The pizza's for you too, you know. A twenty ought to do it."

Kitty crosses her arms. "I'll give you the money, but first you have to tell me about that boy from this morning. Your *boyfriend*."

I groan. "What do you want to know?"

"I want to know how you got together."

"We used to be friends back in middle school, remember? We'd all hang out in the Pearces' tree house sometimes." Kitty gives me a blank shrug. "Well, remember that day I got in a car accident?" Kitty nods. "Well, Peter was driving by, and he stopped and helped me. And we just ... reconnected. It was fate." Actually, this is good practise, telling Kitty this story. I'll tell Chris the same story tonight.

"That's it? That's the whole story?"

"Hey, that's a pretty good story," I say. "I mean, a car accident is very dramatic, plus our history together."

Kitty just says, "Hmm," and she leaves it at that.

We have sausage and mushroom pizza for dinner, and when I broach the idea of Pizza Mondays, Daddy is quick to agree. I think he's remembering my bo ssam mac and cheese.

It's a relief that Kitty spends most of dinner talking about her field trip and all I have to do is chew on my pizza. I'm still thinking about what Manda said and wondering if maybe this wasn't such a good idea after all.

When Kitty pauses to inhale her slice, Daddy turns to me and says, "Did anything interesting happen to you today?"

I swallow my mouthful of pizza. "Um ... not really."

Later that night I fix myself a bubble bath and soak in the tub for so long Kitty bangs on the door twice to check if I've fallen asleep. Once I almost do.

I've just drifted off when my phone buzzes. It's Chris. I hit ignore, but then it keeps buzzing, and buzzing, and buzzing. I finally just pick up.

"Is it true?" she screams.

I hold the phone away from my ear. "Yes."

"Oh my gawd. Tell me everything."

"Tomorrow, Chris. I'll tell you everything tomorrow. Good night."

"Wait—"

"Night!"

*OceanofPDF.com*

That Friday I go to my first ever football game. I've never had even the tiniest bit of interest in it before, and I still don't. I'm sitting high in the stands with Peter and his friends, and as far as I can tell, there's not a lot to see. It just seems like a lot of waiting and huddling and not a lot of action. Nothing at all like football games in the movies and on TV shows.

By nine thirty the game's almost over, I hope, and I'm yawning into my coat when Peter suddenly throws his arm around me. I nearly choke on my yawn.

Down below, Genevieve is cheering with the rest of the squad. She is shimmying and shaking her pom-poms. She looks up in the stands, and when she sees us, she stops for just a half second before launching into a new cheer, eyes blazing.

I glance at Peter, who has a satisfied smirk on. When Genevieve's back on the sidelines, he drops his arm and suddenly seems to remember I'm there. He says, "Eli's having people over tonight. Wanna go?"

I don't even know who Eli is. I yawn again, a big one for show. "Um ... I'm really tired. So ... no. No, thank you. Can you just drop me off on the way there?"

Peter gives me a look, but he doesn't argue.

On the way home, we pass by the diner and Peter suddenly says, "I'm hungry. Do you want to stop and get something?" Pointedly he adds, "Or are you too tired?"

I ignore the dig and say, "Sure, I can eat."

So Peter turns the car around and we go to the diner. We get a booth up front. Whenever I used to come here with Margot and Josh, we would always sit in the back near the jukebox so we could put coins in. Half the time the jukebox was broken, but we still liked sitting near it. It's weird to be here without them. We have so many traditions here. The three of us would get two grilled-cheese sandwiches and cut them up into squares, and we'd order a bowl of tomato soup to dip the squares in, and then Josh and I would share a waffle with extra whipped cream for dessert and Margot would have a bowl

of tapioca pudding. Gross, I know. I'm pretty sure only grandmas like tapioca pudding.

Our waitress is Kelly, who's a student at the college. She was gone all summer, and I guess now she's back. She eyes Peter as she sets down our waters. "Where are your friends tonight?" she asks me.

I say, "Margot's left for Scotland, and Josh ... isn't here." Which Peter rolls his eyes at.

Then Peter orders blueberry pancakes and bacon and scrambled eggs. I get a grilled cheese with fries on the side and a black-cherry soda.

When Kelly leaves to put in our orders, I ask him, "Why do you hate Josh so much?"

"I don't hate him," Peter scoffs. "I barely know the guy."

"Well, you certainly don't like him."

Peter scowls at me. "What's to like? That kid turned me in once for cheating in seventh grade."

Peter cheated? My stomach twists a little. "What kind of cheating was it? Like, homework?"

"No, a Spanish test. I wrote down the answers in my calculator, and Josh freaking told on me. Who does that?"

I search his face for some sign of embarrassment or shame at having cheated, but I don't see even an iota. "What are you so high and mighty for? You're the one who cheated!"

"It was seventh grade!"

"Well, do you still cheat?"

"No. Hardly ever. I mean, I have." He frowns at me. "Would you quit looking at me like that?"

"Like what?"

"With judgey eyes. Look, I'm going to school on a lacrosse scholarship anyway, so what does it matter?"

I have a sudden revelation. I lower my voice and say, "Wait ... can you read?"

He bursts out laughing. “Yes, I can read! Geez, Lara Jean. Not everything has a story behind it, OK? I’m just lazy.” He snorts. “*Can I read?* I’ve written you multiple notes! You’re hilarious.”

I can feel my face get flushed. “It wasn’t that funny.” I squint at him. “Is everything a joke to you?”

“Not everything, but most things, sure.”

I drop my chin. “Then maybe that’s a character flaw that you should work on,” I say. “Because some things are serious and they should be taken seriously. Sorry if you think that’s me being judgey.”

“Yup, I think that’s judgey. I think you’re judgey in general. That’s a character flaw that *you* should work on. I also think you need to learn how to kick back and have fun.”

I’m listing off all the ways I have fun – biking (which I hate), baking, reading; I consider saying knitting but I’m pretty sure he’ll only make fun of me – when Kelly drops off our food and I stop so I can bite into my grilled cheese while it’s still oozy.

Peter steals one of my french fries. “So who else?”

“Who else what?”

With his mouth full, he says, “Who else got letters?”

“Um, that’s really private.” I shake my head at him, like, *Wow, how rude.*

“What? I’m just curious.” Peter dips another fry into my little ramekin of ketchup. Smirking, he says, “Come on, don’t be shy. You can tell me. I know I’m number one, obviously. But I want to hear who else made the cut.”

He’s practically flexing, he’s so sure of himself. Fine, if he wants to know so bad, I’ll tell him. “Josh, you—”

“Obviously.”

“Kenny.”

Peter snorts. “Kenny? Who’s he?”

I prop my elbows up on the table and rest my chin on my hands. “A boy I met at church camp. He was the best swimmer of the whole boys’ side. He saved a drowning kid once. He swam out to the middle of the lake before the lifeguards even noticed anything was wrong.”



“So what’d he say when he got the letter?”

“Nothing. It was sent back return to sender.”

“OK, who’s next?”

I take a bite of sandwich. “Lucas Krapf.”

“He’s gay,” Peter says.

“He’s not gay!”

“Dude, quit dreaming. The kid is gay. He wore an ascot to school yesterday.”

“I’m sure he was wearing it ironically. Besides, wearing an ascot doesn’t make someone gay.” I give him a look like, *Wow, so homophobic.*

“Hey, don’t give me that look,” he objects. “My favourite uncle’s gay as hell. I bet you fifty bucks that if I showed my uncle Eddie a picture of Lucas, he’d confirm it in half a second.”

“Just because Lucas appreciates fashion, that doesn’t make him gay.” Peter opens his mouth to argue but I lift up a hand to quiet him. “All it means is he’s more of a city guy in the midst of all this ... this boring suburbia. I bet you he ends up going to NYU or some other place in New York. He could be a TV actor. He’s got that look, you know. Svelte with fine-boned features. Very sensitive features. He looks like ... like an angel.”

“So what did Angel Boy say about the letter then?”

“Nothing ... I’m sure because he’s a gentleman and didn’t want to embarrass me by bringing it up.” I give him a meaningful look. *Unlike some people* is what I’m saying with my eyes.

Peter rolls his eyes. “All right, all right. Whatever, I don’t care.” He leans back in his seat and stretches his arm out on the back of the empty seat next to him. “That’s only four. Who’s the fifth?”

I’m surprised he’s been keeping count. “John Ambrose McClaren.”

Peter’s eyes widen. “McClaren? When did you like him?”

“Eighth grade.”

“I thought you liked me in eighth grade!”

“There may have been a little bit of overlap,” I admit. Stirring my straw, I say, “There was this one time, in gym ... he and I had to pick up all the soccer

balls, and it started to rain..." I sigh. "It was probably the most romantic thing that ever happened to me."

"What is it with girls and rain?" Peter wonders.

"I don't know... I guess maybe because everything feels more dramatic in the rain," I say with a shrug.

"Did anything actually happen with you two, or were you just standing out in the rain picking up soccer balls?"

"You wouldn't understand." Someone like Peter could never understand.

Peter rolls his eyes. "So did McClaren's letter get sent to his old house?" he prompts.

"I think so. I never heard anything back from him." I take a long sip of my soda.

"Why do you sound so sad about it?"

"I'm not!"

Maybe I am, a little. Besides Josh, I think John Ambrose McClaren matters the most to me of all the boys I've loved. There was just something so sweet about him. It was the promise of maybe, maybe one day. I think John Ambrose McClaren must be the One That Got Away. Out loud I say, "I mean, either he never got my letter or he did, and..." I shrug. "I just always wondered how he turned out. If he's still the same. I bet he is."

"You know what, I think maybe he mentioned you once." Slowly he says, "Yeah, he definitely did. He said he thought you were the prettiest girl in our grade. He said his one regret from middle school was not asking you to the eighth-grade formal."

My whole body goes still and I think I even stop breathing. "For real?" I whisper.

Peter busts up laughing. "Dude! You're so gullible!"

My stomach squeezes. Blinking, I say, "That was really mean. Why would you say that?"

Peter stops laughing and says, "Hey, I'm sorry. I was just kidding—"

I reach across the table and punch him in the shoulder, hard. "You're a jerk."

He rubs his shoulder and cries out, "Ow! That hurt!"

"Well, you deserved it."

"Sorry," he says again. But there's still a trace of laughter in his eyes, so I turn my head away from him. "Hey, come on. Don't be mad. Who knows? Maybe he did like you. Let's call him and find out."

My head snaps up. "You have his phone number? You have John Ambrose McClaren's number?"

Peter pulls out his cell phone. "Sure. Let's call him right now."

"No!" I try to grab his phone away from him, but he's too quick. He holds his phone above my head and I can't reach. "Don't you dare call him!"

"Why not? I thought you were so curious about what ever happened to him."

I shake my head fervently.

"What are you so afraid of? That he doesn't remember you?" Something changes in his face, some dawning realization about me. "Or that he does?"

I shake my head.

"That's it." Peter nods to himself; he tips back in his chair, his hands linked around his head.

I don't like the way he's looking at me. Like he thinks he's figured me out. I hold my palm out to him. "Give me your phone."

Peter's jaw drops. "You're going to call him? Right now?"

I like that I've surprised him. It makes me feel like I've won something back. I think throwing Peter off guard could be a fun hobby for me. In a commanding voice I've only ever used with Kitty, I say, "Just give me your phone." Peter hands me his phone, and I copy John's number into mine. "I'll call him when *I* feel like it, not because *you* feel like it."

Peter gives me a look of grudging respect. Of course I'm never going to call John, but Peter K. doesn't need to know that.

That night, I'm lying in bed still thinking about John. It's fun to think of the what-if. Scary, but fun. It's like, I thought this door was closed before, but

here it is open just the tiniest crack. What if? What would that be like, me and John Ambrose McClaren? If I close my eyes, I can almost picture it.

*OceanofPDF.com*

Margot and I are on the phone; it's Saturday afternoon here and Saturday night there. "Have you lined up an internship for the spring?"

"Not yet..."

Margot lets out a sigh. "I thought you were going to try and do something at Montpelier. I know they need help in the archives. Do you want me to call Donna for you?"

Margot did an internship at Montpelier for two summers and she loved it. She was there for some important dig where they found a shard of Dolley Madison's china plate, and you'd have thought they found diamonds or a dinosaur bone. Everybody loves Margot over there. When she left, they gave her a plaque for all her hard work. Daddy hung it up in the living room.

"Montpelier's too far of a drive," I say.

"What about volunteering at the hospital?" she suggests. "You could get a ride with Daddy on the days you have to go in."

"You know I don't like the hospital."

"Then the library! You like the library."

"I've already filled out an application," I lie.

"Have you really?"

"Or I was just about to."

"I shouldn't have to push you to want things. You should want them for yourself. You need to take the initiative. I'm not always going to be beside you to push you."

"I know that."

"I mean, do you realize how important this year is, Lara Jean? It's kind of everything. You don't get a do-over: this is junior year."

I can feel tears and panic building up inside me. If she asks me another question, it will be too much, and I'll cry.

"Hello?"

“I’m still here.” My voice comes out tiny, and I know Margot knows how close I am to crying.

She pauses. “Look, you still have time, OK? I just don’t want you to wait too long and have all the good placements go to other people. I’m just worried about you is all. But everything’s fine; you’re still OK.”

“OK.” Even just that one little word is an effort.

“How’s everything else?”

I started out this conversation wishing I could tell her about Peter and everything that’s been going on with me, but now I’m just feeling relieved that there are all these miles between us and she can’t see what I’m up to. “Everything’s good,” I say.

“How’s Josh? Have you talked to him lately?”

“Not really,” I say. Which I haven’t. I’ve been so busy with Peter I haven’t really had a chance.

Kitty and I are on the front steps. She's drinking her Korean yogurt drink and I'm working on that scarf for Margot while I wait for Peter. Kitty's waiting for Daddy to come out. He's dropping her off at school today.

Ms Rothschild hasn't come outside yet. Maybe she's sick today or maybe she's running even later than usual.

We've got our eyes locked on her front door when a minivan drives down our street and slows in front of our house. I squint my eyes. It's Peter Kavinsky. Driving a tan minivan. He ducks his head out the window. "Are you coming or not?"

"Why are you driving *that*?" Kitty calls out.

"Never mind that, Katherine," Peter calls back. "Just get in."

Kitty and I look at each other. "Me too?" Kitty asks me.

I shrug. Then I lean back and open the front door and yell out, "Kitty's getting a ride with me, Daddy!"

"OK!" he yells back.

We stand up, but just then Ms Rothschild comes dashing out of the house in her navy blue suit, briefcase in one hand, coffee in the other. Kitty and I look at each other gleefully. "Five, four, three—"

"Damn it!"

Giggling, we hurl ourselves towards Peter's minivan. I hop into the passenger seat and Kitty climbs into the back. "What were you guys laughing about?" he asks.

I'm about to tell him when Josh walks out of his house. He stops and stares at us for a second before he waves. I wave back and Kitty hangs her head out the window and yells, "Hi, Josh!"

"What up," Peter calls out, leaning over me.

"Hey," Josh says back. Then he gets in his car.

Peter pokes me in the side and grins and puts the car in reverse. "Tell me why you guys were laughing."

Clicking into my seat belt, I say, "At least once a week, Ms Rothschild runs out to her car and spills hot coffee all over herself."

Kitty pipes up, "It's the funniest thing in the world."

Peter snorts. "You guys are sadistic."

"What's sadistic?" Kitty wants to know. She puts her head between us.

I push her back and say, "Put your seat belt on."

Peter puts the car in reverse. "It means seeing other people in pain makes you happy."

"Oh." She repeats it to herself softly. "Sadistic."

"Don't teach her weird stuff," I say.

"I like weird stuff," Kitty protests.

Peter says, "See? The kid likes weird stuff." Without turning around, he lifts his hand up for a high five and Kitty leans forward and slaps it heartily. "Hey, gimme a sip of whatever it is you're drinking back there."

"It's almost gone, so you can have the rest," she says.

Kitty hands it over, and Peter tips back the plastic container in his mouth. "This is good," he says.

"It's from the Korean grocery store," Kitty tells him. "They come in a pack and you can put them in the freezer and if you pack it for lunch, it'll be icy and cold when you drink it."

"Sounds good to me. Lara Jean, bring me one of these tomorrow morning, will you? For services rendered."

I shoot him a dirty look and Peter says, "I mean the rides! Geez."

"I'll bring you one, Peter," Kitty says.

"That's my girl."

"As long as you give me a ride to school tomorrow too," Kitty finishes, and Peter hoots.



Before fourth period, I'm at my locker, trying to repin my milkmaid braid in the little mirror hanging from the door.

"Lara Jean?"

"Yes?"

I peek around the door and it's Lucas Krapf, wearing a thin V-neck sweater in brilliant blue and stone-coloured khakis. "I've had this for a while now... I wasn't going to say anything, but then I thought maybe you'd want it back." He puts a pink envelope in my hand. It's my letter. So Lucas got his too.

I drop it into my locker, make a *yikes* face at myself in the mirror, and then close the door. "So you're probably wondering what this is all about," I begin. And then I immediately falter. "It's um, well, I wrote it a long time ago, and —"

"You don't have to explain."

"Really? You're not curious?"

"No. It was just really nice to get a letter like that. I was actually pretty honoured."

I let out a relieved sigh and sag against my locker. Why is Lucas Krapf just so exactly right? He knows how to say the perfect thing.

And then Lucas gives me a half grimace, half smile. "But the thing is..." He lowers his voice. "You know I'm gay, right?"

"Oh, right, totally," I say, trying not to sound disappointed. "No, I totally knew." So Peter was right after all.

Lucas smiles. "You're so cute," he says, and I perk up again. Then he says, "Listen, can you not tell anybody though? I mean, I'm out, but I'm not *out* out yet. You know what I mean?"

"Totally," I say, super confident.

"For instance, my mom knows but my dad only kind of knows. I haven't outright told him."

"Got it."

“I just let people believe what they please. I don’t feel like it’s my responsibility to quantify myself for them. I mean, you get what I’m talking about. As a biracial person, I’m sure people are always asking you what race you are, right?”

I haven’t thought of it that way before, but yes yes yes! Lucas just gets it. “Exactly. It’s like, why do you need to know?”

“Exactly.”

We smile at each other and I feel that wonderful sensation of being known by someone. We walk together in the same direction; he has Mandarin class and I have French. At one point he asks me about Peter, and I’m tempted to tell him the truth, because I’m feeling so close to him. But Peter and I made that pact: we explicitly said we would never tell anyone. I don’t want to be the one to break it. So when Lucas says, “Hey, so what’s the deal with you and Kavinsky?” I just shrug and give him an enigmatic smile.

“It’s crazy, right? Because he’s so ...” I search for the exact right word, but I can’t think of it. “I mean, he could play the part of a handsome guy in a movie.” Hastily I add, “So could you though. You’d play the guy the girl *should* pick.”

Lucas laughs, but I can tell he likes it.

*Dear Lucas,*

*I never met a boy with manners as good as yours. You ought to have a British accent. At homecoming, you wore a cravat and it suited you so well I think you could wear one all the time and get away with it.*

*Oh, Lucas! I wish I knew what kind of girls you liked. As far as I can tell, you haven’t dated anyone . . . unless you have a girlfriend at another school. You’re just so mysterious. I hardly know a thing about*

you. The things I know are so unsubstantial, so unsatisfying, like that you eat a chicken sandwich every day at lunch, and you're on the golf team. I guess the one remotely real thing I know about you is you're a good writer, which must mean you have deep reserves of emotion. Like that short story you wrote in creative writing about the poisoned well, and it was from a six-year-old boy's perspective. It was so sensitive, so keen! That story made me feel like I knew you at least a little bit. But I don't know you, and I wish I did.

I think you're very special. I think you are probably one of the most special people at our school, and I wish more people knew that about you. Or maybe I don't, because sometimes it's nice to be the only one who knows something.

Love, Lara Jean

After school, Chris and I are hanging out in my room. She's in trouble with her mom for staying out all night, so she's hiding out over here until her mom leaves for book club. We're sharing a big bag of Kitty's Pirate Booty, which I'm going to have to replace because she'll complain if it's missing from her lunch on Monday.

Chris stuffs a handful of Pirate Booty puffs in her mouth. "Just tell me, Lara Jean. How far have you guys gone?"

I almost choke. "We've gone nowhere! And we have no plans to go anywhere in the near future." Or ever.

"Seriously? Not even over-the-bra action? A quick swipe across your chest?"

"No! I told you, me and my sister aren't like that."

Chris snorts. "Are you joking me? Of course Margot and Josh have had sex. Quit being so naive, Lara Jean."

"This isn't me being naive," I tell her. "I know for a fact that he and Margot haven't done it."

"How? How do you know 'for a fact'? I'd love to hear this."

"I'm not telling you."

If I tell Chris, she'll only laugh more. She doesn't understand; she only has a little brother. She doesn't know how it is with sisters. Margot and I, we made a pact, back in middle school. We swore we wouldn't have sex until we were married or we were really, really in love and at least twenty-one. Margot might be really, really in love, but she's not married and she's not twenty-one. She'd never go back on her word. With sisters a pact is everything.

"No, I'd really love to know." Chris has that hungry glint in her eyes, and I know she's just getting warmed up.

"You just want to make fun of it, and I'm not going to let you," I say.

Chris rolls her eyes. "Fine. But there's no way they haven't boned."

I think Chris talks like that on purpose to get a reaction from me. She loves a reaction, so I'm careful to not give her one. I calmly say, "Can you please

stop talking about my sister and Josh having sex. You know I don't like it."

Chris takes a permanent marker out of her bag and starts to colour in her thumbnail. "You need to stop being such a scaredy-cat. Seriously, you've built it up in your head to be this huge, life-changing moment, but it's actually done in under five, and it's not even the best part."

I know she's waiting for me to ask what the best part is, and I am curious, but I ignore her and say, "I think permanent marker is toxic for your nails," to which she shakes her head at me like I'm a lost cause.

I wonder, though ... what *would* it be like? To be that close to a boy and have him see all of you, no holding back. Would it be scary only for a second or two, or would it be scary the whole time? What if I didn't like it at all? Or what if I liked it too much? It's a lot to think about.

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“Do you think if a guy and a girl have been dating for a long time, they’ve automatically had sex?” I ask Peter. We’re sitting on the floor of the library, our backs against the wall of the reference section nobody ever goes to. It’s after school, the library’s empty, and we’re doing homework. Peter gets Cs and Ds in chemistry, so I’ve been helping him study.

Peter looks up from his chem book, suddenly interested. He tosses the book aside and says, “I need more information. How long have they been dating?”

“A long time. Like two years, something like that.”

“How old are they? Our age?”

“About.”

“Then most likely but not necessarily. It depends on the girl and the guy. But if I had to put money on it, yeah.”

“But the girl’s not like that. The guy isn’t either.”

“Who are we talking about here?”

“That’s a secret.” I hesitate, and then say, “Chris thinks there’s no way they haven’t. She says it’s impossible.”

Peter snorts. “Why are you going to her for advice? That girl is a train wreck.”

“She is not a train wreck!”

He gives me a look. “Freshman year she got wasted on Four Loko and she climbed up on Tyler Boylan’s roof and did a striptease.”

“Were you there?” I demand. “Did you see it with your own two eyes?”

“Damn straight. Fished her clothes out of the pool like the gentleman I am.”

I blow out my cheeks. “Well, Chris never mentioned that story to me, so I can’t really speak to that. Besides, didn’t they ban Four Loko or whatever it’s called?”

“They still make it, but a shitty watered-down version. You can dump Five-Hour Energy in it to get the same effect.” I shudder, which makes Peter smile. “What do you and Chris even talk about?” he asks. “You have nothing in common.”

“What do *we* talk about?” I counter.

Peter laughs. “Point taken.” He pushes away from the wall and puts his head in my lap, and I go completely still.

I try to make my voice sound normal as I say, “You’re in a really strange mood today.”

He raises an eyebrow at me. “What kind of mood am I in?” Peter sure loves to hear about himself. Normally, I don’t mind, but today I’m not in the mood to oblige him. He already has too many people in his life telling him how great he is.

“The obnoxious kind,” I say, and he laughs.

“I’m sleepy.” He closes his eyes and snuggles against me. “Tell me a bedtime story, Covey.”

“Don’t flirt,” I tell him.

His eyes fly open. “I wasn’t!”

“Yes, you were. You flirt with everyone. It’s like you can’t help yourself.”

“Well, I don’t ever flirt with you.” Peter sits back up and checks his phone, and suddenly I’m wishing I didn’t say anything at all.

I'm in French class, looking out the window as I am wont to do, and that's when I see Josh walking towards the bleachers by the track. He's carrying his lunch, and he's alone. Why is he eating alone? He has his comic-book group; he has Jersey Mike.

But I guess he and Jersey Mike didn't hang out so much last year. Josh was always with Margot and me. The trio. And now we're not even a duo, and he's all alone. Part of it's Margot's fault for leaving, but I can see my part in it too – if I'd never started liking him, I wouldn't have had to make up this whole Peter K. story. I could just be his good friend Lara Jean like always.

Maybe this is why Mommy told Margot not to go to college with a boyfriend. When you have a boyfriend or a girlfriend, you only want to be with that person, and you forget about everybody else, and then when the two of you break up, you've lost all your friends. They were off doing fun stuff without you.

All I can say is, Josh sure is a lonely figure eating his sandwich on the very top bleacher.

I take the bus home from school because Peter had to leave early for a lacrosse game with his club team. I'm in front of the house, taking the mail out of our mailbox, when Josh pulls into his driveway. "Hey!" he calls out. He climbs out of his car and jogs over to me, his backpack slung over his shoulder.

"I saw you on the bus," he says. "I waved, but you were doing your daydreaming thing. So how long's your car going to be in the shop?"

"I don't know. It keeps changing. They had to order a part from, like, Indiana."

Josh gives me a knowing look. "So you're secretly relieved, right?"

"No! Why would I be relieved?"

"Come on. I know you. You hate driving. You're probably glad to have the excuse not to drive."



I start to protest, but then I stop. There's no use. Josh knows me too well. "Well, maybe I'm a teeny-tiny bit relieved."

"If you ever need a ride, you know you can call me."

I nod. I do know that. I wouldn't call him for myself, but I would for Kitty, in an emergency.

"I mean, I know you have Kavinsky now, but I'm right next door. It's way more convenient for me to give you a ride to school than him. I mean, it's more environmentally responsible." I don't say anything, and Josh scratches the back of his neck. "I want to say something to you, but I feel weird bringing it up. Which is also weird, because we've always been able to talk to each other."

"We can still talk to each other," I say. "Nothing's changed." That's the biggest lie I've ever told him, even bigger than the lie about my so-called dead twin Marcella. Until a couple of years ago Josh thought I had a twin sister named Marcella who died of leukemia.

"OK. I feel like ... I feel like you've been avoiding me ever since..."

He's going to say it. He's actually going to say it. I look down at the ground.

"Ever since Margot broke up with me."

My head snaps up. That's what he thinks? That I'm avoiding him because of Margot? Did my letter really make that little of an impact? I try to keep my face still and expressionless when I say, "I haven't been avoiding you. I've just been busy."

"With Kavinsky. I know. You and I have known each other a long time. You're one of my best friends, Lara Jean. I don't want to lose you too."

It's the "too" that's the sticking point. The "too" is what stops me in my tracks. It sticks in my craw. Because if he hadn't said "too", it would be about me and him. Not about me and him and Margot.

"That letter you wrote—"

Too late. I don't want to talk about the letter any more. Before he can say another word, I say, "I'll always be your friend, Joshy." And then I smile at him, and it takes a lot of effort. It takes so much effort. But if I don't smile, I'll cry.

Josh nods. "OK. Good. So ... so can we hang out again?"

"Sure."

Josh reaches out and chucks my chin. "So can I give you a ride to school tomorrow?"

"OK," I say. Because wasn't that kind of the whole point of this? To be able to hang out with Josh again without that letter hanging over our heads? To just be his good friend Lara Jean again?

After dinner I teach Kitty how to do laundry. She resists me at first, but I tell her that this is a job we are all sharing from now on, so she'd better just accept it.

"When the buzzer goes off, that means it's done and you have to fold it right away or it'll get wrinkled."

To both of our surprise, Kitty likes doing laundry. Mostly because she can sit in front of the TV and fold and watch her shows in peace.

"Next time I'll teach you how to iron."

"Ironing too? Who am I, Cinderella?"

I ignore her. "You'll be good at ironing. You like precision and clean lines. You'll probably be better at it than me."

This piques her interest. "Yeah, maybe. Your stuff always looks wrinkled no matter what."

After we finish the laundry, Kitty and I are washing up in the bathroom we share. There are two sinks; Margot had the one on the left and Kitty and I used to fight over who the sink on the right belonged to. It's hers now.

Kitty's brushing her teeth and I'm putting on a cucumber-aloe face mask, when Kitty says to me, "Do you think if I asked, Peter would take us to McDonald's tomorrow on the way to school?"

I rub another dollop of green face mask on to my cheeks. "I don't want you getting used to Peter giving us rides. You're taking the bus from now on, OK?"

Kitty pouts. "Why!"

"Because. Besides, Peter's not giving me a ride tomorrow, Josh is."

“But won’t Peter be mad?”

My face is getting tight from the mask drying. Through clenched teeth I say, “Nah. He’s not the jealous type.”

“Then who’s the jealous type?”

I don’t have a good answer for that. Who *is* the jealous type? I’m mulling this over when Kitty giggles at me in the mirror and says, “You look like a zombie.”

I hold my hands out to her face and she ducks away. In my best zombie voice I say, “I want to eat your brains.”

Kitty runs away, screaming.

When I’m back in my room, I text Peter that I don’t need a ride to school tomorrow. I don’t tell him Josh is giving me a ride. Just in case.

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Today's note from Peter says, *Tart and Tangy after school?*

He's drawn two boxes, a yes or a no. I check yes and drop the note in his locker.

After school ends, I meet Peter at his car, and we caravan with his lacrosse friends to Tart and Tangy. I order an original frozen yogurt with Cap'n Crunch and strawberries and kiwi and pineapple, and Peter gets key lime with crushed-up Oreos. I pull out my wallet to pay for my yogurt, but Peter stops me. He winks at me and says, "I got this."

I whisper, "I thought you weren't ever paying for anything."

"My boys are here. I can't look like a cheap-ass in front of my boys." Then he puts his arm around me and says loudly, "For as long as you're my girl, you don't pay for frozen yogurt."

I roll my eyes, but I'm not going to say no to a free frozen yogurt. No boy has ever paid for me before. I could get used to this kind of nice treatment.

I was bracing myself to see Genevieve here, but she doesn't show. I think Peter's wondering too, because he keeps his eyes on the door. With Genevieve, I keep waiting for the other shoe to drop. So far she's been eerily, disturbingly quiet. She's hardly ever in the cafeteria during lunch because she and Emily Nussbaum have been eating off campus, and when I see her in the hallways, she fake smiles at me without showing her teeth, which is somehow more menacing.

When is she going to strike back against me? When will I have my Jamila Singh moment? Chris says Genevieve's too obsessed with her college boyfriend to care about me and Peter, but I don't believe it. I've seen the way she looks at him. Like he's hers.

The boys put a few tables together and we basically take over the place. It's just like at the lunch table, with them being loud, talking about the football game coming up on Friday. I don't think I say two words. I don't really have anything to add. I just eat my free frozen yogurt and enjoy the fact that I'm

not at home organizing my shoe closet or watching the Golf Channel with my dad.

We're walking to our cars when Gabe says, "Hey, Lara Jean, did you know that if you say your name really fast, it sounds like Large? Try it! Larajeau."

Dutifully I repeat, "Larajeau. Larjeau. Largy. Actually I think it sounds more like Largy, not Large."

Gabe nods to himself and announces, "I'm going to start calling you Large. You're so little it's funny. Right? Like those big guys who go by the name Tiny?"

I shrug. "Sure."

Gabe turns to Darrell. "She's so little she could be our mascot."

"Hey, I'm not *that* small," I protest.

"How tall are you?" Darrell asks me.

"Five two," I fib. It's more like five one and a quarter.

Tossing his spoon in the trash, Gabe says, "You're so little you could fit in my pocket!" All the guys laugh. Peter's smiling in a bemused way. Then Gabe suddenly grabs me and throws me over his shoulder like I'm a kid and he's my dad.

"Gabe! Put me down!" I shriek, kicking my legs and pounding on his chest.

He starts spinning around in a circle, and all the guys are cracking up. "I'm going to adopt you, Large! You're going to be my pet. I'll put you in my old hamster cage!"

I'm giggling so hard I can't catch my breath and I'm starting to feel dizzy. "Put me down!"

"Put her down, man," Peter says, but he's laughing too.

Gabe runs towards somebody's pickup truck and sets me down in the back. "Get me out of here!" I yell. Gabe's already running away. All the guys start getting into their cars. "Bye, Large!" they call out. Peter jogs over to me and extends his hand so I can hop down.

"Your friends are crazy," I say, jumping on to the pavement.

“They like you,” he says.

“Really?”

“Sure. They used to hate when I would bring Gen places. They don’t mind if you hang out with us.” Peter slings his arm around me. “Come on, Large. I’ll take you home.”

As we walk to his car, I let my hair fall in my face so he doesn’t see me smiling. It sure is nice being part of a group, feeling like I belong.

I volunteered to bake six dozen cupcakes for Kitty’s PTA bake sale. I did it because Margot’s done it for the past two years. Margot only ever did it because she didn’t want people to think Kitty’s family wasn’t involved enough in PTA. She did brownies both times, but I signed up for cupcakes because I thought they’d be a bigger hit. I bought a few different kinds of blue sprinkles and I made little toothpick flags that say BLUE MOUNTAIN ACADEMY. I thought Kitty would have fun helping me decorate.

But now I’m realizing Margot’s way was better, because with brownies, you just pour them in the pan, bake, and slice, and there you go. Cupcakes are a lot more work. You have to scoop the perfect amount six dozen times, and then you have to wait for them to cool, and then you’re frosting and sprinkling.

I’m measuring out my eighth cup of flour when the doorbell rings. “Kitty!” I scream. “Get the door!”

It rings again. “Kitty!”

From upstairs she screams back, “I’m running an important experiment!”

I run to the door and fling it open without bothering to check who it is.

Peter. He busts up laughing.

“You have flour all over your face,” he says, dusting off my cheeks with the backs of his hands.

I twist away from him and wipe my face with my apron. “What are you doing here?”

“We’re going to the game. Didn’t you read my note from yesterday?”

“Oh, shoot. I had a test and I forgot.” Peter frowns and I add, “I can’t go anyway because I have to bake seventy-two cupcakes by tomorrow.”

“On a Friday night?”

“Well ... yeah.”

“Is this for the PTA bake sale?” Peter brushes past me and starts taking off his sneakers. “You guys are a no-shoes house, right?”

“Yeah,” I say, surprised. “Is your mom making something too?”

“Rice Krispie treats.” Another way smarter choice than seventy-two cupcakes.

“Sorry you came over here for nothing. Maybe we can go to the game next Friday,” I say, expecting him to put his shoes back on.

But he doesn’t, he wanders into the kitchen and sits on a stool. Huh? “Your house looks the same as I remembered,” he says, looking around. He points at the framed picture of me and Margot taking a bath when we were babies. “Cute.”

I can feel my cheeks burn. I go and turn the photo over. “When have you ever been to my house?”

“Back in seventh grade. Remember how we’d hang out in your neighbour’s tree house? I had to pee once and you let me use your bathroom.”

“Oh, yeah,” I say.

It’s funny to see a boy other than Josh in our kitchen. I feel nervous for some reason. “How long’s it going to take?” he asks me, his hands in his pockets.

“Hours, probably.” I pick up the measuring cup again. I can’t remember what cup I was on.

Peter groans. “Why can’t we just go to the store and buy some?”

I start measuring the flour that’s in the bowl, separating it into piles. “Because, do you think any of the other moms are buying cupcakes from Food Lion? How would that make Kitty look?”

“Well, if it’s for Kitty, then Kitty should be helping.” Peter hops off the stool and comes up to me and slides his hands around my waist and tries to untie my apron strings. “Where is the kid?”

I stare at him. “What ... are you doing?”

Peter looks at me like I’m a dummy. “I need an apron too if I’m going to help. I’m not trying to get my clothes all messed up.”

“We’re not going to be done in time for the game,” I tell him.

“Then we’ll just go to the party after.” Peter shoots me an incredulous look. “That was in the note I wrote you today! God, why do I even bother?”

“I was really busy today,” I say meekly. I feel bad. He’s following through on his end of the deal and faithfully writing me a note a day and I can’t even be bothered to read them. “I don’t know if I can go to a party. I don’t know if I’m allowed to go out that late.”

“Is your dad home? I’ll ask him.”

“No, he’s at the hospital. Besides I can’t just leave Kitty here by herself.” I pick up the measuring cup again.

“Well, what time does he get home?”

“I don’t know. Maybe late.” Or maybe like in the next hour. But Peter will be long gone by then. “You should just go. I don’t want to hold you up.”

Peter groans. “Covey. I need you. Gen hasn’t said a word about us yet, which is kind of the whole point of this. And ... she might bring that dickhole she’s dating.” Peter pushes out his lower lip. “Come on. I came through for you with Josh, didn’t I?”

“Yes,” I admit. “But, Peter, I have to make these cupcakes for the bake sale —”

Peter stretches his arms out. “Then I’ll help you. Just give me an apron.”

I back away from him and start rummaging around for another apron. I find one with a cupcake print and hand it to him.

He makes a face and points at mine. “I want the one you’re wearing.”

“But it’s mine!” It’s red-and-white gingham with little brown bears; my grandma got it for me in Korea. “I always bake in this. Just wear that one.”

Slowly Peter shakes his head and holds out his hand. “Give me yours. You owe me for not reading any of my notes.”

I untie the apron and hand it over. I turn around and go back to my measuring. “You’re a bigger baby than Kitty.”



“Just hurry up and give me a task.”

“Are you qualified, though? Because I only have exactly enough ingredients for six dozen cupcakes. I don’t want to have to start over—”

“I know how to bake!”

“OK, then. Dump those sticks of butter into the mixing bowl.”

“And then?”

“And then when you’re done, I’ll give you your next task.”

Peter rolls his eyes but he does as he’s told. “So this is what you do on Friday nights? Stay home and bake in your pjs?”

“I do other stuff too,” I say, tying my hair into a tighter ponytail.

“Like?”

I’m still so flustered from Peter’s sudden appearance that I can’t think. “Um, I go out.”

“Where?”

“God, I don’t know! Quit interrogating me, Peter.” I blow my bangs out of my eyes. It’s getting really warm in here. I might as well just turn off the oven, because Peter’s arrival has slowed down this whole process. At this rate I’ll be up all night. “You made me lose my count on the flour. I’m going to have to start over from scratch!”

“Here, let me do it,” Peter says, coming up close behind me.

I jerk away from him. “No, no, I’ll do it,” I say, and he shakes his head and tries to take the measuring cup from me, but I won’t let go, and flour puffs out of the cup and into the air. It dusts us both. Peter starts cracking up and I let out an outraged shriek. “Peter!”

He’s laughing too hard to speak.

I cross my arms. “I’d better still have enough flour.”

“You look like a grandma,” he says, still laughing.

“Well, you look like a grandpa,” I counter. I dump the flour in my mixing bowl back into the flour canister.

“Actually, you’re really a lot like my granny,” Peter says. “You hate cussing. You like to bake. You stay at home on Friday nights. Wow, I’m dating my

granny. Gross.”

I start measuring again. One, two. “I don’t stay home every Friday night.” Three.

“I’ve never seen you out. You don’t go to parties. We used to hang out back in the day. Why’d you stop hanging out?”

Four. “I ... I don’t know. Middle school was different.” What does he want me to say? That Genevieve decided I wasn’t cool enough so I got left behind? Why is he so clueless?

“I always wondered why you stopped hanging out with us.”

Was I on five or six? “Peter! You made me lose my count again!”

“I have that effect on women.”

I roll my eyes at him and he grins back at me, but before he can say anything else, I yell, “Kitty! Get down here!”

“I’m working—”

“Peter’s here!” I know that will get her.

In five seconds flat, Kitty’s running into the kitchen. She skids to a stop, all of a sudden shy. “Why are you here?” she asks him.

“To pick up Lara Jean. Why aren’t you helping?”

“I was running an experiment. Wanna help me?”

I answer for him. “Sure, he’ll help you.” To Peter I say, “You’re distracting me. Go help Kitty.”

“I don’t know if you want my help, Katherine. See, I’m really distracting to women. I make them lose their count.” Peter winks at her and I make a gagging sound. “Why don’t you stay down here and help us bake?”

“Bo-ring!” Kitty turns tail and runs back up the stairs.

“Don’t you dare try to sprinkle or frost when it’s all over!” I yell. “You haven’t earned the right!”

I’m creaming the butter and Peter’s cracking eggs into a chipped salad bowl when my dad gets home. “Whose car is that out front?” Daddy asks as he walks into the kitchen. He stops short. “Hello,” he says, surprised. He has a Chan’s Chinese Bistro bag in his hands.

“Hey, Daddy,” I say, like it’s perfectly normal that Peter Kavinsky is cooking in our kitchen. “You look tired.”

Peter stands up straighter. “Hi, Dr Covey.”

My dad sets the bag down on the kitchen table. “Oh, hello,” he says, clearing his throat. “Nice to see you. You’re Peter K., right?”

“Right.”

“One of the old gang,” my dad says jovially, and I cringe. “What are you kids up to tonight?”

“I’m baking cupcakes for Kitty’s PTA bake sale and Peter’s helping,” I say.

My dad nods. “Are you hungry, Peter? I have plenty.” He lifts the bag. “Shrimp lo mein, kung pao chicken.”

“Actually, Lara Jean and I were going to stop by our friend’s party,” Peter says. “If that would be OK? I’ll bring her back early.”

Before my dad can answer, I say to Peter, “I told you I have to finish these cupcakes.”

“Kitty and I will finish them,” my dad interjects. “You two go to that birthday party.”

My stomach flips. “It’s really OK, Daddy. I have to be the one to do them; I’m decorating them specially.”

“Kitty and I will figure it out. You can go get changed. We’ll keep working on these cupcakes.”

I open and close my mouth like a trout. “All right, then.” And I don’t make a move, I just stand there, because I’m afraid to leave the two of them alone together.

Peter smiles at me broadly. “You heard the man. We’ve got this covered.”

I think, *Don’t act too confident, because then my dad will think you’re arrogant.*

There are certain outfits you have that make you feel good every time you wear them, and then there are outfits where you wore them too many times in a row because you liked them so much, and now they just feel like garbage. I’m looking at my closet now and everything looks like garbage. My anxiety is

only compounded by the fact that I know Gen will be wearing the exact right thing, because she always wears the exact right thing. And I have to be wearing the right thing too. Peter wouldn't have come by and made such a point of going to this party if it weren't important to him.

I pull on my jeans and try on different tops – a frilly peach one that suddenly looks prissy in my eyes, a long fuzzy sweater with a penguin on it that looks too kiddish. I'm stepping into a pair of grey shorts with black suspenders when someone knocks at my door. I freeze and grab a sweater to cover myself up.

“Lara Jean?” It's Peter.

“Yes?”

“Are you almost ready?”

“Almost! Just – just go downstairs. I'll be down soon.”

He lets out an audible sigh. “OK. I'm gonna see what the kid's doing.”

When I hear his footsteps walking away, I scramble and try a cream polka-dot blouse with the shorts-suspenders ensemble. It's cute, but is it too cute? Too much? And should I do black tights or black knee socks? Margot said I look Parisian in this outfit. Parisian is a good thing. It's sophisticated, romantic. I try on a beret, just to see the effect, and I immediately throw it off. Definitely too much.

I wish Peter hadn't snuck up on me with this. I need time to plan, to prepare. Though truthfully, if he'd asked me ahead of time, I would have come up with an excuse not to go. It's one thing to go to Tart and Tangy after school, but a party with all of Peter's friends, not to mention Genevieve?

I hop around my room, searching for my over-the-knee socks, then searching for my strawberry lip pot that looks like a strawberry. Gosh, I really need to clean my room. It's hard to find anything in this mess.

I run to Margot's room for her big grandpa cardigan, and I pass Kitty's open door, where I see Peter and Kitty lying on the floor, working with her lab set. I root through Margot's sweater drawer, which is now T-shirts and shorts because she's taken most of her sweaters. No grandpa cardigan. But at the bottom of the drawer there is an envelope. A letter, from Josh.

I want to open it so badly. I know I shouldn't.

Carefully, ever so carefully, I take out the letter and unfold it.

*Dear Margot,*

*You say we had to break up because you don't want to go to college with a boyfriend, and you want your freedom, and you don't want to be held back. But you know and I know that's not the real reason. You broke up with me because we had sex and you were scared of getting close to me.*

I stop reading.

I can't believe it. Chris was right and I was wrong. Margot and Josh did have sex. It's like everything I thought I knew is the opposite. I thought I knew exactly who my sister was, but it turns out I don't know anything.

I hear Peter calling my name. "Lara Jean! Are you ready yet?"

Hastily I fold the letter up and put it back in the envelope. I put it back in the drawer and slam the drawer shut. "Coming!"

*OceanofPDF.com*

We're standing at the front door of Steve Bledell's mansion. Steve's on the football team; he's mostly known for having a rich stepdad with his own plane.

"Ready?" Peter asks me.

I wipe my palms on my shorts. I wish I'd had time to do something better to my hair. "Not really."

"Then let's talk strategy for a second. All you have to do is act like you're in love with me. That shouldn't be too hard."

I roll my eyes. "You're the vainest boy I've ever met."

Peter grins and shrugs. He's got his hand on the doorknob, but then he stops. "Hold on," he says, and he pulls the hair tie out of my hair and tosses it into the yard.

"Hey!"

"It looks better down. Just trust me." Peter runs his fingers through my hair and fluffs it up, and I swat his hand away. Then he takes his phone out of his back pocket and he snaps a picture of me.

I give him a puzzled look, and he explains, "In case Gen checks my phone." I watch as he sets the picture as his wallpaper.

"Can we do another one?" I don't like the way my hair looks.

"Nah, I like it. You look pretty." He probably only said it so we could hurry up and go inside, but it makes me feel good.

Walking into this party with Peter Kavinsky, I can't help but feel a sudden rush of pride. He's here with me. Or is it that I'm here with him?

I see her as soon as we walk in – she's on the couch with her girls; they're all drinking from red Solo cups. No boyfriend in sight. She raises her eyebrows at me and whispers something to Emily Nussbaum. "Heyyy, Lara Jean," Emily calls out, crooking her finger at me. "Come sit by us."

I start to walk towards them, thinking Peter is next to me, but he's not. He's stopped to say hi to someone. I look at him with panicky eyes and he just gestures at me to keep going. He mouths, *You're up*.

Crossing the room alone feels like crossing a continent, with Gen and her friends watching me. “Hi, guys,” I say, and my voice comes out high-pitched and little-girlish. There’s no room for me on the couch, so I perch on an armrest like a bird on a telephone wire. I keep my eyes trained on Peter’s back; he is across the room with some guys from the lacrosse team. It must be nice to be him. So at ease, so comfortable with himself, knowing that people are waiting for him, like, *Peter’s here, now the party can really get started*. I look around the room, just to have something to do, and see Gabe and Darrell, and they wave at me very nicely, but they don’t come over. It feels like everyone is waiting and watching, waiting and watching to see what Genevieve will do.

I wish I hadn’t come.

Emily leans forward. “We’re all dying to know ... what’s the story with you and Kavinsky?”

I know she’s been commissioned by Gen to ask. Gen’s sipping her drink, casual as can be, but she’s waiting for my answer. *Is she drunk yet?* I wonder. From everything I’ve heard and know about Gen, she is a mean drunk. Not that I’ve ever personally experienced it, but I’ve heard things. There are stories.

I wet my lips. “Whatever Peter said ... I guess that’s the story.”

Emily waves this off like whatever Peter says doesn’t really count. “We want to hear it from you. I mean, it’s just so surprising. How did this even happen?” She leans closer, like we are girlfriends.

When I hesitate, when my eyes dart towards Genevieve, she smiles and rolls her eyes. “It’s OK, you can say, Lara Jean. Peter and I are over. I don’t know if he told you this, but I’m actually the one who broke up with him, so.”

I nod. “That’s what he said.” That is *not* what he said, but it’s what I already knew.

“So when did you guys get together?” She tries to sound offhand, but I know my answer is important to her. She’s trying to catch me in something.

“Pretty recently,” I say.

“How recently?” she presses.

I swallow. “Right before school started,” I tell her. Isn’t that what Peter and I decided the story was going to be?

Genevieve’s eyes go bright and my heart sinks. I’ve said the wrong thing, but it’s too late. It’s hard not to get caught up in her spell. She’s the kind of person you want to like you. You know she can be cruel; you’ve seen her be cruel. But when her eyes are on you, and she’s paying attention to you, you want it to last. Her beauty is part of it, but there’s something more – something that draws you in; I think it’s her transparency – everything she thinks or feels is written all over her face, and even if it wasn’t, she’d say it anyway, because she says what she thinks, without thinking first.

I can see why Peter has loved her for so long.

“I think it’s adorable,” Genevieve says, and then the girls start talking about some concert they’re trying to get tickets for and I just sit there, glad I don’t have to talk any more, wondering how it’s going with the cupcakes back at home. I hope Daddy isn’t overbaking them. There’s nothing worse than a dry cupcake.

The girls move on to talking about Halloween costumes, so I get up and go to the bathroom. I come back to find Peter sitting in a wingback leather armchair, drinking a beer and talking to Gabe. There’s nowhere for me to sit; my spot on the couch has been taken. Now what?

I stand there for a second and then I go for it: I do what a girl in love with Peter would do. I do what Genevieve would do. I march right in and plop down in his lap like it’s my rightful place.

Peter yelps in surprise. “Hey,” he says, coughing on his beer.

“Hey,” I say. Then I tweak him once on the nose like I saw a girl do in a black-and-white movie.

Peter shifts in his seat and gives me a look like he’s trying not to laugh, and I get nervous – tweaking a boy on the nose is romantic, right? Then, out of the corner of my eye, I see Genevieve glaring at us. She whispers something to Emily and stalks out of the room.

Success!



Later I am pouring myself Cherry Coke and I see Genevieve and Peter, talking in the kitchen. She's speaking to him in a low, urgent voice, and she reaches out and touches his arm. He tries to brush her hand away, but she doesn't let go.

I'm so mesmerized I don't even notice when Lucas Krapf comes up to me, popping the cap off a bottle of Bud Light. "Hey, Lara Jean."

"Hi!" I'm relieved to see a familiar face.

He stands next to me, our backs against the dining-room wall. "What are they fighting about?"

"Who even knows?" I say. I smile a secret smile. Hopefully, it's about me, and Peter will be happy our plan is finally working.

Lucas crooks his finger at me so I'll come closer. He whispers, "Fighting isn't a good sign, Lara Jean. It means you still care." His breath smells like beer.

Hmm. Genevieve obviously still cares. Peter must too.

Lucas pats me on the head fondly. "Just be careful."

"Thank you," I say.

Peter stalks out of the kitchen and says, "Are you ready to go?" He doesn't wait for me to answer him; he just starts walking, his shoulders stiff.

I give Lucas a shrug. "See you on Monday, Lucas!" Then I scurry after Peter.

He's still mad; I can tell by the way he jerks the keys into the ignition. "God, she makes me crazy!" He's so keyed up energy is vibrating off him in waves. "What did you say to her?"

I shift uncomfortably in my seat. "She asked me when we got together. I told her just before school started."

Peter does a full-body groan. "We hooked up that first weekend."

"But ... you guys were broken up already."

"Yeah, well." Peter shrugs. "Whatever. What's done is done."

Relieved, I click on my seat belt and kick my shoes off. "What were you two fighting about tonight, anyway?"

“Don’t worry about it. You did a good job, by the way. She’s so jealous it’s killing her.”

“Yay,” I say. Just as long as she doesn’t kill *me*.

We drive through the night in silence. Then I ask, “Peter ... how did you know you loved Genevieve?”

“God, Lara Jean. Why do you have to ask those kind of questions?”

“Because I’m a naturally curious person.” I flip down his mirror and start braiding the top of my hair. “And maybe the question you should be asking yourself is, why are you so afraid to answer those kinds of questions?”

“I’m not afraid!”

“Then why won’t you answer the question?”

Peter goes silent, and I’m pretty sure he’s not going to answer, but then, after a long pause where my question just hangs in the air, he says, “I don’t know if I ever loved Genevieve. How would I even know what that felt like? I’m seventeen, for God’s sake.”

“Seventeen’s not so young. A hundred years ago people got married when they were practically our age.”

“Yeah, that was before electricity and the Internet. A hundred years ago eighteen-year-old guys were out there fighting wars with bayonets and holding a man’s life in their hands! They lived a lot of life by the time they were our age. What do kids our age know about love and life?”

I’ve never heard him talk like this before – like he actually cares about something. I think he’s still all worked up from his fight with Genevieve.

I wind my hair into a honey bun and secure it with a ponytail holder. “You know who you sound like? You sound like my grandpa,” I say. “Also I think you’re stalling because you don’t want to answer the question.”

“I answered it, you just didn’t like my answer.”

We pull up in front of my house. Peter turns off the engine, which is what he does when he wants to talk a little while longer. So I don’t jump out right away; I put my bag in my lap and search for my keys even though the lights are on upstairs. Gosh. To be sitting in the passenger seat of Peter Kavinsky’s black Audi. Isn’t that what every girl has ever wanted, in the history of boys

and girls? Not Peter Kavinsky specifically, or yes, maybe Peter Kavinsky specifically.

Peter leans his head back against the headrest and closes his eyes.

I say, “Did you know that when people fight with each other, that means they still really care about each other?” When Peter doesn’t answer, I say, “Genevieve must really have a hold on you.”

I expect him to deny it, but he doesn’t. Instead he says, “She does, but I wish she didn’t. I don’t want to be owned by anyone. Or belong to anyone.”

Margot would say she belongs to herself. Kitty would say she belongs to no one. And I guess I would say I belong to my sisters and my dad, but that won’t always be true. To belong to someone – I didn’t know it, but now that I think about, it seems like that’s all I’ve ever wanted. To really be somebody’s, and to have them be mine.

“So that’s why you’re doing this,” I tell him – I’m partly asking but I’m mostly telling. “To prove you don’t belong to her. Or with her.” I stop. “Do you think there’s a difference? Between belonging *with* and belonging *to*, I mean?”

“Sure. One implies choice; the other doesn’t.”

“You must really love her to go to all this trouble.”

Peter makes a dismissive sound. “You’re too dreamy-eyed.”

“Thank you,” I say, even though I know he doesn’t mean it as a compliment. I say it just to bug him.

I know I’ve succeeded when he says, his face sour, “What would you know about love, Lara Jean? You’ve never even had a boyfriend before.”

I’m tempted to make up someone, a boy from camp, from another town, from anywhere. *His name is Clint* is on the tip of my tongue. But it would be too humiliating, because he’d know I was lying; I already told him I never dated anybody before. And even if I hadn’t, it is far more pathetic to make up a boyfriend than to just admit the truth. “No, I’ve never had a boyfriend. But plenty of people I know have had boyfriends but they’ve never once been in love. I’ve been in love.” That’s why *I’m* doing this.

Peter snorts. “With who? Josh Sanderson? That tool?”

“He’s not a tool,” I say, frowning at him. “You don’t even know him to say that.”

“Anybody with one eye and half a brain could tell what a tool that guy is.”

“Are you saying my sister’s blind and brainless?” I demand. If he says one bad word about my sister, that’s it. This whole thing is off. I don’t need him that badly.

Peter laughs. “No. I’m saying you are!”

“You know what? I changed my mind. You’ve obviously never loved anyone but yourself.” I try to jerk the passenger door open, but it’s locked.

“Lara Jean, I was just kidding. Come on.”

“See you on Monday.”

“Wait, wait. First tell me something.” Peter leans back in his seat. “How come you never dated anybody?”

I shrug. “I don’t know ... because nobody ever asked?”

“Bullshit. I know for a fact that Martinez asked you to homecoming and you said no.”

I’m surprised he knows about that. “What is it with you guys all calling each other by your last name?” I ask him. “It’s so—” I struggle to find the right word. “Effected? Affected?”

“Don’t change the subject.”

“I guess I said no because I was scared.” I stare out the window and run my finger along the glass, making an *M* for Martinez.

“Of *Tommy*?”

“No. I like Tommy. It’s not that. It’s scary when it’s real. When it’s not just thinking about a person, but, like, having a real live person in front of you, with, like, expectations. And wants.” I finally look at Peter, and I’m surprised by how hard he’s paying attention; his eyes are intent and focused on me like he’s actually interested in what I’m saying. “Even when I liked a boy so much, loved him even, I would always rather be with my sisters, because that’s where I belong.”

“Wait. What about right now?”

“Right now? Well, I don’t like you that way so...”

“Good,” Peter says. “Don’t go falling for me again, OK? I can’t have any more girls in love with me. It’s exhausting.”

I laugh out loud. “You’re so full of yourself.”

“I’m kidding,” he protests, but he’s not. “What did you ever see in me anyway?” He grins at me then, cocky again and so sure of his charm.

“Honestly? I really couldn’t tell you.”

The grin falters and then rights itself, but now it’s not so certain. “You said it was because I make people feel special. You ... you said it was because I was a good dancer and I was science partners with Jeffrey Suttleman!”

“Wow, you really memorized every single word of that letter, huh?” I tease. It gives me a small, mean surge of satisfaction to see Peter’s grin fade completely. That surge is immediately followed by remorse, because now I’ve hurt his feelings for no good reason. What is it in me that wants to hurt Peter Kavinsky’s feelings? To make it better, I quickly add, “No, it’s true – you really did have something about you then.”

I guess I made it worse, because he flinches.

I don’t know what else to say, so I open the car door and climb out. “Thanks for the ride, Peter.”

When I get inside the house, I go look in the kitchen first to check on the cupcakes. They’re packed away in Tupperware and my cupcake carrier. The frosting’s a little messy and the sprinkles are haphazard, but overall they look pretty good. That’s a relief. Kitty won’t be shamed at the PTA bake sale on my account, at least!

**From: Margot Covey [mcovey@st-andrews.ac.uk](mailto:mcovey@st-andrews.ac.uk)**

**To: Lara Jean Covey [larajeansong@gmail.com](mailto:larajeansong@gmail.com)**

**How’s school going so far? Have you joined any new clubs? I think you should consider Lit Mag or Model UN. Also don’t forget it’s Korean Thanksgiving this week and you have to call Grandma or she’ll be mad! Miss you guys.**

**PS Please send Oreos! I miss our dunk contests.**

**Love, M**

From: Lara Jean Covey larajeansong@gmail.com

To: Margot Covey mcovey@st-andrews.ac.uk

School is good. No new clubs yet, but we'll see. I already have it down in my planner to call Grandma. Don't worry about a thing, I've got everything under control here!

xx

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Peter's mom owns an antique store called Linden & White in the cobblestone part of downtown. She sells furniture mostly, but she has jewellery cases too, arranged by decades. My favourite decade is the aughts, which means the 1900s. There's this one gold heart locket with a tiny diamond chip in the centre; it looks like a starburst. It costs four hundred dollars. The store is right next to McCalls bookstore, so I go in sometimes and visit it. I always expect it to be gone, but then it never is.

We once bought our mom a gold clover pin from the 1940s for Mother's Day. Margot and I ran a lemonade stand every Saturday for a month, and we were able to chip in sixteen dollars for it. I remember how proud we were when we presented Daddy with the money, we had it nice and neat in a ziplock bag. At the time I thought we were paying the lion's share and my dad was only helping out a little. I realize now that the pin cost a lot more than sixteen dollars. I should ask Daddy how much it really cost. But then maybe I don't want to know. Maybe it's nicer not knowing. We buried her with it because it was her favourite.

I'm standing over the case, touching my finger to the glass, when Peter comes out from around back. "Hey," he says, surprised.

"Hey," I say. "What are you doing here?"

Peter gives me a look like I'm a dummy. "My mom owns the place, remember?"

"Well, duh. I've just never seen you here before," I say. "Do you work here?"

"Nah, I had to drop something off for my mom. Now she's saying I have to go pick up a set of chairs in Huntsburgh tomorrow," Peter says in a grumbly voice. "It's two hours there and back. Annoying."

I nod companionably and lean away from the case. I pretend to look at a pink-and-black globe. Actually, Margot would like this. It could be a nice Christmas present for her. I give it a little spin. "How much is this globe?"

"Whatever it says on the sticker." Peter rests his elbows on the case and leans forward. "You should come."

I look up at him. “Come where?”

“To pick up the chairs with me.”

“You just complained about how annoying it’s going to be.”

“Yeah, alone. If you go, it might be slightly less annoying.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

I roll my eyes. Peter says “you’re welcome” to everything! It’s like, *No, Peter, that was not a genuine thank you, so you do not need to say you’re welcome.*

“So are you coming or what?”

“Or what.”

“Come on! I’m picking the chairs up from an estate sale. The owner was some kind of shut-in. Stuff has just been sitting there for, like, fifty years. I bet there’ll be stuff you can look at. You like old stuff, right?”

“Yes,” I say, surprised that he knows this about me. “Actually, I’ve kind of always wanted to go to an estate sale. How did the owner die? Like, how long was it before someone found him?”

“God, you’re morbid.” He shudders. “Didn’t know you had that side to you.”

“I have lots of sides to me,” I tell him. I lean forward. “So? How did he die?”

“He isn’t dead, you weirdo. He’s just old. His family’s sending him to a nursing home.” Peter raises an eyebrow at me. “So I’ll pick you up tomorrow at seven.”

“Seven? You never said anything about leaving at seven in the morning on a Saturday!”

“Sorry,” he says contritely. “We have to go early before all the good stuff gets snatched up.”

That night I pack lunches for Peter and me. I make roast beef sandwiches with cheese and tomato, mayonnaise for me, mustard for Peter. Peter doesn’t



like mayonnaise. It's funny the things you pick up in a fake relationship.

Kitty zooms into the kitchen and tries to grab a sandwich half. I smack her hand away. "That's not for you."

"Then who's it for?"

"It's for my lunch tomorrow. Mine and Peter's."

She climbs on to a stool and watches me wrap the sandwiches in wax paper. Sandwiches look so much prettier wrapped in wax paper than encased in ziplock. Any chance I get, I use wax paper. "I like Peter," Kitty says. "He's a lot different than Josh, but I like him."

I look up. "What do you mean?"

"I don't know. He's really funny. He jokes around a lot. You must really be in love if you're making sandwiches for him. When Margot and Josh first became a couple, she made three-cheese macaroni and cheese all the time because that's his favourite. What's Peter's favourite?"

"I – I don't know. I mean, he likes everything."

Kitty gives me the side eye. "If you're his girlfriend, you should know what his favourite food is."

"I know he doesn't like mayonnaise," I offer.

"That's because mayonnaise is gross. Josh hates mayonnaise too."

I feel a pang. Josh does hate mayonnaise. "Kitty, do you miss Josh?"

She nods. "I wish he still came over." A wistful look crosses over her face, and I'm about to give her a hug when she puts her hands on her hips. "Just don't use all the roast beef, because I need it for my lunch next week."

"If we run out, I'll make tuna salad. Sheesh."

"See that you do," Kitty says, and zooms off again.

"See that you do"? Where does she get this stuff?

At seven thirty I'm sitting by the window, waiting for Peter to pull up. I've got a brown paper bag with our sandwiches and my camera, in case there's anything spooky or cool I can take a picture of. I'm picturing a crumbling,

grey old mansion like you see in horror movies, with a gate and a murky pond or a maze in the backyard.

Peter's mom's minivan pulls up at seven forty-five, which is annoying. I could've slept a whole hour longer. I run out to the car and hop inside, and before I can say a word, he says, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry. But look what I brought you." He passes me a doughnut in a napkin, still warm. "I stopped and got it special, right when they opened at seven thirty. It's mocha sugar."

I break off a piece and pop it into my mouth. "Yum!"

He gives me a sidelong glance as he pulls out of my driveway. "So I did the right thing being late, right?"

I nod, taking a big bite. "You did the exact right thing," I say, my mouth full. "Hey, do you have any water?"

Peter hands me a half-full water bottle and I gulp it down. "This is the best doughnut I ever had," I tell him.

"Good," he says. Then he takes one look at me and laughs. "You have sugar all over your face."

I wipe my mouth off with the other side of the napkin.

"Cheeks too," he says.

"All right, all right." Then it's quiet, which makes me nervous. "Can I put some music on?" I start pulling out my phone.

"Actually, do you mind if we just drive in quiet for a while? I can't have music blaring in my face before my caffeine kicks in."

"Uh ... sure." I'm not sure if that means he wants me to be quiet too. I wouldn't have agreed to come on this little outing if I'd known I would have to be silent.

Peter has a serene look on his face, like he is a fishing-boat captain and we are floating placidly along in the middle of the sea. Except he isn't driving slowly; he is driving really fast.

I stay quiet for all of ten seconds and then say, "Wait, were you wanting me to be quiet too?"

"No, I just didn't want music. You can talk as much as you want."

“OK.” And then I’m quiet, because it’s awkward when someone tells you you can talk as much as you want. “Hey, so what’s your favourite food?”

“I like everything.”

“But what’s your *favourite*? Like, your *favourite* favourite. Is it macaroni and cheese, or, um, fried chicken, or steak, or pizza?”

“I like all that stuff. Equally.”

I let out an aggrieved sigh. Why does Peter not get the concept of picking a favourite thing?

Peter mimics my sigh and laughs. “Fine. I like cinnamon toast. That’s my favourite thing.”

“Cinnamon toast?” I repeat. “You like cinnamon toast better than crab legs? Better than a cheeseburger?”

“Yes.”

“Better than *barbecue*?”

Peter hesitates. Then he says, “Yes! Now quit picking my choice apart. I stand by my choice.”

I shrug. “OK.” I wait, give him a chance to ask me what my favourite food is, but he doesn’t. So I say, “My favourite food is cake.”

“What kind of cake?”

“It doesn’t matter. All cake.”

“You just gave me so much shit for not picking,” he begins.

“But it’s so hard to pick one kind!” I burst out. “I mean, there’s coconut cake, the kind with white frosting that looks like a snowball – I like that a lot. But then I also like cheesecake, and lemon cake, and carrot cake. Also red velvet cake with cream-cheese frosting, and chocolate cake with chocolate-ganache frosting.” I pause. “Have you ever had olive-oil cake?”

“No. That sounds weird.”

“It’s really, really good. Really moist and delicious. I’ll make it for you.”

Peter groans. “You’re making me hungry. I should have gotten a whole bag of those doughnuts.”

I open up my brown paper bag and pull out his sandwich. I wrote a *P* on his in Sharpie so I'd know whose was whose. "Do you want a sandwich?"

"You made that for me?"

"I mean, I was making one for myself too. It would have been rude to just bring one sandwich and eat it in front of you."

Peter accepts the sandwich and eats it with the bottom half still wrapped. "This is good," he says, nodding. "What kind of mustard is this?"

Pleased, I say, "It's beer mustard. My dad orders it from some fancy food catalogue. My dad's really into cooking."

"Aren't you going to eat yours too?"

"I'm saving it for later," I say.

Halfway into the ride, Peter starts weaving in and out of traffic, and he keeps looking at the clock on the dashboard.

"Why are we in such a hurry?" I ask him.

"The Epsteins," he says, rapping his fingers on the steering wheel.

"Who are the Epsteins?"

"They're an old married couple with an antiques store in Charlottesville. Last time, Phil got there five minutes before me and cleared the whole place out. That's not gonna happen today."

Impressed, I say, "Wow, I had no idea this business was so cut-throat."

Like a know-it-all, Peter smirks and goes, "Isn't all business?"

I roll my eyes at the window. Peter's so Peter.

We're at a stoplight when Peter suddenly sits up straight and says, "Oh, shit! The Epsteins!"

I was halfway asleep. My eyes fly open and I yell, "Where? Where?"

"Red SUV! Two cars ahead on the right." I crane my neck to look. They are a grey-haired couple, maybe in their sixties or seventies. It's hard to tell from this far away.

As soon as the light turns green, Peter guns it and drives up on the shoulder. I scream out, "Go go go!" and then we're flying past the Epsteins.

My heart is racing out of control. I can't help but lean my head out the window and scream because it's such a thrill. My hair whips in the wind and I know it's going to be a tangled mess, but I couldn't care less. "Yahhh!" I scream.

"You're crazy," Peter says, pulling me back in by the hem of my shirt. He's looking at me like he did that day I kissed him in the hallway. Like I'm different than he thought.

We pull up to the house and there are already a few cars parked in front. I'm craning my head trying to get a good look. I was expecting a mansion with a wrought-iron gate and maybe a gargoyle or two, but this just looks like a normal house. I must look disappointed, because as he puts the car in park, Peter says to me, "Don't judge an estate sale by the house. I've seen all kinds of treasures at regular houses and junk at fancy houses."

I hop out and bend down to tie my shoelace. "Hurry, Lara Jean! The Epsteins will be here any second!" Peter grabs my hand and we run up the driveway; I am breathing hard trying to keep up with him. His legs are so much longer than mine.

As soon as we are inside, Peter goes right up to a man in a suit and I bend over and try to catch my breath. A few people are milling around looking at the furniture. There's a long dining-room table in the centre of the room with china and milk glass and porcelain knick-knacks. I go up to it and take a closer look. I like a little white creamer with pink rosebuds but I'm not sure if I'm allowed to touch it and see how much it costs. It could be really expensive.

There's a big basket with olden-day Christmas memorabilia in it, plastic Santas and Rudolfs and glass ornaments. I'm sifting through it when Peter comes up to me, a huge grin on his face. "Mission accomplished," he says. He nods at an older couple who are looking at a wooden sideboard. "The Epsteins," he whispers to me.

"Did you get the chairs?" Mr Epstein calls out. He's trying to sound casual and not annoyed, but his hands are on his hips and he's standing very rigidly.

"You know it," Peter calls back. "Better luck next time." To me he says, "Do you see anything cool?"

“Lots of stuff.” I hold up a hot-pink reindeer. It’s glass, with an electric blue nose. “This would look great on my vanity. Will you ask the man how much it costs?”

“No, but you can. It’ll be good for you to learn how to negotiate.” Peter grabs my hand and leads me over to the man in the suit. He’s filling out some paperwork on a clipboard. He looks very busy and important. I’m not even sure if I’m supposed to be here. I’m thinking I don’t *really* need this reindeer.

But Peter’s looking at me expectantly, so I clear my throat and say, “Excuse me, sir, but how much is this reindeer?”

“Oh, that’s part of a lot,” he says.

“Oh. Um, I’m sorry but what’s a lot?”

“It means it’s part of a set,” he explains. “You have to buy the whole set of ornaments. Seventy-five dollars. They’re vintage, you see.”

I start to back away. “Thank you anyway,” I say.

Peter pulls me back and gives him a winning smile and says, “Can’t you just throw it in with the chairs? A gift with purchase?”

The man sighs. “I don’t want to separate them.” He turns away to flip through his clipboard.

Peter throws me a look, like, *You’re the one who wants the reindeer; you should step up*. I give him back a look that says, *I don’t want it that bad*, and Peter shakes his head firmly and pushes me towards the man. I say, “Please, sir? I’ll give you ten dollars for it. No one will know they’re missing a reindeer. And, look, his paw is a little chipped on the bottom, see?” I hold it up.

“All right, all right. Just take it,” the man says begrudgingly, and I beam at him and start to pull my wallet out of my purse, but he waves me off.

“Thank you! Thank you so much.” I clutch the reindeer to my chest. Maybe haggling isn’t as hard as I thought.

Peter winks at me, and then he says to the man, “I’ll bring my van closer so we can load up the chairs.”

They go out the back, and I hang around, looking at the framed pictures on the wall. I wonder if they’re for sale too. Some of them look really old: black-and-white pictures of men in suits and hats. There’s one picture of a girl in a

confirmation dress, it's white and lacy like a wedding gown. The girl isn't smiling, but she has a mischievous glint in her eye that reminds me of Kitty.

"That's my daughter, Patricia."

I turn around. It's an old man in a navy-blue sweater and stiff jeans. He's leaning against the staircase watching me. He looks very frail; his skin is paper white and thin.

"She lives in Ohio. She's an accountant." He's still gazing at me, like *I* remind *him* of someone.

"Your house is lovely," I say, even though it isn't. It's old; it could use a good cleaning. But the things inside it are lovely.

"It's empty now. All my things sold up. Can't take it with you, you know."

"You mean when you die?" I whisper.

He glares at me. "No. I mean to the nursing home."

Whoops. "Right," I say, and I giggle the way I do when I feel awkward.

"What do you have there in your hand?"

I lift it up. "This. He – the man in the suit gave it to me. Do you want it back? I didn't pay for it. It's part of a lot."

He smiles, and the wrinkles in his paper skin deepen. "That was Patty's favourite."

I hold it out to him. "Maybe she'd like to keep it?"

"No, you have it. It's yours. She couldn't even be bothered to help me move, so." He gives a spiteful nod. "Is there anything else you want to take? I've got a trunk full of her old clothes."

Yikes. Family drama. Best not to get involved in that. But vintage clothes! That's tempting.

When Peter finds me, I'm sitting cross-legged on the floor in the music room, looking through an old trunk. Mr Clarke is snoozing on the couch next to me. I found a mod minidress the colour of cotton-candy pink that I'm crazy about, and a sleeveless button-down with little daisies on it that I can tie at the waist. "Look, Peter!" I lift up the dress. "Mr Clarke said I could have it."

“Who’s Mr Clarke?” Peter asks, and his voice fills the room.

I point at him and put my finger to my lips.

“Well, we’d better get out of here fast before the guy in charge of the sale sees him giving stuff away for free.”

I get up in a hurry. “Bye, Mr Clarke,” I say, not too loud. Probably better to let him sleep. He was very down earlier, when he was telling me about his divorce.

Mr Clarke’s eyes flutter open. “Is this your feller?”

“No, not really,” I say, and Peter throws his arm around my shoulder and says, “Yes, sir. I’m her feller.”

I don’t like the way he says it, like he’s making fun. Of both me and Mr Clarke. “Thank you for the clothes, Mr Clarke,” I say, and he sits up straight and reaches for my hand. I give it to him and he kisses it, and his lips feel like dry moth’s wings.

“You’re welcome, Patty.”

I give him a goodbye wave and grab my new things. As we walk out the front door, Peter says, “Who’s Patty?” and I pretend I don’t hear.

I must fall asleep in about two seconds from the excitement of the day, because the next thing I know, we’re parked in my driveway, and Peter’s shaking my shoulder, saying, “We’re here, Lara Jean.”

I open my eyes. I’m clutching my dress and shirt to my chest like a security blanket, and my reindeer is in my lap. My new treasures. I feel like I just robbed a bank and got away with it. “Thanks for today, Peter.”

“Thanks for coming with me.” Then, abruptly, he says, “Oh yeah. I forgot to ask you something. My mom wants you to come over to dinner tomorrow night.”

My mouth drops. “You told your mom about us?”

Peter gives me a dirty look. “Kitty knows about us! Besides, my mom and I are close. It’s just her and me and my brother, Owen. If you don’t want to come, then don’t come. But just know that my mom will think you’re rude if you don’t.”

“I’m just saying ... the more people that know, the harder it is to manage. You have to keep lies restricted to as few people as possible.”



“How do you know so much about lying?”

“Oh, I used to lie all the time as a kid.” I didn’t think of it as lying though. I thought of it as playing make-believe. I told Kitty she was adopted and her real family was in a travelling circus. It’s why she took up gymnastics.

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I'm not sure how dressed up I should get for dinner at Peter's house. At the store his mom seems so fancy. I just don't want to meet her and have her be thinking of all the ways that I'm lacking compared to Genevieve. I don't see why I have to meet her at all.

But I do want her to like me.

I go through my closet, and then Margot's closet. I finally pick a cream-coloured sweater and a blouse with a Peter Pan collar, with a corduroy mustard circle skirt. Plus tights and flats. Then I put on some make-up, which I hardly ever wear. I put on peach blush and I try to do some eye make-up, but I end up washing everything off and starting over again, this time with just mascara and lip gloss.

I go show Kitty and she says, "Looks like a uniform."

"Like in a good way?"

Kitty nods. "Like you work at a nice store."

Before Peter arrives at my house, I go on the computer and look up what fork to use with what, just in case.

It's strange. Sitting at Peter's kitchen table, I feel like I'm living someone else's life. It turns out Peter's mom has made pizzas, so I didn't even need to worry about forks. And their house isn't fancy on the inside; it's just normal and nice. There's a real butter churner on display in the kitchen, pictures of Peter and his brother hanging on the walls in wooden frames, and red-and-white gingham everything.

There are a bunch of pizza toppings on the breakfast bar – not just pepperoni and sausage and mushroom and pepper, but also artichoke hearts and greasy kalamata olives and fresh mozzarella and whole cloves of garlic.

Peter's mom is nice. She keeps putting more salad on my plate all throughout dinner, and I keep eating it even though I'm full. Once, I catch her looking at me, and she has a soft smile on her face. When she smiles, she looks like Peter.

Peter's younger brother is named Owen. He's twelve. He's like a miniature Peter, but he doesn't talk as much. He doesn't have Peter's easy way. Owen grabs a slice of pizza and shoves it into his mouth even though it's too hot. He puffs out hot air and he almost spits a piece back out into his napkin, and their mom says, "Don't you dare, Owen. We have company."

"Leave me alone," Owen mumbles.

"Peter says you have two sisters," Mrs Kavinsky says with a bright smile. She cuts a piece of lettuce into bite-sized bits. "Your mother must love having three girls."

I open my mouth to answer her, but before I can, Peter does. He says, "Lara Jean's mom passed away when she was little." He says it like she should already know, and embarrassment crosses her face.

"I'm so sorry. I remember that now."

Quickly I say, "She did love having three girls. They thought for sure my little sister Kitty was going to be a boy, and my mom said she was so used to girls she was nervous about what she was going to do with a boy. So she was really relieved when Kitty turned out to be a girl. My sister Margot and I were too; we would pray every night we'd get a sister and not a brother."

"Hey, what's wrong with boys?" Peter objects.

Mrs Kavinsky's smiling now. She puts another piece of pizza on Owen's plate and says, "You're heathens. Wild animals. I bet Lara Jean and her sisters are angels."

Peter snorts.

"Well ... Kitty might be part heathen," I admit. "But my older sister Margot and I are pretty good."

Mrs Kavinsky takes her napkin and tries to wipe tomato sauce off Owen's face, and he swats her hand away. "Mom!"

When she gets up to take another pizza out of the oven, Peter says to me, "See how my mom babies him?"

"She babies you way more," Owen counters. To me he mumbles, "Peter doesn't even know how to cook ramen."

I laugh. "Can you?"

"Hell, yeah, I've been cooking for myself for years," he says.

“I like to cook too,” I say, taking a sip of iced tea. “We should give Peter a cooking lesson.”

He eyes me and then says, “You wear more make-up than Genevieve did.”

I shrink back like he slapped me. All I’m wearing is mascara! And a little lip gloss! I know for a fact that Genevieve wears bronzer and eye shadow and concealer every day. Plus mascara and eyeliner and lipstick!

Swiftly Peter says, “Shut up, Owen.”

Owen’s snickering. I narrow my eyes. This kid is only a few years older than Kitty! I lean forward and wave my hand in front of my face. “*This* is all natural. But thank you for the compliment, Owen.”

“You’re welcome,” he says, just like his big brother.

On the drive home, I say, “Hey, Peter?”

“What?”

“Never mind.”

“What? Just ask.”

“Well ... your parents are divorced, right?”

“Yup.”

“So how often do you see your dad?”

“Not often.”

“Oh, OK. I was just wondering.”

Peter looks over at me with expectant eyes.

“What?” I say.

“I’m just waiting for the next question. You never just have one question.”

“Well, do you miss him?”

“Who?”

“Your dad!”

“Oh. I don’t know. I think it’s more that I miss how it used to be with us. Him and my mom and me and Owen. We were like a team. He used to come to every lacrosse game.” Peter gets quiet. “He just ... took care of things.”

“I guess that’s what dads do.”

“That’s what he’s doing for his new family.” Peter says it matter-of-factly, without bitterness. “What about you? You miss your mom?”

“Sometimes, when I think about it.” Suddenly I say, “You know what I miss? I miss bath time. I miss when she would wash my hair. Don’t you think getting your hair washed is just the best feeling? Like, warm water and bubbles and fingers in your hair. It’s so nice.”

“Yeah, it is.”

“Sometimes I don’t think about her at all, and then ... and then sometimes I’ll have a thought like, I wonder what she would think of me now? She only knew me as a little girl, and now I’m a teenager, and I wonder, if she saw me on the street, would she recognize me?”

“Of course she would. She’s your mom.”

“I know, but I’ve changed a lot.” An uncomfortable look has crossed his face, and I can tell he’s regretting complaining about his dad, because at least his dad is still alive. And then, because Peter’s looking at me like he feels sorry for me, I straighten up and say in a haughty voice, “I’m very mature, you know.”

He’s grinning now. “Oh yeah?”

“Oh, yes, I’m very refined, Peter.”

When Peter drops me off, right before I get out of the car, he says, “I can tell my mom liked you.” This makes me feel good inside. It’s always been really important to me that other people’s moms like me.

It was my favourite part of going over to Genevieve’s house – hanging out with her mom. Wendy was so stylish. She used to wear a silky blouse and nice pants and a statement necklace, just for sitting around the house. Perfect hair, always smooth and flat. Genevieve has that same good hair, but she doesn’t have her mom’s perfect straight nose. Hers has a little bump on the bridge that I think only adds to her appeal.

“By the way, you definitely don’t wear more make-up than Gen. She was always getting bronzer on my white shirts.”

For someone who’s over Genevieve, he sure does talk about her a lot. Though it’s not just him. I was thinking about her too. Even when she’s not

here, she's here. That girl has some kind of reach.

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During chemistry, Peter writes me a note that says, *Can I come over tonight to study for the test?*

I write back, *I don't remember study sessions being in the contract.* After he reads it, he turns around and gives me a wounded look. I mouth, *I'm kidding!*

At dinner I announce that Peter's coming over to study and we're going to need the kitchen, and my dad raises his eyebrows. "Leave the door open," he jokes. We don't even have a door to the kitchen.

"Daddy," I groan, and Kitty groans with me.

Casually he asks, "Is Peter your boyfriend?"

"Um ... something like that," I say.

After we eat and Kitty and I do the dishes, I set up the kitchen like a study room. My textbook and notes are stacked up in the centre of the table, with a row of highlighters in blue, yellow and pink, a bowl of microwave kettle corn, and a plate of peanut-butter brownies I baked this afternoon. I let Kitty have two but that's it.

He said he'd be over around eight. At first I think he's just late as usual, but the minutes tick by and I realize he's not coming. I text him once but he doesn't text back.

Kitty comes down between commercial breaks, sniffing around for another brownie, which I give her. "Is Peter not coming?" she asks. I pretend I'm so absorbed in my studying I don't hear.

Around ten he sends a text that says, **Sorry something came up. I can't come over tonight.** He doesn't say where he is or what he's doing, but I already know. He's with Genevieve. At lunch he was distracted; he kept texting on his phone. And then, later in the day, I saw them outside the girls' locker room. They didn't see me, but I saw them. They were just talking, but with Genevieve it's never *just* anything. She put her hand on his arm; he brushed her hair out of her eyes. I may only be a fake girlfriend, but that's not nothing.

I keep studying, but it's hard to concentrate when your feelings are hurt. I tell myself it's just because I went to the trouble of baking brownies and cleaning up the downstairs. I mean, it's rude to just not show up somewhere. Does he not have manners? How would he like it if I did that? And really, what's the whole point of this charade if he's just going to keep going back to her anyway? What's even in it for me any more? Things are better with Josh and me, practically normal. If I wanted to I could just call the whole thing off.

The next morning, I wake up still mad. I call Josh to ask him for a ride to school. For a second I worry he might not pick up; it's been so long since we hung out. But he does, and he says no problem.

Let's see how Peter likes it when he comes to my house to pick me up and I'm not there.

Halfway to school I start to feel uneasy. Maybe Peter had a legitimate reason for not coming over. Maybe he wasn't with Genevieve and now I've just done a very petty thing out of spite.

Josh is looking at me with suspicious eyes. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

He doesn't believe me, I can tell. "Did you and Kavinsky have a fight?"

"No."

Josh sighs and says, "Just be careful." He says it in a patronizing older-brother kind of way that makes me want to scream. "I don't want to see you hurt by that guy."

"Josh! He won't hurt me. Geez."

"He's a douche. I'm sorry, but he is. All the guys on the lacrosse team are. Guys like Kavinsky, they only care about one thing. As soon as they get what they want, they're bored."

"Not Peter. He dated Genevieve for almost four years!"

"Just trust me. You haven't had much experience with guys, Lara Jean."

Quietly I ask, "How would you know?"

Josh gives me an *Oh, come on* look. "Because I know you."

"Not as well as you think."



We're quiet the rest of the way.

It won't be that big of a deal. Peter will stop by my house, see that I'm not there, and then he'll leave. Big deal, so he had to go five minutes out of his way. I waited for him last night for two friggin' hours.

When we get to school, Josh heads for the senior hall and I go straight to the junior hall. I keep sneaking peeks down the hallway at Peter's locker, but he doesn't arrive. I wait at my locker until the bell rings, and he still doesn't come. I run off to first period, my backpack banging against my back as I go.

Mr Schuller is taking attendance, when I look up and see Peter standing in the doorway glaring at me. He gestures at me to come out. I gulp and quickly look down at my notebook and pretend like I didn't see him. But then he hisses my name, and I know I have to talk to him.

Shakily I raise my hand. "Mr Schuller, can I go the bathroom?"

"You should have gone before class," he grumbles, but he waves me on.

I hurry out to the hallway and pull Peter away from the door so Mr Schuller can't see.

"Where were you this morning?" Peter demands.

I cross my arms and try to stand tall. It's hard, because I'm so short and he really is tall. "You're one to talk."

Peter huffs, "At least I texted you! I've called you like seventeen times. Why is your phone off?"

"You know we're not allowed to have our phones on at school!"

He huffs, "Lara Jean, I waited in front of your house for twenty minutes."

Yikes. "Well, I'm sorry."

"How'd you get to school? Sanderson?"

"Yes."

Peter exhales. "Listen, if you were pissed I couldn't come over last night, you should've just called and said so instead of the shit you pulled this morning."

In a small voice I say, "Well, what about that shit *you* pulled last night?"

A smile tugs at the corners of his mouth. "Did you just say 'shit'? It sounds really funny coming out of your mouth."

I ignore that. "So ... where were you? Were you with Genevieve?" I don't ask what I really want to know, which is, *Did you guys get back together?*

He hesitates and then he says, "She needed me."

I can't even look at him. Why is he such a dummy? Why does she have such a hold on him? Is it just the amount of time they've been together? Is it the sex? I don't understand. It's disappointing, how little self-control boys have. "Peter, if you're just going to go running every time she beckons, I don't see a point to any of this."

"Covey, come on! I said I was sorry. Don't be pissed."

"You never said you were sorry," I say. "When did you say you were sorry?"

Chastened, he says, "Sorry."

"I don't want you to go to Genevieve's any more. How do you think that makes me look to her?"

Peter looks at me steadily. "I can't not be there for Gen, so don't ask me to."

"But, Peter, what does she even need you for when she has a new boyfriend?"

He flinches, and right away I'm sorry I said it. "I'm sorry," I whisper.

"It's fine. I don't expect you to understand it. Gen and I ... we just get each other."

He doesn't know it, but when Peter talks about Genevieve, he gets a certain softness in his face. It's tenderness mixed with impatience. And something else. Love. Peter can protest all he wants, but I know he still loves her.

Sighing, I ask, "Did you at least study for the test?"

Peter shakes his head, and I sigh again.

"You can look at my notes during lunch," I say, and I head back to my class.

It's starting to make sense to me. Why he'd go along with a scheme like this, why he'd spend his time with someone like me. It's not so he can move on from Gen. It's so he can't. I'm just his excuse. I'm holding Genevieve's place for her. When that piece makes sense, everything else starts to.

Josh's parents fight a lot. I don't know if it's a normal amount of fighting because I only have one parent, but I don't remember my parents fighting that much when I had two. Our houses are close enough that I can hear them sometimes, if my window is open. The fights usually start out with something small, like Mrs Sanderson accidentally leaving the car door open and the battery going dead, and end with something big, like how Mr Sanderson works too much and is inherently selfish and not cut out for a family.

When they fight bad, Josh comes over. When we were younger, he'd sneak out sometimes in his pyjamas with his pillow, and he'd stay until his mom came looking for him. It's not something we talk about. Maybe him and Margot, but not me and him. The most he ever said about it was that sometimes he wished they'd just get divorced so it could finally be over. They never did, though.

I can hear them tonight. I've heard them other nights since Margot left, but tonight sounds particularly bad. So bad I close my window. I gather up my homework and go downstairs and turn on the living-room light so Josh knows he can come over if he wants.

Half an hour later there's a knock at the door. I wrap myself in my pale-blue baby blanket and open it.

It's Josh. He smiles at me sheepishly. "Hey. Can I hang out here for a bit?"

"Course you can." I leave the door open and trudge back to the living room. I call back, "Lock it behind you."

Josh watches TV and I do my homework. I'm highlighting my way through US history when Josh asks me, "Are you going to try out for *Arcadia*?" That's the spring play. They just announced it yesterday.

"No," I say, switching highlighter colours. "Why would I?" I hate public speaking and getting up in front of people, and Josh knows it.

"Duh, because it's your favourite play." Josh changes the channel. "I think you'd be a really good Thomasina."

I smile. "Thanks but no thanks."

"Why not? It could be something good to put on your college apps."

“It’s not like I’m going to be a theatre major or anything.”

“It wouldn’t kill you to get out of your comfort zone a little bit,” he says, stretching his arms out behind his head. “Take a risk. Look at Margot. She’s all the way over in Scotland.”

“I’m not Margot.”

“I’m not saying you should move to the other side of the world. I know you’d never do that. Hey, what about Honour Council? You love judging people!”

I make a face at him.

“Or Model UN. I bet you’d like that. I’m just saying ... your world could be bigger than just playing checkers with Kitty and riding around in Kavinsky’s car.”

I stop highlighting mid-sentence. Is he right? Is my world really that small? It’s not like his world is so big! “Josh,” I begin. Then I pause, because I don’t know how I’m going to finish the sentence. So instead I throw my highlighter at him.

It ricochets off his forehead. “Hey! You could have hit me in the eye!”

“And you would have deserved it.”

“OK, OK. You know I didn’t mean it like that. I just mean that you should give people a chance to know you.” Josh points the remote control at me and says, “If people knew you, they would love you.” He sounds so matter-of-fact.

Josh, you break my heart. And you’re a liar. Because you know me, you know me better than almost anybody, and you don’t love me.

After Josh goes back home, I tidy up the living room, lock all the doors and turn off the lights. Then I pour myself a glass of water and head upstairs.

The light is on in my bedroom, and Chris is asleep in my bed. I roll her to the side so I can fit in too. Stirring, she mumbles, “Wanna go get hot wings?”

“It’s too late to eat hot wings,” I say, pulling my quilt up so it covers both of us. “You just missed Josh.”

Her eyes fly open. “Joshy was here? Why?”

“No reason.” I won’t tell Josh’s secrets, not even to Chris.

“Well, don’t mention it to Kavinsky.”

“He wouldn’t care,” I say.

Chris shakes her head. “All boys care.”

“Peter’s not like that. He’s really confident.”

“They’re the ones that care the most,” she says. I’m about to ask her what she means, but before I can, she says, “Let’s go do something wild.”

“Like what?” It’s a school night; I can’t go anywhere and she knows it. But I still like to hear her schemes. They’re like bedtime stories.

“Like ... I don’t know. We could sneak into the nursing home and break out that grandma you’re always talking about. What’s her name again? Thunder?”

I giggle. “Stormy.”

“Yeah, Stormy.” She yawns. “She seems like she knows how to have a good time. I bet she’d buy us cocktails.”

“Stormy goes to sleep at nine every night to get her beauty rest. Let’s do it tomorrow.” By tomorrow, Chris will have forgotten all about it, but it’s still a nice thought. Her eyes are closed again. I poke her in the side. “Chris, wake up. Go brush your teeth.” I keep a toothbrush in my bathroom drawer just for her. I painted a cursive C on it with red nail polish so it doesn’t get mixed up with anybody else’s toothbrush.

“Can’t. I’m too tired to move.”

“A second ago you wanted to break Stormy out of Belleview, and now you’re too tired to wash your face and brush your teeth?”

Chris smiles but doesn’t open her eyes.

I turn off my bedside lamp. “Night, Chris.”

She wriggles closer to me. “G’night.”

There are very limited options for Asian girls on Halloween. Like one year I went as Velma from *Scooby-Doo*, but people just asked me if I was a manga character. I even wore a wig! So now I'm committed to dressing up as Asian characters exclusively.

Margot never goes as a person; she is always an inanimate object or a concept of some kind. Like last year she went as a "formal apology": she wore a floor-length evening gown we found at Goodwill for ten dollars, and she had a sign around her neck, written in calligraphy, which said, *I'm sorry*. It won second prize in the school contest. First prize went to a Rastafarian alien.

Kitty's going as a ninja, which I suppose is in line with my whole Asian costume idea.

This year I'm going as Cho Chang from Harry Potter. I've got my Ravenclaw scarf and an old black choir robe I found on eBay, plus one of my dad's ties and a wand. I'm not going to win any contests, but at least people will know what I am. I wish I never have to answer a *What are you?* question ever again.

I'm waiting for Peter to pick me up for school, messing with my knee-highs. They won't stay up.

"Lara Jean!"

Automatically I call back, "Josh!" It's our version of Marco Polo.

Then I look up. There's Josh, standing in front of his car. In a full-on Harry Potter costume. Black robe, glasses, lightning mark on his forehead, wand.

We both burst out laughing. Of all the random costumes! Ruefully Josh says, "The guys from the graphic-novel club are going as different fantasy-book characters. I was going to go as Drogo from *Game of Thrones* because, you know, I've got the upper body for it, but..."

I giggle, trying to picture Josh with eyeliner and a long braid and no shirt. It's a funny picture. I wouldn't exactly call Josh scrawny, bu ...

“Hey, quit laughing so hard,” he objects. “It wasn’t *that* funny.” He jingles his keys. “So do you need a ride, Cho?”

I look at my phone. Peter’s five minutes late as usual. Not that I can really complain, because it’s a free ride to school, and I could be taking the bus. But if I go with Josh, I won’t have to rush to class, I can go by my locker, I can go pee, I can get a juice at the vending machine. But he’s probably already nearly here. “Thanks, but I’m waiting for Peter.”

Josh nods. “Oh, yeah ... right.” He starts to climb into his car.

I shout out, “Expelliarmus!” and Josh spins around and calls back, “Finite!” Then we grin at each other like goofs.

He drives off and I hug my knees to my chest. Josh and I read Harry Potter around the same time, when I was in sixth and he was in seventh. Margot had already read them. Neither of us can read as fast as she does. It drove her crazy waiting for us to get to the third book so we could discuss.

The longer I sit waiting for Peter, the more prickly I feel. I take off my robe and put it back on a few times. It’s polyester, and polyester doesn’t breathe or feel nice against your skin. When he drives up, I run to his car and get in without saying hello. I spread my robe over my lap like a blanket, because my kilt is short.

His eyes are big. “You look hot,” he says, sounding surprised. “What are you? An anime character?”

“No,” I say, or more like snap. “I’m Cho Chang.” Peter still has a blank look on his face, so I add, “From Harry Potter.”

“Oh yeah. Cool.”

I look over at him. He’s wearing a regular button-down and jeans. “Where’s your costume?”

“Me and my boys are going to change right before the assembly. It’s a better effect if we unveil at the same time.”

I know he wants me to ask what his costume is, but I don’t feel like talking to him, so I sit there, not saying anything and looking out the window. I keep waiting for him to ask me what’s wrong, but he doesn’t. He’s so oblivious; I don’t even think he notices I’m mad.

Abruptly I say, “I wish you weren’t always late.”

Peter frowns. "Geez, sorry. I was trying to get my costume together."

"Today you were trying to get your costume together. But you're late all the time."

"I'm not late all the time!"

"You were late today, and yesterday, and last Thursday." I stare out the window. The autumn leaves are already falling. "If you're not going to be on time, I don't want you giving me rides any more."

I don't have to look; I can feel him glaring at me. "Fine. That means I get five extra minutes of sleep, so, works for me."

"Good."

During the judging, Chris and I are sitting in the balcony of the theatre. Chris is dressed up as Courtney Love. She's wearing a pink slip and holey knee socks and lots of smudgy eye make-up. "You should go down there too," I say. "I bet you'd win something."

"People at this school wouldn't even know who she is," Chris sneers. But I can tell she kind of wants to.

The guys in Peter's group are all superheroes. There's Batman, Superman, Iron Man, the Incredible Hulk, all to varying degrees of effort. Peter went all out. He is, of course, Peter Parker. Who else would Kavinsky go as? His Spider-Man costume is super authentic, with yellow Mylar eyes and gloved hands and bootied feet. He is a total ham up onstage. All the guys run around, capes flapping, pretend fighting each other. Peter tries to climb up a column, but Mr Yelznik stops him before he can get far. I cheer when his group wins for best group costume.

Genevieve is Catwoman. She's wearing pleather leggings and a bustier and black cat ears. I wonder if she was in on the superhero theme, if Peter told her, or if she came up with that on her own. Every guy in the auditorium goes wild when she goes onstage for best junior costume. "What a ho," Chris says. She sounds almost wistful.

Genevieve wins, of course. I sneak a look at Peter, and he's whistling and stomping his feet with all his friends.



After the assembly I'm getting my chem book out of my locker when Peter comes over and leans his back against the locker next to mine. Through his mask he says, "Hey."

"Hey," I say. And then he doesn't say anything else; he just stands there. I close my locker door and spin the combination lock. "Congratulations on winning best group costume."

"That's it? That's all you're going to say?"

Huh? "What else am I supposed to say?"

Just then Josh walks by with Jersey Mike, who's dressed up as a hobbit, hairy feet and all. Walking backward, Josh points his wand at me and says, "Expelliarmus!"

Automatically I point my wand back at him and say, "Avada Kedavra!"

Josh clutches his chest like I've shot him. "Way harsh!" he calls out, and he disappears down the hallway.

"Uh ... don't you think it's weird for my supposed girlfriend to wear a couples costume with another guy?" Peter asks me.

I roll my eyes. I'm still mad at him from this morning. "I'm sorry, I can't talk to you when you look like this. How am I supposed to have a conversation with a person in head-to-toe latex?"

Peter pushes his mask up. "I'm serious! How do you think it makes me look?"

"First of all, it wasn't planned. Second of all, nobody cares what my costume is! Who would even notice something like that?"

"People notice," Peter huffs. "I noticed."

"Well, I'm sorry. I'm very sorry that a coincidence like this would ever occur."

"I really doubt it was a coincidence," Peter mutters.

"What do you want me to do? Do you want me to pop over to the Halloween store during lunch and buy a red wig and be Mary Jane?"

Smoothly Peter says, "Could you? That'd be great."

"No, I could not. You know why? Because I'm *Asian*, and *people* will just think I'm in a manga costume." I hand him my wand. "Hold this." I lean

down and lift the hem of my robe so I can adjust my knee socks.

Frowning, he says, "I could have been someone from the book if you'd told me in advance."

"Yes, well, today you'd make a really great Moaning Myrtle."

Peter gives me a blank look, and disbelieving, I say, "Wait a minute ... have you never read Harry Potter?"

"I've read the first two."

"Then you should know who Moaning Myrtle is!"

"It was a really long time ago," Peter says. "Was she one of those people in the paintings?"

"No! And how could you stop after *Chamber of Secrets*? The third one's the best out of the whole series. I mean, that's literally crazy to me." I peer at his face. "Do you not have a soul?"

"Sorry if I haven't read every single Harry Potter book! Sorry I have a life and I'm not in the Final Fantasy club or whatever that geek club is called—"

I snatch my wand back from him and wave it in his face. "Silencio!"

Peter crosses his arms. Smirking, he says, "Whatever spell you just tried to cast on me, it didn't work, so I think you need to go back to Hogwarts." He's so proud of himself for the Hogwarts reference, it's kind of endearing.

Quick like a cat I pull down his mask, and then I put one hand over his mouth. With my other hand I wave my wand again. "Silencio!" Peter tries to say something, but I press my hand harder. "What? What was that? I can't hear you, Peter Parker."

Peter reaches out and tickles me, and I laugh so hard I almost drop my wand. I dart away from him but he pounces after me, pretend shooting webs at my feet. Giggling, I run away from him, further down the hall, dodging groups of people. He gives chase all the way to chem class. A teacher screams at us to slow down, and we do, but as soon as we're around the corner, I'm running again and so is he.

I'm breathless by the time I'm in my seat. He turns around and shoots a web in my direction, and I explode into giggles again and Mr Meyers glares at me. "Settle down," he says, and I nod obediently. As soon as his back is

turned, I giggle into my robe. I want to still be mad at Peter, but it's just no use.

Halfway through class he sends me a note. He's drawn spiderwebs around the edges. It says, *I'll be on time tomorrow*. I smile as I read it. Then I put it in my backpack, in my French textbook so the page won't crease or crumble. I want to keep it so when this is over, I can have something to look at and remember what it was like to be Peter Kavinsky's girlfriend. Even if it was all just pretend.

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When we pull up in my driveway, Kitty runs out of the house and over to the car. “Spider-Man!” she shrieks. She’s still in her ninja costume, though she’s taken the mask off. “Are you coming inside?”

I glance at Peter. “He can’t. He has to go condition.” Peter spends an hour a day conditioning for lacrosse. He’s very dedicated to it.

“Condition?” Kitty repeats, and I know she’s imagining Peter washing his hair.

“I can hang out for a little bit,” Peter says, turning the engine off.

“Let’s show him the dance!”

“Kitty, no.” The dance is something Margot and I made up when we were bored one night a few summers ago at the beach. Let’s just say neither of us is particularly talented at choreography.

Peter’s eyes light up. He’ll take any opportunity for a laugh, especially at my expense. “I wanna see the dance!”

“Forget about it,” I tell him. We’re in the living room; each of us has our own couch or armchair. I poured us iced teas and put out a bowl of potato chips, which we’ve already finished.

“Come on,” he pouts. “Show me the dance. Please, please show me the dance.”

“That’s not going to work on me, Peter.”

“What’s not going to work?”

I wave my hand in his Handsome Boy face. “*That*. I’m immune to your charms, remember?”

Peter lifts his eyebrows like I’ve dared him. “Is that a challenge? ’Cause I’m warning you, you do not want to step into the ring with me. I’ll crush you, Covey.” He doesn’t take his eyes off mine for several long seconds, and I can feel my smile fade and my cheeks heat up.

“Come on, Lara Jean!”

I blink. Kitty. I'd forgotten she was still in the room. I scramble to my feet. "Cue up the music. Peter just challenged us to a dance-off."

Kitty squeals and runs to turn on the speakers. I push back the coffee table. We take our places in front of the fireplace, backs turned, heads down, hands clasped behind our backs.

When the bass kicks in, we jump and turn around. Hip thrust, swivel, then move into our knee slides. Then the running man, then this move Margot made up called the treadmill. The music stops, and Kitty and I freeze in our crunking positions – and then it starts up again, and we're doing the butterfly, then back into the knee slides. I forget what the next move is so I sneak a peek at Kitty, who's shimmying and clapping her hands. Oh yeah.

Our big finish is splits, with our arms crossed for emphasis.

Peter's bowled over, laughing his head off. He claps and claps and stomps his feet.

When it's over, I try to catch my breath and manage to say, "OK, you're up, Kavinsky."

"I can't," Peter gasps. "How do I follow a performance like that? Kitty, will you teach me that pop-and-lock move?"

Kitty gets shy all of a sudden. She sits on her hands and looks at him through her lashes and shakes her head.

"Please, please?" he asks.

Kitty finally caves ins – I think she just wanted to make him work for it. I watch them dance all afternoon, my little sister the ninja and my pretend boyfriend Spider-Man. First I laugh, but then a worrying thought comes out of nowhere – I can't let Kitty get too attached to Peter. This is temporary. The way Kitty looks at him, so adoringly, like he's her hero...

When Peter has to leave, I walk him out to his car. Before he gets in, I say, "I don't think you should come over any more. It's confusing to Kitty."

Frowning, he says, "How is it confusing to Kitty?"

"Because ... because when our ... our *thing* is over, she's going to miss you."

"I'll still see the kid around." Peter pokes me in the stomach. "I want joint custody."

All I can think of is how patient he was with her, how sweet. Impulsively I get up on my tiptoes and kiss him on the cheek, and he jerks back in surprise.

“What was that for?”

My cheeks feel scalded. I say, “For being so nice to Kitty.” Then I wave goodbye and I run into the house.

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If I don't buy groceries today, it's scrambled eggs for dinner tonight. Again.

Margot's car is fixed and sitting in the driveway, where it's been sitting for the past few weeks. I could go to the store if I wanted to. I do want to. But I don't want to drive. If I was a nervous driver before, the accident has only made me worse. What business do I have behind the wheel of a car? What if I hurt someone? What if I hurt Kitty? They shouldn't just give out driver's licences so easily. I mean, a car is a really dangerous thing. It's practically a weapon.

But the store is less than ten minutes away. It's not like I'd be getting on the highway. And I really, really don't want to eat scrambled eggs for dinner tonight. Besides ... if Peter and Genevieve are getting back together, he won't be giving me rides any more. I've got to learn how to do for myself. I can't depend on other people to help me.

"We're going to the store, Kitty," I say.

She's lying down in front of the TV, propped up on her elbows. Her body looks so long; it's getting longer every day. Pretty soon she'll be taller than me. Kitty doesn't look away from the TV. "I don't want to come. I want to watch my shows."

"If you come, I'll let you pick out an ice cream."

Kitty gets to her feet.

On the drive there, I'm going so slow that Kitty keeps telling me the speed limit. "They give tickets for going under the limit too, you know."

"Who told you that?"

"No one. I just know it. I bet I'm going to be a better driver than you, Lara Jean."

I grip the steering wheel tighter. "I bet you are." *Brat*. I bet when Kitty starts driving, she's going to be a speed demon without the slightest concern for those around her. But she'll still probably be better at it than me. A reckless driver is better than a scared one; ask anybody.

"I'm not scared of things like you are."

I adjust my rearview mirror. “You sure are proud of yourself.”

“I’m just *saying*.”

“Is there a car coming? Can I switch lanes?”

Kitty turns her head. “You can go, but hurry.”

“Like how much time do I have?”

“It’s already too late. Wait ... now you can go. Go!”

I jerk into the left lane and look in my rearview. “Good job, Kitty. You just keep being my second pair of eyes.”

As we push the cart around the store, I’m thinking about the drive home and having to get behind the wheel again. My heart still races even as I’m trying to decide if we should have zucchini or green beans with dinner. By the time we’re in the dairy aisle, Kitty’s whining. “Can you hurry? I don’t want to miss my next show!”

To appease her, I say, “Go pick out an ice cream,” and Kitty heads off towards the frozen-food aisle.

The way home, I stay in the right lane for blocks and blocks so I don’t have to switch lanes. The car in front of me is an old lady, and she’s moving at a snail’s pace, which suits me just fine. Kitty begs me to switch lanes, but I just ignore her and keep doing what I’m doing, nice and easy. My hands are gripping the steering wheel so tightly my knuckles are white.

“The ice cream’s going to be all melted by the time we get home,” Kitty gripes. “And I’ve missed every single one of my shows. Can you please go to the fast lane?”

“Kitty!” I screech. “Will you just let me drive?”

“Then drive already!”

I lean across the console to cuff her upside the head, and she scoots closer to the window so I can’t reach her. “Can’t touch me,” she says gleefully.

“Quit playing around and be my eyes,” I say.



A car is coming up on my right, zooming off a highway exit. He's going to have to merge into my lane soon. Lightning fast I look over my shoulder for my blind spot, to see if I can switch lanes. Every time I have to take my eyes away from the road, even for a second, I feel so much panic in my chest. But I don't have a choice, I just hold my breath and I switch over to the left lane. Nothing bad happens. I exhale.

My heart races the whole way home. But we make it, no accidents and nobody honking their horn at me, and that's the important thing. And the ice cream is fine, only a little melted on top. It will get easier each time, I think. I hope. I just have to keep trying.

I can't stand the thought of Kitty being scornful of me. I'm her big sister. I have to be someone she looks up to, the way I look up to Margot. How can Kitty look up to me if I'm weak?

That night I pack Kitty's and my lunches. I make what Mommy used to make us sometimes when we went on picnics at the winery in Keswick. I dice up a carrot and an onion and fry it with sesame oil and a little vinegar; then I mix in sushi rice. When it's cooked, I scoop pats of rice into tofu skins. They're like rice balls in little purses. I don't have an exact recipe to follow, but it tastes right enough. When I'm finished, I get on a ladder and search for the bento boxes Mommy used to put them in. I finally find them in the back of the Tupperware cabinet.

I don't know if Kitty will remember eating these rice balls, but I hope that her heart will.

At the lunch table Peter and his friends can't get enough of the rice balls. I only get to eat three. "These are so good," Peter keeps saying. When he reaches for the last one, he stops short and quickly looks up at me to see if I noticed.

"You can have it," I say. I know what he's thinking of. The last piece of pizza.

"No, it's all right, I'm good."

"Have it."

"I don't want it!"

I pick up the rice ball with my fingers and put it in his face. "Say 'ah'."

Stubbornly he says, "No. I'm not going to give you the satisfaction of being right."

Darrell hoots with laughter. "I'm jealous of you, Kavinsky. I wish I had a girl to feed me my lunch. Lara Jean, if he doesn't take it, I will." He leans forward and opens his mouth for me.

Peter shoves him to the side and says, "Step off, it's mine!" He opens his mouth and I pop it in like he's a seal at Sea World. With his mouth full of rice and his eyes closed, he says, "Yum yum yum."

I smile, because it's so cute. And for a second, just for a second, I forget. I forget that this isn't real.

Peter swallows the food in his mouth and says, "What's wrong? Why do you look sad?"

"I'm not sad. I'm hungry because you guys ate my lunch." I cross my eyes at him to show him I'm joking.

Immediately Peter pushes out his chair and stands up. "I'm gonna get you a sandwich."

I grab his sleeve. "Don't. I'm just kidding."

"Are you sure?" I nod, and he sits back down. "If you're hungry later, we can stop somewhere on the way home."

“About that,” I say. “My car’s fixed now, so I won’t be needing you to give me rides any more.”

“Oh, really?” Peter leans back in his chair. “I don’t mind picking you up though. I know you hate to drive.”

“The only way I’ll get better is if I practise,” I say, feeling like Margot. Margot the Good. “Besides, now you’ll get back your extra five minutes of sleep.”

Peter grins. “True.”

*OceanofPDF.com*

Virtual Sunday night dinner was an idea I thought up.

I've got my laptop propped up on a stack of books in the centre of the table. Daddy and Kitty and I are all sitting in front of it with our slices of pizza. It's our lunchtime and Margot's dinnertime. Margot's sitting at her desk with a salad. She's already in her flannel pjs.

"You guys are eating pizza again?" Margot gives me and Daddy a disapproving look. "Kitty's going to stay tiny if you don't feed her any green food."

"Relax, Gogo, there's peppers on this pizza," I say, holding up my slice, and everybody laughs.

"There'll be spinach salad with dinner tonight," Daddy offers.

"Can you make my spinach portion into a green juice instead?" Kitty asks. "That's the healthiest way to eat spinach."

"How do you know that?" Margot asks.

"From Peter."

The pizza slice that was halfway to my mouth freezes in midair.

"Peter who?"

"Lara Jean's boyfriend."

"Wait a minute ... Lara Jean's dating who?" On the computer screen Margot's eyes are huge and incredulous.

"Peter Kavinsky," Kitty chirps.

I whip my head around and give her a dirty look. With my eyes I say, *Thanks for spilling the beans, Kitty.* With her eyes she says, *What? You should have told her yourself ages ago.*

Margot looks from Kitty to me. "What in the world? How did that happen?"

Lamely I say, "It just sort of ... happened."

"Are you serious? Why would you ever be interested in someone like Peter Kavinsky? He's such a..." Margot shakes her head in disbelief. "I mean, did

you know Josh caught him cheating on a test once?”

“Peter cheats at school?” Daddy repeats, alarmed.

I quickly look at him and say, “Once, in seventh grade! Seventh grade doesn’t even count any more it’s so long ago. And it wasn’t a test, it was a quiz.”

“I definitely don’t think he’s a good guy for you. All of those lacrosse guys are so *douchey*.”

“Well, Peter’s not like those other guys.” I don’t understand why Margot can’t just be happy for me. I was at least pretend happy for her when she started dating Josh. She could be pretend happy for me too. And it makes me mad, the way she’s saying all of this stuff in front of Daddy and Kitty. “If you talk to him, if you just give him a chance, you’ll see, Margot.” I don’t know why I’m bothering trying to convince her of Peter when it will be over soon anyway. But I want her to know that he is a good guy, because he is.

Margot makes a face like, *Yeah, OK, sure* and I know she doesn’t believe me. “What about Genevieve?”

“They broke up months ago.”

Daddy looks confused and says, “Peter and Genevieve were an item?”

“Never mind, Daddy,” I say.

Margot is quiet, chewing on her salad, so I think she’s done, but then she says, “He’s not very smart, though, is he? I mean, at school?”

“Not everybody can be a National Merit Scholar! And there are different kinds of intelligence, you know. He has a high emotional IQ.” Margot’s disapproval makes me feel prickly all over. More than prickly. Mad. What right does she have to weigh in when she doesn’t even live here any more? Kitty has more of a right than she does. “Kitty, do you like Peter?” I ask her. I know she’ll say yes.

Kitty perks up, and I can tell she is pleased to be included in the big-girl talk. “Yes.”

Surprised, Margot says, “Kitty, you’ve hung out with him too?”

“Sure. He comes over all the time. He gives us rides.”

“In his two-seater?” Margot shoots a look at me.

Kitty pipes up. “No, in his mom’s van!” With innocent eyes she says, “I want to go for a ride in his convertible. I’ve never been in a convertible.”

“So he doesn’t drive around his Audi any more?” Margot asks me.

“Not when Kitty’s riding with us,” I say.

“Hmm” is all Margot says, and the skeptical look on her face makes me want to X her right off the screen.

*OceanofPDF.com*

After school I get a text from Josh.

**You, me and the diner like old times.**

Except old times would have included Margot. Now it's new times, I suppose. Maybe that's not altogether a bad thing. New can be good.

**OK but I'm getting my own grilled cheese because you always hog more than your fair share.**

**Deal.**

We're sitting in our booth by the jukebox.

I wonder what Margot's doing right now. It's night-time in Scotland. Maybe she's getting ready to go out to the pub with her hallmates. Margot says pubs are really big over there; they have what they call pub crawls, where they go from pub to pub and drink and drink. Margot's not some big drinker, I've never even seen her drunk. I hope she's learned how to by now.

I hold my hand out for quarters. Another Lara Jean-and-Josh tradition. Josh always gives me quarters for the jukebox. It's because he keeps mounds of them in his car for the tollbooth, and I never have quarters because I hate change.

I can't decide if I want doo-wop or folksy guitar, but then at the last second I put in "Video Killed the Radio Star" for Margot. So in a way it's like she is here.

Josh smiles when it comes on. "I knew you'd pick that."

"No you didn't, because I didn't know I was going to until I did." I pick up my menu and study it like I haven't seen it a million times.

Josh is still smiling. "Why bother looking at the menu when we already know what you're going to get?"

"I could change my mind at the last second," I say. "There's a chance I could order a tuna melt or a turkey burger or a chef salad. I can be adventurous too, you know."

"Sure," Josh agrees, and I know he's just humouring me.

The server comes over to take our order and Josh says, "I'll have a grilled cheese and a tomato soup and a chocolate milkshake." He looks at me expectantly. There's a smile coming up on the corners of his lips.

"Ah ... um..." I scan the menu as fast as I can, but I don't actually want a tuna melt or a turkey burger or a chef salad. I give up. I like what I like. "A grilled cheese, please. And a black-cherry soda." As soon as the server is gone, I say, "Don't say a word."

"Oh, I wasn't going to."

And then, because there's a silence, we both speak at the same time. I say, "Have you talked to Margot lately?" and he says, "How are things going with Kavinsky?"

Josh's easy smile fades and he looks away. "Yeah, we chat online sometimes. I think ... I think she's kind of homesick."

I give him a funny look. "I just talked to her last night and she didn't seem homesick at all. She seemed like the same old Margot. She was telling us about Raisin Weekend. It makes me want to go to Saint Andrews too."

"What's Raisin Weekend?"

"I'm not a hundred per cent sure ... it sounds like it was a mix between drinking a lot and Latin. I guess it's a Scottish thing."

"Would you do that?" Josh asks. "Would you go somewhere far away?"

I sigh. "No, probably not. That's Margot, not me. It'd be nice to visit, though. Maybe my dad will let me go during spring break."

"I think she'd like that a lot. I guess our Paris trip isn't happening any more, huh?" He laughs awkwardly, and then he clears his throat. "So wait, how are things going with Kavinsky?"

Before I can answer, the server comes back with our food. Josh pushes the bowl of soup so it's in the middle of the table. "First sip?" he asks, holding up the milkshake.

Eagerly I nod and lean across the table. Josh holds the glass and I take a long sip. "Ahhh," I say, sitting back down.

"That was a pretty big sip," he says. "How come you never get your own?"

"Why should I when I know you'll share?" I break off a piece of grilled cheese and dip it into the soup.



“So you were saying?” Josh prods. When I stare at him blankly, he says, “You were about to talk about Kavinsky ...”

I was hoping this wouldn't come up. I'm not in the mood to tell more lies to Josh. “Things are good.” Because Josh is looking at me like he's expecting something more, I add, “He's really sweet.”

Josh snorts.

“He's not what you'd think. People are so quick to judge him, but he's different.” I'm surprised to find I'm telling the truth. Peter *isn't* what you'd think. He is cocky and he can be obnoxious and he's always late, true, but there are other good and surprising things about him too. “He's ... not what you think.”

Josh gives me a dubious look. Then he dunks half his sandwich into the soup and says, “You already said that.”

“That's because it's true.” He shrugs at this like he doesn't believe me. So I say, “You should see the way Kitty acts around Peter. She's crazy about him.” I don't realize it until the words are actually out of my mouth, but I say it to hurt him.

Josh tears off a hunk of grilled cheese. “Well, I hope she doesn't get too attached.” Even though I've had that exact same thought for different reasons, it still hurts to hear.

Suddenly the easy Josh-and-Lara Jean feeling is lost. Josh is withdrawn and closed off, and I'm stinging from what he said about Peter, and it feels like play-acting to sit across from each other and pretend it's the same as the old days. How could it be, when Margot isn't here? She is the point of our little triangle.

“Hey,” Josh says suddenly. I look up. “I didn't mean that. That was a shitty thing to say.” He ducks his head. “I guess ... I don't know, maybe I'm just jealous. I'm not used to sharing the Song girls.”

I go soft inside. Now that he's said this nice thing, I am feeling warm and generous towards him again. I don't say what I'm thinking, which is, *You may not be used to sharing us, but we're very used to sharing you.* “You know Kitty still loves you best,” I say, which makes him smile.

“I mean, I did teach her how to hock a loogie,” Josh says. “You don't forget the person who teaches you something like that.” He takes a long sip of his

milkshake. “Hey, they’re doing a Lord of the Rings marathon at the Bess this weekend. Wanna go?”

“That’s like ... nine hours!”

“Yeah, nine hours of awesome.”

“True,” I agree. “I wanna go; I just have to check with Peter first. He said something about going to a movie this weekend, and—”

Josh cuts me off before I can finish. “It’s fine. I can just go with Mike. Or maybe I’ll take Kitty. It’s about time I introduced her to the genius that is Tolkien.”

I’m quiet. Are Kitty and I interchangeable in his mind? Are Margot and I?

We’re sharing a waffle when Genevieve walks into the diner with a little kid who I guess must be her little brother. Not her actual little brother; Gen is an only child. She’s the president of the Little Sib program. It’s where a high school student is paired up with an elementary school kid and you tutor them and take them out for fun days.

I slump down in my seat, but of course Gen still sees me. She looks from me to Josh, and then she gives me a little wave. I don’t know what to do so I just wave back. Something about the way she’s smiling at me is unsettling. It’s how genuinely happy she looks.

If Genevieve is happy, that’s not good for me.

At dinner I get a text from Peter. It says, **If you’re going to hang out with Sanderson, can you at least not do it in public?**

Under the table I read it over and over. Could it be that Peter’s the teensiest bit jealous? Or is he really just worried about how it looks to Genevieve?

“What do you keep looking at?” Kitty wants to know.

I put my phone down, face down. “Nothing.”

Kitty turns to Daddy and says, “I bet it was a text from Peter.”

Buttering a roll, my dad says, “I like Peter.”

“You do?” I say.

Daddy nods. “He’s a good kid. He’s really taken with you, Lara Jean.”

“Taken with me?” I repeat.

To me Kitty says, “You sound like a parrot.” To Daddy she says, “What does that mean? Taken by her?”

“It means he’s charmed by her,” Daddy explains. “He’s smitten.”

“Well, what’s smitten?”

He chuckles and stuffs the roll in Kitty’s open, perplexed mouth. “It means he likes her.”

“He definitely likes her,” Kitty agrees, her mouth full. “He ... he looks at you a lot, Lara Jean. When you’re not paying attention. He looks at you, to see if you’re having a good time.”

“He does?” My chest feels warm and glowy, and I can feel myself start to smile.

“I’m just happy to see you so happy. I used to worry about Margot taking on so many responsibilities at home and helping out the way she did. I didn’t want her to miss out on her high school experience. But you know Margot. She’s so driven.” Daddy reaches over and squeezes my shoulder. “To see you now, going out and doing things and making new friends ... it makes your old man very happy. Very, very happy.”

I feel a lump grow in my throat. If only it wasn’t all a lie.

“Don’t cry, Daddy,” Kitty orders, and Daddy nods and pulls her into his arms for a hug.

“Can you do me a favour, Kitty?” he says.

“What?”

“Can you stay this age for ever?”

Automatically Kitty replies, “I can if you give me a puppy.”

My dad roars with laughter, and Kitty laughs too.

I really admire my little sister sometimes. She knows exactly what she wants, and she’ll do whatever it takes to get it. She’s shameless that way.

I’m going to talk to Daddy and help her cause. The two of us will wear him down. There’ll be a puppy under our tree Christmas morning. I’d bet money on it.

The next night Peter and I study at Starbucks for a few hours – well, I study, and he keeps getting up and talking to people from school. On the way home he asks, “Did you sign up for the ski trip?”

“No. I’m a terrible skier.” Only cool people like Peter and his friends go on the ski trip. I could try to twist Chris’s arm into going, but she’d probably laugh in my face. She’s not going on any school trip.

“You don’t have to ski. You can snowboard. That’s what I’m doing.”

I give him a look. “Can you picture me snowboarding?”

“I’ll teach you. Come on, it’ll be fun.” Peter grabs my hand and says, “Please, please, please, Lara Jean? Come on, be a sport. It’ll be fun, I promise.”

He catches me by surprise with this. The ski trip isn’t until winter break. So he wants to keep this, us, up until then. For some reason I feel relieved.

“If you don’t want to snowboard,” he continues, “the lodge has a big stone fireplace and big comfy chairs. You can sit and read for hours. And they sell the best hot chocolate. I’ll buy you one.” He squeezes my hand.

My heart does a little zing, and I say, “All right, I’ll go. But the hot chocolate had better be as good as you say.”

“I’ll buy you as many as you want.”

“Then you better bring a lot of singles,” I say, and Peter snorts. “What?”

“Nothing.”

When we get to my house, I climb out and he drives away before it occurs to me I left my bag on the floor of his car, and Daddy and Kitty aren’t home. They’re at Kitty’s school for parent–teacher conferences.

I fumble around blindly under the deck, feeling around in the dark for the spare keys we keep hidden under the wheelbarrow. Then I remember that the spare keys are in the junk drawer, in the house, because I forgot to put them back the last time I got locked out. I have no keys, no phone, no way of getting into the house.

Josh! Josh has a spare key. He's watered my dad's plants for him a few times when we went away on vacation.

I find a rock in the driveway and I cross the lawn and stand underneath Josh's window. I throw the rock at it and I miss. I find another one, and it pings off the glass, barely making a sound. I try again, with a bigger rock. This one hits.

Josh opens the window and leans his head out. "Hey. Did Kavinsky leave already?"

Surprised, I say, "Yeah. I left my bag in his car. Can you throw down the spare keys?"

Josh sighs, like I'm asking for something huge. "Hold on." Then he disappears.

I stand there and wait for him to come back to the window, but he doesn't. He comes outside the front door instead. He's wearing a hoodie and sweatpants. It's Margot's favourite hoodie. When they first got together, she used to wear it all the time, like it was a letterman's jacket or something.

I hold my hand out for the keys and Josh drops them in my hand. "Thanks, Joshy."

I turn to leave, but he says, "Wait. I'm worried about you."

"What? Why?"

He sighs heavily and adjusts his glasses. He only wears his glasses at night. "This thing with Kavinsky..."

"Not that again. Josh—"

"He's a player. He's not good enough for you. You're ... innocent. You're not like other girls. He's a typical guy. You can't trust him."

"I think I know him a lot better than you do."

"I'm just looking out for you." Josh clears his throat. "You're like my little sister."

I want to hit him for saying that. "No, I'm not," I say.

An uneasy look crosses over Josh's face. I know what he's thinking, because we're both thinking it.

Then, headlights are beaming down our street. It's Peter's car. He's come back. I hand Josh his set of keys and run over to my driveway. Over my shoulder I call out, "Thanks, Joshy!"

I come around the front to the driver's side. Peter's window is down. "You forgot your bag," he says, glancing over towards Josh's house.

"I know," I say breathlessly. "Thanks for coming back."

"Is he out there?"

"I don't know. He was a minute ago."

"Then just in case," Peter says, and he leans his head out and kisses me on the lips, open-mouthed and sure.

I'm stunned.

When he pulls away, Peter's smiling. "Night, Lara Jean."

He drives off into the night and I'm still standing there with my fingers to my lips. Peter Kavinsky just kissed me. He kissed me, and I liked it. I'm pretty sure I liked it. I'm pretty sure I like him.

The next morning I'm at my locker, putting my books away, when I see Peter walking down the hallway. My heart thumps in my chest so loud I can hear it echo in my ears. He hasn't seen me yet. I duck my head into my locker and start arranging my books into a pile.

From behind the locker door he says, "Hey."

"Hey," I say back.

"I just want to set your mind at ease, Covey. I'm not going to kiss you again, so don't worry about it."

Oh.

So that's that. It doesn't matter if I like him or not, because he doesn't like me back. It's kind of silly to feel so disappointed about something you only just realized you wanted, isn't it?

*Don't let him see that you're disappointed.*

I face him. "I wasn't worrying about it."

“Yes, you were. Look at you: your face is all pinched together like a clam.” Peter laughs, and I try to unpinch my face, to look serene. “It’s not going to happen again. It was all for Sanderson’s benefit.”

“Good.”

“Good,” he says, and he takes my hand, and he closes my locker door, and he walks me to class like a real boyfriend, like we’re really in love.

How am I supposed to know what’s real and what’s not? It feels like I’m the only one who doesn’t know the difference.

*OceanofPDF.com*

My dad's thrilled when I ask him to sign the permission slip. "Oh, Lara Jean, this is great. Did Peter convince you? You've been scared of skiing ever since you were ten and you did the splits and you couldn't get back up!"

"Yeah, I remember." My boots froze on to the skis, and I lay there in the splits for what felt like days.

Signing the paper, my dad says, "Hey, maybe we can all of us go to Wintergreen over Christmas. Peter too."

So that's where I get it from. My dad. He lives in a fantasy world. Handing me the slip, he says cheerfully, "You can wear Margot's ski pants. Her gloves too."

I don't tell him that I won't need them, because I'll be cozy in the lodge, reading and sipping hot cocoa by the fire. I should bring my knitting stuff with me too.

When I talk to Margot on the phone that night, I tell her I'm going on the ski trip, and she's surprised. "But you hate skiing."

"I'm going to try out snowboarding."

"Just ... be careful," she says.

I'm thinking she means on the slopes, but when Chris comes over the next night to borrow a dress, I learn otherwise. "You know everybody hooks up on the ski trip, right? It's like a school-sanctioned booty call."

"*What?*"

"That's where I lost my V, freshman year."

"I thought you lost it in the woods near your house."

"Oh yeah. Whatever, the point is, I had sex on the ski trip."

"There are chaperones," I say worriedly. "How can people just have sex with chaperones around?"

"Chaperones go to sleep early because they're old," Chris says. "People just sneak out. Plus there's a hot tub. Did you know that there's a hot tub?"



“No ... Peter never mentioned that.” Well, that’s that, I just won’t pack a bathing suit. It’s not like they can make you go in a hot tub if you don’t want to.

“The year I went, people were skinny-dipping.”

My eyes bug out. Skinny-dipping! “People were nude?”

“Well, the girls took their tops off. Just be prepared.” Chris chews on her fingernail. “Last year I heard Mr Dunham got in the hot tub with students and it was weird.”

“This sounds like the Wild West,” I mutter.

“More like Girls Gone Wild.”

It’s not that I’m worried Peter will try something with me. I know he won’t, because he doesn’t see me that way. But are people going to expect it? Am I going to have to sneak into his room in the middle of the night so people think we’re doing something? I don’t want to get in trouble on a school trip, but Peter has a way of convincing me to do stuff I don’t want to do.

I grab Chris’s hands. “Will you please come? Please, please!”

She shakes her head. “You know better than that. I don’t do school trips.”

“You have before!”

“Yeah, freshman year. Not any more.”

“But I need you!” Desperately I squeeze her hands and say, “Remember how I covered for you last year when you went to Coachella? I spent the whole weekend sneaking in and out of your house so your mom would think you were at home! Don’t forget the things I’ve done for you, Chris! I need you now!”

Unmoved, Chris plucks her hands away from mine and goes to the mirror and starts examining her skin. “Kavinsky’s not going to pressure you to have sex if you don’t want to. If you minus the fact that he dated the devil, he’s not a total dummy. He’s kind of decent, actually.”

“What do you mean by decent? Decent like he doesn’t care that much about sex?”

“Oh, God, no. He and Gen were in constant heat for each other. She’s been on the pill longer than I have. Too bad everyone in my family thinks she’s this angel.” Chris pokes at a zit on her chin. “What a fake. I should send an

anonymous letter to our grandma... Not that I really would. I'm no rat, unlike her. Remember that time she told our grandma I was going to school drunk?" She doesn't wait for me to answer. When Chris gets going on a Genevieve rant, she is single-minded. "My grandma wanted to use the money she saved for my college for rehab! They had a family meeting about me! I'm so glad you stole Kavinsky from her."

"I didn't steal him. They were already broken up!"

Chris snorts. "Sure, keep telling that to yourself. Gen's going on the ski trip, you know. She's class president, so she's basically organizing it. So just beware. Don't ever ski alone."

I let out a gasp. "Chris, I'm begging you. Please come." In a burst of inspiration I say, "If you come, it'll make Genevieve really mad! She's organizing this whole thing; it's her trip. She won't want you there!"

Chris purses her lips into a smile. "You know how to play me." She juts her chin at me. "Do you think this zit is ready to pop?"

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Thanksgiving day, Daddy cleans out the turkey for me and then leaves to go pick up our Korean grandma, who lives an hour away in a retirement community with a lot of other Korean grandmas. Daddy's mom, Nana, is spending Thanksgiving with her boyfriend's family, which is fine by me, because I know she wouldn't have anything nice to say about the food.

I make up a green-bean dish with orange peel and dill, in an earnest effort to be jazzy and inventive. I nominate Kitty to be my taste tester and she takes a bite of green bean and says it tastes like an orange pickle. "Why can't we just have green-bean casserole with the fried onion rings that come in the can?" Kitty ponders. She's cutting out different-coloured feathers for her turkey place mats.

"Because I'm trying to be jazzy and inventive," I say, dumping a can of gravy into the saucepan.

Doubtfully Kitty says, "Well, are we still having broccoli casserole? People will eat that."

"Do you see any broccoli anywhere in this kitchen?" I ask. "No, the green in this meal is the green bean."

"What about mashed potatoes? We're still having mashed potatoes, right?"

Mashed potatoes. I jump up and check the pantry. I forgot to buy the potatoes. I got the whole milk and the butter and even the chives to put on top like Margot always does. But I forgot the actual potatoes. "Call Daddy and ask him to pick up Yukon gold potatoes on the way home," I say, closing the pantry door.

"I can't believe you forgot the potatoes," Kitty says, with a shake of her head.

I glare at her. "Just focus on your place mats."

"No, because if I didn't just ask about the mashed potatoes, the meal would have been ruined, so you should be thanking me." Kitty gets up to call Daddy, and I yell out, "By the way, those turkeys look more like the NBC peacock logo than actual turkeys, so!"

Kitty is unfazed, and I take another bite of the green beans. They do taste like an orange pickle.

It turns out I have cooked the turkey upside down. Also, Kitty kept hounding me about salmonella because she watched a video on it in science, so I wind up leaving the bird in too long. The mashed potatoes are fine, but there are some crunchy bits here and there because I rushed to boil them.

We are seated around the dining room table, and Kitty's place mats really do add a certain something.

Grandma is eating a whole pile of green beans, and I shoot Kitty a triumphant look. *See? Someone likes them.*

There was a minute or two, after Mommy died, when Grandma moved in to help take care of us. There was even talk of her staying. She didn't think Daddy could manage on his own.

"So, Danny," Grandma begins. Kitty and I exchange a look across the table, because we know what's coming. "Are you seeing anyone these days? Going on dates?"

My dad reddens. "Er ... not so much. My work keeps me so busy..."

Grandma clucks. "It's not good for a man to be alone, Danny."

"I've got my girls to keep me company," my dad says, trying to sound jovial and not tense.

Grandma fixes him with a cold stare. "That's not what I mean."

When we're doing the dishes, Grandma asks me, "Lara Jean, would you mind if your daddy had a girlfriend?"

It's something Margot and I have discussed at length over the years, most often in the dark, late at night. If Daddy absolutely had to date, what kind of woman would we like to see him with? Someone with a good sense of humour, kind-hearted, all of the usual things. Someone who'd be firm with Kitty but not rein her in so much that it would squash all the special things about her. But also someone who wouldn't try to be our mother; that's what Margot is fiercest about. Kitty needs a mom, but we're old enough to not need mothering, she says.

Of the three of us, Margot would be the most critical. She's incredibly loyal to Mommy's memory. Not that I'm not, but there have been times, over the years, where I've thought how it would be nice to have someone. Someone older, a lady, who knows about certain things, like the right way to put on blush, or how to flirt to get out of a speeding ticket. Things to know for the future. But then it never happened. Daddy's been on some dates, but he hasn't had a steady girlfriend he's brought around. Which has always been sort of a relief, but now that I'm getting older, I keep thinking about what it will be like when I'm gone and it's just Kitty and Daddy, and then before long it will just be Daddy. I don't want him to be alone.

"No," I say. "I wouldn't mind at all."

Grandma gives me an approving look. "Good girl," she says, and I feel warm and cozy inside, like how I used to feel after a cup of the Night-Night tea Mommy used to make me when I couldn't fall asleep at night. Daddy's made it for me a few times since, but it never tasted the same, and I never had the heart to tell him.

*OceanofPDF.com*

The Christmas Cookie Bonanza starts December first. We drag out all of Mommy's old cookbooks and cooking magazines and we spread them out on the living-room floor and turn on the *Charlie Brown Christmas* album. No Christmas music is allowed in our house until December first. I don't remember whose rule this is, but we abide by it. Kitty keeps a list of which cookies we're definitely doing and which ones we're maybe doing. There are a few perennials. My dad loves pecan crescents, so those are a must. Sugar cookies, because those are a given. Snickerdoodles for Kitty, molasses cookies for Margot, cowgirl cookies for me. White-chocolate cranberry are Josh's favourite. I think this year though, we should mix things up and do different cookies. Not entirely, but at least a few new ones.

Peter's here; he stopped by after school to work on chem, and now it's hours later and he's still here. He and Kitty and I are in the living room going through the cookbooks. My dad's in the kitchen listening to NPR and making tomorrow's lunches.

"Please no more turkey sandwiches," I call out.

Peter nudges my sock and mouths, *Spoiled*, and he points at me and Kitty, shaking his finger at us.

"Whatever. Your mom makes your lunches every day, so shut it," I whisper.

My dad calls back, "Hey, I'm sick of leftovers too, but what are we going to do? Throw it away?"

Kitty and I look at each other. "Pretty much exactly," I say. My dad has a thing about wasting food. I wonder if I snuck down to the kitchen tonight and threw it out, if he'd notice. He probably would.

"If we had a dog," Kitty pipes up loudly, "there wouldn't be any more leftovers." She winks at me.

"What kind of dog do you want?" Peter asks her.

"Don't get her hopes up," I tell him, but he waves me off.

Immediately Kitty says, "An Akita. Red fur with a cinnamon-bun tail. Or a German shepherd I can train to be a seeing-eye dog."

"But you're not blind," Peter says.

“But I could be one day.”

Grinning, Peter shakes his head. He nudges me again and in an admiring voice he says, “Can’t argue with the kid.”

“It’s pretty much futile,” I agree. I hold up a magazine to show Kitty. “What do you think? Creamsicle cookies?” Kitty writes them down as a maybe.

“Hey, what about these?” Peter pushes a cookbook in my lap. It’s opened up to a fruitcake cookie recipe.

I gag. “Are you kidding? You’re kidding, right? Fruitcake cookies? That’s disgusting.”

“When done right, fruitcake can be really good,” Peter defends. “My great-aunt Trish used to make fruitcake, and she’d put ice cream on top and it was awesome.”

“If you put ice cream on anything, it’s good,” Kitty says.

“Can’t argue with the kid,” I say, and Peter and I exchange smiles over Kitty’s head.

“Point taken, but this isn’t your average fruitcake. It’s not, like, a wet loaf of neon jujubes. It’s got pecans and dried cherries and blueberries and good stuff. I think she called it Christmas Memory fruitcake.”

“I love that story!” I exclaim. “That’s my favourite. It’s so good but so sad.”

Peter looks puzzled and so does Kitty so I explain. “‘A Christmas Memory’ is a short story by Truman Capote. It’s about a boy named Buddy and his older lady cousin who took care of him when he was little. They’d save up all year to buy ingredients for fruitcake and then they’d send them as presents to friends, but also to, like, the president.”

“Why is it so sad?” Kitty wants to know.

“Because they’re best friends and they love each other more than anybody, but they get separated in the end, because the family thinks she doesn’t take good enough care of him. And maybe she doesn’t, but maybe it doesn’t matter, because she was still his soulmate. In the end she dies, and Buddy doesn’t even get to say goodbye to her. And, it’s a true story.”

“That’s depressing,” Peter says. “Forget the fruitcake cookies.”

Kitty crosses out fruitcake cookies on her pad.

I'm thumbing through an old *Good Housekeeping* magazine when the doorbell rings. Kitty scrambles up and runs for the door. "Check who it is before you open it," I call after her. She's always forgetting to check first.

"Josh!" I hear her squeal.

Peter's head jerks up.

"He's here to see Kitty," I tell him.

"Yeah, right."

Josh walks into the living room with Kitty hanging around his neck like a monkey. "Hey," he says, eyes flickering in Peter's direction.

"What's up, man," Peter says, friendly as can be. "Have a seat."

I give him a strange look. Just a second ago he was grouching, and now he's happy as a clam. I don't get boys.

Josh holds up a plastic bag. "I brought back your casserole dish."

"Is that Josh?" my dad calls from the kitchen. "Josh, do you want a snack? Turkey sandwich?"

I'm positive he's going to say no, because I'm sure he's had as many leftover turkey sandwiches over at his house as we've been eating over here, but then he goes, "Sure!"

Josh disentangles himself from Kitty and plops down on the couch. To me he says, "Christmas Cookie Bonanza?"

"Christmas Cookie Bonanza," I confirm.

"You're making my favourite, right?" Josh gives me puppy-dog eyes, which always makes me laugh, because it's so un-Josh.

"You're such a dork," I say, shaking my head.

"What's your favourite?" Peter asks him. "Because I think the list is pretty set."

"I'm pretty sure it's already on the list," Josh says.

I look from Josh to Peter. I can't tell if they're kidding or not.

Peter reaches out and tickles Kitty's feet. "Read us the list, Katherine."

Kitty giggles and rolls over to her notepad. Then she stands up and grandly says, "M&M cookies are a yes, cappuccino cookies are a maybe, Creamsicle



cookies are a maybe, fruitcake cookies are a *no way*—”

“Wait a minute, I’m a part of this council too,” Peter objects, “and you guys just turned down my fruitcake cookies without a second thought.”

“You said to forget the fruitcake cookies, like, five seconds ago!” I say.

“Well, now I want them back under consideration,” he says.

“I’m sorry, but you don’t have the votes,” I tell him. “Kitty and I both vote no, so that’s two against one.”

My dad pops his head into the living room. “Put me down as a yes vote for the fruitcake cookies.” His head disappears back into the kitchen.

“Thank you, Dr Covey,” Peter crows. He drags me closer to him. “See, I knew your dad was on my side.”

I laugh. “You’re such a suck-up!”

And then I look over at Josh, and he is staring at us with a funny, left-out look on his face. It makes me feel bad, that look. I scoot away from Peter and start flipping through my books again. I tell him, “The list is still a work in progress. The cookie council will strongly consider your white-chocolate cranberry cookies.”

“Greatly appreciated,” Josh says. “Christmas isn’t Christmas without your white-chocolate cranberry cookies.”

Kitty pipes up, “Hey, Josh, you’re a suck-up too.” Josh grabs her and tickles her until she’s laughing so hard she has tears in her eyes.

After Josh leaves and Kitty goes upstairs to watch TV, I’m tidying up the living room and Peter’s sprawled out on the couch watching me. I keep thinking he’s about to leave, but then he keeps lingering.

Out of nowhere he says, “Remember back at Halloween how you were Cho Chang and Sanderson was Harry Potter? I bet you that wasn’t a coincidence. I bet you a million bucks he got Kitty to find out what your costume was and then he ran out and bought a Harry Potter costume. The kid is into you.”

I freeze. “No, he isn’t. He loves my sister. He always has and he always will.”

Peter waves this off. “Just you wait. As soon as you and I are done, he’s gonna pull some cheesy-ass move and, like, profess his love for you with a boom box. I’m telling you, I know how guys think.”

I yank away the pillow he’s got cushioning his back and put it on the recliner. “My sister will be home for winter break soon. I bet *you* a million dollars they get back together.”

Peter holds his hand out for me to shake on it, and when I take it, he pulls me on to the couch next to him. Our legs touch. He has a mischievous glint in his eye, and I think maybe he’s going to kiss me, and I’m scared, but I’m excited too. But then I hear Kitty’s footsteps coming down the stairs, and the moment’s over.

*OceanofPDF.com*

“Can we put up the tree this weekend?” Kitty asks at breakfast.

My dad looks up from his bowl of oatmeal. Oatmeal, ugh. “I don’t see why not.”

Half-heartedly I say, “Margot might be mad if we do it without her.” Truth be told, I want to put up the tree too. It’s so cozy to do Christmas Cookie Bonanza and have the lights twinkling on the tree and Christmas music and the whole house smelling like sugar and butter.

“Brielle’s family put their tree up the day after Thanksgiving,” Kitty says.

“Let’s just do it then,” I say. “Can we, Daddy?”

“Well, if Brielle’s family is doing it,” Daddy says.

We drive out to the Christmas tree farm an hour away, because that’s where the really nice ones are. Kitty insists on seeing each and every tree to make sure ours is the best one. I vote for a plump balsam fir because it smells the best, but Kitty doesn’t think it’s tall enough. We go for a Douglas fir instead, and the whole drive home the air smells like Christmas morning.

Josh runs out of his house when he sees us struggling to get the tree inside. He and my dad heft it up and take it inside the house. He holds the tree up straight as my dad screws the Christmas-tree stand around it tight. I have a feeling like he’s going to want to stay and help decorate the tree. I can’t stop thinking about what Peter said. How Josh could maybe like me.

“A little to the left,” Kitty directs. “It’s not straight enough.”

I bring down the box with the twinkle lights and the ornaments and start sorting through them. My favourite is the painted blue star I made in kindergarten out of dough. It’s my favourite because there’s a bite taken out of it – I told Kitty it was a cookie and she chomped right into it like the Cookie Monster. And then she cried, and I got in trouble, but it was worth it. “Should we do coloured lights or white lights this year?” I ask.

“White,” Kitty says. “It’s classier.”

“But coloured lights are whimsical,” Josh argues. “I mean, they’re nostalgic.”

I roll my eyes. “Whimsical, Josh?” And then Josh proceeds to make a case for coloured lights, and he and I argue back and forth until Daddy intercedes and says we should just do half and half. This is when things finally feel really and truly normal between us, now that we are bickering again like old times. Peter was wrong about Josh.

The tree is so tall it nearly touches the ceiling. We run out of lights, so Daddy goes to buy more at the store. Josh puts Kitty on his shoulders so she can put the star on the tippy top.

“I’m glad we got a big tree this year,” I say with a happy sigh, falling back on to the sofa and looking up at the top. There’s nothing cozier than a Christmas tree all lit up.

A little later, Daddy has to go in to the hospital, and Kitty goes over to our neighbour’s house because they’re making s’mores in the fireplace, so it’s just Josh and me cleaning up. I’m putting ornament hooks back into their different ziplock bags and Josh is loading up a cardboard box with the ornaments we didn’t have room for. He hoists the box in his arms and bumps into a branch on the tree, and a glass ornament slips off and breaks.

Josh groans.

“Jo-osh,” I say. “I made that in home ec.”

“Sorry.”

“It’s OK. It wasn’t my best work anyway. I put in too many feathers.” It’s a clear glass ball with white feathers and white sequins inside.

I go get a broom, and when I come back, he says, “You act different around Kavinsky. Did you know that?”

I look up from sweeping the broken ornament. “No I don’t.”

“You don’t act like you. You act like ... like how all girls act around him. That’s not you, Lara Jean.”

Annoyed, I say, “I act the same as I always do. What would you know about it, Josh? You’ve barely ever even been around us.” I crouch down and pick up a shard of glass.

“Be careful,” Josh says. “Here, I’ll do it.” He stoops down next to me and reaches for another shard. “Ow!”

“*You* be careful!” I lean close to him and try to get a closer look at his finger. “Are you bleeding?”

He shakes his head. “I’m fine.” And then he says, “You know what I don’t get?”

“What?”

Josh stares at me, his cheeks a dull red. “Why you never said anything. If all that time you felt like that about me, why didn’t you say anything?”

My whole body goes stiff. I wasn’t expecting that. I’m not prepared. I swallow hard and say, “You were with Margot.”

“I wasn’t always with Margot. The stuff you wrote – you liked me before I ever liked her. Why didn’t you just tell me?”

I let out a breath. “What does that even matter now?”

“It matters. You should have told me. You should have at least given me a chance.”

“It wouldn’t have made a difference, Josh!”

“And I’m telling you it would have!” He steps towards me.

Jerkily I rise to my feet. Why is he bringing this up now, just when things are back to normal again? “You’re so full of it. You’ve never thought of me that way, not ever, so don’t go trying to reinvent history now when I have somebody.”

“Don’t tell me what I think,” he snaps. “You don’t know my every thought, Lara Jean.”

“Yes, I do. I know you better than anyone. You know why? You’re predictable. Everything you do. It’s so predictable. The only reason you’re even saying this now is because you’re jealous. And it’s not even because of me. You don’t care about who I’m with. You’re just jealous that Peter took your spot. Kitty likes him better than you now too.”

His face darkens. He glares at me and I glare back. “Fine!” he yells. “I’m jealous! Are you happy now?”

And then he jerks his head towards mine, and he kisses me. On the lips. His eyes are closed, mine are wide open. And then mine close too, and for a second, just for a second, I kiss him back. Then I break away. I push him off.

Triumphantly he says, "Did you predict that, Lara Jean?"

My mouth opens and closes, but no words come out. I drop the broom and run up the stairs, as fast as I can. I run all the way to my room and lock my door behind me. Josh just kissed me. In my living room. My sister is coming back in a few weeks. And I have a fake boyfriend I just cheated on.

*OceanofPDF.com*

After third period, Lucas is waiting for me.

He's wearing a skinny tie today with a V-neck and he has a full-size bag of Cheetos in his hand. He stuffs a handful of Cheetos into his mouth, and orange dust floats on to his white V-neck. The corners of his mouth look slightly orange too. With his mouth full he says, "Look, there's something I need to tell you."

I laugh. "I can't believe I ever thought you were so refined," I say, blowing Cheetos powder off his shirt. "What do you need to tell me?" I ask. I steal a few Cheetos out of the bag. When he hesitates, I say, "Lucas, I hate when people say that they have something to tell you and they don't just say it. It's like when people say they have a funny story – like, just hurry up and tell the story and I'll decide for myself if I think it's funny or not."

Lucas licks cheese off his lips. "Well, you know I live in the same neighbourhood as Genevieve, right?" I nod. "Last night I saw Kavinsky leaving her house."

"Oh." That's all I say. Just "oh".

"Normally I wouldn't think it was that big of a deal, but there's one other thing." Lucas wipes his mouth off with the back of his hand. "Genevieve and her college guy broke up over the weekend. You know what that means, right?"

I'm nodding but I'm numb inside. "Yes... Wait, what?"

Lucas gives me a look that's half pitying, half impatient. "She's going to try to get Peter back, Lara Jean!"

"Right," I say, and I feel a pang even as I'm saying it. "Of course she will."

"Don't let her," he warns.

"I won't," I say, and the words come out soft like jelly, without any conviction at all.

I didn't know it until now but I think maybe I've been counting down to this moment all along. For Genevieve to want Peter back. For Peter to figure out this whole thing has been a zany little detour and now it's time for him to go back where he belongs. To the person he belongs to.

I wasn't planning on telling Peter a thing about Josh kissing me. I really wasn't. But then, as Lucas and I are walking together, I see him and Genevieve walking down the hallway. Lucas gives me a meaningful look, which I pretend not to see.

In chemistry class I write Peter a note.

*You were right about Josh.*

I tap him on the back and slip the note in his hand. When he reads it, he sits up straight and immediately scrawls something back.

*Be more specific.*

*He kissed me.*

When Peter stiffens, I am ashamed to say that I feel a little bit vindicated. I wait for him to write back, but he doesn't. As soon as the bell rings, he turns around and says, "What the hell? How did that even happen?"

"He came over to help us trim the tree."

"And then what? He kissed you in front of Kitty?"

"No! It was just the two of us at the house."

Peter looks really irritated, and I'm starting to regret mentioning it. "What the hell is he thinking, kissing my girlfriend? It's fucking ridiculous. I'm gonna say something to him."

"Wait, what? No!"

"I have to, Lara Jean. He can't just get away with it."

I stand up and start packing up my bag. "You'd better not say anything to him, Peter. I mean it."

Peter watches me silently. And then he asks, "Did you kiss him back?"

"What does it matter?"

He looks taken aback. "Are you mad at me for something?"

"No," I say. "But I will be if you say anything to Josh."

"Fine," he says.

"Fine," I say back.



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I haven't seen Josh since he kissed me, but when I get home that night from studying at the library, he is sitting on the front porch in his navy parka, waiting for me. The lights are on in the house; my dad is home. Kitty's bedroom light is on. I'd rather go on avoiding Josh, but here he is, at my house.

"Hey," he says. "Can I talk to you?"

I sit down next to him and look straight ahead, across the street. Ms Rothschild's put her Christmas tree up too. She always puts it by the window near the door so people can see it from the outside.

"We have to figure out what we're going to do before Margot gets here. It was my fault what happened. I should be the one to tell her."

I stare at him in disbelief. "Tell her? Are you nuts? We're never telling Margot because there's nothing to tell."

He juts his chin out. "I don't want to keep a secret from her."

"You should have thought of that before you kissed me!" I hiss. "And for the record, if anybody was going to tell her, it would be me. I'm her sister. You were just her boyfriend. And you're not even that any more, so..."

Hurt flashes across his face and it stays there. "I was never just Margot's boyfriend. This is weird for me too, you know. It's like, ever since I got that letter..." He hesitates. "Forget it."

"Just say it," I say.

"Ever since I got that letter, things have been messed up between us. It's not fair. You got to say everything you wanted to say, and I'm the one who has to rearrange the way I think about you; I have to make sense of it in my head. You totally blindsided me, and then you just shut me out. You start dating Kavinsky, you stop being my friend." He exhales. "Ever since I got your letter ... I haven't been able to stop thinking about you."

Whatever I was expecting him to say, it wasn't that. It definitely wasn't that. "Josh..."

"I know you don't want to hear it, but just let me say what I need to say, OK?"

I nod.

“I hate that you’re with Kavinsky. I hate it. He’s not good enough for you. I’m sorry to say it, but he’s just not. In my opinion, no guy will ever be good enough for you. Least of all me.” Josh ducks his head, and then suddenly he looks up at me and says, “There was this one time, I guess it was a couple of summers ago. We were walking home from somebody’s house – I think it was Mike’s.”

It was hot, around dusk. I was mad because Mike’s older brother Jimmy had said he’d give us a ride home, and then he went somewhere and didn’t come back, so we had to walk. I was wearing espadrilles and my feet were hurting something terrible. Josh kept telling me to keep up with him.

Quietly he says, “It was just me and you. You had on that tan suede fringed shirt you used to wear, with the straps, and it showed your belly button.”

“My Pocahontas-meets-seventies-Cher-style shirt.” Oh, how I loved that shirt.

“I almost kissed you that day. I thought about it. It was this weird impulse I had. I just wanted to see what it would be like.”

My heart stops. “And then?”

“And then I don’t know. I guess I forgot about it.”

I let out a sigh. “I’m sorry you got that letter. You were never supposed to see that. It wasn’t meant for you to ever read. It was just for me.”

“Maybe it was fate. Maybe this was all supposed to happen just like this, because ... because it was always gonna be you and me.”

I say the first thing that comes to mind. “No, it wasn’t.” And I realize it’s true.

This is the moment I realize I don’t love him, that I haven’t for a while. That maybe I never did. Because he’s right there for the taking: I could kiss him again; I could make him mine. But I don’t want him. I want someone else. It feels strange to have spent so much time wishing for something, for someone, and then one day, suddenly, to just stop.

I tuck my fingers inside my jacket sleeves. “You can’t tell Margot. You have to promise me, Josh.”

Reluctantly he nods.

“Has Margot been in touch with you recently?” I ask him.

“Yeah. She called the other night. She said she wants to hang out while she’s home. She wants to go to DC for the day. Go to the Smithsonian, get dinner in Chinatown.”

“Great. Then that’s what you’ll do.” I pat him on the knee and then quickly take my hand back. “Josh, we just have to act like before. Like always. If we do that, everything will be fine.” I repeat it to myself in my head. *Everything will be fine*. We’ll all go back to our proper places now. Josh and Margot. Me. Peter.

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After school lets out the next day, I go look for Peter in the weight room. He's sitting at the bench press. I think it's better to talk here and not in his car. I'm going to miss riding around in his car. It was starting to feel like home. I'm going to miss being somebody's pretend girlfriend. Not just somebody's – Peter's. I've gotten to really like Darrell and Gabe and the other lax guys. They aren't as douchey as people say. They're good people.

The weight room is empty except for Peter. He's at the bench press, lifting weights. When he sees me, he smiles. "Are you here to spot me?" He sits up and wipes sweat off his face with the collar of his T-shirt.

My heart squeezes painfully. "I'm here to break up. To fake break up, I mean."

Peter does a double take. "Wait. What?"

"There's no need to keep it going. You got what you wanted, right? You saved face, and so did I. I talked to Josh, and everything's back to normal with us again. And my sister will be home soon. So ... mission accomplished."

Slowly he nods. "Yeah, I guess."

My heart is breaking even as I smile. "So OK, then." With a flourish I whip our contract out of my bag. "Null and void. Both parties have hereby fulfilled their obligations to each other in perpetuity." I'm just rattling off lawyer words.

"You carry that around with you?"

"Of course! Kitty's such a snoop. She'd find it in two seconds."

I hold up the piece of paper, poised to rip it in half, but Peter grabs it from me. "Wait! What about the ski trip?"

"What about it?"

"You're still coming, right?"

I hadn't thought of that. The only reason I was going to go was for Peter. I can't go now. I can't be a witness to Peter and Genevieve's reunion, I just can't. I want them to come back from the trip magically together again, and it

will be like this whole thing was just something I dreamed up. "I'm not going to go."

His eyes widen. "Come on, Covey! Don't bail on me now. We already signed up and gave the deposits and everything. Let's just go, and have that be our final hurrah." When I start to protest, Peter shakes his head. "You're going, so take this contract back." Peter refolds it and carefully puts it back in my bag.

Why is it so hard to say no to him? Is this what it's like to be in love with somebody?

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I get the idea during the morning announcements, when they announce that our school's hosting a Model UN scrimmage this weekend. John Ambrose McClaren was the middle school Model UN president. I wonder if he's on his school's team.

I bring it up to Peter at lunch, before any of the guys sit down. "Do you know if John McClaren still does Model UN?"

He gives me a funny look. "How should I know?"

"I don't know. I was just wondering."

"Why?"

"I think maybe I'm going to go to the Model UN scrimmage this weekend. I have a feeling that he'll be there."

"For real?" Peter hoots. "If he is, what are you going to do?"

"I haven't figured that part out yet. Maybe I'll go up to him, maybe I won't. I just want to see how he turned out."

"We can look him up online right now and I'll show you."

I shake my head. "No, that would be cheating. I want to see him with my own eyes. I want to be surprised."

"Well, don't bother asking me to go and keep you company. I'm not going to waste a whole Saturday on Model UN."

"I wasn't planning on asking you to go."

Peter throws me a hurt look. "What? Why not?"

"It's just something I want to do by myself."

Peter lets out a low whistle. "Wow. The body ain't even cold yet."

"Huh?"

"You're a little player, Covey. We aren't even broken up yet and you're already trying to talk to other guys. I would be hurt if I wasn't impressed."

This makes me smile.

In eighth grade I kissed John McClaren at a party. It wasn't a romantic kiss. It was a barely anything kiss. We were playing spin the bottle, and when it was his turn, I held my breath and prayed the bottle would land on me. And it did! It almost landed on Angie Powell, but luck was on my side that day, and he was mine by half an inch. I tried to keep my face very still and robotic so I wouldn't smile. John and I crawled into the centre and we did this very quick chicken peck, and everybody groaned, and his face was red. I was disappointed; I think maybe I'd expected something more, a kiss with more weight to it. More va-va-va-voom. More zsa zsa zsu. But that was it. Maybe I'll get a second chance. Maybe it'll make me forget Peter.

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As I walk into school on Saturday morning, I go over what I'm going to say. Maybe just, *Hey, John, how are you? It's Lara Jean*. I haven't seen him since the eighth grade. What if he doesn't recognize me? What if he doesn't even remember me?

I scan the sandwich boards in the lobby and I find John's name under General Assembly. He's representing the People's Republic of China.

The General Assembly is meeting in the auditorium. There are desks set up for each delegate, and onstage there is a podium where a girl in a black suit is making a speech about nuclear non-proliferation. I'm thinking I'll just slip in the back and sit and watch but there's nowhere to sit, so I just stand at the back of the room with my arms crossed and look for John. There are so many people here, and everybody's facing the front, so it's hard to tell what's what.

A kid in a navy suit turns around and looks at me and whispers, "Are you a page?" He's holding up a folded piece of paper.

"Um..." I'm not sure what a page is, and then I see a girl hustling around the room delivering notes to people.

The boy thrusts the piece of paper at me and turns back around and scribbles in his notebook. The note is addressed to Brazil, from France. So I guess I'm a page.

The tables aren't in alphabetical order, so I just start wandering around trying to find Brazil. I finally find Brazil, a guy in a bow tie, and other people are raising their hands with notes for me to deliver. Before long I'm hustling too.

From behind I see a boy's hand raised for me to pick up his note, so I hurry forward, and then he turns his head just slightly. And, oh my God, it's John Ambrose McClaren, delegate from the People's Republic of China, a few feet away from me.

He has sandy hair, clean cut. His cheeks are rosy, just the way I remember. They still have that fresh-scrubbed wholesomeness that makes him look young. He's wearing khakis and a light-blue button-down with a navy crew-

neck sweater. He looks serious, focused, like he's a real delegate and this isn't pretend.

Honestly, he looks just the way I imagined he'd grow up to look.

John's holding the piece of paper out for me as he takes notes with his head down. I reach for it; my fingers close around the paper, and then he looks up and does a double take.

"Hi," I whisper. We're both still holding on to the note.

"Hi," he says back. He blinks, and then he lets go of the paper, and I hurry away, my heart pounding in my ears. I hear him call out my name in a loud whisper, but I don't slow down.

I look down at the paper. His handwriting is neat, precise. I go deliver his note to the USA, and then I ignore Great Britain, who is waving a note at me, and I walk right out the auditorium double doors and into the afternoon light.

I just saw John McClaren. After all these years, I finally saw him. And he knew me. Right away he knew who I was.

I get a text from Peter around lunchtime.

**Did you see McClaren?**

I type back yes, but then I delete it before I hit send. I write back no instead. I'm not sure why I do it. I think maybe I just want to keep it for myself, and be happy just knowing that John remembered me, and have that be enough.

We all go to pick up Margot from the airport. Kitty's made a sign that says *Welcome Home Gogo*. I keep my eyes peeled for her, and when she comes out I almost don't recognize her for a second – her hair is short! It's cut in a bob! When Margot sees us, she waves, and Kitty drops her sign and runs towards her. Then we're all hugging and Daddy has tears in his eyes. "What do you think?" Margot says to me, and I know she means her hair.

"It makes you look older," I lie, and Margot beams. If anything it makes her look younger, but I knew she wouldn't want to hear that.

On the way home, Margot makes Daddy pull over at Clouds for a cheeseburger, even though she says she isn't hungry. "I've missed this so much," she says, but she only has a few bites and Kitty has the rest.

I'm excited to show Margot all the cookies we made, but when I take her into the dining room and show her all the tins, she frowns. "You guys did the Christmas Cookie Bonanza without me?"

I feel a little bit guilty, but I honestly didn't think Margot would mind. I mean, she was in Scotland, doing way more fun stuff than baking cookies, for Pete's sake.

"Well, yeah. We kind of had to. School ends tomorrow. If we'd waited for you, we wouldn't have had time. We saved half the dough in the freezer, though, so you can still help us bake the rest for the neighbours." I open the big blue tin so she can see the cookies layered and lined up in rows. I'm proud of how they are the same size and height. "We did some new cookies this year. Try an orange Creamsicle; it's really good."

Margot picks through the tin and frowns. "You didn't do molasses cookies?"

"Not this year... We decided to do orange Creamsicle cookies in their place." She picks one up and I watch her bite into it. "Good, right?"

She nods. "Mm-hmm."

"Those were Kitty's pick."

Margot glances towards the living room. “When did you guys do the tree?”

“Kitty couldn’t wait,” I say, and it sounds like an excuse, but it’s true. I try not to sound defensive as I add, “I think it’ll be nice to enjoy the tree for as long as we can.”

“So when did you put it up?”

Slowly I say, “A couple of weeks ago...” Why is she in such a bad mood?

“That’s so long ago. It’ll probably be dried out by Christmas Day.” Margot walks over to the tree and moves the wooden owl ornament to a different branch.

“I’ve been watering it every day and putting in Sprite like Grandma taught us.”

Somehow this feels like a fight, and we never fight.

But then Margot yawns and says, “I’m really jet-lagged. I think I’m going to take a nap.”

When someone’s been gone a long time, at first you save up all the things you want to tell them. You try to keep track of everything in your head. But it’s like trying to hold on to a fistful of sand: all the little bits slip out of your hands, and then you’re just clutching air and grit. That’s why you can’t save it all up like that.

Because by the time you finally see each other, you’re catching up only on the big things, because it’s too much bother to tell about the little things. But the little things are what make up life. Like a month ago when Daddy slipped on a banana peel, a literal banana peel that Kitty had dropped on the kitchen floor. Kitty and I laughed for ages. I should have emailed Margot about it right away; I should have taken a picture of the banana peel. Now everything feels like, *You had to be there* and *Oh, never mind, I guess it’s not that funny*.

Is this how people lose touch? I didn’t think that could happen with sisters. Maybe with other people, but never us. Before Margot left, I knew what she was thinking without having to ask; I knew everything about her. Not any more. I don’t know what the view looks like outside her window, or if she still wakes up early every morning to have a real breakfast or if maybe now that she’s at college she likes to go out late and sleep in late. I don’t know if she prefers Scottish boys to American boys now, or if her room-mate snores. All I

know is she likes her classes and she's been to visit London once. So basically I know nothing.

And so does she. There are big things I haven't told her – how my letters got sent out. The truth about me and Peter. The truth about me and Josh.

I wonder if Margot feels it too. The distance between us. If she even notices.

Daddy makes spaghetti bolognese for dinner. Kitty has hers with a big pickle and a glass of milk, which sounds terrible, but then I take a bite, and actually pickle and spaghetti taste good together. Milk too.

Kitty's dumping more noodles on her plate when she says, "Lara Jean, what are you going to get Peter for Christmas?"

I glance at Margot, who is looking at me. "I don't know. I hadn't thought about it."

"Can I go with you to pick it out?"

"Sure, if I get him something."

"You have to get him something; he's your boyfriend."

"I still can't believe you're dating Peter Kavinsky," Margot says.

She doesn't say it in a nice way, like it's a good thing. "Can you just ... not?" I say.

"I'm sorry, I just don't like the guy."

"Well, you don't have to like him. I do," I say, and Margot shrugs.

Daddy stands up and claps his hands together. "We have three different kinds of ice cream for dessert! Pralines and cream, Chunky Monkey, and strawberry. All your favourites, Margot. Help me get the bowls, Kitty." They gather up the dirty dishes and go into the kitchen.

Margot looks out the window, towards Josh's house. "Josh wants to see me later. I hope he finally gets that we're broken up and he doesn't try to come over every day while I'm home. He needs to move on."

What a mean thing to say. She's the one who's been calling Josh, not the other way around. "He hasn't been pining for you, if that's what you're imagining," I say. "He gets that it's over."

Margot stares at me in surprise. “Well, I hope that’s true.”

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“I think we should do recital party this year,” Margot says from her spot on the couch.

When my mom was alive, every Christmas we’d have what she called a recital party. She’d make tons of food and invite people over one night in December, and Margot and I would wear matching dresses and play Christmas carols on the piano all night. People would drift in and out of the piano room and sing along, and Margot and I would take turns playing. I hated real piano recitals because I was the worst in my age group and Margot was the best. It was humiliating to have to play some easy “Für Elise” while the other kids had already moved on to Liszt. I always hated recital party. I used to beg and beg not to have to play.

The last Christmas, Mommy bought us matching red-velvet dresses to wear, and I threw a fit and said I didn’t want to wear it, even though I did, even though I loved it. I just didn’t want to have to play the piano in it next to Margot. I screamed at her and I ran to my room and slammed the door and I wouldn’t come out. Mommy came up and tried to get me to open the door, but I wouldn’t, and she didn’t come back. People started arriving, and Margot started playing the piano, and I stayed upstairs. I sat in my room, crying and thinking about all the dips and little canapés Mommy and Daddy had made and how there would be none left for me and how Mommy probably didn’t even want me down there anyway after the way I’d behaved.

After Mommy died, we never had another recital party.

“Are you serious?” I ask her.

“Why not?” Margot shrugs. “It’ll be fun. I’ll plan it all, you won’t have to do anything.”

“You know I hate piano.”

“Then don’t play.”

Kitty’s looking from me to Margot with worried eyes. Biting her lip, she offers, “I’ll do some tae kwon do moves.”

Margot reaches out and cuddles Kitty to her and says, “That’s a great idea. I’ll play the piano and you’ll do tae kwon do, and Lara Jean will just—”

“Watch,” I finish.

“I was going to say hostess, but suit yourself.”

I don’t answer her.

Later, we’re watching TV and Kitty’s asleep, curled up on the couch like she’s a real cat. Margot wants to wake her up and make her go to her bed, but I say just let her sleep, and I put a quilt over her.

“Will you help me work on Daddy about a puppy for Christmas?” I ask.

Margot groans. “Puppies are so much work. You have to let them out to pee, like, a million times a day. And they shed like crazy. You’ll never be able to wear black pants again. Also who’s going to walk it, and feed it, and take care of it?”

“Kitty will. And I’ll help.”

“Kitty is so not ready for the responsibility.” Her eyes say, *And neither are you.*

“Kitty’s matured a lot since you’ve been gone.” And so have I. “Did you know that Kitty packs her own lunch now? *And* she helps with the laundry? I don’t have to nag her to do her homework either. She just does it on her own.”

“Really? Then I’m impressed.”

Why can’t she just say, *Good job, Lara Jean?* That’s it. If she could just acknowledge that I’ve been doing my part to keep the family going since she’s been gone. But no.



At six thirty in the morning the day of the ski trip, Daddy drops me off at school. It's not even light out yet. It seems like every day the sun takes longer and longer to come up. Before I hop out of the car, my dad pulls a hat out of his coat pocket. It's light pink yarn with a pom-pom on top. He fits it on my head so it covers my ears. "I found this in the hall closet. I think it was one of your mom's. She was such a great skier."

"I know. I remember."

"Promise me you'll go out on the slopes at least once."

"I promise."

"I'm so glad you're doing this. It's good for you to try new things."

I smile weakly. If he only knew what went down at the ski trip, he wouldn't be so glad then. Then I spot Peter and his friends messing around outside by the charter bus. "Thanks for the ride, Daddy. See you tomorrow night." I give him a peck on the cheek and grab my duffel bag.

"Zip up your coat," he calls out as I shut the car door.

I zip up my coat and watch his car drive off. Across the parking lot, Peter's talking to Genevieve. He says something that makes her laugh. Then he sees me and gestures at me to come over. Genevieve walks away, looking down at her clipboard. When I get there, he takes my duffel bag off my shoulder and puts it next to his. "I'll put this on the bus."

"It's freezing," I say, my teeth chattering.

Peter pulls me in front of him and puts his arms around me. "I'll keep you warm." I look up at him, like, *SO cheesy*, but his attention is somewhere else. He's watching Genevieve. He snuggles against my neck, and I squirm away from him. "What's with you?" he asks.

"Nothing," I say.

Ms Davenport and Coach White are looking through kids' bags – Ms Davenport's doing the girls and Coach White is doing the boys. "What are they looking for?" I ask Peter.

“Alcohol.”

I whip out my phone and text Chris.

**Don't bring alcohol! They are checking!**

No response.

**Are you awake??**

**Wake up!**

But then her mom's SUV pulls into the parking lot and she stumbles out of the passenger seat. She looks like she just woke up.

What a relief! Peter can talk to Genevieve all he wants; I'll be sharing a seat with Chris and eating the snacks I packed. I have strawberry gummies and the wasabi peas that Chris loves, and Pocky sticks.

Peter groans. “Chris is coming?”

I ignore him and wave at her.

Genevieve's standing by the bus with her clipboard when she spots Chris too. She has a big frown on her face. She marches right up to Chris and says, “You didn't sign up.”

I run over to them and hover next to Chris. In a small voice I say, “In the announcements last week they said there were still spots left.”

“Yeah, that you had to sign up for.” Genevieve shakes her head. “I'm sorry, but Chrissy can't come if she didn't sign up or give a deposit.”

I wince. Chris hates being called “Chrissy”. She always has. She started going by Chris as soon as we got to high school, and the only people who still call her that are Genevieve and their grandma.

Peter shows up beside me out of nowhere. “What's going on?” he asks.

Folding her arms, Genevieve says, “Chrissy didn't sign up for the ski trip, so I'm sorry, but she can't come.”

I'm panicking, but all the while Chris is smirking and saying nothing.

Peter rolls his eyes and says, “Gen, just let her come. Who gives a shit if she didn't sign up?”

Her cheeks flush with anger. “I didn't make the rules, Peter! Should she just get to come for free? How is that fair to everybody else?”

Chris finally speaks. “Oh, I already talked to Davenport and she said it was cool.” Chris makes a kissy face at Genevieve. “Too bad, Gen.”

“Fine, whatever, I don’t care.” Genevieve turns on her heel and spins off in Ms Davenport’s direction.

Chris watches her go, grinning. I tug on her coat sleeve. “Why didn’t you say so from the beginning?” I whisper.

“Obvi because it was more fun that way.” She slings her arm around my shoulder. “It’s going to be an interesting weekend, Covey.”

Worried, I whisper, “You didn’t bring any alcohol, did you? They’re checking bags.”

“Don’t worry about me. I’m covered.”

When I give her a dubious look, she whispers back, “Shampoo bottle filled with tequila at the bottom of my bag.”

“I hope you washed it out really well! You could get sick!” I’m envisioning Chris and company trying to take shots of bubbly tequila and then having to go to the hospital to get their stomachs pumped.

Chris ruffles my hair. “Oh, Lara Jean.”

We file on to the bus and Peter slides into a seat in the middle and I shuffle forward. “Hey,” he says, surprised. “You’re not going to sit with me?”

“I’m sitting with Chris.” I try to keep walking down the aisle, but Peter grabs my arm.

“Lara Jean! Are you kidding me? You have to sit with me.” He looks around to see if anybody’s listening. “You’re my *girlfriend*.”

I shake him off. “We’re breaking up soon, aren’t we? We might as well make it look more realistic.”

When I slide into the seat next to her, Chris is shaking her head at me.

“What? I couldn’t just let you sit alone. You came here for me, after all.” I open up my backpack and show her the snacks. “See? I brought your favourite things. What do you want to eat first? Gummies or Pocky?”

“It’s barely even morning,” she grouses. Then: “Hand me the gummies.”

Smiling, I rip open the bag for her. "Have as much as you want."

I stop smiling when I see Genevieve get on the bus and sit down in the seat next to Peter.

"You did that," Chris says.

"For you!" Which isn't true, not really. I think maybe I'm just tired of all this. This in-betweenness of being somebody's girlfriend but not really.

Chris stretches. "I know you're all about hos before bros, but if I were you, I'd be careful. My cousin's a barracuda."

I stuff a gummy into my mouth and chew. It's hard to swallow. I watch Genevieve whisper something in Peter's ear, and Chris falls asleep right away just like she said, her head on my shoulder.

The lodge is exactly the way Peter described – there's a big fireplace and bearskin rugs and lots of little nooks. It's snowing outside, tiny little whisper flakes. Chris is in good spirits – halfway through the bus ride she woke up and started flirting with Charlie Blanchard, who's going to take her out on the black diamond slopes. We even lucked out with a double room instead of a triple, because all the other girls had signed up for triples together.

Chris went off to snowboard with Charlie. She invited me to come along, but I said no thanks. I tried to ski next to Margot when she snowboarded once, and it ended up with us coming down the slopes at different times and waiting for each other and then losing each other all day.

If Peter were to invite me to go snowboarding with him, I think I'd go. But he doesn't, and I'm hungry anyway, so I go to the lodge to eat lunch.

Ms Davenport is there, looking at her cell phone and eating a bowl of soup. Ms Davenport is young, but she presents herself old. I think it's her heavy foundation and her severe part down the middle. She isn't married. Chris told me she saw her having an argument with some guy outside the Waffle House once, so I guess she has a boyfriend.

When she spots me sitting alone, eating a sandwich by the fireplace, she waves me over. I carry my plate to her table and sit down across from her. I'd rather eat alone and read my book, but it's not like I have much of a choice in

the matter. I ask her, “Do you have to stay here in the lodge all weekend, or can you go ski too?”

“I’m officially home base,” she says, wiping the corners of her mouth. “Coach White’s on slope duty.”

“That doesn’t seem very fair.”

“I don’t mind. I actually like sitting in the lodge. It’s peaceful. Besides, somebody has to be here for emergencies.” She takes another bite of soup. “What about you, Lara Jean? Why aren’t you out on the slopes with everybody else?”

“I’m not the best skier,” I say, feeling embarrassed.

“Oh, really? I hear Kavinsky’s a very good snowboarder. You should get him to teach you. Aren’t you two dating?”

Ms Davenport loves being in on student drama. She calls it having her finger on the pulse, but really she’s just a gossip. If you give her an opening, she’ll burrow in for as much dirt as she can. I know she and Genevieve are close.

I have a quick flash of Genevieve and Peter on the bus with their heads close together, and the picture makes my heart squeeze. Our contract isn’t over yet. Why should I let her have him back even one second early? “Yes,” I say. “We’re together.” Then I stand up. “You know what? I think I will go check out the slopes.”

I'm bundled up in Margot's pink ski bib and the pom-pom hat and my parka and I feel like an Easter treat – a strawberry-flavoured marshmallow. As I try to click into my skis, a group of girls from school walk by in cute yoga-ish ski pants. I didn't even know those existed.

I always think I could like skiing and then I go on a ski trip and I remember, oh yeah, I hate it. All the other kids are on the black diamond slopes and I'm on green circle, aka the bunny slope. I pizza-wedge down the whole way, and little kids keep zooming by me, which makes me lose my concentration because I'm terrified they're going to run into me. They whoosh back and forth like Olympic skiers. Some of them aren't even using poles. They're like Kitty. She can go down black diamond slopes. She and my dad love it. Margot too, though Margot prefers snowboarding to skiing now.

I've been keeping my eyes peeled for Peter but I haven't seen him yet, and it's starting to feel a bit bleak out here all alone.

I'm considering giving the intermediate slope a try, just for kicks, when I spot Peter and all his friends carrying their snowboards. No Genevieve in sight. "Peter!" I call out, feeling very relieved.

He turns his head and I think he sees me, but he keeps walking.

Huh.

He saw me. I know he saw me.

After dinner, Chris goes back to the slopes to snowboard. She says she's addicted to the rush. I'm heading back to the room when I run into Peter again, this time in swimming trunks and a hoodie. He's with Gabe and Darrell. They have towels around their necks. "Hey, Large," Gabe says, flicking me with his towel. "Where you been all day?"

"I've been around." I look over at Peter, but he won't meet my eyes. "I saw you guys on the slopes."

Darrell says, "Then why didn't you holler at us? I wanted to show off my ollies for you."

Teasingly I say, “Well, I called Peter’s name, but I guess he didn’t hear me.”

Peter finally looks me in the eyes. “Nope. I didn’t hear you.” His voice is cold and indifferent and so un-Peter-like, the smile fades from my face.

Gabe and Darrell exchange looks, like, *Oooh* and Gabe says to Peter, “We’re gonna head out to the hot tub,” and they trot off.

Peter and I are left standing in the lobby, neither of us saying anything. I finally ask, “Are you mad at me or something?”

“Why would I be mad?”

And then it’s back to quiet again.

I say, “You know, you’re the one who talked me into coming on this trip. The least you could do is talk to me.”

“The least you could do was sit next to me on the bus!” he bursts out.

My mouth hangs open. “Are you really that mad that I didn’t sit next to you on the *bus*?”

Peter lets out an impatient breath of air. “Lara Jean, when you’re dating someone, there are just ... certain things you do, OK? Like sit next to each other on a school trip. That’s pretty much expected.”

“I just don’t see what the big deal is,” I say. How can he be this mad over such a tiny thing?

“Forget it.” He turns like he’s going to leave, and I grab his sweatshirt sleeve. I don’t want to be in a fight with him; I just want it to be fun and light the way it always is with us. I want him to at least still be my friend. Especially now that we’re at the end.

I say, “Come on, don’t be mad. I didn’t realize it was that big of a deal. I swear I’ll sit next to you on the way home, OK?”

He purses his lips. “But do you get why I was pissed?”

I nod back. “Mm-hmm.”

“All right then, you should know that you missed out on mocha sugar doughnuts.”

My mouth falls open. “How’d you get those? I thought the shop didn’t open that early!”

“I went out and got them last night specifically for the bus ride,” Peter says. “For you and me.”

Aw. I’m touched. “Well, are there any left?”

“Nope. I ate them all.”

He looks so smug that I reach out and swat at his hoodie strings. “You creep,” I say, but I mean it affectionately.

Peter grabs my hand mid-swat and says, “Wanna hear something funny?”

“What?”

“I think I started liking you.”

I go completely still. Then I pull my hand away from his, and I start to gather my hair into a ponytail, and then I remember I don’t have a hair tie. My heart is thudding in my chest and it’s hard to think all of a sudden. “Stop teasing.”

“I’m not teasing. Why do you think I kissed you that day at McClaren’s house back in seventh grade? It’s why I went along with this thing in the first place. I’ve always thought you were cute.”

My face feels hot. “In a quirky way.”

Peter grins his perfect grin. “So? I guess I must like quirky then.”

Then he leans his head closer to mine, and I blurt out, “But aren’t you still in love with Genevieve?”

Peter frowns.

“Why are you always bringing up Gen? I’m trying to talk about us, and all you want to do is talk about her. Yeah, Gen and I have history. I’m always going to care about her.” He shrugs. “But now ... I like you.”

People are walking in and out of the lodge; a guy from school walks by and claps Peter on the shoulder. “What up,” Peter says. When he’s gone, Peter says to me, “So what do you say?” He’s looking at me expectantly. He’s expecting me to say yes.

I want to say yes, but I don’t want to be with a boy whose heart belongs to somebody else. Just once, I want to be somebody’s first choice. “You might think you like me, but you don’t. If you did, you wouldn’t still like her.”



Peter shakes his head. "What Gen and I have is completely separate from you and me," he says.

"How can that be true when from the very first minute, this has been about Genevieve?"

"That's not fair," he objects. "When we started this thing, you liked Sanderson."

"Not any more." I swallow hard. "But you still love Genevieve."

Frustrated, Peter backs away from me and runs his hands through his hair. "God, what makes you such an expert on love? You've liked five guys in your life. One was gay, one lives in Indiana or Montana or some place, McClaren moved away before anything could actually happen, one was dating your sister. And then there's me. Hmm, what do we all have in common? What's the common denominator?"

I feel all the blood rush to my face. "That's not fair."

Peter leans in close and says, "You only like guys you don't have a shot with, because you're scared. What are you so scared of?"

I back away from him, right into the wall. "I'm not scared of anything."

"The hell you're not. You'd rather make up a fantasy version of somebody in your head than be with a real person."

I glare at him. "You're just mad because I didn't die of happiness because the great Peter Kavinsky said he liked me. Your ego really is that enormous."

His eyes flash. "Hey, I'm sorry I didn't show up on your doorstep with flowers and profess my undying love for you, Lara Jean, but guess what, that's not real life. You need to grow up."

That's it. I don't have to listen to this. I turn on my heel and walk away. Over my shoulder I say, "Enjoy the hot tub."

"I always do," he calls back.

I'm shaking.

Is it true? Could he be right?

Back at the room, I change into my flannel nightie and put on thick socks. I don't even go wash up. I just turn out the lights and crawl into bed. I can't

fall asleep though. Every time I close my eyes, I see Peter's face.

How dare he say I need to grow up? What does he know about anything? As if he's so mature!

But ... is he right about me? Do I only like the boys I can never have? I've always known Peter was out of my reach. I've always known he didn't belong to me. But tonight he said he liked me. The thing I've been hoping for, he said it. So why didn't I just tell him I liked him back when I had the chance? Because I do. I like him back. Of course I do. What girl wouldn't fall for Peter Kavinsky, handsomest boy of all the Handsome Boys. Now that I really know him, I know he's so much more than that.

I don't want to be afraid any more. I want to be brave. I want ... life to start happening. I want to fall in love and I want a boy to fall in love with me back.

Before I can talk myself out of it, I put on my puffy coat, slip my keycard in my pocket and head off to the hot tub.

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The hot tub is behind the main lodge, tucked in the woods on a wooden platform. On the way there, I run into kids with wet hair who are on their way back to their rooms before curfew. Curfew is at eleven, and it's already ten forty-five. There's not much time left. I hope Peter's still out there. I don't want to lose my nerve. So I quicken my pace and that's when I spot him, alone in the hot tub, his head tipped back with his eyes closed.

"Hi," I say, and my voice echoes into the woods.

His eyes fly open. Nervously, he looks over my shoulder. "Lara Jean! What are you doing out here?"

"I came to see you," I say, and my breath comes out in white puffs. I start taking off my boots and socks. My hands are shaking, and not because it's cold. I'm nervous.

"Uh ... what are you doing?" Peter's looking at me like I'm crazy.

"I'm getting in!" Shivering, I unzip my puffy coat and set it on the bench. Steam is rising out of the water. I dip my feet in and sit down on the ledge of the hot tub. It's hotter than a bath, but it feels nice. Peter's still watching me warily. My heart is racing out of control and it's difficult to look him in the eyes. I've never been so scared in my life. "That thing you brought up earlier ... you caught me off guard, so I didn't know what to say. But ... well, I like you too." It comes out so fumbly and uncertain, and I wish I could start over and say it smoothly and confidently. I try again, louder. "I like you, Peter."

Peter blinks, and he looks so young all of a sudden. "I don't understand you girls. I think I have you figured out, and then ... and then..."

"And then?" I hold my breath as I wait for him to speak. I'm so nervous; I keep swallowing, and it sounds loud to my ears. Even my breathing sounds loud, even my heartbeat.

His pupils are dilated he's looking at me so hard. He's staring at me like he's never seen me before. "And then I don't know."

I think I stop breathing when I hear him say "I don't know". Did I screw things up that badly that now he doesn't know? It can't be over, not when I finally found my courage. I can't let it be. My heart is pounding like a million

trillion beats a minute as I scoot closer to him. I bend my head down and press my lips against his, and I feel his jolt of surprise. And then he's kissing me back, open-mouthed, soft-lipped kissing me back, and at first I'm nervous, but then he puts his hand on the back of my head, and he strokes my hair in a reassuring way, and I'm not so nervous any more. It's a good thing I'm sitting down on this ledge, because I am weak in the knees.

He pulls me into the water so I'm sitting in the hot tub too, and my nightgown is soaked now but I don't care. I don't care about anything. I never knew kissing could be this good.

My arms are at my sides so the jets won't make my skirt fly up. Peter's holding my face in his hands, kissing me. "Are you OK?" he whispers. His voice is different: it's ragged and urgent and vulnerable somehow. He doesn't sound like the Peter I know; he is not smooth or bored or amused. The way he's looking at me right now, I know he would do anything I asked, and that's a strange and powerful feeling.

I wind my arms around his neck. I like the smell of chlorine on his skin. He smells like pool, and summer, and vacations. It's not like in the movies. It's better, because it's real.

"Touch my hair again," I tell him, and the corners of his mouth turn up.

I lean into him and kiss him. He starts to run his fingers through my hair, and it feels so nice I can't think straight. It's better than getting my hair washed at the salon. I move my hands down his back and along his spine, and he shivers and pulls me closer. A boy's back feels so different than a girl's back – more muscular, more solid somehow.

In between kisses he says, "It's past curfew. We should go back inside."

"I don't want to," I say. All I want is to stay and be here, with Peter, in this moment.

"Me neither, but I don't want you to get in trouble," Peter says. He looks worried, which is so sweet.

Softly, I touch his cheek with the back of my hand. It's smooth. I could look at his face for hours, it's so beautiful.

Then I stand up, and immediately I'm shivering. I start wringing the water out of my nightgown, and Peter jumps out of the hot tub and gets his towel, which he wraps around my shoulders. Then he gives me his hand and I step

out, teeth chattering. He starts drying me off with the towel, my arms and legs. I sit down to put on my socks and boots. He puts my coat on me last. He zips me right in.

Then we run back inside the lodge. Before he goes to the boys' side and I go to the girls' side, I kiss him one more time and I feel like I'm flying.

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When I see Peter at the bus the next morning, he's standing around with all his lacrosse friends, and at first I feel shy and nervous, but then he sees me, and his face breaks into a grin. "C'mere, Covey," he says, so I go to him and he throws my tote over his shoulder. In my ear he says, "You're sitting with me, right?"

I nod.

As we make our way on to the bus, somebody wolf whistles. It seems like people are staring at us, and at first I think it's just my imagination, but then I see Genevieve look right at me and whisper to Emily Nussbaum. It sends a chill down my spine.

"Genevieve keeps staring at me," I whisper to Peter.

"It's because you're so adorably quirky," he says, and he rests his hands on my shoulders and gives me a kiss on the cheek, and I forget all about Genevieve.

Peter and I sit in the middle of the bus with Gabe and the lacrosse guys. I wave to Chris so she'll sit with us, but she's cozy with Charlie Blanchard. I haven't had a chance to tell her about last night. When I got back to the room, she was already asleep. This morning, we both overslept and there wasn't time. I'll tell her all about it later. But, for now, it's kind of nice that Peter and I are the only ones who know about it.

The way down the mountain, I share my Pocky sticks with the boys and we play a heated round of Uno, which I also brought.

An hour into the trip, we stop at a rest-stop diner for breakfast. I eat a cinnamon bun, and under the table Peter and I hold hands.

I go to use the bathroom, and there is Genevieve, alone, applying lip gloss with a little brush. I step inside the stall to pee and hope she'll be gone by the time I come out, but she's still there. I wash my hands quickly, and then she says, "Did you know that when we were kids, I used to wish I was you?" I freeze. Genevieve snaps her compact shut. "I used to wish your dad was my dad and Margot and Kitty were my sisters. I loved coming over to your house."

I would hope and pray that you would invite me to sleep over. I hated being at home with my dad.”

Haltingly, I say, “I – I didn’t know that. I used to like going to your house, because your mom was so nice to me.”

“She really liked you,” Genevieve says.

I screw up all my courage and I ask, “So why did you stop being friends with me?”

Genevieve narrows her eyes at me. “You really don’t know?”

“No.”

“You kissed Peter that day at my house in seventh grade. You knew I liked him, but you kissed him anyway.” I recoil, and she continues. “I always knew your goody-goody act was fake. It’s no wonder you and my cousin are BFFs now. Although at least Chris owns her sluttiness. She doesn’t put on an act.”

My whole body goes rigid. “What are you talking about?”

She laughs, and it’s chilling how happy she sounds. That’s when I know I’m already dead. I brace myself for whatever mean thing will come out of her mouth, but even still I’m not ready for what comes next.

“I’m talking about how you and Peter had full-on sex in the hot tub last night.”

My mind goes completely blank. I might even black out for a second. I can feel myself sway on my feet. Somebody come quick with the smelling salts; I’m about to faint.

My head is swimming. “Who told you that?” I choke out. “Who said that?”

Genevieve tilts her head to the side. “Everybody?”

“But – but we *didn’t*—”

“I’m sorry, but I think it’s absolutely disgusting. I mean, sex in a hot tub – a *public* hot tub – is just ...” She shudders. “God only knows what kind of stuff is floating around in there now. *Families* use that hot tub, Lara Jean. There could be a family in there right now.”

Tears are spiking my eyes. “All we did was kiss. I don’t know why people would even say that.”

“Um, because Peter’s telling them you did?”

My whole body goes cold. It's not true. There's no way that's true.

“All the guys think he's a god 'cause he got sweet little Lara Jean Covey to give it up in the hot tub. Just so you know, the only reason Peter even dated you was to make me jealous. His ego couldn't take the fact that I dumped him for an older guy. He was *using* you. If he got free sex out of it, all the better. But he still came running whenever I called. That's because he loves me. He will never love another girl as much as he loves me.” Whatever she sees in my face must please her, because she smiles. “Now that Blake and I are done ... well, I guess we'll see, won't we?”

I stand there mute and numb as she fluffs her hair in the mirror.

“But don't worry. Now that you're a slut, I'm sure you'll have plenty of guys who'll want to date you. For a night.”

I flee. I run out of the ladies' room and out the doors, back on to the bus, and I cry.

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People are starting to file back on the bus. I can feel their eyes on me so I keep my head turned towards the window. I run my finger along the edge of the foggy glass. The window is cold, so it leaves a trail.

Chris slides in next to me. In a low voice she says, "Um, I just heard something cray-cray."

Dully I say, "What did you hear? That Peter and I had sex in the hot tub last night?"

"Oh my God! Yeah! Are you OK?"

My chest feels really tight. If I get in a good breath, I am going to start crying again, I know it.

I close my eyes. "We didn't have sex. Who told you that?"

"Charlie."

Peter's making his way down the aisle. He stops at our seat. "Hey, why didn't you come back to the table? Is everything OK?" Peter is looming over the seat, looking at me with concerned eyes.

In a quiet voice I say, "Everybody's saying how we had sex in the tub."

Peter groans. "People need to mind their own business." He doesn't sound surprised, not at all.

"So you already knew?"

"Some of the guys were asking me about it this morning."

"But ... where did they even get that idea?" I feel like I'm going to be sick.

Peter shrugs. "I don't know, maybe somebody saw us. What does it even matter? It's not true."

I screw my lips together tight. I can't cry right now, because if I start, I'll never be able to stop. I will cry the whole way home, and everyone will see, and I can't have that. I fix my gaze somewhere over Peter's shoulder.

"I don't get it. Why are you mad at me?" He's still confused.

People are starting to bottleneck behind Peter. They need to get to their seats. "People are waiting behind you," I say.

Peter says, “Chris, can I have my seat?”

Chris looks at me and I shake my head.

“It’s my seat now, Kavinsky,” she says.

“Come on, Lara Jean,” Peter says, touching my shoulder.

I jerk away from him and his mouth drops open. People are looking at us and whispering and snickering. Peter glances over his shoulder, his face red. Then he finally makes his way down the aisle.

“Are you OK?” Chris asks.

I can feel my eyes welling up. “No. Not really.”

She sighs. “It’s not fair for the girl. Guys have it easy. I’m sure they were all congratulating him, pounding him on the back for being such a stud.”

Sniffing, I say, “Do you think he’s the one who told people?”

“Who knows?”

A tear trickles down to my cheek and Chris wipes it away with her sweater sleeve. “It might not have been him. But it doesn’t matter, Lara Jean, because even if he didn’t encourage all the talk, I doubt he discouraged it, if you know what I’m saying.”

I shake my head.

“What I’m saying is, I’m sure he denied it – with a shit-eating grin on his face. That’s how guys like Peter are. They love to look like the man, have all the other guys look up to them.” Bitterly she says, “They care more about their reputation than yours.” She shakes her head. “But what’s done is done. You’ve just gotta hold your head up and act like you don’t give a shit.”

I nod, but more tears leak out.

“I’m telling you, he isn’t worth it. Let Gen have him.” Chris tousles my hair. “What else can you do, kid?”

Genevieve comes on board last. I quickly straighten up and wipe my eyes and brace myself. But she doesn’t go directly to her seat. She stops at Bethy Morgan’s seat and whispers something in her ear. Bethy gasps and turns in her seat – and looks right at me.

Oh my God.

Chris and I watch as Genevieve goes from seat to seat.

“Bitch,” Chris breathes.

Tears burn my eyes. “I’m just gonna go to sleep now,” and I rest my head on Chris’s shoulder, and I cry. She keeps her arm tight around me.

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Margot and Kitty pick me up from school. They ask me how the trip was, if I stayed on the bunny slope all day. I try to be upbeat; I even make up a story about how I went down a blue circle slope. Softly Margot asks, “Is everything OK?”

I falter. Margot always knows when I’m not telling the truth.

“Yeah. I’m just tired. Chris and I stayed up late talking.”

“Take a nap when we get home,” Margot advises.

My phone buzzes, and I look down at it. A text from Peter.

**Can we talk?**

I turn off my phone. “I think maybe I’ll just sleep right through Christmas break,” I say. Thank God and Jesus for Christmas break. At least I have ten days before I have to go back to school and face everyone. Maybe I’ll just never go back. Maybe I can convince Daddy to home school me.

When Daddy and Kitty go to bed, Margot and I wrap presents in the living room. Mid-wrap, Margot decides that we should have recital party the day after Christmas. I’d hoped she’d forgotten all about her grand idea to have recital party, but Margot’s memory has always been killer. “It’ll be a post-Christmas, pre-New Year’s Eve party,” she says, tying a bow on one of Kitty’s presents from Daddy.

“It’s too last-minute,” I say, carefully cutting a sheet of rocking-horse wrapping paper. I’m being extra careful because I want to save a strip of it for a background page in Margot’s scrapbook, which is nearly done. “No one will come.”

“Yes, they will! We haven’t had one in ages; tons of people used to come.” Margot gets up and starts pulling down Mommy’s old cookbooks and stacking them on the coffee table. “Don’t be a Grinch. I think this should be a tradition that we bring back for Kitty’s sake.”

I cut off a strip of fat green ribbon. Maybe this party will help me take my mind off things. “Find that Mediterranean chicken dish Mommy used to

make. With the honey-yogurt dip.”

“Yes! And remember the caviar dip? People *love* the caviar dip. We have to make that too. Should we do cheese straws or cheese puffs?”

“Cheese puffs,” I say. Margot’s so excited about it that even in my current state of self-pity, I can’t begrudge her.

She gets a pen and paper from the kitchen and starts writing things down. “So we said the chicken dish, caviar dip, cheese puffs, punch... We can bake some cookies or brownies. We’ll invite all the neighbours – Josh and his parents, the Shahs, Ms Rothschild. Who of your friends do you want to invite? Chris?”

I shake my head. “Chris is visiting her relatives in Boca Raton.”

“What about Peter? He could bring his mom, and doesn’t he have a younger brother?” I can tell she is trying.

“Let’s leave off Peter,” I say.

Her forehead creases and she looks up from her list. “Did something happen on the ski trip?”

Too quickly I say, “No. Nothing happened.”

“Then why not? I want to get to know him better, Lara Jean.”

“I think he might be going out of town too.” I can tell Margot doesn’t believe me, but she doesn’t press me further.

She sends the invites out that night, and right away there are five yeses. In the comments section Aunt D. (not our real aunt, but one of Mommy’s best friends) writes, *Margot, I can’t wait to hear you and Dad sing “Baby, It’s Cold Outside”!* Another recital-party tradition. Margot and Daddy sing “Baby, It’s Cold Outside” and I am always commissioned to sing “Santa Baby”. I used to do it lying on top of the piano with my mom’s high heels on and our grandma’s fox stole. Not this year. No way.

When Margot tries to get me to go with her and Kitty to deliver our cookie baskets to the neighbours the next day, I beg off and say I’m tired. I go up to my room to put the finishing touches on Margot’s scrapbook and listen to only the slow songs from *Dirty Dancing*, and I keep checking my phone to see if Peter’s texted again. He hasn’t, but Josh has.

**I heard what happened. Are you OK?**

So even Josh knows? He's not even in our grade. Does the whole school know?

I write back, **It isn't true**, and he writes back, **You don't have to tell me – I didn't believe it for a second**, which makes me feel weepy.

He and Margot have hung out once since she's been home, but they haven't taken that DC trip Josh mentioned. It's probably for the best if I go ahead and take the Josh-and-Margot page out of the scrapbook.

I stay up late just in case Peter texts again. I think to myself, if Peter calls or texts me tonight, I'll know he's thinking about me too and maybe I'll forgive him. But he doesn't text or call.

Around three a.m. I throw away Peter's notes. I delete the picture of him from my phone; I delete his number. I think that if I just delete him enough, it will be like none of it ever happened and my heart won't hurt so badly.

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Christmas morning, Kitty wakes up everyone while it is still dark out, which is her tradition, and Daddy makes waffles, which is his tradition. We only ever eat waffles on Christmas, because we all agree it's too much trouble to lug the waffle iron out and clean it and store it back on the cabinet top shelf where we keep it. And anyway it makes waffles more of a special occasion this way.

We take turns opening presents to make it last longer. I give Margot her scarf, and the scrapbook, which she loves. She pores over every page, exclaiming over my handiwork, marvelling over my font choices and paper scraps. Hugging it to her chest, she says, "This is the perfect gift," and I feel like all the tension and bad feelings between us evaporate into nothingness. Margot's gift to me is a pale-pink cashmere sweater from Scotland. I try it on over my nightgown and it's so soft and luxurious.

Kitty's present from Margot is an art set with oil pastels and watercolours and special markers, which makes Kitty squeal like a piglet. In return Kitty gives her socks with monkeys on them. I give Kitty a new basket for her bike and the ant farm she asked for months ago, and Kitty gives me a book on knitting. "So you can get better," she says.

The three of us pitched in for Daddy's present – a thick Scandinavian sweater that makes him look like an ice fisherman. It's a little too big, but Daddy insists he likes it that way. He gives Margot a fancy new ereader, Kitty a bike helmet with her name on it – Katherine, not Kitty – and me a gift certificate to Linden & White. "I wanted to get you that locket necklace you're always looking at, but it was gone," he says. "But I bet you'll find something else you like just as much." I jump up and throw my arms around him. I feel like I could cry.

Santa, aka Daddy, brings silly gifts like sacks of coal and water guns with disappearing ink inside, and also practical things like athletic socks and printer ink and my favourite kind of pens – I guess Santa shops at Costco too.

When we're done opening presents, I can tell Kitty is disappointed there is no puppy, but she doesn't say anything. I pull her into my arms and whisper to her, "There's always your birthday next month," and she nods.

Daddy goes to see if the waffle iron is hot and the doorbell rings. “Kitty, could you get that?” he calls from the kitchen.

Kitty goes to the door, and seconds later we hear her high-pitched scream. Margot and I leap up and run to the door, and right there on the welcome mat is a basket with a biscuit-coloured puppy in it, a ribbon around its neck. We all start jumping up and down and screaming.

Kitty scoops the puppy up in her arms and runs into the living room with it, where Daddy stands grinning. “Daddy Daddy Daddy!” she squeals. “Thank you thank you thank you!”

According to Daddy, he picked the puppy up from the animal shelter two nights ago, and our neighbour Ms Rothschild has been hiding him in her house. It’s a boy, by the way – we figure that out pretty quick, since he pees all over the kitchen floor. He is a Wheaten Terrier mix, which Kitty declares is far better than an Akita or a German shepherd.

“I always wanted a dog with bangs,” I say, cuddling him to my cheek.

“What should we name him?” Margot asks. We all look to Kitty, who chews on her bottom lip in a contemplative way.

“I don’t know,” she says.

“How about Sandy?” I suggest.

Kitty sneers. “Unoriginal.”

So I say, “What about François? We can call him Frankie for short.”

“No, thanks,” Kitty says. Cocking her head, she says, “What about Jamie?”

“Jamie,” Daddy repeats. “I like it.”

Margot nods. “It has a nice ring to it.”

“What’s his full name?” I ask, setting him down on the floor.

Kitty promptly says, “Jamie Fox-Pickle, but we’ll only call him that when he’s in trouble.” She claps her hands and coos, “Come here, Jamie!” and he skitters over to her, tail wagging like mad.

I’ve never her seen her so happy or so patient. She spends all of Christmas Day trying to teach him tricks and taking him outside to pee. Her eyes never stop shining. It makes me wish I was little again and everything could be solved with a Christmas Day puppy.



I only check my phone once to see if Peter called. And he didn't.

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The morning of the party I come downstairs after ten, and they've been working for hours. Margot's the head chef and Daddy's her sous-chef. She has him chopping onions and celery and washing pots. To us she says, "Lara Jean, I need you to clean the downstairs bathroom and mop and tidy. Kitty, you're overseeing decorations."

"Can we at least have some cereal first?" I ask.

"Yes, but be quick about it." She goes back to scooping cookie dough.

To Kitty I whisper, "I didn't even want to have this party and now she's got me scrubbing the toilet. Why do you get the good job?"

"Because I'm the littlest," Kitty says, climbing on to a stool at the breakfast bar.

Margot spins around and says, "Hello, the toilet needed to be scrubbed anyway! Besides, it'll all be worth it. We haven't done recital party in so long." She slides a cookie sheet into the oven. "Daddy, I'm going to need you to make a run to the store soon. We're out of sour cream and we need a big bag of ice."

"Aye, aye, Captain," our dad says.

The only one of us Margot doesn't put to work is Jamie Fox-Pickle, who is taking a nap under the Christmas tree.

I'm wearing a red-and-green plaid bow tie with a white button-down and a tartan skirt. I read on a fashion blog that mixing plaids is a thing. I go to Kitty's room to beg her to give me a braid crown, and she curls her lip at me and says, "That's not very sexy."

I frown. "Excuse me? I wasn't trying to look sexy! I was trying to look festive."

"Well ... you look like you're a Scottish waiter, or maybe a bartender at a bar in Brooklyn."

"What do you know about bartenders in Brooklyn, Katherine?" I demand.

She gives me a withering look. "Duh, I watch HBO."

Hmm. We might need to put some parental controls on the TV.

Kitty goes to my closet and pulls out my red off-the-shoulder knit dress with the swishy skirt. “Wear this. It’s still Christmasy but less elf-costumey.”

“Fine, but I’m putting my candy-cane pin on it.”

“Fine, you can wear the pin. But leave your hair down. No braid.” I give her my best sad pouty face, but Kitty shakes her head. “I’ll curl the ends to give it some body, but no braids of any kind.”

I plug in the curling iron and sit on the floor with Jamie in my lap, and Kitty sits on the bed and sections my hair off. She wraps my hair around the barrel like a real pro. “Did Josh RSVP yes to the party?” she asks me.

“I’m not sure,” I say.

“What about Peter?”

“He’s not coming,” I say.

“Why not?”

“He just can’t,” I tell her.

Margot’s at the piano playing “Blue Christmas”, and our old piano teacher Mr Choi is sitting next to her, singing along. Across the room, Daddy’s showing off a new cactus to the Shahs from down the street, and Kitty and Josh and a few of the other little kids are trying to teach Jamie how to sit. I’m sipping cranberry-and-ginger-ale punch and talking to Aunt D. about her divorce when Peter Kavinsky walks in wearing a hunter-green sweater with a button-down shirt underneath, carrying a Christmas tin. I almost choke on my punch.

Kitty spots him when I do. “You came!” she cries. She runs right into his arms, and he puts down the cookie tin and picks her up and throws her around. When he sets her down, she takes him by the hand and over to the buffet table, where I’m busying myself rearranging the cookie plate.

“Look what Peter brought,” she says, pushing him forward.

He hands me the cookie tin. “Here. Fruitcake cookies my mom made.”

“What are you doing here?” I whisper accusingly.

“The kid invited me.” He jerks his head towards Kitty, who has conveniently run back over to the puppy. Josh is standing up now, looking over at us with a frown on his face. “We need to talk.”

So now he wants to talk. Well, too late. “We don’t have anything to talk about.”

Peter takes me by the elbow and I try to shake him off, but he won’t let go. He steers me into the kitchen. “I want you to make up an excuse to Kitty and leave,” I say. “And you can take your fruitcake cookies with you.”

“First tell me why you’re so pissed at me.”

“Because!” I burst out. “Everyone is saying how we had sex in the hot tub and I’m a slut and you don’t even care!”

“I told the guys we didn’t!”

“Did you? Did you tell them that all we did was kiss and that’s all we’ve ever done?” Peter hesitates, and I go on. “Or did you say, ‘Guys, we didn’t have sex in the hot tub,’ wink wink, nudge nudge.”

Peter glares at me. “Give me a little more credit than that, Covey.”

“You’re such a scumbag, Kavinsky.”

I spin around. There is Josh, in the doorway, glaring at Peter.

“It’s your fault people are saying that crap about Lara Jean.” Josh shakes his head in disgust. “She’d never do that.”

“Keep your voice down,” I whisper, my eyes darting around. This is not happening right now. At recital party, with everyone I’ve ever known my whole entire life in the next room.

Peter’s jaw twitches. “This is a private conversation, Josh, between me and my girlfriend. Why don’t you go play World of Warcraft or something. Or maybe there’s a Lord of the Rings marathon on TV.”

“Fuck you, Kavinsky,” Josh says. I gasp. To me Josh says, “Lara Jean, this is exactly what I’ve been trying to protect you from. He’s not good enough for you. He’s only bringing you down.”

Beside me Peter stiffens. “Get over it! She doesn’t like you any more. It’s over. Move on.”

“You have no idea what you’re talking about,” Josh says.

“Whatever, dude. She told me you tried to kiss her. You try that again, and I’m kicking your ass.”

Josh lets out a short laugh. “Go ahead.”

Panic rises in my chest as Peter moves towards Josh with purpose. I pull Peter’s arm back. “Stop it!”

That’s when I see her. Margot, standing a few feet behind Josh, her hand to her mouth. The piano music has stopped, the world has stopped spinning, because Margot has heard everything.

“It’s not true, is it? Please tell me it’s not true.”

I open and close my mouth. I don’t have to say anything, because she already knows. Margot who knows me so well.

“How *could* you?” she asks, and her voice trembles. The hurt in her eyes makes me want to die. I’ve never seen that look in her eyes before.

“Margot,” Josh begins, and she shakes her head and backs away.

“Get out,” she says, her voice breaking. Then she looks at me. “You’re my *sister*. You’re the person I trust more than anybody.”

“Gogo, wait—” But she’s already gone. I hear her feet run up the stairs. I hear her door shut and not slam.

And then I burst into tears.

“I’m so sorry,” Josh says to me. Bleakly, he says, “This is all my fault.” He walks out the back door.

Peter moves to put his arms around me, but I stop him. “Can you just ... can you just go?”

Hurt and surprise register on his face. “Sure, I can go,” he says, and he walks out of the kitchen.

I go to the bathroom off the side of the kitchen and sit on the toilet and cry. Someone knocks and I stop crying and call out, “Just a minute.”

Mrs Shah’s cheery voice says, “Sorry, dear!” and I hear her heels clack away.

Then I get up and splash cold water on my face. My eyes are still red and puffy. I run water over a hand towel and I wet my face with it. My mom used to do this for me when I was sick. She’d put an ice-cold washcloth over my

forehead and she'd switch it out with a fresh one when it wasn't cold any more. I wish my mom was here.

When I step back into the party, Mr Choi is sitting at the piano playing "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas", and Ms Rothschild has my dad cornered on the couch. She's throwing back champagne, and he has a mildly startled look on his face. As soon he sees me, my dad jumps off the couch and over to me. "Oh, thank God," he says. "Where's Gogo? We haven't done our number yet."

"She doesn't feel well," I say.

"Hm. I'll go check on her."

"I think she just wants to be left alone."

Daddy's forehead creases. "Did she and Josh have a fight? I just saw him leave."

I swallow. "Maybe. I'll go talk to her."

He pats me on the shoulder. "You're a good sister, honey."

I force a smile. "Thank you, Daddy."

I go upstairs and Margot's bedroom door is locked. I stand outside it and ask, "Can I come inside?"

No answer.

"Please, Margot. Please just let me explain..."

Still nothing.

"I'm sorry. Margot, I'm so sorry. Please talk to me."

I sit down outside my door and start to cry. My big sister knows how to hurt me best. Silence from her, being shut out by her, is the worst punishment she could conjure up.

Before Mommy died, Margot and I were enemies. We battled constantly, mostly because I was always messing up something of hers – some game, some toy.

Margot had a doll she loved named Rochelle. Rochelle had silky auburn hair, and she wore glasses like Margot did. Mommy and Daddy had given her to her for her seventh birthday. Rochelle was Margot's only doll. She adored her. I remember begging Margot to let me hold her, just for a second, but Margot always said no. There was this one time, I had a cold, and I stayed home from school. I crept into Margot's room and I took Rochelle, I played with her all afternoon, I pretended Rochelle and I were best friends. I got it into my head that Rochelle's face was actually kind of plain; she would look better with lipstick on. It would be a favour to Margot if I made Rochelle more beautiful. I got one of Mommy's lipsticks out of her bathroom drawer and I put some on her lips. Right away I knew it was a mistake. I'd drawn it on outside of her lip lines, she looked clownish, not sophisticated. So then I tried to clean off the lipstick with toothpaste, but it only made her look like she had a mouth disease. I hid under my blankets until Margot came home. When she found the state Rochelle was in, I heard Margot's scream.

After Mommy died, we all had to realign ourselves. Everybody had new roles. Margot and I were no longer locked in battle, because we both understood that Kitty was ours to take care of now. "Look out for your sister," Mommy was always saying. When she was alive, we did it begrudgingly. After she was gone, we did it because we wanted to.

Days go by and still nothing. She looks through me, speaks to me only when necessary. Kitty watches us with worried eyes. Daddy is bewildered and asks what's going on with us, but doesn't push me for an answer.

There is a wall between us now, and I can feel her moving farther and farther away from me. Sisters are supposed to fight and make up, because they are sisters and sisters always find their way back to each other. But the thing that scares me is that maybe we won't.

Outside my window, snow is falling in clumps that look like cotton. The yard is starting to look like a cotton field. I hope it snows all day and all night. I hope it's a blizzard.

There's a knock at my door.

I lift my head up from my pillow. "Come in."

My dad comes in and sits down at my desk. "So," he says, scratching his chin the way he does when he's uncomfortable. "We need to talk."

My stomach drops. I sit up and wrap my arms around my knees. "Did Margot tell you?"

My dad clears his throat. "She did." I can't even look at him. "This is awkward. I never had to do this with Margot, so..." He clears his throat again. "You'd think I would be better at this since I'm a health professional. I'll just say that I think you're too young to be having sex, Lara Jean. I don't think you're ready yet." He sounds like he's about to cry. "Did ... did Peter pressure you in any way?"

I can feel all the blood rush to my face. "Daddy, we didn't have sex."

He nods, but I don't think he believes me. "I'm your dad, so of course I'd rather you wait until you're fifty, but..." He clears his throat again. "I want you to be safe. I'm making an appointment with Dr Hudecz on Monday."

I start to cry. "I don't need an appointment, because I'm not doing anything! I didn't have sex! Not in the hot tub or anyplace. Somebody made the whole thing up. You have to believe me."

My dad has a pained expression on his face. "Lara Jean, I know it's not easy to talk about this with a dad and not a mom. I wish your mom was here to navigate us through this."

"I wish she was too, because she'd believe me." Tears are running down my cheeks. It's bad enough for strangers to think the worst of me, but I never thought my sister and dad would believe it.

"I'm sorry." My dad puts his arms around me. "I'm sorry. I do believe you. If you tell me you're not having sex, you're not having sex. I just don't want



you to grow up too fast. When I look at you, you're still as young as Kitty to me. You're my little girl, Lara Jean."

I sag against him. There's no place safer than my dad's arms. "Everything's a mess. You don't trust me any more; Peter and I are broken up; Margot hates me."

"I trust you. Of course I trust you. And of course you and Margot will make up like you always do. She was only worried about you; that's why she came to me." No, it's not. She did it out of spite. It's her fault that Daddy thought that of me for even a second.

Daddy lifts my chin and wipes the tears off my face. "You must really like Peter, huh?"

"No," I sob. "Maybe. I don't know."

He tucks my hair behind my ears. "Everything will work out."

There is a specific kind of fight you can only have with your sister. It's the kind where you say things you can't take back. You say them because you can't help but say them, because you're so angry it's coming up your throat and out your eyes; you're so angry you can't see straight. All you see is blood.

As soon as Daddy leaves and I hear him go to his room to get ready for bed, I barge into Margot's room without knocking. Margot is at her desk on her laptop. She looks up at me in surprise.

Wiping my eyes, I say, "You can be mad at me all you want, but you had no right to go to Daddy behind my back."

Her voice is piano-string tight as she says, "I didn't do that as revenge. I did it because you clearly have no idea what you're doing, and if you're not careful, you're going to end up some sad teenage statistic." Coldly, as if she is speaking to a stranger, Margot continues. "You've changed, Lara Jean. I honestly don't even know who you are any more."

"No, you definitely don't know me any more, if you think for one second that I would have sex on a school trip! In a hot tub, in plain view of anybody who might happen to walk by? You must not know me at all!" And then I lay it down, the card I've been holding against her. "Just because you had sex with Josh, that doesn't mean I'm going to have sex with Peter."

Margot sucks in her breath. “*Lower your voice.*”

I feel happy that I’ve wounded her too. I yell, “Now that Daddy’s already disappointed in me, he can’t be disappointed in you too, right?”

I whirl around to go back to my room, and Margot follows close behind me.

“Come back here!” she shouts.

“No!” I try to close my door in her face, but she wedges her foot inside. “Get out!”

I lean my back against the door, but Margot is stronger than me. She pushes her way in and locks the door behind her.

She advances towards me and I back away from her. There’s a dangerous light in her eyes. She’s the righteous one now. I can feel myself start to shrink, to cower. “How did you know Josh and I had sex, Lara Jean? Did he tell you that himself while you two were going behind my back?”

“We never went behind your back! It wasn’t like that.”

“Then what was it like?” she demands.

A sob escapes my throat. “I liked him first. I liked him all that summer before ninth grade. I thought ... thought he liked me back. But then one day you said you were dating, and so I just, I just swallowed it. I wrote him a goodbye letter.”

Margot’s face twists into a sneer. “Do you seriously expect me to feel sorry for you now?”

“No. I’m just trying to explain what happened. I stopped liking him, I swear I did. I didn’t think of him like that again, but then, after you left, I realized that deep down I still had feelings for him. And then my letter got sent and Josh found out, so I started pretend dating Peter—”

She shakes her head. “Just stop. I don’t want to hear it. I don’t even know what you’re talking about right now.”

“Josh and I only kissed one time. *Once*. And it was a huge mistake, and I didn’t even want to do it in the first place! You’re the one he loves, not me.”

She says, “How can I believe anything you ever say to me now?”

“Because it’s the truth.” Trembling, I tell her, “You have no idea the power you have over me. How much your opinion means to me. How much I look up to you.”

Margot’s face screws up like a fist; she is holding back tears. “You know what Mommy would always say to me?” She lifts her chin higher. “‘Take care of your sisters.’ So that’s what I did. I’ve always tried to put you and Kitty first. Do you have any idea how hard it was being so far away from you guys? How lonely it was? All I wanted to do was come back home, but I couldn’t, because I have to be strong. I have to be” – she struggles for a breath – “the good example. I can’t be weak. I have to show you guys how to be brave. Because ... because Mommy isn’t here to do it.”

Tears roll down my cheeks. “I know. You don’t have to tell me, Gogo. I know how much you do for us.”

“But then I left, and it’s like you didn’t need me as much as I thought.” Her voice breaks. “You were fine without me.”

“Only because you taught me everything!” I cry out.

Margot’s face crumbles.

“I’m sorry,” I weep. “I’m so sorry.”

“I *needed* you, Lara Jean.”

She takes one step towards me and I take one towards her, and we fall into each other’s arms, crying, and the relief I feel is immeasurable. We are sisters, and there’s nothing she or I can ever say or do to change that.

Daddy knocks on the door. “Girls? Everything OK in there?”

We look at each other and together at the same time, we say, “We’re fine, Daddy.”

It's New Year's Eve. New Year's Eve has always been a stay-at-home holiday for us. We make popcorn and drink sparkling cider, and at midnight we go outside to the backyard and light up sparklers.

Some of Margot's friends from high school are having a party at a cabin in the mountains, and she said she wasn't going to go, that she'd rather stay with us, but Kitty and I made her. My hope is that Josh is going too, and that they'll talk, and who knows what will happen. It's New Year's Eve, after all. The night for new beginnings.

We sent Daddy to a party someone from the hospital is throwing. Kitty ironed his favourite button-down shirt and I picked the tie and we shoved him out the door. I think Grandma is right; it's not good to be alone.

"Why are you still sad?" Kitty asks me as I dump popcorn into a bowl for us. We're in the kitchen; she's sitting on a stool at the breakfast bar with her legs dangling. The puppy is curled up like a centipede under her stool, gazing up at Kitty with hopeful eyes. "You and Margot made up. What's to be sad about?"

I'm about to deny being sad, but then I just sigh and say, "I don't know."

Kitty grabs a handful of popcorn and drops a few kernels on the floor, which Jamie gobbles up. "How can you not know?"

"Because sometimes you just feel sad and you can't explain it."

Kitty cocks her head to the side. "PMS?"

I count the days since my last period. "No. It's not PMS. Just because a girl is sad, it doesn't mean it has anything to do with PMS."

"Then why?" she presses.

"I don't know! Maybe I miss someone."

"You miss Peter? Or Josh?"

I hesitate. "Peter." Despite everything, Peter.

"So call him."

"I can't."

“Why not?”

I don't know how to answer her. It's all so embarrassing, and I want to be someone she can look up to. But she's waiting, her little brow furrowed, and I know I have to tell her the truth. “Kitty, it was all fake. The whole thing. We were never really together. He never really liked me.”

Kitty wrinkles. “What do you mean it was fake?”

Sighing, I say, “It all started with those letters. Remember how my hatbox went missing?” Kitty nods. “I had letters inside, letters I wrote to the boys I loved. They were supposed to be private, they were never supposed to be sent, but then somebody did, and everything turned into a mess. Josh got one, and Peter got one, and I was just so humiliated... Peter and I decided to pretend to date so I could save face in front of Josh and he could make his ex-girlfriend jealous, and the whole thing just spun out of control.”

Kitty is biting her lip nervously. “Lara Jean ... if I tell you something, you have to promise not to be mad.”

“What? Just tell me.”

“First promise.”

“OK, I promise I won't be mad.” Prickles are going up my spine.

In a rush Kitty says, “I'm the one who sent the letters.”

“*What?*” I scream.

“You promised you wouldn't be mad!”

“What?” I scream again, but less loud. “Kitty, how could you do that to me?”

She hangs her head. “Because I was mad at you. You were teasing me about liking Josh; you said I was going to name my dog after him. I was so mad at you. So when you were sleeping ... I snuck into your room and stole your hatbox and I read all your letters and then I sent them. I regretted it right away, but it was too late.”

“How did you even know about my letters?” I yell.

She squints at me. “Because I go through your stuff sometimes when you're not at home.”

I'm about to scream at her some more, and then I remember how I read Margot's letter from Josh and I bite my tongue. As calmly as I can, I say, "Do you even know how much trouble you've caused? How could you be so spiteful to me?"

"I'm sorry," she whispers. Fat teardrops form in the corners of her eyes, and one plops down like a raindrop.

I want to hug her, to comfort her, but I'm still so mad. "It's fine," I say in a voice that is the exact opposite of fine. None of this would have happened if she hadn't sent those letters.

Kitty jumps up and runs upstairs, and I think she's going to her room to cry in private. I know what I should do. I should go comfort her, forgive her for real. It's my turn to be the good example. To be the good big sister.

I'm about to go upstairs when she comes running back into the kitchen. With my hatbox in her arms.

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When it was just Margot and me, my mom used to buy two of everything, blue for Margot and pink for me. The same quilt, stuffed animal, or Easter basket in two different colours. Everything had to be fair; we had to have the exact same number of carrot sticks or french fries or marbles or erasers shaped like cupcakes. Except I was always losing my erasers or eating my carrot sticks too fast, and then I'd beg for just one of Margot's. Sometimes Mommy would make her share, which even then I realized wasn't fair, that obviously, Margot shouldn't be penalized for eating her snack slowly or keeping track of her erasers. After Kitty was born, Mommy tried to do blue, pink, and yellow, but it's just a lot harder finding one thing in three different colours. Also, Kitty was enough years younger than us that we didn't want the same kinds of toys as her.

The teal hatbox might be the only gift from Mommy I got that was just for me. I didn't have to share it; this one was mine and mine alone.

When I opened it, I expected to find a hat, maybe a straw hat with a floppy brim, or maybe a newsboy – but it was empty. “This is for your special things,” she said. “You can put all your most precious, most favourite, most secret things in here.”

“Like what?” I said.

“Whatever fits inside. Whatever you want to keep just for you.”

Kitty's pointy little chin trembles, and she says, “I really am sorry, Lara Jean.”

When I see that, the chin tremble, I can't be mad any more. I just can't, not even a little bit. So I go to her, and I hug her tight. “It's all right,” I say, and she sags against me in relief. “You can keep the box. Put all your secrets in it.”

Kitty shakes her head. “No, it's yours. I don't want it.” She thrusts it at me. “I put something in there for you.”

I open the box, and there are notes. Notes and notes and notes. Peter's notes. Peter's notes I threw away.

“I found them when I was emptying your trash,” she says. Hastily she adds, “I only read a couple. And then I saved them because I could tell they were important.”

I touch one that Peter folded into an airplane. “Kitty ... you know Peter and I aren’t getting back together, right?”

Kitty grabs the bowl of popcorn and says, “Just read them.” Then she goes into the living room and turns on the TV.

I close the hatbox and take it with me upstairs. When I am in my room, I sit on the floor and spread them out around me.

A lot of the notes just say things like “*Meet you at your locker after school*” and “*Can I borrow your chemistry notes from yesterday?*” I find the spiderweb one from Halloween, and it makes me smile. Another one says, “*Can you take the bus home today? I want to surprise Kitty and pick her up from school so she can show me and my car off to her friends.*” “*Thanks for coming to the estate sale with me this weekend. You made the day fun. I owe you one.*” “*Don’t forget to pack a Korean yogurt for me!*” “*If you make Josh’s dumb white-chocolate cranberry cookies and not my fruitcake ones, it’s over.*” I laugh out loud. And then, the one I read over and over: “*You look pretty today. I like you in blue.*”

I’ve never gotten a love letter before. But reading these notes like this, one after the other, it feels like I have. It’s like ... it’s like there’s only ever been Peter. Like everyone else that came before him, they were all to prepare me for this. I think I see the difference now, between loving someone from afar and loving someone up close. When you see them up close, you see the real them, but they also get to see the real you. And Peter does. He sees me, and I see him.

Love is scary: it changes; it can go away. That’s part of the risk. I don’t want to be scared any more. I want to be brave, like Margot. It’s almost a new year, after all.

Close to midnight, I gather up Kitty and the puppy and the sparklers. We put on heavy coats and I make Kitty wear a hat. “Should we put a hat on Jamie too?” she asks me.

“He doesn’t need one,” I tell her. “He’s already got on a fur coat.”



The stars are out by the dozen; they look like faraway gems. We're so lucky to live by the mountains the way we do. You just feel closer to the stars. To heaven.

I light up sparklers for each of us, and Kitty starts dancing around the snow making a ring of fire with hers. She's trying to coax Jamie to jump through but he isn't having it. All he wants to do is pee around the yard. It's lucky we have a fence, or I bet he'd pee his way down this whole block.

Josh's bedroom light is on. I see him in the window just as he opens it and calls out, "Song girls!"

Kitty hollers, "Wanna light a sparkler?"

"Maybe next year," Josh calls back. I look up at him and wave my sparkler, and he smiles, and there's just this feeling of all rightness between us. One way or another, Josh will be in our lives. And I'm certain, I'm so suddenly certain that everything is exactly the way it's supposed to be, that I don't have to be so afraid of goodbye, because goodbye doesn't have to be for ever.

When I'm back in my room in my flannel nightgown, I get out my special flowy pen and my good thick stationery, and I start to write. Not a goodbye letter. Just a plain old love letter.

*Dear Peter . . .*

# Acknowledgements

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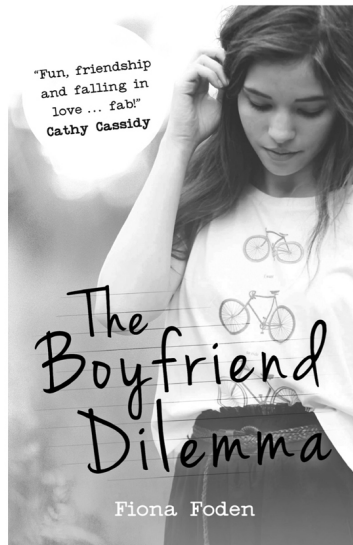
And to Emily van Beek, for everything, always.

All of my love,

*Jenny*

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Two girls ... one guy ...  
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love  
you  
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**For Logan. I've only just met  
you and already I love you.**

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She was glad that the cosy house, and Pa and Ma and the fire-light and the music, were now. They could not be forgotten, she thought, because now is now. It can never be a long time ago.

—LAURA INGALLS WILDER, *Little House in the Big Woods*

Time is the longest distance between two places.

—TENNESSEE WILLIAMS, *The Glass Menagerie*

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Dear Peter,

I miss you. It's only been five days but I miss you like it's been five years. Maybe because I don't know if this is just it, if you and I will ever talk again. I mean I'm sure we'll say hi in chem class, or in the hallways, but will it ever be like it was? That's what makes me sad. I felt like I could say anything to you. I think you felt the same way. I hope you did.

So I'm just going to say anything to you right now, while I'm still feeling brave. What happened between us in the hot tub scared me. I know it was just a day in the life of Peter for you, but for me it meant a lot more, and that's what scared me. Not just what people were saying about it, and me, but that it happened at all. How easy it was, how much I liked it. I got scared and I took it out on you and for that I'm truly sorry.

And at the recital party, I'm sorry I didn't defend you to Josh. I should have. I know I owed you that much. I owed you that much and more. I still can't believe you came, and that you brought those fruitcake cookies.

You looked cute in your sweater, by the way. I'm not saying that to butter you up. I mean it.

Sometimes I like you so much I can't stand it. It fills up inside me, all the way to the brim, and I feel like I could overflow. I like you so much I don't know what to do with it. My heart beats so fast when I know I'm going to see you again. And then, when you look at me the way you do, I feel like the luckiest girl in the world.

Those things Josh said about you, they weren't true. You haven't brought me down. Just the opposite. You've brought me out. You gave me my first love story, Peter. Please just don't let it be over yet.

Love,

Lara Jean

# 1

Kitty's been a little complainer all morning, and I suspect both Margot and Daddy are suffering from New Year's Eve hangovers. And me? I've got hearts in my eyes and a letter that's burning a hole in my coat pocket.

As we're putting on our shoes, Kitty's still trying to weasel her way out of wearing a hanbok to Aunt Carrie and Uncle Victor's. "Look at the sleeves! They're three-quarter length on me!"

Unconvincingly Daddy says, "They're supposed to be that way."

Kitty points to me and Margot. "Then why do theirs fit?" she demands. Our grandma bought the hanboks for us the last time she was in Korea. Margot's hanbok has a yellow jacket and apple-green skirt. Mine is hot pink with an ivory-white jacket and a long hot-pink bow with flowers embroidered down the front. The skirt is voluminous, full like a bell, and it falls all the way to the floor. Unlike Kitty's, which hits right at her ankles.

"It's not our fault you grow like a weed," I say, fussing with my bow. The bow is the hardest thing to get right. I had to watch a YouTube video multiple times to figure it out, and it still looks lopsided and sad.

"My skirt's too short too," she grumps, lifting the bottom.

The real truth is, Kitty hates wearing a hanbok because you have to walk delicately in it and hold the skirt closed with one hand or the whole thing comes open.

“All of the other cousins will be wearing them, and it will make Grandma happy,” Daddy says, rubbing his temples. “Case closed.”

In the car Kitty keeps saying “I hate New Year’s Day,” and it puts everyone but me in a sour mood. Margot is already in a semi-sour mood because she had to wake up at the crack of dawn to get home from her friend’s cabin in time. There’s also the matter of that maybe hangover. Nothing could sour my mood, though, because I’m not even in this car. I’m somewhere else entirely, thinking about my letter to Peter, wondering if it was heartfelt enough, and how and when I’m going to give it to him, and what he’ll say, and what it will mean. Should I drop it in his mailbox? Leave it in his locker? When I see him again, will he smile at me, make a joke of it to lighten the mood? Or will he pretend he never saw it, to spare us both? I think that would be worse. I have to keep reminding myself that, despite everything, Peter is kind and he is easygoing and he won’t be cruel no matter what. Of that much I can be sure.

“What are you thinking so hard about?” Kitty asks me.

I barely hear her.

“Hello?”

I close my eyes and pretend to be asleep, and all I see is Peter’s face. I don’t know what I want from him exactly, what I’m ready for – if it’s boyfriend-girlfriend heavy-duty serious love, or if it’s what we had before, just fun and some here-and-there kisses, or if it’s something in between, but I do know I can’t get his Handsome Boy face out of my mind. The way he

smirks when he says my name, how when he's near me I forget to breathe sometimes.

Of course, when we get to Aunt Carrie and Uncle Victor's, none of the other cousins are wearing hanboks, and Kitty practically turns purple with the effort of not yelling at Daddy. Margot and I give him some side-eye too. It's not particularly comfortable to sit around in a hanbok all day. But then Grandma gives me an approving smile, which makes up for it.

As we take off our shoes and coats at the front door, I whisper to Kitty, "Maybe the adults will give us more money for dressing up."

"You girls look so cute," Aunt Carrie said as she hugs us. "Haven refused to wear hers!"

Haven rolls her eyes at her mom. "I love your haircut," she says to Margot. Haven and I are only a few months apart, but she thinks she's so much older than me. She's always trying to get in with Margot.

We get the bowing out of the way first. In Korean culture, you bow to your elders on New Year's Day and wish them luck in the new year, and in return they give you money. The order goes oldest to youngest, so as the oldest adult, Grandma sits down on the couch first, and Aunt Carrie and Uncle Victor bow first, then Daddy, all the way down the line to Kitty, who is youngest. When it's Daddy's turn to sit on the couch and receive his bows, there's an empty couch cushion next to him as there has been every New Year's Day since Mommy died. It gives me an achy feeling in my chest to see him sitting there alone, smiling gamely, handing out ten-dollar notes. Grandma catches my eye pointedly and I know she's thinking the same

thing. When it's my turn to bow, I kneel, hands folded in front of my forehead, and I vow that I will not see Daddy alone on that couch again next year.

We get ten dollars from Aunt Carrie and Uncle Victor, ten from Daddy, ten from Aunt Min and Uncle Sam, who aren't our real aunt and uncle but second cousins (or is it cousins once removed? They're Mommy's cousins, anyway), and twenty from Grandma! We didn't get more for wearing hanboks, but all in all a good take. Last year the aunts and uncles were only doing five apiece.

Next we do rice cake soup for good luck. Aunt Carrie also made black-eyed pea cakes and insists we try at least one, though no one wants to. The twins, Harry and Leon – our third cousins? Cousins twice removed? – refuse to eat the soup or the black-eyed pea cakes and are eating chicken nuggets in the TV room. There isn't enough room at the dining table, so Kitty and I eat on stools at the kitchen island. We can hear everyone laughing from over here.

As I begin to eat my soup, I make a wish. *Please, please let things work out with me and Peter.*

“Why do I get a smaller bowl of soup than everyone else?” Kitty whispers to me.

“Because you're the littlest.”

“Why don't we get our own bowl of kimchi?”

“Because Aunt Carrie thinks we don't like it because we're not full Korean.”

“Go ask for some,” Kitty whispers.

So I do, but mainly because I want some too.

While the adults drink coffee, Margot, Haven and I go up to Haven's room and Kitty tags along. Usually she plays with the twins, but this time she picks up Aunt Carrie's Yorkie, Smitty, and follows us upstairs like one of the girls.

Haven has indie rock band posters on her walls; most I've never heard of. She's always rotating them out. There's a new one, a letterpressed Belle and Sebastian. It looks like denim. "This is cool," I say.

"I was just about to switch that one out," Haven says. "You can have it if you want."

"That's all right," I tell her. I know she's only offering it to feel above me, as is her way.

"I'll take it," Kitty says, and Haven's face pulls into a frown for a second, but Kitty's already peeling it off the wall. "Thanks, Haven."

Margot and I look at each other and try not to smile. Haven's never had much patience for Kitty, and the feeling is infinitely mutual.

"Margot, have you been to any shows since you've been in Scotland?" Haven asks. She plops down on her bed and opens up her laptop.

"Not really," Margot says. "I've been so busy with classes." Margot's not much of a live-music person anyway. She's looking at her phone; the skirt of her hanbok is fanned around her. She's the only one of us Song girls still fully clothed. I've taken off my jacket, so I'm just in the slip and skirt, and Kitty's



taken off both the jacket and the skirt and is just wearing an undershirt and bloomers.

I sit down on the bed next to Haven so she can show me pictures from their vacation to Bermuda on Instagram. As she's scrolling through her feed, a picture from the ski trip pops up. Haven's in the Charlottesville Youth Orchestra, so she knows people from a lot of different schools, including mine.

I can't help but sigh a little when I see it—a picture of a bunch of us on the bus the last morning. Peter has his arm around me, he's whispering something in my ear. I wish I remembered what.

All surprised, Haven looks up and says, “Oh, hey, that's you, Lara Jean. What's this from?”

“The school ski trip.”

“Is that your boyfriend?” Haven asks me, and I can tell she's impressed and trying not to show it.

I wish I could say yes. But—

Kitty scampers over to us and looks over our shoulders. “Yes, and he's the hottest guy you've ever seen in your life, Haven.” She says it like a challenge. Margot, who was scrolling on her phone, looks up and giggles.

“Well, that's not exactly true,” I hedge. I mean, he's the hottest guy I've ever seen in *my* life, but I don't know what kind of people Haven goes to school with.

“No, Kitty's right, he's hot,” Haven admits. “Like, how did you get him? No offence. I just thought you were the non--dating type.”

I frown. The non-dating type? What kind of type is that? A little mushroom who sits at home in a semi-dark room growing moss?

“Lara Jean dates plenty,” Margot says loyally.

I blush. I date never, Peter barely even counts, but I’m glad for the lie.

“What’s his name?” Haven asks me.

“Peter. Peter Kavinsky.” Even saying his name is a remembered pleasure, something to savour, like a piece of chocolate dissolving on my tongue.

“*Ohh,*” she says. “I thought he dated that pretty blonde girl. What’s her name? Jenna? Weren’t you guys best friends when you were little?”

I feel a pang in my heart. “Her name is Genevieve. We used to be friends, not any more. And she and Peter have been broken up for a while.”

“So then how long have you and Peter been together?” Haven asks me. She has a dubious look in her eye, like she 90 per cent believes me but there’s still that niggling 10 per cent that has doubt.

“We started hanging out in September.” At least that much is true. “We’re not together right now; we’re kind of on a break... But I’m ... optimistic.”

Kitty pokes my cheek, makes a dimple with her pinky. “You’re smiling,” she says, and she’s smiling too. She cuddles closer to me. “Make up with him today, OK? I want Peter back.”

“It’s not that simple,” I say, though maybe it could be?

“Sure it’s that simple. He still likes you a lot – just tell him you still like him, too, and boom. You’re back together and it’ll be like you never kicked him out of our house.”

Haven’s eyes go even wider. “Lara Jean, *you* broke up with *him*?”

“Geez, is it so hard to believe?” I narrow my eyes at her, and Haven opens and then wisely closes her mouth.

She takes another look at the picture of Peter. Then she gets up to go to the bathroom, and as she closes the door, she says, “All I can say is, if that boy was my boyfriend, I’d never let him go.”

My whole body tingles when she says those words.

I once had that exact same thought about Josh, and look at me now: It’s like a million years have gone by and he’s just a memory to me. I don’t want it to be like that with Peter. The farawayness of old feelings, like even when you try with all your might, you can barely make out his face when you close your eyes. No matter what, I always want to remember his face.

When it’s time to go, I’m putting on my coat and Peter’s letter falls out of my pocket. Margot picks it up. “Another letter?”

I blush. In a rush I say, “I haven’t figured out when I should give it to him, if I should leave it in his mailbox, or if I should actually mail it? Or face to face? Gogo, what do you think?”

“You should just talk to him,” Margot says. “Go right now. Daddy will drop you off. You go to his house, you give him the letter, and then you see what he says.”

My heart pumps wildly at the thought. Right now? Just go over there, without calling first, without a plan? “I don’t know,” I hedge. “I feel like I should think it over more.”

Margot opens her mouth to respond, but then Kitty comes up behind us and says, “Enough with the letters. Just go get him back.”

“Don’t let it be too late,” Margot says, and I know she’s not just talking about me and Peter.

I’ve been tiptoeing around the subject of Josh because of everything that’s happened with us. I mean, Margot’s forgiven me, but there’s no sense in rocking the boat. So these past couple of days I’ve stayed silently supportive and hoped that was enough. But Margot leaves for Scotland again in less than a week. The thought of her leaving without at least talking to Josh doesn’t feel right to me. We’ve all been friends for so long. I know Josh and I will mend things, because we’re neighbours, and that’s how it goes with people you see a lot. They mend, almost on their own. But not so for Margot and Josh, with her so far away. If they don’t talk now, the scar will only harden over time, it will calcify, and then they’ll be like strangers who never loved each other, which is the saddest thought of all.

While Kitty’s putting on her boots, I whisper to Margot, “If I talk to Peter, you should talk to Josh. Don’t go back to Scotland and leave things like this with him.”

“We’ll see,” she says, but I see the hope that flares in her eyes, and it gives me hope too.

## 2

Margot and Kitty are both asleep in the back seat. Kitty's got her head in Margot's lap; Margot's sleeping with her head back and her mouth wide open. Daddy is listening to NPR with a faint smile on his face. Everyone's so peaceful, and my heart is thumping a million beats a minute just in anticipation of what I'm about to do.

I'm doing it now, this very night. Before we're back at school, before all the gears shift back to normal and Peter and I are nothing more than a memory. Like snow globes, you shake them up, and for a moment everything is upside down and glitter everywhere and it's just like magic – but then it all settles and goes back to where it's supposed to be. Things have a way of settling back. I can't go back.

I time it so that we are one stoplight from Peter's neighbourhood when I ask Daddy to drop me off. He must hear the intensity in my voice, the *necessity*, because he doesn't ask any questions, he just says yes.

When we pull up to Peter's house, the lights are on and his car is in the driveway; so is his mom's minivan. The sun is just going down, early because it's winter. Across the street, Peter's neighbours still have their holiday lights up. Today's probably the last day for that, seeing as how it's a new year. New year, new start.

I can feel the veins in my wrists pulsing, and I'm nervous, I'm so nervous. I run out of the car and ring the doorbell.

When I hear footsteps from inside, I wave Daddy off, and he backs out of the driveway. Kitty's awake now, and she's got her face up against the back window, grinning hard. She sends me a thumbs-up and I wave back.

Peter opens the door. My heart jumps like a Mexican jumping bean in my chest. He's wearing a button-down I've never seen before, plaid. It must have been a Christmas present. His hair is mussed on top, like he's been lying down. He doesn't look so very surprised to see me. "Hey." He eyes my skirt, which is poofing out from under my winter coat like a ball gown. "Why are you so dressed up?"

"It's for New Year's." Maybe I should've gone home and changed first. At least then I would feel like me, standing at this boy's door, proverbial hat in hand. "So, hey, how was your Christmas?"

"Good." He takes his time, four whole seconds, before he asks, "How was yours?"

"Great. We got a new puppy. His name is Jamie Fox-Pickle." Not even a trace of a smile from Peter. He's cold; I didn't expect him to be cold. Maybe not even cold. Maybe just indifferent. "Can I talk to you for a second?"

Peter shrugs, which seems like a yes, but he doesn't invite me in. I have this sudden sick-to-my-stomach fear that Genevieve is inside – which quickly dissipates when I remember that if she *were* inside, he wouldn't be out here with me. He leaves the door ajar as he puts on sneakers and a coat, and then steps on to the porch. He closes the door behind him and sits down on the steps. I sit next to him, smoothing my skirt around me. "So, what's up?" he says, like I'm taking up his precious time.

This isn't right. Not what I expected at all.

But what, exactly, did I expect from Peter? I'd give him the letter, and he'd read it, and then he'd love me? He'd take me in his arms; we'd kiss passionately, but just kissing, just innocent. Then what? We'd date? How long until he grew bored of me, missed Genevieve, wanted more than I was prepared to give, bedroomwise and also just lifewise? Someone like him could never be content staying at home and watching a movie on the couch. This is Peter Kavinsky we're talking about, after all.

I take so long swept up in my fast-forward reverie that he says it again, just slightly less cold this time. "What, Lara Jean?" He looks at me like he's waiting for something, and suddenly I'm afraid to give it.

I tighten my fist around the letter, shove it into my coat pocket. My hands are freezing. I don't have any gloves or hat; I should probably just go home. "I just came to say ... to say I'm sorry for the way things turned out. And ... I hope we can still be friends, and happy new year."

His eyes narrow at this. "Happy new year?" he repeats. "That's what you came here to say? Sorry and *happy new year*?"

"And I hope we can still be friends," I add, biting my lip.

"You hope we can still be friends," he repeats, and there is a note of sarcasm in his voice that I don't understand or like.

"That's what I said." I start to stand up. I was hoping he'd give me a ride home, but now I don't want to ask. But it's so cold outside. Maybe if I hint... Blowing on my hands, I say, "Well, I'm gonna head home."

“Wait a minute. Let’s go back to the apology part. What are you apologizing for, exactly? For kicking me out of your house, or for thinking I’m a dirtbag who would go around telling people we had sex when we didn’t?”

A lump forms in my throat. When he puts it that way, it really does sound terrible. “Both of those things. I’m sorry for both of those things.”

Peter cocks his head to the side, his eyebrows raised. “And what else?”

I bristle. *What else?* “There is no ~~what~~ else’. That’s it.” Thank God I didn’t give him the letter, if this is how he’s going to be. It’s not like I’m the only one with stuff to apologize for.

“Hey, you’re the one who came here talking about ~~I’m sorry~~ and ~~let’s be friends~~’. You don’t get to force me into accepting your half-assed apology.”

“Well, I wish you a happy new year anyway.” Now I’m the one being sarcastic, and it sure is satisfying. “Have a nice life. Auld lang syne and all that.”

“Fine. Bye.”

I turn to go. I was so hopeful this morning, I had such stars in my eyes imagining how this was all going to go. God, what a jerk Peter is. Good riddance to him!

“Wait a minute.”

Hope leaps into my heart like Jamie Fox-Pickle leaps into my bed – swift and unbidden. But I turn back around, like *Ugh, what do you want now*, so he doesn’t see it.

“What’s that you’ve got crumpled up in your pocket?”



My hand flies down to my pocket. “That? Oh, it’s nothing. It’s junk mail. It was on the ground by your mailbox. No worries, I’ll recycle it for you.”

“Give it to me and I’ll recycle it right now,” he says, holding out his hand.

“No, I said I’ll do it.” I reach down to stuff the letter deeper into my coat pocket, and Peter tries to snatch it out of my hand. I twist away from him wildly and hold on tight. He shrugs, and I relax and let out a small sigh of relief, and then he lunges forward and plucks it away from me.

I pant, “Give it back, Peter!”

Blithely he says, “Tampering with US mail is a federal offence.” Then he looks down at the envelope. “This is to me. From you.” I make a desperate grab for the envelope, and it takes him by surprise. We wrestle for it; I’ve got the corner of it in my grip, but he’s not letting go. “Stop, you’re going to rip it!” he yells, prising it out of my grasp.

I try to grab harder, but it’s too late. He has it.

Peter holds the envelope above my head and tears it open and begins to read. It’s torturous standing there in front of him, waiting – for what, I don’t know. More humiliation? I should probably just go. He’s such a slow reader.

When he’s finally done, he asks, “Why weren’t you going to give me this? Why were you just going to leave?”

“Because, I don’t know, you didn’t seem so glad to see me...” My voice trails off lamely.

“It’s called playing hard to get! I’ve been waiting for you to call me, you dummy. It’s been six days.”

I suck in my breath. “Oh!”

“Oh.” He pulls me by the lapels of my coat, closer to him, close enough to kiss. He’s so close I can see the puff his breath makes. So close I could count his eyelashes if I wanted. In a low voice he says, “So then ... you still like me?”

“Yeah,” I whisper. “I mean, sort of.” My heartbeat is going quick-quick-quick. I’m giddy. Is this a dream? If so, let me never wake up.

Peter gives me a look like *Get real, you know you like me*. I do, I do. Then, softly, he says, “Do you believe me that I didn’t tell people we had sex on the ski trip?”

“Yes.”

“OK.” He inhales. “Did ... did anything happen with you and Sanderson after I left your house that night?” He’s jealous! The very thought of it warms me up like hot soup. I start to tell him no way, but he quickly says, “Wait. Don’t tell me. I don’t want to know.”

“No,” I say, firmly so he knows I mean it. He nods but doesn’t say anything.

Then he leans in, and I close my eyes, heart thrumming in my chest like hummingbird wings. We’ve technically only kissed four times, and only one of those times was for real. I’d like to just get right to it, so I can stop being nervous. But Peter doesn’t kiss me, not the way I expect. He kisses me on my left cheek, and then my right; his breath is warm. And then nothing. My eyes fly open. Is this a literal kiss-off? Why isn’t he kissing me properly? “What are you doing?” I whisper.

“Building the anticipation.”

Quickly I say, "Let's just kiss."

He angles his head, and his cheek brushes against mine, which is when the front door opens, and it's Peter's younger brother, Owen, standing there with his arms crossed. I spring away from Peter like I just found out he has some incurable infectious disease. "Mom wants you guys to come in and have some cider," he says, smirking.

"In a minute," Peter says, pulling me back.

"She said right now," Owen says.

Oh my God. I throw a panicky look at Peter. "I should probably get going before my dad starts to worry..."

He nudges me towards the door with his chin. "Just come inside for a minute, and then I'll take you home." As I step inside, he takes off my coat and says in a low voice, "Were you really going to walk all the way home in that fancy dress? In the cold?"

"No, I was going to guilt you into driving me," I whisper back.

"What's with your outfit?" Owen says to me.

"It's what Korean people wear on New Year's Day," I tell him.

Peter's mom steps out of the kitchen with two steaming mugs. She's wearing a long cashmere cardigan that's loosely belted around her waist, and cream cable-knit slippers. "It's stunning," she says. "You look gorgeous. So colourful."

"Thank you," I say, feeling embarrassed over the fuss.

The three of us sit down in the family room; Owen escapes to the kitchen. I still feel flushed from the almost kiss and from the fact that Peter's mom probably knows what we were up to. I wonder, too, what she knows about what's been going on with us, how much he's told her, if anything.

"How was your Christmas, Lara Jean?" his mom asks me.

I blow into my mug. "It was really nice. My dad bought my little sister a puppy, and we've just been fighting over who gets to hold him. And my older sister's still home from college, so that's been nice too. How was your holiday, Mrs Kavinsky?"

"Oh, it was nice. Quiet." She points to her slippers. "Owen got me these. How did the holiday party go? Did your sisters like the fruitcake cookies Peter baked? Honestly, I can't stand them."

Surprised, I look over at Peter, who is suddenly busy scrolling on his phone. "I thought you said your mom made them."

His mom smiles a proud kind of smile. "Oh no, he did it all by himself. He was very determined."

"They tasted like garbage!" Owen yells from the kitchen.

His mom laughs again, and then things are silent. My mind is racing, trying to think up potential conversation pieces. New Year's resolutions, maybe? The snowstorm we're supposed to get next week? Peter's no help at all; he's looking at his phone again.

She stands up. "It was nice to see you, Lara Jean. Peter, don't keep her out too late."

“I won’t.” To me he says, “I’ll be right back; I’m just gonna get my keys.”

When he’s gone, I say, “I’m sorry for dropping in like this on New Year’s Day. I hope I wasn’t interrupting anything.”

“You’re welcome here anytime.” She leans forward and puts her hand on my knee. With a meaningful look she says, “Just be easy with his heart is all I ask.”

My stomach does a dip. Did Peter tell her what happened between us?

She gives my knee a pat and stands up. “Good night, Lara Jean.”

“Good night,” I echo.

Despite her kind smile, I feel like I’ve just got in trouble. There was a hint of reproach in her voice – I know I heard it. *Don’t mess with my son* is what she was saying. Was Peter very upset by what happened between us? He didn’t make it out like he was. Annoyed, maybe a little hurt. Certainly not hurt enough to talk to his mom about it. But maybe he and his mom are really close. I hate to think I may have already made a bad impression, before Peter and I have even got going.

It’s pitch black out, not many stars in the sky. I think maybe it’ll snow again soon. At my house, all the lights are on downstairs, and Margot’s bedroom light is on upstairs. Across the street I can see Ms Rothschild’s little Christmas tree lit up in the window.

Peter and I are warm and cosy in his car. Heat billows out the vents. I ask him, “Did you tell your mom about how we broke up?”

“No. Because we never broke up,” he says, turning the heat down.

“We didn’t?”

He laughs. “No, because we were never really together, remember?”

*Are we together now?* is what I’m wondering, but I don’t ask, because he puts his arm around me and tilts my head up to his, and I’m nervous again. “Don’t be nervous,” he says.

I give him a quick kiss to prove I’m not.

“Kiss me like you missed me,” he says, and his voice goes husky.

“I did,” I say. “My letter told you I did.”

“Yeah, but—”

I kiss him before he can finish. Properly. Like I mean it. He kisses back like he means it too. Like it’s been four hundred years. And then I’m not thinking any more and I’m just lost in the kissing.

### 3

After Peter drops me off, I run inside to tell Margot and Kitty everything, and I feel like a purse bulging with gold coins. I can't wait to spill.

Kitty's lying on the couch, watching TV with Jamie Fox-Pickle in her lap, and she scrambles up when I come through the door. In a hushed voice she says, "Gogo's crying."

My enthusiasm dries up instantly. "What! Why?"

"I think she went over to Josh's and they had a talk and it wasn't good. You should go check on her."

Oh no. This isn't how it was supposed to go for them. They were supposed to get back together, like Peter and me.

Kitty settles back on the couch, remote in hand, her sisterly duty fulfilled. "How did it go with Peter?"

"Great," I say. "Really great." The smile comes to my face without me even intending it, and I quickly wipe it away, out of respect for Margot.

I go to the kitchen and make Margot a cup of Night-Night tea, two tablespoons of honey, like Mommy used to make us for bedtime. For a second I contemplate adding a splash of whiskey because I saw it on a Victorian show on PBS – the maids would put whiskey in the lady of the manor's hot beverage to calm her nerves. I know Margot drinks at college, but she already has a hangover, and besides, I doubt Daddy would be into it. So I just put the tea, sans whiskey, in my favourite mug, and I send Kitty upstairs with it. I tell her to act

adorable. I say she should first give Margot the tea and then snuggle with her for at least five minutes. Which Kitty balks at, because Kitty only cuddles if there's something in it for her, and also because I know it frightens her to see Margot upset. "I'll just bring her Jamie to cuddle with," Kitty says.

Selfish!

When I go to Margot's room with a piece of buttered cinnamon toast, Kitty's nowhere in sight and neither is Jamie. Margot's curled up on her side, crying. "It's really over, Lara Jean," she whispers. "It's been over, but now I know it's over for good. I th-thought that if I wanted to get back together, he would too, but he d-doesn't." I curl up next to her, my forehead pressed to her back. I can feel every breath she takes. She weeps into her pillow, and I scratch her shoulder blades the way she likes. The thing to know about Margot is she never cries, so seeing her cry sets my world, and this house, off its axis. Everything feels tilted somehow. "He says that long distance is too h-hard, that I was right to break up with him in the first place. I missed him so much, and it seems like he didn't miss me at all."

I bite my lip guiltily. I was the one who encouraged her to talk to Josh. This is partly my fault. "Margot, he did miss you. He missed you like crazy. I would look out the window during French class, and I would see him outside on the bleachers eating his lunch alone. It was depressing."

She sniffles. "Did he really?"

"Yes." I don't understand what's the matter with Josh. He acted like he was so in love with her; he practically went into a depression when she was gone. And now this?



Sighing, she says, “I think ... I think I just still really love him.”

“You do?” *Love*. Margot said “love“. I don’t think I’ve ever heard her say she loved Josh before. Maybe “in love“, but never “love“.

Margot wipes her eyes with her sheet. “The whole reason I broke up with him was so I wouldn’t be that girl crying over her boyfriend, and now that’s exactly what I am. It’s pathetic.”

“You’re the least pathetic person I know, Gogo,” I tell her.

Margot stops sniffing and rolls around so we’re lying face to face. Frowning at me, she says, “I didn’t say *I* was pathetic. I said crying over a boy was.”

“Oh,” I say. “Well, I still don’t think it’s pathetic to cry over someone. It just means you care about them deeply and you’re sad.”

“I’ve been crying so much I feel like my eyes look like ... like shrivelled-up raisins. Do they?” Margot squints at me.

“They *are* swollen,” I admit. “Your eyes just aren’t used to crying. I have an idea!” I leap out of bed and run downstairs to the kitchen. I fill a cereal bowl with ice and two silver spoons and come running back. “Lie back down,” I instruct, and Margot obeys. “Close your eyes.” I put a spoon over each eye.

“Does this really work?”

“I saw it in a magazine.”

When the spoons warm up against her skin, I dip them back into the ice and back on to her face, over and over again. She asks me to tell her what happened with Peter, so I do, but I

leave out all the kissing because it feels in poor taste in light of her own heartbreak. She sits up and says, “You don’t have to pretend to like Peter just to spare my feelings.” Margot swallows painfully, like she has a sore throat. “If any part of you still likes Josh ... if he likes you...” I gasp in horror. I open my mouth to deny it, to say that it feels like for ever ago already, but she silences me with her hand. “It would be really hard, but I wouldn’t want to stand in the way of that, you know? I mean it, Lara Jean. You can tell me.”

I’m so relieved, so grateful she’s bringing it up. I rush to say, “Oh my gosh, I don’t like Josh, Gogo. Not like that. Not at all. And he doesn’t like me like that either. I think ... I think we were both just missing you. Peter’s the one I like.” Under the blanket I find Margot’s hand and link my pinky with hers. “Sister swear.”

She swallows hard. “Then I guess there’s no secret reason for him not wanting to get back together. I guess it’s as simple as he just doesn’t want to be with me any more.”

“No, it’s as simple as you’re in Scotland and he’s in Virginia and it’s too hard. You were wise to break it off when you did. Wise and brave and right.”

Doubt creeps across her face like dark shadows, and then she shakes her head and her expression clears. “Enough about me and Josh. We’re yesterday’s news. Tell me more about Peter. Please, it’ll make me feel better.” She lies back down, and I put the spoons back on her eyes.

“Well, tonight at first he was very cool with me, very blasé blasé—”

“No, go all the way back to the beginning.”

So I go back further: I tell her about our pretend relationship, the hot tub, everything. She keeps taking the spoons off so she can look at me as I tell her. But before long her eyes do look less puffy. And I feel lighter – giddy, even. I’ve kept all these things secret from her for months, and now she knows everything that’s happened since she’s been gone, and I feel so close to her again. You can’t be close to someone, not truly, with secrets in between you.

Margot clears her throat. She hesitates and then asks, “So, how does he kiss?”

I’m blushing. I tap my fingers on my lips before I say, “He kisses like ... like it could be his job.”

Margot giggles and lifts the spoons off her eyes. “Like a male prostitute?”

I grab one of the spoons and tap her on the forehead with it like a gong.

“Ow!” She snatches for the other spoon, but I’m too quick and I’ve got them both. We’re both laughing like crazy as I try to get in another gong on her forehead.

“Margot ... did it hurt when you had sex?” I’m careful not to say Josh’s name. It’s strange, because Margot and I have never talked about sex before in any kind of real way, because neither of us had a point of reference. But now she does and I don’t, and I want to know what she knows.

“Umm. I mean, the first couple of times, a little.” Now she’s the one who’s blushing. “Lara Jean, I can’t talk about this with you. It’s too weird. Can’t you just ask Chris?”

“No, I want to hear it from you. Please, Gogo. You have to tell me everything about it so I’ll know. I don’t want to look like a fool when I do it the first time.”

“It’s not like Josh and I had sex hundreds of times! I’m not an expert. He’s the only person I’ve done it with. But if you’re thinking about having sex with Peter, make sure you’re careful and you use a condom and everything.” I nod quickly. This is when she’ll get to the good stuff. “And just be really sure, as sure as you *can* be. And make sure he knows to be really gentle and caring with you, so it’s special and it’s something you can look back on with good feelings.”

“Got it. So, like, how long did it last from start to finish?”

“Not that long. Don’t forget, it was Josh’s first time too.” She sounds wistful. Now I feel wistful too. Peter’s done it with Genevieve so many times, he’s probably an expert by now. I’ll probably even have an orgasm my first time out. Which is great, but it might’ve been nice if we both didn’t know what we were doing instead of just me.

“You don’t regret it, do you?”

“No. I don’t think so. I think I’ll always be glad it was with Josh. No matter how it’s turned out.” This is a relief to me, that even now, with eyes red from crying, Margot still doesn’t regret having loved Josh.

I sleep in her room that night like old times, huddled beside her under her quilt. Margot’s room is coldest, because it’s above the garage. I listen as the heat clicks off and on.

In the dark next to me she says, “I’m going to date a bunch of Scottish guys when I get back to school. When else will I have another opportunity like that, right?”

I giggle and roll over so we’re face-to-face. “No, wait – don’t date a bunch of Scottish guys. Date one from England, one from Ireland, one from Scotland. And Wales! A tour of the British Empire!”

“Well, I *am* going to school to study anthropology,” Margot says, and we giggle some more. “You know the saddest part? Josh and I will never be friends like we were before. Not after all this. That part’s just over now. He was my best friend.”

I give her fake-wounded eyes to lighten the mood, so she won’t start crying again. “Hey, I thought I was your best friend!”

“You’re not my best friend. You’re my sister, and that’s more.”

It *is* more.

“Josh and I started out so easy, so fun, and now we’re like strangers. I’ll never have that person back, who I knew better than anyone and who knew me so well.”

I feel a pinch in my heart. When she says it that way, it’s so sad. “You could become friends again, after some time has passed.” But it wouldn’t be the same, I know that. You’d always be mourning what once was. It would always be a little bit ... less.

“But it won’t be like before.”

“No,” I agree. “I suppose it won’t.” Strangely, I think of Genevieve, of who we used to be to each other. Ours was the kind of friendship that makes sense as a kid but not so much now that we’re older. I suppose you can’t hold on to old things just for the sake of holding on.

It’s the end of an era, it seems. No more Margot and Josh. This time for real. It’s real because Margot is crying, and I can hear it in her voice that it’s over, and this time we both know it. Things have changed.

“Don’t let it happen to you, Lara Jean. Don’t get too serious to where things can’t go back. Be in love with Peter if you want, but be careful with your heart. Things feel like they’ll be for ever, but they aren’t. Love can go away, or people can, without even meaning to. Nothing is guaranteed.”

Gulp. “I promise I’ll be careful.” But I’m not sure I even know what that means. How can I be careful when I already like him so much?

## 4

Margot's off shopping for new boots with her friend Casey, Daddy's at work, and Kitty and I are lazing about watching TV when my phone buzzes next to me. It's a text from Peter. Movie tonight? I text back yes, exclamation point. Then I delete the exclamation point for sounding too eager. Though without the exclamation point, the yes seems completely unenthusiastic. I settle on a smiley face and press send before I can obsess over it further.

"Who are you texting with?" Kitty is sprawled out on the living-room floor, spooning pudding into her mouth. Jamie tries to steal a lick, but she shakes her head and scolds, "You know you can't have chocolate!"

"I was texting with Peter. You know, that might not even be real chocolate. It might be imitation. Check the label."

Of all of us, Kitty is firmest with Jamie. She doesn't immediately pick him up when he's crying to be held; she sprays him in the face with a water bottle when he's naughty. All tricks she's learning from our across-the-street neighbour Ms Rothschild, who it turns out is kind of a dog whisperer. She used to have three dogs, but when she and her husband got divorced, she got to keep Simone the golden retriever, and he got custody of the other two.

"Is Peter your boyfriend again?" Kitty asks me.

"Um. I'm not sure." After what Margot said last night about taking things slow and being careful with my heart and not

going to a point of no return, maybe it's good to exist in a place of unsureness for a while. Also, it's hard to redefine something that never had a clear definition in the first place. We were two people pretending to like each other, pretending to be a couple, so now what are we? And how might it have unfolded if we'd started liking each other without the pretense? Would we ever have been a couple? I guess we'll never know.

“What do you mean, you're not sure?” Kitty presses. “Shouldn't you know if you're somebody's girlfriend or not?”

“We haven't discussed it yet. I mean, not explicitly.”

Kitty switches the channel. “You should look into that.”

I roll on my side and prop myself up on my elbow. “But would that change anything? I mean, we like each other. What's the difference between that and the label? What would change?” Kitty doesn't answer. “Hello?”

“Sorry, can you say that again at the commercial break? I'm trying to watch my show.”

I throw a pillow at her head. “I would be better off discussing these things with Jamie.” I clap my hands. “C'mere, Jamie!”

Jamie lifts his head to look at me and then lies back down again, nestled against Kitty's side, still hoping for pudding, I'm sure.

In the car last night Peter didn't seem troubled by the status of our relationship. He seemed happy and carefree as always. I'm definitely a person who worries too much over every little thing. I could do with a bit more of Peter's roll-with-it philosophy in my life.



“Wanna help me pick out what to wear to the movies with Peter tonight?” I ask Kitty.

“Can I come too?”

“No!” Kitty starts to pout and I amend: “Maybe next time.”

“Fine. Show me two options and I’ll tell you which is the better one.”

I dart upstairs to my room and start going through my closet. This will be our actual first date, I want to wow him a bit. Unfortunately, Peter’s already seen me in my good outfits, so the only thing to do is go for Margot’s closet. She has a cream sweater dress she brought back from Scotland that I can put with tights and my little brown boots. There’s also her periwinkle Fair Isle sweater I’ve been admiring; I can wear it with my yellow skirt and a yellow ribbon in my hair, which I’ll curl, because Peter once told me he liked it curled.

“Kitty!” I scream. “Come up and look at my two options!”

“On the commercial break!” she screams back.

In the meantime I text Margot:

Can I borrow your fair isle sweater or your cream sweater dress??

Oui.

Kitty votes for the Fair Isle sweater, saying I look like I’m wearing an ice-skating outfit, which I like the sound of. “You can wear it if we go ice skating,” she says. “You, me, and Peter.”

I laugh. “All right.”

# 5

Peter and I are standing in line for popcorn at the movies. Even just this mundane thing feels like the best mundane thing that's ever happened to me. I check my pocket to make sure I've still got my ticket stub. This I'll want to save.

Gazing up at Peter, I whisper, "This is my first date." I feel like the nerdy girl in the movie who lands the coolest guy in school, and I don't mind one bit. Not one bit.

"How can this be your first date when we've gone out plenty of times?"

"It's my first *real* date. Those other times were just pretend; this is the real thing."

He frowns. "Oh, wait, is this real? I didn't realize that."

I move to slug him in the shoulder, and he laughs and grabs my hand and links my fingers with his. It feels like my heart is beating right through my hand. It's the first time we've held hands for real, and it feels different from those fake times. Like electric currents, in a good way. The best way.

We're moving up in the line, and I realize I'm nervous, which is strange, because this is Peter. But he's also a different Peter, and I'm a different Lara Jean, because this is a date, an actual date. Just to make conversation, I ask, "So, when you go to the movies are you more of a chocolate kind of candy or a gummy kind of candy?"

"Neither. All I want is popcorn."

“Then we’re doomed! You’re neither, and I’m either or all of the above.” We get to the cashier and I start fishing around for my wallet.

Peter laughs. “You think I’m going to make a girl pay on her first date?” He puffs out his chest and says to the cashier, “Can we have one medium popcorn with butter, and can you layer the butter? And a Sour Patch Kids and a box of Milk Duds. And one small Cherry Coke.”

“How did you know that was what I wanted?”

“I pay a lot better attention than you think, Covey.” Peter slings his arm around my shoulders with a self-satisfied smirk, and he accidentally hits my right boob.

“Ow!”

He laughs an embarrassed laugh. “Whoops. Sorry. Are you OK?”

I give him a hard elbow to the side, and he’s still laughing as we walk into the theatre – which is when we see Genevieve and Emily coming out of the ladies’ room. The last time I saw Genevieve, she was telling everyone on the ski trip bus how Peter and I had sex in the hot tub. I feel a strong surge of panic, of fight or flight.

Peter slows down for a second, and I’m not sure what’s going to happen. Do we have to go over and say hi? Do we keep walking? His arm tightens around me, and I can feel Peter’s hesitance too. He’s torn.

Genevieve solves it for everyone. She walks into the theatre like she didn’t see us. The same theatre we’re going into. I don’t look at Peter, and he doesn’t say anything either. I guess we’re

just going to pretend like she isn't here? He steers me through the same set of doors and picks our seats, far left towards the back. Genevieve and Emily are sitting in the middle. I see her blonde head, the back of her dove grey dress coat. I make myself look away. If Gen turns around, I don't want to be caught staring.

We sit down, and I'm taking off my coat and getting comfy in my seat when Peter's phone buzzes. He pulls it out of his pocket and then puts it away, and I know it was Gen, but I feel like I can't ask. Her presence has punctured the night. Two vampire bite marks right into it.

The lights dim, and Peter puts his arm back around me. Is he going to keep it there the whole movie, I wonder. I feel stiff and I try to even my breathing. He whispers in my ear, "Relax, Covey."

I'm trying, but it's sort of impossible to relax on command under these circumstances. Peter gives my shoulder a squeeze, and he leans in and nuzzles my neck. "You smell nice," he says in a low voice.

I laugh, a touch too loudly, and the man sitting in front of us whips around in his seat and glares at me. Chastened, I say to Peter, "Sorry, I'm really ticklish."

"No worries," he says, keeping his arm around me.

I smile and nod, but now I'm wondering – is he expecting that we're going to do stuff during the movie? Is that why he picked seats in the back when there were still free seats in the middle? Panic is rising inside me. Genevieve is here! And other people too! I might have made out with him in a hot tub, but there wasn't anyone around to see. Also, I kind of just want to

watch the movie. I lean forward to take a sip of soda, but really it's just so I can subtly move away from him.

After the movie we have an unspoken understanding to hustle out so we don't run into Genevieve again. The two of us bolt out of the theatre like the devil is on our heels – which, I suppose, she sort of is. Peter's hungry, but I'm too full from all the junk to eat a real dinner, so I suggest we just go to the diner and I'll share his fries. But Peter says, "I feel like we should go to a real restaurant since this is your first date."

"I never knew you had such a romantic side." I say it like it's a joke, but I mean it.

"Get used to it," he boasts. "I know how to treat a girl."

He takes me to Biscuit Soul Food – his favourite restaurant, he says. I watch him scarf down fried chicken with hot honey and Tabasco drizzled on top, and I wonder how many times Genevieve has sat and watched him do the very same thing. Our town isn't that big. There aren't many places we can go that he hasn't already been with Genevieve. When I get up to go to the bathroom, I suddenly wonder if he's texting her back, but I make myself push this thought out of my mind *tout de suite*. So what if he does text back? They're still friends. He's allowed. I'm not going to let Gen ruin this night for me. I want to be right here, in this moment, just the two of us on our first date.

I sit back down, and Peter's finished his fried chicken and he has a pile of dirty napkins in front of him. He has a habit of wiping his fingers every time he takes a bite. There's honey on his cheek, and a bit of breading is stuck to it, but I don't tell him, because I think it's funny.

“So how was your first date?” Peter asks me, stretching back in his chair. “Tell it to me like it wasn’t me that took you.”

“I liked it when you knew what kinds of movie theatre snacks I like.” He nods encouragingly. “And ... I liked the movie.”

“Yeah, I got that. You kept shushing me and pointing at the screen.”

“That man in front of us was getting mad.” I hesitate. I’m not sure if I should say this next thing I want to say, the thing I’ve been thinking all night. “I don’t know ... is it just me, or ...”

He leans in closer, now he’s listening. “What?”

I take a deep breath. “Is it ... a little weird? I mean, first we were fake, and then we weren’t, and then we had a fight, and now here we are and you’re eating fried chicken. It’s like we did everything in the wrong order, and it’s good, but it’s ... still kind of upside down.” *And also were you trying to feel me up during the movie?*

“I guess it’s a little weird,” he admits.

I sip my sweet tea, relieved that he doesn’t think I’m the weird one for bringing up all the weirdness.

He grins at me. “Maybe what we need is a new contract.”

I can’t tell if he’s joking or if he’s serious, so I play along. “What would go in the contract?”

“Off the top of my head ... I guess I’d have to call you every night before I went to bed. You’d agree to come to all my

lacrosse games. Some practices, too. I'd have to come to your house for dinner. You'd have to come to parties with me."

I make a face at the parties part. "Let's just do the things we want to do. Like before." Suddenly I hear Margot's voice in my head. "Let's ... let's have fun."

He nods, and now he's the one who looks relieved. "Yeah!"

I like that he doesn't take things too seriously. In other people that could be annoying, but not him. It's one of his best qualities, I think. That and his face. I could stare at his face all day long. I sip sweet tea out of my straw and look at him. A contract might actually be good for us. It could help us to head problems off at the pass and keep us accountable. I think Margot would be proud of me for this.

I pull a little notebook out of my purse and a pen. I write *Lara Jean and Peter's New Contract* on the top of the page.

Line one I write, *Peter will be on time.*

Peter cranes his neck to read upside down. "Wait, does that say, ~~Peter will be on time~~?"

"If you say you're going to be somewhere, then be there."

Peter scowls. "I didn't show up *one time* and you hold a grudge—"

"But you're always late."

"That's not the same as not showing up!"

"Being late all the time shows a lack of respect for the person who's waiting for you."

"I respect you! I respect you more than any girl I know!"

I point at him. “-Girl? Just -girl? What boy do you respect more than me?”

Peter throws his head back and groans so loudly it's a roar. I reach across the table, over the food, and grab him by the collar and kiss him before we can fight again. Though I have to say, it's this kind of fighting, the bickering kind, not the hurt-feelings kind, that makes us feel like *us* for the first time all night.

This is what we decide on.

Peter will not be more than five minutes late.

Lara Jean will not make Peter do crafts of any kind.

Peter doesn't have to call Lara Jean before he goes to bed at night, but he can if he feels like it.

Lara Jean will only go to parties if she feels like it.

Peter will give Lara Jean rides whenever she wants.

Lara Jean and Peter will always tell each other the truth.

There's one thing I want to add to the contract, but I'm nervous to broach the subject now that things are going smoothly.

*Peter can still be friends with Genevieve, as long as he is up front with Lara Jean about it.*

Or maybe it's *Peter will not lie to Lara Jean about Genevieve*. But that's redundant, because we already have the rule about always telling each other the truth. A rule like that wouldn't be the



truth anyway. What I really want to say is *Peter will always pick Lara Jean over Genevieve*. But I can't say that. Of course I can't. I don't know a ton about dating or guys, but I do know that jealous insecurity is a real turn-off!

So I bite my tongue; I don't say what I'm thinking. There's only one thing, one really important thing I want to be sure of.

"Peter?"

"Yeah?"

"I don't want us to ever break each other's hearts."

Peter laughs easily; he cups my cheek in his hand. "Are you planning on breaking my heart, Covey?"

"No. And I'm sure you're not planning on breaking mine. Nobody ever plans it."

"Then put that in the contract. Peter and Lara Jean promise not to break each other's hearts."

I beam at him, relieved as anything, and then I write it down. *Lara Jean and Peter will not break each others hearts.*

*OceanofPDF.com*

## 6

The day before we go back to school, Kitty and I are lying in my bed watching pet videos on my computer. Our puppy, Jamie Fox-Pickle, is curled up in a ball at the foot of the bed. Kitty wrapped him up in her nubby old baby blanket so only his face is peeking out. He's dreaming – I can tell by the way he shudders and shakes every so often. I can't tell if it's a good dream or a bad dream.

“Do you think we should start doing videos of Jamie?” Kitty asks me. “He's cute enough, right?”

“He's definitely got the look, but he doesn't have any discernible talent or quirky thing about him.” As soon as I say the word “quirky”, I think of Peter and how he once said I was “cute in a quirky way”. I wonder if that's still how he sees me. I've heard people say that the more you like someone, the more you think they are beautiful even if you didn't think so in the beginning.

“Jamie does that thing where he prances around like a baby deer,” Kitty reminds me.

“Hm. I wouldn't exactly call that a ~~thing~~'. It's not the same as leaping into cardboard boxes or playing the piano or having a really grumpy face.”

“Ms Rothschild will help me train him. She thinks he has the right personality for tricks.” Kitty clicks on the next video, a dog that howls when you play Michael Jackson's “Thriller”. Kitty and I crack up and we watch it again.

After a video of a woman whose cat wraps itself around her face like a scarf, I say, “Wait a minute – did you do your homework?”

“All I had to do was read a book.”

“So did you read it?”

“Mostly,” Kitty hedges, snuggling in closer to me.

“You’ve had all of Christmas break to read it, Kitty!” I really wish Kitty were more of a reader like Margot and me. She much prefers TV. I click stop on the video and snap my computer shut with a flourish. “No more pet videos for you. You go finish your book.” I start to shove her out of the bed, and Kitty grabs on to my leg.

“Sweet my sister, cast me not away!” Proudly she says, “That’s Shakespeare. *Romeo and Juliet*, in case you haven’t read it.”

“Don’t act high and mighty like you were reading Shakespeare. I saw you watching the movie on TV the other day.”

“Who cares if I read it or I saw the movie? The message is still the same.” Kitty crawls back up by me.

I pat her hair. “So what’s the message?”

“Don’t kill yourself over a boy.”

“Or a girl.”

“Or a girl,” she agrees. She opens up my computer. “One more cat video and then I’ll go read.”

My phone buzzes, a text from Chris.

Check Anonybitch's instagram NOW.

Anonybitch is an anonymous Instagram account that puts up scandalous pictures and videos of people hooking up and getting drunk at parties around town. No one knows who runs the account; they just send in the content. There was a picture of a girl from another high school that went viral last year – she was flashing a cop car. I heard she got expelled from school for it.

My phone buzzes again.

NOW!

“Hold on, Kitty, let me check something first,” I say, pausing the video. As I type in the address, I say, “If you want to stay in here, close your eyes until I tell you to open them.”

Kitty obeys.

At the top of Anonybitch's feed, there is a video of a boy and a girl making out in a hot tub. Anonybitch is particularly famous for her hot tub videos. She tags them #rubadub. This one's a little grainy, like it was zoomed in from far away. I click play. The girl is sitting in the boy's lap, her body draped over his, legs hooked around his waist, arms around his neck. She's wearing a red nightgown, and it billows in the water like a full sail. The back of her head obscures the boy. Her hair is long, and the ends dip into the hot tub like calligraphy brushes in ink. The boy runs his hands down her spine like she is a cello and he is playing her.

I'm so entranced I don't notice at first that Kitty is watching with me. Both of our heads are tilted, trying to suss out what it is we're looking at. “You shouldn't be looking at this,” I say.

“Are they doing it?” she asks.

“It’s hard to say because of her nightgown.” But maybe?

Then the girl touches the boy’s cheek, and there is something about the movement, the way she touches him like she is reading braille. Something familiar. The back of my neck goes icy cold, and I am hit with a *gust* of awareness, of humiliating recognition.

That girl is me. Me and Peter, in the hot tub on the ski trip.

Oh my God.

I scream.

Margot comes racing in, wearing one of those Korean beauty masks on her face with slits for eyes, nose, and mouth.

“What? *What?*”

I try to cover the computer screen with my hand, but she pushes it out of the way, and then she lets out a scream too. Her mask falls off! “Oh my God! Is that you?”

*Oh my God oh my God oh my God.*

“Don’t let Kitty see!” I shout.

Kitty’s wide-eyed. “Lara Jean, I thought you were a goody-goody.”

“I am!” I scream.

Margot gulps. “That ... that looks like ...”

“I know. Don’t say it.”

“Don’t worry, Lara Jean,” Kitty soothes. “I’ve seen worse on regular TV, not even HBO.”

“Kitty, go to your room!” Margot yells. Kitty whimpers and clings closer to me.

I can't believe what I am seeing. The caption reads *Goody two shoes Lara Jean having full-on sex with Kavinsky in the hot tub. Do condoms work underwater? Guess we'll find out soon enough.* ;) The comments are a lot of wide-eyed emojis and *lols*. Someone named Veronica Chen wrote, *What a slut! Is she Asian??* I don't even know who Veronica Chen is!

"Who could have done this to me?" I wail, pressing my hands to my cheeks. "I can't feel my face. Is my face still my face?"

"Who the hell is Anonybitch?" Margot demands.

"No one knows," I say, and the roaring in my ears is so loud I can hardly hear my own voice. "People just re-gram her. Or him. Am I talking really loud right now?" I'm in shock. Now I can't feel my hands or feet. I'm gonna faint. Is this happening? Is this my life?

"We have to get this taken down right now. Is there a help line for inappropriate content? We have to report this!" Margot's grabbing the computer from me. She clicks the REPORT INAPPROPRIATE tab. Scanning the comments on the page, she seethes, "People are absolute jerks! We might have to call a lawyer. This won't get taken down right away."

"No!" I scream. "I don't want Daddy to see!"

"Lara Jean, this is serious. You don't want colleges to google you and have this video come up! Or, like, future employers —"

"Gogo! You're making me feel so much worse right now!" I grab my phone. Peter. He'll know what to do. It's five o'clock,

which means he's still at lacrosse practice. I can't even call him right now. I text instead:

Call me ASAP.

Then I hear Daddy's voice calling up the staircase. "These potatoes won't mash themselves! Who's helping me?"

Oh my God. Now I have to sit at dinner and look my dad in the face, knowing that this video exists. This can't be my life.

Margot and Kitty look at each other, then back at me. "Nobody says a word to Daddy!" I hiss at them. "That means you, Kitty!"

She gives me a hurt look. "I know when to keep my mouth shut."

"Sorry, sorry," I mumble. My heart is pounding so hard it's giving me a headache. I can't even think straight.

At dinner, my stomach is churning and I can barely get down a bite of potatoes. Luckily, I have Margot and Kitty to run interference and keep a steady chatter going so I don't have to talk. I just push the food around on my plate and sneak Jamie Fox-Pickle bites under the table. As soon as everyone else is done eating, I sprint upstairs and look at my phone. Still nothing from Peter. Just more texts from Chris and one from Haven:

OMG is this you??!

I don't know who the girl in the video is. I don't recognize me in it. It's not how I see myself at all. It's like some other person who has nothing to do with me. I'm not someone who climbs into hot tubs with boys and sits in their laps and kisses them

passionately with a wet nightgown clinging to them. But I was that night. The video just doesn't tell the whole truth.

I keep telling myself it's not like we're really having sex in the video. It's not like I'm naked. It just *feels* like I'm naked in the video. And all I can think is, everybody at school has seen that video, a video of me in one of the most intimate and truly romantic moments of my life. And not only that, but someone recorded it. Someone was there. That memory was supposed to only be mine and Peter's, but now it turns out there was some random Peeping Tom in the woods there with us. It's not just ours any more. It feels tawdry now. It certainly looks that way. In the moment I felt free, and adventurous, maybe even sexy. I don't know that I've ever felt sexy in my whole life. And now I just want to not exist.

I'm lying in bed staring up at the ceiling, phone at my side. Margot and Kitty have forbidden me from looking at the video. They tried to take my phone away, but I told them I need it for when Peter calls. Then I snuck a look at the video, and so far there are over a hundred comments, none good.

Kitty's playing with Jamie Fox-Pickle on the floor and Margot's emailing Instagram customer service when Chris knocks on my window. Margot unlocks it for her, and Chris climbs inside, shivering and pink-cheeked. "Is she OK?"

"I think she's in shock," Kitty says.

"I'm not in shock," I say. But maybe I am. Maybe this is shock. It's a queer, surreal sort of feeling, like I'm numb, but also all my senses feel heightened.



Margot says to Chris, “Why can’t you come in through the front door like a normal person?”

“Nobody answered.” Chris yanks off her boots and sits down on the floor next to Kitty. Petting Jamie, she says, “OK, first of all, you can barely tell it’s you. And second of all, it’s really hot, so there’s nothing to be ashamed of. I mean, you look great.”

Margot makes a disgusted sound. “That’s so beside the point I don’t even know where to begin.”

“I’m just being honest! Objectively, it sucks, but also objectively, Lara Jean looks awesome in it.”

Crawling under my quilt, I say, “I thought you could barely even tell it was me! I knew I shouldn’t have gone on that ski trip. I hate hot tubs. Why would I willingly get into a hot tub?”

“Hey, be glad you were in your pyjamas,” Chris says. “You could have been nude!”

My head pops out from under the quilt and I glare at her. “I would never be nude!”

Chris snorts. “Never nude. Did you know that’s a real thing? Some people call themselves never-nudes and they wear clothes at all times, even in the shower. Like, jean shorts.”

I turn on my side, away from Chris.

The weight of my bed shifts as Margot climbs in. “It’s going to be fine,” she says, peeling back the blanket. “We’ll get them to take the video down.”

“It won’t matter,” I say. “Everyone’s already seen it. They all think I’m a slut.”

Chris's eyes go narrow. "So are you saying that if a girl has sex in a hot tub, that makes her a slut?"

"No! That's not what I'm saying; that's what other people are saying."

"Then what *are* you saying?" she demands.

I look at Kitty, who's braiding Chris's hair in microbraids. She's being extra quiet so we forget she's here and don't kick her out. "I think that as long as you're ready and it's what you want to do and you're protecting yourself, then it's OK and you should do what you want to do."

Margot says, "Society is far too caught up in shaming a woman for enjoying sex and applauding a man. I mean, all of the comments are about how Lara Jean is a slut, but nobody's saying anything about Peter, and he's right there with her. It's a ridiculous double standard."

I hadn't thought of that.

Chris looks down at her phone. "Like, three different people just texted the video to me as we were sitting here."

I let out a sob and Margot says, "Chris, that's not helping. At all." To me she says, "If people say anything, just be really blasé, like it's beneath you."

"Or just, like, lean into it," Chris says.

From behind her Kitty says, "Nobody will say anything to Lara Jean because she's Peter's girl. That means she's under his protection, like on *The Sopranos*."

Aghast, Margot says, "Oh my God, you've seen *The Sopranos*? How have you seen *The Sopranos*? It's not even on TV

any more.“

“I watched it on demand. I’m on season three.“

“Kitty! Stop watching it!“ She shuts her eyes and shakes her head. “Never mind. That’s not what’s important right now. We’ll talk about it later. Kitty, Lara Jean doesn’t need a boy to protect her.“

“No, Kitty has a good point,“ Chris says. “It’s not about the fact that Peter’s a guy. Well, not completely. It’s about the fact that he’s popular and she isn’t. That’s where the protection comes into play. No offence, LJ.“

“None taken,“ I say. It’s slightly insulting, but it’s also true, and now isn’t the time for me to get my feelings hurt about something so miniscule in comparison to a would-be sex tape.

“What did Kavinsky say about it?“ Chris asks me.

“Nothing yet. He’s still at lacrosse practice.“

My phone immediately starts to buzz, and the three of us look at each other, wide-eyed. Margot picks it up and looks at it. “It’s Peter!“ She hot-potatoes the phone to me. “Let’s give them some privacy,“ she says, nudging Chris. Chris shrugs her off

I ignore both of them and answer the phone. “Hello.“ My voice comes out thin as a reed.

Peter starts talking fast. “OK, I’ve seen the video, and the first thing I’m going to say to you is don’t freak out.“ He’s breathing hard; it sounds like he’s running.

“Don’t freak out? How can I not? This is terrible. Do you know what they’re all saying about me in the comments? That

I'm a slut. They think we're having sex in that video, Peter."

"Never read the comments, Covey! That's the first rule of \_\_\_"

"If you say ~~Fight Club~~ to me right now, I will hang up on you."

"Sorry. OK, I know it sucks but—"

"It doesn't ~~suck~~'. It's a literal nightmare. My most private moment, for everybody to see. I'm completely humiliated. The things people are saying—" My voice breaks. Kitty and Margot and Chris are all looking at me with sad eyes, which makes me feel even sadder.

"Don't cry, Lara Jean. Please don't cry. I promise you I'm going to fix this. I'm going to get whoever runs Anonybitch to take it down."

"How? We don't even know who they are! And besides, I bet our whole school's seen it by now. Teachers, too. I know for a fact that teachers look at Anonybitch. I was in the faculty lounge once and I overheard Mr Filipe and Ms Ryan saying how bad it makes our school look. And what about college admissions boards and our future employers?"

Peter guffaws. "Future employers? Covey, I've seen much worse. Hell, I've seen worse pictures of *me* on there. Remember that picture of me with my head in a toilet bowl, and I'm naked?"

I shudder. "I never saw that picture. Besides, that's you; that's not me. I don't do that kind of stuff"

"Just trust me, OK? I promise I'll take care of it."

I nod, even though I know he can't see me. Peter is powerful. If anyone could fix such a thing, it would be him.

"Listen, I've gotta go. Coach is gonna kick my ass if he sees me on the phone. I'll call you tonight, OK? Don't go to sleep."

I don't want to hang up. I wish we could talk longer. "OK," I whisper.

When I hang up, Margot, Chris and Kitty are all three staring at me.

"Well?" Chris says.

"He says he'll take care of it."

Smugly Kitty says, "I told you so."

"What does that even mean, ~~he~~'ll take care of it?" Margot asks. "He hasn't exactly proven himself to be responsible."

"It's not his fault," Kitty and I say at the same time.

"Oh, I know exactly who's responsible for this," Chris proclaims. "My she-devil cousin."

This knocks the wind out of me. "What? Why?"

She gives me an incredulous look. "Because you took her man!"

"Genevieve's the one who cheated on Peter. That's why they broke up. It wasn't because of me!"

"Like that matters!" Chris shakes her head. "Come on, Lara Jean. Remember what she did to Jamila Singh? Telling everyone that her family had an Indonesian slave just because she had the balls to date Peter after they broke up? I'm just saying, I wouldn't put a bitch move like this past her."

On the ski trip, Genevieve said she knew about the kiss, which has to mean that Peter told her about it at some point in their relationship – though I doubt he told her that he was the one who kissed me and not the other way around! Even so, I find it hard to believe that she could do something so cruel to me. Jamila Singh and Genevieve never liked each other. But Gen and I were best friends once. Sure, we haven't talked much the last few years, but Gen was always loyal to her friends.

It had to have been one of the guys hanging out in the rec room, or maybe ... I don't know. Maybe anyone!

"I've never trusted her," Margot says. Then she says to Chris, "No offence. I know she's your cousin."

Chris snorts. "Why would I be offended? I can't stand her."

"I'm pretty sure she's the one who scraped up the side of Grandma's car with her bike," Margot says. "Remember, Lara Jean?"

It was actually Chris, but I don't say so. Chris starts biting her nails and giving me panicky eyes and I say, "I don't think Genevieve was the one who posted the video. It could've been anybody who happened to see us that night."

Margot puts her arm around me. "Don't worry, Lara Jean. We'll get them to take the video down. You're underage."

"Pull it up again," I say. Kitty cues it up and pushes play. I feel the same sinking feeling in my stomach every time I watch it. I close my eyes so I don't have to. Thank God the only things you can hear are the sounds of the woods and the hot tub water bubbling. "Is it ... is it as bad as I'm remembering? I

mean, does it really look like we're having sex? Be honest." I open my eyes.

Margot's peering at it, head tilted. "No, it really doesn't. It just looks like ..."

"Like a hot make-out," Chris supplies.

"Right," Margot agrees. "Just a hot make-out."

"You guys swear?"

In unison they say, "We swear."

"Kitty?" I ask.

She bites her lip. "It looks like sex to me, but I'm the only one here besides you who's never had sex, so what do I know?" Margot lets out a gasp. "Sorry, I read your diary." Margot swats at her, and Kitty crawls away fast like a crab.

I take a deep breath. "OK. I can live with that. I mean, who cares about a hot make-out, right? That's just part of life, right? And you can barely even see my face? You'd have to really know me to know it was me. My full name isn't on here anywhere, just Lara Jean. There must be a ton of Lara Jeans, right? Right?"

Margot gives me an impressed nod. "I've never seen anybody move through the five stages of grief that fast. You really do have an incredible bounce-back."

"Thank you," I say, feeling a little proud.

But then in the dark, when my sisters and Chris have left and Peter and I have said our good nights and he has assured me for the millionth time that everything will be fine, I look at Instagram again, at all the comments. And I am mortified.

I asked Peter who he thought could have done it; he said he didn't know. Probably just some horny pathetic guy, he said. I don't ask the thing I'm still thinking about, the thing that's still stuck in my craw. Was it Genevieve? Could she really hate me so much that she'd want to hurt me that badly?

I remember the day we exchanged friendship bracelets. "This proves that we're best friends," she said to me. "We're closer with each other than with anyone else."

"What about Allie?" I asked. We'd always been a trio, though Genevieve had taken to spending more time at my house, mainly because Allie's mom was strict about boys coming over and being on the Internet.

"Allie's OK but I like you better," she'd said, and I had felt guilty but honoured. Genevieve liked me best. We were close, closer than with anyone else. The bracelets were proof. How cheaply I was bought then, with just a bracelet made out of string.



# 7

The next morning I dress for school with special care. Chris said I should lean into it, which would mean a look-at-me kind of outfit. Margot said I should be above it all, which means something mature like a pencil skirt or maybe my green corduroy blazer. But my instinct is to blend, blend, blend. Big sweater that's more like a blanket. Leggings, Margot's brown boots. If I could wear a baseball cap to school, I would, but no hats allowed.

I make myself a bowl of Cheerios with sliced banana on top, but I can only force down a few bites. I'm too nervous. Margot notices and slips a cashew bar in my bag for later. I'm lucky that she's still here to take such good care of me. She'll be heading back to Scotland tomorrow.

Daddy feels my forehead. "Are you sick? You barely had any dinner last night either."

I shake my head. "Probably just cramps. My period's coming soon." I have only to say the magic word, "period", and I know he won't push it further.

"Ah," he says with a sage nod. "After you get some food in your stomach, take two ibuprofen so you have it in your system."

"Got it," I say. I feel bad for the lie, but it's a tiny one, and it's for his own good. He can never know about that video, not ever.

Peter pulls up in front of our house right on time for once. He's really sticking to our contract. Margot walks me to the door and says, "Just hold your head up high, all right? You haven't done anything wrong."

As soon as I get in the car, Peter leans over and kisses me on the mouth, which still feels surprising somehow. I'm taken off guard, so I accidentally cough into his mouth a little. "Sorry," I say.

"No worries," he says, smooth as ever. He places his arm on the back of my seat as he puts the car in reverse; then he tosses me his phone. "Check Anonybitch."

I open up his Instagram and go to Anonybitch's page. I see the entry that was below ours, a picture of a passed-out guy with penises permanent-markered all over his face. It's the top of the feed now. I gasp. The hot tub video is gone! "Peter, how did you do this?"

Peter grins a peacocky kind of grin. "I messaged Anonybitch last night and told them to take that shit down or we're suing. I told them how my uncle is a lawyer and you and I are both underage." He gives my knee a squeeze.

"Is your uncle really a lawyer?"

"No. He owns a pizza parlour in New Jersey." We both laugh, and it feels like such a relief. "Listen, don't worry about anything today. If anybody says anything, I'll kick their ass."

"I just wish I knew who did it. I could've sworn we were alone that night."

Peter shakes his head. "It's not like we did anything so wrong! I mean, who cares if we made out in a damn hot tub?"

Who cares if we had sex in it?" I frown and he quickly says, "I know, I know. You don't want people thinking we did something when we didn't. We definitely didn't, and that's what I told that bitch Anonybitch."

"It's different for guys and girls, Peter."

"I know. Don't be mad. I'm going to find out who did this." He looks straight ahead, so serious and unlike himself; his profile is almost noble for all its good intent.

Oh, Peter, why do you have to be so handsome! If you weren't so handsome I never would have got in that hot tub with you. It's all your fault. Except it isn't. I'm the one who took off my shoes and socks and got in. I wanted it too. I just appreciate that he's taking it as seriously as he is, writing emails on our behalf. I know this is the kind of thing that Genevieve wouldn't care about; she never had a problem with PDAs or being the centre of attention. But I care, I care a lot.

He turns his head and looks at me, studying my eyes, my face. "You don't regret it, do you, Lara Jean?"

I shake my head. "No, I don't." He smiles at me so sweetly I can't help but smile back. "Thanks for getting them to take the video down for me."

"Us," Peter corrects. "I did it for us." He links our fingers together. "It's you and me, kid."

I tighten my fingers around his. If we just hold on tight enough, it will all be OK.

When we walk down the hall together, girls whisper. Boys snigger. One guy from the lacrosse team runs up and tries to

high-five Peter, who swats him away with a growl.

Lucas comes up to me when I'm alone at my locker trading out my books. "I'm not going to mince words," he says. "I'm just going to ask. Is the girl in the video really you?"

I take deep, calming breath. "It's me."

Lucas lets out a low whistle. "Damn."

"Yeah."

"So ... did you guys..."

"No, we definitely did not. We *are* not."

"Why not?"

I'm embarrassed by the question, though I know there's no reason for me to be. It's just that I've never been in a position to talk about my sex life before, because who would ever have thought to ask me anything? "We aren't because we aren't. There's no big reason behind it, other than I'm not ready yet and I don't know if he is either. We haven't even talked about it."

"Well, it's not like he's a virgin. Not by any stretch of the imagination." Lucas makes his cerulean blue angel eyes go wide for emphasis. "I know you're innocent, Lara Jean, but Kavinsky definitely isn't. I'm saying this to you as a guy."

"I don't see what that has to do with me," I say, even though I've wondered and worried about this myself. Peter and I had a conversation about this once, about whether a guy and a girl who'd dated for a long time were automatically having sex, but I don't remember if he ever said what his take on it was. I should have listened harder. "Look, just because he and

Genevieve did it like ... like wild rabbits or whatever—" Lucas sniggers at this, and I pinch him. "Just because they did it doesn't mean we automatically are, or that he automatically even wants to." Does it?

"He definitely wants to."

Gulp. "Well, too bad, so sad, if that's the case. But honestly, I don't think it is." In this very moment I decide that Peter and I will be the relationship equivalent of a brisket. Slow and low. We will heat up for each other over time. Confidently I say, "What Peter and I have is completely different than what he and Genevieve were. Or had. Whatever. The point is, you shouldn't compare relationships, OK?" Never mind the fact that I've been doing that constantly in my head.

In French class, I hear Emily Nussbaum whisper to Genevieve, "If it turns out she's preggo, do you think Kavinsky will pay for the abortion?"

Genevieve whispers back, "No way. He's too cheap. Maybe half." And everyone laughs.

My face burns in mortification. I want to scream at them, *We didn't have sex! We are brisket!* But that would only give them more satisfaction, to know they're getting a rise out of me. That's what Margot would say anyway. So I hold my chin up even higher, as high as I can, so high my neck hurts.

Maybe Gen did do it. Maybe she really does hate me that much.

Ms Davenport grabs me on my way to my next class. She puts her arm around me and says, "Lara Jean, how are you holding up?"

I know she doesn't care about me, not really. She just wants gossip. She's the biggest gossip of all the teachers, maybe even the students. Well, I'm not going to be faculty-lounge fodder. "I'm great," I say sunnily. Chin up, chin up.

"I saw the video," she whispers, eyes darting around to see if anyone's listening. "Of you and Peter in the hot tub."

My jaw is clenched so tight my teeth hurt.

"You must be really upset about the comments, and I don't blame you." Ms Davenport really needs to get a life if all she's doing over her winter break is looking at high school kids' Instagrams! "Kids can be very cruel. Trust me, I know this from personal experience. I'm not that much older than you guys."

"I'm really fine, but thanks for checking in." Nothing to see here, folks. Keep it moving.

Ms Davenport's lower lip pushes out. "Well, if you need to talk to someone, you know I'm here for you. Let me be a resource. Come hang out with me anytime; I'll write you a note."

"Thank you, Ms Davenport." I slither out of from under her arm.

Mrs Duvall, the guidance/college counsellor stops me on my way to English. "Lara Jean," she begins, then falters. "You're such a bright, talented girl. You're not the type of girl to get caught up in these sorts of things. I'd hate to see you go down a wrong path."

I can feel tears coming up the back of my throat, pushing their way to the surface. I respect Mrs Duvall. I want her to

think well of me. All I can do is nod.

She tips my chin up tenderly. Her perfume smells like dried rose petals. She's an older woman; she's worked at the school for ever. Mrs Duvall really cares about the students. She is the one kids come back and say hi to when they're home from college for winter break. "Now is the time to buckle down and get serious about your future, not high school drama. Don't give colleges a reason to turn you down, OK?"

Again I nod.

"Good girl," she says. "I know you're better than that."

The words echo in my ears: *Better than that*. Better than what? Than who?

During lunch, I escape to the girls' bathroom so I don't have to speak to anybody. And of course there Genevieve is, standing in front of the mirror, dabbing on lip balm. Her eyes meet mine in the mirror. "Hi there." It's the way she says it – *hi there*. So smug, so sure of herself.

"Was it you?" My voice echoes against the walls.

Genevieve's hand goes still. Then she recovers, and screws the top back on her lip balm. "Was *what* me?"

"Did you send that video to Anonybitch?"

"No," she scoffs. Her mouth turns up to the right, the smallest of quivers. That's when I know she's lying. I've seen her lie to her mom enough times to know her tell. Even though I suspected it, maybe even knew it deep down, this confirmation takes my breath away.

“I know we’re not friends any more, but we used to be. You know my sisters, my dad. You know me. You knew how much this would hurt me.” I clench my fists to keep from crying. “How could you do something like this?”

“Lara Jean, I’m sorry this happened to you, but it honestly wasn’t me.” She gives me a pseudosympathetic shrug, and there it is again: The corner of her mouth turns up.

“It was you. I know it was. Once Peter finds out...”

She raises one eyebrow. “He’ll what? Kick my ass?”

I’m so angry my hands shake. “No, because you’re a girl. But he won’t forgive you either. I’m glad you did it if it proves to him what kind of person you really are.”

“He knows exactly what kind of person I am. And you know what? He still loves me more than he’ll ever like you. You’ll see.” With that she turns on her heel and walks away.

This is when it dawns on me. She’s jealous. Of me. She can’t stand that Peter’s with me and not her. Well, she just played herself, because once Peter finds out she’s the one who did this to us, he’ll never look at her the same way again.

When school lets out, I race to the parking lot, where Peter is in his car waiting for me with the heat on. As soon as I open the passenger side door, I gasp out, “It was Genevieve!” I scramble inside. “She’s the one who sent the video to Anonybitch. She just admitted it to me!”

Soberly he asks me, “She said she took the video? She said those exact words?”

“Well ... no.” What were her exact words? I walked away feeling like she’d confessed, but now that I’m going over it in



my head, she never out-and-out admitted it. “She didn’t admit it per se, but she practically did. Also, she did that thing with her mouth!” I turn up the corner of my mouth. “See? That’s her tell!”

He raises an eyebrow. “Come on, Covey.”

“Peter!”

“OK, OK. I’ll talk to her.” He starts the car.

I’m pretty sure I know the answer to this question, but I have to ask. “Have any teachers said anything to you about the video? Maybe Coach White?”

“No. Why? Has anyone said anything to you?”

This is what Margot was talking about, this double standard. Boys will be boys, but girls are supposed to be careful: of our bodies, of our futures, of all the ways people judge us. Abruptly I ask him, “When are you going to talk to Genevieve?”

“I’ll go over there tonight.”

“You’re going over to her house?” I repeat.

“Well, yeah. I have to see her face to know whether she’s lying or not. I’ll check out this ~~tell~~ you’re so excited about.”

Peter’s starving, so we stop and get hamburgers and milkshakes on the way. When I finally get home, Margot and Kitty are waiting for me. “Tell us everything,” Margot says, handing me a cup of cocoa. I check to see if she’s put mini marshmallows inside, and she has.

“Did Peter fix it?” Kitty wants to know.

“Yes! He got Anonybitch to take the video down. He told them how he has an uncle who’s a top lawyer, when in

actuality he owns a pizza parlour in New Jersey.“

Margot smiles at this. Then her face gets serious. “Were people horrible at school?“

Blithely I say, “Nah, it wasn’t bad at all.“ I feel a swell of pride for putting on a brave face in front of my sisters. “But I’m pretty sure I know who did it.“

In unison they say, “*Who?*“

“Genevieve, just like Chris said. I confronted her in the bathroom and she denied it, but then she did that thing she does with her mouth when she’s lying.“ I demonstrate for them. “Gogo, do you remember that thing?“

“I think so!“ she says, but I can tell she doesn’t. “What did Peter say when you told him it was Genevieve? He believed you, right?“

“Not exactly,“ I hedge, blowing on my hot cocoa. “I mean, he says he’s going to talk to her and get down to the bottom of it.“

Margot frowns. “He should have your back no matter what.“

“He does, Gogo!“ I grab her hand and link my fingers through hers. “This is what he did. He said, ‘It’s you and me, kid.’ It was really romantic!“

She giggles. “You’re hopeless. Don’t ever change.“

“I wish you weren’t leaving tomorrow,“ I sigh. I’m homesick for her already. Margot being here, making judgements and doling out sage advice, makes me feel secure. It gives me strength.

“Lara Jean, you’ve got this,” she says, and I listen hard, look hard for any doubt or falseness in her, any hint that she’s only saying it to bolster me. But there is none. Only confidence.

*OceanofPDF.com*

## 8

It's Margot's last dinner before she leaves for Scotland tomorrow. Daddy makes Korean short ribs and potatoes au gratin from scratch. He even bakes a lemon cake. He says, "It's been so grey and cold; I think we're all due a little sunshine by way of lemon cake." Then he puts an arm around my waist and pats my side, and though he isn't asking, I know he knows there's something up with me that's a lot bigger than my period.

We've barely had a chance to put our forks to our lips before Daddy's asking, "Does this galbi jjim taste like Grandma's?"

"Basically," I say. Daddy's mouth turns down and I quickly add, "I mean, it might even be better."

"I tenderized the meat the way she said," Daddy says. "But it's not falling right off the bone the way hers does, you know? You shouldn't even need a knife to eat galbi jjim if it's prepared correctly." Margot was sawing away at a piece of meat with her steak knife, and she stops short. "The first time I ever had it was with your mom. She took me to a Korean restaurant on our first date and ordered everything for us in Korean and told me about each dish. I was so in awe of her that night. My one regret is that you girls didn't keep up with Korean school." The corners of his mouth turn down for just a moment, and then he's smiling again. "Eat up, girls."

"Daddy, UVA has a Korean language programme," I say. "If I get in, I'm definitely going to take Korean."

“Your mom would’ve loved that,” he says, and he gets that sad look in his eyes again.

Swiftly Margot says, “The galbi jjim is delicious, Daddy. They don’t have good Korean food in Scotland.”

“Pack some seaweed to take back with you,” Daddy suggests. “And some of that ginseng tea Grandma brought us back from Korea. You should take the rice cooker too.”

Kitty frowns. “Then how will *we* have rice?”

“We can buy a new one.” Dreamily he says, “What I’d really love to do is take a family vacation there. How great would that be? Your mom always wanted to take you girls on a trip to Korea. You still have a lot of family there.”

“Could Grandma come with us?” Kitty asks. She keeps sneaking bites of meat to Jamie, who sits on his hind legs, looking at us with hopeful eyes.

Daddy nearly chokes on a bite of potatoes. “That’s a great idea,” he manages. “She’d be a good tour guide.”

Margot and I exchange a little smile. Grandma would drive Daddy crazy after a week. What I’m excited about is the shopping. “Oh my gosh, just think of all the stationery,” I say. “And clothes. And hair pins. BB cream. I should make a list.”

“Daddy, you could take a Korean cooking class,” Margot suggests.

“Yeah! Let’s think about it for the summer,” Daddy says. He’s already getting excited, I can tell. “Depending on everyone’s schedules, of course. Margot, you’re going to be here all summer, right?” That’s what she was saying last week.

She looks down at her plate. “I’m not sure. Nothing’s been decided yet.” Daddy looks puzzled, and Kitty and I exchange a look. For sure this has to do with Josh, and I don’t blame her. “There’s a chance I could get an internship at the Royal Anthropological Institute in London.”

“But I thought you said you wanted to go back to work at Montpelier,” Daddy says, his forehead creased in confusion.

“I’m still figuring things out. Like I said, I haven’t decided anything yet.”

Kitty interjects. “If you do the royal internship, would you get to meet any royal people?”

I roll my eyes, and Margot throws her a grateful look and says, “I doubt it, Kitten, but you never know.”

“What about you, Lara Jean?” Kitty asks, innocent and round-eyed. “Aren’t you supposed to be doing stuff this summer to look good for colleges?”

I shoot her a dirty look. “I’ve got plenty of time to figure things out.” Under the table I pinch her hard, and she yelps.

“You were supposed to be looking for an internship for this spring,” Margot reminds me. “I’m telling you, Lara Jean, if you don’t act fast, all the good internships will be gone. Also have you emailed Noni yet about SAT tutoring? See if she’s doing summer school or if she’s going home for the summer.”

“All right, all right. I will.”

“I might be able to get you a job at the hospital gift shop,” Daddy offers. “We could ride to work together, have lunch together. It would be fun hanging out all day with your old man!”

“Daddy, don’t you have any friends at work?” Kitty asks.  
“Do you sit by yourself at lunch?”

“Well, no, not every day. Sometimes I suppose I do eat alone at my desk, but that’s because I don’t have much time to eat. If Lara Jean worked at the gift shop, I’d make time, though.” He taps his chopsticks on his plate absentmindedly. “There might also be a job for her at the McDonald’s, but I’d have to see.”

Kitty pipes up, “Hey, if you got a job at McDonald’s, I bet they’d let you eat fries as much as you want.”

I frown. I can see a preview into my summer, and I’m not liking what I’m seeing. “I don’t want to work at McDonald’s. And no offence, Daddy, but I don’t want to work at the gift shop, either.” I think fast. “I’ve been thinking about doing something more official at Belleview. Maybe I could be the activities director’s intern. Or assistant. Margot, which sounds more impressive?”

“Assistant activities director,” Margot says.

“That does sound more professional,” I agree. “I’ve got a lot of ideas. Maybe I’ll stop by this week and pitch them to Janette.”

“Like what?” Daddy asks me.

“A scrapbooking class,” I improvise. “They have so many pictures and tokens and things that they’ve collected, I think it’d be good to bind it all up in a book so nothing gets lost.” Suddenly I’m on a roll. “And then maybe we could have a little exhibit, with all of the scrapbooks on display, and people can flip through them and see their life stories. I could make cheese puffs, there could be white wine...”

“That’s an *amazing* idea,” Margot says with an approving nod.

“Really great,” Daddy enthuses. “Obviously no white wine for you, but the cheese puffs, definitely!”

“Oh, Daddy,” we all chorus, because he loves it when we do that, when he gets to be the cheesy dad (pun intended!) and we all groan like we’re exasperated and say “Oh, Daddy.”

When we’re doing the dishes, Margot tells me I should follow up with the Belleview idea for sure. “They need someone like you to take charge of things,” she says, sudsing up the Dutch oven. “Fresh energy, new ideas. People can get burned out working at a retirement home. Janette will be relieved to have an extra set of hands.”

I mostly said all that stuff about Belleview to get everybody off my back, but now I’m thinking I really should talk to Janette.

When I go back upstairs, I have a missed call from Peter. I call him back, and I can hear the TV on in the background. “Did you talk to her?” I hope hope hope he believes me now.

“I talked to her.”

My heart thuds. “And? Did she admit it?”

“No.”

“No.” I let out a breath. OK. That was to be expected, I guess. Gen isn’t the type to lie down in the street and die. She’s a fighter. “Well, she can say whatever she wants, but I know it was her.”

“You can’t get all that from a look, Covey.”



“It’s not just a look. I know her. She used to be my best friend. I know how she thinks.”

“I know her better than you, and I’m telling you, I don’t think it was her. Trust me.”

He does know her better; of course he does. But girl to girl, ex–best friend to ex–best friend, I know it was her. I don’t care how many years it’s been. There are things a girl knows in her gut, her bones. “I trust *you*. I don’t trust *her*. This is all her plan, Peter.”

There’s a long silence, and I hear my last words ringing in my ears, and they sound crazy, even to me.

His voice is heavy with patience as he says, “She’s stressed out with family stuff right now; she doesn’t even have time to plot against you, Covey.”

Family stuff? Could that be? I feel a pang of guilt as I remember how Chris mentioned that their grandma broke her hip and the families were discussing whether or not to put her into a home. Genevieve was always close to her grandma; she said she was the favourite out of all the grandchildren because she looked just like her – i.e., gorgeous.

Or maybe it’s her parents. Genevieve used to worry about them getting divorced.

Or maybe it’s all a lie. It’s on the very tip of my tongue to say, and then he says, wearily, “My mom’s calling me downstairs. Can we talk about this more tomorrow?”

“Sure,” I say.

I mean, I guess it could be anything. Peter's right. Maybe I knew her well once, but not any more. Peter is the one who knows her best now. And besides, isn't this the way one loses boyfriends, by acting paranoid and jealous and insecure? I'm fairly certain this is not a good look on me.

After we hang up I resolve to put the video behind me once and for all. What's done is done. I have a boyfriend, a possible new job (unpaid, I'm sure, but still), and my studies to think about. I can't let this bring me down. Besides, you can't even see my face in the video.

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## 9

The next morning before school, we're packing up the car so Daddy can take Margot to the airport, and I keep looking up at Josh's bedroom window, wondering if he'll come down and say goodbye. It's the least he can do. But his lights are off, so he must still be asleep.

Ms Rothschild comes out with her dog while Margot's saying her goodbyes to Jamie Fox-Pickle. As soon as he sees her, he leaps out of Margot's arms and makes a run for it across the street. Daddy chases after him. Jamie is barking and jumping all over Ms Rothschild's poor old dog Simone, who ignores him. Jamie is so excited he pees on Ms Rothschild's green Hunter boots, and Daddy's apologizing, but she's laughing. "It'll wash right off," I hear her say. She looks pretty, her brown hair is in a high ponytail, and she's in yoga pants and a puffy bomber jacket that I think Genevieve has.

"Hurry, Daddy!" Margot calls out. "I need to be at the airport three hours early."

"Three's a bit much," I say. "Two hours is plenty." We watch as Daddy tries to scoop up Jamie and Jamie tries to wriggle away. Ms Rothschild snatches him up with one arm and plants a kiss on his head.

"With international flights you're supposed to be at the airport three hours early. I have bags to check, Lara Jean."

Kitty doesn't say anything; she's just gazing across the street at all the dog drama.

When Daddy returns with a squirming Jamie in his arms, he says, “We’d better get out of here before Jamie causes any more trouble.” We three hug each other fiercely, and Margot whispers to me to be strong, and I nod, and then she and Daddy are gone for the airport.

It’s still early, earlier than we would’ve woken up on a school morning, so I make Kitty and me banana pancakes. She’s still lost in thought. Twice I have to ask her if she wants one pancake or two. I make a few extra and wrap them in aluminium foil to share with Peter on the way to school. I do the dishes; I even send Janette over at Belleview a feeler email, and she writes back right away. Margot’s replacement quit a month ago, so it’s perfect timing, she says. Come in on Saturday and we’ll talk about your responsibilities.

I feel like finally, I’ve got it together: I’ve hit my stride. I can do this.

So when I walk into school that cold January morning, holding Peter’s hand, full on banana pancakes, with a new job and wearing Margot’s Fair Isle sweater she left behind, I am feeling good. Great, even.

Peter wants to stop in the computer lab to print out his English paper, so that’s our first stop. He logs in, and I gasp out loud when I see the wallpaper.

Someone has taken a still of the hot tub video, of me in Peter’s lap in my red flannel nightgown, skirt hitched up around my thighs, and across the top it reads HOT HOT TUB SEX. And on the bottom – YOU’RE DOING IT WRONG.

“What the hell?” Peter mutters, looking around the computer lab. Nobody looks up. He goes to the next computer – same picture, different caption. SHE DOESN’T KNOW ABOUT SHRINKAGE on top. HE’S HAPPY WITH WHAT HE CAN GET across the bottom.

We are a meme.

Over the next couple of days, the picture shows up all over the place. On other people’s Instagrams, on their Facebook walls.

There’s one with a dancing shark photoshopped in. Another one where our heads have been replaced by cat heads.

And then one that just says AMISH BIKINI.

Peter’s lacrosse friends think it’s hilarious, but they swear they don’t have anything to do with it. At the lunch table Gabe protests, “I don’t even know how to use Photoshop!”

Peter stuffs half his sandwich into his mouth. “Fine, then who’s doing it? Jeff Bardugo? Carter?”

“Dude, I don’t know,” Darrell says. “It’s a meme. A lot of people could be throwing their hat in the ring.”

“You have to admit, the cat-head one was pretty funny,” Gabe says. Then he turns to me and says, “My bad, Large.”

I stay quiet. The cat heads *were* kind of funny. But overall it is not. Peter tried to laugh the first one off, but now we are a few days in and I can tell it’s bothering him. He isn’t used to being the butt of the joke. I suppose I’m not either, but only because I’m not used to people paying this much attention to anything I’m doing. But ever since I’ve been with Peter, people are, and I wish they weren’t.

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# 10

That afternoon, we have a junior class assembly in the auditorium. Our class president, Reena Patel, is onstage giving a PowerPoint presentation on the state of the union – how much money we’ve fund-raised for prom, the proposal for senior class trip. I’m sitting low in my seat, relieved for the respite, where people aren’t looking at me, whispering and making judgements.

She clicks on the last slide, and that’s when it happens. “Me So Horny“ blasts out of the speakers and my video, mine and Peter’s, flashes on the projector screen. Someone has taken the video from Anonybitch’s Instagram and put their own soundtrack to it. They’ve edited it too, so I bop up and down on Peter’s lap at triple speed to the beat.

*Oh no no no no. Please, no.*

Everything happens at once. People are shrieking and laughing and pointing and going “Oooh!“ Mr Vasquez is jumping up to unplug the projector, and then Peter’s running onstage, grabbing the microphone out of a stunned Reena’s hand.

“Whoever did that is a piece of garbage. And not that it’s anybody’s fucking business, but Lara Jean and I did not have sex in the hot tub.“

My ears are ringing, and people are twisting around in their seats to look at me and then shifting back around to look at Peter.

“All we did was kiss, so fuck off!” Mr Vasquez, the junior class advisor, is trying to grab the mic back from Peter, but Peter manages to maintain control of it. He holds the mic up high and yells out, “I’m gonna find whoever did this and kick their ass!” In the scuffle, he drops the mic. People are cheering and laughing. Peter’s being frog-marched off the stage, and he frantically looks out into the audience. He’s looking for me.

The assembly breaks up then, and everyone starts filing out the doors, but I stay low in my seat. Chris comes and finds me, face aight. She grabs me by the shoulders. “Ummm, that was crazy! He freaking dropped the F bomb twice!”

I am still in a state of shock, maybe. A video of me and Peter hot and heavy was just on the projector screen, and everyone saw. Mr Vasquez, seventy-year-old Mr Glebe who doesn’t even know what Instagram is. The only passionate kiss of my life and everybody saw.

Chris shakes my shoulders. “Lara Jean! Are you OK?” I nod mutely, and she releases me. “He’s kicking whoever did it’s ass? I’d love to see that!” She snorts and throws her head back like a wild pony. “I mean, the boy’s an idiot if he thinks for one second it wasn’t Gen who posted that video. Like, wow, those are some serious blinders, y’know?” Chris stops short and examines my face. “Are you sure you’re OK?”

“Everybody saw us.”

“Yeah ... that sucked. I’m sure that was Gen’s handiwork. She must’ve got one of her little minions to sneak it on to Reena’s PowerPoint.” Chris shakes her head in disgust. “She’s such a bitch. I’m glad Peter set the record straight, though.



Like, I hate to give him credit, but that was an act of chivalry. No guy has ever set the record straight for me.“

I know she’s thinking of that boy from freshman year, the one who told everyone that Chris had sex with him in the locker room. And I’m thinking of Mrs Duvall, of what she said before. She would probably lump Chris in with the party girls, the girls who sleep around, the girls who aren’t “better than that.“ She would be wrong. We’re all the same.

After school, I’m walking out of class when my phone buzzes in my purse. It’s Peter.

I’m out on parole. Meet me at my car!

I race to the parking lot, where Peter is in his car waiting for me with the heat on. Grinning at me, he says, “Aren’t you going to kiss your man? I just got released from prison.“

“Peter! This isn’t a joke. Are you suspended?“

He smirks. “Nah. I sweet-talked my way out of it. Principal Lochlan loves me. Still, I could’ve been. If it had been anybody else ...“

Oh, Peter. “Please don’t brag to me right now.“

“When I came out of Lochlan’s office, there were a bunch of sophomore girls waiting for me to give me a standing O. They were like, ~~K~~avinsky, you’re so romantic.“ He hoots, and I give him a look. He pulls me to his side. “Hey, they know I’m taken. There’s only one girl I want to see in an Amish bikini.“

I laugh; I can’t help it. Peter loves attention, and I hate to be another girl who gives it to him, but he makes it really hard sometimes. Besides, it *was* kind of romantic.

He plants a kiss on my cheek, nuzzles against my face. “Didn’t I tell you I would take care of it, Covey?”

“You did,” I admit, patting his hair.

“So did I do a good job?”

“You did.” That’s all it takes for him to be happy, me telling him that he did a good job. He’s smiley all the way home. But I’m still thinking about it.

I beg off the lacrosse party I was supposed to go to with Peter tonight. I say it’s because I have to prepare for my meeting with Janette tomorrow, but we both know it’s more than that. He could call me on it, remind me that we promised to always tell the truth to each other, but he doesn’t. He knows me well enough to know that I just need to burrow in my little hobbit hole for a while, and when I’m ready, I’ll come out again and be all right.

That night I bake chai sugar cookies with cinnamon-eggnog icing – they’re like a hug in your mouth. Baking calms me; it’s stabilizing. It’s what I do when I don’t want to think about anything hard. It is an activity that requires very little from you – you just follow the directions, and then at the end you have created something. From ingredients to an actual dessert. It’s like magic. Poof, deliciousness.

After midnight, I’ve set the cookies on the cooling rack and put on my cat pyjamas, and I’m climbing into bed to read when there’s a knock at my window. I think it’s Chris, and I go to the window to check and see if I’ve locked it, but it’s not – it’s Peter! I push the window up. “Oh my God, Peter! What are you doing here?” I whisper, my heart pounding. “My dad’s home!”

Peter climbs in. He's wearing a navy beanie on his head and a thermal with a puffy vest. Taking off the hat, he grins and says, "Shh. You're gonna wake him up."

I run to my door and lock it. "Peter! You can't be here!" I am equal parts panicky and excited. I don't know if a boy has ever been in my room before, not since Josh, and that was ages ago.

He's already taking off his shoes. "Just let me stay for a few minutes."

I cross my arms because I'm not wearing a bra and say, "If it's only a few minutes, why are you taking off your shoes?"

He dodges this question. Plopping down on my bed, he says, "Hey, why aren't you wearing your Amish bikini? It's so hot." I move to slap him upside the head, and he grabs my waist and hugs me to him. He buries his head in my stomach like a little boy. His voice muffled, he says, "I'm sorry all this is happening because of me."

I touch the top of his head; his hair feels soft and silky against my fingers. "It's OK, Peter. I know it's not your fault." I glance at my moonbeam alarm clock. "You can stay for fifteen minutes, but then you have to go." Peter nods and releases me. I sink down on the bed next to him and put my head on his shoulder. I hope the minutes go slow. "How was the party?"

"Boring without you."

"Liar."

He laughs an easy kind of laugh. "What did you bake tonight?"

"How do you know I baked?"

Peter breathes me in. “You smell like sugar and butter.”

“Chai sugar cookies with eggnog icing.”

“Can I take some with me?”

I nod, and we lean our backs against the wall. He slides his arm around me, safe and secure. “Twelve minutes left,” I say into his shoulder, and I feel rather than see him smile.

“Then let’s make it good.” We start to kiss, and I’ve definitely never kissed a boy in my bed before. This is brand-new. I doubt I’ll ever be able to think of my bed the same way again. Between kisses he says, “How much time do I have left?”

I glance over at my clock. “Seven minutes.” Maybe I should tack on an extra five...

“Can we lie down, then?” he suggests.

I shove him in the shoulder. “Peter!”

“I just want to hold you for a little bit! If I was going to try to do more, I’d need more than seven minutes, trust me.”

So we lie down, my back to his chest, him curved around me, his arms slung around mine. He snuggles his chin into the hollow between my neck and my shoulder. It might be my favourite thing we’ve ever done. I like it so much I have to keep reminding myself to be vigilant that we don’t fall asleep. I want to close my eyes but I keep them trained on my clock.

“Spooning’s the freaking best,” he sighs, and I wish he didn’t say it, because it makes me think of how many times he must have held Genevieve just like this.

At the fifteen-minute mark, I sit up so fast he jumps. I clap him on the shoulder. “Time to go, buddy.”

His mouth falls into a sulk. “Come on, Covey!”

I shake my head, resolute.

*If you hadn't made me think of Genevieve, I would've given you five minutes more.*

After I send Peter off with a bag of cookies, I lie back down and close my eyes and imagine his arms are still around me, and that's how I fall asleep.

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I go to Janette's office at Belleview the next day, armed with my notebook and my pen. "I had an idea for a craft class. Scrapbooking to the Oldies." Janette nods at me and I continue. "I can teach the residents how to scrapbook, and we'll go through all their old photos and mementos and listen to oldies."

"That sounds great," she says.

"So I could run that class and also I could take on Friday night cocktail hour?"

Janette takes a bite of her tuna-fish sandwich and swallows. "We might cut the cocktail hour altogether."

"Cut it?" I repeat in disbelief.

She shrugs. "Attendance has been waning ever since we started offering a computer class. The residents have figured out Netflix. It's a whole new world out there."

"What if we made it more of an event? Like, more special?"

"We don't really have the budget for anything fancy, Lara Jean. I'm sure Margot's told you how we have to make do around here. Our budget's tiny."

"No, no, it could be really DIY stuff! Just simple little touches will make all the difference. Like we could make a jacket mandatory for the men. And couldn't we borrow glassware from the dining room instead of using plastic cups?" Janette is still listening, so I keep on going. "Why serve peanuts

right out of the can, when we can put them in a nice bowl, right?”

“Peanuts taste like peanuts no matter the receptacle.”

“They’d taste more elegant served out of a crystal bowl.”

I’ve said too much. Janette is thinking this all sounds like too much trouble, I can tell. She says, “We don’t have crystal bowls, Lara Jean.”

“I’m sure I can scrounge one up at home,” I assure her.

“It sounds like a lot of work for every Friday night.”

“Well – maybe it could just be once a month. That would make it feel even more special. Why don’t we take a little hiatus and bring it back in full force in a month or so?” I suggest. “We can give people a chance to miss it. Build the anticipation and then really do it right.” Janette nods a begrudging nod, and before she can change her mind I say, “Think of me as your assistant, Janette. Leave it all to me. I’ll take care of everything.”

She shrugs. “Have at it.”

Chris and I are hanging out in my room that afternoon when Peter calls. “I’m driving by your house,” he says. “Wanna do something?”

“No!” Chris shouts into the phone. “She’s busy.”

He groans into my ear.

“Sorry,” I tell him. “Chris is over.”

He says he’ll call me later, and I’ve barely set down the phone when Chris grouses, “Please don’t become one of those girls who gets in a relationship and goes MIA.”

I'm very familiar with "those girls", because Chris disappears every time she meets a new guy. Before I can remind her of this, she goes on. "And don't be one of those lax groupies either. I fucking hate those groupies. Like, can't they find a better thing to be a groupie for? Like a band? Oh my God, I would be so good at being a groupie for an actual, important band. Like being a muse, you know?"

"What happened to that idea about you starting your own band?"

Chris shrugs. "The guy who plays bass fucked up his hand skateboarding and then nobody felt like it any more. Hey, do you want to drive to DC tomorrow night and see this band Felt Tip? Frank's borrowing his dad's van, so there's probably room."

I have no idea who Frank is, and Chris has probably only known him for all of two minutes. She always says people's names like I should already know who they are. "I can't – tomorrow's a school night."

She makes a face. "See, that's exactly what I'm talking about. You're already becoming one of ~~those girls~~'."

"That has nothing to do with it, Chris. A, my dad would never let me go to DC on a school night. B, I don't know who Frank is, and I'm not riding in the back of his van. C, I have a feeling Felt Tip is not my kind of music. *Is it my kind of music?*"

"No," she admits. "Fine, but the next thing I ask you to do, you have to say yes. None of this A-B-C ~~here~~ are all of the reasons why' bullshit."



“All right,” I agree, though my stomach does a little lurch, because with Chris you never know what you’re getting yourself into. Though, also knowing Chris, she’s already forgotten about it.

We settle on to the floor and get down to the business of manis. Chris grabs one of my gold nail pens and starts painting tiny stars on her thumbnail. I’m doing a lavender base and dark purple flowers with marigold centres. “Chris, will you do my initials on my right hand?” I hold up my hand for her. “Starting with the ring finger down to my thumb. *LJSC*.”

“Fancy font or basic?”

I give her a look. “Come on. Who are you talking to here?” At the same time we both say, “Fancy.”

Chris is good with doing script. So good, in fact, that as I’m admiring her handiwork, I say, “Hey, I have an idea. What if we started doing manicures at Belleview? The residents would love that.”

“For how much?”

“For free! You could think of it like community service but not mandatory. Out of the goodness of your heart. Some of the residents can’t cut their own nails very well. Their hands get really gnarled. Toes, too. The nails get thick and...” I trail off when I see the disgusted look on her face. “Maybe we could have a tip jar.”

“I’m not going to cut old people’s toenails for free. I’m not doing it for less than fifty bucks a set at the very least. I’ve seen my grandpa’s feet; his toenails are like eagle talons.” She gets back to my thumb, giving me a beautiful cursive C with a

flourish. “Done. God, I’m good.” She throws her head back and yells, “Kitty! Get your booty in here!”

Kitty comes running into my room. “What? I was in the middle of something.”

“I was in the middle of something,” Chris mimics. “If you go get me a Diet Coke, I’ll do your nails for you like I did Lara Jean’s.” I display my hands lavishly like a hand model. Chris counts with her fingers. “Kitty Covey fits perfectly.”

Kitty bounds off, and I call after her, “Bring me a soda too!”

“With ice!” Chris screams. Then she sighs a wistful sigh. “I wish I had a little sister. I would be amazing at bossing her around.”

“Kitty doesn’t usually listen so well. It’s only because she looks up to you.”

“She does, doesn’t she?” Chris picks at a fuzzy on her sock, smiling to herself.

Kitty used to look up to Genevieve, too. She was sort of in awe of her. “Hey,” I say suddenly. “How’s your grandma?”

“She’s all right. She’s pretty tough.”

“And how’s ... the rest of your family? Everything all right?”

Chris shrugs. “Sure. Everything’s fine.”

Hmm. If Chris doesn’t know, how bad could things be with Genevieve’s family? Either not that bad or, more likely, just another one of Genevieve’s deceptions. Even when we were little she lied a lot, whether it was to get out of trouble with her mom, in which case she’d blame me, or to gain sympathy from adults.

Chris peers at me. “What are you thinking about so hard? Are you still stressing over your sex tape?”

“It’s not a sex tape if you’re not having sex in it!”

“Calm down, Lara Jean. I’m sure Peter’s grandstanding did the trick and people will leave it alone. They’ll be on to the next thing.”

“I hope you’re right,” I say.

“Trust me, there’ll be someone or something new to obsess over by next week.”

It turns out that Chris is right, that people have moved on to the next thing. On Tuesday, a sophomore boy named Clark is caught masturbating in the boys locker room, and it’s all everyone can talk about. Lucky me!

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## 12

According to Stormy, there are two kinds of girls in this world. The kind who breaks hearts and the kind who gets her heart broken. One guess as to which kind of girl Stormy is.

I'm sitting cross-legged on Stormy's velvet fainting couch, going through a big shoe box of mostly black-and-white photos. She's agreed to join my scrapbooking class, and we're getting a head start organizing. I have several piles going. Stormy: the early years; her teenagehood; her first, second, and fourth weddings – no pictures from her third wedding, because they eloped.

“I am a heartbreaker, but *you*, Lara Jean, are a girl who gets her heart broken.” She lifts her eyebrows at me for emphasis. I think she forgot to pencil them in today.

I mull this over. I don't want to be a girl who gets her heart broken, but I also don't really want to break boys' hearts. “Stormy, did you have a lot of boyfriends in high school?”

“Oh, sure. Dozens. That's how we did it in my day. Drive-in on Friday with Burt and cotillion with Sam on Saturday. We kept our options open. A girl didn't settle down unless she was supremely, supremely sure.”

“Sure that she liked him?”

“Sure that she wanted to *marry* him. Otherwise what was the point in ending all the fun?”

I pick up a picture of Stormy in a sea-foam formal gown, strapless with a full skirt. She looks like she could be Grace Kelly's sneaky cousin, with her pale blonde hair and the lift of her brow. There's a boy standing next to her, and he isn't very tall or particularly handsome, but there's something about him. A glint in his eye. "Stormy, how old were you in this one?"

Stormy peers at it. "Sixteen or seventeen. About your age."

"Who's the boy?"

Stormy takes a closer look, her face wrinkling like a dried apricot. She taps her red fingernail on the picture. "Walter! We all called him Walt. He was a real charmer."

"Was he your boyfriend?"

"No, he was just a boy I saw from time to time." She waggles her pale eyebrows at me. "We went skinny-dipping out by the lake, and we got caught by the police. It was quite the *scandale*. I got to ride home in a police car in nothing but a blanket."

"And so ... did people gossip about you?"

"*Bien sûr.*"

"I've had a little bit of a *scandale* of my own," I say. Then I tell her about the hot tub, and the video, and all the fallout. I have to explain to her what a meme is. She is delighted; she's practically vibrating from the salaciousness of it all.

"Excellent!" she crows. "I'm so relieved you have some bite to you. A girl with a reputation is so much more interesting than a Goody Two-shoes."

"Stormy, this is on the Internet. The Internet is for ever. It's not just gossip at school. And also, I kind of *am* a Goody Two-

shoes.“

“No, your sister Margaret’s the Goody Two-shoes.“

“Margot,“ I correct.

“Well, she certainly seems like a Margaret. I mean, really, every Friday night at a nursing home! I’d have slit my wrists if I was a teenage girl spending all my beauty years at a damn nursing home. Excuse my French, darling.“ She fluffs up the pillow behind her. “Oldest children are always high-achieving bores. My son Stanley is a frightful bore. He’s the worst. He’s a podiatrist, for God’s sake! I suppose it’s my fault for naming him Stanley. Not that I had any say in it. My mother-in-law insisted we name him after her dead husband. Good Lord, she was a crone.“ Stormy takes a sip of her iced tea. “Middle children are supposed to have fun, you know. You and I, we have that in common. I was glad you hadn’t been coming around as much. I was hoping you were getting into trouble. Sounds like I was right. Although you might’ve come around a *bit* more.“

Stormy’s terrific at making a person feel guilty. She’s mastered the art of the injured sniff

“Now that I’ve got a proper job here, I’ll be around a lot more often.“

“Well, not too often.“ She perks up. “But next time bring that boy of yours. We could use some fresh blood around here. Give the place a jolt. Is he handsome?“

“Yes, he’s very handsome.“ The handsomest of all the handsome boys.

Stormy claps her hands together. “Then you *must* bring him by. Give me advance notice, though, so I look my absolute best. Who else have you got waiting in the wings?”

I laugh. “No one! I told you, I have a boyfriend.”

“Hmm.” That’s all she says, just “hmm”. Then, “I have a grandson who could be about your age. He’s still in high school, anyhow. Maybe I’ll tell him to come by and see you. It’s good for a girl to have options.” I wonder what a grandson of Stormy’s might be like – probably a real player, just like Stormy. I open my mouth to say no thank you, but she waves me off with a *shh*. “When we’re done with my scrapbook, I’m going to transcribe my memoirs to you, and you’ll type them up for me on the computer. I’m thinking of calling it *The Eye of the Storm*. Or *Stormy Weather*.” Stormy starts to hum. “Stormy weather,” she sings. “Since my man and I ain’t together ... keeps rainin’ all the time...” She stops short. “We should have a cabaret night! Picture it, Lara Jean. You in a tuxedo. Me in a slinky red dress draped over the piano. It’ll give Mr Morales a heart attack.”

I giggle. “Let’s not give him a heart attack. Maybe just a tremor.”

She shrugs and goes on singing, adding a shimmy to her hips. “Stormy weather ...”

She’ll go off on a singing jag if I don’t redirect her. “Stormy, tell me about where you were when John F. Kennedy died.”

“It was a Friday. I was baking a pineapple upside-down cake for my bridge club. I put it in the oven and then I saw the news and I forgot all about the cake and nearly burned the house

down. We had to have the kitchen repainted because of all the soot.“ She fusses with her hair. “He was a saint, that man. A prince. If I’d met him in my heyday, we really could’ve had some fun. You know, I flirted with a Kennedy once at an airport. He sidled up to me at the bar and bought me a very dry gin martini. Airports used to be so very much more glamorous. People got dressed up to travel. Young people on airplanes these days, they wear those horrible sheepskin boots and pyjama pants and it’s an *eyesore*. I wouldn’t go out for the *mail* dressed like that.“

“Which Kennedy?” I ask.

“Hmm? Oh, I don’t know. He had the Kennedy chin, anyway.“

I bite my lip to keep from smiling. Stormy and her escapades. “Can I have your pineapple upside-down cake recipe?“

“Sure, darling. It’s just yellow box cake with Del Monte pineapple and brown sugar and a maraschino cherry on top. Just make sure you get the *rings* and not the *chunks*.“

This cake sounds horrible. I try to nod in a diplomatic way, but Stormy is on to me. Crossly she says, “Do you think I had time to sit around baking cakes from scratch like some boring old housewife?“

“You could never be boring,“ I say on cue, because it’s true and because I know it’s what she wants to hear.

“You could do with a little less baking and a little more living life.“ She’s being prickly, and she’s never prickly with me.



“Youth is truly wasted on the young.” She frowns. “My legs ache. Get me some Tylenol PM, would you?”

I leap up, eager to be in her good graces again. “Where do you keep it?”

“In the kitchen drawer by the sink.”

I rummage around, but I don't see it. Just batteries, talcum powder, a stack of McDonald's napkins, sugar packets, a black banana. Covertly, I throw the banana in the trash. “Stormy, I don't see your Tylenol PM in here. Is there anywhere else it could be?”

“Forget it,” she snaps, coming up behind me and pushing me to the side. “I'll find it myself.”

“Do you want me to put on some tea?” Stormy is old; that's why she's acting this way. She doesn't mean to be harsh. I know she doesn't mean it.

“Tea is for old ladies. I want a cocktail.”

“Coming right up,” I say.

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# 13

My scrapbooking to the oldies class has officially begun. I won't deny that I'm disappointed with the turnout. So far it's just Stormy, Alicia Ito, who is sprightly and put-together – short, buffed nails, pixie cut – and wily Mr Morales, who I think has a crush on Stormy. Or Alicia. It's hard to know definitively, because he flirts with everyone, but they both have full pages in the scrapbook he's working on. He's decided to title it "The Good Old Days". He's decorated Stormy's page with music notes and piano keys and a picture of the two of them dancing on Disco Night last year. Alicia's page he's still working on, but his focal point is a picture of her sitting on a bench in the courtyard, gazing off into space, and he's affixed some flower stickers around it. Very romantic.

I haven't got much of a budget, so I've brought my own supplies. I've also instructed the three of them to collect scraps from magazines and other little bobbles and buttons. Stormy's a pack rat like me, so she has all kinds of treasures. Lace from her kids' christening gowns, a matchbook from the motel where she met her husband ("Don't ask," she said), old ticket stubs to a cabaret she went to in Paris. (I piped up, "In 1920s Paris? Did you ever meet Hemingway?" and she cut me with her eyes and said she obviously wasn't *that* old and I needed a history lesson.) Alicia's style is more minimalist and clean. With my black felt tip calligraphy pen, she writes descriptions in Japanese underneath each picture.

“What does it say here?” I ask, pointing to a description below a picture of Alicia and her husband, Phil, at Niagara Falls, holding hands and wearing yellow plastic ponchos.

Alicia smiles. “It says ~~the~~ time we got caught in the rain’.”

So Alicia’s a romantic too. “You must miss him a lot.” Phil died a year ago. I only met him a couple of times, back when I’d help out Margot with Friday cocktail hour. Phil had dementia, and he didn’t talk much. He’d sit in his wheelchair in the common room and just smile at people. Alicia never left his side.

“I miss him every day,” she says, tearing up.

Stormy jostles her way between us, green glitter pen tucked behind her ear, and says, “Alicia, you need to jazz up your pages more.” She flicks a sheet of umbrella stickers Alicia’s way.

“No, thank you,” Alicia says stiffly, flicking the page back at Stormy. “You and I have different styles.”

Stormy’s eyes narrow at this.

I quickly go over to the speakers and turn up the volume to lighten the mood. Stormy dances over to me and sings, “Johnny Angel, Johnny Angel. You’re an angel to me.” We put our heads together and chorus, “I dream of him and me and how it’s gonna be ...”

When Alicia goes to the bathroom, Stormy says, “Ugh, what a bore.”

“I don’t think she’s a bore,” I say.

Stormy points at me with her hot-pink manicured nail. “Don’t you dare go liking her better than me just because

you're both Asian."

Hanging around a retirement home, I've got used to the vaguely racist things old people say. At least Stormy doesn't use the word "Oriental" any more. "I like you both equally," I tell her.

"There's no such thing," she sniffs. "No one can ever like anyone exactly the same."

"Don't you love your kids the same?"

"Of course not."

"I thought parents didn't have favourites?"

"Of course they do. My favourite's my youngest, Kent, because he's a mama's boy. He visits with me every Sunday."

Loyally I say, "Well, I don't think my parents had favourites." I say it because it seems like the right thing to say, but is it true? I mean, if somebody put a gun to my head and said I had to choose, who would I say was Daddy's favourite? Margot, probably. They're the most alike. She's genuinely into documentaries and bird-watching, just like him. Kitty's the baby, which automatically gives her an edge. Where does that leave me, the middle Song girl? Maybe I was Mommy's favourite. I wish I could know for sure. I'd ask Daddy, but I doubt he'd tell the truth. Margot might.

I'd never be able to pick between Margot and Kitty. But if, say, they were both drowning and I could only throw one a life jacket, it would probably have to be Kitty. Margot would never forgive me otherwise. Kitty's both of ours to care for.

The thought of ever losing Kitty puts me in a kinder, more contemplative mood, and so that night after she's asleep, I bake

offla tray of snickerdoodles, her favourite cookie. I have bags of cookie dough in the freezer, frozen into perfect cylindrical balls so that when any of us gets a taste for cookies, we can have them in twenty minutes flat. She'll have a nice surprise when she opens her lunch bag tomorrow.

I let Jamie have a cookie too, even though I know I shouldn't. But he keeps looking up at me with sorrowful puppy eyes and I can't resist.

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“What are you daydreaming about?” Peter taps my forehead with his spoon to get my attention. We are at Starbucks doing homework after school.

I dump two raw sugar packets into my plastic cup and stir it all up with my straw. I take a long sip, and sugar granules crunch satisfyingly against my teeth. “I was thinking about how it would be neat if people our age could be in love like it’s the 1950s.” Right away I wish I didn’t say “in love,” because Peter’s never said anything about being in love with me, but it’s too late, the words are already out of my mouth, so I just press on and hope he didn’t catch it. “In the 50s, people just dated, and it was as easy as that. Like one night Burt might take you to a drive-in movie, and the next night Walter might take you to a sock hop or something.”

Bemused, he says, “What the hell is a sock hop?”

“It’s like a dance, like in *Grease*.” Peter looks back at me blankly. “You’ve never seen *Grease*? It was on TV last night. Never mind. The point is, back then you weren’t somebody’s girl until you had a pin.”

“A pin?” Peter repeats.

“Yes, a fellow would give a girl his fraternity pin, and it meant they were going steady. But you weren’t official until you had the pin.”

“But I’m not in a fraternity. I don’t even know what a fraternity pin looks like.”

“Exactly,” I say.

“Wait – are you saying you want a pin or you don’t want a pin?”

“I’m not saying it either way. I’m just saying, don’t you think there was something cool in the way it used to be? It’s old-fashioned, but it’s almost...” What’s Margot always saying? “Postfeminist.”

“Wait. So do you want to go on dates with other guys?” He doesn’t sound upset, necessarily, just confused.

“No! I just ... I’m just making an observation. I think it would be cool to bring back casual dating. There’s something sweet about it, don’t you think? My sister told me she wishes she didn’t let things get so heavy with her and Josh. You said yourself how you hated how serious it got with Genevieve. If we break up, I don’t want things to ever get so bad that we can’t be in the same room together. I want to still be friends no matter what.”

Peter dismisses this. “With me and Gen, it’s complicated because of who Gen is. It’s not like with me and you. You’re ... different.”

I can feel my face get all flush again. I try not to sound too eager as I say, “Like different how?” I know I’m digging for a compliment, but I don’t care.

“You’re easy to be with. You don’t make me get all crazy and worked up; you’re...” Peter’s voice trails off as he looks at my face. “What? What did I say?”

My whole body feels tight and stiff. No girl wants to hear what he just said. No girl. A girl *wants* to get a boy crazy and

worked up – isn't that part of being in love?

“I mean that in a good way, Lara Jean. Are you mad? Don't be mad.” He rubs his face tiredly.

I hesitate. Peter and I tell each other the truth; that's how it's been since the beginning. I'd like it to stay that way, on both sides. But then I catch the sudden worry in his eyes, the uncertainty, and it's not something I'm used to seeing on him. I don't like to see it. We've only been back together a couple of weeks, and I don't want to start a new fight when I know he didn't mean any harm. I hear myself say, “No, I'm not mad,” and just like that, I'm not any more. After all, I'm the one who was worrying about going too far too fast with Peter. Maybe it's a good thing he doesn't get crazy and worked up over me.

The clouds in his face clear away instantly, and he is sunny and bright again. That's the Peter I know. He gulps at his tea. “See, that's what I mean, Lara Jean. That's why I like you. You just get it.”

“Thank you.”

“You're welcome.”

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# 15

Early morning before school, Josh is chiselling ice off his windshield when I run out to my car. Daddy's already scraped the ice off mine and started the engine and turned on the heat. By the looks of Josh's car, he's not going to make it to school on time.

We've hardly seen Josh since Christmas; after all the strangeness with me and then the break-up with Margot, he's been a ghost in this house. He leaves a little earlier for school now, comes home a little later. He never reached out to me when all the video stuff happened either, though part of me was relieved for that. I didn't want to hear I told you so from Josh about how he was right about Peter.

I back out my driveway, and at the last second I open the window and lean towards it. "Do you want a ride?" I call out to Josh.

His eyes widen in surprise. "Yeah. Sure." He throws his ice scraper into his car and grabs his backpack, then comes running over. Climbing in, he says, "Thanks, Lara Jean." He warms his hands on the heating vents.

We make our way out of the neighbourhood, and I'm driving carefully, because the roads are icy from the night before.

"You've got really good at driving," Josh says.

"Thanks." *I have* been practising, on my own and with Peter. I still get nervous sometimes, but each time I get in the car and

drive, it's a little bit less, because now I know I can do it. You only know you can do something if you keep on doing it.

We're a few minutes from school when Josh asks, "When are we going to talk again? Just tell me so I have a general idea."

"We're talking right now, aren't we?"

"You know what I mean. What happened with me and Margot was between us – can't you and I still be friends like we were before?"

"Josh, of course we'll still be friends. But you and Margot have been broken up less than a month."

"No, we broke up in August. She decided she wanted to get back together three weeks ago, and I said no."

I sigh. "Why did you say no, though? Was it just the distance?"

Josh sighs too. "Relationships are hard work. You'll see. After you've been in it with Kavinsky longer, you'll see what I'm talking about."

"Oh my God, you're such a know-it-all. The biggest know-it-all I ever met, besides my sister."

"Which one?"

I can feel a giggle bubbling up inside of me, which I push down. "Both. They're both know-it-alls."

"One more thing." He hesitates, then keeps going. "I was wrong about Kavinsky. The way he's handled this whole video thing, I can tell he's a good guy."

"Thanks, Joshy. He really is."

He nods, and there is a comfortable quiet between us, and I'm glad for the bad weather we had last night, glad for the ice on his windshield this morning.

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# 16

After school the next day I'm sitting on a bench, waiting for Peter out front, when Genevieve walks out the double doors on her phone. "If you don't tell her, I will. I swear I'll do it."

My heart stills. Who is she talking to? Not Peter.

Her friends Emily and Judith burst out the doors then, and she abruptly hangs up. "Where the hell have you bitches been?" she snaps.

They exchange a look. "Gen, chill out," Emily says, and I can tell she is walking that tightrope, a little bit feisty but careful not to further incur her wrath. "We still have plenty of time to shop."

Genevieve notices me then, and her peevish expression disappears. Waving, she says, "Hey, Lara Jean. Are you waiting for Kavinsky?"

I nod, and blow on my fingers just to have something to do. Also, it's cold.

"That boy's always running late. Tell him I'll call him later tonight, OK?"

I nod without thinking, and the girls walk away, arms linked.

Why did I nod? What is wrong with me? Why can't I ever come up with a good comeback? I'm still berating myself when Peter appears. He slides on to the bench beside me and slings his arm around my shoulders. Then he ruffles the top of my head the way I've seen him to do to Kitty. "What up, Covey?"

“Thanks for making me wait for you outside in the cold,” I say, pressing my freezing fingers on his neck.

Peter yelps and jumps away from me. “You could’ve waited inside!”

He has a point. That’s not what I’m mad about anyway. “Gen says to tell you she’ll call you later tonight.”

He rolls his eyes. “She’s such a shit stirrer. Don’t let her get to you, Covey. She’s just jealous.” Standing up, he offers me his hands, which I accept begrudgingly. “Let me take you for a hot chocolate to warm up your poor frozen body.”

“We’ll see,” I say.

In the car, he keeps sneaking peeks at me, checking to see if I’m still annoyed. I don’t keep up my chilly routine for much longer, though; it takes up too much energy. I let him buy me a hot chocolate and I even share it with him. But I tell him he can’t have any of the marshmallows.

That night my phone buzzes on my nightstand, and I know without looking that it’s Peter looking for more reassurance. I take off my headphones and pick it up. “Hi.”

“What are you doing?” His voice is low; I can tell he’s lying down.

“My homework. What about you?”

“I’m in bed. I just called to say good night.” There’s a pause. “Hey, how come you never call me to say good night?”

“I don’t know. I guess I never thought of it. Do you want me to?”

“Well. You don’t *have* to – I just wondered why not.”

“I thought you hated the whole ‘last call’ thing. Remember? You put it in the contract. You said that Genevieve insisted that she be your last call every night, and it was annoying.”

He groans. “Can we please not talk about her? Also, why is your memory so good? You remember everything.”

“It’s my gift and my curse.” I highlight a paragraph and try to balance the phone on my shoulder, but it keeps slipping. “So wait, do you want me to call you every night or not?”

“Ugh, just forget it.”

“Ugh, fine,” I say, and I can hear him smiling through the phone.

“Bye.”

“Bye.”

“Wait – can you bring me one of those yoghurt drinks for lunch?”

“Say please.”

“Please.”

“Say pretty please.”

“Bye.”

“Byeeee.”

It takes me another two hours to finish my homework, but when I fall asleep that night, I fall asleep smiling.

*I think my dad is on a date. Tonight he said he had plans with a friend, and he shaved and put on a nice button-down shirt and not one of his ratty sweaters. He was in a hurry to leave, so I didn't ask who the friend was. Someone from the hospital, probably. Daddy doesn't exactly have wide social circles. He's shy. Whoever it is, this sounds like a good thing.*

As soon as he leaves, I turn to Kitty, who is lying on the couch watching TV and licking the sour off sour gummies. Jamie lies asleep next to her. "Kitty, do you think Daddy's—"

"On a date? Duh."

"And you're OK with it?"

"Sure. Though I'd rather it was with someone I knew and already liked."

"What if he got married again? Would you be OK with that?"

"Sure. So you can quit making your concerned-big-sister face at me, all right?"

I try to smooth my face out like a blank sheet of paper. Serenely I say, "So you're saying you're OK with Daddy getting married again."

"It's just a date, Lara Jean. People don't get married off of one measly date."

"But they do off of a lot of dates."

A flash of worry crosses her face, and then she says, “We’ll just wait and see. There’s no point in getting all revved up yet.”

I wouldn’t say I’m revved up, exactly, but I am curious. When I told Grandma I wouldn’t mind if Daddy dated, I meant it, but I do want to know that she’s good enough for him, whoever she is. I change the subject. “What do you want for your birthday?” I ask her.

“I’ve got a list going,” she says. “A new collar for Jamie. Leather. With spikes. A treadmill.”

“A treadmill!”

“Yeah, I want to teach Jamie how to walk on one.”

“I doubt Daddy will go for a treadmill, Kitty. They’re really expensive, and besides, where would we even put it?”

“OK fine. Scratch the treadmill. I also want night-vision goggles.”

“You should cc Margot on that.”

“What kinds of special things can I get only from Scotland?” she asks.

“Genuine Scottish shortbread. A tartan kilt. What else ... golf balls. Loch Ness monster paraphernalia.”

“What’s paraphernalia?”

“A stuffed Loch Ness monster. A Loch Ness T-shirt. Maybe a glow-in-the-dark poster.”

“Stop right there. That’s a good idea. I’m gonna add that to my list.”



After Kitty goes to bed, I clean up the kitchen – I even scrub the stove with a Brillo pad and organize the refrigerator – so that I can give Daddy the third degree the second he gets home. I’m refilling the flour canister when Daddy walks through the door. Casually I say, “How was your date?”

He frowns in confusion. “Date? I went to the symphony with my colleague Marjorie. Her husband came down with the flu, and she didn’t want the ticket to go to waste.”

I deflate. “Oh.”

Humming, he pours himself a glass of water and says, “I should go to the symphony more often. Any interest, Lara Jean?”

“Um ... maybe,” I say.

I make myself a stack of snickerdoodles, and I run up to my room and sit down at my desk. Munching on one, I open up my computer and type in “dating for dads“, and lo and behold I find a dating site for single parents.

I start drafting a profile. First things first, he’ll need a profile pic. I start going through the photos of him on my computer. There are hardly any of him alone. I finally settle on two, which I bookmark: one from last summer at the beach – a full-length shot, because that’s one of the tips on the website – and one of him from this past Christmas, wearing that Scandinavian sweater we got him. He’s carving a roast chicken, and he looks daddish in a wholesome coffee-commercial way but still vital. The dim dining room light makes him look hardly wrinkled at all, just some crinkles around the eyes. Which reminds me: I should get on him about wearing sunscreen every day. A men’s

skin-care kit could be a good Father's Day gift. I make a note of it in my Reminders.

Daddy is only in his early forties. That's still plenty young enough to meet someone and fall in love, maybe two or three times over, even.

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# 18

When Kitty was born, I said she looked like a kitten and not a Katherine, so that's the name that stuck. After we came home from visiting her and Mommy at the hospital, Margot and I made a HAPPY BIRTHDAY, KITTEN banner to make the time go faster. We got out all the paints and craft supplies, and Grandma got annoyed because there was a big mess to clean in the kitchen, colours dripping all over the floor, handprints everywhere. We have a picture of Mommy standing underneath the sign holding Kitty that very first day, eyes tired but bright. Happy.

It's our tradition to put the sign on Kitty's door so it's the first thing she sees when she wakes up. I get up really early and hang the sign with care, so the edges don't bend or rip. For breakfast I make her a muenster-cheese omelette. With a ketchup bottle I squeeze out a cat face with a heart around it. We have a "celebrations drawer", which is birthday candles, paper hats, tablecloths, emergency birthday cards. I take out the paper hats and put one on my head, jauntily to the side. I set one each by Kitty and Daddy's plate, and I put one on Jamie Fox-Pickle too. He is not into it, but I'm able to get a picture before he knocks the hat off.

Daddy's prepared Kitty's favourite lunch to take to school. A Brie sandwich and chips, plus a red velvet cupcake with cream cheese frosting.

Kitty delights in the place settings and in her cat face omelette. She claps and laughs like a hyena when the rubber

band on Daddy's hat snaps, and the hat springs off his head. Truly, there's no happier birthday girl than our Kitty.

"Can I wear your sweater with the daisies on it?" she asks me, her mouth full of omelette.

I glance at the clock. "I'll go get it, but you have to eat fast." He'll be here any minute.

When it's time to leave, we put on our shoes, kiss Daddy goodbye and tumble out the front door. Waiting for us on the street in front of his car is Peter with a bouquet of cellophane-wrapped pink carnations. "Happy birthday, kid," he says.

Kitty's eyes bulge. "Are those for me?"

He laughs. "Who else would they be for? Hurry and get in the car."

Kitty turns to me, her eyes bright, her smile as wide as her face. I'm smiling too. "Are you coming too, Lara Jean?"

I shake my head. "No, there's only room for two."

"You're my only girl today, kid," Peter says, and Kitty runs to him and snatches the flowers out of his hand. Gallantly, he opens the door for her. He shuts it and turns and winks at me. "Don't be jealous, Covey."

I've never liked him more than in this moment.

Kitty's birthday party with all her friends won't be for a few weeks. She insisted on a sleepover, and Daddy's on call for weekends in February. Tonight, we'll celebrate with a family dinner.

One of Daddy's most go-to dinners is roast chicken. He calls it the house speciality. He'll slather it in butter, pop an onion

and an apple inside, sprinkle some poultry seasoning and stick it in the oven. Usually a potato in some form as the side. Tonight I've mashed sweet potatoes and sprinkled brown sugar and cinnamon on top, then put them under the broiler so the sugar burns like crème brûlée.

Kitty is in charge of setting the table and putting out the condiments: Texas Pete's hot sauce for Daddy, mustard for Kitty, strawberry jam for me. Chutney for Margot if she were here. "What kind of sauce did Mommy like with her chicken?" Kitty asks me suddenly.

"I ... can't remember," I say. We both look at Daddy, who is checking on the chicken.

"Did she like mustard like me?" she asks.

Closing the oven door, Daddy says, "Hmm. Well, I know she liked balsamic vinegar. A lot. A lot a lot."

"Just on chicken?" Kitty asks.

"On everything, actually. Avocados, with butter on toast, tomatoes, steak."

I file this away under Misc. Facts about M.

"Are you guys ready to eat?" Daddy asks. "I want to get this bird out while it's still nice and juicy."

"In a minute," Kitty says, and literally a minute later the doorbell rings. Kitty springs into action. She comes back with Ms Rothschild from across the street. She's in skinny jeans and a black turtleneck sweater and high-heeled boots, a chunky black-and-gold necklace around her neck. Her mahogany brown hair is half up, half down. She's carrying a wrapped present in her hands. Jamie Fox-Pickle's puppy legs can't get to

her fast enough; he is sliding all over the place, wagging his little tail.

Laughing, she says, “Well, hello, Jamie.” She sets her gift on the counter and kneels down and pets him. “What’s up, everybody?”

“Hi, Ms Rothschild,” I say.

“Trina!” Daddy says, surprised.

Ms Rothschild lets out an awkward laugh. “Oh, did you not know I was coming? Kitty invited me when she was over with Jamie today...” She reddens. “Kitty,” she chides.

“I did tell him – it’s just that Daddy’s absent-minded,” Kitty says.

“Hm,” Ms Rothschild says, giving her a look, which Kitty pretends not to see. “Well, thank you anyway!” Jamie starts jumping all over her, another of his bad habits. Ms Rothschild sticks her knee out and Jamie settles down immediately. “Sit, Jamie.”

And then he actually sits! Daddy and I exchange an impressed look. Clearly Jamie needs to continue under Ms Rothschild’s tutelage.

“Trina, what can I get you to drink?” Daddy asks her.

“I’ll have whatever’s open,” she says.

“I don’t have anything open, but I’m happy to open whatever you like—”

“Ms Rothschild likes pinot grigio,” Kitty says. “With an ice cube.”

She turns even redder. “God, Kitty, I’m not a lush!” She turns to us and says, “I’ll have a small glass after work, but not every night.”

Daddy laughs. “I’ll put some white wine in the freezer. It’ll get cold soon.”

Kitty looks pleased as punch, and when Daddy and Ms Rothschild go into the living room, I grab her by the collar and whisper, “What are you up to?”

“Nothing,” she says, trying to squirm away.

“Is this a set-up?” I hiss.

“So what if it is? They’d be a good match.”

Huh! “What makes you say that?”

Kitty ticks off her fingers. “She loves animals, she’s hot, she makes her own money, and I like her.”

Hmm. All of that does sound good. Plus she lives across the street, which is convenient.

“Do you think Ms Rothschild watches documentaries?”

“Who cares about dusty old documentaries? He can watch them with you or Margot. The important thing is chemistry.” Kitty tries to jerk loose from my grip. “Let go of me so I can see if they have any!”

I release her collar. “No, don’t go in yet.” Kitty huffs and flounces away and I say meaningfully, “Let’s let it *simmer* for a minute.”

She stops short and then gives me an appreciative nod. “Let’s let it simmer,” she repeats, savouring the words.

Kitty is sawing her way through a piece of white meat, the only kind she'll eat – she likes it sliced thin like deli meat, and Daddy tries but it always ends up kind of shredded and sad-looking. I think maybe I'll get him an electric carving knife for this birthday. Personally, I like the thigh. I honestly don't know why anyone would bother eating anything but thigh if they had the choice.

When Ms Rothschild shakes some hot sauce on her chicken, Kitty's eyes glow like a lightning bug. I make note of the way Ms Rothschild laughs at Daddy's corny jokes with sincerity. I also appreciate the way she goes wild for my snickerdoodles. I threw some frozen ones in the oven when Daddy put the coffee on.

“I love how this cookie is crunchy but also soft. You're telling me you made this from scratch?”

“Always,” I tell her.

“Well, give me the recipe, girl.” Then she laughs. “Wait, don't bother. I know my strengths, and baking is not one of them.”

“We'll share with you anytime – we always have lots of cakes and cookies,” Kitty says, which is rich coming from her, because it's not like Kitty ever helps. She only shows up for the fun parts, the decorating and eating.

I sneak a look at Daddy, who is placidly sipping his coffee. I sigh. He's completely oblivious.

We all do the washing up and wrapping up of leftovers together, and it feels very natural. Without anyone telling her, Ms Rothschild knows to hand-wash the wineglasses and not



put them in the dishwasher, and on the first try she finds the aluminium foil and plastic wrap drawer. Which might say more about Margot's organizational skills than Ms. Rothschild's intuition, but still. I think I could see her fitting in with us pretty seamlessly. And, as I said, she does live across the street, which is convenient. People say absence makes the heart grow fonder, but I think they're wrong: *Proximity* makes the heart grow fonder.

As soon as Ms Rothschild's gone home and Daddy's in his study, Kitty pounces on me in my room, where I'm setting out school clothes. Navy sweater with a fox on it that I've been saving for a rainy day, mustard-yellow skirt, knee socks.

"Well?" she demands. She has Jamie Fox-Pickle in her arms.

"I like the way she started Saran-wrapping things; that was some good initiative," I say, pinning a tortoiseshell bow in my hair and checking it out in the mirror. "She also complimented my snickerdoodles a lot, which I appreciated. But I don't know if I necessarily saw any sparks with Daddy. I mean, did you think he seemed interested?"

"I think he could be if she gave him a chance. She was dating a guy from her office, but it didn't work out because he reminded her of her ex-husband."

I raise my eyebrows. "It sounds like you guys have had some serious talks."

Proudly Kitty says, "She doesn't treat me like a little kid."

If Kitty's that crazy about her, that says a lot. "Well, she might not be Daddy's type, but if we keep throwing them together, who knows?"

“What do you mean she might not be Daddy’s type?”

“Her style seems really different than Mommy’s. Doesn’t she smoke? Daddy hates that.”

“She’s trying to quit. She’s got an electronic cigarette now.”

“Let’s keep inviting her to things and see what happens,” I say, picking up my hairbrush. “Hey, do you think if you watched a video, you could give me a little side cornrow?”

“I could give it a shot,” Kitty says. “Curl the ends first and then check with me after I watch my shows.”

“Got it.”

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# 19

The next time Margot and I video-chat, I break the news to her. She's sitting at her desk, wearing a Fair Isle sweater, light blue and hunter green, and her hair is wet. She has a Saint Andrews mug she's drinking tea out of. "That's a cute sweater," I say, nestling my laptop on my thighs and getting cosy against my pillows. "So guess who Kitty's been trying to set Daddy up with."

*"Who?"*

"Ms Rothschild."

Margot practically chokes on her tea. "From across the street? You've got to be kidding me. That's literally the craziest thing I ever heard."

"Really? You think so?"

"Yes! Don't you?"

"I don't know. Kitty's been spending a lot of time with her because she's teaching her how to train Jamie. She seems pretty nice."

"I mean, sure, she's nice, but she wears so much make-up and she's always spilling hot coffee all over her cleavage and shrieking like a banshee. Remember how she and her ex-husband used to get into those screaming matches in their yard?" Margot shudders. "What would she and Daddy even have to talk about? She's like a Real Housewife of Charlottesville. Except she's divorced."

“She did mention that *Real Housewives* is her favourite show,” I admit, feeling like a tattletale. “But she said it’s a guilty pleasure!”

“Which city?”

“I think all of them?”

“Lara Jean, promise me you won’t let her get her hooks in Daddy. He doesn’t know the first thing about dating in the twenty-first century, and she’ll just eat him alive. He needs to be with someone mature, someone with wisdom in her eyes.”

I snort. “Like who? A grandma? If so, I know a few from Belleview I could set him up with.”

“No, but someone who’s at least the same age as him! She should be sophisticated, but also enjoy nature and hiking and that kind of thing.”

“When’s the last time Daddy hiked?”

“Not for years, but that’s the point—he needs a woman who will encourage those kinds of interests. Keep him active, physically *and* mentally.”

Giggling, I say, “And ... sexually?” I simply cannot resist the joke, or the opportunity to gross Margot out.

“Ew!” she screams. “You’re depraved!”

“I’m just joking!”

“I’m hanging up on you right now.”

“No, don’t. If Ms Rothschild isn’t the one, I was thinking he should try online dating. I’ve found a dating site for him and everything. He’s a handsome guy, you know. And at

Thanksgiving, Grandma was bugging him about dating more. She says it's not good for a man to be alone."

"He's perfectly happy." She pauses. "Isn't he?"

"I think he's perfectly ... content? But that's not the same thing as happy, is it? Gogo, I hate to think of him being lonely ... and the way Kitty's so bent on setting him up with Ms Rothschild, it makes me think she's longing for a mother figure."

Margot sighs and takes a sip of tea. "OK, work on his profile and send me the login info so I can weigh in on everything. We'll handpick a few and present him with a really curated selection so he doesn't get overwhelmed."

Impulsively I say, "Why don't we hold off until we see how this thing with Ms Rothschild plays out? We should at least give her a chance, don't you think? For Kitty's sake."

Margot sighs again. "How old do you think she is?"

"Like, thirty-nine? Forty?"

"Well, she dresses much younger."

"You shouldn't hold that against her," I say, though I will admit to feeling slight discomfort when she said we shop at the same places. Does that mean she dresses too young or I dress too old? Chris has called my style "granny meets little-girl chic" and "Lolita went to library school". Which reminds me. "Hey, if you see any cute kilts, will you bring one back for me? Red tartan, maybe with a big safety pin button?"

"I'll keep my eyes open for you," she promises. "Maybe I can find matching for the three of us. Actually, the four of us. It can be next year's Christmas card."

I snort. “Daddy in a kilt!”

“You never know, he might be into it. He’s always talking up his one-quarter Scottish heritage. He can put his money where his mouth is.” She wraps both hands around her mug and takes a sip of tea. “Guess what. I met a cute boy. His name is Samuel, and he’s in my British pop culture class.”

“Ooh. Does he have a posh accent?”

“Indubitably,” she says in a posh English accent. We both giggle. “We’re meeting up at a pub tonight. Wish me luck.”

“Luck!” I shout.

I like seeing Margot like this, so light and happy and unserious. I think it must mean she’s really and truly over Josh.

## 20

“Don’t stand in front of the TV,” Kitty snaps.

I’m dusting the bookshelves with a new feather duster that I ordered online. I don’t know the last time anybody dusted in here. I whirl around and say, “Why are you being such a mean little crab apple today?”

“I’m just in a mood,” she mutters, stretching her string-bean legs out in front of her. “Shanae was supposed to come over today and now she isn’t.”

“Well, don’t take it out on me.”

Kitty scratches her knee. “Hey, what would you think about me sending Ms Rothschild a valentine on Daddy’s behalf?”

“Don’t you dare!” I shake my feather duster at her. “You’ve got to stop with this meddling habit of yours, Katherine. It’s not cute.”

Kitty gives me a deep eye roll. “Ugh, I never should have told you.”

“Too late now. Look, if two people are meant to be, they’ll find their way to each other.”

“Would you and Peter have ~~found~~ your way to each other’ if I hadn’t sent those letters?” she challenges.

Point one for Kitty. “Probably not,” I admit.

“No, definitely not. You needed my little push.”

“Don’t act like sending my letters was some altruistic act on your part. You know you did it out of spite.”

Kitty sails right past that and asks, “What does ~~altruistic~~ mean?”

“Selfless, charitable, generous of spirit ... a.k.a. the opposite of you.” Kitty shrieks and lunges at me, and we struggle briefly, both of us breathless and giggling and bumping into the shelves. I used to be able to disarm her with not much effort, but she’s gaining on me. Her legs are strong, and she’s good at wriggling out of my grasp like a worm. I finally get both her arms behind her back, and she yells, “I give, I give!” As soon as I release her, she jumps up and attacks me again, tickling under my arms and going for my neck.

“Not the neck, not the neck!” I shriek. The neck is my weak spot, which everyone in my family knows. I fall to my knees, laughing so hard it hurts. “Stop, stop! Please!”

Kitty stops tickling. “And that’s me being altru ... altruistic,” she says. “That’s my altruicity.”

“Altruism,” I pant.

“I think ~~altruicity~~ works too.”

If Kitty hadn’t sent those letters, would Peter and I still have found our way to each other? My first impulse is to say no, but maybe we would have kept going down different paths and converged at some other fork in the road. Or maybe not, but either way, we’re here now.



## 21

“Tell me more about your young man,” Stormy says. We’re sitting cross-legged on her floor, setting aside pictures and mementos for her scrapbook. She was the only one to show up for Scrapbooking to the Oldies today, so we moved it over to her apartment. I’d worried Janette would notice the low attendance, but since I started volunteering, she hasn’t so much as popped her head in. All the better.

“What do you want to know about him?”

“Does he play any sports?”

“He plays lacrosse.”

“Lacrosse?” she repeats. “Not football or baseball or basketball?”

“Well, he’s very good. He’s being recruited by colleges.”

“Can I see a picture of him?”

I get my phone out and pull up a picture of the two of us in his car. He’s wearing a hunter green sweater that I think he looks particularly handsome in. I like him in sweaters. I get the urge to cuddle and pet him like a stuffed animal.

Stormy looks at it closely. “Huh,” she says. “Yes, he is very handsome. I don’t know if he’s as handsome as my grandson, though. My grandson looks like a young Robert Redford.”

Whoa.

“I’ll show you if you don’t believe me,” she says, getting up and rooting around for a picture. She’s opening drawers,

moving papers around. Any other grandmother at Belleview would already have a picture of her beloved grandson on display. Framed, above the TV or on the mantel. Not Stormy. The only pictures she has framed are pictures of herself. There's a huge black-and-white bridal portrait in the entryway that takes up nearly the whole wall. Though I suppose if I was once that beautiful, I would want to show it off too. "Huh. I can't find a picture."

"You can show me next time," I say, and Stormy lowers herself back down on the couch.

She puts her legs up on the ottoman. "Where do young people go these days for a little alone time? Is there no 'Lookout Point' type of place?" She's digging, she's definitely digging for information. Stormy's a bloodhound when it comes to sniffing out juicy goods, but I'm not giving up a thing. Not that I even have much juice to offer her.

"Um, I don't know ... I don't think so." I busy myself with cleaning up a pile of scraps.

She starts to cut up some trimmings. "I remember the first boy I ever went parking with. Ken Newbery. He drove a Chevy Impala. God, the thrill of a boy putting his hands on you for the first time. There's nothing quite like it, is there, dear?"

"Mm-hmm. Where's that stack of old Broadway playbills you had? We should do something with those, too."

"They might be in my hope chest."

*The thrill of a boy putting his hands on you for the first time.*

I get a shivery feeling in my stomach. I do know that thrill. I remember it perfectly, and I would even if it hadn't been caught on camera. It's nice to think of it again as its own memory, separate from the video and everything that followed.

Stormy leans in close and says, "Lara Jean, just remember, the girl must always be the one to control how far things go. Boys think with their you-know-whats. It's up to you to keep your head and protect what's yours."

"I don't know, Stormy. Isn't that kind of sexist?"

"Life is sexist. If you were to get pregnant, you're the one whose life changes. Nothing of significance changes for the boy. You're the one people whisper about. I've seen that show, *Teen Moms*. All those boys are worthless. Garbage!"

"Are you saying I shouldn't have sex?" This whole time, Stormy has been telling me to stop being such a stick-in-the-mud, to live life, to love boys. And now this?

"I'm saying you should be careful. As careful as life and death, because that's what it is." She gives me a meaningful look. "And never trust the boy to bring the condom. A lady always brings her own."

I cough.

"Your body is yours to protect *and* to enjoy." She raises both eyebrows at me meaningfully. "Whoever you should choose to partake in that enjoyment, that is your choice, and choose wisely. Every man that ever got to touch me was afforded an *honour*. A privilege." Stormy waves her hand over me. "All this? It's a privilege to worship at this temple, do you understand my meaning? Not just any young fool can approach the throne.

Remember my words, Lara Jean. You decide who, how far and how often, if ever.“

“I had no idea you were such a feminist,” I say.

“Feminist?” Stormy makes a disgusted sound in her throat. “I’m no *feminist*. Really, Lara Jean!”

“Stormy, don’t get worked up about it. All it means is that you believe men and women are equal, and should have equal rights.“

“I don’t think any man is my equal. Women are far superior, and don’t you forget it. Don’t forget any of the things I just told you. In fact you should probably be writing it down for my memoirs.“ She starts to hum “Stormy Weather“.

There was never a threat of things going too far when we were fake. But I see now how fast things can change without you even realizing it. It can go from a kiss to hands under my shirt in two seconds, and it’s so feverish, so frenzied. It’s like we’re on a high-speed train that’s going somewhere fast, and I like it, I do, but I also like a slow train where I can look out the window and appreciate the countryside, the buildings, the mountains. It’s like I don’t want to miss the little steps; I want it to last. And then the next second I want to grow up faster, more, now. To be as ready as everyone else is. How is everyone else so ready?

I still find it very surprising, having a boy in my personal space. I still get nervous when he puts his arm around my waist or reaches for my hand. I don’t think I know how to date in the 2010s. I’m confused by it. I don’t want what Margot and Josh had, or Peter and Genevieve. I want something different.

I guess you could call me a late bloomer, but that implies that we're all on some predetermined blooming schedule, that there's a right or a wrong way to be sixteen and in love with a boy.

*My body is a temple not just any boy gets to worship at.*

*I won't do any more than I want to do.*

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## 22

Peter and I are at Starbucks, sitting side by side, studying for our chemistry exam. Idly, he puts his arm around my chair and starts twisting my hair around his pencil and letting it unfurl like a slice of ribbon. I ignore him. He pulls my chair closer to his and plants a warm kiss on my neck, which makes me giggle. I scoot away from him. “I can’t concentrate when you do that.”

“You said you like when I play with your hair.”

“I do, but I’m trying to study.” I look around and then whisper, “Besides, we’re in public.”

“There’s hardly anybody in here!”

“There’s the barista, and that guy over there by the door.” I try to discreetly point with my pencil. Things have been quiet at school; the last thing we need is another meme flare-up.

“Lara Jean, nobody’s going to film us if that’s what you’re worried about. We’re not doing anything.”

“I told you from the start I’m not into PDAs,” I remind him.

Peter smirks. “Really? Let’s not forget who kissed who in the hallway. You literally jumped on top of me, Covey.”

I blush. “There was a purpose for that and you know it.”

“There’s a purpose now,” he pouts. “The purpose is I’m bored and I feel like kissing you. Is that a crime?”

“You’re such a baby,” I say, pinching his nose hard. “If you stay quiet and study for forty-five more minutes, I’ll let you kiss me in the privacy of your car.”

Peter's face lights up. "Deal." His phone buzzes, and he reaches down to check it. He frowns and texts something, his fingers lightning quick.

"Is everything OK?" I ask.

He nods, but he looks distracted, and he keeps texting, even as we're supposed to be studying. And now I'm distracted too, wondering what it could be. Or who.

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## 23

I'm pushing my grocery cart around, looking for condensed milk for key lime pie, when I spot Josh in the cereal aisle. I roll right up to him and bump him with my cart.

"Hey, neighbour," I say.

"Hey, so guess what." Josh grins a pleased, proud sort of grin. "I got into UVA early."

I let out a high-pitched shriek and let go of my cart. "Josh! That's amazing!" I throw my arms around him and jump up and down. I shake his shoulders. "Be more excited, you loon!"

He laughs and jumps up and down a few times too before releasing me. "I am excited. My parents are out of their heads excited because now they don't have to pay out-of-state tuition. They haven't fought in days." Shyly he asks, "Will you tell Margot? I feel like I can't call her myself, but she deserves to know. She's the one who helped me study all that time. It's partly because of her that this is even happening."

"I'll tell her. I know she'll be really happy for you, Josh. My dad and Kitty, too." I lift my hand for a high five, and he smacks it. I can't believe it – Josh is going to college, and soon he won't be my neighbour any more. Not like before. Now that he'll be graduating and leaving town, maybe his parents will finally get their divorce, and then they'll sell the house and he won't even be my sort-of neighbour. Things have been off with us for months, even before the Margot break-up, and we haven't hung out in ages ... but I liked knowing that he was



there, right next door if I needed him. “Once a little more time has passed...” I begin. “Once we have the all clear from Margot, will you come over for dinner again like before? Everyone misses you. I know Kitty’s dying to show you Jamie’s new tricks. I’ll tell you right now, it’s nothing fancy, so don’t get excited. But still.”

A smile spreads across his face, that slow smile I know so well. “All right,” he says.

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## 24

The song girls take valentine making very seriously. A valentine is humble and sweet and sincere in its old-fashionedness, and as such, home-made is best. I have plenty of raw materials from my scrapbooking, but in addition I've saved snippets of lace and ribbon and doilies. I have a tin with little beads and pearls and rhinestones in it; I have antiquey rubber stamps, too – a Cupid, hearts of all kinds, flowers.

Historically, Daddy gets one valentine from the three of us. This year is the first that Margot will be sending one of her own. Josh will get one too, though I let Kitty take the lead on it and merely sign my name under hers.

I've spent the better part of the afternoon on Peter's. It's a white heart, edged in white lace. In the centre I've stitched *YOU'RE MINE, PETER K* in pink string. I know it will make him smile. It's lighthearted, teasing; it doesn't take itself too seriously, much like Peter himself. Still, it acknowledges the day and the fact that we, Peter Kavinsky and Lara Jean Song Covey, are in a relationship. I was going to make a much more extravagant card, big and beaded and lacy, but Kitty said it would be a bit much.

“Don't use all my pearls,” I tell Kitty. “It's taken me years to build up my collection. Literally, years.”

Pragmatic as ever, Kitty says, “What's the point of collecting them if you don't use them? All that work so they can just live in a little tin box where no one can even see them?”

“I guess,” I say, because she does have a point. “I’m just saying, only put pearls on the valentines of the people you really like.”

“What about the purple rhinestones?”

“Use as many of those as you want,” I say in a benevolent tone, much like a wealthy landowner to a less-fortunate neighbour. The purple rhinestones don’t go with my motif. I’m shooting for a Victorian look, and purple rhinestones are more Mardi Gras, but you won’t see me saying that to Kitty. Kitty’s temperament is such that when she knows you don’t much value something, she grows suspicious of it too and the appeal is lost to her. For a long time I had her convinced that raisins were my absolute favourite, and she must never ever eat more than her share, when in actuality I hate raisins and was grateful someone else was eating them. Kitty used to hoard raisins; she was probably the most regular kid in kindergarten.

I’m hot-gluing white bric-a-brac around a heart as I wonder aloud, “Should we do a special breakfast for Daddy? We could buy one of those juicers at the mall and make fresh-squeezed pink grapefruit juice. And I think I saw heart waffle makers online for not very expensive.”

“Daddy doesn’t like grapefruit,” Kitty says. “And we barely use our regular waffle maker as it is. How about we just cut the waffle into the shape of a heart instead?”

“That would look so cheap,” I scoff. But she’s right. There’s no sense in buying something we’d only ever use once a year, even if it only costs \$19.99. As Kitty gets older, I see that she is far more like Margot than me.

But then she says, “What if we use our cookie cutter to make heart-shaped pancakes instead? And put in red food colouring?”

I beam at her. “Attagirl!” So maybe she’s got a little bit of me in her after all.

Kitty continues. “We could put red food colouring in the syrup, too, to make it look like blood. A bloody heart!”

No, never mind. Kitty is all her own.

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## 25

The night before Valentine's Day, I get it in my head that my card for Peter isn't enough and cherry turnovers would be a fantastic idea, so I wake up before the sun rises to bake them fresh, and now the kitchen looks like a crime scene. Cherry juice splattered all over the countertops and tiles. It's a bloodbath, a cherry-juice bloodbath. Worse than the time I made red velvet cake and got red food colouring in the backsplash tiles. I had to take a toothbrush to the grout.

But my turnovers turn out so perfect, right out of a cartoon, each one so golden and homey, with their fork-tined edges and the little holes to let out steam. My plan is to bring these to the lunch table; I know that Peter and Gabe and Darrell will appreciate them. I'll give one to Lucas, too. And Chris, if she shows up for school.

I text Peter that I don't need a ride, because I want to get there early and put the valentine in his locker. There's something sweet about a valentine in a locker – when you think about it, a locker is much like a mailbox, and everyone knows that letters sent in the mail are far more romantic than when they're unceremoniously handed over in person.

Kitty comes downstairs around seven, and the two of us set a beautiful Valentine's table setting for Daddy, with his valentines from me, Kitty, and Margot arranged around his plate. I leave him two turnovers. I miss the big reaction because I don't want to get to school after Peter. He always cuts it close, so I figure I'm fine being just five minutes early.

When I get to school, I slip the valentine into Peter's locker, then head to the cafeteria to wait for him.

But when I walk in, he's already there, standing by the vending machines with ... Genevieve. He has his hands on her shoulders, and he is talking to her intently. She's nodding, her eyes downcast. What could it be, this thing that has her so sad? Or is it just an act, a way to keep Peter close?

Here it is Valentine's Day and I feel like I'm interrupting my boyfriend and his ex-girlfriend. Is he really just being a good friend to her, or is it something more? With her I feel like it's always something more, whether he knows it or not. Have they exchanged Valentine's gifts, for old times' sake? Is that me being paranoid or is that a thing that exes who are still friends do?

She spots me then, says something to Peter, and walks past me and out of the cafeteria. He strides over to me. "Happy Valentine's Day, Covey." He puts his hands on my waist and picks me up for a hug like I weigh nothing. Setting me down, he says, "Can we kiss in public since it's a holiday?"

"Where's my valentine first?" I say, holding my hand out.

Peter laughs. "Damn, it's in my backpack. Geez. So greedy." Whatever it is, I can tell he is excited to give it to me, which in turn excites me. He takes my hand and leads me over to the table where his backpack is. "First sit down," he says, and I obey. He sits down next to me. "Close your eyes and hold out your hand."

I do, and I hear him unzip his bag, and then he puts something in my hand, a piece of paper. I open my eyes.

"It's a poem," he says. "For you."

*The moon never beams without bringing me dreams*

*Of beautiful Lara Jean.*

*And stars never rise but I feel the bright eyes*

*Of beautiful Lara Jean.*

I touch my hand to my lips. *Beautiful Lara Jean!* I can't even believe it. "This is my favourite thing anyone has ever done for me. I could squeeze you to death right now I'm so happy." To picture him, sitting at his desk at home, scribbling away with a pen and paper, endears him to me so completely. It gives me shivers. Currents of electricity from my scalp down to my toes.

"Really? You like it?"

"I love it!" I throw my arms around him and squeeze with all my might. I will put this valentine in my hatbox, and when I'm old like Stormy, I will take it out and look at it and remember this exact moment. Forget Genevieve; forget everything. Peter Kavinsky wrote me a poem.

"That's not the only present I brought you. It's not even the best one." He peels away from me and pulls a little velvet jewellery box out of his backpack. I gasp. Pleased, he says, "Hurry up and open it already."

"Is it a pin?"

"It's better."

My hands fly to my mouth. It's my necklace, the heart locket from his mom's antique store, the very same necklace I admired for so many months. At Christmas when Daddy said the necklace had been sold, I thought it was gone from my life for ever. "I can't believe it," I whisper, touching the diamond chip in the middle.

“Here, let me put it on for you.”

I lift my hair up, and Peter comes around and fastens the necklace around my neck. “Can I even accept this?” I wonder aloud. “It was really expensive, Peter! Like, really really expensive.”

He laughs. “I know how much it cost. Don’t worry, my mom cut me a deal. I had to sign over a bunch of weekends to driving the van around picking up furniture for the store, but you know, no biggie. It’s whatever, as long as you’re into it.”

I touch the necklace. “I am! I’m so, so into it.” Surreptitiously I look around the cafeteria. It’s a petty thought, a small thought, but I wish Genevieve were here to see this.

“Wait, where’s my valentine?” Peter asks me.

“It’s in your locker,” I say. Now I’m sort of wishing I didn’t listen to Kitty and let myself go a little overboard this first Valentine’s Day with a boyfriend. With Peter. Oh, well. At least there are the cherry turnovers still warm in my backpack. I’ll give them all to him. Sorry, Chris and Lucas and Gabe.

I can’t stop looking at myself in this necklace. At school, I wear it over my sweater, so all can see and admire. That night I show it to Daddy, to Kitty, to Margot over video chat. As a joke I show it off to Jamie Fox-Pickle. Everyone’s impressed. I don’t take it off, ever: I wear it in the shower; I wear it to sleep.

It’s like in *Little House in the Big Woods*, when Laura got a rag doll for Christmas. It had black button eyes and berry-stained lips and cheeks. Red flannel stockings and a pink-and-blue calico dress. Laura couldn’t take her eyes off of it. She held that



doll tight and forgot the rest of the world. Her mother had to remind her to let the other girls hold it.

That's how I feel. When Kitty asks to try it on, I hesitate for a tiny second and then feel guilty for being so stingy. "Just be careful with it," I tell her as I unclasp the necklace.

Kitty pretends to drop the locket off the chain and I shriek. "Just kidding," she giggles. She goes over to my mirror and looks at herself, her head tilted, neck arched. "Not bad. Aren't you so glad I set this whole you-and-Peter thing in motion?"

I throw a pillow at her.

"Can I borrow it for a special occasion?"

"No!" Then I think of Laura and the doll again. "Yes. If it's a very special occasion."

"Thank you," Kitty says. Then she cocks her head and looks at me with serious eyes. "Lara Jean, can I ask you a question?"

"You can ask me anything," I say.

"It's about boys."

I try not to look too eager as I nod. Boys! So we're here already. All right. "I'm listening."

"And you promise you'll answer honestly? Sister swear?"

"Of course. Come sit by me, Kitty." She sits down next to me on the floor and I put my arm around her, feeling generous and warm and maternal. Kitty really is growing up.

She looks up at me, doe-eyed. "Are you and Peter doing it?"

"What?" I shove her away. "Kitty!"

Gleefully she says, "You promised you'd answer!"

“Well, the answer is no, you sneaky little fink. God! Get out of my room.” Kitty skips off, laughing like a mad hyena. I can hear her all the way down the hallway.

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## 26

Just when I thought the hot-tub-video ordeal was well and truly over with, another version pops up and reminds me that this particular nightmare will never be over. Nothing on the Internet ever dies; isn't that what people say? This time I'm in the library, and out of the corner of my eye I see two sophomore girls sharing a pair of earbuds, watching the video, giggling. There I am, in my nightgown, draped all over Peter's lap like a blanket. For a few seconds I just sit there, trapped in my indecision. To confront or not to confront. I remember Margot's words about rising above it and acting like I couldn't care less. And then I think, *Screw it.*

I stand up, stalk over to them and snatch the earbuds out of the laptop. "Part of Your World" comes blasting out the speakers.

"Hey!" the girl says, whirling in her seat.

Then she sees it's me, and she and her friend exchange a panicky look. She slams the laptop shut. "Go ahead, play it," I say, crossing my arms.

"No thanks," she says.

I reach over her and open it and push play. Whoever's made this video has spliced it with scenes from *The Little Mermaid*. "When's it my turn? Wouldn't I love, love to explore that shore up above..." I snap the computer shut. "Just so you know, watching this video is the equivalent of child pornography, and you guys could be charged for it. Your IP address is already in

the system. Think about that before you forward it on. That's distribution."

The red-haired girl gapes. "How is this child porn?"

"I'm underage and so is Peter."

The other girl smirks and says, "I thought you guys claimed you weren't having sex."

I'm stumped. "Well, we'll let the Justice Department sort that out. But first I'm notifying Principal Lochlan."

"It's not like we're the only ones looking at it!" the red-haired girl says.

"Think about how you'd feel if it were you in that video," I say.

"I'd feel great," the girl mutters. "You're lucky. Kavinsky's hot."

Lucky. Right.

It catches me off guard how upset Peter is when I show him the *Little Mermaid* video. Because nothing bad ever sticks to Peter; it just rolls off his back. That's why people like him so much, I think. He's sure of himself; he's self-possessed. It sets people at ease.

But it's the *Little Mermaid* video that breaks him. We watch it in his car, on his phone, and he's so mad I'm afraid he's going to throw the phone out the window. "Those fuckers! How dare they!" Peter punches the steering wheel, and the horn beeps. I jump. I've never seen him upset like this. I'm not sure what to say, how to calm him down. I grew up in a house full

of women and one gentle dad. I don't know anything about teenage boys' tempers.

"Shit!" he yells. "I hate that I can't protect you from this."

"I don't need you to," I say, and I realize as I say it that it's true. I'm coping on my own just fine.

He stares straight ahead. "But I want to. I thought I fixed it before, but here it is again. It's like fucking herpes."

I want to comfort him, to make him laugh and forget. Teasingly I ask him, "Peter, do you have herpes?"

"Lara Jean, it's not funny."

"Sorry." I put my hand on his arm. "Let's get out of here."

Peter starts the car. "Where do you want to go?"

"Anywhere. Nowhere. Let's just drive." I don't want to run into anybody, I don't want any knowing looks or whispers. I want to hide. Peter's Audi, our little haven. To cover up my bleak thoughts, I give Peter a bright smile, bright enough to make him smile back, just.

The drive calms Peter down, and by the time we get to my house, Peter seems to be in good spirits again. I ask him if he wants to come inside and have pizza, it being pizza night and all. I tell him he can order whichever toppings he wants. But he shakes his head, says he should get home. For the first time he doesn't kiss me goodbye, and it makes me feel guilty, how bad he feels. It's partly my fault, I know it is. He feels like he has to make things right for me, and now he knows he can't, and it's killing him.

When I walk into the house, Daddy is waiting for me at the kitchen table, just sitting and waiting, eyebrows knit together.

“Why haven’t you been answering your phone?”

“Sorry ... my battery died. Is everything OK?” Judging by the serious look on his face, everything is definitely not OK.

“We need to talk, Lara Jean. Come sit down.”

Dread hits me like a tidal wave. “Why, Daddy? What’s wrong? Where’s Kitty?”

“She’s in her room.” I put down my bag and make my way over to the kitchen table, feet moving as slow as I can make them. I sit down next to him and he sighs heavily, hands folded.

Just as I say, “Is this about the dating profile I set up for you? Because I haven’t even activated it yet,” he says, “Why didn’t you tell me what was going on at school?”

My heart drops all the way to the floor. “What do you mean?” I’m still hoping, praying this is about something else. Tell me I failed my chemistry test; say anything but the hot tub.

“The video of you and Peter.”

“How did you find out?” I whisper.

“Your guidance counsellor called me. She was worried about you. Why didn’t you tell me what was going on, Lara Jean?”

He looks so stern, and so very disappointed, which I hate most of all. I feel pressure building behind my eyes. “Because ... I was ashamed. I didn’t want you to think of me that way. Daddy, I swear, all we were doing was kissing. That’s it.”

“I haven’t seen the video, and I won’t. That’s private, between you and Peter. But I wish you had used better judgement that day, Lara Jean. There are long-lasting consequences to our actions.”

“I know.” Tears roll down my cheeks.

Daddy takes my hand out of my lap and holds it in his. “It pains me that you didn’t come to me when things were so hard for you at school. I knew you were going through something, but I didn’t want to push too hard. I always try to think about what your mom would do if she were here. I know it’s not easy, only having a dad to talk to—“ His voice breaks, and I cry harder. “But I’m trying. I really am trying.”

I jump out of my seat and throw my arms around him. “I know you’re trying,” I cry.

He hugs me back. “You have to know you can come to me, Lara Jean. No matter what it is. I’ve spoken to Principal Lochlan, and he’s going to make an announcement tomorrow saying that anyone who watches or distributes the video will be suspended.”

Relief floods over me. I should’ve come to my dad in the first place. I stand up straight, and he reaches up and wipes my cheeks. “Now, what’s this about a dating profile?”

“Oh... “ I sit back down again. “Well ... I started one for you on [Singleparentloveconnection.com](http://Singleparentloveconnection.com).” He’s frowning, so I quickly say, “Grandma doesn’t think it’s good for a man to be alone for so long, and I agree with her. I thought online dating could help you get back out there.”

“Lara Jean, I can handle my own dating life! I don’t need my daughter managing my dates.”

“But ... you never go on any.”

“That’s my concern, not yours. I want you to take down that profile tonight.”

“It was never even active; I just set it up in case. It’s a whole new world out there, Daddy.”

“Right now we’re talking about your love life, not mine, Lara Jean. Mine we’ll save for another time. I want to hear about yours.”

“OK.” Primly, I fold my hands in front of me on the table. “What do you want to know?”

He scratches his neck. “Well ... are you and Peter pretty serious?”

“I don’t know. I mean, I think I might love him. But maybe it’s too early to say. How serious can you be in high school, anyway? Look at Margot and Josh and how that turned out.”

Wistfully, Daddy says, “He never comes around here any more.”

“Exactly. I don’t want to be the girl crying in her dorm room over a boy.” I stop suddenly. “That’s something Mommy said to Margot. She said don’t be the girl who goes to college with a boyfriend and then misses out on everything.”

He smiles a knowing kind of smile. “That sounds like her.”

“Who was her high school boyfriend? Did she love him a lot? Did you ever meet him?”



“Your mom didn’t have a high school boyfriend. That was her room-mate she was talking about. Robyn.” Daddy chuckles. “She drove your mom crazy.”

I rest back in my seat. All this time I thought Mommy was talking about herself.

“I remember the first time I saw your mom. She was throwing a dinner in her dorm called Fakesgiving, and a buddy of mine and I went. It was a big Thanksgiving meal in May. She had on a red dress, and her hair was long back then. You know, you’ve seen the pictures.” He pauses, a smile flickering on his face. “She gave me a hard time because I brought canned green beans and not fresh ones. That’s how you knew if she liked someone, if she teased them. Of course, I didn’t know it at the time. I was pretty clueless about girls back then.”

Ha! *Back then*. “I thought you guys met in a psychology class,” I say.

“According to your mom, we took the same class one semester, but I don’t remember seeing her. It was in one of those lecture halls with hundreds of people.”

“But she noticed you,” I say. That, I’ve heard before. She said she liked the way he paid attention in class, and how his hair was a little too long in the back, like an absent-minded professor.

“Thank God she did. Where would I be without her?”

This gives me pause. Where *would* he be? Without us, certainly, but probably he wouldn’t be a widower either. Would his life have been happier if he’d married some other girl, made some other choice?

Daddy tips my chin. Firmly he says, “I would be nowhere without her, because I wouldn’t have my girls.”

I call Peter and tell him Mrs Duvall called my dad and he knows all about the video, but he’s talked to Principal Lochlan and everything will be fine now. I expect him to be relieved, but he still sounds down. “Now your dad probably hates me,” he says.

“He doesn’t,” I assure him.

“Do you think I should say something to him? I don’t know, like, apologize, man to man?”

I shudder. “Definitely not. My dad is super awkward.”

“Yeah, but—”

“Please stop worrying, Peter. It’s like I told you, my dad’s sorted it all out. Principal Lochlan will make the announcement and people will leave us alone. Besides, there’s nothing for you to apologize for. I was in it just as much as you were. You didn’t make me do anything I didn’t want to do.”

We hang up soon after, and even though I feel better about the video, I still feel unsettled about Peter. I know he’s upset about not being able to protect me, but I also know that part of why he’s upset is because his pride was injured, and that has nothing to do with me. Is a boy’s ego really such a fragile, breakable thing? It must be so.

The letter comes on a Tuesday, but I don't see it until Wednesday morning before school. I'm at the kitchen window seat, eating an apple, going through the stack of mail while I wait for Peter to pick me up. Electric bill, cable bill, a Victoria's Secret catalogue, Kitty's issue of this month's *Dog Fancy (For Kids!)*. And then a letter, in a white envelope, addressed to me. A boy's handwriting. A return address I don't recognize.

Dear Lara Jean,

A tree fell in our driveway last week and Mr Barber of Barber Landscaping came by to haul it away. The Barbers are the family who moved into our old house in Meadowridge, and not to overstate, but they own a landscaping company. Mr Barber brought your letter. I saw on the postmark you sent it way back in September, but I only just got it this week, because it was sent to my old house. That's why it took me so long to write back.

Your letter made me remember all kinds of stuff I thought I'd forgotten. Like that time your older sister made peanut brittle in the microwave and you guys decided we should have a break-dancing contest for who got the biggest piece. Or the time I got locked out of my house one afternoon and I went to the tree house and you and I just read until it got really dark and we had to use a flashlight. I remember your neighbour was grilling hamburgers and you dared me to go ask for one for us to share, but I was too chicken. When I went home I was in so much trouble because no one knew where I was, but it was worth it.

I stop reading. I remember that day we both got locked out! It was Chris and John and me, and then Chris had to leave and it was just John and me. My dad had been at a seminar; I don't remember where Margot and Kitty were. We got so hungry, we tore into the bag of Skittles that Trevor had stashed under a loose floorboard. I suppose I could have gone to Josh's for food

and shelter, but there was something fun in being vagabonds with John Ambrose McClaren. It was like we were runaways.

I have to tell you, your letter blew me away, because when I was thirteen, I was still such a little kid, and here you were this actual person with complex thoughts and emotions. My mom still cut my apple up for me for afternoon snack. If I had written a letter to you in eighth grade it would have said, your hair is pretty. That's it. Just, your hair is pretty. I was so clueless. I had no idea you liked me back then.

A few months ago I saw you at a Model UN scrimmage at Thomas Jefferson. I doubt you recognized me, but I was there representing the Republic of China. You dropped off a note for me and I called your name but you kept walking. I tried to find you later, but you were gone. Did you see me?

I guess what I'm most curious about is why you decided to send me the letter after all this time. So if you want to call me, or email me, or write me, please do.

Yours truly, John

PS. Since you asked - the only people that call me Johnny are my mom and my grandma, but feel free.

I let out a long sigh.

In middle school John Ambrose McClaren and I had all of two “romantic“ encounters – the spin-the-bottle kiss, which honestly wasn't the least bit romantic, and that day in the rain during gym, which up until this year was the most romantic moment of my life. I'm sure John doesn't remember it that way. I doubt he remembers it at all. To get this letter from him, after all this time, it's like he's come back from the dead. It feels different from seeing him for those few seconds at Model UN in December. That was like seeing a ghost. This is a real, living person I used to know, who used to know me.

John was smart; he made the best grades of the boys, and I made the best grades of the girls. We were in honours classes together. He liked history best – he always did his readings –

but he was good at maths and science, too. I'm sure that hasn't changed.

If Peter was the last boy in our grade to get tall, John was the first. I liked his yellow hair, sunny and fair like white summer corn. He was innocent and sweet-cheeked, he had the face of a boy who'd never been in trouble, and the neighbourhood mothers loved him best. He just had this look about him. That's what made him such a good partner in crime. He and Peter used to get into all kinds of mischief together. John was the clever one, he had the great ideas, but he was a little bit shy to talk because he used to have a stutter.

He liked to play a supporting role, whereas Peter loved to be the star. So everyone always gave the credit, and the blame, to Peter, because he was the scamp and how could an angel like John Ambrose McClaren really be to blame for anything? Not that there was even much blame. People are so charmed by beautiful boys. Beautiful boys get an indulgent shake of the head and an "Oh, Peter", not even a slap on the wrist. Our English teacher Ms Holt used to call them Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, which none of us had ever heard of. Peter convinced her to show the movie to us in class one day, and then they argued all year over who got to be Butch and who had to be the Sundance Kid, even though it was very clear to everyone who was who.

I bet all the girls at his school like him. When I saw him at the Model UN scrimmage, he looked so assured, the way he sat tall in his seat, shoulders squared, utterly focused. If I went to John's school, I bet I would be right there at the front of the pack, with binoculars and a granola bar, camping out at his locker. I'd have his schedule memorized; I'd know his lunch by

heart. Does he still eat double-decker peanut butter and jelly sandwiches on whole wheat bread? I wonder. There are so many things I don't know.

Peter's car honking out front is what shakes me out of my reverie. I jump guiltily at the sound. I have this crazy impulse to hide the letter, to tuck it away in my hatbox for safekeeping and never think about it again. But then I think, no, that would be crazy. Of course I'll write John Ambrose McClaren back. It would be rude not to.

So I tuck the letter in my bag, throw on my white puffer coat and run outside to Peter's car. There's still a bit of snow on the ground from the last storm, but it looks shabby, like a threadbare rug. I'm an all-or-nothing kind of girl when it comes to weather, I'd much rather it all melt away or have feet and feet of snow, so deep your knees sink in.

When I get in Peter's car, he's texting on his phone. "What's up?" I ask him.

"Nothing," he says. "It's just Gen. She wanted me to give her a ride, but I told her we can't."

My skin prickles. It rankles that they still text so much, that they're in such easy contact, enough to ask for rides. But they're friends, just friends. That's what I keep telling myself. And he's telling me the truth, just like we promised we would. "Guess who I got a letter from."

He backs out of the driveway. "Who?"

"Guess."

"Um ... Margot?"

“Why would that be surprising? No, not Margot. John Ambrose McClaren!”

Peter just looks confused. “McClaren? Why would he write you a letter?”

“Because I wrote him one, remember? Same as I did to you. There were five love letters, and his was the only letter that never came back. I thought it was lost for ever, but then a tree fell in John’s driveway after this last ice storm, and Mr Barber came to haul it away and he brought the letter.”

“Who’s Mr Barber?”

“He’s the man who bought John’s old house. He owns a landscaping company – that’s all beside the point, anyway. The point is, John only just got my letter last week; that’s why it took him so long to write back.”

“Hm,” Peter says, messing with the heating vents. “So he wrote you an actual letter? Not an email?”

“No, it was a real letter that came in the mail.” I watch to see if he is jealous, to see if this new development gets under his skin even a little.

“Hm,” Peter says again. The second *hm* is bored-sounding, non-committal. Not the slightest bit jealous. “How is the Sundance Kid anyway?” He sniggers. “McClaren used to hate when I called him that.”

“I remember,” I say. We’re at the stoplight; there’s a line to get into school.

“What’d the letter say?”

“Oh, you know, just ~~how~~ are you’, the usual sort of things.“ I look out the window. I’m feeling a bit stingy about sharing extra information because his ho-hum reaction hasn’t merited any. Doesn’t he have the decency to at least *act* like he cares?

Peter drums his fingers on the steering wheel. “We should hang out with him sometime.“

The thought of Peter and John Ambrose McClaren in the same space together again is discomfiting. Where would I even look? Vaguely I say, “Hmm, maybe.“ Perhaps bringing up the letter wasn’t such a great idea.

“I think he still has my old baseball glove,” he muses. “Hey, did he say anything about me?“

“Like what?“

“I don’t know. Like did he ask what I was up to?“

“Not really.“

“Hmm.“ Peter’s mouth turns down into a miffed sort of expression. “What’d you write him back?“

“I just got it! I haven’t had time to write anything back.“

“Tell him I say hey when you do,” he says.

“Sure,” I say. I feel around in my bag to make sure the letter is still in there.

“So, wait, if you sent a love letter to five of us, does that mean you liked us all equally?“

He’s looking at me with expectant eyes, and I know he thinks I’m going to say I liked him best, but that wouldn’t be true. “Yes, I liked you all exactly the same,” I tell him.



“Bullshit! Who’d you like best? Me, right?”

“That’s a really impossible question to answer, Peter. I mean, it’s all relative. I could say I liked Josh best, because I liked him longest, but you can’t judge who you love the most by how long you love them.”

“Love?”

“Like,” I say.

“You definitely said ~~love~~’.”

“Well, I meant ~~like~~’.”

“What about McClaren?” he asks. “How much did you like him in comparison to the rest of us?”

Finally! A little jealousy at last. “I liked him ...” I’m about to say “the same“, but I hesitate. According to Stormy, no one can ever like anyone exactly the same. But how can you possibly quantify how much you like a person, much less two? Peter always has to be liked the best. He expects it. So I just say, “It’s unknowable. But I like you best now.”

Peter shakes his head. “For someone who’s never had a boyfriend before, you really know how to work a guy.”

I raise my eyebrows. *I* know how to work a guy? That’s the first time I’ve ever heard that in my life. Genevieve, Chris, *they* know how to work guys. Not me. Never me.

Dear John (ny),

First of all, thanks for writing me back. That was a really nice surprise. Second of all . . . the story behind the letter. I wrote you that letter in eighth grade, but I never meant for you to see it. It sounds crazy, I know, it was just a thing I used to do – when I liked a boy, I'd write the letter and then I'd hide it away in my hatbox. The letters were just for me. But then my little sister Kitty – remember her? Scrawny and willful? – sent them all out back in September, including yours.

I do remember that break-dancing contest. I think Peter won. He would've taken the biggest piece of peanut brittle either way, though! This is random but do you remember how he used to always take the last piece of pizza? So annoying. Do you remember how he and Trevor got into a fight over it and they ended up dropping the pizza and nobody got to have it? Do you remember how all of us went to your house to say goodbye when you moved? I made a

chocolate cake with chocolate peanut butter frosting, and I brought a knife but your forks and plates were all packed up, so we ate it on the front porch with our hands. When I got home, I realized that the corners of my mouth were stained brown from the chocolate. I was so embarrassed. It feels like such a long time ago.

I'm not in Model UN but I was there that day and I did see you. Actually, I had a feeling you might be there because I remembered how into Model UN you were in middle school. I'm sorry I didn't stick around so we could catch up. I think I was just startled because it had been so long. You looked the same to me too. Much taller, though.

I have a favour to ask – would you mind sending me back my letter? The other ones have found their way back to me, and though I'm sure it will be excruciating, I'd really like to know what I said.

Your friend, Lara Jean

## 29

It's late, and all the lights are off at my house. Daddy's at the hospital; Kitty's at a sleepover. I can tell Peter wants to come inside, but my dad will be home soon and he might be freaked out if he gets home and it's just the two of us alone in the house so late. Daddy hasn't said anything in so many words, but since the video, something shifted just the tiniest fraction. Now when I go out with Peter, Daddy oh-so-casually asks what time I'll be home, where we'll be. He never used to ask those kinds of questions, though I suppose he never had much reason to before.

I look over at Peter, who has turned off the ignition. Suddenly I say, "Why don't we go up to Carolyn Pearce's old tree house?"

Readily, he agrees. "Let's do it."

It's dark outside; I've never been up here in such darkness. There was always a light on from the Pearces' kitchen or garage or from our house. Peter climbs up first and then shines his phone flashlight down on me as I make my way up.

He marvels at how, inside, nothing's changed. It's just like we left it. Kitty never had much interest in coming up here. It's just been sort of abandoned since we stopped using it in eighth grade. "We" was the neighbourhood kids my age: Genevieve, Allie Feldman, sometimes Chris, sometimes the boys – Peter, John Ambrose McClaren, Trevor. It was just a private place; we weren't doing anything bad like smoke or drink. We'd sit up there and talk.

Genevieve was always thinking up games of Who Would You Choose. If we were on a deserted island, which of us here would you choose? Peter picked Genevieve without hesitation, because she was his girlfriend. Chris said she'd pick Trevor because he was the meatiest and also the most obnoxious, and who knew if at some point she'd have to resort to cannibalism. I said I'd pick Chris because I'd never get bored. Chris liked that; Genevieve frowned at me, but she'd already been picked once. And besides, it was true: Chris would be the funner island companion, and probably more helpful around the island. I doubted Genevieve would help gather firewood or spear a fish. John took a long time to decide. He went around the circle, weighing all of our merits. Peter was a fast runner, Trevor was strong, Genevieve was crafty, Chris could handle herself in a fight, and for me he said I would never give up hope of being rescued. So he picked me.

It was the last summer we spent outside. Just, every day was outside. As you grow up, you spend less and less time outside. Nobody can say "Go play outside" any more to you. But that summer we did. It was the hottest summer in a hundred years, they said. We spent most of it on bikes, at the pool. We played games.

Peter sits down on the floor and takes off his coat and spreads it out like a blanket. "You can sit here."

I sit down, and he pulls me towards him by my ankles, reeling me in carefully like a big fish that might jump off the line. When we're knees to knees, he kisses me: soft-lipped, *we have all the time in the world* kisses. I'm shaking, but not from the cold. I feel jittery heart-palpitations kind of nerves. Peter bends

his head and starts kissing my neck, making his way down to my collarbone. I'm so keyed up, it doesn't even tickle the way it normally does when someone touches my neck. His mouth is warm, and it feels nice. I fall back against my hands, and he moves over me. Is this it? Is this when it's supposed to happen? On the floor of Carolyn Pearce's tree house?

When his hand moves under my blouse, but still over my bra, a panicky thought leaps into my head, one I haven't thought before – Genevieve's boobs are definitely bigger than mine. Will he be disappointed?

Suddenly I blurt out, "I'm not ready to have sex with you."

His head jerks up in alarm. "God, Lara Jean! You scared me."

"Sorry. I just wanted to make that clear, in case it wasn't."

"It was clear." Peter flashes a hurt look at me and sits up, his back ramrod straight. "I'm not some caveman. Damn!"

"I know," I say. I sit up and fix my necklace so the heart is in front. "Just ... I hope you weren't thinking that because you gave me this beautiful necklace, that..." I stop talking because he's glaring at me. "Sorry, sorry. But ... do you miss sex? Since you and Genevieve used to do it all the time, I mean?" We've all heard the stories about Kavinsky and Gen's sex life, how they did it in Steve Bledell's parents' bedroom at his last-day-of-school party, how she went on the pill in ninth grade. How can someone who's used to having sex 24/7 be content with someone like me, a virgin who's so far barely been to second base with him? Not content. "Content" is the wrong word. Happy.

“We didn’t do it all the time! I don’t want to talk about this with you. It’s too weird.”

“I’m just saying, since I’ve never done it, but you’ve done it a lot, is that, like, a void in your life? Do you maybe feel like ... like you’re missing out? Is it, like, if I never had an ice cream sundae, so I don’t know how good it is, but then I finally try one and I’m craving it all the time?” I chew on my bottom lip. “Are you ... craving it all the time?”

“No!”

“Be honest!”

“Do I wish we were having sex? I mean, OK, yes. But it’s not like I’m trying to pressure you. I’ve never even brought it up! And it’s not like guys don’t have other ways of ...” He goes red. “Of release.”

“So ... do you look at porn, then?”

“Lara Jean!”

“I have a naturally inquisitive personality! You know that about me. You used to answer all my questions.”

“That was before. Now it’s different.”

Sometimes Peter can say the most insightful thing and not even realize he’s said it. Things *are* different. They were easier before. Before sex was ever up for discussion.

Haltingly I say, “In the contract we said we’d always tell the truth.”

“Fine, but I’m not talking to you about porn.” I start to ask another question and Peter adds, “All I’ll say about it is, any guy that says he never looks at porn is a liar.”

“So you do.” I nod to myself. OK. Good to know. “You know those statistics people are always spouting off about teenage boys thinking about sex every seven seconds? Is that really true?”

“Nope. And I just want to point out that you’re the one who keeps bringing up sex. I think teenage girls might be more obsessed than boys.”

“Maybe,” I say, and his eyes widen, all excited. Hastily I add, “I mean, I’m definitely curious about it. It’s definitely a *thought*. But I don’t see myself doing it anytime soon. With anybody. Including you.”

I can tell Peter is embarrassed, the way he rushes to say, “OK, OK, I got it. Let’s just change the subject.” Under his breath he mutters, “I didn’t even want to talk about it in the first place.”

It’s sweet that he’s embarrassed. I didn’t think he would be, with all his experience. I tug on his sweater sleeve. “At some point, when I’m ready, if I’m ready, I’ll let you know.” And then I pull him towards me and press my lips against his softly. His mouth opens, and so does mine, and I think, *I could kiss this boy for hours*.

Mid-kiss, he says, “Wait, so we’re never having sex? Like ever?”

“I didn’t say never. But not now. I mean, not until I’m really, really sure. OK?”

He lets out a laugh. “Sure. You’re the one driving this bus. You have been from the start. I’m still catching up.” He



snuggles closer and sniffs my hair. “What’s this new shampoo you’re wearing?”

“I stole it from Margot. It’s juicy pear. Nice, right?”

“It’s all right, I guess. But can you go back to the one you used to wear? The coconut one? I love the smell of that one.” A dreamy look crosses his face, like evening fog settling over a city.

“If I feel like it,” I say, which makes him pout. I’m already thinking I should buy a bottle of the coconut hair mask, too, but I like to keep him on his toes. Like he said, I’m the one driving this bus. Peter pulls me against him so he’s curved around my back like shelter. I let my head rest on his shoulder, rest my arms on his kneecaps. This is nice. This is cosy. Just me and him, just for a while, apart from the rest of the world.

We’re sitting there like that when suddenly I remember something, an important something. The time capsule. John Ambrose McClaren’s grandmother gave it to him for his birthday in seventh grade. He’d asked for a video game, but the time capsule was what he got. He said he was going to throw it away, but then he thought one of us girls might want it. I said I wanted it, and then Genevieve said she wanted it, so of course Chris chimed in too. And then I had the idea to bury it right there in the Pearces’ backyard under the tree house. I got really excited and said everybody needed to put in something that they had on them at that very moment. I said we should come back the day we graduate from high school and open it up and reminisce.

“Do you remember that time capsule we buried?” I ask him.

“Oh, yeah! McClaren’s. Let’s dig it up!”

“We can’t open it without everybody else,” I say.  
“Remember, we were going to do it after high school graduation?” This was when I still thought we’d all be friends.  
“You, me, John, Trevor, Chris, Allie.” I don’t say Genevieve’s name.

Peter doesn’t appear to notice. “All right, then we’ll wait. Whatever my girl wants.”

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# 30

Dear Lara Jean,

I will give you your letter back on one condition. You have to make a solemn

unbreakable vow that you will return it to me after you're done reading it. I need physical proof that a girl liked me in middle school, otherwise who would ever believe it?

And for what it's worth, that peanut butter chocolate cake you baked was the best I ever ate. I never had another cake quite like that one, with my name written in Reese's Pieces. I still think about it sometimes. A guy doesn't forget a cake like that.

I have one question for you. How many letters did you write? Just wondering how special I should feel.

John

*Dear John,*

*I, Lara Jean, hereby make a solemn vow – nay, an unbreakable vow – to return my letter to you, intact and unchanged. Now give me my letter back!*

*Also you're such a liar. You know very well that plenty of girls liked you in middle school. At sleepovers, girls would be like, are you Team Peter or Team John? Don't pretend like you didn't know that, Johnny!*

*And to answer your question – there were five letters. Five meaningful boys in my whole life history. Though, now that I'm*

writing it down, five sounds like a lot, considering the fact that I'm only sixteen. I wonder how many there'll have been by the time I'm twenty! There's this lady at the nursing home I volunteer at, and she's had so many husbands and lived so many lives. I look at her and I think, she must not have even one regret, because she's done and seen it all.

Did I tell you my older sister Margot's all the way in Scotland, at St Andrews? It's where Prince William and Kate Middleton met. Maybe she'll meet a prince, too, haha! Where do you want to go to college? Do you know what you want to study? I think I want to stay in state. Virginia has great public schools and it'll be much cheaper, but I guess the main reason is I'm very close to my family and I don't want to be too-too far away. I used to think I might want to go to UVA and live at home, but now I'm thinking dorms are the way to go for a true college experience.

Don't forget to send back my letter, Lara  
Jean

Daddy's at the hospital, but he's made a big pot of oatmeal, a vat of it like you see in a soup kitchen. By this time it's gummy

and I have to put half a bottle of maple syrup and dried cherries on mine to make it palatable, and even then I'm not sure if I like oatmeal. I make a bowl for me with some chopped-up pecans on top, and a bowl with just honey on top for Kitty. "Have some gruel," I call out. She's in front of the TV, of course.

We sit on stools at the breakfast bar and eat our gruel. I will say there is something satisfying about it, the way it sticks to your insides like paste. As I eat, I keep my eyes towards the window.

Kitty snaps her fingers in my face. "Hello! I asked you a question."

"Has the mail come yet?" I ask.

"The mailman doesn't come until after twelve on Saturdays," Kitty says, licking honey off her spoon. Eyeing me she says, "Why have you been so excited about the mail all week?"

"I'm waiting for a letter," I say.

"From who?"

"Just ... no one important." A rookie mistake. I should've made up a name, because Kitty's eyes narrow, and now she's really interested.

"If it wasn't someone important, you wouldn't be so gaga looking out the window for it. Who's it from?"

"If you must know, it's actually a letter from me. One of those love letters of mine *you* sent out." I reach across the table and pinch her arm. "It's coming back my way."

“From the boy with the funny name. Ambrose. What kind of name is Ambrose?”

“Do you remember him at all? He used to live on our street.”

“He had yellow hair,” Kitty says. “He had a skateboard. He let me play with it once.”

“That sounds like him,” I say, remembering. Of all the boys, he had the most patience with Kitty, even though she was a pain.

“Stop smiling,” Kitty commands. “You already have a boyfriend. You don’t need two.”

My smile slips. “We’re just writing letters, Kitty. Also don’t snap at me.” I lean in to give her another pinch, and she jumps up before I can. “What are you going to do today?”

“Ms Rothschild said she’d take me and Jamie to the dog park,” Kitty says, putting her dirty bowl in the sink. “I’m gonna go over and remind her.”

“You’ve been hanging out with her a lot lately.” Kitty shrugs and gently I say, “Just don’t become a nuisance, all right? I mean, she’s like, forty; she might have other things she wants to be doing with her Saturday. Like go to a winery or a spa. She doesn’t need you harassing her about dating our dad.”

“Ms Rothschild loves hanging out with me, so keep your little opinions to yourself.”

I frown at her. “Seriously, you have such bad manners, Kitty.”

“Blame my manners on you and Margot and Daddy, then. You’re the ones who raised me this way.”

“Then I guess nothing will ever be your fault in life because of the shoddy way you were raised.”

“I guess not.”

I let out a scream of frustration, and Kitty skips off humming to herself, pleased as punch to have annoyed me.

Dear Lara Jean,

For the record, the only reason girls ever paid me any attention was because I was Peter’s best friend. It’s why Sabrina Fox asked me to be her date to the eighth grade formal! She even tried to sit next to Peter at Red Lobster before the dance.

As for college, my dad went to UNC, so he’s really pushing for that. He says I have tar in my blood. My mom wants me to stay in state. I haven’t told anyone this, but I really want to go to Georgetown. Knock on wood. Studying for the SATs as we speak.

Anyway ... here’s your letter back. Don’t forget your promise. I’m really enjoying writing letters back and forth, but can I also have your phone number? You’re pretty hard to find online.

My very first thought is: He hasn’t seen the video. He can’t possibly have! Not if he’s saying I’m so hard to find online. I suppose deep down I must have been worrying about it, because I feel so relieved to know for certain. What a comfort, to know that he can still have a certain idea of me in his head, the same as I have of him. And truly, John Ambrose McClaren isn’t the type of boy to look at Anonybitch. Not the John Ambrose McClaren I remember.

I look back down at the letter, and there, at the bottom, is his phone number.

I blink. Letters were harmless enough, but if John and I started talking on the phone, would that be a betrayal of sorts?

Is there even a difference between texting and letter writing? One is more immediate. But the act of writing a letter, of selecting paper and pen, addressing the envelope, finding a stamp, let alone putting pen to paper ... it's far more deliberate. My cheeks heat up. It's more ... romantic. A letter is something to keep.

Speaking of which ... I unfold the second piece of paper in the envelope. It's creased, a stationery I recognize well. Thick creamy paper with *LJSC* engraved in navy at the top. A birthday gift from my dad because of my delight in anything monogrammed.

*Dear John Ambrose McClaren,*

*I know the exact day it all started. Fall, eighth grade. We got caught in the rain when we had to put all the softball bats away after gym. We started to run back to the building, and I couldn't run as fast as you, so you stopped and grabbed my bag too. It was even better than if you'd grabbed my hand. I still remember the way you looked – your T-shirt was stuck to your back, your hair wet like you just came out of the shower. When it started to pour, you whooped and hollered like a little kid. There was this moment – you looked back at me, and your grin was as wide as your face. You said, "Come on, LJ!"*



It was right then. That's when I knew, all the way down to my soaking-wet Keds. I love you, John Ambrose McClaren. I really love you. I might have loved you for all of high school. I think you might have loved me back. If only you weren't moving away, John! It's so unfair when people move away. It's like their parents just decide something and no one else gets a say in it. Not that I even deserve a say – I'm not your girlfriend or anything. But you at least deserve a say.

I was really hoping that one day I would get to call you Johnny. Your mom came to get you after school once, and a bunch of us were hanging out on the front steps. And you didn't see her car, so she honked and called out, "Johnny!" I loved the sound of that. Johnny. One day, I bet your girlfriend will call you Johnny. She's really lucky. Maybe you already have a girlfriend right now. If you do, know this – once upon a time in Virginia, a girl loved you.

I'm going to say it just this once, since you'll never hear it anyway. Goodbye, Johnny.

*Love,*

*Lara Jean*

I let out a scream, so loud and so piercing that Jamie barks in alarm. “Sorry,” I whisper, falling back against my pillows.

I cannot believe that John Ambrose McClaren read that letter. I didn’t remember it to be so . . . naked. With so much . . . yearning. God, why do I have to be a person who yearns so much? How horrible. How perfectly horrible. I’ve never been naked in front of a boy before, but now I feel like I have. I can’t bear to look at it again, to even think about it. I scramble up and stuff it back inside the envelope and push it under my bed so it no longer exists. Out of sight, out of mind.

Obviously John won’t be getting this letter back. In fact I don’t know if I should write him back at all. Things feel . . . altered, somehow.

I’d forgotten that letter, how ardently I longed for him. How certain I was, how absolutely certain I believed we were meant to be, if only. The memory of that belief shakes me up; it leaves me feeling unsettled and even uncertain. Unmoored. What was it about him, I wonder, that made me so sure?

Strangely, there’s no mention of Peter in my letter. In the letter I say I started liking him in the fall of eighth grade. I liked Peter in eighth grade too, so there was a definite crossover. When did one begin and the other end?

The one person who would know is the one person I could never ask.

She is the one who foretold that I would like John.

Genevieve slept over at my house most nights that summer. Allie was only allowed to sleep over on special occasions, so it was usually just the two of us. We'd go over what happened that day with the boys, every detail. "This is going to be our crew," she said to me one night, her lips barely moving. We were doing Korean face masks my grandma had sent, the kind that look like ski masks, and drip with "essence" and vitamins and spa-like things. "This is what high school is going to be like. It'll be me and Peter and you and McClaren, and Chrissy and Allie can share Trevor. We'll all be power couples."

"But John and I don't like each other like that," I said, teeth clenched to keep my face mask from shifting.

"You will," she said. She said it like it was a preordained fact, and I believed her. I always believed her.

But none of it came to be, except for the Gen and Peter part.

Lucas and I are sitting cross-legged in the hallway, sharing a strawberry-shortcake ice cream bar. “Stick to your side,” he reminds me as I lower my head for another bite.

“I’m the one who bought it!” I remind him. “Lucas ... do you think it’s cheating to write letters to someone? Not me, I’m asking for a friend.”

“No,” Lucas says. He raises both eyebrows. “Wait, are they sexy letters?”

“No!”

“Are they the kind of letter you wrote me?”

A meek little “no” from me. He gives me a look like he isn’t buying whatever I’m selling. “Then you’re fine. Technically you’re in the clear. So who are you writing to?”

I hesitate. “Do you remember John Ambrose McClaren?”

He rolls his eyes. “Of course I remember John Ambrose McClaren. I had a crush on him in seventh grade.”

“I had a crush on him in eighth!”

“Of course you did. We all did. In middle school you either liked John or you liked Peter. Those were the two main choices. Like Betty and Veronica. Obviously John is Betty and Peter’s Veronica.” He pauses. “Remember how John used to have that really endearing stutter?”

“Yes! I mourned it a little when it went away. It was so sweet. So boyish. And do you remember how his hair was the

colour of pale butter? Like, the way I bet freshly churned butter looks.“

“I thought it was more like moonlit corn silk, but yeah. So how did he turn out?“

“I don’t know... It’s strange because there’s the him I remember from middle school, and that’s just my memory of him, but then there’s the him now.“

“Did you guys ever go out back then?“

“Oh no! Never.“

“So that’s probably why you’re curious about him now.“

“I didn’t say I was *curious*.“

Lucas gives me a look. “You basically did. I don’t blame you. I’d be curious too.“

“It’s just fun to think about.“

“You’re lucky,“ he says.

“Lucky how?“

“Lucky that you have ... *options*. I mean, I’m not officially out’, but even if I was, there are, like, two gay guys at our school. Mark Weinberger, who’s a pizza face, and *Leon Butler*.“ Lucas shudders.

“What’s wrong with Leon?“

“Don’t patronize me by asking. I just wish our school was bigger. There’s nobody for me here.“ He stares off into space moodily. Sometimes I look at Lucas and for a second I forget he’s gay and I want to like him all over again.

I touch his hand. “One day soon you’ll be in the world, and you’ll have so many options you won’t know what to do with them. Everyone will fall in love with you, because you’re so beautiful and so charming, and you’ll look back on high school as such a tiny blip.”

Lucas smiles, and his moodiness lifts away. “I won’t forget you, though.”

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“The pearces finally sold their house,” Daddy says, heaping more spinach salad on Kitty’s plate. “We’ll have new backyard neighbours in a month.”

Kitty perks up. “Do they have kids?”

“Donnie says they’re retired.”

Kitty makes a gagging noise. “Old people. Boring! Do they have grandkids, at least?”

“He didn’t say, but I don’t think so. They’re probably going to take down that old tree house.”

I stop mid-chew. “They’re demolishing our tree house?”

Daddy nods. “I think they’re putting in a gazebo.”

“A gazebo!” I repeat. “We used to have so much fun up there. Genevieve and I would play Rapunzel for hours. She always got to be Rapunzel, though. I just got to stand underneath it and call up” – I pause to put on my best English accent – “Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your hair, miss.”

“What kind of accent is that supposed to be?” Kitty asks me.

“Cockney, I think. Why? Was it not good?”

“Not really.”

“Oh.” I turn to Daddy. “When are they tearing the tree house down?”

“I’m not sure. I’d imagine before they move in, but you never know.”

There was this one time I looked out the window and saw that John McClaren was up in the tree house alone. He was just sitting by himself, reading. So I went out there with a couple of Cokes and a book and we read up there all afternoon. Later in the day Peter and Trevor Pike showed up, and we put the books away and played cards. At the time I was deep in the throes of liking Peter, so it wasn't romantic in the slightest, of that I'm sure. But I do remember feeling that our quiet afternoon had been disrupted, that I'd rather have just kept reading in companionable silence.

"We buried a time capsule under that tree house," I tell Kitty as I squeeze toothpaste on to my toothbrush. "Genevieve, Peter, Chris, Allie, Trevor, me and John Ambrose McClaren. We were going to dig it up after we graduated high school."

"You should have a time capsule party before they demolish the tree house," Kitty says from the toilet. She's peeing and I'm brushing my teeth. "You can send invitations and it can be a fun little thing. An unveiling."

I spit out toothpaste. "I mean, in theory. But Allie moved, and Genevieve is a—"

"Witch with a *b*," she supplies.

I giggle. "Definitely a witch with a *b*."

"She's scary. One time when I was little, she locked me in the towel closet!" Kitty flushes the toilet and gets up. "You can still have a party, just don't invite Genevieve. It doesn't make sense for you to invite your boyfriend's ex-girlfriend to a time capsule party anyway."



As if there were some set etiquette for who to invite to a time capsule party! As if there were really such a thing as a time capsule party! “I got you out of the closet right away,” I remind her. I set my toothbrush back down. “Wash your hands.”

“I was going to.”

“And brush your teeth.” Before Kitty can open her mouth, I say, “Don’t say you were going to, because I know you weren’t.”

Kitty will do anything to get out of brushing her teeth.

We can’t just let this tree house go without a proper send-off. It wouldn’t be right. We always said we’d come back. I will have a party, and it will be themed. Genevieve would sneer at that, how babyish – but it’s not like I’m inviting her, so who cares what she thinks. It will just be Peter, Chris, Trevor, and ... John. I’ll have to invite John. As friends, just friends.

What did we eat that summer? Cheez Doodles. Melty ice cream sandwiches – the chocolate wafer would stick to our fingers. Lukewarm Hawaiian Punch flowed freely. Capri Suns when we could get them. John always had a double-decker peanut butter and jelly sandwich with him in a ziplock bag that his mother packed. I’ll be sure to have all of those snacks for the party.

What else? Trevor had portable speakers he used to carry around. His dad was big into Southern rock, and that summer Trevor played “Sweet Home Alabama” so much that Peter threw his speakers out of the tree house and Trevor wouldn’t speak to him for days. Trevor Pike had brown hair that curled when it was wet, and he was chubby in the way that middle school boys are (in the cheeks, around the middle) right before

they have a big growth spurt and everything sort of evens out. He was always hungry and hanging around other people's cupboards. He'd have to go pee, and he'd come back with a Popsicle or a banana, or cheese crackers, whatever he could scam. Trevor was Peter's number three. It went John and Peter and then Trevor. They don't hang out so much any more. Trevor's more friends with the track guys. We don't have any classes together; I'm in all honours and APs and Trevor was never that into school or grades. He was fun, though.

I remember the day Genevieve showed up at my house crying, saying she was moving. Not far, she'd still go to school with us, but she wouldn't be able to ride her bike or walk over any more. Peter was sad; he comforted her, put his arms around her. I remember thinking how grown-up they seemed in that moment, like real teenagers in love. And then Chris and Gen had a fight about something, a bigger fight than usual; I don't even remember what it was about. I think something with their parents. Whenever their parents weren't getting along, things trickled down to them like trash floating down a river.

Gen moved away, and we were still friends, and then, around the time of the eighth grade dance, she dropped me. I guess there was no place for me in her life any more. I thought Genevieve was someone I would know for ever. Those people in your life that you just always know, no matter what. But it's not that way. Here we are, three years later, and we're worse than strangers. I know she took that video; I know she sent it to Anonybitch. How could I forgive that?

Josh has a new girlfriend: Liza Booker, a girl from his comic-book club. She has frizzy brown hair, nice eyes, big boobs, braces. She's a senior like Josh, smart like Josh. I just can't believe he's with a girl who's not Margot. Next to my sister, Liza Booker's nice eyes and big boobs are nothing.

I kept seeing a car I didn't recognize in Josh's driveway, and then today, when I was getting the mail, she and Josh came out of the house and he walked her to her car and then he kissed her. Just like how he used to kiss Margot.

I wait until she's driven away and he's about to walk back inside his house before I call out to him. "So you and Liza are a thing now, huh?"

He turns around and at least looks sheepish. "We've been hanging out, yes. It's not serious or anything. But I like her." Josh comes a few feet closer, so we're not so far apart.

I can't resist saying, "There's no accounting for taste. I mean, that you'd pick her over Margot?" I let out a huffy little laugh that surprises even me, because Josh and I are fine now – not like before, but fine. It was a mean thing to say. But I'm not saying it to be mean to Liza Booker, who I don't even know; I'm saying it for my sister. For what she and Josh used to be to each other.

Quietly he says, "I didn't pick Liza over Margot and you know it. Liza and I barely knew each other in January."

"OK, well, why not Margot then?"

“It just wasn’t going to work out. I still care about her. I’ll always love her. But she was right to break things off when she left. It would only have been harder if we’d kept it going.”

“Wouldn’t it have been worth it just to see? To know?”

“It would’ve ended the same way even if she hadn’t gone to Scotland.”

His face has that stubborn look to it; that weak chin of his is firmly set. I know he isn’t going to say anything more: It isn’t really my business, not truly. It’s his and Margot’s, and maybe he doesn’t even fully know, himself.

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Chris shows up at my house with ombré lavender hair. Pulling her jacket hood all the way off, she asks me, “What do you think?”

“I think it’s pretty,” I say.

Kitty mouths, *Like an Easter egg*.

“I mostly did it to piss off my mom.” There’s the tiniest bit of uncertainty in her voice that she’s trying to conceal.

“It makes you look sophisticated,” I tell her. I reach out and touch the ends, and her hair feels synthetic, like Barbie doll hair after it’s been washed.

Kitty mouths, *Like a grandma*, and I cut my eyes at her.

“Does it look like shit?” Chris asks her, chewing on her bottom lip nervously.

“Don’t cuss in front of my sister! She’s ten!”

“Sorry. Does it look like crap?”

“Yeah,” Kitty admits. Thank God for Kitty – you can always count on her to tell the hard truths. “Why didn’t you just go to a salon and have them do it for you?”

Chris starts running her fingers through her hair. “I did.” She exhales. “Shi— I mean, crap. Maybe I should just cut off the bottom.”

“I’ve always thought you would look great with short hair,” I say. “But honestly, I don’t think the lavender looks bad. It’s

kind of beautiful, actually. Like the inside of a seashell.“ If I was as gutsy as Chris, I’d chop my hair off short like Audrey Hepburn in *Sabrina*. But I’m not that brave, and also, I’m sure I’d feel immediate remorse for my ponytails and braids and curls.

“All right. Maybe I’ll keep it for a bit.“

“You should try deep-conditioning it and see if that helps,“ Kitty suggests, and Chris glares at her.

“I have a Korean hair mask my grandma bought me,“ I say, putting my arm around her.

We go upstairs, and Chris goes to my room while I root around in the bathroom for the hair mask. When I get back to my room with the jar, Chris is sitting cross-legged on the floor, sifting through my hatbox.

“Chris! That’s private.“

“It was out in the open!“ She holds up Peter’s valentine, the poem he wrote me. “What’s this?“

Proudly I say, “That’s a poem Peter wrote for me for Valentine’s Day.“

Chris looks down at the paper again. “He said he wrote it? He’s so full of shit. This is from an Edgar Allan Poe poem.“

“No, Peter definitely wrote it.“

“It’s from that poem called ~~Annabel~~ *Annabel Lee*! We studied it in my remedial English class in middle school. I remember because we went to the Edgar Allan Poe museum, and then we went on a riverboat called the *Annabel Lee*. The poem was framed on the wall!“

I can't believe this. "But ... he told me he wrote it for me."

She cackles. "Classic Kavinsky." When Chris sees that I'm not cackling with her, she says, "Eh, whatever. It's the thought that counts, right?"

"Except it isn't his thought." I was so happy to receive that poem. No one had ever written me a love poem before, and now it turns out it was plagiarized. A knock-off!

"Don't be pissed. I think it's funny! Clearly he was trying to impress you."

I should've known Peter didn't write it. He hardly ever reads in his spare time, much less writes poetry. "Well, the necklace is real, at least," I say.

"Are you sure?"

I shoot her a dirty look.

When Peter and I talk on the phone that night, I'm all set to confront him about the poem, to at least tease him about it. But then we get to talking about his upcoming away game on Friday. "You're coming, right?" he says.

"I want to, but I promised Stormy I'd dye her hair on Friday night."

"Can't you just do it on Saturday?"

"I can't, the time capsule party is on Saturday, and she has a date that night. That's why her hair needs to be done on Friday..." It sounds like a weak excuse, I know. But I promised. And also ... I wouldn't be able to ride on the bus with Peter, and I don't feel comfortable driving forty-five

minutes away to a school I've never been to. He doesn't need me there anyway. Not like Stormy needs me.

He's silent.

"I'll come to the next one, I promise," I say.

Peter bursts out, "Gabe's girlfriend comes to every single game and she paints his jersey number on her face every game day. She doesn't even go to our school!"

"There have only been four games and I've gone to two!" Now I'm annoyed. I know lacrosse is important to him, but it's no less important than my commitments at Belleview. "And you know what? I know you didn't write that poem for me on Valentine's Day. You copied it off of Edgar Allan Poe!"

"I never said I *wrote* it," he hedges.

"Yes you did. You acted like you wrote it."

"I wasn't going to, but then you were so happy about it! Sorry for trying to make you happy."

"You know what? I was going to bake you lemon cookies on game day, and now I don't know."

"Fine, then I don't know if I'm going to make it to your tree-house party on Saturday. I might be too tired from the game."

I gasp. "You'd better be there!" This party is small as it is, and Chris isn't the most reliable person. It can't just be me and Trevor and John. Three people does not a party make.

Peter makes a harrumph sound. "Well, then I'd better see some lemon cookies in my locker come game day."



“Fine.“

“Fine.“

On Friday I bring his lemon cookies *and* wear his jersey number on my cheek, which delights Peter. He grabs me and throws me in the air, and his smile is so big. It makes me feel guilty for not doing it sooner, because it took so very little on my part to make him happy. I can see now that it's the little things, the small efforts, that keep a relationship going. And I know now too that in some small measure I have the power to hurt him and also the power to make it better. This discovery leaves me with an unsettling, queer sort of feeling in my chest for reasons I can't explain.

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I'd worried it would be too cold for us to stay in the tree house for long, but it's unseasonably warm, so much so that Daddy starts on one of his rants about climate change, to the point where Kitty and I have to tune him out.

After his rant I get a shovel from the garage and set about digging under the tree. The ground is hard, and it takes me a while to get into a good groove digging, but I finally hit metal a couple of feet in. The time capsule's the size of a small cooler; it looks like a futuristic coffee thermos. The metal has eroded from the rain and snow and dirt, but not as much as you'd think, considering it's been nearly four years. I take it back to the house and wash it in the sink so it gleams again.

Close to noon, I load up a shopping bag with ice cream sandwiches, Hawaiian Punch and Cheez Doodles and take it all out to the tree house. I'm crossing our backyard to the Pearces', trying to juggle the bag and the portable speakers and my phone, when I see John Ambrose McClaren standing in front of the tree house, staring up at it with his arms crossed. I'd know the back of his blond head anywhere.

I freeze, suddenly nervous and unsure. I'd thought Peter or Chris would be here with me when he arrived, and that would smooth out any awkwardness. But no such luck.

I put down all my stuff and move forward to tap him on the shoulder, but he turns around before I can. I take a step back. "Hi! Hey!" I say.

“Hey!” He takes a long look at me. “Is it really you?”

“It’s me.”

“My pen pal the elusive Lara Jean Covey who shows up at Model UN and runs off without so much as a hello?”

I bite the inside of my cheek. “I’m pretty sure I at least said hello.”

Teasingly he says, “No, I’m pretty sure you didn’t.”

He’s right: I didn’t. I was too flustered. Kind of like right now. It must be that distance between knowing someone when you were a kid and seeing them now that you’re both more grown-up, but still not all the way grown-up, and there are all these years and letters in between you, and you don’t know how to act.

“Well – anyway. You look ... taller.” He looks more than just taller. Now that I can take the time to really look at him, I notice more. With his fair hair and milky skin and rosy cheeks, he looks like he could be an English farmer’s son. But he’s slim, so maybe the sensitive farmer’s son who steals away to the barn to read. The thought makes me smile, and John gives me a curious look but doesn’t ask why.

With a nod, he says, “You look ... exactly the same.”

Gulp. Is that a good thing or a bad thing? “I do?” I get up on my tiptoes. “I think I’ve grown at least an inch since eighth grade.” And my boobs are at least a little bigger. Not much. Not that I want John to notice – I’m just saying.

“No, you look ... just like how I remembered you.” John Ambrose reaches out, and I think he’s trying to hug me but he’s only trying to take my bag from me, and there’s a brief but

strange dance that mortifies me but he doesn't seem to notice.  
"So thanks for inviting me."

"Thanks for coming."

"Do you want me to take this stuff up for you?"

"Sure," I say.

John takes the bag from me and looks inside. "Oh, wow. All of our old snacks! Why don't you climb up first and I'll pass it to you." So that's what I do: I scramble up the ladder and he climbs up behind me. I'm crouched, arms outstretched, waiting for him to pass me the bag.

But when he gets halfway up the ladder, he stops and looks up at me and says, "You still wear your hair in fancy braids."

I touch my side braid. Of all the things to remember about me. Back then, Margot was the one who braided my hair.  
"You think it looks fancy?"

"Yeah. Like ... expensive bread."

I burst out laughing. "Bread!"

"Yeah. Or ... Rapunzel."

I get down on my stomach, wriggle over to the edge, and pretend like I'm letting down my hair for him to climb. He climbs up to the top of the ladder and passes me the bag, which I take, and then he grins at me and gives my braid a tug. I'm still lying down but feel an electric charge like he's zapped me. I'm suddenly feeling very anxious about the worlds that will be colliding, the past and the present, a pen pal and a boyfriend, all in this little tree house. Probably I should have thought this through a bit better. But I was so focused on the time capsule,

and the snacks, and the *idea* of it – old friends coming back together to do what we said we'd do. And now here we are, in it.

“Everything OK?” John asks, offering me his hand as I rise to my feet.

I don't take his hand; I don't want another zap. “Everything's great,” I say cheerily.

“Hey, you never sent back my letter,” he says. “You broke an unbreakable vow.”

I laugh awkwardly. I'd kind of been hoping he wouldn't bring that up. “It was too embarrassing. The things I wrote. I couldn't bear the thought of another person seeing it.”

“But I already saw it,” he reminds me.

Luckily, Chris and Trevor Pike show up and break up the conversation about the letter. They immediately tear into the snacks. Meanwhile Peter's late. I text him a stern You better be on your way. And then: Don't text back if you're driving. That's dangerous.

Just as I'm texting again, Peter's head pops up in the door and he climbs inside. I'm about to give him a hug, but then right behind him is Genevieve. My whole body goes cold.

I look from him to her. She sails right past me and sweeps John into a hug. “Johnny!” she squeals, and he laughs. I feel the sharp twist of envy in my stomach. Must every boy be charmed by her?

While she's hugging John, Peter's looking at me with pleading eyes. He mouths, *Don't be mad*, and he clasps his hands

in prayer. I mouth back, *What the hell*, and he grimaces. I never explicitly said I wasn't inviting her, but I would have thought it was pretty clear. And then I think, *Wait a minute*. They came here together. He was with her and he never said a word to me about it, and then he brought her here, here, to my house. Specifically to my neighbours' tree house. This girl who has hurt me, hurt us both.

Then Peter and John are hugging and high-fiving and slapping each other on the back, like old war buddies, long-lost brothers in arms. "It's been too fucking long, man," Peter says.

Genevieve is already unzipping her puffy white bomber jacket and making herself comfortable. Whatever fleeting moment there was for me to kick her and Peter both out of my neighbours' tree house is gone. "Hi, Chrissy," she says, smiling as she settles on the ground. "Nice hair."

Chris glares at her. "What are you even doing here?" I love that she says this – I love *her*.

"Peter and I were hanging out and he told me about what you guys were doing today." Shrugging out of her jacket, Genevieve says to me, "I guess my invitation got lost in the mail."

I don't reply, because what can I say in front of all these people? I just hug my knees to my chest. Now that I'm sitting next to her, I realize how small this tree house has become. There's hardly enough room for all the arms and legs, and the boys are so big now. Before, we were more or less the same size, boys and girls.

“God, was this place always so tiny?” Genevieve says to no one in particular. “Or did we all just get really big?” She laughs. “Except you, Lara Jean. You’re still itty-bitty pocket-sized.” She says it sweetly. Like sweetened condensed milk. Sweet and condescending. Poured on super thick.

I play along: I smile. I won’t let her get a rise out of me.

John rolls his eyes. “Same old Gen.” He says it dryly, with weary affection, and she smiles her cute wrinkly-nose smile at him like he’s paid her a compliment. But then he looks at me and raises one sardonic eyebrow, and I feel better about everything, just like that. In a strange way, maybe her presence here completes the circle. She can take whatever’s hers in that time capsule, and this history of ours can be done.

“Trev, throw me an ice cream sandwich,” Peter says, squeezing in between Genevieve and me. He stretches his legs out into the centre of the circle, and everyone else adjusts to make room for his long legs.

I push his legs over so I can set the time capsule down in the centre. “Here it is, everybody. All your greatest treasures from seventh grade.” I try to whip off the aluminium top with a flourish, but it’s really stuck. I’m struggling with it, using my nails. I look over at Peter and he’s digging into the ice cream bars, oblivious, so John gets up and helps me unscrew it. He smells like pine soap. I add this to the list of new things I’ve learned about him.

“So how are we gonna do this?” Peter asks me, his mouth full of ice cream. “Do we dump it all out?”

I’ve given this some thought. “I think we should take turns pulling something out. Let’s make it last, like opening presents

on Christmas morning.“

Genevieve leans forward in anticipation. Without looking, I reach into the cylinder and pull out the first thing my fingers touch. It's funny, I'd forgotten what I put inside, but I know what it is instantly; I don't have to look down. It's a friendship bracelet that Genevieve made for me when we were in our weaving phase in fifth grade. Pink, white and light blue chevron. I made one for her too. Purple and yellow chevron. She probably doesn't even remember it. I look over at her, and her face is blank. No recognition.

“What is it?” Trevor asks.

“It's mine,” I say. “It's ... it's a bracelet I used to wear.”

Peter touches his shoe to mine. “That piece of string was your most treasured thing?” he teases.

John is watching me. “You used to wear it all the time,” he says, and it's sweet that he even remembers.

Once it goes on, it's never supposed to come off, but I sacrificed it to the time capsule because I loved it so much. Maybe this is where Gen's and my friendship went sour. The curse of the friendship bracelet. “You go next,” I say to him.

He reaches inside the box and pulls out a baseball.

“That's mine,” Peter crows. “That's from when I hit a home run at Claremont Park.” John throws the ball to him, and Peter catches it. Examining it, he says, “See, I signed and dated it!”

“I remember that day,” Genevieve says, tilting her head. “You came running off the field, and you kissed me in front of your mom. Remember?”



“Uh ... not really,” Peter mumbles. He’s staring down at the baseball, turning it in his hand like he’s fascinated by it. I can’t believe him. I really can’t.

“Awk-ward,” Trevor says with a chortle.

In a soft voice, like no one else is here, she says to him, “Can I keep it?”

Peter’s ears are turning red. He looks at me, panicky. “Covey, do you want it?”

“Nope,” I say, keeping my head turned away from them. I grab the bag of Cheez Doodles and stuff a handful in my mouth. I’m so mad all I can do is eat Cheez Doodles or else I’ll scream at him.

“OK, then I’m gonna keep it,” Peter says, putting the baseball in his coat pocket. “Owen might want it. Sorry, Gen.” He grabs the time capsule and starts rifling through it. He holds up a worn-out baseball cap. Orioles. Too loudly he says, “McClaren, look what I got here.”

A smile spreads across John’s face like a slow sunrise. He takes it from Peter and puts it on his head, adjusting the bill.

“That really was your most prized possession,” I say. He wore it deep into the fall, too. I asked my dad to buy me an Orioles T-shirt because I thought John McClaren would be impressed. I wore it twice but I don’t think he ever noticed. My smile fades when I notice Genevieve watching me. Our eyes meet; there is some knowing light in her gaze that makes me feel twitchy. She looks away; now she is the one smiling to herself.

“The Orioles suck,” Peter says, leaning against the wall. He reaches for the box of ice cream sandwiches and pulls one out.

“Pass me one of those,” Trevor says.

“Sorry, last one,” Peter says, biting into it.

John catches my eye and winks. “Same old Kavinsky,” he says, and I laugh. I know he’s thinking of our letters.

Peter grins at him. “Hey, no more stutter.”

I freeze. How could Peter bring that up so cavalierly? None of us ever talked about John’s stutter back in middle school. He was so shy about it. But now John just flashes a smile and shrugs and says, “I’ll pass that along to my eighth grade speech therapist, Elaine.” He’s so confident!

Peter blinks, and I can see that he is caught off guard. He does not know this John McClaren. It used to be that Peter was the shot caller, not John. He followed Peter’s lead. Peter might still be the same, but John has changed. Now Peter’s the one who is less sure-footed.

Chris goes next. She pulls out a ring with a tiny pearl in the centre. Allie’s, a confirmation gift from her aunt. She loved that ring. I’ll have to send it to her. Trevor pulls out his own treasure – an autographed baseball card. Genevieve is the one to pull out Chris’s – an envelope with a twenty-dollar note inside.

“Yes!” Chris screams. “I was such a little genius.” We high-five.

“What about yours, Gen?” Trevor asks.

She shrugs. “I guess I didn’t put anything in the capsule.”

“Yes you did,” I say, brushing orange Cheez dust off my fingers. “You were there that day.” I remember she went back

and forth between putting in a picture of her and Peter or the rose he gave her for her birthday. I can't remember what she decided on.

“Well, there's nothing inside, so I guess I didn't. Whatever.”

I look inside the time capsule just to be sure. It's empty.

“Remember how we used to play Assassins?” Trevor says, squeezing the last bit of juice out of his Capri Sun.

Oh, how I loved that game! It was like tag: Everybody picked a name out of a hat, and you had to tag the person out. Once you got your person, you had to take out whoever *they* had. It involved a lot of sneaking around and hiding. A game could last for days.

“I was the Black Widow,” Genevieve says. She does a little shoulder shimmy at Peter. “I won more than anybody.”

“Please,” Peter scoffs. “I won plenty.”

“So did I,” Chris says.

Trevor points at me. “L'il J, you were the worst at it. I don't think you won once.”

I make a face. *L'il J*. I'd forgotten he used to call me that. And he's right: I never did win. Not even once. The one time I came close, Chris tagged me out at Kitty's swim meet. I'd thought I was safe because it was late at night. I was so close to that win, I could almost taste it.

Chris's eyes meet mine, and I know she's remembering too. She winks at me, and I give her a sour look.

“Lara Jean just doesn't have the killer instinct,” Genevieve says, looking at her nails.

I say, “We can’t all be black widows.”

“True,” she says, and my teeth clench.

John says to Peter, “Remember that one time I had you, and I was hiding behind your dad’s car before school, but it was your dad that came out, not you? And I scared him, and he and I both screamed?”

“Then we had to quit altogether when Trevor came to my mom’s store in his ski mask,” Peter guffaws.

Everyone laughs, except for me. I’m still smarting from Genevieve’s “killer instinct” dig.

Trevor’s laughing so hard he can barely speak. “She almost called the cops!” he manages to sputter.

Peter nudges my sneaker toe with his. “We should play again.”

He’s trying to get back in my good graces, but I’m not ready to let him, so I just shrug a chilly little shrug. I wish I weren’t mad at him, because I really do want to play again. I want to prove I’ve got the killer instinct too, that I’m not some Assassins loser.

“We should do it,” John says. “For old times’ sake.” He catches my eye. “One last shot, Lara Jean.”

I smile.

Chris raises an eyebrow. “What does the winner get?”

“Well ... nothing,” I say. “It would just be for fun.” Trevor makes a face at this.

“There should be a prize,” Genevieve says. “Otherwise what’s the point?”

I think fast. What would be a good prize? “Movie tickets? A baked good of the winner’s choice?” I blurt out. No one says a word.

“We could all put in a twenty,” John offers. I throw him a grateful look and he smiles.

“Money’s boring,” Genevieve says, stretching like a cat.

I roll my eyes. Who asked for her two cents? I didn’t even ask for her to be here.

Trevor says, “Um, how about the winner gets breakfast in bed every day for a week? It could be pancakes on Monday, omelette on Tuesday, waffle on Wednesday, and so forth. There are six of us, so—“

Shuddering, Genevieve says, “I don’t eat breakfast.“ Everyone groans.

“Why don’t you suggest something instead of shooting everybody down,” Peter says, and I hide my face behind my braid so no one sees me smile.

“OK.“ Genevieve thinks for a minute, and then a smile spreads across her face. It’s her Big Idea look, and it makes me nervous. Slowly, deliberately, she says, “The winner gets a wish.“

“From who?“ Trevor asks. “Everybody?“

“From any one of us who are playing.“

“Wait a minute,“ Peter interjects. “What are we signing on for here?“

Genevieve looks very pleased with herself. “One wish, and you have to grant it.“ She looks like an evil queen.

Chris's eyes gleam as she says, "Anything?"

"Within reason," I quickly say. This isn't at all what I had in mind, but at least people are willing to play.

"Reason is subjective," John points out.

"Basically, Gen can't force Peter to have sex with her one last time," Chris says. "That's what everyone's thinking, right?"

I stiffen. That wasn't what I was thinking, like at all. But now I am.

Trevor busts up laughing and Peter shoves him. Genevieve shakes her head. "You're *disgusting*, Chrissy."

"I only said what everyone was thinking!"

I'm barely even listening at this point. All I can think is, I want to play this game and I want to win. Just once I want to beat Genevieve at something.

I only have one pen and no paper, so John tears up the ice cream sandwich box and we take turns writing our names down on our cardboard scraps. Then everybody puts their names in the empty time capsule, and I shake it up. We pass it around and I go last. I pull out the piece of cardboard, hold it close to my chest, and open it.

*JOHN.*

Well, that complicates things. I sneak a peek at him. He's carefully tucking his piece of cardboard in his jeans pocket. Sorry, (pen) pal, but you're going down. I take a quick look around the room for clues to who might have my name, but everyone's got their poker faces on.

## 36

The rules are: your house is a safe zone. School is a safe zone, but not the parking lot. Once you step out the door, it's all fair game. You're out if you get hit with a two-hand touch.

And if you renege on your wish, your life is forfeit. Genevieve comes up with that last part and it gives me shivers. Trevor Pike shudders and says, "Girls are scary."

"No, girls in *their* family are scary," Peter says, gesturing at Chris and Genevieve. They both smile, and in those smiles I see the family resemblance. Casting a sidelong glance at me, Peter says hopefully, "You're not scary, though. You're sweet, right?" Suddenly I remember something Stormy said to me. *Don't ever let him get too sure of you.* Peter is very sure of me. As sure as a person could be.

"I can be scary too," I quietly say back, and he blanches. Then, to everyone else, I say, "Let's just have fun with it."

"Oh, it'll be fun," John assures me. He puts his Orioles cap on his head and pulls the brim down. "Game on." He catches my eye. "If you thought I was good at Model UN, wait till you see my *z ero Dark Thirty* skills."

I walk with everyone out front to their cars, and I hear Peter tell Genevieve to get a ride with Chris, which they both balk at. "Figure it out amongst yourselves," Peter says. "I'm hanging out with my girlfriend."

Genevieve rolls her eyes and Chris groans. "Ugh. Fine." To Genevieve she says, "Get in."

Chris's car is backing out of the driveway when John says to Peter, "Who's your girlfriend?" My stomach does a dip.

"Covey." Peter gives him a funny look. "You didn't know? That's weird."

Now they're both looking at me. Peter's confused, but John gets it, whatever "it" is.

I should have told him. Why didn't I tell him?

Everyone leaves soon after, except for Peter.

"So are we going to talk about this?" he asks, trailing after me into the kitchen. I've got the trash bag with all the ice cream wrappers and Capri Suns, and I refused his help carrying it down. Almost tripped going down the ladder with it, but I don't care.

"Sure, let's talk." I spin around and advance towards him, trash bag swinging in my hand. He lifts his hands up in alarm. "Why did you bring Genevieve here?"

Peter grimaces. "Ugh, Covey, I'm sorry."

"Were you hanging out with her? Is that why you didn't come early to help me set up?"

He hesitates. "Yeah, I was with her. She called me crying, so I went over there, and then I couldn't just leave her by herself ... so I brought her."

Crying? I've never known her to cry. Even when her cat Queen Elizabeth died, she didn't cry. She must have been faking to get Peter to stay. "You couldn't just leave her?"

"No," he says. "She's going through some shit right now. I'm just trying to be there for her. As a friend. That's it!"



“Gosh, she really knows how to work you, Peter!”

“It’s not like that.”

“It’s always like that. She pulls the strings and you just ...” I dangle my arms and head like a marionette doll.

Peter frowns. “That was mean.”

“Well, I feel mean right now. So watch out.”

“You’re not mean, though. Not usually.”

“Why can’t you just tell me? You know I won’t tell anyone. I really want to understand it, Peter.”

“Because it’s not for me to say. Don’t try to make me tell you, because I can’t.”

“She’s just doing this to manipulate you. It’s what she does.” I hear the jealousy in my voice, and I hate it, I hate it. This isn’t me.

He sighs. “Nothing’s happening with us. She just needs a friend.”

“She has a lot of friends.”

“She needs an old friend.”

I shake my head. He doesn’t get it. Girls understand each other in a way boys never will. It’s how I know this is all just another one of her games. Showing up at my house today was just another way for her to exert dominance over me.

Then Peter says, “Speaking of old friends, I didn’t realize you and McClaren were so buddy-buddy.”

I flush. “I told you we were pen pals.”

Raising his eyebrows, he says, “You’re pen pals but he doesn’t know we’re together?”

“It never came up!” Wait a minute – I’m the one who’s supposed to be mad at him right now, not the other way around. Somehow this whole conversation has flipped around, and now I’m the one flailing.

“So that day you went to the Model UN thing a few months ago, I asked you if you saw McClaren and you said no. But then today he brought up Model UN, and you clearly did see him there. Did you not?”

I swallow. “When did you turn into a prosecutor? Sheesh. I saw him there but we didn’t even talk; I just handed him a note —“

“A note? You gave him a note?”

“It wasn’t from me – it was from a different country, for Model UN.” Peter opens his mouth to ask another question, and I quickly add, “I just didn’t mention it because nothing came of it.”

Incredulous, he says, “So you want me to be honest with you, but you don’t want to be honest with me?”

“It wasn’t like that!” I cry out. What is even happening here? How did our fight get so big so fast?

Neither of us says anything for a moment. Then, quietly, he asks, “Do you want to break up?”

*Break up?* “No.” All of a sudden I feel shaky, like I could cry. “Do you?”

“No!”

“You asked me first!”

“So that’s it. Neither of us wants to break up, so we just move on.” Peter sinks down on a chair at the kitchen table and rests his head on it.

I sit across from him. He feels so far away from me. My hand is itching to reach out and touch his hair, smooth it out, to make this fight be over and in our rear-view.

He lifts his head; his eyes are sad and enormous. “Can we hug now?”

Shakily I nod, and we both get up and I wrap my arms around his middle. He holds me tight against him. His voice is muffled against my shoulder as he says, “Can we never fight again?”

I laugh a shaky kind of laugh, shaky and relieved. “Yes, please.”

And then he’s kissing me; his mouth is urgent against mine, like he’s searching for some sort of reassurance, some kind of promise only I can give. In answer I kiss him back – *yes, I promise, promise, promise, let’s never fight again.* I start to lose my balance, and his arm locks around me tight, and he kisses me until I am breathless.

On the phone that night, Chris says, “Spill it. Who do you have?”

“I’m not telling.” I’ve made this mistake in the past, telling Chris too much, only to have her tag her way to victory.

“Come on! I’ll help you if you help me. I want my wish!” Chris’s strength in this game is how bad she wants it, but it’s also her weakness. You have to play Assassins in a cool, measured way, not go too hot too fast. I say this as someone who’s observed all the nuances but has never personally won, of course.

“You might have my name. Besides, I want to win too.”

“Let’s just help each other out on this first round of hits,” Chris wheedles. “I don’t have your name, I swear.”

“Swear on your blankie that you won’t let your mom throw away.”

“I swear on my blankie Fredrick and I double swear on my new leather jacket that cost more money than my damn car. Do you have *my* name?”

“No.”

“Swear on your ugly beret collection.”

I make an indignant sound. “I swear on my *charming* and *jaunty* beret collection! So who do you have then?”

“Trevor.”

“I’ve got John McClaren.”

“Let’s team up to take them out,” Chris suggests. “Our alliance can last as long as this first round, and then it’s every girl for herself.”

Hmm. Is she for real or is this all strategy? “What if you’re lying just to smoke me out?”

“I swore on Fredrick!”

I hesitate and then say, “Text me a picture of the name slip and then I’ll believe you.”

“Fine! Then text me yours.”

“Fine. Bye.”

“Wait. Tell me the truth. Does my hair look like shit? It doesn’t, right? Gen’s just a heinous troll. Right?”

I hesitate the tiniest of beats. “Right.”

Chris and I are slumped down in her car. We are one neighbourhood over from mine; it’s the neighbourhood Trevor will drive through to shortcut to school for track practice. We’re parked in some random person’s driveway. She says, “Tell me what you’re going to wish for if you win.” The way she says it, I know she doesn’t think I’m going to win.

I thought about the wish all last night when I was trying to fall asleep. “There’s a craft expo in North Carolina in June. I could get Peter to drive me. There’s no way he’d take me otherwise. We could take his mom’s van, so there’s plenty of room for all the supplies and things that I’ll buy.”

“A craft expo?” Chris is giving me a look like I’m a cockroach that flew into her car. “You would waste a wish on a

craft expo?”

“I was just getting warmed up with that idea,” I lie. “Anyway, if you’re so smart, what would you wish for if you were me?”

“I would make it so that Peter never talks to Gen again. I mean, right? I’m an evil genius, am I not?”

“Evil, yes; genius, hardly.” Chris gives me a shove, and I giggle. We’re both shoving each other when Chris stops short and says, “Two fifty-five. It’s go time.” Chris unlocks the doors and gets out and hides behind an oak tree in the yard.

My adrenaline is pumping as I hop out of Chris’s car, grab Kitty’s bike out of her trunk, and push it a few houses. Then I set it on the ground and drape myself over it in a dramatic heap. Then I pull out the bottle of fake blood I bought for this very purpose and squirt some on my jeans – old jeans I’ve been planning on giving to Goodwill. As soon as I see Trevor’s car approaching, I start to pretend sob. From behind the tree Chris whispers, “Tone it down a little!” I immediately stop sobbing and start moaning.

Trevor’s car pulls up beside me. He rolls down the window. “Lara Jean? Are you OK?”

I whimper. “No ... I think I might have sprained my ankle. It really hurts. Can you give me a ride home?” I’m willing myself to tear up, but it’s harder to cry on cue than I would have thought. I try to think about sad things – the *Titanic*, old people with Alzheimer’s, Jamie Fox-Pickle dying – but I can’t focus.

Trevor regards me suspiciously. “Why are you riding your bike in this neighbourhood?”

Oh no, I’m losing him! I start talking fast but not too fast. “It’s not my bike; it’s my little sister’s. She’s friends with Sara Healey. You know, Dan Healey’s little sister? They live over there.” I point to their house. “I was bringing it to her – oh my God, Trevor. Do you not believe me? Are you seriously not going to give me a ride?”

Trevor looks around. “Do you swear this isn’t a trick?”

Gotcha! “Yes! I swear I don’t have your name, OK? Please just help me up. It really hurts.”

“First show me your ankle.”

“Trevor! You can’t *see* a sprained ankle!” I whimper and make a show of trying to stand up, and Trevor finally turns the car off and gets out. He stoops down and pulls me to my feet and I try to make my body heavy. “Be gentle,” I tell him. “See? I told you I didn’t have your name.”

Trevor pulls me up by my armpits, and over his shoulder Chris creeps up behind him like a ninja. She dives forward, both hands out, and claps them on his back hard. “I got you!” she screams.

Trevor shrieks and drops me, and I narrowly escape falling for real. “Damn it!” he yells.

Gleefully Chris says, “You’re done, sucker!” She and I high-five and hug.

“Can you guys not celebrate in front of me?” he mutters.

Chris holds her hand out. “Now gimme gimme gimme.”

Sighing, Trevor shakes his head and says, “I can’t believe I fell for that, Lara Jean.”

I pat him on the back. “Sorry, Trevor.”

“What if I had had your name?” he asks me. “What would you have done then?”

Huh. I never thought of that. I shoot Chris an accusing glare. “Wait a minute! What if he had had my name?”

“That was a chance we were willing to take,” she says smoothly. “So Trev, what was your wish going to be?”

“You don’t have to say if you don’t want,” I tell him.

“I was gonna wish for tickets to a UVA football game. McClaren’s dad has season tickets! Damn you, Chris.”

I feel bad. “Maybe he’ll take you anyway. You should ask...”

He reaches into his pocket and pulls out his wallet and hands her a small piece of folded cardboard. Before Chris opens it, I quickly say, “Don’t forget, if it’s my name, you can’t tag me. This is a demilitarized zone right here.”

Chris nods, opens the cardboard, and then grins.

I can’t resist. “Is it me?”

Chris stuffs it in her pocket.

“If it’s me, you can’t take me out!” I start to back away from her. “We agreed to be allies this first round, and you haven’t helped me with mine yet.”

“I know, I know. But I don’t have your name.”

I’m not entirely convinced. This is how she beat me another time we played. She can’t be trusted, not in this game. I should



have remembered that. It's why I always lose; I don't look down the line far enough.

“Lara Jean! I just told you, I don't have your name!”

I shake my head. “Just get in the car, Chris. I'll ride Kitty's bike home.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yes. I'm playing to win this time.”

Chris shrugs. “Have it your way. I'm not helping you with your kill, then, if you don't trust me.”

“Fine by me,” I say, and swing my leg over Kitty's bike.

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Peter and I are only talking on the phone and at school until one of us gets tagged out. It won't be me. I've been super careful. I drive myself to and from school. I look around before I jump out of my car and run like the wind to our front door. I've enlisted Kitty as my scout – she always gets out of the car or the house first and makes sure the coast is clear for me. I've already promised her that whatever I wish for if I win, she'll get a piece of.

But so far I've only been playing defence. I haven't tried to tag out John McClaren yet. It's not because I'm afraid – not of the game, anyway. I just don't know what I'm going to say to him. I'm embarrassed. Maybe I wouldn't even need to say anything; maybe I'm being presumptuous even thinking he might be interested in me.

After lunch, Chris comes flying down the hall and skids to a stop when she sees me and Lucas on the floor at our lockers. Today we're sharing a grape Popsicle. Chris sinks down to the floor. "I'm out," she says.

I gasp. "Who got you?"

"John freaking McClaren!" She snatches the Popsicle out of Lucas's hands and finishes it in a gulp.

"Rude," Lucas says.

"Tell us everything," I urge.

"John tailed me on the way to school this morning. I stopped to get gas and he jumped out of the car as soon as my

back was turned. I didn't even know he was following me!"

"Wait, how did he know you were going to stop for gas?" Lucas asks. He knows all about the game, which will hopefully come in handy if it comes down to Genevieve and me, seeing as how he lives in her neighbourhood.

"He siphoned gas out of my tank!"

"Whoa," I breathe. It warms my heart that John is taking it so seriously. I'd worried people wouldn't, but it seems like they are. I wonder what John's wish is? It must be something good to go to all this trouble.

"That's legit," Lucas says with a nod.

"I almost can't be mad because it's so hard-core." She blows her hair out of her face. "I'm just so pissed I can't make Gen give me our grandma's car."

Lucas's eyes bulge. "That's what you were going to wish for? A *car*?"

"That car holds a lot of sentimental value for me," Chris says. "Our grandma used to take me to the beauty parlour with her in it on Sunday afternoons. By all rights it should be mine. Gen's poisoned Granny's mind against me!"

"What kind of car is it?" Lucas asks.

"It's an old Jaguar."

"What colour?" he wants to know.

"Black."

If I didn't know Chris better, I would think that was a tear forming in her eye. I put my arm around her. "Want me to buy

you another Popsicle?”

Chris shakes her head. “I’ve got to wear a crop top tonight. I can’t have a gut.”

“So if you’re out, who does John have now?” Lucas asks.

“Kavinsky,” Chris says. “I haven’t been able to get him because he’s always with fucking Gen, and I thought for sure Gen had me.” She glances at me. “Sorry, LJ.”

Lucas and Chris are looking at me with pity eyes.

If Chris had Peter, and John took her out, that means John has Peter now. Which means either Peter or Genevieve has me. And since I have John, that means one of them has the other – which means they must be in an alliance. That means they’ve confided in each other, told each other who they have.

Swallowing, I say, “I knew from the start they were still friends. And, she’s going through a hard time, you know?”

“What’s she going through?” Chris asks, one eyebrow way high up.

“Peter said family stuff” She looks blank. “So you haven’t heard anything?”

“I mean, she was acting kind of weird at Aunt Wendy’s birthday dinner last week. Like, more of a bitch than usual. She barely said a word all night to anybody.” She shrugs. “So something probably is up, but I don’t know what.” Chris blows her hair out of her face. “Damn it. I can’t believe I’m not getting that car.”

“I’ll take John McClaren out for you,” I vow. “Your death will not be in vain.”

She gives me side-eye. “If you’d have got him out sooner, this wouldn’t have happened.”

“He lives half an hour away! I don’t even know how to get to his house.”

“Whatever, I still partially blame you.” The bell rings and Chris stands up. “Later, *chicas*.” She heads off down the hall, in the opposite direction of her next class.

“She just called me *chica*,” Lucas says, frowning at me. “Did you tell her I’m gay?”

“No!”

“OK, because I told you that in confidence. Remember?”

“Lucas, of course I remember!” Now I’m nervous—*did* I ever say anything to Chris? I’m almost one hundred per cent sure not, but he has me doubting myself all of a sudden.

“Fine,” he says with a sigh. “It’s whatever.” He rises to his feet and offers his hand to help me up. He is ever the gentleman.

## 39

It's my first official Friday night cocktail hour at Belleview and the night isn't going ... as well as I'd hoped. We're already half an hour in and it's just Stormy, Mr Morales, Alicia and Nelson, who has Alzheimer's and whose nurse brought him in for a change of scenery. He is, however, wearing a dapper navy sport coat with copper buttons. Not that many people came when Margot was in charge, either – Mrs Maguire was a regular, but she was moved to a different nursing home last month, and Mrs Montero died over the holidays. But I made such a fuss to Janette about how I would breathe new life into cocktail hour, and now look at me. I feel a little olive pit of dread in the bottom of my stomach, because if Janette catches wind of how low the attendance is, she might cancel Friday night social after all, and I had the funnest idea for the next one – a USO party. If tonight's a flop, there's no way she'll let me run it. Also, throwing a party and having four people show up, one of whom is dozing off, feels like a huge failure. Stormy either doesn't notice or doesn't mind; she just keeps singing and playing the piano. The show must go on, as they say.

I'm trying to keep busy, keep a smile on my face: *Tra-la-la, everything is lovely*. I've lined up the glassware in neat rows so it looks like a real bar and brought a bunch of things from home – our one good tablecloth (no gravy stains, freshly ironed), a little bud vase I put next to the plate of peanut butter cookies (at first I hesitated at peanut butter, what with allergies and all, but then I remembered that old people don't have as many

food allergies), Mommy and Daddy's silver ice bucket with their monogram, a matching silver bowl with cut-up lemons and limes.

I've already gone around knocking on doors of some of the more active residents, but most weren't home. I guess if you're active, you're not staying in your apartment on a Friday night.

I'm pouring salted peanuts into a heart-shaped crystal bowl (a contribution from Alicia, who brought it out of storage, along with her ice tongs) when John Ambrose McClaren walks into the room in a light blue Oxford shirt and navy sport coat, not dissimilar to Nelson's! I nearly scream out loud. Clapping my hands to my mouth, I drop to the floor, behind the table. If he sees me, he might run off! I don't know what he's doing here, but this is my perfect chance to take him out. I crouch behind the table, running through options in my head.

And then the piano music stops and I hear Stormy call out, "Lara Jean? Lara Jean, where are you? Come out from behind the table. I want to introduce you to someone."

Slowly, I rise to my feet. John McClaren is staring at me. "What are you doing here?" he asks me, tugging on his shirt collar like it's choking him.

"I volunteer here," I say, still keeping a safe distance. Don't want to spook him.

Stormy claps her hands. "You two know each other?"

John says, "We're friends, Grandma. We used to live in the same neighbourhood."

"Stormy's your *grandma*?" My mind is blown. So John is her grandson she wanted to set me up with! Of all the nursing

homes in all the towns in all the world! *My grandson looks like a young Robert Redford.* He does; he really does.

“She’s my great-grandmother by marriage,” John says.

Stormy’s eyes dart around the room. “Hush up! I don’t want people knowing you’re my great-anything.”

John lowers his voice. “She was my great-grandpa’s second wife.”

“My favourite of all my husbands,” Stormy says. “May he rest in peace, that old buzzard.” She looks from John to me. “Johnny, be a dear and bring me a vodka soda with lots of lemons.” She sits back at the piano bench and starts to play “When I Fall in Love.”

John starts towards me and I point at him. “Stop right there, John Ambrose McClaren. Do you have my name?”

“No! I swear I don’t. I have – I’m not saying who I have.” He pauses. “Wait a minute. Do you have mine?”

I shake my head, innocent as a little lost lamb. He still looks suspicious, so I busy myself with making Stormy’s drink. I know just how she likes it. I drop in three ice cubes, an eight-second pour of vodka, and a splash of soda water. Then I squeeze three lemon slices and drop them in the glass. “Here,” I say, holding out the glass.

“You can put it on the table,” he says.

“John! I’m telling you, I don’t have your name!”

He shakes his head. “Table.”

I set the glass back down. “I can’t believe you don’t believe me. I feel like I remember you being a trusting kind of person



who sees the good in people.“

Sober as a judge, John says, “Just ... stay on your side of the table.“

Shoot. How am I supposed to take him out if he makes me stay ten feet away all night?

Airily I say, “Fine by me. I don’t know if I believe you, either, so! I mean, this is a pretty big coincidence, you showing up here.“

“Stormy guilted me into coming!“

I snap my head in Stormy’s direction. She’s still playing the piano, looking over at us with a big smile.

Mr Morales sidles up to the bar and says, “May I have this dance, Lara Jean?“

“You may,“ I say. To John I warn, “Don’t you dare come close to me.“

He throws his hands out like he’s warding me off! “Don’t you come close to me!“

As Mr Morales leads me in a slow dance, I press my face against his shoulder to hide my smile. I’m really quite good at this espionage thing. John McClaren is sitting on a love seat now, watching Stormy play and chatting with Alicia. I’ve got him right where I want him. I can’t even believe how lucky I am. I’d been planning on showing up at his next Model UN meeting, but this is so much better.

I’m thinking I’ll come up from behind him, take him by surprise, when Stormy stands up and declares she needs a piano

break, she wants to dance with her grandson. I go turn on the stereo and cue up the CD we decided on for her break.

John is protesting: “Stormy, I told you I don’t dance.” He used to try and fake sick during the square-dancing unit in gym – that’s how much he hates dancing.

Stormy doesn’t listen, of course. She pulls him off the love seat and starts trying to teach him how to fox-trot. “Put your hand on my waist,” she orders. “I didn’t wear heels to sit behind a piano all night.” Stormy’s trying to teach him the steps, and he keeps stepping on her feet. “Ouch!” she snaps.

I can’t stop giggling. Mr Morales is too. He dances us over closer. “May I cut in?” he asks.

“Please!” John practically pushes Stormy into Mr Morales’s arms.

“Johnny, be a gentleman and ask Lara Jean to dance,” Stormy says as Mr Morales twirls her.

John gives me a searching look, and I have a feeling he’s still suspicious of me and whether or not I have his name.

“Ask her to dance,” Mr Morales urges, grinning at me. “She wants to dance, don’t you, Lara Jean?”

I shrug a sad kind of shrug. Wistful. The very picture of a girl who is waiting to be asked to dance.

“I want to see the young people dance!” Norman yells.

John McClaren looks at me, one eyebrow raised. “If we’re just swaying back and forth, I probably won’t step on your feet.”

I feign hesitation and then nod. My pulse is racing. Target acquired.

We step towards each other, and I thread my arms around his neck, and he puts his around my waist, and we sway, offbeat. I'm short, not even five-two, and he looks just under six feet tall, but in my heels we're a good height for dance partners. From across the room Stormy smiles knowingly at me, which I pretend not to see. I should probably go ahead and take him out before he's on to me, but the residents are so enjoying watching us dance. It couldn't hurt to hold off just a few minutes.

As we sway, I'm remembering the eighth grade formal, how everyone paired up and no one asked me to go. I'd thought Genevieve and I were riding over together, but then she said Peter's mom was taking them, and they were going to a restaurant first, like a real date, and it would be awkward if I tagged along. So it ended up being her and Peter and Sabrina Fox and John. I'd hoped John McClaren would ask me for a slow dance, but he didn't; he didn't dance with anyone. The only guy who really danced was Peter. He was always in the centre of the cool-people dance circle.

John's hand is pressed against my back, leading me, and I think he's forgotten all about the game. I've got him in my crosshairs now.

"You're not so bad," I tell him. Song's halfway over. I'd better hop to the beat. *I've got you in five, four, three, two—*

"So ... you and Kavinsky, huh?"

He's distracted me completely, and I've forgotten all about the game for a moment. "Yeah. . ."

Clearing his throat, he says, "I was pretty surprised that you guys were together."

"Why? Because I'm not his type?" I say it casually, like it's nothing, a fact, but it stings like a little pebble thrown directly at my heart.

"No, you are."

"Then why?" I'm pretty sure John's going to say "because I didn't think he was *your* type," just like Josh did.

He doesn't answer right away. "That day you came to Model UN, I tried to follow you out to the parking lot, but you were already gone. Then I got your letter, and I wrote you back, and you wrote me back, and then you invited me to the tree-house thing. I guess I didn't know what to think. You know what I mean?" He looks at me expectantly, and I feel like it's important that I say yes.

All the blood rushes to my face, and I hear a pounding in my ears, which I belatedly realize is the sound of my heart beating really fast. My body is still dancing, though.

He keeps talking. "Maybe it was dumb to think that, because all that stuff was such a long time ago."

*All what stuff?* I want to know, but it wouldn't be right to ask. "Do you know what I remember?" I ask suddenly.

"What?"

"The time Trevor's shorts split open when you guys were playing basketball. And everybody was laughing so hard that

Trevor started getting mad. But not you. You got on your bike and you rode all the way home and brought Trevor a pair of shorts. I was really impressed by that.“

He has a faint half smile on his face. “Thanks.“

Then we're both quiet and still dancing. He's an easy person to be quiet with. “John?“

“Hmm?“

I look up at him. “I have to tell you something.“

“What?“

“I've got you. I mean, I have your name. In the game.“

“Seriously?“ John looks genuinely disappointed, which makes me feel guilty.

“Seriously. Sorry.“ I press my hands against his shoulders. “Tag.“

“Well, now you have Kavinsky. I was really looking forward to taking him out, too. I had a whole plan and everything.“

All eagerness I ask, “What was your plan?“

“Why should I tell the girl who just tagged me out?“ he challenges, but it's a weak challenge, just for show, and we both know he's going to tell me.

I play along. “Come on, Johnny. I'm not just the girl who tagged you out. I'm your *pen pal*.“

John laughs a little. “All right, all right. I'll help you.“

The song ends and we step apart. “Thanks for the dance,“ I say. After all this time, I finally know what it's like to dance

with John Ambrose McClaren. “So what would you have asked for if you won?”

He doesn’t hesitate even one beat. “Your peanut butter chocolate cake with my name written in Reese’s Pieces.”

I stare at him in surprise. *That’s* what he would have wished for? He could have anything and he wants my cake? I give him a curtsy. “I’m so honoured.”

“Well, it was a really good cake,” he says.

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On the phone a few nights later, Peter suddenly says, “You have me, don’t you?”

“No!” I haven’t told him I took out John over the weekend. I don’t want him – or Genevieve, for that matter – to have any extra info. It’s down to the three of us now.

“So you do have me!” He lets out a groan. “I don’t want to play this game any more. It’s making me lonely and really ... frustrated. I haven’t seen you outside of school for a week! When is this going to be over?”

“Peter, I don’t have you. I have John.” I feel a little guilty for lying, but this is how winners play this game. You can’t second-guess yourself.

There’s a silence on the other end. Then he says, “So are you going to drive over to his house to tag him out? He lives in the middle of nowhere. I could take you if you want.”

“I haven’t figured out my game plan yet,” I say. “Who do you have?” I know it has to be me or Genevieve.

He gets quiet. “I’m not saying.”

“Well, have you told anyone else?” Like, say, Genevieve?

“No.”

Hmm. “OK, well, I just told you, so you obviously owe me that same courtesy.”

Peter bursts out, “I didn’t make you, you offered up that information yourself, and look, if it was a lie and you have me,

please just freaking take me out already! I'm begging you. Come to my house right now, and I'll let you sneak up to my room. I'll be a sitting duck for you if it means I can see you again."

"No."

"No?"

"No, I don't want to win like that. When I get your name, I want to have the satisfaction of knowing I beat you fair and square. My first ever Assassins win can't be tainted." I pause. "And besides, your house is a safe zone."

Peter lets out an aggravated sigh. "Are you at least coming to my lacrosse game on Friday?"

His lacrosse game! That's the perfect place to take him out. I try to keep my voice calm and even as I say, "I can't come. My dad has a date, and he needs me to watch Kitty." A lie, but Peter doesn't know that.

"Well, can't you bring her? She's been asking to go to one of my games."

I think fast. "No, because she has a piano lesson after school."

"Since when does Kitty play the piano?"

"Recently, in fact. She heard from our neighbour that it helps with training puppies; it calms them down." I bite my lip. Will he buy it? I hurry to add, "I promise I'll be at the next game no matter what."

Peter groans, this time even louder. "You're killing me, Covey."



Soon, my dear Peter.

I will surprise him at the game; I'll get all decked out in our school colours; I'll even paint his jersey number on my face. He'll be so happy to see me, he won't suspect a thing!

I can't fully explain why this game of Assassins is so important to me. I only know that with each passing day I want it more and more – the win. I want to beat Genevieve, yes, but it's more than that. Maybe it's to prove that I've changed too: I'm not a soft little marshmallow; I've got some fight in me.

After Peter and I hang up, I text John my idea, and he offers to drive me to the game. It's at his school. I ask if he's sure he doesn't mind coming all the way to get me, and he says it'll be worth it to see Kavinsky get taken down. I'm relieved, because the last thing I need is to get lost on the way there.

After school on Friday, I rush home to get ready. I change into school colours – light blue T-shirt, white shorts, white and light blue striped knee socks, a blue ribbon in my hair. I paint a big 15 on my cheek and outline it with white eyeliner.

I run outside as soon as John pulls into our driveway. He's wearing his faded old Orioles baseball cap, pulled down low. He eyes me as I climb inside.

Smiling, John says, "You look like a rally girl."

I tap him on the bill of his hat. "You used to wear this, like, every day that one summer."

As he backs out of our driveway, John grins like he has a secret. It's contagious. Now I'm smiling too, and I don't even

know why. “What? Why are you smiling?” I ask, pulling up my knee socks.

“Nothing,” he says.

I jab him in the side. “Come on!”

“My mom gave me a really bad haircut at the beginning of summer, and I was embarrassed. I never let my mom cut my hair again after that.” He checks the time on the dashboard. “What time did you say the game started? Five?”

“Yup!” I’m practically bouncing up and down in my seat I’m so excited. Peter will be proud of me for pulling this off, I know he will.

We get to John’s school in under half an hour, and there’s still time before the school bus arrives, so John jogs inside to get us snacks out of the vending machine. He comes back with two cans of soda and a bag of salt-and-vinegar chips to share.

He hasn’t been back long before a tall black guy in a lacrosse uniform comes jogging over to the car. He calls out, “McClaren!” He bends down and puts his face up close to the window, and he and John bump fists. “Are you coming to Danica’s after this?” he asks.

John glances over at me and then says, “Nah, I can’t.”

His friend notices me then; his eyes widen. “Who’s this?”

“I’m Lara Jean, I don’t go here,” I say, which is dumb, because he probably knows that already.

“You’re Lara Jean!” He nods enthusiastically. “I’ve heard about you. You’re why McClaren’s hanging around a nursing home, am I right?”

I blush and John laughs an easy sort of laugh. “Get outta here, Avery.”

Avery reaches over John and shakes my hand. “Nice to meet you, Lara Jean. See you around.” Then he runs off towards the field. As we sit and wait, a few more people come up to John’s car to say hi, and I see it’s just like I thought: He has lots of friends, lots of girls who admire him. A group of girls walks by the car, towards the field, and one in particular stares into the car and right at me, questions in her eyes. John doesn’t seem to notice. He is asking me what TV shows I watch, what I’m going to do for spring break in April, summer vacation. I tell him about Daddy’s idea to go to Korea.

“I have a funny story about your dad,” John says, looking at me sideways.

I groan. “Oh no. What did he do?”

“It wasn’t him; it was me.” He clears his throat. “This is embarrassing.”

I rub my hands together in anticipation.

“So, I went over to your house to ask you to eighth grade formal. I had this whole extravagant plan.”

“You never asked me to formal!”

“I know, I’m getting to that part. Are you going to let me tell the story or not?”

“You had a whole extravagant plan,” I prompt.

John nods. “So I gathered a bunch of sticks and some flowers and I arranged them into the letters *FORMAL?* in front of your window. But your dad came home while I was in the

middle of it, and he thought I was going around cleaning people's yards. He gave me ten bucks, and I lost my nerve and I just went home."

I laugh. "I ... can't believe you did that." I can't believe that this almost happened to me. What would that have felt like, to have a boy do something like that for me? In the whole history of my letters, of my liking boys, not once has a boy liked me back at the same time as I liked him. It was always me alone, longing after a boy, and that was fine, that was safe. But this is new. Or old. Old and new, because it's the first time I'm hearing it.

"The biggest regret of eighth grade," John says, and that's when I remember – how Peter once told me that John's biggest regret was not asking me to formal, how elated I was when he said it, and then how he quickly backtracked and said he was only joking.

The school bus pulls up then. "Showtime," I say. I'm giddy as we watch the players get off the bus – I see Gabe, Darrell, no Peter yet. But then the last person gets off the bus and still no Peter. "That's weird ..."

"Could he have driven his own car?" John asks.

I shake my head. "He never does." I grab my phone out of my bag and text him.

Where are you?

No reply. Something's wrong, I know it. Peter never misses a game. He even played when he had the flu.

"I'll be right back," I tell John, and I jump out of the car and run for the field. The guys are warming up. I find Gabe on the

sideline lacing his cleats. I call out, “Gabe!”

He looks up, surprised. “Large! What’s up?”

Breathlessly I ask him, “Where’s Peter?”

“I don’t know,” he says, scratching the back of his neck. “He told Coach he had a family emergency. It sounded pretty legit. Kavinsky wouldn’t miss a game if it wasn’t important.”

I’m already running back to the car. As soon as I’m in, I pant, “Can you drive me to Peter’s?”

I see her car first. Parked on the street in front of his house. The next thing I see is the two of them, standing together on the street for all to see. He has his arms wrapped around her; she is leaning in to him like she can’t stand on her own two feet. Her face is buried in his chest. He is saying something in her ear, petting her hair tenderly.

It all happens in the span of seconds, but it feels like time goes in slow-motion, like I’m moving through water. I think I stop breathing; my head goes fuzzy; everything around me blurs. How many times have I seen them stand just like that? Too many to count.

“Keep driving,” I manage to say to John, and he obeys. He drives right past Peter’s house; they don’t even look up. Thank God they don’t look up. Quietly I say, “Can you take me home?” I can’t even look at John. I hate that he saw too.

John begins, “It might not be ...” Then he stops. “It was just a hug, Lara Jean.”

“I know.” Whatever it was, he missed his game for her.

We're almost at my house when he finally asks, "What are you going to do?"

I've been thinking it over this whole ride. "I'm going to tell Peter to come over tonight, and then I'm going to tag him out."

"You're still playing?" He sounds surprised.

I stare out the window, at all the familiar places. "Sure. I'm going to take him out and then I'm going to take Genevieve out and I'm going to win."

"Why do you want to win so badly?" he asks me. "Is it the prize?"

I don't answer him. If I open my mouth, I will cry.

We're at my house now. I mumble, "Thanks for the ride," and I get out of the car before John can reply. I run into the house, kick off my shoes, and run up the stairs to my room, where I lie down and stare at the ceiling. I put glow-in-the-dark stars up there years ago, and I scraped most of them off except for one, which hung on tight as a stalactite.

Star light, star bright, the first star I see tonight. I wish I may, I wish I might, have the wish I wish tonight. I wish not to cry.

I text Peter: Come over after you're finished hanging out with Genevieve.

He writes back one word: OK.

Just "OK." No denials, no explanations or clarifications. All this time I've been making excuses for him. I've been trusting Peter and not trusting my own gut. Why am I the one making

all these concessions, pretending to be OK with something I'm not actually OK with? Just to keep him?

In the contract we said we'd always tell each other the truth. We said we'd never break each other's hearts. So I guess two times now he's broken his word.

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Peter and I are sitting on my front porch; I can hear the TV on in the living room. Kitty's watching a movie. There is an interminably long silence between us, only the sound of crickets chirping.

He speaks first. "It isn't what you think, Lara Jean; it really isn't."

I take a moment to gather my thoughts together, to string them into something that makes any kind of sense. "When we first started all this, I was really happy just being at home with my sisters and my dad. It was cosy. And then we started hanging out, and it was like ... it was like you brought me out into the world." At this his eyes go soft. "At first it was scary, but then I liked it too. Part of me wants to just stay next to you for ever. I could easily do that. I could love you for ever."

He tries to make his voice light. "Then just do that."

"I can't." I take a shaky breath. "I saw you two. You were holding her; she was in your arms. I saw everything."

"If you'd seen everything, you'd know that it wasn't anything like what you're saying," he begins. I just stare at him, and his face falls. "Come on. Don't look at me like that."

"I can't help it. It's the only way I can look at you right now."

"Gen needed me today, so I was there for her, but just as a friend."



“It’s no use, Peter. She laid claim to you a long time ago, and there’s just no room for me here.” My eyesight is going fuzzy with tears. I wipe my eyes with my jacket sleeve. I can’t be here any more, around him. It’s hurting me too much to look at his face. “I deserve better than that, you know? I deserve ... I deserve to be someone’s number one girl.”

“You *are*.”

“No, I’m not. She is. You’re still protecting her, her secret, whatever that is. From what, though? From me? What have I ever done to her?”

He spreads his hands helplessly. “You took me away from her. You became my most important person.”

“But I’m not, though. That’s the thing. She is.” He sputters and tries to deny it, but there’s no use. How could I believe him when the truth is right in front of me? “You know how I know she’s your most important person? You pick her every time.”

“That’s bullshit!” he explodes. “When I found out she took that video, I told her that if she ever hurt you again, we were done.” Peter’s still talking, but I don’t hear anything more that comes out of his mouth.

*He knew.*

He knew it was Genevieve who posted that video; he knew and he never told me.

Peter isn’t talking any more; he’s peering at me. “Lara Jean? What’s the matter?”

“You knew?”

His face goes grey. “No! It’s not like how you think. I haven’t known this whole time.”

I wet my lips and press them together. “So at some point you found out the truth, and you didn’t tell me.” It’s hard to breathe. “You knew how upset I was, and you kept defending her, and then you found out the truth, and you never told me.”

Peter starts talking very fast. “Let me explain it. It’s only recently I found out Gen was behind the video. I asked her about it, and she broke down and admitted everything to me. That night at the ski trip, she saw us in the hot tub; she took the video. She’s the one who sent it to Anonybitch and played it at the assembly.”

I knew it, and I let myself go along with Peter and pretend not to know what I knew. And for what? For him?

“She’s been really fucked up over stuff she’s going through with her family, and she was jealous, and she took it out on you and me—“

“Like what? What is she going through?” I don’t ask expecting an answer; I know he won’t tell me. I’m asking to prove a point.

He looks pained. “You know I can’t tell you. Why do you keep putting me in a position where I have to say no to you?”

“You put yourself in that position. You have her name, don’t you? In the game, you have her name and she has mine.”

“Who cares about the stupid game? Covey, we’re talking about us.”

“I care about the stupid game.” Peter is loyal to her first, me second. It’s first Genevieve, then me. That is the deal. That’s

always been the deal. And I'm sick of it. Something clicks in my head. Suddenly I ask him, "Why was Genevieve outside that night at the ski trip? All of her friends were in the lodge."

Peter closes his eyes briefly. "Why does it matter?"

I think back to that night in the woods. How he looked surprised to see me. Startled, even. He wasn't waiting for me. He was waiting for *her*. He still is. "If I hadn't gone out to apologize that night, would you have kissed her?"

He doesn't answer right away. "I don't know."

Those three words confirm everything for me. They take my breath away. "If I win ... do you know what I would wish for?" Don't say it, don't say it. Don't say the thing you can't take back. "I'd wish we never started any of this." The words echo in my head, in the air.

He sucks in his breath. His eyes get small; so does his mouth. I've hurt him. Is that what I wanted? I thought so, but now, looking at his face, I'm not sure. "You don't have to win the game to have that, Covey. You can have that right now if you want it."

I reach out, put both hands on his chest. My eyes fill. "You're out. Who do you have?" I already know the answer.

"Genevieve."

I stand up. "Bye, Peter." And then I walk into my house and shut the door. I don't look back, not once.

We broke so easily. Like it was nothing. Like we were nothing. Does that mean it was never meant to be in the first

place? That we were an accident of fate? If we were meant to be, how could we both walk away just like that?

I guess the answer is, we weren't.

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Peter and me, our break-up, it's all so very high school. By that I mean it's ephemeral. Even this pain will be fleeting, finite. Even the sharp sting of this betrayal I should hold on to and remember and cherish, because it is my first true break-up. It's all just part of it, the process of falling in love. And it's not like I thought we'd stay together for ever; we're only sixteen and seventeen. One day I will look back on all of this fondly.

This is what I keep telling myself, even as tears are filling my eyes, even as I'm lying in bed that night, crying myself to sleep. I cry until my cheeks sting from wiping away my tears. This well of sadness, it starts with Peter but it doesn't end there.

Because over and over one thought runs in my head on a loop: *I miss my mother. I miss my mother. I miss her so much.* If she were here, she would bring me a cup of Night-Night tea, she would sit at the foot of my bed. She would put my head in her lap, and run her fingers through my hair, and whisper in my ear, *It will all be fine, Lara Jean. It will all be fine.* And I would believe her, because her words were always true.

*Oh, Mommy. How I miss you. Why aren't you here, when I need you most?*

So far I've saved a napkin Peter drew a little sketch of my face on, a ticket stub from the first time we went to the movies, the poem he gave me on Valentine's Day. The necklace. Of course

the necklace. I haven't been able to bring myself to take it off.  
Not yet.

I lie in bed all day Saturday, only getting up for snacks and to let Jamie out to pee in the backyard. I fast-forward to the sad parts of romantic comedies. What I should be doing is coming up with a plan to take Genevieve out, but I can't. It hurts every time I think of her, of the game, of Peter most of all. I resolve to put it out of my mind until I can really concentrate.

John texts me once to see if I'm all right, but I can't bring myself to reply. I put that off for later too.

The only time I leave the house is on Sunday afternoon to go to Belleview for a party planning committee meeting. With a little cajoling on Stormy's part, Janette has okayed my USO party idea, and the show must go on, break-ups be damned.

Stormy says the whole retirement community is abuzz about it. She's particularly excited because there's been talk that Ferncliff, the other big nursing home in town, might bus over some of their residents. Stormy says they have at least one eligible widower that she knows from the seniors book club at the local library. This gets the other female residents stirred up. "He's a very distinguished silver," she keeps telling everyone. "He still drives, too!" I make sure to spread that info around myself. Anything to build excitement.

At the party everyone will get five "war bonds," which you can use for a cup of whiskey punch, a little flag pin, or a dance. That was Mr Morales's idea. Actually, his exact idea was one war bond for a dance with a lady, but we all slapped him down for being sexist and said that it should be a dance with a man *or* a lady. Alicia, pragmatic as ever, said, "There will be many

more women than men, so it's the women who will be in charge anyway."

I've been going from apartment to apartment asking people to lend pictures from the forties if they have them, especially in uniform or at a USO party. One resident sniffed at me and said, "Excuse me, but I was six in 1945!" Hastily I told her that pictures of her parents would be welcome too, of course – but she was already closing the door in my face.

Scrapbooking to the Oldies has turned into a de facto dance-planning committee. I printed out war bonds, and Mr Morales is using my paper cutter to cut them. Maude, who is new to the group and is Internet savvy, is clipping news articles from the war to decorate the refreshments table. Her friend Claudia is working on the playlist.

Alicia will have a little table of her own. She's making a paper-crane garland, all different-coloured papers, lilac and peach and turquoise and floral. Stormy balked at the deviation from the red, white, and blue theme, but Alicia held firm and I backed her up. Classy as always, her pictures of Japanese Americans in internment camps are in fancy silver frames.

"Those pictures are really going to bring the mood down," Stormy stage-whispers to me.

Alicia whirls around. "These pictures are meant to educate the ignorant."

Stormy gathers herself up to her full five feet three inches, five-six in heels. "Alicia, did you just call me *ignorant*?" I wince. Stormy's been putting a lot of work into this party, and she's been a little extra Stormy lately.

I just can't take another fight between them right now. I'm about to plead for peace when Alicia fixes Stormy with a steely look and says, "If the muumuu fits."

Stormy and I both gasp. Then Stormy stalks over to Alicia's table and sweeps Alicia's paper cranes to the floor with a flourish. Alicia screams, and I gasp again. Everyone else in the room looks up. "Stormy!"

"You're taking *her* side? She just called me ignorant! Stormy Sinclair might be a lot of things, but I am not ignorant."

"I'm not taking anybody's side," I say, bending down to pick up the paper cranes.

"If you're taking a side, it should be mine," Alicia says. She thrusts her chin in Stormy's direction. "She thinks she's some grand dame, but she is a child, throwing a tantrum over a party."

"A child!" Stormy shrieks.

"Will you two please stop fighting?" To my mortification, tears spurt out the corners of my eyes. "I can't take it today." My voice trembles. "I really just can't."

They exchange a look, and then they both rush to my side. "Darling, what's wrong?" Stormy croons. "It must be a boy."

"Sit, sit," Alicia says. They lead me over to the couch and sit on either side of me.

"Everybody, get out!" Stormy yells, and the others scatter. "Now you tell us what's wrong."

I wipe my eyes with the corner of my shirtsleeve. "Peter and I broke up." It's the first time I've said the words out loud.



Stormy gasps. “You and Mr Handsome broke up! Was it over another boy?” She looks hopeful, and I know she is thinking of John.

“It wasn’t over another boy. It’s complicated.”

“Darling, it’s never that complicated,” Stormy says. “In my day—“

Alicia glares at her. “Will you just let her talk?”

“Peter never got over his ex-girlfriend, Genevieve,” I say, sniffing. “She was the one who posted that video of us in the hot tub, and Peter found out and he didn’t tell me.”

“Perhaps he wanted to spare your feelings,” Alicia says.

Vehemently Stormy shakes her head, so hard her earrings whoosh. “The boy is a dog, pure and simple. He ought to treat you like a queen, not this other girl Genevieve.”

Alicia accuses, “You just want Lara Jean to date your great-grandson.”

“So what if I do!” With a gleam in her eye she says, “Say, Lara Jean. Have you got any plans tonight?”

At that we all laugh. “I can’t think about any boy but Peter right now,” I say. “Do you still remember your first love?”

Stormy’s had so many – could she possibly? But she nods. “Garrett O’Leary. I was fifteen and he was eighteen and we only ever had a dance, but the way I felt when he looked at me ...” She shivers.

I look to my left at Alicia. “And yours was your husband, Phillip, right?”

To my surprise she shakes her head. “My first love was named Albert. He was my older brother’s best friend. I thought I would marry him. But it was not to be. I met my Phillip.” She smiles. “Phillip was the love of my life. And yet I never forgot Albert. How young I was once! Stormy, can you believe we were ever so young?”

Stormy does not give her usual blithe reply. Her eyes go moist, and as softly as I’ve ever heard her speak she says, “It’s all a million lifetimes ago. And yet.”

“And yet,” Alicia echoes.

They both smile at me fondly, with such true and genuine affection that new tears come to my eyes. “What will I do now that Peter’s not my boyfriend any more?” I wonder out loud.

“You’ll just do what you did before he was your boyfriend,” Alicia says. “You’ll go about your day, and you will miss him at first, but over time it will ease. It will lessen.” She reaches out, touches her papery hand to my cheek. A smile plays at her lips. “All you need is time, and you, little one, have all the time in the world.”

It’s a comforting thought, but I don’t know if I believe it is true, not completely. I think that time might be different for young people. The minutes longer, stronger, more vibrant. All I know is that every minute without him feels interminably long, like I’m waiting, just waiting for him to come back to me. I, Lara Jean, know he isn’t, but my heart doesn’t seem to understand it’s over.

After, energies renewed, tears dried, I am with Janette in her office, going over party details. When she offhandedly

mentions the sitting room, I freeze. “Janette, the sitting room isn’t going to be big enough.”

“I don’t know what to tell you. The main activities room is booked for bingo. They have a standing Friday night reservation.”

“But this party is a huge event! Can’t the bingo people be in the sitting room just for one night?”

“Lara Jean, I can’t move bingo. People from all over the community come here for that, including the leasing agent’s own mother. There are a lot of politics at play here. My hands are tied.”

“Well, what about the dining room?” We could move all the tables and set up the dance floor at the centre of the room and then put the refreshments on a long table against the wall. It could work.

Janette gives me a look like *Girl, please*. “And who’s going to put away all the tables and chairs? You?”

“Well, me, and I’m sure I could round up some volunteers —”

“And have one of the residents put out their back and sue the home? No, *gracias*.”

“We wouldn’t need to put away all of the tables, just half. Couldn’t you get the staff to help?” Janette’s already shaking her head when inspiration hits me. “Janette, I heard that Ferncliff might bus over some of their residents. *Ferncliff*. They already call themselves the premier retirement community of the Blue Ridge Mountains.”

“Oh my God, Ferncliff is a dump. The people who work at that place are garbage. I have a *masters*. Premier retirement community of the Blue Ridge Mountains’? Ha! My ass.”

Now I just need to bring it home. “I’m telling you, Janette, if this dance isn’t up to par, it’s going to make us look like fools. We can’t let that happen. I want those Ferncliff residents to walk or wheel out of here wishing they were Belleview!”

“All right, all right. I’ll get the janitors to help set up the dining room.” Janette shakes her finger at me. “You’re like a dog with a bone, girl.”

“You won’t regret it,” I promise her. “For the pictures alone. We’ll put them all over the website. Everyone will want to be us!”

At this Janette’s eyes narrow with satisfaction, and I let out the breath I’ve been holding. This party has to go right. It just has to. It is my one bright spot.

Sunday night I curl my hair. Curling your hair is an intrinsically hopeful act. I like to curl mine at night and think about all the things that could happen tomorrow. Also, it generally looks much better slept on and not so poofy.

I've got half of it clipped and I'm almost done with one side when Chris comes climbing through my window. "I'm supposed to be grounded right now, so I have to wait until my mom falls asleep before I go home," she says, taking off her motorcycle jacket. "Are you still depressed over Kavinsky?"

I wind another section of hair around the curling iron barrel. "Yes. I mean, it hasn't even been forty-eight hours yet."

Chris puts her arm around me. "I hate to say it, but this has been a train wreck from the start."

I give her a wounded look. "Thanks a lot."

"Well, it's true. The way you guys got together was weird, and then the whole hot tub video thing." She takes the curling iron from me and starts curling her own hair. "Although, I will say that it was probably good for you to go through all that. You were really sheltered, hon. You can be very judgemental."

I snatch the curling iron back from her and make like I'm going to bonk her over the head with it. "Are you here to cheer me up or to tell me all of my flaws?"

"Sorry! I'm just saying." She offers me a cheery smile. "Don't be sad for too long. It's not your style. There are other guys besides Kavinsky. Guys who aren't my cousin's sloppy

seconds. Guys like John McClaren. He's hot. I'd go for him myself if he wasn't into you."

Softly, I say, "I can't think about anyone else right now. Peter and I just broke up."

"There's heat between you and Johnny boy. I saw it with my own two eyes at the time capsule thing. He wants you." She bumps her shoulder against mine. "You liked him before. Maybe there's still something there."

I ignore her and keep curling my hair, one lock at a time.

Peter still sits in front of me in chemistry. I didn't know you could miss someone even more acutely when they're only a few feet away. Maybe it's because he doesn't look at me, not even once. I didn't fully comprehend what a big part of my life he'd become. He'd become so ... familiar to me. And now he's just gone. Not gone, still here, just not available to me, which might be even worse. For a minute there it was really good. It was really, really good. Wasn't it good? Maybe really, really good things aren't meant to last for too long; maybe that's what makes them all the more sweet, the temporariness of them. Maybe I'm just trying to make myself feel better. It's working, barely. Barely is enough for now.

After class is over, Peter lingers at his desk, and then he turns around and says, "Hey."

My heart leaps. "Hey." I have this sudden, wild thought that if he wants me back, I'll say yes. Forget my pride, forget Genevieve, forget it all.

"So I want my necklace back," he says. "Obviously."

My fingers fly to the heart locket hanging from around my neck. I wanted to take it off this morning, but I couldn't bear to.

Now I have to give it back? Stormy has a whole box of trinkets and tokens from old boyfriends. I didn't think I'd have to return my one token from a boy. But it *was* expensive, and Peter is practical. He could get his money back, and his mom could resell it. "Of course," I say, fumbling with the clasp.

"I didn't mean you had to give it back right this second," he says, and my hand stills. Maybe he'll let me keep it awhile longer, or even for ever. "But I'll take it."

I can't get the clasp undone, and it's taking for ever, and it's excruciating because he's just standing there. Finally he comes up behind me and pulls my hair away from my neck so it rests on one shoulder. It might be my imagination, but I think I hear his heart beating. His is beating and mine feels like it's breaking.

Kitty flies into my bedroom. I'm at my desk, doing homework. It's been so long since I sat here and did homework; Peter and I usually go to Starbucks after school. Life is lonely already.

"Did you and Peter break up?" Kitty demands.

I flinch. "Who told you?"

"Don't worry about it. Just answer the question."

"Well ... yes."

"You don't deserve him," she spits out.

I reel backwards in my seat. "What? You're *my* sister – it's not fair for you to take Peter's side. You haven't even heard my side. Not that you should have to. Don't you know that you never take a side against your sister?"

She purses her lips. "What's your side?"

"My side is, it's complicated. Peter still has feelings for Genevieve—"

"He doesn't think of her that way any more. Don't make an excuse."

"You didn't see what I saw, Kitty!" I burst out.

"What did you see?" she challenges, chin thrust out like a weapon. "Tell me."

"It isn't just what I saw. It's what I knew all along. Just – never mind. You wouldn't understand it, Kitty."



“Did you see him kiss her? Did you?”

“No, but—“

“But nothing.“ She squints at me. “Does this have anything to do with that guy with the weird name? John Amberton McClaren or whatever?”

“No! Why would you say that?” I let out a gasp. “Wait a minute! Have you been reading my letters again?”

She screws up her face, and I know she has, the fiend. “Don’t change the subject! Do you like him or not?”

“This doesn’t have anything to do with John McClaren. It’s just about me and Peter.“

I want to tell her that he knew it was Genevieve who made that video, spread it around. He knew and he still protected her. But I can’t mar her little-girl notion of who Peter is. It would be too cruel a thing to do to her. “Kitty, it doesn’t matter. Peter still has feelings for Genevieve, and I’ve always known it. And besides, what’s even the point of a serious thing with Peter when we’re only going to break up like Margot and Josh did? High school romances hardly ever last, you know. And for a good reason. We’re too young to be so serious.“ Even as I’m saying the words, tears are leaking out the corners of my eyes.

Kitty softens. She puts her arm around me. “Don’t cry.“

“I’m not crying. I’m tearing up a little.“

Sighing heavily, she says, “If this is love, no thanks. I don’t want any part of it. When I’m older, I’m just going to do my own thing.“

“What does that mean?” I ask her.

Kitty shrugs. “If I like a boy, fine, I’ll date him, but I’m not going to sit at home and cry over him.”

“Kitty, don’t act like you never cry.”

“I cry over important things.”

“You cried the other night because Daddy wouldn’t let you stay up to watch TV!”

“Yes, well, that was important to *me*.”

I sniffle. “I don’t know why I’m arguing over this stuff with you.” She’s too little to understand. Part of me hopes she never does. It was better when I didn’t.

That night, Daddy and I are doing the dishes when he clears his throat and says, “So Kitty told me about the big break-up. How are you holding up?”

I rinse off a glass and set it in the dishwasher. “Kitty has such a big mouth. I was going to tell you about it later.” Maybe deep down I was hoping I wouldn’t have to.

“Do you want to talk about it? I can make some Night-Night tea. Not as good as Mommy’s, but still.”

“Maybe later,” I say, just to be kind. His version of Night-Night tea isn’t the best.

He puts his arm around my shoulders. “It’ll get easier, I promise. Peter Kavinsky isn’t the only boy in the world.”

Sighing, I say, “I just don’t want to hurt like this ever again.”

“There’s no way to protect yourself against heartbreak, Lara Jean. That’s just a part of life.” He kisses me on the top of my

head. “Go upstairs and rest. I’ll finish up here.”

“Thanks, Daddy.” I leave him alone in the kitchen, humming to himself as he dries a pan with a dishcloth.

My dad said Peter isn’t the only boy in the world. I know this is true, of course it’s true. But look at Daddy. My mom was the only girl in the world for him. If she wasn’t, he’d have found somebody new by now. Maybe he’s been trying to protect himself from heartbreak too. Maybe we’re more alike than I ever realized.

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It's raining again. I'd had the thought that I might take Kitty and Jamie to the park after school, but that's out now. Instead I sit in bed and curl my hair and watch the rain shoot down like silver pellets. Weather to match my mood, I suppose.

In the midst of our break-up, I forgot about the game. Well, now I'm remembering all too well. I will win. I will take her out. She can't have Peter *and* win the game. It's too unfair. And I will think of some perfect wish, some perfect something to take from her. If only I knew what to wish for!

I need help. I call Chris, and she doesn't pick up. I'm about to call again, but at the last second I text John:

Will you help me take out Genevieve?

It takes a few minutes for him to write back.

It would be my honour.

John settles into the couch and leans forward, looking at me intently. "All right, so how do you want to do this? Do you want to flush her out? Go black ops on her?"

I set down a glass of sweet tea in front of him. Sitting next to him, I say, "I think we have to run surveillance on her first. I don't even know what her schedule is like." And ... if in winning this game, I find out her big secret, well, that would be a nice bonus.

"I like where your head is at," John says, tipping his head back and drinking his tea.

“I know where they keep the emergency key. Chris and I had to pick up a vacuum cleaner from her house once. What if ... what if I try to get under her skin? Like I could leave a note on her pillow that says *I'm watching you*. That would really creep her out.”

John nearly chokes on his iced tea. “Wait, what would that even get you?”

“I don’t know. You’re the expert at this!”

“Expert? How am I an expert? If I was really any good, I’d still be in the game.”

“There’s no way you could have known I’d be at Belleview,” I point out. “That was just your bad luck.”

“We have a lot of coincidences. Belleview. You being at Model UN that day.”

I look down at my hands. “That ... wasn’t a total coincidence. It actually wasn’t a coincidence at all. I went there looking for you. I wanted to see how you turned out. I knew you’d be in Model UN. I remembered how much you liked it in middle school.”

“The only reason I joined was so I could work on my public speaking. For my stutter.” He stops. “Wait. Did you say you went there for me? To see how I turned out?”

“Yeah. I ... I always wondered.”

John’s not saying anything; he’s just staring at me. He sets down his glass abruptly. Then he picks it back up and puts a coaster under it. “You haven’t said what happened with you and Kavinsky that night after I left.”

“Oh. We broke up.”

“You broke up,” he repeats, his face blank.

That’s when I notice Kitty lurking in the doorway like a little spy. “What do you want, Kitty?”

“Um ... is there any red pepper hummus left?” she asks.

“I don’t know – go check.”

John is wide-eyed. “This is your little sister?” To Kitty he says, “The last time I saw you, you were still a little kid.”

“Yeah, I grew up,” she says, not even a little bit nicely.

I throw her a look. “Be polite to our guest.” Kitty turns on her heels and runs upstairs. “Sorry about my sister. She’s really close with Peter and she gets crazy ideas...”

“Crazy ideas?” John repeats.

I could slap myself. “Yeah, I mean, she thinks that something’s going on with us. But obviously there isn’t, and you don’t, like, like me like that, so, yeah, it’s crazy.” Like, why do I speak? Why did God give me a mouth if I’m just going to say dumb stuff with it?

It’s so quiet I open my mouth to say more dumb stuff, but then he says, “Well ... it’s not *that* crazy.”

“Right! I mean, I didn’t mean *crazy*—” My mouth snaps shut, and I stare straight ahead.

“Do you remember that time we played spin the bottle in my basement?”

I nod.

“I was nervous to kiss you, because I’d never kissed a girl before,” he says, and picks up the glass of sweet tea again. He takes a swig, but there’s no tea left, just ice. His eyes meet mine, and he grins. “All the guys gave me such a hard time afterwards for whiffing it.”

“You didn’t whiff it,” I say.

“I think that was around when Trevor’s old brother told us he made a girl ...” John hesitates, and I nod eagerly so he’ll go on. “He claimed he gave a girl an orgasm just by kissing her.”

I let out a shrieky laugh and clap my hands to my mouth. “That’s the biggest lie I ever heard! I never saw him talk to even one girl. Besides, I don’t think that’s even possible. And if it was possible, I highly doubt Sean Pike was capable of it.”

John laughs too. “Well, I know it’s a lie now, but at the time we all believed him.”

“I mean, was it a great kiss? No, it wasn’t.” John winces and I quickly continue. “But it wasn’t an altogether *terrible* one. I swear. And listen, it’s not like I’m an expert on kissing anyway. Who am I to say?”

“OK OK, you can stop trying to make me feel better.” He sets down his glass. “I’ve got much better at it. That’s what the girls tell me.”

This conversation has taken a strange and confessional turn, and I’m nervous but not in a bad way. I like sharing secrets, being coconspirators. “Oh, so you’ve kissed that many, huh?”

He laughs again. “A respectable number.” He pauses. “I’m surprised you even remember that day. You were so into Kavinsky, I don’t think you even noticed who else was there.”

I push him in the shoulder. “I was not ~~so~~ into Kavinsky!”

“Yes you were. You kept your eyes on that bottle the whole game, like this.” John picks up the bottle and lasers his eyes at it. “Waiting for your moment.”

I’m bright red, I know I am. “Oh, be quiet.”

Laughing, he says, “Like a hawk on its prey.”

“Shut up!” Now I’m laughing too. “How do you even remember that?”

“Because I was doing the same thing,” he says.

“You were staring at Peter too?” I say it like a joke, to tease, because this is fun. For the first time in days I’m having fun.

He looks right at me, navy-blue eyes sure and steady, and my breath catches in my chest. “No. I was looking at you.”

There’s a humming in my ears, and it’s the sound of my heart beating in triple measure. *In memory, everything seems to happen to music.* One of my favourite lines from *The Glass Menagerie*. If I close my eyes I can almost hear it, that day in John Ambrose McClaren’s basement. Years from now, when I look back on this moment, what music will I hear then?

His eyes hold mine, and I feel a flutter that starts in my throat and moves across my collarbone and chest. “I like you, Lara Jean. I liked you then and I like you even more now. I know you and Kavinsky just broke up, and you’re still sad, but I just want to make it unequivocally clear.”

“Um ... OK,” I whisper. His words – they come clearly; they don’t miss in either direction. Not even a trace of a stutter. Just – unequivocally clear.



“OK, then. Let’s win you a wish.“ He takes out his phone and pulls up Google Maps. “I looked up Gen’s address before I came over here. I think you’re right – we should take our time, assess the situation. Not go in half-cocked.“

“Mm-hm.“ I’m in a sort of dream state; it’s hard to concentrate. John Ambrose McClaren wants to make it unequivocally clear.

I snap out of it when Kitty jostles her way back into the living room, balancing a glass of orange soda, the tub of red pepper hummus, and a bag of pita chips. She makes her way over to the couch and plonks down right between us. Holding out the bag, she asks, “Do you guys want some?“

“Sure,“ John says, taking a chip. “Hey, I hear you’re pretty good at schemes. Is that true?“

Warily she says, “What makes you say that?“

“You’re the one who sent out Lara Jean’s letters, aren’t you?“ Kitty nods. “Then I’d say you’re pretty good at schemes.“

“I mean, yeah. I guess.“

“Awesome. We need your help.“

Kitty’s ideas are a bit too extreme – like slashing Genevieve’s tyres, or throwing a stink bomb in her house to smoke her out, but John writes down every one of Kitty’s suggestions, which does not go unnoticed by Kitty. Very little does.

The next morning, Kitty is dawdling over her peanut butter toast, and from behind his newspaper, Daddy says, “You’re going to miss the bus if you don’t hurry.”

She merely shrugs and takes her time going upstairs to get her book bag. I’m sure she thinks she can just catch a ride with me if she misses the bus, but I’m running late too. I overslept and then I couldn’t find my favourite jeans so I had to settle for my second favourite.

As I’m rinsing my cereal bowl, I look out the window and see Kitty’s school bus drive by. “You missed the bus!” I yell upstairs.

No reply.

I stuff my lunch in my bag and call out, “If you’re coming with me, you’d better hustle! Bye, Daddy!”

I’m putting on my shoes by the front door when Kitty shoots right past me and out the door, book bag bouncing against her shoulder. I follow after her and close the door behind me. And there, across the street, leaning against his black Audi, is Peter. He grins broadly at Kitty, and I stand there just completely blindsided. My first thought is, *Is he here to see me?* No, couldn’t be. My second thought is, *Could this be a trap?* My eyes dart around, looking for any sign of Genevieve. There is none, and I feel guilty for thinking he could ever be that cruel.

Kitty waves madly and runs up to him. “Hi!”

“Ready to go, kid?” he asks her.

“Yup.” She turns back to look at me. “Lara Jean, you can come with us. I’ll sit in your lap.”

Peter is looking at his phone, and what little hope I had that maybe he partly came to see me is dashed. “No, that’s OK,” I say. “There’s only room for two.”

He opens the passenger-side door for her, and Kitty scrambles in. “Go fast,” she tells him.

He barely spares me a glance before they’re gone. Well. I suppose that’s that, then.

“What kind of cake are you making me?” Kitty sits on a stool and watches me. I’m baking the cake tonight so it’s all set for tomorrow’s party. I’ve got it in my head that Kitty’s slumber party has to be just the best night ever, partly because the party is so belated and should therefore be worth the wait, and partly because ten is a big year in a girl’s life. Kitty may not have a mom, but she will have a spectacular birthday sleepover if I’ve got anything to do with it.

“I told you, it’s a surprise.” I dump my premeasured flour into a mixing bowl. “So how was your day?”

“Good. I got an A-minus on my maths quiz.”

“Oh, yay! Anything else cool happen?”

Kitty shrugs her shoulders. “I think Ms Bertoli accidentally farted when she was taking attendance. Everybody laughed.”

Baking powder, salt. “Cool, cool. Did, um, Peter drive you straight to school, or did you stop somewhere along the way?”

“He took me to get doughnuts.”

I bite my lip. “That’s nice. Did he say anything?”

“About what?”

“I don’t know. Life.”

Kitty rolls her eyes. “He didn’t say anything about you, if that’s what you’re wondering about.”

This stings. “I wasn’t wondering about that at all,” I lie.

Kitty and I have the whole sleepover planned down to a T. Zombie makeovers. Photo booth with props. Nail art.

I chose Kitty’s cake with utmost care. It’s chocolate with raspberry jam and white chocolate frosting. I’ve made three different kinds of dips. Sour cream and onion, red pepper hummus and cold spinach dip. Crudités. Pigs in a blanket. Salty caramel popcorn for the movie. Lime sherbet punch, the kind you pour ginger ale over. I even scrounged up an old glass punch bowl in the attic, which will also be perfect for the USO theme party. For breakfast in the morning I’m making chocolate chip pancakes. I know all of these details are important to Kitty, too. Already she’s mentioned to me that at Brielle’s birthday, her mom made strawberry smoothies for their snack, and who could forget how Alicia Bernard’s mom made crepes when she’s mentioning it all the time?

Daddy’s banished to his room for the night, which he looks relieved about – but not before I made him drag down the little vintage chest of drawers I have in my room. I artfully arrange my collection of nightgowns and pj’s and footie long underwear, plus fuzzy slippers. Between Kitty, Margot, and me, we have a lot of fuzzy slippers.

Everyone changes into pyjamas right away, giggling and screaming and fighting over who gets what.

I am wearing a pale pink peignoir set I got from a thrift store brand-new with the tags still on. I feel like Doris Day in *The Pajama Game*. The only thing I'm missing are furry slippers with a kitten heel. I tried to convince Kitty that we should have an old movie night, but she shot that idea down right away. To be funny, I put my hair in rollers. I offer to put the girls' hair in rollers too, but everyone shrieks and says no.

They're so loud I keep having to say, "Girls, girls!"

Halfway into the mani session I notice that Kitty is hanging back. I thought she'd be in her element, belle of the birthday ball, but she's ill at ease and playing with Jamie.

When all the girls run upstairs to my room to do the mud packs I've prepared, I grab Kitty's elbow. "Are you having fun?" I ask. She nods and tries to dart away, but I give her stern eyes. "Sister swear?"

Kitty hesitates. "Shanae's got really good friends with Sophie," she says, her eyes welling up. "Like better friends than me and her. Did you see how they did matching manicures? They didn't ask me if I wanted to do matching manicures."

"I don't think they meant to leave you out," I say.

She shrugs her bony shoulders.

I put my arm around her, and she just stands there stiffly, so I push her head down on my shoulder. "It can be tough with best friendships. You're both growing and changing, and it's hard to grow and change at the same rate."

Her head pops up, and I push it back down on my shoulder. “Is that what happened with you and Genevieve?” she asks.

“Honestly, I don’t know what happened with me and Genevieve. She moved away, and we were still friends, and then we weren’t.” I realize belatedly that it’s not the most comforting thing to say to someone who’s feeling left out by her friends. “But I’m sure that will never happen to you.”

Kitty lets out a defeated little sigh. “Why can’t things just stay the same as before?”

“Then nothing would ever change and you wouldn’t grow up; you would have stayed nine for ever and never have turned ten.”

She wipes her nose with the back of her arm. “I might not mind that.”

“Then you’d never get to drive, or go to college, or buy a house and adopt a bunch of dogs. I know you want to do all that stuff. You have an adventurous spirit, and being a kid can get in the way of that, because you have to get other people’s permission. When you’re older, you can do what you want and you won’t have to ask anybody.”

Sighing she says, “Yeah, that’s true.”

I smooth her hair away from her forehead. “Want me to put on a movie for you guys?”

“A horror one?”

“Sure.”

She’s perking up, going into bargaining mode like the business lady she is. “It has to be rated R. No kid stuff.”

“Fine, but if you guys get scared, you aren’t sleeping with me in my room. Last time you guys kept me up all night. And if any parents call to complain, I’m telling them you guys snuck the movie on your own.“

“No problem.“

I watch her fly up the stairs. Impossible as she is, I like Kitty just as she is. I wouldn’t have minded if she’d stayed nine for ever. Kitty’s cares are still manageable; they can fit in the palm of my hand. I like that she still depends on me for things. Her cares and her needs make me forget my own. I like that I am needed, that I am beholden to somebody. This break-up with Peter, it’s not as big as Katherine Song Covey turning ten. She has sprung up like a weed, without a mother, just two sisters and a dad. That is no small feat. That’s something extraordinary.

But ten, wow. Ten isn’t a little girl any more. It’s right in between. The thought of her getting older, outgrowing her toys, her art set ... it makes me feel a bit melancholy. Growing up really is bittersweet.

My phone buzzes, and it’s a pitiful text from Daddy:

Is it safe to come downstairs? I’m so thirsty.

Coast is clear.

Roger that.

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Following Genevieve around is a strangely familiar feeling. Nothing little observations come flooding back. It's a heady combination of the things I used to know about her and the things I don't. She goes through the drive-thru at Wendy's, and without even looking, I know what's in the bag. Small Frosty, small fries to dip, six-piece chicken nuggets, also to dip.

John and I follow Genevieve around town for a bit, but we lose her at a stoplight so we just head over to Belleview. There's a USO party planning meeting I have to get to. With the party so close, we're all doubling our efforts to have everything ready in time. Belleview has become my solace, my safe place throughout all this. In part because Genevieve doesn't know about it, so she can't tag me out, but also because it's the one place I won't run into her and Peter, free to do whatever they want together now that he's single again.

It starts snowing at the beginning of our meeting. Everyone crowds around the windows to look, shaking their heads and saying, "Snow in April! Can you believe it?" and then we go back to work on USO decorations. John helps with the banner.

By the time we're done, there are a few inches of snow on the ground, and the snow has turned to ice. "Johnny, you can't drive in this weather. I absolutely forbid it," Stormy says.

"Grandma, it'll be fine," John says. "I'm a good driver."

Stormy delivers a stinging smack on his arm. "I told you never to call me Grandma! Just Stormy. The answer is no. I'm



putting my foot down. The both of you will stay at Belleview tonight. It's far too dangerous." She sends me a stern look. "Lara Jean, you call your father right now and tell him I won't allow you out in this weather."

"He can come get us," I suggest.

"And have that poor widower get into a car accident on the way here? No. I won't have it. Give me your phone. I'll call him myself."

"But – there's school tomorrow," I say.

"Cancelled," Stormy says with a smile. "They just announced it on the TV."

I protest, "I don't have any of my things! No toothbrush, or pyjamas, or anything!"

She puts her arm around me. "Lie back and let Stormy take care of everything. Don't you worry your pretty little head."

So that is how it came to be that John Ambrose McClaren and I are spending the night together at a retirement home.

A snowstorm in April is a magical thing. Even if it is because of climate change. A few pink flowers have already sprouted in the gardens outside Stormy's living room window, and snow is shaking down on it hard, the way Kitty shakes powdered sugar on pancakes – fast and a lot. Soon you can't even see the pink of the flowers; it's all just covered in white.

We're playing chequers in Stormy's living room, the big kind of chequers you can buy at Cracker Barrel. John has beaten me twice and he keeps asking me if I'm hustling him. I'm coy about it, but the answer is no, he's just better than me at chequers. Stormy serves us piña coladas that she mixes in her

blender with “just a splash of rum to warm us up“, and she microwaves frozen spanakopita that neither of us touches. Bing Crosby is playing on her stereo. By nine thirty Stormy is yawning and saying she’ll need her beauty sleep soon. John and I exchange a look – it’s still so early, and I don’t know the last time I went to bed before midnight.

Stormy insists I stay with her and John stay with Mr Morales in his spare bedroom. I can tell John isn’t crazy about this idea, because he asks, “Can’t I just sleep on your floor?”

I’m surprised when Stormy shakes her head. “I hardly think Lara Jean’s father would appreciate that!”

“I really don’t think my dad would mind, Stormy,” I say. “I could call him if you want.”

But the answer is a firm and resounding no: John must bunk with Mr Morales. For a lady who’s always telling me to be wild and have adventures and bring the condom, she’s far more old-fashioned than I thought.

Stormy hands John a face towel and a pair of foam earplugs. “Mr Morales snores,” she tells him as she kisses him good night.

John raises an eyebrow at her. “How do you know?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know!” She shimmies off into the kitchen like the grand dame she truly is. In a low voice John says to me, “You know what? I really, really wouldn’t.”

I bite the cushiony part of my cheek to keep from laughing.

“Keep your phone on vibrate,” John says before he goes out the door. “I’ll text you.”

I hear the sound of Stormy snoring and the whispery sound of icy snowflakes hitting the windowsill. I keep getting twisted up in Stormy's sleeping bag, twisted and hot and wishing Stormy didn't have the heat turned up so high. Old people are always complaining about how cold it is at Belleview, how the heat is "piss-poor", as Danny in the Azalea building says. Feels plenty hot to me. Stormy's peach high-neck satin nightgown she insisted I wear isn't helping matters. I'm lying on my side, playing Candy Crush on my phone, wondering when John will hurry up and text me.

Wanna play in the snow?

I text back right away:

YES! It's really hot in here.

Meet me in the hallway in two min?

K.

I stand up so fast in my sleeping bag I nearly trip. I use my phone to find my coat, my boots. Stormy is snoring away. I can't find my scarf, but I don't want to keep John waiting, so I run out without it.

He's already in the hallway waiting for me. His hair is sticking up in the back, and on that basis alone I think I could fall in love with him if I let myself. When he sees me, he holds his arms out and sings, "Do you want to build a snowman?" and I burst out laughing so hard John says, "Shh, you're going to wake up the residents!" which only makes me laugh harder. "It's only ten thirty!"

We run down the long carpeted hallway, both of us laughing as quietly as we can. But the more you try to laugh quietly, the

harder it is to stop. “I can’t stop laughing,” I gasp as we run through the sliding doors and to the courtyard.

We’re both out of breath; we both stop short.

The ground is blanketed in thick white snow, thick as sheep’s wool. It’s so beautiful and hushed, my heart almost hurts with the pleasure of it. I’m so happy in this moment, and I realize it’s because I haven’t thought of Peter once. I turn to look at John, and he’s already looking at me with a half smile on his face. It gives me a nervous flutter in my chest.

I spin around in a circle and sing, “Do you want to build a snowman?” And then we’re both giggling again.

“You’re going to get us kicked out of here,” he warns.

I grab his hands and make him spin around with me as fast as I can. “Quit acting like you really belong in a nursing home, old man!” I yell.

He drops my hands and we both stumble. Then he grabs a fistful of snow off the ground and starts to pack it into a ball. “Old man, huh? I’ll show you an old man!”

I dart away from him, slipping and sliding in the snow. “Don’t you dare, John Ambrose McClaren!”

He chases after me, laughing and breathing hard. He manages to grab me around the waist and raises his arm like he’s going to put the snowball down my back, but at the last second he releases me. His eyes go wide. “Oh my God. Are you wearing my grandma’s nightgown under your coat?”

Giggling, I say, “Wanna see? It’s really racy.” I start to unzip my coat. “Wait, turn around first.”

Shaking his head, John says, “This is weird,” but he obeys. As soon as his back is turned, I snatch a handful of snow, form it into a ball, and put it in my coat pocket.

“OK, turn around.”

John turns, and I lob the snowball directly at his head. It hits him in the eye. “Ouch!” he yelps, wiping it with his coat sleeve.

I gasp and move towards him. “Oh my God. I’m so sorry. Are you OK—“

John’s already scooping up more snow and lunging towards me. And so begins our snowball fight. We chase each other around, and I get in another great hit square in his back. We call a truce when I nearly slip and fall on my butt. Luckily, John catches me just in time. He doesn’t let go right away. We stare at each other for a second, his arm around my waist. There’s a snowflake on his eyelashes. He says, “If I didn’t know you were still hung up on Kavinsky, I would kiss you right now.”

I shiver. Up until Peter, the most romantic thing that ever happened to me was with John Ambrose McClaren, in the rain, with the soccer balls. Now this. How strange that I’ve never even dated John, and he’s in two of my most romantic moments.

John releases me. “You’re freezing. Let’s go back inside.”

We go to the parlour on Stormy’s floor to sit and thaw out. There’s only one reading light on, so it’s dim and quiet. All the residents are in their apartments for the night, it seems. It feels strange to be here without Stormy and everyone, like being at

school at night. We sit on the fancy French-style couch, and I take off my boots so my feet can get warm. I wriggle my toes to get the feeling back.

“Too bad we can’t start a fire,” John says, stretching his arms and looking at the fireplace.

“Yeah, it’s fake,” I say. “There must be some sort of nursing-home law about fireplaces, I bet. . .” My voice trails off as I see Stormy, in her silky kimono, tiptoeing out of her apartment and down the hall. To Mr Morales’s apartment. Oh my God.

“What?” John asks, and I slap my hand over his mouth. I duck down low in my seat and slide all the way off the couch to the floor. I pull him down next to me. We stay down until I hear the door click closed. He whispers, “What is it? What did you see?”

Sitting up, I whisper back, “I don’t know if you want to know.”

“Dear God. What? Just tell me.”

“I saw Stormy in her red kimono, sneaking into Mr Morales’s apartment.”

John chokes. “Oh my God. That’s ...”

I give him sympathetic eyes. “I know. Sorry.”

Shaking his head, he leans back against the couch, his legs stretched out long in front of him. “Wow. This is rich. My great-grandmother has a way more active sex life than I do.”

I can’t resist asking, “So then ... I guess, have you not had sex with that many girls?” Hastily I say, “Sorry, I’m a very

inquisitive person.“ I scratch my cheek. “Some might say nosy. You don’t have to answer if you don’t want to.“

“No, I’ll answer. I’ve never had sex with anybody.“

“What!“ I can’t believe it. How can that be?

“Why are you so shocked?“

“I don’t know, I guess I thought all guys were doing it.“

“Well, I’ve only had one girlfriend, and she was religious, so we never did it, which was fine. Anyway, trust me, not all guys are having sex. I’d say the majority aren’t.“ John pauses. “What about you?“

“I’ve never done it either,“ I say.

He frowns, confused. “Wait, I thought you and Kavinsky...“

“No. Why would you think that?“ Oh. The video. I swallow. I thought maybe he was the one person who hadn’t seen it. “So you’ve seen the hot tub video, huh.“

John hesitates and then, says, “Yeah. I didn’t know it was you at first, not until after the time capsule party when I figured out you guys were together. Some guy showed it to me in homeroom, but I didn’t look at it that closely.“

“We were just kissing,“ I say, ducking my head. “I wish you hadn’t seen it.“

“Why? Honestly, it doesn’t matter to me at all.“

“I guess I liked the thought of you looking at me a certain kind of way. I feel like people see me differently now, but you still thought of me as the old Lara Jean. Do you know what I mean?“

“That *is* how I see you,” John says. “You’re still the same to me. I’ll always see you that way, Lara Jean.”

His words, the way he is looking at me – it makes me feel warm inside, golden, all the way to my frozen toes. I want him to kiss me. I want to see if it’s different from Peter, if it will make the hurt recede. Make me forget him, just for a while. But maybe he senses it – that Peter is somehow here with us, in my thoughts, that it wouldn’t just be about him and me – because John doesn’t make a move.

Instead he asks a question. “Why do you always call me by my full name?”

“I don’t know. I guess that’s how I think of you in my head.”

“Oh, so you’re saying you think about me a lot?”

I laugh. “No, I’m saying that when I think about you, which isn’t very often, that’s how I think of you. On the first day of school, I always have to explain to teachers that Lara Jean is my first name and not just Lara. And then, do you remember how Mr Chudney started calling you John Ambrose because of that? –Mr John Ambrose.”

In a fake hoity-toity English accent, John says, “Mr John Ambrose McClaren the Third, madam.”

I giggle. I’ve never met a third before. “Are you really?”

“Yeah. It’s annoying. My dad’s a junior, so he’s JJ, but my extended family still calls me Little John.” He grimaces. “I’d much rather be John Ambrose than Little John. Sounds like a rapper or that guy from *Robin Hood*.”



“Your family’s so fancy.“ I only ever saw John’s mom when she was picking him up. She looked younger than the other mothers, she had John’s same milky skin, and her hair was longer than the other moms’, straw-coloured.

“No. My family isn’t fancy at all. My mom made Jell-O salad last night for dessert. And, like, my dad only has steak cooked well-done. We only ever take vacations we can drive to.“

“I thought your family was kind of ... well, rich.“ I feel immediate shame for saying “rich“. It’s tacky to talk about other people’s money.

“My dad’s really cheap. His construction company is pretty successful, but he prides himself on being a self-made man. He didn’t go to college; neither did my grandparents. My sisters were the first in our family.“

“I didn’t know that about you,“ I say. All these new things I’m learning about John Ambrose McClaren!

“Now it’s your turn to tell me something I don’t know about you,“ John says.

I laugh. “You already know more than most people. My love letter made sure of that.“

The next morning, I sneeze as I’m putting on my coat, and Stormy raises one pencil-drawn eyebrow at me. “Catch a cold playing in the snow last night with Johnny?“

I squirm. I’d hoped she wouldn’t bring it up. The last thing I want to do is discuss her midnight rendezvous with Mr Morales! We watched Stormy go back to her apartment and then waited half an hour before John went back to Mr

Morales's. Weakly, I say, "Sorry we snuck out. It was so early, and we couldn't fall asleep, so we thought we'd play in the snow."

Stormy waves a hand. "It's exactly what I hoped would happen." She winks at me. "That's why I made Johnny stay with Mr Morales, of course. What's the fun in anything if there aren't a few roadblocks to spice things up?"

In awe, I say, "You're so crafty!"

"Thank you, darling." She's quite pleased with herself. "You know, he'd make a great first husband, my Johnny. So, did you French him, at least?"

My face burns. "No!"

"You can tell me, honey."

"Stormy, we didn't kiss, and even if we had, I wouldn't discuss it with you."

Stormy's nose goes thin and haughty. "Well, isn't that so very selfish of you!"

"I have to go, Stormy. My dad's waiting for me out front. See you!"

As I hurry out the door, she calls out, "Don't you worry, I'll get it out of Johnny! See you both at the party, Lara Jean!"

When I step outside, the sun is shining bright and much of the snow has already melted away. It's almost like last night was a dream.

The night before the USO party, I call Chris on speakerphone as I'm rolling a log of shortbread dough in sage sugar. "Chris, can I borrow your Rosie the Riveter poster?"

"You can have it but what do you want it for?"

"For the 1940s USO party I'm throwing at Belleview tomorrow—"

"Stop, I'm bored. God, all you ever talk about is Belleview!"

"It's my job!"

"Ooh, should I get a job?"

I roll my eyes. Every conversation we have turns back to Chris and the concerns of Chris. "Hey, speaking of fun jobs for you, what do you think about being a cigar girl for the party? You could wear a cute outfit with a little hat."

"Real cigars?"

"No, chocolate ones. Cigars are bad for old people."

"Will there be booze?"

I'm about to say yes, but only for the residents, but I think better of it. "I don't think so. It could be a dangerous combination with their medications and their walkers."

"When is it again?"

"Tomorrow!"

"Oh, sorry. I can't give up a Friday night for this. Something better will definitely come up on a Friday. A Tuesday, maybe."

Can you change it to next Tuesday?”

“No! Can you just please bring the poster to school tomorrow?”

“Yeah, but you have to text me with a reminder.”

“Kay.” I blow my hair out of my face and start slicing the cookie roll. I still have to chop carrots and celery for the crudités and also pipe my meringues. I’m doing red-white-and-blue-striped meringue kisses, and I’m nervous about the colours blending together. Oh well. If they do, then people will just have to live with purple meringue kisses. There are worse things. Speaking of worse things ... “Have you heard anything from Gen? I’ve been so careful, but it seems like she’s barely playing.” There’s silence on the other end.

“She’s probably too busy doing sex voodoo on Peter,” I say, half-hoping Chris will chime in. She’s always the first in line to rip on Gen.

But she doesn’t. All she says is “I’ve gotta go – my mom’s bitching at me to take out the dog.”

“Don’t forget the poster!”

## 49

After school Kitty and I set up camp in the kitchen, where there's the best light. I bring down my speakers and play the Andrews Sisters to get us in the right spirit. Kitty puts down a towel and lays out all my make-up, bobby pins, hair spray.

I hold up a packet of individual false eyelashes. "Where'd you get these from?"

"Brielle stole them from her sister and she gave me a pack."

"Kitty!"

"She won't notice. She has tons!"

"You can't just take people's stuff!"

"I didn't take it – Brielle did. Anyway, I can't give it back now. Do you want me to put them on you or not?"

I hesitate. "Do you even know how?"

"Yeah, I've watched her sister put them on plenty of times." Kitty takes the eyelashes out of my hand. "If you don't want me to use them on you, fine. I'll save them for myself."

"Well ... all right then. But no more stealing." I frown. "Hey, do you guys ever take my stuff?" Come to think of it, I haven't seen my cat-ears knit beanie in months.

"Shh, no more talking," she says.

The hair is what takes the longest. Kitty and I have watched countless hair tutorials to figure out the logistics of the victory

rolls. There's a lot of teasing and hair spray and hair rollers involved. And bobby pins. Lots of bobby pins.

I stare at myself in the mirror. "Don't you think my hair looks a little ... severe?"

"What do you mean, -severe?"

"It kind of looks like I have a cinnamon bun on top of my head."

Kitty thrusts the iPad in my face. "Yeah, so does this girl's. That's the look. It's got to be authentic. If we water down the look, it won't be true to the theme, and nobody will know what you're supposed to be." I'm nodding slowly; she has a point. "Besides, I'm going over to Ms Rothschild's for a Jamie training session. I don't have time to start all over again."

For my lipstick, we achieve the perfect shade of cherry red by blending two different reds – one brick and one fire engine – with a hot pink powder to set it. I look like I kissed a cherry pie.

I'm blotting my lips when Kitty asks, "Is that pretty boy John Amber McAndrews picking you up, or are you meeting him at the nursing home?"

I wave my tissue in her face warningly. "He's picking me up, and you'd better be nice. Also he's not a pretty boy."

"He's a pretty boy compared to Peter," Kitty says.

"Let's be honest. They're both pretty. It's not like Peter has a tattoo or huge muscles. In fact he's very vain." We never passed a window or a glass door Peter didn't check himself out in.

"Well, is John vain?"

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Hmph.”

“Kitty, stop making this a competition of John versus Peter. It doesn’t matter who’s prettier.”

Kitty keeps going like she didn’t hear me. “Peter has a much nicer car. What does Johnny boy drive, a boring SUV? Who cares about an SUV? All they do is guzzle gas.”

“To be fair, I think it’s a hybrid.”

“You sure like to defend him.”

“He’s my friend!”

“Well, Peter’s mine,” she says.

Getting dressed is an intricate process, and I enjoy each step. It’s all about anticipation, hope for the night. Slowly I put on the seamed stockings so I don’t get a run in them. It takes me forever to get the seams straight down the backs of my legs. Then the dress – navy with white sprigs and little holly berries and floaty cap sleeves. Last the shoes. Clunky red heels with a bow at the toe and an ankle strap.

Put all together, it goes great, and I have to admit that Kitty was right about the victory roll on top of my head. Anything less wouldn’t be enough.

On my way out Daddy makes a big fuss over how great I look, and he takes about a million photos, which he promptly texts Margot. She immediately video-chats us so she can see for herself. “Make sure you get a picture of you and Stormy together,” Margot says. “I want to see what sexy get-up she’s wearing.”

“It’s actually not that sexy,” I say. “She sewed it herself, off a 1940s dress pattern.”

“I’m sure she’ll find a way to bring the sexy,” Margot says. “What’s John McClaren wearing?”

“I have no idea. He says it’s a surprise.”

“Hmm,” she says. It’s a very suggestive *hmm*, which I ignore.

Daddy’s taking one last shot of me on the front porch when Ms Rothschild comes over. “You look amazing, Lara Jean,” she says.

“She does, doesn’t she?” Daddy says fondly.

“God, I love the forties,” she says.

“Have you seen the Ken Burns documentary *The War*?” Daddy asks her. “If you have any interest in World War Two, it’s a must-see.”

“You should watch it together,” Kitty pipes up, and Ms Rothschild shoots her a warning look.

“Do you have it on DVD?” she asks Daddy. Kitty is aglow with excitement.

“Sure, you can borrow it anytime,” Daddy says, oblivious as ever, and Kitty scowls, and then her mouth falls open.

I turn to see what she’s looking at, and it’s a red convertible Mustang driving down our street, top down – with John McClaren at the wheel.

My jaw drops at the sight of him. He is in full uniform: tan dress shirt with tan tie, tan slacks, tan belt and hat. His hair is



parted to the side. He looks dashing, like a real soldier. He grins at me and waves. “Whoa,” I breathe.

“Whoa is right,” Ms Rothschild says, googly-eyed beside me. Daddy and his Ken Burns DVD are forgotten; we are all staring at John in this uniform, in this car. It’s like I dreamed him up. He parks the car in front of the house, and all of us rush up to it.

“Whose car is this?” Kitty demands.

“It’s my dad’s,” John says. “I borrowed it. I had to promise to park really far away from any other car, though, so I hope your shoes are comfortable, Lara Jean—” He breaks off and looks me up and down. “Wow. You look amazing.” He gestures at my cinnamon bun. “I mean, your hair looks so ... real.”

“It is real!” I touch it gingerly, I’m suddenly feeling self-conscious about my cinnamon-bun head and red lipstick.

“I know – I mean, it looks authentic.”

“So do you,” I say.

“Can I sit in it?” Kitty butts in, her hand on the passenger-side door.

“Sure,” John says. He climbs out of the car. “But don’t you want to get in the driver’s seat?”

Kitty nods quickly. Ms Rothschild gets in too, and Daddy takes a picture of them together. Kitty poses with one arm casually draped over the steering wheel.

John and I stand off to the side, and I ask him, “Where did you ever get that uniform?”

“I ordered it off of eBay.” He frowns. “Am I wearing the hat right? Do you think it’s too small for my head?”

“No way. I think it looks exactly the way it’s supposed to look.” I’m touched that he went to the trouble of ordering a uniform for this. I can’t think of many boys who would do that. “Stormy is going to flip out when she sees you.”

He studies my face. “What about you? Do you like it?”

I flush. “I do. I think you look ... super.”

It turns out that Margot is, as ever, right. Stormy has shortened the hem on the dress; it’s well above the knee. “I’ve still got the gams,” she gloats, twirling. “My best feature, from all the horseback riding I did as a girl.” She’s showing a little cleavage, too.

A silver-haired man who rode over in the van from Ferncliff is making appreciative eyes at her, and Stormy is pretending not to notice, all the while batting her lashes and preening with one hand on her hip. He must be the handsome man Stormy mentioned to me.

I take a picture of her at the piano and send it directly to Margot, who texts back a smiling emoji and two thumbs up.

I’m setting up the American flag centrepiece, watching John lug a table closer to the centre of the room at Stormy’s direction, when Alicia sidles up beside me, and then we’re both watching him. “You should date him.”

“Alicia, I told you, I just got out of a relationship,” I whisper back. I can’t take my eyes off him in that uniform with that side part.

“Well, get into a new one. Life is short.” For once, Alicia and Stormy are on the same page.

Stormy is now straightening John’s tie, his little hat. She even licks her finger and tries to smooth his hair, but he ducks away. Our eyes meet, and he makes a frantic face like, *Help me*.

“Save him,” Alicia says. “I’ll finish the table. My internment camp display is already done.” She’s set that up by the doors, so it’s the first thing you see when you walk in.

I hurry over to John and Stormy. Stormy beams at me. “Doesn’t she look like an absolute *doll*?” She swans off

With a straight face John says, “Lara Jean, you’re an absolute *doll*.”

I giggle and touch the top of my head. “A cinnamon roll-headed doll.”

People are starting to mill in, even though it isn’t seven yet. I’ve observed that old people, as a rule, tend to show up early for things. I still have to set up the music. Stormy says that when hosting a party, music is absolutely the first order of business, because it sets the mood the second your guest walks in. I can feel my nerves starting to pulse. There’s still so much to do. “I’d better finish setting up.”

“Tell me what you need done,” John says. “I’m your second-in-command at this shindig. Did people say ~~shindig~~ in the forties?”

I laugh. “Probably!” In a rush I say, “OK, can you set up my speakers and iPod? They’re in the bag by the refreshments table. And can you pick up Mrs Taylor in 5A? I promised her an escort.”

John gives me a salute and runs off. Tingles go up and down my spine like soda water. Tonight will be a night to remember! We're an hour and a half in, and Crystal Clemons, a lady from Stormy's floor, is leading everyone in a swing-dancing lesson. Of course Stormy is up front, rock-stepping for all she's worth. I'm following along from the refreshments table: one-two, three-four, five-six. Early on I danced with Mr Morales, but only once, because the women were cutting their eyes at me for taking an eligible, able-bodied man off the circuit. Men are in short supply at old-age homes, so there aren't enough male dance partners, not enough by half. I've heard a few of the women whispering how rude it is for a gentleman not to dance when there are ladies without partners – and looking pointedly at poor John.

John is standing at the other end of the table, drinking Coke and nodding his head to the beat. I've been so busy running around, we've hardly had a chance to talk. I lean over the table and call out, "Having fun?"

He nods. Then, quite suddenly, he bangs his glass down on the table, so hard the table shakes and I jump. "All right," he says. "It's do or die. D-day."

"What?"

"Let's dance," John says.

Shyly I say, "We don't have to if you don't want to, John."

"No, I want to. I didn't take swing-dancing lessons from Stormy for nothing."

I widen my eyes. "When did you take swing dance lessons from Stormy?"

“Don’t worry about it,” he says. “Just dance with me.”

“Well ... do you have any war bonds left?” I joke.

John fishes one out of his pants pocket and slaps it on the refreshments table. Then he grabs my hand and marches me to the centre of the dance floor, like a soldier heading off to the battlefield. He’s all grim concentration. He signals to Mr Morales, who is manning the music because he’s the only one who can figure out my phone. Glenn Miller’s “In the Mood” comes blaring out of the speakers.

John gives me a determined nod. “Let’s do this.”

And then we’re dancing. Rock-step, side, together, side, repeat. Rock-step, one-two-three, one-two-three. We step on each other’s feet about a million times, but he’s swinging me around – twirl, twirl – and our faces are flushed and we’re both laughing. When the song is over, he pulls me in and then throws me back out one last time. Everyone is clapping. Mr Morales screams, “To the young ones!”

John picks me up and lifts me into the air like we’re ice dancers, and the crowd erupts. I’m smiling so hard my face feels like it could break.

After, John helps me take down all the decorations and pack everything up. He goes out to the parking lot with the two big boxes, and I stay behind to say goodbye to everyone and make sure we have everything. I still feel sort of a high from the night. The party went so well, and Janette was so pleased. She came up and squeezed my shoulders and said, “I’m proud of you, Lara Jean.” And then the dance with John ... Thirteen-year-old me would have *died*. Sixteen-year-old me is floating down the nursing-home hallway, and it’s like I’m in a dream.

I'm floating out the front entrance when I see Genevieve and Peter walking up, her arm linked in his, and it's like we're in a time machine and the past year never happened. *We* never happened.

They're coming closer. Now they are about ten feet away, and I am frozen to this spot. Is there no way out of this? Out of this humiliation, and out of losing yet again? I got so caught up in the USO party and John that I forgot all about the game. What are my options here? If I turn and run back into the nursing home, she'll just wait in the parking lot for me all night. Just like that, I am a rabbit under her paw again. Just like that, she wins.

And then it's too late. They've spotted me. Peter drops Genevieve's arm.

"What are you doing here?" he asks me. "And what's with all the make-up?" He gestures at my eyes, my lips.

My cheeks burn. I ignore the comment about my make-up and just say, "I work here, remember? I know why you're here, Genevieve. Peter, thanks a lot for helping her take me out. You're a real stand-up guy."

"Covey, I didn't come here to help her tag you out. I didn't even know you'd be here. I told you, I don't give a shit about this game!" He turns to Genevieve. Accusingly he says, "You said you needed to pick something up from your grandma's friend."

"I do," she says. "This is just an amazing coincidence. I guess I win, huh?"

She's so smug, so sure of herself and her victory over me. "You haven't tagged me yet." Should I just make a run for it back inside? Stormy would let me spend the night if I needed to.

Just then, John's red Mustang convertible comes roaring up through the parking lot. "Hey, guys," he says, and Peter's and Gen's mouths drop. It's only then that I think of how strange we must look together, John in his World War II uniform with his jaunty little hat, me with my victory roll and my red lipstick.

Peter eyes him. "What are *you* doing here?"

Bliothely John says, "My great-grandmother lives here. Stormy. You may have heard of her. She's a friend of Lara Jean's."

"I'm sure he wouldn't remember," I say.

Peter frowns at me, and I know he doesn't. It's just like him not to. "What's with the outfits?" he says, his voice gruff

"USO party," John says. "Very exclusive. VIPs only – sorry, guys." Then he tips his hat at him, which I can tell makes Peter mad, which in turn makes me glad.

"What the hell is a USO party?" Peter asks me.

John stretches his arm out on to the passenger seat luxuriously. "It's from World War Two."

"I wasn't asking you; I was asking her," Peter snaps. He looks at me, his eyes hard. "Is this a *date*? Are you on a *date* with him? And who the hell's car is this?"

Before I can answer, Genevieve makes a move towards me, which I dodge. I run behind the pillar. “Don’t be such a baby, Lara Jean,” she says. “Just accept that you lose and I win!”

I peek from behind the pillar, and John is giving me a look – a look that says, *Get in*. Quickly I nod. Then he throws open the passenger door, and I run for it, as fast as I can. I’ve barely got the door closed before he’s driving off, Peter and Gen in our dust.

I turn back to look. Peter is staring after us, his mouth open. He’s jealous, and I’m glad. “Thanks for the save,” I say, still trying to catch my breath. My heart is pounding in my chest so hard.

John is looking straight ahead, a broad smile on his face. “Anytime.”

We stop at a stoplight, and he turns his head and looks at me, and then we’re looking at each other, laughing like crazy, and I’m breathless again.

“Did you see the looks on their faces?” John gasps, dropping his head on the steering wheel.

“It was classic!”

“Like a movie!” He grins at me, jubilant, blue eyes alight.

“Just like a movie,” I agree, leaning my head back against the seat and opening my eyes wide up at the moon, so wide it hurts. I’m in a red Mustang convertible sitting next to a boy in uniform, and the night air feels like cool satin on my skin, and all the stars are out, and I’m happy. The way John is still grinning to himself, I know he is too. We got to play make-believe for the night. Forget Peter and Genevieve. The light



turns green, and I throw my arms in the air. “Go fast, Johnny!” I shout, and he guns it and I let out a shriek.

We zoom around for a bit, and at the next stoplight he slows and puts his arm around me, pulling me closer to his side. “Isn’t this how they did it in the fifties?” he asks, one hand on the steering wheel and the other around my shoulders.

My heart rate picks back up again. “Well, technically we’re dressed for the forties—” and then he kisses me. His lips are warm and firm against mine, and my eyes flutter shut.

When he pulls away just a fraction, he looks down at me and says, half serious, half not, “Better than the first time?”

I’m dazed. He’s got some of my lipstick on his face now. I reach up and wipe his mouth. The light turns green; we don’t move; he’s still looking at me. Someone honks a horn behind us. “The light’s green.”

He doesn’t make a move; he’s still looking at me. “Answer first.”

“Better.” John pushes his foot on the gas, and we’re moving again. I’m still breathless. Into the wind I shout, “One day I want to see you make a Model UN speech!”

John laughs. “What? Why?”

“I think it would be something to see. I bet you’d be ... grand. You know, out of all of us, I think you’ve changed the most.”

“How?”

“You used to be sort of quiet. In your own head. Now you’re so confident.”

“I still get nervous, Lara Jean.” John has a cowlick, a little piece of hair that won’t stay down; it is stubborn. It’s this piece more than anything else that makes my heart squeeze.

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## 50

After John drops me off at home, I run across the street to pick up Kitty from Ms Rothschild's. And she invites me in for a cup of tea. Kitty is asleep on the couch with the TV on low in the background. We settle on the other couch with our cups of Lady Grey, and she asks me how the party went. Maybe it's because I'm still on a high from the night, or maybe it's the bobby pins so tight on my head that I feel woozy, or it could be the way her eyes light up with genuine interest as I begin to talk, but I tell her everything. The dance with John, how everyone cheered, Peter and Genevieve, even the kiss.

She starts fanning herself when I tell about the kiss. "When that boy drove up in that uniform – ooh, girl." She whistles. "It made me feel like a dirty old lady, because I knew him when he was little. But *dear God* he is handsome!"

I giggle as I pull the bobby pins from the top of my head. She leans forward and helps me along. My cinnamon bun unravels, and my scalp tingles with relief. Is this what it's like to have a mother? Late-night boy talk over tea?

Ms Rothschild's voice gets low and confidential. "Here's the thing. My one piece of advice to you. You have to let yourself be fully present in every moment. Just be awake for it, do you know what I mean? Go all in and wring every last drop out of the experience."

"So do you not have any regrets, then? Because you always went all in?" I'm thinking of her divorce, how it was the talk of

the neighbourhood.

“Oh God, no. I have regrets.” She laughs a husky laugh, the sexy kind that only smokers or people with colds get to have. “I don’t know why I’m sitting here trying to give you advice. I’m a single divorcée and I’m forty. Two. Forty-two. What do I know about anything? That’s a rhetorical question, by the way.” She lets out a sigh filled with longing. “I miss cigarettes so much.”

“Kitty will check your breath,” I warn, and she laughs that husky laugh again.

“I’m afraid to cross that girl.”

“—Though she be but little, she is fierce,” I intone. “You’re wise to be afraid, Ms Rothschild.”

“Oh my God, Lara Jean, will you please just call me Trina? I mean, I know I’m old, but I’m not *that* old.”

I hesitate. “OK. Trina ... do you like my dad?”

She goes a little red. “Um. Yeah, I think he’s a great guy.”

“To date?”

“Well, he’s not my usual type. And also he hasn’t shown any particular interest in me, either, so, ha-ha!”

“I’m sure you know Kitty’s been trying to set you two up. Which, if that’s unwelcome, I can definitely make her stop.” I correct myself. “I can definitely try to make her stop. But I think she might be on to something. I think you and my dad could be good together. He loves to cook, and he likes to build fires, and he doesn’t mind shopping because he brings a book.

And you, you seem fun, and spontaneous and just really ... light.“

She smiles at me. “I’m a mess is what I am.“

“Messiness can be good, especially for someone like my dad. It’s worth a date, at least, don’t you think? What’s the harm in just seeing?“

“Dating neighbours is tricky. What if it doesn’t work out and then we’re stuck living across the street from each other?“

“That’s a tiny inconsequential risk compared to what could be gained. If it doesn’t work out, you wave politely when you see each other and then you keep on walking. No big deal. And I know I’m biased, but my dad is really worth it. He’s the best.“

“Oh, I know it. I see you girls and I think, God, any man who could raise those girls is something special. I’ve never seen a man so devoted to his family. You three are the pearls in his crown, you know? And that’s how it should be. A girl’s relationship with her father is the most important male relationship of her life.“

“What about a girl’s relationship with her mother?“

Ms Rothschild tilts her head, contemplating. “Yeah, I would say a girl’s relationship with her mom is the most important female relationship. Her mom or her sisters. You’re lucky to have two of them. I know you know this already, better than most people, but your parents won’t always be there. If it happens the way it’s supposed to, they’ll go first. But your sisters are yours for life.“

“Do you have one?“

She nods, a hint of a smile forming on her tanned face. “I have a big sister. Jeanie. We didn’t get along as well as you girls do, but as we get older, she looks more and more like our mom. And so when I’m missing my mom a lot, I go visit Jeanie and I get to see my mom’s face again.” She wrinkles her nose. “Does that sound creepy?”

“No. I think it sounds ... lovely.” I hesitate. “Sometimes when I hear Margot’s voice – like, she’s downstairs, and she calls us down to hurry up and get in the car, or she says that dinner’s ready – sometimes she sounds so much like my mom, it tricks me. Just for a second.” Tears spring to my eyes.

Ms Rothschild has tears in her eyes too. “I don’t think a girl ever gets over losing her mom. I’m an adult and it’s completely normal and expected for my mom to be dead, but I still feel orphaned sometimes.” She smiles at me. “But that’s just inescapable, right? When you lose someone and it still hurts, that’s when you know the love was real.”

I wipe my eyes. With Peter and me, was the love real? Because it does still hurt, it does. But maybe that’s just part of it. Sniffing, I ask, “So, just to make sure, if my dad asks you out, you’ll say yes?”

She roars with laughter, then claps her hand over her mouth when Kitty stirs on the couch. “Now I see where Kitty gets it from.”

“Trina, you didn’t answer the question.”

“The answer is yes.”

I smile to myself. Yes.

By the time I wash off all my make-up and get into my pyjamas, it's nearly three in the morning. I'm not tired, though. What I really want to do is talk to Margot, go over every single detail of the night. Scotland is five hours ahead, which means it's almost eight a.m. over there. She's an early riser, so I figure it's worth a shot.

I catch her as she's getting ready to go have breakfast. She sets her computer on her dresser so we can talk as she puts on sunscreen and mascara and lip balm.

I tell her about the party, about Peter and Genevieve's appearance, and most importantly the kiss with John. "Margot, I think I could be a person who is in love with more than one person at a time." I might even be a girl that falls in love twelve *hundred* times. I get a sudden picture in my head of myself as a bee, sipping nectar from a daisy to a rose to a lily. Each boy sweet in his own way.

"You?" She stops putting her hair in a ponytail and taps her finger to the screen. "Lara Jean, I think you half-fall in love with every person you meet. It's part of your charm. You're in love with love."

This may be true. Perhaps I am in love with love! That doesn't seem like such a bad way to be.

# 51

Our town's spring fair is tomorrow, and Kitty has promised the PTA a cake for the cake walk on my behalf. At a cake walk, music plays while kids walk around a circle of numbers, like musical chairs. When the music stops, a number is picked at random, and the kid standing in front of the corresponding number gets the cake. This was always my favourite carnival game, of course, because I liked looking at all of the homemade cakes and also for the sheer luck of it. Certainly, the kids crowd around the cake table and earmark the cake they most want and try to walk slowly when they come upon the number, but beyond that there isn't much to it. It's a game that does not require any skill or know-how: You literally just walk around a circle to old-timey music. Sure, you could go to the bakery and pick out the exact cake you want, but there is a thrill in not being sure what you'll end up with.

My cake will be chocolate, because kids and people in general prefer chocolate to any other flavour. The frosting is where I'll get fancy. Possibly salted caramel, or passion fruit, or maybe a mocha whip. I've been toying with the idea of doing an ombré cake, where the frosting goes from dark to light. I have a feeling my cake will be in demand.

When I picked up Kitty from Shanae's house this morning, I asked her mom what cake she was baking for the cake walk, because Mrs Rodgers is vice president of the elementary school PTA. She heaved a sigh and said, "I'll be baking whatever Duncan Hines I can find in my pantry. Either that or Food



Lion.“ Then she asked me what I was baking and I told her, and she said, “I’m voting you Teen Mom of the Year,” which made me laugh and also further spurred me to bake the best cake so everyone knows what Kitty’s working with. I never mentioned this to Daddy or Margot, but in middle school my English teacher sponsored a mother-daughter tea in honour of Mother’s Day. It was after school, an optional thing, but I really wanted to go and have the tea sandwiches and scones she said she was bringing. It was just for mothers and daughters, though. I suppose I could have asked Grandma to come – Margot did that a few times for miscellaneous events – but it wouldn’t have been the same. And I don’t think it’s the kind of thing that would bother Kitty, but it’s still something I think about.

The cake walk is in the elementary school’s music room. I’ve volunteered to be in charge of the walking music, and I’ve made a playlist with all sugar-related songs. Of course “Sugar, Sugar“ by the Archies, “Sugar Shack,” “Sugar Town,” “I Can’t Help Myself (Sugar Pie, Honey Bunch).“ When I walk into the music room, Peter’s mom and another mom are setting up the cakes. I falter, unsure of what to do.

She says, “Hello, Lara Jean,” but her smile doesn’t quite reach her eyes, and it gives me a sinking feeling in my stomach. It’s a relief when she leaves.

There’s a decent crowd all day, with some people playing more than once for the cake of their dreams. I keep steering people towards my caramel cake, which is still in rotation. There’s a German chocolate cake that has people entranced, which I’m pretty sure is store-bought, but there’s no

accounting for taste. I've never been a fan of German chocolate cake myself, because who wants wet coconut flakes? Shudder.

Kitty's been running around with her friends, and she's deigned to help me out at the cake walk for an hour when Peter walks in with his little brother, Owen. "Pour Some Sugar on Me" is playing. Kitty goes over to say hello, while I busy myself looking at my phone as she's showing them the cakes. I've got my head down, pretend-texting, when Peter comes up beside me.

"Which cake is yours? The coconut one?"

My head snaps up. "I would never buy a grocery-store cake for this."

"I was joking, Covey. Yours is the caramel one. I can tell by the way you frosted it so fancy." He stops talking and shoves his hands in his pockets. "So, just so you know, I didn't go to the nursing home with Gen to help her tag you out."

I shrug. "For all I know you've already texted her and told her I'm here, so."

"I told you, I don't give a shit about this game. I think it's dumb."

"Well, I don't. I'm still planning on winning." I put on the next song for the cake walk, and all the kids run into position. "So are you and Genevieve back together?"

He makes a rude sound. "What do you care?"

Again I shrug. "I knew you'd be back with her eventually."

Peter smarts at this. He turns like he's going to leave, but then he stops. Rubbing the back of his neck, he says, "You

never answered my question about McClaren. Was that a date?”

“What do *you* care?”

His nostrils flare. “I fucking care because you were my girlfriend up until a few weeks ago. I don’t even remember why we broke up.”

“If you can’t remember, then I don’t know what to say to you.”

“Just tell the truth. Don’t dick me around.” His voice cracks on the word “dick“. Any other time we would have laughed about it. I wish we could now. “What’s going on with you and McClaren?”

There’s a lump in my throat that’s making it hard to talk all of a sudden. “Nothing.“ Just a kiss. “We’re friends. He’s been helping me with the game.“

“How convenient. First he’s writing you letters, now he’s driving you around town and hanging out with you at a nursing home.“

“You said you didn’t care about the letters.“

“Well, I guess I did.“

“Then maybe you should have said so.“ Kitty’s looking over at us, her forehead pinched. “I don’t walk to talk about this any more. I’m here to work.“

Peter eyes me. “Have you kissed him?”

Do I tell the truth? Do I have to? “Yes. Once.“

He blinks. “So you’re telling me I’ve been living the life of a celibate person ever since we started this stupid game – before,

even – and meanwhile you’re fooling around with McClaren?”

“We’re broken up, Peter. Meanwhile, when we were actually *together*, you were with Genevieve—“

He throws his head back and yells, “I didn’t kiss her!” Some of the adults turn and look at us.

“You had your arms around her,” I whisper-yell. “You were *holding* her!”

“I was *comforting* her. God! She was crying! I told you! Did you do it to get back at me?” Peter wants me to say yes. He wants it to have been about him. But I wasn’t thinking about Peter when I kissed John. I kissed him because I wanted to.

“No.”

The muscle in his jaw twitches. “When we broke up, you said you wanted to be someone’s number one girl, but look at you. You don’t want to have a number one guy.” He gestures rudely at the cake table. “You want to have your cake and eat it too.”

His words sting just the way he intends them to. “I hate that saying. What does it even mean? Of course I want to have my cake and eat it too – otherwise what’s the point of having cake?”

He frowns at me. “That’s not what I’m talking about and you know it.”

The song finishes then, and the kids come over to claim their cakes. Kitty and Owen, too. “Let’s go,” Owen says to Peter. He’s got my caramel cake.

Peter glances down at him and then back at me, his eyes hard. "I don't want that one."

"That's the one you told me to get!"

"Well, I don't want it any more. Put it back and get the Funfetti down there at the end."

"You can't have it," Kitty tells him. "That's not how a cake walk works. You take the cake with the number you were standing on."

Peter's mouth falls open in shock. "Aw, come on, kid."

Kitty moves closer to me. "Nope."

After Peter and his brother leave, I hug Kitty from behind. She was on my side after all. Song girls stick together.

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Kitty wanted to stay longer at the fair, so it's just me driving alone when I spot Genevieve's car on the road. And just like that, I'm following her. It's time to take this girl down.

She's still daring. The way she zips through traffic lights, I almost lose her a few times. *I'm not a good enough driver for this*, I want to scream at her.

We finally end up at an office building, one I recognize as her dad's. She goes inside, and I park in the same strip mall, but not too close. I turn off the engine and recline my seat back so she can't see me.

Ten minutes pass, and nothing. I don't even know why she'd be at her dad's office on a weekend. Maybe she's helping her dad's secretary? I might be stuck here for a while. But I will wait for ever if need be. I will win, no matter what. I don't even care about the prize. I just want the win.

I'm about to doze off when two people come out of the building – her dad, in a suit and a camel coat, and a girl. I duck low in my seat. At first I think it's Genevieve, but this girl is taller. I squint. I recognize her. She was Margot's year; I think they were in Key Club together. Anna Hicks. They walk out to the parking lot together; he walks her to her car. She's fumbling for her keys. He grabs her arm and turns her face to his. And then they're kissing. Passionately. Tongue. Hands everywhere.

Oh my God. She's Margot's age. Just eighteen. Genevieve's dad is kissing her like she's a grown woman. He's a dad. She's somebody's daughter.

I feel sick inside. How could he do this to Genevieve's mom? To Gen? Does she know? Is this the hard thing she's been going through? If my dad ever did such a thing, I could never look at him the same way. I don't know that I could look at my *life* the same way. It would be such a betrayal, not just of our family, but of himself, of who he is as a person.

I don't want to see any more. I keep my head down until they both drive out of the parking lot, and I'm about to start my car too when Genevieve walks out, her arms crossed, shoulders bent.

Oh dear God. She's spotted me. Her eyes are narrow; she's heading straight for me. I want to drive away, but I can't. She's standing right in front of me, angrily motioning for me to roll down the window. So I do, but it's hard to look her in the eyes.

She snaps out, "Did you see?"

Weakly I say, "No. I didn't see anything..."

Genevieve's face goes red; she knows I'm lying. For a second I am terrified she is going to cry, or hit me. I wish she would just hit me. "Go ahead," she manages. "Tag me out. That's what you came here for." I shake my head, and then she grabs my hands off the steering wheel and slaps them on her collarbone. "There. You win, Lara Jean. Game over."

And then she runs to her car.

There's a Korean word my grandma taught me. It's called *jung*. It's the connection between two people that can't be

severed, even when love turns to hate. You still have those old feelings for them; you can't ever completely shake them loose of you; you will always have tenderness in your heart for them. I think this must be some part of what I feel for Genevieve. Jung is why I can't hate her. We're tied.

And Jung is why Peter can't let her go. They're tied too. If my dad did what her dad did, wouldn't I reach out to the one person who never turned me away? Who was always there, who loved me more than anyone? Peter is that person for Genevieve. How can I begrudge her that?

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# 53

We're in the kitchen cleaning up after pancake breakfast when Daddy says, "I believe another one of the Song girls has a birthday coming up." He sings, "You are sixteen, going on seventeen..." I feel a strong surge of love for him, my dad who I am so lucky to have.

"What song are you singing?" Kitty interrupts.

I take Kitty's hands and spin her around the kitchen with me. "I am sixteen, going on seventeen; I know that I'm naive. Fellows I meet may tell me I'm sweet; willingly I believe."

Daddy throws his dish towel over his shoulder and marches in place. In a deep voice he baritones, "You need someone older and wiser telling you what to do..."

"This song is sexist," Kitty says as I dip her.

"Indeed it is," Daddy agrees, swatting her with the towel. "And the boy in question was not, in fact, older and wiser. He was a Nazi in training."

Kitty skitters away from both of us. "What are you guys even talking about?"

"It's from *The Sound of Music*," I say.

"You mean that movie about the nun? Never seen it."

"How have you seen *The Sopranos* but not *The Sound of Music*?"

Alarmed, Daddy says, "Kitty's been watching *The Sopranos*?"

“Just the commercials,” Kitty quickly says.

I go on singing to myself, spinning in a circle like Liesl at the gazebo. “I am sixteen going on seventeen, innocent as a rose... Fellows I meet may tell me I’m sweet, and willingly I believe. . .“

“Why would you just willingly believe some random fellows you don’t even know?”

“It’s the song, Kitty, not me! God!” I stop spinning. “Liesl *was* kind of a ninny, though. I mean, it was basically her fault they almost got captured by the Nazis.”

“I would venture to say it was Captain von Trapp’s fault,” Daddy says. “Rolfe was a kid himself – he was going to let them go, but then Georg had to antagonize him.” He shakes his head. “Georg von Trapp, he had quite the ego. Hey, we should do a *Sound of Music* night!”

“Sure,” I say.

“This movie sounds terrible,” Kitty says. “What kind of name is Georg?”

We ignore her. Daddy says, “Tonight? I’ll make tacos al pastor!”

“I can’t,” I say. “I’m going over to Belleview.”

“What about you, Kitty?” Daddy asks.

“Sophie’s mom is teaching us how to make latke cakes,” Kitty says. “Did you know that you put applesauce on top of them and it’s delicious?”

Daddy’s shoulders slump. “Yes, I did know that. I’m going to have to start booking you guys a month in advance.”

“Or you could invite Ms Rothschild over,” Kitty suggests.  
“Her weekends are pretty lonely too.”

He gives her a funny look. “I’m sure she has plenty she’d rather do than watch *The Sound of Music* with her neighbour.”

Brightly I say, “Don’t forget the tacos al pastor! Those are a draw, too. And you, of course. You’re a draw.”

“You’re definitely a draw,” Kitty pipes up.

“Guys,” Daddy begins.

“Wait,” I say. “Let me just say one thing. You should be going on some dates, Daddy.”

“I go on dates!”

“You’ve gone on, like, two dates ever,” I say, and he falls silent. “Why not ask Ms Rothschild out? She’s cute, she has a good job, Kitty loves her. And she lives really close by.”

“See, that’s exactly why I shouldn’t ask her out,” Daddy says. “You should never date a neighbour or a co-worker, because then you’ll have to keep seeing them if things don’t work out.”

Kitty asks, “You mean like that quote ‘Don’t shit where you eat’?” When Daddy frowns, Kitty quickly corrects herself. “I mean ‘Don’t poop where you eat’. That’s what you mean, right, Daddy?”

“Yes, I suppose that’s what I mean, but Kitty, I don’t like you using cuss words.”

Contritely she says, “I’m sorry. But I still think you should give Ms Rothschild a chance. If it doesn’t work out, it doesn’t work out.”

“Well, I’d hate to see you get your hopes up,” Daddy says.

“That’s life,” Kitty says. “Things don’t always work out. Look at Lara Jean and Peter.”

I give her a dirty look. “Gee, thanks a lot.”

“I’m just trying to make a point,” she says. Kitty goes over to Daddy and puts her arms around his waist. This kid is really pulling out all the stops. “Just think about it, Daddy. Tacos. Nuns. Nazis. And Ms Rothschild.”

He sighs. “I’m sure she has plans.”

“She told me if you asked her out, she’d say yes,” I blurt out.

Daddy startles. “She did? Are you sure?”

“Positive.”

“Well ... then maybe I will ask her out. For a coffee, or a drink. *The Sound of Music* is a bit long for a first date.”

Kitty and I both whoop and high-five each other.

Birthday breakfast at the diner was a bit of a tradition with Margot and Josh and me. If my birthday was on a weekday, we'd wake up early and go before school. I'd order blueberry pancakes, and Margot would put a candle in them, and they'd sing.

The day of my seventeenth birthday, Josh sends me a *Happy Bday* text, but I get that we won't be going to the diner. He has a girlfriend now, and it would be weird, especially with no Margot. The text is enough.

For breakfast Daddy makes chorizo scrambled eggs, and Kitty's made me a big card with pictures of Jamie pasted all over it. Margot video-chats me to wish me happy birthday and to tell me my present should be arriving that afternoon or the next.

At school Chris and Lucas put a candle in the doughnuts they got out of the vending machine and they sing me "Happy Birthday" in the hallway. Chris gives me a new lipstick: red for when I want to be bad, she says. Peter doesn't say anything to me in chemistry class; I doubt he knows it's my birthday, and besides, what could I even expect him to say after the way things ended between us? Still, it's a nice day, uneventful in its niceness.

But then, as I'm leaving school, I see John parked out front. He's standing in front of his car; he hasn't seen me yet. In this bright afternoon light, the sun warms John's blond head like a

halo, and suddenly I'm struck with the visceral memory of loving him from afar, studiously, ardently. I so admired his slender hands, the slope of his cheekbones. Once upon a time I knew his face by heart. I had him memorized.

My steps quicken. "Hi!" I say, waving. "How are you here right now? Don't have you school today?"

"I left early," he says.

"You? John Ambrose McClaren cut school?"

He laughs. "I brought you something." John pulls a box out of his coat pocket and thrusts it at me. "Here."

I take it from him, it's heavy and substantial in my palm. "Should I ... should I open it right now?"

"If you want."

I can feel his eyes on me as I rip off the paper, open the white box. He's anxious. I ready a smile on my face so he'll know I like it, no matter what it is. Just the fact that he thought to buy me a present is so ... dear.

Nestled in white tissue paper is a snow globe the size of an orange, with a brass bottom. A boy and girl are ice-skating inside. She's wearing a red sweater; she has on earmuffs. She's making a figure eight, and he's admiring her. It's a moment caught in amber. One perfect moment, preserved under glass. Just like that night it snowed in April.

"I love it," I say, and I do, so much. Only a person who really knew me could give me this gift. To feel so known, so understood. It's such a wonderful feeling, I could cry. It's something I'll keep for ever. This moment, and this snow globe.

I get on my tiptoes and hug him, and he wraps his arms around me tight and then tighter. “Happy birthday, Lara Jean.”

I’m about to get into his car when I see Peter striding over to us. “Hold up a second,” he says, a pleasant half smile on his face.

Warily I say, “Hey.”

“Hey, Kavinsky,” John says.

Peter gives him a nod. “I didn’t get a chance to say happy birthday, Covey.”

“But – you saw me in chem class...” I say.

“Well, you left in a hurry. I have something for you. Open up your hands.” He takes the snow globe out of my hand and gives it to John. “Here, can you hold this?”

I look from Peter to John. Now I’m nervous.

“Hold your hands out,” Peter prompts. I look at John one more time before I obey, and Peter pulls something out of his pocket and drops it into my palms. My heart locket. “It’s yours.”

Slowly I say, “I thought you returned the necklace to your mom’s store.”

“Nope. Wouldn’t look right on another girl.”

I blink. “Peter, I can’t accept this.” I try to give it back, but he shakes his head; he won’t take it. “Peter, please.”

“No. When I get you back, I’m gonna put that necklace back around your neck and pin you.” He tries to hold my eyes with his own. “Like the 1950s. Remember, Lara Jean?”

I open my mouth and then close it. “I don’t think pin means what you think it means,” I tell him, holding the necklace out to him. “Please, just take it.”

“Tell me what your wish is,” he urges. “Wish for anything, and I’ll give it to you, Lara Jean. All you have to do is ask.”

I feel dizzy. All around us, people are exiting the building, walking to their cars. John is standing beside me, and Peter is looking at me like we’re the only two people here. Anywhere.

It’s John’s voice that makes me break away. “What are you *doing*, Kavinsky?” John says, shaking his head. “This is pathetic. You treated her like garbage and now you decide you want her back?”

“Stay out of it, Sundance Kid,” Peter snaps. To me he says softly, “You promised you wouldn’t break my heart. In the contract you said you wouldn’t, but you did, Covey.”

I’ve never heard him sound so sincere, so heartfelt. “I’m sorry,” I say, my voice whisper-thin. “I just can’t.”

I don’t look back at Peter as I get into the car, but his necklace is still dangling from my fist. At the last second I turn around, but we’re too far away; I can’t see if Peter’s still there or not. My heart is racing. What would I regret losing more? The reality of Peter or the dream of John? Who can’t I live without?

I think back to John’s hand on mine. Lying next to him in the snow. The way his eyes looked even bluer when he laughed. I don’t want to give that up. I don’t want to give up Peter, either. There are so many things to love about them both. Peter’s boyish confidence, his sunny outlook on life, the



way he is so kind to Kitty. The way my heart flips over every time I see his car pull up in front of my house.

We drive in silence for a few minutes, and then, looking straight ahead, John says, “Did I even have a shot?”

“I could fall in love with you so easily,” I whisper. “I’m halfway there already.” His Adam’s apple bobs in his throat. “You’re so perfect in my memory, and you’re perfect now. It’s like I dreamed you into being. Of all the boys, you’re the one I would pick.”

“But?”

“But ... I still love Peter. I can’t help it. He got here first and he ... he just won’t leave.”

He sighs a defeated kind of sigh that hurts my heart. “Goddamn it, Kavinsky.”

“I’m sorry. I like you, too, John, I really do. I wish ... I wish we got to go to that eighth grade formal.”

And then John Ambrose McClaren says one last thing, a thing that makes my heart swell. “I don’t think it was our time then. I guess it isn’t now, either.” John looks over at me, his gaze steady. “But one day maybe it will be.”

I'm in the girls' bathroom, retying a bow around my ponytail, when Genevieve walks in. My mouth goes dry. She freezes, and then she turns on her heel to go inside a stall. When I say, "You and I are always meeting in the bathroom," she doesn't reply. "Gen ... I'm sorry for the other day."

Genevieve whirls around and advances on me. "I don't want your apology." She grabs my arm. "But if you tell one single person, I swear to God—"

"I wouldn't!" I cry out. "I won't! I would never do that."

She releases my arm. "Because you feel sorry for me, right?" Genevieve laughs bitterly. "You're such a little phony. Your whole sugary sweet routine makes me sick, you know that? You've got everyone fooled, but I know who you really are."

The venom in her voice stuns me. "What did I ever do to you? Why do you hate me so much?"

"Oh my God. Stop. Quit acting like you don't know. You need to own the shit you did to me."

"Wait a minute," I say. "What *I* did to *you*? You're the one who put a sexy video of me on the Internet! You don't get to change the story because you feel like it. I'm Éponine; you're Cosette! Don't make me out to be the Cosette!"

Her lip curls. "What the fuck are you even talking about?"

"*Les Mis!*"

“I don’t watch musicals.” She turns like she’s going to leave, and then she stops and says, “I saw you guys that day in seventh grade. I saw you kiss him.”

*She was there?*

She sees my surprise; she revels in it. “I left my jacket down there, and when I went back to get it, I saw the two of you kissing on the couch. You broke the most basic rule of girl code, Lara Jean. Somehow in your mind you’ve made me out to be the villain. But what you should know is I wasn’t being a bitch just for the sake of being a bitch. You deserved it.”

My head is spinning. “If you knew, why did you keep being my friend? You didn’t stop being my friend until later.”

Genevieve shrugs. “Because I liked throwing it in your face. I had him and you didn’t. Believe me, we weren’t friends any more from that moment on.”

It’s odd that out of all the things she’s ever said to me, this hurts the most. “Just so you know, I didn’t kiss him. He kissed me. I didn’t even think of him that way, not before that kiss.”

Then she says, “The only reason he even kissed you that day was because I wouldn’t. You were second choice.” She runs her hand through her hair. “If you had admitted it back then, I might have forgiven you. Might have. But you never did.”

I swallow. “I wanted to. But it was my first kiss, and it was with the wrong guy, and I knew he didn’t like me.”

It all makes sense. Why she went to such lengths to keep me and Peter apart. Leaning on him, making him prove she was still his first choice. It’s no excuse for all the things she’s done, but I see my part in it now. I should’ve told her about the kiss

right away, way back in seventh grade. I knew how much she liked him.

“I’m sorry, Genevieve. I truly am. If I could take it back, I would.” Her eyebrow twitches, and I know she’s not unmoved. Impulsively I say, “We were friends once. Can we – do you think we can ever be friends again?”

She looks at me with such complete and utter disdain, like I’m a child who’s asked for the moon. “Grow up, Lara Jean.”

In a lot of ways, I feel like I have.

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I'm lying down on my back in the tree house, looking out the window. The moon is carved so thin, it's a thumbnail clipping in the sky. Tomorrow, no more tree house. I've barely thought about this place, and now that it's disappearing, I'm sad. It's like all childhood toys, I suppose. It doesn't become important until you don't have it any more. But it's more than just a tree house. It's goodbye, and it feels like the end of everything.

As I sit up, I see it, purple string poking out of a floorboard, sprouting forth like a blade of grass. I tug on the end and it pulls free. It's Genevieve's friendship bracelet, the one I gave to her.

*Believe me, we weren't friends any more from that moment on.*

That isn't true. We still had sleepovers, birthdays; she still cried to me the time she thought her parents were getting divorced. She couldn't have hated me that whole time. I won't believe it. This friendship bracelet proves it.

Because it's what she put in the time capsule, her most treasured thing, just like it was mine. And then, at the party, she took it out, she hid it; she didn't want me to see. But now I know. I was important to her then too. We were true friends once. Tears spring to my eyes. Goodbye, Genevieve, goodbye middle school years, goodbye tree house and everything that was important to me that one hot summer.

People come in and out of your life. For a time they are your world; they are everything. And then one day they're not.

There's no telling how long you will have them near. A year ago I could not have imagined that Josh would no longer be a constant for me. I couldn't have conceived of how hard it would be to not see Margot every day, how lost I would feel without her – or how easily Josh could slip away, without me even realizing. It's the goodbyes that are hard.

“Covey?” Peter's voice calls up to me from outside, down below in the dark.

I sit up. “I'm here.”

He climbs up the ladder quickly, ducking so his head doesn't hit the ceiling. He crawls over to the tree-house wall opposite from me, so we are sitting on either side. “They're bulldozing the tree house tomorrow,” I tell him.

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah. They're going to put up a gazebo. You know, like in *The Sound of Music*?”

Peter squints one eye at me. “Why did you call me over here, Lara Jean? I know it wasn't to talk about *The Sound of Music*.”

“I know about Genevieve. Her secret, I mean.”

He leans his back against the tree-house wall, and his head drops back with a slight thud. “Her dad's an asshole. He's cheated on her mom before. Just never with someone so young.” He speaks in a rush, like it's a relief to finally say the words out loud. “When things got really bad with her parents, Gen would find ways to hurt herself. I had to be the one to protect her. That was my job. Sometimes it scared me, but I liked being, I don't know ... needed.” Then he sighs and says, “I know she can be manipulative – I've always known that. In

some ways it was easier for me to default back to what I knew. I think maybe I was scared.“

My breath catches. “Of what?“

“Of disappointing you.“ Peter looks away. “I know sex is a big deal to you. I didn’t want to mess it up. You’re so innocent, Lara Jean. And I have all this shit in my past.“

I want to say, *I never cared about your past*. But that isn’t true. It’s only then that I realize: Peter wasn’t the one who needed to get over Genevieve. It was me. All this time with Peter, I’ve been comparing myself to her, all the ways I don’t measure up. All the ways our relationship pales next to theirs. I’m the one who couldn’t let her go. I’m the one who didn’t give us a chance.

Suddenly he asks, “What do you wish for, Lara Jean? Now that you’ve won. Congrats, by the way. You did it.“

I feel a rush of emotion in my chest. “I wish that things could go back to the way they were between us. That you could be you and I could be me, and we’d have fun with each other, and it would be a really sweet first romance that I’ll remember my whole life.“ I feel like I’m blushing as I say this last bit, but I’m glad I did, because it makes Peter’s eyes go soft and caramelly at me for just a second, and I have to look away.

“Don’t talk like it’s doomed already.“

“I don’t mean to. The first isn’t necessarily the last, but it will always be the first, and that’s special. Firsts are special.“

“You’re not first,“ Peter says. “But you’re the most special to me, because you’re the girl I love, Lara Jean.“

*Love.* He said “love“. I feel dizzy. I am a girl who is loved, by a boy, and not just her sisters and father and dog. A boy with beautiful eyebrows and a sleight of hand. “I’ve been going crazy without you.“ He scrubs the back of his head. “Can’t we just —“

“You’re saying I drive you crazy too?“ I interrupt.

He groans. “I’m saying you drive me more crazy than any girl I’ve ever met.“

I crawl towards him, and I reach out and trace my finger along his eyebrow that feels like silk. I say, “In the contract we said we wouldn’t break each other’s hearts. What if we do it again?“

Fiercely he says, “What if we do? If we’re so guarded, it’s not going to be anything. Let’s do it fucking for real, Lara Jean. Let’s go all in. No more contract. No more safety net. You can break my heart. Do whatever you want with it.“

I put my hand to his chest, over his heart. I can feel it beating. I let my hand fall away. His heart is mine, just mine. I believe it now. Mine to protect and care for, mine to break.

So much of love is chance. There’s something scary and wonderful about that. If Kitty had never sent those letters, if I hadn’t gone to the hot tub that night, it might’ve been him and Gen. But she did send those letters, and I did go out there. It could have happened lots of ways. But this is the way it happened. This is the path we took. *This* is our story.

I know now that I don’t want to love or be loved in half measures. I want it all, and to have it all, you have to risk it all.



So I take Peter's hand; I put it on my heart. I tell him, "You have to take good care of this, because it's yours."

He looks at me in such a way that I know for sure – he's never looked at another girl quite like this.

And then I'm in his arms, and we're hugging and kissing, and we're both shaking, because we both know – this is the night we become real.

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“Real isn’t how you are made,” said the Skin Horse.

“It’s a thing that happens to you.”

“Does it hurt?” asked the Rabbit.

“Sometimes,” said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful.

“When you are Real you don’t mind being hurt.”

—MARGERY WILLIAMS

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*Jenny*

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## *About the Author*

Jenny Han is the author of the *New York Times* bestselling books *To All the Boys I've Loved Before* and the Summer I Turned Pretty trilogy. She has also written two middle-grade novels, *Shug* and *Clara Lee and the Apple Pie Dream*. She co-wrote the Burn for Burn trilogy with Siobhan Vivian. Jenny lives in Brooklyn, New York. Visit her at [dearjennyhan.com](http://dearjennyhan.com).

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From the author of *To All the Boys I've Loved Before*

always  
and  
forever,  
Lara  
Jean

Jenny  
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For my dear readers. This one's for you.

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“I don’t know what lies around the bend,  
but I’m going to believe that the best does.”

—L. M. MONTGOMERY, *Anne of Green Gables*

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# 1

*I LIKE TO WATCH PETER WHEN HE DOESN'T* know I'm looking. I like to admire the straight line of his jaw, the curve of his cheekbone. There's an openness to his face, an innocence—a certain kind of niceness. It's the niceness that touches my heart the most.

It's Friday night at Gabe Rivera's house after the lacrosse game. Our school won, so everyone is in very fine spirits, Peter most of all, because he scored the winning shot. He's across the room playing poker with some of the guys from his team; he is sitting with his chair tipped back, his back against the wall. His hair is still wet from showering after the game. I'm on the couch with my friends Lucas Krapf and Pammy Subkoff, and they're flipping through the latest issue of *Teen Vogue*, debating whether or not Pammy should get bangs.

"What do you think, Lara Jean?" Pammy asks, running her fingers through her carrot-colored hair. Pammy is a new friend—I've gotten to know her because she dates Peter's good friend Darrell. She has a face like a doll, round as a cake pan, and freckles dust her face and shoulders like sprinkles.

"Um, I think bangs are a very big commitment and not to be decided on a whim. Depending on how fast your hair grows, you could be growing them out for a year or more. But if you're serious, I think you should wait till fall, because it'll be summer before you know it, and bangs in the summer can be sort of sticky and sweaty and annoying... ." My eyes drift back to Peter, and he looks up and sees me looking at him, and raises his eyebrows questioningly. I just smile and shake my head.

"So don't get bangs?"

My phone buzzes in my purse. It's Peter.

Do you want to go?

No.

Then why were you staring at me?

Because I felt like it.

Lucas is reading over my shoulder. I push him away, and he shakes his head and says, “Are you guys really texting each other when you’re only twenty feet away?”

Pammy crinkles up her nose and says, “So adorable.”

I’m about to answer them when I look up and see Peter sweeping across the room toward me with purpose. “Time to get my girl home,” he says.

“What time is it?” I say. “Is it that late already?” Peter’s hoisting me off the couch and helping me into my jacket. Then he pulls me by the hand and leads me through Gabe’s living room. Looking over my shoulder, I wave and call out, “Bye, Lucas! Bye, Pammy! For the record, I think you would look great with bangs!”

“Why are you walking so fast?” I ask as Peter marches me through the front yard to the curb where his car is parked.

He stops in front of the car, pulls me toward him, and kisses me, all in one fast motion. “I can’t concentrate on my cards when you stare at me like that, Covey.”

“Sorry,” I start to say, but he is kissing me again, his hands firm on my back.

When we’re in his car, I look at the dashboard and see that it’s only midnight. I say, “I still have an hour until I have to be home. What should we do?”

Of the people we know, I’m the only one with an actual curfew. When the clock strikes one o’clock, I turn into a pumpkin. Everyone is used to it by now: Peter Kavinsky’s Goody Two-shoes girlfriend who has to be home by one. I’ve never once minded having a curfew. Because truly, it’s not like I’m missing out on anything so wonderful—and what’s that old saying? Nothing good happens after two a.m. Unless you happen to be a fan of watching people play flip cup for hours on end. Not me. No, I’d much prefer to be in my flannel

pajamas with a cup of Night-Night tea and a book, thank you very much.

“Let’s just go to your house. I want to come inside and say hi to your dad and hang out for a bit. We could watch the rest of *Aliens*.” Peter and I have been working our way down our movie list, which consists of my picks (favorite movies of mine that he’s never seen), his picks, (favorite movies of his that I’ve never seen), and movies neither of us have seen. *Aliens* was Peter’s pick, and it’s turning out to be quite good. And even though once upon a time Peter claimed he didn’t like rom coms, he was very into *Sleepless in Seattle*, which I was relieved for, because I just don’t see how I could be with someone who doesn’t like *Sleepless in Seattle*.

“Let’s not go home yet,” I say. “Let’s go somewhere.”

Peter thinks about it for a minute, tapping his fingers on the steering wheel, and then he says, “I know where we can go.”

“Where?”

“Wait and see,” he says, and he puts the windows down, and the crisp night air fills the car.

I lean back into my seat. The streets are empty; the lights are off in most of the houses. “Let me guess. We’re going to the diner because you want blueberry pancakes.”

“Nope.”

“Hmm. It’s too late to go to Starbucks, and Biscuit Soul Food is closed.”

“Hey, food isn’t the only thing I think about,” he objects. Then: “Are there any cookies left in that Tupperware?”

“They’re all gone, but I might have some more at home, if Kitty didn’t eat them all.” I dip my arm out the window and let it hang. Not many more nights left like these, where it’s cool enough to need a jacket.

I look at Peter's profile out of the corner of my eye. Sometimes I still can't believe he's mine. The handsomest boy of all the handsome boys is mine, all mine.

"What?" he says.

"Nothing," I say.

Ten minutes later, we are driving onto the University of Virginia campus, only nobody calls it campus; they call it Grounds. Peter parks along the side of the street. It's quiet for a Friday night in a college town, but it's UVA's spring break, so a lot of kids are still gone.

We're walking across the lawn, his hand in mine, when I'm hit with a sudden wave of panic. I stop short and ask, "Hey, you don't think it's bad luck for me to come here before I'm actually in, do you?"

Peter laughs. "It's not a wedding. You're not marrying UVA."

"Easy for you to say, you're already in."

Peter gave a verbal commitment to the UVA lacrosse team last year, and then he applied early action in the fall. Like with most college athletes, he was all but in, so long as his grades stayed decent. When he got the official yes back in January, his mom threw a party for him and I baked a cake that said, *I'm taking my talents to UVA* in yellow frosting.

Peter pulls me by the hand and says, "Come on, Covey. We make our own luck. Besides, we were here two months ago for that thing at the Miller Center."

I relax. "Oh, yeah."

We continue our walk across the lawn. I know where we're going now. To the Rotunda, to sit on the steps. The Rotunda was designed by Thomas Jefferson, who founded the school, and he modeled it after the Pantheon, with its white columns and big domed top. Peter runs up the brick steps Rocky-style and plops down. I sit down in front of him, leaning back and resting my arms on the tops of his knees. "Did you know," I

begin, “that one of the things that makes UVA unique is that the center of the school, right there inside the Rotunda, is a library and not a church? It’s because Jefferson believed in the separation between school and church.”

“Did you read that in the brochure?” Peter teases, planting a kiss on my neck.

Dreamily, I say, “I learned it when I went on the tour last year.”

“You didn’t tell me you went on a tour. Why would you go on a tour when you’re from here? You’ve been here a million times!”

He’s right that I’ve been here a million times—I grew up going here with my family. When my mom was still alive, we’d go see the Hullabahoos perform because my mom loved a cappella. We had our family portrait taken on the lawn. On sunny days after church, we’d come picnic out here.

I twist around to look at Peter. “I went on the tour because I wanted to know everything about UVA! Stuff I wouldn’t know just by living around here. Like, do you know what year they let women in?”

He scratches the back of his neck. “Uh ... I don’t know. When was the school founded? The early 1800s? So, 1920?”

“Nope. 1970.” I turn back around and face forward, looking out onto the grounds. “After a hundred and fifty years.”

Intrigued, Peter says, “Whoa. That’s crazy. Okay, tell me more facts about UVA.”

“UVA is America’s only collegiate World Heritage UNESCO site in all of the United States,” I begin.

“Never mind, don’t tell me more facts about UVA,” Peter says, and I slap him on the knee. “Tell me something else instead. Tell me what you’re looking forward to most about going to school here.”

“You go first. What are you most excited about?”

Right away, Peter says, “That’s easy. Streaking the lawn with you.”

“*That’s* what you’re looking forward to more than anything? Running around naked?” Hastily I add, “I’m never doing that, by the way.”

He laughs. “It’s a UVA tradition. I thought you were all about UVA traditions.”

“Peter!”

“I’m just kidding.” He leans forward and puts his arms around my shoulders, rubbing his nose in my neck the way he likes to do. “Your turn.”

I let myself dream about it for a minute. If I get in, what am I most looking forward to? There are so many things, I can hardly name them all. I’m looking forward to eating waffles every day with Peter in the dining hall. To us sledding down O-Hill when it snows. To picnics when it’s warm. To staying up all night talking and then waking up and talking some more. To late-night laundry and last-minute road trips. To ... everything. Finally I say, “I don’t want to jinx it.”

“Come on!”

“Okay, okay ... I guess I’m most looking forward to ... to going to the McGregor Room whenever I want.” People call it the Harry Potter room, because of the rugs and chandeliers and leather chairs and the portraits on the wall. The bookshelves go from the floor to the ceiling, and all of the books are behind metal grates, protected like the precious objects they are. It’s a room from a different time. It’s very hushed—reverential, even. There was this one summer—I must have been five or six, because it was before Kitty was born—my mom took a class at UVA, and she used to study in the McGregor Room. Margot and I would color, or read. My mom called it the magic library, because Margot and I never fought inside of it. We were both quiet as church mice; we were so in awe of all the books, and of the older kids studying.

Peter looks disappointed. I'm sure it's because he thought I would name something having to do with him. With us. But for some reason, I want to keep those hopes just for me for now.

"You can come with me to the McGregor Room," I say. "But you have to promise to be quiet."

Affectionately Peter says, "Lara Jean, only you would look forward to hanging out in a library."

Actually, judging by Pinterest alone, I'm pretty sure a lot of people would look forward to hanging out in such a beautiful library. Just not people Peter knows. He thinks I'm so quirky. I'm not planning on being the one to break the news to him that I'm actually not that quirky, that in fact lots of people like to stay home and bake cookies and scrapbook and hang out in libraries. Most of them are probably in their fifties, but still. I like the way he looks at me, like I am a wood nymph that he happened upon one day and just had to take home to keep.

Peter pulls his phone out of his hoodie pocket. "It's twelve thirty. We should go soon."

"Already?" I sigh. I like being here late at night. It feels like the whole place is ours.

In my heart, it was always UVA. I've never really expected to go anywhere else, or even really thought about it. I was going to apply early when Peter did, but my guidance counselor, Mrs. Duvall, advised me against applying early action, because she said it would be better to wait so they could see my senior mid-year grades. According to Mrs. Duvall, it's always best to apply at your peak moment.

And so I ended up applying to five schools. At first it was just going to be UVA, the hardest to get into and only fifteen minutes from home; William and Mary, the second hardest to get into and also my second choice (two hours away); and then University of Richmond and James Madison, both only an hour away, in a tie for third choice. All in state. But then Mrs. Duvall urged me to apply to just one out-of-state school, just

in case, just to have the option—so I applied to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. It's really hard to get into out-of-states, but I picked it because it reminds me of UVA. It has a strong liberal arts program, and it's not too far away, close enough to come home in a hurry if I needed to.

But if I had the choice, I would still pick UVA every time. I've never wanted to be far from home. I'm not like my big sister. Going far away, that was her dream. She's always wanted the world. I just want home, and for me, UVA is home, which is why it's the college I've measured all other colleges against. The perfect storybook campus, the perfect everything. And, of course, Peter.

We stay a bit longer, me telling Peter more facts about UVA and Peter making fun of me for knowing so many facts about UVA. Then he drives me home. It's nearly one a.m. when we pull up in front of my house. The downstairs lights are all off, but my dad's bedroom light is on. He never goes to bed until I'm home. I'm about to hop out when Peter reaches across me and stops me from opening the door. "Give me my good-night kiss," he says.

I laugh. "Peter! I have to go."

Stubbornly he closes his eyes and waits, and I lean forward and plant a quick kiss on his lips. "There. Satisfied?"

"No." He kisses me again like we have all the time in the world and says, "What would happen if I came back after everyone went to sleep, and I spent the night, and left really early in the morning? Like, before dawn?"

Smiling, I say, "You can't, so we'll never know."

"But what if?"

"My dad would kill me."

"No, he wouldn't."

"He'd kill you."

"No, he wouldn't."



“No, he wouldn’t,” I agree. “But he’d be pretty disappointed in me. And he’d be mad at you.”

“Only if we got caught,” Peter says, but it’s halfhearted. He won’t risk it either. He’s too careful about staying in my dad’s good graces. “You know what I’m really looking forward to the most?” He gives my braid a tug before saying, “Not having to say good night. I hate saying good night.”

“Me too,” I say.

“I can’t wait until we’re at college.”

“Me too,” I say, and I kiss him one more time before jumping out of the car and running toward my house. On the way, I look up at the moon, at all the stars that cover the night sky like a blanket, and I make a wish. *Dear God, please, please let me get into UVA.*

*OceanofPDF.com*

## 2

*“SHOULD I DUST MARIE’S WIG WITH PINK* glitter or gold glitter?” I hold up an Easter egg to my computer screen for Margot’s inspection. I’ve dyed the shell pale turquoise blue and decoupaged it with a cameo of Marie Antoinette.

“Hold it up closer,” Margot says, squinting into the camera. She’s in her pajamas; a sheet mask clings to her face. Her hair has grown just past her shoulders, which means she’ll probably cut it soon. I have a feeling she’ll always keep her hair short now. It really suits her.

It’s night in Scotland, and still afternoon here. We are five hours and 3,500 miles apart. She’s in her dorm room; I’m sitting at our kitchen table, surrounded by Easter eggs and bowls of dye and rhinestones and stickers and fluffy white feathers that I saved from when I made Christmas ornaments a few years ago. I’ve got my laptop propped up on a stack of cookbooks. Margot’s keeping me company while I finish decorating my eggs. “I think I’m going to do a pearl border around her, if that helps inform your decision,” I tell her.

“Then I say go with the pink,” she says, adjusting her sheet mask. “Pink will pop more.”

“That’s what I was thinking too,” I say, and I get to work dusting glitter with an old eye-shadow brush. Last night I spent hours blowing the yolks out of the shells. This was supposed to be a fun thing for Kitty and me to do together like the old days, but she bailed when she was invited over to Madeline Klinger’s house. An invitation from Madeline Klinger is a rare and momentous occasion, so of course I couldn’t begrudge Kitty that.

“Only a little while longer before you find out, right?”

“Sometime this month.” I start lining up pearls in a row. Part of me wishes I could just get this over with, but another

part of me is glad to have this time of not knowing, of still hoping.

“You’ll get in,” Margot says, and it’s like a proclamation. Everyone around me seems to think that my getting into UVA is a foregone conclusion. Peter, Kitty, Margot, my dad. My guidance counselor, Mrs. Duvall. I’d never dare say it out loud, for fear of jinxing anything, but maybe I think so too. I’ve worked hard: I got my SAT scores up by two hundred points. My grades are almost as good as Margot’s were, and Margot got in. I’ve done everything I’m supposed to do, but will it be enough? At this point, all I can do is wait, and hope. And hope and hope.

I’m in the middle of hot-gluing a little white bow to the top of my egg when I stop to cast a suspicious look at my sister. “Wait a minute. If I get in, are you going to try to convince me to go somewhere else, just so I can spread my wings?”

Margot laughs, and her sheet mask slips down her face. Readjusting it, she says, “No. I trust you to know what’s best.” She means it, I can tell. Just like that, her words make it so. I trust me too. I trust that when the time comes, I will know what’s best. And for me, UVA is best. I know it. “The only thing I’ll say is, make your own friends. Peter will be making tons of friends because of lacrosse, and the people he’ll be friends with aren’t necessarily the kinds of people you’d pick to be friends with. So make your own friends. Find your people. UVA is big.”

“I will,” I promise.

“And make sure you join the Asian association. The one thing I feel like I’ve missed out on by going to school in a different country is an Asian-American group. It’s definitely a thing, you know, going to college and finding your racial identity. Like Tim.”

“Tim who?”

“Tim Monahan, from my class.”

“Oh, *Tim*,” I say. Tim Monahan is Korean, and he was adopted. There aren’t all that many Asian people at our school, so we all know who each other are, at least tangentially.

“He never hung out with Asians in high school, and then he went to Tech and met a ton of Korean people, and now I think he’s the president of an Asian fraternity.”

“Wow!”

“I’m glad Greek life isn’t a thing in the UK. You’re not going to join a sorority, are you?” She is quick to add, “No judgment if so!”

“I hadn’t thought about it.”

“Peter will probably join a fraternity, though.”

“He hasn’t said anything about it either...” Even though he hasn’t mentioned it, I could easily picture Peter in a fraternity.

“I’ve heard it’s hard if your boyfriend’s in one and you’re not. Something about all the mixers and stuff, like it’s easier if you’re friends with the girls from the sister sorority. I don’t know. The whole thing seems silly to me, but it could be worth it. I hear sorority girls like to craft.” She waggles her eyebrows at me.

“Speaking of which.” I hold up my egg for her. “Ta-da!”

Margot moves closer to the camera to look. “You should go into the egg-decorating business! I want to see the other ones.”

I hold up the egg carton. I’ve got a dozen blown-out eggs, pale pink with neon pink rickrack trim, brilliant blue and lemon yellow, lavender with dried lavender buds. I was glad to have an excuse to use that dried lavender. I bought a sack of it months ago for a lavender crème brûlée, and it’s just been taking up space in our pantry.

“What are you going to do with them?” Margot asks.

“I’m bringing them over to Belleview so they can put them on display in the reception area. It always looks so dreary and hospitably there.”

Margot leans back against her pillows. “How is everyone at Belleview?”

“Fine. I’ve been so busy with college apps and senior year stuff, I haven’t been able to go by as much as I used to. Now that I don’t officially work there anymore, it’s a lot harder to find the time.” I spin the egg in my hand. “I think I’ll give this one to Stormy. It’s very her.” I set the Marie Antoinette egg down on the rack to dry, and I pick up a lilac egg and begin affixing it with candy-colored gemstones. “I’m going to visit more, from here on out.”

“It’s hard,” Margot agrees. “When I come home for spring break, let’s go over there together. I want to introduce Ravi to Stormy.”

Ravi is Margot’s boyfriend of six months. His parents are from India, but he was born in London, so his accent is as posh as you might imagine. When I met him over Skype, I said, “You sound just like Prince William,” and he laughed and said, “Cheers.” He’s two years older than Margot, and maybe it’s because he’s older, or maybe it’s because he’s English, but he seems very sophisticated and not at all like Josh. Not in a snobby way, but definitely different. More cultured, probably from living in such a grand city, and going to the theater whenever he wants, and meeting dignitaries and the like because his mother is a diplomat. When I told Margot that, she laughed and said it’s just because I haven’t gotten to know him yet, but Ravi’s actually a huge nerd and not at all smooth or Prince Williamish. “Don’t let the accent fool you,” she said. She’s bringing Ravi home with her over spring break, so I suppose I’ll see for myself soon enough. The plan is for Ravi to stay at our house for two nights and then fly to Texas to see relatives. Margot will stay here with us for the rest of the week.

“I can’t wait to meet him in real life,” I say, and she beams.

“You’re going to love him.”

I'm sure I will. I like everyone Margot likes, but the truly lucky thing is that now that Margot's gotten to know Peter better, she sees how special he is. When Ravi's here, all four of us will be able to hang out, true double dates.

My sister and I are both in love at the same time, and we have this thing we can share, and how wonderful is that!

*[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)*

### 3

*THE NEXT MORNING, I PUT ON THE POPPY*-colored lipstick Stormy likes me in, gather up my Easter eggs in a white wicker basket, and drive over to Belleview. I stop at the reception desk to drop off the eggs and chat with Shanice for a bit. I ask her what's new, and she says there are two new volunteers, both UVA students, which makes me feel a lot less guilty about not coming around as much.

I say good-bye to Shanice and then head over to Stormy's with my Easter egg. She answers the door in a persimmon-colored kimono and lipstick to match and cries out, "Lara Jean!" After she sweeps me into a hug, she frets, "You're looking at my roots, aren't you? I know I need to dye my hair."

"You can barely tell," I assure her.

She's very excited about her Marie Antoinette egg; she says she can't wait to show it off to Alicia Ito, her friend and rival. "Did you bring one for Alicia, too?" she demands.

"Just you," I tell her, and her pale eyes gleam.

We sit on her couch, and she wags her finger at me and says, "You must be completely moonstruck over your young man since you've barely had time to visit with me."

Contritely I say, "I'm sorry. I'll come visit more now that college applications are in."

"Hmph!"

The best way to deal with Stormy when she's like this is to charm and cajole her. "I'm only doing what you told me, Stormy."

She cocks her head to the side. "What did I tell you?"

"You said to go on lots of dates and lots of adventures, just like you did."

She purses her orangey-red lips, trying not to smile. “Well, that was very good advice I gave you. You just keep listening to Stormy, and you’ll be right as rain. Now, tell me something juicy.”

I laugh. “My life isn’t that juicy.”

She tsks me. “Don’t you have any dances coming up? When’s prom?”

“Not till May.”

“Well, do you have a dress?”

“Not yet.”

“You’d better get a move on it. You don’t want some other girl wearing your dress, dear.” She studies my face. “With your complexion, I think you ought to wear pink.” Then her eyes light up and she snaps her fingers. “That reminds me! There’s something I want to give you.” Stormy hops up and goes to her bedroom and she returns with a heavy velvet ring box.

I open the box and let out a gasp. It’s her pink diamond ring! The one from the veteran who lost his leg in the war. “Stormy, I can’t accept this.”

“Oh, but you will. You’re just the girl to wear it.”

Slowly, I take the ring out and put it on my left hand, and oh, how it sparkles. “It’s beautiful! But I really shouldn’t ... ”

“It’s yours, darling.” Storm winks at me. “Heed my advice, Lara Jean. Never say no when you really want to say yes.”

“Then—yes! Thank you, Stormy! I promise I’ll take good care of it.”

She kisses me on the cheek. “I know you will, dear.”

As soon as I get home, I put it in my jewelry box for safekeeping.

Later that day, I’m in the kitchen with Kitty and Peter, waiting for my chocolate chip cookies to cool. For the past few weeks I’ve been on a quest to perfect my chocolate chip cookie



recipe, and Peter and Kitty have been my steadfast passengers on the journey. Kitty prefers a flat, lacy kind of chocolate chip cookie, while Peter likes his chewy. My perfect cookie is a combination of the two. Crunchy but soft. Light brown, not pale in color or flavor. A little height but not puffy. That's the cookie I've been searching for.

I've read all the blog posts, seen the pictures of all white sugar versus a mix of brown and white, of baking soda versus baking powder, vanilla bean versus vanilla extract, chip versus chunk versus chopped bars. I've tried freezing in balls, flattening cookies with the bottom of a glass to get an even spread. I've frozen dough in a log and sliced; I've scooped, then frozen. Frozen, then scooped. And yet, still, my cookies rise too much.

This time I used considerably less baking soda, but the cookies are still vaguely puffy, and I am ready to throw the entire batch out for not being perfect. Of course I don't—that would be a waste of good ingredients. Instead I say to Kitty, "Didn't you say you got in trouble for talking during silent reading last week?" She nods. "Take these to your teacher and tell her you baked them and you're sorry." I'm running low on people to give my cookies to. I've already given some to the mailman, Kitty's bus driver, the nurses' station at Daddy's hospital.

"What will you do when you figure it out?" Kitty asks me, her mouth full of cookie.

"Yeah, what's the point of all this?" Peter says. "I mean, who cares if a chocolate chip cookie is eight percent better? It's still a chocolate chip cookie."

"I'll take pleasure in the knowledge that I am in possession of the perfect chocolate chip cookie recipe. I will pass it down to the next generation of Song girls."

"Or boys," Kitty says.

"Or boys," I agree. To her I say, "Now go upstairs and get a big Mason jar for me to put these cookies in. And a ribbon."

Peter asks, “Will you bring some to school tomorrow?”

“We’ll see,” I say, because I want to see him make that pouty face I love so much. He makes the face, and I reach up and pat his cheeks. “You’re such a baby.”

“You love it,” he says, snagging another cookie. “Let’s get the movie started. I promised my mom I would stop by the store and help her move some furniture around.” Peter’s mom owns an antiques store called Linden & White, and Peter helps her out as much as he can.

Today’s movie off our list is *Romeo + Juliet*, the 1996 version with Leonardo DiCaprio and Claire Danes. Kitty’s already seen it a dozen or so times, I’ve seen bits and pieces, and Peter’s never seen it at all.

Kitty drags her beanbag cushion downstairs and arranges herself on the floor with a bag of microwave popcorn beside her. Our wheaten terrier mix Jamie Fox-Pickle immediately plants himself next to her, no doubt hoping for a falling popcorn crumb. Peter and I are on the couch, cuddled under a sheep’s-wool blanket that Margot sent from Scotland.

From the moment Leo comes on screen in that navy blue suit, I have chest palpitations. He’s like an angel, a beautiful, damaged angel.

“What’s he so stressed out about?” Peter asks, reaching down and stealing a handful of Kitty’s popcorn. “Isn’t he a prince or something?”

“He’s not a prince,” I say. “He’s just rich. And his family is very powerful in this town.”

“He’s my dream guy,” Kitty says in a proprietary tone.

“Well, he’s all grown up now,” I say, not taking my eyes off the screen. “He’s practically Daddy’s age.” Still ...

“Wait, I thought *I* was your dream guy,” Peter says. Not to me, to Kitty. He knows he’s not my dream guy. My dream guy is Gilbert Blythe from *Anne of Green Gables*. Handsome, loyal, smart in school.

“Ew,” Kitty says. “You’re like my brother.”

Peter looks genuinely wounded, so I pat him on the shoulder.

“Don’t you think he’s a little scrawny?” Peter presses.

I shush him.

He crosses his arms. “I don’t get why you guys get to talk during movies and I get shushed. It’s pretty bullshit.”

“It’s our house,” Kitty says.

“Your sister shushes me at my house too!”

We ignore him in unison.

In the play, Romeo and Juliet were only thirteen. In the movie they’re more like seventeen or eighteen. Definitely still teens. How did they know they were meant to be? Just one look across a bathroom fish tank was all it took? They knew it was a love worth dying for? Because they do know. They believe. I guess the difference is, in those times people got married so much younger than they do now. Realistically, till death do us part probably only meant, like, fifteen or twenty years, because people didn’t live as long back then.

But when their eyes meet across that fish tank ... when Romeo goes to her balcony and professes his love ... I can’t help it. I believe too. Even though, I know, they barely know each other, and their story is over before it even truly begins, and the real part would have been in the everyday, in the choosing to be with each other despite all the hardships. Still, I think they could have made it work, if they had only lived.

As the credits roll, tears roll down my cheeks and even Peter looks sad; but unsentimental, dry-eyed little Kitty just hops up and says she’s taking Jamie Fox-Pickle outside to pee. Off they go, and meanwhile I’m still lost in my emotions on the couch, wiping tears from my eyes. “They had such a good meet-cute,” I croak.

“What’s a meet-cute?” Peter’s lying on his side now, his head propped up on his elbow. He looks so adorable I could

pinch his cheeks, but I refrain from saying so. His head is big enough as it is.

“A meet-cute is when the hero and heroine meet for the very first time, and it’s always in a charming way. It’s how you know they’re going to end up together. The cuter the better.”

“Like in *Terminator*, when Reese saves Sarah Connor from the Terminator and he says, ‘Come with me if you want to live.’ Freaking amazing line.”

“I mean, sure, I guess that’s technically a meet-cute... . I was thinking more like *It Happened One Night*. We should add that to our list.”

“Is that in color or black-and-white?”

“Black-and-white.”

Peter groans and falls back against the couch cushions.

“It’s too bad we don’t have a meet-cute,” I muse.

“You jumped me in the hallway at school. I think that’s pretty cute.”

“But we already knew each other, so it doesn’t really count.” I frown. “We don’t even remember how we met. How sad.”

“I remember meeting you for the first time.”

“Nuh-uh. Liar!”

“Hey just because you don’t remember something doesn’t mean I don’t. I remember a lot of things.”

“Okay, so how did we meet?” I challenge. I’m sure that whatever comes out of his mouth next will be a lie.

Peter opens his mouth, then snaps it shut. “I’m not telling.”

“See! You just can’t think of anything.”

“No, you don’t deserve to know, because you don’t believe me.”

I roll my eyes. “So full of it.”

After I turn off the movie, Peter and I go sit on the front porch, drinking sweet tea I made the night before. It's cool out; there's still enough bite in the air to let you know it isn't quite full-on spring yet, but soon. The dogwood tree in our front yard is just beginning to flower. There is a nice breeze. I think I could sit here all afternoon and watch the branches sway and bow and the leaves dance.

We still have a little time before he has to go help his mom. I would go with him, mind the register while he moves around furniture, but the last time Peter brought me, his mom frowned and said her store was a place of business, not a "teenage hangout." Peter's mom doesn't outwardly dislike me, and I don't even think she inwardly dislikes me—but she still hasn't forgiven me for breaking up with Peter last year. She's kind to me, but there's this distrust, this wariness. It's a let's-wait-and-see kind of feeling—let's wait and see when you hurt my son again. I'd always imagined I would have a great, Ina Garten—type relationship with my first boyfriend's mom. The two of us cooking dinner together, sharing tea and sympathy, playing Scrabble on a rainy afternoon.

"What are you thinking about?" Peter asks me. "You've got that look."

I chew on my lower lip. "I wish your mom liked me better."

"She does like you."

"Peter." I give him a look.

"She does! If she didn't like you, she wouldn't invite you over for dinner."

"She invites me over for dinner because she wants to see you, not me."

"Untrue." I can tell this thought has never occurred to him, but it has the ring of truth and he knows it.

"She wishes we'd break up before we leave for college," I blurt out.

“So does your sister.”

I crow, “Ha! So you’re admitting your mom wants us to break up!” I don’t know what I’m being so triumphant about. The thought is depressing, even if I already suspected it.

“She thinks getting serious when you’re young is a bad idea. It has nothing to do with you. I told her, just because it didn’t work out with you and Dad, it doesn’t mean it’ll be like that for us. I’m nothing like my dad. And you’re nothing like my mom.”

Peter’s parents got divorced when he was in sixth grade. His dad lives about thirty minutes away, with his new wife and two young sons. When it comes to his dad, Peter doesn’t say much. It’s rare for him to even bring him up, but this year, out of the blue, his dad has been trying to reconnect with him—inviting him to a basketball game, over to his house for dinner. So far Peter’s been a stone wall.

“Does your dad look like you?” I ask. “I mean, do you look like him?”

Sullenly he says, “Yeah. That’s what people always say.”

I put my head on his shoulder. “Then he must be very handsome.”

“Back in the day, I guess,” he concedes. “I’m taller than him now.”

This is a thing that Peter and I have in common—he only has a mom and I only have a dad. He thinks I got the better end of the deal, losing a mom who loved me versus a dad who is alive but a dirtbag. His words, not mine. Part of me agrees with him, because I have so many good memories of Mommy, and he has hardly any of his dad.

I loved how after a bath, I would sit cross-legged in front of her and watch TV while she combed the tangles out of my hair. I remember Margot used to hate to sit still for it, but I didn’t mind. It’s the kind of memory I like best—more of a feeling than an actual remembrance. The hum of a memory, blurry around the edges, soft and nothing particularly special,

all kind of blending into one moment. Another memory like that is when we'd drop Margot off at piano lessons, and Mommy and I would have secret ice cream sundaes in the McDonald's parking lot. Caramel and strawberry sauce; she'd give me her peanuts so I had extra. Once I asked her why she didn't like nuts on her sundae, and she said she did like them, but I *loved* them. And she loved me.

But despite all of these good memories, memories I wouldn't trade for anything, I know that even if my mom was a dirtbag, I'd rather have her here with me than not. One day, I hope Peter will feel that way about his dad.

"What are you thinking about now?" Peter asks me.

"My mom," I say.

Peter sets down his glass and stretches out and rests his head in my lap. Looking up at me, he says, "I wish I could've met her."

"She would've really liked you," I say, touching his hair. Hesitantly, I ask, "Do you think I might get to meet your dad some day?"

A cloud passes over his face, and I wish I hadn't brought it up. "You don't want to meet him," he says. "He's not worth it." Then he snuggles closer to me. "Hey, maybe we should go as Romeo and Juliet for Halloween this year. People at UVA go all out for Halloween."

I lean back against the post. He's changing the subject, and I know it but I play along. "So we'd be going as the Leo and Claire version of Romeo and Juliet."

"Yeah." He tugs on my braid. "I'll be your knight in shining armor."

I touch his hair. "Would you be willing to consider growing your hair out a little bit? And maybe ... dyeing it blond? Otherwise people might think you're just a knight."

Peter is laughing so hard I doubt he hears the rest of my sentence. "Oh my God, Covey. Why are you so hilarious?"

“I was joking!” Half joking. “But you know I take costuming seriously. Why bother doing something if you’re only going to do it halfway?”

“Okay, I would maybe wear a wig, but I’m not promising anything. It’ll be our first UVA Halloween.”

“I’ve been to UVA for Halloween before.” The first fall Margot got her driver’s license, we took Kitty trick-or-treating on the lawn. She was Batman that year. I wonder if she might like to do that again.

“I mean we’ll finally be able to go to UVA Halloween parties. Like, legit go to them and not have to sneak in. Sophomore year me and Gabe got kicked out of an SAE party and it was the most embarrassing moment of my life.”

I look at him in surprise. “You? You’re never embarrassed.”

“Well, I was that day. I was trying to talk to this girl who was dressed up in a Cleopatra costume and these older guys were like, ‘Get your ass out of here, scrub,’ and she and her friends laughed. Jerks.”

I lean down and kiss him on both cheeks. “I would never laugh.”

“You laugh at me all the time,” he says. He lifts his head up and pulls my face closer and we are kissing an upside-down Spider-Man type of kiss.

“You like it when I laugh at you,” I say, and, smiling, he shrugs.



## 4

*IT'S THE FIRST DAY OF SENIOR WEEK, AND* during Senior Week, every day there's a theme. Today's theme is school spirit, and I'm wearing Peter's lacrosse jersey and pigtails with yarn ribbons in our school colors, light blue and white. Peter has painted his face half blue and half white. When he picked me up this morning, I screamed when I saw him.

The rest of the week goes: Tuesday seventies day, Wednesday pajamas day, Thursday characters day (the day I am truly looking forward to), and Friday we're off on our senior trip. The vote was between New York City and Disney World, and New York won. We're driving up on a charter bus for the three-day weekend. It's perfect timing for a trip like this, because the seniors are going crazy waiting to hear from colleges and we could all use a distraction. Except for those of us who applied early decision and already know where they're going, like Peter, and Lucas Krapf, who's going to Sarah Lawrence. The majority of my class will stay in state. It's like our guidance counselor, Mrs. Duvall, is always saying: What's the point of living in Virginia if not to take advantage of all the great state schools? I think it's nice that so many of us will still be here in Virginia, that we aren't scattering off to the four corners of the earth.

At lunchtime, when Peter and I walk into the cafeteria, the a cappella group is serenading a junior girl with the song "Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow?" but with the words "Will You Go to Prom with Me, Gina?" We stop and listen before we get in line for our food. Prom isn't for another few months, but promposals have already started in earnest. So far the most impressive was last week, when Steve Bledell hacked into the announcements board and replaced the day's events with *Will you go to prom with me, Liz?* and it took two days for the IT department to figure out how to fix it. Just this morning, Darrell filled Pammy's locker with red roses, and he spelled out

*PROM?* in petals on the door. The janitor yelled at him for it, but the pictures look amazing on Pammy's Instagram. I don't know what Peter's planning. He's not exactly one for big romantic gestures.

When we're in line for food, Peter reaches for a brownie and I say, "Don't—I brought cookies," and he gets excited.

"Can I have one now?" he asks. I pull my Tupperware out of my bag and Peter grabs one. "Let's not share with anybody else," he says.

"Too late," I say, because our friends have spotted us.

Darrell is singing, "Her cookies bring all the boys to the yard," as we walk up to the table. I set the Tupperware down on the table and the boys wrestle for it, snatching cookies and gobbling them up like trolls.

Pammy manages to snag one and says, "Y'all are beasts."

Darrell throws his head back and makes a beastlike sound, and she giggles.

"These are amazing," Gabe groans, licking chocolate off his fingers.

Modestly I say, "They're all right. Good, but not amazing. Not perfect." I break a piece off of Peter's cookie. "They taste better fresh out of the oven."

"Will you please come over to my house and bake me cookies so I know what they taste like fresh out of the oven?" Gabe bites into another one and closes his eyes in ecstasy.

Peter snags one. "Stop eating all my girlfriend's cookies!" Even a year later, it still gives me a little thrill to hear him say "my girlfriend" and know that I'm her.

"You're gonna get a gut if you don't quit with that shit," Darrell says.

Peter takes a bite of cookie and lifts up his shirt and pats his stomach. "Six-pack, baby."

"You're a lucky girl, Large," Gabe says.

Darrell shakes his head. “Nah, Kavinsky’s the lucky one.”

Peter catches my eye and winks, and my heart beats quicker.

I have a feeling that when I’m Stormy’s age, these everyday moments will be what I remember: Peter’s head bent, biting into a chocolate chip cookie; the sun coming through the cafeteria window, bouncing off his brown hair; him looking at me.

After school, Peter has lacrosse practice, and I sit in the stands and do my homework. Of all the guys on the team, Peter is the only one going to a division one school, and Coach White is already crying about what the team will look like when Peter’s gone. I don’t understand all the ins and outs of the game, but I know when to cheer and when to boo. I just like to watch him play. He thinks every shot he takes will go in, and they usually do.

Daddy and Ms. Rothschild are, officially, a couple, and they have been since last September. Kitty’s over the moon; she takes credit for it at every opportunity. “It was all a part of my master plan,” she brags. I’ll give it to her. The girl does have vision. After all, she got Peter and me back together against all the odds, and now we’re in love.

For not having a lot in common, Ms. Rothschild and Daddy are a surprisingly good couple. (Again, not unlike Peter and me.) Proximity really does make all the difference. Two lonely neighbors, Netflix, a couple of dogs, a bottle of white wine. If you ask me, it’s lovely. Daddy has way more of a life now that Ms. Rothschild’s in it. They’re always going places together, doing actual activities. Like on a Saturday morning, before any of us are awake, they’ll go hiking and watch the sun rise. I’ve never known Daddy to hike, but he’s taken to it like a fish to water. They go out to dinner; they go to wineries; they meet up with Ms. Rothschild’s friends. Sure, he still likes to stay in and watch a documentary, but his world is so much more with her in it—and so much less lonely, which I never knew he was, these eight long years since Mommy died. But

he must have been, now that I see him so energized and so out and about. Ms. Rothschild eats with us at least a few times a week, and it's gotten to where it feels strange to not see her sitting there at the kitchen table, with her rich, throaty laugh and her glass of white wine next to Daddy's glass of beer.

After dinner that night, when I bring out cookies and ice cream for dessert, Daddy says, "More cookies?" and he and Ms. Rothschild exchange a meaningful look. Spreading vanilla ice cream on a cookie with a spoon, Daddy says, "You've been doing a lot of baking lately. You must be pretty stressed waiting on those college acceptance letters."

"It has nothing to do with that," I tell them. "I'm only trying to perfect my chocolate chip cookie recipe. Just be grateful, you guys."

Daddy begins, "You know, I read a study that found that baking is actually therapeutic. It's something to do with the repetition of measuring ingredients, and creativity. Psychologists call it behavioral activation."

"Hey, whatever works," Ms. Rothschild says, breaking a piece of cookie off and popping it into her mouth. "I go to SoulCycle; that's where I find my center." If Margot were here, she'd roll her eyes at that. Ms. Rothschild made me go with her once—I kept losing the beat and trying to find it again but to no avail. "Lara Jean, you've got to come with me again. There's a great new instructor who plays all Motown music. You'll love it."

"When can I go with you, Tree?" Kitty asks. That's what Kitty's taken to calling Ms. Rothschild. I still think of her as Ms. Rothschild, and I slip up from time to time, but I try to call her Trina to her face when I remember.

"You can come with me when you're twelve," she says. "Those are the rules of SoulCycle."

It's hard to believe that Kitty is eleven already. Kitty is eleven and I'll be eighteen in May. Time goes by so quickly. I look across the table at Daddy, who is looking at Kitty with a

sad kind of smile, and then at me. I know he must be thinking the same thing.

He catches my eye and sings, “Lara Jean, don’t you worry ’bout a thing,” in his best Stevie Wonder voice, and we all groan. Biting into his makeshift ice cream sandwich, Daddy says, “You’ve worked hard; everything will turn out the way it’s supposed to.”

“There’s no way in the world that UVA would ever say no to you,” Ms. Rothschild says.

“Knock on wood,” Kitty says, rapping the kitchen table with her knuckle. To me she says, “You knock too.”

Dutifully I knock on the table. “What does knock on wood even mean?”

Daddy perks up. “Actually, it’s thought to come from Greek mythology. According to Greek myths, dryads lived in trees, and people would invoke them for protection. Hence knocking on wood: just that added bit of protection so as not to tempt fate.”

Now it’s Ms. Rothschild, Kitty, and me exchanging a look. Daddy’s so square, and Ms. Rothschild seems so young compared to him, even though he’s not that much older than her. And yet it works.

That night I can’t fall asleep, so I lie in bed going over my extracurriculars again. The highlights are Belleview and my internship at the library last summer. My SAT score is higher than the UVA average. Margot got in with just forty more than me. I got a five on the AP US history exam. I’ve known people to get into UVA with less than that.

Hopefully my essay gave me a bit of shine. I wrote about my mom and my sisters, and all the ways she’s shaped us—when she was alive and after she wasn’t. Mrs. Duvall said it was the best she’d read in years, but Mrs. Duvall has always had a soft spot for the Song girls, so who knows.

I toss and turn for another few minutes, and finally I just throw off my covers and get out of bed. Then I go downstairs

and start measuring out ingredients for chocolate chip cookies.

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## 5

*IT'S THURSDAY, CHARACTERS DAY, THE DAY* I've been looking forward to all week. Peter and I spent hours going back and forth over this. I made a strong case for Alexander Hamilton and Eliza Schuyler, but had to back down when I realized how expensive it would be to rent Colonial costumes on such short notice. I think couples costumes might be my favorite part of being in a couple. Besides the kissing, and the free rides, and Peter himself.

He wanted to go as Spider-Man and have me wear a red wig and be Mary Jane Watson, mostly because he already had the costume—and because he's really fit from lacrosse, and why not give the people what they want? His words, not mine.

In the end we decided to go as Tyler Durden and Marla Singer from *Fight Club*. It was actually my best friend Chris's idea. She and Kitty and I were watching it at my house, and Chris said, you and Kavinsky should go as those psychos. She said it would be good for the shock value—for me, anyway. At first I balked because Marla isn't Asian and I have my only-Asian-people-costumes policy, but then Peter's mom found him a red leather jacket at an estate sale, and it just came together. As for my costume, Ms. Rothschild is loaning me clothes from her own wardrobe, because she was young in the nineties.

This morning, Ms. Rothschild comes over before work to help me get ready. I'm sitting at the kitchen table in her black slip dress and a fake mohair jacket and a wig, which Kitty delights in messing up to get that crazy bedhead look. I keep swatting her moussed-up hands away, and she keeps saying, "But this is the look."

"You're lucky I'm a pack rat," Ms. Rothschild says, sipping coffee from her thermos. She reaches into her bag and tosses me a pair of high, high black platform heels. "When I was in my twenties, Halloween was my thing. I was the queen of dressing up. It's your turn to take the crown now, Lara Jean."

“You can still be the queen,” I tell her.

“No, dressing up in costumes is a young person’s game. If I wore a sexy Sherlock Holmes costume now, I’d just look desperate.” She fluffs up my wig. “It’s all right. My time has passed.” To Kitty she says, “What do you think? A little more gunmetal eye shadow, right?”

“Let’s not take it too far,” I say. “This is still school.”

“The whole point of wearing a costume is taking it too far,” Ms. Rothschild says airily. “Take lots of pictures when you get to school. Text them to me so I can show my work friends. They’ll get a kick out of it... . God, speaking of work, what time is it?”

Ms. Rothschild is always running late, something that drives Daddy crazy because he’s always ten minutes early. And yet!

When Peter comes to pick me up, I run outside and open the passenger-side door and scream when I see him. His hair is blond!

“Oh my God!” I shriek, touching his hair. “Did you bleach it?”

He grins a self-satisfied kind of grin. “It’s spray. My mom found it for me. I can use it again when we do Romeo and Juliet for Halloween.” He’s eyeing me in my getup. “I like those shoes. You look sexy.”

I can feel my cheeks warm up. “Be quiet.”

As he backs out of my driveway, he glances at me again and says, “It’s the truth, though.”

I give him a shove. “All I’m saying is, people better know who I am.”

“I’ve got you covered,” he assures me.

And he does. When we walk down the senior hallway, Peter cues up the Pixies’ “Where Is My Mind?” on his phone,



loud, and people actually clap for us. Not one person asks if I'm a manga character.

After school, Peter and I are lying on the couch; his feet are hanging off the end. He's still in his costume, but I've changed into my regular clothes. "You always have the cutest socks," he says, lifting up my right foot. These ones are gray with white polka dots and yellow bear faces.

Proudly I say, "My great-aunt sends them from Korea. Korea has the cutest stuff, you know."

"Can you ask her to send me some too? Not bears, but maybe, like, tigers. Tigers are cool."

"Your feet are too big for socks as cute as these. Your toes would pop right out. You know what, I bet I could find you some socks that fit at ... um, the zoo." Peter sits up and starts tickling me. I gasp out, "I bet the—pandas or gorillas have to—keep their feet warm somehow ... in the winter. Maybe they have some kind of deodorized sock technology as well." I burst into giggles. "Stop ... stop tickling me!"

"Then stop being mean about my feet!" I've got my hand burrowed under his arm, and I am tickling him ferociously. But by doing so, I have opened myself up to more attacks.

I yell, "Okay, okay, truce!" He stops, and I pretend to stop, but sneak a tickle under his arm, and he lets out a high-pitched un-Peter-like shriek.

"You said truce!" he accuses. We both nod and lie back down, out of breath. "Do you really think my feet smell?"

I don't. I love the way he smells after a lacrosse game—like sweat and grass and him. But I love to tease, to see that unsure look cross his face for just half a beat. "Well, I mean, on game days ... ," I say. Then Peter attacks me again, and we're wrestling around, laughing, when Kitty walks in, balancing a tray with a cheese sandwich and a glass of orange juice.

"Take it upstairs," she says, sitting down on the floor. "This is a public area."

Disentangling myself, I give her a glare. “We aren’t doing anything private, *Katherine*.”

“Your sister says my feet stink,” Peter says, pointing his foot in her direction. “She’s lying, isn’t she?”

She deflects it with a pop of her elbow. “I’m not smelling your foot.” She shudders. “You guys are kinky.”

I yelp and throw a pillow at her.

She gasps. “You’re lucky you didn’t knock over my juice! Daddy will kill you if you mess up the rug again.” Pointedly she says, “Remember the nail-polish-remover incident?”

Peter ruffles my hair. “Clumsy Lara Jean.”

I shove him away from me. “I’m not clumsy. You’re the one who tripped over his own feet trying to get to the pizza the other night at Gabe’s.”

Kitty bursts into giggles and Peter throws a pillow at her. “You guys need to stop ganging up on me!” he yells.

“Are you staying for dinner?” she asks when her giggles subside.

“I can’t. My mom’s making chicken fried steak.”

Kitty’s eyes bulge. “Lucky. Lara Jean, what are we having?”

“I’m defrosting some chicken breasts as we speak,” I say. She makes a face, and I say, “If you don’t like it, maybe you could learn to cook. I won’t be around to cook your dinners anymore when I’m at college, you know.”

“Yeah, right. You’ll probably be here every night.” She turns to Peter. “Can I come to your house for dinner?”

“Sure,” he says. “You can both come.”

Kitty starts to cheer, and I shush her. “We can’t, because then Daddy will have to eat alone. Ms. Rothschild has SoulCycle tonight.”

She takes a bite of her cheese sandwich. “I’m making myself another sandwich, then. I don’t want to eat old freezer-

burn chicken.”

I sit up suddenly. “Kitty, I’ll make something else if you’ll braid my hair tomorrow morning. I want to do something special for New York.” I’ve never been to New York before in my life. For our last family vacation, we took a vote, and I picked New York, but I was voted down in favor of Mexico. Kitty wanted to eat fish tacos and swim in the ocean, and Margot wanted to see Mayan ruins and have a chance to work on her Spanish. In the end, I was happy to be outvoted. Before Mexico, Kitty and I had never even left the country. I’ve never seen water so blue.

“I’ll braid your hair only if I have time left over after I do mine,” Kitty says, which is the best I can hope for, I suppose. She’s just so good at doing hair.

“Who will braid my hair when I’m at college?” I muse.

“I will,” Peter says, all confidence.

“You don’t know how,” I scoff.

“The kid will teach me. Won’t you, kid?”

“For a price,” Kitty says.

They negotiate back and forth before finally settling on Peter taking Kitty and her friends to the movies one Saturday afternoon. Which is how I come to be sitting cross-legged on the floor while Peter and Kitty sit on the couch above me, Kitty demonstrating a French braid and Peter recording it on his phone.

“Now you try it,” she says.

He keeps losing a piece and getting frustrated. “You have a lot of hair, Lara Jean.”

“If you can’t get the French, I’ll teach you something more basic,” Kitty says, and there is no mistaking the contempt in her voice.

Peter hears it too. “No, I’m gonna get it. Just give me a second. I’m gonna master it just like I mastered the other kind

of French.” He winks at me.

Kitty and I both scream at him for that. “Don’t talk like that in front of my sister!” I yell, shoving him in the chest.

“I was kidding!”

“Also, you’re not *that* good at French kissing.” Even though, yeah, he is.

Peter gives me a *Who are you kidding?* look, and I shrug, because who *am* I kidding?

Later, I’m walking Peter to his car when he stops in front of the passenger-side door and asks, “Hey, how many guys have you kissed?”

“Just three. You, John Ambrose McClaren—” I say his name fast, like ripping off a Band-Aid, but Peter still has enough time to scowl. “And Allie Feldman’s cousin.”

“The kid with the lazy eye?”

“Yeah. His name was Ross. I thought he was cute. It happened at a sleepover at Allie’s; I kissed him on a dare. But I wanted to.”

He gives me a speculative look. “So me, John, and Allie’s cousin.”

“Uh-huh.”

“You’re forgetting one person, Covey.”

“Who?”

“Sanderson!”

I wave my hand. “Oh, that doesn’t really count.”

“Allie Feldman’s cousin Ross who you kissed on a dare counts, but not *Josh*, who you technically cheated on me with?” Peter wags his finger at me. “Nuh-uh. I don’t think so.”

I shove him. “We weren’t actually together then and you know it!”

“A technicality, but okay.” He gives me a sidelong look. “Your number’s higher than mine, you know. I’ve only ever kissed Gen, Jamila, and you.”

“What about the girl you met at Myrtle Beach with your cousins? Angelina?”

A funny look crosses over his face. “Oh yeah. How’d you know about that?”

“You bragged about it to everyone!” It was the summer before seventh grade. I remember it drove Genevieve crazy, that some other girl had kissed Peter before she did. We tried to find Angelina online, but we didn’t have much to go on. Just her name. “So that makes it four girls you’ve kissed, and you did a lot more with them than kiss, Peter.”

“Fine!”

I’m on a roll now. “You’re the only boy I’ve ever *kissed* kissed. And you were the first. First kiss, first boyfriend, first everything! You got so many of my firsts, and I didn’t get any from you.”

Sheepishly he says, “Actually that’s not entirely true.”

I narrow my eyes. “What do you mean?”

“There was never any girl at the beach. I made the whole thing up.”

“There was no Angelina with big boobs?”

“I never said she had big boobs!”

“Yes you did. You told Trevor that.”

“Okay, fine! Geez. You’re missing the whole point, by the way.”

“What’s the whole point, Peter?”

He clears his throat. “That day in McClaren’s basement. You were my first kiss too.”

Abruptly I stop laughing. “I was?”

“Yeah.”

I stare at him. “Why didn’t you ever tell me?”

“I don’t know. I guess I forgot. Also it’s embarrassing that I made up a girl. Don’t tell anybody!”

I’m filled with a glowy kind of wonder. So I was Peter Kavinsky’s first kiss. How perfectly wonderful!

I throw my arms around him and lift my chin expectantly, waiting for my good-night kiss. He nuzzles his face against mine, and I feel gladness for the fact that he has smooth cheeks and barely even needs to shave. I close my eyes, breathe him in, wait for my kiss. And he plants a chaste peck on my forehead. “Good night, Covey.”

My eyes fly open. “That’s all I get?”

Smugly he says, “You said earlier that I’m not that good at kissing, remember?”

“I was kidding!”

He winks at me as he hops in his car. I watch him drive away. Even after a whole year of being together, it can still feel so new. To love a boy, to have him love you back. It feels miraculous.

I don’t go inside right away. Just in case he comes back. Hands on my hips, I wait a full twenty seconds before I turn toward the front steps, which is when his car comes peeling back down our street and stops right in front of our house. Peter sticks his head out the window. “All right then,” he calls out. “Let’s practice.”

I run back to his car, I pull him toward me by his shirt, and angle my face against his—and then I push him away and run backward, laughing, my hair whipping around my face.

“Covey!” he yells.

“That’s what you get!” I call back gleefully. “See you on the bus tomorrow!”

That night, when we're in the bathroom brushing our teeth, I ask Kitty, "On a scale of one to ten, how much will you miss me when I go to college? Be honest."

"It's too early for this kind of talk," she says, rinsing her toothbrush.

"Just answer."

"A four."

"A four! You said you missed Margot a six point five!"

Kitty shakes her head at me. "Lara Jean, why do you have to remember every little thing? It's not healthy."

"The least you can do is pretend you'll miss me!" I burst out. "It's the decent thing to do."

"Margot was going all the way across the world. You're only going fifteen minutes away, so I won't even have a chance to miss you."

"Still."

She clasps her hands to her heart. "Okay. How's this? I'm going to miss you so much I'll cry every night!"

I smile. "That's more like it."

"I'll miss you so much, I'll want to slit my wrists!" She cackles wildly.

"Katherine. Don't talk like that!"

"Then quit fishing for compliments," she says, and she goes off to bed, while I stay behind and pack up my toiletries for the New York trip tomorrow. If I get into UVA, I'll probably just keep a set of my makeup and creams and combs here at home, so I won't have to pack every time. Margot had to be so careful about what she brought with her to Saint Andrews, because Scotland is so far away and she isn't able to make the trip back home very often. I'll probably only pack for fall and winter and leave all my summer things at home, and then just switch them out when the seasons change.

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## 6

*IN THE MORNING, DADDY DRIVES ME TO* school to catch the charter bus. “Call me as soon as you’re settled in your room,” he says as we wait at the traffic light by school.

“I will.”

“Did you pack the emergency twenty?”

“Yes.” Last night, Daddy gave me a twenty-dollar bill to put in the secret pocket of my jacket, just in case. I have his credit card, too, for spending money. Ms. Rothschild loaned me her tiny umbrella and her portable cell phone charger.

Daddy gives me a sidelong look and a sigh. “It’s all happening so fast now. First your senior trip, then prom, then graduation. Only a matter of time before you’re out of the house too.”

“You’ll still have Kitty,” I say. “Though it’s true that she isn’t exactly the ray of sunshine that I am.” He laughs. “If I get into UVA, I’ll be around all the time, so don’t you worry about a thing.” I sing it the way he does, like Stevie Wonder.

On the bus I sit next to Peter; Chris sits with Lucas. I thought it might be a tough sell to get Chris to come on the senior trip, and it would have been, if Disney World had won out. But she’s never been to New York before either, so it ended up being easy peasy.

We’re on the road for an hour before Peter engages everybody in a game of Never Have I Ever, which I pretend to be asleep for, because I have not done much of anything, drugs-wise or sex-wise, and that’s all anybody cares about. Mercifully, the game dies down pretty fast, I suppose because it’s a lot less exciting when there are no red Solo cups involved. Just as I’m opening my eyes and stretching my arms and “waking up,” Gabe suggests Truth or Dare, and my stomach takes a nosedive.

Ever since Peter's and my hot tub video scandal last year, I've felt self-conscious about what people might be thinking about what we do or don't do. Sex-wise, I mean. And Truth or Dare is miles worse than Never Have I Ever! *How many people have you had sex with? Have you ever been in a threeway? How many times a day do you jerk off?* Those are the kinds of questions people ask each other, and if anybody ever asked them of me, I would have to say that I'm a virgin, and in some ways, that's even more subversive than any other answer. Usually, I slip away to the kitchen or another room when this game gets started at other parties. But there's nowhere for me to slip away to today, for we are on a bus, and I am well and truly trapped.

Peter gives me an amused look. He knows what I'm thinking. He says he doesn't care what people think, but I know that's not true. Historically, Peter cares very much what other people think of him.

"Truth or dare," Gabe says to Lucas.

Lucas takes a swig of his Vitaminwater. "Truth."

"Have you ever had sex with a dude?"

My whole body goes tight. Lucas is gay, and he's out, but he isn't *out* out. He doesn't want to deal with having to explain himself to people all the time, and why should he have to? It's not like it's anybody else's business.

There's a quick beat before Lucas says, "No. Is that an offer?"

Everybody laughs, and Lucas has a slight smile on his face as he takes another swig of Vitaminwater, but I can see the tension in his neck, his shoulders. It must take a toll, having to be on guard for these kinds of questions, ready to deflect, to smile, to laugh it off. My virginity question is tiny in comparison. But I still don't want to answer.

I pray that Lucas picks me next, because I know he'll go easy on me. But Lucas must not notice the pleading glances I am throwing his way, because instead of picking me, he chooses Genevieve, who is sitting a few rows back, looking at her

phone. She's been dating a guy from her church and he goes to a different school, so no one sees her around as much. I heard from Chris that her parents got divorced, and that her dad moved into a new condo with his girlfriend. Chris said Genevieve's mom had a breakdown and had to be hospitalized for a few days, but things are better now, which I'm glad for. Peter sent daffodils to her mom when she came back home, and we labored over what the card should say—we finally decided on just *Be well, Wendy. Love, Peter.* The flowers were my idea, and I chipped in, but of course I didn't put my name on the card. I've just always liked Wendy; she's been nice to me since I was little. I still get that nervous dip in my stomach when I see Genevieve, but not as bad as it used to be. I know we'll never be friends again, and I've made my peace with it.

“Truth or dare, Gen,” Lucas calls out.

She looks up. Automatically she says, “Dare.” Of course Genevieve picks dare; she's a lot of things, but she's no coward. I'd rather do anything than answer a sex question, so I'll likely be picking dare too.

Lucas dares Genevieve to go sit next to Mr. Jain and put her head on his shoulder. “Make it believable,” Lucas says. Everyone howls with laughter. I can tell she really doesn't want to do it, but again, she's not a coward.

We all watch as she makes her way up the aisle and then stops at Mr. Jain's row. Mr. Jain is new this year; he teaches biology. He's on the younger side, handsome; he wears skinny jeans with button-downs to school. Genevieve slides into the seat next to him, and all I can see is the back of her head as she talks. He's smiling. Then she snuggles closer to him and drops her head on his shoulder, and he jumps like a scared cat. Everyone is laughing, and Mr. Jain turns around and shakes his head at us, looking relieved it was a joke.

Genevieve returns to us, triumphant. She takes her seat and looks around the group; our eyes meet for a moment, and my stomach dips. Then she looks away. “Truth or dare, Chrissy?”

“This game is so lame,” Chris says. Gen just stares at her, eyebrows raised in challenge, and Chris finally rolls her eyes and says, “Whatever. Truth.” When they go head-to-head like this, it’s impossible not to notice that they are related—first cousins, on their moms’ side.

Genevieve takes her time thinking up her question. Then she lands the whammy. “Did you or did you not play doctor with our cousin Alex when we were in third grade? And don’t lie.”

Everyone is whooping and hollering, and Chris’s face has gone bright red. I give her a sympathetic look. I know the answer to this one. “True,” she mutters, and everyone howls.

Luckily for me, this is about when Mr. Jain gets up and puts a DVD in the DVD player, so the game dissolves and my turn never comes. Chris turns around and says to me in a low voice, “You got off so easy.”

“Don’t I know it,” I whisper back, and Peter chuckles. He can chuckle all he wants, but I’m sure he’s a little relieved too. Not that he’s ever said so, but it’s not like he’d want the whole senior class to know that he and his girlfriend of a year—longer, if you count our fake relationship—have never had sex before.

Hardly anybody in our class has been to New York City, so we’re all just a little wide-eyed about it. I don’t think I’ve ever been in a place so alive. It’s a city that has its own heartbeat. I just can’t believe how many people there are, how crowded it is, how sophisticated everyone looks. They all look like—like city people. Except for the tourists like us, of course. Chris tries to act bored and unfazed by it all, but when we get on the subway to go to the Empire State Building, she doesn’t hold on to the pole and nearly falls over when we come to a sudden stop. “It’s different than in DC,” she mutters. That’s for sure. DC is the closest big city to Charlottesville, but it’s still a sleepy little town compared to New York. There’s so much to see, so many stores I wish we could stop in. Everyone is in a hurry; they all have plans and places to be. Peter gets screamed at by

an old lady for walking and looking at his cell phone, which makes everyone laugh, and for once, Peter is embarrassed. It's all so overwhelming.

When we get to the Empire State Building, I make Peter take a selfie with me at the elevators. At the top, I feel light-headed, we're so high up. Ms. Davenport tells me to sit with my head between my knees for a minute, which helps. When the nausea passes, I get up and go looking for Peter, who has disappeared during my time of need.

As I turn the corner, I hear Peter calling out, "Wait! Wait! Sir!" He's following a security guard who is approaching a red backpack on the floor.

The security guard bends down and picks it up. "Is this yours?" he demands.

"Uh, yeah—"

"Why did you leave it on the ground?" He unzips the backpack and pulls out a teddy bear.

Peter's eyes dart around. "Can you put that back inside? It's for a promposal for my girlfriend. It's supposed to be a surprise."

The security guard is shaking his head. He mutters to himself and starts looking in the backpack again.

"Sir, please just squeeze the bear."

"I'm not squeezing the bear," the security guard tells him.

Peter reaches out and squeezes the teddy bear and the bear squeaks out, "Will you go to prom with me, Lara Jean?"

I clap my hands to my mouth in delight.

Sternly the security guard says, "You're in New York City, kid. You can't just leave a backpack on the ground for your proposal."

"It's actually called a *promposal*," Peter corrects, and the security guard gives him a look. "Sorry. Can I just have the

bear back?” He spots me then. “Tell him *Sleepless in Seattle* is your favorite movie, Lara Jean!”

I rush over. “Sir, it’s my favorite movie. Please don’t kick him out.”

The security guard is trying not to smile. “I wasn’t going to kick him out,” he says to me. To Peter he says, “Just be more aware next time. In New York, we’re vigilant. If we see something, we say something, do you feel me? This is not whatever little country town you guys are from. This is *New York City*. We do not play around here.”

Both Peter and I nod, and the security guard walks away. As soon as he’s gone, Peter and I look at each other and break out into giddy laughter. “Somebody reported my book bag!” he says. “My promposal got fucked.”

I take the teddy bear out of his bag and hug it to my chest. I’m so happy I don’t even tell him not to cuss. “I love it.”

“You were going to turn the corner, and see the book bag right here by the telescopes. Then you were going to pick up the bear, and squeeze it, and—”

“How was I going to know to squeeze it?” I ask.

Peter pulls a crumpled piece of paper out of the bag. It says, *Squeeze Me*. “It fell off when the security guard was manhandling it. See? I thought of everything.”

Everything except the ramifications of leaving an unattended bag in a public place in New York City, but still! It’s the thought that counts, and the thought is the sweetest. I squeeze the bear, and again he says, “Will you go to prom with me, Lara Jean?” “Yes, I will, Howard.” Howard is, of course, the name of the bear from *Sleepless in Seattle*.

“Why are you saying yes to him and not to me?” Peter demands.

“Because he asked.” I raise my eyebrows at him and wait.

Rolling his eyes, Peter mumbles, “Lara Jean, will you go to prom with me? God, you really do ask for a lot.”

I hold the bear out to him. “I will, but first kiss Howard.”

“Covey. No. Hell, no.”

“Please!” I give him a pleading look. “It’s in the movie, Peter.”

And grumbling, he does it, in front of everybody, which is how I know he is utterly and completely mine.

On the bus to our hotel in New Jersey, Peter whispers to me, “What do you think—should we sneak out after bed checks and come back to the city?” He’s mostly joking. He knows I’m not the type to sneak out on a school trip.

His eyes go wide when I say, “How would we even get to the city? Do taxis go from New Jersey to New York?” I can’t even believe I am considering it. It’s so unlike me. Hastily I say, “No, no, never mind. We can’t. We’d get lost, or mugged, and then we’d get sent home, and then I’d be so mad we missed out on Central Park and everything.”

Peter gives me a skeptical look. “Do you really think Jain and Davenport would send us home?”

“Maybe not, but they might make us stay at the hotel all day long as punishment, which is even worse. Let’s not risk it.” Then: “What would we do?” I’m playing pretend now, not really planning, but Peter plays along.

“We could go hear some live music, or go to a comedy show. Sometimes famous comedians do surprise sets.”

“I wish we could see *Hamilton*.” When we drove through Times Square, Lucas and I craned our heads to see if we could get a glimpse of the *Hamilton* marquee, but no such luck.

“Tomorrow I want to get a New York bagel and see how it stacks up against Bodo’s.” Bodo’s Bagels are legendary in Charlottesville; we’re very proud of those bagels.

Putting my head on his shoulder, I yawn and say, “I wish we could go to Levain Bakery so I could try their cookie. It’s supposed to be like no chocolate chip cookie you’ve had before. I want to go to Jacques Torres’s chocolate shop too. His chocolate chip cookie is the definitive chocolate chip cookie, you know. It’s truly legendary... .” My eyes drift closed, and Peter pats my hair. I’m starting to fall asleep when I realize he’s unraveling the milkmaid braids Kitty pinned on the crown of my head. My eyes fly back open. “Peter!”

“Shh, go back to sleep. I want to practice something.”

“You’ll never get it back to how she had it.”

“Just let me try,” he says, collecting bobby pins in the palm of his hand.

When we get to the hotel in New Jersey, despite his best efforts, my braids are lumpy and loose and won’t stay pinned. “I’m sending a picture of this to Kitty so she’ll see what a bad student you are,” I say as I gather up my things.

“No, don’t,” Peter quickly says, which makes me smile.

The next day is surprisingly springlike for March. The sun is shining and flowers are just beginning to bud. It feels like I’m in *You’ve Got Mail*, when Kathleen Kelly goes to meet Joe Fox in Riverside Park. I would love to see the exact garden where they kiss at the end of the movie, but our tour guide brings us to Central Park instead. Chris and I are taking pictures of the *Imagine* mosaic in Strawberry Fields when I realize Peter is nowhere in sight. I ask Gabe and Darrell, but no one’s seen him. I text him, but he doesn’t reply. We’re about to move on to Sheep Meadow for a picnic, and I’m starting to panic, because what if Mr. Jain or Ms. Davenport notices he’s not here? He comes jogging up just as we’re about to go. He’s not even out of breath or the least bit concerned he almost got left behind.

“Where were you?” I demand. “We almost left!”

Triumphantly he holds up a brown paper bag. “Open it and see.”



I grab the bag from him and look inside. It's a Levain chocolate chip cookie, still warm. "Oh my God, Peter! You're so thoughtful." I get on my tiptoes and hug him, and then turn to Chris. "Isn't he so thoughtful, Chris?" Peter's sweet, but he's never this sweet. This is two romantic things in a row, so I figure I should praise him accordingly, because the boy responds well to positive reinforcement.

She's already got her hand inside the bag, and she stuffs a piece of cookie in her mouth. "Very thoughtful." She reaches for another piece, but Peter snatches the bag away from her.

"Damn, Chris! Let Covey have a bite before you eat the whole thing."

"Well, why'd you only get one?"

"Because it's huge! And it cost, like, five bucks for one."

"I can't believe you ran and got this for me," I say. "You weren't nervous you'd get lost?"

"Nah," he says, all proud. "I just looked at Google Maps and ran for it. I got a little turned around when I got back in the park, but somebody gave me directions. New Yorkers are really friendly. All that stuff about them being rude must be bullshit."

"That's true. Everyone we've met has been really nice. Except for that old lady who screamed at you for walking and looking at your phone," Chris says, snickering at Peter, who scowls at her. I take a big bite of the cookie. The Levain cookie is more like a scone, really dense and doughy. Heavy, too. It really is like no chocolate chip cookie I've ever tasted.

"So?" Peter asks me. "What's the verdict?"

"It's unique. It's in a class of its own." I'm taking another bite when Ms. Davenport comes up and hustles us along, eyeing the cookie in my hand.

Our tour guide has a pointer that looks like the Statue of Liberty's torch, and he holds it up in the air to shepherd us through the park. It's actually pretty embarrassing, and I wish

we could just go off by ourselves and explore the city, but no. He has a ponytail and he wears a khaki vest, and I think he's kind of corny, but Ms. Davenport seems to be into him. After Central Park we take the subway downtown and get off to walk across the Brooklyn Bridge. While everyone else is in line for ice cream at Brooklyn Ice Cream Factory, Peter and I run over to Jacques Torres's chocolate shop. It's Peter's idea. Of course I ask Ms. Davenport for permission first. She's busy talking to the tour guide, so she waves us off. I feel so grown up, walking through the streets of New York without any adults.

When we get to the store, I'm so excited, I'm shaking. Finally I get to try Jacques's famous chocolate chip cookie. I bite into it. This cookie is flat, chewy, dense. Chocolate has pooled on top and hardened! The butter and sugar taste almost caramelized. It's heaven.

"Yours are better," Peter says, his mouth rudely full, and I shush him, looking around to make sure the girl at the register didn't hear.

"Stop lying," I say.

"I'm not!"

He is. "I just don't know why mine aren't like his," I say. "It must be the industrial ovens." It seems I'll just have to accept my not-quite-perfect chocolate chip cookie and be content with good enough.

As we step out the door, I notice a bakery across the street called Almondine and another one on the opposite corner called One Girl Cookies. New York is truly a city of baked goods.

Peter and I walk back to the ice cream shop holding hands. Everyone is out on the pier, sitting on benches, eating their ice cream, and taking selfies with the Manhattan skyline behind them. New York keeps surprising me with how pretty it is.

Peter must be thinking the same thing, because he squeezes my hand and says, "This city is awesome."

"It really is."

I'm sound asleep when there is a knock at the door. I wake up with a start. It's still dark outside. In the bed across the room, Chris doesn't stir.

Then I hear Peter's voice on the other side of the door. "Covey, it's me. Want to go watch the sunrise on the roof?"

I get out of bed and open the door, and there is Peter, in a UVA hoodie, holding a Styrofoam cup of coffee and a cup with a tea bag hanging out the side. "What time is it?"

"Five thirty. Hurry, go get your coat."

"Okay, give me two minutes," I whisper. I run to our bathroom and brush my teeth and then I fumble around in the darkness for my jacket. "I can't find my jacket!"

"You can wear my hoodie," Peter offers from the doorway.

From under her blanket Chris growls, "If you guys don't shut up, I swear to God."

"Sorry," I whisper. "Do you want to watch the sunrise with us?"

Peter shoots me a pouty look, but Chris's head is still under her blanket, so she doesn't see. "No. Just leave!"

"Sorry, sorry," I say, and I scurry out the door.

We take the elevator to the top, and it's still dark outside, but it's beginning to get light. The city is just waking up. Right away Peter shrugs out of his hoodie, and I put my arms up and he slips it over my head. It's warm and smells like the detergent his mother uses.

Peter leans over the edge, looking across the water to the city. "Can't you picture us living here after college? We could live in a skyscraper. With a doorman. And a gym."

"I don't want to live in a skyscraper. I want to live in a brownstone in the West Village. Near a bookstore."

"We'll figure it out," he says.

I lean over the edge too. I never would have pictured myself living in New York City. Before I came here, it seemed like such an intimidating place, for tough people who aren't afraid to get into a fight with someone on the subway, or men in suits who work on Wall Street, or artists who live in SoHo lofts. But now that I'm here, it's not so scary, not with Peter by my side. I steal a look at him. Is this how it goes? You fall in love, and nothing seems truly scary anymore, and life is one big possibility?

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## 7

*IT'S A SIX-HOUR TRIP BACK TO VIRGINIA, AND I'M ASLEEP* for most of it. It's dark out by the time we pull into the school parking lot, and I see Daddy's car parked up front. We've all had our own cars and been driving ourselves around for so long, but pulling into the school parking lot and seeing all the parents waiting there for us feels like being in elementary school again, like coming back from a field trip. It's a nice feeling. On the way home, we pick up a pizza and Ms. Rothschild comes over and she and Daddy and Kitty and I eat it in front of the TV.

After, I unpack, do the bit of homework I have left, talk to Peter on the phone, and then get ready for bed. But I end up tossing and turning for what feels like eternity. Maybe it's all the sleep I got on the bus, or maybe it's the fact that any day now, I'll hear from UVA. Either way, I can't sleep, so I creep downstairs and start opening drawers.

What could I bake this time of night that wouldn't involve waiting for butter to soften? It's a perpetual question in my life. Ms. Rothschild says we should just leave butter out in a dish like she does, but we aren't a leave-the-butter-out family, we are a butter-in-the-refrigerator family. Besides, it messes with the chemistry if the butter is too soft, and in Virginia in the spring and summertime, butter melts quick.

I suppose I could finally try baking the cinnamon roll brownies I've been playing around with in my head. Katharine Hepburn's brownie recipe plus a dash of cinnamon plus cinnamon cream cheese swirl on top.

I'm melting chocolate in a double boiler and already regretting starting this project so late when Daddy pads into the kitchen in the tartan robe Margot gave him for Christmas this past year. "You can't sleep either, huh?" he says.

“I’m trying out a new recipe. I think I might call them cinnabrownies. Or sin brownies.”

“Good luck waking up tomorrow,” Daddy says, rubbing the back of his neck.

I yawn. “You know, I was thinking maybe you’d call in for me and I’d sleep in a little and then you and I could have a nice, relaxing father-daughter breakfast together. I could make mushroom omelets.”

He laughs. “Nice try.” He nudges me toward the stairs. “I’ll finish up the sin brownies or whatever they’re called. You go to bed.”

I yawn again. “Can I trust you to do a cream cheese swirl?” Daddy looks alarmed and I say, “Forget it. I’ll finish making the batter and bake them tomorrow.”

“I’ll help,” he says.

“I’m pretty much done.”

“I don’t mind.”

“Okay then. Can you measure me out a quarter cup of flour?”

Daddy nods and gets out the measuring cup.

“That’s the liquid measuring cup. We need the dry measuring cups so you can level off the flour.” He goes back to the cupboard, and switches them out. I watch as he scoops flour and then carefully takes a butter knife to the top. “Very good.”

“I learn from the best,” he says.

I cock my head at him. “Why are you still awake, Daddy?”

“Ah. I guess I have a lot on my mind.” He puts the top back on the flour canister and then stops and hesitates before asking, “How do you feel about Trina? You like her, right?”

I take the pot of chocolate off the heat. “I like her a lot. I think I might even love her. Do *you* love her?”

This time Daddy doesn't hesitate at all. "I do."

"Well, good," I say. "I'm glad."

He looks relieved. "Good," he says back. Then he says it again. "Good."

Things must be pretty serious if he's asking me such a question. I wonder if he's thinking of asking her to move in. Before I can ask, he says, "No one will ever take the place of your mom. You know that, don't you?"

"Of course I do." I lick the chocolate spoon with the tip of my tongue. It's hot, too hot. It's good that he should love again, that he should have someone, a real partner. He's been alone so long it felt like the normal thing, but this is a better thing. And he's happy, anyone can see it. Now that Ms. Rothschild's here, I can't picture her not here. "I'm glad for you, Daddy."

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## 8

*ALL MORNING LONG I'VE BEEN CHECKING MY PHONE*, just like pretty much every senior at my school has been doing all week. Monday came and went with no word from UVA, then Tuesday, then Wednesday. Today is Thursday, and still nothing. The UVA admissions office always send out acceptances before April first, and last year, notices went out the third week of March, so it really could be any day now. The way it goes is, they put the word out on social media to check the Student Info System, and then you log in to the system and learn your fate.

Colleges used to send acceptance letters in the mail. Mrs. Duvall says that sometimes parents would call the school when the mailman came, and the kid would jump in their car and drive home as fast as they could. There's something romantic about waiting for a letter in the mail, waiting for your destiny.

I'm sitting in French class, my last class of the day, when someone shrieks, "UVA just tweeted! Decisions are out!"

Madame Hunt says, "*Calmez-vous, calmez-vous,*" but everyone's getting up and grabbing their phones, not paying attention to her.

This is it. My hands tremble as I log in to the system; my heart is going a million miles a minute waiting for the website to load.

*The University of Virginia received over 30,000 applications this year. The Committee on Admission has examined your application and carefully considered your academic, personal, and extracurricular credentials, and while your application was very strong, we are sorry to inform you ...*

This can't be real. I'm in a nightmare and any moment I'm going to wake up. Wake up wake up wake up.



Dimly, I can hear people talking all around me; I hear a scream of joy down the hallway. Then the bell rings, and people are jumping out of their seats and running out the door. Madame Hunt murmurs, “They usually don’t send out the notices until after school.” I look up, and she’s looking at me with sad, sympathetic eyes. Mom eyes. Her eyes are what undo me.

Everything is ruined. My chest hurts; it’s hard to breathe. All of my plans, everything I was counting on, none of it will come true now. Me coming home for Sunday night dinner, doing laundry on weeknights with Kitty, Peter walking me to class, studying all night at Clemons Library. It’s all gone.

Nothing will go like we planned now.

I look back down at my phone, read the words again. *We are sorry to inform you ...* My eyes start to blur. Then I read it again, from the beginning. I didn’t even get wait-listed. I don’t even have that.

I stand up, get my bag, and walk out the door. I feel a stillness inside of me, but at the same time this acute awareness of my heart pumping, my ears pounding. It’s like all the parts are moving and continuing to function as they do, but I’ve gone completely numb. I didn’t get in. I’m not going to UVA; they don’t want me.

I’m walking to my locker, still in a daze, when I nearly run right into Peter, who is turning the corner. He grabs me. “So?” His eyes are bright and eager and expectant.

My voice comes out sounding very far away. “I didn’t get in.”

His mouth drops. “Wait—what?”

I can feel the lump rising in my throat. “Yeah.”

“Not even wait-listed?”

I shake my head.

“Fuck.” The word is one long exhale. Peter looks stunned. He lets go of my arm. I can tell he doesn’t know what to say.

“I have to go,” I say, turning away from him.

“Wait—I’ll come with you!”

“No, don’t. You have an away game today. You can’t miss that.”

“Covey, I don’t give a shit about that.”

“No, I’d rather you didn’t. Just—I’ll call you later.” He reaches for me and I sidestep away from him and hurry down the hallway, and he calls out my name, but I don’t stop. I just have to make it to my car, and then I can cry. Not yet. Just a hundred more steps, and then a hundred more than that.

I make it to the parking lot before the tears come. I cry the whole drive home. I cry so hard I can barely see, and I have to pull over at a McDonald’s to sit in the parking lot and cry some more. It’s starting to sink in, that this isn’t a nightmare, this is real, and this fall I won’t be going to UVA with Peter. Everyone will be so disappointed. They were all expecting I’d get in. We all thought it was going to happen. I never should have made such a big deal about wanting to go there. I should’ve just kept it to myself, not let anyone see how much I wanted it. Now they’ll all be worried for me, and it’ll be worse than Madame Hunt’s sad mom eyes.

When I get home, I take my phone and go upstairs to my room. I take off my school clothes, put on my pajamas, and crawl into bed and look at my phone. I’ve got missed calls from Daddy, from Margot, from Peter. I go on Instagram, and my feed is all people posting their reaction shots to getting into UVA. My cousin Haven got in; she posted a screen grab of her acceptance letter. She won’t be going there, though. She’s going to Wellesley, her first choice. She doesn’t even care about UVA; it was her safety school. I’m sure she’ll feign sympathy for me when she finds out I didn’t get in, but inside she’ll feel secretly superior. Emily Nussbaum got in. She posted a picture of herself in a UVA sweatshirt and baseball cap. Gosh, did

everyone get in? I thought my grades were better than hers. I guess not.

A little while later, I hear the front door open and Kitty's footsteps come running up the stairs. She throws open my bedroom door, but I am on my side, eyes closed, pretending to be asleep. "Lara Jean?" she whispers.

I don't reply. I need a little while longer before I have to face her and Daddy and tell them I didn't make it. I make my breathing go heavy and natural, and then I hear Kitty retreat and close the door quietly behind her. Before long, I fall asleep for real.

When I wake up, it's dark outside. It always feels so bleak to fall asleep when it's still light out and then wake up to darkness. My eyes feel swollen and sore. Downstairs, I hear water running in the kitchen sink and the clink of silverware against dishes. I go down the staircase and stop before I make it to the bottom. "I didn't get into UVA," I say.

Daddy turns around; his sleeves are rolled up, his arms soapy, his eyes even sadder than Madame Hunt's. Dad eyes. He turns off the faucet and comes over to the staircase, hoists me up, and draws me into his arms for a hug. His arms are still wet. "I'm so sorry, honey," he says. We're almost the same height, because I am still standing on the stairs. I'm focusing on not crying, but when he finally releases me, he tips up my chin and examines my face worriedly, and it's all I can do to keep it together. "I know how badly you wanted this."

I keep swallowing to keep down the tears. "It still doesn't feel real."

He smooths the hair out of my eyes. "Everything is going to work out. I promise it will."

"I just—I just really didn't want to leave you guys," I cry, and I can't help it, tears are rolling down my face. Daddy's wiping them away as fast as they can fall. He looks like he's going to cry too, which makes me feel worse, because I had planned to put on a brave face, and now look.

Putting his arm around me, he admits, “Selfishly, I was looking forward to having you so close to home. But Lara Jean, you’re still going to get into a great school.”

“But it won’t be UVA,” I whisper.

Daddy hugs me to him. “I’m so sorry,” he says again.

He’s sitting next to me on the staircase, his arm still around me, when Kitty comes back inside from walking Jamie Fox-Pickle. She looks from me to Daddy, and she drops Jamie’s leash. “Did you not get in?”

I wipe my face and try to shrug. “No. It’s okay. It wasn’t meant to be, I guess.”

“Sorry you didn’t get in,” she says, her voice tiny, her eyes sorrowful.

“Come give me a hug at least,” I say, and she does. The three of us sit like that on the staircase for quite some time, Daddy’s arm around my shoulder, Kitty’s hand on my knee.

Daddy makes me a turkey sandwich, which I eat, and then I go back upstairs and get back in bed to look at my phone again, when there’s a knock at my window. It’s Peter, still in his lacrosse uniform. I jump out of bed and open the window for him. He climbs inside, searches my face, and then says, “Hey, rabbit eyes,” which is what he calls me when I’ve been crying. It makes me laugh, and it feels good to laugh. I reach out to hug him and he says, “You don’t want to hug me right now. I didn’t shower after the game. I came straight here.”

I hug him anyway, and he doesn’t smell bad to me at all. “Why didn’t you ring the doorbell?” I ask, looking up at him, hooking my arms around his waist.

“I thought your dad might not like me coming over so late. Are you okay?”

“Kind of.” I let go of him and sit down on my bed, and he sits at my desk. “Not really.”

“Yeah, me too.” There’s a long pause, and then Peter says, “I feel like I didn’t say the right things earlier. I was just

bumped. I didn't think this was going to happen."

I stare down at my bedspread. "I know. Me either."

"It just sucks so much. Your grades are way better than mine. Cary got in, and you're better than him!"

"Well, I'm not a lacrosse player or a golfer." I try not to sound bitter-hearted, but it's an effort. A very traitorous, very small thought worms its way into my head—it's not fair that Peter's going and I'm not, when I deserve it more. I worked harder. I got better grades, higher SAT scores.

"Fuck them."

"Peter."

"Sorry. Screw them." He exhales. "This is insane."

Automatically I say, "Well, it's not *insane*. UVA's a really competitive school. I'm not mad at them. I just wish I was going there."

He nods. "Yeah, me too."

Suddenly, we hear the toilet flush from the hallway, and we both freeze. "You'd better go," I whisper.

Peter gives me one more hug before climbing back out my window. I stand there and watch him run down the street to where he parked his car. After he drives away, I check my phone, and there are two missed calls from Margot and then a text from her that says, I'm so sorry.

And that's when I start to cry again, because that's when it finally feels real.

## 9

*WHEN I WAKE UP IN THE MORNING, IT'S THE* first thing I think of. How I'm not going to UVA, how I don't even know where I'm going. My whole life I've never had to worry about that. I've always known where my place is, where I belong. Home.

As I lie there in bed, I start a mental tally of all the things I'm going to miss out on, not going to a college just around the corner from home. The moments.

Kitty's first period. My dad's an OB, so it's not like he doesn't have it covered, but I've been waiting for this moment, to give Kitty a speech about womanhood that she'll hate. It might not happen for another year or two. But I got mine when I was twelve and Margot got hers when she was eleven, so who knows? When I got my first period, Margot explained all about tampons and what kind to use for what days, and to sleep on your belly when your cramps are particularly bad. She made me feel like I was joining some secret club, a woman's club. Because of my big sister, the grief I felt about growing up was less acute. Kitty likely won't have either of her big sisters here, but she does have Ms. Rothschild, and she's only just across the street. She's grown so attached to Ms. Rothschild that she'll probably prefer a period talk from her anyway, truth be told. Even if in the future Daddy and Ms. Rothschild were to break up, I know Ms. Rothschild would never turn her back on Kitty. They're cemented.

I'll miss Kitty's birthday, too. I've never not been at home for her birthday. I'll have to remind Daddy to carry on our birthday-sign tradition.

For the first time ever, all of the Song girls will be living truly apart. We three probably won't ever live in the same house together again. We'll come home for holidays and school breaks, but it won't be the same. It won't be what it was. But I suppose it hasn't been, not since Margot left for college. The

thing is, you get used to it. Before you even realize it's happening, you get used to things being different, and it will be that way for Kitty too.

At breakfast I keep stealing glances at her, memorizing every little thing. Her gangly legs, her knobby knees, the way she watches TV with a half smile on her face. She'll only be as young as this for a little while longer. Before I leave, I should do more special things with her, just the two of us.

At the commercial break she eyes me. "Why are you staring at me?"

"No reason. I'm just going to miss you is all."

Kitty slurps the rest of her cereal milk. "Can I have your room?"

"What? No!"

"Yeah, but you won't be living here. Why should your room just sit there and go to waste?"

"Why do you want my room and not Margot's? Hers is bigger."

Practically, she says, "Yours is closer to the bathroom and it's got better light."

I dread change, and Kitty steps right into it. She leans in extra hard. It's her way of coping. "You'll miss me when I'm gone, I know it, so quit pretending you won't," I say.

"I've always wondered what it would be like to be an only child," she says in a singsong voice. When I frown, she hurries to say, "Only kidding!"

I know Kitty's just being Kitty, but I can't help but feel a tiny stab of hurt. Why would anyone want to be an only child? What's so great about having no one to warm your feet up against on a cold winter night?

"You'll miss me," I say, more to myself than to her. She doesn't hear me anyway; her show is back on.

When I get to school, I go straight to Mrs. Duvall's office to tell her the news. As soon as Mrs. Duvall sees the look on my face, she says, "Come sit down," and she gets up from behind her desk and closes the door behind me. She sits in the chair next to mine. "Tell me."

I take a deep breath. "I didn't get into UVA." Now that I've said it a few times, you'd think it would be easier to get the words out, but it's not—it's worse.

She heaves a sigh. "I'm surprised. I'm very, very surprised. Your application was strong, Lara Jean. You're a wonderful student. I did hear that they got a few thousand more applicants this year than in years past. Still, I would've thought you'd be wait-listed at the very least." All I can do is give her a small shrug in response, because I don't trust my voice right now. She leans forward and hugs me. "I heard from a source in the admissions department that William and Mary will be sending out their decisions today, so buck up for that. And there's still UNC, and U of R. Where else did you apply? Tech?"

I shake my head. "JMU."

"All great schools. You'll be fine, Lara Jean. I'm not the least bit worried about you."

I don't say what I'm thinking, which is that we both thought I'd get into UVA, too; instead I just offer a weak smile.

When I walk out, I see Chris at the lockers. I tell her the news about UVA, and she says, "You should come with me and work on a farm in Costa Rica."

Stunned, I lean back against the wall and say, "Wait—what?"

"I told you about this."

"No, I don't think you did." I've known Chris wasn't going away to college, that she was going to go to community college first and then see. She doesn't have the grades, or much inclination, really. But she never said anything about Costa Rica.



“I’m going to take a year off and go work on farms. You work for like five hours, and they give you room and board. It’s amazing.”

“But what do you know about farming?”

“Nothing! It doesn’t matter. You just have to be willing to work; they’ll teach you. I could also work at a surfing school in New Zealand, or learn how to make wine in Italy. Basically, I could go anywhere. Doesn’t that sound amazing?”

“It does... .” I try to smile but my face feels tight. “Is your mom okay with it?”

Chris picks at her thumbnail. “Whatever, I’m eighteen. She doesn’t have a choice.”

I give her a dubious look. Chris’s mom is tough. I have a hard time picturing her being okay with this plan.

“I told her I’d do this for a year and then come back and go to PVCC, and then transfer to a four-year college,” she admits. “But who knows what will happen? A year is a long time. Maybe I’ll marry a DJ, or join a band, or start my own bikini line.”

“That all sounds so glamorous.”

I want to feel excited for her, but I can’t seem to muster up the feeling. It’s good that Chris has her own thing to look forward to, something that no one else in our class is doing. But it feels like everything all around me is shifting in ways I didn’t expect, when all I want is for things to stand still.

“Will you write me?” I ask.

“I’ll Snapchat everything.”

“I’m not on Snapchat, and besides, that’s not the same thing.” I nudge her with my foot. “Send me a postcard from every new place you go, please.”

“Who knows if I’ll even have access to a post office? I don’t know how post offices work in Costa Rica.”

“Well, you can try.”

“I’ll try,” she agrees.

I haven’t seen as much of Chris this year. She got a job hostessing at Applebee’s, and she’s become very close with her work friends. They’re all older, some of them have kids, and they pay their own bills. I’m pretty sure Chris hasn’t told any of them she still lives at home and pays exactly no bills. When I visited her there last month, one of the servers said something about hoping to make enough that night for rent, and she looked at Chris and said, “You know how it is,” and Chris nodded like she did. When I gave her a questioning look, she pretended not to see.

The warning bell rings, and we start walking to our first-period classes. “Kavinsky must be freaking out that you didn’t get into UVA,” Chris says, checking her reflection in a glass door we walk past. “So I guess you guys will do long-distance?”

“Yeah.” My chest gets tight. “I guess.”

“You should definitely get people in place to keep an eye on the situation,” she says. “You know, like spies? I think I heard Gillian McDougal got in. She’d spy for you.”

I give her a look. “Chris, I trust Peter.”

“I know—I’m not talking about him! I’m talking about random girls on his floor. Dropping by his room. You should give him a picture of you to keep him company, if you know what I mean.” She frowns at me. “Do you know what I mean?”

“Like, a sexy picture? No way!” I start backing away from her. “Look, I’ve gotta go to class.” The last thing I want to do is think about Peter and random girls. I’m still trying to get used to the idea that we won’t be together at UVA this fall.

Chris rolls her eyes. “Calm down. I’m not talking about a nudie. I would never suggest that for you of all people. What I’m talking about is a pinup-girl shot, but not, like, cheesy. Sexy. Something Kavinsky can hang up in his dorm room.”

“Why would I want him to hang up a sexy picture of me in his dorm room for all the world to see?”

Chris reaches out and flicks me on the forehead.

“Ow!” I shove her away from me and rub the spot where she flicked me. “That hurt!”

“You deserved it for asking such a dumb question.” She sighs. “I’m talking about preventative measures. A picture of you on his wall is a way for you to mark your territory. Kavinsky’s hot. And he’s an athlete. Do you think other girls will respect the fact that he’s in a long-distance relationship?” She lowers her voice and adds, “With a Virgin Mary girlfriend?”

I gasp and then look around to see if anyone heard. “Chris!” I hiss. “Can you please not?”

“I’m just trying to help you! You have to protect what’s yours, Lara Jean. If I met some hot guy in Costa Rica with a long-distance gf who he wasn’t even *sleeping* with? I don’t think I’d take it very seriously.” She gives me a shrug and a sorry-not-sorry look. “You should definitely frame the picture too, so people know you’re not someone to mess with. A frame says permanence. A picture taped on a wall says here today, gone tomorrow.”

I chew on my bottom lip thoughtfully. “So maybe a picture of me baking, in an apron—”

“With nothing underneath?” Chris cackles, and I flick her forehead lightning quick.

“Ow!”

“Get serious then!”

The bell rings again, and we go our separate ways. I can’t see myself giving Peter a sexy picture of me, but it does give me an idea—I could give him a scrapbook instead. All of our greatest hits. That way when he’s missing me at UVA, he can look at it. And keep it on his desk, for any “random girl” who might happen by. Of course I won’t mention this idea to Chris

—she'd just laugh and call me Grandma Lara Jean. But I know Peter will love it.

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# 10

*I'M ON PINS AND NEEDLES ALL DAY, WAITING* to hear the news from William and Mary. My entire focus is on my phone, waiting for it to buzz, waiting for that e-mail. In AP English class, Mr. O'Bryan has to ask me three times about the slave narrative tradition in *Beloved*.

When it does buzz, it's just Margot asking me if I've heard anything yet, and then it buzzes again, and it's Peter asking me if I've heard anything yet. But nothing from William and Mary.

Then, when I'm in the girls' room in between classes, it finally does buzz, and I scramble to zip up my jeans so I can check my phone. It's an e-mail from University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, telling me my application has been updated. I stand there in the bathroom stall, and even though I truly don't expect to get in, my heart is pounding like crazy as I click on the link and wait.

Wait-listed.

I should be happy about it, because UNC is so competitive and the wait list is better than nothing, and I would be happy ... if I had already gotten into UVA. Instead it's like another punch in the stomach. What if I don't get in anywhere? What will I do then? I can see my Aunt Carrie and Uncle Victor now: *Poor Lara Jean, she didn't get into UVA or UNC. She's so different from her sister; Margot's such a go-getter.*

When I get to the lunch table, Peter is waiting for me with an eager look on his face. "Did you hear anything?"

I sit down in the seat next to him. "I got wait-listed at UNC."

"Aw, shit. Well, it's impossible to get in there out of state unless you're a basketball player. Honestly, even getting on the wait list is impressive."

"I guess so," I say.

“Screw them,” he says. “Who wants to go there anyway?”

“A lot of people.” I unwrap my sandwich, but I can’t bear to take a bite, because my stomach’s tied up in knots.

Peter gives a begrudging shrug. I know he’s just trying to make me feel better, but UNC is a great school and he knows it and I know it, and there’s no use pretending it’s not.

All through lunch I’m listlessly sipping on my Cherry Coke and listening to the guys go on about the game they’ve got coming up in a few days. Peter looks over at me at one point and squeezes my thigh in a reassuring way, but I can’t even muster up a smile in return.

When the guys get up to go to the weight room, it’s just Peter and me left at the table, and he asks me worriedly, “Aren’t you going to eat something?”

“I’m not hungry,” I say.

Then he sighs and says, “It should be you going to UVA and not me,” and just like that, poof, the traitorous little thought I had last night about me deserving it more than him disappears like perfume mist into the air. I know how hard Peter worked at lacrosse. He earned his spot. He shouldn’t be thinking those kinds of thoughts. It’s not right.

“Don’t ever say that. You earned it. You deserve to go to UVA.”

His head down, he says, “So do you, though.” Then his head snaps up, his eyes alight. “Do you remember Toney Lewis?” I shake my head. “He was a senior when we were freshmen. He went to PVCC for two years and then he transferred to UVA his junior year! I bet you could do that too, but you’d be able to do it even sooner, since you’re going to a regular four-year college. Getting in as a transfer is a million times easier!”

“I guess that’s true... .” Transferring hadn’t occurred to me. I’m still getting used to the idea that I won’t be going to UVA.

“Right? Okay, so this fall you’ll go to William and Mary or U of R or wherever you get in, and we’ll visit each other all the time, and you’ll apply to transfer for next year, and then you’ll be with me at UVA! Where you belong!”

Hope flares inside of me. “Do you really think it’ll be that easy for me to get in?”

“Yeah! You should’ve gotten in in the first place! Trust me, Covey.”

Slowly, I nod. “Yeah! Okay. Okay.”

Peter breathes a sigh of relief. “Good. So we have a plan.”

I steal a french fry off his plate. I can already feel my appetite coming back to me. I’m stealing another fry when my phone vibrates. I snatch it up and check—it’s an e-mail from the office of admissions at William and Mary. Peter looks over my shoulder and back at me, his eyes wide. His leg bounces up and down against mine as we wait for the page to load.

*It is with great pleasure that I offer you  
admission to the College of William and  
Mary ...*

Relief floods over me. Thank God.

Peter jumps out of his seat and picks me up and swings me around. “Lara Jean just got into William and Mary!” he shouts to the table and anyone who is listening. Everyone at our table cheers.

“See?” Peter crows, hugging me. “I told you everything would work out.”

I hug him back tightly. More than anything else, I feel relieved. Relieved to be in, relieved to have a plan.

“We’ll make it work until you’re here,” he says in a soft voice, burrowing his face in my neck. “It’s two hours away—that’s nothing. I bet your dad would let you take the car. It’s not like Kitty needs it yet. And I’ll do the trip with you a few times to get you comfortable with it. It’s gonna be all good, Covey.”

I'm nodding.

When I sit back down, I send a group text to Margot, Kitty, Ms. Rothschild, and my dad.

I got into W&M!!!

I throw in those exclamation marks for good measure, to show how excited I am, to make sure they know they shouldn't feel sorry for me anymore, that everything is great now.

My dad sends back a string of emojis. Ms. Rothschild writes, You go girl!!!!!! Margot writes, YAYYYYYYYY! We will celebrate IRL next week!

After lunch, I stop by Mrs. Duvall's office to tell her the good news, and she is thrilled. "I know it's your second choice, but in some ways it might be an even better fit than UVA was. It's smaller. I think a girl like you could really shine there, Lara Jean."

I smile at her, receive her hug, but inside I'm thinking, *I guess she didn't think a girl like me could really shine at UVA.*

By the end of the week, I get into James Madison and University of Richmond, too, which I'm happy about, but I'm still set on William and Mary. I've been to Williamsburg plenty of times with my family, and I can picture myself there. It's a small campus, a pretty one. And it really isn't far from home. It's less than two hours away. So I'll go, I'll study hard, and then after a year I'll transfer to UVA, and everything will be exactly the way we planned.



# 11

*I'M THE ONE WHO GOES TO THE AIRPORT* to pick up Margot and Ravi, while Daddy puts finishing touches on dinner and Kitty does her homework. I put the address into the GPS, just in case, and I make it there without incident, thank God. Our airport is small, so I just circle around while I wait for the two of them to come out.

When I pull up to the curb, Margot and Ravi are waiting, sitting on their suitcases. I park and then jump out and run over to Margot and throw my arms around her. Her hair is freshly bobbed around her chin, she's wearing a sweatshirt and leggings, and as I squeeze her tight, I think *Oh, how I've missed my sister!*

I let go, and then I take a good look at Ravi, who is taller than I realized. He is tall and skinny with dark skin and dark hair and dark eyes and long lashes. He looks so unlike Josh, but so like a boy that Margot would date. He has one dimple, on his right cheek. "It's nice to meet you in real life, Lara Jean," he says, and right away I'm bowled over by his accent. My name sounds so much fancier all dressed up in an English accent.

I'm feeling nervous, and then I see that his T-shirt says DUMBLEDORE'S ARMY, and I relax. He's a Potter person, like us. "It's nice to meet you, too. So what house are you?"

He grabs both Margot's and his suitcases and loads them into the trunk. "Let's see if you can guess. Your sister got it wrong."

"Only because you were trying to impress me for the first month I knew you," she protests. Ravi laughs and climbs into the backseat. I think it's a good sign of his character that he doesn't automatically go for shotgun. Margot looks at me. "Do you want me to drive?"

I'm tempted to say yes, because I always like it better when Margot drives, but I shake my head, jingle my keys high. "I've

got it.”

She raises her eyebrows like she’s impressed. “Good for you.”

She goes to the passenger side, and I get in the front seat. I look at Ravi in my rearview mirror. “Ravi, by the time you leave our house, I will have figured out *your* house.”

When we get home, Daddy and Kitty and Ms. Rothschild are waiting for us in the living room. Margot looks startled to see her there sitting on the couch with Daddy, her bare feet in his lap. I’ve grown so used to it, to her being around, that it feels to me like Ms. Rothschild is part of the family now. It hadn’t occurred to me how jarring it would be for Margot. But the truth is, Ms. Rothschild and Margot haven’t spent a lot of time together because she’s been away at school; she wasn’t around when Ms. Rothschild and Daddy first started dating and she’s only been home once since, for Christmas.

As soon as Ms. Rothschild sees Margot, she jumps up to give her a big hug and compliments her on her hair. She hugs Ravi, too. “God, you’re a tall drink of water!” she quips, and he laughs, but Margot just has a stiff smile on her face.

Until she sees Kitty, who she wraps up in a bear hug and then, seconds later, squeals, “Oh my God, Kitty! Are you wearing a bra now?” Kitty gasps and glares at her, her cheeks a dull angry red.

Abashed, Margot mouths, *Sorry*.

Ravi hurries to step forward and shake Daddy’s hand. “Hello, Dr. Covey, I’m Ravi. Thank you for inviting me.”

“Oh, we’re glad to have you, Ravi,” Daddy says.

Then Ravi smiles at Kitty and lifts his hand in greeting and says, a tad awkwardly, “Hi, Kitty.”

Kitty nods at him without making eye contact. “Hello.”

Margot is still staring at Kitty in disbelief. I’ve been here all along, so it’s harder for me to see how much Kitty has grown in

the past year, but it's true, she has. Not so much in the chest department—the bra is merely ornamental at this point—but in other ways.

“Ravi, can I get you something to drink?” Ms. Rothschild chirps. “We have juice, Fresca, Diet Coke, water?”

“What's a Fresca?” Ravi asks, his brow furrowed.

Her eyes light up. “It's a delicious grapefruity soda. Zero calories! You have to try it!” Margot watches as Ms. Rothschild goes to the kitchen and opens up the cabinet where we keep our cups. Filling a glass with ice, she calls out, “Margot, what about you? Can I get you something?”

“I'm fine,” Margot answers in a pleasant enough tone, but I can tell she doesn't appreciate being offered a drink in her own home by someone who doesn't live there.

When Ms. Rothschild returns with Ravi's Fresca, she presents it to him with a flourish. He thanks her and takes a sip. “Very refreshing,” Ravi says, and she beams.

Daddy claps his hands together. “Should we take the bags upstairs? Give you guys a chance to freshen up before dinner? We've got the guest room all set up.” He gives me a fond look before saying, “Lara Jean put in a new pair of slippers and a robe for you, Ravi.”

Before Ravi can reply, Margot says, “Oh, that's so nice. But actually, I think Ravi's just going to stay with me in my room.”

It's as if Margot has dropped a stink bomb in the middle of our living room. Kitty and I are looking at each other with huge *OMG* eyes; Daddy just looks stunned and at a complete loss for words. When I made up the guest room for Ravi, folded a set of towels for him on the side of the bed, and put out the robe and slippers, it never occurred to me that he'd be staying in Margot's room. Clearly, the thought never occurred to Daddy either.

Daddy's face is growing redder by the second. “Oh, um ... I don't know if ...”

Margot purses her lips nervously as she waits for Daddy to finish his sentence. We're all waiting, but he can't seem to figure out what to say next. His eyes dart over to Ms. Rothschild for help, and she puts her hand on the small of his back in support.

Poor Ravi looks supremely uncomfortable. My first thought was that he was a Ravenclaw like Margot; now I'm thinking he's a Hufflepuff like me. In a soft voice he says, "I truly don't mind staying in the guest room. I'd hate to make things awkward."

Daddy starts to answer him, but Margot gets there first. "No, it's totally fine," she assures Ravi. "Let's go get the rest of our stuff out of the car."

The second they leave, Kitty and I turn to each other. At the same time we say, "Oh my God."

Kitty ponders, "Why do they need to stay in the same room together? Do they have to have sex that bad?"

"Enough, Kitty," Daddy says, his tone sharper than I've heard him use with her. He turns and leaves, and I hear the sound of his office door closing. His office is where he goes when he is really mad. Ms. Rothschild gives her a stern look and follows after him.

Kitty and I look at each other again. "Yikes," I say.

"He didn't have to snap," Kitty says sullenly. "I'm not the one whose boyfriend is staying in my bed."

"He didn't mean it." I tuck her against me, wrapping my arms around her bony shoulders. "Gogo has a lot of nerve, huh?" She's very impressive, my sister. I just feel sorry for Daddy. This isn't a fight he's used to having—or any kind of fight at all, really.

Of course I text Peter right away and tell all. He sends back a lot of wide-eyed emojis. And: Do you think your dad would let us stay in the same room?? Which I ignore.

When Ravi goes upstairs to wash up and change, Ms. Rothschild says she has dinner out with the girls, so she'd better get going. I can tell Margot is relieved. After Ms. Rothschild leaves, Kitty takes Jamie Fox-Pickle for a walk, and Margot and I head to the kitchen to fix a salad to go with the chicken Daddy's roasting. I'm eager to have a moment alone with her so we can talk about the whole sleeping-arrangements situation, but I don't get a chance to ask, because as soon we step into the kitchen, Margot hisses at me, "Why didn't you tell me Daddy and Ms. Rothschild are so serious?"

"I told you she's over here for dinner almost every night!" I whisper back. I start rinsing a basket of cherry tomatoes so the sound of the water running will give us cover.

"She was walking around like she lives here! And since when do we have Fresca? We've never been a Fresca-drinking family."

I start slicing the tomatoes in half. "She loves it, so I always make sure to buy a case when I go to the store. It's actually very refreshing. Ravi seemed to like it."

"That's not the point!"

"What's your problem with Ms. Rothschild all of a sudden? You guys got along great when you were home for Christmas —" I break off as Daddy walks into the kitchen.

"Margot, can I talk to you for a minute?"

Margot pretends to be busy counting out silverware. "Sure, what's up, Daddy?"

Daddy glances at me, and I look back down at the tomatoes. I am staying for moral support. "I would prefer if Ravi stayed in the guest room."

Margot bites her lip. "Why?"

There's an awkward silence before Daddy says, "I'm just not comfortable—"

"But Daddy, we're in college... . You do realize we've shared a bed before, right?"

Wryly he says, “I had my suspicions, but thank you for that confirmation.”

“I’m almost twenty years old. I’ve been living away from home, thousands of miles away, for nearly two years.” Margot glances over at me and I shrink down. I should’ve left when I had the chance. “Lara Jean and I aren’t little kids anymore—”

“Hey, don’t bring me into this,” I say, as jokingly as I can.

Daddy sighs. “Margot, if you’re set on this, I’m not going to stop you. But I would just remind you that this is still my house.”

“I thought it was *our* house.” She knows she’s won this battle, so she keeps her voice light as meringue.

“Well, you freeloaders don’t pay the mortgage on it, I do, so that should make it my house slightly more.” With that final dad joke, he puts on oven mitts and takes the sizzling chicken out of the oven.

When we sit down to eat, Daddy stands at the head of the table and carves the chicken with the fancy new electric carving knife Ms. Rothschild got him for his birthday. “Ravi, can I offer you dark meat or white?”

Ravi clears his throat. “Um, I’m so sorry, but I actually don’t eat meat.”

Daddy gives Margot a horrified look. “Margot, you didn’t tell me Ravi was a vegetarian!”

“Sorry,” she says, grimacing. “I totally forgot. But Ravi loves salad!”

“I truly do,” he assures Daddy.

“I’ll take Ravi’s portion,” I offer. “I’ll take two thighs.”

Daddy saws off two thighs for me. “Ravi, tomorrow morning I’m making you a mean breakfast enchilada. No meat!”

Smiling, Margot says, “We’re going to DC early tomorrow morning. Maybe the day he leaves?”

“Done,” Daddy says.

Kitty is unnaturally subdued. I’m not sure if it’s nervousness from having a boy she doesn’t know sit at her dining room table, or if it’s just because she’s getting older, and she’s less a kid in the way she interacts with new people. Though I suppose a twenty-one-year-old boy is really more of a young man.

Ravi has such nice manners—probably because he is English, and isn’t it a fact that English people have better manners than Americans? He says sorry a lot. “Sorry, can I just ...” “Sorry?” His accent is charming, I keep saying pardon so he’ll speak again.

For my part, I try to lighten the mood with questions about England. I ask him why English people call private school public school, if his public school was anything like Hogwarts, if he’s ever met the royal family. His answers are: because they are open to the paying public; they had head boys and head girls and prefects but no Quidditch; and he once saw Prince William at Wimbledon, but only the back of his head.

After dinner, the plan is for Ravi, Margot, Peter, and me to go to the movies. Margot invites Kitty to come along, but she demurs, citing her homework as the reason. I think she’s just nervous around Ravi.

I get ready in my room, dab a little perfume, a little lip balm, put on a sweatshirt over my cami and jeans because the theater gets cold. I’m ready fast, but Margot’s door is closed, and I can hear them talking quietly yet intensely. It’s a strange thing to see her door closed. I feel like a little spy standing outside the door, but it’s awkward, because who knows if Ravi has a shirt on, or what? It’s so adult, that closed door, those hushed voices.

Through the door I clear my throat and say, “Are you guys ready? I told Peter we’d meet him at eight.”

Margot opens the door. “Ready,” she says, and she doesn’t look happy.

Ravi steps out behind her, carrying his suitcase. “I’m just going to drop this off in the guest room, and then I’m all set,” he says.

As soon as he’s gone, I whisper to Margot, “Did something happen?”

“Ravi didn’t want to make a bad impression on Daddy by us staying in the same room. I told him it was fine, but he doesn’t feel comfortable.”

“That’s very considerate of him.” I wouldn’t say so to Margot, but it was totally the right move. Ravi just keeps rising in my estimation.

Reluctantly she says, “He’s a very considerate guy.”

“Really handsome, too.”

A smile spreads across her face. “And there’s that.”

Peter’s already at the movie theater when we arrive, I’m sure because of Margot. He has no problem being late for me, but he would never dare be late for my big sister. Ravi buys all four of our tickets, which Peter is really impressed by. “Such a classy move,” he whispers to me as we sit down. Peter deftly maneuvers it so we’re sitting me, Peter, Ravi, Margot, so he can keep talking to him about soccer. Or football, as Ravi says. Margot gives me an amused look over their heads, and I can tell all the unpleasantness from before is forgotten.

After the movie, Peter suggests we go for frozen custards. “Have you ever had frozen custard before?” he asks Ravi.

“Never,” Ravi says.

“It’s the best, Rav,” he says. “They make it homemade.”

“Brilliant,” Ravi says.

When the boys are in line, Margot says to me, “I think Peter’s in love—with my boyfriend,” and we both giggle.

We’re still laughing when they get back to our table. Peter hands me my pralines and cream. “What’s so funny?”



I just shake my head and dip my spoon into the custard.

Margot says, “Wait, we have to cheers my sister getting into William and Mary!”

My smile feels frozen as everyone clinks their custard cups against mine. Ravi says, “Well done, Lara Jean. Didn’t Jon Stewart go there?”

Surprised, I say, “Why yes, yes he did. That’s a pretty random fact to know.”

“Ravi’s specialty is random facts,” Margot says, licking her spoon. “Don’t get him started on the mating habits of bonobos.”

“Two words,” Ravi says. Then he looks from Peter to me and whispers, “Penis fencing.”

Margot’s so lit up around Ravi. I once thought she and Josh were meant for each other, but now I’m not so sure. When they talk about politics, they’re both equally passionate, and they go back and forth, challenging each other but also conceding points. They’re like two flints sparking. If they were on a TV show, I could see them as rival residents at a hospital who first grudgingly respect each other and then fall madly in love. Or two political aides at the White House, or two journalists. Ravi is studying bioengineering, which has not a lot to do with Margot’s anthropology, but they sure make a great team.

The next day, Margot takes Ravi to Washington, DC, and they visit a few of the museums on the Mall and the Lincoln Memorial and the White House. They invited Kitty and me to go along, but I said no on behalf of both of us because I was pretty sure they would want some time alone and because I wanted to be cozy at home and work on my scrapbook for Peter. When they get back that night, I ask Ravi what his favorite thing to do in DC was, and he says the National Museum of African American History and Culture by far, which makes me regret my decision not to go, because I haven’t been there yet.

We turn on a BBC show on Netflix that Margot has been raving about, and it was filmed near where Ravi grew up, so he points out landmark places like his first job and his first date. We eat ice cream right out of the cartons, and I can tell that Daddy likes Ravi by the way he keeps urging him to have more. I'm sure he noticed that Ravi is staying in the guest room, and I'm sure he appreciates the gesture. I hope Ravi and Margot keep dating, because I could see him in our family forever. Or at least stay together long enough for Margot and me to take a trip to London and stay at his house!

Ravi has to leave for Texas the next afternoon, and while I'm sad to see him go, I'm also a little bit glad, because then we get to have Margot all to ourselves before she leaves again.

When we say good-bye, I point at him and say, "Hufflepuff?"

He grins. "You got it in one." Then he points at me. "Hufflepuff?"

I grin back. "You got it in one."

That night we're in my bedroom watching TV on my laptop when Margot brings up college—which is how I know that on some level she was waiting for Ravi to go too, so she could talk to me about real things. Before we load the next episode, she looks over at me and says, "Can we talk about UVA? How are you feeling about it now?"

"I was sad, but it's all right. I'm still going to go there." Margot gives me a quizzical look, and I explain, "I'm going to transfer after freshman year. I talked to Mrs. Duvall, and she said if I got good grades at William and Mary, I would definitely get in as a transfer."

Her forehead wrinkles up. "Why are you talking about transferring from William and Mary when you aren't even there yet?" When I don't answer right away, she says, "Is this because of Peter?"

"No! I mean, it is, in part, but not completely." I hesitate before saying the thing I haven't said out loud. "You know that

feeling, like you're meant to be somewhere? When I visited William and Mary, I didn't get that feeling. Not like with UVA."

"It might be that no school gives you the exact feeling you have with UVA," Margot says.

"Maybe so—which is why I'm going to transfer after a year."

She sighs. "I just don't want you to live a half life at William and Mary because the whole time you're wishing you were with Peter at UVA. The freshman-year experience is so important. You should at least give it a fair chance, Lara Jean. You might really love it there." She gives me a look heavy with meaning. "Remember what Mommy said about college and boyfriends?"

How could I forget?

*Don't be the girl who goes to college with a boyfriend.*

"I remember," I say.

Margot takes my laptop and goes on the William and Mary website. "This campus is so pretty. Look at this weather vane! It all looks like something out of an English village."

I perk up. "Yeah, it kind of does." Is it as pretty as UVA's campus? No, not to me, but then I don't think anywhere is as pretty as Charlottesville.

"And look, William and Mary has a guacamole club. And a storm-watchers club. And oh my God! Something called a wizards-and-muggles club! It's the largest Harry Potter club at any US university."

"Wow! That *is* pretty neat. Do they have a baking club?"

She checks. "No. But you could start one!"

"Maybe ... That would be fun... ." Maybe I *should* join a club or two.

She beams at me. “See? There’s a lot to be excited about. And don’t forget the Cheese Shop.”

The Cheese Shop is a specialty food store right by campus, and they sell cheese, obviously, but also fancy jams and bread and wine and gourmet pastas. They make really great roast beef sandwiches with a house dressing—a mayonnaisey mustard that I have tried to duplicate at home, but nothing tastes as good as in the shop, on their fresh bread. Daddy loves to stop at the Cheese Shop for new mustards and a sandwich. He’d be happy to have an excuse to go there. And Kitty, she loves the Williamsburg outlet mall. They sell kettle corn there, and it’s really addictive. They pop it right in front of you, and the popcorn is so hot, it melts the bag a little.

“Maybe I could get a job in Colonial Williamsburg,” I say, trying to get into the spirit. “I could churn butter. Wear period garb. Like, a calico dress with an apron or whatever they wore in Colonial times. I’ve heard they’re not allowed to speak to each other in modern-day language, and kids are always trying to trip them up. That could be fun. The only thing is, I’m not sure if they hire Asian people because of historical accuracy...”

“Lara Jean, we live in the time of *Hamilton*! Phillipa Soo is half-Chinese, remember? If she can play Eliza Hamilton, you can churn butter. And if they refuse to hire you, we’ll put it on social media and make them.” Margot tilts her head and looks at me. “See! There’s so much to be excited about, if you let yourself be.” She puts her hands on my shoulders.

“I’m trying,” I say. “I really am.”

“Just give William and Mary a chance. Don’t dismiss it before you even get there. Okay?”

I nod. “Okay.”

# 12

*THE NEXT MORNING IS GRAY AND RAINY OUT* and it's just us three girls, because Daddy's left a note for us on the refrigerator saying he got called into the hospital, and he'll see us for dinner that night. Margot's still jet-lagged, so she got up early and fixed scrambled eggs and bacon. I'm luxuriously spreading eggs on buttered toast and listening to the rain tap on the roof, when I say, "What if I didn't go to school today, and we did something fun?"

Kitty brightens. "Like what?"

"Not you. You still have to go to school. I'm basically done. No one cares if I go anymore."

"I think Daddy probably cares," Margot says.

"But if we could do anything ... what would we do?"

"Anything?" Margot bites into her bacon. "We'd take the train to New York City and enter the *Hamilton* lottery, and we'd win."

"You guys can't go without me," Kitty says.

"Be quiet, And Peggy," I say, giggling.

She glares at me. "Don't call me And Peggy."

"You don't even know what we're talking about, so calm down."

"I know you're cackling about it like a witch. Also, I do so know about *Hamilton*, because you play the soundtrack all day long." She sings, "Talk less; smile more."

"For your information, it's a cast recording, not a soundtrack," I say, and she makes a big show of rolling her eyes.

In truth, if Kitty's anyone, she's a Jefferson. Wily, stylish, quick with a comeback. Margot's an Angelica, no question. She's been sailing her own ship since she was a little girl. She's

always known who she was and what she wanted. I suppose I'm an Eliza, though I'd much rather be an Angelica. In truth I'm probably And Peggy. But I don't want to be the And Peggy of my own story. I want to be the Hamilton.

It rains all day, so as soon as we get home from school, the first thing Kitty and I do is get back into our pajamas. Margot never got out of hers. She's wearing her glasses, her hair in a knot at the top of her head (it's too short to stay put), Kitty is in a big tee, and I'm happy it's cold enough to wear my red flannels. Daddy is the only one still in his day clothes.

We order two large pizzas for dinner that night, plain cheese (for Kitty) and a supreme with the works. We're on the living room couch, shoving oozy slices of pizza into our mouths, when Daddy suddenly says, "Girls, there's something I'd like to talk to you about." He clears his throat like he does when he's nervous. Kitty and I exchange a curious look, and then he blurts out, "I'd like to ask Trina to marry me."

I clap my hands to my mouth. "Oh my God!"

Kitty's eyes bulge, her mouth goes slack, and then she flings her pizza aside and lets out a shriek so loud that Jamie Fox-Pickle jumps. She catapults herself at Daddy, who laughs. I jump up and hug his back.

I can't stop smiling. Until I look at Margot, whose face is completely blank. Daddy's looking at her too, eyes hopeful and nervous. "Margot? You still there? What do you think, honey?"

"I think it's fantastic."

"You do?"

She nods. "Absolutely. I think Trina's great. And Kitty, you adore her, don't you?" Kitty's too busy squealing and flopping around on the couch with Jamie to answer. Softly, Margot says, "I'm happy for you, Daddy. I really am."

The *absolutely* is what gives her away. Daddy's too busy being relieved to notice, but I do. Of course it's weird for her. She's still getting used to seeing Ms. Rothschild in our kitchen.

She hasn't gotten to see all the ways Ms. Rothschild and Daddy make sense. To Margot, she's still just our neighbor who used to wear terry-cloth booty shorts and a bikini top to mow the lawn.

"I'll need your guys's help with the proposal," Daddy says. "Lara Jean, I'm sure you'll have some ideas for me, right?"

Confidently I say, "Oh, yeah. People have been doing promposals, so I have lots of inspiration."

Margot turns to me and laughs, and it almost sounds real. "I'm sure Daddy will want something more dignified than 'Will You Marry Me' written in shaving cream on the hood of somebody's car, Lara Jean."

"Promposals have gotten way more sophisticated than in your day, Gogo," I say. I'm playing along, teasing her so she can feel normal again after the bomb Daddy just dropped.

"My day? I'm only two years ahead of you." She tries to sound light, but I can hear the strain in her voice.

"Two years is like dog years when it comes to high school. Isn't that right, Kitty?" I pull her toward me and hug her tight to my chest. She squirms away.

"Yeah, both of you guys are ancient beings," Kitty says. "Can I be a part of the proposal too, Daddy?"

"Of course. I can't get married without you guys." He looks teary. "We're a team, aren't we?"

Kitty is hopping up and down like a little kid. "Yeah!" she cheers. She's over the moon, and Margot sees it too, how important this is to her.

"When are you going to propose?" Margot asks.

"Tonight!" Kitty pipes up.

I glare at her. "No! That's not enough time to think up the perfect way. We need a week at least. Plus you don't even have a ring. Wait a minute, do you?"

Daddy takes off his glasses and wipes his eyes. “Of course not. I wanted to wait and talk to you girls first. I want all three of you to be here for the proposal, so I’ll do it when you come back for the summer, Margot.”

“That’s too far away,” Kitty objects.

“Yes, don’t wait that long, Daddy,” Margot says.

“Well, you’ll have to help me pick out the ring at least,” Daddy says.

“Lara Jean has a better eye for that kind of thing,” Margot says serenely. “Besides, I barely know Ms. Rothschild. I haven’t a clue what kind of ring she’d like.”

A shadow crosses over Daddy’s face. It’s the *I barely know Ms. Rothschild* that put it there.

I rush to put on my best Hermione voice. “You ’haven’t a clue’?” I tease. “P.S., did you know you’re still American, Gogo? We don’t talk as classy as that in America.”

She laughs; we all do. Then, because I think she saw that brief shadow too, she says, “Make sure to take tons of pictures so I can see.”

Gratefully Daddy says, “We will. We’ll videotape it, whatever it is. God, I hope she says yes!”

“She’ll say yes, of course she’ll say yes,” we all chorus.

Margot and I are wrapping slices of pizza in plastic and then double wrapping in foil. “I told you guys two pizzas would be too much,” she says.

“Kitty will eat it for her after-school snack,” I say. “So will Peter.” I glance toward the living room, where Kitty and Daddy are snuggled up on the couch, watching TV. Then I whisper, “So how do you really feel about Daddy asking Ms. Rothschild to marry him?”

“I think it’s completely bonkers,” she whispers back. “She lives across the street, for pity’s sake. They can just date like two grown-ups. What’s the point of getting *married*?”



“Maybe they just want it to be official. Or maybe it’s for Kitty.”

“They haven’t even been dating that long! How long has it been, six months?”

“A little longer than that. But Gogo, they’ve known each other for years.”

She stacks up the slices of foiled pizza and says, “Can you imagine how weird it’ll be to have her living here?”

Her question gives me pause. Ms. Rothschild *is* at the house a lot, but that’s not the same as living here. She has her own ways of doing things, and so do we. Like, she wears shoes at her house, but we don’t wear them here, so she takes them off when she comes over. And, now that I think about it, she’s never slept over here before; she always goes back home at the end of the night. So that might feel a little weird. Also, she stores bread in the refrigerator, which I hate, and to be quite honest, her dog Simone sheds a lot and has been known to pee on the carpet. But the thing is, since I’m not going to UVA, I won’t be around much longer—I’ll be away at college. “Neither of us will be living here full-time though,” I say at last. “Just Kitty, and Kitty’s thrilled to death.”

Margot doesn’t respond right away. “Yes, they do seem really close.” She goes to the freezer and makes space for the pizza, and with her back facing me she says, “Don’t forget, we have to go prom-dress shopping before I leave.”

“Ooh, okay!” It feels like two seconds ago that we were shopping for Margot’s prom dress, and now it’s my turn.

Daddy, who I didn’t realize had walked into the kitchen, pipes up with, “Hey, maybe Trina could go too?” He casts a hopeful look my way. I’m not the one he should be looking at. I already love Ms. Rothschild. It’s Margot she has to win over.

I look over at Margot, who is giving me wide panic eyes. “Um ... ,” I say. “I think it should just be a Song girls thing this time.”

Daddy nods like he understands. “Ah. Got it.” Then he says to Margot, “Can the two of us spend a little daughter-dad time together before you leave? Maybe take our bikes on a trail?”

“Sounds good,” she says.

When his back is turned, Margot mouths, *Thank you*. I feel disloyal to Ms. Rothschild, but Margot is my sister. I have to be on her side.

I think maybe Margot’s feeling guilty about cutting Ms. Rothschild out of the dress shopping expedition, because she keeps trying to make it more of a thing. When we go to the mall the next day after school, she announces that we’ll each pick two dresses, and I have to try all of them on no matter what, and then we’ll rate them. She even printed out thumbs-up and thumbs-down emojis and made paddles for us to use.

It’s cramped in the dressing room, and there are dresses everywhere. Margot gives Kitty the job of rehangng and organizing, but Kitty’s already given it up in favor of playing Candy Crush on Margot’s phone.

Margot hands me one of her picks first—it’s a flowy black dress with fluttery cap sleeves. “You could do your hair up for this one.”

Without looking up, Kitty says, “I would go with beachy waves.”

Margot makes a face at her in the mirror.

“Is black really me, though?” I wonder.

“You should try wearing black more often,” Margot says. “It really suits you.”

Kitty picks at a scab on her leg. “When I go to prom, I’m going to wear a tight leather dress,” she says.

“It can get hot in Virginia in May,” I say, as Margot zips me up. “You could wear a leather dress to homecoming though, since it’s in October.”

We study my reflection in the mirror. The dress is too big in the bodice, and the black makes me look like a witch, but a witch in an ill-fitting dress.

“I think you need bigger boobs for that dress,” Kitty says. She holds up the thumbs-down paddle.

I frown at her in the mirror. She’s right, though. “Yeah, I think you’re right.”

“Did Mommy have big boobs?” Kitty asks suddenly.

“Hmm. I think they were on the small side,” Margot says. “Like an A?”

“What size do you wear?” she asks.

“A B.”

Eyeing me, Kitty says, “And Lara Jean’s small like Mommy.”

“Hey, I’m practically a B!” I protest. “I’m a large A. An almost B. Somebody unzip me.”

“Tree has big boobs,” Kitty says.

“Are they real?” Margot asks as she pulls down my zipper.

I step out of the dress and hand it over to Kitty to hang. “I think so.”

“They’re real. I’ve seen her in a bikini, and hers spread when she’s lying down, and that’s how you know. The fake ones stay in place like scoops of ice cream.” Kitty picks up Margot’s phone again. “Also, I asked her.”

“If they were fake, I doubt she’d tell you that,” Margot says.

Kitty frowns at her. “Tree doesn’t lie to me.”

“I’m not saying she’d lie; I’m saying she might be private about plastic surgery! Which is her right!” Kitty just shrugs coolly.

I quickly put on the next dress to get off the subject of Ms. Rothschild’s boobs. “What do you guys think of this one?”

They both shake their heads and reach for the thumbs-down paddle at the same time. At least they are united in their dislike of my dress.

“Where’s my pick? Try mine on next.” Kitty’s pick is a skintight, white, off-the-shoulder bandage dress I would never in a million years wear, and she knows it. “I just want to see it on you.”

I try it on to appease her, and Kitty insists it’s the best dress of all the dresses, because she wants to have the winning pick. In the end, none of the dresses are my style, but I’m not bothered by it. Prom is still more than a month away, and I want to scour vintage shops before I commit to anything from a regular store. I like the idea of a lived-in dress, a dress that has gone places, seen things, a dress that a girl like Stormy might’ve worn to a dance.

When Margot leaves for Scotland the next morning, she makes me promise to send pictures of potential dresses so she can weigh in. She doesn’t say another word about Ms. Rothschild, but then, she wouldn’t, because that’s not her style.

# 13

*LUCAS SAYS, "I THINK PROM IS A LOT LIKE* New Year's Eve." He and Chris and I are hanging out in the nurse's office, because she is out to lunch, and she doesn't care if we lie on her couch. Since we're so far into senior year, all the teachers are in a pretty generous mood.

"New Year's Eve is for basics," Chris sneers, picking at her nails.

"Will you let me finish?" Lucas sighs and begins again. "As I was *saying*, prom buckles under the weight of all the expectations you put on it. One perfect high school night that every American teenager is supposed to have. You spend all this time and money and you feel obligated—no, *owed* an epic night. What can possibly live up to that amount of pressure?"

I think the perfect high school night will end up being some random little nothing moment that you didn't plan or expect; it just happened. I think I've already had like twelve perfect high school nights, with Peter, so I don't need prom to be epic. When I picture my prom night, I picture Peter in a tux, being polite to my dad, putting a corsage on Kitty. All of us taking a picture by the mantel. I make a mental note to ask Peter to get an extra little corsage for her.

"So does that mean you aren't going?" I ask Lucas.

He sighs again. "I don't know. There's no one here I would even want to go with."

"If I wasn't going with Peter, I would ask you," I say. Then I look from Lucas to Chris. "Hey, why don't you guys go together?"

"I'm not going to prom," Chris says. "I'll probably go clubbing in DC with my Applebee's people."

"Chris, you can't not go to prom. You can go clubbing with your Applebee's friends anytime. We only get one senior

prom.”

My birthday’s the day after prom and I’m a little hurt that Chris seems to have forgotten. If she goes clubbing in DC, she’ll probably stay all weekend and I won’t even see her on my actual birthday.

“Prom’s going to be lame. No offense. I mean, I’m sure you’ll have fun, Lara Jean; you’re going with the prom king. And what’s that girl’s name you’re friends with now? Tammy?”

“Pammy,” I say. “But it won’t be fun if you’re not there.”

She puts her arm around me. “Aww.”

“We always said we’d go to prom together and watch the sun rise over the elementary school playground!”

“You can watch it with Kavinsky.”

“That’s not the same!”

“Calm down,” Chris says. “You’re probably going to lose your V that night anyway, so I’ll be the last thing you’ll be thinking about.”

“I wasn’t planning on having sex on prom night!” I hiss. My eyes dart over at Lucas, who is looking at me, bug-eyed.

“Lara Jean ... you and Kavinsky haven’t had sex yet?”

I look to make sure no one’s in the hallway listening. “No, but please don’t tell anybody. Not that I’m ashamed of it or anything. I just don’t want everyone knowing my business.”

“I get it, obviously, but wow,” he says, still sounding shocked. “That’s ... wow.”

“Why is it so wow?” I ask him, and I can feel my cheeks warming.

“He’s so ... hot.”

I laugh. “That’s true.”

“There’s a reason why having sex on prom night is a thing,” Chris says. “I mean, yes, it’s tradition, but also, everybody’s dressed up, you get to stay out all night ... Most of these

people will never look as good as they do on prom night, grooming-wise, and that's sad. All these lemmings getting their manis and their pedis and their blowouts. So basic."

"Don't you get blowouts?" Lucas says.

Chris rolls her eyes. "Of course."

I say, "Then why are you judging other people for—"

"Look, that's not my point here. My point is ..."

She frowns. "Wait, what were we talking about?"

"Blowouts, manis, lemmings?" Lucas says.

"Before that."

"Sex?" I suggest.

"Right! My point is, losing your virginity on prom night is a cliché, but clichés are clichés for a reason. There's a practicality to it. You get to stay out all night, you look great, et cetera, et cetera. It just makes sense."

"I'm not having sex for the first time because it's convenient and my hair looks good, Chris."

"Fair enough."

I don't know for sure, but I imagine my first time will probably be at college, in my own room, as an adult. It's hard to imagine it happening now, at home, when I'm Lara Jean the sister and the daughter. At college, I'll just be Lara Jean.

*IT'S DECIDED THAT DADDY WILL PROPOSE* to Ms. Rothschild on Saturday, after hiking on one of their favorite trails. He's going to do it right by a waterfall. The plan is for Peter and Kitty and me to hide behind trees and record the whole thing, then pop out with a romantic picnic basket. Daddy was nervous about the video part, in case Ms. Rothschild doesn't say yes, but Kitty begged. "It's for Margot," she kept saying, when really she's just nosy and wants to see it go down. Of course I do too. Peter's along for the ride, literally. He's giving us a ride.

That morning, before he leaves to pick up Ms. Rothschild, Daddy says, "Guys, if it doesn't look like it's going to be a yes, can you stop videotaping?"

I'm carefully wrapping roast beef sandwiches in wax paper. I look up to say, "She's going to say yes."

"Just promise me you'll quietly slip away," he says. He gives Kitty a pointed look.

"You got it, Dr. Covey," Peter says, lifting his hand for a high five.

As they slap hands, I say, "Daddy, did you pack the ring?"

"Yup!" Then he frowns. "Wait, did I?" He pats his pockets and unzips the inside compartment of his windbreaker. "Damn, I forgot it!" Then he runs upstairs.

Peter and I exchange a look. "I've never seen your dad so stressed out," he says, popping a grape in his mouth. "He's usually a cool customer."

I slap Peter's hand away from the grapes.

Kitty steals a grape and says, "He's been like this all week."

Daddy runs back downstairs with the engagement ring. Kitty and I helped him pick it out. It's a white-gold princess



cut with a diamond halo. I was certain about the princess cut and Kitty was certain about the halo.

Daddy heads off to pick up Ms. Rothschild, and I finish putting together the picnic basket. I'm glad to have an excuse to bring it out. I bought it from a yard sale ages ago, and I haven't used it once. I pack a bottle of champagne, a perfect cluster of grapes, the sandwiches, a wedge of Brie, crackers.

"Pack a bottle of water, too," Peter says. "They'll be dehydrated from the hike."

"And probably from all the crying after she says yes," Kitty says.

"Should we play some music for them, when he gets down on one knee?" Peter suggests.

"We didn't discuss that part of the plan, and Daddy's nervous enough as it is," I say. "He can't be thinking about how we're hiding in the bushes waiting to cue up music for them. It'll make him self-conscious."

"Besides, we can add the music in post," Kitty says. "We need to be able to hear the dialogue."

I give her a look. "Katherine, this isn't a movie. This is real life."

I leave them to go to the downstairs bathroom, and after I wash my hands, I'm turning off the faucet when I hear Kitty say, "Peter, when Lara Jean's gone, will you still come visit me sometimes?"

"Course I will."

"Even if you guys break up?"

There's a pause. "We're not breaking up."

"But if you do?" she presses.

"We won't."

She ignores this. "Because we never see Josh anymore, and he said he'd visit too."

Peter scoffs. “Are you kidding me? You think I’m the same as Sanderson? *Me?* I’m a completely different league than him. I’m insulted you would even compare us.”

Kitty lets out a relieved kind of laugh, the kind that sounds more like a sigh. “Yeah, you’re right.”

“Trust me, kid. You and I have our own thing.”

I love him so much for that I could cry. He’ll look after Kitty for me, I know he will.

Daddy told us they’d get to the waterfall around noon, so we should be there by eleven forty-five to get into position. We end up going a little earlier than that, just to be on the safe side, at Kitty’s insistence.

We pick a hiding spot far enough away that Ms. Rothschild won’t spot us, but close enough to see. Kitty and I hide behind a tree, and Peter crouches behind one close by, phone in his hand, ready to record. Kitty wanted to be the one to do it, but I make the executive decision that it should be Peter, because he isn’t as emotionally invested in this moment and will have a steady hand.

Just after twelve, they come up the trail. Ms. Rothschild is laughing about something, and Daddy is laughing robotically with that same nervous look on his face. It’s funny to watch them interact when she doesn’t know we’re watching. Kitty was right; it is a bit like a movie. He looks somehow younger next to her—maybe it’s because he’s in love. They walk over to the waterfall, and Ms. Rothschild sighs with happiness. “God, it’s gorgeous up here,” she says.

“I can barely hear anything,” Kitty whispers to me. “The waterfall is too loud.”

“Shh. You’re the one being loud.”

“Let’s take a picture,” Daddy says, fishing around in his windbreaker pocket.

“I thought you were morally opposed to selfies!” She laughs. “Hold on, let me try and fix my hair for this

momentous occasion.” She pulls her hair out of its ponytail holder and tries to fluff it up. Then she pops what looks like a cough drop or a piece of candy in her mouth.

Daddy’s taking so long that for a second I’m afraid he’s lost the ring or his nerve, but then he gets down on one knee. Daddy clears his throat. It’s happening. I grab Kitty’s hand and squeeze it. Her eyes are shining. My heart is bursting.

“Trina, I never expected to fall in love again. I thought I got my shot, and I was okay with that, because I had my girls. I didn’t realize anything was missing. Then came you.”

Ms. Rothschild’s hands are covering her mouth. She has tears in her eyes.

“I want to spend the rest of my life with you, Trina.” Ms. Rothschild starts choking on her candy, and Daddy leaps up off his knee and starts pounding her on the back. She’s coughing like crazy.

From his tree Peter whispers, “Should I go do the Heimlich on her? I know how to do it.”

“Peter, my dad’s a doctor!” I whisper back. “He’s got it.”

As her coughing subsides, she stands up straight and wipes her eyes. “Wait. Were you asking me to marry you?”

“I was trying to,” Daddy says. “Are you all right?”

“Yes!” She claps her hands to her cheeks.

“Yes, you’re all right, or yes, you’ll marry me?” Daddy asks her, and he’s only half kidding.

“Yes, I’ll marry you!” she screams, and Daddy reaches for her, and they kiss.

“This feels private,” I whisper to Kitty.

“It’s all part of the show,” she whispers back.

Daddy hands Ms. Rothschild the ring box. I can’t quite make out what he says next, but whatever it was, it makes her double over laughing.

“What’s he saying?” Kitty asks me, just as Peter says, “What did he say?”

“I can’t hear! Both of you be quiet! You’re ruining the video!”

Which is when Ms. Rothschild looks over in our direction.

Shoot.

We all pop back behind our respective trees, and then I hear Daddy’s wry voice call out, “You can come out, guys. She said yes!”

We run out from behind the trees; Kitty launches herself into Ms. Rothschild’s arms. They fall over onto the grass, and Ms. Rothschild is laughing breathlessly, her laughter echoing through the woods. I hug Daddy, and meanwhile Peter’s still playing videographer, recording the moment for posterity like the good boyfriend he is.

“Are you happy?” I ask, looking up at my dad.

His eyes brimming with tears, he nods and hugs me tighter.

And just like that, our little family grows bigger.

*[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)*

*IT'S THE FIRST NIGHT WE'VE ALL BEEN* together for dinner since the engagement, and Daddy's in the kitchen making a salad. Us girls are sitting in the living room just hanging out. Kitty is doing her homework; Ms. Rothschild is sipping on a glass of white wine. It's all very mellow—perfect timing for me to bring up wedding business. I've spent the last week working on a mood board for Daddy and Ms. Rothschild's wedding: *Pride and Prejudice* the movie, a whole wall of roses for the photo-booth area, *The Virgin Suicides*, wine-bottle floral centerpieces as a nod to Charlottesville wineries.

When I present it to Ms. Rothschild on my laptop, she looks vaguely alarmed. She sets down her wine glass and looks closer at the screen. "This is beautiful, Lara Jean. Really lovely. You've put a lot of time into this!"

So much time, in fact, that I skipped Peter's lacrosse game this week, plus a movie night at Pammy's. But this is important. Of course I don't say any of this out loud; I just smile a beatific smile. "Does this vision feel in line with what you were thinking?"

"Well ... to be honest, I think we were thinking we'd just go to the justice of the peace. Selling my house and figuring out how I'm going to fit all my junk in here is enough of a headache already."

Daddy comes out with the wooden salad bowl in his hands. Dryly he says, "So you're saying marrying me is a headache?"

She rolls her eyes. "You know what I'm saying, Dan! It's not like you have the time to plan a big wedding either." She takes a sip of wine and turns to me. "Your dad and I have both been married before, so neither of us feels like making a big fuss. I'll probably just wear a dress I already have."

“Of *course* we should make a big fuss. Do you know how many years it took Daddy to find someone who’d eat his cooking and watch his documentaries?” I shake my head. “Ms. Rothschild, you’re a miracle. For that we *have* to celebrate.” I call out to my dad, who’s disappeared back into the kitchen. “Did you hear that, Daddy? Ms. Rothschild wants to go to *city hall*. Please disabuse her of this notion.”

“Will you please stop calling me Ms. Rothschild? Now that I’m going to be your wicked stepmother, you should at least call me Trina. Or Tree. Whatever feels right to you.”

“How about Stepmother?” I suggest, all innocence. “That feels pretty right.”

She swats at me. “Girl! I will cut you.”

Giggling, I dart away from her. “Let’s get back to the wedding. I don’t know if this is a sensitive issue or not, but did you keep your old wedding photos? I want to see what your bridal style was.”

Ms. Rothschild pulls a terrible face. “I think I threw out everything. I might have a picture tucked in an album somewhere. Thank God I got married before social media was a thing. Can you imagine, getting divorced and having to take down all your wedding pictures?”

“Isn’t it bad luck to talk about divorce when you’re planning your wedding?”

She laughs. “Well then, we’re already doomed.” I must look alarmed because she says, “I’m kidding! I’ll hunt around for a wedding picture to show you if you want, but honestly, I’m not real proud of it. Smoky eye was the thing back then, and I took it a little too far. Plus I did that early two thousands thing with the chocolate lip liner and the frosted lip.”

I try to keep my face neutral. “Right, okay. What about your dress?”

“One-shoulder, with a mermaid style skirt. It made my butt look amazing.”

“I see.”

“Quit judging me!”

Daddy puts his hand on Ms. Rothschild’s shoulder. “What if we did it here at the house?”

“Like in the backyard?” She considers this. “I think that could be nice. A little barbecue, just family and a few friends?”

“Daddy doesn’t have any friends,” Kitty says from across the living room, her math book in her lap.

Daddy frowns at her. “I do too have friends. I have Dr. Kang from the hospital, and there’s Marjorie, and Aunt D. But er, yes, it would be a small group on my side.”

“Plus Nana,” Kitty says, and both Daddy and Ms. Rothschild look nervous at the mention of Nana. Daddy’s mother isn’t the friendliest person.

“Don’t forget Grandma,” I throw in.

Grandma and Ms. Rothschild met at Thanksgiving, and while Daddy didn’t explicitly introduce her as his girlfriend, Grandma is shrewd and she doesn’t miss a thing. She gave Ms. Rothschild the third degree, asking if she had any kids of her own, how long she’d been divorced, if she had any student-loan debt. Ms. Rothschild held up pretty well, and when I walked Grandma out to the car to say good-bye, she said Ms. Rothschild was “not bad.” She said she dressed young for her age, but she also said that Ms. Rothschild had a lot of energy and a brightness to her.

“I’ve already done the big wedding thing,” Ms. Rothschild says. “It’ll be small on my side too. A few friends from college, Shelly from work. My sister Jeanie, my SoulCycle friends.”

“Can we be your bridesmaids?” Kitty asks, and Ms. Rothschild laughs.

“Kitty! You can’t just ask that.” But I turn to Ms. Rothschild, waiting to hear what she will say.

“Sure,” she says. “Lara Jean, would you be okay with that?”

“I would be honored,” I say.

“So you three girls, and my friend Kristen, because she’ll kill me if I don’t ask her.”

I clap my hands together. “Now that that’s settled, let’s get back to the dress. If it’s going to be a backyard wedding, I feel like your dress should reflect that.”

“As long as it has sleeves so my bat wings don’t flap around,” she says.

“Ms. Roth—I mean, Trina, you don’t have bat wings,” I say. She’s very in shape from all her Pilates and SoulCycle.

Kitty’s eyes light up. “What are bat wings? That sounds gross.”

“Come here, and I’ll show you.” Kitty obeys, and Ms. Rothschild lifts her arm and stretches it out; then at the last second she grabs Kitty and tickles her. Kitty’s dying laughing, and so is Ms. Rothschild.

Breathlessly she says, “Gross? That’ll teach you to call your wicked stepmother-to-be gross!”

Daddy looks as happy as I’ve ever seen him.

Later that night in our bathroom, Kitty’s brushing her teeth, and I’m scrubbing my face with a new exfoliant I ordered off a Korean beauty site. It’s walnut shells and blueberry. “Mason jars and gingham—but elegant,” I muse.

“Mason jars are played out,” Kitty says. “Look on Pinterest. Literally everybody does Mason jars.”

Her words do have the ring of truth. “Well, I’m definitely wearing a flower crown on my head. I don’t care if you say it’s played out.”

Flatly she says, “You can’t wear a flower crown.”

“Why not?”

She spits out toothpaste. “You’re too old. That’s for flower girls.”



“No, you aren’t envisioning it correctly. I wasn’t thinking baby’s breath. I was thinking little pink and peach roses, with a lot of greenery. Pale green greenery, you know that kind?”

She shakes her head, resolute. “We aren’t fairies in a forest. It’s too cutesy. And I know Gogo’s going to agree with me.”

I have a sinking feeling she will too. I decide to put this argument aside for now. It won’t be won today. “For dresses, I was thinking we could wear vintage. Not off-white, but tea-stained white. Sort of nightgown-style. Very ethereal—not fairy, more like celestial being.”

“I’m wearing a tuxedo.”

I nearly choke. “A what!”

“A tuxedo. With matching Converse.”

“Over my dead body!”

Kitty shrugs.

“Kitty, this wedding isn’t black tie. A tuxedo isn’t going to look right at a backyard wedding! The three of us should match, like a set! The Song girls!”

“I’ve already told Tree and Daddy, and they both love the idea of me in a tux, so get over it.” She’s got that look on her face, the obstinate look she gets when she’s really digging her heels in. Like a bull.

“At the very least you should wear a seersucker suit, then. It will be too hot for a tuxedo, and seersucker breathes.” I feel like I’ve made a concession here, so she should too, but no.

“You don’t get to decide everything, Lara Jean. It’s not your wedding.”

“I know that!”

“Well, just keep it in mind.”

I reach out to shake her, but she flounces off before I can. Over her shoulder, she calls out, “Worry about your own life!”

# 16

*IT'S AN EARLY-RELEASE DAY AND I'M HURRYING* down the hallway to meet Peter at his locker when Mrs. Duvall stops me. “Lara Jean! Are you coming to the mixer this evening?”

“Um ...” I don’t remember hearing anything about a mixer.

She tsks me. “I sent you a reminder e-mail last week! It’s a little get-together for local students who were accepted to William and Mary. There’ll be a few of you from our school, but lots of other schools too. It’s a nice opportunity for you to meet some people before you get there.”

“Oh ...” I did see that e-mail, but I forgot all about it. “I would love to go, but I can’t because I have a ... um, family obligation.”

Which is, technically, true. Peter and I are going to an estate sale in Richmond—he has to pick up end tables for his mom’s antiques store, and I’m looking for a cake table for Daddy and Trina’s wedding.

Mrs. Duvall gives me a lingering look and says, “Well, I’m sure there’ll be another one. A lot of people would kill to be in your spot, Lara Jean, but I’m sure you already know that.”

“I do,” I assure her, and then I scuttle off to meet Peter.

The estate sale turns out to be a bust—for me, anyway. Peter picks up the end tables, but I don’t see anything appropriate for an ethereal backyard wedding. There’s one chest of drawers that is a possibility, if I painted it, maybe, or stenciled some rosebuds on it, but it costs three hundred dollars, and I have a feeling Daddy and Trina would balk at the price. I take a picture of it just in case.

Peter and I go to a place I read about on the Internet called Croaker’s Spot, where we get fried fish and buttery cornbread

dripping in sweet sauce. “Richmond’s cool,” he says, wiping sauce off his chin. “Too bad William and Mary isn’t in Richmond. It’s closer to UVA, too.”

“Just by thirty minutes,” I say. “Anyway I was thinking about it, and it won’t even be a full year until I’m at UVA.” I start counting the months off my fingers. “It’s really like nine months. And I’ll be home for winter break, and then we have spring break.”

“Exactly,” he says.

When I get home, it’s dark out, and Daddy, Trina, and Kitty are at the kitchen table finishing up dinner. Daddy starts to get up when I walk in. “Sit down, I’ll fix you a plate,” he says. With a wink he says, “Trina made her lemon chicken.”

Trina’s lemon chicken is just chicken breasts with lemon seasoning cooked in Pam, but it’s her specialty and it’s pretty good. Sliding into a seat, I say, “No thanks, I just ate a ton of food.”

“Did they serve dinner at the mixer?” Daddy asks, sitting back down. “How was it?”

“How did you know about the mixer?” I ask him, leaning down to pet Trina’s dog Simone, who followed me into the kitchen and is now sitting at my feet, hoping for a crumb.

“They sent an invitation in the mail. I put it on the fridge!”

“Oh, whoops. I didn’t go. I went to Richmond with Peter to look for a cake table for the wedding.”

Daddy frowns. “You went all the way to Richmond on a school night? For a cake table?”

Uh-oh. I quickly pull out my phone to show them. “It’s a little expensive, but we could have the drawers kind of half-open, bursting with roses. Even if we didn’t get this exact one, if you like it, I’m sure I could find something similar to it.”

Daddy leans in to look. “Drawers of roses bursting out? That sounds very expensive and not exactly ecologically responsible.”

“Well I suppose we could do daisies, but it doesn’t really have the same effect.” I cast a look over at Kitty before continuing. “I want to circle back on the bridesmaid dresses.”

“Wait a minute, I want to circle back on you skipping out on your college mixer to go to Richmond,” Daddy interjects.

“Don’t worry, Daddy, I’m sure there will be a million of them before fall,” I tell him. “Kitty, about the bridesmaid dresses—”

Without even looking up, Kitty says, “You just wear the nightgown outfit on your own.”

I choose to ignore the fact that she called it a nightgown outfit and say, “It won’t look right if it’s just me. The beauty of it is the set. All of us matching, very ethereal, like angels. Then it becomes a look, a moment. If I wear it on my own it won’t work. It needs to be all three of us.” I don’t know how many more times I have to say the word “ethereal” to make people understand what the vibe of this wedding is.

Kitty says, “If you want to be a set, you’re welcome to wear a tux too. I would be fine with that.”

I take a deep breath to keep from screaming at her. “Well, let’s just see what Margot says about all this.”

“Margot won’t care either way.”

Kitty gets up to put her plate in the sink, and when her back is turned, I raise my hands like I’m going to strangle her. “Saw that,” she says. I swear, she has eyes in the back of her head.

“Trina, what do you think?” I ask.

“Honestly, I could care less what you guys wear, but you’re going to have to run it by Margot and Kristen. They might have their own ideas.”

Delicately I say, “Just FYI, it’s ‘I couldn’t care less,’ not ‘I could care less.’ Because if you could, then you are technically caring.”

Trina rolls her eyes, and Kitty slides back into her chair and says, “Why are you like this, Lara Jean?”

I shove her in the side. To Trina I say, “Kristen is a grown woman, so I’m sure she’ll be fine with whatever us kids do. She’s an adult.”

Trina doesn’t look so sure. “She won’t want anything that shows her arms. She’ll try to convince you to put a matching cardigan on top.”

“Um, no.”

Trina puts her hands up. “You have to take it up with Kristen. Like I said, I could care less.” She crosses her eyes at me, and I laugh and so does Kitty.

“Wait a minute, can we talk more about this mixer you didn’t go to?” Daddy asks, his brow furrowed. “That sounded like a really nice event.”

“I’ll go to the next one,” I promise him. Of course, I don’t mean it.

There’s no point in me going to mixers and getting attached to people when I’m only going to be there nine months.

After I make myself a bowl of ice cream, I go upstairs and text Margot to see if she is awake. She is, so I immediately call her to shore up support on the dress situation, and Kitty’s right—Margot doesn’t care either way.

“I’ll do whatever you guys want to do,” she says.

“The hottest places in hell are reserved for people who maintain neutrality in times of crisis,” I say, licking my spoon.

She laughs. “I thought the hottest places in hell were reserved for women who don’t help other women.”

“Well, I suppose hell has a lot of rooms. Honestly, don’t you think Kitty will look silly in a tuxedo? It’s a backyard wedding. The feel is supposed to be ethereal!”

“I don’t think she’ll look any sillier than you’ll look in a flower crown all by yourself. Just let her wear it, and you wear your flower crown, and I’ll be neutral. Honestly, I don’t even see the point in me being a bridesmaid when Ms. Rothschild and I barely know each other. I mean, I know she’s doing it to be nice, but it’s so not necessary. It’s all a bit much.”

Now I’m regretting stirring the waters and pushing the whole tuxedo-versus-flower-crown issue. The last thing I want is for Margot to get any ideas about dropping out of the wedding. She’s lukewarm on Trina at best. Hastily I say, “Well, we don’t have to wear flower crowns. You and I could wear plain dresses and Kitty could wear her tux, and that would look fine.”

“How was that William and Mary mixer today? Did you meet any cool people?”

“How does everybody but me know about the mixer!”

“It was on the fridge.”

“Oh. I didn’t go.”

There’s a pause. “Lara Jean, have you sent in your William and Mary deposit yet?”

“I’m about to! It’s not due until May first.”

“Are you thinking about changing your mind?”

“No! I just haven’t gotten around to it yet. Things have been crazy around here, with all the wedding planning and everything.”

“It sounds like the wedding is getting really big. I thought they just wanted to do a simple thing.”

“We’re weighing our options. It’ll still be simple. I just think the day should be really special, something we’ll always remember.”

After we get off the phone, I go downstairs to put my ice cream bowl in the sink, and on the way back, I stop in the living room, where Mommy and Daddy’s wedding portrait

hangs above the fireplace. Her dress is lace, with cap sleeves and a flowy skirt. Her hair is up, in a side bun, with a few tendrils that slip out. She's wearing diamond earrings I never saw her wear in real life. She hardly ever wore jewelry, or much makeup, either. Daddy's in a gray suit, but no gray in his hair yet; his cheeks are apple smooth, no stubble. She looks the way I remember her, but he looks so much younger.

It hits me that we'll have to move the picture. It would just be too awkward for Trina to have to look at it every day. She doesn't seem bothered by it now, but after she's living here, after they're married, she's bound to feel differently. I could hang it in my room, though Margot might want it too. I guess I'll ask her when she's back.

Trina's friend Kristen comes over after dinner later that week, armed with a bottle of rosé and a stack of bridal magazines. The way Trina talks about Kristen, I was picturing someone really intimidating and tall, but Kristen is my height. She has brown hair cut in a short bob, tan skin. I'm impressed by her collection of *Martha Stewart Weddings*—it goes back years and years. “Please just don't crease the corners,” she says, which makes me frown. As if I would ever.

“I think we should discuss the bridal shower first,” she says. She's petting Jamie Fox-Pickle; his sandy head is in her lap. I've never seen him take to a stranger so quickly, which I take to be a good sign.

I say, “I thought a tea party could be fun. I'd make little sandwiches with the crusts cut off, and little bite-sized scones, and clotted cream ...”

“I was thinking a SoulCycle party,” Kristen says. “I'd have matching neon tank tops made that say 'Team Trina.' We could rent out the whole class!”

I try not to look disappointed, and just nod like, *Hmm*.

“Guys, both of those ideas sound so great, but I'm thinking no bridal shower,” Trina interjects. Kristen gasps and I do too. With an apologetic smile she explains, “We have too much

stuff as it is. The whole point of a bridal shower is to shower the bride with everything she'll need for her house, and I can't think of one thing we'd need."

"We don't have an ice cream maker," I say. I've been wanting to experiment with ice creams for a while now, but the one I want is more than four hundred dollars. "And Daddy's always talking about a pasta machine."

"We can buy those things for ourselves. We're grown-ups, after all." Kristen opens her mouth to argue, but Trina says, "Kris, I'm firm on this. No bridal shower. I'm in my forties, for Pete's sake. I've been to this rodeo before."

Stiffly Kristen says, "I don't see what that has to do with anything. The point of a bridal shower is to make the bride feel special and loved. But fine. If it's that important to you, we won't do one."

"Thank you," Trina says. She leans over and puts her arm around Kristen, who gives her a stern look.

"But where I will not negotiate is a bachelorette. You've gotta have a bach. Period."

Smiling, Trina says, "I will not fight you on that. Maybe we can do your SoulCycle idea for my bachelorette."

"No way. We gotta go big. So, Vegas, am I right? You love Vegas. I'm gonna e-mail the girls tonight so Sarah's husband can get us a suite at the Bellagio—"

"It's gonna be a no on Vegas," Trina says. "The bachelorette has to be local and PG so the girls can come."

"What girls?" Kristen demands.

Trina points to me. "My girls." She smiles at me shyly and I smile back, feeling warm inside.

"What if we did karaoke?" I suggest, and Trina claps her hands in delight.

Kristen's mouth drops. "No offense, Lara Jean, but what the hell is going on here, Trina! You can't have your future



stepchildren at your bach. It's just not right. We're not gonna be able to celebrate the way you're supposed to celebrate a bach. Like the old days—aka get naked wasted so you can live up your last moments as a single woman.”

Trina looks at me and shakes her head. “For the record, we never got 'naked wasted.” To Kristen she says, “Kris, I don't think of them as my future stepchildren. They're just ... the girls. But don't worry. We'll have fun. Margot's in college, and Lara Jean's practically in college. They can be exposed to a little sangria and chardonnay.”

“You do love your white wine,” I say, and Trina swats at my shoulder.

Kristen exhales loudly. “Well, what about the little one?”

“Kitty's very mature for her age,” Trina says.

Kristen crosses her arms. “I'm putting my foot down. You can't bring a child on a bachelorette. It isn't right.”

“Kris!”

At this I feel like I have to speak up. “I'm going to side with Kristen on this one. We won't be able to bring Kitty to karaoke. She's too young. They won't let an eleven-year-old in.”

“She'll be so disappointed, though.”

“She'll live,” I say.

Kristen sips on her rosé and says, “Disappointment is good for kids; it prepares them for the real world, where it's not all about them and their feelings.”

Trina rolls her eyes. “If you're putting your foot down on having Kitty at the bachelorette, I'm putting my foot down on penises. I mean it, Kris. No penis cake, no penis straws, no penis pasta. No penises, period.”

I blush. There's such a thing as penis pasta?

“Fine.” Kristen pushes out her lower lip.

“All right, then. Can we move on to the actual wedding, please?”

I run and get my laptop and pull up my vision board, which is when Kitty decides to grace us with her presence. She’s been in the living room watching TV. “Where are we in the planning?” she wants to know.

Kristen eyes her before saying, “Let’s talk food.”

“What about food trucks?” I suggest. “Like, a waffle truck?”

Kristen purses her lips. “I was thinking barbecue. Trina loves barbecue.”

“Hmm,” I say. “But a lot of people do barbecue, don’t they? It’s kind of ...”

“Played out?” Kitty suggests.

“I was going to say common.” But yeah.

“But Trina loves barbecue!”

“Can y’all please stop talking about me like I’m not here?” Trina says. “I do love barbecue. And can we do Mason jars?”

I’m expecting Kitty to denigrate Mason jars again, but she doesn’t say anything of the sort. She says, “What do we think about edible flowers in the drinks?” I’m pretty sure that was one of my ideas that she just stole.

Trina does a shimmy in her seat. “Yes! I love it!”

I’m quick to add, “We could do a nice punch bowl and float some flowers on top.”

Kristen gives me an approving look.

Bolstered, I grandly say, “And as for the cakes, we’ll need a wedding cake and a groom’s cake.”

“Do we really need two cakes?” Trina asks, chewing on her nail. “There won’t be that many people there.”

“This is the South; we have to have a groom’s cake. For yours I was thinking yellow cake with vanilla buttercream

frosting.” Trina beams at me. That’s her favorite kind of cake, just plain. Not exactly exciting to bake, but it’s her favorite. “For Daddy’s, I was thinking ... a Thin Mint cake! Chocolate cake with mint frosting, but with Thin Mints crumbled on top.” I have such a vision for this cake.

This time Kitty’s the one to give me an approving nod. I feel more in my element then I have in weeks.

*OceanofPDF.com*

*KITTY'S MIXING NAIL-POLISH COLORS ON* a paper plate while I'm looking up "celebrity updos" for Trina's wedding hair. I'm lying on the couch, with pillows propped up behind me, and she is on the floor, with nail-polish bottles all around her. Suddenly she asks me, "Have you ever thought about, like, what if Daddy and Trina have a baby and it looks like Daddy?"

Kitty thinks of all sorts of things that would never have occurred to me. I hadn't once thought of that—that they might have a baby or that this pretend baby wouldn't look like us. The baby would be all Daddy and Trina. No one would have to wonder whose child he was or calculate who belongs to who. They'd just assume.

"But they're both so old," I say.

"Trina's forty-three. You can get pregnant at forty-three. Maddie's mom just had a baby and she's forty-three."

"True ..."

"What if it's a boy?"

Daddy with a son. It's a startling thought. He's not exactly sporty, not in a traditional male sense. I mean, he likes to go biking and he plays doubles tennis in the spring. But I'm sure there are things he'd want to do with a son that he doesn't do with us because no one's interested. Fishing, maybe? Football he doesn't care about. Trina cares more than he does.

When my mom was pregnant with Kitty, Margot wanted another sister but I wanted a boy. The Song girls and their baby brother. It would be nice to get that baby brother after all. Especially since I won't be at home and have to hear it crying in the middle of the night. I'll just get to buy the baby little shearling booties and sweaters with red foxes or bunnies.

“If they named him Tate, we could call him Tater Tot,” I muse.

Two red blotches appear on Kitty’s cheeks, and just like that, she looks as young as I always picture her in my head: a little kid. “I don’t want them to have another baby. If they have a baby, I’ll be in the middle. I’ll be nothing.”

“Hey!” I object. “I’m in the middle now!”

“Margot’s oldest and smartest, and you’re the prettiest.” *I’m the prettiest?? Kitty thinks I’m the prettiest?* I try not to look too happy, because she’s still talking. “I’m only the youngest. If they have a baby, I won’t even be that.”

I put down my computer. “Kitty, you’re a lot more than the youngest Song girl. You’re the wild Song girl. The mean one. The spiky one.” Kitty’s pursing her lips, trying not to smile at this. I add, “And no matter what, Trina loves you; she’ll always love you, even if she did have a baby which I don’t think she will.” I stop. “Wait, did you mean it when you said I was the prettiest?”

“No, I take it back. I’ll probably be the prettiest by the time I get to high school. You can be the nicest.” I leap off the couch and grab her by the shoulders like I’m going to shake her, and she giggles.

“I don’t want to be the nicest,” I say.

“You are, though.” She says it not like an insult, but not exactly like a compliment. “What do you wish you had of mine?”

“Your nerve.”

“What else?”

“Your nose. You have a little nubbin of a nose.” I tap it. “What about me?”

Kitty shrugs. “I don’t know.” Then she cracks up, and I shake her by the shoulders.

I'm still thinking about it later that evening. I hadn't thought of Daddy and Trina having a baby. But Trina doesn't have any children, just her "fur baby" golden retriever Simone. She might want a baby of her own. And Daddy's never said so, but is there a chance he'd want to try one more time for a son? The baby would be eighteen years younger than me. What a strange thought. And even stranger still: I'm old enough to have a baby of my own.

What would Peter and I do if I got pregnant? I can't even picture what would happen. All I can see is the look on Daddy's face when I tell him the news, and that's about as far as I get.

The next morning, on the way to school in Peter's car, I steal a look at his profile. "I like how you're so smooth," I say. "Like a baby."

"I could grow a beard if I wanted to," he says, touching his chin. "A thick one."

Fondly I say, "No, you couldn't. But maybe one day, when you're a man."

He frowns. "I *am* a man. I'm eighteen!"

I scoff, "You don't even pack your own lunches. Do you even know how to do laundry?"

"I'm a man in all the ways that count," he boasts, and I roll my eyes.

"What would you do if you were drafted to go to war?" I ask.

"Uh ... aren't college kids given a pass on that? Does the draft even still exist?"

I don't know the answers to either of these questions, so I barrel forward. "What would you do if I got pregnant right now?"

"Lara Jean, we're not even having sex. That would be the immaculate conception."

“If we were?” I press.

He groans. “You and your questions! I don’t know. How could I know what I would do?”

“What do you *think* you would do?”

Peter doesn’t hesitate. “Whatever you wanted to do.”

“Wouldn’t you want to decide together?” I’m testing him—for what, I don’t know.

“I’m not the one who has to carry it. It’s your body, not mine.”

His answer pleases me, but still I keep going. “What if I said ... let’s have the baby and get married?”

Again Peter doesn’t hesitate. “I’d say sure. Yeah!”

Now I’m the one frowning. “‘Sure’? Just like that? The biggest decision of your life and you just say sure?”

“Yeah. Because I *am* sure.”

I lean over to him and put my palms on his smooth cheeks. “That’s how I know you’re still a boy. Because you’re so sure.”

He frowns back at me. “Why are you saying it like it’s a bad thing?”

I let go. “You’re always so sure of everything about yourself. You’ve never been not sure.”

“Well, I’m sure of this one thing,” he says, staring straight ahead. “I’m sure I’d never be the kind of dad my dad is, no matter how old I am.”

I go quiet, feeling guilty for teasing him and bringing up bad feelings. I want to ask if his dad is still reaching out to make amends, but the closed-up look on Peter’s face stops me. I just wish he and his dad could fix things between them before he goes to college. Because right now, Peter *is* still a boy, and deep down, I think all boys want to know their dads, no matter what kind of men they are.

After school, we go through the drive-thru, and Peter's already tearing into his sandwich before we're out of the parking lot. Between bites of fried chicken sandwich, he says, "Did you mean it when you said before that you couldn't picture marrying me?"

"I didn't say that!"

"I mean, you kind of said that. You said I'm still a boy and you couldn't marry a boy."

Now I've gone and hurt his feelings. "I didn't mean it like that. I meant I couldn't picture marrying anybody right now. We're both still babies. How could we *have* a baby?" Without thinking, I say, "Anyway, my dad gave me a whole birth-control kit for college, so we don't even have to worry about it."

Peter nearly chokes on his sandwich. "A birth-control kit?"

"Sure. Condoms and ..." Dental dams. "Peter, do you know what a dental dam is?"

"A what? Is that what dentists use to keep your mouth open when they clean it?"

I giggle. "No. It's for oral sex. And here I thought you were this big expert and *you* were going to be the one to teach *me* everything at college!"

My heart speeds up as I wait for him to make a joke about the two of us finally having sex at college, but he doesn't. He frowns and says, "I don't like the thought of your dad thinking we're doing it when we're not."

"He just wants us to be careful is all. He's a professional, remember?" I pat him on the knee. "Either way, I'm not getting pregnant, so it's fine."

He crumples up his napkin and tosses it in the paper bag, his eyes still on the road. "Your parents met in college, didn't they?"



I'm surprised he remembers. I don't remember telling him that. "Yeah."

"So how old were they? Eighteen? Nineteen?" Peter's headed somewhere with this line of questioning.

"Twenty, I think."

His face dims but just slightly. "Okay, twenty. I'm eighteen and you'll be eighteen next month. Twenty is just two years older. So what difference does two years make in the grand scheme of things?" He beams a smile at me. "Your parents met at twenty; we met at—"

"Twelve," I supply.

Peter frowns, annoyed that I've messed up his argument. "Okay, so we met when we were kids, but we didn't get together until we were seventeen—"

"I was sixteen."

"We didn't get together *for real* until we were both basically seventeen. Which is basically the same thing as eighteen, which is basically the same thing as twenty." He has the self-satisfied look of a lawyer who has just delivered a winning closing statement.

"That's a very long and twisty line of logic," I say. "Have you ever thought about being a lawyer?"

"No, but now I'm thinking maybe?"

"UVA has a great law school," I say, and I get a sudden pang, because college is one thing, but law school? That's so far away, and who knows what will happen between now and then? By then we'll be such different people. Thinking of Peter in his twenties, I feel a sense of yearning for the man I may never get to meet. Right now, today, he's still a boy, and I know him better than anybody, but what if it isn't always this way? Already our paths are diverging, a little more every day, the closer we get to August.

*TRINA PUT HER HOUSE ON THE MARKET* a couple of weeks after she and Daddy got engaged. Kristen's a real estate agent, and she told her that now was the time to sell, because everybody likes to buy in the springtime. It turns out she was right; a couple made an offer on it the very same week—sooner than any of us could have imagined. Daddy and Trina thought the house would sit on the market for at least a month, but now movers are unloading boxes at our house and everything's careening forward at lightning speed.

There was never any big discussion about who was moving in with who—it was just understood that Trina was coming here. For one, our house is bigger, but also, it's easier to move one person than four. You would think. For one person, Trina has a lot of stuff. Boxes and boxes of clothes and shoes, her exercise equipment, random pieces of furniture, a huge velvet upholstered headboard that I know my dad is horrified by.

“If it was me, I wouldn't want to move into another woman's house,” Chris says. She's standing at my window, watching Trina direct the movers. She stopped by on her way to work to borrow a pair of my shoes.

“What other woman?” I ask her.

“Your mom! I would always feel like it was her house. Like, she picked the furniture, the wallpaper.”

“Actually Margot and I picked a lot of it,” I say. “I picked the dining room wallpaper; she picked the upstairs bathroom color.” I remember that Margot and Mommy and I sat down on the living room floor with all the wallpaper books and carpet samples and paint chips spread around us. We spent the whole afternoon going over every book with a fine-tooth comb, with Margot and me battling over which blue was the right blue for the upstairs bathroom we'd share. I thought robin's-egg blue, and Margot thought sky blue. Mommy finally

had us do rock, paper, scissors for it, and Margot won. I sulked over it until I beat her out with my wallpaper choice.

“I’m just saying. I feel like if I was Trina, I would want a fresh start,” Chris says.

“Well, that’s kind of impossible when her husband-to-be already has three kids.”

“You know what I mean. As fresh as possible.”

“They’re getting a new bed, at least. It’s coming tomorrow.”

Chris perks up at this. Flopping on my bed, she says, “Ew, is it weird to think about your dad having sex?”

I slap her on the leg. “I don’t think about that! So please don’t bring it up.”

Picking at the strings on her cutoffs, she says, “Trina does have a great body.”

“I’m not kidding, Chris!”

“I’m just saying, I would kill to have her body at her age.”

“She’s not that old.”

“Still.” Chris preens at me prettily. “If I open the window, can I smoke in here?”

“I think you know the answer to that question, Christina.”

She pouts, but it’s just for show because she knew I wasn’t going to say yes. “Ugh. America is so annoying about smoking. So basic.”

Now that Chris is going to Costa Rica, she relishes looking down on everything American. I still can’t believe she’s leaving. “Are you really not going to prom?” I ask.

“I’m really not.”

“You’re going to regret not going,” I warn her. “When you’re working on the farm in Costa Rica, you’ll suddenly remember how you didn’t go to prom, and you will feel abject regret, and you’ll have no one to blame but yourself.”

With a laugh, she says, “I highly doubt it!”

After Chris leaves for work, I’m on my computer in the kitchen looking for bridesmaid dresses and/or prom dresses, and Daddy and Trina walk in from being outside with the movers. I try to look busy, like I’m studying, in case they ask for help. Shrewd little Kitty has made herself scarce these past couple of days, and I’m regretting not following her lead.

Daddy pours himself a glass of water, wiping sweat from his brow. “Do you really need to bring that treadmill?” he asks Trina. “It doesn’t even work properly.”

“It works fine.”

Gulping the rest of his water, he says, “I’ve never seen you use it.”

She frowns at him. “That doesn’t mean I don’t use it. It means I don’t use it in front of *you*.”

“All right. When’s the last time you used it?”

Her eyes narrow. “None of your business.”

“Trina!”

“*Dan!*”

This is a new side to Daddy—bickering, losing his patience just barely. Trina brings it out of him, and I know it sounds strange, but I’m glad for it. It’s something I never realized was gone in him. There’s making do, living a pleasant life, no big ups or downs, and there’s all the friction and fire that come with being in love with someone. She takes forever to get ready, which drives him crazy, and she makes fun of his hobbies, like bird-watching and documentaries. But they just fit.

# 19

*THERE'S A LACROSSE GAME TONIGHT, AND* Pammy can't go because she has to work, and of course Chris would never deign to go to a lacrosse game, so I bring Kitty with me. She pretends to mull it over, musing aloud that it might be boring, but when I say, "Never mind, then," she quickly agrees to come.

In the stands we run into Peter's mom and his younger brother, Owen, so we sit with them. He and Kitty proceed to each pretend the other doesn't exist—he plays games on his phone and she plays games on hers. Owen is tall, but he sits hunched, with his hair in his eyes.

We chat about my dad and Trina's engagement for a bit and I tell her some of my ideas for the wedding. She's nodding along and then she suddenly says, "I hear congratulations are in order for you, too."

Confused, I say, "What for?"

"William and Mary!"

"Oh! Thank you."

"I know you were hoping to go to UVA, but this might be for the best anyway." She gives me a sympathetic smile.

I smile back, unsure. Unsure of what, exactly, "for the best" means. Is she glad I'm not going to UVA with Peter? Does she think this means we're breaking up now? So all I say is, "Williamsburg isn't really that far from Charlottesville anyway."

Her response is, "Hmm, yes, that's true." Then Peter scores a point, and we both stand up and cheer.

When I sit back down again, Kitty asks me, "Can we get popcorn?"

"Sure," I say, glad to have an excuse to get up. To Peter's mom and brother I ask, "Do you guys want anything?"

Without looking up, Owen says, “Popcorn.”

“You guys can share,” Peter’s mom says.

I make my way down the bleachers, and I’m heading for the snack bar when I notice a man, standing off to the side, his arms crossed, watching the game. He is tall; he has nut-brown hair. Handsome. When he turns his head and I see his profile, I know who he is, because I know that face. I know that chin, those eyes. He’s Peter’s dad. It’s like seeing the Ghost of Christmas Future, and I’m frozen in place, transfixed.

He catches me staring at him, and offers a friendly smile. I feel like I have no choice but to take a step forward and ask, “Excuse me ... but are you Peter’s dad?”

Surprised, he nods. “Are you a friend of his?”

“I’m Lara Jean Covey. His, um, girlfriend.” He looks startled, but then he recovers and extends his hand. I shake it firmly, to give a good impression. “Wow, you look just like him.”

He laughs, and I’m struck anew by how much of him is in Peter. “He looks just like me, you mean.”

I laugh too. “Right. You were here first.”

There is an awkward silence, and then he clears his throat and asks me, “How is he?”

“Oh, he’s good. He’s great. Did you hear he’s going to UVA on a lacrosse scholarship?”

He nods, smiling. “I heard that from his mom. I’m proud of him. Not that I can take any credit for it—but still. I’m really proud of the kid.” His eyes flicker back to the field, to Peter. “I just wanted to see him play again. I’ve missed it.” He hesitates before saying, “Please don’t mention to Peter that I was here.”

I’m so taken by surprise, all I can say is, “Oh ... okay.”

“Thank you, I appreciate it. It was nice to meet you, Lara Jean.”

“It was nice to meet you, too, Mr. Kavinsky.”

With that, I go back to the bleachers, and only when I’m halfway up there do I remember I forgot the popcorn, so I have to go back down. When I get back to the snack bar, Peter’s dad is gone.

Our team ends up losing, but Peter scores three points and it’s a good game for him. I’m glad his dad got to see him play, but I really wish I didn’t agree to keeping it a secret from Peter. The thought makes my stomach hurt.

In the car I’m still thinking about his dad, but then Kitty says, “That was weird what Peter’s mom said about it being a good thing you weren’t going to UVA.”

“I know, right! You took it that way too?”

“There really wasn’t any other way to take it,” Kitty says.

I check my side-view mirrors before turning left out of the school parking lot. “I don’t think she meant it in a *mean* way, exactly. She just doesn’t want to see Peter get hurt, that’s all.” And neither do I, so maybe it’s for the best that I don’t say anything to Peter about seeing his dad tonight. What if he gets excited about his dad coming, and then his dad hurts him again? Abruptly I say, “Do you wanna stop and get frozen yogurts?” and of course Kitty says yes.

Peter comes to the house after he showers up, and as soon as I see how happy he is, my mind is made up not to say anything.

We’re lying on the living room floor doing face sheet masks. If the kids at school could see him now! Through gritted teeth he asks, “What’s this one supposed to do?”

“Brighten dull skin.”

He twists toward me and croaks, “Hello, Clarice.”

“What are you talking about?”

“It’s from *Silence of the Lambs!*”

“Oh, I never saw that. It looked too scary.”

Peter sits upright. He's terrible at sitting still. "We have to watch it right now. This is ridiculous. I can't be with someone who's never seen *Silence of the Lambs*."

"Um, I'm pretty sure it's my turn to pick."

"Covey, come on! It's a classic," Peter says, just as his phone buzzes. He answers it, and I hear his mom's voice on the other line. "Hey Mom ... I'm at Lara Jean's. I'll be home soon... . I love you too."

When he gets off the phone, I say, "Hey, I forgot to tell you this earlier, but at the game tonight, your mom said that maybe it was for the best that I didn't get into UVA."

"*What?*" He sits up and pulls off his face mask.

"Well, she didn't say it exactly like that, but I think that's how she meant it."

"What were her exact words?"

I peel off my mask too. "She congratulated me on getting into William and Mary, and then I think she said, 'I know you were hoping to go to UVA, but this might be for the best anyway.'"

Peter relaxes. "Oh, she always talks like that. She looks for the bright side in things. She's like you."

It didn't seem that way to me, but I don't push it, because Peter's very protective of his mom. I guess he's had to be, since it's just the three of them. But what if it didn't have to be? What if Peter has a real chance of having a relationship with his dad? What if tonight is proof? Casually, I ask him, "Hey, how many graduation announcements did you sign up for?"

"Ten. My family's small. Why?"

"Just wondering. I signed up for fifty, so my grandma could send some to family in Korea." I hesitate before asking, "Do you think you'll send your dad one?"

He frowns. "No. Why would I?" He picks up his phone. "Let's see what movies we have left. If *Silence of the Lambs* is off



the table, we could watch *Trainspotting*, or *Die Hard*.”

I don't say anything for a moment, and then I snatch his phone out of his hands. “It's my turn to pick! And I pick ... *Amélie!*”

For someone who once put up such a fuss about not watching rom coms or foreign films, Peter sure loves *Amélie*. It's about a French girl who is afraid to live in the world, so she concocts these whimsical fantasies in her head, with lamps that talk and paintings that move, and crepes that look like records. It makes me want to live in Paris.

“I wonder what you'd look like with bangs,” Peter muses. “Cute, I bet.” At the end of the movie, when she bakes a plum cake, he turns to me and says, “Do you know how to bake a plum cake? That sounds delicious.”

“You know, mini plum cakes could be good for the dessert table.” I start researching recipes on my phone.

“Just make sure you call me when you do your trial run,” Peter says, yawning.

## 20

*TRINA AND I ARE ON THE COUCH DRINKING* tea. I'm showing her pictures of floral arrangements when Daddy walks through the front door and collapses on the couch with us. "Long day?" Trina asks him.

"The longest," he says, closing his eyes.

"Question," I say.

His eyes flutter open. "Yes, my middle-born?"

"What are you guys thinking for the first dance?"

He groans. "I'm too tired to think about dancing right now."

"Please. It's your wedding! Be present, Daddy."

Trina laughs and pokes him in the side with her foot. "Be present, Dan!"

"Okay, okay. Well, Trina's a big Shania Twain fan." They grin at each other. "So—what about 'From This Moment On'?"

"Aww," she says. "You really do know me."

"Shania Twain?" I repeat. "Doesn't she sing that song 'Man! I Feel Like a Woman'?"

Trina holds her mug like it's a microphone and tilts her head. "From this moment, I will love you," she sings, off-key.

"I don't think I know that song," I say, trying to sound neutral.

"Play it for her on your phone," she says to Daddy.

"Don't judge," he warns me, and then he plays it.

It's the most un-him song I've ever heard. But he's got a goofy smile on his face the entire time, and it only gets bigger when Trina puts her arm around his shoulder and makes him

sway with her to the beat. “It’s perfect,” I say, and suddenly I feel like crying. I clear my throat. “So now that the song is picked out, we can start ticking other stuff off the list. I’ve been going back and forth with Tilly’s Treats about doing mini banana puddings in little canning jars, and they say they can’t do them for less than seven dollars apiece.”

Worry lines cross Daddy’s forehead. “That seems pricy, no?”

“Don’t worry, I’ve got a call in to a bakery in Richmond, and if the delivery price isn’t too bad, that might be the way to go.” I flip through my binder. “I’ve been so busy with desserts, I haven’t had a chance to go meet with the band I’ve been in touch with. They’re playing in Keswick this weekend, so I might try and go see them play.”

Daddy looks at me with concern in his eyes. “Honey, it seems like maybe you’ve replaced baking with wedding planning as your stress relief. This is all a little much.”

“The band isn’t exactly a *band*,” I quickly say. “It’s a singer and a guy with a guitar. They’re just starting out, so it’s all very reasonable. I’ll know more when I see them in person.”

“Don’t they have videos you can watch?” Trina asks.

“Sure, but it’s not the same as seeing them live.”

“I don’t think we need a band,” Daddy says, exchanging a look with Trina. “I think we’d be fine with just playing music off the computer.”

“That’s fine, but we’d need to rent sound equipment.” I start flipping through my binder, and Trina reaches out and puts her hand on my arm.

“Sweetie, I love that you want to help us with this, and I’m so grateful. But honestly, I’d rather you didn’t stress yourself out. Your dad and I don’t really care about any of the details. We just want to get married. We don’t need a food truck, or mini banana puddings. We’d truly be just as happy ordering a bunch of barbecue from BBQ Exchange.” I start to speak, and

she stops me. “You only get one senior year of high school, and I want you to enjoy it. You have a hot boyfriend and you got into a great school. Your birthday is coming up soon. This is the time to just be young and celebrate and enjoy each other!”

“Yes, within reason, of course,” Daddy says hastily.

“But guys, I’m not stressed out,” I protest. “Focusing on the wedding gives me a sense of peace! It’s very calming for me.”

“And you’ve been a big help, but I think there are other things you could be focusing on that are more worthy of your time. Like finishing out your senior year, and preparing for college.” Daddy has that firm, immovable look on his face, the one I see so seldom.

I frown. “So you don’t want me to help out with the wedding anymore?”

Trina says, “I still want you to be in charge of the bridesmaid dresses, and I’d love for you to bake our wedding cake—”

“And the groom’s cake?” I interrupt.

“Sure. But the rest of it we’ll take care of. I swear I’m only saying this to you for your own good, Lara Jean. No more haggling over prices with vendors.”

“No more impromptu road trips to Richmond for cake tables,” Daddy adds.

I sigh a reluctant kind of sigh. “If you’re sure ...”

She nods. “Just go be young. Focus on your prom dress. Have you started looking yet?”

“Sort of.” It’s hitting me now that we are less than a month away from prom and I still don’t have a dress. “If you’re really sure ...”

“We’re sure,” Daddy says, and Trina nods.

As I head up the stairs, I hear Daddy whisper to her, “Why in the world are you encouraging her to go enjoy her hot

boyfriend?”

I almost laugh out loud.

“That’s not what I meant!” Trina says.

He makes a harrumph sound. “It sure sounded like it.”

“Oh my God, don’t take everything so literally, Dan. Besides, her boyfriend *is* hot.”

I look at prom dresses on my computer, and I laugh out loud every time I think about Daddy calling Peter my “hot boyfriend.” An hour into searching, I’m fairly certain I’ve found my dress. It’s ballerina style, with a metallic lattice bodice and a tulle skirt—the website calls the color dusty pink. Stormy will be pleased.

With that done, I go on the William and Mary website and pay the enrollment deposit like I should’ve done weeks ago.

Later that week, on the ride to school, Peter says he got out of doing a delivery for his mom, and he can go with me to see the band play in Keswick.

Glumly I say, “It turns out Daddy and Trina don’t want a band after all. Or much of anything, for that matter. They want this wedding to be very low maintenance. They’re just going to borrow some speakers and play music off a computer. Guess what song they picked for their first dance.”

“What song?”

“‘From This Moment On’ by Shania Twain.”

He frowns. “I never heard of that before.”

“It’s really cheesy, but they love it, apparently. Do you realize that we don’t have a song? Like, a song that’s ours.”

“Okay, then let’s pick one.”

“It doesn’t work like that. You don’t just *pick* your song. The song picks you. Like the Sorting Hat.”

Peter nods sagely. He finally finished reading all seven Harry Potter books and he’s always eager to prove that he gets

my references. “Got it.”

“It has to just ... happen. A moment. And the song transcends the moment, you know? My mom and dad’s song was ‘Wonderful Tonight’ by Eric Clapton. They danced to it at their wedding.”

“So how did it become their song, then?”

“It was the first song they ever slow danced to in college. It was at a dance, not long after they first started dating. I’ve seen pictures from that night. Daddy’s wearing a suit that was too big on him and my mom’s hair is in a French twist.”

“How about whatever song comes on next, that’s our song. It’ll be fate.”

“We can’t just make our own fate.”

“Sure we can.” Peter reaches over to turn on the radio.

“Wait! Just any radio station? What if it’s not a slow song?”

“Okay so we’ll put on Lite 101.” Peter hits the button.

“Winnie the Pooh doesn’t know what to do, got a honey jar stuck on his nose,” a woman croons.

Peter says, “What the hell?” as I say, “This can’t be our song.”

“Best out of three?” he suggests.

“Let’s not force it. We’ll know it when we hear it, I think.”

“Maybe we’ll hear it at the prom,” Peter offers. “Oh, that reminds me. What color is your dress? My mom’s going to ask her florist friend to make your corsage.”

“It’s dusty pink.” It came in the mail yesterday, and when I tried it on for everybody, Trina said it was “the most Lara Jean” dress she’d ever seen. I texted a picture to Stormy, who wrote back, “Ooh-la-la,” with a dancing woman emoji.

“What the heck is dusty pink?” Peter wants to know.

“It’s like a rose gold color.” Peter still looks confused, so I sigh and say, “Just tell your mom. She’ll know. And do you

think you could bring a little corsage for Kitty, too, and act like it was your idea?”

“Sure, but I could’ve had that idea on my own, you know,” he grumbles. “You should at least give me a chance to have ideas.”

I pat him on the knee. “Just please don’t forget.”

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# 21

*IT'S LATE. I'M IN MY BED LOOKING THROUGH* my welcome packet from William and Mary. It turns out William and Mary doesn't allow freshmen to have cars on campus, and I'm about to call Peter to tell him, when I get a text from John Ambrose McClaren. When I first see his name on my phone, I feel a jolt of surprise, because it's been so long since we last talked. Then I read the text.

Stormy died in her sleep last night. The funeral is in Rhode Island on Wednesday. I just thought you'd want to know.

I just sit there for a moment, stunned. How can this be? When I last saw her, she was fine. She was great. She was Stormy. She can't be gone. Not my Stormy. Stormy, who was larger than life, who taught me how to apply red lipstick "so it lasts even after a night of kisses and champagne," she said.

I start to cry and I can't stop. I can't get air in my lungs. I can barely see for crying. My tears keep falling on my phone, and I keep wiping it with the back of my hand. What do I say to John? She was his grandmother, and he was her favorite grandson. They were very close.

First I type, I'm so sorry. Is there anything I can do? Then I delete it, because what could I possibly do to help?

I'm so sorry. She had the most spirit of anyone I ever met. I'll miss her dearly.

Thank you. I know she loved you too.

His text brings fresh tears to my eyes.

Stormy was always saying that she still felt like she was in her twenties. That sometimes she'd dream she was a girl again, and she'd see her ex-husbands and they'd be old but she'd still be Stormy. She said when she woke up in the morning, she'd be surprised to be in her old body with her old bones. "I've still got the gams, though," she said. And she did.



It's almost a relief that the funeral is in Rhode Island, too far away for me to go. I haven't been to a funeral since my mom died. I was nine, Margot was eleven, Kitty just two. The clearest memory I have of that day is sitting beside my dad, Kitty in his arms, feeling his body shake next to mine as he cried silently. Kitty's cheeks were wet with his tears. She didn't understand anything except that he was sad. She kept saying, "Don't cry, Daddy," and he would try to smile for her, but his smile looked like it was melting. I'd never felt that way before—like nothing was safe anymore, or would be ever again.

And now I'm crying again, for Stormy, for my mom, for everything.

She wanted me to transcribe her memoirs for her. *Stormy Weather*, she wanted to call it. We never did get around to doing that. How will people know her story now?

Peter calls, but I'm too sad to talk so I just let it go to voice-mail. I feel like I should call John, but I don't really have the right. Stormy was his grandma, and I was just a girl who volunteered at her nursing home. The one person I want to talk to is my sister, because she knew Stormy too, and because she always makes me feel better, but it's the middle of the night in Scotland.

I call Margot the next day, as soon as I wake up. I cry again as I tell her the news, and she cries with me. It's Margot who has the idea to have a memorial service for her at Belleview. "You could say a few words, serve some cookies, and people could share memories of her? I'm sure her friends would like that, since they won't be able to make it to the funeral."

I blow my nose. "I'm sure Stormy would like it too."

"I wish I could be there for it."

"I wish so too," I say, and my voice quivers. I always feel stronger with Margot beside me.

"Peter will be there, though," she says.

Before I leave for school, I call my old boss Janette over at Belleview and tell her the idea about the memorial service. She agrees right away, and says we could have it this Thursday afternoon, before bingo.

When I get to school and tell Peter about Stormy's memorial service, his face falls. "Shit. I have to go to that Days on the Lawn thing with my mom." Days on the Lawn is an open house for incoming first-years at UVA. You go with your parents; you sit in on classes, tour the dorms. It's a big deal. I was really looking forward to it, when I thought I might be going.

He offers, "I could skip it, though."

"You can't. Your mom would kill you. You have to go."

"I don't mind," he says, and I believe him.

"It's really okay. You didn't know Stormy."

"I know. I just want to be there for you."

"The offer is what counts," I tell him.

Instead of wearing black, I choose a sundress that Stormy once said she liked me in. It's white, with cornflower-blue forget-me-nots embroidered on the skirt, short puffy sleeves that go a little off the shoulder, and a nipped-in waist. Because I bought it at the end of summer, I've only had the chance to wear it once. I stopped by Belleview on my way to meet Peter at the movies, and Stormy said I looked like a girl in an Italian movie. So I wear that dress, and the white sandals I bought for graduation, and a little pair of lacy white gloves that I just know she'd appreciate. I found them at a vintage store in Richmond called Bygones, and when I put them on, I can almost imagine Stormy wearing them at one of her cotillions or Saturday night dances. I don't wear her pink diamond ring. I want the first time I wear it to be at my prom, the way Stormy would have wanted.

I bring out the punch bowl, a crystal bowl of peanuts, a stack of cocktail napkins embroidered with cherries that I found at an estate sale, the tablecloth we use for Thanksgiving.

I put a few roses on the piano, where Stormy used to sit. I make a punch with ginger ale and frozen fruit juice—no alcohol, which I know Stormy would have balked at, but not all of the residents can have it, because of their medications. I do put out a bottle of champagne next to the punch bowl, for anyone who wants to top off their punch with a little something extra. Lastly, I turn on Frank Sinatra, who Stormy always said should've been her second husband, if only.

John said he'd come if he made it back from Rhode Island in time, and I'm feeling a little nervous for that, because I haven't seen him since almost exactly a year ago, on my birthday. We were never a thing, not really, but we almost were, and to me, that's something.

A few people file in. One of the nurses wheels in Mrs. Armbruster, who has fallen to dementia but used to be pretty friendly with Stormy. Mr. Perelli, Alicia, Shanice the receptionist, Janette. It's a good little group. The truth is, there are fewer and fewer people that I know at Belleview. Some of them have moved in with their children; a few have passed away. Not as many familiar faces in the staff, either. The place changed while I wasn't looking.

I'm standing at the front of the room, and my heart is pounding out of my chest. I'm so nervous to make my speech. I'm afraid of stumbling over my words and not doing her justice. I want to do a good job on it; I want to make Stormy proud. Everyone's looking at me with expectant eyes, except for Mrs. Armbruster, who is knitting and staring off into space. My knees shake under my skirt. I take a deep breath, and I'm about to speak when John Ambrose McClaren walks in, wearing a pressed button-down shirt and khakis. He takes a seat on the couch next to Alicia. I give him a wave, and in return, John gives me an encouraging smile.

I take a deep breath. "The year was 1952." I clear my throat and look down at my paper. "It was summer, and Frank Sinatra was on the radio. Lana Turner and Ava Gardner were the starlets of the day. Stormy was eighteen. She was in the marching band, she was voted Best Legs, and she always had a

date on Saturday night. On this particular night, she was on a date with a boy named Walt. On a dare, she went skinny-dipping in the town lake. Stormy never could turn down a dare.”

Mr. Perelli laughs and says, “That’s right, she never could.” Other people murmur in agreement, “She never could.”

“A farmer called the police, and when they shined their lights on the lake, Stormy told them to turn around before she would come out. She got a ride home in a police car that night.”

“Not the first time or the last,” someone calls out, and everyone laughs, and I can feel my shoulders start to relax.

“Stormy lived more life in one night than most people do their whole lives. She was a force of nature. She taught me that love—” My eyes well up and I start over. “Stormy taught me that love is about making brave choices every day. That’s what Stormy did. She always picked love; she always picked adventure. To her they were one and the same. And now she’s off on a new adventure, and we wish her well.”

From his seat on the couch, John wipes his eyes with his sleeve.

I give Janette a nod, and she gets up and presses play on the stereo, and “Stormy Weather” fills the room. “Don’t know why there’s no sun up in the sky ...”

After, John shoulders his way over to me, holding two plastic cups of fruit punch. Ruefully he says, “I’m sure she’d tell us to spike it, but ...” He hands me a cup, and we clink. “To Edith Sinclair McClaren Sheehan, better known as Stormy.”

“Stormy’s real name was Edith? It’s so serious. It sounds like someone who wears wool skirts and heavy stockings, and drinks chamomile tea at night. Stormy drank cocktails!”

John laughs. “I know, right?”

“So then where did the name Stormy come from? Why not Edie?”

“Who knows?” John says, a wry smile on his lips. “She’d have loved your speech.” He gives me a warm, appreciative sort of look. “You’re such a nice girl, Lara Jean.” I’m embarrassed, I don’t know what to say. Even though we never dated, seeing John again is what I imagine seeing an old boyfriend feels like. A wistful sort of feeling. Familiar, but just a little bit awkward, because there’s so much left unsaid between us.

Then he says, “Stormy kept asking me to bring my girlfriend to visit her, and I never got around to it. I feel bad about that now.”

As casually as I can, I say, “Oh, are you dating someone?”

He hesitates for just a split-second and then nods. “Her name is Dipti. We met at a Model UN convention at UVA. She beat me out for the gavel for our committee.”

“Wow,” I say.

“Yeah, she’s awesome.”

We both start to speak at the same time.

“Do you know where you’re going to school?”

“Have you decided—?”

We laugh, and a sort of understanding passes between us. He says, “I haven’t decided. It’s between College Park and William and Mary. College Park has a good business school, and it’s really close to DC. William and Mary’s ranked higher, but Williamsburg is in the boonies. So I don’t know yet. My dad’s bummed, because he really wanted me to go to UNC, but I didn’t get in.”

“I’m sorry.” I decide not to mention that I got wait-listed at UNC.

John shrugs. “I might try and transfer there sophomore year. We’ll see. What about you? Are you going to UVA?”

“I didn’t get in,” I confess.

“Aw man! I hear they were insanely selective this year. My school’s salutatorian didn’t get in, and her application was killer.

I'm sure yours was too."

Shyly, I say, "Thanks, John."

"So where are you gonna go if not UVA?"

"William and Mary."

His face breaks into a smile. "Seriously? That's awesome! Where's Kavinsky going?"

"UVA."

He nods. "For lacrosse, right."

"What about ... Dipti?" I say it like I don't remember her name, even though I do, I mean, I just heard him say it not two minutes ago. "Where's she going?"

"She got in early to Michigan."

"Wow, that's so far."

"A whole lot farther than UVA and William and Mary, that's for sure."

"So are you guys going to ... stay together?"

"That's the plan," John says. "We're going to at least give the long-distance thing a try. What about you and Peter?"

"That's our plan too, for the first year. I'm going to try to transfer to UVA for the second year."

John clinks his cup against mine. "Good luck, Lara Jean."

"You too, John Ambrose McClaren."

"If I end up going to William and Mary, I'm going to call you."

"You better," I say.

I stay at Belleview a lot longer than I expected. Someone brings out their old records and then people start dancing, and Mr. Perelli insists on teaching me how to rumba, in spite of his bad hip. When Janette puts on Glenn Miller's song "In the Mood," my eyes meet John's, and we share a secret smile, both

of us remembering the USO party. It was like something out of a movie. It feels like a long time ago now.

It's strange to feel happy at a memorial for someone you loved, but that's how I feel. I'm happy that the day has gone well, that we've sent Stormy off in style. It feels good to say a proper good-bye, to have the chance.

When I get back from Belleview, Peter's sitting on my front steps with a Starbucks cup. "Is nobody home?" I ask, hurrying up the walk. "Did you have to wait long?"

"Nah." Still sitting, he reaches out his arms and pulls me in for a hug around my waist. "Come sit and talk to me for a minute before we go inside," he says, burying his face in my stomach. I sit down next to him. He asks, "How was Stormy's memorial? How'd your speech go?"

"Good, but first tell me about Days on the Lawn." I grab his Starbucks cup out of his hands and take a sip of coffee, which is cold.

"Eh. I sat in on a class. Met some people. Not that exciting." Then he takes my right hand in his, traces his finger over the lace of my gloves. "These are cool."

There's something bothering him, something he isn't saying. "What's wrong? Did something happen?"

He looks away. "My dad showed up this morning and wanted to come with us."

My eyes widen. "So ... did you let him come?"

"Nope." Peter doesn't elaborate. Just, nope.

Hesitantly, I say, "It seems like he's trying to have a relationship with you, Peter."

"He had plenty of chances and now it's too late. That ship has fucking sailed. I'm not a kid anymore." He lifts his chin. "I'm a man, and he didn't have anything to do with it. He just wants the credit. He wants to brag to his golf buddies that his son is playing lacrosse for UVA."

I hesitate. Then I think of how his dad looked when he was watching Peter out on the lacrosse field. There was such pride in his eyes—and love. “Peter ... what if—what if you gave him a chance?”

Peter’s shaking his head. “Lara Jean, you don’t get it. And you’re lucky not to get it. Your dad’s freaking awesome. He’d do anything for you guys. My dad’s not like that. He’s just in it for himself. If I let him back in, he’ll just fuck up again. It’s not worth it.”

“But maybe it is worth it. You never know how long you have with people.” Peter flinches. I’ve never said something like that to him before, brought my mom up like that, but after losing Stormy, I can’t help it. I have to say it because it’s true and because I’ll regret it if I don’t. “It’s not about your dad. It’s about you. It’s about not having regrets later. Don’t hurt yourself just to spite him.”

“I don’t want to talk about him anymore. I came over here to make you feel better, not to talk about my dad.”

“Okay. But first, promise me you’ll think about inviting him to graduation.” He starts to speak, and I interrupt him. “Just think about it. That’s all. It’s a whole month away. You don’t have to decide anything right now, so don’t say yes or no.”

Peter sighs, and I’m sure he’s going to tell me no, but instead he asks, “How’d your speech go?”

“I think it went okay. I think Stormy would’ve liked it. I talked about the time she got caught skinny-dipping and the police came and she had to ride home in a squad car. Oh, and John made it back in time.”

Peter nods in a diplomatic sort of way. I’d told him John might be coming today, and all he said was “Cool, cool,” because of course he couldn’t say anything different. John was Stormy’s grandson, after all. “So where’s McClaren going to school?”



“He hasn’t decided yet. It’s between Maryland and William and Mary.”

Peter’s eyebrows fly up. “*Really*. Well, that’s awesome.” He says it in a way that makes it clear he doesn’t think it’s awesome at all.

I give him a funny look. “What?”

“Nothing. Did he hear that you’re going there?”

“No, I just told him today. Not that one thing has anything to do with the other. You’re being really weird right now, Peter.”

“Well, how would you feel if I told you Gen was going to UVA?”

“I don’t know. Not that bothered?” I mean that sincerely. All of my bad feelings about Peter and Genevieve feel like such a long time ago. Peter and I have come so far since then. “Besides, it’s completely different. John and I never even dated. We haven’t spoken in months. Also, he has a girlfriend. Also, he hasn’t even decided if he’s going there or not.”

“So where’s his girlfriend going then?”

“Ann Arbor.”

He makes a dismissive sound. “That ain’t gonna last.”

Softly I say, “Maybe people will look at you and me and think the same thing.”

“It’s literally not the same thing at all. We’re only going to be a couple of hours apart, and then you’re transferring. That’s one year tops. I’ll drive down on weekends. It’s literally not a big deal.”

“You just said literally twice,” I say, to make him smile. When he doesn’t, I say, “You’ll have practice and games. You won’t want to be at William and Mary every weekend.” It’s the first time I’ve had this thought.

For just a moment Peter looks stung, but then he shrugs and says, “Fine, or you’ll come up here. We’ll get you used to

the drive. It's basically all just I-64."

"William and Mary doesn't let freshmen have cars. Neither does UVA. I checked."

Peter brushes this off. "So I'll get my mom to drop my car off when I want to come see you. It's not like it's far. And you can take the bus. We'll make it work. I'm not worried about us."

I am, a little, but I don't say so, because Peter doesn't seem to want to talk about practicalities. I guess I don't either.

Scooting closer to me, he asks, "Want me to stay over tonight? I can come back after my mom goes to bed. I can distract you if you get sad."

"Nice try," I tell him, pinching his cheek.

"Did Josh ever spend the night? With your sister, I mean."

I ponder this. "Not that I know of. I mean, I really doubt it. We're talking about my sister and Josh, after all."

"That's them," Peter says, dipping his head low and rubbing his cheek against mine. He loves how soft my cheeks are; he's always saying that. "We're nothing like them."

"You're the one who brought them up," I start to say, but then he is kissing me, and I can't even finish a thought, much less a sentence.

## 22

*THE MORNING OF PROM, KITTY COMES IN* my room as I'm painting my toes. "What do you think about this color with my dress?" I ask her.

"It looks like you dipped your toenails in Pepto-Bismol."

I peer down at my feet. It kind of does look like that. Maybe I should do a beige color instead.

The consensus is that the dress requires an updo. "To show off your collarbone," Trina says. I've never thought of my collarbone as something to be shown off; in fact I've never thought of my collarbone at all.

After lunch Kitty goes with me to the hair salon, to supervise. She tells the stylist, "Don't make it too *done*, do you know what I mean?"

The stylist gives me a nervous look in the mirror. "I think so? You want it to look natural?" She's talking to Kitty, not me, because it's obvious who is in charge. "Like a natural chignon?"

"But not too natural. Think Grace Kelly." Kitty pulls up a picture on her phone and shows it to her. "See, like this, but we want the bun to the side."

"Just please don't use too much hairspray," I say meekly, as the stylist coils my hair into a knot at the nape of my neck and shows Kitty.

"That's great," Kitty says to her. To me she says, "Lara Jean, she has to use hairspray if you want it to stay up."

Suddenly I'm having second thoughts about an updo. "Are we sure about the updo?"

"Yes," Kitty says. To the stylist she says, "We're doing the updo."

The updo is more "done" than I'm used to. My hair is in a side bun; the top is smooth like a ballerina. It's pretty, but when I

look in the mirror, I don't recognize myself. It's an older, sophisticated version of me who's going to the opera, or the symphony.

After all the time the woman at the salon spent putting my hair up, I end up taking it down when I get home. Kitty yells at me as she brushes my hair out, but I bear it. Tonight I want to feel like me.

"How are we doing your grand entrance?" Kitty asks me as she sweeps the brush through my hair one last time.

"Grand entrance?" I repeat.

"When Peter gets here. How are you going to enter the room?"

Trina, who is lying on my bed eating a Popsicle, pipes up with, "When I went to prom, we did a thing where the dads walked the girls down the stairs and then somebody would announce you."

I look at them both like they are nuts. "Trina, I'm not getting married. I'm going to prom."

"We could turn off all the lights and put on music, and then you walk out and do a pose at the top of the stairs—"

"I don't want to do that," I interrupt.

Her forehead creases. "What part?"

"All of it."

"But you need a moment where everybody looks at you and only you," Kitty says.

"It's called a first look," Trina explains. "Don't worry, I'll get the whole thing on video."

"If we'd thought about this earlier, we could've really done it up, and maybe it would've gone viral." Kitty shakes her head at me in a disgusted way, as if this is somehow my fault.

"The last thing I need is to go viral again," I tell her. Pointedly I say, "Remember my hot tub video?"

She at least looks a little abashed, for a second. “Let’s not linger on the past,” she says, fluffing up my hair.

“Hey, birthday girl,” Trina says to me. “Is the plan still to go for barbecue tomorrow night?”

“Yup,” I say. With Stormy passing away and prom and the wedding and everything else, I haven’t given my birthday much thought. Trina wanted to throw me a big party, but I told her I’d rather just have a family dinner out, and cake and ice cream back at the house. Trina and Kitty are baking the cake while I’m at prom, so we’ll see how that goes!

When Peter and his mom arrive, I’m still running around doing last minute things.

“Guys, Peter and his mom are here,” my dad calls up the stairs.

“Perfume!” I screech to Kitty, who sprays me. “Where’s my clutch?”

Trina tosses it to me. “Did you pack a lipstick?”

I open it to check. “Yes! Where are my shoes?”

“Over here,” Kitty says, picking them up off the floor. “Hurry up and get strapped in. I’ll go downstairs and tell them you’re coming.”

“I’ll open up a bottle of champagne for the grown-ups,” Trina says, following her out.

I don’t know why I’m so nervous. It’s only Peter. I guess prom really is its own kind of magic. The last thing I do is put on Stormy’s ring, and I think of how she must be looking down on me right now, happy I’m wearing her ring on prom night, in honor of her and all the dances she went to.

When I come down the stairs, Peter is sitting on the couch with his mom. He is shaking his knee up and down, which is how I know he’s nervous too. As soon as he sees me, he stands up.

He raises his eyebrows. “You look—wow.” For the past week, he’s been asking for details on what my dress looks like, and I held him at bay for the surprise, which I’m glad I did, because it was worth it to see the look on his face.

“You look wow too.” His tux fits him so nicely, you’d think it was custom, but it’s not; it’s a rental from After Hours Formal Wear. I wonder if Mrs. Kavinsky made a few sly adjustments. She’s a marvel with a needle and thread. I wish guys could wear tuxedos more often, though I suppose that would take some of the thrill away.

Peter slides my corsage on my wrist; it is white ranunculus and baby’s breath, and it’s the exact corsage I would have picked for myself. I’m already thinking of how I’ll hang it over my bed so it dries just so.

Kitty is dressed up too; she has on her favorite dress, so she can be in the pictures. When Peter pins a daisy corsage on her, her face goes pink with pleasure, and he winks at me. We take a picture of me and her, one of me and Peter and her, and then she says in her bossy way, “Now just one of me and Peter,” and I’m pushed off to the side with Trina, who laughs.

“The boys her age are in for it,” she says to me and Peter’s mom, who is smiling too.

“Why am I not in any of these pictures?” Daddy wonders, so of course we do a round with him too, and a few with Trina and Mrs. Kavinsky.

Then we take pictures outside, by the dogwood tree, by Peter’s car, on the front steps, until Peter says, “Enough pictures! We’re going to miss the whole thing.” When we go to his car, he opens the door for me gallantly.

On the way over, he keeps looking at me. I keep my eyes trained straight ahead, but I can see him in my periphery. I’ve never felt so admired. This must be how Stormy felt all the time.

As soon as we get to prom, I tell Peter we have to get in line to take our official prom picture with the professional

photographer. He says we should just wait till the line dies down, but I insist. I want a good one for my scrapbook, before my hair goes flat. We do the requisite prom pose, with Peter standing behind me, his hands on my hips. The photographer lets us take a look at our picture, and Peter insists on taking another one because he doesn't like the way his hair looks.

After we take our picture, we find all of our friends on the dance floor. Darrell has matched his tie to Pammy's dress—lavender. Chris is wearing a tight black bandage dress—not unlike the one Kitty picked out for me to wear when she and Margot and I went shopping. Lucas looks like an English dandy in his suit, which is tailored to his body just beautifully. I finally convinced the two of them to come, by suggesting they just “stop by.” Chris said she was still going clubbing with her work friends, but from the looks of it, she isn't going anywhere anytime soon. She's getting so much attention in her bandage dress.

“Style” comes on and we all go crazy, screaming in each other's faces and jumping up and down. Peter goes craziest of all. He keeps asking me if I'm having fun. He only asks out loud once, but with his eyes he asks me again and again. They are bright and hopeful, alight with expectation. With my eyes I tell him, *Yes yes yes I am having fun.*

We're starting to get the hang of slow dancing, too. Maybe we should take a ballroom-dancing class when I get to UVA so we can actually get good at it.

I tell him this, and fondly he says, “You always want to take things to the next level. Next-level chocolate chip cookies.”

“I gave up on those.”

“Next-level Halloween costumes.”

“I like for things to feel special.” At this, Peter smiles down at me and I say, “It's just too bad we'll never dance cheek to cheek.”

“Maybe we could order you some dancing stilts.”

“Oh, you mean high heels?”

He snickers. “I don’t think there’s such a thing as ten-inch heels.”

I ignore him. “And it’s too bad your noodle arms aren’t strong enough to pick me up.”

Peter lets out a roar like an injured lion and swoops me up and swings me around, just like I knew he would. It’s a rare thing, to know someone so well, whether they’ll pivot left or right. Outside of my family, I think he might be the person I know best of all.

Of course Peter wins prom king. Prom queen is Ashanti Dickson. I’m just relieved it isn’t Genevieve up there, slow dancing with him with a tiara on her head. Ashanti is nearly Peter’s height, so the two of them actually can dance cheek to cheek, though they don’t. Peter looks out at me and winks. I’m standing off to the side with Marshawn Hopkins, Ashanti’s date. He leans over to me and says, “When they come back, we should ignore them and just dance away,” which makes me laugh.

I’m proud of Peter out there, at how he dances so tall, with his back so straight. At a pivotal moment in the song, Peter dips Ashanti, and everyone hoots and hollers and stomps their feet, and I’m proud of that, too. People are so sincere in their affection for him; they can all celebrate Peter because he is nice, and he makes everyone feel good. He just gives the night a little extra shine, and they are glad for it, and so am I. I’m happy he gets this send-off.

One last dance.

We’re both quiet. It’s not over yet. We still have the whole summer ahead. But high school, the two of us here together, Lara Jean and Peter as we are today, that part is done. We’ll never be here exactly like this again.

I’m wondering if he’s feeling sad too, and then he whispers, “Check out Gabe over there trying to casually rest his hand on Keisha’s butt.”



He turns me slightly so I can see. Gabe's hand is indeed hovering at Keisha Wood's lower back/butt area, like an indecisive butterfly looking for a landing spot. I giggle. This is why I like Peter so much. He sees things I don't see.

"I know what our song should be," he says.

"What?"

And then, like magic, Al Green's voice fills the hotel ballroom. "Let's Stay Together."

"You made them play this," I accuse. I'm tearing up a little bit.

He grins. "It's fate."

*Whatever you want to do ... is all right with me-ee-ee.*

Peter takes my hand and puts it on his heart. "Let's, let's stay together," he sings. His voice is clear and true, everything I love about him.

On the way to after-prom, Peter says he's hungry, and can we stop at the diner first.

"I think there's going to be pizza at after-prom," I say. "Why don't we just eat there?"

"But I want pancakes," he whines.

We pull into the diner parking lot, and after we park, he gets out of the car and runs around to the passenger side to open my door. "So gentlemanly tonight," I say, which makes him grin.

We walk up to the diner, and he opens the door for me grandly.

"I could get used to this royal treatment," I say.

"Hey, I open doors for you," he protests.

We walk inside, and I stop short. Our booth, the one we always sit in, has pale pink balloons tied around it. There's a round cake in the center of the table, tons of candles, pink frosting with sprinkles and *Happy Birthday, Lara Jean* scrawled in

white frosting. Suddenly I see people's heads pop up from under the booths and from behind menus—all of our friends, still in their prom finery: Lucas, Gabe, Gabe's date Keisha, Darrell, Pammy, Chris. "Surprise!" everyone screams.

I spin around. "Oh my God, Peter!"

He's still grinning. He looks at his watch. "It's midnight. Happy birthday, Lara Jean."

I leap up and hug him. "This is just exactly what I wanted to do on my prom night birthday and I didn't even know it." Then I let go of him and run over to the booth.

Everyone gets out and hugs me. "I didn't even know people knew it was my birthday tomorrow! I mean today!" I say.

"Of course we knew it was your birthday," Lucas says.

Darrell says, "My boy's been planning this for weeks."

"It was so endearing," Pammy says. "He called me to ask what kind of pan he should use for the cake."

Chris says, "He called me, too. I was like, how the hell should I know?"

"And you!" I hit Chris on the arm. "I thought you were leaving to go clubbing!"

"I still might after I steal some fries. My night's just getting started, babe." She pulls me in for a hug and gives me a kiss on the cheek. "Happy birthday, girl."

I turn to Peter and say, "I can't believe you did this."

"I baked that cake myself," he brags. "Box, but still." He takes off his jacket and pulls a lighter out of his jacket pocket and starts lighting the candles. Gabe pulls out a lit candle and helps him. Then Peter hops his butt on the table and sits down, his legs hanging off the edge. "Come on."

I look around. "Um ..."

That's when I hear the opening notes of "If You Were Here" by the Thompson Twins. My hands fly to my cheeks. I can't believe it. Peter's recreating the end scene from *Sixteen Candles*, when Molly Ringwald and Jake Ryan sit on a table with a birthday cake in between them. When we watched the movie a few months ago, I said it was the most romantic thing I'd ever seen. And now he's doing it for me.

"Hurry up and get up there before all the candles melt, Lara Jean," Chris calls out.

Darrell and Gabe help hoist me onto the table, careful not to set my dress on fire. Peter says, "Okay, now you look at me adoringly, and I lean forward like this."

Chris comes forward and puffs out my skirt a bit. "Roll up your sleeve a little higher," she instructs Peter, looking from her phone to us. Peter obeys, and she nods. "Looks good, looks good." Then she runs back to her spot and starts to snap. It takes no effort on my part at all to look at Peter adoringly tonight.

When I blow out the candles and make my wish, I wish that I will always feel for Peter the way I do right now.

*THE NEIGHBORHOOD POOL ALWAYS OPENS* up on Memorial Day weekend. When we were little, Margot and I would count down the days. Our mom would pack ham and cheese sandwiches wrapped in wax paper, carrot sticks, and a big jug of apple water. Apple water was watered down sugar-free apple juice, but mostly water. I begged for soda out of the machine, or fruit punch, but no. Mommy would slather us up with sunscreen the same way she slathered butter on a turkey. Kitty used to scream her head off; she was too impatient for the rubdown. Kitty's always been impatient; she's always wanted more, now. It's funny how much of who we are as babies is who we are as we get older. I'd never have known it if it weren't for Kitty. She still makes the same screwy faces.

Kitty isn't doing swim team this year; she says it isn't fun anymore now that none of her friends are doing it. When she didn't know I was watching, I saw her looking at the meet schedule on the community board with wistfulness in her eyes. I guess that's part of growing up, too—saying good-bye to the things you used to love.

Everyone's lawns are freshly cut, and the air smells of clovers and green. The first crickets of summer are chirping. This is the soundtrack of my summer and every summer. Peter and I have staked our claim on the lounge chairs farthest away from the kiddie pool, because it's less noisy. I'm studying for my French final, or trying to, at least.

"Come over here so I can get your shoulders first," I call out to Kitty, who is standing by the pool with her friend Brielle.

"You know I don't burn," she calls back, and it's true; her shoulders are already tanned like golden brioche. By the end of summer they'll be dark as the crust on whole wheat bread. Kitty's hair is slicked back, a towel around her shoulders. She's all arms and legs now.

“Just come over here,” I say.

Kitty trots over to the lounge chairs Peter and I are sitting on, her flip-flops clacking against the pavement.

I spray her with the sunscreen and rub it into her shoulders. “It doesn’t matter if you don’t burn. Protect your skin so you don’t end up looking like an old leather bag.” That’s what Stormy used to tell me.

Kitty giggles at “old leather bag.” “Like Mrs. Letty. Her skin is hot dog-colored.”

“Well, I wasn’t talking about any one person in particular. But yeah. She should’ve worn sunscreen in her younger days. Let that be a lesson to you, my sister.” Mrs. Letty is our neighbor, and her skin hangs on her like crepe.

Peter puts on his sunglasses. “You guys are mean.”

“Says the guy who once toilet-papered her lawn!”

Kitty giggles and steals a sip of my Coke. “You did that?”

“All lies and propaganda,” Peter says blithely.

As the day heats up, Peter convinces me to put down my French book and jump in the pool with him. The pool is crowded with little kids, no one as old as us. Steve Bledell has a pool at his house, but I wanted to come here, for old times’ sake.

“Don’t you dare dunk me,” I warn. Peter starts circling me like a shark, coming closer and closer. “I’m serious!”

He makes a dive for me and grabs me by the waist, but he doesn’t dunk me; he kisses me. His skin is cool and smooth against mine; so are his lips.

I push him away and whisper, “Don’t kiss me—there are kids around!”

“So?”

“So nobody wants to see teenagers kissing in the pool where kids are trying to play. It isn’t right.” I know I sound like

a priss, but I don't care. When I was little, and there were teenagers horsing around in the pool, I always felt nervous to go in, because it was like the pool was theirs.

Peter bursts out laughing. "You're funny, Covey." Swimming sideways, he says, "It isn't right," and then starts laughing again.

The lifeguard blows the whistle for adult swim, and all the kids get out, including Peter and me. We go back to the lounge chairs, and Peter pushes them closer together.

I turn on my side and, squinting up at the sun, I ask him, "How old do you think you have to be to stay in the pool for adult swim? Eighteen or twenty-one?"

"I don't know. Twenty-one?" He's scrolling on his phone.

"Maybe it's eighteen. We should ask." I put on my sunglasses and start to sing "Sixteen Going on Seventeen" from *The Sound of Music*. "You need someone older and wiser, telling you what to do." I tap him on the nose for emphasis.

"Hey, I'm older than you," he objects.

I run my hand along Peter's cheek and sing, "I am seventeen going on eighteen, I-I-I'll take care of you."

"Promise?" he says.

"Sing it just once for me," I prompt. Peter gives me a look. "Please? I love it when you sing. Your voice is so clean."

He can't help but smile. Peter never met a compliment he didn't smile at. "I don't know the words," he protests.

"Yes you do." I pretend to wave a wand in his face. "*Imperio!* Wait—do you know what that means?"

"It's ... an unforgivable curse?"

"Yes. Very impressive, Peter K. And what does it do?"

"It makes you do things you don't want to do."

"Very good, young wizard. There's hope for you yet. Now sing!"

“You little witch.” He looks around to see if anyone is listening, and then he softly sings, “I need someone older and wiser telling me what to do... . You are seventeen going on eighteen ... I’ll depend on you.”

I clap my hands in delight. Is there anything more intoxicating than making a boy bend to your will? I roll closer to him and throw my arms around his neck.

“Now you’re the one making PDAs!” he says.

“You really do have a pretty voice, Peter. You never should’ve quit chorus.”

“The only reason I ever took chorus is because all the girls were in chorus.”

“Well, then forget about joining a chorus at UVA. No a cappella groups either.” I mean it to be a joke, truly, but Peter looks bothered. “I’m kidding! Join all the a cappella groups you want! The Hullabahoos are all guys, anyway.”

“I don’t want to join an a cappella group. And I’m not planning on looking at other girls, either.”

Oh. “Of course you’ll look at other girls. You have eyes, don’t you? I swear, that’s just as silly as when people say they don’t see color. Everyone sees everyone. You can’t help but see.”

“That’s not what I meant!”

“I know, I know.” I sit up and put my French book back in my lap. “Are you really not going to study at all for your US history final on Wednesday?”

“All I need to do at this point is pass,” he reminds me.

“It must be nice, it must be nice,” I sing.

“Hey, it’s not like William and Mary is taking away your spot if you get a C in French,” Peter says.

“I’m not worried about French. I’m worried about my calculus exam on Friday.”

“Okay, well, it’s not like they’ll kick you out for getting a C in calculus, either.”

“I guess so, but I still want to finish well,” I say. The countdown is really on, now that May is nearly over. Just one more week left of school. I stretch out my arms and legs and squint up into the sun and let out a happy sigh. “Let’s come here every day next weekend.”

“I can’t. I’m going on that training weekend, remember?”

“Already?”

“Yeah. It’s weird that the season is over and we won’t be playing any more games together.”

Our school’s lacrosse team didn’t make it to state championships. They knew it was a long shot, because as Peter likes to say, “There’s only one of me.” Ha! Next weekend he is off to a training camp with his new team at UVA.

“Are you excited to meet your teammates?” I ask him.

“I already know a few of the guys, but yeah. It’ll be cool.” He reaches over and starts braiding a section of my hair. “I think I’m getting better at this.”

“You have the whole summer to practice,” I say, leaning forward so he can reach more of my hair. He doesn’t say anything.



## 24

*THE END OF SCHOOL ALWAYS HAS A PARTICULAR* feeling to it. It's the same every year, but this year the feeling is amplified, because there won't be a next year. There's an air of things closing down. Teachers wear shorts and T-shirts to class. They show movies while they clean out their desks. Nobody has the energy to care anymore. We're all just counting down, passing time. Everyone knows where they're going, and the right now already feels like it's in the rearview. Suddenly life feels fast and slow at the same time. It's like being in two places at once.

Finals go well; even calculus isn't as bad as I thought. And just like that, my high school career is coming to an end. Peter's gone away on his training weekend. It's only been one day and I'm already longing for him the way I long for Christmas in July. Peter is my cocoa in a cup, my red mittens, my Christmas morning feeling.

He said he'd call as soon as he gets back from the gym, so I keep my phone by my side, with the volume up. Earlier this morning he called when I was in the shower, and by the time I saw it, he was gone again. Is this what the future looks like? It'll be different when I have classes and a schedule of my own, but for now it feels like I am standing on top of a lighthouse, waiting for my love's ship to come in. For a romantic kind of person, it's not an altogether unpleasant feeling, not for now, anyway. It'll be different when it's not so novel anymore, when not seeing him every day is the new normal, but for now, just for now, longing is its own kind of perverse delight.

Late afternoon, I go downstairs in my long white nightgown that Margot says makes me look like *Little House on the Prairie* and Kitty says makes me look like a ghost. I sit at the counter with one leg up and open a can of cling peaches and eat them with a fork, right out of the can. There's something so satisfying about biting into the skin of a syrupy cling peach.

I let out a sigh, and Kitty looks up from her computer and says, “What are you sighing about so loudly?”

“I miss ... Christmas.” I bite into another slice of peach.

She brightens. “So do I! I think we should get a few deer to go in our front yard this year. Not the cheap kind, the classy wire kind that come covered in lights.”

I sigh again and set down the can. “Sure.” The syrup is starting to feel heavy in my stomach.

“Quit sighing!”

“Why does sighing feel so good?” I muse.

Kitty heaves a big sigh. “Well, it’s basically the same thing as breathing. And it feels good to breathe. Air is delicious.”

“It is, isn’t it?” I spear another slice of peach. “I wonder where you buy those kinds of deer. Target will probably sell them.”

“We should go to that store the Christmas Mouse. We can stock up on a bunch of stuff. Don’t they have one in Williamsburg?”

“Yeah, on the way to the outlet malls. You know, we could use a new wreath, too. And if they have lavender lights, that could be cool. It would give it a winter-fairyland kind of feeling. Maybe the whole tree could be in pastels.”

Dryly she says, “Let’s not get carried away.”

I ignore her. “Don’t forget that Trina has a lot of her own holiday stuff. She has a whole Christmas village, remember? It’s all packed away in those boxes in the garage.” Trina’s village isn’t just a little nativity scene. It has a barber shop and a bakery and a toy store; it’s intense. “I don’t even know where we’ll put it.”

She shrugs. “We’ll probably have to throw away some of our old stuff.” God, Kitty doesn’t have an ounce of sentimentality in her! In that same practical tone she adds, “Not everything we have is so great anyway. Our tree skirt is

scraggly and chewed-up-looking. Why keep something just because it's old? New is almost always better than old, you know."

I look away. Our mom bought that tree skirt at a Christmas fair the elementary school had. One of the PTA moms was a knitter. Margot and I fought over which to pick; she liked the red with tartan trim, and I liked the white because I thought it would look like our tree was standing in snow. Mommy went with the red, because she said the white would get dirty fast. The red has held up well, but Kitty's right; it's probably time to retire it. I'll never let her throw it away though, and neither will Margot. At the very least, I'll cut off a square and put it in my hat box for safekeeping.

"Trina has a nice tree skirt," I say. "It's white fur. Jamie Fox-Pickle will love to snuggle with it."

My phone buzzes, and I jump to see if it's Peter, but it's only Daddy saying he's picking up Thai food for dinner, and do we want pad thai or pad see yew? I sigh again.

"I swear, Lara Jean, if you sigh one more time!" Kitty threatens. Eyeing me, she says, "I know it's not really Christmas you're missing. Peter's been gone for like one day and you're acting like he went off to war or something."

I ignore her and type back pad see yew out of pure spite, because I know Kitty prefers pad thai.

That's when I get the e-mail notification. It's from UNC admissions. My application has been updated. I click on the link. *Congratulations ...*

I'm off the wait list.

What in the *what?*

I sit there, stunned, reading it over and over. I, Lara Jean Song Covey, was accepted to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. I can't believe it. I never thought I'd get in. But I'm in.

"Lara Jean? Hello?"

Startled, I look up.

“I just asked you a question three times. What’s up with you?”

“Um ... I think I just got in to UNC Chapel Hill.”

Kitty’s jaw drops. “Whoa!”

“Weird, right?” I shake my head in wonder. Who’d have ever thought it? Not me. I’d all but forgotten about UNC after I got wait-listed.

“UNC is a really hard school to get into, Lara Jean!”

“I know.” I’m still in a daze. After I didn’t get into UVA, I felt so low, like I wasn’t good enough to be there. But UNC! It’s even harder to get into UNC out of state than it is UVA in state.

Kitty’s smile fades a little. “But aren’t you going to William and Mary? Didn’t you already send in your deposit? And aren’t you transferring to UVA next year anyway?”

UVA. For those few seconds, I forgot about transferring to UVA and I was just happy about UNC. “That’s the plan,” I say. My phone buzzes, and my heart jumps, thinking it’s Peter, but’s it’s not. It’s a text from Chris.

Wanna go to Starb

I write back, GUESS WHAT. I got into UNC!

OMG!

I’m calling you

A second later my phone rings and Chris screams, “Holy shit!”

“Thank you! I mean, wow. I just ... it’s such a great school. I figured—”

“So what are you going to do?” she demands.

“Oh.” I glance over at Kitty, who is watching with eagle eyes. “Nothing. I’m still going to William and Mary.”

“But isn’t UNC a better school?”

“It’s higher ranked. I don’t know. I’ve never been there.”

“Let’s go,” she says.

“To visit? When?”

“Right now! Spontaneous road trip!”

“Are you crazy? It’s four hours away!”

“No it’s not. It’s only three hours and twenty-five minutes. I just looked it up.”

“By the time we get there, it’ll be—”

“Six o’clock. Big deal. We’ll walk around, get dinner, and then drive back. Why not! We’re young. And you need to know what you’re saying no to.” Before I can protest again, she says, “I’m picking you up in ten minutes. Pack some snacks for the road.” Then she hangs up.

Kitty is eyeing me. “You’re going to North Carolina? Right now?”

I’m feeling pretty euphoric at the moment. I laugh and say, “I guess!”

“Does that mean you’re going there instead of William and Mary?”

“No, it’s just—I’m just going to visit. Nothing’s changed. Don’t tell Daddy, though.”

“Why not?”

“Just—because. You can tell him I’m with Chris, and that I won’t be at dinner, but don’t mention anything about UNC.”

And then I’m getting dressed and flying around the house like a banshee, throwing things into a tote. Dried wasabi peas, Pocky sticks, bottled water. Chris and I have never gone on a road trip together before; I’ve always wanted to do that with her. And what would it hurt to just look at Chapel Hill, just to see? I won’t be going there, but it’s still fun to think about.

Chris and I are halfway to Chapel Hill before I realize my phone is dying and I forgot to pack my charger. “Do you have

a car charger?" I ask her.

She's singing along to the radio. "Nope."

"Shoot!" We've eaten up most of her phone battery using the GPS, too. I feel a little uneasy about traveling out of state without a full charge on my phone. Plus, I told Kitty not to tell Daddy where I was going. What if something were to happen? "What time are we getting back, do you think?"

"Quit worrying, Granny Lara Jean. We'll be fine." She rolls down her window and mine and starts fumbling around for her purse. I get her purse from the floor of the backseat and pull out her cigarettes before she wrecks the car. When we're at a red light, she lights her cigarette and inhales deeply. "We'll be like pioneers. It just adds to the adventure. Our forefathers didn't have cell phones either, you know."

"Just remember, we're only going to look. I'm still going to William and Mary."

"You just remember—options are everything," Chris says.

That's what Margot's always telling me. Those two have more in common than they think.

We spend the rest of the trip surfing radio stations and singing along and talking about whether or not Chris should dye her hair pink in the front. I'm surprised by how fast the time goes. We get to Chapel Hill in just under three hours and thirty minutes, like Chris said we would. We find a parking spot right on Franklin Street, which I guess is their main street. The first thing that strikes me is how similar UNC's campus is to UVA's. Lots of maple trees, lots of green, lots of brick buildings.

"It's so pretty, isn't it?" I stop to admire a pink flowering dogwood tree. "I'm surprised they have so many dogwood trees, since it's Virginia's state flower. What do you suppose is North Carolina's state flower?"

"No idea. Can we please eat? I'm starving." Chris has the attention span of a fly, and when she is hungry, everybody better watch out.

I put my arm around her waist. I'm suddenly feeling very tender toward her for taking me on this trip to see what might have been. "Let's fill that belly up, then. What do you want? Pizza? A hoagie? Chinese food?"

She puts her arm around my shoulder. Her mood is already picking up at the mention of different cuisines. "You pick. Anything but Chinese food. Or pizza. You know what, let's get sushi."

A couple of guys pass on the street, and Chris calls out, "Hey!"

They turn around. "What's up?" one says. He's black, handsome, tall, with muscular arms in a CAROLINA WRESTLING T-shirt.

"Where's the best sushi around here?" Chris asks.

"I don't eat sushi, so I can't really say." He looks at his red-haired friend, who is less cute but still cute. "Where do you go?"

"Spicy Nine," he says, eyeing Chris. "Just go down Franklin that way and you'll run right into it." He winks at her, and they go back to walking in the other direction.

"Should we go after them?" she says, her eyes following them as they walk away. "Find out what they're up to tonight?"

I steer her in the direction they pointed us to. "I thought you were hungry," I remind her.

"Oh yeah," she says. "So that's one point in the UNC column, am I right? Hotter guys?"

"I'm sure William and Mary has good-looking guys too." Quickly I add, "Not that it matters to me, because I obviously have a boyfriend." Who still hasn't called, mind you. My phone is down to 5 percent, so by the time he does, it'll be too late.

After we eat sushi, we wander around on Franklin Street, stopping in stores. I consider buying a UNC Tar Heels basketball hat for Peter, but he probably wouldn't wear it, since he'll be a Wahoo.

We pass a pole with signs on it, and Chris stops short. She points to a sign for a music hall called Cat's Cradle. A band called Meow Mixx is playing tonight. "Let's go!" Chris says.

"Have you ever heard of Meow Mixx before?" I ask. "What kind of music do they play?"

"Who cares. Let's just go!" She grabs my hand. Laughing, we run down the street together.

There's a line to get inside, and the band has already started to play; snatches of dancey music float through the open door. A couple of girls are waiting in line in front of us, and Chris throws her arms around me and tells them, "My best friend just got into UNC."

I feel warm inside hearing Chris call me her best friend—to know that we still matter to each other, even though she has her work friends and I have Peter. It makes me feel sure that when she's in Costa Rica, or Spain, or wherever she ends up, we'll still be close.

One of the girls hugs me and says, "Congratulations! You're going to love it here." Her hair is in milkmaid braids, and she's wearing a T-shirt that says HILLARY IS MY PRESIDENT.

Adjusting the lollipop enamel pin in her hair, her friend says, "Put down Ehaus or Craige for your dorm. They're the most fun."

I feel sheepish as I say, "Actually, I'm not coming here; we just came to visit. For fun."

"Oh, where are you going?" she asks me, a slight frown on her freckled face.

"William and Mary," I tell her.

"It's not definite though," Chris butts in.

"It's pretty definite," I say.

"I came here over Princeton," the braided girl tells me. "That's how much I loved it when I visited. You'll see. I'm Hollis, by the way."



We all introduce ourselves and the girls tell me about the English department, and going to basketball games at the Dean Dome, and the places on Franklin Street that don't card. Chris, who zoned out during the English department part of the conversation, is suddenly all ears. Before we go inside, Hollis gives me her number. "Just in case you come here," she says.

When we get inside, the venue is pretty full, lots of people standing near the stage, drinking beers and dancing to the music. The band is actually just two guys with guitars and a laptop, and their sound is sort of electronica pop. It fills the whole room. It's a mixed crowd in the audience: some older guys in rock band T-shirts and beards, closer to my dad's age, but also a lot of students. Chris tries to wipe off the stamp on her hand to get us beers, but is unsuccessful. I don't mind, because I don't really like beer, and also, she still has to drive us back tonight. I start asking around to see if anyone has a phone charger, which Chris slaps my arm for. "We're on an adventure!" she yells. "We don't need cell phones for an adventure!"

Then she grabs my hand and pulls me along with her to the edge of the stage. We dance our way to the middle, and we jump along to the music, even though we don't know any of the songs. One of the guys went to UNC, and midway through the show, he leads the crowd in the Tar Heels fight song. "I'm a Tar Heel born, I'm a Tar Heel bred, and when I die I'm a Tar Heel dead!" The crowd goes nuts, the whole room is shaking. Chris and I don't know the words, but we shout, "Go to hell, Duke!" along with everyone else. Our hair swings wildly in our faces; I'm sweaty, and suddenly I'm having the best time. "This is so much fun," I scream in Chris's face.

"Same!" she screams back.

After the second set Chris declares that she is hungry, so we are off into the night.

We walk up the street for what feels like ages when we find a place called Cosmic Cantina. It's a tiny Mexican place with a long line, which Chris says must mean they either have good

food or really cheap food. Chris and I inhale our burritos; they are stuffed full with rice and beans and melting cheese and homemade pico de gallo. It tastes pretty plain, except for the hot sauce. So hot my lips burn. If my phone weren't dead and Chris's phone weren't nearly dead, I'd have searched online for the best burrito in Chapel Hill. But then we might not have found this place. For some reason it's the best burrito of my life.

After we eat our burritos, I say, "What time is it? We should head back soon if we want to get back before one."

"But you've barely seen any of campus," Chris says. "Isn't there anything you want to see in particular? Like, I don't know, a boring library or something?"

"Nobody knows me like you do, Chris," I say, and she bats her eyelashes. "There is one place I want to see ... it's in all the brochures. The Old Well."

"Then let's go," she says.

As we walk, I ask her, "Does Chapel Hill seem like Charlottesville to you?"

"No, it seems better."

"You're just like Kitty. You think everything new is better," I say.

"And you think everything old is better," she counters.

She has a point there. We walk the rest of the way in companionable silence. I'm thinking about the ways UNC does and doesn't remind me of UVA. The campus is quiet, I guess because most kids have gone home for summer break. There are still people walking around, though: girls in sundresses and sandals and boys in khaki shorts and UNC baseball caps.

We cross the green lawn, and there it is: the Old Well. It sits between two brick residence halls. It's a small rotunda, like a mini version of the one at UVA, and there is a drinking fountain in the center. There's a big white oak tree right

behind it, and there are azalea bushes all around, hot pink like a lipstick color Stormy used to wear. It's enchanting.

"Are you supposed to make a wish or something?" Chris asks, stepping up to the fountain.

"I think I heard that on the first day of classes, students take a sip of water from the fountain for good luck," I say. "Either good luck or straight As."

"I won't need straight As where I'm going, but I'll take the luck."

Chris bends down to take a sip, and a couple of girls walking by caution, "Frat guys pee in that fountain all the time—don't do it."

Her head snaps back up and she jumps away from the fountain. "Ew!" Hopping down, she says, "Let's take a selfie."

"We can't; our phones are dead, remember? We'll just have to have the memory in our hearts like the old days."

"Good point," Chris says. "Should we hit the road?"

I hesitate. I don't know why, but I'm not ready to leave just yet. What if I never get to come back? I spot a bench facing one of the brick buildings and go over and sit down, "Let's stay a little bit longer."

I hug my knees to my chest and Chris sits down next to me. Fiddling with the stack of bracelets on her arm, she says, "I wish I could come here with you."

"To college or to UNC?" I'm so caught off guard by the pensive note in her voice that I don't stop to correct her, to remind her that I won't be coming here either.

"Either. Both. Don't get me wrong. I'm psyched about Costa Rica. It's just ... I don't know. Like, what if I'm missing out by not going to college at the same time as everybody else." She looks at me then, a question in her eyes.

I say, "College will be here waiting for you, Chris. Next year, the year after. Whenever you want it."

Chris twists around and looks out at the lawn. “Maybe. We’ll see. I can picture you here, Lara Jean. Can’t you?”

I swallow. “I have a plan. William and Mary for a year, then UVA.”

“You mean you and Peter have a plan. That’s why you’re holding back.”

“Okay, Peter and I have a plan. But it’s not the only reason.”

“But it’s the main one.”

I can’t deny it. The thing that’s missing no matter where I go, if it’s William and Mary or if it’s here, is Peter.

“So why not go here for a year, then?” Chris asks me. “What’s the difference if you’re here or William and Mary? An hour? Either way, you’re not at UVA. Why not be here?” She doesn’t wait for me to answer her; she hops up and runs out onto the lawn, and she kicks off her shoes and does a series of cartwheels.

What if I came here and I ended up loving it? What if, after a year, I didn’t want to leave? What then? But wouldn’t it be great if I loved it? Isn’t that the whole point? Why bet on not loving a place? Why not take a chance and bet on happiness?

I lie down and stretch my legs out on the bench and look up at the sky. There is a canopy of tree branches high above my head—one tree sits by the building; the other is planted in the lawn. Their branches reach across the walkway and meet in the middle. What if Peter and I could be like these two trees, far apart but still touching? Because I think maybe I could be happy here. I think maybe I could picture myself here too.

What was it Stormy said? The last day I saw her, the day she gave me her ring? *Never say no when you really want to say yes.*

When Chris pulls up to my house, it’s just after three a.m. and every single light is on. Gulp. I turn to Chris. “Come in with me?” I plead.

“No way. You’re on your own. I’ve gotta go home and deal with my own mom.”

I hug Chris good-bye, get out of the car, and trudge up to the front steps. The door flies open as soon as I’m fumbling around in my bag for my keys. It’s Kitty, in her big sleep T-shirt. “You’re in trouble,” she whispers.

I step inside, and Daddy’s right behind her, still dressed in his work clothes. Trina’s on the couch, giving me a look like, *You’re in for it, and I feel sympathy for you, but also, you could’ve at least called.* “Where have you been all night!” he shouts. “And why weren’t you answering your phone!”

I shrink backward. “I ran out of battery. I’m sorry. I didn’t realize it had gotten so late.” I briefly consider making a joke about how this is why millenials should wear watches, to lighten the mood, but I don’t think a joke will do the trick this time.

Daddy starts pacing around the living room. “So why didn’t you use Chris’s phone!”

“Chris’s phone died too... .”

“We’ve been worried half to death! Kitty says you left with Chris without saying where you were going... .” At this, Kitty gives me a look. “I was five seconds from calling the police, Lara Jean! If you hadn’t walked in the door when you did—”

“I’m sorry,” I begin. “I’m really sorry.”

“This is just so irresponsible.” Daddy’s muttering to himself, not even listening. “Lara Jean, you might be eighteen, but—”

From the couch, Trina says, “Dan, please don’t say, ‘but you’re still living under my roof.’ It’s such a cliché.”

Daddy spins around and says to her, “It’s a cliché for a reason! It’s a good line! It’s a very good line.”

“Lara Jean, just tell them where you were,” Kitty says, impatient.

Daddy shoots an accusing look her way. “Kitty, did you know where she went?”

“She made me swear not to tell!”

Before he can reply, I say, “I was in North Carolina with Chris.”

He throws his hands up in the air. “In North Carolina! What in the—what in the world? You crossed state lines without even telling me? With a dead phone battery, to boot!”

I feel sick to my stomach for worrying him. I don’t know why I didn’t call. I could’ve borrowed somebody’s phone. I guess I just got carried away with the night, with being there. I didn’t want to think about home or real life. “I’m sorry,” I whisper. “I’m really, really sorry. I should’ve called.”

He shakes his head. “Why were you in North Carolina?”

“I was in North Carolina because ...” I pause. If I say it now, that’s it. “Because I got into UNC.”

Daddy’s eyes widen. “You did? That’s—that’s wonderful. But what about William and Mary?”

Smiling, I lift my shoulders into a shrug.

Trina lets out a scream and jumps up from the couch, dropping the flannel blanket she had wrapped around her and nearly tripping herself in the process. Daddy grabs me into his arms and sweeps me into a hug, and Trina joins in. “Oh my God, Lara Jean!” she says, slapping me on the back. “You’re gonna be a Tar Heel!”

“I’m happy you’re happy,” Daddy says. He wipes a tear from his eyes. “I’m still furious with you for not calling. But I’m also happy.”

“So you’re really going, then?” Kitty asks from her perch on the stairs.

I look over at her. I smile shakily and say, “Yeah, I’m going.” Peter and I will find a way. We’ll make it work.

I tell them every little detail of the night: going to a show at Cat's Cradle, eating burritos at Cosmic Cantina, the Old Well. Trina makes popcorn, and it's nearly dawn before any of us goes to sleep. As Daddy shuffles off to bed, Trina whispers to me, "Your daddy just aged ten years in one night. Look at him walking like he needs a cane. Thanks to you, I'm marrying an old man." We both start laughing, and neither of us can stop. I think we're delirious from lack of sleep. Trina rolls onto her back and kicks her legs in the air, she is laughing so hard. Kitty, who has fallen asleep on the couch, wakes up and says, "What's so funny?" which only makes us laugh harder. On his way up the stairs, Daddy stops and turns around and shakes his head at the two of us.

"You guys are already ganging up on me," he says.

"Face it, Daddy. You've always lived in a matriarchy." I blow him a kiss.

He frowns. "Hey, don't think I've forgotten about you staying out all night without even a phone call home."

Whoops. Maybe too soon for such gaiety. As he trudges up the stairs, I call out, "I truly am sorry!"

Sorry for not calling, but not sorry for going.

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## 25

*WHEN I WAKE UP, I LOLLY ABOUT IN MY* bed for a while, stretching out my arms and legs like a big X, reaching north, south, east, west. Last night feels like a dream. Is it really true? Am I really going to UNC?

Yes, yes I really am. How crazy, how thrilling that your whole life trajectory can change in just one night. I've always been scared of change, but right now I don't feel that way. I feel excited. I'm seeing now what a privilege it is, to be excited about where I'm going. Peter and Chris and Lucas, they're going where they want to go, but my future felt like a second choice because it was, no matter how great a school William and Mary is. UNC is a choice I didn't even know I had, like a door that magically appeared, a door that could lead anywhere.

When I'm done with my reverie, I look at my clock and see that I've slept the whole day away. I sit up, turn my phone on, and see all the missed calls and voice mails from my dad and Kitty from the night before. I delete those without listening to them, so I don't have to hear the anger in Daddy's voice; then I see that Peter left me a voice mail too. When I see his name on my phone, my heart does a little dive into my stomach. There are texts, too, wondering where I am. I call him back, but he doesn't answer, so I figure he must be training. I leave a message telling him to just come over when he gets back home. We're supposed to go to Steve Bledell's party tonight. I'm nervous to tell Peter the news. Our plan was set, and now I'm changing things around, but it's not like I knew this door would open for me. He'll understand. I know he will.

I flop back on my bed and FaceTime Margot. She's outside walking, on her way somewhere. "What's up?" she asks.

"Guess what."

"What!"



“I got into UNC!”

She promptly screams and drops her phone. Thankfully, it falls in the grass. She scrambles to pick it up. She’s still screaming. “Oh my God! This is amazing! This is the best news! When did you find out?”

I roll onto my stomach. “Yesterday! Chris and I went to visit last night, and Gogo, it was so much fun. We went to see a band play, and we danced and we screamed ourselves silly. My throat is sore!”

“So wait—you’re going, right?”

“Yes!”

Margot screams again, and I laugh. “What’s UNC’s campus like?” she demands.

“Well, it’s a lot like UVA.”

“I’ve heard that. I’ve heard the campuses are very similar. The towns, too. Both liberal, but Chapel Hill maybe even a little more so. Lots of great minds there. I can’t wait to look at the course book with you.” She starts walking again. “You’re going to love it there. Maggie Cohen, she was a year above me, she *loves* it. You should talk to her.” Beaming, Margot says to me, “This is when everything begins, Lara Jean. You’ll see.”

After I get off the phone with Margot, I take a bubble bath and do all my rituals: face mask, loofah, brown sugar–lavender scrub. In the bath, I practice what I’m going to say to Peter. *There are two trees, on opposite sides, and their branches meet in the middle...* I stay in for so long, Kitty screams at me to hurry up. When I get out of the tub, I dry my hair and then curl it; I redo my nails and I even apply the lemon cuticle cream I bought but never remember to use.

Daddy, Trina, and Kitty have gone out to see a movie, so I’m all alone in the house when Peter arrives around eight. He’s wearing new UVA sweats; his hair is freshly washed and still damp. He smells like Dove soap, which I love on him. He pulls me in for a hug, leaning his body weight into me. “I’m so

sore,” he says, falling onto the living room couch. “Can we not go to Steve’s tonight? I just want to stay here and hang out with you and not have to talk to people. I’m fucking exhausted.”

“Sure,” I say, and take a deep breath to tell him my news, but then he looks up at me with weary eyes.

“Those guys on the team are in incredible shape. It was hard to keep up.”

I frown. “Hey, you’re in good shape too.”

“Not as good as them. I need to get my act together.” He rubs the back of his neck. “So are you finally gonna tell me where you were last night?”

I sit down on the couch and face him, my legs tucked under my butt. I put the backs of my hands to my cheeks, which feel flushed. Then I put them in my lap. “Well, okay.” I pause. “Are you ready for this?”

He laughs. “Yeah, I’m ready.”

“Okay. This is so crazy, but I was in North Carolina with Chris.”

Peter raises his eyebrows. “Weird. Okay. Go on.”

“I was there because ... I got into UNC!”

He blinks. “Wow. That’s ... wow. That’s awesome.”

I take another deep breath. “I didn’t think I’d want to go there, but then when Chris and I visited, the town was really charming, and the people were really nice, and there’s this bench, by the Old Well, where if you lie down and look up, two trees on opposite sides, they meet in the middle. Their branches touch, like this.” I start to demonstrate, and then I stop, because I realize Peter isn’t really listening. He’s staring into space. “What are you thinking?”

“Does this mean you’re going there now and not William and Mary?”

I hesitate. “Yes.”

He nods to himself. “I’m happy for you, I am. It just sucks that you’re going to be so far away. Like, if I had to get in my car and drive to Chapel Hill right now, I’d fall asleep at the wheel. How far away is Charlottesville from Chapel Hill? Four hours?”

I feel a sinking sensation in my stomach. “Three hours and twenty-five minutes. I know it sounds long, but I swear it goes by fast!”

“That’s double how long it takes to get from Charlottesville to William and Mary. And that’s without traffic.” He drops his head back against the couch.

“It’s not double,” I say quietly. “It’s an extra hour and a half.”

He looks over at me, and I see the regret in his eyes. “I’m sorry. I’m just really wiped right now. This is going to be a lot harder than I thought it would be. Not you and me, but college. I’m going to be at practice 24/7, and when I’m not at practice, I’m training or I’m in class or I’m sleeping. It’s gonna be intense. Nothing like high school. It’s a lot of pressure. And ... I didn’t think you’d be so far away.”

I’ve never seen him like this before. He looks so defeated. When it comes to lacrosse, to school, he’s always so easygoing, so confident. Everything’s always come easily for him. “Peter, you’re going to be great. You’re just starting out. Once you get the hang of things, it’ll be like always.” Shyly I say, “And ... we’ll get the hang of things too.”

All of a sudden he sits up straight. “You know what? Let’s go to that party.”

“Are you sure?”

“Sure. You’re all dressed up. Let’s not waste your hair.” He pulls me toward him. “Let’s celebrate your big W.”

I put my arms around him and hug him to me. His shoulders feel tight; I can feel the tension in his back. Most boys wouldn’t notice a thing like that: that I curled my hair, put

on a blouse. I try to concentrate on that and not on how he didn't really congratulate me.

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## 26

*AT STEVE BLEDELL'S HOUSE, A BUNCH OF* people are in the family room smoking pot and watching soccer on the huge flat-screen TV mounted on the wall. Lucas is here, and when I tell him my big news, he picks me up and spins me around. "You're getting out of here too!" he shouts.

"Well, I'm only going next door to North Carolina," I say, laughing. What an unexpected thrill to say those words out loud. "It's not that far."

"But it's *away*." Lucas sets me back down on the floor and puts his hands on my cheeks. "This is going to be very good for you, Lara Jean."

"You think?"

"I know it."

I'm in the kitchen getting myself a Coke when Genevieve walks in, barefoot, wearing a Virginia Tech hoodie and carrying a beer in a Virginia Tech koozie. She sways on her feet before saying, "I heard you got into Chapel Hill. Congrats."

I wait for the whammy, the underhanded little dig, but it doesn't come. She just stands there, a little drunk but sober enough. "Thank you," I say. "Congrats on Tech. I know you always wanted to go there. Your mom must be happy."

"Yeah. Did you hear Chrissy's going to Costa Rica? Lucky bitch." She takes a sip of her beer. "Chapel Hill and here are pretty far away, huh?"

"Not that far. Just three hours," I lie.

"Well, good luck with that. I hope he stays as devoted to you as he is today. But knowing him, I seriously doubt it." Then she lets out a loud belch, and the look of startled surprise on her face is so funny, I almost laugh out loud. For a second it looks like she might too, but she stops herself, glares, and leaves the kitchen.

I only catch glimpses of Peter throughout the night, talking to other people, swigging on his beer. He seems to be in a better mood. He's smiling; his face is a little flushed from the beer. He's drinking a lot more than I've seen him drink.

Close to one, I go looking all around the house for Peter, and when I find him, he's with a bunch of people playing flip cup on the Ping-Pong table in Steve's garage. They are all cracking up over something he just said. He sees me standing at the top of the steps and beckons to me. "Come play with us, Covey," he says, too loudly.

My feet stay planted on the steps. "I can't. I have to get home."

His smile slips. "All right, I'll take you."

"No, it's fine, I'll get a ride or call an Uber to come get me." I turn to leave, and Peter follows me.

"Don't do that. I'll take you," he says.

"You can't. You're drunk." I try not to make the words sound mean, but it is what it is.

He laughs. "I'm not drunk. I've only had three beers over the course of, what, three hours? I'm fine. You don't drink so you don't know, but that's nothing. I promise."

"Well, I can smell your breath, and I know you wouldn't pass a breathalyzer."

Peter peers at me. "Are you mad?"

"No. I just don't want you driving me home. You shouldn't drive yourself home either. You should just spend the night here."

"Aw, you are mad." He leans closer to me and looks around before he says, "I'm sorry for before. I should've been more excited for you. I was just tired is all."

"It's fine," I say, thought it isn't, not completely.

Stormy used to have a saying. Leave with the one you came with, unless he's a drunk—then find your own way home. I

end up getting a ride home from Lucas, and I make it before my curfew, just. After last night, I can't be pushing it.

Peter keeps texting me, and I'm petty enough to be glad he's not enjoying himself anymore. I make him wait long minutes before I text back a terse reply not to drive home tonight, and he texts back a picture of him lying on Steve's couch, with somebody's jacket as a blanket.

I can't sleep, so I go downstairs to make myself a grilled cheese sandwich. Kitty's down there too, watching late-night TV and playing a game on her phone. "Want a grilled cheese?" I ask.

"Sure," she says, looking up from her phone.

I make Kitty's first. I keep pressing the sandwich into the pan, so the bottom gets crispy and the sandwich flattens. I cut off another dab of butter and watch it melt into a puddle, still feeling a bit out of sorts from the night, when out of nowhere it comes to me. Direct contact. The bread needs direct contact with the hot pan to get the right amount of crisp.

That's it. That's the answer to my chocolate chip cookie problem. All this time, I've been using my Silpat baking sheet so the cookies don't stick to the pan. Parchment paper is the answer. It's whisper thin, unlike Silpat. With parchment paper, the dough has more direct contact with heat, and therefore the dough spreads more! Voilà, thinner cookies.

I'm so determined, I start grabbing ingredients from the pantry. If I make the dough right this minute, it can rest all night, and I'll be able to test my theory tomorrow.

I sleep in again, because there's no school thanks to teacher meetings and because I was up till three making my dough and watching TV with Kitty. When I wake up, just like the day before there are texts from Peter.

I'm sorry.

I'm a dick.

Don't be mad.

I read his texts over and over. They're spaced minutes apart, so I know he must be fretting over whether I'm still mad or not. I don't want to be mad. I just want things to go back to how they were before.

I text back:

Do you want to come over for a surprise?

He immediately replies:

ON MY WAY

"The perfect chocolate chip cookie," I intone, "should have three rings. The center should be soft and a little gooey. The middle ring should be chewy. And the outer ring should be crispy."

"I can't hear her give this speech again," Kitty says to Peter. "I just can't."

"Be patient," he says, squeezing her shoulder. "It's almost over, and then we get cookies."

"The perfect cookie is best eaten while still warm, but still delicious at room temperature."

"If you don't quit talking, they won't be warm anymore," Kitty grumbles. I shoot her a glare, but truthfully, I'm glad she's here to be a buffer between Peter and me. Her presence makes things feel normal.

"In the baking world, it is a truth universally acknowledged that Jacques Torres has perfected the chocolate chip cookie. Peter, you and I tasted it for ourselves just a few months ago." I'm really stretching it now to make them suffer. "How will my cookie measure up? Spoiler alert. It's amazing."

Kitty slides off her stool. "That's it. I'm out of here. A chocolate chip cookie isn't worth all this."

I pat her on the head. "Oh, naive little Kitten. Dear, foolish girl. This cookie is worth all this and more. Sit or you will not partake."

Rolling her eyes, she sits back down.



“My friends, I have finally found it. My white whale. My golden ring. The cookie to rule them all.” With a flourish, I whisk off the tea towel and present them with my flat, chewy, non-puffy cookies, artfully arranged on the plate.

To my dismay, Peter shoves one in his mouth whole. With his mouth full he says, “Delicious!”

He’s still worried that I’m upset, so he’ll say anything right now. “Eat slower. Savor it, Peter.”

“I am, trust me.”

Kitty is the true critic to please. Eagerly I say, “I used muscovado sugar. Can you taste that hint of molasses?”

She is munching thoughtfully. “I can’t taste the difference between this one and the one you made two batches ago.”

“This time I used chocolate fèves and not chunks. See the way the chocolate melts in streaks?”

“What’s a fève?”

“It’s a disc.”

“Then just say disc. Also didn’t Daddy get mad because you spent thirty dollars on chocolate?”

“I wouldn’t say he was *mad*. Maybe annoyed. But I think he’ll agree that it’s worth it.” Kitty gives me a look, like, *Yeah, right*, and I mumble, “It’s Valrhona, okay? It doesn’t come cheap. And also, it was a two-pound bag! Look, that isn’t the point. Can’t you tell how much crispier the edges are, and how much chewier it is in the center? Do I need to explain to you guys again about Silpat versus parchment paper?”

“We got it,” Kitty says.

Peter hooks his finger into the loop of my jeans and pulls me closer. “Best cookie of my life,” he declares. He’s really laying it on thick, but I’m not quite done being mad.

“You guys are so corny,” Kitty says. “I’m taking my share of the cookies and getting out of here.” She starts stacking cookies

on a napkin, rapid-fire.

“Only take three!”

She puts two back, then heads upstairs.

Peter waits until she is gone before he asks, “Are you still pissed at me? I’ll never drink on a night I’m supposed to drive you ever again, I promise.” He gives me his winning smile.

“Are you really okay with me going to UNC?” I ask him.

His smile fades, and there is a slight hesitation before he nods. “It’s like you said. We’ll get the hang of it, whatever it is.” For the briefest of moments his eyes search mine, and I know he’s looking for reassurance. That’s when I put my arms around him and hug him tight to me, tight enough that he knows I’m here; I won’t let go.

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*NOW THAT I'VE MADE MY DECISION TO GO* to UNC, there are suddenly things to do, and right away. I inform William and Mary I'm not coming; I send in my deposit to UNC. I tell my guidance counselor, Mrs. Duvall, who is overjoyed. She tells me I'm the only one from our class going there, and she can't wait to add it to the list of accepted schools. "I knew you'd make me proud," she says, nodding her head. "I knew it."

Our caps and gowns have arrived, and Peter and I go to the gym to pick ours up, along with graduation announcements.

We sit down on the bleachers to try our caps on, and Peter tilts mine to the side and says, "You look cute."

I blow him a kiss. "Let me see your announcements." I want to see his name all fancy in calligraphy.

He passes me the box and I open it. I run my fingers along the embossed letters. *Peter Grant Kavinsky*. Then I say, "Have you given any more thought to inviting your dad?"

Peter looks around to see if anyone's listening before saying in a low voice, "Why do you keep bringing that up?"

I reach out and touch Peter's cap. "Because I think that, deep down, you want him to be there. If only so he can see all that you've accomplished and all that he's missed out on."

"We'll see," he says, and I leave it at that. It's Peter's decision.

On the way home from school Peter asks me, "Wanna see a movie tonight?"

"I can't," I say. "Trina's friend Kristen is coming over to go over final details of Trina's bachelorette party."

He gives me a sly look. "Are you guys going to a strip club?"

“No! Ew. Like I would ever want to see any of that.”

“See any of what?” he demands.

“Oiled-up muscles.” I shudder. “I’m just glad you don’t have big muscles.”

Peter frowns. “Hey, I’m built.”

I squeeze his bicep, and he automatically flexes against my fingers. “You’re nice and lean with little muscles.”

“You really know how to emasculate a guy, Covey,” he says as he turns down my street.

I feel bad, because now I’m remembering how he said he wasn’t in the same shape the other guys on the lacrosse team were in. “I like you just the way you are,” I quickly say, and he laughs, so he can’t be that hurt.

“What’s your dad doing for his bachelor party?”

I laugh. “Have you met my dad? He’s the last person who would ever have a bachelor party. He doesn’t even have any guy friends to have a party with!” I stop and consider this. “Well, I guess Josh is the closest thing he has. We haven’t seen much of him since he went to school, but he and my dad still e-mail every so often.”

“I don’t get what your family sees in that guy,” Peter says sourly. “What’s so great about him?”

It’s a touchy subject. Peter’s paranoid my dad likes Josh better than him, and I try to tell him it’s not a contest—which it definitely isn’t. Daddy’s known Josh since he was a kid. They trade comic books, for Pete’s sake. So, no contest. Obviously my dad likes Josh better. But only because he knows him better. And only because they’re more alike: Neither of them is cool. And Peter’s definitely cool. My dad is bewildered by cool.

“Josh loves my dad’s cooking.”

“So do I!”

“They have the same taste in movies.”

Peter throws in, “And Josh was never in a hot tub video with one of his daughters.”

“Oh my God, let it go already! My dad’s forgotten about that.” “Forgotten” might be too strong of a word. Maybe more like he’s never brought it up again and he hopefully never will.

“I find that hard to believe.”

“Well, believe it. My dad is a very forgiving, very forgetful man.”

As we’re pulling into my driveway, Peter suddenly says, “What if I threw your dad a bachelor party? We could do steaks, maybe cigars—”

“My dad doesn’t smoke cigars.”

“Well, just steaks, then. Geez.”

“Steaks and no strip club.”

“Oh my God, give me a little credit, Covey! Besides, I’m not twenty-one yet. I doubt I could even get in.”

I give him a dirty look.

Quickly he says, “Not that I would even want to. And I definitely wouldn’t want to go to one with my girlfriend’s dad.” He shudders. “That’s sick.”

“So then what’s the plan? Grill some steaks?”

“No. We’ll go to a nice steakhouse. We’ll get dressed up; it’ll be a real guys’ night. Maybe we’ll even wear suits.”

I suppress a smile. Peter will never admit it, but he loves to get dressed up. So vain. “Sounds good.”

“Will you ask him about it?” he asks.

“I think *you* should ask him.”

“If he says yes, who should I invite?”

“Josh?” I suggest it half-heartedly, knowing he won’t agree.

“No way. Doesn’t he have any work friends?”

“He doesn’t have that many close friends at work,” I say. “Just Dr. Kang... . You could invite my uncle Victor. And sometimes he goes on bike rides with Mr. Shah from down the street.”

“Can you get me their e-mails ASAP?” Peter asks me. “I want to get the invites out as soon as I get the okay from your dad. When’s the bachelorette? The weekend after next?”

My heart surges. I’m so touched by how eager Peter is to impress my dad. “It’s the third Friday of the month. We’re waiting for Margot to come home.”

Kitty was suspiciously serene about not being invited to Trina’s bachelorette night, and I thought to myself, Wow, Kitty’s really growing up. She gets that it’s not about her; she understands that the night is about Trina.

But of course Kitty always has a long game.

For the first time in a while, she’s riding to school with us. She wanted Peter to take her in his Audi, but I put my foot down and said I needed to get to school too. So we’re all in his mom’s minivan like old times.

However, Kitty is up front and I am in the backseat.

From the passenger seat Kitty sighs heavily and rests her head against the window.

“What’s up with you?” Peter asks.

“The bridesmaids won’t let me go on the bachelorette night,” she says. “I’m the only one left out.”

I narrow my eyes at the back of her head.

“That’s bullshit!” Peter looks at me in the rearview mirror. “Why won’t you guys let her go?”

“We’re going to a karaoke bar! We can’t bring Kitty in because she’s too young. Honestly, I think I was barely allowed to go.”

“Why can’t you guys just go to a restaurant like we’re doing?”

“Because that’s not a real bachelorette.”

Peter rolls his eyes. “It’s not like you guys are going to a strip club or something—wait, did you change your mind? Are you going to a strip club?”

“No!”

“Then what’s the big deal? Just go somewhere else.”

“Peter, it’s not my decision. You’ll have to take it up with Kristen.” I smack the back of Kitty’s arm. “Same goes for you, you little fiend! Quit trying to weasel your way in by manipulating Peter. He has no power here.”

“Sorry, kid,” Peter says.

Kitty slumps in her seat and then straightens. “What if I came to the bachelor night instead?” she suggests. “Since you’re just going to a restaurant?”

Peter stutters, “Uh—uh, I don’t know, I’d have to talk to the guys... .”

“So you’ll ask? Because I like steak too. I like it so much. I’ll order steak with a baked potato on the side, and for dessert I’ll have a strawberry sundae with whipped cream.” Kitty beams a smile at Peter, who smiles back weakly.

When we get to the elementary school and she hops out, perky and puffed up like a chickadee, I lean forward in my seat and say into Peter’s ear, “You just got played.”

*WITH ONLY THREE DAYS LEFT OF SCHOOL*, yearbooks arrive. There are several blank pages in the back for signatures, but everybody knows the place of honor is the back cover. Of course I've saved mine for Peter. I never want to forget how special this year was.

My yearbook quote is "I have spread my dreams under your feet; / Tread softly because you tread on my dreams." I had a very hard time choosing between that and "Without you, today's emotions would be the scurf of yesterday's." Peter was like, "I know that's from *Amélie*, but what the hell is a scurf?" and honestly, he had a point. Peter let me write his. "Surprise me," he said.

As we walk through the cafeteria doors, someone holds the door for us, and Peter says, "Cheers." Peter's taken to saying cheers instead of thanks, which I know he learned from Ravi. It makes me smile every time.

For the past month or so, the cafeteria's been half-empty at lunch. Most of the seniors have been eating off-campus, but Peter likes the lunches his mom packs and I like our cafeteria's french fries. But because the student council's passing out our yearbooks today, it's a full house. I pick up my copy and run back to the lunch table with it. I flip to his page first. There is Peter, smiling in a tuxedo. And there is his quote: "*You're welcome.*"—*Peter Kavinsky*.

Peter's brow furrows when he sees it. "What does that even mean?"

"It means, here I am, so handsome and lovely to look at." I spread my arms out benevolently, like I am the pope. "You're welcome."

Darrell busts out laughing, and so does Gabe, who spreads his arms out too. "You're welcome," they keep saying to each other.



Peter shakes his head at all of us. “You guys are nuts.”

Leaning forward, I kiss him on the lips. “And you love it!” I drop my yearbook in front of him. “Write something memorable,” I say, leaning over his shoulder. “Something romantic.”

“Your hair is tickling my neck,” he complains. “I can’t concentrate.”

I straighten up and rock back on my heels, arms crossed. “I’m waiting.”

“How am I supposed to think of something good with you looking over my shoulder?” he says. “Let me do it later.”

I shake my head firmly. “No, because then you never will.”

I keep bugging him about it, until finally he says, “I just don’t know what to write,” which makes me frown.

“Write down a memory, or a hope, or—or anything.” I’m disappointed and trying not to show it, but would it be so hard for him to think of something on his own?

“Let me take it home tonight so I can take my time with it,” he says hastily.

I spend the rest of the day filling up my yearbook, and people write generic things like *Good luck at UNC*, and *You made freshman year gym fun*, and *Add me on Instagram*, but also more meaningful things, like *I wish you had started coming out more sooner, so I’d know you better*. Ben Simonoff writes, *It’s always the quiet ones that are the most interesting. Stay interesting*. I hand the yearbook over to Peter at the end of the day. “Keep it safe,” I tell him.

The next morning, he forgets to bring it to school with him, which is annoying, because I want to get the whole senior class’s signatures, and I still have a few more to go. Tomorrow is the last day of school.

“Did you at least finish it?” I ask him.

“Yeah! I just forgot it,” he says, wincing. “I’ll bring it tomorrow, I swear.”

Beach Week is a tradition where we’re from. It’s exactly what it sounds like. The day after graduation, the senior class packs up and goes to Nags Head for a week. Never in a million years did I think I would be going. For one thing, you have to gather up enough friends to rent a house together—like ten friends! Before Peter I didn’t have ten friends I could rent a beach house with. Somebody’s parent has to rent the house in their name, because no one wants to rent out a house to a bunch of high school kids. Margot didn’t go her year. She and Josh went camping with some friends. She said Beach Week wasn’t really her thing. A year ago, it wouldn’t have been my thing either. But now I have Peter, and Pammy, and Chris and Lucas.

When the topic of Beach Week first came up months ago, Peter asked me if I thought my dad would let me stay at his house. I said no way. Instead I’m staying with a bunch of girls. Pammy’s older sister Julia rented the house, and Pammy assured me it had air-conditioning and everything. She said the boys’ house was on the beach and we were two rows back, but it was better this way because then we could junk up their house with sand and ours would stay pristine.

My dad said yes at the time, but I’m fairly certain he’s forgotten about it, because when I bring up Beach Week tonight at dinner, he looks confused. “Wait, what’s Beach Week again?”

“It’s when everybody goes to the beach after graduation and parties all week,” Kitty explains, stuffing her slice of pizza in her mouth.

I shoot her a look.

“My Beach Week was *insane*,” Trina says, and a fond smile crosses her face.

I shoot Trina one too.

Daddy’s forehead creases. “Insane?”

“Well it wasn’t *that* insane,” Trina amends. “It was just a fun girls trip. One last fling with all the girls before college.”

“Where’s Peter staying?” Daddy asks me, and now his forehead looks as wrinkled as a walnut.

“In a boy house. I told you all about it ages ago and you said yes, so you can’t go back on it now. It’s the day after graduation!”

“And there won’t be any adult supervision? Just kids?”

Trina puts her hand on Daddy’s arm. “Dan, Lara Jean isn’t a kid anymore. In a few months she’ll be living on her own. This is just practice.”

“You’re right. I know you’re right. That doesn’t mean I have to like it.” He sighs heavily and stands up. “Kitty, help me clear the table, will you?”

As soon as they’re gone, Trina turns to me, and in a low voice she says, “Lara Jean, I know you’re not a drinker, but here’s a pro tip that you can take with you to Beach Week and college and beyond. Always, always have a buddy system in place. It’ll go like this: One night, you get to drink. The next night, your girlfriend gets to drink. That way one person is always sober enough to hold the other person’s hair back and make sure nothing bad happens.”

Smiling, I say, “Peter will be there. He’ll hold my hair back if need be. Or I can just wear it in a ponytail.”

“True. I’m just saying, for the future.” For when he isn’t there. My smile dims, and she quickly goes on to say, “At my Beach Week, we took turns cooking dinner for the house. When it was my turn, I made chicken parmesan and all the smoke detectors went off and we couldn’t figure out how to make the beeping stop all night!” She laughs. Trina has such an easy laugh.

“I doubt my Beach Week will get that crazy,” I say.

“Well, let’s hope it gets a *little* crazy,” she says.

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## 29

*THIS IS THE LAST TIME WE'LL WALK UP THIS* staircase together, Peter taking the stairs two at a time, me nipping at his heels, huffing and puffing to keep up. It's the last day of school for seniors, the last day of my high school career.

When we reach the top of the staircase, I say, "I feel like taking the stairs two at a time is just bragging. Have you ever noticed that only boys ever take stairs two at a time?"

"Girls probably would if they were as tall."

"Margot's friend Chelsea is five eleven, and I don't think she does it."

"So what are you saying—boys brag more?"

"Probably. Don't you think?"

"Probably," he admits.

The bell rings, and people start heading for class.

"Should we just skip first period? Go get pancakes?" He raises his eyebrows at me enticingly, pulling me toward him by the dangling straps of my book bag. "Come on, you know you want to."

"No way. It's the last day of school. I want to say good-bye to Mr. Lopez."

Peter groans. "Goody-goody."

"You knew who I was when you started dating me," I tell him.

"True," he says.

Before we go our separate ways, I hold out my hands and wait expectantly. Peter gives me a curious look. "My yearbook!"

"Oh shit! I forgot it again."

“Peter! It’s the last day of school! I only got half the signatures I wanted!”

“I’m sorry,” he says, rubbing his hand through his hair and making it go all messy. “Do you want me to go back home and get it? I can go right now.” He looks genuinely sorry, but I’m still annoyed.

When I don’t say anything right away, Peter starts to head back toward the stairs, but I stop him. “No, don’t. It’s fine. I’ll just pass it around at graduation.”

“Are you sure?” he asks.

“Sure,” I say. We’re not even here the full school day; I don’t want him to have to run back home just for my yearbook.

Classes are pretty lax; we mostly just walk around saying good-bye to teachers, the office staff, the cafeteria ladies, the school nurse. A lot of them we’ll see at graduation, but not everyone. I pass around cookies that I baked last night. We get our final grades—all good, so no worries there.

It takes me forever to clean out my locker. I find random notes I saved from Peter, which I promptly put in my bag so I can add them to his scrapbook. An old granola bar. Dusty black hair ties, which is ironic because you can never seem to find a hair tie when you need one.

“I’m sad to throw any of this stuff away, even this old granola bar,” I say to Lucas, who is sitting on the floor keeping me company. “I’ve seen it there at the bottom of my locker every day. It’s like an old pal. Should we split it, to commemorate this day?”

“Sick,” Lucas says. “It’s probably got mold.” Matter-of-factly he says, “After graduation I probably won’t see any of these people again.”

I throw him a hurt look. “Hey! What about me?”

“Not you. You’re coming to visit me in New York.”

“Ooh! Yes, please.”

“Sarah Lawrence is so close to the city. I’ll be able to go to Broadway shows whenever I want. There’s an app for same-day student tickets.” He gets a faraway look in his eyes.

“You’re so lucky,” I say.

“I’ll take you. We’ll go to a gay bar, too. It’ll be amazing.”

“Thank you!”

“But everybody else I can take or leave.”

“We still have Beach Week,” I remind him, and he nods.

“For the rest of our lives, we’ll always have Beach Week,” he says mockingly, and I throw a hair tie at him.

Lucas can mock me for being nostalgic all he wants. I know these days are special. High school *will* be a time we remember the whole rest of our lives.

After school, Peter and I go to his house because mine is a disaster zone with wedding stuff, and Peter’s mom has her book club after work, and Owen has soccer, so we have the house all to ourselves. It seems the only place we’re ever truly alone is in his car, so moments like these are rare and of note. My last drive home from high school, and Peter K. is the one who’s driving me. It’s fitting, to end high school the way I spent it—riding in the passenger seat of Peter’s car.

When we go up to his room, I sit down on his bed, which is neatly made, with the comforter pulled in tight; the pillows look fluffed, even. It’s a new comforter, probably for college—a cheery red and cream and navy tartan that I’m sure his mom picked out. “Your mom makes your bed, doesn’t she?” I ask him, leaning back against the pillows.

“Yes,” he says, without an ounce of shame. He flops onto the bed, and I scoot over to make room for him.

Late afternoon light filters in through his pale curtains, and it casts the room in a dreamy kind of filter. If I were going to name it, I would call it “summer in the suburbs.” Peter looks beautiful in this light. He looks beautiful in any light, but especially this one. I take a picture of him in my mind, just like

this. Any annoyance I felt over him forgetting my yearbook melts away when he snuggles closer to me, rests his head on my chest, and says, “I can feel your heart beating.”

I start playing with his hair, which I know he likes. It’s so soft for a boy. I love the smell of his detergent, his soap, everything.

He looks up at me and traces the bow of my lip. “I like this part the best,” he says. Then he moves up and brushes his lips against mine, teasing me. He bites on my bottom lip playfully. I like all his different kinds of kisses, but maybe this kind best. Then he’s kissing me with urgency, like he is utterly consumed, his hands in my hair, and I think, no, these are the best.

Between kisses he asks me, “How come you only ever want to hook up when we’re at my house?”

“I—I don’t know. I guess I never thought about it before.” It’s true we only ever make out at Peter’s house. It feels weird to be romantic in the same bed I’ve slept in since I was a little girl. But when I’m in Peter’s bed, or in his car, I forget all about that and I’m just lost in the moment.

We’re at it kissing again—Peter’s shirt is off; mine is still on—when the phone rings downstairs, and Peter says it’s probably the repairman calling about when he’s coming to fix the pipes. He puts on his shirt and runs downstairs to answer it, and that’s when I spot my yearbook on his desk.

I get out of bed and pick it up and flip to the back. It’s still empty. When Peter comes back upstairs, I’m sitting on his bed again and I don’t mention my yearbook, I don’t ask why he still hasn’t written in it. I’m not sure why. I tell him I’d better get going, because Margot’s coming home from Scotland tonight, and I want to stock the fridge with all her favorite foods.

Peter’s face falls. “You don’t want to hang out a little longer? I can take you to the store.”

“I still have to clean up the upstairs, too,” I say, standing up.

He tugs on my shirt and tries to pull me back onto the bed. “Come on, five more minutes.”



I lie back down next to him and he cuddles in close, but I'm still thinking about the yearbook. I've been working on his scrapbook for months; the least he can do is write me a nice yearbook message.

"This is good practice for college," he murmurs, pulling me toward him, wrapping his arms around me. "The beds are small at UVA. How big are the beds at UNC?"

My back to him, I say, "I don't know. I didn't get to see the dorms."

He tucks his head in the space between my neck and shoulder. "That was a trick question," he says, and I can feel him smile against my neck. "To check and see if you visited a random UNC guy's dorm room with Chris. Congrats, you passed the test."

I can't help but laugh. Then my smile fades and I give him a test of my own. "Don't let me forget to take my yearbook with me when we leave."

He stiffens for a second and then says in an easy tone, "I have to hunt it down. It's here somewhere. If I can't find it, I'll just bring it over later."

I pull away from him and sit up. Confused, he looks up at me. "I saw my yearbook on your desk, Peter. I know you haven't written anything yet!"

Peter sits up and sighs and scrubs his hand through his hair roughly. His eyes flit over to me and then back down again. "I just don't know what to write. I know you want me to write some great, romantic thing, but I don't know what to say. I've tried a bunch of times, and I just—I freeze up. You know I'm not good at that kind of thing."

Feelingly, I tell him, "I don't care what you say as long as it's from the heart. Just be sweet. Be you." I crawl closer to him and put my arms around his neck. "Okay?" Peter nods, and I give him a little kiss, and he surges up and kisses me harder, and then I don't even care about my dumb yearbook anymore. I am

aware of every breath, every movement. I memorize it all, I hold it in my heart.

When we break away, he looks up at me and says, “I went to my dad’s house yesterday.”

My eyes widen. “You did?”

“Yeah. He invited me and Owen to come over for dinner, and I wasn’t going to go, but then Owen asked me to come with him and I couldn’t say no.”

I lie back down, rest my head on his chest. “How was it?”

“It was fine, I guess. His house is nice.” I don’t say anything; I just wait for him to go on. It feels like a long time before he says, “You know that old movie you made me watch, where the poor kid was standing outside with his nose pressed to the glass? That’s how I felt.”

“That old movie” he’s referring to is *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*, when Charlie is watching all the kids go hog wild at the candy store but he can’t go inside because he doesn’t have any money. The thought of Peter—handsome, confident, easy Peter—feeling that way makes me want to cry. Maybe I shouldn’t have pushed him so hard to reconnect with his dad.

“He put up a basketball hoop for those kids. I asked him for one so many times, but he never did it. His kids aren’t even athletic. I don’t think Everett’s picked up a basketball once in his whole life.”

“Did Owen have a good time?”

This he grudgingly concedes. “Yeah, he and Clayton and Everett played video games. My dad grilled hamburgers and steaks. He even wore a damn chef’s apron. I don’t think he ever helped my mom in the kitchen once the whole time they were married.” Peter pauses. “He didn’t do the dishes, though, so I guess he hasn’t changed that much. Still, I could tell he and Gayle were trying. She baked a cake. Not as good as yours, though.”

“What kind of cake?” I ask.

“Devil’s food cake. Kind of dry.” Peter hesitates before he says, “I invited him to graduation.”

“You did?” My heart swells.

“He kept asking about school, and ... I don’t know. I thought about what you said, and I just did it.” He shrugs, like he doesn’t care much either way if his dad’s there or not. It’s an act. Peter cares. Of course he cares. “So you’ll meet him then.”

I snuggle closer to him. “I’m so proud of you, Peter.”

He gives a little laugh. “For what?”

“For giving your dad a chance even though he doesn’t deserve it.” I look up at him and say, “You’re a nice boy, Peter K.,” and the smile that breaks across his face makes me love him even more.

*AFTER PETER DROPS ME OFF AT HOME*, I end up having just enough time to run to the grocery store and pick up chips and salsa, ice cream, challah bread, Brie, blood-orange soda—you know, all the essentials—and then come home and clean the upstairs bathroom and make up Margot’s bed with fresh sheets.

Daddy picks Margot up at the airport on the way home from work. It’s the first time she’s been home since Trina moved in. When we step inside the house with her suitcases, I see her looking around the living room; I see her eyes flit to the mantel, where there is now framed art that Trina brought over from her house—it’s an abstract painting of the shoreline. Margot’s expression doesn’t change, but I know she notices. How could she not? I moved Mommy and Daddy’s wedding portrait into my room the day before Trina moved in. Margot’s looking around the whole room now, silently noting everything that is different. The embroidered throw pillows Trina brought with her, a framed picture of her and Daddy on the day he proposed on the side table by the couch, the armchair we switched out for Trina’s. All of Trina’s little knickknacks, of which there are many. Now that I’m looking at it all through Margot’s eyes, it *is* kind of cluttered.

Margot takes off her shoes and opens the door to the shoe closet and sees how stuffed it is—Trina has a lot of shoes, too. “Geez, this closet is packed,” she says, shoving Trina’s cycling shoes to the side to make room for her booties.

After we lug her suitcases upstairs and Margot changes into comfy clothes, we come back down for a snack while Daddy fixes dinner. I’m sitting on the couch, chomping on chips, when Margot suddenly stands up and declares that she’s going to go through the shoe closet and get rid of all her old shoes. “Right now?” I say, my mouth full of chips.

“Why not?” she says. When Margot gets it into her head to do something, she does it right away.

She dumps everything out of the shoe closet and sits on the floor cross-legged, going through piles, deciding which ones to keep and which to donate to the Salvation Army. She holds up a pair of black boots. “To keep or to toss?”

“Keep them or give them to me,” I say, scooping salsa with a tortilla chip. “They look so cute with tights.”

She tosses them in the keep pile. “Trina’s dog sheds so much,” Margot grouches, plucking dog fur off of her leggings. “How do you ever wear black clothes?”

“There’s a lint roller in the shoe case. And I guess I don’t wear that many black clothes?” I really should wear black more often. Every fashion blog emphasizes the importance of a little black dress. I wonder if there will be a lot of occasions for a little black dress at college. “How often do you get dressed up at Saint Andrews?”

“Not that often. People mostly wear jeans and boots when they go out. Saint Andrews isn’t that dressy of a place.”

“You don’t get dressed up even to go to a wine-and-cheese night at your professor’s house?”

“We get dressed up for high table dinners with professors, but I’ve never been invited to one’s house. Maybe they do that at UNC, though.”

“Maybe!”

Margot holds up a pair of yellow rain boots. “Keep or toss?”

“Keep.”

“You’re no help. You’ve voted to keep everything.” She tosses the rain boots into the cardboard giveaway box.

It seems both of my sisters are pretty ruthless about throwing away old things. When Margot’s done sorting through everything, I go through the box one more time to see

if there isn't anything I can save. I end up taking her rain boots and a pair of patent-leather Mary Janes.

That night I'm heading to the bathroom to brush my teeth when I hear Trina's hushed voice coming from Margot's room. I stop in the hallway to listen like a little spy, like Kitty. "This is a little awkward, but you left this in the bathroom, so I stuck it in a drawer just in case you wanted to keep it private."

Margot's cool voice returns, "Keep it private from whom? Kitty?"

"Well, from your dad. Or whoever. I just wasn't sure."

"My dad's an obstetrician. It's not like he's never seen birth-control pills before."

"Oh, I know. I just ..." Lamely she says again, "I just wasn't sure. If it was a secret or not, I mean."

"Well, thanks. I appreciate the thought, but I don't keep secrets from my dad."

I scurry back to my bedroom before I hear Trina's reply. Eek.

The day before graduation, Peter comes over to hang out at the house. I'm sewing little flowers onto my graduation cap, Kitty's watching TV on the floor on her beanbag, and Margot's shelling beans into a mixing bowl. She has a recipe she wants to try out for dinner tonight. A wedding show is on the TV, one of those who-had-the-best-wedding type programs.

"Hey, for your dad's wedding, what about one of those sky-lantern ceremonies, where you light up the lantern and make a wish and release it into the sky?" Peter pipes up. "I saw it in a movie."

I'm impressed. "Peter, that's a really nice idea!"

"I saw that in a movie too," Kitty says. "*Hangover Part Two?*"

"Yeah!" I give them both a look. Peter is quick to ask, "Isn't that an Asian tradition? Could be nice."

“It’s not a Korean tradition, it’s Thai,” Kitty says. “Remember, the movie takes place in Thailand?”

“Not that it matters, because it’s not like Trina is even Asian,” says Margot. “Why would she need to appropriate Asian culture into her wedding just because we’re Asian? It doesn’t have anything to do with her.”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” I say. “She wants us to feel included. The other day she was saying it might be nice to acknowledge Mommy in some way.”

Margot rolls her eyes. “She didn’t even know her.”

“Well, she knew her a little. They were all neighbors, after all. I don’t know, I thought during the ceremony, like, maybe the three of us could light a candle... .” I trail off because Margot doesn’t look at all convinced. “It was just an idea,” I say, and Peter makes a *yikes* face at me.

“I don’t know, I think that sounds kind of awkward? I mean, this wedding is about Trina and Daddy starting a new life together, not the past.”

“That’s a good point,” Peter agrees.

Peter works hard to impress Margot. He’s always taking her side. I pretend to be annoyed by it, but really I am touched. Of course he should take her side. It’s his job to take her side. It shows that he gets how important her good opinion is to me, and he gets the place she has in my life. I could never be with someone who didn’t understand how important my family is to me.

When Margot leaves to take Kitty to piano lessons, Peter says, “Your sister is really not loving Ms. Rothschild, huh.” Peter still hasn’t gotten the hang of calling Ms. Rothschild Trina, and he likely never will. In our neighborhood, none of the kids growing up called the adults by their first names. Everyone was Miss or Mrs. or Mr., except for Daddy, who was Dr.

“I wouldn’t say Gogo *dislikes* Trina,” I say. “She likes her; she just isn’t used to her yet. You know how Trina is.”

“True,” he says. “I also know how your sister is. It took her forever to warm up to me.”

“It wasn’t forever. You’re just used to people liking you from the very first minute they meet you.” I give him a sidelong look. “Because you’re so very charming.” He scowls, because I don’t say it like a compliment. “Gogo doesn’t care about charm. She cares about real.”

“Well, now she loves me,” he says, all confidence. When I don’t answer right away, he says, “Right? Doesn’t she?”

I laugh. “She does.”

Later that day, after Peter leaves to help his mom out at her store, Margot and Trina get into a spat over, of all things, hair. I’m in the laundry room, ironing my dress when I hear Trina say, “Margot, when you shower, would you mind picking up your hair out of the drain catch? I was cleaning the tub this morning and I noticed it.”

Then comes Margot’s quick reply. “Sure.”

“Thanks. I just don’t want the drain to get clogged.”

A minute later Margot’s in the laundry room with me. “Did you hear that? Can you believe her? How does she even know it was my hair and not yours or Kitty’s?”

“Your hair is lighter, and it’s shorter,” I point out. “Plus, Kitty and I pick ours up because we know it grosses Trina out.”

“Well, dog fur all over my clothes grosses *me* out! Every time I take a breath, I feel like I’m inhaling fur. If she’s so concerned about housekeeping, she should vacuum more often.”

Trina comes up behind Margot, looking stony-faced, and says, “I actually vacuum once a week, which is the standard amount.”



Margot's gone red. "Sorry. But if you have a dog that sheds as much as Simone, I think twice a week is probably more appropriate."

"Then tell that to your dad, since I haven't seen him pick up a vacuum once in the whole time I've known him." Trina stalks off, and Margot's mouth drops open, and I go back to ironing.

"Don't you think that was a bit much?" she whispers to me.

"She's right, though. Daddy never vacuums. He sweeps, and he mops, but he doesn't vacuum."

"Still!"

"Trina isn't one to be trifled with," I tell her. "Especially not when she's about to get her period." Margot stares at me. "We're synced up. It's only a matter of time before you are too."

Margot and I go to the mall, ostensibly so I can get a new strapless bra for my dress, but really because Margot wants to escape Trina. When we get back, the downstairs rugs are freshly vacuumed and neat as a pin, and Kitty is putting the vacuum cleaner away, which I can tell Margot feels bad about.

At dinner Trina and Margot are cordial to each other, as if nothing happened. Which, in some ways, is worse than a fight. At least when you're in a fight, you're in it with someone.

*THE DAY OF MY GRADUATION, I WAKE UP* early and lie in bed listening to the sounds of the house waking up. Daddy is puttering around downstairs making coffee; Margot has the shower running; Kitty is probably still sound asleep. Trina, too. They're both late sleepers.

I will miss these house sounds when I'm gone. A part of me is already homesick for them. Another part of me is so, so excited to take this next step, and I never thought I would be, not after things didn't turn out the way I'd hoped.

For my graduation present, Margot gives me a college kit. A pink satin eye mask with my name embroidered on it in pale silvery blue. A USB drive shaped like a gold tube of lipstick. Earplugs that look like circus peanuts, pink fuzzy slippers, a nylon makeup bag covered in sketches of bows. I love every single thing in the kit equally.

Kitty makes a beautiful card. It's a collage of pictures of us, but she's used some sort of app to turn the pictures into line drawings, like a coloring book. She's colored them all with coloring pencils. On the inside she's written, *Congratulations. Have fun at college. P.S. I'll miss you an 11.* Tears spring to my eyes, and I scoop Kitty into my arms and hug her tightly, for so long that she says, "All right, all right—enough already," but I can tell she is pleased. "I'm going to frame it," I declare.

My gift from Trina is a vintage tea set—cream with pink rosebuds and rimmed in gold. "It was my mom's," she tells me, and I feel like I could cry, I love it so much. When I hug her, I whisper in her ear, "This is my favorite gift," and she winks at me. Winking is one of Trina's talents. She's great at it, very natural.

Daddy sips from his coffee and then clears his throat. "Lara Jean, your gift from me is one that Margot and Kitty will also partake in."

“What is it, what is it?” Kitty presses.

“Hush, it’s my gift,” I say, looking at Daddy expectantly.

Grinning, he says, “I’m sending you three girls to Korea with Grandma this summer. Happy graduation, Lara Jean!”

Kitty screams and Margot is beaming, and I’m in shock. We’ve been talking about going to Korea for years. Mommy always wanted to take us. “When, when?” Kitty asks.

“Next month,” Trina says, smiling at her. “Your dad and I will go on our honeymoon, and you guys will jet off to Korea.”

Next month?

“Aw, you guys aren’t coming?” Kitty pouts. Margot, on the other hand, is smiling. Ravi’s visiting family in India over the summer, and she doesn’t have any big plans.

“We really want to come, but I can’t take that much time away from the hospital,” Daddy says, regretful.

“For how long?” I ask. “How long will we go?”

“For all of July,” Daddy says, gulping the rest of his coffee. “Grandma and I have set the whole thing up. You’re going to stay at your great-aunt’s in Seoul, you’ll take Korean language classes a few times a week, and you’re going on a tour of the whole country, too. Jeju, Busan, the works. And Lara Jean, something special for you—a Korean pastry-making class! Don’t worry, it’ll be in English.”

Kitty starts doing a little dance in her seat.

Margot looks at me then, her eyes shining. “You’ve always wanted to learn how to bake Korean cream cakes! We’ll go shopping for face masks and stationery and cute things, like, every day. By the time we come back, we’ll be able to watch Korean dramas without subtitles!”

“I can’t wait,” I say, and Margot and Kitty and Daddy start discussing all the logistics, but Trina looks over at me closely. I keep the smile on my face.

A whole month. By the time I get back, it'll be nearly time to leave for college, and Peter and I will have spent the summer apart.

At graduation all the girls wear white dresses. All white everything. I'm wearing Margot's dress from two years ago—sleeveless with Swiss dots and a crisp knee-length skirt. Trina's taken up the hemline for me because I'm shorter. Margot wore it with Converse, and I'm wearing white patent-leather sandals with a T-strap and little perforations.

In the car on the way over, I smooth down my skirt and say to Kitty, "Maybe you could wear this dress for your high school graduation too, Kitten. And you'll pose by the oak tree just like we did. It'll be a beautiful triptych." I wonder what shoes Kitty will wear. She's about as likely to wear white stilettos as she is white Reeboks or white roller skates.

Kitty makes a sour-lemon face. "I don't want to wear the same dress as you and Margot. I want my own dress. Besides, it'll *really* be out of style by then." She pauses. "What's a triptych?"

"It's, um, three pieces of art that come together and make one." Furtively, I google "triptych" on my phone to make sure I'm telling her the right thing. "It's, like, three panels, sort of hinged side by side. They're meant to be appreciated together."

"You're reading that off your phone."

"I was just double-checking," I say. I smooth my dress down again, making sure my cap is in my bag. I'm graduating from high school today. It snuck up on me—growing up, I mean. In the driver's seat, Trina's looking for a parking spot, and Margot's next to her, texting on her phone; Kitty's next to me, looking out the window. Daddy has driven separately, to pick up Grandma. Nana, Daddy's mom, is in Florida with her boyfriend and won't be able to make it. I only wish my own mom were here for this. All these big moments she's missing, that she'll keep missing. I have to believe that she knows, that somehow she still sees. But I also just wish I could have a hug from my mom on my graduation day.

Throughout the valedictorian speech, I keep looking out in the crowd for Peter's family. I wonder if his dad is sitting with Peter's brother and his mom, or separately. I wonder if I'll get to meet Peter's two half brothers too. I've already spotted my own family—they are hard to miss. Every time I look in their direction, they all wave madly. Plus, Trina's wearing a wide brimmed Kentucky Derby hat. Whoever is sitting in the row behind her probably can't see a thing. Margot exercised a lot of self-control by not rolling her eyes when Trina came downstairs wearing it. Even Kitty said it was "a bit much," but Trina asked me what I thought and I said I loved it, which I kind of do.

Our principal calls my name, "Lara Jean Song Covey," but he pronounces it Laura, which trips me up for a second.

When I accept my diploma from him and shake his hand, I whisper, "It's *Lara*, not *Laura*."

My plan was to blow my family a kiss as I walked across the stage, but I get so nervous that I forget. Over the applause I can hear Kitty's whoop, Daddy's whistle. When it's Peter's turn, I clap and scream like crazy, and of course everyone else does too. Even the teachers clap extra loud for him. It's so obvious when teachers have favorites. Not that I could blame them for loving Peter. We all do.

After we are declared graduates, after we throw our caps in the air, Peter makes his way past the throngs of people to find me. As he moves through the crowd, he's smiling, making jokes, saying hi to people, but there's something wrong. There's a blankness in his eyes, even as he grabs me for a hug. "Hey," he says, kissing me swiftly on the lips. "So we're officially college kids now."

Looking around, I straighten my robe and say, "I didn't see your mom and Owen in the stands. Did your dad sit with them? Are your brothers here? Should I come over now or after I take pictures with my family?"

Peter shakes his head. He doesn't quite meet my eyes. "My dad couldn't come last minute."

“What! Why?”

“There was some kind of emergency. Who knows.”

I’m stunned. His dad seemed so sincere when I saw him at the lacrosse game. “I hope it was a really big emergency to miss his own son’s high school graduation.”

“It’s fine.” Peter shrugs like he doesn’t care either way, but I know that can’t be true. His jaw is set so tight, he could break his teeth.

Over his shoulder I see my family making their way through the crowds to get to me. You can’t miss Trina’s hat, even in this swarm of people. My dad’s carrying a big bouquet of all different-colored roses. Grandma’s wearing a cranberry-colored suit; her hair is freshly permed.

I feel so rushed and panicky for more time with Peter, to comfort him, to just be at his side. I grab his hand. “I’m sorry,” I say, and I want to say more, of course I do, but my family arrives, and everyone’s hugging me. Peter says hi to my grandma and takes some pictures with us before he escapes to find his mom and brother. I call out to him, but he’s too far away, and he doesn’t turn around.

After we take pictures, Daddy, Trina, Grandma, Kitty, Margot, and I go to a Japanese restaurant for lunch. We order plates and plates of sashimi and sushi, and I wear a napkin bib so soy sauce doesn’t fling onto my white dress. Trina sits next to Grandma and chatters in her ear about all manner of things, and I can just hear Grandma thinking, *Damn, this girl talks a lot*—but she’s trying, and that’s what Grandma appreciates. I’m trying to be festive and appreciative and in the moment, since this lunch is in my honor, but all I can think of is Peter and how hurt I am on his behalf.

Over mochi ice cream, Grandma tells us about all the places she wants to take us in Korea: the Buddhist temples, the outdoor food markets, the skin clinic where she goes to get her moles lasered off. She points at a tiny mole on Kitty’s cheek and says, “We’ll get that taken care of.”

Daddy looks alarmed, and Trina's quick to ask, "Isn't she too young?"

Grandma waves her hand. "She'll be fine."

Then Kitty asks, "How old do you have to be to get a nose job in Korea?" and Daddy nearly chokes on his beer.

Grandma gives her a threatening look. "You can never, ever change your nose. You have a lucky nose."

Kitty touches it gingerly. "I do?"

"Very lucky," Grandma says. "If you change your nose, you'll change your luck. So never do it."

I touch my own nose. Grandma's never said anything about my nose being lucky.

"Margot, you can get new eyeglasses in Korea," Grandma says. "It's very cheap to buy eyeglasses in Korea. All the newest fashions."

"Ooh," Margot says, dunking a piece of tuna in her soy sauce. "I've always wanted red frames."

Grandma turns to me and asks, "What about you, Lara Jean? Are you excited about the cooking class?"

"So excited," I say brightly. Underneath the table I text Peter.

Are you okay?

We're almost done at lunch.

Come over anytime.

The ride home from the restaurant is just Daddy and me, because Trina, Margot, and Kitty are driving Grandma back home. When Margot said she'd ride with us, Grandma insisted that Margot come along with them. She knows Margot isn't crazy about Trina; I know she's just trying to matchmake them a bit. Grandma doesn't miss a beat.

On the drive home, Daddy looks over at me from the driver's seat with misty eyes and says, "Your mom would've been so proud of you today, Lara Jean. You know how much

she cared about your education. She wanted you to have every opportunity.”

Fingering the tassel on my graduation cap in my lap, I ask him, “Do you think Mommy was sad she never got to get her master’s? I mean, not that she ever regretted having Kitty or anything. Just, do you think she wished things happened differently?”

He’s taken aback. Glancing at me, he says, “Well, no. Kitty really was a happy surprise. I’m not just saying that. We always wanted a big family. And she planned on going back after Kitty was in preschool full-time. She never gave up that plan.”

“She didn’t?”

“No way. She was going to get her master’s. In fact she was going to take a class that fall. She just ... ran out of time.” Daddy’s voice chokes a little. “We only had eighteen years together. We had as many years as you’ve been alive, Lara Jean.”

A lump gathers in my throat. When you think about it, eighteen years with the person you love isn’t much time at all. “Daddy, can we stop by the drugstore? I want to get some photo paper.” Peter and I took a picture together in our caps and gowns this morning, before the ceremony. It’ll be the last page of his scrapbook, our last high school chapter.



*PETER COMES OVER AFTER HAVING DINNER*

with his mom and Owen. When he rings the bell, I run to the front door and the first thing I do is ask if he's spoken to his dad, but he brushes me off, the very picture of nonchalance. "It's fine," he says, taking off his shoes. "I didn't even want him to come in the first place."

This stings, because it feels like maybe he's blaming me, and maybe he should—after all, I was the one who kept pushing him to invite his dad. I should've listened to him when he said no.

Peter and I go upstairs to my room, and I hear my dad jokingly call out, "Keep the door open!" the way he always does, which makes Peter wince.

I sit down on the bed, and he sits far away from me at my desk. I go over to him and put my hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry. This is my fault. I never should have pushed you to invite him. If you're mad at me, I don't blame you one bit."

"Why would I be mad at you? It's not your fault he sucks." When I don't say anything, he softens. "Look, I'm really not sad. I'm not anything. You'll meet him another time, okay?"

I hesitate before saying, "I've actually already met him before."

He stares at me in disbelief. "*When?*"

I swallow. "I accidentally met him at one of your lacrosse games. He asked me not to mention it—he didn't want you to know he was there. He just wanted to watch you play. He said he missed it." The muscle in Peter's jaw jumps. "I should have told you. I'm sorry."

"Don't be. It's like I said, I don't give a shit what he does." I start to say something in return, but he interrupts before I can. "Can we just not talk about him anymore? Please?"

I nod. It's killing me to see the hurt in his eyes that he's trying so hard to hide, but I feel like if I keep pressing him, it'll make things worse. I just want to make him feel better. Which is when I remember his gift. "I have something for you!"

Relief washes over his face, the tension in his shoulders loosens. "Aw, you got me a graduation gift? I didn't get you anything, though."

"That's okay, I didn't expect anything." I jump up and get his scrapbook out of my hatbox. As I present the scrapbook to him, I find my heart is jumping all over the place. With excitement, and with nervousness. This will cheer him up, I know it will. "Hurry up and open it!"

Slowly he does. The first page is a picture I found in a shoe box when Kitty and I were cleaning out the attic to make room for Trina's boxes. It's one of the few from our middle school days in the neighborhood. It's the first day of school; we're waiting for the bus. Peter's arms are slung around John McClaren and Trevor Pike. Genevieve and I have our arms linked; she is whispering a secret to me, probably about Peter. I am turned toward her and not looking at the camera. I'm wearing a heather-gray camisole of Margot's and a jean skirt, and I remember feeling very grown-up in it, like a teenager. My hair is long and straight down my back, and it looks pretty much the same as it does now. Genevieve tried to convince me to cut it short for middle school, but I said no. We all look so young. John with his rosy cheeks, Trevor with his chubby ones, Peter with his skinny legs.

Underneath the picture I wrote, *THE BEGINNING*. "Aww," he says tenderly. "Baby Lara Jean and Baby Peter. Where'd you find this?"

"In a shoe box."

He flicks John's smiling face. "Punk."

"Peter!"

"Just kidding," he says.

There's our homecoming picture. Last Halloween, when I dressed up as Mulan and Peter wore a dragon costume. There's a receipt from Tart and Tangy. One of his notes to me, from before. *If you make Josh's dumb white-chocolate cranberry cookies and not my fruitcake ones, it's over.* Pictures of us from Senior Week. Prom. Dried rose petals from my corsage. The *Sixteen Candles* picture.

There are some things I didn't include, like the ticket stub from our first real date, the note he wrote me that said, *I like you in blue.* Those things are tucked away in my hatbox. I'll never let those go.

But the really special thing I've included is my letter, the one I wrote to him so long ago, the one that brought us together. I wanted to keep it, but something felt right about Peter having it. One day all of this will be proof, proof that we were here, proof that we loved each other. It's the guarantee that no matter what happens to us in the future, this time was ours.

When he gets to that page, Peter stops. "I thought you wanted to keep this," he said.

"I wanted to, but then I felt like you should have it. Just promise you'll keep it forever."

He turns the page. It's a picture from when we took my grandma to karaoke. I sang "You're So Vain" and dedicated it to Peter. Peter got up and sang "Style" by Taylor Swift. Then he dueted "Unchained Melody" with my grandma, and after, she made us both promise to take a Korean language class at UVA. She and Peter took a ton of selfies together that night. She made one her home screen on her phone. Her friends at her apartment complex said he looked like a movie star. I made the mistake of telling Peter, and he crowed about it for days after.

He stays on that page for a while. When he doesn't say anything, I say, helpfully, "It's something to remember us by."

He snaps the book shut. “Thanks,” he says, flashing me a quick smile. “This is awesome.”

“You’re not going to look at the rest of it?”

“I will, later.”

Peter says he should get back home so he can pack for Beach Week, and before we go back downstairs, I ask him again if he’s okay, and he assures me that he is.

After Peter leaves, Margot comes up to my room and helps me pack. I’m sitting cross-legged on the floor, arranging my suitcase, and she’s passing me piles. I’m still feeling worried about Peter, so I’m glad to have her company to take my mind off things.

“I can’t believe you’re already graduated,” Margot says, folding a stack of T-shirts for me. “In my head you’re still the same age you were when I left.” Teasingly she says, “Forever sweet sixteen, Lara Jean.”

“Almost as grown-up as you now, Gogo,” I say.

“Well, you’ll always be shorter than me, at least,” she says, and I throw a bikini top at her head. “Pretty soon we’ll be packing you up for college.”

I stuff a curling iron into the pocket of my suitcase. “Margot, when you first went to college, what did you miss most about home?”

“Well, you guys, obviously.”

“But what else? Like, what were the unexpected things you missed?”

“I missed giving Kitty a kiss good night after she’d had a bath and her hair was clean.”

I make a snorty sound. “A rare occasion!”

Margot takes her time, thinking about what else. “I missed a good hamburger. Hamburgers taste different in Scotland. More like ... meat loaf. Meat loaf on a bun. Hmm, what else? I

missed driving you guys around. I felt like the captain of a ship. I missed your baked goods!”

“Which ones?” I ask.

“Hmm?”

“Which ones did you miss the most?”

“Your lemon cake.”

“If you’d told me, I would’ve sent you one.”

Smiling, she says, “I’m pretty sure sending a cake overseas is exorbitantly expensive.”

“Let’s make one now,” I say, and Margot kicks her legs up happily.

So we go downstairs and that’s what we do. Kitty is asleep; Daddy and Trina are in their bedroom with the door closed. As much as I love Trina, that’s a strange thing to get used to as well. Daddy’s door was never closed. But I suppose he needs his time too, time where he’s not a dad. Not even for sex, but just to talk, to take a breath. But also for sex, I guess.

Margot’s measuring flour when I ask, “Did you have on music when you and Josh first did it?”

“You made me lose count!” Margot dumps all the flour back in the canister and starts over again.

“Well, did you?”

“No. Nosy! I swear, you’re worse than Kitty.”

I roll a lemon around on the counter to warm it up before I start squeezing. “So it was just ... silent?”

“It wasn’t *silent*. There was the sound of someone mowing their lawn. And his mom had the dryer going. Their dryer is really loud... .”

“But his mom wasn’t home, right?”

“No way! I couldn’t do that. My roommate brought someone home once and I pretended to be asleep, but honestly,

I was trying not to laugh. The guy was a heavy breather. He was a moaner, too.”

We both giggle.

“I hope my roommate doesn’t do that.”

“Just set up ground rules in the beginning. Like who can use the room when, that kind of thing. And just remember that you should try to be understanding, because Peter will be visiting a lot, and you don’t want to use up her goodwill.” She pauses. “You guys haven’t had sex yet, right?” Quickly she adds, “You don’t have to say if you don’t want to.”

“No,” I say. “I mean, not yet.”

“Are you thinking about it?” Margot asks, trying to sound casual. “Because of Beach Week?”

I don’t answer her right away.

I hadn’t been thinking about it, not Beach Week specifically, anyway. The thought of Peter and me having sex in the future, for it to be as commonplace as us going to the movies or holding hands—it’s a little strange to imagine. I just wouldn’t want it to be less special, after we do it. I want it to always be a sacred thing, not something to take for granted because everybody else does it, or because we’ve done it before. I suppose anything can become ordinary or commonplace if you do it enough times, but my hope is that this never is. Not for us. “I think I definitely want music,” I say, straining lemon juice into a glass measuring cup. “That way if I’m a heavy breather or he’s a heavy breather, we won’t really know. And it’ll be more romantic. Music makes everything more romantic, doesn’t it? One second you’re walking your dog in the suburbs, and then you put on Adele, and it’s like you’re in a movie and you’ve just had your heart brutally broken.”

Margot says, “In movies they never put on a condom, so make sure you’re in real life for that part.”

That’s enough to shake me out of my reverie. “Daddy gave me a whole kit. He left it in the upstairs bathroom for me.

Condoms, cream, dental dams.” I burst out laughing. “Isn’t ‘dental dam’ the unsexiest word you ever heard?”

“No, I think ‘gonorrhoea’ is!”

Abruptly I stop laughing. “Peter doesn’t have gonorrhoea!” Now Margot’s the one cracking up. “He doesn’t!”

“I know, I’m just teasing. But I think you should pack your kit just in case things go in that direction.”

“Gogo, I’m not planning on having sex at Beach Week.”

“I said just in case! You never know.” She pushes her hair out of her face and in a serious tone, she says, “I’m really glad my first time was with Josh, though. It should be with someone who really knows you. Someone who loves you.”

Before I go to bed, I open up that kit and take out the condoms and pack them deep in the bottom of my suitcase. Then I pick out my prettiest bra and underwear set, pale pink edged in electric blue lace, never been worn, and I pack that too. Just in case.

*PETER'S AT MY HOUSE BRIGHT AND EARLY* to pick me up. Everyone else is caravanning down together, but Peter wanted it to be just him and me in his two-seater. He's in a good mood; he's brought donuts for us like old times. He says they're all for me, though. Ever since he came back from that training weekend with his lacrosse team, he's been in fitness mode.

We're moving stuff around in his car to make room for my suitcase when Kitty comes running out to say hi. She spots the bag of donuts resting on top of my bag and she snags one. Her mouth full, she says, "Peter, did Lara Jean tell you the news about Korea?"

"What news?" he says.

My head snaps up and I throw Kitty a look. "I was just about to. Peter, I didn't get a chance to tell you yesterday... . My dad's sending us to Korea for my graduation present."

"Wow, that's cool," Peter says.

"Yeah, we're going to see our relatives and do a tour around the country, too."

"When?"

I glance over at him. "Next month."

"For how long?" he asks.

"A month."

He looks at me in dismay. "A *month*? That long?"

"I know." We're already in mid-June. Only two months of summer left from here and then he'll still be here and I'll be in Chapel Hill.

"A month," he repeats. Before Peter, I wouldn't have thought twice about going to Korea for a month. I would have



rejoiced. And now ... I'd never say so to Daddy or Margot or Kitty, but I don't want to go. I just don't. I do. But I don't.

When we're in the car, on our way, I say, "We'll FaceTime every day. It's a thirteen-hour time difference, so if I call you at night, it'll be your morning."

Peter looks gloomy. "We were gonna go to Bledell's for his Fourth of July weekend, remember? His dad got a new boat. I was going to teach you how to wakeboard."

"I know."

"What am I going to do when you're all the way over there? The summer's going to suck. I wanted to take you to Pony Pasture." Pony Pasture is a little park on the James River in Richmond; there are big stones you can lie out on, and you can float down the river on inner tubes. Peter's gone before, with friends from school, but I never have.

"We can go when I come back," I say, and he nods half-heartedly. "And I'll bring back lots of presents. Face masks. Korean candy. A present a day!"

"Bring me back some tiger socks."

"If they make them big enough," I say, just to make a joke, just to make him smile. This week will have to be the most perfect, the best ever, to make up for the fact that I'll be gone all summer.

Peter's phone buzzes, and he ignores the call without looking to see who it is. A minute later it buzzes again, and Peter's face goes tight.

"Who is it?" I ask.

"My dad," he says shortly.

"I hope he's calling to apologize and explain how he could miss his own son's graduation."

"I already know why. He told my mom Everett had an allergic reaction so they took him to urgent care."

“Oh,” I say. “I guess that’s a pretty good excuse. Is Everett okay?”

“He’s fine. I don’t think he’s really even that allergic. When I eat strawberries, my tongue itches. Big deal.” With that, Peter turns on the music, and we don’t talk for a while.

The girls’ house is second row, with a view of the beach. It’s on stilts, like all the other houses in the second row. There are three levels, with the kitchen and living room on the bottom level, and the bedrooms on the top levels. Chris and I share a room with two beds on the top level. It’s like we are at the top of a lighthouse. The bedspreads are turquoise with seashells on them. Everything smells a little mildewy, but it’s not a bad house.

All of the girls in the house have taken up different roles, except for Chris, whose main role has been to sleep on the beach all day with a water bottle of beer. The first day she came back with her chest and face lobster red; the only unburned part of her was where her sunglasses were. She was embarrassed but she played it off, saying it’s her base tan for Costa Rica. Pammy is the den mom. She promised her parents she wouldn’t drink, so she’s taken it upon herself to check on the other girls and bring water and Advil to their beds in the morning. Kaila’s really good with a flatiron. She can even curl with it, something I’ve never managed to quite get the hang of. Harley’s good at coordinating and making plans with the other houses.

I’m the cook. When we first got to the house, we went out and did a big shopping trip and bought cold cuts, granola, dried pasta and jars of sauce, salsa, cereal. The one thing we didn’t buy was toilet paper, which we ran out of on the second day. Every time we leave the house to eat lunch or dinner out, one of us steals a wad of toilet paper from the restaurant bathroom. Why we don’t just go buy more, I don’t know, but it’s turned into kind of a game. Chris is the clear winner, because she managed to get an economy-size roll out of the dispenser, and she smuggled it out under her shirt.

The boys come over every day to freeload and also because their house is already filled with sand. We've nicknamed it the Sandcastle. Just sitting on their couch, it's like getting a body scrub, and you stand up feeling exfoliated and not in a good way.

I wonder if this is what it would feel like to live in a sorority house. At first it's kind of charming, like those boarding houses in the 1940s, borrowing nail polish and playing music while we get ready, eating ice cream in bed. But then on Wednesday, Kaila and Harley get into a screaming fight at one in the morning over who left the flatiron on and our neighbors call the police. That same night Pammy gets drunk, and I sit next to her on the beach for hours while she cries, because she feels guilty about breaking her word to her parents. The next night, some of the girls go out to a club and bring back three guys from Montana. One has shifty eyes and I make sure to lock my bedroom door that night. In my and Chris's room, I text Peter, who's already gone back to his house. He comes right back and camps out downstairs "to keep my eye on them."

Peter and I spend our days at the beach, where I sit and read and he goes for long runs. Since we've been here, he goes running all the time, because he can't work out like he does at home, in the gym. He goes for a long run in the morning before it gets hot, a short one midday, and another long one at dusk. Except for the day I make him go with me to the Wright Brothers museum in Kill Devil Hills. I went there as a kid with my family, before Kitty was born, but I was too little to climb up to the monument. We go all the way to the top and take in the view.

All week, Peter has been as winsome and winning as ever, especially in front of other people—always with an easygoing smile on his face, always the first to suggest an activity, a game. But with me he's been distant. Like even though he's right here next to me, he feels far away. Unreachable. I've tried to broach the topic of his dad again, but he just laughs it off. He hasn't brought up my trip to Korea again either.

Every night there's a party at one of the houses—except ours. We never host, because Pammy is worried about losing our security deposit. The nice thing about it is, all the different groups are hanging out in a way that people didn't in high school. There is something freeing about knowing it's all over. We won't all be together like this again, so why not? In that spirit, Chris hooks up with Patrick Shaw, a guy from Josh's anime club.

Tonight the party is at Peter's house. I have no idea how they're getting their security deposit back, because the place is in sandy shambles: One of the wicker chairs on the deck is broken, there are beer cans everywhere, and someone sat down on the beige living room couch in a wet orange towel and now there's a big orange spot in the middle. I'm making my way through the kitchen when I see John Ambrose McClaren, going through the refrigerator.

I freeze. Peter's been in such an unpredictable mood; I don't know what he'll do when he sees John at his house.

I'm trying to decide if I should go find Peter and tell him John's here, when John's head pops up behind the refrigerator door. He's holding a carrot and munching on it. "Hey! I thought I might see you here."

"Hi!" I say, cheerfully, as if I weren't just contemplating backing away before he saw me. I come over and he gives me a one-armed hug, because he's still holding the carrot. "Have you seen Peter?" I ask him. "This is the house he's staying in."

"Nah, we just got here." John looks tan, his hair is bleached from the sun, and he's wearing a worn blue-and-white-checked shirt and khaki shorts. "Where are you staying?"

"Really close to here. What about you?"

"We got a house in Duck." He smiles and then offers me his carrot. "Want a bite?"

I laugh. "No thanks. So where did you decide on for school?"

“William and Mary.” John holds his hand up for a high five. “So I’ll see you there, right?”

“Actually ... I’m going to Chapel Hill. I got in off the wait list.”

John’s jaw drops. “Are you serious? That’s awesome!” He pulls me in for a hug. “That’s amazing. It’s actually the perfect place for you. You’re going to love it there.”

I’m looking toward the kitchen door, thinking of how I can gracefully exit this conversation, when Peter strolls into the kitchen with a beer in his hand. He stops short when he sees us. I’m cringing inside, but he just grins and shouts, “McClaren! What up!” They do a guy hug, where they pull each other in and then just kind of bump into each other. When they back away, Peter’s eyes linger on the carrot in John’s hand. Every day, Peter’s made himself a carrot-and-berry protein shake, and I just know he’s smarting over John taking one. He’s counted out exactly how many carrots he needs for the rest of the week.

“Lara Jean was just telling me she got into Carolina,” John says, resting his back against the countertop. “I’m so jealous.”

“Yeah, you always wanted to go there, right?” Peter’s eyes are still on the carrot.

“Ever since I was a kid. It was my top choice.” John gives me a playful nudge. “This girl snuck in there like a thief in the night. Took my spot right out from under me.”

Smiling, I say, “Sorry about that.”

“Nah, I’m just kidding with you.” John takes a bite of his carrot. “I really might transfer, though. We’ll see.”

Peter puts his arm around my waist and takes a swig of beer. “You should. We could all go to a Tar Heels game together.” He says it genially enough, but I can hear the tension underneath.

John doesn’t miss it either. “For sure,” he says. Then he polishes off the rest of his carrot and tosses the stem into the

sink. “I want you guys to meet my girlfriend, Dipti. She’s around here somewhere.” He pulls his phone out of his pocket and sends her a text.

We’re still standing around when she finds us. She is taller than me, sporty-looking, shoulder-length black hair, dark skin, maybe Indian. She has a nice white smile and one dimple. She’s wearing a silky white romper and sandals. I’m regretting my decision to wear a UVA T-shirt of Peter’s and cutoffs. We introduce ourselves, and then she hops up on the countertop and asks, “So how do you guys know each other?”

“McClaren was my BFF back in middle school,” Peter says. “They used to call us Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid. Who do you think was Butch and who do you think was the Sundance Kid, Dipti?”

She laughs. “I don’t know. I never saw that movie.”

“Butch was the main guy.” Peter points to himself. “And the Sundance Kid over there”—he points to John—“he was the sidekick.” Peter cracks up, and I’m cringing inside, but John just shakes his head in his good-natured way. Peter grabs John’s bicep. “Yo, have you been working out?” To Dipti he says, “This kid used to have spaghetti arms and read all day, but now look at him. He’s a stud.”

“Hey, I still read,” John says.

“When Peter and I first got together, I thought maybe he didn’t know how to read,” I say, and John doubles over laughing.

Peter laughs too, but not as heartily as he was a second ago. When it gets late, Peter says I should just stay over instead of going back to my house. I say no, because I don’t have my toothbrush or any of my things, but really, I’m just annoyed with him for the way he acted in front of John.

On the walk back to my house, Peter says, “Dipti seems cool. Good for McClaren. Doubt they’ll stay together, though. They’ll probably visit each other once and be broken up by Christmas, if that.”

I stop walking. “That’s a lousy thing to say.”

“What? I’m just being honest.”

I face him, and salty beach wind whips my hair around my face. “Okay, if you’re ‘just being honest,’ then maybe I will be too.” Peter raises an eyebrow and waits for me to continue. “You acted like a jerk tonight. Insecurity is not a good look on you, Peter.”

“Me?” Peter makes a derisive sound. “Insecure? About what? McClaren? Please. Did you see how he just went into my fridge and ate my carrots?”

I start walking again, faster. “Who cares about your carrots!”

He jogs to catch up with me. “You know I’m trying to get in shape for lacrosse!”

“You’re ridiculous, do you know that?” We are now standing in front of my house. Angry walking sure gets you places in a hurry. “Good night, Peter.” I turn on my heel and start walking up the steps, and Peter doesn’t try to stop me.

*THE NEXT MORNING, I WAKE UP UNSURE* if Peter and I are in a fight. Last night felt like a fight, only I'm not sure if he's mad at me or if I'm supposed to be mad at him. It's an unsettling feeling.

I don't want to be mad at him. I leave for Korea on July 1. We don't have time to get into dumb fights over carrots and John Ambrose McClaren. Every second we have left together is precious.

I decide to make him French toast as a peace offering. His favorite breakfast food, besides donuts, is French toast. In the kitchen I find a box of sugar in the cabinet, milk, half a loaf of bread, a couple of eggs, but no cinnamon. The cinnamon is essential.

I take Pammy's car keys and drive to the little market near our house, where I buy a shaker of cinnamon, butter, a dozen eggs, and a new loaf of white bread, because I figure I might as well make toast for Peter's whole house while I'm at it. At the last second, I throw in a bag of carrots.

Everyone at his house is still asleep, and the place looks even worse than it did the night before. Beer bottles all over the place, empty bags of chips strewn about, bathing suit trunks drying on furniture. Dirty dishes are piled high in the sink, and I have to wash a bowl and a spatula caked in old egg in order to start cooking.

Because the bread is fresh, my first few pieces end up disintegrating in the egg mix, but I get the hang of it on the third try, dipping the bread for only a few seconds before I drop it in the frying pan.

The boys drift downstairs, and I keep frying more French toast. Every time the stack dwindles, I add more. Peter's the last one down, and when I offer him a piece, one of the good crispy ones, he shakes his head and says he'd better not, because



of his diet. He doesn't meet my eyes as he says it. He just doesn't want to eat something I made.

After breakfast I don't stick around, and again Peter doesn't try to stop me. I drive back home and wake up Chris, who is still in last night's clothes. "I have a piece of French toast for you downstairs," I say. I brought her the piece I saved for Peter.

There's a cookout that night, at a house a few streets down from ours. Our house brings tubs of neon-yellow potato salad and all the wine coolers we have left. Since it's the last night, we are emptying out the fridge.

Out on the deck, I end up in a conversation with Kaila and Emily Nussbaum, one of Genevieve's friends. I've barely seen Genevieve at all this week, because she's here with her church friends, and her house is a mix of people from other schools.

Emily asks me, "So are you and Kavinsky really going to stay together?"

Right this second? I have no idea, seeing as how we've barely said two words to each other all night. Of course I don't say that. Whatever I say to Emily will get right back to Genevieve. Gen might have moved on, but she would surely still take pleasure in Peter and me being in a fight. I say, "Yes, we're staying together. UNC and UVA aren't that far."

Kaila sucks up rum and Diet Coke out of her straw, giving me a sidelong look. "You know, you're an interesting girl, Lara Jean. You seem shy and kind of babyish at first, but you're actually very confident. That was a compliment, by the way."

"Thanks," I say. If someone is giving you a compliment, I don't think they should have to tell you they're giving you one; it should probably be obvious to the person receiving it. I take a sip of the drink Chris made me, and I nearly spit it out because she made it so strong. She called it a grown-up Shirley Temple, whatever that means.

"I can see why Kavinsky likes you," Kaila says. "I hope it works out."

"Thank you," I say.

Emily puts her feet up on my chair and says, “If Blake broke up with me, I would freak out. I would be absolutely devastated.”

“Well, you guys are super intense. You’ll probably get married right after college.”

“No way,” Emily says, but she’s obviously pleased.

“Y’all are going to the same school. It’s different.” Kaila regards me. “I don’t think I could ever do long distance.”

“Why not?” I ask.

“I like seeing my man every day. I don’t want to wonder what he’s up to. Like, am I a possessive person? Yes. But also, I don’t want to have to play catch-up at the end of the day. I need to be a part of his daily life and he needs to be a part of mine.” She crunches ice with her teeth.

That’s what happened with Margot and me when she went to college. The distance came slowly, like seawater filling up a boat, without us even realizing it. Before you know it you’re underwater. We made it through, but we’re sisters. Sisters always find their way back to each other. I don’t think it’s the same for boyfriends. The thought of it happening to Peter and me fills me with such sadness. How will we ward it off? By talking every day? Visiting at least once a month? He said it himself—his life is going to be so busy and so full because of lacrosse. He’s already changing, with his healthy diet and his workouts. And we’re fighting, and we never fight, not really. Not the kind of fights you can’t take back. So what now? How do we negotiate this next step?

I stay a few more minutes, and when Emily and Kaila start talking about whether or not to rush a sorority, I make my escape to find Peter. Between this conversation and last night’s fight, I just want him close, while we’re still in the same vicinity. I find him standing around with a bunch of guys who are building a bonfire. He already seems so far away, and I want so badly for things to feel normal between us again. I take big sip of my grown-up Shirley Temple, for courage. Our eyes

meet, and I mouth, *Do you want to go?* He nods. I start to head back inside, and he follows me.

As I take another sip of my grown-up Shirley Temple, he asks, “What are you drinking?”

“Something Chris made me.”

He takes the red Solo cup from me and tosses it in the trash on our way out.

Our walk back to my house is pretty quiet, except for the sound of the ocean waves. I don’t think either of us knows what to say, because whatever is wrong between us, we both know it wasn’t John Ambrose McClaren, or the carrots.

As we make our way down the street, I hear Peter’s subdued voice. “Are you still mad about last night?”

“No.”

“Okay, good,” he says. “I saw the carrots you bought in the fridge. Sorry I didn’t eat your French toast.”

“Why didn’t you? I know it wasn’t because of your diet.”

Peter rubs the back of his neck. “I don’t know what my problem was. I’ve just been in a weird mood.”

I look over at him; his face is obscured by the dark. “We only have a little bit of time before I leave for Korea. Let’s not waste it.” Then I slide my hand in his, and he squeezes it.

The house is completely empty, for the first time all week. All the other girls are still at the party, except for Chris, who ran into somebody she knows through Applebee’s. We go up to my room, and Peter takes off his shoes and gets in my bed. “Want to watch a movie?” he asks, stretching his arms behind his head.

No, I don’t want to watch a movie. Suddenly my heart is racing, because I know what I want to do. I’m ready.

I sit down on the bed next to him as he says, “Or we could start a new show—”

I press my lips to his neck, and I can feel his pulse jump. “What if we don’t watch a movie or a show? What if we ... do something else instead.” I give him a meaningful look.

His body jerks in surprise. “What, you mean like now?”

“Yes.” Now. Now feels right. I start planting little kisses down his throat. “Do you like that?”

I can feel him swallow. “Yes.” He pushes me away from him so he can look at my face. “Let’s stop for a second. I can’t think. Are you drunk? What did Chris put in that drink she gave you?”

“No, I’m not drunk!” I had a little bit of a warm feeling in my body, but the walk home woke me right up. Peter’s still staring at me. “I’m not drunk. I swear.”

Peter swallows hard, his eyes searching mine. “Are you sure you want to do this now?”

“Yes,” I say, because I really, truly am. “But first can you put on Frank Ocean?”

He grabs his phone, and a second later the beat kicks in and Frank’s melodious voice fills the room. Peter starts fumbling with his shirt buttons and then gives up and starts to pull my shirt up, and I yelp, “Wait!”

Peter’s so startled, he jumps away from me. “What? What’s wrong?”

I leap off the bed and start rummaging through my suitcase. I’m not wearing my special bra and underwear set; I’m wearing my normal every day cappuccino-colored bra with the frayed edges. I can’t lose my virginity in my ugliest bra.

“What are you doing?” he asks me.

“Just wait one second.”

I run to the bathroom and change out of my old bra and underwear and put on the lacy ones. Then I brush my teeth, look at my face in the mirror. This is it. I, Lara Jean Song Covey, am about to lose my virginity to Peter K.

Peter calls out, “Is everything okay?”

“Just a sec!” Should I put my clothes back on or just come out in my bra and underwear? He’s never seen me in just my underwear before. Well, I guess he’s about to see me without any clothes at all, so I might as well.

I step out of the bathroom, carrying my clothes in front of me like a shield, and Peter does a double take when he sees me and quickly takes his shirt off. I can feel myself blush. I stuff my bra and underwear in my suitcase, and then dig around inside until I find the packet of condoms. I take one out and then climb back into bed and get under the sheets. “Okay, now I’m ready.”

“I like your bra,” Peter says, peeling the sheet away from me.

“Thank you.”

He moves closer to me and kisses my eyelid. First the left, then the right. “Are you nervous?”

“A little.”

“We don’t have to do anything tonight, Covey.”

“No, I want to.” I hold up the condom, and Peter’s eyebrows shoot up. “From my dad’s kit. Remember, I told you he made me a contraception kit?”

Taking the condom from me, he kisses my neck and says, “Can we not talk about your dad right now?”

“Sure,” I say.

Peter rolls on top of me. My heart is thrumming in my chest, the way it does whenever I am close to him, but now even more so, because everything’s about to change. I’m going somewhere with him I’ve never gone before. He’s careful to keep his weight on his forearms, to not crush me, but I don’t mind the weight of his body on mine. His hand is in my hair the way I like; his lips are warm. We’re both breathing fast.

And then he's suddenly not kissing me anymore. I open my eyes and he's hovering above me, his brow furrowed. "Is this because we had a fight last night? Because, Covey—"

"It's not because of the fight. I just—I just want to feel close to you." Peter's looking at me so intently, and I can tell he's waiting for more, for me to give him some grand reason. It's pretty simple, really. "It's not all of a sudden. I want to have sex with you because I love you and I want it to be you."

"But why me?"

"Because—because you're my first love, so who else would it be?"

Peter rolls off me and sits up; his head is in his hands.

I sit up too, pulling the sheet up around me. "What's wrong?" He doesn't say anything for what feels like forever. "Please just say it." I'm starting to feel sick to my stomach.

"I don't want to do this right now."

"Why not?" I whisper.

He can't look at me. "I don't know... . I just have a lot on my mind. Between lacrosse, and my dad not showing up at graduation, and now you're leaving for the summer."

"Not the whole summer. Just July. I'll be back at the end of July! Why are you fast-forwarding the whole summer away?"

Peter shakes his head. "It just seems like you're leaving and you don't really care."

"You know it wasn't my choice! My dad surprised me! You're not being fair, Peter."

He looks at me for a long beat. "What about UNC? Are you even planning on transferring to UVA anymore? When it was William and Mary, it was a given, and now it doesn't seem like it."

I wet my lips. My heart is pounding out of control. "I'm not sure. Maybe? But maybe not. UNC feels different to me."

“Yeah, I know. It’s obvious.”

“Don’t make it sound like a bad thing! Would you rather I go somewhere and be unhappy?”

“Temporarily unhappy,” he corrects.

“Peter!”

“Come on, Lara Jean. Do you really think that shitty of me?”

“No. I ... I just don’t understand why you’re acting this way. I want to at least give UNC a real chance. I want to give myself a chance.” My eyes well up with tears, and it’s hard to speak. “And I think you should want that for me too.”

Peter flinches like I’ve hit him. This bed is small, but it feels like he’s so far away from me right now. I ache inside, wanting to go to him. But I can’t.

Silently he puts his shirt back on. “I think I’m gonna go,” he says. Then he gets up, walks out the door, and leaves. I wait for the front door to shut before I start to cry.

*AS WE PACK UP THE CAR THAT MORNING*, I keep thinking Peter might show up to take me home, but he doesn't, and I don't reach out to him, either. I ride back up to Virginia with the girls.

I don't hear anything from Peter until the next day. I get a text that says:

I'm sorry for last night. I was a dick. We're gonna make this work, I promise. I have to do some stuff for my mom but can I see you later?

I text back:

Yes.

He texts back:

I really am sorry.

I love you.

I'm starting to text back, I love you, too, when my phone rings. It's Peter's house number, and I answer it eagerly.

"I love you, too," I say.

There is surprised silence on the other end, then a little laugh to cover it up. "Hi, Lara Jean. This is Peter's mom."

I am mortified. "Oh! Hi, Mrs. Kavinsky."

She wants me to come over and chat with her. She says Peter isn't home, that it'll be just the two of us. She must have sent him out to run errands for her so she could ask me over. What can I do but go?

I put on a yellow sundress and lipstick, brush my hair, and drive to Peter's house. She answers the door with a ready smile on her face; she's wearing a gingham blouse and Bermuda shorts. "Come on in," she says.

I follow her into the kitchen, and she says, "Lara Jean, would you like something to drink? Sun tea?"



“Sure,” I say, climbing onto a stool.

Peter’s mom pours me a glass of sun tea out of a plastic frosted pitcher. She hands me the glass and says, “Thank you for coming over here to visit with me, just us girls. There’s something I’ve been wanting to talk to you about.”

“Sure,” I say again. My skin is prickling.

She takes my hands in hers. Her hands are cool and dry; mine suddenly feel clammy. “Peter’s been through a lot, and he’s worked so hard. I’m sure you know how disappointing it was for him when his dad didn’t come to graduation.” Her eyes search mine, and I nod. “He pretends he doesn’t care, but he’s hurting inside. He came back from Beach Week talking about transferring to UNC for his sophomore year. Did you know that?”

I can feel all the blood rush to my face. “No, I didn’t know that. He ... he hasn’t said a word to me about it.”

She nods, as if she suspected as much. “If he were to transfer, he wouldn’t be able to play for a year. That means he wouldn’t keep his athletic scholarship. Out-of-state tuition is very expensive, as I’m sure you know.”

It is. Daddy said it would be all right, that Margot only has two more years of college, and Kitty has ages before it’s her turn. But I know it’s expensive. And I know, even though we don’t talk about it, that my dad makes more money than Peter’s mom does.

“Peter’s dad says he wants to contribute, but his dad isn’t someone to be depended on. So I can’t count on him.” She pauses delicately. “But I’m hoping I can count on you.”

I rush to say, “You don’t need to worry about me. I’ll tell Peter not to transfer to North Carolina.”

“Honey, I appreciate that so much, I really do, but it’s not just transferring that I’m worrying about. I’m worried about his mind-set. When he gets to UVA, he needs to be focused. He’s going there to be a student athlete. He can’t be driving down to North Carolina every weekend. It just isn’t practical.

You're both so young. Peter's already making big life decisions based on you, and who even knows what's going to happen with you two in the future. You're teenagers. Life doesn't always work out the way you think it's going to work out... . I don't know if Peter ever told you this, but Peter's dad and I got married very young. And I'd—I'd just hate to see you two make the same mistakes we did." She hesitates. "Lara Jean, I know my son, and he's not going to let you go unless you let him go first."

I blink.

"He'd do anything for you. That's his nature. He's loyal to his very core. Unlike his father." Mrs. Kavinsky looks at me with sympathetic eyes. "I know you care about Peter and you want what's best for him. I hope you'll give what I said some thought." She hesitates, then says, "Please don't mention anything to him. Peter would be very upset with me."

I struggle to find my voice. "I won't."

Her smile is bright, relieved. "You're a sweet girl, Lara Jean. I know you'll do the right thing." She pats my hands and releases them. Then she changes the subject, asking me about my dad's wedding.

When I get back to my car, I flip down the mirror and see that my cheeks are still stained pink. It feels like the time in seventh grade when Chris's mom found her cigarettes and she thought we'd both been smoking them. I wanted to say it wasn't me, but I couldn't. I just shriveled up with shame. That's how I feel right now. Like I've gotten in trouble.

Was it foolish of Peter and me to think that we could be the exception to the rule? Is Peter's mom right? Are we making a huge mistake? Suddenly it feels like every decision we make is so momentous, and I'm so scared to make the wrong one.

Back at home, Daddy, Margot, and Kitty are in the living room debating over where to go for dinner. It's such a normal thing to be discussing on a Thursday evening, but I feel so strange, because it's as if the earth is shifting beneath my feet, and the

ground isn't steady anymore, but everyone around me is talking about food.

"What do you feel like, Lara Jean?" Daddy asks me.

"I'm not very hungry," I say, looking down at my phone. What will I say to Peter when he calls? Do I tell him? "I might just stay home."

Daddy peers at me. "Are you all right? Coming down with something? You look pale."

I shake my head. "No, I'm fine."

"How about Seoul House?" Margot suggests. "I've really been craving Korean food."

Daddy hesitates, and I know why. Trina doesn't exactly have the most sophisticated palate. She lives off of Diet Coke and chicken fingers; kale salads are about as adventurous as she gets. When we order sushi, she'll only eat California rolls and cooked shrimp. She doesn't eat any fish at all. But nobody's perfect.

"Trina's not big on Korean food," I say, to spare Daddy having to say it. My phone buzzes, but it's just an email from UNC's housing department.

Incredulous, Margot says, "Are you serious?"

"It's a little spicy for her." Hastily he adds, "But it's fine. She can get the bulgogi sliders or the fried rice."

"I don't want Korean food either," Kitty says.

"We'll go to Seoul House," Daddy says. "Trina will be fine."

As soon as Daddy goes to make a reservation, I say to Margot, "Don't judge Trina for not liking Korean food. She can't help it if she can't eat spicy stuff."

Kitty is quick to jump in with, "Yeah, don't judge her."

A hurt look flashes across Margot's face, and she protests, "I didn't say anything!"

“We know what you were thinking,” I say. I know what she’s thinking because I’ve had the same thought. And I’m now in the curious position of having to defend Trina for something I also think is annoying. It wouldn’t kill Trina to broaden her culinary horizons.

“Fried rice, though? Really?”

“What’s the big deal if she doesn’t like Korean food?” Kitty says.

“Korean food is our biggest link to Korean culture,” Margot tells her. “Are we just never going to eat Korean food anymore because Trina doesn’t like it?” Margot doesn’t wait for us to answer. “I just hope she realizes that when she marries Daddy, she gets the whole package, and Korea’s a part of that package.”

“Margot, she knows that,” I say. “And besides, we’ll get to eat Korean food every day this summer.” Every day this summer when I’m away from Peter.

“I wish Daddy and Trina were coming too,” Kitty says.

“It’s better this way,” Margot says. “What would Trina even eat in Korea?” She’s halfway joking but not really.

Kitty, who is petting Jamie, ignores her and asks me, “Who’s going to take care of Jamie Fox-Pickle and Simone when we’re all gone?”

“A dog sitter?” I suggest. My heart’s not really in it. I’m only halfway here. All I can think of is Peter. “We’ll figure something out.”

Margot looks around the room. Her eyes land on Trina’s big armchair. “This house feels so small all of sudden. There isn’t enough room for all of Trina’s stuff.”

Kitty says, “It doesn’t feel that small when you’re not here.” I gasp. “Kitty!”

All the color drains from Margot’s face, and then her cheeks go splotchy. “Did you really just say that to me?”

I can tell Kitty regrets it, but she lifts her chin in her stubborn Kitty way. “Well, I’m just saying.”

“You’re a brat.” Margot gets the words out strong, but I see her face as she turns to go upstairs, and I know she’s going to her room to cry in private.

As soon as she’s gone, I turn to Kitty. “Why did you say that to her?”

Tears leak from her eyes. “Because! She’s been so mean to Tree for no reason.”

I wipe her tears with the back of my hand. I feel like crying too. “Gogo feels left out, that’s all. We know Trina, because we’ve had time to know her. But Margot doesn’t know her at all. And Kitty—Gogo practically raised you. You don’t talk to her like that.”

Half-heartedly, she mutters, “I talk to you like that.”

“That’s different and you know it. We’re closer in age.”

“So you’re saying you and I are on the same level?”

“I mean—no. Margot and I are almost on the same level, and you’re on the level below us, because you’re the youngest. But you and I are more on the same level than you and Margot. Just try and understand her. She doesn’t want to feel like her place has been taken.”

Kitty’s shoulders hunch. “It hasn’t been taken.”

“She just needs a little reassurance, that’s all. Be understanding.” Kitty doesn’t reply or lift her head, but I know she’s hearing me. “You *are* a little brat, though.” Her head snaps up and she lunges at me, and I laugh. “Go upstairs and say sorry to Gogo. You know it’s the right thing to do.”

Kitty actually listens to me for once. She goes upstairs, and then, sometime later, they both come down with red eyes. In the meantime I get a text from Peter, asking if I can come out. I tell him I can’t, that I’m going out to dinner with my family, but I’ll see him tomorrow night. The guys are meeting us at

the karaoke bar after they have their steak dinner. I hope that by the time I see him, I'll know what to do.

In my room that night, I am painting my nails mint green for the bachelorette party tomorrow night, and Margot is lying on my bed looking at her phone. "Do you want me to do your nails too?" I ask.

"No, I don't care," she says.

I sigh. "Listen, you have to stop being in a bad mood about Trina. She and Daddy are getting married, Gogo."

Margot sighs. "It's not just Trina. Trina's ... Trina."

"Then what?"

Margot chews on her top lip, something I haven't seen her do since she was little. "It's like I came back and there was a whole new family here that I wasn't a part of."

I want to tell her that nothing has changed, that she's still just as much a part of it as she always was, but that wouldn't be true. Life here kept going on without her, just like it'll keep going on without me when I leave this fall.

A tear rolls down her cheek. "And I miss Mommy."

My throat tightens up. "Me too."

"I wish Kitty could have known her." Margot sighs. "I know it's selfish ... but I guess I just never pictured Daddy getting married again. I thought he'd date, maybe have a long-term girlfriend at some point, but married?"

Gently I say, "I never really thought about it either, but then when you left for Scotland, I don't know ... it just started making more sense. The thought of him having someone."

"I know. And it's good for Kitty, too."

"I think she thinks of Trina as hers. I have my own relationship with Trina, but Kitty's had a special thing with her from the start."

“God, she’s like a pit bull with Trina!” Margot laughs a shaky kind of laugh. “She really loves her.”

“I know that’s why you got so upset about Korean food today. You think that if Daddy stops cooking Korean food because Trina doesn’t like it, Kitty won’t have that connection anymore. And if we forget Korea, we forget Mommy.” Tears are rolling down her cheeks, and she is wiping them away with the back of her sweatshirt sleeve. “But we’ll never forget Korea, and we’ll never forget Mommy. Okay?”

Margot nods and takes a deep breath. “God, I’ve cried twice today! It’s so un-me.” She smiles at me, and I smile back, as brightly as I can. Her brow furrows. “Lara Jean, is something up with you? You’ve seemed sort of ... I don’t know, melancholy, ever since you got back from Beach Week. Did something happen with you and Peter?”

I want so desperately to tell her everything, to lay all my burdens upon my big sister, to have her tell me what to do. Things would be so much simpler if she would just tell me what to do. But I know what Margot would do, because she’s already done it.

*Don’t be the girl who goes to college with a boyfriend.* That’s what my mom said. That’s what Margot said.

*FOR THE BACHELORETTE, KRISTEN DECIDED* the theme of the night should be the nineties, because there's nothing Trina loves better than the nineties, so everyone has to dress up in nineties clothes. Honestly, I think the whole reason behind the theme is because Kristen wants to wear a crop top and show off her abs. She arrives at the house in a blue T-shirt that says SKATER GURL and baggy jeans, and her hair is parted down the middle. She's wearing dark brown lipstick, very matte.

The first thing she does is turn on a nineties station, which blasts all over the whole house. The girls are meeting here, and the boys (and Kitty) are meeting at the steakhouse. I'm glad, because I still don't know what I'm going to say to Peter.

We're still getting ready. I'm going with a floral babydoll dress I found on Etsy, and cream-colored knee socks and black platform Mary Janes. I'm brushing my hair into two ponytails when Kristen comes upstairs to do inspections, carrying a martini glass that says *Maid of Honor* in pink cursive. "Aw, you look cute, Lara Jean," she says, sipping on her cocktail.

I tighten my ponytails. "Thank you, Kristen," I say. I'm just glad my outfit is up to snuff. I've got a lot on my mind, and I would hate to mess up Trina's night.

Kitty and Margot are on the floor; Kitty is painting Margot's nails black. Margot has chosen to go the grunge route—a long flannel shirt and jeans and a pair of Doc Martens I borrowed from Chris.

"What are you drinking?" Kitty asks Kristen.

"Cosmopolitan. I have more downstairs in a Sprite bottle. Not for you, though."

Kitty rolls her eyes at this. "Where's Tree?"

"She's in the shower," I tell her.



Kristen tilts her head and squints at me. “You’re missing something.” She puts down her glass and digs into her clutch and pulls out a lipstick. “Put this on.”

“Oh ... is it the color you’re wearing?” I ask.

“Yes! It’s called Toast of New York. It was the shit back in the day!”

“Um ... ,” I hedge. Kristen looks like she smeared Hershey’s kisses all over her lips and then the chocolate dried.

“Just trust me,” she says.

“I was thinking about wearing this.” I put down my hairbrush and show her a shiny pink lip gloss. “Didn’t the Spice Girls wear lip gloss like this? Weren’t they from the nineties?”

Kristen frowns. “They were more late nineties, early two thousands, but yes. I guess that’ll work.” She points her lipstick at Margot. “You need this, though. Your outfit isn’t nineties enough.” She watches as Kitty puts the finishing touches on Margot’s nails. “I used to use a Sharpie,” Kristen says. “You girls don’t know how lucky you are to have all these options. We used to have to make do. Sharpies for black, Wite-Out for white.”

“What’s Wite-Out?” Kitty asks her.

“Oh my God. You children don’t even know what Wite-Out is?”

As soon as Kristen turns her back to pick up her cocktail, Kitty bares her teeth at her and hisses silently.

“I saw you in the mirror,” Kristen says.

“I meant for you to,” Kitty says back.

Kristen eyes her. “Hurry up and finish with your sister’s nails so you can do mine.”

“I’m almost done,” Kitty says.

A minute later the doorbell rings, and all three of them head downstairs. I hear Kristen yell, “You get the door; I’ll get

the drinks!”

Trina’s sorority sister Monique is wearing a slip dress with big sunflowers splashed all over it, and a white T-shirt underneath, plus black platform Mary Janes that look like space shoes. Her friend Kendra from SoulCycle is wearing overalls with a pink ribbed cami and a matching pink scrunchie in her hair. A lot of the stuff people are wearing, the kids from school wear too. Fashion really is cyclical.

The nineties theme was the right call, because Trina is delighted by all of it.

“I love your dress!” Kendra says to me.

“Thank you!” I say. “It’s vintage.”

She recoils in real horror. “*Oh my God*. Are the nineties considered vintage now?”

Trina says, “Yes, girl. Their nineties are our seventies.”

She shudders. “That’s terrifying. Are we old?”

“We’re geriatric,” Trina says, but cheerfully.

In the car on the way to the karaoke bar, I get a text from Peter—it’s a picture of him and my dad in their suits, smiling big. My heart lurches when I see it. How do I let a boy like that go?

We have a private room reserved at the karaoke bar. When the waitress comes around, Margot orders a pomegranate margarita, which Trina notices, but she doesn’t say anything. What could she say? Margot’s in college. She’ll be twenty in a month.

“Is that good?” I ask her.

“It’s really sweet,” she says. “Do you want a sip?”

I would surely love a sip. Peter’s texted twice from the steakhouse, asking how my night is going, and my stomach is tied up in knots. Furtively I look over at Trina, who is doing a duet with Kristen. She might not have said anything to Margot, but I have a feeling she will say something to me.

“In Scotland, the drinking age is eighteen,” Margot says.

I take a quick sip, and it’s good, tart and icy.

Meanwhile, everybody’s looking through songbooks, trying to decide what songs to put in. The rule of the night is only nineties music. It takes a while for people to get warmed up, but then the drinks start coming fast and furious, and people are shouting out song numbers for the queue.

Trina’s friend Michelle goes up next. She croons, “There was a time, when I was so broken-hearted ...”

“I like this song,” I say. “Who sings this song?”

Kristen pats me on the head indulgently. “Aerosmith, baby girl. Aerosmith.”

They all get up and sing Spice Girls.

Margot and I sing “Wonderwall” by Oasis. When I sit back down, I’m breathless.

Trina’s SoulCycle friend Kendra is swaying to the beat of whatever nineties song Trina and Kristen are dueting, her frosted martini glass in the air. It’s acid green.

“What are you drinking, Kendra?” I ask her.

“Apple martini.”

“That sounds good. Can I try it?”

“Yeah, have a sip! They’re so fruity you can’t even taste it.”

I take a little hummingbird sip. It is sweet. It tastes like a Jolly Rancher.

When Kristen and Trina’s number is up, they fall on the couch beside me, and Kendra jumps up to sing a Britney Spears song.

Kristen is slurring, “I just want us to stay close, you know? Don’t be boring. Don’t be, like, a mom all of a sudden, okay? I mean, I know you have to be a mom, but like, don’t be a *mom* mom.”

“I won’t be a mom mom,” Trina says soothingly. “I could never be a mom mom.”

“You have to promise to still come to Wine Down Wednesdays.”

“I promise.”

Kristen lets out a sob. “I just love you so much, girl.”

Trina has tears in her eyes too. “I love you, too.”

Kendra’s martini is just sitting on the table all alone. I take another sip when no one is looking, because it does taste good. And then another. I’ve finished the glass when Trina spots me. She raises her eyebrows. “I think you might’ve had a little *too* much fun at Beach Week.”

“I barely drunk a thing at Beach Week, Trina!” I protest. I frown. “Is it drunk or is it drank?”

Trina looks alarmed. “Margot, is your sister drunk?”

I put my hands up. “Guys, guys, I don’t even drank!”

Margot sits down next to me, examines my eyes. “She’s drunk.”

I’ve never been drunk before in my life. Am I drunk now? I do feel very relaxed. Is that what drunk feels like, when your limbs are loose, kind of silky?

“Your dad is going to kill me,” Trina says with a groan. “They just dropped Kitty off back at home. They’ll be here any minute. Lara Jean, drink a lot of water. Drink this whole glass. I’m going to get another pitcher.”

When she returns a few minutes later, the bachelor party is in tow. She gives me a warning look. *Don’t act drunk*, she mouths. I give her a thumbs-up. Then I jump up and throw my arms around Peter.

“Peter!” I shout above the music. He looks so cute in his button-down and tie. So cute I could cry. I bury my face in his neck like a squirrel. “I’ve missed you so, so very much.”

Peter peers at me. “Are you drunk?”

“No, I only had like two sips. Two drinks.”

“Trina let you drink?”

“No.” I giggle. “I stole sips.”

“We’d better get you out of here before your dad sees you,” Peter says, eyes darting around. My dad is looking through a songbook with Margot, who is giving me a look that says, *Get it together.*

“What he doesn’t know won’t hurt a living soul.”

“Let’s go out to the parking lot so you can get some air,” he says, putting his arm around me and hustling me out the door and through the restaurant.

We step outside, and I sway on my feet a little. Peter’s trying not to smile. “You’re drunk.”

“I guess I’m a weightlight!”

“Lightweight.” He pinches my cheeks.

“Right. Weightlight. I mean, lightweight.” Why is that so funny? I can’t stop laughing. But then I see the way he is looking at me, with such tenderness, and I stop. I don’t feel like laughing anymore. I feel like crying. Look at the way he made my dad’s bachelor party so special. Look at all the ways he loves me so well. I have to love him back just as much. I didn’t know what I was going to do until this very moment, but now I know. “There’s something I want to say to you.” I straighten up suddenly and accidentally knock Peter in the collarbone, which makes him cough. “I’m sorry. Here’s what I want to say to you. I want you to do what you’re supposed to do and I want to do what I’m supposed to do.”

He has a half smile on his face. Shaking his head at me, he says, “What are you talking about, Covey?”

“I’m talking about, I don’t think we should be in a long-distance—a long-distance relationship.”

His smile is fading. “What?”

“I think that you need to do all the things you need to do at UVA, like play lacrosse, and study, and I need to do what I need to do at UNC, and if we try to stay together, everything will just fall apart. So we can’t. We just, we just can’t.”

He blinks and then his face goes very still. “You don’t want to stay together?”

I shake my head, and the hurt on his face sobers me up. “I want you to do what you’re supposed to do. I don’t want you to do something for me. UVA is what you’ve worked for, Peter. That’s where you have to be. Not at UNC.”

He turns ashen. “Did you talk to my mom?”

“Yes. I mean, no ...”

The muscle in his jaw twitches. “Got it. Say no more.”

“Wait, listen to me, Peter—”

“Nah, I’m good. Just for the record, I mentioned UNC to my mom as a throwaway possibility. It wasn’t anything definite. Just something I threw out there. But it’s cool if you don’t want me to come.” He starts to walk away from me, and I grab his arm to stop him.

“Peter, that’s not what I’m saying! I’m saying that if you came, if you gave up everything you’ve worked for at UVA, you’d only end up resenting me.”

Flatly he says, “Just stop it, Lara Jean. I saw this coming a mile away. Ever since you decided to go to UNC, you’ve been saying good-bye to me.”

My arm drops away from him. “What does that even mean?”

“There’s the scrapbook, for one thing. You said it was to remember us by. Why would I need something to remember us by, Lara Jean?”

“That isn’t how I meant it! I spent months working on that scrapbook. You’re putting this all on me, but you’re the one who’s been pushing me away. Ever since Beach Week!”

“Fine, let’s talk about what happened that night at Beach Week.” I can feel my face flush as he looks at me with a challenge in his eyes. “That night you wanted to have sex, it was like you were trying to put a bow on this whole thing. Like you were putting me in your—your hatbox. Like I played my part in your first love story, and now you can go on to the next chapter.”

I feel light-headed, unsteady on my feet. Peter, who I thought I understood so well. “I’m sorry you took it that way, but that’s not how I meant it. Not at all.”

“It clearly is how you meant it, because you’re doing it right now. Aren’t you?”

Is there some hidden truth to what he’s saying, even a little bit? It’s true that I wouldn’t want my first time to be with anyone else. It’s true that it felt right to have it be with Peter, because he’s the first boy I ever loved. I wouldn’t want it to be with some boy I meet in college. That boy is a stranger to me. Peter I’ve known since we were kids. Was I just trying to close a chapter?

No. I did it because I wanted it to be him. But if that’s how he sees it, maybe it’s easier this way.

I swallow. “Maybe you’re right. Maybe I did want my first time to be with you so I could close a chapter on high school. On us.”

He freezes. I see the pain in his eyes, and then his face closes up like a shuttered empty house. He starts to walk away. This time I don’t try to stop him. Over his shoulder he says, “We’re good, Covey. Don’t worry about it.”

As soon as he’s gone, I turn to the side and throw up everything I drank and ate tonight. I’m bent over, heaving, when Trina and Daddy and Margot walk out of the karaoke bar. Daddy rushes over to me. “Lara Jean, what’s the matter? Are you all right?”

“I’m fine, I’m fine,” I mumble, wiping my eyes and mouth.

His eyes widen, alarmed. “Have you been drinking?” He looks accusingly at Trina, who is rubbing my back. “Trina, you let Lara Jean drink?”

“She had a few sips of a pomegranate martini. She’ll be fine.”

“She doesn’t look fine!”

Trina stands up straight, her hand still on my back. “Dan, Lara Jean’s a young woman now. You can’t see it, because you still see her as a little girl, but she’s grown up so much in the time I’ve known her. She can handle herself.”

Margot breaks in. “Daddy, I let her have a few sips of my drink—that’s it. She really doesn’t have any tolerance. Frankly, it’s something she should work on before she gets to college. Don’t blame Trina.”

Daddy looks from Margot to Trina and back to Margot. She is standing shoulder to shoulder with Trina, and in that moment they are united. Then he looks over at me. “You’re right. This is all on Lara Jean. Get in the car.”

On the way home we have to pull over once so I can throw up again. It’s not the pomegranate martini that’s making me want to die. It’s the look on Peter’s face. The way the light in his eyes went away. The hurt—if I close my eyes I can see it. The only other time I’ve seen him look that way was when his dad didn’t show up at graduation. And now that look is there because of me.

I start to cry in the car. Big sobs that make my shoulders shake.

“Don’t cry,” my dad says with a sigh. “You’re in trouble, but not that big of trouble.”

“It’s not that. I broke up with Peter.” I can barely get the words out. “Daddy, if you could’ve seen the look on his face. It was—terrible.”

Bewildered, he asks, “Why did you break up with him? He’s such a nice boy.”



“I don’t know,” I weep. “Now I don’t know.”

He takes one hand off the steering wheel and squeezes my shoulder. “It’s all right. It’s all right.”

“But—it isn’t.”

“But it will be,” he says, stroking my hair.

I made the right choice tonight. I did, I know it. Letting him go was the right thing.

I can see the future, Peter. That way lies heartbreak. I won’t do it. Better to part while we can still see each other in a certain way.

*[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)*

*I WAKE UP IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT* crying, and my first thought is, I want to take it back. I've made a huge mistake and I want to take it all back. Then I cry myself back to sleep.

In the morning, my head throbs, and now I'm the one throwing up in the bathroom, just like the girls at Beach Week, only there's no one to hold my hair back. I feel better after, but I lie on the bathroom floor for a while in case another wave of nausea hits. I fall asleep there, and wake up to Kitty shaking me by the arm. "Move, I have to pee," she says, stepping over me.

"Help me up," I say, and she drags me to my feet. She sits down to pee and I splash cold water on my face.

"Go eat some toast," Kitty says. "It'll soak up the alcohol in your stomach."

I brush my teeth and stumble downstairs to the kitchen, where Daddy is cooking eggs and Margot and Trina are eating yogurt.

"Rise and shine, little girl," Trina says with a grin.

"You look like someone ran you over with a truck," Margot says.

"You'd be grounded right now if it weren't for the wedding," Daddy says, trying to sound stern and failing. "Eat some scrambled eggs."

I gag at the thought.

"First eat some toast," Margot instructs. "It'll soak up the alcohol."

"That's what Kitty said."

Trina points her spoon at me. "And then, once you've put some food in your belly, you can have two Advil. Never, ever

take Advil on an empty stomach. You'll be feeling much better in no time."

"I'm never drinking again," I vow, and Margot and Trina exchange a smirk. "I'm serious."

I spend the whole day in bed, lights off with the curtains drawn. I want so badly to call Peter. To ask him to forgive me. I don't even remember everything I said. I remember the gist of it, but the memory itself is blurry. The one thing I do remember so clearly, what I'll never forget, is the stricken look on his face, and it makes me hate myself for putting it there.

I give in. I text him. Just three words.

I'm so sorry.

I see the ... on the other end. My heart pounds madly as I wait. But the reply never comes. I try calling, but my call goes straight to voice mail, and I hang up. Maybe he's already deleted me from his phone, like he did his dad. Maybe he's just ... done.

*CHRIS IS THE FIRST TO LEAVE. SHE COMES* by the house that week and says, “I can’t go to your dad’s wedding this weekend. I’m leaving for the Dominican Republic tomorrow.”

“*What?*”

“I know. I’m sorry.” Chris doesn’t look the least bit sorry; she has a huge grin on her face. “It’s so crazy. A spot opened up for me at an eco-hotel, and there’s no way I can pass this up. They speak Spanish in the Dominican Republic, too, right?”

“Yes. But I thought you were going to Costa Rica!”

Shrugging, she says, “This other opportunity came up so I pounced on it.”

“But—I can’t believe you’re leaving so soon! You weren’t supposed to leave until August. When do you come back?”

“I don’t know... . I guess that’s the beauty of it. I could stay for six months, or something else will come up and I’ll go there.”

I blink. “So you’re leaving for good, then?”

“Not for *good*. Just for now.”

Something inside of me knows that this really is for good. I don’t see Chris coming back here a year from now to go to Piedmont Virginia Community College. This is Chris, the stray cat, who comes and goes as she pleases. She’ll always land on her cat tippy-toes.

“Don’t look so sad. You’ll be fine without me. You have Kavinsky.” For a second I can’t breathe. Just hearing his name is like a dagger in my heart. “Anyway we’re all leaving soon enough. I’m just glad I’m not going to be left behind.”

That’s how it would feel to her—staying here, going to a community college, working at Applebee’s. I feel a surge of

gladness that instead of that, she's off on an adventure. "I just can't believe you're leaving so soon." I don't tell her that Peter and I broke up, that I don't have him anymore. Today isn't about me and Peter; it's about Chris, and her exciting new future. "Can I at least come help you pack?"

"I'm already packed! I'm only bringing the essentials. My leather jacket, bikinis, a few crystals."

"Shouldn't you bring sneakers and work gloves and that kind of thing, just in case?"

"I'll wear sneakers on the plane, and whatever else I need, I'll get when I'm there. That's the whole point of an adventure. Pack light and figure the rest out as you go."

I thought we'd have more time, me and Chris in my bedroom, sharing secrets late into the night, eating chips in bed. I wanted to cement our friendship before she left: Lara Jean and Chrissy, like the old days.

It's all ending.

## 39

*THAT NIGHT BEFORE THE WEDDING, WHEN* my cakes are cooling on the kitchen counter and everyone at my house is setting up lawn chairs outside, I drive over to Chris's to say good-bye.

As soon as she lets me in, she says, "I'm not letting you in here if you cry."

"I can't help it. I feel like this is going to be the last time I ever see you." A tear slips down my cheek. There is a finality to this moment. I know it, I just know it. Chris is catapulting on to the next thing. Even if we see each other again, it won't be like this. She's a restless spirit. I'm lucky to have had her for as long as I did.

"You'll probably see me again next week when I fly right back home," she jokes, and there is the tiniest note of trepidation in her voice. Chris, with all her bluster and bravado, is nervous.

"No way. You're just getting started. This is it, Chris." I jump up and hug her. I'm trying not to cry. "It's all happening now."

"What is?"

"Life!"

"You're so corny," she says, but I could swear I see tears in her eyes.

"I brought you something," I tell her. I take the present out of my bag and give it to her.

She tears off the wrapping paper and opens the box. It's a picture of the two of us in a little heart frame, no bigger than a Christmas tree ornament. We are at the beach, in matching bathing suits; we are twelve, maybe thirteen. "Hang this up on your wall wherever you go so people know you have somebody waiting for you back home."

Her eyes tear up and she brushes them with the back of her hand. “Oh my God, you’re the worst,” she says.

I’ve heard people say you meet your best friends in college, and they’re the ones you’ll know your whole life, but I’m certain that I’ll know Chris my whole life too. I’m a person who saves things. I’ll hold on forever.

When I get back home, Trina’s at SoulCycle. Daddy is still outside setting up the chairs, Margot is steaming our bridesmaid dresses, and Kitty is cutting paper flags for the bunting that will go over the dessert table. I get to work icing the wedding cake—yellow cake with buttercream frosting, just like I promised Trina. Daddy’s groom’s cake is already done, Thin Mints and all. This is my second try with the wedding cake—I scrapped the first one because I didn’t trim enough off the tops of the layers and when I stacked it, the cake looked hopelessly lopsided. This second one is still a tiny bit uneven, but a thick layer of buttercream covers all manner of sins, or so I keep telling myself.

“You’re putting enough frosting on that cake to give us all diabetes,” Kitty remarks.

I bite my tongue and keep spinning the cake and frosting the top so it’s smooth. “It looks all right, doesn’t it, Margot?”

“It looks professionally done,” she assures me, zooming the steamer along the hem of her dress.

As I sail past Kitty, I can’t resist saying, “P.S., the last three flags you cut are crooked.”

Kitty ignores me and sings to herself, “Sugar shock, whoa baby, that cake’ll give us sugar shock,” to the tune of that oldies song “Sugar Shack.” It’s probably my own fault for playing it whenever I bake.

“This is the last time it’ll be just us,” I say, and Margot looks over at me and smiles.

“I’m glad it won’t be just us anymore,” Kitty says.

“So am I,” Margot says, and I’m fairly certain she means it.

Families shrink and expand. All you can really do is be glad for it, glad for each other, for as long as you have each other.

I can't sleep, so I go downstairs to make a cup of Night-Night tea, and as I run the water for my kettle, I look out the window and see the red embers of a cigarette glowing in the darkness. Trina is outside smoking!

I'm debating whether or not to forego my tea ritual and go to bed before she sees me, but as I'm emptying the kettle, she comes back inside, a can of Fresca in her hand.

"Oh!" she says, startled.

"I couldn't sleep," I say, just as she says, "Don't tell Kitty!"

We both laugh.

"I swear it was a good-bye smoke. I haven't had a cigarette in months!"

"I won't tell Kitty."

"I owe you one," Trina says, exhaling.

"Would you like a cup of Night-Night tea?" I ask her. "My mom used to make it for us. It's very soothing. It'll make you feel nice and cozy and ready for bed."

"That sounds like heaven."

I fill the kettle and put it on the stove. "Are you nervous about the wedding?"

"No, not nervous ... just, nerves, I guess? I really want everything to go off—without a hitch." A giggle escapes her throat. "Pun intended. God, I love a good pun." Then she straightens up and says, "Tell me what's going on with you and Peter."

I busy myself with spooning honey into mugs. "Oh, nothing." The last thing Trina needs on the night before her wedding is to hear about my problems.

She gives me a look. "Come on, girl. Tell me."



“I don’t know. I guess we’re broken up?” I shrug my shoulders high so I don’t cry.

“Oh, honey. Bring that tea over here and come sit next to me on the couch.”

I finish making the tea and bring the mugs over to the couch and sit next to Trina, who tucks her legs under her and drapes a blanket over both of us. “Now tell me everything,” she says.

“I guess things started to go sideways when I got into UNC. Our plan was for me to go to William and Mary and then I’d transfer, and we’d be long distance for the first year. But UNC is a lot farther, and when I visited, I knew I wanted to be there. Not with one foot in and one foot out, you know?” I stir my spoon. “I really want to give it a chance.”

“I think that’s a thousand percent the right attitude.” Trina warms her hand on her tea mug. “So that’s why you broke up with him?”

“No, not entirely. Peter’s mom told me he was talking about transferring to UNC next year. She wanted me to break up with him before he messed up his life for me.”

“Damn! Peter’s mom is kind of a bitch!”

“She didn’t use those exact words, but that was the gist of it.” I take a sip of tea. “I wouldn’t want him to transfer for me either... . My mom used to say not to go to college with a boyfriend, because you’ll lose out on a true freshman experience.”

“Well, to be fair, your mom never met Peter Kavinsky. She didn’t have all the facts. If she had met him ...” Trina lets out a low whistle. “She might’ve been singing a different tune.”

Tears fill my eyes. “Honestly I regret breaking up with him and I wish I could take it all back!”

She tips up my chin. “Then why don’t you?”

“I don’t think he’ll ever forgive me for hurting him like that. He doesn’t let people in easily. I think I’m probably dead

to him.”

Trina tries to hide a smile. “I doubt that. Look, you’ll talk to him at the wedding tomorrow. When he sees you in that dress, all will be forgiven.”

I snifle. “I’m sure he’s not coming.”

“I’m sure he is. You don’t plan a man’s bachelor party and then not show to the wedding. Not to mention the fact that he’s crazy about you.”

“But what if I hurt him again?”

She wraps both her hands around her mug of tea and takes a sip. “You can’t protect him from being hurt, babe, no matter what you do. Being vulnerable, letting people in, getting hurt ... it’s all a part of being in love.”

I take this in. “Trina, when did you figure out that you and my dad were the real thing?”

“I don’t know... . I think I just—decided.”

“Decided on what?”

“Decided on him. On us.” She smiles at me. “On all of it.”

It’s so crazy to think that a year ago, she was just our neighbor Ms. Rothschild. Kitty and I would sit on our stoop and watch her run to the car in the morning and spill hot coffee all over herself. And now she’s marrying our dad. She’s going to be our stepmom, and I’m so glad for it.

*THE AIR SMELLS LIKE HONEYSUCKLES AND* summer days that go on and on. It is the perfect day to get married. I don't think there's any place prettier than Virginia in June. Everything in bloom, everything green and sunny and hopeful. When I get married, I think I might like it to be at home too.

We woke up early, and it seemed like there would be plenty of time, but of course we're running around like chickens with their heads cut off. Trina is flying around the upstairs in her silky ivory robe that Kristen bought her. Kristen bought pink ones for us bridesmaids, with our names embroidered in gold on the front pocket. Trina's says *The Bride*. I've got to hand it to Kristen. She's annoying but she has vision. She knows how to make things nice.

Trina's photographer friend takes a picture of all of us in our robes, Trina sitting in the middle like a very tan swan. Then it's time to get dressed. We compromised on Kitty's tuxedo—she's wearing a white short-sleeved button-down shirt, a jaunty plaid bow tie, and pants that hit at her ankle. Her hair is in Swiss Miss braids, tucked under and pinned up. She looks so pretty. She looks so ... Kitty. I compromised by putting baby's breath in my hair but no flower crown. I also compromised on my vision of fairy nightgowns for Margot and me. Instead we are wearing vintage 1950s floral dresses that I found on Etsy—Margot's is cream with yellow daisies, and mine has pink flowers and straps that tie at the shoulder. Mine must have been owned by a short person, because we didn't even have to alter it, and it hits at the knees, right where it's supposed to, .

Trina is a beautiful bride. Her teeth and dress look very white against her tanned skin. "I don't look silly, do I?" She casts a nervous look in my direction. "Too old to wear white? I mean, I *am* a divorcée."

Margot answers before I can. “You look perfect. Just perfect.”

My older sister has a way of sounding right. Trina’s whole body relaxes, like one big exhale. “Thank you, Margot.” Her voice goes tremulous. “I’m just ... so happy.”

“Don’t cry!” Kitty screeches.

“Shh,” I tell her. “Don’t scream. Trina needs serenity.” Kitty’s been a nervous bundle of energy all day; it’s like her birthday and Christmas and first day of school combined.

Trina fans her armpits. “I’m sweating. I think I need more deodorant. Kitty, do I smell?”

Kitty leans in. “You’re good.”

We’ve already taken a hundred pictures today, and we’ll take hundreds more, but I know this one will be my favorite. Us three Song girls flocked in tight around Trina, Margot dabbing at Trina’s eyes with a tissue, Kitty standing on a footstool fussing with Trina’s hair, Trina’s arm around me. We’re smiling so big. Things are ending, but they are beginning, too.

As for Peter, there’s been no word. Every time a car comes down our street, I go to the window to see if it’s him, but it never is. He isn’t coming, and I don’t blame him one bit. But still I hope, because I can’t help but hope.

The backyard is covered in Christmas lights and white paper lanterns. Granted, there’s no wall of roses, but it still looks lovely. All of the chairs are set up; the runner is rolled out in the middle for Trina to walk down. I greet guests as they come in—it’s a small group, under fifty people. The perfect size for a backyard wedding. Margot’s sitting with Grandma, Nana, and Trina’s dad and sister in the first row, keeping them company while I walk around saying hello to our neighbors the Shahs, Aunt Carrie and Uncle Victor, my cousin Haven, who compliments my dress. Throughout it all, I keep my eyes trained on the driveway, waiting for a black Audi that doesn’t come.

When “Lullaby” by the Dixie Chicks begins to play, Kitty, Margot, and I get into our places. Daddy walks out and stands on the groom’s side, and we all look toward the house, where Trina is making her way toward us. She is resplendent.

We cry throughout the vows, even Margot, who never cries. They go with the traditional ones, and when Reverend Choi, the pastor from Grandma’s church, says, “You may kiss the bride,” Daddy turns beet red, but he kisses Trina with a flourish. Everyone claps; Kitty whoops. Jamie Fox-Pickle barks.

The father-daughter dance was Trina’s idea. She said she’d already been there and done that and didn’t feel the need to do it again, and that it would be far more meaningful for us girls to do it instead. We practiced earlier this week, on the dance floor Daddy rented.

We planned the father-daughter dance to go Margot first, then I cut in, then Kitty cuts in. The song Daddy chose is “Isn’t She Lovely,” a song Stevie Wonder wrote for his daughter when she was first born.

Kitty and I stand off to the side, clapping to the beat. I know she’s already relishing her moment to cut in on me.

Before Daddy releases Margot, he pulls her close and whispers something in her ear, and she gets tears in her eyes. I won’t ask what he said; it is a moment just for them.

Daddy and I have practiced a few moves. The crowd-pleaser is when we dance-walk side by side and shimmy together in unison.

“I’m so proud of you,” he says. “My middle girl.” It’s my turn for my eyes to fill. I kiss him on the cheek and hand him off to Kitty. Daddy swings her around just as the harmonica starts up.

I’m walking off the dance floor when I see him. Peter, in a suit, standing to the side, beside the dogwood tree. He looks so handsome I can hardly stand it. I cross the backyard, and he watches me the whole time. My heart is pounding so hard. Is

he here for me? Or did he just come because he promised my dad?

When I'm standing in front of him, I say, "You came."

Peter looks away. "Of course I came."

Softly I say, "I wish I could take back the things I said the other night. I don't even remember all of them."

Looking down, he says, "But you meant them, right? So it's a good thing you said them then, because somebody had to and you were right."

"Which part?" I whisper.

"About UNC. About me not transferring there." He lifts his head, his eyes wounded. "But you should have told me my mom talked to you."

I take a shaky breath. "You should have told me you were thinking about transferring! You should've told me how you were feeling, period. You shut down after graduation; you wouldn't let me in. You kept saying everything was going to be fine."

"Because I was fucking scared, okay!" he bursts out. He looks around to see if anyone heard, but the music is loud, and everyone is dancing; no one is looking at us, and it's like we are alone here in this backyard.

"What were you so scared about?" I whisper.

His hands tighten into fists at his sides. When he finally speaks, his voice comes out raw, like he hasn't used it in a while. "I was scared that you were going to go to UNC and you were gonna figure out I wasn't worth it, and you were going to leave."

I take a step closer to him. I put my hand on his arm; he doesn't pull away from me. "Besides my family, you're the most special person to me in the world. And I meant some of those things I said the other night, but not the part when I said I only wanted to lose my virginity to you to close a chapter on us. I wanted it to be you because I love you."

Peter puts one arm around my waist, pulls me in, and, looking down at me, he says fiercely, “Neither of us wants to break up. So why should we? Because of some shit my mom said? Because your sister did it that way? You’re not the same as your sister, Lara Jean. We’re not the same as Margot and Sanderson or anybody else. We’re you and me. And yeah, it’s gonna be hard. But Lara Jean, I’ll never feel for another girl what I feel for you.” He says it with all the certainty only a teenage boy can have, and I have never loved him more than at this very moment.

“Lovin’ in My Baby’s Eyes” is playing, and Peter takes my hand and leads me out to the lawn.

We’ve never danced to this kind of song before. It’s the kind of song where you sway together and make a lot of eye contact and smile. It feels different, like we’re already older versions of Peter and Lara Jean.

Across the dance floor, Trina and Kitty and Margot are dancing in a circle, with Grandma in the middle. Haven is dancing with my dad. She catches my eye and mouths, *He’s so cute*. Peter, not my dad. He is. He is so, so cute.

I will never forget tonight, not for as long as I live. One day, if I’m lucky, I’ll tell some young girl all my stories, just like Stormy told me hers. And I’ll get to live them again.

When I’m old and gray, I will look back on this night, and I will remember it just as it was.

Is.

We’re still here. It’s not the future yet.

That night, after all the guests have gone, after the chairs have been stacked back up, and the leftovers put in the fridge, I go up to my room to change out of my dress. Sitting on the bed is my yearbook. I flip to the back of the book, and there it is, Peter’s message to me.

Only, it’s not a message, it’s a contract.

*Lara Jean and Peter’s Amended Contract*

*Peter will write a letter to Lara Jean once a week. A real handwritten letter, not an e-mail.*

*Lara Jean will call Peter once a day. Preferably the last call of the night, before she goes to bed.*

*Lara Jean will put up a picture of Peter's choosing on her wall.*

*Peter will keep the scrapbook out on his desk so any interested parties will see that he is taken.*

*Peter and Lara Jean will always tell each other the truth, even when it's hard.*

*Peter will love Lara Jean with all his heart, always.*

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*THE NIGHT BEFORE I LEAVE FOR COLLEGE*, there is a Perseids meteor shower in the forecast. It's supposed to be a good one. Peter and I are going out to the lake to watch. Kitty doesn't say so, but she wants to come too; she's dying to. Her whole body is rigid with wanting and not being able to ask. Any other time I would say yes.

When I say good-bye, her lips twist in disappointment for just a second, but she hides it well. How hard it must be to be the youngest sometimes, to be the one left behind.

In the car I feel sick with guilt for being so possessive about my time with Peter. It's just that there's so little time left now... . I'm a terrible big sister. Margot would have brought her.

"What are you thinking about?" Peter asks me.

"Oh, nothing," I say. I'm too ashamed to say out loud that I should have invited Kitty along.

When I come home for fall break, we'll do something the three of us. Peter and I will take her to the midnight show at the drive-in, and she'll go in her pajamas and I'll set up the backseat with a blanket for when she falls asleep. But tonight I want it to be just Peter and me, just this once. There's no use lingering in the guilt and ruining the night, when I've already done the selfish deed. And if I am truly honest with myself, I would do it again. That's how covetous I am of every last moment I have left with Peter. I want his eyes only on me; I want to talk only to him, to be just him and me for this little while longer. One day she'll understand. One day she'll love a boy and want to keep him all to herself and not share his attention with anyone else.

"We should have let Kitty come," I burst out suddenly.

"I know," he says. "I feel bad too. Do you think she's mad?"

“Sad, probably.”

But neither of us suggests turning the car around and going back to get her. We are silent, and then we are both laughing, sheepish and also relieved. Assuredly, Peter says, “We’ll bring her next time.”

“Next time,” I echo. I reach over and grab his hand, and lock my fingers around his, and he locks back, and I am comforted in knowing that tonight he feels the exact same way, and there is no distance between us.

We spread a blanket out and lie side by side. The moon looks like a glacier in the navy night. So far I don’t see anything out of the ordinary. It looks like the normal night sky to me.

“Maybe we should’ve gone to the mountains,” Peter says, turning his face to look at me.

“No, this is perfect,” I say. “Anyway, I read that stargazing is a waiting game no matter where you are.”

“We have all night,” he says, pulling me closer.

Sometimes I wish we’d met when we were twenty-seven. Twenty-seven sounds like a good age to meet the person you’re going to spend the rest of your life with. At twenty-seven, you are still young, but hopefully you are well on your way to being the you you want to be.

But then I think, no, I wouldn’t give up twelve, thirteen, sixteen, seventeen with Peter for the world. My first kiss, my first fake boyfriend, my first real boyfriend. The first boy who ever bought me a piece of jewelry. Stormy would say that that is the most monumental moment of all. She told me that that’s how a boy lets you know that you’re his. I think for us it was the opposite. It’s how I knew he was mine.

I don’t want to forget any of this. The way he’s looking at me at this very moment. How, when he kisses me, I still get shivers down my back, every time. I want to hold on to everything so tight.

“The first sixth-grade assembly.”

I look up at him. “Huh?”

“That’s the first time I saw you. You were sitting in the row in the front of me. I thought you were cute.”

I laugh. “Nice try.” It’s so endearingly Peter to make up stuff to try and sound romantic.

He keeps going. “Your hair was really long and you had a headband with a bow. I always liked your hair, even back then.”

“Okay, Peter,” I say, reaching up and patting him on his cheek.

He ignores me. “Your backpack had your name written on it in glitter letters. I’d never heard of the name Lara Jean before.”

My mouth falls open. I hot-glued those glitter letters to my backpack myself! It took me forever trying to get them straight enough. I’d forgotten all about that backpack. It was my prized possession.

“The principal started picking random people to come on stage and play a game for prizes. Everybody was raising their hands, but your hair got caught in your chair and you were trying to untangle it, so you didn’t get picked. I remember thinking maybe I should help you, but then I thought that would be weird.”

“How do you remember all that?” I ask in amazement.

Smiling, he shrugs. “I don’t know. I just do.”

Kitty’s always saying how origin stories are important.

At college, when people ask us how we met, how will we answer them? The short story is, we grew up together. But that’s more Josh’s and my story. High school sweethearts? That’s Peter and Gen’s story. So what’s ours, then?

I suppose I’ll say it all started with a love letter.

“I’ve had a splendid time,” she concluded happily,  
“and I feel that it marks an epoch in my life.  
But the best of it all was the coming home.”

—L. M. MONTGOMERY, *Anne of Green Gables*

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*Jenny*

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