

TO ALL THE BOYS I'VE LOVED BEFORE  
VOLUME THREE

*always  
and  
forever,  
Lara  
Jean*

JENNY HAN

SIMON & SCHUSTER **BFYR**

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For my dear readers. This one's for you.

“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*

# 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.*

## 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 decoupage 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 hospitaly 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!

# 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.