

ONE

Five hundred twenty-five thousand six hundred minutes. That's how long it takes me to start falling out of love with you. One year. Our own season of love. You do know which musical I'm referring to, right, Gavin? Because there's no way you can be my boyfriend and not know that of course, *of course*, I would bring *Rent* into this. Five hundred twenty-five thousand six hundred minutes of your lips on mine and whispering in the dark and you picking me up and spinning me around and taking my virginity and fucking with my head and telling me I'm worthless, worthless, worthless.

If I were writing a musical about us, I wouldn't start where we're at right now, at the end. I would want the audience to really get how I was able to fall for you hook, line, and sinker. Girls don't fall in love with manipulative assholes who treat them like shit and make them seriously question their life choices. They fall in love with manipulative assholes (who treat them like shit and make them seriously question their life choices) who they *think* are knights in shining armor. You rode in on your fucking white horse, aka 1969 Mustang, and I was all like, *My hero!* But I am so tired of being a damsel in distress. In my

next life, I'm going to be an ass-kicking ninja warrior queen. And I will hunt shits like you *down*. Throw your ass in a dungeon and drop the key in my moat and my lady knights will be all, *Huzzah!* and I will sit on my throne like, *Yes*.

But I can't daydream too much about my next life because I have to deal with you in *this* life. Before I break up with you, I want to reflect. I want to go back through us piece by piece. I want to remember why I was so ooey-goey crazy in love with you. I want to know why it's taken me this long to figure out that you're poison.

So, I'm gonna *Sound of Music* this shit: *Let's start at the very beginning, a very good place to start . . .*

There I am, downstage right, finishing my breakfast at the dining room table. It's my junior year. Winter. A Tuesday, which is better than Monday but not nearly as good as Wednesday. We aren't together yet, Gav, but, as my lusciously crass best friend Alyssa says, I am *so hard for you*. I've just finished my peanut butter toast and I'm thinking about how yesterday I saw you eating a Reese's Peanut Butter Cup and wanted to lick the chocolate off your lips. Because that would be the most amazing kiss—Gavin Davis tasting like Reese's Peanut Butter Cups. YES. You are my super happy place and I am there, la la la, trying to ignore my stepfather (who shall hereafter be known as The Giant). He's pounding around in the kitchen and muttering under his breath, and I know he wants me to be all, *What's wrong?*, but I'm not going to because he is an absolute fuck nut (that's an Alyssa expression, too—she's very linguistically creative) and nobody should have to deal with absolute fuck nuts without caffeine.

The Giant is displeased.

"Where the hell's my lunch?" he growls, louder now, as he paws through the refrigerator.

Today is the day that will change my life. But I don't know that, of course. I have no idea what's in store for me. What *you*, Gavin, have in

store for me. All I know is that The Giant is ruining my Gavin day-dreaming buzz and I really want some of that coffee in the pot, but I'm not allowed because they said so. Everything is *Because we said so*.

The Giant slams his lunch pail on the counter and opens it. It is only then that I remember what I'd forgotten to do last night before I went to bed.

I close my eyes and wish I had a Greek chorus to shake their fists at the sky for me (*Oh, woe! Woe!*) because this slight infraction could result in me losing my whole weekend.

"I'm sorry," I murmur. "I forgot to make it."

My head hangs in shame. I am the picture of Contrite and Subservient Female because this is what The Giant needs to see at all times. But that's on the outside.

On the inside, which The Giant can't get to no matter how hard he tries: *screw you, make your own damn lunch, and while you're at it, clean your own car and do your own laundry, especially your boxers, and can I please stop having to clean your bathroom, because your stray pubic hairs make me nauseous?*

I play this role of the beaten-down, cowed girl because I'm scared. Terrified, really. What little freedom I have is like a delicate piece of blown glass. The slightest push can make it shatter into a thousand million pieces. It wasn't always like this. Before my mom married The Giant, there was laughter in our house, random dance parties, adventures. Not anymore. I live in a kingdom ruled by a tyrant bent on my destruction.

The Giant curses under his breath and I want to be like, *It won't kill you to make your own fucking sandwich*. Seriously. Bread, turkey, mustard, Swiss: *boom*—you have a sandwich. Christ.

I hear a door open down the hall and then Mom is coming in with her own version of Contrite and Subservient Female on her face. My mom thinks invisible dirt is real, that disasters are around every corner.

She thinks the Grim Reaper hides in the cracks between tiles, on top of baseboards, in the toilet bowl. She is unwell.

“What’s going on?” she asks, looking from me to The Giant. Her lips pull down as she glances at me, like I’m already a disappointment and it’s not even eight in the morning.

“Your daughter didn’t make my lunch *again* and so I’ll have to waste money today on getting lunch out *again, that’s what’s going on.*” He looks at me and I can almost hear the thought in his head: *You aren’t my child—I wish you would get the hell out of my house forever.*

“You better not be expecting to go to the movies on Friday with Natalie and Alyssa,” he adds.

Big surprise. Let me guess: babysitting.

Don’t get me wrong: even though Sam is half Giant, I love him to death. It’s pretty hard to hate on a three-year-old. It’s not his fault The Giant’s his dad just as much as it’s not my fault my dad is a former/possibly current cokehead who lives in another state and forgets my birthday every year.

Mom shoots me an irritated glare and brushes past me into the kitchen without another word. She pats The Giant on the arm, then pulls down a mug for coffee. It says *#1 Mom* on it, which is ten kinds of ironic. I want mug makers to start keeping it real. Like, why aren’t there mugs that say *Once Pretty Okay Mom Who Got Remarried and Stopped Caring About Her Kids?* I mean, that’s a lot of words, but if you use twelve-point font, you could totally rock that on a mug.

The Giant doesn’t walk past me on his way out the door, he *pushes* past me, shouldering like a linebacker so that I’m forced into the entryway, my spine colliding with a corner of the wall. Pain shoots up my back. He doesn’t notice. Or maybe he does. Bastard. As soon as he slams the door behind him, Mom turns on me.

“What have I told you about finishing your chores?” she says. “I’m getting tired of this, Grace. First it’s not properly rinsing the dishes,

then it's Roy's lunch or Sam's toys." She raises a finger in the threatening way of dictators everywhere: "You better get it together, young lady. You're walking on thin ice."

She doesn't have to tell me what happens if that ice breaks beneath my feet. My dad promised to help me pay for drama camp this summer at Interlochen, this amazing program in Michigan. I've been saving for it like crazy, working doubles on the weekends at the Honey Pot so that I can help my dad scrape together the hundreds of dollars it costs to be free of suburban hell for a few weeks.

I hang my head even lower this time and become Beaten-Down Daughter. She's the cousin of Contrite and Subservient Female, but more tired. If this were a musical, Beaten-Down Daughter would turn to the audience and sing something like "I Dreamed a Dream" from *Les Mis*. There wouldn't be a dry eye in the house.

"I'm sorry," I say again, my voice soft.

It is an act of will not to let the frustration building inside me slip into my voice, my mouth, my hands. In order to stay Beaten-Down Daughter I keep my eyes on my baby-pink Doc Martens because lowering your eyes broadcasts your worthlessness and makes the other person feel better about themselves and increases the possibility of them being magnanimous. You asked me the story of my boots once and I told you about how I found them in a thrift store on Sunset Boulevard and that I was pretty sure the girl who wore them before me did stuff like write poetry and dance to the Ramones because when I wear them, I totally feel more artistic. *Betty and Beatrice are my shoe soul mates*, I said, and you asked me if I named all my shoes and I said, *No, just these*, and you said, *Rock on*, and then the bell rang and I lived off of that two-second conversation for the rest of the day. So even though my mom's being heinous this morning, my shoes manage to cheer me up a little. I mean, everything is going to be okay as long as there are pink combat boots in the world. Someday I will tell you just that and

you will pull me against you and say, *I fucking love you so much*, and I will feel like five million bucks.

“Sorry.” Mom snorts. “If I had a nickel for every time you said that . . .” She glances at the clock. “Go or you’ll be late.”

I grab my bag and a sweater, which is all you really need in Cali winter. I consider slamming the door on my way out, but that won’t end well for me, so I quietly shut it and then rush down the walkway before Mom can think of some other reason to be mad at me.

I need to go to my happy place. Now. I can’t let this be my day. I have to shake it off, Taylor Swift style.

Roosevelt High is less than a ten-minute walk away, and I spend that time with my earbuds shoved in, listening to the *Rent* soundtrack, probably the best thing to come out of the nineties. It takes me to New York City, to a group of bohemian friends, to my future. Some people run or meditate when they’re stressed, but I go to the Village. I picture myself walking along the streets of the city, past overflowing trash bins and scurrying rats and cool boutiques and coffeehouses. People everywhere. I’m surrounded by brick buildings with fire escapes and I jump on the subway and I’m flowing under the city, on my way to the Nederlander Theater, where I’ll be directing a play or musical. Maybe even a Broadway revival of *Rent*. By the time I get to school, the music is thrumming through me (*Viva la vie Bohème!*). My mom and The Giant and home splinter and fall away, replaced by my real family, the cast of *Rent*: Mark, Roger, Mimi, Maureen, Angel, Collins, Joanne. I’m okay. For now.

I keep my eye out for you the moment I’m on campus. You’d be hard to miss.

You’re like Maureen from *Rent*: *Ever since puberty, everybody stares at me—boys, girls. I can’t help it, baby.*

You’ve got this halo of cool that makes people want to bow at your feet, light a candle. Saint Gavin. You leave stars in your wake. Whenever

you walk by, I swear sparks fly off you. The air crackles. Sizzles. You steal all the oxygen so that I'm left gasping for breath, panting. In heat.

I want to steal the leather notebook you carry around all the time. Songs are in there and poetry and maybe sketches. All in your handwriting, which I've never seen but imagine as surprisingly neat. If I could, I'd crawl into your vintage Mustang, your bad-boy car, and curl up in the backseat, waiting for you to maybe ravage me or at least sing me a song. I can't get enough of that sexy, shuffling gait, the way your black hair is perfectly mussed up. The faded Nirvana shirt and the low-slung jeans, the black fedora that I've never seen you without. You have these eyes that are positively arctic, so blue I keep expecting to see waves or maybe glaciers in them. Then there's that impenetrable look, like you have a million secrets locked inside you. I want the key.

I like you best when you're playing guitar, leaning your weight forward, left foot slightly in front of the right, muscled hands strumming magic into the air, intent on the music that bleeds from those long, thin fingers. And your voice: gravel and honey mixed together, a little Jack White, a little Thom Yorke. The songs you write are poetry. You close your eyes and open your mouth and something starts spinning in me, faster and faster, and I would do anything if you asked me. When you sing, I imagine my lips against yours, your tongue in my mouth, your hands everywhere.

You are the most exotic thing in our crappy excuse for a town. A rock god abandoned by cruel fate to an outpost of suburbia, where it's at least twenty degrees hotter than hell. I like to think that as an LA girl forced to move here I could somehow understand you more than the others. I know what it's like to hear car horns and helicopters and music all hours of the night. I know what it feels like to zip down neon freeways and find street art in the most unlikely places. I know what it's like to feel alive. You want all that, I can tell. You look at everything around us the same way I do: with quiet desperation.

Birch Grove has a newness that only towns in Cali can manage—shopping centers popping up like mushrooms, schools and housing developments where once there'd only been a strawberry patch or cornfield. Even though we have a Target and a Starbucks and all that, it's the kind of place that has an annual rodeo. There is only one vintage store and the mall is the opposite of Disneyland: the Saddest Place on Earth. The worst part is that everything here is the same—the houses, the people, the cars. There's no grit. No wild abandon.

I hate Birch Grove with a passion.

One of the few things I *do* like about it, though, is our school: the drama program, the dance program, my French teacher, who's half Egyptian and smokes long, thin cigarettes behind the gym. And I actually like the school itself, like, the buildings. It has a certain coziness to it, a human scale that makes it feel like a second home. I love how the open-air campus is drenched in sunshine, the huge grassy lawn in its center, the outdoor arena with its covered cement stage that looks like the Hollywood Bowl in miniature. It's an idyllic California school, although sometimes I wish I were at an East Coast boarding school with bricks covered in ivy. If I were, I'd wear a sweater set and have a boyfriend named Henry, who plays lacrosse and whose father is a world-renowned physician. That's a pumpkin spice latte kind of world I'll never be in, though.

When Miss B chose me to be her stage manager and chose you to be her lead for *The Importance of Being Earnest*, I ran home and had a dance party in my room. I wanted to cling to you just like the girls in the play and say, *Earnest, my own!* That's how happy I was to be just a few feet away from you every day after school for six weeks. It was too much, those feet. I wanted them to be inches. Millimeters. You gave me a hug once, laughed at one of my rare attempts at a joke. You accepted pieces of gum I offered you. Smiled at me in the halls. Do you know

you are the bestower of the perfect half smile: part smirk, all enigma? Of course you do.

I asked you once why a rock god at night is a drama guy by day and you told me you auditioned for *Singin' in the Rain* (that was way back in my freshman year) on a dare and then you got the lead and your mom made you take the part. And you loved it. I wonder if rock stars are all secretly mama's boys who like to tap-dance.

I love you, Gavin. And maybe it's in the most superficial way, like how I can't stand it when you take off your fedora and run your fingers through your hair. Or how you keep those hands shoved into your front pockets when you're walking to class. I wonder, if you took them out and placed them on my bare skin, would I feel the calluses from all those hours of you alone in your room, playing guitar? Would your fingers be warm or cool? I want to know what it feels like to have your palm against mine, like Romeo and Juliet: *Palm to palm is holy palmers' kiss.*

I still can't believe that when you see me in the halls you say hi. You think it's cool that I want to be a director, so I never had to endure that separation between cast and crew that normally happens. It helped that my best friends were in the show, too. We talk about movies and who my favorite directors are (Julie Taymor and Mike Nichols). We talk about music and who your favorite bands are (Nirvana and Muse). I breathe you in like you're air.

I don't see you on the way to first-period French, which I take because how am I going to speak to my future French lover otherwise (François, Jacques?). Natalie and Alyssa think I'm a weirdo. My best friends are taking Spanish, which, as The Giant says, could be used in the real world (as if France is not part of the real world). I have a bit of trouble concentrating on what Madame Lewis is saying, though, because it's Valentine's Day and even though I dressed up in my *Je t'aime*

shirt, pink poodle skirt, and red tights, I have no valentine and am thus depressed as hell.

“Bonjour, Grace,” Madame says to me. “*Ça va?*”

“What? Oh, um. *Oui, ça va.*”

You should probably know that I’ve never had a boyfriend on Valentine’s Day. Either I break up with them before or get together with them after. And by *them* I mean the one boyfriend I have ever had, which was Matt Sanchez freshman year. It’s becoming more of a problem now than it used to be, this not having a boyfriend on V Day. Before high school, it was enough to pig out on heart-shaped stuff with my friends and watch *Shakespeare in Love* for the millionth time, but Natalie is getting over that guy she met at her church camp last summer and anything lovey makes her super depressed so she’s abstaining from the holiday this year. Alyssa refuses to participate in my celebrations because she says Valentine’s Day is a capitalist ploy invented by soul-killing corporations that prey on women who subscribe to the romantic ideal.

Whatever.

If you were my boyfriend, I bet you’d write me a song or, I don’t know, maybe do something homemade. You don’t seem like a flowers-and-chocolate kind of guy. You’d make cookies that are burned but I still love, or maybe write a ten-page letter filled with all the reasons you adore me. These are both totally acceptable, by the way.

I’m sort of dying to know what you got Summer. What she got you. You’ve been together for a year, so I bet it’s something special. She’s a senior like you, a va-va-voom redhead who somehow makes being in choir sexy. I’d like to believe that if things were different, you might pick me, but all it takes is one look at Summer and I’m quickly disabused of the notion. Mom says I have an interesting face, which is just a nice way of saying I’m not pretty. *Sorry*, she says, *you take after your dad’s side of the family.*

The bell rings and I'm off to second period—AP Comp with Mr. Jackson. The halls are packed as students bleed out of their classrooms. I walk on my tiptoes, looking for your fedora even as I tell myself I'm not really stalking you. Usually I'm guaranteed a Gavin sighting on my walk to Comp because you're in the classroom across from mine, but nope, you are nowhere to be found.

I sink into my chair just as the final bell rings, resigned. You are likely with Summer, ditching and in love. I am stuck in English, trying not to think about you ditching and in love.

Mr. Jackson turns off the lights so that we can watch the conclusion of Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo and Juliet*, which we started a couple days ago. It's a pretty badass version, with a young Leonardo DiCaprio who could seriously give you a run for your money in the hotness department. You win, though, hands down.

By the time the credits are rolling, half the class is pretending not to cry as Romeo and Juliet lie dead. It's like, we *knew* it was going to end badly but, even so, it guts us to watch it happen.

TWO

The bell for lunch rings and I make my way toward Drama. I've got the blues and the only thing that will even slightly cure me is the next forty minutes. The Roosevelt High drama room is my personal sanctuary. I love the black velvet curtains, how they hang there like a promise, and the cumbersome wooden blocks we use in scenes to act as tables, benches, or chairs. You'd never know we're in Central California, agriculture Mecca of America: we build kingdoms here, big-city love affairs, and the ancient houses of gods and monsters.

This is my favorite part of the day, when I open the heavy metal door, which is extra tall to allow sets to be brought in, and am immediately submerged in the din of voices, laughter, singing.

We are the music-makers and we are the dreamers of dreams.

We thespian types laugh loudly and often, tumble over one another's sentences, a dogpile of exuberance. *Look at us*, we're saying to anyone nearby. *Let me entertain you, let me make you smile.* Our ears are fine-tuned; we wait for applause.

Every time I walk into this room I know that someday, even if it

seems impossibly far away, I'm going to New York City, a small-town girl with stars in her eyes like what's her face in *Rock of Ages*. I'm not forging a new path in my desire to run away from my home, from a mother who squeezes the life out of me and a stepfather who's always two seconds away from a slap—I'm walking, as fast as I can, down a well-trod path. I'm the girl who's desperate to get out of her small town because if she doesn't she knows she'll die. She knows her soul will start to rot, like fruit gone bad.

One more year, I tell myself. *One more year until graduation*. I can make it that long.

I think.

I step through the door and let out the breath I didn't even know I'd been holding in. The whole gang is here, focused on the current obsession over auditions for the spring musical, *Chicago*. I'll be stage managing, a part I've already been cast in, by choice. According to Miss B, it's a stepping-stone to directing. For the first time in a long while I sort of wish I were auditioning—I don't think I could get away with wearing black fishnets and a leotard as the stage manager. I secretly want you to see me like that. I actually had a moment of doubt and told my mom I was thinking about auditioning.

You can't sing, she said.

My mom went to one of those hard-core Catholic schools. She's big on Being Realistic. She's not trying to be mean; she's trying to help me. It's just that sometimes her words feel like a nun's ruler smacking across my knuckles.

Grace and her pipe dreams, The Giant says whenever I talk about directing plays on Broadway. He's big on Being an Asshole. The Giant has a life motto and this is it: *Money is king*. It's the code he lives by. Obviously we don't see eye-to-eye on the whole starving artist thing.

So instead of being in the cast, I'll help run rehearsals and for performances I'll be in charge, calling the show. *Light cue 47, Go. Sound*

Cue 21, Go. Blackout. I always feel like such a badass, like I'm in Air Traffic Control or something.

Today, I laugh and smile with the others, but I'm not paying attention, not really, because on top of dealing with the fact that there are no boys in love with me (especially you), I'm thinking about how to sneak off to the cafeteria to grab my food without anyone coming along. Sneaking off is hard to do when you're wearing a bright pink skirt with a black poodle on it. See, my friends pay with money, but my currency is the little green tickets the poor kids who need free school lunches get. I'd use my own money for lunch, but I need it for stuff like clothes and books and deodorant because The Giant sure as hell won't buy me any of that. I should have gone to the caf first, but what if you came in to say hi before going off campus and I missed you?

The group's up to its usual antics. Peter does the voices of his favorite video game characters. Kyle stands around looking like a young Bruno Mars, occasionally bursting into song. Our whole group is comprised of juniors, except for three seniors: you (Lead singer of Evergreen! Love of my life!), Ryan (your best friend and bass player for Evergreen), and your girlfriend, Summer (boo, hiss).

Natalie and Alyssa are discussing the pros and cons of leggings worn as pants rather than as a substitute for tights. Normally I get all I-read-*Vogue*-every-month when the subject of fashion comes up, but today I just listen: I'm too whatever I am to join in.

"They make everyone look fat," Lys is saying. She nods to a group of freshmen passing by the drama room. "Case in point."

Nat swats Lys on the arm. "Be nice. That is so not cool."

Lys shrugs. "Neither are leggings."

My two best friends are polar opposites. Nat wears a dress to school almost every day and has perfect makeup and hair with flipped ends, like it's 1950. She wears a tiny cross necklace and this thing called a

promise ring, which represents how she's going to wait to have sex until she's married (she says she takes it off when she messes around with her boyfriends, LOL). I can totally imagine her as First Lady someday, with pearls and Jackie O sunglasses. Lys has a wild bob, bleached so that it's almost white, and wears sexy manga clothes like she's Sailor Moon. She's always getting in trouble for violating the dress code—she's got this thing for Catholic schoolgirl plaid skirts. Sometimes she wears tulle, like she's just performed in a psychedelic ballet, all neon and crazy patterns. I guess I'm in the middle because I'm the one who wears vintage thrift stuff, scarves in her hair, and lip gloss that tastes like Dr Pepper.

Peter switches from video game impersonation to strutting across the drama room's makeshift stage, busting out his best vintage Britney Spears moves. He's on this whole Britney kick right now. Last month it was Katy Perry. He's not gay—he's got a hard-on for pop stars that he takes to ridiculous extremes.

"Hit me baby one more time!"

"Not that you were ever remotely cool socially," Lys says, "but you've just taken away any hope of that status changing."

Today she's wearing a black tulle skirt over neon-green tights, crazy platform boots, and a T-shirt with a knife stabbing a heart.

"Hater alert!" Kyle calls. He boos Lys and she rolls her Cleopatra eyes.

I scan the students passing by the door, which is propped open and gives a good view of the quad. I'm hoping to spot a certain black fedora.

"Where's Gavin?" I ask, casual. At least, I hope I sound casual and non-stalkerish.

"Probably humping Summer," Ryan says. He's your best friend so I guess he would know. He takes a bite of one of the soggy burritos they sell on campus, oblivious to the horror on my face.

I get a pins-and-needles feeling in my heart. It's kind of like a heart

attack but worse because it's a heart attack for unloved girls. This is a medical fact: when a girl hears another girl is engaging in sexual activities with the boy said girl likes, her heart turns into a pincushion. Pure science.

"Humping? Ewww." Natalie wrinkles her nose. "Summer doesn't *hump*."

I hope that's true. I hope your worst is the PDA you two engage in all over school: kissing against the lockers, your hands gripping the skin at her waist, fingertips under her shirt. Because that is seriously bad enough. But you just *look* like someone who has sex a lot. I'm not holding out hope that you're saving yourself for me.

"Oh, sorry," Ryan says. "Would you prefer *make love*?"

"Or, *do the nasty*?" Kyle says.

"*Get boned*?" Peter adds.

In an unspoken decision to shun the boys in the group, Alyssa, Natalie, and I close ranks.

"This," Lys says, "is yet another reason I thank God I was born a lesbian."

Lys just came out last year and has yet to find a girlfriend. I wonder if that's why she keeps saying Valentine's Day is a social construct of The Man.

"*Oh, baby, baby, how was I supposed to know . . . ?*" Kyle and Peter start up, serenading us.

"Remind me why we hang out with these fools again?" Natalie asks.

"I don't remember," I say.

Lys pulls out her trig homework. "I have better things to do, anyway." She shoots the boys a glare. "FYI, you look like a bunch of asshats. I hope you weren't intending to lose your virginity anytime soon."

"Oh, *burn*," Ryan says.

My stomach growls and I start edging toward the cafeteria. "I'll be back in a sec."

I turn and hurry into the thick mess of students outside before anyone can react. Despite wanting to be invisible, a part of me is sad because none of the boys in our group seem to notice my departure. None of the boys notice me, period. This sucks, but I'm a drama girl and I know my casting. I'm not the ingenue, the pretty one, the one who bursts with life. That's Natalie. Summer. Instead, I'm somewhere hovering on the edges: of talent, of popularity, of intelligence. I'm in honors classes, but I have to study twice as hard as everyone else to keep up. The only reason I get to be involved in every show at RHS is because I take the part nobody wants: stage manager, assistant director, Everyone's Bitch. I was the sophomore class secretary last year, but that was just luck: I impersonated a stoner in my speech and it won me the popular vote. I know lots of in-crowders (cheerleaders, jocks), but I'd never be part of their cliques. I barely get the slightest glance from them in the halls between classes. Knowing you, *the* Gavin Davis, is weird luck that proves I'm on Dionysus's good side, long may the god of drama reign.

I have just enough time to scarf down the slice of pizza the government paid for and make it back to the drama room before the bell rings. I walk through the door and stop. Somehow, in just a few minutes, a black cloud swept in to block out our sun.

Summer is there *sans* you, her usually smooth auburn hair a frizzy mess. There are dark circles under her eyes and her face is red and puffy from crying.

A little part of me—an evil part of me—lifts. Did you break up with her?

“What's wrong?” I murmur as I come up.

The group's energy has gone from ten to zero in a matter of minutes. Kyle is bear-hugging Summer. He looks . . . stricken. I've never seen him this serious.

Natalie edges closer to me. “It's Gavin,” she whispers. My

stomach turns. I don't like the way she says your name, the horror on her face.

"What about him?"

"He . . ." She shakes her head, big brown eyes filling. "He tried to kill himself."

The words fly through my mind, around and around, a dog chasing its tail. *Kill himself, kill himself.* The bell rings and we all stand there, lost.

It can't be true. People like you don't kill themselves until after they're famous. Then, and only then, are you supposed to overdose on heroin or drive an expensive car too fast on Mulholland or do any number of things that rock gods do.

I will later hear that Summer had broken up with you, that you'd gone to her house and sobbed on her front porch and said you would do it, you'd kill yourself. And she kept that door closed on you anyway. It will take me a long time—over a year—to see that her dumping you was an act of bravery.

You'd left her house, your Mustang roaring down the street. Later that night, your parents found you in the bathtub, fully clothed. The only thing that saved you was that you'd cut the wrong way and fainted before you could finish the job.

I learn all this on the five-minute walk to history, where Natalie, Kyle, Peter, and I discuss you at length. The guys can't believe Summer was stupid enough to break up with you—you walk on water for them, too. They fall to competing over who's most in the know about your and Summer's relationship. This knowledge is suddenly a status symbol— whoever knows the most is your BFF. I secretly think Summer's crazy to give you up, but I keep quiet because I don't know you like the guys do—but I've wanted to and here's my chance.

I pull out a piece of paper, suddenly compelled to write you a letter. I still don't know exactly why I did it. I guess the thought of a world without Gavin Davis was too horrifying.

I know we don't know each other really well . . .

If you ever need someone to talk to . . .

I'm here for you . . .

I don't realize now, but this is the moment. The moment when the rest of my life in high school—the rest of my whole life—will change. The moment when I begin to lose a part of myself I'll have to fight like hell to get back. Five hundred twenty-five thousand six hundred minutes.

All because of a love letter in disguise.

When I see Ryan in the hall after class, I give him the letter to pass on. You two are like brothers—I know he'll be seeing you at some point today or tomorrow. By the end of the day, we find out that you have been, for all intents and purposes, committed to a mental hospital. Birch Grove Recovery Center is where you go when you do stuff like try to kill yourself in your bathtub. Normally this isn't the kind of thing that makes a girl swoon, but there's something so dramatic and beautiful about a boy whose heart is breaking and my imagination latches onto that, elaborates on your suffering. You immediately reach mythical status for me, a Byron who's given himself over completely to the ecstasy and agony of love. Van Gogh, cutting off his ear.

Of course I'm worried about you and sad, but there's also this feeling of excitement, which I know is probably wrong, but all the same I can't help feeling it. Suicide is taking matters into your own hands and to me that seems courageous, fierce. You aren't just the rocker/actor everyone loves, the one we all think will for sure make it when he moves to LA. Suddenly, you're Romeo shunned by Rosaline. Or Hamlet, suffering the slings and arrows of destiny: *To be, or not to be, that is the question.*

I'm taken with the morbid romance of it all, that someone in our world of drive-throughs and cow patties and evangelical churches has

done the sort of thing we've only seen onstage. Something inside me echoes that refusal to participate in the awfulness of life. I admire the guts it takes to give up. Only tortured artists do that, and being a tortured artist is my most fervent longing.

I know what it feels like, the hopelessness you're wrestling with. I feel it every day at home, when Mom treats me like her personal slave or when The Giant raises his hand just to watch me flinch. When Dad calls, drunk, teetering on the edge of surliness, making promises he'll never keep, telling lies he believes. Sometimes I wish I could sit my life out. Like, *Hey, it's cool but I'm over it. Peace.*

I understand . . .

I know right now it seems like . . .

You matter, even if you think you don't . . .

You are the most talented person I've ever . . .

Later, you'll tell me how you read and reread that letter—the only valentine you received. How my words had been a life raft. How—as impossible as it may seem—you fell in love with me when you were imprisoned in that stark white room at Birch Grove Recovery Center, your wrists wrapped in gauze.

I guess crazy is catching.

THREE

You haven't been at school for a week and your absence never seems normal. It's not something I get used to. It's like someone turned down all the colors. Still, the rest of us have to go on with normal life, which for me means after-school shifts at the Honey Pot.

The mall is packed, so we've got a line. Since there're only two of us on this shift and Matt, my coworker/ex-boyfriend is in the back mixing up cookie dough, I stay in front, rushing from the oven to the trays of cookies that are lined up behind the glass case. I use a long spatula to transfer the cookies into the customers' bags, trying to be patient as they pick out the specific cookie they want. A dozen for twenty bucks or one seventy-five each. Expensive, but worth every penny. My favorite is the sugar cookie—with or without sprinkles. You haven't had a sugar cookie until you've tasted the buttery, sweet, soft delight that is the Honey Pot's Sugar Daddy. Sometimes, when I'm really daring, I'll put frosting on top.

I get to eat cookies all day and drink unlimited amounts of soda. I scoop up dough and pop it into my mouth when no one's looking. I drop batches of cookies onto sheets of waxed paper using a tiny ice-cream scooper that gives me blisters. There's a glass window in front

of the ovens and it's no secret that boys sneak glances at the girls as we bend over to put trays in the oven or take them out. I can't decide if I like this or not.

When the line gets to be too much, I run into the back.

"Sanchez! Help, I'm drowning out there," I say.

Matt looks up from the dough and it takes everything in me not to wipe the flour off his nose. We are so not together anymore and that's a good thing, but sometimes I want to make out with him. Nat says this is totally normal.

He salutes me. "Aye, Cap'n."

Matt and I went out for exactly two months freshman year. We were in the same English class and what started as a daily flirtation became a heady eight weeks of declarations and fights and awkwardness. He loves fantasy football and movies about funny dumbasses. I hate sports and love Shakespeare. It was never meant to be. Still, we stayed friends and I was the one who helped him get the job here at the Pot. Being with him was fun—not an epic love or massive heartbreak. But I'm ready for the real deal. *A Serious Relationship. Love.*

By dinnertime the line dwindles and we get a breather.

"Dude, that was insane," Matt says.

"For real."

The buzzer goes off and he crosses to the oven to retrieve the newest batch of cookies. The air fills with their warm, sweet scent: macadamia nuts and white chocolate. I'm about to go snag one when I see you out of the corner of my eye. You don't see me. You're following your parents into Applebee's, head down. You're wearing a long, thin cardigan, unbuttoned over a Muse concert tee. You're pretty much the only guy other than Kurt Cobain who can rock a cardigan sweater. My eyes follow you. They take in how your dad pats your back, how your mom reaches out and grabs your hand. A lump forms in my throat.

"Grace? *Chica*, hello . . ."

I turn and Matt's holding up a yellow cardboard box.

"That special order—how many macadamia cookies did they want?"

"A half dozen," I say.

My eyes float back to the restaurant, but you're already gone. I text Nat and Lys, tell them I saw you. They both respond with emojis. I can't translate what a confused face, a party hat, and a palm tree mean.

I keep glancing toward the Applebee's entrance throughout my shift, but you never reappear. I'm nervous. What if you think I'm a total freak for giving you that letter? What if you never read it?

I blush, thinking about how I'd said you were the most talented person I'd ever met. How obvious can I be about crushing on you?

"Excuse me," someone snaps in front of the register.

I turn around, ready to be fake nice, but it's just Nat and Lys.

"You bitches! I thought the horrible lady from last week had come back."

Long story short: a customer called me uppity. It was a whole thing.

Lys crosses her arms and leans her chin on the glass counter, her eyes—which have glittery blue and pink eyeshadow—sympathetic. "Sucks being a wage slave."

Though you wouldn't know by looking at her, Lys comes from some serious money. She probably won't have to work a day in her life unless she wants to.

"I like to tell myself it builds character," I say. I point to the cookies with my spatula. "What'll it be, ladies?"

"Chocolate. I'm on my period," Nat says.

Lys scans the trays. "I'll have my usual."

I put brownie chocolate chip cookies in one bag and snickerdoodles in the other.

"If I worked here I'd be such a fatty," Nat says. She's reed thin and has perfect posture after an entire childhood spent in a ballet studio.

"Yeah, my mom told me she saw some cottage cheese—aka

cellulite—on my legs the other day,” I say, “so I’m taking a break from the deliciousness.”

Lys stares at me. “Your mom actually *said* that?”

Nat rolls her eyes. “Are you surprised? That’s textbook Jean.”

Matt comes through the swinging door wearing basketball shorts and a tee. He gives us a little wave.

“*Adios, chicas,*” he says. “I’m out.”

“Does that ever get weird working with him?” Lys asks after Matt heads toward the parking lot.

I shake my head. “Everything’s cool between us.”

Nat glances over her shoulder, toward Applebee’s. “So I’m just gonna say it. Suicide attempt aside, Gavin Davis is back on the market.”

Lys grins at me. “So when are you gonna tap that?”

Nat gasps and I laugh. “Nice, Lys. Keepin’ it classy.”

“Dude. You’ve been in love with him for, like, three *years,*” she says. “Now is your chance.”

Nat raises her hand. “Can I say something?” We nod. “As the most responsible of the three of us, I would say go for it, but be careful.”

“Why are you the most responsible?” Lys asks.

Nat eyes Lys’s ensemble, which includes rainbow tights, platform sneakers, and a pink bow in her hair.

“Fine, you can be the most responsible,” Lys says.

I break off a piece of a freshly baked peanut butter cookie. “What do you mean *be careful?*”

“He’ll be on the rebound,” Nat says. “And he might be a little . . .” She makes the sign for crazy, twirling her index finger next to her temple.

Lys nods. “True. The dude did try to kill himself.”

“Guys, I appreciate your faith in me, but there is no way Gavin would ever look at me that way, so I don’t really need this advice.”

Nat’s eyes flash. “You just think that because of the kind of crap your mom says.”

I fold my arms. “Like what?”

She ticks off on her hand: “According to her, you have cottage cheese legs, you’re not photogenic, you can’t sing—”

“Okay, okay. I get it.” My eyes flick toward Applebee’s. Maybe you and your parents went out the other door. “But this is *Gavin Davis* we’re talking about. He’s going to have a Grammy before any of us finish college. Also, if you compare Summer and me—”

Lys holds up her hand. “Please allow me to give the lesbian perspective. Summer is nice and cool and all of that, but she’s really not as hot as you think. I, for one, have never fantasized about her while masturbating.”

“OH MY GOD,” Nat says, her eyes wide with shock. Two spots of pink deepen on her cheeks.

Lys raises her eyebrows. “Aren’t you people not allowed to take the Lord’s name in vain?”

Nat gives Lys a dainty punch in the arm and Lys gets into a karate stance and starts quoting *princess Bride*. “Hello. My name is Inigo Montoya. You killed my father. Prepare to die.”

Just then a woman comes up and I try to keep it together while I box up her dozen cookies but I keep snort-laughing. She frowns at the three of us as though we’re all hoodlums, her eyebrows going way high as she takes in Lys’s ensemble. It’s crazy that a socialist lesbian and an evangelical Christian are besties, but that’s just how the three of us roll. We became friends our freshman year, when we were put together for a musical-theatre assignment in drama class. We decided to sing “The Schuyler Sisters” from *Hamilton*, and we bonded over corset shopping for our costumes. To this day, people randomly sing out “The Schuyler Sisters” when they see us. I feel like our friendship is like those outfits you see in *Vogue* where nothing matches but it looks totally awesome. We’re plaid and polka dots and stripes.

As soon as my customer’s gone, I glance at Nat and Lys.

“I wrote him a letter,” I say as I start bagging cookies to sell as day-olds tomorrow. The mall closes in fifteen minutes.

“Gavin?” Nat asks.

I nod. “And I . . . I mean, he probably didn’t read it. Or, if he did, he’ll think I’m, like, the lamest person ever.” My breath tightens just thinking about it. “I’m sort of mortified. I don’t know what got into me.”

Nat’s phone buzzes and she glances at it. “Well, you’re going to find out tomorrow. Kyle says Gav’s coming back.”

“Tomorrow?” I say.

“Yep.”

“Oh god,” I moan. “Why did I write that stupid letter?”

“Because you’re fucking cool and fucking hot and he probably fucking knows it and just needs an excuse to fucking make out with you,” Lys says.

Nat nods. “I agree with everything she says minus the F-bombs.”

Lys places a hand over mine. “You’ve been crazy about him forever. Now it’s up to the universe.”

“Or God,” Nat says.

“Or Buddha or Muhammed or, like, the Dalai Lama, whatever,” Lys says. “Ten bucks says Gavin falls for you before he graduates.”

“Ten bucks says he doesn’t,” I say, holding out my hand.

Nat balls up her bag and throws it in the trash. “May the best woman win.”

YOU ARE BACK at school today.

I see you in the halls, joking around with the other drama guys, with your band. You’re like a pack of gangly puppies; none of you ever sit still. Somehow you’re able to live in both those worlds: the cool-guy band and the nerdy drama dudes.

It’s been nine days since The Day happened and from where I’m standing, Gav, it looks like you’re back to normal. You’re wearing your Nirvana

shirt and your fedora is tilted at a particularly jaunty angle. The hat throws me off. I'd expected—what? A black turtleneck and beret in place of your usual outfit? A Greek chorus following you to class? You're wearing the cardigan sweater again and I wonder if it's to hide your wrists. I know I'm not the only one that wonders if there's a bandage, a scar on each one.

My heart speeds up and I suddenly feel foolish. What possessed me to write that letter? What if you think I've overstepped my bounds, that I'm weird? What if—

You turn around.

There are dozens of students between us, everyone rushing because the bell's about to ring. You're holding both straps of your backpack and you stop the minute you see me. Freeze. Your eyes widen (blue, blue like a tropical sea) and then the corner of your mouth turns up, just the slightest bit.

How do boys do that? How do they make your whole body combust just by looking at you?

I hug my books to my chest, Sandy in *Grease* asking Danny Zucko with her eyes, *What now?*

I don't know this yet, but these moments between us are choreography for the movie of your life. This thing you're doing—the look, the stop, the awed stare—you stole it right out of the BBC production of *Pride and Prejudice*. You're ripping off Colin Firth like nobody's business and I don't even realize it. You're two steps away from rising out of a lake wearing a drenched white shirt. It's only later that I'll see you're feeding me rehearsed lines and perfectly timed smiles and gasps and tears that come at precisely the right moment. A year from now I'll be screaming *Fuck you, FUCK YOU* into a pillow because I won't have the guts to say the words to your face.

But right now, a boy is staring at me from the end of the hall and even though he doesn't say a word, he's claimed me.

I'm new territory and you've planted your flag.

FOUR

I walk through the drama room door just as the bell rings. It feels like there's one inside me, too, clanging away. I keep replaying that look on your face when you saw me. The smile. *Ring! Ring! Ring!*

Peter is working on his English accent for the scene he's doing this week from Pinter—I forget which play. Alyssa is helping Karen with the first sixteen counts of the dance they're in for the concert this spring. Kyle's singing "Lily's Eyes" from *Secret Garden*, totally lost in a world of his own, and I listen to him for a moment, utterly enchanted. He has the kind of voice that makes everything inside you sit up straight. If God could carry a tune, I bet he'd sound like Kyle.

I cross the room and plop down next to Natalie, who's sitting on the carpeted floor, cross-legged and deep in conversation with Ryan. From the concerned looks on their faces, I suspect they're talking about you, analyzing your first day back. I want to tell her how you stared at me. I want to use words to trace that half smile.

"How is he?" I ask instead.

She shakes her head. "I can't tell. Summer said his parents are freaking out. They didn't want him to come back yet."

“Well, duh,” I say. “He tried to . . . you know.”

“Yeah,” she says, soft.

It’s strange to think that your life is going to go back to normal, that you’ll have math homework and run laps at P.E. You’re so beyond that now.

Miss B comes out of her office, which is located just off the drama room. We don’t have chairs or desks here, just lots of space to play. We turn our bodies toward her. She helped us all through what happened to you—there were whole class periods that turned into counseling sessions.

“Who’s auditioning for *Chicago* today—can I get a show of hands?”

I look around—nearly everyone has raised a hand.

“Excellent,” she says, smile wide. “Be sure to bring your music to the choir room and comfortable clothes for the dancing portion.”

Natalie grips my hand. She has no reason to be nervous—she’s a total triple threat. Plus, she’s pretty, but she doesn’t know it, which is the best kind of pretty.

Miss B passes out new scenes for all of us and I’m paired up with Nat and Lys, as usual. We’re playing cheerleaders in a scene from the play *Vanities*. I’m secretly excited about this scene because I’ve always wanted to be a cheerleader. It doesn’t matter that as a smart, arty girl I’m supposed to hate them. Being a cheerleader has always seemed like a way to change your fate, to become something bright and shiny that no one can look away from. Nat and I went to the meeting at the beginning of this year, just to see what the tryout required. As it turned out, we were both too broke to be cheerleaders. You have to buy a specific color lipstick, special shoes, the uniform, bows, warm-up outfits . . . I guess there’s a reason why all the rich girls are in cheer.

But none of this—cheerleaders, popularity, becoming a sparkle kind of girl—matters in light of you being back, you being broken.

“Do you think Gavin’s going to audition?” I ask Natalie.

She shakes her head. "I have no idea."

How must you feel, knowing that as you smile and sing and dance, everyone will be thinking about what you did, their idea of you reorienting itself around this terrible thing?

"Let's read through it, yeah?" I say, holding up my script.

We jump into make believe like it's a pool on a sweltering day. Here, we wear other people's skins and it helps us forget our own, lets us pretend, for a little while, that we're okay.

THE CHOIR ROOM is packed with actors. I sit a little ways from Miss B, keeping track of everyone. There's only one name I haven't checked off the list yet.

"Hey."

Someone plops down next to me. I turn. It suddenly becomes a little bit harder to breathe. I can cross that last name off the list.

"Gavin. Hey." Everything in me lights up like Christmas.

We've never been alone before, never had a real conversation that didn't include other people. When we were in rehearsals for *Earnest*, you'd mostly talk to the guys. Except for our one or two conversations about music and directing, we've mostly had brief exchanges about stupid, inconsequential stuff. The last thing we talked about was garden gnomes. But now I can feel that letter, hovering in the air between us.

I understand . . .

I know right now it seems like . . .

You matter, even if you think you don't . . .

I'm here for you . . .

"You ready to get up there, show Miss B what you got?" I ask.

You lean in, conspiratorial, forehead nearly touching mine. You wink and it's the goddamn sexiest thing I've ever seen.

“It’s in the bag,” you say.

Your voice has its usual carefree tone, but amazing actor that you are, you can’t hide the tension underneath. I follow your lead, though—if you want to pretend everything’s fine, then I will, too.

“Pretty confident, are we?” I ask.

You laugh and I notice that when you do, you look down at your lap and shake your head a little. Soon, this gesture will become familiar to me. Dear.

“Put in a good word for me?” you say.

“I’ll think about it.” Now it’s my turn to wink.

“This is pretty fabulous.” You reach out and gently tug on my sweater. It’s covered in sequins, one of those cheap five-dollar things from H&M.

“You’re the only straight guy I know who can say *fabulous* and get away with it,” I say.

You grin. “That’s because I’m fabulous.”

The first round of singers go up, most of them variations on awful. You actually cringe once and slide lower into your chair, like the sound is physically painful to you. I like that you try to keep this on the DL—you’re not a jerk, just a connoisseur.

You turn to me, eyes snagging on mine. “Thank you,” you say, your voice soft. “Your letter, it kinda . . . saved me.”

I blush, pleasure blooming in my chest. I don’t know it now, but there will be a garden inside me soon. And it’ll grow thorns.

“Oh,” I say. Why can I suddenly only think of expressions from French class? *Je suis un ananas*. I am a pineapple? “I mean, cool. I hope it helped. Um.”

I bite my lip, look down at the audition slips I’m clutching in my hands. Nothing ever comes out right. I wish Tony Kushner or some other beautiful playwright could live inside my throat and just say the right thing for me at the right time.

“It did,” you say. “Help, I mean.”

Something in my bones tells me this moment is important.

Miss B calls your name before we can say anything else and you pass me your audition slip (your handwriting *is* surprisingly neat) and lope to the front of the room. You hand your music to the pianist, then look at us with what my grandpa would call a shit-eating grin.

You’re suddenly Billy Flynn, perfect casting for the conniving lawyer. Anyone who wants that part probably gave up the moment they heard you were still auditioning. Like so much, it’s yours for the taking.

This is Drama King Gavin: life of the party, the guy who takes nothing and no one seriously. Especially himself. Band Gavin is more like the real Gavin I’ll be getting to know: broody, moods shifting like tectonic plates. Vulnerable.

Despite the smile on your face and the magnetism that crackles around you whenever you’re onstage, I can feel the apprehension in the room. Everyone leans forward in their seats. I can almost see the neon sign blinking above your head: SUICIDE SUICIDE SUICIDE.

You sing “One Song Glory” from *Rent* and I wonder if this is the song you’d originally planned to sing, or your way of telling us, *I’m okay now*. It’s definitely not the kind of jazzy song everyone else is doing and not your band’s brand of angst rock. It’s . . . beautiful. Delicate and raw, laced with gritty elegance. I want to make out with you so bad right now.

*One song, he had the world at his feet,
Glory, in the eyes of a young girl, a young girl . . .*

I’m that young girl.

I just don’t know it yet.

FIVE

All my guy friends at school are horny. Their favorite thing to do is figure out what each of us girls' porn names would be. I guess a lot of people in porn use their middle name as their first name and the street they live on as their last name. This would make me Marie Laye.

Unfortunate (or perfect), I know.

You, Kyle, Peter, and Ryan think it's the most hilarious thing in the world that I live on Laye Avenue. It's a pretty perfect name for a porn star. It cracks you up and seeing you laugh makes me happy, so I don't care that the four of you are plotting my side career in adult films. I guess if directing doesn't work out, I'll have something to fall back on.

Gavin Davis.

I can't get you out of my head. The air around you is changed, weighted somehow, by what happened. You look older, like you've really been through something. You don't even try to hide your scars. You almost wear them like a badge of honor. Battle scars. I like that. You seem wise somehow. Like you found the answer to a question you've been asking for a long time. I want to know the answer.

The words I wrote you two weeks ago make my fingers burn. I hold them to my lips now and suddenly think, *I wonder what it would be like to kiss him*. Summer has moved from fear and sadness to seriously pissed off at you—she doesn't hang around with us anymore. Lys, who plans to be a psychologist someday like her parents, says that Summer is moving through the stages of grief.

Summer says you're controlling, that you didn't like her having guy friends. I mean, I guess that's not cool but she *is* pretty flirty with other guys. Even I've noticed that. *He wanted to be with me all the time*, she says. *He wanted to be the most important thing*. Sorry, but I don't see what's so bad about that. I mean, if you were my boyfriend, I can't imagine not wanting to hang out with you every second of every day. If that's crazy, sign me up. Attach me to your hip.

The bell at the end of my last class rings, jolting me out of my thoughts, bringing me back to Now, which is not a happy place. I'd like to pass Go and collect my two hundred dollars, but college feels like a long way off. So the bell rings and my heart sinks. I hate this part of the day, when I know I have to go home.

There's a collective happy sigh as Mr. Denson says, "Do your homework or you'll end up homeless. Say it with me: Trigonometry is good."

We all groan out, "Trigonometry is good."

I realize I haven't heard a thing Mr. Denson has been saying for the past hour. This happens to me all the time. I get lost in my thoughts, daydream whole classes away.

Get your head out of the clouds, Mom says.

My house is only a few blocks from campus, so I'm home pretty quick. Pro: I don't have a long-ass walk. Con: I get home before I want to, which is never. You know that bummed-out feeling you get on Sundays—the Sunday blues? That's how coming home is. That's how I feel every second I'm in my family's house.

I'm not really sure why my mom had me. By that I mean that I wasn't a mistake baby, like an oh-shit-I-got-knocked-up baby. My mom wanted me. Which is why it's so weird that she doesn't seem to want me *now*. I feel like I've somehow intruded on her, like she and The Giant have a big No Trespassing sign and an electric fence around them and Sam. I am constantly bumping into the goddamn fence.

They don't want me here. In some of our worse arguments, when I threaten to go live with my drug addict of a dad, my mom says, *Fine, see how you like it there*. And I don't know what she means by that. Like, *Fine, I don't care?* Or does she mean the life she gives me is so much better? And if she does mean that, isn't it, like, not really impressive that she's giving me a better life than a drug addict? The bar is set pretty low, is what I'm saying.

To my mom and The Giant, I'm a nuisance first, a servant second, and a person a distant third. My life at home is an endless list of chores. To name a few: scrubbing between the tiles in the shower, organizing the recycling (crushing every individual can first), watering the lawn, dusting, vacuuming, folding laundry, prepping dinner, washing the windows (God forbid I leave a streak), making beds that aren't mine, doing dishes, and babysitting. My mother, she can't stand dirt. Everything has to be spotless, in its right place, and it is my job to do that regardless of my pile of homework or the friends who want to see a movie, hang out. The Giant gets in on this action, too. For example, it's my job to wash his car every week and I'm often stuck doing his laundry.

My friends and I secretly dubbed him The Giant because he has a very *fee fi fo fum* personality. He drinks vodka tonics and has a voice that throws goose bumps over your arms. His word is law. Our house is full of yelling and tears, walls that hide the truth from our neighbors. The Giant can be very charming, you see. When he's outside our house, he's an ogre in disguise, morphing into Friendly Neighbor or

Dedicated Parent. He's an accountant with a business that costs more than it makes, but his true calling, I think, is acting: he's so very talented at pretending to be a good person.

We live in a one-story with three bedrooms. I used to share my room with my older sister, Beth, which is why I have a bunk bed. I claimed the bottom one because it feels like a cocoon, like I can hide there when things get too hard.

I've stuck up pictures of my friends on the wall beside the bed, a mixture of show photos and random candid shots. There's one of you sitting on the edge of the stage, fixing me with a lazy grin. I have pictures of my idols: Julie Taymor (only the best director *ever*), Walt Whitman. There's also my favorite quote, which my freshman-year English teacher had on a poster above the whiteboard: *Medicine, law, business, engineering are necessary to sustain life. But poetry, beauty, romance, and love—these are what we live for.* It's basically my mission statement.

The quote's from *Dead Poets Society*, one of the parts where Robin Williams is in the classroom, teaching his students about Shakespeare. No one had to get me to like Shakespeare. I've memorized nearly all of *Romeo and Juliet*. I understand how trapped they feel, how desperate they are to get out. In eighth grade, I carried it everywhere, reading and rereading it in all my spare moments. My copy is pretty beat-up, but it would probably be the first thing I saved in a fire. The pages are brittle and yellowing already, stained with the hope that bled through my fingers, a new girl in a new town looking for something epic in her life.

I remember the day we moved here from LA. My mom and The Giant had just gotten married, and Beth and I stayed up late in the dark, crying. It was too quiet—we missed the sound of the freeway, the helicopters. It smelled weird, like dung and dirt and broken dreams. We made a list of all our favorite things about LA and then posted it on our

bedroom wall. It's still up there: Venice Beach, the Fifties Cafe, Pickwick Ice Rink, standing in line at Pink's, Mexican food.

I dump my backpack on the floor in the entryway of our house just as Sam skips in. Even though I love him, Sam, through no fault of his own, is kind of the bane of my existence. My mom has already told me that my (unpaid, unappreciated) job this summer will be to babysit him every day, all day, whenever I'm not at the Honey Pot. Beth and I used to share the burden, but now it's all on me—babysitting, chores, punching bag. Mom takes advantage of the free labor so that she can spend time on Mineral Magic, this makeup company she does parties for, selling the makeup to her friends and their friends and their friends.

“Gace!” Sam yells.

He has trouble pronouncing his r's. Sam reaches his arms up, smiling, and I hug him to me, pick him up and spin him around. I like the way he throws his head back and how the laughter starts somewhere deep in his belly. Right now, he's not the bane of my existence: he is adorable and sweet and really the only good thing about this house.

“Grace!”

My mom, already calling, impatient, irritated. It's chore time, I just know it. I swing Sam around so I'm carrying him piggyback style and head for the kitchen. Mom's doing her drink ritual: glass, ice, water, lemon wedge, one packet of Equal. Place in glass in that order, stir three times clockwise, three times counterclockwise. She has me make it for her all the time. *Grace, I need a water.* She'll do that, just call me out of my room while I'm doing homework, like I'm some on-call bartender. One time she caught me stirring it four times—I was daydreaming about you and lost track. She screamed at me for wasting the lemon, the Equal, the water during a drought as she poured the contents out, rinsed the glass, then set it on the counter. *Do it again.*

“I need you to weed the backyard,” she says. “Take Sam with you and keep an eye on him.”

No *Hey, how was your day?* No *Do you have a lot of homework?* Did any more of your friends try to commit suicide?

Ever since last week I kept wanting to talk to her about you because sometimes adults know stuff, but she's always busy with some new project and now I feel like, what's the point? I hate the yo-yo that is our relationship. Sometimes I feel so close to my mom, like we're two soldiers in a trench, clutching our guns to our chest, ready to charge when the enemy comes. Other times, she *is* the enemy.

This is my attempt to not have the worst afternoon ever: "I have to do a ton of trig before work—"

She raises her hand. "You should have thought about that before you decided not to weed last weekend."

The anger in me simmers just under the surface of my skin. It's there, right when I want it. Waiting. I only have an hour to do homework before I have to work the closing shift at the Honey Pot. Now I don't even have that.

"Mom, that's not fair. I had work and then that big project for English to finish, remember?"

"I don't want to hear it."

She's yelling now. It doesn't take much to get her there. Sam digs his forehead into my back like he's trying to hide. My mom is angry all the time. When she talks to me, she clenches her teeth, growling. I'm too old for an actual spanking, but my face, my arm, the back of my head—all that's up for grabs. I'd like to avoid getting slapped around today. I'd like to not hate her.

"Okay," I say, my voice suddenly quiet. Beaten-Down Daughter. I curl my toes. Stare at my Doc Martens. Except I don't do a good enough job of hiding my frustration this time.

"You're walking on thin ice, young lady," she says. "I'm *this close* to keeping you home."

According to her, I'm always walking on thin ice. It's the topography of my life. Cold, about to break, always uncertain.

"I'm sorry," I say, contrite, like she's Jesus and I'm asking for forgiveness.

If she keeps me home, I could lose my job. I just want it to stop. This constant confrontation—it's exhausting. Mom has three major states: Angry, Depressed, Unhinged. By *unhinged* I mean she'll decide to reorganize the Christmas decorations in July—at three in the morning.

I'm so tired.

When I try to explain how awful it feels here to my friends, when I try to explain the fear I constantly live with that the bit of freedom I have is going to get taken from me—it just comes out sounding petty. Poor me. And their sympathy isn't what I want, anyway. I need righteous anger. I need someone pounding on the front door, ready to tell my mom and The Giant just how lucky they are. I get straight A's. I'm a virgin. The only alcohol I've ever had is a thimble of Communion wine when my grams takes Beth and me to church. I've never smoked pot or a cigarette or even been in a room where those things are present. I don't jaywalk, I don't ditch classes, I never lie to my mom. In short, I am a really good fucking kid. But they don't see that. They see someone trespassing on a life that would, it seems to me, be much better without me in it.

Please don't ground me. Those are the words that go round and round in my head right now. I was grounded for half of last month because I hadn't cleaned the master bathroom that my mom and Roy share before I went to Nat's house. I was running late and wiped it down quickly, hoping she wouldn't notice. But she did, of course she did. There was a hair on the base of the toilet (*You call this CLEAN?*) and a speck of mold between two tiles (*And THIS. I'm not blind, Grace.*). My punishment: two weeks of imprisonment, which just happened to

coincide with a home improvement project that The Giant was undertaking.

Mom's voice turns indifferent—my apology does nothing. “When you're done you can go.”

“Are you still okay to drive me?”

The mall is a half-hour walk away and my mom refuses to let me get my license because she says it's an adult responsibility and I'm not mature enough to handle it (except: Straight A's! Virgin! Sober!).

“Let's see how you do on the lawn.”

This is how I pick up the pieces of my afternoon, how I hold on to the hope of making it to work on time and thus not losing my job: I nod, wrapping my meekness around me like a cloak.

I change out of my vintage mod dress and into old jeans and a T-shirt, then head out the sliding glass door that leads to the back, picking Sam up on my way. I squeeze him too tight and he cries out and I snap at him, the anger pouring out of me, hot and quick. The guilt is instantaneous. I'm not any better than my mom.

“I'm sorry, buddy,” I whisper to Sam as we get outside.

I help him over to his swing set, then pull on gardening gloves and get to work on the weeds.

Being seventeen with fascist parents sucks. You get to feeling like nothing is yours except the thoughts in your head and these tiny private moments.

Don't be a martyr, Mom would say.

Look, I'm not this upset because I have to do one stupid chore or babysit my brother for a few hours after school. It's that things have gotten to the point where everything is bad all the time, so one little thing pushes me right over. Sometimes I wish I had split lips or bruises to show the school counselor—it's hard to explain the torture of living in this house, the way the constant nagging and housework and yelling grinds you down. Before, when there were welts on my skin from The

Giant, I was too young to know what to do about them. Now I'd love to present them to a school counselor and say, *See? I can't live like this anymore.* I'm trapped, suffocating. Living in this house is like the time I was in my cousin's pool and a big raft everyone was playing on covered me. I was stuck underwater with it just over my head and for a few seconds I was certain I was going to drown.

It's not bad one hundred percent of the time, but if anything good happens, there are always strings attached. I've learned to barter. Time with my friends, clothes, movie tickets, a night out—these all cost something. Is having fun Friday night worth a weekend's worth of chores or babysitting? I remember once how Lys tried to explain that this wasn't normal, that parents would do nice things for their kids because they wanted to, because they loved them. There was no *you owe me*, no *what's in it for me?* It sounded too good to be true.

I pull weeds, the sun hot on my back. It's unseasonably warm, even though we're used to crazy heat in this part of California—ninety degrees even though it's March. Money's tight, though, so being inside isn't much better. On days like this, Mom only puts the air-conditioning on at night. It's too expensive to keep it on all day. I take a break and look at the sky—the same sky as the one over Paris. I pretend for a minute that I'm there, walking along the Seine. I'm wearing a chic skirt and blouse, and . . . carrying a picnic basket with a baguette, cheese, and wine inside. And of course I'm holding hands with my boyfriend (Jacques? Pierre?). Or maybe I'm in New York City walking along Fifth Avenue, my hand in yours . . .

Mom opens the door and shouts at me to pay attention—Sam is climbing too high on his jungle gym. Every few minutes I have to get Sam away from one thing or another: the hose, the garden tools, the grill. I am never going to finish. I check my phone: 4:15. My shift starts at five. I speed-dial Beth and my perpetually busy sister actually picks up on the first ring.

“Hey, little sis,” she says, and I burst into tears.

“Ah,” she says softly. “What’d they do this time?”

I tell her about being on thin ice, how I’m scared Mom and The Giant aren’t going to let me go to Interlochen. I tell her about you and about weeding the backyard and about being exhausted.

“Why does she have to make everything harder?” I say.

“Because . . . it’s hard for her, too. With Roy. You know?” Beth says. “I don’t even think Mom realizes she’s like this.”

Beth has sort of become the voice of reason since going away to college. It’s like the distance is letting her see what’s happening at home more clearly. I don’t know how I feel about that. I don’t think it’s okay to let Mom off the hook. I liked when we were in the thick of things together, war buddies.

“Are you having the time of your life?” I ask her.

Even though she’s just in LA, it feels like she’s a million miles away. I want gossiping in the middle of the hottest nights, when we can’t sleep because the only air we have is the hot, manure-scented breeze trickling through the open window. I want washing dishes side by side. I want how we’d go from tears to laughing so hard our stomachs hurt.

“I am,” she says. “And you will, too. One more year. Chin up, okay?”

“Okay.”

When I’m done, I run to the kitchen and make the salad and set the table. I glance at the clock on the stove: 4:40. I really hope Mom doesn’t make me walk. It’s a couple miles—I’d never make it in time.

I hurry to my room and throw on the white shirt and black skirt all of us Honey Pot girls wear, then grab my khaki apron and purse. 4:45.

Mom comes in from her room and surveys what I’ve done in the kitchen as she talks on the phone to a friend.

She laughs. “Oh, it’s no problem, really. Grace can watch Sam and

I'll come over and help you plan the party. Saturday night at six? Perfect."

I hate when she does this, just puts a big X over my weekend. Maybe I had plans for Saturday night at six. But the conversation with her friend seems to be winding down and my heart lifts. She'll hang up, I'll be on time—no. Now she's crossing into the living room, straightening things that are already straight, seeing wrinkles that aren't there.

It wouldn't be the first time that I was late for work (or anything else) for that reason. I'm dying inside (*I have to go, I have to go!*). Why does she always do this? She knows I start at five. She knows you can't be late for your job. I can't say anything, even though it's so hard not to. It's pointless. She'll just wave me away like I'm an annoying fly: *buzz buzz buzz*. It's hard to kill a fly, but it can be done, if you swat at it enough.

I rush to my room and scream into my pillow, just to let some of this out. When I get back to the kitchen, she's off the phone and scrubbing the cutting board.

"Mom?" I glance at the clock. 4:55. I should have just walked. "Can we—"

"I'm not leaving the house like a pigsty," she says. "What have I told you about cleaning up after yourself?"

It's a cutting board, that's all that's out of place. A cutting board I'd already rinsed off after chopping onions and making a salad for a meal I'm not even going to be eating because there's no time to eat and I'd rather go hungry or eat my left arm, if it means I can get the hell out of here. I'm going to be late because of a cutting board? How do you explain that to your boss? *I'm sorry, but there was this dreadful cutting board situation, you know how it is.*

Other than the cutting board, the house is perfectly clean. I mean,

you could literally eat off the floor. Put on white gloves and run your finger along the bookcase—your glove will come away white as snow. There are medical words for the problems my mom has, but my only words for it right now are *batsbit crazy*.

These are the worst moments, knowing I can't say a word while something important to me hangs in the balance. How many times have I been late or missed entire events because of a dirty dish or my mom's sudden need to dust or organize a cupboard, water the grass. I've learned my lesson the hard way: pester her, even just once, and *that's it, you're not going*.

4:58—if we leave right now, I'll only be five or ten minutes late. That's respectable. You can blame traffic or a watch that's set too slow.

4:59. My mom hands me the keys. "Go get your brother in the car seat."

I grab Sam and run.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

When I was sixteen I fell in love. Hard. For the next two and a half years I would stay in my bad romance, desperate to get out of it. It wasn't until I'd graduated high school that I got the guts to break up with my Gavin. It can seem pretty crazy that anyone would stay in such an abusive relationship so long, but when you're in it, breaking up seems impossible.

The essence of this book is true even though much of what you've read is made up, wildly altered, or reimagined. As Stephen King says, "Fiction is a lie, and good fiction is the truth inside the lie."

I wrote this book because, as the incomparable Lady Gaga puts it: *I'm a free bitch, baby*. If you're stuck in your own bad romance, I want you to be free, too. I also wanted to raise awareness: dating abuse now affects one in three young adults. Young women ages 16 to 24 experience the highest rates of rape and sexual assault. That's messed-up and it needs to stop.

Below are some places where you can get help. I've also created a website for all of us to share our experiences and to get encouragement and inspiration. Blogs, art, music, and lots of love: badromancebook.tumblr.com. Our hashtag is #chooseyou.

Whoever you are, know that it does get better. You just have to take the leap. You've got this.

RESOURCES

Love Is Respect (loveisrespect.org): This site is amazing. It has quizzes you can take to see if you're in a healthy or unhealthy relationship, tons of resources on what you can do to get help, and how to stay safe. If you are in an abusive relationship, this should be your first stop for online help. Peer advocates are available 24/7 to talk. Text "love is" to 22522 or call 1-866-331-9474.

Day One (dayoney.org): If you are—or think you might be—in an abusive relationship, go here to find out more. You can also call their confidential hotline at (800) 214-4150 or text (646) 535-DAY1 (3291).

Break The Cycle (breakthecycle.org): This site has tons of info about dating violence. You can find out what the signs are and what you can do about it.

No More (nomore.org): This organization is great and also has information if you are the friend or family member of someone who is being abused. They need you more than ever. For some tips on how to help them, check out nomore.org/how-to-help/what-to-say/.

Girls Health (girlshealth.gov): This site has all the phone numbers you need, a great Q and A section, quizzes, stats, and more.

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