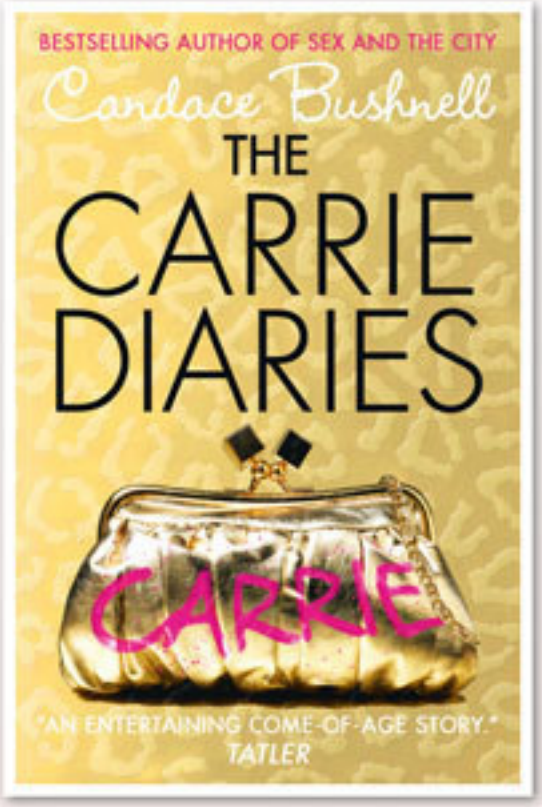
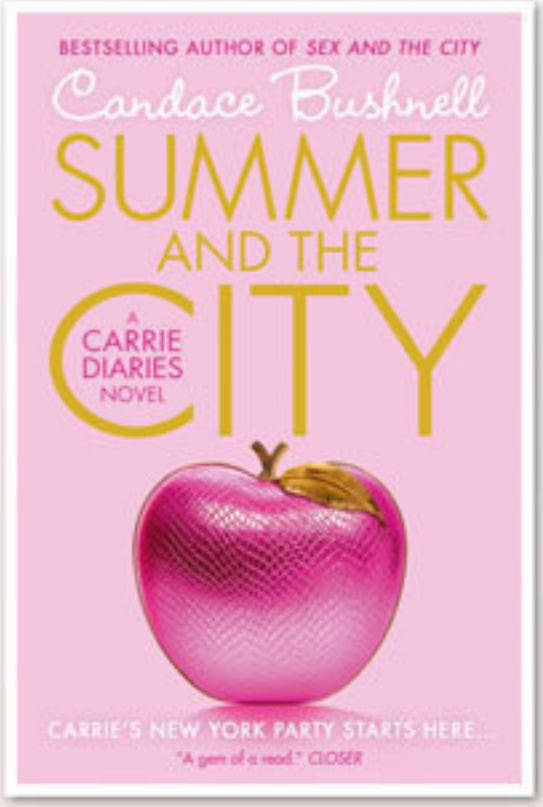
Candace Bushnell

THE CARRIE DIARIES





2 BOOK COLLECTION

Candace Bushnell

The Carrie Diaries and Summer in the City

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The Carrie Diaries and Summer in the City / C. Bushnell — «HarperCollins»,

The Carrie Diaries: The Carrie Diaries & Summer in the CityMeet teenage Carrie Bradshaw as she hits the bright lights, big city of New York for the very first time! Find out how Carrie transforms from country girl to super-cool fashionista, from the globally bestselling author of SEX AND THE CITY.Carrie is in love with New York City – the crazy characters in her neighbourhood, the vintage-clothing boutiques, the wild parties and the glamorous man who has swept her off her feet. Best of all, she's finally in a real writing class, taking her first steps toward fulfilling her dream.Carrie learns to navigate her way around the Big Apple, going from being a country "sparrow" – asSamantha Jones dubs her – to the person she always wanted to be. But as it becomes increasingly difficult to reconcile her past with her future, Carrie realises that making it in New York is much more complicated than she ever imagined.With her signature wit and sparkling humour, Candace Bushnell reveals the irresistible story of how Carrie met Samantha and Miranda, and what turned a small-town girl into one of the New York City's most unforgettable icons, Carrie Bradshaw.

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Содержание

Copyright 6
Table of Contents 7
Table of Contents 10
CHAPTER ONE A Princess on Another Planet 11
CHAPTER TWO The Integer Crowd 15
CHAPTER THREE Double Jeopardy 20
CHAPTER FOUR The Big Love 24
CHAPTER FIVE Rock Lobsters 26
CHAPTER SIX Bad Chemistry 31
CHAPTER SEVEN Paint the Town Red 36
CHAPTER EIGHT The Mysteries of Romance 42
CHAPTER NINE The Artful Dodger 48
CHAPTER TEN Rescue Me 52
CHAPTER ELEVEN Competition 56
CHAPTER TWELVE You Can’t Always Get What You Want 60
CHAPTER THIRTEEN Creatures of Love 65
CHAPTER FOURTEEN Hang in There 69
CHAPTER FIFTEEN Little Criminals 75
CHAPTER SIXTEEN How Far Will You Go? 79
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 84

The Carrie Diaries
CANDACE BUSHNELL



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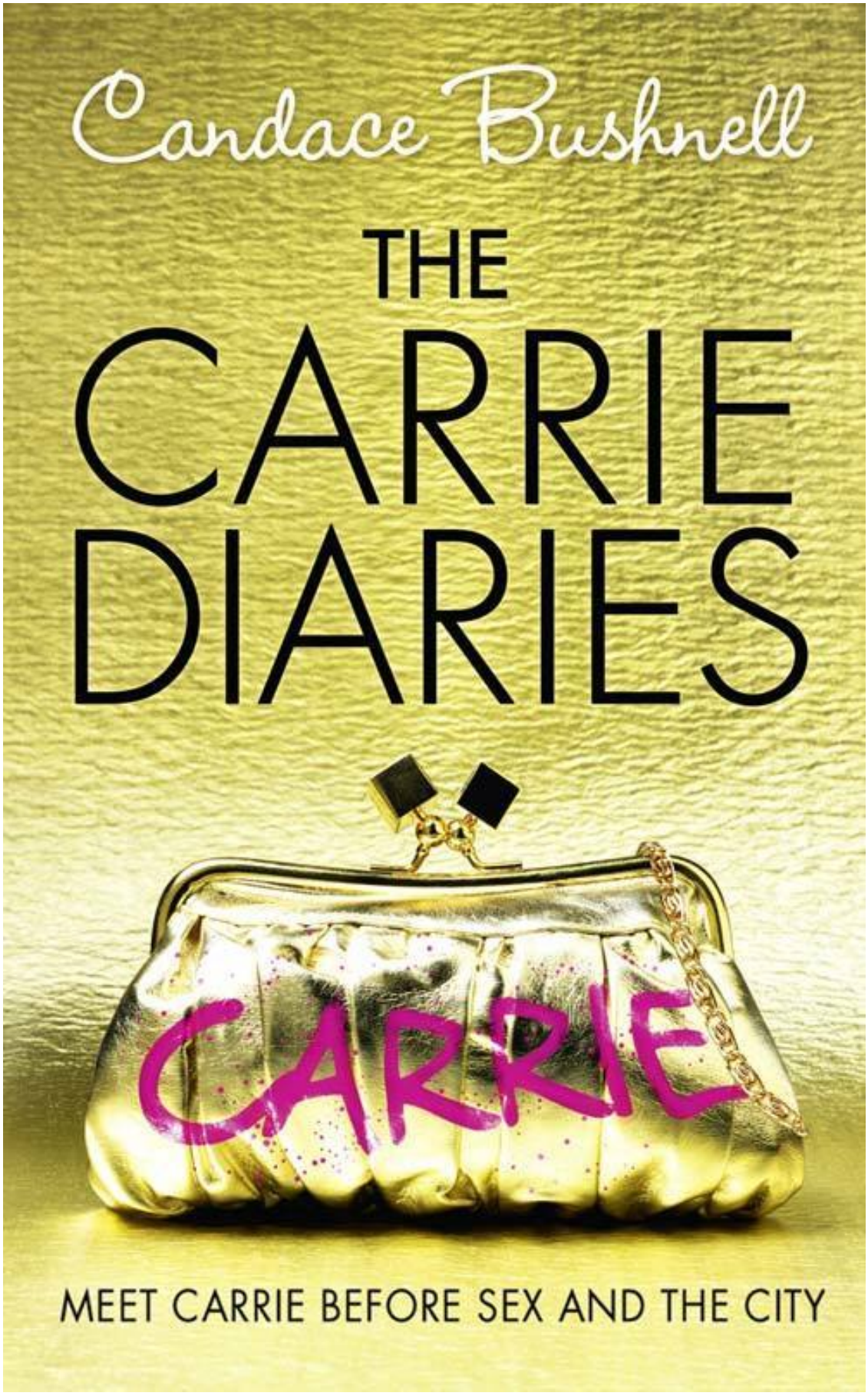
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Table of Contents

Cover
Title Page
Copyright
THE CARRIE DIARIES
SUMMER AND THE CITY
About the Author
Also by the Author
About the Publisher


Candace Bushnell
THE
CARRIE
DIARIES
CARRIE
MEET CARRIE BEFORE SEX AND THE CITY

The Carrie Diaries
CANDACE BUSHNELL



HarperCollins *Children's Books*

For Calvin Bushnell

Table of Contents

Cover
Title Page
Dedication
CHAPTER ONE - A Princess on Another Planet
CHAPTER TWO - The Integer Crowd
CHAPTER THREE - Double Jeopardy
CHAPTER FOUR - The Big Love
CHAPTER FIVE - Rock Lobsters
CHAPTER SIX - Bad Chemistry
CHAPTER SEVEN - Paint the Town Red
CHAPTER EIGHT - The Mysteries of Romance
CHAPTER NINE The - Artful Dodger
CHAPTER TEN - Rescue Me
CHAPTER ELEVEN - Competition
CHAPTER TWELVE - You Can't Always Get What You Want
CHAPTER THIRTEEN - Creatures of Love
CHAPTER FOURTEEN - Hang in There
CHAPTER FIFTEEN - Little Criminals
CHAPTER SIXTEEN - How Far Will You Go?
CHAPTER SEVENTEEN - Bait and Switch
CHAPTER EIGHTEEN - Cliques Are Made to Be Broken
CHAPTER NINETEEN - Ch-ch-ch-changes
CHAPTER TWENTY - Slippery Slopes
CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE - The Wall
CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO - Dancing Fools
CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE - The Assumption of X
CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR - The Circus Comes to Town
CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE - Lockdown at Bralcatraz
CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX - The S-H-I-T Hits the Fan
CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN - The Girl Who…
CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT - Pretty Pictures
CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE - The Gorgon
CHAPTER THIRTY - Accidents Will Happen
CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE - Pinky Takes Castlebury
CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO - The Nerd Prince
CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE - Hold On to Your Panties
CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR - Transformation
CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE - A Free Man in Paris

CHAPTER ONE A Princess on Another Planet

They say a lot can happen in a summer.

Or not.

It's the first day of senior year, and as far as I can tell, I'm exactly the same as I was last year.

And so is my best friend, Lali.

"Don't forget, Bradley, we have to get boyfriends this year," she says, starting the engine of the red pickup truck she inherited from one of her older brothers.

"Crap." We were supposed to get boyfriends last year and we didn't. I open the door and scoot in, sliding the letter into my biology book, where, I figure, it can do no more harm. "Can't we give this whole boyfriend thing a rest? We already know all the boys in our school. And—"

"Actually, we don't," Lali says as she slides the gear stick into reverse, glancing over her shoulder. Of all my friends, Lali is the best driver. Her father is a cop and insisted she learn to drive when she was twelve, in case of an emergency.

"I hear there's a new kid," she says.

"So?" The last new kid who came to our school turned out to be a stoner who never changed his overalls.

"Jen P says he's cute. Really cute."

"Uh-huh."Jen P was the head of Leif Garrett's fan club in sixth grade. "If he actually is cute, Donna LaDonna will get him."

"He has a weird name," Lali says. "Sebastian something. Sebastian Little?"

"Sebastian Kydd?" I gasp.

"That's it," she says, pulling into the parking lot of the high school. She looks at me suspiciously. "Do you know him?"

I hesitate, my fingers grasping the door handle.

My heart pounds in my throat; if I open my mouth, I'm afraid it will jump out.

I shake my head.

We're through the main door of the high school when Lali spots my boots. They're white patent leather and there's a crack on one of the toes, but they're genuine go-go boots from the early seventies. I figure the boots have had a much more interesting life than I have. "Bradley," she says, eyeing the boots with disdain. "As your best friend, I cannot allow you to wear those boots on the first day of senior year."

"Too late," I say gaily. "Besides, someone's got to shake things up around here."

"Don't go changing." Lali makes her hand into a gun shape, kisses the tip of her finger, and points it at me before heading for her locker.

"Good luck, [A-Z]ngel," I say. *Changing.* Ha. Not much chance of that. Not after the letter.

Dear Ms. Bradshaw, it read.

Thank you for your application to the New School's Advanced Summer Writing Seminar. While your stories show promise and imagination, we regret to inform you that we are unable to offer you a place in the program at this time.

I got the letter last Tuesday. I reread it about fifteen times, just to be sure, and then I had to lie down. Not that I think I'm so talented or anything, but for once in my life, I was hoping I was.

I didn't tell anyone about it, though. I didn't even tell anyone I'd applied, including my father. He went to Brown and expects me to go there, too. He thinks I'd make a good scientist. And if I can't hack molecular structures, I can always go into biology and study bugs.

I'm halfway down the hall when I spot Cynthia Viande and Tommy Brewster, Castlebury's golden Pod couple. Tommy isn't too bright, but he is the center on the basketball team. Cynthia, on the other hand, is senior class president, head of the prom committee, an outstanding member of the

National Honor Society, and got all the Girl Scout badges by the time she was ten. She and Tommy have been dating for three years. I try not to give them much thought, but alphabetically, my last name comes right before Tommy's, so I'm stuck with the locker next to his and stuck sitting next to him in assembly, and therefore basically stuck seeing him—and Cynthia—every day.

"And don't make those goofy faces during assembly," Cynthia scolds. "This is a very important day for me. And don't forget about Daddy's dinner on Saturday."

"What about my party?" Tommy protests.

"You can have the party on Friday night," Cynthia snaps.

There could be an actual person inside Cynthia, but if there is, I've never seen it.

I swing open my locker. Cynthia suddenly looks up and spots me. Tommy gives me a blank stare, as if he has no idea who I am, but Cynthia is too well brought up for that. "Hello, Carrie," she says, like she's thirty years old instead of seventeen.

Changing. It's hard to pull off in this little town.

"Welcome to hell school," a voice behind me says.

It's Walt. He's the boyfriend of one of my other best friends, Maggie. Walt and Maggie have been dating for two years, and the three of us do practically everything together. Which sounds kind of weird, but Walt is like one of the girls.

"Walt," Cynthia says. "You're just the man I want to see."

"If you want me to be on the prom committee, the answer is no."

Cynthia ignores Walt's little joke. "It's about Sebastian Kydd. Is he really coming back to Castlebury?"

Not again. My nerve endings light up like a Christmas tree.

"That's what Doreen says." Walt shrugs as if he couldn't care less. Doreen is Walt's mother and a guidance counselor at Castlebury High. She claims to know everything, and passes all her information on to Walt—the good, the bad, and the completely untrue.

"I heard he was kicked out of private school for dealing drugs," Cynthia says. "I need to know if we're going to have a problem on our hands."

"I have no idea," Walt says, giving her an enormous fake smile. Walt finds Cynthia and Tommy nearly as annoying as I do.

"What kind of drugs?" I ask casually as we walk away.

"Painkillers?"

"Like in *Valley of the Dolls*?" It's my favorite secret book, along with the *DSM-III,* which is this tiny manual about mental disorders. "Where the hell do you get painkillers these days?"

"Oh, Carrie, I don't know,"Walt says, no longer interested. "His mother?"

"Not likely." I try to squeeze the memory of my one-and-only encounter with Sebastian Kydd out of my head but it sneaks in anyway.

I was twelve and starting to go through an awkward stage. I had skinny legs and no chest, two pimples, and frizzy hair. I was also wearing cat's-eye glasses and carrying a dog-eared copy of *What About Me?* by Mary Gordon Howard. I was obsessed with feminism. My mother was remodeling the Kydds' kitchen, and we'd stopped by their house to check on the project. Suddenly, Sebastian appeared in the doorway. And for no reason, and completely out of the blue, I sputtered, "Mary Gordon Howard believes that most forms of sexual intercourse can be classified as rape."

For a moment, there was silence. Mrs. Kydd smiled. It was the end of the summer, and her tan was set off by her pink and green shorts in a swirly design. She wore white eye shadow and pink lipstick. My mother always said Mrs. Kydd was considered a great beauty. "Hopefully you'll feel differently about it once you're married."

"Oh, I don't plan to get married. It's a legalized form of prostitution."

"Oh my." Mrs. Kydd laughed, and Sebastian, who had paused on the patio on his way out, said, "I'm taking off."

"Again, Sebastian?" Mrs. Kydd exclaimed with a hint of annoyance. "But the Bradshaws just got here."

Sebastian shrugged."Going over to Bobby's to play drums."

I stared after him in silence, my mouth agape. Clearly Mary Gordon Howard had never met a Sebastian Kydd.

It was love at first sight.

In assembly, I take my seat next to Tommy Brewster, who is hitting the kid in front of him with a notebook. A girl in the aisle is asking if anyone has a tampon, while two girls behind me are excitedly whispering about Sebastian Kydd, who seems to become more and more notorious each time his name is mentioned.

"I heard he went to jail—"

"His family lost all their money—"

"No girl has managed to hold on to him for more than three weeks—"

I force Sebastian Kydd out of my thoughts by pretending Cynthia Viande is not a fellow student but a strange species of bird. Habitat: any stage that will have her. Plumage: tweed skirt, white shirt with cashmere sweater, sensible shoes, and a string of pearls that is probably real. She keeps shifting her papers from one arm to the other and tugging down her skirt, so maybe she's a little nervous after all. I know I would be. I wouldn't want to be, but I would. My hands would be shaking and my voice would come out in a squeak, and afterward, I'd hate myself for not taking control of the situation.

The principal, Mr. Jordan, goes up to the mike and says a bunch of boring stuff about being on time for classes and something about a new system of demerits, and then Ms. Smidgens informs us that the school newspaper, *The Nutmeg,* is looking for reporters and how there's some earthshaking story about cafeteria food in this week's issue. And finally, Cynthia walks up to the mike. "This is the most important year of our lives. We are poised at the edge of a very great precipice. In nine months, our lives will be irreparably altered," she says, like she thinks she's Winston Churchill or something. I'm half expecting her to add that all we have to fear is fear itself, but instead, she continues: "So this year is all about senior moments. Moments we'll remember forever."

Suddenly Cynthia's expression changes to one of annoyance as everyone's head starts swiveling toward the center of the auditorium.

Donna LaDonna is coming down the aisle. She's dressed like a bride, in a white dress with a deep V, her ample cleavage accentuated by a tiny diamond cross hanging from a delicate platinum chain. Her skin is like alabaster; on one wrist, a constellation of silver bracelets peal like bells when she moves her arm. The auditorium falls silent.

Cynthia Viande leans into the mike. "Hello, Donna. So glad you could make it."

"Thanks," Donna says, and sits down.

Everyone laughs.

Donna nods at Cynthia and gives her a little wave, as if signaling her to continue. Donna and Cynthia are friends in that weird way that girls are when they belong to the same clique but don't really like each other.

"As I was saying," Cynthia begins again, trying to recapture the crowd's attention, "this year is all about senior moments. Moments we'll remember forever." She points to an AV guy, and the song "The Way We Were" comes over the loudspeaker.

I groan and bury my face in my notebook. I start to giggle along with everyone else, but then I remember the letter and get depressed again.

But every time I feel bad, I try to remind myself about what this little kid said to me once. She was loaded with personality—so ugly she was cute. And you knew she knew it too. "Carrie?" she asked. "What if I'm a princess on another planet? And no one on this planet knows it?"

That question still kind of blows me away. I mean, isn't it the truth? Whoever we are here, we might be princesses somewhere else. Or writers. Or scientists. Or presidents. Or whatever the hell we want to be that everyone else says we can't.

CHAPTER TWO The Integer Crowd

"Who knows the difference between integral calculus and differential calculus?"

Andrew Zion raises his hand. "Doesn't it have something to do with how you use the differentials?"

"That's getting there," Mr. Douglas, the teacher, says. "Anyone else have a theory?"

The Mouse raises her hand. "In differential calculus you take an infinitesimal small point and calculate the rate of change from one variable to another. In integral calculus you take a small differential element and you integrate it from one lower limit to another limit. So you sum up all those infinitesimal small points into one large amount."

Jeez, I think. How the hell does The Mouse know *that*?

I'm never going to be able to get through this course. It will be the first time math has failed me. Ever since I was a kid, math was one of my easiest subjects. I'd do the homework and ace the tests, and hardly have to study. But I'll have to study now, if I plan to survive.

I'm sitting there wondering how I can get out of this course, when there's a knock on the door. Sebastian Kydd walks in, wearing an ancient navy blue polo shirt. His eyes are hazel with long lashes, and his hair is bleached dark blond from seawater and sun. His nose, slightly crooked, as if he was punched in a fight and never had it fixed, is the only thing that saves him from being too pretty.

"Ah, Mr. Kydd. I was wondering when you were planning to show up," Mr. Douglas says.

Sebastian looks him straight in the eye, unfazed. "I had a few things I needed to take care of first."

I sneak a glance at him from behind my hand. Here is someone who truly does come from another planet—a planet where all humans are perfectly formed and have amazing hair.

"Please. Sit down."

Sebastian looks around the room, his glance pausing on me. He takes in my white go-go boots, slides his eyes up my light blue tartan skirt and sleeveless turtleneck, up to my face, which is now on fire. One corner of his mouth lifts in amusement, then pulls back in confusion before coming to rest on indifference. He takes a seat in the back of the room.

"Carrie," Mr. Douglas says. "Can you give me the basic equation for movement?"

Thank God we learned that equation last year. I rattle it off like a robot: "*X* to the fifth degree times *Y* to the tenth degree minus a random integer usually known as *N*."

"Right," Mr. Douglas says. He scribbles another equation on the board, steps back, and looks directly at Sebastian.

I put my hand on my chest to keep it from thumping.

"Mr. Kydd?" he asks. "Can you tell me what this equation represents?"

I give up being coy. I turn around and stare.

Sebastian leans back in his chair and taps his pen on his calculus book. His smile is tense, as if he either doesn't know the answer, or does know it and can't believe anyone would be so stupid as to ask. "It represents infinity, sir. But not any old infinity. The kind of infinity you find in a black hole."

He catches my eye and winks.

Wow. Black hole indeed.

"Sebastian Kydd is in my calculus class," I hiss to Walt, cutting behind him in the cafeteria line.

"Christ, Carrie,"Walt says. "Not you, too. Every single girl in this school is talking about Sebastian Kydd. Including Maggie."

The hot meal is pizza—the same pizza our school system has been serving for years, which tastes like barf and must be the result of some secret school-system recipe. I pick up a tray, then an apple and a piece of lemon meringue pie.

"But Maggie is dating you."

"Try telling Maggie that."

We carry our trays to our usual table. The Pod People sit at the opposite end of the cafeteria, near the vending machines. Being seniors, we should have claimed a table next to them. But Walt and I decided a long time ago that high school was disturbingly like India—a perfect example of a caste system—and we vowed not to participate by never changing our table. Unfortunately, like most protests against the overwhelming tide of human nature, ours goes largely unnoticed.

The Mouse joins us, and she and Walt start talking about Latin, a subject in which they're both better than I am. Then Maggie comes over. Maggie and The Mouse are friendly, but The Mouse says she would never want to get too close to Maggie because she's overly emotional. I say that excessive emotionality is interesting and distracts one from one's own problems. Sure enough, Maggie is on the verge of tears.

"I just got called into the counselor's office—again. She said my sweater was too revealing!"

"That's outrageous," I say.

"Tell me about it," Maggie says, squeezing in between Walt and The Mouse. "She really has it out for me. I told her there was no dress code and she didn't have the right to tell me what to wear."

The Mouse catches my eye and snickers. She's probably remembering the same thing I am—the time Maggie got sent home from Girl Scouts for wearing a uniform that was too short. Okay, that was about seven years ago, but when you've lived in the same small town forever, you remember these things.

"And what did *she* say?" I ask.

"She said she wouldn't send me home this time, but if she sees me in this sweater again, she's going to suspend me."

Walt shrugs. "She's a bitch."

"How can she discriminate against a sweater?"

"Perhaps we should lodge a complaint with the school board. Have her fired," The Mouse says.

I'm sure she doesn't mean to sound sarcastic, but she does, a little. Maggie bursts into tears and runs in the direction of the girls' room.

Walt looks around the table. "Which one of you bitches wants to go after her?"

"Was it something I said?" The Mouse asks innocently.

"No." Walt sighs. "There's a crisis every other day."

"I'll go." I take a bite of my apple and hurry after her, pushing through the cafeteria doors with a bang.

I run smack into Sebastian Kydd.

"Whoa," he exclaims. "Where's the fire?"

"Sorry," I mumble. I'm suddenly hurtled back in time, to when I was twelve.

"This is the cafeteria?" he asks, gesturing toward the swinging doors. He peeks in the little window. "Looks heinous. Is there any place to eat off campus?"

Off-campus? Since when did Castlebury High become a campus? And is he asking me to have lunch with him? No, not possible. Not me. But maybe he doesn't remember that we've met before.

"There's a hamburger place up the street. But you need a car to get there."

"I've got a car," he says.

And then we just stand there, staring at each other. I can feel the other kids walking by but I don't see them.

"Okay. Thanks," he says.

"Right." I nod, remembering Maggie.

"See ya," he says, and walks away.

Rule number one: Why is it that the one time a cute guy talks to you, you have a friend who's in crisis?

I run into the girls' room. "Maggie? You won't believe what just happened." I look under the stalls and spot Maggie's shoes next to the wall. "Mags?"

"I am totally *humiliated*," she wails.

Rule number two: Humiliated best friend always takes precedence over cute guy.

"Magwitch, you can't let what other people say affect you so much." I know this isn't helpful, but my father says it all the time and it's the only thing I can think of at the moment.

"How am I supposed to do that?"

"By looking at everyone like they're a big joke. Come on, Mags. You know high school is absurd. In less than a year we'll be out of here and we'll never have to see any of these people ever again."

"I need a cigarette," Maggie groans.

The door opens and the two Jens come in.

Jen S and Jen P are cheerleaders and part of the Pod clique. Jen S has straight dark hair and looks like a beautiful little dumpling. Jen P used to be my best friend in third grade. She was kind of okay, until she got to high school and took up social climbing. She spent two years taking gymnastics so she could become a cheerleader, and even dated Tommy Brewster's best friend, who has teeth the size of a horse. I waver between feeling sorry for her and admiring her desperate determination. Last year, her efforts paid off and she was finally admitted to the Pod pack, which means she now rarely talks to me.

For some reason, she does today, because when she sees me, she exclaims, "Hi!" as if we're still really good friends.

"Hi!" I reply, with equally false enthusiasm.

Jen S nods at me as the two Jens begin taking lipsticks and eye shadows out of their bags. I once overheard Jen S telling another girl that if you want to get guys, you have to have "a trademark"—one thing you always wore to make you memorable. For Jen S, this, apparently, is a thick stripe of navy blue eyeliner on her upper lid. Go figure. She leans in to the mirror to make sure the eyeliner is still intact as Jen P turns to me.

"Guess who's back at Castlebury High?" she asks.

"Who?"

"Sebastian Kydd."

"Re-e-e-ally?" I look in the mirror and rub my eye, pretending I have something in it.

"I want to date him," she says, with complete and utter confidence. "From what I've heard, he'd be a perfect boyfriend for me."

"Why would you want to date someone you don't know?"

"I just do, that's all. I don't need a reason."

"Cutest boys in the history of Castlebury High," Jen S says, as if leading a cheer.

"Jimmy Watkins."

"Randy Sandler."

"Bobby Martin."

Jimmy Watkins, Randy Sandler, and Bobby Martin were on the football team when we were sophomores. They all graduated at least two years ago. *Who cares?* I want to shout.

"Sebastian Kydd," Jen S exclaims.

"Hall of Famer for sure. Right, Carrie?"

"Who?" I ask, just to annoy her.

"Sebastian Kydd,"Jen P says in a huff as she and Jen S exit.

"Maggie?" I ask. She hates the two Jens and won't come out until they've left the bathroom. "They're gone."

"Thank God." The stall door opens and Maggie heads for the mirror. She runs a comb through her hair. "I can't believe Jen P thinks *she* can get Sebastian Kydd. That girl has no sense of reality. Now, what were you going to tell me?"

"Nothing," I say, suddenly sick of Sebastian. If I hear one more person mention his name, I'm going to shoot myself.

"What was that business with Sebastian Kydd?"The Mouse asks a little later. We're in the library, attempting to study.

"What business?" I highlight an equation in yellow, thinking about how useless it is to highlight. It makes you think you're learning, but all you're really learning is how to use a highlighter.

"He winked at you. In calculus class."

"He did?"

"Bradley," The Mouse says, in disbelief. "Don't even try to tell me you didn't notice."

"How do I know he was winking at me? Maybe he was winking at the wall."

"How do we know infinity exists? It's all a theory. And I think you should go out with him," she insists. "He's cute and he's smart. He'd be a good boyfriend."

"That's what every girl in the school thinks. Including Jen P."

"So what? You're cute and you're smart, too. Why shouldn't *you* date him?"

Rule number three: Best friends always think you deserve the best guy even if the best guy barely knows you exist.

"Because he probably only likes cheerleaders?"

"Faulty reasoning, Bradley. You don't know that for a fact." And then she gets all dreamy and rests her chin in her hand. "Guys can be full of surprises."

This dreaminess is not like The Mouse. She has plenty of guy friends, but she's always been too practical to get romantically involved.

"What does that mean?" I ask, curious about this new Mouse. "Have you encountered some surprising guys recently?"

"Just one," she says.

And rule number four: Best friends can also be full of surprises.

"Bradley." She pauses. "I have a boyfriend."

What? I'm so shocked, I can't speak. The Mouse has never had a boyfriend. She's never even had a proper date.

"He's pretty nifty," she says.

"Nifty? *Nifty?*" I croak, finding my voice. "Who is he? I need to know all about this nifty character."

The Mouse giggles, which is also very un-Mouse-like. "I met him this summer. At the camp."

"Aha." I'm kind of stunned and a little bit hurt that I haven't heard about this mysterious Mouse boyfriend before, but now it makes sense. I never see The Mouse during the summer because she always goes to some special government camp in Washington, D.C.

And suddenly, I'm really happy for her. I jump up and hug her, popping up and down like a little kid on Christmas morning. I don't know why it's such a big deal. It's only a stupid boyfriend. But still. "What's his name?"

"Danny." Her eyes slide away and she smiles dazedly, as if she's watching some secret movie inside her head. "He's from Washington. We smoked pot together and—"

"Wait a minute." I hold up my hands. "Pot?"

"My sister Carmen told me about it. She says it relaxes you before sex."

Carmen is three years older than The Mouse and the most proper girl you've ever seen. She wears pantyhose in the summer. "What does Carmen have to do with you and Danny? Carmen smokes pot? Carmen has sex?"

"Listen, Bradley. Even smart people get to have sex."

"Meaning *we* should be having sex."

"Speak for yourself."

Huh? I pull The Mouse's calculus book away from her and bang it shut. "Listen, Mouse. What are you talking about? Did you have *sex*?"

"Yup," she says, nodding, as if it's no big deal.

"How can you have sex and I haven't? You're supposed to be a nerd. You're supposed to be inventing the cure for cancer, not doing it in the backseat of some car filled with marijuana smoke."

"We did it in his parents' basement," The Mouse says, taking her book back.

"You did?" I try to imagine The Mouse naked on some guy's cot in a damp basement. I can't picture it. "How was it?"

"The basement?"

"The sex," I nearly scream, trying to bring The Mouse back down to earth.

"Oh, that. It was good. Really fun. But it's the kind of thing you have to work at. You don't just start doing it. You have to experiment."

"Really?" I narrow my eyes in suspicion. I'm not sure how to take this news. All summer, while I was writing some stupid story to get into that stupid writing program, The Mouse was losing her virginity. "How did you even figure out how to do it in the first place?"

"I read a book. My sister told me everyone should read an instructional manual before they do it so they know what to expect. Otherwise it might be a big disappointment."

I squint, adding a sex book to my image of The Mouse and this Danny person getting it on in his parents' basement. "Do you think you're going to…continue?"

"Oh, yes," The Mouse says. "He's going to Yale, like me." She smiles and goes back to her calculus book, as if it's all settled.

"Hmph." I fold my arms. But I suppose it makes sense. The Mouse is so organized, she would have her romantic life figured out by the time she's eighteen.

While I have nothing figured out at all.

CHAPTER THREE Double Jeopardy

"I don't know how I'm going to get through this year," Maggie says. She takes out a pack of cigarettes, which she stole from her mother, and lights up.

"Uh-huh," I say, distracted. I'm still shocked The Mouse is having sex. *What if* everyone *is having sex?*

Crap. I absentmindedly pick up a copy of *The Nutmeg.* The headline screams: yogurt served in cafeteria. I roll my eyes and shove it aside. With the exception of the handful of kids who actually work on *The Nutmeg,* no one reads it. But someone left it on the old picnic table inside the ancient dairy barn that sits just outside school property. The table's been here forever, scratched with the initials of lovers, the years of graduating classes, and general sentiments toward Castlebury High, such as "Castlebury sucks." The teachers never come out here, so it's also the unofficial smoking area.

"At least we get yogurt this year," I say, for no particular reason. *What if I never have sex? What if I die in a car accident before I have the chance to do it?*

"What's that supposed to mean?" Maggie asks.

Uh-oh. Up next: the dreaded body discussion. Maggie will say she thinks she's fat, and I'll say I think I look like a boy. Maggie will say she wishes she looked like me and I'll say I wish I looked like her. And it won't make a bit of difference, because two minutes later, we'll both be sitting here in our same bodies, except we'll have managed to make ourselves feel bad over something we can't change.

Like not getting into the damn New School.

What if some guy wants to have sex with me and I'm too scared to go through with it?

Sure enough, Maggie says, "Do I look fat? I do look fat, don't I? I *feel* fat."

"Maggie. You're not fat." Guys have been drooling over Maggie since she was thirteen, a fact that she seems determined to ignore.

I look away. Behind her, in the dark recesses at the far end of the barn, the glowing tip of a cigarette moves up and down. "Someone's in here," I hiss.

"Who?" She spins around as Peter Arnold comes out of the shadows.

Peter is the second-smartest boy in our class and kind of a jerk. He used to be a chubby-faced short kid with pasty skin, but it appears something happened to Peter over the summer. He grew.

And apparently took up smoking.

Peter is good friends with The Mouse, but I don't really know him. When it comes to relationships, we're all like little planets with our own solar system of friends. Unwritten law states that the solar systems rarely intersect—until now.

"Mind if I join you?" he asks.

"Actually, we do. We're having girl talk here." I don't know why I'm like this with boys, especially boys like Peter. Bad habit, I guess. Worse than smoking. But I don't want boring old Peter to ruin our conversation.

"No. We don't mind." Maggie kicks me under the table.

"By the way, I don't think you're fat," Peter says.

I smirk, trying to catch Maggie's eye, but she's not looking at me. She's looking at Peter. So I look at Peter too. His hair is longer and he's shed most of his zits, but there's something else about him.

Confidence.

Jeez. First The Mouse and now Peter. Is everyone going to be different this year?

Maggie and Peter keep ignoring me, so I pick up the paper and pretend to read. This gets Peter's attention.

"What do you think of *The Nutmeg*?" he asks.

"Drivel," I say.

"Thanks," he says. "I'm the editor."

Nice. Now I've done it again.

"If you're so smart, why don't you try writing for the paper?" Peter asks. "I mean, don't you tell everyone you want to be a writer? What have you ever written?"

Maybe he doesn't mean to sound aggressive, but the question catches me off guard. Does Peter somehow know about the rejection letter from The New School? But that would be impossible. Then I get angry. "What does it matter, what I've written or not?"

"If you say you're a writer, it means you write," Peter says smugly. "Otherwise you should go and be a cheerleader or something."

"And you should stick your head in a barrel of boiling oil."

"Maybe I will." He laughs good-naturedly. Peter must be one of those obnoxious types who's so used to being insulted he's not even offended when he is.

But still, I'm shaken. I grab my swim bag."I've got practice," I say, as if I can hardly be bothered with this conversation.

"What's the matter with her?" Peter asks as I storm out.

I head down the hill toward the gym, scuffing the heels of my boots in the grass. Why is it always like this? I tell people I want to be a writer, and they roll their eyes. It drives me crazy. Especially since I've been writing since I was six. I have a pretty big imagination, and for a while I wrote stories about a pencil family called "The Number 2's," who were always trying to get away from a bad guy called "The Sharpener." Then I wrote about a little girl who had a mysterious disease that made her look like she was ninety. And this summer, in order to get into that stupid writing program, I wrote a whole book about a boy who turned into a TV, and no one in his family noticed until he used up all the electricity in the house.

If I'd told Peter the truth about what I'd written, he would have laughed. Just like those people at The New School.

"Carrie!" Maggie calls out. She hurries across the playing fields to catch up. "Sorry about Peter. He says he was joking about the writing thing. He has a weird sense of humor."

"No kidding."

"Do you want to go to the mall after swim practice?"

I look across the grounds to the high school and the enormous parking lot beyond. It's all exactly the same as it always was.

"Why not?" I take the letter out of my biology book, crumple it up, and stick it in my pocket.

Who cares about Peter Arnold? Who cares about The New School? Someday I'll be a writer. Someday, but maybe not today.

"I am so effing sick of this place," Lali says, dropping her things onto a bench in the locker room.

"You and me both." I unzip my boots. "First day of swim practice. I hate it."

I pull one of my old Speedos out of my bag and hang it in the locker. I've been swimming since before I could walk. My favorite photo is of me at five months, sitting on a little yellow float in Long Island Sound. I'm wearing a cute white hat and a polka-dot suit, and I'm beaming.

"You'll be *fine*," Lali says. "I'm the one with the problems."

"Like what?"

"Like Ed," she says with a grimace, referring to her father.

I nod. Sometimes Ed is more like a kid than a dad, even though he's a cop. Actually, he's more than a cop, he's a detective—the only one in town. Lali and I always laugh about it because we can't figure out exactly what he detects, as there's never been a serious crime in Castlebury.

"He stopped by the school," Lali says, stripping off her clothes. "We had a fight."

"What's wrong now?" The Kandesies fight like Mongolians, but they always make up, cracking jokes and doing outrageous things, like waterskiing in their bare feet. For a while, they kind of took me in, and sometimes I'd wish I'd been born a Kandesie instead of a Bradshaw, because then I'd

be laughing all the time and listening to rock 'n' roll music and playing family baseball on summer evenings. My father would die if he knew, but there it is.

"Ed won't pay for college." Lali faces me, naked, her hands on her hips.

"What?"

"He won't pay," she repeats. "He told me today. He never went to college and he's just fine," she says mockingly. "I have two choices. I can go to military school or I can get a job. He doesn't give jack shit about what *I* want."

"Oh, Lali." I stare at her in shock. How can this be? There are five kids in Lali's family, so money has always been tight. But Lali and I assumed she'd go to college—we'd both go, and then we'd do something big with our lives. In the dark, tucked into a sleeping bag on the floor next to Lali's bunk bed, we'd share our secrets in excited whispers. I was going to be a writer and Lali was going to win the gold medal in freestyle. But now I've been rejected from The New School. And Lali can't even go to college.

"I guess I'm going to be stuck in Castlebury forever," Lali says furiously. "Maybe I can work at Ann Taylor and earn five dollars an hour. Or maybe I could get a job at the supermarket. Or"—she smacks her hand on her forehead—"I could work at the bank. But I think you need a college degree to be a teller."

"It's not going to be like that," I insist. "Something will happen—"

"What?"

"You'll get a swimming scholarship—"

"Swimming is not a profession."

"You could still go to military school. Your brothers—"

"Are both in military school and they hate it," Lali snaps.

"You can't let Ed ruin your life," I say with bravado. "Find something you want to do and just do it. If you really want something, Ed can't stop you."

"Right," Lali says sarcastically. "Now all I need to do is figure out what that 'something' is." She holds out her suit, sliding her legs through the openings. "I'm not like you, okay? I don't know what I want to do for the rest of my life. I mean, why should I? I'm only seventeen. All I know is that I don't want someone telling me what I *can't* do."

She turns and makes a grab for her swim cap, accidentally knocking my clothes to the floor. I bend over to pick them up, and as I do, I see that the letter from The New School has slid out of my pocket, coming to rest next to Lali's foot. "I'll get that," I say, making a grab for it, but she's too fast.

"What's this?" she asks, holding up the crumpled piece of paper.

"Nothing," I say helplessly.

"Nothing?" Her eyes widen as she looks at the return address. "Nothing?" she repeats as she smoothes out the letter.

"Lali, *please.*"

Her eyes move back and forth, scanning the brief missive.

Crap. I knew I should have left the letter at home. I should have torn it up into little pieces and thrown it away. Or burned it, although it's not that easy to burn a letter, no matter how dramatic it sounds in books. Instead, I keep carrying it around, hoping it will act as some kind of perverse incentive to try harder.

Now I'm paralyzed by what must be my own stupidity.

"Lali, don't," I whisper.

"Just a minute," she says, reading the text one more time. She looks up, shakes her head, and presses her lips together in sympathy. "Carrie. I'm sorry."

"So am I." I shrug, trying to make light of it. My insides feel like they're filled with broken glass.

"I mean it." She folds the letter and hands it back to me, busying herself with her swim goggles. "Here I am, complaining about Ed. And you're being rejected by The New School. That's got to suck."

"Sort of."

"Looks like we're both going to be hanging around here for a while," she says, putting her arm around my shoulder. "Even if you do go to Brown, it's only forty-five minutes away. We'll still see each other all the time."

She pulls open the door to the pool, enveloping us in a chemical steam of chlorine and cleaning fluid. I consider asking her not to tell anyone about the rejection. But that will only make it worse. If I act like it's not a big deal, Lali will forget about it.

Sure enough, she flings her towel into the bleachers and runs across the tiles. "Last one in is a rotten egg," she shouts, doing a cannonball into the water.

CHAPTER FOUR The Big Love

I return home to bedlam.

A puny kid with a punk haircut is running across the yard, followed by my father, who is followed by my sister Dorrit, who is followed by my other sister Missy. “Don’t ever let me catch you on this property again!” my father shouts as the kid, Paulie Martin, manages to jump on his bike and pedal away.

“What the hell?” I ask Missy.

“Poor Dad.”

“Poor Dorrit,” I say, shifting my books. As if in mockery of my situation, the letter from The New School falls out of my notebook. *Enough.* I pick it up, march into the garage, and throw it away.

I immediately feel lost without it and fish it out of the trash.

“Did you see that?” my father says proudly. “I just ran that little thug off the property.” He points to Dorrit.“You—get back in the house. And don’t even think about calling him.”

“Paulie’s not that bad, Dad. He’s only a kid,” I say.

“He’s a little S-H-I-T,” says my father, who prides himself on rarely swearing. “He’s a hoodlum. Did you know he was arrested for buying beer?”

“Paulie Martin bought beer?”

“It was in the paper,” my father exclaims. “*The Castlebury Citizen.* And now he’s trying to corrupt Dorrit.”

Missy and I exchange a look. Knowing Dorrit, the opposite is true.

Dorrit used to be the sweetest little kid. She would go along with anything Missy and I told her to do, including crazy stuff like pretending she and our cat were twins. She was always making things for people—cards and little scrapbooks and crocheted pot holders—and last year, she decided she wanted to be a vet and spent practically all her time after school holding sick animals while they got their shots.

But now she’s nearly thirteen, and lately, she’s become a real problem child, crying and having temper tantrums and yelling at me and Missy. My father keeps insisting she’s in a stage and will grow out of it, but Missy and I aren’t so sure. My father is this very big scientist who came up with a formula for some new kind of metal used in the *Apollo* space rockets, and Missy and I always joke that if people were theories instead of actual human beings, Dad would know everything about us.

But Dorrit isn’t a theory. And lately, Missy and I have found little things missing from our rooms—an earring here or a tube of lip gloss there—the kinds of things you might easily lose or misplace on your own. Missy was going to confront her, but then we found most of our things stuffed behind the cushions in the couch. Nevertheless, Missy is still convinced that Dorrit is on the path to becoming a little criminal, while I’m worried about her anger. Missy and I were both brats at thirteen, but neither one of us can remember being so pissed off all the time.

True to form, in a couple of minutes Dorrit appears in the doorway of my room, aching for a fight.

“What was Paulie Martin doing here?” I ask. “You know Dad thinks you’re too young to date.”

“I’m in eighth grade,” Dorrit says stubbornly.

“That’s not even high school. You have years to have boyfriends.”

“Everyone else has a boyfriend.” She picks a flake of polish from her nail. “Why shouldn’t I?”

This is why I hope never to become a mother. “Just because everyone else is doing something, it doesn’t mean you should too. Remember,” I add, imitating my father, “we’re Bradshaws. We don’t have to be like everyone else.”

"Maybe I'm *sick* of being a stupid old *Bradshaw*. What is so great about being a Bradshaw anyway? If I want to have a boyfriend, I'll have a boyfriend. You and Missy are just jealous because you don't have boyfriends." She glares at me, runs to her room, and slams the door.

I find my father in the den, sipping a gin and tonic and staring at the TV. "What am I supposed to do?" he asks helplessly."Ground her? When I was a boy, girls didn't act like this."

"That was thirty years ago, Dad."

"Doesn't matter," he says, pressing on his temples."Love is a holy cause." Once he goes off on one of these spiels, it's hopeless. "Love is spiritual. It's about self-sacrifice and commitment. And discipline. You cannot have true love without discipline. And respect. When you lose the respect of your spouse, you've lost everything." He pauses. "Does this make any sense to you?"

"Sure, Dad," I say, not wanting to hurt his feelings.

A couple of years ago, after my mother died, my sisters and I tried to encourage my father to find someone else, but he refused to entertain the idea. He wouldn't even go on a date. He said he'd already had the one big love of his life, and anything less would feel like a sham. He felt blessed, he said, to have had that kind of love once in his life, even if it didn't last forever.

You wouldn't think a hard-boiled scientist like my father would be such a romantic, but he is.

It worries me sometimes. Not for my father's sake, but for my own.

I head up to my room, sit down in front of my mother's old Royale typewriter, and slide in a piece of paper. *The Big Love*, I write, then add a question mark.

Now what?

I open the drawer and take out a story I wrote a few years ago, when I was thirteen. It was a stupid story about a girl who rescues a sick boy by donating her kidney to him. Before he got sick, he never noticed her, even though she was pining away for him, but after she gives him her kidney, he falls madly in love with her.

It's a story I would never show anyone, because it's too sappy, but I've never been able to throw it away. It scares me. It makes me worry that I'm secretly a romantic too, just like my father.

And romantics get burned.

Whoa. Where's the fire?

Jen P was right. You can fall in love with a guy you don't know.

That summer when I was thirteen, Maggie and I used to hang out at Castlebury Falls. There was a rock cliff where the boys would dive into a deep pool, and sometimes Sebastian was there, showing off, while Maggie and I sat on the other side of the river.

"Go on," Maggie would urge. "You're a better diver than those boys." I'd shake my head, my arms wrapped protectively around my knees. I was too shy. The thought of being seen was terrifying.

I didn't mind watching, though. I couldn't take my eyes off Sebastian as he scrambled up the side of the rock, sleek and sure-footed. At the top, there was horseplay between the boys, as they jostled one another and hooted dares, demanding increasing feats of skill. Sebastian was always the bravest, climbing higher than the other boys and launching himself into the water with a fearlessness that told me he had never thought about death.

He was free.

He's the one. The Big Love.

And then I forgot about him.

Until now.

I find the soiled rejection letter from The New School and put it in the drawer with the story about the girl who gave away her kidney. I rest my chin in my hands and stare at the typewriter.

Something good has to happen to me this year. It just does.

CHAPTER FIVE Rock Lobsters

"Maggie, get out of the car."

"I can't."

"Please—"

"What's wrong now?"Walt asks.

"I need a cigarette."

Maggie, Walt, and I are sitting in Maggie's car, which is parked in the cul-de-sac at the end of Tommy's street. We've been in the car for at least fifteen minutes, because Maggie is paranoid about crowds and refuses to get out of the car when we go to parties. On the other hand, she does have the best car. It's a gigantic gas-guzzling Cadillac that fits about nine people and has a quadraphonic stereo and a glove compartment filled with her mother's cigarettes.

"You've smoked three cigarettes already."

"I don't feel good," Maggie moans.

"Maybe you'd feel better if you hadn't smoked all those cigarettes at once," I say, wondering if Maggie's mother notices that every time Maggie gives the car back, about a hundred cigarettes are missing. I did ask Maggie about it once, but she only rolled her eyes and said her mother was so clueless, she wouldn't notice if a bomb blew up in their house. "Come on," I coax her. "You know you're just scared."

She frowns. "We're not even invited to this party."

"We're not *not* invited. So that means we're invited."

"I can't stand Tommy Brewster," she mutters, and crosses her arms.

"Since when do you have to like someone to go to their party?"Walt points out.

Maggie glares and Walt throws up his hands. "I've had enough," he says. "I'm going in."

"Me too," I say suddenly. We slide out of the car. Maggie looks at us through the windshield and lights up another cigarette. Then she pointedly locks all four doors.

I make a face. "Do you want me to stay with her?"

"Do you want to sit in the car all night?"

"Not really."

"Me neither," Walt says. "And I don't plan to indulge in this ridiculousness for the rest of senior year."

I'm surprised by Walt's vehemence. He usually tolerates Maggie's neuroses without complaint.

"I mean, what's going to happen to her?" he adds. "She's going to back into a tree?"

"You're right." I look around. "There aren't any trees."

We start walking up the street to Tommy's house. The one good thing about Castlebury is that even if it's boring, it's beautiful in its own way. Even here, in this brand-new development with hardly any trees, the grass on the lawns is bright green and the street is like a crisp black ribbon. The air is warm and there's a full moon. The light illuminates the houses and the fields beyond; in October, they'll be full of pumpkins.

"Are you and Maggie having problems?"

"I don't know," Walt says. "She's being a huge pain in the ass. I can't figure out what's wrong with her. We used to be fun."

"Maybe she's going through a phase."

"She's been going through a phase all summer. And it's not like I don't have my own problems to worry about."

"Like what?"

"Like everything?" he says.

"Are you guys having sex too?" I ask suddenly. If you want to get information out of someone, ask them unexpectedly. They're usually so shocked by the question, they'll tell you the truth.

"Third base,"Walt admits.

"That's it?"

"I'm not sure I want to go any further."

I hoot, not believing him. "Isn't that all guys think about? Going further?"

"Depends on what kind of guy you are," he says.

Loud music—Jethro Tull—is threatening to shake Tommy's house down. We're about to go in, when a fast yellow car roars up the street, spins around in the cul-de-sac, and comes to rest at the curb behind us.

"Who the hell is that?" Walt asks, annoyed.

"I have no idea. But yellow is a much cooler color than red."

"Do we know anyone who drives a yellow Corvette?"

"Nope," I say in wonder.

I love Corvettes. Partly because my father thinks they're trashy, but mostly because in my conservative town, they're glamorous and a sign that the person who drives one just doesn't care what other people think. There's a Corvette body shop in my town, and every time I pass it, I pick out which Corvette I'd drive if I had the choice. But then one day my father sort of ruined the whole thing by pointing out that the body of a Corvette is made of plastic composition instead of metal, and if you get into an accident, the whole car shatters. So every time I see a Corvette now, I picture plastic breaking into a million pieces.

The driver takes his time getting out, flashing his lights and rolling his windows up, down, and back up again as if he can't decide if he wants to go to this party either. Finally, the door opens and Sebastian Kydd rises from behind the car like the Great Pumpkin himself, if the Great Pumpkin were eighteen years old, six-foot-one, and smoked Marlboro cigarettes. He looks up at the house, smirks, and starts up the walk.

"Good evening," he says, nodding at me and Walt. "At least I hope it's a good one. Are we going inside?"

"After you,"Walt says, rolling his eyes.

We. My legs turn to jelly.

Sebastian immediately disappears into a throng of kids as Walt and I weave our way through the crowd to the bar. We snag a couple of beers, and then I go back to the front door to make sure Maggie's car is still at the end of the street. It is. Then I run into The Mouse and Peter, who are backed up against a speaker. "I hope you don't have to go to the bathroom,"The Mouse shouts, by way of greeting. "Jen P saw Sebastian Kydd and freaked out because he's so cute she couldn't handle it and started hyperventilating, and now she and Jen S have locked themselves in the toilet."

"Ha," I say, staring carefully at The Mouse. I'm trying to see if she looks any different since she's had sex, but she seems pretty much the same.

"If you ask me, I think Jen P has too many hormones,"The Mouse adds, to no one in particular. "There ought to be a law."

"What's that?" Peter asks loudly.

"Nothing,"The Mouse says. She looks around. "Where's Maggie?"

"Hiding in her car."

"Of course."The Mouse nods and takes a swig of her beer.

"Maggie's here?" Peter says, perking up.

"She's still in her car," I explain. "Maybe you can get her out. I've given up."

"No problem," Peter shouts. He hurries away like a man on a mission.

The bathroom scene sounds too interesting to miss, so I head upstairs. The toilet is at the end of a long hall and a line of kids are snaked behind it, trying to get in. Donna LaDonna is knocking on

the door. “Jen, it’s me. Let me in,” she commands. The door opens a crack and Donna slips inside. The line goes crazy.

“Hey! What about us?” someone shouts.

“I hear there’s a half-bath downstairs.”

Several annoyed kids push past as Lali comes bounding up the stairs. “What the hell is going on?”

“Jen P freaked out over Sebastian Kydd and locked herself in the bathroom with Jen S and now Donna LaDonna went in to try to get her out.”

“This is ridiculous,” Lali declares. She goes up to the door, pounds on it, and yells, “Get the hell out of there, you twits. People have to pee!” When several minutes pass in which Lali does more knocking and yelling to no avail, she gives me an exaggerated shrug and says loudly, “Let’s go to The Emerald.”

“Sure,” I say, full of bluster, like we go there all the time.

The Emerald is one of the few bars in town with—according to my father—a reputation for being full of shady characters: i.e. alcoholics, divorcées, and drug addicts. I’ve only been three times, and each time I looked around desperately for these so-called degenerates but was never able to spot any patrons that fit the bill. In fact, I was the one who looked suspicious—I was shaking like a Slinky, terrified that someone was going to ask for my ID and, when I couldn’t produce it, call the police.

But that was last year. This year I’ll be seventeen. Maggie and The Mouse are nearly eighteen, and Walt is already legal, so they can’t kick him out.

Lali and I find Walt and The Mouse and they want to go too. We troop out to Maggie’s car, where she and Peter are deep in conversation. I find this slightly irritating, although I don’t know why. We decide that Maggie will drive Walt to The Emerald, while The Mouse will take Peter, and I’ll go with Lali.

Thanks to Lali’s speedy driving, we’re the first to arrive. We park the truck as far away from the building as possible in order to avoid detection. “Okay, this is weird,” I say, while we wait. “Did you notice how Maggie and Peter were having some big discussion? It’s very strange, especially since Walt says he and Maggie are having problems.”

“Like that’s a surprise.” Lali snorts.“My father thinks Walt is gay.”

“Your father thinks everyone is gay. Including Jimmy Carter. Anyway, [A-Z]alt can’t be gay. He’s been with Maggie for two years. And I know they definitely do more than make out because he told me.”

“A guy can have sex with a woman and still be gay,” Lali insists. “Remember Ms. Crutchins?”

“Poor Ms. Crutchins,” I sigh, conceding the argument. She was our English teacher last year. She was about forty years old and she’d never been married and then she met “a wonderful man” and couldn’t stop talking about him, and after three months they got married. But then, one month later, she announced to the class that she’d annulled her marriage. The rumor was that her husband turned out to be gay. Ms. Crutchins never came right out and admitted it, but she would let revealing tidbits drop, like, “There are just some things a woman can’t live with.” And after that, Ms. Crutchins, who was always full of life and passionate about English literature, seemed to shrink right into herself like a deflated balloon.

The Mouse pulls up next to us in a green Gremlin, followed by the Cadillac. It’s terrible what they say about women drivers, but Maggie really is bad. As she’s trying to park the car, she runs the front tires over the curb. She gets out of the car, looks at the tires, and shrugs.

Then we all do our best to stroll casually into The Emerald, which isn’t really seedy at all—at least not to look at. It has red leather banquettes and a small dance floor with a disco ball, and a hostess with bleached blond hair who appears to be the definition of the word “blousy.”

“Table for six?” she asks, like we’re all absolutely old enough to drink.

We pile into a banquette. When the waitress comes over, I order a Singapore Sling. Whenever I'm in a bar I always try to order the most exotic drink on the menu. A Singapore Sling has several different kinds of alcohol in it, including something called "Galliano," and it comes with a maraschino cherry and an umbrella. Then Peter, who's ordered a whiskey on the rocks, looks at my drink and laughs. "Not too obvious," he says.

"What are you talking about?" I ask innocently, sipping my cocktail through a straw.

"That you're underage. Only someone who's underage orders a drink with an umbrella and fruit. And a straw," he adds.

"Yeah, but then I get to take the umbrella home. And what do you get to take home besides a hangover?"

The Mouse and Walt think this is pretty funny, and decide to only order umbrella drinks for the rest of the night.

Maggie, who usually drinks White Russians, orders a whiskey on the rocks, instead. This confirms that something is definitely going on between Maggie and Peter. If Maggie likes a guy, she does the same thing he does. Drinks the same drink, wears the same clothes, suddenly becomes interested in the same sports he likes, even if they're totally wacky, like whitewater rafting. All through sophomore year, before Maggie and Walt started going out, Maggie liked this weird boy who went whitewater rafting every weekend in the fall. I can't tell you how many hours I had to spend freezing on top of a rock, waiting for him to pass by in his canoe. Okay—I knew it wasn't really a canoe, it was a kayak, but I insisted on calling it a canoe just to annoy Maggie for making me freeze my butt off.

And then the door of The Emerald swings open and for a moment, everyone forgets about who's drinking what.

Standing by the hostess are Donna LaDonna and Sebastian Kydd. Donna has her hand on his neck, and after he holds up two fingers, she puts her other hand on his face, turns his head, and starts kissing him.

After about ten seconds of this excessive display of affection, Maggie can't take it anymore. "Gross," she exclaims. "Donna is such a slut. I can't believe it."

"She's not so bad," Peter counters.

"How do you know?" Maggie demands.

"I helped tutor her a couple of years ago. She's actually kind of funny. And smart."

"That still doesn't mean she should be making out with some guy in The Emerald."

"He doesn't look like he's resisting much," I murmur, stirring my drink.

"Who is that guy?" Lali asks.

"Sebastian Kydd,"The Mouse volunteers.

"I know his name," Lali sniffs. "But who *is* he? Really?"

"No one knows," I say. "He used to go to private school."

Lali can't take her eyes off him. Indeed, no one in the bar seems to be able to tear themselves away from the spectacle. But now I'm bored with Sebastian Kydd and his attention-getting antics.

I snap my fingers in Lali's face to distract her."Let's dance."

Lali and I go to the jukebox and pick out some songs. We're not regular boozers, so we're both feeling the giddy effects of being a little bit drunk, when everything seems funny. I pick out my favorite song, "We Are Family" by Sister Sledge, and Lali picks "Legs" by ZZ Top. We take to the dance floor. I do a bunch of different dances—the pony, the electric slide, the bump, and the hustle, along with a lot of steps I've made up on my own. The music changes and Lali and I start doing this crazy line dance we invented a couple of years ago during a swim meet where you wave your arms in the air and then bend your knees and shake your butt. When we straighten up, Sebastian Kydd is on the dance floor.

He's a pretty cool dancer, but then, I expected he would be. He dances a little with Lali, and then he turns to me and takes my hand and starts doing the hustle. It's a dance I'm good at, and at

a certain point one of his legs is in-between mine, and I'm kind of grinding my hips, because this, after all, is a legitimate part of the dance.

He says, "Don't I know you?"

And I say, "Yes, actually you do."

Then he says, "That's right. Our mothers are friends."

"Were friends," I say. "They both went to Smith." And then the music ends and we go back to our respective tables.

"That was hilarious."The Mouse nods approvingly. "You should have seen the look on Donna LaDonna's face when he was dancing with you."

"He was dancing with both of us," Lali corrects her.

"But he was mostly dancing with Carrie."

"That's only because Carrie is shorter than I am," Lali remarks.

"Whatever."

"Exactly," I say, and get up to go to the bathroom.

The restroom is at the end of a narrow hall on the other side of the bar. When I come out, Sebastian Kydd is standing next to the door as if he's waiting to go in. "Hello," he says. He delivers this in a sort of fakey way, like he's an actor in a movie, but he's so good-looking, I decide I don't mind.

"Hi," I say cautiously.

He smiles. And then he says something astoundingly ridiculous. "Where have you been my whole life?"

I almost laugh, but he appears to be serious. Several responses run through my head, and finally I settle on: "Excuse me, but aren't you on a date with someone else?"

"Who says it's a date? She's a girl I met at a party."

"Sure looks like a date to me."

"We're having fun," he says. "For the moment. You still live in the same house?"

"I guess so—"

"Good. I'll come by and see you sometime."And he walks away.

This is one of the oddest and most intriguing things that has ever happened to me. And despite the bad-movie-ish quality to the scene, I'm actually hoping he meant what he said.

I go back to the table, full of excitement, but the atmosphere has changed. The Mouse looks bored talking to Lali, and Walt appears glum, while Peter impatiently shakes the ice cubes in his glass. Maggie suddenly decides she wants to leave. "I guess that means I'm going," Walt says with a sigh.

"I'll drop you first," Maggie says. "I'm going to drive Peter home, too. He lives near me."

We get into our respective vehicles. I'm dying to tell Lali about my encounter with the notorious Sebastian Kydd, but before I can say a word, Lali announces that she's "kind of mad at The Mouse."

"Why?"

"Because of what she said. About that guy, Sebastian Kydd. Dancing with you and not me. Couldn't she see he was dancing with both of us?"

Rule number five: Always agree with your friends, even if it's at your own expense, so they won't be upset. "I know," I say, hating myself. "He *was* dancing with both of us."

"And why would he dance with you, anyway?" Lali asks. "Especially when he was with Donna LaDonna?"

"I have no idea." But then I remember what The Mouse said. Why *shouldn't* Sebastian dance with me? Am I so bad? I don't think so. Maybe he thinks I'm kind of smart and interesting and quirky. Like Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice.*

I dig around in my bag and find one of Maggie's cigarettes. I light up, inhale briefly, and whoosh the smoke out the window.

"Ha," I say aloud, for no particular reason.

CHAPTER SIX Bad Chemistry

I've had boyfriends before, and frankly, each one was a disappointment.

There was nothing horribly wrong with these boys. It was my fault. I'm kind of a snob when it comes to guys.

So far, the biggest problem with the boys I've dated is that they weren't too smart. And eventually I ended up hating myself for being with them. It scared me, trying to pretend I was something I wasn't. I could see how easily it could be done, and it made me realize that was what most of the other girls were doing as well—pretending. If you were a girl, you could start pretending in high school and go on pretending your whole life, until, I suppose, you imploded and had a nervous breakdown, which is something that's happened to a few of the mothers around here. All of a sudden, one day something snaps and they don't get out of bed for three years.

But I digress. Boyfriends. I've had two major ones: Sam, who was a stoner, and Doug, who was on the basketball team. Of the two I liked Sam better. I might have even loved him, but I knew it couldn't last. Sam was beautiful but dumb. He took woodworking classes, which I had no idea existed until he gave me a wooden box he'd made for Valentine's Day. Despite his lack of intelligence—or perhaps, more disturbingly, because of it—when I was around him I found him so attractive I thought my head would explode. I'd go by his house after school and we'd hang in the basement with his older brothers, listening to *Dark Side of the Moon* while they passed around a bong. Then Sam and I would go up to his room and make out for hours. Half the time, I worried I shouldn't be there, that I was wasting precious time engaging in an activity that wouldn't lead to anything (in other words, I wasn't using my time "constructively," as my father would say). But on the other hand, it felt so good I couldn't leave. My mind would be telling me to get up, go home, study, write stories, advance my life, but my body was like a boneless sea creature incapable of movement on land. I can't remember ever having a conversation with Sam. It was only endless kissing and touching in a bubble of time that seemed to have no connection with real life.

Then my father took me and my sisters away for two weeks on an educational cruise to Alaska and I met Ryan, who was tall and smooth like polished wood and was going to Duke, and I fell in love with him. When I got back to Castlebury, I could barely look at Sam. He kept asking if I'd met someone else. I was a coward and said no, which was partly true because Ryan lived in Colorado and I knew I'd never see him again. Still, the Sam bubble had been punctured by Ryan, and then Sam was like a little smear of wet soap. That's all bubbles are anyway—a bit of air and soap. So much for the wonders of good chemistry.

With bad chemistry, though, you don't even get a bubble. Me and Doug? Bad chemistry.

Doug was a year older, a senior when I was a junior. He was one of the jocks, a basketball player, friends with Tommy Brewster and Donna LaDonna and the rest of the Pod crowd. Doug wasn't too bright, either. On the other hand, he wasn't so good-looking that a lot of other girls wanted him, but he was good-looking *enough.* The only thing that was really bad about him was the zits. He didn't have a lot of them, just one or two that always seemed to be in the middle of their life cycle. But I knew I wasn't perfect either. If I wanted a boyfriend, I figured I would have to overlook a blemish or two.

Jen P introduced us. And sure enough, at the end of the week, he came shuffling around my locker and asked if I wanted to go to the dance.

That was all right. Doug picked me up in a small white car that belonged to his mother. I could picture his mother from the car: a nervous woman with pale skin and tight curls who was an embarrassment to her son. It made me kind of depressed, but I told myself I had to complete this experiment. At the dance, I hung around with the Jens and Donna LaDonna and some older girls, who all stood with one leg out to the side, and I stood the same way and pretended I wasn't intimidated.

"There's a great view at the top of Mott Street," Doug said, after the dance.

"Isn't that the place next to the haunted house?"

"You believe in ghosts?"

"Sure. Don't you?"

"Naw," he said."I don't even believe in God. That's girl stuff."

I vowed to be less like a girl.

It was a good view at the top of Mott Street. You could see clear across the apple orchards to the lights of Hartford. Doug kept the radio on; then he put his hand under my chin, turned my head, and kissed me.

It wasn't horrible, but there was no passion behind it. When he said, "You're a good kisser," I was surprised. "I guess you do this a lot," he said.

"No. I hardly do it at all."

"Really?" he said.

"Really," I said.

"Because I don't want to go out with a girl who every other guy has been with."

"I haven't been with anyone." I thought he must be crazy. Didn't he know a thing about me?

More cars pulled in around us, and we kept making out. The evening began to depress me. This was it, huh? This was dating, Pod-style. Sitting in a car surrounded by a bunch of other cars where everyone was making out, seeing how far they could go, like it was some kind of *requirement.* I started wondering if anyone else was enjoying it as little as I was.

Still, I went to Doug's basketball games and I went by his house after school, even though there were other things I wanted to do more, like read romance novels. His house was as dreary as I'd imagined—a tiny house on a tiny street (Maple Lane) that could have been in Any Town, U.S.A. I guess if I were in love with Doug it wouldn't have mattered. But if I had been in love with Doug it would have been worse, because I would have looked around and realized that this would be my life, and that would have been the end of my dream.

But instead of saying, "Doug, I don't want to see you anymore," I rebelled.

It happened after another dance. I'd barely let Doug get to third base, so maybe he figured it was time to straighten me out. The plan was to go parking with another couple: Donna LaDonna and a guy named Roy, who was the captain of the basketball team. They were in the front seat. We were in the back. We were going someplace we'd never get caught, a place where no one would find us: a cemetery.

"Hope you don't still believe in ghosts," Doug said, squeezing my leg."If you do, you know they'll be watching."

I didn't answer. I was studying Donna LaDonna's profile. Her hair was a swirl of white cotton candy. I thought she looked like Marilyn Monroe. I wished I looked like Marilyn Monroe. Marilyn Monroe, I figured, would know what to do.

When Doug unzipped his pants and tried to push my head down, I'd had enough. I got out of the car. "Charade" was the word I was thinking over and over again. It was all a charade. It summed up everything that was wrong between the sexes.

Then I was too angry to be frightened. I started walking along the little road that wound through the headstones. I might have believed in ghosts, but I wasn't scared of them per se. It was people who were troubling. Why couldn't I just be like every other girl and give Doug what he wanted? I pictured myself as a Play-Doh figure; then a hand came down, squeezing and squeezing until the Play-Doh oozed through the fingers into ragged clumps.

To distract myself, I started looking at the headstones. The graves were pretty old, some more than a hundred years. I started looking for one type in particular. It was macabre but that's the kind of mood I was in. Sure enough, I found one: *Jebediah Wilton. 4 mos. 1888.* I started thinking about

Jebediah's mother and the pain she would have felt putting that little baby into the ground. I bet it felt worse than childbirth. I got down on my knees and screamed into my hands.

I guess Doug figured I would come right back, because he didn't bother looking for me for a while. Then the car pulled up and a door opened. "Get in," Doug said.

"No."

"Bitch," Roy said.

"Get in the car," Donna LaDonna ordered. "Stop making a scene. Do you want the cops to come?"

I got into the car.

"See?" Donna LaDonna said to Doug. "I told you it was useless."

"I'm not going to have sex with some guy just to impress you," I said.

"Whoa," Roy said. "She really is a bitch."

"Not a bitch," I said."Just a woman who knows her own mind."

"You're a woman now?" Doug said, sneering. "That's a laugh."

I knew I should have been embarrassed, but I was so relieved it was over, I couldn't be bothered. Surely, Doug wouldn't dare ask me out again.

He did though. First thing Monday morning, I found him standing by my locker. "I need to talk to you," he said.

"So talk."

"Not now. Later."

"I'm busy."

"You're a prude," he hissed. "You're frigid."When I didn't reply, he added, "It's okay," in a creepy tone. "*I* know what's wrong with you. I *understand.*"

"Good," I said.

"I'm coming by your house after school."

"Don't."

"You don't need to tell me what to do," he said, spinning an imaginary basketball on his finger. "You're not my *mother.*" He shot the imaginary basketball into an imaginary hoop and walked away.

Doug did come by my house that afternoon. I looked up from my typewriter and saw the pathetic white car pull hesitantly into the driveway, like a mouse cautiously approaching a piece of cheese.

A discordant phrase of Stravinsky came from the piano followed by the soft taps of Missy running down the stairs. "Carrie," Missy called from below. "Someone's here."

"Tell him I'm not."

"It's *Doug.*"

"Let's go for a drive," Doug said.

"I can't," I begged. "I'm busy."

"Listen," he said. "You can't do this to me." He was pleading, and I started to feel sorry for him. "You *owe* me," he whispered. "It's only a drive in the car."

"Okay," I relented. I figured maybe I did owe him for embarrassing him in front of his friends.

"Look," I said when we were in the car and driving toward his house. "I'm sorry about the other night. It's just that—"

"Oh, I know. You're not ready," Doug said. "I understand. With everything you've been through."

"No. It isn't that." I knew it had nothing to do with my mother's death. But I couldn't bring myself to tell Doug the truth—that my reluctance was due to the fact that I didn't find him the least bit attractive.

"It's okay," he said. "I forgive you. I'm going to give you a chance to make it up to me."

"Ha," I said, hoping he was making a joke.

Doug drove past his house and kept going, down the dirt track that led to the river. Between his sad little street and the river were miles and miles of mud-flat farmland, deserted in November. I began to get scared.

"Doug, stop."

"Why?" he asked. "We have to talk."

I knew then why boys hated that phrase, "We have to talk." It gave me a tired, sick feeling. "Where are we going? There's nothing out here."

"There's the Gun Tree," he said.

The Gun Tree was all the way down by the river, so named because a lightning strike had split the branches into the shape of a pistol. I began calculating my chances for escape. If we got all the way to the river, I could jump out of the car and run along the narrow path that led through the trees. Doug couldn't follow in his car, but he could certainly outrun me. And then what would he do? Rape me? He might rape me and kill me afterward. I didn't want to lose my virginity to Doug Haskell, for Christ's sake, and definitely not like that. I decided he'd have to kill me first.

But maybe he did only want to talk.

"Listen, Doug, I'm sorry about the other night."

"You are?"

"Of course. I just didn't want to have sex in a car with other people. It's kind of gross."

We were about half a mile from civilization.

"Yeah. Well, I guess I can understand that. But Roy is the captain of the basketball team and—"

"Roy is disgusting. Really, Doug. You're much better than he is. He's an asshole."

"He's one of my best buds."

"You should be captain of the basketball team. I mean, you're taller and better looking. And smarter. If you ask me, Roy's taking advantage of you."

"You think?" He took his eyes off the road and looked at me. The road was becoming increasingly bumpy, made for tractors not cars, and Doug had to slow down.

"Well, of course," I said smoothly. "Everyone knows that. Everyone says you're a better player than Roy—"

"I am."

"And—" I took a quick peek at the speedometer. Twenty miles an hour. The car was bucking like an old bull. If I was going to make a break for it, I had to do it now. "And, Doug, I *need* to go home." I rolled down the window. A cold blast of air hit my face like a slap. "The car's covered with mud. Your mother's going to kill you."

"My mother won't care."

"Come on, Doug. Stop the car."

"We'll go to the Gun Tree. Then I'll take you home." But he didn't sound so sure.

"I'm getting out." I grabbed the door handle.

Doug tried to pull my hand away as the car veered off the track and slid into a pile of dried cornstalks.

"Christ, Carrie. Why the hell d'you do *that*?"

We got out of the car to inspect the damage. It wasn't too bad. Mostly straw caught in the bumper."If *you* hadn't…" I said, relief and anger burning the back of my throat. "Because you wanted to prove to your stupid friends that you aren't a *loser*—"

He stared at me, his breath steaming the air around him like a mysterious dry ice.

Then he smacked his hand on the hood of the car. "I wouldn't fuck you if you paid me," he shouted, pausing for breath. "You're lucky…lucky I even considered having sex with you. Lucky I even took you out in the first place. I only did it because I felt *sorry* for you."

What else could he say?

"Good. Then you should be *happy.*"

"Oh, I'm happy all right." He gave the front tire a good kick. "I'm happy as *hell*."

I turned and started walking up the road. My back was a firestorm of nerves. When I got about fifty feet away, I started whistling. When I was a hundred feet away, I heard the puttering sound of the car engine, but I kept going. Eventually, he passed me, looking straight ahead as if I didn't exist. I picked up a strand of dried grass and tore it with my fingers, watching the pieces blow away.

I did tell this story to The Mouse and Maggie. I even told it to Walt. I told it again and again, but I made it funny. I made it so funny, [A-Z]he Mouse couldn't stop laughing. Funny always makes the bad things go away.

CHAPTER SEVEN Paint the Town Red

"Carrie, you're not going to be able to joke your way out of this," Mrs. Givens says, pointing to the can of paint.

"I wasn't planning to make a joke," I insist, as if I'm completely innocent. I have a problem with authority. I really do. It turns me into mush. I'm a real jellyfish when it comes to facing adults.

"What were you planning to do with the paint, then?" Mrs. Givens is one of those middle-aged ladies who you look at and think, If I ever end up like her, shoot me. Her hair is teased into a dried bush that looks like it could self-ignite at any moment. I suddenly picture Mrs. Givens with a conflagration on her head, running through the halls of Castlebury High, and I nearly crack up.

"Carrie?" she demands.

"The paint is for my father—for one of his projects."

"This is not like you, Carrie. You've never been in trouble before."

"I swear, Mrs. Givens. It's nothing."

"Very well. You can leave the paint with me and pick it up after school."

"Givens confiscated my paint can," I whisper to The Mouse as we enter calculus.

"How did she find it?"

"She saw me trying to shove it into my locker."

"Damn,"The Mouse says.

"I know. We're going to have to go to plan B."

"What is plan B?"

"Action must be taken," I say. "I'll think of something."

I sit down and look out the window. It's October now. Time to find a perfect red leaf and iron it between two pieces of waxed paper. Or stick cloves into a crisp apple, the juice running all over your fingers. Or scoop the slimy guts out of a pumpkin and roast the seeds until they nearly explode. But mostly, it's time to paint the year of our high school graduation on the roof of the dairy barn.

It's a grand tradition around here. Every fall, a few members of the graduating class scrawl their year on the roof of the barn behind the school. It's always some boys who do it. But this year, The Mouse and I decided we should do it. Why should the boys have all the fun? Then we got Lali involved. Lali was going to bring the ladder, and The Mouse and I would get the paint. Then Maggie wanted to come. Maggie is fairly useless in these kinds of situations, but I figured she'd be good for booze and cigarettes. Then Maggie spilled the beans to Peter. I told her to un-tell Peter, but she said she couldn't do that, and now Peter's all excited about it even though he says he won't actually be participating. Instead, he plans to stand there and direct.

After calculus, I head out to the barn, where I take a good look at the structure. It's at least a hundred years old, and though it looks sturdy enough, the roof is higher and steeper than I'd imagined. But if we chicken out, next week the boys will probably do it, and I don't want that to happen. No more missed opportunities. I want to leave some mark on Castlebury High, so when I'm old, I can say, "I did it. I painted the year of our graduation on the old barn out back." Lately, high school hasn't been bugging me as much as usual and I've been in a pretty good mood. Today, I'm wearing overalls, Converse sneakers, and a red and white checked shirt that I got at a vintage store in honor of the occasion. I also have my hair in braids, and I'm wearing a strip of rawhide around my head.

I'm standing there, staring up at the roof, when I'm suddenly overcome by a mysterious happiness and I have to start doing my best John Belushi *Animal House* imitation. I run all the way around the barn and when I get back to where I started, Sebastian Kydd is there, looking at me curiously while he shakes a cigarette out of a pack of Marlboro Reds.

"Having fun?" he asks.

"Sure," I say. I should be embarrassed, but I'm not. I hate the way girls are supposed to be embarrassed all the time and I decided a long time ago that I just wouldn't do it. "What about you? Are you having fun?"

"Relatively."

I'm sure he is having fun, but not with me. After that night at The Emerald—nothing. He never called, never came by my house—all I get are bemused looks from him when he sees me in calculus or in the halls or occasionally hanging out here at the barn. I tell myself it's just as well; I don't need a boyfriend anyway—but it doesn't prevent my mind from veering out of control every time I sense he's in the vicinity. It's almost as bad as being twelve—worse, I remind myself, because I ought to know better by now.

I glance at Sebastian, thinking it's a good thing he can't read my mind, but he's no longer paying attention. He's looking over my shoulder at the two Jens, who are carefully picking their way up the hill in high heels, like they've never walked on grass before. Their appearance is not surprising. The two Jens have taken to following Sebastian everywhere, like two small, cheery tugboats. "Ah," I say. "Your fan club is here."

He looks at me quizzically but says nothing. In my fantasy, Sebastian is a person of great and perceptive thought. But in reality, I don't know a thing about him.

Lali picks me up in the truck at nine o'clock that evening. We're dressed in black turtlenecks, black jeans, and sneakers. There's an enormous harvest moon. Lali hands me a beer and I crank up the radio and we scream over the music. I'm pretty sure this is going to be the best thing we've ever done. I'm pretty sure this is going to be a real Senior Moment—A Moment to Remember. "Fuck Cynthia Viande," I scream, for no good reason.

"Fuck Castlebury High," Lali says. "Fuck the Pods."

We pull into the driveway of the high school going about eighty miles an hour and drive right over the grass. We try to drive straight up the hill, but the truck gets stuck, so we decide to park it in a dark corner of the parking lot. While we're struggling to get the ladder out of the back, I hear the telltale sputter of a fully loaded V-eight engine, and sure enough, Sebastian Kydd pulls up beside us.

What the hell is he doing here?

He rolls down the window. "You girls need some help?"

"No."

"Yes," Lali says. She gives me the shut-up look. I give her the shut-up look right back.

Sebastian gets out of the car. He's like a panther getting up from a nap. He even yawns. "Slow night?"

"You could say that," Lali says.

"Or you could get off your keister and help us. Since you don't appear to be leaving," I add.

"Can we trust you?" Lali asks.

"Depends on what you want to trust me *with*," he says.

Eventually, we get the ladder up against the barn, and then The Mouse shows up with the paint and a large brush. Two enormous cone-shaped lights play over the parking lot, indicating Maggie's arrival in the Cadillac. Maggie insists she can't keep track of her high and low beams and usually blinds her fellow motorists. She parks the car and meanders up the hill with Walt and Peter in tow. Peter busies himself by examining the paint. "Red?" he says, and then, as if we didn't hear him the first time, *"Red?"*

"What's wrong with red?"

"It's not the traditional Castlebury color for this exercise. It should be blue."

"We wanted *red*," I counter. "Whoever does the painting gets to pick the color."

"But it's not right," Peter insists. "For the rest of the year, I'm going to be looking out the window seeing the year of our graduation painted in red instead of blue."

"Does it really matter?" Sebastian asks.

"Red is a statement. It's a fuck-you to tradition,"Walt says. "I mean, isn't that the point?"

"Right on, brother." Sebastian nods.

Maggie hugs her arms around her chest. "I'm scared."

"Have a cigarette," Walt remarks. "That will calm your nerves."

"Who's got the booze?" Lali asks. Someone hands her a bottle of whiskey, and she takes a swig, wiping her mouth on her shirt sleeve.

"Okay, Bradley. Get on up there,"The Mouse commands.

In unison, we tip our heads back and look skyward. The orange moon has come up behind the roof, casting a boxlike black shadow below. In the spooky light, the peak appears as high as Mount Everest.

"*You're* going up?" Sebastian asks, astonished.

"Bradley used to be very good in gymnastics,"The Mouse says. "*Very good.* Until she was about twelve, anyway. Remember when you did that jump onto the balance beam and landed right on your —"

"I'd rather not," I say, sneaking a glance at Sebastian.

"I'd do it, but I'm scared of heights,"Lali explains. Heights, indeed, are the only thing she admits to being scared of, probably because she thinks it makes her more interesting. "Every time I cross the bridge to Hartford, I have to get down on the floor so I don't get dizzy."

"What if you're the one who's driving?" asks The Mouse.

"Then she has to stop in the middle of traffic and sit there shaking until the police come and tow her car," I say, finding this vision hysterical.

Lali gives me a dirty look. "That is so not true. If I'm driving, it's different."

"Uh-huh,"Walt says.

Maggie takes a gulp of whiskey. "Maybe we should go to The Emerald. I'm getting cold."

Oh no. Not after we've made all this effort. "*You* go to The Emerald, Magwitch. I'm going to do this," I say, with what I hope sounds like gutsy determination.

Peter rubs Maggie's shoulders, a gesture not lost on Walt. "Let's stay. We can go to The Emerald later."

"All right," The Mouse says pointedly. "Anyone who doesn't want to be here should go now. Anyone who wants to stay should just shut up."

"I'm staying,"Walt says, lighting up a cigarette. "And I'm not shutting up."

The plan is simple: Lali and Peter will hold the ladder while I go up. Once I'm at the top, Sebastian will climb up after me with the can of paint. I place my hand on a rung. The metal is cold and grooved. Look up, I remind myself. The future is ahead of you. Don't look down. Never look back. Never let 'em see you sweat.

"Go on, Carrie."

"You can do it."

"She's at the top. Ohmigod. She's on the roof!" That's Maggie.

"Carrie?" Sebastian says. "I'm right behind you."

The harvest moon has transformed into a bright white orb surrounded by a million stars. "It's beautiful up here," I shout. "You should all have a look."

I slowly rise, testing my balance, and take a few steps to get my footing. It's not so hard. I remind myself of all the kids who have done this in the past. Sebastian's at the top of the ladder with the paint. With the can in one hand and the brush in the other, I make my way to the side of the roof.

I begin painting, as the group takes up a chant below. "One…Nine…Eight…"

"NINETEEN. EIGHTY—" And just as I'm about to paint the last number, my foot slips.

The can flies out of my hand, bounces once, and rolls off the roof, leaving a huge splotch of paint behind. Maggie screams. I drop down to my knees, scrambling to get a handhold on the wooden shingles. I hear a soft thud as the can hits the grass. Then…nothing.

"Carrie?"The Mouse says tentatively."Are you all right?"

"I'm fine."

"Don't move," Peter shouts.

"I'm not."

And it's true. I'm not moving. But then, with excruciating slowness, I begin to slide. I try to jam my toe into the shingles to stop, but my sneaker glides right over the slick spill of red paint. I reassure myself that I will not die. It's not my time. If I were going to die, I'd know it, right? Some part of my brain is aware of the scraping of skin, but I have yet to feel the pain. I'm picturing myself in a body cast, when suddenly a firm hand grabs my wrist and drags me up to the peak. Behind me I see the tips of the ladder fall away from the edge, followed by a whomp as it clatters into the bushes.

Everyone is screaming.

"We're okay. We're fine. No injuries," Sebastian shouts as the wail of a police siren rips the air.

"There goes Harvard," Peter says.

"Hide the ladder in the barn," Lali commands. "If the cops ask we're just up here smoking cigarettes."

"Maggie, give me the booze,"Walt says. There's a crash as he throws the bottle into the barn.

Sebastian tugs on my arm. "We need to get to the other side."

"Why?"

"Don't ask questions. Just do it," he orders as we scramble over the peak. "Lie flat on your back with your knees bent."

"But now I can't see what's happening," I protest.

"I've got a record. Don't move and don't say a word, and pray the cops don't find us."

My breath is as loud as the pounding of a drum.

"Hello, Officers,"Walt says when the police arrive.

"What are you kids up to?"

"Nothing. Just smoking some cigarettes," Peter says.

"Have you been drinking?"

"Nope." A group answer.

Silence, followed by the sound of feet squelching around in the wet grass. "What the hell's this?" demands one of the cops. The beam from his flashlight slides up the roof and into the sky. "You kids painting the barn? That's a misdemeanor. Violation of private property."

"Yo, Marone," Lali says to one of the cops. "It's me."

"Whoa," Marone says. "Lali Kandesie. Hey, Jack. It's Lali, Ed's girl."

"You want to take a look around?" Jack asks cautiously, now that he's being confronted by the boss's daughter.

"Nah. Looks okay to me," says Marone.

Jack snorts. "Okay, kids. Party's over. We're going to make sure you get to your cars and get home safely."

And they all leave.

Sebastian and I lie frozen on the roof. I stare up at the stars, intensely aware of his body a few inches from mine. If this isn't romance, I don't know what is.

Sebastian peers over the side. "I think they're gone."

Suddenly, we look at each other and laugh. Sebastian's laugh—I've never heard anything like it—is deep and throaty and slightly sweet, like ripe fruit. I imagine the taste of his mouth as being slightly fruity too, but also sharp, with a tang of nicotine. Boys' mouths are never what you think they're going to be anyway. Sometimes they're stiff and sharp with teeth, or like soft little caves filled with down pillows.

"Well, Carrie Bradshaw," he says. "What's your big plan now?"

I hug my knees to my chest. "Don't have one."

"You? Without a plan? That must be a first."

Really? Is that how he thinks of me? As some nerdly, uptight, efficient *planner*? I've always thought of myself as the spontaneous type. "I don't *always* have a plan."

"But you always seem to know where you're going."

"I do?"

"Sure. I can barely keep up with you."

What does *that* mean? Is this a dream? Am I actually having this conversation with Sebastian Kydd?

"You could always try calling—"

"I did. But your phone's perennially busy. So tonight I was going to stop by your house, but then I saw you getting in Lali's truck and followed you. I figured you were up to something interesting."

Is he saying he *likes* me?

"You're definitely a character," he adds.

A character? Is that good or bad? I mean, what kind of guy falls in love with a *character*?

"I guess I can be…sort of funny sometimes."

"You're funny a lot. You're very entertaining. It's good. Most girls are boring."

"They are?"

"Come on, Carrie. You're a girl. You must know that."

"I think most girls are pretty interesting. I mean, they're a lot more interesting than boys. *Boy*s are the ones who are boring."

"Am I boring?"

"You? You're not boring at all. I just meant—"

"I know." He moves a little closer. "Are you cold?"

"I'm okay."

He takes off his jacket. As I put it on, he notices my hands. "Christ," he says. "That must hurt."

"It does—a little."The palms of my hands are stinging like hell where I've scraped the skin. "It's not the worst thing that's happened to me though. One time, I fell off the back of the Kandesies' truck and broke my collarbone. I didn't know it was broken until the next day. Lali made me go to the doctor."

"Lali's your best friend, huh?"

"Pretty much. I mean, she's been my best friend since we were ten. Hey," I ask. "Who's your best friend?"

"Don't have one," he says, staring out at the trees.

"I guess that's the way guys are," I say musingly. I check my hands. "Do you think we're ever going to get off this roof?"

"Do you want to get off this roof?"

"No."

"So don't think about it. Someone will come and get us eventually. Maybe Lali, or your friend The Mouse. She's cool."

"Yeah." I nod. "She's got her life all figured out. She's applying early admission to Yale. And she'll definitely get in."

"That must be nice," he says with a hint of bitterness.

"Are you worried about your future?"

"Isn't everyone?"

"I guess…But I thought…I don't know. I thought you were going to Harvard or something. Weren't you in private school?"

"I was. But I realized I didn't necessarily want to go to Harvard."

"How could anyone not want to go to Harvard?"

"Because it's a crock. Once I go to Harvard, that's it. Then I'll have to go to law school. Or business school. Then I'll be a suit, working for a big corporation. Taking the commuter train to New York City every day. And then some girl will get me to marry her, and before you know it, I'll have kids and a mortgage. Game over."

"Hmph." It's not exactly what a girl wants to hear from a guy, but on the other hand, I have to give him points for being honest. "I know what you mean. I always say I'm never getting married. Too predictable."

"You'll change your mind. All women do."

"I won't. I'm going to be a writer."

"You look like a writer," he says.

"I do?"

"Yeah. You look like you've always got something going on in your head."

"Am I that transparent?"

"Kind of." He leans over and kisses me. And suddenly, my life splits in two: before and after.

CHAPTER EIGHT The Mysteries of Romance

"Tell me *exactly* what he said."

"He said I was interesting. And a character."

"Did he say he liked you?"

"I think it was more that he liked the idea of me."

"Liking the *idea* of a girl is different from actually *liking* a girl," Maggie says.

"I think if a guy says you're interesting and a character, it means you're *special*," The Mouse counters.

"But it doesn't mean he wants to be with you. Maybe he thinks you're special—and *weird*," Maggie says.

"So what happened after we left?" The Mouse asks, ignoring her.

"Lali came and rescued us. He went home. He said he'd had enough excitement for one evening."

"Has he said anything since?" Maggie asks.

I scratch a nonexistent itch. "Nope. But it doesn't matter."

"He'll call,"The Mouse says with confidence.

"Of course he'll call. He *has* to call," Maggie says, with too much enthusiasm.

Four days have passed since the barn-painting incident and we're dissecting the event for about the twentieth time. After Lali rescued us, apparently The Mouse and Walt did come back, but we were gone along with the ladder, so they figured we got away okay. On Monday when we showed up at school, we couldn't stop laughing. Every time one of us looked out the window and saw *198* and that big red splotch, we'd crack up. At assembly that morning, Cynthia Viande referred to the incident, saying the vandalism to private property had not gone unnoticed, and the perpetrators, if caught, would be prosecuted.

We all snickered like little cats.

All of us, that is, except for Peter. "Can the cops really be *that* dumb?" he kept asking. "I mean, they were right *there.* They *saw* us."

"And what did they see? A few kids standing around an old dairy barn."

"That Peter guy—geez,"Lali said."He's so paranoid. What the hell was he doing there anyway?"

"I think he likes Maggie."

"But Maggie's with Walt."

"I know."

"She has two boyfriends now? How can you have two boyfriends?"

"Listen," Peter said the next day, sidling up to me in the hall. "I'm not sure we can trust Sebastian. What if he rats us out?"

"Don't worry. He's the last person who's going to tell."

Hearing Sebastian's name was like a skewer to the gut.

Ever since the kiss, Sebastian's presence has been like an invisible shadow sewn to my skin. I cannot go anywhere without him. In the shower, he hands me the shampoo. His face floats up behind the words in my textbooks. On Sunday, Maggie, Walt, and I went to a flea market, and while I pawed through piles of sixties T-shirts, all I could think about was what Sebastian would like.

Surely he'll call.

But he hasn't.

A week passes, and on Saturday morning, I reluctantly pack a little suitcase. I look at the clothes I've laid out on the bed, perplexed. They're like the random, disjointed thoughts of a thousand strangers. What was I thinking when I bought that beaded fifties sweater? Or that pink bandanna?

Or the green leggings with yellow stripes? I have nothing to wear for this interview. How can I be who I'm supposed to be with these clothes?

Who am I supposed to be again?

Just be yourself.

But who am I?

What if he calls while I'm gone? Why hasn't he called already?

Maybe something happened to him.

Like what? You saw him every day at school and he was fine.

"Carrie?" my father calls out. "Are you ready?"

"Almost." I fold a plaid skirt and the beaded sweater into the suitcase, add a wide belt, and throw in an old Hermès scarf that belonged to my mother. She bought it on the one trip to Paris she took with my father a few years ago.

"Carrie?"

"Coming." I bang down the stairs.

My father is always nervous before a trip. He gathers maps and estimates time and distance. He's only comfortable with the unknown or the unexpected if it's a number in an equation. I keep reminding him that this is not a big deal. It's his alma mater, and Brown is only forty-five minutes away.

But he fusses. He takes the car to the car wash. He withdraws cash. He inspects his travel comb. Dorrit rolls her eyes. "You're going to be gone for less than twenty-four hours!"

It rains during the drive. As we head east, I notice the leaves are already beginning to flee their branches, like flocks of birds heading south for the winter.

"Carrie," my father says. "Don't sweat the small stuff. Don't beat yourself up about things." He can usually sense when something is wrong, although he's rarely able to pinpoint the cause.

"I'm not, Dad."

"Because when you do," he continues, warming up to one of his favorite topics, "you lose twice. You've lost what you've lost, but then you also lose your perspective. Because life happens to people. Life is bigger than people. It's all about nature. The life cycle…It's out of our control."

It shouldn't be, though. There ought to be a law that says every time a boy kisses a girl, he has to call within three days.

"So in other words, old man, shit happens and then you die."

I say this in a way that makes my father laugh. Unfortunately, I can hear Sebastian in the backseat, laughing too.

"Carrie Bradshaw, right?"

The guy named George shifts my file from one arm to another and shakes my hand. "And you, sir, must be Mr. Bradshaw."

"That's right," my father says. "Class of 1958."

George looks at me appraisingly. "Are you nervous?"

"A little."

"Don't be." He smiles reassuringly. "Professor Hawkins is one of the best. He has PhD's in English literature and physics. I see on your application that you're interested in science and writing. Here at Brown, you can do both." He reddens a little, as if he realizes he's being quite the salesman, and suddenly adds, "Besides, you look great."

"Thanks," I murmur, feeling a bit like a lamb being led to slaughter.

I immediately realize I'm being silly and overly dramatic. George is right: Everything about Brown is perfect, from the charming redbrick buildings of the Pembroke College campus, to College Green, dotted with voluptuous elms that still have their leaves, to the glorious columned John Carter Brown Library. I need only insert my mannequin self into this picture-postcard scene.

But as the day progresses from the interview in the artfully messy professor's office—"What are your goals, Ms. Bradshaw?" "I'd like to make an impact on society. I'd like to contribute something meaningful"—to the tour of the campus, chem labs, the computer room, a first-year dorm room, and finally to dinner with George on Thayer Street, I begin to feel more and more flimsy, like a doll constructed of tissue paper. Halfway through dinner, when George mentions there's a rock 'n' roll band playing at the Avon Theatre, I feel like I can't refuse, even though I'd prefer to lie in my hotel room and think about Sebastian instead.

"Go," my father urges. He's already informed me that George is the kind of young man—intelligent, well-mannered, thoughtful—that he's always pictured me dating.

"You're going to love Brown," George says in the car. He drives a Saab. Well engineered, slightly expensive, with European styling. Like George, I think. If I weren't obsessed with Sebastian, I probably would find George attractive.

"Why do you love Brown so much?" I ask.

"I'm from the city, so this is a nice break. Of course, I'll be in the city this summer. That's the great thing about Brown. The internships. I'm going to be working for *The New York Times.*"

George suddenly becomes much more interesting. "I've always wanted to live in New York City," I say.

"It's the best place in the world. But Brown is right for me now." He gives me a hesitant smile. "I needed to explore a different side of myself."

"What were you like before?"

"Tortured," George says, and grins. "What about you?"

"Oh, I'm a little tortured too," I say, thinking of Sebastian. But when we pull up to the theater, I vow to put Sebastian out of my mind. Clusters of college kids, drinking beer and flirting, are seated outside at tiny French tables. As we push through the crowd, George puts his hand on my shoulder and squeezes. I look up at him and smile.

"You're awfully cute, Carrie Bradshaw," he says into my ear.

We stay out until closing time, and when we get back in the car, George kisses me. He kisses me again in the driveway of the hotel. It's a clean and tentative kiss, the kiss of a man who thinks in straight lines. He takes a pen out of the glove compartment. "May I ask for your number?"

"Why?" I ask, giggling.

"So I can call you, dummy." He tries to kiss me again, but I turn my head.

I'm feeling a little woozy, and the beer hits me full force when I lie down. I ask myself if I would have given George my number if I weren't so drunk. I probably wouldn't have let him kiss me either. But surely Sebastian will call now. Guys always call as soon as another man is interested. They're like dogs:They never notice if you've changed your hair, but they can sense when there's another guy sniffing around their territory.

We're back in Castlebury by mid-afternoon on Sunday, but my theory proves wrong. Sebastian hasn't called. Maggie, on the other hand, has. Several times. I'm about to call her when she calls me. "What are you doing? Can you come over?"

"I just got back," I say, suddenly deflated.

"Something happened. Something big. I can't explain it on the phone. I have to tell you in person." Maggie sounds very dire and I wonder if her parents are getting divorced.

Maggie's mother, Anita, opens the door. Anita looks stressed, but you can tell that a long time ago she was probably pretty. Anita is really, really nice—too nice, in fact. She's so nice that I always get the feeling the niceness has swallowed up the real Anita, and someday she's going to do something drastic, like burn down the house.

"Oh, Carrie," Anita says."I'm so glad you're here. Maggie won't come out of her room and she won't tell me what's wrong. Maybe you can get her to come downstairs. I'd be so grateful."

"I'll take care of it, Mrs. Stevenson," I say reassuringly. Hiding in her room is something Maggie's been doing for as long as I've known her. I can't tell you how many times I've had to talk her out.

Maggie's room is enormous with floor-to-ceiling windows on three sides and a closet the length of one wall. Nearly everyone in town is familiar with the Stevenson house, because it was designed by a famous contemporary architect and is mostly comprised of glass. The inside of the house is pretty sparse, though, because Maggie's father can't abide clutter. I crack open the door to Maggie's room as Anita stands anxiously to the side. "Magwitch?"

Maggie is lying in her bed, wearing a white cotton nightgown. She rises from beneath the covers like a ghost, albeit a rather churlish one."Anita!" she scolds."I told you to leave me alone." The expression on Anita's face is startled, guilty, and helpless, which is pretty much her usual demeanor around Maggie. She scurries away as I go in.

"Mags?" I caution. "Are you okay?"

Maggie sits cross-legged on the bed and puts her head in her hands. "I don't know. I did something terrible."

"What?"

"I don't know how to tell you."

I can tell, however, that I'm going to have to wait for this terrible revelation, so I sit on the padded stool-y thing Maggie uses as a chair. According to her father, it's a Swedish-designed ergonomically correct sitting contraption that prevents backaches. It's also sort of bouncy, so I bob up and down a bit. But then I'm suddenly tired of everyone else's problems.

"Listen, Mags," I say firmly. "I don't have much time. I have to pick up Dorrit at the Hamburger Shack."This is true, sort of. I probably will have to pick her up eventually.

"But Walt will be there!" she cries out.

"So?" Walt's parents insist that Walt have an after-school job to make money for college, but the only job Walt's ever had is working at the Hamburger Shack for four dollars an hour. And it's only part-time, so it's hard to see how Walt will be able to save enough money for even one semester.

"That means you'll see him," Maggie gasps.

"And?"

"Are you going to tell him you saw me?"

This is becoming more and more irritating. "I don't know. Should I tell him I saw you?"

"No!" she exclaims."I've been avoiding him all weekend. I told him I was going to see my sister in Philadelphia."

"Why?"

"Don't you get it?" She sighs dramatically. "Peter."

"Peter?" I repeat, slightly appalled.

"I had sex with him."

"What?" My legs are all tangled up in the Swedish sitting device and I bounce so hard the whole thing falls over, taking me with it.

"Shhhhh!" Maggie says.

"I don't get it," I say, trying to detach myself from the stool. "You had *sex* with Peter?"

"I had *intercourse* with him."

And another one bites the dust.

"When?" I ask, once I manage to get off the floor.

"Last night. In the woods behind my house." She nods. "You remember? The night we painted the barn? He was all over me. Then he called yesterday morning and said he *had* to see me. He said he'd secretly been in love with me for, like, three years but was afraid to talk to me because he thought I was so gorgeous I wouldn't talk to him. Then we went for a walk, and we immediately started making out."

"And then what? You just did it? Right in the woods?"

"Don't act so surprised." Maggie sounds slightly hurt and superior at the same time. "Just because you haven't done it."

"How do you know I haven't?"

"Have you?"

"Not yet."

"Well then."

"So you just did it. On top of the leaves? What about sticks? You could have gotten a stick stuck in your butt."

"Believe me, when you're doing it, you don't notice things like sticks."

"Is that so?" I have to admit, I'm immensely curious. "What did it feel like?"

"It was amazing." She sighs. "I don't know exactly how to describe it, but it was the best feeling I've ever had. It's the kind of thing that once you do it, all you want is to do it again and again. And"—she pauses for effect—"I think I had an orgasm."

My mouth hangs open. "That's incredible."

"I know. Peter says girls almost never have orgasms their first time. He said I must be highly sexed."

"Has Peter done it before?" If he has, I'm going to shoot myself.

"Apparently," Maggie says smugly.

For a minute, neither one of us speaks. Maggie picks dreamily at a thread on her bedspread while I look out the window, wondering how I got so left behind. Suddenly, the world seems divided into two kinds of people—those who have done it and those who haven't.

"Well," I say finally. "Does this mean you and Peter are dating?"

"I don't know," she whispers. "I think I'm in love with him."

"But what about Walt? I thought you were in love with Walt."

"No." She shakes her head. "I thought I was in love with Walt two years ago. But lately, he's been more like a friend."

"I see."

"We used to go to third base. But then Walt never wanted to go any further. And it made me think. Maybe Walt didn't really love me after all. We were together for two years. You'd think a guy would want to do it after two years."

I want to point out that maybe he's saving himself, but the truth is, it is pretty strange. "So you were willing and he wasn't?" I ask just to clarify.

"I wanted to do it on my birthday, and he wouldn't."

"Weird," I say. "Definitely weird."

"And that really tells you something."

Not necessarily. But I don't have the energy to contradict her.

All of a sudden, even though I know this isn't really about me, I feel a thundering sense of loss. Maggie and Walt and I were a unit. For the past couple of years, we went everywhere together. We'd sneak into the country club at night and steal golf carts, and cooling off a six-pack of beer in a stream, we'd talk and talk and talk about everything from quarks to who Jen P was dating. What's going to happen to the three of us now? Because somehow I can't imagine Peter taking Walt's place in our corny adventures.

"I guess I have to break up with Walt," Maggie says. "But I don't know how. I mean, what am I supposed to say?"

"You could try telling him the truth."

"Carrie?" she asks in a wheedling tone. "I was wondering if maybe you could—"

"What? Break up with him? You want me to break up with Walt for you?"

"Just kind of prepare him," Maggie says.

Maggie and Peter? I can't think of two people who belong together less. Maggie is so flighty and emotional. And Peter is so serious. But maybe their personalities cancel each other out.

I pull into the parking lot of the Hamburger Shack, turn off the car, and think, Poor Walt.

The Hamburger Shack is one of the few restaurants in town, known for its hamburgers topped with grilled onions and peppers. That's pretty much considered the height of cuisine around here. People in Castlebury are mad for grilled onions and peppers, and while I do love the smell, Walt, who has to man the onion and pepper grill, says the stench makes him sick. It gets into his skin and even when he's sleeping, all he dreams about are onions and peppers.

I spot Walt behind the counter by the grill. The only other customers are three teenage girls with hair dyed in multiple hues of pink, blue, and green. I nearly walk past them when suddenly I realize that one of these punks is my sister.

Dorrit is eating an onion ring as if everything is perfectly normal. "Hi, Carrie," she says. Not even a "Do you like my hair?" She picks up her milk shake and drains the glass with a loud slurp.

"Dad's going to kill you," I say. Dorrit shrugs. I look at her friends, who are equally apathetic. "Get out to the car. I'll deal with you in a minute."

"I'm not done with my onion rings," she says with equanimity. I hate the way my sister won't listen to authority, especially my authority.

"Get in the car," I insist, and walk away.

"Where are you going?"

"I have to talk to Walt."

Walt's wearing a stained apron and there's sweat on his hairline. "I hate this job," he says, lighting up a cigarette in the parking lot.

"But the hamburgers are good."

"When I get out of here, I never want to see another hamburger in my life."

"Walt," I say. "Maggie—"

He cuts me off."She didn't go to her sister's in Philadelphia."

"How do you know?"

"Number one, how many times does she visit her sister? Once a year? And number two, I know Maggie well enough to know when she's lying."

I wonder if he knows about Peter, as well. "What are you going to do?"

"Nothing, I guess. I'll wait for her to break up with me and that'll be it."

"Maybe *you* should break up with *her*."

"Too much effort." Walt tosses his cigarette into the bushes. "Why should I bother when the result will be the same either way?"

Walt, I think, is sometimes a bit passive.

"But maybe if you did it first—"

"And save Maggie from feeling guilty? I don't think so."

My sister walks by with her new Day-Glo hair. "You'd better not let Dad catch you smoking," she says.

"Listen, kid. First of all, I wasn't smoking. And secondly, you've got bigger things to worry about than cigarettes. Like your hair."

As Dorrit gets into the car, [A-Z]alt shakes his head. "My little brother's just like her. The younger generation—they've got no respect."

CHAPTER NINE The Artful Dodger

When Dorrit and I get home, my poor father takes one look at Dorrit's hair and nearly passes out. Then he goes into her room to have a talk with her. That's the worst, when my father comes into your room for a talk. He tries to make you feel better, but it never quite works that way. He usually goes into some long story about something that happened to him when he was a kid, or else makes references to nature, and sure enough, that's what he does with Dorrit.

Dorrit's door is closed, but our house is a hundred and fifty years old, so you can hear every word of any conversation if you stand outside the door. Which is exactly what Missy and I do.

"Now, Dorrit," my dad says."I suspect your actions concerning your, ah, *hair* are indirectly related to overpopulation, which is something that is increasingly becoming a problem on our planet. Which was not meant to sustain these vast clusters of people in limited spaces…and tends to result in these mutilations of the human body—piercings, dyeing the hair, tattoos…It's human instinct to want to stand out, and it manifests itself in more and more extreme measures. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"No."

"What I mean," he continues, "is that you must do all you can to resist these unwarranted instincts. The successful human being is able to conquer his unwanted and unwise desires. Am I making myself clear?"

"Sure, Dad," Dorrit says sarcastically.

"In any event, I still love you," my father says, which is the way he ends all his talks. And then he usually cries. And then you feel so horrible, you vow never to upset him again.

This time, however, the crying bit is interrupted by the ringing of the phone. Please, let it be Sebastian, I pray, while Missy grabs it. She puts her hand slyly over the receiver. "Carrie? It's for you. It's a *guy.*"

"Thanks," I say coolly. I take the phone into my room and close the door.

It has to be him. Who else could it be?

"Hello?" I ask casually.

"Carrie?"

"Yes?"

"It's George."

"George," I say, trying to keep the disappointment out of my voice.

"You got home okay?"

"Sure."

"Well, I had a great time on Saturday night. And I was wondering if you'd like to get together again."

I don't know. But he's asked too politely to refuse. And I don't want to hurt his feelings. "Okay."

"There's a nice country inn between here and Castlebury. I thought maybe we could go next Saturday."

"Sounds great."

"I'll pick you up around seven. We'll have dinner at eight and I can get you home by eleven."

We hang up and I go into the bathroom to examine my face. I have a sudden desire to radically alter my appearance. Maybe I should dye my hair pink and blue like Dorrit's. Or turn it into a pixie cut. Or bleach it white blond. I pick up a lip pencil and begin outlining my lips. I fill in the middle with red lipstick and turn the corners of my mouth down. I draw two black tears on my cheeks and step back to check the results.

Not bad.

I take my sad-clown face into Dorrit's room. Now she's on the phone. I can tell by her side of the conversation that she's comparing notes with one of her friends. She bangs down the receiver when she spots me.

"Well?" I ask.

"Well what?"

"What do you think about my makeup? I was thinking of wearing it to school."

"Is that supposed to be some kind of comment about my hair?"

"How would you feel if I showed up at school tomorrow looking like this?"

"I wouldn't care."

"Bet you would."

"Why are you being so mean?" Dorrit shouts.

"How am I being mean?" But she's right. I *am* being mean. I'm in a mean, foul mood.

And it's all because of Sebastian. Sometimes I think all the trouble in the world is caused by men. If there were no men, women would always be happy.

"C'mon, Dorrit. I was only *kidding*."

Dorrit puts her hands on top of her head. "Does it really look that bad?" she whispers.

My sad-clown face no longer feels like a joke.

When my mother first got sick, Dorrit would ask me what was going to happen. I'd put on a smiley face because I read somewhere that if you smile, even if you're feeling bad, the action of the muscles will trick your brain into thinking you're happy. "Whatever happens, we're all going to be fine," I'd tell Dorrit.

"Promise?"

"Of course, Dorrit. You'll see."

"Someone's here," Missy calls out now. Dorrit and I look at each other, our little tiff forgotten.

We clatter down the stairs. There, in the kitchen, is Sebastian. He looks from my sad-clown face to Dorrit's pink and blue hair. And slowly, he shakes his head.

"If you're going to be around Bradshaws, you have to be *prepared.*There could be craziness. Anything might happen."

"No kidding," Sebastian says. He's wearing a black leather jacket, the same one he was wearing at Tommy Brewster's party and on the night we painted the barn—the night we first kissed.

"Do you always wear that jacket?" I ask as Sebastian downshifts on the curve leading to the highway.

"Don't you like it? I got it when I lived in Rome."

I suddenly feel like I've been swept under a wave. I've been to Florida and Texas and all around New England, but never to Europe. I don't even have a passport. I sure wish I had one now, though, so I'd know how to deal with Sebastian. They should make passports for relationships.

A guy who's lived in Rome. It sounds so romantic.

"What are you thinking?" Sebastian asks.

I'm thinking that you probably won't like me because I've never been to Europe and I'm not sophisticated enough. "Have you ever been to Paris?" I ask.

"Sure," he says. "Haven't you?"

"Not really."

"That sounds like being a little bit pregnant. You either have been or you haven't."

"I haven't been there in person. That doesn't mean I haven't been there in my mind."

He laughs. "You are a very strange girl."

"Thank you." I look out the window to hide my tiny smile. I don't care if he thinks I'm strange. I'm just so happy to see him.

I don't ask him why he hasn't called. I don't ask him where he's been. When I found him in my kitchen, leaning against the counter like he belonged there, I pretended it was perfectly natural,

not even a surprise. “Am I interrupting something?” he asked, like it wasn’t odd that he suddenly decided to show up.

“Depends on what you call interrupting.” My insides were filled with diamonds, suddenly illuminated by the sun.

“Do you want to go out?”

“Sure.” I ran upstairs and scrubbed off my clown face, knowing all the while I should have said no, or at least allowed myself to be convinced, because what girl agrees to go on a date spur of the moment like that? It sets a bad precedent, makes the guy think he can see you whenever he wants, treat you however he wants. But I didn’t have it in me to refuse. As I pulled on my boots, I wondered if I’d come to regret being so easy.

I’m not regretting it now, though. Who makes up those rules about dating, anyway? And why can’t I be exempt?

He puts his hand on my leg. Casually. Like we’ve been dating for a long time. If we were, I wonder if his hand on my leg would always produce the reaction I’m having now, which is a confused sort of divine giddiness. I decide it would. I can’t imagine ever not feeling like this when I’m with him.

I’m losing it.

“It’s not that great, you know,” he says.

“Huh?” I turn back to him, my happiness pitching into inexplicable panic.

“Europe,” he says.

“Oh,” I breathe. “Europe.”

“Two summers ago when I lived in Rome, I went all around—France, Germany, Switzerland, Spain—and when I got back here, I realized this place is just as beautiful.”

“Castlebury?” I gasp.

“It’s as beautiful as Switzerland,” he says.

Sebastian Kydd actually likes Castlebury? “But I always imagined you”—I falter—“living in New York. Or London. Or someplace exciting.”

He frowns. “You don’t know me that well.” And just as I’m about to expire from fear that I’ve insulted him, he adds, “But you will.

“In fact,” he continues, “since I figured we ought to get to know each other better, I’m taking you to see an art exhibit.”

“Ah,” I say, nodding. I don’t know a damn thing about art either. Why didn’t I take art history when I had the chance?

I’m a goner.

Sebastian will figure it out and dump me before we’ve even had a proper first date.

“Max Ernst,” he says. “He’s my favorite artist. Who’s yours?”

“Peter Max?” It’s the only name I can think of at the moment.

“You *are* funny,” he says, and laughs.

He takes me to the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Hartford. I’ve been there a million times on field trips, holding the sticky hand of another little classmate so no one got lost. I hated the way we were marched around, scolded by a teacher’s aide who was always somebody’s mother. Where was Sebastian back then? I wonder as he takes my hand.

I look down at our intertwined fingers and see something that shocks me.

Sebastian Kydd bites his nails?

“Come on,” he says, pulling me along beside him. We stop in front of a painting of a boy and a girl on a marble bench on a fantasy lake in the mountains. Sebastian stands behind me, resting his head on top of mine and wrapping his arms around my shoulders.”Sometimes I wish I could go into that painting. Close my eyes and wake up there. I’d stay there forever.”

But what about me? screams a voice in my head. I suddenly don’t like being left out of his fantasy. “Wouldn’t you get bored?”

"Not if you were there with me."

I just about fall over. Guys aren't supposed to say these things. Or rather, they're supposed to but never do. I mean, who actually says things like that?

A guy who is crazily, madly in love with you. A guy who sees how incredible and amazing you are, even though you're not the cheerleader or even close to the prettiest girl in the school. A guy who thinks you're beautiful, just the way you are.

"My parents are in Boston," he says. "Want to go to my house?"

"Sure." I figure I'd go just about anywhere with him.

I have this theory that you can tell everything about a person by their room, but in Sebastian's case, it isn't true. His room is more like a guestroom in an antique boardinghouse than an actual boy's lair. There's a black and red handmade quilt, and an old wooden captain's wheel hangs on the wall. No posters, photographs, albums, baseballs—not even a dirty sock. I stare out the window at the view of a fading brown field and past that, the stark yellow brick of a convalescent home. I close my eyes and try to pretend I'm with Sebastian in the Max Ernst painting under an azure blue sky.

Now that I'm actually in his room—with him, for real—I'm a little uneasy.

Sebastian takes my hand and leads me to the bed. He puts his hands on either side of my face and kisses me.

I can barely breathe. Me—and Sebastian Kydd. It's really happening.

After a while, he raises his head and looks at me. He's so close I can see the tiny flecks of dark green around his irises. He's so close I could count them if I tried.

"Hey," he says. "You never asked why I didn't call."

"Was I supposed to?"

"Most girls would have."

"Maybe I'm not most girls."This sounds kind of arrogant but I'm certainly not going to tell him how I spent the last two weeks in an emotional panic, jumping every time the phone rang, giving him sidelong glances in class, promising myself I would never, ever do any bad thing ever again if he would only talk to me the way he had that night at the barn…and then hating myself for being so stupid and girlish about the whole thing.

"Did you think about me?" he asks slyly.

Oh boy. A trick question. If I say no, he'll be insulted. If I say yes, I'll sound pathetic.

"Maybe a little."

"I thought about you."

"Then why didn't you call?" I ask playfully.

"I was afraid."

"Of me?" I laugh, but he seems oddly sincere.

"I was worried that I could fall in love with you. And I don't want to be in love with anyone right now."

"Oh." My heart drops to my stomach.

"Well?" he asks, running his finger along my jaw.

Aha. I smile. It's only another one of his trick questions.

"Maybe you just haven't met the right girl," I murmur.

He brings his lips close to my ear. "I was hoping you'd say that."

CHAPTER TEN Rescue Me

My parents met in a library.

After college, my mother was a librarian. My father came in to borrow some books, saw my mother, and fell in love.

They were married six months later.

Everyone says my mother used to look like Elizabeth Taylor, but in those days they told every pretty girl she looked like Elizabeth Taylor. Nevertheless, I always picture Elizabeth Taylor sitting demurely behind an oak desk. My father, bespectacled and lanky, his blond hair modeled into a stiff crew cut, approaches the desk as my mother/Elizabeth Taylor stands up to help him. She is wearing a poodle skirt flourished with fuzzy pink pom-poms.

The skirt is somewhere up in the attic, zipped away in a garment bag with the rest of my mother's old clothes, including her wedding gown, saddle shoes, ballet slippers, and the megaphone embossed with her name, Mimi, from her days as a high-school cheerleader.

I almost never saw my mother when she wasn't beautifully dressed and had completed her hair and makeup. For a period, she sewed her own clothes and many of ours. She prepared entire meals from the Julia Child cookbook. She decorated the house with local antiques, had the prettiest gardens and Christmas tree, and still surprised us with elaborate Easter baskets well past the time when we had ceased to believe in the Easter Bunny.

My mother was just like all the other mothers, but a little better, because she felt that presenting one's home and family in the best possible light was a worthy pursuit, and she made everything look easy.

And even though she wore White Shoulders perfume and thought jeans were for farmers, she also assumed that women should embrace this wonderful way of being called feminism.

The summer before I started second grade, my mother and her friends started reading *The Consensus,* by Mary Gordon Howard. It was a heavy novel, lugged to and from the club in large canvas bags filled with towels and suntan lotion and potions for insect bites. Every morning, as they settled into their chaises around the pool, one woman after another would pull *The Consensus* out of her bag. The cover is still etched in my brain: a blue sea with an abandoned sailboat, surrounded by the black-and-white college photographs of eight young women. On the back was a photograph of Mary Gordon Howard herself, taken in profile, a patrician woman who, to my young mind, resembled George Washington wearing a tweed suit and pearls.

"Did you get to the part about the pessary?" one lady would whisper to another.

"Shhhh. Not yet. Don't give it away."

"Mom, what's a pessary?" I asked.

"It's not something you need to worry about as a child."

"Will I need to worry about it as an adult?"

"Maybe. Maybe not. There might be new methods by then."

I spent the whole summer trying to find out what it was about that book that so managed to hold the attention of the ladies at the club that Mrs. Dewittle didn't even notice when her son David fell off the diving board and needed ten stitches in his head.

"Mom!" I said later, trying to get her attention."Why does Mary Gordon Howard have two last names?"

My mother put down the book, holding her place with her finger. "Gordon is her mother's maiden name and Howard is her father's last name."

I considered this. "What happens if she gets married?"

My mother seemed pleased by the question. "She is married. She's been married three times."

I thought it must be the most glamorous thing in the world to be married three times. Back then, I didn't know one adult who had been divorced even once.

"But she never takes her husbands' names. Mary Gordon Howard is a very great feminist. She believes that women should be able to define themselves and shouldn't let a man take their identity."

I thought it must be the most glamorous thing in the world to be a feminist.

Until *The Consensus* came along, I'd never thought much about the power of books. I'd read a ton of picture books, and then the Roald Dahl novels and the *Chronicles of Narnia* by C. S. Lewis. But that summer, the idea that a book could change people began to flutter around the edges of my consciousness. I thought that I, too, might want to become a writer and a feminist.

On Christmas of that year, as we sat around the table eating the Bûche de Noël that my mother had spent two days assembling, she made an announcement. She was going back to school to get her architecture degree. Nothing would change, except that Daddy would have to make us dinner some nights.

Years later, my mother got a job with Beakon and Beakon Architects. I loved to go to her office after school, which was in an antique house in the center of town. Every room was softly carpeted, perfumed with the gentle scent of paper and ink. There was a funny slanted desk where my mother did her work, drawing elegant structures in a fine, strict hand. She had two people working for her, both young men who seemed to adore her, and I never thought you couldn't be a feminist if you wore pantyhose and high heels and pulled your hair back in a pretty barrette.

I thought being a feminist was about how you conducted your life.

When I was thirteen, I saw in the local paper that Mary Gordon Howard was coming to speak and sign books at our public library. My mother was no longer well enough to leave the house, so I decided to go on my own and surprise her with a signed book. I braided my hair into pigtails and tied the ends with yellow ribbons. I wore a yellow India print dress and a pair of wedge sandals. Before I left, I went in to see my mother.

She was lying in her bed with the blinds half-closed. As always, there was the mechanical *tick, tick, tick* of the grandfather clock, and I imagined the little teeth in the mechanism biting off a tiny piece of time with each inexorable movement.

"Where are you going?" my mother asked. Her voice, once mellifluous, was reduced to a needle scratch.

"To the library," I said, beaming. I was dying to tell her my secret.

"That's nice," she said. "You look pretty." She took a heavy breath and continued. "I like your ribbons. Where did you get them?"

"From your old sewing box."

She nodded. "My father brought those ribbons from Belgium."

I touched the ribbons, unsure if I should have taken them.

"No, no," my mother said. "You wear them. That's what they're there for, right? Besides," she repeated, "you look pretty."

She began to cough. I dreaded the sound—high and weak, it was more like the futile gasping of a helpless animal than an actual cough. She'd coughed for a year before they discovered she was sick. The nurse came in, pulling the top off a syringe with her teeth while tapping my mother's forearm with two fingers.

"There you go, dear, there you go," she said reassuringly, smoothly inserting the needle. "Now you'll sleep. You'll sleep for a bit and when you wake up, you'll feel better."

My mother looked at me and winked. "I doubt it," she said as she began to drift away.

I got on my bike and rode the five miles down Main Street to the library. I was late, and as I pedaled, an idea began to form in my head that Mary Gordon Howard was going to rescue me.

Mary Gordon Howard was going to *recognize* me.

Mary Gordon Howard was going to see me and know, instinctively, that I, too, was a writer and a feminist, and would someday write a book that would change the world.

Standing atop my pedals to pump more furiously, I had high hopes for a dramatic transformation.

When I reached the library, I threw my bike into the bushes and ran upstairs to the main reading room.

Twelve rows of women sat on folding chairs. The great Mary Gordon Howard, the lower half of her body hidden behind a podium, stood before them. She appeared as a woman dressed for battle, in a stiff suit the color of armor enhanced by enormous shoulder pads. I caught an undercurrent of hostility in the air, and slipped behind a stack.

"Yes?" she barked at a woman in the front row who had raised her hand. It was our next-door neighbor, Mrs. Agnosta. "What you're saying is all very well and good," Mrs. Agnosta began carefully. "But what if you're not unhappy with your life? I mean, I'm not sure my daughter's life *should* be different than mine. In fact, I'd really like my daughter to turn out just like me."

Mary Gordon Howard frowned. On her ears were enormous blue stones. As she moved her hand to adjust her earring, I noticed a rectangular diamond watch on her wrist. Somehow, I hadn't expected Mary Gordon Howard to be so bejeweled. Then she lowered her head like a bull and stared straight at Mrs. Agnosta as if she were about to charge. For a second, I was actually afraid for Mrs. Agnosta, who no doubt had no idea what she'd wandered into and was only looking for a little culture to enhance her afternoon.

"That, my dear, is because you are a classic narcissist," Mary Gordon Howard declared. "You are so in love with yourself, you imagine that a woman can only be happy if she is 'just like you.' You are exactly what I'm talking about when I refer to women who are a hindrance to the progress of other women."

Well, I thought. That was probably true. If it were up to Mrs. Agnosta, all women would spend their days baking cookies and scrubbing toilets.

Mary Gordon Howard looked around the room, her mouth drawn into a line of triumph. "And now, if there are no more questions, I will be happy to sign your books."

There were no more questions. The audience, I figured, was too scared.

I got in line, clutching my mother's copy of *The Consensus* to my chest. The head librarian, Ms. Detooten, who I'd known since I was a kid, stood next to Mary Gordon Howard, handing her books to sign. Mary Gordon Howard sighed several times in annoyance. Finally she turned to Ms. Detooten and muttered, "Unenlightened housewives, I'm afraid." By then I was only two people away. "Oh no," I wanted to protest. "That isn't true at all." And I wished I could tell her about my mother and how *The Consensus* had changed her life.

Ms. Detooten shrank and, flushed with embarrassment, turned away and spotted me. "Why, here's Carrie Bradshaw," she exclaimed in a too-happy, nudging voice, as if I were a person Mary Gordon Howard might like to meet.

My fingers curled tightly around the book. I couldn't seem to move the muscles in my face, and I pictured how I must look with my lips frozen into a silly, timid smile.

The Gorgon, as I'd now begun to think of her, glanced my way, took in my appearance, and went back to her signing.

"Carrie's going to be a writer," Ms. Detooten gushed. "Isn't that so, Carrie?"

I nodded.

Suddenly I had The Gorgon's attention. She put down her pen. "And why is that?" she asked.

"Excuse me?" I whispered. My face prickled with heat.

"Why do *you* want to be a writer?"

I looked to Ms. Detooten for help. But Ms. Detooten only looked as terrified as I did. "I… I don't know."

"If you can't think of a very good reason to do it, then don't," The Gorgon snapped. "Being a writer is all about having something to say. And it'd better be interesting. If you don't have anything interesting to say, don't become a writer. Become something useful. Like a doctor."

"Thank you," I whispered.

The Gorgon held out her hand for my mother's book. For a moment, I thought about snatching it away and running out of there, but I was too intimidated. The Gorgon scrawled her name in sharp, tiny handwriting.

"Thank you for coming, Carrie," Ms. Detooten said as the book was handed back to me.

My mouth was dry. I nodded my head dumbly as I stumbled outside.

I was too weak to pick up my bike. I sat on the curb instead, trying to recover my ego. I waited as poisonous waves of shame crashed over me, and when they passed, I stood up, feeling as if I'd lost a dimension. I got on my bike and rode home.

"How'd it go?" my mother whispered later, when she was awake. I sat on the chair next to her bed, holding her hand. My mother always took good care of her hands. If you only looked at her hands, you would never know she was sick.

I shrugged. "They didn't have the book I wanted."

My mother nodded. "Maybe next time."

I never told my mother how I'd gone to see her hero, Mary Gordon Howard. I never told her Mary Gordon Howard had signed her book. I certainly didn't tell her that Mary Gordon Howard was no feminist. How can you be a feminist when you treat other women like dirt? Then you're just a mean girl like Donna LaDonna. I never told anyone about the incident at all. But it stayed with me, like a terrible beating you can push out of your mind but never quite forget.

I still feel a flicker of shame when I think about it. I wanted Mary Gordon Howard to rescue me.

But that was a long time ago. I'm not that girl anymore. I don't need to feel ashamed. I turn over and squish my pillow under my cheek, thinking about my date with Sebastian.

And I don't need to be rescued anymore, either.

CHAPTER ELEVEN Competition

"I hear Donna LaDonna is seeing Sebastian Kydd," Lali says, adjusting her goggles.

What? I dip my toe into the water as I tug on the straps of my Speedo, trying to compose myself. "Really," I say casually. "How'd you hear that?"

"She told the two Jens and they're telling everyone."

"Maybe she's making it up," I say, stretching my legs.

"Why would she do that?"

I get up on the block next to her and shrug.

"On your mark. Get set. *Go!*" Coach Nipsie says.

As we're both airborne, I suddenly shout, "I went on a date with Sebastian Kydd."

I catch a glimpse of her shocked expression as she belly flops into the pool.

The water's cold, barely seventy-five degrees. I swim one lap, turn, and when I see Lali coming up behind me, start pounding the water.

Lali's a better swimmer than I am, but I'm the better diver. For almost eight years now, we've been competing with each other and against each other. We've gotten up at four a.m., swallowed weird concoctions of raw eggs to make us stronger, spent weeks at swimming camp, given each other wedgies, made up funny victory dances, and painted our faces with the school colors. We've been screamed at by coaches, berated by mothers, and made little kids cry. We're considered a bad combination, but so far, no one's been able to separate us.

We swim an exhausting eight-lap medley. Lali passes me on the sixth lap, and when I hit the wall, she's standing above me, dripping water into my lane. "Nice way to freak out the competition," she says as we high-five.

"Except it's true," I say, grabbing my towel and rubbing my head.

"What?"

"Last night. He came to my house. We went to a museum. Then we went to his house and made out."

"Uh-huh." She flexes her foot and pulls it up to her thigh.

"And he spent a summer living in Rome. And"—I look around to make sure no one is listening —"he bites his nails."

"Right, Bradley."

"Lali," I whisper."I'm *serious.*"

She stops stretching her leg and looks at me. For a second, I think she's angry. Then she grins and blurts out,"Come on, Carrie. Why would Sebastian Kydd go out with *you*?"

For a moment, we're both stunned into one of those terrible awkward moments when a friend has gone too far and you wonder if ugly words will be exchanged. You'll say something nasty and defensive. She'll say something hurtful and cruel. You wonder if you'll ever speak again.

But maybe she didn't mean it. So you give her another chance. "Why wouldn't he?" I ask, trying to make light of it.

"It's only because of Donna LaDonna," she says, backtracking. "I mean, if he's seeing her… you wouldn't think he'd start seeing someone else, too."

"Maybe he isn't seeing her," I say, my throat tight. I'd been looking forward to telling Lali everything about the date, turning over each little thing he said and did, but now I can't.

What if he *is* seeing Donna LaDonna? I'll look like a complete and utter fool.

"Bradshaw!" Coach Nipsie shouts. "What the hell is wrong with you today? You're up on the planks."

"Sorry," I say to Lali, as if somehow it's all my fault. I grab my towel and head to the diving boards.

"And I need you to nail the half gainer with a full twist for the meet on Thursday," Coach Nipsie calls out.

Great.

I climb the rungs to the board and pause, trying to visualize my dive. But all I can see is Donna LaDonna and Sebastian together that night at The Emerald. Maybe Lali is right. Why would he bother chasing me if he's still seeing Donna LaDonna? On the other hand, maybe he isn't seeing her and Lali's just trying to mess me up. But why would she do that?

"Bradshaw!" Coach Nipsie warns. "I don't have all day."

Right. I take four steps, come down hard on my left foot, and pop straight up. As soon as I'm in the air, I know the dive is going to be a disaster. My arms and legs flail to the side as I land on the back of my head.

"Come on, Bradshaw. You're not even trying," Coach Nipsie reprimands.

Usually, I'm pretty tough, but tears well up in my eyes. I can't tell if it's from the pain in my head or the humiliation to my ego, but either way, they both hurt. I glance toward Lali, hoping for sympathy, but she isn't paying attention. She's seated in the bleachers, and next to her, about a foot away, is Sebastian.

Why does he keep popping up unexpectedly? I'm not prepared for this.

I get back on the board. I don't dare look at him, but I can feel him watching. My second attempt is a little better, and when I get out of the water, Lali and Sebastian have started talking. Lali looks up at me and raises her fist."Go, Bradley!"

"Thanks." I wave. Sebastian catches my eye and winks.

My third dive is actually pretty good, but Lali and Sebastian are too engaged in their animated conversation to notice.

"Hey," I say, squeezing water out of my hair as I stride over.

"Oh, hi," Lali says, as if she's seeing me for the first time that day. Now that Sebastian is here, I figure she must be feeling pretty cheesy about what she said.

"Did it hurt?" Sebastian asks as I sit down next to him. He pats the top of my head and says sweetly, "Your noggin. It looked like it took some damage there."

I glance at Lali, whose eyes are the size of eggs. "Nah." I shrug. "Happens all the time. It's nothing."

"We were just talking about the night we painted the barn," Lali says.

"That was hysterical," I say, in an attempt to behave as if all of this is normal, as if I'm not even surprised to find Sebastian waiting for me.

"You want a ride home?" he asks.

"Sure." He follows me to the locker room door, and for some reason, I'm relieved. I suddenly realize I don't want to leave him alone with Lali.

I want him all to myself. He's too new to share.

And then I feel like a crap heel. Lali is my best friend.

I slip out to the parking lot through the gym instead of the pool, my hair still wet, my jeans clinging uncomfortably to my thighs. I'm halfway across the asphalt when a beige Toyota pulls up beside me and stops. The window rolls down and Jen S sticks her head out. "Hey, Carrie," she says, all casual. "Where are you going?"

"Nowhere."

Jen P leans across her. "Want to go to the Hamburger Shack?"

I give them a deliberately skeptical look. They've never asked me to go to the Hamburger Shack before—hell, they've never asked me to go anywhere. Do they really think I'm that dumb?

"Can't," I say vaguely.

"Why not?"

"I have to go home."

"You have time for a hamburger," Jen S says. It might be my imagination, but I detect a slight threat in her tone.

Sebastian honks his horn.

I jump. Jen S and Jen P exchange another look. "Get in," Jen P urges.

"Really, guys. Thanks. Some other time."

Jen S glares at me. And this time there is no mistaking the hostility in her voice. "Suit yourself," she says as she rolls up the window. And then they just sit there, watching as I walk up to Sebastian's car and get in.

"Hi," he says, leaning over to kiss me.

I pull away. "Better not. We're being watched." I point out the beige Toyota. "The two Jens."

"Who cares?" he says, and kisses me again. I go along with it but break away after a few seconds. "The Jens," I say pointedly. "They're best friends with Donna LaDonna."

"And?"

"Well, obviously they're going to tell her. About you and me," I say cautiously, not wanting to be presumptuous.

He frowns, turns the key in the ignition, and slams the stick into second gear. The car leaps forward with a screech. I peek out the back window. The Toyota has pulled right up behind. I slump down in the seat. "I can't believe this," I mutter. "They're following us."

"Oh, for Christ's sake," he says, looking into the rearview mirror. "Maybe it's time someone taught them a lesson."

The engine roars like a wild animal as he puts the car into fourth gear. We take a sharp turn onto the highway and hit seventy-five. I turn around to check the progress of the Toyota. "I think we're losing them."

"Why would they do this? What is wrong with these girls?"

"Boredom. They don't have anything better to do."

"Well, they'd better find someone else to tail."

"Or what? You're going to beat them up?" I giggle.

"Something like that." He rubs my leg and smiles. We take a sharp turn off the highway and onto Main Street. As we approach my house, he slows down.

"Not here." I panic. "They'll see your car in the driveway."

"Where then?"

I consider for a moment. "The library."

No one will think to look for us there, except maybe The Mouse, who knows that the Castlebury Public Library is my favorite secret place. It's housed in a white brick mansion, built in the early 1900s, when Castlebury was a booming mill town and had millionaires who wanted to show off their wealth by building grand mansions on the Connecticut River. But hardly anyone has the money to keep them up now, so they've all been turned into public properties or nursing homes.

Sebastian whips into the driveway and parks behind the building. I hop out and peek around the side. The beige Toyota is slowly making its way down Main Street, past the library. Inside the car, the two Jens are swiveling their heads around like swizzle sticks, trying to find us.

I bend over, laughing. Every time I try to straighten up, I look at Sebastian and burst out into hysterics. I stumble around the parking lot and fall to the ground, holding my stomach.

"Carrie?" he says. "Is it really *that* funny?"

"Yes," I cry. And I collapse into another wave of laughter while Sebastian looks at me, gives up, and lights a cigarette.

"Here," he says, handing it to me.

I get up, holding on to him for support. "It is funny, isn't it?"

"It's hilarious."

"How come you're not laughing?"

"I am. But I like watching you laugh more."

"Really?"

"Yeah. It makes me happy." He puts his arm around me and we go inside.

I lead him up to the fourth floor. Hardly anyone comes up here because all the books are on engineering and botany and obscure scientific research that most people don't want to bother trekking up four flights to read. In the middle of the room is an old chintz-covered couch.

We're at least half an hour into an intense make-out session when we're startled by a loud angry voice.

"Hello, Sebastian. I was wondering where you'd run off to."

Sebastian is on top of me. I look over his shoulder and see Donna LaDonna looming over us, like an angry Valkyrie. Her arms are crossed, emphasizing her formidable chest. If breasts could kill, I'd be dead.

"You're disgusting," she sneers at Sebastian before she focuses her attention on me. "And *you,* Carrie Bradshaw. You're even *worse.*"

"I don't get it," I say in a small voice.

Sebastian looks guilty. "Carrie, I'm sorry. I had no idea she would react that way."

How could he have "no idea"? I wonder, my anger growing. It's going to be all over the school tomorrow. And I'm the one who's going to look like either a fool or a bitch.

Sebastian has one hand on the wheel, tapping the fake wood inlay with a ragged nail, as if he's as perplexed by this as I am. I'm probably supposed to yell at him, but he looks so cute and innocent, I can't quite muster the energy.

I look at him hard, folding my arms. "*Are* you seeing her?"

"It's complicated."

"How?"

"It's not that simple."

"It's like being a little bit pregnant. You either are or you're not."

"I'm not, but she *thinks* I am."

And whose fault is that? "Can't you tell her you're not seeing her?"

"It's not so easy. She *needs* me."

Now I really have had enough. How can any self-respecting girl respond to this nonsense? Am I supposed to say. "No, please, I need you too"? And what's up with this old-fashioned "neediness" stuff, anyway?

He pulls into my driveway and parks the car. "Carrie—"

"I should probably go." There's a bit of an edge to my voice. But what else am I supposed to do? What if he does like Donna LaDonna better and he's only using me to make her jealous?

I get out of the car and slam the door.

I race up the walk. I'm nearly at the door when I hear the quick, satisfying tread of his footsteps behind me.

He grabs my arm. "Don't go," he says. I allow him to turn me around, put his hands in my hair. "Don't go," he whispers. He tilts my face up to his. "Maybe *I* need *you.*"

CHAPTER TWELVE You Can't Always Get What You Want

"Maggie, what's wrong?"

"Nothing," she says coldly.

"Are you angry at me?" I gasp.

She stops, turns, and glares. And there it is: The international girl face for "I'm mad at you, and you should know why, but I'm not going to explain it."

"What did *I* do?"

"It's what you didn't do."

"Okay, what *didn't* I do?"

"You tell me," she says, and starts walking.

I run through a variety of scenarios but can't come up with a clue.

"Mags." I chase after her down the hall. "I'm sorry I didn't do something. But I honestly don't know what that something is."

"Sebastian," she snaps.

"Huh?"

"You and Sebastian. I come to school this morning and everyone knows all about it. Everyone except *me.* And I'm *supposed* to be one of your best friends."

We're nearly at the door to assembly, where I will have to walk in knowing that I'm going to have to face the hostility of Donna LaDonna's friends, as well as a small army of kids who aren't her friends, but want to be.

"Maggie," I plead."It just happened. I didn't exactly have time to call you. I was planning to tell you first thing this morning."

"Lali knew," she says, not buying my explanation.

"Lali was there. We were at the pool when he came by to pick me up."

"So?"

"Come on, Magwitch. I don't need you mad at me as well."

"We'll see." She pulls open the door to the auditorium. "We'll talk about it later."

"Okay." I sigh as she heads off. I skittle along the back wall and hurry down the aisle to my assigned seat, trying to attract as little attention as possible. When I finally reach my row, I stop, startled by the realization that something is terribly wrong. I check the letter "B" to make sure I haven't made a mistake.

I haven't. But my seat is now occupied by Donna LaDonna.

I look around for Sebastian, but he's not there. Coward. I have no choice. I'm going to have to brazen it out.

"Excuse me," I say, making my way past Susie Beck, who has worn purple every day of her life for the last two years; Ralph Bomenski, a frail, white-skinned boy whose father owns a gas station and makes Ralphie work there in all kinds of weather; and Ellen Brack, who is six feet tall and is giving off the impression that she'd prefer to disappear—a sentiment I understand completely.

Donna LaDonna is oblivious to my progress. Her hair is like a giant dandelion seed, obstructing her view. She's talking with great animation to Tommy Brewster. It's the longest conversation I've ever witnessed between them. Nonetheless, it makes sense, as Tommy is part of her clique. Her voice is so loud you can practically hear her from three rows away.

"Some people don't know their place," she says. "It's all about pecking order. Do you know what happens to chickens that don't stay in their place?"

"No," Tommy says dumbly. He's noticed me, but quickly returns his eyes to their proper spot —on Donna LaDonna's face.

"They get pecked to death. By the other chickens," Donna says ominously.

Okay. Enough. I can't stand here forever. Poor Ellen Brack's knees are up to her ears. There simply isn't enough room for both of us.

"Excuse me," I say politely.

No response. Donna LaDonna continues her tirade."And on top of that, she's trying to steal another girl's boyfriend."

Really? Donna LaDonna has stolen just about every one of her friends' boyfriends at one time or another, simply to remind them that she can.

"Notice I said *trying.* Because the most pathetic thing about it is that she hasn't succeeded. He called me last night and told me what a"—Donna suddenly leans forward and whispers in Tommy's ear so I can't make out the word—"she is."

Tommy laughs uproariously.

Sebastian called her?

No way. I can't let her get to me.

"Excuse me," I say again. But this time it's much louder and with much more authority. If she doesn't turn around, she's going to look like a complete idiot.

She turns. Her eyes slide over me like slow-burning acid. "Carrie," she says. "Since you seem to be a person who likes to change the rules, I thought we'd change our seats today."

Clever, I think. Unfortunately, not allowed.

"Why don't we switch seats another day?" I suggest.

"Oooooh," she says mockingly. "Are you afraid of getting in trouble? A Goody Two-shoes like you? Don't want to ruin your precious record, do you?"

Tommy throws back his head as if this, too, is hilariously funny. Jeez. He would laugh at a stick if someone told him to.

"All right," I say."If you won't move, I guess I'll have to sit on top of you."

Childish, yes. But effective.

"You wouldn't dare."

"Oh really?" And I lift my handbag as if I'm about to place it on her head.

"I'm sorry, Tommy," she says, getting to her feet. "But some people are simply too juvenile to bother with." She brushes past me on her way out, deliberately stepping on my foot. I pretend not to notice. But even when she's gone, there's no relief. My heart is thumping like an entire brass band. My hands are shaking.

Did Sebastian *really* call her?

And where is Sebastian anyway?

I manage to get through assembly by berating myself for my behavior. What was I thinking? Why did I piss off the most powerful girl in the school over a guy? Because I got the opportunity, that's why. And I took it. I couldn't help myself. Which makes me a not-very-logical and perhaps not-very-nice person as well. I'm really going to get into trouble for this one. And I probably deserve it.

What if *everyone* is mad at me for the rest of the year?

If they are, I'll write a book about them. I'll send it into the summer writing program at The New School, and this time I'll get in. Then I'll move to New York and make new friends and show them all.

But right as we're shuffling out of assembly, Lali finds me."I'm proud of you," she says. "I can't believe you stood up to Donna LaDonna."

"Eh, it was nothing." I shrug.

"I was watching the whole time. I was afraid you were going to start crying or something. But you didn't."

I'm not exactly a crybaby. Never have been. But still.

The Mouse joins us. “I was thinking…Maybe you and me and Danny and Sebastian could go on a double date when Danny comes up to visit.”

“Sure,” I say, wishing she hadn’t said this in front of Lali. With Maggie mad at me, the last thing I need is for Lali to feel left out as well. “Maybe we can all go out. In a group,” I say pointedly, adding, for Lali’s sake, “Since when did we start needing boyfriends to have fun?”

“You’re right,”The Mouse says, catching my drift.“You know what they say: A woman needs a man about as much as a fish needs a bicycle.”

We all nod in agreement. A fish may not need a bicycle, but it sure as hell needs friends.

“Ow!” Someone pokes me in the back. I turn, expecting to see one of Donna LaDonna’s lieutenants. Instead, it’s Sebastian, holding a pencil and laughing.

“How are you?” he asks.

“Fine,” I say, heavy on the sarcasm. “Donna LaDonna was sitting in my seat when I got to assembly.”

“Uh-huh,” he says noncommittally.

“I didn’t see *you* in assembly.”

“That’s because *I* wasn’t there.”

“Where were you?” I can’t believe I just said that. When did I turn into his mother?

“Does it matter?” he asks.

“There was a scene. With Donna LaDonna.”

“Nice.”

“It was ugly. Now she really hates me.”

“You know my motto,” he says, playfully tapping me on the nose with his pencil. “Avoid female trouble at all costs. What are you doing this afternoon? Skip swim practice and let’s go somewhere.”

“What about Donna LaDonna?” It’s the closest I can come to asking if he called her.

“What about her? You want her to come too?”

I glare at him.

“Then forget about her. She’s not important,” he says as we take our seats in calculus.

He’s right, I think, opening my book to the chapter on rogue integers. Donna LaDonna is not important. Calculus is, along with rogue integers. You never know when a rogue integer is going to show up and ruin your entire equation. Perhaps that’s how Donna LaDonna feels about me. I am a rogue integer and I must be stopped.

“Carrie?”

“Yes, Mr. Douglas?”

“Could you come up here and finish this equation?”

“Sure.” I pick up a piece of chalk and stare at the numbers on the blackboard. Who could ever imagine that calculus would be easier than dating?

“So the long knives are out,” Walt says, referring to the assembly incident with a certain degree of satisfaction. He lights a cigarette and tilts back his head, blowing smoke into the rafters of the dairy barn.

“I knew he liked you,”The Mouse says triumphantly.

“Mags?” I ask.

Maggie shrugs and looks away. She’s still not talking to me.

She grinds her cigarette under her shoe, picks up her books, and walks off.

“What’s eating her?”The Mouse asks.

“She’s mad at me because I didn’t tell her about Sebastian.”

“That’s stupid,”The Mouse says. She looks at Walt. “Are you sure she’s not mad at you?”

“I’ve done absolutely nothing. I am blame-free,”Walt insists.

Walt has taken the breakup awfully well. It's been two days since Walt and Maggie had their "talk," and their relationship seems to be nearly the same as it was before, save for the fact that Maggie is now officially dating Peter.

"Maybe Maggie's mad at you because you're not more upset," I add.

"She said she thought we made better friends than lovers. I agreed," Walt says."You don't get to make a decision and then be angry about it when the other person agrees with you."

"No," says The Mouse. "Because that would require a certain degree of logic. It's not a criticism," she says quickly, catching the warning expression on my face. "But it's true. Maggie isn't the most logical person."

"But she is the nicest." I'm thinking I'd better go after her, when Sebastian appears.

"Let's get out of here," he says. "I just got accosted by Tommy Brewster who kept asking me something about chickens."

"You guys are too cute,"Walt says, shaking his head. "Just like Bonnie and Clyde."

"What should we do?" Sebastian asks.

"I don't know. What do you want to do?" Now that we're in Sebastian's car, I suddenly feel insecure. We've seen each other three days in a row. What does it mean? Are we dating?

"We could go to my house."

"Or maybe we *should* do something." If we go to his house, all we'll do is make out. I don't want to be the girl who only has sex with him. I want more. I want to be his *girlfriend.*

But how the hell do I do that?

"Okay," he says, resting his hand on my leg and sliding it up my thigh, "Where do *you* want to go?"

"Don't know," I say glumly.

"The movies?"

"Yeah." I perk up.

"There's a great Clint Eastwood retrospective at the Chesterfield Theatre."

"Perfect." I'm not sure I know exactly who Clint Eastwood is, but having agreed, I don't know how to admit it. "What's the movie about?"

He looks at me and grins."Come on," he says, as if he can't believe I would ask such a question. "And it's not *a* movie. It's movies—plural. *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly* and *The Outlaw Josey Wales.*"

"Fantastic," I say, with what I hope is enough enthusiasm to cover up my ignorance. Hey, it's not my fault. I don't have any brothers, so I'm completely ignorant about guy culture. I sit back in the seat and smile, determined to approach this date as an anthropological adventure.

"This is great," Sebastian says, nodding his head as he becomes more and more excited about his plan. "Really great. And you know what?"

"What?"

"You're great. I've been dying to check out this retrospective forever and I can't think of any other girl who would go with me."

"Oh," I say, pleased.

"Normally girls don't like Clint Eastwood. But you're different, you know?" He takes his eyes off the road for a second and looks at me. His expression is so earnest, I can almost picture my heart melting into a little pool of sticky sweet syrup. "I mean, it's kind of like you're more than a girl." He hesitates, searching for the perfect description. "It's like—you're a guy in a girl's body."

"What?"

"Take it easy. I didn't say you looked like a guy. I meant you think like a guy. You know. You're kind of practical but tough. And you're not afraid to have adventures."

"Listen, buster. Just because someone is a girl doesn't mean she can't be tough and practical and have adventures. That's the way most girls *are*—until they get around guys. Then guys make them act all stupid."

"You know what they say—all guys are assholes and all women are crazy."

I take off my shoe and hit him.

Four hours later, we stumble out of the theater. My lips are raw from kissing, and I feel slightly woozy. My hair is matted and I'm sure I've got mascara smudged all over my face. As we step out from the darkness into the light, Sebastian grabs me, kisses me again, and pushes back my hair.

"So what'd you think?"

"Pretty good. I love the part where Clint Eastwood shoots Eli Wallach down from the noose."

"Yeah," he says, putting his arm around me. "That's my favorite part too."

I pat my hair, trying to make myself look slightly respectable and not like I've been making out with a guy in a movie theater for half the day. "How do I look?"

Sebastian steps back and grins appraisingly. "You look just like Tuco."

I swat his butt. Tuco is the name of the Eli Wallach character, aka "the Ugly."

"I think that's what I'm going to call you from now on," he says, laughing. "Tuco. Little Tuco. What do you think?"

"I'm gonna kill you," I say, and chase him all the way across the parking lot to the car.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN Creatures of Love

I lay low for the next couple of days, steering clear of Donna LaDonna by skipping assembly and avoiding the cafeteria during lunch. On the third day, Walt tracks me down in the library, where I'm hiding in the self-help section of the stacks, secretly reading *Linda Goodman's Love Signs* in a futile attempt to discern if Sebastian and I have a future. Problem is, I don't know his birthday. I can only hope he's an Aries and not a Scorpio.

"Astrology? Oh no. Not you, Carrie," Walt says.

I shut the book and put it back on the shelf. "What's wrong with astrology?"

"It's dumb," Walt says snidely. "Thinking you can predict your life from your birth sign. Do you know how many people are born each day? Two million five hundred and ninety-nine. How can two million five hundred and ninety-nine people have anything in common?"

"Has anyone mentioned that you've been in a really bad mood lately?"

"What are you talking about? I'm always like this."

"It's the breakup, isn't it?"

"No, it's not."

"Then what is it?"

"Maggie's in tears," he says suddenly.

I sigh. "Is it about me?"

"Not everything's about you, Bradley. Apparently she had some kind of fight with Peter. She sent me to find yo.Se's in the girls' room by the chemistry lab."

"You don't have to run errands for her."

"I don't care," Walt says, as if the whole situation is pointless. "It's easier than not doing it."

Something is definitely wrong with Walt, I think, as I hurry away to meet Maggie. He's always been slightly sarcastic and cynical, which is what I love about him. But he's never been this world weary, as if everyday life has drained him of the strength to continue.

I open the door to the small lav in the old part of the school that hardly anyone uses because the mirror is mangy and all the fixtures are from about sixty years ago. The writing scratched into the stalls appears to be about sixty years old as well. My favorite is, *For a good time, call Myrtle.* I mean, when was the last time someone named their kid Myrtle?

"Who's there?" Maggie calls out.

"It's me."

"Is anyone with you?"

"No."

"Okay," she says, and comes out of the stall, her face swollen and blotchy from crying.

"Jesus, Maggie," I say as I hand her a paper towel.

She blows her nose and looks at me over the tissue. "I know you're all caught up in Sebastian now, but I need your help."

"Okay," I say cautiously.

"Because I have to go to this doctor. And I can't go alone."

"Of course." I smile, grateful that we seem to have made up. "When?"

"Now."

"Now?"

"Unless you have something better to do."

"I don't. But why now, Maggie?" I ask with growing suspicion. "What kind of doctor?"

"You *know*," she says, lowering her voice. "A doctor for…women's stuff."

"Like abortion?" I can't help it. The word comes out in a loud gasp.

Maggie looks panicked. "Don't even say it."

"Are you—?"

"No," she says, in a heated whisper. "But I thought I might be. But then I got my period on Monday."

"So you did it…without protection?"

"You don't exactly plan these things, you know," Maggie says defensively. "And he's always pulled out."

"Oh, Maggie." Even if I haven't had actual sex, I know quite a bit about the theories behind it, the number one fact being that the pull-out method is known not to work. And Maggie should know this too. "Aren't you on the pill?"

"Well, I'm trying to be." She grimaces. "That's why I have to go to this doctor in East Milton."

East Milton is right next to our town, but it's supposedly filled with crime, and nobody goes there. They don't even go through it, under any circumstances. Honestly, I can't believe there's even a doctor's office there. "How did you find this doctor anyway?"

"The Yellow Pages." I can tell by the way she says it that she's lying. "I called up and I got an appointment for twelve thirty today. And you have to go with me. You're the only person I can trust. I mean, I can't exactly go with Walt, can I?"

"Why can't you go with Peter? He's the person who's responsible for all this, right?"

"He's kind of pissed at me," Maggie says. "When he found out I might be pregnant he freaked out and didn't talk to me for twenty-four hours."

There is something about this whole scenario that just isn't making sense. "But, Maggie," I counter, "when I saw you on Sunday afternoon, you said you'd had sex with Peter for the first time—"

"No, I didn't."

"Yes, you did."

"I don't remember." She grabs a handful of toilet paper and puts it over her face.

"It wasn't the first time, was it?" I say. She shakes her head. "You'd slept with him before."

"That night after The Emerald," she admits.

I nod slowly. I walk to the tiny window and look out. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Oh, Carrie, I couldn't," she cries. "I'm so sorry. I wanted to tell you, but I was scared. I mean, what if people found out? What if Walt found out? Everyone would think I was a slut."

"I would never think you were a slut. I wouldn't think you were a slut if you slept with a hundred men."

This makes her giggle. "Do you think a woman can sleep with a hundred men?"

"I think she could, if she worked really, really hard at it. I mean, you'd have to sleep with a different guy every week. For two years. You practically wouldn't have time for anything but sex."

Maggie throws away the tissue and looks at herself in the mirror as she pats cold water on her face. "That sounds just like Peter. All he thinks about is sex."

No kidding. Hell. Who knew nerdly old Peter was such a stud?

The doctor's office should be fifteen minutes away, but thirty minutes have passed and we still can't find it. So far we've nearly backed into two cars, driven over four curbs, and run over a handful of french fries. Maggie insisted we stop at McDonald's on the way, and when we got our food into the car, she lurched out of the parking lot with so much force all my french fries flew out the window.

Enough! I want to scream. But I can't do that—not when I'm trying to get one of my best friends to a crackpot doctor's office to get a prescription for birth control pills. So when I look at my watch and see that it's past twelve thirty, I gently suggest we stop at a gas station.

"Why?" Maggie asks.

"They have maps."

"We don't need a map."

"What are you, a guy?" I open the glove compartment and look inside in despair. It's empty. "Besides, we need cigarettes."

"My goddamn mother," Maggie says. "She's trying to quit. I hate when she does that."

Luckily, the cigarette issue distracts us from the fact that we are lost, we are in the most dangerous town in Connecticut, and we are losers. Enough to get us to a gas station anyway, where I am forced to flirt with a pimply faced attendant while Maggie takes a nervous leak in the dirty bathroom.

I show the attendant the piece of paper with the address on it. "Oh, sure," he says. "That street is right around the corner." Then he starts making shadow figures on the side of the building.

"You're really good at doing a bunny," I say.

"I know," he says. "I'm going to quit this job soon. Going to do shadow figures at kids' parties."

"I'm sure you'll have a huge clientele." All of a sudden, I'm feeling kind of sentimental toward this sweet, pimply faced guy who wants to do shadow figures at children's parties. He's so different from anyone at Castlebury High. Then Maggie comes out and I hustle her into the car, making my hand into a barking dog shape as we peel out of there.

"What was that about?" Maggie asks. "The hand. Since when do you do shadow puppets?"

Ever since you decided to have sex and didn't tell me, I want to say, but don't. Instead I say, "I've always done them. You just never noticed."

The address for the doctor's office is on a residential street with tiny houses crammed right next to one another. When we get to number 46, Maggie and I look at each other like this can't be right. It's just another house—a small, blue ranch with a red door. Behind the house we discover another door with a sign next to it that reads, doctor's office. But now that we've finally found this doctor, Maggie is terrified. "I can't do it," she says, slumping onto the steering wheel. "I can't go in."

I know I should be peeved at her for making me come all the way to East Milton for nothing, but instead, I know exactly how she's feeling. Wanting to cling to the past, wanting to be the way you always were, too scared to move forward into the future. I mean, who knows what's in the future? On the other hand, it's probably too late to go back.

"Look," I say. "I'll go inside and check it out. If it's okay, I'll come back and get you. If I'm not back in five minutes, call the police."

Taped to the door is a piece of paper that says, knock loudly. I knock loudly. I knock so loudly, I nearly bruise my knuckles.

The door opens a crack, and a middle-aged woman wearing a nurse's uniform sticks her head out. "Yes?"

"My friend is here for an appointment."

"For what?" she says.

"Birth control pills?" I whisper.

"Are you the friend?" she demands.

"No," I say, taken aback. "My friend is in the car."

"She'd better come in quickly. Doctor has his hands full today."

"Okay," I say, and nod. My head is like one of those bobble things truckers put on their dashboards.

"Either get your 'friend' or come in," the nurse says.

I turn around and wave to Maggie. And for once in her life, she actually gets out of the car.

We go in. We're in a tiny waiting room that was maybe the breakfast room in the original house. The wallpaper is printed with tea kettles. There are six metal chairs and a fake wooden coffee table with copies of *Highlights* magazine for kids. A girl about our age is sitting on one of the chairs.

"Doctor will be with you soon," the nurse says to Maggie, and leaves the room.

We sit down.

I look over at the girl, who is staring at us with hostility. Her hair is cut in a mullet, short in the front and really long in the back, and she's wearing black eyeliner that swoops up into little wings, like her eyes might fly away from her face. She looks tough and miserable and kind of mean. Actually,

she looks like she'd like to beat us up. I try to smile at her, but she glares at me instead and pointedly picks up *Highlights* magazine. Then she puts it down and says, "What are *you* looking at?"

I can't handle another girl fight, so I reply as sweetly as possible, "Nothing."

"Yeah?" she says. "You'd better be looking at nothing."

"I'm looking at nothing. I swear."

And at last, before this can go any further, the door opens and the nurse comes out, escorting another teenage girl by the shoulders. The girl looks quite a bit like her friend, except that she's crying quietly and wiping the tears from her cheeks with the back of her hands.

"You're okay, dear," the nurse says with surprising kindness. "Doctor says it all went fine. No aspirin for the next three days. And no sex for at least two weeks." The girl nods, weeping. Her friend jumps up and puts her hands on the side of the crying girl's face. "C'mon, Sal. It's okay. You're gonna be okay." And with one final scowl in our direction, she leads the girl away.

The nurse shakes her head and looks at Maggie. "Doctor will see you now."

"Maggie," I whisper. "You don't have to do this. We can go someplace else—"

But Maggie stands, her face resolute. "I *have* to do it."

"That's right, dear," the nurse says. "Much better to take precautions. I wish all you girls would take precautions."

And for some reason, she looks directly at me.

Whoa, lady. Take it easy. I'm still a virgin.

But I may not be for much longer. Maybe I should get some pills too. Just in case.

Ten minutes pass and Maggie comes back out, smiling and looking like a weight has been lifted from her shoulders. She thanks the nurse profusely. In fact, she thanks her so much I have to remind her that we ought to get back to school. Outside, she says, "It was so easy. I didn't even have to take off my clothes. He just asked me about the last time I got my period."

"That's great," I say, getting in the car. I can't get the image of the crying girl out of my head. Was she crying because she was sad or relieved? Or just scared? Either way, it was pretty awful. I open the window a crack and light up a cigarette. "Mags," I say. "How did you hear about that place? Really?"

"Peter told me about it."

"How did he know?"

"Donna LaDonna told him," she whispers.

I nod, blowing smoke into the cold air. I am so not ready for all this.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN Hang in There

"Missy!" I say, knocking on the bathroom door. "Missy, I need to get in there."

Silence. "I'm busy," she finally says.

"Doing what?"

"None of your business."

"Missy, please. Sebastian's going to be here in thirty minutes."

"So? He can wait."

No, he can't, I think. Or rather, I can't. I can't wait to get out of the house. I can't wait to get out of *here.*

I've been telling myself this all week. The "getting out of here" part is unspecified, though. Maybe I simply want to get away from my life.

For the past two weeks, ever since the library incident, the two Jens have been stalking me. They poke their heads into swim practice and make mooing noises when I dive. They've followed me to the mall, the supermarket, and even the drugstore, where they had the exciting experience of watching me buy tampons. And yesterday, I found a card in my locker. On the front was a cartoon drawing of a basset hound with a thermometer in his mouth and a hot-water bottle on his head. Inside, someone had written "Don't" before "Get Well Soon," followed by, "Wish you were dead."

"Donna would never do something like that," Peter protested.

Maggie, The Mouse, and I glared at him.

Peter held up his hands. "You wanted my opinion, that's my opinion."

"Who else would do it?" Maggie asked. "She's the one who has the biggest reason."

"Not necessarily," Peter said. "Look, Carrie. I don't want to hurt your feelings, but I can promise you, Donna LaDonna doesn't even know who you are."

"She does now," The Mouse countered.

Maggie was aghast. "Why wouldn't she know Carrie?"

"I'm not saying she doesn't literally know who Carrie Bradshaw is. But Carrie Bradshaw is definitely not high on her list of concerns."

"Thanks a lot," I said to Peter. I was really beginning to hate him.

And then I was furious at Maggie for going out with him. And then I was furious at The Mouse for being friends with him. And now I'm furious at my sister Missy for hogging the bathroom.

"I'm coming in," I say threateningly. I try the door. It's unlocked. Inside, Missy is standing in the tub with Nair on her legs.

"Do you mind?" she says, yanking the shower curtain closed.

"Do *you* mind?" I ask, going to the mirror. "You've been in here for twenty minutes. I need to get ready."

"What is *wrong* with you?"

"Nothing," I snarl.

"You'd better get out of that mood or Sebastian isn't going to want to be with you either."

I storm out of the bathroom. Back in my room, I pick up *The Consensus*, open it to the title page, and glare at Mary Gordon Howard's tiny signature. It's like the writing of a witch. I kick the book under the bed. I lie down and put my hands over my face.

I wouldn't have even remembered the damn book and that damn Mary Gordon Howard if I hadn't spent the last hour searching for my special handbag—the one from France that my mother left me. She felt guilty buying it because it was so expensive. Even though she paid for it with her own money and she always said every woman ought to have one really good handbag and one really good pair of shoes.

The handbag is one of my most treasured possessions. I treat it like a jewel, only taking it out on special occasions, and always returning it to its cloth pouch and then to its original box. I keep the box in the back of my closet. Except this time, when I went to get it out, it wasn't there. Instead, I found *The Consensus*, which I'd also hidden in the back of my closet. The last time I used the bag was six months ago, when Lali and I took a trip to Boston. She kept eyeing the bag and asking if she could borrow it sometime, and I said "yes," even though the thought of Lali with my mother's bag gave me the creeps. You would think it would have given her the creeps too—enough for her to know better than to ask. After the trip, I specifically remember putting the bag away properly, because I decided I wouldn't use it again until I went to New York. But then Sebastian suggested dinner at this fancy French restaurant in Hartford called The Brownstone, and if that isn't a special occasion, I don't know what is.

And now the bag is missing. My whole world is falling apart.

Dorrit, I think suddenly. She's gone from pilfering earrings to stealing my handbag.

I tear into her room.

Dorrit's been awfully quiet this week. She hasn't been causing her usual amount of turmoil, which is in itself suspicious. Now she's lying on her bed, talking on the phone. On the wall above her is a poster of a cat, swinging from a tree branch. *Hang in there,* reads the caption.

Dorrit puts her hand over the receiver. "Yes?"

"Have you seen my bag?"

She looks away, which makes me guess she is, indeed, guilty. "What handbag? Your leather saddlebag? I think I saw it in the kitchen."

"Mom's bag."

"*I* haven't seen it," she says, with exaggerated innocence. "Don't you keep it locked up in your closet?"

"It's not there."

Dorrit shrugs and tries to go back to her conversation.

"Mind if I search your room?" I ask casually.

"Go ahead," she says. She's crafty. If she were guilty, she'd say, yes, she did mind.

I search her closets, her drawers, and under the bed. Nothing. "See?" Dorrit says in an I-told-you-so tone. But in her second of triumph, her eyes go to the giant stuffed panda bear seated on the rocking chair in the corner of her room. The panda bear that I supposedly gave her as a present when she was born.

"Oh no, Dorrit," I say, shaking my head. "Not Mr. Panda."

"Don't touch him!" she screams, leaping off the bed and dropping the phone. I grab Mr. Panda and run out.

Dorrit follows me. Mr. Panda is suspiciously heavy, I note, as I bear him away to my room.

"Leave him alone," Dorrit demands.

"Why?" I ask. "Has Mr. Panda been up to something naughty?"

"No!"

"I think he has." I feel around the back of the stuffed bear and find a large opening that's been carefully fastened closed with safety pins.

"What's going on?" Missy comes running in, her legs dripping with foam.

"This," I say, unfastening the safety pins.

"Carrie, *don't*," Dorrit cries as I slip my hand into the opening. The first thing I pull out is a silver bracelet I haven't seen for months. The bracelet is followed by a small pipe, the type used to smoke marijuana. "It's not mine. I swear. It's my friend Cheryl's," Dorrit insists. "She asked me to hide it for her."

"Uh-huh," I say, handing Missy the pipe. And then my hand closes around the soft nubby surface of my mother's bag. "Aha!" I exclaim, yanking it out. I place it on the bed, where the three of us stare at it aghast.

It's ruined. The entire front side with the chic little flap where my mother used to keep her checkbook and credit cards is speckled with what looks like pink paint. Which just happens to be exactly the same color as the nail polish on Dorrit's hands.

I'm too shocked to speak.

"Dorrit, how could you?" Missy screams. "That was Mom's bag. Why did you have to ruin Mom's bag? Couldn't you ruin your own bag for a change?"

"Why does Carrie have to have everything of Mom's?" Dorrit screams back.

"I don't," I say, surprising myself with how calm and reasonable I sound.

"Mom left that bag to Carrie. Because she's the oldest," Missy says.

"No she didn't," Dorrit wails. "She left it to her because she liked her the best."

"Dorrit, that isn't true—"

"Yes it is. Mom wanted Carrie to be just like her. Except that now Mom is dead and Carrie is *still alive.*" It's the kind of scream that makes your throat hurt.

Dorrit runs out of the room. And suddenly, I burst into tears.

I'm not a good crier. Some women can supposedly cry prettily, like the girls in *Gone with the Wind.* But I've never seen it in real life. When I cry, my face swells up and my nose runs and I can't breathe.

"What would Mom say?" I ask Missy between sobs.

"Well, I guess she can't say anything *now*," Missy says.

Ha. Gallows humor. I don't know what we'd do without it.

"I mean, yeah," I giggle, between hiccups. "It's only a handbag, right? It's not like it's a person or anything."

"I think we should paint Mr. Panda pink," Missy says. "Teach Dorrit a lesson. She left a bottle of pink polish open under the sink. I almost knocked it over when I went to get the Nair."

I race into the bathroom.

"What are you doing?" Missy squeals as I start my handiwork. When I'm finished, I hold up the bag for inspection.

"It's cool," Missy says, nodding appreciatively.

I turn it over, pleased. It really is kind of cool. "If it's deliberate," I tell her, with a sudden realization, "it's fashion."

"Ohmigod. I *love* your bag," the hostess gushes. She's wearing a black Lycra dress and the top of her hair is teased into spiky meringue waves. "I've never seen anything like it. Is that your name on it? Carrie?"

I nod.

"My name's Eileen," she says. "I'd love to have a bag like that with my name on it."

She picks up two menus and holds them aloft as she leads us to a table for two in front of the fireplace. "Most romantic table in the house," she whispers as she hands over the menus. "Have fun, kids."

"Oh, we will," Sebastian says, unfolding his napkin with a snap.

I hold up the bag. "You like?"

"It's a purse, Carrie," he says.

"This, Sebastian, is no mere *purse.* And you shouldn't call a handbag a purse. A purse was what people used to carry coins in the sixteen hundreds. They used to hide their purse inside their clothes to foil robbers. A bag, on the other hand, is meant to be seen. And this isn't any old bag. It was my mother's…" I trail off. He's clearly not interested in the provenance of my bag. Hmph. Men, I think, opening my menu.

"I like who's carrying it, though," he says.

"Thank you." I'm still a little annoyed with him.

"What would you like?"

I guess we're supposed to be all formal, now that we're at a fancy restaurant.

"Haven't decided."

"Waiter?" he says. "Can we have two martinis please? With olives instead of a twist." He leans toward me. "They have the best martinis here."

"I'd like a Singapore Sling."

"Carrie," he says. "You can't have a Singapore Sling."

"Why not?"

"Because it's a martini place. And a Singapore Sling is juvenile." He glances at me over the top of the menu. "And speaking of juvenile, what's wrong with you tonight?"

"Nothing."

"Good. Then try to act normal."

I open my menu and frown.

"The lamb chops are excellent. And so is the French onion soup. It was my favorite thing to eat in France." He looks up and smiles. "Just trying to be helpful."

"Thanks," I say, with slight sarcasm. I immediately apologize. "Sorry." What is wrong with me? Why am I in such a bad mood? I'm never in a bad mood with Sebastian.

"So," he says, taking my hand. "How was *your* week?"

"Terrible," I say as the waiter arrives with our martinis.

"Cheers," he says. "To terrible weeks."

I take a sip of my drink and carefully put it down. "Honestly, Sebastian. This week was pretty bad."

"Because of me?"

"No. Not because of you. I mean, not directly. It's just that Donna LaDonna hates me—"

"Carrie," he says. "If you can't handle the controversy, you shouldn't see me."

"I *can* handle it—"

"Well then."

"Is there always controversy? When you're seeing someone?"

He leans back and gives me a smug look. "Usually."

Aha. Sebastian is a guy who loves drama. But I love drama too. So maybe we're perfect for each other. Must discuss this aspect with The Mouse, I think, making a mental note.

"So are the French onion soup and lamb chops good for you?" he asks as he gives our order to the waiter.

"Perfect," I say, smiling at him over the rim of my martini.

And there's the problem: I don't want French onion soup. I've had onions and cheese my whole life. I wanted to try something exotic and sophisticated, like escargot. And now it's too late. Why do I always do what Sebastian wants?

As I lift my glass, a woman with coiffed red hair, a red dress, and bare legs knocks into me, spilling half of my drink. "I'm sorry, sweetheart," she says, slurring her words. She steps back, taking in what appears to be a romantic scene between me and Sebastian. "Young love," she twitters, staggering away as I mop up the mess with my napkin.

"What was *that* about?"

"Some middle-aged drunk." Sebastian shrugs.

"She can't help being middle-aged, you know."

"Yeah. But there's nothing worse than a woman over a certain age who's had too much to drink."

"Where do you pick up these rules?"

"Come on, Carrie. Everyone knows that women are lousy drunks."

"And men are better?"

"Why are we having this discussion?"

"I guess you think women are lousy drivers and scientists, too."

"There are exceptions. Your friend, The Mouse."

Excuse me?

Our onion soup arrives, the top bubbling with melted cheese. "Be careful," he says. "It's hot."

I sigh, blowing on a spoonful of gooey cheese. "I still want to go to France someday."

"I'll take you there," he says, just like that, cool as can be. "Maybe we could go this summer."

He leans forward, suddenly aroused by the thought. "We'll start in Paris. Then we'll take the train to Bordeaux. That's wine country. Then we'll swing down to the South of France. Cannes, Saint-Tropez…"

I picture the Eiffel Tower. A stucco villa on a hill. Speedboats. Bikinis. Sebastian's eyes, serious, soulful, staring into mine. "I love you, Carrie," he whispers in my fantasy. "Will you marry me?"

I was still hoping to go to New York this summer, but if Sebastian wants to take me to France, I'm there.

"Hello?"

"Huh?" I look up and see a blond woman wearing a headband and a gummy smile.

"I had to ask. Where did you get that bag?"

"Do you mind?" Sebastian says pointedly, to the blonde. He plucks the bag off the table and puts it on the floor.

The woman walks away as Sebastian orders another round of drinks. But the mood is broken, and when our lamb chops come, we eat in silence.

"Hey," I say. "We're like an old married couple."

"How so?" he asks in a flat voice.

"You know. Eating dinner and not talking. That's my worst fear. It makes me sad every time I see one of those couples at a restaurant, barely looking at each other. I mean, why bother going out, right? If you have nothing to say, why not stay home?"

"Maybe the food's better at a restaurant."

"That's funny." I put down my fork, carefully wipe my mouth, and look around the room. "Sebastian, what's wrong?"

"What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing."

"Well then," he says.

"Something is wrong."

"I'm eating, okay? Can't I eat my lamb chops without you nagging me the whole time?"

I shrink with embarrassment. I'm two inches tall. I widen my eyes and force myself not to blink. I refuse to cry. But wow, that hurt. "Sure," I say casually.

Are we having a fight? How on earth did this happen?

I pick at my lamb for a bit; then I put down my knife and fork. "I give up."

"You don't like the lamb."

"No. I love the lamb. But you're mad at me about something."

"I'm not mad."

"You sure seem mad to me."

Now he puts down his utensils. "Why do girls always do that? They always ask 'What's wrong?' Maybe nothing's wrong. Maybe a guy is just trying to eat."

"You're right," I say quietly, standing up.

For a second, he looks anxious. "Where are you going?"

"Ladies' room."

I use the toilet, wash my hands, and peer closely at my face in the mirror. Why am I being like this? Maybe there is something wrong with me.

And suddenly, I realize I'm scared.

If something happened and I lost Sebastian, I'd die. If he changed his mind and went back to Donna LaDonna, I'd double die.

On top of that, tomorrow night I have that date with George. I wanted to get out of it but my father wouldn't let me. "It would be rude," he said.

"But I don't like him," I replied, as sulky as a child.

"He's a very nice guy, and there's no reason to be unkind."

"It would be unkind to lead him on."

"Carrie," my father said, and sighed. "I want you to be careful with Sebastian."

"What's wrong with Sebastian?"

"You're spending a lot of time with him. And a father has instincts about these things. About other men."

Then I was angry at my father too. But I didn't have the guts to cancel on George, either.

What if Sebastian finds out about the date with George and breaks up with me?

I'll kill my father. I really will.

Why don't I have any control over my life?

I'm about to reach for my bag, when I remember I don't have it. It's under the table where Sebastian hid it. I take a deep breath. I order myself to buck up, put on a smiley face, get back out there, and act like everything is fine.

When I return, our plates have been cleared. "So," I begin with false cheeriness.

"Do you want dessert?" Sebastian asks.

"Do you?"

"I asked you first. Can you please make a decision?"

"Sure. Let's have dessert." Why is this so excruciating? Chinese fingernail torture sounds more appealing.

"Two cheesecakes," he says to the waitress, ordering for me again.

"Sebastian—"

"Yes?" He looks like thunder.

"Are you still angry?"

"Look, Carrie. I spend all this time planning a date and taking you out to a really nice restaurant and all you do is pick on me."

"Huh?" I say, caught off guard.

"I feel like I can't do anything right."

For a second, I sit frozen in horror. What am I doing?

He's right, of course. I'm the one who's being a jerk, and for what? Am I so scared of losing him that I'm trying to push him away before he can break up with me?

He said he wanted to take me to France, for Christ's sake. What more do I want?

"Sebastian?" I ask in a tiny voice.

"Yes?"

"I'm sorry."

"It's okay." He pats my hand. "Everyone makes mistakes."

I nod, sinking further into my chair, but Sebastian's mood is suddenly restored. He pulls my chair around next to his, and, in full view of the entire restaurant, kisses me.

"I've been wanting to do this all night," he whispers.

"Me too," I murmur. Or at least, I thought I did. But after a few seconds, I break away. I'm still a bit angry and confused. But I take another sip of my martini and push the angry feelings down, right to the bottom of my soles, where hopefully, they won't cause any more trouble.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN Little Criminals

"Wow," George says.

"Wow what?" I ask, coming into the kitchen. George and my father are comparing notes on Brown like they're old pals.

"That bag," George says. "I love it."

"You do?" Hmph. After my roller-coaster date with Sebastian, which ended with us making out in his car in my driveway until my father switched the outdoor lights on and off, the last person I want to see is George.

"I was thinking," I say to George now. "Instead of driving all the way to this inn, why don't we go to The Brownstone? It's closer, and the food's really good." I'm being cruel, taking George to the same restaurant as Sebastian. But love has made me evil.

George, of course, has no idea. He's annoyingly agreeable. "Wherever you want to go is fine with me."

"Have fun," my father says hopefully.

We get into the car, and George leans over for a kiss. I turn my head and his kiss lands on the side of my mouth. "How have you been?" he asks.

"Crazy." I'm about to tell him all about my wild two weeks with Sebastian and how I'm being stalked by Donna LaDonna and the two Jens, and the nasty card in my locker, but I stop myself. George doesn't need to know about Sebastian yet. Instead I say, "I had to take a friend of mine to this doctor to get birth control pills, and there was a girl who'd obviously had an abortion and—"

He nods, keeping his eyes on the highway. "Growing up in the city, I always used to wonder what people did in small towns. But I guess people manage to get into trouble, no matter where they live."

"Ha. Have you ever read *Peyton Place*?"

"I mostly read biographies. When I'm not reading for class."

I nod. We've only been together for ten minutes, but already it's so awkward I can't imagine how I'll get through the evening. "Is that what they call it?" I ask tentatively. "'The city?' Not 'New York' or 'Manhattan'?"

"Yeah," he says, with a little laugh. "I know it sounds arrogant. Like New York is the only city on earth. But New Yorkers are a little arrogant. And they do think Manhattan is the center of the universe. Most New Yorkers couldn't imagine living anywhere else." He glances over at me. "Does that sound terrible? Do I sound like an asshole?"

"Not at all. I wish I lived in Manhattan." I want to say "the city," but I'm afraid I'll sound affected.

"Have you ever been?" he asks.

"Not really. Once or twice when I was little. We went on a school trip to the planetarium and looked at stars."

"I practically grew up in the planetarium. And the Museum of Natural History. I used to know everything about dinosaurs. And I loved the Central Park Zoo. My family's house is on Fifth Avenue, and when I was a kid, I'd hear the lions roaring at night. Pretty cool, huh?"

"Very cool," I say, hugging myself. I'm strangely cold and jittery. I have a sudden premonition: I'm going to live in Manhattan. I'm going to hear the lions roaring in Central Park. I don't know how I'm going to get there, but I will.

"Your family lives in a house?" I ask stupidly. "I thought everyone in New York lived in apartments."

"It *is* an apartment," George says. "A classic eight, as a matter of fact. And there are actual houses—townhouses and brownstones. But everyone in the city calls their apartment a house. Don't ask me why. Another affectation, I suppose." He gives me a sidelong glance. "You should visit me.

My mother spends the entire summer at her house in Southampton, so the apartment is practically empty. It has four bedrooms," he adds quickly so I don't get the wrong idea.

"Sure. That would be great." And if I could get into that damn writing program, it would be even better.

Unless I go to France with Sebastian instead.

"Hey," he says. "I've missed you, you know?"

"You shouldn't miss me, George," I say with coy irritation.

"You don't even know me."

"I know you enough to miss you. To think about you, anyway. Is that all right?"

I should tell him I already have a boyfriend—but it's too soon. I hardly even know him. I smile and say nothing.

"Carrie!" Eileen, the hostess at The Brownstone, greets me like I'm an old friend, looks George up and down, and nods approvingly.

George is amused. "They know you here?" he asks, taking my arm as Eileen leads us to a table.

I nod mysteriously.

"What's good here?" he asks, picking up the menu.

"The martinis." I smile. "And the French onion soup is pretty good. And the lamb chops."

George grins. "Yes to the martini and no to the French onion soup. It's one of those dishes Americans think is French, but no self-respecting French person would ever order."

I frown, wondering once again how I'm going to make it through this dinner. George orders the escargot and the cassoulet, which is what I wanted to order last night but didn't, because Sebastian wouldn't let me.

"I want to know all about you," George says, taking my hand from across the table.

I slip it away, hiding my resistance by acting like I simply have to have another sip of my martini. How does a person explain everything about themselves anyway? "What do you want to know?"

"For starters, can I expect to see you at Brown next fall?"

I lower my eyes. "My father wants me to go. But I've always wanted to live in Manhattan." And before I know it, I'm telling him all about my dream of becoming a writer and how I tried to get into the summer writing program and was rejected.

He doesn't find this shocking or embarrassing. "I've known a few writers in my life," he says slyly. "Rejection is part of the process. At least at first. Plenty of writers don't even get published until they've written two or three books."

"Really?" I feel a soaring hope.

"Oh, sure," he says with authority. "Publishing is full of stories about the manuscript that got rejected by twenty publishers before someone took a chance on it and turned it into a huge bestseller."

Just like me, I think. I'm masquerading as a regular girl, but somewhere inside me there's a star, waiting for someone to give me a chance.

"Hey," he says. "If you want, I'd be happy to read some of your stuff. Maybe I can help you."

"Would you?" I ask, astonished. No one's ever offered to help me before. No one's even encouraged me. I take in George's gentle brown sloping eyes. He's so nice. And damn it, I do want to get into that writing program. I want to live in "the city." And I want to visit George and hear the lions roaring in Central Park.

I suddenly want my future to begin.

"Wouldn't it be cool if you were a writer and I was an editor at *The New York Times*?"

Yes! I want to shout. There's only one problem. I have a boyfriend. I can't be a louse. I have to let George know now. Otherwise, it isn't fair.

"George. I have to tell you something—"

I'm about to spill my secret, when Eileen approaches the table with a self-important look on her face. "Carrie?" she says. "You have a phone call."

"I do?" I squeak, looking from George to Eileen. "Who would be calling me?"

"You'd better find out." George stands as I get up from the table.

"Hello?" I say into the phone. I have a wild thought that it's Sebastian. He's tracked me down, discovered I'm on a date with another guy, and he's furious. Instead, it's Missy.

"Carrie?" she asks in a terrified voice that immediately makes me imagine my father or Dorrit has been killed in an accident. "You'd better come home right away."

My knees nearly buckle beneath me. "What happened?" I ask in a hoarse whisper.

"It's Dorrit. She's at the police station." Missy pauses before delivering the final blow. "She's been *arrested.*"

"I don't know about you," says a strange woman clutching an old fur coat over what appears to be a pair of silk pajamas, "but I'm finished. Through. Ready to wash my hands of her."

My father, who is sitting next to her on a molded plastic chair, nods bleakly.

"I've been doing this for too long," the woman continues, blinking rapidly. "Four boys, and I had to keep trying for a girl. Then I got her. Now I have to say I wish I didn't. No matter what anyone says, girls are more trouble than boys. Do you have any sons, Mr., er—"

"Bradshaw," my father says sharply. "And no, I don't have any sons, just three daughters."

The woman nods and pats my father on the knee. "You poor man," she says. This, apparently, is the mother of Dorrit's notorious pot-smoking friend, Cheryl.

"Really," my father says, shifting in his seat to get away from her. His glasses slide to the tip of his nose. "In general," he says, launching into one of his theories on child rearing, "a preference for children of one sex over the other, especially when it's so baldly expressed by the parent, often results in a *lack* in the child, an inherent *lack*—"

"Dad!" I say, skittering across the floor to rescue him.

He pushes his glasses up his nose, stands, and opens his arms. "Carrie!"

"Mr. Bradshaw," George says.

"George."

"George?" Cheryl's mother stands, batting her eyes like butterfly wings. "I'm Connie."

"Ah." George nods, as if somehow this makes sense. Connie is now clinging to George's arm. "I'm Cheryl's mother. And really, she's not a bad girl—"

"I'm sure she isn't," George says kindly.

Oh jeez. Is Cheryl's mother flirting with George now?

I motion my father aside. I keep picturing the small marijuana pipe I found in Mr. Panda. "Was it—" I can't bring myself to say the word "drugs" aloud.

"Gum," my father says wearily.

"Gum? She was arrested for stealing gum?"

"Apparently it's her third offense. She was caught shoplifting twice before, but the police let her go. This time, she wasn't so lucky."

"Mr. Bradshaw? I'm Chip Marone, the arresting officer," says a shiny-faced young man in a uniform.

Marone—the cop from the barn.

"Can I see my daughter, please?"

"We have to fingerprint her. And take a mug shot."

"For stealing *gum*?" I blurt out. I can't help myself.

My father blanches. "She's going to have a record? My thirteen-year-old daughter is going to have a record like a common criminal?"

"Those are the rules," Marone says.

I nudge my father. "Excuse me. But we're really good friends with the Kandesies—"

"It's a small town," Marone says, rubbing his cheeks. "A lot of people know the Kandesies—"

"But Lali is like one of the family. And we've known them forever. Right, Dad?"

"Now, look here, Carrie," my father says. "You can't go asking people to bend the rules. It isn't right."

"But—"

"Maybe we could call them. The Kandesies," George says. "Just to make sure."

"I can assure you. My little Cheryl has never been in trouble before," Connie says, squeezing George's arm for support as she blinks at Marone.

Marone has clearly had enough. "I'll see what I can do," he mutters, and picks up the phone behind the desk. "Right," he says into the receiver. "Okay. No problem." He hangs up the phone and glowers.

"Community service." Dorrit gasps.

"You'll be lucky to get off that easily," says my father.

George, my father, Dorrit, and I are gathered in the den, discussing the situation. Marone agreed to release Dorrit and Cheryl with the caveat that they have to see the judge on Wednesday, who will probably sentence them to community service to pay for their crimes.

"I hope you like picking up trash," George says playfully, poking Dorrit in the ribs. She giggles. The two are sitting on the couch. My father told Dorrit she should go to bed, but she refused.

"Have you ever been arrested?" Dorrit asks George.

"Dorrit!"

"What?" she says, staring at me blankly.

"As a matter of fact I have. But my crime was much worse than yours. I jumped a subway turnstile and ran right into a cop."

Dorrit gazes up at George, her eyes filled with admiration. "What happened then?"

"He called my father. And boy, was my dad pissed. I had to spend every afternoon in his office, rearranging his business books in alphabetical order and filing all his bank statements."

"Really?" Dorrit's eyes widen in awe.

"So the moral of the story is, always pay the fare."

"You hear that, Dorrit?" my father says. He stands, but his shoulders are stooped and he suddenly looks exhausted. "I'm going to bed. You too, Dorrit."

"But—"

"Now," he says quietly.

Dorrit gives George one last, longing look and runs upstairs.

"Good night, kids," my father says.

I absentmindedly smooth my skirt. "Sorry about that. My father, Dorrit—"

"It's okay," George says, taking my hand again. "I understand. No family is perfect. Including mine."

"Really?" I try to maneuver my hand out from under his, but I can't. I attempt to change the subject instead.

"Dorrit seemed to like you."

"I'm good with kids," he says, leaning in for a kiss. "Always have been."

"George." I twist my head away. "I'm—uh—really exhausted—"

He sighs. "I get it. Time to go home. But I'll see you again soon, right?"

"Sure."

He pulls me to my feet and wraps his arms around my waist. I bury my face in his chest in an attempt to avoid what's inevitably coming next.

"Carrie?" He strokes my hair.

It feels nice, but I can't let this go any further. "I'm so tired," I moan.

"Okay." He steps back, lifts my head, and brushes my lips with his. "I'll call you tomorrow."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN How Far Will You Go?

"What's the holdup?" Sebastian asks.

"Have to fix my makeup," I say.

He runs his hand up my arm and tries to kiss me. "You don't need makeup."

"Stop," I hiss. "Not in the house."

"You don't have a problem doing this in my house."

"You don't have two younger sisters. One of whom—"

"I know. Was arrested for shoplifting gum," he says with disdain. "Which ranks pretty low in the annals of criminal activity. It's right down there with lighting firecrackers in neighbors' mailboxes."

"And thus began your own life of crime," I say, gently closing the bathroom door in his face.

He knocks.

"Yeeeees?"

"Hurry up."

"Hurrying," I say. "Hurrying and scurrying." Which is not true. I'm stalling.

I'm waiting for George to call. Two weeks have passed since Dorrit's arrest, but true to form, George called me the next day and the day after that, and then I asked him if he really meant it when he said he would read one of my stories and he said yes. So I sent it to him and now I haven't heard from him for five days, except for yesterday when he left a message with Dorrit saying he'd call me today between six and seven. Damn him. If he'd called at six, Sebastian wouldn't be here, hovering. It's nearly seven. Sebastian will be furious if I get a phone call just before we're about to go.

I unscrew a tube of mascara and lean forward, applying the wand to my lashes. It's the second coat, and my lashes twist into jagged little spikes. I'm about to apply a third, when the phone rings.

"Phone!" Missy shouts.

"Phone!" Dorrit yells.

"Phone!" I scream, bursting out of the bathroom like a lit firecracker.

"Huh?" Sebastian says, sticking his head out my bedroom door.

"Could be Dorrit's probation officer."

"Dorrit has a probation officer? For stealing gum?" Sebastian says, but I can't stop to explain.

I grab the phone in my father's room just before Dorrit reaches it. "Hello?"

"Carrie? George here."

"Oh, hi," I say breathlessly, closing the door. *What did you think of my story? I need to know. Now.*

"How are you?" George asks. "How's Dorrit?"

"She's fine." *Did you read it? Did you hate it? If you hated it I'm going to kill myself.*

"Is she doing her community service?"

"Yes, George." The agony is killing me.

"What did they assign her to?"

Who cares? "Picking up litter on the side of the road."

"Ah. The old litter routine. Works every time."

"George." I hesitate. "Did you read my story?"

"Yes, Carrie. As a matter of fact, I did."

"And?"

A long silence during which I contemplate the practicalities of slitting my wrists with a safety razor.

"You're definitely a writer."

I am? I'm a writer? I imagine running around the room, jumping up and down and shouting, "I'm a writer, I'm a writer!"

"And you have talent."

"Ah." I fall back onto the bed in ecstasy.

"But—"

I sit right up again, clutching the phone in terror.

"Well, really, Carrie. This story about a girl who lives in a trailer park in Key West, Florida, and works in a Dairy Queen…Have you ever been to Key West?"

"For your information, I have. Several times," I say primly.

"Did you live in a trailer? Did you work at the Dairy Queen?"

"No. But why can't I pretend I did?"

"You've got plenty of imagination," George says. "But I know a thing or two about these writing programs. They're looking for something that smacks of personal experience and authenticity."

"I don't get it," I mutter.

"Do you know how many stories they're sent about a kid who dies? It doesn't ring true. You need to write what you know."

"But I don't know anything!"

"Sure you do. And if you can't think of something, find it."

My joy dissipates like a morning mist.

"Carrie?" Sebastian knocks on the door.

"Can I call you tomorrow?" I ask quickly, cupping my hand around the receiver. "I have to go to this party for the swim team."

"I'll call you. We'll make a plan to get together, okay?"

"Sure." I put down the phone and hang my head in despair.

My career as a writer is over. Finished before it's even begun.

"Carrie," Sebastian's voice, louder and more annoyed, comes from the other side of the door.

"Ready," I say, opening it.

"Who was that?"

"Someone from Brown."

"Are you going to go there?"

"I have to get in. Officially. But yeah. I guess I probably will."

I feel like I'm being suffocated by thick green slime.

"What are you going to do about college?" I ask suddenly. Strange how I haven't asked him about this before.

"I'm going to take a year off," he says. "Last night, I was looking at the essay portion of my application to Amherst when it hit me. I don't want to do this. I don't want to be part of the system. That probably shocks you, doesn't it?"

"No. It's your life."

"Yeah, but how are you going to feel about having a deadbeat boyfriend?"

"You're not a deadbeat. You're smart. Really smart."

"I'm a regular genius," he says. And after another second: "Do we have to go to this party?"

"Yes," I insist. "Lali has it every year. If we don't show up, she'll be really hurt."

"You're the boss," he says. I follow him out of the house, wishing we didn't have to go to the party, either. *Write what you know.* That was the best George could come up with? A cliché? Damn him. Damn everything. Why is it all so goddamned hard?

"If it wasn't difficult, everyone would do it," Peter says, holding court to a small group of kids who are clustered around the couch. Peter has just been accepted to Harvard, early decision, and everyone is impressed. "Bioengineering is the hope of the future," he continues as I drift away and find Maggie sitting in the corner with The Mouse.

The Mouse looks like she's being held hostage. "Honestly, Maggie," she says, "this is great for Peter. It makes us all look good if someone from Castlebury gets into Harvard."

"It doesn't have anything to do with us," Maggie counters.

"I can't believe Peter got into Harvard," Lali says, pausing on her way to the kitchen. "Isn't it great?"

"No," Maggie says firmly. Everyone is thrilled for Peter—everyone, it seems, but Maggie.

I understand her despair. Maggie is one of the millions of kids out there who have no idea what they want to do with their lives—like Sebastian, I suppose, and Lali. When someone close to you figures it out, it pulls you up short in front of your own wall of indecision.

"Harvard is only an hour and a half away," I say soothingly, trying to distract Maggie from what's really bothering her.

"It doesn't matter how far it is," she says glumly. "Harvard is not any old college. If you go to Harvard, you become someone who went to Harvard. For the rest of your life, it's what people say about you: *He* went to Harvard—"

Maybe it's because I'll never go to Harvard and I'm jealous, but I hate all this elitist talk. Who you are shouldn't be defined by where you go to college. It probably is, though.

"And if Peter is always going to be the guy who went to Harvard," Maggie continues, "I'm always going to be the girl who *didn't*."

The Mouse and I exchange glances. "If you don't mind, I'm going to get a beer,"The Mouse says.

"What does she care?" Maggie says, looking after her. "She's going to Yale. She'll be the girl who went to Yale. Sometimes I think Peter and The Mouse should date. They'd be perfect for each other." There's an unexpected bitterness in her voice.

"The Mouse is dating someone," I say gently. "Remember?"

"Right," she says. "Some guy who doesn't live around here." She waves her arm in dismissal. She's drunk, I realize.

"Let's go for a walk."

"It's cold outside," she protests.

"It's good for us."

On our way out, we pass Sebastian and Lali in the kitchen. Lali has put Sebastian to work, placing mini hot dogs from the oven onto a plate. "We'll be right back," I call out.

"Sure." Lali barely glances in our direction. She says something to Sebastian and he laughs.

For a second I feel uneasy. Then I try to look on the bright side. At least my boyfriend and my best friend are getting along.

When we get outside, Maggie grabs my arm and whispers, "How far would you go to get what you wanted?"

"Huh?" I say. It's freezing. Our breath envelops us like summer clouds.

"What if you really, really, really wanted something and you didn't know how to get it—or you did know how to get it but you weren't sure you should do it. How far would you go?"

For a second, I wonder if she's talking about Lali and Sebastian. Then I realize she's talking about Peter.

"Let's go into the barn," I suggest. "It's warmer."

The Kandesies keep a few cows, mostly for show, in an old barn behind the house. Above the cows is a hayloft, where Lali and I have retreated hundreds of times to spill our most important secrets. The loft is fragrant and warm, due to the heat from the cows below. I perch on a hay bale. "Maggie, what's wrong?" I say, wondering how many times I've asked her this question in the last three months. It's becoming disturbingly repetitive.

She takes out a pack of cigarettes.

"Don't." I stop her. "You can't smoke up here. You could start a fire."

"Let's go outside, then."

"It's cold. And you can't grab a cigarette every time you feel uncomfortable, Mags. It's becoming a crutch."

"So?" Maggie looks evil.

"What did you mean before—about how far you would go?" I ask. "You're not thinking about Peter, are you? You're not thinking about…are you taking the birth control pills?"

"Of course." She looks away. "When I remember."

"Mags." I leap toward her. "Are you insane?"

"No. I don't think so."

I slide in next to her and fall back on a bale of hay, gathering my arguments. I stare up at the ceiling, which nature has decorated with swags of cobwebs, like a Halloween extravaganza. Nature and instinct versus morality and logic. That's how my father would put this dilemma.

"Mags," I begin. "I know you're worried about losing him. But what you're thinking about doing is not the way to keep him."

"Why not?" she asks stubbornly.

"Because it's wrong. You don't want to be the girl who forced a guy to be with her by getting pregnant."

"Women do it all the time."

"That doesn't make it right."

"My mother did it," she says. "No one's supposed to know. But I counted backward, and my oldest sister was born six months after my parents were married."

"That was years ago. They didn't even have the pill back then."

"Maybe it would be better if they didn't now."

"Maggie, what are you saying? You don't want to have a baby at eighteen. Babies are a huge pain. All they do is eat and poop. You want to be changing diapers while everyone you know is out having fun? And what about Peter? It could ruin his life. That doesn't seem very nice, does it?"

"I don't care," she says. And then she starts crying.

I put my face close to hers. "You're not pregnant *now*, are you?"

"No!" she says fiercely.

"Come on, Mags. You don't even like dolls."

"I know," she says, wiping her eyes.

"And Peter is crazy about you. He may be going to Harvard, but it doesn't mean he's going anywhere."

"I didn't get into Boston University," she says suddenly. "That's right. I got a rejection letter from them yesterday when Peter got his acceptance to Harvard."

"Oh, Mags."

"And pretty soon, everyone will be leaving. You, The Mouse, Walt—"

"You'll get in someplace else," I say encouragingly.

"What if I don't?"

Good question. And one I haven't faced squarely until now. What if nothing works out the way it's supposed to? On the other hand, if it doesn't, what are you supposed to do? You can't just sit there.

"I miss Walt," she says.

"I do too," I say, hugging my knees to my chest. "Where is Walt anyway?"

"Don't ask me. I've hardly seen him for three weeks. That's not like Walt."

"No, it isn't," I agree, thinking about how cynical Walt's been lately. "Come on. Let's call him."

Back in the house, the party is in full swing. Sebastian is dancing with Lali, which annoys me slightly, but I have more important things to worry about than my best friend and my boyfriend. I pick up the phone and dial Walt's number.

"Hello?" his mother answers.

"Is Walt there?" I ask, yelling over the noise of the party.

"Who is this?" she asks suspiciously.

"Carrie Bradshaw."

"He's out, Carrie."

"Do you know where he is?"

"He said he was meeting up with you," she snaps, and hangs up the phone.

Weird, I think, shaking my head. Definitely weird.

Meanwhile, Maggie has commandeered the party by standing on the couch and doing a striptease. Everyone is hooting and clapping, save for Peter, who is trying to appear as if he's enjoying it, but is actually mortified. I can't let Mags go down alone, not in the state she's in.

I kick off my shoes and jump onto the couch next to her.

Yes, I'm aware that nobody really wants to see me doing a striptease, but people are used to me making a fool of myself. I'm wearing white cotton tights under a cheap sequined skirt that I bought at a discount store, and I begin pulling them off at the toe. Within seconds, Lali has joined us on the couch, running her hands up and down her body while elbowing Maggie and me to the side. I'm standing on one foot, and I fall over the back of the couch, taking Maggie with me.

Maggie and I are lying on the ground, laughing hysterically. "Are you okay?" Peter asks, bending over Maggie.

"I'm fine," she giggles. And she is. Now that Peter is paying attention to her, everything is great. For the moment, anyway.

"Carrie Bradshaw, you're a bad influence," Peter chides as he leads Maggie away.

"And you're an uptight prig," I mutter, fixing my tights as I get to my feet.

I look over at Peter, who is pouring Maggie a whiskey, a tender yet smug expression on his face.

How far would *you* go to get what you wanted?

And that's when it hits me. I could write for the school newspaper. It would give me material to send into The New School. And it would be—ugh—*real.*

No, scolds a voice in my head. *Not* The Nutmeg. *That really is going too far. Besides, if you write for* The Nutmeg, *you're a hypocrite. You never hesitate to tell anyone who will listen that you hate* The Nutmeg—*including Peter, who's the editor.*

Yes, but what choice do you have? asks another voice. *Do you really want to do nothing, letting life just happen to you like you're some kind of loser? If you don't at least try to write for* The Nutmeg, *you'll probably never get into that writing program.*

Hating myself, I head over to the bar, pour myself a vodka cranberry juice, and sidle up to Maggie and Peter. "Hi, guys," I say casually, taking a sip of my drink. "So Petey-boy," I begin. "I was thinking I might want to write for that newspaper of yours after all."

He takes a sip of his drink and looks at me, irritated. "It's not *my* newspaper."

"You know what I mean."

"No, I don't. And it's very difficult to communicate with a person who can't be precise. That's what writing is all about. Precision."

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