

## **This Lullaby by Sarah Dessen**

### CHAPTER ONE

The name of the song is "This Lullaby." At this point, I've probably heard it, oh, about a million times. Approximately.

All my life I've been told about how my father wrote it the day I was born. He was on the road somewhere in Texas, already split from my mom. The story goes that he got word of my birth, sat down with his guitar, and just came up with it, right there in a room at a Motel 6. An hour of his time, just a few chords, two verses and a chorus. He'd been writing music all his life, but in the end it would be the only song he was known for. Even in death, my father was a one-hit wonder. Or two, I guess, if you count me.

Now, the song was playing overhead as I sat in a plastic chair at the car dealership, in the first week of June. It was warm, everything was blooming, and summer was practically here. Which meant, of course, that it was time for my mother to get married again.

This was her fourth time, fifth if you include my father. I chose not to. But they were, in her eyes, married—if being united in the middle of the desert by someone they'd met at a rest stop only moments before counts as married. It does to my mother. But then, she takes on husbands the way other people change their hair color: out of boredom, listlessness, or just feeling that this next one will fix everything, once and for all. Back when I was younger, when I asked about my dad and how they'd met, when I was actually still curious, she'd just sigh, waving her hand, and say, "Oh, Remy, it was the seventies. You know."

My mother always thinks I know everything. But she's wrong. All I knew about the seventies was what I'd learned in school and from the History Channel: Vietnam, President Carter, disco. And all I knew about my father, really, was "This Lullaby." Through my life I'd heard it in the backgrounds of commercials and movies, at weddings, dedicated long-distance on radio countdowns. My father may be gone, but the song—schmaltzy, stupid, insipid—goes on. Eventually it will even outlive me.

It was in the middle of the second chorus that Don Davis of Don Davis Motors stuck his head out of his office and saw me. "Remy, honey, sorry you had to wait. Come on in."

I got up and followed him. In eight days, Don would become my stepfather, joining a not-so-exclusive group. He was the first car salesman, the second Gemini, the only one with money of his own. He and my mother met right there in his office, when we came in to buy her a new Camry. I'd come along because I know my mother: she'd pay the list price right off the bat, assuming it was set, like she was buying oranges or toilet paper at the grocery store, and of course they'd let her, because my mother is somewhat well known and everyone thinks she is rich.

Our first salesman looked right out of college and almost collapsed when my mother waltzed up to a fully loaded new-year model, then poked her head inside to get a whiff of that new-car smell. She took a deep gulp, smiled, and announced, "I'll take it!" with characteristic flourish.

"Mom," I said, trying not to grit my teeth. But she knew better. The entire ride over I'd been prepping her, with specific instructions on what to say, how to act, everything we needed to do to get a good deal. She kept telling me she was listening, even as she kept fiddling with the air-conditioning vents and playing with my automatic windows. I swear that was what had really led to this new-car fever: the fact that I had just gotten one.

So after she'd blown it, it was up to me to take over. I started asking the salesman direct questions, which made him nervous. He kept glancing past me, at her, as if I was some kind of trained attack dog she could easily put into a sit. I'm

used to this. But just as he really started to squirm we were interrupted by Don Davis himself, who made quick work of sweeping us into his office and falling hard for my mother in a matter of about fifteen minutes. They sat there making googly eyes at each other while I haggled him down three thousand bucks and got him to throw in a maintenance plan, a sealant coat, and a changer for the CD player. It had to be the best bargain in Toyota history, not that anyone noticed. It is just expected that I will handle it, whatever it is, because I am my mother's business manager, therapist, handyman, and now, wedding coordinator. Lucky, lucky, me.

"So, Remy," Don said as we sat down, him in the big swiveling leather throne behind the desk, me in the just-uncomfortable-enough-to-hurry-the-sale chair opposite. Everything at the dealership was manufactured to brainwash customers. Like memos to salesmen encouraging great deals just casually "strewn" where you could read them, and the way the offices were set up so you could easily "overhear" your salesman pleading for a good deal with his manager. Plus the fact that the window I was now facing opened up to the part of the lot where people picked up their brand-new cars. Every few minutes, one of the salesmen would walk someone right to the center of the window, hand them their shiny new keys, and then smile benevolently as they drove off into the sunset, just like in the commercials. What a bunch of shit.

Now, Don shifted in his seat, adjusting his tie. He was a portly guy, with an ample stomach and a bit of a bald spot: the word doughy came to mind. But he adored my mother, God help him. "What do you need from me today?"

"Okay," I said, reaching into my back pocket for the list I'd brought. "I double-checked with the tux place and they're expecting you this week for the final fitting. The rehearsal dinner list is pretty much set at seventy-five, and the caterer will need a check for the rest of the deposit by Monday."

"Fine." He opened a drawer and pulled out the leather binder where he kept his checkbook, then reached into his jacket pocket for a pen. "How much for the caterer?"

I glanced down at my paper, swallowed, and said, "Five thousand."

He nodded and started writing. To Don, five thousand bucks was hardly any money at all. This wedding itself was setting him back a good twenty, and that didn't seem to faze him either. Add to it the renovation that had been done on our house so we could all live together like one happy family, the debt Don was forgiving on my brother's truck, and just the day-to-day maintenance of living with my mother, and he was making quite an investment. But then again, this was his first wedding, first marriage. He was a rookie. My family, however, had long been of pro status.

He ripped out the check, slid it across the desk, and smiled. "What else?" he asked me.

I consulted my list again. "Okay, just the band, I think. The people at the reception hall were asking—"

"It's under control," he said, waving his hand. "They'll be there. Tell your mother not to worry."

I smiled at this, because he expected me to, but we both knew she wasn't worrying at all about this wedding. She'd picked out her dress, decided on flowers, and then pushed the rest off on me, claiming she needed absolutely every free second to work on her latest book. But the truth was, my mother hated details. She loved to plunge into projects, tackle them for about ten minutes, and then lose interest. All around our house were little piles of things that had once held her attention: aromatherapy kits, family tree software, stacks of Japanese cookbooks, an aquarium with four sides covered in algae and one sole survivor, a fat white fish who had eaten all the others.

Most people put off my mother's erratic behavior to the fact that she was a writer, as if that explained everything. To me that was just an excuse. I mean, brain

surgeons can be crazy too, but no one says it's all right. Fortunately for my mother, I am alone in this opinion.

". . . is so soon!" Don said, tapping his finger on the calendar. "Can you believe it?"

"No," I said, wondering what the first part of his sentence had been. I added, "It's just amazing."

He smiled at me, then glanced back down at the calendar, where I now saw the wedding day, June 10, was circled several times in different colors of pen. I guess you couldn't blame him for being excited. Before he met my mother, Don was at the age where most of his friends had given up on him ever getting married. For the last fifteen years he'd lived alone in a condo right off the highway, spending most of his waking hours selling more Toyotas than anyone else in the state. Now, in nine days, he would get not only Barbara Starr, romance novelist extraordinaire, but also, in a package deal, my brother Chris and me. And he was happy about it. It was amazing.

Just then the intercom on his desk buzzed, loudly, and a woman's voice came on. "Don, Jason has an eight fifty-seven on deck, needs your input. Should I send them in?"

Don glanced at me, then pushed down the button and said, "Sure. Give me five seconds."

"Eight fifty-seven?" I asked.

"Just dealership lingo," he said easily, standing up. He smoothed down his hair, covering the small bald spot I only noticed when he was seated. Behind him, on the other side of the window, a ruddy-faced salesman was handing a woman with a toddler the keys to her new car: she took them as the kid tugged on her skirt, trying to get her attention. She didn't seem to notice. "Hate to push you out, but—"

"I'm done," I told him, tucking the list back in my pocket.

"I really appreciate all you're doing for us, Remy," he said as he came around the desk. He put one hand on my shoulder, Dad-style, and I tried not to remember all the stepfathers before him that had done the same thing, that same weight, carrying the same meaning. They all thought they were permanent too.

"No problem," I said as he moved his hand and opened the door for me. Waiting for us out in the hallway was a salesman, standing with what had to be that eight fifty-seven—code for an on-the-fence customer, I assumed—a short woman who was clutching her handbag and wearing a sweatshirt with an appliquéd kitten on it.

"Don," the salesman said smoothly, "this is Ruth, and we're trying our hardest to get her into a new Corolla today."

Ruth looked nervously from Don to me, then back to Don. "I just—" she sputtered.

"Ruth, Ruth," Don said soothingly. "Let's just all sit down for a minute and talk about what we can do for you. Okay?"

"That's right," the salesman echoed, gently prodding her forward. "We'll just talk."

"Okay," Ruth said, somewhat uncertainly, and started into Don's office. As she passed she glanced at me, as if I were part of this, and it was all I could do not to tell her to run, fast, and not look back.

"Remy," Don said, quietly, as if he'd noticed this, "I'll see you later, okay?"

"Okay," I told them, then watched as Ruth made her way inside. The salesman steered her to the uncomfortable chair, facing the window. Now, an Asian couple was climbing into their new truck. Both of them were smiling as they adjusted the seats, admired the interior: the woman flipped down the visor, checking her reflection in the mirror there. They were both breathing deep, taking in that new-car smell, as the husband stuck the key in the ignition. Then they drove off, waving to their salesman as they went. Cue that sunset.

"Now Ruth," Don said, settling into his chair. The door was closing on them, and I could barely see his face now. "What can I do to make you happy?"

I was halfway across the showroom when I remembered that my mother had asked me to please, please remind Don about cocktails tonight. Her new editor was in town for the evening, ostensibly just passing through from Atlanta and wanting to stop in and be social. Her true motivation, however, was that my mother owed her publisher a novel, and everyone was starting to get a little antsy about it.

I turned around and walked back down the hallway to Don's office. The door was still closed, and I could hear voices murmuring behind it.

The clock on the opposite wall was the school kind, with big black numbers and a wobbly second hand. It was already one-fifteen. The day after my high school graduation and here I was, not beach bound or sleeping off a hangover like everyone else. I was running wedding errands, like a paid employee, while my mother lay in her king-size Sealy Posturepedic, with the shades drawn tight, getting the sleep she claimed was crucial to her creative process.

And that was all it took to feel it. That slow, simmering burn in my stomach that I always felt when I let myself see how far the scale had tipped in her favor. It was either resentment or what was left of my ulcer, or maybe both. The Muzak overhead was growing louder, as if someone was fiddling with the volume, so that now I was getting blasted with a rendition of some Barbra Streisand song. I crossed one leg over the other and closed my eyes, pressing my fingers into the arms of my chair. Just a few weeks of this, I told myself, and I'm gone.

Just then, someone plopped down hard into the chair on my left, knocking me sideways into the wall; it was jarring, and I hit my elbow on the molding there, right in the funny bone, which sent a tingly zap all the way up to my fingers. And suddenly, just like that, I was pissed. Really pissed. It's amazing how all it takes is one shove to make you furious.

"What the hell," I said, pushing off the wall, ready to take off the head of whatever stupid salesperson had decided to get cozy with me. My elbow was still buzzing, and I could feel a hot flush creeping up my neck: bad signs. I knew my temper.

I turned my head and saw it wasn't a salesman at all. It was a guy with black curly hair, around my age, wearing a bright orange T-shirt. And for some reason he was smiling.

"Hey there," he said cheerfully. "How's it going?"

"What is your problem?" I snapped, rubbing my elbow.

"Problem?"

"You just slammed me into the wall, asshole."

He blinked. "Goodness," he said finally. "Such language."

I just looked at him. Wrong day, buddy, I thought. You caught me on the wrong day.

"The thing is," he said, as if we'd been discussing the weather or world politics, "I saw you out in the showroom. I was over by the tire display?"

I was sure I was glaring at him. But he kept talking.

"I just thought to myself, all of a sudden, that we had something in common. A natural chemistry, if you will. And I had a feeling that something big was going to happen. To both of us. That we were, in fact, meant to be together."

"You got all this," I said, clarifying, "at the tire display?"

"You didn't feel it?" he asked.

"No. I did, however, feel you slamming me into the wall," I said evenly.

"That," he said, lowering his voice and leaning closer to me, "was an accident. An oversight. Just an unfortunate result of the enthusiasm I felt knowing I was about to talk to you."

I just looked at him. Overhead, the Muzak was now playing a spirited version of the Don Davis Motors theme song, all plinking and plunking.

"Go away," I told him.

He smiled again, running a hand through his hair. The Muzak was now building to a crescendo over us, the speaker popping, as if close to short-circuiting. We both glanced up, then at each other.

"You know what?" he said, pointing up at the speaker, which popped again, louder this time, then hissed before resuming the theme song at full blast. "From now on, forever"—he pointed up again, jabbing with his finger—"this will be our song."

"Oh, Jesus," I said, and right then I was saved, hallelujah, as Don's office door swung open and Ruth, led by her salesman, came out. She was holding a sheaf of papers and wore that stunned, recently-depleted-of-thousands look on her tired face. But she did have the complimentary fake-gold-plated key chain, all hers.

I stood up, and the guy beside me leapt to his feet. "Wait, I only want—"

"Don?" I called out, ignoring him.

"Just take this," the guy said, grabbing my hand. He turned it palm up before I could even react, and pulled a pen out of his back pocket, then proceeded—I am not joking—to write a name and phone number in the space between my thumb and forefinger.

"You are insane," I said, jerking my hand back, which caused the last digits to get smeared and knocked the pen out of his hand. It clattered to the floor, rolling under a nearby gumball machine.

"Yo, Romeo!" someone yelled from the showroom, and there was a burst of laughter. "Come on man, let's go!"

I looked up at him, still incredulous. Talk about not respecting a person's boundaries. I'd dumped drinks on guys for even brushing against me at a club, much less yanking my hand and actually writing on it.

He glanced behind him, then back at me. "I'll see you soon," he said, and grinned at me.

"Like hell," I replied, but then he was already going, dodging the truck and minivan in the showroom and out the front glass door, where a beat-up white van was idling by the curb. The back door flung open and he moved to climb in, but then the van jerked forward, making him stumble, before stopping again. He sighed, put his hands on his hips, and looked up at the sky, then grabbed the door handle again and started to pull himself up just as it moved again, this time accompanied by someone beeping the horn. This sequence repeated itself all the way across the parking lot, the salesmen in the showroom chuckling, before someone stuck a hand out the back door, offering him a hand, which he ignored. The fingers on the hand wagged, a little at first, then wildly, and finally he reached up and grabbed hold, hoisting himself in. Then the door slammed, the horn beeped again, and the van chugged out of the lot, bumping its muffler on the way out.

I looked down at my hand, where in black ink was scrawled 933-54somethingsomething, with one word beneath it. God, his handwriting was sloppy. A big D, a smear on the last letter. And what a stupid name. Dexter.

When I got home, the first thing I noticed was the music. Classical, soaring, filling the house with wailing oboes and flowing violins. Then, the smell of candles, vanilla, just tangy sweet enough to make you wince. And finally, the dead giveaway, a trail of crumpled papers strewn like bread crumbs from the foyer, through the kitchen, and leading to the sunporch.

Thank God, I thought. She's writing again.

I dropped my keys on the table by the door and bent down, picking up one balled-up piece of paper by my feet, then uncrumpled it as I walked toward the

kitchen. My mother was very superstitious about her work, and only wrote on the beat-up old typewriter she'd once dragged around the country when she did freelance music articles for a newspaper in San Francisco. It was loud, had a clanging bell that sounded whenever she reached the end of a line, and looked like some remnant from the days of the Pony Express. She had a brand-new top-of-the-line computer too, but she only used that to play solitaire.

The page in my hand had a 1 in the upper right-hand corner, and started with my mother's typical gusto.

Melanie had always been the type of woman who loved a challenge. In her career, her loves, her spirit, she lived to find herself up against something that fought her back, tested her resolve, made the winning worthwhile. As she walked into the Plaza Hotel on a cold November day, she pulled the scarf from her hair and shook off the rain. Meeting Brock Dobbin hadn't been in her plans. She hadn't seen him since Prague, when they'd left things as bad as they'd started them. But now, a year later, with her wedding so close, he was back in the city. And she was here to meet him. This time, she would win. She was

She was . . . what? There was only a smear of ink after the last word, trailing all the way down the page, from where it had been ripped from the machine.

I continued picking up discarded papers as I walked, balling them into my hand. They didn't vary much. In one, the setting was in L.A., not New York, and in another Brock Dobbin became Dock Brobbin, only to be switched back again. Small details, but it always took a little while for my mother to hit her stride. Once she did, though, watch out. She'd finished her last book in three and a half weeks, and it was big enough to function effectively as a doorstop.

The music, and the clanging of the typewriter, both got louder as I walked into the kitchen, where my brother, Chris, was ironing a shirt on the kitchen table, the salt and pepper shakers and napkin holder all pushed to one side.

"Hey," he said, brushing his hair out of his face. The iron hissed as he picked it up, then smoothed it over the edge of the collar of the shirt, pressing down hard.

"How long's she been at it?" I asked, pulling the trash can out from under the sink and dumping the papers into it.

He shrugged, letting some steam hiss out and stretching his fingers. "A couple of hours now, I guess."

I glanced past him, through the dining room to the sunporch, where I could see my mother hunched over the typewriter, a candle beside her, pounding away. It was always weird to watch her. She really slammed the keys, throwing her whole body into it, as if she couldn't get the words out fast enough. She'd keep it up for hours at a time, finally emerging with her fingers cramped, back aching, and a good fifty pages, which would probably be enough to keep her editor in New York satisfied for the time being.

I sat down at the table and flipped through a stack of mail by the fruit bowl as Chris turned the shirt over, nudging the iron slowly around one cuff. He was a really slow ironer, to the point that more than once I'd just jerked it away, unable to stand how long it took him to do just the collar. The only thing I can't stand more than seeing something done wrong is seeing it done slowly.

"Big night tonight?" I asked him. He was leaning close to the shirt now, really focusing on the front pocket.

"Jennifer Anne's having a dinner party," he said. "It's smart casual."

"Smart casual?"

"It means," he said slowly, still concentrating, "no jeans, but not quite a sport jacket event either. Ties optional. That kind of thing."

I rolled my eyes. Six months ago, my brother wouldn't have been able to define smart much less casual. Ten months earlier, on his twenty-first birthday, Chris had gotten busted at a party selling pot. It wasn't his first brush with the law, by any

means: during high school he'd racked up a few breaking and enterings (plea-bargained), one DWI (dismissed), and one possession of a controlled substance (community service and a big fine, but just by the skin of his teeth). But the party bust did him in, and he did jail time. Only three months, but it scared him enough to shape up and get a job at the local Jiffy Lube, where he'd met Jennifer Anne when she'd brought her Saturn in for a thirty-thousand-mile checkup.

Jennifer Anne was what my mother called "a piece of work," which meant she wasn't scared of either of us and didn't care if we knew it. She was a small girl with big blond hair, whip smart—though we hated to admit it—and had done more with my brother in six months than we'd ever managed in twenty-one years. She had him dressing better, working harder, and using proper grammar, including wacky new terms like "networking" and "multitasking" and "smart casual." She worked as a receptionist for a conglomerate of doctors, but referred to herself as an "office specialist." Jennifer Anne could make anything sound better than it was. I'd recently overheard her describing Chris's job as a "multilevel automotive lubrication expert," which made working at Jiffy Lube sound on a par with heading up NASA.

Now Chris lifted the shirt off the table and held it up, shaking it slightly as the typewriter bell clanged again from the other room. "What do you think?"

"Looks okay," I said. "You missed a big crease on the right sleeve, though."

He glanced down at it, then sighed. "This is so freaking hard," he said, putting it back on the table. "I don't see why people bother."

"I don't see why you bother," I said. "Since when do you need to be wrinkle free, anyway? You used to consider wearing pants dressing up."

"Cute," he said, making a face at me. "You wouldn't understand, anyway."

"Yeah, right. Excuse me, Egbert, I keep forgetting you're the smart one."

He straightened the shirt, not looking at me. "What I mean," he said slowly, "is that you'd just have to know what it's like to want to do something nice for somebody else. Out of consideration. Out of love."

"Oh, Jesus," I said.

"Exactly." He picked up the shirt again. The wrinkle was still there, not that I was going to point it out now. "That's exactly what I'm talking about. Compassion. Relationships. Two things you are sadly, and sorely, lacking."

"I am the queen of relationships," I said indignantly. "And hello, I just spent the entire morning planning our mother's wedding. That is so freaking compassionate of me."

"You," he said, folding the shirt neatly over one arm, waiter-style, "have yet to experience any kind of serious commitment—"

"What?"

"—and you have bitched and moaned so much about the wedding I'd hardly call that compassionate."

I just stood there, staring at him. There was no reasoning with him lately. It was like he'd been brainwashed by some religious cult. "Who are you?" I asked him.

"All I'm saying," he replied, quietly, "is that I'm really happy. And I wish you could be happy too. Like this."

"I am happy," I snapped, and I meant it, although it sounded bitter just because I was so pissed off. "I am," I repeated, in a more level voice.

He reached over and patted my shoulder, as if he knew better. "I'll see you later," he said, turning and heading up the kitchen stairs to his room. I watched him go, carrying his still-wrinkled shirt, and realized I was clenching my teeth, something I found myself doing too often lately.

Bing! went the typewriter bell from the other room, and my mother started another line. Melanie and Brock Dobbin were probably halfway to heartbreak already, by the sound of it. My mother's novels were the gasping romantic type, spreading

across several exotic locales and peopled with characters that had everything and yet nothing. Riches yet poverty of the heart. And so on.

I walked over to the entrance of the sunroom, careful to be quiet, and looked in at her. When she wrote she seemed to be in another world, oblivious of us: even when we were little and screaming and squawking, she'd just lift her hand from where she was sitting, her back to us, the keys still clacking, and say, "Shhhhhhh." As if that was enough to shut us up, making us see into whatever world she was in at that moment, at the Plaza Hotel or some beach in Capri, where an exquisitely dressed woman was pining for a man she was sure she had lost forever.

When Chris and I were in elementary school, my mom was pretty broke. She hadn't published anything yet except newspaper stuff, and even that had petered out once the bands she was writing about—like my dad's, all 1970s stuff, what they call "classic rock" now—began to die out or drop off the radio. She got a job teaching writing at the local community college, which paid practically nothing, and we lived in a series of nasty apartment complexes, all with names like Ridgewood Pines and Lakeview Forest, which had no lakes or pines or forests anywhere to be seen. Back then, she wrote at the kitchen table, usually during the evenings or late at night, and some afternoons. Even then, her stories were exotic; she always picked up the free brochures from the local travel agency and fished Gourmet magazine out of the stacks at the recycling center to use as research. While my brother was named after my mother's favorite saint, my name was inspired by an expensive brand of cognac she'd seen advertised in Harper's Bazaar. Never mind that we were living on Kraft macaroni and cheese while her characters favored Cristal and caviar, lounging in Dior pantsuits while we shopped at the thrift store. She always loved glamour, my mother, even if she'd never seen it up close.

Chris and I constantly interrupted her while she was working, which drove her crazy. Finally, at a flea market, she found one of those gypsy curtains, the kind that are made up of long strings of beads, and attached it above the entryway to the kitchen. It became our understood symbol: if the curtain was pulled aside, out of the way, the kitchen was fair game. But if it was hanging there, my mother was working, and we had to find our snacks and entertainment elsewhere.

I was about six then, and I loved to stand there and brush my fingertips over the beads, watching them swish back and forth. They made the softest sound, like little bells. I could peer through them and still see my mother, but now she looked almost exotic, like a fortune-teller or a fairy, a maker of magic. Which was what she was, but I didn't know it then.

Most of the remnants of our apartment years had been long lost or given away, but the beaded curtain had made the trip to the Big New House, as we'd called it when we moved in. It was one of the first things my mother hung up, before even our school pictures or her favorite Picasso print in the living room. There was a nail so it could be pulled back out of sight, but now it was down, a little worse for wear, but still doing the job. I leaned closer, peering in at my mother. She was still hard at work, fingers flying, and I closed my eyes and listened. It was like music I'd heard all my life, even more than "This Lullaby." All those keystrokes, all those letters, so many words. I brushed my fingers over the beads and watched as her image rippled, like it was on water, breaking apart gently and shimmering before becoming whole again.

## CHAPTER TWO

It was time to dump Jonathan.

"Tell me again why you're doing this?" Lissa asked me. She was sitting on my bed, flipping through my CDs and smoking a cigarette, which was fast stinking up my room even though she'd sworn it wouldn't, since she had it halfway out the

window. Even before I quit I'd hated the stink of smoking, but with Lissa I always let things slide more than I should have. I think everyone has at least one friend like that. "I mean, I like Jonathan."

"You like everybody," I told her, leaning closer to the mirror and examining my lip liner.

"That's not true," she said, picking up a CD and turning it over to examine the back. "I never liked Mr. Mitchell. He always looked at my boobs when I went up to do theorems on the board. He looked at everybody's boobs."

"Lissa," I said, "high school is over. And besides, teachers don't count."

"I'm just saying," she said.

"The thing is," I went on as I lined my lips, turning the pencil slowly, "that it's summer now, and I'm leaving for school in September. And Jonathan . . . I don't know. He's just not a keeper. He's not worth working my schedule around if we're only going to break up in a few weeks anyway."

"But you might not break up."

I leaned back, admiring my handiwork, and smudged a bit along my top lip, evening it out. "We'll break up," I said. "I'm not going to Stanford with any other entanglements than absolutely necessary."

She bit her lip, then tucked a springy curl behind one ear, ducking her head with the hurt expression she always got lately when we talked about the end of the summer. Lissa's safe zone was the eight weeks left before we all split for different directions, and she hated to think past that. "Well, of course not," she said quietly. "I mean, why would you?"

"Lissa," I said, sighing. "I didn't mean you. You know that. I just mean"—I gestured to the bedroom door, slightly ajar, beyond which we could hear my mother's typewriter still clacking, with violins drifting in the background—"you know."

She nodded. But in truth I knew she didn't understand. Lissa was the only one of us who was even slightly sentimental about high school being over. She'd actually cried at graduation, great heaving sobs, ensuring that in every picture and video she'd be red-eyed and blotchy, giving her something to complain about for the next twenty years. Meanwhile, me, Jess, and Chloe couldn't wait to get across that stage and grab our diploma, to be free at last, free at last. But Lissa had always felt things too deeply. That was what made us all so protective of her, and why I worried most about leaving her behind. She'd gotten accepted into the local university with a full scholarship, a deal too good to pass up. It helped that her boyfriend, Adam, was going there too. Lissa had it all planned out, how they'd go to freshman orientation together, live in dorms that were in close proximity, share a couple of classes. Just like high school, but bigger.

The very thought of it made me itch. But then, I wasn't Lissa. I'd powered through the last two years with my eyes on one thing, which was getting out. Getting gone. Making the grades I needed to finally live a life that was all my own. No wedding planning. No messy romantic entanglements. No revolving door of stepfathers. Just me and the future, finally together. Now there was a happy ending I could believe in.

Lissa reached over and turned up the radio, filling the room with some boppy song with a la-la-la chorus. I walked over to my closet, pulling open the door to examine my options.

"So what do you wear to dump somebody?" she asked me, twirling a lock of hair around one finger. "Black, for mourning? Or something cheerful and colorful, to distract them from their pain? Or maybe you wear some sort of camouflage, something that will help you disappear quickly in case they don't take it well."

"Personally," I told her, pulling out a pair of black pants and turning them in my hands, "I'm thinking dark and slimming, a bit of cleavage. And clean underwear."

"You wear that every night."

"This is every night," I replied. I knew I had a clean red shirt I liked somewhere in my closet, but I couldn't find it in the shirt section. Which meant somebody had been in there, picking around. I kept my closet the way I kept everything: neat and tidy. My mother's house was usually in chaos, so my room had always been the only place I could keep the way I chose. Which was in order, perfectly organized, everything where I could easily find it. Okay, so maybe I was a little obsessive. But so what? At least I wasn't a slob.

"Not for Jonathan," she said, and when I glanced at her she added, "I mean, this is a big night for him. He's getting dumped. And he doesn't even know it yet. He's probably eating a cheeseburger or flossing or picking up his dry cleaning, and he has no idea. No inkling."

I gave up on the red shirt, pulling out a tank top instead. I didn't even know what to say to her. Yes, it sucked getting dumped. But wasn't it better to just be brutally honest? To admit that your feeling for someone is never going to be powerful enough to justify taking up any more of their time? I was doing him a favor, really. Freeing him up for a better opportunity. In fact, I was a practically a saint, if you really thought about it.

Exactly.

A half hour later, when we pulled up to the Quik Zip, Jess was waiting for us. As usual, Chloe was late.

"Hey," I said, walking over to her. She was leaning against her big tank of a car, an old Chevy with a sagging bumper, and sucking on an Extra Large Zip Coke, our drug of choice. They were the best bargain in town, at \$1.59, and served a multitude of uses.

"I'm getting Skittles," Lissa called out, slamming her door. "Anybody want anything?"

"Zip Diet," I told her, and reached for my money, but she shook me off, already heading inside. "Extra large!"

She nodded as the door swung shut behind her. She even walked perkily, hands jauntily in her pockets as she headed for the candy aisle. Lissa's sweet tooth was infamous: she was the only person I knew who could discern between Raisinets and chocolate-covered raisins. There was a difference.

"Where's Chloe?" I asked Jess, but she just shrugged, not even taking her lips off the straw of her Zip Coke. "Did we not say seven-thirty sharp?"

She raised an eyebrow at me. "Calm down, anal retentive," she said, shaking her drink. The ice rattled around, sloshing in what was left of the liquid. "It's just six right now."

I sighed, leaning back against her car. I hated when people were late. But Chloe always ran five minutes behind, on a good day. Lissa was usually early, and Jess was Jess: solid as a rock, there right on the dot. She'd been my best friend since the fifth grade, and was the only one I knew I could always depend on.

We'd met because our desks sat side by side, per Mrs. Douglas's alphabet system. Mike Schemen the nose picker, then Jess, then me, with Adam Struck, who had bad adenoids, on my other side. It was practically required that we be best friends, seeing as we were surrounded by the booger twins.

Jess was big, even then. She wasn't fat, exactly, just like she wasn't fat now. More just large, big-boned, tall and wide. Thick. Back then, she was larger than any of the boys in our class, brutal at dodgeball, able to hit you hard enough with one of those red medicine balls before school that it left a mark that lasted through final bell. A lot of people thought Jess was mean, but they were wrong. They didn't know what I knew: that her mom had died that summer, leaving her to raise two little brothers while her dad worked full-time at the power plant. That money was always tight, and Jess didn't get to be a kid anymore.

And eight years later, after making it through some hellish middle school and decent high school years, we were still close. Mostly because I did know these things about her, and Jess still kept most stuff to herself. But also because she was one of the only people who just didn't take my shit, and I had to respect that.

"Looky look," she said now in her flat voice, crossing her arms over her chest. "The queen has arrived."

Chloe pulled up beside us, cutting the engine on her Mercedes and flipping down the visor to check her lipstick. Jess sighed, loudly, but I ignored her. This was old news, her and Chloe, like background music. Only if things were really quiet or dull did the rest of us even notice it anymore.

Chloe got out, slamming her door, and came over to us. She looked great, as usual: black pants, blue shirt, cool jacket I hadn't seen before. Her mom was a flight attendant and a compulsive shopper, a deadly combination that resulted in Chloe always having the newest stuff from the best places. Our little trendsetter.

"Hey," she said, tucking her hair behind her ear. "Where's Lissa?"

I nodded toward the Quik Zip, where Lissa was now at the counter, chatting up the guy behind the counter as he rang up her candy. We watched as she waved good-bye to him and came out, a bag of Skittles already opened in one hand. "Who wants one?" she called out, smiling as she saw Chloe. "Hey! God, great jacket."

"Thanks," Chloe said, brushing her fingers over it. "It's new."

"Is that surprising?" Jess said sarcastically.

"Is that diet?" Chloe shot back, eyeing the drink in Jess's hand.

"All right, all right," I said, waving my hand between them. Lissa handed me my Zip Diet, and I took a big sip, savoring the taste. It was the nectar of the gods. Truly. "What's the plan?"

"I have to meet Adam at Double Burger at six-thirty," Lissa said, popping another Skittle into her mouth. "Then we'll catch up with you guys at Bendo or whatever."

"Who's at Bendo?" Chloe asked, jangling her keys.

"Don't know," Lissa said. "Some band. There's also a party we can go to in the Arbors, Matthew Ridgefield has a keg somewhere and, oh, and Remy has to dump Jonathan."

Now, everyone looked at me. "Not necessarily in that order," I added.

"So Jonathan's out." Chloe laughed, pulling a pack of cigarettes out of her jacket pocket. She held them out to me, and I shook my head.

"She quit," Jess said to her. "Remember?"

"She's always quitting," Chloe replied, striking a match and leaning into it, then shaking it out. "What'd he do, Remy? Stand you up? Declare undying love?"

I just shook my head, knowing what was coming.

Jess grinned and said, "He wore a nonmatching outfit."

"Smoked in her car," Chloe said. "That's got to be it."

"Maybe," Lissa offered, pinching my arm, "he made a major grammatical error and was fifteen minutes late."

"Oh, the horror!" Chloe shrieked, and all three of them burst out laughing. I just stood there, taking it, realizing not for the first time that they only seemed to get along when ragging on me as a group.

"Funny," I said finally. Okay, so maybe I did have a bit of history with expecting too much from relationships. But God, at least I had standards. Chloe only dated college guys who cheated on her, Jess avoided the issue by never dating anyone, and Lissa—well, Lissa was still with the guy she lost her virginity to, so she hardly counted at all. Not that I was going to point this out. I mean, I was all about the high road.

"Okay, okay," Jess said finally. "How are we doing this?"

"Lissa goes to meet Adam," I said. "You, me, and Chloe hit the Spot and then go on to Bendo. Okay?"

"Okay," Lissa said. "I'll see you guys later." As she drove off, and Chloe moved her car to the church parking lot next door, Jess lifted up my hand, squinting at it.

"What's this?" she asked me. I glanced down, seeing the black letters, smudged but still there, on my palm. Before leaving the house I'd meant to wash it off, then got distracted. "A phone number?"

"It's nothing," I said. "Just this stupid guy I met today."

"You heartbreaker," she said.

We piled into Jess's car, me in front, Chloe in back. She made a face as she pushed aside a laundry hamper full of clothes, a football helmet, and some knee pads of Jess's brothers, but she didn't say anything. Chloe and Jess may have had their differences, but she knew where to draw the line.

"The Spot?" Jess asked me as she cranked the engine. I nodded, and she put the car in reverse, backing up slowly. I reached forward and turned on the radio while Chloe lit another cigarette in the backseat, tossing the match out the window. As we were about to pull out onto the road, Jess nodded toward a big metal trash can by the gas pumps, about twenty feet away.

"Bet me?" she asked, and I craned my neck, judging the distance, then picked up her mostly empty Zip Coke and shook it, feeling its weight.

"Sure," I said. "Two bucks."

"Oh, God," Chloe said from the backseat, exhaling loudly. "Now that we're out of high school, can we please move on from this?"

Jess ignored her, picking up the Zip Coke and pressing her hand around it, flexing her wrist, then stuck her arm out the driver's-side window. She squinted, lifted her chin, and then, in one smooth movement, threw her arm up and released the Zip Coke, sending it arcing over our heads and the car. We watched as it turned end over end in the air, a perfect spiral, before disappearing with a crash, top still on and straw engaged, in the trash can.

"Amazing," I said to Jess. She smiled at me. "I never have been able to figure out how you do that."

"Can we go now?" Chloe asked.

"Like everything else," Jess said, turning out into traffic, "it's all in the wrist."

The Spot, where we always started our night, really belonged to Chloe. When her dad and mom divorced back in the third grade, he'd left town with his new girlfriend, selling off most of the property he'd amassed in town while working as a developer. He only kept one lot, out in the country past our high school, a grassy field with nothing on it but a trampoline he'd bought for Chloe on her seventh birthday. Chloe's mom had banished it quick from the backyard—it didn't match her English garden decor, all sculpted hedges and stone benches—and it ended up out on the land, forgotten until we were all old enough to drive and needed someplace of our own.

We always sat on the trampoline, which was set up in the middle of the pasture, with the best view of the stars and sky. It still had some good bounce to it, enough so that any sudden movement by anybody jostled the rest. Which was good to remember whenever you were pouring something.

"Watch it," Chloe said to Jess, her arm jerking as she poured some rum into my Zip Coke. It was one of those little airplane bottles, which her mom regularly brought home from work. Their liquor cabinet looked like it was designed for munchkins.

"Oh, settle down," Jess replied, crossing her legs and leaning back on her palms.

"It's always like this when Lissa isn't here," Chloe grumbled, opening up another bottle for herself. "The balance of weight gets all out of whack."

"Chloe," I said. "Give it a rest." I took a sip of my Zip Coke, now spiked, tasting the rum, and offered it to Jess purely out of politeness. She never drank, never smoked. Always drove. Being a mom for so long to her brothers made it a given she'd be the same to us.

"Nice night," I said to her now, and she nodded. "Hard to believe it's all over."

"Thank God," Chloe said, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. "Not a second too soon, either."

"Let's drink to that," I said, and leaned forward to press my cup against her tiny bottle. Then we just sat there, suddenly quiet, no noise except the cicadas starting up in the trees all around us.

"It's so weird," Chloe said finally, "that it doesn't feel different now."

"What?" I asked her.

"Everything," she said. "I mean, this is what we've been waiting for, right? High school's over. It's a whole new thing but it feels exactly the same."

"That's because nothing new has started yet," Jess told her. She had her face tipped up, eyes on the sky above us. "By the end of the summer, then things will feel new. Because they will be."

Chloe pulled another tiny bottle—this time gin—out of her jacket pocket and popped the top. "It sucks to wait, though," she said, taking a sip of it. "I mean, for everything to begin."

There was the sound of a horn beeping, loud and then fading out as it passed on the road behind us. That was the nice thing about the Spot: you could hear everything, but no one could see you.

"This is just the in-between time," I said. "It goes faster than you think."

"I hope so," Chloe said, and I eased back on my elbows, tilting my head back to look up at the sky, which was pinkish, streaked with red. This was the time we knew best, that stretch of day going from dusk to dark. It seemed like we were always waiting for nighttime here. I could feel the trampoline easing up and down, moved by our own breathing, bringing us in small increments up and back from the sky as the colors faded, slowly, and the stars began to show themselves.

By the time we got to Bendo, it was nine o'clock and I had a nice buzz on. We pulled up, parked, and eyed the bouncer standing by the door.

"Perfect," I said, pulling down the visor to check my makeup. "It's Rodney."

"Where's my ID?" Chloe said, digging through her jacket. "God, I just had it."

"Is it in your bra?" I asked her, turning around. She blinked, stuck her hand down her shirt, and came up with it. Chloe kept everything in her bra: I.D., money, extra barrettes. It was like sleight of hand, the way she just pulled things from it, like quarters from your ear, or rabbits out of a hat.

"Bingo," she said, sticking it in her front pocket.

"So classy," Jess said.

"Look who's talking," Chloe shot back. "At least I wear a bra."

"Well, at least I need one," Jess replied.

Chloe narrowed her eyes. She was a B cup, and a small one at that, and had always been sensitive about it. "Well at least—"

"Stop," I said. "Let's go."

As we walked up, Rodney eyed us from where he was sitting on a stool propping the door open. Bendo was an eighteen-and-up club, but we'd been coming since sophomore year. You had to be twenty-one to drink, though, and with our fakes Chloe and I usually could get our hand stamped. Especially by Rodney.

"Remy, Remy," he said as I reached into my pocket, pulling out my fake. My name, my face, my brother's birthday, so I could quote it quick if I had to. "How's it feel to be a high school graduate?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," I said, smiling at him. "You know I'm a junior at the university."

He hardly glanced at my ID but squeezed my hand, brushing it with his fingers as he stamped it. Disgusting. "What's your major?"

"English lit," I said. "But I'm minoring in business."

"I got some business for you," he said, taking Chloe's ID and stamping her hand. She was quick though, pulling back fast, the ink smearing.

"You're an asshole," Jess told him, but he just shrugged, waving us in, his eyes on the next group of girls coming up the steps.

"I feel so dirty," Chloe sighed as we walked in.

"You'll feel better after you have a beer."

Bendo was crowded already. The band hadn't come on yet, but the bar was two deep and the air was full of smoke, thick and mixed with the smell of sweat.

"I'll get a table," Jess called out to me, and I nodded, heading for the bar with Chloe behind me. We pushed through the crowd, dodging people, until we got a decent spot by the beer taps.

I'd just hoisted myself up on my elbows, trying to wave down the bartender, when I felt someone brush up against me. I tried to pull away, but it was packed where I was standing, so I just drew myself in a bit, pulling my arms against my sides. Then, very quietly, I heard a voice in my ear.

It said, in a weird, cheesy, right-out-of-one-of-my-mother's-novels way, "Ah. We meet again."

I turned my head, just slightly, and right there, practically on top of me, was the guy from the car dealership. He was wearing a red Mountain Fresh Detergent T-shirt—not just fresh: mountain fresh!—it proclaimed, and was smiling at me. "Oh, God," I said.

"No, it's Dexter," he replied, offering me his hand, which I ignored. Instead I glanced around behind me for Chloe, but saw she had been waylaid by a guy in a plaid shirt I didn't recognize.

"Two beers!" I shouted at the bartender, who'd finally seen me.

"Make that three!" this Dexter yelled.

"You are not with me," I said.

"Well, not technically," he replied, shrugging. "But that could change."

"Look," I said as the bartender dropped three plastic cups in front of me, "I'm not—"

"I see you still have my number," he said, interrupting me and grabbing one of the beers. He also slapped a ten down, which redeemed him a bit but not much.

"I haven't had a chance to wash it off."

"Will you be impressed if I tell you I'm in a band?"

"No."

"Not at all?" he said, raising his eyebrows. "God, I thought chicks loved guys in bands."

"First off, I'm not a chick," I said, grabbing my beer. "And second, I have a steadfast rule about musicians."

"Which is?"

I turned my back to him and started to elbow my way through the crowd, back to Chloe. "No musicians."

"I could write you a song," he offered, following me. I was moving so fast the beers I was carrying kept sloshing, but damn if he didn't keep right up.

"I don't want a song."

"Everybody wants a song!"

"Not me." I tapped Chloe on the shoulder and she turned around. She had on her flirting face, all wide-eyed and flushed, and I handed her a beer and said, "I'm going to find Jess."

"I'm right behind you," she replied, wagging her fingers at the guy she'd been talking to. But crazy musician boy kept after me, still talking.

"I think you like me," he decided as I stepped on somebody's foot, prompting a yelp. I kept moving.

"I really do not," I said, finally spying Jess in a corner booth, head propped on one elbow, looking bored. When she saw me she held up both hands, in a what-the-hell gesture, but I just shook my head.

"Who is this guy?" Chloe called out from behind me.

"Nobody," I said.

"Dexter," he replied, turning a bit to offer her his hand while still keeping step with me. "How are you?"

"Fine," she said, a bit uneasily. "Remy?"

"Just keep walking," I called behind me, stepping around two guys in dreadlocks. "He'll lose interest eventually."

"Oh, ye of little faith," he said cheerfully. "I'm just getting started."

We arrived at the booth in a pack: me, Dexter the musician, and Chloe. I was out of breath, she looked confused, but he just slid in next to Jess, offering his hand.

"Hi," he said. "I'm with them."

Jess looked at me, but I was too tired to do anything but plop into the booth and suck down a gulp of my beer. "Well," she said, "I'm with them. But I'm not with you. How is that possible?"

"Well," he said, "it's actually an interesting story."

No one said anything for a minute. Finally I groaned and said, "God, you guys, now he's going to tell it."

"See," he began, leaning back into the booth, "I was at this car dealership today, and I saw this girl. It was an across-a-crowded-room kind of thing. A real moment, you know?"

I rolled my eyes. Chloe said, "And this would be Remy?"

"Right. Remy," he said, repeating my name with a smile. Then, as if we were happy honeymooners recounting our story for strangers he added, "Do you want to tell the next part?"

"No," I said flatly.

"So," he went on, slapping the table for emphasis, making all our drinks jump, "the fact is that I'm a man of impulse. Of action. So I walked up, plopped down beside her, and introduced myself."

Chloe looked at me, smiling. "Really," she said.

"Could you go away now?" I asked him just as the music overhead cut off and there was a tapping noise from the stage, followed by someone saying "check, check."

"Duty calls," he said, standing up. He pushed his half-finished beer over to me and said, "I'll see you later?"

"No."

"Okay, then! We'll talk later." And then he pushed off, into the crowd, and was gone. We all just sat there for a second. I finished my beer, then closed my eyes and lifted the cup, pressing it to my temple. How could I already be exhausted?

"Remy," Chloe said finally in her clever voice. "You're keeping secrets."

"I'm not," I told her. "It was just this stupid thing. I'd forgotten all about it."

"He talks too much," Jess decided.

"I liked his shirt," Chloe told her. "Interesting fashion sense."

Just then Jonathan slid in beside me in the booth. "Hello, ladies," he said, sliding his arm around my waist. Then he picked up crazy musician boy's beer, thinking it was mine, and took a big sip. I would have stopped him, but just the fact that he did it was part of our problem. I hated it when guys acted proprietary toward me, and Jonathan had done that from the beginning. He was a senior too, a nice guy, but as soon as we'd started dating he wanted everyone to know it, and slowly began to encroach on my domain. He smoked my cigarettes, when I still smoked. Used my cell phone all the time to make calls, without asking, and got very comfortable in my car, which should have been the ultimate red flag. I cannot abide anyone even

changing my station presets or dipping into my ashtray change, but Jonathan charged right past that and insisted on driving, even though he had a history of fender benders and speeding tickets as long as my arm. The stupidest part was that I let him, flushed as I was with love (not likely) or lust (more likely), and then he just expected I'd ride shotgun, in my own car, forever. Which just led to more Ken behavior—as in ultraboyfriend—like always grabbing onto me in public and drinking, without asking, what he thought was my beer.

"I've got to go back to the house for a sec," he said now, leaning close to my ear. He moved his hand from around my waist, so it was now cupping my knee. "Come with me, okay?"

I nodded, and he finished off the beer, slapping the cup down on the table. Jonathan was a big partier, another thing I had trouble dealing with. I mean, I drank too. But he was sloppy about it. A puker. In the six months we'd been together I'd spent a fair amount of time at parties outside the bathroom, waiting for him to finish spewing so we could go home. Not a plus.

He slid out of the booth, moving his hand off my knee and closing his fingers around mine. "I'll be back," I said to Jess and Chloe as someone brushed past, and Jonathan finally had to cease contact with me as the crowd separated us.

"Good luck," Chloe said. "I can't believe you let him drink that guy's beer."

I turned and saw Jonathan looking back at me, impatient. "Dead man walking," Jess said in a low voice, and Chloe snorted.

"Bye," I said, and pushed through the crowd, where Jonathan's hand was extended, waiting to take hold of me again.

"Okay, look," I said, pushing him back. "We have to talk."

"Now?"

"Now."

He sighed, then sat back on the bed, letting his head bonk against the wall. "Okay," he said, as if he were agreeing to a root canal, "go ahead."

I pulled my knees up on the bed, then straightened my tank top. "Running in for something" had quickly morphed into "making a few phone calls" and then he was all over me, pushing me back against the pillows before I could even begin my slow easing into the dumpage. But now, I had his attention.

"The thing is," I began, "things are really starting to change for me now."

This was my lead-up. I'd learned, over the years, that there was a range of techniques involved in breaking up with someone. You had your types: some guys got all indignant and pissed, some whined and cried, some acted indifferent and cold, as if you couldn't leave fast enough. I had Jonathan pegged as the last, but I couldn't be completely sure.

"So anyway," I continued, "I've just been thinking that—"

And then the phone rang, an electronic shriek, and I lost my momentum again. Jonathan grabbed it. "Hello?" Then there was a bit off umm-hmming, a couple of yeahs, and he stood up, walking across the room and into his bathroom, still mumbling.

I pulled my fingers through my hair, hating that my timing seemed to be off all night long. Still listening to him talking, I closed my eyes and stretched my arms over my head, then curled my fingers down the side of the mattress closest to the wall. And then I felt something.

When Jonathan finally hung up, checked himself in the mirror, and walked back into the bedroom, I was sitting there, cross-legged, with a pair of red satin bikini panties spread out on the bed in front of me. (I'd retrieved them using a Kleenex: like I'd touch them.) He came strolling in, all confident, and, seeing them, came to a dead, lurching stop.

"Ummphz," he said, or something like that, as he sucked in a breath, surprised, then quickly steadied himself. "Hey, um, what—"

"What the hell," I said, my voice level, "are these?"

"They aren't yours?"

I looked up at the ceiling, shaking my head. Like I'd wear cheap red, polyester panties. I mean, I had standards. Or did I? Look who I'd wasted the last six months on.

"How long," I said.

"What?"

"How long have you been sleeping with someone else?"

"It wasn't—"

"How long," I repeated, biting off the words.

"I just don't—"

"How long."

He swallowed, and for a second it was the only sound in the room. Then he said, "Just a couple of weeks."

I sat back, pressing my fingers to my temples. God, this was just great. Now not only was I cheated on, but other people had to know it, which made me a victim, which I hated most of all. Poor, poor Remy. I wanted to kill him.

"You're an asshole," I said. He was all flushed, quaky, and I realized that he might have even been a whiner or weeper, had things gone differently. Amazing. You just never knew.

"Remy. Let me—" He reached forward, touching my arm, but for once, finally, I was able to do what I wanted and yank it back as if he'd burned me.

"Don't touch me," I snapped. I grabbed my jacket, knotting it around my waist, and headed for the door, feeling him stumbling behind me. I slammed door after door as I moved through the house, finally hitting the front walk with such momentum I was at the mailbox before I even realized it. I could feel him watching me from the front steps as I walked away, but he didn't call out or say anything. Not that I wanted him to, or would have reconsidered. But most guys would have at least had the decency to try.

So now I was walking through this neighborhood, full-out pissed, with no car, in the middle of a Friday night. My first Friday night as a grown-up, out of high school, in the Real World. Welcome to it.

"Where the hell have you been?" Chloe asked me when I finally got back to Bendo, with the help of City Transit, about twenty minutes later.

"You are not going to believe—" I began.

"Not now." She took my arm, pulling me through the crowd and back outside, where I saw Jess was in her car, the driver's door open. "We have a situation."

When I walked up to the car, I didn't even see Lissa at first. She was balled up in the backseat, clutching a wad of those brown school-restaurant-public-bathroom kind of paper towels. Her face was red and tear streaked, and she was sobbing.

"What the hell happened?" I asked, yanking open the back door and sliding in beside her.

"Adam b-b-broke up with m-m-me," she said, her voice gulping in air. "He just d-d-dumped me."

"Oh, my God," I said as Chloe climbed in the front seat, slamming the door behind her. Jess, already turned around facing us, looked at me and shook her head.

"When?"

Lissa took in another breath, then burst into tears again. "I can't," she mumbled, wiping her face with a paper towel. "I can't e-e-ven—"

"Tonight, when she picked him up from work," Chloe said to me. "She took him back to his house so he could take a shower and he did it there. No warning. Nothing."

"I had to walk p-p-past his p-p-parents," Lissa added, sniffing. "And they knew. They looked at me like I was a kicked d-d-dog."

"What did he say?" I asked her.

"He told her," Chloe said, clearly in her spokesperson role, "that he needed his freedom because it was summer and high school was over and he didn't want either of them to miss any opportunities in college. He wanted to make sure that they—"

"M-m-made the most of our lives," Lissa finished, wiping her eyes.

"Jerk," Jess grumbled. "You're better off."

"I l-l-love him!" Lissa wailed, and I reached over, sliding my arm around her.

"It's okay," I said.

"And I had no idea," she said, taking in a deep breath, which shuddered out, all bumpy, as she tossed aside the paper towel she was holding, letting it fall to the floor. "How could I not even have known?"

"Lissa, you'll be okay," Chloe told her, her voice soft.

"It's like I'm Jonathan," she sobbed, leaning into me. "We were just living our lives, picking up the dry cleaning—"

"What?" Jess said.

". . . unaware," Lissa finished, "that t-t-tonight we'd be d-d-dumped."

"Speaking of," Chloe said to me, "how'd that go?"

"Don't ask," I said.

Lissa was full-out crying now, her face buried in my shoulder. Over Chloe's head I could see Bendo was fully packed, with a line out the door. "Let's get out of here," I said to Jess, and she nodded. "This night has sucked anyway."

Chloe dropped down into the front passenger seat, punching in the car lighter as Jess cranked the engine. Lissa blew her nose in the paper towel I handed her, then settled into small, quick sobs, curling against me. As we pulled out I patted her head, knowing how much it had to hurt. There is nothing so bad as the first time.

Of course we had to have another round of Zip Drinks. Then Chloe left, and Jess pulled back out into traffic to take me and Lissa to my house.

We were almost to the turnoff to my neighborhood when Jess suddenly slowed down and said, very quietly, to me, "There's Adam."

I cut my eyes to the left, and sure enough, Adam and his friends were standing around in the parking lot in front of the Coffee Shack. What really bugged me was that he was smiling. Jerk.

I glanced behind me, but Lissa had her eyes closed, stretched out across the backseat, listening to the radio.

"Pull in," I said to Jess. I turned around in my seat. "Hey Liss?"

"Hmmm?" she said.

"Be still, okay? Stay down."

"Okay," she said uncertainly.

We chugged along. Jess said, "You or me?"

"Me," I told her, taking a last sip of my drink. "I need this tonight."

Jess pushed the gas a little harder.

"You ready?" she asked me.

I nodded, my Zip Diet balanced in my hand. Perfect.

Jess gunned it, hard, and we were moving. By the time Adam looked over at us, it was too late.

It wasn't my best. But it wasn't bad either. As we whizzed by, the cup turned end over end in the air, seeming weightless. It hit him square in the back of the head, spilling Diet Coke and ice in a wave down his back.

"Goddammit!" he yelled after us as we blew past. "Lissa! Dammit! Remy! You bitch!"

He was still yelling when I lost sight of him.

After a sleeve and a half of Oreos, four cigarettes, and enough Kleenex to pad the world, I finally got Lissa to go to sleep. She was out instantly, breathing through her nose, legs tangled around my comforter.

I got a blanket, one pillow, and went into my closet, where I stretched out across the floor. I could see her from where I was, and made sure she was still sleeping soundly as I pushed aside the stack of shoe boxes I kept in the far right corner and pulled out the bundle I kept there, hidden away.

I'd had such a bad night. I didn't do this all the time, but some nights I just needed it. Nobody knew.

I curled up, pulling the blanket over me, and opened the folded towel, taking out my portable CD player and headphones. Then I slipped them on, turned off the light, and skipped to track seven. There was a skylight in my closet, and if I lay just right, the moonlight fell in a square right across me. Sometimes I could even see stars.

The song starts slowly. A bit of guitar, just a few chords. Then a voice, one I knew so well. The words I knew by heart. They did mean something to me. Nobody had to know. But they did.

This lullaby is only a few words  
A simple run of chords  
Quiet here in this spare room  
But you can hear it, hear it  
Wherever you may go  
I will let you down  
But this lullaby plays on. . . .  
I'd fall asleep to it, to his voice. I always did. Every time.

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**Sarah's new title ALONG FOR THE RIDE  
goes on sale June 16, 2009!**