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emily giffin

the diary of  
darcy j. rhone



**The Diary of Darcy J. Rhone**

**Emily Giffin**

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January 1, 1987

My best friend, Rachel White, gave me this journal for Christmas. What was she thinking? She knows how much I hate to write. She told me to do my best because someday I'd look back and be grateful to have all our memories recorded. She is usually right about stuff like that—my dad calls her an old soul. I'm sort of the opposite. My theory on life is OFIYOYO, which stands for "Oh fuck it, you're only young once!" I made that up myself. Great, huh? I can be boring when I'm an adult. Right now is the time for having FUN!

So from the top! My name is Darcy Jane Rhone and I am . . .

*D=Daring* . . . I went skinny-dipping at the lake last summer (with boys!).

*A=Agile* . . . I can do a perfect center split. (Impressive word, huh?)

*R=Rare beauty* . . . Enough said.

*C=Charismatic* . . . Rachel's mom called me that just last week.

*Y=Why ask why?* Haha.

More about me: I am fourteen years old and a freshman at Naperville High School in Naperville, Indiana. Other than Rachel, my other best friends are Annalise (total sweetie!) and Ethan (sometimes an annoying know-it-all, but mostly funny and nice). I have one younger brother named Jeremy who is a complete dork. God, I wish I had an older HOT brother. Once I even pretended that was true by decorating our guest bedroom with Heather Locklear posters and telling the girls at my tenth birthday party that my brother was away at college. Rachel hates to lie but she backed me up like she always does.

More on my family: My dad is a dentist and he's pretty cool as far as dads go. He is very handsome and drives a wickedly cool black BMW and loves to play golf. My mom doesn't work except for her little personal shopper business (she basically shops for other moms who have no fashion sense—like Rachel's mom, only she doesn't charge Mrs. White).

Now back to me: I am a cheerleader, and a pretty damn awesome one thanks to all those years of gymnastics. (I could do a back handspring when I was nine.) I was the only freshman to make the JV squad—instead of the freshmen squad. Rachel didn't make either, which was so, so, sooo sad. She acted like it didn't bother her but her mom told my mom that she cried her eyes out so I try not to bring it up in front of her and I don't blow her off for my cheerleader friends. Isn't that nice of me? I try my best to be nice to everyone, even the geeks. The only exception is when someone is mean first—like that butt-ugly bimchette Becky Zurich, who I had to tell off for being rude to Rachel for no reason. I definitely have to protect Rachel sometimes because without me she might slip into nerd territory. People like her and she's really interesting to talk to and stuff, but she studies too much, doesn't wear makeup, and her clothes are a little out of style (even though I tell her she can borrow mine anytime she wants). At least I convinced her to get contacts. That was a huge improvement.

Let's see . . . What else??? . . . I'm going out with Jonathan Carlisle, but we really don't go anywhere, except in groups, because I'm not allowed to date until I'm fifteen

in September. So basically that means we write notes, talk on the phone every night, and make out between classes. (I had two detentions last semester for PDAs, but they were with him so we just made out some more in detention! Ha!) When I am allowed to date, I'm probably going to break up with Jonathan and go out with a senior with a car. I am very popular and pretty and thin. (I know this sounds like bragging but this is a historical document, and I want to be accurate for the sake of my children and grandchildren.) Jonathan thinks I look like a green-eyed Susanna Hoffs—especially in the video for “If She Knew What She Wants.” Right now my hair is even cut that way, only my bangs are bigger and better. God, I love that song—especially the line “He’d be giving it to her.” Because I like to think that Jonathan would give me anything I want. Rachel said he would. She says he’s crazy about me. I like him too, but I’m definitely not *in love*. God, I can’t wait to be in love. To experience that thing in the movies and in songs. It’s what I want more than anything in the world. Except for maybe fame and fortune. Haha. But no, seriously, I do want to be an actress someday. Rachel says I better join the drama club if I’m so interested in acting. But I don’t think that’s necessary. . . . Okay, this is more writing than I’ve done in my entire life and my hand is really starting to hurt. But I’m going to write in this thing every single night if it kills me!!!

Urgent shopping list:

Eternity perfume

Annalise birthday gift???

Janet Jackson's Control

Van Halen's 5150

Clinique Black Honey lipgloss



FUN



“OFIYOYO”

## January 1, 1988

Oops. Forgot about this stupid journal until about five minutes ago when Rachel got her journal out and asked what my resolutions were. So that is my first resolution!

- 1) Write in my journal at least once a week (instead of once a year).
- 2) Bring up my GPA to a 3.0 and stop copying Rachel's homework.
- 3) Let the Sun-In grow out of my hair. Why the HELL did I ignore the warning "reddish results may occur in dark brown hair"? Rachel says I should amputate the red part but I say short hair is worse than red hair.
- 4) Eat only fat-free foods! No more Portillo's hot dogs!
- 5) Go out with Carlos Medina (a HOT exchange student from South America or Spain or somewhere like that).

More on Carlos in a minute. First I need to catch up on the whole last year. Here are some highlights (Rachel is helping because she is better at remembering my life than I am!):

- 1) I made varsity cheerleading. The only sophomore. Totally on track for head cheerleader, maybe even by next year.
- 2) I made the homecoming court (for the second time). On track for homecoming queen.
- 3) In July, I broke up with Jonathan to go out with Scott Slazinski, a wide receiver from Central who I met at a party. It was a little scandalous since they are our crosstown rivals, and I accidentally cheered for him at the end of a close game. Oops.
- 4) After football season ended, I broke up with Scott to date Jeff Doyle, a senior. His ex-girlfriend, Penny Winkelman (also a senior), and all her lame friends were so pissed. But I was like, "Get over it. I can't help it that I'm cooler and more fun than you." Only it turned out I am cooler and more fun than Jeff too. So I dumped him and now he's going back out with loser-face. What can I say? Boring people belong with boring people.
- 5) Best movies I saw with Rachel, Annalise, and Ethan: *Broadcast News* (Ethan's fave because he wants to be a journalist or writer), *Fatal Attraction* (remind me to never have an affair! Holy shit!), and

*Dirty Dancing* (saw it four times). I'm obsessed with Patrick Swayze. Those arms! Whoever I marry better be able to lift me up over his head like that because NOBODY PUTS DARCY IN THE CORNER!

6) Oh, yeah. Rachel just reminded me that the stock market crashed in October. Blah, blah, blah. Because Black Monday really affected my life . . .  
. *Not!*

Now more on Carlos: He is seriously finer than fine. He's a cross between Rob Lowe and Jake in *Sixteen Candles*—who is my ideal guy. He has the same dreamy brown eyes, broad shoulders, and square jaw. And he has the sexiest accent. He's in my P.E. class so I get to see him in shorts every day, playing his native game, soccer. SCORE! (Which he does about every five minutes.) God, he is SOOOOO beautiful. He seems really sweet too. The only issue I have with him is that he's on the short side. But if he hits a growth spurt, I would totally marry him. And even if he doesn't, I still might. Because, you know, looks aren't everything.

Okay. Rachel and I are going to go shower and hit the mall. I need some new Victoria's Secret push-up bras. My A-cups are my only physical flaw. But like Carlos, I'm sure they'll grow!

## February 12

Carlos is either shy or playing hard to get and it's really getting frustrating. He barely gives me the time of day even though I put on lots of makeup right before P.E. and wear my push-up bras. Also, I'm very tan from four sessions at Tahitian Tan (my mom bought me a ten-pack). Rachel mentioned how dark my legs were in the gym. Carlos was standing pretty close to us so I said as loud as I could, "I know. I practically look Hispanic, don't I?" And then looked right at him. Nothing. Maybe he didn't hear me. Maybe he was offended. Oh. My. God. Maybe he's gay??? That would suck. Then again, I bet I could convert him.

## February 17

I'm not the most patient person in the world. So guess what I did today? I marched right up to Carlos, who was getting his books out of his locker, and said, "I'm tired of waiting." He smiled and goes, "Pardon?" in that to-die-for accent. (I made a mental note to start saying "pardon?" instead of "what?") So anyway, I go, "I'm tired of waiting for you to ask me out." He laughed the sexiest laugh (I don't know how a laugh can sound foreign, but his did) and said, "Okay. Will you go out with me?" I smiled back at him and said, "I'll have to think about it. Call me later and I'll give you my answer." Then I wrote my phone number on his palm and turned right around and walked to my locker with my best runway sashay, lots of hip movement, easy to do in my new, three-inch Nine West sandals. Rachel said he watched me the whole way. But I didn't need her to tell me that. Because I always know when a guy is watching me.

Call it a sixth sense. I think I have him in my clutches now. God, I hope I lose my virginity to him. How cool would that be? To have sex with a passionate foreigner with an accent?! It's sooo much more romantic than doing it with some goober from Indiana who you've known since kindergarten.

*What I ate today:*

*Breakfast: Fruit roll-up & Tab*

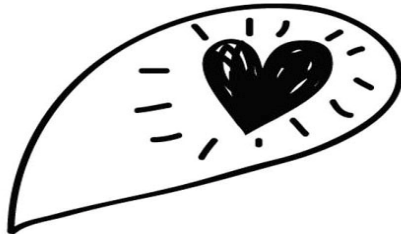
*Lunch: Banana, 15 baby carrots, & 1 rice cake*

*Snack: 8 1/2 Cool Ranch Doritos & Crystal Light*

*Dinner: baked potato with fat free sour cream  
and fat free bacon bits*

## February 18

Carlos called me and asked me out again. Officially. This time I said YES!! Then we talked for almost two hours. It was the BEST conversation I've ever had with a guy. He told me all about Spain and how beautiful it is, especially his hometown Barcelona (his mom works at the Picasso Museum! How clutch is that?). I feel so chic and sophisticated and Euro. So anyway, we're going to Ogden 6 and Connie's on Friday—which was my suggestion. I broke my rule about guys having to make the plans because he's not from here. I also broke my rule about the guy must drive because it's not really fair to expect an exchange student to have a car. And his host family, the Parkers, have an old Buick station wagon and a Ford Taurus. Yuck. So I asked my Dad if Carlos could drive his BMW. He looked at me like I was insane (my dad loves that car as much as loves me and more than he loves my brother and mom). I told him it was for a cultural good cause—that I wanted to show an exchange student the best of America. He said BMWs are German. I begged and begged until he gave in. I wonder how long he'd ground me if he knew what I'm planning to do in the backseat of his Beamer! ☺





## February 21

Best. Date. Ever. Best. Kisser. Ever. I'm totally in love!!!!!! We even skipped the movie, *Good Morning, Vietnam*, because who wants to dwell on war when you can focus on LOVE! My lips are chapped and my chin is red from so much kissing, but I don't care. So worth it. Darcy Medina has a nice ring, doesn't it?

Carlos + Darcy  
 Darcy Medina  
 Mrs. Carlos Medina


 The text is written in a cursive, handwritten style. The names 'Carlos + Darcy', 'Darcy Medina', and 'Mrs. Carlos Medina' are arranged vertically. To the right of the names, there is a decorative flourish of several small hearts of varying sizes, some solid and some outlined, scattered across the lines of text.

## March 12

It's been a while since I've written because I've been soo busy with Carlos. We haven't done it yet, but we've gone to third base plus some. I told Rachel that I think I'm ready to lose my virginity and she said, "You've only been going out for a few weeks." I told her, "When you know, you know." She started lecturing me about how you only get one first time until I started singing "Don't Worry, Be Happy," in my best rasta accent. She told me to just be careful, her two favorite words in the world. *Be careful* when I'm diving off the dock at Centennial Beach. *Be careful* when I'm looking through her dad's cassette collection. *Be careful* when I go to parties and drink. *Be careful* when I'm on top of the pyramid in cheerleading. For a second I was annoyed. But then I reminded myself that it's good to have a friend who tells you to be careful. Because there is a "care" in there. I kinda wonder why she wants me to be careful though. Careful not to get some disease or careful not to get my heart broken? Because *duh*—I'm going to use a condom—and duh, I will NEVER get my heart broken. Broken hearts are for losers.

## April 10

We finally did it!!!! Carlos took my V-card! And I got his! We planned the whole thing, down to the last detail, like the fact that we packed two apples to eat right afterwards. (Get it? The forbidden fruit?? My idea!) We were at the Excel Inn (the only hotel we could find that didn't hassle us about being underage), room 44 because 4 is my lucky number. It wasn't exactly glam surroundings but the fifty votive candles I brought helped. And Carlos scattered rose petals all over the bed (also my idea but he paid for them). And of course we played our mix tape of romantic songs, including INXS's "Need You Tonight" and U2's "With or Without You"—and the one we officially lost our virginity to: David Lee Roth's "Just Like Paradise." And it most

certainly WAS paradise even though it hurt like hell (I have a low pain threshold) and we had to start and stop about five times to get the job done. I made Carlos take a before and after picture of me, but I don't look or feel all that different—other than the fact that I'm still a little bit sore. I called Rachel from the hotel phone immediately afterwards. I told her I wanted her to be the first to know. She told me congratulations, but I kind of got the feeling that she was a little jealous. Her voice sounded sad, like it does after she gets a B on a test or has a fight with her mom. I told her she should do it with Ethan, since she's been in love with him since the fifth grade, but she insisted that they are just friends like she always does. Then I put Carlos on the phone. That one didn't go over so well with either of them since they are both kind of shy, but I'm determined for them to be super close. After all, she's going to be the maid of honor in our wedding. I wonder if we'll get married in the U.S. or Spain?? Maybe we'll do both. How fun to get to plan TWO weddings!



## April 28

Carlos and I ditched school today and went to my house to knock boots. My mom was supposed to be up at the outlets, but she got a migraine and came home early and we were so totally busted. Thank God I had locked my door—but when it took us five minutes to find our clothes and come out, it was pretty obvious what we were doing. So I'm grounded for two weeks—one for having a boy in my room and one for blowing off school. I was so pissed until I got the best plan. I dictated a note to Carlos (who wrote it in his handwriting) that said: *Darcy, I know we shouldn't have left school. But I knew you weren't feeling well and I wanted to take care of you. I do wish that your parents trusted you more. Did you tell them we have only kissed? Maybe you should. Then again, maybe it's best to just take this punishment. We could both use the extra time to study since grades are so important to us. Your friend, Carlos.* Then I left the note on my geography book in the kitchen—carefully placed on the map of Africa—knowing my mom would read it. Sure enough, she did! Which I knew because it was moved to Australia. And of course my plan so totally worked. She goes, “Darcy, I think maybe your punishment was a little too harsh. I’m going to change it to a week.” I gave her a big hug and told her she was the best. If I keep up the compliments and tell her she’s looking really skinny, I bet she’ll even lower it to four or five days. Rachel says that my parents are like the most lenient parole board in the world. They never stick to anything. It’s a wonder they’re still married.

## May 12

I never thought it could happen but Carlos is starting to get on my nerves. He is so needy and insecure. Yesterday, we were at the mall and some guy whistled at me on the escalators and he just couldn't let it go. He said it wasn't so much about the guy whistling but about me talking to him afterwards, but sheesh, I didn't want to be rude. Isn't it common courtesy to thank someone when they compliment you? Like Emily Post 101. And then it turned out we knew all these people in common so I couldn't just cut him off, right? Then, about twenty minutes later, we were in the dressing room in the Gap trying on clothes, and I stepped out to use the three-way mirror without buttoning my shirt back up. He was like, “Darcy, your bra is showing.” And I was like, “Aren't there topless beaches all over Europe? Chill out.” I still love him, but I think it's sort of a good thing that he's going back to Spain this summer. That way I can avoid actually breaking up with him. I hate hurting people's feelings.

Mon — Pink Gap shirt and  
acid-washed Guess jeans

Tues — Limited electric-blue skirt with  
leggings and Slippery When Wet t-shirt

Wed — Black tights with Esprit multi-colored sweater

Thurs — ripped Calvins with light  
green OP top and white jean jacket

Fri — Red Benetton sweater with black stirrup pants



## May 20

Omigod—I got this letter today in my locker!

Darcy,

*I hope that you interpret this letter to be the true feelings of a shy guy. Every time I see you my day brightens. I'm not sure if it's the smile on your face, the way you look at me in the halls, or a combination of the two. All I know is that something about you stirs up feelings inside me. Sometimes I catch myself staring at you uncontrollably. My imagination runs wild about the things I would do or could show you if only I had the chance, but I'm not sure if our two worlds could ever fuse as a single unit. Only time will tell. I can only hope that fate is on my side.*

*Love,*

*Your Biggest Admirer*

It's either super creepy or really romantic (depending on who wrote it). The part about being from different worlds worries me a little, because my world is the only world!! Kidding (but not really). Oh, and I made the mistake of showing Carlos, who flipped OUT. He said it was MY fault for being so flirtatious! Like it's a crime to be friendly. I told him he better stop buggin' or we weren't going to make it. I am REALLY getting sick of his jealous ass. (I mean, I like when a guy is a little jealous, but not when he gets all psycho.) Anyway, I'm going to try to figure out who sent the letter. Maybe it's from a really cute junior or senior. If so, I will let him take me to prom. As friends. Carlos would have to get over it. That's the worst part about dating him. I always said I'd never go out with a freshman or sophomore, at least not during prom time. And here I am. Now the best I can do is three out of four proms.

## June 10

Ugh. I'm so over Carlos. How could I have thought that he was "the one"? I need dark, handsome, AND tall. Not just two of the three. I told Rachel that and she said I should try a little harder to be a little less shallow. It really hurt my feelings. I was like how can you say that about your best friend? She goes, "Because what you just said is sort of the definition of shallow," in her holier-than-thou tone. I was like, "No it's not.

It's about wanting to be happy. Is it noble to not be attracted to your husband?" She rolled her eyes and said, "Lemme guess. I bet you want him to be rich too?" Like that's some kind of a crime. So I quoted my mom and told her it's just as easy to fall in love with a rich guy as a poor guy. I love Rachel but she really has a lot to learn.

Hottest Guys:

1. Jake Ryan in *Sixteen Candles*! #1 forever!

(But lyrics in last scene worry me:

"If you were here, I could deceive you..."???)

Humm. What's up with that???) Curveball?!) )

2. Christian Slater

3. River Phoenix

4. Rob Lowe

5. Emilio Estevez

6. John Cusack

7. Patrick Swayze

8. Bret Michaels

9. Jon Bon Jovi

## September 1

We're juniors! Upperclassmen at last! Life is good. I don't even mind being back in school because I'm getting my driver's license in a month, and Carlos is gone. Good riddance. Rachel was right (as usual) because I really do regret sleeping with him and wish I had saved myself for Blaine, the new kid in school who just moved here from Columbus. He supposedly has some girlfriend named Cassandra back home, but I'm pretty sure I can bust that up. Give me a month, tops. ☺

## October 28

I finally got my driver's license—three times the charm! Thank God I passed because Ethan was having way too much fun. I swear he got happier every time I failed. He even gave me a remote-control car for my birthday, saying it would be the only car I'd learn to drive anytime soon. And it wasn't even a cool car. Bite me.

The only other interesting thing I can think of is that Michael Dukakis came to speak at our town hall meeting and Rachel and Ethan dragged me along. (They are democrats—although obviously none of us can vote yet.) His speech was pretty boring, but I loved watching the secret service agents. There’s something about a man with an earpiece and a gun! I would never marry a cop, though. They don’t make enough money. But I might make an exception for a firefighter. There is nothing sexier than a man brave enough to run into a burning building.

*Cars I want!*

*Honda Prelude Si (powder blue)*

*Accura Integra (white)*

*Mazda RX-7 (silver)*

*Scirocco VW (sparkly navy blue)*

*Dream car: Alfa Romeo (black)*

## November 9

George Bush won the election, and Rachel and I won airband for the second year in a row. We did Rob Base & DJ E-Z Rock’s “It Takes Two.” Everyone loved it! “Hit it! I’m not internationally known! But I’m known throughout the Naperville home!” It was really cute, and it got Blaine’s attention for sure. I saw him in the front row, laughing, eyes on me the whole time. He likes me—I just know he does. If only he’d dump his stupid girlfriend already. I saw her picture in his locker. She’s not even that pretty, and her hair looks so seventies. Straight-up Marcia Brady. No—make that Jan.

## December 23

I finally figured out what to get Rachel for Christmas! A framed poster of Bono for her room. He’s wearing a cowboy hat and sunglasses and he looks pretty hot, and he’s not even my type. It’s the perfect gift for her because she is so into U2 it’s crazy. She and Ethan even slept out for tickets last spring for the Joshua Tree Tour. I like a couple of their songs, but I think bands like Whitesnake and Poison and Bon Jovi are so much cooler. Anyway, Rachel is going to love her gift, which is good because I accidentally went into the craft room in her basement and saw what she is making me—a collage of all the fun stuff we’ve done together since junior high. It has ticket stubs and pictures and song lyrics that she wrote in calligraphy. It is the coolest gift ever. She is seriously the best friend a girl could ever want. I have spent the night at her house since we got

off for Christmas break. It's so much nicer and cozier over there. For one, she doesn't have a dumb little brother. For another, her parents never fight like mine do. And most of all, it's just fun to hang out with her. We sleep in her bed and just talk and talk until one of us falls asleep. Just like real sisters. Anyway, I think it's going to be a very merry Christmas!!! Even without a boyfriend!

## January 1, 1989

Wow. I can't believe it's the last year of the eighties! Crazy!!! Almost time to start thinking about college. Kind of scary because my grades suck. I have a 2.8—and even if I studied every day from now until graduation I don't think I could pull it up to a 3.0. But I did join Amnesty International with Ethan and Rachel. That will be good for my lame-o transcript. And it's a nice bonus to help out all those innocent, tortured prisoners.

## February 17

Holy shit. I'm pretty sure my own mom just told me I'm fat. I was eating crackers with peanut butter and she started reading the label and was all "Do you know how many fat grams are in peanut butter?" I was like, "What are you saying, Mom?" She took away the peanut butter and was like, "You'll thank me later." I asked her if she wanted me to have an eating disorder (although I think she already knows I occasionally make myself puke) and she was like, "If by eating disorder, you mean not eating peanut butter, then yes." Wow. Are you kidding me?!!!! It's like all she cares about is how people look. How *I* look. Rachel's mom is so much nicer. Every time I go over there she tells me how much fun I am to be around. She is so right about that. I am more than just another pretty face.

## April 2

Rachel and I watched Blaine pitch a no-hitter against Central last night. It was SO hot. I love guys who are good at sports. It's not so much that I love jocks as it is that I love when people are passionate about something. I wish I had a passion (other than Blaine). Rachel has school, Ethan has his writing and all his political activist stuff, Annalise has horseback riding. I'm going to try to find a hobby if it kills me. Or become an expert in something cool. Like become a storm chaser or a poker player or a contortionist. Then again, maybe all of that isn't necessary. I mean, I seriously doubt if Cindy Crawford is collecting rare coins on the side.

## April 3

My dad got two tickets to *Les Misérables* from one of his patients. He gave them to me so I called and asked Blaine out. He hemmed and hawed and said he had a girlfriend. I

said I knew he had a girlfriend but that I just wanted to go as friends. Wasn't he allowed to have friends? It totally worked! He said yes! Crucial! Rachel is all judgey because she knows what I'm up to and said she feels sorry for Cassandra. I told her all's fair in love and war. I wonder where that quote came from? Shakespeare? The Bible? Elvis? Whoever made it up was pretty smart. I totally, totally believe in that saying.

## April 14

Blaine and I had an amazing time on our date. I wore a little black sundress from Express and stuffed my push-up bra almost to the point of cleavage. The musical was really good, and I grabbed Blaine's hand just after intermission. He looked nervous but didn't move it. Afterwards, Blaine drove me back to my house, and we made out in the basement (after I went to the bathroom and took out the tissues, of course!). He didn't end up going for my boobs, though, and it was all pretty PG-13 but still steamy with lots of kissing. When he went for my neck, I warned him that I bruise easily, but that didn't stop him from giving me a hickey. I showed it off proudly at school rather than wearing a turtleneck the way other girls do, and it was all anyone could talk about. But the best part was that Blaine dumped Cassandra the very next day! I feel sort of bad because he said she cried, but he reassured me that it wasn't my fault. They clearly weren't meant to be. Because WE ARE! Even Rachel is on board now. She told me that she admires the way I go for what I want and wishes she were more like that. I thought that was a really nice thing to say because sometimes it feels like I'm not very good at anything.

## April 20

I'm soooo into Blaine and he feels the same about me. He gave me a note today that said, *Dear Darcy, You look smokin' today in that dress. I'm thinking about you all the time, and I like it. Love, Blaine.* How sweet is that??? Being with him makes me feel all funny inside. Like my heart races and I get really dizzy. That never happened with Carlos. I wonder if this is a sign of true love?? I am dying to say those three words to him, but want him to tell me first.

## May 1

Blaine and I had a long talk about sex. He said he wanted to do it with me prom weekend and admitted that he was a virgin. Which I pretty much knew from snooping through his bag and reading a letter that Cassandra wrote him about "saving herself for marriage." (How lame is that? What if you marry a guy and he sucks in bed?? What then?? It's like not test-driving a car.) Anyway, I sort of fibbed and told him that I was a virgin too, ignoring Rachel's advice that a relationship built on lies will never last in the long run. I agree with her in theory, but this lie is more about protecting his feelings and making his first time more special. In a strange way, Rachel can be a little coldhearted sometimes.



## May 28

Prom was amazing. Like the best night of my entire life. My dad rented us a sweet stretch white limo and me, Blaine, Rachel, Annalise, and Ethan all went together. I mean, Blaine and I went together, and those three just tagged along, but it was really fun. We didn't even drink. (I quit drinking after getting busted with vodka in the Burger King parking lot—at least until after graduation.) Afterwards, Blaine and I made love in the football stadium press box (we got keys from Mark Oftedal, the sports editor of our school newspaper, who I'm friends with from computer lab). So right before we did it, I ended up telling Blaine the truth about Carlos. Rachel was right—I feel so much closer to him after telling him the truth. He hugged me and said he didn't care about the past. Only the present and the future. How amazing is that? And it was so much better than it was with Carlos. Slower and more romantic and he looked in my eyes the whole time, and afterwards he whispered, I love you. Of course I said it back and then we both started to cry. It is the best feeling in the entire world to be in love. I really hope it lasts forever. I can totally picture marrying Blaine. He's not the smartest, but I think he's good enough to play professional baseball. How cool would that be?? Especially if my acting career took off. We'd be unstoppable.

## September 16



Senior year!!!!!! I had the best summer ever with Blaine, then we won homecoming king and queen, which was seriously like a dream come true. But lately things have been sort of weird. Since football started, he has been so distant. He said football has to be his top priority, just like cheerleading has to be mine. I said, "Cheerleading isn't my first priority. You are." And he said nothing back. In other words, football is more important than me! He never writes me notes anymore or acts like he did last spring.

Rachel says maybe that's what happens when the "newness" wears off. She is in that new stage with Brandon, her first real boyfriend, and watching them together makes me sad and jealous. Not that I'd ever in a million years want to date Brandon, but still. He wants to be around her ALL the time and seems to care about her in a deeper way than Blaine cares about me. I really love Blaine, and I know he loves me, but I need to be put first. Is that so much to ask?

## October 10

I just got back from breaking up with Blaine. It was way harder than I thought it would be, especially after he started to say things like "I'll try harder to make you happy" and "All I know is how much I love you" and "This is all my fault." I told him not to use words like "fault" and "blame"—one of the lines that Rachel had prepared for me. But he kept begging me not to do it. I almost caved but figured I could always change my mind later, and at the very least, this would give me the power back. Sure enough, he got choked up when he walked me to my car and I took off his letterman jacket and gave it back to him. It's a shame that it takes losing something to make someone realize how good they had it. He said, "Can I kiss you one more time?" I nodded and leaned into him. His lips were soft and he smelled so good, but I made myself pull away. He wiped away a tear and said he will never find a better kisser. I gave him a sad smile and then a final hug goodbye. Then I got in the car, pressed my palm to the window, and slowly drove away. It was like a scene in a movie, it was so sad. But I still think this is for the best. And now I can go out with Matt Fiore. Matt's not my usual type—he gets high and loves heavy metal—but something tells me he will put me ahead of Judas Priest and Iron Maiden!

Fave Bands:

Bon Jovi

Poison

AC/DC

Guns 'n' Roses

Whitesnake

Prince

Madonna

(And don't tell anyone . . . Journey! Shhhh!)  
 (Oh, and FYI: RECM is sooo overrated!!!)

I ♥ JON BON JOVI!



## October 15

Omigod. I'm so depressed. Totally bombed the SAT. I got a NINE freakin' hundred. This is a total disaster. What if I don't get in anywhere? What then? Shit! I really didn't think I was that dumb. I mean, even Annalise broke a thousand, and no offense to her, but she's a total idiot. I will just die if Rachel and Ethan find out. Die. I'm seriously taking this one to the grave. And if they ask me—which I know they will—I'm going with 1105, the first two numbers of my locker combination. Because who could ever forget their locker combination??? Senior year was supposed to be the best ever, but so far it has just been a big disappointment. Except for homecoming queen—but that was always a given.

## November 25

Thought I should mention that the Berlin Wall came down. Rachel's making a huge big deal out of it—probably because Mrs. Lee, her honors European history teacher, is making a huge big deal out of it and Rachel worships Mrs. Lee. She's even talking about being a history-political science double major in college and then going to law

school. I don't see her being a lawyer. She's way too shy. I think it'd be better if we both just married well and had babies together. Unless I become famous, that is.

## January 1, 1990

It's the nineties! Woo hoo!!! This will be the decade of Darcy! I really hope I become famous someday. Do you think I need a stage name? Maybe Darcy Rose? Darcy Fine? Darcy Rouge? Hmmm. I have some time to think about that one.

Oh, by the way, things didn't work out with Matt so I gave Blaine a second chance after he promised he wouldn't obsess over basketball like he did with football. I really did miss him. I also missed being part of the "golden couple." Nobody ever said that about Matt and me. He's cute and all, but we really didn't look that good together. His concert T-shirts clashed with my cute outfits.



## January 20 1990

I just watched the Golden Globes with Rachel and Annalise. *Driving Miss Daisy* beat *When Harry Met Sally*?! What a terrible call. *When Harry Met Sally* is the best movie I've ever seen, including *Dirty Dancing*. I mean, the orgasm scene?? Most hilarious ever. Side note: Annalise thought the *The Little Mermaid* should've won. Classic Annalise.

## February 5

Crappy Monday. PMSing with a big case of the blues. So bored with everything and everyone. Only good news: I've lost three pounds since New Year's. And I haven't

made myself puke since Rachel told me how the acid can rot the enamel off your teeth. Ewww. I mean, I hate cellulite—I *fear* cellulite more than cancer—but nothing, NOTHING is more disgusting than gross teeth. And I’m not just saying that because my dad is a dentist.

But back to my boring life. School is a drag, and every weekend it’s the same old thing. I have to choose between some dumb party where everyone gets loaded and talks shit about each other the next day—okay, I admit that I do it too, but only because I’m soo bored!—or I go out with Rachel, Ethan, and Annalise, who don’t drink at all and we just sit around talking about stupid college applications. Rachel is obsessed with getting into a good college and she carries that damn Fiske Guide with her everywhere. Of course she’s being a big snob about the whole thing and acting like nowhere in the Midwest (except Notre Dame and Northwestern) is good enough for her. She’s mostly looking at faraway schools like Duke, Brown, Princeton, and Cornell. But maybe she won’t get into any of those and will be stuck with Indiana, her safety school. I know it sounds mean, but sometimes I hope that happens. Because if it does, we will stay together. We could even room together, assuming she can get into the best sorority. Plus, she already thinks she’s better than me—I can’t imagine how snobbish she’d get if she went to the Ivy League. Ethan is just as bad, but he has always been like that. And she only gets that way when she’s around him. Just last week he mentioned his application to Tulane and I was like, “Where the hell is that?” So he rolls his eyes and goes, “New Orleans.” Like I’m an idiot for not knowing the location of some rando school. So I tried to change the subject and said, “I thought you wanted to go somewhere warm.” And he goes, “Darcy. Where do you think New Orleans is, exactly?” with that patronizing look he always gets. So I go, “You know. Up there with all the other News.” He kept staring at me so I said, “You know. New York, New Jersey. New Hampshire.” Rachel and Ethan about peed themselves laughing so hard—which really **PISSED** me off. I mean, I usually don’t mind being the butt of their jokes, but sometimes it’s just too much. So I got up and moved to another table because unlike them, I actually have more than three friends in the world. Rach came over a minute later and whispered an apology. She said she didn’t mean to hurt my feelings, but that I should probably know that New Orleans was in Louisiana, down by Texas. I was like, “Whatever.” It took all I had not to throw in, “Besides, I’d rather be pretty than smart.” No offense to Rachel, but a 4.0 is so not worth that frizzy hair of hers. I mean, *hello!* Rachel: meet deep conditioner. Deep conditioner: meet my best friend. And while you’re at it, introduce her to a beer. Cause that little meeting is so *beyond* overdue.

## February 18

I seriously can’t stand Ethan. I’m just so sick of him trying to make me look stupid in front of people. On Friday night after the basketball game, a bunch of us were waiting for Blaine to shower. (He scored nineteen points including the game-winning shot after which he pointed right at me cheering on the sidelines and mouthed “I love you, babe.”) So anyway, at some point, I used the word *infer* and Ethan goes, “It’s

imply, not infer,” and starts giving me this big lesson on the difference. So I said, “It’s Friday night, Ethan. Take a chill pill.” And he starts going off on how there is certain “basic knowledge” that all people should know. Like where New Orleans is. And then he starts quizzing me. He’s all “Does the sun rise in the east or the west?” Puh-lease! So I said, “The east”—and he goes, “Who is the vice president?” And I’ll admit that I blanked for one second. So he goes, “Dan Quayle!” I was like, “No shit, Sherlock.” Then he goes, “Keep diggin’, Watson.” And then, “Bet you can’t name three planets other than the one you’re on.” So I called him queer. Right in front of Tommy Bilas—who just came out of the closet. Of course, I apologized right away and said I didn’t mean *that* kind of queer. Just the lame kind of queer. Ethan just shook his head and said, “You wanna throw out some racist remarks while you’re at it?” I was like, “I’m not racist! Hello? I dated a Spaniard.” That shut him up. Who needs enemies when you’re friends with Ethan Ainsley?



## March 16

Major update. I’m pretty sure my dad is having an affair. He was ordering a pizza and gave a phone number I didn’t recognize (not his work or our home). So I memorized it and called it later. Some chick answered and said, “Melanie Miller speaking.” I hung up on her. Later that night, after my mom had gone to drink a glass of wine in the bathtub, I said to my dad, all casually, “Who is Melanie Miller?” He looked

at me, stunned, and said, “Why do you ask that?” And I could just tell. All the late nights doing emergency procedures started to make sense, as did the dental conference in Palm Beach. “No reason,” I said. And then, “Hey, mind if I take your Amex to the mall tomorrow? I really could use a new Dooney & Bourke bag.” He said yes quicker than he’s ever given me permission before. After that, I was positive he was up to no good. I went over to Rachel’s and balled my eyes out. But she and her mom said there’s probably a logical explanation. Something I’m not thinking of. I hope they are right. I don’t want my parents to get a divorce!!!!



## March 24

I did a phone book search for Melanie Millers. There is only one in our town. So after three days of drive-bys on Setauket Avenue, I found my dad’s BMW in her driveway. That night, he came to my room to ask me something. I just glared at him and said, “Dad. I’m kind of sick of the Dooney & Bourke. I’m thinking more along the lines of Gucci.” Then I gave him a good, long stare before he said yes. I’m so pissed and sad.

## April 8

Things are going from bad to worse. I got rejected by Notre Dame. That was pretty much a given, but I thought maybe they’d let me in for the sake of diversity. I mean, everyone there is super smart and serious about school and Catholic. You’d think they’d want a few fun Protestants in the mix. But no. I made the mistake of telling Rachel I got in. The lie just sort of slipped out. I was going to be all “Psyche! Just kidding,” but she acted so shocked that I got offended and decided to stick to the lie. I don’t know what I will do if she gets in, though. Because then she will expect me to go with her, and I’ll have to make up another lie to cover it up. I guess that’s what they mean about lying being dangerous. They just start to pile up.

## April 15

I disregarded my usual “I don’t break up, I trade up” rule and broke up with Blaine with no backup. I can’t take more talk about baseball (note to self: do NOT date a three-sport guy in college!), and there is literally not one single guy at school I want to date. I think I’ll ask Michael Jordan to the prom. I love the Bulls and I feel that I’m worthy of a superstar. I think I will enclose a bikini shot too. I bet he will say yes.

As for Melanie Miller, I don’t think she’ll be sleeping with my dad anymore. I called her and read this script that Rachel typed for me while she sat on another line with the phone muted. The conversation went like this:

“Hello. May I please speak to Ms. Melanie Miller.”

“This is Melanie.”

“Melanie. My name is Gwendolyn Smith and I’m calling from the Illinois Department of Health.”

Silence.

“Ms. Miller, I regret to inform you that one of your former sexual partners has tested positive for the HIV virus.”

“Who?” she asked, just as Rachel predicted.

“I’m sorry, Ms. Miller, but under recent Illinois confidentiality legislation, I cannot divulge this information. However, I do recommend you schedule an appointment with your healthcare provider as soon as possible.”

More silence.

“Ms. Miller?”

“Yes?” (In a whisper.)

“Best of luck to you. Be careful out there.”

We hung up, and I felt much better. I’m not sure if it will save my parents’ marriage, but at least it will give Melanie Miller a few sleepless nights. And my dad, too, for that matter.

## April 29

So I finally confronted my dad and he swore up and down that nothing is going on. He said that Melanie works in his office and is going through a tough time and that he has been helping her. I told him he must be calling her an awful lot if he gave the wrong phone number to the pizza guy. He said they were talking pretty often but they aren’t anymore. (Because she is too busy getting tested for AIDS! HA!) I didn’t tell him about the drive-bys because I’m going to keep checking. He also said he loves mom even though they fight a lot and that they aren’t going to get a divorce. I feel so relieved even though I’m still mad at him. Rachel said that I should forgive him. That nobody is perfect. And that I should give him the benefit of the doubt because he’s my father. I guess she’s right. But even if they weren’t fooling around physically, I don’t think he should be keeping secrets from my mom. I will never do that to a boyfriend. I mean, what’s the point? . . . . On a more fun note, I drove all the way to Chicago with Rachel and her dad to go to Game Two of the playoffs—Bulls versus the Bucks. The seats



were right behind the Bulls's bench! After MJ made one sick dunk, we made eye contact. I kid you not! I bet he put two and two together from the photo I sent. I'm betting that I hear from him this week. Fingers crossed!

## May 15

I got two more rejections—from Purdue and Ohio State—and worse, a rejection from Michael Jordan that said he appreciates the invitation but has to focus on the playoffs. Ethan said it was a form letter with a rubber stamp signature. Why does he always have to rain on my parade?! Thank goodness I didn't tell Ethan and Rachel about the beach shot I enclosed because it clearly didn't do the trick. I guess he gets too many pictures likes that. I knew I should have gone with the terminal illness angle. . . . So now I don't know what I'm going to do about prom because Blaine asked Lucy Hendricks. I know they're just friends but I'm still jealous and sad that he didn't even try to ask me. It's like he just gave up on me because of the whole Michael Jordan thing. Rachel said I could go with her and Brandon. She even suggested that I ask Ethan—which was really nice of her considering that I can tell she loves him more than Brandon. Which proves my point that friends are so much better than family and boyfriends. They never let you down.

## June 5

It's official! I'm a high school graduate! A bunch of us are going to the dunes on a camping trip to celebrate. Even Blaine, although technically we are still broken up. I can't wait to hang out, drink, and not worry about ANYTHING. The summer is going to be awesome and college is going to be even more awesome. The only sad part is that I'm going to Indiana and Rachel's going to Duke (in North Carolina), which is going to be really hard. But I keep telling myself that it's only for four years. Then we can move to the same city again and pick up just where we left off. With her working hard, and me playing hard. Ha! But seriously, I know that everything will be fine. Better than fine. Aaaaazing. Because no matter what else happens, Rachel and I will be best friends 4EVER!!!



**BFF 4 EVA**

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## About the Author

Emily Giffin is a graduate of Wake Forest University and the University of Virginia School of Law. After practicing litigation at a Manhattan firm for several years, she moved to London to write full time. The author of five *New York Times* bestselling novels, *Something Borrowed*, *Something Blue*, *Baby Proof*, *Love the One You're With*, and *Heart of the Matter*, she now lives in Atlanta with her husband and three young children. Visit [www.emilygiffin.com](http://www.emilygiffin.com).

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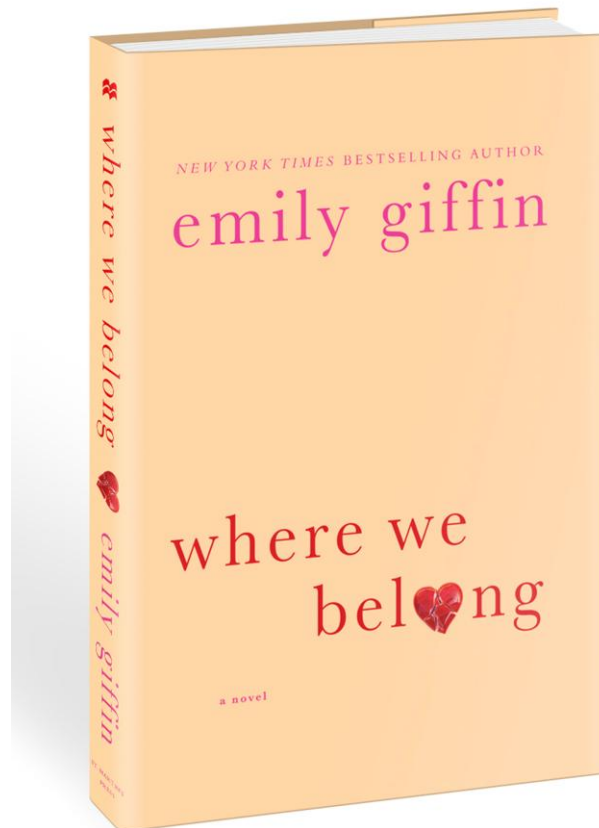
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## marian

**I** know what they say about secrets. I've heard it all. That they can haunt and govern you. That they can poison relationships and divide families. That in the end, only the truth will set you free. Maybe that's the case for some people and some secrets. But I truly believed I was the exception to such portents, and never once breathed the smallest mention of my nearly two-decade-long secret to anyone. Not to my closest friends in my most intoxicated moments or to my boyfriend, Peter, in our most intimate ones. My father knew nothing of it—and I didn't even discuss it with my mother, the only person who was there when it all happened, almost as if we took an unspoken vow of silence, willing ourselves to let go, move on. I never forgot, not for a single day, yet I was also convinced that sometimes, the past really was the past.

I should have known better. I should have taken those words to



heart—the ones that started it all on that sweltering night so long ago:  
*You can run but you can't hide.*

But those words, that night, my secret, are the farthest things from my mind as Peter and I stroll down Bleecker Street following a lingering dinner at Lupa, one of our favorite restaurants in the city. After several stops and starts, winter seems over for good, and the balmy spring night is made warmer by the bottle of Barolo Peter ordered. It's one of the many things I admire about him—his fine taste coupled with his firm belief that life is too short for unexceptional wine. Unexceptional anything really. He is too kind and hard-working to be considered a snob, shunning his lazy trust fund acquaintances who accomplished “nothing on their own,” but he's certainly an elitist, having always traveled in prep school, power circles. I'm not uncomfortable in that world—but had always existed on the fringe of it before Peter brought me into his vortex of jet shares, yachts, and vacation homes in Nantucket and St. Bart's.

“Ah! Finally. No slush on the sidewalks,” I say, happy to be wearing heels and a light cardigan after months of unseemly rubber boots and puffy winter coats.

“I know . . . *Quel soulagement,*” Peter murmurs, draping his arm around me. He is possibly the only guy I know who can get away with musing in French without sounding insufferably pretentious, perhaps because he spent much of his childhood in Paris, the son of a French runway model and an American diplomat. Even after he moved to the States when he was twelve, he was allowed to speak only French at home, his accent as flawless as his manners.

I smile and bury my cheek against his broad shoulder as he plants a kiss on the top of my head and says, “Where to now, Champ?”

He coined the nickname after I beat him in a contentious game

of Scrabble on our third date, then doubled down and did it again, gloating all the while. I laughed and made the fatal mistake of telling him “Champ” was the ironic name of my childhood dog, a blind chocolate Lab with a bad limp, thus sealing the term of endearment. “Marian” was quickly relegated to mixed company, throes of passion, and our rare arguments.

“Dessert?” I suggest, as we turn the corner. We contemplate Magnolia’s cupcakes or Rocco’s cannolis, but decide we are too full for either, and instead walk in comfortable silence, wandering by cafés and bars and throngs of contented Villagers. Then, moved by the wine and the weather and a whiff of his spicy cologne, I find myself blurting out, “How about marriage?”

At thirty-six and after nearly two years of dating, I’ve had the question on my mind, the subject one of speculation among my friends. But this night marks the first time I’ve broached the topic with him directly, and I instantly regret my lapse of discipline and brace myself for an unsatisfying response. Sure enough, the mood of the night instantly shifts, and I feel his arm tense around me. I tell myself it isn’t necessarily a bad sign; it could just be poor timing. It even occurs to me that he could already have the ring—and that his reaction has more to do with my stealing his thunder.

“Oh, forget it,” I say with a high-pitched, forced laugh, which only makes things more awkward. It’s like trying to retract an “I love you” or undo a one-night stand. Impossible.

“Champ,” he says, then pauses for a few beats. “We’re so good together.”

The sentiment is sweet, even promising, but it’s not even close to being an answer—and I can’t resist telling him as much. “*Sooo* that means . . . what, exactly? Status quo forever? Let’s hit City Hall tonight? Something in between?” My tone is playful, and Peter seizes the opportunity to make light of things.

“Maybe we should get those cupcakes after all,” he says.

I don’t smile, the vision of an emerald-cut diamond tucked into one of his Italian loafers beginning to fade.

“Kidding,” he says, pulling me tighter against him. “Repeat the question?”

“Marriage. Us. What do you think?” I say. “Does it ever even . . . cross your mind?”

“Yes. Of course it does . . .”

I feel a “but” coming like you can feel rain on your face after a deafening clap of thunder. Sure enough, he finishes, “But my divorce was just finalized.” Another noncommittal nonanswer.

“Right,” I say, feeling defeated as he glances into a darkened storefront, seemingly enthralled by a display of letterpress stationery and Montblanc pens. I make a mental note to buy him one, having nearly exhausted gifts in the “what to buy someone who has everything” category, especially someone as meticulous as Peter. Cuff links, electronic gadgets, weekend stays at rustic New England B and Bs. Even a custom LEGO statue of a moose, the unofficial mascot of his beloved Dartmouth.

“But your marriage has been over for a long time. You haven’t lived with Robin in over *four* years,” I say.

It is a point I make often, but never in this context, rather when we are out with other couples, on the off chance that someone sees me as the culprit—the mistress who swooped in and stole someone else’s husband. Unlike some of my friends who seem to specialize in married men, I have never entertained so much as a wink or a drink from a man with a ring on his left hand, just as I, in the dating years before Peter, had zero tolerance for shadiness, game playing, commitment phobias, or any other symptom of the Peter Pan syndrome, a seeming epidemic, at least in Manhattan. In part, it was about principle and self-respect. But it was also a matter of pragmatism, of thirty-something life engi-

neering. I knew exactly what I wanted—*who* I wanted—and believed I could get there through sheer effort and determination just as I had doggedly pursued my entire career in television.

That road hadn't been easy, either. Right after I graduated from film school at NYU, I moved to L.A. and worked as a lowly production assistant on a short-lived Nickelodeon teen sitcom. After eighteen months of trying to get lunch orders straight in my head and not writing a single word for the show, I got a job as a staff writer on a medical drama series. It was a great gig, as I learned a lot, made amazing contacts, and worked my way up to story editor, but I had no life, and didn't really care for the show. So at some point, I took a gamble, left the safety of a hit show, and moved back to New York into a cozy garden apartment in Park Slope. To pay the bills, I sold a couple specs and did freelance assignments for existing shows. My favorite spot to write became a little family-owned bar named Aggie's where there was constant drama between the four brothers, much of it inspired by the women they married and their Irish-immigrant mother. I found myself ditching my other projects and sketching out their backstories, until suddenly *South Second Street* was born (I moved the bar from modern-day Brooklyn to Philly in the seventies). It wasn't high concept like everything in television seemed to be becoming, but I was old-school, and believed I could create a compelling world with my writing and characters—rather than gimmicks. My agent believed in me, too, and after getting me in to pitch my pilot to all the major networks, a bidding war ensued. I took a deal with a little less money (but still enough for me to move to Manhattan) and more creative license. And voilà. My dream had come true. I was finally an executive producer. A showrunner.

Then, one intense year later, I met Peter. I knew his name long before I actually met him from the industry and snippets in *Variety*: Peter Standish, the esteemed television executive poached from another

network, the would-be savior to turn around our overall struggling ratings and revamp our identity. As the new CEO, he was technically my boss, another one of my rules for whom not to date. However, the morning I ran into him at the Starbucks in our building lobby, I granted myself an exception, rationalizing that I wasn't one of his direct reports—the director of programming buffered us in the chain of command. Besides, I already had a name. My series was considered a modest hit, a tough feat for a mid-season show, so nobody could accuse me of using him to get ahead or jump-start a stalling career.

Of course at that point, as I stood behind him in line, eavesdropping as he ordered a “double tall cappuccino extra dry,” the matter was completely theoretical. He wasn't wearing a ring (I noticed instantly), but he gave off an unavailable vibe as I tapped him on the shoulder, introduced myself, and issued a brisk, professional welcome. I knew how old he was by the press release still sitting in my in-box—forty-seven—but with a full head of dark hair, he looked younger than I expected. He was also taller and broader than I thought he'd be, everything on a larger scale, including his hand around his cup of extra dry cappuccino.

“It's nice to meet you, Marian,” he said with a charming but still sincere tilt of his head, pausing as I ordered my own tall latte, even lingering as the barista made my drink, telling me I was doing a hell of a job on my show. “It's got a nice little following, doesn't it?”

I nodded modestly, trying not to focus on the elegant cut of his suit and the cleft in his clean-shaven, square jaw. “Yes. We've been lucky so far. But we can do more to expand our audience . . . Have you ever watched it?”

It was bold to put your boss's boss on the spot, and I knew the answer in his hesitation, saw that he was debating whether to admit he'd never seen my show.

He sheepishly told the truth, then added, “But I will tonight. And that’s a promise.” I had the gut feeling that he really *was* a man of his word—a reputation he had earned in a business full of lecherous, egomaniacal slicksters.

“Well, at least you know it’s on Thursday nights,” I say, feeling a wave of attraction and suddenly sensing that it wasn’t completely one-sided. It had been a long time since I had felt anything close to chemistry with someone—at least not someone so eligible on paper.

The next morning, to my delight, we both showed up at Starbucks at 7:50 A.M., once again, and I couldn’t help but wonder if he had done it on purpose, as I had.

“So, what did you think?” I asked with a hint of coyness—which wasn’t my usual style, especially at work. “Did you watch it?”

“Yes. And I loved it,” he announced, ordering his same drink but this time opting for whipped cream, proving he could be spontaneous. I felt myself beaming as I thanked him.

“Tight writing. And great acting. That Angela Rivers sure is a pistol, isn’t she?” he asked, referring to our up-and-coming, quirky, redhead lead who often drew comparisons to Lucille Ball. During casting, I had gone out on a limb and chosen her over a more established star, one of the best decisions I had ever made as a producer.

“Yes,” I said. “I can see an Emmy in her future.”

He nodded, duly noting. “Oh, and by the way,” he said, an endearing smile behind his eyes. “I not only watched the show, but I went back and watched the pilot online. And the rest of the first season. So I have you to thank for less than four hours of sleep last night.”

I laughed. “Afternoon espresso,” I said as we strolled to the elevator bank. “Works like a charm.”

He winked and said, “Sounds good. Around four-thirty?”

My heart pounded as I nodded, counting down the minutes to

four-thirty that day, and for several weeks after that. It became our ritual, although for appearances, we always pretended that it was a coincidence.

Then one day, after I mentioned my love of hats, a package from Barneys appeared by messenger. Inside was a jaunty, black grosgrain beret with a card that read: *To Marian, the only girl I know who could pull this one off.*

I promptly called his direct dial from the network directory, delighted when he answered his own phone.

“Thank you,” I said.

“You’re welcome,” he said—with what I could tell was a smile.

“I love it,” I said, beaming back at him.

“How about the card? Was ‘girl’ okay? I debated ‘girl’ versus ‘woman.’” His second-guessing confirmed that he cared—and that he could be vulnerable. I felt myself falling for him a little more.

“I like ‘girl’ from *you*,” I said. “And I love the beret. Just glad that it wasn’t raspberry.”

“Or from a secondhand store,” he deadpanned. “Although I would love to see you in it. And if it was warm . . .”

I laughed, feeling flushed, a churning in my stomach, wondering when—not if—he was going to ask me out on an official date.

Three days later, we flew to Los Angeles for the Emmys on the network jet. Although my show hadn’t been nominated, we were getting a lot of great buzz and I had never felt better about my career. Meanwhile, Peter and I were getting some buzz of our own, a few rumors circulating, clearly due to our coffee break repartee. But we played it cool on the red carpet, and even more so at the after-parties, until neither of us could take it another second, and he sent me a text I still have saved on my iPhone: *That dress is stunning.*

I smiled, grateful that I had not only overspent on an Alberta Ferretti gown but had opted for emerald green instead of my usual

black. Feeling myself blush, I turned to look in his direction as another text came in: *Although it would look better on the floor.*

I blushed and shook my head as he sent a final text: *I promise I won't try to find out if you meet me upstairs. Room 732.*

Less than ten minutes later we were in his room, finally alone, grinning at each other. I felt sure that he'd kiss me immediately, but he showed a restraint that I found irresistible, increasingly more so with every glass of champagne we poured. We grew tipsier by the hour as we talked about everything—the state of television, our network, my show, gossip about actors, and even more drama among the executives. He told me about his thirteen-year-old son Aidan and his ongoing divorce proceedings. Despite the fact that he jokingly referred to his ex as “the plaintiff,” he didn't make her out to be the villain, which I found to be a refreshing change from the few other divorcés I had dated. We talked about places we had traveled, our favorite hotels and cities, and where we hoped to someday go, both literally and in our careers. We were different in some ways—I preferred the Caribbean or traditional urban trips to places like Rome and London, while he loved exotic adventure, once pedaling through the Golden Triangle in Thailand, another time trekking up the Pacaya volcano in Guatemala. He had also taken more risks in business, which of course had paid off, while I generally avoided conflict and preferred to stick with something if it was working, even a little. Yet at the core, we had a common sensibility—a belief in striving for excellence and never settling, a love of New York and all that came with it, a sense of conservatism with a core philosophy that we should all live and let live, whatever our political or religious beliefs. He was handsome, confident, intelligent, and thoughtful—the closest I'd ever come to perfection.

Then, as the California sky showed its first streaks of muted pink, he reached over and took my hand, pulled me onto his lap and kissed



me in a way I hadn't been kissed for years. We said good night a few minutes later, then laughed, and said good morning.

Within a few weeks, we were an established couple, even having the conversation about no longer wanting to see others. One evening, we were photographed dining together, our picture appearing in a blurb on Page Six with the caption: "Powerful Love Connection: TV Exec Peter Standish with Producer Marian Caldwell." As the calls rolled in from friends and acquaintances who had seen the press, I pretended to be some combination of annoyed and amused, but I secretly loved it, saving the clipping for our future children. Things would have seemed too good to be true, if I hadn't always believed I could—and *would*—find someone like him.

But maybe they *were* too good to be true, I think now, squinting up at him as we turn the corner, hand in hand. Maybe we had stalled. Maybe this was as good as it was ever going to get. Maybe I was one of those girls, after all. Girls who wait or settle—or do some combination of both. Disappointment and muted anger well inside me. Anger at him, but more anger at myself for not facing the fact that when a person avoids a topic, it's generally for a reason.

"I think I'm going home," I say after a long stretch of silence, hoping that my statement doesn't come across as self-pitying or manipulative, the two cards that never work in relationships—especially with someone like Peter.

"C'mon. Really?" Peter asks, a trace of surrender in his voice where I'd hoped to hear urgency. He was always so controlled, so measured, and although I usually loved this quality, it irritated me now. He abruptly stops, turns, and gazes down at me, taking both of my hands in his.

"Yeah. I'm really tired," I lie, pulling my hands free.

"Marian. Don't do this," he meagerly protests.

“I’m not doing anything, Peter,” I say. “I was just trying to have a conversation with you . . .”

“Fine,” he says, exhaling, all but rolling his eyes. “Let’s have a conversation.”

I swallow my dwindling pride and, feeling very small, say, “Okay. Well . . . can you see yourself getting married again? Or having another child?”

He sighs, starts to speak, stops, and tries again. “Nothing is missing in my life if that’s what you’re asking. I have Aidan. I have you. I have my work. Life is good. Really good. But I *do* love you, Marian. I *adore* you. You know that.”

I wait for more, thinking how easy it would be for him to appease me with a nonspecific promise: *I don’t know what I see exactly, but I see you in my life.* Or: *I want to make you happy.* Or even: *I wouldn’t rule anything out.* Something. Anything.

Instead, he gives me a helpless look as two cabs materialize, one after the other, a coincidence to which I ascribe all sorts of meaning. I flag the first and force a tight-lipped smile. “Let’s just talk tomorrow. Okay?” I say, trying to salvage what’s left of my image as a strong, independent woman and wondering if it’s only an image.

He nods as I accept a staccato kiss on the cheek. Then I slide in the cab and close my door, careful not to slam it, yet equally careful not to make eye contact with him as we pull away from the curb, headed toward my apartment on the Upper East Side.

Thirty minutes later, I’m changed into my oldest, coziest pair of flannel pajamas, feeling completely sorry for myself, when my apartment intercom buzzes.

*Peter.*

My heart leaps with shameful, giddy relief as I nearly run to my foyer. I take a deep breath and buzz him up, staring at the door like my namesake Champ waiting for the mailman. I imagine that Peter and I will make up, make love, maybe even make plans. I don't need a ring or a promise of a baby, I will say, as long as I know that he feels the way I do. That he sees us sharing a life together. That he can't imagine us apart. I tell myself it isn't settling—it's the opposite—it's what you do for love.

But a few seconds later, I round the corner to find not Peter at my door, but a young girl with angular features, a narrow face, and small, pointed chin. She is slight, pale, and almost pretty—at least I think she will be in a few years. She is dressed like a typical teenager down to her oversized backpack and peace sign necklace, but she has a composed air, something telling me that she is not a follower.

“Hello,” I say, wondering if she is lost or has the wrong apartment or is peddling something. “Can I help you?”

She clears her throat, shifts her weight from side to side, and asks in a small, raspy voice, “Are you Marian Caldwell?”

“Yes,” I say, waiting.

“My name is Kirby Rose,” she finally says, tucking her long, dirty-blond hair behind her ears, which are a little on the big side or at least at an unfortunate angle to her head, a trait I understand too well, then glances down at her scuffed black boots. When her eyes meet mine again, I notice their distinctive color—bluish-gray and banded by black—and in that instant, I know *exactly* who she is and why she has come here.

“Are you? . . .” I try to finish my sentence, but can't inhale or exhale, let alone speak.

Her chin trembles as she nods the smallest of nods, then wipes her palms on her jeans, threadbare at the left knee.

I stand frozen, anticipating the words I have imagined and feared, dreaded and dreamt about, for the last eighteen years. Then, just as I think my racing heart will explode, I finally hear her say them: "*I think you're my mother.*"

july 14, 1995

**I**t was the hottest day ever recorded in Chicago history, the mercury hitting 106 and the heat index topping out at 120 degrees, a record that still stands today, nearly two decades later. The heat wave was all anyone could talk about, eventually killing seven hundred fifty people, making bigger headlines than the Iran Disarmament Crisis, the Bosnian war, and the Grateful Dead's final performance at Soldier Field—at least on B96, my sole source of news at eighteen.

That blistering morning, as I lounged by our pool in the white string bikini I had ordered from the Victoria's Secret catalogue, I tuned in to the Kevin and JoBo show, listening to their banter about how the heat makes people do crazy things: fall in love, commit crimes, run naked through the streets. They were obviously joking, the way DJs do, but looking back, I actually believe that the temperature was at least partly to blame for what happened later that night at

my best friend Janie's house. That it would have been a different story during any other season or even on an ordinarily hot summer's day.

There were other factors, too, of course, such as alcohol, everyone's favorite culprit, specifically the four strawberry Boone's Farm coolers I downed on an empty stomach. Throw in the intensity of emotions that come with that bittersweet summer sandwiched between high school graduation and the rest of your life, supreme hometown boredom, and a dash of bad luck—or good, depending on who you ask. And of course, the final ingredient: Conrad Knight himself.

Conrad wasn't my type up close and in reality, but he was pretty much everyone's type from afar and in fantasy, and I certainly wasn't immune to his seductive blue-gray eyes, just-long-enough dark hair, and cheekbones Janie called "epic" years before the word became overused. He seemed mysterious and a little dangerous, an image some kids tried to cultivate—but only Conrad seemed to achieve naturally. He had a tattoo on his forearm, rumored to be his mother's initials and the date of the car crash that killed her. He smoked hand-rolled cigarettes, drove an old, black Mustang, and sang in a garage band downtown. A few girls with fake IDs who had gone to see him compared his voice to Eddie Vedder's, swearing that he'd be famous someday. His father, who was actually a retired actor, having starred in a now-defunct soap opera and a still-running commercial for Tums, returned to L.A. intermittently for auditions, taking Conrad with him for long stretches of time. Despite his absences from school and spotty academic record, he seemed smart and somehow worldly—or at least profoundly indifferent to the social order of high school, which gave him an aura of sophistication. In short, he was nothing like the affable jocks I had dated throughout high school—nothing like I was, for that matter—but not in a dramatic, cliques-at-war way, just in a way where our paths never really crossed. We

occasionally said hello in the halls, but hadn't really talked since elementary school.

"Marian Caldwell," Conrad declared when I ran into him in Janie's backyard. At least half of Glencoe had come to the party after word had spread that her parents were out of town. He was expressionless, yet something in his eyes told me that we were about to have a meaningful exchange.

"Hey Conrad," I said, self-consciously swaying to the swell of Sarah McLachlan's "I Will Remember You" coming from the boom box in Janie's upstairs bedroom window.

He gave me a half-smile, and then, as if continuing a long-running conversation, said those words I'd replay for years to come. "You can run, but you can't hide."

As he took a sip from a can of Dr Pepper, I surveyed the scruff on his face and inhaled the scent of his skin—a mix of cedar, salt, and Calvin Klein's Eternity cologne.

"Who's running?" I said. "And what are you doing at a party like this?"

I still cringe when I think of the question. I might as well have said a party with the "popular crowd," of which we both knew I was a sustaining benefactor.

"Lookin' for you," he said, his eyes smoldering as much as light eyes can. I glanced around, assuming he was joking, expecting his fellow bandmates or his girlfriend to be returning from the bathroom. I had never seen her—she went to another school—but Janie had spotted them at the mall together once and said she was a dead ringer for Kate Moss, right down to her gypsy top, long, floral skirt, and Birkenstocks.

"Well. Looks like you found me." I laughed, feeling bolder than usual as I touched his forearm, right on the black ink numbers, like

Braille on his skin, determining that he was not only alone but completely sober.

“So how you been?” He glanced at his naked wrist where a watch would have been if he had worn one. “For the past six years?”

“Six years?” I asked, then reminded him that we had gone to school together since the fourth grade.

“Last time we talked,” he said, running his hand through his hair, wavier than usual from the humidity that was so thick I felt like we were treading water. “I mean, *really* talked. We were on the bus coming back from that field trip.”

“From the Shedd,” I said, nodding, remembering the trip to the aquarium in the sixth grade—and especially the bus ride back to school.

Conrad smiled, and for one second, relinquished his cool posture. He looked twelve again, and I told him so.

His smile grew wider as he said, “You gave me half of your Twix and told me you wanted to be a marine biologist.”

I laughed and rolled my eyes. “Yeah . . . I don’t want to be a marine biologist anymore.”

“I know,” he said. “You’re going to Michigan, then film school, then L.A. or New York where you’re going to do great things and become huge. The next Nora Ephron or . . . well, that’s about the only girl director I know.”

I gave him a look of surprise until he divulged his obvious source. “The yearbook. Remember? Plans for the future?” He made quotes in the air, clearly mocking the whole exercise.

“Right,” I said, thinking that he must also be aware that I had been voted “most likely to succeed”—just as I was aware that he had won “best eyes.”

“And what are your plans?” I asked, something telling me that he



had left the yearbook questionnaire blank, until I remembered his three-word reply: *Color me gone*.

I asked him what he meant by this and he told me, “Just get the hell out of here. That’s all.”

“So nothing . . . more specific?” I asked, meaning of course, college. Which in my mind, and among my circle of friends, was simply a given.

“Nope,” he said, draining his Dr Pepper. He crushed the can with one hand and tossed it into a nearby wastebasket. “Except to kiss you tonight. And probably tomorrow night, too. And if you’re not careful . . . maybe even the one after that.”

I felt myself shiver, even as perspiration trickled down my back, and decided that I would let him. Or more accurately, I acknowledged to myself that I wouldn’t be able to say no. But I pretended to be in complete control, reaching up to adjust my long, blond ponytail, the humidity having the reverse effect on my straight, now limp hair. “Now why would you do such a thing?” I asked, my heart pounding as I gave him a coy look.

“Because I *like* you.”

The word was juvenile, but he made it sound otherwise.

“Since when?” I said, my voice stronger than my knees.

“Since always. Since day one.” He said it matter-of-factly, as if he were telling me a trivial piece of information like the time of day or the temperature—which was likely still in triple digits, nightfall providing no relief from the stifling heat. He then rattled off a catalogue of memories, dispelling any lingering doubt about his sincerity, if not his motives: the location of my locker over the last four years; the scar on my left knee that he had studied whenever I wore skirts to school; the purple dress I wore to the homecoming dance, silk pumps dyed to match.

“I don’t remember you ever going to a dance,” I said, breathless.

“I didn’t,” he said, holding my gaze. “I saw the snapshot in what’s his name’s locker.”

I stared back at him, remembering how I had taped it in my boyfriend’s locker, right over an annoying photo of Rebecca Romijn and Angie Everhart lounging on the beach in the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue. “Todd,” I said.

“Yeah. Him,” he said, rolling his eyes.

“We broke up,” I said.

“I know. About time.”

“What about your girlfriend?”

“We broke up, too,” he said. “What a coincidence.”

He took another step toward me and we began to slow dance to Sade, his hand on my back, and his breath in my ear, the distinct smell of pot wafting toward us. A few minutes later, amid many stares, we made our way inside, nestling into the corner of the tweed sectional in Janie’s family room, sweaty bodies gyrating all around us. For over an hour, we sat together, making light conversation that still felt heavy. There was an electricity between us, a sense of fresh discovery, but also a profound familiarity—the kind that comes when you grow up with someone, passing each other in the same halls, day after day. I found myself wondering why we had never talked like this before—and yet I knew exactly why.

“Let’s find somewhere more quiet,” he said at one point, after the first lull in our conversation.

I nodded, leading him to the foyer, then up the stairs, then down the hall to Janie’s parents’ bedroom, past the sign she had posted that said DO NOT ENTER!!! We no longer spoke, both of us nervous yet intent, as we locked the door, kissing, peeling off our clothes, then crawling under the covers of the four-poster king bed. At some point, he reached down on the floor, finding his jeans, pulling his wallet out of the back pocket. I knew what he was doing even before he

produced the square, foil package, fumbling in the dark. I closed my eyes, letting it all unfold, waiting for him, wanting him.

What happened next is predictable, except that it is never entirely predictable when it is happening to you, for the first time, after you've said no a hundred times before. I thought of all the times I had come close with Todd, trying to pinpoint what the difference was now, deciding that it all came down to a desire I had never felt before. A desire so intense that it felt like need.

"Are you sure?" he asked, even though we were nearly past the point of no return. I looked into his eyes, then up toward the ceiling, dizzy from my feelings and the fan whirring above us, trying to make a final decision as Conrad held himself steadily over me, breathing, waiting.

My mind raced, my thoughts disjointed and blurry—yet remarkably clear, too. I told myself that there were risks, that I might regret it in the morning, if not sooner. I told myself he might only be pretending to like me—that he was really just using me to get laid, that surely I was only one of many. I told myself that it wasn't the kind of thing a girl like me did, especially with someone like him.

But the answer was still yes. With every beat of my heart, I heard yes. And then I said it aloud, holding his gaze, so there would be no mistake about my decision. Heat, lust, and alcohol aside, I knew exactly what I was doing—that I was making an indelible, irrevocable choice. I knew it as I felt him enter me slowly, lingering for a few seconds before he withdrew to put on the condom and begin again. I knew I was changed forever.

Yet in that still, salty aftermath, I never imagined what would follow. I never dreamed that it would be anything other than a moment in time. A story from my youth. A chapter from that summer. A heat wave with a beginning, middle, and definite end.

## kirby

**M**y name is Kirby Rose, and I'm adopted.

I don't mean to make it sound like an AA confession, although sometimes that's how people take it, like it's something they should be supportive about. I just mean that they are two basic facts about me. Just as you can't pinpoint the moment you learn your name, I can't remember the first time I heard my parents tell the story of that out-of-the-blue phone call announcing my birth and the news that I would be theirs in seventy-two hours. All they had to do was drive to Chicago (a short trip from their neighborhood in South City, St. Louis, where they both grew up and still lived), sign some papers, and pick me up at the hospital. All they had to do was say yes.

It was April Fools' Day and for a second my mom thought it was a joke, until she reassured herself that nobody would be cruel enough to play such a trick on a couple who had been trying and wishing,

waiting and praying for a baby for over ten years, from virtually the day they got married. My dad was an electrician, my mom an administrative assistant at a big law firm in town, so they made decent money, but they couldn't afford any fancy fertility clinics. Instead, they looked into adoption—first sticking with domestic Catholic agencies, then gradually registering with any organization in any country that might have a baby to give them. China. Russia. Colombia. Shady lawyers. It didn't matter; they just wanted a baby.

So of course my mother shouted yes into the phone before she knew a single fact about me. Then, as my dad picked up the other extension, the lady on the phone calmly reported that I was a healthy six-pound-three-ounce baby girl. Nineteen inches long, with big, blue eyes and a head covered with peach fuzz. She said I had a big appetite and a sweet disposition. She called me “perfect”—and told them that they were the lucky ones chosen by the agency from hundreds of adoptive parents.

“Congratulations,” she said. “We'll see you soon.”

My parents hung up, wept, embraced, then laughed through more tears. Then they rushed out to Babies “R” Us the way people hit grocery stores before a blizzard. They bought tiny pink clothes and a crib and a car seat and more toys and dolls than I could ever hope to play with, then came home and transformed my mother's sewing room into a lavender and yellow nursery.

The next day, they drove to Chicago and checked into a hotel near Northwestern Memorial Hospital. They had to wait three more days to meet me, neither of them sleeping for more than a few minutes here and there, even though they knew it was the last good rest they'd have for a while. In the meantime, they discussed baby names, my mother lobbying hard for her maiden name, Kirby. We have to see her first, my dad insisted. I had to look like a Kirby—whatever *that* was.

My dad typically picks up the story from there, telling me how he cut himself shaving, his hands shaking so much that he almost let my mother drive to the hospital, something he never does because she sucks so badly at it. Then he skips ahead to the papers they hurriedly signed, and the moment the lady from the agency returned with a baby—*me*—swaddled in a pink fleece blanket.

“Meet your daughter,” the lady said as she handed me to my parents. “Dear one, meet Lynn and Art Rose. Your parents.”

It has always been my favorite part of the story. The first time they held me, gazed down at my face, felt the warmth of my body against their chests.

“She has your nose,” my dad joked, and then declared me a Kirby.

It was the moment, they said, when we became a family. They said it felt like an absolute miracle, not unlike the moment they met Charlotte, my little sister who was conceived by complete surprise shortly after they adopted me. The only difference, my mother was fond of saying, was that she wasn’t in any pain when she met me. That came later.

Growing up, I heard the story a million times, along with all the sentimental quotes about adoption, like the one framed in my bedroom for years: “Not flesh of my flesh, nor bone of my bone, but somehow miraculously still my own. Never forget for a single minute, you didn’t grow under my heart but in it.” I knew which celebrities had adopted babies, and more important, who had been adopted themselves: Steve Jobs, two presidents, including Bill Clinton (who was in the White House when I was born), two first ladies, Faith Hill *and* Tim McGraw (who happened to also be married—how cool is *that?*), Darryl McDaniels from Run-DMC and, as my mother sometimes pointed out, Moses and Jesus.

Yet despite my full understanding of my adoption, I didn’t give much thought to my birth mother, and even less to my birth father. It

was as if they were both bit players in the whole drama, completely beside the point but for their necessary contribution of a little DNA. And I *certainly* never felt rejected because they had given me up. My parents knew nothing about my birth mother, yet always explained with certainty that she didn't "give me up" or "give me away"—she made a *plan* for me, the best one she could make under her circumstances, whatever those were. Looking back, I think they were probably just following the advice of some adoption book, but at the time I bought it, hook, line, and sinker. If anything, I felt sorry for her, believing that I was *her* loss; she wasn't mine.

In fact, the first time I really wondered about her with anything more than a passing curiosity was in the fifth grade when we researched our family ancestry in social studies. I did my report on Ireland, like many of the kids in my class, explaining that my father's people came from Galway, my mother's from Cork. Of course, I understood that they weren't really *my* bloodlines or my ancestors—and I made no bones about that fact in my report. Most everyone knew I was adopted, as I'd been in the same school since kindergarten, and it was no big deal, simply one of those bits of trivia, like being double-jointed or having an identical twin.

So I matter-of-factly informed the class that I knew nothing about my birth mother except that she was from Chicago. I didn't know her name, and we had never seen a photo of her, but based on my blond hair and blue eyes, I guessed that she was Scandinavian—then narrowed it to Danish, maybe because I have a sweet tooth and liked the sound of it. My classmates seemed satisfied with this theory, except for annoying Gary Rusk who raised his hand, and without waiting to be called on, asked whether I was mad at my mother and if I ever planned on tracking her down. Envisioning a bounty hunter with a rifle and a couple of bloodhounds, I exchanged a look with my best

friend, Belinda Greene. Then I cleared my throat and calmly replied, “I already have a mother. And no, I’m not mad at anyone.”

The seed was planted. Maybe I *should* be mad; clearly others *would* be—at least Gary would. He pressed on with his nosy line of questioning. “Could you find her if you wanted to? Like with a private investigator?”

“No. I don’t even, like, know her *name*. So how would I find her?” I said, thinking of all the many women who must have given birth at my hospital in Chicago on April Fools’ Day 1996.

Finished with my report, I sat down, and we went on to hear about Debbie Talierco’s Italian heritage. But for the rest of the class, and all that day in school, I couldn’t shake the thought of my birth mother. I didn’t yet *want* to find her, but I kept wondering if there was even a chance that I *could*.

So that night at the dinner table, during a tedious conversation about the Gallaghers’ newly adopted Yorkie puppy and how he kept nipping their toddler, and that they really needed to show that dog who was boss, I silently rehearsed the question that Gary had posed to me, somehow anticipating that it wasn’t something my parents, particularly my mother, wanted to discuss. It was one thing when they brought it up in the context of *their* prayers being answered; I knew it would be another thing altogether for me to focus on *her*.

“Why’d they get a Yorkie anyway? They should have *rescued* a dog,” Charlotte said, a tenderhearted animal lover. “I mean, it *saves* a life.”

I suddenly felt like a rescue dog myself, a total *mutt*, as I casually shook A.I. onto my pork chops, a habit I had picked up from my dad, who puts it on everything, including scrambled eggs.

“So I did this report today on my ancestors,” I began. “And, umm . . . my adoption came up.”



My mother stared at me, chewing, swallowing, waiting.

“And anyway, I was wondering . . . if there was any way I could find my birth mother? If I wanted to? I mean, do we even know her name?”

I could tell right away that asking the question was a mistake. The air felt thick with tension and my mother began to blink back tears. *Tears!* Over a stupid *question*. Meanwhile, Charlotte looked down at her plate with this guilty look on her face while my dad strapped on his most somber, preachy one, the same one he wore when he gave my sister and me the big “don’t do drugs” speech. Rather than just answering the question, he said, “Well. This is a pretty serious subject.”

“It’s not *that* serious,” I said.

“Well, sure it is,” he said. “And it’s important. Very, very important. I mean, if it’s important to you, it’s important to us. Right, Lynn?”

“I don’t *want* to find her or anything,” I backpedaled. “I just wanted to know if I *could*. Geez.”

“Don’t take His name in vain,” my mother said.

I told her I was spelling it with a *g*, not a *j*, fighting back the urge to ask if she thought I’d go to *heck* for it.

Charlotte laughed at this, and I flashed her a smile. No matter how much she got on my nerves, I loved making my sister laugh.

Then I looked back at my mother and mumbled, “I mean, I don’t care a single thing about her. I’d probably hate her.”

My mother looked relieved, while my father said, “Don’t say that. She did a brave thing. She did what was best for you.”

“Whatever,” I said, at my peril. It was one of my parents’ least favorite words. “It’s no biggie.”

My father pressed on. “Do you want to find her, Kirbs?”

“I already said I didn’t!”

He nodded, clearly not believing me, as he went on to carefully explain that Heartstrings, the agency that had arranged my adop-

tion, had a provision in the documents which granted me access to my birth mother when I turned eighteen, should I want to meet her.

“Access?” I said, as casually as I could.

“If you want her contact information, the agency will provide it to you,” my father said. “Assuming she has kept her records current. She agreed to this term, but understood that it was *your* decision, not hers. Currently, she has no information about you or us, nor will she ever be given it. And,” he said, raising his eyebrows as if about to make an important point, “she was okay with this.”

In other words, she didn’t want to find me so why should I want to find her? I shrugged, as if the details of the legal arrangement bored me. To myself, I silently vowed never to bring the subject up again, at least not with my parents.

But from that day forward, I became intrigued by adoption in a way I hadn’t been before, acutely aware of stories about adopted children finding their birth mothers and vice versa. I lived for talk shows that orchestrated reunions, riveted by the emotional tales. Sometimes there was guilt and regret, sometimes anger, usually a complex mix of emotions. Occasionally there was a dramatic health issue at stake—or in a few rare cases, a murder, mystery, or kidnapping. I gathered the anecdotes in my mind as I wondered about my own birth mother, her story. I never thought of her as a second mother, more like a distant relative, a long-lost aunt or cousin who was doing something far more interesting (I hoped) than anyone in my life. Perhaps she was a musician, or a CEO, or a surgeon, or a missionary in a third-world country. I had no feelings of bitterness or resentment or abandonment, just a growing curiosity and an occasional, fleeting, romanticized notion of who she might be—and what that might make me by association. Deep down, I had the feeling that she was the missing piece of me—and I wondered if the same was true for her. I still insisted to myself that I didn’t want to find her, but I was

starting to also believe that I could never really know myself until I did.

All these feelings only intensified by the time I entered Bishop Du-Bourg High School, and realized just how lost I felt. I had no real identity and didn't seem to belong anywhere—even places I had once felt comfortable. I quit the volleyball team, avoided mass and anything related to our parish, and completely blew off my schoolwork. I even felt myself drifting from Belinda. We were still best friends, but I couldn't stand the way she obsessed over every three-ounce weight gain, boys who had nothing going for them, and worst of all, the Jonas Brothers and other crappy Disney packaged bands. I could forgive a lot of things, but cheesy taste in music wasn't one of them.

For a short time, I started hanging out with a new group of kids who I thought shared my sensibilities or at least my taste in music. But they turned out to be even more fake than the popular crowd, spending hours cultivating their emo image, listening to obscure indie bands no one had ever heard of (and who they'd immediately disown as soon as someone outside the group “discovered” them, too), spending a fortune at Hot Topic and Urban Outfitters to look as if they went to a thrift shop, and in the worst example, drawing fake scars onto their wrists and lying about suicide attempts. I decided I'd much rather hang with Belinda than a bunch of posers—because at least she was authentic in her complete lack of good taste (and even I had to admit that it was fun belting out a Kelly Clarkson song now and then). Mostly, though, I just wanted to be alone with my thoughts and music. In fact, music—*good* music—was one of the few things guaranteed to make me happy. Much to my parents' frustration, who thought that fresh air was synonymous with *any* air, I spent hours in

my room, listening to records, writing songs, singing (when no one was home to hear me), and playing the drums. I had picked them up in the sixth grade when my music teacher told me they were the hardest instrument to learn, and although I had long since quit the band, the drums were the only thing I didn't abandon altogether. In fact, I played them all the time, saving every dollar I made bagging groceries at Schnuck's, until I could afford to upgrade from my first Ludwig junior drum set to a sick Pearl Masters MCX kit with the coolest maple shells finished in a black sparkle glitter wrap. It was the sweetest thing I had ever seen, and for the first few nights after I bought it, I moved it next to my bed so I could sleep right beside it and then see it first thing in the morning. My parents humored me, pretending to get my fascination with drums. My dad even bought me a Sabian eighteen-inch HHX Evolution Crash cymbal that he researched on his own for my birthday, which was supercool of him. But I could tell they both wished I did something a little more normal and social. Or at the very least, found a quieter hobby.

The only person who seemed to respect and accept me was Mr. Tully, our school guidance counselor, who I was required to visit about my falling grades and the fact that I was, in everyone's words, not living up to my potential. I pretended to be annoyed when the pink counselor slips came, but I secretly loved spending time in his office, even though he constantly nagged me to sing in the school liturgical choir, join the symphonic or jazz band, or at least play the percussion in our high school musical. (*Not gonna happen—any of it.*) Mr. Tully was young and funny and handsome with light brown eyes and dimples that showed up even when he wasn't smiling. But more than his looks or fun personality, he was the only member of the faculty—the only adult, for that matter—who really seemed to get that being a teenager generally sucked and that it certainly wasn't

the best time of your life the way my parents always said it should be and the way it seemed to be for Charlotte. When pressed, I could even get him to admit that some of our school rules were overkill, such as the requirement that every class start with a prayer (although he was an alum himself and promised that one day I'd be proud of it, and if I put my mind to it, this place could be a launching pad for greatness as it had been for the Twitter founder Jack Dorsey). But for all his coolness, I never opened up to him completely. I believed he liked me, but I was well aware that he was getting *paid* to have empathy—so just in case, I wasn't about to admit to him just how shitty I felt on the inside.

To that point, during one counselor visit about my failing grade in chemistry, the subject of my sister came up, and Mr. Tully came right out and asked me the question nobody else had ever dared ask: Did it ever bother me that I was adopted and Charlotte wasn't? I thought hard about the answer, waited a beat longer than felt comfortable before I shook my head no. I wondered if it was the truth. I honestly didn't think that was the problem. Charlotte never lorded this over me, or mentioned it at all, and we had very little sibling rivalry, kind of weird given that we were only eleven months and one grade apart.

I still found myself resenting her for reasons I couldn't quite pinpoint. Yes, she had a great figure (or at least *a* figure while I was scrawny, flat-chested, and barely five feet two), more classic features, and the best, thick, curly hair. But I preferred my gray-blue eyes and blond hair to her muddy brown combination. She did better in school, but only because she worked twice as hard and cared three times more. She was a far superior athlete; I was a middling, retired-from-the-JV-squad volleyball player, while she was a star swimmer, breaking all kinds of school and even citywide records, routinely making headlines in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. Our dining room

table doubled as a scrapbook center, a newspaper-clipping shrine to Charlotte's prowess in the pool. But even that didn't faze me. I had no desire to train twenty hours a week at anything, even drumming, and jumping into a cold pool on dark winter mornings seemed like a sick form of torture.

So if it wasn't her miraculous conception, her looks, her brains, or her athletic ability, I wondered why I was jealous, sometimes even wishing to be her. I wasn't sure, but had the feeling it had something to do with the way Charlotte felt on the inside. She genuinely seemed to like who she was—or at least had the luxury of giving it no thought whatsoever, all of which translated to massive popularity. Everyone knew her and loved her regardless of clique—the jocks, geeks, burn-outs, and hoosiers—while I felt downright invisible most of the time.

On one particularly bad day during my junior year, the gulf between Charlotte and me was illustrated in dramatic fashion. First, I failed an American history pop quiz on the one day that week I had blown off my homework. Then, I got my period all over my khaki pants, which was called to my attention as I did a problem *wrong* on the whiteboard in trig. Third, I heard that Tricia Henry had started a rumor that I was a lesbian (which wouldn't matter if it was true, although she was too much of an ignoramus to realize that distinction) simply based on the fact that I play the drums.

Meanwhile, Charlotte made the homecoming court. As a *sophomore*—virtually unheard of at DuBourg. To her credit, she looked genuinely surprised, and completely humble as she elegantly made her way down from the bleachers to the center of the gym where Seth O'Malley, the most beautiful boy in the entire school, gave her a high five and threw his muscled arm around her neck. I didn't want to be on the homecoming court, nor did I want our entire class body watching me, in bloodstained pants or otherwise, but I

ached with envy over how effortless it all was for her. How she could stand there with no trace of self-consciousness, even waving at a group of obnoxious freshmen boys bellowing, “Hottie Lottie!” It didn’t help matters that Belinda shot me sympathetic stares during the pep rally and asked me no fewer than four times if I was jealous of my little sister, a more direct version of Mr. Tully’s question. Clearly, I was *supposed* to feel that way, even in the eyes of my guidance counselor and best friend.

Later that day, I passed Charlotte in the hall in a pack of happy, pretty girls. She was still wearing her red sash from the assembly over her long-sleeved, button-down white blouse and red plaid kilt. (I could never understand how she could make a uniform look good when I looked like crap every day. Then again maybe it was because I typically went with the more comfortable but decidedly unstylish polo shirt and khaki pants option.) We made eye contact, and she eagerly smiled at me, pausing as if on the verge of breaking free of her posse. But I didn’t give her the chance. I put my head down and kept walking. I glanced back just long enough to tell I had hurt her feelings, maybe even tarnished her big day. Instead of feeling guilty, I felt a dark, shameful satisfaction that I had managed to wipe that near-constant grin off her face.

It was short-lived, though, as she was back to her same old cheery self that evening, chatting with our mother in the kitchen like the best friends they were. The two had heart-to-hearts all the time, if you can call surface revelations such as “if only green beans tasted as good as chocolate cake” and “isn’t Suri Cruise precious?!” heart-to-hearts, while she and my father bonded over her swimming. There were few things as sacred as sports to my dad, and I watched him brimming with pride whenever they returned from her meets, memorizing every boring race, then rehashing the details, over and over and over. So I guess it was inevitable that our parents would come to

like her better, all but saying the words they were thinking: “Why can’t you be more like your sister?”

Deep down, I knew they *loved* us both equally, and that any favoritism had to do with the fact that she brought them daily pleasure and was just plain easier to live with—not that she was their biological kid. Yet over time, that fact certainly didn’t help matters in my head. Nor did the fact that they all looked alike. Even my parents could pass for siblings, with their athletic builds, curly brown hair, and perky Irish noses complete with a smattering of outdoorsy freckles. Their personalities were similar, too, all of them hardwired to be cheerful and outgoing, even with strangers. The three of them all talked nonstop about anything and everything and nothing. They could talk to a freakin’ wall while I couldn’t conceive of making small talk just for the heck of it, especially with a stranger (much to the annoyance of my boss at Schnuck’s who seemed to think that chatting up the customer while I bagged their groceries was crucial to their shopping experience). It was just another example of me feeling like an outsider.

Things went downhill my senior year, the chilly standoff with my parents escalating to an outright war—and believe me, my parents didn’t subscribe to the “choose your battles” strategy. *Everything* was a battle with them. We fought over the volume of my music (my iPod was going to make me go deaf; my drums disturbed the neighbors). We fought over my decision to be a vegetarian (unwise for a growing girl). We fought over my Facebook page (somehow they found the status update “my parents suck” offensive). We fought about my messy room (that they weren’t supposed to go into in the first place). We fought about the cigarettes and bottle of vodka they “found” *in* my messy room (earning them another status update comparing



them to the Gestapo). We fought over the Catholic church, my attendance at mass, the fact that I was agnostic (okay, maybe this was just to piss them off—I did *sorta* believe in Him). We fought over Belinda after she got busted at school with a dime bag (thank God they didn't find my dime bag during their unconstitutional search and seizure). We fought over my ten o'clock curfew that I broke more in protest of how stupidly early it was than because I had anything that interesting to do (translation: *nothing* interesting to do and certainly nothing that involved boys—only the lame ones liked me). We fought over my shitty grades (and shittier attitude). We even managed to fight over my shockingly high SAT score—because, in their words, it was further evidence that I wasn't living up to my potential. And most of all, we fought over the fact that I wasn't going to college—not even to the School of Music at the University of Missouri, Mr. Tully's grand plan for me (which I might have considered if I didn't have to study any other subject or see anyone else from my high school while I was there). We fought over *everything*.

Then one freezing January night (we fought over the thermostat, too—there was frost on the inside of my windows, for Christ's sake), I woke up to go the bathroom and overheard my parents talking in the kitchen. As I crept down the hall, I felt oddly soothed by the cadence of their voices and the sound of my mother's teaspoon clinking against her cup, just as I secretly loved the sound of Charlotte snoring on the nights she had a bad dream and asked to sleep in my room. For one second, I felt like my little-girl self again—and wondered why I couldn't just will myself to be happy.

That's when I overheard the word "adoption." Then: "her mother."

I froze, my cheeks burning despite the fact that I was shivering, then crept closer to the banister, craning to listen, hoping I had heard them wrong.

But no. My mother continued, “Who knows what *she* was like. Who knows what really happened.”

“I know,” my father said. “The agency could have lied.”

My heart pounded as I kept listening. *Depression . . . mental illness . . . alcohol and drugs . . . teen pregnancy.*

Their words slashed through me, filling me with rage. I knew I was a difficult, moody disappointment, but in a lot of ways, it all seemed like typical teenager stuff—hardly a big enough crime for them to start casting stones at the woman who birthed me and had given them the “treasure” they always claimed I was. Yet the worst part was that suddenly, it all rang true to me. Their theories about my birth mother would certainly explain a few things, that’s for sure. Maybe she was the root of my problem—she *and* my birth dad. And so now, along with the rage, I realized I was feeling shame, too. A lovely combination.

“Do you think we can talk her into going to college?” I heard my mother say.

“If she even gets in.”

My mother said even if I did, it made no sense to pay all that money if I wasn’t going to try. It was bad enough that they had to pull teeth to get me to fill out the application for Missouri. They weren’t going to keep spoon-feeding me. I’d have to find out on my own what the world was like.

That’s when they took it to a whole new level, saying you couldn’t really make someone change. My dad said he would have killed to go to college. My mom said if only I tried half as hard as Charlotte. Then they circled right back to where they started, blaming my biology, coming right out and saying *it’s the only thing that explains the difference between the girls*. In other words, nature over nurture. I wasn’t *their* fault; I was *her* fault. I felt myself blaming her, too, while

a sad irony washed over me. Even though she had given me away, this was the first time in my life that I had truly felt rejected, disowned, downright unloved. And it was my own parents' fault.

Devastated, I returned to bed, putting my face under the covers, clenching my fists, telling myself not to cry if only because it would make me look like shit in the morning. I couldn't afford to be one drop more ugly than I already was.

I squeezed my eyes shut, thinking of her as I often did at night, a rapid succession of faces flashing in my brain, until I settled where I usually did: on a cross between Meryl Streep and Laura Linney. But this time, she was a sickly, crackhead version of the two actresses, my fantasies of a glamorous, successful mother quickly fading.

In that moment, I decided I was going to find her. I was going to find out the truth about who she was and why she had given me away. I would turn eighteen in just a few months, and the day I did, the very *morning* I did, I would call the agency and get her name and address. Until then, I would save up for a ticket to wherever she was. I would show my parents, show *everyone*. Show them what, I wasn't exactly sure, but I would figure that out once I got there.

So on April Fools' Day (the biggest *joke* of a birthday), I called the agency, then, as directed, sent them a fax with my social security number and signature. Two minutes later, I had an answer in my in-box. My hands shaking, I read: *Marian Caldwell*, along with a New York City address. It took everything I had not to Google her, but I worried that if I did, I'd somehow find an excuse to chicken out, even if it was as simple as her looking mean in her picture. I didn't want anything to sway me from my plan. I didn't want to write her a letter and wait for months for it to be answered—or worse, *not* answered. I didn't

want anything to be on her terms when everything had been on her terms in the beginning. It was my turn. And this was my way.

So right after my birthday, and before a long, four-day weekend, I put the genius plan that Belinda helped me orchestrate into action (genius because it was so easy). I simply asked my parents if I could join Belinda and her mother on a road trip to Mobile to visit Belinda's aunt (after planting a few offhand fibs about said aunt being a former Catholic missionary). I got permission after they called Belinda's mom to confirm the trip. Then I told Belinda's mom that I wasn't feeling well, banking on the only element of luck—that Mrs. Greene wouldn't phone my parents to discuss the cancellation. Sure enough, she did not, and the next day I went down to the bus station on Fifteenth Street and bought a two-hundred-seventy-five-dollar round-trip ticket to New York City, and boarded a foul-smelling Greyhound bus with what seemed to be a good many ex-cons, including a shady driver.

For the next twenty-four hours, I rode that bus halfway across the country, listening to my iPod and wondering about her and her story. Had she been too poor, too young, or too sick to keep me? Or did she just not want me? Had she ever regretted her decision? Had she pulled herself up by her bootstraps since then, changing her life completely? Did she want me to find her? Had she ever looked for me? Was she married now? Did she have children who she kept who would be my half siblings? Who was my father (there was nothing on him in the file)? Did I get all my loser genes from her, him, or both of them? Were they still together, raising my full-blooded siblings? Would meeting her help me understand why I am the way I am? Or just make me feel worse? With every scenario, I made a list of pros and cons. If she was an awful loser, my parents would be right—and maybe I'd be destined to be that way, too. On the other hand, if my

parents were wrong about her, then I disproved their theory, but would have to confront another problem: Why didn't she want me? And would my life have been so much better if she had? Would I still feel the way I do now inside—dark and frustrated and lonely? There seemed to be no winning—and a huge chance for losing. But then again, what else was new?

And then I finally arrive at the Port Authority terminal, a scary shit hole, smelling worse than the bus, which I didn't think was possible. I look around with no clue where to go. The three people I ask either don't speak English or have no desire to reply to me. I finally see a sign for taxis and follow the arrows to the street, emerging onto Eighth Avenue, which looks nothing like the New York I've seen on television and in the movies. Overwhelmed, I find a uniformed worker barking at everyone. She looks right through me, but I speak up, ask her if this is where I can get a taxi. She points to the back of a very long line. As I wait, I keep my eyes fixed on a homeless woman across the street. She is huddled under a gray quilt, a cardboard sign propped against her, a paper cup at her feet. I wonder if she's my mother—maybe she's just been evicted from the address the agency sent.

Twenty minutes later, I am climbing into a cab, which is surprisingly clean, a hopeful sign. I give the driver the address I've memorized as he lurches full speed ahead, stopping and starting every few blocks, the scenery quickly improving. We drive through a wooded area, that I assume is Central Park, and then emerge into a neighborhood that looks residential. A minute later, he stops, looks at me, points at the meter. It reads \$9.60. I hand him eleven dollars—and remember advice my dad once gave me: When in doubt, tip. I give

him another buck. Then I grab my backpack from the seat next to me, slide out of the car onto Eighty-eighth Street and Madison Avenue and look up at the residence of my birth mother.

*Damn, I think. I did it.*

I glance down at my black Swatch watch, nervously loosening the polyurethane strap one notch, then tightening it again. It is nearly eleven, probably too late to go knocking on her door, but I can't wait until the morning to find out the truth. I remind myself that this is the city that never sleeps, hoping she is up, then hoping nobody is home.

I pace in the shadows of the sidewalk, my stomach in knots. It's hard to say what I want more—for me to like her or for her to like me. After stalling a few more seconds, I finally force myself to walk to the open doorway of her building and peer around the lobby. It is fancy, with a gleaming, black-and-white marble floor and formal furniture. The crack den notion quickly vanishes, but I'm more intimidated than relieved. My heart pounding, a doorman suddenly materializes, asking if he can help me. I jump, then say hello. He says hello back, friendly enough. He has shiny black hair, neatly gelled into a low side part, and wears a navy and gold uniform with a matching hat. His nametag reads JAVIER—but for a second, I think it says “Caviar”—which I picture her eating on a high floor above me.

“I'm here to see Marian Caldwell,” I say, trying to sound more official than I must look in my jeans, T-shirt, and pilled sweater coat. I nervously pluck a few balls of fuzz from my sleeve, wishing I had Googled her, after all. Belinda was right—I should have been more prepared for this moment. I would have worn something nicer. Maybe I wouldn't have come at all.

“She expecting you?” Javier asks, giving me a curious once-over.

I panic, worried that he has been warned about the possible

arrival of a troubled teenager. Then, as I hear Belinda telling me not to be paranoid, frequent advice from her, I reassure myself Javier doesn't know a thing about me—he's just doing his job. Just in case, though, I smile, so as to look, at the very least, untroubled. Then I clear my throat and say, "Yes . . . I mean, she very well *might* be."

Technically this is true. She *might* be waiting for me, expecting me, hoping for me. After all, she did sign the paper that said I could know her name on my eighteenth birthday—which she had to have remembered was a week ago. Surely she keeps track of my birthdays. It seems the very least a woman could do who, you know, gives *birth* to a child and then gives her away. She might even have a little annual ritual or ceremony she performs. Maybe she sips champagne with her closest friends or her own mother, my grandmother. Maybe she bakes a cake, adding a candle with every passing year. I wonder if she loves chocolate as much as I do. Or maybe she will tell me the sweet tooth came straight from my birth father. The answers might be seconds away.

As Javier turns and pushes a button on a large switchboard, I strongly consider bolting. But instead, I hold as still as the marble statues flanking the elevator, even holding my breath as I anticipate the sound of her voice, asking who is here to see her. But there is only a loud buzzing noise in response and Javier turns to me and says, "You can go ahead up!" with a grand gesture toward the elevator.

I take this as a good sign. She is, by nature, welcoming, granting permission to visit when she has no idea who is at her door. Then again, maybe she thinks I'm someone else. Maybe she has a real daughter who ran out to the store for some gum or milk—and frequently forgets her key.

In any event, there is no turning back now. "Um . . . what floor?"

“That’d be the penthouse!” Javier says, pointing skyward with great flair.

I nod, as if I’m told to go to the penthouse every day of the week, but inside, the word causes panic. I readjust my backpack, swallow, and take the few steps to the polished elevator doors. They suddenly open, exposing an old man in high-waisted pants walking a tidily groomed toy poodle in a pink sweater and purple rhinestone collar. The two don’t go together at all, except for the fact that they both survey me with disapproval as I step past them. Once in the elevator alone, I take a deep breath, and push the PH button. When the doors close, I quickly practice my introduction, with slight variations:

*Hello. I’m Kirby Rose. Your daughter.*

*Hello. I’m your daughter. Kirby Rose.*

*Hi. My name is Kirby Rose. I think I’m your daughter?*

The word daughter seems too intimate, but there is really no other word to use (besides technical ones like “offspring” or “progeny”), and no adjective to clarify the relationship, as there is with *birth* mother. My thoughts jolt to a standstill as the elevator doors open directly into the foyer of an apartment. Beyond the foyer, I can see the living room with large windows covering one whole wall. Everything is neat, sleek, perfect, and there is no sign of children or babies. My relief over this fact makes me uneasy; I already care too much.

And then. There she is, walking gracefully toward me in cotton pajamas in a preppy pink and green print. They are a bit baggy, but I can tell she is slim, an average height. She looks younger than my parents, about thirty-five, although it’s tough to guess the age of grown-ups. She has blond hair highlighted even blonder, pulled back in a messy but stylish ponytail. Her face is thin and longish, and for a second I see myself in her. Maybe our noses or chins? I decide that it’s just wishful thinking; she is way prettier than I am.



I look down at her bare feet, dainty and narrow, her toes painted a deep plum—so unlike my mother’s broad, callused feet and oddly shaped toes. I look back at her face, into her eyes, and decide she looks kind. At the very least she doesn’t look bitchy, and she is probably smart and hardworking, too, because dumb, lazy people don’t end up in the penthouse. Then again, maybe she has a really rich family, but she doesn’t have that Paris Hilton-y, spoiled look.

“Hello,” she says, her voice light and pleasant, her expression curious. “Can I help you?”

I clear my throat and ask, “Are you Marian Caldwell?”

“Yes,” she says, and for one second, I have the feeling she knows. But then I see a flicker of impatience. The baby she had eighteen years ago is the farthest thing from her mind.

I look down at my shoes, take a deep breath, and try not to mumble. “My name is Kirby Rose.”

No reaction, of course. She doesn’t know my name. I tuck a piece of hair behind my ears and force myself to look into her eyes again. Something changes in them.

Sure enough, she says, “Are you? . . .”

My pulse quickens as I nod, trying to breathe, trying not to faint. Then I say the words I’ve said in my head a thousand times. “I think you’re my mother.”

Her smile fades, all the color draining from her already fair complexion, as she stares into my eyes. She looks more scared than I am, completely frozen. An eternity seems to go by before she reaches out and touches my arm and says, “Oh . . . Goodness. It *is* you.”

I smile, but my throat feels so tight and dry that I can’t speak and start to worry that I’m going to cry. I don’t, though. It feels like a pretty major victory.

“Please. Come in,” she says, backing up, motioning for me to step forward.

I take a few small steps and say, “I’m sorry to roll up on you like this. I can come back another time. . . .”

“No. Stay. *Please* stay,” she says.

I nod, telling myself she means it. That she has to be at least a *little* bit happy to see me again.

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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