



To
all the
boys
I've
loved
before

BY
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HAN**

AUTHOR
OF
THE
SUMMER
I TURNED
PRETTY

For my sister, Susan—Han girls forever

I like to save things. Not important things like whales or people or the environment. Silly things. Porcelain bells, the kind you get at souvenir shops. Cookie cutters you'll never use, because who needs a cookie in the shape of a foot? Ribbons for my hair. Love letters. Of all the things I save, I guess you could say my love letters are my most prized possession.

I keep my letters in a teal hatbox my mom bought me from a vintage store downtown. They aren't love letters that someone else wrote for me; I don't have any of those. These are ones I've written. There's one for every boy I've ever loved—five in all.

When I write, I hold nothing back. I write like he'll never read it. Because he never will. Every secret thought, every careful observation, everything I've saved up inside me, I put it all in the letter. When I'm done, I seal it, I address it, and then I put it in my teal hatbox.

They're not love letters in the strictest sense of the word. My letters are for when I don't want to be in love anymore. They're for good-bye. Because after I write my letter, I'm no longer consumed by my all-consuming love. I can eat my cereal and not wonder if he likes bananas over his Cheerios too; I can sing along to love songs and not be singing them to him. If love is like a possession, maybe my letters are like my exorcisms. My letters set me free. Or at least they're supposed to.

1

JOSH IS MARGOT'S BOYFRIEND, BUT I guess you could say my whole family is a little in love with him. It's hard to say who most of all. Before he was Margot's boyfriend, he was just Josh. He was always there. I say always, but I guess that's not true. He moved next door five years ago but it feels like always.

My dad loves Josh because he's a boy and my dad is surrounded by girls. I mean it: all day long he is surrounded by females. My dad is an ob-gyn, and he also happens to be the father of three daughters, so it's like girls, girls, girls all day. He also likes Josh because Josh likes comics and he'll go fishing with him. My dad tried to take us fishing once, and I cried when my shoes got mud on them, and Margot cried when her book got wet, and Kitty cried because Kitty was still practically a baby.

Kitty loves Josh because he'll play cards with her and not get bored. Or at least pretend to not get bored. They make deals with each other—if I win this next hand, you have to make me a toasted crunchy-peanut-butter-sandwich, no crusts. That's Kitty. Inevitably there won't be crunchy peanut butter and Josh will say too bad, pick something else. But then Kitty will wear him down and he'll run out and buy some, because that's Josh.

If I had to say why Margot loves him, I think maybe I would say it's because we all do.

We are in the living room, Kitty is pasting pictures of dogs to a giant piece of cardboard. There's paper and scraps all around her. Humming to herself, she says, "When Daddy asks me what I want for Christmas, I am just going to say, 'Pick any one of these breeds and we'll be good.'"

Margot and Josh are on the couch; I'm lying on the floor, watching TV. Josh popped a big bowl of popcorn, and I devote myself to it, handfuls and handfuls of it.

A commercial comes on for perfume: a girl is running around the streets of Paris in an orchid-colored halter dress that is thin as tissue paper. What I wouldn't give to be that girl in that tissue-paper dress running around Paris in springtime! I sit up so suddenly I choke on a kernel of popcorn. Between coughs I say, "Margot, let's meet in Paris for my spring break!" I'm already

picturing myself twirling with a pistachio macaron in one hand and a raspberry one in the other.

Margot's eyes light up. "Do you think Daddy will let you?"

"Sure, it's culture. He'll have to let me." But it's true that I've never flown by myself before. And also I've never even left the country before. Would Margot meet me at the airport, or would I have to find my own way to the hostel?

Josh must see the sudden worry on my face because he says, "Don't worry. Your dad will definitely let you go if I'm with you."

I brighten. "Yeah! We can stay at hostels and just eat pastries and cheese for all our meals."

"We can go to Jim Morrison's grave!" Josh throws in.

"We can go to a *parfumerie* and get our personal scents done!" I cheer, and Josh snorts.

"Um, I'm pretty sure 'getting our scents done' at a *parfumerie* would cost the same as a week's stay at the hostel," he says. He nudges Margot. "Your sister suffers from delusions of grandeur."

"She is the fanciest of the three of us," Margot agrees.

"What about me?" Kitty whimpers.

"You?" I scoff. "You're the *least* fancy Song girl. I have to beg you to wash your feet at night, much less take a shower."

Kitty's face gets pinched and red. "I wasn't talking about that, you dodo bird. I was *talking* about Paris."

Airily, I wave her off. "You're too little to stay at a hostel."

She crawls over to Margot and climbs in her lap, even though she's nine and nine is too big to sit in people's laps. "Margot, you'll let me go, won't you?"

"Maybe it could be a family vacation," Margot says, kissing her cheek. "You and Lara Jean and Daddy could all come."

I frown. That's not at all the Paris trip I was imagining. Over Kitty's head Josh mouths to me, *We'll talk later*, and I give him a discreet thumbs-up.

* * *

It's later that night; Josh is long gone. Kitty and our dad are asleep. We are in the kitchen. Margot is at the table on her computer; I am sitting next to her,

rolling cookie dough into balls and dropping them in cinnamon and sugar. Snickerdoodles to get back in Kitty's good graces. Earlier, when I went in to say good night, Kitty rolled over and wouldn't speak to me because she's still convinced I'm going to try to cut her out of the Paris trip. My plan is to put the snickerdoodles on a plate right next to her pillow so she wakes up to the smell of fresh-baked cookies.

Margot's being extra quiet, and then, out of nowhere, she looks up from her computer and says, "I broke up with Josh tonight. After dinner."

My cookie-dough ball falls out of my fingers and into the sugar bowl.

"I mean, it was time," she says. Her eyes aren't red-rimmed; she hasn't been crying, I don't think. Her voice is calm and even. Anyone looking at her would think she was fine. Because Margot is always fine, even when she's not.

"I don't see why you had to break up," I say. "Just 'cause you're going to college doesn't mean you have to break up."

"Lara Jean, I'm going to Scotland, not UVA. Saint Andrews is nearly four thousand miles away." She pushes up her glasses. "What would be the point?"

I can't even believe she would say that. "The point is, it's Josh. Josh who loves you more than any boy has ever loved a girl!"

Margot rolls her eyes at this. She thinks I'm being dramatic, but I'm not. It's true—that's how much Josh loves Margot. He would never so much as look at another girl.

Suddenly she says, "Do you know what Mommy told me once?"

"What?" For a moment I forget all about Josh. Because no matter what I am doing in life, if Margot and I are in the middle of an argument, if I am about to get hit by a car, I will always stop and listen to a story about Mommy. Any detail, any remembrance that Margot has, I want to have it too. I'm better off than Kitty, though. Kitty doesn't have one memory of Mommy that we haven't given her. We've told her so many stories so many times that they're hers now. "Remember that time ... ," she'll say. And then she'll tell the story like she was there and not just a little baby.

"She told me to try not to go to college with a boyfriend. She said she didn't want me to be the girl crying on the phone with her boyfriend and saying no to things instead of yes."

Scotland is Margot's yes, I guess. Absently, I scoop up a mound of cookie dough and pop it in my mouth.

"You shouldn't eat raw cookie dough," Margot says.

I ignore her. “Josh would never hold you back from anything. He’s not like that. Remember how when you decided to run for student-body president, he was your campaign manager? He’s your biggest fan!”

At this, the corners of Margot’s mouth turn down, and I get up and fling my arms around her neck. She leans her head back and smiles up at me. “I’m okay,” she says, but she isn’t, I know she isn’t.

“It’s not too late, you know. You can go over there right now and tell him you changed your mind.”

Margot shakes her head. “It’s done, Lara Jean.” I release her and she closes her laptop. “When will the first batch be ready? I’m hungry.”

I look at the magnetic egg timer on the fridge. “Four more minutes.” I sit back down and say, “I don’t care what you say, Margot. You guys aren’t done. You love him too much.”

She shakes her head. “Lara Jean,” she begins, in her patient Margot voice, like I am a child and she is a wise old woman of forty-two.

I wave a spoonful of cookie dough under Margot’s nose, and she hesitates and then opens her mouth. I feed it to her like a baby. “Wait and see, you and Josh will be back together in a day, maybe two.” But even as I’m saying it, I know it’s not true. Margot’s not the kind of girl to break up and get back together on a whim; once she’s decided something, that’s it. There’s no waffling, no regrets. It’s like she said: when she’s done, she’s just done.

I wish (and this is a thought I’ve had many, many times, too many times to count) I was more like Margot. Because sometimes it feels like I’ll never be done.

Later, after I’ve washed the dishes and plated the cookies and set them on Kitty’s pillow, I go to my room. I don’t turn the light on. I go to my window. Josh’s light is still on.

2

THE NEXT MORNING, MARGOT IS making coffee and I am pouring cereal in bowls, and I say the thing I've been thinking all morning. "Just so you know, Daddy and Kitty are going to be really upset." When Kitty and I were brushing our teeth just now, I was tempted to go ahead and spill the beans, but Kitty was still mad at me from yesterday, so I kept quiet. She didn't even acknowledge my cookies, though I know she ate them because all that was left on the plate were crumbs.

Margot lets out a heavy sigh. "So I'm supposed to stay with Josh because of you and Daddy and Kitty?"

"No, I'm just telling you."

"It's not like he would come over here that much once I was gone, anyway."

I frown. This didn't occur to me, that Josh would stop coming over because Margot was gone. He was coming over long before they were ever a couple, so I don't see why he should stop. "He might," I say. "He really loves Kitty."

She pushes the start button on the coffee machine. I'm watching her super carefully because Margot's always been the one to make the coffee and I never have, and now that she's leaving (only six more days), I'd better know how. With her back to me she says, "Maybe I won't even mention it to them."

"Um, I think they'll figure it out when he's not at the airport, Gogo." Gogo is my nickname for Margot. As in go-go boots. "How many cups of water did you put in there? And how many spoons of coffee beans?"

"I'll write it all down for you," Margot assures me. "In the notebook."

We keep a house notebook by the fridge. Margot's idea, of course. It has all the important numbers and Daddy's schedule and Kitty's carpool. "Make sure you put in the number for the new dry cleaners," I say.

"Already done." Margot slices a banana for her cereal: each slice is perfectly thin. "And also, Josh wouldn't have come to the airport with us anyway. You know how I feel about sad good-byes." Margot makes a face, like *Ugh, emotions*.

I do know.

* * *

When Margot decided to go to college in Scotland, it felt like a betrayal. Even though I knew it was coming, because of course she was going to go to college somewhere far away. And of course she was going to go to college in Scotland and study anthropology, because she is Margot, the girl with the maps and the travel books and the plans. Of course she would leave us one day.

I'm still mad at her, just a little. Just a teeny-tiny bit. Obviously I know it's not her fault. But she's going so far away, and we always said we'd be the Song girls forever. Margot first, me in the middle, and my sister Kitty last. On her birth certificate she is Katherine; to us she is Kitty. Occasionally we call her Kitten, because that's what I called her when she was born: she looked like a scrawny, hairless kitten.

We are the three Song girls. There used to be four. My mom, Eve Song. Evie to my dad, Mommy to us, Eve to everyone else. Song is, was, my mom's last name. Our last name is Covey—Covey like lovey, not like cove. But the reason we are the Song girls and not the Covey girls is my mom used to say that she was a Song girl for life, and Margot said then we should be too. We all have Song for our middle name, and we look more Song than Covey anyway, more Korean than white. At least Margot and I do; Kitty looks most like Daddy: her hair is light brown like his. People say I look the most like Mommy, but I think Margot does, with her high cheekbones and dark eyes. It's been almost six years now, and sometimes it feels like just yesterday she was here, and sometimes it feels like she never was, only in dreams.

She'd mopped the floors that morning; they were shiny and everything smelled like lemons and clean house. The phone was ringing in the kitchen, she came running in to answer it, and she slipped. She hit her head on the floor, and she was unconscious, but then she woke up and she was fine. That was her lucid interval. That's what they call it. A little while later she said she had a headache, she went to lie down on the couch, and then she didn't wake up.

Margot was the one who found her. She was twelve. She took care of everything: she called 911; she called Daddy; she told me to watch over Kitty, who was only three. I turned on the TV for Kitty in the playroom and I sat with her. That's all I did. I don't know what I would have done if Margot hadn't been there. Even though Margot is only two years older than me, I look up to her more than anybody.

When other adults find out that my dad is a single father of three girls, they shake their heads in admiration, like *How does he do it? How does he ever manage that all by himself?* The answer is Margot. She's been an organizer from the start, everything labeled and scheduled and arranged in neat, even rows.

Margot is a good girl, and I guess Kitty and I have followed her lead. I've never cheated or gotten drunk or smoked a cigarette or even had a boyfriend. We tease Daddy and say how lucky he is that we're all so good, but the truth is, we're the lucky ones. He's a really good dad. And he tries hard. He doesn't always understand us, but he tries, and that's the important thing. We three Song girls have an unspoken pact: to make life as easy as possible for Daddy. But then again, maybe it's not so unspoken, because how many times have I heard Margot say, "Shh, be quiet, Daddy's taking a nap before he has to go back to the hospital," or "Don't bother Daddy with that; do it yourself"?

I've asked Margot what she thinks it would have been like if Mommy hadn't died. Like would we spend more time with our Korean side of the family and not just on Thanksgiving and New Year's Day? Or—

Margot doesn't see the point in wondering. This is our life; there's no use in asking what if. No one could ever give you the answers. I try, I really do, but it's hard for me to accept this way of thinking. I'm always wondering about the what-ifs, about the road not taken.

* * *

Daddy and Kitty come downstairs at the same time. Margot pours Daddy a cup of coffee, black, and I pour milk in Kitty's cereal bowl. I push it in front of her, and she turns her head away from me and gets a yogurt out of the fridge. She takes it into the living room to eat in front of the TV. So she's still mad.

"I'm going to go to Costco later today, so you girls make a list for whatever you need," Daddy asks, taking a big sip of coffee. "I think I'll pick up some New York strips for dinner. We can grill out. Should I get one for Josh, too?"

My head whips in Margot's direction. She opens her mouth and closes it. Then she says, "No, just get enough for the four of us, Daddy."

I give her a reproofing look, and she ignores me. I've never known Margot to chicken out before, but I suppose in matters of the heart, there's no predicting how a person will or won't behave.

3

SO NOW IT'S THE LAST days of summer and our last days with Margot. Maybe it's not altogether such a bad thing that she broke up with Josh; this way we have more time with just us sisters. I'm sure she must have thought of that. I'm sure it was part of the plan.

We're driving out of our neighborhood when we see Josh run past. He joined track last year, so now he's always running. Kitty yells his name, but the windows are up, and it's no use anyway—he pretends not to hear. “Turn around,” Kitty urges Margot. “Maybe he wants to come with us.”

“This is a Song-girls-only day,” I tell her.

We spend the rest of the morning at Target, picking up last minute things like Honey Nut Chex mix for the flight and deodorant and hair ties. We let Kitty push the cart so she can do that thing where she gets a running start and then rides the cart like she's pushing a chariot. Margot only lets her do it a couple of times before she makes her stop, though, so as not to annoy other customers.

Next we go back home and make chicken salad with green grapes for lunch and then it's nearly time for Kitty's swim meet. We pack a picnic dinner of ham-and-cheese sandwiches and fruit salad and bring Margot's laptop to watch movies on, because swim meets can go long into the night. We make a sign, too, that says *Go Kitty Go!* I draw a dog on it. Daddy ends up missing the swim meet because he is delivering a baby, and as far as excuses go, it's a pretty good one. (It was a girl, and they named her Patricia Rose after her two grandmothers. Daddy always finds out the first and middle name for me. It's the first thing I ask when he gets home from a delivery.)

Kitty's so excited about winning two first-place ribbons and one second place that she forgets to ask where Josh is until we're in the car driving back home. She's in the backseat and she's got her towel wrapped around her head like a turban and her ribbons dangling from her ears like earrings. She leans forward and says, “Hey! Why didn't Josh come to my meet?”

I can see Margot hesitate, so I answer before she can. Maybe the only thing I'm better at than Margot is lying. “He had to work at the bookstore tonight. He really wanted to make it, though.” Margot reaches across the console and gives my hand a grateful squeeze.

Sticking out her lower lip, Kitty says, “That was the last regular meet! He promised he’d come watch me swim.”

“It was a last-minute thing,” I say. “He couldn’t get out of working the shift because one of his coworkers had an emergency.”

Kitty nods begrudgingly. Little as she is, she understands emergency shifts.

“Let’s get frozen custards,” Margot says suddenly.

Kitty lights up, and Josh and his imaginary emergency shift is forgotten. “Yeah! I want a waffle cone! Can I get a waffle cone with two scoops? I want mint chip and peanut brittle. No, rainbow sherbet and double fudge. No, wait —”

I twist around in my seat. “You can’t finish two scoops and a waffle cone,” I tell her. “Maybe you could finish two scoops in a cup, but not in a cone.”

“Yes, I can. Tonight I can. I’m *starving*.”

“Fine, but you better finish the whole thing.” I shake my finger at her and say it like a threat, which makes her roll her eyes and giggle. As for me, I’ll get what I always get—the cherry chocolate-chunk custard in a sugar cone.

Margot pulls into the drive-thru, and as we wait our turn, I say, “I bet they don’t have frozen custard in Scotland.”

“Probably not,” she says.

“You won’t have another one of these until Thanksgiving,” I say.

Margot looks straight ahead. “Christmas,” she says, correcting me. “Thanksgiving’s too short to fly all that way, remember?”

“Thanksgiving’s gonna suck.” Kitty pouts.

I’m silent. We’ve never had a Thanksgiving without Margot. She always does the turkey and the broccoli casserole and the creamed onions. I do the pies (pumpkin and pecan) and the mashed potatoes. Kitty is the taste tester and the table setter. I don’t know how to roast a turkey. And both of our grandmothers will be there, and Nana, Daddy’s mother, likes Margot best of all of us. She says Kitty drains her and I’m too dreamy-eyed.

All of a sudden I feel panicky and it’s hard to breathe and I couldn’t care less about cherry chocolate-chunk custard. I can’t picture Thanksgiving without Margot. I can’t even picture next Monday without her. I know most sisters don’t get along, but I’m closer to Margot than I am to anybody in the world. How can we be the Song girls without Margot?

4

MY OLDEST FRIEND CHRIS SMOKES, she hooks up with boys she doesn't know hardly at all, and she's been suspended twice. One time she had to go before the court for truancy. I never knew what truancy was before I met Chris. FYI, it's when you skip so much school you're in trouble with the law.

I'm pretty sure that if Chris and I met each other now, we wouldn't be friends. We're as different as different can be. But it wasn't always this way. In sixth grade Chris liked stationery and sleepovers and staying up all night watching John Hughes movies, just like me. But by eighth grade she was sneaking out after my dad fell asleep to meet boys she met at the mall. They'd drop her back off before it got light outside. I'd stay up until she came back, terrified she wouldn't make it home before my dad woke up. She always made it back in time though.

Chris isn't the kind of friend you call every night or have lunch with every day. She is like a street cat, she comes and goes as she pleases. She can't be tied down to a place or a person. Sometimes I won't see Chris for days and then in the middle of the night there will be a knock at my bedroom window and it'll be Chris, crouched in the magnolia tree. I keep my window unlocked for her in case. Chris and Margot can't stand each other. Chris thinks Margot is uptight, and Margot thinks Chris is bipolar. She thinks Chris uses me; Chris thinks Margot controls me. I think maybe they're both a little bit right. But the important thing, the real thing, is Chris and I understand each other, which I think counts for a lot more than people realize.

* * *

Chris calls me on the way over to our house; she says her mom's being a beotch and she's coming over for a couple hours and do we have any food?

Chris and I are sharing a bowl of leftover gnocchi in the living room when Margot comes home from dropping Kitty off at her swim team's end-of-season barbecue. "Oh, hey," she says. Then she spots Chris's glass of Diet Coke on the coffee table, sans coaster. "Can you please use a coaster?"

As soon as Margot's up the stairs, Chris says, "Gawd! Why is your sister such a beotch?"

I slide a coaster under her glass. "You think everyone's a beotch today."

“That’s because everyone is.” Chris rolls her eyes toward the ceiling. Loudly, she says, “She needs to pull that stick out of her ass.”

From her room Margot yells, “I heard that!”

“I meant for you to!” Chris yells back, scraping up the last piece of gnocchi for herself.

I sigh. “She’s leaving so soon.”

Snickering, Chris says, “So is Joshy, like, going to light a candle for her every night until she comes back home?”

I hesitate. While I’m not sure if it’s still supposed to be a secret, I *am* sure that Margot wouldn’t want Chris knowing any of her personal business. All I say is, “I’m not sure.”

“Wait a minute. Did she dump him?” Chris demands.

Reluctantly I nod. “Don’t say anything to her, though,” I warn. “She’s still really sad about it.”

“Margot? Sad?” Chris picks at her nails. “Margot doesn’t have normal human emotions like the rest of us.”

“You just don’t know her,” I say. “Besides, we can’t all be like you.”

She grins a toothy grin. She has sharp incisors, which make her look always a little bit hungry. “True.”

Chris is pure emotion. She screams at the drop of a hat. She says sometimes you have to scream out emotions; if you don’t, they’ll fester. The other day she screamed at a lady at the grocery store for accidentally stepping on her toes. I don’t think she’s in any danger of her emotions festering.

“I just can’t believe that in a few days she’ll be gone,” I say, feeling sniffly all of a sudden.

“She’s not *dying*, Lara Jean. There’s nothing to get all boo-hoo about.” Chris pulls at a loose string on her red shorts. They’re so short that when she’s sitting, you can see her underwear. Which are red to match her shorts. “In fact, I think this is good for you. It’s about time you did your own thing and stopped just listening to whatever Queen Margot says. This is your junior year, beotch. This is when it’s supposed to get good. French some guys, live a little, you know?”

“I live plenty,” I say.

“Yeah, at the nursing home.” Chris snickers and I glare at her.

Margot started volunteering at the Belleview Retirement Community when she got her driver's license; it was her job to help host cocktail hour for the residents. I'd help sometimes. We'd set out peanuts and pour drinks and sometimes Margot would play the piano, but usually Stormy hogged that. Stormy is the Belleview diva. She rules the roost. I like listening to her stories. And Miss Mary, she might not be so good at conversation due to her dementia, but she taught me how to knit.

They have a new volunteer there now, but I know that at Belleview it really is the more the merrier, because most of the residents get so few visitors. I should go back soon; I miss going there. And I for sure don't appreciate Chris making fun of it.

"Those people at Belleview have lived more life than everyone we know combined," I tell her. "There's this one lady, Stormy, she was a USO girl! She used to get a hundred letters a day from soldiers who were in love with her. And there was this one veteran who lost his leg—he sent her a diamond ring!"

Chris looks interested all of a sudden. "Did she keep it?"

"She did," I admit. I think it was wrong of her to keep the ring since she had no intention of marrying him, but she showed it to me, and it was beautiful. It was a pink diamond, very rare. I bet it's worth so much money now.

"I guess Stormy sounds kind of like a badass," Chris says begrudgingly.

"Maybe you could come with me to Belleview sometime," I suggest. "We could go to their cocktail hour. Mr. Perelli loves to dance with new girls. He'll teach you how to fox-trot."

Chris makes a horrible face like I suggested we go hang out at the town dump. "No, thanks. How about I take *you* dancing?" She nudges her chin toward upstairs. "Now that your sister's leaving, we can have some real fun. You know I always have fun."

It's true, Chris does always have fun. Sometimes a little too much fun, but fun nonetheless.

5

THE NIGHT BEFORE MARGOT LEAVES, all three of us are in her room helping pack up the last little things. Kitty is organizing Margot's bath stuff, packing it nice and neat in the clear shower caddy. Margot is trying to decide which coat to bring.

"Should I bring my peacoat and my puffy coat or just my peacoat?" she asks me.

"Just the peacoat," I say. "You can dress that up or down." I'm lying on her bed directing the packing process. "Kitty, make sure the lotion cap is on tight."

"It's brand-new—course it's on tight!" Kitty growls, but she double-checks.

"It gets cold in Scotland sooner than it does here," Margot said, folding the coat and setting it on top of her suitcase. "I think I'll just bring both."

"I don't know why you asked if you already knew what you were going to do," I say. "Also, I thought you said you were coming home for Christmas. You're still coming home for Christmas, right?"

"Yes, if you'll stop being a brat," Margot says.

Honestly, Margot isn't even packing that much. She doesn't need a lot. If it was me, I'd have packed up my whole room, but not Margot. Her room looks the same, almost.

Margot sits down next to me, and Kitty climbs up and sits at the foot of the bed. "Everything's changing," I say, sighing.

Margot makes a face and puts her arm around me. "Nothing's changing, not really. We're the Song girls forever, remember?"

Our father stands in the doorway. He knocks, even though the door is open and we can clearly see it is him. "I'm going to start packing up the car now," he announces. We watch from the bed as he lugs one of the suitcases downstairs, and then he comes up for the other one. Drily he says, "Oh no, don't get up. Don't trouble yourselves."

"Don't worry, we won't," we sing out.

For the past week our father has been in spring-cleaning mode, even though it isn't spring. He's getting rid of everything—the bread machine we never used, CDs, old blankets, our mother's old typewriter. It's all going to Goodwill. A psychiatrist or someone could probably connect it to Margot's leaving for college, but I can't explain the exact significance of it. Whatever it is, it's annoying. I had to shoo him away from my glass-unicorn collection twice.

I lay down my head in Margot's lap. "So you really are coming home for Christmas, right?"

"Right."

"I wish I could come with you." Kitty pouts. "You're nicer than Lara Jean."

I give her a pinch.

"See?" she crows.

"Lara Jean will be nice," Margot says, "as long as you behave. And you both have to take care of Daddy. Make sure he doesn't work too many Saturdays. Make sure he takes the car in for inspection next month. And make sure you buy coffee filters—you're always forgetting to buy coffee filters."

"Yes, drill sergeant," Kitty and I chorus. I search Margot's face for sadness or fear or worry, for some sign that she is scared to go so far away, that she will miss us as much as we will miss her. I don't see it, though.

The three of us sleep in Margot's room that night.

Kitty falls asleep first, as always. I lie in the dark beside her with my eyes open. I can't sleep. The thought that tomorrow night Margot won't be in this room—it makes me so sad I can hardly bear it. I hate change more than almost anything.

In the dark next to me Margot asks, "Lara Jean ... do you think you've ever been in love before? Real love?"

She catches me off guard; I don't have an answer ready for her. I'm trying to think of one, but she's already talking again.

Wistfully, she says, "I wish I'd been in love more than once. I think you should fall in love at least twice in high school." Then she lets out a little sigh and falls asleep. Margot falls asleep like that—one dreamy sigh and she's off to never-never land, just like that.

* * *

I wake up in the middle of the night and Margot's not there. Kitty's curled up on her side next to me, but no Margot. It's pitch dark; only the moonlight filters through the curtains. I crawl out of bed and move to the window. My breath catches. There they are: Josh and Margot standing in the driveway. Margot's face is turned away from him, toward the moon. Josh is crying. They aren't touching. There's enough space between them for me to know that Margot hasn't changed her mind.

I drop the curtain and find my way back to the bed, where Kitty has rolled farther into the center. I push her back a few inches so there will be room for Margot. I wish I hadn't seen that. It was too personal. Too real. It was supposed to be just for them. If there was a way for me to unsee it, I would.

I turn on my side and close my eyes. What must it be like, to have a boy like you so much he cries for you? And not just any boy. Josh. Our Josh.

To answer her question: yes, I think I have been in real love. Just once, though. With Josh. Our Josh.

6

THIS IS HOW MARGOT AND josh got together. In a way I heard about it from Josh first.

It was two years ago. We were sitting in the library during our free. I was doing math homework; Josh was helping because he's good at math. We had our heads bent over my page, so close I could smell the soap he'd used that morning. Irish Spring.

And then he said, "I need your advice on something. I like someone."

For a split second I thought it was me. I thought he was going to say me. I hoped. It was the start of the school year. We'd hung out nearly every day that August, sometimes with Margot but mostly just by ourselves, because Margot had her internship at the Montpelier plantation three days a week. We swam a lot. I had a great tan from all the swimming. So for that split second I thought he was going to say my name.

But then I saw the way he blushed, the way he looked off into space, and I knew it wasn't for me.

Mentally, I ran through the list of girls it could be. It was a short list. Josh didn't hang out with a ton of girls; he had his best friend Jersey Mike, who had moved from New Jersey in middle school, and his other best friend, Ben, and that was it.

It could have been Ashley, a junior on the volleyball team. He'd once pointed her out as the cutest of all the junior girls. In Josh's defense, I'd made him do it: I asked him who was the prettiest girl in each grade. For prettiest freshman, my grade, he said Genevieve. Not that I was surprised, but it still gave me a little pinch in my heart.

It could have been Jodie, the college girl from the bookstore. Josh often talked about how smart Jodie was, how she was so cultured because she'd studied abroad in India and was now Buddhist. Ha! I was the one who was half-Korean; I was the one who'd taught Josh how to eat with chopsticks. He'd had kimchi for the first time at *my* house.

I was about to ask him who when the librarian came over to shush us, and then we went back to doing work and Josh didn't bring it up again and I

didn't ask. Honestly, I didn't want to know. It wasn't me, and that was all I cared about.

I didn't think for one second that the girl he liked was Margot. Not that I didn't see her as a girl who could be liked. She'd been asked out before, by a certain type of guy. Smart guys who would partner up with her in chemistry and run against her for student government. In retrospect, it wasn't so surprising that Josh would like Margot, since he's that kind of guy too.

If someone were to ask me what Josh looks like, I would say he's just ordinary. He looks like the kind of guy you'd expect would be good at computers, the kind of guy who calls comic books graphic novels. Brown hair. Not a special brown, just regular brown. Green eyes that go muddy in the center. He's on the skinny side, but he's strong. I know because I sprained my ankle once by the old baseball field and he piggybacked me all the way home. He has freckles, which make him look younger than his age. And a dimple on his left cheek. I've always liked that dimple. He has such a serious face otherwise.

What was surprising, what was shocking, was that Margot would like him back. Not because of who Josh was, but because of who Margot was. I'd never heard her talk about liking a boy before, not even once. I was the flighty one, the flibbertigibbet, as my white grandma would say. Not Margot. Margot was above all that. She existed on some higher plane where those things—boys, makeup, clothes—didn't really matter.

The way it happened was sudden. Margot came home from school late that day in October; her cheeks were pink from the cold mountainy air and she had her hair in a braid and a scarf around her neck. She'd been working on a project at school, it was dinnertime, and I'd cooked chicken parmesan with thin spaghetti in watery tomato sauce.

She came into the kitchen and announced, "I have something to tell you." Her eyes were very bright; I remember she was unspooling the scarf from around her neck.

Kitty was doing her homework at the kitchen table, Daddy was on his way home, and I was stirring the watery sauce. "What?" Kitty and I asked.

"Josh likes me." Margot gave a pleased kind of shrug; her shoulders nearly went up to her ears.

I went very still. Then I dropped my wooden spoon into the sauce. "*Josh* Josh? Our Josh?" I couldn't even look at her. I was afraid that she would see.

"Yes. He waited for me after school today so he could tell me. He said—" Margot grinned ruefully. "He said I'm his dream girl. Can you believe that?"

“Wow,” I said, and I tried to communicate happiness in that word, but I don’t know if it came out that way. All I was feeling was despair. And envy. Envy so thick and so black I felt like I was choking on it. So I tried again, this time with a smile. “Wow, Margot.”

“Wow,” Kitty echoed. “So are you boyfriend and girlfriend now?”

I held my breath, waiting for her to answer.

Margot took a pinch of parmesan between her fingers and dropped it in her mouth. “Yeah, I think so.” And then she smiled, and her eyes went all soft and liquid. I understood then that she liked him too. So much.

That night I wrote my letter to Josh.

Dear Josh ...

I cried a lot. Just like that, it was over. It was over before I even had a chance. The important thing wasn’t that Josh had chosen Margot. It was that Margot had chosen him.

So that was that. I cried my eyes out; I wrote my letter; I put the whole thing to rest. I haven’t thought of him that way since. He and Margot are meant to be. They’re MFEO. Made for each other.

* * *

I’m still awake when Margot comes back to bed, but I quickly shut my eyes and pretend to be asleep. Kitty’s cuddled up next to me.

I hear a snuffly sound and I peek out of one eye to look at Margot. Her back is to us; her shoulders are shaking. She’s crying.

Margot never cries.

Now that I’ve seen Margot cry over him, I believe it more than ever—they’re not over.

THE NEXT DAY, WE DRIVE Margot to the airport. Outside, we load up her suitcases on a luggage carrier—Kitty tries to get on top and dance, but our father pulls her down right away. Margot insists on going in by herself, just like she said she would.

“Margot, at least let me get your bags checked,” Daddy says, trying to maneuver the luggage carrier around her. “I want to see you go through security.”

“I’ll be fine,” she repeats. “I’ve flown by myself before. I know how to check a bag.” She stretches up on her toes and puts her arms around our dad’s shoulders. “I’ll call as soon as I get there, I promise.”

“Call every day,” I whisper. The lump in my throat is getting bigger, and a few tears leak out of my eyes. I’d hoped I wouldn’t cry, because I knew Margot wouldn’t, and it’s lonely to cry alone, but I can’t help it.

“Don’t you dare forget us,” Kitty warns.

That makes Margot smile. “I could never.” She hugs us each one more time. She saves me for last, the way I knew she would. “Take good care of Daddy and Kitty. You’re in charge now.” I don’t want to let go, so I hold on tighter; I’m still waiting and hoping for some sign, some indication that she will miss us as much as we’ll miss her. And then she laughs and I release her.

“Bye, Gogo,” I say, wiping my eyes with a corner of my shirt.

We all watch as she pushes the luggage carrier over to the check-in counter. I’m crying hard, wiping my tears with the back of my arm. Daddy puts one arm around me and one around Kitty. “We’ll wait until she’s in line for security,” he says.

When she’s done checking in, she turns back and looks at us through the glass doors. She lifts one hand and waves, and then she heads for the security line. We watch her go, thinking she might turn around one more time, but she doesn’t. She already seems so far away from us. Straight-A Margot, ever capable. When it’s my time to leave, I doubt I’ll be as strong as Margot. But, honestly, who is?

I cry all the way home. Kitty tells me I'm a bigger baby than she is, but then from the backseat she grabs my hand and squeezes it, and I know she's sad too.

Even though Margot isn't a loud person, it feels quiet at home. Empty, somehow. What will it be like when I'm gone in two years? What will Daddy and Kitty do then? I hate the thought of the two of them coming home to an empty, dark house with no me and no Margot. Maybe I won't go away far; maybe I'll even live at home, at least for the first semester. I think that would be the right thing to do.

LATER THAT AFTERNOON CHRIS CALLS and tells me to meet her at the mall; she wants my opinion on a leather jacket, and to get the full effect I have to see it in person. I'm proud she's asking for my sartorial advice, and it would be good to get out of the house and not be sad anymore, but I'm nervous about driving to the mall alone. I (or anyone, really) would consider myself a skittish driver.

I ask her if she'll just send me a picture instead, but Chris knows me too well. She says, "Nuh-uh. You get your ass down here, Lara Jean. You'll never get better at driving if you don't just suck it up and do it."

So that's what I'm doing: I'm driving Margot's car to the mall. I mean, I have my license and everything; I'm just not very confident. My dad has taken me for lessons numerous times, Margot too, and I'm basically fine with them in the car, but I get nervous when I drive alone. It's the changing-lanes part that scares me. I don't like taking my eyes away from what's happening right in front of me, not for a second. Also I don't like going too fast.

But the worst thing is I have a tendency of getting lost. The only places I can get to with absolute certainty are school and the grocery store. I've never had to know how to get to the mall, because Margot always drove us there. But now I have to do better, because I'm responsible for driving Kitty around. Though truthfully, Kitty is better with directions than I am; she knows how to get to loads of places. But I don't want to have to hear her tell me how to get somewhere. I want to feel like the big sister; I want her to relax in the passenger seat, safe in the knowledge that Lara Jean will get her where she needs to go, just like I did with Margot.

Sure, I could just use a GPS, but I would feel silly putting in directions to go to the mall when I've been there a million times. It should come to me intuitively, easy, where I don't even have to think about it. Instead I worry over every turn, second-guess every highway sign—is it north or is it south, do I turn right here or is it the next one? I've never had to pay attention.

But today, so far so good. I'm listening to the radio, bopping along, even driving with just one hand on the wheel. I do this to feign confidence, because the more I fake it, the more it's supposed to feel true.

Everything is going so well that I take the shortcut way instead of the highway way. I cut through the side neighborhood, and even as I'm doing it, I'm wondering if this was such a great idea. After a couple of minutes things aren't looking so familiar, and I realize I should have taken a left instead of a right. I push down the panic that's rising in my chest and I try to backtrack.

You can do it, you can do it.

There's a four-way stop sign. I don't see anyone, so I zip ahead. I don't even see the car on my right; I feel it before I see it.

I scream my head off. I taste copper in my mouth. Am I bleeding? Did I bite my tongue off? I touch it and it's still there. My heart is racing; my whole body feels wet and clammy. I try to take deep breaths, but I can't seem to get air.

My legs shake as I get out of the car. The other guy is already out, inspecting his car with his arms crossed. He's old, older than my dad, and he has gray hair, and he's wearing shorts with red lobsters on them. His car is fine; mine has a huge dent in the side. "Didn't you see the stop sign?" he demands. "Were you texting on your phone?"

I shake my head; my throat is closing up. I just don't want to cry. As long as I don't cry ...

He seems to sense this. The irritated furrow of his brow is loosening. "Well, my car looks fine," he says reluctantly. "Are you all right?"

I nod again. "I'm so sorry," I say.

"Kids need to be more careful," the man says, as if I haven't spoken.

The lump in my throat is getting bigger. "I'm very, very sorry, sir."

He makes a grunty sound. "You should call someone to come get you," the man says. "Do you want me to wait?"

"No, thank you." What if he's a serial killer or a child molester? I don't want to be alone with a strange man.

The man drives off.

As soon as he's gone, it occurs to me that maybe I should have called the police while he was still here. Aren't you always supposed to call the police when you're in a car accident, no matter what? I'm pretty sure they told us that in driver's ed. So that's another mistake I made.

I sit down on the curb and stare at Margot's car. I've only had it for two hours and I've already wrecked it. I rest my head in my lap and sit in a tight bundle. My neck is starting to ache. This is when the tears start. My dad is not

going to be happy. Margot is not going to be happy. They'll both probably agree that I have no business driving around town unsupervised, and maybe they're right. Driving a car is a lot of responsibility. Maybe I'm not ready for it yet. Maybe I'll never be ready. Maybe even when I'm old, my sisters or my dad will have to drive me around, because that's how useless I am.

I pull out my phone and call Josh. When he answers, I say, "Josh, can you do me a f-f-favor?" and my voice comes out so wobbly I'm embarrassed.

Which of course he hears, because he's Josh. He comes to attention immediately and says, "What's wrong?"

"I just got into a car accident. I don't even know where I am. Can you come get me?" *Wobble wobble.*

"Are you hurt?" he demands.

"No, I'm fine. I'm just—" If I say another word, I will cry.

"What street signs do you see? What stores?"

I crane my neck to look. "Falstone," I say. I look for the closet mailbox. "I'm at 8109 Falstone Road."

"I'm on my way. Do you want me to stay on the phone with you?"

"No, that's okay." I hang up and start to cry.

I don't know how long I've been sitting there crying when another car rolls up in front of me. I look up, and it's Peter Kavinsky's black Audi with the tinted windows. One of them rolls down. "Lara Jean? Are you okay?"

I nod my head yes and make a motion like he should just go. He rolls the window back up, and I think he's really going to drive off, but then he pulls over to the side and parks. He climbs out and starts inspecting my car. "You really messed it up," he says. "Did you get the other guy's insurance info?"

"No, his car was fine." Furtively, I wipe my cheeks with my arm. "It was my fault."

"Do you have Triple A?"

I nod.

"So you called them already?"

"No. But someone's coming."

Peter sits down next to me. "How long have you been sitting here crying by yourself?"

I turn my head and wipe my face again. "I'm not crying."

Peter Kavinsky and I used to be friends, back before he was Kavinsky, when he was Peter K. There was a whole gang of us in middle school. The boys were Peter Kavinsky and John Ambrose McClaren and Trevor Pike. The girls were Genevieve and me and Allie Feldman who lived down the block and sometimes Chris. Growing up, Genevieve lived two streets away from me. It's funny how much of childhood is about proximity. Like who your best friend is is directly correlated to how close your houses are; who you sit next to in music is all about how close your names are in the alphabet. Such a game of chance. In eighth grade Genevieve moved to a different neighborhood, and we stayed friends a little while longer. She'd come back to the neighborhood to hang out, but something was different. By high school Genevieve had eclipsed us. She was still friends with the boys, but the girls' crew was over. Allie and I stayed friends until she moved last year, but there was always something just a little bit humiliating about it, like we were two leftover heels of bread and together we made a dry sandwich.

We're not friends anymore. Me and Genevieve or me and Peter. Which is why it's so weird to be sitting next to him on somebody's curb like no time has passed.

His phone buzzes and he takes it out of his pocket. "I've gotta go."

I sniffle. "Where are you headed?"

"To Gen's."

"You'd better get going then," I say. "Genevieve will be mad if you're late."

Peter makes a *pfft* sound, but he sure does get up fast. I wonder what it's like to have that much power over a boy. I don't think I'd want it; it's a lot of responsibility to hold a person's heart in your hands. He's getting into his car when, as an afterthought, he turns around and asks, "Want me to call Triple A for you?"

"No, that's okay," I say. "Thanks for stopping, though. That was really nice of you."

Peter grins. I remember that about Peter—how much he likes positive reinforcement. "Do you feel better now?"

I nod. I do, actually.

"Good," he says.

He has the look of a Handsome Boy from a different time. He could be a dashing World War I soldier, handsome enough for a girl to wait years for him to come back from war, so handsome she could wait forever. He could be

wearing a red letterman's jacket, driving around in a Corvette with the top down, one arm on the steering wheel, on his way to pick up his girl for the sock hop. Peter's kind of wholesome good looks feel more like yesterday than today. There's just something about him girls like.

He was my first kiss. It's so strange to think of it now. It feels like forever ago, but really it was just four years.

* * *

Josh shows up about a minute later, as I'm texting Chris that I'm not going to make it to the mall after all. I stand up. "It took you long enough!"

"You told me 8109. This is 8901!"

Confidently I say, "No, I definitely said 8901."

"No, you definitely said 8109. And why weren't you answering your phone?" Josh gets out of his car, and when he sees the side of my car, his jaw drops. "Holy crap. Did you call Triple A yet?"

"No. Can you?"

Josh does, and then we sit in his car in the air-conditioning while we wait. I almost get into the backseat, when I remember. Margot isn't here anymore. I've ridden in his car so many times, and I don't think I've ever once sat up front in the passenger seat.

"Um ... you know Margot's going to kill you, right?"

I whip my head around so fast my hair slaps me in the face. "Margot's not going to find out, so don't you say a word!"

"When would I even talk to her? We're broken up, remember?"

I frown at him. "I hate when people do that—when you ask them to keep something a secret and instead of saying yes or no, they say, 'Who would I tell?'"

"I didn't say, 'Who would I tell?!'"

"Just say yes or no and mean it. Don't make it conditional."

"I won't tell Margot anything," he says. "It'll just be between you and me. I promise. All right?"

"All right," I say. And then it gets quiet with neither of us saying anything; there's just the sound of cool air coming out of the A/C vents.

My stomach feels queasy thinking about how I'm going to tell my dad. Maybe I should break the news to him with tears in my eyes so he feels sorry

for me. Or I could say something like, I have good news and bad news. The good news is, I'm fine, not a scratch on me. The bad news is, the car is wrecked. Maybe "wrecked" isn't the right word.

I'm mulling over the right word choice in my head when Josh says, "So just because Margot and I broke up, you're not going to talk to me anymore either?" Josh sounds jokingly bitter or bitterly joking, if there is such a combination.

I look over at him in surprise. "Don't be dumb. Of course I'm still going to talk to you. Just not in public." This is the role I play with him. The part of the pesky little sister. As if I am the same as Kitty. As if we aren't only a year apart. Josh doesn't crack a smile, he just looks glum, so I bump my forehead against his. "That was a joke, dummy!"

"Did she tell you she was going to do it? I mean, was it always her plan?" When I hesitate, he says, "Come on. I know she tells you everything."

"Not really. Not this time anyway. Honestly, Josh. I didn't know a thing about it. Promise." I cross my heart.

Josh absorbs this. Chewing on his bottom lip he says, "Maybe she'll change her mind. That's possible, right?"

I don't know if it's more heartless for me to say yes or no, because he'll be hurt either way. Because while I'm 99.99999 percent sure that she will get back together with him, there's that tiny chance she won't, and I don't want to get his hopes up. So I don't say anything.

He swallows, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down. "No, you're right. When Margot makes up her mind, she doesn't go back on it."

Please please please don't cry.

I rest my head on his shoulder and say, "You never know, Joshy."

Josh stares straight ahead. A squirrel is darting up the big oak tree in the yard. Up and down and back up again. We both watch. "What time does she land?"

"Not for hours."

"Is ... is she coming home for Thanksgiving?"

"No. They don't get off for Thanksgiving. It's Scotland, Josh. They don't celebrate American holidays, hello!" I'm teasing again, but my heart's not in it.

"That's right," he says.

I say, “She’ll be home for Christmas, though,” and we both sigh.

“Can I still hang out with you guys?” Josh asks me.

“Me and Kitty?”

“Your dad, too.”

“We’re not going anywhere,” I assure him.

Josh looks relieved. “Good. I’d hate to lose you, too.”

As soon as he says it, my heart does this pause, and I forget to breathe, and just for that one second I’m dizzy. And then, just as quickly as it came, the feeling, the strange flutter in my chest, is gone, and the tow truck arrives.

When we pull into my driveway, he says, “Do you want me to be there when you tell your dad?”

I brighten up and then I remember how Margot said I’m in charge now. I’m pretty sure taking responsibility for one’s mistakes is part of being in charge.