

## DISCLAIMER

You have to understand: I've been madly, hopelessly, *tragically* in love with Garrett Delaney for two years now—ever since the fateful day when I looked up from my list of the Top Ten Couples of All Time and saw him sauntering into the local coffeehouse.

(And before you say that fourteen-year-olds aren't capable of real love, well, my Couple Number Four, Romeo and Juliet, were barely out of junior high when they first met, and nobody doubts the burning force of their passion.)

But back to Garrett. There he was, all long limbs and faded corduroy pants, his dark blond hair falling carelessly over cloudy blue eyes. He stood in the doorway, a battered leather satchel slung across his chest, and right then I knew. He was the one I'd been waiting for, sent by

the heavens to make my life infinitely better and exquisitely painful all in one fell swoop.

Because it was fate—don't try telling me otherwise. How else can you explain the fact that Totally Wired—usually half full at most with study fiends and hard-core cappuccino addicts—was packed solid with baby-yoga moms and their bawling brats, meaning that I, Sadie Elisabeth Allen, was sitting next to the only free table in the entire room?

Never mind that my BFF Kayla was stuck late at viola practice, so I was waiting there alone. No, the real reason I know that Garrett and I were destined to meet is that out of all the trashy, uncool books I could have brought along (this being the Judith Krantz era of my sexual education), I happened to pick a battered old copy of Pablo Neruda poetry my dad had given me, so that when Garrett collapsed into the chair beside mine, he looked over and lit up with a crooked half smile that to this day still does strange things to my stomach.

“*Twenty Love Poems?*” he asked while I tried not to choke on my cheesecake. The teen boy god was looking at me. The teen boy god was *talking* to me! “Neruda is my favorite. I love his surrealist work.”

He waited patiently while I took a gulp of my mocha whip and tried to register this new reality where cute boys actually made intelligent conversation with me instead of just shooting spitballs into my hair all through third-period bio. Maybe Kayla was right: maybe high school really would be different.

“Did you know he wrote only in green ink?” I replied

at last, reciting the only factoid I knew about Neruda. I took a breath, thanking the Gods of False Advertising that I was wearing a padded bra, which could, maybe, possibly make me look *at least* sixteen. “He said it was the color of hope.”

“Really? That’s cool.” He gave me an admiring look. “I’m Garrett. I just moved to Sherman.”

“Sadie,” I managed. “Hi!”

“Sadie,” he repeated, and my name—which had always seemed like such an old-lady name to me, up there with Gertrude and Ada—suddenly sounded glamorous and exotic. “So, Sadie, tell me what the hell you do for fun in this town.”

He grinned at me like we were in this together. Friends, partners, future class couple. Prom king and queen. And in that glorious instant, I could see it all stretching out in front of us, like those cute couple montages in all those romantic-comedy movies Kayla and I love: Garrett and me fooling around with old video games in the arcade; Garrett and me snuggled up in a listening booth at the record store; Garrett and me lying out by the riverbank, holding hands, making out. . . .

So what if I couldn’t play arcade games and the nearest record store had closed down the year before? I looked over at him and knew that this was the start of my own real-life love story. Move aside, Elizabeth and Darcy (Couple Number Six); make way, Scarlett and Rhett (Couple Number Nine)—there was a new entry on that list, and our names were Sadie and Garrett.

# CHAPTER ONE

“Hey, birthday girl!”

I sit up so fast I get a head rush, the world tilting from blue sky to gray bleachers and back to the lush grass of the empty football field. It’s the first week of summer, and there’s nobody here but Garrett, heading my way with a knowing grin on his face and both hands hidden behind his back. He’s in his usual uniform of faded corduroy pants and a crumpled button-down shirt, this time over an old Clash T-shirt that I can’t help noticing hangs against his torso just so. Fifty percent prep, twenty percent punk, thirty percent old-school British indie rock, and one hundred percent gorgeous—that’s Garrett for you.

“Close your eyes.” He stops a few feet away, the setting sun shining through his hair like some kind of halo. “And no peeking.”

“Is it a kitten?” I clap my hands in excitement, my bracelets jangling. “A unicorn? A kitten-unicorn hybrid?”

“You wanted a kitti-corn?” Garrett teases. “Why didn’t you say so? They had them at the store, but I just figured, you know, your allergies, and those wings flapping around . . .”

“But all the other girls have one!” I laugh. “And ponies are so last season!” There’s a thud as he collapses on the ground and I open my eyes to find him smiling at me.

“Sorry, I failed. Will you ever forgive me?” He presents me with a package.

“Forgiven.” I give the package an exploratory shake. Garrett never just takes the store gift-wrap option or grabs a roll from the closet at home. This time, he’s created wrapping out of pages from old books, the paper yellowed and fading at the edges. “I love getting older,” I muse as I carefully begin to peel the layers away. “You’re closer to death, but there are presents.”

“They should put that on a Hallmark card.” Garrett laughs. “And file it under Consumerist Celebrations.”

“Is there any other kind?” I quip. The last layer of paper flutters to the ground, and I’m left with my bounty: a bundle of *Paris Reviews*, an old-school mix CD, and a beat-up copy of a Kerouac novel, *The Dharma Bums*.

“Thanks!” I beam, turning the book over in my hands. “This is awesome! I’ve wanted to read this for ages—ever since you told me about it.”

Garrett smiles. “Let me know what you think. I left some notes in the margins for you. I can’t wait until we

do our own big road trip,” he adds. “Nothing but open highway, all the way to California.”

“Staying in seedy roadside motels . . .” I lean back on my elbows, slipping into our well-worn refrain.

“Living off diner food . . .”

“Stopping to see the world’s biggest ball of yarn.”

“No way,” he protests. “None of that tourist trash. We’re going to see the *real* America.” He sprawls out beside me, carelessly flinging one arm over his eyes to block out the sun.

I watch him for a moment, shadows falling across those perfect cheekbones. I should be happy, I know—with my gifts, and Garrett’s daydreams of our awesome plans—but there’s one thing wrong with this picture. With every picture.

He’s not mine.

I don’t understand it, either. We’re supposed to be together. I knew the day we met that it was fate! But I guess even fate finds a way of destroying your hopes and dreams, leaving your heart dashed on the cruel rocks of life—just ask the poor souls in all those Greek myths. See, it turns out I wasn’t entirely right about me and Garrett back then. Not the friends part, because despite my fears that he’d show up on the first day of school, get sucked into the vortex, and never speak to a lowly freshman girl again, that’s exactly what we turned out to be: buddies, pals, BFFs. Everything except the only thing I ever really wanted us to be.

In love.

And it kills me. Mom says I exaggerate, but I’m

not even kidding about this. You can die of a broken heart—it's scientific fact—and my heart has been breaking since that very first day we met. I can feel it now, aching deep behind my rib cage the way it does every time we're together, beating a desperate rhythm: *Love me. Love me. Love me.*

I sneak another look at Garrett, lying out on the grass beside me. He yawns, stretching a little as he does; his shirt rides up, revealing a whole inch of pale-golden stomach.

Be still, O heart of mine!

I stifle a familiar sigh of longing. It would be one thing if he was completely unobtainable—gay, for example, or madly in love with some other girl—but I have no such comforting reason why we can't make it work. No matter which girl he's dated—and there have been plenty—he's stayed just as close to me. Closer, even, since I'm the one who gets to listen to all his deepest, darkest fears and secrets, the one who brings over pizza and root beers after the (inevitable) breakup.

For two long years, we've been inseparable. And for two long years, I've been desperately waiting for more.

Garrett can never stay still for long, and sure enough, after a couple of minutes, he sits up, restless. "So, you ready for the next part of your birthday? We've got a whole night o' fun ahead of us."

"As long as it includes sugar and caffeine," I reply lightly, as if I haven't just been meditating on his delicious abs.

"Done and done."

I stuff my goodies into my own beat-up leather satchel and head back toward the parking lot, my frayed jeans dragging on the grass.

“Did you pick your classes yet?” he asks as I curl my fingers into my palm to make up for the fact they’re not wrapped around his.

“Not yet,” I admit. “The short-story class sounds kind of fun. . . .”

“It will be—you’ll love it,” Garrett insists, enthusiastic. “And your short fiction is getting really great; you’ve improved so much this year.”

“Thanks.” Praise from Garrett is praise indeed. “Then short stories it is!”

I think again of the fabulous summer ahead of us. Six weeks together at an intensive writing camp in the woods of New Hampshire—who could ask for a more romantic retreat? Sure, there are eight-hour days of classes scheduled, but those will fly by. It’s the nights I’m looking forward to the most. Snuggling together around the campfire, walking in the moonlight down by the lake . . . It’s the chance I’ve been waiting for—I just know it. We’re still waiting on our acceptance letters, but Garrett knows one of the instructors through his parents and swears we’re a lock.

We reach his old Vespa, parked in the middle of the concrete. “Hey, Vera,” I coo, stroking the metal. “How are you feeling?”

“Temperamental as ever.” Garrett hands me the cherry-red passenger helmet.

“Aww, she’s just messing with you.” I knock three



times on the metal for luck as I climb on board. It's stupid, I know, but tradition. The only time I didn't knock, Vera threw a mechanical temper tantrum and gave out on us somewhere past the last gas station but before the creepy abandoned development on the outskirts of town. We froze on the side of the street in the rain until my mom came to pick us up—armed with “I told you so” and a lecture on road safety and organ donation.

“You think she'll make it through another year?” I ask, tucking my hair into the helmet.

Garrett feigns outrage. “You'll have to pry Vera from my cold, dead hands!”

I laugh. “You might want to rethink that metaphor, with all those road-safety stats my mom keeps leaving out for you.”

“Hush, child,” he scolds me, climbing on in front. “Where's your sense of adventure?”

“I'm plenty adventurous!” I protest, wrapping my arms around him. Never mind adventure. This is the part I love the most: the excuse to hold him tight for as long as our journey takes. “Just remember who you drag along to all those foreign movie nights in the city.”

“You love them.” Garrett starts the bike, and slowly, we start to ride away. “Don't even try to deny it!” he calls over the noise from the engine.

So I don't. Because I do love them.

And him.

Totally Wired is busy when we arrive, the evening cappuccino crew jostling for position with the summer

college crowd buried behind their textbooks. We head for our regular table in back, the one under the wall of old rock-show posters, peeled and fading. “The usual?” Garrett asks.

“Yup!” I hurl myself down on the cracked leather bench. “Here, I think I’ve got . . .”

Garrett waves away my crumpled dollar bills. “Are you kidding? It’s the day of your birth. Your money’s no good to me.”

He heads for the counter while I settle back and check out the scene. This place is the closest Sherman, Massachusetts, comes to having a hangout of any kind: the lone beacon of coolness in a line of generic drug-stores, take-out places, and bland clothing outlets. I live in the cultural wastelands, I swear. After years of praying to the Gods of Cultural Experience, I’ve had to accept that this town is a lost cause; when they opened a strip mall outside of town with, *gasp*, a Chipotle, it was all kids in school could talk about for a week. No, if we want culture, we have to drive for it: forty miles to the nearest college town or a couple of hours east to Boston, where Garrett and I gorge on Indian food, art-house movies, and the sweet, sweet mildewy scent of used bookstores.

But I have to admit, as lone beacons go, Totally Wired is great. The bare brick walls and steel pillars and weird art are like something you’d find in Brooklyn, or Chicago maybe, and there’s always a cool song playing. If you ask, the baristas will tell you the band and the album and how this new stuff isn’t as good as the release from a few years

ago, when they had a different bass player and the lead singer hadn't sold out.

"Hey, kid." LuAnn snaps her gum as she clears the table next to mine. At least, I think her name is LuAnn; that's what it says on her old-school diner name tag, but I'm always too in awe of her to ask if it's for real. "Cute shoes."

"Oh, thanks," I mumble. "They're only from Target."

"Still, you're working them." She winks and struts away in her pink 1950s sandals that match her floral-print sundress. I look down at my red sneakers, feeling a glow of pride. Fashion compliments from the resident vintage queen are gold dust; LuAnn is always showing up in crazy ensembles, with her long red hair in pin curls or a severe wave. She can't be more than a few years older than me, twenty at the most, but she has this aura of awesome confidence I can't even begin to mimic. Not that I'd ever try.

"Make a wish." Garrett returns, depositing a tray with our drinks on the table and presenting me with a cupcake adorned with a single candle.

"You didn't have to!" I protest, but inside, I'm beaming. Red velvet: my favorite.

He remembers.

"Sure, I did. It's a momentous day. You're seventeen now. You can do . . . absolutely nothing you couldn't already." Garrett makes a face, then laughs. "Still, we have to celebrate. You're all grown up!"

I grin. "As long as there's no singing," I warn him, then blow out the candle. "You'll get us barred for life."

Garrett blinks. "Are you saying I can't sing?"

“I’m saying the last time you broke out in a chorus of Radiohead, half the neighborhood cats went into a frenzy.” I scoop a fingerful of frosting from the top of the cupcake. After all, what is cake if not a vehicle for frosting?

“Yum.” Garrett reaches over with ink-stained fingertips and does the same before I can slap his hand away. “Ow!” He sticks out his tongue, covered with sprinkles. “So what did you wish for?”

I shrug. “The usual: world peace, winning the Nobel prize . . . Meeting Justin Bieber . . .” I add with a laugh.

“Aiming high. I like it.”

“A girl can dream.” I busy myself with the cupcake, hiding my lie. The truth is, I wished for the same thing I always do, when I let myself wish at all.

Him.

A group of girls comes chattering along the aisle next to us, fourteen or fifteen years old maybe, heading back toward the bathroom. They’re loud and excited. “Ohmigod, we *have* to see that movie!”

“I know—he’s so cute.”

“Do you think he did that flying thing, or was it all a stunt guy?”

“No way, he wouldn’t do something like that!”

Garrett and I share an amused roll of the eyes. “God, someone needs to lock them in a room and teach them about real culture,” Garrett murmurs conspiratorially. I giggle. “I’m serious!” he says darkly. “A whole generation raised on plastic pop stars and movies with happily-ever-afters.”

“The only way they’ll ever discover great literature is if someone makes a Disney sing-along,” I say. “*Anna Karenina*: the dance-off.”

He snorts on his coffee, and I feel a surge of pride at my quip. The girls move on.

“So what did your mom get you?” Garrett settles back in his seat.

“No idea.” I pour half the canister of sugar into my coffee, the only way I can stand it so black and strong. Garrett says those ice-blended syrupy things are milk shakes with delusions of grandeur—kid stuff—so I switched to the hard stuff ASAP after we met. “She was talking about some big surprise for when I get back tonight.”

“Maybe she’s finally caved on the car,” he suggests. “You left out that list of used models, right?”

I fix him with a dubious look. “We’re talking about the same woman, right? Tiny, incessantly organized, insanely overprotective?”

“OK, maybe not,” he agrees. “But she’s got to let up sometime, right? You’re a junior now. It’s not like you can ride around on the bus forever.”

I grimace. “Don’t remind me.” In case you hadn’t noticed, I’m not a senior. Not anywhere close. In my many disagreements with my mom, this is the sorest spot of all: that despite the fact I turned seventeen today, I’m still only heading into my junior year of high school. Such is the fate of those of us born on the school-year borderline. Sure, Mom has psychology reports in her corner—and

believe me, she quotes them all the time—about how it’s better to be the most advanced, intelligent, mature kid in your peer group, instead of the underdeveloped wisp in the class above with lower reading scores and a way smaller chest, but honestly, I’d take that boob-related insecurity in a heartbeat rather than feel so out of place and *old* all the time.

“Knowing her, she’s probably booked us for another mother-daughter bonding retreat.” I sigh. “A workshop on realizing our full potential or some other bleak hell.” This is what I get for having a real-live life coach as a mother; the last time, it was “Seven Steps to Actualizing Your Inner Awesomeness,” none of which turned out to include room service or cable TV. Some retreat.

Garrett gives me that famous half smile, but this time, it doesn’t quite reach his eyes. He’s toying with the handle on his coffee mug, and now that I’m sitting right across from him, I can tell something’s not right. I have a radar for his moods, and this one isn’t exactly a bundle of sunshine and bunnies.

“What’s up?” I ask. “Are you OK?”

“Sure. Fine. Hey, did you see that documentary on Warhol and the Factory scene?” Garrett gulps his coffee, looking casual as ever, but I know him too well.

“Nope. You’re not distracting me that easy. Spill,” I order, setting my elbows on the table and fixing him with a look. “I mean it. You’re holding out on me.”

He exhales. “It’s nothing. I mean, it’s your birthday; you don’t want me to get into it.”

“Garrett!” Now I’m starting to worry. “What’s going on? You know you can tell me anything.”

A pause, and then he says the words I’ve been longing to hear, the ones second only to “I love you” and “I can’t live without you.”

“I, um . . . It’s me and Beth. We broke up.”

## CHAPTER TWO

“You what?” I gasp. Talk about a birthday miracle: I offered my wish up to the universe, and it delivered! OK, so Garrett hasn’t swept me into a passionate embrace and sworn he can’t live without me, but still, this is a start.

“When?” I ask, struggling to hide my joy. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

He looks awkward. “It was just last night. I mean, we’ve been fighting for a while, but . . . I don’t know. I didn’t want to spoil your birthday with all my breakup drama.” He keeps playing with his coffee cup, looking embarrassed.

“Garrett! What happened? Did she cheat on you? Did you finally get sick of her reading *Cosmo* all the time? Did she throw one tantrum too many?” Garrett has a thing for redheads, and drama club girls at that. I’ve thought



about dyeing my hair and nearly auditioned for the spring play, but somehow, I don't think even that would make the difference. "Wait. I'm sorry," I say, reminding myself that I'm supposed to be the supportive friend here—rather than, you know, filled with wild hope and rapturous expectation. "The most important thing is, are you OK?"

He nods, reluctant, but something about the way he presses his fingertip into the sugar grains on the table brings me back to earth with a jolt. He's genuinely hurt here, and even I wouldn't wish that on him, however thrilled I am about the circumstances behind said pain. "I guess it was inevitable?" he asks. "I mean, she's graduated now. And things haven't exactly gone smooth these last few months."

"You mean, because she's crazy," I point out.

"No! Beth is just . . . complicated. High maintenance . . ."

"Crazy," I finish, shaking my head. "The girl would throw a fit over anything."

You may think I'm a teeny, tiny bit biased when it comes to the character of Garrett's girlfriends, but trust me, this isn't even me being blinded by jealousy and unrequited longing. After tagging along on countless third-wheel movie nights and after-school hangouts, I can safely say that Beth Chambers is a high-strung, temperamental bitch. And I can—say it, I mean. Finally!

"You're so much better off without her," I reassure him fervently. "I don't know why you dated her in the first place."

Let alone for five months. Five whole months of agony, watching him moon all over her, every kiss like a tiny dagger to my heart.

Garrett gives me this wistful smile. “Because she’s beautiful.” He sighs. “And unpredictable. And being around her inspired me to write the most amazing poetry. . . .”

I bite my lip. OK, so we’re not quite done with the tiny daggers just yet. “But it didn’t work out, right?” I remind him. “There was a reason you broke up with her.”

He nods, resigned. “She wanted commitment. You know, that we’d stay together in college. She made it into an ultimatum, like if I couldn’t promise her that, then there was no point in even trying.” Garrett’s voice is heavy, and even though this is the news I’ve been waiting—hoping, praying!—for ever since they first hooked up at Lexie Monroe’s party, I can’t help but feel a pang for him.

“You did the right thing,” I insist. “Really, you won’t regret it.”

Garrett, alas, isn’t as convinced. “I don’t know. I cared about her,” he says quietly. “I still do. I know she could be . . . difficult, but when we were together, just the two of us, it was amazing.”

“But she gave you the ultimatum,” I remind him gently. “And who could give that guarantee, anyway?”

He manages a smile. “I know. I’ll feel better soon. I hope. See?” He rolls his eyes. “This is why I didn’t mention it—I didn’t want to drag you into my relationship angst. Not today.”

“What are best friends for?” I bounce up. “Come on,

no more moping around here. There's a *Before Sunrise* box set with our name on it."

He pauses. "Are you sure?"

"Hmm, let me think about that." I pretend to ponder. "An evening with Ethan Hawke and pizza. Oh, the tragedy!"

Not to mention snuggling up with Garrett on the conveniently small couch.

Garrett finally cracks a smile, genuine this time. "We're gonna party like it's your birthday," he raps, badly, slinging an arm over my shoulder as we head toward the exit.

"Eww, no, stop!" I hit him.

"Gonna talk about Descartes like it's your birthday."

"I'm officially disowning you," I tell him, putting distance between us. Garrett just sings louder.

"Gonna sip root beers like it's your birthday."

I catch LuAnn's eye as we pass. She grins, and I blush. "I can't take him anywhere," I tell her as Garrett makes lame white-boy gang signs.

"You know we'll stay out past eleven o'clock 'cause it's your birthday!"

"And you call yourself a poet."

By the time Garrett drops me off back home after our movie marathon—and a whole tub of peanut brittle—I've managed to convince him that breaking up with Beth is the best thing that's ever happened to him. I definitely know it's the best thing that's ever happened to me. Finally, the Gods of Unrequited Crushes are on my

side: Garrett is single, just in time for us to head off to lit camp together. I can see us now: days spent pushing each other to dizzying literary heights, nights spent sneaking away for romantic rendezvous under the stars.

After two years of agony, destiny is on my side once more!

“Remember, no more moping around, reading her old love letters,” I order Garrett as I hop off the Vespa and tuck the helmet under the backseat.

“Yes, ma’am.” He laughs.

“See you tomorrow?” I ask. “We could spend the day reading out by the river.”

“Sounds good.” Garrett revs the engine. “Give me a call in the morning, OK?”

I watch happily as he rides away, Vera spluttering all the way back down the street, a flash of red against the green of the shady oak trees and overgrown front lawns. Me and mom live on the older side of town, where the streets are full of rambling colonial houses and leafy backyards, but Garrett’s family is across town in one of the newer developments by the lake: the crisp mock-Tudor houses full of plush cream carpets and sofas that get smudge marks just from looking at them.

“Hey, Sadie.”

The voice comes from across the street, and I turn to find Kayla sitting on her front porch steps in a pretty print blouse and cutoffs. She waves. “Happy birthday,” she adds. “It *is* your birthday, right?”

“Yup, thanks!” I call back, but neither of us crosses the road. After a childhood of sleepovers and playdates,

our friendship kind of faded out after we started high school. We still get along fine, but it's clear we're different kinds of people. After I met Garrett, I got involved with the lit magazine, while Kayla turned out to be one of those perky, cheer-filled girls, wearing bright bands in her blond ponytail and gossiping over celebrity breakups. She's been dating a varsity basketball player named Blake for a year now, and sometimes, when Garrett drops me off at home late at night, we pass his blue pickup truck, parked two blocks over, the windows steamed up inside.

I'm just deciding whether to go over and say hi when that very truck pulls around the corner, some rock song playing loudly through the open windows. Kayla bounces up. "Have fun!" she calls, smiling, and then hurries toward the truck. Blake leans over to open the passenger door; Kayla hops in, kissing him for a long moment before he slings one arm around her shoulder and they drive away.

I watch them go, feeling a curious pang of envy. Not because I harbor a secret love for monosyllabic jocks—I would die of boredom spending even an hour with Blake. I've met him in passing a couple of times, and sure he's cute (in a hair-product-and-tan kind of way), but the guy has nothing to say. Not even a little; not even a teeny, tiny bit. *Nothing*. Garrett and I talk for hours, about everything under the sun: politics, philosophy, religion. He challenges me to think about the world in a whole new way. That's real love: when you're intellectual equals. The Ted Hughes to my Sylvia Plath.

Except, of course, without that whole sticking-my-head-in-the-oven thing.

I've barely closed the front door behind me when my mom bounces out of the kitchen, resplendent in matching aqua velour yoga separates. I swear she's the only woman in the known universe who irons her loungewear.

"Honey!" She beams. "I've been waiting! Are you ready for your surprise?"

"Sure," I say. "Let me just go change and—"

"No need! Your gift is upstairs."

I follow her up. Everyone says that we look alike, with our Jewish coloring and dark, wants-to-be-curly hair, but she's the petite, polished version, while I got my dad's awkward height and bony figure—forever doomed to the Extra Tall section at department stores, and the continual assumption of gym teachers that I should be good at organized sports.

"Close your eyes," I'm ordered for the second time today. I wait patiently while Mom opens my bedroom door. "Ta-da!"

I open my eyes—and promptly let out a wail of distress.

"What did you *do*?"

Gone are my haphazard photo collages; all my pictures are now neatly pinned on a bulletin board in the corner. My messy but totally personalized desk system has been reduced to color-coded storage boxes and a gleaming in-box. My collection of battered old books

is nowhere to be seen, and the clothes I had carefully—well, lovingly—strewn across the night table, floor, and dresser . . .

“What do you think?” Mom spins around, proud as a catalog model. “I reorganized the closet. See? Everything is color coded, with sections and boxes. And your desk is set up for maximum functionality, with a proper filing system and—”

“Mom!” I interrupt, staring in horror at the organization she’s wrought on my perfect mess. “I thought we agreed: you keep your life coaching out of my life!”

She’s unswayed. “But honey, you’ll love it. You can be so much more productive now. You know what I always say: an ordered environment means an ordered internal life!”

“And you know what Nietzsche says?” I counter. “‘You must have chaos within you to give birth to a dancing star!’”

Mom blanches. “Birth?”

“It’s a *metaphor!*” I catch my breath. “And where did all my books go?”

“They’re here.” Mom shows me the shelf full of neatly ordered volumes. Shiny, brand-new volumes. “They were all so battered and old. I replaced them with brand-new editions.”

“But . . .” I gasp, lost for words. Are we even related? “That’s the point! That they’re old; they’ve been passed along from somebody else. They had notes in them! History, and meaning, and—”

“OK, all right!” Clearly, Mom realizes that tampering with my library collection is an intrusion too far. She puts a soothing hand on my shoulder and backtracks. “They’re still boxed in the garage. We can go get them back.”

“Thank you.” I sigh with relief. “And, um, thanks,” I add, not wanting to seem like a completely ungrateful brat. “For all of this. It’s a . . . nice thought.”

She smiles. “I promise, just a few days of the new system, and you’ll be convinced. It’s the first thing I do with my clients. And look, I even made you a wall chart with space for your personal goals and achievement schedule!”

I sigh. “Thanks, Mom.”

It was inevitable, I guess. For years now, she’s been just itching to get her hands on me: to turn me into one of her little clones, following their checklists and seven-step plans that she hands out like a grade-school teacher passing around paint-by-numbers sheets. She used to be cool, once upon a time—scatterbrained and artistic. She was into pottery, these weird abstract sculptures, and would sometimes be so deep in a project that she’d lose all track of time. We’d wind up eating PB&J sandwiches for dinner and wearing pajamas around the house on laundry days.

It was awesome.

But then Dad left us to go play saxophone on tour with his jam band, and overnight it seemed she turned into this stranger—guzzling self-help books and going on motivational weekends designed to strip her of all spontaneity and turn her into a goddess of achievement



and positive thinking. It worked out for her, I guess. She qualified as a life coach, and now she has a ton of clients, paying her ridiculous amounts of money to brainwash, I mean, *teach*, them, too.

But not me.

As far as Garrett and I are concerned, organization and structure are the mortal enemies of creativity. I mean, did Emily Dickinson plan her goals in a color-coded workbook? Did Shakespeare use an inspirational daily quote calendar?

I think not.

Mom turns to go, and I flop down on my—crisply made—bed. “Wait,” I say, stopping her. “Did the mail come? Is there anything from camp?”

“Why don’t you check your in-box?” Mom winks. I leap up.

There it is: a single white envelope. “Why didn’t you say something?” I cry, tearing it open in such a rush that I rip part of the letter itself.

“Slow down!” Mom laughs, but I’m already eagerly scanning the printed letter, my eyes racing over the small type.

*Dear Ms. Allen:*

*Thank you for your application to our summer program. However, we regret to inform you that due to the high number of eligible candidates this year, we have decided to limit intake to those who have completed at least their junior year of high school. . . .*