

Shani Petroff

Finding
Mr. Better-
Than-
* You

Swoon Reads
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A SWOON READS BOOK

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For my friends—thank you for being you.

Chapter 1

“That is not art,” my boyfriend, Marc Gerber, said, pointing his paintbrush at my easel.

“You are just jealous,” I told him, studying my masterpiece, which admittedly looked like a big red splotch on a canvas. “People will be fighting over this one day.”

“Yeah,” our friend and Marc’s soccer buddy Todd Slocum said, leaning over to get a better look, “to get it out of their sight.”

Marc laughed. “Right? *You* take it. No, *you* take it. No, *you* take it,” he said, pretending to be two people arguing over my work.

“You know . . .” I dipped my brush into the red paint. “I think your painting may need a little sprucing up.”

I took a step toward him, wiggling my paintbrush at his project.

“You wouldn’t.” Marc’s eyes had a glint to them, almost daring me to go on.

“Wouldn’t I?”

I inched closer. Marc’s piece was of a soccer goalie leaping for the ball to stop the other team from scoring. My boyfriend lived for soccer. “I think some red could spice it up.”

“Cam . . . ,” he said, unsure of what I was going to do next.

“Yes, Marc?”

I twirled the brush as if I was about to make my move.

Before I could, he wrapped his arms around me, nuzzling his head into my neck. He knew I was super ticklish there.

I squealed as I tried to pull away, accidentally painting the side of his cheek.

“Marc, Cam, stop it,” our art teacher, Ms. Winters, called out. “Do not make me speak to you again.”

“Sorry.” I tried to look remorseful despite the fact that my boyfriend had a gob of red paint dripping down his face. I hoped I at least got some points for containing my laughter.

“Me too,” Marc said.

Ms. Winters let out a sigh and handed him a cloth to wipe off the paint. Then she turned her attention to me.

“Didn’t you say you had a guidance counselor’s appointment this period? Why don’t you just go now?”

I still had time, but I wasn’t going to push it. She wanted me gone.

I was not exactly my art teacher’s favorite student. Yesterday alone, she’d snapped at me eight times to stop talking and focus on my painting. It was only the first week of school, but Ms. Winters was already all business, determined to keep the class on track. And apparently, I wasn’t making that easy.

I started cleaning up my station.

“What’d you do?” Todd asked me.

“Huh?”

“To get called to guidance.”

I shook my head. “No idea.”

Marc still had a tiny bit of paint on his face. He looked so cute, but I decided to be a good girlfriend and help him out anyway. I wiped the smudge away with my thumb, and, after checking to make

sure that Ms. Winters was facing the other direction, I gave him a light peck on the lips.

Todd rolled his eyes at me. “I bet that has something to do with it. They probably figured out you lied to get in this class just to be with Marc.”

I hadn’t lied. Not exactly. Okay, I had. But it was for a good reason. I was not going my whole senior year without a class with my boyfriend.

“You don’t think that’s it, do you?” I asked.

Todd shrugged, but it wasn’t his answer I was looking for. I wanted to know what Marc thought.

As if reading my mind, Marc squeezed my hand. “Relax, it’s probably nothing.”

I hoped he was right, but that word *probably* dug at me as I sat in the guidance counselor’s office.

Why did Todd have to get in my head? I hadn’t been nervous at all until he opened his mouth. But now I was semipetrified. I’d never been called to the office before—not guidance’s, not the principal’s, not even the nurse’s.

I couldn’t get in trouble: It was my senior year, and my transcript couldn’t afford it. It needed to stay perfect if I had any chance of getting into Columbia, and I *really* needed to get in.

I stared at the clock on the wall. I’d been waiting to see my guidance counselor, Ms. Vail, for twenty minutes. Much longer and last period would be over.

Finally her office door opened.

“Thanks again,” a tall, blondish girl said, walking out alongside Ms. Vail.

“No problem, Lissi.”

My ears perked up. This was the infamous Lissi Crandall? I craned my neck to get a better look. *Everyone* was talking about her. Not that I could blame them. It wasn't every day Brooksvale High got a new student, let alone at the start of senior year. Lissi was practically a celebrity in our little Connecticut town. She'd started attending the school's volleyball practices this summer, and from what I'd heard, she'd made quite the impression. Loved by some, hated by others—this latter group included one of my BFFs, Grace Kim.

"I'll keep you posted," Ms. Vail told her, then turned her attention toward me. "Camryn Roth?"

The sound of my name made Lissi's face snap in my direction. Her eyebrows rose and her blue eyes widened. Did she know who *I* was?

We didn't have any classes together, but I guess it was possible she'd heard about me. We did have people in common. I hung out with the soccer guys, and they were all about Lissi. *She's so hot; she's so funny; she's so perfect.* I gave them more than my fair share of eye rolls over it, but I could sort of see what they saw in her. Lissi had that whole *I can command a room without saying a word* vibe.

"You can come with me," Ms. Vail instructed.

I followed her into the office, thoughts of the new girl quickly evaporating. I had much bigger things to think about.

"Have a seat," Ms. Vail said, shuffling through some files on her desk until she found the one that read CAMRYN ROTH. "Sorry for the delay; the last meeting went longer than expected."

"That's okay."

Then I waited as she flipped through my transcript. She frowned as she turned to one of the pages. I was pretty sure she even shook her head slightly, but that could have been my imagination. My right

knee started shaking, moving up and down at a rapid pace. It had a mind of its own. I pressed my hands down to stop it, but it wasn't doing any good.

Ms. Vail still hadn't said anything.

"I really, really appreciate you switching me to that art class," I sputtered, trying to get ahead of the situation. "Sorry for all the emails and voice mails about it this summer. But I think it will definitely help my college applications. Can't get enough culture, I always say." I didn't always say that. I'd *never* said that. Well, except when I was trying to convince my counselor of something.

In the case of this past summer, it was getting Ms. Vail to move me into my boyfriend's class—although I never mentioned the boyfriend part to her. I may or may not have bugged her about four dozen times to get switched into Ms. Winters' last-period art class.

After the first dozen correspondences, she wrote me back with "good" news. She had managed to move me to Mr. Tobin's second-period art class. But good to her was sucktastic to me. I'd been trying to get into *Marc's* class so I could be near *him*, not to learn about pointillism and other things that made my head spin. So I doubled down, saying that the only reason I wanted to take art was to work under Ms. Winters' esteemed tutelage. Yes, I laid it on thick, and often, but I had an agenda: taking at least *one* class with my boyfriend.

I couldn't only see Marc at lunch. That wasn't happening. So I did what I had to do.

I mean, it wasn't like I gave up physics for him. I scrapped a persuasive-speaking class, which clearly I didn't need, since I was able to convince Ms. Vail to rearrange my schedule. Or so I thought. Sitting in the office had me wondering if maybe the class would have sharpened my skills.

Ms. Vail must have found out the true motive for my request.

Ms. Winters probably tipped her off. I was going to be in trouble. A detention or—worse—switched out of Marc’s class. They’d probably want to make a point that what I did wasn’t acceptable. I couldn’t imagine the school looking too favorably on changing a student’s schedule due to their relationship status.

“What? Oh.” Ms. Vail waved her hand at me. “That wasn’t a problem.”

I sat up straighter. If that wasn’t the issue, what was?

She turned a piece of paper toward me. “I actually wanted to talk to you about your college applications.”

I let out a sigh of relief. *That’s it?* I’d worried over nothing.

“I’m all set with that. I already started.”

Now it was Ms. Vail’s turn to let out a breath. “Camryn—”

“Cam,” I corrected her. Unless I was getting grounded, no one ever called me Camryn.

“Cam,” she continued. “You remember the assembly last year?”

I nodded. The juniors had been called into the auditorium for a lecture about life after high school, what to look for in a college, and so on. It was pretty boring, but it got me out of precalc, so I was all about it.

The guidance counselors made us fill out a questionnaire and encouraged us to set up an appointment to talk about options. The only person I knew who had actually signed up was Grace. I guess now that it was the start of senior year, they were circling back to all of us no-shows.

She pointed at the paper in front of me. “That’s the form you turned in.”

Scanning the questions, I couldn’t help but smile. I definitely remembered filling it out. The whole college section had hearts drawn around it. I traced one with my finger.

“I’ve been going over everyone’s files, and your answers concern me,” Ms. Vail said.

I knew it wasn’t so much my answers, plural, as my answer, singular. The questions read:

What is your dream school?

What is your reach school?

What is your match school?

What is your safety school?

I wrote Columbia for all of them.

“I wasn’t ignoring the assignment. I just know what I want.”

Ms. Vail folded her hands together and leaned forward. “Camr—Cam,” she said, softening her voice, “it’s good to have a reach. I just think you need to keep your options open. Columbia University is extremely competitive. I’ve gone over your transcript, and I’m worried you may be setting yourself up for disappointment. It’s important to have backups.”

I wasn’t *only* going to apply to Columbia (my parents had vetoed that idea), but it was the only place I wanted to go. It was part of the plan.

“My grades are good. I got all As last year, my SATs are way above average, and I’m writing a kickass essay.” I slapped my hand over my mouth. Could you say *kickass* to your guidance counselor?

“Your grades are good, but you’re not in AP classes,” she said, unfazed by my language, “and your SAT scores are impressive, but they’ll be comparable to most of the people who apply there. You need something that makes you stand out, and your lack of extracurriculars has me concerned.” She glanced back down at my file. “There’s nothing here since freshman year. Not one club, team, or activity. Schools look at things like that.”

“I have stuff.”

She waited for me to continue.

I twisted my charm bracelet around my wrist. “I did volleyball part of my freshman year. And I would have done some clubs, but sophomore year on, I got stuck babysitting my sister after school.” My mom used to work from home, but she got a new boss that year who decided everyone needed to come into the office. My sister was too young to be left alone, so I had to watch her until one of my parents got back. “I shouldn’t be penalized for that—it’s not fair.”

Ms. Vail nodded. “You can definitely include babysitting, but what about other activities? Like writing for the school newspaper or the literary magazine, volunteering to plant trees on the weekends, being an office worker during your study halls, signing up for the cleanup committee for the school dances? There are plenty of options that don’t involve staying after the last bell.”

I hadn’t even thought of those things. My heartbeat quickened. I was busy all the time; there had to be stuff that would qualify as an extracurricular. “I’m at almost every nighttime soccer game,” I said, letting the words tumble out, “and a ton of the volleyball ones. And now that my sister is older, and I don’t need to be home, I’ll be going to the afternoon games, too. I even have one today. I’m like their number one cheerleader.”

“But you’re not a cheerleader, you’re a spectator, and that doesn’t make for a compelling application.”

I didn’t need to be on the cheerleading team to show I had school spirit—anyone who saw me at the games knew that—but Ms. Vail clearly disagreed.

“Okay then, how about this. I, um, helped at the soccer team’s car wash. I manned a booth at my synagogue’s Purim carnival. I . . .” I couldn’t think of anything else. Unless hanging out with

your best friends and your boyfriend a ridiculous amount counted for something.

“Cam . . .”

“Oh,” I said, clapping my hands together, “the yearbook!”

“You were on yearbook?” she asked, flipping through the pages of her CAMRYN ROTH file.

“Not technically, but last year they told people to send in their photos, and I’m always taking pictures, so I submitted a bunch. They used a few, and they would have taken more, if there had been seniors in them instead of my group of friends. But I can still write down yearbook photographer, right?”

Ms. Vail pursed her lips. “Cam, I’m not the admissions board. I’m not the one you’re going to need to convince. I’m just trying to prepare you. The way things look now, I think you need to seriously consider some other options. I’m afraid you may not be able to get into Columbia.”

The bell rang, interrupting us, but I didn’t get up. I didn’t budge. I was frozen to my chair. I could hear students racing out of classrooms with that rush of excitement that comes with leaving school on a Friday—and not just *any* Friday. The *first* Friday of the school year.

“Can you stay a few extra minutes?” Ms. Vail asked, once the ringing stopped.

I nodded. I wasn’t going anywhere, not until we fixed this mess.

“Reading,” I said, reaching into my backpack and pulling out three books I had stashed there. “I do it all the time. I took these out of the library right before lunch. I’ve probably taken out more books than anyone at this school. Ms. Chakrabarti can vouch for me—I’d bet she would even write me a recommendation.” I knew

I was grasping at straws, but how come kicking a ball counted as an extracurricular, but reading—which was so much more mind opening—didn’t count?

I droned on and on about my favorite romances to my friends. I’d pretty much given a dissertation about the differences between the book *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* and the movie *Love, Simon*. They’d tuned me out, but maybe, possibly, that counted as a book club? I’d take any sort of win at the moment.

“I don’t want you to worry,” Ms. Vail continued. “There are plenty of excellent schools you can get into. Why don’t we take a look at some of those?”

Because I didn’t want any of those.

Columbia had been my dream forever.

I was so ready to leave this small town and be in a big city. Ever since my aunt took me to Manhattan in fifth grade, I’d wanted to go back. I hadn’t had a chance, thanks to my parents’ fear of me traveling to the city sans chaperone, but by some miracle they were okay with me applying to school there. I couldn’t wait, and Columbia seemed like the perfect school for me.

Marc was the one who first got me excited about it. He was a legacy. His grandma and both of his parents had gone there, and his older brother was enrolled now. The way Marc talked about the campus, the classes, the prestige, and the city had made me fall in love with it—enough that I’d worked my butt off to get straight As so that I could get in.

Ever since freshman year, the two of us had planned to go to Columbia together. It was a pact sealed with a kiss. Cheesy, I know, but the thought still made me grin like a fool. Marc was a shoo-in to get accepted. Not only did he have the family connections, but he didn’t have any extracurricular deficiencies. Marc was a star ath-

lete, on the student senate, and took all AP classes—which he aced. Apparently, unbeknownst to me until a few minutes ago, *I* was the slacker.

I was the one jeopardizing everything.

No. I shook my head. I wasn't giving up. I had worked too hard to not get into my dream school.

"I still have time. I can fix this," I told Ms. Vail. She knew how persistent I was; she'd gotten a taste of it over the summer. Now I was going to multiply my efforts tenfold. Sure, this squashed any hope of applying early decision, but that was okay. The extra time would help get me where I needed to be. "You'll see. I'll get incredible recommendations, keep my grades up, and find some extracurriculars. I'll do whatever it takes. I can make this happen. Columbia will be laying out the red carpet by the time I'm through."

Ms. Vail gave me one of those pitying smiles I could never stand. "I hope you're right. But you only have two marking periods before applications are due. That's not a lot of time."

"I'll make it work."

I had to.

Everything I dreamed about depended on it.

Chapter 2

I opened the door to the gymnasium, careful not to bring any attention to myself. I was super late. The volleyball match was well underway. I glanced up at the scoreboard and cringed. It wasn't good. Fourth set, and Brooksvale was down. They needed to tie this game to stay alive. Grace and her teammates broke out of a huddle and took their spots on the court. They looked intense. I scanned the bleachers for my other best friend, Terri Marin, and quickly maneuvered my way through the stands to her.

Her dark eyes were focused on her sketch pad, her long brown-almost-black curls hanging over the page, as the pencil in her hand moved at warp speed. I snapped a photo with my phone. I'd call it *The Artist at Work*. Terri didn't notice me do it; she was so fixated on her drawing that she didn't even stir when I sat down next to her. "Hey," I said, bumping my shoulder gently into hers. "Sorry I'm late. Got stuck at the guidance counselor's office. Long, horrible story. I'll tell you all about it."

She turned toward me, and before she could even get out a word, my mouth dropped into an O and I gasped. "Oh no. Don't kill me." I squeezed my eyes shut. "I'm so, so sorry. I did not do this on pur-

pose. I meant to change. Honest. I totally forgot with everything that happened.” I peeked one eye open. “How mad are you?”

Terri was shaking her head and pinching her navy-blue shirt, which had a giant *GO* written on it in silver glitter. “How many times did you make me promise I would remember to put this on?” she asked.

“Eight?” I answered, scrunching my nose.

“Try fifteen,” she corrected me. “And yet, somehow, I’m the one looking like a glitter bomb exploded on me, while Little Miss School Spirit is wearing plain old jeans and a lacy pink top. Not even wearing school colors. You’re slipping.”

Fortunately, her voice seemed playful and not pissed. Still, I felt guilty. “I wasn’t even thinking. I can go get mine. It’s in my locker.” The shirt I was supposed to be wearing had Grace’s name written on it in the same silver glitter.

Terri shook her head. “Forget it. By the time you get back here, the whole match will be over. But you owe me! I have sparkles everywhere. I’ll probably still be dripping glitter at graduation.” She picked a piece off her arm to emphasize her point.

“I totally owe you.” I put up my fingers in the Girl Scout Promise. “On my honor, I promise to help Terri at all times, and to live by the Girl Scout Law,” I recited, altering the organization’s pledge.

“That’s a start,” Terri said, but she was already back to sketching in her pad, which meant I was off the hook. When Terri was angry, she made sure you knew it.

“On the plus side, you’re wearing my art,” I reminded her. “That should make you happy.”

She raised an eyebrow at me. “You definitely need Winters’ class if you think this shirt is art.”

“Hey,” I said, crossing my arms over my chest and putting on my best mock-indignation voice. “The Griffin kids and I worked very hard on that. Wait until you see the signs we made.”

“Hopefully, the twins made them by themselves. I’ve seen your work.” She laughed at her own joke.

The Griffins were five-year-olds I babysat every once in a while. Terri did, too. The kids loved doing any type of crafts project. Unfortunately, my skills were pretty much on par with theirs, which everyone seemed to be reminding me about today.

“We can’t all be Picasso,” I told her.

“Picasso, really? Surrealism or neoclassical—you really think that’s my style?”

I threw my hands up. “You just told me a kindergartener is more artistic than I am—do you really think I know the difference between periods or styles?”

“Yes. I mean, I know all about rom-coms, and the romance tropes you go on and on about.” She started ticking them off on her fingers. “Friends to lovers. Enemies to lovers. Second-chance romance. Destined lov—”

“Okay, okay, I get it, you’re a better listener than I am. But in my defense, you usually talk about your inspiration for a piece—i.e., a hot guy, a memory, Christmas tinsel—and not your particular style. Besides, you know I’m your biggest fan. Well, other than Luke.” I wiggled my eyebrows up and down.

“Oh my God, don’t go there—you know we’re just friends,” Terri said, swatting me with her sketch pad.

I grabbed it. She and Luke Cahill had gone out a couple of times during sophomore year, but it never went anywhere. Terri thought that being in a long-term relationship in high school was stupid, that tying yourself down was for when you were old and boring. At first,

it didn't seem like Luke felt the same way. He was always hanging around us, but eventually he kind of became one of us—an honorary member of our little group, even if I did like to tease Terri about their dating history every once in a while.

“Terri,” I moaned, her current sketch catching my eye, “please tell me your motivation for this one isn't Lissi.” I whispered the name, even though Grace was nowhere near us. “Grace is going to have a fit.”

“It's not my fault,” Terri said, grabbing her pad back. “Look how intense her expression is. It hasn't changed throughout the whole game. How could I not draw that?”

I followed Terri's gaze to the sidelines. There was Lissi. I hadn't noticed her, but now that I did, it *was* hard to look away. She was hyperfocused on the game. She was leaning forward, lips pursed, eyes lasered in on the players. “Nice ace!” Lissi called out after Crystal Pollack made a serve that the other team couldn't return. “Do it again.”

“Well, the sight of Grace's fists might be a deterrent,” I said, noticing the way her arm muscles were bulging.

Grace's hands were tight balls, and her whole body was stiff. She looked like a force to be reckoned with. Lissi either didn't notice or didn't care, because she went right on shouting out instructions. Apparently, she had been a star on her team back in New Hampshire. But here in Brooksvale, that role belonged to Grace. She had worked hard to bring the team together, to keep everyone in sync, and to make practice a priority. She'd been bumped up to varsity during sophomore year and helped turn a losing team into state champions. This year she was finally captain, and she loved all nineteen of her teammates.

Our varsity teams could only roster twenty players each, and the

volleyball team was full. But according to Grace, Lissi showed up at summer practice for the last two weeks, right before school started, and said she wanted to be on the team. Coach was hesitant to make an exception. If you let one extra on, why not two or three, or ten, or everyone who tried out? He wanted a team he could manage—and coach properly. JV was for the masses, at least at Brooksvale. Allowing Lissi on would mean kicking someone else off. There was still a discussion about what to do. In the meantime, Lissi kept attending practices, and now apparently the games. This annoyed Grace to no end.

“You might want to burn that picture before Grace sees it,” I warned Terri.

“I think you might be right,” she said, turning to a fresh page in her pad. “So why were you so late today? What happened with the guidance counselor?”

Instead of answering, I jumped out of my seat. “Go, Grace!” I screamed, and started clapping. She had just spiked the ball over the net, winning the set and tying the match. It was 2–2. Anyone’s game.

“Come on,” I said, pulling Terri’s arm.

Terri gathered up all her stuff. “This is the most ridiculous thing ever.”

She said that every time, but it was tradition. At Brooksvale High volleyball games, when the teams switched sides, so did the spectators.

I took her bag from her. “You don’t want Grace thinking you’re rooting for her opponents.”

Terri’s face went wooden. “Trust me. She knows if I’m at a game, I’m here for her.”

“You’re a good friend,” I told her, patting her on the back. Terri

was not shy about her disdain for sports. But she rarely missed Grace's home games. She was one of those people you could always count on to be there.

"I know," Terri said with a smirk as she climbed down the bleachers.

As we neared the other side of the gym, some guy I'd never seen gave a meek wave.

"Terri, hi."

She winked at him and kept walking, adding just a smidge more sway to her hips. Terri was curvy and confident, and I was more than a little in awe of her ability to flirt and make friends wherever she went.

"Who was that?" I whispered.

"Remember I told you about Mr. Sneezed-All-Over-My-Pizza?" she said as we situated ourselves in our new seats. "That was him."

"No way." I totally remembered that story. Terri had met some guy at a Sandbrook High party; they ditched it and went out for a slice, and as they were sitting outside eating, he sneezed all over hers. "That was *him*?"

"Yes," she said, giving me eyes that said *don't you dare look in his direction*, "but that was a million years ago. Who cares?" It was actually only about five months, but who was counting? "Are you going to answer my question or what?" she continued.

"Huh?"

"What happened with the guidance counselor?"

"Oh yeah." I sighed and then filled her in about my lack of extracurriculars, and how if I didn't find some soon, my Columbia dreams would be over.

Terri shook her head. “I told you not to quit volleyball over a boy.”

“I didn’t. I did it to watch my sister.”

She gave me another one of her stares—she was the queen of them—and this particular look always had me spilling the truth whether I wanted to or not. “Okay, fine. I did it for a boy. But not for just *any* boy—for Marc.” I could tell she had to resist rolling her eyes. I quit the volleyball team before the end of the season during my freshman year so I could watch Marc play in the soccer finals. He was so excited about getting that far, and I didn’t want to miss his moment. “But it wasn’t like I was that great, and I would have had to quit the next year anyway.”

“You’re always doing what Marc—” She stopped herself. “I’m sorry. This isn’t the time for that.” She squeezed my arm. “You’re amazing, Cam. I know how much you want to get into Columbia. You’ll figure something out. And if you need anything, I’m here to help.”

“Thanks.”

“What did Marc say about your meeting?”

I pressed my hands down on the bleacher. “Nothing yet. By the time I was done with the guidance counselor, he was already in soccer practice. He won’t look at his phone for hours.” Although I knew his first words were going to be that it would all work out. It wasn’t necessarily true, but hearing him say it would make me feel better anyway. It always did. I really needed to talk to him. “I’ll see him tonight; we’re going to the diner. Hopefully, he’ll be able to come up with something.”

“*You’ll* be able to.”

I let the statement go. I knew Terri wasn’t the biggest Marc Gerber

fan. She thought I relied on him too much, but that was because she didn't understand what it was like to be in a couple.

Marc and I were better together. What we had wasn't boring or mutually dependent—it was love. And with him by my side, there was no way I couldn't get through this.

I was more determined than ever. I was going to Columbia, and so was Marc. We just needed a new plan.

Chapter 3

It had only been a few hours since my meeting with my guidance counselor, but in that time I'd gone from stressed to panicked. "Whoa," the waitress said as I inhaled the last remnants of my Oreo Madness shake through my straw. "That was fast. Want another?"

I looked up from my book and shook my head no. I could have done without the commentary, but I bit my tongue. Tonight was definitely a two-, possibly three-shake night. Still, I was going to wait until Marc got there before I dove into my next one.

We were supposed to meet at Scobell's Diner at seven, but I'd arrived a half hour early. I needed to get out of my house, so I had my mom drive me over as soon as she could. I was feeling antsy. The volleyball game had been a temporary distraction, but I couldn't shake Ms. Vail's words. Thoughts of Marc were the only things calming me down.

I couldn't even focus on my book. I'd read the same page six times, and I was at my favorite part—where the dorky yet adorable main character was about to learn that her secret crush actually liked her. *Loved* her, even. Their eyes would meet; they'd move closer until they were mere millimeters apart. Then they'd have that epic

kiss, the one to seal their fate as a perfect couple, so that they could ride off into their happily-ever-after. Except that this time it wasn't cheering me up. All I could think about was that my perfect ending had a giant crack in it and was in serious danger of falling apart. Sure, not going to the same college as Marc wouldn't destroy us, but it would make things a lot harder. I wanted things to be easy and fun. My dream school with my dream guy. I closed the book and put it back in my bag. Why couldn't life be like a rom-com?

I took a deep breath.

The clock above the cash register ticked to seven, but it didn't magically make my boyfriend appear. Not that I was surprised—he was never on time. Sometimes I'd tell him things started twenty minutes earlier than they actually did, just so he'd get there when I wanted him to. I hoped today he wouldn't keep me waiting too long. I really needed to see his face.

I played with my straw and scanned the crowd. Scobell's was busy. I guess that was to be expected since it was the first Friday night of the school year. The diner was swamped on a normal evening—it was pretty much the main hangout for every high school kid in Brooksvale, Sandbrook, and every other surrounding town—and after having to deal with homework and classes after a whole summer off, everyone wanted to go out. I recognized a bunch of faces, not that I really knew them—just *of* them. A couple of people from the newspaper were there. Some guy Terri had hung out with for like a week during sophomore year was sitting with a group I didn't know. Grace's old chem lab partner was at the table behind me. And Avery Owens and her cheerleading clique were by the old arcade games. She looked up, had probably sensed me staring, but I turned my focus back to my phone before she could catch my eye. I didn't want to seem like some stalker.

Right as I was about to text Marc, he walked in the door. He was wearing his faded blue Yankees T-shirt. I couldn't help but smile at the familiar sight. He wore that thing all the time. I'd bought him a new team shirt for his birthday, but he wouldn't give up that old one. He said he wore it during a game where the Yankees had an epic comeback, and that it was "lucky." Marc was about as attached to it as my little sister was to her security blanket—even though at thirteen she was way too old for it. Hopefully, the shirt would conjure up some magic and help us figure out this whole Columbia mess.

I caught Marc's eye; he nodded at me and held up a finger to indicate "one minute" as he stopped by a table over by the far wall. I leaned over to get a better look. It was a bunch of the guys from the soccer team. I wished I had seen them earlier; I totally would have sat with them while I waited. I couldn't make out what they were saying, but a couple of minutes later Marc slid into the booth across from me.

"Hey," he said.

"Hey." I reached out and took his hand. He was still tan from the summer, his usual pale complexion sun-kissed. I hated that I hadn't gotten to spend the past few months with him. He was always happiest when the weather was warm.

Marc stared down at the table, and his messy dark brown curls tumbled forward. The familiar scent of coconut-scented shampoo and musky body spray flooded my nose. I took a deep whiff. Some people liked to breathe in lavender and jasmine to calm down, but my go-to scent was Marc. Being with him was exactly what I needed right now.

"I'm so glad you're here. I've been freaking out ever since I left the guidance counselor. I even went off on my mom on the way over here. She kept asking what we were doing tonight, and I just lost

it.” I puffed my cheeks with air and let my breath out slowly. “‘It’s a diner, we’re eating, what do you think,’” I said, giving a playback of my response—sarcastic tone and all. I felt guilty. I shouldn’t have taken it out on my mom. I just hadn’t been in a talking mood.

“I wouldn’t worry about it,” Marc said, his eyes still focused on the table. “I’m sure she’s over it.”

He wouldn’t even look at me. We hadn’t talked since I’d texted him the news, and he seemed to be taking it even harder than I had. With my free hand, I tossed my straw wrapper at him. “Hey, you okay?”

“Yeah. It’s just . . .” Marc’s voice trailed off.

He didn’t have to say anything. I understood. This Columbia thing was screwing everything up. “It will be all right. It’s us. And I’m going to do whatever I can to make sure I get in.” Somehow I’d wound up trying to comfort *him* instead of the other way around, but I couldn’t help it. I hated seeing him upset. It snapped me into Miss Fix-It mode. “Now let’s brainstorm.” I squeezed his hand. “I need that mind of yours.”

Before we got the chance, the waitress came over. “Get you guys anything?”

“I think we’re going to need two extra-large Mint Explosion milk—”

“Actually,” Marc said, cutting me off, “can you give us a few minutes? We might be heading out soon.”

I put my other hand on his and practically bounced in my seat. “Ooh. This sounds good. What do you have in mind? Where are we going? What are we doing?” I knew I sounded like an overeager kindergartener, but I didn’t care. This was what I’d been craving. A Marc pick-me-up. Some sort of special surprise that would make me feel like all of this would be okay again.

“Cam . . .” He looked up, his hazel eyes locking onto mine.

He looked so sad.

“Marc, please don’t stress. You’re going to make me stress. It’s going to work out. I can feel it.”

He pulled his hands back and started rubbing his neck.

I winked at him. “Need some help? I give a pretty mean massage.”

Marc shook his head. “No, I’m okay.”

He was *okay*? Marc never turned down a massage. Half the time, he begged for them. “Now you’re really freaking me out.”

He swallowed, his Adam’s apple bobbing in his throat. “It’s just . . . I was thinking . . . maybe this isn’t such a bad thing.”

My stomach turned, the milkshake lying heavy. “What?”

His eyes flitted from me to my empty cup and stayed there. “Going to different schools. Maybe it’s better if we don’t do college together. Do you really even want to go to Columbia? Or even New York?”

My whole body tensed up. I couldn’t be hearing him right; we’d talked about this since freshman year. He knew I’d always wanted to be in Manhattan. And, sure, going to Columbia together had been *his* idea, but it was one that I had wholeheartedly fallen in love with. “Yes, I want to. What’s gotten into you? I’m not giving up on our dream. Don’t let Ms. Vail make you all paranoid. I’m going to get in. Besides, do you know how hard long distance would be? I don’t even want to think about it.”

“Yeah,” he said, his voice sounding far away. Then he paused. It was just a few seconds, but it seemed like hours, and my whole body somehow felt hot and cold at the same time. “That’s why . . . um . . . maybe it would be better for both of us if we kind of ended things now.”

I couldn’t move. I couldn’t think.

Kind of ended things now? Had he just broken up with me?

In a diner?

No. He wouldn't.

"What?" I asked, or at least I think I asked. My mouth opened, it formed the word, but I didn't hear any sound come out.

This time Marc took my hand and said, "Maybe we should each do our own thing. It's our senior year."

I snapped my hand away from his. *Our own thing?* What did that even mean? "Are you breaking up with me?" I managed to croak out.

"Don't call it that. It's more like . . . I'm doing what's best for both of us."

This wasn't what was *best*. It was the exact opposite.

Everything got foggy. I could see Marc in front of me, but it felt like he was miles away.

He kept talking.

"I mean, this summer, didn't you like having some space? A chance to be on your own?"

My mouth opened, but this time I couldn't get any words out. I just stared at him.

Over the summer, I had been a counselor at an overnight camp in Massachusetts. I'd hated being away from him. I snuck phone calls and texts whenever I could. Marc had always said he missed me, too.

"This will be good for both of us, don't you think?" he asked, looking at me now and nodding, as if that would make me agree.

"You've got to be kidding me," I answered, finding my voice. "Good!? Obviously, I don't think this will be *good*."

"Cam, come on."

The more he spoke, the angrier I got. "What would make you think I'd find anything about this good? You're ruining everything. Don't you see that?"

He put out his hands and lowered them slowly, looking around, embarrassed.

I stared at him. Was he trying to shush me? “What?” I asked.

“Keep it down,” he whispered. “People are starting to look.”

I dug my fingers into the red pleather cushion I was sitting on. I had no idea how loud I was being, and I didn’t care. My volume was not my main concern, and it shouldn’t have been his, either. “Seriously? Tell me you’re joking,” I said, digging my nails in deeper. I was still trying to comprehend that the guy I’d been in love with forever was calling it quits out of nowhere, and he was critiquing my *volume*?

“Please don’t make a scene.”

“You’re worried about a scene. A *SCENE*.” Somehow I found myself standing, my hands slapping the table in front of me. “You dump me *here*, now, and *that’s* what you’re worried about?”

He was standing now, too. “You want this all over the internet?” He waved his arms around the room. “Because that’s what’s happening,” he said in a harsh whisper. “Look at all the phones out.” He clucked his tongue. “I should have known you’d do something like this.”

Something in me snapped. “Me? ME! What is wrong with *you*? We’ve been together for years, Marc. *Years*. How did you think I’d react?”

He ran his hand through his hair. “You know what, if this is how it’s going to be, if we can’t talk like normal people, I’m out of here. You’re acting like a—”

“Watch it, Marc,” Avery Owens called out as she moved from the cheerleaders’ table and toward us. “I’d be very careful about what you say next.”

He rolled his eyes at her.

Tears were threatening to escape my eyes, but I fought them back. “Marc, please, just sit down,” I told him. I needed answers; I needed to know what had happened. If he wanted me to be quiet, I would. I’d do anything if it meant he’d stay. “Please,” I said, my voice almost a whisper, but he didn’t seem to care.

“You know what, let’s do this another time. We’ll talk tomorrow or something. This was a mistake.”

It *was* a mistake. This whole thing was, but I couldn’t wait a whole day to talk to him. I needed answers *now*. My thoughts were already racing. Twenty-four hours from now, I’d be going out of my mind. This was all I was going to be able to think about. He had to stay and hash it out. Was he really going to leave me here?

He moved out of the booth.

“Marc!” I cried out.

He turned to go. He might have made it, too, except he almost smacked right into Avery.

“She asked you to sit down,” she quietly hissed, her brown eyes lasering into his.

“This is none of your business, Avery,” he said.

“No kidding,” she told him. “But you made it my business, *everyone’s* business, when you broke up with your girlfriend of two—”

“Three,” I corrected her.

“Three years,” she continued, “in the middle of a crowded diner. If she wants you to sit, you sit. If she wants you to leave, you leave. This isn’t about you anymore.” He looked like he was going to say something, but then he actually slunk back into our booth. Avery turned to the crowd. “And the rest of you put away the phones and go back to eating your food. What is wrong with everyone?”

For the briefest instant, my grief turned to awe as I watched her.

“Are you okay?” she asked me.

I nodded.

“If you need *anything*,” Avery said, “anything at all, I’m right over there.” She pointed to her booth.

“Thanks.”

She nodded slightly, but I could tell she meant what she said. Her words were sincere.

After Avery walked away, Marc asked, “Do you want to go somewhere else and talk?”

I shook my head. That would have been a great question before all of this had started, but now I didn’t have the energy. I just wanted answers.

“Why did you do this here?” I asked him, wiping my eyes with my arm, leaving a trail of black eyeliner. I didn’t want him to see me crying, not when he was acting all indifferent. “It was cruel.”

His tone changed. I’m not sure if it was what I said, what Avery had said, or that he was afraid people were still watching, but his voice got soft, like he was trying to calm an animal that had escaped from the zoo. “I thought it would be easier.”

But I wasn’t some wild animal. *I* was a human being with feelings. Feelings he didn’t care about, or he never would have done this—not here, not at all. I let out a maniacal laugh. “Easier for who? You? Because if you haven’t noticed, it’s not easier for me.”

“Cam,” he said.

I held up my hand to stop him. “No, don’t. You thought if you did it here, you could just get it over with, not have to deal with the mess, or even think about it. It’s not going to be that easy.” So much for not crying in front of him. The tears began streaming down my cheeks.

“Please don’t cry,” Marc said and pulled out a napkin from the holder and handed it to me.

Please don't cry? PLEASE DON'T CRY? The guy I love, the guy who said he loved me, just told me it's over, and he wants me to what? Smile?

I took the napkin and blew my nose. "Why are you doing this? What changed?" I choked out, the anger giving way to hurt.

He slunk down even farther in the booth and let out a sigh. "Nothing. Everything. We've been together for all of high school. And we're seniors now . . . and . . . I don't know, I just thought it could be fun not to be in a relationship."

The words felt like a knife twisting in my gut. "*Fun?* So, what, you want to date other people?"

"I don't know what I want, and maybe that's the problem. I want to figure it out. It was like I got to breathe this summer while you were gone, and—"

I squeezed my eyes shut. "I was *choking* you?"

"No, you're twisting my words. Cam, I love you, I do. You know that."

He sure had a funny way of showing it. This wasn't how you treated someone you loved. "I don't know that. Not anymore."

His eyebrows furrowed. "I do—it's just . . . I don't want this right now. But this doesn't have to be goodbye. I don't want to lose you altogether. We can still be—"

"Don't say it." If he said the word *friends*, I was going to explode. I wanted to be his *girlfriend*. Not his pal.

"I'm sorry," he said.

We sat there in silence. Part of me hoped he'd realize he was making a horrible mistake. Part of me wanted to scream. The other part was just too drained to do anything.

I felt a shadow cloud over our table, and I looked up. Vern Harmon, one of Marc's soccer buddies—and a guy I thought was

my friend, too—was standing over us. He didn't even glance in my direction. "A bunch of us are getting out of here," he told Marc. "You coming?"

Marc looked from Vern to me, silently asking for my permission to leave this hell.

"Just go," I said.

He didn't argue, or even check if I was okay. He just jumped out of the booth and booked it for the exit.

I watched him go, watched the door close behind him.

Marc left.

He had left *me*, and he wasn't coming back.

I covered my face with my hands and sobbed.

Marc and I were over.

Chapter 4

A hand touched my shoulder. I held my breath. Thank God, Marc had come back! He must have realized how awful he was being and what a mistake he was making. I lowered my hands, ready to work everything out, to give him hell for putting me through this but to eventually, inevitably, forgive him and get back to where we were before.

Only it wasn't Marc who had come to comfort me.

It was Avery.

A virtual stranger cared more about my well-being than the guy I would have done anything for. It made me sob even harder. I didn't care that Avery was watching. That *everyone* was watching. There was no hiding the fact that my life was falling apart.

"It's going to be okay. *You're* going to be okay," Avery said. "Is it all right if I sit?"

I nodded. I really didn't want to be around anyone, but I really didn't want to be alone, either.

She put a glass down in front of me. "I brought you some water."

I reached for it but stopped midway. I was visibly shaking. I was an even bigger mess than I thought. I managed to get the glass to my

lips, take a sip, and put it down. Then I watched my fingers tremble. Avery put her hand over mine. “What do you say we get out of here? Do you want me to call someone for you? Help you to your car? Whatever you need.”

More sobs bubbled to the surface. I couldn’t go anywhere. “Marc was my ride.”

My mom had dropped me off, but she and my dad were going out as soon as she got home. My *boyfriend* was supposed to make sure I got back. Now I was going to have to wait for my parents or risk their wrath and take a Lyft or Uber. They didn’t trust the apps, but I wasn’t sure I cared.

“I can take you,” Avery offered.

I shook my head. “You don’t have to.” I didn’t want to be anybody’s charity case.

“I want to. Please.”

I studied her face. She looked sincere, and I really had nothing to lose. I stood up and followed Avery to her car.

“It’s unlocked,” she said.

Once I was inside, I leaned my head against the window. It was throbbing.

“I’m so stupid.”

“No you’re not.”

There was no way that was true. I’d had no idea that my own boyfriend was planning to dump me. We’d hung out when I got back from camp, I had sat with him at lunch every day we’d been in school, we’d joked around, even kissed in art class, and yet I’d had no inkling he was about to turn everything upside down. Sure sounded stupid to me.

“He should be the one feeling miserable,” Avery insisted, “not you.”

I closed my eyes. I appreciated what she was trying to do, but it wasn't going to change anything. *I* was the one with tears in my eyes. *I* was the one who felt like a stack of bricks had landed on my chest. *I* was the one who didn't know what to do with myself. Marc was off having a night out with his friends, enjoying his *freedom*. The miserable award went to me—warranted or not.

“Um, Cam,” Avery said a little while later. It could have been seconds, minutes, hours; I'd lost track. All I could think about was Marc. Our conversation played on repeat in my brain.

I raised my head in her direction.

“Your address?” she asked quietly.

Right. Of course. I gave it to her, and we drove the rest of the way in silence.

She parked the car, and I fumbled with the seat belt. “Thanks,” I told her. I didn't know what else to say, so I just opened the door and got out.

Avery did, too. “You said your parents weren't home, right? How about I keep you company for a bit?”

“You don't have to.”

She shrugged her shoulder. “I don't mind. You shouldn't be alone.”

Alone.

But that's what I was. There was no more coupledom for me. *I was* on my own. I probably needed to get used to it. Avery was watching me, and I tensed as I thought about everything she—and the rest of the diner—had witnessed.

A giant scene in the middle of Scobell's, starring me.

Now Avery was ready for the sequel. What did she want from me? Was she just trying to help? Was she afraid I was going to do something stupid? Did she want a story, some good gossip to tell

her cheerleading buddies? “My sister’s home. I’ll be fine,” I said, unable to get that last thought out of my mind. Was she going to get back into her car and text everyone she knew about what a pathetic loser I was?

“Why are you doing this for me anyway?” I asked. Then I shook my head. I’d just snapped at the only person who had been nice to me, the only one at the diner who’d checked how I was doing. “Sorry, I just . . .” I didn’t finish. Avery had been nothing but kind. I hadn’t meant to be rude. Why did I keep taking things out on the wrong people? “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” she said. “I get it. It’s not like we’re friends or anything. I just saw Marc being an ass, and I thought you could use someone on your side. I’d want someone on mine.”

My eyes filled up again. Marc used to be the one on my side. Not the one I needed saving from.

“He never should have done that in there,” she went on, her eyes getting a faraway look. “Getting dumped sucks. Trust me, I know.” Avery and Scottie Zhang had ended things last May. Seeing her after it happened, I’d always thought she was the one who’d done the breaking up. She seemed so happy. It never even crossed my mind that it could have been an act or that she was hurting. She focused her attention back on me. “We girls need to stick together, right?”

I nodded. “Thank you. I really don’t deserve this.” I felt guilty. I barely spoke to Avery, or any of the cheerleaders, for that matter, even though I had classes with most of them. I thought they were snobby because of the way they were always huddled together, laughing and whispering. But I guess it was no different from how my friends and I behaved.

My rom-coms apparently didn’t get everything right. Not all

pretty, popular cheerleaders were cruel. In fact, it would seem some were secretly Wonder Woman coming to the aid of heartbroken souls at local diners.

Avery put up her hand. “Stop. You do deserve this.”

There she was, being all amazing again.

I reached into my bag to get out my keys, and noticed my phone. “Whoa.” It was blowing up. Hundreds of messages were waiting for me, most of them from Grace. If she was going for the Guinness World Record for Most Texts Sent in Under Thirty Minutes, she was well on her way to succeeding.

I scrolled through the messages.

GRACE

Omg, Cam. I’m so sorry. Are you OK?

Marc totally sucks.

I’m with Terri. Please let us know you’re all right.

“Grace and Terri are freaking out,” I told Avery. Then I realized what that meant. My news had spread beyond the diner and to the rest of the school.

“Cam?” Avery asked, waving her hand in front of my face. “Cam?”

I shook myself back to life. “I’m fine.” It was a lie, but maybe if I said it enough, it would be true. My breakup was all over the internet for everyone to see. It had felt real before, but this made it seem permanent.

I looked back at my phone.

GRACE

OK, you don't have to answer, just don't move.
We're coming to the diner to pick you up.

Too late on that one. I was about to respond when I saw what she wrote next.

GRACE

They told us Avery gave you a ride home. We're coming.

Oh, and Terri says you'd have more texts from her if she wasn't driving, and that she thinks Marc is the biggest jerk on the planet.

Now she wants me to tell you that wasn't her wording, and that I am censoring her creative curse words for that @\$!*\$@&* ex of yours. Yeah, you know I can't type what she said. We'll be there soon.

The tears that had been threatening to escape finally did.

"What happened?" Avery asked, her eyes widening. "Was it Marc? Did he say something?"

"No, it was Grace. She and Terri are on their way."

"Then why are you crying?"

I wiped my face with my arm. "It's just them. You. This day has been crappy, but you've all been—" Another huge sob escaped.

"Sorry, I'm not always this big of a crier."

“Stop apologizing. Come on,” Avery said, linking her elbow with mine. “I’ll wait with you until your friends get here.”

I let her lead me to the door.

This day still royally sucked, but it had some bright spots—some bright people, who were watching out for me and helping me to keep moving—and that was something. Maybe I wasn’t alone after all.

Chapter 5

“Why are you home already?” my sister, Jemma, asked as little pieces of potato chips fell from her mouth.

“You’re disgusting,” I told her.

She was sitting on the floor in front of the TV, a giant bag of Lay’s to her left, a two-liter bottle of Coke in front of her, and boxes of Swedish Fish, M&M’s, and Twizzlers to her right. If she kept this up, there was a good chance my parents would make me start staying home to babysit her again.

“And you’re not supposed to be here.” She looked from me to Avery and back again. “Weren’t you supposed to be hanging out with Marc?” Her nose scrunched up as she scrutinized what had to be my red-rimmed eyes. “Where is he?”

“Dead,” I said, expressionless.

Her eyes widened to about twice their size. “What! Oh my God. What happened?”

“Relax—”

“How can I relax?” She jumped up, cutting me off before I could explain. “He’s *dead!*”

“Oh my God.” I shook my head. Obviously, I wasn’t being seri-

ous. She had to know that. “Will you calm down? He’s not *dead* dead. He’s dead to me.”

Jemma crossed her arms, and one single, surely fabricated tear dripped down her cheek. “That wasn’t funny, Caaaammrrrrryyyyyynnnn.” She dragged out the syllables in my name for what felt like half an eternity. And everyone thought I was the dramatic one? They clearly did not spend enough time with my little sister. “You don’t joke about things like that. It’s not funny. At. All. Think how you’d feel if something actually happened to him.” Then she stormed off in a huff, her frizzy reddish-brown hair, identical to mine, whipping around her.

“I’m sorry!” I yelled out after her. Even though I knew she was just reacting for show, I still felt guilty. Great, another thing to feel bad about.

I picked up her stash of snacks. “Regretting your decision to come over?” I asked Avery.

“Nah, I’m sure I was worse to my big brother when I was her age.”

“I doubt it.” I nodded toward the steps. “Let’s go upstairs. Jemma will be back down soon, and I can’t deal with her right now.”

I led the way to my room.

“Whoa,” Avery said as she stepped inside.

“Oh,” I said, following her gaze. “That’s my picture wall.”

“I can see that,” she said, walking over to it.

There were hundreds of photos taped there. I was all for posting on social media, but there was something about a physical picture that I loved. I’d started the collage when I moved to Brooksvale in second grade, to remember everyone I left back in Shaker Heights, Ohio. But in the many years since, images of Terri, Grace, me—and *Marc*—pretty much ruled the wall.

As Avery looked over the pictures hanging by my desk, I climbed onto my bed and studied the ones taped up right by my pillow. They were the last things I saw before I went to sleep every night and the first things when I woke up every morning.

“No, no, no, no, no, no,” Avery said as I traced my favorite picture with my fingers. It was one of Marc and me roasting marshmallows out on the beach last year. I was looking at the fire, but he was looking at me. His gaze was pure love. At least that’s what I had thought. I had a whole little section of the wall for just the two of us.

“You don’t want him,” Avery reminded me, and gently threw a stuffed koala bear sitting at the edge of my bed in my direction.

I hugged it to my chest. But *I did*.

My expression must have been easy to read because she continued. “*Trust me*, you don’t.”

She was making sense. My head knew that, but my heart was having a harder time getting the message.

Avery grabbed scissors from my desk and marched over to me. “You know what to do,” she said, holding them out.

I did, but that didn’t mean I wanted to. “Do I have to?”

“I’m not going to force you . . . ,” she said, still waiting for me to take them. “But do you really want to look at his face every single day? Every single *night*?”

Yes.

That was the wrong answer. I knew that, and staring at his face wasn’t going to help me get over him. I plucked the scissors from her. This was a rite of passage that I’d seen more times than I could count. Any breakup film worth its weight had some sort of ritual cleansing: cutting photos, burning reminders of an ex, something! Sure, the symbolism was cliché—getting rid of things from the past

to make room for the future—but there was truth to it. Those scenes always made me smile. And I definitely needed a smile.

I pulled a couple of photos down. Except that feeling of closure didn't wash over me. It made me feel emptier than before, if that was even possible. "This sucks." I held the picture of Marc and me at my sweet sixteen, his arm draped around my waist. "I looked so happy in this one."

"So snip out his face. Keep you. You can put your dream guy on there instead."

"Marc is my—"

Avery cut me off. "Don't say it. A guy who would treat you like *he* treated you is not a dream guy."

She was right.

I looked at the picture one last time and then plunged the scissors in.

It was time to cut Marc Gerber out of my life.