



The Birds, the Bees, and You and Me

Olivia Hinebaugh

A SWOON READS BOOK

An Imprint of Feiwel and Friends and Macmillan Publishing Group LLC
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Hinebaugh, Olivia, author.

Title: The birds, the bees, and you and me / Olivia Hinebaugh.

Description: First edition. | New York : Swoon Reads, 2019. | Summary:
Seventeen-year-old Lacey Burke responds to the failure of her school's abstinence-only sexual education curriculum by handing out advice and contraceptives in the girls' bathroom, even as her own life gets complicated.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018020069 (print) | LCCN 2018030166 (ebook) | ISBN 9781250192660 (E-book) | ISBN 9781250192653 (hardcover) | ISBN 9781250192660 (ebook)

Subjects: | CYAC: Sex instruction—Fiction. | Friendship—Fiction. | Dating (Social customs)—Fiction. | Bands (Music)—Fiction.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.H5685 (ebook) | LCC PZ7.1.H5685 Bi 2019 (print) | DDC [Fic]—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018020069>

Book design by Liz Dresner

First Edition, 2019

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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**For Jason, the best partner and
co-parent I could ask for.**

One

I think I finally have my audition piece," I say to my best friend Evita. I plop into the chair next to her and start unpacking my lunch.

"Huh?" she asks, pulling out ear buds that I hadn't noticed under her mane of curls.

"You're not supposed to listen to anything too loudly," I remind her. It's a rule she came up with anyway. She needs to preserve her perfect hearing for when she's a famous record producer/singer/DJ. "But if you are going to listen to something . . ." I hold up my phone.

"What's that?" Theo asks, sitting opposite us.

"Possibly my audition piece," I tell him.

Evita sits up a little straighter and puts her game face on. "Hand it over."

"Why does she get to hear it first?" Theo asks.

"Get over here," Evita tells him, holding out one of her ear buds.

"It's obviously just a MIDI file, but, you know, I could do it on viola. With maybe piano, but it's kind of . . ." I gnaw on the side of my thumb.

Theo shoves between us, balancing precariously across our two chairs. I hand Evita the phone. She hits play. The piece is two and a half minutes.

A long two and a half minutes.

Beyond an occasional bob of her head, Evita makes no show of emotion. Theo, thankfully, is much less opaque. First, he raises his eyebrows at me. Then he mouths "Wow!" He's probably at that set of arpeggios from the viola that melt under those big chords.

"What are you listening to?" Theo's girlfriend, Lily Ann, asks as she sits down with her lunch tray.

Theo puts a finger up, telling her to wait.

When it's over, Evita finally smiles. "Yes, Lacey. Absolutely. We should record it ASAP."

"It's great," Theo says, throwing an arm around me and giving me a squeeze.

I can't keep the smile from my face. "Awesome."

"You nailed it," Theo says as he stands and joins Lily Ann on the other side of the table.

"Can I listen?" Lily Ann asks.

"Of course," I say with a forced smile.

"So, if we can record this today after school, we can send it in by Wednesday. Or even tomorrow. You know I don't mind pulling an all-nighter," Evita says.

"That's not necessary," I tell her. "Let's just do it Saturday. We were going to rehearse other stuff this afternoon anyway, right?"

“Okay. It can wait until the weekend. But you have to slate the entire weekend for this endeavor and band practice.”

“The whole weekend?” I ask. “I have that other project, though . . .” Evita knows I’m working on a piece for Theo’s birthday next week.

“Pretty sure that’s almost finished,” Evita says.

“What is?” Theo asks.

“Nothing!” Evita and I say in unison, grinning conspiratorially.

“Weirdos,” Theo says.

“We have absolutely nothing going on other than rehearsals and audition recordings. The sooner we send them in, the sooner we get accepted and the sooner we look for an apartment,” Evita says.

The three of us are applying to Berklee College of Music in Boston. It’s been the plan since before we even got to high school. Play music. Listen to music. Study music. Leave our small town in North Carolina for college in Boston. Play even more music. Conquer the world.

It’s only October, so we don’t need to rush. And Berklee has rolling admissions, so it doesn’t really matter when we submit, but Evita wants us to send them at the exact same time, so we hear back at the same time. She wouldn’t cop to feeling nervous that one of us won’t get in, but none of us has a backup plan. It’s Boston or bust. It’s funny we’re so set on Boston, especially since none of us has even been there.

Theo is listening again, sharing the headphones with Lily Ann this time.

Seeing them all cozy together always bothers Evita.

“Your face is going to get stuck like that,” I whisper to her.

Her somewhat bushy eyebrows are scrunched together, and her upper lip is sneering.

"Not true. This is just my resting bitch face."

"It's a face that only appears at lunch, oddly enough," I say.

Theo kicks me under the lunch table. "Secrets don't make friends, girls."

"No secrets here," Evita says cheerfully.

"It's good!" Lily Ann says too loudly. She's either totally oblivious that Evita shoots daggers at her any chance she gets, or she really doesn't care.

"Thanks," I say.

"You guys heard Theo's audition piece?" Lily Ann asks once she's done listening.

"Evita mixed it," Theo says through a mouthful of sandwich. He also definitely played it for us during quartet rehearsals. Lily Ann and Theo and I, along with this other guy Scott, have a string quartet that meets last period every day for an independent study credit. Apparently, Lily Ann doesn't recall that. Or maybe she just likes to keep the conversation spinning around Theo.

"Oh yeah. It's just super good, right?" Lily Ann asks. She turns to Theo and puts a hand on his arm. "You should seriously send it to some of the conservatories I'm applying to."

"I'm not a conservatory kind of guy," Theo says, kissing her on the forehead.

"You're just such a brilliant cellist," Lily Ann says with a pout.

Evita crosses her arms. "Just because someone *can* play classical music doesn't mean that's all they should do."

"I know he's more than just a good cello player," Lily Ann says defensively.

"Right. He's also hot," Evita says. "And an epically good kisser."

"Evita," Theo groans.

This is Evita's MO: say something to make Lily Ann uncomfortable by bringing up her own history with Theo, even though, historically, it's not something she talks about all that often. No one mentions the brief period when Evita and Theo were together, or the even more painful period after they broke up, unless it's to rub Lily Ann's nose in it. The subtext is always: "It's not as if it's a feat to get Theo to sleep with you." Lily Ann seems infuriatingly immune to these comments, but Theo always caves in on himself when it comes up.

"I have to pee," I say, grabbing Evita's arm and pulling her with me. "We'll be back." The hallway is mostly empty since it's still the middle of lunch. "Do you really need to do that?"

"I honestly can't help myself. The two of them make me want to vomit."

"You didn't always hate Lily Ann," I point out.

Evita's the one who adopted Lily Ann at the start of the year when she moved to town. Evita picked her out of the crowd the first day in August as a "lonely new kid." It's the exact same way she saved me when I was the new kid on the first day of sixth grade.

As soon as she found out that Lily Ann played violin, Evita asked her to sit with us at lunch, since Theo and I also play in the school orchestra and were already hoping to find another

violinist for our quartet. Lily Ann didn't know the history with Theo and Evita. She didn't know that Theo was sort of spoken for. Before we knew it, Lily Ann and Theo were a thing, and our "perfect senior year was ruined," as Evita likes to say.

"I just wish he'd date someone deserving of him," Evita says, pushing the bathroom door open.

There's a girl at the mirror adding mascara to already-mascaraed eyelashes. She glances over at us. This school is small, and everyone is always up in everyone else's business. One of the things I love about Evita is that she does not care who knows her business. But I prefer to be invisible.

"You don't think anyone would be good enough for him," I say quietly.

"Well. Right."

"Okay, but, he's with Lily Ann now, and what do you think is going to happen if she decides she doesn't want to put up with your scowling and under-the-breath comments?"

"She'll break up with him?" Evita says hopefully, but she obviously doesn't believe this. She sighs. "Okay. You're right. I will attempt niceness."

"Honestly, nice would be amazing, but we could all probably settle for civil," I tell her. "You do not want him to have to choose between Lily Ann and us. Somehow we haven't lost him yet." I can't imagine facing high school without Evita and Theo.

"I'll make an effort," Evita mumbles.

"Hey, Jess?" a voice from a stall asks the girl with the mascara.

Jess peels herself away from listening intently to our conversation. "Yeah?"

"Do you have a tampon?"

"No, sorry," Jess says.

I reach into my bag without a second thought and pass a tampon under the door. My mom always tells me to carry more feminine protection than I need. Part of her "sisterhood" philosophy.

"Thanks!" the girl says.

"So . . .," Evita says, "do you actually have to pee?"

"No."

"Okay. Meeting adjourned. I will be nice." Evita throws the door open.

Back at our lunch table, Evita makes a barely audible apology and we all move on. Theo catches my eye and mouths "Thank you." I shrug.

The bell rings, dismissing us from lunch. Theo, Evita, and I go one way to our senior seminar class, while Lily Ann goes to a different class. She has complained about this fact every day for the last two months.

"I don't know why I didn't sign up for that class," Lily Ann moans.

"Because it's boring and you don't like taking easy classes with no homework?" Evita offers unhelpfully.

"It really is boring," Theo agrees. So far, it's mostly been about college or trade schools or community college or job applications. "It's fine, babe, I'll see you in independent study."

At the word *babe*, Evita turns to me. I shake my head before she can pantomime vomiting. But, let's get real, when people call each other *babe* it's sickening.

"Okay," Lily Ann says. She pouts and Theo puts his arms

around her waist and whispers something in her ear that makes her grin.

“Ugh. Come on,” Evita says, linking arms with me.



Evita and I drop our lunch stuff in Theo’s locker because it’s the closest to the senior seminar classroom. We’re the first to arrive, so we claim our usual table in the back. Theo slips in right before the bell, sitting a row in front of us.

There’s this nervous-looking guy sitting behind the teacher’s desk. Our teacher, Mrs. Einhorn, introduces him as the guest speaker.

“We’re starting a new unit on healthy life choices. Mr. Robbins is here to kick this unit off. He has a lot of wisdom to share, so I hope you give him your attention.”

Evita and I exchange a look. We’re generally on the same wavelength. Without saying anything, I know she’s as skeptical as I am that our backward school will ever teach us anything useful in a health unit. Evita and I have more than just music in common. We were both raised by single mothers. Single, liberal, feminist mothers. My mom was a teenager when she had me, and she has spent my entire life talking to me about “healthy life choices.” Things like safe sex and consent and women’s health.

Mom and I still laugh about how my sophomore health class was a lot like the one in *Mean Girls*, where the gym teacher is so uncomfortable discussing sex that he basically tells them just “don’t do it,” then hands out condoms. Our class was a lot like that . . . minus the condom part. When I told her about that class,

my mom threatened to take the issue of abstinence-only sex education to the school board. But at the end of sophomore year, she found out she was pregnant with my little brother, Dylan, and a few things fell by the wayside. We still smash the patriarchy in smaller, subtler ways.

“To get us thinking about the impact our choices have on our lives, Mr. Robbins is going to be talking about the choices he has made. Some were healthy, and some were not. I’m hopeful you’ll learn a lot from his experiences,” Mrs. Einhorn says.

Mr. Robbins stands up awkwardly and grips index cards that he starts to read from. At first he’s mostly talking about alcohol. His story is familiar. Half the kids here could probably relate to it. First, he was just drinking at parties, then whenever he was with friends, then all the time, even when he was alone. Theo, Evita, and I are generally too busy with music to go to parties in the mountains or at the nearby college campus. But we still hear all about them. From everyone.

Half the class is doodling or fiddling with jewelry or chewing on pencils, even when Mr. Robbins talks about dabbling in other drugs. But then Mr. Robbins starts talking about sex. Everyone sits a little taller.

But instead of going into anything useful about sexual health, he just lists it as a regret. Being drunk and high all the time caused him to do the unforgivable: he had life-ruining sex! The kind where you get a girl pregnant.

Mrs. Einhorn starts chiming in with how sex is not something you can take back. She and Mr. Robbins are demonizing sex at every turn and my hands flex and un-flex. I bite my lip to keep from blurting something out. They are completely skipping an

important issue. If you're going to talk about drugs and sex, then you should be talking about consent and how tricky the issue is when you are drinking. Or about—I don't know—contraception!

But *of course* they don't talk about contraception. Because if you get pregnant, then it's obviously your fault for making bad choices. Shame on you!

This whole talk reeks of stigma. And if my mom has taught me anything, it's that demonizing and stigmatizing sex prevents everyone from getting information on *safer* sex. That stigma hits girls extra hard. And my mom knows about that, because she was once a pregnant teenager. Instead of getting support from her family and friends, she got a lot of judgment. If I could travel back in time and punch my mom's unsupportive friends in the face, I would. And I'm not generally a violent person.

I keep fighting the urge to raise my hand and give them a piece of my mind, but I always chicken out. Just when I don't think I can keep these thoughts to myself any longer, the bell finally rings. I get out of there as fast as I can. My face is burning, because this whole class feels like an attack on everything I've been taught and believe in.

Theo and Evita catch up to me and Theo hands me a tally sheet. If they can tell I'm upset by the class, they choose not to address that.

"What's this?"

"Eye rolls, Burke. Yours."

"You sit in front of me," I point out.

"Yes, but you make this sound when you roll your eyes," Theo says.

"I do not!"

“Yeah, you do, like this little *pffffff* through your front teeth.”

I roll my eyes and, yeah, that sound is automatic. “Shit!” We stop by Theo’s locker, drop our binders in there, and grab our government stuff. “You do realize,” I say, “that that lecture was basically fearmongering. I did not sign up for that.”

“It’s an easy A. What more could you want?” Evita asks.

“I just . . .” I get this annoying prickle between my shoulder blades. Under all my feminist rage, my insecurities are simmering. Namely: Do I even know what I’m talking about? Aside from listening to my mother all my life, do I know anything? I have never even been kissed. No one has ever wanted to kiss me. So what do I actually know about sex?

“What?” Theo asks. I swear no thought I have gets past him.

“It’s like, I’ve had a few drinks before—”

“We were there,” Evita interrupts.

I sigh. This whole topic is embarrassing, even if, intellectually, I know it shouldn’t be. It’s that damn stigma. “Well, even when I was buzzed or whatever, it isn’t like I suddenly lost control and jumped anybody. They make it seem like if you have a drink or kiss someone you’ll just . . . I dunno . . . lose control and the next thing you know you’ve contracted an STI and gotten knocked up. But, for real, is that it? Are we all just ticking time bombs, waiting to lose control?”

“It’s not like that,” Evita says. She knows I worry about this. My mom is the smartest person I know. But she had me at sixteen. There are probably half a dozen pregnant girls in our school at any given time. What other explanation would there be for so many people making so many mistakes?

“Not for you,” Theo says. Evita seems to brush the comment

aside, but we both know that he's still hurt by the fact that his and Evita's sexual experimentation ended when Evita concluded that sex wasn't for her. She just didn't want much past kissing and cuddling. And even though she has been totally clear that it wasn't Theo's fault, and that she isn't sexually attracted to anyone, it still seems to make Theo insecure.

"My asexuality aside," Evita says to me, "you don't lose control. And *you* are the least out-of-control person I know. And you know more about sex than any other virgin I've ever met."

"Vita, you know that virginity is such a patriarchal construct," Theo deadpans.

"My mother would be so proud of you," I say, a smile finally creeping back onto my face. "I just wish I had some experience to speak of. I wish someone *wanted* me." The minute I say that, I'm mortified.

"Seriously, Lacey, I'm sure people want you. We'll just get you that first kiss. And you'll see, it's not like this slippery slope," Evita says.

"Wait . . .," Theo starts. Then he shakes his head, his cheeks suddenly blooming with color, as he closes his locker.

"What?" I ask him. I've recovered from being mortified, and now I'm just annoyed that he'd have the gall to be embarrassed by this conversation. After all I've heard about him sleeping with Evita and even tidbits about Lily Ann.

"You haven't kissed *anyone*?" he asks.

"For real, Theo? Where have you been?" Evita asks him.

"I dunno. Like, never at camp? Or, like, on the bus as a dare? Or at a middle school boy-girl party?" Theo asks.

"You *knew* me in middle school," I point out. Being the new kid at that age was awful. I was awkward, and I didn't know anyone. Theo and Evita saved me from certain hell. They cared way more about the fact that I was into music than the fact that I wore childish clothes or that I was shy or a dorkily overeager student. They saw me through two sullen years of complaining about my mother getting married and how my life was over. They even boycotted a middle school party because the girl throwing it didn't want to invite me.

"Yeah. But you're not Lacey Burke, prepubescent dork, anymore," Evita points out.

"Thanks," I grumble.

"No. You know what I mean. Now it's cool to be smart. Or cooler. And, like . . ." Evita opens and closes her mouth, as if she can't think of anything else nice to say about me. Super helpful for how insecure I feel at this moment.

"Stop. You really don't have to try to make me feel better about this. Let's just drop it."

"You're a catch," Evita says firmly. "I'm sorry I brought it up. I'd be happy to make out with you if it would make you feel better. You know I've always wanted to kiss more girls. Softer lips." Before Evita came out to us as asexual, she came out as bi. Previously bisexual, currently biromantic. She tells us her identity is a never-ending work in progress. And, yes, she has often bemoaned the fact that there aren't more gay or bi girls at our tiny school, even in the Genders and Sexualities Alliance, which she's the president of. Her backpack is practically a shrine to all things pride, the black, gray, white, and purple asexual flag pin being her most beloved pin.

In this moment, I wish I could have things half as figured out as Evita does. Or be even a quarter as comfortable talking about sex and attraction. “Can we just change the subject? I’m getting twitchy.”

“Good twitchy or bad twitchy?” Evita winks.

“Stop! Bad twitchy! Definitely bad twitchy.” I shoo her away.

“Hey, Lacey, you’re fine,” Theo says. He affectionately tugs one of the short pieces of my grown-out bangs that always fall into my face.

I bat him away. “I’m a delicate flower.” I don’t want them to see just how embarrassed I am to have asked about this. But it’s obvious, so Theo throws his arm around my shoulders. Evita shimmies her way under his other arm, and we walk toward government.

“My delicate flower and my prickly porcupine,” Theo says.

Two

Sometime in the last month, the three of us went from best friends jamming on our instruments to an actual band. Theo plays the last of the melody on his cello, I lay down a huge chord on my keyboard, and Evita fades it all out from her console. I'm grinning. I can't help it. We sound *good*.

"The extra keyboard is magical," Evita says.

"Yeah, but I need major practice," I say. I'm not a pianist; I've just taught myself what I can. The viola is still my instrument of choice.

"Let's do that one again, then," Evita suggests. She ties her long mop of hair into a high bun and pulls one leg of her sweatpants up past her knee. "I think we should record a demo of this one to try to get gigs. What do you think, Lacey?"

"It's very us," I say. Our music falls somewhere between epic film score, trippy electronic music, and pop. Dramatic and catchy.

"Sounds amazing. But twenty minutes 'til you have to shut it down," Evita's mom, Janice, says as she picks her way through cables and clutter on her way to the kitchen.

"Let's start at the top, then. Time to run through it five more times," Evita says. Without even a moment to catch our breath, Evita spins the beat up. I pick up my viola and look at Theo on his cello. We lock eyes, I take a deep breath in through my nose, and we start in unison.



With all the equipment shut off, the three of us pile onto Evita's deep couch. This is our routine. We play until it gets late, then we watch TV or do homework until we all crash in Evita's room. My mom and stepdad don't mind that I spend most of my nights here. And Theo's parents don't seem to care. He says it's a benefit of being the youngest of four kids.

I pull out my biology textbook to try to get some reading done, when Evita jumps up.

"I almost forgot!" she says. "I think I have a name for our band!"

"Do tell," Theo says. We have been drawing blanks for weeks on this. Every name we suggest either seems too fluffy or like we're trying too hard.

She holds up both of her hands in a gesture like *wait for it!* "The Sparrows," she finally says.

Theo and I look at each other, our grins mirroring each other's perfectly. "Yes!" I say. "I love it. It fits."

"But where did the name come from?" Theo asks. "Aside from you being a tiny little bird of a person?"

"The inspiration is not important. It works, right?" Evita says. Her eyes are huge and she's nodding enthusiastically.

"I'm just glad it's not Evita and the Something-or-Others," I say.

"Well. Right. So, the name comes from an Eva Peron quote . . . so it is tangentially related to my name," Evita says.

"Ha. Knew it," Theo says, laughing.

"Whatever. It's good, right?"

"It's good," I say. "Now you can put a label on the demo we record."

"Oh my god, yes! I need to sketch a logo!" Evita scampers into her bedroom to grab a notebook and then doodles little birds while I read.

Theo's phone rings, and he goes into Evita's room to answer it. Evita looks at me with her eyebrows raised.

"That just kills my good mood," Evita says, climbing up onto the couch next to me and covering us both with a blanket.

"Don't let it," I tell her. "He's allowed to talk to Lily Ann on the phone."

"I know. I can't help it," she says, resting her head on my shoulder. "I guess I'm a little jealous," she whispers.

"I understand," I say. I really do understand. It was hard for me when Evita and Theo were together. It was stressful when they broke up. And it's hard now, knowing that Theo always has this other person on his mind when Evita and I are used to being the only ones.

"I wonder if I shouldn't have ended things with him," Evita whispers.

I snap my head toward her. She's never seemed anything less than certain that splitting up was best for both of them.

“But I thought you didn’t want to be with him like that.”

She bites her lip, like she isn’t sure if she should say anything more. “Okay, so that’s the thing. I couldn’t stand it when he would look at me that way.”

“What way?”

“You know, that sort of searing stare where the person wants to take your clothes off and is feeling all sexy?”

“I don’t know that look,” I say grumpily.

“Okay, well, that look made me anxious. It made me like him less. Like having sex was kind of fine. Like it could feel good sometimes. But I hated him wanting me. I hated knowing he was feeling things I wasn’t. I felt like I was pretending to be into it. Pretending is *so* not my strong suit. I wanted to slow things down, not speed them up. Like if we could just kiss and cuddle forever, I’d be happier. We were totally not on the same page. I like him so much better when he doesn’t want me like that.”

“That makes sense,” I say.

“But that’s the thing,” she says, playing with a loose thread on the blanket and scooting closer to me. “I’m asexual. Not aro-mantic. Because that’s a totally different thing.”

She’s talked about these parts of her identity before. Theo and I both joined the GSA when she did, and there’s a lot of discussion of identities there. I know that even though she’s asexual, she’s alloromantic, meaning she experiences romantic attraction. And sometimes she specifies biromantic, because she has romantic feelings for guys and girls.

I know that she still wants to date. She wants to fall in romantic love. But she’s never said any of this in relation to *Theo*.

"So . . . like . . . maybe you *love* him?" I ask her. The words feel so heavy.

She nods, tight lipped. I want to talk more about it with her. She spends so much time being bright and bubbly and untouchable. But the moment is over, because Theo comes back in and plops down on my other side.

"Let's see the sketches," he says, reaching for Evita's notebook.

All I can do is give Evita's arm a little squeeze under the blanket and then marvel over her sketches with Theo. When Theo has his face in the notebook, Evita glances at me. She shakes her head ever so slightly. She doesn't want me to ever tell Theo any of what she's just told me. I nod. We're on the same page, like always.

Three

After school on Tuesday, I drive to the hospital to meet my mom. She's a labor and delivery nurse. I could meet her at home, but whenever I meet her at the hospital, she gets this goofy grin that I just can't pass up. My earliest memories are of her working toward this career, and I love seeing her so happy.

I park in the hospital garage and take the elevator to the fourth floor. When I get off the elevator, I see a bunch of familiar faces at reception and down the hall at the nurses' station. I volunteered here over the summer. Mostly I restocked postpartum kits for the new moms and made coffee runs to the cafeteria, but since school started, I only come by when Taco Tuesdays coincide with Mom's shifts.

I say hi to some of the nurses I know. I don't see Mom, so she must be busy with a patient. I head to the large waiting area. It's brightly lit and pleasant. There's an older couple sitting across from the seat I choose. They're holding a bunch of balloons and

looking both tense and excited. Probably waiting for the arrival of a grandchild. I smile at them and they smile back.

Glancing around, I realize with a shock that I recognize someone here. Sitting off in a corner is my friend Alice. Our eyes meet, and my first instinct is to pretend I haven't seen her. Because she might be here as a patient. She's almost definitely pregnant, judging by her belly and the way she rests a hand there. A few doctors and midwives see prenatal patients at the hospital, and she's sitting in the corner of the waiting room near the offices. The way she's sitting, with her shoulders shifted away from the room and her back curled, I don't think she wants to be noticed.

I'm not sure what would be kinder, pretending I don't see her or walking over and saying hello. I glance back over. She's studying her shoes, which is not exactly an invitation. But this is Alice. Soprano Alice. GSA Alice—at least until her mom made her quit. She's a junior. Last year Evita declared that she wanted to be her mentor because "The girl has got some serious pipes," and "In a sea of non-queer people, it's nice to have a bi friend," and "She's like a taller mini-me." I haven't seen her all school year. And her large belly possibly explains why.

Before this awkwardness can go on, I grab my bag and walk across the waiting room toward her.

"Hey, Alice," I say, taking a seat near her.

"Lacey! Hi!" She looks relieved I came over. "How are you? How's Evita?"

"We're good. Doing a lot of music stuff. How are you?"

She looks down at her belly and smiles. "You know. Good. Kind of huge. But good. Everything's good. Are you . . . ?" She nods at my belly.

"Oh. No." It comes out defensive. Which makes me sound judgmental. And I want to say something to make Alice more comfortable. "My mom's a nurse here."

"Cool. Obviously, I'm here as a patient," she says with a shrug.

"We miss you at school," I say. "You should get in touch with Evita. She'd want to know how you are."

"I know I should. But I'm sort of embarrassed. My mom thought it would be easier for me if I just homeschooled this year and got off Facebook and stuff."

"Gotcha," I say. But this is exactly the stigma that makes me angry. Why should she hide? I search for something else to say. Anything that isn't the rant I have building in my head. "Do you like homeschooling?"

"It's kind of all right, actually. I'm trying to fit junior and senior year into just this year. So that'll be good. I just do my schoolwork online and watch a lot of TV. Occasionally come to appointments and stuff."

I nod. I'm already being super awkward, especially since I'm trying not to look at her with pity. But her life now sounds so isolating. It's not like she'd be the only pregnant girl in school, either. I guess sometimes the teen moms drop out, but most of the time they keep going to class right up until they deliver.

It sucks that someone's own parent would encourage them to drop out of school. My mom would never. But then, she continued going to school before and after she had me, even when it was difficult. Even when it took her twice as long to graduate and get through college.

"It's really fine," she says, even though in this situation, I feel like I should be putting *her* at ease.

"Is anyone here with you?" I ask, looking around.

"Nah. My mom says that if I'm old enough to get myself into this situation, I can handle it all by myself."

"Sorry, but that's bullshit," I blurt out before I give it a second thought. I clap my hand over my mouth. "Oh my god. Sorry. It's just . . ." There's no end to that sentence. Or rather, there are a thousand ends. She deserves better. She should have more support now, not less. She shouldn't be punished for this.

But Alice smiles. "It is, isn't it?" She sighs. "It's really awesome running into you."

"Are you still singing?" I ask her.

"To myself. To him." She pats her belly.

"It's a boy?"

She grins. "Yeah. Eli James."

"That's an awesome name. I have a baby brother. He's so sweet." *What stupid things to say*, I think. Maybe I should just be polite and wish her well and go find my mom. Or else I'll probably keep saying stupid, unhelpful things. But maybe if I were in Alice's shoes, I would be tired of people being afraid to say the wrong thing. I think maybe what she needs right now is a friend.

"I volunteered here over the summer," I say. "And I came with my mom for all of her appointments when she was pregnant with my brother. You know, if you ever want company for appointments or anything . . ."

"I've been coming to them by myself and it's mostly okay," she says. "And now I have to come every two weeks. So this place is like my home away from home."

"Okay. But if you do want someone. I mean . . . I'm here. And

I happen to like doing the baby thing. Hearing the heartbeat." My palms are legit sweating. It all feels like a bad pickup line.

"That would actually be really great," she says, smiling. "Even Eric doesn't want to come. He's the dad. Do you remember Eric?"

I nod. Eric was her boyfriend last year. I didn't know him that well. I'm grappling for things to make this conversation less awkward than it already is. "I'm really not trying to pry. Is he still . . . ?" *Oh my god. That is totally prying.*

"Oh. I don't know. He's going to be around for the birth and wants to be a dad and stuff, but, honestly, the whole thing is kind of a lot for him. It's a lot for me, too, not that anyone ever asks." She pauses. "So . . . actually, you could come with me, if you want. Or . . . if you don't mind. And I'd love to see Evita and hear about choir and GSA. I just feel so weird that I didn't tell anyone about the baby and then to be so huge and, like, spring it on everyone? That would be so awkward."

"She would love to see you. You should come jam with us sometime. Evita isn't totally satisfied with my backup vocals. Not that she'd come out and say that to me. But I bet she'd love to have another singer to record stuff."

"You guys are recording stuff?" she asks.

"Well, not like an album or anything. Audition pieces for Berklee. Other than that, just some tracks and samples for the stuff we want to perform live."

I start telling her about the band name and the instruments we play and how we've been collaborating when we write stuff. Once we start talking about music, the awkwardness just falls away.

My mom walks over in her Pepto Bismol-pink scrubs that all the labor and delivery nurses wear. "Lacey, the other nurses said

you were here," my mom says. She's so energetic, you'd never guess she's coming off a ten-hour shift.

"Mom. This is Alice," I say. "She's a singer," I add, instead of saying "She's pregnant." My mom has this rule about never commenting on another woman's pregnancy. It's up to the mom to tell you she's pregnant. And, unless you see a baby emerging, you don't assume.

My mom holds out her hand. "Nice to meet you, Alice."

"Nice to meet you, too. I'm here for an appointment with Kelly," Alice says.

"Kelly is the best," my mom says. "She delivered Lacey's little brother and oversaw Lacey's volunteering hours this summer."

"Really?" Alice asks.

"Yeah," I tell Alice. "You are absolutely in great hands." Then I tell my mom, "I'm actually gonna hang with Alice for her appointment if you just want to meet at home."

My mom gives me a decidedly uncool grin. I kind of wish she could let her feelings fly under the radar just a little bit. "Sure. I'll save you a taco."

"Have I ever eaten just one taco?" I ask her.

"I will save you twice as many tacos as I think you could possibly eat," my mom says with a laugh. "See you at home. Have a good appointment, Alice."

"You really don't have to wait if you've got plans," Alice says once my mom is gone.

"My plans involve eating tacos, and as you heard, my mom will save me some."

"That's really nice."

I think maybe Alice's eyes are watering. I keep talking music

in case she wouldn't want me to notice her tears. "Actually, we're probably going to record my audition piece this weekend."

"A viola piece?" she asks.

"Yeah. I wrote it for viola, but we might add in some other stuff. I don't know, I want the admissions people to see my composing just as much as my playing."

Kelly pokes her head into the waiting room and calls Alice back. She gives us both a smile. "Nice to see you again, Lacey."

"You, too," I say.

"Is it okay if she stays for my appointment?" Alice asks.

"Totally, if you want," Kelly says as she holds the door to her office open for us. "I wondered if you guys knew each other."

They go on with their appointment, and I just feel glad to be included. Alice is thirty-two weeks along, so she's nearing full term. They discuss birth plans and preparations and a lot about easing her discomfort. Then comes the magical moment when Kelly uses the Doppler to hear the baby's heartbeat. It's like a small microphone that glides over the belly and amplifies the little *whoosh, whoosh* of the heart.

"I don't think there's anything better than that sound," Alice says, grinning.

"There really isn't," I agree.

"Everything looks good with little Eli," Kelly announces. "And, Lacey, I'm glad you're here, because I wanted to talk to you about the possibility of an internship. I talked to a radiologist last week, and he is sponsoring one of your classmates doing an independent study. I know the year has already started, but when I heard there were kids from the high school doing internships

here, I thought of you. I'd love to sponsor you. I know you completed doula training over the summer."

"Lacey, you'd be awesome," Alice says eagerly.

I'm stunned. Volunteering here over the summer was great. I loved seeing the new babies and the happy new families. But that was the summer. I had plenty of time outside my weekly shift to play music.

"I have an independent study already," I say.

"Oh. That's too bad. I was just thinking that if you were interested in working something out so you could try attending births as a doula, going through the school is a great way to go, liability-wise."

"I did think the training was really interesting," I say. Doulas provide support to women during birth and beyond. It isn't a medical job. It's more about supporting them emotionally and physically, trying to ensure they have all the help they could want. Mom and I took the training together over the summer. I observed childbirth classes, learned all about labor and birth and what kind of help women need. "I'll think about it and let you know."

Kelly looks so hopeful. I want to say yes just because saying yes is always easier for me than no. But I just don't see how it would work.

"Of course. But if you want to try it out, you could just drop in on Sunday for a shift. We can totally run it past the hospital as you shadowing me, to consider an independent study or something," Kelly says.

"I'll let you know," I repeat.

"Awesome. Alice, I'll see you in two weeks," Kelly says. She gives us both hugs.

Back in the waiting room, Alice turns to me. "Thank you so much for hanging out."

"Are you kidding? This was fun. And exciting," I say.

"It's really cool that you know about this stuff. If I had known that you were into this, I might have told you about Eli sooner."

"Well, I'm glad I know now. And I could come to other appointments if you want. Just let me know when they are, and I'll make it work," I say.

"I would love that," Alice says. "Thank you." She lets out a big exhale and then smiles. She already seems so much more at ease than she did when I first spotted her. "You should go get those tacos. And tell Evita I said hi."

"I will. She'll be glad to hear you haven't moved away or something."

"Could you maybe just let me tell her about the pregnancy and stuff?" Alice asks.

"Oh. Absolutely. I wouldn't mention anything."

Alice looks relieved. "I just feel like such a moron. You know? Like, obviously, I knew this was a possibility, but somehow I just didn't think I would get pregnant, and now I know just how stupid that was. You must think it's dumb."

"No way. My mom had me when she was our age, and she's the smartest person I know. But just because you're smart doesn't mean you make all the right choices. Not that . . . you chose this . . . You know what I mean," I say.

She laughs bitterly. "Yeah. I do. I would not have chosen this. But, well, I guess it's happening." She shrugs. "And I love Eli already. That's not it . . ."

"You'll be great," I tell her.

We exchange phone numbers, and I put her next appointment in my phone. I give her one last hug. I am hungry for tacos and tired from a long day, but I'm also energized. I really like Alice, and I'm honestly honored that she let me into her appointment and in on her secret. I probably won't do the doula thing—not yet anyway—but I can do this. I can support Alice in whatever ways she needs.

Four

Mom wraps me in a hug the moment I walk through the door. “I’m so proud of you! Supporting your friend at her appointment.”

“Yes, Mom, I know. You made that obvious,” I tease.

“We haven’t eaten yet! Come grab a taco,” my stepdad, Charlie, calls from the kitchen. “Big day. Dylan is going to try his first solid food!”

Dylan squeals at me from his high chair. He’s been sitting at the table with us for about a month, eyeing our food, but he has yet to actually try any. I take the seat next to him and kiss his chubby cheeks.

“Food at last!” I say to him in the singsong voice that doesn’t seem to belong to me but comes out whenever I’m around my baby brother.

I help Charlie get all the taco fixings on the table while my mom carefully mashes an avocado.

"I can't believe my baby is about to eat solid food," my mom says sadly.

"And your other baby is almost eighteen. Time flies," Charlie says.

I wait until we are all sitting and digging in to tell my mom that Alice asked me to come with her to her next appointment.

"What did you say?"

"That I'd love to. Kelly even asked if I wanted to try volunteering as a doula, like work it out as another independent study credit. She said I could try it out this Sunday."

"Oh, Lacey, you have to," she says, clapping her hands together. "You know you'll be amazing at it!"

"No. I know it could be cool, but weekends are kind of full as it is."

"But birth is so special, Lacey. I have this feeling that if you tried it, you'd love it. In the moment of birth, it's like nothing else exists. I mean, it's impossible to think of anything other than the fact that you're about to meet a human for the first time and bear witness to a woman's strength." My mom thinks for a second. "Or I should say, a birthing person's strength. I suppose not everyone who gives birth identifies as a woman." She shakes her head. "Regardless of a birthing person's gender, it is the most magical thing on the entire planet. Calling it beautiful doesn't even scratch the surface."

Charlie and I exchange a look.

"You are way overselling it, darlin'," Charlie says. "And I'm not sure it's helping your case."

"I get it, Mom, I really do. I just have to think about it," I say.

The way she's grinning at me, I want to give it a try. At least on Sunday. Her enthusiasm is always infectious. And how can I argue that birth is special? I was there when Dylan was born. But that was different. He's my baby brother.

"I'll probably go this Sunday," I say. "But I'm not sure I'll even like it. I'll feel like I'm intruding. It's kind of nerve-racking."

"You just gotta make that leap. Jump in and help. You'll be wonderful." My mom grins. "I am *so* proud of you. You've always been a helper. You're a people person. You know what people need and you help them get it. This is a natural fit for you, Lacey. You'll see."

I put up my hand to stop her. "All right. Stop trying to talk me into it or I'll change my mind."

I can tell my mom is fighting the urge to leave me with just one more piece of wisdom, but she changes the subject and asks me if anything fun is happening in school.

"Oh yeah, I almost forgot," I say, remembering that before seeing Alice, I was excited to tell her all about our guest speaker. "We had an awesome abstinence-only lecture. It was infuriating."

"You're joking! What was it this time?" She's just as outraged as I thought she'd be when I tell her what happened.

"Because only drug users have sex," she says, shaking her head. "Can you imagine sitting there as a sexually active teenager and feeling that guilt laid on you?"

"I'd imagine it was awkward for them. Not that I totally relate," I say, with an eye roll. I have the only parent on the planet who would probably be totally fine having a sexually active high schooler, and instead she's got me.

“So is there going to be a whole unit of this? Or was it just the guest lecture?” Charlie asks.

“I think this might be just the first of many. Apparently, we’re discussing ‘healthy life choices,’” I say with air quotes.

“You have to keep me posted on what y’all talk about,” Mom says. “I want all the details.”

“I’ll take notes.”

“Oh, would you?” Mom asks.

“I’ll probably get teased mercilessly, but I will.” I get up to clear my plate. “I’ve gotta work on this project for a bit, but don’t put Dylan to bed before I can give him a kiss.”

“You got it,” Charlie says.

Down in my room, I put on my headphones, sit at my old desktop computer, and open my music composition software. I’ve been working on Theo’s birthday present for over a month. It’s this sort of Celtic-sounding piece I’m composing for our quartet. Theo and I always complain about the Haydn and Mozart we play. The cello and viola parts are boring, so I set out to write a quartet that would give both of us some of the best melodic lines and epic supporting harmonies. I’m giving the violins a lot of syncopation. It’s sort of an in-joke. On viola I always play these lines that are syncopated, falling after the beat. And Theo and I tease our violinists who can’t play off the beat, because they’ve never had to learn.

I started working on this just to try to trip up our violinists while showboating Theo’s cello skills, but once I got started on it, I got really into it. I decided to add other movements and variations. I can’t wait to give it to him, because I can already imagine how much he’ll like it.

Now with my headphones on, even with the lackluster MIDI synth this computer has, I get sort of lost in it.



“Lacey!” Charlie calls down to me. “You’ve got a guest!”

I know it’s either Theo or Evita, so I quickly save and quit the program and go upstairs. Theo’s standing in our foyer with his cello and two coffees.

“Thought you might want to jam. Or you could work on your Berklee audition piece?” he asks.

“Definitely.” It isn’t totally like him to show up here unannounced. Evita’s apartment is the usual hangout place. It’s kind of an awesome surprise, and I smile at him and jog up the stairs to take one of the coffees.

“You guys can play until eight, and then it’s Dylan’s bedtime,” Charlie says.

“I know the drill,” Theo says, smiling. He lifts his cello case and raises his eyebrows at me eagerly. He’s always dorkily excited to practice. He follows me down the stairs, and I can tell even from the way his feet fall on the steps that he’s happy about something.

He starts unpacking his cello. I’m sitting on my desk chair. I bite my lip. I sort of want to show him the quartet, but his birthday isn’t until next week.

He notices me watching him. “Hey,” he says as he rosins his bow.

“Hey,” I say. I’ll show him soon. I cross my room and start unpacking my viola.

“So. Why did you want to come here to practice?” I ask. “We only have about twenty minutes until Dylan’s bedtime.” I wish

I weren't curious about why he's here, but he was hanging out with Lily Ann this afternoon. And Lily Ann is, objectively, a better player than me. She's been first chair violinist since she moved here. She's one of those kids who's been playing forever, starting with the Suzuki Method when she was four or five.

"Oh. I'm not allowed to stay at Lily Ann's house after dinner," Theo tells me. "Her folks think it's inappropriate to hang out after dark. Even though, like, we are all just sitting around the dining room table together."

And it must be obvious that this pings for me: that Lily Ann's strict parents are the only reason he's here.

"No. No, no, no, no. I'd be here anyway. I can't betray our anti-violin ways! Plus, you'll give it to me straight. Lily Ann gets sort of swoony when I play."

"Dude. Everyone swoons when you play."

His ears turn red. "You know what I mean."

"Yes. I will tell you when you make a mistake."

"Exactly!" Theo holds the neck of his cello in one arm and swings the other arm around me and pulls me in, kissing the top of my head. "Let's tune up."

We start on this boring *étude* that our orchestra teacher gave us to practice. Then Theo decides we should play it at the same time, but he transposes it up a tritone so it's really dissonant when we play together. It messes both of us up, and we are laughing so hard, he's snorting. Before long, my mom comes down and knocks on the door and we put our instruments away.

We join Charlie in the family room, where he's watching sitcoms. Theo plops onto the loveseat and I sit next to him. My mom comes down looking exhausted, staring at the video baby

monitor. She snuggles into Charlie and kisses him. I roll my eyes at Theo. They're as bad with PDA as some of the kids at school. But Theo just puts his arm around me and pulls me into him. Theo doesn't like to be outsnuggled by anyone. It's a point of pride. Evita and I always list his snuggling as one of his best qualities. Evita likes to mention this in front of Lily Ann especially.

"Where's Evita?" I ask him, realizing she hasn't texted me all evening.

"Oh." He clears his throat and whispers in my ear, "She's 'spending the night with me.' But actually, she's at a club listening to this big DJ spin."

"She's such a wild child," I whisper back conspiratorially.

"Oh, of all the—" Mom points to the TV. "This is bullshit! Sexist! That woman is being sexually harassed and they're mining it for comedy. You might as well tell young girls to use their cleavage to get a job."

"Mom. It's a joke. It's a joke the character is clearly in on," I say.

"What's wrong with using what you've got?" Charlie asks.

My mom gasps. Charlie's joking, knowing just how to push her buttons. He laughs as he dodges a swat.

"I solemnly swear to wear turtlenecks to job interviews," I tell her.

"And auditions," she says.

"I will wear a nun habit," I joke.

"At the same time, Lacey, I want you to take charge of your sexuality. It's yours and yours alone." My mom is suddenly serious. And I want to die—she can say whatever she wants in front

of Charlie, but Theo is different. This conversation can go a couple of ways. If she brings up the fact that she bought me a vibrator, because I should “know how I work,” I will never be able to look at Theo again.

“Mom. Please.” I look at Theo, communicating how mortifying this is.

But he’s laughing.

“You are a whole person. You don’t need to hide any aspect of yourself. And you don’t need to give any part of yourself away if you don’t want to. You know that, right?” she asks, shutting off the TV. Charlie starts to complain, but she shushes him.

“Yes, Mom.”

“You, too, Theo. Pressure on men can be just as damaging. Don’t be afraid to embrace your own femininity.”

“Oh. God.” I groan, because I feel a lecture coming on. And Theo is the last person who needs this particular lecture. He isn’t averse to showing his emotions, and he’ll wear “girls’ clothes” if he likes the way they look. *Affectionate* and *sensitive* are probably the first two adjectives I’d use to describe him.

“No, Lacey, your mom is right,” Theo says. “But, Ms. Burke, you don’t need to worry about that. I was raised by a pack of females. My cycle even syncs up with theirs,” he jokes. But I groan again, because he has no idea what he just stepped into.

“Oh, Theo. No. No, no. We don’t call women ‘females.’ And we *definitely* don’t joke about the menstrual cycle. Men have used that for centuries to discredit women and their emotions.”

“Oh, I really was joking—”

“I know. But that’s just as bad. Other men aren’t as evolved as you are.”

"Can we please just turn the TV back on?" I beg.

"I better shove off anyway, Lace," Theo says.

"Oh, honey, I didn't mean to embarrass you," my mom apologizes. She jumps up when Theo stands.

"What part of bringing up the menstrual cycle isn't embarrassing?" I ask her.

"Lacey!" she says, shocked. "You can't be embarrassed by your beautiful body! Have I taught you nothing?"

"You know, she might just be objecting to you saying all this in front of company," Charlie says gently.

"I'm gonna walk Theo out," I say. "I promise I love my body and all of its life-giving functionality." I grab Theo's hand and pull him up the stairs to the foyer before my mom can say something else.

Outside it's surprisingly warm for the end of October. "I can practically feel my cello going out of tune," Theo says as he puts it in his trunk.

"Where are you headed?" I ask him. Since the youngest of his three older sisters went away to college, Theo avoids being home as much as possible. He doesn't really talk about it, but Evita and I know.

"I guess I'll try to catch up with Evita."

"You want company?" I ask him.

"Nah. Don't you want to see how the sexist TV show pans out?"

I really don't want him to leave. "You should stay. We can just hang out in my room. I have something . . ." But I shake my head. I should wait until it's totally finished.

"I gotta catch Evita at some point anyway. Unless you'll miss me too much," he says. He's joking. I think. But something in the

way he says it makes me think he's fishing for something, wondering if I miss him when he's not here.

"Nah. Have fun. I'm tired." *And I want to work on your quartet.*

He nods. "All right. Good night, Lacey." He hugs me. "Please don't wear turtlenecks for auditions. I don't want to be embarrassed to be seen with you," he deadpans.

"Sexist pig," I joke.

"Is it sexist to tell you that you smell good?"

I laugh at this. He's always asking Evita and me about what shampoo we use, because he wishes his hair smelled good. "No. But it's weird."

"Okay. See you later." He folds himself into the driver's seat of his dad's old muscle car. I watch him drive off, kind of wishing he would stay.

Five

Wednesday, I'm heading into senior seminar ready to note every ridiculous detail of whatever lesson Mrs. Einhorn has planned. It's more than just wanting to report back to my mom, though. I get a little thrill at being outraged. I've prepared for this class like I'm going into battle, armed only with common sense, statistics, and memorized lectures from my mom. I'm just hoping to prove someone wrong. But, then again, maybe it's ridiculous that I'm going into this class feeling like I know anything at all about sex.

Theo holds up a sheet of paper. "I'm going to tally again."

"And I am going to try very hard to roll my eyes silently," I say.

When the bell rings, without saying a word, Mrs. Einhorn carefully places two clear plastic cups on her desk. In the first one, she pours an inch of water from a pitcher. "This is you. Your body is healthy and pure."

I draw in an audibly loud breath. Screw being silent. I might be healthy, but I'm not *pure*, and that whole idea is bullshit. I know exactly where this is headed.

Then she fills the second cup, only this time she adds a dozen drops of blue food coloring. "Can anyone guess what this is?"

Evita raises her hand. "From what I understand from television, that's menstrual blood." She's completely deadpan. Everybody giggles.

"Evita. You can see me after class," Mrs. Einhorn scolds. "This is another person. And they have been exposed to a sexually transmitted infection."

I could scream. Or, at the very least, I feel a big eye roll coming. Theo turns around and raises his eyebrows at me even though I'm pretty sure it was a silent eye roll.

"And if the two of you engage in sexual activity . . ." Mrs. Einhorn takes the two cups and pours the water back and forth between the two of them a few times. "Now look at your body."

"Hey! But my sexual partner's STI has cleared up a little!" Evita calls out. There are more snickers, but Mrs. Einhorn ignores it.

"This is an apt illustration, don't you think? It perfectly shows the exchange of bodily fluids." This comment elicits a slew of groans.

She pulls out half a dozen more cups and fills them all with water. She begins to mix the cups, pouring them back and forth, demonstrating sex in the stupidest way possible. I can feel my palms clenching and sweating, I'm so personally offended.

I think of what Alice would feel if she were here. She said she

was embarrassed to have gotten pregnant. And that's without anyone telling her she isn't pure or that the sex she had with her boyfriend was nothing but a gross exchange of bodily fluids. Alice deserves better. We all do. Because what if some of these kids in this class believe what Mrs. Einhorn is saying? Even just a little bit.

My mind is racing with problems with this demonstration. It's completely ignoring sex that isn't heterosexual intercourse. It's presenting virginity as a state of purity, when it is just *someone who hasn't had sex yet*. And what about victims of sexual abuse? What would they say about this "purity"?

I am so tired of hearing this same shit over and over and not having it help anyone.

And something just clicks into place for me. A crucial piece of information is missing from this equation.

I tap Theo, and even though I don't want to know the answer, I ask him, "Do you have a condom on you?"

"Uh . . . seriously?"

"Yes!" I whisper. "If you do, hand it over."

He digs through his backpack and produces one.

"Gross, dude. Were you gonna do it at school?" Evita whispers to him.

I snatch it and march to the front of the class. "Mrs. Einhorn," I say, my voice sounding more confident than I feel. "It's a pretty good demonstration, but perhaps we could provide a few more variables."

She's shocked that I would interrupt a lesson, so she's speechless as I unwrap the condom and stretch the opening over the top of one of the cups of now-light-blue liquid. I turn the cup upside down over a "pure" cup.

"And, look, we have prevented the transmission of the STI," I say. The class applauds.

Mrs. Einhorn shushes the class and turns to me. "You can see me after class as well. Return to your seat."

I sit back down. Theo turns around and whispers, "I hope that's the last time you walk around without being prepared. You never know when—"

"Theo! You may see me after class also," Mrs. Einhorn calls. She turns back to the class, trying to get their attention back on the inane cups of blue liquid. "Perhaps the transmission of disease can be somewhat lessened."

"Eighty percent reduction in incidence of HIV," I call, armed with that particular statistic from one of the brochures my mom has given me.

She ignores me. "But what of the emotional consequences?" She tries desperately to regain the class's attention, but it's too late; everyone is whispering and giggling. I even get a couple smiles and nods of approval. "You may use the rest of the class to do homework and to ponder the demonstration."

Evita reaches her hand under the table for a low five. "You are such a badass."



After class, Evita, Theo, and I stay in our seats. We're gonna be late for government, because Mrs. Einhorn makes us wait before she says anything.

"I have been teaching at this school for almost twenty years," she says. "I have never, in all those years, been so disappointed in my students as I was today."

My heart speeds up. I have never been in trouble at school. I still remember when a teacher had to raise her voice at me for giggling with Evita during a lesson. My cheeks burned with shame for almost an hour. The pounding of my heart isn't actually unpleasant this time, because her lesson was bullshit, and I'm righteously furious.

"I expect you all to listen to the knowledge I'm imparting. You need to trust that I am trying to teach you. That I care about you."

"We don't doubt that," Theo says. He glances at me, and I think maybe he's trying to draw the heat off me, since, obviously, I was the most disruptive. "But if we have opinions or questions or other thoughts, shouldn't we express them? Start a discussion that benefits all of us?"

"Not how you did it," Mrs. Einhorn says, looking right at me.

"Are you saying that condoms don't lower the transmission of sexually transmitted infections?" Evita asks.

"I'm saying that interrupting and derailing my demonstration was rude, disrespectful, and inappropriate. I'm not going to be taking official disciplinary action, but as this class's grading mainly focuses on class participation, you all have some work to do to bring your grades up. You will each hand in five pages on healthy life choices on Monday if you want to improve your grade. And any further inappropriate outbursts will not be tolerated." Mrs. Einhorn, who's normally a mild-mannered teacher, practically glares at me when she says it.

The bell that indicates our tardiness to our next class rings. Evita squeezes my hand under the table. She knows I hate being late.

"Gladly. Thanks for the chance to make it up," she says. "Can we go?"

Mrs. Einhorn nods. I grab my backpack, eager to leave as soon as possible. Theo puts his arm around me as soon as we're in the hall.

"Don't let the man get you down," he says.

"No way," Evita says reassuringly. "You were and are amazing."

"Guys. I am surprisingly unruffled. I kind of feel awesome." I just did that. *Me*. Straight-A Lacey who hates to make waves. But today felt right.

"I would write a million papers to see you rip open a condom like that again."

I just blink at Theo.

"Oh god. I just heard myself say that out loud and I'm mortified. No. Not like that," Theo laughs.

"Suuuuuuuuure," Evita teases him.

"You guys are nuts," I tell them, but I'm laughing along with them.