A woman with long blonde hair, wearing a peach-colored, strapless, short-sleeved dress with a ruffled waist and a necklace, stands next to a bright pink bicycle. The background is a soft-focus outdoor setting with trees and a clear sky. The text is overlaid on the image in various fonts and colors.

The Beach Lane Collection

Formerly published as The Au Pairs

Beach Lane
Skinny-Dipping
Sun-Kissed
Crazy Hot

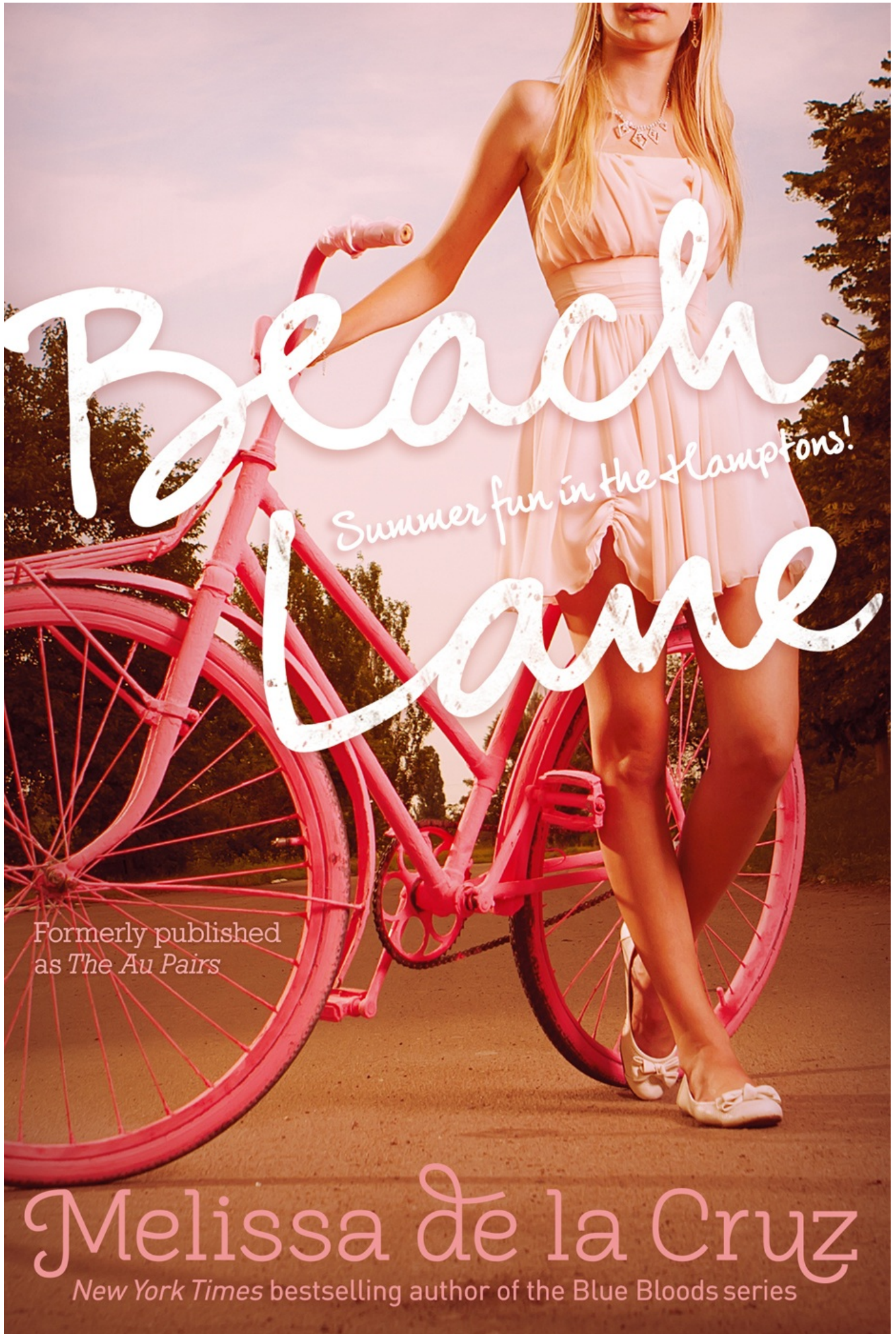
Melissa de la Cruz
New York Times bestselling author of the Blue Bloods series

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Beach Love

Summer fun in the Hamptons!

Formerly published
as *The Au Pairs*

Melissa de la Cruz
New York Times bestselling author of the Blue Bloods series

Beach Lane

A NOVEL BY

Melissa de la Cruz

SIMON & SCHUSTER **BFYR**

New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

For Papa and Mommy. For Chito. For Aina, Steve, and Nico. Because being with my family is the best vacation there is.

For Kim DeMarco and David Carthas, the coolest people in the Hamptons.

For my husband, Mike, with whom every day is a day at the beach.

There are only the pursued, the pursuing, the busy, and the tired.

—F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*

“It’s all about the Benjamins, baby.”

—P. Diddy, *No Way Out*

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port authority, take one: eliza experiences public transportation

ELIZA THOMPSON HAD NEVER BEEN SO UNCOMFORTABLE in her entire life. She was sitting in the back of a Greyhound bus, sandwiched between the particularly fragrant bathroom and an overfriendly seatmate who was using Eliza's shoulder as a headrest. The old bag in the Stars and Stripes T-shirt had little bubbles of spit forming on her lips. Eliza took a moment to pity herself. Seriously, how hard could it have been for her parents to spring for a ticket on Jet Blue?

The nightmare had begun a year ago, when some people started looking into her dad's "accounting practices" at the bank and dug up some "misdirected funds." Several details had been leaked—the papers had a field day with the thousand-dollar umbrella stand on his expense reports. The lawyer bills added up quickly, and soon even the maintenance on their five-bedroom, five-bath co-op was just too much.

The Thompsons sold their "cottage" in Amagansett—which was actually the size of an airplane hangar—to pay their mounting legal expenses. Next they sold their beachfront condo in Palm Beach. And then one afternoon Eliza came home from Spence, her elite all-girls private school (which counted none other than Gwynnie Paltrow as an alum), to find her maid packing her bedroom into boxes. The next thing she knew, she was living in a crappy two-bedroom in Buffalo and enrolled at Herbert Hoover High, while her parents shared a ten-year-old Honda Civic. Forget AP classes. Forget early admission to Princeton. Forget that year abroad in Paris.

Her parents had told everyone they were simply going to go recover from it all "upstate in the country," though no one had any idea how far upstate they had really gone. To Manhattanites, there's as big a difference between the Catskills and Buffalo as there is between Chanel Couture and Old Navy.

But thank God for rich brats. The call from Kevin Perry had come just yesterday—he was looking for a summer au pair and could Eliza make it to the Hamptons by sunset? Kevin Perry's law firm had been instrumental in keeping her dad out of the Big House, so he was one of the only people that really knew about their situation. The au pair job was her one-way ticket out of godforsaken Buffalo; so what if she had to work for old friends of her family? At least she wouldn't have to show up for work at the Buffalo Galleria on Monday. The girl who used to have personal shoppers at Bergdorfs had come this close to waiting on pimply classmates determined to squeeze themselves into two-sizes-too-small, cheap-ass polyester spandex. She shuddered at the thought.

The woman next to her grunted and exhaled. Eliza discreetly spritzed the air with her signature tuberose perfume to camouflage the offensive stank. She fiddled with her right earring, a diamond that was part of the pair Charlie Borshok had given her for her sixteenth birthday. Eliza wasn't sentimental, but she still wore them despite breaking up with him more than six months ago. She'd done it in self-defense, really: how do you explain Buffalo and bankruptcy to the sole heir of a multi-million-dollar pharmaceutical fortune? She'd loved Charlie as much as she knew how, but she couldn't bring herself to tell him or anyone else about exactly how much they'd lost. It was almost like if she said it out loud, it would make it true. So Eliza was determined to make sure no one ever found out. She didn't know how she was going to cover it up exactly, but she was sure she'd come up with something. She always did, after all.

Take today, for example. So, fine, she was on the Manhattan-bound Greyhound, but she'd already found a way to get out of taking the Jitney to the Hamptons. She was relying on Kit to take her, just like he'd always done before. Sure, she could spend four hours in a glorified bus (and hello, the Jitney was a bus even with its exclusive name)—but why should she when Kit drove his sweet little Mercedes CLK convertible out of the city every Summer Friday just like clockwork? All she needed to do was hitch a ride. She and Kit had grown up across the hall from each other—they were practically siblings. Good old Kit. She was looking forward to seeing him again—she was looking forward to seeing everyone who was anyone again.

* * *

The bus pulled into the yawning chasm of the Port Authority and discharged its passengers under a grimy concrete slab. Eliza shouldered her Vuitton carryall (the only one her mom let her keep from her formerly extensive collection) and walked as fast as she could to get away from the awful place.

She looked around at the sprawling bus station, wrinkling her nose at the blinding fluorescent lights, the holiday rush of the crowd on their way to the 34th Street piers for the fireworks, the pockets of pasty-faced tourists holding American flags and scanning LIRR timetables. Was this how the other half lived? Pushing and pulling and running and catching trains? Ugh. She'd never had to take public transportation in her life. She'd almost missed the bus that morning before she realized it might actually have the temerity to leave without her.

Life had always waited for and waited on Eliza. She never even wore a wristwatch. Why bother? The party never started till she arrived. Eliza was dimpled, gorgeous and blond, blessed with the kind of cover girl looks that paradise resort brochures were made of. All she needed to complete the picture was a dark tan and a gold lavalier necklace. The tan would happen—she'd hit Flying Point and slather on the Ombrelle, and, well, the lavalier was tacky anyway.

She wandered for a while in a bit of a daze, looking for exit signs, annoyed at all the plebian commotion. A harried soccer mom with a fully loaded stroller elbowed her aside, throwing her onto a brunette girl who was standing in the middle of the station, holding a map.

“Oh, gee, I'm so sorry,” the girl said, helping Eliza back to her feet.

Eliza scowled but mumbled a reluctant, “It’s okay,” even though it hadn’t been the girl’s fault that she had fallen.

“Excuse me—do you know where the . . .?” the girl asked, but Eliza had already dashed off to the nearest exit.

On 42nd Street, horns honked in futile protest at the usual gridlock. A long, serpentine line for the few yellow cabs snaked down the block, but Eliza felt exultant. She was back in New York! Her city! She savored the smog-filled air. She hoped idly that she would make it in time. She didn’t really have a backup plan in mind. But the one thing she loved about Kit was how predictable he was.

She walked a block away from the taxi line and put two fingers in her mouth to blow an earsplitting whistle.

A cab materialized in front of her turquoise Jack Rogers flip-flops. Eliza smiled and stowed her bags in the trunk.

“Park Avenue and Sixty-third, please,” she told the driver. God, it was good to be home.

port authority, take two: mara is definitely not a new yorker

MARA WATERS CONSULTED THE GRUBBY PIECE OF PAPER in her hand. Mr. Perry had said something about the Hampton Jitney, but as she looked around the Port Authority complex, she couldn't find signs for it anywhere. She was getting anxious. She didn't want to be late for her first day.

She still couldn't believe she was in New York! It was so exciting to see all the flickering neon lights, the mobs of people, and to experience the brisk, rubberneck pace—and that was just the bus station! In Sturbridge the bus station was a lone bench on a forlorn corner. You'd think they'd spruce up the place a bit to herald the occasion of someone actually leaving that dead-end town, but no.

When the phone call came the day before, she just couldn't believe her luck. There she was, dressed up as the Old School Marm at Ye Olde School House at Olde Sturbridge Village, sweating underneath an itchy powdered wig and shepherding complacent midwestern tourists through the nineteenth century, when the news came. She'd gotten the job as an au pair! In the Hamptons! For ten thousand dollars for two months! More money than she could even imagine. At the very least, enough to pay for her college contribution and maybe have enough left over for the sweet little Toyota Camry she had her eye on from Jim's uncle's used car dealership.

Of course, Jim hadn't been too pleased she was leaving him for the summer. Actually that was the understatement of the year. Jim had been *p-i-s-s-e-d*. It had all happened so quickly that Mara hadn't even had a chance to tell him she'd applied for the job, and Jim wasn't the kind of guy who liked Mara making plans without him, or plans that didn't include him, or, really, any plans at all that he hadn't approved of beforehand. This whole Hamptons thing had blindsided him. It, like, totally ruined his plans for the Fourth of July! He was going to show off his souped-up El Dorado at the local auto show. Who was going to help him polish the hood now that Mara was abandoning him?

She and Jim had been inseparable since freshman year. More than a few people had told her she was too good for him, but they were mostly related to her, so what were they supposed to say? Mara felt a twinge of guilt for leaving but brushed it away. She had other things to take care of at the moment. She walking up tentatively to a uniformed officer behind a ticket booth and rapped on the glass window.

"Yeah?" he asked curtly, annoyed at being interrupted.

“Hi there, sir. Could you please tell me where the Hampton Jitney is?”

“You wan’ da Longuylandrail?”

“No, um, it’s called the Jitney?”

“Jipney?”

“It’s a bus? To the Hamptons?”

“New Joisey transit ovah theh.” He shook his head. “You wan’ da Hampton, take LIRR on Eight Ave.”

A passenger waiting on line overheard and chirped, “You won’t find the Jitney here; it’s on Third Avenue.”

“But really, you’re better off taking the train. Less traffic,” piped a lady holding several shopping bags behind him.

“Forget the train. Jitney’s worth it.”

“I don’t know why anyone bothers to go to the Hamptons anyway.” The lady sniffed in exasperation. “It’s just inundated with all those horrid summer people. Woodstock is so much nicer.”

“I don’t know about that. You can’t get decent sushi anywhere in the Catskills,” the first guy disagreed.

The two began a colorful argument about the relative merits of the Hamptons versus the Hudson Valley, completely ignoring Mara.

“Third—Third Avenue, did you say?” Mara asked.

“Huh? Oh yeah, just take the one-nine over to Times Square, then take the shuttle over to Forty-third and walk two blocks up toward Lex; it’s on the south side.”

It was all Greek to her. She nodded dumbly, feeling more like a hick than ever.

“But I’m telling you, dear, the train’s much better!” yelled the lady with the bags.

Mara left the line and had opened the crumpled e-mail again to make sure she had read the directions correctly when she was caught off balance by a girl who tumbled into her, narrowly missing falling flat on her face.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” she said, helping the pretty, long-haired blonde to her feet. Mara noticed a tennis racket slung over the girl’s shoulder and was about to ask her about the Jitney, but when she looked up, the girl was gone.

Squaring her shoulders, she decided a taxi was probably her best bet and joined the packed line in front of the station to wait for a cab. Mara looked around her happily. She was so thrilled to be away, it didn’t matter how long it took to get where she was going.

jfk baggage claim: jacqui picks up more than her luggage

KEEP LOOKING, A LITTLE BIT TO YOUR LEFT, UH-HUH, *these are real, all the way down, yeah, baybee, you like what you see? I know you do, pervert, three, two, one. . . .*

BINGO.

The thirty-something guy with the slicked-back hair, faded jeans and sockless mocassins touched Jacarei Velasco on her arm. It was a soft tap—a mere flutter, really; he didn't pat her arm as much as hint at the start of a caress.

“Manuela?”

That she didn't expect.

“*Qué?*” she asked, raising her wraparound shades to assess him further. Bronze tan. Oversized Rolex. Aviator sunglasses. The shoes were obviously hand-made. He'd do.

“Sorry, I thought we'd met somewhere before, Miami Beach maybe?” he said, smiling so that the faint wrinkles around his bright blue eyes crinkled charmingly. He shrugged and turned away. Well, if that wasn't the oldest line in the book. But she wasn't about to let him get away that easily. “Maybe we have,” she called.

The guy turned. “The Delano bar? Last year?”

Jacqui shook her head, smiling.

“Ah, well. Rupert Thorne,” he said, shaking her hand firmly. “Those yours?” he asked, spying a matching pair of shiny black patent luggage on the ramp.

Jacqui nodded. “I'm Jacqui Velasco.”

* * *

He motioned deftly to a uniformed driver to pick them up.

“Where to?” he asked.

“The, ah, 'Amptons?”

“Exactly where I'm headed.” He nodded approvingly. “City's no good in the summer. Fry an egg on that concrete. Not to mention the smell.” He grimaced.

“Are you from New York?” Jacqui asked, amused by his complaints.

“Originally. We’ve got a place up in Sag. But I’ve got the cross-country commute. I’m still on Malibu time.”

She smiled, letting him yap while her mind was elsewhere. She wondered where this was headed. In São Paulo she was so accustomed to being hit on by older men that figuring out how much she could get away with was a favorite pastime. As a salesgirl at Daslu, the most fashionable store in Brazil, she had zipped the country’s richest women into handmade Parisian ball gowns. She was no mere wage slave, either, more like a glorified stylist, as the store only employed girls from roughly the same social class as its customers. Jacqui’s family wasn’t rich, but her grandmother sent her to a prestigious convent school in the city, where Jacqui was a middling student. At Daslu she was adept at conducting ongoing flirtations with many of her patrons’ husbands. Keep them entertained while the missus spent most of his paycheck on Versace leather pants and she picked up that sweet commission. It was all part of doing business.

And it came naturally to Jacqui: Ever since she’d started filling out her C-cup bikini top, men had noticed her. Their eyes lingered on her chest, her hips, her long black hair, and Jacqui had come to believe that being beautiful was the only thing she was really good at. It was certainly the only thing anyone ever paid attention to.

But her life changed when she met Luca. Sweet, earnest Luca. The American boy she met in Rio during Carnival. Luca, with his goofy grin and his omnipresent backpack. He was the first guy she ever met who didn’t hit on her immediately. Like many revelers, she was masked at the time, but unlike most of her friends, who were staggering on the cobblestone streets trying to hold their liquor, Jacqui had been content to stand on the sidelines. After all, every year was the same wild frenzy. She didn’t know then, but she was dying for a change. She found it when Luca, an American high school senior, asked her for directions and then walked away, even when Jacqui gave him her warmest smile. They’d only exchanged a few words, but when he turned to leave, something in Jacqui wanted to follow him. And she’d certainly never felt like that before.

Unlike the overly obnoxious wolf-whistling boys from her hometown or the salacious older men from the city, Luca didn’t even seem attracted to her at first—which certainly piqued her interest. Jacqui had no false illusions about her looks. Her black hair fell in long, inky waves down her sun-kissed shoulders, and as for her body, let’s just say Giselle would have wept. The only reason Jacqui wasn’t a model was because she’d tried it once and it bored her. The endless standing around, the vacuous conversation, the asinine flattery. She had better things to do with her time than play photographer’s mannequin.

Luca was spending his spring break backpacking through South America—hiking in Machu Picchu and the Aztec trail—and seemed totally unimpressed by Jacqui’s glamour. He listened to Jacqui like he really cared what she thought, and she was quickly charmed by his lazy smile and enormous backpack. They spent a wonderful two weeks together—hitting the samba clubs, downing liters of *cachaça*, climbing the peak of the Corcovado, sunbathing in Ipanema. He had even convinced her to go camping with him in Tijuca one weekend. They had snuggled in his sleeping bag, kissing under the night sky.

Luca had told her the sexiest thing about her was her brain. Their first night together, Jacqui couldn't go to sleep. She kept smiling to herself, not believing her luck. She tossed and turned, clutching at her stomach, feeling happy and frightened at the same time. So this was what love was like.

Then, after an amazing week, he just disappeared. He left without so much as a goodbye or a note with his e-mail address. She didn't even know his last name. Jacqui was crushed. For the first time in her life, Jacqui was in love. The only key to his whereabouts was that he had once mentioned his family normally spent the summer in someplace called "the Hamptons."

It was only two days ago that Jacqui logged on to the store computer and googled "the Hamptons" yet again. But this time she found something new: Kevin Perry's classified ad for "the summer of her life" in East Hampton. She heard back from him almost instantly. (Jacqui's head shot had that effect on people.) It was urgent; could she hop on a plane tomorrow to arrive in town by July 4? *Mas naturalmente!* She was convinced she'd find her Luca in the Hamptons somewhere. And if not, she could always fly back home. It wasn't as if she *really* needed the job.

Rupert consulted his watch, breaking her reverie. "If we leave now, we'll still have time to hit the beach before sunset. My car is waiting outside," he said, pointing to the curb, where a stretch Hummer was waiting.

"Sure." Jacqui shrugged. She didn't have any concrete plans on how to get to the Hamptons. She just figured something would turn up like it always did.

Jacqui gave him her flashiest megawatt smile. The one that had always led men to promise chinchilla furs and hand over platinum AmEx cards. "Lead the way."

eliza tells a couple of not-so-white lies

THE CAB DROPPED ELIZA OFF IN FRONT OF HER FORMER building, an imposing prewar high-rise that was one of the city's most sought-after addresses. Its bronze gilt doors shone in the bright sun. How she missed it. In Buffalo her family occupied the first floor of a row house. The bathroom had never been renovated, and Eliza swore there was mold behind the tub. Every time she showered, she felt dirtier than when she'd started.

Her old bathroom boasted a panoramic view of Central Park and a gleaming eggshell white tub that Eliza had personally picked out from the Bofi showroom with her mother's decorator. Original paintings by Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning hung in the hallways, heirlooms from Eliza's maternal grandmother, a former debutante who hung out with the abstract expressionists in the fifties. Woody Allen had once scouted their living room as a possible location for one of his movies. The only movie Eliza could ever imagine being filmed in her new home was something out of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. Okay, so she was exaggerating. Slightly.

Cracking linoleum tile in the kitchen. Rusted aluminum siding. Wall-to-wall putrid avocado shag carpeting. A cramped six hundred square feet! Even their former servants had lived better. Her parents kept reminding her it could have been worse. Much, much worse. Dad could have ended up in—but Eliza couldn't go there. Bad enough that it had even been a possibility.

The weekend doorman opened the cab door and recognized her immediately.

"Miss Eliza!"

"Hi, Duke."

He tipped his cap. "Been a long time."

"You're telling me."

"You guys back in the building?"

"Not exactly," she said, trying to appear casual. She looked down the street. There was no sign of Kit's convertible.

"Kit around?"

"Mr. Christopher?" Duke scratched his forehead with a black leather glove, which was part of the uniform—even in ninety-eight-degree heat. "I think he just left."

She cursed under her breath. She couldn't believe she'd missed her ride.

“Mr. and Mrs. Ashleigh are upstairs, though. I can ring up.”

“No thanks,” Eliza said, suppressing a temptation to gnaw her nails. What on earth was she going to do now?

Just then a familiar red convertible pulled up in front of the red canopy. An agreeable-looking guy with a blond crew cut hopped out of the front seat without waiting for Duke to open the door. He gasped when he saw Eliza.

“Liza!”

“Kit!”

“What the hell are you doing here?” he asked before enveloping her in a bone-crunching bear hug.

Eliza ignored the question. “It’s great to see you!” she said, rubbing her fingers on his spiky hair and giving him a noogie.

“I forgot something—I just gotta run up and grab it. You goin’ to Amagansett?” Kit started jogging backward into the marble lobby. “Hey, you want a ride?”

“Sure!” she said, relieved. Good old Kit. Eliza let Duke put her bags in the trunk and settled in the front seat to wait for Kit.

“Damn, girl! I missed you!” Kit said when he returned. He fired up the engine and they cruised top down on Park Avenue. “You, like, went AWOL.”

“Yeah, well, after everything that happened,” Eliza said offhandedly, “my parents wanted to get out of the city to just relax, you know? So they decided to ship me off to boarding school. *Quel* drag.” Eliza found Kit’s Marlboros on the dashboard and helped herself to one. Her hands shook slightly as she rooted in the glove compartment for a lighter. “Lights out at eleven and the hall monitor is a tool,” she said, firing up a Zippo and inhaling.

Kit grunted in sympathy. “Dad threatened that once. But I don’t have the grades for Andover. So, uh, how are the ’rents, anyway?” Kit asked tentatively.

“They, um, spend all their time in Florida these days,” she improvised. Eliza knew what everyone had read in the papers, but no one knew just how bad it had gotten. The gossip pages and business section had lost interest after her dad got off without an indictment, and before long the Thompsons had feigned exhaustion and disinterest over all the hubbub and left Manhattan for good.

“I didn’t know you guys were down in PB!” He smacked the steering wheel, looking relieved. “We gotta hook up winter break!”

“Of course!” She felt sick to her stomach having to lie to one of her best friends. Especially since he automatically assumed the Thompsons had retired to Palm Beach. God, she missed their place by Mar-a-Lago.

It was all her dad’s fault. She felt an all-too-familiar bitter resentment welling up inside her. It just wasn’t fair. Her parents could hide out in Buffalo and avoid all their old friends.

But Eliza was sixteen—not sixty—she had her whole life ahead of her. She wasn't about to waste her chance. She wanted back *in*, no matter what it took.

“So it's just you this summer?” Kit asked.

“Yeah, thank God I bumped into you! I thought I'd have to take the Jitney. Ugh. You know I got kicked out last time because I wouldn't turn off my cell.”

Kit grinned. “I remember. It made the *Post*.”

“Anyway, I'm staying at my uncle's place on Georgica,” she said. It wasn't such a stretch, really—Kevin Perry was one of her father's lawyers and after the last year, well, they were practically family. Eliza decided she was really just “helping out,” and if she got paid doing it, what was the harm? Come to think of it, she was really more like an honored guest. After all, she had grown up with his oldest daughters, Sugar and Poppy, who were twins.

“Cool. That's not too far from our new place. Got any plans for tonight?”

“No, what's up?”

“A couple of the gang are hitting Resort, there's a party in the VIP room around midnight, then afterward there's P. Diddy's Red, White, and Blue soiree at the PlayStation2 House.”

“Sounds cool.” Eliza nodded. She knew the guys who ran the PlayStation2 House. A couple of New York club promoters had convinced Sony it was a good idea to fund a weekend party house to “market” their new games. In the Hamptons it was unofficially known as a model landing pad. Kind of like the Playboy Mansion but with nubile flat-chested eighteen-year-olds who were more likely to be found marching down a runway than spread-eagle in a centerfold.

“I'll put you on the list.”

“Hey, have you seen Charlie around, by the way?”

Kit gave her a furtive glance. “Last I heard, he was dating some hoochie he met in summer school.”

“Huh.”

“I'm sure it's not serious.”

“Kit, you're too sweet.”

She remembered Charlie's face, crumpled in disbelief, when she told him over Christmas that it was probably not a good idea for them to see each other anymore. For weeks afterward he had left her voice mails wondering where she had gone. She wasn't at school. She wasn't at Jackson Hole after school. She wasn't at Barneys on Saturday mornings or at Bungalow 8 on Thursday nights. Then she changed her cell number to a local Buffalo area code (some luxuries are just necessities), and she stopped getting the messages. Eliza had thought it would be easier if she just disappeared—she knew that she might break down and tell him everything if she saw him, and that was a risk she simply could not afford to take.

The convertible inched its way out of the city, and Kit paid the toll at the Triborough Bridge. Eliza savored the freeway signs as they sped east, Long Island towns with funny-sounding names like Hicksville, Ronkonkoma, and Yaphank bidding her on her way, taking her back to where she belonged.

She relaxed for the first time that day. So far, so good. Kit had bought her story about boarding school and her “uncle,” she was already invited to some pretty fabu soirees in the Hamptons, and even if her ex-boyfriend was currently unavailable, Eliza loved him and she was coming back to retrieve what was rightfully hers.

mara discovers the rules for hamptons travel

“**AH, DE HAMPTONS, BERRY, BERRY RICH PEOPLE** there,” the bearded cabdriver told Mara when she told him where she was headed.

“So I’ve heard,” she agreed. Her sister Megan, the *US Weekly* addict, had given her the full rundown before she left. “I hear Resort is hot this summer but stay away from the Star Room—it’s so over. And try to get a table at Bamboo if you can.” As if Mara had any idea what she was talking about. For Mara the Hamptons was the episode on *Sex and the City* where Carrie goes to stay with a friend and accidentally sees her friend’s husband naked. Mara knew it was some sort of rich summer place, but she went to the Cape every summer—it couldn’t be any different from that, could it?

“Very, very rich people, yes. You lika Jerry Seinfeld? Billy Joel? They inda Hamptons all dee time. The guy who dated Jennifer Lopez before this Affleck. He has big party this weekend. Piff Daddy.”

“P. Diddy?” Mara laughed.

“Yeah, him. I useta drive limo for him. Big party. Big, big fireworks. So many beautiful people. So thin. All the girls, thin, thin, thin.” He angled back to appraise Mara. “You thin. You rich?”

“No, I’m not rich,” Mara said. “I’m going to be working for some rich people, though.”

“Ah, not rich. Working girl, eh?”

“That’s right.”

“Here Forty-third and Third. Jitney over there,” he said, waving toward a large silver-and-green bus with The Hampton Jitney in cheerful lettering on the back.

“Great!” Mara said, giving him the exact amount on the meter. “Here you go, thank you very, very much!” She scurried out of the cab and slammed the door.

“No tip?” the confused cabdriver asked to the empty air.

Mara ran to find another long line waiting for her in front of the Jitney. She shuffled patiently to the front, where a tough-looking middle-aged woman wearing a fanny pack stood with a clipboard.

“Name?”

“Mara Waters.”

“Waters, Waters, Waters . . . Huh. I don’t see you. Did you make a reservation?”

“Was I supposed to?” Mara asked, a little nervous.

“Sorry. This bus is fully booked. You’ll have to go standby on the next. But I doubt you’ll get on. It’s July Fourth weekend!”

“Omigod. Are you serious? I’m not going to be able to get on?”

“Not without a reservation, you’re not.”

“But—but—I didn’t know. . . .”

“Step aside, miss,” the bus madam said rudely.

“You don’t understand! I’ll be late for my job, and it’s really, really important I get to East Hampton by five. Please?”

“Can’t help you. Try tomorrow.”

Mara moved numbly to the side, shell-shocked. She had been on the road since six o’clock in the morning and now this! It was just like Kevin Perry to forget to mention the reservation policy on the Jitney. He just assumed that like everyone in New York, Mara would know the drill.

“Please—is there any way?” she asked, inching back to the front.

“I told you, miss, you’ll have to STAND ASIDE!”

“Excuse me! What’s the holdup?” asked an elegant woman in an oversized straw hat, holding a tiny lapdog in her handbag.

“No reservation,” the grouchy clipboard nazi said, pointing to Mara.

“I didn’t know. I really need to get on this bus or I’ll be late for my job,” Mara explained, her eyes welling up.

“Fine, fine, fine.” The woman sighed loudly behind her sunglasses. “You can take Muffy’s seat as long as you hold him,” she said in a martyr’s tone.

“Oh, thank you! Thank you so much!” Mara said as the lady deposited her dog and its carrier in her arms.

Harried and still a little upset, Mara was finally allowed to climb aboard the bus and take a seat. She squeezed in next to her benefactor, who promptly put on a frilly eye mask and fell asleep as the bus pulled away.

Mara looked out the window at the receding New York skyline. In Queens they passed Shea Stadium, festooned with American flags and patriotic bunting. An hour went by. Traffic on the freeway was brutal. Mara pressed her nose against the glass, counting the aboveground pools that sprouted in every backyard once they hit Long Island proper.

It reminded her of Sturbridge. She should really call Jim to try and work things out. She didn’t like leaving things the way they did, and she hated to think of anyone being mad at

her. Just as she was wondering whether she could try him again, her phone began to ring.

The slumbering silence was suddenly broken by a wheezy DA-DA-DA-DA-DA-DUM, DA-DA-DA-DA-DA-DUM. The digitized opening bars of “Sweet Child of Mine.”

“Cell phone!” hissed her seatmate, lifting her eye mask. “Who’s got the cell phone?”

“Turn it off! Turn it off!” demanded a pinched-looking girl a few years older than Mara, looking up from her knitting.

“The noise! The noise!” quavered a bald middle-aged man holding up the latest Harry Potter novel.

Mara frantically began searching for her tiny phone inside her overstuffed backpack. A cantankerous voice thundered from the front seat. “No cell phones allowed! Will you please turn that off!” Everyone craned their necks to see who had broken the most august law on the Hampton Jitney. Fifty pairs of irritated, sleep-rumpled eyes glared in Mara’s direction. The clipboard-wielding bus madam who’d already given Mara grief for getting on the bus without a reservation gestured angrily. “You there!”

“Sorry! Sorry! I didn’t know!” Mara said, fumbling with her phone. “Hello???” She brushed her long brown bangs off her face with a hurried sweep.

“Mar! It’s me! Hey, I—”

“Jim! I can’t talk now!” she said, snapping the phone shut and cutting him off in mid-protest.

The long-haired Chihuahua in her arms stared her down with an indignant look on its pointy face.

“What’s wrong, pup?” she cooed nervously, holding up the dog close to her. As if in answer, the dog peed in her lap.

“Hey!” Mara yelled.

“Oh. He does that to some people.” Muffy’s owner yawned. “You should really have turned off your phone. Didn’t you see the sign?” she added, motioning to the image of a cell phone inside a circle with an angry red slash drawn across it.

Mara sank lower in her seat. It was going to be a very long ride.

somewhere on the montauk highway: jacqui can really hold her liquor

THE SMARMY MOVIE PRODUCER WAS STARTING TO look very, very attractive, but that was probably Johnny Walker talking, Jacqui thought.

For the most part Rupert had acted the perfect gentleman; in fact, he had barely paid her any attention except to refill her whiskey glass. He had been glued to his cell phone's wireless earpiece, yelling into the little receiver about some botched film deal. By the time they reached Noyak, Jacqui had already watched three episodes of *That 70s Show* on the Tivo, played numerous games of Halo on the Xbox, and watched as the landscape out the window changed from crowded metropolis to suburban wasteland to picturesque vineyards.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart," he said, taking a moment to squeeze her left knee.

Hmmm. She didn't know how she felt about that.

Maybe she'd feel better after just one more drink, she thought, reaching over for the crystal decanter. Rupert had said to "help herself," and she wasn't one to pass up on the limousine's amenities. Who knew when she'd ever be in a stretch Hummer again?

Rupert finally put away his phone and turned to her. "Sorry about that. The floozy signed the contract, but now she's trying to get out of it to do a movie with Tom Cruise. Didn't mean to be rude."

Jacqui waved it away, still holding her cocktail glass.

He smirked and poured himself another shot of bourbon.

"Cheers," he said.

"Sua saúde." To your health.

They clinked glasses. Rupert took a hearty sip and smacked his lips. "Much better," he said, unbuttoning the topmost button on his oxford shirt. "So, what are you doing in the Hamptons this summer?" he inquired.

"Au pair," she said.

"No way. You're serious? I was sure you were a model or something. And that's not a line. I see pretty girls in my business every day."

"Não um modelo."

"Actress wannabe?"

Jacqui shook her head. She had absolutely no desire to generate even more attention to herself.

“Just a nanny, huh?”

“Au pair,” she corrected.

“Right. Right.” He smiled, revealing a row of yellowish teeth. “Who’s the lucky family?”

She told him about the Perrys and gave him their address on Lily Pond Lane. He looked impressed.

“Perry? Not Kevin Perry?”

She nodded.

“The lucky bastard,” Rupert said, now grinning broadly. “Maxine and I know them,” he said as he put a hand on her knee. “My wife, you know. We just got married last year. It wasn’t my idea,” he added as he ran a hand up her toned thigh, stopping just short of her denim miniskirt. He let his hand rest there—just below—to see what she would do.

It must have been the alcohol because even if she had expected this, Jacqui wasn’t as repulsed as she normally would be.

“We won’t get into East Hampton for another hour with this traffic,” he murmured, leaning in to smell her hair. “What do you say?”

Jacqui giggled into her glass. Really, men were way too predictable. “I don’t know, what do you say?” she asked, finally pushing his hand away.

“Well, I think we should get to know each other a little . . .” he began to suggest when they were both jostled by the limo swerving to miss a red convertible.

Jacqui looked out the window and saw a cute guy giving the limo the finger while a blond girl laughed beside him.

“Luca?” she called. It looked like him—from the back—was it? She couldn’t be sure. Thinking of Luca sobered her up. What the hell was she doing in the back of a limo with a guy twice her age?

It was time to take control of the situation.

“Rupert,” she said, turning around to let him know she needed to be dropped off in East Hampton pronto and she wasn’t about to play any more games. But Rupert was already on the other side of the car, answering his cell phone.

Thank God for Hollywood diva crises.

east hampton, new york: god, eliza missed this

THREE HOURS AFTER THEY SET OFF FROM PARK AVENUE, Kit and Eliza arrived on East Hampton's main drag. Eliza felt a wave of nostalgia and affection at the sight of the familiar tree-lined shopping street with the shiny new Citarella anchored at the end of the block. The store stocked even better salmon pâté and stuffed grape leaves than the one on the Upper West Side. A few blocks away stood the Creed outpost, a pink jewel box of a store, where she had spent hours trying on perfumes last summer, finally selecting one especially made for the duchess of Windsor.

That's what Eliza loved about the Hamptons—Manhattan's most elegant boutiques and gourmet food stores supplanted to a gentler setting. The Hamptons were just like the city, except with only one-tenth of its inhabitants—the top one-tenth. It was like the social equivalent of Harvard, Eliza decided. Of course, there were too many of the hoi polloi these days—wannabes who piled into illegal fifty-person “share houses,” where the beds were stacked up right next to each other like the gyms that doubled as disaster-recovery zones whenever there was a flood or a fire or a tornado or one of those other terrible things that happened far, far from here.

Regrettably, the Hamptons were getting more media attention every year. There had been a number of cable specials, documentaries, and “exposés” on everything from the singles dating scene to the environmental problems. It was a favorite target of lazy lifestyle reporters who were forever sounding the death knell and declaring the scene “over” and the beach “spoiled by civilization.” Still, it didn't keep the hordes of up-and-coming Hollywood stars, Grammy Award winners, sitcom royalty, rap impresarios, and literary lions as well as assorted social-climbing aspirants from calling the place home-away-from-home three months out of the year. After all, a forty-mile stretch of beach only four hours' drive from Manhattan (make that two if you speed on Route 27 after dinner and *The Sopranos* on Sundays) was a total godsend.

“You can drop me off right here,” she told Kit. “I'm meeting my uncle by the windmill.”

“Okay.” Kit nodded, finding a spot by the curb. He popped the trunk and helped her with her bags. “So we'll see you tonight?” he asked.

“Duh. Of course.”

“Rockin'. Don't forget—if they ask, you're on my list. Any problem at the door, buzz me,” he said, miming a phone call. He kissed her on the cheek. “Later.”

“Later.” She waved. She walked over to the bench where a Jitney was disembarking its passengers. A disgruntled girl wiping away a stain on the bottom of her shirt walked off the bus and sat down next to her.

Eliza barely noticed. She was oblivious to the outside world and already plotting how she would ditch work to go to the party. She wasn’t totally clear on the rules per se, but if the party started at midnight, there was no reason she wouldn’t be able to go, right? Kevin was just doing this as a favor to her dad. It wasn’t as if the Perrys *actually* expected her to watch their children.

ryan perry is adonis in board shorts

“YECCH. IT’S NO USE!” MARA COMPLAINED, MAKING one last effort to clean up the mess. She threw the tissue away in disgust, making a perfect arc into the trash can. It was her best going-out shirt, too. A nice rayon-poly blend she’d gotten at the Sturbridge Mall for, like, thirty bucks! It wasn’t so pretty now that the little beast Muffy had peed all over it.

Mara looked around, blinking at the quaint small-town storefronts that announced exclusive brand names. A white summer cottage read Tiffany & Co. in the window; another rustic shack read Cashmere Hampton. A glittering assortment of Mercedes-Benzes, Jaguars, BMWs, and Porsches made a slow, rumbling parade down the center of town, where a giant windmill towered at the intersection. Mara had never seen a Bentley in her life—and in two minutes in East Hampton, she had already counted two.

Everyone moved at a leisurely, languid pace. Elegant women with psychedelic silk scarves wrapped around their heads carried fluffy white dogs in their Hermès pocketbooks. Balding men with women less than half their age walked arm in arm down to the nearby park. Giggling teenagers wearing nothing but the tightest tube tops and the highest platform wedges darted in and out of traffic.

“Do you have the time?” asked the girl beside her. Mara did a quick double take. The long blond hair, the annoyed expression, the tennis racket . . . She’d seen this girl before, but where?

“It’s ten after five,” Mara replied, discreetly checking out the girl’s outfit. Mara wished she had thought to wear a little skirt and flip-flops. She was wearing her leather cowboy boots in a misguided attempt to impress. It was ninety degrees and she was boiling.

The girl nodded and started paging through her PalmPilot.

“Excuse me,” Mara said.

Blondie raised an eyebrow without looking up from her task.

“Weren’t you in Port Authority this morning?”

“No.”

“Oh. Sorry. I thought I might have bumped into you this morning. . . .”

“No. Wrong person,” she said curtly, sliding down to the opposite end of the bench to make her point.

“Oh, okay. Sorry,” Mara said. They lapsed into an awkward silence.

The two of them sat on the bench and studiously ignored each other.

A silver Aston Martin Vanquish convertible pulled up in front of the bench, and the two girls immediately sat up a little straighter. A tall, tanned guy wearing a holey Martha's Vineyard T-shirt and cutoff board shorts eased out and walked barefoot on the sidewalk. Cue: dreamboat music.

Guys that like that are so out of my league, Mara thought. Not that she was in the market for one—she did have a guy at home. What was his name again? Jim. *Right.*

Of course, the hottie went straight up to that prissy blonde who'd been so rude to her earlier. It just made sense.

"Ryan Perry! It's been too long," she cooed.

"Hey!" Ryan said, bending over for a quick hug. "How was the Jitney?"

"What Jitney? I rode in with Kit."

"Very cool. How's he doing?"

"Not bad. There's a party tonight. At Resort," she said, self-importantly flipping her hair.

"Yeah, yeah. I heard." He grinned. "I got the e-vite."

"Maybe I'll let you be my date," she teased, basking in the glow of his attention.

Ryan Perry was the type of guy girls swooned over and guys considered their best buds. That he was superlatively good-looking was intrinsic yet somehow irrelevant to the totality of his charm. He had that sunny, good-natured disposition that came from being incredibly lucky both in looks and in life. He wore the mantle of privilege carelessly and would have been just as appealing driving a Pinto as a Porsche. He was the kind of guy who was loyal to his girlfriends and could always be counted on to provide the biggest liter of tequila to any party. Of course, he could also be counted on to empty it.

Mara watched them flirt without the slightest bit of envy. They might as well have been from another planet as far as she was concerned. Mara was always afraid she was just a "sorta." You know, "sorta cute," "sorta smart," "sorta popular" but nothing special. So when Ryan suddenly called her name, he had to repeat it three times since she was so shocked to have even been noticed, let alone recognized. She wasn't the only one. The other girl was now looking at her with renewed, if slightly hostile interest.

"Mara? Mara Waters?" Ryan asked, giving her the full benefit of his dazzling dimples. One on each cheek. Mara could hardly bear it.

"Uh. Me?" Mara squeaked.

"I'm Ryan Perry," Ryan said, offering his hand. "My dad was supposed to come get you guys, but he had to do something for Anna. This your suitcase?" he asked, picking up her oversized roller bag.

"Uh-huh." Mara nodded, dying as her bag went clackety-clackety-clack all over the cobblestone tiles. She almost wanted to disappear when the bag careened wildly and the

magazines she'd stuffed in the back pocket went flying. She swore the first thing she would do when she got paid was find out where to get her hands on one of those cute canvas monogrammed tote bags everyone seemed to carry around here.

Ryan held his door open so Mara could climb inside.

"So . . . have you guys met?" Ryan asked.

"Yes," Mara replied.

"No," the other girl said.

"Oh-kay." Ryan laughed. "Eliza, Mara, Mara, Eliza. We're all really glad you're both working here this summer. God knows Anna has been totally freaked out the past couple of days." He drove off the highway into a road with a Private Property: No Trespassing sign. Seeing the concerned look on Mara's face from the rearview mirror, he said, "Oh, don't worry. The Mortons let us use it all the time. The traffic's so bad here, everyone has to use the back roads to get anywhere."

"Don't I know it," Eliza agreed.

Mara nodded. But her mind was still on what Ryan had said earlier. We're so happy you're *both* working here? Huh. Looked like there was more (or a lot less) to this Eliza girl than she had first thought.

mara is the odd girl out on lily pond lane

THEY DROVE PAST A PRACTICALLY UNENDING LINE OF ten-foot-tall hedges—Mara could barely see the roofs of the houses. Ryan steered the car steadily down the one-lane back road, occasionally calling out hellos and waving. Several groups walked on the side of the road, carrying surfing or water sport gear. Others pedaled on English Raleigh bicycles, shopping bags from Dreesen's tucked in their baskets. Practically every other car was a convertible. Eliza spent the entire time glued to her cell phone, making calls to various friends and updating them on her plans for the evening.

"Hey, was that . . .?" Mara asked, turning around so quickly she almost gave herself whiplash.

"Yeah, that's Steven Spielberg. They have a house near us on the pond. We always see him at Nick and Toni's," Ryan mentioned offhandedly. His dad had a standing table at the restaurant, one of the most popular gathering spots for bold-faced names.

"Oh." Wow. Mara tried not to look too impressed. "I saw Tom Hanks once," she offered.

"Really? Where?" Ryan asked, sounding genuinely intrigued.

"The airport," she said sheepishly. "He gave my sister an autograph. She chased him all the way to the men's room."

Ryan laughed.

"Tom and Rita used to come to your mom's fund-raisers all the time, didn't they, Ryan?" Eliza lifted her chin from her phone and asked in an extremely bored voice.

Mara felt slapped in the face.

They drove up to another row of hedges into a private driveway that snaked up to a white mansion with huge Grecian columns. In the driveway were a Mercedes SUV, a Range Rover, a vintage Corvette convertible, a Porsche Cayenne SUV, and two motor scooters. Talk about an auto show.

"Here we are," said Ryan, bringing the car to a stop on the gravel drive.

A stretch Hummer limousine with rims that spun in reverse even when the car was stopped was parked out front.

"Oh my God! Look at that!" Mara hooted. "What a dumb car."

"It's an H2 stretch. Top of the line," Eliza said in an irritated tone.

A chauffeur emerged from the front seat and walked the four car lengths to the back to hold the door open. A pair of mile-long tanned legs that ended in white furry sheepskin boots swung out. Jacqui Velasco certainly knew how to make an exit, or an entrance, if you will. She let the newcomers take in her presence, then turned around and hitched her hip to the side, kneeling on the car door to say good-bye to her patron.

“*Obrigado*,” she said, a little unsteadily from the numerous cocktails on the ride.

“No, thank *you, bellissima*.” Rupert Thorne winked, pulling her in for a kiss.

“Naughty boy,” Jacqui said, wagging her finger when Rupert licked rather than pecked her cheek.

“I’ll see you around,” he promised.

Not if I can help it, Jacqui thought grimly. She straightened up, slammed the door, and found Ryan, Eliza, and Mara watching her, all with different expressions on their faces. Ryan looked amused, Mara intimidated, and Eliza impressed.

“Kick-ass boots!” Eliza said to Jacqui.

Apparently boots in summer were okay after all, thought Mara.

“Thank you,” Jacqui said with a slight accent. “We just got them in from Australia the other day.” She smiled at Eliza. “Jacqui Velasco.”

“Eliza Thompson. That’s Ryan Perry, our boss.” She snickered. “And, uh . . . I forgot your name. Mary, right?”

“Mara,” Mara said with steel in her voice. She wasn’t going to Blondie here push her around. “Mara Waters, nice to meet you.”

“So did you have to go on a wait list or something to get those? I’ve been dying for them!” Eliza said, falling in step with Jacqui.

The two headed inside the house, chatting about footwear, their nearly identical wraparound sunglasses pulled up on their heads. Mara stood somewhat at a loss, wondering if she should follow them, already feeling completely out of place.

Ryan pulled her battered nylon suitcase from the trunk and handed it to a white-jacketed butler. “Don’t let Eliza bother you too much,” he said. “She can be a pain, but she’s actually really nice. She’s just going through a lot right now.”

Mara couldn’t fathom how “really nice” could ever apply to the Attitude Queen, but she wanted to be agreeable. If only she wouldn’t blush every time he looked at her.

A chubby ten-year-old girl with unruly curls ran out of the side door, wearing a bright pink bathing suit, goggles, and flippers. “You’re IT!” she said, barreling into Ryan.

“Madison Avenue!” he said, lifting her up and spinning her around.

“Stop! Stop!” She giggled. “Put me down!!”

Ryan let her go and said, “Hey, say hi to Mara. Mara, my little sister Madison.”

Madison scooted inside the front door, Ryan and Mara following.

“By the way,” Ryan said, holding the door open. “I thought that limo was a dumb car, too.”

Mara couldn't stop smiling even after he had left.

This is what “Let’s burn the money to keep warm” looks like

“**HI! WELCOME TO CREEK HEAD MANOR!**” A **FROWSY**, overweight woman in a pink sweatshirt with a Nokia hanging on a chain around her neck beamed at them as they entered the house. “I’m Laurie, Anna’s personal assistant. Anna’s not back from her Reiki session yet, so she asked me to welcome you and give you a tour of the house.” She clucked at the sight of their footwear. “Sorry, but I’m going to have to ask everyone to take off their shoes before entering. The zebrawood hasn’t been oiled yet.” Laurie proudly explained that Anna had flown in an artisan from South America to work with I. J. Peiser and Sons on the floor design. According to Laurie, they did everyone’s floors, though it occurred to Mara that “everyone” must not be anything like anyone Mara knew.

Eliza grumbled at the inconvenience, Jacqui laughed, and Mara felt embarrassed to take off her cowboy boots—one of her gray socks had a huge hole in the toe. Laurie kept up the chatter as they tiptoed around the edges of the vast living room, which was dominated by an enormous floor-to-ceiling picture window that stretched from one end of the house to the other. “I love this feature!” she gushed as she pressed a button on the wall and automated curtains revealed an uninterrupted view of the Atlantic coast. The waves lapped gracefully by the shore, and seagulls waddled across the sand.

“We’ve been putting out poisoned bread to keep them off, but it’s not working.” Laurie sighed. “Shoo! Shoo!”

Mara’s eyes widened at the view—it was amazing. Eliza picked at her cuticles—

she’d been a guest at the house before, and besides, the Thompsons’ old place had almost the same view (maybe even better since their next-door neighbors, a prominent Hollywood actor and his starlet wife, had liked to sunbathe nude on their terrace). Jacqui yawned—the sight didn’t hold a candle to the golden beaches of Angra dos Reis in Costa Verde. No one braved a comment on the seagullicide program.

The house smelled sweet but slightly suffocating. Immense bouquets of freshly cut flowers were placed everywhere in carefully considered arrangements. The sculpted glass coffee table was decorated by a spray of fat, blooming, Georgia-peach-colored roses in a crystal decanter, matching sideboards spilled over with hollyhocks, irises, and calla lilies, and an enormous Ming vase in the foyer held a magnificent cluster of six-foot-tall acid yellow sunflowers.

Laurie’s cell phone rang with a piercing shrill. “Laurie here! Anna, hi! Yes, they’ve made it! No, I didn’t see an invitation from Calvin Klein yet. Oh, okay. I’ll try.” She shut the phone

off and told the au pairs, “Anna says hi!”

She led them to the kitchen, an airy, light-filled rustic wood room with shiny marble countertops and no visible appliances. Laurie breathlessly explained that the cabinets were cut from original floorboards salvaged from an eighteenth-century French chateau. To keep the serenity of the line, the refrigerator, freezer, and dishwasher had been recessed and built into the antique cabinets. Oh. My. God. Mara kept having to remind herself to close her gaping mouth.

The kitchen led to a formal dining room that could easily seat thirty. An immense baroque chandelier hung from the double-height space. Next to it was a second dining room for everyday meals and a breakfast room with a “cozy” nook. The first floor also had an indoor lap pool, a yoga studio, and a fully equipped Nautilus gym. The billiards room was a by-the-book re-creation of King George’s library, complete with a first edition Shakespeare folio underneath a locked glass case. Laurie caressed the glass as if it were her own treasure.

On their way to the back exit they bumped into Ryan, who was holding a book and climbing up the stairs. “How’d you like the renovation?” he asked. “The house certainly didn’t look like this last year,” he added a little wistfully.

“It’s very nice,” Mara said politely.

Ryan winked. “Laurie, don’t forget to tell them about the mirror in the bathroom. It’s an exact reproduction of Marie Antoinette’s!” he added with mock enthusiasm.

The girls’ expectations shot up after Laurie told them the house contained several guest bedrooms. Now, that was more like it. Eliza hoped she would get the same room she was given when she visited last summer while their house was being fumigated. But the preternaturally perky assistant led them outside, all the way to the servants’ quarters—a small, tidy cottage a good five-minute walk away, where they were deposited in a small room on the topmost landing.

It couldn’t have been more different from the main house. The attic bedroom consisted of a bunk bed, one single bed, two bureaus, a ratty armchair, one bathroom, and a lone lightbulb hanging from the ceiling.

A spider made its way across the grimy carpet, the lone occupant to welcome them to their new home.

don't worry, girls, this is a partnership

“**TWENTY THOUSAND SQUARE FEET AND ALL THREE OF US** have to share *one* godforsaken room?” Eliza griped, smoking out of the tiny attic window.

Mara kept silent, unpacking her suitcase. Since Eliza had taken the single bed and Jacqui the top bunk, she had been left with the claustro-inducing bottom bunk, but she wasn't going to complain. She was still flabbergasted by the size of the estate. (Twelve acres, Anna's assistant had told them in a hushed tone.) Mara didn't realize real people actually lived this way—that marble bathrooms the size of her whole house weren't just something you could find in an episode of *The Fabulous Life Of . . .* on VH-1 or something out of an *It's Good to Be . . .* special on E! As far as she could tell, the Perrys weren't famous, but they were sure loaded.

“Eh.” Jacqui shrugged. “What can we do? Is not like we have choice,” she said, borrowing Eliza's cigarette to light her own.

“Could you guys not smoke in here?” Mara asked, waving her hands in dismay.

Eliza blew a smoke ring in response.

A rap on the door caused the two girls to stub out their cigarettes on the soles of their shoes. Eliza kicked the butts under the bed. “Come in!” she said brightly.

A maid in a black-and-white uniform peeked into the room. “Mrs. Perry calling. Follow me, pliss.”

The three of them were led to the backyard, a stunning expanse of greenery that surrounded an Olympic-sized pool that flowed into a small waterfall, emptying into a bubbling Jacuzzi tub. Mara spied tennis courts in the distance, a putting green, and a basketball court. Back home in Sturbridge, their backyard was a sliver of brown, fenced in on each side by chicken wire. There were several chairs rotting from too many winters left outdoors and an ancient hibachi sat squat by a dying maple tree.

Several kids were chasing each other with Super Soakers on the patio, and a little boy with water wings was running between everyone's legs, screaming. In the middle of the chaos stood a slim, frosted blonde in a metallic gold bikini and stiletto mules.

“Cody! Stop making that noise! Stop it! Let go of my leg . . . let go of my leg!” She wrenched his tiny baby hands from a bronzed calf the size of a chicken wing. “Ugh.” The woman grimaced in distaste. She straightened up, only to be met by a nine-year-old boy wielding a loaded water gun.

“GOTCHA!” The kid squealed.

“William! Don’t even *think* about it!” she threatened.

It was no use. He pulled the trigger, sending a powerful blast of water at her head.

“JESUS! Did you take your meds today! DID YOU? LOOK AT WHAT YOU’VE DONE!” she said, taking him by his thin shoulders and shaking the bejesus out of him. He started to bawl.

“Okay. Okay. Fine. I didn’t mean it. Scoot,” she said, shooing him away.

She turned to the three teenagers, wiping dripping wet bangs away from her face. “I’m Anna Perry, sorry about all this,” she said grandly. She shook Mara’s and Jacqui’s hand with a limp shake, but when she turned to Eliza, her countenance mellowed. “Oh! Eliza, darling! You made it. Wonderful!” she said, giving Eliza her cheek to kiss. “How’s your mother? Do tell her I said hi. Did she get the books I sent?”

Eliza gritted her teeth and smiled. “Yes, she did, Anna.” Thinking she had been “helpful,” Anna had sent Eliza’s mother several books in The Idiots Guide to . . . series (*Wine, Housekeeping, Getting a Job after Fifty*, etc.). The attached card had read: *Now that you don’t have a staff, here’s something I hope can help you out as you transition into your new life.*

“I’m so glad you all made it. I was a little worried about the traffic. Anyway, as you know, my husband, Kevin, hired you. Oh, thank God, here he is now.”

The girls turned to see a hefty, bald man in an immaculately pressed Hawaiian shirt and Bermuda shorts making his way toward them.

“Kevin, did you manage to remember to send over the bottle of Petrus as a hostess present? Yes? Okay, good. How much was it?”

He told her. She winced. Making her way into the good graces of the grand hostesses of the Hamptons was costing them an arm and a leg, but Anna was determined to chair the big ovarian cancer benefit next month.

“Kevin Perry,” he said. He shook each of their hands warmly, lingering just a hair too long with Jacqui’s handshake. *Typical*, thought Jacqui. *But maybe this could come in handy.*

“How’s your dad?” he asked Eliza.

“Same.” Eliza shrugged.

“Why don’t we sit over here?” Kevin said, motioning to the round patio table. Anna followed him, teetering on her heels and almost slipping on the wet tile. The girls took their seats. If any of them cared to look down, they might have noticed that each and every single screw in the teak veranda had been hand-turned to a precise ninety-degree angle, orthogonal to the direction of the boards. A simple but telling detail on the stringent perfectionism the Perrys expected from everything, and everyone, around them.

“We want to formally welcome you girls to the Hamptons,” Anna began crisply. “As you can imagine, we have a very busy night ahead of us. I thought we’d just have a little barbecue for the kids since it’s the Fourth of July. We usually do something more elaborate, but we’ve

been invited to a party at the Perelmans' later." She paused so they could let that name sink in—they were hanging out with Ron Perelman! The Revlon mogul married to Ellen Barkin—the tippy top of the Hampton A-list! Unfortunately, Mara and Jacqui had never heard of him, and Eliza couldn't care less about Ron Perelman—he didn't have any kids her age.

"So tonight we'll do just a simple affair—nothing too fancy." Anna laughed. "Just a few burgers, maybe some hot dogs. Don't you think?"

"Oh, definitely." Kevin nodded.

"There's a grill out back, and we could even do some seared tuna, maybe? There's an avocado salad in the fridge that might go nicely with that. Or is tuna not patriotic?" she asked with a little laugh.

"Tuna sounds good," Eliza ventured.

"It's Pacific ahi, just came off the plane in Hawaii," Anna told her. "Delicious. Maybe with a little mirin sauce? Like we did last year?" Last Fourth of July the Perrys hosted a catered, white-glove party on their private beach to celebrate the holiday. Eliza remembered the succulent tuna steak served on silver platters.

"Sure." Eliza shrugged. "Maybe with some white wine?"

"A perfect menu. Except, of course, the kids can't have alcohol. And this will be a lot more intimate." Anna smiled without showing any teeth. "Anyway, enough about the barbecue. It's at seven since the kids aren't allowed food after sunset."

"Honey? Can we get back to business, please?" Kevin asked.

"Of course, of course," Anna said.

"We just want to stress that this is a partnership. You're part of the family now. Call us Anna and Kevin, please," he said. "We see this as an opportunity for the kids to have a good time this summer. I think we're all going to have a little fun, aren't we?" he said, winking at Jacqui.

"But of course, we have some goals in mind," Anna continued. "First off, there's William. He's been diagnosed with ADHD. He can't keep still for a moment and keeps forgetting to take his meds. He *must* calm down this summer. He's got to learn how to sit still or they're not taking him back at St. Bernard's in the fall." She passed a list of daily prescriptions.

Mara stared at the list, mystified. A nine-year-old on drugs?

Eliza was unfazed. William's regime was longer and more complicated than the heart medicine her father took every day, sure, but that was modern parenting for you. And with that thought, her eyes glazed over. What should she wear to the party later?

Jacqui was getting impatient. When could she begin the search for Luca? This blond insect should stop yapping already.

"Next, Madison *must* lose weight. As I see it, she's carrying about fifteen more pounds than she should. Kids can be so cruel, and I don't want any daughter of mine to be 'the fat one.'" She didn't make the quotation mark sign with her hands, but they could hear it clearly

in her tone. “I’ve put her on an eight-hundred-calorie diet.” She handed out a detailed folder with nutritional charts and calorie serving information. “I’d really prefer if she only ate raw foods. It truly helped my digestion, and it’s a very healthy way to live.” She suddenly craned her neck, like a dog on the trail of a bad scent, and hollered toward the pool. “MADISON! Put that cookie down! Put it down! Do you want to be a piggy your whole life?”

Raw food? Mara wondered. *What the hell?*

The Christian Dior halter? Eliza mused. *Or the Gucci tank top?*

Water, I need water, Jacqui wheezed. All that whiskey in the car was giving her a premature hangover.

“Zoë is six and is starting first grade in the fall. I want her to learn to read this summer. We sent her to the best kindergarten and pre-K and she still can’t do her ABCs. It’s so embarrassing.” Anna shook her head.

Six years old. Reading. Got it, Mara thought.

Or maybe the Dolce mini? Eliza wondered.

Jacqui was starting to feel faint from dehydration. She gripped the edge of her seat to keep herself upright.

“And as for Cody . . .” Anna’s visage softened slightly. “The baby has got to conquer his fear of water. I mean, we’re in the Hamptons . . . and he won’t even go in the pool!”

“What else? Oh. House rules. Curfew is midnight. It’s the same for the twins. Ryan you’ve met. You can drive any car that’s not being used, and you’ll need to, to get into town and take Zoë and Madison to ballet and yoga and William to his three therapists. Every Sunday we’ll all sit down for a weekly progress meeting. You’ll be paid in three installments, the first is in a few weeks. Other than that, we don’t really have a lot of rules here.”

Well, that was good to know, thought Mara.

Thank God, thought Eliza.

Water, thought Jacqui.

“Lastly, I absolutely *insist* that you girls have a great summer with us. Like we said in the ad—this is going to be the summer of your life! Please make yourselves at home, and we’ll see you later at the barbecue?”

“Sounds like fun,” Mara said.

“We’ll be there,” Eliza assured Anna. Seared tuna, avocado salad? She was famished!

Jacqui nodded.

“Ciao,” Anna said with a wave of her hand. They were dismissed.

“Uh—honey . . .,” Kevin Perry said.

“Yes?”

“Don’t you think they should *meet* the kids?”

where there's smoke, there's usually fire

“SO WHAT DID YOU THINK OF MOMZILLA?” ELIZA asked when they were back in their rooms.

“Problema. Women like that at my store. Dios mio. Never satisfied,” Jacqui prophesied.

“How do you know them?” Mara asked.

“Long story.” Eliza shrugged. What business was it of theirs? “My dad went to college with Kevin. He called asking if I was available for the summer. I’m only doing this as a favor. I know these kids. Absolute terrors. My advice? Stay as far away from them as possible.”

Well, that wasn’t really practical, Mara thought, since they were hired to take care of them.

“Anna’s a total witch, too. She’s his second wife. Cody—the three-year-old—is the only one that’s hers. The others are Brigitte’s. She was crazy. Anna was Kevin’s personal assistant. She was having an affair with him for years,” Eliza said as she checked herself out in the mirror. White halter top, sequin-embellished miniskirt, white sandals with satin ties that laced up the calf—yes, that would work for tonight. Jacqui pulled on a pair of low-waisted jeans and a tube top. Mara changed out of her stinky poly-blend blouse for a T-shirt, shorts, and sneakers.

Second wife. Stepkids. Personal assistants. Affairs. It was too much for Mara. Had she walked into some whacked-out soap opera? She was still wondering how she was going to heat Madison’s food to only “100 degrees Fahrenheit so as not to spoil its natural essence.”

At sunset the three walked toward the pool, where the smell of gasoline hung heavy in the air. Packs of hamburger meat, hot dogs, and sesame buns were stacked next to an open, smoking grill. Finding no one around, the three girls sat around the table, which had been set for dinner with a white linen tablecloth, sterling silver cutlery, and porcelain plates.

“She said seven, right?” Eliza asked.

“Yeah,” Mara said, feeling a little apprehensive. Something was wrong here.

Jacqui got up. “Where do you think the wine is?” she asked, poking in the Igloo cooler she found near the pots of citronella candles.

Suddenly all four kids burst through the screen door, clamoring for food.

“Something smells,” William said, wrinkling his nose at the smoking fire pit.

“Is something burning?” Madison asked.

“I’m hungry,” Zoë said.

“Me too,” Eliza replied. What was going on? Where were the eats?

“Camille always made me a double cheeseburger,” Madison said. “With lots of onions and pickles,” she added hopefully.

“Who’s Camille?” Mara asked.

“She was here three days ago,” Madison said, playing with her napkin. “But she did a bad thing and had to go away.”

Just then Anna wafted by, humming to herself. She was wearing a grass skirt over her bikini and had put an orchid in her hair (which was still showing slight aftereffects of William’s water attack). “The invitation said Hula Couture,” she said with a laugh, walking out to the patio. “Isn’t this fun? I got Michael Kors to sew it up for me.”

Kevin followed, wearing a formal tuxedo jacket over his Hawaiian shirt.

“Is everyone having a lovely time?” Anna asked.

“No!” William roared. “There’s nothing to eat!”

“We’re hungry!” Madison whined.

“What?” Anna said, walking over to investigate. She found the three au pairs sitting at the table in front of empty plates. “Why isn’t anything ready? I distinctly remembered informing you we were having a barbecue tonight.”

“Oh!” Mara said.

They had assumed they were *invited* to the barbecue. None of them had realized they were supposed to be *cooking* it.

“You said to be here by seven,” Eliza said weakly.

There was a frosty silence as the misunderstanding sank in.

Anna frowned. “Huh. Well, Kevin and I have to get to the party in a few minutes, so I guess it doesn’t matter. You can take them to Main Beach afterward to see the fireworks.”

“No problem, we’ll get on it right away,” Mara said, standing by the grill and handing Jacqui a flipper.

“And remember the tuna for Madison,” Anna reminded them as she hoofed it out of the patio without saying good-bye to the kids.

“Mama! Mama! Cody wanna Mama!” the baby cried after her.

“Sh . . . shh . . .,” Mara said soothingly. “Mara’s here.”

But Cody continued to howl.

“This is bullsh—,” Eliza said, catching herself, as grease splattered on her skirt and Jacqui burned another patty.

Mara pried the tuna off the grill. She wondered if it was safe to feed it to Madison; didn’t fish need to be cooked? Mara decided to keep it where it was. Hopefully Anna wouldn’t find

out she had broken the raw food rule on the first night. She'd have to remember to ask Madison who this Camille was and why she was sent away.

"Don't they have a chef?" Mara asked. She had observed enough servants around the property.

"Uh-huh. Cordon Bleu. But he doesn't do kiddie meals apparently. It's probably below him." Eliza shrugged. She was used to handling difficult help. Laurent, their former French chef, refused to cook anything other than five-star meals. He would throw a tantrum when her dad demanded a well-done steak. Her mother eventually had to replace him with someone more flexible.

"Hey, did anyone see the rest of the ahi?" Eliza asked.

"There's just this itty piece," Mara said.

Jacqui shrugged. She'd found a six-pack of beer underneath the soda cans and had helped herself to one. "Miller Lite?" she offered.

Eliza shook her head. She unwrapped all the waxed paper packages in a panic, but they all contained ground meat. Apparently Anna had decided not to waste the precious tuna on the likes of them.

The reality of her status finally sank in: she had been installed in an attic room instead of the corner bedroom. Fed burgers instead of tuna steak. She wasn't a guest on the Perry estate. Eliza Thompson, former "it girl," was now the help.

main beach: you can only keep eliza down for so long

THE BEACH WAS AS CROWDED AS CENTRAL PARK DURING a Dalai Lama blessing or a free White Stripes concert. The fireworks show had begun, and as rockets whizzed up to the heavens, Beethoven's Fifth Symphony thundered from temporary overhead speakers. Stylish picnickers popping champagne corks and feasting on three-pound lobsters sat on checkered tablecloths and sent fuzzy photos via their cell phones to provide latecomers with location coordinates. Almost no one looked up. They had better things to do, like blanket-hop to exchange effusive double-cheek air kisses and discreetly check out each other's flowered Murakami handbags.

The three au pairs secured a place on top of the hill, primo real estate, thanks to Eliza's pushiness. She found them a postage-stamp-sized area bordered by two identical silk jacquard blankets and managed to expand their territory by letting Cody cry his lungs out as the rockets boomed. Nothing like an irritable toddler to motivate self-involved single Hamptonites to get out of the way.

Mara couldn't help but overhear some of the chatter around them.

"How's the black truffle ravioli?" a woman asked her guests as she handed out monogrammed china filled with plump, glistening pasta and smothered with a white cream sauce.

"Superb. And the *cervelle de canut* is divine with this Reisling."

"Did someone bring the opera glasses?" another asked, motioning for a pair of binoculars.

She had never seen anyone picnic like this before. Back home, picnics meant a couple of sandwiches, a bag of chips, and a liter of soda. Not a four-course menu with a different wine accompaniment for each entrée. Wresting her eyes away from the neighboring sheets, Mara turned back to her own group.

"Madison, where did you find that candy bar?" she asked.

Madison looked up guiltily and stuffed the entire Snickers bar in her mouth for fear of having it taken away. Mara shook her head. She would have to find out where the kid hid her stash or they were all dead. She did a quick head count. One, two, three . . . That couldn't be right. "William! Eliza, Jacqui, have you seen William?!" she asked.

The two shrugged indifferently.

“You guys stay here; I’ll try to find him,” Mara said, beginning to panic. She walked carefully around the perimeter, calling his name as softly as she could. “William?” she whispered. “William? Where are you?”

“Sorry, sorry,” she said, tiptoeing by an uproarious group of clean-cut guys in matching khaki pants and Teva sandals, puffing on cigars as they cheered the spectacle in the sky.

“No worries. Why don’t you join us?” one asked, offering her a plastic cup filled with bubbly.

“No thanks. I’m just looking for a little boy.” Mara shook her head.

“We’re all big boys here.” He winked. “C’mon, stay awhile.” He looked about twenty-two, red cheeked, and well meaning, but she wasn’t interested in older guys (even older guys with the maturity of teenagers).

“Really, I can’t. I’m working.”

“What do you do?”

“I’m an au pair.”

And with those four little words, his posture changed. He raked his eyes over her body. “Then you’ve got absolutely no excuse *not* to stay. It’s not like you’ve got a real job, right?”

Mara turned away without answering him, completely offended.

“WILLIAM!!” Mara began to yell in desperation, not caring if she caused a scene. The hyperactive nine-year-old finally reappeared, making airplane noises and screaming every time the rockets boomed.

“Don’t ever do that again!” Mara scolded. “You can’t just disappear like that! It’s not safe!”

“DON’T TELL ME WHAT TO DO!” William screamed. “YOU’RE NOT MY MOMMY!”

“I know I’m not your mommy, but I work for your mommy.”

“No, you don’t—you work for ANNA,” William spat.

Back at the blanket, Mara recounted what the Dartmouth-undergrad-look-alike had said to her. “It was like I said ‘au pair’ but he heard ‘hooker!’”

Eliza rolled her eyes. She could have warned her about using the “*a*” word to describe herself. “Most of the young investment banker types around here think au pairs are easy summer lays with little or no responsibility. Stay away from them; they rent tract homes in Westhampton and are totally not worth your while,” Eliza advised.

Madison removed a Ziploc full of gummi bears from her pocket. She nudged her brother. “The other au pairs were a lot nicer.”

“Wait. What other au pairs?” Mara demanded.

“Camille, Tara, and Astrid. They were taking care of us because Nanny went back to England this summer,” Zoë piped up.

“What happened to them?” Eliza wanted to know.

“They were fired,” William said gleefully. “It was funny.” He hugged his knees, remembering how the Porsche Cayenne careened through the streets of East Hampton and screeched to a halt at the Jitney stop and how his stepmother used bad, bad words as she threw their suitcases out of the window.

“Fired?” Mara asked, a chill in her heart. The possibility had never occurred to her. That would totally ruin her plans to earn enough money for her college tuition.

Fired? Eliza thought. Now, that would definitely complicate matters. She was supposed to spend the whole summer here—God help them if they tried to ship her back to Buffalo.

Jacqui didn’t much care about being fired. As long as they did it after she found Luca.

“I miss them,” Zoë said. “Tara was supposed to braid my hair today.”

But before they could ask them any more questions about this mystery, a particularly loud firecracker exploded and Cody started to bawl again.

“Oh my God, can you hold him? What should we do?” Eliza said, thrusting the toddler into Mara’s arms.

“Shh . . . shh . . .,” Mara said, rocking him on her lap and trying to hum a lullaby.

“Thees one says she’s a little hungry,” Jacqui said, pointing to Madison. “Maybe we give her something?” she asked when Mara had her back turned.

“What’s in the basket?” Eliza asked.

“Pringles.”

“Yeah, fine.” Eliza shrugged.

Mara looked up. “Hey, where’d William go? William! Stay here! On the blanket! Don’t move!” Mara said in her best sophomore class secretary voice. “Zoë, come on, honey, look at all the colors, aren’t they nice?”

“Cody, it’s okay, baby, it’s only fireworks. I know, they’re loud, but it’s okay,” she soothed.

A few minutes later the kids were crowded around Mara, who put an arm around all of them. “Look at that! The Stars and Stripes! Have you ever seen anything so beautiful?” Mara asked the little girls, who were sitting raptly looking at the night sky. The boys were passed out on the blanket, William utterly spent from chasing dragonflies and Cody sleeping in his stroller with his thumb in his mouth.

Eliza looked at her cell phone. Uh-oh. Almost eleven. Time to motor.

“Hey, you know what, I’ve got to run. I’m meeting some friends . . .,” Eliza said, brushing grass stains off her knees and starting to walk away.

“Excuse me?” Mara asked.

“Where are you going?” Jacqui asked.

“Party. Wanna come?” Eliza said.

“Sí.” Jacqui nodded, standing up.

“Yeah, after all, you’ve got things under control here, right, Mary?” Eliza asked. But before Mara could answer, Eliza and Jacqui were running down the hill as fast as their stilettos would take them.

resort is the hottest party in the hamptons. at least until next week.

ELIZA TOOK A DEEP BREATH AS SHE SCANNED THE MOB scene outside Resort. Five hundred people were elbowing each other to get closer to the velvet-roped entrance, and there was a backup of twenty stretch limos parked on the driveway, waiting to discharge their famous (or merely showy) passengers. Skinny, toothpick-sized women with significant cleavage, lathered in layers of foundation, blush, and hair spray, wearing brightly colored tank tops and formfitting knee-length skirts, picked their way across the gravel in spindly sandals. Their dates, slick older men with equally artificial tans, jangled enormous gold bracelets on their hairy wrists.

Two spotlights directed up in the air lit the entire scene like a movie set. Several overwhelmed publicists tried to control the crowd while burly, three-hundred-pound bouncers glared at the overeager revelers.

Eliza fought her way to the front armed with the magic words: *I'm on the list!*

"Eliza Thompson!" she screamed at a beleaguered girl in a headset.

After rifling through her pages the door girl snapped, "You're not on the list. You'll have to wait in line."

"Under Kit Ashleigh?!"

"You should have said that you were on Kit's list in the first place," she said sullenly. "What did you say your name was again?"

"ELIZA THOMPSON!"

"Oh, there you are." The girl nodded at the gorilla in the three-piece suit. He lifted the rope reluctantly. Eliza tugged at Jacqui's arm, and the two were swept inside the nightclub.

They found themselves in the middle of a chaotic scene, and Jacqui felt the familiar rush she felt whenever she was somewhere new, uncharted, and maybe even slightly dangerous. She licked her lips in anticipation. She was certain Luca was here somewhere. She could feel it.

"Hold up!" Eliza said, grabbing Jacqui's arm. "I see my friends over there."

Kit was sitting in the middle of the biggest banquette in the middle of the packed VIP room. His face lit up when he spotted Eliza. "Liza!"

“Kitty cat!” she shrieked, giving him a two-cheek air kiss as if they hadn’t just seen each other a few hours before.

“Who’s your friend?” Kit asked, wagging his eyebrows at Jacqui.

“Jacqui Velasco. She’s, uh, an exchange student . . . living with my uncle’s family,” Eliza said before Jacqui could open her mouth. She gave Jacqui a mute plea to play along.

“Sí.” Jacqui shrugged. What was that all about?

“Cool,” Kit said. “What are you studying?”

“Design,” Jacqui said.

“English,” Eliza replied.

They looked at each other. Eliza laughed nervously. “English design, right, Jac?”

“Whatever,” Jacqui conceded. She was too busy scanning the room for a sign of her beloved to deal with Eliza right now. But she was polite enough to smile at Kit, who beamed at her.

“About time you got here!” Kit’s girlfriend, Taylor, said to Eliza as she squeezed herself between her man and the hot South American girl.

“You’re back!” Lindsay, another friend, crowed, coming to join them.

“My girls!” Eliza said, triumphant.

So many people were coming up to hug and kiss her she felt like homecoming queen. Except that she’d never be caught dead at something as lame as a high school dance. This was homecoming Eliza style: frozen margaritas, flowing bottles of Cliquot, hot guys, good shoes, even better cars parked outside.

“Sweetie, you look fantastic!” Taylor said in an admiring and slightly jealous tone.

“You must be starving yourself!” said Lindsay, the master of the left-handed compliment.

“Is Charlie here?” Eliza asked, a little too eagerly.

“Not yet. Why?” Lindsay asked, narrowing her eyes.

“Nothing. I just thought it would be nice to see him, for old times’ sake.” Eliza shrugged.

Lindsay and Taylor exchanged a knowing look.

“Well, look who’s here,” purred a voice from behind the champagne bucket. A sloe-eyed blonde with a vixenish pout appraised them coolly. She was wearing a pink beret, aviator sunglasses, and a tight baby T-shirt that showed off a completely flat midriff.

“Sugar!” Eliza said, bending down to say hello.

“Careful—I just had it blow-dried,” Sugar Perry said, turning away before Eliza could get any closer.

“How are *you*?” Eliza asked, sliding into the seat next to her.

Sugar was the most popular girl at Eliza's old prep school. At least, she was now that Eliza had left.

"I'm all right," Sugar drawled, taking a cigarette from Eliza's pack and tapping it on her hand. "I'm so over this scene."

"I know, it's *so* boring. The same every year." Eliza knew this was the right thing to say in the Hamptons, even though the truth was, she was thrilled to be back.

"You're so lucky your parents sent you to boarding school." Sugar sighed. "If only I could get away from mine."

"It's never going to happen," added a similarly hoarse voice. Eliza looked up to see Sugar's identical twin, Poppy, looming over them.

"Eliza, you're back," Poppy said flatly. She had the same long platinum Donatella-Versace-like locks as her sister, the same seductive languor, but where Sugar had the makings of a porn star in a debutante body, Poppy, who was taller and two minutes younger, projected a more innocent air. Sugar was sexy; Poppy was just cute.

Finding the banquette fully crowded, Poppy parked herself on Eliza's lap without a second thought. Eliza didn't have the nerve to complain. She was too excited not to have to answer any difficult questions. Taylor and Lindsay receded to the background, pretending not to be bothered that Eliza had replaced them for the twins without a second thought.

Meanwhile, after downing two quick flutes of champagne and making chitchat with some of Eliza's friends, Jacqui scanned the room again. These people were nice enough, and yes, she could tell they were rich, but after meeting Luca, Jacqui had started caring less about those things. Before him she probably would have made her way straight over to the handsome Almost Forty who was staring at her from across the room—Jacqui knew the benefits of seeing an older man (hello, expense account)—but Luca had changed everything. For once she had found a guy who really liked her for who she was, not what she looked like.

Jacqui looked around, trying to look through the older man still staring her down. *I can see your wedding ring*, she thought. And then a flash of familiar stripes made her sit up a little straighter. Was it? No way . . . there was no way. But it was worth a shot. She stood up, pulling her underwear-completely-optional-low-rider jeans up with her, and she walked off to follow the lanky guy wearing a very familiar-looking rugby shirt.

back at the beach, mara got blown off
so eliza could blow out her hair

MARA COULDN'T BELIEVE THEY PULLED THIS ON THE first night. She packed up the picnic basket, trying to keep an eye on the one-two-three-four (thank God they were all there!) kids. "All right, everybody, follow me."

"Don't want to go! Want to stay play outside!" Zoë whined.

"Can we go over there? There's ice cream," Madison said, pulling at Mara's hand.

"Why you want ice cream for? Porky Pig Porky Pig!" William jeered. He started snorting and making noises with his armpit.

"William!"

"William!"

"WHAT???"

"STOP MAKING THAT . . ." Mara clapped. "Arrrghh!"

William, who was clearly enjoying torturing his sister, cackled. Madison was nearly in tears.

"Hey, buddy, that's not nice."

Mara looked up to see Ryan Perry standing next to her, holding a death's-head skateboard in one hand. He wore a faded Groton sweatshirt over his frayed shorts. He smiled at Mara, then put a hand on William's head and turned the kid around. "Apologize to Maddy."

"Erm sorry." William sniffled.

Madison stuck a chocolate-covered tongue out at her brother.

"I saw Eliza and Jacqui back at the house. I figured you might need a hand," he explained.

"Oh—that's so nice. Really, though, it's all good," she said, just as William wrestled Madison to the ground and the two of them began rolling down the hill toward the ocean.

"No—no—no—come back!" Mara cried.

"Don't worry, they won't get far," Ryan promised as he picked up the picnic basket. "Hey, cool, you brought the Scrabble," he said when he spied the board game among the Tupperware.

“I thought it might be fun, you know, to teach Zoë about letters.” Mara shrugged. “I found it in the closet in our room.”

“You any good?”

“I’m not bad.” Mara smiled.

“Bet I can beat you.”

“Oh, I don’t know—I do a mean triple-triple. I know all the words that begin with *x*.”

“All of them?” Ryan cocked an eyebrow.

“Try me.”

“I’ll take you up on that challenge.”

“Deal.” Mara smiled even more broadly.

Ryan tucked the box under his arm along with his skateboard and began to push Cody’s stroller. He lifted Zoë on his shoulders.

“Giddyap, Ryan!” Zoë said.

“Hang on, Zo.”

The four of them walked down the hill toward the mini-death match.

“WILLIAM ADDISON PERRY! MADISON ALEXANDRA PERRY!” Ryan roared.

William and Madison immediately froze.

“That’s enough of that!” Ryan scolded.

“You’re not really mad, are you, Ryan?” Madison asked, releasing her hold on William and getting up to take his free hand.

“Me! Me! Me!” William whined, trying to find something of Ryan’s to hold on to. With no available hand in sight, he grabbed the edge of his big brother’s T-shirt.

“Easy, big guy,” Ryan said.

They headed back to the Range Rover. Ryan stashed his skateboard in the back and they drove the half mile back to the house.

“Sorry they’re so out of control. It’s really not their fault. No one’s ever taught them any boundaries.”

“The kids?” Mara asked. “Don’t worry, I’ve taken care of worse.”

Mara told Ryan about the neighborhood nightmare—eight-year-old Tommy Baker, who was famous for locking himself in the bathroom for hours, only to emerge as his parents were pulling back into the driveway. At which time he would pee on the floor, leaving a disgusting puddle for her to mop up.

“It happened every time I babysat him and his parents never even tipped!”

“Bastards,” Ryan said.

“Look,” Mara whispered, turning to look at the backseat, where the children were all sleeping. “Like angels. You’d never think—” But she cut herself off—they *were* still his siblings.

Ryan glanced at them from the rearview mirror. “Angels with dirty faces,” he surmised, giving Mara a warm smile.

They pulled up to the driveway. Mara carried Cody to his crib, and Ryan walked the rest of the sleepy trio back to their rooms.

“I’ve got to make a couple of calls, then I’ll be in the kitchen,” he said. “Think you’re up for a game later, Madame X?”

“Yeah, sure,” Mara agreed.

“Don’t stand me up, now,” he teased.

“I won’t,” she promised, flushing a little.

She tucked the kids in, and after she was satisfied the four were safely in dreamland, she tiptoed down the stairs toward the kitchen.

“Hey, they’re totally out—do you want to bust out the Scrabble? Ryan? Ryan?” she called, a little short of a stage whisper. But he was nowhere to be found. She wandered in and out of the darkened rooms for a while, thinking he might magically pop out of one.

But he wasn’t anywhere. Mara felt her good mood deflate. A wave of homesickness hit her in the middle of the perfectly spotless kitchen when she saw a Post-it on a French cabinet that she could only assume was hiding the fridge:

M: Sorry, duty called. Scrabble another time?—R

Of course he had better things to do. Someone to do, more likely, Mara thought with a tiny twinge of jealousy. She pulled out her cell phone and dialed.

“Jimmy? You still up? It’s me, Mara.”

back at resort, jacqui certainly has an eye for fabrics

JACQUI WALKED FAST THROUGH THE CROWD, NOT LETTING those rugby stripes out of her sight. Her heart was beating quickly; she was short of breath. There was no way, was there? This was fate. Kismet. This was meant to be. It was what she had been dreaming about since the day she woke up alone in her room in São Paulo. . . . Those broad shoulders, the fine, baby soft hairs on the neck . . . She had kissed that neck many times. . . .

With trembling fingers she put her hand on his back. “Luca?”

Jacqui couldn’t believe her eyes. It was him! Luca, with his pale, freckled skin, glossy honey-colored hair, and beautiful green eyes behind those nerdy-but-hip eyeglasses.

“Luca?” she choked.

“Excuse me.” Luke van Varick smirked, turning to face her. His eyes widened and he blinked for a minute, unsure of what to do. Then he broke into a lopsided grin.

“Jacarei!” Luke said as he leaned down to kiss her forehead. “What the HELL are you doing here?”

“I work here!” Jacqui laughed, so happy she was almost screaming. Luca! Here! In the Hamptons!

“Here?” he asked, motioning to the floor with the straw from his gin and tonic. He was swaying a little and Jacqui smelled the alcohol on his breath.

“No, up the road. I’m an au pair.”

“How cool is that?” Luke laughed. “I didn’t know you worked with kids. I thought you were just a shopgirl.”

This is making no sense, Jacqui thought. We haven’t seen each other in two months and all he wants to do is chitchat? What about all the stuff they did in São Paulo?

“Listen, you wanna get out of here?” Luke asked as his eyes roamed around the room.

“*Sí,*” Jacqui replied. That was more like it. She took his hand. She loved him. Her Luca! He could lead her anywhere.

* * *

A few minutes later Jacqui hung on as Luke sped down the Montauk Highway to his parents’ home in Bridgehampton. The place was as expansive as the Perry homestead, and Luke

showed her his private entrance and the four-bedroom suite in his “wing.” It was a classic bachelor pad, with a vintage Foosball table, a Miss PacMan game console, dartboards, a basketball hoop, and dirty laundry strewn around the carpet. He pressed a button on a remote, and a sixty-inch television materialized from the floor.

Jacqui sat on the edge of his bed, looking around at all of his things—his soccer trophies, his G4 computer, his bulletin board studded with photos from his travels around the world. So this was where he lived. This was where he slept. She drank it all in—intent to know as much as she could about the guy who’d finally opened her heart and made her feel all jittery inside.

Luke stood in front of her, holding an open bottle of Absolut in one hand. He took a swig. His other hand was underneath his shirt, scratching his stomach. He stared at her hungrily. “You know, you’re even more beautiful than I remembered,” he said, putting down the bottle and reaching for the light switch.

“What else do you remember?” Jacqui asked with a playful lilt.

With the lights snuffed out, Luke splayed himself spread-eagle on top of the goose-down comforter. Jacqui curled up next to him. He tossed an arm around her and she snuggled on his chest. She listened to him breathe, happy to be so close to him again.

“I remember this,” he said, tracing a finger on her cheek.

Soon she felt his hand move down toward her breast, cupping it over her shirt, then slowly inch its way down underneath the neckline. She wasn’t wearing a bra, and his fingers were cold on her skin.

“Oh . . . Luca,” she said, turning to kiss him fully on the mouth.

He pulled her up on him, holding her close so she could feel him getting excited.

They kissed, slobbering with open mouths, so quickly and urgently that Jacqui could barely catch her breath. All the while Luke tugged at her top. Finally he pulled it over her head and threw it to the corner of the room.

She realized she was trembling a little—she’d missed him so much. It was everything she ever wanted and everything she had been yearning for when he left her in São Paolo.

She sat up, looking down on him. They held hands and stared at each other.

A trick of the moonlight lit up a photograph on his nightstand.

It was her Luca, smiling, with his arm around a girl.

Huh?

Jacqui stopped and released his hands. He reached up to touch her face, but she pushed his hand away. “Who’s that?” she asked, pointing.

He craned his neck to see what she was talking about.

“Oh. Nobody.” He shrugged, gently laying the photo down. “Just someone I knew before I met you.”

Jacqui felt a little better. But somehow the moment had passed. She rolled off him and slid underneath the sheets.

He joined her, spooning her so that her back was pressed against his chest. He began to kiss between her shoulder blades, her most sensitive part. His hand awkwardly unbuttoned her fly. His fingers reached south.

“Not tonight. Okay, baby?” Jacqui asked, grasping his hand right above her waist.

“Uhmhhh?” Luke asked sleepily. “Are you sure?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Mm-kay.”

They were quiet for a moment, and Jacqui listened to his soft breathing.

“Luca? I love you,” she whispered. It was something they never had time to say to each other during their two weeks in São Paulo.

But Luke was already snoring.

eliza is red, white, and definitely blue

“ELIZA—WE’RE GOING . . .,” SUGAR CALLED OVER, interrupting the conversation. She stood outside the circle, tapping a kitten heel.

“We’ll meet you out front,” Poppy said, ignoring the fawning looks from the throng. The sisters stalked off, fully aware that all eyes were on their perfectly sculpted backsides.

“Sorry, guys. See y’all later?” Eliza asked.

“Where are you staying?” Lindsay asked, miming a phone call.

“My uncle’s place—uh, in Sagaponack. He’s not listed—but don’t worry, I’ll be in touch,” Eliza said, putting down her drink. “Sugar! Poppy! Wait up!”

She ran after them, catching up just as the twins stopped to pose for the paparazzi stationed outside the entrance. She waited hesitantly just out of flashbulb range.

“Hey—how ’bout one with your friend?” a photographer asked, noticing Eliza and shooing her into the picture. Eliza found herself wedged between the twins, giving them apologetic smiles.

“Beautiful! Three of a kind!” The photographers wolf-whistled their approval.

“That’s enough,” Poppy decided when the valet pulled up with their Mercedes SUV. He held open the door and handed her a ticket stub. “Oh no . . . I left my wallet at home,” she said patting her purse and looking around expectantly.

“Don’t look at me,” Sugar said. “You know I never carry cash.”

“Here, I got it,” Eliza offered, rooting in her Louis Vuitton Epi pouchette. “How much?”

“Forty dollars, miss.”

Holy . . . That was, like, half a day’s salary. Eliza paid the parking fee while Poppy slid behind the wheel.

“Shotgun,” Sugar called.

The girls piled into the SUV and Poppy started poking at the GPS screen. “I can never figure this thing out,” she muttered to herself just as Justin came blaring through the speakers. Sugar had dated him for a minute, and she liked to say this song was for her, even if it wasn’t true. Sugar stuck her hands through the sunroof and whooped loudly as they made their big exit.

“That was fun!” Eliza yelled over “Rock Your Body,” feeling drunk and giddy and happy to be back. After spending the spring locked in her room because she couldn’t bear another cold night in a wet field drinking Natty Light—the only thing that passed for a social life in Buffalo—Eliza finally felt like her old self again.

“That place was great!” she said.

“Are you serious? It was packed with nobodies.” Poppy sniffed.

“Did you see that troll in last-season’s Gucci?” Sugar agreed. “Totally D-list.”

Eliza surreptitiously tugged on her not-exactly-new mini. She vowed to hit the shops as soon as she got her fat cash-filled envelope in three weeks.

“So, what are we going to wear to P. Diddy’s party?” Poppy asked, zooming past a stop sign. “Oberon said it’s strictly red, white, and blue attire only.”

“That’s so corny.” Sugar yawned.

“It’s at the PlayStation2 House, isn’t it?” Eliza added.

“Isn’t that the place where J.Lo had her birthday party last week?” Sugar mused. “I don’t think it’s even open to the public.”

“Apparently even Brad and Jen RSVP’d.”

“Awesome!” Eliza leaned forward between the front seats. She was dying to see some real celebrities again. Back when she was still living on 63rd and Park, she hardly ever noticed them. Spotting Julia Roberts hailing a taxicab or Sarah Jessica Parker pushing a stroller was just kind of the backdrop for her life. Good luck catching anyone *US Weekly*—worthy in Buffalo.

“This is your street, right?” Poppy asked, pulling into a private driveway a few blocks from the club.

“Uh . . . actually . . .”

“You guys rented out your house?” Sugar asked, eyes wide.

“Well . . . um . . .”

“What’s the deal? Spit it out,” Poppy ordered.

“I’m kind of staying with you guys,” Eliza said sheepishly.

“What?” Poppy exclaimed as Sugar nudged her sister hard in the ribs. Sugar turned around with a sweet smile. “Excuse my sister, she doesn’t know how to mind her manners. Of course you can crash with us tonight. You can borrow something. You’re a size zero like me, right?”

“No—it’s not that. I’m kind of . . . well . . . Kevin called my dad the other day. He asked me if I could help out Anna with the kids this summer,” Eliza finished lamely. “It’s no big deal.”

Except that it was. The twins remembered their father telling them about the Thompsons’ troubles, not that they had paid much attention back then.

“Oh,” Sugar said, putting two and two together.

“Excuse me?” Poppy asked, turning around in shock. The SUV jumped over a speed bump and the three of them flew up from their seats.

“Ow! Watch the road!” Sugar said, glaring at her sister.

“Sorry!” Poppy said. “You’re one of the au pairs?” she asked disbelievingly, looking at Eliza in the rearview mirror.

“Kind of,” Eliza admitted.

There was an ominous silence.

“Huh. Well, that’s gonna be fun, right? All three of us together again!” Sugar said cheerfully.

The SUV pulled up to the Perry homestead. Poppy pulled into the driveway and cut the engine. “We’re home,” she said brightly.

“So, I’ll just run in and put on something patriotic and I’ll meet you guys back here?” Eliza asked, swinging her door open.

Sugar and Poppy exchanged a quick glance.

“You know what, I’m soooo pooped,” Sugar said, yawning.

“Me too,” Poppy agreed. “God, it’s been a really long night.”

“Yeah,” Eliza conceded.

“I think we’re just going to go to bed. We have tennis really early tomorrow, right, Pop?” Sugar asked. “We’ll see you later, Eliza.”

“Night,” Eliza said, unsteadily slipping out of the car onto the crunching gravel underfoot.

“Night,” the twins called, already halfway into the main house.

Eliza made her way down the stone path and opened the door to the au pairs’ cottage ever so slowly. She was trying to be quiet. Really, she was. But she snagged her stiletto heel on the rug and went sprawling. She crashed into a bedside table with a loud thud.

The light clicked on.

“What the hell?” Mara asked, blinking like an owl without her contact lenses. She put on her glasses and glanced at the digital clock on the nightstand. “Eliza, it’s two in the morning!”

“So what?” Eliza asked, heaving herself up from the floor and falling backward into her bed. “It’s early!”

“For you, maybe,” Mara snapped. “Some of us actually worked today. What’s the deal with cutting out? Hey, are you drunk?”

“God, Mara, get a grip.” Eliza moaned. “I don’t know how to break it to you, but we’re in the *Hamptons*—hello? *The Hamptons*.”

“I know that,” Mara snapped.

But clearly she didn't, thought Eliza.

"Where's Jacqui?" Mara asked.

"I don't know. Probably still having a lot of fun, unlike some people," Eliza said pointedly. "You missed a great party."

"I wasn't invited," Mara replied.

Right. Eliza looked uncomfortable. She had forgotten about that part. That was kind of mean of her, she realized, and she wasn't a mean person—really. Just careless. But someone had to watch those bratty kids.

She peeled off her tank top and struggled out of her skirt, pulling on her favorite silk camisole and a pair of Brooks Brothers pajama bottoms. She was still feeling high from her night and caught a glimpse of the pool reflecting in the garden pathway lights, giving her an idea . . . the six-pack Jacqui had found was still in the cooler.

"Hey, Mar, what do you say we . . .," she started to say, turning to her roommate. But Mara was already back asleep. Boy, Mara was one lame goody-goody.

Eliza hopped into bed, hitting her pillow just as an all-too-familiar rumble geared up outside. *No, it can't be*, she thought, bolting upright.

"Get in!" she heard Sugar's scratchy voice call.

She scrambled to the window and watched as Poppy ran out of the main house, wearing a red, white, and blue tank top and white jeans, looking furtively over her shoulder toward the au pairs' cottage. Eliza's stomach dropped as the car backed stealthily away, the headlights sweeping the road only after they'd made it out of the driveway without the lights. *I invented that trick*, thought Eliza.

They were going to the party after all.

It was all well and good to hang out with her at a VIP room or two—but when it came to hitting the *real* action, she was just deadweight.

The truth hit her hard, and for a minute she was back in her bedroom in Buffalo on yet another lonely Friday night. No one had asked her to be on prom committee even if it was obvious she had more style than anybody else in the class. They'd all thought she was such a snob when she turned up for her first day of school in a mink chubby. But hell, it was *cold* up there.

This summer was supposed to be different—she was supposed to be back with the old posse, back in the limelight, back in the lap of luxury, where she belonged. She thought Sugar and Poppy were her *friends*.

She thought back over the evening, looking for clues. So much had happened and she'd had so much to drink. It was mostly a fun, loud, Gucci-Envy-scented blur. But she did remember one thing: they hadn't even thanked her for paying the valet.

A blistering day at the beach

MARA SHOOK ELIZA'S SHOULDER. IT WAS ALMOST NOON and she was annoyed. Jacqui was nowhere to be found and Eliza had slept in all morning. Only Mara had shown up to feed the kids their breakfast in the main house (a grapefruit for Madison, gluten-free pancakes for Zoë and William, mashed rice cereal for Cody).

“What time is it?” Eliza asked sleepily.

Mara told her. “Hurry up. Anna wants us to take the kids to the beach. They’re already in the car.”

Eliza grumbled as she hoisted herself up against her pillows. She blinked at the tiny attic room. Where on earth was she? Then she remembered. The Hamptons. Working for the Perrys. As an au pair. God, it was depressing.

“Where’s Jacqui?”

Mara shrugged. “I don’t think she came home last night,” she said with a hint of disapproval in her voice.

Eliza yawned. “Good for her.” She padded to the bathroom to get ready, just as Jacqui walked into the room.

“Hola chicas!” Jacqui greeted, a blissful expression on her face. She was glowing and fresh-faced, although Mara noticed she was still wearing last night’s clothes.

Mara frowned. “Anna’s on a rampage. I suggest you guys meet me and the kids in the main house in five minutes if you all don’t want to get in trouble.” Mara was irritable from their little stunt the night before, and determined not to let them get away with it again. She stormed off, and Eliza and Jacqui exchanged dismayed expressions.

“What crawled up her butt and died?” Eliza asked. Jeez. She hadn’t bargained on having to spend her summer with some hick from the sticks, who was so obviously a little tattle-tale, as well.

Jacqui shrugged. That morning, she and Luca had more than made up for their months apart, and she was still in a romantic daze. She was also sporting a few red hickeys on her neck from their passionate reunion. “She needs *um amante*. A lover,” Jacqui decided. That was Jacqui’s solution to everything. Jacqui had had one boyfriend or another ever since she turned thirteen and it was the only way she felt totally comfortable.

“Don’t we all,” Eliza sighed.

* * *

They changed into their shorts and swimsuits and met Mara and the kids by the driveway. William was jumping up and down in the gravel driveway, the baby was bawling in his car seat, and the little girls sat in the very back of the SUV with bored faces.

“William! Please get in the car!” Mara pleaded.

“C’mon,” Eliza said, picking up William and shoving him in the car. “You better behave or I’m enrolling you in ballet with your sisters.” That sobered him up. Mara wished she’d thought of that.

Eliza walked to the driver’s seat. “I’ll drive, I know how to get there.”

Mara nodded, thankful for the help. They piled in and Eliza drove to Georgica Beach. They dropped Jacqui off to go grab lunch at the snackbar and Eliza gave her instructions on where to meet them. It was a struggle keeping all of the kids together, but Eliza finally chose a spot on the sand that was far from where her old crowd hung out. She shook out the towels and reclined on a beach chair. She still had a pounding headache from the night before, and the kids’ whining wasn’t helping any, but boy did it feel good to be back at Georgica.

Mara affixed a floppy sun hat on Cody’s head and began to slather sunscreen on the girls. When Zoë and Madison were good and covered, she tried her luck with William. “Sit still! Wait! I still have to do your back!” Mara pleaded, but William kept jumping and wriggling away.

“I give up!” Mara sighed. She looked around. Eliza was asleep on her towel. They’d dropped Jacqui off almost an hour ago, but she was still missing. What a surprise.

* * *

“What happened to him?” Eliza asked, horrified, hours later when she woke up and noticed William’s raw, red face.

“What do you mean?” Mara said. She had been so busy playing with the girls and Cody that she hardly noticed how red William had gotten. Mara had been so grateful when he’d finally gotten out of the waves and splayed out on a towel that it didn’t occur to her that laying down might be a tad uncharacteristic for the boy.

“I don’t feel too good,” William said. His entire body was an angry crimson, and his eyes were watering.

“Haven’t you heard of sunblock?” Eliza asked Mara accusingly.

“I tried to put it on him,” Mara said weakly. “But he wouldn’t sit still!” She put a hand on his forehead. “He’s burning up!”

“Sunstroke. I’ve seen it happen to tourists. It’s bad. We should get him to the doctor,” Jacqui said, surveying the damage with a critical eye.

The girls panicked. William began to hyperventilate. Mara’s heart began beating hard against her chest. She scooped William up in her arms and ran to the car. Eliza and Jacqui packed up the remaining kids and the bags in helter-skelter fashion and scrambled after them.

* * *

At the hospital, they deposited an unconscious and feverish William in the arms of a gentle nurse and a kindly doctor, and handed the other three kids off to Laurie, who'd met them there. "I won't tell Anna. For now. But call if you need me," she said sternly before driving off.

"It's my fault," Mara said quietly. She felt terrible for neglecting him. It didn't even occur to her that he had been Eliza and Jacqui's responsibility as well.

"Well, he really wouldn't stay still," Eliza conceded. That was as close to an admonition of guilt as Eliza would get. Still, she was really worried about the kid—and not just because they might get fired.

Jacqui murmured a short prayer. The worst of it was that she knew from experience that sunstroke was easily prevented. She felt a twinge of guilt for sneaking out to meet up with Luca for lunch.

They waited in the little outdoor room, debating whether or not to call Anna. Mara said yes. Eliza said no. And in the end, it was Jacqui's deciding vote for *what she doesn't know won't hurt her* that finalized their decision not to call.

* * *

When the doctor emerged, the news was good. Minor sun stroke. Nothing ice packs, fluids and bed rest wouldn't cure. They almost cheered when William ran out, just as spastic as ever.

Eliza tousled his hair. "You gave us a quite scare!"

"Next time will you sit still?" Mara asked.

William only grinned. Jacqui hugged him.

"What's that on your neck?" He asked her.

Jacqui blushed.

* * *

They returned home hoping not to run into Anna. No such luck. She had just returned from the salon and pulled up to the house at the same time.

"Anyone care to explain?" She demanded when she saw William.

"Um, it was the sunscreen. I don't think it was strong enough," Eliza said smoothly.

"But he's fine," piped in Jacqui. "Right, Will?" William just smiled and pointed at her hickey. He was *definitely* fine.

"Drugstore brands are really ineffective," Eliza said, playing up to Anna's snobbishness. "There's a really good one from Zurich that is divine."

"Order some for tomorrow," Anna allowed, and turned away without even saying hello to any of the children.

The three breathed a sigh of relief. And then William ran off, as though nothing had happened at all.

the girls have finally learned how to locate the fridge under all that french cabinetry

TWO WEEKS AFTER THE TWINS DITCHED HER BEFORE the PlayStation2 party, Eliza stood by the washbasin in the laundry room, trying to get the mud off Sugar's Escada tennis whites. This was so not what she had prepared for when she told Kevin Perry she would "help out with the kids" this summer.

Poppy and Sugar's snub had hit Eliza hard, but she still managed to claw her way back into the scene through her old friends Taylor and Lindsay, who had instant access to every guest list event in town, from store openings to movie premieres. The three of them hit a different nightclub every night, all while Eliza strategically avoided the Perry twins. It was harder to pretend they didn't exist back at the house, where the blond brats kept her busy with countless mundane tasks. Eliza didn't mind so much since it appeared Sugar and Poppy had failed to mention her diminished status to anyone in the clique. Were they being nice or just indifferent? Eliza couldn't hazard a guess, but she was thankful for the reprieve in public, at least.

"There," she said, holding the soiled cloth up to the light. "That should be good enough."

She had ruined her manicure in the process, but at least she wouldn't wake up tomorrow morning to hear Sugar's hoarse voice asking her ever so sweetly why her tennis skirt wasn't hanging in her closet. She walked out to the kitchen, where Mara was sitting in front of a bowl, her forehead knit in concentration as she carefully balanced a small green object on her fingers.

"What are you doing?" Eliza asked.

"What does it look like I'm doing? I'm peeling Madison's grapes," Mara explained, as if it were the most normal thing in the world.

"Hell no." Eliza still couldn't believe some of the things they had to do for these kids.

Mara gingerly took an edge of the grape and peeled off its skin. The bowl in front of her held about two dozen similarly skinless specimens.

"Where's Jacqui?" Eliza asked.

"Feeding Cody dinner. It's her turn." And for once Jacqui was actually there to do it.

Eliza made a face. Talk about a thankless undertaking. The girls had learned not to stand in the line of fire when Cody hurled after every meal. Two words: projectile vomit.

“MERDA!” Jacqui stormed into the kitchen from the dining room. A river of green-colored puke ran down the length of her cotton dress. “Why does everything he eats have to be hand chopped?” she ranted. “Has this woman never heard of baby food? This makes his stomach *virada!*”

They grunted in sympathy.

Madison walked in and helped herself to a grape. “Bleh,” she said, spitting out a chewed-up mess.

“What’s wrong now?” Mara sighed.

“They’re not cold enough. And that one still has its skin on a little bit.”

Mara wanted to throw her hands up in despair. Madison’s grapes were never cold enough or peeled properly or else could not be eaten because they were deemed “funny looking.” Mara knew the kid was just rebelling against the strict diet her stepmother had put her on, but it was seriously making her own life difficult.

“There’s nothing wrong with them,” Eliza said, taking one and popping it into her mouth. “Yum. I wish I had somebody to peel my grapes. You’re a lucky girl.”

Madison looked at Eliza doubtfully but began to eat the grapes without complaint. A miracle.

The door swung open again and this time Anna walked into the kitchen. The three au pairs froze, wondering what was wrong now.

“Has anyone seen the mail?” She asked.

They shook her heads. Laurie had told them that Anna was desperately waiting for an invitation to a dinner party at Calvin Klein’s house. Unfortunately, it had yet to arrive.

“Anna? Could we ask you something?” Mara assayed.

“Yes?”

“The kids keep talking about these other girls—who, um, used to take care of them? Do you know what they’re talking about?”

“Some girls named Camille, and Tara, or something,” Eliza added.

Anna scowled. “Yes. They used to work here. But we don’t talk about them,” she said sternly. “Do you understand?”

They nodded. Obviously, the former au pairs were a sore subject. But the girls’ curiosity was doubly piqued. What had they done that was so bad? If only someone would tell them. It obviously hadn’t been letting one of the kids fry like a potato chip. They’d done that and they were still here. But they had to find out, because as all three of them agreed, they couldn’t afford to make the same mistake.

After cleaning up the kitchen and putting the kids to bed, the au pairs staggered back to their dingy room.

“God! What a week!” Eliza said, flopping into the only armchair. Between the cooking and the cleaning and the scrambling out of a VIP room whenever she spotted any sign of the twins’ blond heads, Eliza was exhausted.

“Seriously,” Mara agreed, thinking about the week spent catering to the whims of four adorable but very spoiled children.

Jacqui had disappeared into the bathroom to change. She was meeting Luca for dinner at The Laundry, a romantic French restaurant.

Eliza looked at the clock. It was nine. Too early to hit the clubs yet. “You know what? We deserve a little break.”

“What have you got in mind?” Mara asked.

Eliza smiled mischievously. “Look what I found.” She grinned, holding up an antique key that just happened to unlock the Perrys’ liquor cabinet. It was about time they had a little fun.

the best way to find out a secret? a bottle of grey goose and a game of truth

AN EMPTY VODKA BOTTLE ROLLED DOWN THE THREADBARE carpet.

“Here’s another one.” Eliza hiccupped, grabbing another bottle from her bag.

“No thanks—I’m done,” Mara said.

“No way, if I’m having another, everyone else is, too.”

Jacqui held up her glass. She wasn’t one to argue with that.

Stealing a couple of bottles from the Perry stash seemed totally appropriate, given how they had been slaving away. It was sort of like a bonus, Eliza had told herself.

“Let’s play truth,” Eliza decided, and spun the bottle around.

It stopped in front of Jacqui.

“What do you want to ask me?” Jacqui asked, thinking the game was sort of fun for being a little wicked. Plus Luca had called earlier to say could they meet at eleven for drinks at Turtle Crossing instead, so she had lots of time to kill with the roommates.

“Have you ever been in love?” Eliza asked, thinking she would start it off easy.

Jacqui blew out a puff of smoke and considered the question. “Of course.”

“Are you in love now?” Mara asked.

“Maybe,” Jacqui hedged.

“The game is called TRUTH!” Eliza said.

“Okay, okay. Yes. I’m in love.” Jacqui giggled. She told them about Luca, the guy she had come all across the globe to be with, and how they had gotten reacquainted very, very quickly. It was the same as it ever was. Or was it? She didn’t tell them, but Luca never took her out on proper dates. Instead they spent an awful lot of time in his bedroom or in dingy, out-of-the-way crab shacks in the North (known by most as the “Wrong”) Fork.

“I’m just not digging the scene this year, Jac,” Luke had explained one evening when they were getting ready to drive all the way to some ramshackle bar on Shelter Island for what he called “the best hamburgers in the Hamptons.” Jacqui didn’t think the burgers at the Dory were anything to write home about, but she had found her man and as long as they were together, she was happy.

Jacqui spun the vodka bottle, which pointed toward Mara.

“Shoot,” Mara said. “Ask me whatever you want.”

“How many guys have you slept with?” Eliza asked with a grin. She wanted to shake Mara up a little. The girl was so uptight sometimes.

To Eliza’s surprise, Mara merely rolled her eyes. “One.”

She told them about Jim, her boyfriend back home, not that it had escaped her roommates’ notice that all Mara seemed to do after work was log on to her laptop to send him e-mails or else max out her mobile minutes to chat to him every night. As if it was doing her any good. Even Jacqui could see that every time Mara set her eyes on Ryan Perry, she got all flustered.

“So how was he?” Eliza giggled.

“I don’t believe you guys get follow-up questions!” Mara huffed.

“Not that good, huh?” Eliza teased. She was in a good mood after three vodka tonics.

“How many guys have you slept with?” Mara demanded.

Eliza blushed. “It’s not my turn!”

“C’mon, how many?” Jacqui asked, curious.

“I’m not telling.”

“TRUTH! TRUTH! TRUTH!” Mara demanded.

“All right—fine. None,” Eliza said challengingly.

“Wow.” Jacqui and Mara raised their eyebrows. Now things were getting interesting.

“I almost did once. With my boyfriend Charlie.” Eliza’s face softened. “It was our six-month anniversary, and he’d just given me these earrings,” she said, touching her ear. “I had bought this really cute little outfit from La Perla.”

“What happened?”

“He’d rented a room at the Carlyle, but when we got up there, he fell asleep from all the wine at dinner,” Eliza said. “Then we broke up the next week, so we never got a chance.”

“What happened?” Mara asked.

“Things got—uh, complicated,” Eliza said. “I had to go away.”

“Were you in love with him?” Mara asked.

“Yeah—I think so,” Eliza said. She certainly loved *being* Charlie Borshok’s girlfriend, if not Charlie himself. There were so many perks that went with the title. The gifts (always hand-delivered by special messenger). The vacations (weekends in Locust Valley, skiing in Telluride, surprise jaunts to St. Bart’s). The flat-out envy of everyone in the sophomore class.

“Do you guys keep in touch?” Mara asked.

“Not really. But he’s in the Hamptons this summer,” Eliza said. “I’m sure I’ll bump into him one of these days.”

“Maybe you guys will get back together,” Mara suggested. She couldn’t help it; she was a romantic at heart.

“We’ll see,” Eliza said. “I heard he’s already dating someone else.” She looked at her cell phone for the time. “I’ve got to get ready!”

“Where are you going?”

“There’s some benefit for baby teeth testing at Trupin Castle. It’s this huge mansion this guy built in Southampton; he broke, like, all the zoning laws to do it. I heard he paid six million in fees. Anyway, it’s never been open to the public and the new owner just got it renovated.”

“How do you keep getting into all these things? Don’t they card?” Mara asked.

Eliza took a puff from her cigarette and placed it on a makeshift ashtray (an upside-down Bumble and Bumble styling wax top). “I’ve got a fake ID. And it’s a private event. As long as you’re on the list, it doesn’t matter. It’s two hundred bucks a head, but Kit gave me three tickets. You guys wanna come?” The tonics and secret sharing were making Eliza feel surprisingly benevolent. Maybe these other girls weren’t so bad after all, she thought.

“No, I’m meeting Luca,” Jacqui said.

“I told Jim I’d call.”

“Suit yourselves,” Eliza said, pulling on a pair of skinny jeans and an off-the-shoulder top. She gave her blond mane a shake and took one last look at her reflection in the mirror. “Later,” she said, disappearing in a cloud of smoke and perfume.

It was eleven o’clock. By Hamptons standards, it was early. The evening had just begun.

mara's got something special about her.
it's called being nice.

PROMPTLY AT MIDNIGHT THE ALARM CLOCK IN THE AU pairs' room emitted an angry screech. Mara banged the snooze button down in confusion. She blinked. She had only been asleep for an hour. What was the deal?

Then she remembered.

Zoë.

She hauled herself out of bed and put on her robe and fuzzy slippers. She trudged all the way back to the main house and disabled the burglar alarm only after a few attempts. The house was eerily quiet. Mara walked up the stairs to the second landing to the room in the corner. She opened the door and walked quietly toward the small form huddled on the bed.

"Zoë, get up," she said.

"Huh?"

"Time to go to the bathroom." Mara yawned.

One morning Mara had discovered Zoë drenched up to her neck in her own pee. No one in the household seemed to know or care—least of all her stepmother—that the six-year-old was still wetting the bed. The kid was ruining five-hundred-count Frette sheets by the day. She had also developed an itchy rash on her legs from her nightly emissions. Mara couldn't believe that the girl hadn't been potty trained. So after picking up a well-thumbed copy of Dr. Spock from Bookhampton, every night at midnight Mara stole into the kid's room and walked her to the bathroom. Zoë still couldn't believe it when she woke up in the morning to dry sheets. Mara was a miracle worker.

"I'm done, Mara," Zoë called from the bathroom. She flushed the toilet and walked back to her bed.

"Maybe next time you won't need me to wake you up," Mara said hopefully.

Zoë nodded. Whatever Mara said, Zoë was starting to believe.

Mara closed the door and walked out to the landing just in time to see Ryan Perry walk out of his room, fully dressed to go out. His hair was still wet from the shower, and he smelled like Ivory soap and cologne. He was wearing a linen sweater and dark jeans. Mara thought he could not look any cuter.

“Hey,” he said. They hadn’t seen much of each other since the first night. He had apologized about missing the Scrabble game, citing a friend in a broken-down Jeep as his excuse.

“Hi,” Mara said, wishing she was wearing something other than a plaid robe, bunny slippers, and a ragged nightshirt that read I ONLY SLEEP WITH THE BEST! in big pink bubble letters.

“Cute shirt.” He grinned. “Is it true?”

“My sister gave it to me for my birthday when I was eleven,” Mara said, embarrassed.

“Kids being a pain?” Ryan asked.

“No, I thought Zoë buzzed the intercom. But she’s asleep. What are you up to?” Mara didn’t want to blow up Zoë’s spot, even if she was only six.

“My friends are dragging me out,” he said, cracking his neck. “Some party to save babies; I don’t remember.”

“At Trupin Castle?”

“Yeah.” His face lit up. “You going?”

She laughed, looking down at her slippers. “Does it look like I am?”

His smile faded a little. “Do you want to come? I’m sure it won’t be a problem.”

She shook her head. “No, I’m fine, really.”

“Next time, then.”

“Sure.”

* * *

Mara walked back to the au pairs’ cottage, wondering if she should have taken Ryan up on his offer, and found Jacqui sitting on the front steps, looking dejected. “What happened? Where’s Luca?”

“He canceled,” Jacqui said. “I sat out there in front waiting for him for an hour, and he just called and said he was too tired.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I feel like going out, though. *É uma noite bonita*. Don’t you?”

“I’m in pajamas,” Mara pointed out.

“You could change.”

“I dunno. . . .”

“C’mon. I called Eliza and she said she’d put us on the list if we changed our minds.”

Mara thought about it. In two weeks she hadn’t even set foot outside the Perry estate after dark. And Ryan was going to be there, too. Maybe it was time to see this “other side of the Hamptons” that Eliza was always talking about.

Jacqui looked at her hopefully.

“Oh, sure, what the hell, we’ll go.”

And with that, Mara and Jacqui bounded back to the cottage to change.

there's never a dress code if you're cute enough

NOT FOR THE FIRST TIME SINCE SHE ARRIVED, MARA wondered why everything was so *crowded* in the Hamptons. For a so-called weekend retreat, it was certainly packed with enough people.

She and Jacqui had taken a cab, and they barely had enough between them to pay the meter. They were aghast at the price, but they were still leery of taking full advantage of the “take any car that isn’t being used in the lot” rule, ad plus, the Grey Goose had made them both a little tipsy. When they arrived at the castle gates, Mara was sure they were never getting inside. The people at the door of Trupin Castle couldn’t understand Jacqui’s accent, and when they did, they couldn’t find Eliza’s name on the list. Then even *after* they found it, one of the guards shook his head at Mara’s shoes. “There’s a dress code here, ladies,” he scolded. Jacqui had told her not to wear her Reeboks, but then when she saw Mara’s totally-in-need-of-a-pedicure toes, she acquiesced. Closed toes were a must. Luckily the other bouncer took a shine to Jacqui and decided to let them in anyway.

“You made it!” Eliza said when she spotted them by the bar. “What do you want? I know the bartender,” she added, signaling. They told her, and two drinks were promptly passed over. “Check out the live shark tank,” she said, pointing to the middle of the room, where six-foot-long hammerheads were on display.

Mara tried not to gape. Was there no end to all this excess?

“I got Mara out. Can you believe it?” Jacqui laughed.

“Where’s Luca?”

Jacqui shrugged. “He was busy.”

“Jacqui, you’ve met Lindsay and Taylor,” Eliza said, motioning to her two friends, who were giving the newcomers not-so-subtle once-overs.

“Yeah—the exchange student,” Lindsay said, giving Jacqui a fake smile. Lindsay didn’t like girls that looked like Jacqui. They were way too much competition at a game she could never win.

Exchange student? Mara wondered. *Huh?*

“And this is Mara, another new friend of mine,” Eliza said.

“What *is* that?” Taylor asked, pointing to the Amstel Light in Mara’s hands.

“Beer?” Mara replied.

Taylor made a face. “Ugh, how can you drink that?” she asked. “So foul.” Mara sipped her drink and cautiously looked around. Everyone else was holding brightly colored cocktails in martini glasses. Couldn’t she do anything right? And where was Ryan? She couldn’t see him anywhere, but there were so many people, it wasn’t that surprising.

“Taylor—drinks?” Lindsay asked, even if her glass was only half empty. The two took that cue to make their exit. They’d had enough of Eliza’s “new friends.”

“Don’t look now, but Charlie’s walking over,” Taylor warned before she stalked off, motioning to a short guy in a blue blazer who was making a beeline their way.

Eliza turned around to show her best side and slouched down a little—in her heels she was taller than he was, and she knew he never liked that.

Charlie Borshok was a classic trust fund kid. Rumor had it his family had already spent half a million dollars on restructuring his face. He’d received a nose job, ear tuck, chin lift, cheek implants, forehead lift, and who knows what else to approximate some sort of attractiveness. There had been a documentary made about the lives of super-rich kids that had caused a big mess a little while back. Rumor had it that he was supposed to be one of the stars. “Prenup! Prenup! Prenup! It’s been drilled into my head since I was three!” he’d told the cameras. “And if she won’t sign, she’s a disgusting gold digger anyway.” But the Borshok family had filed enough court injunctions that the director finally gave up on Charlie, and the material was left on the cutting room floor. Of course, everyone heard about it anyway. Eliza knew half a dozen kids who had been interviewed for the film who’s parents had tried to do the same thing.

But none of that mattered to Eliza. Charlie was still the great guy who gave her a pair of two-carat Harry Winston diamond earrings on their six-month anniversary. Now that was love.

“Hey, handsome,” she said, still smiling down at him despite the slouching.

“Hi, Eliza,” Charlie said, a little coldly. He was still pissed that she had dumped him last semester. What was up with that? Hadn’t he given her a pair of two-carat Harry Winston diamond earrings on their six-month anniversary? Wasn’t that love?

“Long time no see,” Eliza said with as much warmth as she could muster. She and Charlie were good together, she was sure of that.

He shrugged. “Heard you were shipped out to Farmington.”

Eliza tried not to look uneasy. She’d been very careful not to mention exactly which boarding school she was supposed to be attending, lest someone in her circle knew someone who prepped at the same school. But somehow word had gone out that she was supposed to be at Miss Porter’s, an elite finishing school for girls in Connecticut.

“Tell me about it. Charlie, I want you to meet my friends, Mara and Jacqui. Guys, this is *Charlie*,” Eliza said triumphantly.

“Nice to meet you. How do you know Eliza?” Charlie inquired, to be polite.

“Oh, we wor—” Mara began.

“She’s my roommate!” Eliza interjected, thinking quickly.

“How do you like it?” Charlie asked.

“It’s not too bad. The kids can be a pain, and our room is really small, but otherwise it’s all right,” Mara said. “Our boss is kind of demanding, though.”

“That’s what we call our house mistress.” Eliza laughed shrilly. She gave Mara frantic warning eyes. “*Boarding school* is *très* lame.”

Boarding school? “Uh . . . right,” Mara said hesitantly. “Yeah. Boarding school. The uniforms suck.” What was going on here? “But, um. Eliza’s the most popular girl there,” she was inspired to add.

“Well, that’s not a surprise,” Charlie said, looking keenly at his ex-girlfriend. Charlie looked at women the way he measured Thoroughbreds—the flanks, the teeth, the shoes, and Eliza passed with flying marks on all counts. He was still smarting from their breakup. The Charlie Borshoks of the world didn’t take too kindly to being dumped out of the blue. But Eliza Thompson was easily still the prettiest girl in East Hampton.

“We should get together sometime,” he said to Eliza, giving her a kiss on the cheek.

Eliza’s eyes misted at his touch. Was she being forgiven? Was Charlie going to let her back into his life? Was everything going to be perfect again? Would he rescue her from that roach-infested attic and book them a suite at the Bentley Hotel?

“Looks like you guys are gonna get back together after all,” Mara said after Charlie had left.

“God, I hope so. Charlie’s parents have the *biggest* yacht!” Eliza said, oblivious to how shallow she sounded.

“But what was THAT all about—us being friends from school?” Mara asked. “And why is Jacqui an exchange student?”

“It’s like this . . .,” Eliza said, biting her lip. Should she tell them? Could she trust them? They had covered for her so far. Who knew Mara could lie like that? They had made her look good in front of Charlie. Maybe she owed them the truth, even without an empty vodka bottle pointing in her direction.

Eliza pulled them to the quietest corner she could find—behind the column, near where several glassy-eyed club kids passed a suspiciously fragrant rolled-up cigarette. She told them the whole story—Buffalo, bankruptcy, and the boarding school fiction.

“I just don’t want my friends to know, especially Charlie, that I’m working here this summer . . . you know? As an au pair . . .”

Mara and Jacqui looked at each other. What was the big deal?

“I know it’s stupid, but I just want to have fun this summer. Is that okay?” she pleaded.

Jacqui yawned. Eliza's confession meant nothing to her. Let the girl tell everyone she was the Queen of England, what did it matter to her? Mara found it harder to understand. There was no shame in living in Buffalo. Hey, she was from Sturbridge. Eliza obviously had some issues, but Mara knew it wasn't her place to tell her that.

“So you guys won't tell anyone?” Eliza asked.

They nodded. Her secret was safe with them.

you call this progress?

IT WAS FINALLY TIME FOR THE FIRST WEEKLY PROGRESS report, even if the girls had been working at the Perrys for almost three weeks. Laurie assured them this time Anna and Kevin would expect them in the screening room at ten o'clock Sunday morning. The girls were nervous as they left their attic room and walked over to the main house.

They had good reason to worry. The kids were getting on their nerves, constantly comparing them to their predecessors. "Astrid made us spicy tuna rolls." "Camille always let us stay up till ten." "Tara was so much prettier than you." The little girls had been late for ballet twice because Mara was the only one who got up early enough to take them and she was always getting lost in the side streets.

Plus they were all a little on edge ever since one of the housemaids confirmed that the original group of au pairs had worked at the Perry house since June but had been let go abruptly without any notice. They still had no clue what had gone down.

"Quick, what was the last book we read to Cody?" Eliza asked.

"*Hop on Pop?*" Mara ventured.

"What's that? Sounds like a porno."

"You have a dirty mind! It's Dr. Seuss!"

"Riiiiight."

"No, I think it was *Pokey Little Puppy*," Jacqui said.

"*Hop on Pokey*. Got it." Eliza nodded.

"What did Madison have for breakfast?" Mara asked frantically.

"What else? An ice cream cone and a tub of Oreos," Eliza said, rolling her eyes. "Like she does every day."

"Noooo—she's on that macrobiotic raw food diet! Eliza, I left the recipes on your bed. You were supposed to take care of that while Jacqui and I brought the boys to krav maga!" Mara groaned. Anna had enrolled her sons in the Israeli martial art, even though the youngest was still awfully prone to falling when he walked. Apparently karate classes just didn't cut it.

"What are their names again?" Jacqui asked.

"Are you kidding me?" Mara demanded.

Jacqui shook her head. There were so many of them, it was hard to keep track. Plus it wasn't like she was around all that much—every minute she could find, she stole off to be with Luca. “Uh—Villiam. And Manhattan?”

“MADISON.”

“*Sí*. Zoöey . . . and . . . Cory?”

“Cody.”

“Zoë. Tell me about Zoë,” Eliza said. “Is there something I should know about her?”

“What's to say? She's still sucking her thumb and acts like a three-year-old rather than a six-year-old. Her yoga teacher complained that she kicked someone in class the other day.”

“*Pobre bebé*,” Jacqui muttered.

“What else do you think they're going to ask?” Eliza said, wringing her hands. She didn't want to mess up the good thing she had going. Mara basically took care of the kids while she and Jacqui spent every night partying and every day nursing their hangovers.

“It'll be fine,” Mara said, even though her heart was pumping hard in her chest. Cody hadn't even stuck a toe in the water. Madison had gained two pounds. William had taken to ramming his head against the walls. Zoë barely recognized the alphabet.

“Well, here goes.” Eliza shrugged, opening the door to the basement screening room the Perrys had installed over the spring. A large sixteen-foot-long and eight-foot-tall screen was set up at the far wall, and each girl took a seat on a black leather Barcalounger.

They waited for ten minutes. Fifteen . . . half an hour . . .

Jacqui fell asleep. Eliza read a copy of *Vogue*, happy to have a bit of quiet time away from the little devils. Mara looked at her watch anxiously.

Finally Esperanza, the Perrys' full-time housekeeper, appeared at the door. “*Dios mío*, I forgot to tell you. Laurie say Miss Anna out shopping and Mister Kevin playing tennis.”

Oh.

tanning is eliza's favorite sport

“MAR, PASS THE SUNTAN OIL,” ELIZA ORDERED FROM behind her wraparound shades. The sun was blinding, but that wasn't the reason she hadn't taken off her sunglasses all day.

Earlier that morning the Doublemint twins had found her wiping up Cody's daily spill in the sun-filled breakfast room. They were dressed in matching skimpy satin nightgowns and cashmere bathrobes. “Ew, gross,” Sugar had said, daintily stepping away from the mess.

“How can you even touch that?” Poppy asked.

Eliza's cheeks burned as she scrubbed the floor on her knees. She hadn't counted on the twins getting up so early.

“Did you call Kit?” Poppy asked her sister. “What time is he picking us up to hit Sunset Beach?”

Sugar gave Poppy a warning look, not so subtly motioning toward Eliza, who could hear them perfectly even if their backs were turned to her.

“I don't know; let's check later,” Sugar said, taking a banana from the fruit bowl. “Hey, Eliza, did you remember to call Jean-Luc to make us a reservation?” Poppy asked.

“Yeah, you're booked for eight-thirty,” Eliza mumbled, picking up the baby from his high chair.

“You made sure we got the corner table, right?”

“That's what they told me.”

“Huh. Well, if we're seated anywhere else, I'm so not going to be very happy,” Poppy threatened.

Sugar shrugged, gave Eliza a half-scornful, half-pitying look, and followed her sister out of the room.

After they were gone, Eliza had quietly sobbed into Cody's Diaper Genie. It just wasn't fair. It just wasn't fair. . . . She was a good person, underneath the fading five-hundred-dollar highlights, and she hadn't done anything in her life to deserve being treated that way. Cody watched her in fascination as she sniffed and blew her nose loudly.

“One day, when you grow up and come into your trust fund, promise me you'll try to get them disinherited,” she told him, cuffing his chin.

Her eyes were still red and puffy from her run-in with the two wicked stepsisters when she went out to join the others by the pool. But that was what big Gucci sunglasses were made

for.

* * *

“Mara—the suntan lotion, please?” Eliza snapped, still holding out her palm.

“Oh, sorry,” Mara said, looking up from the side of the Infinity Edge pool, where she was trying to coax Cody into the water. She was a little annoyed that both Eliza and Jacqui acted like they were getting paid to laze about and sunbathe in their skimpy bikinis. The two of them had been comatose on their lounge chairs all afternoon, hardly lifting a finger to help—even when William fell in and pretended to drown. “Psych!” he’d yelled when Mara dove in after him, still in her shorts and T-shirt. And Madison was stuffing her face, but no one had the energy to find yet another of her junk food hiding places.

The only time the two had shown any motivation was when Kevin Perry passed through on his way to his golf game. Eliza had jumped to help William with his scuba mask, and Jacqui had assumed interest in the book *Zoë* seemed to be reading out loud to herself. Unfortunately, the little girl wasn’t actually reading any words, just pretending to by repeating the instructions her mother gave to their housekeeper every morning. “Make sure you alphabetize the spices in the pantry.” “When my trainer arrives, tell him to meet me in the studio.” “Please make sure you are using the environmentally safe tile cleaner I bought from Amsterdam.”

“So how are our girls doing?” Kevin had asked, his gaze resting on Jacqui’s spectacular MTV-rocks-Cancún body, barely covered by two seashell-trimmed crochet triangles and a matching thong.

“You missed a spot,” he said, coming over to wipe a smudge of white sunblock goop on Jacqui’s shoulders. He rubbed it in with his thumb. “There, that’s better.”

Mara and Eliza blanched. But Jacqui didn’t flinch from his touch and returned his stare with an impudent smile of her own. With her luck, maybe she wouldn’t need to do anything this summer except keep the kids’ dad’s imagination well occupied. Besides, nothing could put a damper on her blissful state. Luca had promised he would take her to the very charming and quaint Farmhouse restaurant later that evening. And it was actually just down the street in East Hampton and not an hour away.

When Kevin departed, Jacqui and Eliza flopped down on their lounge chairs again. Mara sighed. She didn’t know what to do about her two coworkers. She expected them to be closer after William’s sunstroke accident and the night of truth, but no such luck. Jacqui was completely preoccupied with Luca, and Eliza was acting aloof and distant. So the three were only really speaking when they were dealing with the kids or complaining about the Perrys. Although there really wasn’t that much to grouse about—Anna and Kevin were hardly ever home. It wasn’t as if she had no troubles of her own. Lately Jim had been pressuring her to take a weekend off, get on the New London ferry, and get her behind back to Sturbridge.

“Here,” Mara said, getting up and slapping Eliza’s palm with the orange bottle.

“Thanks.”

Eliza massaged the oil into her skin, all the while exorcising the twins' insults from her memory. She counted herself lucky because unlike Sugar and Poppy, she didn't freckle or burn but browned to an even golden color.

She didn't have their money, but at least she could do one thing they couldn't.

She could tan.

eliza gives the gardener a free show

THE SOUND OF CLIPPING SHEARS STARTLED THE GIRLS, and they all turned around to see a very cute dark-haired guy in a holey T-shirt and weathered jeans trimming the hedges. Eliza looked up questioningly, and the guy met her gaze for a second before dropping his eyes back down to his task.

He's checking me out, Eliza thought, a little annoyed but also a little intrigued. She stretched her legs and arched her back as she slowly rubbed her chest and bare flat stomach with SPF 4 carrot juice.

When she turned on her back and untied the strings, she caught him looking again. Ugh. How rude. She rolled her eyes. But a minute later she peeked at him from behind her lowered Gucci wraparounds.

Broad shoulders, blue eyes underneath that icky fishing hat. Hmmm . . . possibly even cute?

As if she would ever be interested.

Let him look, Eliza thought. *It's probably the highlight of his life.*

"C'mon, Cody, it's just the kiddie pool, it's just water, it won't hurt you," Mara said, trying to soothe the trembling child.

"YES, IT WILL! HA HA HA!" William said, splashing on his baby brother as he cannonballed in.

"Ignore him."

"Ah, just throw him in," a jovial voice joked. The girls looked up to see Ryan Perry—bare chested and wearing faded jams, stretching his legs to get ready for his afternoon laps.

"Hey, dude, are you heading over to the thing at Sunset later?" Eliza called. What was it about Ryan Perry? Eliza wondered. He was superhot, but somehow she was never interested. Maybe because she'd known him since they were babies. And seriously, could she ever even think of dating those wretched girls' brother? She'd pass. But it didn't mean she didn't enjoy lording it over Jacqui and Mara that they had a somewhat more special relationship. Her being an old friend of the family and all.

"Maybe." Ryan nodded, but his attention was focused elsewhere. He knelt down to where Mara was wrapping Cody in a towel.

"Hey, when do you want to get together for that long-delayed Scrabble game?" he asked.

“What? Oh . . . sure. Anytime,” Mara said, smiling.

“Cool.”

They grinned at each other, and Ryan dove headfirst into the pool. Mara missed Jim, but it was hard—every time she called, he was either drunk in Andrus Field with his boys or helping customers (who happened to sound awfully young and female) at his uncle’s car dealership. And Ryan was so nice to her. If she’d let herself think about it, she’d have already realized that Ryan was nicer to her than Jim had ever been.

“I forgot to tell you guys—Anna said we get to take the kids to the polo match next week,” Jacqui said. “She left instructions on how to get in the VIP tents.”

At the mention of “VIP,” Eliza’s ears pricked up. “No way—you guys got a box this year?” she yelled to Ryan.

Ryan nodded from the deep end.

“Oh my God! But I have nothing to wear!” Eliza shrieked, sitting up and accidentally flashing the gardener in her excitement. “Oops,” she said, pulling her straps up and retying her top.

The shears tumbled to the ground.

Eliza blushed but resumed her poise.

“What’s the big deal about a polo match?” Mara asked.

“It’s the Mercedes-Benz Polo Match Championship,” Eliza said, in the tone of, “It’s the Presidential Inauguration.” “Everyone will be there. It’s like a really important weekend.”

“Is just game, *si?*” Jacqui asked, shrugging. Polo. Horses. Mallets. Big deal. Give her the World Cup any day.

Eliza shook her head. You couldn’t really *explain* the Hamptons social scene—you either had it or you didn’t, and you either got it or you didn’t. And sadly, Jacqui and Mara just didn’t have it *or* get it. They didn’t even realize how lucky they were to be in East Hampton—they could have been stuck in Montauk, for heaven’s sake.

“It’s not about the game. Nobody really cares who wins. It’s about the champagne in the tents. And between the third and fourth chukker everyone goes out to stomp on the divots! It’s, like, tradition. Stephanie Seymour always comes out in five-inch heels that sink into the mud! One year Prince Harry rode with one of the teams.” Eliza caught her breath, remembering how much fun she had last summer.

“Anyway, everyone gets really dressed up. But casual. Kind of like LA.” She fretted, “But I don’t have anything new. I need to go shopping.” Eliza was itching to spend some of her hard-earned money.

After the canceled progress meeting, the girls were given a handwritten note from Anna and three envelopes stuffed with cash (\$3,334 exactly). *Thanks for all the hard work. So sorry we couldn’t meet today. Giorgio couldn’t reschedule my appointment. Try not to spend it all in one place. XOXO, Anna*, read the thick embossed card.

“Mim demasiado,” Jacqui chimed. “At Daslu, I always had new outfit every week. I saw this great dress from Gucci with a snake belt in *Vogue*. It would look perfect with my new Alain Tondowski slides.”

They both looked so bummed, Mara almost laughed at them. “Hey, if you guys want to go shopping, I can stay here and watch the kids.”

“Are you sure?” Eliza yelped.

“Fantastico!” Jacqui exclaimed. The two began gathering their towels and beach bags, delighted at this unexpected turn of events.

“You guys taking off?” Ryan asked, pulling himself out of the pool, dripping fat drops of water on the limestone.

“Just them,” Mara replied. “They wanted to go shopping, so I offered to stay with the kids.”

“You should go, too. I’ll watch ’em,” Ryan offered.

Mara was floored. “Seriously?” she asked. Shopping did sound tempting—and she was feeling kind of frumpy around those two fashion butterflies. It wouldn’t hurt to get a little something—maybe a new skirt or a pair of those big sunglasses with the *Gs* on the side that everyone seemed to own. Plus she could probably stop by the bank while she was in town to make a deposit.

“Yeah, Mar, c’mon, leave them with him. He’s got nothing to do all day,” Eliza said, giddy at the prospect of an afternoon of her favorite pastime. So giddy that she almost liked the idea of Mara coming along.

“Oh, okay. All right, but we’ll be back in, like, fifteen minutes,” Mara promised.

Fifteen minutes? Eliza and Jacqui eyed each other. Obviously Mara had never been shopping with girls like them before.

main street, east hampton: that's why they invented credit cards

THE GIRLS LINGERED OVER SARIS AND “SUMMER weight” satins at Calypso, where Jacqui picked up another Eres bikini to add to the fifteen *tangas* she had already brought with her, then they hightailed it to Tracey Feith to take a look at the new sundresses, passing by Steven Stolman because Eliza wanted to check if the rainbow-colored Jelly Kellys were in. Sadly, they weren't: they were on wait list and out of stock. At Jimmy's the selection of beaded corset gowns took their breath away.

Next stop: Scoop on the Beach.

“This is my *favorite!*” Eliza said, walking by the racks of terry cloth Juicy tube dresses, pastel-colored Marc Jacobs camisoles and tanks, rows of candy-colored cotton minis, and shelves of James Perse baby T-shirts and shrunken Joie hooded sweaters—the unofficial Hamptons uniform.

The store was filled with emaciated twenty- and thirty-year-old women trying on Petit Bateau T-shirts (made for French toddlers). Dueling mother and daughter tag teams abounded. Mara noticed two distinct breeds—mothers who dressed younger than their daughters in Von Dutch tank tops and terry cloth sweatpants while their daughters wore vintage Chanel jackets, and mothers who dressed exactly like their daughters, both generations in sleeveless black Lacoste dresses and espadrilles.

“Can I help you?” Asked a bubbly salesgirl, about their age, in a T-shirt that read JUICY across the chest. “Looking for something in particular?” she asked Mara, who looked a bit hesitant, while Eliza and Jacqui went through the racks with feverish passion.

Mara shrugged. “Not really.”

“Just let me know if I can help you in any way!” the salesgirl chirped, and left Mara alone to wait on more savvy customers.

Mara noticed most of the shoppers clustered around several tables stacked with folded jeans and decided to follow their lead. There were blue jeans, dark blue jeans, pin-striped jeans, colored jeans, and “dirty” jeans. Bell-bottom. Low rise. Super-low rise. Flared. Slim. Boot leg. Jeans with cargo pockets in the front, on the butt, or on the thigh. There were so many permutations of infinitesimal difference. Yet everyone around Mara was discussing which ones they already owned and which ones they still had to buy. Mara turned over a price tag. \$175! For a pair of blue jeans that didn't look too different from her own trusty Levi's.

“Mom, what do you think?” a sylph of a girl asked, walking out of the dressing room wearing a nude chiffon slip dress with a plunging neckline.

Her mother, a knockout with toned Linda Hamilton arms and a taut midriff, shook her head. “Don’t you think it’s a little too much for someone your age?” she asked.

“I’m twelve!” her daughter argued.

A thirty-year-old woman walked out of her dressing room wearing the same exact dress. She looked at the teenager and sighed. “I would kill to have your waist.”

* * *

The energetic salesclerk helped Jacqui and Eliza as they both disappeared into the dressing rooms underneath a humungous pile of clothing. Mara hung behind, her eyes widening at the prices. She found a cute bandanna-printed sleeveless blouse but immediately put it back when she saw how much it cost. \$250! For a cotton top? Was there nothing in the store under fifty bucks? Yup—a pile of cotton belts in a bucket by the door. Eliza emerged from the wooden shutter doors in a slinky bias-cut Diane von Furstenberg wrap dress.

“Omigod, that is totally adorbs on you! Reese bought the same one yesterday,” the salesgirl gushed. Dropping a celebrity name was just the thing to ensure a quick sale; even Mara knew that.

“You don’t say?” Eliza asked. “I’ll take it!”

The salesgirl grinned. Mara knew that smile: it said *sucker*, but Eliza was too pleased with her new dress to notice.

“Find anything?” Eliza asked Mara as she tugged at the under-fifty-dollar belt and critically ascertained her figure in the mirror.

“No, uh, I’ll just wait for you guys. Maybe I should get back,” Mara said.

“What are you talking about!” Eliza said, marching over. She pulled out a body-hugging red strapless Shoshanna dress that came with a pair of matching red lace underwear. “Try this on. With your dark hair, this is going to look perfect on you!”

“I don’t know . . .,” Mara said.

The mother and daughter who were arguing about the sexy chiffon dress walked up to the register. “Get out of my way, Mom, I’m getting it,” the daughter said, holding the hanger and brandishing her Visa card. “It’s perfect for Tiffany’s bat mitzvah!”

Her mother sighed and gave Mara a look that said: *Kids, what can you do?*

Mara didn’t return a sympathetic glance. She wasn’t sure she approved of twelve-year-olds in lingerie chic, but she was from Sturbridge, so what did she know. She had already spotted girls Zoë’s age wearing Porn Star T-shirts on the beach.

Jacqui walked out of her dressing room in a mini Polo shirt and the briefest striped denim shorts. “What do you guys think?”

“That is to die!” Eliza screeched. “Those look insane on you. Jac, don’t you think Mara should try this on?” Eliza asked, holding up the dress.

“Is *perfecto*. You must. We insist,” Jacqui agreed. The two of them pushed Mara into a dressing room.

“Oh, all right, but just for fun,” Mara said. Jeez, it was so tight, how did anyone get their hips into this thing? She zipped it up in the back and looked behind her at the mirror. It barely covered her butt! So that was what the matching underwear was for.

“Hey, guys, what do you think?” she asked, stepping gingerly out of the dressing room.

“*Muy bonito*,” Jacqui pronounced.

“What did I tell you?” Eliza asked. “But you need shoes. Sorry, but those Reeboks aren’t going to cut it and don’t you dare think you can wear your cowboy boots with that.”

Jacqui nodded and picked out a pair of matching red plastic Sigerson Morrison high-heeled flip-flops. “Here, put these on,” she said, slipping them on Mara’s feet.

The extra height lengthened Mara’s legs, which were getting good and brown from their daily excursions to Georgica Beach. “Perfect!” Eliza crowed. “Except for the hair. Have you always worn it that way?”

“Why? Is there something wrong with it?”

Eliza tut-tutted. “We’re going to have to let Pierre have a hand in it.” She punched some numbers on a cell phone. “Pierre? It’s Eliza. Do you think you could come and visit me later? I’ve got a friend who really needs your help.”

“Jim would never let me wear this in public,” Mara said, scrutinizing herself in the mirror.

“Who’s Jim?”

“My boyfriend,” Mara reminded them. The two of them seemed to have some kind of amnesia whenever Mara told them anything about her life back home. “He’s kind of pissed at me already for leaving him this summer.”

“Right. Mr. Numero Uno,” Eliza teased. “Why? Can’t he visit? Aren’t you from Boston? That’s only four hours away.”

“Sturbridge. And yeah, it’s not that far, but Jim’s kind of a homebody.”

“God. What a baby,” Eliza said. “If I were him, I’d want to keep an eye on you!”

“And who cares about Jim? *Esqueça-se dele*. That’s going to blow Ryan’s mind!” Jacqui said.

“What do you mean?” Mara squeaked.

“Don’t tell us you don’t notice the way he looks at you. And he’s supernice to you all the time.” Eliza smirked. Shopping always made Eliza more magnanimous.

“He’s nice to all of us,” Mara said stubbornly.

“Have it your way.” Eliza shrugged.

By habit Jacqui began putting away the sweaters they had disturbed. She was enjoying herself as she folded the cardigans into perfect squares. But as she laid them on the shelf, she looked out the window and almost dropped the whole load. Outside was Luca! Her heart started to beat. They almost never saw each other during the day anymore. He always had some sort of excuse—he had to go back to the city for a family event or he had to go on a fishing trip with his dad.

“Luca! Luca! *Um momento!*” she said excitedly, heading for the door, still wearing all of the store’s clothes. She scrambled out to say hello, and just as she hit the sidewalk, she was pulled roughly back into the store by the ever-vigilant Scoop salesgirl.

“Whoa! Miss! Where do you think you’re going?” she said with a viselike grip on Jacqui’s elbow.

“Hey! Jacqui! It’s great to see you! Nice Polo!” Luke hollered from across the street without slowing his pace.

Huh. Jacqui reluctantly followed the salesgirl inside. Maybe he didn’t want to spoil the romantic dinner they’d planned that evening? Somehow that didn’t feel likely, and making all these excuses for Luca was starting to wear on her.

“Seriously, I can’t buy this. I can’t wear it and I can’t afford it,” Mara said.

“What are you talking about?” Eliza asked. “I get 25 percent off at this store. VIP discount, hello. That dress was made for you. And didn’t we just get paid?”

Jacqui paid for her outfit, and Eliza put her purchases on the table. A Marc Jacobs Stella handbag, several C&C California T-shirts, four pairs of Jimmy Choo sandals, and a new Theory dress. The whole thing amounted to five hundred dollars more than she had actually made. “Put the rest on my Visa,” she told the salesgirl.

Mara hesitated, but she did need a new dress, and those flip-flops were so cute.

“All right, I’ll take it,” she said reluctantly.

Shopping bags in hand, Eliza led them to her *second*-most favorite shop in East Hampton, Scoops—with an *s*—where they all ordered chocolate parfait sundaes.

contrary to *queer eye* logic, not all gay men dress well

THAT NIGHT, WHEN ALL FOUR KIDS HAD FINALLY BEEN put to bed, the three au pairs hung out in their room and made plans.

“You coming out, Mara?” Eliza asked. “Don’t say no again!”

Mara was reluctant, but it wasn’t as if she had anything better to do. She had already walked Zoë to the bathroom, so she didn’t have to stay home for that. And Jim was giving her the cold shoulder after she had told him she couldn’t take the weekend off to visit. She had even sent him a care package from Barefoot Contessa, complete with scones and muffins, as a guilt present, but it had done nothing to thaw his temper.

“Oh, okay. But we’re not going to stay long, right? The girls have ballet in the morning.”

“Yeah, we’ll stay for, like, a minute,” Eliza said, winking at Jacqui.

Mara pulled out her new red dress.

“WHAT are you doing?” Eliza asked, taking it from her and putting it back on the hanger.

“Um, wearing my new dress?”

“Sweetie. This is for the polo match. It’s all wrong for Jet East. This is a day dress. Also, you don’t want to show up at polo wearing something everyone’s already seen. Do I have to spell out everything?” Eliza sighed. “Here—put this on,” she said, handing Mara one of her own shirts—a clingy, black jersey halter with a plunging neckline. “You can wear it with your jeans; those are cool. And your new flip-flops.”

Jacqui came out of the bathroom wearing a black lace top and silk cargo pants that she had bought especially for her date with Luca that night. She stood in front of the cracked antique mirror with Mara.

“Don’t pull your hair back; wear it down,” Jacqui said. Pierre, Eliza’s hairdresser friend and self-proclaimed “Queen of Hair,” had come over that afternoon to give all the girls a haircut gratis in exchange for posing with their new styles for his portfolio. Jacqui started to brush Mara’s hair expertly. “See, you keep the flip—here, and kind of smooth it down here—but shake it out and make it all messy-messy.”

Jacqui brought out her twenty-pound, professional makeup artist’s trunk and began to apply foundation, powder, eyeliner, eye shadow, and lipstick on Mara.

When Jacqui was done, Mara looked at herself with the hand mirror Jacqui provided. “Don’t you think it’s too much?” She’d never worn this much makeup in her life, not even counting the spring formal she had gone to with Jim last year.

“You look almost better than me!” Eliza said, a little enviously. “*Almost* being the operative word,” she joked.

Mara laughed.

They said good-bye to Jacqui, and Eliza pumped her fist in the air when she saw the twins hadn’t left yet. Their Mercedes SUV was still parked in the driveway.

Eliza clambered into the front seat. “Get in,” she told Mara.

“What about the twins?”

“Anna and Kevin said we could take any car in the lot.” Eliza shrugged. “The Volvo’s still available.” She grinned wickedly.

A line of paparazzi stood in front of the red carpet, hollering at various people. Eliza walked slowly, hoping they would snap some shots, but they were distracted by blond pop starlet Chauncey Raven and her crew of bodyguards. The eighteen-year-old most famous for baring her toned midriff all the way down to her pelvis and declaring her virginity while sucking face with a crew of Hollywood hotheads was the latest tabloid phenomenon. “CHAUNCEY! CHAUNCEY! OVER HERE! CHAUNCEY!” the photographers screamed in desperation, but the star stayed completely hidden behind her seven-foot-tall army of former linebackers.

Eliza and Mara entered the club after her without any fanfare. Inside, Eliza began scanning the place for her friends and disappeared into a back room, losing Mara in the crowd. Mara stood by the wall, holding a martini glass and feeling a little out of place. She put down her drink and hit the ladies’ room, where she found a chubby Chinese guy stuck halfway through the back window, his arms dangling helplessly over the porcelain sink.

“Excuse me?”

“Help! You, there, in the two-hundred-dollar top and the Jennifer Aniston haircut! Help me!”

Mara took one of his hands—the one not holding an enormous Nikon camera—and pulled him inside.

“Oh, good Lord!” the guy said, wiping his brow. “I should really stay away from the buffet table next time. Too many free meals are not good for *moi!*”

The man in front of Mara was a pint-sized Chinese guy with an enormous belly and a double chin. He wore a leopard-print jacket over a paisley shirt and shiny, polyester pants. Everything was too small and too tight—as if he had been caught off guard by some sudden expansion of his girth.

“Lucky Yap!” he said, holding out a hand for Mara to shake.

“Mara Waters.”

“My savior! I need to get a shot of Chauncey Raven or my boss is going to have my ass. The little tart didn’t even stop for photos outside the club. And they wouldn’t let me in even though I’m on the list.”

“Wow, they can do that?”

“Honey, they specialize in that! Her PR guy is a total prick. But then, they weren’t too happy with the shot we got of her last week.” Lucky sniggered. “Girlfriend passed out at Tavern and had to be carried off the dance floor. *Star* magazine paid a hundred grand for the exclusive.”

Mara snickered. “C’mon, I think I saw an alternate entrance to the room back there.” They headed to the hole between the curtains that separated the VIP tables from the rest of the riffraff. Inside, Chauncey was straddling her latest paramour with great gusto. “Keep it sexy!” Lucky said, angling his camera for a shot. “That’s right, baby, grind it! Woo-hoo! Show me the money!” His flashbulbs barely made a dent in the laser strobe light that shone to the beat of the music.

“Thank God her thong was showing. They always pay more for undie shots,” Lucky said, putting his camera away. “You’re a lifesaver.”

“No worries.” Mara smiled. Meeting Lucky was the most fun she’d had so far that evening.

“I’m going to do a lap to check if there’s anyone else worthy of being plastered all over the party pages with spinach on their teeth. Do you know if the Perry twins are here? Sugar and Poppy?” he asked.

“Um . . . not sure.” Mara giggled, wondering if the twins would hazard the Hamptons nightlife in the crappy Volvo. *Crappy?* Apparently the Hamptons really were getting to Mara.

She said a warm good-bye to the prickly paparazzo. But now that their little adventure was over, she didn’t know whether to go or stay. She was still deciding when she felt someone brush by her.

“Hey, you,” Ryan said, bumping her shoulder with his fist lightly.

“Ryan! Hi!” she said, so happy to see a familiar face that she impulsively gave him a hug and a kiss on the cheek.

Ryan was suddenly glad it was so dark in there since he was blushing to the roots of his blond hair. “Wow, you look great!” he said, stepping back to take a good look.

“Because for once I’m not covered in baby drool?” Mara teased.

“No, no, I mean, you always—er, look good. I mean, I . . .,” he said, uncharacteristically fumbling for the right words. “So, uh, I thought you said you were staying in tonight,” Ryan finished lamely, trying to change the subject.

“Can’t a girl change her mind?”

“I’m glad she did,” Ryan said, a little more seriously than was necessary. “Anyway, Eliza said you were here. Come on back and meet some of my friends.”

“Sure.”

He took her hand and led her to the far corner of the room, where a bunch of guys were lounging on velvet couches, smoking stogies, their girlfriends perched daintily on their laps.

“Hey, everybody, meet my friend Mara,” Ryan said. “Mara, that’s pretty much everybody.”

His friend! Mara thought, elated at the introduction. *He didn’t say meet the au pair! Or meet the girl who’s working for us this summer! His friend!*

The tall guy with the shaved head sitting nearest to Mara made as if to kiss her hand. Mara laughed as Ryan swatted his pal’s hand away. “Enough of that,” he said. “Can I get you a drink?” he asked her.

“Sure, why not?”

As they turned to the direction of the bar, Lucky Yap walked by. “Hey! Mr. Perry!” he said, blowing Ryan a kiss.

“What’s going on, Lucky?” Ryan said, laughing. “How’s Frederic?” Like everyone in the Hamptons, Ryan knew Lucky Yap as über-party-photographer Frederic O’Malley’s right-hand man.

“He’s all right. In Cannes for the festival. Leaving me with the B-listers! There’s no one here! I haven’t even seen your sisters all night. Let me get a photo of the two of you instead!” Lucky ordered.

Ryan and Mara looked at each other questioningly, then Ryan put his arm around Mara’s shoulders and they both turned to the camera.

“Perfect! Marvelous! Sexy!” Lucky enthused. Afterward he let them take a peek at the results on his digital viewfinder. Lucky whipped out his notebook. “Ryan Perry and Mara Waters, right?” he said, scribbling their names.

Ryan raised his eyebrows at Mara, impressed that the town’s most social shutterbug already knew her name.

Mara only smiled mysteriously.

somewhere in the sticks (aka hampton bays), jacqui is getting in touch with her feelings

JACQUI VELASCO WAS . . . WHAT WAS THAT WORD that Mara used? Bummed? Yes, bummed. Really, truly bummed.

She should be really, truly, totally, completely happy at being reunited with Luca. In fact, she had spent the last month telling herself how perfectly happy she was, how glad she was that everything was working out just like in her wildest dreams. But that was the problem—Jacqui knew that if she really felt happy, she wouldn't have to keep reminding herself how happy she was. As the weeks dragged on, miserable seemed like a more accurate description of her feelings. Yes, miserable, Jacqui decided.

Luca had negged on the romantic dinner again. Instead of taking her to the Farmhouse, he'd suggested a "romantic" clambake on the beach. They had driven an hour to a small, rundown restaurant where Luke had bought two soggy oyster po'boys and picked up a six-pack of beer. They weren't even alone. His friend Leo had met them on the beach.

At least the boys had made a roaring campfire, or else Jacqui would have frozen in her silk and lace. She shivered under her thin cotton sweater and wondered when she would be able to go home.

The other thing that was making her miserable: Luca wasn't even paying her the least bit of attention. That was the heart of the problem. She wouldn't have minded at all—they could eat at Burger King every night and she wouldn't care, but she was beginning to realize that maybe he wasn't quite the guy she had met in Sao Paolo. In fact, all he'd done all night was roll a couple of fat stogies filled with tobacco and pot and smoke them by himself. He'd offered Jacqui and Leo a few puffs, but pot made Jacqui's head ache, and Leo had declared himself fine with the beer.

"I'm out of rolling *papiere!* Nobody panic!" he said, laughing hysterically at his own joke.

Jacqui watched him silently. He was the love of her life, but when he was like this, she had to face it, he was kind of a jackass.

Luke got up from the blanket and ran down the beach to where he'd parked the car behind some sand dunes.

“You having a good time this summer?” Leo asked, propping himself up with his right arm and looking up at her. He didn’t have Luke’s startling blue eyes or fine, Roman nose, but he had a kind face.

“Yes. Is been nice,” Jacqui said politely, hugging her knees to her chest.

“Don’t mind Van Varick. He can cut up kind of rough sometimes,” he said gently.

Jacqui nodded, not really sure what he’d said.

“So what’s Brazil like?”

Jacqui thought about it. What a question. But soon enough she was telling Leo all about her life back home—her two younger brothers, who still lived at home in Campinas, her life in the big city with her grandmother, who was sending her to the prestigious Santa Anita convent, where the president’s daughters were educated, how her family wasn’t rich, so she had gotten a job at Daslu to help pay her tuition.

Leo was an avid and interested listener, asking her all the right questions and prodding her for more details. Jacqui found herself feeling so much better just to have someone who was actually interested in what she had to say.

The two of them were laughing at some particularly funny soccer play-by-plays she was recounting when Luke rounded up the hill.

“What’s so funny?” he asked suspiciously.

“Nothing—nothing,” Jacqui said, still chuckling at the David Beckham fumble.

Luke looked pointedly at his friend, who shrugged and turned away. Jacqui knew that look. It said: *Easy, man.*

Luke crouched next to Jacqui and whispered in her ear, “Hey, babe, you wanna go for a walk? So we can get a chance to talk without this clown around?” he asked, winking lasciviously.

Jacqui nodded and let Luke help her up.

“Just going to take Jacqui for a moonlight stroll,” he said to Leo.

Luke led her to a secluded spot near the bushes. “Come down here with me,” he said, patting the sand.

“Look at the moon,” Jacqui said as she sat down beside him. “Remember how you told me that poem about the stars?” she mused.

“Mmm,” Luke said, not having any idea what she was talking about.

“Walt Whitman. You read it to me when we were camping outdoors. ‘The Astronomer’ . . . ‘the Astronomer’ something?”

“‘When I heard the learn’d astronomer,’ ” Luke said impatiently.

In São Paulo, Luke had recited this poem to her when they were looking up at the night sky.

Yeah, Dalton had taught him something, but he wasn't about to repeat that poem—or that moment with her now. He had other things on his mind, and before she could ask him another question, he was on top of her, slipping a hand up her shirt. She flinched as he stuck his wet tongue in her ear. He smelled like shellfish.

“You know how pot makes me so horny . . . and you look on fire tonight, babe. God, you don't know what you do to me,” he said, slobbering all over her neck and shoulders.

Jacqui blinked up at the fat, white moon and the perfectly silent stars. It wasn't romantic and it wasn't making her happy, but somehow, she wanted her Luca all the same.

ryan finds out mara is full of surprises

THE PARTY WAS OVER. CHAUNCEY RAVEN AND HER thirty-person entourage were long gone. The only people left at the club were desperate single people who were still hoping to go home lucky, hard-core alcoholics, and a stray cocktail waitress or two. Even the publicists and the gossip columnists had gone to bed. Eliza had taken the Mercedes SUV, though, so Mara was still there, sitting alone in the back room with Ryan.

“I guess we should go,” Mara said as the overhead lights blinked on and off.

“You think?” Ryan grinned.

They walked out to where he had parked the Aston Martin convertible, one of the few cars left in the lot. Even the valet guys had punched out. Ryan opened the door and Mara stepped inside. “I didn’t realize it was so late,” she said.

She rubbed her eyes, smearing her eye makeup all over her face.

“God, I look like a mess!” she said, pulling down the visor to check out the damage in the mirror.

Ryan turned. “You make a pretty cute raccoon.”

She wiped her face with tissues, amazed at how much makeup came off. Jacqui had really outdone herself.

They drove back to the house in comfortable silence. The night air smelled fresh and a little wet, and in the quiet of the night Mara could feel what made this place so special. Yes, all that posturing all the time was a little much, but it was beautiful.

“Well, good night . . .,” Ryan said, helping Mara up the steps.

“Good night.” She smiled at him sleepily. She walked down the garden path toward the servants’ cottage.

Ryan lingered at the doorway, his forehead knit in a frown. “Hey, are you going to bed?” he called.

“I was . . .,” Mara said tentatively.

“I thought maybe I’d build a bonfire on the beach. It’s a nice night, and, well, I’ve got some sleeping bags.”

Mara smiled into the dark. “That sounds great. Just let me change.”

A few minutes later Mara watched as Ryan dug a hole in the sand and filled it with firewood and kindling. She was wearing a T-shirt and pajamas and had scrubbed off all the makeup.

He struck a match. The newspapers flared up, but the firewood didn't catch.

"I think they're a little damp."

"Here, let me help," Mara said. She was an expert at building fires. Her parents liked to heat their house with their woodstove through the harsh New England winters; they thought it was quaint, even though Mara knew there wasn't much quaint about their single-story ranch. "You just need a little more kindling . . . and blow on the smoke. . . ." She arranged the sticks into a teepee over the newspaper, and when the initial blaze died down, a few red embers remained.

"Blow, blow!" she told Ryan, and the two of them huffed and puffed on the small sparks. The sparks became larger and finally the wood caught fire. Mara and Ryan cheered.

"I found some marshmallows in the pantry," Ryan said, opening a bag. He grabbed a long stick from the cattail bushes and stuck one on. He handed it to Mara. She held it over the fire, watching the sugar melt into a brown glaze.

"When I was little, I always left the marshmallows in too long and they would burn and fall off," Mara said, taking a bite.

"But you have to leave them on for a long time! That's when they taste best!" Ryan argued.

He left his stick in the fire, and the marshmallow sizzled and fell into the flames.

"See, I told you!" Mara laughed at his dismayed expression.

Ryan speared another marshmallow. "This time you're not getting away!" he said sternly to his food.

They sat in companionable silence for a while. Mara dug her bare toes into the cold sand until it started to feel wet a few inches down. She could see the smallest orange reflection of their fire as the waves rolled in again and again. Behind them were the biggest houses she'd ever seen, but it was the beach that impressed her the most.

"I always thought I'd stay here forever," Ryan said, breaking Mara's silent reverie.

"What do you mean?"

"Growing up, when we used to come out to the Hamptons, I never wanted to leave come September. I promised myself that when I was older, I would live here year-round."

"It must get so cold, with the ocean right there."

"Oh, it's awful," Ryan said cheerfully. "But there's no one here. That's what's so great about it."

"But now?"

"I don't know. The house isn't the same."

“I’m sorry.” Eliza had told her once that the house used to be different—more comfortable, less like a big showpiece.

“Don’t be. It’s not a big deal. I mean, what would I do here anyway?” He shrugged. “What about you—what did you think you wanted to do when you were little?”

“I wanted to be a scientist,” Mara said. “When I was nine, I was sure that’s what I wanted to do. I thought that would be cool, wearing a lab coat, looking in microscopes.”

“And now?”

“Well, I kind of suck at science! And I hate math. So no, I don’t think I’m going to be a scientist.”

“What do you want to do, then?”

Mara thought about it. What she really wanted to do was become a writer. She wasn’t sure what kind, maybe a journalist. Or maybe the kind that wrote books. But it seemed like such an impossible thing. Like saying she wanted to win an Academy Award. It just wasn’t going to happen. Besides, her parents always said if she made it to college, she should be a lawyer or a banker, someone who made a lot of money. She couldn’t afford her dreams.

“I don’t know . . . maybe a writer,” she whispered. For some reason, she felt comfortable telling him. Maybe it was because he was so easy to talk to or maybe because she knew he wouldn’t ask her to explain herself.

“Cool.” He nodded.

They ate a few more marshmallows and kept talking on and off. Mara liked the silent time between the talking as much as she did their conversations. She never mentioned Jim because for once it was nice to not just be “Jim Mizekowski’s girlfriend.” To Ryan she was just Mara, and for once Mara felt pretty good about just being herself.

As the sky started to show signs of a new day, they zipped themselves into their sleeping bags like beach caterpillars. And then, in a quiet moment, while they listened to the waves crashing, Mara and Ryan fell asleep.

* * *

The next day Page Six ran two photos. One of Chauncey Raven straddling the current Wimbledon champ in the VIP room. The other was of Mara and Ryan, under the headline “Has the Perry Heir Found Love?”

eliza's postmortem brunch of pancakes and page six

"OH. MY. GOD. I AM STILL SOOO WASTED," LINDSAY rasped, chasing down a Bloody Mary with an unfiltered Camel. "I am, like, hoovering these," she said, alternately blowing smoke and smashing her face with a handful of french fries.

"Jesus, you should have seen me last night," Taylor said. "I totally threw up all over Kit's mom's bathroom."

"Oh, man, at least you guys had people to drive you home. I basically woke up in a ditch!" Eliza hooted. "I was, like, excuse me, how did I get here exactly?"

The three were playing drunken one-upmanship, where whoever was suffering from the most severe case of hangover won. They were at their usual table at 75 Main Street, a cute corner café in Southampton, checking out the scene from behind dark sunglasses.

"Psst. Check it out." Lindsay nudged her friends as a famous comedian's comely wife passed by with a double stroller.

"And isn't that . . .?" Taylor asked, looking over her shoulder at the bleary-eyed star of the latest romantic comedy flop.

"Uh-huh. Check out that face-lift. She can't fool anybody. My mom said she's, like, fifty-two."

"No way!" Eliza hissed, loving every minute. "*People* magazine said she was thirty-eight!"

"The morning sun ain't too kind," Lindsay decided.

They attacked their pancake- and french-toast-stacked plates, feeling young and superior.

"I brought the paper," Taylor said, digging into her bag for a rolled-up *New York Post*. She flipped straight to their favorite section: Page Six.

"Linds, there's a photo from your party!" Taylor crowed, showing them.

HAS THE PERRY HEIR FOUND LOVE? the headline blared, over the picture of Ryan and Mara.

"Oh my God! Don't tell me Ryan Perry has a girlfriend already!" Lindsay cried. "I'm so pissed! And at my party, too!"

Technically, Ryan and his friends were just hanging out at the club. He hadn't even known about the party. But Eliza and Taylor wisely didn't correct their friend's assumption.

“Give me that!” Lindsay said, grabbing the paper from Taylor’s manicured fingernails. “Who IS she?”

“She’s gorgeous, whoever she is,” Taylor observed.

“Lucky bitch!” Lindsay hissed.

“And she’s wearing the Chloë top I wanted last season, but they sold out!”

“Why does everyone have to be so much cuter than me?” Lindsay complained. “It’s so not fair. She’s like a total babe and, of course, she gets, like, the hottest guy.”

“Mara Waters . . . Waters . . . I wonder if that’s Tobin Easley’s cousin? You know, I think I’ve seen her around somewhere.”

Eliza said nothing, feeling a tiny twinge of realization at how superficial this all was. If only these girls knew Mara was an au pair, they would never talk about her like this. She wouldn’t even register on their radar. As she examined the picture, Eliza also felt a rush of pride. Mara did look awesome, and it was all because of her . . . and Jacqui, of course, but Eliza liked taking most of the credit.

“I dunno, guys. I mean, I think she’s a little high waisted, don’t you think? Her legs are, like, up to her chin!” Eliza said. As if that could be in any conceivable way a bad thing.

“Yeah, you’re right,” Lindsay agreed all too eagerly.

Soon the three are dissecting all of Mara’s “flaws.” Her eyes were too big. Her nose was way too small. Her smile, too wide. She was practically Quasimodo when they were through with the virtual dissection.

“And I don’t think she’s Tobin’s cousin. I heard she’s *working* for the Perrys,” Eliza said, whispering the scandalous news. “She’s practically the help!”

“Oooh . . .” Lindsay and Taylor were breathless with excitement. This was called hitting pay dirt.

“I heard it from Sugar and Poppy, and they would know,” Eliza said. Sure, she was selling Mara out—but she also wanted to know what her friends thought of the whole deal.

“Ryan Perry’s dating—the maid?” Taylor asked, wide-eyed.

“No, she’s, like, the au pair or something,” Eliza explained, backtracking.

“Au pair!” Lindsay snorted. “Is that what they’re calling them now? Isn’t that just a euphemism for foreign sex slave?”

Eliza wanted to tell them that only one of them was foreign and that most of their duties were 100 percent real and dealt with four children under the age of twelve, but she bit her tongue.

“Ryan’s dating the housekeeper! That’s hilarious!” Taylor cackled loudly.

“So he’s, like, slumming,” Lindsay said smugly. “We should inform the *Post*! Tell Page Six we have a bigger scoop!”

Eliza had a difficult time keeping the smile plastered to her face.

After the girls were done, they threw down the newspaper. “So, like, what’s up with boarding school? Are you staying there next year, too?” Lindsay asked.

“Yeah, I think so. Hey, are you guys going to the polo match?” she asked, changing the subject.

“Of course,” Lindsay said. “You?”

“Charlie and I are sort of going together,” she confessed with a smug smile.

“So what’s up? You guys back together?”

“Not really,” Eliza said. “Not yet, anyway.” But he did ask her to be his date at the polo match, and she had told him she would meet him there. She was also supposed to be working at the event, taking care of the kids. But that was fine since Charlie was actually playing on one of the teams and wouldn’t be in the tents much. He hadn’t exactly said anything about getting back together, but she was hoping that was all about to change at the polo match. Thank God she had bought that hot little wrap dress. Charlie wouldn’t be able to resist.

“Anyway, ladies, this was hella fun. But I got to go.” A little of the California talk that was so big in Buffalo right now snuck in as she threw down a twenty on the table.

Lindsay waved it away. “I have my dad’s Visa. Why do you have to leave so early? I thought we were going to go shopping after brunch.”

“Nah, I told my aunt I’d go to some art exhibit in Water Mill with her today,” Eliza lied. In fact, she was due to pick up Mara, Jacqui, and the kids at Fifi Laroo, where Anna had booked the kids for massage treatments.

As she drove down the street, her friends’ words rang in her head. “Au pair is just another word for mistress on the payroll!” “He’s dating THE MAID?”

God help her if they ever found out the truth about her.

prima donnas got nothing on these girls

MADAME SUZETTE WAS A FORMER PRIMA BALLERINA. She had danced for Balanchine and Baryshnikov, and was once the star of the American Ballet Theater. She'd been linked with many rich and famous men, and earned the adulation of the cultured elite. It was one of the reasons why her studio was one of the most sought-after in the Hamptons.

On a bright Saturday morning, a group of little girls in black leotards and pink tights and ballet slippers stood in order of height against the mirror.

“Plié, plié, grand plié, plié,” Madame ordered briskly, walking up and down the barre. “Pointe tendu,” she directed, inspecting the girls’ outstretched toes.

“Szzt! Madeeezun!” Madame called. “*Arretez!* Toes point out! Like theez!” Madame stretched her foot to show Madison how her toe was arched out in a sharp point. Madison fumbled and tried to imitate it. Madame sighed.

“Allez! From the top! Plié, plié, grand plié . . .”

During the course of the lesson, Madame returned to Madison’s place several times to correct her posture, her arm movements, her awkward *rond de jambes*.

“Toes in, ankles out! What do you not *comprenez?*” Madame asked, as she forced Madison’s feet into fourth position. Several girls snickered. Madison’s cheeks burned.

“Isn’t that your sister?” someone asked Zoë.

After the grueling hour, the studio assistant set out milk and cookies as treats for the students, and Madame handed out performance grades on embossed note cards.

“Madison, you must *melhorez*. Improve. This is an art. A practice. You are not cut out for ballet. Perhaps you should take the jazz dance.” Madison lowered her head and reached for a cookie.

Madame clucked her tongue. “No cookies for you. You have not the ballet shape.”

* * *

When Mara, Eliza and Jacqui came to pick up the girls, they found Madison crying softly and Zoë trying to hold back tears. “What happened?” Mara asked, immediately coming around to give Madison a hug.

Madison shook her head.

A few of the other students walked out of the studio to meet their parents and nannies. “Madeeezon! No cookies! You no have ballet shape!” one pretty little girl jeered. The other

girls laughed.

“Excuse me?” Eliza snapped. “That’s not a very nice thing to say.” A nanny gave Eliza an apologetic look and gathered the little girl into a Mercedes.

Jacqui began wiping Madison’s wet face. “Ignore them.”

“What’s this?” Mara asked, after Zoë handed her the report cards. Mara read them, appalled at the notes.

“Check this out. *I strongly recommend Madison try another dance form. She is not cut out for ballet and is wasting her time.*” Mara read aloud.

Eliza nodded. “Madame Suzette’s pretty harsh.” She too, had endured summers in the upstairs studio, and remembered the ballet mistress’s baleful glare.

“This is totally unacceptable,” Mara said. “She’s only ten years old!”

Jacqui noticed that Zoë was munching on madeliene cookies, but Madison didn’t have any. “Did you eat yours already?” she asked.

“Maddy didn’t get any,” Zoë replied.

“Shut up, Zoë.” Madison snapped, humiliated.

“What do you mean she didn’t get any?” Mara asked. “Why not?”

“Madame Suzette said she was too fat,” Zoë said matter-of-factly.

Mara was so infuriated she couldn’t believe her ears. Madison was a healthy child, and so what if she still had a little baby fat around her middle. What kind of person—what kind of *teacher*—would talk to her students that way?

“I’m going to give that witch a piece of my mind!” Mara said wrathfully.

“Don’t –she’s like, French.” Eliza said. “She’s mean. That’s why they send us to her.”

“You went here?”

“Yeah. Everyone does. She’s famous. She used to date Onassis or something.”

“I don’t care. You don’t treat a kid like that! Look at her!”

Madison was sitting on the floor, hunched over her ballet bag. Mara knew that slouch. It said: *No one notice me, please. I’m not worth looking at.* Mara had been a little chubby as a kid. She knew what this was like.

“It’s not right, Eliza.” Jacqui agreed. “Ballet should be fun.”

“And Madison loves ballet, don’t you?” Mara asked.

“Uh-huh,” Madison nodded. She did like it. Other than Madame Suzette, everything else about it was great. The music, the pianos, and every year they put on a recital and got to wear make-up and tutus and everyone came to the show to see them.

* * *

“Excuse me? Madame Suzette?” Mara asked.

“Oui?” The sixty year old former ballerina appraised Mara from behind pince-nez glasses.

“I’m Madison’s, uh . . . guardian,” Mara decided. “And I don’t appreciate you talking to her like that.”

“Excusez-moi?” Madame asked. In all her years teaching spoiled brats how to plie, this was a first. Usually the mothers were so intimidated by her resume and background, no one ever uttered a squeak of protest. But Mara didn’t care if the New York Times had once called Madame “the most exquisite Gisele this side of Pavlova.”

“She might not be very graceful, but she’s trying very hard. Doesn’t effort count for anything?”

“Non,” Madame replied. “This is about performance. If you cannot perform, you cannot be part of my class.”

“C’mon Mara,” Eliza said, pulling her away.

“This is such bull!” Mara cried.

“Let’s go,” Jacqui said.

They hustled the little girls down the rickety steps. Mara was still so annoyed. “That woman should not be allowed near children!”

“There’s a great Pilates studio that just opened up. I met one of the teachers at Scoop the other day. Really sweet. Anyway, they have a kids’ class.” Eliza suggested. “I’ll tell Anna about it.”

“I used to do pilates, it’s so much better than ballet,” Jacqui told the little girls. “More fun and more relaxed.”

* * *

The next day, it was settled. Zoe and Madison were enrolled in Pilates, and the au pairs took them shopping for cute new outfits, to make up for the loss of the black leotards. They all agreed pink tights were for babies anyway.

at the mercedes-benz polo match, not all the cute boys are loaded

ON THE FIELD THE HORSES' HOOVES SOUNDED LIKE roaring thunder. A loud, sharp THAWK filled the air as the red-shirted team whacked the ball with mallets and sent it flying to the opposite end, tying the score 1–1. The star center, a dashing nineteen-year-old Argentine, raised his hand in victory.

“How hot is he?” Eliza marveled.

“Who’s that?” Mara asked.

“Nacho Figueroa. Charlie’s dad stole him from Peter Brant’s team this year.”

“He’s gorgeous,” Mara said, admiring Nacho like a fine oil painting.

“Saw him first!” Eliza teased.

The girls giggled. Having a crush on Nacho was like having a crush on Orlando Bloom. Giselle and that other Brazilian model from the Victoria’s Secret catalogue were cheering for him on the sidelines. He wasn’t someone Mara or Eliza could really take seriously as a romantic possibility. Still, it was nice to look.

Nacho scored another goal, and crowd—especially the girls—went wild.

In the VIP tents no one paid much attention. The guests filled their plates with beluga, guzzled magnums of champagne, and gossiped about each other’s new outfits. Mara and Eliza turned back to where Jacqui was trying to find a table for all four kids. Ryan pulled an empty char toward the table. He’d been hanging out with them all morning trying to help.

“Mr. Perry! The Hamptons’ answer to Brad Pitt! And Miss Waters! In a four-hundred-dollar dress bought on sale for two hundred dollars at Scoop!” Lucky Yap said, giving Mara two air kisses on each cheek and shaking Ryan’s hand vigorously. “Let’s get a shot!”

Mara posed prettily in her new red dress. She felt a little awkward in it, and every once in a while she would grab the end of the too-short hemline and yank it down over her butt, but only when she was certain Ryan wasn’t looking. She felt a little self-conscious, but looking around, she could see that her tiny dress and high heels were perfectly appropriate for the Hamptons.

Ryan excused himself to rustle up two more flutes of champagne. Every once in a while he would look back just to sneak a peek at Mara’s legs in that dress. When she had walked out to

the car wearing it earlier, he had almost fallen out of the driver's seat. She was such a babe, and the best thing was, she didn't even realize it.

"Hey, Lucky. Good to see you again," Mara said.

"Oh, you'll be sick of seeing me soon. I'm everywhere. Honey, did you see your picture in the *Post*?" he asked.

"No! I didn't!" Mara said, shocked.

Lucky nodded. "Check it out. It's still online. Gotta run, I see Lara Flynn Boyle with a huge ice cream cone!" he said, bouncing off toward his prey.

Ryan returned with the goods, clinking glasses with Mara. He was about to tell her how pretty she looked when her phone began to chirp.

"Oh, sorry," she said nervously, balancing her glass and flipping open her cell phone. "Hello? Jim! Hi! How are you?"

Ryan backed off. *Jim? Who the hell is Jim?*

"Who's Jim?" Ryan mouthed. He couldn't help himself.

"My boyfriend," Mara replied, holding the phone to her ear and turning away.

Boyfriend? What? She'd never mentioned that before. Not even the night when they had fallen asleep on the beach together. He watched her walk away.

"Ryan?" a voice called behind him.

He turned around.

"Hey, remember me?" asked a pretty redhead in curvy black Lycra. She smiled at him disarmingly.

"Camille Molloy!" He smiled. "How could I forget?"

He wandered over to her side, and they were soon in animated conversation.

* * *

Meanwhile Mara was having trouble with the reception on the other side of the tent. "Can you hear me now?" she yelled.

Jim Mizekowski was cute like a bulldog, stubborn, with small-town boy written all over his John Deere hat and his rusted Nissan four-by-four pickup. In the background Mara could hear Dave Mathews playing—Mara knew that Jim liked to play Dave when he was feeling "deep."

"Are you there? Is that better? God, I feel like I haven't spoken to you in ages," Mara was saying just as Madison began tugging at her skirt. "What, honey? No, not you, Jim. . . . I'm working. . . . It's not really a good time right now."

"Mara, I feel sick," Madison complained, looking a little green around the edges.

“Hold on, sweetie . . . Jim, I’m sorry, but one of the kids is . . . No, please don’t hang up on me!”

“Gurrrgle,” Madison said, clutching her tummy. She had one too many cucumber sandwiches from the buffet table and started spewing green-and-white chunks all over the grassy floor.

Mara gave Eliza a pleading look. She didn’t want to hang up on Jim. Not when he hadn’t called her in so long. “Liza, please,” she mouthed.

Eliza sighed and took Madison by the arm. “I told you not to have that last one,” she scolded.

“I want my mommy,” Madison whimpered, white spittle flying from her chin.

Eliza knew Madison’s real mommy was probably a million miles away, so she chanced a look at Anna, who was greeting friends and looking untouchable in a new Valentino sheath and a massive ostrich-feathered hat. She guessed the last thing Anna wanted was to be bothered by a vomit-covered stepchild, so she carted Madison away to the parking lot to clean her up by the restrooms.

“Madison, if you have to go again, just make sure you don’t do it all over my new shoes, okay?” Eliza asked, kneeling down to wipe away the puke from Madison’s embroidered French blouse.

Eliza grimaced at the smell. “Ugh! I’m out of tissues!” she complained, and looked up to see the cute gardener from the Perry house who’d been giving her eye the other day, standing next to her, holding a towel.

“I thought you might need this,” he said, offering it to her. His dark curly hair fell over his eyes, and he was wearing a blue one-piece work suit with *J. Stone* scripted on the left-hand pocket.

“No thanks, I’ve got it under control.”

“Suit yourself.” He shrugged.

“Don’t you have, like, a tree to prune or something?” Eliza asked superciliously, still wiping the front of Madison’s shirt and rubbing the mess into the fabric instead of the other way around.

“I’m off today. I do the landscaping for the field; I thought I’d make sure they didn’t ruin my top seed,” he said. “I’m Jeremy.”

“I know who you are,” she snapped.

He put away the towel and began to walk off, and right then Madison blew chunks all over Eliza’s shoes. “Noooooo! I told you!” Eliza wailed, standing up in shock. “I just bought these!”

Jeremy ascertained the damage. “They’re leather. It’ll come off,” he said, kneeling down and taking a shoe off Eliza’s foot. “Let me.” He began to clean off the ick.

“Seriously, you can’t just leave a girl alone, can you?” Eliza said, softening a little. He really was cute.

“Not if I can help it.” He grinned.

“You know, it’s really okay. I’m totally fine. It’s not that I don’t appreciate all this . . .,” she said, hopping on the other foot as Jeremy cleaned the other shoe. “Could you get—er—that part?” she asked, pointing toward a smudge.

Jeremy gave her an are-you-kidding look, but Eliza only smiled sweetly. “I guess this means I can’t ignore you anymore.”

“In some cultures we’re practically married,” he joked, standing up. “See you around . . . Eliza.”

“How’d you know my name? And where do you think you’re going?” she demanded in mock annoyance.

“I’m off now. Getting beers with the guys,” he yelled back. “I didn’t know you cared so much!”

“I don’t!” she yelled back, but she was still smiling. “C’mon, Madison,” Eliza said, holding her hand. “Don’t snifle. You’re okay, aren’t you? Will you be good now and listen to what I say?”

The two headed back inside the tents. Mara was still engrossed in an intense cell phone conversation with Jim, and Jacqui was still MIA. Zoë, Cody, and William were seated at the table, scarfing down platters of raw clams, which they recognized from their high-protein-low-carb-diet. Eliza spotted Taylor and Lindsay smoking in the roped-off section and shooed Madison toward the other kids under the tent. She walked over to them so they could admire her outfit.

“Charlie was looking for you,” Taylor said accusingly.

“He was here?” Eliza asked. “Where is he?”

“He’s gone. He looked kind of mad,” Lindsay added dramatically.

Eliza’s shoulders slumped. All the time she was in the parking lot up to her ears in barf and flirting with the gardener, her ex-boyfriend was inside looking for her.

“I’m sure he’ll call me later,” Eliza said, trying to sound confident.

The minute they turned their backs, Eliza rushed over to the kids’ table for a quick head count. William, check. Madison, check. Cody, check. But where was the other little girl? Oh, there she was, underneath the table, picking up a scallop from the floor.

Thank God. They were a lot of work, but she was actually starting to warm up to the pukey little brats.

there is some pain even bacardi 151 can't numb

MADISON HAD ASKED FOR ANOTHER HELPING OF shrimp, so Jacqui, thinking it was probably allowed on the little girl's diet, had gone to fetch her some. It was seafood after all—how fattening could that be? As she spooned a few plump pink specimens on a porcelain plate, she glanced up across the lawn. It was divot-stomping time, and the game had stopped to let the spectators pound the clumps. Ladies in *peu de soie* and gentlemen in navy blazers and pressed khaki trousers paraded out to toe at the clumps of grass unearthed by the quick stops and starts of the ponies. They patted the earthy patties back into the ground, grass side up, of course.

Across the field a familiar mess of blond hair and glasses caught her eye. But Luca hadn't mentioned anything about attending the match! She put down the plate, all thoughts of feeding the child promptly fading from her memory.

Wait—what? Luca—holding some girl's hand? Someone who looked familiar? But why would he be holding her hand? Or—gulp—kissing her? On the lips? Like that? She stormed over, all the hurt and misunderstandings she'd been keeping in check for the last month boiling in her brain.

"Luca!" she shrieked.

But Luke had seen her clear across the way and was ready. "Jacqui!" he said smoothly, kissing her on the cheek. "Good to see you!" He put an arm around her. "I want you to meet my *girlfriend*, Karin. Karin, this is Jacqui. We met in São Paolo last spring break. And now she's working for the Perrys! Small world, huh?" He glared at Jacqui, warning her not to give him away.

"Hi, Jacqui," Karin said pleasantly. She was a mild-faced blonde with soft, rounded features and a small button nose. She was wearing a floral calf-length Laura Ashley dress that looked more like a sack.

Jacqui shook Karin's hand automatically. "Please to meet you," she mumbled.

It wasn't this girl's fault, Jacqui knew that. But just as she was trying to find the right English words to say, Luke turned and started to walk away, taking Karin along with him.

"Um, nice meeting you!" Karin called back.

Too hurt to run after him, Jacqui walked away, catching her high heels in the dense thick mud. Several South American polo players returning to the field walked by her, chattering to

each other in Spanish and Portuguese.

“*Preste atenção a sua etapa,*” one said, catching her as she tottered.

“I know where I’m going!” Jacqui hissed. She brushed by them, completely oblivious to their appreciative stares.

“*Bonita, mas olha miserável*” Nacho Figueroa, the handsome team captain, shrugged. So what if she was gorgeous? She was miserable.

Jacqui walked off in a daze and found herself in front of a white linen table manned by a tuxedoed bartender.

“Bacardi. 151. Straight up. Double,” she ordered, and downed four shots in quick succession.

She returned to the Perry table, where Eliza and Mara were in the middle of arguing about whether it was time to take the kids home yet.

“I swear, they won’t mind!” Eliza pressed. She wanted to hightail it out of there before Taylor and Lindsay spotted her playing Mary Poppins. “Look how tired Zoë is.”

“But Anna and Kevin didn’t say anything about it,” Mara said doubtfully.

“Do you really think they care if the kids see the end of the game? Look around you, Mara, everyone’s leaving!”

It was true. Now that the TV cameras and the photographers from the society rags had departed, many of the guests decided they’d had quite enough themselves.

“Hey, Jacqui, where’ve you been?” Eliza snapped, then instantly regretted it when she saw the look on Jacqui’s face.

“What’s wrong?” Mara asked, concerned. They had never seen their self-possessed roommate so unnerved. Jacqui was shaking, her eyes were red, and she looked like she was about to cry. And she smelled like a rum distillery.

Mara put a hand on Jacqui’s shoulder. “Jeez, you’re so cold!” Mara said.

“What happened?” Eliza demanded.

“It’s . . . Luca. . . . He . . . he has a girlfriend. . . . He’s been lying to me . . .,” Jacqui choked out.

“What?!” Eliza exclaimed.

“That’s terrible!” Mara said.

“I just saw him . . . across the field. . . . He said it was someone he used to date . . . but it’s not. . . . *Deus bom* . . . that’s why he never wanted to take me out anywhere. . . . I was just . . . a fling . . . *barato* and I thought . . . I thought . . .”

“What a dickwad!” Eliza declared.

“Don’t,” Jacqui said. She felt even more depressed by their sympathy. “He’s right behind you.”

Eliza turned around and saw Luke van Varick with Karin Emerson.

“That’s your Luca? Jacqui, you should have told me earlier! That’s Luke van Varick. He’s like the biggest player in New York. A total jerk. I’ve known him for years. He and Karin have been dating since eighth grade, and he’s been cheating on her ever since.”

Jacqui nodded and bit her lip. She knew something like this was coming; she just hadn’t wanted to believe it. Now she was stuck in some godforsaken place in the States when she could have been in Rio with her friends.

“There was no way you could have known that,” Mara consoled.

“He always plays that whole nerdy thing, like he’s not interested, but it’s all a ploy. He’s totally cocky and arrogant. Ugh. He’s the worst,” Eliza said. “You’re better off without him. Good riddance!”

“*O que quer que*, I’m going to get another drink,” was all Jacqui said.

Eliza and Mara looked at each other helplessly, and then they did the things that came most naturally to them in times of crisis. Mara took a tissue and wiped the mascara from under Jacqui’s eyes, and Eliza handed Jacqui two half-drunk flutes of champagne. For now, it was the best they could do.

jacqui knows that the best way to get over somebody is to get under someone else

AN HOUR LATER JACQUI STOOD IN FRONT OF THE BAR, nursing her drink. The bartender had put a cheerful umbrella on her mojito, but the sight of the jaunty little paper parasol just made her feel worse. She rested her drink on a nearby cocktail table and fished in her purse for a cigarette.

“Excuse me,” a guy said, placing an empty glass next to hers. He’d been heading toward the parking lot before he stopped. “Jacqui?”

She looked up to see Leo—Luca’s sweet friend Leo—standing there with a goofy grin on his face. He was wearing a similar seersucker jacket to the one Luca was also wearing that afternoon, with the sleeves scrunched to the elbows, and baggy blue jeans with the top of his flannel boxer shorts showing. It was very hip-hop Wasp, a big look in East Hampton that summer.

“Good to see you—hey, something wrong?” he asked when he saw the look on her face.

“Nothing,” she said. She didn’t want anything to do with him, especially anything or anyone who reminded her of Luca.

“C’mon, you can tell me,” he said gently, placing a hand on her bare shoulder.

“Seriously. *Não é nada*. Maybe I’m a little homesick,” she said. She realized once she said it that it was true. She missed home. The Hamptons were fun and all, but without Luca it was just another overpriced American city. She missed her grandmother, a stubborn old lady who worked long hours as a manager of a textile factory to keep her only granddaughter in school.

“You want to get dinner somewhere?” Leo asked. “There’s a place not too far that has the best fish tacos.”

“I don’t know. I should probably get back to work,” Jacqui said, scanning the emptying tent for the Perry kids and her roommates.

“C’mon, seriously, it will make you feel so much better. C’mon,” Leo said, taking her arm.

By then she was too drunk to argue.

He drove her to a taco stand in Amagansett, where they shared Baja fish tacos underneath a rickety straw roof. Leo was right, the food did make her feel better. She was still numb,

angry, and hurt in a way that she didn't even want to think about—she felt stupid and embarrassed on top of feeling lonely and miserable.

There had been signs, of course. The picture. His weird aversion to hanging out in the Hamptons proper. His constant excuses and absences. She was being played for a fool. Jacqui should have known better than that.

She looked at Leo across the table as she chewed on the spicy, delicious mahi-mahi taco. He kind of looked like Luca, with that same glossy honey-colored hair. He even smelled like him—like Chanel Egoiste and aftershave. He dressed so much like Luca that Jacqui even made a mental bet that those were Tartan boxers underneath the baggy Fubus. He even talked like Luca. In fact, if she closed her eyes, she could almost pretend she was still with her Luca.

So when they stumbled out of the restaurant and Leo suggested maybe she might want to, um, hang out a little more, see his, um, guitar collection or something, she didn't say no. And when they got there and his guitar collection consisted of two wimpy Fenders and he tried to kiss her instead, she kissed him back. And when he lifted up her shirt and unzipped his jeans, she didn't protest. In Brazil they had a saying: The best way to get over somebody was to get under someone else.

* * *

“So, it's really over between you guys?” Leo asked when it was over and they were lying in his bed watching Jimmy Fallon needle the hapless host on *SNL*.

She nodded.

“Good, because I don't want to get in the way of that, you know what I mean?”

“Sí.”

“You know, I was so into you the moment I saw you,” he said.

“Me too,” she lied.

He squeezed her tighter.

She was about to tell him that this was a mistake, that this was all wrong. That they shouldn't see each other again. It would hurt Luca's feelings if he knew she had hooked up with his best friend.

Wait.

It *would* hurt Luca. Or at least, put a huge dent in his pride.

Jacqui had an idea. Suddenly Leo didn't feel like a mistake after all.

mara finally gets a backbone

THE NEXT MORNING MARA WOKE UP TO THE INTER minable refrain of her cell phone melody.

“Herrhhoo?” She wiped the sleep from her eyes. “No, I’m awake, I’m awake. Hi, Jim.” Mara held the phone to her ear with a hand across her eyes. Jim’s enthusiasm was unbearable at such an early hour.

“Enough is enough. I’ve got a great plan—you’ll love it! My parents are going away for the weekend, so I’ve got the homestead all to my lonesome. Anyway, I was thinking, you know, I really want my girl—my Mara to be there, you know? Coz it’s going to totally rock! I’m going to have a party for sure. And you know, I’m going to need someone to help me clean up afterward!” He laughed at his joke.

But Mara was beginning to realize Jim wasn’t really kidding. “Jim, I’d love to, but I can’t,” she told him.

“What do you mean you can’t?”

“I can’t. I have to work. It’s not like I get the weekends off, you know. This job is full-time, twenty-four hours a day.”

“That’s what you always say,” Jim grumbled. “I don’t believe it, Mara. Those rich losers you work for won’t even let you take one stupid weekend off? What are you, some kind of slave? That’s ridiculous!”

“It’s not ridiculous. You always think what I do is stupid, and it’s not. It’s really important. I’m making a lot of money here, and you know my parents can’t cover my whole college tuition.”

“Whatever, Mara. Something’s up. I can just tell. You’re, like, different now, and I don’t think I like it.”

“What do you mean?” Mara propped her head up against her pillows.

“I dunno, it’s like you’re all hoity-toity all of a sudden. . . .”

“Excuse me?”

“You’re acting kind of selfish, you know? It’s like all you think about is yourself. It makes me sick, really it does.”

Mara sat up at that. “I’M SELFISH? *I’M* SELFISH?” she yelped, suddenly very angry. “Oh, and I suppose when I hand-washed your football jersey for the big game instead of studying for my English final, I was just thinking of myself? And what about when I gave you

my hamster when Bobo died, that was selfish? Or the time I let you and your stupid friends into Ye Olde Tavern so you guys could see what nineteenth-century ale tastes like? Or the time I had to go to the ER when you had to get your stomach pumped and I had the SATs the next day?” Mara could keep going like this for hours. “Or, I don’t know, Jim, what about the time I sold my antique dollhouse so you could buy new hubcaps for your car?”

“Oh, right, sure, Mar—”

But Mara had had enough. “You know what, Jim? You’re right—I have changed—and I’m not going to do this anymore!” And then, with as much force as she could muster, she pressed her thumb on the end button of her cell phone. It didn’t have the same drama as slamming a receiver down, but she pressed that button with just as much fervor.

“Arrggh!” Mara screamed at the empty room.

ryan isn't exactly having breakfast in bed, but . . .

MARA RAN DOWN THE STAIRS AND OUT THE DOOR OF the au pairs' cottage, slamming the door behind her. *God, what was wrong with Jim? Selfish? Selfish?*

Mara scurried across the lawn toward the main house. It was almost noon—*God, they'd been out late last night!*—Ryan usually got back from his morning surf right about now.

He was probably in the kitchen making one of his favorite double-decker submarine sandwiches—the housekeeper always made sure to pick up fresh mortadella, prosciutto, bologna, and salami from Papassini's just for him. He and Mara had shared a big fat hoagie every Saturday morning now, so her timing was probably going to be about perfect.

She walked quickly up the stone pathway to the glass-enclosed kitchen. Sure enough, Ryan was there—still wearing one half of his wet suit (the other half he'd peeled down from the heat). In his right hand he wielded a dinner knife thick with yellow mustard and in the other hand . . . he was holding the waist of a very pretty girl in a matching folded-down black wet suit and red string bikini top.

Mara was certain she had seen that girl somewhere, and with a sick twist in her stomach she realized it was the girl from the polo match. The redhead Ryan was talking to while she was arguing with Jim on the phone.

"Ryan—stop—no!" The girl squealed, giggling as Ryan pretended to flick mustard on her cheek.

"You love it." He grinned.

He popped a cherry tomato in her mouth and chased it with a kiss.

Oh.

Mara stood in front of the kitchen window, completely taken aback and unsure of what to do. She was so surprised to see him with *someone*.

Someone *else*—that is—but she tried to ignore it. *C'mon, it wasn't as if I was expecting him to . . . It wasn't as if I thought of him as . . . And there's Jim, although . . .*

But just as Mara's face was beginning to contort with some strange understanding of what was really going on here, Ryan looked up.

"Mar—"

But Mara was already halfway down the back stairs, more embarrassed and confused than ever.

eliza is learning a lot this summer, like the atkins diet isn't worth it

IN THE FRONT YARD ELIZA THOUGHT SHE HAD THINGS under control. She had gotten all the kids in their beach clothes without too much of a struggle. William was already strapped in and Cody was in his child seat, which left only Zoë and Madison to go.

“Where are we going?” Zoë asked, holding a raggedy copy of *Where the Wild Things Are* to her chest.

“Same place we always go,” Eliza replied, checking the seat belt.

“I’m hungry,” Madison said.

“You’re always hungry.” Eliza sighed.

“Hi, Jer’mey,” Zoë called from the backseat.

Eliza turned to see Jeremy carrying a hose and a rake, walking out from the rear shed. He tipped his cap.

“HI, JEREMY!” William mimicked.

“Come get ice cream with us!” Madison said.

“Yeah, come get ice cream!” Zoë agreed.

William took up the call, and soon all the kids were begging Jeremy to come to the Snowflake with them.

“You guys getting sundaes?” Jeremy asked. “Which ones are your favorite?”

“Hot fudge,” William said promptly.

“Good choice, my man.” Jeremy nodded.

“Butterscotch,” said Zoë.

“Even better.”

“Can you? Can you? Can you?” Zoë asked. “Come with us?”

“Sure, why not?” Jeremy said, winking at Eliza. “I’m done for the day.”

“I don’t mind.” Eliza shrugged. “I was going to wait for Mara, but I heard her fighting with her boyfriend on the phone, so I figured she might need a break.”

“Then it’s just us.” Jeremy smiled.

The Snowflake was a cute retro-fifties-style diner on nearby Pantigo Road, famous for its juicy hamburgers and vats of homemade ice cream. Eliza eased the Range Rover into the parking lot next to the creepy statue of a six-foot-tall hot dog squeezing ketchup on itself. It was famous in the Hamptons as “the weird hot dog.”

The Perry kids lined up in front of the ice cream counter, peering into the freezer.

“I want Tasti D-Lite,” Madison decided. “Poppy and Sugar always order it.”

“They don’t have nonfat ice cream here,” Eliza said patiently. It was one of the reasons the Snowflake was so popular. “And anyway, it’s not really that good for you, sweetie. It has more sugar than regular ice cream so you’ll be hungry again in an hour, plus it doesn’t taste as good!”

Eliza felt bad for the kid. Sugar, Poppy, and Anna, with their fickle, macrobiotic diets, food phobias, and addiction to laxatives, weren’t the best examples of healthy nutrition. Lately Madison had been mimicking their food indulgences—not eating for hours and then gorging herself, which made it even worse. But at least she hadn’t learned the twins’ trick of post-meal excursions to the bathroom to throw up. Not yet, that is.

“Eating healthy is all about moderation,” Eliza said. “Why don’t you have one scoop of butter pecan instead of the whole sundae that you usually do? You’ll feel better and you won’t crave sweets later.”

If there’s one thing Eliza knew about, it was the Zone, the South Beach Diet, Atkins, Sugar Busters, and portion control. Mostly she thought it was a bunch of hooey—*who can give up carbs for good?*—but she’d taken the major tenets to heart years ago.

Once the kids were properly sated, they piled back in the car. Eliza backed out of the lot and wheeled the car to their usual destination.

“Have you ever been to Two Mile Hollow Beach?” Jeremy asked.

“Isn’t that the gay beach?”

“Yeah, but only on the far side. On the other side it’s all families. And it’s great. It’s so empty and doesn’t have the scene of Georgica. We should go there.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, just take this next right and it’s straight down.”

Just as Jeremy had predicted, Two Mile Hollow Beach was paradise compared to the towel-to-towel congestion of Georgica. Down beyond, Eliza spied groups of handsome gay men arrayed around lavish picnic spreads, complete with champagne and caviar, while several random lesbian couples sunned underneath golf umbrellas.

“This is great!” Eliza said, unzipping her Juicy Couture hoodie and taking off her shorts. She was wearing a sleek black bandeau bikini with boy-cut briefs monogrammed with the letter *E*. She looked like a throwback to one of those Vargas pinup girl calendars, with her long blond hair in a high ponytail with a thick black headband.

“I always come here. It’s the best beach in the Hamptons—it’s so private,” Jeremy said.

The kids seemed to agree. Already William was engrossed in building the largest sand castle he could imagine—he always had to fight for space on the other beach. Madison had taken off her shorts—she was always too self-conscious to be seen in her bathing suit, but since there was no one else around, she didn’t seem to care. Zoë just snuggled next to Eliza, seemingly grateful for the company.

Eliza pulled out a glossy magazine from her tote bag. Zoë had forgotten *Where the Wild Things Are at the ice cream parlor*, but Eliza was determined get her reading. She flipped through the pages. Maybe the reason Zoë wasn’t learning was because she was reading all those boring books about puppies and flowers and that ilk. Maybe if they gave the kid something more interesting to read . . .

“Here, Zoë, let’s start with this,” Eliza said, finding a promising page. “How to blow his mind in twenty-six ways.” Eliza pointed down the column. It was alphabetical! So educational. “A is for Always Be Ready.”

“Always be ready,” Zoë repeated, her eyes wide at the picture of a woman in the lying on silk sheets.

“For what?” She asked Eliza.

Eliza didn’t quite know how to answer that one. “Hmm . . . let’s try something else?” She asked, paging through to a fashion spread. “Here we go. Packing for a weekend in the country.”

Jeremy, who had been silently appalled the whole time, burst out laughing.

“I dare you to kiss her,” Zoë turned to Jeremy.

Jeremy blushed. “A dare is a dare,” he said solemnly, and brushed Eliza’s cheek with a quick kiss.

Eliza was flattered. She was surprised at how much fun she was having. It was always such a hassle finding parking, getting a space, and making sure no one from her old high school spotted her with the kids. This way she could actually relax. And that kiss wasn’t too bad either. . . .

“What are you doing later?” Jeremy asked. “My friends are having a bonfire in Montauk tonight.”

Just as Eliza was about to ask what time, her cell phone rang with a piercing shrill.

“Sorry—let me just take this,” she said. “Oh, Lindsay, hi! Charlie’s having a party? No, he didn’t tell me. Tonight? Oh my God, I’ve been dying to get in there. Sure, I’m not doing anything! What time should I meet you guys?”

She clicked off, a happy smile on her face.

Jeremy turned away and scowled at the ocean. *Did she really just make other plans right in front of me after I asked her out?*

“About tonight . . .,” Eliza said hesitantly. “Something just came up for later. But maybe we can still do dinner or something?”

“Sure.” Jeremy nodded. He wouldn’t normally have said okay, but there was something about Eliza that made guys agree to lots of things they normally wouldn’t.

jacqui is still testing out that brazilian saying

MEANWHILE SOMEWHERE IN BRIDGEHAMPTON WAS A bed with two lumps underneath. Jacqui and her new boyfriend were spooning, and she was happy to feel the warmth of another person next to her. It was the most comfortable she'd felt in weeks.

"Oh . . . Luca . . .," Jacqui whispered.

A tousled head shot up. "What did you say?" he asked Jacqui. "What did you call me?"

"*Leo . . . Leo . . .* I said, 'Oh, Leo,'" Jacqui explained, peppering his face with kisses. "I said, '*Leo . . . meu amor. . .*'"

Leo settled back down next to her, even though he wasn't quite sure that Jacqui was thinking about him. Jacqui lay there, thinking of how Leo was a bad idea she couldn't shake. Jacqui couldn't help herself. She was the type of girl who always had a boyfriend, and she needed to do something to stop herself from crying all the time, and finding solace in Leo's skinny arms seemed to do the trick.

After the scene at the polo match Jacqui hadn't had the heart to continue working. Who could work when your heart was stomped on and thrown to the dogs? Instead she holed up in Leo's room, watching bad television and raiding the fridge. She had gone back to the Perry house to pick up clothes when she knew Eliza and Mara were out with the kids.

She didn't want to face them. They had been so nice to her at the match, but she just wanted to be alone, or at least alone in the only way she knew how to be. She knew she was going to get in trouble, but she was in a foreign country, in a place that only meant something to her because of the guy she loved, and somehow everything that she knew was *actually* important—like her job—just . . . faded away. She thought about maybe just getting on the next plane back to Sao Paolo and forgetting all about the Hamptons. She hadn't even spent any of the money she'd made so far. That morning, she'd looked up ticket prices on Leo's laptop. But right now, she didn't even have the energy to leave the shelter of Leo's bedroom, and she had a feeling that feeling wasn't going to go away anytime soon.

Anna would probably fire her when she got back, but Jacqui was too far gone to care.

How silly of her to think that anyone could really love her. Their two weeks in São Paolo were nothing but a mirage. What had Eliza said? He was a "player." Someone who pretended to be in love with her, but he was really only in love with her body. Just like every other guy on the planet. No one ever got past her looks to bother with the real person inside.

Leo seemed different at first. Yeah, he was always telling her how beautiful she was, but he was also always mentioning how lucky he felt. When she looked at him, she didn't feel any butterflies, and when he kissed her, she didn't close her eyes and see fireworks. But she could pretend. She was good at that.

He was sweet. He was a nice guy. And right now, he would have to do.

mara finally orders the right kind of drink

SHE COULD GET USED TO THIS LIFE, MARA THOUGHT AS SHE sipped on her second frozen star fruit margarita. The cool, sweet, and tart concoction tasted like liquid heaven, and she was getting a nice buzz from the pure agave tequila. Better yet, Ryan had asked her to come with him to the party—as friends of course—it wasn't a date or anything. But Mara had been flattered enough that she was trying very hard to put the weirdness of that morning behind her.

The two of them shared a prime outdoor table with an ocean view, underneath a heat lamp. Lucky Yap had swished by and took yet another photo of the two of them. By now it was such a common occurrence, Mara knew how to pose to show off her best side.

Ryan explained it was some party for an old friend of his. Whoever it was, he must be really important, Mara decided. Around them assorted glitterati mingled and table-hopped. Mara had already spotted the teenage star of the summer's hit movie, the game-winning shortstop of last year's World Series, and a slew of quasi-famous reality TV stars, from the twenty-something socialites who had shipped themselves off to boot camp to a couple who had met and married on a dating show.

If Megan could see me now, she thought, feeling a little homesick at the memory of her funny older sister, who worked at the local beauty shop and spent her days giving the local clientele her approximation of the latest Hollywood looks. Mara promised herself she would remember every detail so she could tell her sister all about it.

But her mind kept wandering back to the scene in the kitchen. So Ryan had a girlfriend, so what? She kept reminding herself that she had a boyfriend, too.

And so what if Ryan liked redheads? Who didn't? Mara thought as she unconsciously pulled on her own dark locks. The girl was cute, Mara would give her that. Too cute. She could surf, too. Mara was a flop at athletics. Always the last picked on any team. Cute and could surf. And blessed with a hot little body that filled out her string bikini top. Speak of the devil . . .

"There you are!" the girl said breathlessly, giving Ryan a quick kiss on the lips before she sat down.

Mara tried to curl her lips into a smile, but they wouldn't obey.

"Hi! I'm Camille!" she said, sticking her hand in Mara's face.

"Mara."

Camille leaned forward to whisper something in Ryan's ear. The two of them started to laugh, and Mara felt extremely uncomfortable.

"Sorry! We're being so annoying, aren't we?" Camille asked. "Being in love is so sick!"

"How did you two meet?" Mara asked. She and Ryan had avoided talking about this—her—until now, but Mara was above all that. At least, she would try to be.

"Oh, I used to work for Ryan!"

"How do you mean?"

"She was, uh, one of the au pairs . . . before you guys came," Ryan explained, a little apologetically.

"Yeah, getting fired was, like, the best thing that happened to me! I got a job at Bamboo and I'm staying at my friend's place in North Haven. And now I don't have to feel guilty about dating the boss's son!"

Ryan laughed nervously.

"So! Mara, you replaced me!" Camille joked. "How are the kids doing?"

"They're fine. We take them to Georgica every day," Mara said.

"GEORGE-i-cuh," Camille said, batting her eyelashes.

"What did I say?" Mara asked.

"George-EEE-cah."

"Oh." Mara couldn't tell the difference.

"Accent's on the first syllable, not the second," Camille explained. "Lots of newcomers do it. Where are you from? New Jersey?"

Mara had been in the Hamptons long enough to know when she was being insulted. She didn't reply.

"Ryan, let's go dance! Can we dance? Please . . ." she whined, pulling Ryan up to the dance floor, leaving Mara at the table alone.

Mara ordered another drink, determined not to feel abandoned. She couldn't tell exactly why she was so irritated. A breathless Eliza rushed in and took the empty seat.

"I'm so sorry I'm late! Jeremy and I went to Lunch for dinner and we got lobsters and corn bread. I'm SO fat from the carb bloat!" Eliza giggled as she kissed Mara hello.

"Jeremy with the clippers? You went out with Jeremy?" Mara asked. She'd met him the first week. He'd been really nice about helping her navigate the estate. Mara looked at Eliza with a new perspective. Jeremy was a real good guy—a solid guy—she didn't think someone like Eliza would ever be interested in someone like him.

"Yeah, we spent the whole day together. It was awesome. Oh, look, there's Lindsay. Hiiiiii!" Eliza said, waving.

“So why didn’t you bring him? Didn’t you have a plus one?” Mara had learned that anyone who was anyone had their name “plus one” on the guest list.

“Oh, he would never fit in here,” Eliza said between getting up and saying hello to her friends.

“What do you mean by that?” Mara asked.

“You can’t just bring someone like Jeremy into this world,” Eliza explained. “Oops! Watch it!” she snapped as an overeager birthday well-wisher spilled his whiskey on the rocks onto her dress.

Eliza wiped off the stain, a little annoyed. “People can be so rude,” she griped.

“What world?” Mara asked stubbornly. Her good feeling toward Eliza had vanished. Jeremy was from the same background as Mara—his dad was a carpenter, her dad was in construction. His mother was a teacher, Mara’s mom was a social worker. In fact, back home she was a lot more like Jeremy than Eliza.

“You know, all this,” Eliza said airily. “Oh, there’s Charlie. Hey!” She got up and ran after him. She wanted to make it up to him for missing him at the polo match.

What the hell did Eliza think she was doing, chasing after Charlie when she just had dinner with Jeremy? Mara frowned. She was already in a bad mood from meeting Camille, and now she was totally offended by Eliza’s breezy generalizations and insouciant snobbishness.

Mara had started to really like Eliza, too, even if she was kind of princessy and prone to flake. Eliza had a natural charm about her that Mara had gravitated toward, and she was still grateful for the makeover. Her hair had never looked this good. But now this . . .

Her cell phone blared the familiar chords. *Oh, oh, oh, sweet child o’ mine . . .*

Mara checked the caller ID.

JIM M flashed.

Ugh.

She shut it off. Ryan might have a girlfriend, but that didn’t mean she was ready to make up with her boyfriend. Yet.

ryan gets schooled

AT THE END OF THE EVENING THE REST OF RYAN'S friends trooped to Charlie's after-party at the nearby American Hotel, and Eliza had gone with them, but Mara had pleaded exhaustion. Camille had left, so Ryan took Mara home.

"You know, we never did get to have that Scrabble game," Ryan said as he pulled into the driveway.

"Yeah, I guess we both got kind of busy," Mara said, a little more cutting than she'd meant it.

Ryan gave her a sidelong glance. "Do you want to play?"

"Sure."

They set up the board in the kitchen, and Mara counted out the tiles. She adored board games. She knew it was really dorky of her, but she couldn't help it. In seventh grade she had won a Trivial Pursuit tournament, and she was addicted to the Game Show network..

They played a heated battle, but Mara kicked his ass, spelling *sacristy*, *temptation*, and *gigolo* to Ryan's *cat*, *mop*, and *yam*.

Finally Ryan placed his tiles down and spelled "Xer."

"Xer?" Mara asked. "Prefixes aren't allowed."

"No, it's like *Generation X-er*." Ryan explained. "A member of *Generation X*. You know, those people who are a little older than us and sold out the grunge thing for five-dollar cappuccinos." He smiled at her. "Let's see. I'm on a triple-word tile. . . ."

"Xer isn't a word."

"Yuh-huh."

"No way. It's slang." Mara shook her head.

"Are you saying you challenge?"

"It's not a word!" Mara laughed.

"You're killing me!" Ryan said.

"I'm not going to challenge, but it's not a word. Go ahead, leave it on. There's no way you're going to win anyway."

"Oh, look who's cocky now."

“That’s right.” Mara grinned.

“I’m not going to take your pity,” Ryan huffed, collecting his tiles.

“Leave it! Leave it! I was only kidding.” Mara laughed.

They put away the board game and Ryan opened a bottle of wine, which they drank while looking out at the view from the porch. But their silence wasn’t as comfortable as it had been all those times before.

“So, what happened with Camille?” Mara finally asked.

“She wanted to go to some fund-raiser in Wainscott. I didn’t have it in me to hit another party.”

“She’s very . . . um, cute,” Mara offered.

Ryan shrugged. “She’s nice,” he said, almost defensively.

“Have you guys been seeing each other for a while?”

“Not really,” Ryan said. “What about you and Jim? How long have you guys been dating?”

“Since freshman year, officially. Unofficially, probably since third grade,” Mara said as if this conversation wasn’t unbelievably awkward.

“Mmm,” he said. “It’s Camille’s birthday next week. What do you think I should get her? Is jewelry too much? It’s always so hard to figure out what girls want.”

“Mmm,” she said. Mara didn’t want to hear any more of Ryan’s plans for his girlfriend’s birthday. “It’s so gorgeous out here,” she said, changing the subject. “You don’t know how lucky you are.”

“Actually, I do,” Ryan said.

“I’m sorry—I didn’t mean it that way.”

“No, no, it’s fine.” He smiled a little.

“It must be nice—being rich, I mean,” Mara said, a little shocked at her candor.

“My dad’s rich. It’s his money, not mine,” Ryan said. “I don’t confuse the two. But I don’t fool myself about it either.”

Mara wasn’t sure exactly what he meant by that, but by now they’d covered two of the most awkward conversations they could—significant others and money—and Mara was trying not to push her luck. She was also trying really hard not to let the hurt she felt about Camille and her New Jersey comment show through. Combined with Eliza’s take on Jeremy’s “status,” Mara was feeling more out of place than she had in a while.

“What do you want to do with your life?” Mara asked. “Surf the Big Ten in Hawaii?”
Oops, that didn’t sound so nice, Mara realized.

“Nah—that’s just a hobby.” He paused. “I have an uncle in Paris. I think about moving there a lot and helping him with his business.”

“That sounds nice. What’s he do?”

“He owns a gallery. My mom’s brother. Not Anna’s. My real mom.”

“Where is she?”

Ryan looked sad for a moment. “Honestly, I don’t know. She said she was going to check out some ashram in Tibet. Or maybe she’s in South Africa, getting a face-lift on safari. I never know. The kids miss her. She was a lot of fun when she wasn’t crazy.”

“Why? What did she do?”

“Oh, one night she came home and she’d spent basically their entire bank account on a car and a couple of furs and she drove up Fifth Avenue wearing nothing but her underwear in the snow. The doctors said she was manic-depressive. I could have told anyone that. She would bake chocolate cakes and throw an impromptu birthday party and have us all wearing fun little paper hats and the next moment she’d be sobbing in the corner, threatening to slit her wrists.”

“That’s terrible. I’m so sorry.”

Ryan sighed. “It’s good to talk about it sometimes. Dad just pretends nothing ever happened and Anna’s been in the family forever. What’s your family like?”

“We’re so boring.” Mara shrugged, feeling bad for being so testy earlier.

“Boring sounds perfect.”

“My dad’s in construction. He builds, like, developer houses, and he always complains about the shoddy jobs they do. He always tries to do his best, but no one ever wants to pay for it. They put, like, plastic windows in their houses. He’s a good guy. My mom’s a social worker. She works with autistic kids, home-schools them. I’m the youngest. My sister Molly is married and lives in South Boston with her husband. She has two kids. My other sister, Megan, is a hairdresser. She’s a riot. She makes all her own clothes and she looks like Julia Roberts.”

“You guys sound close.”

“We are,” Mara said, her eyes misting a little. She really missed them. “Every summer we go out to Gloucester for a week. It’s nice. Nothing like this, though.”

“What made you decide to take this job?”

“I needed the money,” Mara admitted. “And talk about boring, nothing ever happens in Sturbridge.”

“Well, I for one am glad you decided to make it,” Ryan said, leaning down to look in her eyes.

Mara was a little drunk, and for some reason, she didn’t look away. He was gorgeous—but more than that, he was smart—and funny—and just adorable. She lowered her lashes. She felt his breath on her cheek. She raised her lips to meet his.

And pulled away when she heard the patio door bang open.

Poppy stood in the doorway, holding a cigarette and an open bottle of beer. “Ryan! I didn’t see you there! You scared me!”

“Hey, sis,” Ryan said, easing back into his seat.

“How was Charlie’s?” Poppy asked, leaning on the glass door. “Oh, hey, you’re, like, one of the au pairs, aren’t you?” she said, turning to Mara.

Mara nodded.

“That’s Mara. Mara, you’ve met my sister Poppy, haven’t you?” Ryan asked.

“I think I’ll go to bed now,” Mara said, jumping up and saying good night.

“Good night,” Ryan said, trying to catch her eye, but Mara refused to look at him.

Poppy shrugged. There were so many people going in and out of their house, it was hard to keep track. “Ry, you got a light?”

“You shouldn’t smoke,” Ryan told his younger sister on his way inside. “It’s bad for your skin,” he said with an ironic smile.

“Screw you,” Poppy sneered. Her older brother was such a killjoy.

these girls aren't as predictable as they
look

“CODY! YOU GET BACK HERE, YOU HEAR? CODY!” Eliza yelled in despair.

The two-year-old streaked out of the main house completely naked, chortling to himself.

Inside, William was gleefully lobbing soggy Cocoa Puffs on the floor, and Zoë and Madison were bickering over who ate the last blueberry scone.

Eliza made a last-ditch effort to try and tackle the baby. With Jacqui nowhere to be found and Mara nursing a killer hangover (mixing star fruit margaritas and cabernet was a very bad idea, it turned out), Eliza was the only one available for kid duty.

“Need some help?” Jeremy asked, picking up Cody by his elbows and swinging him into Eliza’s arms.

“They never listen to me,” Eliza lamented.

With Jeremy’s help Eliza got all the kids, the picnic basket, the Hokey Pokey Elmo, the Limbo Elmo, the Chicken Dance Elmo, two Bratz babies, coloring books, and sand shovels and buckets into the car.

“I had a really nice time last night,” she said as Jeremy leaned into the window.

“Me too.”

Impulsively she gave him a quick kiss on the lips.

“Eliza and Jeremy sitting in a tree. *K-I-S-S-I . . .*,” Madison began to chant.

“Shush!” Eliza said, putting a hand on the girl’s mouth. But she gave Jeremy a warm smile.

“I’ll see you later,” she said with a lopsided grin.

“Later.” He bowed a little at the waist and walked back toward the garden.

* * *

Eliza hustled the kids to their usual spot on Main Beach near the lifeguard section. They didn’t have proper bathrooms at Two Mile Hollow, and that had ended up being a bit of a problem the other day. The kids were running wild, and Eliza was so bummed to be on solo babysitting duty today.

But just a few paces ahead was Mara. Good old Mara. She was wearing awfully big sunglasses and nursing a Gatorade, but she was there. Lord be praised.

“About time you guys got here,” Mara said, taking Cody out of his stroller and giving him a little tickle.

“What happened to you! You looked like you were at death’s door this morning,” Eliza said.

“I was, I was. But Ryan made me this great hangover remedy—Worcestershire sauce and egg yolk.”

Eliza made a face. “Ew.”

“I know, but it worked. I don’t have a headache anymore, but I’m still so dehydrated,” Mara said, taking another gulp.

“How’d you get here so fast?”

“Ryan drove me.”

“Of course,” Eliza wanted to say, but held her tongue. Mara was so weird about the whole Ryan situation, and Eliza didn’t want to make her feel self-conscious about it.

Mara took the baby by the shore, and Eliza and the others followed.

“C’mon Cody, just a few more steps. It won’t hurt, c’mon, I got you.”

Cody followed Mara tentatively, but screamed and ran away as the waves crashed.

“It’s no use. The kid is never going to learn to swim,” Mara sighed. “Cody! Come on! Look, it’s fun!” she said, splashing the water.

“I saw Jeremy this morning—he was so cute! He helped me put all the kids in the car. And we were looking all scruffy . . .,” Eliza said dreamily. *Since when do I say things like “scruffy”?* she wondered dreamily. “He was wearing the cutest overalls. Did you see?”

“Enough! I’m already about to vomit,” Mara joked. She was in a lot better mood after seeing Ryan that morning—they’d acted like everything was normal, which made it feel pretty, well, normal. She could even forgive Eliza’s indiscretions last night. No one was perfect, and Mara was sure Eliza didn’t really mean half the things she said. Look at how she glowed whenever she said Jeremy’s name.

“You’re so mean!” Eliza pouted. “I finally find a guy I really like and I can’t even tell you about all the cute things he did!”

“What about Charlie?” Mara asked.

“Oh, I don’t know.” Eliza shrugged, “Jeremy is just so perfect, and, I don’t know, he’s so good with the kids. . . .”

“Seriously, Liza, I’m going to yak if you don’t get out of here,” Mara said with a smirk.

“Out of here?”

Mara waved her doubts away. “Totally. Go see him. You saved my butt the other day at the polo match. Go ahead! Really, just go!”

“I owe you one!” Eliza squealed, wrapping her arms around Mara and giving her a kiss.

She ran down the dune, hoping to catch Jeremy before he went home for the day.

poor little not-so-rich girl

ELIZA TIPTOED BACK INTO THE ESTATE, DUCKING BEHIND the statuary as she observed Kevin Perry heading off for the yacht club. He was taking out the schooner today and had even invited Jacqui to come with him. Kevin stood in front of his Ferrari Spider, checking his watch. But when it was clear Jacqui wasn't going to appear anytime soon, he drove off in a snit.

Eliza crept through the back entrance and found Jeremy planting hyacinths near the croquet hoops.

"Guess who?" she asked, covering his eyes with her hands.

"Sugar? Is that you? I'm awful tired out right now," Jeremy joked. "Or is it Poppy, hoping for some action?"

"That's so not funny," she said, walking off, a little hurt. She didn't think anything to do with the twins was in any way entertaining.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," Jeremy said, running to catch up with her. "I'm just goofing around."

He nudged her in the midsection and Eliza smiled. She couldn't really stay mad at him for long.

"C'mon," she said, taking his hand and leading him to the au pairs' cottage. They snuck inside the attic room, which was still mercifully empty. (Hell, wasn't too often no one was there, after all.)

"Nice digs," Jeremy said, checking out the small, eight-by-ten room.

"It's not the Four Seasons, that's for sure." Eliza sighed, sitting on the edge of the bed. She looked at him expectantly. Now that she had ditched work to hang out with him, she wasn't sure what they were going to do.

She tried her hardest to look endearingly innocent, sitting there in her pink sundress and canvas espadrilles, waiting for him to make the first move.

Jeremy took a seat next to her. "So."

"So."

They turned to each other, and the next thing Eliza knew, he was kissing her. Softly at first, on the lips, light little trembly things. She closed her eyes. He smelled like the dark,

warm earth with a hint of sweat and the sun. One of his hands was tangled in her hair, the other caressed the small of her back.

She returned his kisses eagerly, exploring the taste of his mouth. He tasted like mint and Dr. Pepper. He thought she smelled like coconuts and vanilla.

He pulled her on his lap, and she buried her face in his chest.

“That’s nice,” she said.

“Mmm?”

“Last night, did I tell you I live in Buffalo now?” she asked.

“No, you just said you grew up on Park Avenue.”

“I did.” She sighed, resting her face in the crook of his neck and liking the way his stubble felt on her skin.

“My dad used to be a big deal on Wall Street. You might have heard of him. He was kind of famous. There was some scandal with the accounting stuff, and he lost his job and we had to leave our apartment. My parents had to sell everything—their art collection, the house here . . . and we moved to Buffalo.”

“Buffalo’s not so bad.”

“No, it’s worse.” Eliza moaned. “It’s awful. All the kids think I’m a total snob and no one talks to me. And the thing is, I don’t even do anything. I don’t have anything to be snobby about. My dad’s on unemployment, and my mom got a job at Kinko’s to make ends meet.”

Jeremy was silent and stroked her hair. “It’s going to be okay,” he whispered, holding her close.

It felt good to talk about all this. Eliza had never really told anyone what happened to her—what her life was really like. She was so comfortable around him, knowing that he wouldn’t judge her, somehow knowing she could tell him anything, anything at all about herself, and he would still like her.

“I never realized I was so spoiled before. I used to charge my lunch at this fancy restaurant in the city every day—like, thirty-dollar hamburgers and stuff—and I never gave it a second thought. And I would go into Barneys and Bergdorfs and buy whatever I wanted. Sometimes I’d even harass the salespeople to find things at other stores if they didn’t have it in my size.”

She paused, remembering those heady, halcyon days, when she had her own Town Car at her beck and call and her AmEx didn’t have a preset limit.

“I know this sounds really shallow, but I really miss it. I miss it more than I ever thought I would. Before, I could walk into any room, and everyone thought I was so special just from looking at me. Sugar and Poppy used to be in my clique in high school. They were part of *my* group. My clothes were always the coolest, the newest, the most expensive. My hair was always the blondest. I had it highlighted every thirteen days. I was thinner than everybody. Even the building we lived in—it was the hardest one to get into in the city. I just had IT, you know? But now I can’t afford to have IT anymore. I just look like everyone else.”

She looked at him, afraid she would find him laughing at her. Eliza knew they were stupid, silly, material things. But it practically broke her heart when the strap of her Mombassa handbag broke. She knew she would never be able to afford another one.

“I know it’s kind of funny. I mean, please, I know people are starving somewhere. But I’m really kind of . . . sad,” she said.

“You have every right to be,” Jeremy soothed. “It’s only natural. But Eliza—you have nothing to worry about. The first time I saw you, I couldn’t take my eyes off you. And it had nothing to do with whatever “IT” is or whether you have the latest Dolce and Gambino or whatever; you just have this glow about you.”

He took her face in his hands again, cupping her chin. “You’re absolutely beautiful. And I know we’re just getting to know each other, but I think you’re beautiful inside and out.”

It was the nicest thing anyone had *ever* said to her.

She kissed him long and hard. One day she was going to show him just how much he meant to her.

the only good thing anna perry has ever said

ON MONDAY MORNING ANNA CALLED AN EARLY MEETING in her office. Mara and Eliza walked to the third floor, the only level they hadn't yet explored. They found their boss inside a magnificent, book-lined room, sitting in front of dainty writing desk, dictating a memo to Laurie, who had her pen poised in readiness.

"Thus I feel it is in everyone's best interest that I chair the fund-raiser this year," Anna said crisply. "I expect my choice of lead designer to bring in thousands in guaranteed contributions."

Anna looked up and raised a finger so Mara and Eliza wouldn't interrupt. "All best, Mrs. Anna Farnsworth Perry. The number is on the fax machine."

She waved the girls to sit down. They sank into the velvet-upholstered armchairs. Mara looked around at all the beautiful hard-covered books on the walls. She wondered if Anna even bothered to read them. Eliza had a shy smile on her face. She was still thinking about Jeremy.

"We have to take the kids back to the city this week to meet with their independent private school admissions counselor," Anna said. "So we'll have to skip this week's progress report. You don't mind, do you, girls?" She smiled.

Mara and Eliza shook their heads. Not at all. They didn't mind one bit. Especially since they had yet to have a weekly progress meeting anyway, and they were already more than halfway through the summer.

"By the way, I haven't seen that—Jacqui—around very much. Is she ill?" Anna asked, concerned.

"No, she's, uh—giving Cody his bath," Mara improvised.

"Yeah, she's been working on his water treatment," Eliza agreed. "Some kind of South American theory."

"Good. Good idea." Anna nodded crisply. "Can you please excuse me for a moment, girls?" Anna teetered in her Manolos toward the hallway.

"I'm so sick of covering up for her all the time!" Mara complained when Anna left the room to check on the fax she'd asked Laurie to send. She and Eliza had noticed some really

strange clothes coming in and out of their cottage, but they hadn't seen their third roommate in the flesh since . . . well, since the polo match, come to think of it.

"Where do you think she is?" Mara asked.

"Beats me. Maybe she has a new boyfriend. She's certainly not sleeping here."

"I'm worried about her," Mara said.

"She's fine. Jacqui's a big girl. She can take care of herself," Eliza said.

"I hope so." Mara frowned.

"Don't stress yourself over it; she's not worth it. I mean, she obviously doesn't even care to tell us where she is, so why should we bother?" Eliza had nothing against Jacqui except to begrudge her getting out of a fair share of the work. Another pair of hands would have been sorely appreciated the day William decided to try out his krav maga training on his sisters.

Mara sighed. "I just hope she knows what she's doing."

Anna returned to the room, looking a little ruffled and arguing with her hapless assistant. "I told you to type it up on my personal letterhead, not just a blank piece of paper."

"I'm so sorry; I didn't check."

"Well, send it again. They might not even look at it! I know the committee is meeting today."

"Yes'm." Laurie bowed, skittering out of the room.

Anna looked surprised to find Eliza and Mara still sitting in front of her desk. "That's it, girls. You can go. And don't worry, we'll be back for Super Saturday, and if you need anything . . . Ryan is in charge."

It was like music to their very tan ears.

ryan calls a very important meeting in the hot tub

THE REST OF THE WEEK FLEW BY IN A FUN-FILLED BLUR. Without any kids to look after, Eliza and Mara spent the entire time perfecting their tans and discovering new shopping streets. On Wednesday they hit the Saks in Southampton, Thursday was the Tanger Outlets in Riverhead, and on Friday they bought matching vintage Lilly Pulitzer dresses at Colette. They were also spending a lot time with the boys. Eliza and Jeremy had explored the vineyards on the North Fork, and Mara had been taking surf lessons from Ryan, sans Camille, thank goodness

Friday night Ryan called a house meeting in the hot tub.

“So I was thinking . . . it’s about time we had a little party,” Ryan said, grinning from behind the bubbles. “You know, just a small party—only close friends,” he suggested.

“That sounds awesome!” Eliza cheered.

“Sure, it sounds like fun.” Mara nodded.

“Okay, so tomorrow night, then. Mara, you’ll come with me to get the food. Eliza, you have the best ID, so I’ll put you in charge of the booze. And Jacqui, hey, where the hell is Jacqui?” Ryan asked, his face furrowing. “Has anyone seen her lately?”

Mara and Eliza shook their heads a little guiltily. They knew something was up with Jacqui—but both of them had been so wrapped up in their own lives, they barely paid attention to anything else.

* * *

The next evening Mara and Ryan set off to Barefoot Contessa to amass party treats. They were picking out smoked salmon platters and choosing between canapés when Mara’s phone started ringing incessantly.

“Who’s trying to get a hold of you so bad?” Ryan asked, balancing several baguettes in one arm and holding a jar of caviar in the other.

“Jim,” Mara explained. They hadn’t talked about Jim or Camille since their almost-kiss the week before, but they also hadn’t come close to anything like that again, so Mara was ready to chock it up to the cabernet (and the margaritas, ahem). “I just kind of need a break from us for a while. I really can’t deal with him right now.”

“Mmm,” Ryan grunted.

“But it’s not, like, permanent or anything,” she added hastily, for no good reason.

Mara looked sidelong at Ryan while she pretended to pick out tortilla chips, and she couldn’t help but notice that maybe, just maybe, he looked a little down when she’d said it wasn’t “permanent.”

eliza always gets what she wants, even if she doesn't want it anymore

"I THOUGHT I SAID CLOSE FRIENDS ONLY," RYAN GROUSED as he surveyed the fully packed living room, dining room, ballroom, game room, pool area, patio, and sundeck. Everyone under the age of twenty-one in the Hamptons was present and accounted for, including several rock star offspring and the cast of MTV reality shows.

Sugar and Poppy had done what they did best—spread the news—and keeping things “small” was in no way part of their agenda. They had even hired a publicist, who had secured a party permit and made sure there was valet parking for guests.

“Great idea, bro!” Sugar hooted at Ryan as she was carried, sphinx-like, by an army of admirers toward the back cabana.

Ryan shook his head. Oh, well, might as well enjoy it. He turned up the stereo so that the rafters shook to the beat of the Hamptons’ perennial “It’s All About the Benjamins.”

Already all the bedrooms were occupied, and the smell of pot was strong in the air. A clique of British teens were huddled around the glass dining room, and a fedora-wearing dealer (a Bennington alum on his summer vacation) was making the rounds.

Ryan found Mara standing to the side, sipping a glass of white wine.

“You having fun?”

“Who are all these people?” she asked in astonishment.

“Beats me. They must all be my sisters’ friends.” Ryan laughed. “C’mon, I see my boys down by the patio.”

* * *

Eliza kept an eye out for Jeremy. He was supposed to be here by now. He had promised he would be there by eleven, after he got off his second job as a waiter at TGI Friday’s in Hauppauge. She fluffed her hair in the mirror and made herself another vodka tonic. Things were going so well between them, every time he left her side, she missed him instantly. She didn’t know she could feel this way about anyone.

She spotted Kit in the crowd and raised her glass hello. He and Taylor had broken up the week before, and Eliza had been trying to cheer him up. As much as she was friends with Taylor, she always thought Kit deserved better. A lot of her old friends were at the party, but every time one of them waved her over, she just shook her head and smiled.

“Where do you think you’re going?” a voice called as she stepped out to check the driveway for Jeremy’s pickup again.

She spotted Charlie Borshok leaning on a pillar, completely wasted.

“Nowhere.”

Charlie took a few steps over and wrapped his arms around her. “Oh, Liza, you smell so good. I missed you, baby.”

“That’s really nice, Charlie,” she said, twisting her body away.

It was what she had wanted to hear all summer. That he wanted her back. That they were the golden couple again. That she was still the same girl who had snagged the richest boy in New York. But now she was looking for Jeremy.

* * *

A half hour later, Jeremy’s pickup truck pulled into the driveway. He was still wearing his uniform T-shirt and apron. Eliza ran out and leapt into his embrace.

“Hey, baby.” He grinned at her.

“I MISSED YOU!”

She hugged her legs around his waist tighter and whispered, “Let’s go find somewhere we can be alone.”

jacqui has always been smarter than you'd think

NOW, THIS WAS A PARTY! JACQUI THOUGHT, WALKING into the Perry mansion, momentarily forgetting that she was employed there.

She'd been drinking all afternoon. She felt *fantastic*—except for the wooziness and the dizziness and the slight double vision, that is. But who cared? She snuggled up to Leo. Leo, nice, faithful Leo, who made her forget, well, almost everything.

So what if his lovemaking wasn't earth-shattering? Not to mention that his parents' three-bedroom shack in Bridgehampton was nothing compared to Luke's corner wing on the Van Varick estate. And so what if he was slightly cross-eyed and had an irritating laugh? None of it mattered. He was Luke's best friend. And as every girl knows, there's nothing a guy hates more than sharing.

Jealousy was a terrible thing, and Jacqui knew exactly what she was doing. She wanted Luke to feel as bad as she did when she found out about his girlfriend. She wanted him to squirm. She wanted him to *suffer*. Maybe she wouldn't be able to break his heart—but she could damn well try to shatter his ego. It was time for her to go public with her latest conquest.

"Where's the bar?" Leo asked, yelling in her ear.

"Over there!" she screamed, pointing to where Ryan was mixing frozen daiquiris in a blender.

They picked their way past a group playing Twister and several clumps of people dancing on the sofa (Anna would die if they knew what they were doing to her Louis Quinze) and were stopped in their tracks by Poppy Perry, in a shredded Van Halen T-shirt and micro denim hot pants.

"I don't remember inviting you," she sneered, giving Leo a death's-head stare.

"What's up with the *bruha*?" Jacqui asked.

Leo looked sheepish. "She's my ex-girlfriend."

Poppy's eyes followed them as they moved across the room, where another angry face met them.

"What's the deal?" Luke said, coming up in Leo's face close enough to spitting vicinity. "Are you here with her?" he demanded, giving his pal a hard shove.

“I’m here with *him*,” Jacqui said, pushing at Luke’s chest with a pointy fingernail. “Do you have a *problema* with that?”

“What’s going on, honey?” Karin asked, appearing by Luke’s side. “Oh, hi, Leo. And Jacqui, right?” she said pleasantly.

“Nothing—everything’s fine. Get me another beer,” Luke spat.

Karin walked away meekly as the three of them glowered at each other.

eliza teaches jeremy *the o.c.* drinking game

IN THE PERRYS' PRIVATE SCREENING ROOM THE DIGITAL projection screen blazed a sixteen-foot-tall upset-looking Mischa Barton explaining to Benjamin Mackenzie why she couldn't see him anymore. "They're breaking up! You need to take a drink!" Eliza cheered.

Eliza had found the only room in the house that wasn't already locked and in use by an amorous couple, or occupied by a group of kids passing a roach around. Not everyone knew about the basement screening room.

On-screen, Ben apologized for being from "a different county."

"Chug?" Jeremy asked, holding his shot glass.

"No! Only when he actually says 'Chino,'" Eliza said, explaining the rules of the game.

"Oh. Sorry. I don't watch this show."

"If you did, I'd worry. Oh, look, Summer's going shopping. Double chug!"

"I say we do body shots instead," Jeremy said, pouring another shot of Cuervo and handing her a wedge of lime. "Hmmm . . . where will I do mine?" he asked, lifting up Eliza's shirt to expose her pierced belly button. She had gotten it in Greenport one afternoon when he told her he thought they were sexy. He pulled down her skirt a bit to expose her jutting hip bones and bent his head to lick her in the shallow of her stomach.

"That tickles!" Eliza giggled, ruffling his hair and squealing as he began biting her belly.

The door clicked open, and Eliza froze. In the darkness she saw a couple feverishly making out and groping their way to the pool table. A flurry of limbs began throwing items of clothing to the ground. Apparently, she wasn't the only one who knew about the room.

"We're not alone!" she told Jeremy, putting a finger to her lips.

Jeremy smirked when he saw the other couple. "I guess someone else had the same idea," he whispered. They giggled quietly.

"Let's go," she told him, zipping up her skirt and collecting the shot glasses and tequila bottle. They inched their way to the doorway, laughing as the couple began making lurid, disgustingly wet sloppy noises along with unintentionally comic expressions of discomfort. "Ow! Not there! Oops, I think I'm sitting on the remote control! Oh, that's you!" "Honey, please, stop pinching . . ." "That's better. Oh, wait, is that your leg or mine?"

The light suddenly switched on, filling the room in a blaze of light.

The two couples blinked. Taylor and Lindsay stood at the front of the room. They were roaming the house, trying to find the source of the music in order to change the CD. The speaker system was wired to the entire house, and you could only take so much vintage Puffy.

“I think they keep the Crestron in here,” Lindsay said, meaning the universal remote that controlled all the electricity in the house, including the lighting, stereo, televisions, burglar alarm, and even the microwave.

“Oh! Sorry!” Taylor said.

Eliza finally got a clear picture of the room’s other amorous inhabitants “Charlie! Sugar!”

Sugar, splayed out between two Barcaloungers, was topless in a Cosabella thong. She was, indeed, straddling the remote control. Charlie was dressed in his polka-dot boxers and nursing his foot. Talk about compromising positions.

Sugar sat up and shook out her hair, casually sliding her completely see-through cami back on. Eliza willed herself not to look and see if Jeremy was staring.

“Eliza, what are you doing here?” Sugar asked coolly. “And hey, aren’t you our pool boy or something?” she said, noticing Jeremy as she reached for her pack of cigarettes and patted out a stick.

Charlie grabbed at his pants on the floor and pulled out his lighter. He lit her cigarette and assessed the situation, observing Eliza’s crimson face and rumpled clothes and her partner’s stony expression and some kind of Pizza Hut uniform.

“Liza,” Charlie drawled, obviously still drunk. “I didn’t know you had it in you to go slumming.”

Eliza recoiled from Jeremy, shaking off his protective hand on her elbow. “I didn’t know you did either, Charlie,” she said, looking pointedly at Sugar. Let her whine to Anna and get her fired. Eliza didn’t care.

Jeremy balked. “Eliza, my family is richer than yours.”

“Excuse me?” Charlie asked, not sure what he just heard. The dude was obviously some blue-collar trash. And Eliza Thompson was Park Avenue born and bred.

Eliza turned to Jeremy, completely horrified that he had just blown her cover. “You don’t even know me,” she spat.

Jeremy’s face hardened. He couldn’t believe keeping her status with her so-called friends was so important to her. “You’re right, I definitely don’t know you at all.” He pushed his way past them to the door without giving her a second glance.

Lindsay and Taylor were utterly speechless with shock and schadenfreude. Eliza? *Poor?* Could it get *any* better than this?

Sugar, dumb as she was, said matter-of-factly, “God, you guys didn’t know that? Eliza’s been working here as an au pair all summer. Her family’s totally bankrupt. Hey, don’t you

have to go burp my brother or something?” she said snidely.

Tears in her eyes, Eliza mumbled something unintelligible and ran out the door as fast as her three-inch-heel Jimmy Choos could carry her.

luke and leo are rich white boys who think they're straight outta compton

“MAN, THAT IS SO LOW,” LUKE SAID, SHAKING HIS HEAD and staring at Leo and Jacqui. “I can’t believe you would tap my bitch like this.”

“Dude, you have a girlfriend,” Leo said in his defense.

Bitch? Jacqui was no one’s bitch. What was this, some bad audition tape for a rap video? Who did these guys think they were? Eminem and Dr. Dre? More like Vanilla Ice and MC Hammer.

“You! You *lied* to me!” she said to Luke. “You had girlfriend the whole time!”

“Listen, *mamasita*. What I do in the States is my business. I showed you a good time, didn’t I?” Luke said scornfully. He’d had Jacqui’s number since they met. All pretty girls had zero self-esteem. Jacqui was just like every Upper East Side ice princess who pretended to be all that, but melted at a well-phrased compliment.

Jacqui couldn’t believe she had ever fallen in love with such a cretin. Or that she had fallen for his whole aw-shucks, nice-guy act.

“Goddamn, Leo, I can’t believe you got on my bitch!” Luke said, scowling and folding his arms across his chest, assuming the confrontational pose he had seen Snoop throw down on the BET.

“I didn’t. The bitch wasn’t taken,” Leo said, stepping back and waving his arms.

“Bitch? What? Listen, you,” Jacqui said, turning to Leo. “I’m only with you to make him jealous.”

“See. You’re being played, man. That is cold. That’s cold,” Luke said, smirking.

Leo turned purple and turned to Jacqui. “What?!”

Jacqui shrugged. Jesus, what did he think he was, some kind of stud? Of course she was only with him to lick her wounds and get even with the so-called love of her life.

* * *

It was a whole sloppy-second mess, a complete emotional disaster. But somehow, by the end of the argument, Luke and Leo were slapping each other on the back, calling each other homie and laughing about the whole thing. Dating and dumping the same girl—it was something the two jerks could relate to. It was just like something out of a Bad Boy video,

and they thought that was pretty cool. She just provided them with a summer's worth of gross locker room anecdotes, and they couldn't be happier.

But for once it looked like Jacqui was going to have to sleep in the au pairs' cottage. Alone.

mara can't keep her clothes on

2 A.M.

Almost everyone left for another party, and the only people in the house were Ryan and his close friends. In the back patio by the pool the remaining guests were having another kind of party altogether . . . a more intimate one, shall we say. The table held several empty bottles of liquor, dozens of cocktail glasses, and ashtrays filled to the brim with cigarette butts, and the group exuded a jovial camaraderie as if it were perfectly normal that they were more than half naked. They didn't call it strip poker for nothing.

Mara peeked at her hand. A pair of queens. Not bad. Her dad had taught all three of his kids his favorite game, and Mara always thought of herself as a bit of a pro. No daughter of George "Texas No Limit Hold'Em" Waters was going to lose to a bunch of overprivileged softies from East Hampton.

Nonetheless, she was down to her pink Chantelle bra and matching low-rise underwear.

She looked across the table, where Ryan was busy examining his cards, frowning.

The dealer flipped the next card: an ace. "And that's the river," he crowed.

"Well, I'm out," Ryan's friend Corey decided, putting down his cards in disgust.

"Me too," another friend agreed.

Around the table everyone took a pass, forfeiting an item of clothing in the process.

"I'm in," Ryan declared.

Mara looked at the ace, looked at her high pair. She scanned the other four community cards—all trash. There was no way he could beat her. He had nothing! Nothing! He was totally bluffing! Ryan was the worst player of the night—he was the only one down to his boxer shorts. Well, besides her.

Mara smiled to herself. This was going to be fun.

"I'm in, too," she said challengingly.

"The Scrabble Master should fold," he advised.

"No way."

"Not to be cliché, but read them and weep." Ryan grinned, putting down a pair of aces. With the dealer's ace, he had three of a kind.

Mara slumped in her seat.

“What have you got?”

She showed him.

“No big deal. You don’t have to do it if you don’t want to,” Ryan told her, a sympathetic look on his face.

She shrugged. What the hell. It was just like the dressing room at Loehmann’s. Except outdoors. In public. In front of Ryan Perry.

“Rules are rules,” she said. All those daiquiris she’d drunk were making her pretty brave.

Taking a deep breath, she unhooked her bra and threw in her underwear as well. Naked as Aphrodite emerging from the sea, she streaked past the rest of the strip poker revelers, through the kitchen, across the porch, and through the yard and dove into the pool.

Far from shy, Ryan took the cue, doffed his boxers, and followed her in. After all, his mother had shipped him to a hippie summer camp in Vermont as a kid. This was all just fun and games.

“WATER FIGHT!” he yelled, splashing up to her.

Mara screamed mid-backstroke and tackled him in the water. She’d never had so much fun in her life. She was liberated, free. The old class secretary Mara would never be caught dead in the wee hours of the morning, completely nude with a guy she wasn’t even dating.

Ryan swam up and grabbed her by the waist. “GOTCHA!”

“Ryan! Let me go!” Mara squealed, loving every minute.

They treaded water for a while, laughing, and Mara suddenly realized she was like, oh, good God, totally naked in front of Ryan! And he was holding her . . . kind of close actually.

She looked into his eyes, which were laughing back at her.

He’s going to kiss me, Mara thought. It’s going to happen. Now. Here. She closed her eyes, but then she suddenly pulled away.

“Ryan, I can’t—this doesn’t feel right—not that I don’t want to—I really do—but I still have to work things out with Ji—JIM!”

And there, standing by the edge of the pool, was Jim Mizekowski, all two hundred and twenty pounds of him. With a look of absolute disgust on his face.

when arguing naked, be careful how emphatically you talk

MARA STRUGGLED OUT OF THE POOL, RUNNING AFTER JIM. She felt terrible for him—there was so much to explain—if he would just wait.

“Jim, please, listen to me,” she pleaded.

“So THIS is why you couldn’t come home this week. You had to ‘work.’ I get it.” He spat, so angry that a vein throbbed dangerously on his forehead. “Jesus, I can’t even look at you.”

“It’s not what you think. Ryan’s just a friend. We were just playing a game, that’s all,” Mara said, knowing it sounded pretty weak.

“Calm down, buddy,” Ryan said, still laughing, giving Jim his usual disarming smile. “We’re just having fun. You want to join us in a little strip poker?”

Jim ignored him.

“NOTHING HAPPENED, Jim! I SWEAR!” Mara said, energized by the truth. After all, nothing had happened. Yet.

“You know why I came up here?” Jim asked. “My MOM saw your picture in the paper. She gets the *Post*, you know. And there was some picture of you from some polo match and some guy you were with—this guy!” he said, motioning to Ryan. “I didn’t even believe it. It’s just not like you. Not my Mara. But I saw the picture—you were dressed like a hooker.”

“I’m not a hooker!” Mara cried. Even though she was, technically, still naked. In public. Ahem.

“No, you’re worse. You’re a slut and a whore. You’re nothing better than a two-bit hooker on Worth Avenue.”

Mara gasped. She had never been called such awful names. And from her own boyfriend! She didn’t know how to react.

“Hey, dude, that’s enough,” Ryan said, coming up to shield Mara from Jim. His voice was quiet, and he was no longer amused. (He had thought the whole thing was kind of funny, really, since he and Mara were still naked, and hey, everything could easily be explained—it’s not as if there wasn’t a bunch of half-naked people on the porch.) But this guy was acting way out of line.

“I understand you’re angry, but you can’t talk to her that way,” Ryan said.

Mara couldn't believe what was happening. It was all too much. And she'd had a lot to drink. It was surreal. A total nightmare.

Meanwhile, back on the patio, the music was still blasting and the game continued. Everyone else was totally clueless about the drama going on in the backyard.

"I'll speak to her any way I want," Jim spat, hulking up. This little fancy pants prep school kid had nothing on him.

"And Mara, you can forget about the discount on that Camry at my uncle's dealership." With those fighting words, Jim took off through the woods.

It was so absurd Ryan actually began to laugh.

"A Camry?" he asked.

"It's not funny," Mara said miserably. "I was counting on that car. It was the only one I could afford to buy and still have money left over for college."

"God, I'm sorry," Ryan said, sobering up.

Mara frowned, but after a minute she, too, began to laugh. There they were, standing naked in the Perrys' front yard. "It *is* kind of funny."

They walked back toward the house, collecting their clothes along the way.

* * *

A few hours later Jacqui walked out of the au pairs' cottage and found the two of them huddled in Ryan's oversized sweatshirts, sharing a cigarette and watching the sun rise.

"I couldn't sleep," Jacqui explained.

"Glad you made it to the party," Ryan joked.

"Jacqui—are you okay?" Mara asked.

No, she was really so far from okay, it was laughable. The guy she had loved was a two-timing loser with serious identity issues. And the guy she had replaced him with was an even bigger loser who was more Li'l Romeo than DMX. Jacqui felt empty and used and completely burned out.

"I'll be okay," she said, hugging herself and shivering.

Mara didn't press for any answers. She knew Jacqui would tell her more when the time was right.

"You want a cig?" Mara asked, offering the only solace she knew Jacqui might accept just then.

"I thought you didn't smoke," Jacqui said, taking a seat on the grass next to them.

Mara shrugged. "I thought I didn't do a lot of things."

vacation is never long enough, is it?

EARLY THE NEXT MORNING THE PERRY KIDS RAN SCRAMBLING into the au pairs' room. They galloped up the rickety stairs, completely ruining the girls' plans to sleep in. Remnants of the party the night before were in evidence in their little domicile. Jeremy had left his coat under Eliza's bed. Ryan's sweatshirt was draped over the armchair. Several dirty cocktail glasses were breeding fungus in the bathroom.

"We're back! We're back!" Madison yelled, jumping up and down on Eliza's bed. "Did you guys miss us?"

"Wanna go swimming!" Zoë said.

Eliza groaned. "Is it Sunday already?"

Mara couldn't even raise her head from her pillow. "William, stop pulling my hair, please!"

"Oh my God, I am SO hung over," Eliza complained.

"Me too," Mara said, clutching her stomach. She scanned the room. "Where's Jacqui?"

Eliza gave Mara a blank look. Jacqui? Hello, where had Mara been all summer? Jacqui was never around. She was their phantom roommate.

"She was here last night," Mara explained. "I can't believe she bailed! It's her turn to take the kids somewhere. Ugh."

"Well, I haven't seen her." Eliza shrugged, trying to hide underneath the covers.

"Seriously, there is no way I can go to the beach today," Mara yelled over the clamor as William and Madison fought over who got to sit on the armchair.

"I've got an idea," Eliza said.

* * *

They drove into one of the few movie theaters in town. Unlike the sprawling suburban megaplexes in Sturbridge or the high-tech high-rises in Manhattan, where a movie ticket cost upward of ten dollars, the East Hampton theater was a small, brown-shingled building that showed obscure foreign films, art house indies, and, luckily for them, a Disney animated feature that afternoon.

"I wanna see *Alien versus Predator!*" William demanded.

"Sucks to be you; it's not showing." Eliza yawned.

They ushered the kids into the theater. Eliza was thankful for the air-conditioning and the darkness. She was planning to catch up on her sleep through the entire thing in an attempt to exorcise the events of the night before from her memory. After she had left the screening room in disgrace, she had tried to look for Jeremy, but all she found were assorted half-naked people passed out on the porch.

He *had* to understand—she'd been put on the spot—in front of people she had known her whole life. It wasn't anything to do with him, really. God, it was all such a mess. She gnawed her cuticles anxiously.

Mara walked in with Madison, carrying a huge bucket of popcorn and a Coke.

Eliza stuffed a handful into her mouth and instantly spit it out. "What? No butter?"

"That motor oil they pass off for butter has more calories than a porterhouse steak!" Mara reminded her, nodding toward Madison.

Eliza knew that. But everyone knew popcorn wasn't really a food. And it tasted like sand without butter. "I'm getting butter on this and salt," Eliza said, grabbing the carton.

"Hey, get your own!" Mara said, nodding even less subtly at Madison.

"Why don't we just ask her what she wants?" Eliza said. "Do you want butter?"

Madison looked at the two au pairs. She really wanted butter, but Mara was giving her such an encouraging look, she didn't know what she wanted. It was Mara who had fixed the hair on her Barbies the other day, combing them until they weren't tangled up anymore. She didn't want to disappoint her.

"No," she replied, almost like a question.

"Good girl, Mad." Mara nodded. "Why don't you buy your own bag?" she asked Eliza in a conciliatory tone.

"Forget it." Eliza frowned. She had already spent all her money and didn't have a penny to her name till the next pay period.

The lights dimmed, and the strains of the Walt Disney theme built to a crescendo.

* * *

While the kids were occupied with the movie, Eliza told Mara what had happened with Jeremy and her friends. "I swear, I totally didn't mean for that to happen! I was just so shocked, you know?" Eliza said, wanting to be consoled so badly. "He means more to me than any of them put together."

Mara nodded. That was a pretty wretched picture Eliza had painted, but Mara could see it was tearing Eliza up. "I'm sure he'll understand. You're only human."

In hushed tones she then told Eliza about the scene with Jim and Ryan, complete with a strip poker play-by-play.

"Jeez, what a jerk. I don't even know why you stayed with that white trash Jim for so long," Eliza said.

Mara was taken aback. That was pretty harsh. Granted, she wanted sympathy, but calling her boyfriend white trash was stepping over the line. Sure, Jim wasn't some heir to a brand-name fortune and he didn't drive a fancy car, and fine, he couldn't pronounce *Quogue* if his life depended on it, but he wasn't that bad. A little dim, maybe, a little overprotective, yes. And very bad tempered when he was provoked. But white trash? Combined with Eliza's callous comments the other night about Jeremy not "fitting in" with "this world," Mara felt extremely insulted.

"You really are a piece of work," Mara said, glaring at Eliza.

"Huh?"

"You know, I felt really bad about what happened with you and Jeremy, but now I think maybe you just got what you deserved."

"Wait a minute . . ."

"Here's a piece of advice, Liza: maybe you should think about what you're saying before you open your mouth," Mara hissed, grabbing her bags.

"Why? What the hell?" Eliza asked, mystified. It wasn't like she had the best night either. C'mon, all her friends thought *she* was white trash now.

"Because you know what's really low class?" Mara asked, her color high and her voice defiant. "A total SNOB like you!"

And with that, Mara left all four sugar-crazed kids for Eliza to deal with on her own.

* * *

Mara returned to the estate in time to see Jacqui saunter through the front door.

"Where have you been all morning?" Mara demanded.

"I was signing up the kids for the regatta competition down in Shelter Island. I thought they might enjoy it, and it's the last day," Jacqui explained.

Oh. She was actually doing something nice and responsible for the kids for a change. But instead of putting Mara in a good mood, it just made Mara feel worse for neglecting the kids every so often in order to make googly eyes at their older brother.

"Well, you could have told us," she snapped.

"What's wrong with you?" Jacqui asked, a little hurt that Mara hadn't even thanked her for the idea.

"Nothing. Nothing. Just—can you just leave me alone?" Mara said.

"Gladly," Jacqui said.

everything is getting progressively worse

FOR THE FIRST TIME THE ENTIRE SUMMER, BOTH ANNA and Kevin actually showed up for the weekly progress report in the screening room. Anna was in a good mood. Her co-chairwomanship of Super Saturday was almost locked. She had found a designer with a massive amount of overstock who wanted to sell it all in a prime booth, and it was just a matter of time before the committee anointed her with the title.

Mara and Eliza stumbled in late (projectile poo from the baby while getting his diaper changed had delayed their arrival) and were surprised and not too pleased that Jacqui of all people was sitting there, conversing pleasantly with their bosses as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

They took their usual seats, perplexed at the turn of events.

“So, anyway, as I was saying, I just want to know how Zoë is keeping up with her reading. Has she moved on to the new Art Spiegelman?”

“Uh, I’m not quite sure, Anna,” Eliza said brightly. “In fact, you should ask Jacqui since she’s been reading to her all summer.”

“Yes, she’s completely engrossed in a book, I think it’s called *Where in the World Is Carmen SanDiego?*” Mara interrupted.

Jacqui kicked Mara under the table.

Anna beamed. “And Cody?”

“Oh, we’ve almost cured him of the whole running-around-naked thing. We’re really setting a fine example that clothes are very, very important to one’s social development,” Eliza said, glaring at Mara.

Kevin yawned. He was still picturing Jacqui naked below the decks on his Catalina.

“As for Madison, she’s learning the value of telling the truth. Especially to her friends,” Mara said, returning Eliza’s icy stare.

“And William? Is he taking his meds?”

“Oh, absolutely,” all three au pairs chorused. His doctor had put William on Adderall in addition to the Ritalin and the Metadate that he was already taking, so that was true enough.

Not that it had done anything to change the kid's personality. He was still a hyperactive little monster.

"Marvelous!" Anna shone. "Oh, Kevin, aren't these girls perfect? They're nothing like those other ones you hired. I'm so glad."

The au pairs' ears pricked up. They never did find out what happened to the "A Team," as they had dubbed the first set of au pairs, and they were slightly worried they would be given the boot as well. Who knew what those girls did wrong? It wasn't as if Mara, Eliza, and Jacqui were doing anything right. Except Anna and Kevin were so clueless or indifferent, it really didn't matter.

Kevin handed out the fat cash-filled envelopes. "Thanks, ladies. Keep up the good work."

He led Anna out of the den.

"Oh, darling, I forgot to tell you," Anna said as they walked away. "The landscaper—or the gardener—he quit today. You're going to have to find someone else in town who can take care of the azaleas. Such a shame."

Eliza tried to catch Mara's eye. But Mara turned away.

As the girls pocketed their cash, each of them took mental bets on who wasn't going to make it to their final payday.

Mara: 5–1 it's Eliza. The girl was a complete flake. Plus she didn't have anything to stay for now that all her friends had abandoned her.

Eliza: 3–1 on Mara. She liked the odds on the small-town girl feeling homesick and quitting life in the fast lane.

Jacqui: 2–1 on herself. She wasn't sure she could take this any longer. She certainly wasn't having the summer of her life that the job ad had promised. So much for truth in advertising.

that money is burning a hole in eliza's stella bag

THE NEXT DAY ELIZA FOUND HERSELF IN FRONT OF THE counter at Cartier. Even after everything that had happened, she felt like herself again inside its gilt doors. Now, this was living. She pondered the classics: interlocking trinity rings, sparkling diamond solitaires with the *C* emblem, the latest from the “nouvelle vague” collection of sturdy, minimalist gold cube rings that Hamptons housewives were collecting as casually as multistriped sailor shirts from LL. Bean.

“That one,” she said, pointing to an eighteen-karat-gold Panthère watch set with diamonds.

The salesgirl put the watch on Eliza’s tiny wrist. “It’s a beauty.”

Eliza held it up to the light, admiring how it glinted and shone. “I’ll take it,” she said. “And no need to wrap it up; I’ll just wear it out.”

The watch cost significantly more than the amount in the envelope, but Eliza asked the girl to put the rest on her well-worn Visa.

She deserved this watch! After everything she had to put up with. Maybe if she looked at it long enough, she would forget Jeremy’s disgusted expression, her friends’ scornful laughter, and the fact that she had to return to Buffalo at the end of the summer.

Eliza left the store and spotted Mara across the street, headed to a branch of the North Fork bank. She ducked down before Mara could see her. She didn’t feel like showing Mara the watch or speaking to her just yet.

someday mara will have saved enough
to buy her own country

MARA LEFT THE TELLER WINDOW. SHE HAD APPROXIMATELY \$6,300 in the bank! She would have had \$6,666 if she hadn't spent so much money on a dress and flip-flops on that fateful shopping trip. Maybe she could still buy that Camry if Jim found it in his heart to forgive her. After all, it wasn't as if she and Ryan had made out or anything, she thought, with more than a little sense of regret.

She tucked her deposit ticket into her wallet and walked out the door. She saw Eliza across the street leaving Cartier with a small red shopping bag. Eliza was pretending not to see her. Just like on the first day when they had sat on opposite sides of the bench.

Mara started toward the Pilates studio to pick up the little girls.

jacqui just might win her own bet

JACQUI STOOD AT THE TRAVEL AGENCY COUNTER, BITING her lip. She had just enough to take her back to São Paulo. It was so tempting. What was she doing staying in town? She could be back on a real beach in sixteen hours.

She looked across the desk to the flight schedules on the computer screen. See, there was one leaving that evening from JFK.

But maybe running away wasn't the answer? It was such a waste of money. There were only a few weeks left. Her grandmother would be surprised to see her back so early. There would be too much explaining to do, and Jacqui didn't think her *avó* would approve when she confessed that she had spent her summer in the States just to be with a boy. Her grandmother had only allowed her to come to America because Jacqui had told her she had been chosen to participate in an "educational experience." How prophetic.

After a month in the Hamptons, Jacqui had learned that thongs were not allowed on the beaches, that her breasts were not considered real, and that the best way to crash a party was to pretend you already belonged.

"Should I make the reservation?" The clerk sat back down at her desk.

"Actually, I think I've changed my mind," Jacqui said.

Besides, she had promised Zoë she would teach her to read that book she had brought from home, with all the pretty pictures.

So she left the travel agency, her envelope of cash safely tucked inside her purse.

super saturday is turning out to be not so super after all

ON THE LAST SATURDAY OF AUGUST, THE ONLY GAME in town was a day-long shopping extravaganza to benefit ovarian cancer. Former luminaries who have cohosted the event include the late Princess Diana (who simply loved the discount de la Rentas), Donna Karan (who turned it into a themed carnival complete with rides), and, of course, the late and great founding chairwoman, *Harper's Bazaar's* Liz Tilberis. It's a madhouse of billowing white tents, and designers from Calvin Klein, Jill Stuart, Kate Spade, Michael Kors and many more sell samples and overstock and leftovers for a fraction of the price.

Anna, who had been passed up for hosting duties at the last minute in favor of a more well-financed socialite, nevertheless courageously soldiered on to sponsor the booth for Edgardo DeMenil, a new up-and-coming designer who had debuted last fall with a collection of studded leather ponchos. Unfortunately, the world was not ready for studded leather ponchos, and the designer was trying to unload all the merchandise at Super Saturday. Anna was trying to talk up the "couture" items with her friends, all of whom were understandably taking a pass.

"Mara, can you take the kids to the petting zoo? They're scaring away the clients!" Anna asked in a frantic tone.

"Eliza, will you do it? You forgot to pack Cody's stroller and now I have to hold him all afternoon," Mara said accusingly, although the truth was that there was something calming about having the baby rest on her hip.

Eliza, whose attention was distracted by all the incredible designer discounts, wandered over at the sound of her name. A pair of Yanuk jeans for \$50! A Calvin Klein silk jersey dress for \$120! If only she hadn't bought that Cartier watch! She felt poor and irritable and was looking at six straight hours of misery. Nothing's worse than coming to a sale with an empty pocketbook.

"So what? I took him yesterday. He puked all over my Foley and Corrina top," she said, annoyed. "Where's Jacqui?"

Nowhere, as usual.

When Jacqui waltzed back, sipping a frosty drink, Mara lost it. "You're never around when we need you!" she accused in a whispered, hostile tone.

Anna and Kevin were mingling and kiss-kissing friends, randomly introducing a kid when he or she happened to be in the line of vision. Sugar was sitting looking pouty, sexy, and bored, as usual.

“Shhh! They’ll hear you!” Eliza warned, hastily wiping Zoë’s chocolate-covered mouth.

William decided it was great fun to hang on her hair, and he pulled her backward just as Taylor and Lindsay walked up, holding several bulging shopping bags.

“William! Please let go! Let go!” Eliza pleaded, trying to wrench the little monkey away from her head.

She looked up and saw Taylor and Lindsay by the Marc Jacobs booth, trying on pinstripe sundresses.

“What do you think?” Taylor asked, smoothing down the front of her peplum skirt. She caught Eliza’s eye and turned away in embarrassment.

“Oh, it’s Eliza. Hey,” Lindsay said, giving her a weak wave.

The two scooted away as soon as they had swiped their charge cards.

Eliza couldn’t decide what was worse—that her friends were ignoring her or that they obviously felt sorry for her.

“Excuse me, miss? Can you get me a drink?” Charlie asked, a twisted smile on his face.

“Can’t you see? She’s working right now.” Sugar laughed, getting up from her seat. “Hey, Bill, pull harder,” she told her little brother.

“I got ya!” William crowed.

“Fuck you,” Eliza said, looking directly at Charlie.

“Excuse me?” Charlie asked.

“Eliza, did I just hear you say the *f* word?” Anna asked primly. “You know we try to keep that kind of language away from the kids’ ears. Spoils their interactive development.”

“Sorry, sorry. I . . .”

“Here,” Anna said, expertly wringing William away and giving Eliza a doubtful look. “Now go play with the Kennedy-Cole kids. Over there, over there. Scoot!” she said to her stepson.

“Thanks,” Eliza said weakly, feeling a little humiliated to have been rescued by Anna of all people.

* * *

Mara found a quiet place by the outdoor restaurant to try calling Jim again. He hadn’t picked up his phone since Saturday night. She didn’t want things between them to end this way, and she wanted to get her story straight with him. It made her furious to think about what kind of lies Jim was probably spreading about her back home. What if everyone thought she was a two-cent hooker when she got back? She was class secretary, after all. She had a rep to protect.

She dialed his number again. Straight to the answering machine.

“Jim, it’s me, Mara. I know you don’t want to hear it, but you have to. You have to give me a chance to explain. I’m really, really sorry about what happened. . . .”

“Hey.”

“Jim, you’re there.”

“Yeah.”

“Look—”

“No,” he interrupted. “I’m sorry I blew up at you on Saturday. It wasn’t right and I’m sorry.”

Mara was stunned.

“I don’t know what happened between you and that guy, and I don’t really want to know.”

“Noth—”

But Jim kept talking. “The thing is, I kinda knew you wanted the job to get away from here. And I guess I was mad at you for deserting me. But the thing is . . . well . . .” He sounded a little sheepish.

“What?”

“I think I’ve met someone else,” he admitted.

Mara exhaled. Now that, she hadn’t seen coming. She had mixed feelings about his admission. On the one hand, she was in the clear. On the other, what the hell? She’d been so worried about his feelings all summer, but apparently he wasn’t really thinking of her at all.

“Who?”

“Stephanie Fortuna.”

The head of the cheerleading squad. Mara had a vague memory of how the little curly-haired minx seemed to jump extra high whenever Jim got a tackle.

“I’m . . . happy for you,” she said, almost actually meaning it.

“Yeah, well. We had some good times, though, didn’t we?” Jim asked.

“We did,” Mara said softly. She and Jim had been dating for almost two years. It was the end of an era. It was the most anticlimactic end to an era that she could ever imagine. It was like the last sequel to *The Matrix*.

“Good luck with your job and everything. And I didn’t mean what I said . . . about the Camry. It’s yours if you still want it,” Jim added.

“Thanks,” Mara said simply. “You take care.”

“You too.”

“Bye.”

“Bye.”

Mara hung up the phone without saying “I love you” like they had every time they got off the phone for the last two years. It was weird, especially because she was pretty sure she really didn’t love him anymore. She felt unanchored. Free. She wasn’t Jim’s girlfriend anymore. She was Just Mara, but she wasn’t quite sure what Just Mara wanted to do next.

“Hey, Mar, can you lend me a twenty?” Eliza asked, coming over and holding up a cute black sweater. “Please?”

Mara stared at her blankly. Was she serious? Eliza sure had some nerve. They weren’t even officially talking to each other just yet.

“Are you still mad at me?” Eliza bit her lip. She wasn’t used to people staying mad at her. Being rude or out of line wasn’t new to Eliza, but having to take some responsibility for the things she did, was.

“Listen, I’m . . . I’m sorry about what I said the other day. It’s just with everything . . . and I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings.” Eliza still wasn’t very good at this apology thing.

Mara folded her arms. “Well, you did.”

“I know. I suck,” Eliza lamented.

“Yeah,” Mara said, noticing that Eliza’s eyes were starting to mist a little bit. Now *that* was something she’d never seen before. “I’m sorry too.”

“For what?”

“Nothing, I just don’t want you to cry.”

Eliza giggled, and ran her finger underneath her lower eyelashes to wipe away any makeup. “So, can I borrow the money? Promise I’ll pay you back.”

“Oh, alright. I’m charging interest!” Mara joked.

Eliza hugged Mara impulsively. “I hate it when you’re mad at me. I kind of missed your nagging.” Eliza bought the sweater and they walked back to Anna’s booth, where Jacqui was handing out doughnuts.

* * *

“Here you go, Chloë,” she said, giving Zoë a chocolate-sprinkled one.

“Chloë?” Anna asked, looking up sharply from writing up a bill of sale for a particularly ugly poncho.

Eliza elbowed Jacqui. “Zoë.”

“Zoë . . . Zoë,” Jacqui sang, getting red from her slipup.

“Zoë’s been wanting us to call her by different names lately. This week she’s Chloë. Last week it was Julie. Right, Zo?” Mara asked.

Zoë nodded, rapturously eating her doughnut. She was only six, but she could be bribed.

When Anna turned her back, Jacqui apologized.

“*Dios mio!* I’m so, so sorry. I totally lost my head. I don’t know what I was thinking,” she said, looking completely wretched. “I don’t want to get us in trouble.”

“It’s okay. It could have happened to any of us,” Eliza said.

“Yeah, don’t worry about it.”

* * *

They spent the rest of the afternoon stalking a supermodel that the three of them were obsessed with. Mara and Eliza were just thinking how the day didn’t turn out to be such a washout after all as they piled the kids back in the car when Jacqui ran up.

Her eyes were shining and she was obviously very excited about something.

“I’ll catch you guys later! I just saw a friend of mine who invited me to this great party at Sting’s house!” she said. “Ciao!”

Mara rolled her eyes. “What is it with that girl?” She asked Eliza. Mara had had enough of Jacqui. She was getting paid just as much as the rest of them—for doing less than a third of the work. William pulled on a lock of Mara’s hair and then ran away. God, another pair of hands sure would be useful to wrestle that little boy sometimes.

Eliza felt extremely annoyed, too, but not about Jacqui ditching them. Hello, a party she didn’t know about? The reality of social ostracism was starting to set in.

jacqui is not a chick gone crazy

RUPERT THORNE SMILED A CATLIKE SMILE AT HIS quarry. He had never forgotten the girl he'd given a ride from the airport that day. Spotting her again at the Super Saturday benefit his wife always dragged him to was indeed a pleasant surprise.

He mentioned Sting was in town—a private concert—and would she care to join him?

They had started the evening by having dinner at The Palm, where Rupert ordered a seven-hundred-dollar bottle of Chateau Latour. “I’m celebrating something,” he’d explained to Jacqui. Afterward he had taken her to the bar at the elite Maidstone Club, which was legendary for its stringent exclusionary practices concerning its eighty-acre golf course. Bill Clinton hadn’t been deemed worthy enough to tee up during his 1999 visit. Rupert had broken several rules concerning women, foreigners, and Catholics just to impress Jacqui.

The Hummer into an enormous estate overlooking the sea. It was the hundred-thousand-square-foot mansion owned by a former investment banker-cum-techno-DJ (not Sting—Jacqui had misunderstood) who liked to throw wild, twenty-four-hour Vegas-style parties on the grounds, complete with showgirls giving lap dances. The house was frequently rented out for movie shoots, music videos, and twelve-hundred-person bashes like this one.

At the door a woman gave the two of them releases to sign, explaining it was being taped for television. Jacqui signed her name on the sheet without bothering to read it. This wasn’t the first time she’d had to sign a release at a party—some cable station or another always seemed to be taping something in the Hamptons. Rupert did the same and gave her his hand as they entered the party.

It was wild. Massive. This was partying on a grand scale. Hundreds of sweaty guests danced under a throbbing laser light show. A two-story-high ice sculpture of a vodka bottle melted in the middle of the fountain. The swimming pool had been turned into a massive grotto. Cocktail waitresses in corsets and tiny boy-shorts handed out free packs of cigarettes.

“Wow,” Jacqui said. “Where’s Sting?”

“Oh, he’s performing later,” Rupert replied. The truth was Sting had already bowed out of the event, citing a scheduling conflict, but word had it that he just wasn’t into this kind of scene.

“Let’s enjoy ourselves, shall we?”

Roaming camera crews dressed in CHICKS GO CRAZY! hats and logo T-shirts cajoled guests to flash their ta-tas to the cameras. Wait a second. Jacqui had seen these videos

advertised on E! once when she was watching that disgusting pig Howard Stone, or whatever his name was.

“What about you?” a bearded, potbellied man asked Jacqui.

“No, no thanks.” She smiled, feeling uncomfortable. It wasn’t quite the star-studded event Rupert had led her to believe she was attending. Where were all the big names? Ashton Kutcher and Cameron Diaz? Sara Jessica Parker and Kim Catrall? Or at the very least, Tara Reid and Paris Hilton? It wasn’t an elegant A-list bash. In fact, most of the guests were cheesy guys in shiny shirts and polyester pants, and most of the women were overly tanned, silicone enhanced, and wearing cheap spandex dresses.

“Uh, I think I’ll just get a drink,” she said.

“Good idea,” Rupert agreed, licking his lips.

Rupert kept refilling her glass even when it wasn’t empty, so she wasn’t even sure how many drinks she had. In her growing anxiety Jacqui drank a lot more than she had intended. The piercing light of a filming camera suddenly flashed onto Jacqui. She squinted to see several hefty bodyguards and camera crews standing at the doorway.

The twenty-eight-year-old topless-video entrepreneur who was throwing the party took a bullhorn. “It’s that time of the night, ladies and gentlemen. Any woman who isn’t naked in five minutes better leave now.”

“What?” Jacqui said.

Rupert grinned. “Oh c’mon. It’s no big deal. Everyone knows these parties always end this way.”

“I didn’t!”

“Hey, you signed the waiver at the door. C’mon, let’s have a little fun,” Rupert said, reaching over to pull down the straps of her shirt.

“Wait! Wait!” Jacqui said, pushing his hand away.

Rupert scowled. “What’s the matter?” he asked. “I show you a good time, I take you to dinner and the Maidstone, and this is how you thank me? C’mon, I just want to have a little fun,” he said, keeping his hand on her breast with a little too much force.

“Of course we’re going to have fun,” Jacqui said, her mind racing. “I just need to go to the bathroom and take care of a few things.” She winked, her heart pounding.

All around them women were stripping down and shaking their breast for the cameras. It wasn’t a fun, careless goof like Mara and Ryan skinny-dipping in the pool. This was business. This was frightening. This was not what she bargained for when she said she’d like to see Sting play a private concert.

“I’ll wait right here,” Rupert drawled.

Jacqui stood unsteadily on her feet. “I’ll be right back,” she promised.

It was four in the morning and she was in the middle of nowhere. She didn't have money for a cab, and she didn't even know where she would call for one. No one at the party would take her home.

She found a phone in the hallway and dialed the first number that came to mind.

"Luca! It's me—I really need your help!"

"Who is this?" a sleepy female voice demanded. "Who's calling?"

"It's Jacqui. Can I talk to Luca?"

"He's sleeping right now. What's this about?" the suspicious voice asked.

No use. Jacqui dialed another number.

"Leo! It's me, Jacqui. I really need your help."

"Jacqui?" Leo asked. He was still awake, having played fifty-four straight games of John Madden Football on his PlayStation. "The girl who said I was just a mercy screw?"

"Leo—please."

But he had already hung up.

Jacqui was in tears. In a few minutes Rupert would storm out looking for her and God knows what she would do then. She dialed the last number she could remember.

The phone rang and rang, and Jacqui had almost resigned herself to walking down the four miles of the Montauk Highway when Mara's voice answered.

"Hello?"

"Mara. It's Jacqui. I really need your help. Can you guys come and pick me up?"

Mara sat up in bed and looked at the clock. "What the hell? Just because you blow everything off, doesn't mean we can just up and get—"

"Mara, please," Jacqui said, starting to cry.

"What's going on?" Mara asked, suddenly realizing something was wrong here.

"I'm at this party—Sting isn't here—it's just—I need to get away."

"Where are you?"

Jacqui told her. "I'm really scared, Mara."

"We'll be there in a few minutes. I have to get Eliza up, I don't know how to get there, but I'm sure she will. Hang in there."

Jacqui put down the phone and tiptoed out the front gate. It was getting cold outside from the ocean breeze, but she would rather freeze than walk into that house again.

sometimes people actually forget that the hamptons is long island

A FLASH OF HEADLIGHTS AND A FAMILIAR CLUNKY RED Volvo pulled up to the front door. Mara threw open the car door. “Jacqui?”

Eliza lit herself another cigarette. God, talk about drama.

Mara had hastily explained why they had to get up and go get their lost roommate, but Eliza still wasn't sure exactly why she had to leave her comfortable bed at four-thirty in the morning.

They found Jacqui huddled by the steps. When she spotted them, she burst into tears.

“Oh my God! What happened!” Mara said, fearing the worst.

“Nothing—nothing. I just didn't know if you were actually going to show up,” Jacqui whimpered.

She was shaking and so upset, a totally different person than the confident, glacial, sophisticated South American who was so jaded about everything. In the moonlight she looked all of her sixteen years.

“I was stupid,” she said. “I should have known something like this would happen.” She told them all about Rupert, the bait and switch, the sketchy party, the leering guys, the video cameras.

“You're under the age of consent,” Eliza said. “We could put them in jail.”

“I signed the release form,” Jacqui admitted.

“Who cares? That doesn't matter. That's never going to hold up in court.”

“C'mon, let's get out of this place before they try to get new recruits,” Mara suggested.

Jacqui sniffed and wiped her nose with the palm of her hand. She looked at the car. “You guys took the Volvo?”

* * *

They drove west—all the way west—to the part of Long Island where it was more strip mall than stripper party. After all, it's not *all* about the Hamptons. By now they were a little sick of the place, to be honest. All that posing, primping, and posturing. The constant need to match one's bikini, sarong, handbag, and flip-flops. It took hours just to get dressed to go nowhere.

“Look, there’s a Denny’s,” Mara said. “I haven’t been to one in so long.”

“Anyone up for breakfast?” Eliza asked.

“Sounds perfect,” Jacqui agreed.

They found a corner booth by the window and opened menus.

“What can I get ya?” a waitress in a checkered uniform with a beehive asked them. She was so far from the sylphs who dole out minuscule plates of tofu at Babbette’s that the girls couldn’t help but grin at each other. This was exactly what they needed. A dose of reality.

“I have lumberjack special,” Jacqui decided.

“Three eggs, two pancakes, bacon, sausage, *and* ham?” Eliza asked in horror. There was absolutely nothing on the menu that was under her four-hundred-calorie-per-minimeal ratio.

“Sounds great. I’ll have the same,” Mara decided, snapping her menu closed.

“Two ’jacks, what about you, hon?”

Eliza contemplated. The bacon alone was three hundred calories. But she was really, really hungry. “Make it three.”

They wolfed down their greasy breakfasts and filled each other in on the latest news.

“And you haven’t even spoken to Jeremy since?” Mara asked after Eliza updated Jacqui on what happened.

“No.”

“You’ve got to find him and tell him how you feel,” Mara stressed. “It’s important. You guys can’t just leave things like this!”

“I know, I know.” Eliza sighed, spearing a fat brown sausage with her fork and popping it in her mouth.

“Jeremy—the guy who cuts the lawn?” Jacqui asked. “He’s really nice. I saw him looking for you the other day. Sorry. I forgot to tell you.”

“He was?” Eliza asked. “Oh my God.”

“See—I’m sure he feels the same way. But you’ve got to go to him first.” Mara had a major romantic streak.

“Okay. But only if you break up with Jim. You deserve so much better than that bonehead,” Eliza said. “And he is a bonehead.”

“We broke up already,” Mara said. “Yesterday, actually.”

“And you haven’t told Ryan?”

“No, why should I?” Mara said obstinately.

Jacqui and Eliza exchanged a look. “Only because he is so into you,” Eliza said.

“Is love,” Jacqui announced. “I know when men love. He is sick with passion. He can’t get enough of you. He’s so in love,” she said dramatically.

“No, he isn’t,” Mara said. “He has a girlfriend.”

“That Camille girl? She’s history,” Eliza said. “He told me the other day, he just wasn’t feeling it. He broke it off.”

“So what? It’s not like he would ever be interested in someone like me,” Mara said quietly. She knew how guys like Ryan felt about her—she knew it the first time she saw him—guys like that were so out of her league.

“What on EARTH are you talking about?” Eliza yelled, so loudly that the truckers having breakfast at the counter turned around. “You are a bombshell! Have you looked in the mirror lately?” Eliza asked, pulling Mara to look at her reflection in the glass.

Jacqui nodded vigorously. “In São Paulo we call girls like you *consideravelmente*.”

“You guys are really sweet, but you’re just blowing smoke up my butt,” Mara said as she turned. There was Eliza, the spitting image of Cameron Diaz, who even totally hung over still radiated that *InStyle* cover girl glow. There was Jacqui, the sultry, Latin sexpot. Then there was her. The plain one. But for once Mara took a good look at the reflection. The haircut Pierre had given her brought out the angles of her cheekbones, and the new blue shirt Eliza had helped pick her out made her eyes look bluer than they ever did. While running after the kids half the summer, she had even lost a few pounds. Were they right? Had she transformed into a hottie overnight?

“See,” Eliza said smugly. “Told you.”

“Now, you go get that boy,” Jacqui said. She was so happy to be just where she was at that moment. As she looked around at Mara, who was brushing her bangs away from her face with a wistful smile, and Eliza, who was motioning for a round of milk shakes (Hey, what else goes well with a lumberjack special?), Jacqui realized that after everything that had happened this summer, they really were friends.

eliza, mara, and jacqui find the best part of the hamptons

THE SUN WAS RISING WHEN THEY DROVE BACK UP Route 27 toward East Hampton. Roadside farm stands were opening up for business, and Eliza convinced them that they couldn't pass up this chance to buy the freshest fruit and vegetables for the house.

"Anna always goes to the one in Amagansett, but it's always so picked over. This one is so much better." Eliza sniffed as they walked around, looking at all the stalls.

The corn was piled high in the palest emerald green stalks, and inside, they were ivory white or as yellow as daffodils. Grapefruits the size of basketballs, oranges that glowed with an almost fluorescent light. Carrots as long and thick as your arm. Radicchio, endive, arugula, and every other fancy lettuce for less than a dollar a bunch.

Eliza showed them the bakery table, set up with loaves of gluten- and wheat-free pumpernickel, sourdough, and challah bread.

They spotted Cindy Crawford behind a baseball cap, sniffing persimmons.

"Hey, look, there's a homemade peach-and-blueberry pie," Mara said, walking over to the delicious smell. "Let's get one for the kids."

"Madison will love it," Eliza agreed.

"Peaches! Zoë's favorite." Jacqui nodded.

"William would like throwing it against the wall." Mara laughed.

They bought Cody a Sponge-Bob-shaped balloon and filled up the trunk with baskets of citrus, loaves of freshly baked bread, fat red-orange tomatoes on the vine, cauliflower and broccoli blossoms, and enough grapes to make their own barrel of wine.

Eliza dropped them back off at the house.

"Where are you going?" Mara asked.

"Jeremy always gets up early to go running in Montauk. I'm going to try to find him."

"Good," Mara said, squeezing Eliza's arm. "I'm going to go find Ryan."

"Go get him, sista." Eliza smiled.

Jacqui impulsively put her arm around both of them, which was actually rather hard to do, considering Eliza was still in the car. "You guys are the best."

Eliza drove off and Jacqui and Mara walked to the back of the house to the stone pathway.

“I’m going to go get some sleep,” Jacqui said to no one in particular as she climbed the rickety attic stairs.

But only after a long, hot shower so she could start with a fresh, clean slate.

mara finally makes her move

THE MAIN HOUSE WAS EMPTY WHEN MARA SNUCK inside; not even the kitchen staff were awake yet. She walked up the back stairs to Ryan's room and opened the door.

"Ryan?" she whispered. "Are you up?"

Now that she had decided she knew exactly what she wanted—*him*—she couldn't wait to break the news. And if he didn't want her, she could live with that—what she wouldn't be able to live with was if she never told him.

She creaked open the door and walked inside his room. On his desk rested the pack of playing cards from the other night, a few twigs they'd picked up from the beach as potential marshmallow sticks, and the book she'd lent him to read—*Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. He'd said he'd never read it and she had chastised him for his lack of literary education.

His surfboards and skateboards were lined up against the wall.

But his bed was still made. The blue comforter was turned down perfectly.

Her heart sank. He probably never even came home last night. If it wasn't Camille, it was someone else. There was always someone else—it wasn't as if he was going to wait around for her the whole summer, was he? Mara remembered all the girls at the many parties they attended this summer who had made their interest clear.

She closed the door behind her. By this time he'd probably found someone to keep him company, maybe one of those Bush nieces or Hearst heiresses who hung on his every word. Or maybe even one of the cute Irish girls who worked at every café, bar, and kayak rental shop in the Hamptons.

"Good morning, miss," Stevens, the butler, greeted as he passed her on his way to opening the curtains in the master den.

She nodded to him shyly.

The pool sparkled in the morning light and she told herself she was still really, really happy she'd spent the summer in the middle of such gorgeous beauty. The knife edge of the pool blended with the blue horizon of the ocean. It was a sight Mara would never get tired of.

She absentmindedly picked up strewn children's toys as she walked back to the au pairs' cottage. Zoë's Disco Elmo, William's missing Gameboy, Cody's blankie, Madison's dueling Britney and Christina dolls.

As she turned the corner, she caught her breath.

There, in the hammock behind the au pairs' cottage, was Ryan, asleep.

She kissed him softly on the lips to wake him up. Her sleeping prince. His nostrils flared slightly with every breath. She felt an amazing wave of tenderness and affection.

His eyelids fluttered, and when he saw her, he smiled. "What was that for?"

"I just felt like it." She smiled back.

"I was looking for you all night. Where'd you go?" he asked.

"Nowhere. I was looking for you, too."

"Fancy that."

She leaned down to the hammock, and he pulled her down to cuddle with him. It swung underneath their combined weight and threw them closer together.

"What about Jim?" he asked, gently grazing her bare arm with the back of his hand.

"We broke up," she said.

"And you're okay with that?"

"I should have done it a long, long time ago."

"Good," he said sleepily, and closed his eyes.

Mara nestled into the crook of his armpit, savoring his strong arms around her. She never wanted to let go.

The hammock swayed in the breeze, and they fell asleep to the sound of crashing waves on the shore.

eliza goes to montauk for the first time all summer

PLEASE, PLEASE, LET HIM BE THERE, ELIZA PRAYED. *Please, please, please.*

She parked the car in the lot and walked down to the beach. A few brave swimmers were doing laps in the early tide, but otherwise the beach was empty. Then she saw him. He was wearing a dirty anorak and his running shorts.

“Jeremy! Jeremy!” she called.

He turned back, saw her, and kept running. Faster.

Eliza tossed away her high-heeled platforms and ran to keep up with him.

“Jeremy, please!” she begged. “Please wait.”

But he kept running.

“I LOVE YOU!” she cried.

Finally, halfway down the beach, he stopped and took off his earphones. “What did you say?”

She ran down, not caring if little broken pieces of seashells were piercing the soft soles of her feet. She stopped right in front of him. His face was shiny with sweat, and his hair had kinked in the humidity. But she thought he was even more handsome than she remembered.

“I’m so sorry about that night. I don’t know what I was doing—no, I did know, and I’m so embarrassed. I love you. I’ve never felt this way before, and you have to know that.” Eliza looked for a trace of feeling on Jeremy’s face. Nothing. “Why did you quit the Perrys?”

“You think I could work there—seeing you—knowing what you really think of me?” he asked.

Eliza could see how much she’d hurt him. “Please forgive me. Can we start over again? Please?” She held her breath.

He had to say yes, he just had to. She told him she loved him. She’d never said those words aloud to anyone—ever.

“I don’t know,” he said, looking at the sand. “I think we’re too different.” He shook his head. “It’s not that easy.”

“Can’t we just try?” She tried grabbing for his hand, but he pulled away.

This wasn't how it was supposed to happen. He was supposed to kiss her right now and say everything was forgiven and forgotten. But his face was grim.

"It's not a faucet I can just turn on and off," he said. "I'm . . . I'm going to have to think about it. You have to give me time."

He put his earphones back on and began to jog away.

Eliza watched him, not sure how to react. It was the most vulnerable she'd ever been with another person, and she had been rejected.

He'd asked for time. But it was almost Labor Day. She didn't have any more time. She was going back to Buffalo in a week.

mara finds happiness in a hammock

“MARA AND RYAN SITTING IN A TREE! K-I-S-S-I . . .,” Madison and Zoë chorused, waking up their big brother and the au pair in his arms.

“MARA AND RYAN ARE IN LOVE!” William snickered and made loud sloppy kissing noises.

“Shush,” Ryan said, batting at his smaller siblings.

“Wake up! Wake up, sleepyheads! We wanna go swimming!”

Mara blinked and smiled. “You guys go and get changed and we’ll meet you in the pool.”

Instead the girls climbed into the hammock with them, so that William, who never liked being left out, scrambled in, too. “Oof! You’re heavy!” Ryan said, hugging his younger brother.

Mara laughed as the kids began wildly swinging the hammock. “We’re all going to fall off! Okay, if no one’s going to get out, I will!” she threatened, trying to grab hold of one side of the hammock so she could climb off safely.

“No, you don’t, you’re staying right here,” Ryan said, reaching over to pull her back against him.

The two little girls whispered to each other on the far end of the hammock, cupping their mouths with tiny hands.

“Zoë and I decided,” Madison said, in a very serious tone, “that you are a LOT prettier than Ryan’s old girlfriend.”

“Oh, thanks.” Mara winked at Ryan. “So I’m prettier than Camille, am I?”

Madison and Zoë looked confused. “Camille?”

“Um, Ryan’s old girlfriend?” Mara asked.

“You mean Sophie?” Madison asked.

“Or Annette?” Zoë chimed in.

“There’s more than one?” Mara asked.

“Maddy! Zo! Don’t answer that!” Ryan said in a half-jestful manner.

“There are *tons*,” Madison assured Mara.

“Lots.” Zoë nodded.

Mara raised an eyebrow at Ryan. “Lots, eh? How many were there?”

“Do we have to get into this now?” Ryan laughed. “It doesn’t really matter, does it? I mean, we’re together now.” He noticed Mara looking downcast. “My sisters don’t know what they’re talking about.”

He cupped Mara’s chin and kissed her again. “You’re the *only* one I want. Okay?”

“Okay.” As long as they were clear on that.

The little girls sighed happily. It was just so romantic.

* * *

A few minutes later Jacqui appeared, wearing sunglasses and shorts and carrying a croissant and a coffee cup from the Hampton Coffee Company. She held several newspapers and magazines underneath her free arm.

“Who are you?” William asked on his way to the pool.

“I’m Jacqui—I’ve been taking care of you all summer!” Jacqui joked.

He looked puzzled.

She smiled when she saw Mara and Ryan together.

“Look what I found,” Jacqui said, holding aloft copies of *New York* magazine, *Hamptons* magazine, the *New York Post*, the *New York Daily News*, and the *New York Times*. There were photos of Mara everywhere, with photo credits from her friend Lucky Yap.

“The summer’s latest IT girl—and she didn’t have to run over the back wall of a club or tape a sex video to do it!” blared the always-restrained Page Six.

“Hey, you’re more famous than me,” Ryan said, noticing that the latest round didn’t even mention the “Perry heir.”

Mara paged through the magazines and newspapers with a thoughtful smile on her face. She felt confident and blissfully happy—not because she’d achieved in one season what most Hamptonites crave their whole lifetimes, but because she was with the guy she loved.

jacqui is a miracle worker

JACQUI ROUNDED UP THE KIDS AND TOOK THEM TO the pool. She pumped up Cody's water wings and tugged them on his chubby arms.

"Let's go!" She whooped, jumping into the deep end.

Amazingly, he followed her in, splashing and kicking like a duck.

"Good boy! Good boy!" Jacqui said, laughing.

She didn't even realize how miraculous this was—Mara and Eliza had been trying to get him in the water all summer, but as far as ever-absent Jacqui knew, Cody was a born-swimmer. William jumped in the pool too, almost knocking out his brother.

"Be careful!" Jacqui chided.

The little boy stuck his tongue out. "DUNK!" He said, and pushed Cody's head under water.

"WILLIAM!" Really, that one was such a monster.

Chortling, William let his brother go and swam to the other end of the pool.

Cody kicked and splashed happily.

"Not bad," Kevin Perry said, kneeling down. "Hey, Jacqui, right? You want to hit the steam bath later? We just put in a new showerhead. It's amazing."

Jacqui swam to the edge of the pool. She was sick of being watched, being slobbered over, and after the night at the orgy party she'd had it with older men.

"I don't think your wife would appreciate you talking to me that way," she said evenly.

He looked confused. A lot more confused than he should have. "Sure. I'll, uh, see you around," Kevin said.

Jacqui nodded. She felt relieved. After years of kowtowing and bowing and scraping and flirting with men for a tip or a ride or another drink or an invitation to a party, she had finally stood up for herself.

It felt fantastic.

the second-best thing anna ever said

ONCE AGAIN ANNA WAS SITTING AT THE HEAD OF THE TABLE when the au pairs trooped in for the weekly progress report. Did miracles never cease?

The three au pairs took their seats across the table.

“Where’s Kevin?” Eliza whispered.

Jacqui shrugged.

Now that Jacqui had made it clear she wasn’t going to tolerate his advances, Kevin had found better things to do with his time.

The girls were all a little tense. They were supposed to get their final payment at the meeting—that is, if they didn’t get fired first. They still had no idea why the first batch of au pairs was let go—and Super Saturday was not their best moment.

But Anna was positively glowing at them.

“Well, I hope you had a wonderful summer,” she said. “I certainly did.” She had been asked to donate her tennis court for the annual Cartier tournament, putting her right up there with the Swids, Kravises, and Davises of the town. It sort of made up for the Super Saturday debacle. Sorta.

The girls nodded.

“I just can’t be more pleased with your obvious devotion to the kids,” Anna said. “In particular, Cody swimming this morning was amazing!” Anna held a hand to her chest. “To see him conquer his greatest fear—a mother couldn’t be more proud!”

Mara and Eliza nodded, trying to figure how the hell Jacqui had done it.

“And that Portuguese book you’re teaching Zoë, Jacqui! We were just hoping we could get her to read in English, but to have her bilingual to boot, it’s spectacular. Her admissions counselor thinks this will put her over the hump for next year. She said Zoë is Dalton material for sure.”

Again Eliza and Mara exchanged confused glances. When exactly did this happen?

“Better yet, Madison’s lost ten pounds!” Anna cheered.

The kid had been eating them out of house and home all summer, and the weight loss was just from shedding baby fat, but none of the girls would tell Anna that.

“Of course, William’s still a bit twitchy. But nothing’s perfect. At least he’s stopped biting people,” Anna continued. “It’s just so easy to get off track in the Hamptons. The social life here is just frenetic, what with the parties and nightclubs and all.”

The girls looked a little guilty at that.

“I never told you guys this, but we had to let our first au pairs go for that very reason! They were out every night!”

The girls all exchanged sidelong glances.

“So we just want to congratulate you on a job well done. Here’s the last of your payment, with a little bonus inside.” Anna winked.

Eliza sighed with relief. Those Visa bills had been piling up. She was going to make a dent on them this time instead of adding to the total. Seriously. As soon as she got her hand on the gorgeous tweed coat she saw at Scoop the other day. Hey, it was almost fall, and a girl needed back-to-school clothes.

Mara hugged herself. She had made almost ten thousand dollars this summer. Woo-hoo! College and a ten-year-old Camry. Life didn’t get better than this! Sure, she’d gotten a bit more fabulous this summer, but underneath it all, she was the same small-town girl she’d always been.

Jacqui put her envelope away. When she got home, she was going to buy her grandmother the biggest statue of the Virgin Mary the old lady had ever seen—it was the one gift that would tell her how much Jacqui loved her, and that’s exactly what she wanted to say.

But Anna wasn’t done.

“By the way, we’d love to have you girls with us this Christmas. We always do two weeks in Palm Beach, and our regular nanny goes to England at that time, so we’re strapped. Do you think you’d be interested? We’ll pay five thousand dollars. We can all meet in New York and we’ll go by our private jet.”

Palm Beach? Christmas? Five grand? A jet? Where did they sign?

p. diddy knows how to throw a party

IT WAS TIME FOR P. DIDDY'S ANNUAL LABOR DAY WHITE Party, the last big bash before the summer was over. Eliza had worked the phones for three days straight, trying to make sure they all got invitations. Kit had come through again, and Lucky Yap had sent over a couple, so they were all covered.

Mara hung out in Ryan's room, watching him change into a white linen suit. He buttoned up his shirt in the mirror and caught her eye.

"What are you looking at?"

"My gorgeous boyfriend," she answered, then caught herself. Did she just say **THAT WORD**? How could she do that? She didn't even know what he thought they were doing. Maybe they were just fooling around. Certainly she didn't want to label their relationship so early.

Seeing the distress on her face and knowing what put it there, Ryan turned and climbed up on the bed, then crawled up to kiss her on the cheek.

"I'd rather look at my gorgeous girlfriend," he whispered.

Mara leaned back, pulling him closer, tugging on the rawhide necklace he always wore around his neck. The pillows were still warm from their earlier activities.

Ryan kissed her closed eyelids, her nose, her cheeks. "Maybe we shouldn't get dressed yet," he murmured.

"Maybe not," she agreed.

* * *

Eliza looked at her closet askance. How could this be? Everything white that she owned was dirty, or yellowed, or stained. She had absolutely nothing to wear to the biggest party of the season.

Or did she . . .

She walked furtively to the main house. The diaphanous white Versace dress Sugar had asked her to send to the cleaners earlier that week was still hanging in her walk-in closet, waiting to be worn. But Sugar wasn't going to get back from her bikini wax for a while yet.

Sugar would just look washed out in it, Eliza thought. Really, I'm doing her a favor.

Eliza grabbed the dress. It was her last night in town. And didn't she deserve to wear it? She was the one who had taken such good care of it all summer.

* * *

Jacqui yawned as she put on her white shirt and a calf-length skirt. The most conservative outfit she owned. For once she didn't feel like attracting any attention to herself. Guys were just too much trouble these days. She was enjoying being single.

* * *

The group met at the driveway. Mara and Ryan walked out of the main house, holding hands, apple cheeked and glowing in their matching white pantsuits.

Eliza met them at the door in the borrowed (fine, stolen) Versace.

"Isn't that . . .," Ryan asked, thinking the dress looked familiar.

"It's mine," Eliza declared. At least for the night. If she couldn't have Jeremy, she could at least have a Versace dress.

Jacqui walked up from the garden pathway, looking devastating in her "conservative" outfit. "Everybody ready?" she asked.

Mara and Ryan took the Aston Martin, and Eliza and Jacqui thought it would fun to ride in on the Vespas. It beat having to worry about parking.

* * *

They drove to an imposing modern mansion on Settlers Landing with P. Diddy's initials carved into the wrought iron gates. Several billowing white tents were set up near the entrance to facilitate the guest check-in.

Eliza told them that she'd heard the entire city of East Hampton had to be insured for up to five million dollars against any incident related to the party and that Puffy had paid for an eleven-thousand-square-foot tent with a ten-inch plastic foam wall on one side to keep the dulcet tones of Funkmaster Flex from reaching a nearby neighbor.

"I heard he even had a whole orchard planted the week before to make it look more countrylike!" Eliza said.

At the receiving line they spotted Leonardo di Caprio getting patted down by several hulking bodyguards. Leo was a vision in white, from his cream-colored baseball cap to his snow white shoes. There was Topher Grace hanging out with Ali Hilfiger, Gavin Rossdale walking in with Gwen Stefani, and Eve, Li'l Kim, and Busta Rhymes mingling with Zac Posen, Paz de la Huerta, and Claire Danes.

The three girls held their collective breath as one of the huge bouncers waved their invitations underneath a laser. It seemed an eternity before it pinged as authentic.

"Go right in." The doorman in the pristine three-piece suit waved them inside.

A cocktail waitress in a white lace dress brought over a tray of champagne flutes. "Cristal?"

They each took a glass and toasted each other.

"To all of us," Mara said. Sure, it was a little cheesy, but she was allowed—she was a Hamptons It girl.

it pays to tip the valet well

THEY FOUND AN UNOCCUPIED TABLE NOT FAR FROM where Amanda Hearst was in deep conversation with Andre 3000. Puffy's annual barbecue was the perfect mix of old money and mo' money. Waspy blue bloods traded tall tales with gold-toothed gangbangers. New York's fanciest socialites boogied down with Hollywood hotshots and hip-hop stars. A white Moroccan-style tent was set up on the grounds, and belly dancers in ivory-and-pearl-embossed ensembles were clacking their finger cymbals as they gyrated through the crowd.

"Check it out! His logo is, like, everywhere!" Mara said. Their host's monogram was engraved into the bottom of the pool, on the napkins, even on the towels that hung in the bathrooms. In fact, on every beach, bath, and dish towel on the premises.

"Yeah." Eliza sighed. Somehow the fact that she had scored a legitimate invitation to the best party of the season didn't do anything to improve her mood.

"Don't be so down," Mara said. "It's our last night together!"

Eliza managed a weak smile. "I know. I'll try."

Jeremy had never bothered to call. He said he needed time to think about it, but for Eliza time had run out. Kit, the only friend who still talked to her after she was "outed" as poor, had offered to drive her back to the city next day, and she had a ticket on the Greyhound back to Buffalo.

"Who knows, he might surprise you," Mara said.

"I know. I felt like it might still work out," she said a little hopelessly. "I gave him my number at home. Who knows, maybe he'll call me still."

"If he doesn't, there are a million other guys who would die to go out with you," Mara said loyally. She would never have thought she could be best friends with someone like Eliza—but there you had it.

"Maybe," Eliza said. The summer had been spectacular—but humbling as hell. Before this summer the thought that she would lose her heart to the gardener was laughable, even ludicrous. She was Eliza Thompson; she could have anyone she wanted.

But Eliza Thompson didn't get everything she ever wanted anymore. She was starting to learn that.

* * *

Lindsay and Taylor walked by. They did a double take when they saw Eliza. What was *she* doing here? Nevertheless, they decided to stop by Eliza's table and say hi. They could show her how bighearted and generous they could be. Besides, it wasn't like they were going to have to hang out with her in the city anyway. They knew all about Buffalo.

But when they walked up to the table, Eliza looked the other way. Eliza knew it wasn't their fault they were the way they were, but that didn't mean she had to pretend to like them anymore. The truth was that she never really liked them. Not really. Not in the way she liked Mara and Jacqui.

"Um, hi?" Lindsay said.

Taylor cleared her throat.

Eliza pretended to be extremely fascinated by the contents of her cocktail glass as she purposefully ignored them.

The two girls stood there as Ryan, Mara, and Jacqui smirked without saying anything.

And with that, they flipped their perfectly Sahag-layered hair and walked away in their four-hundred-dollar shoes, and for the first time Eliza was really, truly happy to see them go. She went back to staring at the bubbles in her glass, thinking about how none of this really mattered to her anymore. How much money she could have saved on bags alone if she'd realized that a few years ago. How she'd give up her Marc Jacobs Stella bag, her orange Tod's purse, her black Prada bag that was the same as Gwyneth's just to have another shot with Jeremy.

And then, as if she'd finally thought the magic words, Jeremy appeared.

"Hey, Eliza," Jeremy said. He was wearing a white valet uniform. He had his hands in his pockets and he looked utterly miserable.

"Jeremy! What are you doing here?"

"I got a job parking cars," he said.

"Why?"

"I knew you would be here. I wanted to see you," he told her.

"You did?" She seemed so small and vulnerable just then, and for once she wasn't trying to be like anything but who she was.

The rest of the table took that as their cue to make a graceful exit.

Eliza stood up. She looked into his eyes and saw how much she'd hurt him.

"I didn't want you to leave thinking that I didn't care," he said.

Her eyes misted with tears. Real tears this time. She wanted to jump into his arms, wipe that awful, wretched look off his face, and tell him that nothing mattered—it didn't matter that they had been apart for so long—what was important was that he was here now.

So that's exactly what she did.

In front of Puffy, Demi, Leo, and her two ex-friends, Eliza leapt from her seat and threw herself in his arms.

Caught off guard, Jeremy fell backward, and the two of them tumbled on the grass, hugging and kissing and smiling at each other. Screw the Versace dress—she was with Jeremy.

“Oh my God . . . what the hell! Is that Eliza kissing the *valet*?” Lindsay asked, an eyebrow raised.

“You know what, he is kind of cute,” Taylor allowed.

And finally they started to see: Eliza knew something they didn't.

it's called karma

JACQUI SMILED AT ELIZA AND JEREMY. MARA AND RYAN were cuddling by the pool, and Jacqui thought she would just slip away. All her friends looked pretty busy. She was thrilled for them but a little sad for herself, too. She certainly hadn't bargained for the kind of summer she had ended up having.

She shook her head at the passed tray of canapés.

But she did help herself to a goody bag at the exit. A crisp white shopping bag emblazoned with the ubiquitous logo contained a white terry cloth robe, terry cloth slippers, and a bottle of Absolut (the party's corporate sponsor that year).

"Leaving so soon?" A very handsome and very familiar-looking guy stopped her on the way to the gates.

"You look even more beautiful when you aren't crying." He smiled. "So I guess your summer ended up getting a lot better?"

It was Nacho Figueroa—the hot Argentinean polo player from the big match!

"Hey! Jacqui, right?" She turned, and standing by the Mister Softee truck parked in the driveway (you never know what the guests will want if they get the munchies) was Eliza's friend Kit—the nice guy who had given them their party invitations.

"Hi, Kit," she said, kissing him hello.

Kit beamed. Nacho took a step back, a quizzical look on his face.

She smiled at both of them, but just then her cell phone rang. "*Espere um momento,*" she told Nacho. "Excuse me," she told Kit.

* * *

"*Pronto?*"

"Jacqui, it's Luke. Your Luca." He was obviously drunk, but Jacqui wanted to know what this was all about.

"*Si?*"

"Someone called my house at three in the morning and my girlfriend—I mean, my ex-girlfriend—she flipped. We broke up, and, well, I miss you, Jac, I really do."

"Oh, *pobre babê,*" Jacqui said scathingly.

“And she’s with Leo now, can you believe it?” He was slurring a little. “What is it about that guy? One eye isn’t even quite straight.”

“So what do you say? Me and you? I know you don’t like to be alone,” Luke breathed. “And I’m so lonely.”

Jacqui laughed to herself. So there was justice in this world after all. “That’s a shame, Luca. But *nien*. Ciao.”

She turned the phone off and turned back to Kit and Nacho. Hmm . . . the rakish polo player or Eliza’s childhood friend?

Jacqui paused for a moment. *Isn’t “polo player” just a long way of saying “player”?* Nacho seemed nice, but Jacqui was tired of men who played games.

“Drive me home?” she asked, linking an arm around Kit’s. “Ciao ciao, Nacho.”

Kit grinned. Maybe they were wrong. Maybe nice guys did finish first.

it's the last night of summer, but it's the first night for other things

A FEW MINUTES AFTER MIDNIGHT MARA CREPT UP THE stairs to their attic bedroom. She found Jacqui asleep in the top bunk.

“Jac? Are you awake?” she asked.

Jacqui raised her head. “Now I am.”

Mara sat on the bed and took off her shoes. When she looked up, Eliza was walking through the door. “Hey.”

She was glad all three of them were together on their last night.

Eliza sparkled in her white dress when she kicked off her shoes. “Help me with this, Mar,” she said as she began pushing her single bed up against Mara’s bottom bunk. “Get down here, Jac,” she whispered.

The three of them snuggled on the one makeshift king-size bed, feeling comfort in the warmth of each other’s bodies.

Eliza told them about how she and Jeremy got back together. “I just love him so much,” she said, burying her face in the pillow at her own cheesiness. “But Buffalo is so far.”

“I’m sure you’ll see each other,” Mara said. She could have slept in Ryan’s bed, but she didn’t want to for some reason. Their last week in the Hamptons had been something out of the middle part of *Titanic*—before the ship sank and everything was perfect and hot and steamy. But on the last night there, she wanted to be in the au pairs’ room. It was the only thing that felt right.

Jacqui told them how Kit had offered all three of them a ride back to the city in his car. That was good. At least they wouldn’t have to take the Jitney. So why were they all so bummed?

“We’ll see each other at Christmas,” Eliza said, voicing the emotion they were all feeling. They were going to miss each other. They had gone through a lot this summer. “Just think, we’ll need winter bikinis!”

“In Palm Beach,” Mara said dreamily. Another chance to get out of Sturbridge.

“What’s it like?” Jacqui asked.

“Awesome,” Eliza yawned. “Parties and galas and we’ll all need new clothes!” Her eyelids dropped. Mara was falling asleep, too. Jacqui turned on her side, grabbing for the covers.

Their summer was over. They had done everything they wanted to do and some things they shouldn’t have. Tomorrow they would drive out on the Montauk Highway for the last time. They would return home older, wiser, and certainly more glamorous.

In the end, it had been best summer of their lives. Maybe there was truth in advertising after all.

acknowledgments

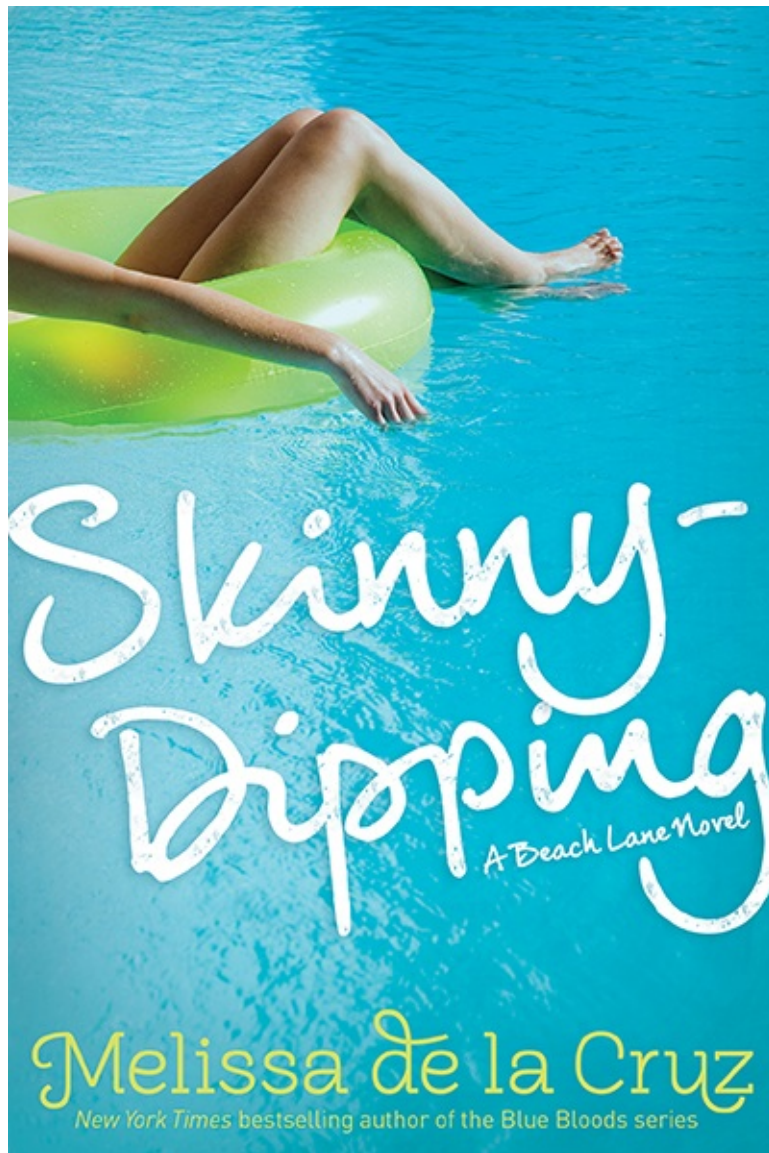
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Spend another summer with the girls!



eliza discovers fire & brimstone is a new cosmo flavor

IT DIDN'T LOOK LIKE MUCH, BUT THEN THAT WAS PROBABLY because it was three o'clock in the afternoon, and Seventh Circle, the newest, soon-to-be-hottest club in the Hamptons, wouldn't get going until after midnight. A potato barn in its former life, Seventh Circle was a large, brown-shingled, rambling wood building set back in the Southampton woods. Only a discreet sign off the highway (seven circles posted to a tree, natch) let the initiated know they had arrived at their destination.

Eliza Thompson steered her black Jetta into the parking lot, feeling at once pleased and apprehensive. She examined her makeup in the rearview mirror, applied a thick layer of lip gloss, stuck two fingers inside her mouth, and pulled them out slowly, just like *Allure* suggested, in order to avoid a grandmother-esque lipstick-on-teeth situation.

She checked for detritus of Chanel Glossimer. Nothing. Perfect.

Eliza grabbed her bag—the season's covetable metallic leather Balenciaga motorcycle clutch. Eliza had bought it in Palm Beach, during the week she'd spent as a vacation au pair for the Perrys last winter. Inside was a rolled-up resume that listed her sparkling attributes: a Spence education (up until her parents' bankruptcy last year and their subsequent move to Buffalo, that is), an internship at *Jane* (which had entailed fetching nonfat soy lattes and alphabetizing glitter nail polish), and a reference from her longtime friend and Manhattan boy-about-town, Kit Ashleigh.

Life was almost great again for Eliza. Okay, sure, the Thompsons were still living in Buffalo—a far, far cry from the posh life they'd left behind in New York City—but they had moved from a sordid little rental to a proper three-bedroom condominium in the only luxury high-rise in the city. With a little help from some old friends and loyal clients, her dad was slowly getting back on his feet, and there was money for such things as thousand-dollar handbags again. (Well, there was credit at least.) With her grades and SAT scores (top 99th percentile—Eliza was no dummy), there was a good chance she would be able to wing financial aid and get into Princeton after all. This summer her parents were even renting a little Cape Cod in Westhampton. It had the smallest pool Eliza had ever seen—it was practically a bathtub!—but still, it was a house, it was theirs (for the summer), and it was in the Hamptons.

The only thing keeping Eliza off balance was the Big Palm Beach Secret from last winter. Something had happened while she was there that she'd rather forget, but news traveled fast

in the Hamptons and Eliza knew she'd have to come clean soon enough. She brushed aside the thought for now—it was time to focus on the task at hand: getting a job in the hottest new club in the Hamptons and recapturing her title as the coolest girl in town.

Before Buffalo and bankruptcy, Eliza had been famous for being the prettiest, most popular girl on the New York private school circuit. Sugar Perry, who now ruled in her stead, had been a mere wannabe when Eliza was on the scene. Eliza was the one who set the trends (white-blond highlights), knew about all the best parties (Tuesdays at Butter), and dated the hottest guys (polo-playing Charlie Borshok, who was now Sugar's boyfriend as well). Being "outed" as a poor au pair last summer had changed all that, but this was a new year, a new summer, and a new Eliza—who just happened to look a lot like the *old* Eliza, the girl everyone wanted to know and all the other girls wanted to *be*.

It was still drizzling, the end of a typical early June East End rainstorm, as Eliza slid quickly out of her Jetta, which she'd begged her parents to lease her for the summer, and checked her cell phone for any missed calls from Jeremy. Last summer, Eliza had fallen in love with Jeremy Stone, the Perrys' hunky nineteen-year-old gardener, but they'd broken up over the winter since they lived so far away from each other. Now that summer was here, Eliza was dying to see him again. She wasn't exactly sure where Jeremy would fit in with her plans for getting back on top of the social scene, since he wasn't rich or famous (although he was very, very cute), but she did know her plans *included* him, and she hoped that would be good enough. With no missed calls or new texts, Eliza stuffed her phone back in her clutch and headed toward the club.

The door was hanging open, so she let herself inside. Seventh Circle was supposed to be *the* place to be this summer, but here it was, a week after Memorial Day, and it hadn't even opened yet. There was a thick layer of fresh sawdust on the floor, and a full construction crew was barking orders at one another. The barn had been retrofitted to accommodate a U-shaped zinc bar, and against the back wall stood a built-in glass liquor cabinet almost twenty-five feet high. The guys looked up when they spied Eliza. Several whistled at the sight of her tanned legs underneath her pink smocked Juicy tube dress. It was the kind of dress that made everyone else who wore it look fat or pregnant, but on Eliza it looked cute and sexy.

"Hi, I'm here to see the owners—Alan or Kartik?" Eliza said, pulling her long blond hair into a high ponytail.

One of the hard hats grunted and pointed a finger toward the back of the club. Eliza stepped over a paint tray delicately, picking her way past the sawhorses and a couple of dusty potato sacks, toward two guys yammering into their cell phone headsets.

They were the self-styled kings of Manhattan nightlife, and while their press clippings might reach to the ceiling, neither was taller than five-five, and Eliza towered over both of them in her four-inch Louboutin platforms. Alan Whitman was balding and dough-faced, but he'd been legendary since ninth grade at Riverdale, when he'd begun his career selling pot at the Limelight. He'd oozed his way up a string of downtown hot spots until he'd raised enough money to open his trio of celebrity playgrounds—Vice, Circus, and Lowdown. He liked to say that before he'd gotten his hands on Paris Hilton, she was just a cute little Dwight sophomore in a rolled-up uniform skirt. He'd been the one who'd waived Paris past the ID

check and had personally alerted gossip columnists when she was dancing on the tables—or falling off them—on any given night. His partner, Kartik (one name only), a Miami transplant, had been friends with Madonna back when he was still a teenager and she was still a dog-collar-wearing pop icon, not a dowdy children’s book author who answered to the name Esther.

“What do you mean the liquor license is delayed? Are you serious?” Alan whined into his receiver.

“Babycakes, of course we’ve got the permits in hand,” Kartik smoothly promised on his cell. “We’re ready to roll. We’re all set for the after-party, no problem!”

Eliza stood aside patiently, watching the guys tell two different stories on their phones. It was inspirational, really: If Alan Whitman could transform himself from some geeky kid who sold oregano dime bags out of his Eastman backpack into New York’s most sought-after nightclub promoter, then surely she, Eliza Thompson, could find a way to reinvent herself from fallen Manhattan It Girl into Hamptons royalty. After all, Eliza had always wanted to be a princess.

mara goes from zero to somebody in sixty seconds

THE STRETCH LIMOUSINE IN HER DRIVEWAY WAS THE FIRST sign that for Mara Waters, life was going to start getting interesting again. During prom season in Sturbridge, it wasn't unusual to find rented limos parked in front of the tidy ranch-style houses, but this one didn't sport a CALL 1-800 DISCO LIMO! sticker on its bumper. Instead, it had a uniformed chauffeur who held a golf umbrella above Mara's head and took her bags from her stupefied father.

Anna Perry had told Mara she would send a car, but Mara hadn't been expecting one quite so large and luxurious. Then again, everything that Anna Perry, the very young, very demanding second wife of Kevin Perry, one of New York's most successful and feared litigators in New York City, did was patently over-the-top. Anna had wanted Mara in East Hampton immediately, and whatever Anna wanted, Anna usually got. She'd convinced their new neighbors, the Reynolds family, who were leaving Cape Cod for the Hamptons in their private plane, to give Mara a ride.

Heading back to the Hamptons on a private jet was the complete opposite of last August, when Mara had returned to Sturbridge on a battered Greyhound. It had been the summer of her life, and she'd made the best friends in the world—Eliza, an uptight Upper East Side golden girl, and Jacqui, a Brazilian bombshell so beautiful men routinely threw themselves at her feet. They'd all signed on for a summer of babysitting the Perry kids—to the tune of ten thousand dollars for the summer—but the friendship they formed was even more valuable. The three of them were as different as could be, but somewhere between the social climbing, the party crashing, and keeping all the kids in line, the three of them had formed a tight-knit bond.

There was another reason that last summer had been amazing: Ryan Perry. She'd fallen completely in love with Ryan, the older brother of the kids she was babysitting, and they'd finally gotten together the last week of the summer. When they said good-bye, Mara had told him that she would love to bring him home so he could meet her family and see where she lived. But when she got off the Greyhound at the grimy Sturbridge bus stop several hours later, it no longer seemed like a good idea.

Her stomach had sunk when Megan picked her up in their dented '88 Ford Taurus. Mara was still wearing her Hamptons uniform: a lace-trimmed silk camisole, pre-faded cargo pants and high-heeled jewel-encrusted mules from Miss Trish of Capri. Her hair still smelled of Eliza's French lavender shampoo, but the sight of the car and her sister brought reality home to her. Mara had never been ashamed or embarrassed of where she came from, but after a

summer in the Hamptons, she suddenly thought, *This isn't good enough*. He came from a family that hired a personal chef, and she came from a family with a fifteen-year-old microwave.

She'd made a bunch of excuses to put off Ryan's visit to Sturbridge, telling him she had to study for a test or had to write a paper. Finally, in November, she'd taken the train to Groton to visit him at his fancy private school. But she'd been awkward and out of place among his friends, and she'd broken up with him the next week, telling him what she'd been telling herself ever since she got back to Sturbridge: Last summer was fun and all, but it wasn't real life. They weren't meant to be.

But breaking up with Ryan Perry and forgetting about Ryan Perry were two different things altogether. She couldn't stop thinking about him, and a secret part of her wished that he'd tried harder to change her mind. He'd been totally understanding about their breakup, but that was the problem: Ryan was almost too nice. If only he'd yelled, or cried, or fought for their relationship more. Maybe that was all she'd wanted—to hear that he really missed her, really needed her. But he hadn't said anything, only, "If this is what you really want," and she'd told him it was. So it was over, and she hadn't heard from Ryan since.

She'd excused herself from babysitting for the Perrys in Palm Beach over winter break, fearing it would be too weird to see Ryan. But as winter turned to spring, Mara still couldn't get Ryan out of her head, and she realized what a mistake breaking up with him had been. She was still in love with him, and when Anna Perry had called to offer Mara her old job (along with a raise—twelve thousand dollars for the summer!), Mara had started planning the outfit she'd wear when she first saw Ryan and how they'd fall into each other's arms and pretend the year apart had never happened. She'd played the scene in her head so many times, she'd really started to believe it would happen.

It rained all the way on the drive to Barnstable, a private airfield in Hyannis, and the car drove right up to the tarmac, where a white tent and a red carpet led to a sleek silver plane emblazoned with a gleaming *R* logo on the wing. A flight attendant in a crisp navy blue uniform took Mara's bags—last year's treasured LL Bean totes—and Mara was momentarily flustered to realize that the rest of the luggage cart held sleek nylon-and-canvas rollaway suitcases. Would she ever get it right?

A tall lady in an embroidered caftan and raffia slippers wearing the biggest diamond Mara had ever seen cheerfully waved her up the ramp. "Pity about the rain, isn't it? They said it would shower—but this is almost a hurricane! I'm Chelsea Reynolds, welcome, welcome. There you go, watch the puddle on the last step. Anna told me we were picking up a friend, but she didn't say it was *you!*"

Her? Mara didn't know what she meant by that, and was about to ask, but the minute she set foot inside the plane, she was enveloped in a bear hug.

"If it isn't Miss Waters! The diva! Girlfriend, where've you been all year?" Lucky Yap demanded, readjusting his own leopard-print dashiki. Lucky was one of the most important paparazzi working the society circuit. He was the unofficial arbiter of Hamptons fabulosity—

if you were in, Lucky took your photo; if you were out, you might as well move to the Jersey shore.

“Lucky, hi!” Mara smiled, surrendering to his flurry of air-kisses.

Lucky handed her a glass of champagne and quickly introduced her to the rest of the passengers—a typical hoity-toity Hamptons crowd wearing similar variations on ethnic African tribal wear. Apparently, the Serengeti had relocated to the East End this year. There was a smattering of boldfaced names and their assorted hangers-on, from brand-name heiresses to well-preserved society swans to pretty public-relations assistants and the E! style experts they represented.

“Everyone knows Mara, right? My muse?” Lucky brayed. Last summer, Mara had helped Lucky out on a tricky assignment, and the popular photographer had made her a perennial presence in the society pages to show his appreciation.

“Of course!” a sweet-faced girl replied. “Didn’t we meet at the Polo last year?”

“Love that shirt. Is it Proenza?” one of the style experts asked, fingering the material on her pink polka-dot blouse. She’d matched it with a pair of slim white Bermuda shorts and cork-wedge espadrilles. After spending last summer with two fashion mavens—Jacqui and Eliza—Mara had picked up a few tips. She was flattered by the compliment and didn’t have the heart to tell him it was a knockoff she’d bought at Forever 21 for fifteen bucks.

Lucky took a few shots of her, then leaned over to whisper conspiratorially with his seatmate. Mara couldn’t help but overhear buzzing as her name was linked to Ryan Perry’s.

The stewardess led her to the nearest available seat and Mara sipped happily from her champagne flute, soaking in the atmosphere, listening in on the gossip from the Cape Cod beach wedding they were all returning from. After a year in Sturbridge, where the most glamorous thing in town was the hokey piano bar attached to the Hyatt, she’d forgotten how well the other half lived.

“Oh! There’s Garrett!” a girl next to Mara whispered excitedly.

“Mr. Reynolds!” Lucky greeted. “Can we get a shot?”

Mara looked up to see a tall, shaggy-haired boy emerge from the cockpit. Immediately, all the girls in the group stood up a little straighter, trying to catch his eye. He was holding a champagne bottle aloft and grinning. He was rakishly, devilishly handsome, with a Jude Law-style flop of dark hair falling over his forehead. His button-down white Thomas Pink shirt lay rumpled and untucked from his black wool pants.

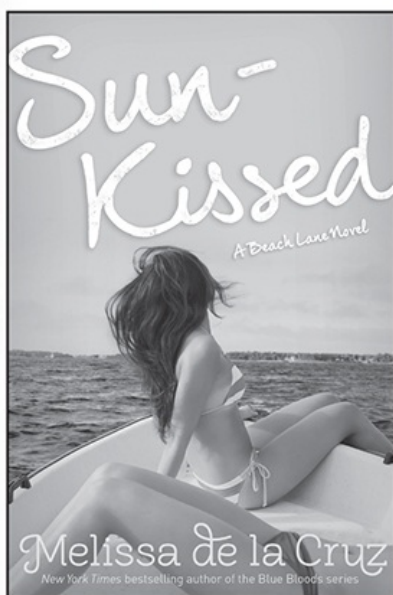
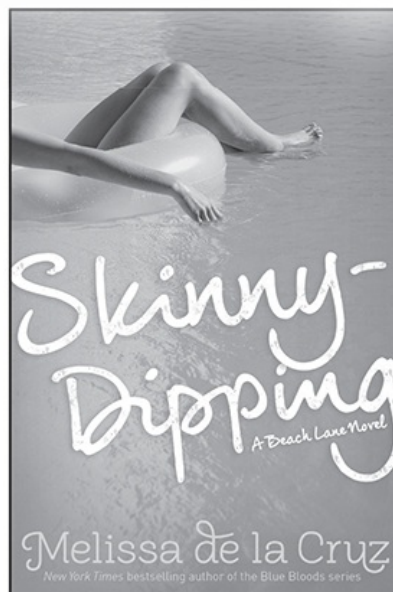
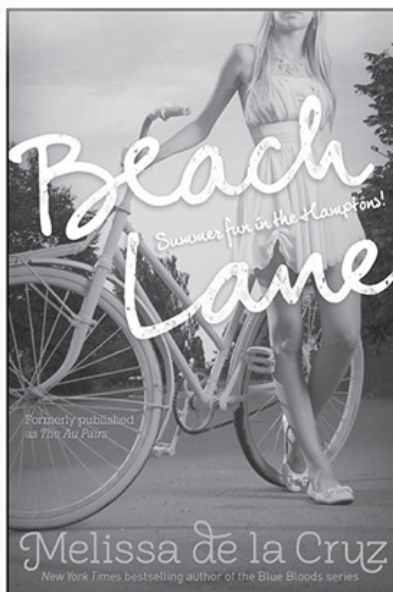
“You,” he said, walking down the aisle and heading straight for Mara.

He had deep, dark eyes, as dark as his hair, framed by the thickest set of lashes Mara had ever seen. “Come with me,” he said, taking her by the hand before she could protest. As Garrett led her away, the group parted silently to let them through, and Mara received glances of barely contained jealousy from the girls, as well as an approving nod from Lucky. Mara felt singled out, special, and she couldn’t help but think, *Hamptons, here I come.*

Three girls.
One summer.
Too many memories to count.

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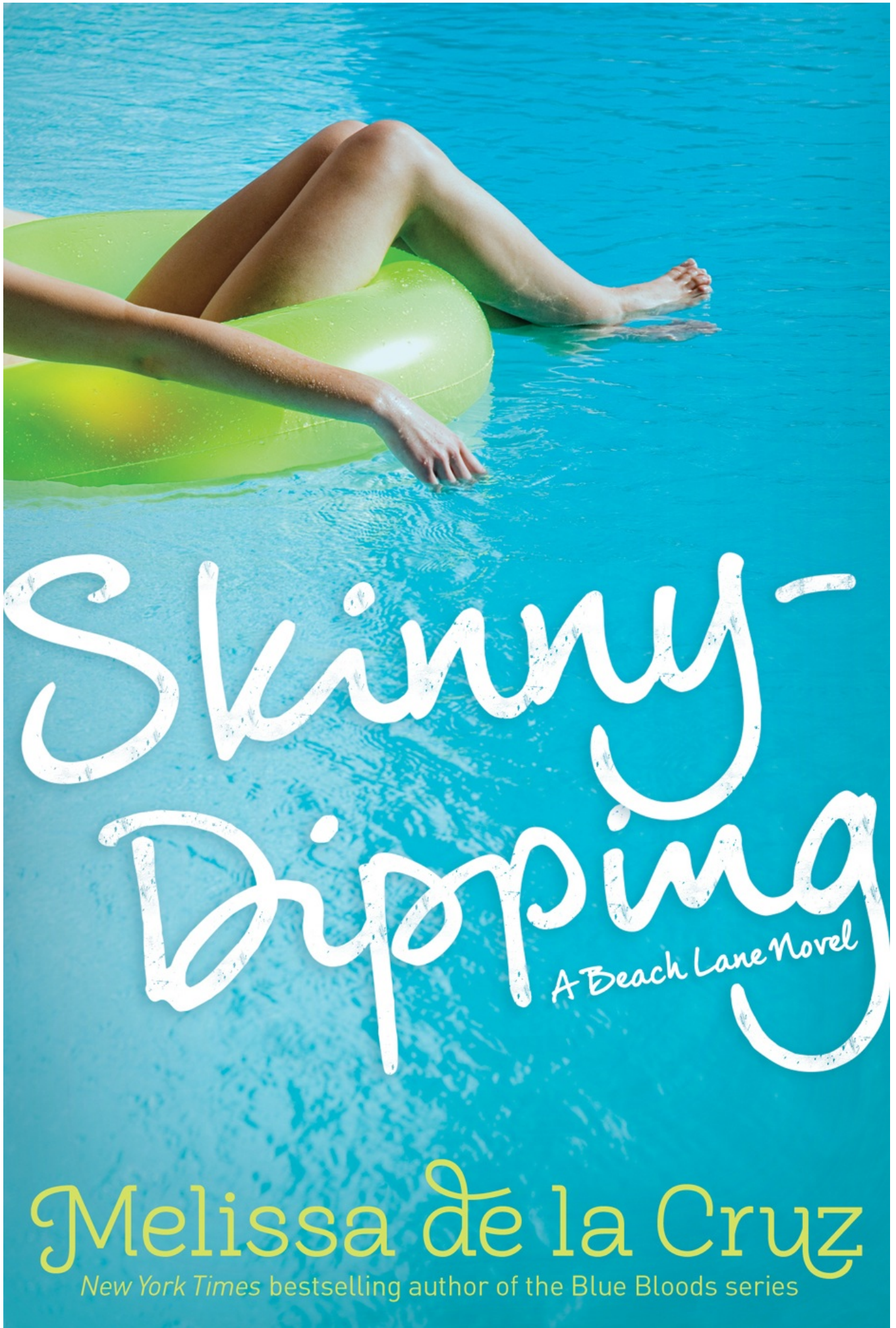
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Skinnys - Dipping

A Beach Lane Novel

Melissa de la Cruz

New York Times bestselling author of the Blue Bloods series

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SIMON & SCHUSTER **BFYR**

New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

This book is lovingly dedicated to Jennie Kim, because you can't write about best friends without having one of your own; Sara Shandler, editor extraordinaire, because this book is as much hers as it is mine; and Mike Johnston, just because.

“It is more shameful to distrust one’s friends than to be deceived by them.”

—La Rochefoucauld

“It’s gettin’ hot in herre.”

—Nelly

eliza discovers fire & brimstone is a new cosmo flavor

IT DIDN'T LOOK LIKE MUCH, BUT THEN THAT WAS PROBABLY because it was three o'clock in the afternoon, and Seventh Circle, the newest, soon-to-be-hottest club in the Hamptons, wouldn't get going until after midnight. A potato barn in its former life, Seventh Circle was a large, brown-shingled, rambling wood building set back in the Southampton woods. Only a discreet sign off the highway (seven circles posted to a tree, natch) let the initiated know they had arrived at their destination.

Eliza Thompson steered her black Jetta into the parking lot, feeling at once pleased and apprehensive. She examined her makeup in the rearview mirror, applied a thick layer of lip gloss, stuck two fingers inside her mouth, and pulled them out slowly, just like *Allure* suggested, in order to avoid a grandmother-esque lipstick-on-teeth situation.

She checked for detritus of Chanel Glossimer. Nothing. Perfect.

Eliza grabbed her bag—the season's covetable metallic leather Balenciaga motorcycle clutch. Eliza had bought it in Palm Beach, during the week she'd spent as a vacation au pair for the Perrys last winter. Inside was a rolled-up resume that listed her sparkling attributes: a Spence education (up until her parents' bankruptcy last year and their subsequent move to Buffalo, that is), an internship at *Jane* (which had entailed fetching nonfat soy lattes and alphabetizing glitter nail polish), and a reference from her longtime friend and Manhattan boy-about-town, Kit Ashleigh.

Life was almost great again for Eliza. Okay, sure, the Thompsons were still living in Buffalo—a far, far cry from the posh life they'd left behind in New York City—but they had moved from a sordid little rental to a proper three-bedroom condominium in the only luxury high-rise in the city. With a little help from some old friends and loyal clients, her dad was slowly getting back on his feet, and there was money for such things as thousand-dollar handbags again. (Well, there was credit at least.) With her grades and SAT scores (top 99th percentile—Eliza was no dummy), there was a good chance she would be able to wing financial aid and get into Princeton after all. This summer her parents were even renting a little Cape Cod in Westhampton. It had the smallest pool Eliza had ever seen—it was practically a bathtub!—but still, it was a house, it was theirs (for the summer), and it was in the Hamptons.

The only thing keeping Eliza off balance was the Big Palm Beach Secret from last winter. Something had happened while she was there that she'd rather forget, but news traveled fast

in the Hamptons and Eliza knew she'd have to come clean soon enough. She brushed aside the thought for now—it was time to focus on the task at hand: getting a job in the hottest new club in the Hamptons and recapturing her title as the coolest girl in town.

Before Buffalo and bankruptcy, Eliza had been famous for being the prettiest, most popular girl on the New York private school circuit. Sugar Perry, who now ruled in her stead, had been a mere wannabe when Eliza was on the scene. Eliza was the one who set the trends (white-blond highlights), knew about all the best parties (Tuesdays at Butter), and dated the hottest guys (polo-playing Charlie Borshok, who was now Sugar's boyfriend as well). Being "outed" as a poor *au pair* last summer had changed all that, but this was a new year, a new summer, and a new Eliza—who just happened to look a lot like the *old* Eliza, the girl everyone wanted to know and all the other girls wanted to *be*.

It was still drizzling, the end of a typical early June East End rainstorm, as Eliza slid quickly out of her Jetta, which she'd begged her parents to lease her for the summer, and checked her cell phone for any missed calls from Jeremy. Last summer, Eliza had fallen in love with Jeremy Stone, the Perrys' hunky nineteen-year-old gardener, but they'd broken up over the winter since they lived so far away from each other. Now that summer was here, Eliza was dying to see him again. She wasn't exactly sure where Jeremy would fit in with her plans for getting back on top of the social scene, since he wasn't rich or famous (although he was very, very cute), but she did know her plans *included* him, and she hoped that would be good enough. With no missed calls or new texts, Eliza stuffed her phone back in her clutch and headed toward the club.

The door was hanging open, so she let herself inside. Seventh Circle was supposed to be *the* place to be this summer, but here it was, a week after Memorial Day, and it hadn't even opened yet. There was a thick layer of fresh sawdust on the floor, and a full construction crew was barking orders at one another. The barn had been retrofitted to accommodate a U-shaped zinc bar, and against the back wall stood a built-in glass liquor cabinet almost twenty-five feet high. The guys looked up when they spied Eliza. Several whistled at the sight of her tanned legs underneath her pink smocked Juicy tube dress. It was the kind of dress that made everyone else who wore it look fat or pregnant, but on Eliza it looked cute and sexy.

"Hi, I'm here to see the owners—Alan or Kartik?" Eliza said, pulling her long blond hair into a high ponytail.

One of the hard hats grunted and pointed a finger toward the back of the club. Eliza stepped over a paint tray delicately, picking her way past the sawhorses and a couple of dusty potato sacks, toward two guys yammering into their cell phone headsets.

They were the self-styled kings of Manhattan nightlife, and while their press clippings might reach to the ceiling, neither was taller than five-five, and Eliza towered over both of them in her four-inch Louboutin platforms. Alan Whitman was balding and dough-faced, but he'd been legendary since ninth grade at Riverdale, when he'd begun his career selling pot at the Limelight. He'd oozed his way up a string of downtown hot spots until he'd raised enough money to open his trio of celebrity playgrounds—Vice, Circus, and Lowdown. He liked to say that before he'd gotten his hands on Paris Hilton, she was just a cute little Dwight sophomore in a rolled-up uniform skirt. He'd been the one who'd waived Paris past the ID

check and had personally alerted gossip columnists when she was dancing on the tables—or falling off them—on any given night. His partner, Kartik (one name only), a Miami transplant, had been friends with Madonna back when he was still a teenager and she was still a dog-collar-wearing pop icon, not a dowdy children’s book author who answered to the name Esther.

“What do you mean the liquor license is delayed? Are you serious?” Alan whined into his receiver.

“Babycakes, of course we’ve got the permits in hand,” Kartik smoothly promised on his cell. “We’re ready to roll. We’re all set for the after-party, no problem!”

Eliza stood aside patiently, watching the guys tell two different stories on their phones. It was inspirational, really: If Alan Whitman could transform himself from some geeky kid who sold oregano dime bags out of his Eastman backpack into New York’s most sought-after nightclub promoter, then surely she, Eliza Thompson, could find a way to reinvent herself from fallen Manhattan It Girl into Hamptons royalty. After all, Eliza had always wanted to be a princess.

mara goes from zero to somebody in sixty seconds

THE STRETCH LIMOUSINE IN HER DRIVEWAY WAS THE FIRST sign that for Mara Waters, life was going to start getting interesting again. During prom season in Sturbridge, it wasn't unusual to find rented limos parked in front of the tidy ranch-style houses, but this one didn't sport a CALL 1-800 DISCO LIMO! sticker on its bumper. Instead, it had a uniformed chauffeur who held a golf umbrella above Mara's head and took her bags from her stupefied father.

Anna Perry had told Mara she would send a car, but Mara hadn't been expecting one quite so large and luxurious. Then again, everything that Anna Perry, the very young, very demanding second wife of Kevin Perry, one of New York's most successful and feared litigators in New York City, did was patently over-the-top. Anna had wanted Mara in East Hampton immediately, and whatever Anna wanted, Anna usually got. She'd convinced their new neighbors, the Reynolds family, who were leaving Cape Cod for the Hamptons in their private plane, to give Mara a ride.

Heading back to the Hamptons on a private jet was the complete opposite of last August, when Mara had returned to Sturbridge on a battered Greyhound. It had been the summer of her life, and she'd made the best friends in the world—Eliza, an uptight Upper East Side golden girl, and Jacqui, a Brazilian bombshell so beautiful men routinely threw themselves at her feet. They'd all signed on for a summer of babysitting the Perry kids—to the tune of ten thousand dollars for the summer—but the friendship they formed was even more valuable. The three of them were as different as could be, but somewhere between the social climbing, the party crashing, and keeping all the kids in line, the three of them had formed a tight-knit bond.

There was another reason that last summer had been amazing: Ryan Perry. She'd fallen completely in love with Ryan, the older brother of the kids she was babysitting, and they'd finally gotten together the last week of the summer. When they said good-bye, Mara had told him that she would love to bring him home so he could meet her family and see where she lived. But when she got off the Greyhound at the grimy Sturbridge bus stop several hours later, it no longer seemed like a good idea.

Her stomach had sunk when Megan picked her up in their dented '88 Ford Taurus. Mara was still wearing her Hamptons uniform: a lace-trimmed silk camisole, pre-faded cargo pants and high-heeled jewel-encrusted mules from Miss Trish of Capri. Her hair still smelled of Eliza's French lavender shampoo, but the sight of the car and her sister brought reality home to her. Mara had never been ashamed or embarrassed of where she came from, but after a

summer in the Hamptons, she suddenly thought, *This isn't good enough*. He came from a family that hired a personal chef, and she came from a family with a fifteen-year-old microwave.

She'd made a bunch of excuses to put off Ryan's visit to Sturbridge, telling him she had to study for a test or had to write a paper. Finally, in November, she'd taken the train to Groton to visit him at his fancy private school. But she'd been awkward and out of place among his friends, and she'd broken up with him the next week, telling him what she'd been telling herself ever since she got back to Sturbridge: Last summer was fun and all, but it wasn't real life. They weren't meant to be.

But breaking up with Ryan Perry and forgetting about Ryan Perry were two different things altogether. She couldn't stop thinking about him, and a secret part of her wished that he'd tried harder to change her mind. He'd been totally understanding about their breakup, but that was the problem: Ryan was almost too nice. If only he'd yelled, or cried, or fought for their relationship more. Maybe that was all she'd wanted—to hear that he really missed her, really needed her. But he hadn't said anything, only, "If this is what you really want," and she'd told him it was. So it was over, and she hadn't heard from Ryan since.

She'd excused herself from babysitting for the Perrys in Palm Beach over winter break, fearing it would be too weird to see Ryan. But as winter turned to spring, Mara still couldn't get Ryan out of her head, and she realized what a mistake breaking up with him had been. She was still in love with him, and when Anna Perry had called to offer Mara her old job (along with a raise—twelve thousand dollars for the summer!), Mara had started planning the outfit she'd wear when she first saw Ryan and how they'd fall into each other's arms and pretend the year apart had never happened. She'd played the scene in her head so many times, she'd really started to believe it would happen.

It rained all the way on the drive to Barnstable, a private airfield in Hyannis, and the car drove right up to the tarmac, where a white tent and a red carpet led to a sleek silver plane emblazoned with a gleaming *R* logo on the wing. A flight attendant in a crisp navy blue uniform took Mara's bags—last year's treasured LL Bean totes—and Mara was momentarily flustered to realize that the rest of the luggage cart held sleek nylon-and-canvas rollaway suitcases. Would she ever get it right?

A tall lady in an embroidered caftan and raffia slippers wearing the biggest diamond Mara had ever seen cheerfully waved her up the ramp. "Pity about the rain, isn't it? They said it would shower—but this is almost a hurricane! I'm Chelsea Reynolds, welcome, welcome. There you go, watch the puddle on the last step. Anna told me we were picking up a friend, but she didn't say it was *you!*"

Her? Mara didn't know what she meant by that, and was about to ask, but the minute she set foot inside the plane, she was enveloped in a bear hug.

"If it isn't Miss Waters! The diva! Girlfriend, where've you been all year?" Lucky Yap demanded, readjusting his own leopard-print dashiki. Lucky was one of the most important paparazzi working the society circuit. He was the unofficial arbiter of Hamptons fabulosity—

if you were in, Lucky took your photo; if you were out, you might as well move to the Jersey shore.

“Lucky, hi!” Mara smiled, surrendering to his flurry of air-kisses.

Lucky handed her a glass of champagne and quickly introduced her to the rest of the passengers—a typical hoity-toity Hamptons crowd wearing similar variations on ethnic African tribal wear. Apparently, the Serengeti had relocated to the East End this year. There was a smattering of boldfaced names and their assorted hangers-on, from brand-name heiresses to well-preserved society swans to pretty public-relations assistants and the E! style experts they represented.

“Everyone knows Mara, right? My muse?” Lucky brayed. Last summer, Mara had helped Lucky out on a tricky assignment, and the popular photographer had made her a perennial presence in the society pages to show his appreciation.

“Of course!” a sweet-faced girl replied. “Didn’t we meet at the Polo last year?”

“Love that shirt. Is it Proenza?” one of the style experts asked, fingering the material on her pink polka-dot blouse. She’d matched it with a pair of slim white Bermuda shorts and cork-wedge espadrilles. After spending last summer with two fashion mavens—Jacqui and Eliza—Mara had picked up a few tips. She was flattered by the compliment and didn’t have the heart to tell him it was a knockoff she’d bought at Forever 21 for fifteen bucks.

Lucky took a few shots of her, then leaned over to whisper conspiratorially with his seatmate. Mara couldn’t help but overhear buzzing as her name was linked to Ryan Perry’s.

The stewardess led her to the nearest available seat and Mara sipped happily from her champagne flute, soaking in the atmosphere, listening in on the gossip from the Cape Cod beach wedding they were all returning from. After a year in Sturbridge, where the most glamorous thing in town was the hokey piano bar attached to the Hyatt, she’d forgotten how well the other half lived.

“Oh! There’s Garrett!” a girl next to Mara whispered excitedly.

“Mr. Reynolds!” Lucky greeted. “Can we get a shot?”

Mara looked up to see a tall, shaggy-haired boy emerge from the cockpit. Immediately, all the girls in the group stood up a little straighter, trying to catch his eye. He was holding a champagne bottle aloft and grinning. He was rakishly, devilishly handsome, with a Jude Law-style flop of dark hair falling over his forehead. His button-down white Thomas Pink shirt lay rumpled and untucked from his black wool pants.

“You,” he said, walking down the aisle and heading straight for Mara.

He had deep, dark eyes, as dark as his hair, framed by the thickest set of lashes Mara had ever seen. “Come with me,” he said, taking her by the hand before she could protest. As Garrett led her away, the group parted silently to let them through, and Mara received glances of barely contained jealousy from the girls, as well as an approving nod from Lucky. Mara felt singled out, special, and she couldn’t help but think, *Hamptons, here I come.*

jacqui gets serious . . . about shopping

THE GUY AT BOOKHAMPTON WAVED AWAY HER CHARGE card with a smile, even though Jacqui Velasco insisted on paying for her books herself. Just once she wished she could meet a guy who saw past her *Sports Illustrated* Swimsuit Edition body. It was getting on her nerves a little—the abject, puppy-dog treatment from men who were always more than willing to pick up the check, the tab, the bill. Not too long ago, Jacqui was more than happy to let them pay, and she had a wardrobe full of Louis Vuitton, Gucci, and Prada to prove it. But things were different now. Last summer, Jacqui’s heart had been broken by slimy Luke van Varick, and now she was determined to become a more serious person, someone whom people took seriously.

“*Por favor*, I insist,” Jacqui repeated, trying to change his mind.

“Sorry, your money’s no good here,” the pimply cashier repeated, even though Jacqui knew he’d hear it from his boss later when the receipts came up short. But that was the impact Jacqui had on guys—something about her slightly almond-shaped eyes and bee-stung lips (not to mention that impressive set of 36Cs) turned even a ninety-pound bookstore nerd into a protective, macho, chest-puffing buffoon who would do anything to impress her. “Consider it a gift,” he added.

Jacqui sighed and accepted the plastic bag reluctantly, tossing it into her patent leather carryall. She walked into the bright early-summer afternoon and crossed the street to sit on a park bench to wait for Eliza. It was another glorious day in East Hampton. The early-morning rainfall had given way to sparkling sunshine, and the tiny, jewel-box boutiques on Main Street trilled with the chatter of what to wear to another season of beachfront barbecues and white-tent benefits. Jacqui was oblivious to the stares from the preening slicksters in their 911 Carreras or the head-to-toe scrutiny from the Botox brigade. She sat and immediately immersed herself in her book, *The U.S. News & World Report’s* guide to America’s best colleges.

It was amazing what a little studying could do for her grades and how gratifying it was to bring home a decent report card for a change. Her grandmother couldn’t believe it—during the past year, Jacqui had spent more time at the library than the mall and was even talking about going to college. In the past, the only thing Jacqui had been passionate about was whether or not she’d be able to score the latest fox-fur Prada shrug before anyone else. Before, she’d had only a vague idea of what she wanted for the future. She’d always assumed she’d end up marrying some rich guy twice her age and spend the rest of her life flitting between spa treatments and couture fittings while ignoring her husband’s infidelities. It was the life that Jacqui had been groomed for.

Her mother, a former beauty queen who had won third runner-up in a Miss Universe pageant, once had her pick of suitors—from the son of the owner of the largest electric company in the country, to the son of a landed cattle rancher. Instead, she'd settled on a handsome civil engineer with beautiful black eyes and no family money whatsoever. Roberto Velasco was resolutely middle-class in a country of extreme wealth and extreme poverty. The Velascos lived happily enough in Campinas, and her mother contented herself with ruling over the small provincial society, but she wanted more for her daughter, which was why she'd sent Jacqui to live with her grandmother in São Paulo to attend a private school in the city where Jacqui would rub shoulders with the daughters of the ruling *branco* class.

But Jacqui's beautiful face and Coke-bottle curves had only made the rich girls envious, and Jacqui had made few friends there. For a while, she'd dutifully dated the arrogant scions of landowners and the sugarcane gentry, but that soon bored her, and she'd found that true adventure lay in the arms of their married, older fathers.

Then Luke van Varick—her Luca—had come into her life. A cool American boy with a lazy grin and a huge backpack, she'd met him while he was traveling over spring break and had fallen hard for him. After their two-week spring fling, he'd told her he loved her and then disappeared. She'd tracked him down all the way to the Hamptons, but it turned out her Luca had actually belonged to someone else the whole time.

So now Jacqui had a better plan: She would do a great job for the Perrys this summer so they would recommend her as a live-in nanny for one of their rich friends. That way she could move to New York City for her senior year of high school and go to Stuyvesant, an elite public school in the city, through their foreign-exchange program. If she did well there, she'd have a chance to attend NYU and make something of her life. She had Eliza's friend Kit to thank for putting the idea in her head when they'd hung out together in Palm Beach over winter break. He'd told her about his older sister, who hadn't done a lick of work at school until senior year and was now a freshman at NYU.

In order to make her dreams happen, Jacqui had made a bunch of new rules for herself, the most important being No More Boys. They were just distractions, and if Jacqui had been able to resist the temptations of the cutest guys in Brazil, she could definitely do the same in the Hamptons. She was going to keep her head down, take care of those kids, and attend an SAT prep class on her nights off. God help her, she was going to show the world she was more than just an empty-headed Gisele clone.

She perused the pages of the guidebook: There were photographs of sweater-wearing coeds sitting on green lawns, and an endless array of statistics concerning minority enrollment, merit scholarships, and alumni testimonials. Okay, so it was just a teensy bit boring. Surely there was something else she could do while waiting. She slammed the book shut and looked at her watch. Eliza was due to pick her up in a half hour, and Scoop looked awfully inviting across the street. Just because she was getting serious about school didn't mean she couldn't indulge in her favorite extracurricular activity, did it?

A girl's got to have a new bikini, after all.

eliza learns that hell is made for famous people

“YOU GOT ANY EXPERIENCE WITH NIGHTCLUBS?” ALAN Whitman asked, once the three of them were seated on plastic-wrapped leather club chairs in the back of the room. He had barely glanced at the resume Eliza had handed him. To Eliza’s chagrin, her chair made a squishy, sticky sound like an embarrassing bodily function whenever she moved. Thankfully, neither of the guys seemed to notice.

“Not specifically,” she replied. “But I’m really eager to learn. I read in the *Times* that you guys are looking to expand into publicity, marketing, and upscale lifestyle branding, and that’s really where I see myself making a—”

“Do you know any celebrities? High-profile people?” Kartik interrupted with an intense look on his face as he put the tops of his fingers together in an upside-down V-shape without his palms touching.

“Uh . . .” Eliza said warily.

“Like Jessica and Ashlee? Or the Perry twins?”

“Of course, we went—I mean, we go to school together,” she said, relieved.

“Who doesn’t? But that’s good. Because we really need that kind of crowd here,” Kartik said, frowning. “There are five new nightclubs opening this summer, and we need to have the hottest people here. I don’t want to see has-beens, nobodies, fuglies. I want to see Mary-Kate Olsen puking in the bathroom, if you know what I mean.”

Eliza nodded.

Alan hooted. “Damn, Kartik, don’t be so hard on her just because she blew you off!”

His partner ignored him, boring his eyes into Eliza. “I can’t tell you how important it is to get someone in here who recognizes everyone from Tara Reid to Page Six reporters. You’ve got to know the scene.” He paused meaningfully. “We had a kid at Vice who didn’t let JC Chazez in! I mean, I know it’s hard to recognize those ’N Sync guys without Justin, but man, did I hear about it then. You know, when it’s kicking, this place is going to be like Beverly Hills, SoHo, and Saint-Tropez combined, but on the beach to boot!”

Eliza didn’t bother to point out that Saint-Tropez *was* on the beach.

“It’s a real demanding position. You’re like the quarterback driving up the lane,” Alan interjected, mangling his sports metaphors. “Every night in Seventh Circle is going to be the

center of the freaking universe, you know what I mean? That's the way we operate. Like a freaking constellation of stars!" He slammed his fist on the zinc-topped coffee table.

"Here's the deal," Kartik said pompously. "This place is all about celebs. Without celebs, we don't get the mooks who pay the thirty-dollar entrance fee to gawk at 'em."

Alan nodded wisely, adding, "Overpriced, watered-down, six-ounce cocktails taste that much sweeter if Chauncey Raven's at the next table fondling her new husband. So, invite the Perry twins, give them a table, make sure it's one up on the second level where they can see everybody and everybody can see them. Keep. The. Celebrities. Happy. Dig?"

"Anything they want, anything!" Kartik said, picking up the refrain, and it dawned on Eliza that she was watching a carefully choreographed song-and-dance routine. "Lindsey Lohan wants a pizza from Domino's at 3 A.M.? *Done!* Avril Lavigne needs a private helicopter back to the city? *Done!* R. Kelly wants a stripper for his birthday party? *Double-done!*" He punched the air to emphasize his point.

Eliza nodded briskly. At the magazine, during a celebrity shoot, she'd once had to fill a toilet bowl with gardenias every time the diva went to the bathroom, so she was used to catering to a set of ridiculous demands.

"Of course, the rules change for civilians," Alan said in a silky tone. "If it's a group of guys, double the drink bill—they'll never notice. Keep the tables turning, unless they've reserved it for the entire summer, and in that case, keep the five-hundred-dollar bottles moving, at least two per hour, 'cause that's what's going to pay the overhead."

"Remember, you've got to dress sexy, look sexy, feel sexy, you know?" Kartik grinned. "Here's a piece of advice: The shorter the skirt, the better the tips. I'm talking crotch-length, babe," he said, making a cutting motion with his hand across his thigh to demonstrate.

Alan reached out to grab her elbow, making Eliza recoil. "Whatever you do, never, never, never, ever, ever, *ever* let anybody in if they're not on the list. The list is God. It could be my mother out there, but if she's not on the list, tough luck, Ma, no list, no entry. Unless it's a celeb, but that goes without saying. I'm frigging serious. The only way we can keep the place hot is if absolutely no one can get in."

A model in a baby T-shirt and ripped jeans slunk out of the bathroom and plopped herself on the armrest of Alan's chair. "Baby, I'm hungry," she pouted. Eliza recognized her from a recent Victoria's Secret commercial. She'd been wearing a lace teddy and three-foot-long angel wings. The ad always irritated Eliza—what kind of lame sexual fantasy involved underwear and hokey feather-covered appendages?

"Get the chef to make you something," Alan said irritably.

"I love your necklace," the model said in a thick accent, flicking her eyes at Eliza.

Eliza nodded. "Thanks." She fiddled with the leather string Ryan had given her in Palm Beach, feeling a pang of anxiety.

"What do you think? You up for it?" Kartik asked. "The best summer of your life?"

Eliza smiled, thinking she'd heard that line before. "When do I start?" she asked, elated that she'd landed the job so easily. She would be back on the A-list as fast as you could say, "By invitation only."

"Saturday," Alan and Kartik replied in unison.

"In two days?" Eliza blanched, looking around. Hello, the walls were still exposed Sheetrock, weren't they?

"Relax. It's only a soft opening, for a premiere party. You know that new movie that's an update of *Gone with the Wind* with Jennifer Love Hewitt and Chad Michael Murray? Favor for a friend of ours. You know Mitzi Goober?" Kartik asked.

Eliza nodded. Mitzi was only the most feared publicist in the tristate area. At twenty-seven Mitzi had achieved immortality by landing on the cover of *New York* magazine as a "party grrrrl." Two years ago she'd spent a month in jail after her teacup Chihuahua attacked an unsuspecting waitress's fur-trimmed uniform vest, landing the waitress in the hospital and Mitzi on the cover of the tabloids. It was widely reported that Mitzi had laughed off the incident and called the waitress a "fashion victim," setting off a class war that resulted in aggressive and diminutive canines being banned from certain Hamptons eateries. But now she was back, a bestselling prison memoir under her belt, and more popular than ever. It was the Paris Hilton effect—there was no such thing as bad publicity in the Hamptons.

"But . . ." Eliza wordlessly motioned to the surrounding mess. It was hard to believe that in less than forty-eight hours the place would be turned into something resembling a decent watering hole.

"They'll be done by then, I promise you. By the way, how old are you?"

"I just turned seventeen . . ." she said tentatively, wondering if she should have lied.

Kartik waved a hand dismissively. "You're not bartending, so it's cool."

Eliza realized she didn't know what exactly she would be doing, or even how much she would be making. It seemed a little rude to ask, especially since the interview was obviously over. She figured they would straighten out those details later.

"You guys fans of Dante?" she asked, on her way out the door.

"Huh?" Kartik looked at her blankly. Alan was already nuzzling the underage panty model, his hands disappearing up the back of her shirt.

"The club. Seventh Circle. It's about the seventh circle of hell, right?" she asked, wondering if she sounded like an idiot, because that was how her new boss was looking at her. She remembered from English class that in Dante's *Inferno*, the seventh circle of hell was where Alexander the Great, Attila the Hun, and a bunch of other boldface names in history had ended up, due to sins of violence and pride.

"Sure, whatever." He shrugged. "Dante's cool. He's that new DJ from Paris, right?"

Eliza made a note that being literate was something that her new job—whatever it was—would not entail. Just wear the short skirt and keep the celebrities happy. She could do that.

is there such a thing as an accidental lap dance?

“I’M MARA, BY THE WAY,” MARA SAID TO THE DARK-HAIRED boy who was uncorking a champagne bottle. She wondered why he was paying so much attention to her—there were several girls on board who made their living off their cheekbones, and yet he’d barely looked at them. The two of them were sitting opposite each other in cushy caramel leather wing chairs in a cozy alcove behind the cockpit.

“I know who you are,” he said smoothly. “You work for the Perrys, right? I’m Garrett Reynolds,” he introduced himself, offering a hand. Mara had already put two and two together. It was his parents’ jet. They were *that* Reynolds family. The one *Forbes* magazine had just minted America’s newest billionaires. His father, Ezra Reynolds, was responsible for littering the Manhattan skyline with *R* logos on all of his buildings.

Garrett pulled down a cantilevered metal table hidden in a side panel and began placing champagne glasses in two rows on top of it, taking the glasses out of an adjoining cabinet. The flight attendants secured the doors and the plane began to roll down the runway. Mara noticed there was no standard spiel concerning safety procedures, the nearest exits, or about using one’s seat cushion as a floatation device (although she bet mink didn’t float). She and Garrett were two of the few people even sitting down.

“It looks pretty bad out there,” Mara noted, as the storm rattled the plane.

“We’re only a half-point over the minimums to fly,” Garrett agreed, explaining that unlike commercial airlines, which were legally required to adhere to FAA regulations that restricted flying under certain weather conditions—like, say, the violent downpour they were caught in—private jets had no such limitations. As long as wind velocity met a minimum standard, they were good to go. “But apparently Mother has a hair appointment she can’t miss.” Garrett smirked.

Mara didn’t know if he was kidding or not. That Chelsea Reynolds would risk death for a blowout was totally plausible, considering everything Mara knew about the Hamptons high life.

“Brace yourself,” Garrett warned, cupping the magnum of champagne under his chin.

The plane took off like a bumper car on a trampoline, and Mara heard the crowd shriek with laughter as they bounced around like pinballs. Miraculously, none of the glassware on their table moved an inch.

“Magnetized bottoms.” Garrett smiled, pouring champagne into each flute as the plane zigzagged off the ground.

Mara gripped her armrest worriedly, but Garrett seemed completely oblivious to the booming thunder and taut drumbeat of the raindrops against the windowpanes.

“Is it always this, uh, bouncy?” Mara asked, trying desperately to keep her balance on her seat as the plane hit a sharp air pocket. If there was a seat belt, she couldn’t find it.

“Smaller planes take the bumps harder on takeoff, although this weather certainly doesn’t help,” he mused. “This is nothing compared to landing,” he added.

When all the champagne flutes were filled to the brim with bubbly, Garrett looked up at her expectantly. Mara couldn’t help but be reminded of the way her cat Stinky always stared at Blue, her sister’s parakeet.

“There’s an old saying in the West . . .” Garrett drawled, leaning forward and staring into her eyes intently.

Mara smirked. So that explained why he’d chosen her. It was all a game called Let’s Get the New Girl Drunk. Did he really think she would be such an easy mark? In Sturbridge, they’d used beer mugs instead of champagne flutes, but she was sure the rules were the same.

“In Texas, it’s always high noon,” Mara replied somberly, gratified when Garrett nodded admiringly at her recognition of the game’s ritual introduction.

“And at high noon, we . . . *draw!*” Garrett exclaimed, reaching for his first flute.

Mara lunged for hers. She opened her throat and poured the sharp, crisp liquid inside.

“Draw again!” Garrett exclaimed gleefully when he’d emptied his glass before she was even halfway through hers.

Mara slammed her flute down, surprised she’d been beaten, and promptly reached for another. She won the next round, barely, but Garrett beat her on every other, until each glass on her side was empty. Damn, this guy was slick. In Sturbridge, Mara had wiped the floor with many a competitor, putting even the most funnel-happy football player to shame. Her ex-boyfriend Jim had taught her that the trick was not to breathe.

“Impressive,” she commended him.

“Thank you,” Garrett smiled. “You’re not so bad yourself.”

Mara relaxed against her seat, momentarily forgetting her nervousness about the turbulence, when a particularly sharp jolt threw her completely out of her chair and onto his lap.

“Oh my God! I’m so sorry!” she exclaimed, scrambling to get her balance.

“No need to apologize,” Garrett replied breezily, helping Mara steady herself against him when the plane bounced sharply again. She clung to him, bouncing up and down against his lap.

“So you’re that kind of girl,” Garrett joked, making her blush. He was obnoxious, but somehow charming all the same. She couldn’t help but notice how tightly he was holding her.

“You’re driving me crazy,” he growled, half-mockingly, but with a flirtatious edge. “Why don’t you have dinner with me this weekend? That way, we can actually get to know each other instead of just fooling around like this.”

“I can’t.” She shook her head. “I have to work, I’m sorry.” She wondered what Ryan would think if he saw her now, sitting on some other boy’s lap.

“I’m making the reservation anyway.” He shrugged. “I’ll pretend I didn’t hear that.”

A few minutes later, the plane stopped shaking and the pilot announced that they were above the storm clouds and had settled into a stable cruising altitude. Garrett helped Mara to her seat, bowing and kissing her hand in a gentlemanly fashion. She exhaled a sigh of relief when he excused himself to attend to his other guests. He was suave all right, but she had a feeling Garrett Reynolds always got—or bought—what he wanted, and Mara was definitely not for sale.

in girl-talk, “you look great!” means “i’m so happy to see you”

INSIDE SCOOP, JACQUI TREATED THE DRESSING ROOM as a revolving door, posing in each skimpy bathing suit in rapid succession, discarding those that were too tight across the chest and too small in back. (She’d gotten in trouble for her thongs on Georgica Beach last year, and she didn’t want to get hauled in again for violating the “morality” laws that kept the Hamptons beaches safe from the sight of exposed rear ends.) When Eliza found her, she was wearing a bandeau top and checking out the crucial crack-covering ability of a minuscule suit bottom by performing a series of squats in front of the three-way mirror (to the obvious consternation of an envious row of shoppers).

“Sorry, am I interrupting?” Eliza joked, as Jacqui performed deep knee bends in the tiny half-moon piece of fabric.

“’Liza!” Jacqui said happily, standing up for a hug. They embraced each other warmly, Eliza’s stack of gold bangle bracelets clanking against Jacqui’s bare shoulders.

“Look at you!” Eliza said, pulling Jacqui’s arms out and admiring how her friend filled out the Gaultier bikini.

“No, *chica*, look at you!” Jacqui squealed. The two of them clucked and cooed in the fawning, joyful way that girls greet each other, effusively complimenting each other on their hair, their shoes, their weight loss (real or imagined).

“I didn’t see you at the Jitney stop and figured you’d be here,” Eliza explained. “I’m sorry I’m late. The interview took a while.”

“How did it go?” Jacqui asked, disappearing into the dressing room to change.

“Awesome! I got the job!” Eliza said, admiring a canvas Kate Spade tote.

“Hooray!” Jacqui cheered, emerging in a bohemian-style empire-waist dress and high-heeled Gucci clogs. “Do you take AmEx?” she asked the salesgirl, handing her the bikini.

“Can I take a quick peek around before we get Mara?” Eliza asked, critically examining a crocheted poncho while Jacqui paid for her new purchase.

“I think her plane gets in right now, so no.”

“All riiiiight,” Eliza said, looking longingly at the brightly colored Matthew Williamson sarongs. “We’ll come back.”

“So, how’ve you been?” Jacqui asked, when they were in Eliza’s car on the way to the East Hampton airport. They rolled down all the windows to let in the fresh ocean breeze, even though Eliza had the AC cranking. The girls hadn’t seen each other since Palm Beach, where they’d shopped on Worth Avenue and hung out at the Four Seasons pool with all the kids in tow. There’d been an insane Christmas ball at the Colony Club and a lavish New Year’s party at the Breakers. Everything had been perfect—except for the fact that Mara hadn’t joined them. Jacqui couldn’t wait for all three of them to be back together again soon, but first she wanted to make sure Eliza had come clean about what exactly had happened when Mara *wasn’t* around.

“I’m good.” Eliza nodded, and told Jacqui about her plans for world (or at least Hamptons) domination that summer. She was going to be working at the coolest club and hanging out with the hottest people—in her mind, it wasn’t even a job, it was more like . . . a title, a position. She would be *representing* what Seventh Circle was all about. Her old crew would come around, and soon she’d be calling the shots again. She had nothing to be embarrassed about this summer, and she was counting on her connection with Kartik and Alan to facilitate her return to the high life.

“Have you seen Ryan yet?” Jacqui asked, steering the conversation back to where she wanted it to go.

“No, but we’ve e-mailed, and I spoke to him on the phone the other night. I don’t think it’ll be awkward.” Eliza had tried to push the memory out of her mind, but the fact that she’d hooked up with Ryan Perry—the love of her best friend’s life—in Palm Beach was not easily forgotten. Especially when she had yet to tell that best friend. “I mean, it was just a stupid drunken thing, and we’ve been friends for, like, ever.”

After Sugar and Poppy Perry’s New Year’s party at the Breakers, Eliza and Ryan had gone back to the hotel so that Eliza could pick up some flip-flops, since her Louboutins were killing her. They were both completely smashed from the champagne, and for the first time on vacation they were both happy. Ryan had been sad because Mara had broken up with him and backed out of Palm Beach, and Eliza was depressed because Jeremy had told her they should take a break until next summer, since being away from each other was so hard. Ryan found *The Godfather* on pay-per-view and they snuggled next to each other on the bed, just like when they were kids and had memorized all the lines.

“Leave the gun, take the cannoli,” they said at the same time, and they both laughed. Then, all of a sudden, he was kissing her . . . or she was kissing him . . . and then they were totally fooling around. They hadn’t meant it to happen, and it didn’t mean *anything*, she swore.

“I’m going to tell Mara as soon as I see her,” Eliza said emphatically, clenching the steering wheel so hard her knuckles turned white. “I can’t wait to get it off my chest, you know? I thought it would be too hard if I told her on the phone, or in an e-mail. I don’t want her to think it’s more than it is.”

“Definitely,” Jacqui agreed. She was relieved Eliza was finally going to come clean. Eliza had been adamant about keeping the Big Palm Beach Secret a secret, so Jacqui had reluctantly

promised not to tell Mara, and as a result Jacqui hadn't talked to Mara since before New Year's. Jacqui didn't want to lie to her, and with the studying and the time difference, it hadn't been that hard to fall out of touch.

"Anyway, tell me more about this new job of yours," Jacqui said, changing the subject since Eliza looked so uncomfortable. "Are you really going to get to meet all those stars?"

Eliza happily obliged, and the two forgot all about Palm Beach as they gossiped and chatted all the way to the East Hampton airport. The airport was a remote field off the dirt roads, and when they arrived, they found Mara in the middle of a crowd, kissing several well-heeled people good-bye. Eliza recognized a few of the socialites gathered around her and was impressed. But then, after Mara had merited not one but three glowing profiles in the Hamptons media last summer, Eliza hadn't expected anything less from her friend. Whether she'd planned on it or not, Mara was Somebody in the Hamptons.

Eliza leaned on the horn. "Over here!" She threw open the car door and climbed out, and Jacqui followed suit. They were both excited to see Mara—the three of them hadn't been together since last August, and they were eager to pick up where they'd left off.

Mara's eyes lit up and she quickly rushed over to Eliza and Jacqui. "Hello! Hello!" she enthused, embracing Eliza warmly. "I've missed you guys!" she said, giving Jacqui a similar bear hug. "You both look amazing!"

The cooing and the fawning began anew, as Eliza and Jacqui marveled over Mara's highlights, and Mara praised them on their tans and cute outfits.

"God, I can't believe I'm back. It's like I never left!" Mara shook her head and hiccuped.

"Mara, are you tipsy?" Eliza asked. Last summer, Mara had been such a goody-goody they'd practically had to drag her out to parties.

"A little," Mara giggled. "I had a little—*hiccup*—Cristal on the plane."

Jacqui raised an eyebrow in admiration. Private plane, five-hundred-dollar champagne—this girl knew how to roll.

The three of them grinned at each other, remembering how much fun last summer had been, and wondering what kind of mischief and adventure lay ahead for them this time. Everything was lush and green after the rainstorm, and the air smelled like salt and earth, mixed with a wonderful woody scent. All three girls felt lucky to be alive, in the Hamptons, and finally back together.

Mara stuffed her bag in the trunk, then opened the back door. "Er . . ." she said, not quite sure where to sit. The backseat of Eliza's car was akin to a homeless person's grocery cart. It was filled to the brim with empty water bottles, torn shopping bags, shoe boxes, CDs, Advantage bar wrappers, and carb-free tortilla chip bags. It was odd how someone as perfect-looking as Eliza, who was such a neat freak about her clothes, hair, and person, had turned her car into what was essentially a dump truck. It was one of the things that Mara liked so much about her—you could never pin Eliza down to a stereotype.

"Eek. Sorry about the mess," Eliza apologized sheepishly.

Mara grinned and pushed aside Eliza's dry cleaning so she could sit down.

"Anybody hungry?" Mara asked. "They had these, like, imported Majorcan almonds on board—they had so many, I took a couple of bags. Here, have some. They're yummy."

Eliza started the car and Mara handed out her pilfered snacks.

"So spill! How was Palm Beach? You guys never told me what happened!" Mara demanded. She was still giddy and high from the plane ride. Garrett had been a total ham the entire trip, and at one point, he'd turned the plane into a flying disco and had whirled Mara around until she was dizzy. Her good mood was so contagious that Jacqui momentarily forgot that Palm Beach was dangerous territory.

"It was fun!" Jacqui said. "We got to borrow these couture ball gowns for the twins' debut, I wore a Lacroix with a hand-beaded corset that Poppy didn't want, and Eliza got this amazing Chanel dress that Karl had made for Sugar."

Mara oohed and aahed at Jacqui's description of the house and the New Year's Eve party, and Eliza knew this was the moment she'd have to tell her best friend what exactly had happened with her best friend's ex-boyfriend. "Mar, I have something really important to tell you about Palm Beach. . . ."

Mara looked at Eliza expectantly. If she felt a twinge of foreboding, she didn't reveal it. Her face was wide open and innocent.

Jacqui held her breath. She'd put Eliza and Ryan's hookup out of her mind for a second, but looking back and forth between her two friends, she knew that what was about to happen would be totally unforgettable.

the girls meet the perrys' latest french import

“HOLD UP!” MARA SAID, INTERRUPTING ELIZA. AN OLD Madonna song came on the radio, and Mara leaned through the front seats to turn it up.

“ ‘Papa don’t preach!’ ” they all sang. “ ‘I’m in trouble deep!’ ”

Mara thought she couldn’t be happier. It was great to be back with Eliza and Jacqui in the Hamptons again. She’d really missed them. There was no one as fun as Eliza or as mischievous as Jacqui back home.

The song ended, but before Eliza could speak, Mara suddenly blurted, “God, I just can’t wait to see Ryan!”

“Really?” Jacqui asked. “Even after you broke up with him?”

“I know, I know.” Mara sighed. Her champagne buzz was still strong. “You guys, I really think I made a mistake. I mean, he said he still loved me, you know, even after I said we couldn’t go on, and I just hope . . . I don’t know. . . . Do you know if he’s seeing anyone?” Mara asked hopefully.

Eliza cleared her throat. If she was going to tell, she would have to do it now, before this got even worse. It was obvious Mara was still in love with Ryan, and the knowledge that he had hooked up with one of her friends was bound to be crushing. Best to get it over with quickly. Mara would be upset, but she would understand and hopefully forgive Eliza.

“Mar, listen, this is important. Please don’t be mad at me, okay? Because it meant nothing, I *swear*. This winter in Palm Beach I—”

“That’s the thing,” Mara said, interrupting again, obviously oblivious to the rising notes of anxiety in Eliza’s voice. “I wish I’d gone to Palm Beach. God, I don’t know why I stayed away. I just . . . I really regret it. I should have listened to you, Jac.”

Jacqui stayed silent.

“Anyway, what did you want to tell me, ’Liza? Why shouldn’t I be mad?” Mara asked, starting to braid Eliza’s hair, which was hanging over the back of her seat. “What happened in Palm Beach?”

Eliza sucked her teeth. “Over winter break I . . . I . . .” Eliza felt her throat dry up. She exhaled. “I decided not to work for the Perrys this summer. I’m not going to be an au pair.”

“*What?!*” Mara and Jacqui both said, shocked for very different reasons.

Eliza gnawed on her bottom lip. She’d meant to tell Mara—really she had. She’d been going to confess everything and get it over with. Mara was different from Lindsay and Taylor, those two-faced former best friends who’d turned on Eliza last year. Eliza always felt like she could tell Mara anything. Okay, so maybe they hadn’t kept in touch all that much over the school year, but that was irrelevant, Eliza almost felt like the year apart hadn’t even happened.

Eliza shrugged her shoulders helplessly at Jacqui. She knew Jacqui would think she was a coward and a liar. She could live with that, but she couldn’t live with Mara’s disappointment. She was just too scared to hurt her friend. Besides, she reasoned, maybe keeping her mouth shut was the best option. That way, Mara and Ryan could get back together without having any bad feelings between them. If Eliza ignored the problem, then it would surely just go away, right?

“What are you doing, then?” Mara asked, interrupting Eliza’s internal debate.

“I’m working at Seventh Circle, this new nightclub,” Eliza said proudly. “It’s really cool—I’ll be learning all about public relations and stuff. I don’t really need the money from the Perrys this summer. My dad’s doing better, and we might even move back to the city next year.”

Mara slumped in the backseat. “Jac, you knew about this?”

Jacqui nodded.

“And you didn’t tell me?” Mara whined.

“I’m sorry—I thought Eliza e-mailed you.” Jacqui shot Eliza another daggerlike look. Then again, if Mara was this upset about not knowing about Eliza’s summer plans, Jacqui was kind of glad she hadn’t told her about Palm Beach.

“That’s great and all,” Mara said. “I mean, I’m really happy for you ’Lize. But what are we going to do without you? Who’s going to scare William into submission? Are we ever going to see you?”

“What are you talking about? We’ll see each other all the time,” Eliza promised.

Eliza turned into the Perry driveway, where several expensive cars were parked. The newest addition to the fleet was a shiny new Toyota Prius, a gas/electric hybrid car that was the latest Hamptons automobile obsession. Priuses were politically correct, environmentally friendly, and incredibly hard to find—there was a six-month waiting list, and cars were selling for fifty percent over sticker price. Next to the Prius was Ryan Perry’s Aston Martin. But since Ryan was a touchy subject, nobody said anything.

Laurie, Anna Perry’s personal assistant, a frowsy-haired forty-year-old woman who wore a cell phone around her neck on a leash and lived vicariously through her employers, greeted them at the front door.

“Girls! Welcome back! Eliza, what are you doing here? Anna and the kids arrive tomorrow morning from the city. They were supposed to come in today, but Kevin needed the heli for some emergency meeting in Connecticut, and Anna didn’t want to sit in traffic. Ryan and the

twins are around somewhere. Jacqui, Mara, you have the night off after getting the kids' rooms ready."

They all followed Laurie inside and found the Perry house the same as ever, with immense floral arrangements in every corner, the striped zebrawood floors polished to a high sheen, every room perfectly appointed and camera-ready for an *Architectural Digest* shoot. Laurie told them that the Perrys paid a skeleton staff to keep the house looking this way even in the dead of winter. It was important that the house be prepared for their arrival at any moment, even if months passed between visits during the off-season.

"What's that noise?" Mara asked. "Is that a cement mixer?" Her father was in construction, and she recognized the sound.

Laurie grimaced and put her hands to her ears. "It's the Reynolds Castle. They're not supposed to have construction after five. I've already told Anna we should report it to city hall."

The three girls scurried to the picture window and spied a humongous structure being built over a traditional Victorian house. The sprawling wood skeleton, complete with turrets, towers, and what looked like a moat, seemed to span the entire length of the property, all the way down to the beachfront. A huge crane was lifting up several gold-plated Grecian columns. They stared, fascinated, as a forty-foot-wide stained glass cathedral window was positioned on the top floor.

"It's a shame what they're doing to the old Rockefeller place," Laurie sniffed, as insulted as a true East Hampton blueblood. "It's a monstrosity!"

"Here, I'll help you guys with your things," Eliza said, grabbing Jacqui's makeup bag and Mara's magazines.

The girls walked through the kitchen to the back door that led out to the terrace and garden. The grounds were pristine, the croquet set laid out for a game, and in the distance, the tennis and basketball courts shone with new paint.

"Oh my God. Who is that?" Eliza asked in a stage whisper, when they reached the pool patio.

Lounging on a raft in the middle of the infinity pool was the most beautiful boy they had ever seen. His entire lean, bronzed body was caramel-colored, from his honey-blond hair to his nut-brown tan. A cigarette dangled from his lower lip. He was wearing aviator sunglasses and holding a frosted cocktail glass with an umbrella in it.

"*Bonjour*," the beautiful boy drawled, trailing a finger on the water.

Jacqui's chest heaved. Had she said, "No more boys"? Did it count if he was the most gorgeous creature she had ever seen?

He raised his sunglasses to appraise them, a playful smile on his lips.

"Hi," Mara said weakly.

"*Bonjour* yourself," Eliza shot back.

“Boa tarde.” Jacqui smiled.

“Je m’appelle Philippe Dufourg. You must be my coworkers, two of you at least,” he said, in a sexy French accent.

“Coworker?” Mara asked. “You’re not . . .”

He grinned, puffing on his cigarette and flicking his ashes into the chlorine-blue waters. *“Mais oui.* I am the new au pair.”

aren't rules made to be broken?

LAURIE FILLED THEM IN AS SHE LED THEM TO THE SERVANTS' cottage—Philippe was the French nephew of the kids' regular nanny, who took every summer off to go home to Cornwall. He went to school in London—hence the (almost) perfect English—and had arrived just that morning. Philippe was an aspiring tennis pro and hoped to bolster his reputation by winning the Rolex Invitational, which took place in East Hampton each July. Besides babysitting the children, he was going to give them private tennis lessons.

“And as you can see, he's made himself quite at home,” Laurie said, with a hint of disapproval. “Well, here you are,” she said, throwing open the door to the tidy cottage.

Everything was exactly as they remembered it. Even the third step on the rickety stairs still squeaked. Their room was as plain and bare as a prison cell, but they hadn't expected anything more. There were a bunk bed and a small single bed, each with one flat pillow and scratchy wool blankets. Against the opposite wall were two bureaus, a ratty armchair, and a nightstand with a lamp that didn't work that well ever since Eliza had tripped on its wire one night last July. There was one new addition, though: a shiny white intercom/phone, which Laurie explained Anna had had installed so they could get in touch with the au pairs with the push of a button.

Mara and Jacqui began unpacking, chattering about this exciting new development (the boy, not the phone) as they decided on drawers and beds. “Do you want the top bunk?” Mara asked Jacqui.

“Sure. Thanks. Where do you think they put the boy?” Jacqui nodded, pulling aside the curtain on the one small attic window.

Mara shrugged. She hadn't given Philippe a second thought—she was still fixated on the Aston Martin, wondering if Ryan was on the grounds somewhere. Maybe he was in his room, or in the kitchen. Maybe she should do a little scouting. . . .

Eliza sat on the single bed, feeling a little out of place. She felt nostalgic for last summer, remembering all the wild times they'd shared together in this small space—sneaking smokes out the window and bottles of Grey Goose from the Perrys' liquor cabinet. She and Jeremy had first made out on the very bed she was sitting on. But the feeling ended when she spotted a row of dust bunnies underneath the nightstand and remembered her air-conditioned bedroom back at her family's summer rental.

“Hey—that's a nice necklace. Ryan has one just like it, doesn't he?” Mara asked, looking up from unpacking and noticing the leather string Eliza was holding between her fingers, lost in thought.

“Oh!” Eliza’s hands flew from her neck. She looked around nervously. “Yeah. It’s nothing, just this old thing I picked up.”

“Did you guys hang out in Florida?” Mara asked wistfully. “You and Ryan? How was he?”

Eliza colored. “Excuse me?”

“I dunno, what did he look like? Was he with anyone?” Mara asked.

“Same as always,” Eliza shrugged. “He wasn’t around much. Anyway, what about that guy by the pool, huh? How lucky are you guys? What a hottie!” she said, to change the subject. She motioned to the two of them to come closer. “I heard French guys have the biggest . . .”

Jacqui and Mara giggled.

Just then, Philippe walked in, smelling of smoke and coconut suntan oil. Jacqui thought nothing smelled sexier. “*Bon!*” he said, rubbing his palms together. “*Ça devrait être amusant, trois filles et moi!*”

“No way, you’re not staying *here*, are you?” Mara asked, realizing he was saying something about his room. Anna didn’t seriously think to put two girls and one very hot guy in the same room, did she? But then, Anna Perry wasn’t really one for propriety. Mara was aghast.

Jacqui shrugged. What was the big deal? Obviously Mara had never backpacked through Europe. She was intrigued. Philippe was staying in the same room with them. How very . . . convenient.

“*Oui.*” Philippe nodded. He rummaged in the top bureau drawer for a shirt and pants and began to peel off his trunks.

“Hold it! What do you think you’re doing?” Mara demanded. She knew she was being a killjoy, but seriously, this was out of line. She didn’t care if he *was* hot and French—she didn’t want to feel awkward around him all summer. He would have to learn how to respect her privacy, even if he had no need for his own.

Eliza and Jacqui looked a little disappointed. That little slice of Philippe’s perfect backside was tantalizing. They had been looking forward to the show.

Philippe shrugged. “Nakedness is not allowed? But I am in my room?”

Eliza and Jacqui watched, amused, as Mara marched Philippe to the hallway, holding his arms firmly to his sides. Now this was the uptight Mara they remembered. “In America, we change in private!” Mara insisted.

Mara walked back into the room, wiping her palms in consternation. “Can you believe that guy? Anyway, Jac, I guess he gets that drawer next to the bed. Huh. Well, do you want to share that closet then? And I guess we should see what Laurie needs us to do.”

“Yeah—I guess I should go . . .” Eliza said awkwardly, standing up and collecting her purse. It was weird to be back in the old room and not be able to stay. “Hey, what are you guys doing tomorrow night? Do you want to come over to my house and hang out? I don’t start work till Saturday.”

“Maybe,” Jacqui said, realizing for the second time in only a few minutes that her plan to ignore all distractions and be a stellar babysitter was not going to be as easy as she’d hoped. “If we can put the kids to bed early.”

“Don’t worry, we’ll be there,” Mara assured her. If there was one thing Mara had learned last year, it was that they could figure out a way to take care of the kids *and* have a good time.

Eliza raised an eyebrow and smiled. Jacqui being responsible? Mara ready to party? Some things really did change. They hugged Eliza good-bye, promising to call her soon.

When Eliza left, her slides click-clacking loudly on the stairs, Philippe reentered the room, looking freshly shaven and wearing a starched white oxford shirt and perfectly pressed blue jeans.

“Better?” he asked Mara.

Mara nodded coolly. She had finished putting away all of her clothes, not having brought as many as Jacqui, who had already crammed the closet with her wardrobe. “I’m going to see what Laurie needs for the kids’ rooms.”

“I’ll be there in a bit,” Jacqui promised, not meeting Mara’s eyes. She was fully conscious that Philippe had sprawled, emperor-like, on the single bed and was staring at her expectantly.

Mara shrugged her shoulders and left, thinking she might take a few unnecessary detours on the way to Laurie’s office—say, the landing right by Ryan’s room.

“So, Jacqui, are you also needing to see Laurie?” Philippe asked Jacqui. “Because there are still some, what you call it, piña coladas in the blender.”

Jacqui stopped putting her clothes away. She knew that the right thing to do was to follow Mara and get everything prepared for the kids tomorrow. But Philippe was still smiling at her, a dazzling preponderance of shiny white teeth and blue eyes. He reached under the bed and brought out a half-empty bottle of Bacardi. “Help me finish this?” he asked.

“I guess I am kind of thirsty . . .” Jacqui allowed. She had sworn to herself that she was really going to be better this summer: she was going to keep her head down, she was going to help Mara take care of the kids, she was going to study for that uh, test thing, S-A . . . whatever was it called again. . . .

She exhaled loudly, squaring her shoulders, and looked straight into his eyes. “But you know what? I think I’ll just catch up with you later,” she told Philippe, running out of the room before he could say her name again in that sexy accent of his.

reunited, and it feels so . . . awkward

MARA WOKE UP EARLY THEIR FIRST DAY IN THE AU PAIRS' room, tossing off the sheets and yawning. Jacqui was snoozing on the top bunk, and Philippe was snoring loudly under a mountain of blankets on the single bed. Last night, she and Jacqui had returned to the room to find Philippe smoking cigarettes and playing solitaire card games by himself. They'd joined him for a few hands of hearts before turning in early.

Mara had spent most of yesterday evening skulking around the main house, hoping to catch Ryan, without any luck. Knowing he always got up early to surf before breakfast, she'd set the alarm and hoped to catch him on his way out. She was extra-careful to put on a cute outfit—a pale-green shrunken T-shirt that showed off her small waist, and Jessica Simpson-like cutoff jean shorts that showed off her legs. She put her long brown hair in a messy ponytail, taking care to frame a few loose tendrils around her face.

Unfortunately, there was no sign of Ryan in his wet suit checking the weather on the flat-screen TV in the kitchen, or waxing down his board in the driveway. Mara stared at the parked Aston Martin, as if willing Ryan to appear. Her shoulders slumped as she walked back into the house, wondering if he was avoiding her. Back in the kitchen, she helped herself to a cup of yogurt and heard voices coming from the patio. Her stomach clenched out of nervousness, and she opened the sliding door.

Ryan was standing on the terrace, talking to a tall, blond girl. He looked up, startled, when he saw Mara. He was wearing a hooded sweatshirt and faded jeans, and was holding a sleeping bag under one arm and an Igloo cooler in the other. His hair was comically tousled, sticking out in every direction, and he had pillow creases on his cheek, but they only made him look more adorable. As usual, he was barefoot, and his toes were covered with sand.

“Hey!” he said, and for an instant, Mara caught a glimpse of his open, dimpled smile, but it soon vanished into an embarrassed grimace. “Mara—I didn't know you were here.”

“I got in yesterday,” she said, forcing a light tone. *Who the hell was this girl?* “Sorry for interrupting.”

Ryan dropped his things and walked toward her, his arms extended. “Not at all. It's great to see you,” he said, making sure not to make contact with any part of her body other than her back, which he thumped as if she were one of his soccer teammates. She smelled the saltwater in his hair, which reminded her painfully of last summer.

“You too,” she said, finding it difficult to breathe.

He was even more gorgeous than she'd remembered. The sun had lightened his hair, and his green eyes sparkled in his darkly tanned face. He moved with the same easy grace, projected the same laid-back, down-to-earth vibe. The kind of guy who'd been born with everything and hadn't let that happy accident spoil him one bit. Mara had always thought he was way out of her league—but for one week last summer, he'd been blessedly, deliciously, gloriously hers. And now she wanted him back.

“Allison was just giving me a ride home,” Ryan explained, introducing the girls to each other. “Remember my friend Oz? He had a bonfire last night,” he said, looping his arm around the six-foot-tall Charlize Theron clone. Allison was wearing a thin white tank top and drawstring pajamas. Her hair was messy and uncombed, but Mara noted how effortlessly sexy she looked. This was not a girl who took half an hour choosing just the right outfit and pulling tendrils out of her ponytail.

“And this one was in no condition to drive!” Allison cooed, tickling Ryan's stomach.

“Hey!” Ryan protested, smacking her hands away. They wrestled, and Allison pretended to get upset when Ryan caught her hands behind her back.

Mara watched them flirt, her stomach tightening. Just a year ago she and Ryan had spent almost every night of the last week entwined in each other's arms and telling each other their deepest, darkest secrets. She remembered every scar on his body (the one from when he blasted his knee skiing, the one down the side of his right calf from wiping out on his skateboard), every story he'd told her about growing up (Christmases in Maine, his Outward Bound safari in Kenya, how he still had lunch with his old Latin professor in New York), and especially the way his nose crinkled when he closed his eyes and kissed her. Even though Mara knew she was the one who'd broken up with him, it hurt to see him flirt with someone else.

Mara was relieved when the show was over, but felt anxious when Ryan took a seat next to her on the patio table. Allison mentioned something about being cold, and Mara watched the girl's long, lithe figure glide to where a jeep was parked on the sand. They had driven up the back way, onto the private beachfront that bordered the Perry estate, which meant that Allison came from a family that also owned a mansion on Georgica, since the back roads were all private. Allison was exactly the kind of girl a guy like Ryan Perry was meant to be with. Mara put down her yogurt cup; she'd lost her appetite.

Allison bounded back up to the patio, wearing a boy-sized Dartmouth sweatshirt. Mara remembered that Ryan had wanted to go to Dartmouth and wondered if he'd gotten in. Allison promptly sat on Ryan's lap.

“What's this?” Allison asked, poking at an exotic-looking fruit display in the middle of the table.

“That's a persimmon,” Ryan said, pointing to what looked like a squashed orange tomato. “And this is a rambutan,” he explained, holding up a prickly red ball. “Anna gets them shipped in from Indonesia.”

One of Anna's many pretensions was snobbery over the local produce. Even if the Hamptons were famous for their plump strawberries, peaches, and pears, rare, expensive and

imported always trumped fresh and available.

“How do I open this?” Allison asked.

Ryan showed her how to delicately peel the skin, exposing the white jellylike substance inside.

“Yum!” Allison said, chewing. She peeled another and fed it to Ryan, who rewarded her with a kiss. They laughed and giggled, and Mara felt like she might vomit. She slid her chair back to get up.

“So, how was the Jitney? Crowded?” Ryan asked, finally looking in her direction.

She shook her head. “No—I flew. Anna set it up so I could ride with the Reynoldses on their jet.”

“Really?” Allison interjected. “What’s it like? I heard it’s so tacky!” she said, her eyes wide.

“It’s a new G5,” Mara retorted, remembering what Garret had told her about the plane. “It’s actually really nice,” she added, feeling defensive.

“I bet,” Ryan said, and Mara thought she heard a bite in his tone.

“Garrett is really sweet. He said he knows you,” Mara said, deciding to feel Ryan out.

“He used to be a good friend of mine,” Ryan said, his face stony. “But he’s not anymore.”

Just then, a piercing whistle interrupted the early-morning silence, and they looked up to see the object of their conversation standing in front of the dirt path between the two houses, holding up a tennis ball. “Bounced over the fence,” Garrett Reynolds explained. He was wearing crisp tennis whites and looked like a Ralph Lauren model.

“Hey,” Ryan grunted.

“Hi, Gar,” Allison cooed. “Heard you guys got some new wings.”

Garrett nodded, smiling. He shambled over, pointing a finger at Mara. “Hi, gorgeous. We on for tomorrow night? I hope you’ve changed your mind. I’ve got the best table at the American reserved.”

Just yesterday, Mara had gently turned him down for a date, but after the display Ryan had just put on with Allison, she decided to change course. Mara smiled winningly back at Garrett. “Sure, why not?” she told him.

“Good girl. Pick you up at seven.” Garrett grinned. “’Bye, Ali. Later, Perry,” he told Ryan, bouncing the tennis ball on his racket as he disappeared behind the hedges.

Ryan cleared his throat. “Well. Have fun tomorrow night,” he said brusquely. “By the way, I think Laurie’s in her office,” he said, talking to Mara as if she was just one of the many people who worked for the Perrys. He turned back to Allison, helping her up from her seat, and the two of them disappeared into the house.

Everything Mara had been hoping for—getting back together with Ryan, the two of them picking up exactly where they’d left off—was dashed before the summer had even begun. But before she could sink any further into her sadness, the ground suddenly began to shake, and

Mara looked out to see a silver helicopter land on the lawn, whipping the tall grass to the ground.

An emaciated woman wearing a billowing African muumuu stepped gingerly out of the side door, futilely shielding her hairdo against the wind and yelling at the copilots. Several children tumbled out after her, screaming loudly for their breakfast.

Anna Perry and the Perry kids had finally arrived.

the perry kids have a lot to learn, and medication to take

ANNA PERRY SAT IN FRONT OF THE GAMING TABLE in the Perrys' state-of-the-art screening room, drumming her fingers against the green felt. Next to her sat Laurie, her fingers poised on a laptop computer. The sixteen-foot-wide projection screen in the front of the room showed a colorful PowerPoint presentation page that displayed PERRY CHILDREN SUMMER GOALS in marquee lettering.

Mara sat across from them, pensive and tense after the early-morning encounter with Ryan and his new girlfriend. Next to her were two empty chairs. Jacqui and Philippe were late. A bearded, bespectacled gentleman in a shabby tweed suit, holding a notebook, sat on Anna's left. Mara wondered who he was.

A slim eleven-year-old girl walked in, a skinny teen Mara had spied leaving the helicopter earlier. She hadn't recognized the girl from far away, but now she could see that she was someone very familiar indeed.

"Madison!" Mara called. "Hi, sweetie!"

The newly svelte Madison allowed Mara a cool nod. Last summer, Mara had been Madison's champion, defending her against a mean ballet teacher and bucking her up when William teased her. Mara attempted a hug, but Madison stood out of arm's reach.

"Anna, do you like this shirt on me?" Madison asked, turning to whisper in Anna's ear. The little girl with curly hair who favored oversized T-shirts and shorts had grown up to become a Jamie Lynn Spears clone with flat-ironed locks, wearing bootleg jeans and a tight tank top that showed off her midriff.

A few minutes later, Madison kissed the air next to Anna's cheek and pranced out the door, just as Jacqui rushed in, her hair wet, followed closely by Philippe. The two of them seemed to be sharing some secret joke, and Mara noticed Anna's lips pucker at the sight of them.

"Philippe! *Vous vous êtes bien installé?*" Anna said graciously in a perfect French accent.

"*Oui, madame, il est très beau ici,*" he said, giving her the full benefit of his smile.

Anna glowed. "Well, Kevin and I are so glad to have everyone here for the summer," she said grandly. "I take it, Jacqui and Mara, you've met Philippe. Philippe, Jacqui and Mara have worked for us before, so they can fill you in if I forget to mention anything. This will be very short, as I have a committee meeting at the Parrish in a few minutes." Anna was forever

dropping names and making allusions to various nabobs of Hamptons society, which always went over the heads of the au pairs.

“First, let me introduce you to Dr. Pell Abraham, William’s new therapist. Dr. Abraham will be monitoring William for his hyperactivity disorder. Jacqui, I don’t need to remind you what happened in Palm Beach. Needless to say, we can’t have that happen again. My scars have disappeared with laser therapy, thank God. Laurie, can we have the lights, please?” Anna asked. “First slide. Thank you,” she said, as the PowerPoint page gave way to a screen showing a photo of William sticking his tongue out, next to a bullet-pointed list of his “issues.” At Anna’s direction, Laurie had put together a PowerPoint presentation on the Perry children, as neatly organized and soullessly rendered as a corporate sales pitch.

“As you can all see, we’re hoping to send William to Eton next year, and they won’t accept him if he fails to qualify due to his mental illness,” Anna said, using a laser pointer to highlight the words *ADHD disorder—new prescriptions*. “Dr. Abraham will be conducting experiments and focusing on how William’s family life affects his condition. Please don’t mind him as he sits in on activities or asks questions.”

Mara blanched. Not only was Anna getting rid of the kid, she was sending him clear across the ocean. Eton was an elite English boarding school that counted the future king of England as an alumnus. Anna had found a way to further her social-climbing aspirations as well as divest herself of her most difficult stepchild. Worse yet, this summer there was going to be some weird doctor following him around and taking notes. That should do *wonders* for William’s behavioral problems.

Laurie clicked the remote, and Zoë’s screen came up. “We think it would be wonderful if Zoë learned to speak another language this year. Kevin and I were so pleased when she started reading that Portuguese children’s book last summer. But we think she should really branch out to a more . . . ah, historically and culturally rich language. Something a little more challenging. We’ve chosen Russian. I studied Chekhov in college, and I think it will be wonderful for her to get a head start on the classics.”

A seven-year-old studying Russian? How were they going to manage that? Mara had barely passed Spanish. It was just like Anna to choose a language that neither of the foreign-born au pairs spoke.

“As for Cody, Dr. Abraham has alerted me to the fact that he has begun to exhibit warning signs that hint of a borderline personality. So he will also have to be monitored very closely.”

Jacqui took copious notes, which Mara had to snigger at, while Philippe put his hands behind his head and kicked his chair back. He yawned openly.

The slide clicked, showing a weekly calendar.

“We’ve decided on a very packed schedule for them this summer. Idle hands, idle minds, the devil’s playground, and all that. Sundays and Mondays are surfing in Montauk, Tuesdays are music and art appreciation, horseback riding on Wednesdays, kabala camp on Thursdays, and etiquette and ballroom dancing at the country club on Fridays. Saturdays they can do as they please, but I hope you can encourage the children to do something productive, like

practice their meditation. Spirituality is so important.” Anna nodded to Laurie and the lights flashed back on.

“Excuse me, Anna, what about Madison? Do we have any goals for her this summer?” Mara asked.

“Madison is eleven. Too old to have an au pair anymore,” Anna said. “No need to worry about her. We’re so proud that she finally found success with her new diet!”

* * *

The rest of the day was a manic blur, and when the kids were safely tucked into bed, Mara and Jacqui returned, exhausted, to their room. Philippe had skipped out soon after the first disastrous tennis lesson. (William had used his racquet as a blunt instrument, Zoë swung hers like a baseball bat, and Cody could barely lift his.)

“I’m so tired!” Jacqui said, heaving herself up with difficulty onto the top bunk. “I don’t remember last summer being this much work!”

Mara’s mouth opened with a ready reply, but when she saw Jacqui’s face, she burst out laughing. At least Jacqui was around to lend a hand this time—who even knew where Philippe had gone?

They’d barely had a chance to relax when the new phone began to ring.

“Au pairs!” Mara answered, just as Anna had instructed them, even though it made her feel silly.

“No kidding,” Eliza guffawed. “You bitches coming over or what?” she demanded. “My parents just left for the night and I just found a great mojito recipe. Bring mint!”

when skinny-dipping at night, it helps to get sloshed

WHEN THEY ARRIVED AT ELIZA'S HOUSE, IT WAS ALMOST ten o'clock in the evening, since Jacqui had insisted on trying to find Philippe to invite him to come along. "It seems rude to just leave him here," Jacqui told Mara. Even though she'd promised herself no more boys, there was nothing wrong with being friendly, was there? But the French boy never resurfaced, and Mara, who was tired of waiting, persuaded Jacqui to leave him a note with directions to the Thompsons' house instead. The only car left in the driveway was Ryan's Aston Martin, and even though the Perrys had always assured them they could use any car in the lot that was available, they decided to hitch a ride to Westhampton with one of the day staff instead. They figured they could call a taxi or something for the ride back.

The Thompsons' rental was a weathered New England cottage with an inviting wraparound porch. It was nestled in a pretty cul-de-sac and shaded by a grove of bent oak trees. Several single-passenger kayaks and long wooden paddles were stacked on its front lawn.

Eliza greeted them at the door with a tray of frosty mojitos in tall glasses.

"About time," she chided, handing out drinks. "I thought I'd have to drink these all myself."

Eliza gave Jacqui and Mara a quick tour. "I don't think they've renovated since the seventies," she sighed, shaking her head at the orange shag rug. "And of course, we're on the wrong side of the highway," she added, since the house was located north of Route 27.

Mara looked around admiringly. She really couldn't understand Eliza sometimes. Sure, it was nothing like the Perrys' designer show palace on Georgica, but it was airy and comfortable nonetheless. While the house looked small from the outside, Mara counted six bedrooms—two in the attic, three on the ground floor, and one downstairs in the expansive finished basement, complete with a dartboard and a foosball table. Eliza had no idea how good she had it.

They made their way to the back patio, where Eliza pointed out the "crummy" pool and the "gross" hot tub. The three of them sat at the edge of the pool and let their legs dangle over the side, balancing their drinks carefully.

"This is delish," Mara said, taking a big gulp from her glass, careful not to splash on her shirt. The sugarcane and mint mixed with the rum had a pleasant salty but sweet taste.

“Mmm,” Jacqui agreed. God, it was heaven to be away from those kids. She borrowed a cigarette from Eliza’s pack. Eliza lit one too and offered Mara one. After shaking her head, Mara changed her mind and took one as well. They puffed contentedly, sipping their drinks.

Eliza asked them about their day and listened keenly as Mara described her disappointment at finding Ryan involved with someone else so soon.

“I know Allison Evans,” Eliza said carefully, keeping her voice even. “I didn’t know they were together. Are you sure? Because Ryan has lots of girlfriends—I mean, friends who are girls,” she said a little awkwardly, thinking of how she was one of Ryan’s “friends who are girls” as well. “Maybe you should ask him about it?”

Mara shrugged. “What’s the point? He totally acted like I was nothing to him.” She drained her glass, feeling the effects of the rum. “I should have known.”

Jacqui put her arm around Mara’s shoulder in sympathy and gave her a squeeze. “It’s okay, *chica*, everyone makes mistakes,” Jacqui said as she looked at Eliza meaningfully. If Eliza was ever going to own up to Palm Beach, this was the perfect time to do it.

But Eliza didn’t meet Jacqui’s gaze. “Look at it this way, Mar, at least you know you’re not going to die a virgin,” she said ruefully, stubbing out her cigarette on the tile.

“You and Jeremy never—?” Mara asked.

“Dating long-distance didn’t really work for us.” Eliza sighed. “He’s supposed to stop by the club tomorrow. But I don’t know. . . . I’m afraid he might be seeing someone else too,” she lamented. Jeremy had finally returned her call yesterday. He’d said he was really looking forward to seeing her, but he’d been curt and distracted on the phone.

“With my track record, I’ll probably never get to do it. Something *always* happens. I’m just trying to give it away, and no one will take me up on it!” Eliza whined, fully aware of how ridiculous she sounded.

“Here lies Eliza Marie Thompson,” Jacqui said in a grave tone. “The Last American Virgin. She tried to give it away, but no one would take it. May she rest in peace.”

Jacqui and Mara giggled. Eliza pretended to be insulted and then gave in to the laughter bubbling up inside of her.

“C’mon,” she said, dragging them up to their feet when their giggles subsided. She was suddenly energized with a new plan. She grabbed the bottle of rum. Screw dangling their feet in this dinky little washbasin—the ocean wasn’t far.

* * *

To get there faster, they cut through the neighbors’ yards diagonally, ducking under clotheslines and stepping over kids’ go-carts until they reached the shore. They watched the waves rumble in, cresting on the horizon. The cool night air smelled damp and salty. Eliza stuck a toe in the water. “It’s warm,” she marveled. The Atlantic was *never* warm. The waters off Long Island usually felt like an ice bath, especially in the evening. In Eliza’s buzzed state, she decided it must be a sign. “Let’s go swimming!” she said, exhilarated.

“Hello, we’re not wearing bathing suits,” Mara protested, wading into the shallows. The water *was* comfortably temperate, but still . . .

“So what?” Eliza shrugged, already tossing off her cardigan. She felt hot from all the rum. A dunk in the ocean sounded like the perfect way to cool off.

Jacqui held her glass and assessed the situation. The water felt wonderful on her bare feet. She finished her drink and followed Eliza’s lead, stepping out of her cotton sundress. She rarely wore any underwear anyway, and she ran laughing into the waves.

Eliza shed her T-shirt and capris, then quickly removed her bra and underwear as well. She whooped as she caught up to Jacqui in the water.

Jacqui and Eliza splashed around happily, calling to Mara. “C’mon, Mar! Or do you only swim naked with boys?” Eliza called teasingly, reminding Mara that she’d been caught skinny-dipping with Ryan in the Perrys’ pool last year—by her boyfriend, no less.

That did it. Mara unbuttoned her blouse and stepped out of her jeans. She hitched her camisole over her head and folded her underwear neatly on top of her clothes.

“Banzai!” Mara laughed, as she cartwheeled into the ocean.

They swam around lazily for a while, feeling delightfully wicked. This was what summer was all about! They floated on their backs and looked up at the stars and then took turns dunking each other. After a little while, the alcohol they’d drunk wore off and they all discovered the same thing, at just about the same time: *The water was freezing!*

“I’m c-c-c-cold!” Eliza said, shivering as she ran back to shore. She was in such a hurry to get back into her clothes, she put her shirt on backward. Mara and Jacqui followed, laughing at how stupid they’d been not to bring towels. They watched the waves roll in, and were about to head back, when Eliza was struck by an idea.

“Does anyone have a pen?” she asked, holding up the empty bottle of rum.

“I do,” Mara said, fishing in her pocket and handing it to Eliza.

“What are you doing?” Jacqui asked, watching Eliza carefully peel away the label. Eliza smiled as she scribbled a few lines on the back of the label. She showed them what she had written, then folded it in thirds and stuck it inside the bottle. She screwed the cap back on, nice and tight.

“Did you ever do this as kids?” Eliza asked.

Jacqui and Mara shook their heads.

“It’s fun. You never know who’s going to get it,” Eliza said. “Who’s got the best arm? Mara?”

Mara shrugged and accepted the bottle. She threw it in a wide arc, and the three of them watched the bottle bob up and down until it disappeared into the waves. They trudged back to Eliza’s house in good spirits.

“So you guys are coming tomorrow night to the club, right? I’ll put you on the list,” Eliza said, as Jacqui flicked her cell open to call a taxi.

“Okay,” Jacqui said slowly. She was already feeling worried about getting caught sneaking out tonight. “I guess it depends on when we get the kids to bed. . . .”

“Yeah, I don’t know,” Mara said. “I have this dinner thing earlier.”

Eliza gripped Mara’s shoulders affectionately, as if to shake away her doubts. “C’mon, it’ll be fun. It’s the first weekend of the summer. *Promise.*”

“Is Ryan going to be there?” Mara asked, thinking she really didn’t want a repeat of that morning again.

“So what if he is?” Eliza asked. “I mean, well, Mara—”

But suddenly, there was a flash of headlights as an Aston Martin Vanquish convertible turned into the driveway.

“*Bonjour!*” Philippe called out. Obviously, *he* had no qualms about using Ryan’s car.

“Am I too late?” Philippe asked, a crooked smile on his lips when he saw how disheveled the girls were, their wet clothes plastered to their bodies.

“No, you’re just in time,” Jacqui replied briskly, “to drive us home.”

anna perry is a lot younger than her botox implies

THE NEXT EVENING, AFTER WRESTLING THE KIDS TO bed, Jacqui walked into the playroom—a carpeted, windowless room in between the girls’ and boys’ bedrooms—and began putting away toys, games, skateboards, Legos, plastic pistols, Barbie dolls, and assorted talking stuffed animals in the plastic chest. The kids’ wing was located in a remote, almost inaccessible corner of the house, behind a soundproofed door. Jacqui noticed that the kids couldn’t have been farther from Anna’s bedroom unless they were in the servants’ cottage, but that a dual-level walk-in closet, complete with a built-in wet bar, was located right off the master bedroom.

Jacqui finished her task alone, since Mara was getting ready for her date with Garrett, and Philippe had wandered off again. But when she walked back to the cottage, she found Philippe sitting—no, *lounging* on the steps outside.

The lazy bastard. He was never around when they needed him. Jacqui put her hands on her hips, ready to give him a piece of her mind.

Seeing the look on her face, Philippe handed her a rolled-up joint. “Not really my scene,” he explained, motioning back toward the house. “Here, take a *poof*.”

It really wasn’t a great idea to get stoned right on the property. Especially if she was concerned about getting a stellar reference from the Perrys at the end of the summer. But she was feeling a little tense . . . and, well, she wasn’t one to turn down a hit. She accepted it and inhaled, feeling the acrid smoke hit the back of her throat.

“You are amazing,” Philippe said. “*Ma tante* said it wouldn’t be easy, but I did not think it would be this hard. I just wanted to be near the beach.”

Jacqui laughed. She really couldn’t be that angry at Philippe. He sounded just like she had last summer. They sat in companionable silence, listening to the crickets chirping in the bushes and watching the fireflies dance around the bushes by the pool. Philippe’s cell phone rang a couple of times, but he ignored it.

“Who’s trying to get hold of you so bad?” Jacqui asked when he ignored it the third time.

Philippe was nonchalant. “Just a couple of friends,” he replied, and left it at that.

A few minutes later, Mara walked out of the door, wearing one of Jacqui’s designer dresses. It was a low-cut Zac Posen lavender chiffon number, with beaded rhinestones that formed a pretty pattern on the neck and waist. The back dipped so low Mara was sure it was indecent,

but Jacqui had assured her that none of the clothes Mara had brought would be dressy enough for dinner at the American Hotel.

Philippe whistled.

“I don’t know if I put this on right,” she said to Jacqui. “Does it look okay?”

Jacqui handed Philippe the roach, then stood up to judge. She pulled down on the waist, so that the neckline sat a little lower. “There. *Perfeito*. I have a pair of Jimmy Choo heels in my bag. Those are cute, but they’re not high enough,” Jacqui advised, pointing to Mara’s sandals.

“What are you smoking?” Mara asked them, sniffing the fragrant air suspiciously.

“Nothing.”

“*Rien.*”

Mara knew they were lying, but she was too concerned about looking presentable and too grateful to Jacqui for loaning her the dress to criticize them. Besides, she was tired of being the Good Girl all the time. Jacqui and Philippe were old enough to know the risks of getting fired if they were caught smoking pot.

“Tell Eliza I’m sorry I didn’t make it, okay?” Mara told them, slipping on Jacqui’s sandals. She walked up to the main house to wait for Garrett in the foyer.

Not long after Mara left, a pair of heels clicked on the concrete walk. Jacqui figured it was just Mara—she’d probably forgotten something—but it was Anna Perry who emerged from the darkness, dressed in a silk robe pulled tightly across her waist, and high-heeled brocade bedroom slippers. “I thought I smelled something,” she said.

Jacqui choked on an exhale and tried to wave away the smoke.

“There you are,” Anna said, smiling warmly at Philippe. “I was looking for you everywhere,” she said flirtatiously, as Jacqui quickly hid the incriminating evidence behind her back.

“What are the two of you up to?” Anna asked, taking a seat next to Philippe by the curb. “Jacqui, is something wrong?”

Jacqui shook her head and surreptitiously threw down the joint, crushing it beneath her heel. “Nothing—we were just—nothing.” Jacqui attempted a smile, edging away from the two of them. “I’m sorry, I’m really tired. I need to hit the straw. Um, good night!” she said, turning the doorknob to the servants’ cottage.

She slammed the door behind her, her heart beating quickly in her chest. Her boss had busted them smoking pot! How would Anna ever recommend her for a job in New York now? Jacqui wondered what was going on outside, since Anna was still talking to Philippe. She pressed an ear to the door and found she could overhear parts of their conversation.

“Do you have anything?” she heard Anna ask.

Philippe murmured a protest.

“Don’t be silly. I’m not that clueless, you know,” Anna said.

Jacqui heard rustling and then Anna’s voice again. “God, have I been craving this. Kevin is so boring sometimes. We used to have a lot of fun together, but now it’s all just work, work, work.”

Philippe snorted.

Jacqui couldn’t believe it. Anna Perry! Smoking pot with one of the au pairs! Anna began to giggle at something Philippe said, and Jacqui suddenly felt abandoned, even though she was the one who’d left.

“How old do you think I am?” Anna asked Philippe.

Oh God, what an old line, Jacqui thought.

“Twenty-five,” Philippe said graciously.

“Close, but no,” Anna said. “I’m thirty-two. That’s not too old, is it?”

Jacqui muffled a laugh. Thirty-two seemed kind of ancient to her.

“Sometimes I can’t believe I’m thirty-two and the mother of seven children. Seven!” Anna shook her head. “I’m like Maria von Trapp or something.”

Jacqui coughed. Anna was actually only the mother of one kid, Cody, and was a stepmom to the rest of the brood. Jacqui couldn’t hear Philippe’s reply. Then Anna said something about her life passing her by, and Jacqui realized the poor thing was lonely. It must suck not to have any real friends to talk to and to have to resort to the company of an employee. Still, why did it have to be Philippe?

After what seemed like an eternity, Jacqui heard Anna stand up, and footsteps clacking away from the cottage. She opened the door tentatively. Now that Anna had gone, maybe she and Philippe could hit Seventh Circle. But when Jacqui stepped outside again, there was no sign of the French boy anywhere. There were only the remnants of a stubbed-out joint and some torn rolling papers on the curb.

Jacqui felt deflated. She could still go to the club, but somehow, the prospect wasn’t as fun or exciting as it had been when she had assumed Philippe would be with her. Besides, now that she thought about it—she *was* tired. Running after three kids all day could do that to a girl. She trudged up the stairs, thinking that her SAT book could keep her company. Somehow, knowing she was doing the right thing wasn’t as much consolation as she’d thought.

there's nothing like a maybach to warm a girl's heart

MARA WAS MYSTIFIED TO FIND A FULL CAMERA CREW IN the foyer, setting up overhead lights and screens. One of the guys wearing a headset and carrying a boom almost crashed into Anna's collection of miniature crystal Lladro animal sculptures displayed on a lower shelf. Sugar Perry, wearing a shrunken pink velour hoodie that exposed her midriff, and matching pink velour hot pants, was talking animatedly into the camera. The director, a young guy in faded cords, was kneeling, checking Sugar's image on the monitor, when he noticed Mara hovering by the doorway. "Who's your friend?" he asked, motioning the cameraman to take shots of Mara.

"Oh, that's nobody," Sugar replied in a very bored voice. "She just works here."

But the director ignored Sugar and stared at Mara. "Hi, I'm Randy Braverman from E! Entertainment Network," he said, shaking her hand. "Did Laurie tell you about our show?"

Then Mara remembered. Sugar was starring in a reality show about rich kids in the Hamptons this summer. The show's premise was to capture the pampered class's day-to-day life, which meant following Sugar everywhere. Laurie had warned them that by working for the Perrys, their participation was mandatory. They'd all had to sign release forms earlier in the week.

"What's Garrett's car doing here?" Sugar asked, looking out the bay window, where a sleek Mercedes Maybach had pulled up to the driveway.

"That's my ride," Mara explained, inching toward the door and hoping to get out of there as quickly as possible.

"*You're* going out with Garrett Reynolds?" Sugar asked, unable to keep the shock from her voice.

"Who's going out with Garrett Reynolds?" Poppy Perry demanded, walking down the stairs. Poppy was a little miffed she hadn't been chosen for the show. Earlier that year their publicist had released a memo to the press requesting that the Perry twins not be called "the Perry twins" in public anymore, but instead be known as "Sugar Perry" and "Poppy Perry" from now on—since they insisted they were two different girls with two different careers. But it had bit Poppy in the ass—apparently, she wasn't as famous as her taller, sexier, more toxic twin.

"I am," Mara said quietly. The Perry twins said Garrett's name in the same way that someone else would say "Prince William" or "Leonardo di Caprio," like he was some kind of god.

Poppy's eyes were like saucers. "No way."

"Funny, he didn't mention anything about it last night," Sugar said, looking at Mara as if Mara had done something wrong.

"What's it like, dating one of the richest guys in the Hamptons?" Randy Braverman asked, the boom suddenly over Mara's head and the cameras directed on her.

"We're not dating. I mean, it's our first—I mean, I don't know. He's really nice," Mara stammered. "Sorry. I really need to go," she said, scissoring through the crowd to the front door.

Garrett emerged from the backseat of the car, carrying one long-stemmed white rose for Mara. He had slicked his dark hair back from his forehead, and he looked handsome in a buttercream-colored linen suit.

"Your chariot, milady," Garrett said. "What's going on over here?" he asked, waving to the crowd, who were huddled in the foyer, watching them. The camera was still focused on the two of them, and Sugar was looking dangerously impatient.

Mara accepted the rose and slid inside. "Sugar's taping something for E! You know, the socialite show."

"Ah yes." Garrett grinned. "*Rich and Stupid in the Hamptons.*"

Mara blinked. She'd thought Sugar and Poppy were Garrett's friends—that was the impression she'd gotten from the twins just now—but here he was making fun of them. Maybe he was smarter than he let on.

"Champagne?" he asked, taking a bottle from a cleverly concealed refrigeration unit in the armrest. The Maybach was a cocoon of luxury, with two plasma television screens, wireless headsets, and bucket seats outfitted with full-body massagers. "They recline all the way down," Garrett smiled naughtily. "But maybe we'll save that for later."

Mara pretended not to hear. She was beginning to worry she'd made a mistake in saying yes to the date, when all she'd wanted to do was find a way to make Ryan see that they were meant to be together. She didn't want to lead Garrett on, especially since he was going to all this trouble.

"You are absolutely gorgeous," Garrett said, reaching over to squeeze her hand. He looked at her admiringly, complimenting her on her dress, her hair, her smile, her perfume, her legs, her shoes. It was nice to feel appreciated, especially since in Sturbridge, she always felt average, and yesterday, in front of Allison and Ryan, she'd felt practically invisible.

The restaurant was a hushed, formal establishment with tuxedoed waiters and silver candelabras. Mara felt clumsy and out of place, even though she didn't look it. As the haughty maitre d' led them to their table, Garrett whispered, "I bet he's wearing women's underwear."

Mara stifled a guffaw and stopped feeling intimidated, even if they were by far the youngest people there.

At dinner, Garrett ordered for her, which would have annoyed her if the dishes he'd chosen hadn't been perfectly delicious. Mara never had "torchons of foie gras" or "gently poached langoustines smothered in caviar" before. The most exotic restaurant in Sturbridge was the Baja Fresh. This was by far the best and most interesting meal she'd ever had. Between the fish course and the meat course, the waiter brought out a martini glass filled with cold cucumber sorbet. "A palate cleanser," Garrett explained. Mara gulped it down, relishing the juicy tartness.

She had to admit she was having fun. For sure, Garrett was a tiny bit self-centered—Mara got a little tired of hearing about his opinion on everything from the electoral process, to stem-cell research, to the new Wes Anderson film, to his idea for a great movie (a remake of *Casablanca* in space!)—but since he was so passionate about it, she didn't hold it against him. Aside from his suggestive asides, he was a riot. He had a childish enthusiasm and irreverence that was catching, and against her better instincts, Mara found herself warming to him.

"I'm never eating again," she declared, after putting away a luscious dessert and patting her full stomach. "That was amazing."

Garrett poured the last of the Sauternes into her dessert wine glass. "Cheers," he said. They polished off the bottle of wine—he'd palmed a hundred-dollar bill so the sommelier wouldn't check IDs, and Mara was definitely feeling tipsy. She staggered out of her chair, and Garrett offered her his arm. He steered her gently back to the sedan.

"Where to?" the chauffeur asked, tipping his cap.

Mara shrugged, smiling impishly at Garrett. He really was hot. She could understand why Poppy and Sugar were jealous. Sugar's boyfriend Charlie was attractive, but Eliza said it was thanks to major plastic surgery, and Poppy had recently been dumped by her on-again, off-again boyfriend Leo, who was slightly cross-eyed.

"Seventh Circle?" Garrett suggested.

Mara nodded. Dinner had been so pleasant. It seemed rude to cut the evening short, especially since Garrett was being conscientious.

"My friend works there," she said, smiling as the Maybach accelerated into the night.

celebrities are like two-year-olds: demanding and prone to tantrums

ELIZA HAD FOLLOWED KARTIK AND ALAN'S INSTRUCTIONS to the letter and was dressed in a silver-sequined Sass & Bide minidress that brushed the tops of her thighs—Jessica Simpson owned the only other one that had ever been made—and a pair of four-inch metallic Pierre Hardy heels.

The club glittered under the strobe lights, and the double-height glass liquor cabinet that ran the length of the club along the back wall was an architectural marvel. The bartenders were hooked to mountain-climbing lines, and when a customer ordered a certain drink, they scaled the shelves like trapeze artists and deftly retrieved the requested bottle. It was an entertaining diversion and a cool gimmick. Already, customers were angling for the most-out-of-reach liquor choices, just to look up the sexy bartenders' skirts. Eliza still couldn't believe the transformation from construction site to hot club that had happened practically overnight. She had to hand it to those guys—they knew what they were doing.

But she hadn't figured that working at a nightclub would be quite so demanding. She'd barely had time to hang out with Mara or even ask her what she was doing with Garrett Reynolds, since it had been total chaos at the velvet rope when they'd arrived. Eliza had put them at the best table in the house; Mara was her best friend, and Garrett was a big deal because of his name alone, so it made sense. She only wished that, like them, she could sit down. Between making sure the celebrities were entertained and indulged, keeping the no-names at bay, feeding the press juicy tidbits, and ducking the airborne bartenders scaling the liquor cabinet, Eliza was exhausted. Her nerves were frazzled, and if one more bodyguard demanded that another photographer be tossed out of the club, she would scream.

Already, she was agitated because Ondine Sylvester, a sitcom star who had once dated pop singer Chauncey Raven's husband, was reportedly on her way. This was bad news, because Chauncey and her hubby, Daryl Wolf, a failed backup singer, were front and center in the VIP room. Chauncey's handler demanded that they not let Ondine inside, lest her client become upset. Ondine had two children by Daryl and had been pregnant with a third when Chauncey had come on the scene. Eliza patiently explained to Chauncey's pompous publicist that they couldn't deny Ondine entrance but that she could promise to seat Ondine on the opposite side of the room. It was important to keep Chauncey happy, since she was the bigger celebrity at the club, but Eliza also understood that they couldn't afford to alienate Ondine either, since they needed as many famous people in the house as possible.

"Eliza—someone at the front for you—says he knows you," Eliza's headset crackled.

“Got it. On my way,” she replied, straightening her headset. God, it was probably some old friend from high school trying to get inside, Eliza thought. She’d already let Taylor and Lindsay in, just to show that there were no hard feelings from last summer. Plus, how much fun was it to be the one who held their evening in her hands?

She walked to the front door and saw Jeremy—all six-four of him, looking a bit ruffled in a gray pinstriped suit and a loosened necktie. She’d forgotten how gorgeous he was. His chestnut hair was combed back high from his forehead and curled underneath his ears. He’d told her he would stop by the club that night, but a part of her hadn’t believed that he would actually show up. He looked so handsome and businesslike in his suit, and the sight of his red tie askew made her love him even more.

“I told them you asked me to meet you here, but they wouldn’t let me in.” He grinned.

“It’s good, Rudolph,” Eliza said to the burly bouncer, smiling at Jeremy.

“Lotsa people say they know Eliza tonight,” Rudolph said menacingly to Jeremy, even as he unhooked the velvet rope.

“Rudolph—I’m taking a five-minute break. If Ondine arrives, beep me on the headset.”

Eliza led Jeremy by the hand to the back garden, where patrons who’d had enough of the pounding techno beat and relentless posing went for a smoke.

“What’s with the suit?” she asked playfully. She didn’t want to appear overly excited to see him, even though she was bursting with happiness.

“I’m interning at Morgan Stanley. I-banking,” he said.

“Wow. That’s awesome!” she said, impressed. Only last summer, Eliza had hated twentysomething investment banker types who rented share-houses in the Hamptons and thought they were entitled to everything. But looking at Jeremy in his suit, I-banking suddenly seemed a lot sexier.

“Yeah, it is. They work me like a dog, though. I’m there until three, four A.M. every night. I didn’t think I could get away this weekend, but thankfully we closed on the RFP,” he said, talking in financial jargon.

Eliza smiled admiringly at him. This was so not the Jeremy from last summer, who had worked as a gardener on the Perry estate. Last year all Jeremy had cared about were dwarf Japanese elm trees and American Beauty roses.

“Where are you staying?” she asked.

“My parents’ place, but I’m in the city all week, staying at an apartment the firm rents for us.”

“So,” Eliza said, taking Jeremy’s hand.

“So,” replied Jeremy, rubbing his thumb over her Sheer-Bliss-manicured nails.

They stared at each other, feeling suddenly shy to be so near one other again. Eliza hadn’t realized she was inching toward him, until she was standing so close that she could feel his

breath on her cheek and they were hugging. She had never experienced anything like this before. She and Jeremy belonged together. Even though the year apart had been hard—she'd tried not to ask if he was dating anyone in the many e-mails she sent him, and he'd never mentioned any other girls in the e-mails he sent her—it was just like the first time they'd met, when they couldn't keep their hands off each other.

Before Eliza knew it, he was kissing her, and it was just as sweet as she remembered. "It's been too long," he murmured into her hair. "I thought about you all the time."

"Me too," she said, liking how her head fit snugly under his chin. "My parents are in Westhampton this summer. We got a house," she said, a little proudly. "Do you maybe want to have dinner with us next week?" Eliza wouldn't have invited Jeremy to meet her parents in the past, fearing they would suss out his working-class background immediately and their disapproval would come between her and Jeremy. But looking at him in his suit and hearing him talk about his internship, she couldn't imagine how her parents wouldn't approve of him.

"If I can get out of work. We have a big presentation next week. But I'll try."

Her headset buzzed. "Eliza! Ondine just walked into the VIP room! There are no tables! And she's about to spot Chauncey and Daryl!"

"I've got to go," she said reluctantly pulling away from his embrace.

"Right. I'm beat anyway. It's been a long week."

"I'll call you," she said, fading back inside the club.

"Not if I call you first." He smiled.

Eliza ordered a table brought out from the back kitchen and set up in the far corner of the VIP room for Ondine, so that the happy newlyweds could drink their free cocktails in peace.

jacqui catches a wave, but the boy slips through her fingers

“LEAVE HER,” PHILIPPE ADVISED, AS JACQUI TRIED UNSUCCESSFULLY to rouse Mara from the bed. They had to be in Montauk for the kids’ first surfing lesson by nine, and they wouldn’t be able to make it if they waited for Little Miss Hangover to wake up.

Jacqui gave Mara one last shake and was rewarded with a bleary groan. “Mffpphhh,” Mara said, turning to her side and burying her head under the pillows.

Mara had stumbled in near dawn, laughing hysterically when she’d climbed into the nearest bed and landed on Philippe. Jacqui and Philippe had helped her into the bottom bunk, Jacqui taking care to cover her friend with a blanket before unzipping her out of her dress. They had tucked her in like one of the kids, and the next morning they looked down at her like bemused parents.

“She’s a partier, huh?” Philippe asked a few minutes later, as he and Jacqui collected the kids and all their aquatic equipment, piling the latter into the back of the Range Rover.

“Not usually,” Jacqui said, defending her friend as she strapped Cody into his car seat and grabbed Zoë’s doll out of William’s hands and returned it to the whimpering little girl.

Jacqui was a little annoyed with Philippe. She was bummed to have missed Eliza’s opening night at the club. She still had no idea where he’d spent the rest of the evening last night. It wasn’t any of her business, but she was a little irritated that he’d paid more attention to Anna than he had to her. Rules were rules, and she didn’t plan on breaking hers, but Jacqui wasn’t accustomed to playing second banana to anyone.

Philippe backed the SUV out of the driveway, and they were to the private road when Dr. Abraham, in a red bathrobe and flippers, came running out of the house, flagging them down. The kids grumbled as the doctor hauled himself into the car.

“Thank you,” the doctor nodded, huffing and puffing and buckling his seat belt.

“Ah, the good doctor,” Philippe said cheerfully. “You need to monitor the children’s physical activities, yes?” he asked, discreetly motioning toward a large tote bag filled with sunscreen and books. “The beach behavior?”

“Indeed, indeed,” Dr. Abraham replied.

* * *

When they arrived in Montauk, the two surfing instructors, Bree, a squat, toothy girl with blond dreadlocks, and Roy, a laid-back Hawaiian guy who kept giving them hang-ten hand signals, showed them where to change. Anna had bought all the kids matching black full-body wet suits and the most high-tech equipment, including battery-powered homing devices on their ankle chains that attached to their fiberglass surfboards. Bree handed Jacqui and Philippe wet suits as well, explaining that the cute little string bikini Jacqui was wearing would get totally torn off her body by the waves, eliciting looks of excitement and then disappointment from all the males present.

Once everyone had changed, they paddled out on their boards in the ocean. The smaller waves swelled close to shore, so they didn't have to go too far. Bree and Roy took the two youngest between them, advising William to follow.

"Ouch!" William said, as a wave crested and he smacked himself on the face with his board.

"Hold it out like this," Philippe said, holding his borrowed board at arm's length and grasping the rails.

A large wave lifted all of them up a few feet, drawing frightened screams from Cody, who was wearing water wings with his wet suit.

"Boards at the sides, facing the beach!" Roy directed, cupping his hands over his mouth. "Keep an eye on the waves and choose one that looks like it can hold you, like this," he said. "Then pull yourself up on the board. Paddle out, let the wave take you."

"Easier said than done," Jacqui noted, pulling herself up on the board only to fall back on the other side. "*Merda!*"

"Look at me! Look at me!" Zoë said, slipping out of Bree's reach and paddling furiously as a wave brought her to shore.

"Nice one, *mahalo!*" Roy said, giving another hang-ten signal.

"Cowabunga!" William yelled, diving straight into the sand as a wave tossed him backward. "I'm okay! I'm okay!" he said, resurfacing and spitting out ocean water.

Philippe ducked into a wave, paddling furiously, then emerged, standing straight up on his board, cruising to the sand. He ran back to the water, laughing. "I haven't done that in years." His whole face was lit up, and his eyes were gleaming.

"Wow! *Surpreendente!*" Jacqui said. "I didn't know you could surf."

"Only a little. It's not that hard," he said, coaching her. "There, get that one. . . . Pull up, pull up, *bien!* Ah, fantastic! Go, go, go!" he cheered, as Jacqui coasted gracefully down to the beach.

* * *

They watched the kids bob up and down for a while, satisfied that Roy and Bree were taking good care of their charges, then retreated back to shore, where Dr. Abraham was snoozing underneath his umbrella.

“Looks like they’re paying him to take a vacation,” Jacqui noted dryly.

Philippe nodded. “Good thing we’re working so hard,” he teased as he spread out their towels. “The only thing I hate is when it sloshes around,” he said, jumping up and down.

Jacqui nodded and unzipped her suit, peeling it from her body. She could feel Philippe staring at her, even though she wasn’t looking at him.

“You are very beautiful,” he stated, in the same way that someone would say, “The sun is hot” or “The earth is round,” like it was simply a fact of life and nothing to get all hot and bothered about.

“Thank you,” she said, meeting his gaze with her level one.

“You must get told that a lot, I’m sure. It must get extremely . . . *ennuyeux* . . . uh, boring,” Philippe said.

“It is, actually,” Jacqui said seriously.

“Then maybe I should just say you are very ugly,” he teased.

Jacqui threw a snorkel at him. He was cute, but he was also quick and she liked that. She hugged her legs to her chest and reluctantly cracked open her SAT book. Her first class was tomorrow night, and as much as she just wanted to spend the day flirting with Philippe, she couldn’t afford to be distracted.

Philippe’s cell rang again, which it seemed to do constantly. Jacqui wondered how someone who’d never been to the Hamptons could have made so many friends so quickly.

“’Allo?” he asked, snapping open his phone. He spoke in rapid French, then excused himself, hoisting his backpack on his shoulder.

“Where are you going?” Jacqui called.

Philippe held up his finger to say, “Just a minute,” but he kept walking away toward the boardwalk. Jacqui noticed several girls watching him from behind their oversized Gucci and Chanel frames, as well as a few guys checking him out from under their striped umbrellas. Philippe was giving everyone, male and female, the same flirtatious smile. Jacqui sighed and dropped her head to look at her book. She would never understand the French.

that's why it's called page six six six

LATER THAT SAME MORNING, MARA WOKE UP TO FIND herself alone in the au pairs' room. It was almost eleven-thirty, and Philippe and Jacqui were nowhere to be found. Mara was surprised she'd slept so late and that neither of them had woken her up. Last night was a hazy blur. She remembered dancing wildly when the old rock song "Livin' on a Prayer" came on, crashing into Eliza, and trading shopping stories with Chauncey Raven, the beleaguered pop star who'd recently had her second quickie marriage in Vegas, who was sitting at the next table. She'd also spent a good part of the evening perched on Garrett's lap, since a bunch of his friends had shown up and they'd had to squeeze into the banquette, but she'd fended off his good-night kiss when he'd dropped her off at four in the morning.

Mara shuffled into the main house, which was reverberating with the sound of the Reynolds Castle's jackhammers. She shook her head—all that pounding was not what she needed right now—and walked into the kitchen, where antique French cabinetry covered every surface, even the Sub-Zero fridge. She realized that maybe the Reynolds Castle was just like every house in the Hamptons, just bigger and more obvious. The kitchen was empty save for Madison, who was weighing a boiled chicken breast on a kitchen scale. Mara watched as the girl carefully cut it in half, weighed it again, and then put it on a plate with several raw baby carrots.

"What are you doing?"

Madison glared. "Nothing."

Mara pulled up a stool next to her and began to assemble breakfast, slicing a banana and pouring two-percent milk over a bowl of cereal. "You know, Madison, when I was younger, I was kind of chubby. But when I turned fourteen, my metabolism kicked in when I was playing a lot of soccer, and I lost a lot of weight."

"I hate soccer," Madison sulked, slamming the door behind her.

Mara sighed. She picked up a copy of the *New York Post*, which had been opened to the Page Six column. *HAS THE REYNOLDS HEIR FOUND LOVE?* screamed the headline, above a picture of Mara perched on Garrett's lap from the night before.

She was leaning on Garrett's arm, laughing at what he was saying. Garrett was smirking into the camera, holding a fizzing bottle of champagne in one hand, with the other clasped firmly around Mara's waist. Aside from a few snide mentions about the hundred-thousand-square-foot "Frankenstein Castle" the Reynoldses were building in East Hampton, the accompanying article was nearly identical to one about her and Ryan from the summer before, detailing how the sexy young couple had been caught canoodling at the hottest club of

the season. *Canoodling?* She'd only been sitting on his lap! Okay, so maybe he'd nuzzled her neck a little. . . .

A pit formed in her stomach. She wondered if Ryan had been the one to leave the paper on the table. She picked up and sniffed a half-empty cup sitting next to the paper. Green tea. Ryan was only one in the Perry household who drank green tea.

Just then, Sugar walked in, panther-skinny and sweaty from a morning yoga session. The same two-man camera crew from last night followed her.

"Oh, hi," Sugar said. "Is that Page Six?" She walked over to read over Mara's shoulder. Sugar looked up from the picture and regarded Mara thoughtfully. "You guys should hang out with me and Charlie some time."

One of the Perry twins being nice to her? Mara couldn't believe it. Last summer Sugar hadn't even been able to remember her name. She'd called her Marta or Maria or Mary.

"We're having a party on his yacht next weekend. Close friends only. Bring Gar. It'll rock."

"Yeah, maybe," Mara mumbled as Sugar shrugged and smiled into the cameras, tossing her hair back and puffing out her chest.

"C'mon, guys," Sugar told the crew. "Meet me in the outdoor shower."

Mara stared at Page Six, wondering if there was any way Ryan would want to talk to her after seeing that picture. That was the thing about pictures—they were worth a thousand words, but sometimes they weren't the right ones.

nothing spells love like a car full of goody bags

AT END OF THE FOLLOWING WEEK, MARA MADE HER way to the screening room for the first weekly progress meeting. Jacqui and Philippe were supposed to join her as soon as they returned from taking the boys to some kind of boot camp for the day. The two of them were obviously getting friendly and liked to do chores together if they could.

Mara planned to complain about Dr. Abraham at the meeting. He'd lectured her when she'd given Cody a hug after he'd stubbed his toe, telling her direly, "Positive reinforcement after a painful experience is unlikely to build character," and then asked her if she knew how he could get a VIP table at Seventh Circle a few minutes later. There was something off about the guy.

After sitting in the dark for fifteen minutes, it became clear to Mara that neither Anna nor Kevin would materialize. No surprise there. The meetings were something Anna had insisted upon last summer as well, even though neither she nor Kevin ever attended. Mara shrugged and walked out of the room. Madison and Zoë were waiting for her to take them to yoga.

They walked out the front door to see a large delivery truck parked in the Perrys' driveway. Several uniformed workers were unloading racks of clothing as well as dozens of black shopping bags with pink tissue paper sticking out of the top. An overly tanned, clothes-hanger-skinny woman in a white tank top that read YOUR BOYFRIEND WANTS ME and low-riding blue jeans was directing the action.

"What's going on?" Mara asked Laurie, who was surveying the spectacle with a caustic eye.

"I'm not sure, but I think it's for you," Laurie said.

"Hi! Mara Waters? Mitzi Goober!" the woman in the white tank top said, saying her last name with a Frenchified lilt, so it sounded like "*Giubaire*" rather than the name of a popular candy. She thrust a muscular and bony arm in Mara's direction. "Wow! I would never have recognized you. You are *so* much prettier than your pictures!"

"Thanks, I think . . ." Mara said, her forehead descending.

She'd thought things would die down after the photo of her and Garrett was published in the *Post*, but the following week it had popped up in *Hamptons*, *Hamptons Life*, *Hamptons Living*, *Hamptons Country*, and *Hamptons Luxury* magazines. She never had a chance to explain the photo to Ryan, since whenever they ran into each other—just that morning they'd bumped into each other in the pool—he basically ignored her. It was heartbreaking how aloof

he was, but it did help that Garrett was being so persistent about a second date. He'd already sent her so many flowers, the au pairs' room looked like a funeral parlor.

A shot of Mara alone, in the lavender Zac Posen dress, had ultimately ended up on the party page of *Vogue*, under the heading *Lilac Ladies*, between a photo of Jennifer Connelly in a bow-tied lavender Chloé dress and one of Aerin Lauder in a purple Valentino shift. Mara had been back in the Hamptons for two weeks, but already she was eliciting stares of barely concealed jealousy, or just plain curiosity, everywhere she went. She felt like a freak and a fraud: There she was, in the pages of a glossy magazine posing in Jacqui's designer dress, while in reality, she was schlepping the kids to the dentist, wiping Cody's bottom, and trying to coerce Madison into eating something more than clear chicken broth and nonfat string cheese.

* * *

"Anyway, dollink, as I was just explaining to your assistant here . . ." Mitzi was saying.

Doll rink? Mara was confused. *Doll tint?* What the hell was Mitzi saying? *Dog fink?* It was hard to follow her rat-a-tat delivery.

"I'm Anna Perry's assistant," Laurie cut in.

"Sure. Whatever," Mitzi said as she motioned the delivery men to grab the rest of the bags from the truck.

"Mara is an au pair," Laurie said indignantly.

"An au pair! How cute! Groovy!" Mitzi said. "Listen, Mara, I've got a hot new designer who wants to dress you—several, in fact—and these are all gifts for you to wear around town."

"For me?" Mara said, watching the guys set down bag after bag on the grass next to the driveway.

"Sure, sure, sure! Just make sure to mention their names when people ask you what you're wearing. Shoshanna sent her whole summer collection. She loved the photos of you in her dress last year, and she thinks you might like a few pieces. Okay to just leave them here?"

"This is really nice, Mitzi, but uh, I don't know."

"Wait! Wait! Best part. Almost forgot." Mitzi grabbed a black velvet case from her oversized Birkin bag. "A gift. Open."

Mara opened the case. Inside was a strand of luminescent pearls nestled on a velvet pillow.

"Mikimotos. They're only the cultured ones, sorry. But if you could remember to mention them if you can . . ." Mitzi smiled.

"I don't know if I can accept these," Mara said nervously.

"What are you talking about? Please! You deserve it! You're so fabulous! God, why can't I get my hair to do that?" Mitzi said, sticking out her tongue and pulling at her hair. Mara had

never met anyone as full of energy and enthusiasm as Mitzi Goober. She was like your new best friend, cheerleader, and guru all in one. She was giving Mara a headache.

As the messengers began to unload a second rolling rack, Mara tried to get them to put it back on the truck, with Madison and Zoë, wide-eyed at all the loot, at her heels. “Mitzi! Wait! Really, I can’t!”

“Nonsense! Do you know how hard it is to find someone who fits into a sample size? Please. It would be such a great favor to my designers. They are your biggest fans.”

Fans? She was an au pair who’d posed for a few pictures, and now she had a following?

Mitzi rattled a key chain in front of Mara’s nose. “What are you driving? That Range Rover over there? It’s so bulky, don’t you think?”

“It’s the Perrys’, actually.”

“I’d really love it if you could test-drive this new BMW convertible,” Mitzi said, thrusting the keys into Mara’s hands and motioning to a shiny black car on the driveway.

“A car?” Mara said, her mouth hanging open.

“For the whole summer. Every day we’ll get someone to fill the gas tank and put some treats in there for you. Fun-fun-fun! So you won’t have to worry.”

Mara stared at the BMW keys. This was crazy. And exciting. She could actually *keep* all this stuff?

Zoë and Madison had begun rifling through the racks. “Oooh, look at this!” Madison said, holding up a black jersey Gucci halter top. “Pretty!” Zoë said as she wrapped herself in a lacy shawl.

“Wait! Mitzi!” Mara said, running to catch up with the publicist, who had hopped into a vintage Citroën and was pulling out of the driveway. “I just—I don’t know if this is right,” Mara said, leaning in the window.

Mitzi put a hand to Mara’s mouth, smushing her lipstick. “Dollink!”

Doe wink? Door blink? Mara wondered.

“Don’t be boring! Just remember, mention my clients when you talk to the press. Deal? Have a great summer! And I hope you come to my party at Seventh Circle next week! Toodles!”

Mitzi pulled out of the driveway and the Toyota Prius pulled in.

“Who was that?” Jacqui asked, getting out of the car with Philippe and the boys.

Mara looked around at what Mitzi had left her—two rolling racks full of designer clothes, several bags of shoes and accessories, a velvet case of pearls, and a shiny black BMW convertible.

“Um, I’m not really sure,” Mara said, amazed at her good fortune. “My fairy godmother?”

guess who's coming to dinner?

TWO WEEKS AFTER ELIZA AND JEREMY WERE REUNITED at Seventh Circle, Eliza opened the door to find him standing on her doorstep with a bouquet of flowers. They had seen each other only once since then—Jeremy's brutal work schedule kept him in the city more often than not, and they'd already had to reschedule dinner twice. Her parents were totally harassing her to let them meet her "young man." They were old-fashioned that way, and Eliza hoped that the dinner would go well, or at least go quickly, so she and Jeremy could get out of there and finally be alone.

"For your mom," Jeremy said, handing her the white Astor lilies. Their clean fragrance filled the room.

"That's so sweet. Come on in," Eliza said. She'd worn her hair back in a demure chignon and had tied a black satin ribbon with an antique locket around her neck. She knew Jeremy liked it when she looked pretty and girlish, and so she'd chosen her clothes carefully—a white Chloé eyelet cotton dress and pink Delman ballet flats. She was pleased that he looked so professional in his tan linen suit and sky blue dress shirt. He'd loosened his conservatively striped tie just a bit, and he looked the perfect picture of a young, successful banker.

"Dad, this is Jeremy. Jeremy, this is my dad, Ryder Thompson," Eliza said, leading Jeremy into the living room. Her father, a tall, large man with a gleaming crown of silver hair, stood up to shake Jeremy's hand.

Ryder had worked on Wall Street, too, before he'd been caught dipping a little too often into the bank's coffers. Eliza still couldn't believe it had been such a big deal: It was his company, wasn't it? Didn't that count for something? Sure, she remembered how they used the company jet for weekend trips to Paris, but so what? The papers had said that even Eliza's two-hundred-thousand-dollar Sweet Sixteen party at the Rainbow Room was paid for by the company's dime, but plenty of her dad's associates were there, so it *was* sort of like a business function. In any case, that hadn't stopped the subsequent investigation, lawsuit, and humiliation. The Thompson family had weathered it as best they could, keeping their chins up and finally hightailing it to Buffalo when Manhattan became unbearable and unaffordable.

Her parents had made it clear that it was very important that Eliza date a suitable boy, someone appropriate to her background and breeding, despite everything that had happened in the last couple of years. Eliza hoped Jeremy would pass her parents' litmus test. They could be a little strict when they chose to be, and for the first time Eliza missed the freedom she'd experienced last summer, when she'd lived on her own and hadn't had to answer to anyone except the Perrys, who were away or indifferent most of the time.

“Gin?” Ryder asked Jeremy, holding up a silver cocktail shaker.

“Whatever Eliza is drinking is fine, thanks, Mr. Thompson,” Jeremy replied.

Eliza’s dad frowned as he poured Jeremy a glass of white wine but made no comment. The four of them sank into the linen couch.

“I must apologize—this is not to our standard,” Eliza’s mother, Billie, said, her hands nervously fluttering about her throat as she looked at the collection of porcelain dolls in a china cabinet with distaste. “But Eliza did so want to be back in the Hamptons this year, and we thought . . .”

“It’s very nice,” Jeremy assured her. “I like these old houses. They have a feeling of security to them, don’t you think?”

Eliza’s mother smiled warmly at him. “I like older architecture as well.”

“Jeremy grew up in the Hamptons,” Eliza offered, unwittingly trying to make it sound like Jeremy was more like them. Not that she really cared what her parents thought—she didn’t think like they did anymore, not really, anyway. If she did, she would have been after Garrett Reynolds, not Jeremy Stone. But it would just be so much easier if they liked him.

“Oh, where?” Billie asked, brightening.

“Southampton,” Jeremy said.

There was a murmur of approval from the Thompsons. “Do you know the Rosses? Courtney started that lovely school. We almost moved out here too, so that Eliza could go there.”

“I know Mrs. Ross,” Jeremy allowed. He didn’t add that he was their gardener, to Eliza’s relief.

“Where in Southampton?” Eliza’s father inquired.

Jeremy told him.

“Ah, is that in the township?” Ryder asked, referring to the considerably more modest section of single-family homes in Southampton called the township.

Jeremy nodded.

“How quaint,” Billie nodded with a strained smile.

“What does your father do?” Ryder inquired.

“Jeremy’s dad runs his own business.” Eliza interjected. She could see where this was going.

“What kind of enterprise?” her dad asked.

“He owns a fish and bait shop on Route 27,” Jeremy replied, before Eliza could fudge some other euphemism like, “He’s in the shipping industry.”

“Is it the one with the big neon salmon on the door?” Billie asked.

“That’s it!” Jeremy slapped his thigh.

“I think Colombia got some lovely oysters from there the other day, darling,” Billie said, nodding to her husband. “They were delicious. So fresh.”

Jeremy beamed, but Eliza felt the burden of impending disaster. This was not going well. Eliza knew her parents were snobs’ snobs. They could figure out somebody’s place in the social hierarchy in a heartbeat, and Eliza could see they were writing Jeremy off.

“Where do you go to college, dear?” Billie asked, continuing the interrogation as they sat down for dinner.

“I go to State,” Jeremy said, wiping his mouth with a linen napkin. “SUNY.”

Ryder Thompson turned to his wife. “Isn’t that Woody Allen’s wife?” he joked.

Eliza stepped in. This was too painful. “He means State University of New York, Dad. In Nassau. It’s not far from here.”

“New York has a wonderful state university system,” Billie said graciously.

Eliza squirmed in her seat. Jeremy was the first person in his family ever to go to college, and he was really proud of that. *Don’t hate me*, her eyes pleaded, wanting him to look up so he could see how much she was on his side, but Jeremy kept his head down for the rest of the evening.

After coffee, the Thompsons took their leave, wishing Jeremy a courteous good night and reminding Eliza about her curfew.

“So do you want to go for a ride somewhere? Maybe take a walk on the beach?” Eliza asked, standing up from the table. She wanted to apologize for her parents, but she was still holding on to the hope that Jeremy hadn’t noticed they were total snobs.

“Nah,” Jeremy shook his head. “I have an early meeting tomorrow. I should get back.”

Eliza’s face fell. They weren’t even going to hang out? It was her one night off from the club and she’d been looking forward to seeing him all week.

Jeremy slung his coat jacket over his shoulder and walked toward the door. Eliza opened it for him and followed him to the porch.

“What about dinner next week at Lunch—just the two of us?” Eliza asked. She hated how desperate she sounded.

“Maybe.” He sighed. “Things are really busy at the office.”

“Don’t go,” she said, her lips trembling. She lifted up her chin to be kissed, willing him to understand.

Jeremy sighed and looked like he was about to walk away, but he bent his head down instead. They stood under the porch light kissing for what seemed to Eliza to be a sweet eternity.

“I love you, you know,” she said, muffled into his shirt.

“I know,” he said, reluctantly pulling away. “But I’ve got to get back into work early tomorrow, and I can’t miss the last train.” He climbed into his rusty pickup truck, the one remnant of his former occupation.

Eliza watched him drive away and wondered when she would see him again. She hadn’t failed to notice that when she’d said, “I love you,” he hadn’t said it back.

kryptonite is to superman as boys are to jacqui

TO JACQUI'S CHAGRIN, THE SAT PREP CLASS SHE'D SIGNED up for was filled with overachieving rich kids who were striving for nothing less than a perfect showing—which made her scores on the first diagnostic test even more depressing. Jacqui had just stuffed her SAT books in the backseat of the Prius that evening when she saw Philippe ride up on a Vespa. He took off his helmet and shook out his hair. “*Arrête!*” he said when he saw Jacqui.

She leaned against the door of the car and smiled. “What’s up?”

He shrugged, smiling his devastating grin. “*Pas beaucoup*. Where are you going?”

“Class,” she explained. “It’s Wednesday, remember?”

Jacqui had told him about the class the other night, when he’d stumbled in around midnight and found her studying her SAT book. She told him about her SAT prep course, and he’d affectionately teased her about what a distraction she must be to all the dorks in the class. Philippe’s plan for his life was to win the Rolex tennis invitational, turn pro, follow the circuit, and generally have a great time bouncing from one sunny resort town to another. His entire ambition in life was to become a tennis bum.

“Come play pool with me instead,” Philippe invited. “You can skip one class, no? He smiled roguishly, looking her up and down in an inviting manner.

Jacqui bit her lip. Playing pool with Philippe sounded like so much more fun than sitting in a damp basement solving word problems. She’d hardly had a bit of excitement in weeks. To think that she, Jacqui, was actually the one who was shouldering most of the work with the kids. She was proud of that, since she did have a knack for it, but she missed having fun.

Philippe took her hand, and they tiptoed to the main house. They made their way to the screening room, where a billiard table sat in the corner. One of the most amazing things about the Perrys’ house was that there was hardly ever anyone home to enjoy its wealth of amusements. The twins were always out at some party, Ryan kept to his room when he was home, and the many toys—the sixteen-foot projection screen, the ATVs parked next to the beachfront, the vintage PacMan and pinball machines—mostly went unused. Philippe racked the balls and Jacqui broke, sinking a solid yellow ball in a corner pocket.

“So where’ve you been anyway?” she asked, rubbing chalk on her pool cue. Philippe had been MIA for a few days. She leaned over the table to assess her next shot. She flubbed an easy one, sending a ball to the opposite corner instead of the near pocket.

“I had to go visit the French consulate and Anna needed me to help with something, so we spent a couple of days in New York,” he said, walking around the table and studying the angles for his shot.

“Mmmm . . . Just the two of you?”

Philippe shrugged and sank a striped ball. “*Oui*. Have you been to their townhouse in the city? It’s beautiful,” he said.

Jacqui felt ridiculous for feeling a little jealous, but she did. She’d been so sure Philippe was interested in her—but even though they slept next to each other almost every night, he never even tried to make a move. Even though she’d promised herself not to be distracted by boys this summer, she hadn’t counted on not being a distraction herself.

“I love New York,” Jacqui said dreamily. She’d never actually even been to the city, but the place loomed large in her imagination. The busy streets, the people, the little cafes, the nightclubs, the shopping. Jacqui loved Brazil, but she was looking forward to making her future in New York. “It’s the best city in the world.”

Philippe grunted, leaning down for a shot.

“I want to stay in New York next year,” she said wistfully.

He looked up from the pool table. “*Pourquoi?*”

She told him excitedly about her plans for Stuyvesant and hopefully NYU and how she hoped Anna would help get her a nanny position if she did a good job this summer.

They played, matching each other ball for ball, until only the black eight-ball was left. It was in a precarious position, and Jacqui hunkered down, twisting her body so she could aim with the cue.

“You have to keep one leg on the floor,” Philippe reminded her, as Jacqui’s mule heels dangled from the table.

“I’m trying!” she laughed.

“Like this,” Philippe said, coming up behind her and gently guiding her arms. She let him press on the stick and release it. The ball shot into the corner pocket.

“So who won?” Jacqui asked, turning her head toward him. Philippe still had his arms around her.

“Call it even,” he said, leaning down to smell her hair. He pressed against her back, and Jacqui felt the heat from his body. It was too much to resist. She melted into him, shuddering as he planted soft kisses down her neck. She closed her eyes and turned toward him. As if he’d read her mind, he gently lowered her to the table, bumping her head on the overhead light.

“Oops!” she laughed, pulling him down on top of her. She felt his hands twine through her hair as he kissed her neck and shoulders. She snaked her hands up behind his back.

“Jacqui?”

The lights in the screening room suddenly blazed on.

Jacqui pushed Philippe off her, unintentionally kicking up the pool stick, which smacked him squarely on the forehead.

“Ouch!”

“What were you guys doing?” Zoë asked, holding a teddy bear. “Why are you on the pool table?”

This was *exactly* why the No More Boys rule had been invented.

nobody puts mara in the corner

IT WAS ANOTHER BUSY NIGHT AT SEVENTH CIRCLE, AND Eliza was trying to keep up with the rush of impatient clubgoers storming the velvet rope. Kartik had advised her to let guests trickle in slowly, in small groups of two or three. That way there was always a long line at the door, which made the club look even more popular than it was.

Eliza scanned the crowd, looking for Jeremy. She hoped he would stop by the club again, but so far, he hadn't shown up. She hadn't seen him since the disastrous dinner with her parents the week before. She'd left him a couple of messages on his cell phone and at work, where some schmuck had answered the phone and asked her to spell her name twice. But he'd never called her back.

"Name?" she asked an older woman in a beige pantsuit who had wrestled her way to the front of the line.

"Margot Whitman," the lady answered sharply.

Eliza ran a nail against the list, searching intently. *Wilson (Owen), Wilson (Luke plus one), Williams (Venus & Serena), W, Women's Wear Daily*. "I'm sorry," she concluded. "You're not on the list," she said flatly. Kartik had advised her that the guest list rule only applied to "civilians." Models, or other fearsomely pretty girls, as well as celebrities and other VIPs could always get in, regardless of their guest list status. But as for regular people—which this woman clearly was—they could freeze in hell before they were allowed inside Seventh Circle.

"I'm Alan's mother," the woman declared. "Is this some kind of joke? Can you get my good-for-nothing son out here to let me in? This is ridiculous. I've got clients waiting here."

"I'm sorry, do you want to try Alan on his cell phone to confirm? I can't do anything," Eliza apologized.

The woman threw her arms up. "This is bull! I am his mother! Now let me inside!"

Eliza held her ground. Alan's voice echoed in her brain. *The List is God. It could be my mother out there, but if she's not on the list, tough luck*. What if this woman was some kind of impostor? Although she did have Alan's receding chin and bug eyes. But rules were rules, and for once, Eliza didn't want to break them. It was too much fun to say no sometimes.

"Sorry. I can't help you," Eliza decided. "Please step to the side. You're not on the list. Next!"

"Hey, E," a familiar voice said, and a hand tapped her shoulder.

Eliza's heart leapt for a moment—Jeremy had arrived! But when she looked up, it was Ryan who was standing in front of the velvet rope. He was wearing his linen sweater that brought out the green in his eyes, and a pair of jeans. Totally not dress-code-worthy, but rules didn't apply to guys who were as handsome as Ryan Perry.

“Oh, Ryan, hey.” Eliza smiled, nodding to Rudolph to unhook the rope.

“Crazy night, huh?” Ryan asked, motioning to the teeming, seething mass of people who stared angrily back since he was able to cut the line. Someone even threw a beer bottle, which smashed right in front of Eliza's feet, and Rudolph immediately hustled the frustrated civilian away.

“You have no idea,” Eliza said, shaking her head at the mess. “What is it about nightclubs that bring out the worst in people? The regular people insist they're on the guest list, the guest list people demand VIP tables, the VIPs want . . . oh, God, well, they want everything. The other day I had to babysit Naomi Campbell's fur coat. Apparently it needed a massage.” Eliza laughed.

Ryan shrugged, grinning. “Ah, you can handle it.”

Eliza handed him some free-drink tickets. “I guess.” She rolled her eyes. It was nice to see Ryan again. They'd hardly seen each other at all since they'd gotten back, maybe because of what had happened in Palm Beach. Damn Palm Beach. Eliza wished, not for the first time, that she'd never even gone there.

“Eliza! Hey! Over here!”

Eliza turned and saw Mara and Garrett push their way through the crowd. She felt another burst of happiness at seeing a familiar face and waved back, ushering them to the front of the line as well.

Ryan turned around too, but his face clouded as soon as he saw Mara and Garrett. “I should go,” he told Eliza, bumping a fist on her shoulder. “I'm meeting Allison inside.”

“Where you going, Perry?” Garrett called.

Mara saw Ryan walk away without saying hello, and her heart ached. He looked so cute in that sweater. It was her favorite sweater. Last summer she'd borrowed it from him when they were on the beach and it got cold, and the sweater was so big, it reached down to her knees.

For two weeks, Mara had brushed Garrett off with excuses, saying she had to stay and watch the kids, or she was tired, or that she was busy with something else. But yesterday, she'd finally caved. She'd bumped into Ryan and Allison walking on the beach and then come home to the racks of fabulous clothes. It seemed a shame not to let them see the light of a paparazzi bulb. Wasn't that what she was supposed to do anyway? Wear the clothes and pose for pictures?

“How are you?” Mara gushed, giving Eliza a dramatic double air-kiss. “Where have you been?”

“I've been, um, good,” Eliza said, feeling guilty about Palm Beach all over again. “I've been here. You know where to find me.”

“All right, but seriously, we need to hang out!” Mara said. “Anyway, do you think we could get a table? My heels are, like, killing me.”

Last summer Mara had lived in either Reeboks or flip-flops. Eliza noticed she was wearing a pair of shockingly high Manolo Blahnik sandals with two bands of sparkling rhinestone straps at the toe and ankle. The same ones Eliza had wanted, except they’d been all out of her size. Where had she gotten those?

Eliza led them through the double doors, past the bi-level dance floor, which glittered under the strobe lights. The music was deafening, and the crowd was a mix of underdressed women and overdressed guys. Eliza noticed a particularly amorous couple stretched out on one of the king-sized ottomans and wondered if she should throw a coat over them.

“Garrett, my man,” Kartik said, as Eliza seated Mara and Garrett. “Good to see you.”

Then he turned to Eliza. “Did you let in those eyesores in the back?” Kartik accused, jerking a thumb toward two nondescript men and their shellacked dates, who were eagerly looking around, taking pictures with their camera phones.

Eliza shook her head. They must have made dinner reservations to get inside.

“Turn the lights down around them, will you? They’re seriously killing the mood. And I want them gone before Mitzi gets here.”

Eliza nodded. She asked the busboy to dim the lights, then walked back to where she’d sat Mara and Garrett, not realizing she’d put them uncomfortably close to Ryan and Allison’s table.

“How about shopping tomorrow?” Mara asked, after they’d given their drink orders to the cocktail waitress, and the bartender promptly zoomed up the wall to retrieve a bottle of the expensive Finnish vodka that Garrett had ordered. “We get paid!”

“Well, I don’t, but yeah, sure,” Eliza said, a little more tersely than she’d intended.

Mara saw Ryan across the VIP room, leaning against the bar with Allison. The tall Nordic blonde was laughing at something Ryan was saying, and it was killing Mara how Ryan was smiling back at her, his dimples flashing.

“Penny for your thoughts,” Garrett said, handing her the mojito she’d ordered. After Eliza had made the tangy Cuban cocktails that first weekend, they had quickly become Mara’s favorite drink. The sugarcane and crushed mint leaves reminded her of the last time she was really happy. Since arriving in the Hamptons, things had not exactly turned out as she’d hoped: Ryan was with another girl, Eliza was being weirdly distant, and she felt like a third wheel around Jacqui and Philippe. Even the kids didn’t seem to like her as much as they had last summer.

“I was just thinking . . .” she said, watching as Ryan rubbed Allison’s shoulders. Ugh. She turned back to Garrett. “Let’s dance.”

Garrett smiled. “You got it.” He stood up and offered her his hand. They snaked their way to the center of the dance floor, where the crowd was gyrating to Nelly’s “Hot in Herre.” The song was kind of last year, but it was still a club favorite.

Mara began to swing her hips and feel the music throb against her body. She moved to the beat, dancing sexily around Garrett, letting her hands slide up and down his back, and pressing her legs against his. Garrett, unlike most guys his age, who kept their dancing to a one-two shuffle, could actually move—and he ground his pelvis into Mara’s hips in a sinuous, sexy rhythm. Mara lost herself to the sensation of the music, the alcohol, and the feel of his breath against her neck. She turned around, and Garrett pulled her toward him, pressing against her back. He licked the back of her neck, and she raked her fingernails up his thighs behind her.

It was quite a performance—one that Ryan wouldn’t be able to miss, but that was sort of the point. Mara sneaked a glance in his direction, and was gratified to see that he’d stopped talking to Allison and was watching Mara with a scowl on his face. Mara tossed her hair back and pulled Garrett closer to her.

“God, you’re hot,” Garrett said, whispering raggedly in her ear. “Where’d you learn to dance like that?”

Mara smiled slyly. She liked Garrett. But more than that, she liked that being with Garrett made Ryan jealous. Maybe that way, Ryan would do something about it.

* * *

On the other side of the club, Alan grabbed Eliza’s elbow as she ushered Kit and a crew of Eastern European gazelles to his table. “My mom just reamed me out. She said she couldn’t get into the club earlier. What’s the deal?” Alan demanded of Eliza.

Eliza froze. “Your mom? Margot Whitman? But she wasn’t on the list!” she explained in her defense. “And you said—”

Alan’s features relaxed. “She wasn’t on the list? Well, in that case . . . hold on . . . *Ma!* You didn’t RSVP!” he yelled into his wireless receiver. “How many times do I have to tell you, you gotta RSVP?! No, I can’t do it for you! I am a very, very busy man! Why don’t you ever listen to me? You don’t get in if you’re not on the list! Twenty-four hours of labor? C’mon, I run a business here!” Walking away, he patted Eliza on the shoulder, mouthing, “Good job.”

never trust a seven-year-old to keep a secret

ANNA PERRY FINALLY SHOWED UP FOR A WEEKLY PROGRESS meeting the next day. It was the Friday before the Fourth of July weekend, and she was taking the kids to Nantucket to visit their grandparents. Unfortunately for Anna, Kevin's family didn't believe in help, and so the au pairs were granted a holiday break as well.

"Oh, hello, Mara," Anna said, actually standing up to kiss Mara on both cheeks.

Mara responded graciously, oblivious to Jacqui's puzzled look.

Before heading to Seventh Circle last night, Mara and Garrett had bumped into Anna at the Boys & Girls Club annual harbor fireworks benefit, and Anna had noticed Mara chatting with Jessica Seinfeld. A dinner invitation to the Seinfelds' was the Hamptons biggest "get," and Anna had yet to score one.

"How is everyone today?" Anna asked, looking around the table pleasantly.

Philippe smirked and sat with his feet on top of the table, but Jacqui squirmed in her chair beside him. She was certain they were going to be fired after being caught fooling around in the game room by Zoë. Since then, she had stayed as far away from him as possible, rebuffing all his attempts to pick up where they'd left off. Jacqui was certain Anna was just relishing the moment before swinging the ax.

Anna went through the progress reports, which were more tragic than usual, even for the Perry kids. Dr. Abraham had reported that William was now showing signs of bipolar disorder on top of ADHD and that he and Cody—who was possibly schizophrenic—would have to be constantly monitored. Zoë still couldn't recognize the Cyrillic alphabet (although she *had* memorized a *Marie Claire* article on how to find your G-spot—Zoë thought it was in her elbow), but Anna was strangely ebullient regardless.

"Rome wasn't built in a day, now was it?" she asked, winking at Philippe while dispensing three cash-filled envelopes. "Jacqui darling, can you stay a bit?" she asked, as they filed out of the room.

"Sure," Jacqui nodded, settling back into her seat apprehensively. Mara gave Jacqui a questioning look as she walked out, but Jacqui pretended not to see it. She hadn't told Mara about Philippe, since she was well aware she'd broken her rule and she didn't want to be lectured about it. She felt stupid enough already.

“First of all, Philippe has told me everything,” Anna said, once everyone had left and the door was closed.

This is it. I’m fired, Jacqui thought. Good-bye, East Hampton. Good-bye, New York. Hello, retail and sales, for the rest of my life.

“And I think it’s an excellent idea.” Anna nodded crisply, stuffing her papers into her handbag.

“*Desculpe-me . . . er . . . pardon?*”

“You, staying with us in New York for the year.” Anna smiled. “That is what you want, isn’t it?”

“Excuse me?”

“So you can finish your senior year in the city. That was the plan, wasn’t it? To attend Stuyvesant so you can apply to NYU?”

Jacqui nodded, speechless. Philippe had told Anna about that? Why? And why was Anna looking so happy about it?

“I think that can definitely be arranged,” Anna nodded thoughtfully. She blew her nose daintily on a pink tissue. “Nanny will be back, but she’ll need an assistant. The kids are getting so out of hand lately. Of course, you’ll have to work very hard.”

“Of course,” Jacqui said, chewing the inside of her cheek.

“And have absolutely no distractions,” Anna said meaningfully. “I have to insist on that. If you’re going to be working for us during the school year, I expect you to be above reproach this summer.” Anna glanced toward the door. “Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“I see.” It slowly dawned on Jacqui what Anna was expecting from her in exchange for the job next year: Philippe.

“One other thing. I’ve decided to move Philippe into the main house. Zoë mentioned something about a particularly interesting game of pool she walked in on, and I really don’t think we can have that kind of behavior around the children. Understood?”

A heavy, tension-filled silence settled on the room. Anna’s laptop computer was the only sound for several seconds. Jacqui’s mind raced with the implications of Anna’s offer. On the one hand, Anna was offering her everything she was working toward that summer: a job, a place to stay, an opportunity to better herself. Yet on the other hand . . . there was Philippe. Philippe, with his sardonic grin, his angelic face, his bronzed, diesel-cut body. Philippe, the only guy since Luca who had set her blood pounding.

“Do you think you’ll be able to manage?”

It was a bribe. An out-and-out bribe. *All right*, Jacqui thought grimly. If that was what it took, that was what it took. She would stop seeing Philippe. Never kiss him again. Never run her fingers through his soft hair. But, hey, there were other guys, right? One hot French guy wasn’t worth her dream of moving to New York and going to college. No guy was worth her future.

She nodded. "Of course."

Anna Perry smiled. "I knew I could trust you."

the best things in life are free?

WORKING AT A NIGHTCLUB WAS NOWHERE NEAR AS glamorous as Eliza had expected it to be. Somehow even the ego stroke of deciding who was going to get in and who was going to have to call it a night didn't make up for all the humiliations that catering to the celebrity and wannabe-celebrity clientele entailed. The other night she'd had to spritz a famous actress's face with Evian mist every fifteen minutes, since the actress didn't want her skin to dehydrate while she downed magnums of champagne.

And it was the opposite of glamorous when she'd opened her pay envelope and found out how much, exactly, she was actually making while working at Seventh Circle. She had stormed into Alan's office, insisting that a mistake had been made. Alan glanced at her check. It appeared there *had* been a mistake—they hadn't taken FICA taxes out, and the amount should have been even less. Eliza did the math and realized she was barely clearing minimum wage. When she complained to Kit, he told her that when he'd interned at *Rolling Stone* one semester after school, he hadn't been paid a dime. It was a prestige job, not a paying one. Eliza was privileged enough to work at Seventh Circle, and surely, since her parents were doing better, she didn't really need the money, right?

Except that she kind of did. Her parents had been generous enough to provide her the use of a MasterCard again, but after several trips to Calypso, Tracy Feith, and Georgina, she'd already maxed it out. She had to find a different stylish and sexy outfit to wear to work every night, and that was getting hard to do on a limited budget.

The job at Seventh Circle was supposed to be her entrée back into the good life, but instead of becoming an important fixture on the scene, like a junior Mitzi Goober, Eliza found herself catering to her former friends instead. The other day, she'd had to arrange for Sugar to bungee-jump off the top of the liquor cabinet—to the delight of her camera crew—and then sweep up the broken bottles she'd sent smashing to the floor.

Eliza arrived at the au pair cottage just in time to catch Mara and Jacqui counting the money in their pay envelopes. Philippe had already left for the weekend, citing an invitation from friends in Sag Harbor. Eliza felt a little ill seeing all that cash.

“Can we go to the bank?” Mara asked happily. If she spent one more summer working for the Perrys, she would have her entire college contribution covered.

Jacqui stuck her pay envelope into her bureau drawer carelessly, taking out several hundred-dollar bills just in case they went anywhere fun. She planned to use most of the money to pay for her SAT class, which was expensive but would hopefully be worth it.

“What’s all this?” Eliza asked, noticing two rolling racks of clothes jammed in the corner. “Oh my God—are those the Sally Hershberger jeans?” Eliza squealed, pouncing on a pair of distressed denim jeans that retailed for one thousand dollars. “I want these,” Eliza said covetously, holding the jeans up to the light and examining them closely. “How on earth did you get them?” she asked Mara.

“Mara’s famous,” Jacqui teased, rifling through the shopping bags and finding a pretty psychedelic Pucci scarf. It was true. Garrett Reynolds was the heir to a billion-dollar fortune, and the papers chronicled his love life with the same zeal with which they documented the spiraling construction costs of the Reynolds Castle. (The blueprints had recently been leaked to the press, revealing the home’s thirty-five bathrooms.) Garrett’s former girlfriends included actresses like Kate Bosworth and rock royalty like Keith Richards’s model daughter Theodora. Mara’s relatively obscure background made her even more of a choice subject to the press, especially Lucky Yap, who loved to run photos of the very public, very attractive couple. Page Six had nicknamed them “Beauty and the Billionaire Boy.”

Mara blushed and explained in an apologetic tone that they were “gifts” from designers to wear around town.

“You mean these are free?” Eliza gasped. No wonder Mara had looked so good the other night at Seventh Circle. Eliza’s eyes widened as she pawed through the loot. The leopard-print Shoshanna cape! The latest Alvin Valley leather-band trousers! The turquoise-encrusted Marni dress! The two-thousand-dollar Devi Kroell python clutch!

“Wow, that is crazy,” Eliza said. “I can’t believe you have all these!”

The Sally Hershberger jeans! She’d been lusting for a pair ever since she read about them in Vogue. They were supposed to be the best jeans on earth, the softest, rarest European and Japanese denim cut by the hand by Sally Hershberger—the Hollywood stylist who charged six hundred dollars for a haircut.

“Do you think I could borrow them? We’re the same size, right?” Eliza asked, pulling the jeans out and pressing them against her legs.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Mara said nervously. “I had to sign all these responsibility forms.”

Eliza pouted. “That’s only a formality. They really won’t want these back ever. Right, Jac?”

Jacqui shrugged. “They usually let you keep them, but it depends, I guess.”

Eliza had already stepped out of her cargos and zipped up the jeans. “They look amazing! I can’t believe they sent them to *you!*” She said.

“Why not?” Mara asked, feeling a little hurt. Eliza hadn’t come over to hang out with them all summer and now that she was here, she didn’t seem to think Mara deserved the free clothes from Mitzi.

Eliza didn’t answer. She was too excited to be wearing the jeans. “Can I borrow them? Please, please, please? With sugar on top?”

“Oh, all right,” Mara said, caving in. “But if anything happens to them . . . !” she raked her thumb across her neck.

Eliza squealed and hugged Mara tightly. “I owe you!”

Mara still didn’t feel it was totally right to lend Eliza clothes that weren’t hers, but she didn’t feel like she could really say no.

“So what’s going on with you and Garrett?” Eliza asked, changing back into her own clothes. Jacqui handed Eliza a shopping bag for the jeans.

“I like him,” Mara said hesitantly. “He’s a cool guy. I thought he was just some obnoxious rich kid, but he’s not.”

“What about Ryan?” Jacqui asked.

“He doesn’t even remember that I’m alive,” Mara shrugged. The new, aloof Ryan was sure not the sweet boy she remembered from last summer. “So, I don’t know. Who cares about him, right?”

Eliza felt relieved. It looked like she could stop worrying about Palm Beach. If Mara had moved on from Ryan, then who cared? Even Jacqui had stopped thinking it was a big deal. Like everyone else in the Hamptons, she’d started to think of Mara as Garrett Reynolds’s new girlfriend.

* * *

Mara found an outpost of her bank, and after depositing her money met Eliza and Jacqui at the Neiman Marcus Last Call store at the outlet mall, where they were browsing through the discounted designer offerings. The place was famous for selling glamorous duds from seasons past at fire-sale prices. Price tags were stamped with color-coded stickers according to date, and the longer they remained unsold, the cheaper they became.

“Check it out!” Eliza giggled, holding up a minuscule orange tube top with a busy multicolored print. “Do you think it’s too much?”

“It’s definitely loud,” Mara agreed.

“But it’s Missoni,” Eliza said reverently. “And in my size. I’m getting it. It’s going to look great with my new jeans,” she said, already feeling possessive of the Hershberger denim. She found several other choice pieces—a nifty little white Balenciaga coat dress that didn’t look too last-season, and a Yves Saint Laurent lipstick-print skirt with a small black smudge that Eliza was sure a good dry cleaner could get out. Jacqui found a gray Narciso Rodriguez shift and a pair of Christian Dior sunglasses, both at less than half price.

“You’re not getting anything?” Eliza asked Mara, as they walked up to the counter. “Did you see the Marc Jacobs flats back there?”

“I have the new ones,” Mara said, wiggling her toes in a pair of the designer’s bubble-gum-colored open-toed shoes.

“Oh,” Eliza said, feeling a little strange that Mara of all people would be the one with the latest “it” garments. She had thought all along that being associated with Seventh Circle would bring her those kinds of perks, but so far, the only bounty she’d scored was a free movie pass to a screening Kartik wasn’t interested in.

“I just have so many clothes at home that I haven’t even worn yet,” Mara sighed as she absently picked up an open perfume bottle near the counter and took a big sniff.

Did Mara not hear how snotty she sounded? “Yeah, I forgot, you’re like, the Julia Roberts of the Hamptons,” Eliza grumbled, even more ticked when her total at the cash register was more than what was left on her card. “Jac, do you think I could borrow a fifty?”

Jacqui shook her head while handing Eliza the money. Eliza would never change. Give the girl a million bucks and she would still be broke by midweek. Apparently looking like a million cost that much too. Unless you were Mara Waters, of course.

the world looks better from atop a pedestal (or a table)

“CAN WE GET ONE OF MARA ONLY?” THE PHOTOGRAPHERS demanded when Garrett and Mara stepped out of the Maybach at the entrance to Seventh Circle late on a Saturday night. Since the Fourth of July, which they’d spent together on the Reynoldses’ boat watching fireworks burst above the Atlantic, the two of them had been inseparable.

“Be my guest,” Garrett bowed, stepping aside. “She’s something else, isn’t she?” he asked, as Mara was blinded by flashbulbs.

“You are such a star,” he growled in her ear as they settled into their usual table. Even though she’d initially gone out with Garrett only to make Ryan jealous, Mara couldn’t help but enjoy his company.

He swung an arm around the back of the booth and put his hand possessively on her shoulder. She snuggled underneath his armpit, liking the feel of his heavy hand on her bare skin. Garrett leaned over for a kiss, settling in to nuzzle his cheek against her neck at the same moment she looked up from the table, straight into the eyes of Ryan Perry. He was standing next to Allison, who was waving to Garrett.

Garrett disengaged from Mara’s cleavage. “Perry!” he said, throwing out a hand. “Hey, Ali. What are you doing with this bozo?” he joked.

Ryan shook Garrett’s hand grimly. “Hi, Garrett. Mara.”

“Hey,” she said back. It was the most Ryan had said to her all week. Usually he’d just nod at her curtly if she bumped into him at the house.

Garrett stood up to kiss Allison on the cheek. “Sit down with us, c’mon.”

Ryan raised his eyebrow to Allison, who shrugged and returned Garrett’s smile. “Sure,” she said, taking the seat next to Garrett.

Ryan was wearing a loose-fitting guayabera shirt and faded blue jeans, what he used to joke was “surfer black-tie.” Garrett suddenly looked overdressed in his Dolce & Gabbana French-cuffed dress shirt and starched dark denim jeans.

Mara disengaged herself from Garrett, but Ryan turned around and started talking only to Allison, who was giggling at something Garrett was whispering in her other ear. Garrett explained that he and Allison went to the same prep school back in New York, and soon, the three of them began talking about kids they knew in common.

“Did you hear about Fence Preston? He’s about to blow up, for sure,” Garrett was saying.

“You’re so much cuter,” Allison said, poking Ryan in the nose affectionately.

Mara, who had no idea who or what a Fence Preston was, felt nervous and neglected. But Garrett made sure to refill her glass whenever it was half-empty, and she began downing drinks with a vengeance.

“Let’s do shots,” Garrett suggested.

“Sure,” Mara agreed.

Garrett ordered a bottle of Goldschläger and poured the clear liquid with golden sparkles into four glasses.

“This stuff is gross,” Allison said daintily, taking a small sip and making a face.

Ryan grimly knocked his back. Mara, wanting desperately to impress him, did the same with hers. “Let’s do another!” Garrett howled, and the three of them pounded back a few more.

It was right about the time that all four shots hit Mara that the DJ played his nightly remix of Bon Jovi’s “Livin’ on a Prayer.” Seventh Circle regulars like Garrett and Mara recognized it as the Seventh Circle anthem. It was the song that officially kicked off the evening and was guaranteed to get the celebrities dancing on the tables.

“I loooooove this song!” Mara howled, singing along. “This is awesome!”

“Isn’t this the best?” Chauncey Raven asked, leaning over to their banquette. The petite pop star was wearing a black bra underneath a tight white T-shirt, and a denim mini with the hems slashed so high that the white pockets peeked out from underneath. She was barefoot, with a sparkly toe ring. “C’mon, let’s dance!” she said, climbing up on their table and pulling Mara up to join her.

Feeling dizzy and exhilarated, Mara followed the pop star’s lead, and the two of them gyrated hips and threw their hair around in a dazzling imitation of a cheesy eighties music video.

“You too!” Chauncey said, noticing Allison sitting down.

Allison shook her head, a bemused expression on her face. “Oh no, thanks, I prefer to do my dancing on chairs.”

“Oh, I forgot my drink!” Chauncey said, hopping off in search of her cocktail glass.

Alone on top of the table, Mara accidentally kicked the bottle of Goldschläger to the side, and Ryan Perry saved it from crashing to the floor at the last minute. Mara froze for a moment, feeling vulnerable and exposed. She noticed that Ryan was looking at her strangely. Maybe she should get off the table. She hesitated—but then Garrett cheered at her.

“All right! *Go, Mara!*” he yelled, whooping it up. He was laughing and wolf whistling, and several other people in club turned to cheer as well. Inspired, she danced even more wildly. The banquette was soon bathed in the spotlight of photographers’ flashbulbs.

“Over here!”

“Look this way, luv!”

“Over your shoulder, Mara!”

“Can we get one with you leaning over Garrett?”

Only too happy to oblige, Mara leaned over and gave Garrett a kiss on his forehead, sending the paparazzi into a frenzy as their cameras flashed. Mara slunk her hips, pouting and posing, noticing how Ryan couldn't take his eyes off her. Finally! He was looking at her!

“ ‘Woaaaaah, we're halfway there-uh. . . Whooaah, livin' on a prayah . . . ’ ” she sang. She was having the time of her life until she felt a hand on her ankle. She looked down. Eliza was glaring at her, looking pretty steamed for some reason. But Mara was nothing but delighted to see her.

“ ‘Liza! Come up here!’ she enjoined. “ ‘Take my hand, we'll make it I swear!’ ” she sang, holding out her hand to her friend.

“Get down! Get down! Get down this minute!” Eliza hissed, pulling at her ankle.

“What? I can't hear you!” Mara shouted.

“We have a health inspector here tonight—this is a *restaurant!* You can't dance on the tables! They'll shut us down!”

“What?” Mara asked, laughing.

“I said, *get down!*” Eliza screamed, “Oh my God, oh my God.” She pulled Mara off the table, and Mara stumbled down, her skirt almost catching on the candle. She landed on Garrett's lap.

“What on earth were you thinking? I could get fired!” Eliza said angrily.

“What's wrong with you?” Mara demanded. It wasn't like Mara was doing anything different from what Lindsey Lohan had pulled the night before.

“Nothing's wrong with me—you're the one who's being a total brat,” Eliza spat. Mara was acting just like the spoiled celebrities who thought they owned the place.

“Excuse me?” Mara yelped. “What did you call me?”

“Hey, hey, cool down,” Ryan said, standing up and holding his arms out between the two seething girls. “Mara, Eliza didn't mean it.”

“Shut up, Ryan!” Mara glared. “Who asked you?” It was just like Ryan to be on Eliza's side. Why couldn't he be on her side just for once? He was always defending Eliza. Even last summer, when she'd first met Eliza and Eliza had been such a witch to her, Ryan had told her not to hold it against Eliza since her family was going through some “hard times.” As if Mara didn't know what hard times were like!

Meanwhile, Eliza noticed that Garrett was leaning against his chair, smirking and enjoying the show. He was probably thinking that if he was lucky enough, Mara and Eliza would start

rolling around the floor, pulling each other's hair out in a proper catfight. Eliza was disgusted by him. For the first time, she wondered what Mara saw in him besides all that money.

"Mara, calm down," Eliza said. "You're drunk."

That only made Mara more furious. *Hello*, who was a bigger lush than Eliza? The girl practically lived on vodka-cranberries. "Um, excuse me, I'm in a nightclub!" Mara yelled, drunk and belligerent. "You're just jealous because I'm in the VIP room and you just work here!"

Eliza reacted as if slapped. "Stop acting like a bitch!"

"I'm a bitch? You're the one who's been acting so weird all summer!" Mara said, knowing it was true. Eliza had blown her off almost all summer and had been short with her when they had hung out.

They glared at each other. Last summer, the two of them had had a hard time seeing eye to eye, and they'd done their share of bickering. But this was so much worse.

"Oh God, I feel sick," Mara said, holding a hand to her mouth and clutching her stomach with the other. Then she leaned over and threw up all over Eliza's new Marc Jacobs shoes.

Before blacking out, the last thing Mara remembered was seeing a look of utter disgust on Ryan's face.

you'll always love your first love

SEVENTH CIRCLE CLOSED AT 5 A.M., AND ELIZA PUNCHED her card and walked through the empty club to the staff rooms in the back. The fight with Mara had rattled her. Not only had she gotten yelled at by her bosses, since she'd barely gotten Mara down from the table before the health inspector saw what was going on, but her new shoes were ruined, and unlike Mara, she didn't have several free pairs waiting at home. She felt tired and defeated and a little resentful. How was it that *she*—Eliza Thompson, who used to run rampant through a slew of Manhattan nightclubs—was now the one who was dead sober at the end of the evening, with puke-covered shoes, no less?

She slid her feet from the mottled suede heels and put on a pair of flip-flops and a bulky Princeton sweatshirt that was as long as her skirt. The bar backs were hosing down the bar and the night porter had arrived to clear the garbage. She said good-bye to Milly, the coat-check girl, and split her tips with the three waitresses. They'd had a decent evening because Eliza had decided that names could magically appear on the list with the help of a hundred-dollar bribe. She had to supplement her meager income somehow.

"You're still here?" she asked, seeing Ryan Perry sitting alone by the bar.

He nodded. "What do you mean? I never leave," he joked. "Nah. I was waiting for you. Just wanted to make sure you get home safe."

"That's sweet," she said. She was glad they still had that easy connection and that their friendship was just the same as it was before.

"Want a drink? You look like you need one," Ryan offered.

"I'm the one who works here, remember? Johnnie? Could we have one for the road?" The bar back nodded and provided them with two glasses of whiskey.

"None for me, thanks," Ryan said.

"Well, then—I'll have yours too. Shame to let it go to waste," Eliza smiled, sipping her glass. "God, what was up with Mara tonight?"

"I have absolutely no idea," Ryan said, tapping his knuckles on the counter.

"Me either," Eliza said, raising her glass in a mock salute.

"I'll drive you home," he offered, when Eliza finished off the second tumbler.

"But—my car." Eliza motioned to her Jetta parked in the lot.

"I'll have Laurie send someone out to get it tomorrow," Ryan told her.

They drove with the top down on Ryan's car, and Eliza found herself telling him about how her job at Seventh Circle wasn't everything she'd thought it would be. She shook out a cigarette from her pack and lit it. "Want one?" she asked him. Ryan shook his head, then thought better of it. Eliza helped him light his cigarette, cupping it against the wind.

"Thanks," Ryan said, talking from the side of his mouth as he steered the car to the highway.

Eliza exhaled a huge plume of smoke. "And Jeremy hasn't even called me in two weeks," she complained. "I have no idea what's going on between us. He tells me he missed me all year, but then he like, drops off the face of the earth."

Ryan nodded in sympathy. Eliza put her bare feet up on the dashboard, feeling more relaxed and comfortable than she had in a long time. "So what's going on with you and Allison?" she asked.

"Not much." He shrugged. "I think she's into me, but we're just friends."

"Dude, everyone likes you," Eliza emphasized. "That's so not news."

He laughed and tapped the ashes from his cigarette in the wind. "I wish."

"Mara and Garrett look pretty cozy, huh?" Eliza noted, not to be mean, but just as an observation. "They're at the club together almost every night."

"I guess," Ryan shrugged. "She's different now."

When they arrived in front of Eliza's house, she hesitated before getting out of the car. "You want to maybe come in for a little bit?" she asked. "I'm so wired and I know I won't be able to sleep for a while yet. We could watch *Godfather Two*. . . ."

"Sure." Ryan shrugged. He didn't seem to want to be alone just yet either.

Ryan sat back on the couch, and Eliza tiptoed out of the kitchen holding a bowl of microwaved popcorn and two bottles of Diet Coke. She popped the DVD in. It was so natural, hanging out with Ryan. He'd been in the background all her life. She remembered how when they were little, their families used to vacation together in the Bahamas at Christmas. They'd learned to ski together on the slopes of Aspen. Eliza remembered Ryan's mom—his real mom, Brigitte—saying the two of them would make a good couple when they grew up. Back then, Sugar and Poppy were still called Susan and Priscilla, and they'd followed Eliza around like little puppies, competing with each other to be the one to brush her hair or be her ski-lift partner. The twins sure had changed, but Ryan was still the same—still here, still right next to her.

Robert De Niro was beating up some guys on the screen, and Eliza leaned back on the couch, nestling her head on Ryan's shoulder. But when Ryan leaned down to say something, their lips met instead. She didn't mean for it to happen, but instead of pulling away, Eliza opened her mouth to his. He pulled up her sweatshirt and began to unbutton her blouse, unhooking her bra, kissing every inch of her.

She was thinking it was wrong—that she should stop him—but it felt so . . . right. It was just like in Palm Beach, exactly like in Palm Beach—two broken hearts finding comfort in each other. That was all it was really, just hooking up. It didn't mean anything, she told herself.

And then she wasn't thinking of anything at all, because Ryan was kissing her again, and whatever worries she had, whatever doubts about where this was headed (nowhere, she thought), and what it would mean (nothing, she hoped) were made completely irrelevant by the sweet insistence of his lips on hers.

the doctor is definitely out

“WHERE’S MARA?” ZOË ASKED WHEN JACQUI ARRIVED to get the kids ready the next morning.

“She’s sick,” Jacqui said grimly, helping the little girl tie her bathrobe. “It’s only me, okay?” Mara had certainly looked green around the gills that morning. Mara had overslept again, and when Jacqui tried to wake her, she’d mumbled something about a killer hangover, which was turning into a frequent excuse. Philippe was gone on another errand for Anna, and Mara and Jacqui had agreed that if Jacqui dealt with the kids yesterday, Mara would take the kids today so Jacqui could study for her SATs. But of course, Mara had flaked again.

“Where’s Philippe? Where’s Philippe?” William asked, alternately bouncing on his sneakers and gliding on the built-in wheels. Jacqui cursed whoever had invented the damn things—they made William twice as fast and harder to catch.

“I’m not sure,” Jacqui said. “I think your mom needed him to do something for her in the city again.” Laurie had told her that some French papers Anna wanted translated needed a few more corrections. It sounded incredibly fishy. Since agreeing to Anna’s ultimatum, she had kept away from Philippe as directed, which was a little hard to do since every time Philippe caught her alone in the house, he wanted to know when he could see her again. He’d even accused her of playing hard-to-get, which Jacqui found ironic.

“I told you, she’s not my mom!” William shouted in a deafening tone.

“Okay! Okay! Calm down, please!” Jacqui said. *“Merda!”* she cursed when she realized she’d forgotten to put swimming diapers on Cody. The regular ones weren’t waterproof.

“Madison, are you coming with us today?” Jacqui asked. For the past month Madison had been standoffish with the au pairs, since they were technically not responsible for her anymore.

“I’m meeting a friend there,” Madison nodded. She was perfectly turned out in a pink bathing suit and a velour cover-up and was primping with a mascara wand in the mirror.

“That’s a lot of makeup for the beach, don’t you think?” Jacqui asked, amused.

“That bikini’s a little revealing, don’t you think?” Madison snapped back, applying a deep berry lip gloss.

Jacqui felt a little hurt. She’d bonded with Madison last summer, and this year the child was a little beeyatch. And her stepmother didn’t seem to care that the eleven-year-old walked around looking like a little tramp.

“It just gets a little hot on the beach, and it’s bad for your skin,” Jacqui said gently.

“I don’t care,” Madison declared.

Jacqui folded up Cody’s stroller. He was getting way too big for it; his legs almost came up to his chin when he sat in it. The “baby” was four years old and he still preferred to ride rather than walk. Just yesterday, when she’d wheeled him out on Main Street, several women had asked her if her boy was “special,” i.e., crippled. “Nope, just lazy!” Jacqui had said cheerfully.

For all of Anna’s hypervigilance about the kids’ diets, academic goals, and spirituality, Jacqui had never seen kids who were so lacking in the basics.

As she ushered them to the garage, they bumped into Dr. Abraham, walking out of a guest suite and munching on a banana. “We’re off to the beach today? Hold on!” he said, and before Jacqui could disagree, the doctor ran out of his room carrying his tote bag.

“Looks like I have you all to myself,” Dr. Abraham joked, seeing that Mara and Philippe were nowhere in sight.

“If you count the kids as nobody,” Jacqui retorted.

The only car left in the lot was the tiny little Toyota Prius, and between Cody’s car seat and the doctor’s girth, it was a bit of a tight squeeze. Jacqui drove them to nearby Georgica, where the kids dispersed—Madison to look for her friends, William to run up and down the boardwalk, and Zoë to collect seashells.

“Don’t go far! Only where I can see you!” Jacqui called out as she planted her beach umbrella and spread out her towel. She tied her hair back with the Pucci scarf Mara had told her she could borrow.

She stepped out of her cotton sundress and ignored the doctor’s stares. She hoped that he would get the message and leave her alone.

The SAT tutorial was a little hard to follow—they’d gone over the verbal part of the exam at the class she’d missed to play pool with Philippe the other week. Jacqui just didn’t get the word problems. Rock is to mountain as feather is to A) wing, B) chickens, C) pillow, or D) all of the above. In Portuguese, *rock* also meant “foundation” as well as “soil.” In that case, the answer could be A, since wings were made out of feathers—but then, feathers were also the foundation of most pillows, which pointed to C. It was all very confusing.

“Man, that is a boring book!” a voice said from above her.

Jacqui looked up from under her floppy Panama hat and grinned. “Hey, Kit, how are you?”

“I’m good. A little bummed you didn’t call the minute you got into town, but I lived,” Kit Ashleigh joked, taking a seat next to her. He had a spiky blond crew cut, and he was so pale his nose was already peeling from the sun. He was one of Eliza’s best friends, and Jacqui had gotten to know him better in Palm Beach. She knew Kit sort of had a crush on her, but she played it down. She liked Kit—but not in that way. Besides, there was her No More Boys rule, and so long as she was being forced to make it apply to Philippe, it had to apply to Kit as well.

“I’m sorry. It’s been so busy, with the kids. . . . I haven’t had a day off,” Jacqui apologized.

“Who’s the dork?” Kit asked, referring to the doctor, who was snoring underneath a paperback copy of Dr. Phil’s *Family First*.

“A *falsificação* . . . like a . . . duck doctor?” Jacqui had a hard time with American slang.

“Quack?” Kit asked helpfully.

Jacqui nodded excitedly. “Exactly!” Leaning down, she whispered, “I hate him.”

Kit nodded. “Let’s ditch him,” he said conspiratorially.

“What do you have in mind?” Jacqui asked, one finely plucked eyebrow raised.

is mara the new tara?

MARA WOKE UP WITH NO MEMORY OF WHAT HAD happened the night before. Her head was pounding, and she was so thirsty she walked to the bathroom and drank water straight from the faucet, cupping it with her hands. Lately, Mara was always waking up this way. It was almost noon, and as usual, Jacqui and the kids were already gone. She took a long shower, dried her hair, put on her most comfortable outfit—a terry zip-up hoodie swim cover-up—and hid her eye bags under a pair of sleek Oliver Peoples aviator sunglasses, all courtesy of the Mitzi gravy train.

She walked toward the main house, noticing there was a new addition to the Reynolds Castle that morning: a pair of giant armored knight statues that stood guard at the gates. She walked to the kitchen and made herself a smoothie and was rinsing out the blender when the newspaper caught her eye. She leafed through the *Post*, going straight to her favorite gossip column, Page Six. That's when she saw it.

“Oh my God.” She clamped her hands to her mouth and looked around nervously. She looked at the photo again. *Oh my God.* Suddenly, images from last night began flooding back, making her head pound harder. Dancing on the table. Yelling at Ryan. Calling Eliza a bitch. But even worse—that awful picture in the paper!

She'd thought Lucky Yap was her friend. Some kind of friend he turned out to be. There it was, right in the middle of the Page Six column—underneath the headline *THE NEW TARA REID?* was a photo of her from last night. Mara Waters, the nice girl from Sturbridge—or at least that was how she'd always thought of herself—hanging over Garrett, his nose in her cleavage, her boobs literally *popping* out of her Gucci corset. Good Lord, one nipple had actually escaped from the tight bodice of the neckline!

Mortified didn't even begin to describe her feelings that morning. It was one thing to lose control for an evening and quite another to have it broadcast around the world. Mara hurriedly stuffed the newspaper into the garbage can, hoping nobody would see it. Especially not Ryan. It was just too embarrassing. *The new Tara Reid?* Even Tara Reid didn't want to have Tara Reid's reputation.

Mara blushed. A little part of her had always felt that even though the Perrys were wildly rich and privileged, there was nothing to be envious of, because they didn't have what she had—a great, solid family, with parents who had instilled in their three daughters the importance of integrity, honesty, and decency. But with the publication of that photo, she didn't have a leg to stand on. Neither Sugar nor Poppy had ever been captured in such a compromising position, although there had been that close call with Sugar's ex-boyfriend, who'd videotaped

one of their steamy encounters. But Kevin's law firm and a hefty bribe had made that go away. Maybe Mara had been wrong about herself. Maybe she was just like everyone in the Hamptons—someone who'd do anything for attention and fame.

"Mara, didn't you hear me? There's someone at the door for you," Laurie said, walking into the kitchen.

Mara froze, feeling apprehensive. She wasn't expecting anyone. Was it against the law to get your photo taken? Were the nipple police here to get her? But when she opened the door, it was only a brown-uniformed messenger. "Sign here!" he said, pushing a clipboard under her nose.

She scribbled her name, and he thrust several oversize shopping bags into her arms. The bags contained three more gorgeous Shoshanna dresses, as well as a selection of pastel cashmere cardigans. Mara finally found a handwritten note on expensive card-stock stationery: *Excellent coverage in the Post! Keep it up! Hugs, Mitzi.*

The errant nipple aside, Mara understood that in Mitzi's view, the photo was a roaring success. The article in Page Six had named every brand she was wearing.

She gathered the bags just in time to see Ryan Perry pull up to the driveway. She froze, rooted to the spot. He climbed out of his car and walked toward her. He was bleary-eyed and still wearing the same clothes from the night before. Against her resolve, Mara's heart sank.

"Oh, er . . . hi, Mara," Ryan nodded, turning crimson.

"Morning." She nodded. It was so obvious he'd hooked up with somebody last night. Mara felt sickeningly jealous. It seemed that Ryan Perry would never lack for a girl in his life, and even worse, she would never be that girl again.

happiness is a full sail on a strong wind

THERE WERE MANY ADVANTAGES TO KNOWING KIT Ashleigh—his sense of humor, his steadfast loyalty to his friends, his many expensive playthings. But the one that was most important was his ability to have fun, no matter where he was. Kit was instrumental in rounding up all the kids, convincing William he'd let him steer the sailboat, letting Madison bring her friend, telling Zoë they would see dolphins, and carrying Cody to the car. They all piled into his Mercedes-Benz CLK convertible (Jacqui had left the keys to the Toyota underneath the doctor's suntan oil), and he drove them to Sag Harbor, where his sailboat was docked.

"It's really not much," Kit said of the Sunfish. "But it'll fit all of us, and maybe we can get the kids to learn how to sail. My dad taught me when I was a kid."

"This is it?" William asked, not impressed with the fifteen-foot craft. "My dad's is, like, three times as big."

"It's not all about size, my friend," Kit said, unfurling the sails and unhitching the ropes. "C'mon, give me a hand with this. You too, Madison, Zoë—everyone can help."

With Kit giving directions, they were able to cast off, and Kit steered them up to the dock next to the JLX Bistro, a trendy French restaurant on the water.

A waiter came right up to the boat and took their order, and a few minutes later, several bulging bags of cheese, prosciutto sandwiches, Caprese salads, and bottles of sparkling water and cider were passed over on the starboard side.

Jacqui was impressed. Kit steered them back out to sea.

"Can't we go any faster?" William whined.

"Here, let me show you," Kit said, jumping up. They caught a breeze and everyone was quiet. The water was calm and smooth, and the sailboat ran swiftly over the waves. It was a relaxing and thrilling at the same time. Jacqui unwrapped their picnic lunch, passing around the sandwiches.

"God, this is so queer," Madison's friend Angelica complained. "We should have stayed on Georgica. Those cute guys my cousin knows were supposed to be there today."

Madison, who seemed to be enjoying the ride so far, hastily agreed.

"You're not going to eat that, are you?" Angelica asked, as Madison spooned a slice of tomato and mozzarella onto her plate.

Madison quickly put it back.

Jacqui watched the exchange silently. She wanted to say something to Madison about how girls like Angelica, who were too skinny and privileged for their own good, just masked their own insecurities by making fun of everyone else, but she knew she would just embarrass the girl, so she kept her mouth shut.

Instead, Jacqui heaped her own plate with cheese, salami, bread, and pickled vegetables, and made a show of eating every last bite, to the fascination of both preteen girls, who couldn't believe anyone who looked like Jacqui could eat like that.

Angelica had already tried flattery to get Jacqui to like her, but since Jacqui hadn't responded, the girl had taken to calling Jacqui "the au pair" in a snotty voice. Jacqui was relieved when the two decided to make the most of the day and sunbathe quietly on the deck.

Jacqui looked around at the kids, who were all entertained, and at the glittering water and bright sun. She leaned back on the deck and felt the wind in her hair. She was glad to have a friend like Kit.

it's so much easier to lie on the phone

ELIZA DABBED A SPLOTCH MORE FOUNDATION ON HER neck. The hickeys from Ryan had bloomed overnight. She looked war-ravaged, with little purple and yellow love marks all over her chest, collarbone, and underneath her chin. It was more than a little distressing. She couldn't go to work looking like she'd just been mauled, hence the bottle of Bobbi Brown foundation. Thank God for perfect-blend makeup.

Okay, so that was a little weird—hooking up with Ryan again like that. What about Jeremy? Was she cheating on him or something? Were they even together? Eliza felt confused and a little sad. And Ryan—what was up with that? She didn't like Ryan, did she? Ryan was like, her friend. Like, her brother—okay, so not like her brother *exactly*.

That morning, he'd woken her up and carried her to her bed. "I gotta go. I don't think your parents will be so thrilled if they see us in the living room," he whispered, kissing her nose.

"Okay." She'd nodded sleepily.

"See you later," he said, tucking her in.

Eliza smiled at the memory, dabbing a smidge more green-tinted concealer to mask a hickey, when her cell rang.

"Hi, 'Liza, it's me."

"Oh," she said, holding a compact powder in midair. Mara. Shit. Had Ryan told her something?

"Listen . . ." Mara started.

Eliza sucked in her stomach.

"I'm really, really sorry about last night," Mara said. "I don't know what got into me. I've never been that drunk before."

"Oh." Eliza exhaled. "It's nothing—don't worry about it."

"I just want you to know I would never ever do anything to get you in trouble," Mara said. "I know how much your job means to you."

"No, really, seriously, don't worry about it," Eliza said, wanting nothing more than to hang up. Mara was being so nice, it was hard to take. It would be so much easier if Mara was a real bitch, but she wasn't.

"Well, I really feel awful about it," Mara insisted. "And in front of Ryan, too!"

“Mar—I really gotta go,” Eliza said, cutting her off. Even though she and Ryan had agreed that last night was a fluke, just as Palm Beach had been, and nothing whatsoever was going on between them *at all*, Eliza couldn’t deal with the guilt. Even if Mara had Garrett Reynolds now, it didn’t make Eliza feel any better.

“Oh, okay. Maybe we can go get coffee later this week or something?” Mara asked meekly.

“Yeah, I’ll call you, ’kay?” Eliza replied quickly.

“Okay,” Mara answered, but Eliza was already stabbing at the END button.

* * *

Mara hung up the phone in the kitchen, feeling blue. Eliza was still totally pissed off, she could tell. She opened the patio doors and was surprised to see Philippe sun-bathing on a raft in the middle of the pool, smoking as usual. She’d thought he’d gone away to the city. He was supposed to be one of the au pairs, but they rarely saw him since he’d been relocated to the main house.

“Your sister called earlier,” he said, tapping his ashes into the water. “Laurie was looking for you.”

“Which one?”

Philippe shrugged.

It had to be Megan. Maureen had three kids and was too busy to call. Mara wondered why Megan hadn’t phoned her cell, but then, she didn’t get a great signal in the Hamptons. Mara went back to the kitchen and dialed Megan’s number at work.

“Hey, Meg? It’s me,” Mara said.

“Mara! Our star!” The cheerful voice of her sister vibrated down the line.

“Oh my God. You saw it? The *Post*?”

“Of course I saw it. Hello, it’s Meg you’re talking to, remember? I saw you in *Us Weekly* the other day, too. You look cuter on Page Six. A little risqué, but cute,” Megan said authoritatively. Mara could hear the sounds of blow-dryers and scissors clicking in the background.

“You really think I looked good? Did Mom and Dad see it?” Mara asked, looking out the window where Philippe was floating in circles. Anna Perry walked out to the terrace, wearing a white bikini and transparent high heels. She stepped gingerly into the pool, and Philippe helped her situate herself on a similar raft. They glided to the other end, where the water spilled over to a waterfall and a Jacuzzi.

“Mara, are you listening?” Megan asked.

“Oh, no, sorry,” Mara said. “What did you say?”

“I told you that I hid the paper from them—if they’d seen it, you’d be back home in like, ten seconds. You know what Dad’s like.”

“Thank God. I owe you.”

“No kidding. That’s why I’m coming down to visit you in two weeks. I want to see where my famous little sister hangs out!”

“That would be awesome!” Mara replied.

“I know. That’s why I didn’t wait for an invitation,” Megan said.

“What do you mean? You know you’re always welcome!” Mara protested.

“That’s why I’m coming to visit. Anyway, I gotta go. I was supposed to rinse Mrs. Norman ten minutes and now her hair is going to be lavender. See you soon!”

Mara hung up the phone, feeling better. Her favorite sister, Megan, was coming down to visit! It would be so great to have Megan around—they could do some normal stuff, like get burgers at O’Malley’s in East Hampton and maybe have a lobster boil on the beach. Mara could use a little break, and there was nothing like family to bring you back down to earth when you’ve had too much champagne.

garrett reels in a catch

THE RICH WERE DIFFERENT. MARA HAD UNDERSTOOD THAT ever since last summer, when she met the Perry twins, who didn't think anything of spending eight hundred dollars on a designer dress but drew the line at paying for their own cocktails, and Ryan Perry, who drove a custom-made British sports car but filled the tank with unleaded to save a few bucks. Only a family like the Reynoldses would build a saltwater pool—a giant fish tank you could swim in—a mere thirty feet from the ocean. Garrett invited Mara over to check it out, since it had just been stocked with fish. The water was warm and soothing as Mara stepped inside.

“Another one?” Garrett asked, wading in with a pitcher of mango margaritas.

“I've already had two,” Mara said, waving it away. “Maybe I should cool it a little,” she said. “My sister's coming to visit soon, I don't want her to think—”

“Think what?” he asked, drinking straight from the pitcher and smacking his lips.

It was a beautiful warm night, and the crickets were chirping.

“I don't know, like I'm some kind of party girl or something. I do have a job, you know,” she reminded him. “What if the kids saw me in Page Six?” she agonized.

“You know what? You shouldn't worry so much. It's just a photo in a newspaper. You know what people do with the newspaper?” Garrett asked, waving the pitcher around, accidentally sloshing its contents into the pool.

Mara shook her head, wondering if the alcohol would hurt the fish.

“They throw it away at the end of the day. In London, they wrap french fries in it to soak up the oil!” He laughed and set the pitcher by the side of the pool. He swam up, splashing her with water. “I like you, Mara. You're fun. Be *fun!*”

Mara glowed. He liked her. He'd said it out loud. With his hair all wet, he looked so cute, like a sleek, dark seal. He smiled at her, and she touched his face, liking how nonjudgmental he was. Ryan Perry probably thought she was the biggest hoochie in the Hamptons, but Garrett Reynolds thought she was fun.

A school of orange-and-white clown fish darted around the nearby coral, and Mara refilled her glass. It was delicious, and besides, hadn't Megan wanted to come to the Hamptons to experience all the glamour? Who wanted to go get lobster rolls in Montauk when you could hang out in the VIP room at Seventh Circle with movie stars?

Garrett threw her a pair of goggles and a snorkel and switched on the underwater lights. She dipped her head underneath and looked around. The water was a bright, cerulean blue, as

clear as daylight, and populated by colorful sea creatures of every size and shape. There were sea turtles and moray eels, brilliantly stark zebra fish, angelfish, rainbow fish, and blue-finned emperor fish.

“This is amazing,” she told him, stopping to take the snorkel out of her mouth.

“Why go to St. Barths when you can bring St. Barths to you?” Garrett asked, adjusting his goggles. “That’s the problem with the Hamptons: there’s no good scuba.”

A school of black stingrays floated by their knees. Mara watched them glide toward the reef, marveling at their smooth and graceful pace.

Garrett held her hand as they floated across the pool, pointing out transparent jellyfish and pulsating starfish. He swam toward an imitation grotto, a man-made cavern in the middle of the pool, and gestured to Mara to follow.

Mara held her cocktail above the waves, ducking into the cave. She’d thought the Perrys lived well, but this was a whole other level entirely. The Reynolds house was like Versailles and, well, SeaWorld all rolled into one.

“This is my favorite spot,” Garrett said, pulling her closer to him. “Have you ever been to Capri?”

Mara shook her head. Apart from the Hamptons, she’d never really been anywhere.

He wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her closer. “Some day I’ll take you there,” he whispered in her ear.

“Mmmm,” Mara smiled, liking the idea of that.

She wondered what Ryan was doing right then, but shook the thought out of her mind.

The dark cavern made Garrett’s dark hair gleam with blue-black highlights, and his eyes glittered with mischief. “Bet you can’t hold your breath underwater longer than I can,” he challenged.

“Oh, ho! Bet I can!” Mara disagreed.

Mara inhaled and bent down, puffing her cheeks with oxygen, determined to prove him wrong. Garrett reached out to hold her hand as they sank underneath the water. Then he was kissing her, breathing into her mouth, salty and slick, hot and wet, and Mara surrendered to the novel sensation of being electrified by his touch, because for the longest time, she hadn’t thought anyone but Ryan could make her feel that way again.

do two kind-of boyfriends equal one whole one?

EVERY SUMMER SINCE ELIZA COULD REMEMBER, THE Meadow Club in Southampton held an amateur tennis tournament for its members. Over the years, the two-day event had grown from a private, low-key country club match to one of the most important stops on the tennis circuit, complete with an official corporate sponsor, and had since been dubbed the Rolex Invitational. The tourney was able to attract tennis stars like Andy Roddick and Lindsay Davenport, as well as former luminaries like Pete Sampras and Ivan Lendl, to compete for the grand prize, a silver plate and a ten-thousand-dollar check. However, this year, none of the players were famous or internationally ranked, much to the chagrin of the club, which counted on the publicity the stars garnered.

At the end of the week, everyone turned out to watch the men's and women's championships. A well-heeled crowd in Lacoste polos and cheerful madras prints watched as Philippe double faulted against his opponent, a hulking Swede.

Jacqui sat in the back with the kids, whom she'd bribed with ice cream bars. She knew how badly Philippe wanted to win the championship, but this was not going well. In the front box, Jacqui noticed Anna Perry watching the game with interest as well. Even though Jacqui knew she had to stay away from Philippe, there was something about watching Anna watch him that made her want him more. She still remembered the way he'd kissed her on the pool table. As much as she tried, Jacqui couldn't shake the memory.

* * *

On the adjoining court, Eliza was matching a two-time NCAA champ from Stanford serve for serve. She'd won the semifinal in a nail-biting sudden-death round, and it was a total thrill to be in the finals. She'd never expected this. Eliza looked up at the stands, enjoying being the center of attention for the first time all summer. She caught Ryan's eye and smiled at him in the front row, and then looked up again and saw Jeremy. She botched her serve, lobbing it into the net weakly.

Mara was sitting in the front box next to Garrett, directly opposite from Ryan, but she and Ryan weren't looking at each other. Sugar and Poppy were there as well, close to Mara. Eliza noticed that the three girls were wearing identical pastel Cynthia Rowley dresses. Totally weird—they'd hardly known Mara existed last summer.

Eliza shook the distractions from her head. This was it: last set. The Stanford champ sent a liner down the middle. Eliza sent it back with a powerful crash. Game. Set. Match. And just

like that, Eliza won.

* * *

The NCAA champ was giving interviews in the locker room, trying to explain away her loss to a high school student, so Eliza ducked in, took a quick shower, and changed into a tiny Sabbia Rosa camisole and white Chloé jeans. She ran out to the hallway, hoping to avoid her surly opponent.

“Hey, good game!”

Eliza looked around. Ryan was standing underneath the archway with a bouquet of flowers.

“Ryan! Thanks!” She smiled, flushed and happy to see him. “Are those for me?”

Ryan handed the flowers over and they hugged warmly. Ryan was leaning down to kiss Eliza on the cheek when another hand tapped her on the shoulder. She turned to find Jeremy, smiling a little warily at her.

“Hey!” Eliza enthused, throwing her arms around Jeremy’s neck.

“You were great on that court,” Jeremy whispered.

Eliza smiled into Jeremy’s polo shirt, almost forgetting that he’d completely blown her off ever since dinner with her parents. Ryan coughed, and Eliza remembered her manners.

“Jeremy, you know Ryan Perry, right? He’s an old friend of mine,” Eliza explained, a little nervously.

“Sure. I used to work for you guys,” Jeremy said, taking Ryan’s hand.

“How are you, man?” Ryan asked. The two of them clenched hands, smiling tightly at each other. Ryan affected a relaxed pose that Eliza could tell was just an act.

“Oh, Eliza, this is Carolyn,” Jeremy said, turning to introduce a tall, auburn-haired girl behind him. “Eliza Thompson, Carolyn Flynn.”

Eliza handed Ryan the bouquet so she could shake hands with Jeremy’s friend.

“You should turn pro,” Carolyn said. “That was amazing.”

“Thanks—you’re sweet. You know, you look familiar,” Eliza said, narrowing her eyes. “You went to Spence, didn’t you?”

“I think I was a year older,” Carolyn agreed.

“And you two know each other?” Eliza asked, gesturing from Carolyn to Jeremy.

“We’re both interning at Morgan,” Jeremy explained.

Eliza felt her jaw muscles tighten from having to smile so much. It was so great to see Jeremy—finally. And she was so touched he’d actually remembered the tennis tournament, but it sort of seemed like he was here . . . with a date.

“I’m sorry I haven’t been by the club,” Jeremy was saying. “Work has been killer.”

“That’s okay,” Eliza said. “Make it up to me tonight at Seventh Circle?”

He nodded. “I’ll be there.”

“Me too,” said Ryan, still holding the bouquet of flowers, but Eliza was already gone.

forbidden love is the greatest aphrodisiac

JACQUI RAPPED ON THE DOOR. SHE KNEW PHILIPPE was sulking inside. Having lost the game in the most humiliating manner—6–0, 6–0, 6–3—he had stormed off the court. But watching Anna watch him at the game, Jacqui decided that she might just want to help him feel . . . better. She opened the door and walked in, just as Anna Perry was walking out.

“Oh! Excuse me!” Jacqui said. “I was just—”

“The children’s wing is that way, Jacqui,” Anna said in a cold voice.

“Yes, I . . . I was just looking for Cody’s blanket,” Jacqui said, hurrying away. She ran down the hallway, and when Anna’s footsteps receded, she tiptoed quickly back to Philippe’s door.

“Hurry, open up, it’s me,” she whispered.

“It’s open,” he whispered back.

She walked in to find Philippe lying on his bed, smoking a cigarette and looking a little more relaxed than he had earlier when he’d thrown his racket against the concrete and pushed away the TV cameras.

“What was that about?” she asked.

“What?” Philippe replied.

“Anna.” Jacqui motioned over her shoulder.

“Who?”

“Our boss. Was she just with you?”

Philippe shrugged.

Jacqui pressed her lips tightly together. Looking at Philippe now, completely sweaty from the match, his honey blond hair damp and stuck to his handsome face, she could hardly resist him. Knowing she wasn’t supposed to be with him made her want him even more. But if he really was having an affair with Anna Perry, then that was another story.

“Don’t worry about Anna Perry,” Philippe said, practically reading her mind. “It’s not your concern. Can I help it if she is attracted to me? But me, I am not attracted to her, so there is nothing between us.”

“That’s not what I was thinking,” Jacqui lied.

Philippe took a drag from his cigarette, letting the smoke whirl around them. “Really.” He smiled.

Jacqui smiled back. God, he was hot. “Well, how are you feeling? Are you okay?” she asked gently.

“It’s just a game,” he said, stubbing out his cigarette and readjusting his head against a pillow.

“Well, I’m sorry.” Jacqui looked at the door, nervous that Anna would come back at any minute.

“I’m sorry too,” Philippe said. “But as Americans say, you win some, you lose some, *n’est-ce pas?*” He smiled impishly. “What are you doing here, anyway?” he asked. “I have to lose a tennis match to get your attention?”

“Well, you’ve been kind of busy with someone else,” Jacqui said, sitting down on the side of the bed.

“Anna Perry again! What do I have to do to make you believe there is nothing between me and that woman?” Philippe asked, throwing up his arms.

“Prove it,” Jacqui taunted, her full lips parting into a sexy smile.

Philippe pulled her toward him. “Is this what you want?” he asked, between kisses.

Jacqui responded by kissing him ardently back. He slid his hand up the back of her shirt, but she pushed him away. “No—not now . . .” she said, looking at the door again.

“When?” Philippe asked.

“We’ll figure something out,” Jacqui said, smoothing her hair and kissing him one last time.

She stuck her head out the door. The coast was clear. She ran out the door, just as Dr. Abraham was walking purposefully toward his room. As she shuffled down the hallway toward the kids’ wing, Jacqui heard them talking and wondered what that was all about. Philippe was one popular boy.

mara acquires a perry sister nickname

NEVER JUDGE A BOOK BY ITS COVER. THAT WAS WHAT MARA had always been taught, growing up in a small town like Sturbridge. Her parents were heavily into clichéd sayings, such as *Still waters run deep* and *The Lord helps those who help themselves*, which her mother had embroidered and framed in their kitchen. For the most part, Mara abided by the first one—she was always willing to give people a second chance.

Look at Garrett Reynolds. She'd assumed he was some rich playboy who only had one thing on his mind, but he'd turned out to be genuinely interested in her. So, she'd been wrong about Garrett. Could it be possible she'd been wrong about Poppy and Sugar as well?

It had started innocently enough, when she and Garrett had attended Charlie Borshok's birthday party, at Sugar's invitation. They'd had a decent time, and the twins hadn't mentioned one thing about her being an au pair. In fact, unlike last summer, they were treating her like one of them. Poppy, who'd recently come back from a "spa" in Arizona with a pumped-up chest and her hair dyed dark chocolate brown, was especially friendly after the Nipplegate incident. "It's good to be a little controversial—it keeps people interested," she'd told Mara.

Poppy knew all about controversy. Since she had been overlooked by the reality show, Poppy had tried to recapture the spotlight through alternative means. First up: a line of scented candles inspired by her oh-so-glamorous life. Fragrances included New York City Musk, which unfortunately smelled exactly like its name; Last Call, which smelled like the backroom of a bar; and Fame, made from poisonous elderberries and cloyingly sweet gardenias. It didn't seem to bother their parents that neither of the twins was planning on going back to high school in the fall. As Sugar put it, they could always get their GEDs just like everybody else in Hollywood.

The night of the launch party for Sniffers by Poppy Perry at Seventh Circle, Poppy had totaled the family's Mercedes SUV. Kevin had not been pleased and had told the girls that they could either drive the Volvo or pay for a new car themselves. Unwilling to raid their own trust funds, the twins had asked Mara if she'd mind if they joined her in that sweet little 7-series BMW convertible she was tooling around town in.

They were the last two girls on earth that Mara had ever thought she would like—but since they were invited to all the same parties and were friends with Garrett's friends, and there was no one else for Mara to hang out with anyway, it just seemed natural. Even though Eliza had told Mara not to worry about it, Mara and Eliza hadn't hung out since that night at

Seventh Circle. Mara was upset that Eliza was harboring a grudge, but she didn't know how to resolve their quarrel.

Later that evening, Mara was sitting on Sugar's platform bed, the three of them trying on clothes and putting on makeup.

"This is gorgeous," Mara said, fingering a daringly low-cut white Versace dress in Sugar's closet.

"I know, it's like, my fave," Sugar said. "I can't wear it anymore, though. It's been in too many magazines. And I'd give it to Pop, but it won't fit her anymore because of, you know"—she laughed, pointing at her sister's chest—"the surgery."

"Shut up! They still *huuuurt*," Poppy whined, rubbing her breasts. "Mara, you try it on," Poppy encouraged. "I bet it'll look amazing on you. C'mon."

"I couldn't!" Mara said, although she was already stepping out of her shorts and pulling up the dress over her hips.

"What are you wearing tonight?"

"I hadn't decided." Mara said, zipping up the white Versace.

"Oh my God. Poppy, look!"

"Oh. My. God."

"What?" Mara asked, "Does it look stupid?"

Poppy turned Mara to the full-length mirror. "Doesn't she look like a ripe, juicy, perfectly sweet little plum?" she asked her sister.

"Totally," Sugar drawled. "She is *such* a plum."

"Plum—that's it! Your new name! That's what we're going to call you from now on. No offense, but 'Mara' is so boring," Poppy said with her hand on her hip.

"That dress is made for you. You know what? You look so good in it, you should keep it," Sugar told her grandly.

Poppy nodded enthusiastically. "You look like that Russian model Natalia Something!"

"Really? You think so?" Mara blushed. She looked at herself in the mirror. It was the same dress Eliza had worn to P. Diddy's birthday bash last year, and Mara remembered wondering where Eliza had gotten it. Now she knew.

"Darling, it's yours. A present," Sugar said. "Anything for our Plum."

"Hey, do you guys know if Ryan is seeing anyone?" Mara asked, suddenly. She'd noticed that Allison had stopped coming over to the house lately.

Sugar shrugged, and Poppy looked blank.

"Not that we know of," Sugar assured, winking at Poppy when Mara turned around.

“C’mon, we gotta go to the club,” Poppy said. “I’ll drive,” she declared, jangling Mara’s BMW keys.

* * *

Eliza stood outside the club, manning her little four-foot-square empire, shivering in yet another skimpy outfit. She recognized the BMW that pulled up, but why was Poppy driving it? Poppy threw the keys to the valet, and Sugar slid out of the passenger side. The twins posed for a few shots, completely ignoring Eliza in order to squeal hellos to Kartik.

“Hey, wait up!”

Eliza turned to see Mara climb out of the back door of her car, running unevenly after the twins. Eliza grabbed Mara’s arm as she walked past. “What, we don’t say hello anymore?”

“Eliza! I didn’t see you!” Mara squealed, in pitch-perfect imitation of Sugar’s signature greeting. “Congratulations on the win today. You rocked!”

“Plum! Get your ass over here!” Poppy yelled from the entrance to the club.

“Coming!” Mara screeched, running over. “Bye-ye!”

Plum? Eliza wondered. Who the hell was *Plum*? Eliza stared at Mara’s retreating back. Was she just imagining things, or was Mara wearing Sugar’s white Versace dress? *In front of Sugar?*

As Eliza watched, dark-haired Mara and newly brunette Poppy flanked platinum blond Sugar, and the three of them stepped into the club, leaving Eliza outside in the cold.

a spoonful of sugar makes the medicine go down

JEREMY HAD PROMISED HE WOULD BE THERE, BUT IT WAS way after midnight and there was no sign of him anywhere. Eliza checked her cell phone again, just to make sure she hadn't missed any of his calls. She walked through the club, checking to see how many tables she had left in the VIP room. It irritated her to see Mara ensconced in the best banquette in the house, bookended by the Perry twins, holding court with several of the richest young swans of Manhattan society. And it irritated Eliza that she was irritated. She didn't want to be jealous of Mara, but there was something just a little off-putting about seeing her friend—whom Eliza knew couldn't even spell Hermès last year—hanging out with the teenage heiress to the venerable French couture house. Mara was hobnobbing with the crème de la crème of the junior elite, and not only that, she looked like she totally belonged there.

The girl looked seriously chic. Mara was wearing Sugar's white Versace dress with a pair of flat-heeled Imitation of Christ gladiator sandals, and she was holding a slick little art deco cigarette case for a purse. Eliza was wearing her mother's decades-old Alaïa halter dress. The dress was a metallic, thigh-high mock turtleneck with a racer back. It was so tight it hugged Eliza's every curve, and she'd worn it to remind Jeremy what he'd been missing all summer. When she'd gotten dressed that evening, Eliza had felt pretty good about herself, but now she just felt average.

"Hey, cool dress," Sugar said, catching up with Eliza in the coed restroom, a shiny stainless steel room with an industrial trough for a sink.

"Thanks, it's vintage," Eliza said, feeling gratified. Although she hated to admit it, she had missed Sugar's attention. Sugar could be a real bitch when she wanted to—Eliza still remembered how nasty she had been when she'd found out Eliza was working for the Perrys—but she could also turn on the charm when she wanted to. And for some reason, she was doing it now.

"Groovy," Sugar nodded, rinsing her hands. "Congrats, by the way."

"Thanks," Eliza sighed. She was happy she'd won—she could certainly use the money, and she loved being in the spotlight—but it bothered her that it was already one in the morning and Jeremy still hadn't shown up like he'd promised.

"What's wrong, doll?" Sugar asked, powdering her nose out of a T. LeClerc compact.

"Nothing," Eliza shrugged. "I just . . . There was a guy I was supposed to meet here tonight."

“Our old gardener?” Sugar asked, not unkindly.

“Yeah,” Eliza nodded, frowning at her reflection in the mirror.

“I thought you were with Ryan,” Sugar said.

“Who told you that?” Eliza asked, startled. They’d only hooked up once earlier in the summer, and neither of them was planning to do it again.

Sugar smiled mysteriously. “He *is* my brother, you know. And there was that whole thing with you guys down in PB.”

Eliza looked crestfallen. She’d forgotten the twins knew about that. “It’s nothing. We’re not together.”

“Why not?” Sugar asked, leaning against the sink and folding her arms across her chest. “He’s not good enough for you?”

“No, it’s not that. Of course not.”

“Then you guys should just be together,” Sugar decided, as if she’d resolved a complicated matter.

“But what about Mara?” Eliza asked anxiously.

Sugar rolled her eyes. “You think Mara doesn’t know about you guys?”

“Mara knows?” Eliza asked, a little taken aback. Why hadn’t she said anything to Eliza then? Because she was mad? Or because she honestly didn’t care anymore?

“It’s *so* not a big deal. She’s with Garrett now,” Sugar declared, pecking Eliza on the cheek. “See ya.”

* * *

Much later that night, after all the celebrities had departed and Sugar’s entourage—including Mara—had left Seventh Circle for a party at Jet East, Eliza saw that she had a message from Jeremy. She went outside to listen to it. Apparently, he’d been stuck at a benefit with his boss that he’d thought he’d be able to get out of. Blah, blah, blah. Eliza heard glasses clinking and girls laughing in the background. He said he was really sorry. Sure he was. Eliza erased the message, too angry and disappointed to care anymore.

She walked inside to the VIP room, where she saw Ryan Perry, who was sitting by himself at a corner table. She sat down next to him, noticing the bouquet of flowers he’d tried to give her earlier. This time, she would remember to accept them.

they shoot models, don't they?

“WHAT’S SO FUNNY?” MARA ASKED, ARRIVING LATE TO meet Jacqui and Philippe and the kids for lunch at Jeff & Eddy’s. She’d spent the morning getting pedicures with Sugar and Poppy, and she felt slightly guilty that she’d ditched work again.

“That woman over there just asked us if we were models,” Jacqui explained, rolling her eyes and holding up a thick business card. Mara turned to see Mitzi Goober waving enthusiastically at their table. Mara blew kisses in her direction. “What did Mitzi want?” she asked.

“She wants us to work at this show,” Philippe explained, handing Mara an invitation.

Mara read the engraved lettering. It was an invitation to a charity fashion show at the Bridgehampton Polo Club next week. She’d received one the other day in the mail, with a front-row seat designation. Sugar and Poppy had been talking about the event nonstop since then—apparently, it was going to be one of the biggest events of the summer. “You guys should do it,” Mara said.

“Modeling is so silly,” Jacqui declared, cutting up Cody’s string beans.

Mitzi Goober rushed over, air-kissing Mara’s cheeks. “So, you guys are all set, right? Reinaldo is going to love you guys. Seriously, it would be such a huge favor, since a couple of the models couldn’t get their visas renewed in time.”

“So it’s a favor? What will you do for me in return?” Philippe asked, smiling wickedly.

“Oooh, you’re a bad boy,” Mitzi cooed. “I like that. What do I have to do?”

“We’ll do it,” Jacqui said flatly, cutting in. Did Philippe have to flirt with everybody in sight? Philippe was supposed to be hers—even if all they’d done was sneak a few kisses here and there since the tennis tourney. If agreeing to walk in the show was all it took to get rid of this annoying girl, she was happy to do it. Plus, Eliza and Mara were both going to be there, and Jacqui wished the three of them would get their asses together and be best friends again.

“Fabu!” Mitzi said, blowing air-kisses all around. “See you later, lover. I’ll get us a room,” she joked, growling at Philippe.

A room, huh?

Now there was an idea.

booty calls totally don't count

IF ANYONE EVER ASKED, ELIZA WOULD TELL THEM SHE WAS totally not in love with Ryan Perry. Not at all. They both had their reasons for wanting to keep their relationship—if that was even a word for what they were doing—quiet.

After Jeremy flaked the night of the tennis tourney and Eliza found out Mara knew—and didn't care—about her and Ryan, it just felt natural to do it again. He'd brought her flowers, for goodness' sake. That night they'd gone back to the Perry estate and, well, the next thing she'd known, they were naked. That was the third time that year. Maybe it was a pattern?

The next morning, Eliza had sneaked out of Ryan's room, taking care not to use the side stairway that led to the back of the house that the au pairs often used. Even though Sugar said Mara knew, she was paranoid about bumping into her. Eliza couldn't totally shake the feeling that fooling around with Ryan was like playing with someone else's toys.

Now, ten days later, Eliza was getting more comfortable with the idea. They'd hooked up a few more times, and it had been fun and casual. The other night, after 50 Cent celebrated his album release at Seventh Circle, Ryan had popped over to the club around closing, and they'd gone back to her place, ostensibly to watch a DVD again, but somehow things had gotten kind of friendly. A couple of days later, he'd called her on her night off and asked if she wanted to come over for *Godfather III*. She hadn't really felt like it (Sofia Coppola might be a great director now but she was a bad actress, Eliza thought), but she'd found herself there anyway. Eliza decided that hooking up with Ryan was like eating standing up in front of the fridge. It didn't count. Zero calories.

Except her parents were being so annoying about the two of them, treating Ryan like her boyfriend, which he was so not. One night, Ryan came over and the two of them microwaved a pizza and hung out by the pool instead of going to a party at the PlayStation2House like they'd planned. Her parents had gotten home early from some charity shindig, and her mom and dad hadn't been able to stop making a big deal out of him being there. Of course, Ryan was an old family friend and all, but still. Her mom winked at the two of them, and then the next morning her dad said Ryan could come over to visit any time he liked, which was interesting, since after Jeremy had come over for dinner, her dad had said maybe it wasn't such a good idea to have people around the house since it wasn't theirs. Eliza supposed that had to do with Ryan being the right sort of person to have around, and Jeremy the wrong sort—according to her parents' logic, anyway.

Not that Jeremy even tried to see her anymore—she'd hardly heard from him since the night of the tournament. Of course, that didn't stop her from checking her messages

obsessively.

“Who’re you calling?” Ryan asked, shoving a handful of kettle corn in his mouth and spilling crumbs all over the carpet. He’d picked her up from work that night, and now they were just hanging out, watching TV.

“Just checking my messages,” Eliza said.

Ryan nodded. On the screen, a popular actress was explaining away her latest disastrous relationship to Oprah during the show’s 3 A.M. repeat.

The thing was, it was fun doing whatever it was she was doing with Ryan. It was fun when he picked her up from the club, since everyone knew him or knew of him, and all the waitresses and bartenders thought he was such a doll. It was fun not worrying about anything. Even the guilt over Mara was getting more distant every day. Sugar had said Mara knew and didn’t care, so it wasn’t like Eliza was doing anything wrong. Being with Ryan reminded her of her old life in New York, when she would kiss any boy she wanted to, just because she could.

“Hey, isn’t that Sugar?” Eliza asked, looking up at the screen from her list of text messages. It was the E! reality show. They were covering the tennis match.

Ryan grunted in a disapproving manner. He was about to change the channel when something caught his eye. Eliza saw it too—Mara, in the corner of the screen, staring longingly at something—or someone. And when the camera panned to where she was looking, there was Ryan, sitting in the stands, intently watching the game.

Huh.

the best things in life are (still) free

“TELL ME THOSE AREN’T REAL!” MEGAN PRACTICALLY screamed, lunging at Mara’s ears as she pulled her hair into a ponytail. “They’re the size of ice cubes!”

The day of the benefit fashion show, Mara had received two visitors: her sister Megan, toting a huge battered suitcase and a fifteen-pound bag of makeup, and a brown-uniformed messenger bearing a small black bag. Inside the bag was a velvet case with a pair of ten-carat diamond earrings worth two hundred and fifty thousand dollars, on loan from one of Mitzi’s new clients.

Now they were on their way to Jean-Luc East, where Mara was friendly with the owner. “Yup. Nicole Kidman wore them to the Oscars,” Mara responded. “I’m supposed to wear them tonight.”

After the two were seated at one of the best tables in the restaurant, Mara’s sister filled her in on the latest news from Sturbridge—trouble on Dad’s construction site, Mom’s work at the church rummage sale—but it all sounded so small-town and hokey to Mara’s ears that she found herself spacing out without meaning to.

“And the Infusium sales rep is so cute!” Megan squealed, getting Mara’s attention. Every week the salon got a delivery of beauty products, and the Infusium rep—a nice Irish guy named Bobby O’Donnell—was Megan’s current crush.

Mara looked at her sister from behind her oversized Chanel frames: Megan was taller than Mara, with red, curly hair and a loopy Julia-Roberts-like grin. She was fearsomely pretty, whip-smart, and in love with a guy who delivered boxes of shampoo and conditioner for a living. What gave?

“You can do a lot better than Bobby O’Donnell,” Mara said, cutting short any more discussion on the beauty product sales rep. She’d forgotten how boring life was back home. Had it always been that way?

After lunch, Mara opened her handbag and left a few bills on the table, dismissing Megan’s charge card. “I got paid today,” she explained, patting a fat brown envelope.

They spent the rest of the day browsing among the East Hampton shops and then returned to the Perry house in time to get ready for the show. Mara looked at herself in the mirror. She was wearing a skinny Christian Dior evening dress with hand-beaded pearls and a feathered hemline. Scott Barnes, the famous makeup artist, and one of Mitzi’s clients, had arrived to do her makeup. He’d attached custom fox-fur lashes to hers, just like he did for J.Lo., and Edward Tricomi, who’d given half of Hollywood their shaggy cuts, had personally

cut and styled her hair for the evening. On top of that, she was wearing ten carats' worth of flawless ice on each of her earlobes.

Megan came out of the bathroom. "Isn't this the best?" she said. "I got it from Loehmann's!"

She was wearing a Marc Jacobs mod minidress with big plastic buttons and knee-high white go-go boots. It had been a huge hit . . . *two* seasons ago.

"Why don't you borrow something from me?" Mara asked, motioning to the racks of clothes that were stuffed with the latest fashions. "Really, I don't mind."

"Are you kidding? I bought this especially for tonight!"

Mara groaned. Her outfit practically screamed, "Over," which wasn't exactly what you wanted your fashion show ensemble to say. Mara knew it was wrong, but for the first time, she felt a little embarrassed to be related to her sister.

don't hate them because they're beautiful

BACKSTAGE, THE DESIGNER'S ASSISTANT, WHOSE REAL name was Octavian, but who preferred to be addressed as "Miss O," gathered the models around. "Listen, people!" he yelled. "Boys! Wear your willies down! Girls, you are ski bunnies on vacation! *Hot, hot, hot!* Got it? Okay? Okay!"

Jacqui stood in her first outfit, a skimpy thong-tank top combination and a pair of very low-cut bootleg jeans. The tank top stopped about halfway down the midriff, so that in the back was merely a thin line of fabric that tucked into the jeans' waistband.

She nearly hadn't made it to the show, and now she wasn't all that pleased that she had. When she and Philippe had agreed to model, they had completely overlooked the fact that they would need to be there the whole day. The only thing that had saved them was an overnight retreat for the kabala camp that Anna had insisted the kids attend. She was determined to have the kids befriend Lourdes and Rocco, who were rumored to be in attendance as well.

At the show, Jacqui couldn't believe how stupidly they were being treated. All the production assistants and wardrobe dressers talked to them very slowly, as if they were children, or mentally challenged, or mentally challenged children. Each model had a team of no fewer than three people to herd him or her from makeup to hair to dressing station.

Octavian ran over. "Jacqui! I've been looking for you. Reinaldo has a new vision for the finale." He herded her over to the hair dock, where intrepid stylists were turning the girls' manes into gravity-defying rats' nests, and the lead designer, Reinaldo, was approving each model's updo.

"So, I was thinking," Reinaldo said, touching Jacqui's silky black hair, "what about Sinéad, with a little Good Charlotte thrown in?"

"Divine!" Miss O agreed.

Jacqui sat on the chair, looking quizzically at the two of them.

The hair stylist held a razor in his hand. "Darling, how do you feel about a Mohawk?" he asked.

"You can't be serious!" Jacqui said, reaching up protectively to cover her head. Her long, lustrous black hair!

“It is imperative!” Reinaldo declared, suddenly positive. “Punk-rock wedding, retro meets old-school. Have you seen the movie . . .” he said, frowning and snapping his fingers. “*Star Wars: Attack of the Clones?*”

“More like a fauxhawk, you know, spiky but messy,” Octavian nodded. “Richard Avedon meets Helmut Newton in a Baz Luhrmann fantasy!”

“Genius!” the hairstylist pronounced.

Before Jacqui could reply, he was shaving into the side of her scalp. It hurt, and a few minutes later, a broom was sweeping up Jacqui’s hair, and she was stricken, looking at herself in the mirror.

She’d always taken her looks for granted—but this? She reached up, feeling the downy duck’s back that her scalp had become.

“Perfecto! Beautiful!” Octavian gushed.

Jacqui had never felt uglier in her entire life.

that's why they call it b-list, baby

THE BRIDGEHAMPTON POLO CLUB HAD SET UP A HUGE white tent for the fashion show in the middle of the polo field. A line of white tables greeted Mara and Megan at the entrance, and several guests were walking around drinking cocktails, their heels sinking into the grass. Mara spotted Eliza manning the first table and pulled Megan with her to the very front, pushing and murmuring “Excuse mes” while Megan apologized to everyone they jumped in front of. Alan and Kartik had “loaned” Eliza to Mitzi to help run the show, since half of Mitzi’s office had had an allergic reaction to a client’s new face cream. Apparently, unprocessed seaweed extracts were not for everybody.

“Are you sure this is okay?” Megan asked.

“Excuse me—sorry—excuse us. Sorry, could you move?” Mara asked, stepping forward without waiting for an answer.

Several Waspish socialites cast annoyed glances in their direction, which Mara ignored.

“’Liza!” Mara called.

Eliza, wearing her signature headset and a pretty black-and-white Temperley dress she’d bought with her tournament winnings, waved them over.

“See, I told you—she’s a friend of mine,” Mara said, not bothering to explain that Eliza had also been one of the au pairs the year before.

Mara pecked the air on either side of Eliza’s cheeks, while Eliza did the same to her. Things weren’t exactly normal between them, but on the other hand, they weren’t exactly estranged, either.

“Eliza, this is my sister Megan,” Mara said.

“Oh, hi!” Eliza smiled. “Wow, you guys look so much alike!”

“Really?” Mara asked, not sure if it was a compliment. Hanging around Sugar and Poppy had made her think everyone was always being sarcastic.

“You are gorgeous!” Eliza told Megan, and Mara felt relieved.

Eliza looked down at her clipboard, frowning. “I don’t see Megan on here,” she whispered to Mara.

“Um, you don’t?” Mara asked. She’d meant to ask Mitzi for a seat for her sister, but she’d completely forgotten.

Eliza glanced down. Several of the celebrities they'd been expecting still hadn't shown up, and there was a very slim chance that they would even make it.

"Follow me," Eliza said, pulling back the tent flap. The two Waters girls followed Eliza inside. A long white runway with plastic covering ran the length of the room, and on either side, white folding chairs were arranged in neat rows. Each chair held a small black bag filled with numerous beauty products and glossy magazines, but the bags in the front row were considerably larger than the others.

"Here you go," Eliza said, finding a seat with Mara's name on it. Eliza peeled off the name of a celebrity on the seat next to it. "Megan, you're here too."

"Thank you," Mara mouthed.

Megan plopped down, her eyes agog over the commotion. At the end of the stage, photographers were setting up their tripods and cameras, and a roving band of paparazzi were snapping pictures of the people seated in the front rows. There were famous fashion editors hiding behind their signature sunglasses; a cadre of young, mostly blond women wearing pastel-colored cashmere sweaters around their necks; and a smattering of famous actresses sitting in the best seats. Perky "news" correspondents from all the celebrity news shows and networks—*Access Hollywood*, *Entertainment Tonight*, *The Insider*, E!, VH1, the Style Network—were interviewing fashionistas, socialites, and celebrities.

Mara crossed her legs and angled her face for the best shot, knowing that they would soon make their way over to her and take her picture. She was pretending not to notice that her sister was already rooting in the goody bag and exclaiming over the items inside it.

"Look, Mar—free Kiehl's lip balm!" Megan said excitedly, showing her the loot.

Mara nodded, smiling. "It's the best," she agreed. She didn't mention that the company had sent her a carton of its products just the other day. Mara smiled at a tiny, curly-haired woman in enormous sunglasses who was sitting down next to Megan.

"Oh my God! I loved your show!" Megan said turning to look at the woman. "I'm totally a Carrie!"

"Thanks," the star replied modestly.

"Can I get your autograph?" Megan asked.

Mara almost died. Even though Sarah Jessica Parker happily obliged, Mara was embarrassed—celebrities totally didn't come to fashion shows to be hassled by fans. It didn't help that once the photographers had stopped taking Jessica Simpson's picture and started taking Sarah Jessica's, none of them even stopped to take a photo of Mara Waters.

Contrary to what Mara had grown to believe, she wasn't nearly as famous as she thought.

it's getting hot in where?

JACQUI TRIED NOT TO LOOK INTO THE MIRRORS THAT WERE everywhere backstage. Her hair! Her glorious, beautiful, thick, black hair! Gone! Replaced by some trendy haircut—a fauxhawk, the stylist had called it—a halfway, wussy Mohawk that was long in the middle and gelled to a point, while the sides were short and cropped. She ran her fingers over the rough edges, shuddering at the buzz cut on the nape of her neck. It felt like it belonged on a boy. But there was no more time to think about it, because the lights went down in the front of the house and Octavian was in front, yelling at all the models to get in line.

She tried to find her spot, her eyes bleary with almost-tears—how could she face the world with this ridiculous haircut? She readjusted her bodysuit thing—was it on backward?—pulling it off her shoulders and letting it hang around her waist.

“Jacqui?”

She turned around—completely topless. “Yes?”

“Oh! Hi! Oh!” Kit Ashleigh stood at the perimeter of the dressing area, his face turning purple. He was holding an enormous bouquet of flowers. “God! I’m so sorry!”

Jacqui folded her arms in front of her chest to cover up. “Kit!”

“I’m sorry I’m late. These are . . . for you,” he said, thrusting them at her and averting his eyes.

“They’re so beautiful! *Obrigado.*”

A dresser slipped the tank top–thong back over her shoulders, but it didn’t really make a difference. Jacqui was still very nude.

Kit did a double take. He’d just noticed her hair. “Your hair!”

“What do you think?” Jacqui said, nervously touching the ends. “Ugly, huh?”

“You look . . .” Kit’s eyes shone with admiration. “You look awesome.”

“You really think so?” Jacqui smiled, raising her eyebrows in a hopeful expression.

Just then, one of the production assistants spotted Kit. “No boyfriends here!” he said, ushering Kit out of the door.

“I’m not her . . .” Kit blushed again, to the roots of his blond hair. “You look beautiful. Good luck.”

“ ’Bye! Thanks!” she called, as her dresser straightened the thong string into the back of her pants.

Then something bronze and sculpted and perfect caught her eye—Philippe, in the middle of changing, his lean, tennis-toned body naked. He was doing pull-ups on a dressing rack, hanging—*ahem*—out there, for all the world to see, when Jacqui caught his eye.

He shot her a wolfish grin. “Nice haircut!” he called.

There were so many beautiful girls backstage, but for once, he was only looking at her. She ran to her place in line. The lights dimmed outside, and Reinaldo exhorted them to think, *Sex! Sex! Sex!*

After seeing Philippe naked, that wouldn’t be too hard.

musical chairs isn't just for kindergarten

A FASHION SHOW WAS THE LAST PLACE ELIZA WOULD HAVE thought to bump into Jeremy, but here he was anyway. She had been helping to keep track of the donation checks, cross-referencing them with the checked-off names on the list, when he appeared at the entrance with Carolyn Flynn. The two of them were huddled together in the second row—sponsor seats, since Morgan Stanley had underwritten most of the event—sipping from champagne flutes and looking around with bemused expressions.

Eliza was watching them, wondering if Carolyn and Jeremy were a couple, when she saw Ryan enter from a side door and slip into his seat beside his sisters. Eliza's heart melted a little bit. So what if Jeremy didn't like her anymore—she had Ryan, and he was a great friend/hookup/whatever-they-were. Ryan winked and gave her a little wave.

Eliza waved back, just as she was accosted by a heavysset woman who looked a little familiar. "Are you in charge here?" the woman demanded. She was wearing a faded black polo shirt and baggy black pants, and was holding a Motorola walkie-talkie.

"Er . . . yes, I suppose," Eliza said. "Can I help you?"

"My client, Chauncey Raven, is about to arrive," the woman said, and Eliza remembered where she'd seen the woman before. She was the pompous publicist who'd asked Eliza not to let Ondine Sylvester into the VIP room earlier in the summer.

"That's wonderful—we love Chauncey," Eliza said, giving her standard reply to the assistants of the famous.

"Well, yes, but I need to know where she's sitting. Those girls over there said all the front-row seats are taken."

"Oh!" Eliza exclaimed. *Shit*. The show was about to start in five minutes. Her headset squawked with Mitzi's grating voice "Eliza! Dollink! Code Blue! Chauncey Raven doesn't have a seat!"

The heavysset handler scowled at Eliza.

Eliza didn't know what to do. Mitzi's command to *fix it!* didn't really translate to anything helpful. How? Bring one seat from the second row up to the front? She scanned the room, which was filling up with guests, and settled on Mara and Megan. Surely they would understand how important it was to have Chauncey in the front row. Eliza click-clacked on her heels down the plastic-covered runway to where they were seated.

"Mar, can I talk to you for a sec?" Eliza asked, pulling on Mara's arm.

“What’s going on? Anything wrong?” Mara asked.

“Chauncey Raven is coming to the show.”

“Oh, great!” Mara had hung out with Chauncey so much at Seventh Circle, she considered her a friend.

“But there aren’t any more front-row seats left. I’m so, *so* sorry. But do you think we could move you and your sister back to the second row? I can put you guys right there, behind the Perry twins.”

Mara straightened up. “But why?” she asked, noticing the Perry twins whispering across the runway. Sugar and Poppy were smirking, checking out Megan, and Mara blushed to think of what the twins were saying about her sister’s outfit. She couldn’t believe Eliza was asking them to move. Mara had been in the Hamptons long enough to know that being asked to give up your seat was completely humiliating.

Chauncey Raven’s publicist gripped Eliza’s arm and whispered, “Chauncey is in the building! Now!”

“I’m really sorry to have to do this,” Eliza said, turning away from Mara and making a begging gesture to Megan. “But we have a really important celebrity attending who forgot to RSVP, and we really need these two front-row seats. I’m totally sorry, Megan.”

“No prob!” Megan said, beaming. “Who’s the celeb?”

“Really, Meg, you don’t have to get up,” Mara pressed, even as Eliza was helping Megan out of her seat.

“It’s for Chauncey Raven. Thank you, thank you, thank you,” Eliza said, handing Megan her things and moving her to the second row. “Oh. Except you have to leave the goody bag.”

Megan’s face fell. She noted the significantly smaller goody bag on the second-row seat.

“Okay, keep it,” Eliza said. “It’s fine.”

Chauncey arrived a full fifteen minutes later, with husband Daryl Wolf in tow. Since there was only one seat for the two of them, Chauncey promptly sat on her husband’s lap.

The room went pitch black, and suddenly, a booming bass line thundered from the overhead speakers, and a sultry British voice began to rap in a sexy coo. The lights went up, and the models strutted on the runway to the beat of the electroshock hip-hop song “Fuck the Pain Away.”

The crowd thrilled to the nasty lyrics and the tiny little outfits. Jacqui came out in her tank top—thong and new fauxhawk, and there was an electric shiver in the air. It was all so bad . . . yet so good. Not one outfit was wearable. Not one item of clothing had any reference to the lives of any of the women sitting in the audience. But it didn’t matter. The collection was a joyous celebration of sex and youth, and it would garner rave reviews in the papers. By the time the collection hit department stores, the sheer shirts would be lined, the miniskirts cut to a more modest length, and the tank top—thongs—well, they were really only for show.

Eliza put two fingers in her mouth and whistled, looking back to where Mara was sitting. But she didn't see Mara, only Chauncey Raven, who was seated sideways on her husband's lap, completely blocking Mara's view of the runway.

And that's what being a bitch will get you.

blood may be thicker than water, but nothing beats a VIP table

ONCE THE SHOW WAS OVER AND REINALDO HAD TAKEN his bows, there was a stampede toward the reception on the grounds of the country club. Garrett had arrived just as the show ended and given Megan a once-over before completely dismissing her from his attention. Mara gave Megan her goody bag to hold so she could say hello to her friends.

Once the real celebrities had departed and Garrett appeared at her side, the paparazzi finally noticed her. Mara saw that Megan seemed to be feeling awkward, but Mara had to say hello to so many people—gossip columnists, magazine editors, the various publicity handlers whose clients' designs Mara had worn at some point during the summer.

“Dollink!” Mara screeched, saying hello to a slightly overweight girl in a tight Liberty print. She had finally figured out what Mitzi was saying to her all the time—“darling,” in an affected British accent. Not that it had stopped her from copying it. “You look fabulous!” Mara said.

When the girl turned away, however, she whispered to Garrett, Megan, and anyone else who was in earshot, “If you call wearing a tablecloth fabulous!”

Garrett laughed, and the Perry twins sauntered over to join the fun.

“Oh, wow,” Sugar said, when she saw Megan’s outfit. “I *loved* that dress.”

“Really?” Megan asked. “Thanks.”

“Yeah, last season,” Sugar snickered. “I gave mine away to Goodwill.”

Mara pretended not to hear that. She had told Megan to borrow something from her closet, and this was exactly why.

Megan excused herself to check out the buffet, giving Mara a hurt look. Mara shared a cigarette with Sugar.

“God, who can eat at a place like this?” Sugar asked.

Mara shrugged. “Should we go to Dragonbar now?” she asked, referring to the real after-party that only a select few had been invited to, including the three of them.

Several of Sugar and Poppy’s friends, including an heiress to a large pharmaceutical fortune, joined their circle. “Hey, Plum, isn’t that your sister?” she asked, pointing to Megan,

who was having trouble juggling two cocktail-sized plates filled with stuffed mushrooms and crab legs.

“Um, uh, well . . . not exactly,” Mara replied, feeling uncomfortable.

Megan didn’t hear what she said, but someone else did. Mara looked up to see Ryan Perry staring at her, shaking his head.

“Hi, Ryan,” she said, blowing smoke in his face.

“I never would have believed it,” he said.

“Excuse me?”

“You’ve become one of . . . *them*,” he said, motioning to the crowd. “My sisters are bad enough, but you . . . I always thought you were different.”

“What do you mean by *that*?” Mara asked, but Ryan had already turned and was walking away.

Mara looked around, hoping someone else had heard their conversation and could confirm how totally out of line Ryan was, but there was no one near her, save for a waiter who didn’t look exactly pleased to be there. She went back to sit next to Garrett and watched Ryan say hi to Eliza. Megan caught up with her, still holding a plateful of appetizers.

“Mar, I’m exhausted. I think I’m going to go home early,” Megan said, looking deflated. “And I think I’ll just take the earliest bus back to Sturbridge tomorrow.”

Mara was still distracted by Ryan’s words “You’re just like them.” *Like who?* Megan was talking, but Mara wasn’t listening. “Um, okay, sure,” she nodded, distracted.

“Mara, didn’t you hear me? I’m going,” Megan said.

But Mara only reached into her purse and handed Megan the keys. “The top lock sticks a bit—you have to turn it twice,” she said.

Megan nodded, swallowing. “Well. Okay. I guess I’ll see you when you get home at the end of the summer then,” she said.

“Yeah,” Mara replied, standing up to give her sister an awkward hug good-bye. *Just like them?* Who was *them*—Sugar and Poppy? What was so wrong about that? They were his sisters, after all. Mara looked at them and then back at herself. Sure, they were all wearing metallic sandals and asymmetrical minidresses, but that didn’t mean they were the same. *Looks can be deceiving*, Mara said to herself. Ryan should have known that better than anyone.

“Is she gone?” Garrett asked, sidling up to Mara.

“Yeah,” Mara said. “She was really tired.”

“Good,” Garrett said, rubbing her back.

Mara flicked the ashes off her cigarette into an empty wineglass since the ashtray was so far away. Across the room, she spotted Eliza and Ryan huddled in a corner with Ryan’s friends. Eliza was sitting right next to Ryan, so that their thighs were pressed tightly against each

other's, and Eliza was brushing his bangs out of his face—anyone who saw them would think they were a couple.

See, looks can be deceiving, she repeated to herself again.

Then again, sometimes things are just the way they appear.

i'll break your stupid french face

ELIZA BUMPED INTO KIT, WHO WAS NURSING A DOUBLE scotch, when she arrived at Dragonbar. “Hey, dude, what’s wrong?” she asked.

Kit motioned to where Jacqui was huddled in a corner with a crew of glamazons.

Everyone else at the party was dressed like gilded lilies, but the true beauties—Jacqui included—were lounging in sweats and sneakers. Jacqui was sitting squarely on Philippe’s lap.

“C’mon, let me buy you another drink,” Eliza said. “Maker’s Mark, right?”

Kit nodded, shaking the ice cubes in his now empty glass.

Philippe walked up next to them. He nodded to Eliza. “*’Allo*. I think we have met before, yes?” he asked flirtatiously.

“Yes,” Eliza nodded, smiling.

Philippe was still wearing makeup, which looked totally goofy up close. He nodded to the bartender and ordered a cosmopolitan.

“Philippe, this is my friend Kit. Kit, this is Philippe. He’s one of the au pairs this summer at the Perrys’,” Eliza explained.

“Hey,” Kit said, watching as Philippe took a big slurp of his girly cocktail. The model in eyeliner was a pink-drink man. “You with that girl?” Kit asked, motioning to Jacqui.

Philippe cocked an eyebrow. “What if I am?” he asked.

“Well, she’s a friend of mine,” Kit said, trying not to let his voice betray more anger than he was feeling.

“Oh yes?” Philippe raised his eyebrows.

“Yeah. And if you break her heart, I’ll break your stupid French face,” Kit snarled, poking a finger at Philippe’s chest and sloshing the pink drink down his silly **MODELS SUCK** T-shirt.

“*Merde*,” Philippe cursed, turning away without a response, wiping at the pink stain on his T-shirt as he walked away.

“Don’t worry about it, baby,” Jacqui said, when he sat back down. “We’ll get you out of that T-shirt soon enough.”

eliza does the relationship math

IT WASN'T THAT HE DIDN'T INTRODUCE HER TO HIS best friend from prep school—Matt Hooper, whom he'd mentioned a couple of times. He certainly did. He'd said, "Hey, Matt, this is Eliza." And Eliza had smiled up at Matt, and Matt had said, "Yo," and taken a seat. That was it. He didn't give her the special once-over or the subtle nod that said, *So, you're my buddy's girl*. Eliza was just Eliza. Just some chick sitting next to Ryan at a club.

They'd been hooking up for more than a month now, and while she didn't expect Ryan to introduce her as his girlfriend . . . she wasn't *not* his girlfriend either. When they'd first gotten together, she'd still thought of Ryan as Mara's boyfriend. But since Mara was so obviously Garrett's new girlfriend, that made Ryan . . . *her* boyfriend? Eliza mentally calculated what Ryan had done for her—picked her up from the club so she wouldn't have to drive, called her every evening, never made plans to see her on the weekend because it was already assumed that he would, of course, see her on the weekend. He'd even given her that necklace before they left Palm Beach. Maybe Eliza was crazy, but it sure sounded like girlfriend status to her.

And if she was his girlfriend, why didn't he say so? Why didn't he tell his friends about her? Why didn't any of them realize that she wasn't merely Ryan's date for the evening, or Ryan's friend, but the girl he went home with every night? Suddenly, Eliza stopped feeling confused, and started feeling incredibly . . . *dissed*.

"Ryan, can I talk to you for a second?" Eliza asked.

"Sure, babe," Ryan nodded, smiling.

"I mean, just the two of us?" she clarified.

Eliza led him to a corner of the club. "What exactly do you think we're doing?"

"Having a drink?" Ryan shrugged, still smiling warmly at her.

"No, I mean . . . the two of us . . . you know."

"Oh." Ryan's face went blank for a second; then he realized that Eliza was looking at him intently. "Well, the way I see it"—Ryan waggled his eyebrows, obviously trying to make light of the situation—"we're like friends . . ."

Uh-huh.

". . . with benefits. You know . . ." He shrugged his shoulders and tried a winning smile.

"Benefits? What kind of benefits?" Eliza demanded. She knew the term, but she was angry enough to demand that he give her his explanation of it.

“You know . . . we’re friends who like . . . hook up and stuff.” Ryan grinned. “C’mon, let me get you another drink.”

Where the hell did Ryan Perry get off being so casual about them? “So that’s all I am? A hookup? A booty call?” Eliza spat.

“E, don’t be that way,” Ryan said, putting his arms around her to calm her down. “C’mon, it’s not what you think. Don’t be mad. You knew what we were doing, right?”

“Fuck you, Ryan!” Eliza blinked back tears. She wasn’t cheap, but that’s exactly how she felt like right now.

“Eliza . . . wait . . . Eliza!” Ryan stammered. “C’mon . . .”

Several heads turned in their direction, watching the lovers’ spat that was obvious to all. If any of Ryan’s friends *had* thought Eliza and Ryan were just friends, then the sight of her throwing her drink in his face made it quite clear that they were anything but.

love is blind, but maybe mara had sunglasses on

“WHAT WAS THAT ALL ABOUT?” MARA ASKED, GESTURING to Ryan, who was following Eliza out of the club. She had watched the whole thing—and although she couldn’t hear anything they’d said, it was pretty clear that Eliza and Ryan had been fighting.

Fighting the way only two people who had gotten naked and trembled together could fight.

Sugar sniggered into her drink. “Don’t you know?” She licked the side of her martini glass and smiled at Mara innocently.

Poppy elbowed her sister.

“Eliza and Ryan hooked up in Palm Beach. I’ve heard they’ve been hooking up all summer. He’s at her house, like, all the time,” Sugar told Mara, in a matter-of-fact voice.

Eliza . . . and Ryan? Together? Her best friend! And her boyfriend! Okay, her ex-boyfriend! And fine, her ex–best friend! But . . . Ryan! And Eliza! In Palm Beach! Together! And all summer, too! How could she have not known?

How could Eliza not understand the first commandment of friendship: *Thou shalt not hook up with your friend’s crush, boyfriend, or ex-boyfriend*. Or the second commandment: *Thou shalt not lie to your best friend*. But Eliza had spent all of last summer skulking around the Hamptons, lying to all her old friends about moving to Buffalo and being an au pair. Maybe she’d had been wrong about Eliza all along.

“Sweetie—we thought you knew,” Sugar said, with a light hand on Mara’s shoulder.

“Are you okay?” Poppy asked, looking concerned. She handed Mara a cocktail napkin. “You’re not crying, are you?”

Mara shook her head and forced herself to smile. “I’m all right, really.”

But really, she wasn’t.

jacqui is the victim of nokia interruptus

A MOTEL KEY.

That was what Jacqui slipped into Philippe's jeans pocket at Dragonbar when he wasn't looking. "I got us a room," she explained when he found it. "It's in Montauk, not far from the beach."

Screw Anna and her ultimatums. Philippe was worth the risk.

The motel was an old ramshackle fifties-style beach resort, with clean rooms and wall-to-wall carpeting. It wasn't the Bentley, but it wasn't something out of *Psycho*, either. Jacqui disappeared into the bathroom. They were finally together—alone, in private, and away from the eyes of Anna Perry. She looked at herself in the bathroom mirror, still not used to seeing her hair so short, and slipped into the Agent Provocateur ensemble she'd bought especially for this occasion.

Philippe was lying in bed, under the covers, already naked when she came out of the bathroom. He grinned when he saw her. "Ah, the Agent Provocateur," he said knowingly.

Hmm. Not quite the reaction Jacqui had expected. She believed a real compliment was, "You look beautiful in that dress," not, "Your dress is Chanel," but maybe Philippe was just super fashion-savvy because he was French.

She pulled the blankets aside and slid in beside him.

"Ooof! Your feet are freezing," Philippe complained when she snuggled next to his body.

"Sorry!" she said, rubbing her ankles on the sheets. "The tiles were cold in there."

Philippe calmed down and began to kiss her. She closed her eyes, feeling his hands move across her body, pulling at the delicate bows holding her lingerie together. Philippe suddenly propped himself up on his elbow and looked around the room.

"What?" Jacqui asked.

"My phone," he said, jumping out of bed and running to the corner, where his backpack was buzzing. He knelt down and unzipped the front pocket, where his phone was lit up and vibrating.

Jacqui fell back into the bed, sighing loudly, but Philippe was already talking into his Nokia. "No, no, I'm not doing anything," he was saying. He hung up and looked at Jacqui. "I'm sorry. . . . I have an, uh, emergency," he said.

Jacqui watched, speechless, as Philippe put his clothes back on. When he ran to the bathroom to wash his face, she lunged for his backpack. Who the hell could be so important that he'd leave her—*naked*—in the middle of the night? She scrolled feverishly down the menu. The last received call: *Perry House*.

Anna.

Of course.

that's why they call it the walk of shame

WAKING UP IN AN UNFAMILIAR BED IS NEVER FUN. The way the sunlight hits you—lemony-stark, unflattering, and speckled with dust—it's like the world is punishing you for your clandestine actions the night before. Even though Mara hadn't hooked up with Garrett the night before—he'd passed out fully clothed the minute they'd gotten into bed—she woke up feeling wretched. Ryan and Eliza were together, and the thought made her chest clench.

Garrett was still sleeping when she got up to put on her clothes from last night. It felt gross—cheap—to wear a feathered evening gown in the morning, and she'd slept with all her makeup on. She looked for her Blahnik sandals but couldn't find them anywhere.

“Heymmppf,” Garrett said, opening one eye and trying to pull Mara back into bed. “Whereareyougoing?”

“I've got to go,” Mara said, feeling frantic as she removed his arms from her waist. She picked up her purse from the carpet and scurried out the door without her shoes.

“Illcallurrgh,” Garrett mumbled.

She sped out the side stairs through the servants' entrance, and through the back yard that separated the Reynolds and Perry properties.

She'd just cleared the hedges in front of the pool, when Ryan appeared with a surfboard tucked under his arm. Just *great*. Just the guy she wanted to see.

Ryan took in Mara's wrinkled dress from the night before, her bare feet, her smeared makeup, and the direction from which she'd come. His face registered contempt.

“Late night?” he asked with an angry smirk.

Mara squared her shoulders. Nothing had happened, but she wasn't going to tell him that. Let him think she'd spent the night with Garrett—let him think she didn't care about him one bit.

“Garrett kept me up for hours,” she said, smiling as widely as she could force herself. “I'm *sooo* tired.”

Ryan's face contorted angrily. He looked disgusted with her.

“I know about you and Eliza,” she said. “So don't even think you're so much better than me.”

“What are you *talking* about? You broke up with me in November!” he yelled.

It was the first time Mara had ever seen Ryan show any real anger, any indication that his laid-back, anything-goes attitude could be rattled. It was exactly what she'd needed to see last fall when she'd told him they should just be friends.

"Only because I didn't think you really . . . Oh, forget it," Mara said, turning away. It was too late anyway—he was with Eliza now. She turned and walked briskly back to the au pairs' cottage, trying not to think about what had just happened.

When she got to their room, it was empty. Jacqui was nowhere to be found, and Megan was gone. She hadn't even left a note. Mara collapsed on the single bed, mentally, physically, and emotionally exhausted. The intercom rang.

She picked it up. "Hello?"

"Is that any way to answer the phone?" Anna Perry's clipped voice asked.

"Oh, sorry," Mara answered.

"The children are waiting for their breakfast. Am I correct in assuming you still work for us?"

"I'll be there right away, Anna," she said grudgingly, wondering where on earth Jacqui had disappeared to, and why the fuck she hadn't told her about Eliza and Ryan.

Some friends those two had turned out to be.

babies cry when you take away their candy

KARTIK HAD ASKED ELIZA TO HELP MITZI WITH THE day-after wrap-up from the fashion show, so now she was back after only a few hours of sleep. The ground crew was stacking all the chairs, and empty goody bags blew through the tent like tumbleweeds. Eliza sat in a meeting with Mitzi and the other assistants, everyone yawning behind dark sunglasses and sipping from venti nonfat lattes, rehashing the gossip from the night before.

“Okay, so we need to messenger a goody bag to any celeb who didn’t get one last night,” Mitzi said, looking over her checklist. “Chauncey Raven’s publicist called. Chauncey needs one.”

Eliza nodded. That was *so* like a celebrity. She could have forty million in the bank, but she really *needed* that Kiehl’s lip balm and Swarovski-crystal-encrusted Sidekick.

“We need to follow up on a couple of items today, too—we lent several girls a few dresses to wear, and we need to get them back. Just send the usual messengers. We do have a special case, however. Sugar Perry has a Chanel, and we need to get it back for Karl’s show in Paris tomorrow. It’s really important, since it’s the only sample we have right now. Eliza, you know Sugar, right? Can you handle that personally?”

“Sure,” Eliza said, trying not to roll her eyes.

Pulling into the Perrys’ driveway, she was glad to see that Ryan’s car wasn’t there. Last night, Ryan had called her cell phone six times, but she hadn’t picked up, and she’d deleted his messages without listening to them.

After throwing her drink at Ryan last night, she’d run out of the club in tears, and right into Jeremy and Carolyn. He’d tried to grab her arm, but she’d kept walking. It was funny how things worked out: All she’d wanted was to be with Jeremy this summer, and now here he was with someone else, and here she was, crying over a guy who wasn’t even him. Except that on the ride home, the woods dark on either side of the car as she sped through night, she’d stopped crying about Ryan and started crying about Jeremy.

Eliza rang the doorbell and asked the butler for Sugar. She braced herself for a fight. Sugar Perry wasn’t the kind of girl who would give up a one-of-a-kind couture dress that easily.

Sure enough, when Eliza walked into Sugar’s all-white bedroom, the first thing Sugar said was, “Who let you in?” She was wearing a sheer T-shirt and boy-shorts, and the reality-TV cameramen were taping her every move.

Eliza shrugged. "Mitzi wants the dress back."

"What dress?" Sugar asked innocently, doing back-bends. Sugar had been up since dawn, doing sun salutations. She always got up early, regardless of a hangover.

"The Chanel. It's the only one, and we need it for Karl's show."

"Oh, that one," Sugar said. "I don't know where it is."

"You lost it?" Eliza asked, incredulous. "I mean, you wore it home, didn't you?"

"I suppose." Sugar giggled. "I don't remember."

"Listen, Sugar, I really don't care. I'm just doing my job. Could we get the dress back? It's not yours, you know."

"Fine," Sugar said. She opened the door to her dressing room and rooted in the pile of clothes on the floor. She tossed a shredded silk rag at Eliza.

"Oh my God," Eliza said. "It's ruined."

"Charlie stepped on the train, and I think Poppy burned a hole in it with her cigarette. Sorry!" Sugar smiled fakely.

Eliza held up the pale pink Chanel dress to the camera. She couldn't believe anyone could be so reckless, even someone as spoiled as Sugar Perry. "You know Daria Werbowy is supposed to wear it on the runway tomorrow! Mitzi told you to be careful!" Eliza spat at her.

"I was careful. It wasn't my fault, okay?" Sugar said impatiently. "Besides, can't he just, like, make another dress? I mean, that's what designers do, right?"

Eliza stuffed the dress into a brown paper bag, pushing past the cameramen. Eliza knew Mitzi would be furious, and that she, rather than Sugar, would bear the brunt of her fury. Celebrity trumped all else. That much Eliza had learned this summer.

the best things in life are . . . covered by insurance? (let's hope!)

WHEN MARA ARRIVED BACK FROM HER DAY OF BABYSITTING, she was still seething that Jacqui hadn't told her about Eliza and Ryan. She'd hardly seen Eliza all summer, but she'd slept in the same room as Jacqui almost every night.

"Ivan Jewelers called for you," Laurie said, as Mara shooed the kids into their playroom.

"Oh?"

"They sent a messenger this afternoon to pick up some . . . earrings? But you hadn't left a package or anything, so I sent them away."

The earrings. The two-hundred-and-fifty-thousand-dollar earrings. Right. Mitzi had told her they would send someone to pick them up the day after the party. She'd completely forgotten.

Mara ran out to the au pairs' cottage. The message light next to the answering machine was blinking.

"Mara, hiii! It's Mitzi. You were gorgeous last night, dollink! Anyway, hon, I gotta get those earrings back to Ivan. Put them in the case and just leave them with your assistant so the messenger can pick them up. Thanks! Bye-yeee."

"Mara, hiiii! It's Mitzi again. Listen, hon, the messenger says there wasn't a package for him at the house. You must have forgotten. Call me and let me know—Ivan really needs them because J.Lo is going to wear them to the MTV Music Video Awards. Thanks, sweetie. Bye-yeee."

Mara ransacked her dresser. She *swore* she'd taken them off when she got back to the cottage that morning and put them in the little velvet case next to Jacqui's watch, but when she opened the case, they weren't there. They weren't in her other jewelry box, either, or on the sink, where she sometimes put the Mikimoto pearls. Could she have left them at Garrett's the night before?

She called Garrett and explained the situation. "Nope, nothing here. The only thing missing from this room is you, dollface," Garrett drawled.

She hung up on him, frantic.

Could Megan have taken them? No way, Megan had left before Mara arrived home—and please, her sister? She was so honest she'd actually called Target to tell them they hadn't

charged her for something she'd ordered. Could she have lost them at the fashion show? Earrings didn't just fall out, did they?

She was certain she had taken them off right when she arrived that morning—right after seeing Ryan—but why weren't they there?

The phone rang. Mara picked it up. "Hello?"

"Mara! Dollink! So glad I caught you. Listen, can you leave those earrings in a package for pickup tomorrow? Thanks, doll!"

"Sure," Mara said weakly, her stomach churning. She'd signed for them so blithely, agreeing to legal and financial responsibility for the value of the earrings in case of loss or theft. But this must happen all the time, right? Mara remembered reading something about Paris Hilton losing a diamond bracelet at some club.

But then, Paris was famous, and as Mara had come to see at the fashion show, she . . . *wasn't*.

with friends like these, who needs the perry twins?

JACQUI RETURNED FROM MONTAUK MUCH LATER IN THE afternoon, since Philippe had taken the car last night without any thought as to how Jacqui was going to get home herself. She'd had to take the bus, which took a winding route and stopped roughly every five seconds. The many hours she spent in transit gave Jacqui ample time to feel incredibly stupid about risking everything just to be with Philippe, especially when he had been Anna's boy toy all along. She was angry at herself for not sticking to her resolution and disappointed that she'd believed Philippe when he'd said there was nothing going on between him and Anna. But they hadn't been caught—not really, anyway—and even if Anna had Philippe, at least everything else was still going to work out, especially the job in New York.

When she got back, she found the au pairs' room in chaos and Mara in the middle of the mess, looking frantic, her hair awry; the sheets, pillows, and blankets piled haphazardly on the perimeter; and all of Jacqui's clothes, shoes, scarves, bikinis, underwear, tissues, and magazines laid out on the bed.

“Merda! What on earth? Mara, what are you doing!?”

“You!” Mara accused, looking up from her search. She forgot the earrings for a moment. There was something more important she wanted to confront Jacqui about. “You knew all along, didn't you?”

“Me? What? What are you talking about?” Jacqui said, confused.

“Ryan and Eliza. You were there in Palm Beach. You knew they'd hooked up. And you never told me?”

“Hang on. Hang on,” Jacqui said, stepping slowly into the room as if Mara were a cornered and dangerous animal.

“You knew, didn't you?” Mara demanded, her eyes flashing with anger.

“About Ryan and Eliza? Yes, I did. Mara, I'm so sorry. I wanted to tell you . . . I just didn't think it was my business—”

Mara recoiled. “I would have told you if it was your boyfriend!”

Jacqui blinked. “Mara, he *wasn't* your boyfriend. You broke up with him, remember?”

Mara didn't have an answer to that. Instead, she made a throaty noise and resumed her search.

“But what is going on here?” Jacqui asked, taking another careful step into the room, holding up her hands like Mara might attack at any second. “Why is the place all torn up?”

“I am looking—for—my—earrings!” Mara said in an agonized voice.

“O . . . kay . . .” Jacqui said, still holding up her hands. “What earrings?”

“The ones Ivan the Jeweler lent me. The ones I wore last night. Nicole Kidman wore them at the Oscars. They’re worth two hundred and fifty thousand dollars. And they need them back, like, tomorrow.”

“The ones you were wearing last night?” Jacqui asked slowly.

“Yes.” Mara nodded impatiently. Was Jacqui hard of hearing?

“They cost that much?”

“Yes.”

“Shit,” Jacqui said, beginning to sort through the pile on the bed and help Mara look for them.

“They’re not lost. I had them on this morning. I took them off—and put them—there,” Mara said, motioning to the dresser. “And now they’re gone. Did you see them?”

“No. I mean . . .” Jacqui stammered, rooting through a pile of underwear. *How could Mara be so careless?* “I don’t know. . . . I wasn’t looking. . . . I just got here.”

“Strange, you always seem to know where everything else is,” Mara snipped, looking pointedly at the Pucci scarf Jacqui was wearing in her hair.

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that it’s incredibly strange, isn’t it? They were here when I left—but they’re not here when I got back. And you seem to feel fine helping yourself to the rest of my things, so—”

“Are you suggesting that I took them?” Jacqui asked, not quite sure if she’d understood Mara’s English correctly.

“I’m just saying they’re not here. And you’re the only one who has the key to this room aside from me.”

Jacqui had never been so insulted in her life. She stared at Mara, who suddenly seemed like a stranger to her.

“Maybe *you* took them,” Jacqui said coldly, wanting to say the meanest thing she could think of to Mara.

“Why would I?” Mara asked, alarmed.

Jacqui shrugged. She put down the stack of clothes she was sorting through. She wasn’t about to help Mara do anything.

Just then, the door opened, and Eliza entered, not realizing she was walking into a landmine.

“Oh, look! Another lying slut,” Mara said. She’d had enough time to get really worked up about Eliza and Ryan while she’d been desperately searching. “You probably took the earrings just to spite me or something.”

“What are you talking about?” Eliza asked, confused.

Jacqui quickly explained about the earrings.

“Listen, Eliza, I know you’ve been jealous of me this whole summer. I know you just want what I have, but I really didn’t think . . . I didn’t think you would do something so underhanded.”

“What are you *talking* about?” Eliza demanded, leaning forward as if that would help her understand why Mara was being such a total bitch.

Mara snapped. “I know all about Palm Beach.”

Eliza looked startled. “But I thought you already knew about Palm Beach. I thought you didn’t care.”

“Who told you that?” Mara scoffed.

“Sugar,” Eliza said.

“It doesn’t even matter if I knew or not,” Mara spat. “I can’t believe you would do something like that to me.”

“You guys had broken up! And I did mean to tell you . . . but then Sugar and Poppy said you already knew and didn’t care . . . and . . .” Eliza said, her voice trailing off when she realized what a mistake she had made. Of course Sugar had lied to her. That was what Sugar did—she lied.

“So you think it’s okay to date my boyfriend behind my back?”

“Your *ex*-boyfriend. You have a *new* boyfriend now, Mara. Or did you forget? And we weren’t going behind anyone’s back. We just didn’t want anyone getting hurt,” Eliza said.

We. We. We. That hurt Mara more than anything Eliza had said. She and Ryan were a *We*. The two of them, Ryan and Eliza, were a couple.

“But you knew how I felt about Ryan,” Mara said. She could have lived with knowing they’d had a one-night stand in Palm Beach, maybe, but a whole summer of the two of them? Together? Behind her back? What was Eliza thinking? “You knew I still liked him,” Mara said.

“How would I know that? We barely hung out this summer,” Eliza argued.

“Yeah, you ignored me the whole time,” Mara replied.

It was true. Eliza had avoided Mara out of guilt at first, but as the summer wore on, and her job wore her down, and Jeremy ignored her, she had found comfort in Ryan. She’d been using Ryan as a Band-Aid to forget about Jeremy. But the Jeremy wound had never healed. She was still in love with Jeremy, and she’d wasted the whole summer with Ryan. And lost a best friend.

Mara, Eliza, and Jacqui stared at each other, hating one another for more reasons than they could possibly say.

it takes e-v-i-l to spell *handsome devil*

MARA HAD TURNED THE ENTIRE COTTAGE INSIDE OUT, searched the footpaths and the bushes next to the pool, the country club grounds where she'd brought the kids that day—although the possibility of both earrings falling off her ears was highly unlikely. As the days passed, it was looking more and more like someone had deliberately stolen them.

Mitzi Goober had taken to tele-stalking Mara—her cell phone, the phone in the room, and the main house phone rang incessantly, and it was always Mitzi or one of Mitzi's assistants asking if Mara could please call back and let them know when Ivan could expect his earrings returned. Mitzi had even come by herself, since the MTV Awards show was in two days, but thankfully Mara had been out with the kids at the beach. Finally, Ivan himself had called, screaming and threatening legal action.

It was a Thursday evening, and Garrett was supposed to pick her up at seven so they could go to a dinner his parents were throwing at Alison by The Beach to celebrate the sale of his movie—*Casablanca in Space*—to a studio. But seven came and went, and the Maybach failed to appear in the driveway. Seven-fifteen, seven-thirty. Eight o'clock. The dinner was supposed to start right now.

Mara looked at her watch. She dialed Garrett's number again, but there was no answer. She felt sort of ridiculous just standing around in her Roland Mouret kimono dress and peep-toe Prada heels, waiting for him to arrive. Finally, she drove herself in the BMW to the party. Maybe she was supposed to meet him there?

The restaurant was airy and light, with a copper bar and all-white bunting hanging from the ceiling. The Reynoldses had rented out the whole restaurant, and Mara noticed several people staring at her strangely as she looked around the room for Garrett.

"Hey, do you know where Garrett is?" Mara asked a girl who was dating one of Garrett's friends.

"He's over there," the girl said. "But, um . . ."

Mara ignored her and walked over to the main table in the middle of the room, where Garrett was sitting with his chair tipped back, laughing uproariously. She walked up to him and rubbed her hand down his arm.

"Er, hi. Sorry I'm late," she whispered, looking for an empty seat at the table. There wasn't one.

Garrett turned around, obviously surprised to see her. "Mara, what are you doing here?"

“I was waiting for you. I thought you were going to pick me up,” Mara said, wondering why he was looking at her like that. He’d told her about the dinner last week and had made her promise she’d be there.

“Excuse us one second,” Garrett said, leading Mara away from the table. She noticed a tall, exotic-looking girl glaring at them.

“Wait a minute—are you here with someone else?” Mara asked.

“You didn’t get my message?” he whispered urgently, leading her farther away from the crowd.

“What message?” Mara asked, stepping aside so a waiter could deliver a tray of champagne glasses to a nearby table.

He sighed loudly and ran his fingers through his bangs. “I uh . . . I’m really sorry, Mara. You’re a great girl and all, but you know, no hard feelings.”

“Excuse me?” she asked, noticing that everyone at the party was settling into their seats and several people were shooting Garrett concerned looks.

“Listen,” he said, looking like a guy whose patience was being tested, “I can’t be seen with someone like you right now. My dad is getting all this bad press about our house, and if he finds out the girl I’m dating . . .” He trailed off.

“What?” Mara asked.

“Oh, Mara. Everyone knows you took the earrings.” Garrett smiled. “I think it’s awesome, actually. Great job sticking it to Mitzi. You know her firm doesn’t have liability insurance, right? Her career is over.” He chuckled.

“But I didn’t take the earrings. *I didn’t*,” Mara said. “And I can’t believe you would think that of me.”

“Listen, babe. It doesn’t matter what I think. I told you, I don’t care if you did take them, but I can’t have any bad publicity right now. My dad is going to go ballistic if my name is attached to yours any more this summer. It was bad enough when people chatted about your . . . you know . . . background. But this is worse.”

Mara shook her head. She didn’t understand what Garrett was saying. What background? What press? What bad publicity? How did he even *know* about the earrings? Then Mara remembered: This was the Hamptons. Everyone knew everything.

“So you’re dumping me?” Mara asked.

“Mara, you’re a nice girl, and we had some good times, right?” Garrett said, winking at her. “It was worth it for the Perry factor alone.”

Perry factor? Mara opened her mouth to ask what the hell he meant by that, but Garrett was already back at his table, raising his glass in a toast.

To himself, natch.

seventh circle of hell, indeed

“YOU SEE THAT TABLE OVER THERE?”

Eliza nodded. She looked over to where Kartik was pointing. It wasn't just a table, it was *the* table—the table that Mara had danced on the night of the nipple photo, and the one that Chauncey Raven usually commanded.

“Make sure they get extra-special treatment,” Kartik said.

Eliza nodded and walked over to the table to deliver her standard welcome: a monologue on the services offered at the club, with a personal gesture—a bottle of the most expensive champagne. It was a pretty little speech that never failed to impress the VIPs, who, if male, would drool over Eliza, wondering if she was part of the “services provided,” or, if female, would try to bond with Eliza, since most celebrities had been waitresses or hostesses until they hit it big.

“Hi, I'm Eliza. I just want to welcome you to Seventh Circle,” Eliza said, beginning her speech, when she noticed who it was that had caused Kartik to single the table out. “Sheridan Dunlop?”

“Oh my God. Eliza!”

Sheridan Dunlop had been a year ahead of Eliza at Spence but had dropped out and moved to Los Angeles after her junior year. She'd since cornered the market on icy blond Wasp princess roles, now that Gwyneth Paltrow had joined the ranks of stay-at-home moms, and had recently been nominated for an Academy Award for her portrayal of a deaf-mute prostitute. She was sitting with a bunch of old friends from New York and the Hamptons. Carolyn Flynn was there, as well as her old friends Taylor and Lindsay, and . . . *Jeremy?*

“Hey, Eliza,” Jeremy said casually, as he smoothly took the bottle of champagne from her grasp. He was actually sitting between Taylor and Lindsay, and Lindsay had her hand on his knee.

Eliza was stunned. She'd thought all along that Jeremy was with Carolyn, but now it was even worse. Lindsay—Lindsay, that smug little copycat wannabe with the bad nose job and the hyena laugh. She was looking at Eliza like she'd won a prize.

“Hi, Jeremy. Great to see you, Sheridan,” Eliza said, walking away.

She was holding back tears on the back patio, shakily smoking a cigarette when Jeremy found her.

“'Liza,” he said, touching her shoulder.

“They’re just using you, you know,” she said quickly. “They’re the kind of people who . . . who . . . they don’t even really like you. They just want something from you. Lindsay’s not exactly an honest person, you know.”

Jeremy raised his eyebrow, pulling his lips into his mouth. “You know, I’m not sure you’re exactly in a position to be talking about *honesty*. I know all about you and Ryan Perry.”

Oh.

there's more than one kind of pond scum

THE NEXT MORNING, MARA WAS SUPPOSED TO HAVE a massage at Naturopathica with Poppy and Sugar. She was looking forward to it, since the stress of the lost earrings was definitely getting to her.

“Have you seen the twins?” Mara asked, bumping into Laurie outside their bedrooms.

“I think they left.”

“They did? How?” The twins hadn't had their own car for weeks.

“I think they took Poppy's BMW,” Laurie explained.

That was *her* BMW, but Mara didn't feel like correcting Laurie, who'd been pretty cold ever since Mitzi Goober had mistaken her for Mara's assistant at the beginning of the summer.

Still annoyed, Mara walked into the kitchen and flipped through the newspapers. *GEORGICA POND DRAINED OVERNIGHT!* blared the latest issue of the *East Hampton Star*. Georgica Pond was a pretty lagoon and nature preserve next to the ocean, where she and Ryan used to walk and the kids liked to play. It was also home to the piping plover, an endangered bird. Someone had dug a ditch through the fifty-foot beachhead to drain the pond water into the ocean overnight. There were “before” and “after” pictures, and Mara didn't even recognize the swampy mess in the “after” photo.

Ezra Reynolds was named as the prime suspect because he had publicly complained that the pond overflow was disturbing his construction, and he had been denied a permit to legally drain the pond. The article mentioned that those who lived on Georgica Pond “frequently saw themselves as above the law,” and that neighbors included Calvin Klein, Martha Stewart, Stephen Spielberg, and Ron Perelman, who had all issued stern denials. The Reynolds contingent was suspiciously mum on the matter.

Mara felt more than a little repulsed. What kind of person—what kind of family—would be so selfish? Those poor little piping plovers. She picked up the *New York Post*, immediately turning to Page Six to read their gossipy take on the Pond Drain Mystery. But a different article caught her eye: *QUARTER-MIL MISHAP!* Mara sat down, swallowing as she read.

Which not-so-wellborn girl who dated one It Boy last year and traded up for an even richer boyfriend this summer was loaned a pair of million-dollar earrings for an event and hasn't bothered to return them?

It was a classic Page Six blind item, except that it went on . . . and on.

“She said she misplaced them, but I think they’re stolen,” an anonymous source revealed. “I thought she was a friend of the Perry twins, but she’s from some cow town or something.” Sugar Perry, when asked for a quote, said only, “So many people claim to be my friend, and I’ve never met them in my life!”

“Totally,” her newly brunette sister Poppy added.

The article did everything but name Mara, although her identity wouldn’t be too difficult to figure out from the incriminating details.

“I didn’t steal them!” Mara said to the empty kitchen, her face ashen. So that was why the twins hadn’t waited for her this morning. They had already written her off. The *Daily News* had a story about the earring scandal as well, and another gossip columnist lambasted her as a greedy, stealing au pair.

Garrett and the twins’ brush-off would only be the first of many, she knew. Mara had never felt so deflated and rejected in her life.

* * *

It was raining hard when Jacqui returned from her SAT class late that night to find a shadowy figure on the lawn, holding an umbrella and combing the grass with a flashlight. Poor Mara. Even if Jacqui was still mad at her, it still made her sad to watch Mara searching the grass in the middle of a downpour. A flash of lightning lit up the sky, and Jacqui realized the figure was too tall to be Mara.

It was Ryan.

“Hey,” Jacqui said, calling to him. “What are you doing?”

“Oh, hi, Jacqui,” Ryan said, pointing his flashlight in her direction. “I lost my, uh, contact lens and I was looking for it.”

“I didn’t know you wore contacts,” Jacqui said.

Ryan shrugged, and Jacqui smiled sadly.

If only Mara knew how much Ryan Perry still loved her.

the piping plovers have never been so popular

ALLAN WHITMAN AND KARTIK COULDN'T RESIST A CHANCE for publicity, and the weekend after the pond scandal, they quickly put together a benefit party for the homeless plovers at Seventh Circle.

Eliza found Jacqui in the middle of the crowd and hugged her. It was the first time that summer Jacqui had set foot in Seventh Circle, and she was impressed with the way Eliza controlled the crowd and worked the room. Neither of them mentioned how hurt they were by Mara, but they both knew what the other was thinking.

Eliza saw Ryan come in and walked over to his side. They hadn't seen each other in a week, and in that time, she had stopped being angry about the friends-with-benefits thing and had started wanting to be actual friends again.

"Hey," she said, bumping an arm on his shoulder.

Ryan managed a smile. "Hey, yourself."

She kissed him on the cheek, brushing the corner of his lips by accident. "I'm sorry about the other night," she said.

"I'm sorry too," Ryan said. "I didn't realize . . . I mean, I want to say, I really do care about you, Eliza. And I don't know what I was saying. I mean . . . you know you're more than a friend to me. We can be a couple if that's what you want."

"I know," Eliza said.

Ryan held out his arms and Eliza stepped into them. She nestled her head on his shoulder and he tightened his arm around her waist. It should have been enough, but it wasn't. Because just then, across the room, she spotted Jeremy and Lindsay walking into the VIP room.

Jeremy had slicked his dark hair back and was wearing a brown cashmere sport jacket and dark denim jeans. Lindsay had her arm snaked around him in a vise grip and was looking up at him adoringly. He bent down to whisper something in her ear, and Lindsay laughed as if she'd never heard anything funnier in her life. Eliza's heart clenched.

Ryan went to get them drinks, and Eliza turned to look out the window. It was still raining hard outside, like it had yesterday, but that didn't stop people from waiting outside the club

as usual. Then she saw Mara at the door, underneath an umbrella, being turned away by one of Mitzi Goober's minions.

Eliza saw Mitzi Goober pretend not to see Mara. Mara was one of the few people who actually cared about the plovers, and Eliza knew it had taken courage for her to even show her face to this crowd. J.Lo had attended the MTV Music Awards wearing Harry Winston, and Mara had been blacklisted.

Mitzi's assistants asked Mara to step aside, and, against Eliza's better judgment, her heart went out to her. Mara slowly turned away, but not before peering through the plate glass window and seeing Ryan kiss Eliza on the forehead and hand her a drink.

It's not what you think, Eliza thought. But even if Eliza had wanted to run out of the club to call her name, Mara was already walking away.

something's about to blow

THE NEXT MORNING, JACQUI AND MARA WOKE UP TO the sound of an explosive crack.

“*Merda!*” Jacqui said, throwing off the covers and looking out the window.

“What’s going on?” Mara asked.

It had been raining for several days now, but nothing like this. The wind howled and raged against the windowpanes, and the two of them had gotten dressed in silence, since Jacqui still wasn’t talking to Mara. They ran into the main house, where Laurie had already turned on the television to the news channel. Hurricane Tiffany was coming in from North Carolina, but instead of moving over land and weakening, as had been predicted, it was moving over water and picking up speed.

“It’s going to hit tonight,” Laurie said grimly. “We’re going to have to get the house ready. Where are the kids?”

Philippe helped Laurie find the storm windows in the basement and started hammering them on the sills.

A quick reconnaissance of the pantry revealed a lack of fresh water and other supplies, so Laurie called Ryan on his cell phone and told him to go to the nearest Home Depot and stock up on bottled water, flashlights, batteries, candles, towels, canned goods, and other sundries.

Zoë ran up to Mara. “I’m scared,” she said.

“It’s going to be all right, sweetie,” Mara said, hugging the little girl. “Just let me go a minute.”

Even as the rest of Long Island was battering down for a major hurricane, the relentless business of publicity marched on. Now that Mara had been knocked off her pedestal and was rumored to have been dumped by Garrett Reynolds, all the designers wanted their clothes back. Pronto. Which meant Mara spent half the day tracking down flashlights and towels and the other half running back to her room and handing back all the shopping bags to the messengers. It was all so humbling and shameful, especially when one of Mitzi’s assistants had arrived to tally up the total, just to make sure everything was there and accounted for.

“This Chloé blouse hasn’t been cleaned,” the assistant said rudely, checking it off of a list. “Okay, so we’re just missing the Sally Hershberger jeans, the rhinestone Blahniks, and the Pucci scarf.” She sighed.

“I don’t, um, have them,” Mara stammered, hating the way it sounded coming out of her mouth, especially after the earring scandal. The brown-uniformed man from the delivery

company gave her a sympathetic look.

“Fine, I’ll just tell Mitzi you stole those, too,” the assistant said snidely as she opened her umbrella and stepped outside.

Jacqui couldn’t help but notice the parade out of the cottage. She held an armful of four-by-fours to help reinforce the front door and nodded to Mara as Mara led the assistant to the garage to pick up the BMW.

Poppy drove up in the car, and when she and Sugar heard that Mitzi had asked for it back, their matching faces contorted into a grimace. “What do you mean she wants it *baaaaaack?*” Sugar whined at the publicist before giving back the keys. “We’re the ones using it now!”

“You really are an idiot, Plum,” Poppy complained, as they stood in the open garage, watching the BMW disappear down the driveway.

You have no idea, Mara thought.

eliza is an over-it girl

AT NOON THE SKY WAS PITCH BLACK, AND THE STREETS were deserted. Everyone had battened down the hatches to prepare for the worst storm of the year. Eliza stood on the deck of her rented house, in a yellow parka with the Spence crest on its front pocket, watching for Ryan in the Cayenne. Her family had asked her to get supplies, and Ryan had offered to pick her up.

Ryan threw open the passenger door. He too was wearing a yellow windbreaker with his school crest, jeans, and his usual flip-flops. He told her it was a mess back at the house—none of the flashlights were working, and they were short several storm windows. Plus the water had begun to trickle in the front door, and they were already out of towels.

“I know, you’d think the people who own our rental would have stuff, but they just have all this dinky crap,” Eliza said.

“Anna is having a nervous breakdown. She can’t live without her hair-dryer if the power goes out.”

Eliza giggled at that and, catching Ryan’s eye, they both chuckled again.

They drove slowly through the rain, and it seemed that every car on the highway was going their same direction. When they arrived, the parking lot at Home Depot was completely filled. Ryan managed to snag a spot just as a Bentley pulled out, a generator strapped to its roof.

The rain was coming down in huge droplets against the windowpane. The trees were bent backward by the wind. The storm howled and raged, shaking the SUV.

“God, look at that,” Ryan said, as the wind carried a beach umbrella through the parking lot.

“I know. It’s crazy.” Eliza nodded. “And you know what else is crazy?” she asked quietly.

“What?” he asked, clearly having no idea what she was about to say.

“You and me.”

Ryan’s smile faded. “What do you mean?”

Eliza looked at Ryan. His hair was pasted to his forehead, but he looked as gorgeous as ever. But in the end, they were just too comfortable around each other. Too similar. Eliza craved mystery, spontaneity, the kind of guy who would get a job as a valet at a party just to be close to her. As wonderful as Ryan was, he wasn’t that guy.

“You’re not in love with me,” Eliza said.

Ryan began to protest.

“And I’m not in love with you, either,” she interrupted.

“Ouch,” he joked, clutching his heart in faux pain.

“This summer—this summer was like, kind of weird, you know? I thought it was going to be the best time ever.” Eliza sank a little deeper into her seat. “I had this cool job—but it turned out to be totally worthless. I’d rather babysit kids than babysit celebrities. Believe me, even William is easier. Ever tried taking champagne away from a celebrity?” Eliza laughed.

“Eliza?”

“Yeah?” She turned to look at him.

“You’re the coolest girl I know.” Ryan leaned over and cupped her chin in his hands, then lowered her face so that his lips touched her forehead. “Friends?”

“Of course.” Eliza laughed. “Stop it, that tickles.”

They loved each other—as friends—and Eliza suddenly wanted to see her friend happy. She looked at Ryan again. He was tall, gorgeous, smart, rich, and her childhood friend—the kind of guy her parents always wanted her to end up with—but she knew they weren’t meant to be together.

Ryan hugged her, and as she pressed her cheek against his, she whispered, “I know you love me, but I also know you’re in love with someone else.”

He released her slowly and sighed. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.” He picked at a cuticle.

“The girl we both love, the girl you’re in love with—she’s still there,” Eliza insisted. “Believe me, I’ve been pissed at her too, but she’s still in there.”

He shrugged. “Mara’s different now. She’s let the Hamptons get into her head. She’s changed.”

“Look, nobody who goes through the It Girl treatment comes out alive on the other side, you know? Believe me, I know. There’s not a girl in the world who wouldn’t get carried away. But I still believe in her. I haven’t told her that, because we’re kind of mad at each other right now. But I think the reason she broke up with you is because she didn’t think . . . well, she thinks she doesn’t deserve you.” It all came out in a rush, and Eliza didn’t dare look Ryan in the eye. She glanced at him now, but his face was still stony.

“She’s with Garrett now,” Ryan said flatly. In that one sentence, Eliza knew that what she’d said was true. Ryan was definitely still in love with Mara.

Eliza looked at Ryan. She was closer to him now than she’d ever been. Maybe the term *friends with benefits* had a deeper meaning than either of them had realized.

“Well, we better go in before it gets any worse,” Ryan said.

“And by the way, Mara and Garrett broke up,” Eliza said. “I’m surprised your sisters didn’t say anything. Aren’t they totally hot for him?”

“Eliza, I don’t even know how we’re from the same family,” Ryan joked.

They ran into the Home Depot—but all the steel braces, wood reinforcements, tarps, hurricane lamps, candles, batteries, space heaters, generators, rope, nails, and sandbags were gone.

“What’s going on?” Eliza demanded of a nearby foreman wearing an orange vest.

The foreman shrugged. “We got a big order,” he said, waving toward a guy leaning against the counter and signing a huge credit card receipt. Garrett Reynolds looked up and waved at Ryan and Eliza.

oscar wilde said, “true friends stab you in the front”

POPPY WAS STILL SEETHING ABOUT THE LOSS OF “HER” car as she and Mara ran into the house to escape the battering winds.

“That is just so rude, I have never been treated so rudely. Do they know who I am?” Poppy whined as she struggled with her umbrella.

Mara was squeezing the water out of her wet hair when something bright and sparkly caught her eye. Something Poppy was wearing on her ears: Huge, fat rocks. Diamonds so big they pulled down on Poppy’s earlobes and so clear and perfect they glittered in dull of the entryway.

“Poppy,” Mara said, reaching out toward the earrings. “Where did you get those?”

Poppy’s hands immediately fluttered to her ears. “Oh, these? Uh . . . I . . . borrowed them from your dresser. I lent you my handbag and I figured, you know, what’s mine is yours and what’s yours is mine.” She giggled shrilly. “Why?” She was totally acting like she and Sugar hadn’t completely blown Mara off for the last couple of days, never mind that they had actually talked to Page Six about Mara and the earrings.

“Those aren’t mine,” Mara said, dumbfounded.

“They’re not?” Poppy fluttered her wet eyelashes innocently.

“They belong to Ivan. They’re worth a quarter of a million dollars. Haven’t you read Page Six? You were quoted in it. People think I stole them.”

Poppy feigned innocence. “I have no idea what you’re talking about. C’mon, let’s go dry off. I’m freezing.”

“Wait a second. I need them back,” Mara said flatly, holding her hand out.

“Okay! Don’t be such a wench about it. *Jeez*,” Poppy said, pulling them out of her ears and brusquely laying them in Mara’s hand.

Mara just stared at her. She had never met anyone so relentlessly self-centered, so aggressively selfish, in her entire life. And this was the kind of person she’d spent the whole summer trying to impress. It was sickening how much time she’d wasted.

“Now, Plum, don’t be mad. I was just borrowing them!” Poppy said defensively.

“Don’t call me that!” Mara hissed, elbowing her aside and heading for the phone.

When the messenger picked up the earrings, Mara felt so relieved and deliriously happy, she had no idea what to do with herself. She felt liberated and free, and as she waved away the brown truck, she bumped into Jacqui, who was getting ready to run a few errands before the hurricane really hit.

“Jac! Oh God, Jac!” Mara said, rushing toward her and picking Jacqui’s arms up and twirling her around.

“What? What happened?” They hadn’t talked in more than a week, and she hadn’t seen Mara smile in that entire time.

“Jacqui! I’m so stupid. I’m so awful. I’m so sorry. Poppy—it was Poppy who took the earrings. I don’t know if they knew, I don’t know if it was deliberate. I think it was, but I’m so sorry I thought . . . you had . . . I must be insane. . . .”

Jacqui raised an eyebrow. The Perry twins. Of course. The twins’ bedrooms were the first place they should have looked for the earrings. “It’s okay,” she told Mara.

“I just want you to know that I’m really, really, really, really sorry,” Mara said. “Really, really, really—”

“Mara, look, I forgive you, all right?” Jacqui interrupted, taking her hand.

“It’s just, I feel so embarrassed. I wish it had never happened.”

“Listen, things happen for a reason. Don’t worry about it,” Jacqui said as she hugged Mara tightly. “But your apologies aren’t over, *chica*.”

Jacqui was right. They were just beginning.

there's nothing sexier than a guy with a hammer

JUST AS RYAN AND ELIZA WERE ABOUT TO LEAVE THE Home Depot empty-handed and disillusioned, a friendly voice called over. “You guys looking to get some supplies?” Jeremy asked. He’d also been stymied by the Reynoldses’ great buyout. He walked over wearing a slick vinyl poncho and a crushed fisherman’s hat.

“They’re all out,” Eliza said.

“Yeah, but I know where we can get some,” he said. “There’s a Target in Riverhead, and they sell storm windows and everything there. Not many people in the Hamptons know about it, since it’s in the North Fork. You guys want to follow me? Take the highway north to the Riverhead exit and it’s right there.” He wiped his hands on his jeans, which were tucked into big rubber fishing boots.

Eliza nodded her thanks, and she and Ryan followed Jeremy as he drove down the flooded highway. There weren’t as many cars going in that direction, and they made good time.

Inside the Target, it was as if the hurricane wasn’t even happening. It was bright and cheerful, and all the shelves were stocked high with everything they needed. There were several other people shopping, but there was plenty to go around, and they all just smiled conspiratorially at one another.

“Who’s going to put up your windows?” Jeremy asked Eliza as they both took some lanterns and heating oil.

“My dad,” Eliza said, even though her dad was like, seventy years old.

“I’ll do it,” Jeremy said quietly. “Look, man, I’ll just drive Eliza home,” Jeremy said, turning to Ryan. “Her house is on the way to mine, anyway.”

“Okay with you, E?” Ryan asked.

“That’s fine, actually,” Eliza said, her heart beating fast.

Ryan gave Eliza a quick hug. “Good luck. Stay dry!” he said to both of them.

Eliza climbed into Jeremy’s pickup truck. The seats were battered leather, and it was nothing like the Porsche Cayenne’s sleek leather upholstery or heads-up dashboard display—but it smelled like the earth, piney and loamy, like Jeremy. She loved that smell.

They drove in silence back to Eliza's Westhampton rental, where her parents were frantic with worry. Without a staff to command, the Thompsons had no idea what to do. The television had already gone out and the lights were off, but Jeremy soon found the circuit breaker in the basement and flipped the right switch.

"Oh thank God," Eliza's mother said, tugging at the pearls around her neck anxiously.

"I don't know how long we'll have the juice, but we might as well use it while we have it," Jeremy said. "Power'll probably go out soon."

Eliza watched as Jeremy expertly put up all the windows, hammering and pushing and figuring out the complicated instructions. She hoped her parents could see what she saw in him.

He was working on the attic bedroom windows when she brought him a bottle of water. "It's not cold, I'm sorry."

"No, this is good, thanks," he said, wiping the sweat from his brow. He leaned against the bracing and put his body into it. The joint snapped right into the window, and he smiled in satisfaction. "There, that should do it. You guys have enough towels, right? And a radio?"

"We have a little battery-powered Sony Watchman—my dad found it in the basement. So I think we'll be okay," Eliza said.

Jeremy nodded. "That's good." He sat down on the floor and gulped down the water.

"What happened to you this summer?" Eliza asked, sitting next to him on the carpet.

"What happened to *me*? What happened to *you*?" Jeremy said, peeling the label of the water off.

"I don't know—you like, pushed me away. I didn't think you wanted me anymore," she said. "You never called. You didn't even want to see me."

"Eliza, the only reason I took that internship at Morgan Stanley was so I could be someone you could respect. Someone from your . . . *world*," Jeremy said, making quotation marks with his fingers when he said "world."

"You did that for me?"

"I did, but it turned out I still wasn't good enough. Your parents made that pretty clear at dinner. I figured, I'd never change their minds about me, so why should I even bother?" He shrugged.

"Why *bother*?" Eliza said, incredulous. "Because I don't think like my parents do, that's why. And that's pretty shitty to judge someone based on their family," she said. "People can't help where they come from."

Jeremy looked embarrassed, but then he said, "Yeah, but then I heard about you and Ryan, so . . ." He trailed off.

It was Eliza's turn to look embarrassed.

"I missed you," she said matter-of-factly.

"I missed you too," he agreed. "I saw you on TV last night," he offered, unexpectedly lightly.

"You did? Where?" Eliza asked, surprised.

"On Sugar's show. You were asking for a dress back and she wouldn't give it to you." He chuckled. "And at the end some old French designer guy in big black glasses was saying that he would never dress Sugar Perry again. It was pretty funny."

"*Karl Lagerfeld?*" Eliza asked, but Jeremy just shrugged. Maybe Sugar would get her comeuppance after all. Eliza looked at Jeremy. Even talking about some stupid TV show, he was still ten times more soulful than anyone else she'd ever met. She'd missed him so much.

"It's just . . . you were always so busy," she said, tentatively pulling at the bottom of his pant leg.

"Yeah, no kidding. I hated that job. Anyway, I quit. You can't believe the amount of bullshit you need to put up with. I'm working at the Perrys' again next summer."

"You are?"

"Yeah, I just told them I'd be back." He finished the last of the water and put down the empty plastic bottle.

Eliza was still processing all this new information. "I thought you didn't like me anymore," she said.

"Eliza, what are you talking about? I'm crazy about you," he said. "I've been crazy about you since the first time I saw you at the Perrys' pool."

"What about Carolyn? Or Lindsay? Why were you with them?"

"I met them through work. Carolyn is cool. And she was friends with your friends. I thought . . . I don't know, I thought that would matter to you, that I knew people you did. Lindsay was nothing. I was only with her because I thought I could make you jealous, since you were with Ryan."

"Ryan and I aren't . . . aren't anything special. We're just friends."

"Really?" he asked hopefully.

"Really," she said firmly.

"So . . . you're not with him?"

"No." But Eliza had to come clean. "I mean, not anymore. He's great, but he's . . . he's just not you."

Jeremy smiled his crooked smile. Eliza smiled into his eyes, and just like that, they kissed. Jeremy stroked her hair, and Eliza put a hand up to his cheek, warming her hands on his skin while the hurricane swirled around them and the house shook.

"I love you," he said. "You're the only girl for me."

Eliza felt so much happiness that she wasn't sure it could fit inside her skin. And when he kissed her again, she felt as light as air, like a bubble that had popped out of a bottle of champagne, floating dizzily toward the ceiling.

mara steals from the rich to give to the, uh, rich

THE LIGHTS WENT OUT AT FIVE, AND THERE WERE NO MORE towels to stop the water from entering through the cracks in the doorway. The kids were getting antsy. Mara had spent the afternoon with them, playing Go Fish and Old Maid. William was actually sitting still for once. Zoë had a knack for Go Fish, and even Cody was being quiet. Madison had even found a bag of chips and was eating them along with everyone else.

“Old Maid!” Madison crowed, when Mara took the wrong card.

“Well, let’s just hope it’s not prophetic,” Mara joked.

The house shook with a rumble that came from the driveway, and they all ran to the window to see an immense Home Depot truck pull up to the front of the Reynolds estate.

Mara couldn’t believe it. Ryan had called to tell Laurie that there was nothing at the Home Depot. Looking at the truck, she could only guess what had happened.

“C’mon, kids!” she said, getting all of them together. “We’re going to do a raid!”

After making sure all the kids were dressed warmly in sweaters and nylon slickers, she led them outside. The rain was coming down hard, and it was going to get really bad really soon. She ushered them through the hedges that separated the property and into a secret passageway that Garrett had showed her, which led to the basement of the Reynolds Castle.

The kids were beside themselves with delight. Mara led them up through the basement. She cracked open the door to the kitchen. The coast was clear.

“C’mon,” she said, and led the kids to one of the upstairs bathrooms where the linen closet held so many towels it was like a miniature Bed, Bath & Beyond. Mara began loading up on towels, passing them out to the kids to hold.

“What are you doing?” Garrett asked lightly, walking into the bathroom, holding a beer. He looked pasty in his white oxford shirt.

Mara looked at him. She remembered his cutting remarks, the way he’d immediately believed she had taken the earrings and dumped her without even bothering to listen to her side.

“You guys have too much of this stuff. You don’t need all of it, so we’re taking some,” Mara replied, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

“You can’t do that,” he said, still in a light, mocking tone.

“Okay, then I’ll ask nicely. Can we have some? Please?”

“No,” he replied sharply. “Now please leave and take the brats with you, or I’ll have to call security.”

“Sorry, Garrett, but that’s not going to work,” Mara said. “William?”

“Uh-huh?” The little boy asked.

“You know that move they taught you in kickboxing class?” she asked, bending down to his level. “That would come in handy right about now, don’t you think?”

Once William realized what Mara was asking him to do, an evil grin spread across his face.

“*Hiii-ya!!*” he said, running straight for Garrett and kicking him—hard—in the stomach, making the older boy double over. “Go, go, go!” William yelled.

Before leaving, Mara spied another something sparkly that had been missing. Her Blahnik sandals. She picked them up from behind the bathroom door triumphantly. Mitzi had already written them off, so they were hers to keep.

“’Bye, Garrett!” Mara laughed.

As they ran out the door, supplies in hand, an older couple who lived up the hill were getting out of their car. They noticed the supplies Mara and the kids were carrying.

“Where did you get that? They’re all out of supplies at Home Depot!”

“Here, have some—there’s much more!” Mara said gaily, passing over a couple of paper bags filled with batteries and bottled water.

They ran back into the Perry house, flushed with success and triumphant over their loot.

“We found water!” Mara said, marching victoriously into the kitchen and depositing two one-gallon bottles on the table. “Oh.” Her face fell.

On the kitchen counter was a huge stack of water bottles, towels, batteries, and firewood. There were candles and heating oil and hurricane lamps and several loaves of bread, canned tuna and baked beans, and towels and rope and flashlights, all in cheerful white plastic bags with the Target logo. The kids began to cheer, tearing into the Cheetos and Pringles.

Ryan stood in the middle of the kitchen, putting away the dried pasta. “Eliza and I found a Target that was open,” he explained, without looking at her.

“Oh . . . oh, great.” She was about to back out the door, when he called her.

“Wait, I want to—we need to talk,” Ryan said. He turned around, and for the first time, Mara could see just how upset he was.

knight in yellow rain slicker

“MERDA!” JACQUI CURSED AS SHE TURNED THE IGNITION and the engine of the little gas-electric hybrid sputtered to life, then went dead. Everyone in the Perry household had taken the Prius’s fifty miles per gallon for granted, and Jacqui couldn’t remember anyone filling up the tank all summer. Now it was empty, and she was screwed. She was stuck out on Route 27, and the storm was only getting worse.

She tried the Perry house, but the line just kept ringing, which meant the phone lines were probably down. She tried Eliza’s cell, but it went straight to voice mail. Even though she was still angry with Philippe, she didn’t know who else to call. She hated having to depend on him, especially since he’d never even explained about the other evening at the motel and acted like nothing had ever happened when he bumped into her at the house.

She dialed his cell phone.

“Hello? Hello, Philippe? Listen, it’s Jacqui, I really need you right now.”

“Hello? Who is this?” a female voice demanded.

“Um, it’s Jacqui?” Jacqui replied. What was going on? Why wasn’t Philippe answering his phone?

“Well, *this* is an unpleasant surprise,” the dulcet tones of Anna Perry said. “I’m sorry to say that Philippe is no longer open for business.”

Click.

What? Her hands shook as she turned off her phone. Anna Perry? Then it hit Jacqui: She’d been caught—or at least Anna thought she’d caught her. It was almost comical. After a summer of stealing kisses with Philippe, she’d been caught *after* they’d already stopped seeing each other.

Jacqui sighed, realizing what this meant: She could kiss that job in New York good-bye. No more working for the Perrys over the school year, no more Stuyvesant, no more college. She had risked everything, just for some guy. Some guy who wasn’t even worth it. Some guy who was obviously having an affair with their employer. Her whole future—down the drain.

She looked out the window, frightened as lightning lit up the sky. She dialed another number, hoping against hope that the person she called would pick up the phone.

Fifteen minutes, passed, thirty, then almost an hour—the car was being rocked back and forth by the wind. She had to get out of there, or the car was liable to be carried away by a flash flood soon.

Finally, just as she'd given up hope, the headlights of a hulking Lincoln Navigator appeared out of the fog. A boy wearing a yellow slicker ran to the side of the Toyota.

"You all right in there?" Kit called from under underneath the hood of his windbreaker.

She nodded. He helped her out of the car. The water was ankle deep as they waded through to the behemoth SUV. Kit secured Jacqui's door and ran around to the driver's seat. He grinned at her when he climbed back inside.

"Thank you so much," Jacqui said. "I'm so sorry to bother you."

"Not a bother at all." Kit smiled.

Jacqui returned his smile, and for the first time felt butterflies in her stomach. Maybe it was simply her relief at finally being rescued, but Jacqui couldn't stop smiling as Kit navigated his way through the flooded roads.

He explained that all the roads back to East Hampton were blocked, and they were better off going back to his parents' place in Wainscott. They arrived at the Ashleigh compound, the only lit-up house on the street. While the acreage surrounding the property was enormous, the house itself was just a tidy modern box—a long, squat concrete terminal with floor-to-ceiling windows looking out into the ocean. Kit explained that his dad's best friend was a famous architect and had designed it. Apparently, it was small enough—just two thousand square feet—that the European generator they'd installed could power the whole house for weeks.

Kit drove the car into the adjoining garage and led Jacqui into the house through the kitchen, where his mother was cooking dinner on the Viking stove in an open loft-style kitchen. Unlike the Perry house, the Ashleigh house was a real home—someplace where people *lived*, not just a showcase.

There was a huge black canvas on the wall that could only be a very expensive piece of art, and a few spare wool couches and leather-and-chrome chairs, but there was a newspaper disassembled on the coffee table, and dog hair on the couch, and mugs of coffee on the side tables. The shelves were lined with books, and only a few framed platinum records in an unobtrusive nook hinted at Kit's father's prominence in the music industry.

"Hi, dear. Oh, is that your friend?" Kit's mother asked pleasantly. "Awful out there, isn't it? You must be freezing. Christopher, darling, why don't you give Jacqui a sweater and pants from my closet so she can change?"

There was none of the frantic confusion or unorganized panic of the Perry home, and no towels under the doorways, either. The house was built like a bunker—it was an oasis of art and light and great Italian food.

Jacqui thanked her, feeling undeserving of so much hospitality. After showering in the steam bath and changing into a bulky black sweater and a pair of sweatpants, she had dinner with Kit's parents, regaling them with stories of Brazil and her observations of the Hamptons, and after the Ashleighs retired for the evening, she helped Kit load the dishwasher and clean up the kitchen.

They brought out Kit's duvet and snuggled underneath it on the couch, watching the news. There were several mudslides reported in the cliffs, and the ocean was rising at a dangerous speed.

"I hope the Perrys are all right," Jacqui said, gnawing on her fingernails. She was worried about them, but also worried about what would happen when she returned. Anna was sure to fire her ass as soon as she set foot back on the estate.

"I'm sure they're fine," Kit said. "I talked to Ryan, and it sounds like they have it under control."

Jacqui leaned her head affectionately on Kit's shoulder. She'd never thought of Kit as anything but a friend, but as she sat beside him on his couch, feeling safe and protected and secure in his warm stone house, Jacqui felt the first stirrings of something deeper—something more than lust—and it dawned on her that maybe this was what really *liking* someone, as opposed to *wanting* them, felt like.

"You've got to give me time," she whispered, putting a hand on Kit's red cheek. He was so pale, his skin was too sensitive, and his hair was so blond it was almost white. He definitely had potential.

"Huh?" Kit asked sleepily.

"Nothing," Jacqui said.

"Are you comfortable?" Kit asked.

Jacqui nodded. She'd never felt more at home.

a bathrobe never looked so good

MARA FELT BAD FOR RYAN. HE LOOKED SO SAD, JUST standing there, dripping wet in the kitchen, a pack of Rice-A-Roni in his hand.

“Listen, you don’t have to say anything,” she said. The thought broke her heart, but if Ryan and Eliza were happy together, then she would just have to find a way to be happy for them.

“I don’t?” he asked, confused.

“I know you and Eliza are together now, and it’s . . . fine. I just want you guys to be happy . . .” she said, her voice trailing.

Ryan shuffled and put down the cardboard box. “But that’s what I’m telling you—I’m not with Eliza. Eliza and I . . . we’re just friends,” he said, stepping toward her. “We’re good friends, but that’s all.”

“You’re not? With Eliza? But . . . I don’t understand,” Mara said, taking a step closer to him. Then she saw that his lips were a little purple. “Oh God, you’re freezing,” she said, before Ryan could say anything else.

“But I want to tell you something,” Ryan said, dripping fat, wet rain droplets on the floor.

“Okay, but you need to get out of those wet clothes first,” she said, “Come on.”

“I *am* c-cold,” he said, shivering. “Come with me?” he said as he began stripping off his outer clothes on the way to his room. When they arrived at the top of the stairs, Mara saw that a maid had already started a fire in the fireplace next to his bed. Ryan stood next to it and started looking a little less blue.

“Here,” she said, holding a fluffy white towel from the bathroom. “You need to get dry, or you’ll catch the flu or something.”

“Mara, wait—we need to talk,” Ryan said, rubbing the towel against his neck. His T-shirt was drenched. “Do you mind?” he asked, tugging at the shirt.

“Um, oh, no,” Mara said, turning around. “Go ahead, I won’t look.”

Ryan laughed. “No, I mean, will you help me?”

Mara lost all her self-consciousness as she helped him out of his soaked clothes. He stripped off his wet jeans, and Mara handed him his bathrobe. He looked so handsome, so tan against the terry cloth, so nearly naked. . . .

“So, Mara . . . I just wanted to tell you . . .” he said awkwardly. “I mean, this is kind of hard to say.”

“Yes?” Mara looked at him hopefully.

“It’s just that, well, this summer, you know, I . . . just . . . I just . . .” He shook his head and looked grimly into the flames. “I missed you this summer, you know,” he finally said. He exhaled. “I guess I missed—I *miss*—the old Mara.”

“I do too,” Mara said, her throat tightening as she sat down on the side of his bed, deflated. The old Mara. The Mara before the earring scandal, the Garrett Reynolds debacle, the Perry sisters’ nickname. She didn’t know who the old Mara was anymore. She certainly wasn’t just some small-town girl from Sturbridge anymore, but she wasn’t a Hamptons swan, either.

“Ryan, I feel awful. I’ve been terrible. I just . . . I just . . .” Her eyes filled with tears, and when they fell, she couldn’t stop them. “I just got carried away, and all I wanted was to be with you. I don’t even know why I was with Garrett all the time. I just wanted to make you jealous.”

“Well, it worked.” He laughed, sitting down next to her.

“I kind of think he was only with me to make you jealous too,” Mara said. “When he broke up with me, he said it’d all been worth it for ‘the Perry factor,’ whatever that meant.”

Ryan shook his head. “He’s been like that since we were kids. He stole my first girlfriend, back in sixth grade. Sophomore year, I took this girl to the winter ball and he took her home.” He shrugged. “He’s a douche.”

Mara squeezed his knee sympathetically and smiled at Ryan’s summation of Garrett’s personality. He *was* a douche.

“You know, I really lost it when you broke up with me,” Ryan said. “I should have said something, I should have come down to Sturbridge. Tried to get you to change your mind . . .”

“I just never thought a guy like you could be my boyfriend,” she admitted. “I thought if I broke up with you first, I could make it easier on myself.”

They hadn’t been looking at each other when they were talking, preferring to confess to the fire, but finally, Mara turned to face Ryan. She pushed his bangs off his forehead.

“I did so many things this summer that I regret,” she sighed. “I’ve been so awful to Eliza and Jacqui. And I was so rude to my sister when she was here.”

“Eliza and Jacqui and your sister will all forgive you,” he said reassuringly. “It’s all going to be all right.”

“No, everyone hates—” But before she could finish, he was kissing her. And she was kissing him back. It was so sweet it was almost painful.

He pulled her toward him, his fingers lost in her hair, and she wrapped her arms around him. They kept kissing and kissing and kissing, without stopping to breathe, as if the only

thing that mattered was pouring their souls into each other through their kisses. She shivered, and he pulled his bathrobe open, wrapping it around her, too.

Mara closed her eyes, elated and anxious. There was no one else for her, and no one else for him. He was everything she'd ever wanted, and even though she was still anxious that she'd made a mess of a million things, she let her body melt into his. It was as if they were made for each other, and their bodies were telling each other what their hearts had been feeling for a long, long time.

so that's why william was so out of control

THE NEXT MORNING, THE FLOOD HAD RECEDED AND sanitation workers were beginning to clear the highways of fallen trees and branches. Kit drove Jacqui back to the Perry house, the Navigator plowing through the deep, muddy waters. The winds had died down, and it had finally stopped raining. The storm had moved north, but the Hamptons were devastated. Several homes on cliffside bluffs were completely destroyed, and as Kit pulled up to the Perrys' driveway, they noticed that the Reynolds Castle—what was left of it, anyway—had taken a severe beating.

"Yikes," Kit said, his eyes dancing. "I hope they had insurance."

"It was such an eyesore, it's a blessing," Jacqui said.

She felt more nervous looking at the Perry house. It was almost time to face the music, and she was *so* fired. But as she was gathering her resolve, getting ready to pack up her things and head unceremoniously back to Brazil, a junky old taxi pulled into the other side of the circular driveway. Philippe opened the trunk and stacked his suitcases inside.

He was leaving? Jacqui hadn't realized he wasn't staying for the whole summer, but then again, she hadn't realized a lot of things about him. She looked at the beautiful boy and felt stupid, but not heartbroken. Philippe gave her a mild wave.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

He shrugged and put on his sunglasses. "*Au revoir, ma cherie.*" He shook a cigarette out of his pack before climbing into the back of the taxi.

Laurie came barging out of the house. "And don't come back! You're lucky we're not pressing charges! If it weren't for your aunt, you'd be in a lot of trouble, young man!"

Dr. Abraham pushed past Laurie, carrying his battered plaid suitcases. "Hold on, boy! I need a ride to the train as well!" Dr. Abraham gave Laurie a sheepish nod and followed Philippe into the car.

Jacqui walked up the waterlogged steps. The Perry house seemed to have survived intact. "What happened?" she asked Anna, who was watching everything from the foyer.

The frosted blonde looked Jacqui up and down. "Don't you know?" she asked suspiciously.

"Know what?" Jacqui asked, mystified.

“But you called Philippe last night . . .” Anna said.

Jacqui blushed. “I . . . I was stuck out on Route 27. The Prius ran out of gas and I was trapped outside in the hurricane. I tried the main house, but the lines were down,” she explained.

Anna’s face visibly relaxed upon hearing Jacqui’s explanation. “So you really didn’t know?” she asked again.

“Know *what*?”

“Philippe is a drug dealer,” Laurie interjected, breathlessly recounting how Anna had found out that Philippe and Dr. Abraham were selling Ritalin, Adderrall, Valium, and Ambien to customers in the greater Hamptons area.

So *that* was why his cell was always ringing. Apparently, Philippe had started nicking William’s prescriptions to fill some orders, and when the doctor had found out what Philippe was doing, instead of reporting it, he’d supplied Philippe with more scrips and gotten a cut of the deal. The hurricane had made a lot of people nervous, and Philippe had made a lot of deliveries that week. Anna had discovered the truth when she’d caught him stuffing William’s pills in his backpack, when she’d been running around the house looking for *her* meds. And *that* was why Anna had said, “Philippe isn’t open for business,” when Jacqui had called.

Anna didn’t want a scandal and had chosen to send Philippe away and fire the doctor rather than take any legal action. She found the whole thing more unseemly than criminal. She didn’t want her name in the papers. At least, not for this sort of reason.

Anna dismissed Laurie and then touched Jacqui’s arm conspiratorially. “By the way, congratulations on keeping away from him all summer.” Anna winked. “I know how charming he can be.”

Even though Jacqui hadn’t entirely stayed away from Philippe, she didn’t think there was any reason to mention that now. Maybe Philippe hadn’t been with Anna—the emergency call from the Perry house the night at the motel could have just as likely have been Dr. Abraham. Jacqui would probably never know for sure, but she also didn’t care.

“Anyway, Jacqui darling, I just wanted to remind you that we’ll need you to be back in New York by late August. I’ll send a ticket to your address in Brazil—will that be all right?” Anna asked.

“Does that mean I get the job?” Jacqui practically squealed.

“Of course.” Anna nodded. “And my friend at Stuyvesant said we’d be able to get you in, no problem. We’re not sending William to Eton after all, since he failed the entrance test. And after everything that’s happened with Philippe, I don’t think his aunt—our usual nanny—will be coming back. So we’re definitely going to need someone to help with the kids.”

Jacqui laughed. After all that, she was getting everything she’d wanted. And, looking at Kit, who was helping Ryan clear the wreckage of fallen limbs, she realized that maybe she had ended up with even more than she deserved.

summer ends early, but the next one isn't too far behind

THAT AFTERNOON, ANNA ANNOUNCED THAT THE Perrys were going to go back to New York early. There were a couple of weeks left before Labor Day, but staying around to clean up the house and yard was not Anna's idea of a good time. The girls were still going to get paid for the whole summer as had been agreed, but after that evening, their services would no longer be required.

Since the kitchen was unusable due to water damage, Jacqui proposed a full-blown Brazilian *churrascaria*—grilled steaks, sausages, chicken, and lamb, to celebrate surviving the hurricane. Now that the storm had passed, the sky was bright and clear and the air was warm. It was the perfect night for a barbecue. Jacqui even made a pitcher of caipirinhas, a Brazilian version of the mojito, that she knew her friends would like.

She invited Eliza to come over and join the fun, and although Eliza was a little hesitant at first, she agreed. She had a lot to say to Mara, and it was finally time. She and Jeremy arrived at dusk, his trusty old pickup truck carefully maneuvering over the bumpy roads and around the fallen trees. They walked over to the patio, where the smell of sizzling meat wafted deliciously in the air. The kids were running around, sword fighting with the fallen branches.

Eliza saw Mara and Jacqui manning the grill. Mara was fresh-faced and glowing. For the first time that summer, she was wearing her own clothes—a plain white T-shirt and a pair of Gap cargos.

“*Hola, chicas,*” Eliza said, in her best imitation of Jacqui.

Mara looked up at the sound of Eliza's voice. Eliza was wearing her Sally Hershberger jeans and the discount Missoni top. Jacqui had covered her fauxhawk with the Pucci scarf. Mara was glad her friends each had a souvenir from the Mitzi closet.

“Let's talk, Mar,” Eliza said bravely, when she got a little closer.

Mara nodded. “Yeah, that'd be good.”

“You, too, Jac,” Eliza said. “All of us. It's been too long.”

The three of them ambled to the beach in silence, Jacqui walking between Mara and Eliza, hoping she could be the peanut butter to stick the three of them back together. They watched the seagulls glide gently over the waves and the ocean glitter under the setting sun. The hurricane had stirred up the ocean floor, and the beach was littered with broken seashells and assorted debris.

Finally, Eliza turned to Mara. "I'm really sorry. For everything. I really hope . . . I mean, I hope you know I would never do anything to hurt you," she said, her voice cracking. "I know you and Ryan are meant to be, and I made a mistake, and I'm really sorry. I wish I'd told you about Palm Beach earlier—I tried, but not hard enough. . . ."

"'Liza, don't. Please don't cry," Mara said. "I was so awful to you at the fashion show, and I accused you of taking those stupid earrings. I'm so embarrassed. It's my fault too."

"No, really, it's me," Eliza said, wiping at her face with her whole palm. She reached down and blew her nose on the bottom of her gorgeous Missoni shirt. It was such an un-Eliza move that Mara and Jacqui had to laugh.

Mara nodded. "I trust you," she said simply. And, looking in her heart, she found that it was true. She really did trust Eliza. People made mistakes. She understood that now. And as happy as she was to be with Ryan again, her friendship with Eliza was just as important. You only met a few kindred spirits in your life, and you had to hold on to the ones you were lucky enough to find.

Eliza's eyes filled with tears again. In a hoarse voice, she said, "I hope you guys know you're the best friends I've ever had."

Jacqui slung an arm around each of their shoulders, and the three of them hugged each other tightly. Mara started to sob too, and without entirely totally knowing why, Jacqui did as well. They'd been so lonely without each other.

"Hey, look . . ." Jacqui said, pointing to some trash that had washed up on the beach. "Doesn't that look like our bottle?"

Mara almost couldn't believe it, but it was the same rum bottle they'd hidden their message in at the start of the summer. What were the chances?

Eliza pulled the cork open and fished out the label. On top of the scrap was their note: *Hello from Mara Waters, Eliza Thompson, and Jacarei Velasco in the Hamptons. We're having the summer of our lives. If you find our bottle, please write your name and a note and toss it back into the ocean.*

Scrawled on the bottom of the page was the following:

Hello from Nova Scotia, Canada, from Sandra Shepherd, Alana King, and Margritte Lyon. We found your bottle floating in White Point Beach. We're having an amazing summer, too!

Jacqui, Eliza, and Mara laughed. It was like a little miracle.

"Nova Scotia! God, that's far away," Eliza said.

"The hurricane probably pushed it farther," Jacqui surmised. "Or brought it back."

"I wonder if they're like us," Mara mused, touching her neck. The Mikimoto pearl necklace. Mitzi had said it was hers to keep at the start of the summer. It was the only real gift from the designers. Mara thought of a certain tall redheaded sister of hers who would love it.

"Next summer—we'll be back!" Eliza declared. "Next summer—I know this sounds so cheesy, but I promise—it'll be the best summer yet. It'll be the summer of our lives."

Jacqui and Mara smiled indulgently. They were all thinking of the Internet ad that had gotten the three of them together in the first place. Would they au pair for the Perrys again? It was hard to say. Ryan had told Mara about little cottages you could rent down on the beach. Eliza was already planning her next internship, maybe for a fashion designer—she'd had enough of nightclub hostessing. And Jacqui . . . well, Jacqui was just thinking of how cute Kit had looked yesterday, and of making her dreams of NYU come true.

The day after the hurricane, the world was still, and at peace. It was a cleansing, a catharsis. The Hamptons would survive: During the fall the roads would be repaired, the monstrous houses rebuilt, and, come May, a new crew of hopefuls looking for fun and sun would come to play, fall in love, and drink too much champagne on the sandy white beaches.

Mara, Jacqui, and Eliza vowed that they would be back. Next summer would be here before they knew it.

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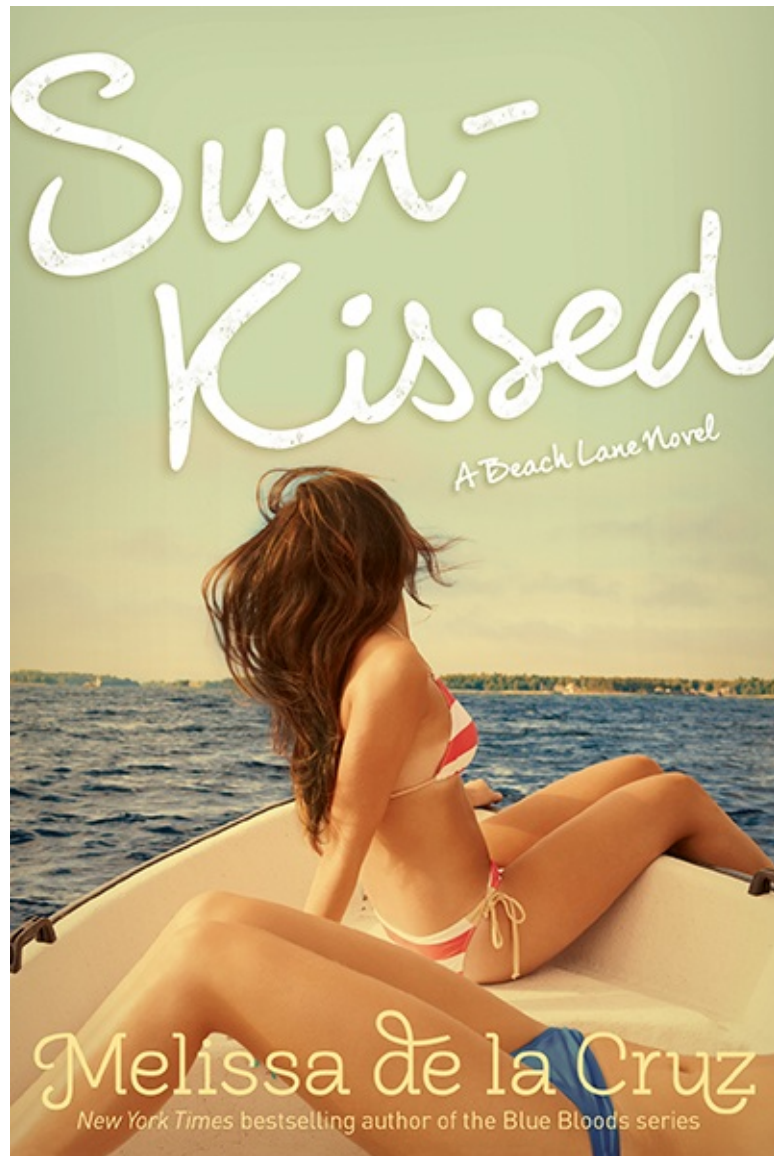
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Can't Wait for the next summer? Take a look at what's in store!



in seat 12A, mara hopes that all good things come to those who wait

AS THE PILOT CIRCLED LAGUARDIA AIRPORT, MARA WATERS switched off her iPod mini and put away the Dartmouth College catalog she'd been reading. She looked out of the tiny airplane window down at the Manhattan skyline—a luminous vision of steel and glass obscured by a late-afternoon haze. She'd made the forty-minute shuttle trip from Boston to New York several times now and was familiar with the commute. It was a pleasant enough journey that included stacks of complimentary magazines at the terminal and the company of crisp-looking professionals in worsted wool suits or crumpled corporate khakis, twinkling Bluetooth headsets discreetly curled behind their ears.

It was the first week of June, and barely forty-eight hours ago, she had officially graduated from high school. The ceremony itself had been a relatively straightforward affair, with a dull speech from the myopic valedictorian and the halfhearted singing of the class song (Kelly Clarkson's "Breakaway"—chosen by the administration after the class's real choice, Green Day's "American Idiot," was banned). The only excitement had come when a member of the marching band flashed the stage, showing he was wearing nothing underneath his gown as he accepted his diploma. (His brightly uniformed colleagues quickly struck up a sassy bump-and-grind version of "The Strip.")

Mara had won the English prize, along with a two-thousand-dollar college scholarship. Her mother cried and her father took way too many pictures with his new digital camera while her sisters cheered from the stands. To the hearty beat of "Pomp and Circumstance," she'd joined the three hundred other Fighting Tigers in tossing their cardboard hats into the air. Afterward, over watery punch and stale Mint Milano cookies at the gym, she'd watched as her classmates exchanged new college e-mail addresses and promised to visit each other the next fall.

If only she had been able to do the same.

Mara frowned at the Dartmouth catalog, feeling envious of the cable-knit-clad coeds photographed studying on the lawn. *Wait-listed*. That was what the one-page letter inside the slim white envelope had said. Not "yes" or "no", but "maybe".

She could find out she'd been accepted in a week or even a few days before school started. Or she could never be accepted at all. Luckily, she'd been offered a place at Columbia with a generous financial aid package, and she'd put down a deposit to hold her place just in case Dartmouth didn't come through.

So now her whole summer stretched out in front of her, filled with anxiety and dread, since she didn't know where she would be in the fall. It was just so unfair. Dartmouth was her first choice, her *only* choice—as far as she was concerned. Ryan, after all, was going to be a junior there.

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THE DOORBELL RANG, AND THE SOUND OF BELL CHIMES reverberated loudly in the studio, but Jacqui Velasco ignored it. She was hurriedly throwing clothes, shoes, and straw tote bags into two open suitcases in the bedroom. It was just half an hour since she'd walked onto the stage with the rest of the St. Grace Academy class to collect her diploma, and she was still wearing the pretty floral Blumarine dress and round-toe Gucci heels she'd chosen for the event.

Her grandmother had already left for the airport to catch her flight back to São Paulo. It had been great to see her *óvo*, who had been positively bursting with pride in her lace mantilla. After all, Jacqui had graduated with a solid B-plus average and honors in Spanish (being fluent in Portuguese certainly helped). She'd kissed her grandmother good-bye outside the auditorium and had scrambled to return home to pack for the Hamptons as soon as she could. The Perrys kept to a tight schedule and expected everyone to adhere to it.

Why, oh why, had she put packing off for so long? Jacqui wondered, even if she knew the answer only too well. Senior Week. Instead of spending time getting ready for the Perrys' annual pilgrimage to East Hampton, Jacqui had chosen to celebrate with her friends. The last forty-eight hours had been a whirlwind—there'd been a boozy bash at the Maritime Hotel, mini-golf at the Chelsea Piers, and an overnight retreat to the Catskills (campfire hookups and roasted marshmallows). Between the festivities and schlepping the Perry kids to their after-school activities, there just hadn't been any time to pack.

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Perrys' massive town house, the apartment was close enough that Jacqui could come over and watch the kids easily but far enough that she had her privacy.

Jacqui had enrolled for her senior year at St. Grace—a small, all-girls' parochial school on the west side that had accepted her after Stuyvesant, one of the most competitive public schools in the country, did not. The Perrys had covered her tuition as part of her compensation, and Jacqui's classmates quickly idolized the brash, beautiful Brazilian in their midst. Jacqui had studied hard through the year but had still managed to become very popular. After all, she was the only one at school with her own apartment, and she'd hosted a lot of parties. She found an empty beer bottle underneath the bed and chucked it in the garbage can.

The doorbell chimed again, and this time Jacqui could definitely make out Anna and Kevin Perry's quarreling voices behind the door.

"I'm talking to you—don't answer your phone when I'm talking to you!"

"Anna, this is work. It's important. Give me a sec, all right?"

"You never listen to me. Work always comes first!"

"Babe, please shut up. I need to take this."

"Oh, just go ahead, then! Where is she? Jacqui! Jacqui!"

"Coming!" Jacqui yelled. She ran over and opened the door.

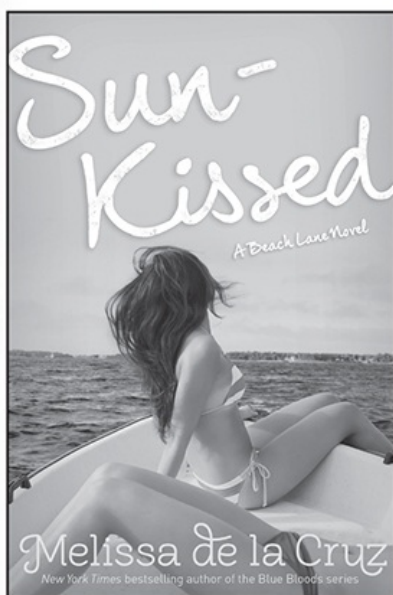
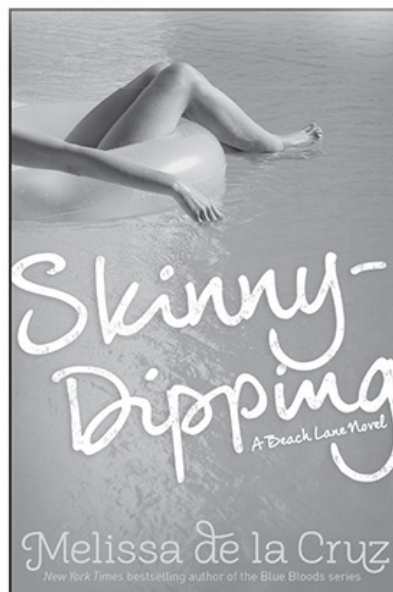
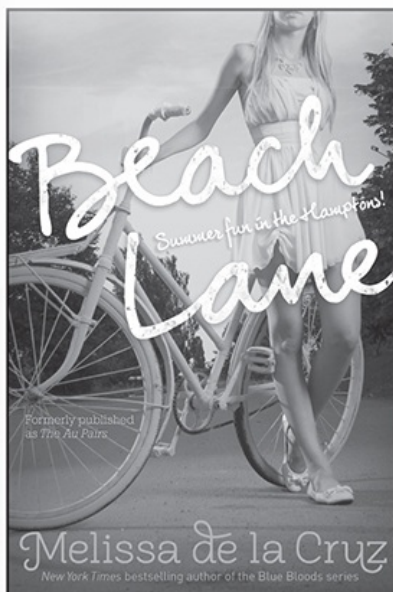
Anna Perry, a vision in sparkling Chanel tennis whites, tapped her French manicure impatiently in the doorway. "The limo's here. We need to get to the Thirty-fourth Street helipad pronto or we'll lose our departure time," she ordered briskly. Kevin Perry, who looked tense and ruffled in a gray wool suit, gave Jacqui a curt nod as he put a cell phone to his ear.

"Yes, yes, sorry—just—give me a minute." Jacqui nodded, closing the door in front of Anna's face. The Perrys might pay for the apartment, but it was still her own. Besides, she totally had to hide the keg that was standing in the middle of the living room.

Three girls.
One summer.
Too many memories to count.

From *New York Times* bestselling author

Melissa de la Cruz



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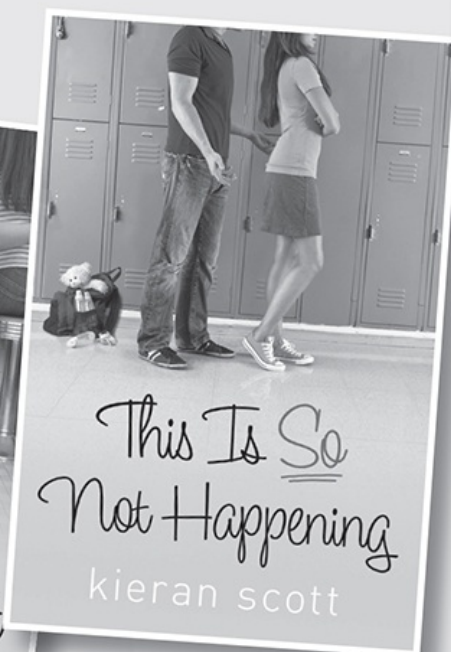
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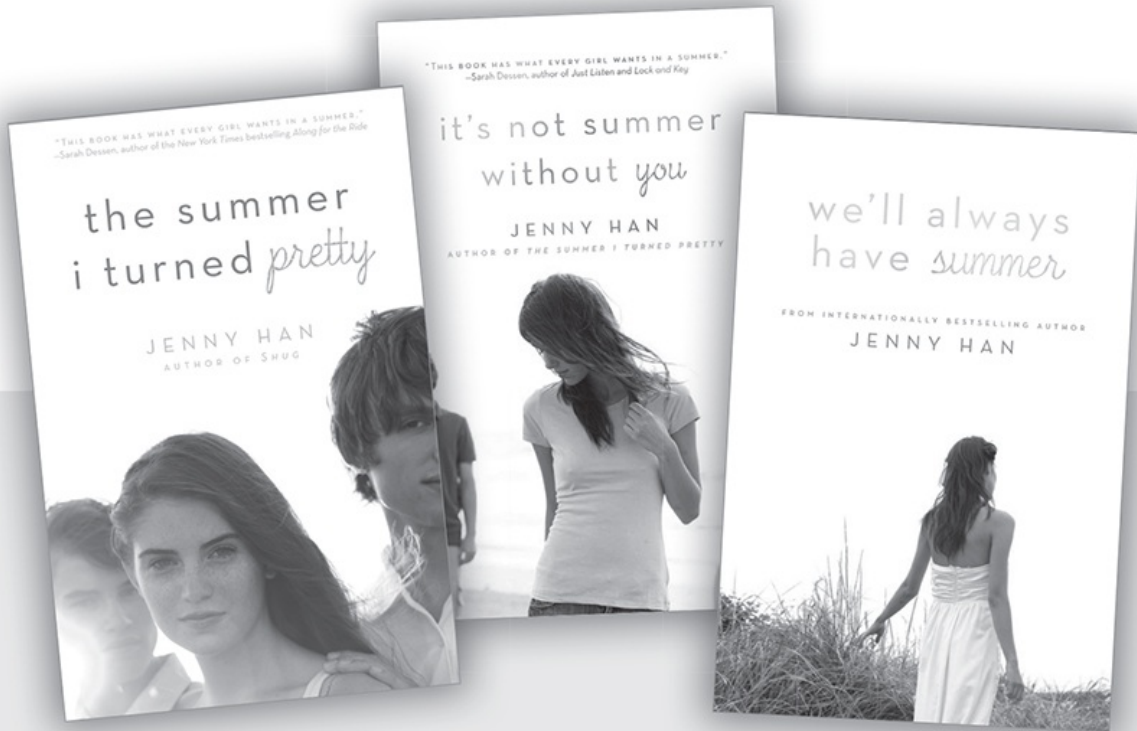
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The Ashleys: Lip Gloss Jungle

Sun-Kissed

A Beach Lane Novel



Melissa de la Cruz

New York Times bestselling author of the Blue Bloods series

Sun- Kissed

A Beach Lane Novel

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For all the wonderful girls who e-mailed, IM'd, texted, blogged, and posted reviews—thank you for your unflagging support, cheerful enthusiasm, and many interesting questions! This one is for you. And yes, there is a lot about Mara and Ryan in this book. And to new readers—welcome to the Hamptons! Now go home. Just kidding.

Take care of the luxuries and the necessities will take care of themselves.

—Dorothy Parker

*All the riches baby, won't mean anything, All the riches baby, won't bring what your love can
bring.*

—Gwen Stefani, "Rich Girl"

in seat 12A, mara hopes that all good things come to those who wait

AS THE PILOT CIRCLED LAGUARDIA Airport, Mara waters switched off her iPod mini and put away the Dartmouth College catalog she'd been reading. She looked out of the tiny airplane window down at the Manhattan skyline—a luminous vision of steel and glass obscured by a late-afternoon haze. She'd made the forty-minute shuttle trip from Boston to New York several times now and was familiar with the commute. It was a pleasant enough journey that included stacks of complimentary magazines at the terminal and the company of crisp-looking professionals in worsted wool suits or crumpled corporate khakis, twinkling Bluetooth headsets discreetly curled behind their ears.

It was the first week of June, and barely forty-eight hours ago, she had officially graduated from high school. The ceremony itself had been a relatively straightforward affair, with a dull speech from the myopic valedictorian and the halfhearted singing of the class song (Kelly Clarkson's "Breakaway"—chosen by the administration after the class's real choice, Green Day's "American Idiot," was banned). The only excitement had come when a member of the marching band flashed the stage, showing he was wearing nothing underneath his gown as he accepted his diploma. (His brightly uniformed colleagues quickly struck up a sassy bump-and-grind version of "The Strip.")

Mara had won the English prize, along with a two-thousand-dollar college scholarship. Her mother cried and her father took way too many pictures with his new digital camera while her sisters cheered from the stands. To the hearty beat of "Pomp and Circumstance," she'd joined the three hundred other Fighting Tigers in tossing their cardboard hats into the air. Afterward, over watery punch and stale Mint Milano cookies at the gym, she'd watched as her classmates exchanged new college e-mail addresses and promised to visit each other the next fall.

If only she had been able to do the same.

Mara frowned at the Dartmouth catalog, feeling envious of the cable-knit-clad coeds photographed studying on the lawn. *Wait-listed*. That was what the one-page letter inside the slim white envelope had said. Not "yes" or "no", but "maybe".

She could find out she'd been accepted in a week or even a few days before school started. Or she could never be accepted at all. Luckily, she'd been offered a place at Columbia with a generous financial aid package, and she'd put down a deposit to hold her place just in case Dartmouth didn't come through.

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And no one could take that away from her.

in soho, eliza is stuck in the fashion trenches

“EH-LIE-ZUH!”

“Eh-lie-zuh!”

“Are you listening to me?”

Snap.

Eliza blinked. Someone was talking to her. More specifically, someone was *talking down* to her. She put aside her chopsticks and tried not to look too irritated. Couldn't she even eat dinner in peace?

It was half-past midnight. She had been at the showroom since nine o'clock that morning and couldn't wait to get home for a shower. She was, for the first time in her perennially Fracas-perfumed life, seriously “funky.” She took a discreet sniff of each armpit and grimaced.

“Eh-lie-zuh. Hello. Earth to Eh-lie-zuh!”

Eliza rubbed her eyes and finally focused on the person who owned that voice. Paige McGinley. Otherwise known as a Paige-in-the-ass. Her so-called boss and slave driver for Sydney Minx—famous fashion designer and all-around diva, owner of the showroom and the reason she'd had barely half an hour of sleep in the past forty-eight hours.

Sydney Minkowitz was a gay Jewish dress designer from the Bronx who'd changed his last name to the more intriguing and less ethnic “Minx.” Early in his career, he'd befriended a coterie of New York socialites through vigorous ass kissing and with their support had launched a line of chic, casual, yet expensive sportswear that had grown to include licenses for accessories, perfume, housewares, candles, and linens. If you dressed, dined, or dreamed, you could bet there was a Sydney Minx product that catered to it.

The histrionic designer was opening his first boutique in the Hamptons in two days, and the whole office was buzzing with frantic activity to get all the details for the grand-opening party and fashion show completed. Like everyone in New York, Eliza had been a devotee of Sydney's early work—the waffle-knit “poor boy” cashmere sweaters that came with enormous price tags, the sexy drain-pipe trousers, the artfully graffitied logo handbags. But the designer had been slipping of late. The latest collections had veered wildly from sex-bomb attire one season to starchy, covered-up pretension the next as the label tried to connect with an ever-more-fickle audience of high-fashion buyers. You could only have so many bad collections before you were considered fashion roadkill, and with this opening, Sydney had a lot at stake.

The place was so tense that if the notoriously difficult-to-please Sydney summoned the group to yet another meeting in which he called all of his design associates, production assistants, runway models, and office interns an untalented bunch of idiots, someone was going to burst into tears. Already, one of the pattern makers had left her sewing machine in a huff after Sydney had called the dress sample she was making “a two-dollar *schmatte*, an eyesore of epic proportions, an insult to the name of couture!”

“Can I help you?” Eliza asked belligerently as she wiped her mouth with a paper napkin.

“Why aren’t all the T-shirts folded yet?” Paige demanded. She was a dark-haired, sharp-featured twenty-two-year-old, a recent F.I.T. graduate who had ascended quickly from being Sydney’s personal assistant to being de facto creative director of the label. “I told you, all the shirts need to go in boxes so the messengers can take them to the stores tomorrow morning!” The T-shirts, silk-screened with the designer’s Photoshopped and markedly slimmer-than-life silhouette, would be given away for free in the overstuffed goodie bags to the VIP guests at the East Hampton party and sold for seventy-five dollars apiece at Sydney’s boutiques around the country to the hoi polloi.

“Because I’m spray-painting all the fabric gold like Sydney asked for the ‘Anna’ coat,” Eliza replied, pushing away the Chinese food containers. She showed Paige the metallic swatches that would be sewn onto a military trench Sydney hoped would catch the eye of the *Vogue* editor. Half of them were still unpainted.

Eliza wiped her hands on the backs of her So Low sweatpants, then crossed her arms defensively. Packing the T-shirts was, like, menial grunge work! She was Eliza Thompson. Once named in *New York* magazine as the most popular girl on the prep school circuit! She’d only taken the job because she liked fashion and thought it would be a cakewalk to hang around a designer’s showroom for the summer.

“Those swatches aren’t done yet? Sydney needed those *hours* ago,” Paige said, aghast.

Eliza tried not to look too guilty. She had taken her sweet time spray-painting the fabric just so no one would ask her to do anything else. She’d noticed that if she looked busy enough, she could avoid doing the more-boring chores.

“Anyway, forget this for now. Go help Vidalia. She can’t seem to get her dress on correctly for the run-through. Then I need those T-shirts.”

“All right,” Eliza grunted.

“And what *is* that smell?”

Eliza froze, pressing her armpits next to her torso.

“Ew! Who ordered Chinese food?” Paige demanded, holding up the half-empty container of beef chow fun that Eliza had been munching from.

“Um, we all did?” Eliza reminded. The whole staff had sent for takeout since it was hours after dinner and they were all starving. She had been ravenously devouring the noodles when Paige had interrupted her meal.

“Well, get it out of here. If Sydney comes back and finds his clothes smelling like Chinatown, he is going to have a fucking meltdown.”

Eliza shoved in a few more mouthfuls of the tangy dish before reluctantly tossing it in the trash chute across the hall from the office. She walked back into Sydney Minx’s ten-thousand-square-foot loft. It was on the third floor of a former factory building in SoHo. The designer had bought it in the seventies when the building had still been an art collective. Sydney had sworn he would never leave the neighborhood but once business had taken off had quickly repaired to a swanky Upper East Side address, and the loft had been turned into the headquarters for his line.

Just the week before, Eliza had been beside herself when she’d learned her mother had talked Sydney Minx into hiring her as an intern. She’d even skipped her own high school graduation to be here tonight. Not that it mattered—after a year at Spence in New York and two years at Herbert Hoover High in Buffalo, she’d spent her last year of high school at boarding school, where she’d essentially phoned in her senior year, breezing through a host of AP classes. Wear a black gown and a cardboard hat just to receive a piece of paper? Nuh-uh. She’d asked the school to mail it to her instead. Besides, everyone knew a graduation cap made your hair flat.

The Thompsons were back on top, and for Eliza, all was right in the world. The scandal that had bankrupted her parents and doomed them to social oblivion (aka Buffalo) was ancient history. With the help of some well-connected friends, her father had made some key ground-floor investments in an abandoned warehouse property on the west side of Manhattan, which was now being developed into the hottest real estate in the city. Voila: the Thompsons were back in business. After repurchasing their old Park Avenue co-op and re-upping their Knickerbocker Club memberships, their reputation had been reinstated along with their credit cards.

It looked like all of Eliza’s dreams were finally coming true—she’d been accepted early to Princeton, her dream college—but then, that never had been in doubt, what with her perfect SAT score and legacy-kid status. Plus, this summer she wasn’t going to be taking care of the Perry kids, nor was she going to have to prostrate herself working at a nightclub catering to bratty celebrities. The internship with Sydney Minx was icing on the cake—allowing her to make some industry contacts (she could use a few good discounts to stretch her shopping dollars—she’d heard the sample sales were amazing!) and have a fun way to pass the time. Not that the job was any fun at the moment, but it could be, if only they would let her do something more interesting than paint fabric, steam clothes, and pack boxes.

No matter; tomorrow she would be in the Hamptons with Jeremy and her friends—Mara was supposed to be there by now, and Jacqui would be flying in with the Perrys soon enough. The three of them hadn’t been together since spring break, when they’d managed to meet up for a few sun-soaked days in Cabo San Lucas. She couldn’t wait to tell them all about her new gig. Of course, stapling the fashion show programs wouldn’t sound too glamorous, so she probably wouldn’t describe it in any detail.

She passed a full-length mirror and quickly checked her reflection. Horror of horrors—there were saddlebags under her eyes from lack of sleep, and her usually lustrous blond hair

fell flat against her shoulders. Her blue eyes were red-rimmed and watery. But somehow, even while looking her absolute worst, Eliza was still the best-looking girl in the room. She'd tied her loose white oxford shirt around her waist in lieu of buttoning it, displaying a sliver of flat, tanned stomach above her baggy sweats. And even though she was wearing a comfy pair of slides, they sported a discreet Chanel logo on each side. She gathered up her hair in a loose but elegant bun, securing it with a pair of clean chopsticks.

Jeremy liked it when she put her hair up, she thought fondly. He was already in Montauk and couldn't wait for her to arrive. She had seen him just a few weeks ago at his college graduation in Binghamton, and she'd been so proud of him. Jeremy was one of the few guys who made wearing that stupid cardboard hat look sexy—his dark curls peeked out from under the cloth cap.

Dating long distance sucked, but they'd made it work, and they were going to celebrate their one-year anniversary soon. Not that it even felt like a year—whenever they were together, it was like they'd just met, and honestly, she felt like she was more in love with him than ever. She couldn't wait to see him. Jeremy was the only guy she'd ever met who saw the “real” her, who loved her because she sometimes snorted milk out of her nose when she laughed. The only guy she ever felt comfortable enough with to drop the whole princess-diva act. So many guys just expected her to be this perfectly poised mannequin. Jeremy told her he thought she was beautiful when she had a pimple on her chin.

They were planning to spend the night together as soon as she arrived in town—and Eliza knew, even if Jeremy didn't, that for the first time, it would mean *truly* spending the night together—no making out PG-13 style, the way they had been. After a year of seriously dating, she was ready to hand over her V card and make him her first. He was her one true love and had waited for so long for her to feel comfortable doing it. She was eighteen—for her, it was time. She took a deep breath and looked at herself in the mirror again.

If all went according to plan, by tomorrow evening, she would no longer be a virgin. She wondered if she would look different. Older? More mature? More experienced? And would anyone be able to tell? She'd find out soon enough.

on the upper east side, jacqui finds that packing for the hamptons doesn't help a hangover

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Her first year in New York had been nothing short of magical. The Perrys had installed her in a studio apartment formerly occupied by their ex-nanny. Jacqui had gasped when she saw the six-hundred-square-foot space—a charming, cozy room with floor-to-ceiling windows, a pretty alcove bedroom, a full kitchen, and a working fireplace. Only a block away from the

Perrys' massive town house, the apartment was close enough that Jacqui could come over and watch the kids easily but far enough that she had her privacy.

Jacqui had enrolled for her senior year at St. Grace—a small, all-girls' parochial school on the west side that had accepted her after Stuyvesant, one of the most competitive public schools in the country, did not. The Perrys had covered her tuition as part of her compensation, and Jacqui's classmates quickly idolized the brash, beautiful Brazilian in their midst. Jacqui had studied hard through the year but had still managed to become very popular. After all, she was the only one at school with her own apartment, and she'd hosted a lot of parties. She found an empty beer bottle underneath the bed and chucked it in the garbage can.

The doorbell chimed again, and this time Jacqui could definitely make out Anna and Kevin Perry's quarreling voices behind the door.

"I'm talking to you—don't answer your phone when I'm talking to you!"

"Anna, this is work. It's important. Give me a sec, all right?"

"You never listen to me. Work always comes first!"

"Babe, please shut up. I need to take this."

"Oh, just go ahead, then! Where is she? Jacqui! Jacqui!"

"Coming!" Jacqui yelled. She ran over and opened the door.

Anna Perry, a vision in sparkling Chanel tennis whites, tapped her French manicure impatiently in the doorway. "The limo's here. We need to get to the Thirty-fourth Street helipad pronto or we'll lose our departure time," she ordered briskly. Kevin Perry, who looked tense and ruffled in a gray wool suit, gave Jacqui a curt nod as he put a cell phone to his ear.

"Yes, yes, sorry—just—give me a minute." Jacqui nodded, closing the door in front of Anna's face. The Perrys might pay for the apartment, but it was still her own. Besides, she totally had to hide the keg that was standing in the middle of the living room.

mara achieves golden-girl status

MARA STRODE CONFIDENTLY THROUGH THE Airport, taking a little-known shortcut to the baggage claim area. She was so focused she didn't notice the many admiring stares in her direction. She cut a sharp figure in her tight white Michael Stars T-shirt, pink-and-green Lilly Pulitzer clam diggers, and Tory Burch for TRB wedge sandals—recent purchases thanks to congratulatory checks from her grandparents. Her thick chestnut hair was expertly colored and styled, falling sexily just below her shoulders, and she was tan from spending a weekend on Block Island as part of graduation festivities.

She retrieved the rest of her luggage, piled it on a cart, and walked out of the sliding glass doors to look for Ryan. She found him leaning against a flat red Ferrari Enzo illegally parked by the curb.

He ran over toward her, taking long loping strides. “Hey, gorgeous,” he said, plucking a garment bag from the top of the pile.

“Hey, yourself,” Mara replied, her heart skipping a beat—it always did whenever she saw his handsome face. She smiled at him over her matching butter-leather Coach suitcases—graduation booty from her sister Megan, who had quit the beauty shop for a gig as a sales rep, meriting a deep discount.

Ryan was wearing his hair longer, in a shaggy, college-boy cut, but otherwise he looked the same, the same burnished tan, the same slightly disheveled clothing—a worn Aboveground Records T-shirt over a pair of holey Rogan jeans, his usual rubber flip-flops, vintage Ray-Ban aviators perched on top of his forehead. Mara set the cart by the sidewalk and walked over to him, putting an arm around his waist as he fed the bag into his trunk.

“New wheels?” she asked, admiring the Italian sports car.

“Yeah.” He shrugged apologetically. “My dad. I think it's some kind of guilt present. He forgot my birthday this year.”

In Mara's family, guilt presents meant homemade brownies and a trip to the mall, not to the Ferrari dealership. “What happened to your old car?”

“Sugar's driving it around L.A.”

Mara thanked whatever gods were responsible that the twins, Ryan's eighteen-year-old hellion sisters, were going to be absent from the Hamptons scene this year. Sugar and Poppy had “gone Hollywood,” and both were actively auditioning for movie roles. So far, they had made a total of one direct-to-video horror film but had managed to attend every red-carpet premiere in town. Sugar was currently recording an album (*Melted Sugar*), while Poppy was

broadening her empire from a line of perfume—“Sniffers,” by Poppy Perry—to include handbags (“Stuffers”) and home fragrance (“Stinkers”). They were both famous for appearing inebriated and half naked in public and, needless to say, had become very popular in Los Angeles.

Mara shook her head at the memory of the twins’ exploits—she had almost forgiven them for their hand in what had happened last summer, but not quite.

“Missed you,” Ryan said, leaning down to give her a kiss. His lips pressed against hers, and Mara closed her eyes, opening her mouth to his. She felt him press against her body, and she tightened her embrace; soon the two of them were totally necking in front of the terminal. Ryan buried his face in Mara’s neck, and she breathed in his familiar scent—Ivory soap underneath salt water and suntan lotion. Yummy.

Several cars beeped in annoyance since Ryan’s car was blocking traffic, and they reluctantly pulled away from each other.

“Mmm,” Ryan said, holding her arms to her sides and squeezing her shoulders. “I think we should go.”

“You think?” Mara winked, still feeling happy and dazed from his hello kiss.

Ryan raised an eyebrow at the sight of all the luggage. “I don’t think it’s all going to fit in the trunk.” He shook his head.

“I kind of over-packed.”

“I can see that.” He nodded, attempting to stuff a particularly large suitcase into the Ferrari’s tiny trunk. “If I’d known, I would have brought the Rover.”

“Sorry,” Mara said sheepishly.

Ryan cursed half seriously as the suitcase wheels became stuck in the doorjamb. Mara stood back, not wanting to get in the way. “What’s SGH?” she asked, noticing a small oval sticker on the left side of the convertible’s bumper.

“Sag Harbor, where we’re spending the summer,” Ryan explained, blushing a bit. “Anna got them for all the cars—theirs say, ‘EH’, for East Hampton. I couldn’t stop her from sticking one on mine. It’s kind of cheesy, I know.”

Mara smirked. A sticker proclaiming their summer destination—trust Anna Perry, Ryan’s status-conscious stepmother, never to pass up a chance to flaunt their wealth. In the end, Ryan was able to cram most of the luggage in the trunk and squish the rest in the sports car’s tiny backseat. Mara balanced her brand-new Mulberry handbag on her lap and stuffed the matching tote bag underneath her feet. She felt slightly embarrassed to have packed so much—but as an intern at the Hamptons’ most high-profile magazine, she was determined to look the part of a glamorous journalist, even if she would just be running to the Starbucks. She’d been in the Hamptons long enough to understand the meaning of “fake it till you make it.”

Ryan climbed into the driver’s seat, and the Ferrari roared out to the lane. Mara beamed as her handsome boyfriend zoomed ahead of all the cars on the highway.

Anyone who saw Mara would think she had always been one half of a golden couple. That she took for granted the kind of life most people only dreamed about. That she had been born beautiful, rich, blessed, and confident—but anyone who thought that couldn't have been more wrong.

eliza blings it on

“HEY, VIDALIA,” ELIZA SAID, WALKING over to a Rail-Thin, six-foot-tall model who was half in and half out of her Sydney Minx original. “Paige said you needed help?”

“I can’t seem to get this to work,” the model complained in the flat, nasal tones of her native Cincinnati.

Eliza wondered if Vidalia (one name only) had changed her name to project a more exotic image and in doing so had unwittingly styled herself after a very common onion.

“Let’s see, I think that’s the armhole that you’ve got on your head, and this actually goes over here, and this one buttons to that part, and then this is loose,” Eliza said, helping Vidalia out of the dress, then gliding it back over her shoulders and deftly snapping buttons and pulling the intricately shredded chiffon frock to its rightful position.

Vidalia and Eliza stared at Vidalia’s reflection.

“That’s it?” Vidalia asked skeptically.

Eliza nodded, but she understood why the model looked doubtful. The dress, on its own, was supposed to be a show-stopper, but it still looked a little plain. It needed something. . . .

Eliza spied several gold chain belts lying on a cutting table. “Here,” she said, draping the gold chains around the model’s neck. “Put these on.” Eliza layered gold-link necklace after gold-link necklace. Then she switched Vidalia’s strappy sandals for a pair of brown crocodile leather thigh-high boots. It was supposed to be a spring/summer collection, but everyone was going to want a pair of boots this summer—cowboy boots, motorcycle boots, why not skyscraper croc? Sandals were so over. Feeling inspired, Eliza also spray-painted the edges of the dress for a dramatic finish.

The model grinned at her reflection. It was sexy, street, and luxe at the same time, hitting just the right note of savvy and super-expensive. It was the way everyone wanted to look right now, and somehow Eliza had articulated the desire with just the right accessories.

“Better, no?” Eliza asked.

“Perfecto,” Vidalia agreed, now sounding for all the world like a European heiress.

They hugged each other, feeling an adrenaline high from a job well done, an outfit well planned. Eliza smiled, dropping to her knees to pin up the skirt hem to the right length.

But when her high faded, Eliza felt nervous. It was a risky move, styling the dress and switching the sandals for boots. Only the head stylists—seasoned Seventh Avenue veterans

with years of magazine experience and fashion show production under their braided Marni belts—were supposed to style the clothes for presentation.

Who knew how Sydney would react once he saw how Vidalia was wearing the dress? He might hate it. He might throw Eliza out of the studio for what she'd done. Eliza had seen it happen—she'd been backstage at a fashion show last summer when the designer had thrown a glass of champagne at a makeup artist who'd had the audacity to lend a model his wraparound sunglasses for the show. The sunglasses hadn't been on the style sheet for that particular outfit. The designer had ripped the sunglasses off the model's head so violently, he'd pulled off her hair weave. The model had had to walk the runway bald as a newborn.

Eliza panicked. "You know, Vidalia, maybe we should have you take off these chains," she suggested. "Sydney might not like it."

But Vidalia only swatted Eliza's hand away. "It's great. Don't worry."

In any case, it was too late, since all the models were being called for a final run-through. Eliza took a deep breath and walked to the middle of room, hoping her first day at Sydney's studio wouldn't be her last.

jacqui babysits a thirty-three-year-old

BEHIND THE CLOSED DOOR, JACQUI could hear anna and Kevin continue to quarrel about his inability to listen to his wife and her inability to let him do his job. She knew Anna and Kevin weren't mad at her. They were just using her tardiness as an excuse to yell at each other—something they did much too often these days. Jacqui knew that some of it stemmed from Anna's growing insecurity about growing older—she'd almost shot her hairstylist when he pointed out a few gray strands of hair at her last appointment.

Jacqui didn't know how two people could drive each other so crazy. Anna nagged Kevin about everything from his table manners to his golf drive. Kevin squabbled with Anna over the credit card bills and the maid's housekeeping. Anna had a penchant for hurling the closest object at hand, and so far, several of her prized Lladro animal figurines had shattered in the heat of battle.

Last week before a dinner party they were hosting in their apartment, Kevin had broken Anna's treasured Mason Pearson hairbrush in two in a fit of temper. "That's a six-hundred-dollar hairbrush!" Anna had wailed in agony, and in retaliation had flicked his ear so hard during the ensuing battle that she'd broken cartilage. Enraged, Kevin had called Anna "abusive" and threatened to call 911. Things only calmed down when their guests arrived, wondering why Kevin's head was in a bandage.

Jacqui had quickly learned to usher the children away from witnessing the battles of World War III. She was an even-tempered, sunny-side-of-the-street kind of girl. She liked things to be amicable. Even her breakup with Kit Ashleigh couldn't have been more civil.

The two of them had dated soon after Jacqui had moved to New York. At first, things were great, but it soon became evident that they didn't work as a couple—Kit lost his cool every time another guy even *looked* at Jacqui (which was often) and Jacqui got tired of having to assure him 24/7 of her love. The last straw was when Kit didn't even want to take her to the newest club he was promoting because if they stayed home, then she was safe from the competition. Part of the reason she was drawn to him was because Kit always had a lot of fun. But somehow the two of them together only stressed him out. She could tell he'd almost been relieved when she broke it off—almost as if he'd been expecting it. Still, she was grateful they had been able to part as friends.

After Kit, she had dated a few boys—no one special, no one who made her breath catch in her throat and her skin tingle just at the sight of him. But Jacqui was an optimistic person. She would be open to love, and she would listen when it came knocking. After all, she had time to wait.

Like the way she could wait for NYU. They'd sent her an e-mail explaining that their decision hinged on one tiny, minuscule, nagging little detail. A problem with translating credits from her school back in Brazil. Some bureaucratic mess. Once it was cleared up, she would be sharing notes with some underage supermodel and a lone Olsen twin before she knew it.

Nothing really bothered Jacqui. After all, when you're five-ten, built like Gisele Bündchen, with a smile as blinding as the sun, what was there to worry about? Plus, she was looking forward to another summer in the Hamptons—hanging out with Mara and Eliza again—and she wouldn't have any more pesky SAT classes to keep her from partying up a storm. It was going to rock! She deserved a break after working so hard all year.

Jacqui went back to her packing, took one last look at the closet—sundresses? Espadrilles? Thongs? Check, check, check—and zipped up both suitcases. She lugged them out to the door, where now only Anna was waiting.

"Where's Kevin?" Jacqui asked. Over the year, her relationship with her famously demanding employer had become almost sisterly. Anna wasn't as terrifying or insane once you got to know her better, and they had become so friendly that Anna had even begun to confide in Jacqui.

"He's not coming. He got called for a meeting. So now I don't have a date for the East Hampton Day-Care benefit tonight. Men!"

Jacqui followed Anna into the elevator. "It's probably important."

"What's more important than spending time with his family? I swear, one of these days, I'm going to call Raoul Felder, just watch me!" Anna said, naming a notorious divorce attorney who handled high-profile marital disintegrations. "Maybe that will make him pay attention! He hardly even looks at me anymore."

"Shhh—you shouldn't say that!" Jacqui said, crossing herself. Jacqui was superstitious and didn't believe in tempting bad karma. As far as she could tell, divorce was the last thing that would solve Anna's marital mess. That was the problem these days—everything was considered disposable—clothes, cell phones, relationships. Jacqui knew that once she fell in love—really fell in love—it would be forever. There would be no divorce in her future if she could help it. Her grandparents had been together for fifty-three years, until Papi died, and her parents had weathered twenty years so far.

"Why not? It's true. He takes me for granted! If I divorce him, he'll finally realize how much I do around here," Anna pouted. She'd told Jacqui that when they first met, Kevin couldn't keep his hands off her, and the two of them would jet to Barbados or Capri at a moment's notice. But years of marriage and its grueling domestic routine had left little time for such pleasures.

Sometimes, Jacqui thought eight-year-old Zoë was more mature than Anna. Jacqui hadn't realized it then, but she knew now that part of her job as an au pair was to take care of Anna as well. As if on cue, Anna rested her head on Jacqui's shoulder.

“He couldn’t do a thing without you,” Jacqui said soothingly as they walked out of the building and into the black stretch limousine parked in front of the awning.

“Tell that to him,” Anna said bitterly. She shook her head. “Anyway, how was graduation? Everything went well?”

It was nice of Anna to remember. Jacqui climbed into the limo and told Anna a little bit about the ceremony. The class had even been able to snag Tina Fey as a speaker since her housekeeper’s daughter went to the school. She wasn’t their first choice—Hillary Clinton was. But the senator had canceled due to a last-minute scheduling conflict. Such was life in the city.

The car pulled away and began winding its way down and across town toward the helicopter landing. As they turned left on Park Avenue, Jacqui suddenly realized she’d forgotten to pack the most crucial item for a summer in the Hamptons.

Her favorite Rosa Chá seashell-trimmed bikini. Three pieces of tiny fabric attached by a string. She’d shown her girlfriends back in Brazil the bathing suits Americans considered sexy. They had all laughed at the size of the bikini bottoms. They looked gigantic compared to the tiny tangas they were used to wearing.

If only she’d remembered to grab it. Oh, well. It just meant she’d have fun buying a new one, even if she’d have to “Brazilianize” it a bit if she wanted to feel like herself.

somewhere, chris martin is singing his heart out

THEY ARRIVED AT THE SAG Harbor yacht club—tiny white lights illuminated the crisp sails against a dark sky. The forty-seven-foot-long Perry yacht was docked in a choice location—the first off the pier, nearest to the water. Ryan pulled up alongside the other cars parked across from their owners' boats.

“Your castle, milady,” he joked, but it wasn't that far from the truth. The sleek sailboat was a twin-engine Catalina with a spacious and elegant master stateroom, guest V-berths, three bathrooms, a galley kitchen, a living room, and satellite TV. “It sleeps ten, so it should be big enough for the two of us.”

Mara gasped. It was even larger and more beautiful than she'd remembered, with its hand-polished teak decks, sleek fiberglass finish, and moniker *The Malpractice* (so named after the lawsuits that had paid for the yacht) painted in platinum leaf on the transom. Three triangular flags flew at the top of the mast: the Stars and Stripes, the yacht club logo, and the Perrys' own family coat of arms. She walked to the end of the dock, removed her shoes, and carefully stepped barefoot onto the deck of the boat, where she found a trail of rose petals leading to the downstairs cabins.

“What's this?” she asked, looking at him wonderingly.

Ryan followed her down, half hidden underneath all of her luggage. “You'll see.”

She followed the trail of red rose petals and found that it led to the front deck, where a table and two chairs were set for a formal dinner.

“Oh!” Mara said, clasping her hands.

The starched white tablecloth held two dinner settings, Royal Copenhagen porcelain plates in a fleur jouty pattern. In the middle of the table stood silver chafing dishes warmed by a small gaslight. The smell of roasted chicken, herbed vegetables, and other succulent treats wafted up from the table. A silver bucket by the side of the rails held a magnum of Veuve Clicquot champagne.

Ryan dumped the bags on the floor and walked up to Mara, embracing her from behind and whispering in her ear, “Welcome home.”

Mara felt her eyes well up with tears. It was the most romantic thing she'd ever seen—and not at all cheesy and contrived, like an episode of *The Bachelor*. This was the real thing. And it was all for her.

A waiter in a white dinner jacket came out of the shadows and bowed. “Is it all to your satisfaction, Mr. Perry?” he asked with a slight French accent.

“Yes, thank you, George.” Ryan nodded. “We’ll clean this up ourselves. No need to wait on us. Have yourself a nice evening.”

“Very good, sir,” the Frenchman said, disappearing into the night.

“I got Jean-Luc to do the dinner—they don’t usually cater and they don’t deliver. But the owner’s a good friend of my dad’s,” he explained. “C’mon, let’s sit down.” He pulled out Mara’s chair.

Mara sat down, still overwhelmed by the entire spectacle. The night air was balmy and sweet—a fresh breeze blew through her hair, and she remembered how much she loved the Hamptons.

They opened the silver dishes eagerly. The four-hour drive had left them famished.

“Heard from Dartmouth yet?” Ryan asked between bites.

Dartmouth. Shit. Mara shook her head. For a moment, the magic faltered. Being on the wait list was the only thing that was keeping her life from being perfect, perfect, perfect. “No, unfortunately.”

“They’ll take you. They *have* to,” Ryan insisted, cutting into the chicken. He was stubbornly optimistic that everything would work out.

“I hope so.” She sighed. “Though I really can’t do anything about it at this point.”

“You know, I could always ask my dad . . .” Ryan said, reaching over to squeeze her hand. “He knows the university president really well.”

Mara shook her head. It was sweet of Ryan to offer, but she really didn’t feel comfortable asking his father to pull strings on her behalf. Part of her felt like it was an unfair practice, and she was already feeling guilty about getting the gig at *Hamptons* magazine so easily. Besides, she wanted to get into Dartmouth on her own merit.

They continued eating, and after dessert, Ryan pulled out a box from under the table and pushed it toward Mara. It was robin’s-egg blue and tied with a familiar white ribbon. Mara’s heart skipped, but its dimensions were too large for the contents to be jewelry.

“What’s this?”

Ryan shrugged, feigning innocence, but there was a gleam in his eye.

Mara untied the ribbon and opened the box. Nestled inside the tissue paper were three-by-five note cards. Each had a tiny drawing of the sailboat in the center. Underneath, it read *Mara Waters, Sag Harbor*.

Her new address. On Tiffany stationery, no less.

“Ryan—you didn’t have to . . .” she said, her eyes shining.

“Oh, it was nothing. I thought you might like it for your new job, you know? I think magazine people get off on things like this.”

“Magazine people,” Mara murmured, lovingly stroking the stationery. “What’s that mean?” she asked.

“You know, glossy girls . . .”

She beamed. She was a “glossy girl.”

Ryan stood up and took the champagne bottle from the bucket, spilling fat droplets of water on the floor. He took a napkin, placed it around the bottle’s neck, and popped the cork. Faint lines of cold air whispered out of the open bottle. He quickly filled two flutes with the bubbly and handed her one.

“To our summer,” he proposed.

“To us,” Mara agreed, clinking her glass against his.

They sipped from their glasses in silence and walked to the edge of the boat by the railings. Mara found she couldn’t keep the smile from her face.

When the bubbly had been drained, he took her champagne glass and set it on the table next to his. And in one smooth motion, he scooped her up in his arms.

She buried her face in his neck. They didn’t need to say anything to each other; everything they meant to say they said with the closeness of their beating hearts. She felt so light, so airy and feminine and loved in his strong arms—as he walked down the length of the boat toward the captain’s quarters.

“Oops!” he said, sliding on a few rose petals, but he regained his balance and carried her over the threshold.

Cue the Coldplay, Mara thought. This is the definition of romance.

Ryan maneuvered the door open and laid Mara gently on the king-size bed. She stared up at him hungrily and reached over to help him take off his T-shirt while he pulled up her blouse.

They were kissing again, his tongue deep in her mouth, when they suddenly noticed an incessant, shrill beeping.

“What the hell is that?” Ryan asked, looking wildly around the room.

“I don’t know,” Mara said, propping herself up on her elbows. She was down to her Cosabella thong and Ryan was in his boxers.

She spied a white, purple, and orange cardboard box vibrating in the corner. “I think it’s coming from there.”

Ryan hauled himself off the bed and walked over to the box. He held it up. It was a FedEx package. He looked down at the address label.

“It’s for you,” he said blankly, handing it to Mara.

is this what they call ghetto fabulous?

THE MURMURING IN THE STUDIO was interrupted by a fearful hush and the sound of one man bitching.

Sydney Minx had arrived for the run-through.

The designer was a short, squat man with a long white ponytail who never went anywhere without his oversized blind-as-a-bat sunglasses. He looked like a smaller, fatter version of Karl Lagerfeld, and the tribute didn't end there—Sydney was waving a small Japanese fan around madly.

All the models were arranged in a row for a final rehearsal before the show at the Hamptons boutique tomorrow.

“What is this? *Qu'est-ce que c'est?* This is terrible! *Horeeeeb!*” he exclaimed in an affected French accent, pointing to a model wearing an ostrich-feather-trimmed tunic and matching silk pants. “That outfit is three thousand dollars retail, but somehow it looks like it's nineteen ninety-nine at the mall!

“And will you look at this! Someone please tell me what she is supposed to be!” he cried, slapping a model on her bottom with his fan. The girl was wearing an abbreviated cotton biker jacket over a leopard-print dress. “This is Donatella Versace committed suicide! This is not Sydney Minx at all! This is not my vision! Paige! Paige!”

Eliza smiled. This was the only time the rant was worth it. In Sydney's presence, Paige was reduced to a simpering yes-woman, a sniveling, wimpy Smithers to an apocalyptic Mr. Burns.

“It's Aspen East?” Paige said weakly, referring to Sydney's “vision” of the collection, which blended ski-bunny coquettishness with Hamptons-style aristocratic summer hauteur.

“This is *not* Aspen East! It's more like Ghetto West!”

The models cowered, the seamstresses frowned, and one of the assistants began taking the dress off the nearest model with an almost violent rage. Back to the drawing board.

“You!” Sydney suddenly exclaimed, his eyes resting on Vidalia. “Come here!”

Vidalia tentatively walked out to the center and in front of Sydney. The numerous gold chains clinked softly against her skin.

“Turn around!” he directed.

She did, taking a few steps.

“Paige! Did you do this? This isn’t how the dress is supposed to be presented!” Sydney’s fan was shaking in agitation.

Paige shook her head adamantly. “I asked one of the interns to dress her, not restyle her!” she barked.

Eliza paled. This was it. She knew she had totally overstepped her boundaries—her job was to help zip up the dress, certainly not do anything so important as *accessorize* it.

Sydney scanned the room intensely. “Who is the intern responsible for this?”

Eliza gulped and slowly raised her hand.

“What’s your name?” he asked, taking off his sunglasses and giving her a critical once-over.

“Eliza Thompson, sir.”

He puckered his lips. “Billie Thompson’s daughter. *N’est-ce pas?*”

“Yes, sir—I mean, Sydney.”

Sydney sniffed as if he smelled something bad. He closed his eyes. The whole room was quivering with tension, half of them feeling sorry for Eliza, the other half thankful it wasn’t them in the hot seat.

The prickly designer finally opened his eyes. He looked at Vidalia again. “Well, Eliza, I have to say, this is simply fabulous!”

Eliza, and the rest of the room, exhaled.

“But the rest is dog shit.” His fan fluttered again.

“Er, thank you, I think,” Eliza said, bowing her head. She snuck a peek at the front of the room and suppressed a grin. Paige wore a scowl on her face.

Sydney whispered to Paige behind his fan, and soon he had left the room again. Paige wearily clapped to attract everyone’s attention. “All right, people. We obviously have a lot of work to do, so let’s get started,” she said, and the group disbanded to resume their tasks.

Eliza went back to the T-shirt pile, her face glowing. Sydney had loved the outfit—he’d even said she was *good*—no, he’d said she was *simply fabulous*. It was like a lightning bolt through the clouds. She’d loved helping style the dress. Working on the look was the first time she’d ever felt passionate about her work—really, the first time she’d felt excited about anything other than shopping.

A shadow suddenly enveloped Eliza. She looked up to find Paige looming over her. Insta-buzz kill.

“Sydney would like you to take a look at the rest of his line.” Each word seemed painful for Paige to speak. “I’ll take over folding the T-shirts.”

Eliza leaped to attention and handed over the folding board. Even though her feet were sore and her joints ached, a sweet feeling of satisfaction seeped into her bones and made her oblivious to the pain.

Suddenly, the job wasn't so boring after all.

you can't always get what you want. . . .

THE LIMOUSINE INCHED FORWARD FOR several blocks, stuck in Midtown gridlock. All around them the streets were jammed with harried commuters trying to get out of the city early on a Friday afternoon, a veritable *Escape from New York*. Sometimes it took longer to get out of the city than it took to drive to the Hamptons.

Jacqui stretched her legs in the back of the limousine, dozing as the kids flipped channels on the built-in DVD player and Anna made phone calls. Her Sidekick vibrated, and she checked the screen. The new-message icon was flashing. She clicked on it idly but caught her breath once she saw the sender's e-mail address: admissions@nyu.edu. It could only mean one thing. The school had finally come to a decision. After a deep breath, she scrolled down to read it.

To: jacarei_velasco@stgraceacademy.edu

From: admissions@nyu.edu

Dear Jacarei Velasco,

We regret to inform you that we are unable to offer you a position in next year's freshman class. Unfortunately, subsequent investigation of your high school transcript from São Paulo reveals that you have taken only two years of science and mathematics. New York University requires that all its incoming students complete a minimum of three years of study in these subjects. We suggest taking a fifth year of college preparatory courses to bolster your application if you choose to apply for admission next year.

Thank you for your interest in New York University, and best of luck in the future.

Sincerely,

The New York University Admissions Committee

How could this be? She'd been waiting for so long—she'd worked so hard—between schooling and the au pair gig, she'd barely even had time to hang out when Eliza was home from boarding school. Plus, she'd taken the SAT no fewer than *seven* times, and she'd even passed her AP English exam—a real achievement! Then she'd put in all that time at the dialysis center as part of her community service to beef up her application—which had been a difficult squeeze with all her responsibilities at the Perry house. She'd done everything possible—she'd rewritten her essay so many times even she herself was sick of her life story and “the most influential person in her life” (her grandmother). By rights, she was a perfect candidate—well rounded, solid GPA, likable background, killer head shot. (All the schools were asking for them now.) What could have gone wrong?

“Are you okay?” Anna asked, raising an eyebrow. She'd noticed Jacqui staring at the screen with uncharacteristic intensity.

“I got an e-mail from NYU,” Jacqui said flatly. She choked out the bad news.

“I’m sorry,” Anna said, her voice warm. “I went to NYU. I know it’s terribly hard to get in these days. I’m sure you’ll do just as well at another university.”

Jacqui took Anna’s words of comfort in the spirit they were offered; she knew her employer meant well. But Jacqui didn’t have a plan B. She’d refused to apply to any other college as the counselor had suggested. The University of Michigan? She didn’t even know where Michigan *was*. Wellesley? An all-girls’ school? Forget it! So instead of college, her only remaining option was to take a *fifth* year—of high school! The humiliation!

Jacqui had heard about the dreaded “five-year plan.” A few seniors from last year’s class at St. Grace had returned to the school for the same program. It was usually offered to dumb rich kids who had marginal brains but oodles of money. Jacqui couldn’t believe she would be one of those people. First off, she wasn’t rich. Who was going to pay for another year of her tuition?

Of course, she could work for the Perrys again. She was sure Anna wasn’t looking forward to breaking in a new au pair. But Jacqui had talked about NYU so much—she and Eliza were already planning on meeting up in October for Halloween, and she’d had Mara promise that wherever she ended up, they would spend Thanksgiving together. She even had a roommate lined up—a friend from St. Grace who had been granted early admission to Tisch.

Traffic finally let up, and the car deposited them in front of the barbed-wire gates in front of the Thirty-fourth Street tarmac. Anna and the rest of the family clambered out of the limousine, leaving Jacqui alone inside.

With no one to notice, Jacqui brushed away a few tears. Madison Perry, twelve years old and even skinnier than last summer, stuck her head inside the car. “Jacqui? We need to go.” She saw the look on Jacqui’s face. “Is something wrong? Are you okay?”

Jacqui smiled bravely. She wiped her face. “I just realized I’m wearing the wrong outfit for the helicopter. My skirt is going to be in my face from all that wind.”

Madison chuckled hesitantly.

“You know, like Marilyn Monroe—poof!” Jacqui joked. She slid out of the car. This time Madison laughed in earnest.

Jacqui forced a laugh too, holding down her skirt as they ran past the scissoring helicopter blades. But her smile faded as soon as Madison turned away.

The girl from sunny São Paulo felt as cloudy as the New York sky.

when duty calls . . . blackberries vibrate

RYAN TOSSED OVER THE CARDBOARD FedEx box, and Mara tore it open.

“What the—?” she asked as out tumbled a vibrating BlackBerry.

She tried to answer it. “Hello? Hello? Hello?” she yelled, twiddling the little knobs on the side.

“I don’t think it’s ringing,” Ryan said helpfully. “I think it means you have a message.”

“Right,” Mara said, scrolling down the page and finding a blinking envelope icon on the screen. She tapped it open.

“Oh no!”

“What’s wrong?” Ryan asked, climbing back into bed and kicking the FedEx box to the side. He knelt above Mara and nuzzled her neck. “Whatever it is, it can’t be that important.”

“Shit! I’m so dead!” she gasped as she scrolled down the screen. She looked at her watch and cursed again. “It’s eleven-thirty!”

“Why? What’s going on?”

“Ryan—can you please—” Mara said, brushing away his hand and turning her head from his kisses. “It’s my boss!” she wailed. “She’s the only one who knows the boat address. Anyway, there’s a big benefit party at Cain tonight for some day-care center, and their society columnist is stuck at some royal wedding in Saint-Tropez.” Mara swallowed hard. “She wants me to be there . . . and write a whole column about it!”

Ryan sighed loudly against Mara’s shoulder. “So?” he asked. “What’s the big deal? You’re supposed to write for them, aren’t you?”

Mara blew out her bangs. “Not really. She said there was a chance I could do some writing—but mostly captions. Not a real article. You don’t understand—I’ve never written anything like this before! The biggest event I’ve ever written about was the musical production of *Mary Poppins* at our high school! And she wants a column—with quotes from celebrities. How do I even do that?” Mara was terrified at the thought of actually sticking a tape recorder under a famous person’s chin. Did she even own a tape recorder?

“Easy. You just go up and ask a question,” Ryan replied. “It’s not a big deal. I see reporters do it all the time. Besides, you’ve been to, like, a million parties in the Hamptons. It’s all the same thing every year.”

Mara freed herself from his arms. She wrapped her body in a bedsheet and ran out to the deck to fetch her luggage.

“You’re leaving?” he asked incredulously. “But we just got here!”

“I have to,” she pleaded, returning to the cabin with a suitcase and a garment bag. “The party started at ten! I’m already so late! Lucky was supposed to meet me there an hour ago!” She unzipped the bag and began rooting in it for something to wear.

“Relax. Nothing ever happens before midnight,” he said.

He remained silent as she fastened her push-up bra back on and wiggled into a tight-fitting Hollywood dress with a sexy cutout front studded with turquoise beads.

“Zip me up?”

Ryan sighed and propped himself up on his knees. Mara turned her back to him and he carefully zipped up the dress.

She turned around to smooth out the front panels. “Do I look okay?”

“You looked better before.” He smirked and switched on the sixty-inch flat-screen television.

“Why don’t you come with me?” Mara asked, her face lighting up with the idea. She felt so bad to be leaving him in the middle of the night. She sat on the side of the bed to put on a pair of patent leather Pierre Hardy slingbacks, sneaking a glance in his direction. “It’ll be fun,” she wheedled.

“Nah,” Ryan said, falling against the pillows. “I’m beat—I had to drive down from New Hampshire and then drive out here. You go. Seriously. I don’t mind.”

“C’mon, we’ll dance a little, drink a few margaritas . . .” she said seductively, hooking the straps around her heels.

“Hypnotic margaritas?” he asked, cocking an eyebrow.

“Your favorite.”

“Mmm . . .” He looked like he was about to leave the bed and put on some clothes but at the last second fell back against the pillows again. “I’m so beat, I don’t think I can move. I really need to crash tonight.”

“I just want us to be together for our first night,” Mara pouted.

“I know, babe,” Ryan said, leaning forward and putting an arm around her neck so that he pulled her back on the bed. He slipped a hand up her skirt and pulled teasingly down on her underwear. “We can be.”

For a moment, she relaxed against his grip, closing her eyes. She could feel him gently kissing the back of her neck, and it would be so easy to just surrender—to give in—to let them be together. But she put a hand on his hand and eased it out from under her skirt. Reluctantly.

“I should really go. I don’t want to, but I have to.”

“All right.” Ryan sighed again. “I understand.”

She turned around to look at him in the eye. “Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.” He nodded, but his eyes were bereft of their usual spark.

She still looked uncertain, and part of her just wanted to stay in the bed and be with him forever—but another part was also extremely worried about her first magazine story. A bona fide assignment! She’d just have to overcome her natural shyness and get a few quotes from the celebrities in attendance. Ask them what they were wearing and who they were dating . . . and . . . what? She had to fill a column—eight hundred words! She hoped she could pull it off.

“I’m sorry,” she repeated.

“Don’t be,” he said. “We’ve got the whole summer ahead of us.”

Mara smiled. He was such a great guy. And what was one missed night? He was right—they had three glorious months ahead to do everything together.

She held up his Ferrari keys. “Okay if I drive it to Cain?”

black hawk down!

“**WHAT DO YOU MEAN, OUR** chopper isn’t here?” Anna demanded, jabbing a finger at the chest of the beleaguered air traffic controller. “We’re always slotted first for departure.”

“Sorry, ma’am, but you’ll have to wait till they leave,” the nervous technician explained, thumbing behind him. “Then your pilot can land and you can board.”

Anna looked over to where he had pointed and gasped. “What the hell is that? And what is it doing in our space!”

In the Perrys’ usual spot was a magnificent army-issue Black Hawk helicopter revamped with custom detailing and luxury finishes, boasting a veritable *Pimp My Ride* makeover, from the cushy leather bucket seats to the retractable step platform. It could withstand Iraqi gunfire but was currently used to ferry its owners from Manhattan to the Hamptons in under an hour.

A boxy, behemoth, bright yellow Hummer barged into the terminal and pulled up next to the Black Hawk with a loud screech. The side door opened and three very cute young indie-rock-looking guys jumped out. One was tall and light-haired with a pleasant face and a quick, friendly grin. He was wearing a purple Atari T-shirt and baggy jeans. The second had neat dark hair and black plastic square-rimmed glasses. A hipster nerd, good-looking in that bookish way. The third was lanky and laid-back, with messy brown hair and a fine set of sideburns. He wore a yellow polyester shirt with a seventies-style spread collar that spanned the length of his shoulders and a pair of loud checkered trousers. They looked like college freshmen lost on their way to orientation.

Jacqui stood by the chain-link fence next to the Perry kids, holding Zoë’s backpack and Cody’s hand. She barely noticed the three guys. Cody was screaming that he had to go potty, and Jacqui had to tell him to wait until they got to the Hamptons because there was no bathroom at the helipad. He’d finally been toilet-trained at the grand old age of five, but the poor kid still had the occasional accident. Jacqui prayed he wouldn’t have one now—or perhaps she could just let him go by the side of the road. He was just a little boy, after all, and it seemed cruel to let him suffer like that.

While she debated on how to handle the toilet situation, her mind searched for an easy answer to her problems. She needed to think, and it was hard to concentrate with the sound of the helicopter engines and the Hummer stereo blasting and Anna’s incessant complaining.

The trio from the Hummer sauntered toward the Black Hawk.

“Sorry we’re late,” the tall blond one said to the air traffic controller with a wicked grin. “Ben here had a little appointment with Madame Cinq Doigt,” he said, holding up five fingers and smirking.

“Duffy, man, you know she’s my best customer,” said Ben, the one with the glasses. He shrugged easily and laughed.

“Check it out!” the handsome one with the sideburns exclaimed. “Fucking A.” He whistled, stalking over to the side of the chopper with smooth, catlike grace.

Painted on the side of the helicopter was a cartoon hand holding up its index and third fingers in a crooked V. Underneath was emblazoned the words *The Shocker!*

“Oh, man, Grant.” Duffy suddenly raised his arms to the back of his head and looked pained. “Totally forgot I have to pick up my parents from the Vineyard in that thing tomorrow!”

“Maybe they won’t notice,” Ben soothed, taking off his glasses and wiping them on the edge of his shirt. “You can always tell them it’s a peace sign.”

“Yeah, right,” Duffy said glumly as Grant punched him on the shoulder, trying not to laugh too hard.

The three of them climbed up the steps into the helicopter, completely ignoring the Perry clan.

Until they spotted Jacqui crouching on her knees, trying to calm Cody.

“You can just go here, Cody. No one will see,” she said as she helped the kid with his pants buttons.

“Ten o’clock,” Duffy said, alerting his friends to the direction where Jacqui was kneeling. “Hottie central.”

Ben put his glasses back on his nose for a closer look. “Girls sure don’t look like that at Harvard,” he lamented.

Grant nodded. “No wonder Latin American women always win Miss Universe.”

His friends looked askance at him. “How do you know that shit?” they ribbed.

“It’s called having sisters,” Grant huffed. He straightened his winged collar and slicked back his dark hair.

Jacqui didn’t even notice the three boys staring at her with an intensity bordering on reverence. In the afternoon sun, violet highlights shone in her black hair, and her deep bronze tan glowed. The sweetheart neckline on her dress displayed her ample cleavage, and her slim, toned legs were taut from squatting to Cody’s height. “There you go; that’s a good boy,” she said, relieved that the kid had been able to urinate. She brushed her hair out of her eyes, lifting and stretching her bountiful chest, which elicited a chorus of strangled cries from two of the Black Hawk’s occupants.

“Yo!” Duffy said, opting for a direct approach.

“Excuse me!” Ben yelled, trying for a polite angle.

Grant merely slumped back in his seat and regarded Jacqui thoughtfully. Girls usually came up to him, and he didn't see the need to make a fool of himself. Especially as the sounds of his friends' desperate mating calls were obscured by the din of the engine roaring into first gear.

“Who do you think she is?” Ben wondered aloud as the helicopter lifted them high up in the air and out of earshot.

“A goddess,” Duffy opined.

“Relax, guys, we're going to the Hamptons. And believe me, they all look like that there,” Grant assured them. But his two friends looked at him doubtfully. As far as they could see, there was only one Jacqui.

the first rule of party reporting: fabricate fun!

IN THE HAMPTONS, EVEN A day-care-center fund-raiser merited boldface names and a swishy crowd. The first person Mara saw on entering Cain was none other than Mitzi Goober—the toxic publicist from last summer who had styled herself Mara’s best friend and plied her with gifts, only to turn on her after a misunderstanding over a pair of misplaced quarter-million-dollar earrings that were supposed to be worn by J.Lo at the MTV Awards. But what was a lost PR opportunity among friends? To Mara’s surprise, Mitzi greeted her with a shrill hello and immediately drew her in for a fierce embrace. It was like hugging a skeleton, Mara thought.

Mitzi was tanner and blonder than ever. But while her arms were toned and muscular, she had a basketball-sized stomach owing to the fact that she was six months pregnant. She sported a tight tank top that blared *LIVING THE AMERICAN DREAM* over a proud baby bump—the ne plus ultra of accessories that summer. “Yummy Mommies” were all the rage—fertility was very fashionable at the moment. Of course, once the children were born, they were quickly ushered offstage by a crew of nannies. The glamorous crowd cooed over a chic pregnancy but beat a hasty retreat when faced with the reality of actually raising a child.

“Dollink!” Mitzi cooed as she sipped on a thin red straw poking out of a blue-and-silver Red Bull can. Caffeine intake concerns? Not this mother-to-be.

“Hi, Mitzi,” Mara said, relieved to see someone she recognized. Where was Lucky? She hoped she would run into him soon so she could find out what exactly she was supposed to do at the party.

“How *are* you? What’s *new*?” Mitzi jabbered in her singsong voice. “I heard you’re on staff at *Hamptons* this summer—that’s beyond! We need to get you to meet our clients—we have some awesome things coming up this season. We’re doing Sydney’s opening—I see six-page spread!”

“Um . . .” Mara didn’t know what to say. The idea that she would be making decisions on anything as important as a multi-page feature was absurd. She was a lowly intern.

“We’ll talk, okay? I’ll send you samples. Bye-ye!” Mitzi gushed, assaulting Mara with a brush of her lips on each cheek.

The minute Mitzi released her, several people whom Mara had met during the last two summers made their way to her side. They all knew she was working for *Hamptons* magazine. The same crowd who had shunned her at the end of last summer were now angling to get

back in her good graces, reminding her of how they knew each other. Part of Mara was disgusted by their hypocrisy, but another part admired their tenacity. Some would call it fair-weather friendship, but such was life in the Hamptons. In their own way, they were paying Mara a compliment. It was obvious from all the attention they were lavishing on her that they considered Mara a real player. Even Alan Whitman and Kartik, the co-owners of Seventh Circle, last year's hot spot, came over to pay their respects.

Eliza's former bosses told Mara they were just back from Las Vegas, where they had opened Seventh Circle in the Desert, with an opening party that had included topless dancers re-creating the seminal dance scene from *Showgirls*.

"But I'm telling you." Alan nodded. "You've got to check out our new place, Volcano. We've got real lava coming out of the fountain. It's *intense*."

"Come over for dinner, on us," Kartik added, giving Mara a bear hug. "Mitzi'll call you. Hook us up!"

Mara smiled in a noncommittal fashion. "Hook us up!" was the rousing chorus of the evening, with everyone from desperate socialites and their scheming publicists to coat-check girls and valet attendants pitching Mara items for the magazine.

She spotted Anna Perry in the corner of the club, looking woefully overdressed and awkwardly out of place in a floor-length ball gown. While the benefit dinner had been attended by the A-list social crowd, the dessert-and-dancing after-hours catered to the younger set. Usually Anna left early with the other society wives, but there she was, perched on a tufted ottoman, balancing a drink on her knee.

Mara noticed that she was accompanied by one of the more famous Hamptons "walkers"—gay men who acted as escorts to married women who couldn't persuade their husbands to join them in the social whirl. Where was Kevin? She stopped by to say hello, and Anna greeted her warmly. "Did you see all the pictures of the kids? Aren't they so cute?" her former employer asked wistfully. "Cody's gotten so big! I miss having a baby around the house."

"There you are!"

For the first time at the party, Mara felt genuine happiness at spotting someone. Lucky Yap, the tart-tongued party photographer, was making his way toward her.

"Excuse me, Anna," Mara said, taking her leave and turning to her friend.

Lucky was wearing a voluminous velvet frock coat over a T-shirt that read FASHION VICTIM! (Edwardian irony was in, and last year's African muumuus were out this summer), with his trusty digital Nikon around his neck. He was scanning the crowd with a raised eyebrow.

"It's just exes, siblings, and stepkids tonight," he lamented, meaning the crowd was made up of those with tenuous connections to the famous rather than real celebrities themselves.

"What should I do?" Mara asked eagerly.

“What we always do: lie, lie, lie! All these parties are so motha-effing boring, but no one has to know that or we’ll be out of work.”

Mara laughed. She knew Lucky was joking. Or at least, she hoped he was. She gave him a rundown of what she’d observed. She thought she’d spotted a famous socialite—one of the Bush nieces—but she wasn’t sure. And she had caught a glimpse of a married polo player kissing a newlywed television starlet near the coat check.

“Do you think that’s enough for the column?”

“Honey, of course it is. You can put the canoodling adulterers in the “blind item” category. But I’ll run the starlet’s photo above it so everyone will know it was him,” Lucky said wickedly.

“Oh, good,” Mara said, relieved.

“Miss Mara Waters,” a sexy yet familiar voice growled behind her.

She turned around. “Mister Garrett Reynolds,” she cooed back, folding her arms under her chest.

Garrett brushed a saucy flop of dark hair out of his eye. He was tan and wearing a white linen shirt and cream-colored trousers. He kissed her on the cheek and acted like they were old friends and like nothing had ever happened between them—as though he hadn’t dumped her unceremoniously once she’d been the victim of bad press.

“Working hard?”

She shrugged.

“Good luck with it,” he said, shaking his whiskey glass. “It’s my last night here.”

“Oh? You’re not staying in the Hamptons this summer?”

Garrett laughed as if it were the funniest thing he’d ever heard. “Oh no, *of course* not. The Hamptons are so over. We’re renting out the house. I’ll be in Cape Town, where the real action is.” He smirked. “But you have fun—I know you’ll find some way to get into trouble.”

His condescending and dismissive attitude did little to dampen Mara’s spirits. Garrett was an ass, and she was glad to see the back of him. She wondered how on earth she’d ever found him attractive.

She suddenly missed Ryan, who was sure to be asleep with the TV turned to *Aqua Teen Hunger Force*. She thought about heading home and crawling into bed next to him, but Lucky Yap called her over to introduce her to Jill Klompenhower, the only real A-list celeb in the joint—an Oscar-winning actress who was rumored to have recently annulled her two-week marriage to a Christian rocker. Suddenly Mara was too busy trying to remember every detail of Jill’s story to pine for her sleeping boyfriend.

as heidi klum would say, eliza is “in” and
paige is “out”

ELIZA HELPED ANOTHER MODEL WITH her outfit, tweaking it so that the girl wore the newsboy cap at a rakish angle and the lacy camisole over the dress instead of vice versa. Then she moved on to the next one and the next, making little adjustments, adding earrings here, a pair of fishnet stockings there—and before she knew it, she’d changed the entire look and feel of the collection.

There! Eliza thought. *Now, that’s more like it.* The clothes all displayed an overall theme, with a sexy, beachy, jet-set vibe. More like the Sydney Minx collection of old. She had to say so herself—she was a genius!

“What do you think you’re doing?” Paige demanded. She had walked out of Sydney’s office and only just noticed that almost all of the models were wearing their outfits ever-so-slightly differently.

“Oh, Paige!” Eliza pouted. “You scared me.”

“Sydney, look what she’s done!” Paige called out ominously. “Everything is different!”

The designer emerged from his office. He frowned and cupped his chin in the palm of his hand. “Let me see.”

Eliza froze. She held her breath. All her bravado momentarily left her. It was easy to feel confident and inspired when the models cooed and aahed over her changes, but they were just models—what did they know? Most of them couldn’t even spell their own fake names.

“Good, good,” Sydney said. “Continue,” he told Eliza. “And Paige, give her a hand.”

It was a moment of triumph Eliza found bittersweet. Because while she took it upon herself to feverishly spray-paint, shred, and accessorize each outfit, Paige stood to the side, bored, unhelpful, and seething with barely controlled passive-aggressive rage.

“Can I get a glue gun, please?” Eliza called to her as she pulled on a model’s skirt and began pinching the fabric in a ruched pattern.

“Here,” Paige said, throwing it down.

The clatter made Eliza jump, causing her to cut into the fabric with her scissors.

“Jesus!” the model yelped.

“Oh, fuck!” Eliza said, noticing the hole. She looked over at Paige, who looked the picture of innocence. She knew Paige had done it on purpose, but there was nothing Eliza could do about it.

Eliza had a thought. “Hold still,” she told the model, cutting another hole in the skirt and another and another, creating a sexy peekaboo design.

A few minutes later, there was a ruckus in the back of the room. “It’s too small!” the model complained. The coffee-colored leather dress she was wearing was so short it barely covered her bottom.

“What’s happened now? I warn you girls, I *cannot* have another crisis! I’m already out of Xanax!” Sydney shouted, storming over to assess the situation.

“Eliza told me to put it in the dryer—and look,” Paige said smugly. “The outfit’s ruined. It’ll never be ready for the show.”

“I was going for a distressed leather thing,” Eliza explained, examining the destroyed fabric with a critical eye. She had asked Paige to set the machine on delicate, but obviously the malicious assistant had made sure the machine was set on high.

The leather was nubby and indeed shrunken.

“Here,” Eliza, decided, handing the model a pair of denim cutoffs. She pulled the dress higher on the waist. “It’s a top!”

“Naturally,” Sydney agreed, fanning away.

“Naturally,” Eliza repeated, beaming her million-dollar smile Paige’s way. No matter how badly Paige tried to sabotage her efforts, Eliza could do no wrong.

if only all nerf football games ended this way

JACQUI ARRIVED IN THE HAMPTONS at Sunset. the Perry estate, Creek Head Manor, was just as immaculate and photo-shoot-ready as ever, as if waiting for its close-up in *Metropolitan Home*. Laurie, Anna's jovial assistant, had arrived a week earlier to make the proper preparations, and there were long-stemmed white calla lilies blooming in all the vases and fresh Italian linens on each bed. Anna had ordered yet another renovation over the winter, and the house now boasted a solarium and a fully equipped wet bar in the master closet. The master bath also housed Jackie Onassis's former bidet (purchased at an exorbitant price at auction) to match the existing Marie Antoinette bath tiles.

Jacqui made the kids dinner and gave the little ones baths, and after she'd tucked them into bed, reminding William and Madison not to stay up too late, she was finally free to unpack and set up her own room. She trudged up the rickety steps to the highest floor and opened the door, tearing through a cobweb.

After living in high style in the city for a year, going back to the au pair cottage was a bit of letdown for Jacqui. The room was dark and musty and smelled like mildew. Jacqui threw open the windows and immediately wished she were back in her apartment's central-air-conditioned comfort. She found wrinkled percale sheets in the drawers and halfheartedly tossed them on the stained and lumpy mattress on the single bed. It just wasn't the same without Eliza whining about the tiny bathroom or Mara admonishing everyone to prepare for work the next day.

She sat moodily at the edge of the bed and lit a cigarette, tossing the ashes haphazardly into the nearby planter that contained a dry ficus tree.

Jacqui scratched her cheek and took a long puff. Eliza was still in the city, and Mara was on the boat with Ryan—best to let them alone on their first night back. In the middle of unpacking, she spotted the lights from the pool illuminating the garden pathway. Now, there was an idea. She grabbed a towel from the bathroom and walked quickly out of the cottage.

Just what she needed—a little skinny-dip to make her feel better. Anna was out at the benefit, and it was past midnight, so the kids were asleep. . . . It wasn't like there was anyone else in the house. . . . The water was warm and refreshing—the Perrys had it especially irrigated with the finest fresh water pumped in from a stream in the North Fork. She did a couple of lazy strokes, then floated on her back for a while. She swam to the side of the pool,

where an icy tumbler was waiting. Thankfully, she knew where the keys to the liquor cabinet were kept.

After a few minutes, she decided she'd had enough and swam to the opposite edge nearer the path back to the cottage. She emerged from the water, dripping and naked, just as the bushes that lined the perimeter of the pool exploded with a crash.

Jacqui screamed.

Three boys wrestling over a foam football tumbled through the hedge that separated the Perrys' home from the Reynolds property.

"Twelve—twelve—twelve o'clock!" Duffy choked, still holding on to the Nerf. "It's *her!*"

"Sweet Mother of Mercy," Ben exclaimed, craning his neck. "Swear to God, I'm never going back to Harvard."

"Señorita, please excuse my stupid friends," Grant said in his slow southern drawl, which would have been charming had he not been lying on the ground, his face smashed up in the grass.

They stared round-eyed at Jacqui in all her naked glory, wearing nothing but her Brazilian—bikini wax, that is.

"*Merda!*" she cursed, wrapping a towel around herself and running back to the au pair cottage, leaving three very love-struck boys in her wake.

mara has king-size doubts about her new position

A LITTLE AFTER TWO IN the morning, Mara crept back onboard the Catalina. She slowly unlocked the cabin door and softly tiptoed inside the dark stateroom. Moonlight spilled through the porthole, and Mara could see Ryan's long form huddled underneath the white goose-down comforter.

She eased out of her heels, pulling down the straps, and massaged the balls of her feet. Jill had invited them over to her Bridgehampton rental, and after a couple of vodka shots and a drunken game of "Celebrity" (the star herself winning on her Nicole Richie impersonation alone), they'd finally called it an evening.

Mara filed the story of Jill's annulment and all the details of the day-care benefit party from her BlackBerry, hoping against hope that the story would make it into the magazine's next issue. Lucky had assured her the piece was fine, but she wasn't so sure. What if her boss didn't like any of the jokes about the Walkers? Or the remark about how in the current celebrity math, two assistants of the famous now equaled one C-list star? For example, CaCee Cobb (Jessica Simpson's personal assistant and best friend) + Trace Ayala (Justin Timberlake's personal assistant and best friend) = Brooke Burke.

Her feet made a squishy noise on the thick carpet, and she locked herself in the bathroom to wash her face, shower, and change. She slipped into one of Ryan's old T-shirts, feeling the softness of the cotton against her skin.

She slid underneath the covers and quietly snuggled into his chest, angling her body so that her arms ducked underneath his armpits and held him close while her legs curved under his legs.

"Mmmppf," Ryan murmured, patting her arm absentmindedly. He sighed.

"Ry, are you awake? Ryan?" she whispered. "I think they made a big mistake sending me to cover the party. I don't know anything about writing a society column. I'm not even in society."

She was hopped up from the vodka and anxious about her story. If only he would wake up so she could talk to him about it. She could really use his support right now.

"Mmmppff . . . huh?" Ryan said sleepily. "Don't worry about it. Everything'll be fine," he mumbled.

Mara wrung her hands. What if her boss totally hated her copy? She'd be stuck with penning nothing but photo captions all summer. *L-R, Ketchup Heir, Trophy Wife, Prominent Plastic Surgeon . . .*

"Ryan, are you listening? Honey, I'm so nervous," she said.

Ryan snored loudly in response. He turned over to his other side and hugged his pillow, leaving Mara feeling abandoned on the other side of the king-size bed.

Oh, well . . . so much for that. Standing in heels for three hours was an exercise in torture anyway, so she could use the rest. She gave Ryan one final kiss on the cheek and turned away from him to face the wall, hugging the covers to her chest.

They slept like that, back to back, their bodies scarcely touching. The bed rocked softly as the boat bobbed up and down in the water, and when Mara closed her eyes, she dreamed she was floating alone through space.

there's nothing like a job well done to make a girl feel good

THAT WAS THE LAST OF it. Eliza held the box flaps together while the other intern taped them shut. It was officially six o'clock in the morning, and the entire staff had been working all through the night. Eliza felt slightly delirious, but she was exultant. The final choices for the show turned out incredibly—she'd placed over-the-top jewelry on all the models, played with different textures and patterns, and succeeded in creating a super-glamorous spectacle. Sydney couldn't have been more pleased nor Paige more annoyed.

Eliza was on cloud nine. She'd never worked so hard and felt so good in her life! The collection was amazing—even Paige had grudgingly remarked on how gorgeous everything looked. She was so proud of herself. This was even better than scoring a 5 on all of her AP tests.

They'd packed each outfit in acid-free tissue and hung them inside plastic bags in a portable closet that was going in the truck to the Hamptons. The messengers were arriving in an hour, and the clothes would be in the store by the next morning—the day of the party.

Eliza planned to catch a few hours' sleep and then drive out to the Hamptons later that afternoon. She nodded good-bye to the rest of the team and went home for a well-deserved shower.

In an uncharacteristic fit of generosity, Sydney had allowed everyone to take the company car service home, and a fleet of black Lincoln town cars were parked in front of the building. Eliza directed hers up to Park Avenue.

It was wonderful to be home—truly home. The doorman tipped his hat and held the door open for her, and she felt an immeasurable amount of pleasure as she walked into the marble lobby, decorated with rococo-style pastel murals of nymphs and cherubs. She took the carpeted, mirrored elevator to the twenty-first floor. The Thompsons' homestead had been in Eliza's mother's family since the early part of the twentieth century. It was a "classic six," but a "luxury twelve" was more like it, since it was double the usual square footage, with a soaring, three-story entry space and a balcony that overlooked Central Park.

Her parents were already in the Hamptons, back in their Amagansett "cottage" (their ten-bedroom country house could only be called rustic according to the standards of a Ralph Lauren ad), and Cheka, their maid, answered the door sleepily in her nightgown. Eliza was shocked to realize she'd probably been working harder than Cheka all evening and most likely

getting paid less for it. It was strange—Eliza would never have thought of herself as someone who enjoyed working, but a day in Sydney’s studio had suddenly changed that.

All of her friends from Spence did nothing more than make hair appointments, shop for clothes, and talk about boys. Sure, there were those brilliant girls who went to Williamsburg for the summer for acting camp or interned at magazines or the White House, but Eliza had never been interested in being one of them.

She never thought a hard night of work would actually make her feel more energized, not less. But having the opportunity to express herself creatively and using her innate talents to make something beautiful brought a level of satisfaction she’d never experienced before. Eliza felt inspired, and she was glad she’d taken the internship at Sydney’s company. She couldn’t wait until the show itself.

A few hours later, refreshed from a nap and a much-needed shower, Eliza packed the last of her monogrammed Goyard bags and called downstairs for a taxi. She took the taxi to their garage across town, which housed her new ride—a sporty new Land Rover LR3, an upgrade from last summer’s leased Jetta. Her parents had bought her the car as a prize for getting into Princeton, her father’s alma mater. The SUV was polished to a shine, and Eliza threw her stuff in the back and hopped inside the driver’s seat.

A clipped British voice greeted her as soon as she gunned the engine. “Good morning, Eliza. Where would you like to go today?”

“Good morning, car!” Eliza chirped back. It always cracked her up to have a conversation with her automobile. Eliza punched their address in Amagansett into the automated GPS system.

The car began giving her directions, and Eliza drove it out of the lot and pulled out into traffic. “Telephone,” the car informed her as a flashing symbol on the dashboard lit up.

“Answer,” Eliza said.

“Answering telephone. You are connected.”

Eliza heard the sound of waves in the background and Jeremy fumbling with his cell phone. “Hello? Hello?” he called. “Liza, are you there?”

“Hi, baby.”

“Hey.” He had a voice that melted her heart. A deep rumble. Eliza felt a twinge of pity for any girl who didn’t have a guy with a voice as sexy as Jeremy’s. She remembered how Charlie Borshok, her former paramour, had a voice like a hyena and tended to laugh in a high-pitched giggle.

“I just left the garage, and I’m about to go into the tunnel. I should be there in a few hours.” Her conversational voice was quickly replaced by schoolgirl cooing. “Did you miss me?”

“Not one bit,” he joked.

She steered the car into the cavernous Midtown Tunnel, and the signal started to fade. “Jer, I’m going to lose you. I’ll call when I’m on 27, okay? Love you!”

There was no answer. The symbol on the dashboard was dull. She’d lost the connection. No matter. She’d call him again once she got past the tunnel. She felt a thrill thinking of the special custom-made lingerie set in her luggage. The palest pink silk, with satin ribbons. Jeremy didn’t know it yet, but tonight her V card would expire. Hopefully the world wouldn’t end before then because Eliza had absolutely no intention of dying a virgin.

the devil wears louboutin

THE FIRST GIVEAWAY THAT THIS wasn't going to be a normal job was the sight of her boss's heels perched on top of her desk. Mara admired them from the corner of her eye. They were hot-pink patent-leather Louboutins with fire-engine-red soles—the status-conveying detail that communicated each pair's five-hundred-dollar price tag to observant and shoe-savvy females everywhere.

For a decade Sam Davis had ruled the New York media world. She had single-handedly transformed several sluggish, out-of-touch magazines into cash-cow bonanzas, starting with *American Teen* and working her way up the “pink ghetto” of women's magazines, from *Sophisticated* to the Spanish import *Anna Claudia* to the mainstream *Glitter* to her most famous reinvention yet—*Them*—a notorious weekly celebrity tabloid that fed the public desire for knowledge about the intimate private lives of nubile reality television stars. Sam Davis was the reason pop starlet Chauncey Raven, newly married to her former backup singer Daryl Wolf and mother to four-month-old Liam Spenser Raven Wolf, had already totaled two Mercedes-Benz convertibles in high-speed paparazzi car chases through Malibu.

Sam Davis bent the media landscape to her will, and her trajectory had seemed to go higher and higher. For years, it seemed she was unstoppable. Thinking she could conquer all, she set her sights on reinventing the intellectual-mag market. She proposed a magazine that was equal part *Harper's* and *InStyle* that would make “smart people sexy.” She did this by putting Nobel Prize winners in skimpy outfits and having actresses review the latest literary tomes. The high point had come when a reality show host summed up a Pulitzer Prize-winning book on famine in Africa as “making her hungry for more.” The magazine folded after three issues, her multi-year contract was canceled, and as quickly as she had been the toast of the town, she was a laughingstock.

Hence the exile to the Hamptons. She swore it was to get back in touch with her family (she worked sixteen-hour days, her staff reported, even while her five-year-old son was in the hospital with a brain tumor) and to enjoy the slower pace of Hamptons reporting (garden shows, horse shows, show-offs). But New York knew the truth—she was over.

But not out. Sam Davis was eager to put her personal stamp on *Hamptons* and shake things up once again.

Mara waited eagerly while Sam was on the phone harassing her assistant about her coffee. “Haven't I told you a thousand times? A dry cappuccino has *no foam!*”

She still couldn't believe she'd landed such a sought-after gig. The speed of it still made Mara's head dizzy. All her life, she'd been told getting ahead was the result of hard work and

discipline, but how could she believe that when with one simple phone call—one connection—she'd landed the job of her dreams? It didn't seem quite fair. What about all the other girls who had applied for the position but weren't lucky enough to have once worked for Sam Davis's college roommate?

But thoughts like that were "lame" according to Eliza. The world operated on the Rolodex system. It was all about whom you knew—the more important and worth knowing, the better. At seventeen, Mara was surprised to find she knew quite a lot of those people.

"Yes?" Sam asked, finally acknowledging Mara's presence. She was a solidly built woman of thirty-six with a hard, lined face. Her jet-black hair was meant to look punk, as was the dog collar around her neck, but somehow, stuffed into a too-tight Vivienne Westwood sweater and thigh-hugging bootleg Shagg jeans, Sam Davis still managed to look like any other suburban mother of three but one who was desperately—and vainly—trying to hold on to her rebellious youth.

"I'm Mara Waters. Your new intern. I filed the story on the benefit at Cain last night."

"The what?" Sam asked. She whipped her feet back onto the floor, her pink shoes disappearing in a lurid flash. "Oh. Right. Got your copy. We cut it."

"Oh," Mara said, stung and disappointed. All that work, leaving Ryan, and the piece hadn't even run. Plus, it proved her worst fear—she wasn't a writer. She couldn't even make a society gossip column exciting. This was seriously depressing.

That morning, Mara had woken up in bed alone. Ryan had left a note saying he'd gone off to surf. He had a habit of waking up at dawn to catch the waves. She'd felt a little sad—last night they'd been too tired to hook up, and then they hadn't even been able to spend the morning together. She'd planned on making them a romantic breakfast in the galley kitchen but had had to settle for a cold bagel alone by the television.

"I thought about running it next week, but by then it'll be old news. And we don't do old news at *Hamptons*," Sam Davis declared pompously.

"Of course." Mara nodded. She began to put her notebook back in her bag. It was obvious she was about to get relegated to the keeper of the office supplies. Her shoulders slumped.

But to her surprise, Sam gestured for her to take the seat across the desk, and, after Mara removed the piles of manuscripts, magazines, envelopes, and FedEx boxes lying on top of it, she did.

"Listen, it's not a big deal. Happens all the time," Sam said, rolling her eyes. "It was a little heavy on the puns—but otherwise not a bad read. A little wordy. You buried the lead by putting the polo player hooking up with the NBC star in the fourth 'graf. But you'll learn."

Mara perked up. "Really?"

Sam shuffled through some papers on her desk and found a hard copy of Mara's story. She skimmed it quickly. "There are some nice things here—'celebrity math'—that's funny. I like that. We need more of that."

Mara glowed. She'd thought that was a cute turn of phrase.

“Tell you what, the managing ed hired another intern, some favor to the publisher’s sister-in-law or something. So it turns out, we don’t need you to intern,” Sam said.

But before Mara’s face could crumple, Sam finished her sentence. “But I do need someone to fill in the Social Diary column regularly. Courtney von Wilding called. She’s spending the summer sailing the Mediterranean on some Greek prince’s boat and won’t be back in New York till the fall.” Sam sighed. “That’s what I get for hiring some junior socialite to write the Diary column. It’s almost impossible to get those girls near a keyboard. Ruins the manicure.”

She pulled out a few old issues of the magazine and threw them across the desk in Mara’s direction. “You’re going to cover fashion shows, the polo, benefits, dinner parties, who’s in, who’s out, what they’re wearing, who they’re sleeping with, who got snubbed at the fireworks this year. Let’s shake it up a little! Give them something to read between all the Cartier ads.”

Mara nodded, scribbling furiously. *Who in/out, read btw Cartier ads.*

“Sydney Minx is opening his new boutique tomorrow. I want you there; make sure you get an interview with him. Let’s do a full profile. More of that outsider-turned-insider stuff you do. Maybe we’ll do it as a cover. See what the old bitch has got up his sleeve. I want three thousand words by Monday.”

Three thousand words! Practically a novel! And had Sam Davis said “cover”? This was her big chance!

“But before I forget, there is one thing I desperately need,” Sam Davis said. “Socks.”

“Socks?”

Sam pointed to her feet. “Socks. For my tennis game. I need some. Get Sydney to send some over. Tell them we’re shooting for a fashion page.”

“Sorry—call in some socks?”

“Are you deaf? Yes. Here’s the number,” she said, throwing a card at Mara. “I’m late for my lunch at Nick and Toni’s.”

And with that, Sam Davis departed.

Mara stared at the scrap of paper in front of her. Did her boss actually expect her to ask a designer to messenger over some socks? Why couldn’t Sam just pop down to the store and buy a pair? Or go home and pick up her own?

She dialed the number.

“Goober Public Relations,” said a silky female voice she recognized as Mitzi’s assistant’s.

Mara immediately hung up the phone. She just couldn’t bring herself to ask someone to send over some socks, especially not Mitzi. Not even with the crazy excuse of needing them for a fashion photo shoot. They were just white socks—they sold them at a drugstore for \$1.99. Maybe she should just run down there and buy some. But what if Sam noticed they weren’t Sydney Minx socks? Was there something special about Sydney Minx socks?

Luckily, she had another idea. She quickly dialed Eliza’s cell.

“Liza?”

“Mar! Holla!” In Cabo, they’d played Gwen Stefani’s album on Mara’s iPod speakers until their ears bled.

“Holla back, girl! Where are you?” Mara asked, feeling a flush of happiness at hearing Eliza’s throaty voice. This summer, the three of them would be together again—and who knew what kind of mischief they would find themselves in?

“Stuck in traffic on 27, as always. I should be there in an hour, though.”

“Listen, I need some socks. For my boss. Sam Davis. Do you think you guys can send some over?”

“Socks?”

Mara quickly explained.

“Oh yeah. Don’t worry. I heard she does that all the time, calls in for every little thing. No one even lends her any clothes anymore since she always lies and says it’s for a shoot and then they see it on her at some premiere party. But she and Sydney go way back, I heard. I’ll get one of the girls in the shop to send over a pair. What’s her size?”

Mara surreptitiously kicked the Louboutin shoe box under the desk so that she could see the label. “Ten and a half. Literally Bigfoot.” She snickered.

Eliza beeped off the line and then beeped back on. “They’ll be there by noon.”

“You’re a lifesaver.”

“More like a socksaver.” Eliza giggled.

“Guess what? I’m writing a cover story on Sydney Minx!” Mara said, her voice rising with excitement. She doodled on her notepad, writing, *By Mara Waters*, and, *Social Diary by Mara Waters*, and tried out a few byline bios: *Mara Waters lives in Sag Harbor with her boyfriend. This is her first piece for the magazine.*

“Shut up!” Eliza gasped.

“Seriously. They’re making me the Social Diary columnist. Isn’t that crazy?”

“Insane,” Eliza enthused. “Oh my God, you’re, like, going to be so important!”

“You shut up!” Mara laughed. Eliza tended to exaggerate, but it was still nice to hear. She put her feet up on the desk just as she’d seen Sam Davis do. There was no one around who would be able to see her anyway.

“Will you put me in the story? I styled the whole collection.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Mara replied in a professional tone.

“Oh,” Eliza said, disappointed.

“Loser, I’m only kidding. Of course you’ll be in it,” Mara promised.

“Phew. For a minute there, I thought I might have to bring you my super-duper-big-head-shrinking machine,” Eliza teased.

“See you at the Perry house?”

“If I don’t see you first!” Eliza threatened.

Mara smiled as she hung up the phone. She couldn’t wait to see her friends.

jacqui tunes out prelude-to-divorce radio

THE KIDS TRIED TO PRETEND they didn't hear them, but the house reverberated with the sound of poison and bile. Kevin and Anna were fighting over the intercom. Again.

Jacqui looked at the white box by the toaster and wished she could shut off the speakers, but their Hamptons intercom was different from the New York system. In New York, when you beeped for a certain room, you got a private line. But in the Hamptons, which had older technology, when you pressed a button, your voice carried to the fifteen other intercom speakers in the house.

"Goddammit, where the hell are my golf clubs? How come I can never find anything in this house?" Kevin bellowed.

"Don't blame me—I wasn't the one who sent them out to get varnished!" Anna screeched.

"It's not like you do anything around here! All you do is spend money! And by the way, that little stunt you pulled on my ear is serious. The doctor said it's become infected!"

"So what? I don't care! I'm so sick of the way you treat me. I'm your wife, not your assistant anymore!" Anna screamed.

"Yeah, I know. My assistant does more work than you do!" Kevin retorted.

"Screw you! I want a divorce!"

"Fine! You've got one!" Kevin yelled back. "You probably just want to be with someone younger! It's not like you ever want to do anything that I want to do!"

"Earth to Kevin. Your friends are *bo-ring!*"

"Well, you won't have to hang around them anymore, will you?"

"I mean it this time!" Anna threatened. "I want a divorce!"

"Go ahead! Call your lawyer!"

"He's on speed dial! Just watch me!"

"They don't mean it," Jacqui said as she ladled out organic, steel-cut Irish oatmeal into the children's cereal bowls. The idle threat of divorce was thrown out so often, it lacked any punch. "Seriously."

Madison rolled her eyes. She pretended to be indifferent to her father and her stepmother's quarrels, but since Anna was the only mother they had—their real mother, Brigitte, had absconded to a Sri Lankan ashram and had hardly laid eyes on any of them in years—it was evident the fights spooked her. When a long shriek of Anna's voice screeched over the intercom, Madison accidentally upset her glass of orange juice on the table.

"Don't worry about it," Jacqui said, helping her wipe up the spill with a wad of paper napkins.

Eleven-year-old William didn't take his eyes off the adventure novel he was reading. The hyperactive little boy had calmed down, surprisingly without the help of any medications, and a miraculous transformation had taken place. Whereas it had been so hard to shut him up before, now you could hardly get him to talk. He had grown tall and lanky and was looking more like Ryan every day. The two older children tried not to show their anxiety, but the noise was clearly bothering Zoë and the baby, which was what they all still called Cody.

Zoë's lower lip trembled and it looked like she might cry, and Cody, the only one who was Anna's biologically, was pressing his hands against his ears and screaming.

Her fuse already dangerously short, Jacqui walked over and pulled the plug out of the white box, which immediately stopped squawking. They could still hear the rest of the house echo with the elder Perrys' quarrel, but now it was muffled and distant.

"C'mon, eat your fruit," she coaxed, handing around a bowl full of raisins and prunes.

"Anyone home?" a cheerful voice called from outside the screen door.

Jacqui looked up. Mara walked in, bearing a large basket filled with warm, fresh-baked muffins from Barefoot Contessa. Their cinnamon-and-nutmeg smell filled the kitchen. And for the first time since she'd gotten the bad NYU news, Jacqui actually felt like smiling.

"Hello, hello!" Mara said.

"Holla!"

Mara came over and hugged Jacqui. "You look so great!"

Jacqui twirled. She was wearing a blousy eyelet Derek Lam halter top and slim gray plaid Bermudas. "So do you. Is that a Tory tunic? *J'adore!*"

Mara nodded and pulled out a seat from the counter, while the kids immediately dropped their oatmeal spoons and raided the muffins.

"My God, William, you've grown like a weed!" Mara said. "And Madison, you look so pretty in that shirt."

"It's Bill now. He doesn't like to be called William anymore," Jacqui said fondly. "And we found that shirt on sale at Jeffrey last week, didn't we, Mad?"

William gave Mara a shy smile and went back to his seat. Mara raised her eyebrows at Jacqui, who merely shrugged. For two summers, the boy had terrorized them with his hyperactive tantrums—it was hard to reconcile the Super Soaker-wielding brat with the quiet boy reading a book.

Mara ruffled Cody's hair and kissed Zoë.

"So, how was your first night on the 'love boat'?" Jacqui teased, making air quotes with her fingers as she collected the untouched bowls around the table.

Mara blushed and looked meaningfully at Ryan's younger siblings.

Jacqui nodded and quietly explained that as soon as their grandparents arrived, she and Mara could have some privacy. Kevin's parents were taking the kids to their estate on the far end of the island, where they would spend the day fishing in the pond and riding horses. The no-nonsense Perry elders didn't approve of nannies, and so Jacqui basically had the day off.

When the kids had left, Mara told Jacqui about the amazingly romantic dinner that Ryan had prepared, only to have it interrupted by a work assignment. "I had to leave him—I didn't really have a choice," Mara defended herself.

"Tough," Jacqui said.

"Yeah, but it's okay. We'll have three months together." Then she told Jacqui all about her new job and her crazy boss.

"That's fantastic, Mar. You're, like, a real reporter," Jacqui marveled. "I'm so proud of you, *chica*."

Mara beamed. Jacqui always knew the right thing to say.

They compared their respective graduation ceremonies, and the subject soon landed on their college choices.

"I'm still on the wait list at Dartmouth; can you believe?" Mara groaned. "I'm sooo bummed. How about you—did you hear from NYU yet?"

In an instant, her stomach sank. Jacqui couldn't think of a reply—she didn't want to own up to her rejection, especially after having given Mara the impression that she was a shoo-in. Plus, it hurt too much to admit it out loud. She had never felt so guarded in front of her friend before.

But Jacqui was saved the embarrassment of confessing by two loud, long beeps from the driveway.

"WHERE ARE MY HARAJUKU GIRLS?" Eliza bellowed from the front door of the house.

reunited once again, the three musketeers take a cigarette break

ELIZA CLIMBED OUT OF HER car. She wore a white strapless, empire-waist floor-length smocked jersey cotton dress that showed off her jutting collarbone and tanned shoulders. Perched on her button nose was a pair of oversized Dita sunglasses, the latest celebrity fashion obsession, the provenance of which she had tracked down to a boutique in West Hollywood. They were so big they obscured half of her face, but she had to have them. (Everyone else could wear run-of-the-mill Chanel and Gucci, but to be in the know, it was all about Dita!) Her hair was twisted into a long sexy French braid down her back. Her cheeks glowed and her teeth shone. She was the picture of summer, and the beat-up cowboy boots she wore added just the right edgy note.

Mara and Jacqui admired Eliza's dress and both immediately decided they wanted one too. That was the usual effect Eliza's clothes had on the female gender—you always wanted what she was wearing. Luckily, Eliza was one of those girls who happily shared her shopping secrets.

"It's so cute, no? Planet Blue in the 'bu. I was in Cali with my dad the other week. I have the number, so no panicking!" Eliza enthused as she kissed the two girls effusively on each cheek—a habit she'd picked up after a day working in the fashion studio. "Jacqui, no one does more to a pair of Bermuda shorts than you. Where did you get them? Old Navy? Are you serious? They look designer! Mar, your haircut is so good! And did you do something to your eyebrows? But before we catch up, can someone please get me a bottled water? I'm parched!"

Mara laughed and fetched a frosty Glaceau Smartwater from the kitchen and handed it to her. When she'd first met Eliza, she had written her off as some kind of princessy brat, but Eliza had certainly proved her wrong. Although Eliza strove to live in a world where the Sub-Zero was always filled with champagne and caviar, she still knew what it was like to eat leftovers out of a ten-year-old Kenmore in Buffalo.

"Check it out!" Eliza said, motioning to the black LR3 parked in the driveway as she twisted off the top of the bottle and took a long chug.

Mara nodded, impressed. Eliza had told them that her family had regained their former affluence, and the car was proof of their ascension. "It's tight," she agreed.

"Where're the rug rats?" Eliza asked.

"At their granny's," Jacqui explained. "*Agradeça o Deus.*" Thank the Lord.

“So no one’s here? Good. We can smoke,” Eliza said, pulling out a pack from a Chloé Silverado handbag. “You like? I know. I was bad,” she admitted, referring to the bag’s five-figure price tag.

The three of them made themselves comfortable on the front steps, catching up over cigarettes. It had occurred to all of them that this might be their last summer together—who knew where next year would bring them?—and the thought made them huddle closer together. Without it being said, all three of them were glad they had one more chance to have another sun-kissed season in the Hamptons to shop, play, and party their hearts out before college came calling.

The girly chitchat was momentarily suspended when a clattering taxicab pulled up to the driveway. A tiny girl stepped out of the back. She was a petite thing, an extremely pretty Korean girl with short brown hair in a pixie cut and cat’s-eye tortoise-shell glasses. The driver helped her with her luggage—matching olive green Fendi logo suitcases—and she paid him with several crumpled dollar bills from her Gucci bag.

She consulted a piece of paper in her hand before glancing up at the girls. “Excuse me. This is Creek Head Manor, right?”

“Uh-huh.” Mara nodded.

“Can I help you?” Jacqui asked.

The girl looked at the three of them intently, as if noticing them for the first time. “Oh my God!” she said. “You’re *them!*”

“Them who?” Mara asked, turning to her friends with a confused expression.

“You’re *famous!*” the girl shrieked. “You guys are the coolest girls in the Hamptons—I read all about you in *Teen Vogue!*”

Last summer, as a favor to Mitzi Goober, the three of them had been featured in a “Summer Girls” roundup in the magazine. Mara had been pictured on Garrett Reynolds’s arm, stepping out of a Bentley. Eliza had been photographed in her sequined Sass & Bide minidress holding a clipboard in front of a nightclub. There’d even been a double-page centerfold of Jacqui in the outfit she’d worn for the finale at the fashion show.

“You’re Mara, right?” the girl said, thrusting a hand toward Mara. “I saw you on Sugar Perry’s reality show!”

“Oh. Thanks, I guess,” Mara said, still a bit confused.

The girl nodded eagerly. “And you must be Eliza—the trendy one,” she said, turning to Eliza.

“So that makes you Jacqui—my favorite!” she squealed, throwing her arms around the stunned bombshell.

Mara and Eliza nudged each other while Jacqui politely escaped the hug. “Favorite”? What were they, like characters in a television show?

The new girl looked like she was about to faint. “How cool is it that I’m going to be working with you this summer!”

“Working with us?” Eliza asked, her eyes narrowing, grinding her cigarette butt on the bottom of her shoe.

“I’m Shannon Shin. The new au pair! And I’m ready for the best summer of my life!”

misunderstandings go hand in hand with too many margaritas

OVER BLUE HYPNOTIQ MARGARITAS ON the patio at the Sunset Hotel, the girls discussed the latest development in the Perry establishment. Eliza had driven the three of them to Shelter Island for a quick happy hour drink before she had to pick up Jeremy from work. He had started a landscape company that summer and had soon rounded up all his former employers as clients. They were going to rendezvous at his apartment in a few hours, and she wanted to fortify before the big event. Even though she'd decided she was finally going to lose her virginity, she didn't want to lose her nerve.

“Did you know you were getting help?” Eliza asked, lighting a cigarette and propping her feet on the ledge. They were sitting on the bar's wicker chairs that lined up against the low wall that faced toward the ocean.

Jacqui shook her head. “I guess Anna forgot to mention it. Big surprise.”

Mara nodded. “The new girl seems very . . . enthusiastic.” She was still struck by how Shannon had treated them—like they were celebrities.

“I think it's great,” Eliza agreed. “At least you have someone to order around.”

The three of them felt a little older—had it really been almost three years ago that they had first met? Seeing Shannon's fresh fifteen-year-old face reminded them of how young and naive they had been when they had accepted the au pair gig. Shannon had been happy enough to stay at the house by herself to wait for the children to get back while Jacqui snuck out for a quick drink with her friends. They found out Anna had hired the new girl the same way she had originally found the three of them—by posting an ad online. Shannon told them she had sent Anna a professional-looking portfolio, including a ten-page dossier of her skills, complete with moving testimonials from the children she had previously babysat. She had been hired immediately.

Jacqui still felt a little guilty about leaving her there alone on her first day, but then again, Eliza was right. She was in charge, and it would be good to have an extra pair of hands for the summer.

“So we need to have an awesome summer before we start college in the fall,” Eliza said. “We need to be at the polo every Saturday afternoon. No exceptions. I hear it's going to blow up this year. Major, major people hosting the VIP tent.”

“I’ve got a press pass,” Mara said. “I’m covering it.” She still couldn’t believe she had merited one—but Sam Davis had handed it to her that afternoon. It was a laminated ID card that read PRESS in red capital letters above her name. Just looking at it gave Mara a thrill.

“Cool. I’m on the list. I’ll get you on too, Jac,” Eliza promised. Now that her family was back on their high perch, Eliza was confident in her ability to navigate the social stream. “Then there’s the Art for Life benefit and the AIDS Luau. Maybe one weekend we should drive out to the North Fork to the vineyards for some wine-tasting?”

“*Perfeito.*” Jacqui nodded.

“How about a party on the boat, Mar?” Eliza asked.

“Sure. Maybe for the Fourth of July?” Mara said, thinking how pretty the sparklers would look off the deck. They could get a cooler full of beer and a few bottle rockets and Roman candles for the boys. Jeremy could probably hook them up if Ryan didn’t know where to get them in town.

“I’ll do the barbecue,” Jacqui offered. “You guys have a grill on the boat, yes?”

“I’ll ask Ryan, but I think I saw one,” Mara said.

“How is Ryan?” Eliza asked, exhaling a smoke ring and keeping her voice light. She fiddled with the Claddagh ring Jeremy had given her for her birthday. It was an Irish wedding ring, and Eliza wore it with the heart facing inward to show that her heart was already spoken for.

“The boy surfs twenty-four seven. It’s like there’s salt water in his brain,” Mara joked.

“So I’ve already been asked to join this eating club at Princeton,” Eliza said.

“Are you going to do it? I heard they’re so snobby,” Mara chided.

“You *have* to—it’s the only way to eat,” Eliza replied. “Nobody eats in the cafeteria. Please!” Eliza didn’t think it was being snobby, merely being practical. The eating clubs had better chefs, organic food; one even offered a vegan/macrobiotic diet. She didn’t plan on gaining the freshman fifteen. She told them how she’d mapped out the next four years with the help of an insider’s guide to the easiest classes and professors who were the most generous with grades. Cruise through the requirements the first two years, take a junior year abroad in Paris, then graduate. Nothing too taxing, since she was certain to take over her dad’s company one day. It was what everyone expected her to do, especially her parents.

“Wow, you have it all worked out,” Jacqui said admiringly. She felt a little sadness at that, since, for once in her life, she’d made plans as well, except hers hadn’t quite panned out.

“I do like to plan, yes,” Eliza said modestly. “How ’bout you, Mar? Any word?”

“Not yet.” Mara frowned. “It’s agonizing. They shouldn’t be able to do this to a person! It’s not fair.”

“I know, that sucks, but Columbia could be awesome. It’s in the city.”

Mara nodded. “But Ryan won’t be there,” she said in a tiny, tiny voice. She ground her cigarette out in the plastic ashtray and watched as a group of kids folded up their volleyball

net on the beach.

Eliza shrugged. “New Hampshire’s not far.”

“I suppose.” Mara sighed.

“How ’bout you, Jac, what happened with NYU?” Eliza asked.

“Yeah, tell us. At least if I end up at Columbia, I’ll know you’ll be in the city,” Mara prodded.

Jacqui put down her glass and cleared her throat. She felt her cheeks flush with embarrassment as she formed the words. “Yeah . . .”

“Yeah?” Mara echoed, interrupting.

“You got in?” Eliza squealed.

“Congratulations!” the two of them cheered.

Mara and Eliza gave Jacqui sloppy kisses and bear hugs. They knew how much she’d wanted NYU and how hard she’d worked for it.

Jacqui kept smiling. The smile remained frozen on her face long after the subject had switched to what time they would meet up at Sydney Minx’s store-opening party the next evening. It was all a misunderstanding—but she hadn’t bothered to clear it up. Well, what was the harm? She just didn’t want to make it real just yet. Right then, she just wanted another drink with her friends.

temptation wears a bright blue bikini

A FLOCK OF SEAGULLS FLEW in a triangular formation over the sky as Mara drove back to the harbor. Eliza dropped her off with a friendly wave. The three of them had spent the better part of the evening at Sunset Beach and, after waiting an hour for Eliza to sober up, had driven back to the mainland singing along to Gwen Stefani's album with the windows rolled all the way down so that the ocean breeze could blow through their hair.

"Be good!" Eliza called.

"Don't do anything I wouldn't do," Jacqui teased from the shotgun seat.

"That leaves . . . everything!" Mara replied, laughing and waving back.

She heard the sound of Ryan's voice from the deck. He was probably talking to one of his surfing buddies who had stopped by for a visit. Their first houseguests! Mara wondered if there was anything in the fridge she could put together as a snack for them. She felt a Martha Stewart moment coming on. It would be fun to show off their new domesticity.

Mara hurried across their pier and stepped onto the back deck. She put her bag down in the living area and walked over to the front of the stern, where she found him. Ryan was on his knees, dressed only in his cotton pinstripe boxers, waxing the finish. He was sweaty, and Mara thought he'd never looked sexier in his life. There was only one problem.

This was no surfer dude.

A chick in a turquoise bikini scrubbed down the boat next to theirs. She leaned over her railing and splashed Ryan with suds from her sponge, and Ryan retaliated by throwing his rag at her.

Suddenly, Mara didn't feel very hospitable. The fantasy of serving hors d'oeuvres and cocktails went straight out the porthole.

Throughout the year, Mara had wondered how she would be able to stand it knowing that Ryan was the kind of guy who'd had so many girlfriends, and girls who were friends, and girls who wanted to be more than friends. The problem was he simply adored female company. He was a natural around women, having so many sisters, and was completely oblivious to the fact that Mara felt uncomfortable with how comfortable he was around the opposite sex. Especially those who could fill out a tiny turquoise string bikini.

"I'm just being friendly," Ryan would assure her. "You know you're the only girl for me." But the guy was a natural flirt—it was part of his charm—and as much as Mara didn't want

to make him change, seeing him banter so easily with another girl didn't do a lot for her feelings of insecurity and self-esteem. It had been hard enough to get over the Eliza factor.

"Hey, you, have you been standing there for long?" he said.

"Not really," Mara said coolly.

"Tinker, this is my girlfriend, Mara," he said, taking Mara in his arms.

"Oh, hi!" Tinker said. "I've heard all about you," she said in a friendly manner.

"Tinker's in my frat," Ryan explained.

Mara nodded. She knew Ryan was in a coed fraternity at Dartmouth. Somehow, she'd assumed any girl who wanted to join a fraternity would be just one of the guys—but Tinker was one hundred percent babe.

"Anyway, like I told Ryan, my sisters and I are living on my parents' boat this summer," Tinker said.

Mara smiled and tried to look enthusiastic about the situation, then turned back to Ryan. "You stink," she told him.

"I do, do I?" he threatened, and pretended to smother her with his armpits.

"Stop." Mara giggled.

"C'mon," Ryan said. "Why don't we take a shower? We can get all clean . . ." he whispered. "And you can, you know, make up for deserting me last night. . . ."

As Mara's knees turned to jelly, she squeezed his hand tightly. She was going to let him know how sorry she was she'd left him all alone last night. How very, very, very sorry she really was. She shot him a wicked grin. "You are a really dirty boy," she said.

He replied by blowing softly in her ear.

"Nice to meet you, um, Tinker!" she called, feeling a buzz of anticipation as Ryan led her by the hand down to the master suite, where they would make the most of the rainfall shower-head, the Jacuzzi, the king-size bed. . . .

too close for comfort

WHEN JACQUI ARRIVED BACK IN the au pair cottage, she was startled to find that most of her belongings had been carelessly shoved into two small drawers and that a strange pillow was lying on the only single bed.

Shannon walked out of the bathroom in a robe, a towel wrapped around her head. “Oh, hi, Jacqui! I had to move some of your stuff since you took the whole closet. You probably didn’t know I was going to be here, right? Anna’s a bit of a spaz, I can tell.”

Jacqui was about to reply, but the girl kept talking. “And I hope you don’t mind, but my doctor says I have a back problem and I really can’t sleep on the bunk bed. Is that all right?” The tiny girl batted her eyes and left Jacqui momentarily flabbergasted. She was supposed to be the senior au pair here, yet with one breath, Shannon had taken the best benefits of the room.

Jacqui didn’t trust herself to reply; she was still tipsy from the margaritas and sour from the misunderstanding she’d left uncorrected. Instead, she started to pull out the drawers so she could fold her clothes more neatly, thinking of a plan.

* * *

An hour later, as they prepared the children’s dinner, Jacqui told Shannon about how important the summer was going to be for them. It was certainly going to be an important one for Jacqui because if she was going to spend a fifth year in high school, she would need Anna to hire her for another full year.

“I just want to warn you, the first year I was here, we found out Anna fired the original au pairs before we even arrived. So we can’t really slack off. It’s not a total party, okay?” Jacqui said. “And the Perry kids can be a little difficult, especially Madison. We have to keep our eye on the basket all the time.” Jacqui meant to say “eye on the ball,” but she still mixed up her metaphors when she was flustered.

Shannon nodded as she cut up the carrots. “Oh, of course,” she said effusively. “I’m really not worried, though. Kids love me.”

Jacqui remained silent as she put the pasta pot on the stove to boil, a small smile on her face. With the Perry kids, Shannon had no idea what she was in for. . . .

* * *

At dinner, she introduced Shannon to the children. “Everyone, this is Shannon Shin. She’s going to help me take care of you this summer.”

Shannon got down on her knees and put her face right in front of Zoë's. She affected a high-pitched voice as she asked, "Hewow, Zoey. How are weed too-die?"

Zoë stared back at her balefully. "I'm well, thank you," she said in a clear voice.

Cody screamed when Shannon tried to embrace him and refused to leave Jacqui's side. "I hate you! I hate you! I hate you!" he kept saying, shaking his head at Shannon.

Feeling flummoxed, Shannon tried to befriend the older children. "Hi, I'm Shannon, and Jacqui tells me you're . . . Bill?" she asked, offering a hand to William.

William was rendered practically mute, and his face turned beet red when Shannon spoke to him. He stared at his plate and immediately stuffed his mouth with a spoonful of fettuccine.

Jacqui bit back a laugh. Just as she'd thought, the kids weren't going to be won over that easily. She even felt a little proud of them. She had earned their trust and love through hard work and dedication, and Shannon would have to do the same.

But there was still one more kid at the table. Madison Perry sat in front of a plateful of wilted lettuce leaves that she kept moving around with her fork.

Jacqui nudged Madison to eat, but instead of doing as Jacqui asked, Madison merely glared at Shannon. "Who's that? And what is she doing here?" she asked Jacqui.

"She's the new au pair," Jacqui explained. "Be nice."

Shannon came over to sit next to Madison. "Ooh, you have a TechnoMarine!" she gushed, motioning to Madison's diamond-encrusted pink watch.

"Uh-huh," Madison allowed, holding up her wrist so Shannon could examine it more closely. "My dad bought it at a fund-raiser. It used to be Paris Hilton's. It comes with five different straps. My favorite's the pink alligator."

"That is so cool," she said. "I've always wanted one. I'm Shannon. You're Madison, right? I love your hair. Do you get it straightened? I'm can't wait to grow mine out so I can get it done too."

Madison beamed. The two of them bent their heads together, admiring Madison's watch. "You're twelve? You look older, so mature. I just turned fifteen," Shannon said. "We're practically like sisters!"

With one flattering compliment after another, soon Madison and Shannon were chatting just like two old friends. As Jacqui helped Cody cut his carrots, she couldn't help feeling a bit cheated.

eliza puts out an APB on a dress

THE PHONE WAS RINGING. NOW-I-ain't-sayin'-she-a-gold-digger-but-she-ain't-messin'-wit'-no-broke- . . . Eliza opened one eye. Jeremy groaned. She reached over his chest and rummaged on her bedside drawer for her cell.

“Uhloo?” she said while Jeremy buried his head underneath her pillow.

“Hmprrff,” Jeremy complained.

“Shh!” she said, jokingly pressing the pillow onto his face but half terrified someone would hear him. She’d snuck him in late last night when he’d gotten off from work and she’d come back from drinks with the girls, but Assignment: Expiration Date hadn’t quite gone as planned. Jeremy had spent the whole day planting Japanese maple trees and was so tired he could hardly keep his eyes open. They’d barely gotten to second base before Jeremy began snoring.

Eliza thought they could try again this morning. She was counting on her dad leaving early for his golf game and her mother for her charity committee meeting. Then she and Jeremy could have the rest of the house to themselves. She had meant to discreetly slip out of bed, brush her teeth, change into the lingerie set, and slide back under the covers so she could look perfect before he awoke. But she hadn’t counted on an early-morning wake-up call from her least favorite person throwing her off schedule.

“Eliza!” a frantic voice exclaimed.

“Paige? What is it?” Eliza asked, immediately sitting up.

“It’s an emergency!”

“What’s wrong?” Eliza asked, her heart beating rapidly. Numerous dire scenarios filled her head: Sydney had changed his mind, he hated all the outfits she’d styled. Or the clothes had arrived and all the spray-painted parts had stained parts of the fabric that weren’t meant to be painted. The paint had dried the wrong color.

“An outfit is missing,” Paige said with panic-stricken urgency. “The one Vidalia is supposed to wear for the finale. I’m here at the boutique on Main Street with Sydney and we’ve unpacked everything, but we can’t find it. It’s not here.”

“But I packed it myself,” Eliza argued. “It has to be there.”

“Well, it’s not and Sydney’s having a heart attack. You know it’s the most important outfit in the show. The whole thing is ruined without it.”

“I know. I know.”

“You need to fix this. You packed that box,” Paige insisted. “It’s your fault if it’s not at the show tonight. . . .”

“All right, don’t worry. I’ll take care of it,” Eliza promised, trying not to panic herself. She clicked off the phone and sat pensively by the side of the bed. All thoughts of early-morning seduction were completely dismissed.

Think, Eliza, think, she admonished herself as she tried to remember the details of the previous night . . . the chronology of events . . . and tried to figure out what had happened: she’d asked Vidalia to remove the dress and put it in the hanger to be wrapped, but in all the frenzy, Eliza had forgotten to check whether the model had done so. She remembered Vidalia saying how she was going to some fancy dinner party that night and needed something fabulous to wear so the cosmetics executives at Estée Lauder would take her seriously and offer her an exclusive contract.

Eliza gasped. The damn model had snuck out in the outfit! She’d worn it to the Lauder dinner! Eliza was sure of it.

“What’s happened? Everything okay?” Jeremy asked.

“Everything is going to be fine,” Eliza said just as a Black Hawk helicopter thundered overhead. She looked out the window and wondered about the two-fingered logo painted on the side. It disappeared into the clouds, blasting hip-hop music.

Eliza picked up her purse from the side of the bed and fingered her titanium AmEx card. . . .

is there such a thing as an early-life crisis?

SHANNON WAS ALREADY IN THE screening room when Jacqui arrived that morning. The new au pair was sitting at the head of the gaming table, chatting happily with Anna Perry.

“Oh, Jacqui, there you are. You know we do try to run these things on time, dear,” Anna said, waving Jacqui toward the nearest seat.

Jacqui glared. “The, uh, hot water was out at the cottage,” she explained.

“I should have warned you,” Shannon said, an innocent look on her face. “I have to take really long showers because of my back condition. . . .”

Jacqui nodded curtly. That morning, she had woken up to find the bathroom door locked for a solid hour. She had decided to give the kids breakfast without the benefit of bathing and had returned to find only cold, freezing water coming out of the pipes for her own shower.

“I’m glad you guys have met. Shannon has a lot of experience and excellent references,” Anna explained.

Jacqui gave the younger girl a sideways glance. Last night, Shannon had admitted to Jacqui that despite her impressive resume, the only kids she’d ever babysat were her younger siblings. Still, Shannon looked the picture of innocence.

Anna clasped her hands. “So, here we are, another summer in the Hamptons!” she said, mustering a cheerful tone even though Jacqui had heard her and Kevin battling over the credit card bills last night. Anna was already on her third cup of coffee, and it was obvious the strain of her crumbling marriage was getting to her.

Jacqui opened her notebook, her pen poised to take notes on Anna’s list of expectations for the children’s educational, spiritual, and physical activities for the next three months.

“This year, I have nothing planned for the children,” Anna announced.

Jacqui almost fell out of her chair. Every summer, Anna planned a strict, hour-by-hour regimented schedule and a list of unachievable goals she expected the children to accomplish and the au pairs to facilitate. Last year, there had even been an hour-long PowerPoint presentation.

“Nothing?” Jacqui asked, mouth agape.

“I’ve been reading a lot lately about ‘mini-midlife crises’—about kids who are so thoroughly scheduled that they experience undue anxiety and juvenile stress syndrome. You know, like those Japanese kids who throw themselves out the window during finals,” she said with a meaningful look toward Shannon.

“They call it *karoshi*,” Shannon replied cheerfully. “Suicide due to overwork. It’s rising among grade-schoolers especially.”

“Right,” Anna said a little nervously. “Anyway, I don’t want that for the kids. Therefore, this summer is all about play. I want them to relax, enjoy themselves. Let them be free . . .”

“To do what they want,” Shannon finished.

“Exactly. I think that’s about it.”

“That’s it?” Jacqui asked, still incredulous.

“That’s it,” Anna said.

Jacqui couldn’t believe it. No riding lessons, no surfing lessons, no kabala camp, no krav maga, no conversational French, Italian, and Cantonese? No ballet, no yoga, no Pilates, no Yogalates? The kids free to do whatever they wanted? Play video games, watch movies, go to the mall, swim, hang out with their friends . . . nothing educational or aspirational at all?

As they walked out of the screening room, Jacqui couldn’t help but share with Shannon how different this summer was going to be compared to the ones before.

Shannon smiled craftily. “Who do you think sent her the *Time* article on stressed-out grade-schoolers? I know what these alpha moms are like. I’m here at the Hamptons for some fun, hello! By the way, you don’t need to thank me.”

Jacqui granted her new coworker a respectful nod. Shannon Shin might be a manipulative little wench, but one day at the Perrys’ and she already knew how to work Anna. . . . Well, she might just come in handy.

“Did you get an invitation to the Sydney Minx opening?” Jacqui asked her. “It’s tonight, and it’s supposed to be the best party of the summer.”

“No,” Shannon said, her face dropping. “I don’t know anyone here but you, really.”

“Don’t worry.”

“Is that an invitation?”

“I think it’s a truce,” Jacqui said, sotto voce.

“Excuse me?”

“Nothing. Now, let’s decide what you should wear. . . .”

underneath ryan's perfect exterior lies the soul of pigpen

RYAN ASSURED MARA THAT AFTER a couple of days, she wouldn't even notice the rocking of the boat, but Mara woke up from her afternoon nap feeling cranky and like she hadn't slept at all.

She'd spent the morning at the *Hamptons* office, tracking down background information for the Sydney Minx piece and calling in gift bag requests for Sam. Her editor demanded a gift bag from every event featured in the magazine even if she hadn't attended it personally. Sometimes, Sam called in gift bags from as far away as Europe if she heard the contents were particularly choice.

After work, Mara returned to the Catalina for a short nap before the evening's festivities. When she awoke, she realized she had only a half hour to get ready for the fashion show.

She walked out to the living room and found all of Ryan's gear haphazardly strewn around the room. His boxes had arrived by UPS truck from Hanover that morning, and the living room looked like a branch of the Sports Authority. There were a wake-board, several snowboards, tennis and badminton rackets, lacrosse and hockey sticks, basketballs, golf balls, footballs. Ryan had once told her calling him a "jock" was an insult. The proper term, he'd explained, was *athlete*, since *jock* connoted a level of brutal small-mindedness to which Ryan certainly did not subscribe. His best friend from prep school was gay. All right, Mara thought, looking at all the sports paraphernalia. So he wasn't a jock . . . but he was certainly *athletic*.

One of the boxes was open, and Mara saw that it contained all manner of clothing, from clean T-shirts to dirty socks and towels to suit jackets that were still on hangers and wrapped in drycleaner's plastic. It appeared that Ryan had just tossed anything and everything into the nearest box without bothering to separate anything. Nestled in the pile of clothing, Mara saw CD jewel cases, cigarette boxes, an ashtray (dirty), a beer mug (clean), and even a trash can, complete with balled-up scraps of his term papers. Mara shook her head—she hadn't known Ryan was such a slob. Ryan had promised to get his stuff in order, but he'd apparently abandoned the project to hit the waves. Typical.

He sauntered in just as she was trying to excavate her second suitcase from underneath yet another one of his surfboards.

"Let me get that," he said, easily pulling up the board so she could reach for her bag.

"Sweetie, do you think we could kind of—well, clean up here a little bit?" Mara fretted.

“Sure, sure,” he said, coming over to kiss her. He was wet with sand and smelled like the sea. His dark hair was plastered slick against his forehead. Normally, the sight of him in his black wet suit would have made her melt—but she was more interested in finding her invitation to the party and the list of people she had to get interviews with for her story.

“I can’t find anything in this mess!” she complained. There were a ton of empties around the room from a night when his friends had stopped by. Mara’s Martha Stewart fantasies of elegant entertaining had been quickly shattered, since the boys had preferred to eat cold pizza and drink cheap beer.

“Why are you getting all worked up over this fashion show?” Ryan asked.

Mara was beginning to get the impression he thought her job was pretty trivial, especially since several of the girls in his circle had penned the column in the past. It bothered her that he didn’t understand that it was a big deal for her.

“Ryan, I’m not sure where the boutique is. And I don’t even know how I’m getting there. Are you going to come with me?” she asked.

Ryan sank down onto the couch. Even though Mara didn’t own it, she felt irritated to see the water from his suit seep into the Italian leather, where it would definitely leave a stain. It bothered her that Ryan wasn’t even aware of things like that—the couch probably cost thousands of dollars, but what was such a small amount to a guy who already owned everything?

“Can I meet you there?” he asked, hooking a hand behind his back and unzipping the suit. “I need to shower and change.”

“I guess I could get a ride,” Mara conceded. She quickly dialed Lucky, who was fortunately not too far from Sag Harbor and was able to swing by.

“Cool,” Ryan said, planting a kiss on her forehead before he walked, whistling, into the shower.

Mara shrugged as she unzipped her suitcase. He was the love of her life, but sometimes it was maddening how careless he could be. . . . Mara was starting to discover that the path of love wasn’t always smooth.

Sometimes, it was littered with dirty beer cans.

working hard or hardly working?

NOW, THIS WAS WHAT SUMMER was supposed to be like. . . .

With Anna's decree of full summer freedom ringing in their heads, Jacqui had decided that she and Shannon would just hang out by the pool the whole day. William was absorbed in a book, Madison was tanning on a raft floating lazily in the middle of the pool, and Zoë and Cody were hanging out in the shallows, practicing headstands in the water.

Shannon was zoned out underneath the umbrella, wearing a skimpy black maillot one-piece, and Jacqui sat beside her in her new red French-cut bikini. That morning, she had purchased her new swimwear at one of the mobile J. Crew trucks that roamed the Hamptons for just this kind of emergency. Jacqui liked how the trunks on her suit could switch from boy shorts to a sexy high cut with just a few twists to the sides of the fabric.

Jacqui closed her eyes and felt the sun warm her face and relax her tense muscles. After a few minutes, she sat up on the chair and flipped through the latest issue of *W*. This was the life—the kids entertained, her coworker now a friend, a pitcher of icy lemonade by her side. She settled in for a good juicy read on the latest socialite scandals.

Then from the other side of the pool, behind the tall hedges, she heard a *thump, thump, thump*. Silence. Then *thump, thump, thump*. The noise was distracting, and she couldn't concentrate on her magazine. Finally, she got up to investigate.

She walked past the thick greenery that separated the house from the Reynolds eyesore, the hundred-thousand-square-foot monstrosity erected by the Perrys' bombastic neighbors. Rising above the hedges was a huge inflatable plastic jumping castle, a puffed-out balloonlike structure that contained three tumbling, jumping, and laughing guys inside it. Guys who looked really familiar . . .

"Excuse me!" Jacqui yelled.

The tumbling abruptly stopped as all three boys looked her way, each wearing a goofy smile. She couldn't help but grin back. In the light of day, these boys were seriously handsome. This time, NYU completely faded to the back of her mind. Who needed to worry about college when there were hotties around?

"Greetings and salutations," Grant Kotack said, making an impressive leap from the air mattress to the ground in front of her. "If I'm not mistaken, I do believe we've met before," he said in his silky southern accent.

"It was a very short meeting—unfortunately," Duffy pointed out, taking huge steps on the billowing plastic and ending with a cartwheel onto the grass.

“Almost broke our hearts,” Ben agreed, following his friends out of the tumbling castle.

Jacqui wasn't embarrassed about what had happened during her midnight swim—she was proud of her body and didn't think there was anything to be ashamed about.

“I'm Jacqui Velasco. I work for the Perrys,” she said, offering a hand to the nearest boy, the shaggy-haired one with the sideburns.

“Grant Kotack,” Grant smiled, pleased that she'd come up to him first. He kissed the back of her hand with courtly, old-fashioned grace, which was pleasing to see in a boy who wore painter's pants and an oversized T-shirt with a Reese's peanut butter cup logo emblazoned on it. “A pleasure.”

“John Duffy,” said the tall, lanky, towheaded one, interrupting their greeting. He was WB-star cute, with a square jaw, ashy-white blond hair falling in his eyes, and the kind of grin that grew slowly from his lips and lit up his whole face. “You can call me Duffy or Duff. Everyone does.”

“Ben Defever.” The third guy nodded. He'd put on a pair of thick black glasses and looked not unlike Rivers Cuomo from Weezer, one of Jacqui's favorite bands. “Can we help you?”

“Do you guys work for the Reynoldes?” she asked.

“The who?” Duffy asked with a wide smile.

“The uptight bastards who own this joint,” Grant said, winking at Jacqui.

“We rented it this summer. It's insane. Do you know there's a saltwater pool stocked with tropical fish in the back? With a grotto?” Ben asked, adding shyly, “You'll have to check it out with us sometime.”

“How about now?” Duffy suggested. “Now's a good time, right? I'll get the scuba masks!”

“Only if you want to,” Ben assured in a sincere tone.

“Maybe later,” Jacqui said, still smiling. Mara had told her all about it last summer. She blushed—Duffy was so cute and boyish, Grant the image of an indie-rock guitar god, and Ben just adorable with those glasses. And there it was—a definite tingle up her spine, the feeling she'd been missing all year.

“What about a jump?” Grant asked, jerking a thumb in the direction of the inflatable castle.

“Sure, but I've got a couple of kids here too—can they come?” Jacqui asked.

“Yours?” Duffy asked, looking perplexed.

“No, I'm the au pair.” Jacqui laughed.

“Oh, good, because for a while there, you scared us,” Grant teased, which let Jacqui know that Duffy had just been fooling with her.

“The more the merrier!” Ben offered. “Bring them on!”

Jacqui smiled her thanks and ran to tell the kids the good news. She brought them over, along with Shannon, whose eyes grew wide at the sight of the three cute boys.

“What’s going on? Hi, I’m Shannon!” she said, smiling broadly at the three guys, her hands on her slim hips. “Cool castle!”

But when Jacqui was around, like all boys, Grant, Ben, and Duffy could hardly see, much less hear, anyone else.

nobody ever said college humor was mature

SYDNEY MINX'S BOUTIQUE WAS IN the middle of the east Hampton main street, lit up with two spotlights that beamed Sydney's initials into the sky. There was the typical crush of people attempting to gain entrance, waving their pink-and-gold invitations vainly at the phalanx of unsmiling PR girls who were only letting in the press and VIPs.

Mara flashed her pass and was immediately ushered inside. She spotted Jacqui at the bar, trying to get the attention of the bartender.

"Where's Eliza?" Mara asked, yelling over the blaring techno music. She looked around—for the party of the season it was surprisingly low-key, or maybe Mara had attended enough of these events over previous summers to finally feel jaded by them—a few socialites here, a few B-list celebrities there, a goodie bag . . . ho hum. All in all, it wasn't that much different from the standard boutique opening. It was possibly even just a teeny bit boring. Hopefully the fashion show would change that. In the middle of the store stood a raised runway covered in plastic.

Jacqui shrugged. She craned her neck and tried to catch the bartender's eye, feeling slightly irritated. She usually had no problem getting a guy's attention, but the bar was mobbed and Jacqui's request barely registered.

"Champagne, madam?" Duffy asked, suddenly appearing with a flute and placing it in Jacqui's hand.

"Oh, thanks! And one for my friend too?" she asked.

"Not a problem," Ben said, appearing with another flute. Jacqui passed it to Mara. They toasted quickly and took long sips from their respective glasses.

"There's more where that came from," Grant assured them, topping off their glasses with a bottle of Veuve Clicquot hidden underneath his arm.

"Where'd you get that?" Jacqui asked.

"We have our ways," Ben said mysteriously.

"Nicked it from the kitchen." Duffy grinned, revealing two more bottles underneath his canvas coat.

"With a healthy bribe to the bartender," Grant explained. "Hey, you two clowns owe me, by the way."

Mara and Jacqui giggled. The three boys formed a protective half circle around them.

“Guys, this is Mara. Mar, these are the guys,” Jacqui said, introducing them. Mara smiled and thanked them for the drinks.

“Where’s Shannon?” Mara asked. She’d heard the latest about the au pair’s machinations concerning the bed and the closet but agreed with Jacqui that as long as Shannon had been responsible for Anna’s change of heart, it was worth a few inconveniences.

“Over there,” Jacqui said, and Mara looked over to where the dark-haired girl was ferociously going through the racks of clothing one by one. Shannon reminded her of someone, Mara thought. Someone who shopped as if executing a military operation. It struck her—Shannon was a lot like Eliza. Or at least, shopped a lot like Eliza: as if her life depended on it.

“It’s kind of hot in here, isn’t it?” Jacqui said to no one in particular as she fanned the neckline of her vintage Oscar de la Renta dress.

“I’ll take care of it!” Duffy exclaimed, quickly springing into action. He was so thrilled to have a task he almost knocked over a nearby mannequin. “Hey, buddy!” he called to the nearest cater-waiter. “Turn up the air, yo!” he called as he ran after the guy.

“Don’t bother—I know where the HVAC is!” Ben argued, nudging Duffy to the side so *he* could fulfill Jacqui’s latest request.

“Stay right here,” Grant whispered, giving her arm a squeeze. “I know the guy who’s running the party. I’ll get it done.”

“Who are they?” Mara asked when the three boys disappeared into the throng. “Your slaves?”

Jacqui laughed. “They’re cute, aren’t they?”

“Not bad.”

“They’re the guys who started DormDebauchery.com—there was a big piece in the Sunday Styles section about them a few months ago, remember? They started the web site their freshman year at Harvard, and last spring their IPO took them to, like, several hundred million dollars.”

Mara nodded in recognition. The web site was a paean to college humor—selling T-shirts screen-printed with slogans like the punch line to a famous *SNL* skit, “More Cowbell,” and jokes concerning teenage abstinence, proclaiming, “I gave my word to stop at third.” They were famous for their “Shocker” logo—a vulgar hand gesture (not the usual one) of two fingers held up in a crooked *V*, which they’d made into the huge foam fingers normally found at football games. Ryan had once explained to Mara what “The Shocker” was, and she’d been disgusted for a day and then amazed at how dirty boys’ minds could be. But what was most amazing was how young and rich they were. None of them was over twenty-one.

“Anyway, they rented out the Reynolds castle this summer. It’s their first summer in the Hamptons, so I told them I’d show them around,” Jacqui explained.

Mara raised an eyebrow. “All three of them?”

“I’m just having some harmless fun.” Jacqui laughed.

“Oh, wait, there’s Sydney. I should go—I need to get an interview,” Mara said, spying the designer mingling in the crowd.

She passed her champagne glass into Jacqui’s hand, almost running over a tuxedoed waiter bearing a tray of canapés as she chased the rotund designer around the crowded room.

“Sydney, hi! Mara Waters from *Hamptons*; we’re doing a story on you. . . . Can I ask you a few questions?” she asked, thrusting her iPod voice recorder in his face. She’d bought it soon after finding out about the assignment.

“Not right now,” Sydney said, hiding his face behind his black fan. “As you can see, I’m extremely busy.”

“I know, I’m so sorry to bother you, Mr. Minx, but if I could just get some quotes?” Mara asked, feeling intimidated by Sydney’s imperiousness.

“Paige! Paige!” Sydney suddenly shouted, taking no notice of Mara. “Talk to my assistant, Paige. She’ll take care of what you need. . . .”

“Oh, okay. I guess,” Mara said, defeated, as she switched off her recorder. “Do you think you’ll have time after the show to chat?”

“Regina, darling! You look fabulous! Yes, thank you. It’s crazy, right? And Cecily! You’re wearing it! Love!” Sydney said, disappearing into a crowd of socialites congratulating him on the opening and taking no further notice of Mara.

Mara stood to the side, patiently waiting for him to finish his conversation. “Mr. Minx, do you think—”

“Can you move? You’re blocking my light,” Sydney ordered, cutting her off before she could finish her sentence. “Paige!” he yelled. “What’s the ETA on that dress?”

“Eliza said she’d be here any minute now,” Paige assured him, looking harried.

“She better be,” Sydney threatened. “The show starts in minutes!”

Mara felt upset and flustered. She’d been brushed aside like an inconsequential minion, like someone who didn’t have her own column in the area’s most popular magazine. Maybe Eliza could help get her on the inside track—but Eliza was nowhere to be found.

Mara tried not to panic, but if she didn’t get an interview with Sydney, how on earth was she going to file the story?

eliza turns main street into an haute couture drop zone

MARA WAS STILL CHEWING ON her nails, worried about the fate of her assignment and wondering where the hell Ryan was. She'd tried calling him on the boat, but he hadn't picked up the phone. He really should have arrived at the party by now. She was contemplating calling him again when the lights in the store dimmed and the raised runway was illuminated in a pink glow. The guests' conversations hushed, and they clapped halfheartedly, manicured fingernails clinking against the crystal.

Runway-staple French techno music wailed from the overhead speakers, and the first model, dressed in a spray-painted tiger-print caftan, walked out of the back room and onto the platform. Model after model followed, each wearing a variation on the jungle theme, and Mara noticed that the clothes were actually interesting to look at. With their tie-dyed and spray-painted details, they represented a radical and slightly avant-garde departure for the Sydney Minx line.

Mara took copious notes while Jacqui chugged champagne. After fifteen minutes, the final model, wearing a tangerine tunic and turquoise hot pants airbrushed with gold flecks, abruptly stopped mid-walk. The music was suddenly drowned by an earsplitting noise coming from outside the store. The audience turned away from the runway and crowded to the front of the store to look out the window to find out what had caused the interruption.

Hovering above the store was an ominous-looking black army helicopter.

"Is that our Black Hawk?" Duffy asked.

"Nah—no logo. Must be a rental."

Mara and Jacqui followed the crowd outside. A rope ladder was being lowered from the helicopter, and a familiar figure was climbing down toward the sidewalk.

"Oh my God! It's Eliza!" Mara gasped.

So it was. Eliza descended from the rope ladder wearing a daringly cut, shredded chiffon dress and thigh-high crocodile boots. She had several chunky interlocked gold chain rope necklaces around her neck. As the wind kicked up by the helicopter blades whipped the dress around, Eliza sauntered straight from the rope ladder to the sidewalk, into the store, and onto the runway stage without breaking her confident stride.

The photographers rewarded her with a shower of flashbulbs—and the momentarily stunned crowd broke into enthusiastic cheers and wolf whistles. They had seen a lot of things

in the Hamptons—but a fashion show finale via helicopter was a definite first.

Eliza grinned as she posed for the camera, bathed in the klieg lights. It had worked! She'd made it happen! She'd managed to track down Vidalia at the model's fifth-floor walk-up in the East Village. At first, she had planned on having Vidalia do the honors, but the model had been so hung over from the party the night before, there was no way she was going to look presentable for the fashion show. So Eliza put the dress on herself and thanked God she was a sample size. Then she chartered a helicopter flight on her new Marquis Jet Card (thank you, AmEx!) that took her from New York to the Hamptons in a snap. Those nifty little Black Hawks sure came in handy.

She looked toward where Paige and Sydney were standing in the corner. She couldn't see that well because the flashbulbs blinded her, but she was certain they were going to congratulate her on a job well done. She'd pulled it off all by herself—this was surely a spectacle that the Hamptons would be talking about for the rest of the summer.

mayday! mayday!

“WE DID IT!” ELIZA CROWED, stepping off the runway and holding out her arms to envelop Paige and Sydney in a hug. “Isn’t this amazing?” she cried as the photographers continued to snap her picture.

Only when the flashbulbs died down did Eliza realize that Sydney and Paige did not share in her happiness one bit. She’d expected Paige to be a little jealous, sure, but wasn’t she the one who’d told Eliza she had to “fix” it or else? Why couldn’t she at least look a tiny bit happy that she’d pulled it off? Instead, Paige looked like she was going to vomit, and Sydney’s eyes were murderous. Hello, had she missed something here?

The smile evaporated from Eliza’s face. “What’s wrong? Did you guys not like the helicopter? Don’t worry, I’ve got it covered. I have a Marquis Jet Card. I won’t charge it to the company—my treat.”

“Paige, you know what you have to do,” Sydney said ominously before turning his back without even acknowledging Eliza’s presence.

“Eliza, can I have a word?” Paige asked coldly.

What now? She’d managed to save the evening—and they were acting like she’d done something terrible. As if she’d failed to deliver the goods instead of coming through with a bang. This was so not what she expected. She followed Paige to the back room.

“What’s going on?” she asked. Her face glistened from the heat of the photographer’s lights.

“You’re fired,” Paige said flatly. Eliza noticed Paige couldn’t quite conceal a note of glee in her voice. Paige had wanted this all along. The little brownnoser, who couldn’t style an outfit if you put a Bedazzler to her head, had just been waiting for Eliza to trip up. Eliza just wasn’t sure how she’d managed to make such a mess of things. Something didn’t compute.

“But I don’t understand. . . .”

“This night was about *Sydney*. Sydney Minx. And you know what’s going on out there? What people are talking about?”

“What?” Eliza asked, still confused.

“You. That’s who. Who’s the girl from the helicopter? Who’s the model who flew down? Who’s the girl in the dress? Who’s *the girl*. It’s all about you. I had to teach a couple of reporters from the *New York Post* how to spell your name!”

Eliza almost said, “They know exactly how to spell my name at the *Post!*” She wisely kept her mouth shut. “C’mon, Paige, cut me some slack,” Eliza pleaded. “Talk to Sydney. He listens to you. I mean, I got the dress back, didn’t I?”

“You *got* the dress, but you *took* the press,” Paige replied.

As if on cue, a tall reporter from the *East Hampton Star* gossip column tapped on the side door. “Hey—chopper girl. Can I get a quote?”

Paige rolled her eyes.

“Sure—be with you in a bit.” Eliza smiled. When the reporter left, she grabbed Paige’s arm. “You can’t be serious. You guys can’t do this to me. This is my internship for the summer. My parents will freak if they find out!”

Eliza was devastated. She had just found her passion, found that there was more to life than a MasterCard. She was really looking forward to learning more about the fashion industry. How could they take it away from her now?

“You’re fired, Eliza. Please remove that dress and vacate the premises immediately.”

And just like that, chopper girl went down in flames.

in celebrity journalism, noncooperation is never a problem

THE PARTY WAS OVER, AND Jacqui and the three guys from the web site had departed to continue the hoopla at the Reynolds castle. Mara caught a ride with them and asked them to drop her off at the Starbucks a few blocks from the harbor. She could grab a double latte to fuel up, and the coffee counter was close enough to the dock that she could walk home.

She was totally screwed. She had no story. Sydney Minx had completely ignored her the whole evening and refused to give her an interview. And she had four pages to fill! Dozens of column inches! The story had already been laid out by the art department; they were just waiting for her text to arrive.

What was she going to do . . . ? This time, she was going to get canned for sure. Sam Davis had handed her a plum assignment—but Mara had ended up with egg in her face. It wasn't even as if she were trying to nail an interview with the president, for God's sake. Sydney Minx was a fashion designer! Fashion designers lived for press! Yet somehow she had bungled it again. At this rate, Mara decided she should forget about becoming a serious journalist, since she couldn't even hack it as a celebrity reporter.

A few people were idling by the coffee shop, and after Mara collected her double-shot no-fat venti cup, she took a seat by the window, BlackBerry in her clammy hand. Better to do it now than later . . .

"Hi, Sam? It's Mara."

"Hey, there." The noise of a squalling infant filled the background.

"I'm so sorry to call so late. . . ."

"Not a worry at all. What's up?" Sam asked, sounding chipper and professional.

"It's just, about the Sydney Minx cover," Mara hedged.

"Uh-huh? Heathcliff, put down the baby, put down baby Kathy right now! Mommy says!" Sam ordered.

"I didn't get—" Mara said hesitantly.

"I said listen to Mommy! Bad Heathcliff! Bad boy!" Sam screeched.

"I didn't—"

“What did you say?” Sam asked, a little breathlessly. “Sorry, it’s a madhouse around here. Three kids under the age of five, and the nanny’s gone for the day.”

Mara made a sympathetic noise. “Sydney wouldn’t do the interview—I don’t have anything for the piece. I’m so sorry,” Mara confessed, gripping her coffee cup tightly.

“The old diva is still holding that *Them* piece against me, huh?” Sam asked, a trace of amusement in her voice.

Mara was surprised to hear her boss laugh as if nothing was wrong.

“Well . . . that’s okay. We’ll just do a write-around.”

“What’s that?”

“You call people close to Sydney to give you quotes—people who knew him back then, people who know him now, people who know how his mind works and what he’s like in private. We need at least two to go on the record, and everyone else can be “a close source” or an “insider.” You did some research today, right? Go back to LexisNexis, use our account—and we’ll just write the story around him without his input.”

“We can do that?”

“We do it all the time,” Sam assured her. “Standard practice.”

“Oh.”

“So, three thousand words by tomorrow morning?”

“Right,” Mara promised, grateful to have been saved from a future of arranging canapés on a platter. She was so glad not to have been fired she didn’t realize she still didn’t know exactly where to begin. But that was okay. She’d just realized she had a friend who was *very* close to the story indeed.

playing designer deep throat

FIRE.

Given the boot.

Voted off the island.

Torch extinguished.

Like a failed contender on one of those reality shows wherein the steely-eyed, pompadoured billionaire or the former super-model or the convicted lifestyle guru or the flak-jacketed adventure guide somberly handed you your butt on a platter and ushered you to the nearest exit and confessional cam.

She stood alone in the cramped quarters of the staff bathroom in the back of the store and tried not to cry. Instead, she took off the gold chains one by one and hung them on the door hook. She unzipped the crocodile boots and unbuttoned the chiffon dress, then hung it carefully on a padded hanger. Paige had barked her orders without even pausing to wonder what Eliza would wear once she took it off. Thankfully, Eliza had been able to grab a goodie bag before they were all gone. She put on one of the complimentary Sydney Minx T-shirts. It was a size large, so it fell all the way down her thighs, as big as a dress. It would do.

She walked out of the bathroom barefoot, wearing only the T-shirt. In her handbag, her Treo rang. What now?

This-shit-is-bananas, B-A-N-A-N-A-S . . . her Treo chirped.

Mara.

“’Lo?” Eliza greeted.

She listened while her friend told her tale. Mara was having some problem with her article since Sydney wouldn’t give the interview.

“So I need some names, people who will talk about him, what he’s like to work with, where he gets his ideas, that sort of thing,” Mara said. “And anyone who can give us any juicy insider stuff. Do you think you can help?”

Even through her cloud of humiliation, Eliza spotted clearly an opportunity for revenge.

“No problem,” she said. “You should talk to his former partner, Richard Mendelsohn—he financed the line until they parted ways last year. And a few of his design associates; some of them don’t work there anymore. His socialite friends. He used to hang out with my friend

Taylor's mom, Pringle. Oh, and Anna Perry too. She knows him from way back. They'll have tons of scandalous stories, I'm sure." A vindictive smile appeared on Eliza's face.

"You are the best!" Mara said gratefully.

"Yeah, that's me. The best." Eliza sighed.

"Liza, is something wrong? You sound weird."

"No—it's nothing. I'm just tired," Eliza dismissed. Revenge was sweet, but it offered little consolation. Getting Sydney crucified in print wouldn't do much to get her job back. She suddenly wished she hadn't been so backstabbing but justified her snarkiness by telling herself she was helping a friend.

"Okay," Mara said doubtfully. "Insane entrance, by the way. It's all everybody's talking about."

That's the problem, Eliza thought, but she didn't say anything to Mara. They said their good-byes and Eliza hung up. She walked out to the front of the store, looking for Jeremy. He had texted earlier to say he was running late because of a client meeting but that he would meet her outside as soon as it was over.

She found him standing in front of his truck, talking animatedly to Paige on the now-deserted red carpet. Come again? How and why did they know each other? She saw him give Paige a kiss on the cheek. Eliza hung back in the shadows, feeling like an intruder.

When Paige finally disappeared in a taxi, Eliza walked up to him, careful about where to step.

"Hey, babe." Jeremy grinned, giving her a quick hug. "Is this what the beautiful people are wearing this summer? T-shirts? What happened to your shoes?"

"How do you know her?" Eliza asked, climbing up into the truck without bantering back.

"Who?" Jeremy asked, backing out from the curb and putting an arm around Eliza's headrest.

"That girl you were just talking to. Paige McGinley."

"Oh, Paige. We grew up on the island together," he said. "Old friend of mine. She really climbed up the corporate ladder quick, huh? Pretty impressive. Do you work for her?"

Great, Eliza thought. Just what she needed to hear. Jeremy was fraternizing with the enemy. "It's a long story."

"Oh yeah? What'd I miss?" he asked, since he'd arrived at the party too late to witness her star-making entrance.

"Nothing," she replied, shaking her head. She didn't want to get into it just then.

mara's sense of humor floats away with the tide

THE FOAMY LATTE WAS A welcome pick-me-up, and, armed with the data from Eliza's e-mail, Mara felt pumped and ready to pull an all-nighter and write her article. She walked from the Starbucks back to the Sag Harbor dock. The boats were rocking gently, and Mara walked down the length of the pier until she realized she'd passed their spot—where was the *Malpractice*? She walked back and forth until she finally realized: it was just not there.

The boat—and, more importantly, her computer—were gone!

Stolen! was the first thing that came to mind. . . . Call 911! Ryan hadn't made it to the event, so something terrible must have happened! She had to report a boat-jacking! Her imagination ran wild with Colombian drug dealers and illegal arms merchants hijacking the yacht for their dire purposes—for a moment, she was utterly convinced Ryan had been kidnapped!

A minute later, she realized she was being completely ridiculous. The boat hadn't been pirated or stolen. Ryan had obviously gone for a midnight sail. She guessed he felt that was more important than meeting her at the party.

She punched his number frantically on her BlackBerry. Her computer was on that boat, and her article was due in a couple of hours. But there was no service in the bay, and the closest Mara got to reaching him was when an automated voice informed her, "The number you are trying to reach cannot be completed as dialed. Please check the number and try again."

Shit.

She looked around frantically and noticed a couple of kids from the boat across the way pulling out of their dock on two Seadoo jet skis. "You guys going out to the bay?" she asked.

"Yeah, someone's throwing a huge bash on a yacht."

That sounded like Ryan, all right.

"Can I get a ride?"

"Hop on."

They cruised the water until they spotted the *Malpractice*. Its floodlights were on, a wild party in full swing, the boat's speakers thumping out bass lines. Several people were bobbing

by the side of the water in lifesaver vests, making use of the diving board off the port side. Another kid was scaling the masthead to run up a pirate flag.

The jet ski pulled up by the side of the boat, and Mara hoisted herself on deck, her blood boiling. When she found him, she swore she would . . . she would . . .

“Mara!”

Ryan scooped her up in his arms. “You made it! I left you all these messages.”

He had a big grin on his face and an even bigger beer stein in his hand. “I was worried you’d miss the first big bash of the summer.” He looked absolutely psyched to see her and planted a big smooch on her lips.

What messages? Mara wondered. She hadn’t received one call from him. “You didn’t come to the show,” she accused.

“I fell asleep,” he said sheepishly. “By the time I got up, I knew it would be over. And then Tinker and her sisters came by, and then we called some people . . . and we got some beer . . . and . . .”

And decided to have the party of the century, Mara thought. It did look pretty fun, but she didn’t have time for socializing. She was on deadline.

“C’mon, let’s get you a drink,” Ryan said.

“You *left* me,” Mara said, her anger not so easily assuaged.

“What are you talking about?”

“I got to the dock and it was gone—this boat is *my home*, Ryan, don’t you understand? For the summer. Where I *live*. My computer is here. And I have a job. And I got there and the boat was missing and—”

“Hold on—hold on—I left the number for a water taxi on your phone,” he said. “Didn’t you get my voice mails?”

“No,” she said.

“I kept calling,” he insisted, looking perplexed.

“Did you call my BlackBerry or my old number?” she asked. “Because I told you to only call me on the work phone. I’m not using the old one anymore.”

“Oh,” he said, smiling sheepishly. “I forgot.”

She turned away from him. Didn’t he ever listen to her? And where did he get off hanging out with cute girls when she was at work? Did he even know how bad it sounded?

She stormed down to the main cabin without another word, leaving Ryan looking hurt and irritated on the deck. “Mara, c’mon, don’t be that way!”

A couple of guests were making out on the couch in the living room, but she hardly noticed them as she walked straight into the captain’s quarters. She slammed the door with a bang and walked over to her desk. She turned on her computer with a vengeance.

When she was done with the piece, she would *kill* him. But first, she had to make a few phone calls.

to whom much is given, much can be
taken away. . . .

“C’MON, WHAT’S WRONG?” JEREMY RAN a hand through his curly chestnut hair and stuck his upper lip out at Eliza. “What did I do to get the silent treatment?” he asked, mystified by her actions. “I thought you were going to spend the night at my place,” he added, a little hurt at the change of plans.

Eliza remained silent, thinking, *Paige McGinley. Just an old friend. We grew up here on the island.* Terrific. The woman who’d just handed her the biggest humiliation of her life was an “old pal” of her boyfriend’s. Nothing could have made Eliza feel worse.

She’d planned to spend the night with Jeremy at his apartment in Montauk—she’d already told her parents she was going to sleep over at a friend’s house, and her ass was covered. She’d even stashed an overnight bag with her lingerie set in the back of his truck that morning.

She’d thought that after making such a triumphant splash at the fashion show, she would cap off the evening by handing over her V card. And she had wanted to—*really* wanted to—but after having her ego stomped on, she just didn’t feel like it tonight. All she wanted to do now was Hoover a tub of Ben & Jerry’s and fall asleep watching *Room Raiders*.

Jeremy’s truck idled on her driveway with the lights off. “Are you sure you don’t want to come over?” He put a hand on her knee and began to massage it. His strong fingers worked their way down to her calf muscles, kneading them gently.

Eliza hesitated. She did want to—but she wanted their first time to be perfect, and the evening was already ruined for her.

“I wish I could, but I forgot, I told my parents I would go to some bird-watching thing with them tomorrow, and I need to get up early,” she said reluctantly. It was a white lie—her dad had invited her to join them, except she’d already said no.

He lifted his hand from her knee and put it around her shoulders, drawing her close so that she was pressed against his chest. His fingers lightly caressed her arm, sending electric currents up her spine. “C’mon, stay. I want to show you my new apartment. I cleaned up just for you,” he said huskily.

Eliza melted a little at that. She should just go with him—who cared about Paige? But then the memory of Jeremy kissing Paige on the cheek soured the moment and strengthened her decision.

“I can’t. I wish I could. Next time, okay?” she said, kissing him quickly on the lips. “I’ll call you.”

She waved at him from the front steps, watching as the truck disappeared beyond the hedges to the private easement on the property. She walked into the house and found her parents in the kitchen, waiting for her. Her dad was holding a stack of credit card bills in his hands.

“Hi, Mom, hi, Dad,” she said, giving them quick pecks on the cheek.

“I thought you were spending the night at Taylor’s,” her mother said.

“Change o’ plans,” Eliza said breezily. “What are you guys still doing up?”

“We received a phone call today from American Express.”

Eliza nodded as she opened the stainless steel freezer drawer and poked around for the cartons of ice cream she knew were inside. She found a pint of Phish Food and began digging into it with a spoon, straight from the carton.

“Did you buy a Marquis Jet Card?” her mother asked. “And please, use a bowl. Were you brought up in a barn?”

“Uh-huh.” She nodded, shoving a heaping spoonful into her mouth.

“The barn or the jet card?”

“Jet,” Eliza said, her voice muffled by the ice cream.

“And you chartered a helicopter from New York to East Hampton today?”

“Uh-huh,” she repeated, licking the spoon.

“Who told you to be so extravagant? That card is for *emergencies*,” her mother emphasized.

But it *was* an emergency . . . at least, it had seemed like one that morning. “You and Daddy have NetJets, and I thought . . .” Eliza said in her defense, reminding her parents that they were subscribers to a private jet service as well.

“Eliza, we already bought you a car for the summer. This is outrageous. Eighteen-year-old girls do not charter private helicopter flights. We’ve canceled the account,” her mother told her, her tone dropping low and cold. “And Daddy and I found out that all of your other credit cards are already maxed out. Those cards were your allowance for the summer.”

Uh-oh.

“You really need to learn the value of things. You can’t spend money like water. This kind of behavior is what got us into trouble in the first place. I’ll need the cards back,” her mother said sternly.

“Every one?” Eliza asked, stricken. She looked plaintively at her father. Her dad always let her do whatever she wanted, and money was never an object when it came to his little girl. But this time he merely shook his head and didn’t look her in the eye. This totally *blew*. Usually her mother was the strict one, but if her father was also upset, then she was definitely

in the doghouse. Make that the poorhouse. How was she supposed to get by without the help of her friends Visa and MasterCard?

“Every one,” her mother repeated, holding out her palm.

“But what am I going to do for cash?” Eliza asked, reaching into her purse and relinquishing her treasured cards.

“You have your internship stipend,” her mother reminded.

“I don’t anymore,” Eliza confessed, her stomach twisting in disappointment and frustration. She stabbed the ice cream hard with the spoon, and a huge chunk of it flew out of the pint and on the terrazzo floor. “Shit,” she cursed.

“What happened?” her mother asked, looking genuinely concerned. “I thought you said that it was going so well and that you were really enjoying yourself.”

“I’d rather not talk about it right now,” Eliza said quietly. “It’s complicated.” She returned to ferociously shoveling in the ice cream.

“Well, dear, you are going to have to find a new job if you want money for the summer,” her mother said. Her tone of voice indicated that the parental court had made its decision, and no further appeal would be heard by the two justices.

anna is the wife who cried wolf!

SHORTLY AFTER HALF-PAST FOUR o'clock the next afternoon, Jacqui, Shannon, and the children had just returned from Main Beach when Laurie walked into the kitchen, looking nervous. "There's someone at the door," she said.

Jacqui was helping Cody remove a scuba mask and Shannon was collecting wet towels. They both looked up at the sound of Laurie's voice. The kids dispersed into their rooms, leaving trails of wet sand on the zebrawood floors.

"Who's here?" Jacqui asked.

"A man. He wants to see Anna."

Jacqui shrugged. "Did you tell her someone wants to see her?"

"She's having her facial," Laurie explained. Anna had recently gotten into the habit of having costly at-home spa treatments. Once a week, a facialist, a masseuse, and a manicurist visited the house to pamper her with their services. "I told him to come back in an hour, but he won't go away." Laurie nervously twisted the ends of her plain cotton blouse. "He said it's important."

"You want me to tell her?" Jacqui asked, finally understanding what Laurie was asking her to do.

Laurie nodded in relief. "Would you? She told me no visitors, and I'm worried if I say anything, she'll . . ."

Jacqui stood up and shrugged. "All right. No skin off my back."

"Nose." Shannon giggled. "No skin off your nose."

Jacqui tapped on Anna's bedroom door softly. The sound of tinkling water, wind chimes, and whale songs drifted from behind the door. "Anna—there's someone at the door who needs to see you."

There was no answer.

"Anna? Anna?"

With a start, the door banged open, and Anna stood in the doorway in a white terry-cloth bathrobe, her face covered in a chunky green avocado mask. "What is it? I told Laurie I was not to be disturbed!" she hissed.

"There's a man . . . a man at the door . . . says he has to see you. . . . We told him to come back, but he won't go," Jacqui explained, suddenly feeling as nervous as Laurie.

“Who does he think he is?” Anna whispered viciously, stomping down the stairs to the foyer. She opened the door, where a man in a dark suit and sunglasses stood patiently.

“Yes?”

“Anna Perry?” he asked.

“That’s me,” she replied haughtily.

“You’ve just been served,” he said, handing her a thick yellow envelope. “Good afternoon.” He tipped her a salute and walked away.

“What?” Anna asked, whatever color was left in her face draining. She ripped open the envelope and pulled out several pages of a thick document. “THAT BASTARD!” she yelled. Anna threw the papers in the air and stormed through her own ticker-tape parade back to her spa treatment room. “I can’t believe he took me seriously!”

Jacqui winced.

Shannon, huddled in the kitchen doorway, looked at Jacqui with questioning eyes. “What just happened?”

“I think Kevin just asked Anna for a divorce,” Jacqui said, collecting the scattered papers. “Go outside and watch the kids. Don’t you say a word!”

She skimmed a page. *Contract for the predetermined division of assets, arrangement of alimony or other support, and/or allocation of attorney’s fees associated with the termination of marriage*, she read.

She flipped through the second bundle of papers, and only when she found the signatures on the last page did it slowly dawn on her what she was reading. Anna and Kevin Perry’s prenuptial agreement!

Her eyes scanned down, and Jacqui found a section circled and marked with an arrow, with notations from a lawyer. *Until August 26th*, the lawyer had scribbled in the margin.

The circled clause stipulated that if Kevin and Anna were married for less than five years, Anna wouldn’t receive a penny in the event of a divorce. In New York, it was called the “Trump clause”—after Donald Trump, who’d famously ditched Marla Maples a month before their five-year anniversary so that he wouldn’t be required to give her a bigger settlement. If Anna was able to stick it out beyond five years, she got half of everything, but if the marriage ended before they made it to the five-year mark, she got nothing.

Jacqui felt her stomach clench. Anna was about to get Trumped!

Kevin had actually done it! She read the first paragraph—under *cause for dissolution*, the lawyer had checked *physical abuse* and cited Anna’s *use of excessive force* (um, an ear flick) that had led to *massive trauma* (i.e., broken cartilage) and *physical endangerment* (but it was just a little infection!).

Then the reality hit her: if the Perrys got divorced, Kevin would take the children (most of them were his), and if Anna was left broke, Jacqui would be out of a job. She wouldn’t be able to complete a fifth year of high school and would have to move back to Brazil instead. No

more New York, and certainly no more NYU. So much for a stress-free, careless summer. A divorce would totally suck. Not only would it render Jacqui homeless in the fall, the kids would never get over it—they'd already gone through so much when Kevin split up with his first wife.

She'd heard that Zoë had refused to speak for six months. Madison had retreated into overeating, and that was when William had begun to show symptoms of hyperactive disorder. They were finally settled in with Anna as their stepmother—what would they do when Kevin pushed her out of their lives? And poor Cody, who wouldn't be able to see his half brothers and sisters. Jacqui felt a pit forming in her stomach. She didn't know who she felt more sorry for—the kids or herself. Jacqui could see the kids playing happily outside through a large bay window, without a clue as to the impending destruction of their family unit.

She slipped the papers back in their envelope and walked back toward the pool, her mind a whirl. Her problem was no longer just that she hadn't gotten into college—now she would have to fight just to keep her life afloat. Jacqui took a deep breath. Thankfully, she'd always been a strong swimmer.

mara is big green with envy

A FEW WEEKS AFTER THE fashion show, Jacqui, Mara, and Eliza went out to dinner so that Jacqui could celebrate getting paid. Mara remembered those thick, cash-filled envelopes with affection. She'd traded them in for the skimpy direct-deposit payments due a cub reporter. Even though the perks made up for it, part of her did miss receiving those thick tax-free wads of cash every three weeks.

The three girls were sitting in a booth at Lunch and had ordered the restaurant's famous lobster rolls and a pitcher of beer to share. Jacqui did most of the talking, since Eliza was uncharacteristically quiet and wasn't her usual boisterous self and Mara's thoughts were preoccupied with her relationship with Ryan.

They were still having some bad feeling over the other morning, when Mara had woken up and found that they were drifting from the dock. Ryan had forgotten to check on the knots that held them to the pier, and they had come loose in the middle of the night. They'd had to call the someone at the yacht club to give them a tug back to land, and Mara had come in late for work and had been yelled at by her boss.

A formal politeness had descended on their relationship, with the two of them walking on eggshells around each other. The frosty atmosphere worried her. Being in a relationship was really hard work. It wasn't the honeymoon she'd been expecting. Mara was stressed over the situation. Ryan was the best thing that had ever happened to her, but it bothered her that he couldn't understand why she was so upset.

She'd managed to work her way back into Sam Davis's good graces by filing a great column on the Writers versus Actors softball championship, where she'd given the celebrities funny nicknames (portly Alec Baldwin was "Cake Batter"). Mara knew a thing or two about the game, and her trenchant observations on how a backyard activity had grown to have corporate sponsors and coverage on ESPN simply due to its participants were funny and wellput.

Jacqui was telling them about how the web site guys had chartered a plane to write her name in the sky when Mara noticed a familiar figure stroll into the restaurant. Her neighbor wasn't wearing her signature blue bikini this time, but Tinker was outfitted in a very tight halter top and cutoff Daisy Dukes.

She walked by Mara's table and said hello. "Mind if I join you guys?" she asked with a friendly smile. "I think my sis is running late."

"Sure," Mara said tightly before taking a huge bite from her lobster roll. She wiped off the excess mayo on her lips with a gingham napkin. "Guys, this is Tinker. She's living on the boat

next to ours on Sag. Tinker, this is Jacqui and Eliza.”

“Cool,” Tinker said. “How do you all know each other?”

“We au-paired together a couple of years ago,” Eliza replied.

“Oh, right,” Tinker said, turning to Mara. “Ryan told me he was dating his little brothers’ and sisters’ nanny.”

Mara colored. The way Tinker said *nanny* sounded like Mara had only taken the job to seduce the rich kids’ hot older brother.

“How do you know Ryan?” Jacqui asked curiously.

“We’re in the same coed fraternity at Dartmouth,” Tinker explained, taking a handful of Mara’s fries. “It’s so fun. Ryan’s president.”

“Which one?” Eliza wanted to know.

Tinker told her.

“Do you guys still have Naked Night?” asked Eliza, who knew a thing or two about Ivy League Greek culture.

“Naked Night?” Mara asked, almost choking on her beer.

“Yeah, it’s like one night of the year when all the members hang out in the nude all evening. It’s really trippy, I heard. Lindsay’s older brother went to Dartmouth. He told us about it,” Eliza explained, scooping up the chunks of lobster salad that had fallen onto her plastic plate.

“Oh God, it’s so wild.” Tinker laughed, as if thinking about a very naughty secret.

“Really,” Mara said icily. “Tell us more.”

“Well, first we streak the campus, and then there’s a hot tub in the basement of the house and we all get sudsy in the bubbles. The pictures are absolutely hysterical.” Tinker giggled. “We get so drunk, it’s scary. It’s a miracle no one’s drowned in the Jacuzzi.”

“I’m sure,” Mara said sarcastically. “So what else do you guys do in this frat?”

“In the winter, there’s a big scavenger hunt in the woods. Every item we find is some kind of alcohol. By the end of it, everyone’s so drunk some of us write our addresses on our arms. *If found, please return to Animal House.* I woke up in a pasture once. I had no idea how I got there. Anyway, I’m organizing it with Ryan this year.” Tinker rolled her eyes. “Sadly, there’s not much to do in New Hampshire, so we basically have to make our own fun. Which means a lot of beer and planning road trips.”

“Oh.”

“Last winter, we all went to Stowe. A couple of us are on the ski team. We all snowboarded on the mountains together. Ryan’s really good. But you know that,” Tinker said. “Ryan’s good at everything.”

Right, Mara thought. It was a trip he'd invited her to. But she'd bowed out of it since she couldn't ski and hadn't looked forward to making a fool of herself on the mountain.

She looked at Tinker. She was one of the prettiest girls she'd ever seen—tall, long-limbed, with fine Scandinavian features—the high forehead, the silver blond hair and cornflower blue eyes. A hot girl who was in Ryan's frat, who could ski and snowboard and liked to plan scavenger hunts in the woods. Beautiful . . . and *athletic*. It sounded like Tinker did a lot of things that Ryan always wanted Mara to do. Mara couldn't share in any of Ryan's sports activities, since she had the coordination of a lobster.

What exactly had happened in Vermont on the ski trip? Not to mention Naked Night? *In the hot tub?*

She wondered if she should be worried. *But you're the one spending the summer with him on the boat*, she reminded herself. Not Tinker. And even if she and Ryan weren't getting along right then, they would make up. They always did.

Tinker's sister finally arrived, and Tinker waved her good-byes to the three girls and made Mara promise that she and Ryan would visit their boat that weekend.

"She seems nice," Jacqui hedged.

Mara made a face.

"C'mon," Eliza assured. "You're so much prettier than she is. And I bet her chest isn't real. Silicone City."

There were times when Mara was glad Eliza was so sharp-tongued, and this was one of them.

"You know, there really is nothing to worry about. She doesn't seem like Ryan's type at all," Jacqui observed.

"Really, why not?" Mara asked, skeptical.

"Well, for one, she's nothing like you," Jacqui said wisely.

The check came, and Mara plunked down her plastic. Eliza rummaged in her purse, and she looked up at them, empty-handed, her face red. "Guys, can you spot me this one?"

"Of course." Mara nodded. "Why, did you lose your credit card?"

"No need, I've got it," Jacqui said, handing Mara her card back. She pulled out a hundred-dollar bill from the fat envelope. "*Chicas*, this is my treat."

When the waitress had taken their bill, Eliza told them her sad story.

"They fired you?" Jacqui asked, aghast.

"But you were on the cover of *Dan's Papers!*" Mara argued.

"They *fired* you?" Jacqui repeated again, still shocked.

Eliza nodded. "And after they found out about the chopper rental, my parents took away the plastic. I'm officially broke."

“What are you going to do?”

Eliza held up an application form. She had picked one up from the reception desk when they had walked inside the restaurant.

“You’re going to work *here*? At Lunch?” Mara gasped. Eliza Thompson, the girl who was a waitress’s nightmare with her picky salad instructions, was going to be serving customers herself? Or, even more unlikely, working in a hot kitchen?

“Well, they’re hiring . . . and beggars can’t be choosers.” She laughed hollowly. “At least I won’t starve.”

looking to get lost

LATER THAT NIGHT, THE THREE web site honchos invited Jacqui to a party they were throwing at the castle to celebrate their latest triumph—their stock had split and they were now worth double what they used to be. The guys had outdone themselves: the house was packed with glamorous revelers, there were three different full cocktail bars set up in the patio with massive “Shocker” ice sculptures, and the Killers were scheduled to play a set in the ballroom.

Jacqui rang the doorbell, but not even the promise of a fun night of partying could make her feel better just then. It was too late. Kevin had made good on his promise, had filed papers and sent an assistant to the Hamptons to bring his things back to their town house in the city. He had been gone for two weeks.

Anna had asked Jacqui to keep it a secret from the kids. She didn’t want to upset them, and she wanted some time to ponder what she was going to do now. “Don’t worry, I’ll think of something,” Anna had told her.

But for the most part, Anna didn’t seem to be doing anything to save her marriage. Instead, she hit the boutiques with a vengeance. Not a day went by that Anna didn’t come home loaded with shopping bags. When the kids asked Jacqui why their dad was never home, she had to lie and tell them he was away on business. The atmosphere in the house was becoming strained, with Anna locking herself in her room for hours and then coming out red-eyed and sniffing and the children demanding to see their father.

Thank God for the three guys—their fun-loving antics made her forget all of her problems. It was obvious all three of them were attracted to her, and it was entertaining to watch them jockey for the key position, but since the three of them shadowed her constantly, she didn’t know which one of the three was the boy who made her heart skip faster.

She rang the bell again, impatient to get inside and grab a drink to drown her sorrows.

The door opened, and Ben Defever stood in the doorway. His good-looking face broke into a sweet smile when he saw her, but his forehead soon creased in concern. “What’s wrong?” he asked, noticing her agitation.

“It’s nothing—oh, Ben,” Jacqui said in a wretched tone.

“C’mon,” he said “let’s go somewhere quiet, where we can talk.”

Jacqui nodded, and they slipped through the crowd to the back staircase. Ben put a light hand on her back as he led her up to the top floor of the house. His room was in the northern end.

She sat on the edge of his bed and put her head in her hands.

“Now, tell me what’s bothering you,” Ben said, handing her a glass of sangria.

“I just can’t take it anymore,” she said mournfully, thinking about the Perrys’ impending divorce and her fifth-year issues. She took a long gulp from the glass and looked around, as if the answer to all her problems could be found nearby. His room was unexpectedly neat for a boy’s, spartan and immaculate, with nary a dirty sock or a wet towel in sight. A few guitars were stacked against the wall.

“Boss trouble?” Ben asked.

Jacqui turned to him with a wan smile. “Yeah, kind of. It’s a lot of pressure working for them. And there’s only so much one person can do, you know? But they expect me to do everything. Sometimes I feel like I’m the only person keeping that family together, and it’s not even my family. *Merda.*”

Ben nodded sympathetically. “I know. It sucks. I feel the same way—not about my family, but about the business. The site was my idea and I write a lot of it, on top of overseeing the marketing stuff, and I can’t bring myself to delegate. I get kind of burnt out sometimes.”

“Me too.”

“But it’ll get better. You just need to take a second to breathe.” Ben took a deep breath and exhaled. “Just let it in, then push it out.”

Jacqui followed his lead. For a few minutes, the room was quiet except for the sound of their breathing exercises. “You’re right—it does help.”

“Anytime you ever need to talk, you can come to me, you know,” he said shyly.

“You’re so sweet,” Jacqui said, impulsively putting her arms around him. She put her face in the warm cotton of his shirt and felt his heart beat through the fabric. It was just nice to be next to someone. Ben was such a great guy—he really understood her feelings. He held her for a while and then cleared his throat. He looked at her hesitantly, as if he’d just realized she was clinging to him.

“This is nice,” Jacqui whispered.

“Sorry,” Ben said. “I . . .” He meant to apologize for holding her for so long, but soon, there was no need for any apology as Jacqui had brought her face close to his and he decided to kiss her instead, removing his glasses before doing so.

Jacqui closed her eyes and put a warm hand on his hot cheek, rubbing his stubble. His lips were soft and warm, and he smelled like strawberries and heather. *Strong and sensitive—just what the doctor ordered*, Jacqui thought.

They jumped apart when someone knocked on the door.

“Yo, Defever! Jacqui in there? Someone said they saw her comin’ up,” Duffy’s deep voice called. “You hidin’ her?”

Jacqui and Ben exchanged guilty looks. “Yeah, she’s in here,” Ben said reluctantly.

Duffy stormed in, his eyebrows wagging. “What’ve you two been up to?” he asked suspiciously.

“I was just, uh—showing Jacqui my telescope. Venus is rising,” Ben lied, motioning to the telescope planted by the window.

Jacqui nodded. Venus? Was that some kind of pun? The goddess of love? Ben winked at her and she winked back, but Duffy was already pulling her up from the bed.

“C’mon, the party’s downstairs,” Duffy urged.

“All right!” Jacqui agreed. Feeling so much better after talking to Ben, she was ready for some of Duffy’s wild antics.

Duffy galloped down the stairs, but instead of bringing her to the hubbub of the party, he led her past the ballroom, through the back patio, and to a golf cart parked behind the main house.

“Hop on,” he urged, sliding into the driver’s seat.

“Where are we going?” she asked, a little amused.

“You’ll see.” He grinned, revving up the engine.

“All right, be that way,” she teased. They zipped across the Reynolds estate, the golf cart bouncing over the grass.

He turned to her and offered her a thermos from his jacket. “Drink?”

Jacqui sipped from it. Rum-spiked punch. She snuggled happily against him on the cart. He reminded her of a frisky, overeager puppy, and Jacqui had a soft spot for friendly creatures.

“How fast can this thing go?”

In answer, Duffy floored the gas pedal, and Jacqui squealed as they zoomed by the tennis courts and the guest bungalows over to the private beach on the property.

“Wanna drive?” he asked over the sound of the waves crashing on the beach.

“What? No!” But it was too late. Duffy had taken his hands off the wheel, and Jacqui screamed as she tried to steer the cart.

“You’re crazy!” she yelled, but she was having too much fun to be upset, and they bounced along until Duffy finally put on the brakes. They stopped so abruptly Jacqui was thrown into his arms, and they tumbled out of the cart, falling onto the sand, entangled in each other. They were both laughing as they rolled on the shore.

“You almost got us killed!” she cried, pretending to be furious.

“Oh, c’mon! You loved it!” he teased.

The moon was full, and the beach was deserted. Their only companions were a bunch of seagulls flying low over the water or walking slowly on the sand.

“It’s so peaceful out here,” she said, still lying on top of him.

“Yeah, I don’t like crowds much myself.” He smiled, looking up at her. Her hair was windblown and her cheeks were red from the cold.

“You are such a liar! You guys are always having parties,” she reminded him, but she was charmed nonetheless. She punched him on the shoulder.

“*Ow!*” he yelped. “You . . .” And before she knew it, he was tickling her, and she was laughing so hard she got the hiccups.

“Oops,” she said, feeling embarrassed.

“Just hold your nose. Here, I’ll do it for you,” he said, pinching her nose with his thumb and index finger.

“I can’t breed,” she gasped, still giggling. She pulled his hand away, and then he was holding it tightly in his.

“If you say so,” he said, leaning over to give her a kiss, and she met his lips with her open mouth, tasting the mix of salt and sweet liquor in his kiss. As he kissed her, his hand smoothed her hair ever so gently.

A loud honking interrupted them, and they pulled away just in time to see another golf cart pull up next to their overturned one. Grant was sitting in the front seat, and he looked genuinely pained to see his friend alone with Jacqui.

“Jac, you’re missing the Killers. And you, my friend, have got a phone call,” Grant told Duffy pointedly. “Your girlfriend’s on the line.”

“So, you’ve got a girlfriend?” Jacqui said to Duffy, her arms crossed. She got up to sit next to Grant and let him drive her back to the party.

“*Ex*-girlfriend. We broke up six months ago!” Duffy pleaded. He looked so crushed that Jacqui immediately forgave him. But the golf cart sped back to the house anyway.

* * *

She danced with Grant in the middle of the mosh pit, the two of them mangling the lyrics to “Mr. Brightside.” He made sure she was relatively unharmed within the circle of slam dancers, but a beefy kid broke through, knocking right into them, and Jacqui stumbled to the ground. She lost Grant in the pushing, milling crowd, and for a moment she was worried she was going to be trampled.

But a strong hand pulled her up to her feet, and she was relieved to find Grant’s tall form standing protectively above her once more. He cleared a path through the dance floor to the kitchen. “C’mon, let me get you some ice for that cut,” he said. “Sorry about that. I’ll have that kid beaten behind the shed,” he said in his laconic southern manner. He was Rhett Butler in a Death Cab for Cutie T-shirt.

“I’m all right, really,” Jacqui said, touched by his concern.

Grant pulled out a medical-grade ice pack from the fridge, twisted it to release the chemical reaction that created the ice, and held it against Jacqui’s forehead gently.

She put a hand over his, pressing it closer to the wound. He was such a gentleman. A ministering angel. They stood like that for a long time without speaking, and part of Jacqui wanted to never stop bleeding. Grant pulled his hand away and assessed the cut on her forehead. "I think you're okay now."

Jacqui nodded, a bit speechless. Grant was so handsome, with his striking eyebrows and gray eyes. The sideburns gave him a rockabilly edge that she found immensely appealing. He was just so sexy—there was an animal magnetism to him that she couldn't resist. The heat of the dance floor had made her blood run quickly, and she looked at him hopefully.

That was all he needed, and without warning, he pinned her against the sink, looked deep into her eyes, and kissed her urgently. There were a few people milling about in the kitchen who soon fled when they noticed what was going on. Jacqui kissed him furiously back, embracing him tightly.

She pulled him closer to her, and when his warm hands slipped up the back of her shirt and down her jeans, she wanted nothing more than to feel his body next to hers.

* * *

"They're all in love with you, you know," Mara warned Jacqui when they bumped into each other at the party after Jacqui had stumbled out of the kitchen alone, trying to get her bearings. She and Grant had quickly separated when Duffy walked in, complaining to Grant that the bars were short of mixers.

"They're just having fun," Jacqui demurred, stirring her drink.

"Are *you* having fun?" Mara asked pointedly. She was covering the party for her column, had already leveled her steady gaze on the trio, and had described them in print as *the kind of fellows from my high school who would sit in the back of the class throwing spitballs and clapping erasers but who secretly earned straight A's. Smart boys can play dumb too.*

Jacqui blushed, thinking of kissing Ben in his room, Duffy by the beach, and Grant in the kitchen. The truth was that when they kissed, she forgot about all the Perrys' divorce as well as the fact that she had kissed one of each guy's best friends a few minutes before. Oh, well, she was just having fun, right?

* * *

Later, when Jacqui returned to the main party, she received knowing secret smiles from all three boys.

"This is such a great party," Jacqui said, watching members of the Killers push each other into the pool.

"This is just the beginning, my friend. In the fall, we're having this huge party at the Rainbow Room to launch a couple of new sites we've developed. You've got to be there," Duffy said, handing her a marijuana pipe. "You're in New York, right?"

"What's wrong?" Ben asked, noticing her face fall.

"I might not be," Jacqui confessed, exhaling and coughing.

“Why not?” Grant asked, accepting the pipe and taking a huge hit of his own.

“My bosses are getting a divorce,” she blurted. She hadn’t been able to tell Mara about it because of Ryan, but she felt safe telling the guys. It wasn’t as if they could do anything about it anyway. “And if they get a divorce, I have to leave New York and go back to São Paulo in September.”

All three guys looked like they had just been told their stock had dropped three hundred points.

a team of horses can't drag ryan away from the waves

“YOU’RE LEAVING?” MARA ASKED, TRYING not to sound too disappointed.

Ryan shrugged. He looked around the crowded VIP tent at the Bridgehampton Polo Club, frowning. He’d agreed to accompany her to the polo, something he wouldn’t have been caught dead at otherwise.

The traditional afternoon event had become a commercial circus. It was little more than a platform for corporate advertising—one week, a telecom company, the next, a tropical island tourism authority, their logos draped all over the tents. He cringed in distaste as a pinched-faced woman walked through the crowd, draped in several hundred carats’ worth of diamonds.

Mara was pleased that he had accompanied her to the event but had become distressed when, after the first chukker, he’d become completely bored with the constant posturing of the crowd. He’d stood in a corner by himself, looking restless and nursing his drink.

She knew there was nothing Ryan disliked more than having to attend some snobby social event. He liked nightclubs fine but had no particular interest in spending an afternoon watching wealthy old men hit a ball across a field. During the first summer she’d spent in the Hamptons, he’d only attended the polo because he’d heard she would be there. Later, he’d confided that he thought polo was the most pretentious sport: since it cost so much money to play, it was just about showing off.

“You know this isn’t my scene. Besides, you’re busy,” he said, trying not to make it sound like an accusation. “Don’t you have to get that guy to give you a sound bite?” he asked, nodding toward the back of the tent, where, bordered by a velvet rope and several menacing bodyguards (the VIP tent?), stood Boris Carter, the arrogant celebrity host everyone was gawking at shamelessly. Boris was the star of such movies as *No Guts, No Glory 1, 2, and 3*—a trilogy based on a popular video game.

So far, the actor, famous for his squinty-eyed Texan stare and broken nose, had rebuffed all of Mara’s attempts to nail a few quotes. He’d had the temerity to tell Mara that “talking to her was not part of his job.” Apparently, the self-important Hollywood star had been paid a princely sum to attend the event but explained to Mara through his bodyguards that his appearance fee did not include having to grant interviews to the press. Mara had been in the middle of arguing with his publicist on the phone from Los Angeles when Ryan tapped her on the shoulder.

“I think I’m gonna take off. You seem pretty busy, like always.”

“I’m not *always* busy,” Mara replied. “You make it sound like all I do is work.”

“Well, don’t you?” Ryan asked. Mara’s Diary column was a huge hit, having quickly turned into a Hamptons must-read. Her outsider-turned-insider tone hit a comic nerve with loyal readers. Her mailbox was stuffed with invites, and her presence was requested at a fabulous bash every night of the week.

Already, her busy schedule had driven a bit of a wedge between them—Ryan was always trying to get Mara to blow off her job so they could spend more time together. “It’s not like you’re writing for *Newsweek*,” he’d said under his breath the other evening when he’d wanted her to hang out with him and his friends and Mara had chosen to stay at home to bang out an assignment. “It’s superficial celeb gossip stuff—you can do it in your sleep.”

Mara tried not to feel too insulted. Why couldn’t he just chill? Just the week before, they’d been getting along so well. Then they’d hosted a kick-ass Fourth of July bash on the boat. The party had been the first time they had entertained friends together as a couple, and the evening had been perfect. Eliza had brought Jeremy, and Jacqui had brought not one but three dates. All eight of them had had a blast.

“If you can just wait, I’ll be done in a few minutes, I swear,” she promised, holding up her BlackBerry. “I finally got Boris’s rep to look up his contract to see if it includes interviews. He’s going to make Boris talk to me. Right, Lucky?” she asked, looking for backup from the photographer, who was standing next to them.

“Oh, sure.” Lucky nodded.

“Wish I could, but the group’s doing a paddle-out in a half hour. Why don’t you come by afterward?” Ryan asked.

“All right,” Mara said, feeling dejected. Ryan had told her about the paddle-out earlier. It was a surfer thing—a big deal with the community, Ryan had explained—surfers liked to commemorate events by gathering together and paddling out on their boards into the ocean as a group activity. This one was for Tinker’s twenty-first birthday. Mara couldn’t decide if she was more upset that Ryan was leaving the reception or that he was leaving to attend a paddle-out for Tinker.

“Great! See you later.” Ryan smiled as he made his way toward the exit.

“Let him go,” Lucky said sympathetically. “If you love someone, set them free.”

“Lucky, Sting is so over,” Mara chided.

But Lucky was right. She couldn’t put Ryan on a tight leash. He was his own person and free to do whatever he wanted. If she let him go freely, he would come back to her.

mara is a righteous betty

MARA HIT THE SEND BUTTON on the screen. She'd spent the last hour polishing her copy on the polo reception. The actor had finally consented to give her a brief interview after his publicist had convinced the party's sponsor to kick in a free trip on the company jet to St. Thomas, a fact that she hadn't left out of her column. Her readers loved that sort of insider dish, and she had managed to pull off writing about the celebrity as both an idol and an object of ridicule—no mean task. She stretched and yawned, then checked her watch. Eleven-thirty in the evening.

Ryan still hadn't returned from the paddle-out. He'd said they would be down at the cove. Maybe she should join him. He'd gotten a ride with his friends, so the car was available.

She took the Ferrari down to the beach. She couldn't see very well in the dark, but as she rounded a sand dune, she came upon a brightly lit bonfire. People were sitting around it, and she heard the sound of laughter and a guitar being strummed. An Igloo cooler filled with frosty Coronas was planted in the sand.

Mara took off her shoes and walked barefoot on the cold, wet sand as she approached the merry group.

The surfers were hanging out in front of the bonfire, their boards stuck perpendicular on the sand behind them. Ryan was seated in the middle. He'd put a sweatshirt over his wet suit, and he was strumming a guitar. Next to him was Tinker, in the tiniest bikini imaginable, a black one that looked like it was held up by shoelaces, the straps were so thin. Even though it was goose-bump cold and everyone else was huddled in blankets and wearing sweaters. Mara herself shivered in her cotton yoga pants and terry-cloth sweatshirt.

She walked up to the group and cleared her throat. Ryan looked up. His handsome features broke into a huge grin that melted her heart.

"Mar—you're here!" he said, putting aside his guitar.

She nodded. "I got the story done."

"Hey, guys! You remember Mara, my girlfriend," Ryan said.

"Sure enough." Several of the guys smiled.

Of course they remembered her. She was the one who'd gone totally ballistic when she'd found all of them hanging out on their boat when she had to write a story. She'd practically chased them off the port side. But they smiled at her in a friendly fashion nonetheless.

“Make room, bro,” Ryan ordered. The guy next to Ryan moved a foot, but Mara squeezed herself between her boyfriend and the bikini-wearing wannabe home wrecker instead.

“Happy birthday, Tinker,” she said.

“Glad you could make it,” Tinker said coolly.

Ryan kept strumming his guitar.

Conversation veered toward the experience of the paddle-out—how amazing it was to be one with the ocean at sunset. “I, like, felt so small, man, like a grain of sand, a drop of water. . . . Mind-blowing, brah,” the boy next to Ryan was saying. “*Respect.*”

“I’ve never felt so self-actualized,” Tinker agreed.

Mara raised a skeptical eyebrow. The most New Age she ever got was burning a stick of incense in an ashtray. *Self-actualized?* What the hell was Tinker talking about? It all sounded hokey to her. She found she enjoyed the surfers’ company—they were all laid-back and mellow—but she couldn’t stomach all the beach-side philosophy they espoused.

Still, it was nice to sit next to Ryan. He was playing her favorite song on his guitar, “Wonderful Tonight.” She knew it was a code for how happy he was that she had come to the beach.

“We’re going out tomorrow, killer waves off the point, get inside the pope’s living room,” a dreadlocked surfer enthused, meaning the swells were so huge, they would be able to surf inside the barrell of the waves.

Mara smiled. “Maybe I’ll go too.”

“You will?” Ryan asked, surprised. It was the first time Mara had offered to join him all summer. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah.” She nodded, reaching over to hold his hand.

“Cool,” he said, giving hers a warm squeeze. He went back to strumming on his guitar, a small smile playing on his lips, and she knew they were all right again. They might not see eye to eye on how they were going to spend the summer (Ryan seemed to want to carry on his hard-core Dartmouth partying, while Mara wanted to jump-start her career), but there was one thing they agreed on: they were crazy for each other.

around and around they go

THERE WAS A BRIGHT YELLOW school bus parked in front of the Perry mansion the next morning. The driver of the bus honked the horn several times until Jacqui walked outside. She found Grant and Ben hanging out of the bus window. Duffy was sitting in the driver's seat. "*Bom dia*, Jacarei. Get in! We rented Great Adventure for the day," he said, bidding her a good morning. "Everyone on board!"

"You what?" Jacqui asked.

"You looked so down the other day, we thought we should try to make you feel better. And what's better than a day at an amusement park?" Ben asked.

"Your chariot, madam." Grant smiled as Duffy opened the door.

Jacqui helped the Perry kids aboard. As they pulled out of the driveway, she saw a dejected Anna Perry looking at them from her bedroom window.

The drive out to New Jersey took several hours, but the guys kept the kids entertained by cracking jokes and telling them about their latest silly videos on their web site. "There's one where these two dudes are doing a choreographed karaoke of *NSync. It's hilarious."

True to their word, the company had rented out the entire amusement park for a staff "family day." They had the whole place to themselves, and the two-thousand-acre park had an almost ghost-town-like quality, since fewer than a hundred of them were in a place that could hold thousands. Jacqui couldn't even imagine how much this excursion had cost—the boys seemed to have no concerns in that area. It was all play money to them.

"Hey, Jac, should we check out the Batman ride? The centrifugal force is excellent. It'll make your hair stand on end, a real rush!" Ben cajoled.

"No way, we've got to check out the Haunted Tunnel. Don't worry, I'll keep you safe." Grant smiled. He had a high appreciation for campy pleasures, and Jacqui knew he was looking forward to snuggling on the small creaky boat.

"It's bumper cars all the way!" Duffy urged, hopping up and down like a little boy.

The three boys stood in front of her, eager faces aglow, each convinced that only he was the one who had kissed Jacqui the night before.

"I—I . . ." she said, flustered. "Give me a minute," she pleaded. She sat down on a nearby bench and clutched her forehead.

"Still worried about the divorce?" Ben whispered out of earshot of the Perry kids.

“Yeah, I’m sorry, guys. Can we just sit down for a moment?” she asked, Cody and Zoë at her side. Shannon had run after Madison and William, who were hell-bent on riding the upside-down roller coaster until they both puked.

“Look, Jac, if you’re really concerned, you have to do something about it. You can’t just sit around letting it happen,” Duffy declared.

“What do you mean?” Jacqui asked, wondering if she should feel offended. Cody and Zoë stepped away to throw coins in a fountain.

“Well, you know, we built a multimillion-dollar business from our dorm rooms. Surely we can help you keep one dinky marriage together,” Ben said.

“True dat, true dat.” Grant nodded.

In the end, since they had two kids under the height limit to entertain, the three boys and Jacqui ended up spending the day on the slow, pokey kids’ rides, which Cody and Zoë enjoyed. As they went around and around the two-mile-an-hour choo-choo, long legs folded with knees pressed up against the seat in front of them, the boys looked longingly at the high-flying, technologically advanced roller coasters that thundered across the park. But not one of them would give up being by Jacqui’s side.

out of the frying pan and into the fire

ELIZA MOPPED UP THE COUNTER Dejectedly. It was her first day of work at Lunch, and so far, it had been an unmitigated disaster. She was dressed in the uniform Lunch T-shirt with the screen-printed logo of the diner on the front (available at the gift shop for fifteen dollars) and white shorts with a jaunty red apron around her waist. During her brief stint as a waitress, she'd spilled a pitcher of iced tea on a customer as well as herself (although the customer had borne the brunt of it). Her T-shirt was splattered with grease from the kitchen, where she'd been posted even more briefly. She was quickly relieved of that duty after she accidentally upset a vat of clam chowder while attempting to place an angry lobster in a boiling pot. She'd lost control of the crustacean, and the lobster had hightailed it to freedom through the swinging doors into the restaurant, to the applause of all the patrons. And the kitchen floor was now wet and chunky with the creamy soup.

Hence the cash register. Her employers thought she couldn't possibly do any harm there. So far, they had been correct. But Eliza spotted a threat to this balance out of the corner of her eye. She kept mopping up, trying to look busy so that the customer would choose to be served by the other cashier. But no such luck.

Paige was headed her way.

The designer's assistant looked chic and polished in a black Lacoste shirt and colorful Sydney Minx capris. She rapped her fingernails on the table. "Eliza," she said, in that condescending tone.

"Oh, hi, Paige," Eliza said, trying to look like manning the cash register at the lobster shack was the most normal thing in the world. "Did you enjoy your lunch?"

"I did indeed." Paige smiled thinly, handing Eliza her corporate credit card. "Although I would have enjoyed it more if Sydney hadn't called me in the middle of it, screaming that none of the T-shirts that were supposed to go to the other stores had arrived."

"What do you mean?"

"All eight hundred T-shirts were sent to East Hampton. I told you to send half to the boutiques in Miami, Chicago, and Los Angeles."

"Oh," Eliza said. In the middle of the frenzy of that night, she had completely forgotten that only half the T-shirts were to be sent to the store opening. Damn! She handed Paige her card back and a pen to sign the receipt.

"God, Eliza. I mean, seriously. You couldn't even fill out a T-shirt order correctly." Paige accepted her credit card receipt and checked it, her eyes narrowing. "Nor did you calculate the

tax correctly on this bill.”

“Jesus, I’m sorry,” Eliza said, her fingers shaking as she punched in the numbers again. The credit card machine beeped angrily. “I just learned how to work this. . . .”

Paige sighed loudly. “Can someone else help me? This girl here doesn’t seem to know how to do anything.”

The other cashier walked over, took Paige’s card, and helped Eliza void the earlier transaction. “Sorry about that, miss. She’s a new trainee.”

“Maybe you should just give up. You’re a pampered rich girl, and that’s the only thing you can do right,” Paige hissed. “And by the way, next time you want to give out our clients’ personal information to the media, you should think twice, because next time, we’ll sue your ass.”

Eliza stood back, stung.

“What do you mean?”

Paige thrust the infamous issue of *Hamptons* toward Eliza. “This is what I mean.” She sneered before stomping out of the restaurant.

Eliza flipped through the magazine and found Mara’s profile on the designer. Oops—she had completely forgotten about the write-around. The anonymous “sources” Eliza had given Mara had gleefully stuck their knives in Sydney’s back. There were a lot of passive-aggressive comments from Sydney’s “friends,” and the story was an all-out bitch fest. His former assistants said that Sydney took all the credit for their designs or ripped off other designers’ work, his partner said that Sydney had cheated on their financial arrangement, and his clients complained of double-charging on their bills.

She couldn’t help but laugh when she read that “someone” had leaked to Mara that Sydney wore a toupee. (That would have been Eliza.) Paige could complain all she wanted, but the damage had already been done, and there was nothing to prove that Eliza had been the one to spill the beans. Eliza closed the magazine and resumed wiping down the counter, whistling a merry tune.

whoever said “practice makes perfect”
is a liar

JUST KEEP YOUR HEAD DOWN and then pull yourself up, pull yourself up on the board! C'mon, now! You can do it, you can do it! One! Two! Three! And—Mara flopped back into the water, hanging for dear life to the side of her surfboard.

Ryan paddled up next to her, grimacing with concern. “Hey, babe, you all right there?”

She sputtered up some salt water that had gone into her nose and managed a weak smile. Her swimsuit was giving her a painful wedgie. She should have worn a wet suit like Ryan had suggested, but with the image of Tinker in her minuscule bikini in mind, Mara had opted for sexy instead of sensible. Alas, when she'd arrived at the beach, she'd found Tinker looking trim and athletic in a full-body wet suit. Several times, the force of the waves had almost pulled off Mara's bikini top.

Another large wave crashed into them, and Ryan dove into it, emerging from the crest, a tall, graceful figure on his surfboard. All around him, his friends were similarly positioned, including Tinker, who was a demon on the water (she rose elegantly from her board as if pulled by strings), but Mara couldn't even get her body *on* her surfboard, let alone try to *stand* on it. Every time the waves rolled, she was buffeted by the crash, and she was pulled farther and farther back toward the shore.

It wasn't enough that she had woken up at daybreak to do this. It wasn't enough that her eyes hurt, her joints hurt, and she couldn't breathe. She couldn't even see, since one of her contacts had floated away, and her arms were red from scraping on the sand. To add insult to injury, Tinker had had the audacity to actually make fun of her surfboard.

“Oh, that's so cute! You have a foamy!” Tinker cooed when she saw Mara's board as she and Ryan arrived at the beach.

“No need for that,” Ryan said good-naturedly. “It's Mara's first time.”

“What's a foamy?” Mara asked when Tinker was out of earshot. She was using one of Ryan's old boards, one he'd picked himself for Mara to use, so she didn't understand the mockery.

“It's a beginner board. Most surfers use fiberglass, like mine,” he said, motioning to his sleek Ferrari Challenge Stradale, a limited-edition five-thousand-dollar surfboard with the distinctive stallion logo.

“Hey, who’s the baby with the foamy?” another one of Ryan’s surfer friends called, hooting at the sight of Mara’s yellow surfboard.

“Knock it off,” Ryan called back. “Ignore them, they’re just a bunch of Barneys,” he told Mara.

Ryan spent the better part of the morning trying to teach her the fundamentals of surfing. Either he was a really bad teacher or Mara was just an awful student. The closest she had gotten to her surfboard was when it hit her on the head when the waves rolled in.

She’d told Ryan to let her practice alone. She didn’t mind, since it looked like he really wanted to hit the big waves that were breaking down the beach.

“You sure?” he’d asked. “I can stay. I’m just glad you’re here.” He was sitting on top of his surfboard as naturally as if he were sitting on the couch, while Mara was barely clinging to the side of hers, frantically dog-paddling with her feet underneath the water.

So much for her fantasy of re-creating that Justin-Cameron smooch—the two of them on their surfboards locking lips on the water. Not going to happen.

Especially if she was half drowning.

“No, go ahead—I’ll get the hang of it sooner or later. I don’t want to keep you,” she urged him, feeling guilty.

“Okay,” Ryan said reluctantly. “I really don’t mind. I want to stay.”

But Mara thought she’d rather he didn’t see her fall flat on her face again while the surfboard whacked her on the head, especially since that bitch Tinker was cruising on her board doing her best imitation of Kate Bosworth in *Blue Crush*.

“No, really. Go. I want you to go,” she said.

So he’d left her, and Mara had spent the rest of the morning bobbing up and down beside her surfboard, trying not to choke on the ocean water.

As she floated away from the rest of the surfers, she caught sight of Ryan on his board again, a striking, slim figure crouched in the peak position to get maximum speed, getting up on the plane above the waves. She loved him so much. . . . If only she could share this with him . . .

After a few minutes, Mara swam back to shore. She waved to Ryan from the beach and then walked away. She had to be at work in an hour.

jacqui springs a parent trap

IN THE MOVIE, LINDSAY LOHAN was still a cute nine-year-old with freckles and a sunny smile, not a stick-thin lollipop-headed starlet notorious for her after-hours antics in a host of Hollywood nightspots. Jacqui grasped a handful of popcorn and stared reflectively at the screen. She had rented the Disney remake to pick up a few tips from the twin Lindsays' attempts to get their parents back together. It was a bonus that Cody and Zoë loved the movie.

The web site guys had suggested trying to talk Anna and Kevin into counseling, but nothing as practical as therapy would ever appeal to Anna. And it wasn't as if Jacqui could just give Kevin a call and suggest such a thing—they hardly spoke to each other, because things had been a bit awkward between them ever since Kevin had tried to hit on her the first summer she was working for the family.

Anna's behavior was also becoming more erratic—the other day she'd asked Jacqui if she could tag along when Jacqui was going out after work to meet Mara and Eliza at Tavern. She had tried to talk Anna out of it, but Anna had insisted. Eliza and Mara exchanged alarmed looks when they saw Anna, but Jacqui merely shrugged. Their former and Jacqui's present employer had quickly downed four shots of Jägermeister and spent the evening draped over the twenty-two-year-old DJ. "Your mom is hot!" several guys told Jacqui. "She's not my mom; she's my—oh, never mind," Jacqui had said.

The next morning, Anna, still reeling from the effects of a brutal hangover, had asked Jacqui when they were going to do that again.

Never, Jacqui had thought. Anna's partying like a teenager sure didn't seem like the actions of a woman desperate to save her marriage.

But what if instead of making them *figure out* if they were still in love with each other, Jacqui could make them *believe* that they had never fallen out of love? After all, even though they hated each other's guts right now, like Dennis Quaid and Natasha Richardson in the movie, Anna and Kevin belonged together. Anna was the only woman who thought Kevin's law puns were funny (he liked to say that he had a "sunny deposition"), and Kevin was the only man who thought Anna looked hot in a billowing African muumuu.

Jacqui knew that Anna was still in love with her husband—her demand for a divorce had just been a way to make him notice her, and even though Kevin was a workaholic, he did love his wife; he just never tried to show it. So what if she, Jacqui, orchestrated a courtship of sorts—doing nice things for each of them in secret, which they would assume the other person had done for them?

Where would she start? First, she needed a recruit. She couldn't do this alone.

* * *

“So, you want me to help you send Anna romantic gifts but pretend they're from Kevin even though they're not?” Shannon asked when the two of them were in the laundry room sorting through the children's dirty clothing. “I mean, I know divorce is a sad thing and all, but I guess I don't understand why you'd want to be so involved.”

Jacqui bit her lip. Could she really trust Shannon? She had no choice, really. She took a deep breath and told the younger girl the whole story—about the apartment in New York, the NYU rejection, how she needed the Perrys to stay together so she could finish her fifth year of high school and stay in New York.

“But remember, you can't tell Madison, okay? Anna doesn't want the kids to know,” Jacqui warned. She knew how close Shannon and Madison had become. The two girls were glued together at the hip, and Madison was really blossoming under the friendship, looking up to Shannon like the big sister she'd never had.

“I guess I won't,” Shannon said reluctantly, feeling bad about keeping something from a friend. She tossed a folded T-shirt into the laundry basket. “I'll help you, but.”

“But?”

Shannon broke into a wide grin. “But you have to promise me you'll invite me to stay with you in the city at your apartment sometime. I live in Jersey, and it's sooo boring. My parents would never let me stay in the city, but if I told them I had a friend . . .”

Jacqui contemplated Shannon's proposal. She could see where this was leading—Shannon turning Jacqui's sweet studio into a New York City crash pad of her own—inviting friends over, sneaking in beer, forcing Jacqui to host a bunch of fifteen-year-old brats in her private abode. In the end, it would be a small price to pay for living in the city, and Shannon couldn't come over every weekend, could she?

“All right. It's a deal.” She nodded grimly.

“Cool. And remember, I need to sleep in the bed. No pullout couch for me. My back problem, you know.”

* * *

The next day, Anna Perry discovered that someone had sent her an iPod programmed with all of her favorite Matchbox Twenty love songs. (“Matchbox Twenty?” Shannon had asked, wrinkling her nose in distaste when Jacqui had told her what to put on the MP3 player. “Ew!” “Just do it!” Jacqui had laughed.)

Anna and Kevin had not said a word to each other since he had served her papers. Kevin was still bunkered back in the city. Jacqui knew that Anna had tried calling him on his cell and at the office, but he never returned her calls. Perhaps the black iPod nano would give her a sign that he was having second thoughts. Of course, gifts wouldn't be enough in the long run. Jacqui knew she would have to engage Kevin in some way to make Anna believe he wanted her back, through a more personal approach, like actually asking her out on a date.

But for now, Jacqui noticed Anna was in a good mood all afternoon, humming “Accidentally in Love” as she went about the house. Score one for the plan. She ushered the kids into the Range Rover.

“Where are we going today?” Zoë squealed. After the excitement of yesterday’s impromptu trip to Great Adventure, the kids expected something as fun every day.

“Just the beach. Sorry.” Jacqui smiled. “Zoë, is this your book?” she asked, picking up a copy of V. C. Andrews’s *Flowers in the Attic*. “You’re reading this?”

Zoë nodded.

It was a book for twelve-year-olds, and Zoë was eight. Two summers ago, the kid hadn’t even been able to recognize letters. But now she was reading at an advanced level! Okay, so maybe Zoë shouldn’t be reading that book (blond incestuous twins?)—but hey, at least she was reading! It looked like the “summer off” plan was working. With Kevin out of the house, the daily battles had ceased, and the environment was peaceful for once. William had decided to be an amateur geologist and was collecting stones and seashells on the beach and doing research on their provenance. Free from a fully regimented schedule, Cody had stopped having his “accidents” and was finally properly toilet-trained. Madison had even (grudgingly) started eating again. She looked red-cheeked and happy.

Even Jacqui was benefiting from the new relaxed approach to the summer. If her plan didn’t work, at least she’d return to Brazil in September with a killer tan.

blue-collar blues

TALK ABOUT A SIGHT FOR sore eyes. Eliza untied her apron and stuffed it in the laundry basket underneath the counter, smiling as she saw Jeremy walk inside the door. Her spirits lifted the minute their eyes met. He looked so adorable in his blue uniform work shirt with **STONE CONTRACTING** scripted on the front pocket. His jeans were dusty and muddy, but Eliza thought she had never seen him look cuter.

“Can I help you?” she asked flirtatiously.

Jeremy pretended to scan the menu underneath the glass counter. “I’m not sure. I’m looking for an Eliza Thompson? You might know her—about so high,” he said, motioning under his chin. “The prettiest girl in the Hamptons, kind of high-maintenance?” He leaned over the counter. “Do you know what time she gets off work?”

Eliza threw her arms around him and gave him a kiss.

“So, do you want to eat here?” he asked.

“Are you kidding? I can’t get out of this place fast enough.”

* * *

They drove to the nearest sushi restaurant, and over shrimp tempura rolls, Eliza unburdened her tale of woe. Jeremy knew that she’d lost her job working for Sydney’s showroom but not that Paige had fired her. She’d kept that detail out of it, not wanting to bring up memories of his old “friend.”

“I can’t even walk, my knee hurts, and I think I’m breaking out from all the stress!” she said, dipping a piece of sushi into the wasabi-spiked soy sauce. “And I almost burnt my fingers when I tried to get the corncobs out of the oven!”

Jeremy was silent as he picked at his chicken teriyaki. It had been Eliza’s idea to get Japanese, and it was obvious he didn’t share her enthusiasm for the cuisine.

She continued her tirade, complaining about customers who didn’t tip, waitresses who stole her stations, and an abusive and mocking kitchen staff. Jeremy grunted in response but didn’t interrupt her self-pitying monologue.

Finally, he threw his napkin on the table. “So what?”

“What do you mean, so what?” Eliza asked, taken aback by his harsh tone.

He shrugged and took a swig of his Sapporo. “People *work*, Eliza. I know it’s hard to imagine, but some people have to work hard to get where they are; they don’t just inherit it.

I've worked hard all my life. . . . I started out as a gardener, a groundskeeper, and I worked all through high school and college and every summer. And even now, even though I have my own landscape company, it's not easy. Nothing's easy. You just need to get used to it."

Eliza started to protest, but he didn't let her get a word in.

"Some people think money's just handed to them; they don't realize how much hard work really goes toward earning it. You've got to get your hands dirty, you know? It's not just about cruising through life. It really makes me sick how entitled some of my clients act," he said, furiously taking another swig from his beer glass.

"I mean, I know you're not used to it. But it's like, my friend Paige—she and I used to cut lawns together, and we had to get in the dirt and pull weeds, and we made, like, minimum wage, but she was always there, and she never complained."

"Oh, really. So you want me to be more like Paige, is that it?" she asked snippily, trying not to show him how much he'd hurt her with his unsympathetic comments. And to bring Paige into it as well—that really stung.

"Well, not everyone can be like Paige—"

"Of course not. Paige is perfect," Eliza said bitterly.

When the check came, Eliza grabbed it.

"Hey, c'mon, I got you," Jeremy argued.

"No, no. I don't take any handouts," she snapped. It had been her decision to eat at Mount Fuji, even though the bill was equal to her full day's pay, which meant she'd basically worked eight hours for a few sushi rolls. "I don't expect a free ride."

They drove back to Eliza's house in silence, and when he dropped her off at her driveway, she slammed the door so hard it shook on its hinges.

trouble in paradise

THE DISHES IN THE SINK had been undisturbed for a whole week, sitting in tepid water, crusty and dirty. As Mara rinsed them off and began to stack them in the dishwasher, she wondered why Ryan never even bothered to try to make the place neater. All of his boxes were still unpacked in the living room, and the dozens of empty beer cans, dirty paper cups, cigarette butts, and empty vodka and gin bottles from the assorted parties added to the general detritus. He'd promised to clean up after each get-together, and Mara would have cleaned up herself except she had to be at work so early and she arrived home so late, there never seemed to be enough time to try to get the place in order.

She had to face it: Ryan was a terrific slob without a live-in maid.

Mara pulled the vacuum cleaner out of the utility closet and began to sweep, picking up pieces of paper and throwing all the empties into a big black trash bag. A small nagging voice in her head wondered if they had rushed into this too soon. Sure, they'd been together all year, but they'd hardly been in the same city for more than a few days. The transition from long distance to close quarters was a rocky one.

Ryan was so used to having people pick up after him. There was a reason why his room at home was always clean and his bed there was always made—it was called hired help. He didn't even notice that they were practically living in a trash dump. The other day she'd found a half-eaten bag of potato chips underneath the bed, along with an empty pizza box and a bong.

Not that she could talk—she wasn't the neatest person in the world—but at least she tried to put things away in their proper place. And what did he do all day? He was always surfing—either on the water or on the Internet. He could have at least begun to unpack.

Plus, all of Tinker's talk about what she and Ryan did at Dartmouth was really starting to grate on Mara. The other day, Tinker had come over to hang out, and every other sentence that had come out of her mouth began, "Me and Ryan used to . . ." The litany was endless: Ski trips. Keg stands. Greek Week. Rush parties.

Still, Dartmouth was where she wanted to be—especially because that was where Ryan was. She tried to put her doubts out of her head. She couldn't hold his messiness against him. He couldn't help it that he was used to living in a household with a staff of nine. It was the way he'd been raised. She had seen his room at the frat and shuddered to think what kind of mold had seeped into the beer-soaked walls. But for some reason, she had assumed that when they lived together, he would clean up his act. She had obviously assumed incorrectly.

She couldn't even be that mad at him, because whenever she pointed out how gross the boat was, he was always so cheerful and apologetic about it. Not that it ever amounted to actual cleaning on his part.

Mara pressed the lever and switched off the vacuum. The room didn't look any tidier. She sighed. It was the most she could do for now, since she had to meet Jacqui and Eliza at the premiere of the new feel-good Cameron Diaz movie in an hour.

* * *

She arrived a few minutes late and found Eliza waiting by herself in front of the theater. The red carpet was empty, since the stars had yet to arrive. A small group of photographers stood around chatting. A few of them took casual shots of Mara and Eliza to fill the time. Nothing reduced a person to celebstatus faster than the sight of a real celebrity. As soon as tousel-headed Cameron arrived, the photographers forgot all about Mara and Eliza. Not that either minded. They had both gone through the PR rinse cycle and had come out of it a little worse for wear.

"Where's Jeremy?" Mara asked.

Eliza shrugged, and Mara didn't push. It wasn't as if Ryan was there with her either. It turned out Jacqui was the only one who brought a date. She arrived holding hands with Duffy, the tall blond one with the Heath Ledger smile.

"What's the story?" Eliza whispered when Duffy excused himself to collect the complimentary popcorn and snacks.

"He's nice," Jacqui allowed, smiling.

"So is he the one?" Mara teased. "What about the other two?"

Jacqui shrugged. She'd asked Duffy on impulse since she had seen him first—bumping into him at the tennis courts that afternoon. Not that she was neglecting the other two—she was supposed to go parasailing with Grant tomorrow, and Ben had asked her to accompany him to a reggae festival in Quogue later that week.

If the three boys knew they were all dating the same girl, they never mentioned it to her, and for now, Jacqui gave no indication of her actions. Each boy had declared it was best not to let the other two find out about the relationship, and there had been many close calls already—she and Duffy sneaking out of the Jacuzzi just as Grant walked out to the patio, hiding in Ben's closet when Duffy suddenly walked in asking for a light, she and Grant getting his sailboat stuck among some rocks off the bay one afternoon and hoping they'd be rescued by the Coast Guard before Ben and Duffy figured out they were missing.

The last thing Jacqui wanted was for her good time to go bad. She'd promised herself she would come clean once she figured out which one of the boys she really wanted to be with. The problem stemmed from the fact that whenever she was with each of them individually, she was convinced he was the one. Duffy made her laugh, Grant was hands-down the best kisser, and Ben, the most romantic of the three, wrote her love songs on his guitar.

"I'm just having fun," Jacqui insisted. "It's harmless."

Mara shook her head as the lights dimmed. She already had enough trouble with one boyfriend; she couldn't even begin to imagine juggling the affections of three. "I hope you know what you're doing," she told her friend.

and then she moved on to quarters. . . .

THE REYNOLDS CASTLE WAS SHAKING with the sound of a blistering bass line, and the whole house was packed with people gathered for what had now become the weekly “DormDebauchery debauchery.” Jacqui was picking her way through the crowd, looking for one of the guys, when she chanced upon the person she would have thought least likely to attend one of these parties.

In the middle of the room, where a Ping-Pong table was littered with empty paper cups, was Anna Perry, intensely taking part in a no-holds-barred Beirut tournament. The guys had explained the rules of the game to Jacqui—but all she understood was that whenever the ball bounced, it meant the participants drank.

“Anna?” Jacqui asked, aghast, just as Anna slammed a Ping-Pong ball on the table and watched it hop around, finally landing in a cup. Jacqui shouldn’t have been surprised, considering last weekend she’d bumped into Anna at the VIP lounge at the Star Room.

Anna jumped when she saw Jacqui. “Oh! Hi!”

“What are you doing here?” Jacqui asked. *With a bunch of teenagers?* was the unspoken part of the question.

“Give me a sec,” Anna called to the gathering, stepping away from the table, her pint of beer in its plastic cup in hand.

They walked over to a quieter corner, next to one of Chelsea Reynolds’s prized Aztec sun calendars that the boys were using for target practice.

Jacqui noticed that there was something different about her boss—for one thing, Anna was wearing her hair long and loose in waves, like a lot of girls were doing now, including Jacqui. And her clothes! Gone were the embellished, structured, proper Michael Kors and Carolina Herrera ensembles. Anna was wearing a tight Skull and Bones polo shirt over a denim mini. The label was the most popular one in the Hamptons that summer—a line of preppy staples emblazoned with a Jolly Roger–like skull-and-bones logo. Anna Perry looked like she was thirty-three going on sixteen. . . . It was a little disturbing.

“What’s going on?”

Anna sighed loudly and took a big gulp from her beer cup. “I’m depressed. The lawyer’s pressuring me to sign. He told me Kevin wants custody of Cody as well, since he’s taking the rest of the kids when he moves out—can you believe it?”

“But didn’t he send you a gift certificate to a spa the other day?” Jacqui asked, trying to rally. Her instincts had been right—Kevin would be taking the kids. She would be out of a job for sure!

“He did, but I’m sure his secretary just ordered it. He never buys gifts himself,” Anna noted shrewdly.

Jacqui tried not to blush, since she herself had ordered the certificate but had put it under Kevin’s name.

“But what about the iPod with all those songs?” Jacqui asked urgently.

Anna shrugged. “I guess.”

“He can’t want a divorce. I think he’s just playing games—he wants you to think he wants out so he can win you back,” Jacqui said.

“What are you talking about?” Anna asked. “I’m confused.”

“Sometimes, asking for a divorce is just a sign of love,” Jacqui said desperately, trying to channel Dr. Phil–like mumbo jumbo. She had to make Anna believe it.

“I don’t know. Maybe it’s for the best.” Anna sighed. “Maybe I should just sign the papers, take Cody, and move back to Jersey. I just want to feel young again. All the passion is gone from our marriage. In the beginning—oh, it was crazy. He was crazy about me. Couldn’t divorce Brigitte fast enough. But now . . .” Her voice trailed off. They heard the pounding sound of Kanye West snarling about gold diggers in the background.

“I think the divorce is just a smoke screen. I think Kevin’s planning something really special for the two of you,” Jacqui said, as sincerely as she could. This was terrible. Operation Parent Trap was a bust—Kevin’s “gifts” hadn’t seemed to make an impression. And so far, Jacqui hadn’t been able to come up with a way to get the two of them in the same city.

“You think so?” Anna asked hopefully.

“Trust me. It’s just a sign that he’s serious about you. He loves you.”

“He used to, anyway,” Anna said doubtfully.

Their conversation was cut short when cries of, “*Anna! Anna! Anna’s turn!*” arose from the Beirut table.

“Oh, I should go—it’s my turn!” Anna said, skipping happily back to the drinking game.

Jacqui bit her lip. She would have to find another way to really convince Anna that Kevin was still in love with her short of Kevin actually coming out and saying so. Although that seemed to be the only way Anna would ever believe her husband was still interested in her. Suddenly, the prospect of going back to São Paulo at the end of the summer seemed inevitable, and Jacqui felt the mean reds coming on—if only she could find someone to talk to, to make her feel better, the way Ben had the night they had first kissed.

“We get all kinds here,” Grant mused, coming up behind Jacqui and watching Anna funnel three pints of beer at once. “Your boss, right?”

“Uh-huh.” Jacqui nodded, still thinking about the disappointment her grandmother would feel once she found out Jacqui had failed to get accepted into an American college like she had planned. But Grant was still talking and had put his arms around her waist, pulling her close.

“She came over the other night complaining about the noise. But then she realized she’d met us before—at that club, with you. So Duffy just invited her in—and, well, she’s come over every night of the week now.”

“Don’t you think that’s weird? I mean, she’s, like, forty.” Anna was actually a few years shy of that date, but she might as well have been retirement age to Jacqui, who at seventeen thought twenty-five ancient.

“Yeah, but Duffy thinks she’s a MILF. So, there you go.” Grant shrugged, leading her to the den off the living room where they could be alone. He locked the door behind them and returned to nuzzle her neck briefly, planting soft butterfly kisses. Kisses that normally would make her knees weak and her heart melt, but when he started unbuttoning her shirt, Jacqui didn’t feel like making out just then.

She pushed his hands away and removed herself from his embrace, holding her shirt closed and looking him in the eye. The guys probably thought it was hilarious that their uptight neighbor was playing drinking games, but Jacqui didn’t think it was that funny. “I just don’t think it’s such a good idea to encourage her to visit. I mean, how can she get her marriage back on track if all she’s doing is hanging out here?”

“Huh?” Grant had already forgotten the topic of conversation. “Who cares?” he asked, putting his arms around her again and kissing her forehead, then her nose, and finally her lips. He gently pulled her arms away so that he could finish removing her top. His fingers stroked her bare stomach.

Jacqui sighed and rolled over. There were worse things one could do to pass the time than fool around with a cute boy, but just then, it was the last thing she felt like doing.

sometimes, manhattan can be an escape from the hamptons. . . .

BY NOW, MARA WAS SO used to getting in everywhere in the Hamptons that when the PR girl at the door stopped her friends from entering the CD release party for some new hip-hop act, she was momentarily blindsided.

“But they’re with me,” she argued. “I’m with *Hamptons*. Lucky’s already here?”

“I know, Mara, and we’re really glad to have you, but we’re oversubscribed right now. I’m sorry. I can only get you in plus one,” Mitzi’s assistant said. “Not plus two.”

“It’s not a big deal.” Jacqui shrugged. “I can go.”

“No, stay where you are,” Mara ordered.

“Forget it—let’s go,” Eliza said. “I don’t want to stand around and argue with the clipboard patrol all night. Let’s just get a drink across the street. We *can* pay for our drinks sometimes, you know.”

“But my column,” Mara protested, thinking she still needed a few items for the piece.

“Oh, Mara, c’mon. One night off? All you do is run around with your notepad and recorder. Didn’t Sam Davis already say you were doing such a great job, you remind her of her when she was young? Can’t you just kick back and forget about your column for one night? Just hang out with us; no getting up to talk to celebrities. Okay?” Eliza asked.

“All right,” Mara conceded. “I guess I could just write from the pictures tomorrow.” She’d quickly become a pro at structuring her column to highlight Lucky’s candid photographs.

“That’s the spirit.” Eliza smiled.

* * *

They settled into a couch near the door and ordered drinks. Jacqui was just telling them about the latest Anna Perry transformation when Taylor and Lindsay walked inside the bar. The two used to be Eliza’s best friends, back when she was still the most popular girl at Spence, but they had dropped her like last year’s Uggs when they discovered Eliza’s family had lost all their money and Eliza had been reduced to working as an au pair.

“Oh, hey,” Eliza said. Since her family was back in the black, her old friends from New York were cordial. Not that she cared one bit.

Lindsay merely shrugged, but Taylor's response was warmer. "Hey, E., I heard you got into Princeton—good job," she said.

"Thanks. Where are you headed?"

"I got rejected from Yale. Can you believe? My grandfather threatened to revoke his donation. But I got into Brown, thank God. So it's all good. Providence can't be any worse than New Haven anyway."

"How about you, Linds?"

"Oh, NYU for me," Lindsay said, exhaling a plume of cigarette smoke. "Close to home. I gotta get back to the city next weekend for some pre-frosh event."

"Anyway, see you around, Eliza," Taylor said.

"Hey, aren't you working at Lunch these days?" Lindsay smirked.

Eliza ignored the question, turning to Jacqui instead. "Are you going back for the pre-frosh thing? You should go. They, like, give tours of the campus and talk about the classes and stuff. I'm sure Anna will give you the weekend off. Shannon can take care of the kids."

"Oh, me? I, uh, I don't know," Jacqui said weakly.

"You have to go," Eliza insisted. "You need to scope out the boys and stake out the best dorms. Otherwise, you might end up in social Siberia."

"Yeah, Jac, you know what? We should all go!" Mara piped up. A weekend in New York sounded like an excellent plan.

"Oh my God. What a great idea! Totally!" Eliza nodded. "The three of us haven't been in the city all at the same time—how awesome will that be?"

"Work has been crazy—I totally need a break from Sam Davis. Today she made me hunt down a milk chocolate Mounds bar. And after searching everywhere, I finally found out they only make them in dark chocolate. *There is no such thing as a milk chocolate Mounds.* But do you think she believed me? Plus, a bunch of people from Ryan's frat are coming in and staying with us next weekend. I think I'll avoid getting on that train." Mara shuddered. Ryan's friends from college were nice enough individually, but as a group, they devolved into meathead city. What was it about boys that reduced them to video-game-playing, beer-swilling, immature, testosterone-pumped adolescents when they were all together? "Anyway, maybe while I'm there, I can get a tour of Columbia as well. I still haven't heard from Dartmouth."

"It's settled, then: we're going. Jacqui can do the NYU thing, Mara can visit Columbia, and all of us can hang out and shop," Eliza decided.

They high-fived each other giddily. Jacqui's heart sank. How could she tell them she wasn't going to NYU? She couldn't. As for watching the kids, Shannon could hold down the fort at home as well as keep Operation Parent Trap going. The spa certificate had been Shannon's idea—not that it had done much good. Plus, a weekend in the city would be a much-needed break from Anna, who seemed to want Jacqui's social life for her own.

It would be yet another escape.

She downed her drink quickly and looked longingly at the crowd mingling by the jukebox. She tapped her foot impatiently, thinking it would be fun to join them. As if on cue, she spotted a familiar face by the bar and waved him over.

“Hello, ladies,” Ben Defever said, looking adorably owlish behind his square-rimmed glasses. “Mind if I steal Jacqui away for a moment?”

Eliza and Mara traded knowing smiles. “Go ahead,” Mara urged.

Jacqui practically leaped off her seat and followed Ben to the impromptu dance floor. She began shaking her hips wildly to an infectious Outkast hit, but Ben just stood aside, nursing his drink.

“Don’t you want to dance?” she pleaded.

“It’s so loud in here. Let’s go find somewhere we can really talk,” Ben suggested, cupping his mouth and yelling so that he could be heard above the music.

“Oh, all right.” Jacqui sighed and let him lead her to a quiet corner. Talking just didn’t hold the same appeal as dancing did right then. If only she’d bumped into Duffy instead—he could always be counted on for a hilarious Napoleon Dynamite impersonation on the dance floor.

But when you’re dating three boys at the same time, sometimes you end up in the right place with the wrong boy.

shannon tries her hand at a little identity theft

THE LIGHTS IN THE AU pairs' room were still shining when Jacqui returned later that evening from a grueling conversation with Ben in a coffee shop next to the bar. All she'd wanted to do was chill out, but Ben had been more interested in really delving into a serious discussion on her feelings. He'd dropped her off at the main house, and she had barely made her way to the au pairs' cottage when she bumped into Duffy, who was bouncing by on a pogo stick on the way to the beach.

But after the caffeine-and-analysis session with Ben, Duffy's crazy antics left her cold, and all she wanted to do was lie on the beach and let him hold her.

Sadly, Duffy had other ideas. He couldn't keep still, and for a moment Jacqui wished she were with Grant, who really knew how to make a girl feel good. Finally, she'd said good night after Duffy slightly twisted his ankle on a hard landing and had to limp back home. Jacqui shook her head: boys. They offered so much and too little at the same time.

* * *

"You're still up?" Jacqui asked, noticing Shannon sitting upright in the middle of the single bed, tapping on a laptop computer.

"Wait till you see what I found," Shannon crowed, excitement in her voice. The newest au pair had thrown herself into Operation Parent Trap with gusto and enjoyed coming up with schemes to manipulate the Perrys into thinking they were in love.

"Come look," Shannon said, and Jacqui sat down on the bed next to her.

Jacqui looked at the screen. "Isn't that . . .?"

"Anna's. I know. I took it from her office. Laurie left the key in the kitchen the other day and I swiped it."

Shannon typed a bunch of keystrokes and Anna's e-mail outbox came up.

"How'd you get her password?" Jacqui asked.

"Easy, it's all stored in the memory. I'm Korean; we're, like, computer geniuses, right?" Shannon smirked. "A kid could figure it out."

Shannon clicked on an envelope icon, launching an e-mail, and filled in Kevin's e-mail address in the "to" box.

“I think it’s time Kevin got a love letter from his wife, don’t you think?” the younger girl asked.

Jacqui was impressed. Faking e-mail love notes certainly ratcheted up the game. Shannon typed:

Dear Kevin, I’m so sorry I’ve been so crazy. I can’t bear to be apart from you. You know you’re the only one for me. This has gone far enough. I miss you and can’t fall asleep without knowing you are by my side. I hope your ear is okay. I can’t live with knowing I’ve hurt you. Call off the dogs and let’s get back together again. Yours always, Snugglepuss. It was the nickname everyone in the house knew Kevin called Anna. Anna had even had it embroidered on one of her boudoir pillows.

“Nice, huh?” Shannon asked with a cheeky grin. She clicked on the send icon and sent the love note whizzing into cyberspace. Afterward, she went to the sent-mail folder and deleted the e-mail so that Anna would never see it.

Jacqui was still marveling at the younger au pair’s creativity when Shannon launched another window. This time, she typed in the mobile address for Kevin’s law firm. With speedy efficiency, Shannon accessed his e-mail account as well. “He uses her laptop sometimes. All I needed to do was find all the cookies, and the computer had stored all his passwords, too.”

Jacqui nodded, watching over Shannon’s shoulder as she began typing:

Dearest Anna, I think I made a mistake. Please forgive me. I’m lost without you. You’re as beautiful as you were when I first saw you in my office and we snuck off to the Regency Hotel. Remember those days? You were my secret and now you are my future. I still love you. Your own, Kevinbear. P.S: My ear is healing nicely.

“Kevinbear?” Jacqui gagged.

“I saw it in some old e-mails.” Shannon snickered. Like all the staff in the Perry household, Shannon was caught up in the history of her employers’ marriage and knew that Anna was the secretary with whom Kevin had been having an affair before she became his wife.

They checked Anna’s account. Kevin’s e-mail appeared in the new-mail folder.

“Do you think it’ll work?” Shannon asked.

Jacqui nodded. “Pretty sure it will on Anna’s side, at least. All she needs is a couple of groveling e-mails from him and she’ll start sending love notes on her own. The only problem is Kevin. What if he doesn’t want to get back together and sends e-mails saying so?”

“Well, I fixed it so that I get a text message whenever Anna gets a new mail from his account so that I can delete his real e-mails if they’re nasty,” Shannon explained. “I’m sure he’ll come around in time and send mushy notes of his own. You said yourself that he still loves her. In the meantime, we’ll just write them for him.”

Jacqui looked at Shannon in awe. “You’re a genius!”

“I know,” Shannon said modestly. “Just call me Kevinbear.”

That did it. They started laughing hysterically. Faking a romance between their two warring employers was just too much—Jacqui felt tears coming to her eyes, and Shannon laughed so hard her shoulders shook and she almost dropped Anna’s laptop. Their mirth was interrupted when Madison suddenly appeared in the doorway. Jacqui had forgotten to lock the door when she entered.

Madison explained that she couldn’t sleep and was looking to see if Shannon was still up and interested in watching a movie in the screening room.

“What’s so funny?” Madison asked. She looked from Jacqui to Madison expectantly. “Tell me!”

Jacqui stopped laughing immediately and Shannon suddenly looked really guilty. To them, it was a bit of entertainment, but these were Madison’s parents they were talking about.

“Nothing—there’s, uh, a really funny video on DormDebauchery.com,” Shannon said, quickly covering up.

“Let me see,” Madison urged.

Shannon quickly closed all the windows and brought up the boys’ web site.

“That’s it?” Madison asked, unimpressed, when Shannon clicked on a video of a guy falling off his skateboard. She looked quizzically at the two of them. Shannon quickly looked away and didn’t meet her friend’s eyes.

Jacqui shrugged. “Mad, it’s past my bedtime, but if you and Shannon want to see *Titanic* again on the big screen, go ahead.”

“I think I’ll just go to bed,” Madison said coldly.

“I feel bad,” Shannon said when Madison had left. “We should tell her.”

“I know,” Jacqui agreed. “But she’ll tell the other kids, and then Anna will freak. Besides, once our plan works, she’ll never have to find out anything. They’ll be going off on a second honeymoon in no time. We’re giving them what they want most from each other—an apology.”

“Right.” Shannon nodded.

The two girls felt very pleased with the fake e-mail love letters. Operation Parent Trap would soon be a mission accomplished.

Shannon stowed the laptop away and said good night, turning out the lights. Jacqui climbed up on the top bunk, and for a moment, the room was quiet as the two girls drifted off to sleep. Until Shannon whispered, “Snugglepuss,” and that set them off once again.

scientists confirm what girls already know: dopamine levels spike when shopping

JULY IN NEW YORK WAS hotter than usual, and eliza cranked up the AC in the Land Rover as high as it would go. They made good time on the highway and arrived in Greenwich Village a little before noon. Most of New York University was situated around Washington Square Park, a small patch of green in the dense urban neighborhood.

Eliza pulled over to the curb next to the stone arch, a small replica of the Arc de Triomphe in Paris. The arch bore a huge purple banner with the NYU logo and the words WELCOME PROSPECTIVE FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS! Several booths and registration tables were set up, and the park was lively with NYU students in purple T-shirts leading around excitable high school seniors. Purple balloons were everywhere. It was a cheerful, vibrant day, and already several students had started an Ultimate Frisbee game in the southeast corner.

“So what do you think? It should end at about four or five? We can pick you up then,” Eliza said, unlocking the doors.

“Sure.” Jacqui nodded, climbing out. She waved to the two of them from the sidewalk and watched as the car disappeared down the street. When they were definitely out of sight, Jacqui lost her ebullient facade, and her hand fell limp at her side.

Why couldn't she tell the truth? It wasn't like they would judge her or anything. They were her friends. But admitting to Mara and Eliza that she had failed would be like admitting to herself that she had fallen far short of her goal. And she just wasn't ready to do that.

A cute freckled boy wearing an NYU T-shirt found Jacqui walking furtively past the fringes of the event.

“Hey! Welcome to NYU. Will we be seeing you in the fall?” he asked, handing Jacqui an NYU button.

Jacqui colored. “Oh, oh no—no, you won't!” she said, before running past the arch and bursting into tears.

She furiously wiped her face with the back of her hand. This was no way to act. She was in New York, and there was absolutely no reason to cry. Okay, so she might have to go back to Brazil at the end of the summer, and maybe she'd have to be some kind of salesgirl all her life,

but she didn't have to think about it right then. As she walked down Bleecker Street, she passed by the Marc Jacobs store.

The mannequin in the front window was wearing a cute pink bikini with purple hearts.

Jacqui stopped sniffing and walked inside, pushing open the glass door, which tinkled to announce her arrival.

"Hi, can I help you?" a cheerful salesgirl asked.

Jacqui nodded. Okay, so every time she was depressed, she bought another bikini. But somehow, handing over the plastic made her feel better. That's why they call it retail therapy.

mara visits the ivy in the apple

THE COLUMBIA CAMPUS WAS LOCATED far uptown, on the other side of the city. Eliza dropped Mara off right on 116th and Broadway, in front of College Walk—a pretty brick-lined street bordered by a row of trees on each side. Unlike NYU, Columbia had a proper campus. There were two green lawns in the middle of a square bordered by Low Library, a domed Palladian building on the north side, and on the south by Butler Library, which housed the university's book collection (one of the largest in the world, next to the Library of Congress). Etched in the pediments of both Low and Butler libraries were the names of Greek writers and philosophers in a majestic array: SOPHOCLES, SOCRATES, HERODOTUS, HOMER.

Mara walked around, impressed by the scale and feeling of scholarship the architecture inspired. She hadn't expected Columbia to be so beautiful. She had visited Dartmouth and had immediately fallen in love with its leafy, colonial New England atmosphere, but Columbia had a different feel—it was an urban campus; New York was just outside the gates. It felt like a genteel sanctuary in a vibrant metropolis, offering the best of both worlds.

Not that it mattered. Columbia might have classical architecture and a New York address, but it didn't have Ryan. She checked into a modern glass-and-steel building with crisscrossing entrance ramps. The admissions office had told her to meet her student guide in front of Ferris Booth Hall. Mara noticed how modern the café inside the building was and how chic the students looked—unlike at Dartmouth, where a slouchy preppy homogeneity prevailed, with everyone wearing J. Crew sweaters or dressed down in slouchy sweatpants. The Columbia kids were a lot more dressed up, in fashionable jeans and hipster shades of black.

She approached a girl in low-rise jeans wearing a worn, vintage Skid Row band T-shirt and Puma sneakers. "Hi, are you Danielle?" she asked.

"I surely am. And that makes you Mara?"

Mara nodded. "Thanks so much for giving me the tour."

"Not a problem at all; I'm happy to show you around." Danielle smiled. She wore her hair in a ponytail, and Mara noticed she didn't wear a speck of makeup. None of the clothes she wore were trendy or expensive, but there was something fresh-faced, practical, and undeniably cool about her. Mara liked her on sight.

Danielle explained that she was a sophomore and from California. She was working in the dorms that summer and was a film and gender studies major. She chattered happily about her classes, Columbia's core curriculum, and the advantages and disadvantages of several first-year dorms.

“So, Carmen is the most popular. It’s, like, the classic Columbia freshman experience. You get a suite, four roommates sharing two rooms, and a bathroom. It’s nice, like a little apartment, so you don’t have to share a bathroom with boys. The other buildings can be a little scary. A lot of the dorms have coed bathrooms, and my friend who was in one last year said she was constipated for a year!”

As Danielle showed her around, Mara noticed that the curly-haired girl said hello to a diverse group of people—from a tall guy in a basketball jersey, to a girl in a printed granny dress and hiking boots, to a boy in a tight white tank top with a rainbow flag pin, denim short-shorts, and black combat boots.

“So what do you do for fun?” Mara asked.

“Oh, there’s tons of things. I mostly go out downtown. I like to go clubbing. And, of course, the Angelika—the art cinema. The restaurants in New York are just amazing. Have you ever had Ethiopian food? There’s a really great Ethiopian restaurant on 115th. And what’s cool is you can use your dining card at a bunch of places on Broadway.”

“Is it very social here?”

“How do you mean?”

Mara shrugged, feeling embarrassed. “Are there a lot of frat parties?”

Danielle wrinkled her nose. They walked down 114th Street, past a row of brownstones, each door decorated with a letter of the Greek alphabet. “Yeah, we do have frats. But it’s not a big part of Columbia life. Our football team sucks. The typical notion of Greek life here is pretty atypical. Like the frat for poets. Every year, they host this really groovy party called Hot Jazz and Cool Champagne. Girls wear cocktail dresses and this great jazz band plays Billie Holiday. It’s really fun.”

Mara thought that sounded really cool . . . and extremely different from everything she’d heard from Tinker about social life at Dartmouth.

“So, what are you doing with your summer? Hanging out?”

Mara told her about her column in *Hamptons* magazine.

Danielle immediately lit up. “That is fantastic. Wow. Good for you. Columbia is the place to be for aspiring journalists, you know. Sam Davis—who used to edit all those big magazines? She’s an alum. So are a lot of people in publishing. We have an Art Suite, a Writers’ Suite, and a Nonfiction Writers’ Suite, and the *Spectator* is one of the country’s best college papers.”

Mara’s head was swimming. Columbia sounded really, really great. And the writing program—along with its list of prestigious alumni—was very tempting. Plus, she’d already gotten in. The school actually wanted her—it didn’t still have to make up its mind, like Dartmouth.

Maybe she didn’t even want to go to Dartmouth anymore. But that was crazy, wasn’t it? What about Ryan? She felt bad thinking like that, especially since they’d been fighting so much lately.

After the tour, she said good-bye to Danielle and promised to look her up if she made it on campus in the fall. Then she hailed a cab to take her downtown to meet the girls in the Meatpacking District to check out the new boutiques. One advantage of moving to New York City—the shopping would certainly be a lot better than in New Hampshire.

you always need to be armed in a food fight

TAKING CARE OF THE KIDS was harder than Shannon had thought. With Jacqui away, Shannon had assumed it would be a breeze. In fact, she had been looking forward to the weekend—how hard could it be?

But Eliza's Land Rover had barely turned the corner when it started. Zoë looked across the breakfast table at the new au pair with a skeptical eye.

"I don't eat pancakes," she informed her.

"You do when Jacqui makes them," Shannon pointed out.

"These are gross," Zoë said, pushing her plate away.

Seeing his sister resist, Cody did the same. "No eat," he said. "I hate you! I hate you! I hate you!"

"C'mon, you guys, these are good, see?" Shannon said, forking up a piece and putting it in her mouth. "Yum."

"No, Zoë's right, these *are* gross. They're, like, the grossest pancakes in the world," William agreed. An evil smile came onto his face. If Jacqui had been there, she would have recognized that smile. It meant that mayhem was about to erupt.

William picked up a pancake and threw it across the table, hitting Zoë in the face.

"Ow!" the little girl screamed. She picked up a handful of berries from a bowl and pelted them at her older brother.

Chortling, Cody did the same, upturning the jug of maple syrup on the walnut table.

"Stop it! Stop it!" Shannon yelled.

"Food fight!" William cheered.

"Nooo!" Shannon yelled as Cody spilled his glass of milk on the floor.

Madison walked in, sweaty and red-cheeked from an early tennis game. Since the other night, when she had walked in on Jacqui and Shannon laughing about something they hadn't shared with her, things had been a little frosty between the two insta-friends. Shannon knew Madison thought she was keeping something from her, and since Madison was right about that, Shannon didn't know what to do about it.

“Uh—I just—they won’t stop,” Shannon said as a banana flew by, hitting the microwave.

“Yeah, I can see that.” Madison shrugged. “Zoë, Bill, quit it. Leave Shannon alone. Come on, now. Clean up this mess. You know you’re both being bad.”

“You can’t do that,” Zoë said. “You can’t tell us what to do.”

“Yeah, you’re not Jacqui,” William said.

“So what? I’m older than all of you. You have to listen to me. You guys listen to Ryan, Sugar, and Poppy,” Madison pointed out.

In answer, William kicked his chair and Zoë knocked her plate to the floor. Cody giggled and did the same, shattering the porcelain.

“*Stop it!* Everyone stop or I’ll sell all your toys and give them to children who’ll appreciate them!” Madison demanded, letting them know she wasn’t fooling around.

The kids shuddered, and one by one they ran off to their rooms to clean themselves up and do as they were told. They had no idea if Madison would carry out her threat, but they weren’t sticking around to find out.

“Thanks,” Shannon said.

Madison helped pick up the thrown fruit and handed Shannon a roll of paper towels so she could mop up the floor. “It’s nothing. You just need to show them who’s boss. I think they’re all a little antsy since we haven’t seen Dad in a while, and the last time that happened, he and Mom had split up.”

Shannon was kneeling on the floor, scrubbing, and didn’t reply.

“Do you know anything? Are Dad and Anna getting divorced?” Madison asked directly. “Anna’s been acting really strange lately, and Dad hasn’t been around all summer.”

“I don’t know,” Shannon lied, wishing she could tell Madison the truth. “I think everything’s okay.”

* * *

Anna walked in as Madison was walking out. “Oh, Shannon, I do hope this isn’t the way every breakfast is going to be,” she said, noticing the stains on the slate counter. She was uncharacteristically cheerful and wearing a tight halter dress. Anna checked her reflection in the beveled mirror by the entryway.

“Are you meeting someone?” Shannon asked, smiling knowingly. According to the e-mail plan, Jacqui and Shannon, posing as Kevin and Anna, had sent e-mail invites from each of their mailboxes to set up a face-to-face appointment. Kevin thought Anna wanted to talk about making up, and Anna in turn was acting under the assumption that Kevin had asked her to lunch to discuss withdrawing the divorce petition.

“Yes, an old friend.” Anna smiled mysteriously. “I haven’t heard from him in such a long time, but Ward Pershing was one of the cutest young associates in the office. I used to die

every time he borrowed my stapler. He said he would love to meet me for lunch at Babette's. How did he know it was my favorite place!"

Who is Ward Pershing? Shannon wondered, panicked.

Something wasn't right. As soon as she could, Shannon stole away to Anna's laptop. She called up the deleted mail, where her fake e-mails were stored. She scrolled to the one labeled *Coffee, Tea or Moi?* that read, *You, me, Babette's, 1 p.m. Be there. Let's make up for lost time.* Alas, the address line didn't read `perry@perryassociates.com` but `pershing@perryassociates.com`. Shannon had mistakenly let the automatic function on Anna's mail system fill in Ward Pershing's e-mail rather than Kevin Perry's, and now Anna was going to meet an old crush rather than her husband. Worse, Kevin would be there to see the two of them together and think that Anna was playing a dirty trick and wanted nothing more to do with him!

Shannon groaned. Jacqui was going to *murder* her. And she'd directly lied to Madison, who suspected something.

It was going to be a long weekend.

if the shoe fits . . .

WHEN SHE'D BEEN LIVING IN exile in Buffalo, Eliza had missed a lot of things about New York City. The food, her friends, their apartment, the way the light reflected off the Hudson River at night. But she hadn't missed anything as much as she'd missed Todd Gillian, her shoe salesman at Jeffrey.

Jeffrey was a candy-colored store on the far west side of lower Manhattan, in the Meatpacking District. Once an outpost of butcher shops and trannie bars, the Meatpacking District was now the trendiest neighborhood in town, filled with designer boutiques and Asian fusion restaurants. Like Barneys, Bergdorf's, and Saks, Jeffrey was a designer emporium—it sold all the majors—Gucci suits, Yves Saint Laurent cocktail gowns, Marni sweaters, Balenciaga shearlings. But what really set Jeffrey apart was its shoe selection. The front tables were all given over to the latest five-inch cork-soled patent leather Christian Louboutin stilettos, mink-lined Manolo Blahnik boots, and spindly Jimmy Choo sandals. It was a temple to designer footwear, the Valhalla of the sole.

Every time Eliza stepped inside its doors, she could hear angels singing. (Okay, so it was in the voice of Sarah Jessica Parker, but still.) After she'd dropped off Jacqui and Mara, Eliza had driven all the way down to 14th Street to Jeffrey, where Todd was waiting for her.

She had known Todd ever since seventh grade, when he had fitted her with a pair of lime green Jimmy Choo mules for her friend Taylor's bat mitzvah. Todd had seen Eliza through all the important events in her life: her first Gucci loafer, her first Manolo pump, her first Yves Saint Laurent wedge, her first snakeskin Roger Vivier.

He welcomed her now with open arms. "Eliza! Princess!"

"Todd! My love!" It was their usual greeting.

"Wait till you see what I have for you," Todd whispered, disappearing into the storage area. He came back bearing an armful of black shoe boxes.

Eliza took a seat on the suede couch and removed her Clergerie sandals and clasped her hands in anticipation.

She spent several blissful hours trying on every pair. There was a darling one from Marni with pom-poms on the tips, a gorgeous Dries Van Noten—gold, with silver flecks in the heel—a super-sexy Rochas with a Lucite stiletto. She was in shoe heaven. Until a voice interrupted her reverie. *Oh no, not again.* Eliza turned around.

Paige McGinley stood in front of the cashier, berating the salesclerk. She was holding an armful of the latest designer clothes.

“Where is that leather McQueen dress? I specifically ordered it.”

“Yes, miss. But you have to prepay and . . .”

Todd saw where Eliza was staring. “It’s her again,” he whispered. “She’s here all the time. At the same time each season. She wants the new line before it’s ready to be sold. She wants to see the look books, the samples. You know she works for Sydney Minx? And all he does is copy everyone else’s collection. We stopped carrying his line years ago. He had a falling-out with Jeffrey.”

Paige noticed Eliza sitting on the couch and walked over with her many white shopping bags. “So, back on the trust fund?” she sneered. “Mommy and Daddy bail you out again? Too hard to work for a living, I know.”

Eliza tried to keep a fake smile on her face. “It’s the weekend, Paige. I’m off.”

Paige didn’t notice as her cell phone rang and she struggled to answer it, rooting through her bag. She removed tissues, stacks of business cards, and a vanity case before finding it. Several loose business cards fluttered to the floor. Eliza picked up the cards that fell by her side and saw one that caught her eye. The older girl shrugged her thanks as she flipped open her phone. Too late—she’d missed it.

“Hey, how do you know Jeremy Stone?” she asked as she handed Paige her cards back, Jeremy’s brown cardboard one on top of the pile. Eliza couldn’t help herself; she had to know the story from Paige’s point of view as well. What if Jeremy wasn’t telling her something?

Paige’s brow crinkled. “Jeremy who?” Then it relaxed. “Oh yeah. I went out with him,” she said in a bored voice.

Eliza’s face paled, but she kept the smile plastered on her face. “You did?”

“We went out for two years in high school and after college for a bit. He’s a sweet guy. He’s doing his own landscaping now; good for him. How do you know him?”

Eliza didn’t answer. She was mentally calculating the dates—high school and college, which meant . . . Paige was Jeremy’s ex-girlfriend. The one he never talked about. The one who’d supposedly broken his heart when they’d broken up. She felt cold suddenly, as if someone had poured a pitcher of margaritas down her back.

Paige and Jeremy had been together. Paige—she was the girl Jeremy had lost his virginity to. It was almost too much to stomach. Jeremy had told her that he’d only fallen in love once before but that it hadn’t worked out. Eliza had gotten the impression that it had taken a long time for Jeremy to get over Paige. Maybe he still wasn’t over her. Maybe he still loved her. Maybe he thought of Eliza as some consolation prize when all he wanted, really, was Paige.

Eliza noticed something white by the open shoe boxes. It was another piece of paper that had fallen out of Paige’s handbag. Eliza picked it up, thinking she’d return it, when she saw what it was. The receipt for the special-order McQueen. Acting quickly, Eliza crumpled it into the toe of one of the shoes she wasn’t going to buy and closed the lid tightly. They would never find it now. She knew that by doing so she would cause the order to be delayed and once Sydney got his hands on the dress, it would be too late to manufacture the knockoffs.

But sabotaging Sydney's plan and knowing that Paige would have to face the designer's wrath later didn't do anything to make her feel better.

Paige had been with Jeremy. Jeremy had slept with Paige. The news was even worse than realizing once she'd made her selections that she couldn't even begin to pay for the shoes. It was only then that she remembered her mother had taken away her credit cards and she wasn't getting a paycheck from Lunch until next week.

the girls string up cupid's arrow and aim it at the perrys

MARA AND JACQUI ARRIVED AT pastis at the same time to find Eliza glumly sitting by herself in a corner of the bustling restaurant.

“What’s wrong?” Mara asked, pulling out a chair.

The three of them quickly ordered mussels, frisée salads, french fries, and a bottle of wine to share. They dug into the food, sopping up the garlicky sauce that came with the seafood with the crusty bread and toasting each other with glasses of wine.

Eliza told them about Paige and Jeremy and how she was worried that he hadn’t called her since the night they’d quarreled at Mount Fuji.

“And the worst part of it is, I’m eighteen and I’m still a virgin!” Eliza wailed, trying to make a joke out of the situation.

“It’ll happen,” Mara assured her. “I’m sure he’ll call when you get back.”

“*Querida*, so what if you’re a virgin? It’s better to wait for the right time,” Jacqui said wisely.

“I guess.” Eliza shrugged. She sighed and tried to cheer up. She didn’t want to be such a bum on their weekend in New York. “Whatever. It doesn’t matter.”

“Of course it does,” Mara said, reaching over to squeeze her arm.

It was so nice to have friends who actually cared about her feelings. “I know. But we don’t need to talk about it right now. Do you guys want to get another bottle? I parked my car at my garage, so I don’t need to drive. And let’s move out to a sidewalk table so we can smoke.”

* * *

Many cigarettes and several bottles of wine later, they caught a cab back up to the Upper East Side, where they were spending the night at Jacqui’s apartment. Eliza had invited them all to stay at her place, but they’d decided it would be fun to see where Jacqui lived instead. Besides, Eliza’s parents were kind of odd about guests—her mother had almost had a heart attack after finding a greasy handprint on the Regency sofa after a dinner party, and since then they entertained very rarely. Besides, at Jacqui’s they could do whatever they wanted.

Jacqui felt the pride of ownership as she unlocked the door. “It’s really tiny—but it’s all mine.” She stopped. Voices were coming from the alcove. *People* were inside.

“Excuse me?” she called.

A dark-suited Corcoran real estate broker stood in the middle of the living room. She was talking to an earnest young couple in their twenties.

“Oh, hello, are you the current tenant? Sorry. Kevin said this afternoon that we could show the place,” the broker explained. “We’ll get out of your way.”

They left, and Jacqui closed the door, totally agitated. “They can’t sell this place! They can’t! This is my home!” What had happened? Jacqui panicked. Why was Kevin selling the apartment? He and Anna were supposed to have had a romantic lunch at Babette’s earlier, making the divorce history.

“Why not?” Mara asked, putting her bag down on the floor and admiring the marble fireplace. The mantel held a bunch of photos of them from summers past and from their spring break in Cabo.

“Hold on a sec,” Jacqui said. “I need to call Shannon.” She picked up her cell and dialed frantically.

Shannon picked up on the first ring. “Jac, I’m so, so sorry. I tried to call, but it’s been so busy here with you gone.”

“What happened? Didn’t they go to lunch?”

“That’s the thing—they didn’t,” Shannon confessed. “Well, I mean, they were both there, but by the time Kevin arrived, Anna was eating with someone else.”

“Excuse me?”

Shannon explained the Pershing/Perry e-mail snafu and how Anna had returned from lunch angrier than ever, since Kevin had confronted her at the restaurant and accused her of deceiving him and, worse, having an affair with a much-younger man.

“So the divorce is still on?” Jacqui moaned.

“Totally. Kevin had a fit, said he was going to the judge as soon as possible, putting it on an express track.” Shannon sighed.

“It’s not your fault,” Jacqui said, even though she wanted to strangle the girl for making such a sloppy mistake. But that was the problem with the Cyrano scheme—stealing identities only led to more confusion. She hung up the phone and looked at Mara and Eliza, who were waiting patiently for an explanation of her outburst and the odd phone call.

“What was that all about?” Mara asked.

“Yeah, and why are you so worried about Kevin selling this place? Won’t you be at the dorms?” Eliza asked, poking into the fridge.

Jacqui looked utterly miserable. “Because . . .”

“Do you want to try and keep this apartment?” Eliza asked, still not understanding. “You really shouldn’t. You’ll make more friends if you stay downtown, you know.”

“No, no—I—I’m not going to NYU,” Jacqui said, slumping across the kitchen counter that separated the stove and refrigerator from the rest of the room. She had a stricken look on her face, and she buried her head in her hands. She’d tried to hide from the truth all summer by hanging out with the web site guys, but now that she was with her friends, she couldn’t take it alone anymore. She needed their support.

“You didn’t like the tour?” Mara asked, still not comprehending.

“No—I didn’t take the tour,” Jacqui said, surfacing for a moment “I—I didn’t get in.”

Mara and Eliza exchanged shocked glances, and Jacqui told them the whole story. The missing math and science requirements, the fifth year of high school program, the Perrys’ impending divorce and how if they split up, it meant a one-way ticket back to Brazil. They felt awful for Jacqui—Mara since all she did was talk about college, Eliza because she knew how hard it was to live with a secret.

“I’m so sorry I lied to you guys,” Jacqui said. “I just didn’t want to deal with it.”

“It’s okay,” Mara said, putting an arm around Jacqui and hugging her. “We understand. I wish there was something we could do to help.”

Jacqui sniffed. “I wish there was too. I’ll really miss you guys if I end up going home.”

“Well, we can’t let that happen,” Eliza declared in her bossy way.

“No, not at all.” Mara nodded. “You’re not going anywhere. That’s so weird Ryan hasn’t mentioned it. But then again, he hardly talks to his dad.”

“Anna’s keeping it a secret from all the kids. It doesn’t look good. He already served her papers and Anna is really close to signing.” Jacqui told them about Operation Parent Trap and how she’d been sending romantic gifts to Anna with Kevin’s name on them as well as how Shannon’s idea to craft lovey-dovey e-mails in Kevin’s name had blown up in their faces when an e-mail from “Anna” had gone astray.

“Yikes,” Eliza sympathized. “Shannon’s a piece of work, isn’t she?”

“There’s got to be something more we can do,” Mara said. “Something to really bring them back together, face-to-face.”

“Their anniversary is next month, you said?” Eliza asked, looking thoughtful.

Jacqui nodded.

“What could we do?” Mara asked. “There has to be something Anna would want that would make her change her mind.”

“What about a party?” Eliza suggested.

“For who?”

“The two of them. As a surprise,” Eliza said, getting excited. “Maybe if they celebrate their anniversary, they won’t want to split up. When my parents almost got divorced, my dad threw this huge party at the Frick for my mom. And because of that, they decided to stay

together. My mom said that if my dad would rent out an entire museum to keep her, then he was a keeper too.”

“I like it,” Mara said. “It’s romantic.”

“Let’s do it,” Eliza urged.

“Okay,” Jacqui said. “It’s worth a throw.”

“Shot. Worth a shot,” Mara automatically corrected.

“Yes, yes.” Jacqui nodded impatiently. “You know what I mean. I still don’t know if it’s going to work, though. We could throw the best party in the world—but what if neither of them shows up?”

“Well, we’ll just have to make sure they have no choice but to be there. How hard can it be?” asked Eliza, ever the optimist.

The three of them put their heads together, talking way into the night. Party planners never worked so hard.

is there more to eliza than just a pretty face?

GOING BACK TO WORK AFTER a fun weekend in the city was even harder than Eliza had thought. It wasn't that she didn't like working at Lunch—the place was fun, and she liked the camaraderie in the kitchen. They'd warmed up to her when they saw how hard she was trying to do a good job. Her co-workers were mostly Irish kids working illegally or Long Island natives saving up for summer shopping money, like she was. She'd been assigned back to kitchen duty since they were shorthanded after a couple of cooks quit. Thankfully, this time she hadn't upset any soup pots or liberated any two-pound lobsters.

The work was repetitive and demanding—as a sous-chef, it was her responsibility to cut up all the vegetables needed for the varying soups and salads. Everything needed to be diced to the same exact size, and her hand was getting sore from leaning on the knife. Not that she was complaining—she was determined not to act like the princess Jeremy thought she was. She hadn't called him since they'd had their tiff at Mount Fuji, and she had been disheartened to realize he hadn't called her either. It was the longest they had ever gone without talking. All weekend she had checked and re-checked her Treo, but there'd been no missed calls from J. Stone.

“Order!” the waitress called, bursting in through the restaurant door just as another figure walked in through the back way.

Eliza threw some chopped onions into the chowder. When she turned around, she saw Jeremy standing by the metal sinks, his arms crossed.

“You can't be here,” she said petulantly, even though her heart was beating with elation.

“Relax, I know these guys,” Jeremy said, winking at the Mexican busboys.

“What do you want?”

“C'mon, let's go outside and chat,” he said soothingly.

“I can't; I don't have a break.”

“Ricardo—okay if Eliza takes fifteen?” he asked.

The chef nodded. Jeremy had grown up in the area and so knew almost everyone who worked at Lunch.

Eliza sighed and followed him to the parking lot.

“I know you’re mad,” he said. “And I want to say, I thought about it, and I did give you a hard time the other night, and I’m sorry.”

“Fine. Is that it?” Eliza said.

“I’m apologizing—isn’t that good enough?”

“Okay, but you shouldn’t have lied to me,” she accused.

Jeremy’s forehead crinkled. “What do you mean? What are you talking about?”

“Paige. I know what happened between the two of you. She told me.”

He threw his arms up. “What happened between the two of us? I’m confused. What *did* happen between the two of us?”

“She was your girlfriend.”

He exhaled. “It was a long time ago. It was nothing,” he said, biting the hangnail on his thumb.

“Nothing! You’re full of it! She was the one, wasn’t she? *The one.*”

“The one?”

Eliza whispered fiercely. “The one you lost your virginity to. Your girlfriend in high school who dumped you in college.”

“Hold up! Hold up!” Jeremy said. “First off, okay, yes, she was the one. But it was a long time ago, and seriously, neither of us knew what we were doing. And she didn’t break up with me. I broke up with her. C’mon, now. It’s ancient history.”

“Not to me.”

“You’re really something you know?” he said, smiling.

“What are you looking so pleased about?” she asked.

“I’m not. You’re being silly. Let’s not fight.”

“I’m not fighting,” Eliza said defensively.

But they continued to argue until Jeremy finally lost his temper. “You know what? You’re so obsessed with Paige? Then maybe you should be more like her. At least she was passionate about her work. She doesn’t just coast on her looks and connections. She never complains! She loves her job, and she does something that she loves doing.”

“Oh—you!” Eliza said, smacking him with her apron.

It left a red mark on his cheek.

He raised his eyebrows and shook his head. He left without another word.

Eliza went back to the hot kitchen. She was utterly disgusted. Anyone could be someone’s bitch, like Paige was to Sydney, but slaving away for someone didn’t equal passion! How did working at Lunch indicate she was “coasting on her looks and connections”? And, she had wanted to say to him, she *had* found something to be passionate about—she’d loved her job

at the designer label but had been fired before she could even explore it more thoroughly. She would show them! She would show Jeremy and Paige that she wasn't just some lazy rich girl who didn't do anything but shop.

It was over a hundred and ten degrees in the kitchen, and Eliza wrung sweat from the bottom of her T-shirt. She took a pair of kitchen shears and slashed the collar and the hem to make it vented and more comfortable. Then she rolled up her shorts and pinned them.

“Hey—look at that,” said Margie, the Irish girl who manned the fryer station. “Can you do that to mine too?”

Eliza wiped the tears from her eyes. “Sure.” She nodded.

who will have the last laugh?

VISITING THE DORMDEBAUCHERY WEB SITE had become one of Jacqui's regular habits since kissing all three of its founders. But when she logged on to the site after arriving back from the city, she found that the home page displayed the same jokes it had shown for the last week. None of the gags had been updated, and the newest video, which showed an intoxicated starlet smiling cluelessly into the camera while her strap fell and exposed her left breast and plastic surgery stitches, was already old news.

She clicked off the screen, wondering if something was wrong.

When she arrived at the Reynolds castle that evening, she was surprised to find that, for the first time that entire summer, it was dark: the lights were off, the windows shuttered. There was no sign of the nightly debauchery—no hordes of Hamptonites angling for entry, no girls engaging in wet T-shirt contests on the lawn, no booming hip-hop music, no Beirut tournament. What was going on? Had somebody died? She opened the door, calling out softly, “Grant? Ben? Duffy? Where are you guys?”

She found the three of them sitting glumly on the sofa, each nursing a can of beer. Grant was listlessly throwing darts at the board across the room but missing the target by miles; the carpet was strewn with fallen darts. Duffy was picking at a crusted wound on his elbow from the pogo-stick fall. Ben was immersed in a video game but didn't seem to be doing very well; the voice on the television kept intoning, “Please reload. Please reload.”

Grant stopped mid-throw, and the dart hit Ben on the knee.

“Watch it!” Ben said, annoyed, throwing it back at him, but it hit Duffy's sore elbow instead.

“Hey!” Duffy bellowed.

They all looked up at Jacqui with gloomy faces, a marked contrast to their usual manic excitement.

“Oh, you're here,” Duffy said without his usual enthusiasm.

“Jacqui, Jacqui, Jacqui.” Grant shook his head.

“What do you want?” Ben asked a bit brusquely.

Jacqui sat on the arm of the sofa. “Everything all right?”

“No.” Ben sighed. “The site's tanking. We've got nothing new, no new jokes or videos. And our hits dropped way down. We lost, like, seventy percent of our market share.”

“There’s some new site now where kids can put up their own videos and jokes. Goddamn Internet economy. Everything moves too fast,” Duffy explained.

They explained that the lack of eyeballs had cased their advertising revenues to take a free fall, and the cost of throwing insane weekly parties had almost bankrupted them.

“We might have to sell the Black Hawk!” Grant cried.

“Why don’t you put up some new jokes, then?” Jacqui asked.

“We can’t think of any.” Duffy shrugged. “Nothing’s come to mind. Nothing seems funny anymore.”

“I’m depressed,” Ben admitted.

“We’re doomed,” Grant declared.

“C’mon, guys, it can’t be that bad! It’s just a speed bump; you’ll think of something. I know you will. Duffy—Ben—Grant—come on—”

“We know, you know,” Ben interrupted.

“Excuse me?” she asked, leaning forward.

“We know what you’ve been doing.” Duffy said, looking at her mournfully.

“You deceived us,” Ben lamented.

“What?”

“You’ve hooked up with all three of us—don’t try to deny it; we all know,” Grant said.

Jacqui blushed. “I didn’t mean to. . . .” Really, she didn’t. It had just happened—she had found all three of them irresistible, although in the back of her mind, she’d known this day would arrive, and she suddenly felt awful.

“It’s okay. We should have known,” Ben said. “It’s not such a big deal, except that there’s three of us and only one of you.”

“And we can’t live like this,” Grant confessed. “So you have to choose.”

“One of us,” Duffy said soberly. “Only one.”

Exchange all three boys for just one? Jacqui turned crimson. How could she ever decide? Because in a way, she loved all three of them . . .

you get what you wish for

WHEN MARA ARRIVED BACK FROM New York, she fully expected the *Malpractice* to be messier than ever—after all, several of Ryan’s college buddies had descended on the boat for the weekend. Mara steeled herself for the smell of stale beer when she walked inside the main cabin.

She pushed the sliding door aside, but she was assaulted by a strangely pleasing smell. Like roasting vegetables and rosemary. She looked around—there were no boxes on the floor, no cigarette butts, no empty cans, no dust bunnies in the corner. Instead, the boat was clean, its floors shining, the carpets vacuumed. There was a spray of bamboo sticks in a glass vase, emitting a pleasant scent reminiscent of freshly washed laundry.

For a moment, Mara wondered if she should check the boat’s transom to see if she was in the right place.

But then Ryan walked out of the kitchen, holding a wooden spoon.

“Taste,” he said in greeting, placing the spoon to her lips.

“You cook?” she asked, and took a lick. It was delicious. Marinara sauce.

“Occasionally.”

“And you cleaned?”

“Well, Laurie sent someone over,” Ryan admitted. “But I figured it was about time. I should have just had someone come every week. You were right: the place was getting disgusting.”

“Did you have fun with your friends?” she asked, watching as he uncorked a bottle of wine.

“It was fun,” Ryan said. “But I missed you.”

“I missed you too,” Mara replied, nuzzling him on the cheek. They kissed briefly. Ryan sniffed her hair, breathing in her scent—he hadn’t done that in a long time.

She embraced him tightly. Mara was delighted. The show of affection seemed to mean he was ready to be more supportive of her career aspirations. She was tired of feeling guilty for leaving him all the time. “I have the best news!” she said.

“I do too, but you go first,” Ryan said, eyes twinkling. He was still holding her close.

“Sam Davis called while I was in New York. The Associated Press is picking up that profile I did on Sydney! They’re going to offer it to all their media outlets. It’s going to be published

nationally! Can you believe that?” Mara was still in shock about the news. Sam had been very complimentary as well and had said that Mara had bona fide “chops.”

“That’s great.” Ryan nodded, but Mara noticed he let go of her ever so slightly. “Good for you.”

Her smile faltered a bit. Why didn’t Ryan ever seem that excited about her job? He’d once admitted he never even read *Hamptons* magazine, although he did make an exception for her column. But only when she reminded him.

“Sam said that they never sell any stories to the AP. And I got a call the other day from an editor at *Harper’s Bazaar*—they want me to write a little story about ‘Hamptons style.’ It’s only five hundred words, but still.”

“Mmm.” Ryan nodded again. “Very cool.”

“So what’s your news?” Mara asked, suddenly remembering Ryan had mentioned having some glad tidings as well.

Ryan immediately lit up again. “There’s something for you. On the table.”

Mara walked over to her desk. It was a thick white envelope with the Dartmouth crest. “Oh my God,” she whispered.

Ryan’s eyes were dancing. “You got in! I *told* you it would happen!”

“I did,” Mara breathed, sliding her fingers through the clasp. She removed a package of forms and read the official letter congratulating her on being accepted into Dartmouth’s next freshman class.

“Now we can be together!” He enveloped her in a tight hug.

Mara put the forms back in the envelope, feeling conflicted. She should be happy. She had finally gotten what she wanted. She had gotten into Dartmouth. But she remembered the Columbia campus—the energy of the city, the writing program, Danielle’s effortless sophistication. Her story was going out on the wires, and she had an assignment from *Harper’s Bazaar*. How could she continue to write about fashion if she was stuck in New Hampshire?

She’d wanted Dartmouth so much, but now that she’d gotten it, it felt anticlimactic.

“Well, what are you waiting for?” Ryan exhorted, giving her a pen so that she could sign the acceptance forms.

He looked so eager and excited for her. Mara remembered why she’d wanted to attend Dartmouth so much in the first place. She and Ryan would be together now; their summer wouldn’t have to end. Maybe it was only beginning.

Mara signed her name to the statement, promising to attend Dartmouth in the fall. She put it in her purse. She would mail it tomorrow, with a deposit, as soon as possible. Ryan handed her a stamp.

“C’mon,” he urged, pulling her to the kitchen. “Dinner’s getting cold.”

donna karan, eat your heart out

JEREMY DIDN'T THINK SHE HAD passion? she *had* passion. She would show him she was more than just some kind of shopping addict. He thought that all she could do was spend money? And obviously, even with the job at Lunch (which left her fingers calloused, hello), she still didn't merit his respect. Paige was doing something she loved, while Eliza was just a wage slave. Well, enough of that. *She* was going to do something she loved.

Everyone always told her she dressed the best—that she had a unique sense of style that everyone wanted to copy, and it was *her* vision that had made Sydney's show a success—she'd even heard that due to the hype that surrounded her helicopter entrance, orders were up and Sydney's line was back in the black. After working for more than a month at Lunch, Eliza wasn't afraid of getting her hands dirty, and she suddenly realized how she could put two and two together—her passion for fashion and her newly acquired work ethic.

She would design her own collection. Just a few pieces, maybe ten outfits total. She just needed one standout piece. Calvin Klein had made his name on the backs of his blue jeans. Donna Karan on a stretchy bodysuit. Zac Posen on the strength of one slinky party dress.

Fall meant back to school; back to school usually meant uniforms. Inspired, Eliza sketched out plans to do a working-girl glamour collection: "The Uniform of Fall," she would call it—cool, trendy pieces inspired by uniforms of all kinds—school uniforms (plaid, tartan, gray wool, burgundy, rep ties), flight attendant uniforms (pencil skirts, waist-nipping jackets, colorful scarves), military uniforms (brass-buttoned coats, epaulets, camouflage), Wall Street uniforms (bespoke suiting, skinny pants, houndstooth). A working woman's uniform—the height of wearable chic.

Anytime she had a break between shifts at the restaurant, she started drawing in her book, and thanks to her internship at Sydney's office, she knew where to find the best pattern makers and fabric retailers available. Her friend Todd, the shoe salesman at Jeffrey, offered to be her business partner, and Eliza couldn't have been more excited about the prospect of setting up her own label.

She was going to show Paige and Sydney a thing or two about real motivation and creative vision—something they both lacked.

* * *

A few days later, her parents were away for the night, so Eliza invited the girls to come over to her house for dinner, thinking it would be fun for the three of them to cook together instead of going out all the time. She'd visited the farmers' market that afternoon and had returned

with fresh vegetables and herbs, and her boss at Lunch had given her a few fat trout filets to take home.

Eliza was marinating the fish in olive oil and lemon when Jacqui and Mara entered, bearing wine bottles and fresh bread from Citarella.

“I love your kitchen,” Mara said, putting away the groceries and looking over Eliza’s shoulder to take a peek at the fish. “This is such a great house.” She squeezed Eliza’s arm affectionately.

Eliza smiled. “Thanks, it was my grandmother’s. They’ve had it for ages. Dad had to pay double what they sold it for, but it was worth it.”

The Thompsons’ kitchen had an earthy, comfortable, shabby quality belied by the custom built-in stainless-steel industrial Traulsen refrigerators. Eliza’s mom had decorated in a vaguely French country style, with tons of rooster- and hen-shaped crockery and colorful floral towels. Whitewashed floorboards, rusting and paint-scraped window finishes. And every conceivable surface was covered by family photographs. Eliza on her fifth birthday, wearing a pink dress and carrying a parasol. Her parents dancing at the Stork Club. Eliza on skis in Gstaad. Her mother as a debutante at the Waldorf. Photographs from a glamorous yet loving family life.

Mara admired each picture, thinking Eliza led a charmed and charming life—the kitchen hummed with good energy.

“What’s this?” Jacqui asked, noticing a thick sketchbook in the middle of the table. She opened it and began leafing through the pages. “Wow, Liza. Is this your stuff? It’s really good.”

Eliza nodded as she stuck the fish in the broiler. “Uh-huh.” She told them about her idea for setting up her own label, her face aglow.

“It’s brilliant,” Mara said, looking at the theme that Eliza had put together. “Can we do anything?”

“Thank God you asked—I need so much help,” Eliza confessed, outlining the different tasks: cutting fabric, acting as fit models for the patterns, putting together a press release, meeting with boutique owners. “I bought a sewing machine, but I’m going to have the samples made by real garment workers in the city.”

“When’s the fashion show?” Jacqui asked, taking a sip from her glass. She’d already offered to help Eliza as a sales coordinator—she would tell her bosses at the boutique in Brazil about the new line.

“A show—God, I never even thought of that,” Eliza admitted. “But that’s a great idea.”

“Sydney’s showing the last week of August,” Mara informed her. “We just got the invitation today. He’s not doing Fashion Week in New York; he wants to show early.”

“Wouldn’t it be funny if I did my show on the same night?” Eliza laughed. Then she realized—that was exactly what she was going to do. “But how am I going to do a show without any money? I’d have to pay to rent a place and everything. I can’t afford that.”

“Why don’t you do it on the beach? The beach is free. There’s a really nice stretch over on Flying Point that’s pretty far from any houses. You could have it there,” Jacqui said, thinking of the night she’d spent with Grant and feeling sad that they had yet to speak to each other. Grant was ignoring her calls. She’d told her friends what had happened, and they’d both told her to give it time.

“I love it. I’m going to do it!” Eliza decided. “Thanks, guys.”

They set the table and sat down to dinner. The fish was fresh and wonderfully moist, and they all complimented Eliza on her cooking.

“Jeremy’s a lucky guy,” Mara said.

Eliza winced. “I don’t know. We’re not really talking at the moment.” She told them about what had happened the other day at Lunch. It made her unhappy. She didn’t know if they were still together or just fighting. “Anyway, I guess one of us should apologize, but I can’t decide if I’m waiting for him to call me or if I should just call him.”

“You should call him,” Mara urged. “Summer’s almost over. You don’t want to waste any more time,” she said, thinking more about herself and Ryan. She told them about finally getting into Dartmouth, and they drank to her acceptance.

“But you don’t seem happy?” Jacqui noticed.

“I am, but I’m not,” Mara admitted. “I kind of feel like I really want to stay in New York, but then there’s Ryan. . . .”

“Boys,” Eliza summed up. “Can’t live with ’em, can’t live without ’em.”

“I’ll toast to that.” Jacqui laughed, thinking about how even though the boys had given her an ultimatum, behind each other’s backs, they were still trying to sneak some time alone with her—each had taken the “showdown” to mean she would choose him. This insanity had to end before someone really got hurt. And at that very moment, Jacqui made her decision.

They spent the night helping Eliza with the fabric, pinning up a few patterns, acting as fit models for a few of the outfits, and dancing around the room to Gwen Stefani’s newest album. Even if the boys were being a pain, it was a comfort to know they could always count on each other.

she's just not that into you

THROWING A SURPRISE ANNIVERSARY PARTY for two people on the brink of divorce was harder than Jacqui had assumed. Especially when one's love life wasn't turning out to be so great either. It was time for the three-ring circus to stop, and when Duffy invited her for a sunset ride in the golf cart one afternoon, she saw a chance to clean the slate. They had parked near the spot where they had first tumbled out of it and kissed.

"You look so serious," Duffy chided after Jacqui told him she needed to tell him something important.

"I've got some bad news," she said gently, brushing the sand from her jeans.

"It's not me, is it?" he asked.

"It's not you," Jacqui said. "It's me." They both cracked up at the clichéd breakup line.

"Ah, Jacarei. We were having so much fun!"

"I hope you're not mad."

Duffy grinned, the same easy grin he'd given her the first time they'd met. "How can I stay mad at such a beautiful girl?"

"Friends?" Jacqui asked, holding up her hand for a high five.

Duffy slapped it affectionately. "Always."

Jacqui exhaled. One down, two to go.

* * *

Later, back at Cupid headquarters, Eliza had procured the number of the best wedding planner in town, and that afternoon, the three of them were meeting the organizer to go over the event. They had decided that the best place for the anniversary party was in the Perrys' own backyard. Georgina Perkins's office was in a simple low-slung Southampton cottage, filled with comfortable overstuffed linen couches. There were antique floral prints framed on the wall, numerous pastel chenille throws, and mismatched crockery—tasteful country chic.

"So, is this for your parents?" the high-strung blond-bobbed Martha Stewart doppelganger asked, opening up her massive black appointment binder.

"No," Jacqui said quickly.

"Kind of," Eliza replied.

"They're, uh, *like* parents to us," Mara explained with a helpful smile.

“So, you’re thinking tent in the backyard, butlered hors d’oeuvres, five courses, a band, fireworks at the end?” Georgina asked, describing the typical hundred-thousand-dollar Hamptons affair.

“Oh yes.” The three of them nodded eagerly.

“And a chocolate fountain. We have to have one,” Eliza insisted. Her cousin had gotten married over the spring, and the five-foot-tall flowing chocolate extravaganza had been the hit of the evening. “It’s romantic,” she argued.

“That’s extra,” Georgina noted.

“And could we have the steaks catered from Delmonico’s?” Jacqui asked.

“Sure. But we’ll have to get them from the city, so it’ll be extra as well.”

“Why Delmonico’s?” Mara asked.

“I’ll explain later,” Jacqui said.

“And who are you thinking for a band?” Georgina asked.

“Well—I know it’s a stretch, but do you think we could get Matchbox Twenty to sing at the party?” Jacqui asked.

“Matchbox Twenty?” Eliza gagged. “They’re, like, so 1998!”

Mara giggled. Even though she had nothing against the band, Eliza did have a point. It was almost as bad as inviting Sheryl Crow.

“Precisely. That’s when they met,” Jacqui said. “Anna would die.”

“I don’t know if we could get the band; I think they might have broken up,” Georgina said. “But we could maybe get Rob Thomas to sing one song. I know his wife.”

“*Excelente.*” Jacqui smiled.

Georgina wrote down notes furiously. Then she pulled out a deposit form. “We’ll need fifty percent up front and then the rest the day of the party. Sign here.”

“We’ve got it covered.” Jacqui said smoothly.

* * *

They left the wedding planner’s office and walked over to a nearby coffee shop.

“So, who’s paying for this party?” Eliza wondered.

Jacqui looked sheepish. “I put it on Anna’s account. I figured, if it works, they’ll thank me for it later. If not, I’m fired anyway.”

“Nice.” Eliza nodded, impressed.

There was just one problem—Jacqui and Shannon couldn’t figure out a way to get Kevin Perry to the Hamptons on the day of the party. After the confrontation at the restaurant and the bad feeling it had engendered, the last place he wanted to be was anywhere near his wife. Worse, Shannon had checked his e-mail account and found that Kevin was planning a trip to

the Caribbean in late August—the same time as the party. They had to think of something fast; otherwise Rob Thomas would be singing a divorce dirge rather than a love song.

* * *

Later that evening, Jacqui and Ben shared a banana split at the Snowflake diner so she could take care of other unfinished business.

Ben reached over to hold her hand, and Jacqui gently but firmly pushed it away.

“Listen, I have to tell you something,” she said. She sighed; this was going to be hard.

But Ben, who was always sensitive to her moods, saved her from the difficult part. “I already know,” he said quietly. “I wish we didn’t have to make you choose. It was fun while it lasted. I think we all kind of knew what was going on, but we tried to pretend it wasn’t.”

“Ben—you guys were right. There’s not three of me, and it’s not fair to you.” She scooped up some fudge-covered ice cream, thought better of it, and put her spoon down again. It seemed rude to eat at a time like this. “I’m sorry,” Jacqui said.

“Don’t be. I had a great time.” Ben smiled. He caressed her cheek softly. “It was worth it.”

Jacqui leaned over to kiss him sweetly on the cheek. “Every minute.”

nicky hilton can do it—why not eliza?

IT WAS THE THIRD WEEK of August—summer had flown by so quickly. Mara sat at her cubicle at work, marveling at how much she'd learned that year. She was going over the proposed outline for her final column with Sam, who was on the other line yelling at her husband for having bought them tickets to the Caribbean without securing a free first-class upgrade. “Did you tell them who I am? You did? And—they didn't?”

“So, I was thinking, for my final piece—there's this really great new designer who's showing on the beach next week,” Mara said when Sam had slammed down the phone. By now, Mara was used to her boss verbally abusing everyone, including her spouse. It was a common occurrence.

“Who is it? Can they send samples?” Sam asked, perking up and sounding completely normal, as if she hadn't been screaming her lungs out just a second ago.

“No, it's her first collection. It's Eliza Thompson. Remember, the girl we put in the socialite centerfold the first week of July?” Each summer, the magazine regularly shot the season's hottest social swans in a three-page foldout. It was a tongue-in-cheek nod to the *Playboy* model, with lists of the socialites' “turn-ons” and “turn-offs.” *Turn-ons: Five-hundred-thread-count sheets. Turn-offs: Flying commercial. Eager readers collected them like baseball cards.* (“Oh, you have an Elisabeth Kieselstein-Cord! Trade you for an Ivanka Trump?”)

“She has a line?”

Mara nodded eagerly.

“I don't know,” Sam said doubtfully. “This is the final issue, so we can only cover the really big names. Sydney Minx is having his show at the same time. Plus, I spoke to his publicist—he's going to give us a full interview this time.”

“But I really think Eliza Thompson is going to be more relevant to the column, to the new generation of readers who are her age . . .” Mara argued. After the success of her column and since receiving the attention of the New York media world, Mara was starting to believe she could pull off being a reporter after all. She was eager to flex some of her new journalistic muscle, especially if it meant being able to help a friend.

“Maybe,” Sam said. “But the whole socialite-with-a-clothing-line is kind of done, isn't it? Aren't they all DJs now? Or porn stars? Let's stick with Sydney.”

“Are you sure? I really feel like Eliza's show will be more dynamic and current,” Mara wheedled, thinking of several fabulous outfits Eliza had in store.

“Sydney’s show is the biggest thing to hit this town,” Sam snapped. “It’s going to close the social season. Everyone is going to be there—nobody can stop talking about that show he did earlier this year. And your profile will only made him a bigger deal. People love scandal. It’s going to be his comeback.”

“But Eliza—”

“Enough. I want you at Sydney’s show.”

Mara nodded. She’d been shot down, but what could she do? After all, Sam had been in the business twenty years.

She looked at the invitation Eliza had sent—a carefully constructed origami representation of an oversize tote bag (“The Working Woman’s New Briefcase”)—and put it aside. There was no way she would be able to cover Sydney’s show and Eliza’s at the same time. Eliza was bound to be so disappointed; she’d already told several prospective buyers that *Hamptons* would be covering the collection. Mara only hoped her friend would understand.

daughter knows best

IN THE MIDDLE OF HER fitting, Jacqui got a call from the caterer. Bad news. The credit card account that Jacqui had given her at the meeting had been closed. Kevin had already started to freeze all of their mutual assets. *Damn.* Jacqui thought quickly and provided Georgina with Anna's ATM card. She crossed her fingers. Hopefully, the checking account was still working. Georgina called back. It was. They were back on track.

"What's up?" Eliza asked, pinning back the dress on Jacqui's torso. "Does that feel okay?"

Jacqui nodded. She stood in the middle of Eliza's bedroom and looked at herself in the mirror. She still couldn't believe how well the dress fit. It was a cheeky take on a Catholic schoolgirl uniform, with a glen plaid pattern and a Peter Pan collar. But instead of looking . . . well, costumey and pervy, the dress was fresh-looking and fashionable while being incredibly comfortable.

"It's fabulous," she told Eliza. "It feels so good."

"Cotton with a hint of spandex." Eliza grinned. The glamour girl collection had been inspired by her idea—Girls Who Mattered. It was all about making clothes for girls who had other things to think about than clothes. The "uniform" was supposed to take all the angsting out of dressing—just grab a sweater, a shirt, pants, and go.

She had been able to talk a few of her old classmates into modeling at the show as well, and they were all sitting around Eliza's room, waiting their turns.

"I still need two more girls," Eliza fretted.

"What about Shannon and Madison?" Jacqui suggested. "I'm sure they'd love to do it."

* * *

Jacqui found Shannon reading a book to Cody in the sunroom. She explained that Eliza needed a few more girls for her show and thought that she and Madison would be ideal.

"Me? In a fashion show? Fantastic," Shannon said, putting down the book. "But . . ."

"But?"

"I don't know about Madison. She's kind of pissed at me right now." Shannon told Jacqui how Madison had asked her point-blank if Anna and Kevin were getting a divorce and how Shannon had lied to her about it. "I think she suspects something."

"Maybe we should just tell her," Jacqui said thoughtfully. It seemed cruel to keep the kid in the dark. They were also still racking their brains on how to get Kevin back to the

Hamptons, and maybe Madison, who was the most observant member of the Perry family, could help them figure out a plan.

The two au pairs found Madison in her room, IM'ing friends on her computer. "What?" she asked.

"First of all, Mad, I'm really sorry," Shannon began. She explained how Jacqui had told her about the divorce and how she and Jacqui were trying to get the Perrys back together through some crazy schemes.

Madison's face was a mask. "So they're really splitting up? Anna's going to have to leave? And Cody too?"

"We've been trying our best to keep that from happening," Jacqui said, kneeling down to hug the girl. "I'm really sorry."

"But, it's not over yet," Shannon said. "We're throwing them an anniversary party a couple of days from their real anniversary."

"The only problem is getting your dad out here to attend the party," Jacqui said. "I thought if we could get him to come out for it, the party would make them feel better and then they'd realize they don't want to split up after all."

"Okay," Madison said, not sounding convinced.

Jacqui spied a picture of Madison and Kevin on Madison's desk. It struck her suddenly that Madison looked a lot like her father and that she was stubborn in the same way. Perhaps they wouldn't need to concoct such a complicated deception after all. "You know, you and your dad are pretty close. Maybe you could call him and ask him to come out to the Hamptons next weekend?"

Madison chewed on her bubble gum and blew a big bubble. "I guess. I do miss him a bit. And I have my first tennis tournament the day after."

"He would be so proud of you," Jacqui urged.

"It would be nice," Madison allowed, adding, a little sadly, "He's never even seen me play."

"Have you ever invited him?" Shannon asked.

The young girl shook her head. "Dad's always so busy. But you're right—he should be at the tournament. He always brags about how he won the junior championship one year. I'll do it."

Jacqui clapped her on the back. "Wonderful."

Madison grinned. "Besides, if it doesn't work, I'll just tell Dad that the neighbors are encroaching on his property. That always sets him off. He'll totally come over to check it out."

Jacqui laughed. That sounded like Kevin, all right.

"Are you mad?" Shannon asked tentatively. "I'm really sorry I lied to you."

“A little,” Madison admitted. “But you were only trying to help. I don’t want Anna and Dad to split up either. She’s not great, but you know, she’s all we’ve got,” Madison said, showing a vast degree of maturity concerning her stepmother.

“But that’s not all we came to say,” Jacqui said, beaming.

* * *

The two younger girls found themselves in Eliza’s bedroom, being fitted by a team of seamstresses. They could hardly contain their excitement. They were going to be models!

“It’s nothing big, you know,” Eliza told them. “It’s not even a real show. It’s kind of a guerrilla event. I mean, we’re inviting the press, but it’s not sanctioned by Fashion Week or anything.”

“Who cares?” Shannon asked. “It sounds amazing!”

“Totally,” Madison agreed.

They grinned at each other, and the past few weeks of sourness and suspicion completely faded away and they were fast friends all over again.

* * *

Later that evening, Grant knocked on the door to the servants’ cottage. It had been a habit of his to pop in during the wee hours for a late-night booty call, and for most of the summer Jacqui had been agreeable. But not this time. She walked down the rickety stairs and met him at the doorway.

Grant raised his eyebrows, and Jacqui nodded, and they walked quietly to the beach, where Grant had already dug out the sand and collected wood for a fire. He knelt by it and struck a match. The flames licked the wood and were soon shooting sparks into the air. Jacqui huddled in the blankets Grant always brought for such occasions.

He snuggled next to her and put an arm around her shoulders. Usually this would be the time when Grant would start kissing her, slowly working his way from her mouth to her neck to the deep spot between her shoulder blades, warm hands underneath her shirt, her bra, her jeans. But after a few minutes of breathless, passionate kissing, Jacqui came up for air.

“Grant.”

“Huh?”

“We need to stop. I can’t do this anymore. I’m so sorry.”

“What do you mean?” Grant asked. “I thought—well, Ben and Duff, they said that you’d broken up with them, so I thought . . .”

Oh. Jacqui’s strained smile was all he needed to realize his mistake.

He took his hands away and put them around his head. “Man, I feel like a dork.”

“Don’t,” Jacqui said. “It’s my fault. I shouldn’t have let it go so long.” She sighed. The thing was, she liked Grant, but he wasn’t the one. Just one of three.

“If that’s what you want.” Grant exhaled.

Jacqui nodded. “It’s what I want.”

Grant scratched his right sideburn for a while, looking at her intently. Finally, he spoke. “Well, one thing I always do is give girls what they want.” He kissed her softly on the lips one last time. “I’ll always think of you,” he said. He fixed her with his smoldering, sexy stare, and Jacqui knew he deserved a girl who only had eyes for him.

Jacqui stood by herself on the beach for a while, watching him walk away. She was glad she had done it but felt sad nonetheless. She’d had a fun summer with three boyfriends, but when it came down to it, there’d just been too many people in the relationship. The seagulls’ haunting cries filled the air, and Jacqui wondered if every summer would always be bittersweet.

fashion week

UNLIKE EVERY OTHER MAJOR DESIGNER in new york, Sydney Minx decided to stage his show in late August, the week before Fashion Week, when the entire fashion world converged upon the Bryant Park tents in Manhattan. He was determined to make a splash by “showing early” but also to save money on the fees and expense a Manhattan show would entail. Besides, the bulk of his clients were in the Hamptons. He had rented out the entire Volcano nightclub, and there was a terrific buzz as the well-heeled audience gathered in the main room near the lava fountain to take their seats draped in white linen and decorated with fat goodie bags.

They were all there: the international fashion media (annoyed at having their summer vacations cut short), buyers from all the major department stores, coifed socialites, local celebrities and those who had jetted into East Hampton Airport just for the privilege of sitting in the front row.

Thanks to all the hype concerning Eliza’s helicopter stunt and the energy she had brought to the styling of the collection, there was palpable excitement and expectation to see what the designer would do next. Almost all of the women in the room were dressed in the distressed, shredded chiffon and metallic spray-painted clothes that Eliza had created. They were eager to find out what they would be wearing for the fall.

Backstage, Mara held up a tape recorder in front of the designer. Sydney had unleashed a torrent of half-baked explanations about his vision. But so far, the only thing Mara had been able to determine was that he didn’t have one.

“I think it’s all about party girls, girls who dance on tables, girls who get in gossip columns,” Sydney said, fluttering his fan. “It girls, it girls, it girls!”

It was a tired cliché, and Mara pitied the old man for trying to keep his pulse on the beat of the culture when it was so obvious he would rather be anywhere than at a fashion show. She noticed a sharp-faced dark-haired girl prepping the models for the show. *That must be Paige*, Mara thought. She thanked Sydney for his time and walked out to the main room.

She took her seat in the second row and rifled through the program, hoping she could find something there she could hang the piece on, something that captured the idea of the collection so she would be able to articulate it to her readers. She felt a stab of guilt at not being at Eliza’s show across town. She hadn’t had the heart to tell Eliza she wouldn’t be covering her debut.

Exactly an hour late, Sydney’s show finally started.

The crowd hushed, and all eyes focused on the end of the runway, and the first model appeared from behind the curtain.

Wearing a slashed-to-the-belly-button leather dress and clunky platform heels. It looked like an outfit better suited to dancing on a Vegas stage than to a chic Manhattan cocktail party. It went downhill from there.

The collection was a slew of tarted-up, décolletage-displaying blouses and thigh-skimming skirts that seemed completely out of touch with what women actually wanted to wear.

“Does he think we live in L.A.?” one swan snorted without checking off any of the items on the runway sheet for future purchase.

Dressing for Dinner, the accompanying notes read, while a model pranced out in a see-through feather-trimmed negligee.

“Maybe for dining at the Playboy Mansion!” another appalled blue blood retorted.

That was enough for Mara. She checked her watch. If she didn’t encounter any traffic, she would still be able to make it to Eliza’s show. She noticed her boss, Sam Davis, across the aisle, grimacing as a model walked out in a bra and skirt.

If she was going to do it, she’d have to do it now. Mara took a deep breath, ducked her head, and excused herself as she walked from her seat down the row and toward the exit.

She turned to look at the runway one last time and accidentally caught Sam’s eye.

“Where are you going?” Sam mouthed, looking cross.

Mara shrugged. She just had to trust her instincts, and if it didn’t pay off, well, her days at *Hamptons* were almost over anyway. There was no way she was going to miss her friend’s first fashion show.

a few technical difficulties

THE MODELS WERE ALL DRESSED and made up, and Eliza was touched to know how many friends she had—her makeup artist had donated his time, and so had her hairdresser. A crew from Lunch had prepared a table of appetizers, and colleagues from last summer at Seventh Circle had swiped alcohol for the pre-show party. Even the DJ had offered his services for free. There was a feeling of camaraderie in the air; the crowd was mostly made up of young people thrilled to be taking part in a real art event instead of a slick corporate presentation. She wondered where Mara was. Mara had told her she would interview Eliza before the show for the piece, but so far, her friend was nowhere to be found.

Eliza was pumped, except for one thing—on the way to her show, she had passed by Volcano and had seen Paige and Jeremy together outside the club. Paige was there to set up for Sydney’s show, but why was Jeremy there with her? The two of them were in a deep, intense discussion, and Jeremy even had a hand on Paige’s shoulder. The two of them looked up as Eliza drove by, and she caught both of their eyes. Jeremy looked guilty, and Paige looked annoyed. Eliza felt a stab in her stomach. So they were together after all. Jeremy was just waiting to get rid of her so he could go back to his former flame.

She tried to put the image out of her mind and went back to checking each model.

“You guys look terrific,” Eliza said. Her vision of working-girl “uniform” glamour was really coming to life. She couldn’t wait to see the audience reaction. Would they hate it? Would they love it? Did she have a future in this business?

Eliza peeked out from the side of her car. She’d asked her guests to assemble by the shore. A makeshift runway was cordoned off in the sand, and she had rented two spotlights to light the “stage.” Once they were switched on, the show could begin.

She waited for the floodlights to illuminate the runway.

And waited . . .

And waited . . .

Finally, a figure ran up from the sand. When he got closer, she recognized Serge, the busboy from the restaurant who’d volunteered to help with the lights.

“They won’t go on. I’m not sure what’s wrong.” Serge shook his head.

“What?” Eliza asked.

“I tried ’em twice, checked the wires; they all looked fine. I don’t know. Maybe the bulbs are busted?”

What good was staging a fashion show if the audience couldn't even see the clothes? The beach was covered in darkness, and the audience was getting restless. Eliza saw guests mingling and drinking the purloined vodka martinis. The show was going to turn into nothing more than a cocktail party if she didn't do something fast.

"What are we going to do?" Shannon asked, her eyelashes heavy with mascara.

"We need to start, Eliza. They're already playing the music," Madison said as the opening chant to Gwen Stefani's "Hollaback Girl" played in the background.

"Shit!" Eliza cursed, gnawing on her cuticles until they bled. She had no idea what to do now.

Jacqui noticed they weren't starting and walked out of the line to speak to Eliza. "What's the problem?"

Before Eliza could answer, another figure appeared next to her car.

"Hey, did I miss anything?" Mara asked, walking up to the huddled crowd.

"The spotlights—they won't go on!" Eliza told her friends. "I don't know what to do!"

"I just saw someone working on them," Jacqui remembered. "I thought she was one of your volunteers."

"No, Serge just checked. He said they're busted," Eliza said. "Mar, where have you been?"

Mara blushed deeply. "Sam made me go to Sydney's show. But don't worry—the thing was a total disaster. No one even stayed for the finale. I thought I was the only one walking out early, but when I turned around, I noticed a bunch of people behind me. I think they all followed me here too."

Eliza felt elated at the news. Sydney's show was a bust! Ha! Then she realized. Paige. It had to be. She'd known Eliza was staging a show, and she must have been furious when she noticed that everyone had walked out before the end of Sydney's show to go to Eliza's. Sabotaging the spotlights had to be her revenge.

Eliza started to feel the sweat form in her armpits. She was so done. She could see major editors from *W*, *Vogue*, *Bazaar*, and the *New York Times* out there, as well as several prominent buyers from the best department stores in the country. They would never give her another chance if she messed this up. She would just be another fashion statistic—joining a slew of wannabes whose creations crowded the clearance racks. If she even made it to the clearance racks.

"Okay, what if we gave all the models candles?" she suggested. "I could run to the Stop and Shop on 27 and—"

All of a sudden, there was a hoot from the crowd. Then cheering erupted.

"What's going on?" Eliza craned her neck. She saw the sandy runway ablaze in lights, even though the spotlights were still dark. "How—?"

“Who cares? Let’s go!” Jacqui said, stepping out from behind the car and leading the pack of models down the catwalk.

The show finally started, and to the surprise of everyone, most of all Eliza, the “runway” turned out to be lit by two lines of cars parked by the beachhead, their headlights blazing.

jacqui in wonderland

JACQUI WAS STILL WEARING HER finale outfit—a daring three-piece black suit that was perfectly fitted to her proportions—when she saw three guys walking toward her from opposite directions, each holding an enormous bouquet of flowers. They handed them to her one by one, looking adorably sheepish.

“You were great,” Duffy said. “It made me want to wear the clothes myself!”

Ben elbowed him away and turned to Jacqui with a somber look on his face. “Are you okay?” he asked, concerned.

“I’m fine.” Jacqui nodded. “I really like you guys.”

“We really like you too.” Grant winked.

“And the site, is everything okay?” she asked.

Ben nodded. “Stock’s back to where it was before the fall, a few points higher, even.”

“Someone sent in a video of that movie star Boris Carter, you know, Mr. Action Guy—who says he does all his own stunts?—getting a leg cramp from walking his dog. Pretty funny.”

Duffy rocked on his heels and put a friendly arm around her shoulders. “Believe us, nothing will stop the Debauchery,” he promised.

They all hugged each other fondly, and Jacqui realized that even if she had lost her chance at love, she had at least come out of the summer with three very good friends. Breaking up with all three boys was the best decision she could have made.

The three of them had added up to one great boyfriend, but Jacqui was certain that one day she would meet the *one* boy who had all those qualities—Duffy’s energy, Grant’s magnetism, and Ben’s sensitivity. In the meantime, their friendships would survive, and, by default, Jacqui had become the fourth amigo.

It looked like everything was settling in place. Except the clock was ticking—the anniversary party was tomorrow night. Madison had happily reported that Kevin had postponed his trip to the Caribbean to attend her tennis match and would be in East Hampton to support her as well as to check out the fictional encroachment on his property. He had been incensed when she told him that the Reynolds were building a three-story gazebo in their backyard that was going to look over the Perrys’ pool and block their view of the ocean.

There was a new snag, however—Anna still wasn't back from her spa trip. She was supposed to return earlier that evening but had explained she was taking an early-morning flight instead, since she wanted one more night to “commune with the stars.” Jacqui hoped her employer's newly rejuvenated self would be on that plane. Otherwise, there was one to São Paulo with her name written all over it.

caught in the high beams

ELIZA CAME OUT TO TAKE her bows at the end of the show. She looked out at the applauding guests, several of whom cheered and wolf-whistled. They had loved it—but even better, she had never felt so satisfied in her life. The past two weeks, she had worked harder than she had ever done, and she was so proud of herself. Her collection was a success—even if no one ever ordered a single piece or no one ever wrote a single line about it, she was satisfied. She'd done it for herself.

Mara ran up and gave her a big bouquet of tulips. “This is from me and Jac,” she said, kissing Eliza on the cheek. “We’re so happy for you!”

A man wearing a natty bow tie approached her with his card and introduced himself as the dean at Parsons. “I’d love to talk to you about scholarship opportunities to our freshman class.”

Parsons School of Design? The school that counted Marc Jacobs, Donna Karan, and Calvin Klein as alumni? Eliza couldn’t believe it. She’d never even thought of applying, because she’d been certain she wouldn’t get in—and besides, there was the whole Princeton thing. She’d been working so hard to get into Princeton all her life. If she told her parents she wanted to go to design school, they would choke on their vichyssoise.

“Thank you,” she said.

A slim girl with long dark hair and wearing the season’s best jeans joined the throng. “Hey, great collection. We should talk—I’d love to order some for my store.”

Eliza recognized her immediately. She’d been shopping at Scoop forever. It was Stefani Greenfield, the store’s owner.

“Give my buyer a call,” Stefani said.

“Definitely.” Eliza grinned.

She looked around happily. Her “models” were mingling with the guests; the buyers were all talking to Todd, her new business partner; and several editors had congratulated her on their way to their cars. Slowly, one by one, the headlights that had lit the catwalk turned and disappeared up the road until the makeshift cat-walk was dark again. It would have been the happiest moment of her life—if only . . .

Suddenly, she missed Jeremy with an ache so painful, it hurt to breathe. She had no one to share her success with, no one to rehash every little delicious detail with, no one who would tell her how well she had done. Of course she had her friends, and she smiled to notice Jacqui

attempting to make peace with her three suitors and Ryan and Mara walking on the beach holding hands. If only . . .

Eliza sighed. Maybe that was the way life was—it just wasn't perfect. There would always be something missing. She gathered the rest of the clothes, packing them away carefully so that she could ship them to the Italian manufacturers later that week. If they did get as many orders as she thought, they would have to start production on the line as soon as possible.

She was lugging the rolling trunk over to her car when a familiar figure walked up from the shadows.

“Need help with that?” Jeremy asked quietly.

Eliza looked up. It was as if she had been wishing so hard for him to appear and now that her wish had come true, she wasn't quite sure if he was really there, standing in front of her. “I can handle it.”

“I know you can,” he said, walking over and taking the other end of the trunk. They lifted it into the car together.

“I'm really proud of you,” he said. “I always knew you could do it. That was amazing. I don't know anything about fashion, but I think girls will really like it.”

Eliza smiled. “I hope so.” Then she realized Jeremy had once told her that part of his job as a landscape contractor and designer was to figure out creative lighting schemes for the estates he tended. Some preferred tiki torches, some gas lamplights. He'd once had a commission to light a garden party for a big shipping company and had used truck headlights as an interesting twist.

“It was you, wasn't it?” she asked. “The headlights? Was that your idea?”

Jeremy looked sheepish. “Yeah, I overheard you talking about the busted spotlights, so I checked them out. The wires were cut.”

“Bastard!” Eliza swore.

“It's my fault. Paige went a little *Fatal Attraction* tonight. She asked me to meet her at Volcano this afternoon because she said she wanted to tell me something. Turns out she just wanted to get back together again. Then you drove by, and I told her you were the only girl for me, ever. I think it set her off.”

“You told her that?”

He nodded. “Eliza, you should have told me Paige had fired you. I knew she would try to do something like that once she found out about us. She tried to get back together with me earlier this year, but I told her I was going out with you.”

“She knew I was your girlfriend all along?” Eliza asked, incredulous. No wonder Paige was always giving her a hard time. She'd wanted Jeremy back for herself, but when he'd rebuffed her affections, she'd taken out her anger on her romantic rival—Eliza. It all made sense now.

“So she cut the wires?” Eliza asked.

“Yeah, I think so. She’s a bit psycho. The first time I broke up with her, she came by the Perry house at five in the morning every day, and I almost got fired. But don’t worry, I don’t think she’ll bother you anymore. I told her if she ever did anything like that again, I’d tell her family what she’s been up to. Her dad’s a cop—he won’t stand for that sort of thing.”

“How did you get everyone to agree to turn on their floods?” she asked, stepping into his arms. “Not everyone who’s parked up there was here for the show.”

“I told them that if they turned on their lights, some beautiful girls would appear,” he murmured.

sweeter the second time around

THEY WALKED ON THE BEACH, feeling the cold water wash over their bare feet. Mara leaned her head on Ryan's shoulder. The summer was almost over. It wasn't what she'd thought it would be—she'd realized love wasn't enough. There were chores to consider. Perhaps she and Ryan had rushed into it too soon and taken all the mystery out of it. Living together. They were still so young—they had the rest of their lives to fight over who squeezed the toothpaste from the middle. She decided that if she did end up at Dartmouth, she wouldn't move in with him until sophomore year.

Ryan kissed the top of her head. "Guess what I brought," he said, fishing in his Coach wallet.

He handed her a laminated piece of paper.

It read *Washington Post*. BEHIND THE SEAMS: SYDNEY MINX, by Mara Waters. It was the headline of the profile she'd written earlier that summer, which had been picked up by the Associated Press and distributed to their network.

"Oh my God," Mara said. "The *Washington Post*! That's huge. That's a real newspaper," she told him.

"I know," Ryan said, grinning. "You're a rock star."

"When did you see this?" she asked.

"I put in a search the other day. Your piece showed up in about fifty newspapers. This is the biggest one."

They walked a little more, past the fashion show, and found a private spot behind a dune. She was so touched that he would even remember to look up where her article had been published and that he would keep a copy in his wallet.

"This reminds me of something," Mara said wickedly, pulling Ryan down to the sand.

He rolled over on his back and put his arms underneath his head, looking up at the stars. She cuddled next to him, feeling his warm body on the wet sand.

"What?" he asked sleepily.

"That night we slept on the beach? Remember? That first summer?"

"Mmm . . ." Ryan agreed, his eyes closed.

Mara snuggled up under his chin, marveling at how his lashes lay flat against his fair cheek. He was just so handsome. He was the kind of guy she'd never thought would ever, ever, in a

million years be interested in someone as ordinary as her. But he had stopped being “that guy” anymore. He was just Ryan. Her Ryan.

He rolled on top of her suddenly, pinning her to the ground with his body. “I wanted to do this that night,” he said as he held her arms down with his.

“What stopped you?” Mara asked.

“It was kind of hard to do since you were all zipped up in your own sleeping bag.” He laughed.

“What’s stopping you now?” she asked, looking at him through half-lidded eyes. The sound of the waves crashed behind them.

“Absolutely nothing,” he replied, pulling up his sweater and throwing it over her head so that the two of them disappeared underneath. Thank God it was so roomy. . . .

* * *

Later, back at the boat, Mara was trying to wash the sand out of her jeans. *That’s what you get for having sex in the sand*, she thought, a bit amused. Her hair was mussed, and her lips were red from his kisses. She had been wrong earlier—love *was* enough. Love was all she would need ever. She didn’t want anything else but Ryan. Ryan, Ryan, Ryan. His name was written in the stars above her head in the night sky; she had called his name out again and again.

There was a tap on the bathroom door.

“Come in,” she said, smiling up at him. He was wearing only his boxer shorts, his perfectly sculpted lateral muscles shining in the dim light.

“I found this on the kitchen table,” he said.

He held up the white envelope with a Dartmouth address. “Why haven’t you sent it in yet? Wasn’t it due yesterday?”

Mara was momentarily caught off guard. The acceptance form. She had been meaning to mail it in all week and somehow had never gotten around to it.

She didn’t know what to say. She’d deliberately forgotten to mail it because she was still on the fence about whether to accept their admission. The prospect of turning down Columbia seemed wrongheaded now, especially in light of how quickly she was amassing press clips.

“Anyway, don’t worry about it. I can make another call to the admissions office,” Ryan assured her.

“*Another* call? Ryan, did you do something?” she asked, finding it difficult to breathe. She was starting to get really angry.

Earlier that summer, Ryan had offered to ask his dad, a prominent alum, to put in a word for her application—but she had expressly told him not to. Had he ignored her request? How could he not respect her wishes? How could he go behind her back like that?

“Did you ask your dad to help get me off the wait list at Dartmouth?” she asked, fixing him with a glare.

“What are you talking about?” Ryan asked, offended. “Of course not. You told me not to.”

“But you just said you were going to ‘make another call.’ Don’t lie to me, Ryan,” she threatened. “I’d never lie to you.”

Ryan shook his head. “I only wanted to make sure the two of us could be together. Was that so wrong? Don’t you want to be together? What’s the matter with you?”

“I can’t believe it,” Mara said. “I just can’t believe you would betray me like that.”

She stormed out of the cabin. She had to get away from Ryan just then. He had actually called his dad and asked him to pull some strings on her behalf! He’d actually used his connections to get her off the wait list! How could he? He knew she didn’t approve of that—she had wanted to get in on her own, not because her boyfriend’s dad was golfing buddies with the university president. It was all so . . . so . . . wrong.

He would never understand her.

the runaway bride

“WHAT’S GOING ON?” ZOË ASKED as a crew of workers set up an enormous white tent in the backyard by the pool.

“We’re having a party!” Jacqui said merrily. “Now go put on that pretty dress.”

“Whose birthday is it?” Zoë asked as Jacqui pulled the smocked French linen dress over the little girl’s head.

“It’s your mommy and daddy’s,” Shannon replied, helping Cody into a cute navy blue sailor outfit.

The team from Georgina’s firm were putting the final details on the event—the driveway was being lit with tea light candles, a huge bower of roses had been erected above the front door, and in the backyard were three tents—one for staging, the middle one for dinner and dancing, and a third housing a fully equipped trailer with separate men’s and women’s bathrooms.

Kevin was due to arrive any minute now from Manhattan. He had been so happy to hear that Madison had qualified for the tennis tournament, he had offered to take her out to dinner, just the two of them, for some father-daughter bonding. The kids were all dressed, and Jacqui had succeeded in talking William into wearing a nice shirt and tie.

Unfortunately, they still had no idea where Anna Perry was. She was supposed to have come back from her weeklong trip to the spa in Arizona that morning, but she had yet to arrive.

It was five o’clock in the afternoon. Already the guests were starting to show up: Anna and Kevin’s society friends, Kevin’s parents, a few gossip columnists from the various newspapers.

Jacqui started to panic. If Anna never appeared, she was looking at a full-scale fiasco. Kevin would not be pleased to learn that “Anna” had orchestrated a hundred-thousand-dollar party and then failed to turn up at the event. Jacqui had to do something. Rob Thomas was scheduled to serenade the happy couple any minute now. A jazz trio was quietly playing standards in the patio as guests trickled inside.

She spotted Eliza walking through the front door on Jeremy’s arm. The two of them were giggling, and Eliza was glowing. There was a visible new tenderness between them. Jeremy was wearing a linen suit, and Eliza looked gorgeous in a long white linen dress with a slit up to her knee.

Jacqui greeted the two of them warmly.

Eliza hugged her friend close. Her eyes shone. Part of her wanted to tell Jacqui everything. How Jeremy had surprised her with a reservation at the Bentley Hotel and how they had spent the night in the best room in the house when the hotel staff found out “Eliza Thompson” was staying there. Jeremy had learned there were some benefits to being a princess. And then how Jeremy had taken off her clothes so slowly and with such delicacy, she had almost died from anticipation. She hadn’t even needed to wear the lingerie set. Everything had been perfect, and she hadn’t planned a single thing. She restrained herself from spilling the beans. What had happened the night before was a beautiful secret that she wanted to keep to herself for the time being. The girl who used to suffer from TMI now realized why people didn’t want to kiss and tell.

“You guys, you have to help me,” Jacqui said, skipping the usual pleasantries.

Eliza immediately noted the urgent tone in Jacqui’s voice. “What’s wrong? What do you need?”

“Anna isn’t here.”

“Where is she?”

“I don’t know. I checked her ATM card and tracked it down. She got on the flight, and she took a car from the airport, and she should have been here by now, but no one’s seen her. I don’t know what to do.”

“Calm down,” Jeremy said reassuringly. “She lives here. She’s got to come home at some point.”

“I know, but Rob Thomas—”

“Rob Thomas!” Eliza cackled.

Jeremy raised a questioning eyebrow. “Rob Thomas?”

“Is going to be on that stage in five minutes to serenade the ‘happy couple.’ Kevin is already on his way; he’s going to be here any minute. I don’t even want to think about what’s going to happen if he finds this party and no Anna.”

“Okay, let’s figure it out. Where does Anna usually spend most of her time? Maybe she went there,” Eliza said helpfully.

Jacqui furrowed her brow. Anna . . . where did Anna spend her time. . . . The beauty salon . . . shopping on Main Street . . . but lately, she was always next door, at the Reynolds castle, participating in some drinking game. Jacqui took a quick look around the assembled guests and noticed that the web site guys weren’t at the party yet, which was odd, since they had promised to be there.

“I think I know where she is,” Jacqui said ominously. Duffy thought Anna was an MILF. She wouldn’t put it past him to make a move on an older, married woman. Duffy would probably think of it as just another adventure. Anna probably liked all the attention too. Maybe she shouldn’t have let Anna tag along with her to all those clubs that summer or have introduced her to the web site guys. If Anna had hooked up with some guy half her age, it wouldn’t bode well for a reunion. . . .

The door to the Reynolds castle was unlocked. Jacqui led her friends into the game room, where the Beirut Ping-Pong table was housed. Alas, no one was flicking Ping-Pong balls into the paper cups of beer.

“Ben? Duffy? Grant? Where are you guys?” she called.

For a long moment, there was no sound. The house was empty. *Damn.* Her cell phone rang—it was Georgina, wondering where the Perrys were. Rob was setting up and was ready to sing their song.

“Let’s go; she’s not here,” Jacqui said despondently, kicking at a beach ball with the web site’s logo.

“In here!” a voice called from the kitchen.

They trooped in to find Anna Perry leaning on the kitchen counter, hanging out with the three guys. “Oh, hey, Jacqui,” Anna said. “Eliza, haven’t seen you in a while. And is that Jeremy, who used to work for us?” she called happily, waving them over.

The three guys were all wearing beachy formal wear—Duffy in a tan linen suit, Grant in seersucker, and Ben in a festive guayabera shirt.

“These guys say I’m throwing some big party at our house this evening, but they’re just pulling my leg.” Anna smiled. Her luggage was on the floor, and she looked tan, rested, and happy after her week at the spa. Jacqui was relieved to note Anna wasn’t drinking. The perennial party girl cup of beer was absent from her hands.

“This place is such a mess!” Anna said, spritzing the counter with lemon cleaner and wiping it off energetically. “I thought I’d give them a hand getting it back in shape.”

“Uh, that’s really nice, Anna, but I think Kevin has a surprise for you,” Jacqui said. “You really need to come home now.”

“A surprise?” Anna asked skeptically. “What kind of surprise?”

Just then, the sounds of the first chords of “Accidentally in Love” wafted from across the way.

“A nice surprise.” Eliza grinned.

the perrys fall accidentally in love all over again

WHEN THEY RETURNED TO THE Perrys' backyard, Rob Thomas was onstage with a guitar.

"What's going on?" Anna asked, mystified, but she had the presence of mind to bid hello to all of her society friends. "Why are Kevin's parents here?" She stopped when she saw her bald husband walk through the crowd.

"There's no gazebo!" he kept saying to anyone who would listen. "What's going on?" he asked, turning to Madison, who had yet to explain why there was a full-scale event complete with ten-foot-high chocolate fountains in their backyard.

He stopped when he saw Anna.

The two of them stared at each other.

But before they could say anything to each other, Rob Thomas was leaning into the microphone. "I'd like to dedicate this song to a really special couple, who I'm told are celebrating their fifth wedding anniversary tomorrow. Here's to Anna and Kevin Perry! In this day and age, it's so great to see a couple who can stick together!"

"But how—?" Kevin asked, sputtering.

"Oh, Kevin!" Anna said softly as Rob started singing the song. "Remember when we . . . ?"

Kevin still looked upset. Who were all these people? Why were there three fifty-foot tents set up on his lawn? But when he saw the look on Anna's face, his features relaxed. "You got my e-mails?"

Anna nodded. "Are you serious? You really don't want to go through with it?"

After Shannon had stopped sending them the fake love note e-mails, it turned out that Anna and Kevin had struck up a correspondence after the disastrous lunch at Babette's anyway. Seeing how jealous Kevin had acted had made Anna feel beautiful again, and she had reached out to Kevin with a barrage of flirtatious and tender e-mails that he had actually responded to. Would wonders never cease.

Jacqui, who had been watching with bated breath, exhaled.

"Happy anniversary," Kevin said softly. "I'm glad we're able to celebrate."

"I've missed you," Anna said, putting her hands around his chubby neck.

"I missed you too, babe," Kevin admitted.

The crowd cheered and lifted their glasses in a toast. The Perry kids surrounded their parents (well, their dad and their stepmom) and hugged them happily. Ryan punched his dad on the shoulder and congratulated him on his fifth anniversary. Kevin kissed Anna on the cheek and ruffled the girls' hair and chucked the boys under the chin. Madison and Zoë beamed, while William and Cody ran around them, hooting loudly.

"And I have a surprise of my own," Anna said. "I'm pregnant!"

"You are?" Kevin yelled.

"Three months. That's why I've been so cranky. Hormones. Mood swings. The whole thing. I just found out at the spa." Anna smiled. "And I promise I'll tear up the credit cards."

"I promise I won't work weekends anymore," Kevin replied.

"So you're not getting divorced?" Madison asked.

"Nope, not a chance," Kevin promised.

As they awkwardly slow-danced to the Matchbox Twenty song, Jacqui left them alone and found a stone bench to sit on. She gripped the edge in triumph. She'd done it. The Perrys were going to be together. They would need her to au-pair, and she would be able to complete her fifth year. Her future was safe for the time being. There was still no guarantee she would get accepted into NYU, but she was willing to try again. She would ace those math and science requirements. Jacqui was nothing but determined.

Nothing motivated a girl to succeed like the fear of having to help the spoiled trophy wives of Brazilian billionaires stuff themselves into Gaultier corsets for the rest of her life.

sting was right after all

AS ANNA AND KEVIN PERRY grossed out the younger guests with their suddenly overly passionate reunited-and-it-feels-so-good make-out session in front of the stage, Mara and Ryan were sitting quietly in the hammock in front of the au pair cottage. Mara had come back to the boat late last night, still angry, and had slept in one of the guest berths. The two of them were still technically not speaking to each other, but Mara had promised she would attend the surprise party, and once Ryan had found out what the girls were up to, he'd decided to attend as well. After all, it was his dad they were talking about.

Ryan had pulled her away from the throng, and they had sat down uneasily in the hammock. It was the site of their first kiss—something that couldn't have escaped their notice.

"Look, Mara," he said, sighing deeply. "I did make a call, but it's not what you think. I was going to try and help things along, but you had already gotten in. The only thing I had the admissions office do is hold a place in the dorm next to my fraternity. That was what I meant about us being together. You got in on your own. My dad had nothing to do with it."

"Why didn't you tell me that last night?"

Ryan gripped the hammock cords in frustration. "You were so ready to believe the worst about me. It pissed me off."

"Oh my God, Ryan, I'm so sorry," Mara said. She felt terrible. She'd been so ready to assume that just because he was rich and privileged, he wouldn't be able to resist using his connections to help him get whatever he wanted.

"No, don't be," he replied. "There's no need."

"I think I'm going to go to Columbia," Mara said softly. "I think it's a better fit for me."

"I know," Ryan said glumly, softly kicking back on the grass so that the hammock swayed gently in the evening breeze.

"I'm sorry," Mara said helplessly. "I would never hold you back, you know. All you had to say was that you didn't want to be at Dartmouth, and I would have understood. I just thought you did, so I made all those plans—I wish you'd believe that I only want the best for you," he said softly.

"I know that now. Oh, Ryan, I messed up so many things," Mara cried. It broke her heart to know how much she'd doubted him all summer, thinking that he wasn't supportive of her

ambitions and that he felt resentful of her career, when all along, he'd had the best intentions at heart.

"So what happens now?" Ryan ventured. "With the two of us?"

"We break up," Mara said bravely. She'd given it a lot of thought, lying alone in the V-berth by herself the night before. She'd started out the summer so nervous about her writing skills, intimidated by her boss and her subjects, but now she was confident she could make it as a journalist. At the very least, she wanted to try. Plus, she truly doubted whether she and Ryan really belonged together. Maybe he would be better off with a girl who could share his love of the ocean, not one who wanted to spend the evening in front of a keyboard. She very much hoped she was the girl for him, but she also didn't want to make him miserable, the two of them trying to bend so far back to accommodate each other that they lost sight of who they really were.

Ryan exhaled. "Is that what you want?"

Mara sighed. If you loved somebody, you had to set them free. If they were meant to be together, they would be together, no matter where they ended up. Maybe it would be a year or two years or maybe even after they graduated from college. Someday, she hoped they would find their way back to each other. But she had to take that chance, she had to risk it, for both of their sakes.

"Yeah. I think we need to grow up a little. Both of us."

"I love you," Ryan said, squeezing her hand tightly. "I'll always love you."

"I love you too," Mara said back.

They kissed, and it was a heavenly, soul-searching kiss. It was just like their first kiss on the hammock, but so much deeper, because it was bittersweet.

They went back to the boat to have one last great night together as a couple. And the next day, they would leave as individuals.

a door is closed, but a new window opens

THE TWO LONG BEEPS OUTSIDE the driveway signaled that Eliza had arrived. Jacqui quickly packed up her bags in the au pair cottage. The boys had offered her a ride to the city on the Black Hawk, but she'd declined, wanting to spend a few more hours with her friends. She felt a little wistful that none of the boys had worked out as a boyfriend, but she was eager to go back to New York and everything it offered. In a city of eight million people—there had to be *one* boy who was right for her. She was certain of it.

Shannon was zipping up her carryall, stuffed with the clothes she'd bought on numerous shopping trips with the older girls.

"Thanks for all the help this summer," Jacqui said, offering her a hand.

Shannon shook it. "No problem. It was fun," she said with a wicked smile. "Is it always like this in the Hamptons?"

Jacqui laughed and thought about it. "Pretty much."

"So, I'll see you in the city? And don't worry about me staying with you. Madison said I could stay at their town house when I come to visit. No offense, but I heard their place has a lap pool in the basement."

That girl was too much, Jacqui thought, smiling.

* * *

Eliza was in the driver's seat, leaning on the horn. She had her hair in a high ponytail, and she was wearing Jeremy's work jacket. It made her feel close to him. The two of them had spent the night at his apartment, and he was planning to come visit her in the city before she had to go off to college. Since he had his own company now, he would come up whenever he could, and she'd promised to come down every month. They were going to make it work. He was her one true love, and she wouldn't let go of him.

She had broken the news to her parents the night before. She was going to defer a year at Princeton and apply to Parsons instead. She was serious about becoming a fashion designer, and she wanted to see where this path would take her. All her life she had lived up to someone else's expectations, but she wanted to see what would happen when she tried to live up to her own. Her parents had not taken the news lightly, and they still hoped she would come around—hence the compromise of deferring a year.

* * *

Mara was sitting in the shotgun seat, leafing through the final issue of *Hamptons* magazine. Her column had been a huge success, and for its last installment, Sam had approved a six-page exclusive on the designer whose name was on everyone's fall shopping list—Eliza Thompson. The magazine had a double scoop as well—after the dismal failure of his fall fashion show, Sydney Minx was out of business, and the designer had announced he was going to retire to his French villa. As for Paige McGinley, Eliza had heard that the former high-handed assistant had been reduced to working the counter at Saks, where she could use her skills at flattery to sell women expensive clothing they didn't need.

Mara was going back home to Sturbridge to pack. She and Ryan had said a tearful goodbye that morning, and her eyes were still red from crying. She had to be brave, but already she was wondering if they had acted too quickly. In any case, he wasn't going anywhere. Mara knew exactly where he would be, and Dartmouth wasn't too far away. But they had agreed on no strings. They were free. Free to return to each other as well.

She tried not to feel too sad. After all, there was so much to look forward to. Already, Sam Davis had asked her if she would think about interning at *Metropolitan Circus* during the school year. The general-interest magazine famous for plastering nude pregnant celebrities on its cover had hired her as editor in chief, and Sam Davis was going to back to the New York media world as fast as you could say "private town car."

* * *

Jacqui finally emerged from the front door. She stuffed her bags in the trunk and slid into the backseat.

"Ready?" She smiled at them.

Eliza gunned the engine, and Mara put down the magazine. She plugged her iPod into the auxiliary connection, and the car's stereo reverberated with Gwen Stefani's sultry voice singing, "Your lovin' is better than gold. . . ."

It had been another hectic, arduous summer. The Hamptons had been a wonderful host to their adventures, and they would miss its rocky beaches, its shingled cottages, its rustic yet elegant charm. Perhaps they would come back again, older, wiser, less likely to end up dancing on tables at Cain. Or not.

Whatever happened, they knew they would have each other to turn to for support, advice, love, and friendship. The Hamptons had brought the three of them together, and they would always be grateful for that gift.

And now, New York City beckoned. . . .

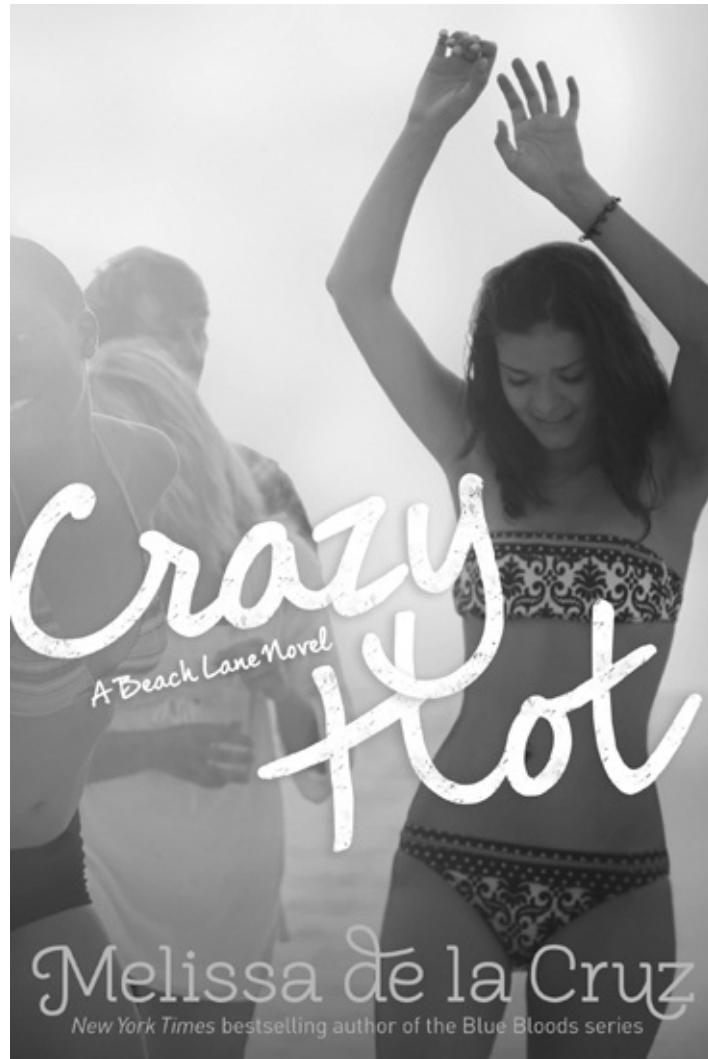
acknowledgments

This book would not have been possible without some high-octane girl power! Shout-outs to my homegirls Siobhan Vivian and Sara Shandler at Alloy Entertainment; the supadupafly chicks over at S&S: Emily Meehan, Jennifer Zatorski, Elizabeth Law, and Tracy van Straaten; and the chic ICM gals: Josie Freedman, Karen Kenyon, and Kate Lee. And where would I be without the boys: mad props to Richard Abate and James Gregorio at ICM; Ben Schrank, Josh Bank, and Les Morgenstein at Alloy Entertainment; and Rick Richter at S&S.

Very special thanks and love to all my family: Mommy-Papa-Chito-Aina-Steve-Nico-and-the-one-on-the-way, Mom-J-Dad-J-John-Anji-Alex-Tim-Rob-Jenn-Val-and-Lily, and all of my insanely wonderful friends—you know who you are (see the back pages of all my other books!)—especially MaryClare Williams, the coolest surfer chick in Malibu; the fabulous Jennie Kim, my MySpace webmistress; and the awesome Arisa Chen, who keeps my home page looking good.

As always, thanks and love to Mike “My Husband” Johnston, who for a long time was known as Mike “My Boyfriend” Johnston because I could never say his name without giving him his full title. Thanks for living on takeout for the last two months. We can eat real food now.

The girls are in for a great final summer together!



eliza is *not* the new au pair

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Once she was safely past the offending family-mobile, Eliza patted the steering wheel and tightened the silk Hermès scarf holding back her long, platinum blond hair. With her Chloé sunglasses and her white halter dress, Eliza felt like she'd come straight out of the movie *Casablanca*. The dress was one of her own designs, inspired by the scene in which Ingrid Bergman and Humphrey Bogart explore the Parisian countryside in a convertible not so terribly unlike Eliza's own.

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Eliza kept her hands by her side. “I think there's been some kind of mistake,” she said hesitantly. “I'm Eliza Thompson.”

“Honey, is it the au pair?” a female voice called from inside.

Rupert's smarmy leer only deepened. “I certainly hope so.” He winked.

“I'm not the au pair. I live here. Or at least, my family does. During the summer. This is our house.” She ignored the sleazy up-and-down look he gave her and dug her phone out of her purse, speed-dialing her father.

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"It's right off Dune Drive," her father said. "You can't miss it. It's the largest one on the block, with all the Greek and Roman statuary out front. Turn left at the Pietà."

Eliza sighed. She didn't have much of a choice. She walked back down the steps and toward her car, ignoring Rupert Thorne as he called after her, asking if the au pair wanted to come play house.

* * *

Eliza's dad was right: she definitely wasn't in any danger of missing Suzy's house. If the Thompsons' "cottage" was the epitome of a Gatsby-like Hamptons past, Suzy's home was decidedly the Hamptons future. It positively screamed new money, with its elaborate mailbox—an exact replica of the house itself—and a massive roof that made it look like the house was sinking into the ground under its own weight. Until now, the Reynolds Castle had been the largest and most ostentatious house in the Hamptons, but the Finnemore mega-mansion certainly gave it a run for its money. And Eliza was going to have to call this monstrosity home for the whole summer?

A white-jacketed butler took her bags, and another servant led her to the terrace. Her father was splayed out in a lawn chair, a pitcher of margaritas by his side, and Suzy sat next to him, holding a BlackBerry and jiggling a six-month-old baby in a Björn carrier. A portable Sony plasma television was set up in front of her, and on the screen was a view of the stock exchange. The shrieking sounds Eliza had heard on the phone were of traders screeching orders to their runners.

"Hey." Eliza nodded at both of them and then bent to give her father a kiss on the cheek. She'd met Suzy a couple of times before and didn't think of her as a woman so much as a blur—she was always on the move, with her three constantly ringing cell phones, two hovering assistants, and her trademark mane of frizzy red hair. For the life of her, Eliza couldn't figure out why Suzy didn't just have it straightened. She could certainly afford it.

"This is Cassidy." Suzy smiled, motioning to the baby as she texted furiously with one hand. "I know it's an unusual name for a boy, but I've always loved the name and was worried this might be my last shot to use it!" She turned her attention away from the BlackBerry for a moment to beam down at the baby boy in her arms. "And sorry for the chaos—the au pair is supposed to arrive today and *of course* she's already late."

Eliza took a glance around. What chaos? There were three kids sitting quietly on lounge chairs by the pool, two of them playing chess and one reading. It was downright peaceful—so different from what she'd encountered that first day at the Perrys' when she was their au pair

for the summer. She shuddered just thinking about it. Thank God she'd never have to do *that* again.

Suzy followed Eliza's eyes. She gestured to the two boys hunched over the chess table. "Logan is the regional champ in the under-ten category. We're traveling to D.C. this fall for nationals," she said proudly. The somber-looking seven-year-old wore a pair of round glasses that gave him an owl-like demeanor. "Logan is teaching Wyatt how to play chess," Suzy added. Eliza looked across from Logan to the chubby little five-year-old who sat across from him, his forehead wrinkled in intense concentration. She'd never seen children who sat so perfectly *still*.

"And that's Jackson with the book. He and Logan are twins, obviously." Jackson was a carbon copy of his brother, down to the owl glasses.

"Obviously," Eliza agreed, trying to keep the shock and awe out of her voice. Jackson was reading *The Greatest Story Ever Sold: The Decline and Fall of Truth from 9/11 to Katrina*. She raised an eyebrow. Whatever happened to comic books?

"The author was on CNN the other day and Jackson insisted on getting his book." Suzy sighed with a wry smile. "It's like that with everybody who comes on that channel! I can never get him to watch anything else."

"Oh," Eliza said simply. She didn't even watch CNN now.

"And that's Violet, behind me," Suzy tilted her head backward and Eliza looked past her to see a thin, pale girl seated at a patio table, hunched over her computer. She'd been so quiet, Eliza hadn't even noticed she was there. "She's first in her class at Horace Mann," Suzy whispered, leaning toward Eliza. "But she gets embarrassed when I tell people that." She turned toward her daughter and called out to her. "Violet, honey! Say hi to Eliza!"

Violet peeked over the screen of her laptop. "Oh, hi," she said shyly, not coming out from behind her computer.

"Nice to meet you, Violet," Eliza called out. She couldn't help but mentally compare Suzy's passel of wunderkids to the Perry kids and their many developmental problems.

"Are you the au pair?" Violet looked at Eliza quizzically.

"No." Eliza shook her head. "No, I'm not." And then she smiled. Even if the Finnemores did seem like perfect children, she knew all too well that looks can be awfully deceiving.

Also by Melissa de la Cruz

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Beach Lane: Skinny-dipping

Beach Lane: Crazy Hot

Angels on Sunset Boulevard

Girl Stays in the Picture

The Ashleys

The Ashleys: Jealous?

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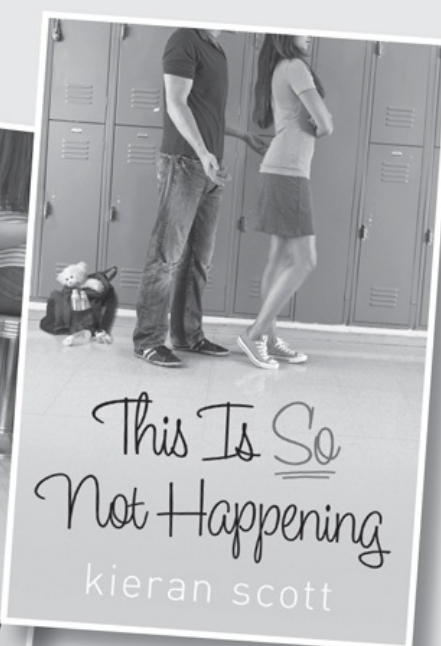
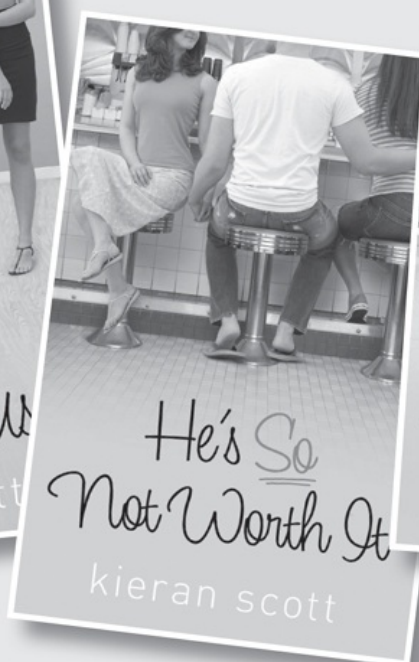
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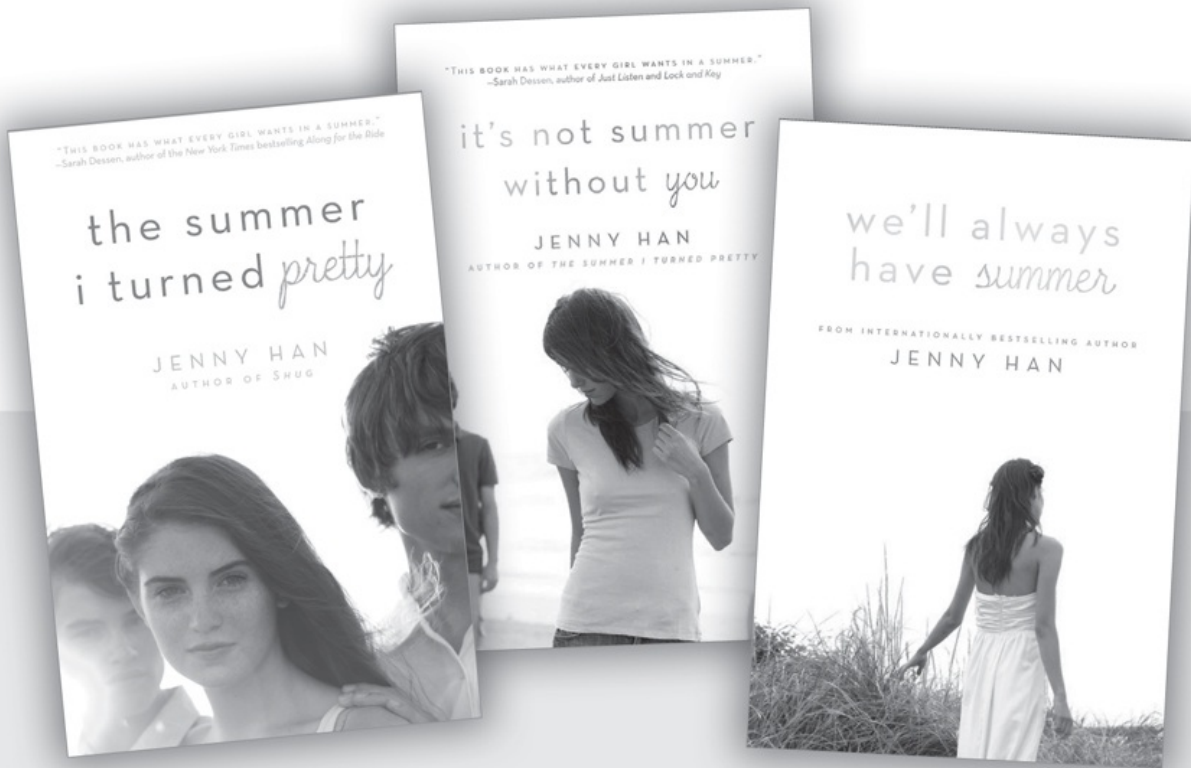
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A young woman with long dark hair, wearing a black and white patterned bikini, is dancing with her arms raised in the air. She is smiling and looking down. The background is a warm, golden sunset over a beach. Other people are visible in the background, also dancing. The overall mood is festive and romantic.

Crazy Hot

A Beach Lane Novel

Melissa de la Cruz

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Crazy Hot

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For Mike and Mattie

*Live your life with arms wide open,
Today is when your book begins,
The rest is still unwritten.*

—Natasha Bedingfield, “Unwritten”

Don't waste your youth growing up.

—Anonymous

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Eliza sighed. She didn't have much of a choice. She walked back down the steps and toward her car, ignoring Rupert Thorne as he called after her, asking if the au pair wanted to come play house.

* * *

Eliza's dad was right: she definitely wasn't in any danger of missing Suzy's house. If the Thompsons' "cottage" was the epitome of a Gatsby-like Hamptons past, Suzy's home was decidedly the Hamptons future. It positively screamed new money, with its elaborate mailbox—an exact replica of the house itself—and a massive roof that made it look like the house was sinking into the ground under its own weight. Until now, the Reynolds Castle had been the largest and most ostentatious house in the Hamptons, but the Finnemore mega-mansion certainly gave it a run for its money. And Eliza was going to have to call this monstrosity home for the whole summer?

A white-jacketed butler took her bags, and another servant led her to the terrace. Her father was splayed out in a lawn chair, a pitcher of margaritas by his side, and Suzy sat next to him, holding a BlackBerry and jiggling a six-month-old baby in a Björn carrier. A portable Sony plasma television was set up in front of her, and on the screen was a view of the stock exchange. The shrieking sounds Eliza had heard on the phone were of traders screeching orders to their runners.

"Hey." Eliza nodded at both of them and then bent to give her father a kiss on the cheek. She'd met Suzy a couple of times before and didn't think of her as a woman so much as a blur—she was always on the move, with her three constantly ringing cell phones, two hovering assistants, and her trademark mane of frizzy red hair. For the life of her, Eliza couldn't figure out why Suzy didn't just have it straightened. She could certainly afford it.

"This is Cassidy." Suzy smiled, motioning to the baby as she texted furiously with one hand. "I know it's an unusual name for a boy, but I've always loved the name and was worried this might be my last shot to use it!" She turned her attention away from the BlackBerry for a moment to beam down at the baby boy in her arms. "And sorry for the chaos—the au pair is supposed to arrive today and *of course* she's already late."

Eliza took a glance around. What chaos? There were three kids sitting quietly on lounge chairs by the pool, two of them playing chess and one reading. It was downright peaceful—so different from what she'd encountered that first day at the Perrys' when she was their au pair

for the summer. She shuddered just thinking about it. Thank God she'd never have to do *that* again.

Suzy followed Eliza's eyes. She gestured to the two boys hunched over the chess table. "Logan is the regional champ in the under-ten category. We're traveling to D.C. this fall for nationals," she said proudly. The somber-looking seven-year-old wore a pair of round glasses that gave him an owl-like demeanor. "Logan is teaching Wyatt how to play chess," Suzy added. Eliza looked across from Logan to the chubby little five-year-old who sat across from him, his forehead wrinkled in intense concentration. She'd never seen children who sat so perfectly *still*.

"And that's Jackson with the book. He and Logan are twins, obviously." Jackson was a carbon copy of his brother, down to the owl glasses.

"Obviously," Eliza agreed, trying to keep the shock and awe out of her voice. Jackson was reading *The Greatest Story Ever Sold: The Decline and Fall of Truth from 9/11 to Katrina*. She raised an eyebrow. Whatever happened to comic books?

"The author was on CNN the other day and Jackson insisted on getting his book." Suzy sighed with a wry smile. "It's like that with everybody who comes on that channel! I can never get him to watch anything else."

"Oh," Eliza said simply. She didn't even watch CNN now.

"And that's Violet, behind me," Suzy tilted her head backward and Eliza looked past her to see a thin, pale girl seated at a patio table, hunched over her computer. She'd been so quiet, Eliza hadn't even noticed she was there. "She's first in her class at Horace Mann," Suzy whispered, leaning toward Eliza. "But she gets embarrassed when I tell people that." She turned toward her daughter and called out to her. "Violet, honey! Say hi to Eliza!"

Violet peeked over the screen of her laptop. "Oh, hi," she said shyly, not coming out from behind her computer.

"Nice to meet you, Violet," Eliza called out. She couldn't help but mentally compare Suzy's passel of wunderkids to the Perry kids and their many developmental problems.

"Are you the au pair?" Violet looked at Eliza quizzically.

"No." Eliza shook her head. "No, I'm not." And then she smiled. Even if the Finnemores did seem like perfect children, she knew all too well that looks can be awfully deceiving.

jacqui discovers that even the best-laid plans often go awry

JACQUI VELASCO WOKE UP TO the bright june sun shining through the window of her Upper East Side studio. She took one glance at the purple NYU sticker on the glass and smiled. It was going to be a great day. Every day was a great day ever since she'd gotten accepted into NYU. Finally. Her fifth year at St. Grace had been absolute torture—she'd had to take precalculus to finish the math requirements and qualify for admission—but it had all been worth it when she received the fat envelope she'd been waiting for since last April. Jacqui threw her arms above her head with a big yawn, gave the sticker a little kiss, and started to get ready.

She was officially in, officially accepted, and ready to begin her freshman year in September. Tuition was expensive, and as a foreign student Jacqui hadn't gotten much financial aid, but thankfully one more summer with the Perrys would take care of her contribution for her first year. She pulled on one of her usual kid-friendly-but-still-New-York-savvy outfits—comfortable but skintight J Brand skinny jeans with a long cotton tunic (machine washable for spit-up stains), and a pair of French Sole ballet flats—and tied her long, ebony locks back into a practical ponytail.

Jacqui headed out the door and toward the Perrys' town house, just a short walk away. The family was leaving for the Hamptons the next day, and Jacqui had to make sure all the kids were packed and ready to go. There were only three of them this time—the girls, thirteen-year-old Madison and nine-year-old Zoë, were spending the summer at an Australian tennis camp, which left only William, Cody, and new baby Eloise.

“Hey, everybody! I'm here!” she called as she closed the Perrys' town house door behind her. But when she made her way into the living room, she was met with not the usual “everybody” but instead a very odd assortment of people.

Ten fat, matronly women, to be exact. All of them with ruddy, chubby cheeks and sweet cherubic smiles. Add flat hats, carpetbags, and black umbrellas, and you would have ten Mary Poppinses.

Jacqui's skin prickled in warning. What was going on here?

“Uh, hi,” she addressed the group, closing the door behind her and shoving the front door key back into her purse.

“Hello, dear, are you here about the position?” one of the women asked in a cheerful British accent. She looked Jacqui up and down. “What part of London are you from? You

don't look like a local."

"London?" Jacqui echoed, a foreboding feeling rising in her chest. "No, I—where's Anna?" She didn't wait for an answer and instead strode purposefully through the room and toward the heart of the house. William, twelve and already almost as tall as she was, rolled down the marble hallway on his skateboard. He looked more like his big brother, Ryan, every day. "Hey, Bill—where's Anna?"

William gestured toward the kitchen as he kept rolling by.

Jacqui quickened her steps, practically running into Madison as she turned the corner. Madison looked trim in her tennis whites, swinging a Dunlop racket. Her face lit up when she saw Jacqui. "Hey! I'm leaving for Sydney tonight, but I hope you come visit!"

"To Sydney?" Jacqui winked. "How about I see you when you get back?"

"When I get back?" Madison's brow furrowed. She strummed a finger along the taut strings of her tennis racket. "Anna hasn't told you?"

"Told me what?" The anxious feeling in Jacqui's chest began to expand.

"That's just like her and Dad. Ugh!" Madison leaned in and gave Jacqui a quick, close hug. "But anyway, don't forget—e-mail me!" With that she trotted off, swinging her racket lightly as she went.

Jacqui shook her shoulders and continued to the kitchen, where she found Anna looking flustered, holding her phone close to her ear and scribbling notes on a yellow legal pad. Baby Eloise sat in her high chair, cheerfully throwing rice cereal everywhere, but Anna didn't seem to notice.

Anna held up a manicured fingernail when she saw Jacqui, mouthing, "One second." Jacqui immediately went to work, wiping Eloise's mouth and tray and scooping the baby up as she began to cry. She was bouncing her on her hip when Anna finally snapped her phone shut.

"Jacqui, you're here. Thank God. It's been such a horrid morning. Of course everything has to happen at the last minute." Anna rubbed her temples and took a gulp of coffee from the mug in front of her.

"What's going on? Who are all those people in the foyer?" Jacqui was both dying to know and totally afraid to hear the answer.

"Oh, right—they're candidates. Of course I have to find a baby nurse and a nanny in less than twenty-four hours!" Anna sighed in her usual melodramatic fashion.

"Excuse me?" Jacqui started. A nanny? Wasn't that pretty much *her* job?

"Didn't we tell you—oh, of course not. You weren't here last week," Anna said a bit peevishly.

Last week Jacqui had gone to Brazil to visit her family, a belated graduation gift from the Perrys. She'd spent the week bonding with her grandmother in São Paulo and her family in Campinas, getting reacquainted with her younger brothers—whom, she thought sadly, she

knew less about than Cody and William. It was great of the Perrys to pay for her ticket, but why was it that every time they did something nice for her, there was a catch?

Anna took out her bottle of Vicodin and popped two pills. She'd scheduled a C-section to deliver Eloise and then had liposuction and a tummy tuck (apparently standard procedure with Upper East Side deliveries), but that had been nine months ago and she was still hoovering painkillers. "The fact is, we're moving to London," Anna said crisply, taking a sip of water. "Kevin's opening up a branch of the law firm there, and we've got to move immediately. Some big trial or something to do with the royal family and Diana's butler." Anna closed the Vicodin container and rolled her eyes, although Jacqui knew there was nothing her employer liked better than to drop (clang!) such big names. "And we've been invited to Highgrove for some big dinner—you know, with the Prince of Wales." This time there was giggling to accompany the name-dropping. "It's tomorrow night. I wonder if Camilla is as much of a bowwow as she is in pictures?"

"Oh." Jacqui was startled. "London? Tomorrow?"

"I know, it's a shock to me too, but Kevin's already found us the most darling little pad near Hyde Park." Anna finally noticed the rice cereal Eloise had been throwing and moved the bowl out of her reach. "It's next to Madonna and Guy!" (Clang! Clang!) She turned to face Jacqui again. "Be a dear and help me with the interviews—you know the kids so well, you can pick a good replacement, can't you?"

For a moment, Jacqui was too stunned to say anything. She froze, trying to process everything Anna had just said.

"I really am sorry, but it looks like we won't be needing you this summer after all, especially since we need someone who can stick out the whole year, and with you off to college and all . . ." Anna's shoulders rose in an exaggerated shrug, and she knit her eyebrows in concern. "But I hope this will cover it. . . ." She fished out an envelope from her red patent leather Jimmy Choo Ramona handbag and extended it toward Jacqui. "It's not for the whole three months—more like a severance."

Jacqui automatically stuck out her hand and took the envelope, mumbling, "Thank you." She stood there numbly, her arm still extended, unable to move.

Anna waved a hand. "And of course we'll need the keys back to the studio. But take your time. Kevin's decided to sublet it for the summer, but you can take two weeks to find a new place." She squeezed Jacqui's shoulder. "Don't worry, I'll give you a great reference, and you shouldn't have a problem finding another family in the city to work for."

Anna's cell phone rang, and she smiled at Jacqui and nodded definitively, as if to say, "We're done here." She picked up her cell phone and resumed her busy travel arrangements.

Jacqui nodded, her throat dry. Just like that, in one fell swoop, she was unemployed and homeless. What now?

mara finds it's a lonesome planet indeed

MARA WATERS HUSTLED THROUGH JFK with a brisk, confident step. She'd just finished her first year at Columbia, acing all her finals and scoring an almost perfect GPA. She smiled just thinking about it. Mara had quickly discovered she was one of those girls who were made for college. In high school she'd been "just Mara"—pretty smart, pretty nice, pretty average all around. But with the polish and poise she'd gained from summers in the Hamptons—not to mention discovering the wonders of butterscotch highlights and professional eyebrow tweezing—she had turned into "that Mara."

As in, that Mara who had thrown the biggest bash the dorm had ever seen (what better training than those numerous Hamptons soirees?). That Mara who had the best clothes of any freshman—hello, her best friend was Eliza Thompson, up-and-coming designer. And that Mara who'd snagged the best internship in the city freshman year. Her old boss from *Hamptons* magazine had been true to her word and had put her on staff at *Metropolitan Circus*.

"You got everything?" David's voice broke into her thoughts. She adjusted the handle on her bag, hoping that it wouldn't burst open to reveal all of her underwear to the entire airport. "With a bag that overstuffed, I certainly hope so," he teased, and kept on walking.

That Mara was also dating "the David." As in, the David who was editor in chief of the *Spectator*, the college newspaper, as well as the David who lived off campus in his own sweet bachelor pad in Trump Place, with a view of the Hudson River from his bedroom window. The David who was president of St. Anthony's Hall—better known as St. A.'s—the snobbiest and most elite fraternity on campus, with its sprawling mansion on Riverside Drive.

And that Mara and the David made the perfect couple, particularly because they had all of the same interests. David was an aspiring writer as well, and Mara thought that if they ended up together, they could have one of those Joan Didion–John Dunne relationships—editing and critiquing each other's work while vacationing at the Four Seasons in Maui.

"Wait up! It's no fair—you've got longer legs!" She giggled as she quickened her pace and tried to catch up with him, her rolling suitcase jostling around behind her as she went.

They were off to Brussels, the first stop on their Lonesome Planet agenda. The two of them had been picked to write the latest European edition of the student-friendly travel guidebook, and Mara was looking forward to spending the whole summer in the most romantic places on earth with David—discovering the hidden treasures of Florence, Venice, Paris, London, Prague, and a host of other fabulous cities. She couldn't wipe the smile from her face when she thought of it: the two of them comparing notes, writing pieces, and sharing

everything from croissants to gondola rides. Okay, so maybe the gondolas were a bit of a fantasy—the Lonesome Planet guides were specifically about the cheapest and most out-of-the-way locations, which meant they wouldn't exactly be splurging on tourist attractions or staying in five-star hotels. But still . . .

“Mar, we have to hurry!” David called back to her as they raced up to the check-in counter. Mara bounded up beside him and he placed their bags on the scale.

“We're on the ten thirty to Brussels,” Mara said breathlessly. “We have e-tickets.”

The airline employee gave them a brisk nod. “May I see your passports, please?”

David slid his forward while Mara fished in her purse, finally pulling hers out and placing it on the counter with a loud *thwack*. While the agent looked over their passports David leaned in and gave her a quick peck on the cheek, stroking her sleeve.

“This one is fine,” the agent said, handing David's passport back to him along with a boarding pass. “But this one is expired.” She pointed to Mara's beaten-up passport, which she'd gotten ages ago but had barely used until the past few years. “Do you have your new one?”

“Oh no!” Mara exclaimed.

“You didn't!” David's face fell. “I told you.”

He had. He had left sticky notes all over her dorm room reminding her to make sure her passport was current—with exclamation points and the occasional smiley face. She had used it last during her trip to Cabo with the girls and she'd been sure it was still good and had meant to check, but with finals, and finals parties, and, well . . .

The people in line behind them shuffled their bags forward, antsy to get their boarding passes. “Hey, what's the holdup?” an angry-looking woman with a mop of frizzy dark hair asked crabbily.

“Oh my God. I'm so sorry.” Mara felt herself flush red as she grabbed her bag again and they stepped away from the counter.

“We're going to miss our flight.” David's forehead wrinkled in concern.

“Hey.” Mara cupped his face in her hands. “I know it sucks, but it'll be fine. I'll get a new one tomorrow, and we'll only be delayed a day.”

David smiled and seemed to relax. “You're right,” he said, pulling out his phone. “I'll call the Lonesome Planet office and let them know what happened.” He dialed and placed the phone to his ear. “It's ringing,” he whispered, cupping a hand over the speaker. “Hi, can I have the assignment office, please? It's David Preston. Listen, there's been a little problem. . . .”

He walked away as he talked to their editor, pacing back and forth. Mara thought she heard him raising his voice, but she bit her lip and focused on the departures board, patiently waiting until he came back.

She watched as David snapped the phone shut and walked back to her, his brow wrinkled again. “What did they say?”

“Well, it’s sort of complicated.” David looked down and started to play with the tag on Mara’s luggage. “It’s Saturday, and the post office is closed. So the earliest you can get it renewed is Monday, which means the earliest we can leave is Tuesday. We’re supposed to have covered Brussels and be in Madrid by then.”

“So . . . what does that mean exactly?” Mara wasn’t sure she wanted to know the answer.

“The three days throw off their schedule completely. Everything’s already pre-booked. And they’ve got someone who can cover for you. She’s already in Brussels.” David put a hand on her arm. “Mara, I’m sorry, but . . . they fired you.”

Mara felt the tears start to bubble up in her eyes. He brought her in for a hug, wrapping his arms tightly around her waist.

“How could they?” she whispered, nuzzling David’s shoulder. She stepped back and shook her shoulders, trying to regroup. They could still have a great summer. They were together, and that was all that mattered. “Well, it’s not the end of the world. . . . We can still travel Europe together . . . and now we don’t have to stay in all those dumpy hostels!” She looked up at David, hoping to find him smiling.

Instead, he looked worried. He glanced down at his watch.

“You can’t be serious,” she said flatly, realizing there was only one reason he’d be checking the time.

“Mar—”

“I mean, you’re still thinking of going? After they fired me for a tiny little mistake?” She felt herself go pale with shock.

“I mean . . . it’s sort of a big mistake, Mar. And I did remind you to get your passport renewed,” he pointed out. “About a hundred times.”

“You know how busy I was!” Mara heard herself start to whine. “I had that story due for the magazine and my dinosaurs final!” Like many English majors, Mara was fulfilling Columbia’s two-semester science requirement by taking a class on prehistoric reptiles. So far she’d only used the course information to compare her college acquaintances to the various species of dinosaurs. Her professor was a total stegosaurus—hunchbacked and scaly.

“Mar, I’m really sorry. But you know this is a huge opportunity for me. . . . If I want to get a job at the *Times* after graduation, they’re really going to look at what I did with my summers. I’d be writing a whole book!”

“It’s a guidebook,” Mara corrected, feeling herself start to pout.

“It’s a start.” He checked his watch again. “Look, if I don’t go now, I’ll miss my flight.”

“It was *our* flight just a few seconds ago,” Mara said, unable to keep the bitterness out of her voice.

“I know this totally blows, but I swear, if you were in the same position, I would understand. I wouldn’t want you to miss out on this chance.” He grabbed her hand, his eyes pleading. “Please, Mara. It’s something I really feel I need to do.”

“If it were me, you’d just let me go?” Mara asked skeptically.

David shrugged. “I would never get in the way of your dreams.” He looked down at the floor again. “You know, maybe part of you just didn’t want this that much. I mean, if you had, you would have remembered to renew your passport, right?” He looked up and into her eyes, and she watched him transform from loving boyfriend to ambitious young writer. “This is a job, Mara, not a vacation. Maybe you’re just . . . not cut out to be a journalist.”

Mara was speechless. Didn’t want this that much? She was the one who had found the listing on the college job board! The one who had hounded the two of them to apply! She was the one who’d never been to Europe before!

David rocked back and forth on his New Balance sneakers, waiting for her to say something.

She sighed. “Go,” she said finally.

“Yeah?” He tilted his head and looked into her eyes. “You’re okay, right?”

“Just go, David.” She nodded, a defeated half smile curving her lips. He was right. She didn’t want to stand in the way of his dreams, and it was her fault for not being more responsible. It was totally unfair that one little mistake would cost her an entire summer, but Mara had lived long enough to realize that sometimes, the Rolling Stones were right on the money—you can’t always get what you want.

He gave her a kiss on the forehead. “You’re the best. I’ll call you from the hostel. Love you.” With that, he turned and raced off to the gate.

Mara stared at his retreating back, still clutching her expired passport. A few minutes ago, she’d been ready to board a plane to Europe, but now her perfect summer—not to mention her perfect boyfriend—was vanishing right before her eyes.

au pair means “extra set of hands” in french. so why not have two?

“**AND THIS**”—ELIZA POSED DRAMATICALLY in the shop window—“is where the cotton candy machine is going.”

“The cotton candy machine?” Jeremy chuckled, shaking his head.

“It’s edible pink!” Eliza squealed. She ducked her head so she wouldn’t hit the ceiling and climbed off the ledge in front of the shop window, making sure not to topple over on her four-inch Yves Saint Laurent platforms. “Isn’t that such a great idea? It’s going to be like a carnival of pink in here!”

Jeremy smiled. “Except for the clothes, of course.” He turned to marvel at the racks of clothing neatly lined up by the wall, still wrapped in dry-cleaning plastic.

“Of course.” Eliza flicked her wrist in mock-diva fashion. “I mean, please, no one actually wears pink. It’s cute, but strictly for babies.” Eliza’s summer collection was completely monochromatic—just as everything in her fall collection had been black, for summer everything in the store would be white: white bikinis, white sundresses, white capri pants, white jeans, white caftans, the perfect white button-down shirts. It was a perfectly Hamptons-pleasing collection. Eliza knew lots of girls who never wore any other hue for all three months—in fact, she was one of them. With the all-pink walls, the handful of pink Pucci chairs, the aquarium filled with pink tropical fish, and the pink cotton candy machine, the white clothes would stand out all the more, practically screaming for attention.

“And we’ll put the mannequin here—the one based on Marilyn Monroe in *The Seven Year Itch*.” Eliza giggled, standing in front of the fan and trying to keep her skirt down, just like her idol once had on top of a subway grate. “I mean, that is the most iconic white dress in history.”

“You’re nuts,” Jeremy said fondly, coming up to stroke her hair. “But you’re my nut.”

“Can you believe I have this store? I had to raid my trust fund to do it, but whatever.” Eliza whooped. “This is huge, J. I mean, this is, like, so scary, but so exciting.”

“Speaking of exciting,” he said, sweeping her into his arms. “I wanted to tell you about what happened to me today. . . .”

Before he could finish his sentence, the front door whipped open with a clang, and a harassed-looking Swedish girl tumbled in.

“Is this Eliza Thompson shop?” the girl asked.

“Yes, it is,” Eliza said, untangling herself from Jeremy’s embrace. “But I’m afraid we’re not open for business yet.”

From behind the girl, Suzy’s wunderkids from earlier that morning appeared, fanning out inside the store. Violet started gently fingering the clothing, as if afraid it might jump up and bite her, while the little boys dispersed in every direction.

“Are those fighting fish?” Logan asked, coming up to the aquarium and pressing his nose against the glass. The startled fish fled from his magnified face, scattering throughout the tank.

“This is crooked.” Jackson straightened a framed photograph of Marlene Dietrich in a white tuxedo that was hung low by the sweater table, getting fingerprints all over the carefully buffed frame.

Wyatt came up to Eliza and tapped her on her shin. “I have to pee,” he whispered, cupping a hand over his mouth as if he were sharing a big secret.

“Yes, they’re fighting fish,” Eliza told Logan as she began to steer Wyatt toward the bathroom. They were perfectly sweet kids, but really, what were they doing in her store?

“This is silk? Where is it made?” Violet held up a white pareo, reading the tag as if it were an information plaque at a museum.

“Actually, the silk comes from a farm in Thailand where the silkworms only eat organic leaves.” Eliza smiled, feeling a small surge of pride. She turned to the Swedish girl. “What’s going on?”

“I leaving. I get modeling contract. Miss Suzy said Mr. Thompson say you will deal with children—you were also au pair.”

“My father said *what?*” Eliza felt herself turning red. Of *course* her father would assume she had nothing better to do than babysit his girlfriend’s children—he’d never really taken her fashion design career seriously. He’d been totally miffed when she postponed Princeton for Parsons.

“I leaving,” the girl said again, removing the Björn carrier from her chest and handing the baby to Eliza.

Eliza looked down, completely perplexed. How had she wound up with a six-month-old in her arms? Cassidy cooed and gurgled, and she felt her heart melting at the sight of him. But really—she had no time for child care this summer. She had a business to run. “Hey, you can’t just—wait!” she called after the Swedish au pair, but the girl was already out the door.

Eliza turned to find Jeremy giving Wyatt a piggyback ride from the bathroom, while Logan and Jackson each clung to one of his knees, mirror images of each other. He approached Violet, who was standing by one of the racks of clothing, looking like she didn’t know what to do with herself. “You want to try on some clothes later? When everything’s all set up?” he asked.

“Okay,” she said with a shy smile, nodding.

“Sounds good. But how about we all clear out of here for now and let Eliza finish her work. There’s an outdoor circus down the block.” He gently set Wyatt down and then took the baby from Eliza’s arms. “I’ll take them for a while, don’t worry,” he told her, giving her a quick kiss on the cheek.

“Thanks.” She nodded gratefully. Her eyes misted. She’d forgotten how good Jeremy was with children. He was going to be an awesome father someday—some far, far distant day in the future.

When Jeremy had every last kid out the door, Eliza stopped to think. So Suzy needed an au pair, did she? Maybe even two au pairs? There were four kids and a baby, after all. Quite a handful.

Eliza knew just who to call—if it wasn’t too late.

jacqui finds comfort in a stranger

JACQUI WALKED OUT OF THE Perrys' town house feeling like she'd just been sucker punched. All of her plans—her well-laid plans—had disappeared in a puff of smoke. Or, more precisely, in an invitation from Buckingham Palace. Jacqui took the envelope Anna had given her out of her bag and peeked at the check. Looking at all the zeros, she instantly felt a little better. Still, it wasn't nearly enough to cover the entire first year's tuition, especially if she was going to have to find a new place to live for three months on top of that. What good was getting accepted into NYU if she couldn't actually afford to go?

Jacqui made peanuts at Daslu, the designer store in Brazil she'd be forced to work at if she went home—the job was all about the free clothes, which weren't going to pay for college. She pictured the NYU admissions office opening the envelope with her contribution in it and finding a Versace gown instead of a check. She tried to laugh at the image but instead found herself blinking back tears. It felt just like last year when she'd been told she was a perfect candidate except for the whole math requirement—close, but no cigar. She wiped her eyes. There would be no NYU in the fall.

Jacqui walked blindly through the streets of New York, not knowing or caring where she was going. She went up Fifth Avenue, past a construction site—they were no doubt building another set of ten-million-dollar luxury apartments, as if the city needed more—and tried not to notice the construction workers leering at her.

“Baby, don't look so glum—I'll cheer you up!” one of them shouted at her as she walked past, but she just threw him a dirty look and kept walking.

Jacqui used to be flattered when men ogled her, but now she was just disgusted.

Someone had once told her that even in a city full of beautiful women, she stood out like an orchid among roses. But what had being pretty really gotten her in the long run? She looked at herself in a shined-to-perfection shop window, taking in her razor-sharp cheekbones and lustrous dark eyes. Her whole life, Jacqui had wanted to prove that she was more than just an amazing body and a beautiful face. It had been so difficult for her to take the embarrassing fifth year of high school, getting left behind as her friends went to college and regaled her with their success stories. She didn't resent Eliza and Mara's accomplishments, but she did wish she had a few of her own under her belt. Being beautiful didn't seem like an achievement—she'd done nothing to deserve her good looks, other than winning the genetic lottery.

Without realizing where her feet were taking her, Jacqui found herself in the middle of Central Park. She spotted a park bench and sat down, watching a family of mallard ducks

float on the pond. She wondered if they were hungry and wished she had something to feed them. Whenever Jacqui took the Perry kids here, she thought of Holden Caulfield in *The Catcher in the Rye* and his fascination with the ducks—he always wondered where the ducks went in the winter and why, despite the inhospitable cold of New York City, they always came back. Why did they try to live in Manhattan when it obviously wasn't a place for a duck? It clearly wasn't a place for a poor girl from Brazil, either. Jacqui felt the tears coming again and blinked furiously.

She'd been kidding herself, thinking that she fit in here. The Perrys had been her substitute family, so much so that she didn't even know her real family anymore. But when it came down to it, she was still considered the help. Help that could so easily be dismissed. It was a painful wake-up call.

I'm not going to cry, I'm not going to cry, she thought fiercely, even as two fat tears slid down her cheeks and plopped onto her lap, staining her whiskered jeans.

She blinked to find a white cotton handkerchief being held under her nose.

"Oh. Thank you," she said gratefully, keeping her eyes to the ground. She blew her nose on the handkerchief, taking in the sweet smell of freshly ironed lavender. It was as large as a formal dinner napkin and softer than Kleenex. Who even carried handkerchiefs anymore?

"I'm sorry. I think I've soiled this," she apologized, balling it up in her hand. She looked up to see who'd given it to her, expecting a white-haired old lady with a plaid hat, but instead found herself looking at a tall, towheaded boy built like a football player, with broad shoulders and a rugged bearing. He was about her age, Jacqui guessed. He had quintessential all-American good looks, from his thick blond hair and clear, cornflower blue eyes to his straight, roman nose.

"I'm Pete Rockwood," he said, holding out his hand.

She shook it. "Jacqui Velasco." She held out his handkerchief. "Thanks again."

"Not at all. Keep it. You need it more than I do." He smiled gently.

Jacqui nodded and looked up at him again. He had a camera around his neck—a small digital Canon Elph, but still. He was clearly a tourist. Somehow she didn't feel the usual disdain she felt for the provincial hordes that swarmed upon Manhattan in the summer months. He was too . . . cute for disdain.

"You take care now." Pete gave her another kind smile and turned to walk away. Jacqui was shocked. He wasn't even going to stay and make small talk? In her whole life, she'd never met a single guy who'd given up the chance to flirt with her. She couldn't decide if she was impressed or insulted.

"Hey!" she called out after him.

He turned around.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"To St. Patrick's. My family's waiting there."

“Oh . . .” Jacqui said. She didn’t want to keep him, but she didn’t much feel like being alone right now either. “Well, what are you doing here, then?”

Pete smiled and gestured to the scene before them. “I just wanted to see the pond, you know. Have a little J. D. Salinger moment. I’d always wanted to see the ducks. We have ducks in Indianapolis too, but it’s not the same.”

Jacqui felt like she’d just been knocked in the chest. He’d been thinking of *The Catcher in the Rye* too? “Do you have to meet them right now?”

Pete walked back and sat down next to her on the bench. “I guess not.” He removed a plastic bag full of bread crumbs from his back pocket and handed her some. Together they started tossing the crumbs to the ducks on the water.

“Sorry to keep you; it’s just . . . it’s been a crappy day.” She tossed a crumb to one of the hungrier-looking ducks.

“Yeah? What happened?” Pete turned and looked at her, really looked at her, waiting patiently for her to tell him.

Jacqui didn’t know why, but she felt like she could trust this Pete Rockwood. Maybe it was something about taking comfort in a stranger, someone who didn’t know anything about her, but before she knew it, she was unburdening herself to him, everything coming out in a torrent—her hopes for NYU, the Perrys’ shocking abandonment, her doomed future.

Pete listened quietly, asking the right questions, never interrupting her or making snap judgments. Throughout all of her experiences in America—with the super-rich Hamptonites, the spoiled and self-involved New Yorkers—no one had ever treated her so . . . nicely. He was so gentle and sweet, strong and solid at the same time. What was this Indianapolis place, and were all the guys there like Pete?

His voice broke into her thoughts. “You know, you’ve been dealt a bad hand—but as my granny says, when life hands you lemons, make lemonade.” Pete grinned, and his teeth were so white he looked like he should be in a Crest commercial.

“Lemonade?”

“You know, figure out a way to make things work for you.” He shrugged. “It’s not an exact science. But something will come up. It always does.” He smiled shyly and his hair fell into his eyes.

“Are you always this optimistic?” Jacqui asked.

Pete nodded. “Yeah, actually. I mean, that lady—Anna, right?—she said she’d give you a great reference. And that there’s a family that’s going to need you.” He picked up the camera and held it up to one eye, squinting. “Well, you’ll probably have a job by tonight.” He snapped a few photos of the ducks and the surroundings but never once asked to take her photo. Another first.

“You think?” Jacqui wrinkled her brow doubtfully, although Pete’s positive outlook was starting to rub off on her. Anna had said someone would need her. After all, this was Manhattan. A family with young children must be in search of a good nanny right now, right?

“Of course. If NYU is what you want, it won’t just . . . happen.” He shrugged again. “You’ll make it happen. All you have to do is follow your heart, and your dreams will come true.” Pete snapped another photo, then put down his camera and turned to face her. “I know it’s totally corny, but I’ve always believed it.” He stood up, brushing the crumbs from his jeans, which weren’t dark-rinsed or low-rise or even remotely trendy—nothing like the jeans worn by guys who chased Jacqui around nightclubs. They were just plain, straight-leg Levi’s 501s.

“You’re going?” Jacqui suddenly felt disappointed, though she wasn’t sure why.

“I have to go meet my family—our flight leaves tonight. Going back home to Indy.” He sighed and crumpled up the now-empty plastic bag, putting it in his pocket—most likely to find a recycling bin for it somewhere.

She nodded and briefly considered asking him for his e-mail address or phone number. But what was the point? He lived in Indiana. She’d likely be on her way back to Brazil soon. Or, if Pete was right, starting classes at NYU.

“Well, it was nice meeting you, Miss Jacqui Velasco.” Pete offered her his hand.

She shook it warmly. “You too, Pete Rockwood.” She grinned at his formality. It was sweet and unexpected.

On a whim, Jacqui took Pete’s camera from his hand and stood next to him, holding the camera away from their faces and snapping a picture of the two of them. “I want you to remember me.” Jacqui smiled.

“Aw.” Pete broke into a wide grin. “I don’t need a picture for that. But thanks.”

Jacqui watched him walk in the direction of St. Patrick’s, and she felt content. Even though she knew she’d never see Pete again, she was happy to have met him.

And just then, as Pete disappeared behind a giant leafy oak tree, Jacqui’s cell phone began to sing the tune to Led Zeppelin’s “The Lemon Song.”

Jacqui glanced down at the screen and saw Eliza’s name.

Had the lemonade arrived?

good friends have great ideas

MARA SAT UNDERNEATH THE FLUORESCENT lights of the airport Pizza Hut, chewing her slice of pepperoni but barely tasting it. She was still slightly shell-shocked. How could David do that to her? She'd always appreciated how much David shared her passion for writing. Well, he shared her passion, all right—so much so that he was on a plane to Brussels while she was stuck at the baggage terminal. Even though she'd told him to go, she'd really wanted to scream, *Stay! What do you mean you're going to Europe without me?*

She couldn't decide if she was angry or proud. *You would do the same thing*, he'd said. But would she? Would she have been driven enough to follow her dreams, even if it meant walking away from him? *This isn't a vacation, Mara.*

Well, maybe that was fair—wasn't that what she'd been secretly fantasizing it would be? A romantic, all-expenses-paid vacation through Europe's most glamorous capitals with her wonderful and worldly boyfriend? Had she not been taking the trip seriously enough? Was she really not cut out for journalism?

The sound of her phone playing Fergie's "London Bridge" startled her. She picked it up immediately. "Liza! Hey!" Mara smiled. She could really use a friend right now.

"Hey, yourself!" Eliza's cheerful greeting lifted Mara's spirits immediately.

"I'm so glad you called! Oh my God, you'll never believe what just happened. . . ." Before Eliza could say another word, Mara poured out the whole sob story, taking care to recount every horrid detail—except for her doubts that maybe David was the teensiest bit right about her not taking their job seriously enough. "So what do you think?" Mara asked as she finished up her story. "Do I win the award for worst start of the summer ever or what?" She tried to laugh at herself but couldn't muster more than a half smile.

"Actually, I think it's fantastic!" Eliza chirped.

"Um, excuse me? Did you hear what I just told you? I pretty much got dumped and fired at the same time!" Saying the word *dumped* made Mara feel less sad—and more angry. She took a bite of the crust of her pizza, tearing it with her teeth.

"David didn't dump you. He said he loved you, didn't he? I bet he's going to bring you back like ten thousand pounds of Perigord truffles from Paris." Eliza's voice was soothing. "And so what if you got fired? I have a job for you!"

"A job?" Mara asked, the slightest bit of hope seeping into her voice. Eliza was really well connected—maybe she knew of an opening at a fashion magazine or something?

“My dad’s girlfriend has these kids. . . . They’re practically angels. Nothing like the Perrys. At all. I mean, the seven-year-olds basically read at college level,” Eliza said enthusiastically.

“And?” Mara switched her phone from one ear to the other and squinted, wondering where this was going.

“Well, the thing is, the au pair they’d hired just quit—nothing to do with the kids, of course; she just landed a modeling job—so they’re hiring!” Eliza sounded so gleeful, as if she had no doubt Mara would take the job in a snap.

“Au pair?” Mara asked doubtfully. It had been two years since she’d played babysitter. Last summer she’d had a kick-ass internship at *Hamptons* magazine. Chasing after a pack of kids, changing diapers, and wiping drool sounded like a big step backward. “I don’t know, E.” Mara’s eyes wandered around the Pizza Hut, finally settling on two eight-year-old boys who were taking the toppings off their pizza and throwing them at each other across the table. Little monsters.

“She’s paying a lot,” Eliza wheedled.

Mara’s curiosity got the better of her. “How much?”

“How’s fifteen grand a month sound?” Eliza asked.

“That’s a lot of money,” she conceded. Even though she’d been lucky enough to win grants and scholarship money to fund her college tuition, with the cost of living in Manhattan, college was very expensive indeed. Her internship at the *Circus* wasn’t putting anything in her pocket, either—it paid in freebies and premiere tickets.

Mara didn’t want to be a sellout, but beggars couldn’t be choosers, and at the moment, she certainly felt like a beggar.

“And there’s more: Jacqui’s in too. Plus I’ll be here and we can all spend the summer together! It’ll be a blast!”

“Oh my God, Jacqui too?” Of course. Jacqui would be with the Perrys in the Hamptons. The money was tempting, and so was the promise of friends, but not the job itself. “I mean, I would love to be with you guys, but I kind of feel like I need to do some writing—you know, show David I’m cut out for it.” She looked over at the eight-year-olds again, who were now sword-fighting with their crusts. “He said my heart wasn’t in journalism. Taking a job as an au pair sort of feels like giving up, like . . . proving him right.”

“Well,” Eliza said thoughtfully, “maybe David is right.”

Mara practically dropped her slice of pizza. “Excuse me?”

“No, no—hear me out. Maybe your heart isn’t in journalism. Because you’re so much more creative than that. You’re too romantic, too much of a . . . free spirit. Maybe you’d be better at writing a novel. Why don’t you come out this summer and try writing a book? You know, like one of those funny Candace Bushnell-type things. About the beautiful people and the glamorous life and how it’s not so beautiful and glam after all.”

Mara sighed. Eliza always had outrageous, over-the-top ideas for everything. She couldn't write a novel. What did she know about it?

"All those nanny books are hot right now," Eliza went on. "You could write a funny one about your experiences with the Hamptons set. The kids and their demands. The parents and their crazy expectations. I predict best seller!"

Against her better judgment, Mara was starting to grin. "That's ridiculous."

"No, it's not, and you know it. C'mon. You'll make a lot of money, get to hang out with me and Jacqui, get some notes for your blockbuster. That'll show David, won't it?" Eliza wheedled.

Mara picked up her tray and tossed the contents in the garbage. "You're quite the saleswoman, Miss Thompson!"

"Does that mean you'll do it?"

"Yeah." Mara grinned, picking up her bag again. "I'm in."

"Woo-hoo!"

Mara laughed as she strode purposefully out of Pizza Hut and toward the terminal exit. It was great to have a friend like Eliza. Someone who could steer you in the right direction, even when life sent you totally off course.

"So," Eliza's voice came chirping through the phone, "how soon can you be in the Hamptons?"

Mara glanced down at her watch. She grinned. "As soon as they're ready for me."

is there such a thing as attachment nannying?

AS SHE STEPPED OUT OF the taxicab on dune drive, Mara found herself greeted by a twenty-foot-high statue of Michelangelo's *David*. Enormous reproductions of several of the most famous sculptures in Western history stood on the lawn in front of the mega-mansion, casting long shadows that stretched all the way to the road. If she'd renewed her passport, Mara thought glumly, she'd be seeing the real *David* in Florence—with *her* David at her side—instead of its rather tacky facsimile. But then a welcome sight greeted her among the fake Greek kouroi, chasing her negative thoughts away.

Jacqui was sitting on the curb, cigarette in hand. She quickly stood as she saw her friend. “Mara!” she cried, running up and throwing her arms around her. Mara hugged her back fiercely. Jacqui's thick, glossy mane of hair tickled her cheek.

Mara finally managed to stand back and smile. “What are you doing here? Did the Perrys send you over to borrow a cup of sugar?” she joked, straightening the straps of her pale yellow sundress.

At the mention of the Perrys, Jacqui's face fell. “No. I'm not working for them anymore. They moved to London.”

“To London?” Mara asked, totally taken aback. It was her turn to look distressed. “All of them?”

Jacqui nodded, putting out her cigarette with the heel of her wedge sandal. “C'mon, let's go in.” She linked her arm in Mara's and the two of them walked up to the front door together.

Mara took Jacqui's arm and followed her blindly, lost in thought. London. If the whole family had moved, that meant Ryan was in London too. Which meant he wasn't going to be in the Hamptons this summer. A small part of her—one she didn't even know existed anymore—suddenly . . . deflated.

When Ryan and Mara broke up last summer, they'd promised each other that they would be friends and that they'd keep in touch. They'd tried, but without much success. Ryan had e-mailed several times, and Mara had called him a bunch too, but the e-mails had been short and the phone calls stilted. In the end, Mara couldn't remember who was supposed to get back to whom, and the correspondence dwindled, until she had to rely on third-party information from Jacqui, who worked for his family, or Eliza, who was one of Ryan's oldest childhood friends and traveled in the same social circles.

Mara took one last look at the *David*, that enduring portrait of male perfection, as they climbed the steps and thought with a sigh about the two guys in her life who she'd once thought were perfect—Ryan and David—but whose relationships with her had either *not* endured or had turned out to be less than perfect.

The door opened moments after they rang the bell, revealing a glowing Eliza, her skin tan against a chic white halter dress. “*Hola, chiquitas!*” She threw out her arms and enveloped them in a three-way hug. She finally pulled back and led them into the house. “Welcome to our humble abode,” Eliza said slyly, gesturing grandly with one arm.

“*Meu Deus!*” Jacqui exclaimed as they took in the size of the foyer, the gold-gilt furniture, and the breathtaking view of the ocean through floor-to-ceiling windows. The five-thousand-square-foot room had a sunken conversation pit with buttery leather couches and crystal coffee tables, and twin six-by-ten-foot Jackson Pollock canvases flanked the fireplace, almost identical to the ones that hung on the entrance to the third floor of MoMA.

Eliza ushered them into a messy office on the ground floor. “This is Suzy,” she said, gesturing to the area behind the paper-covered desk. They turned to see a frizzy-haired woman talking into her headset while miming instructions to a few staff members who stood patiently, somehow understanding her nonverbal cues and scribbling down notes.

Suzy took off her headset and smiled at the girls. “Hi! You must be Eliza’s friends. Come, sit!” She motioned for them to take a seat around the conference table, and her staff members slunk quietly out of the room.

Eliza followed them to the door. “I’ll see you guys later; I have to jet to the store. Jeremy’s putting the downlighting in the dressing rooms and I have to make sure he got the pink bulbs—super-flattering!” She waved her hands and blew them kisses as she shut the door.

Mara turned to look at Suzy again. She wondered if she was going to be as difficult as Anna Perry had been. She’d certainly heard of Suzy Finnemore, hedge fund queen, and had been expecting a hard-as-nails dragon lady. Someone blown out and Botoxed to within an inch of her life. But the woman who sat at the head of table had a blowsy, harried manner—not to mention a rumpled wardrobe. Quite a departure from the perfectly polished Hamptons housewife—which, Mara realized, was exactly what the difference was. Unlike those women, Suzy actually *worked* for a living—in fact, she ran a very successful business. She didn’t have time to sit around and have manicures all day. “So let me begin by saying, I usually don’t work with a nanny.” Suzy moved one of the piles of paper over so they could see each other more clearly. “I raised all the kids myself.”

Jacqui raised an eyebrow. Now, this was interesting.

“My ex-husband and I were total attached parents. We took Violet everywhere and when the twins came, we did the same thing. With Wyatt, we had just started the fund, so it was a little more difficult, but we managed. But then my ex left for Australia to go on a ‘walkabout.’ ” She made quotations with her fingers and, seeing the girls’ confused looks, explained. “It’s one of those things the aborigines do, to find out who they are. It’s been a year and a half and he’s still looking.” She threw up her hands, as if shrugging it off. “In the middle of our divorce, I found out I was pregnant with Cassidy. Since he was born, the fund’s

taken off, and I've found that I barely have time to see to my own needs, much less theirs. And the last thing I want to be is a slacker mom. So I've decided to reevaluate my nurturing methods." She leaned forward, her intelligent brown eyes flashing. "Here's the deal. I just want you guys to think of me as your manager."

Mara wrinkled her brow in worry and turned to Jacqui, whose lips were curling in amusement.

"By that I mean, since I can't be a full-time parent anymore, on the floor and in the thick of things, I need you girls to be me—to think of my children as your children. To do everything that I would do if I had the time." Suzy grabbed a stack of childcare books that were sitting behind her and pushed them down the table. *Your Baby and Child. Dr. Spock. What to Expect the First Year. The No-Cry Sleep Solution. The Happiest Baby on the Block. The Contented Little Baby. How to Talk to a Teenager. Encouraging Your Gifted Child.*

"And then—this is the manager part—I need you to report back to me. I want you guys to keep logs on the kids. Write down everything they do and how they're reacting to the world. Are the activities worth their time? Are they developing at the normal rate? They're all gifted, so I want to make sure they're all being challenged enough. Bored people are boring."

Jacqui cleared her throat. "I think Mara should keep the log. She's a great writer, so maybe it should be her responsibility."

Suzy shrugged. "Sure. I don't care, as long as it gets done."

Mara sighed inwardly but tried to keep a polite smile on her face. She couldn't help but be reminded of their first summer as au pairs, when Eliza and Jacqui routinely blew off their responsibilities to party, leaving Mara holding the diaper bag.

But as she glanced at the stack of books in front of her, a light flipped on in her head. A log would be a great way to keep notes as material for her book. Maybe she could even do it online, as a blog. . . . Everyone had one now, so that could be a great place to start. It would be good practice for writing every day, and maybe she could turn those notes into her book.

"Thanks again for taking the position on such short notice." Suzy stood and smoothed out some of the wrinkles in her suit, even though it looked like it had never seen an iron in its life and might never be able to recover. "Eliza has sung your praises to the heavens, so I'm sure I won't be disappointed." She held out her hand and shook both of their hands again, as if she'd just concluded a successful business deal. "I'll be reviewing the log every week and tailoring their activities and development according to what I find in it. I want a high yield on my investments, so to speak." Suzy winked to let them know she was kidding. "So just make sure they don't crash and burn."

Mara nodded. Even if all didn't go according to plan, she was used to putting out fires. She'd already been burned once today.

these girls can't keep their clothes on for long

“AAAAND HE’S OUT,” MARA SAID, slipping off her shoes and plopping down on her new bed’s cushy duvet comforter. After parting ways just ten minutes ago to put the kids to sleep, she was already back to her new bedroom, and Jacqui was sprawled out on the leather sofa.

They’d spent the better part of the day being “debriefed” on each of the Finnemore children, learning all about their likes and dislikes, their goals, their academic achievements, even their medical history. Suzy was unbelievably thorough and wanted to make sure her au pairs were well versed in all possible information related to their charges. It was like cramming for finals at Columbia all over again. But the kids themselves were remarkably easygoing and good-natured.

“I didn’t think a kid could go to bed that quickly. I just put him down in his crib, like Suzy told me, and left him there. Five minutes later, he’s snoring.” Mara hadn’t believed it at first, having expected six-month-old Cassidy to fuss and holler, but the baby actually adhered to the rigid sleep schedule that was posted by his crib, as if he were well aware of the task at hand and wanted to stay on target. “Suzy said he’ll sleep through the night, so we’re off duty. Amazing.” Mara shook her head and reached behind her for a pillow, wedging it under her head.

Jacqui laughed from the sofa, her glossy black hair spread out across the armrest like a fan. “Tell me about it! Can we clone those *meninos*? I read them a story, tucked them in, and that was it.” Jacqui sighed happily, splaying her arms out on either side of her and letting her body sink into the soft cushions. “They almost don’t need us,” she added wistfully. Her success with the Perry children had led Jacqui to earnestly think about majoring in child development. The Finnemores were a cakewalk compared to her former charges, but part of her missed the challenge.

“We’ve got it made,” Mara agreed, glancing around the enormous room she’d been given in the children’s wing. It had a flat-screen television, a renovated bathroom with a Jacuzzi, a cushy double bed, and an Eames sofa. The whole room was furnished in a very modern style, in black and white with red accents—white walls, a jet-black duvet on the bed, a black leather couch with red cushions. Jacqui’s room was identical and right next door. Compared to the Perrys’ tiny, ramshackle servants’ cottage, this was heaven.

“*Fala sério!*” Jacqui cried, sitting up. She picked up the remote from the floor and tried to figure out which of its hundreds of buttons would turn it on.

There was a rap on the door and Eliza walked in, looking a bit grimy from her day at the store—meaning, her hair was the slightest bit out of place and her pants were wrinkled. “Hey, ladies.” She smiled.

Mara opened one eye. “Why, hello, m’dear.”

“Nice digs, huh?” Eliza sat down beside Jacqui on the leather sofa and Jacqui scooted over. “I told Suzy there was no way she was going to stick you in the service wing. My room is just down the hall.” There was a twinkle in her eye as she bounded from the couch and looked from one girl to the other. “You all aren’t too tired, are you?”

“Why, what do you have in mind?” Jacqui sat up. She was always up for a little fun.

“I found some champagne in the fridge.” Eliza removed a magnum of Cristal from her enormous Chanel bucket bag. “I think we should celebrate!”

Mara groaned.

Jacqui grinned.

“C’mon, Mar,” Eliza pleaded. “What are you, a Sturbridge Puritan again? Or maybe you’re a stiff Ivy Leaguer now,” she teased. “Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten how to have fun!”

“All right, all right.” Mara sighed, slipping her shoes on. “But we better be back at a decent hour—according to Suzy, the baby wakes up at six!”

Eliza led them through the house to the patio, past the pool, and down to the trail that led to the beach. It was a gorgeous night. They kicked off their shoes and walked for a while in silence, taking in the moonlight and the calm sea. They eventually came to the secluded spot near the old Perry homestead, Creek Head Manor. “Weird.” Mara broke the silence. “I had no idea we were so close.”

“Yeah,” Eliza replied. “Pretty much all the houses in this part of the Hamptons are connected to the same beach—you just have to know where to walk.” She dug a toe into the sand. “Anyway, I thought this would be an appropriate spot to bring you girls on our first night.”

The three girls grinned mischievously, thinking of their skinny-dipping excursion of two years ago. They turned to look at the Perry house, memories of their first summer together rushing back. Mara put an arm around her friends’ shoulders. Eliza and Jacqui didn’t know that this spot held extra significance for her—it was where she’d first spent a night with Ryan, sleeping side by side in sleeping bags on the beach but not so much as kissing. She shook off the thought. This night was about her and her girlfriends, not her history with Ryan.

Eliza pulled the bottle out of her purse and handed it to Jacqui, who did the honors, popping the cork and sending a spray of bubbles onto the sand. The three girls giggled. Eliza reached into her purse again and produced three plastic cups. “I propose a toast—to the start of the summer.” She raised her red Solo cup, careful not to spill its contents on her white dress.

Mara’s eyes glinted in the moonlight. “I propose revising your toast—to the *new* start to the summer!” she said with a laugh.

“Yes,” Jacqui agreed, raising her glass. “Here’s to getting a—what is the phrase?—a much needed do-over!”

“Hear, hear!” they all cheered, sipping down the cold bubbles.

The surf was rolling in gently, and the sand was refreshingly cold and wet on their feet. A soft ocean breeze blew, and the sky was blanketed with stars. All three girls couldn’t help but feel lucky to have yet another summer to spend in such a magical place.

Mara looked back at the Perrys’ house again. “Just imagine, if those first au pairs had worked out, we never would have met,” she said softly, referring to the fact that the three of them had been hired as the “B team” after the first group of au pairs had been unceremoniously fired by Anna before the Fourth of July. During the past year, the three of them had been in New York at the same time, but they hadn’t been able to see each other nearly as much as they’d have liked. Eliza had been busy with her new arsty friends, hanging out at the basement of La Esquina with the fashion crowd, while Jacqui had no spare time between juggling the kids’ schedules and her studies. Not that Mara could talk about being busy—she’d been so wrapped up in David and Columbia that more often than not, it was she who canceled on dinner dates and brunch plans.

She looked over at Jacqui and Eliza, who were leaning on each other and happily sipping their champagne. Mara felt a shiver of delight. With the whole summer stretching ahead of them, it was time to reconnect and reacquaint with her old friends. She couldn’t wait. She’d made some good friends at college—her roommates, a debutante from Georgia and a Nantucket preppie, were both really sweet—but they were no Jacqui and Eliza. Somehow, the experience of surviving the Perrys’ dysfunctional family dynamic and the rigors of the Hamptons social scene had bonded the three of them for life.

Mara threw pebbles into the water, making them skip. “This champagne is making me hot,” she said, feeling a warm rush to her cheeks from the alcohol.

“Well,” Eliza said in a practical tone. “There’s only one cure for that.”

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” Mara grinned.

In answer, Eliza kicked off her clogs and took off her sweater. Jacqui watched with an amused expression. “Are we really going to do this?” she asked.

“Hey, it’s practically tradition!” Eliza replied.

Jacqui slid out of her skinny jeans and Mara shrugged off her sundress, following Eliza to the water. The cold waves lapped at their ankles and the breeze tickled their skin.

“This is *it!*” Eliza laughed, expressing what all three of them felt. That they were wild and free, at one with nature and the world, their best friends at their side. This was what life was all about—the ocean, the stars, and friendship. This was what they’d waited all year for.

“Let’s never grow up!” Mara cheered.

“Never!” Jacqui agreed. “*Jovens para sempre!*” Forever young.

And with that promise, the three of them bounded into the surf.

mara finds a new way to warm up

BBBBRRR. MARA STARTED SHAKING FROM the cold, tiny goose bumps forming all over her wet arms. Whose idea had it been to go skinny-dipping in the Atlantic Ocean anyway? Maybe she hadn't drunk enough champagne—Eliza and Jacqui didn't seem to feel adverse to the chill. Jacqui was doing a handstand in the waves, while Eliza floated lazily on her back.

It was with relief that Mara heard her cell phone ringing. Any excuse to get out of the ice bucket. She splashed over to the beach, jumping up and down to warm herself up. Three sets of clothes lay strewn about the sand: Eliza's in a messy pile by a log, Jacqui's all in a row—she apparently liked to strip as she made her way to the water—and Mara's folded neatly by the side of the dune. Her phone kept jingling from her left jacket pocket, breaking the perfect silence of the night.

Mara crouched down and picked up her jacket. Who could be calling so late? Maybe it was David, calling from Brussels to apologize and tell her how much he missed her already? She pulled out the phone. It stopped ringing the second she picked it up. Of course.

“Mara?” A voice behind her startled her. A very, *very* familiar voice.

Mara almost jumped out of her birthday suit—not that that was possible. She turned around. “Oh my God!” Her hands flew to cover herself though she realized there was no need—he'd seen it all before. Because Ryan Perry was standing in front of her, an amused half smile on his face.

Mara's dark chestnut hair was plastered to her cheek, half her body covered with sand. She was so shocked to see him that the only words that came out of her mouth were, “Why aren't you in London?”

“Well, hello to you too,” Ryan said amiably. His honey blond hair shone under the moonlight, and his two dimples winked in his smooth, tanned cheeks. He looked just as handsome as ever, if not more so. But his face was totally unreadable. He was acting so blasé, as if he ran into naked exgirlfriends all the time. Mara willed herself to act as nonchalantly as he was—even if he had the advantage of being fully clothed.

“Oh, sorry—it's just that you caught me by surprise.”

“I can see that.” He grinned. “You make a habit of walking around naked these days, Waters?”

Talk about new habits. Calling her by her last name was a new habit *he'd* developed since they'd broken up. That and calling her “dude.” *Dude?* Mara was no dude. She was “babe,” “good-looking,” “sweetheart.” Not “dude.”

“Learned it from you,” she shot back flirtatiously. Ryan was a free-spirit bohemian, and during the summer they’d spent on his family’s yacht, just the two of them, there had been a lot of naked sailing, naked deep-sea fishing, even naked breakfast-eating.

“Touché, my friend.” Ryan laughed, and Mara decided to ignore the “friend” comment. “You know my habits all too well—I’m always one step away from joining a nudist colony.” He smiled wickedly.

Mara laughed. “It’s good to see you,” she said, trying to keep her voice level. How did you have a normal conversation with a guy you used to love? Especially when one of you was naked? Not wanting to bend over for her clothes, Mara took some of her long hair and tried to reposition it so that it was covering her chest. There. That was better. She crossed her arms for further coverage.

“You too.” Ryan nodded and looked down, digging a toe in the sand.

“But seriously, why *are* you here?” Mara tried to suppress the waves of excitement flowing through her. Not that it meant anything, especially since she had a new boyfriend now. A very cute boyfriend. Although said cute boyfriend had left her stranded at the airport that morning. Definitely not a cute move.

“You heard about London, huh?” Ryan said. “Yeah, the family moved overseas, but I’m staying at the house here until they find someone to rent it. But what about you—aren’t you supposed to be bumming around Prague or something? A friend of mine is doing Lonesome Planet, and I saw your name on the list. What are you doing here?”

“Taking a swim!” Mara yelled, and with that she ran toward the jet-black ocean and dove into the waves. She’d had enough of the conversation—it was just too weird and surreal to stand there in front of Ryan without any clothes on and make small talk. Cordial and civilized had never been their style.

Mara put her head down in the water, her heart racing. Ryan Perry. And he’d been keeping tabs on her, too. Seeing him was like hearing an old song come on the radio—bringing up so many old feelings and memories that you can’t tune them out. Mara swam to where her friends were still bobbing happily.

“Hey, is that Ryan?” Eliza asked, squinting and craning her neck to get a better look at the figure on the beach.

“Ryan! Come join us!” Jacqui yelled mischievously, kicking up one bare foot.

Ryan just waved at them from the shoreline. Mara was relieved to see him finally turn on his heels and walk back to the house. Because even though the water was totally freezing, she felt warm and tingly all over.

jeremy shows eliza her future, eliza doesn't know if she wants to look

“WHERE ARE WE GOING?” ELIZA stretched her feet out in front of her on the dashboard of Jeremy’s truck, admiring her new pedicure—shell pink, to match the decor of her boutique, of course. The past several days had been a mad rush to get everything ready for the store launch that weekend, and she’d hardly even seen the girls since they’d gone skinny-dipping their first night. She was glad to even have snuck in some time with Jeremy.

“You’ll see.” He smiled, putting a hand on Eliza’s slim ankle. “It’s a surprise.”

“You know I hate surprises.” Eliza mock-pouted.

“You’ll like this one,” he said mysteriously.

“Fine, be that way,” she retorted, pretending to be miffed. She sighed, inhaling the woody, loamy scent of Jeremy’s truck. Despite running his own successful landscaping business, Jeremy had yet to trade in his decades-old pickup for something more expensive. When he’d pulled into the driveway to pick her up earlier, his car had looked hilariously mismatched sitting next to Eliza’s CLK convertible. But Eliza didn’t mind. Maybe the old Eliza would have badgered her boyfriend to trade up as soon as he made more money, but this Eliza didn’t care about image the way she’d used to. She liked Jeremy’s truck. It was sensible and sturdy—just like him.

Jeremy drove into one of the quiet, secluded older neighborhoods in Sagaponack, filled with white clapboard houses and picket fences. The streets were lined with enormous maple trees bowed low, their green leaves blowing gently in the breeze. The sun was just beginning to set, giving the whole scene a warm, pinkish tint. “Close your eyes,” he instructed.

“Do I have to?” she whined, crossing her arms over her chest defiantly.

“Yes, and not one more peep from you, young lady.” Jeremy put on a mock-serious, teacher-y voice, taking one hand off the wheel to wag a finger at her.

Eliza closed her eyes obediently. She hadn’t been lying—she hated surprises. Eliza was the type of girl who made lists of presents for other people to get her every time Christmas or her birthday rolled around. If she received a gift that deviated from the list, she promptly returned it for store credit. She could never even read a mystery novel without reading the last page first to see whodunit. She hated suspense. But she wanted to please her boyfriend.

She wondered what trick Jeremy had up his sleeve. He’d been acting anxious all evening, alternately jittery and excited. They were so comfortable with each other, so familiar with

every crevice of each other's body, every variation on each other's moods, that she could tell instantly when something was going on. Sometimes she felt like they were turning into an old married couple.

The car came to an abrupt stop and Eliza heard Jeremy get out of the cab, walk around, and open her door.

"Can I open them now?" she asked.

"Not yet!" He took her elbow and helped her to the ground, steadying her as she wobbled a bit on her chunky white Calypso espadrilles. They walked forward a few feet.

"Okay, now," Jeremy said.

Eliza opened her eyes. She was standing in front of an old, regal mansion—one that needed a lot of work. The paint was peeling, the cornice crumbling. Still, it was beautiful. It reminded her a little bit of the dollhouse she'd played with as a kid, which had looked a bit like an old British manor—her own personal version of a Barbie dream house. "What's this?"

"Remember I told you about old lady Greyson? One of my oldest clients?"

"Yeah." Eliza nodded slowly. She vaguely remembered him talking about one of the old ladies whose gardens he tended, charging much less than he should have. Recently, he'd been acting as her pseudo-caretaker, making sure she'd taken her medicine and that she had enough groceries to see her through the week, feeding her cat, various little things. Jeremy was a sweetheart like that. But was this really her surprise? He'd taken her to meet some cranky, possibly senile old lady? Were they going to have to read her bedtime stories and give her an oatmeal sponge bath?

"Well, she passed away this week." Jeremy looked down at the ground, kicking at a pebble with his shoe.

"Oh—I'm so sorry." She touched his arm. Whoops. She felt like a jerk now. "I . . . didn't know you guys were so close."

"Neither did I," Jeremy said. He looked back up at her, his eyes shining. "She was a really sweet old lady." He paused. "Anyway, she didn't have any family. She used to say I was the only one who cared about her in the end, but I didn't realize it was true."

"That's so sad." Eliza wrinkled her brow. "It must be terrible to die alone."

Jeremy didn't seem to hear her. He was gazing at the house, as if in a trance. "She left me everything," he said softly. "Her entire estate, stocks, bonds, everything. Including the house." He continued to stare at it, as if he were hearing the news for the first time and not the one delivering it. "I know it looks like it's falling apart, but it's got good bones and it's in a great location. With a little work, a cosmetic touch-up, it could really be something."

Eliza looked at him. He was standing so still in the golden light, looking up at the old house as if it held all the answers in the universe. All at once it sank in for her what this meant. This house was *his*. "Oh my God! Jeremy!" Eliza squealed.

“I know.” He turned and smiled. “She always said she wanted the house to go to someone who would take care of it. Don’t you think it’s beautiful?”

“It’s fabulous,” Eliza agreed. “You’ll make a fortune renting it out next summer.” She smiled. If anyone deserved a break like this, it was Jeremy. Maybe nice guys really did finish first.

“C’mon.” Jeremy took her hand. “Let me give you a tour.”

He unlocked the front door and they walked inside. The house still had the stuffy smell of age and neglect, but Eliza could see that it was a grand house indeed. “Look at this kitchen,” he said, showing her the front “master” kitchen and then leading her to a second kitchen in the back. “It’s called the scullery.” He ran a finger over a dusty countertop. “In the early twentieth century, when the house was built, kitchens were only for the help, so they were hidden from the rest of the house.” He gestured to the middle of the space. “I’m thinking of opening this up and making a big island so that it feels more modern,” he said. “Though I’ll of course defer to your taste, since the kitchen is the lady’s domain.” He turned to her and wrapped her in his arms, a sly grin spreading across his face.

“Like you’ll ever get me to cook,” Eliza said dryly, leaning her head on his shoulder. Jeremy well knew that when it came to preparing dinner, she was much more likely to shell out for a private chef than to put on an apron.

“There’s more I want to show you.” He grabbed her hand and took her upstairs. “See, there’s a study off the master bedroom that can be turned into a nursery.” He gestured to a small room with tall windows that really did look like it would fit a crib nicely.

“But why go to all that trouble before you know who’s going to live here?” Eliza asked, puzzled. “I mean, what if the people who move in don’t have a baby?” She walked over to the window and looked out at the enormous, beautiful yard below, the white gazebo cloaked in the orange glow of the setting sun.

“Well, what about when *we* have babies?” Jeremy asked innocently, coming up behind her and kissing her neck.

“Babies!” She turned and swatted his arm. “Jer, *we’re* babies.”

Jeremy just kept nuzzling her ear as if he hadn’t heard her. “Eleven bedrooms,” he whispered. “We can have a big family. A whole soccer team!”

“Sure, I’ll just pop them all out while I’m cooking away in the back kitchen.” Eliza laughed. He was joking, right?

He led her back downstairs and out to the garden. They walked through the overgrown yard, past the willow trees, and to the gazebo she’d seen from upstairs. Looking through it, there was a beautiful view of the ocean in the distance. “And I was thinking . . . this is where we’ll have our wedding,” Jeremy said softly, pointing to the gazebo. Eliza’s heart thumped in her chest. Jeremy wasn’t just fantasizing about the future. No. He was planning it.

It was so beautiful, and yet . . .

“E., I want you to have this,” Jeremy said, slipping a ring on her finger. Her left ring finger.

Eliza looked down in a daze. It was an enormous, glittering rock. A huge, princess-cut diamond. A princess for a princess—just like she’d always said she wanted. Eliza had always been very vocal about her bridal preferences, tossing her opinions out in the air the way she did with everything. She had no idea he’d actually been *listening*.

“Jer . . .” She didn’t know what to say. She wasn’t even really sure what had just happened. Did this mean . . . ?

“I love you,” he said, pulling her to him and kissing her under the setting sun.

Eliza kissed him back, and when she opened one eye to look at her hand, her new ring winked at her, almost as if to say, *Gotcha!*

www.blogspot/hamptonsaupair1

about me

Hello. Hello. Is this mike working? Ha. Just kidding. I'm new to this Internet thingy. But allow me to introduce myself. I'm M., a nineteen-year-old au pair in the Hamptons. And no, I don't have a webcam. Besides, contrary to popular belief, I don't just hang out in my bikini and neglect the kids all day. It's a lot of work taking care of five overachieving children under the age of thirteen while their mom yells at you for feeding them non-free-range chicken nuggets. (Not that it's happened yet—it's only been a week—but I'm just saying.)

my charges

VIOLET is twelve going on thirty-five. She speaks five languages and can probably balance the federal budget. Her advanced-Mandarin tutor arrives every other day. Otherwise, this summer Violet is busy with art, drama, sculpture, Bikram yoga, experimental dance and movement, etiquette, horseback riding, and violin. Her schedule is busier than that of a CEO of a large financial company. I know, because her mom is one, and *she* actually has time off. Violet's goal? Early admission to Harvard (Mom was class of '92), a Rhodes Scholarship, and world domination. Violet displays all twelve signs of extraordinary ability according to *Twelve Signs Your Tween is Gifted*. She is well balanced, well rounded, and incredibly mature for her age. Sadly, I have not yet seen her laugh.

LOGAN and JACKSON are seven-year-old twin child geniuses. Logan has composed a piano solo in the style of Chopin and beat the former Soviet chess champ when he was five years old. Jackson wrote a one-act play that was produced by a New York theater company last year. (Title: *A Car Seat Named Desire*.) They are obsessed with CNN and ending global warming and are full-fledged members of the Libertarian party. Logan asked me with total sincerity what I was doing to lower my carbon monoxide emissions. Told him I myself don't even own a car anymore—I sold my Camry to pay for my first year at Columbia. These days I drive their mom's Lexus hybrid. Does that count?

WYATT is five and has proven the theory of relativity. Joke! Wyatt has eaten a sandwich. As far as I can tell, he is a normal five-year-old with five-year-old likes and dislikes: Tonka trucks, Legos, PlayStation 3, SpongeBob. His mother is convinced there must be something wrong with him.

CASSIDY is six months old, and he's already beginning to crawl. (Yes, Cassidy's a boy—thank God I'm not going to be around during those difficult, name-teasing preteen years.) His toilet trainer comes twice a week. Cassidy is proficient in BSL (baby sign language). I myself cannot speak BSL and therefore did not understand that Cassidy wanted a bottle rather than a cuddle, which resulted in major vomit. *Vomit* is gross in all languages.

Seriously, they're all adorable, and their mom is surprisingly down-to-earth considering she lives in a thirty-thousand-square-foot house. We'll see how long it lasts.

personal notes

Taking care of kids isn't my *entire* life. I'm also here at the beach with my two best friends in the whole world, and between the three of us, we have a lot of fun and get into a lot of trouble. (Not necessarily in that order.)

E. is a designer diva, probably the best-dressed gal on the Atlantic coast. She's blond, gorgeous, funny, and will lend you the Pucci shift off her back—a girl after my own heart. She's opening her own store in the Hamptons this summer and has asked me to model at the opening! Me? Model? Bet you really wish I had a webcam now, huh?

J. is a South American sexpot, as well as one of the sweetest, nicest girls I've ever met. She's been unlucky in love in the past, and I've noticed she's been a bit subdued since we arrived. Every time I turn around, she's googling "Pete Rockwood, Indianapolis" on the computer. I asked her what the deal was, but she wouldn't tell me. No worries—J. will spill when she's ready. She's not one to keep secrets from friends. Unless, of course, it's about how one's boyfriend fooled around with one's other best friend a couple of years ago. But that's an old story and all is forgiven between the three of us. Seriously. Said ex-boyfriend is old news. Ancient history. Totally. Anyway, moving on . . .

My boyfriend D. and I have been together for almost a year. We were supposed to spend the summer in Europe together, but alas, as they say—"the best-laid plans of mice and men . . ." or "Life happens when you're busy making plans." Anyway, who knew that passports can expire? Last I saw him he was hightailing it to gate 24 in terminal 3 at JFK. He has sent a number of apologetic e-mails and texts but has yet to call. Should I give him the cold shoulder when he does ring? Or fake happiness? Which is more likely to prompt gifts of handmade Belgian chocolates?

**Till next time,
HamptonsAuPair1**

jacqui meets the boys from oz

JACQUI GLIDED DOWN MAIN STREET, enjoying the warm sunshine and colorful shop windows and almost forgetting the troop of children trailing her. A sweeping boulevard lined with weeping willow trees, rustic shingled cottages, and hand-painted signs as far as the eye could see, Main Street could have been in any quaint New England town. Filled as it was with dog-walking, child-toting parents, it was impossible to believe that this was one of the most fashionable places on earth. But on closer inspection, those tiny cottages actually housed storefronts for flashy designer labels and expensive apothecary stores, the dogs were hypoallergenic purebreds, and the children's play clothes were made from imported French cotton.

All three Finnemore boys were happily licking generous ice cream cones as they marched behind Jacqui in an orderly fashion. Logan and Jackson were quietly discussing the merits of last night's *Hannity & Colmes* debate, while Wyatt was devouring as much ice cream as possible while making sure not to spill any on his stubby little chin. She smiled, feeling a bit like Julie Andrews's Maria in *The Sound of Music*, the well-loved nanny with her rosy-cheeked, happy troop. Of course, Maria never wore sexy white Stella McCartney jumpers like the one she had on. But then again, Maria was a nun.

Jacqui stopped to look at a Calypso display in one of the cottage windows, admiring a handwoven leather belt. Without her having to tell them to, the boys immediately stopped behind her, waiting patiently.

Just as she had predicted, the kids were an easy bunch to manage. Their first week had been hassle- and trouble-free, with nary a tantrum or a toy thrown. In fact, the little boys were *so* serious Jacqui hoped to shake them up a bit. Violet was so studious she hardly ever went outside. Even the baby never cried. Well behaved was one thing, but these kids were so calm they were practically Stepford. Jacqui, trying to squeeze some fun into the kids' challenging schedule, had brought them to the ice cream counter as a treat, and they'd looked almost bewildered when she told them they could get anything they wanted.

Jacqui leaned in toward the show window, shading her eyes with her hand to block the reflection off the well-polished glass. The store had some beautiful things, and she immediately missed being able to buy what she wanted without worrying how much it cost. Payday was a few weeks off, and Jacqui knew exactly how she wanted to spend it: in their short jaunt, she'd made a mental note of the floaty sundresses at Tracy Feith, the newest thong sandals at Scoop, and a wallet-busting crocodile bag from Georgina.

Jacqui sighed. Those were things she wanted, all right, but she knew she wouldn't buy them. Suzy was paying her handsomely, and Jacqui intended to save every penny of it just to be safe. She'd had the rug pulled out from her once already this summer, and she wanted to have backup plans for her backup plans.

"I'm dripping," Wyatt whined, startling Jacqui from her reverie. "I tried to stop it from melting, but I couldn't."

"Oh no, sweetie." Jacqui bent down to help dab the front of his shirt, which was covered with sticky ice cream residue.

They had run out of napkins a few blocks back, so Jacqui rifled in her handbag for suitable alternatives. She came across the invite to Eliza's store opening that night—Eliza probably wouldn't be too happy to find out her invite was being used to wipe a five-year-old's face, but what she didn't know couldn't hurt her. Jacqui squatted down and began to gently wipe off Wyatt's face with the soft paper, crouching so low that the short-shorts on her jumper rode even farther up her thighs, and bending so far forward that she was dangerously close to revealing to the world that she was not wearing a bra underneath her eyelet top. She was almost done cleaning him when she heard the distinctive click of a camera shutter.

Jacqui jumped at the sound, teetering on her wooden Chloé wedges. *Meu Deus!* Was it the paparazzi again? But what would they want with her? She'd been keeping a low profile ever since Eliza's impromptu beach fashion show last summer. The camera continued to click and Jacqui rolled her eyes. Seriously, what did it take to be left alone these days?

She straightened, whipping her head around, about to unleash a smart retort—until she noticed who was behind the lens.

A lanky guy with shaggy, light brown hair and deep blue eyes stood on the sidewalk, squinting into his camera. He was dressed in a pair of worn cargos and a thin, faded All-Blacks T-shirt. "Hello, love, just hold that, will you? Brilliant! Now if you could just turn this way . . ." He motioned with a hand, still looking through the viewfinder.

Jacqui bristled. Who did he think he was? She was minding her own business, taking care of the kids in broad daylight on Main Street. She could tell from his accent he was Australian—she'd watched enough *Crocodile Hunter* with the Perry kids to be able to differentiate a Brit from an Aussie—and maybe things were done differently Down Under. Still, she certainly didn't need to add *paparazzi* to her list of things to deal with.

"Right there, perfect," the photographer said, just as Logan pulled on the hem of her jumper.

Jacqui looked down at the owlish little boy, trying to keep the annoyance out of her voice. "Yes, sweetie?"

"Why is that man bothering you?" he asked. "Doesn't he know about privacy law?"

Jacqui couldn't stop a grin from spreading across her face. "I don't know. Why don't we ask him?" She finished wiping Wyatt's face and gave him his ice cream cone back.

“Am I bothering you? I’m so sorry.” The photographer smiled and his whole face lit up. He held the lens up to his eye again. “Could you hold that pose, please? Perfect, thanks. And maybe turn your chin down just a bit?”

Jacqui found her chin moving down automatically, her eyes locking with the camera’s lens. Dozens of photographers in Manhattan had told her she was made for the camera, and the way her body seemed to respond to his directions naturally, almost against her will, she began to wonder if it were true.

“Jacqui . . . ,” Jackson whined from behind her, his voice breaking the spell of the camera’s flash. “I dropped my ice cream.” She turned to face him. The little boy was dangerously close to tears, pointing to where his ice cream cone rested upside down on the sidewalk. “It was my fault—I was trying to count how many diamonds there were in the waffle cone and it fell,” he added miserably, staring at the drippy pink mess. Jacqui hurried to his side, bending to give him a big hug.

“No worries, mate, we’ll get you another.” An even deeper voice startled her.

Jacqui and the kids looked up to see another man, identical to the first photographer except with even shaggier hair, so long that it licked the edge of his shirt collar but artfully tousled. He wore a rare vintage concert tee and his cargos were the seven-hundred-dollar designer kind—as she crouched down, the Maharishi logo was just at Jacqui’s eye level. He winked at her and she felt a thrill zigzag up her spine.

“Don’t mind my brother,” he said, nodding at the first photographer. “Atrocious manners. Thinks he can just start taking photos of any girl off the street without asking permission.” He shook his head in mock frustration, his shaggy locks bouncing adorably back and forth. “Let me introduce us. That’s Midas there and I’m Marcus.” He held out a hand. “We’re the Easton boys. At your service, mum.”

Midas waved from behind the camera. “Hello there!”

“Jacarei Velasco.” She stood, extending a hand. Instead of shaking it, Marcus leaned forward and kissed it. She smiled. “But you can call me Jacqui.”

“But why should I when Jacarei is such a pretty name?” Marcus’s eyes twinkled. “You’re from Brazil then, yes?”

Jacqui nodded, surprised. She straightened the hem of her jumper, hoping it hadn’t ridden too high. “You know Brazil?”

“We were just there last month, shooting in Praia da Baía do Sancho.” He nodded, naming one of the country’s most beautiful and remote beaches. “We had to hike a few miles on foot to get there and helicopter in the models. But it was worth it.”

She couldn’t help but grin. Whenever she met anyone who had been to her country, it was usually only for Carnival in Rio. It was refreshing to meet someone who understood that there was more to Brazil than women in feather bikinis dancing the conga.

Midas resumed his monologue as he continued to snap away with his camera. “Yes, those eyes, very good. Very Linda. And my God, those legs. Haven’t seen a pair like that since

Karolina. And that hair rivals Gisele's."

"Where were we?" Marcus frowned, ignoring his brother and studying the kids, who were looking up at him openmouthed. They clearly weren't quite sure what to make of the two big boys who had so suddenly and noisily interrupted their quiet walk. "I remember, you, sir, had lost your ice cream and need a replacement, yes?" he asked, bending down to tickle Jackson's chin. "Now, what flavor can we get you?"

"Passion fruit, please," Jackson said politely.

"Good boy." Jacqui smiled. The kids had chosen low-fat fruit-flavored ice cream rather than the chocolate variety all on their own. Suzy had taught them well.

Marcus loped off to fetch the cone from the nearby Scoops storefront and returned momentarily, handing it briskly to Jackson with an elaborate bow. "Your wish is my command."

Jackson reached out for the cone. "You're silly," he observed. Marcus responded by stretching his face into a contorted grimace and sticking out his tongue. Jackson giggled and Logan, after a minute, followed suit. Soon, Wyatt was laughing too. It was the first time Jacqui had seen the kids let loose, and she giggled along with them.

"They're adorable. Yours?" Marcus raised an eyebrow, his sleepy-sexy eyes twinkling.

"*Deus!* Of course not, I'm only nineteen!" Jacqui laughed. If he wasn't so adorable, she would have been extremely offended. But she'd always had a soft spot for Australian accents, and his was particularly yummy.

Marcus drew a hand across his brow, pretending to look greatly relieved.

Midas, who was still taking photographs, mumbled, "Perfect. And undiscovered, I can bet on it. But how?" He finally put the camera down and addressed Jacqui directly, wiping the sweat off his brow. "You're not with any agency, are you?"

Jacqui shook her head. She had been mistaken for a model so often in Manhattan, it was always tempting to lie and say that she was so people would stop bothering her about it already.

Midas fished in his pants pocket for his card and handed it to her. "I'd love to take more photos of you if you're interested."

She took the card and put in her pocket, crumpling it with her fingers. She wasn't sure if she even believed they were real fashion photographers, and besides, she'd heard that line *many* times before.

"Oh, playing hard to get, are we?" Marcus teased, having noticed the discreet diss. "What my brother is too shy to tell you is that we just arrived here from Sydney to scout locations for a magazine shoot, and you're just the face we're looking for."

Jacqui shook her head again, more firmly this time but with a smile. "You're both very sweet, but it's just not for me." Once upon a time, Jacqui eagerly traded in her looks for anything it could bring—the use of older men's Black AmEx credit cards, free drinks at a bar,

a better table in restaurants. But she was tired of being treated like an empty-headed doll. She wanted to prove to the world that she was a serious girl with serious ambitions—to be known for the size of her brain rather than that of her bust.

“Don’t tell me we’ve found the only girl in the world who doesn’t want to be a model!” Marcus laughed. “You’re going to put Tyra Banks out of business!”

Midas shrugged. “Just think about it,” he said, in a serious, professional manner. He began putting away his camera and nodded, the conversation already over for him. “Let’s go—we told Tonne we’d check out the pond to see if we can use it for the shoot.”

“Hang on a sec,” Marcus said, still eyeing Jacqui. “Sure you’re not interested? We don’t bite, you know.”

Jacqui returned the smile. “I’m not. But if you guys really are fashion photographers, you might want to come by my friend’s party tonight. She’s opening her store.” She dug out the invitation, which was only slightly grimy from having been used as a napkin. “Eliza Thompson. She’s the biggest thing in the Hamptons right now.” Okay, so that might not be true—*yet*—but it would be soon. She stretched out a hand with the invitation and Marcus took it, his fingers lingering over her own for a brief moment.

“Good on ya.” Marcus nodded as he drew his hand away, smoothly pocketing the invite. “See you there.”

Jacqui watched them saunter down the street until an insistent tug on her hem reminded her that there were other, smaller boys who needed her attention as well.

eliza's ring only promises misunderstandings

"IT'S SO TIGHT!" MARA EXCLAIMED as Eliza tightened the straps on the white floor-length mermaid gown she'd asked Mara to model at the store-opening party.

"It's *supposed* to be tight," Eliza replied, cinching it so that the dress showed off Mara's lithe figure to spectacular effect. With its fishtail hem and crisscrossing straps in the back, it was one of her favorite pieces in her collection. "See?" She stepped back and turned Mara toward the mirror.

Mara took in her reflection. She had to admit, the constriction of her breathing might actually be worth it. If there was one thing you could say about Eliza's designs, it was that they flattered a woman's figure. She smiled at herself in the mirror, sneaking a glance at Eliza's beaming face and the messy bedroom behind them.

In typical Eliza fashion, her room at the Finnemore mansion looked like a hurricane had hit it—clothes, papers, and trash were strewn about everywhere. Balled-up designer gowns littered the carpet, along with tangled bikinis, wet beach towels, empty Fiji water bottles, and various fashion magazines. The dresser was covered in cosmetic cases, hairbrushes, and jars of face cream and lotion. Eliza had only lived in the room for a week, and yet it already looked like she'd been there for years. It was a minor miracle that she emerged from her messy room looking immaculately groomed every day.

Mara's phone vibrated with a text message on the dresser beside her, and she grabbed it while Eliza knelt down to pin the hem on her gown. She flipped up the screen.

VU FRM EIFFEL TWR GR8. BUT NOT SAME W/O U.

David again. He'd e-mailed her from Europe a few days after he'd arrived, explaining that it was hard to get an Internet connection and that his cell phone charged astronomical fees for international calls. But he'd quickly discovered he could send text messages for the usual fee and had taken to texting her multiple times a day to let her know exactly where he was—and, inadvertently, what she was missing.

Like Jacqui, Mara had found the kids to be a breeze, but being back to playing nanny was still quite a letdown after her glorious summer plans had gone awry. Mara had spent the afternoon chauffeuring Violet to her various tutors, baby Cassidy strapped in the backseat, while Jacqui took the boys to their lessons. She had given them both their dinner, and Violet had gone to bed early to get ready for her Mandarin exam the next day, and the baby was

already asleep. While nannying the Finnemores wasn't all that difficult, it also wasn't the Eiffel Tower.

Mara texted back. PARTY TONIGHT. AM BUSY.

There. That should let him know she was preoccupied with her own glamorous life. Not that it was that much of a stretch—in the long, elegant white gown, she couldn't help but feel glamorous, and she did have a fun night ahead of her with her friends.

"That should do it," Eliza said, knotting up the stitch and cutting the thread with her teeth. She brushed lint off her knees and stood up. "Where's Jacqui?" she asked, glancing at the bedside clock, which was partially obscured by a pair of dangling bra cups. Whoops, maybe when she got a spare moment she should clean up a bit in here. Not that she ever *had* a spare moment. She was already past due at the store. The caterers should have arrived by now, as well as the army of publicists who were working the event. According to Eliza's schedule, her staff would be assembling the gift bags right this moment. She'd only waited because she wanted to see how Jacqui looked in the outfit she'd chosen for her.

"She called—she was running late with the boys. Jackson got sick in the car and they had to stop at a gas station, but she'll be here," Mara answered, examining her profile in the mirror. The dress was a bit *ta-da!* and she had been worried about being able to pull it off, but Eliza was right—it did look better tighter.

"I hope she gets here soon. I want to make sure her dress fits perfectly—I'm worried it's too low in the chest," Eliza fretted.

"When has that ever been a problem with Jac?" Mara laughed. The girl lived in low-cut outfits. "Décolletage is Jacqui's middle name."

"I know." Eliza nodded with a wry smile. "But I want to make sure it looks Mischa Barton sexy, not Jessica Simpson sexy." She ran a hand nervously through her hair.

"Oh my God. What is *that?*" Mara shrieked as an enormous diamond ring on Eliza's hand caught the light.

Eliza wondered what had gotten into Mara until she noticed the rock on her finger. She usually wore it stone-side down to deflect attention since she didn't know what to make of it yet. She felt more comfortable showing the world she was wearing a plain platinum band, but the ring had turned around when she wasn't looking, and the five-carat rock was now front and center.

"Is this what I think it is?" Mara said, sticking her face a centimeter away from Eliza's hand so she could see it better. "When did you get this?" She looked up at Eliza curiously.

"Last Sunday," Eliza admitted, chewing her bottom lip. She'd been uncharacteristically tight-lipped about the news, having not breathed a word to her friends. She pulled away, picking up a powder brush from the vanity and dusting her nose, as if getting a six-figure diamond ring from her boyfriend happened every week. She just didn't feel like getting into it.

She and Jeremy still hadn't had a proper conversation about what had happened that day at old lady Greyson's. Every time she felt like bringing the subject up, she couldn't find the right words. Asking him exactly what he'd meant by giving her the ring seemed so . . . rude. Especially since Jeremy was being so unbelievably sweet and supportive of her store opening. This week he'd sent her flowers out of the blue and offered to help set up at the party, even though he had a big deadline on one of his jobs. He was acting like something very important had now been settled between them. The problem was, Eliza couldn't shake off a feeling that felt anything *but* settled. Did the ring mean what she—and now Mara—thought it meant?

"Why haven't you said anything?" Mara demanded, swiping the brush away from Eliza and putting a hand on her hip like an angry schoolteacher. The three of them had met up every night for dinner or a nightcap that week, and Eliza had kept absolutely mum on her romantic situation.

"Uh . . ." Eliza didn't know what to say. Jeremy hadn't exactly gotten down on his knees, and she hadn't said yes or anything. Eliza had decided it was more of a "promise" ring than anything, like one of those rings the Bachelor gave when he didn't want to commit to marriage but the producers still wanted to finagle a happy ending. Because really, how could you get engaged to someone you'd met on reality television? Or in Eliza's case, how could you get engaged when you were only nineteen years old? She wasn't barefoot, pregnant, or Paris Hilton. Be serious!

Before Eliza could explain, Mara pulled her in for a tight hug, almost tripping over the thick June issue of *Vogue* splayed out on the carpet between them. "Congratulations! This is sooo exciting! You and Jeremy! Hooray!"

"*O que está acontecendo?*" Jacqui called from the doorway. "What's happening?" She made her way to her gleefully hugging friends, who broke apart and smiled when they saw her. "Is it too late for me to shower? I'm all covered in ice cream." She was exhausted from dealing with Jackson's tummy troubles. Passion fruit ice cream might be fat free, but it was too acidic for the little boy's stomach. She'd spent the last hour in a cramped gas station bathroom, dealing with the consequences.

"No, it's not too late, but here, let me show you what you're wear—" Eliza reached for the white dress hanging on the closet door, but Mara cut her off with a whoop.

"Eliza's engaged!" Mara cried, grabbing Eliza's outstretched hand and thrusting it toward Jacqui to show off the ring.

"*Que beleza!*" Jacqui breathed, blinded by the flash of the diamond. "Congratulations! He proposed?"

"We're totally going wedding gown shopping!" Mara cheered before Eliza could answer, hopping up and down—or at least as much as she could in the tight dress.

"Of course!" Jacqui agreed, squeezing Eliza's hand excitedly, still gazing at the ring. "It's huge!"

Eliza shrugged, her mouth slowly turning into a smile. She looked at her two friends' beaming faces. She wished she could explain about the ring's true meaning, but she wanted

everyone to be excited for tonight. Compared to an engagement ring, explaining that it was only a *promise* ring just didn't sound as, well, promising. Why ruin the moment?

it's the same old hamptons, but an all-
new mara. . . .

MARA COULDN'T HELP BUT SUPPRESS a smile as she circulated about Eliza's boutique, watching the sleek blond socialites wage silent wars against each other in their efforts to secure a bikini or silk pareo. Mara gasped as the handbag tug-of-war unfolding in front of her suddenly escalated into violence. A towering figure in a multicolored Missoni caftan with billowing sleeves wrenched the prized white straw-and-leather tote away from her rival's grasp. The loser of the battle, an overly tanned woman in a transparent Gucci sarong, promptly flew backward onto the shoe display.

Needless to say, Eliza's store opening was a tremendous success.

It was all-bets-off shopping mayhem as the affluent customers—who were used to getting exactly what they wanted—found they had to fight tooth and manicured nail for the precious and dwindling selection of must-have pieces. Salesgirls rushed to keep up with the customers' demands, and the line to the furiously ringing registers snaked through the store, nearly reaching the sidewalk.

Mara's job was to walk slowly around the store—to “swan,” as Eliza had instructed—showing off the evening gown and answering questions about it, while Jacqui did the same on the other side. The two of them had completed several laps of the place already, and the party was in full swing. An army of cater-waiters in white pants and white T-shirts emblazoned with the pink eliza thompson logo brought out a tempting array of dishes, bartenders were pouring pink champagne into crystal flutes, and the store was filled with the buzz of partygoers happily drinking, eating, and shopping.

It wasn't as flashy or insane as the Sydney Minx opening last summer, where Eliza herself had arrived in a helicopter and walked the runway. But that was a good thing, since Sydney Minx was kaput and in the boutique's former place was another yoga studio. Hopefully Eliza's label wouldn't suffer a similar fate.

Mara reached for a shrimp puff and chewed on it slowly, surveying the room with an experienced reporter's eye, taking care not to get oil on her white silk dress. She spotted Garrett Reynolds, her former flame, holding a woman's purse under his arm as his girlfriend, a pouty condiment heiress famous for her public tantrums, disappeared into the dressing room underneath a huge pile of clothing.

“Look what the cat dragged in.” Garrett smirked when he saw Mara and strolled over toward her.

“Hi, yourself.” Mara smiled politely, steeling herself for one of Garrett’s digs. “What are you doing here? Don’t you summer in South Africa these days?” she asked with a hint of derision, referring to his comment last summer about how the Hamptons scene was as “over and out” as a Clay Aiken record.

“Got shot in the ass while on safari,” Garrett growled. “I thought it best to stay in safer waters.”

Mara tried not to laugh and failed. “I’m sorry.” She chuckled.

“Go ahead, have your fun,” Garrett allowed with a debonair wave of the hand. “It’s not every day you get mistaken for a white rhino. Thankfully, the settlement was enough to buy me my own place out here,” he added, craning his neck and preening at his reflection in the mirror. “It’s south of the highway, with a view of the ocean. I’m renovating—you should come visit when it’s done.”

Building his own place? Was his family’s totally ostentatious, five-hundred-million-square-foot castle not enough? “Sure, when it’s done.” Mara nodded, forcing a smile. She knew the visit would never happen.

It was just like Garrett to suffer a humiliation but come out even richer from it, Mara thought as she walked away. Two women already loaded down with shopping bags stopped and asked where to find the dress she was wearing, and after pointing them in the right direction, Mara decided she had to do a little shopping of her own. She grabbed one of the white string bikinis from the racks before they were all gone and bumped into another familiar face.

“Sexy, aren’t they?” Mitzi Goober appeared beside her, her one-year-old daughter strapped to her chest in a Gucci baby carrier. The über-publicist dragged her daughter to every event, no matter how late or how inappropriate. Little Soleil had been to everything, including a party for the launch of a new line of vibrators. Knowing Mitzi, she probably thought it was never too early to get her daughter started socializing with the crème de la crème.

“They’re cut Brazilian style,” Mara explained, knowing Eliza had patterned the swimsuits after the tiny tangas Jacqui was so fond of.

Mitzi clucked approvingly. “Brazil is hot again. I’ll make sure I mention that to *Vogue*.”

“You’re Eliza’s publicist?” Mara asked, momentarily shocked, although she shouldn’t have been. Eliza never let anything like notoriety get in the way of hiring “the best,” and vituperative personality aside, Mitzi got the job done. The place was teeming with dozens of reporters getting drunk and fat off the free booze and eats.

Mitzi nodded, craning over Mara’s shoulder to see if there was anyone more important she should be talking to. Now that Mara was no longer a reporter for *Hamptons* or on staff for *Metropolitan Circus*, the fact that Mitzi had said hello to her at all was a big concession to courtesy.

Thankfully, Mara was rescued from Mitzi’s indifference by Lucky Yap, the friendly paparazzo who had been Mara’s mentor in the past.

“There’s my girl!” Lucky gushed when he saw her. “You look deeevine!” he enthused, taking a few shots of Mara for old times’ sake.

Lucky was dressed in the latest Hampton obsession—orange robes and shawls modeled after the ones worn by the Dalai Lama. His Holiness was making a pilgrimage to the Hamptons that summer, and his devoted followers showed their dedication by donning colorful togas similar to those worn by his Tibetan monks over their Lilly Pulitzer capris. Wooden prayer beads had even replaced wooden Marni necklaces as the season’s hottest accessory.

“Thanks, Lucky. And you look very . . . orange!” Mara said, once again at a loss for words at the sight of Lucky’s outrageous outfit. “Like a sunset!”

“It’s tangerine, my dear, tangerine,” Lucky corrected. “Feel this,” he ordered, taking Mara’s hand and placing it on the shawl. “It’s made from Mongolian antelope hair. Softer than a baby’s butt!”

Mara was just about to ask Lucky if his shawl was an illegal shahtoosh—she suspected that it was—when the portly photographer bolted to the front door. “Oh, oh, oh! Gotta dash—there’s Chauncey Raven stepping out of the limo! I hope she’s wearing underwear this time; I can’t sell hoochie shots to *People* magazine!” And with that he dashed off to snap the pop-star-turned-single-mother, whose every exit from a vehicle was akin to a gynecological exam.

Mara watched him leave with a fond eye. No one ever changed in the Hamptons. It was the same old moneyed crowd, the same old taut and tanned faces—even if some of the face-lifts were new. She yawned, covering her mouth with the back of her hand. The party was fabulous and all, but her feet were starting to swell from the high-heeled sandals Eliza has picked out to match the dress. If only she could sit down. Or better yet, lie down. There was a comfortable bed with her name on it not too far away. Surely Eliza didn’t expect her to model the gown all evening? If she bade her goodbyes now, she could still catch a late-night rerun of *Ugly Betty*.

She found Eliza in a brightly lit corner of the store, flushed and happy, surrounded by clients and the fashion press. She wore a slim white satin tuxedo with nothing underneath, showing off her deep Flying Point beach tan. Mara made eye contact and Eliza broke away from the group with an apologetic bow to say hello to her friend.

“What’s up? Having fun?” Eliza asked, straightening a stack of T-shirts on a table next to Mara, ever the mindful hostess.

“For sure, but I’m pooped,” Mara said. “My feet are killing me. Will you be very angry if I bail?”

“You’re leaving?” Eliza hugged the T-shirts to her chest and then laid them down flat. “So early?”

“I’m sorry,” Mara said, feeling a little guilty. She wanted to be there for Eliza, but she’d been standing in the same stilettos for almost two hours now, and she was tired. It had been a long day, and she was ready for it to be over. “But see, the dress is already sold out,” she said, motioning to the empty rack. “You’re a hit! You don’t need me.”

“Flattery will get you everywhere.” Eliza smiled. “But you’re really going?”

“Yeah.” Mara sighed. “I haven’t been to a party like this in ages, and I’d forgotten how *exhausting* they are. If another socialite asks me where I get waxed, I’m going to hurl. You know David’s idea of a good time is a *New Yorker* lecture.” Mara shook her head in a “what are you gonna do” gesture, shrugging.

Eliza put the shirts back down on the table with a slap. She knew Mara was just trying to be funny, but she felt a twinge of irritation nonetheless. Ever since Mara had started dating The Amazing David (which was what Eliza had begun to call him in her head, since Mara was prone to gush about him), there had been a lot of little comments like that. Mara, who’d once been so intimidated by snooty velvet-rope events when she was a Hamptons newbie, sometimes sounded like she now thought she was “above” the trivial social scene.

“Okay, go home.” Eliza nodded briskly, trying not to show how hurt she was. It was the opening of her first boutique, and Eliza had hoped that once the party wound down and all the celebrities and journalists left, she and Jeremy and her two best friends could celebrate privately—she’d even set aside a tray of caviar and a bottle of champagne for just that purpose. But if Mara wanted to leave, who was she to stop her?

Mara gave Eliza a kiss on the cheek. She held up the bikini. “And I’ll totally pay you for this when I get paid next week, okay?” She waved goodbye to Jacqui across the room and made her way toward the clipboard squad guarding the entrance. After a night of run-ins with her Hamptons past, she was relieved to be finally leaving. The second she got in the door at the Finnemores’, she was going to take off her shoes and massage her aching feet.

There was a huge crowd of people still waiting to get inside the party, but she saw a familiar dark honey blond head walk to the front of the velvet ropes, cutting through the mass of hopeful partygoers like a hot knife through butter.

Because Ryan Perry was *always* on the VIP list.

He caught her eye and her heart stopped at the sight of him. And just like that, Mara completely forgot about her tired, pained feet.

brangelina's got nothing on jereliza

BEFORE ELIZA COULD FEEL TOO upset about Mara abandoning her, she was pulled away by Mitzi Goober, who was hyperventilating in excitement.

“The ‘Tawker’ writer’s here! And she wants you *now*,” Mitzi said, her manicured nails digging into Eliza’s arm. “Tawker” was a must-read Manhattan-based gossip column that appeared daily in one of the major papers.

“Wait! Can I go say hi to my boyfriend first?” Eliza asked, seeing Jeremy enter the store, looking handsome as ever in a nice linen suit. He had been at the store earlier to help but had left to change out of his overalls. He waved to Eliza and started to make his way toward her.

“No time for boyfriends!” Mitzi ordered, pushing Eliza toward the “Tawker” gossipeuse.

“All right.” Eliza sighed, gesturing apologetically in Jeremy’s direction. Given that Mitzi had strapped her baby to her chest, maybe there *was* no time for relationships when you were trying to make a living on the New York social circuit. Was she going to have to strap Jeremy to her chest to get to spend any time with him?

Eliza pasted on her most winning smile as she prepared herself to take on the reporter’s questions. She knew she had to ace the interview or else be subjected to enormous ridicule. “Tawker” was merciless in its coverage of Manhattan movers and shakers. It had even instituted a popular section called “Dumbass of the Day,” wherein various players on the Manhattan social scene were relentlessly savaged. Never appearing in that column was considered a great achievement among a certain set.

“Hey, nice meeting ya.” The gossip writer, a perky, twenty-something brunette quickly shook her hand before diving right in. “So, which stuff did Chauncey Raven buy? The underwear, I hope? God knows the girl needs it, huh?”

Eliza laughed and then provided all the lacy details. She knew that celebrities’ shopping habits were standard fodder for the gossip press.

The “Tawker” editor followed with a few softball questions about the launch party and who had been invited, and Eliza carefully answered every query, making sure not to use the word *like* in every sentence or say anything that could be used to humiliate her—with one careless answer, she could be painted as another rich blond socialite trying to buy her way into a career in fashion.

Eliza was proud of her own composure, but she could tell that after only a few minutes, the reporter could barely contain her boredom—she was already checking her watch. *What was up with everyone tonight?* Eliza thought, annoyed. First Mara bailing early, and now it was

so obvious the “Tawker” writer was talking to her only because Mitzi had forced her to. Well, screw her. Eliza wasn’t going to embarrass herself just to give “Tawker” something to talk about. Though she was dying to get some press—the store wouldn’t survive without it.

“Well, thanks for your time,” the girl said, giving Eliza a fake smile. “I’ll let Mitzi know if we run an item.”

“Sure.” Eliza nodded, pushing her hair away from her face, knowing full well that a passing mention on Chauncey Raven’s lingerie purchase would be the only coverage her store would receive. Still, she’d take any press she could get.

“Hey, is that an engagement ring?” the reporter asked suddenly.

“Oh yeah, I guess,” Eliza said, looking at the ring again as if for the first time.

The writer whistled. “What is that, five carats? It’s a monster!”

Eliza nodded, blushing a little. It really *was* huge. But then, hadn’t she always insisted to whoever listened that she would never settle for anything less? “Five carats—anything less is a speck. An insult. A piece of dust!” “Five carats or don’t bother!” But now, it did seem absurdly large. It looked gigantic on her finger.

“So who’s the lucky guy?” the writer asked, taking a slug of champagne, her interest in Eliza apparently renewed.

“Jeremy Stone,” Eliza said with a warm smile.

“Jeremy Stone,” the girl repeated, furrowing her brow. “Why does his name sound so familiar?”

“He’s a really great landscape architect,” Eliza gushed, beaming. So maybe “landscape architect” was pushing it—Jeremy was just a glorified gardener when you came down to it. But whatever her ambivalence toward the ring, one thing was for sure—she was very proud of Jeremy.

“No, that’s not why,” the reporter said dismissively, waving her glass of champagne around as she furrowed her brow in thought. “Jeremy Stone. . . . Hey, I remember now. Isn’t he the guy who just inherited the Greyson pile?”

What a way to put it. “Um, well, yes . . . ,” Eliza said slowly.

“Damn, girl. You made a killing! You’re marrying the Greyson heir!” The “Tawker” writer immediately lit up and brought out her iPod recorder. “So when’s the wedding?”

The Greyson heir? Wedding? “Uh, we’re not really sure. . . .” Eliza blanched. *Wedding?* Who said anything about a wedding? She wanted to explain that the ring signified more of a “promise” than an engagement—Jeremy had never even said anything more about it; he just looked happy to see the ring on her hand—but no words came out. The “Tawker” writer seemed really interested in the story, and Eliza felt the hunger for publicity start to gnaw at her.

“Um . . . next . . . next year?” Eliza hedged. Besides, if it *was* an engagement ring, which everyone seemed to think it was—and what was the harm if they did?—then that would mean

there would have to be a wedding at some point. . . .

“You gonna wear white? God knows you have enough white in this store. Design the dress?”

“Um . . .” Eliza began to feel her cheeks become very red. Just as she was trying to back away from the aggressive reporter, she was accosted by several of her old friends from Spence.

“Liza! Oh my God! We just heard! Congratulations! And by the way, that is an ice rink!” Lindsay said, admiring the ring while the other girls oohed and aahed.

There was nothing like a ring viewing to cause a commotion, and soon even more reporters were swarming around. *New York* magazine wanted to know if they were having the reception in the city or on the beach. *WWD* inquired as to the ring’s provenance (Neil Lane from *Beverly Hills*). The *Observer* asked if she would do a “bridal blog” on their site. Every question directed toward Eliza had nothing to do with her store launch or the collection but instead focused on her engagement to Jeremy “Five Carat” Stone, as the “Tawker” reported had quickly dubbed him.

It was everything she’d ever dreamed of for herself when she was growing up, and yet—and yet—the ring was starting to feel incredibly heavy on her finger. And she was beginning to become just a teensy bit annoyed that not one of the reporters had asked about her new collection.

Finally, when Eliza could no longer hide the fact that she didn’t have very many details on the impending nuptials, the rest of the reporters ended the bridal inquisition and scattered to attack the goody bags, leaving her alone with the “Tawker” writer once again.

“So, did he have anything to do with the store?” she asked Eliza.

She caught sight of Jeremy across the room. He was politely talking to a few buyers from Japan, who didn’t know anyone else at the party and spoke limited English. He really was such a sweetheart. “Oh yes, he built the whole interior,” Eliza replied. “According to my design, of course.” She smiled fondly, thinking of the two of them throwing paint at each other over the winter and how they had laughed when the ceiling caved in, covering them in plaster, while Jeremy was renovating. She glanced at the corner where he was laughing at something the Japanese buyer was saying.

She caught his eye and he raised his glass to her. She raised hers to him, feeling a pang that she hadn’t even had time to say hello. No matter—if the ring promised anything, it was that they had all the time in the world.

mara doesn't speak ex-boyfriend

“RYAN,” MARA BREATHED. AFTER THAT night on the beach, she'd chalked up that odd jittery feeling she'd felt on seeing him to the fact that she was naked at the time. But now that she was fully clothed, why were her hands still shaking? And why was her throat suddenly dry? Was it just because David was thousands of miles away? And had left her stranded in an airport? Maybe if David were here, seeing Ryan wouldn't affect her so much. She tried to get ahold of herself and stood up straight, willing her voice to stop trembling. “Good to see you.”

“Oh, hey,” Ryan said, looking a bit uncomfortable when he spotted Mara at the door, blocking his way. “You're off?” he asked. “I mean, it's obvious you're leaving. But didn't the party just start?”

“No, I mean, yes, I mean, I don't have to,” Mara said, kicking herself for sounding so flustered. What was it about Ryan and those beautiful greeny blue eyes of his that turned her into a blithering idiot?

“You don't—I mean, you don't have to stay if you don't want to. But if you want to, it's, uh, cool.” Ryan shrugged, sounding a little nervous himself. “I mean, you can do whatever.”

A few people behind him waiting to get inside the party began to harrumph and complain. “Excuse me!” an annoyed forty-something woman cried as she pushed past them, clutching her pink invitation. “Can I get through?”

“Yes, of course,” Ryan said, jumping out of her way and into the store. Mara immediately followed him back into the party. They found a quiet corner by the wall of handbags.

“I thought you hated these things,” Mara said abruptly as Ryan accepted a caviar-stuffed blini off a white-tuxedoed cater-waiter's tray.

“I thought you lived for these things,” Ryan retorted, licking sour cream off his fingers.

Mara frowned. That was a sour statement. She had spent last summer chronicling the social scene for *Hamptons* magazine, which necessitated attendance at dozens of these kinds of events—events at which Ryan had rarely made an effort to join her, choosing to sulk at home at being abandoned by his girlfriend instead. “I'm not writing for *Hamptons* this summer. I'm back on baby duty,” Mara explained. “The Finnemores? Eliza's dad is dating the mom. They live a few streets over from you guys.”

“The house with all the fake statues?” Ryan asked.

“Bingo.”

A smile fleetingly appeared on Ryan's lips, but it disappeared just as quickly.

“Oysters?” A cater-waiter appeared, offering fat bivalves on a tray of ice.

“Sure,” Ryan agreed, knocking one back while Mara grimaced. She could never quite stomach raw seafood. They stood in tense silence for a moment. “Anyway, it’s Eliza’s big day, so I thought I should be here,” he said finally, looking down at the pink terrazzo floor. “Is it me, or is everything pink in here?”

“Everything’s pink,” Mara confirmed. Oh. So he was here for Eliza. He and Eliza went way back, and nothing ever seemed to affect their friendship. She was suddenly a little jealous of that, and took a big gulp of champagne from her glass.

“Dude, that is so Eliza.” Ryan laughed.

Dude. There it was again. There was just something so *platonic* about that word. Ryan called Eliza “dude” all the time, and Mara had liked that he did, since it meant that he thought of her as a buddy and not as a girl he’d once hooked up with. Then again, what did she care? She had a new boyfriend now—not that she was thrilled with David at this particular moment. He’d just sent her a photo of the Louvre from his camera phone with a note that said I LOUVRE YOU. Great, but how about an I Louvre You call?

It was silly to be so awkward around Ryan. They had a history together, and there was no reason they couldn’t be friends. “You know, we should hang out sometime,” Mara proposed, adopting a super-casual tone. The fact that her heart was beating quickly was probably just the stuffy air. There were too many people in the boutique and the air-conditioning system couldn’t keep up.

“Yeah.” Ryan nodded. “I’m sure I’ll see you around this summer.” He took two chicken skewers from a passing tray. “I missed dinner,” he explained, blushing slightly.

“‘See me around’? You’re not getting away that easily,” Mara teased. Did he *really* just give her the “see you around” brush-off? “We should get together. What are you doing for the Fourth?” she pressed, now determined to squeeze a real plan out of him.

“Dunno.” He shrugged, looking around for a trash can for the skewers and shoving them into his pockets when he couldn’t find one.

“C’mon, you always have big plans.” She thought of her first summer at the Hamptons, when Ryan had saved her from a disastrous Fourth of July taking care of the Perry kids by herself. She’d spent the holiday with him these past three years. Why couldn’t they just hang out like they used to?

Ryan shrugged. “A couple of the guys might be getting together for a barbecue down by the house. Not a big deal.”

“What time?”

“Around noon or so.”

“Cool, I’ll bring beer.”

“Uh, okay.” Ryan nodded, taking the empty skewers out of his pockets and placing them on a passing tray.

“See you then,” Mara said cheerfully, willfully oblivious to how reluctant Ryan was about extending the invitation. Boys could be so immature! She’d practically had to invite herself to the shindig. If he could be friends with Eliza, why couldn’t they be friends too? It couldn’t be that hard, could it?

“Ryan! You made it!” Eliza squealed, bursting on the two of them and giving Ryan a friendly hug. She looked puzzled to see Mara. “I thought you’d left!”

“I was just—,” Mara said, but Eliza had already pulled Ryan deeper into the party. Mara watched them walk away, arm in arm.

The Fourth of July was next Saturday. A week wasn’t a very long time, but for Mara it suddenly felt like an eternity. She hitched the shopping bag that held the minuscule bikini on her shoulder. Maybe she’d wear *that* to the barbecue, just to remind him that she wasn’t exactly one of the guys.

“Dude” indeed.

good-looking guys get away with everything

WALLFLOWER WAS NOT A WORD that came to mind when describing Jacqui Velasco, but that was exactly what she felt like at the store opening. Modeling had been fun at first. Eliza had picked a daring, thigh-scraping strapless A-line dress for her to wear, and the white fabric stood out against her deep mocha tan. Jacqui had enjoyed vamping it up and helping guests decide which of Eliza's sexy white dresses looked best on their figures.

But a few hours later, almost all the racks were bare, and she had to inch around the room, which was getting more jammed by the second with the late-night crowd, who were more interested in the free cocktails than in the clothing.

Other than Eliza, who was busy being a social butterfly, and Mara, who had just left, Jacqui realized she knew almost no one at the party. That had never fazed her before—in her hard-partying days, she could make a friend in the instant it took to pop a champagne cork—but between trying to get into NYU and working for the Perrys, it had been a while since she'd been the life of the party. She grabbed another glass of champagne, her fifth of the evening. Ooh. She should stop. But she'd felt ridiculous standing all alone, dressed to the nines with heavy makeup on, looking like a dismissed diva while everyone else was gathered in tight-knit cliques. Drinking had given her something to do.

Oh, well. No one would even notice if she tiptoed out the door right now. She could just put down the champagne flute and sneak out the back. Eliza would understand. It wasn't like she needed Jacqui to be there anymore for moral—or model—support. Almost everything in the store had already sold out. And besides, Jacqui had a big day with the kids planned for tomorrow. The twins needed to be at their gifted seminar in Wainscott by eight, and Wyatt had his practice session for his upcoming KRTs (the Kindergarten Readiness Tests, which was to preschoolers what the SATs were to their high school counterparts) shortly afterward. So it would probably be best if she just left now. . . .

“Don't I know you from somewhere?” A voice startled her from behind.

Finally. Someone she knew. Jacqui turned and began to smile until she realized who it was. Some smarmy-looking thirty-year-old-guy trying too hard to look cool with his slicked-back hair and his vintage Rolex, jangling his Bentley car keys. Why did he look so familiar? Then it hit her. The Hollywood hotshot. The chicks-gone-crazy party. That first memorable summer in the Hamptons. Rupert Thorne. Otherwise known as a Thorne in her side. Raising his smug head again.

“I think you’re confusing me with someone else,” she said, pushing past him and trying to get as far away from him as possible.

“Whoa, don’t be that way, beautiful!” he called after her.

As she stormed away, she bumped into Eliza, who had just finished giving another interview. “You all right?” Eliza asked. “You look tense.”

Jacqui shrugged. “Listen, *chica*, it’s late. . . .”

“Don’t say you’re leaving too! I can’t believe Mara’s already gone!” Eliza wailed, running her fingers through her hair in dismay.

Jacqui was about to apologize, but just then there was a communal buzz from the party as two gorgeous guys appeared in the doorway. She and Eliza turned to look. Jacqui smiled. It was the two cute Aussies she’d met that afternoon! She was glad to see some familiar—not to mention handsome—faces. Midas looked a bit scruffy and tired. He was still wearing the same worn T-shirt and pants that he’d had on earlier, but Marcus looked freshly shaven and had changed into a dashing white linen suit.

She began to wave, but Eliza tugged on her arm. “Oh. My. God. Do you know who those guys are?” Eliza whispered fiercely, pulling Jacqui close. “That’s Midas and Marcus Easton—they’re the hottest photographers in fashion right now!”

“Really?” Jacqui asked. So they hadn’t been lying or pretending to be something they weren’t. That was good to know. So many guys called themselves “photographers” when really all they did was run up-skirt websites. Not that Jacqui had ever been on one, thank you very much. But she’d seen the Chauncey Raven shots.

“Don’t tell me you haven’t heard of the ‘Saucy Aussies?’” Eliza asked, forever shocked that other people could be so ignorant of the fashion industry.

“The what?” Jacqui raised an eyebrow, amused.

“That’s what they’re called because they do these really cool, almost risqué fashion shoots. *Vogue* can’t get enough of them. Midas is known for his ‘touch of gold.’ He’s really the genius behind it all. A lot of people say Marcus is just along for the ride. That he doesn’t do anything but hold up a reflector. But you know, the ‘twin’ thing works to their advantage. I mean, they’re both great-looking, so why not have two beautiful guys on a shoot instead of one? Oh my God. Oh my God. I can’t believe they’re here!” Eliza squealed, unable to conceal her excitement. She was speaking so loudly that several guests turned to look.

“Why? You’ve got almost everyone here,” Jacqui said, pointing to a famous actress who was leaving the party with four goody bags stuffed under her arm. “It looks pretty A-list to me.”

“You don’t understand—every year Midas and Marcus pick one model and one designer to follow—they do this thing called ‘reality fashion,’ where instead of doing formal shoots and stuff, they just follow a model wearing the designer’s clothes the way a normal person would—you know, everywhere from the bedroom to grocery shopping—and then they do a big spread in *Vogue* showing all the designs. If they pick my line, it could launch my career!” Eliza

explained, anxiously smoothing the lapels on her satin tuxedo and giving her hair a good shake.

“That’s so funny, I bumped into them earlier with the—,” Jacqui began, but her words died as the two boys walked right up to them.

“There she is,” Marcus said, putting a friendly arm around Jacqui. “The girl of the moment.”

“Thanks for the invite,” Midas added, fiddling with the zoom lens on his camera and pointing it at the Marilyn mannequin. “This is a great store. Love the high-concept thing.”

Eliza looked confused and turned to Jacqui. “You *know* these guys?”

“Sure. We’re all best pals here. I’m Marcus. That’s Midas. Cheers, big ears,” Marcus said merrily, taking a champagne flute from a waiter’s tray, his hand still draped casually around Jacqui’s neck. “Brilliant! Pink and white! Like being in a big cotton candy machine.”

“That’s the idea,” Eliza replied smoothly, not quite sure if she’d just been complimented or insulted.

“Guys, this is my friend Eliza Thompson that I told you about,” Jacqui said, making introductions all around.

Midas shook Eliza’s hand with a firm grip while Marcus was content to wave lazily, still attached to Jacqui’s side.

Jacqui felt his hand trail from her neck to her waist, giving her a light squeeze. Maybe all the bubbles had gone to her head—she usually didn’t like a guy to be so forward—but she leaned comfortably into his embrace. After all, who could resist a Saucy Aussie?

supermodels are discovered, not made

“**THANKS FOR COMING TO MY** party,” Eliza said shyly to Midas. She felt a little bit like a seventh grader throwing a birthday party, and she hoped he wouldn’t be able to detect her nervousness.

“No worries. You’re all this?” Midas asked, motioning to the store as a whole and closely inspecting the row of portraits of famous actresses from the thirties and forties that lined the wall leading to the dressing rooms. All of Eliza’s fashion icons were up there. Greta Garbo in a feathered nightgown. Bette Davis smoldering in a sequin bolero. Katharine Hepburn in her signature men’s-style trousers. Joan Crawford in her wasp-waisted suit—the only woman who could make shoulder pads look good.

Eliza nodded, glancing in Jacqui and Marcus’s direction as they drifted off on their own, Marcus’s hand brushing Jacqui’s hip in a possessive manner. That was fast. She turned back to Midas. He wasn’t as flashy or slick as his brother, but he was certainly very cute. His deep blue eyes focused on her with shining intensity.

“And you did that,” Midas was saying, gesturing to the hot number that Jacqui was wearing. The dress was covered in white acrylic beading that made it shimmer in the light.

“Uh-huh.” She nodded stupidly. The Easton brothers were total career launchers, and first impressions were everything. Her palms were practically sweating. Why was it so warm in here? Who was in charge? Oh, right, she was.

“It’s very sixties, isn’t it?” Midas asked.

“I was inspired by Twiggy,” Eliza admitted. “But I wanted to update the shape and the fabric. Not make it feel so retro. I like to put my own twist on things. The fabric is actually washable, so it’s practical too.” As the words spilled out of her mouth, Eliza felt herself begin to relax. Talking about her designs had always come naturally.

“This is lovely as well,” Midas said, taking a modern-looking kimono jacket from the nearest rack and studying it intently, as if he were going to be tested on its details. “What’s the theme of your whole collection?”

Eliza smiled, flattered to be the object of such concentrated scrutiny. Finally—*finally*—someone was asking about the idea behind the line. “Well, as you can see, it’s all white because I wanted to keep it really simple and monastic but still sexy.” She gestured around the room at the various outfitted mannequins, as most of the other clothing had been snatched off the racks. “Along with the beachy basics, I also did ten standout pieces that are unique and one-of-a-kind, each with a story behind it. Like this mermaid gown,” she added, finding one

last copy of the dress Mara had worn earlier. “I call it Venus Rising. Jacqui’s dress is Carnaby Street, and the kimono is called Monet, partly because the impressionist painters were obsessed with Japoniserie and partly because it kind of looks like a painter’s smock.”

“Nice.” Midas put the kimono back on the rack and inspected the one-piece halter jumpsuit next to it. “And this?”

“It’s called Angel’s Flight. It’s very Farrah Fawcett from the seventies.” Eliza laughed guiltily. “I was having a little fun.”

“You’ve really thought all this through.” Midas raised an eyebrow, his dark blue eyes scrutinizing her as closely as they’d studied the clothes.

Eliza nodded. “Of course. I think it’s so boring just to wear clothes. Fashion is all about fantasy. I want women to be able to feel transformed—and transported—by my clothing.”

“I get it,” Midas proclaimed. “I like it.” He put a hand on his stubbly chin and looked at her, deep in thought. Eliza smiled, feeling a bit awkward just standing there in silence. She wondered what he was thinking behind those intense dark eyes. Finally, Midas spoke.

“I think we might have a proposition for you,” he said slowly. “Let me just have a quick chat with Marcus.” He glanced around for his brother, who was deep in conversation with Jacqui on the white velvet couch in the middle of the store, their two perfect forms posed like living mannequins. “Hey, mate, could you come over here a second?” Midas called.

Marcus shrugged and stood, giving Jacqui a quick goodbye kiss on the hand that made her giggle. It was obvious they’d both drunk a lot of champagne in a very short time.

“What shakes?” Marcus asked as he approached, hands jauntily in his pockets as if he were out for a stroll.

Midas whispered in Marcus’s ear, and Marcus began nodding, then started shaking his head. Midas looked stymied, but Marcus only shrugged. Then they stepped away from each other. Eliza expected Midas to say something, but it was Marcus who cleared his throat.

“Congratulations . . . uh . . . Eliza Thompson?” he said, reading her name from the logo on one of the shopping bags. “You’ve just won Project Runway.”

“He’s being a goof,” Midas said with a fond but dismissive shake of the head. He turned to Eliza with a serious look on his face. “But I’m glad he agrees with me. Listen, we’d like to do a shoot based on your line. It’s just what we’re looking for. I like the stories behind the clothes, I like your ideas, and I think we’ll have fun working together.”

Eliza was flabbergasted. “Are you serious?”

“Serious as a lawsuit,” Marcus interjected cheekily.

“You’re going to do a shoot—on my line—wow,” Eliza breathed. She was so excited she almost tottered on her high heels. Sure, she’d had orders from Barneys and Bergdorf’s, but the Easton brothers choosing her clothes to photograph brought her to a different level entirely. They only shot the *best*. It was like being picked for the major leagues.

“And we want your friend Jacqui to be the model for the shoot.”

“Jacqui? Fabulous!” Eliza trilled. “I think that’s a great idea!” She looked over to where Jacqui was artfully draped on the couch. The girl looked poised even when she was sitting down.

“I know. She’s a natural.” Midas nodded. “She’s exactly what editors are looking for right now. You know the super-skinny skeletal look is out. Models dying from starvation and all that. Out, out, out. They want healthy. They want exotic. They want a girl with curves. She can be the new Gisele. You said your clothes are about telling a story, about transforming a woman. I think she can convey that—with her looks, she can read as Caucasian, Hispanic, even part African or Asian, like Jessica Alba. She’s unique and universal at the same time.”

Eliza nodded, her enthusiasm building.

“There’s just one catch,” Midas added, a preemptive note in his voice.

“What’s that?” Eliza’s brow furrowed. There was *always* a catch.

“Marcus already asked her to do it, and she turned him down flat.”

Eliza frowned. How could she have forgotten about Jacqui’s distaste for modeling? Whenever Eliza invited her out with her and her fashion buddies in the city, she always declined, saying she knew how models partied. Not that Eliza could really blame her—Jacqui’s sole venture into professional modeling had resulted in a disastrous fauxhawk haircut. “Jacqui doesn’t want to be a model, and I don’t think we can change her mind.” Eliza sighed. “But surely we can find someone else?”

“Oh.” Midas looked troubled. “I’m afraid it doesn’t work that way. We always look for the right combination—model and designer—and if one doesn’t work out, we’ll have to find another label. I’m sorry. So unless you can convince her otherwise . . .” He shrugged, his voice trailing off.

“I’ll talk to her,” Eliza said, trying to make her voice more optimistic than she felt. There would be no convincing Jacqui. Talking to her, you’d think modeling was akin to clubbing baby seals, for God’s sake. She walked over to the couch, where Marcus had reinstated himself. They certainly looked cozy enough. “Jac? Can I borrow you for a second?”

Jacqui blinked, looking a bit dazed and a little drunk. “Sure. What’s up?”

Eliza helped her friend to her feet and walked her over to a shadowy alcove by the cash registers, out of earshot. Eliza noticed Jeremy trying to signal her from across the room, but she ignored him for now. This was more important.

“Those guys want to shoot my line, but only if you’ll model it!” Eliza whispered fiercely.

“I know. They asked me.” Jacqui smiled, wondering what the fuss was all about. “I told them no.”

Eliza looked pained. “You don’t understand. If you don’t do it, they won’t shoot my clothes.”

“Really?” Jacqui asked, shocked momentarily into sobriety. “But that’s so silly.”

“I know, but that’s what they said. C’mon, will you do it? For me?” Eliza pleaded. “I promise I’ll be there every step of the way.”

“Model?” Jacqui asked, making a face. Her brief brush with modeling had totally turned her off from the profession. Everyone she’d met in the industry—designers, makeup artists, stylists, editors—treated models like cattle: dumb, barely sentient beings who needed everything done for them. They even had a name for them: “clothes hangers.” No thanks. “You know I can’t stand it.” She shook her head.

“I know.” Eliza bit her lip. “I wouldn’t ask if it didn’t mean a lot. If it didn’t mean everything to me.”

Jacqui exhaled. She looked at Eliza’s nervous, hopeful face. Maybe she could do just one shoot, as a favor to Eliza. Like the beach fashion show, or even tonight’s task to walk the room. Come to think of it, she’d done a lot of modeling assignments as favors for Eliza in the past, so just one more couldn’t really hurt. And the way Marcus was grinning at her from across the room . . . this would mean she would get to see more of him, a prospect that was starting to look very appealing.

“Oh, all right,” she relented.

“Hooray!” Eliza cheered, pulling Jacqui in for a close hug. She dragged her back to where the boys were waiting for their answer. “She’ll do it!”

“Brilliant!” Marcus cried, grabbing four flutes of champagne from the nearest waiter while Midas got his camera out again to capture the moment.

I’m just being a good friend, Jacqui thought as she glanced at Eliza’s beaming face. She couldn’t very well have said no. And besides, a little modeling here and there shouldn’t interfere with her au pair duties at all. How hard could it be to mix kids and couture?

www.blogspot/hamptonsaupair1

it's 10PM—do you know where your children are?

This week flew by crazy fast. Time flies when the kids have jam-packed schedules. Thought it would be hard to get back in caregiver groove, but the job's turning out to be nothing but a glorified chauffeur gig. Kids are either in class, a seminar, or a tutorial every second of every minute of the day. Their mother, S., says it's good for them. But is it good for them never to see their mom? S. is up at 4 a.m., when the London stock market opens, and works till 10 p.m. each night. Every time she sees me and J., she grills us on the children, but I'm not so sure her hands-off managerial style is the best way to raise your kids. Then again, she's the one with millions of dollars and an enormous empire, so what do I know about management?

On the plus side, the kids are v. independent. Logan and Jackson are self-contained and have amazing imaginations. The other day they asked if they could have a referendum on a later bedtime. They explained that they wanted the nursery run as a democracy. Unfortunately, they lost their bid in appeals court. J. and I voted 2-0 on the eight o'clock statute. Took Violet to a birthday party for a friend at her mom's insistence yesterday. Twenty-four twelve-year-olds sipping mocktails and having makeovers at the Burberry store in Bridgehampton. There were mani-pedi stations, massages, blowouts, and a DJ blasting hip-hop. Those twelve-year-olds know how to party! But Violet spent the afternoon standing in one corner talking to no one. Sad.

love is in the air. . . .

J. has a massive crush on a cute Aussie photog named M. Poor Pete from Indiana is of course long forgotten. Every time J.'s phone rings, she runs to get it and is disappointed when it's just our boss, S., reminding us to make sure the kids are doing their Mensa quizzes. As far as I can tell, J. and M., who she'll be working with a lot this summer, have a strictly business relationship—so far. Which, I'm sure, means lots of subtle eyelash-batting and coquetry on the part of my Brazilian friend. Will be sure to update on the status of this "business partnership."

In other news, E. is engaged!!!! Engaged!!!! Insane. So excited for the first wedding! Wonder if she's having bridesmaids? Must remember to ask her next time I see her—she hasn't said a word about the wedding, and I haven't seen her much since the store opening. These days, the papers seem to have more info on the blushing bride than I do. The media's been in a frenzy with E.'s engagement, which is great for her career, if not for her love life, since the publicity's done wonders for her super-busy store. Will have to grill her during our next weekly catch-up meal.

except i'm out of oxygen

I tried. I really did. Every time D. sent a sweet text or e-mail—mind you, never a call—I told myself that was the most he could do. But frankly, a girl's got needs. And this girl needed to spill the beans. The day before yesterday, I sent him a sort of nasty e-mail telling him the total truth: that part of me wishes he was here, but the other part wishes he'd drown in a Venetian canal for ditching me at the airport. Okay, so maybe the overly harsh wording was fueled by a glass of red wine. And maybe honesty is not the best policy, as I haven't heard from him since. Should I grovel for forgiveness, or be smugly satisfied that his silence proves my point exactly?

**Till next time,
HamptonsAuPair1**

mara feels roasted over the coals

THE FOURTH OF JULY WAS blazing hot, the sun shining and the skies a cloudless blue. Perfect weather for an afternoon barbecue. Outside, the pool was sparkling and hummingbirds were chirping in the imported dwarf cherry trees.

Mara turned from the window and took one last look in the mirror, fluffing her hair and putting on one more layer of lip gloss. She was wearing the white string bikini with a gauzy embroidered peasant top and a pair of simple tan leather flip-flops. Jacqui had loaned her a pair of vintage Ray-Ban aviators, and she was all set.

“How do I look?” she asked, walking out of the bathroom and striking a pose for Jacqui, who had wandered into their room.

Jacqui grinned. “Like you’re armed for battle.”

“What does that mean?” Mara asked, puzzled.

But Jacqui just shook her head and continued overturning the pillows and rugs as she looked for Cassidy’s pacifier.

“Seriously, what are you getting at?” Mara prodded.

“Nothing. Just have fun, okay?” Jacqui said gently. Mara would never admit to it, but Jacqui understood what Mara was doing. She wanted to let Ryan know what he was missing. And her bikini-clad body would certainly remind him.

Jacqui decided to hold her tongue—she’d been around long enough to know that the saga of Mara and Ryan never ended. Those two were either always on the verge of making up or breaking up. Mara couldn’t live with Ryan, but apparently she couldn’t live without him either. But you could never tell that to someone. They had to find out on their own, especially concerning matters of the heart.

Besides, she was in a good mood. She was going to see Marcus again tonight. The two of them had been flirting ever since the store opening, meeting with Midas and Eliza to brainstorm the shots for the “reality fashion” spread. It turned out that “reality fashion” was just as scripted as reality television. Although the photographs were meant to look like they were documenting a “day in the life” of a normal person, everything was carefully thought out and planned beforehand. Midas had suggested they start by shooting her at a fabulous party to create a glamorous, jet-setting image, and what better venue than the annual *Hamptons* magazine Independence Day bash? The party at the publisher’s waterfront estate was the hottest ticket in town—the biggest, most exclusive, and most extravagant party of the season.

“I’ll be back by five,” Mara promised, deciding to drop it. They had agreed to switch off on the kids for the day so that she could attend Ryan’s beach party early and Jacqui would be free to fulfill her modeling duties at the magazine party later.

She hugged Jacqui goodbye and walked out the back door toward the beach path that led to the Perry estate. She began the trek with a light step, but by the time she arrived at the right hedges ten minutes later, the heat had caused her hair to frizz and her floaty top, which had been so airy and breezy in her air-conditioned bedroom, was wet with perspiration and stuck to her body in a most unflattering manner, bunching up in her underarms and against her butt. She huffed from exertion and cursed a little bit at the sand that had stuck to the soles of her feet.

The smell of grilled meat and the soft sound of reggae greeted her as she approached the Perry house. She felt a wave of nostalgia as she opened the terrace’s low gate. There was the patio where she’d played poker with Ryan and his buddies that first summer, and that was the pool where her then-boyfriend Jim Mizekowski had caught her and Ryan skinny-dipping that same night. Too many memories. Mara sucked in her breath, wiped the sweat from her brow, and walked toward the crowd gathered by the Weber grill.

Ryan’s surfer friends were scattered about the pool area, some bobbing in the water on floaties and a few seated by the edge, their tanned legs dangling in the water. Like he’d said, it was a casual event—although this being the Hamptons, the girls were decked out in their Eres bikinis and matching Gaultier sarongs. Mara was glad she’d dressed up, even if the peasant top had left her drenched in sweat.

She said hello to a few familiar faces as she made her way to the cooler, placing the six-pack of Corona she’d brought inside. She straightened, looking around for Ryan. She took off her cover-up—dear God, it was hot!—and stretched, making sure she wasn’t popping out of the bikini. She’d never worn a two-piece that small before, although Jacqui had assured her tangas were more comfortable since they were cut close to the body and better for swimming. A few of the assembled guys did double takes when they saw her, although she was too busy retying the strings on her left hip to notice.

Now where was Ryan?

She was determined to prove to him that they could be friends—real friends—just like he and Eliza were friends. She could live with being called “dude” so long as he remembered how totally hot she was. Really, though, there was no reason they had to be estranged from each other just because they’d once been so close they could finish each other’s sentences and knew each other’s deepest secrets. (Mara’s was that she’d once cheated on a math test, Ryan’s that he’d actually attended an American Idol tour concert—with his little sister, of course). The two of them should be able to hang out, do everything they used to do—well, not *everything*, but she wanted him back in her life in some capacity at least. She could really use a guy friend, especially now that David, still silent after her vindictive e-mail, seemed to be out of the picture.

She was on her tiptoes looking around the party, the tiny strings on her bikini dangling sexily down her back and from her hips, when she saw him.

Sitting in the middle of the circle by the grill, holding hands with a head-turning blonde. A girl who looked all too familiar, and who was wearing an all-too-familiar teensy turquoise bikini.

Tinker!

The chick from Ryan's frat at Dartmouth who had lived in the yacht next to theirs last summer.

Mara felt a stab of—what? Shock? Jealousy? She couldn't be sure. But she was determined—there was that word again—to ignore it. So what if Ryan and Tinker were now an item? Wasn't that just natural? After all, they shared so many things in common—they were both great surfers, they lived for the outdoors, they both looked great in pastel polo tops, and their families both had truckloads of money.

It was almost sickening how absolutely perfect they were for each other. Mara had always suspected that Ryan would be a lot happier with a girlfriend who shared his interests. Now it looked like he'd found her.

She should just go. She felt awkward and out of place. But before her flip-flops could take her back to the safety of the shadowy hedges, Ryan spotted her and waved her over with a smile. She walked toward him slowly, as if approaching the lion's den.

"Hey, you made it," he said easily, seemingly unaffected by her presence.

"Yeah." Mara hoped her smile looked natural. She felt even more naked in the tiny tanga than she had the other night when she really *was* naked.

"Hey, Mara," Tinker greeted her with a smile, leaning over to massage Ryan's shoulders. If she was surprised to see Mara there, she was certainly doing a good job of hiding it. "Nice to see you."

"You too," Mara said. "Hot out," she added awkwardly, fanning herself with her bunched-up top. Had she really just reverted to talking about the weather?

"It's insane." Tinker nodded politely, her hands still on Ryan's bare shoulders. "Hottest summer in the Hamptons ever, I think."

"Have a beer, take a seat," Ryan offered. "Hey, Chuckles, move over," he said, ordering his friend Charlie to make room for Mara.

"Nah . . . I've got to go, actually. Another party. You know how it is." Mara shrugged and sighed, as if her schedule were just way too busy for her to even contemplate staying one more minute. "I just wanted to come by over and say hi."

"Oh—of course." He nodded. "'Tis the Fourth, after all. The Hamptons Christmas." Mara gave him a small smile, feeling the slightest bit more comfortable. They'd always compared the busy social schedule on the Fourth of July weekend to the jam-packed winter holidays. It was part of their secret language—which she'd been worried Ryan no longer spoke.

"Right," Mara agreed. "Well . . ."

“I guess we’ll see you around then,” Ryan finished with an upbeat, friendly smile. He was being so polite and maddeningly *nice*. Sure, Mara wanted the two of them to be friends, but he was treating her as if she were just another guest at the party—not the girl he’d lived with on a freaking boat just last summer!

“Yeah.” Mara nodded lamely as Tinker got up to greet some new arrivals. She noticed Ryan squeeze Tinker’s leg gently as she stood.

“Hey, man, can you pass a beer?” Charlie asked from his perch on the hammock. As Ryan reached into the cooler to get him one, Mara seized the opportunity to duck away as quickly as possible.

As she approached the gate, Mara took one last glance back at the two of them. Tinker had jumped on Ryan’s back, and he was giving her a piggyback ride all the way to the edge of the pool. They fell into the water, laughing and screaming as their toned, athletic bodies splashed about.

Why did she even want to be friends with him? She couldn’t remember the reasons. She was too angry and confused, her mind racing as she remembered all those times she’d come home from work and found Ryan hanging out with Tinker. She wondered if Ryan had ever really been such a great guy to her after all—or if their relationship had been just a sham. Was it possible there had been something between him and Tinker even then? Mara felt her cheeks burn from the heat, inside and out.

jacqui enjoys the view from the top

“ARE YOU READY?” MARCUS ASKED, giving Jacqui a hand as she stepped out of his Jeep onto the red carpet that lined the driveway up to the Swan estate, where the *Hamptons* magazine bash was being held.

She nodded and inhaled deeply. It was her first official modeling shoot—or at least as official you could get, since it was taking place at a party—and she was nervous and excited. Especially since the shoot meant a night out on the town with Marcus. A few hours earlier, a two-man hair-and-makeup team had arrived at the Finnemore mega-mansion to prepare her for the evening. It had taken them three hours to transform Jacqui from merely devastating to billboard-worthy.

She swiveled her legs forward, locked together at the knee so that she wouldn't show her underpants to the world, and exited the car gracefully. With her bronzed skin, dewy lips, and hair worn in loose, mermaid-like waves, she was radiant in a short white jersey minidress—an Eliza Thompson design, of course—with a back that dipped dangerously low to show “back cleavage.” Hordes of paparazzi stationed at the party's entrance immediately descended on her like honeybees around a queen. It was pandemonium bordering on hysteria.

“Jacarei!”

“Over here!”

“No, over here!”

“To your right!”

“To your left!”

“Jaaaaacareiiii!”

Jacqui glanced questioningly back at Marcus. She noticed Midas standing a little removed from the paparazzi horde with his bulky professional camera and tripod, intently taking photographs. “What's going on?” she asked.

“It's all part of the shoot,” Marcus explained with a smile. “It's a day in the life of a glamorous jet-setter, so we tipped the paparazzi to treat you like one.”

They had advised her there would be some staged scenes at the party, but Jacqui was unprepared for the level of commotion the Easton boys had instilled in the photographers. The buzz surrounding “Jacarei” (one name only, at Marcus's insistence) had officially begun.

The Easton boys had envisioned their photo spread as a showcase of Jacqui as a busy Hamptons glamour girl, and tonight would be the first of many shoots. Midas seemed to have the more formal shoots all planned out: they'd get shots of Jacqui attending the biggest parties, hopping off fifty-foot yachts, sunning on Main Beach, riding a horse at the Hamptons Classic. They intended to divide the work between them, and Marcus had readily volunteered to take care of the "behind the scenes" cinema verité moments—Jacqui brushing her teeth over the sink (wearing items from Eliza's new lingerie line), chatting on the phone, or texting on a BlackBerry, having a cup of coffee. Jacqui was excited at the idea that Marcus would be trying to capture such intimate moments and hoped that it would mean having him around a lot.

"What am I supposed to do?" she whispered, unsure of how to proceed. Her hesitation was causing a backlog on the red carpet. An assistant to an actress who was idling in her limousine waiting for her moment in the limelight came up to Marcus to complain about the holdup.

"Very simple, my dear. Model," Marcus said, whispering huskily in her ear and stepping aside to let her commandeer the spotlight solo. He removed a tiny Canon Elph from his jacket pocket and began taking shots of her as well.

Jacqui flushed. She turned on her heel and began to pose, causing the paparazzi to shower her with attention. The popping of flashbulbs was intense, but she focused on Midas's voice, which she heard distinctly above the fray.

"Over to your left, look over your shoulder. That's it. Beautiful. Now chin up, like you've spotted someone you know. Give them a wave. Yes, yes, beautiful."

She noticed Eliza standing next to Midas, pointing and giving suggestions. She gave Jacqui the thumbs-up sign when she caught her eye.

"This is crazy," Jacqui muttered to herself when two photographers began shoving each other for a better vantage point. How much of it was real? How much of it fake? Like most things in the Hamptons, she couldn't tell.

Midas's steady voice helped her focus. "Keep your feet facing forward, but swivel your hips to me; that's it. Gorgeous. Now laugh. As if someone has just told you the funniest joke in the world. That's it. Good girl."

Jacqui felt herself begin to relax. Modeling was all about acting, which required more brain cells than she'd previously assumed. But with Midas's coaching, she began to let herself loose and enjoy herself. She caught Marcus's eye and naughtily hooked a thumb underneath the opening of her dress and pulled it to the side, showing even more skin—a taunting, tempting sight that drove the paparazzi wild for more.

Marcus gave a loud wolf whistle, quickly echoed by the fifty other male photographers who were now shooting in earnest. Several partygoers stopped and stared at Jacqui, and the crowd around her began to grow.

Jacqui laughed. This was *way* more fun than it should be. Did she say she hated modeling? Maybe she hadn't given it enough of a chance before. Besides, it was just a bit of harmless fun

since it was only for the summer anyway. Jacqui blew several kisses and the photographers cheered.

“That’s enough, boys,” Marcus said, holding up his hands to signal that the photo shoot was over, but the press pack wouldn’t let her leave. Even when the famous actress finally left her limo, they still trained their cameras on Jacqui.

“One more!”

“This one is for the *New York Post*!”

“Over here for *People*!”

Lucky Yap came up to Jacqui and asked her to spell her name, carefully writing it down on his notepad.

Jacqui looked over at Midas for guidance. Should she continue to pose? But he was already packing up his camera. He gave her a wordless, amused shrug. Apparently their “staged” paparazzi scene had evolved into a real one. It was all up to her. Jacqui sucked in her stomach and stood with her hand on her hip and a confident smile on her face, looking every inch the nascent supermodel.

Finally, the photographers put down their cameras. To Jacqui’s complete surprise, they began applauding her performance. She gave them a courtly curtsy.

“You were perfect,” Marcus said, gliding up to her and gently steering her into the party. “But work is over, and you’re all mine tonight,” he added in a low voice as they made their way from the red carpet to the house’s magnificent entryway.

“That’s it?” she asked. This modeling gig was all play and no work.

“That’s it, love.” He nodded.

A voluptuous girl in a revealing belly dancer’s outfit greeted them at the door, and they discovered that the house and the two-hundred-foot tent in the backyard had been transformed into a sultan’s palace. It was the Fourth of July, Moroccan style. The bombastic magazine publisher was known for his love of theme parties, but even for him, this was over the top.

“What the bloody . . .,” Marcus said as they took in the billowing silk draperies, the lavish Oriental rugs, the ceiling-tall hookah pipes, and the dizzying array of grilled meats, fruit, yogurt, twenty different kinds of hummus, stuffed grape leaves, and whole roasted lamb and goat, all sitting in authentic tagines on the buffet table. Low tables were set up with fat, overstuffed silk pillows, and *Casablanca* was projected on a fifty-foot screen.

“Welcome!” Christopher Swan, the genial host and owner of *Hamptons* magazine, greeted them personally. Jacqui had only met him once before, when Mara was writing for the publication. Mara had told her he was a bit of an eccentric. “Happy Fourth of July!” he boomed. He was dressed for the occasion in a fez, a short vest, and balloon trousers.

“What’s the big idea?” Marcus asked, obviously amused by the decidedly unpatriotic flair of the event.

“Sssh, don’t tell a soul, but I got a great deal from this new Moroccan restaurant. They charged me a quarter of the cost to cater the party in exchange for publicity in the magazine.” Christopher shrugged. Like a good mogul, he knew a good deal when he saw one. “Besides, who wants hot dogs and beer when you could have veiled dancing girls and camel rides?”

Jacqui nodded as she looked around, agape at the fantastic spectacle. There were ornately costumed drummers, acrobats, and dancers everywhere. Fire-breathers were stationed every couple of feet on the beachfront, and an African drum circle was set up around a bonfire.

“Just don’t leave early,” Christopher cautioned. “At midnight, there’s going to be a re-creation of a cavalry charge, the men firing muskets into the air. Just like the real Fourth of July. Much better than fireworks, don’t you think?”

Jacqui and Marcus hastened to agree, both of them straining not to look too shocked. A Moroccan theme and a cavalry charge at the same event? Only in the Hamptons.

“C’mon, I’ve got you guys up at the main table.” Christopher pointed to a couple of gem-encrusted chairs on a dais in the center of the party.

He led them to their assigned seats, and Jacqui noticed the crowd parting deferentially as they walked by. She overheard a few of the guests’ whispered commentary. “That’s Jacarei—she’s going to be bigger than Gisele. And that’s Marcus Easton with her. Aren’t they just the luckiest people in the world?”

As Jacqui surveyed the action from the vantage point of her golden throne, she wondered if life could get any more fabulous than this.

Marcus seemed to read her mind. “Pretty lovely at the top, isn’t it?” He grinned, plucking a grape from the ornate tray on the table and plopping it into his mouth. He leaned back in his gilt chair and surveyed her admiringly. “It’s where you’re meant to be, I think.”

Jacqui blushed. “That was more fun than I was expecting,” she admitted. When she’d realized that the staged shoot had ended and the *real* paparazzi had been making a fuss over her, the attention had made her head fizzle, like bubbles in a glass of expensive champagne.

“*You’re* just as much fun as I’d been expecting.” Marcus grinned wickedly, leaning forward in his chair. Jacqui held her breath as she saw him lean in toward her, wanting to freeze this moment in time. She was on top of the world, and the most handsome guy she’d met in ages was right there with her.

She giggled and closed her eyes and felt his soft lips press on hers. He caressed her hair as he kissed her gently, his hand finding its way down her back. She felt butterflies in her stomach at his touch.

When they pulled apart, he kept his hand firmly on the small curve of her hip, and she decided that she was going to stay within reach of him for the rest of that night.

Who cared if she had to get up at 6 a.m. the next morning to make the kids their organic breakfast?

is midas interested in eliza's designs, or does he have designs on eliza?

WHEN THE SHOOT WAS OVER and Jacqui had finished preening for the real paparazzi, Eliza tried not to feel too piqued that none of the photographers had bothered to take *her* picture. After all, wasn't she someone too? Not too long ago, Eliza Thompson had ruled the glam-girl private school crowd, her photograph appearing everywhere from the *Times* social diary to *Town & Country* and *Vanity Fair*. But her high school days were over, and already a new crop of hot young heiresses ruled the society pages. The new girls even had websites and rankings and online fan clubs.

Midas saw the slightly distressed look on her face as he stowed away his gear. "You know the press—they're rabid for a new face. It's much better to stay in the background without all the fuss, don't you think? Funny how so much is made of the models when they'd be nothing without the designers."

"You're right." Eliza nodded, jollied out of her temporary irritation and silly jealousy. After all, Jacqui was promoting *her* line. She'd just been sort of touchy recently because all anyone seemed to be interested in when it came to Eliza Thompson was her "engagement" to the "Greyson heir." The papers had been having a field day with the story. Not that she could complain—she'd started it. And at least the publicity had been paying off, since sales in her boutique were through the roof in just its first week. She smiled shyly at Midas, glad to have such a gentleman at her side.

"Let's leave them to it, shall we?" He handed his camera and tripod to an assistant and escorted her into the party. The two of them giggled at the outlandish extravagance. "I didn't realize Morocco was one of the fifty states," Midas quipped. "But perhaps I need to catch up on my American history."

Eliza laughed. "Nope, you're just in the Hamptons—aka an alternate universe." She was used to the quirks of the Hamptons high life. She'd once attended a black-tie square dance: the richest people in America line dancing among bales of hay, for the bargain price of five thousand dollars a plate.

While Marcus and Jacqui had been seated at a grand table at the center of the action, she and Midas opted for a booth in a quiet corner, sinking back into the plump cushions. Midas ordered a bottle of champagne from a passing waitress and they watched as a gyrating belly dancer approached their table, her finger cymbals clanking.

Eliza felt slightly awkward at the sight of the woman's undulating stomach, but Midas looked completely at ease, clapping to the beat and smiling. At the end of the performance, he discreetly tucked a ten-dollar bill into the top of her skirt as the dancer indicated.

"Thank you, sir," the dancer said, before bowing and leaving them to dance for another table.

"Very welcome," he replied. He noticed Eliza staring and explained. "Audience participation is a big part of belly dancing. I learned that in Lebanon."

"You've been to Lebanon?" Eliza asked, impressed.

Midas nodded. "We did a shoot for French *Vogue* in the city ruins. It's a shame what's happened to that country. They've rebuilt a lot since the war, but it's a slow process, and the recent skirmishes obviously haven't helped." Midas shook his head, saddened. "Beirut was the Riviera of the Middle East. The most fantastic nightclubs, and the food was amazing. Try this, it's delicious," he added, passing Eliza a plate of merguez sausages.

Eliza took a little bite. He was right—they were yummy. Tonight was purely business, but she couldn't help feeling that the circumstances were rather enjoyable. As an intern with Sydney Minx, she'd helped out on fashion shoots before, but those had been drawn-out affairs, with teams of stylists arguing with the photographer and Sydney about how the clothes should look. The Easton boys worked "light," with just a handful of assistants, and Midas had been so confident in her vision that he'd let her style the shoot without any help from outside professionals.

She felt a tiny bit guilty about enjoying the party when she'd left Jeremy alone for the night, but they had made plans to catch the fireworks from his dock later. Besides, as she'd told herself a dozen times, he wouldn't have fun at a party like this, especially not with her and Midas wrapped up in fashion talk.

In the short time they'd been working together, Eliza had quickly divined that Midas made all the decisions for team Easton, while Marcus seemed to be content to go with the flow. As far as she could see, Marcus's main task consisted of talking up the project to anyone who would listen—he was the mouth of the operation, Midas the brain. But when she'd hinted as much, Midas explained that while he usually took the bulk of the photographs with his professional Canon, Marcus tended to capture great candid moments with his little Canon Elph that added texture to the shoot as a whole.

"So, where else have you been?" Eliza asked, reaching for the crock of couscous on the table and spooning some onto her plate.

"Oh my, everywhere," Midas said. "Let's see, last month we were in Hanoi for *Visionnaire*," he said, naming a very avant-garde fashion magazine. "We had snake for dinner."

"Snake?" Eliza shuddered.

"It's supposed to be an aphrodisiac. You eat the heart and the blood," Marcus explained, smiling as Eliza looked askance. "We couldn't offend our hosts, so we did it."

“What did it taste like?” she asked, happy to be chewing on a baked fig and not some uncooked reptile’s guts.

“Chicken.” Midas laughed. “Ever had fugu?” he asked, naming the rare Japanese blowfish.

“Isn’t that poisonous?” Eliza asked, dipping a falafel ball into the cup of yogurt. She usually skipped the food offerings at a party, but the spread was too tantalizing to resist.

“Not if it’s cooked correctly. Besides, I like to live dangerously,” he said, raising an eyebrow James Bond style. “Easton. Midas Easton,” he added for effect.

She laughed and took a bite of the falafel ball, careful not to let the yogurt drip onto her dress. “So what’s the scariest thing you’ve ever seen?”

“When we went scuba diving in Palau with Quentin Tarantino, we came face-to-face with a great white. Thought that was it, that was the end. But he just bumped us, scared the shit out of me—and went on his merry way.”

Eliza raised an eyebrow, impressed. “I went running with the bulls in Pamplona one year when I was little. With my parents. We didn’t know they didn’t let kids do it. I got separated from them and cried my eyes out.”

Midas whistled in sympathy. “Bet you gave the bulls a good run, though,” he teased.

She smiled at Midas. For all his celebrity-studded stories and global travels, he was so down-to-earth and easy to talk to. He leaned back in his chair and studied Eliza thoughtfully, his shaggy bangs falling into his eyes. “By the way, I looked at the fall portfolio you sent over. It’s really quite fantastic.”

“Thanks.” Eliza smiled, coloring with pleasure.

“I worked for a season with Phoebe Philo, of Chloé. Your work reminds me of hers. It’s incredibly modern and fresh,” he continued.

Eliza gaped. Phoebe Philo was pretty much her hero. “Go on,” Eliza said demurely.

Marcus chuckled. “You’re going to get a lot of attention because you’re so young and beautiful, you know. But you’ve also got the chops to back it up. I won’t be surprised if you start getting backers. Or if the Vuitton group snatches you up, launches you like they did Stella McCartney. Of course, you can look like a troll and still be successful in this business—I won’t name names.” He grinned wickedly. “But if you have the looks as well as the brains and the savvy, nothing can stop you.”

Eliza lowered her lashes and blushed. It was so flattering to have someone—especially someone who knew the fashion industry—understand and appreciate her work. Plus, he’d said she was beautiful, hadn’t he?

“So who’s the lucky guy?” Midas asked, nodding toward the rock on her finger.

“My boyfriend, Jeremy,” Eliza replied. “We’ve been dating for three years,” she added, almost apologetically.

“What’s he like? What does he do? Describe Mr. Right to me.” Midas settled back into the plush cushions behind him, as if waiting for Eliza to unveil all the secrets of womankind.

Eliza tucked a lock of hair behind her ear before answering. “He’s really nice. Sweet. He’s from here. The Hamptons. But not ‘The Hamptons,’ ” she added quickly, making air quotes with her fingers. She explained about Jeremy’s modest background and how he’d overcome it.

“So why him?” Midas asked, reaching over and lighting the gold hookah pipe that sat in the middle of the table. He took a puff and the sweet smell of fruit-scented smoke filled the air.

“That’s a personal question, don’t you think?” she asked tartly, lightly slapping him on the knee. “Why are you so interested?”

Midas didn’t answer her and instead blew out a smoke ring, passing her the pipe.

“I don’t know—because he’s the nicest guy I ever met,” Eliza said before inhaling the sweet tobacco.

“And that’s enough for you?”

Of course it was enough . . . wasn’t it? Eliza felt her brow furrow. What were Jeremy’s goals? What did he want to *do* with his life? For the life of her, she couldn’t remember anything he wanted to do except renovate a big old house and have a soccer team of kids. But surely that wasn’t all. . . . Jeremy had big plans, didn’t he? Eliza racked her brain. Something to do with building his landscaping business? Maybe?

“Nice guys finish first, huh?” Midas smiled, a slight sadness in his deep blue eyes.

“I guess.” Eliza shrugged. She’d never really questioned the reasons why she and Jeremy were together before. He was cute and loving and he made her laugh, so why was she feeling so defensive suddenly?

“And where’s Mr. Right tonight? He doesn’t like parties?”

“No, he does . . . ,” Eliza protested. He came with her to events like this when she asked him to, but she knew all the air-kissing and talk of fabulousness just wasn’t his thing. Jeremy was completely supportive, but she knew all the fashion stuff bored him—bored most guys, really—to tears.

“Not his thing, got it.” Midas nodded, seemingly glad to have figured out “Mr. Right.”

Eliza shrugged uncomfortably. She didn’t want to say anything to Midas about Jeremy that was disloyal. Especially since it suddenly occurred to her that Midas was the type of guy she’d always thought she would end up with—sophisticated, well traveled, culturally savvy. Until she’d ended up with Jeremy, who thought a trip to Connecticut was exotic.

Just then her cell phone rang. The display read J STONE, and oops, 10 p.m. She’d promised she’d meet him at the dock for fireworks a half hour ago. “I’m almost there!” she sang into the phone, even though she knew she couldn’t make it there for another half hour at least. She started to get up from the table just as the waitress finally returned with their champagne.

“Sure you can’t stay for one drink?” Midas asked, taking the bottle from the bucket with a flourish and preparing to pop the cork.

Eliza glanced at the label. Cristal. And this was about business, after all. . . . She eased back down onto the cushions.

“To Eliza Thompson, this generation’s Coco Chanel!” Midas proposed as the champagne bubbled over their glasses. “To the best spread ever,” he added as he handed her a flute of bubbly, his blue eyes shining.

Eliza accepted the glass. How could she leave when she was being toasted as the next big thing? She’d go meet Jeremy after this one drink. After all, it was the Hamptons. Nobody was ever on time.

www.blogspot/hamptonsaupair1

galloping gourmands

The other day we had to prepare five different lunches for the kids, who are encouraged to “explore their personal palates” and “discover new tastes and new experiences” according to their gifted programs and therefore demand individually crafted meals with stringent specifications. Violet wanted a soy burger cooked extra-crunchy, Jackson wanted quinoa-and-tofu teriyaki, Logan a Provencal pot-au-feu, and Cassidy spit out the mashed organic zucchini I prepared for him until I got the texture just right (not too lumpy!). Thank God for Wyatt, who was happy with PB and J. My kind of guy.

miss crankypants in the hamptons

J. is a supermodel! Her photos from the Fourth of July party appeared *everywhere*. E. can't stock enough of that dress. . . . J. is also now dating that handsome photog, who's a bit too slick for my taste but is definitely a cutie. J. is over the moon, singing while she changes diapers; she's in such a good mood she didn't even blink when S. called us in for an emergency meeting after Wyatt failed his KRTs. Poor kid's gotta go in for remedial kinder-tutoring.

As far as I know, E. and J. are on the road to the altar, although E. is so busy with the store she hasn't begun to plan the wedding or even picked a date. Gotta get that girl on the ball. Doesn't she know it takes a year to get everything together? Oh, well. From the way she waves the subject off every time I ask about it, she isn't in any sort of rush.

Meanwhile, D. is officially out of the picture. Haven't heard from him since the day before I sent my nasty e-mail, when he was in Rome. (Apparently, D.'s last words as my boyfriend will have been to convey that the pasta in Italy is beyond scrumptious. I'll never know.) I really should have waited just a *little* while to get drunk and mean, since I'd asked him to pick me up a fake Hermès bag from this guy E. knows who has a table by the Trevi Fountain a while back. I can't really hope he'll still bring me one now that we no longer appear to be together, right? Is there such a thing as a breakup parting gift?

And not to keep whining, but I really, really don't want to run into my ex R. and his new gal pal T. Thank God, I haven't seen them anywhere, not even at the tea shop where R. gets all his super-antioxidant green tea that he's addicted to. Phew. I don't want to be a bitch (but I will be), but T. isn't all that great. I know she's gorgeous and athletic and good-spirited and all (at least that's what R. always said about her—sans the gorgeous part, although that was obvious enough to everyone). But can I just point out that she has a slightly horse face and a hyena-like laugh. A veritable zoo in one package. Okay. That was so *Mean Girls*. But whatever. I'm allowed. No one reads this blog anyway, right?

**Till next time,
HamptonsAuPair1**

dalai lama says: enlightenment means making friends out of enemies

MARA WOKE UP TO THE sound of the baby crying from the monitor. As she eased her feet into her slippers, she shot a grumpy look in the direction of Jacqui's empty bed. It was Jacqui's turn to give Cassidy a bath and a bottle, but the Brazilian au pair was nowhere to be found. Since hooking up with Marcus on the Fourth of July, she'd spent almost all of her free time with him, even after the shoots. She was usually good about getting back to the mansion before the kids woke up, but this time, she was late.

Mara dialed her cell number. It rang and rang and then went to voice mail. Not willing to give up that easily, she tried again. Jacqui picked up on the last ring.

"Jac? Where are you?" Mara asked, trying to sound more concerned than irritated.

"Mmmpph?"

"It's seven; we need to get the kids ready. It's Dalai Lama day, remember?"

"*Merda!*" Mara heard the phone clatter as it fell to the floor and then Jacqui's voice again. "I'm so sorry, I overslept. But I can get there and be ready to go in an hour."

Mara sighed. The kids had to be in Southampton's largest auditorium before then. Their father, before he'd gone on his walkabout and never returned, had raised his kids as Buddhists, the religion he was practicing at the time. Suzy, who wasn't religious, made sure the kids kept to the noble eightfold path so that they'd feel close to him when he came back—whenever that was. The Dalai Lama was in town for a whole week of events, but the morning's special lecture, "Making Peace," was to be the highlight of his trip.

"Don't worry about it," Mara told Jacqui. "I'll take care of it."

"Are you sure?" Jacqui asked, although the relief in her voice was all too evident.

"I'm sure," Mara said with a huff, keeping an eye on the clock. She had to get the kids dressed, fed, and out the door as soon as possible if they were going to make it.

"We were out last night with some friends of theirs from Auckland, and *Deus*, can those Kiwis drink! We didn't get in until five in the morning. Marcus promised me he'd set the alarm, but—Marcus . . . what are you doing? Don't, I'm not ready. . . . Oof! He just took my picture!" Mara heard the sound of Jacqui pummeling her boyfriend with a pillow. When Jacqui came back on the line, she was still giggling. "Seriously, though, if you need me, I can meet you there," Jacqui offered.

“I told you, it’s okay. Do you know where the kids’ togas are?”

“Togas?”

“You know, the Tibetan prayer robes they have to wear. I asked you to send them out with the dry cleaning on Friday.”

“Oh.” There was a pause. “I forgot,” Jacqui admitted in a small voice.

Mara sighed. She didn’t want to complain—after all, Jacqui was now the “face” of the Eliza Thompson line, and being seen at all the right events was part of that job—but it was the third time that week that Jacqui had messed up on the job. Last Thursday she’d been out all night with Marcus and had been so out of it the next day that she’d brought Violet to chess camp and the twins to ballet. Mara didn’t want to say anything, but it was getting ridiculous.

Plus, life was getting a little lonely. Eliza and Jacqui were always out, doing fun things together, while Mara was left at home with the kids. Jacqui and Eliza invited her to everything, but after one party where a guest asked if she was Eliza’s assistant and another one where she bumped into Ryan and Tinker together—if you could call catching them making out in one of the cabanas at the Star Room “bumping into them”—Mara had decided it was better to stay at home with the kids or to work on her blog. When she’d first launched it, she was elated to receive a handful of hits, but as she began posting more and more of her adventures, she found her audience growing steadily.

The more time Mara spent alone, though, the more time she spent wishing she hadn’t been so cold to David. If he were still in her life, she’d at least be getting texts and e-mails that let her know *someone* was thinking about her. But she was too proud to rescind what she’d written. Everything she’d said was still true—she *was* hurt that he’d left her at the airport and then never even bothered to call. She blamed it on the stupid modern world. If there wasn’t such a thing as texting and e-mailing, he’d have had to call her the old-fashioned way from the start, and maybe then she’d still have a boyfriend.

“Listen, I owe you,” Jacqui said gratefully. “Thanks, *chica*.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Mara sighed. “We’ll catch you later.” She turned off her phone and hurried to pick up the baby, who was squalling loudly on the monitor, seemingly aware that Mara was now behind schedule.

* * *

When they arrived at the auditorium, the line to the entrance stretched around the block, all the way to the village green. The sidewalk was littered with tents, pillows, plastic chairs, sleeping bags, illegal charcoal grills, and assorted garbage, since some people had camped out the previous evening. Apart from stopping by the UN, this was the only public stop the Dalai Lama was making in the country, and people had traveled from all over the eastern seaboard to see him.

“What’s that smell?” Jackson asked, crinkling his nose as they hurried past the Porta Potties the town had hastily set up to accommodate all the pilgrims.

“Don’t ask,” Mara said grimly as she hustled them to the front of the line.

Only a handful of tickets had been made available to the public, and all had sold out in a matter of minutes, but the mood was oddly cheerful and politely cooperative for the Hamptons, where scowls were regularly exchanged at Citarella over the last slice of Scottish lox. Since the holy man was a guest of the Southampton Cultural Board, where Suzy was a trustee, the kids had received VIP tickets. Mara scissored her way expertly through the crowd, waving their laminated passes over their heads, the kids clutching their prayer beads.

Many of the town’s wealthy denizens were dressed in orange prayer robes accessorized with Blahnik slides and Verdura earrings, mingling with the friendly Tibetan monks. The festive air was similar to that of a fashion show, with a lot of air-kissing and jostling over seats. Mara noticed that a good number of sleek scenesters were carrying elaborate floral bouquets, overstuffed picnic baskets from the Barefoot Contessa filled with imported truffles and handmade brownies, or beautifully wrapped boxes from Tiffany and Christofle.

“What’s up with all the gift baskets?” Mara asked Lucky Yap, whom she spotted snapping photos of socialites demurely bending over their prayer wheels.

“Ritual offerings,” Lucky explained over the click of his camera. “The uninitiated can make sacrifices to move up in rank. Food, flowers, or water—symbolized by bowls. Hence the run on crystal bowls at Tiffany. They’re all gone.”

“Gotcha.” Mara smiled, bemused. The Dalai Lama probably didn’t care if the offerings were from the supermarket or the gourmet store, but the Hamptons crowd certainly wouldn’t dream of making a donation that was less than what could be found in their own, utterly gourmet kitchens.

After a quick goodbye, Mara found their seats up front, and the kids quietly settled in. She marveled again at how well behaved the children were being. Violet was already chanting her fifth mantra, while Jackson and Logan were intently studying the geometric mandalas they’d found on their seats. Cassidy was lulled to sleep by the low hum of the crowd. Only Wyatt was wriggling in his seat, already bored to death.

The lights dimmed, and the head of the organizing committee welcomed the Dalai Lama to the Hamptons amid an explosion of applause. Mara clapped heartily along with everyone else. The holy man walked slowly to the middle of the stage and climbed on a generously proportioned armchair that had been provided for him, which allowed him to sit with his legs crossed underneath his body.

During the hour-long lecture, the crowd was rapturously silent. Not even an errant cell phone ring or BlackBerry buzz or the sound of gratuitous sniffing broke the spell of the Dalai Lama as he spoke of compassion, kindness, and gentleness.

Mara listened intently, surprisingly moved by his wisdom. The kids were even quieter than usual when the speech was over until Wyatt tugged on her sleeve.

“What’s individual reponsi . . . responenti—” Wyatt scrunched up his face in frustration at being unable to pronounce the word.

“Individual responsibility?” Logan interrupted. “It means we can choose to be happy by helping others and the world. You know how you always hog the remote? You shouldn’t do that anymore.”

“Er . . . right.” Mara nodded, although she didn’t know if that truly counted as “helping others.” Still, if Logan could get Wyatt to stop hogging the remote, it would mean a lot less individual responsibility for *her*. But maybe that wasn’t a very charitable thought.

The kids wanted to get their prayer books signed, so they joined the group congregating around the Dalai Lama for an autograph.

“That was just so . . . inspiring!” the blonde ahead of them was gushing. “I’m so glad I gave everyone donations to Tibet instead of Christmas gifts this year!”

Mara craned her neck to see who had been the Christmas Goody-Goody Grinch. That was the title her family had quickly given her older sister Megan one year, when she decided to “give” everyone notes saying that she had “donated to their favorite charity”—in the amount of five measly bucks each—instead of adding to the gaily wrapped presents under the tree. She wasn’t surprised to discover she knew this particular Goody-Goody Grinch: it was Tinker, in all her blond and perky glory. She was chatting with a bunch of bald monks, her prayer beads jauntily wrapped around one arm, her orange robes styled into a sexy one-shoulder dress.

“Oh, hiii,” she said, her voice practically tinkling as she spotted Mara. “Wasn’t that amazing? I can’t believe we were actually in the presence of the Dalai Lama!” She beamed at Mara with positive, radiant energy, her bright blue eyes looking like they might just jump out of her face.

“It *was* really great,” Mara agreed reluctantly. She wasn’t a fan of trendy religions, but given that Buddhism had been around for thousands of years, she supposed it wasn’t *exactly* trendy.

“It just makes me want to go out there and change the world . . . starting with myself,” Tinker said quietly. “You know what I mean?”

“I guess.” Mara nodded, not quite sure if she felt that heroic but unwillingly charmed by Tinker’s exuberance. It seemed Tinker had joined their group as they moved up the line, and as they made their way toward the exit, the silence between them became slightly awkward. “So, um . . . what would you change?” Mara asked, not sure if the question was too personal but curious to find out what the beyond-perfect Tinker might say.

“Well . . . ,” Tinker began, “I know this is so ridiculously shallow, but I’ve gained, like, five pounds because Ryan insists on grilling everything with butter, and I totally don’t fit in any of my clothes anymore.” Tinker blushed furiously as she fiddled with her prayer beads, clearly feeling as self-conscious as Mara had the other day in her tiny tanga. “And it’s not just about appearance, it’s that I’ve always been such an athletic person, and I sort of hate not recognizing myself, if that makes sense.”

Huh. Mara cast a sideways glance at Tinker’s moving form. She certainly looked as slim as always. But then again, Mara didn’t notice those things too much. Maybe Tinker wasn’t completely perfect after all.

“Oh! Is that one of your kids? He’s climbed up on the stage,” Tinker cried worriedly, interrupting Mara’s thoughts.

Mara whipped her head around and spotted Wyatt climbing up onto the stage, attempting to get to the chair the Dalai Lama had sat in. “Wyatt! Get down from there!” Mara ordered, nervous about accident-prone Wyatt falling off the stage and getting seriously hurt. She’d been so distracted by Tinker she hadn’t been giving the kids her full attention.

“Don’t worry, I’ve got him,” Tinker said, making her way to the stage in a few sprightly steps. She wrapped Wyatt in a big hug as she plucked him off the stage, and he seemed to be quite pleased with his rescuer. “They’re a lot of work, aren’t they?” She sighed sympathetically, ushering the five-year-old toward his nanny. “I used to babysit my cousins, but there were only two of them—I don’t know how you do it!”

Mara thanked her for her help and did a quick head count to make sure all the Finnemores were indeed alive and with all their limbs intact. Wyatt was squirming in her arms, Violet was asking a monk if women could join the monastery, the twins were debating Tibetan versus Japanese Buddhism behind her, and the baby was gurgling happily in his stroller.

“So when did you become Buddhist?” Tinker asked, once they finally reached the front of the auditorium.

“I’m not,” Mara explained. “But the kids are.”

“Well, it’s nice that you’re so open to it.”

“Yeah, I guess.” Mara shrugged.

Tinker played with her beads as they shuffled forward. “Actually, Mara, I’m glad I bumped into you.” Her smile faltered a bit and she looked slightly nervous. “I’ve been wanting to tell you something, but it’s sort of a weird thing to say and I wasn’t sure how to bring it up. . . .”

“Oh?” Mara pretended to fiddle with the baby’s stroller, hoping her burning curiosity wasn’t completely obvious.

“I just want you to know that nothing ever happened between Ryan and me when you guys were together,” Tinker said earnestly, still playing anxiously with her prayer beads. “It’s an awkward thing to talk about, but I just . . . wanted you to know that. We were always just friends. We didn’t even get together till the spring semester.”

“You don’t have to tell me anything—it’s none of my business,” Mara said bluntly.

“Oh, I know, but I know what I would think if I was in your place, and I just wanted to make sure there wasn’t that kind of tension between us,” Tinker explained, looking worried. She placed a light hand on Mara’s arm.

“Okay. Thanks.” Mara nodded. That really *was* nice of Tinker.

“We should all hang out sometime,” Tinker suggested. “I’ll call you.”

“Sure.” Mara had never really liked Tinker, but all her stubborn animosity was starting to fade. It was just too hard to hate someone who was so darn *nice*. Especially after the Dalai

Lama's speech. Could it be that the road to inner peace began with making peace with your ex's new girlfriend?

a picture's worth a thousand words

ELIZA RUSHED ACROSS THE PATIO outside JLX Bistro, tottering on her heels as she balanced two large garment bags and a rolling suitcase. “There’s my girl,” Jeremy said to the maitre d’ as he spotted her. He smiled tightly. “Better late than never.”

“I’m sooo sorry.” Eliza was slightly out of breath as she made her way into the restaurant. “The shoot ran longer than we thought. Did they give away our table?” she asked worriedly, craning her neck and peering into the restaurant’s depths as if she might be able to spot the evil table stealers themselves. She handed over her baggage to the hostess.

“No, madame, right this way,” the Frenchman said curtly, collecting two leather-bound menus and leading the couple briskly through the restaurant.

“Did you get my text?” Eliza whispered, grabbing Jeremy’s hand and giving it an apologetic squeeze as they tried to keep up with the fast-walking server. She’d let him know she’d be five minutes late, but in reality it’d been more like a half hour, once again counting on “Hamptons” time.

The server stopped so quickly that Eliza almost plowed into him. They had been led to a private table with a view of the ocean. Eliza paused for a moment, waiting for Jeremy to pull out her chair for her the way he usually did, and then seated herself.

“Yeah, I got it,” Jeremy said tersely as he plopped down into his chair.

“I’m so sorry,” Eliza repeated, knowing that Jeremy had all the reason in the world to be upset, since this wasn’t an unusual occurrence—her lateness had become a bad, and predictable, habit of late. She couldn’t help it; the store and the various shoots took up so much of her time. The other night she’d almost stood him up at the movies, arriving just in time before the previews ended, and last week she had completely forgotten they had made plans for brunch and had left him stranded at Babette’s alone.

“Don’t worry about it,” Jeremy said softly, finally relenting and giving her a small smile. He reached for her hand across the table and stroked it, then stopped. “Hey, where’s your ring?”

Eliza looked at her ringless finger and panicked for a second, then remembered she’d taken it off herself. “I took it off because I didn’t want it to fall off while we did that shoot on the boat,” she explained. Jacqui had taken the kids water-skiing while she and the Easton brothers had rented a boat and followed her out on the water.

“Oh, right.” Jeremy nodded, but it was obvious its absence bothered him. Neither of them wanted to say what they were thinking—that the shoot had been three days ago.

The server returned and took their orders. Eliza was momentarily relieved by the interruption, but as soon as they were alone again, she knew it was her turn to speak.

“Jer . . . about the ring,” she began. She had been meaning to have this conversation since he’d given it to her, but it never seemed to be the right time. They’d hardly seen each other in the past month, what with her busy schedule and his workaholic tendencies. Eliza slept over at his apartment a few nights a week, but he was busy renovating the Greyson house and often worked well into the evening, and she was out the door early to open the store while he was still sleeping. When they did see each other, it was in bed, and they were both too tired to do anything but cuddle.

“Is it too big? Is that why you were worried it might fall off? Because we can get it fitted,” he said helpfully, reaching for a roll from the bread basket and slathering it with butter.

“No . . . it’s . . .” She looked out over the ocean, where the sun was setting. The colors bled orange, red, and crimson all over the dark water. She would never get tired of looking at the sunset. It was postcard-ready romance, but Eliza had never been one for cheesy Hallmark moments. She just loved anything that was beautiful.

“Then what is it? Did I get something wrong? I thought it was what you wanted. Princess cut. Neil Lane. Colorless.” He looked up from his roll, his face awash with concern.

Eliza’s heart melted. God, he really was such a sweetheart. “No, it’s perfect.” She sighed. Maybe she could just postpone the conversation for another time. Besides, she still didn’t know exactly what she wanted to say. What was the difference between a promise and an engagement ring, anyway? He was perfect, they were perfect together, and the ring was . . . well, it *was* the ring she’d always wanted. She took a sip of her wine and relaxed into her chair.

Jeremy grinned and gave the saltshaker a little push across the table. Whenever they were at a restaurant, they liked to play air hockey with the salt- and pepper shakers, pushing them across the table and seeing who could get theirs to slide closest to the edge. It was a silly gesture, but it meant Jeremy was in a better mood.

She smiled back at him and playfully pushed the salt back in his direction. She opened her mouth to speak, but they were momentarily blinded by the flash of a camera. She blinked to find a young reporter with a tape recorder standing in front of them.

“Hi, I’m from the *Hampton Daily*; sorry to interrupt. Can we get one with the two of you leaning closer together?”

Eliza looked apologetically at Jeremy, who nodded, clearing his throat to hide his annoyance with the interruption. “Sure,” she told the reporter, and arranged her face into a serene smile. She was glad she’d had her hair blown out that day so it hung perfectly straight down her back, setting off her new black silk ruffled Phillip Lim shirt and Prada cigarette pants (she couldn’t wear her brand *all* the time) and that Jeremy looked handsome in the pale blue Thomas Pink oxford she’d bought him.

Jeremy excused himself to the restroom, though Eliza was sure he just wanted to avoid having his picture taken anymore. She knew Jeremy didn’t like how the press was so obsessed

with their engagement—mashing their names together to create some kind of Frankenstein romance monster, with numerous breathless articles about the upcoming nuptials—which they had yet to really talk about.

But it was a slow news summer in the Hamptons. Chauncey Raven had finally put on underwear and had settled down to raise her two children rather than raise hell at a nightclub. Everyone was already used to the gaudy monstrosity of the Reynolds Castle, and Garrett Reynolds himself had been keeping something of a low profile while his new house was being built. There was no one to write about except for the Greyson heir and his pretty designer fiancée, whose clothes had become the de facto Hamptons uniform.

* * *

“So, can you tell us about the proposal?” the reporter asked Eliza once they were alone, his thumb resting gamely on the red record button as if it were a trigger.

The proposal? Was there even one? Too deep into her little charade with the press to go back, Eliza thought quickly. “It was magical,” she said breathlessly. “We were standing in a gazebo at sunset, with a view of the ocean, when Jeremy went down on his knees and read a poem he’d written for me.” Okay, so neither detail was technically true, but the reporters demanded a story and Eliza knew the more Harlequin it sounded, the better it was for publicity. “I was wearing my spaghetti-strap column dress, which you can find at the boutique!” she added. Why not milk it? In Eliza’s mind, she was wearing a Holly-rock—a Hollywood-style ring whose only purpose was to show the world one was loved enough to be gifted with major bling.

Their food arrived just as Jeremy returned to the table. Eliza beamed at him, trying not to feel too guilty about embellishing a few details. She had a flair for the dramatic, and she knew the public would be so disappointed when they heard he’d just put the ring on her finger without even saying or asking anything. What kind of proposal was that, anyway? Eliza vacillated between being thankful it was a non-proposal proposal—the kind she secretly thought was the most understatedly romantic—and worrying that it wasn’t shout-at-the-top-of-your-lungs romantic enough to share with the world. Or, more specifically, to share with the press and her adoring public.

“Can you tell us about the poem you wrote?” the reporter asked, turning to Jeremy and shoving the tape recorder toward his face.

“What poem?” Jeremy asked, looking puzzled and waving the recorder away with a hand.

Eliza interrupted before the reporter could say anything more. “Can we finish this later?” she said sweetly, plastering on her best put-off smile. “As you can see, my boyfriend and I are in the middle of dinner.” She gestured to the steaming plates before them as if to emphasize her point. The newsman nodded gruffly and left.

Jeremy grabbed his knife and tore into his steak. When he finished chewing, he looked up at her intently. “Why do you keep calling me your boyfriend?”

“Last time I checked, you seemed to be pretty fond of me,” she said playfully, grabbing the saltshaker from its post dangerously near the edge and sprinkling its contents lightly over her

grilled sole.

“Ah, but I was reading, uh, Page Six.” Jeremy spread a little Grey Poupon over his steak before taking another bite. “And in their interview you called me your, and I quote, ‘handsome fiancé.’ ” He made air quotes as he said it and smirked to show that he was joking, but there was a hint of annoyance in his eyes.

“Is something bothering you?” she asked worriedly, putting the salt back down on the table.

“No, it’s nothing.” He shrugged, leaning back in his chair and wiping his hands on the napkin in his lap. “It’s just funny how you make a big deal out of our engagement to the press whenever they ask you about your store.”

“You read Page Six?” she teased, trying to make light of it, even though she *was* guilty of making a big deal about it for the press—playing up the blushing bride angle was keeping her store in the news.

Jeremy took a swig of his beer. “Sure.” His lips twitched. “Don’t worry. It doesn’t bother me either way. It’s just funny,” he said again, though it was obvious he didn’t find it all that amusing. He grabbed another roll and tore it apart with his teeth.

Jeremy was about to say something else when another photographer walked by. “Smile for the *Hampton Star!*”

He rolled his eyes and she shrugged, but they both leaned in and flashed what Eliza thought of as their “eyebrows-at-the-same-level *New York Times* wedding-announcement” pose.

The newspaper would have its shot: the perfect picture of a couple in love. But as Eliza pulled away, her brow furrowed, and Jeremy brooded behind his beer; it was obvious to anyone who’d care to look after the camera flash had passed that there was something less than perfect going on there.

what good is a thirty-minute meal if your friends are more than thirty minutes late?

ONE DASH OF OREGANO. TORN Basil leaves. A teaspoon of salt . . . or was it two teaspoons of salt? Mara checked the recipe again. *One* teaspoon. Oops. So dinner would be slightly salty. She picked up a pepper grinder and ground it for a few seconds above the steaming dish. There. Maybe the spiciness would combat the saltiness.

“Mmmm . . . what’s cooking?”

Mara looked up and smiled when she saw Eliza’s father. “Hey, Mr. T.” They never saw him around much since he was always on the golf course, having a sail, or out at dinner at the Maidstone. But Mara felt comfortable around Mr. Thompson, since she had spent a fair amount of time with Eliza’s family in New York over the years. He was a lot older than her father—almost a grandfather, really—and she liked him a lot.

“I’m making spaghetti Bolognese,” Mara explained as she grabbed some cloves of garlic from the enormous Sub-Zero.

“Fantastic.” Ryder Thompson settled onto one of the bar stools and fixed himself a drink. He looked at his watch. “Suzy better get down here soon, or we’ll miss the dinner and have to join you! Though the way things are smelling, that wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world.” He smiled and Mara began to understand where Eliza got her charm.

Suzy blew through the kitchen wearing a wrinkled black evening dress, her hair its usual frizz bomb, magenta lipstick on her teeth. Mara knew Suzy worked so much she hardly had time for her kids, let alone for grooming herself before going out on a date with her boyfriend (though it was weird to think of Eliza’s dad as somebody’s boyfriend). “Mara!” Suzy cried when she saw her. “Does Cook know you’re in here?”

“She does, and it’s cool.” Mara wiped her hands on her apron and tried to look as responsible as she could. Earlier today she’d had to practically beg the Finnemores’ formidable cook to let her use the kitchen. Florentia was very strict about keeping order in her domain and had tried to convince Mara to just get takeout. Mara had to swear on her life that she wouldn’t touch the complicated oven controls, since Florentia seemed equally worried that Mara would soil her pristine kitchen as that she’d burn the mansion down.

“Okay.” Suzy nodded dubiously. She turned to Ryder. “Darling, are you ready? Do you have the tickets?”

“I thought you had them,” he said, his forehead wrinkling in concern.

“Oh!” Suzy exclaimed, opening her clutch and dumping the contents on the kitchen counter. Out tumbled a BlackBerry, a cell phone, a mess of gum wads, and a broken makeup compact as well as a dirty white envelope.

“Yes, here they are. Okay.” Suzy nodded and began to haphazardly stuff everything back into her purse.

Ryder Thompson raised his eyebrows at Mara and then downed the rest of his drink. “Well, we’re off. If you see my daughter, tell her that she does still have a curfew and that while she thinks I don’t notice when she doesn’t sleep here, I certainly do.”

“ ’Kay.” Mara giggled. Parents. “Bye, Mr. T., Ms. F. I promise I won’t burn the house down!” she called after them as they made their way out the door in a frenzy of smiles and a frizz of red hair.

Mara hummed cheerfully as she chopped up the garlic and tossed it into the sauce. It had been weeks since she and her friends had sat down together, as they’d all been remiss in making their weekly catchup meals. Earlier in the summer they’d been better about hanging out, but lately it felt like they were three different trains running on separate tracks. Of course, Jacqui and Eliza spent a lot of time together, but from what Mara could gather, hanging out gave them little time to chat—those Saucy Aussie boys, or whatever the hell they were called, were always around.

She put some chopped vegetables in another pot to steam and glanced up at the clock. Eight thirty already. Jacqui and Eliza were running late. Typical.

* * *

An hour later, Mara sat at the counter, quietly simmering as much as the pasta sauce. She was about to clear the pots and pans when she heard the front door slam.

“Ouch!” There was a yelp from Jacqui. “*Deus*, who moved the umbrella stand there?”

“Shhh . . . ,” Eliza whispered, laughing.

Hearing her friends joking together while Mara sat alone, waiting, stung. It reminded her too much of their first summer in the Hamptons, when Jacqui and Eliza tore up the party scene while she was left to take care of the Perry kids on her own. Bored and lonely, she’d spent her nights pining for Ryan, who didn’t even know she existed back then. It was three years later, but had anything really changed?

Mara tried to tell herself things were different now as she got up and turned the heat on under the sauce to warm it up. First off, Jacqui and Eliza were now her friends—not two strangers who gave her the cold shoulder. And second, her days of pining for Ryan were well over. Sure, she’d felt the odd flash of jealousy on seeing him with Tinker, especially at first, but her weird fixation with making Ryan see what he was missing earlier in the summer had just been about missing her *own* boyfriend and needing some male attention.

Finally, the kitchen door swung open and Jacqui and Eliza tumbled in, giggling and holding on to each other. They smelled of champagne and cigarettes, and their faces were red and flushed. Both girls wore floor-length, exquisitely draped goddess gowns, samples from

Eliza's upcoming fall collection, Jacqui's with a cutout in the middle to show off her sleek, tanned stomach. They looked red-carpet glamorous, if a little worse for wear.

"About time," Mara said irritably. Not only were they late, they were drunk? "What's so funny?"

They told her about some prank the boys had pulled on an insufferable bore at the party. The twins had pretended they were one and the same person and kept popping up at opposite ends of the party, making the poor guy think he was losing it.

Eliza leaned on the counter, still laughing, while Jacqui investigated the pots and pans simmering on the stovetop. "Mmm, *chica*, this smells great," she said, sticking a ladle into the thick sauce and licking it. "I'm starving."

Mara handed the two of them plates. "I thought you guys would have eaten by now," she said curtly. Neither of them had thought to apologize for their lateness, and she wasn't about to let it slide.

"Nah, you know what those parties are like. Lots of standing around. Cocktails, but no one eating anything," Eliza said, scooping up pasta from the pot onto her plate, not caring that it was getting cold.

"I wouldn't really know." Mara tried to sound wounded as she grabbed silverware from the drawers.

"Aw, Mar, don't be like that," Eliza said soothingly, noticing the resentment in Mara's voice. "We're sorry we're late, but you know how it is. Anyway, we asked you to come with," she pointed out, settling down into a bar stool at the counter.

"Well, I can't really get off at, like, six to go to a cocktail party, can I? Not with five kids to watch," Mara added, setting the silverware down in front of them with a clang and looking meaningfully at Jacqui. She felt a bit like the nagging, irritated housewife, complete with dirty apron.

"I'm sorry, Mar, I know I promised I'd be back," Jacqui said guiltily, looking down at her empty plate. She felt bad about leaving Mara with the kids so often, but she couldn't help it that she had a busy shooting schedule to attend to, could she? Fashion waited for no man (or woman), and it certainly wasn't going to wait for her to clean up baby spittle. "How about you sleep in tomorrow and I'll take the kids to gifted camp?" she offered, making her way to the stove to get some pasta now that Eliza had cleared the area.

"All right," Mara relented. She stood up and grabbed a bottle of white wine from the fridge. She could never stay mad at her friends for very long anyway. "So how's the shoot going?"

"The photos are insane," Eliza said proudly, grating cheese on her spaghetti. "Wanna see?" She dug out a black binder from her bag and placed it on the counter. The three of them crowded around to look.

"Wow, Jac. Is that you?" Mara gushed, taking in the glossy, gorgeous shots. "You're a superstar!"

Jacqui blushed. She hadn't expected to enjoy modeling so much. It was almost too easy to be believed. But the boys had told her it was difficult to find models as photogenic as she was and who responded to direction so naturally. And it certainly didn't hurt having Marcus at every shoot—it made her practically glow with happiness.

“Did you see this one?” Eliza asked, pointing to a risqué photo of Jacqui lying facedown in bed, wearing only a languid smile and a black Gucci thong. She was barely covering herself with a pillow.

“Whoa,” Mara cried. “Racy!”

“It's going to run in ‘Socialite Centerfold’ in *Hamptons* mag,” Eliza said proudly.

“Marcus took it one morning,” Jacqui explained, blushing slightly. She smiled as she remembered the morning Marcus had taken the photo, the admiring look in his eyes. He was everything she could possibly ask for: a funny, fabulous, and sexy guy who was crazy about her. She'd been single for so long, she'd forgotten how incredible it was to have a boyfriend. With NYU in the bag and Marcus in her arms, Jacqui was on top of the world. The whole supermodel-for-a-summer thing was just icing on the very sweet cake.

“Don't forget, tomorrow we have to be in Bridgehampton early for the equestrian shoot,” Eliza reminded Jacqui, getting up to refill her plate. “I'm famished,” she said apologetically as she took another heaping portion.

“Oh yeah . . . I guess I can't cover tomorrow,” Jacqui said, looking anxiously at Mara.

Mara blew out her bangs.

“Anyway, you know how it goes, *chica*. I covered your ass two summers ago,” Jacqui added playfully, still engrossed by the book of photos. She turned the page. “When it comes to the whole au pair thing, we've always traded off doing the actual work, right?”

Mara was about to protest when there was a buzz from the intercom. Eliza flipped the screen on the television to the security channel.

“Who ordered pizza?” Mara joked, picking up an errant piece of pasta off the countertop.

“Oh, whoever he is, he's cuuuute,” Eliza cooed, leaning in for a closer look. “Tall, dark, handsome. Kind of looks like Ewan McGregor in that movie. . . .” Eliza snapped her fingers, trying to recall. “He's wearing horn-rimmed glasses and a varsity fencing jacket. And he's carrying one of those backpacks that sit on those metal things.”

“A fencing jacket?” Mara asked, standing stock-still over the garbage disposal. That sounded awfully familiar. . . .

She raced over to the screen. “Oh my God!” she exclaimed. “It's David!”

She felt her heart beat faster. What on earth was David doing in the Hamptons? How had he tracked her down? Had he come back just for her? What did this *mean*? She was thankful she looked presentable, wearing one of Eliza's tissue-thin James Perse T-shirts she'd borrowed from her closet and low-riding Nuala yoga pants. She'd learned from her friends the secret to looking sexy but casual.

“Really?” Eliza raised an eyebrow. She had never had a chance to meet David in New York. Since it was so impossible to find time to get together, she always wanted to spend time with just Mara, and then every time they made actual plans to double date, one of them would cancel.

“Why do you sound so surprised?” Mara turned to Eliza, a slight edge in her voice.

“It’s just—Mar, he sounded a little nerdy every time you described him. But if it’s any consolation, I was so wrong. He’s a regulation hottie.”

Mara knew Eliza could be blunt, so she wasn’t insulted. Much. “What’s he doing here?” she wondered aloud, wiping her hands on her apron. “He’s supposed to be in the Ukraine by now.” Mara playfully shoved Eliza over and looked at the little black-and-white image of David on the screen. She had almost forgotten how cute he was. She was still angry at him, but seeing him standing there under the porch light, her heart melted a little.

The intercom buzzed again.

“Well, what are you guys waiting for? Let the poor boy in already.” Jacqui laughed. And with that, Eliza buzzed the door open.

love means knowing how to say you're sorry

THE KITCHEN DOOR SWUNG OPEN and David entered. He carried a traveler's pack on his back, and his suitcase was still in his hand. It looked like he had stepped off the plane and come straight from the airport.

"Hey, David," Mara said, as if she wasn't at all surprised to find him in her kitchen instead of in Kiev. She kept her voice cool, but the sight of him looking so humbled and modest—David always looked confident and assured—moved her. "Aren't you supposed to be in the Ukraine by now?" *And what made you think I'd even want to see you after that e-mail I sent?* she added silently.

"I can explain," he said, casting nervous glances at her two friends. Jacqui and Eliza were studying him with hooded eyes from behind their glasses of wine. Mara knew they could be an intimidating pair.

"David, you've met Jacqui before, and this is Eliza," she said, remembering that it was her place to make the introductions. Both girls gave David a guarded smile.

"Nice meeting you. Mara talks about you constantly. It's nice to put faces to names." David looked tan and weather-beaten, his eyes tired and red from lack of sleep, but he smiled politely.

"Nice meeting you too," Eliza drawled, eyeing him up and down as if she were taking inventory.

There was a short silence, and then David cleared his throat. He put his backpack down on the floor. "Mara, do you think we could, uh, go for a walk?"

* * *

They excused themselves and walked out the back toward the beach trail. It was another cool night, and Mara shivered in her thin shirt. David offered her his jacket and she accepted it thankfully. They walked for a few minutes in silence. Finally David stopped, took a deep breath, and looked at Mara. "Listen, I know you're angry at me. I would be angry too. I feel terrible about what happened at the airport."

"So do I," Mara deadpanned. She dug a toe into the gravelly sand, not making eye contact. "And I haven't really been thrilled with the whole lack of response to my e-mail for two weeks. I didn't even think we were together anymore."

“I know.” He looked out to the dark water and sighed, as if the endless ocean would grant him the forgiveness he was seeking. “I felt so guilty about leaving you the whole time I was there. It’s just, I couldn’t walk away from the job. Ever since I was little, I’ve always wanted to be a writer.” He sat down on the cold sand, and Mara sat down beside him.

“I know,” she said quietly. She did know. She had always wanted the same thing.

“I should have just quit on the spot. But my family expected me to go. What would I tell my mom?” He picked a pebble up off the beach and tossed it into the water.

David’s mother was Pinky Preston, the most famous—and most feared—literary agent in New York. Pinky had discovered all the biggest names in publishing: the literary brat pack of the eighties, the Gen-X memoirists of the nineties, the too-clever-for-their-own-good postmodernists of the twenty-first century. David hardly ever talked about his parents, and Mara had gotten the impression they were very cold.

He dug a heel into the damp sand. “I mean, I told you what she’s like.”

Mara nodded. She’d never met Pinky before, despite the fact that she’d once accompanied David to his parents’ apartment in the famous Dakota apartment building to pick up some laundry. She’d stayed outside, too afraid to come in, figuring she’d meet his parents when he was ready to set up a formal introduction. “My dad’s a writer, and she dumped him as a client when his books didn’t become bestsellers.” David sighed. “If I don’t become a famous writer, she’ll probably disown me.”

Mara inched slightly closer to him on the clammy sand. Having such a demanding and overachieving mother explained a lot about David—the high standards he set for himself and for others.

“Anyway, I just couldn’t handle the idea of telling her I gave up the Lonesome Planet gig. If I’d told her I was just going to spend the summer bumming around Europe with my girlfriend, she’d freak.” He shrugged helplessly.

“Well, why didn’t you say so?” Mara asked pointedly. This information would have been helpful a month ago.

“I don’t know. I didn’t want you to think I was some kind of mama’s boy, you know?” He turned to Mara and grabbed her hand, his blue eyes earnest. “But Mara, the minute I got on the plane, I knew I’d made a mistake. I got to Europe, and I missed you so much. But I knew if I called you and spoke to you, I’d just come back, so I e-mailed and texted instead. It was a total cop-out.”

Mara listened quietly without interrupting. The waves crashed softly on the shore.

“But then when I got your e-mail, it hit me how much I’d really hurt you. I was so miserable. I cut myself off from everything. I couldn’t concentrate. I couldn’t write—at all. I quit the guide and just wandered the streets of Europe by myself. After two weeks, I knew the only thing I could do was come back here and try to get you to forgive me. I called Alicia to ask if she knew where you were, and she told me, so here I am.” Alicia was Mara’s roommate, the Southern debutante.

“Here you are,” Mara repeated quietly, still unable to believe that he really *was* here.

“You can hate me if you want,” he offered, biting his lower lip. The air was chilly, but her hand was warm in his.

“I don’t hate you. I’m not even sure I can be angry at you anymore.” As soon as she said it, she knew it was true. She wished she could be stronger and hold on to her anger, but seeing him made her realize how much she’d missed him. She’d missed him so much she’d even convinced herself she still had feelings for Ryan Perry.

“Oh, Mara.” David’s shoulders sagged in relief and he pulled her in for a close hug. She nestled her head against his neck, remembering how strong and solid he felt. “I missed you so much,” he whispered gently in her ear.

When they finally pulled apart, David smiled mischievously. “And I almost forgot, I got you something.”

She knew instantly what’d he’d brought her—a copycat Birkin, from the famous stall near the Trevi Fountain. He’d gotten her text after all. He really had been listening.

She pulled him close, and as their lips met by the crashing sea, Mara’s heart filled with contentment. A boyfriend and a Birkin—what more could any girl want?

www.blogspot/hamptonsaupair1

it's not just a job, it's a relationship

There's something that they don't tell you and that you totally don't expect until you start taking care of other people's children. It's that you start thinking of them—and loving them—as your own. S. needn't have worried. Those kids are my life. Wyatt finally scored a decent grade on his KRTs (PHEW!) and to celebrate, I let him have a video game. (SHHHH!) The twins surprise and delight me every day with their inquisitive and unique view of the world. Yesterday after they found me scribbling notes for my book, they told me they too were going to pen their memoirs. (*Tales of a First-Grade Nothing? Heartbreaking Works of Staggering Precociousness?*) Cassidy is the happiest baby ever—not just on the block. If only Violet would come out of her shell a little. I wish I could find a way to let her know it's okay to have a little fun sometimes.

On a harsher note, it's easier to spot Christie Brinkley at the yacht club than J. at work these days. Her modeling shoot has taken over most of her time, and I know she's in the busy process of becoming an international sensation—this week she did a five-minute spot for a Japanese car commercial and had to learn how to say, “Take the wheel,” in Japanese—but really, couldn't she pay a *little* attention to the home front? While I don't mind (much), I just wish she'd tell me when to expect her (or not expect her) so I'm not waiting around for her to burp the baby or take the kids to squash lessons all the time. I don't want to get in the way of her transformation into “The Body” (as everyone is calling her since that saucy photo of her ran in *Hamptons* mag). I just wish she'd bring her body over to help with doing the baby laundry sometime.

But the good news is that D. is back!!! I have a boyfriend again!!! He's staying at his parents' rarely used summer home in North Fork (they're not exactly beach types, or vacation types for that matter, if you know what I mean) and has claimed that his only job for the rest of the summer is to make his prior absence up to me. So far, he's been true to his word. He's been really great with the kids—we took them sailing in his boat the other day, and tomorrow we're all going to the Nautical Museum out in Riverhead. It's been wonderful to have him here. I take back all my bitching and whining. Yesterday he took me to the annual Writers & Artists softball game (his mom sponsors the Writers team) and we met all these famous authors. It was v. cool. They all seemed to know him—he's like everyone's favorite godson or something. He was nice enough to mention that I was a writer too, although I don't think a few clips in *Hamptons* and *Metropolitan Circus* really counts. Still, it was nice to pretend.

**Till next time,
HamptonsAuPair1**

is midas the guy not taken?

AFTER A LONG DAY AT the store, Eliza sent the salesgirl home, preferring to close up shop herself. This was her favorite part of the day—tallying the day’s receipts, putting back all the clothing on the racks, tidying up and making sure everything was in order. It was her own tiny little retail kingdom, and she loved the peace and quiet.

She was folding the last of the linen sweaters when there was a knock on the door. Eliza glanced up to see Midas in the store window, waving to her. She buzzed him inside.

“Are you busy?” he asked, glancing at the pile of sweaters in her hand. “I’ve got something to tell you, and it deserves a bit of champagne.”

“What is it?” she asked warily, setting the sweaters gently on a lower shelf. “I have to warn you, I hate surprises. . . .” Her voice trailed off as she remembered the last time a guy had a surprise for her—it had ended with a very heavy rock on her finger.

He shook his head with a grin. “Mum’s the word until we’ve got drinks in our hands.” He ushered her out of the store. Main Street was emptying as the shops closed, but the streets glowed with late-summer light. “Let’s just pop in here.” Midas motioned to a tiny hotel bar along the avenue.

They walked into the dark recess, feeling the cold blast of the air-conditioning hit their skin. The bar was cozy, with plush red velvet cushions on cane-backed chairs, and bamboo lining the walls.

“I like this place,” Midas proclaimed as his sharp blue eyes took in the decor. “It’s like a pub in Rangoon, you know—men in white linen suits and fedoras, the sun setting on the British Empire, all that jazz.”

“Mmm. The British raj. Khakis against pink saris.” Eliza nodded. She too viewed every unique setting as a possible stage for a fashion shoot. It was also the way she dressed—every outfit told a story. Today she had put on a pretty, floral-print forties-style Rodarte dress with a nipped-in waist and bell sleeves, matched with her black-and-white Brian Atwood spectator pumps, because she was feeling very Scarlett Johansson in *The Black Dahlia*. Not that she’d even liked that movie, but the clothes were to die for. Pun intended.

The waitress approached, and they ordered—a martini for her, a Manhattan with bitters for him.

“So, khaki with pink . . . I can see your mind working.” Midas leaned back in his chair, scrutinizing her from across the table.

“I need ideas for my resort collection,” she admitted, running a finger over the bamboo coaster. She shivered slightly in her thin silk dress and wondered if she could ask the bartender to turn down the air-conditioning.

When the waitress returned with their order, Midas hoisted his lowball glass. “Now, then. Let me be the first to congratulate you”—he paused dramatically—“on being the youngest designer ever to grace a twenty-page spread in *Vogue*. I think Zac did it before he was twenty-five, but I don’t know anyone who’s done it before they were legal to drink,” he added with a smirk, clinking his glass against hers.

“Oh my God! You’re *joking!*” Eliza cried. Did he just say *twenty pages* in *Vogue*? She knew the Eastons were in the Hamptons on *Vogue*’s dime, but that they were working on spec for the shoot—which meant that the magazine hadn’t approved it yet, and there were no guarantees. Eliza had hoped for two or three pages at the most . . . but *twenty*? That was every designer’s dream.

“I’m serious as a priest.” He put a hand over his heart, his eyes twinkling mischievously, looking quite a bit like his twin brother. Midas looked very much the cool auteur that day, with his five o’clock shadow, chain belt, and distressed Paper Denim jeans. “It was originally scheduled for August, but when Anna saw some of the shots, she flipped. They’re running the whole thing in the September issue.”

“Midas!” She leapt from her chair and threw her arms around his neck. Twenty pages in September *Vogue*, the biggest issue of the year!

He kissed the top of her head, and she felt a frisson of electricity spark between them.

“I’m sorry.” She blushed, extricating herself from his lap.

“Oh, go right ahead.” He laughed, pulling out her chair for her so she could sit back down. “Though in case you feel like jumping again, let me tell you the rest of the news—they want to throw you a big party at the end of the summer at Calvin Klein’s beach house.”

Eliza grabbed Midas’s hand across the table and squeezed it tightly. “You have no idea what this means for me.”

He squeezed her hand back. “You deserve it, kiddo.”

“Please. You’re not that much older than I am.”

“I graduated from university two years ago,” Midas protested. “I’m practically a dirty old man,” he said cheekily. Noticing Eliza’s empty glass, he waved the waitress over for another round, handing her his platinum card.

“You went to college?” Eliza asked, remembering that in England they called college “university,” so in Australia it was probably the same. “I figured you went to art school.”

“Nah, I’m an Oxford man.” Midas took his glass from the waitress as their drinks arrived.

“Oxford, really? Not design school?” Eliza asked, totally floored. She spiked an errant onion in her martini with the little plastic sword that came with it.

“Design’s school’s all well and good, but if you want to work in fashion or media, everyone went to Cambridge or Oxford. And while I’m loath to admit it, who you know is always part of making it in this business.”

Huh. Eliza brought the martini glass to her lips and took a slow sip. She *had* heard from friends who worked in the industry that the staff at all the top magazines were Ivy bred. But she couldn’t imagine going to school just to make connections. “So that’s why you chose Oxford?” She had to decide pretty soon if she was going to Princeton or back to Parsons in the fall. Princeton had only allowed her to defer a year, so if she didn’t enroll this fall, she’d have to reapply for admission, and who knew if she’d even get in the second time? After such a successful year at Parsons, she hadn’t really been considering it. “I can’t imagine committing to a school for four years just to rub shoulders with the ‘right sort of people,’ ” she said, making little air quotes. “I think . . . ,” Eliza started, realizing she really meant it as the words tumbled out of her mouth, “I’d go to college to explore what’s out there, to get a well-rounded education.”

“Of course.” Midas nodded. “It was a twenty-four-hour schmooze fest, yes, but I loved learning the Great Books. I majored in philosophy, if you can believe that.” He chuckled, taking a sip of his drink. “But my dear, you just have to do whatever’s best for you.”

Eliza set her glass down on the table. As she mused on Parsons, which would teach her everything she needed to know about design, her first and current love, versus Princeton, which meant exploring everything she might ever want to learn, Eliza couldn’t stop herself from looking down at the ring on her finger. If she married Jeremy, she’d be committing to her *other* first love—the only person she’d ever really been with. What if she was closing the door on other experiences too? She played with the diamond ring, turning it around and around so that it caught the light, reflecting a thousand rainbow colors on the dark bamboo walls. Between Parsons and Jeremy, it was starting to feel like her whole life had been decided for her.

it's miniature golf, not the pga grand slam. . . .

“GREAT SHOT!” MARA CHEERED AS David shot the ball through the windmill, past the wooden cow, and into the tiny cup at the end of the felt fairway.

David took a little bow and walked over to the hole. “Your turn, man,” he called to Ryan as he bent to pick up the robin’s-egg blue ball, a smug grin on his face. He came to stand beside Mara and gave her a little peck on the cheek. “We’ve got ’em where we want ’em,” he whispered in her ear. She giggled.

“Show him, baby!” Tinker cried from her post behind Ryan, swinging her golf club in the air. “Give ’em hell!”

David had only been back for a week when Mara had run into Tinker and Ryan and they’d invited her to a late-night bonfire. When Mara demurred, saying her boyfriend was in town, Tinker suggested they all double-date sometime. Mara had accepted the invitation, not sure if it would actually happen, but here the four of them were. She was pretty sure she owed the evening to Tinker’s enthusiasm rather than Ryan’s—he’d seemed a little stunned to find out she even *had* a boyfriend, which she had to say was strangely gratifying—but since they’d been having a good time tonight, she was genuinely glad it had all worked out. They had met at Lunch for dinner, ordering mouthwatering lobster rolls and platters of assorted fried fish, the guys swigging back longnecks and talking sports while the girls gossiped about people they knew.

They were going to call it a night when David suggested a round of mini-golf in Riverhead, on the North Fork. It was a nice respite from the high-flying Hamptons scene, as mini-golf was way too corny and suburban for the Hamptons elite. True to form, the course was populated by suburban types in wash-and-dry cotton rather than dry-clean-only denim.

“Isn’t this fun?” Mara giggled, a little tipsy as they moved on to the next hole. She and David were beating Ryan and Tinker—a miracle, considering the other two were athletes. She’d been teasing them about it mercilessly.

Ryan bent down and set his ball, which was fiery red, on the slotted black rubber pad that served as a tee. As he set up his shot, practice-swinging his club back and forth in the air, he accidentally nudged the ball with his club and it rolled off the tee and onto the forest green fake grass.

“That counts as one stroke,” David called.

“Oh, man.” Ryan laughed at his own clumsiness. “I think I had one too many back there.” They had left more than a half-dozen empty beer bottles on the rickety wooden tables back at the restaurant and had decided to cab it to Riverhead. “Can I get a do-over?” he asked.

“No way, dude, those are the rules.” David was the one keeping score, and he’d already reached into his pocket for the stubby golf course pencil to add a stroke to Ryan’s score.

“Rules are made to be fixed,” Ryan grumbled good-naturedly as he set the ball back down on the tee for take number two.

“What’s that?” Tinker asked, looking up from her beer. She was wearing a pristine white knee-length Lacoste dress, a wide grosgrain headband in her thick blond hair, and a string of real pearls around her tanned neck, the epitome of polished patrician chic. Mara had been briefly intimidated when they first met up. Tinker looked like one of those country club queen bees for a moment—but as soon as she’d greeted Mara, rather sweetly asking about the kids and their “enlightenment,” the feeling had quickly passed. Besides, Mara felt confident about her own, Eliza Thompson–approved outfit: a cotton voile bib-front Chloé top and tailored pinstripe Bermudas that Eliza had pronounced the “look” of the season.

“Oh, nothing,” Ryan mumbled as he set up his shot again.

“You know, rules are made to be fixed. The early bird releases the worm. Idle hands are the devil’s workplace.” Mara grinned at Ryan from across the course. Back when they were dating, the two of them would try to come up with as many subverted clichés as possible.

Ryan looked up from his club and grinned back. “The heart despises what it despises.”

“Ah, but I don’t think ‘despises’ is the opposite of ‘wants,’ really,” Mara pointed out, leaning jauntily on her club. “Good try, though. Half a point for effort!”

“I don’t get it.” Tinker frowned, taking a long slug from her plastic cup of Bud Light, the only drink the golf course offered. The red Solo cup looked hilariously mismatched with her chic outfit.

David looked back and forth between Ryan and Mara, shaking his head with a sigh. He yawned.

“We keeping you up, man?” Ryan teased. He tapped the golf ball lightly but didn’t hit it.

“No, but if you don’t take the shot anytime soon, I may just fall asleep standing up,” David ribbed him back, holding his club over his head as he stretched his arms.

Mara looked back and forth between them. Boys could be so competitive. Though she couldn’t help but feel that David’s jabs were less good-natured than Ryan’s had been. “David, I forgot to tell you—Ryan hates to lose,” Mara sang out teasingly, trying to infuse some estrogen into their testosterone standoff. “And he hates even more to be distracted,” she added, jutting her hip out the slightest bit as she leaned against her club, a gesture she knew he used to always find seductive. She couldn’t help herself.

Ryan, as if on cue, flubbed the shot and then cursed impressively. He jogged after the ball and hit it vigorously once it had come to a stop, finally whacking it through the big bad wolf’s head. “Three strokes,” he said definitively to David.

Tinker came to stand beside David, looking over his shoulder at the scorecard. “Don’t worry, babe,” she called to Ryan. “We’re only losing by, um—eleven. I suck! I’m so sorry.”

“You guys do suck,” Mara taunted, sticking out her tongue at Ryan. It was so refreshing to be actually good at a sport—all those years spent at Chuck E. Cheese were finally paying off. Ryan and Tinker, who’d grown up with parents who didn’t believe in cheap amusement parks, were completely hopeless at mini-golf.

They moved onto the next hole, which featured a series of blue ramps painted to look like rivers. David set up his shot and then hit the ball briskly. It hit the side of the ramp with a clang and then went spiraling off the course, where it bounced out onto the concrete and started rolling away.

“Out of bounds, automatic forfeit of the course,” Ryan cried gleefully, waving his cup of beer in the air.

“What? No way,” David argued, pushing his glasses up on his nose and grabbing his ball from outside the course.

“Those are the rules, dude.” Ryan shrugged, looking smug.

David just set his ball on the tee again and took another shot. The ball careened up the ramp, rolling swiftly down the other side and making a beeline for the hole, where it settled with a satisfying plop. “Hole in one!” he cheered, pumping his fist triumphantly into the air.

“It doesn’t count. You forfeited, remember?” Ryan reminded him. His face was a bit red, probably from all the beer.

Mara was laughing at something Tinker was saying when she noticed the boys were facing each other, neither of them smiling. Seriously, why couldn’t they just relax?

“Dudes, it’s just a game,” Tinker said cheerfully. “Mara, it’s your turn.”

Mara looked from her current boyfriend to her ex, confused at how the pleasant evening had suddenly turned frosty. She could swear it looked like they wanted to punch each other but were being too polite to let it show.

“C’mon, guys,” she said, trying to defuse the situation. “It doesn’t really matter who wins, does it?”

“Winner takes nothing,” Ryan replied smoothly, easing back into his and Mara’s own private in-joke. Tinker looked uncomfortable and giggled nervously.

“Whatever.” David shrugged. “I’m going to go get another beer.”

“All’s fair in hate and war,” Mara couldn’t resist replying to Ryan, setting up her shot and slicing expertly, sending the ball flying through the air and landing perfectly in the clown’s mouth.

jacqui models fall's latest accessory: baby puke

“**LOGAN—I MEAN JACKSON—I** mean Wyatt—don’t touch that!” Jacqui begged as Wyatt reached curiously for a steaming brown lump on the ground that could only be horse poo. She had taken the kids to a nearby farm with a petting zoo, which featured pony rides, tractor pulls, and a varied menagerie. She grabbed the little boy’s hand and brought him over to the shady spot where she’d been tending to baby Cassidy, who seemed none too happy to be experiencing the great outdoors.

Jacqui had offered to take the kids for the day so Mara could get in some alone time with David. She’d felt guilty about fobbing the kids off on Mara all summer so she could play supermodel, and she wanted to make it up to her. Although at this particular moment, she wished she hadn’t been so generous.

She’d forgotten Cassidy was allergic to cats, so the baby’s nose was running and dripping all over everything. She didn’t know that Violet was scared of horses. The twins thought a “farm zoo” was beneath their intelligence and had boycotted the event by taking seats under a shady tree and refusing to budge. Only Wyatt threw himself into the activity with gusto and had already fallen into a bale of hay, been chased by a pig, and been bitten by an angry duck.

She wiped Cassidy’s nose with a baby wipe and tried to manage her frustration just as the now-familiar flash of a camera momentarily blinded her.

“Hold it, just like that. . . . Marvelous,” Marcus directed.

On top of everything, the afternoon was also supposed to be a fashion shoot for *Vogue*. The editors had flipped when they heard Jacqui was also an au pair—they declared that children were the hottest accessory of the season, what with all the big stars making child care a fashionable event, and Marcus was quickly dispatched to take some quick shots of Jacqui tending to her young charges.

He had promised that it would be fun and that he would help with the “rug rats,” as he playfully called them, but so far all he’d done was jump in her face with his camera and get in her way.

“Don’t mind me, just go on with what you’re doing . . . ,” he said cheerfully.

Easy for him to say. She jiggled Cassidy on her shoulder, trying to soothe him. The baby suddenly vomited all over her new cross-back sundress. It was the only sample in existence. How exactly was she going to make this look glamorous?

“Ick,” Marcus said, making a face. “You’re going to have to change. Puke is not fall’s new color,” he joked.

Jacqui put the baby back in his car seat and scrubbed at the stain with a baby wipe, hoping Cassidy would be good. She hadn’t expected Marcus to be hands-on with the kids, but she wasn’t prepared for utter revulsion either. She briefly remembered how attentive and sweet Marcus had been with the kids on the day they’d met. Was that all an act, part of the courtship process? And if that was an act, what else was? Jacqui shook off the thought as she wiped baby Cassidy’s pink cheeks, hoping he wouldn’t throw up again—she was almost out of wipes.

Marcus studied the photos in the small viewing screen of his camera. “I don’t know why you’re wasting your time cleaning up spittle,” he said. “You should be on the runway in Milan, not running a day-care center.”

“I like working with kids,” Jacqui said defensively as she hunted down juice boxes in her backpack for the kids’ midafternoon snack.

“That’s not the point, love,” Marcus said, coming over to squeeze her waist and give her a kiss on the cheek. “You’re better than this,” he added in a whisper as Jackson, Logan, and Violet approached from their perch under the shady tree to partake of the snack.

Jacqui smiled to hide her annoyance. Who was he to tell her what to do with her life? She’d done a damn good job taking care of those Perry kids for three years, although no one ever gave her any credit for it. Madison was now a well-balanced teen at a normal weight, William was far from the hyperactive little boy he used to be, Zoë had finally learned to read, and Cody was toilet-trained. And that was a serious feat.

“C’mon, everyone, how about we go on a hayride?” she proposed as she passed out the juice boxes, trying to muster up enthusiasm. She was met by five blank faces.

“A hayride?” Logan wrinkled his nose. “You mean an hour spent sitting on itchy bales of hay while driving around a brown, muddy field?”

Looking around at the children’s unhappy faces, Jacqui was unsure what to do. The more trouble she had with the Finnemores, the more she began to doubt herself and her abilities. Maybe her work with the Perrys had just been a fluke?

“If it’s all right with you, babe, I’m taking off. I’ll meet you later,” Marcus said, stowing away his camera and giving her a quick kiss on the cheek, leaving her to deal with five grumpy children on her own.

Maybe Marcus is right, Jacqui thought as she proceeded to practically drag the children over to the area where eager kids were boarding large red trucks filled with hay. Covered in baby drool, with a sulky pre-teen, two bored seven-year-olds, and a five-year-old who wouldn’t sit still, she wasn’t exactly super-nanny.

“Where’s Mara?” Jackson asked plaintively, not for the first time that day.

“She’ll be back tomorrow,” Jacqui promised, feeling a little hurt.

“I want her noooowwww!!!” he suddenly screamed.

Maybe it was indeed time to throw in the burp cloth and put on the stilettos.

david plays dunne to mara's didion

THE AUGUST SUN FELT WARM and prickly on her skin and Mara turned onto her stomach lazily, feeling genuinely relaxed for the first time in ages. “You’re slacking on lotion duties,” she teasingly told David, pushing the St. Barth’s tanning oil she’d found in the bathroom toward him.

She put her head in her hands and glanced out toward the water. From their vantage point, she could keep an eye on the kids playing by the shore. Violet was completely engrossed in the latest issue of the *New Yorker*. Logan and Jackson were fascinatedly using a metal detector. Wyatt was building sand castles. Cassidy was dozing in his stroller underneath the Bugaboo sunshade. The children were all as they should be—occupied.

When Mara woke up for work that day, Jacqui was nowhere to be found—as usual. It was a whole week since she’d taken the kids to the farm, and she had been missing from the mansion since then. Apparently, now that she was officially a model for *Vogue*, Jacqui wasn’t going to bother to show up for work anymore. Taking care of five children entirely on her own was becoming exhausting, so Mara was thankful when David called and proposed a day at the beach. There were only two weeks of summer left, and she wanted to squeeze at least a little fun out of them.

David inched toward her and began rubbing the buttery lotion into her shoulders, giving her a little massage as he did. Mara sighed. It was heavenly having him back in town. He was amazing with the kids. He was the one who’d brought the metal detector for Jackson and Logan, he’d shown Wyatt how to build a sand castle, and he’d gotten the baby to say his first word, “Dah.” He’d even had a heart-to-heart with Violet, whom he’d confided in that he’d been a gangly smart kid in high school. Violet seemed really happy to know that introverted kids could turn out cool, and she’d even whispered to Mara that David was “really cute.”

Mara sighed in pleasure as his strong hands worked their way down her back, tugging playfully at her bikini strings.

“So . . . I had a chance to look up your blog the other day,” David said, removing one hand from her back to dab a little sun-block on his nose.

“And?” Mara asked, holding her breath. She’d told him about the blog and how she was thinking of maybe turning it into some kind of novel one day. But that was a week ago and he hadn’t mentioned it, so Mara had assumed he hated it or thought it was trivial.

“It’s hilarious. I particularly enjoyed all the death wishes for your slacker boyfriend ‘D.’” he added with a grin.

“Oops. I forgot. I had to vent, you know,” she said, pulling herself up on her elbows and looking at him underneath the brim of her straw hat. “But what’d you think?”

“I told you, I thought it was really funny. You have a great voice—very appealing to women, I think. Very chatty,” he added, capping the suntan oil. He regarded her thoughtfully. “I think you have something there. I would concentrate a little more on the social aspect—do it as a comedy of manners. An upstairs/downstairs kind of thing. You know, like *Remains of the Day* but for teens.”

“Huh.” Mara nodded, gratified that he took her work so seriously. Although wasn’t *Remains of the Day* a bit highbrow for what she was doing? But then, David always was a literary snob. He once gagged when he found Stephen King in her book collection.

“Anyway, I want to show it to my mom,” he said, putting on the clip-on shades for his eyeglasses and leaning back on the blanket.

“Your mom?” Mara breathed.

“I can’t guarantee anything—but I think she should meet you. Mom’s always looking for new clients. And I get points too if it all works out,” he added with a smile.

“You really think your mom would rep me?” Mara asked in disbelief.

“Sure, why not?” David’s tone was casual, as if the opportunity to talk to New York’s most fearsome literary agent happened every day in a writer’s career. He lay all the way down on the blanket, grabbing his copy of *Crime and Punishment*—which he was reading for the fourth time—and putting it on top of his face to block the sun. “She’s giving a dinner party at the end of the month at Daniel, in a private room, and I want you to come. If you ever wanted to meet Salman Rushdie and Jay McInerney, now’s the time.”

She felt her heart thump in her chest. David was very protective of his mom. Other kids at Columbia were always slipping him their manuscripts, asking if he would show it to his mother, and he always just tossed them into the trash.

“What day was that again?”

“August 28.”

Mara grabbed her BlackBerry from her purse—which Suzy had provided so that she could keep track of all the kids’ schedules—and checked her calendar. That was the same night as Eliza’s *Vogue* bash. Shit. Eliza had been so excited when she told her about it, and she’d be heartbroken if Mara didn’t go. But she couldn’t say no to dinner with the Prestons and their literary circle—this could be her big break. Writers would rather die than miss meeting Pinky Preston, let alone be invited to dinner. Mara knew David was going out on a limb for her, so the night meant a lot for them both.

“Thank you,” Mara said, removing the book from his face so she could kiss him on the cheek.

David nuzzled Mara’s forehead, and soon they were kissing, rolling from their blanket onto the damp sand.

“Oops,” Mara said, pulling away, a smile on her face. “The kids.”

They looked up to see all the Finnemore kids watching them, horrified looks on their faces. Mara had a feeling this wasn't *exactly* what Suzy meant when she'd told Mara the kids needed exposure to “ample stimulation” this summer. . . .

jacqui meets some model citizens

“**THIS WAY, LOVE—THE POOL** is out back.” Marcus took Jacqui’s hand and led her through the spacious two-story Georgian house to the Olympic-size infinity pool in the back, where a party was in full swing. Tall, beautiful girls were tossing a beach ball lazily over a volleyball net, sunning on the custom-made rocks, and drinking mojitos out of frosted glasses. There was a sprinkling of moneyed moguls, A-list actors, and hip-hop stars mixing with the girls. It was a good-looking and very European crowd, and Jacqui felt right at home overhearing the babble of many different languages.

When Marcus had suggested they stop by the Chrysler Model house in Southampton for the weekly Sunday afternoon pool party, Jacqui had jumped at the chance to check out the outfit that was so hot to sign her up. Chrysler Models was one of the biggest and most prestigious modeling agencies in New York, and they’d been actively courting Jacqui all summer long. Chrysler girls had a solid reputation in New York as professionals instead of party girls, so Jacqui was curious to see what all the fuss was about.

“Come meet some friends of mine,” Marcus said, bringing Jacqui to where a group of models were splayed out on beach chairs facing the pool, their bodies tanned and lean. “This is Jacarei,” he said to the group at large, presenting her to them as if it were her first day in kindergarten. “Be nice to her, ladies, or by next year she’ll have all your jobs,” he added naughtily.

Jacqui shrugged apologetically but was pleasantly surprised to find that the models, instead of glaring at her, were smiling indulgently at Marcus.

“Don’t worry, honey, we’re used to old Marcus here,” a stunning redhead with a pixie haircut and an Eastern European accent consoled, inviting Jacqui to sit by her on an empty lounge chair. “I’m Katrinka. That’s Fiona, and next to her is Sam.”

Marcus laughed, perching on the arm of a lounge chair and grinning wickedly at all the girls. “Jacarei’s the star of our new *Vogue* spread. We’re doing twenty pages,” he added, throwing down the gauntlet. He looked around the party and jumped up from his seat. “I’ll be right back; I just want to say hello to someone,” he told Jacqui, squeezing her arm before loping off to greet a friend.

Jacqui settled down in the lounge chair, a little nervous to be left alone with all the models.

“Twenty pages. You must be so excited!” Fiona, a petite British girl who was a dead ringer for Kate Moss, smiled, putting aside the issue of French *Vogue* she’d been reading. She poured Jacqui a margarita from the pitcher beside her and Jacqui took it gratefully.

“Is it your first?” Sam, a tan, raven-haired, green-eyed girl asked. She had a slight midwestern accent. “I remember my first *Vogue* with the boys,” she added, looking off into the distance as if she were reminiscing about years past. “We went to Paris. I was so excited—I’d never been out of the country before that.”

Jacqui took a sip of the ice-cold drink. Other than São Paulo, she’d never been anywhere but New York and one trip to Florida with the Perrys, and she felt the slightest bit jealous. But then, she would be starting NYU in the fall, her dream, so who was she to complain?

“How’d you like working with the Eastons? They are very sweet, no? Midas can be a bit of a stickler, but the pictures come out beautiful,” Katrinka jumped in, pushing her sunglasses back on her spiky red hair.

Jacqui nodded. “I like it. To be honest, I didn’t expect to, but it’s a lot of fun,” she admitted. She was surprised at how friendly these girls were. The models she’d met in the past had been distinctly bubble-headed, catty, and hostile. And it was sort of nice to be able to talk to people who understood what she’d been up to all summer.

“When my issue came out, I got signed by Versace to do their ads,” Sam said, piling her luxurious dark hair on top of her head. “Just wait—your life is totally about to change,” she added excitedly, her green eyes sparkling as she smiled eagerly at Jacqui.

“How do you mean?”

“It happened so quickly,” Sam said, folding herself in her arms and tucking her legs underneath her chin. “I mean, one minute, I was just nannying on the Upper East Side, kind of bumming around, not really doing much, and suddenly I was on a private jet to Morocco with Marc Jacobs and André Leon Talley.”

“You were a nanny?” Jacqui asked, surprised. She removed her Tory Burch cover-up and began to lather the body oil Sam handed her on her skin. She was feeling more at ease by the minute.

“Yeah. No one can work a juice box like me.” Sam winked. “Is that an Eliza Thompson?” she asked, critically studying Jacqui’s swimsuit.

Jacqui nodded. “She’s a friend of mine, actually. And I’m an au pair.”

“Not for long,” Sam said wisely.

“I’m not sure I want to make modeling my life, though,” Jacqui told them.

“Oh, it doesn’t have to be. Do you think I’ll be doing this when I’m twenty-five? Be serious.” Sam shook her head. “I’m totally doing the Christy Turlington thing. Retire, start up a company, marry a cute guy, have a great family.”

“In the meantime, the traveling is awesome,” Fiona gushed. “Last week I was in Shanghai, Milan, and the Canary Islands. The lifestyle is great—it’s so flexible. You can work if you want, but if you don’t want to, you don’t have to get out of bed.”

“And of course, there are the parties.” Katrinka nodded. “Not to mention getting to stay in this little cottage here.” She waved a hand at the enormous stately house behind her.

“Your agency put you up here?” Jacqui asked. A little shack on the beach this was not.

“Yup, it’s their little gift to us to let us relax and get away from the city. We’re all roommates in New York too. In a little loft in the Bowery. You should come by sometime.”

“I will,” Jacqui agreed, thinking that a loft in the Bowery sounded a whole lot cooler than a tiny little dorm room. Looking around at the three confident, beautiful girls—each with a distinctive look and a lucrative contract—she began to think that if she ever were to model full-time, she could do worse than become a Chrysler girl.

“Can I steal you for a moment?” Marcus interrupted, coming over with a fresh drink and holding out a hand. Jacqui bid the girls goodbye, and he brought her over to a more private area of the pool patio.

“Big news,” he continued once they were alone. “That was Gilles Bensimon I was just chatting with. Midas and I sent him some outtakes from the *Vogue* shoot last week and he loved them. We’re going to Paris!” he said gleefully, picking her up and spinning her on the grass.

“*Meu Deus!* Paris?”

“The City of Lights! *Singin’ in the Rain!* *Funny Face!*” Marcus laughed. “Picture it: you and I walking along the Seine together. Dancing at Les Bains. It’s going to be absolutely brilliant.”

“But why?” Jacqui asked, still shocked.

“Midas and I just scored the *Elle* cover. Gilles doesn’t want his magazine left out of trumpeting the new girl. They’ve booked Versailles for the location, and we have to get there the day after the *Vogue* party. But no worries, they’re sending a private jet to take us straight there.”

“In ten days? That soon?”

Marcus nodded. “August 29.”

“But that’s the first day of orientation at NYU,” Jacqui said, her face falling. “Couldn’t we shoot it the weekend after?” she asked hopefully, even though she knew it was a stupid question.

Marcus scoffed. “You don’t tell Gilles Bensimon when to schedule a shoot. He tells you and you go, no questions asked. Darling, it’s all very simple.” He grabbed both her hands and squeezed them, looking deep into her eyes. “You need to forget about NYU. Come to Paris and we’ll stay at my flat; I’ve got plenty of space. Midas and I have big plans for our muse.”

Give up NYU? She’d worked so hard to get in for so long. But the opportunity to be an international supermodel certainly didn’t come along every day. She’d just met a bunch of pretty normal girls back there who led amazing, extraordinary lives. Traveling to the most beautiful places on the globe. Free designer clothes. Invitations to the best parties. Here was a chance to join the jet set. The beautiful people.

Marcus smiled at her, and the sun hit the blond highlights in his hair. She could picture it—photographer and muse, living in a charming flat on the Left Bank. It would be so

romantic, like her favorite movie, *Moulin Rouge*, except she wasn't going to die of consumption anytime soon. All she had to do was turn her back on NYU.

She had never been a great student—she'd had to work so hard just to maintain a B average—whereas modeling came so easily to her, it was like breathing. Could this be the one thing she was good at? She thought of Eliza and her designs and Mara and her writing. Maybe this was her talent. Maybe this was what she was meant to do.

“Give it a think. You've got a week and a half. But listen to me. You won't want to miss spending autumn in gay Paree with me.” Marcus took her in his arms and dipped her low.

Jacqui laughed as she felt the blood rush to her head. *Paris*. She'd come to the Hamptons from São Paulo three years ago to track down the boy she thought was the love of her life. She was older now and wiser. But what should stop her from following another guy—one who had *invited* her to go with him—to the most romantic city in the world?

www.blogspot.com/hamptonsaupair1

it's 10 PM—do you know where your friends are?

Seriously, do you? Because I don't. J., E., and I are like three ships passing in the night. Make that a foggy night, without foghorns. Not that I think we're in any danger of crashing anytime soon, but it would be nice to know they're still out there. On the rare occasion that J. and I cross paths, she seems really out of it, like she's so busy thinking about something she's got no brain cells left for everyday cognition (did I mention she's a model? Jk!). E., on the other hand, is simply an invisible wonder. She's so busy at her store, working on her fall line, and generally being so on top of the world that she's got twenty pages in *Vogue* that she seems to have literally exited this earth. I guess I should just be happy that they're both happy. . . . That's what friends are for. . . .

Speaking of E.'s party, I'm totally torn up about missing it to go meet D.'s mom. I've always been the type to put hos before bros (tee-hee,), but this time I must confess I'm leaning toward the dinner. So without further ado, a list of pros and cons re ditching my friends to solve the matter:

pros

Dinner with Manhattan's top agent could make me a literary superstar.

cons

Might no longer be alive to launch my literary career once E. finds out I'm missing her bash.

I think I'm willing to take my chances. . . .

**Till next time,
HamptonsAuPair1**

you know what they say about people who live in glass houses. . . .

“WHAT’S GOING ON?” MARA ASKED when she arrived at their table in a cozy little restaurant not too far from the house. The three girls had been remiss in meeting up for their weekly catch-up meals, and all of them had made an effort to get together that evening. Summer was almost over, and it was criminal how little time the three of them had spent together. Mara had come straight from putting all five kids to bed and had found Jacqui and Eliza looking tense.

“Jacqui is moving to Paris,” Eliza announced in grave tones before soaking a piece of bread in a pool of olive oil on her plate and taking a delicate bite.

Mara took her seat and unfolded her napkin on her lap. “What? Why?”

“Marcus wants me to go to Paris,” Jacqui explained a bit defensively as she perused the menu. “It’s the next step for me, he said. There’s a chance I could be on the cover of *Elle*.”

“But what about NYU?” Mara asked. She reached into her oversize Alexander McQueen tote bag and removed a large white envelope with the purple NYU logo on the right-hand corner. “This came for you today. You’re never at the house anymore, so I thought I’d bring it tonight.”

“Oh.” Jacqui accepted the envelope. She opened it and its contents spilled out—registration forms, cheerful color-coded information memos on housing and meal plans. “It’s the orientation packet,” Jacqui said flatly, brusquely stuffing all the papers back into the envelope.

“So wait—back up—you’re moving to Paris and not going to NYU?” Mara asked, completely floored. All Jacqui ever talked about for two years was how NYU was her dream. She remembered how ecstatic Jacqui had been when she called Mara to tell her she’d just been accepted. “Just so you can model?”

Jacqui shrugged. “NYU will still be there when I’m done with modeling.” She was miffed that her friends weren’t more excited for her, but if they weren’t going to be supportive, she preferred they not talk about it at all. “Have you guys had the salmon here? Is it good?”

Eliza snatched the menu out of Jacqui’s hands. “You can’t be serious,” she said. “Jac, I hate to break it to you, but modeling is not that easy. The world is full of models who never made it living in, like, ghetto apartments. You’re better off going to school.”

“I have twenty pages in *Vogue*,” Jacqui said defensively, reaching back for the menu and scanning the pages with an annoyed look on her face.

“Granted—but think about it. Most girls don’t get paid for anything until they score a cosmetics or designer contract. Editorial pays for shit. You might never hit it big, and then what?” Eliza raised her eyebrow haughtily. She didn’t mean to rain on Jacqui’s parade, but she’d seen too many of her friends in New York fall into the same trap. They left for Paris, Milan, or Tokyo with their portfolios and dreams of magazine covers dancing in their heads, wasting years appearing in beer ads in Ginza rather than the Galliano runway before giving up completely.

Jacqui grimaced. Eliza could be so bossy sometimes. She knew Eliza was right—Marcus had explained to her that she had to work for the lowest pay scale until she joined a proper agency, her rates went up, and a huge brand signed her. She knew her friends had good intentions, but she hated the way they always thought they knew what was good for her. Well, Jacqui could think for herself, and she thought Paris sounded pretty grand, thank you very much.

“And anyway, I think there’s something off about Marcus,” Eliza added, thinking about what Jeremy had said after he met him briefly earlier in the summer—that he seemed like a player. How could Jacqui just run off to another country with a guy she’d only known for a matter of weeks? She and Jeremy had been dating for three years, and *they* weren’t even living together.

She motioned to the waitress to refill their bread basket. All this talk of modeling was making her hungry, almost as if she were unconsciously rebelling against the strict diet Jacqui would have to adhere to once she officially signed on. Eliza remembered being accosted by a modeling scout herself and being told she had to lose another ten pounds to be considered runway ready. Hello, she was already a size zero—she wasn’t about to get into the negative figures. No thanks, she’d rather dine on pasta than on promises.

“How can you say that?” Jacqui asked, now completely irritated. “That’s ridiculous. He and Midas are making your career.”

“What?” Eliza cried, turning pink. Now it was her turn to feel the sting. “Jac, I can’t believe you don’t think I wouldn’t be able to make it on my own.”

“That’s not what I meant.” Jacqui backed off quickly. “But you guys have to understand—it’s not every day that regular people get handed opportunities like this. Some people spend their whole lives waiting for their big break.” Jacqui looked down at her hands and bit off an errant hangnail.

Mara looked at Jacqui curiously. Regular people? Since when did Jacqui consider herself ordinary? Her otherworldly good looks always saved the day for her. The girl had never had to pay for a meal, a cab, or a drink in her life. She quietly took a sip of her water, not wanting to get involved.

“If you flake out on NYU, you’ll hate yourself,” Eliza pronounced, her voice carrying to the other tables so that the well-heeled patrons turned around to glare at her for breaking

through the restaurant's cozy murmur. She closed her menu definitively, as if closing the book on Jacqui's character.

"How can I expect you to understand—you've always had it too good," Jacqui said sourly. "Where is that waitress? I really need a drink."

"Hey!" Mara said, unable to watch from the sidelines anymore. "Stop it, you guys. Let's not spend the evening bitching at each other. C'mon, are we ready to order?"

"No, I'd really like to hear what Jacqui meant by that," Eliza said, her color high. She took a furious gulp from her water glass. Always had it good? Hadn't she suffered humiliation when her father lost their fortune and her family had to hightail it to Buffalo? It wasn't such ancient history that Eliza had forgotten what being poor was like.

"Nothing," Jacqui said sullenly, refusing to meet Eliza's eye. She usually didn't seek out confrontation, but if Eliza pushed, she would give it to her.

"No, go ahead. Please. Tell me," Eliza challenged.

Jacqui put down her napkin. "I don't know. It's just sometimes you take everything for granted. Didn't you pay for your store with your trust fund? I'm sorry, Eliza, but some of us don't have parents who can buy them careers."

"Anything more you have to say?" Eliza asked, her face now as red as her Chloé Gladys bag.

"Actually, yes," Jacqui said fiercely. If Eliza was going to tell her all the mistakes she was making in her life, well, then she deserved a little wake-up call herself. "You don't even take Jeremy seriously. You don't want a commitment; you're just wearing that rock on your finger for show." There. She'd said it. Well, somebody had to.

"You're one to talk about commitment!" Mara jumped in before Eliza, who'd turned completely ashen beside her, could respond. "Jac, you're the one who bailed on me all summer! I've had to do *everything* for those kids!" Mara wiped her hands on her napkin in dismay.

"See what I mean? You've flaked out on Mara," Eliza said in a triumphant tone, the color coming back to her face, although Jacqui's words had hit home. She knew Jacqui wasn't entirely wrong, but she didn't want to give her the satisfaction of acknowledging it.

"Don't take her side—she's not even going to be here for your big *Vogue* party." Jacqui folded her arms over her chest. It was going to be a completely sober evening, apparently. The waitress was nowhere to be seen.

"You're missing the *Vogue* party?" Eliza asked, turning to Mara. She looked more hurt than angry.

Mara flushed. "I was going to tell you," she said, wringing her napkin. "I'm having dinner with David and his mother, Pinky Preston. She's a huge literary agent—you both probably have never heard of her, but she's really famous in publishing. I can't miss it." Mara shrugged. She hadn't wanted the information to come out this way, but Eliza couldn't really blame her, could she? Give up the biggest opportunity of her young career to go to a party?

“So let me get this straight—you’re missing my big night, and possibly Jacqui’s last night in the country, for some lame snobby literary thing?” Eliza said icily.

“It’s not lame,” Mara snapped, now on the defensive.

“Whatever, Mara. All summer long, you don’t want to come to any parties and you act like you’re so above it all, with your pseudo-intellectual better-than-thou boyfriend,” Eliza huffed. She was glad to have an excuse to change the subject, and for the opportunity to pass the feeling of guilt on to someone else. “And now you’re missing out on the biggest night of our lives!”

“Of *your* life—you’ve already established that Jacqui’s modeling career is going nowhere,” Mara said coolly.

The waitress arrived, smiling as she pulled a pencil from behind her ear and a pad out of her belt. “What can I get you girls? Can I start you off with some drinks?”

“I’ll have a mojito,” Jacqui decided.

“A margarita for me,” Mara added.

“Martini.” Eliza nodded. “Dirty, with extra olives.”

“Sure.” The waitress kept smiling. “I just need to see some IDs.”

For a moment, the three girls looked askance at each other. They *never* got carded. They were so used to drinking whatever they wanted at fashion parties, at the house, and at VIP rooms that they had taken the lax policy in the Hamptons for granted.

“You know what, forget it,” Eliza said curtly, standing up. “I’m not hungry.”

“Neither am I,” Jacqui agreed, tossing her dark locks.

“Fine,” Mara said through gritted teeth. “I’ll see you guys later.”

The three of them left the stunned waitress behind and exited the restaurant without so much as a word. Eliza jumped in her convertible without offering the other two a ride, Jacqui hailed a cab, and Mara decided to walk. Was this what friends were for?

romance on the rocks, warning: major iceberg ahead

ELIZA PULLED UP TO THE old Greyson Estate the next afternoon, surprised to see how much work had been done on it since she'd last been there. Those late nights Jeremy had spent working on it had really paid off. The portico was refurbished, the house shone with a new coat of paint, and the crumbling columns had been replaced with new ones. A crew of construction workers milled around the grounds, and there was sawdust all over from the new fence being built.

"Jer?" she called. She hadn't told him she was coming, but she had hoped she'd find him here. After Jacqui's comment at last night's disastrous dinner, she knew she needed to really talk to Jeremy. She wasn't sure exactly what she was going to say, but she'd find the right words when the moment came.

He walked out of the front door in paint-splattered jeans, his dark brown curls plastered to his forehead and his face covered in a light sheen of sweat. "Hey, beautiful. What a nice surprise." He gave her a kiss and brought her inside. "Come take a look."

He took her first to the kitchen, which had been demolished, creating a huge open space. "It's going to have an island right here and then stainless steel counters and appliances," he said proudly. "But don't worry, I'll do all the cooking," he added with a sly grin. Eliza couldn't help but think of that day earlier in the summer, when she'd laughed off the thought of Jeremy ever thinking of her as a housewife. That seemed so long ago now.

She followed Jeremy around the house as he pointed out the work that had already been done—two bathrooms restored with marble tiles and Japanese toilets, as well as the refinished floors, sanded down and stained to a clean, light gray color. It was all incredibly beautiful and exactly to her taste.

He brought her to the master bedroom, which was still a mess of plaster and dust. "Looks like there's a lot of work still to be done," she observed.

"Yeah, but I think we should be finished by Christmas. I want to be moved in by December."

"Kind of big for a bachelor pad, isn't it?" she asked playfully.

"I think the two of us should keep it warm," he said, coming up behind her and folding her into his arms.

"About that . . ."

“I know, I know, you need to be in New York. I understand. But we can stay out here on the weekends. The Hamptons are really beautiful in the winter. So quiet. And then once the spring rolls around and you’re done with classes, I was thinking we should come out here full-time and have the wedding in June. You know, the month we met.”

“June?” Eliza said. “That soon?” Jacqui’s words from last night’s disastrous dinner were still ringing in her ears. *You don’t want a commitment; you’re just wearing that rock on your finger for show.*

Jeremy turned her around to face him, holding on to her arms and looking deep into her eyes. “Liza, I don’t want to wait, and I’ve got no reason to. I’ve been working hard my whole life, and now I’ve gotten this big break. Best of all, I’ve got the girl of my dreams to finish the package. I see the future, and I want it now. I know we’re young, but we’re not stupid. I love you.”

“Jer—I can’t,” Eliza said, pulling away. She looked at the five-carat rock on her finger. Wearing it meant she was engaged to be *married*. Jeremy was dead serious about them, about the ring. “I can’t move into this house with you.”

“But . . . don’t you want to be with me?” His eyes searched hers, his brow furrowed in concern.

“I do, I do, I do,” Eliza said, shaking her head. She could feel the hot tears welling in her eyes. She’d just uttered the very words she would have to say at the altar, but she wasn’t ready to say them in a church.

“Then why are you crying?” Jeremy asked, mystified.

“It’s just—it’s too soon.” She looked into his eyes, begging him to understand. “I’m only nineteen. It’s all too soon. I want more. . . . I want to experience more of *life* before I settle down. . . .” The words spilled out from her lips before she could even think about them. But they were all true.

She took off the ring. It felt heavy in the palm of her hand, but not as heavy as her heart. “Jer, I have to give this back to you.”

She closed his hand over it, and, choking back a sob, she ran away from him, from her Barbie dream house, and from their future.

the heart wants what it wants

MARA WAS THROWING IN ANOTHER load of the kids' laundry when her cell phone rang. She grabbed for it eagerly, hoping it was Eliza or Jacqui. The girls hadn't spoken to each other since their fateful dinner, almost a week ago. Jacqui was now at Marcus's 24/7 and had ceased even pretending to be an au pair. Eliza was busy gearing up for the big *Vogue* party, meeting with the magazine's party planners to prepare for the event, and Mara hadn't so much as run into her at the house. And since the shoot with the Aussie boys was wrapped and done, she knew Eliza and Jacqui's paths weren't crossing either. She missed her friends, but she didn't want to be the one to apologize, since she hadn't really done anything wrong.

"Hello?"

"Hey, what's up." The voice on the phone didn't belong to either Jacqui or Eliza—it was Ryan's. "I'm out by the beach right now. Can you hang out?"

That was kind of a shock. Other than their über-competitive golf date, she'd only run into Ryan in passing. It made her kind of sad, actually. This summer was so different from years past. "Um, sure. I have to throw something into the dryer first, but then I'll come meet you."

"Glad to see you've got your priorities straight, Mar."

"Shut up. See you soon." She grinned as she hung up the phone. At least he'd stopped calling her "Waters" or "dude," but really—what was this all about?

* * *

She walked the short distance to the Perry house and found Ryan waiting for her, sitting on a fallen log, not far from where he'd surprised her when she was skinny-dipping earlier that summer. Come to think of it, it was the very spot where they'd first slept side by side in sleeping bags. She wondered if all those old memories flooded him when he came here too but shook off the thought.

"So, how's it going?" Mara asked, feeling shy all of a sudden. They hadn't been alone together since the start of the summer, and she still wasn't quite sure how to act around him. She sat down on the log beside him, the bark scraping her ankles.

"Good." Ryan nodded. "You?"

"Things are okay," Mara said tentatively. She was about to launch into the positives in her life—how much the kids had been improving, how glad she was to have David back—when she realized she could tell him what had really been on her mind. "I had a big fight with the girls last week, actually," she admitted quietly. "I haven't spoken to either Jacqui or Eliza

since. Which is pretty impressive considering we all live in the same house.” It felt so good to get it off her chest. She hadn’t even told David about it—she was afraid he’d never like her friends again if she told him everything they’d said.

“Oh, man. You all right?” Ryan asked.

“I will be.” Mara sighed. She reached down and grabbed a handful of sand, opening her hand again and letting the grains fall softly down onto the ground. “The fight was sort of a long time coming, I guess.”

“Some things are like that,” Ryan said with a small smile. He looked out to the water, and his eyes were distant. Mara glanced at him curiously, wondering what he was thinking about.

“I broke up with Tinker the other day,” he said quietly.

“What? *Why?*” Mara blurted. She was shocked. They’d seemed so happy together. What could two people who were so much alike possibly find to disagree about?

He shrugged. “I guess I was just starting to feel like I was with her because I felt like I should be, not because I wanted to be.” He looked out to the water again. The waves were crashing angrily against the shore. “I’m sure you know what that feels like,” he added softly.

“Um, no . . . ,” Mara said slowly. Was he implying what she thought he was?

Ryan turned to face her on the log, his green-blue eyes filled with concern. “Oh come on, Mar. I know David’s a writer too, but really . . . He’s totally not right for you.”

Mara felt herself stiffening. She knew Ryan was upset about his breakup with Tinker, but why did he have to bring David into this?

“You deserve better,” he added, almost as an afterthought, but she was too incensed to notice.

“You don’t even *know* David,” Mara said hotly, the color coming to her face. Was this why Ryan had called her? To pick a fight? He was clearly upset about his own breakup, but that wasn’t her problem. Well, she wasn’t going to let him drag her into it.

“I know enough,” Ryan mumbled, looking down at the ground and kicking up a little sand with his foot.

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“Mara, he’s just . . . he seems like the kind of guy who’s always looking out for himself.” He paused. “And not after you,” he finally finished, looking down and kicking the log with his heel.

She sat there, for a moment too shocked to speak. “You’re one to talk,” she said angrily, her eyes flashing. “You were *so* considerate of my feelings all summer—hardly acknowledging my existence, making out with your stupid happy-go-lucky Buddhist girlfriend all over the place, and being so freaking *smug* about it,” she spat. She felt bad about dragging Tinker into this, since she really *had* been sweet to Mara. So much for inner peace. But all was fair in love and war, right?

“Whatever, Mara.” Ryan shook his head disappointedly and stood up. “I was just trying to help,” he added.

She sat there bristling, but before she could say anything more, he turned and walked back inside his house, not looking back at her once.

www.blogspot/hamptonsaupair1

Sorry I haven't been blogging for a while. I heard that's a blogger's cliché—apologizing for not posting to your readers. :) So I doubly apologize. Things have been hectic over here. D. and I are going to New York this weekend, and I'm so looking forward to getting back to civilization. Don't get me wrong, the Hamptons are civilization too, but the Hamptons are like Gaul to New York's Rome. The weather is better, the food is great, but ultimately, you want to be back where the action is, and I miss the city.

How are the kids? Well, thanks. Violet has talked to a boy! Sure, it was just the hot dog vendor on Sag Harbor, but still. Logan and Jackson have received their GREs and are contemplating colleges. They'll probably get into a better one than mine. Cassidy is walking already! And Wyatt has learned how to tie his shoes.

As for J. and E. I wouldn't know . . . and I don't care. Much.

**Till next time,
hamptonsaupair1**

eliza finds an aussie band-aid can't quite heal her all-american broken heart

“IS IT TRUE?” MIDAS ASKED the Second Eliza walked in the door of the temporary *Vogue* offices. He and Marcus had chosen the photographs that were going to be in the spread, and she was dying to see the final edited collection. “You and Mr. Right—it’s off?”

As if her breakup with Jeremy wasn’t difficult enough on its own, the papers had had a field day with the disintegration of Jereliza, and it seemed that every conversation she’d had for the last week had begun with that sentiment—*“It’s really over?”* Eliza had drunkenly confessed about their breakup to a gossip friend at a bar, and the next day it was everywhere. Luckily for her, two days after that, Chauncey Raven had gotten back together with her loser ex-husband, despite the fact that he’d once cheated on her with a nineteen-year-old, and everyone forgot about the Greyson heir and his designer girlfriend again.

Eliza nodded. “It is.” It was bizarre to say it, much less to think about it. She and Jeremy were no longer a couple. She felt too shocked to be sad. She was merely numb.

When she left him that night in a fit of melodrama, she had assumed that he would immediately come after her and demand that she change her mind. But he hadn’t. And now that a week had gone by without her hearing from him, she’d realized that he probably never would. How could they ever get back together after she’d shattered his dreams like that and strung him along so cruelly the whole summer? She couldn’t blame him for giving up on her.

“I offer my condolences,” Midas said softly. “To the poor bastard.”

“Excuse me?” She wasn’t sure if she’d heard him correctly.

“What I meant to say is, fancy having dinner with me tonight?” Midas said a bit more loudly, his blue eyes sparkling and a wide smile on his face.

“Sure.” She nodded. Having not spoken to Mara and Jacqui in a week, she could certainly use a sympathetic ear. “Dinner sounds great.”

“Splendid. I’ll pick you up at eight.” He closed the portfolio, handing it to her. “I’ve got another meeting, so I’m afraid I have to run, but I’ll see you later.”

Eliza stood up, taking her things. Wait. What just happened here? Had they planned a friendly dinner, or had she just agreed to go out with Midas on a date?

* * *

JLX Bistro was more crowded than it had been in a while, filled with the late-August flood of now-or-never vacationers. There were lawyers and bankers who put in hundred-hour weeks and didn't see their families all summer until the very end, as well as the Hollywood crowd who breezed into the Hamptons to catch the last round of parties and premieres of the season.

Eliza was surprised that they were still given a choice seat out on the patio with a view of the ocean, what with all the famous faces surrounding them. But she shouldn't have been. When it came to connections, fashion people always did well for themselves, and Midas was given a bear hug by the owner of the establishment as soon as they arrived. Hollywood actresses might come and go, but the style pack had been summering in the Hamptons forever.

Midas was in top form at dinner, regaling Eliza with stories about growing up in Sydney and hanging out in Bondi Beach. She had been to Sydney once, so they chatted about bars and restaurants and where to get the best beer. Midas was being his usual funny and charming self, but as was the way with her lately, Eliza found she could hardly concentrate on his words, and her mind kept drifting off.

"You should show at Sydney Fashion Week." Midas's voice broke into her thoughts. "The field is growing and Aussies are mad for fashion."

"I'll keep it in mind." Eliza nodded, hoping that he hadn't noticed her zoning out there for a bit. "Are you going?"

"Not this year," Midas said. "I'll be working on a documentary, actually."

"Something fashion related?" Eliza asked, idly playing with her cell phone and wondering what Jeremy was doing right then. Did he even *miss* her?

"Nope. The fashion world's just a stepping-stone. I want to be a real artist, maybe pull a David LaChapelle," he confessed, suddenly looking a bit shy.

"Really?" David LaChapelle had started out shooting fashion spreads for avant-garde magazines like *The Face* and *Black Book*, then pervy-cool portraits of Pamela Anderson and Paris Hilton for *Vanity Fair*, and had recently directed a well-received documentary on inner-city kids. "So what's your film about?"

"Carnies," he said with a grin. "After Paris, Marcus and I are traveling around the world documenting the carnival underground. It's wild."

"That does sound wild." Eliza smiled. It seemed strange to trade in the fun, fabulous world of fashion for a chance to hang out with circus freaks, but she understood Midas's desire to branch out into something different and acquire a bit of art-world credibility. Though she knew with Midas it wasn't about anything snobby—it was about trying something new and being his own boss rather than having to pander to the fashion world's finicky tastes.

But wait. Did he say he and *Marcus* were traveling together after Paris? Where did that leave Jacqui? "You and your brother are so close," Eliza observed, hoping to get more information out of him.

“He’s a good mate,” Midas said simply. “Although he can be a bit of a wolf with the girls.” He grabbed one of his fries and dipped it in ketchup, wolfing down the bite as if to emphasize his point.

“Really,” Eliza drawled. She hated to be right about things like this.

“Like a cat around the birds, that one.” Midas took a sip of his drink. “I hope your friend can take care of herself.”

“She’s a big girl,” Eliza said, though she wasn’t so sure. Even though they were fighting, she wanted to look out for her friend. Especially if Jacqui was ready to throw everything away for the chance to live in Paris with a guy who would be out the door in a month.

“And you? Are you a big girl too?” Midas teased.

He was smiling at her over his steak frites, and Eliza couldn’t help but smile back. Midas was so unbelievably charming. With his piercing blue eyes and messy, tousled, David Beckham–like hair (not to mention his toned David Beckham–like bod), he was by far the best-looking guy in the restaurant—everyone had turned to look at them when they’d entered. As they well should—they looked great together. And now she was free to date him. So why didn’t she feel more excited?

Looking around her, Eliza realized with a hollow thud that she was sitting on the very same patio where she and Jeremy had had that awkward date earlier in the summer, that fateful night when neither of them had the chance to say what they were really thinking and feeling about their relationship.

If only they had really talked about what the ring meant when he put it on her finger. If only she had told him then what she had been truly feeling instead of being too scared to hurt him. Maybe if she’d just laughed and told him he was being silly, he would have put the ring away and they would have waited to talk about marriage again when they were ready, years down the line. Instead, she’d hurt him in the deepest way possible.

Lucky Yap chanced by and, seeing Eliza and Midas together, promptly snapped a photo. “It’ll be in *Hamptons* next week,” he told them gaily. “*Elidas*,” he added to himself with a grin.

Eliza flashed a smile at Midas but shuddered to think what Jeremy would feel when the picture was published, seeing her on a date with someone else so soon after they had broken up. It hurt just to think about it.

Gotcha.

“chick lit” is not a four-letter word

LATE AUGUST IN NEW YORK city meant heat compounded by sweltering humidity, but the day Mara and David returned to Manhattan was one of the rare, extremely pleasant late-summer days. A breeze blew across the Central Park trees, the air was cool and refreshing, and everyone on the street was in a good mood, from the Wall Street types with their folded-up sleeves, to the girls in billowy white sundresses and flip-flops who hurried between shops, to the hot dog vendors and the falafel guys.

They spent a wonderful day together, stopping at the Metropolitan Museum of Art to see the new Rembrandt exhibit, watching Shakespeare in the Park in the afternoon, and grabbing coffee at David’s favorite bookstore on Madison Avenue. Mara’s head was dizzy from all the cultural activities and deep conversations. After a summer spent changing diapers and stopping by the occasional Hamptons glitz fest, she’d forgotten what a day with David in New York was like—stimulating and full.

His childhood bedroom at the Dakota was wall-to-wall bookshelves, and she was gratified to see that they owned a lot of the same books. She fixed her makeup in the tiny mirror on his desk, making sure not to get lipstick on her teeth. They had fifteen minutes before they had to meet his mother at Daniel.

“You look great—don’t stress,” David assured her from the bathroom, where he was fixing his tie.

Mara nodded and smoothed down the folds of her skirt. She’d chosen a pretty Diane von Furstenberg shirtwaist, a crisp black cotton dress that she hoped said “serious writer.” “So, how many pages of the blog should I bring?” she asked, kneeling down and unzipping her suitcase to show him the printout of all the posts she’d done. It was a hefty stack of paper. “Do you think the first fifty are enough?”

“Don’t worry about that; you can just leave it here.” David waved his hand as if it were a silly suggestion as he pulled his tie into a knot with a definitive tug.

“I shouldn’t bring it?” Mara asked, surprised. She put on her best heels—the silver Manolo Blahnik rhinestone sandals she’d gotten for free one summer. If the dress was meant to communicate her serious ambitions, the shoes were to remind everyone she had glamorous aspirations as well. “But what will your mom look at?”

“You’re so cute.” He came back into the room to kiss her on the head. He stroked her hair, petting her like a puppy. “She’ll look at *you*.” He shook his head as he moved over to the dresser, slipping into his navy blazer.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You know what I mean. . . . It’s all about fitting a marketing profile.” He buttoned his gold cuff links and shrugged. “Young, cute, perky blogger girl writes a chick-lit book; publishers will salivate at the sight of your author shot alone,” he finished, putting on his horn-rimmed glasses and smiling at her. “I’d drool at your author shot,” he added huskily, with a wink.

Her author shot? Mara’s face fell. “But you said it was funny. . . .”

“You *are* funny,” David assured her. “You’re a very *entertaining* writer.” She knew he meant it as a compliment, but “entertaining” sounded a lot like “dumb” to Mara’s ears.

He grabbed a pair of argyle socks from his drawer and slipped them on his feet. “It’s the reality of the market these days. It never matters what the writing is like anymore; it’s the concept of the thing. My mom just sold some memoir from twin seven-year-olds. I’m sure it’s awful, but who can resist precocious young kids writing a book?” He shrugged and grabbed his wallet from his desk, sticking it in his pants pocket.

Mara stopped putting on her shoes and sat down on the bed, suddenly feeling a bit dizzy. “So what exactly is *my* hook?”

“You know, cute au pair lit. Chick lit with the nanny angle. From the cutest au pair of all.” He came and sat down beside her on the bed, smiling. “What’s wrong? Are you feeling sick?”

Okay, so maybe she wasn’t writing *Remembrance of Things Past* here, but she’d worked hard on that blog. She slaved over every sentence. It was very difficult to make writing look effortless.

“Seriously, are you okay?” David asked, leaning over and putting a hand on her face to check her temperature.

Mara couldn’t look at him. All this time, she’d thought David was interested in her writing, but he was really just being condescending.

“So you don’t think my writing’s any good.”

“Mara, I just told you,” he said, looking exasperated. “It’s not *about* that. Your writing isn’t what’s going to sell your book.”

Something in Mara snapped. She didn’t need him or his mother. There were other agents in the city. Besides, she had a lot of readers now—who were interested in what she had to say, not just what she looked like. She did *not* have a webcam, thank you very much, and she wasn’t about to whore herself out to an agent who simply wanted a sexy author photo.

“You know what? I’m not okay.” She stood up and began stuffing her clothes back into her suitcase haphazardly. She grabbed her cosmetics from the bathroom and threw them in, not caring if the shampoo spilled on her new Eliza Thompson tunics.

“What are you doing?” David asked, aghast. “My mother is waiting for us.”

“I’m not going to dinner. I’m leaving,” Mara said, looking him straight in the eye. “I’m not your little squirrel,” she added icily.

“Squirrel?” he asked, confused.

“Ibsen. *A Doll’s House*,” she snapped, just to show that she too could make hoity-toity literary references if she wanted to.

“But why? I don’t understand.” He looked truly distressed, and for a moment she felt bad for him. He really didn’t get it. “Just because I said you couldn’t bring your blog? For God’s sake, bring it if you’d like. It doesn’t make a difference to me.”

It didn’t make a difference to him? She didn’t feel so bad anymore. Mara stuffed her manuscript into her laptop bag and it bulged a little. “It’s not just that, David. And if you can’t figure it out, then I can’t help you.”

“Mara, don’t be an idiot. You clearly have no clue what a huge opportunity this is,” he warned. His voice suddenly had a frightening edge, one she’d never heard before.

“Oh, I don’t, don’t I?” She hoisted her suitcase upright and marched for the door, wobbling on her heels a little. It was a little difficult to make a graceful exit in a tight dress and spindly high heels.

“No. You’re being ridiculous,” David said angrily, throwing up his hands. “You’re going to embarrass me in front of my mother and her friends. Now put that suitcase down and let’s go to dinner. All right?”

“No.” She turned as she reached the door, trembling slightly. She looked at David, in his expensive-looking blazer, his trendy horn-rimmed glasses, and his shiny monogrammed cuff links and couldn’t remember what she had found so attractive about him anymore. Ryan was right. David was an impossible snob. Worse, he was kind of a jerk.

Suddenly she thought back to last summer, when she was living with Ryan on the yacht and writing her column for *Hamptons*. Ryan never understood the writing thing the way David had—it just wasn’t one of his interests. But there was a huge difference between her two ex-boyfriends. Ryan would never, ever look down on her.

“What am I going to tell my mother?” David asked, his angry expression crumbling into doubt. Suddenly he looked like a whiny little mama’s boy.

“I don’t know, David. Why don’t you make up a story? That’s what writers do, isn’t it?”

She slammed the door in his face and raced out of the Dakota and onto West Seventy-second Street, hailing a cab. She hoped she could still catch the last Jitney and make it to the big *Vogue* party. Maybe it wasn’t too late to make everything right.

jacqui doesn't seem to like surprises either

“IS IT EVERYTHING YOU EVER wished for?” Marcus asked with a grand wave of the arm, gesturing at the scene before him.

“More,” Jacqui said breathlessly.

She had expected the usual Hamptons blowout for the *Vogue* party celebrating Eliza’s collection: a cadre of security at the front gates, bedlam at the door, valets hustling guests out of their shiny new Porsches. But the fete at the Calvin Klein mansion was a far cry from the extravagant, over-the-top, anything-goes bacchanalian parties that put the Hamptons on the map.

Instead, the spare, modern spaces of the large and airy home were as artfully decorated and well edited as any *Vogue* spread. The pristinely white walls were adorned with enormous, elegant black-and-white blowups from the shoot, and classical music was piped in from the invisible overhead speakers. The magazine had invited only an intimate handful of the most powerful, influential, and well-known style arbiters who had passed muster with the publication’s exacting editor in chief. It was a chic and stylish crowd, comprised of old-money scions and blue-chip heiresses like the Lauders and the Hearsts. Needless to say, Chauncey Raven wasn’t on the guest list.

Jacqui couldn’t stop looking at the humongous life-size photographs of her. She was inescapable. She was no longer Jacqui Velasco, pretty girl from Brazil, but the one-named wonder “Jacarei.” She couldn’t cross the room without being accosted by several different people—editors, modeling agents, PR reps, reporters, designers, photographers, who all wanted a piece of her. The attention was almost overwhelming.

“I’m . . . everywhere,” she said as she took it all in.

“My dear, that’s how Jacarei was meant to be experienced,” Marcus drawled, nodding in pleasure at the enormous wall-high photographs.

Whether or not that was true, the sight gave her a bit of a headache. She wished she hadn’t left her purse in the coat check, since she always kept a few Tylenol pills stashed away. She excused herself and made her way to the grand staircase and the coat check beyond.

As she walked up the stairs, she adjusted the front of her dress, making sure her bra straps weren’t peeking out of the neckline. Knowing that most would expect her to show off “the Body,” Jacqui had decided to trump expectations by choosing a loose, poufy baby-doll dress

from Eliza's fall line. She'd worn it with sky-scraping six-inch Pierre Hardy wedges that made her tanned legs look endless. The effect was stunning and subversively sexy and showed that Jacqui could command a room without having to show off her figure. See? She didn't need Eliza to style her after all.

From the top of the landing, she could see the main hall below, where Eliza was holding court in the great room, looking poised to take over the global fashion market. She wore a smashing red dress with flamenco ruffles—for her resort collection, she'd decided to channel 1950s Cuba. Not that Eliza had told Jacqui that. She'd had to hear about it from Marcus, since she and Eliza still weren't speaking, despite the fact that it had been an entire week since their argument.

Eliza had come up to her when she'd first arrived at the party and hissed in her ear that she needed to talk to her about Marcus. But Jacqui had angrily waved Eliza away. She didn't want to hear another warning about Marcus and the evils of modeling, and she was sick of Eliza thinking she needed to be taken care of. She'd made up her mind, and there was no going back: she'd signed up with the Chrysler agency and was leaving for Paris the next morning. She would have to let NYU know she wouldn't be enrolling in the fall at some point—after all, they'd probably notice when she wasn't at orientation tomorrow—and the thought brought a little sadness. But she was determined, and nothing was going to stop her.

She was feeling a little dizzy from all the cocktails she'd drunk. They'd created a special drink in her honor—the Passionate Jac, made from Jack Daniels and Brazilian passion fruit juice. She looked for an empty bathroom where she could at least clear her head. As she stumbled around a corner, trying to find her way, she crashed into something. Make that someone.

“Oh, excuse me,” she said. She looked up, feeling a bit disoriented. “Don't I know you . . . ?”

“Jacqui Velasco.” The person in front of her was six-foot three, blond, and beaming, in a tailored shirt with nice wool pants.

“Pete? Pete Rockwood?” Jacqui asked in disbelief. “Am I dreaming?”

“Nope. Not at all.” Pete broke into a wide grin. “It's me.”

“What are you doing here?” she blurted, too shocked to have any manners. Was this really the guy she'd met at the duck pond? He almost looked like a sophisticated Hamptonite and not the sweet tourist she'd met back in June.

“It's a long story,” he said, smiling at her so widely that she couldn't help but smile back. “Are you going downstairs?”

She nodded, unable to remember what she'd been doing before she bumped into him, and he led the way.

“I think there's an elevator around here somewhere—I took it on the way up.” They walked down the length of the hallway to a small elevator next to the library that was almost hidden in the wall.

“So, would you like to tell me the long story?” she prodded, her curiosity getting the better of her.

“Well, it all started at the dentist’s office,” he said in a practical tone as he punched button to call the elevator.

“The dentist’s office?” Jacqui burst out laughing. She couldn’t help it; it was all too surreal. Where could this story be going?

“Yeah,” he said with a grin, letting her step inside the car first. He pushed the elevator button and the doors closed behind them. “Anyway, there I was, waiting for Dr. Finklemore, when I pick up a magazine and there *you* are. Your picture, that is. The article said you were spending the summer in the Hamptons, modeling for some store. So I stole the magazine and called up the boutique—Eliza Thompson? Anyway, the girl there said she knew where you were. So here I am.”

Jacqui stood there looking at him, totally stunned. All that effort just to track her down? But then, hadn’t she spent the first weeks of the summer madly Googling him?

“So basically, I came here looking for you. Does that make me a stalker?” His blue eyes twinkled and perfect dimples formed in either cheek. For a moment, all Jacqui could think about was that any girl would be happy to have Pete Rockwood for a stalker.

She suddenly remembered herself and shook her head, as if shaking water out of her ears. “But how—how’d you even get into this party? I thought you were from Indiana,” Jacqui said as they arrived at the first floor with a ding. How did a small-town boy end up at an exclusive fashion event?

“I am.” He smiled as he ushered her out of the elevator. “I’ve got my methods,” he said with a crafty grin.

She raised an eyebrow, more curious than ever.

“C’mon, a guy’s gotta have a few secrets, right? All that matters is that I’m here now and you’re here.”

They stepped out of the elevator and into the main hall. “You’re everywhere, in fact,” he added with a laugh, gesturing to the enormous photographs of Jacqui plastered as far as the eye could see. “Anyway, I was thinking . . . maybe I could take you out? Tomorrow night?”

“Take me out—”

“On, like, a date?” he asked, his face hopeful. “Dinner. Movie. Awkward conversation. You know, that sort of thing.”

“A date . . . tomorrow,” Jacqui repeated. She shook her head, reality suddenly coming back to her in a rush. “I can’t.”

Pete exhaled, looking crestfallen. They stopped in an empty alcove where they could hear the murmur of the party in the adjacent room.

“It’s not what you think,” Jacqui said gently. “I like you. It’s just I’m leaving for Paris tomorrow.” *And I have a boyfriend now*, she thought but didn’t say.

“So how about when you get back?” he asked. “Tell me if I’m trying too hard,” he added, still managing a ghost of a smile.

She shook her head, more slowly this time. “No, it’s not a vacation—I’m going to Paris to model. I’m staying there.”

Now it was his turn to look shocked. “But what about NYU? Didn’t you need that down payment for tuition earlier this summer?”

“I’m not going to NYU,” she said softly. She felt confident about the decision, but it still sounded foreign to say it out loud.

“I see.” Pete frowned, biting his lip. He opened his mouth and then hesitated, shaking his head. “But at the duck pond, you said . . .” He trailed off.

“What?” Jacqui asked.

A white-jacketed server came out of the kitchen and looked curiously at the two of them. They waited until he was out of earshot to resume their conversation.

Pete sighed. “Look, I know I don’t know you at all, but I think you’re making a mistake. When you were talking about what you really want to do in life, you never mentioned anything about modeling. It was all about NYU, your future. Are you sure modeling is what you want to do?”

Jacqui felt her face burning with annoyance. This was just like the lecture Mara and Eliza had given her. “You *don’t* know me at all. I mean, seriously. You met me once, for like five minutes, and that was months ago,” she spat. She knew she was being totally unfair, but why couldn’t anyone trust her to make her own decisions anymore? Why was everyone treating her like a child or, worse, like some airhead model, when that clearly wasn’t what she was going to be?

“Jacqui—,” he began, his voice soothing. But she wasn’t going to be placated.

“It was great bumping into you again. Have a nice life.” And with that, Jacqui returned to the party, certain for the second time that summer that she would never see Pete Rockwood again.

kiss a prince, find a frog?

JACQUI WAS STILL ANNOYED WHEN she found Marcus, who was saving a spot for her on one of the modern white couches and keeping her champagne glass filled. She smiled when she saw him. Everything was going to work out splendidly—she was moving to the most romantic city in the world with her boyfriend, and she was going to be an international supermodel. The more people told her otherwise, the more she was sure of it.

Marcus smiled back as she sat down beside him on the couch. “Great news, love—we can get a ride to Paris on my friend’s private jet tonight. We’ll get there early, and I can show you the city before we have to get to work.”

“That’s fantastic,” she purred, snuggling next to him on the oversize white couch. The sooner the better. She couldn’t wait to get out of here.

“You’ll love Paris,” Marcus murmured, playing with her hair. She rested her head on his shoulder and closed her eyes. *Paris*, and they were leaving tonight. She was more than ready for her fantasy life to begin.

“The other girls are going to love you,” Marcus continued, nuzzling her neck.

Jacqui opened her eyes with a start. “What other girls?”

“Your roommates,” Marcus said casually, running a finger up her leg and tracing all the way up to her thigh.

She pulled away from his touch. Other girls? *Roommates*? Her Parisian dream was starting to look very crowded. “I thought we were going to be together in Paris, just you and me.”

“You and me, and Natalie and Francesca and Zenobia,” Marcus said casually, setting his glass down on the table. “Although I’ll be gone for a little while after next month. Midas and I are doing a film.”

“Excuse me?” Jacqui stared at him, her jaw agape. “Repeat that again. I know my English isn’t very good sometimes.”

“My flat’s one of the Chrysler Model apartments. I rent it out because I’m not there a lot,” he said matter-of-factly. “You’ll like the other girls, I promise. You won’t be lonely. I don’t know how long I’ll be gone, but you’re welcome to stay as long as you want.” His tone indicated that he thought he was being very generous.

“But I thought . . .” Her voice trailed off, and she began to feel the tears well up in her eyes.

“Oh, Jacqui, love.” Marcus sighed, turning to her and taking both her hands in his. “You had to know that this was only for the summer?” He tried to look shocked, but somehow Jacqui got the feeling he’d had this conversation before, with a lot of other girls.

Jacqui’s heart clenched in her chest. Another sucker punch. “But you said—to move with you to Paris,” she said dumbly, drawing her hands out of his.

“I said for you to move to Paris and be a model and that you could stay with me,” he corrected, carefully enunciating each word.

Jacqui shook her head, more disappointed in herself than in Marcus. She’d thought that he loved her and had let herself be swept right off her feet. But when she stopped to think about it, his words had always been so vaguely stated that there were no promises of the future, just empty remarks. Hungry for romance, *she* had filled in the rest.

“Darling. You know how much I adore you. And the two of us, it was great for business. Great for the shoot,” he drawled, stroking her cheek. “And look at you, you’re a star.” He gestured to the enormous photographs on the walls.

She looked at all the photographs, the intimate shots he’d captured—of her in his bed, wiping the sleep from her eyes, sitting wistfully by the window and looking out at the stars. Her eyes closed, waiting for his kiss. Marcus had made it look personal, like he knew her. But in reality he had only presented to the world a perfectly packaged image, sold as the real thing.

“Reality fashion” indeed. It was all scripted, all staged, as fake as her relationship had been. *Women look more beautiful when they’re in love*, he’d told her. But for him it was just the way the industry worked. A way to get a better picture. He had used her, and worst of all, she had let him.

“C’mon. If we leave now, we can wake up tomorrow on the Champs-Élysées.” Marcus stood, holding out his hand. He didn’t seem to notice anything was wrong.

“Marcus, are you ready?” Rupert Thorne appeared at his side. His eyes lit up immediately when he saw Jacqui. “Is this your friend?”

Jacqui felt like she might throw up. What an idiot she had been. She stood up from the couch, grabbed her drink, and threw it in Marcus’s face. The surrounding partygoers gasped. Who was making a scene at such a civilized event?

Marcus shrugged as he wiped his face with a jet-black napkin. “I’m sorry you feel that way.”

She turned on her heel and left the party, catching a glimpse of herself in the hall mirror. Her hair was put up in a complicated pouf, and she was wearing so much makeup it felt like her face was going to crack. Her dress was too short, and her heels hurt. She looked like a beautiful doll. Exactly what she’d never wanted to be.

This wasn’t her. The real Jacqui lived in jeans and flats because it was easier to run around after the kids in those clothes. The real Jacqui was hardworking and determined and never took the easy way out. Mara and Eliza were right. Pete Rockwood was right. She shook her head, unable to believe that a stranger had known her better than she had known herself.

best friends always know best

MARA TIPTOED THROUGH THE DARKENED foyer of the Finnemore mansion, making a beeline for the kitchen. She'd arrived at the *Vogue* party just as it was winding down and, after a disappointing lap of the party, realizing she'd missed Eliza and Jacqui, she'd come straight home. She'd missed dinner and was starving from the four-hour Jitney ride—which, she thought sadly, had all been for nothing. The house was dark and silent, so she was surprised to see a light on in the kitchen.

She found Eliza sitting by herself at the counter, wearing a bright red gown with puffed sleeves, a chicken sandwich in hand.

“Hey. What are you doing here?” she asked. Only Eliza would be casually eating a sandwich wearing a gown that looked like it had come straight off the runway.

“I could ask you the same thing,” Eliza said simply, wiping mayonnaise from her lips with a napkin. Chunks of chicken salad fell onto the floor around her, but she didn't seem to notice or care. “How was your dinner party?” she asked dryly.

“I didn't go. I went to the *Vogue* party instead, tried to find you.” Mara took a seat across from her friend.

“You did?” Eliza asked, her face lighting up.

“Why aren't you over there?” Mara asked. She reached for the bag of potato chips next to Eliza's plate, and Eliza moved it closer. Without even having to say anything, they both knew the fight between them was over.

“I have so much to tell you.” Eliza sighed.

“Me too.” Mara nodded. She raised an eyebrow. “Got any more of that chicken salad?”

“Left drawer.” Eliza smiled.

“Where's Jacqui?” Mara got up and moved over to the Sub-Zero.

“Right here.” Jacqui appeared in the doorway. She'd changed into a pair of sweats and an old NYU T-shirt. Of course, she looked as gorgeous as ever.

“What happened to you?” Eliza asked as Jacqui sat down at the counter and helped herself to Eliza's potato chips. “You left the party early. Everyone was looking for you for the photo op. They had to settle for pictures of me and Midas.” Eliza had been a little upset when no one could find Jacqui but had shaken it off and enjoyed being the center of attention for a change. All the editors at *Vogue* were falling over themselves to compliment her on the

clothes. She mentally reminded herself to send a flood of bouquets to their office tomorrow to thank them for the party.

“I broke up with Marcus.” Jacqui told them about what he’d said and her painful revelation. She sighed, pulling back her freshly washed black hair into a ponytail. “I should have listened to you guys.”

“Me too,” Mara admitted. She recounted the argument she’d had with David and how she’d left him high and dry. “We’re done. It’s over.”

“You were right about him,” both Mara and Jacqui said at the same time. They looked at each other and laughed.

“I’m such an idiot,” Jacqui said. For the whole cab ride home, she’d felt like her world was falling apart. But after a long, hot shower, she realized she was being overly dramatic. After all, what had she lost? As far as NYU knew, she would still be at orientation. And she’d had a really fun summer. She’d wanted a boyfriend, and she’d imagined one for herself. But as a summer fling, Marcus really had shown her a good time. As for her heart—it was bruised, but it wasn’t broken. She was okay with being single if that was what was in the cards for her right now. She knew now, though, that she didn’t want to settle for anything less than the perfect guy next time.

“Don’t be so hard on yourself, Jac,” Mara consoled. “I should have known too—I can’t believe what an awful snob David turned out to be,” she confessed. She told them what he’d said about her writing and her chances for publication, and both girls immediately became incensed.

“He’s an idiot,” Eliza declared, polishing off her sandwich and eating the chunks that had fallen on her plate. “You’ll publish that book without his dragon-lady mom. I know a great agent who can help you. Don’t worry. We’ll show him yet.”

“I think he’s intimidated by you,” Jacqui said, opening another large bag of chips. “You’re the one with all the clips from real magazines. He’s just the editor of a student paper.”

“Ryan was right. . . .” Mara sighed. “He told me David was a jerk, but I didn’t listen . . . to any of you.” She took a huge bite out of her sandwich. Love trauma always made her hungry.

Jacqui and Eliza just sat there, looking at her.

“Ryan?” Eliza said simply, raising an eyebrow.

“Oh. Yeah.” Mara blushed a little. “I didn’t tell you guys. We sort of got into an argument the other day. He said he didn’t think David was right for me.”

“*Chica.*” Jacqui shook her head. “Do you really think Ryan’s impartial?”

Mara couldn’t help but smile at Jacqui’s sagelike pronouncement. But could it be true? Could it be that Ryan had said those things about David because he was *jealous*?

“He was your first love.” Eliza sighed. “You just don’t get over those,” she added softly, staring off into the distance.

Mara looked at her critically. “You miss Jeremy,” she said. Of course Eliza did.

Before Eliza could say anything, the kitchen door swung open and Suzy entered. She was wearing a red silk bathrobe that was the same color as her hair, and her usual frizz was even wilder than usual, sticking up all over the place.

“Don’t mind me,” she said cheerfully. “Just getting a glass of water.” She pulled a Fiji bottle out of the fridge and turned to the girls. “Mara, Jacqui, I just want to say thank you so much for all your work this summer. The kids just adore you guys. I really can’t thank you enough.”

“You’re welcome,” Mara said. “They’re great kids.”

“I know.” Suzy sighed. “They really are.” She sat down at the counter next to the girls, and Eliza shuffled over a little to make room for her. It was starting to get a bit crowded. Suzy absent-mindedly reached for one of the potato chips and started munching on it noisily. “I realized how much of their childhoods I’m missing, so I’m going to cut back on my work hours a bit. The market needs me, but the kids need their mother more.”

“That’s wonderful, Suzy.” Jacqui smiled. She’d known it was only a matter of time before Suzy realized her mother-as-manager theory was not the way to raise children.

“It’s about time. I really shouldn’t outsource everything.” Suzy shrugged, putting the chips down and getting up from the counter, her moment of soul-searching apparently over.

“What else have you been outsourcing?” Eliza asked, suspicious.

“God, the house.” Suzy rubbed her eyes. “I mean, I just wanted a nice little beach house. We hired this really pushy decorating team. And I turn around and I get this . . . this . . .”

“Mega-mansion.”

“Castle.”

“Fortress.”

“Right.” Suzy nodded. She raised an eyebrow. “Do you guys really think I would commission a copy of the *Pietà* for my front lawn?” The girls laughed. Suzy smiled. “Good night, girls,” she called as she headed back upstairs, her red robe billowing out behind her.

“She’s really not so bad,” Jacqui declared.

“I guess not,” Eliza said grudgingly. She had still hoped that her parents would get back together, but as a stepmother, Suzy really wasn’t too bad.

“I love you guys,” Mara said suddenly. “I’m sorry about how I was acting this summer. I wish I’d gone to some of those parties. They sounded fun.”

“Me too,” Jacqui added, tears springing to her eyes. “I mean, I love you guys too. And the parties *were* fun,” she added, a playful gleam in her eyes.

“Well, I never think friends need to apologize,” Eliza said slyly. “It’s just understood.”

They hugged each other tightly, not wanting to let go for a long time. With good friends and potato chips, who needed boys?

jeremy is mr. right, just not right now

IT WAS ALMOST THREE IN the morning when Eliza drove up to the Greyson estate after her late-night snack with the girls, but there was a light shining in the kitchen. Apparently someone else couldn't sleep.

She knocked on the door and after a minute Jeremy appeared, wearing old jeans with holes in the knees and a worn-out white Hanes tee. His eyes were rimmed with red, and he looked exhausted. He leaned his head against the door frame so that their faces were only five inches apart but separated by the screen. "What are you doing here?" he asked quietly, as if not wanting to disturb the silence of the night.

"Can I come in?" Eliza asked in a low whisper.

Jeremy stepped wordlessly aside, and she followed him into the living room. There were several couches in the room, still covered in plastic. He'd picked out the Mies van der Rohe collection—black leather modern couches that she had once admired in a catalog. He took a seat in an Eames lounge chair and she sat on the plastic of the couch across from him, almost sliding off the slippery covering.

"Why haven't you unpacked?" she asked, unable to think of anything to say but the obvious. "How do you live like this?"

"I'm renting it out," he said. "You're right—it's too big for a bachelor pad."

"Jer—"

"Eliza, I don't want to hear it," he said abruptly. "I don't even know what you're doing here."

Eliza nodded, understanding why he was still upset. She ran her fingers through her hair, and took a deep breath. "It was wrong of me to accept that ring," she said. "I just didn't let the implications sink in at the time. Because I was afraid of what it meant. And I was afraid that if I didn't, I would lose you."

He sat there, stony-faced, for a long time. The crickets sang outside, and moonlight poured in through the window. He sighed. "Part of it is my fault too. I guess I got caught up in it. That ring was the first thing I bought with the money from the Greyson estate. I just thought—here it is. Here's my chance to make Eliza happy." He pulled at the plastic covering the arm of his chair. "And I knew it was too soon—which is why I didn't say anything, I just put it on your finger. Because if you went along with it, I thought maybe . . ."

"Oh, Jer . . ."

“I know.” He smiled ruefully.

“And here I thought I was the one with all the doubts.”

“Nah. It’s not like I’ve got it all figured out.”

“Thank *God*.” She sighed heavily, smiling as she got up to sit on his lap. He cradled her in his arms and she tucked her head underneath his chin. He smelled warm and woodsy. She relaxed in his arms. Who needed to meet or date any other boys when you’d found your one true love already? So what if they met so young? It only meant they could grow up together. Everyone should be so lucky.

He buried his nose in her hair and inhaled deeply, as if trying to catch up on everything he’d been missing.

She pulled her head out of the crook of his neck so she could look at him. “I wanted you to know, I’m going to Princeton in the fall. There’s so much I want to learn and do. . . .” His warm brown eyes were locked on hers. He looked surprised but not unhappy. “And I hope we can do it together. But the question is, can you wait?” she asked quietly. She suddenly felt like a little girl, curled up on his lap, waiting helplessly for his answer. “Will you wait for me?”

“I’ll wait forever if I have to,” Jeremy promised, grabbing her hand and kissing it right where her ring would have sat. His answer was everything she’d wanted all along—a promise of forever, not a diamond ring. Jeremy cupped her face in his hands and they leaned in for a long, intense kiss. Eliza felt every part of her relax. This was right. This was home.

When they finally pulled apart, she smiled up at him wickedly. “So, um, whatever happened to that ring?”

the more things change, the more they stay the same

THERE WAS A MOVING TRUCK parked in front of the Perry manor when Mara drove up to it the next morning. Movers were loading cardboard boxes and crates into the truck. Several oversized objects stuck out on the driveway—Ryan’s surfboards, Anna’s Marie Antoinette vanity.

Mara parked the Lexus and walked up to the front door, where she found Ryan directing the men on how to move the art installations.

She came up behind him. “You’re leaving?” she asked bluntly.

He looked up, surprised to find her standing there. “My dad sold the house. They want to buy a summer place in Europe. Anna loves London, and she says she’s tired of the Hamptons.” He stuck his hands in his pockets. “I was lucky to even have the summer here, I guess.”

“What a shame,” Mara couldn’t help saying. She looked up at Creek Head Manor, feeling as if she’d just lost a loved one. “We had a lot of good times in that house.”

He shrugged, as if it didn’t matter to him either way. “So what brings you here, Mara?” he asked, a little sharply.

She held her breath. She hadn’t realized until she saw him how nervous she was. “I broke up with David,” she said simply, and looked at him expectantly.

Ryan looked her square in the eyes and nodded. Then he turned and started to pack up the open cardboard box in the yard beside him.

Her heart dropped. Was that all? “Oh. Well. I just thought you should know,” she said, swallowing the hurt that was building up in her throat. She turned her back and started walking toward the car. She got inside and shut the door, tears starting to well up in her eyes.

The hot sun poured through the windshield and Mara blinked, trying to see straight. She fumbled in her purse for the keys. Why had she even come over here? What did she think was going to happen?

There was a rap on the window. She looked up to see Ryan leaning on the car. She pressed the lever and the glass rolled down.

He exhaled loudly. “Mara. I don’t know what you’re thinking, showing up here and telling me that. What do you want from me?”

“I think—I want *you*,” Mara said softly.

He wrinkled his forehead and shook his head sadly. “That day on the beach—I wanted you to say just that, but you didn’t. And honestly . . . every summer we get back together and then you break up with me at the end of it. I mean, what’s the point anymore?” His face looked pained, and she couldn’t tell if he was more angry or upset.

She wiped the tears with the back of her hand and nodded vigorously. “Okay.” She got it. He wasn’t going to wait around for her anymore. Every year it was the same story. Ryan, standing there with his heart wide open, only to have her slam it shut.

He sighed deeply. “Listen, I need a change. I’ve been doing a lot of thinking lately, and I’m going to take a semester, maybe a year, off from Dartmouth and go to London with my family. I want to travel around Europe for a while. I’m not going to be around.”

She blew her nose with a tissue she found in the glove compartment. “I’ll see you, Ryan. Take care, okay?” She stuck the keys in the ignition.

But before she could start the engine, he opened the car door and got into the passenger seat. He turned to look at her, studying her face intently. He let out a long breath. “I’m leaving, but I had this stupid fantasy that maybe you’d want to join me,” he said, the corners of his mouth turning up slightly.

Mara blinked. Bum around Europe? All of her unrealized dreams for the summer came back to her in a rush: Gondola rides in Venice. Eating chocolate croissants at sunrise on a bench on the Seine. Touring the winding streets of London in a red double-decker bus. But take a year off from Columbia? She’d always followed the straight and narrow path, had never been the type of girl to derail her long-term plans just because a guy had asked her to.

She suddenly remembered that poem, the one they made you read at graduation, about the road not taken. This wasn’t just any guy, and this wasn’t just any offer. Ryan Perry was standing there, giving her another chance. Giving *them* another chance.

“I’ll do it,” she told him.

“You will?” His face broke into a huge, innocent grin. He looked just as handsome as the day they had met, when he had stepped out of his Aston Martin onto the sidewalk, barefoot. Ryan would always be a free spirit. She would have to learn how to let go a little bit, take his example.

He leaned across the gearshift and pulled her close. “I love you,” she whispered softly.

“I love you too.”

And then Mara laughed. After a summer’s worth of drama, she was finally going to get to see Europe. This time, with the right guy.

another summer is gone, but autumn opens new doors. . . .

“EVERYONE READY?” ELIZA CALLED FROM her convertible that afternoon as she beeped the horn loudly.

Mara ran out of the front doors, dragging her luggage, Jacqui right behind. The kids gathered around them. Mara gave them all kisses and hugs.

“Who are you?” Wyatt asked Jacqui.

Jacqui laughed and ruffled his hair. She’d heard that line before.

They piled into Eliza’s convertible. They were all driving back to the city together. Eliza was spending a weekend at home with her mom before heading off to Princeton. Mara had to wrap up a few things at Columbia for her year off before she jetted off to Europe with Ryan, and they were dropping Jacqui off at NYU orientation.

Eliza took them slowly on the two-lane highway, and they drove through the sleepy hamlets. The sun was shining brightly on the calm ocean, and the surrounding countryside was green and vibrant.

“Here,” Jacqui said, leaning forward from the backseat and plopping a fat envelope on Mara’s lap.

“What’s this?” Mara asked, opening the flap and finding a neat stack of hundred-dollar bills.

“My share of the au pair salary. It’s yours. I didn’t earn it—you did.”

“I can’t take this!” Mara protested, trying to give it back.

“Yes, you can.” Jacqui nodded fiercely.

“But what about . . . Don’t you need the money?”

“I did that Japanese commercial, remember? With the payment and residuals, I made enough for tuition,” Jacqui said proudly.

“Are you sure?”

“*Chica*, I’m sure. Believe me, the check I got, it’s got a lot more zeros than what’s in that envelope.”

Mara turned around and gave Jacqui a close hug. “Thank you.”

Jacqui nodded. "I'm not giving up on modeling completely. Christy Turlington graduated from NYU, you know."

Mara shook her head and smiled.

* * *

The drive back into the city was quick, Eliza speeding around all the other cars with a dainty honk and a giggle. They made it to Washington Square Park by midafternoon, and Eliza parked the car by the curb in front of a building with a big purple NYU flag on the front steps. Jacqui looked out the window and took in the scene, near bursting with happiness. There were so many eager eighteen-year-olds, most with their parents in tow, carrying their purple NYU orientation packets and wearing their NYU Class of '11 T-shirts. Sure, they looked a bit like wide-eyed tourists, but she was one of them. And even if her parents couldn't come from Brazil to help her get settled in, she had two people who loved her to see her off, right here in this very car.

As her eyes scanned the crowd of bobbing heads, she suddenly recognized a very familiar head of blond hair. "Pete!" she yelled excitedly, not stopping to think for a second.

Mara and Eliza exchanged smirks in the rearview mirror.

"Is this the famous Pete Rockwood from Indiana?" Mara asked.

"Pete Rockwood? That sounds familiar. . . . Wait a minute—is this the guy who called the store from his dentist's office?" Eliza pushed her sunglasses up on her head to get a better look at him. "Talk about regulation hottie—this one is off the charts!"

But Jacqui was getting out of the car so fast she couldn't hear them. She didn't even bother to open the door, instead leaping over the side of the convertible. She ran up to Pete, who was standing under the grand arch in Washington Square Park, surrounded by cardboard boxes and suitcases.

"What are you doing here?" she said breathlessly as she approached him, not pausing for the usual civilities.

He put down one of the suitcases he was carrying, looking the slightest bit embarrassed. "I'm a freshman here, actually," he said sheepishly. "Remember when we met? I was in New York because I was wait-listed and had a follow-up interview. I was too embarrassed to admit I hadn't gotten in."

Jacqui nodded. That sounded familiar. When she was deferred for a year, she'd done the exact same thing.

"And besides, I didn't want you to think I was just telling you to go to NYU because *I* would be here." He shrugged. "Although that might have been part of it," he added with a small smile.

"So it's just fate." Jacqui nodded, smiling.

"Just fate," Pete agreed. "But what about you? Shouldn't you be in Paris?"

She shrugged. “Paris will always be there. I’ll see it some other time. Isn’t that what spring break is for?” She raised an eyebrow and flipped her dark locks over her shoulder.

Pete grinned at her, his dimples forming irresistibly in either cheek. “So, uh . . . need some help moving into your dorm? If it’s not too forward of me to see your room on our first date,” he added quickly. His shy but eager smile said everything, and Jacqui felt that familiar tingle up her spine.

“You bet.” She grinned right back. “But just a second—I’ve got to say goodbye to my girls.”

Jacqui ran back to the car, her glossy black hair flowing behind her, grinning widely, her face aglow. The three girls hugged one last time.

“So you’re not going to be in New York this year,” Eliza said sadly to Mara.

“Neither are you,” Jacqui reminded Eliza.

“Princeton isn’t too far away,” Eliza assured her. “I’ll come visit.”

“And I’ll write long e-mails, I promise,” Mara said. “And you can always read my blog,” she added with a grin.

After one last hug Eliza pulled the car away from the curb. She and Mara waved to Jacqui and Pete until they were mere specks in the distance, two figures standing hopefully beside each other underneath the looming arch of Washington Square Park.

Eliza steered the car uptown, the late-afternoon light streaming through the windshield. Another summer was over, and they would all be separated once again. But good friends were never too far away in spirit.

Mara turned on the car radio. They sang along to the Natasha Bedingfield song, the one they knew all the words to, and felt a little better.

“The rest is still unwritten. . . .”

www.blogspot/eurogirl1

Europe is amazing! We got to Italy yesterday, first stop Venice, and everything is even more beautiful than I had imagined. R. and I are having too much fun. This afternoon we went on a gondola ride, where the gondolier was actually wearing a red-and-white-striped shirt and a silly black hat. R. joined in the singing, of course, which was hilarious, if not melodic. I'm currently typing from a Venetian Internet café. Did you know they have Internet here now? I had wondered how they'd get the wires through those canals, but apparently my notions are silly and outdated. Italy is just like home, except the pizza is better.

E. is having a blast at Princeton. She's already in the best eating club and is hard at work on her next collection—preppie basics! Of course. Guess she's taking inspiration from her surroundings. She and J. are going strong and have already booked the church for 2012. Here's hoping she designs the bridesmaids' gowns.

J. is dating P. at NYU and modeling on the side. They're planning to meet us in Paris for spring break so J. can go to some look-sees (and eat some escargot, obv.). She's been doing a lot of commercial work since the September *Vogue* came out—but, she assures me, only as much as doesn't interfere with her classes.

And in really exciting news, my blog is going to become a book! It sold to a big publishing house that wants to publish next summer. I'm so excited I don't know what to do with myself. My first novel! I even decided on a title yesterday: *The Au Pairs*. I want the cover to have three girls in bikinis. I know, I know. No sign of the children anywhere. But really—the book is more about the friendships I found there than about the kids or the partying. And, of course, the great guy who made every summer special.

**Till next time,
Eurogirl1**

PS—And no, I still don't have a webcam!

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Beach Lane: Skinny-dipping

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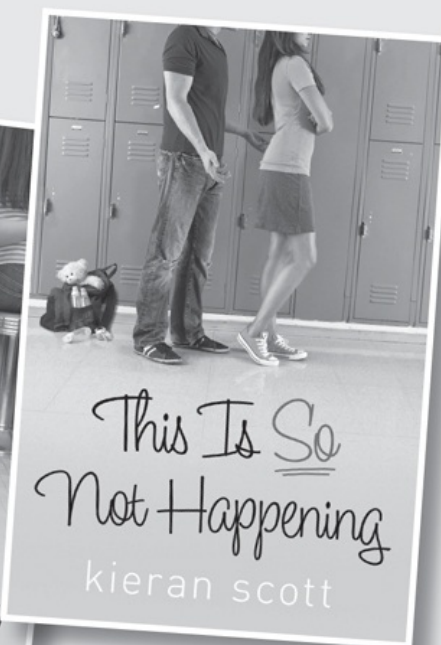
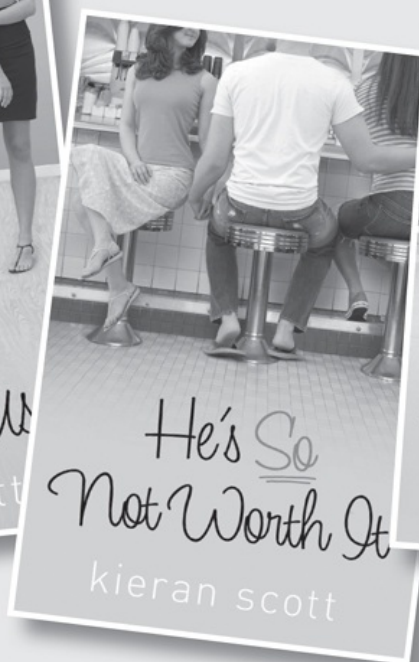
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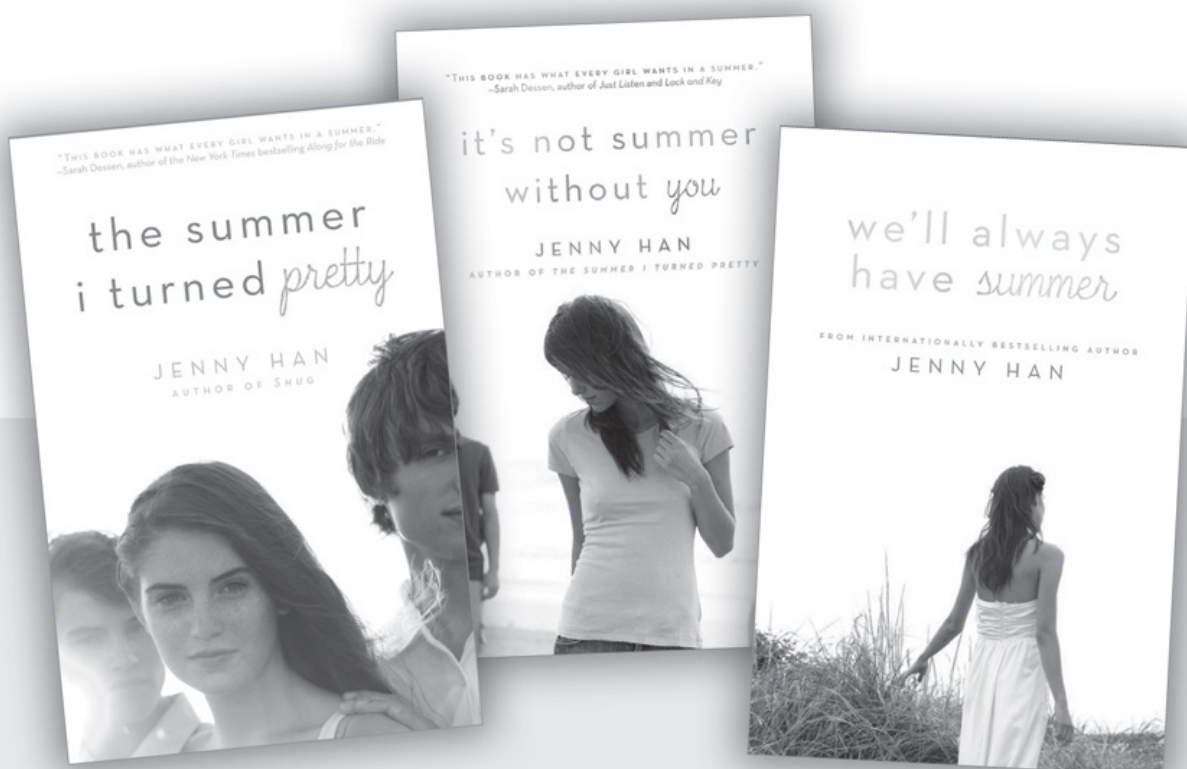
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Melissa de la Cruz is the *New York Times* bestselling author of several books, including the *Ashleys* series, the *Blue Bloods* series, and *Angels on Sunset Boulevard*. She has worked as a fashion and beauty editor and has written for many publications, including the *New York Times*, *Marie Claire*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Glamour*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Allure*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *McSweeney's*, *Teen Vogue*, *CosmoGirl!*, and *Seventeen*. She has also appeared as an expert on fashion, trends, and fame for CNN, E!, and FoxNews. She lives in Los Angeles, California, with her husband and daughter.

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First **SIMON & SCHUSTER BFR** paperback edition May 2013

The Library of Congress has catalogued the hardcover edition as follows:

De la Cruz, Melissa, 1971–

Skinny-dipping / by Melissa de la Cruz.

p. cm.

Summary: When Eliza lands an internship at a club, Mara, Eliza, and Jacqui are annoyed until they learn that the new au pair, Laurent, is gorgeous, French, and male, which is only one of the complications their friendship will have to endure during their summer in the Hamptons.

ISBN 978-1-4169-0382-6 (hc)

[1. Au pairs—Fiction. 2. Wealth—Fiction. 3. Friendship—Fiction. 4. Hamptons (N.Y.)—Fiction.] I. Title

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This **SIMON & SCHUSTER** BFR paperback edition June 2013

The Library of Congress has cataloged the hardcover edition as follows:

De la Cruz, Melissa.

Sun-kissed / Melissa de la Cruz.

p. cm.

Summary: Graduated from high school and back for a third summer in the Hamptons, Mara, Eliza, and Jacqui find that life is not as carefree as they had hoped when boyfriends, jobs, and school problems intrude.

ISBN 978-1-4169-1746-5 (hc)

[1. Au pairs—Fiction. 2. Wealth—Fiction. 3. Friendship—Fiction. 4. Hamptons (N.Y.)—Fiction.]

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Crazy hot / by Melissa de la Cruz

p. cm.

Summary: Eliza, Jaqui, and Mara are just beginning their careers, but find themselves all together in the Hamptons once again since Eliza's new stepmother needs a nanny.

ISBN 978-1-4169-3961-0 (hc)

[1. Au pairs—Fiction. 2. Wealth—Fiction. 3. Friendship—Fiction. 4. Dating (Social customs)—Fiction. 5. Hamptons (N.Y.)—Fiction. 6. New York (State)—Fiction.] I. Title.

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