

SHE
GETS
THE
GIRL

ALSO BY RACHAEL LIPPINCOTT

The Lucky List

ALSO COWRITTEN BY RACHAEL LIPPINCOTT

Five Feet Apart

All This Time



SHE GETS THE GIRL

Rachael Lippincott and Alyson Derrick

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This one's for us
—R. L. & A. D.

SHE
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CHAPTER 1

ALEX

Every single person in this room is looking at Natalie Ramirez.

The hipster dude clutching an IPA like it's his firstborn son. The girl wearing a faded Nirvana shirt that *screams* Urban Outfitters. Brendan, the bartender, too distracted to realize he's made not one but *two* rumless rum and Cokes. All of them have their eyes glued to the stage.

I finish wiping up a few water rings clinging to the counter and throw my white bar towel over my shoulder, craning my neck around the sea of people to get a better view.

The stage lights cast an odd purplish hue over everything. Her face is outlined in shades of lilac and violet, and her long black hair shines a deep burgundy. I watch as her hands move up and down the neck of the guitar without so much as a second glance, every fret memorized, the feel of the strings ingrained in her fingertips.

Because while all eyes are on her, Natalie Ramirez is only looking at me.

She gives me a small, secret smile. The same one that gave me butterflies five whole months ago, when her band first performed at Tilted Rabbit.

It was the best performance I've seen in the three years I've worked here. Being a small local venue, we've had our fair share of Alanis Morissette wannabes and weekend warrior cover bands. There was a guy just last week who tried to go full Neutral Milk Hotel and play a saw for an hour straight, the sound so screeching that everyone except my coworkers and his girlfriend left the building.

To be honest, between the iffy music, the weird hours, and the less-than-ideal pay, the turnover rate here is pretty high. I'd have quit ages ago, but . . . my mom needs money for rent. Plus, I do too, now that I'm leaving for college.

And I guess it's all right. Because if I had quit, I wouldn't have been there that night five months ago, and I wouldn't be here right now, catching Natalie Ramirez's gaze from behind the bar.

My stomach sinks as I realize this is the last time I'll hear her play for a while, and even though I try to push that feeling away, it lingers. It sticks around through saying a final farewell to the ragtag crew of coworkers that let me study at the bar on school nights, through waiting for Natalie to get done with her celebratory drinks backstage before her band goes

on their first-ever tour next week, and through the two of us veering off to spend my last night here at home exactly how I want to spend it.

With her.

We're barely through the door of her cramped Manayunk apartment before she's kissing me, her lips tasting like the cheese pizza and warm beer she has after every show.

It's a blur of kicked-off Converse shoes and hands sliding up my waist as she pulls off my black T-shirt, the two of us stumbling across the space she escaped to after graduating last year from Central High, the public school just across the city from mine.

This place has pretty much been my escape all summer too, so I lead us effortlessly across the worn wooden floor into her room, dodging her bandmates' instruments and sheet music and scattered shoes. Her bedsprings squeak as we tumble back onto her messy sheets, the door clicking shut behind us.

The moment is so alive, so perfect, but that feeling I had earlier still sits heavy on my chest. It's impossible to not think about the bus that will whisk me away to college in the morning. The prickling nervousness I feel over leaving the place where I've lived my whole life. My mom, on the other side of the city, probably half a handle of tequila deep after spending the afternoon guiltling me over "leaving her" just like Dad left us.

But, most importantly, I want to finally have the conversation

I've been avoiding. The conversation about how I want to make this work long distance.

I zero in on the feeling of Natalie's skin under my fingertips, her body pressed up against mine, working up the courage to pull away, to *say something*, when I feel her soft whisper against my lips.

"I love you."

I pull her closer, so wrapped up in her that I hardly register what she just said. So wrapped up in what I'm struggling to say that I almost say it back.

More than almost. My mouth forms around the words. "I lo—"

Wait.

My eyes fly open and my heart hammers in my chest as I jerk away, those three words bringing with them a flood of moments *much* different from this one.

Thrown plates and screaming. My dad stooping down to say "I love you" before he got in the car and drove away, into a new life.

A life without me. Never to be seen or heard from again.

I can't possibly say them to her now. Not like this. Not when *I'm* the one leaving.

I see the question in her face illuminated in the glow of the yellow streetlight outside her window, so I quickly disguise my sudden movement by reaching out to run my fingertips along the black strap of her bra.

“I, uh. I loved that new song you guys played tonight,” I whisper, trying my best to cover the words that almost came out of my mouth. I kiss her again, harder now, the kind of kiss that usually ends any conversation. But what she said lingers in the air around us like a thick fog.

“Alex,” she says, pulling her lips off mine. She studies my face, her eyes searching for something.

“Yeah?” I say, avoiding her gaze as I look down at her fingers laced with mine, the chipped black paint on her nails.

“Sometimes . . .” She lets out a long sigh. “Sometimes I wonder what exactly this *is* to you.”

I lean back and squint at her, finally meeting her gaze. “What do you mean?”

“I mean my band is going on tour. You’re leaving tomorrow for college. You’re going to be all the way in *Pittsburgh*,” she says as she sits back and pulls her black hair into a bun, a sign the moment is slipping away. *Fast.*

There’s a long pause. I can tell she’s still searching. Still waiting for me to say the words she wants me to say. “It’s our last night, and I want to know what *we* are. That I mean something to you. That this is going to work long distance, and you won’t just ghost me and see other people. That I’m not just . . .”

Yes. “Natalie.” I scooch closer to her. “I wanted to talk to you about that. I—”

My phone vibrates loudly on the white sheets beneath us,

the screen lighting up to show a text from Megan Baker, littered with winky face emojis, and a message reading: **HMU if ur ever back in the city!**

Natalie squeezes her eyes shut, angry now, like she's found the answer, but it's one she didn't want. "Megan Baker? That girl that plays the triangle in that Fleetwood Mac cover band? For real, Alex?"

"Natalie," I say as I reach out for her. "Come on. It's not—"

"No," she says as she pushes my hands away and stands up, her jaw locking. I notice her hazel eyes are glistening, tears threatening to spill out of the corners. "This is so . . . typical. This is so *fucking* typical. I try to get close and you pull this. We've been seeing each other for *five* months, and I haven't been able to trust you for a single one of them."

"Natalie. Come *on*. We've been over this. I went on, like, *three* dates. Four, max. I thought things were ruined between us. I thought we were done." I swing my legs over the bed and stand, all of this feeling *very* familiar, in *exactly* the way I didn't want tonight to go. "And only one was with Megan. She means *nothing* to me."

"How can I trust you in Pittsburgh, when you're getting texts like this when we're in the *same city*?" she asks, glowering up at me.

"Texts like *what*?" I snort, and turn the phone to face her. "She wished me safe travels and *all* I said was thanks. Then she's the one that—"

“Just *admit* it, Alex. It’s impossible for you to have a conversation without flirting. I saw you tonight talking to that girl at the bar during my set. It’s why you said no when I asked you to change your plans and come on tour with us last month. Why you avoided every conversation about what happens when you leave. You would rather flirt around in Pittsburgh than actually have a *real* connection.” She shakes her head, her voice breaking as she looks away, out the window. “You’ve never chosen me. Never really been all the way in.”

A familiar wave of guilt washes over me. For those dates I went on at the very beginning, and the times I’ve maybe crossed the line between talking and flirting during my shifts at Tilted Rabbit.

But I *am* in. I didn’t date anyone like this all through high school. I kept it casual with everyone because, well . . . I never wanted them to know the truth. The part of me I keep hidden. A wrecked home life and a mom too drunk off her ass to even take care of herself, let alone me.

But Natalie’s different.

She’s been different since she tried to surprise me with takeout after our third date and found my mom passed out on our porch. I ghosted her for two whole weeks out of embarrassment, going on other dates, sure she would never want to stick around after that, but . . . she didn’t give up. She’s the only person to get close enough to know the truth and stick by me anyway, baggage and all.

Now, though, her voice is cold when she talks next. Distant. “You may have a phone filled with numbers, but at the end of the day, without me, you have no one. You’re *alone*.”

I’m taken aback. We’ve had fights before, but I’ve never seen her quite like this. “*Alone?* That’s ridiculous.”

“Is it? Friends. Relationships. You push *everyone* away when they get too close. It’s a miracle *I’m* still here! We’ve been together for *five* months and I haven’t met *any* of your friends. Just your past hookups. Because that’s all you have, Alex. *You don’t have any friends.*” She turns her head back to face me. “I’m here, and I care about you. I’ve supported you through all the shit with your mom, when no one else *ever* would. I mean, you almost said ‘I love you too,’ Alex. I know you did,” she says. “But you stopped yourself. *Why?*”

“I . . . I don’t know. I just . . .”

I’m stumbling over words. I don’t know how to say *because it was more than I was expecting*.

“All right, Alex,” she says, crossing her arms over her chest. “I’ll give you another chance. Actually tell me how you feel. Tell me you love me too.”

She has me cornered, and she knows it. *Why* is she doing this? “Natalie, look, I . . .”

My voice trails off into silence.

“Wow.” Natalie lets out a huff of air as she shakes her head. “Sometimes I think you really might end up just like your mom.”

I stand there, stunned. She, more than anyone, knows that was a low blow. How nothing in this world scares me more than that.

I try to steady myself as the room starts to feel smaller and smaller, my chest tight when I try to take a breath as memories swim to the surface. My parents screaming at each other from across the house. The sound of glass shattering into a million pieces. The back bumper of my dad's car fading into the distance.

And for the first time in five whole months, I feel like running away, just like I always have.

I grab my T-shirt and angrily pull it back on. "You think you know *everything*, huh? You want me to tell you how I feel, Natalie?" I say, the fear and rage boiling to the surface. "I feel like you don't know shit about me."

"And whose fault is that?"

We stare at each other for a long moment, her chest heaving, the sharp lines of her collarbones intensifying.

"Get out," she says finally, her voice low.

I don't even fight it. "*Gladly*," I say, plastering a smirk on my face, like I don't care. It feels familiar, and I hate it.

I push past her out the bedroom door and grab my duffel bag off the floor, pulling it onto my shoulder as I angrily jam my feet into my shoes. The heel folds in and gets caught under my foot, so I jimmy my ankle around, twisting it back into place while I yank open the apartment door.

I give her one last glare as I grab the handle of my suitcase, that small smile she gave me onstage tonight long gone, those butterflies from five months ago and every time I see her play certifiably crushed. Then, with all the might I can muster and enough force to piss off old Mrs. Hampshire two apartments down, I slam the door behind me.

My head spins as I jog down the uneven steps, my suitcase clunking noisily behind me. I push through the door and out onto the street, trying to *calm down*, but the warm late-August air only makes me angrier.

It's the middle of the night and the temperature still hasn't dropped.

I storm down the block and around the corner, almost running smack into a group of barhoppers as I turn onto Main Street, a blur of faces and shapes and colors. I look to the side and slow down as I catch sight of the small coffee shop we went to on our first date, where we talked about her band, the Cereal Killers, and my upcoming graduation, and our favorite places in the city.

Adjacent to the coffee shop is the diner where we would hang out every Saturday in the corner booth, stealing kisses between bites of pancakes bigger than our heads.

We'd have been there tomorrow morning before I left, but now . . .

I duck my head and look away, the anger giving way to

another feeling. *Loss*. For those Saturdays at the diner, for the night we could have had, and for the girl who stuck around even though she knew the worst parts of me. Even if she just threw them all in my face.

My chest is heaving by the time I get to the SEPTA station. I collapse onto a bench and pull out my phone. The screen lights up to show it's only . . . 1:00 a.m.

It's one o'clock in the morning? Shit. My bus isn't until eight.

And . . . I can't go home. I can't spend one more night scraping my mom off the floor while she berates me for leaving. I'm afraid I'll never leave if I go back.

So, where the hell am I going to—

My eyes land on the text from Megan.

It's . . . worth a shot. She's about to be a sophomore at Temple, and her new dorm is pretty close to the bus station.

I tap on the notification and then the call button, holding my breath as it rings.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Megan," I say, a wave of relief washing over me when she picks up. "Can I come over?"

"*Oh*," she says, her voice changing ever so slightly. "I'd love it if you . . . *came* over."

I cringe. Jesus. No wonder Natalie was mad I went on a date with her.

“I mean, I, uh,” I say as I shift the phone to my other ear. “I was just planning to, like . . . sleep since my bus isn’t until eight tomorrow, but . . .”

But . . . *what have I got to lose?* Shit just hit the fan with Natalie. And Megan’s clearly not looking for anything serious. Would it really be so bad to forget everything, just for a night?

“*Oh,*” she says, jumping in before I have a chance to back-track. “You could, but, uh . . . my roommate is sick.”

“Julie?” I frown. “I just saw her at Natalie’s concert tonight. She was—”

“Yeah, I think . . . I think she must have come down with something after,” she says. Her voice is muffled as she pretends to call out to her roommate, “What’s that, Julie? You’re throwing up? I’ll be right there to help!”

Wow is this girl bad at lying.

“Alex! I think I’ve got to go,” she says in an attempt to wrap up her one-woman show. “Julie just started—”

I hang up before she can finish, saving her from having to keep up the act for even a second longer.

Sighing, I pull open my contact list, scrolling through it as I search for someone else to call. The *As* alone are about a mile long. Natalie may have been right about Megan, but that doesn’t mean there aren’t a million other people I know and can stay with.

My eyes glaze over as I pause on individual names: Melissa, Ben, Mike. Coworkers that never became more than

acquaintances. People I've met working behind the bar or at school, each text chain I try to start left empty as I see how I just . . . lost touch with them, months passing since the last text as I ignored their questions or their offers to hang out, so busy with schoolwork and taking care of my mom I didn't have time for anything else.

But I also realize most of them are . . . hookups. Or, I guess, potential hookups, just like Natalie said. A lot of them. Girls I flirted with just to see what would happen, knowing I could never commit to more than just this moment. Knowing I could never have more than the temporary.

Some don't even have names.

Brown hair, Starbucks.

Freckles, pizza place.

There are *ten* like that. Maybe more. Just some generic description of a girl followed by where I'd met her.

I keep scrolling, until the screen bounces as I hit the bottom of the list. There's no one I can call at 1:00 a.m. Nowhere I can go except to the Greyhound station to sit and wait for seven hours for the bus to come.

You're alone. Natalie's face pops into my head, the pointed look in her eyes clouding my vision.

But, I mean, I had my mom to worry about. And I was *leaving*. For Pittsburgh. I was never going to see most of these people again. Of course I let the ties go. The casual acquaintances, the hookups, the friends I never really talked to outside

of school, keeping my personal life tucked away in a little box.

The only person I really held on to was her. Until tonight.

I feel a rush of hot air as the train screeches noisily to a stop in front of me. Numbly, I stumble inside and slide onto one of the blue-carpeted seats. I rest my arms on my knees and squeeze my eyes shut as I rub my face, the words circling around and around in my head, the truth in them catching me off guard.

She was right. She saw me better than I saw myself.

She said “I love you” and I *stopped* myself from saying it back to her. She asked me to say *one* thing about how much she meant to me, and I couldn’t.

I couldn’t just tell her how Saturday mornings with her are the highlight of my week. How her lyrics speak to me like no other song has before, and watching her perform makes me feel . . . light, how for just those few moments, nothing is weighing down on me. I couldn’t tell her how grateful I’ve been these past few months having someone to support me through all the shit with my mom.

I’m not sure I’d be able to get on the bus tomorrow morning if it weren’t for her help.

But I didn’t say that. I didn’t say anything. I messed it all up because she asked for the moon, and I couldn’t give it to her yet.

She’s the first person I don’t want to say goodbye to, and here I am running away.

What is *wrong* with me?

I swallow hard on a lump forming in my throat and rest my head up against the window, watching Philadelphia whiz by on the other side of the glass, knowing I need to make a change.

I'm not sure how I'm going to fix this, but I've got all the way to Pittsburgh to figure it out.



CHAPTER 2

MOLLY

Oof.

I wake up struggling for breath as my ancient, one-hundred-pound Lab hurls himself onto my bed, his big yellow paw jabbing me right in the kidney.

“Leonard, get down!” I try to lower my voice a few octaves, but it’s no use. He only ever listens to my dad. For the next five minutes he attacks me with kisses and steps on every single one of my organs, until he finally hops down, satisfied with his work.

I will not miss waking up to *that*.

Well, at least not too much.

As I wipe the slobber off my face, I feel around on my side table for my phone, but my hand lands on the pile of five freshly labeled binders I finished preparing last night, ready for the upcoming school year. Nothing quite compares to a peaceful night, just me and my label maker.

I reach past them to tug my phone off the charging cord. And then for the ten thousandth time this summer, I search for Cora Myers's Twitter profile, careful not to accidentally tap the follow button.

I fell asleep at nine thirty yesterday just like I always do, so I missed her tweet from late last night: *Tomorrow I officially become a panther! #hail2pitt.*

A wave of nausea rolls over me, but a grin breaks out across my face too as I press the phone against my chest.

Today.

It's been three months since we graduated from high school.

Eighty-seven days since I've seen her.

Just to be clear. I am not *following* her to college. About half my high school gets funneled into Pitt. We both just happen to be part of that half.

And . . . if you ask me, it feels an awful lot like fate. Like the universe is *finally* doing me a solid after such a crappy four years.

I've really tried to keep my mind occupied with other things this summer, but when you meet a girl like Cora Myers, it becomes impossible to think about anything else.

Well, maybe "meet" is the wrong word, but I haven't been able to get her out of my head since she walked into ninth-grade homeroom wearing a vintage red velvet coat and a pair of oversize yellow combat boots that didn't match at all.

But I liked them anyway.

And I wasn't the only one.

Her energy was magnetic. People naturally gravitated toward her at the beginning of every class, in the hallways, and after school, but the attention never seemed to go to her head. She was never mean, never exclusive, and she was always exactly herself no matter who was around. It seemed like she could talk to anyone about anything.

Not that she ever talked to *me*, but you can hear a lot from two desks over.

It's not that I didn't *want* to talk to her. I'm just not good at opening myself up to people. I'm not good at making friends. When you spend as much time as I have worrying about what to say and how to say it and it still comes out wrong, it just becomes easier to not say anything at all.

This year, though, I don't have to be quiet Molly Parker with the crippling social anxiety. Things can be different at Pitt.

This is college. It's a fresh start, a chance to rewrite myself. People are always saying that things get better in college, and I have to believe that. This can't be all there is.

It *has* to get better.

I don't think I can make it through another four years of—
Crash.

A big box of something hits the kitchen tile downstairs, the sound carrying up through my floorboards.

Mom.

Even though I told her a million times last night that everything I need is already in the car, I just *know* she's packing more crap for me to take. If I don't get down there right now, she's going to have the entire house packed into the back of her SUV.

I take a deep breath before hopping out of bed and taking the steps two at a time. As I turn the corner, I find my mom flying around the kitchen, opening and closing every drawer and door within her five-foot-nothing reach. Her salt-and-pepper chin-length hair is half pulled back into a black clip.

"Where is that son of a bitch?" she grumbles, so focused on looking for who-knows-what that she doesn't even see me. I hear the rustle of paper and look over to see my dad's hazel eyes peeking over the top of the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* at me from our breakfast nook.

They crinkle at the corners just like they always do when he smiles.

"Glad you're up." He's already snickering at whatever he's about to say. "Thought we were going to have to come roll you over so you wouldn't get bedsores." An absolute *classic* Charlie Parker morning zinger.

"It's only eight thirty," I say, making a face. Laughing at his jokes will only encourage him.

"Molly!" An instant grin replaces my mom's frustrated frown as she finally stops her search and sees me. Flyaway

strands of hair float around her round face as she rushes over to give me a hug. Two-handed, one arm over, one under, or she'll make me do it again, because it "just doesn't feel right." She's acting like I am going off to war, but even though she's crushing me almost as much as Leonard, it's hard to pretend like I won't miss this.

When she releases me, I walk over to the counter, closing a few cabinets and hip-thrusting a drawer back into place along the way. I certainly did not get my compulsion for organization from my mother. "*What* are you doing?" I ask.

"I told her not to," my dad interjects without looking up from his newspaper.

"Oh, just do your puzzles, Charlie." Mom waves her hand at him as she crosses the kitchen to open yet another cabinet. "I'm getting a few more things together for you. I just need a whisk and then I'm done, but I can't find my second one," she says.

"Mom," I say as firmly as I can. "I do not need a whisk."

"*Everyone* needs a whisk," she replies, as if we're talking about a toilet or something.

"What am I going to do with a whisk in a dorm room?" I ask her, hoping to bring some logic to the conversation this morning, but she just keeps rifling through every cabinet.

I lean down and open the flaps of the box she's packing up, feeling utterly confused at its contents: a roll of foil, the

stapler from our junk drawer, a spatula, two can openers, a nonstick pan.

“Mom, I don’t need any of this,” I tell her, placing my hand on her arm to try to stop her from opening yet another drawer.

“But what if you do?” she asks, her voice shaking a little. “What if you need something and you don’t have it? What if you get hungry in the middle of the night and . . .”

“Then I’ll just have to figure it out for myself.” I pull her away from the drawer, forcing her to face me. She looks up with tears coating her eyes.

“Please don’t leave,” she says, even though she doesn’t mean it. At least she’s trying not to.

“Mom, I’m going to be fine,” I tell her. I try to sound more confident than I feel.

“But I’m not,” she admits through a pathetic-sounding laugh.

I give her another hug because while I know it’s lame . . . we’re basically best friends. We’ve never explicitly called each other that, but when you’re this close with someone, it doesn’t need to be said. She’s been my closest friend all through high school. My only friend, if I’m honest.

Now, somehow, I have to say goodbye to her, this person who has been by my side through all of it. It doesn’t feel possible, but if things are going to change this year, I need to let go a little.

And I need her to let go a little too.

“Molly, we need to leave in about an hour. If we wait any longer, I’m afraid your mom’s going to pack herself up in one of these boxes,” my dad says, and my mom throws a kitchen towel at him.

An hour later we’re officially on our drive to Pitt. My dad volunteers to drive my car down, so it’s just my mom and I in her SUV, and I find myself regretting it as she points out seemingly everything familiar on our way. My old school, the movie theater, a roller rink off the highway where I spent so many nights skating with my brother, Noah. I tear my eyes away, the memories making this whole moving thing even harder.

Luckily, once we arrive, I pretty much can’t think about any of that because campus is pure insanity. Every trunk in sight is hanging open, and mini fridges, bedding, and IKEA furniture spill out onto the street. The sidewalks are filled with parents trying and failing to round up their younger kids. A girl sporting a Pitt soccer hoodie loses control of her giant moving cart and watches in horror as it slams right into a parked car. Then *I* watch in horror as she just casually walks in the other direction. Just to be safe, we decide to leave Dad to guard the car after he parks mine in the student lot.

“Hi! Welcome to Pitt!” A guy with perfectly coiffed hair greets me as I enter the quad with my mom in tow. “I can help

you get checked in,” he says, leading me over to a table. I give him all the information he needs, and he hands over a welcome bag and my student ID card, featuring a horribly blown-out photo that was taken of me at orientation over the summer.

“How does she find out who her roommate is?” my mom asks, stepping up to the table.

“Oh.” The guy furrows his eyebrows. “You should have gotten an email months ago.”

But . . . I’ve been refreshing it religiously all summer, so there’s no way I missed it. Right? My stomach sinks, but I don’t want to be *that* freshman.

“Oh, okay, I’ll take another look,” I tell him.

“Well, is there any way you can look it up? She didn’t get an email,” my mom interjects, and instantly my skin prickles. Just once I wish she’d let me handle something for myself.

“Mom, it’s fine,” I whisper under my breath. “I’ll figure it out when I get up there. Besides, Noah’s on his way, right?” I thank the guy and tug my mom away from the table.

Thankfully, my distraction works.

“He said he was going to bike over and . . . meet us in the quad? Is this the quad?” she asks. I nod, looking around at the four identical dorm buildings for . . . *there it is* . . . Holland Hall.

“I’m just going to run up and see my room. I’ll be back,” I reply, but quickly realize that she’s following on my heels anyway. “Mom, can you maybe stay here and keep an eye out for Noah?” I pick up speed before she can reply. I actually kind

of want her with me to see the room for the first time, but I keep reminding myself that things have to be different. And for them to be different, I really cannot have my mom barging in behind me as I meet my roommate for the very first time.

Both doors have been propped open, and girls are flooding in and out constantly. The elevator looks pretty busy, so I take the five flights of stairs up to my dorm room, stopping right outside the door to catch my breath and get myself together.

First impression, Molly. New you. You've got this. All you have to say is "Hi, I'm Molly."

Deep breath.

I open the door expecting to see my roommate, but what I find instead makes my stomach sink straight to the floor.

"This is a joke," I whisper to myself as I look around the shoebox of a room.

One bed. One desk. Even though it was my last choice. Even though I specifically asked for anything *but* this.

It's a single.

Like it's not already going to be hard enough for me to make friends, now I get to live in solitary confinement. I step in, looking around my room as I listen to girls go by in the hall, talking with their roommates about what should go where and who gets which side.

"Hey, Moll, where do you want these?" a voice asks from behind, making me temporarily forget my predicament. I turn around to find a huge stack of boxes blocking the entire hall-

way, a pair of muscular legs sticking out the bottom, almost buckling under the weight of about every item I own.

“Hey, Noah,” I say, feeling lighter at the sight of him. “You know they have carts for that.” I hop up on my plastic mattress to make room for him to get by before he drops everything on the floor with a few thuds. He takes a second to catch his breath, hands on his knees.

“I’ve got two perfectly good carts right here,” he says, slapping each of his biceps. I roll my eyes at him. “Besides, what else are older brothers good for?” he asks with an amused smile, coming over to give me a hug.

“Charlie, quit running over my heels!” My mom’s voice echoes down the hallway, accompanied by a laugh that fills up all this empty space. We both turn to the door as our parents appear with a moving cart filled with another load of my things.

My mom’s smile drops instantly as she scans my room.

“They put you in a single,” she says, the corners of her mouth turning down.

“Lucky, right? Man, I would’ve *killed* for a single in college,” Noah says as he sits down on my desk.

“Yeah, this is really nice, Molly. You’ve got your own little space here,” Dad adds.

I meet eyes with my mom, the only person who could possibly understand what this means for me. The only person who knows that this was my one good chance of having a built-in social life in college.

I look away before she says anything, because talking about it will only make me feel worse. So I throw myself into the task at hand. Organizing. The thing I *love*.

Noah and Dad bring up load after load while my mom and I put every single thing in its place. I try not to think about everything I was looking forward to with my roommate. All the nights we were supposed to sit up in bed, gossiping about all the exciting things happening in our lives here, or the midnight trips to Market to get Pitt's famous waffles and ice cream that Noah told me about. I try not to think about how I was supposed to be putting this dorm together with her, not my mom.

"So I was thinking," my mom says as I sit down on the floor next to her to refold some T-shirts. "Why don't you order takeout and ask one of your floormates to hang out?" She tries to sound excited, but the look of pity in her eyes is too familiar.

"They're all going to be getting to know their own roommates. And I don't *know* anyone to ask," I say, returning my gaze to the shirt I'm folding.

"What about Cora?" She nudges me playfully. "Maybe she's free."

"Can we not talk about this right now? Let's just fold," I say, but she can't let it go. Like any true best friend, she also knows how to get under my skin like *no* other, and it feels like that talent is on overdrive today.

“Why don’t you send her a text to see if she wants to hang out tonight?”

“Mom,” I say firmly, turning to face her. “I can’t just ask her to *hang out*, okay? That’s not . . .” I let out a frustrated sigh, picking up my phone to mime texting. “Hey, Cora. You don’t know me at all, and I don’t even have your number, but we went to the same high school and I’m practically in love with you.”

“Why *can’t* you do that? I mean, I’m sure someone you know would have her number. The last part might be a little strong, but . . .” She finally trails off, giggling. “What do I know?”

“Oh my God.” I shove her onto her side, and she bounces right back up. “You honestly drive me crazy.”

“I’m just trying to help. You know that, right?” she asks, and I nod. “Okay, so if it’s a no on Cora, what if *I* come back down tomorrow and we go shopping or something?”

“Mom . . .” I pause to gather my thoughts, wanting to make sure I say all the right things. I hate that I want to say yes. And that tells me I *have* to say this. I just don’t want to hurt her feelings too badly. “I *need* college to be different. Okay?” I look up to meet her eyes. “It’s going to be hard enough now for me to figure that out. If you’re showing up here all the time, I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to make other friends. And I cannot, I *cannot*, go through another four years like that.”

She looks a little hurt, but mostly she looks guilty.

“I know. I know. I’m sorry.” She wraps her arms around

herself and squeezes tight. "I'll give you some space," she says.

I narrow my eyes at her for a second, having a hard time believing that's something she's actually capable of. "I promise!" she follows up, extending her pinkie finger out to me, and I finally laugh.

"Okay. At least for a little while," I reply, taking it in mine.

"Well, that's everything," my dad announces, appearing in the doorway next to Noah. "What do you think, Beth?" he asks.

Now?

This all went by too fast. I was just talking about how much I want things to change. But . . . not right this minute.

Tears press against my eyes as the goodbye I've been dreading all day lingers in the air.

My mom pushes herself off the floor with a grunt as she straightens out her legs. "I think we're all set. Unless you want me to help you finish folding, Molly?" She looks down at me like she's trying so hard to do what I've asked, but it goes against everything she's feeling.

I will have a full breakdown if we extend this goodbye any longer than it needs to be.

"You can just go with them. I've got this," I say, motioning to the pile of clothes.

"Are you sure?" she asks.

Not even a little. But instead, I say, "Totally."

I give my dad a quick hug, knowing that he doesn't like

for me to see him get too emotional. But I can still tell he's struggling, widening his eyes so he doesn't cry.

"Good to have you in the city," Noah says with a smile, pulling me in for a one-handed bro hug. I *am* thankful that he lives nearby. "Call me when you want to hang out. And, Molly?" he says, already halfway out the door. "Open doors make happy floors." He swings my door all the way open before following my dad into the hall. As if making friends is as simple as opening a door.

But I guess that's because it has been for him. Everything has always been so easy for Noah—making friends, playing sports. He was somehow even voted prom king. I mean . . . name one other school in rural PA that named an Asian dude as *prom king*. That just doesn't happen.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath as my mom turns around to face me.

"I promise you it's going to get better," she says, resting her hand on my cheek. I step forward, wrapping her in a hug, and this time I'm the one holding too tight.

"Okay," I whisper, even though it really doesn't feel that way now.

"Okay," she says, her voice quivering as she lets me go and takes a step back into the hall. "Call me later. I love you."

"I love you," I say, biting my cheek until I taste blood. She disappears from the doorway, and I turn around to face my new home. My chest tightens at the all-too-familiar feeling of

loneliness, except this time I don't have my mom to fall back on. Here, I really am alone.

Just focus on the task. Unpack. Organize.

I take a deep breath, trying to ignore the lump in my throat as I unfold the flaps of the last cardboard box.

My vision blurs as I reach in and pick up a metal whisk with a note attached in careful handwriting.

Just in case ♥