

BEFORE THAT NIGHT

A novella by Lauren Barnholdt



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THE BEGINNING

The thing about working at a paintball park is that there are always hot boys around. Hot boys who work here, hot boys who are customers, hot boys with blonde hair, hot boys with dark hair, hot boys in sneakers, hot boys with tattoos, hot boys with their families, hot boys with their friends...

Hot boys love paintball.

Not that it really matters. I mean, I'm not going to say I don't enjoy it when Todd the maintenance guy takes his shirt off while he hoses down the equipment truck, or that watching the constant parade of perfect smiles and floppy hair doesn't make my shifts go by faster.

But if I'm being completely honest, I'm not that good with hot boys. Hot boys are extremely unpredictable, which makes it hard to figure out their motives.

Example: A hot boy comes in and acts all nice and sweet, orders a hot dog and a game of paintball, thanks me politely and even comes back to return the extra dollar I mistakenly gave him with his change.

Problem: Is said hot boy being nice because he's *actually* nice, or is it all a carefully planned act, honed over years of realizing he can use his good looks and charm to manipulate people into giving him what he wants?

On the other hand, if a guy's a total asshole to me, does that automatically mean he's an asshole to everyone? Or is it something about me specifically that makes him think he can get away with it, i.e, he thinks I'm not on his level genetically?

Not to mention hot guys always have this air of entitlement that really pisses me off. In fact, a lot of times I'm tempted to deny them whatever they're asking for, even if it's something totally arbitrary -- *"No, you cannot have a Sprite with no ice, we don't do special orders at Paintball Joe's snack bar, thank you very much!"* -- just because I'm sure not many people ever have.

So when Cooper Marriatti comes in on Sunday afternoon and asks if there's a game for him to get in on, I really want to be able to tell him no. Unfortunately, a father and his four sons are outside waiting for one more person to join their group.

Which I really don't understand at all -- if I were playing paintball with my family, no way I'd want some random joining me. But the dad kept on insisting that the game had to be completely fair, with even teams. He seemed like one of those real asshole types, the kind that turns even a friendly family game of paintball into some big competition. I'm pretty sure he has rage issues, because at one point one of his sons punched another one in the arm and instead of scolding him the dad yelled, "Thatta boy!" and then told the other one not to be such a whine-ass.

But Cooper Marriatti goes to my school, he's a year older than me, a senior, and he's extremely annoying. He only dates girls that are gorgeous and popular, he's super smart, and he's friends with Tyler Twill. (Reasons this friendship is significant and tells you everything you need to know about Cooper: One time in

eighth grade Tyler asked me if my boobs were real, and when I told him they were, he said he should have known since I'm a "bigger girl." According to Tyler, bigger girls always have real boobs. Which isn't even true. That I'm a bigger girl, I mean. I guess if you mean compared to girls who are a size zero or two, then yes, I am a bigger girl. But why should I be called a bigger girl? I'm closer to average. Shouldn't those girls be called "smaller" girls? Anyway, the fact that Cooper is friends with Tyler shows he's a jerk. Everyone knows the company you keep, like, defines you. Or at least says a lot about you.)

"It's okay if there isn't a game," Cooper says. He pulls a chair out from behind the counter of the snack bar and sits down. "I'll just wait, if that's okay. What's good to eat?"

No way I want to have to talk to him, and/or fetch him snacks from the snack bar, not to mention the fact that I'd definitely get in trouble if my boss ever found out I was turning customers away just because they're good looking, so I say, "You can go play with those guys." I point out the window toward the course, where Rage Family is waiting. The two older boys are practicing some kind of wrestling moves while their dad looks on proudly and yells, "Go for the submission! Submission! No, Daryll, I said *Submit. Him!*"

"Perfect," Cooper says, apparently not rattled by the fact that the people he's going to be playing with are out for blood. "Thanks so much."

He ambles out the door, and when he comes back a couple of hours later, his hair's all sweaty and messy, and he has a smudge of dirt on his cheek. "We lost," he says cheerfully, plopping back down in the chair at the counter. I look out the

window towards the parking lot, where Rage Family is climbing into their minivan. The dad has a big scowl on his face. I'm assuming Cooper was on his team.

I shrug. "Sucks to be you, I guess."

"Yup." He's looking up at the board behind me, where the menu of snacks is written in purple Sharpie. A few weeks ago, my boss fired the girl who usually worked the snack bar (she was giving all her friends and any hot boy she saw free slushies, which added up fast) and so now not only am I in charge of ringing up the paintball games, I have to sell people food, too. And I still make the same amount of money. How is that fair? It's like two jobs for one price. "So what's good to eat here?" Cooper asks.

I consider telling him to order the meatball sub (we get them in frozen, and then I just pop them in the microwave), but decide inflicting days of intestinal distress on someone would be way too cruel, even if it *is* Cooper Marriatti, so instead I just say, "Honestly? Nothing."

"That's what I figured," he says. "Well, what's the safest?"

"Candy bar," I tell him. "Or if you're feeling adventurous, one of the soft pretzels."

"Pretzel," he says. "But only if you share it with me, Eliza."

I'm shocked that he knows my name, and so I almost soften, but then I remember I'm wearing a name tag. "No thank you," I say. I pick up a towel and start to wipe down the counter.

Cooper raises his eyebrows at me. "Scared?"

“Please,” I say, “I have a very strong stomach,” I open the pretzel machine, pull one out, and drop it on a paper plate. Cooper grabs a plastic knife out of the container in front of him and cuts the pretzel in half. He slides the plate toward me. “Pick,” he says.

I choose the smaller half, because I totally lied about having a strong stomach, and because those pretzels have been there since I opened up six hours ago. They’re kind of sketch. But I can’t have Cooper thinking I’m afraid of some stupid soft pretzel. Besides, how bad can it be? I take a piece, drag it through the pile of mustard Cooper’s squirted onto the plate, and pop it in my mouth. It’s surprisingly good.

“You have mustard on your face,” Cooper says.

“What?”

“You have a little mustard on your face,” he says. And then he reaches over and brushes it off my lip with his finger. Cooper Marriatti IS BRUSHING MUSTARD OFF MY FACE! WITH HIS FINGER. I mean, how crazy is that? He can’t just come in here and start touching people’s faces! Talk about an invasion of personal space. Although... his fingers felt good on my skin, and a bolt of electricity fired through my whole body as soon as he touched me. And the fact that he felt like it was no big deal to just reach out and brush my lips with his finger is kind of....well, sexy.

No, I tell myself, this is how girls get themselves in all kinds of trouble. They start paying attention to the bolts of electricity in their stomachs. And as history has shown (through shows on the CW, Lifetime Original Movies, and any story in US

Weekly), listening to bolts of electricity is like, the worst thing you can do. It always ends with heartbreak and trauma.

But before I can figure out how to stop the electricity from taking over, there's a scuffle near the front door, and I look over to see a heavysset man in a plaid shirt elbowing his way past another customer. "Out of my way!" he's shrieking. "Get in line, get in line, I was here first!" Which of course makes no sense, since there *isn't* any line, just him and the one other customer who had the unfortunate luck of showing up at the same time he did.

"Oh, no," I say, horrified. "It's Crazy Coupon Man."

"Crazy *who*?" Cooper asks.

"Crazy Coupon Man," I say. "He comes in all the time trying to use these expired coupons fifty percent off coupons, and when you tell him he can't, he freaks out." I look at the clock on the wall. "And we're supposed to close in fifteen minutes, so I'm going to get stuck staying late while he practices on the range." Crazy Coupon man never actually plays a game of paintball. He just practices, spending like, ten minutes setting up each shot before he finally fires. Then he enters all his results into his iPhone.

"Don't worry," Cooper says, and then jumps behind the counter. Wow. Cooper's very....limber. He vaulted over the counter like it was nothing. He pulls a napkin out of the holder and starts scribbling on it, and the bolt of electricity in my stomach fires again. Probably from watching him jump over the counter like that.

"I was here first," Crazy Coupon Man's saying to the customer behind him, a man with close cropped hair and a beard. "So don't even think about cutting the line, *Bucko*."

"I wasn't," the man says, taking a step back. He looks at Crazy Coupon Man. His crazy person radar must be going off, because he hesitates, then turns around and walks out the door.

"Sir!" I try, yelling after him. "It's okay, how can I help you?" But he doesn't even turn around. Sigh.

"Hello!" Cooper chirps to Crazy Coupon Man. "How can I help you today?"

"Who the hell are you?" Crazy Coupon Man demands. He places his huge hands on the counter and leans over, looking at Cooper like he's a piece of garbage left in the bin.

"I'm Cooper," Cooper says. "But most people around here call me The Coop. I work here now, I'm new, and I would be happy to serve your paintball needs!"

"I want to practice," Crazy Coupon Man says. "And I have a coupon." Of course he does.

"A coupon!" Cooper yells, delighted. "That's wonderful news!"

"It is?" Crazy Coupon Man looks skeptical.

"Yes," Cooper says. "Now hand it over."

Crazy Coupon Man pulls out a wrinkled up piece of paper that's so obviously a copy he made on his printer, and hands it to Cooper. Crazy Coupon Man is grinning now, obviously thinking that since Cooper is new, he'll be an easy mark. Then he spots me lurking over in the corner by the soda fountain, and his face

darkens. “Hello, Eliza,” he says, like I’m his arch-nemesis or something. Which I guess I kind of am. Also I realize that wearing these name tags is definitely not safe, since crazy people knowing your name can never be a good thing.

“Oh, hello,” I say, like I just noticed him. Then I get really busy opening up a can of Sprite and taking a sip.

“Why, this coupon is going to be perfect for you!” Cooper says. “What a smart shopper! But we have a new coupon fee policy.”

“A what?”

“A coupon fee,” Cooper says. “You have to pay a *fee* to use this coupon. You know, like, ten percent.”

“Fine,” Crazy Coupon man says. He looks all smug, probably because the coupon he’s trying to use is for fifty percent off, so he figures he’ll still get a deal.

“And you have to pay forty percent more since you’re coming in so close to closing.”

“But that wasn’t announced!” Crazy Coupon man says. “Any coupon policies have to be clearly announced to the consumer!”

Cooper points to the napkin that’s sitting on the counter. “That’s our official announcement,” he says. “See how it says ‘official announcement?’” Crazy Coupon Man peers at it, and I do too. “OFFICIAL ANNOUNCEMENT” it says “ALL COUPONS WILL INCUR A TEN PERCENT FEE AND ANY COUPON USED WITHIN FIFTEEN MINUTES OF CLOSING TIME WILL INCUR AN ADDITIONAL FEE OF FORTY PERCENT.”

I can see the wheels turning in Crazy Coupon Man’s head.

“Too bad,” Cooper says. “If you’d just come in one minute earlier....” AND then Cooper leans over the counter, and his whole tone changes. “Of course, if you think our policy is illegal or unfair in any way, I’d be happy to call the police and get them down here to review it.”

Crazy Coupon Man eyes widen. He looks at Cooper. He looks at me. There’s a moment of silence, and then, finally, he snatches the coupon back from Cooper.

“Fine,” he says. “I’ll come back another time.”

“You do that,” Cooper says.

“That was amazing,” I say in awe once Crazy Coupon Man is gone.

Cooper takes a bow, then vaults back over the counter and turns the sign on the front door from “Open” to “Closed.”

“So,” he says, grinning. “Does that earn me dinner?”

“Dinner?”

“Yeah.”

“With me?” I ask dumbly.

“Yeah,” he says. “You eat, right?”

“With you?”

“Yes,” he says. “Dinner with me.” He smiles, showing a row of perfect white teeth. “Unless you’d rather go with Crazy Coupon Man.”

“No,” I say.

“Why not?”

“No, I mean, I wouldn’t rather go with him.”

“So do you want to go with me?”

I hesitate. "Sure," I say finally. "I just have to finish closing up."

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"Cooper Marriatti?" my best friend Marissa shrieks into the phone. "You're going to dinner with *Cooper Marriatti*?"

"I don't know," I say, even though I've already decided I am. I'm in the bathroom, peering out into the snack stand, where Cooper is wiping down the counters. I didn't even ask him to do that, but he is. It's all very....suspicious. I think again about how he touched my face, and I start to get hot all over.

"How did this happen?" Marissa asks.

"I'm not sure," I say. "He just....came in to play paintball and then he asked me to dinner and now he's out there helping me close down." I look at myself in the mirror, and notice a big splotch of paint on my forehead. How the hell did that get there? I don't even play paintball! I run my hand under the faucet and start to rub it away.

"You can't go," Marissa says. "Guys that good looking are not okay."

"I know," I say. "But..."

"But what?"

"But you should have seen what he did with Crazy Coupon Man."

"Crazy *who*?"

My phone beeps with a text, and I look down. From my other best friend, Clarice. "COOPER M?!?" it says.

"Marissa," I say. "How does Clarice know about Cooper?"

"I texted her."

"While we were talking?"

"Yes." Wow. Talk about the information age. You can share things almost in real time. I sigh, already kind of regretting calling her. But I had to. She was supposed to pick me up from work. And now that I'm going to dinner with Cooper, I had to tell her I didn't need a ride.

"Look," I say. "I have to go. I'll call you later."

"Wait!" she says. "You know that he's friends with Tyler Twill right?"

"I know," I say.

"And you know that Tyler's in the 318s, right?" The 318s are this secret society at our school, a sort of high school fraternity composed of all the most popular (and jerkiest, IMO), guys at our school. No one knows exactly why they're called the 318s, although the rumor is that the original three founding members had had sex with eighteen girls between them, and they apparently thought it was a real hoot to incorporate that into their name.

Anyway, no one's supposed to know who their members are, but it's pretty much common knowledge that Tyler Twill is their president. And once you know that, you can kind of figure out who's in by who's hanging out with him. Although of course they'd never admit it.

"Marissa," I say. "It's just dinner."

"I know, but Eliza –"

"I have to go," I say firmly. "I'll call you later."

I hang up, but my phone rings again immediately. Clarice. I answer it, because I already know what she's going to say.

"Hi," I say.

"Ohmigod, Eliza!" she shrieks. "This is amazing! How exciting! You guys are the perfect couple!"

Clarice thinks everyone is the perfect couple. Which is pretty ridiculous, since Cooper and I definitely aren't. The perfect couple, I mean. In fact, we're not even close to being a *good* couple.

"Clarice," I say. "It's not true. We're not the perfect couple. We're the worst couple, like, ever."

"It's like Cinderella!" she says in her Southern drawl, ignoring me.

"So you don't think it's a bad idea?"

"No," she says. "As long as you call me later."

"I will," I say.

"And make him pay for dinner."

"Clarice," I say. "It's not a date, and even if it was, this isn't the 1950s."

"Eliza! A lady never pays!"

"I'll call you later," I say.

"Promise?"

"Yes," I say. I hang up and look at myself. I'm kind of a disaster. My hair's a mess, my make-up's smeared, and I'm wearing my work shirt, a polo that says "Paintball Joe's." I fix my hair the best I can with the brush in my purse, touch up my

make up, and change into the Boston College hoodie I brought with me in case it got cold.

“Ready?” Cooper asks when I come out.

“Yup,” I say. And then I follow him out to my car.

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He takes me for Italian, which is perfect, because I love Italian, and I never get to eat it since the only people I go out to eat with are Clarice, Marissa, or my older sister Kate. Kate is constantly watching her carbs, Clarice hates Italian, and Marissa claims to be allergic to wheat. (Which if you ask me, is all in her head but whatever.)

Cooper orders two appetizer pizzas – one mushroom and one caprese -- for us to share. He gets the manicotti as his entrée, and I get the chicken parm.

“Did we really need two appetizers?” I ask after we order.

“Of course,” Cooper says, grinning. “I’ve had a long day of paintball playing.”

I still think there’s going to be no way we can finish the food, but Cooper has a monster appetite, and by the time we’re done, there’s hardly anything left. It’s weird, eating with him, but at the same time, it’s not. Like, I thought I’d be self-conscious, and that we’d have nothing to talk about, but it’s not really like that. We talk about school, about college, about nothing and everything.

We order the tiramisu for dessert, although I can hardly manage two bites, and by the time he brings me home, I’m in a nice little carb coma.

But when Cooper pulls into my driveway, I start to panic. What's going to happen tomorrow at school? I might pass him in the hall, I might see him with his dumb friends, he might ignore me, he might feel obligated to say hi even though he doesn't want to. I might have to avoid him, I might...

"Today was fun," Cooper says, and my stomach clenches. Because I had fun too. But the way Cooper says "Today was fun" is the way you'd say "Today was fun and good luck with your life, maybe we'll keep in touch."

"Yeah," I say. "Thanks for dinner." Cooper paid, even though I tried to insist that he didn't. At the time, I thought it was sweet, and it made me feel all flushed and fluttery, but now...now it just seems pathetic.

I go to open the car door, but Cooper reaches across me and pulls it closed. I turn to him, questioning, suddenly knowing what's going to happen, wanting it and being afraid of it all at the same time.

He leans closer, and his lips are close to my neck, and he whispers my name, "Eliza."

I want to push him away, every brain cell I have is screaming to push him away, but my body is telling me to turn my head just a little bit, just a couple of centimeters, and then his lips will be on mine.

In the end, I don't have to make the decision. Cooper reaches out and tilts my chin up and toward him, and he's looking at me and I close my eyes and his lips are warm and perfect. *This is how it is to really be kissed*, I think.

And when I finally walk up to my front door, I'm all woozy.

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“Why would he blow you off?” Clarice asks the next morning at school.

“What do you mean why would he blow her off?” Marissa rolls her eyes like she can’t believe how stupid Clarice is. We’re standing outside the doors to the cafeteria, mostly because I don’t want to go inside. If I don’t go inside, then Cooper can’t blow me off. And then I can’t know if he’s going to. And not knowing is way better than knowing. Denial FTW, la la la. “He’ll blow her off because he’s Cooper Marriatti,” Marissa says. “Didn’t you hear what he did to Phoebe Smith?”

“What?” I ask, a sick feeling rising in my stomach.

“Had sex with her ever day for, like, weeks, and then never called her again,” Marissa reports, nodding sagely. “She was so depressed about it she didn’t get out of her bed for a month.”

“That’s not true,” Clarice says.

“Yes, it is,” Marissa says. “Why do you think she was out of school for so long last year?”

“She had mono,” Clarice says. But her voice is faltering. She shakes her head and pushes a stray strand of her blonde hair behind her ear. “Besides, it doesn’t matter if he did that to Phoebe Smith. Because he might really like Eliza.”

Marissa snorts. Which is a little bit rude, because why can’t he really like me?

“Why can’t he really like me?” I ask. “I’m cute and fun!”

"It doesn't have anything to do with *you*," Marissa says. "It has to do with him. Some guys just want more, more, more. You could be Taylor Swift and he wouldn't care."

"You're right," I say. It's ridiculous, to think even for a second that Cooper might actually like me. I haven't heard of him having a girlfriend, like, ever. And I'm not going to be the one to change him. Those things only happen in the movies. Not real life. That's why they're movies. Hollywood and Lifetime TV and Harlequin sell those types of fantasies in an effort to prey on unsuspecting girls like me. Well! I will not be a victim of their.....I don't know what to call it. Preyful capitalistic practices? The bell rings, and Marissa squeezes my shoulder. "It will be fine," she says. "No matter what."

"I know," I say.

I walk into school, deciding this whole thing with Cooper will be one of those stories I tell my future husband one day. We'll cozy up in front of the fire in our new house and I'll tell him about how I had a random kiss in high school from one of the most popular boys in school, and my husband will be all, "Are you serious? That guy sounds like such a player!" and then I'll be all, "Thank God I didn't fall for it!" and then we'll kiss and I'll look around at my perfect house and my perfect husband and my –

"Hey," Cooper says. "I was waiting for you."

He's outside my homeroom, and I don't know how he knew where my homeroom was, I don't know how he had any idea where I'd be, if he asked someone, if it came up yesterday and I just don't remember. My brain is doing that

thing with my body again, where they fight over what to do. My brain says go into class. My body says stop and talk to him.

But before I can decide, Cooper reaches out and pulls me close. He's wearing a soft gray sweater and he smells delicious, like soap and spicy cologne and mint toothpaste.

"I didn't have your phone number," he says into my hair. "Or I would have texted you last night."

"Oh," I say dumbly. And before I know what's going on, before I can tell myself it's a bad idea, before I can remind myself what a complete player is and what he allegedly did to Phoebe Smith, Cooper kisses me. Right there, in the hallway, in front of everyone.

"Hi," he says to me when he pulls away. He grins. I am so screwed.

By the end of the week, I'm kind of a celebrity. And not in a good way. People are buzzing about the fact that Cooper and I have been hanging out. Hooking up, hanging out, whatever you want to call it, it's what we're doing. Which you think would be a good thing for my reputation, right? Hooking up with one of the most popular seniors in our school? You'd think that would make people be all, "Oh, wow, Eliza Sellman must be so cool, look who she landed!" But it's the opposite. Everyone's speculating about why Cooper would want to be with me.

According to Marissa and Clarice, the top rumor is that I'm ridiculously good in bed. Supposedly Cooper and I are doing it everywhere – in Cooper's car, in his

pool, at my house, at his house, at the movies, even at school. Apparently I'm just that amazing, and I can't get enough. (When I asked Marissa and Clarice if anyone even for one second ever considered that maybe Cooper really does just like me, their response was "No, not really." I didn't know whether to laugh or cry.)

"Does it bother you what people are saying about us?" I ask Cooper a couple of weeks later. It's a Wednesday night, and my parents are out, so Cooper and I are making dinner for Clarice and Marissa. They've been complaining about the fact that I'm never around anymore, and so in an effort to make sure I don't become the girl who blows her friends off for a guy, I thought we could all hang out. Plus I'm hoping they can get to know him, so that Marissa can stop looking at him suspiciously every day at school.

"People are saying things about us?" Cooper asks, feigning shock. He opens the oven and peers at the pizza. Cooper is very good at making pizza, which is surprising. He just doesn't seem like the type. But there a lot of things I didn't know about him. Like how close he is with his little sister. And how he loves to read. And how his parents want him to go to Brown next year, but he has his heart set on NYU so he can major in something art-related.

I push his shoulder playfully. "Come on," I say. "You know what they're saying."

"Not really," he says, shrugging. "And besides, I don't care." He wraps his arms around my waist, pulling me close, and I bury my head against his neck, enjoying the closeness.

The doorbell rings, and I pull away reluctantly to go and let Marissa and Clarice in.

I specifically told them not to grill Cooper, that they were to be nice to him, but even so, as soon as she gets into the kitchen, Marissa immediately says, “So what happened with you and Phoebe Smith?” She pulls a carrot out of the appetizer tray on the table and pops it in her mouth.

“Phoebe Smith?” Cooper looks in the oven once more, then pulls the pizza out and sets it on the counter. I inhale the scent, ravenous despite the fact that my best friend is grilling my boyfriend. “We hooked up last year.”

“And is it true you had sex with her and left her?” Clarice presses.

“And that she couldn’t get out of bed for a month?” Marissa adds.

“Because if it is, that wasn’t very nice, Cooper,” Clarice says.

“No,” Cooper says.

“No?” Marissa asks incredulously. She narrows her eyes at him. “Because I heard she almost killed herself.”

“Pizza’s ready!” I yell, pulling plates down from the cupboard and trying to herd Marissa and Clarice into the dining room. But not too hard, because if I’m being honest, I’m kind of curious about this whole Phoebe Smith situation myself.

“She didn’t almost kill herself,” Cooper says. “And I never had sex with her. We hooked up for a couple of months, and then Phoebe cheated on me with a college guy she met at Emerson.”

“Ha!” Marissa says. “Why did she disappear for a month then?”

Cooper gets an uncomfortable look on his face, and then gets really busy pulling a bottle of soda out of the fridge . “You’d, um, have to ask Phoebe about that,” he mumbles. “That’s her business.”

“Oh my God,” Clarice mouths behind Cooper’s back at me. “Pregnant!” Awwwkward. Even Marissa looks like she wishes she hadn’t brought it up.

But Cooper must win points for protecting Phoebe’s privacy, because by the end of dinner, Marissa’s warmed up to him a little bit, and Clarice is, like, in love with him. The conversation is great, the food is great, and everyone has a really nice time.

After Clarice and Marissa leave, Cooper and I sit outside on my front lawn, legs intertwined, holding hands and talking. “I’m going to visit my sister at BU this weekend,” I murmur, my head resting on his chest, my eyes closing drowsily. “Do you want to come with me? She really wants to meet you.”

Kate knows who Cooper is, and Cooper knows who Kate is, since she graduated just a year before him, but they’ve never really hung out. And she’s been bugging me to meet him.

I’m not sure if it’s my imagination or not, but I feel like he hesitates. But then he says, “I’d love to,” and he kisses me, and I forget all about it.

The next Monday at school, Isabella Royce comes up to me in lunch. I’m sitting in the back of the cafeteria, waiting for Marissa and Clarice, and writing in my

purple notebook. My purple notebook is where I write down everything I'm afraid of doing, but want to do someday. It's kind of silly, I know, but I've been doing it since seventh grade, and the habit just kind of stuck. Right now I'm writing down how if I was really completely fearless, I'd tell everyone who's talking about Cooper and me to shut the hell up.

"Hello, Eliza," Isabella says. I snap the notebook shut immediately, not wanting her to see the things I'm afraid of, some of which are embarrassing even for me to read.

"Hi," I say. I'm not sure why she's here. Isabella Royce has always been nice to me, but she's also pretty popular, so I'm guessing this has something to do with Cooper.

"Can I sit?" Isabella asks. She slides down into a chair without even waiting for me to say yes. I look up to the lunch line where Clarice and Marissa are, willing them to hurry up.

"Sure," I say, even though she's already sitting.

"Cute hoodie," Isabella says, then reaches over and touches the material. But she says it like 'awww, look at Eliza in her hoodie, isn't that sweet?' Isabella is wearing perfectly tight, perfectly worn jeans, a black wrap sweater, and huge silver earrings. Her hair is pulled back into a sleek ponytail. She looks effortlessly put together. And like her outfit cost a lot of money.

"So I heard you've been hanging out with Cooper," she says, in that fake way girls do when they're pretending to be concerned about you.

"Yeah," I say, shrugging like it's no big deal.

"Well, I just wanted to tell you to be careful," she says, lowering her voice to a whisper and leaning in conspiratorially. "You know, from one girl to another."

"Careful of what?"

"You know how guys like Cooper are," she says, sighing. "And you seem like a nice girl. I'd hate to see you get hurt, that's all." She reaches over and pulls my math book toward her, flips through it, and pulls out the homework I have stuck in there.

"What'd you get for number thirteen?" she asks.

I take the book back from her. "I'm not done," I lie.

"Anyway," she says, seemingly not noticing my tone, "I just wanted to tell you that. I think it's so cute you guys are hanging out." She reaches over and pats my shoulder, which is so totally condescending that I almost can't take it.

"I appreciate your concern," I say sarcastically.

"No problem," she says, smiling, still not getting it. "See you later, Eliza."

Once she's gone, I pull my notebook back out. *"Tell girls they're being bitches when they're being bitches,"* I write. It seems so easy when it's written down. But then again, so does everything that's hard.

**

For the rest of the week, I keep telling myself that what Isabella said doesn't mean anything, that mean girls are mean girls, and that her telling me that Cooper is bad news is the equivalent of Jordana Benson telling me in third grade that if I went

on the merry go round too much my brains would come flying out of my head. It's just girls telling girls things that aren't true, in an effort to torment each other.

Still. It's a little disconcerting. I mean, no one wants to hear that kind of thing about their boyfriend. And even though Cooper and I've spent all week together, by the time it's time to drive into Boston to visit my sister on Saturday, I'm kind of freaked out. It's not helping matters that Cooper's been texting with someone all day, and like, covertly, too. Every five minutes he's looking at his phone, and when he catches me looking at him, he immediately puts it away.

"Important text?" I ask as we pull the car into the parking lot near BU.

"No," he says, sliding his phone back into his pocket. He doesn't tell me who he's texting with, though, which makes my stomach twist.

I'm quiet on the walk to the restaurant where we're supposed to meet Kate.

"You okay?" Cooper asks, reaching over and taking my hand. "You're being really quiet."

"Yeah," I say. "I'm okay."

He pulls my hand up and kisses my fingers, and I snuggle into him, telling myself that everything's okay. But then his stupid phone starts going off again, and he's checking it, and I can't see what he's saying, and that's when I realize the most important thing about boys you're supposed to stay away from.

And that's that you *can't* stay away from them. They have an invisible force field that will pull you in and keep you tangled up, not letting you go and making your head a complete and total mess. So when people say, "Oh you should stay away from that guy" what they really mean is "God, you're screwed."

This really is a disaster. By the time we get to The Horseshoe Pub, I feel like I'm going to explode.

"Hi!" Kate yells. She's standing on the street, wearing a silver sweater with a rose-colored scarf around her neck, her long hair in waves down her back. She grabs me in a hug, and I feel my mood instantly lift.

"Cooper!" she says. "Nice to meet you." She grabs him in a hug too, and he hugs her back.

"Nice to meet you, too," Cooper says. "Eliza's told me all about you."

"She's told me all about *you*," Kate says, grinning. *Don't get too attached, Kate*, I think, he has me tangled up in his dumb hot guy web and it's not going to end well.

We eat lunch, lobster mac and cheese for me, a barbeque chicken salad for Kate, and a steak for Cooper.

"So," Kate says when we're finishing up and Cooper's excused himself to go to the bathroom. "He seems really nice."

"He is," I say. "He *is* really nice." I swallow.

"What's wrong?" Kate asks immediately.

I sigh. "It's just hard."

"What's hard?" Kate swirls her straw around in her iced tea and then takes a long sip.

"Being with him," I say, "I just... I know it's lame, but I always feel so insecure." I tell her about what Isabella said to me in the cafeteria, and about how Cooper's been acting weird all day, texting and not telling me who he's texting with.

"Oh, God," Kate says. "Isabella Royce is such a bitch. She always used to throw these ridiculous parties and get all drunk and sloppy, and then she started that Clean Teens club, remember? She saw it on One Tree Hill or something."

"She's a drunk?"

"Well, not a drunk, exactly, but she shouldn't really be drinking that way if she was going to start that kind of club." She waves her hand. "Anyway, just ask Cooper who he's texting."

"What?"

"You're his girlfriend. You have a right to know."

I think about it, and decide she's right. I *do* have a right to know. If Cooper doesn't have anything to hide, then who cares if I ask him who he's texting? It's not like I'm being psycho possessive or anything. He's been texting all day, acting all distracted, and I haven't even asked him *once*.

"Good idea," I tell Kate. And then I see Cooper through the window, out on the sidewalk, pacing back in forth in front of the restaurant on his phone. Well, no time like the present. "In fact," I say, "I'll be right back."

So I march through the automatic doors and over to where Cooper's standing. It sounds like he's arguing with someone, but I'm too far away to hear the whole conversation. "I know," he's saying, "We're in the city right now... going to a party with Kate... No, I don't..." He sees me then, and quickly says into the phone, "I have to go." He hangs up and turns to me. "Eliza! Hey!"

"Hey," I say. "I was just coming to check on you. Is everything okay? Who were you talking to?"

"Tyler," he says, rolling his eyes. "I swear, that kid is a huge pain in the ass."

It should make me feel better, that he was on the phone with Tyler, and not some girl, but it doesn't. How can I believe he was getting into a fight with Tyler that sounded like that? That definitely didn't sound like the kind of conversation you have with a friend. It sounded like the kind of fight you have with a girl.

"You okay?" he asks me for the second time that day.

"Yeah," I say. "I'm fine." And so I chose to believe him, mostly because thinking that he's lying is kind of too hard to take.

**

That night, we go to a party near the BU campus. It's at one of Kate's friend's house, a guy named Julius who lives in this totally dilapidated, tiny shack on a street that definitely isn't in the best part of town. I'm not sure if I've just become way too anxious of a person, or if this place really is sketch. *Really is sketch*, I decide, as two guys dressed in black puffy coats go pushing by me. One smells like beer, and the other one is drinking wine out of a brown paper bag. They stop at the corner and one pukes onto the pavement. Gross.

"You really know the person who lives here?" I ask Kate incredulously.

"My friend Julius," she says proudly, and then, seeing the look on my face as we step over a stack of empty pizza boxes on the porch, "What? It costs a lot of money to live off campus! This is actually a very expensive house!"

We make our way through the door into the dark, smoky living room. Kate smiles at a guy standing by the couch, then leans in and kisses him on the cheek. "Julius!" she says. "I missed you!" They get swallowed up into the crowd, and then someone shoves a cup of beer into my hand. Wow. Talk about being nonchalant about underage drinking.

"Not too much," Cooper warns, as I take a sip of the dark liquid. "I need you to be sober."

"For what?" I ask. "Don't you have a better chance of having your way with me if I'm tipsy?"

"Who said I wanted to have my way with you?"

"Don't you?"

He grins. "Yes." I take another sip of my drink. "I can't believe people think these things are fun," he says, surveying the scene.

"They don't, really," I say. "They just drink enough to get themselves to believe they do."

We push our way through the crowd and over to a red slip-covered couch in the corner, which looks surprisingly clean. And when I say surprisingly clean, I don't mean it's actually clean. I just mean that for a place that smells like old pizza, beer, and sweat, it's amazingly free of stains.

"Now that guy," Cooper says, watching as a guy with curly hair stands up on the table and pulls his shirt off, then screams like an ape. "Is having way too much fun."

"Are you having fun?" I ask.

"I'm having fun because I'm with you," he says. Then he leans over and kisses me softly on the nose. I lean into him, and push all the doubts I'm having out of my head.

"Let's run away," I say. "We could move to New Hampshire or something."

"Why New Hampshire?"

"Because I heard you can buy houses there for like fifteen thousand dollars. You have to live in the middle of nowhere, but that's a small price to pay."

"Do you have fifteen thousand dollars?"

"No," I say. "But I could start saving."

"Sounds good to me," Cooper says. "Can we get a dog?"

"Yes, but it has to be a girl dog."

"Why?"

"Because I've always wanted a girl dog that I could name Snickers."

Cooper laughs, then kisses me again. "Eliza," he says. "You are too funny." He pulls me close, and I run my lips over the smoothness of his neck. It's nice, to be here, where no one knows us, and I don't have to feel self-conscious about kissing him or being close to him, or have to look around constantly to see if anyone's staring at us.

"Are you guys having fun?" Kate asks a few minutes later, making her way through the crowd. She's wearing a black felt top hat.

"I am," I say. "Cooper needs some convincing."

"No, I don't," he says. "I don't need any convincing. I'm having a blast."

"What's up with the hat?" I ask Kate.

“Do you like it?” she tilts her chin to the side and then pulls the brim down over her eyes. “This guy Connor took it off his head and put it on mine. He’s very cute. So I’m wearing it hoping he’ll come back to get it before the end of the night.” Her eyes sparkle. “Besides, I think it’s a good look for me, don’t you?”

“Totally,” I say.

“Hot,” Cooper says.

“You guys should dance,” she says.

Cooper turns to me. “You wanna dance?”

“I don’t dance in public,” I say.

“Oh, right,” Kate says. “Your no dancing in public rule. I forgot.”

“You don’t dance in public?” Cooper looks at me, baffled.

“No,” I say.

“Why not? Are you a horrible dancer?”

“Yes,” I say, even though it’s not really true. I’m not that bad of a dancer. At least, I don’t think I am. But what if someone else thought I was? The thing is, I actually love to dance. But in my room, at home, with the door closed and where no one can see me.

“That’s okay,” Cooper says, pulling me close. “You don’t have to dance. You just have to stay close to me.”

We spend most of the night huddled on the couch, me sipping warm beer, Cooper holding me close, and both of us making up stories about the people in the room. (Like the girl in the pink miniskirt in the corner grinding on everyone was her high school valedictorian, and now that she’s at college she’s rebelling, the guy

in the soccer jersey behind the bar isn't even on the soccer team, he's just wearing the jersey so that he can get girls, the girl sitting in the corner looking like she's about to cry just found out she's flunking out, so she came here to forget her troubles and pick up a guy but now no one's even looking at her, which is making her even more depressed.)

"I have to go to the bathroom," I say after a while.

"You can't get up!" Cooper says. "We'll lose the best spot in the house."

"Can't you save my seat?"

"I'm not letting you go to the bathroom by yourself," he says. "I have to go with you and wait outside, protecting you from any villains that might be lurking around."

"You think there are villains at this party?"

"Don't you?"

I look around. "Yes, definitely."

And that's when Tyler Twill comes walking into the party. At first I don't even recognize him, not because I don't know what Tyler looks like, but because it's so out of context, like if you see a teacher out at the grocery store or something. It's like they don't belong there.

"Hey," Cooper says as Tyler approaches, and it could be my imagination, but I think I feel his body stiffen.

"Hey," Tyler says. "What are you two doing?"

"Hanging," Cooper says. But he pulls his arm out from around me. I swallow hard and tell myself it doesn't mean anything. "What are you doing here?"

"Came to check out the ladies," Tyler says, looking around. He plops down on the sofa in between us, and since it's not really made for three people, I get pushed up against the arm. "Your sister's pretty hot, Eliza. You think she likes younger guys?"

"No," I say dryly.

"We were actually just about to leave," Cooper says. Which is news to me. Wasn't he just talking about not wanting to lose our seats?

"No way," Tyler tells us. "You guys have to stay."

"Can't," Cooper says, taking my hand and pulling me up and off the couch. The couple of beers I drank and the suddenness of the movement makes me stumble a little bit. Also my foot's asleep from sitting in one place too long. "We took the T in, and so we have to get home."

It's a lie, but I keep my mouth shut. Tyler looks at Cooper for a long time, and then finally looks away. "Okay," he says. "I'll text you tomorrow."

"Sure," Cooper says. We go to say goodbye to Kate, who's dancing with this super hot guy with a goatee and ripped arms.

"You're leaving?" she asks. I think she can tell from my face that something's wrong, but she doesn't say anything, because I give her a look like she shouldn't bring it up.

Once we're outside, the cold air on my face starts to sober me up, and I feel myself start to get angry. "What was that about?" I ask.

“What was what about?” Cooper’s walking fast, not talking to me, not holding my hand, apparently forgetting that not that long ago he was telling me to stay close to him.

“That whole thing with Tyler,” I say. “Why’d you lie to him?”

“Tyler just gets annoying,” he says. “You know, always wanting to be around. I wanted to spend time alone, just me and you. And if we’d started hanging out with him, he would have given me a hard time for not drinking, and he would have kept bothering us all night.”

“Okay,” I say. But he’s not acting like someone who wants to spend time alone with me. His hands are shoved in his pockets, and he’s looking down at the sidewalk as he walks, his shoes making heavy sounds on the pavement.

We’re silent the whole ride home, and when we pull into my driveway, he gives me a quick kiss. “Call you tomorrow,” he says.

“Sure,” I say. But I can’t help feeling like he won’t.

**

“You really have to stop freaking out,” Marissa says the next afternoon. “It’s not very becoming on you.”

“I’m not freaking out,” I say. “I just want to know why he was acting so weird.” I’m at the movies with her and Clarice, a matinee of some sappy romantic comedy. They picked the movie, not me. Otherwise I would have opted for horror. Who wants to watch a romantic comedy? Buying into all that ridiculousness is how

I got myself into this mess in the first place. It's one o'clock, and Cooper still hasn't texted me.

"It was probably 318 stuff," Marissa says. "You know how guys can be."

"You really think Cooper's in the 318s?"

"Yes," Clarice says. "Why else would he be hanging out so much with Tyler?"

"I don't know." I slide down in my seat and shake my box of Reese's Piece's, letting a few drop out into my hand. I pop them in my mouth and think about the idea of my boyfriend being in a secret society. "It just seems so not Cooper. He doesn't seem like the kind of guy who'd get mixed up with people like that."

"People like that?" Marissa says, rolling her eyes. "It's not like they're the mob or something."

"Yeah, but Tyler's still a huge jerk," I say.

"Every guy has jerky friends," Clarice says. "And I think it's romantic that he doesn't want to tell you about 318 business. Like remember on that show Alias? Jennifer Garner was a spy and she had to protect all her loved ones! And that's what Cooper's doing for you."

Leave it to Clarice to a) talk about a show that's been off the air forever b) think it's romantic that Cooper might keep something from me c) love a scenario in which I'm some kind of delicate flower that needs protection. She looks so proud of herself, though, that I decide not to bring up the fact that in the show Alias, Jennifer Garner's fiancé gets killed because they find out he knows things. Am I going to know things? Am I going to get killed?

Marissa sees the look on my face and says, “You’re not going to get killed, Eliza. They’re just high school boys.”

The lights start to dim, and as soon as the first preview starts, I lean back in my seat and check my phone for the millionth time. Nothing,

“He’s probably still sleeping,” Clarice whispers. But she gives Marissa a worried look, a ‘I want to believe it’s okay, but brace yourself in case we have to help her pick up the pieces’, kind of look, and my stomach gets all tangly.

But halfway through the movie, I get a text. Cooper. “Wanna come over tonight? I miss u xxxo”

And just like that, I tell myself that everything just might be okay.

**

And it is okay. That day, and for the next few weeks. Perfect, even. No weirdness. No covert texting. No sketch phone calls. Even when I see Tyler in the halls at school, he’s polite and nice. The original hoopla at school about me and Cooper is starting to die down, and people are slowly accepting the fact that we’re together. (Well, as much as they can. I mean, there’s still some rumors and whispering, but mostly people have moved onto the fact that Sadie Hafner has been sexting with, like, half the junior class boys.)

Cooper and I fall into a comfortable routine, hanging out most nights after school, doing our homework together, and spending tons of time with Marissa and Clarice so that they don’t feel left out.

One night, when we're in a bout of Indian summer and it's almost eighty degrees and gorgeous out, Cooper makes me dinner at his house, hamburgers and chicken on the grill, a macaroni salad, and baked potatoes.

"Wanna go swimming?" he asks, as we're finishing up out on his deck.

"Are you crazy?" I ask. "We'll be freezing."

"No, we won't," he says. "The pool's heated. And besides, I'll keep you warm."

He grins, then takes a couple of steps towards me, and takes my hand. And before I know what I'm doing, he's pulling me out of my seat and toward the pool.

"I don't have a suit," I protest.

"You don't need one."

"Not happening," I say. Cooper and I have made it to third base territory, so it's not like he's never seen, um, certain parts of me. But something about taking my clothes off in a pool is different.

"Please?" he asks. He pulls off his t-shirt, revealing hard pecs and a flat stomach. I shiver as he comes over and kisses me softly on the lips.

"Fine," I say. "But I'm keeping my underwear on. And I'm not taking my clothes off until I get in the pool."

"You'd rather go in the pool and get your clothes wet than take them off in front of me?"

"Yes," I say, wading in. The water's warm, and that coupled with the breeze that ruffles softly through my hair makes it feel like heaven. When the water's safely

up to my neck, I quickly pull off my shorts and tank top, throwing them over by the side of the pool.

“Come here,” Cooper says, wading in after me and pulling me close. His body’s warm, and I lean into him, letting him kiss me, his hands on my face and all over my back. He reaches down and kisses my shoulder, letting the strap of my bra fall into the water. “Eliza,” he says, pulling back and looking into my eyes, “You’re beautiful.”

And as he keeps kissing me, for the very first time ever in my life, I start to believe it.

**

I didn’t have sex with him, and here are the reasons:

1. We’ve only been together for six weeks. Something about that time frame just doesn’t seem like it’s long enough to be having sex. No matter how good the kisses are and how amazing his hands feel on me and how much I want to melt ever single time he looks at me. (But I’m thinking maybe eight weeks. Eight weeks definitely seems like enough time to wait.)
2. Sex is scary. What if I’m horrible at it? What if he doesn’t think I’m good? What if it just doesn’t work, or it hurts, or it’s gross? There are a million things that could go wrong.

“You were in his pool, in your underwear, and you didn’t have sex with him?”

Clarice asks, sounding skeptical. It’s Monday morning, and we’re sitting in the

cafeteria, waiting for the homeroom bell to ring. Clarice is touching up her nail polish and eating a Vitatop, this very disgusting muffin top thing that only has like five calories.

“No,” I say. “I told you. I didn’t want to.” I just got finished explaining my reasons to Clarice, which she seemed to approve of, but she’s still acting like maybe she doesn’t believe me.

“You didn’t want to?” She caps her nail polish and blows on her fingers, her blue eyes wide and doubtful.

“Well, of course I *wanted* to,” I say.

“Did he?”

“Yes.” Not that he said it. But I could definitely tell. “But like I said, we’ve only been going out for a little over a month.”

“A month is a long time in some circles,” she says. “So I’m proud of you. You have to make him work for it.”

The bell rings, and I start to gather my books. “I’m meeting Cooper before homeroom. Do you want to grab something to eat with us after school?”

“Sure,” Clarice says. “I’ll text you.”

I head down the hall toward Cooper’s homeroom, but when I turn the corner, I stop. Cooper’s standing against a row of lockers, deep in conversation with Tyler. Cooper’s got his hands in his pockets and he’s trying to push past Tyler, but Tyler reaches out and puts his hand on Cooper’s shoulder.

“I hope it’s the truth,” Tyler says, his tone harsh.

“Of course it’s the truth,” Cooper says. “Come on, man.”

“And she doesn’t know?”

“I told you she doesn’t!”

“Well, it has to happen soon.” Tyler moves down the hall roughly, bumping into a bunch of sophomore girls who are huddled around someone’s iPhone. Cooper leans his head against the lockers and closes his eyes, almost like he’s so stressed out about something that he can’t take it.

“Hey,” I say.

“Hey!” he says, a smile crossing his face. But it seems forced. “Are you a sight for sore eyes.” He brushes his lips against mine.

“What was that about?”

“What was what about?”

“You and Tyler.”

“Oh, that,” he says, rolling his eyes. “It was nothing.”

“It didn’t sound like nothing.”

“He was just mad,” he says. “because I haven’t been hanging out with him as much as I used to.” He puts his arm around me and pulls me close, but I can’t make myself melt into him the way I usually do.

All day, I can’t focus. My head is obsessing, going crazy, thinking about all the things that could be going on with Cooper. Drugs? Gambling? Some kind of blackmail? Are the 318s really some kind of high school mob, like we were talking about that day at the movies?

Later that night, at Cooper’s, I still can’t calm down. I’m all worked up and anxious, and I know I have to talk to Cooper about it. But I’m almost afraid to bring

it up. And besides, the last time I brought this stuff up, that day outside the restaurant when I asked him who he'd been texting, I got the feeling he was lying to me.

So when Cooper goes downstairs to get us both some water, I do something really stupid. But I can't help it. It's like I'm a rubber band that's snapped. I've been tense all day, and suddenly, the emptiness of the room is too much to take. My self-control just disappears, like a balloon floating up into the sky.

I think about what Isabella Royce said to me in the cafeteria that day. I think about Tyler showing up at the BU party. I think about Cooper getting all weird about his texts and phone calls. I think about what I saw in the hall this morning. And before I can stop myself, I'm at his computer. I'm on his gmail, trying a bunch of different passwords in an effort to break into his account. But none of the words I'm trying are working, and so then I'm looking around for his phone, but he must have taken it with him when he went downstairs. And that's when I really lose it. I just start going through everything. His bag. His nightstand. His desk drawers, searching for something, anything. Until finally I find it. A piece of paper, all crinkled up and yellow, sitting at the bottom of his math folder.

318s Initiation, it says across the top in swirly script

Your task, should you chose to accept it, is one of conviction. You must find a girl, and convince her you love her. Once you hit 100 pts on the following list, you will be permitted to move on to your next task....

There's a list that follows, and I scan it, a sick feeling rising up from my stomach to the back of my throat. *5 pts for kissing, 30 pts for third base, 60 pts for...* I hear Cooper coming up the stairs, and I whirl around, the sound of my heart throbbing in my ears.

"Here you go," Cooper says, shutting the door and holding a bottle of water out to me. "And I ordered pizza. Pepperoni and mushroom, because I know you..." He trails off when he sees the paper in my hand.

"Eliza," he says. And the look on his face, one of pain and regret, is almost enough to stop me. Almost.

"*Don't*," I say, and I push past him, grabbing my sweatshirt off his bed and moving toward the door. I need to get out of here, the room is spinning, and I need to get out of here, to get away from him, to get away from all of this.

He grabs my arm, and I wrench away from his touch, feeling like I've been slapped. "Eliza," he says. "Listen, let me explain. You don't – "

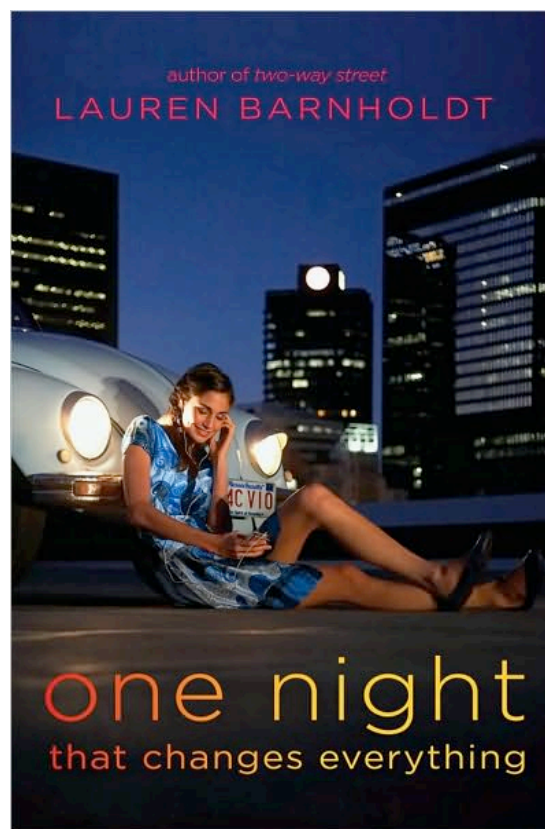
"No," I spit. "Trust me. I do."

I run down the stairs, almost tripping a couple of times because of the tears that are making my vision all blurry. Once I'm outside, I take big gulps of air as hot tears spill down my cheeks. And then I'm running, my legs moving themselves forward toward I don't know where, and my hands are fumbling in my pocket for my phone.

"Kate?" I say when she answers. And I'm crying so hard I can barely talk. "I need you..."

How will Eliza get over Cooper? Will she get her revenge on him and the 318s? And what other secrets is Cooper hiding about his feelings for Eliza, and the real reason he was dating her? Will they ever end up back together? Find out in ONE NIGHT THAT CHANGES EVERYTHING by Lauren Barnholdt, available now from Simon and Schuster, in ebook and in stores everywhere...

Turn the page for a sneak peek of ONE NIGHT THAT CHANGES EVERYTHING...



ONE NIGHT THAT CHANGES EVERYTHING

By Lauren Barnholdt

Chapter One

7:00 pm

I lose everything. Keys, my wallet, money, library books. People don't even take it seriously anymore. Like when I lost the hundred dollars my grandma gave me for back-to-school shopping, my mom didn't blink an eye. She was all, "Oh, Eliza, you should have given it to me to hold onto" and then she just went on with her day.

I try not to really stress out about it anymore. I mean, the things I lose eventually show up. And if they don't, I can always replace them.

Except for my purple notebook. My purple notebook is completely and totally irreplaceable. It's not like I can just march into the Apple store and buy another one. Which is why it totally figures that after five years of keeping very close tabs on it (five years! I've never done anything consistently for five years!) I've lost it.

"What are you doing?" my best friend Clarice asks. She's sitting at my computer in the corner of my room, IM'ing with her cousin, Jamie. Clarice showed up at nine o'clock this morning, with a huge bag of Cheetos and a six-pack of soda. "I'm ready to

party,” she announced when I opened my front door. Then she pushed past me and marched up to my room with the snacks.

I tried to point out that it was way too early to be up on a Saturday, but Clarice didn’t care because a) she’s a morning person and b) she thought the weekend needed to start asap, since my parents are away for the night, and she figured we should maximize the thirty-six hour window of their absence.

“I’m looking for something,” I say from under my bed. My body is shoved halfway under, rooting around through the clothes, papers, and books that have somehow accumulated under there since the last time I cleaned. Which was, you know, months ago. My hand brushes against something wet and hard. Hmm.

“What could you possibly be looking for?” she says. “We have everything we need right here.”

“If you’re referring to the Cheetos,” I say, “I’m sorry, but I think I’m going to need a little more than that.”

“No one,” Clarice declares in her Southern accent, “needs more than Cheetos.” She takes one out of the bag and slides it into her mouth, chewing delicately. Clarice is from the South, and for some reason, when she moved here a couple of years ago, she’d never had Cheetos. We totally bonded over them one day in the cafeteria, and ever since then, we’ve been inseparable. Me, Clarice, and Cheetos. Not necessarily in that order.

“So what are you looking for?” she asks again.

“Just my notebook,” I say. “The purple one.”

“Oooh,” she says. “Is that your science notebook?”

“No,” I say.

“Math?” she tries.

“No,” I say.

“Then what?” she frowns.

“It’s just this notebook I need,” I say. I abandon the wet, hard, mystery object under the bed, deciding I can deal with it later. And by later, I mean, you know, never.

“What kind of notebook?” she presses.

“Just you know, a notebook,” I lie. My face gets hot, and I hurry over to my closet and open the door, turning my back to her so that she can’t see I’m getting all flushed.

The thing is, no one really knows the truth about what’s in my purple notebook. Not Clarice, not my other best friend, Marissa, not even my sister, Kate. The whole thing is just way too embarrassing. I mean, a notebook that lists every thing that you’re afraid of doing? Like, written down? In *ink*? Who does that? It might be a little bit crazy, even. Like, for real crazy. Not just “oh isn’t that charming and endearing” crazy but “wow that might be a deep seeded psychological issue” crazy.

But I started the notebook when I was twelve, so I figure I have a little bit of wiggle room in the psychiatric disorders department. And besides, it was totally started under duress. There was this whole situation, this very real possibility that my dad was going to get a job transfer to a town fifty miles away. My whole family was going to move, to a place where no one knew us. Not me, and not my perfect older sister Kate.

So of course in my deluded little twelve-year-old brain, I became convinced that if I could just move to a different house and a different town, I’d be a totally different person. I’d leave my braces and frizzy hair behind, and turn myself into a goddess. No

one would know me at my new school, so I could be anyone I wanted, not just “Kate Sellman’s little sister Eliza.” I bought a purple notebook at the drugstore with my allowance, and I started writing down all the things I was afraid to do at the time, but would of course be able to do in my new school.

They were actually pretty lame at first, like French kiss a boy, or ask a boy to the dance, or wear these ridiculous tight pants that all the girls were wearing that year. But somehow putting them down on paper made me feel better, and after my dad’s job transfer fell through, I kept writing in it. And I kept writing in it, and writing in it, and writing in it. And, um, I still write in it. Not every day or anything. Just occasionally.

Of course, the things I list have morphed a little over the years from silly to serious. I still put dumb things in, like wanting to wear a certain outfit, but I have more complicated things in there, too. Like how I wish I had the nerve to go to a political rally, or how I wish I could feel okay about not knowing what I want to major in when I go to college. And the fact that these very embarrassing and current things are WRITTEN DOWN IN MY NOTEBOOK means I have to find it. Like, now.

The doorbell rings as I’m debating whether or not the notebook could be in my parents’ car, traveling merrily on its way to the Shaker furniture conference they went to. This would be good, since a) it would at least be safe, but bad because a) what if my parents read it and b) I won’t be able to check the car until they get home, which means I will spend the entire weekend on edge and freaking out.

“That’s probably Marissa,” I say to Clarice.

Clarice groans and rolls her blue eyes. “Why is *she* coming over?” she asks. She pouts out her pink-glossed bottom lip.

“Because she’s our friend,” I say. Which is only a half truth. Marissa is my friend, and Clarice is my friend, and Marissa and Clarice, well... they have this weird sort of love/hate relationship. They both really love each other deep down, (at least, I think they do), but Marissa thinks Clarice is a little bit of an airhead and kind of a tease, and Clarice thinks Marissa is a little crazy and slightly slutty. They’re both kind of right.

Marissa must have gotten tired of waiting and just let herself in, because a second later, she appears in my doorway.

“What are you doing in there?” she asks.

“I’m looking for something,” I say from inside my closet, where I’m throwing bags, sweaters, belts, and shoes over my shoulder in an effort to see if my notebook has somehow been buried at the bottom. I try to remember the last time I wrote in it. I think it was last week. I had dinner with my sister and then I wrote about what I would say to.....Well. What I would say to a certain person. If I had the guts to I mean. And if I ever wanted to even think or talk about that person again, which I totally don’t.

“What something?” Marissa asks. She steps gingerly through the disaster area that is now my room and plops down on the bed.

“A notebook,” Clarice says. Her fingers are flying over the keyboard of my laptop as she IMs.

“You mean like for school?” Marissa asks. “You said this was going to be our party weekend! No studying allowed!”

“Yeah!” Clarice says, agreeing with Marissa for once. She holds the bag of Cheetos out to her. “You want a Cheeto?” Marissa takes one.

“No,” I say, “*You guys* said this was going to be our party weekend.” Although honestly, we don’t really party all that much. At least, I don’t. “All I said was ‘my parents are going away on Saturday, do you want to come over and keep me company.’”

“Yes,” Clarice says. “And that implies party weekend.”

“Yeah,” Marissa says. “Come on, Eliza, we have to at least do *something*.”

“Like what?” I ask.

“Like invite some guys over,” Clarice says.

Marissa nods in agreement, then adds “And go skinny dipping and get drunk.”

And then Clarice gets a super nervous look on her face, and she quickly rushes on to add, “I mean, not guys *guys*. I mean, not guys to like date or anything. Just to ... I mean, I don’t know if you’re ready to, or if you even want to – oh, crap, Eliza, I’m sorry.” She bites her lip, and Marissa shoots her a death glare, her brown eyes boring into Clarice’s blue ones.

“It’s fine,” I say. “You guys don’t have to keep tiptoeing around it. I am completely and totally over him.” I’m totally lying, and they totally know it. The thing is, three and a half weeks ago, I got dumped by Cooper Marriatti, aka the last person I wrote about in my notebook, aka the person who I never, ever want to talk about again. (Obviously I can say his name while defending myself from the allegation that I still like him – that is a total exception to the “never bringing his name up again” rule.) I really liked him, but it didn’t work out. To put it mildly. Cooper did something really despicable to me, and for that reason, I am totally over it.

“Of course you are,” Clarice says, nodding her head up and down. “And of course I know we don’t have to tiptoe around it.”

“I heard he didn’t get into Brown,” Marissa announces. I snap my head up and step out of my closet, interested in spite of myself.

“What do you mean?” I ask. Cooper is a senior, a year older than us, and his big dream was get into Brown. Seriously, it was all his family could talk about. It was pretty annoying, actually, now that I think about it. I mean, I don’t think he even really wanted to go to Brown. He just applied because his parents wanted him to, and the only reason *they* even wanted him to go was because his dad went there, and his grandpa went there, and maybe even his great grandpa went there. If Brown was even around then. Anyway, the point is, the fact that he didn’t get in is a big deal. To him and his family, I mean. Obviously, I could care less.

“Yeah,” Marissa says. “Isabella Royce told me.” She quickly averts her eyes. Ugh. Isabella Royce. She’s the girl Cooper is now rumored to be dating, this totally ridiculous sophomore. She’s very exotic looking, long dark straight hair, perfect almond shaped eyes, dark skin. I hate her.

“Anyway,” I say.

“Yeah, anyway,” Clarice says. She holds out the bag of Cheetos, and this time, I take one. “Oooh,” she says as I crunch away. “Looks like Jeremiah added some new facebook pictures.” She leans over and squints at the screen of my laptop. She’s saying this just to mess with Marissa. Jeremiah is the guy Marissa likes. They hook up once in a while, and it’s kind of a ... I guess you would say booty call situation. Meaning that,

you know, Jeremiah calls her when he wants to hook up, and Marissa keeps waiting for it to turn into something else.

“That’s nice,” Marissa says, trying to pretend she doesn’t care. “Here,” she says, picking a stack of letters up off the bed and holding them out to me. “I brought you your mail.”

“Thanks,” I say, flipping through it aimlessly. I hardly ever get mail, but sometimes my sister Kate will get a catalog or something sent to her, and since she’s away at college, I can hijack it. But today there actually is a letter for me. Well, to me and my parents. It’s from the school.

“What’s that?” Marissa asks, noticing me looking at it. She’s off the bed now and over in the corner, picking through the mound of clothes I hefted out of my closet. She picks a shirt off the pile on the floor, holds it in front of herself, and studies her reflection in the full length mirror. “Are my boobs crooked?” she asks suddenly. She grabs them and pushes them together through her shirt. “I think maybe my boobs are crooked.”

“Your boobs,” I say, rolling my eyes. “Are not crooked.” Clarice stays noticeably quiet and Marissa frowns.

“They’re definitely crooked,” she says. I slide my finger under the envelope and pull out the piece of paper.

“You should really hope that’s not true,” Clarice says sagely. She whirls around on my desk chair and studies Marissa.

“Why not?” Marissa asks.

“Because there’s no way to really correct that,” Clarice says. “Like, if your boobs are too big, you can get them reduced, if they’re too droopy you can get them lifted. But

for crooked boobs, I dunno.” She looks really worried, like Marissa’s crooked boobs might mean the end of her. “Although I guess maybe you could get them, like, balanced or something.” She grins, totally proud of herself for coming up with this idea.

“Hmm,” Marissa says. She smooths her short brown hair back from her face. “You’re right. There’s no, like, boob straightening operation.”

“You guys,” I say. “are nuts.” I look down at the folded piece of paper in my hand, which is probably some kind of invitation to meet the teacher night or something.

Dear Eliza, Mr. and Dr. Sellman,

This letter is to advise you that we will be having a preliminary hearing on Tuesday, November 17th at 2 o’clock pm, to discuss Eliza’s response to the recent slander complaint that has been filed against her. Eliza will be called on to talk about her experience with the website, LanesboroLosers.com including her involvement and participation in the comments that were posted on October 21st, about a student, Cooper Marriatti.

Please be advised that all of you will be allowed to speak.

If you have any questions, please feel free to give me a call at 555-6789 ext. 541.

Sincerely,

Graham Myers, Dean of Students

Oh. My. God.

“What the hell,” I say. “Is this?” I start waving the paper around, flapping it back and forth in the air, not unlike the way a crazy person might do.

“What the hell is what?” Marissa asks. She drops her boobs, crosses the room in two strides, and plucks the paper out of my hand. She scans it, then looks at Clarice.

“Oh,” she says. Clarice jumps up off her perch at my desk and takes the paper from Marissa. She reads it, and then Clarice and Marissa exchange a look. One of those looks you never, ever want to see your best friends exchanging. One of those, “Uh oh, we have a secret and do we really want to tell her?” looks.

“What?” I practically scream. I narrow my eyes at the both of them. “What do you two know about this?”

Marissa bites her lip. “Weee-el,” she says. “I’m not sure if it’s true.”

“Not sure if what’s true?” I say.

“It’s nothing,” Clarice says. She gives Marissa another look, one that says, “Let’s not tell her, we’re going to freak her out too much.”

“Totally,” Marissa says. “It’s nothing.”

“Someone,” I say, “had better tell me exactly what this nothing is.” I put my hands on my hips and try to look menacing.

“I heard it from Marissa,” Clarice says, sounding nervous.

“I heard it from Kelsey Marshall,” Marissa says.

“HEARD WHAT?” I almost scream. I mean, honestly.

“We-ell,” Marissa says again. “The rumor is that Cooper didn’t get into Brown because of what you wrote about him on Lanesboro Losers.”

“But that’s... that doesn’t make any sense.” I frown, and Marissa and Clarice exchange another disconcerting look.

Lanesboro Losers is a website that my older sister Kate started last year when she was a senior. The concept is simple: Every guy in our school is listed, and has a profile. Kind of like facebook, except Kate set up profiles for every guy – so basically they’re on there, whether they like it or not. Under each guy’s picture is a place for people to log in and leave comments regarding any information they may have about that guy and how he is when it comes to girls.

So, like, for example – if you date a guy and then you find out he has a girlfriend who goes to another school, you can log on, find his profile, and write “you should be careful about this guy since the ass has a girlfriend who goes to another school.”

It’s pretty genius when you think about it. Kate got the idea when a bunch of the boys at our school started this list ranking the hottest girls in school. Only it wasn’t just like “the top eight hottest girls” or whatever. They ranked them all the way down to the very last one. Kate, who was number one on the list, was outraged. So she decided to fight back, and started Lanesboro Losers. Even though she’s at college now, she keeps up with the hosting, and has a bunch of girls from our school acting as moderators. (I would totally be a moderator if I could, but again, another thing I’m afraid of – the moderators take a certain amount of abuse at school from the guys who know what they do.)

“What do you mean he didn’t get into Brown because of what I wrote about him?” I ask now, mulling this new information over in my head.

“He didn’t get into Brown because of what you wrote about him,” Marissa repeats.

“I heard you the first time,” I say. “But that makes zero sense.”

“It totally makes sense,” Clarice says. “Apparently the Brown recruiter googled him, and when they read what you wrote about his math test, they brought it up at his interview and basically told him his early decision application was getting rejected.”

I sit down on the bed. “That thing I wrote about his math test was true,” I say defensively.

Well. Sort of. Last year before his math final, Cooper got a bunch of study questions from his friend Tyler, and when he showed up to take his math final, it turned out they weren’t just study questions – it was the actual test. Cooper had already given the packet back to Tyler, and for some ridiculous reason, he didn’t want to get Tyler in trouble, so he didn’t tell anyone. So see? He *did* cheat, even though it was unintentional.

“It was totally true,” Marissa says, nodding up and down. “Which is why you shouldn’t feel bad about what you wrote.” She gives Clarice a pointed look.

“Totally,” Clarice says. “You shouldn’t feel bad about it.” She keeps nodding her head up and down, the way people do when they don’t really believe what they’re saying.

I close my eyes, lean back on my bed, and think about what I wrote about Cooper on Lanesboro Losers. I have pretty much every word memorized, since I spent a couple of hours obsessing over what I should write. (It couldn’t be too bitter, but it couldn’t look like I was trying *not* to be too bitter, either. It was a very delicate balance that needed to be struck. Also, I couldn’t post the truth about what really happened between me and Cooper, since it was way too humiliating.) I finally settled on, “Cooper Marriatti is a total and complete jerk. He cheated on his final math test junior year just so he could

pass, and he also might have herpes.” The herpes thing was of course made up, but I couldn’t help myself. (And as you can see, despite my best efforts, I totally missed the balance.)

Anyway, the thing about Lanesboro Losers is that once you post something on there, they won’t take it down. It’s a failsafe, just in case you end up posting something about a guy when he’s being a jerk to you, and then try to log on and erase it when you guys are back together. Kate set it up so that it’s totally not allowed.

“Whatever,” I say, my heart beating fast. “I don’t feel bad.” I hope saying the words out loud will make them true. And for a second, it works. I mean, who cares about dumb Cooper and dumb Brown? It’s his own fault. If he hadn’t done something totally disgusting and despicable to me, if he hadn’t lied to me and been a complete and total jerk, I wouldn’t have written that, and he would be going to Brown. So it’s totally his own fault, and if he wants to blame anyone, he should blame himself, really, because it’s no concern to me if he wants to --

My cell phone starts ringing then, and I claw through the blankets on my bed, looking for it. Some books clatter onto the floor, and Clarice jumps back. She’s wearing open toed pink sparkly shoes, and one of the books comes dangerously close to falling on her foot.

“Hello,” I say. The number on the caller ID is one I don’t recognize, so I try to sound super professional and innocent, just in case it’s someone from the dean’s office.

There’s a commotion on the other end, something that sounds like voices and music, then the sound of something crinkling, and then finally, I hear a male voice say, “Eliza?”

“Yeah?” I say.

“Eliza, listen, I didn’t ..” Whoever it is is keeping their voice really low and quiet, and I’m having a lot of trouble hearing what they’re saying.

“Hello!” I repeat.

“Who is it?” Marissa asks. “Is it Jeremiah?” Sometimes Jeremiah calls me looking for Marissa, if he thinks we might be together, or if he can’t get through to her for some reason. Clarice’s theory is that he does this so he can relay messages to me instructing Marissa to come over for a hook-up, while not having to actually talk to her.

“Hello?” I say again into the phone. I put my finger in my other ear the way they do sometimes on TV, and it seems to help a little.

“Eliza, it’s me,” the voice says, and this time I hear it loud and clear. Cooper. “Eliza, you have to listen to me, the 318s and Tyler....” There’s a burst of static, and the rest of what he’s saying gets cut off.

“Cooper?” I ask, and my heart starts to beat a little faster.

Marissa and Clarice look at each other. Then in one fast, spring-like movement, they’re on the bed next to me, huddled around the phone.

“Yeah, it’s me,” he says. There’s another burst of commotion on the other end of the line.

“Eliza, listen to me,,” he says. “You’re going to have to –” And then I hear him talking to someone else in the background.

“What do you want?” I ask, my stomach dropping into my shoes. “If this is about you not getting into Brown, then honestly, I don’t even care. It’s all your own fault that you didn’t get into Brown, and I don’t regret – “

“Eliza,” Cooper says. “Listen. To. Me. You have to meet me.” His voice is low now, serious and dark. “Right now. At Cure.”

Marissa and Clarice are falling all over themselves and me, trying to get at the phone, and Clarice’s earring gets caught on my sweater. “Ow, ow, my ear!” she screams, then reaches down and sets it free. I pull the phone away from my ear and put it on speaker in an effort to get them to calm down.

“Cure?” I repeat to Cooper incredulously. Cure is a nightclub in Boston, and they’re notorious for not IDing. I’ve never been there. But Kate used to go all the time, and most of the kids at my school have gone at least once or twice.

“Yeah,” he says. “Eliza.. “ I hear someone say something to him in the background, and then suddenly, his tone changes. “Meet me there. At Cure. In an hour.”

“Tell him no,” Marissa whispers, her brown eyes flashing. “Tell him that you never want to see him again!”

“Ask him if he really turned you into the dean’s office!” Clarice says. She picks up the letter from the dean’s office and waves it in the air in front of me.

“Are you there?” Cooper asks, all snotty like.

“Yes, I’m here,” I say. “Look, why do you want to meet me at Cure?”

“Don’t ask questions,” he says. “You’ll find out when you get there. And make sure you wear something sexy.”

I pull the phone away from my ear and look at it for a second, sure I’ve misheard him. “*Wear something sexy?* Are you *crazy?*” I ask. “I’m not going.” This doesn’t sound like a “come to Cure so I can apologize to you and make sure you forgive me for

the horrible things I've done" kind of request. It sounds like a "Come to Cure so that something horrible can happen that may involve humiliating you further."

Marissa nods her head and give me a "you go, girl" look.

"Yes, you are," Cooper says.

"No, I'm not," I say.

"Yes, you are," Cooper says. And then he says something horrible. Something I wouldn't ever even imagine he would say in a million years. Something that is maybe quite possibly the worst thing he could ever say ever, ever, *ever*. "Because I have your purple notebook." And then he hangs up.

Chapter Two

7:47 pm

“What the hell is in the damn thing?” Marissa asks. It’s forty-five minutes later, and the three of us have piled into Marissa’s mom’s car, and are on the Mass Pike, traveling at about eighty miles an hour. Usually I’m not a fan of Marissa (or anyone, really) driving that fast, but at this point, speed is the least of my worries. My first being, you know, that Cooper has my notebook, and the second being that I am on my way to Cure, and that I am wearing a ridiculous outfit.

“It’s just.. I need it, okay?” I’m rummaging through my purse for my passion pink lip gloss. I slide the visor mirror down and smear the gloss on. Just because my life is potentially over, doesn’t mean I don’t want to look good. Plus I’m going to see Cooper, and even if he is a total bastard, I might as well look my best when I see him. Not that I care about Cooper, of course. But there will be other guys there, too. Guys that might potentially be my future husband.

Plus, lipstick goes with this outfit, which consists of:

Tight skinny leg jeans

Gray shoes with platform heels and studs on the sides

A backless silver shirt that plunges down so far in front I’m afraid my boobs are going to fall out

All of these items of clothing were left in my sister Kate's closet when she left for college. Marissa insisted I wear them, since apparently nothing I owned was Cure appropriate.

"Why are you putting lipstick on?" Clarice pipes up from the backseat. One of the good things about Clarice and Marissa having their little rivalry is that I always get to ride shotgun.

"Because we're going to a club," I say. I glance in the backseat. "You're wearing lipstick," I point out. Of course, this isn't really the same thing. Clarice always wears lipstick. She's mostly always dressed up. I think it's part of her Southern upbringing. Like right now for example. She's wearing a sleeveless, long white eyelet shirt over black leggings and delicate silver open toed sandals. Her long blonde hair is curled perfectly, and her make up is flawless. This is how she showed up at my house this morning. At nine am. When most normal people are dead to the world.

"Yeah," Clarice says. "But I already had my lipstick on. You're putting yours on now, like you're getting ready for the club."

"We are going to a club," I repeat. "There's nothing wrong with putting on makeup before we get to a club."

"It's because of Cooper, isn't it?" Clarice asks. She flops back into the seat, her long blonde curls bouncing. I'm not sure if it's my imagination, but she almost seems... happy about it. That I might be dressing up for Cooper. Which would kind of make sense. Clarice is an eternal romantic, and she gets very caught up in the idea of people getting back together. Plus she always loved Cooper. I glare at her.

“Whatever,” Marissa says. She signals and changes lanes. “Are you going to tell us what’s in this notebook or what? That was part of the deal, remember?”

It took me a while to convince Marissa that we needed to go to Cure. One, she’s not really supposed to be driving her mom’s car into the city. Two, she didn’t understand why I was in such a rush to go off and meet Cooper. Which makes sense, given everything that he’s done to me. The only way I could get her to take me was to promise to tell her what was in the notebook.

“Look, “ I say, taking a deep breath. “We are going to Cure, I am going to get the notebook back, and maybe then I will tell you what’s in it.”

“So I’m just supposed to take you down there, without any idea what’s going on?”

“Um, it’s called having faith in your friends, Marissa,” Clarice says from the backseat. She’s opened a bottle of nail polish and is painting her toenails a dark crimson color.

“Thank you, Clarice,” I say.

“Oh, I have faith in my friends all right,” Marissa says. She pushes her bangs out of her face, and pulls the car onto the off ramp. “But I also like to know what they’re doing so that I can watch out for them.” She glances in the rearview mirror and tries to catch Clarice’s eye, but she’s too busy with her nail polish. “You’d better not spill that,” she says. “My mom will kill me, and then I’ll kill you.”

“You won’t be able to kill me if you’re dead,” Clarice says sweetly. “And besides, I’m not going to spill it. I’m very good with balancing things.” She rolls her

eyes like she can't even fathom the possibility of spilling her nail polish, just as Marissa goes over a pothole, and the bottle almost drops onto the floor.

"Oops!" Clarice says holding it up triumphantly. "Close one."

When we get to Cure, we breeze right by the bouncer without any sort of ID check, and once we're inside, I become instantly grateful I took the time to change. Even though it's mid-November and fifty degrees outside, everyone in here is scantily clad. Most of the girls are in tight black pants or short skirts, with low cut tops. In fact, it seems like the more skin and/or tightness, the better.

Marissa, Clarice, and I huddle in a corner and look around for Cooper.

"Do you see him?" Marissa asks, as we all scan the crowd. Dance music is pumping through the speakers at a ridiculously high volume, but no one's really on the dance floor yet, and the tables set up around the perimeter of the club are mostly empty. At the bar, two guys are ordering drinks, and the bartender, a short girl with a lip piercing and a tight tank top, is laughing loudly at what they're saying. I guess it's too early for things to be really crazy in here.

"No," I say. "I don't think he's here."

"I'm going to get us some drinks and then we're going to wait for him," Clarice announces. She disappears and returns a few minutes later with two cosmopolitans (virgin for her – Clarice doesn't drink, so she always orders cranberry juice and then calls it a virgin cosmo), and a bottle of water wedged under her arm for Marissa, since she's driving. This doesn't seem like the kind of place in which one should order a cosmopolitan, but I can't really imagine Clarice ordering a rum and coke or a Bud Light

or anything like that, and besides, I like cosmopolitans, so I'm not going to complain. We find a table in the middle section of the club, with a good view of the crowd, and sit down with our drinks.

"Now it's important to be haughty," Marissa is saying. "Don't let him think he's going to get one over on you." Hmm. That's great in theory, but I don't think Marissa really has a good grasp on what's in that notebook, aka all the information you'd possibly need to ruin my life.

I start to feel a little faint thinking about it, and so I take a big sip of my drink. It's cool and sweet going down, and I instantly feel better. Although I don't think drinking cosmos is going to be a very good long-term solution because a) alcohol dehydrates you, which is not a good thing when you're already feeling light-headed and b) it's going to do me no good to be drunk, since I'm going to need all my wits about me to deal with Cooper.

Marissa pulls her cell phone out and sets it down on the table next to her.

Clarice gets a disapproving look on her face.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" Marissa asks.

"Because y'all are taking your phone out just so you can wait for Jeremiah to call."

"So?" Marissa asks. "Jeremiah is a guy I am dating, of course I'm going to wait for his call. There is nothing wrong with wanting to talk to the guy you are dating."

Clarice takes a dainty sip of her drink and doesn't say anything. Since Jeremiah and Marissa spend most of their time making out, their relationship goes against everything Clarice believes a true-to-life romance should be. (That's Clarice's term, by

the way. Not mine. I would never say anything like “true-to-life romance.” Especially since I’m not the best one to be speaking on any kind of romance, true-to-life or not.)

Marissa opens her mouth to say something else, like maybe she’s going to defend her relationship with Jeremiah, when I see him. Cooper. Sitting over in the corner at one of those big round booths. He’s by himself, wearing a navy blue long sleeve t-shirt, and he’s sipping what looks like a soda, but if I know Cooper, there’s definitely some rum in that drink. Or maybe even tequila. Actually, that’s not true. Cooper’s not really a big drinker. I mean, he drinks, but he’s not one of those people who’s always falling all over themselves drunk every weekend. But for some reason it’s better if I assume he’s over there with some hard liquor. It makes him seem shadier. Not that he really needs any help in that department.

“There he is,” I say, cutting off Marissa as she’s about to launch into a long spiel involving the reasons Jeremiah is not just using her for sex. My voice sounds all strained, like I’m trying to talk around a mouthful of marbles

“What?” Clarice asks. She leans in closer and I raise my voice to be heard over the music.

“There. He. Is.” I say. “Don’t look.” But of course the two of them do look, turning around on their swivel chairs until they’re facing him. Cooper looks up and locks eyes with me, and I quickly look away.

“Oh. My. God.” I say to Clarice and Marissa. “Is he.. what is he doing, is he coming over here?”

“Um, no,” Clarice says. “He’s just...” she frowns, “...sitting.”

“Is he with anyone else?” I ask. “Do you see Tyler? Or any of the 318s?” The 318s are this secret society at our school, a sort of high school fraternity composed of all the most popular (and jerkiest, IMO), guys at our school. No one knows exactly why they’re called the 318s, although the rumor is that the original three founding members had had sex with eighteen girls between them, and they apparently thought it was a real hoot to incorporate that into their name.

Anyway, no one’s supposed to know who their members are, but it’s pretty much common knowledge that Tyler Twill is their president. And once you know that, you can kind of figure out who’s in by who’s hanging out with him. Although of course they’d never admit it. But I happen to know for a fact that Cooper is one of their members. They’re the ones who made him do the totally ridiculous despicable thing that he did to me a few weeks ago. It was part of his initiation task.

“He seems like he’s alone,” Marissa says.

“Do you see my notebook anywhere?” I ask.

“Um, no,” Marissa says. “I don’t see a notebook anywhere. It could be on the seat next to him, though.”

“You think?”

“I don’t know,” Marissa says. “If this is some kind of game, then he definitely wouldn’t bring it with him. Cooper Marriatti’s a lot of things, but he’s not stupid.”

“Or ugly,” Clarice says, sighing. I glare at her, even though she’s, of course, right. Cooper isn’t ugly. He’s really hot. But still. So not the time to bring it up.

“First of all, “ I say, starting to feel angry. “He actually *is* kind of that stupid, because anyone who would get involved with the 318s cannot be that smart. And second

of all, he really isn't even that cute." Lie, lie, lie. "Did I ever tell you about the scar on his stomach? He's totally deformed."

Clarice and Marissa go all quiet and look at each other nervously, because, of course I've told them about the scar on Cooper's stomach and of course I've told them about how sexy it is.

He got it while he was snowmobiling and he fell off and the snowmobile RAN HIM OVER and Cooper didn't even go to the hospital until later when they found out he had internal injuries. Of course, it's totally possible that I just (used to) think the scar was sexy because of what we were doing the first time I saw it. I swallow around the lump in my throat.

"And furthermore," I say, "I really wish you two would stop looking at each other like that. It's kind of rude." I take another sip of my drink. A big sip. But whatever. What is it they call alcohol? Liquid courage? Good. Fine. I'll take all the courage I can get right now, liquid or otherwise. "I will be right back." I announce. And then I hop off my chair and march right over to where Cooper is sitting.

"Hey," Cooper says when he sees me. He doesn't even look nervous. In fact, he looks totally relaxed, his arms draped across the back of the huge booth he's sitting in. Doesn't he know that if you are alone, you're not supposed to take a big booth that is meant for larger parties? What a jerk. Also, why isn't he nervous? I could totally freak out on him if I wanted. I would have a right to freak out on him, in fact, after what he did to me. I could.... I don't know. Punch him or scream at him or make a big scene, even.

“Give it back, “I demand, and hold my hand out. Maybe he’ll get more nervous if he sees I’m bossing him around, that I am obviously a force to be reckoned with.

“I don’t have it,” Cooper says. He moves over in the booth, then pats the seat next to him and motions for me to sit down. I look over my shoulder at where Clarice and Marissa are sitting, and then slide in next to him.

“So what’s the deal?” I ask. “What is this about?” Our legs are touching underneath the table, and I want to pull mine away, but I don’t. Not because I want to keep my leg against his, God no, but because I don’t want to give him the satisfaction of pulling my leg away.

“Eliza,” he says, leaning in close and whispering in my ear. His breath tickles my skin, and I can smell the familiar scent of Cooper – mint toothpaste and hair gel and some kind of yummy smelling cologne. “You’re going to get your notebook back, but you’re going to have to do what they say.”

“Do what they say?” I look at him. “Do what who say?” Even though, I of course already know who he’s talking about.

“You know, Tyler and all of them.” Cooper moves away from me then and looks at a spot across the room. I follow his gaze and see Tyler standing in the corner, huddled around a high-top table with a bunch of his friends. Ugh. This is like my worst nightmare. I close my eyes and count to three, but when I open them, I’m still here.

“Look,” I say. “If you think I’m going to participate in some weird, sick little game of yours, then you’re wrong.” I look him right in the eye. “I already did that, remember?” Cooper has the decency to look away then, at least. Probably because he

knows it's true, and he can't really dispute the truth. I reach down and rub my leg. It's still tingling from where he was touching it.

Cooper's phone starts to go off then. A text message. He looks at the phone and then looks at me.

"You have to ask a guy here to dance," he says. He scans the crowd. "That one." He points to an extremely good looking guy at the table across from us. He's blonde and wearing a blue button-up shirt and khaki pants. Tan skin. Expensive looking haircut. Not someone I would ever ask to dance. Mostly because I would never ask anyone to dance, but if I were, it would definitely not be that guy.

"I'm not," I say, gritting my teeth. "Doing that."

"Then they're going to put your notebook online," he says.

I blink at him, positive I've heard him wrong. "They're going to put my notebook online?" What the fuck is wrong with these people? I mean, honestly. "What the fuck is wrong with these people?" I ask.

"They're pissed," he says. "That you posted that thing about me online, and kept me from getting into Brown. Plus you outted me."

"Outted you?"

"Yeah, outted me. As being one of the 318s."

"Are you *kidding* me? They're mad about some dumb thing on a dumb high school website about their dumb secret society that maybe two people besides themselves even care about?"

Cooper shrugs, downs the rest of his drink, and then gets up and crosses the room over to where the 318s are sitting. I'm left sitting at the huge booth by myself. I look

down at the seat, thinking that maybe, just maybe, Cooper did bring the notebook and maybe he left it by accident. But of course the seat is empty.

I make my way back to Clarice and Marissa, my head spinning from the warmth of the club and the buzz of the alcohol and the shock of what just happened.

“What did he say, what did he say?” Clarice asks. She’s out of her seat and jumping around, hopping back and forth from one foot to the other, back and forth on her high silver sandals.

“He said,” I say, “that I have to ask that guy to dance.”

“What guy?” Marissa asks. I point him out.

“Oooh, he’s cute,” Clarice says. “Lucky girl.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” Marissa says, obviously a little quicker on the uptake than Clarice. “Why would they ask you to ask that guy to dance?”

“I don’t know,” I say, staring at him. “Maybe he’s a crazy stalker or something, and they know if I ask him to dance, I’ll end up in a dumpster somewhere, killed and dismembered.”

But as soon as the words are out of my mouth, I realize that’s not the reason. And that’s because I remember something. Something from my purple notebook. Something I wrote last year, one night after Kate came home from Cure and it seemed like she had a really, really, fun time. And that was, “Show up at Cure in a sexy outfit and ask the hottest guy there to dance.”

And then I get it. The 318s have somehow decided to make me do the things that are in my notebook. All the things I’m afraid of. The things I’ve been writing since the seventh grade. And if I don’t, they’re going to post the notebook online, and everyone at

school, no, everyone with an *internet connection*, will know all my secrets. For a second, it feels like my throat swallows up my heart, and my breath catches in my chest. There's only one thing left to do. I put my head in my hands and start to cry.