



My Life Next Door

By Huntley Fitzpatrick

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A gorgeous debut about family, friendship, first romance, and how to be true to one person you love without betraying another

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A dreamy summer read, full of characters who stay with you long after the story is over.

"A summer romance with depth." —*The Boston Sunday Globe*

"Fitzpatrick's excellent first novel movingly captures the intensity of first love." —*Publishers Weekly*, starred review

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Editorial Review

Review

“Will connect with your heart—guaranteed!”—Lurlene McDaniel, bestselling author of *Heart to Heart*
“An almost perfect summer romance.”—*Kirkus Reviews* “Serious swoonsville.”—iHeartDaily.com “Perfectly captures the heady joys of first love.”—VOYA “A summer romance with depth.”—*The Boston Sunday Globe*

About the Author

Huntley Fitzpatrick has always wanted to be a writer, ever since growing up in a small coastal Connecticut town much like the Stony Bay of her novel *My Life Next Door*. After college she worked in many fields, including academic publishing and as an editor at Harlequin. Huntley is currently a full-time writer, and mom to six children. She lives in South Dartmouth, Massachusetts.

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MY

LIFE

NEXT

DOOR

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DIAL BOOKS

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Table of Contents

Chapter One

The Garretts were forbidden from the start.

But that’s not why they were important.

We were standing in our yard that day ten years ago when their battered sedan pulled up to the low-slung shingled house next door, close behind the moving van.

“Oh no,” Mom sighed, arms falling to her sides. “I hoped we could have avoided this.”

“This—what?” my big sister called from down the driveway. She was eight and already restless with Mom’s chore of the day, planting jonquil bulbs in our front garden. Walking quickly to the picket fence that divided our house from the one next door, she perched on her tiptoes to peer at the new neighbors. I pressed my face to the gap in the slats, watching in amazement as two parents and five children spilled from the sedan, like a

clown car at the circus.

“This kind of thing,” Mom gestured toward the car with the trowel, twisting her silvery blond hair into a coil with the other hand. “There’s one in every neighborhood. The family that never mows their lawn. Has toys scattered everywhere. The ones who never plant flowers, or do and let them die. The messy family who lowers real estate values. Here they are. Right next door. You’ve got that bulb wrong side up, Samantha.”

I switched the bulb around, scooting my knees in the dirt to get closer to the fence, my eyes never leaving the father as he swung a baby from a car seat while a curly-haired toddler climbed his back. “They look nice,” I said.

I remember there was a silence then, and I looked up at my mother.

She was shaking her head at me, a strange expression on her face. “Nice isn’t the point here, Samantha. You’re seven years old. You need to understand what’s important. *Five* children. Good God. Just like your father’s family. Insanity.” She shook her head again, rolling her eyes heavenward.

I moved closer to Tracy and edged a fleck of white paint off the fence with my thumbnail. My sister looked at me with the same warning face she used when she was watching TV and I walked up to ask her a question.

“*He’s* cute,” she said, squinting over the fence again. I looked over to see an older boy unfold himself from the back of the car, baseball mitt in hand, reaching back to haul out a cardboard box full of sports gear.

Even then, Tracy liked to deflect, to forget how hard our mother found being a parent. Our dad had walked away without even a good-bye, leaving Mom with a one-year-old, a baby on the way, a lot of disillusionment, and, luckily, her trust fund from her parents.

As the years proved, our new neighbors, the Garretts, were exactly what Mom predicted. Their lawn got mowed sporadically at best. Their Christmas lights stayed hung till Easter. Their backyard was a hodgepodge of an in-ground pool and a trampoline and a swing set and monkey bars. Periodically, Mrs. Garrett would make an effort to plant something seasonal, chrysanthemums in September, impatiens in June, only to leave it to gasp and wither away as she tended to something more important, like her five children. They became eight children over the years. All approximately three years apart.

“My unsafe zone,” I overheard Mrs. Garrett explain one day at the supermarket when Mrs. Mason commented on her burgeoning belly, “is twenty-two months. That’s when they suddenly aren’t babies anymore. I love babies so much.”

Mrs. Mason had raised her eyebrows and smiled, then turned away with compressed lips and a baffled shake of her head.

But Mrs. Garrett seemed to ignore it, happy in herself and content with her chaotic family. Five boys and three girls by the time I turned seventeen.

Joel, Alice, Jase, Andy, Duff, Harry, George, and Patsy.

In the ten years since the Garretts moved next door, Mom hardly ever looked out the side windows of our house without huffing an impatient breath. Too many kids on the trampoline. Bikes abandoned on the lawn. Another pink or blue balloon tied to the mailbox, waving haphazardly in the breeze. Loud basketball games. Music blaring while Alice and her friends tanned. The bigger boys washing cars and spraying each other with hoses. If not those, it was Mrs. Garrett, calmly breast-feeding on the front steps, or sitting there on Mr.

Garrett's lap, for all the world to see.

"It's indecent," Mom would say, watching.

"It's legal," Tracy, future lawyer, always countered, flipping back her platinum hair. She'd station herself next to Mom, inspecting the Garretts out the big side window of the kitchen. "The courts have made it absolutely legal to breast-feed wherever you want. Her own front steps are definitely fair game."

"But why? Why do it at all when there are bottles and formula? And if you *must*, why not inside?"

"She's watching the other kids, Mom. It's what she's supposed to do," I'd sometimes point out, making my stand next to Tracy.

Mom would sigh, shake her head, and extract the vacuum cleaner from the closet as if it were a Valium. The lullaby of my childhood was my mom running the vacuum cleaner, making perfectly symmetrical lines in our beige living room carpet. The lines somehow seemed important to her, so essential that she'd turn on the machine as Tracy and I were eating breakfast, then slowly follow us to the door as we pulled on our coats and backpacks. Then she'd back up, eliminating our trail of footprints, and her own, until we were outside. Finally, she'd rest the vacuum cleaner carefully behind one of our porch columns only to drag it back in that night when she got home from work.

It was clear from the start that we were *not to play with the Garretts*. After bringing over the obligatory "welcome to the neighborhood" lasagna, my mother did her best to be very unwelcoming. She responded to Mrs. Garrett's smiling greetings with cool nods. She rebuffed Mr. Garrett's offers to mow, sweep up leaves, or shovel snow with a terse "We have a service, thanks all the same."

Finally, the Garretts stopped trying.

Though they lived right next door and one kid or another might pedal past me as I watered Mom's flowers, it was easy not to run into them. Their kids went to the local public schools. Tracy and I attended Hodges, the only private school in our small Connecticut town.

One thing my mother never knew, and would disapprove of most of all, was that I watched the Garretts. All the time.

Outside my bedroom window, there's a small flat section of the roof with a tiny fence around it. Not really a balcony, more like a ledge. It's in between two peaked gables, shielded from both the front and backyard, and it faces the right side of the Garretts' house. Even before they came, it was my place to sit and think. But afterward, it was my place to dream.

I'd climb out after bedtime, look through the lit windows, and see Mrs. Garrett doing the dishes, one of the younger kids sitting on the counter next to her. Or Mr. Garrett wrestling with the older boys in the living room. Or the lights going on where the baby must sleep, the figure of Mr. or Mrs. Garrett pacing back and forth, rubbing a tiny back. It was like watching a silent movie, one so different from the life I lived.

Over the years, I got more daring. I'd sometimes watch during the day, after school, hunched back against the side of the rough gable, trying to figure out which Garrett matched each name I heard called out the screen door. It was tricky because they all had wavy brown hair, olive skin, and sinewy builds, like a breed all their own.

Joel was the easiest to identify—the oldest and the most athletic. His picture often appeared in local papers

for various sports accomplishments—I knew it in black and white. Alice, next in line, dyed her hair outlandish colors and wore clothes that provoked commentary from Mrs. Garrett, so I had her down as well. George and Patsy were the littlest ones. The middle three boys, Jase, Duff, and Harry...I couldn't get them straight. I was pretty sure that Jase was the oldest of the three, but did that mean he was the tallest? Duff was supposed to be the smart one, competing in various chess competitions and spelling bees, but he didn't wear glasses or give off any obvious brainiac signals. Harry was constantly in trouble—"Harry! How could you?" was the refrain. And Andy, the middle girl, always seemed to be missing, her name called longest to come to the dinner table or pile into the car: "Annnnnnnnnndeeeeeeeeee!"

From my hidden perch, I'd peer out at the yard, trying to locate Andy, figure out Harry's latest escapade, or see what outrageous outfit Alice was wearing. The Garretts were my bedtime story, long before I ever thought I'd be part of the story myself.

Chapter Two

On the first sweltering hot night in June, I'm home alone, trying to enjoy the quiet but finding myself moving from room to room, unable to settle.

Tracy's out with Flip, yet another blond tennis player in her unending series of boyfriends. I can't reach my best friend, Nan, who's been completely distracted by *her* boyfriend, Daniel, since school ended last week and he graduated. There's nothing on TV I want to see, no place in town I feel like going. I've tried sitting out on the porch, but at low tide the humid air is overpowering, muddy-scented from the breeze off the river.

So I'm sitting in our vaulted living room, crunching the ice left over from my seltzer, skimming through Tracy's stack of *In Touch* magazines. Suddenly I hear a loud, continuous buzzing sound. As it goes on and on I look around, alarmed, trying to identify it. The dryer? The smoke detector? Finally, I realize it's the doorbell, buzzing and buzzing, on and on and on. I hurry to open the door, expecting—sigh—one of Tracy's exes, daring after too many strawberry daiquiris at the country club, come to win her back.

Instead, I see my mother, pressed against the doorbell, getting the daylight kissed out of her by some man. When I throw the door open, they half stumble, then he braces his hand on the jamb and just keeps kissing away. So I stand there, feeling stupid, arms folded, my thin nightgown shifting slightly in the thick air. All around me are summer voices. The lap of the shore far away, the roar of a motorcycle coming up the street, the *shhhh* of the wind in the dogwood trees. None of those, and certainly not my presence, stop my mom or this guy. Not even when the motorcycle backfires as it peels into the Garretts' driveway, which usually drives Mom crazy.

Finally, they come up for air, and she turns to me with an awkward laugh.

"Samantha. Goodness! You startled me."

She's flustered, her voice high and girlish. Not the authoritative "this is how it will be" voice she typically uses at home or the syrup-mixed-with-steel one she wields on the job.

Five years ago, Mom went into politics. Tracy and I didn't take it seriously at first—we'd hardly known Mom to vote. But she came home one day from a rally charged up and determined to be state senator. She ran, and she won, and our lives changed entirely.

We were proud of her. Of course we were. But instead of making breakfast and sifting through our book bags to be sure our homework was done, Mom left home at five o'clock in the morning and headed to Hartford "before the traffic kicks in." She stayed late for commissions and special sessions. Weekends

weren't about Tracy's gymnastics practices or my swim meets. They were for boning up on upcoming votes, staying for special sessions, or attending local events. Tracy pulled every bad-teenager trick in the book. She played with drugs and drinking, she shoplifted, she slept with too many boys. I read piles of books, registered Democratic in my mind (Mom's Republican), and spent more time than usual watching the Garretts.

So now tonight, I stand here, stunned into immobility by the unexpected and prolonged PDA, until Mom finally lets go of the guy. He turns to me and I gasp.

After a man leaves you, pregnant and with a toddler, you don't keep his picture on the mantel. We have only a few photographs of our dad, and they're all in Tracy's room. Still I recognize him—the curve of his jaw, the dimples, the shiny wheat-blond hair and broad shoulders. This man has all those things.

“Dad?”

Mom's expression morphs from dreamy bedazzlement to utter shock, as though I've cursed.

The guy shifts away from Mom, extends his hand to me. As he moves into the light of the living room, I realize he's much younger than my father would be now. “Hi there, darlin'. I'm the newest—and most enthusiastic—member of your mom's reelection campaign.”

Enthusiastic? I'll say.

He takes my hand and shakes it, seemingly without my participation.

“This is Clay Tucker,” Mom says, in the reverent tone one might use for Vincent van Gogh or Abraham Lincoln. She turns and gives me a reproving look, no doubt for the “Dad” comment, but quickly recovers. “Clay's worked on national campaigns. I'm very lucky he's agreed to help me out.”

In what capacity? I wonder as she fluffs her hair in a gesture that can't possibly be anything but flirtatious. *Mom?*

“So, Clay,” she continues. “I *told* you Samantha was a big girl.”

I blink. I'm five two. In heels. “Big girl” is a stretch. Then I get it. She means old. Old for someone as young as her to have.

“Clay was mighty surprised to find I had a teenager.” My mother tucks a wayward strand of newly fluffed hair behind her ear. “He says I look like one myself.”

I wonder if she's mentioned Tracy, or if she's going to keep her on the down-low for a while.

“You're as beautiful as your mother,” he says to me, “so now I believe it.” He has the kind of Southern accent that makes you think of melting butter on biscuits, and porch swings.

Clay looks around the living room. “What a terrific room,” he says. “Just invites a man to put his feet up after a long hard day.” Mom beams. She's proud of our house, renovates rooms all the time, tweaking the already perfect. He walks around slowly, examining the gigantic paintings of landscapes on the white, white walls, taking in the so-puffy-you-can't-sit-on-it beige couch and the immense armchairs, finally settling into the one in front of the fireplace. I'm shocked. I check Mom's face. Her dates always stop at the door. In fact, she's barely dated at all.

But Mom doesn't do her usual thing, glance at her watch, say, "Oh, goodness, look at the time," and politely shove him out the door. Instead, she gives that little girlish laugh again, toys with a pearl earring, and says, "I'll just make coffee."

She whirls toward the kitchen, but before she can take a step, Clay Tucker comes up to me, putting his hand on my shoulder. "Seems to me," he says, "you're the kind of girl who'd make the coffee herself and let her mama relax."

My face heats and I take an involuntary step back. Fact is, I usually do make tea for Mom when she comes in late. It's sort of a ritual. But no one has ever told me to do it. Part of me thinks I must have misheard. I met this guy, like, two seconds ago. The other part instantly feels chagrined, the way I do at school when I've forgotten to do the extra credit math problem, or at home when I shove my newly laundered clothes into a drawer unfolded. I stand there, struggling for a response, and come up blank. Finally I nod, turn, and go to the kitchen.

As I measure out coffee grounds, I can hear murmurs and low laughter coming from the living room. Who *is* this guy? Has Tracy met him? Guess not, if I'm the *big girl*. And anyway, Tracy's been off cheering Flip on at his tennis matches since they graduated last week. The rest of the time, they're parked in his convertible in our driveway, bucket seats down, while Mom's still at work.

"Coffee ready yet, sweetie?" Mom calls. "Clay here could use a pick-me-up. He's been working like a hound dog helping me out."

Hound dog? I pour freshly brewed coffee into cups, put them on a tray, find cream, sugar, napkins, and stalk back into the living room.

"That's fine for me, sweetheart, but Clay takes his in a big ol' mug. Right, Clay?"

"That's right," he says with a broad smile, holding the teacup out to me. "The biggest you got, Samantha. I run on caffeine. It's a weakness." He winks.

Returning from the kitchen a second time, I plunk the mug down in front of Clay. Mom says, "You're going to love Samantha, Clay. Such a smart girl. This past year she took all AP classes. A pluses in every one. She was on the yearbook staff, the school newspaper, used to be on the swim team...A star, my girl." Mom gives me her real smile, the one that goes all the way to her eyes. I start to smile back.

"Like mother, like daughter," Clay says, and my mom's eyes slide back to his face and stay there, transfixed. They exchange a private look and Mom goes over and perches on the armrest of his chair. I wonder for a second if I'm still in the room. Clearly, I'm dismissed. Fine. I'm saved from the distinct possibility I'll lose control and pour Clay's still-hot coffee from his big ol' mug onto his lap. Or pour something really cold on Mom.

Pick up, pick up, I beg the other end of the phone. Finally there's a click, but it's not Nan. It's Tim. "Mason residence," he says. "If you're Daniel, Nan's out with another guy. With a bigger dick."

"I'm not Daniel," I tell him. "But is she really? The out part?"

"Nah, of course not. Nan? She's lucky she's got Daniel, and that's pretty fucking sad."

"Where is she?"

"Around somewhere," Tim offers helpfully. "I'm in my room. Have you ever wondered what purpose the

hair on your toes serves?”

Tim’s stoned. As usual. I close my eyes. “Can I speak to her now?”

Tim says he’ll get her, but ten minutes later I’m still waiting. He probably forgot he’d even answered the phone.

I hang up and lie on my bed for a moment, staring at the ceiling fan. Then I open my window and climb out.

As usual, most of the lights are on at the Garretts’. Including the ones in the driveway, where Alice, some of her underdressed friends, and a few of the Garrett boys are playing basketball. There may be some boyfriends thrown in there too. It’s hard to tell, they’re all jumping around so much, music cranked loud on the iPod speakers perched on the front steps.

I’m no good at basketball, but it looks like fun. I peer in the living room window and see Mr. and Mrs. Garrett. She’s leaning on the back of his chair, arms folded, looking down at him while he points out something in a magazine. The light in their bedroom, where the baby sleeps, is still on, even though it’s so late. I wonder if Patsy’s afraid of the dark.

Then suddenly, I hear a voice, right near me. Right below me.

“Hey.”

Startled, I almost lose my balance. Then I feel a steadying hand on my ankle and hear a rustling sound, as someone, some guy, climbs up the trellis and onto the roof, my own secret place.

“Hey,” he says again, sitting down next to me as though he knows me well. “Need rescuing?”

Chapter Three

I stare at this boy. He’s obviously a Garrett, and not Joel, but which one? Up close, in the light spilling from my bedroom, he looks different from most of the Garretts—rangier, leaner, his wavy hair a lighter brown, already with those streaks of blond some brunettes get in the summer.

“Why would I need rescuing? This is my house, my roof.”

“I don’t know. It just hit me, seeing you there, that you might be Rapunzel. The princess in the tower thing. All that long blond hair and...well...”

“And you’d be?” I know I’m going to laugh if he says “the prince.”

Instead he answers “Jase Garrett,” reaching for my hand to shake it, as though we’re at a college interview rather than randomly sitting together on my roof at night.

“Samantha Reed.” I settle my hand into his, automatically polite, despite the bizarre circumstances.

“A *very* princess-y name,” he answers approvingly, turning his head to smile at me. He has very white teeth.

“I’m no princess.”

He gives me a considering look. “You say that emphatically. Is this something important I should know about you?”

This whole conversation is surreal. The fact that Jase Garrett should know, or need to know, anything about me at all is illogical. But instead of telling him that, I find myself confiding, “Well, for example, a second ago I wanted to do bodily harm to someone I’d only just met.”

Jase takes a long time to answer, as though weighing his thoughts and his words. “We-ell,” he responds finally. “I imagine a lot of princesses have felt that way...arranged marriages and all that. Who could know who you’d get stuck with? But...is this person you want to injure me? ‘Cause I *can* take a hint. You can ask me to leave your roof rather than break my kneecaps.”

He stretches out his legs, folding his arms behind his head, oh-so-comfortable in what is oh-so-not his territory. Despite this, I find myself telling him all about Clay Tucker. Maybe it’s because Tracy’s not home and Mom’s acting like a stranger. Maybe it’s because Tim is a waste and Nan is MIA. Maybe it’s something about Jase himself, the way he sits there calmly, waiting to hear the story, as though the hang-ups of some random girl are of interest to him. At any rate, I tell him.

After I finish, there’s a pause.

Finally, out of the half dark, his profile illuminated by the light from my window, he says, “Well, Samantha...you *were* introduced to this guy. It went downhill from there. That might make it justifiable homicide. From time to time, I’ve wanted to kill people I knew even less well...strangers in supermarkets.”

Am I on my roof with a psychopath? As I start to edge away, he continues. “Those people who walk up to my mom all the time, when she’s with our whole crowd, and say, ‘You know, there are ways to prevent this.’ As if having a big family was like, I don’t know, a forest fire, and they’re Smokey Bear. The ones who tell my dad about vasectomies and the high cost of college as if he has no clue about any of that. More than once I’ve wanted to punch them.”

Wow. I’ve never met a boy, at a school or anywhere, who cut through the small talk so quickly.

“It’s a good idea to keep your eye on the guys who think they know the one true path,” Jase says reflectively. “They might just mow you down if you’re in their way.”

I remember all my own mother’s vasectomy and college comments.

“I’m sorry,” I say.

Jase shifts, looking surprised. “Well, Mom says to pity them, feel sorry for anyone who thinks what they think is right should be some universal law.”

“What does your dad say?”

“He and I are on the same page there. So’s the rest of the family. Mom’s our pacifist.” He smiles.

A whoop of laughter sounds from the basketball court. I look over to see some boy grab some girl around the waist, whirling her around, then lowering her and clenching her to him.

“Why aren’t you down there?” I ask.

He looks at me a long time, again as though considering what to say. Finally: “You tell me, Samantha.”

Then he stands up, stretches, says good night, and climbs back down the trellis.

Chapter Four

In the morning light, brushing my teeth, doing my same old morning routine, looking at my same old face in the mirror—blond hair, blue eyes, freckles, nothing special—it's easy to believe that it was a dream that I sat out in the darkness in my nightgown talking feelings with a stranger—a Garrett, no less.

During breakfast, I ask Mom where she met Clay Tucker, which gets me nowhere as she, preoccupied with vacuuming her way out the door, answers only, "At a political event."

Since that's pretty much all she goes to anymore, it hardly narrows things down.

I corner Tracy in the kitchen as she applies waterproof mascara in the mirror over our wet bar, prepping for a day at the beach with Flip, and tell her all about last night. Except the Jase-on-the-roof part.

"What's the big deal?" she responds, leaning closer to her reflection. "Mom's finally found someone who turns her on. If he can help the campaign, so much the better. You know how wiggy she already is about November." She slides her mascara'ed eyes to mine. "Is this all about you and your fear of intimacy?"

I hate it when Tracy pulls that self-help, psychoanalytic garbage on me. Ever since her rebellious phase resulted in a year of therapy, she feels qualified to hang out her own shingle.

"No, it's about Mom," I insist. "She wasn't herself. If you'd been here, you'd have seen."

Tracy throws open her hands, the gesture taking in our completely updated kitchen, connected to our massive living room and the vast foyer. They're all too big for three people, too grand, and make God knows what kind of statement. Our house is probably three times the size of the Garretts'. And there are *ten* of them. "Why would I be here?" she asks. "What is there for any of us *here*?"

I want to say "*I'm here*." But I see her point. Our house contains all that's high-end and high-tech and shiny clean. And three people who would rather be somewhere else.

Mom likes routines. This means we have certain meals on certain nights—soup and salad on Monday, pasta on Tuesday, steak on Wednesday—you get the idea. She keeps charts of our school activities on the wall, even if she doesn't actually have time to attend them, and makes sure we don't have too much unaccounted-for time during the summer. Some of her routines have fallen by the wayside since she got elected. Some have been amped up. Friday dinners at the Stony Bay Bath and Tennis Club remain sacrosanct.

The Stony Bay Bath and Tennis Club is the kind of building everyone in town would think was tacky if "everyone" didn't want to belong to it. It was built fifteen years ago but looks like a Tudor castle. It's in the hills above town, so there's a great view of the river and the sound from both the Olympic and the Lagoon pools. Mom loves the B&T. She's even on the board of directors. Which means that, thanks to swim team, I was roped into lifeguarding there last summer and am signed up again this year, twice a week starting next Monday. That's two whole days at the B&T, plus Friday dinners.

And so, because today *is* a Friday, here we all are, Tracy, Flip, and me, walking through the imposing oak doors behind Mom. Despite Tracy and Flip's eternal quest for the gold in the PDA Olympics, Mom loves Flip. Maybe it's because his dad runs the biggest business in Stony Bay. For whatever reason, since Flip and Tracy started dating six months ago, he always gets to come along for Friday night hornpipe dinner. Lucky guy.

We have our usual table, underneath a gigantic painting of a whaling ship surrounded by enormous whales,

stabbed by harpoons but still able to chomp on a few unlucky sailors.

“We need to outline our summer plans,” Mom says when the bread basket comes. “Get a handle on it all.”

“Moth-er! We’ve been through this. I’m going to the Vineyard. Flip has a sweet job teaching tennis for a bunch of families, and I’ve got a house with my friends, and I’m gonna waitress at the Salt Air Smithy. The rental starts up this week. It’s all planned.”

Mom slides her cloth napkin off her plate and unfolds it. “You’ve broached this, Tracy, yes. But I haven’t agreed to it.”

“This is my summer to have fun. I’ve earned that,” Tracy says, leaning over her plate for her water glass. “Right, Flip?”

Flip has wisely attacked the bread basket, slathering his roll with maple butter, and can’t answer.

“I don’t need to be accountable to colleges anymore. I’m in at Middlebury. I don’t need to prove a thing.”

“Working hard and doing well are only about proving something?” Mom arches her eyebrows.

“Flip?” Tracy says again. He’s still finding his roll fascinating, adding even more butter as he continues to chew.

Mom focuses her attention on me. “So, Samantha. I want to be sure you’re all set for the summer. Your Breakfast Ahoy job is how many mornings a week?” She gives the waiter pouring our ice water her charm-the-public smile.

“Three, Mom.”

“Then there are the two days of lifeguarding.” A little crease crimps her forehead. “That leaves you three afternoons free. Plus the weekends. Hmm.” I watch her split a Parker House roll and butter it, knowing she won’t eat it. It’s just something she does to concentrate.

“Mom! Samantha’s seventeen! God!” Tracy says. “Let her have some free time.”

As she’s saying this, a shadow falls on the table and we all look up. It’s Clay Tucker.

“Grace”—he kisses one cheek, the other, then pulls out the chair next to Mom, flipping it around to straddle it—“and the rest of your lovely family. I didn’t realize you had a son.”

Tracy and Mom hasten to correct this misapprehension as the waiter arrives with the menu. Kind of unnecessary to even offer one, since the B&T has had the same Friday night prix fixe dinner menu since dinosaurs roamed the earth in madras and boat shoes.

“I was just saying to Tracy that she should choose something more goal-oriented for the summer,” Mom says, handing her buttered roll to Clay. “Something more directed than having fun on the Vineyard.”

He drapes his arms over the back of the chair and looks at Tracy, head cocked. “I think a nice summer away from home might be just the ticket for your Tracy, Grace—good prep for going away to college. And it gives *you* more room to focus on the campaign.”

Mom scans his face for a moment, then appears to find some invisible signal there. “Well, then.” She

concedes, “Maybe I’ve been too hasty, Tracy. If you can give me the names, numbers, and addresses of these girls you’re sharing a house with, and your hours at work.”

“Gracie.” Clay Tucker chuckles, voice low and amused. “This is parenthood. Not politics. We don’t need the street addresses.”

Mom smiles at him, a flush fanning over her cheekbones. “You’re right. Here I am, getting all het up about the wrong things.”

Het up? Since when does my mother use a phrase like that? Before my eyes, she’s turning into Scarlett O’Hara. Is *this* going to help her win in Connecticut?

I slide my phone out of my pocket under the table and text Nan: Mom kidnapped by aliens. Pleez advise.

Guess what? Nan types back, ignoring this. I won the Laslo for Literature prize! I get my essay on Huck Finn and Holden Caulfield into the CT State Lit for High School Students Journal!!!! Daniel got his essay in last year and he says it totally helped him ace MIT!!! Columbia, here I come!

I remember that essay. Nan sweated over it, and I thought the topic was such a strange choice because I know she hates *Catcher in the Rye*—“All that swearing. And he’s crazy.”

Gr8t! I respond as Mom reaches out for my phone, snapping it shut and tucking it into her purse.

“Samantha, Mary Mason called me today about Tim.” She takes a deliberate sip of water and glances at me, eyebrows lifted again.

This can’t be good. “About Tim” is always code for “disaster” these days.

“She wants me to pull some strings to get him a lifeguard job here. Apparently, the job at Hot Dog Haven didn’t work out.”

Right. Because if you have trouble putting ketchup and mustard on a hot dog, you should totally move on to saving lives.

“The other lifeguard job is available at the club now that they’re opening the Lagoon pool. What do you think?”

Uh, catastrophe? Tim and lifesaving are not exactly a natural combo. I know he can swim well—he was on the team at Hodges before he got expelled—but...

“What?” she asks impatiently as I worry my lip between my teeth.

When I’m lifeguarding, I barely take my eyes off the pool for a second. I imagine Tim sitting in that lifeguard chair and wince. But I’ve been fudging what he’s up to—to his parents, to my mom for years now.... “Mom, he’s kind of—distracted these days. I don’t think—”

“I know.” Her voice is impatient. “That’s the point, Samantha—why something like this would be good for him. He’d need to focus, get out in the sun and the fresh air. Above all, it will look good on his college applications. I’m going to sponsor him.” She reaches for her own cell, giving me her end-of-conversation nod.

“So,” Clay says, smiling at me, Tracy, and Flip. “You guys mind if your mom and I talk shop?”

“Talk away,” Tracy says airily.

Clay plunges right in. “I’ve been looking at this guy’s specs, this Ben Christopher you’re running against this time, Grace. And here’s what I’m thinking: You need to be more relatable.”

Is that a word?

Mom squints at him as though he’s speaking a foreign language, so maybe not.

“Ben Christopher.” Clay outlines: “Grew up in Bridgeport, poor family, prep school on an ABC scholarship, built his own company manufacturing solar panels, getting the green vote there.” He pauses to butter the other half of Mom’s roll and takes a big bite. “He’s got that man-of-the-people thing going on. You, honey, can seem a little stiff. Chilly.” Another bite of roll, more chewing. “*I know differently, but...*”

Ew. I glance over at Tracy, expecting her to be as grossed out by this as I am, but she’s preoccupied by Flip, intertwining their hands.

“What do I do, then?” A furrow forms between Mom’s eyebrows. I’ve never heard her ask anyone for advice. She doesn’t even find it easy to ask for directions when we’re completely lost.

“Relax.” Clay puts his hand on her forearm, squeezes it. “We just show what’s there. The softer side of Grace.”

Sounds like a laundry detergent ad.

He shoves his hand into his pocket and extracts something, holding it up for us to see. One of Mom’s old campaign flyers. “See, here’s what I’m talkin’ about. Your campaign slogan last time. *Grace Reed: Working for the Common Weal*. That’s just awful, darlin’.”

Mom says defensively, “I *did* win, Clay.” I’m a little impressed that he’s being so blunt with her. Tracy and I came in for our fair share of teasing at school about that campaign slogan.

“You did”—he gives her a swift grin—“which is a tribute to your charm and skill. But ‘weal’? Gimme a break. Am I right, girls? Flip?” Flip grunts around his third bread roll, casting a longing glance toward the door. I don’t blame him for wanting to escape. “The last person who used that in a political campaign was John Adams. Or maybe Alexander Hamilton. Like I say, you need to be more relatable, be who people are looking for. More families, young families, are moving into our state all the time. That’s your hidden treasure. You’re not going to get the common-man vote. Ben Christopher’s got that locked. So here’s my idea: *Grace Reed works hard for your family because family is her focus*. What do you think?”

At this point the waiter arrives with our appetizers. He doesn’t miss a beat about Clay being at the table, making me wonder if this was planned all along.

“My, this looks mighty good,” Clay Tucker says as the waiter tucks a big bowl of chowder in front of him. “Now, some would say we Southerners wouldn’t know how to appreciate this kind of thing. But I like to appreciate what’s in front of me. And this”—he tips his spoon at my mother, flashing a grin at the rest of us—“is delicious.”

I get the feeling I’ll be seeing a lot of Clay Tucker.

Chapter Five

When I get home from work the next day, sticky from walking back in the summer heat, my eyes immediately turn to the Garretts'. The house seems unusually quiet. I stand there looking, then see Jase in the driveway, lying on his back, doing some kind of work on a huge black-and-silver motorcycle.

I want to say right here that I am by no means the kind of girl who finds motorcycles and leather jackets appealing. In the least. Michael Kristoff, with his dark turtlenecks and moody poetry, was as close as I've gotten to liking a "bad boy," and he was enough to put me off them for life. We dated almost all spring, till I realized he was less a tortured artist than just a torture. That said, without planning, I walk right to the end of our yard, around my mother's tall "good neighbor" fence—the six-foot stockade she installed a few months after the Garretts moved in—and up the driveway.

"Hi there," I say. *Brilliant opener, Samantha.*

Jase props himself up on an elbow, looking at me for a minute without saying anything. His face gets an unreadable expression, and I wish I could take back walking over.

Then he observes, "I'm guessing that's a uniform."

Crap. I'd forgotten I was still wearing it. I look down at myself, in my short blue skirt, puffy white sailor blouse, and jaunty red neck scarf.

"Bingo." I'm completely embarrassed.

He nods, then smiles broadly at me. "It didn't quite say *Samantha Reed* to me somehow. Where on earth do you work?" He clears his throat. "And why there?"

"Breakfast Ahoy. Near the dock. I like to keep busy."

"The uniform?"

"My boss designed it."

Jase scrutinizes me in silence for a minute or two, then says, "He must have a rich fantasy life."

I don't know how to respond to this, so I pull one of Tracy's nonchalant moves and shrug.

"It pays well?" Jase asks, reaching for a wrench.

"Best tips in town."

"I'll bet."

I have no clue why I'm having this conversation. And no idea how to continue it. He's concentrating on unscrewing something or unwrenching something or whatever you call it. So I ask, "Is this your motorcycle?"

"My brother Joel's." He stops working and sits up, as though it would be impolite to continue if we're actually carrying on a conversation. "He likes to cultivate that whole 'born to be wild' outlaw image. Prefers it to the jock one, although he is, in fact, a jock. Says he winds up with smarter girls that way."

I nod, as if I'd know. "Does he?"

"I'm not sure." Jase's forehead creases. "The image-cultivation thing has always seemed kind of fake-o and manipulative to me."

"So, you don't have some persona?" I sit down in the grass next to the driveway.

"Nope. What you see is what you get." He grins at me again.

What I see, frankly, up close and in daylight, is pretty nice. In addition to the sun-streaked, wavy chestnut hair and even white teeth, Jase Garrett has green eyes, and one of those quirky mouths that look like they are always about to smile. Plus this steady-on, I-have-no-problem-looking-you-in-the-eye gaze. *Oh my.*

I glance around, try to think of something to say. Finally: "Pretty quiet around here today."

"I'm babysitting."

I look around again. "Where's the baby? In the toolbox?"

He tips his head at me, acknowledging the joke. "Naptime," he explains. "George and Patsy. Mom's grocery shopping. It takes her *hours*."

"I'll bet." Prying my eyes from his face, I notice his T-shirt is sticky with sweat at the collar and under the arms.

"Are you thirsty?" I ask.

Broad smile. "I am. But I'm not about to take my life in my hands and ask you to get me something to drink. I know your mom's new boyfriend is a marked man for ordering you to serve."

"I'm thirsty too. And hot. My mom makes good lemonade." I stand up and start backing away.

"Samantha."

"Uh-huh."

"Come back, okay?"

I look at him a second, nod, then go into the house, shower, thereby discovering that Tracy's perfidiously used up all my conditioner again, change into shorts and a tank top, and come back with two huge plastic cups full of lemonade and clinking ice.

When I walk up the driveway, Jase has his back to me, doing something to one of the wheels, but he turns as my flip-flops slap close.

I hand him the lemonade. He looks at it the way I'm realizing Jase Garrett looks at everything—carefully, noticing.

"Wow. She even freezes little pieces of lemon peel and mint in the ice cubes. And makes *them* out of lemonade."

"She's kind of a perfectionist. Watching her make this is like science lab."

He drains the entire thing in one gulp, then reaches for the other cup.

“That’s mine,” I say.

“Oh, jeez. Of course. Sorry. I *am* thirsty.”

I extend my arm with the lemonade. “You can have it. There’s always more.”

He shakes his head. “I would never deprive you.”

I feel my stomach do that weird little flip-flop thing you hear about. *Not good*. This is our second conversation. *Not good at all, Samantha*.

Just then I hear the roar of a car pulling into our driveway. “Yo, Samantha!”

It’s Flip. He cuts the engine, then strides over to us.

“Hey, Flip,” Jase calls.

“You know him?”

“He dated my sister Alice last year.”

Flip immediately says to me, “Don’t tell Tracy.”

Jase glances at me for clarification.

“My sister’s very possessive,” I explain.

“Hugely,” Flip adds.

“Resents her boyfriends’ past girlfriends,” I say.

“Big-time,” agrees Flip.

“Niiice,” Jase says.

Flip looks defensive. “But she *is* loyal. No sleeping with my tennis partner.”

Jase winces. “You knew what you were getting into with Alice, man.”

I glance back and forth between them.

Flip says, “So...I didn’t know you two knew each other.”

“We don’t,” I say, at the same time Jase answers, “Yup.”

“Okay. Whatever.” Flip waves his hands, clearly uninterested. “So where’s Trace?”

“I’m supposed to tell you she’s busy all day,” I admit. My sister: master of playing hard to get. Even when she’s already gotten.

“Cool. So where is she really?”

“Stony Bay Beach.”

“I’m there.” Flip turns to go.

“Bring her *People* magazine and a coconut FrozFruit,” I call after him. “Then you’re golden.”

When I turn back to Jase, he’s again beaming at me. “You’re nice.” He sounds pleased, as if he hadn’t expected this aspect of my personality.

“Not really. Better for me if she’s happy. Then she borrows fewer of my clothes. You know sisters.”

“Yup. But mine don’t borrow my clothes.”

Abruptly I hear a loud screaming, wailing, banshee-like sound. I jump, wide-eyed.

Jase points to the baby monitor plugged in by the garage door. “George.” He starts heading into the house, then turns back, gesturing me to follow.

Just like that, I’m going into the Garretts’, after all these years.

Thank God Mom works late.

The first thing that hits me is the color. Our kitchen’s white and silver-gray everywhere—the walls, the granite countertops, the Sub-Zero, the Bosch dishwasher. The Garretts’ walls are sunny yellow. The curtains are that same yellow with green leaves on them. But everything else is a riot of different colors. The fridge is covered with paintings and drawings, with more taped on the walls. Cans of Play-Doh and stuffed animals and boxes of cereal clutter the green Formica counters. Dishes teeter high in the sink. There’s a table big enough for all the Garretts to eat at, but not big enough to contain the piles of newspapers and magazines and socks and snack wrappers and swim goggles, half-eaten apples and banana peels.

George meets us before we’re halfway through the kitchen. He’s holding a large plastic triceratops, wearing nothing but a shirt that says *Brooklyn Botanical Gardens*. That’s to say, no pants, no underwear.

“Whoa, buddy.” Jase bends down, indicating the naked half of his brother with a wave of his hand. “What happened there?”

George, still tear-streaked but no longer screaming, takes a deep breath. He has wavy brown hair too, but the big eyes swimming with tears are blue. “I dreamed about black holes.”

“Gotcha.” Jase nods, straightening up. “Is the whole bed wet?”

George nods guiltily, then peeps under spiky damp eyelashes at me. “Who’s that?”

“The girl next door. Samantha. She probably knows all about black holes.”

George eyes me suspiciously. “Do you?”

“Well,” I say, “I, um, know that they’re stars that used up all their fuel and then collapsed inward, due to the pull of their own gravity, and, um, that once anything falls into them it disappears from the visible universe.”

George starts screaming again.

Jase scoops him up, bare bottom and all. “She also knows that there are none anywhere near Connecticut. Don’t you, Samantha?”

I feel horrible. “Not even in our universe,” I tell him hastily, although I’m pretty sure there’s one in the Milky Way.

“There’s one in the Milky Way,” sobs George.

“But that’s nowhere near Stony Bay.” Reaching out to pat him on the back, I inadvertently touch Jase’s hand, as he’s doing the same. I snatch mine away.

“So you’re completely safe, buddy.”

George’s cries descend into hiccups, then depart altogether under the influence of a lime Popsicle.

“I’m so, so sorry,” I whisper to Jase, declining the remaining Popsicle in the box, orange. *Does anyone ever take the orange ones?*

“How could you know?” he whispers back. “And how could *I* know you were an astrophysicist?”

“I went through a big stargazing phase.” My face heats, thinking of all the nights I sat on the roof, watching the stars...and the Garretts.

He raises an eyebrow at me, as though unclear why this would be embarrassing. The worst thing about being a blonde is that your entire body blushes—ears, throat, everything. Impossible to overlook.

There’s another wail from upstairs.

“That’ll be Patsy.” Jase starts for the stairs. “Wait here.”

“I’d better get home,” I say, although there’s really no reason to do that.

“No. Stay. I’ll just be a sec.”

I’m left with George. He sucks on his Popsicle meditatively for a few minutes, then asks, “Did you know that in space it’s very, very cold? And there’s no oxygen? And if an astronaut fell out of a shuttle without his suit he’d die right away?”

I’m a fast learner. “But that would never happen. Because astronauts are really, really careful.”

George gives me a smile, the same dazzling sweet smile as his big brother, although, at this point, with green teeth. “I might marry you,” he allows. “Do you want a big family?”

I start to cough and feel a hand pat my back.

“George, it’s usually better to discuss this kind of thing with your pants on.” Jase drops boxer shorts at George’s feet, then sets Patsy on the ground next to him.

She’s wearing a pink sunsuit and has one of those little ponytails that make one sprout of hair stick straight up on top, all chubby arms and bowed legs. She’s, what, one now?

“Dat?” she demands, pointing to me a bit belligerently.

“Dat is Samantha,” Jase says. “Apparently soon to be your sister-in-law.” He cocks an eyebrow. “You and George move fast.”

“We talked astronauts,” I explain, just as the door opens and in comes Mrs. Garrett, staggering under the weight of about fifty grocery bags.

“Gotcha.” He winks, then turns to his mother. “Hey, Mom.”

“Hi, honey. How were they?” She’s completely focused on her older son and doesn’t seem to notice me.

“Reasonable,” Jase tells her. “We need to change George’s sheets, though.” He takes a few of the plastic bags, setting them down on the floor by the fridge.

She narrows her eyes at him. They’re green like Jase’s. She’s pretty, for a mom, with this open, friendly face, crinkles at the corners of her eyes as though she smiles a lot, the family olive skin, curly brown hair. “What naptime story did you read him?”

“*Mom*. Curious George. I edited it too. There was a little hot-air balloon incident I thought might be problematic.” Then he turns to me. “Oh, sorry. Samantha, this is my mom. Mom, Samantha Reed. From next door.”

She gives me a big smile. “I didn’t even see you standing there. How I overlooked such a pretty girl, I don’t know. I do like the shimmery lip gloss.”

“Mom.” Jase sounds a little embarrassed.

She turns back to him. “This is just the first wave. Can you get the other bags?”

While Jase brings in a seemingly endless series of groceries, Mrs. Garrett chats away to me as though we’ve always known each other. It’s so weird sitting there in the kitchen with this woman I’ve seen from a distance for ten years. Like finding yourself in an elevator with a celebrity. I repress the urge to say “I’m a huge fan.”

I help her put away the groceries, which she manages to do while breast-feeding. My mother would die. I try to pretend I’m used to viewing this kind of thing all the time.

An hour at the Garretts’ and I’ve already seen one of them half-naked, and quite a lot of Mrs. Garrett’s breast. All I need now is for Jase to take off his shirt.

Fortunately for my equilibrium, he doesn’t, although he does announce, after carrying in all the bags, that he needs a shower, beckons me to follow, and marches upstairs.

I do follow. This is the crazy part. I don’t even know him. I don’t know what kind of person he is at all. Though I figure that if his normal-looking mother lets him take a girl up to his room, he’s not going to be a mad rapist. Still, what would Mom think now?

Walking into Jase’s room is like walking into...well, I’m not sure...A forest? A bird sanctuary? One of those tropical habitats they have at zoos? It’s filled with plants, really tall ones and hanging ones and succulents and cacti. There are three parakeets in a cage and a huge, hostile-looking cockatoo in another. Everywhere I look, there are other creatures. A tortoise in an enclosure beside the bureau. A bunch of gerbils in another cage. A terrarium with some sort of lizardy-looking thing. A ferret in a little hammock in another cage. A gray-and-black furry indistinguishable rodent-like beast. And finally, on Jase’s neatly made bed, an enormous white cat so fat it looks like a balloon with tiny furry appendages.

“Mazda.” Jase beckons me to sit in a chair by the bed. When I do, Mazda jumps into my lap and commences shedding madly, trying to nurse on my shorts, and making low rumbling sounds.

“Friendly.”

“Understatement. Weaned too early,” Jase says. “I’m going to take that shower. Make yourself at home.”

Right. In his room. No problem.

I did on occasion visit Michael’s room, but usually in the dark, where he recited gloomy poetry he’d memorized. And it took a lot longer than two conversations to get me there. I briefly dated this guy Charley Tyler last fall too, until we realized that my liking his dimples and him liking my blond hair, or, let’s face it, my boobs, wasn’t enough basis for a relationship. He never got me into his room. Maybe Jase Garrett is some sort of snake charmer. That would explain the animals. I look around again. Oh God, there *is* a snake. One of those orange, white, and black scary-looking ones that I know are harmless but completely freak me out anyway.

The door opens, but it’s not Jase. It’s George, now wearing boxer shorts but no shirt. He comes over and plunks down on the bed, looking at me somberly. “Did you know that the space shuttle *Challenger* blew up?”

I nod. “A long time ago. They have perfected things much more now.”

“I’d be ground crew at NASA. Not on the shuttle. I don’t want to die ever.”

I find myself wanting to hug him. “Me neither, George.”

“Is Jase already going to marry you?”

I start coughing again. “Uh. No. No, George. I’m only seventeen.” As if that’s the only reason we aren’t engaged.

“I’m this many,” George holds up four slightly grubby fingers. “But Jase is seventeen and a half. You could. Then you could live in here with him. And have a big family.”

Jase strides back into the room, of course, midway through this proposition. “George. Beat it. Discovery Channel is on.”

George backs out of the room, but not before saying, “His bed’s really comfortable. And he never pees in it.”

The door closes and we both start laughing.

“Oh Jesus.” Jase, now clad in a different green T-shirt and pair of navy running shorts, sits down on the bed. His hair is wavier when wet, and little drops of water drip onto his shoulders.

“It’s okay. I love him,” I say. “I think I *will* marry him.”

“You might want to think about that. Or at least be really careful about the bedtime reading.”

He smiles lazily at me.

I need to get out of this guy’s room. Fast. I stand up, start to cross the room, then notice a picture of a girl stuck on the mirror over the bureau. I walk closer to take a look. She has curly black hair in a ponytail and a serious expression. She’s also quite pretty. “Who’s this?”

"My ex-girlfriend. Lindy. She had the sticker made at the mall. Now I can't get it off."

"Why ex?" Why am I asking this?

"She got to be too dangerous," Jase says. "You know, now that I think of it, I guess I could put another sticker on top of it."

"You could." I lean closer to the mirror, examining her perfect features. "Define *dangerous*."

"She shoplifted. A lot. And she only ever wanted to go to the mall on dates. Hard not to look like an accomplice. Not my favorite way to spend an evening, doing time, waiting to get bailed out."

"My sister shoplifted too," I say, as though this is some nifty thing we have in common.

"Ever take you along?"

"No, thank God. I'd die if I got in trouble."

Jase looks at me intently, as though what I've said is profound. "No, you wouldn't, Samantha. You wouldn't die. You'd just be in trouble and then you'd move on."

He's standing behind me, too close again. He smells like minty shampoo and clean, clean skin. Apparently any distance at all is too close.

"Yeah, well, I do have to move on. Home. I have stuff to do."

"You sure?"

I nod vigorously. Just as we get to the kitchen, the screen door slams and Mr. Garrett comes in, followed by a small boy. Small, but bigger than George. Duff? Harry?

Like everyone else in the family up till now, I've only seen Jase's father from a distance. Close up, he looks younger, taller, with the kind of charisma that makes the room feel full just because he's in it. His hair's the same wavy deep brown as Jase's, but shot with gray rather than blond streaks. George runs over and attaches himself to his dad's leg. Mrs. Garrett steps back from the sink to smile at him. She lights up the way I've seen girls at school do, sighting their crushes across crowded rooms.

"Jack! You're home early."

"We hit the three-hour mark at the store with no one coming in." Mr. Garrett brushes a strand of her hair away from her face, tucking it behind her ear. "I decided my time would be better spent getting in some more training with Jase, so I scooped up Harry from his playdate and came on home."

"I get to run the stopwatch! I get to run the stopwatch!" Harry shouts.

"My turn! Daddy! It's *my* turn!" George's face crumples.

"You can't even read the numbers," Harry says. "No matter how fast or slow he runs, you always say it's been eleventeen minutes. It's *my* turn."

"I brought home an extra stopwatch from the store," Mr. Garrett says. "You up for it, Jason?"

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