

Reunited

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SIMON & SCHUSTER **BFYR**

New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

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An imprint of Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing Division
1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, New York 10020

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Book design by Lucy Ruth Cummins

The text for this book is set in Bembo Std.

Manufactured in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Graham, Hilary Weisman.

Reunited / Hilary Weisman Graham. — 1st ed.

p. cm.

Summary: Alice, Summer, and Tiernan were best friends who broke up at the same time as their favorite band, but four years later, just before they are preparing to go off to college, the girls reluctantly come back together, each with her own motives, for a road trip from Massachusetts to Austin, Texas, for the band's one-time-only reunion concert.

ISBN 978-1-4424-3984-9 (hardcover)

[1. Friendship—Fiction. 2. Automobile travel—Fiction. 3. Rock groups—Fiction.] I. Title.

PZ7.G7523Re 2012

[Fic]—dc23

2011024299

ISBN 978-1-4424-0689-6 (eBook)



To Sue and Sue

Reunited

Acknowledgments

First and foremost I'd like to thank my manager, Seth Jaret. It is because of your wisdom and tireless support that I've been able to live out my dream of being a writer, and I feel incredibly blessed to have you shepherding my career.

To my editor, Alexandra Cooper—this book literally would not exist without you. Thanks for taking a chance on me, and for your creative vision and thoughtful guidance.

To my agent, Steve Malk—you are the man who Makes Things Happen. I feel lucky to have you on my team.

My deepest gratitude also goes to Lita Judge, Kim Dalley, and Lee Harrington for generously sharing your expertise in order to help me navigate the uncharted waters of the publishing world. Lee—you're the best mentor a newbie novelist could ever hope for.

To my mom, JoAnne Deitch—you have always been my first reader and biggest cheerleader.

Much appreciation goes to Tonya Dreher, Jennifer Duffy, Bethany Ericson, Andrea Summers, Bob Summers, Emily Coburn, Caitlyn Coburn, Janet Graham, Ron Smith, and Ceara Comeau for agreeing to read *Reunited* in its early drafts. Critiquing a novel is no small task, and your comments and insights were an invaluable part of my writing process.

To Cia and the Goddesses—thanks for your encouragement, for your friendship, and *especially* for your endurance in *Reunited*

listening to me kvetch. I am deeply grateful to have you all in my life.

Brian Therriault, Emmanuel Ording, Bill Long, Kaori Hamura, Ethan May, Lisa Carey, Maggie Zavgren, Sadie Zavgren, Sofia Thornblad, Isabel Dreher, Anna Gombas, Rosemary Jo Crooker, Aidan Holding, David Stiefel, and Thomas Curran—I am hugely indebted to you all for volunteering your time and talents in order to help me turn my marketing pipe dreams into a reality. And I apologize for referring to you as my “army of slaves.”

A big thanks to Ariel Coletti, Amy Rosenbaum, and the rest of the team at Simon & Schuster for all of the many wonderful things you do.

To the Society of Children’s Book Writers and Illustrators—the benefits of winning the 2011 SCBWI Book Launch Award have been truly immeasurable. Thank you for bestowing this great honor on me and for helping *Reunited* achieve broader visibility.

And last but not least, my heartfelt thanks to Andy and Henry for your belief in me and for your constant love.

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Chapter One

"IS THE BLINDFOLD REALLY NECESSARY?" ALICE ASKED her parents.

"Yes!" they replied, in stereo.

Her mom tightened the bandanna around her head while her dad squeezed her shoulders. "March!" he commanded, steering her down the hall.

Alice tried not to get her hopes up about this mysterious graduation present—the Chia Pet they'd given her for her eighteenth birthday was still too fresh in her mind—but with all this hype, it was hard not to get a little excited. Especially if her parents remembered to consult the list of gift ideas she'd given them, typed up and organized by price. For a one-time event like high school graduation, Alice was hoping they'd spring for something from Category Two (iPad, camera, golden retriever) or maybe even Category One (laptop). After what happened yesterday, she could really use a good surprise.

"No peeking!" said her dad, guiding her through the living room and out the front door. Her mom made a drum-roll sound with her lips, just in case the neighbors weren't

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already staring. The Miller family had a reputation as the neighborhood oddballs. Nothing too crazy, if you didn't count the garden gnome incident. But Alice was pretty sure that in all of white-bread Walford, Massachusetts, hers was the only house with a pea-green 1976 VW camper van up on blocks in the backyard.

"Okay," said her dad, "you may remove the blindfold."

It wasn't in the backyard anymore. The Pea Pod, as the van was affectionately known, was right there in her driveway. It looked shinier than she remembered, as if a clear coat of nail polish had been painted over a craggy old toenail.

"We fixed it up for you!" her mom announced, waving her arms like one of those ladies from *The Price Is Right*. "Completely restored, good as new."

"It's got new brakes, a new muffler, *and* a new paint job!" her dad said proudly. "We wouldn't let you and MJ drive cross-country if this baby wasn't safe."

Alice blinked a few times, adjusting to the bright summer sun and the shock of her disappointment. She still hadn't told her parents the bombshell that MJ had dropped on her yesterday. She was afraid if she said it out loud, she might have to accept it herself.

"My road trip with MJ," Alice began, tears welling in her eyes, "got canceled."

"Why?" asked her dad.

"Because Mrs. Ling is making her go to China all summer

long,” Alice stammered. She hated to cry in front of them. She hated anything that threatened her image as the Confident Girl Who Had It All Together.

“But you girls have been planning this trip for two years,” said her mom.

“Exactly,” Alice whined. She caught her reflection in the van’s windshield, confirming that she looked as pathetic as she felt. Mascara—the only makeup she ever wore—was running down her cheeks, her long brown curls a frizzy fiasco, thanks to the blindfold.

Her dad wrapped her up in his arms. “Poor kid, you’re not having much luck these days, are you?” *Understatement of the year.* Her best friend was on a plane over the Pacific instead of getting ready for their last big precollege hurrah. Not that Alice actually knew *which* college she’d be going to. She’d applied to Brown early decision and they’d put her on the wait list. *Hello, admissions people, it’s the end of June . . .*

Her dad finally released her from the hug. “Well, like the great John Lennon once said, ‘Life’s what happens while you’re making other plans.’”

“And that’s supposed to be a good thing?” Alice asked. She wanted to believe that everything happened for a reason, that her canceled road trip and being wait listed by Brown were all part of the universe’s grand scheme. But sometimes she wondered if destiny was just something people believed in to make themselves feel better when they didn’t get their way.

“You know,” said her mom, “there was a time when we couldn’t get you out of the Pea Pod.”

Yeah, thought Alice, *when I was twelve*. Back in middle school, when Summer Dalton and Tiernan O’Leary were still her best friends, the Pea Pod had been their clubhouse. “Three peas in a Pea Pod,” her mom used to say. Alice always acted like the nickname embarrassed her, but secretly she’d liked it.

“Why don’t we go give her a whirl?” asked her dad. “It might take your mind off things.”

“That’s a great idea!” said her mom. “It’s a beautiful day for a drive.”

Can’t I just wallow in self-pity for one minute? Alice wondered. Then she looked at her parents. Her dad was buffing the van with his T-shirt. Her mom held the digital camera in her hand.

“Fine,” she said, tugging on the van’s sliding door. After avoiding the Pea Pod for the last four years, she had to admit, she *was* a little curious. Had they reupholstered the orange-and-green plaid seat cushions? Ripped down the limited edition Level3 poster signed by all three members of the band?

They hadn’t. The inside of the Pea Pod looked exactly the same as she remembered it. Level3 memorabilia was still plastered on the walls—song lyrics written on heart-shaped pieces of paper, faded pinups of the boys ripped from the pages of *Rolling Stone*, glossy eight-by-tens covered with sloppy Magic Marker signatures. It was just like the sign taped to the dashboard said: LEVEL3 SUPER-FAN HEADQUARTERS.

“We didn’t want to mess with your stuff,” said her dad.

Of course, he was living in the past, as usual. Level3 wasn’t even a band anymore. They broke up the beginning of her freshman year, right before Alice, Summer, and Tiernan did. But back when they were together—when *everything* was still together—Alice and her friends had been diehard fans. Two all-ages shows at the Middle East, six at Boston Garden, three at the Orpheum, four at the Worcester DCU Center, and one at the Meadowlands in New Jersey, which resulted in their parents making a collective rule about not driving the girls to a concert more than fifty miles from home.

Alice couldn’t help but smile as she took in the display of old collages. When they were young, Alice, Summer, and Tiernan were practically as obsessed with making Level3 collages as they had been with the band. These weren’t ordinary collages, like the kind they used to make in their seventh-grade health class on the dangers of cigarettes. The Level3 collages were art (or at least they aspired toward it). Their final masterpiece consisted of hundreds of tiny cutouts of the boys in Level3, assembled into the shape of an eye. At the center—the pupil—was a photo of Alice, Summer, and Tiernan, age twelve, arms slung around each other, smiling.

“Why don’t I start her up, and you can watch how I drive her for a while? The gear shift takes a little practice so—”

“I know how to drive, Dad.”

“Not so fast. There’s an art to driving the Pea Pod.”

Alice rolled her eyes and flopped down on the bench seat in back, buckling herself in for the trip down memory lane. She'd been sitting right here the first time she'd listened to Level3. They were just eleven when Tiernan showed up with the CD her older brother burned for her—"Level3" scrawled in black marker across the front. It took Alice a few songs to get into it; the music was so different than the sugary Disney pop she was used to. Then something clicked and she started to really listen—not just with her ears, but with her whole body. It was an intense feeling, like she was hearing music for the first time. Like Level3's songs expressed all the things she felt but didn't have the words for. By the end of the album, she was hooked. They all were.

And that was *before* they found out that the boys in the band were cute. Alice liked Ryan because he played the bass with his back to the audience, and she had a thing for shy guys. Tiernan had a crush on Luke, poster child for crazy drummers everywhere. And Summer liked Travis, the lead singer-slash-guitarist-slash-total hottie.

Quickly, the Pea Pod morphed into a Level3 shrine. And like all worshippers, the girls had their rituals.

Step One: Crank up a Level3 tune and dance like crazed animals.

Step Two: Snack break in Alice's kitchen; check fan blogs, official band website.

Step Three: Back to the Pea Pod to discuss fantasies of meet-

ing Level3 boys in real life, possible planning session about triple wedding in Vegas.

Step Four: Put on a sad song, light some candles, lie down on the floor with eyes shut.

“Honey, are you coming?” her dad asked, snapping her out of her reverie.

“Sure, Dad, sure,” Alice said, noticing that he’d actually pulled over and moved himself into the passenger’s seat. It was funny: Alice thought she’d never step foot inside the Pea Pod again after the three little peas turned into split-pea soup, and now here she was, about to drive it.

“Now the clutch is finicky, so you have to push it all the way to the floor . . .”

Alice nodded patiently as her dad shouted commands all the way around the neighborhood loop. Twice. But by the third pass, even *he* had to admit she was Pea Pod proficient. So, she figured it was time for some tunes.

“What’s the deal with this thing?” Alice asked, turning on the radio. “You and mom couldn’t shell out for a new sound system?” She punched the preset buttons one by one. Nothing but static.

“Hands on the wheel, eyes on the road!” her dad yelled, noticing one of Alice’s hands was missing from his mandatory nine-and-three o’clock arrangement.

“Dad, calm down.” Alice kept her hand on the tuner. She scrolled past a Spanish talk radio show, then up through a long,

staticky no-man's-land. She was about to lose all hope when she finally stumbled on a signal. The familiar song rang out loud and clear.

THE THINGS WE WISHED WE DIDN'T SAY
WE WENT AND SAID THEM ANYWAY
NO SAVING FOR A RAINY DAY
THAT'S THE WAY IT WAS

Of course, it was Level3. Who else could it be? Being in the Pea Pod had somehow channeled their music into existence.

“Hang a right,” her dad said, pointing to the street up ahead.

Alice might have laughed out loud at the coincidence if it wasn't the one Level3 song that always made her cringe. Back before that disastrous night at the freshman winter dance, “Heyday” used to be one of her favorites. Now it just brought back ugly memories.

IT'S A ROAD I CAN'T GO DOWN AGAIN
A STREET CALLED I REMEMBER WHEN
IF WE COULD DO IT ALL AGAIN, WE WOULD
WE WOULD . . .

Alice took the turn a little too fast. At the same exact moment, the song changed into its thumping chorus.

IT WAS OUR HEYDAY, HEY DAY, HEY!
OUR HEYDAY, HEY DAY, HEY!

“Slow down!” her dad yelled as Alice jerked the wheel seconds before hitting a mailbox. She stomped on the brakes as the Pea Pod lurched forward with a loud grinding noise, then immediately stalled out.

WHY DID WE REFUSE TO STAY, ANYWAY?

Her dad drove the rest of the way home. By the time he pulled into the driveway, Alice practically leaped out of the van while it was still in motion. Clearly the universe was trying to send her a message. First, there was the canceled road trip, then her “gift” of the Pea Pod, and now “Heyday.”

She hurried inside to the den, desperate to soothe herself with some junk food and mindless TV. That’s when she saw it: the photo of Level3, right there on the TV screen. And unless the van had somehow transported her back in time—which she was pretty sure it hadn’t—she had no choice but to believe that the image was real. It had to be real; the old guy from *MTV News* was talking about it. She hit the TiVo rewind button three times just to make sure she’d heard Kurt Loder (*that* was his name!) correctly.

“Level3, the pop-rock trio that broke up at the height of their success nearly four years ago, has announced they will be getting back together for

a one-night-only benefit concert next Friday in their hometown of Austin, Texas. Tickets go on sale at noon and are expected to sell out within minutes. According to lead singer Travis Wyland, 'A reunion show is the fastest and most effective way to raise money for a cause we all firmly believe in and which has affected my family personally: finding a cure for Duchenne muscular dystrophy.' The band has denied rumors they will be permanently getting back together."

Alice shoved a handful of Doritos in her mouth and crunched them up without even tasting them. How could one day be this crazy? And yet, it was how everything had always been with her old favorite band—meant to be. Tiernan used to have a Yiddish word for all the coincidences between Level3 and the girls. *Beshert*. And when something was *beshert*, you didn't tune it out. When something was *beshert*, you went with it. It was all you *could* do.

It was 11:56 a.m. Four minutes from now, the ticket website would be a feeding frenzy. Alice ran to her bedroom and turned on her computer, the thrill of a new plan formulating as the screen tingled to life. So what if Austin, Texas, was two thousand miles away from Walford, Massachusetts? Or that tickets started at two hundred dollars apiece? Alice was going. *They* were going. How could they not? Especially now that they had the Pea Pod to get them there. But how could she justify spending six hundred dollars on tickets without even knowing if her old friends would agree to go along with her?

She and Tiernan were at least civil to each other. But Summer would pass by in the halls and barely make eye contact. Still, this was Level3, and however Summer and Tiernan felt about her now could never take away the fact that they'd once considered themselves the band's biggest fans. And what was the worst-case scenario? If Summer and Tiernan said no, she'd just sell the tickets on eBay.

Alice rifled through her desk drawer for the credit card she'd borrowed from her mom two months ago and "accidentally" forgotten to give back. *Whoops*. After a few clicks of the mouse, she was on the ticket site. A photo of the band appeared above the words, "Reunited—for one night only!"

She carefully typed in the numbers on her mom's Visa. At the bottom of the screen, an ominous line of text read: "By clicking continue, you agree that your credit card will be charged and your nonrefundable ticket(s) will be processed." If she didn't buy the tickets now, there'd be no other chance.

Well, Alice thought to herself as she clicked the button, if you guys can get back together for a one-time reunion, why can't we?

Now she just needed to convince her ex-best friends to join her.

Chapter Two

SUMMER SQUISHED A MOSQUITO ON HER ARM AS SHE WATCHED Alice Miller cross the stage to take her diploma. *Ugh, they were only on the M's.* She lifted her thick strawberry blond hair from her neck, wiping away the sweat with the back of her hand. At this rate, it would be at least another hour before she could ditch this yawn-fest and dive into Jace's pool. Up in the grandstands, her parents were laughing and talking with their old high school friends like a bunch of rowdy teenagers. If she and Jace were back here with their kids in twenty years, somebody might as well just shoot her now.

"Heads up!" a voice shouted at the exact same moment a beach ball slammed into the head of a nerdy boy sitting in front of her. Summer picked the ball up off the grass. From a few rows back, she could hear Maz's obnoxious laugh. *Typical.*

Summer looked at the boy who'd been hit, the pink flush of embarrassment rising up his neck. She wished she had the nerve to say something to him. To tell him that high school would probably be the pinnacle of Maz's pathetic life. But before she had the chance, the boy turned around and shot her a dirty look, as if the ball in her lap made her guilty by association.

Summer glared back at Maz, then opened the valve and squeezed. The ball collapsed in her hands, air whistling as it escaped.

“Chill out,” said Jace, giving her a finger flick to the neck. By some fluke, he was seated right behind her. Jace Fitzgerald and Summer Dalton, high school power couple extraordinaire. The way the girls in school treated her, you’d think being popular and having a cute boyfriend were the keys to eternal happiness.

Summer never understood what made her and her friends so “popular” anyway, considering half the school hated them. Not that there was any point in bringing this up. Every time she tried to talk about something other than:

1. Who was getting fat
2. Who hooked up with who
3. How wasted they were last weekend

her friends would accuse her of being a nerd. *As if.* Summer was pretty sure that she’d be the laughingstock of her Poetry 101 class in college. It hadn’t stopped her from signing up, but still, the fear was real. So far, the only person to read her poetry was Jace, and he’d said it was amazing. But how much could she trust a boy who considered *Maxim* magazine heavy reading?

And it wasn’t like her parents understood it any better. They could barely wrap their heads around the fact that she wasn’t going to school with all her friends at UMass Walford. But Summer couldn’t wait to go to Boston College in the fall. She wanted to hang out with people who had their own opinions; people who argued with her; people who weren’t so afraid to

just be who they were and live or die by the consequences.

“Tiernan O’Leary!” Principal Roberts’s voice boomed through the loudspeakers. *God, they were only on the O’s.*

“Freak!” Maz shouted as Tiernan crossed the stage. Like a girl with blue hair, combat boots, and red day-glow lipstick would consider that an insult.

“Can you tell your monkey to shut up?” she whispered to Jace.

“You know I can’t control him,” Jace said, shrugging his shoulders.

On the stage, Tiernan curtsied to the crowd, while raising her middle finger in Maz’s general direction.

Thankfully, Summer only had to deal with Maz for one more week. For the month of July, it was good-bye Walford, hello Martha’s Vineyard.

“Tell me again what your beach house is like,” Summer said, fanning Jace with her diploma. She needed to work up a good daydream if she was going to make it through the rest of commencement.

“Uh, it’s gray,” Jace replied. Vivid descriptions were never the boy’s strong point.

Not that it mattered. Summer had already painted the picture in her mind. Picnic dinners of boiled lobster and corn on the cob; sandy games of touch football on the beach; sunsets spent writing poetry in her journal.

Hopefully, Jace wouldn’t mind if she slipped away now and then to write. Knowing Jace, he’d probably be fine with it as

long as she didn't miss out on any important beach activities—especially the kind that happened *after* dark. Summer closed her eyes, imagining the sunsets off of West Chop.

She must have drifted off because the next thing she knew, loud clapping and a chorus of “Woo hoos!” and “Hell, yeah, babies!” jolted her awake. She turned around to ask Jace why he hadn't woken her—well, to yell at him, really—but he wasn't there. Lately, he was always disappearing like that. Summer scanned the crowd. Her parents and their friends were still chatting away up in the bleachers, enjoying their own party too much to notice that graduation was actually over. But Jace was nowhere to be seen.

She headed toward the edge of the field, weaving her way through the throngs of people, dodging tossed caps and that infernal beach ball (reinflated courtesy of Maz). *Where on earth had Jace gone?* Summer was almost at the bleachers when a familiar hand tapped her on the shoulder. Only, it didn't belong to the person she was looking for. It belonged to Alice Miller.

“Hey, there,” said Alice casually, as if it wasn't the first time they'd spoken in nearly four years. “Happy graduation.”

“Happy graduation,” Summer answered by reflex. As far as Summer was concerned, she and Alice had drawn a line in the sand freshman year, one they'd both agreed never to cross. Now, for some unimaginable reason, Alice was acting like the line had never been there to begin with.

“Well, I know this might sound crazy . . .,” Alice began. Then, without even taking a breath, Alice launched into a rambling

account of her last twenty-four hours—her parents giving her the newly refurbished Pea Pod, then learning the news of the Level3 reunion show. Since it was impossible to get a word in edgewise, Summer just stood there, trying her best to absorb Alice’s onslaught of information. It was hard to decide what bothered her more—that Alice had totally glossed over everything that had happened that night at the Winter Wonderland Dance or that she was dredging up the past in the first place. *Note to Alice: High school’s over.*

“Sorry,” Summer said, “Jace and I are going to the Vineyard for all of July. But have fun, okay?”

For a second, Alice just stood there looking as if someone had let the air out of her, like the beach ball from before. “Well, if you change your mind . . .,” she finally stammered, walking away before she even finished the sentence.

Summer was surprised Alice had the audacity to speak to her after all this time, let alone invite her to a concert halfway across the country. But even more shocking was how willingly she took no for an answer. Suddenly Alice stopped.

“He’s still got those dimples!” she shouted through the crowd.

Summer didn’t have to ask who “he” was. She had already googled Travis’s picture when she’d heard about the Level3 reunion on the radio. Not that she would admit it to anyone—especially not Alice Miller. What was more embarrassing than being eighteen and having a crush on some rock star she didn’t even know?

And why was she thinking about Travis's dimples when she already had a boyfriend? A *real* one. Maybe Jace didn't have the soul of a poet, but at least he wasn't some adolescent fantasy. In fact, he was right in front of her.

"Where have *you* been?" Summer asked, flustered.

"I've been looking for *you*," he said.

"Uh-huh," said Maz, nodding his head in confirmation while his eyes stayed firmly planted on the cleavage of a girl walking by.

"I was talking to Alice Miller. She just came up out of the blue and asked me to go to the Level3 reunion show with her in Austin. It was totally messed up."

"Austin, Texas?" Jace asked, confused. "Why is she asking you?"

"We used to be friends. Back in middle school."

"That sounds psychotic," Maz butted in. "Like what if she goes all Leighton Meester in *The Roommate* on you and she tries to kill you and take over your life?"

"Funny," Summer said, wishing she could have had this conversation without Maz's interference.

"I think you should go," Jace suddenly declared. "You listen to that stupid band all the time."

Jace had a point. Summer still loved Level3. But not enough to get her to spend ten days in a van with Alice Miller.

"Even if I wanted to, how could I? We're going to the Vineyard, remember?"

“Right,” said Jace, fanning himself with his customized “Hawks Rule!” cap, “about the Vineyard . . .”

Maz punched Jace in the bicep, then ran off into the crowd.

“I was thinking, actually”—Jace stopped to rub his freshly shaved chin—“that it might be better if you . . . didn’t come.”

Summer could feel her stomach in her throat. She knew this tone. She had *invented* this tone. Jace was breaking up with her.

“And I was thinking about the long-distance thing in the fall,” Jace continued, “and how hard it’s gonna be to only see each other on the weekends . . .”

Summer couldn’t believe that in all her years of dating, up until this moment, she’d never been the one at the receiving end of these words. She’d dumped David Long in an e-mail. She’d had a friend tell Brian Rourke that she didn’t want to see him anymore. And poor Scotty Weishaupt, she’d simply shown up to his state finals basketball game holding hands with Chris Hedison.

Jace was still babbling away, doing everything he could to say *I don’t love you anymore* without actually coming out and using those words. But Summer had plenty of words: mostly the four-letter kind.

“Enough!” she finally said. “I get it, okay?” It always annoyed her when the boys she broke up with wanted to “talk it out,” when clearly the best thing to do was make a clean break, then disappear as quickly as possible. So that’s just what Summer did. She ran through the crowd, hiding under her graduation cap so as not to be spotted by her friends or, even worse, her parents.

“Congratulations” was the last thing she needed to hear right now.

Out in the parking lot, traffic was already at a standstill. Part of her wanted to go back to the stadium and punch Jace right in his rock-hard abs. But instead she kept running—past the gym, up the hill by the science labs—as if it were possible to outrun that feeling in her gut.

For months she’d waited for this day to come, for the chance to start over, to have a clean slate. *Clean slate, indeed. Jace sure took care of that.*

At the top of the hill Summer stopped to catch her breath. Her parents were probably looking for her by now. No doubt, they’d heard the news of the breakup and were ready to console her, right there in front of everyone. Like she needed more humiliation. Just the thought of it made her want to run again. The only problem was, she wasn’t sure which way to go.

What if her parents and Maz were right? What if high school was as good as it got? Or worse: What if there was a better life out there, but Summer didn’t know what it was or where to find it?

That’s when she saw the bright-green van pulling out of the parking lot. It was strange to see the Pea Pod out on the open road after all those years of sitting in the same spot. But there it was, cruising down East Walford Street, just like all the other cars leaving high school forever. It wasn’t until the van drove out of sight that Summer realized she was smiling. If the Pea Pod could get it in gear, maybe there was hope for her yet.

Chapter Three

TIERNAN UNZIPPED HER GREEN POLYESTER GOWN AND CHUCKED it onto the heap of clothes in the corner. She couldn't believe she'd just spent the last four hours in that hideous muumuu, let alone the ridiculous cap. And what the hell was a mortarboard, anyway? Wasn't that some kind of torture our military used to make terrorists spill their secrets? Or maybe that was waterboarding. Whatever. Wearing it *felt* like torture.

Tiernan looked in the mirror, curling her short blue bob behind her ears so that it ended in two perfectly defined points midcheek. Being back in her normal clothes made her happy. Of course, the term "normal" was relative. But Tiernan liked the way her look perfectly captured her personality and at the same time made her look taller than her 103-pound, five-foot-one self. It was one part wacky (vintage Kermit the Frog T-shirt), one part sexy (short skirt, fishnet tights), and one part dangerous (knee-high Doc Martens boots).

Her mother had begged her not to wear the boots to graduation, and after a long knockdown drag-out battle (was there really any other kind with Judy Horowitz?) Tiernan had promised not to wear them. *Oops*.

“Tiernan?” her mother called from upstairs. “Are you down there?”

Where’d her mother think she’d be? Ever since she’d found that 1.5 liter bottle of vodka in Tiernan’s closet, sneaking out of the house had become harder than busting out of Shawshank.

“Tiernan Horowitz O’Leary!” Her mother’s red Dior pumps were already clomping down the stairs into Tiernan’s basement room. So much for the little things, like privacy.

“If you’re here for happy hour,” Tiernan said, “I don’t start mixing martinis till five. But help yourself to a cocktail wiener.”

Judy didn’t even crack a smile. “That’s not why I’m here,” she said, her eyes scanning the room for more contraband. Like Tiernan managed to duck into the liquor store in between getting her diploma and the ride home.

“Then why *are* you here?”

“I’m here because you have a visitor.” Her mother’s gaze landed at Tiernan’s feet. No comment from the shoe police.

“I thought I didn’t get to have visitors when I’m grounded.”

“Well, I’m making an exception.”

Her mother didn’t make exceptions. She certainly didn’t make them for any of Tiernan’s “weirdo, delinquent” friends.

“It’s Alice Miller,” Judy said, smiling.

Tiernan had always feared that this day of reckoning would come, but she didn’t expect it to be right after graduation. Now that high school was over, what was the point? But if Alice had finally uncovered Tiernan’s big lie freshman

year, Tiernan was toast. She should have just 'fessed up ages ago. Not that the debacle at that stupid dance was all her fault anyway. Alice wasn't exactly innocent. Plus, it was only a matter of time before Summer finally exposed herself for the superficial Abercrombie that she was. All Tiernan had done was speed up the process. In a way, she'd probably done Alice a favor. Right?

"Tell her I'm busy," Tiernan said, grabbing her iPod.

Her mother came closer and yanked the little white earbuds from her head. "I am *not* going to lie to your friend," she whispered angrily.

"Since when is Alice Miller still my friend? The girl hates me."

"Don't be ridiculous. Why would she be here if she hated you?"

"Good question," Tiernan shot back. "Did you pat her down for weapons?"

Tiernan's mother just looked at her and waited. It was one of her favorite tools in her arsenal—the Stare of Shame. Then she turned on her heel and hurried back upstairs. Obviously, the woman was pumped to have a normal-looking teenager in the house.

Sometimes Tiernan wondered if she might still be friends with Alice if her mother hadn't shipped her off to New Jew freshman year. New Jew (known to the rest of the world as Jacobs Academy of New Jewish Studies) was the pricey Jewish

boarding school Tiernan's Jewish mother insisted she go to for the sole purpose of making Tiernan's Irish father (Judy's philandering ex-husband) foot the bill. But Tiernan just wanted to go to Walford High with her friends. Not that her mother ever cared about what *she* wanted.

So, Tiernan fought back with the only real power she had—the power to piss her mother off. It was funny how much damage a six-dollar bottle of “Raven” Manic Panic and some scissors could do. Add in a nose ring and an eighteen-year-old boyfriend with dreadlocks (standard issue at all the finest Jewish prep schools) and her transformation into a punk-rock badass was complete.

To Tiernan, the change wasn't all that radical. She'd just turned up the volume on her already quirky personality. To eleven. But the whole thing had seriously wiggled Judy out.

Summer didn't have time to notice Tiernan's makeover, what with her newfound hobby of letting every jock at Walford High ram his tongue down her throat. And Alice (in typical Alice fashion) tried to act like nothing had changed. She pretended it didn't matter that Tiernan went to a different school. She ignored the fact that Tiernan's wardrobe was growing freakier by the day while she and Summer still dressed like Banana Republicans. By the time New Jew booted Tiernan's butt back to public school sophomore year (a story for another day), Summer and Alice seemed like strangers.

Upstairs, Tiernan heard her mother laughing. Of all Tiernan's

friends, Alice had always been Judy's favorite. Even back when Tiernan was still a "good girl" (well, if not "good," at least "better") her mother often wondered (aloud) why Tiernan couldn't be more like her well-mannered, overachieving friend. "Did you know that *Alice* started an after-school environmental club?" Judy would ask, all mock-innocence. "I bet her mother must be proud." Insert knife, twist.

Not that Tiernan held a grudge against Alice for it. Their friendship was fun while it lasted. Then they grew up and drifted apart. The real question was, Why had Alice drifted back into her life now?

And yet, Alice Miller was in her house—the only visitor Judy had *ever* let into chez Horowitz while Tiernan was grounded. (And she spent plenty of time being grounded.)

In every prison break movie, the inmates waited for a chance like this—a guard with a drinking problem, a crack in the fence. Maybe (for once) instead of fighting with her mom, Tiernan would just nod her head and smile. If her mother wanted Tiernan to be Alice's best friend again, then she would play the role the best she knew how. (And Tiernan *did* know how.) After all, if her performance was convincing enough, Alice just might be her ticket out of here.

Tiernan kicked off her combat boots and slid on some boring ballet flats. She dug through the mound of clothes piled in the corner until she found the Level 3 T-shirt Alice had given her as a birthday present back when she'd turned thirteen. It

smelled a bit moldy, but Tiernan was willing to tolerate a little mold. Hell, she was ready to endure Alice's wrath, just as long as it came with a Get Out of Jail Free card. Maybe with Alice at her side, she'd be able to hit a few graduation parties after all.

"Mom!" Tiernan yelled, her voice straining under its own forced sweetness. "Tell Alice I'm ready for her." She took a quick look in the mirror, admiring herself in the costume of the girl she used to be.

"Knock, knock," Alice said in a timid voice. *Some wrath.* All it took was one look at Alice's face for Tiernan to see that her secret about that night at the freshman dance was still safe. Then why *was* Alice here?

"Howdy, stranger," Tiernan said.

"Nice T-shirt," said Alice.

Oh, this old thing? Tiernan thought, but instead said, "Yeah. It's funny, seeing you when I'm wearing this."

"Well, considering why I'm here," Alice replied, "it's totally *besher*."

Tiernan was surprised Alice had hung on to that Yiddish word she'd taught her all those years ago. She also wondered what she meant by it. But before she had a chance to ask, Alice was off and running.

"So, I was watching MTV yesterday—well, I wasn't really watching it, but I had it on and—I don't know if you heard about this—I mean, it's been on the radio but I'm not sure what station you listen to, but anyway . . ."

Alice had always been a fast talker, but whenever she felt uncomfortable or nervous, she bordered on unintelligible. Unfortunately, Tiernan's Alice decoder had grown rusty over time.

"So I was looking on Mapquest and I figure it's about a five-day drive to get to Austin. And I thought we could share the driving once I show you how to handle the stick shift. Plus, I was thinking we'd alternate between staying at motels and sleeping in the van."

Tiernan thought cozying up to Alice might get her out of the house for a night or two—but a full-fledged ten-day vacation? *Jackpot!* Sure, it would be awkward to go on a road trip with her ex-best friend to see a band she hadn't listened to in years, but it still beat living with the dragon lady under house arrest. Just as long as she wasn't stuck in a van with Summer Dalton for ten days (and Alice said she wasn't coming) the whole thing would be totally bearable. Who knew? Maybe they'd even end up having some fun.

Tiernan climbed onto her desk so she could see out the high basement window. Sure enough, there was the Pea Pod parked in front of her house. Her getaway car.

"You're sure Summer's not coming?"

"She can't," Alice said, shaking her head. "She's going away with her boyfriend."

There was only one possible catch in this impossibly perfect plan. What if her mother said no? Tiernan *was* still grounded,

and, as a rule, Judy's punishments were nonnegotiable. Unless Tiernan didn't try to negotiate. If she just slipped away under the radar, by the time her mother figured out she was missing, she'd be halfway across the country.

Technically, it wasn't running away. She'd give Judy a courtesy call from the road. Let her know there was no need to slap her picture on a milk carton or anything drastic like that. And how angry could her mother get if she was hanging out with Alice Miller? That was like the woman's wet dream.

Tiernan stared at the Pea Pod. All she needed now was her retainer and her natural hair color and it'd be eighth grade all over again.

"So," Tiernan whispered so her mother wouldn't hear, "anything special I should bring along? Some back issues of *Tiger Beat*? Maybe my old training bra?"

"Well," Alice said, deadpan, "if it still fits."

Tiernan smiled. Unlike her friendship with Alice, her love of Level3, or any of the other stuff she'd be putting on for this trip, the training bra was probably the one thing she hadn't grown out of.