

The Wednesday afternoon that it all started, I was thinking about how great my life was going.

Actually, to be totally truthful, it didn't start that Wednesday. It started earlier than that—five years earlier. But I didn't know that then. I was just wandering around the aisles of the Putnam, Connecticut, Target with no idea what was coming, like the blond girl heading down to the basement in horror movies. I was blissfully unaware that disaster was looming, and thrilled with the way everything was working out.

After all, I had made it through my sophomore year with decent grades including a passing grade in Chemistry, which was in itself a minor miracle. (I'd been against Chemistry since the first class, when I noticed the safety station at the back, complete with chemical shower and eye-wash station. These things didn't seem to be necessary in Algebra.) School was over for the year, and the whole summer was stretched out in front of me. I had a wonderful best friend. And most important of all, I had an amazing boyfriend. Everything was perfect.

Well, except for the fact that I'd made the very grave mistake of wearing, to Target, a red tank and khaki skirt. I'd forgotten that all the employees there wore red shirts and khakis. And so every few minutes people were coming up to me and asking where they could find the toothpaste, because they thought I worked there.

"Okay!" I said, tracing my finger down the items on the list. "Let's get started." I smiled across the aisle at Teddy Callaway, my boyfriend. Of all the things that were currently good in my life, Teddy was number one. We had started dating my second week of ninth grade at Putnam High School and had been together for the past two years. Teddy was older—eighteen to my sixteen—and would be starting his senior year in the fall. He'd been sophomore and junior class president, and had been elected senior class president for the coming year. He was consistently being featured on the front page of the local paper, the Putnam Post, looking serious and humble, as a result of all the service groups he had started and all the good he was always doing for the community. And Teddy's altruism was actually the reason we were at Target together. We were leaving in a week to do volunteer work in Colombia, and we needed supplies.

Teddy swallowed hard, cleared his throat, and said, "Gemma?"

"Yes?" I asked as I looked down at the list and tried not to wince. When Teddy had first told me about this volunteering program, I had assumed it would mean doing things like planting gardens and

maybe teaching children to sing, until my best friend, Sophie Curtis, pointed out that I was actually thinking of *The Sound of Music*. I hadn't realized until I got the application forms that this program involved things like building houses and digging latrines. The five-page list of supplies included items like work gloves and first-aid kits (extra gauze) and antimalarial pills. But I wasn't going to let that dissuade me. I had been on board to go on this trip ever since Teddy told me about HELPP (Humanitarian Education Learning through Progressive Programs).

Well, technically, I had been on board once it was clear he was going with or without me. My parents had only agreed to let me go after I'd shown them the literature, proving that there would be supervision and that guys and girls stayed in separate cabins. I needed them to agree, because it seemed there were actually a lot of costs involved with volunteering. We'd had to pay for the program, something my dad hadn't been too thrilled about. He said that if I really wanted to learn about construction, he would happily let me work on the addition to his house, and for free.

But I pressed hard to be able to go, because this way Teddy and I wouldn't have to spend three weeks apart, even if we were staying in separate cabins and digging separate latrines. We hadn't been apart for that long since we got together, and I didn't see any reason for us to start now.

"Okay, we need gauze," I said, grabbing some from the shelf and dropping it into my basket. "And . . ."

"Gemma," Teddy said again, a little more loudly this time. I looked down at the list and saw what he must have been pointing out, and dropped in another roll, trying not to think what we would need gauze for. I glanced over at Teddy and noticed that he looked a little pale.

"Are you okay?" I asked as I looked for the Band-Aids. In the two years we'd been together, I'd learned to read him really well, and I could see that he had something on his mind. Possibly he'd been wondering the same thing about the gauze as I had. After all, we were usually on the same wavelength.

And, okay, if we sometimes weren't on exactly the same wave-length, I let him think that we were.

It was actually how we met. I'd spent the first week of my high school experience wandering the halls, bewildered, going to the wrong classes in the wrong classrooms, sometimes not realizing this until the class was over. My sense of direction had never been great, and Putnam High, with two thousand students, was huge compared to my middle school. I had been getting through the first week by basically clinging to Sophie like a bi-valve. One day after school, I'd somehow gotten lost in the warren of classrooms and was just looking for a quiet one to duck into so that I could text Sophie and see if she could come and find me. It wasn't until I'd shut the door that I realized I wasn't alone. "Hi," a voice from the front of the room said. I blinked,

surprised, as a guy who looked older than me hopped off the desk he was sitting on and walked forward. “Are you here for the Warbler meeting?”

I just stared at him. The guy standing before me was incredibly cute, with bright blue eyes and blond hair that was a touch long, a lock of it falling over his forehead. He had such an air of confidence and authority about him that I felt a little dazed.

When I realized he was waiting patiently for an answer, I nodded, even though I had no idea what he was talking about. “Yes,” I said, hoping he would tell me what this meant. I was hoping the Warblers wasn’t some kind of a cappella group, as I had a terrible singing voice. But this was the most dazzling guy I had encountered in a while, and I would have said anything to get to stay in his presence. “I am.”

“Great,” he said, nodding. “I’m so glad you care about this. Too many people at this school are apathetic.”

“I know,” I said fervently, as though I hadn’t been one of those people until a few seconds ago. “But it’s something I’ve always been committed to.”

He looked at me appraisingly for a moment, and his smile widened. “It’s nice to meet you,” he said. “I’m Teddy.”

I later found out that the Warblers was a group dedicated to protecting the environment of the Marsh Warbler, a rare species of bird that wasn’t even found in Connecticut. But that didn’t matter, because after a while I really did come to care about the Marsh Warbler, even if I also secretly thought it was kind of ugly. Because as far as I was concerned, it had brought me and Teddy together, and so I would always have a soft spot for it.

Teddy and I became a couple almost immediately after that. And overnight, I went from being an anonymous freshman accidentally attending the wrong classes to Teddy Callaway’s girl-friend. I was no longer just Gemma Tucker, not particularly special or memorable. I had an identity. His causes (and there were, I soon found out, a lot of them) became my causes. His friends became my friends. Teddy was my first boyfriend—though not my first kiss, which was a fact he didn’t necessarily know. He’d been in my life so long now, and was such a part of it, that I really couldn’t imagine it without him.

I smiled at him across the aisle, and he gave me a weak smile back. He opened his mouth like he was about to say something, when a harassed-looking woman, pushing a toddler in a cart, rolled into the aisle. “Where are the paper towels?” she demanded of me.

“Sorry,” I said, wishing for the umpteenth time I’d worn blue that day. “I don’t actually work here.” She glanced at Teddy, and at my own basket of items.

“Clearly,” she said, rolling her eyes and pushing her cart away as she muttered about shoddy work ethic these days.

“Oh,” I said, leading the way to the gardening aisle to look for bug repellent as Teddy trailed behind me. “Sophie and Doug wondered if we wanted to see a movie this weekend. I told them yes, okay?”

Sophie and I had stayed close, moved out of our bivalve stage, and my best friend had morphed into a class-A heartbreaker by the end of sophomore year, leaving besotted guys and a string of exes in her wake. Doug was her latest victim, but he'd actually lasted a whole month, which was a record for Sophie, who tended to cycle through boys in two-week increments. I'd said yes to the movie without checking with Teddy, because when you've been together as long as we had, some things were assumed, like the fact we'd always have a Saturday-night date. It was one of the million reasons I loved being with him. I didn't have any of the anxiety and stress that I saw Sophie going through with all her various boys. Instead, I had Teddy, who was constant and brilliant and wonderful.

"Gemma," Teddy said, shaking his head.

"I know," I said quickly. "Doug is kind of a meathead. And I know you think he's insensitive to the plight of the, um, worker. But they promised we could pick the movie this time, so I thought about that documentary you wanted to see. The one about the . . . plight of the worker?" I mumbled the last part. I could never remember the details of the documentaries Teddy wanted to watch. All I knew was that they were never the ones I wanted to see, which were mostly about penguins.

Teddy shook his head again and took a big breath. "Gemma . . ."

"But we don't have to have dinner with them again! It can be just the two of us. What do you say?" I picked up a citronella candle in a glass jar and gave it a cautious sniff.

"Gemma."

"We can go to that raw vegan place that just opened, and—"

"Gemma!"

I stopped talking when I realized I'd been interrupting, smiled at him, and thought, one last time, about how wonderful our summer together was going to be. How everything was falling into place. How great my life was.

Teddy looked at me, right into my eyes. He seemed to be struggling with something, and let out a long breath before speaking. "I . . ." He paused, then took another breath and said in a rush, "I think we need to talk."

"We are talking," I said. Then the impact of his words—and the tone of his voice—hit me, and I noticed again how pale he looked. The world seemed to wobble for a second, and it was like I was suddenly having trouble catching my breath. "What . . ." I started, haltingly, hearing how shaky—how scared—my voice sounded. "What do you mean?"

"Gemma," he said, his voice choked, "I think we should break up." I dropped the candle I'd been holding, and the glass shattered into pieces at my feet.