

Anna
K

JENNY LEE

Anna

K

A LOVE STORY



FLATIRON
BOOKS
NEW YORK

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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For my husband, John—my love, my favorite,
and my happily ever after.
This book would not exist without you.

Who's Who in *Anna K*

(in order of appearance)

LOLLY S.

Seventeen, junior at the Spence School. Girlfriend of Steven K., older sister of Kimmie.

STEVEN K.

Eighteen, senior at Collegiate School. Older brother of Anna, boyfriend of Lolly.

DUSTIN L.

Eighteen, senior at Stuyvesant High School. Homework tutor to Steven, younger brother of Nicholas.

KIMMIE S.

Fifteen, sophomore at Spence. Younger sister of Lolly.

ALEXIA VRONSKY

(ALSO KNOWN AS VRONSKY OR COUNT VRONSKY)

Sixteen, sophomore at Collegiate. Cousin of Beatrice.

ANNA K.

Seventeen, junior at Greenwich Academy. Younger sister of Steven, girlfriend of Alexander.

ALEXANDER W.

(ALSO KNOWN AS THE GREENWICH OG)

Nineteen, freshman at Harvard University. Boyfriend of Anna K., older half-brother of Eleanor.

ELEANOR W.

Fifteen, sophomore at Greenwich Academy. Younger half-sister of Alexander.

BEATRICE D.

(ALSO KNOWN AS BEA)

Seventeen, junior at Greenwich Academy. Cousin of Alexia.

NICHOLAS L.

Twenty-one. Older brother of Dustin, boyfriend of Natalia.

MURF G.

Sixteen, sophomore at Greenwich High School. Childhood friend of Vronsky, stable hand at Staugas Farms.

NATALIA T.

Eighteen, lives in Arizona. Girlfriend of Nicholas.

Part One

I

Every happy teenage girl is the same,
while every unhappy teenage girl is miserable
in her own special way.

The whole thing was a fucking disaster. Lolly found out her boyfriend Steven was cheating on her while she was getting his Apple Watch outfitted with a new wristband at the Hermès store on Madison Avenue. Steven didn't even know she had his Apple Watch. Twenty minutes ago, he decided to do back-to-back SoulCycle classes, while Lolly begged off staying for the second class with him. (Her new gluten-free diet lacked the necessary carbs for her to handle doing a double sesh without passing out.)

She was telling him the truth while also needing the time and access to his Apple Watch to take it to the store for a new wristband, his present for their eighteen-month "screw-a-versary," which happened to be the very next day. (Lolly didn't love commemorating their first official date with this crude moniker, but Steven called it that. Lolly went along because she loved him.) So while Steven was climbing an imaginary hill to the steady beat of Dua Lipa's "IDGAF" at the East 83rd Street studio, Lolly was fifteen blocks south standing at the counter of Hermès.

She was deciding between the traditional double-wrap band in iconic orange leather and the more hetero choice in matte black. She was admiring the orange band on her own delicate wrist, when Steven's Apple

Watch vibrated and a tiny tit pic flashed on the screen, followed by the gray text bubble containing the letters: DTF? *eggplant emoji*

Lolly tapped the touch-screen to see the photo again. Confirming the worst, she froze until her fight-or-flight impulse kicked in. Lolly chose flight, forgetting to take off the new band as she ran out, and was stopped by the burly security guard who blocked the door. Lolly, never good at holding back tears, started to sob pitifully, staring down at her beloved Gucci sneakers (the ones with the glittering snakes) that Steven had bought for her this past Christmas. Unsure of what to do, the security guard placed his arms around the crying girl. She pressed her face into his poly-blend jacket and whispered, "It's a mistake. It must be a mistake. Please let it be a goddamn mistake."

Eventually the beautiful Japanese saleswoman decked out in head-to-toe Hermès, who had been helping Lolly before, took charge of the situation and brought her into the back room. She sat her down on a small couch and gave her a Perrier, which gave Lolly hiccups and made her start crying even harder. The whole scene was quite embarrassing for all parties involved. Kimiko, who had worked at Hermès for ten years, was no stranger to the rampant cheating of the city's wealthiest citizens, many of whom were her clients, but there was something about witnessing this seventeen-year-old girl's loss of innocence IRL that unexpectedly moved her.

Once they had gotten rid of her hiccups, Lolly asked if she should scroll through the rest of her boyfriend's messages or not. Kimiko said in a quiet voice, "Better to find out how bad it is now when you're not alone." Soon both women were mesmerized by the appallingly graphic nature of Lolly's boyfriend's relationship with the mysterious "Brad." Steven had used a fake name in his contacts, but there was no chance "Brad" was a guy judging from the plethora of female body parts being photographed and sent to Steven over the last several weeks. There was even one blurry up-the-skirt video that made both women wince and groan in unison.

Lolly purchased an Hermès Iris belt buckle and reversible strap in bleu saphir and bleu Brighton to thank Kimiko for her kindness and left the store fifteen minutes later, Uber-ing straight to Steven's parents'

massive four-bedroom penthouse apartment at 15 Central Park West (his parents were currently in Aspen skiing) to wait for his cheating ass. She tipped Gustavo the doorman a Benjamin not to tell Steven she was upstairs, citing a surprise gift and waving the orange Hermès shopping bag as proof. The doorman took her money, but clearly warned Steven anyway because ten minutes later her bf showed up carrying red deli roses in his still sweaty hands.

He had managed only the words “Lolly baby, what’s wrong?” before his mother’s favorite Lalique Tourbillons amber vase whizzed past him and smashed into the marble foyer floor. He stared at his normally demure girlfriend in shock when she said, “Just tell me one thing Steven . . . !” her voice now building in ferocity, “When’s your screw-a-versary with Brad?!” She was now holding up his Apple Watch as digital proof. Steven stared at it and knew he was irrefutably busted.

Steven’s momentary confusion quickly turned to sheepish shame and he activated full grovel mode. He tried to approach her, but she backed away from him. “Don’t come near me, you . . . you . . . disgusting pig! That’s right, I saw all the vile thirst trap pics that slut Brad sent you!” she screamed. At the mention of the pictures, the latest naked pic that Steven had seen on his phone after class popped into his brain and the tiniest lascivious smile flickered across his face. He was an eighteen-year-old boy, after all.

Unfortunately, Lolly caught Steven’s smirk.

The noise she emitted was more animal than human and she ran past him, almost knocking him over in the process. Having nowhere to run except the end of the hall, Lolly opened the door to the master bedroom and slammed the heavy door behind her. She locked the door and ran straight into Steven’s mother’s walk-in closet. She threw herself face-down on the bloodred crushed-velvet chaise at its center and began to cry harder than she had ever cried before.

Steven tried talking to Lolly through the door, but he was met only with the occasional sound of things being thrown at the door. An hour later he was in the living room watching SportsCenter highlights and eating his third pepperoni Hot Pockets when he received the following text from his buddy Kaedon: Dude, did U buy ur gf a fur coat?!!!

Steven paused the TV and quickly discovered he was already unfriended and blocked across all Lolly's social media accounts. (So much for their 453-day Snap streak!) He texted Kaedon back: screenshot?

Seconds later he received a selfie of a possibly naked Lolly wearing one of his mother's fur coats. Lolly, being much tinier than his mother, looked ridiculous in the chevron-quilted Russian sable, her eyes wild and ringed with mascara. She looked like a rabid raccoon . . . one who just found out that her boyfriend was cheating on her and was royally pissed. He shook his head and knew the situation was now far beyond his skills to rectify. Steven fired off a string of texts to his sister Anna in Greenwich, Connecticut, telling her he was in dire need of her immediate in-person assistance. His sister was younger than he was, but much wiser, especially when it came to relationships and all the tricky emotions that came with them.

Ten minutes later he received a text from Anna announcing her arrival into Grand Central at 8:55 P.M. Before he could text back telling her to take a car, two more texts arrived explaining the latest snowfall was backing up traffic, with Google Maps showing how a train would be the fastest way into Manhattan for her. Anna's last text stated she expected him to pick her up at Grand Central in person so she could hear his side of the 911 gf emergency!! Steven replied with only the single character k, as there was no emoji to depict the grand scale of how fucked he truly was.

II

After playing *Shadow of War* to clear his head and sipping some of his dad's Glenmorangie Pride 1974 scotch to calm his nerves, Steven tried once again to talk to Lolly through the door. A moment later he finally received some indication of his girlfriend's state of mind, but it wasn't good. Lolly pushed the black-and-white photo strip of the two of them,

which they had made together in the photo-booth at her little sister Kimmie's bat mitzvah a year and a half ago, underneath the door. This picture was at one time (like four hours ago!) Lolly's most cherished possession, which she carried around in her LV wallet.

Steven often found his girlfriend staring at the photo strip, but it had been in a different condition than the one he was looking at presently. His eyes had been poked out in each of the four pictures and she had also drawn tiny dicks on his forehead.

"Lolly, baby, it didn't mean anything. It's you I love. I swear." Saying this out loud he knew it was true. When Steven was fourteen years old, his father discovered him getting a BJ from Jenna H. while her parents were over for dinner. His father sent the humiliated girl out of the room and sat Steven down and told him two things. First, he needed to get better at hiding if he didn't want to get caught. And second, the more important lesson, Steven needed to learn the difference between loving sex with girls and loving the girl he was having sex with.

At a loss for what to say and knowing Lolly adored Anna, as every girl adored his younger sister as soon as they met her, Steven announced Anna was on her way into the city, hoping Lolly would take this as a sign he wasn't giving up easily. But again, he was met with only silence. He did however get a text from the doorman alerting him to the fact that Dustin L. was on his way up. Steven sighed, pissed at himself for forgetting to cancel his thrice-weekly homework tutoring session. He stood up in the hallway and headed toward the front door.

He considered talking to Dustin about his current dilemma, as Dustin was one of the smartest guys he knew, but Steven decided there was no way Dustin would take his side. Dustin was technically one of Steven's oldest friends, as their mothers had happened to attend the same mommy-and-me music classes, so they played together as babies every Tuesday and Thursday and were "best buds" until the age of five. But then Dustin's parents divorced, and he went to public school while Steven went to private, which meant they hadn't run in the same social circles for years and had only recently gotten back in touch when Dustin became Steven's homework tutor.

Currently Dustin was a senior graduating with honors from Stuyvesant in June, while Steven was a second-time senior at Collegiate. Steven had attended Collegiate for elementary school but was kicked out in fifth grade when he got busted pantsing a classmate during PE. Next, he was kicked out of Xavier in seventh grade for pot, then Riverdale in ninth grade for fighting. He then attended Horace Mann for a few semesters and was now back at Collegiate on a very short leash.

Steven had his mother to thank for his reinstatement. She'd had to call in a few favors to make it happen. And since one of the conditions of his academic probation was maintaining a high GPA, his mother had hired a string of overpriced homework tutors that all quit after a week or two, citing Steven's poor attitude (i.e., filthy mouth) and even worse work ethic. At her wit's end, his mother finally had the brilliant idea to call Dustin's mother to see if Dustin, whose impressive academic accomplishments were always touted on fb, would agree to work with Steven as his new homework tutor. His mother knew that while her son had little respect for the authority of adults, he coveted the approval of his peers.

Dustin had been adamantly opposed to tutoring Steven when his mother brought it up to him last October. He pointed out that he and Steven were only "friends" because of the happenstance of their two mothers meeting, and by all accounts, the two boys could not have had more different childhoods. "We have nothing in common!" Dustin moaned. "What will we talk about?"

"What you're being paid to talk about . . . homework," was her calm reply.

Dustin let out a deep sigh and rolled his eyes. Where Steven was a good-looking, rich party boy from Manhattan's highest social circle, Dustin was none of those things. Dustin was adopted and knew nothing about his biological parents. Well, he did know that his teenage mother had left a note saying he should be given to Tamar L., "the nice social worker lady who was smart and kind, when she was just a kid from a fucked-up home living with her messed-up mom." She wanted a better life for her own kid, which is why she knew she should give him up.

And so, one Friday night on her way to temple for her first Shabbat

service in quite some time, Tamar received a call from a social worker at a hospital and was given one hour to decide if she wanted to become the mother of a two-day-old newborn. Taking it as a test of her lapsed piety, she leaned forward and gave her cab driver the address to St. Luke's on 112th Street. When she told her husband about her intentions and explained her taxicab epiphany, Dustin's soon-to-be adoptive father didn't give it a moment's hesitation (even though they already had a three-year-old) before saying, "I'm in!" And Tamar was consumed with a feeling of security that she had married the right man. Eighteen years later, Dustin's mom still told this story, but with the caveat that while she was right about adopting Dustin, she had spoken too soon about her now ex-husband.

Dustin had grown up to be a quiet, serious boy whose adoptive parents continually made jokes to their friends that their own genes could have never produced such a smart kid, and Dustin, knowing the routine, would respond that he was pretty sure his biological parents could never have raised him to be such a good Jewish boy. (Only recently with the rise of Drake's popularity was Dustin's blackness combined with his Jewish upbringing thought of by his peers as "cool" rather than "weird.") What people didn't know was that Dustin was also prone to panic attacks and had been in therapy for his anxiety since the age of ten, which was why the thought of tutoring a "crazy rich kid" like Steven tied his stomach in knots. "No way. I can't do it, Mom," Dustin said. "Steven's the epitome of the one percent, and me helping him is like going over to the dark side. I'm no Kylo Ren."

Dustin's mother, being a very practical woman, calmly explained to her son that he was making far too much of a big deal over the matter. "You're being too emotional, Dusty," she said. "This is not *Star Wars*. This is real life, and it's not fair of you to write Steven off just because he was born into great wealth. No one's saying you have to be best friends with him. This is a job where you're providing a needed service and getting paid well for doing it. You'll make more money in the next eight months than I make in an entire year." The going rate for homework tutors in Manhattan was easily two hundred bucks an hour, and Steven's mom was of course offering more, which meant Dustin would be clearing

over two thousand dollars a week along with a bonus of ten grand if Steven ended the year with a GPA above a 3.2.

“Don’t you see how insane that is?” Dustin replied. “You’re a licensed professional who spends her days helping the underprivileged, people who actually need help. You’re the one who’s always saying social workers and public-school teachers are the two noblest professions that are grossly undervalued in today’s world. How can you in good conscience suggest I do this?”

“Stop being so melodramatic! You’re going to college next year and this will spare you working at some crappy part-time job for spending money. That’s the way I’m looking at it, and so should you.” Dustin found his mother’s viewpoint to be simplistic and shortsighted but when he tried to tell her as much, she refused to debate the matter with him further and instead insisted he talk the matter over with someone else before turning it down.

Dustin decided to end the matter quickly by going to the highest authority first, the rabbi at their temple. Much to Dustin’s surprise, Rabbi Kennison agreed with his mother, citing the example that she herself had worked at McDonald’s in high school. “I asked every customer if they wanted to supersize their meal; does that mean I’m responsible for the obesity problem in America?” she asked. Before Dustin could answer, she added that Dustin would be performing a mitzvah by using his God-given intellectual gifts to help another. “What if Steven grows up and becomes a senator because you helped him with his studies?”

Dustin would have scoffed at the idea that the kid who once ate a June bug on a dare when they were four years old could ever become a senator, but the fact that the current president was once a reality star who cheated on his pregnant wife with a porn star gave him pause. Instead Dustin thanked her for her counsel and immediately called Dr. N. and requested an emergency therapy session. After fifty minutes of therapy, Dustin was no closer to a decision. He eventually reasoned that all teenagers, rich and poor alike, probably had the same capacity for good or evil, and the best way to combat evil was through education—that is, if no lightsaber was available. (Dr. N. casually mentioned at the end of the session that if Dustin turned down the job, perhaps he might recom-

mend his nephew for the position, as he was a poor law school student at Fordham. Dustin found this suggestion ethically questionable.) After a week of intense hand-wringing, Dustin accepted the tutoring job, warning his mother that if he felt even a twinge of inner turmoil, he'd quit.

What Dustin found after his first month was that the nine hours a week he spent tutoring Steven was not in fact an Aristotelean battle between good and evil like he had feared (nor a biblical, Shakespearean, philosophical, or even George Lucasian one), but was instead fun. His childhood friend wasn't as entitled and insufferable as Dustin had assumed he would be. Steven had grown up to be very much the same as he was when he was a toddler, a charismatic boy with a good sense of humor who enjoyed expensive toys and was happy to share them with his friends (and who would probably still eat a bug if he was dared to do so).

By the second month, Dustin had begun to find his time spent with Steven amusing, even though he would never admit it to his mother. On more than one weekend, Dustin found himself looking forward to their Monday study session, when Steven would no doubt regale him with some outlandish story from his "lit AF" weekend. The two boys had polar opposite high school student experiences: Steven's were all drugs, nightclubs, and hot girls while Dustin's were mostly coffee shops, study groups, and smart girls who always, always "friend-zoned" him.

By the end of the fall semester Dustin had whipped Steven into fighting academic shape, witnessed Steven ace his finals (without cheating), and found himself prouder of Steven's 3.3 GPA than his own 4.0 (though with APs his GPA was actually higher). The two boys celebrated their shared victory over a massive steak dinner at Peter Luger in Brooklyn, and when Steven toasted Dustin for achieving the impossible—Steven's father told him he was proud of him for the first time ever—it dawned on Dustin that he was going to miss Steven during the monthlong winter break. The fact that he had been proven so wrong about his old friend didn't annoy Dustin, but instead filled him with joy. Feeling superior to his peers often made him lonely, and that night over a feast fit for a king, he felt a profound sense of connection to someone his own age, and he liked it very much.

This was when Steven invited him to his annual New Year's Eve party,

which, though he didn't know it at the time, would forever change the course of Dustin's life. It was never Dustin's soul that was at stake upon reuniting with Steven, it was his heart. The reason for this was that Steven's girlfriend, Lolly, had a little sister, Kimmie, who was to become Dustin's newest infatuation and perhaps his greatest love.

III

Unlike Steven, Dustin had always been an intense, bookish kid, which meant he didn't have many friends, but this never bothered him because he had no time to be social. He put all his time and effort into his schoolwork, the debate team, and worrying about global warming and the rising sea levels. However, he did have one source of real joy: movies. Sitting in a dark theater, he could momentarily stop worrying about his extensive AP course load and just breathe. Because of this escapism, he had seen an impressive number of films, with his favorite guilty pleasures being the high school comedies of the eighties and nineties. It was these very movies that ignited the flame of his one super-secret, shameful fantasy that he had never admitted to anyone in his entire life, not even his therapist.

This fantasy was that Dustin wanted to end his high school career by going to his senior prom not with a pack of guy friends, or even a smart Ivy League-bound girl whose GPA he admired, but with a gorgeous, completely out-of-his-league hot girl (he didn't even care if she was smart). And he didn't want just any pretty high school girl, he wanted a girl who was on the not-so-secret "secret" Manhattan private school Hot List that came out every year during the Christmas holidays, ranking the top ten private school girls in every grade. (He knew, of course, that the very existence of such a list was shallow, misogynistic, and demeaning to girls, but it's not like he actively participated in the making of the list; he just viewed it. And then promptly hated himself for doing so.)

Dustin was wise enough to know this reverie of his was fueled by the fantasy-filled teen movies he loved, where the “nice guy” always ended up with the “hot girl,” but he didn’t care. He wanted what he wanted, and even though he felt guilty for having such a frivolous hankering, especially when the entire political landscape was a shit show these days, he let himself off the hook by viewing the matter scientifically. What he was experiencing was a biological imperative, or to put it more crudely, it was because he had just as much testosterone as every other teenage boy in America.

This prom fantasy of Dustin’s had morphed into an entirely different beast six weeks ago, on the night of Steven’s annual New Year’s Eve party. This infamous party came into existence four years prior when Steven had no choice but to attend Baruch, a New York City public school, for the first semester of his freshman year after he managed to get kicked out on his first day of Riverdale Country School. Steven, worried he was going to lose his social standing while he waited for his mother to get him into a new private school, asked his father to let him throw a New Year’s Eve party, while his parents spent the holiday as always at their beach house in Maui.

His Korean father, who was constantly worrying about his half-Korean son fitting in with the best of New York society, agreed and gave his son the sage advice that for a party to be memorable, it needed not only to be lavish but exclusive as well. It was his father’s idea that Steven should restrict his party to only upperclassmen (private school juniors and seniors) even though he was himself only a freshman. And to attract these cool upperclassmen his father paid handsomely for A\$AP Rocky to perform. It was his mother’s idea to “paper the party” with twenty young Wilhelmina models paid to be pretend guests, something she had heard about from a friend who made his fortune investing in nightclubs. The original party was an enormous success, and Steven’s reputation as the host-with-the-most (models and booze) was now legendary.

This very party five weeks ago was Dustin’s first time being invited, though he had heard stories about the infamous gathering over the years. When Dustin showed up that night, he had convinced himself that the party, like most things in this town, was more than likely 50 percent

hype, but as soon as he entered, he knew he was wrong. This party was unlike anything he had ever seen before.

It was as if Santa Claus had quit the toy-making business and opened a strip club. Sexy models dressed like holiday elves circulated the professionally decorated party, handing out truffle mac-n-cheese balls and poached purple potatoes with caviar. There were two top-shelf liquor bars manned by scantily clad bartenders. (This being her second year as gf of the host, Lolly had made sure there were hot male bartenders as well.) There was a stream of professional DJs who were in charge of the music. And right when you entered the foyer, the first thing you saw was a seven-foot-tall ice sculpture fountain of Rick and Morty, in which champagne poured into Morty's hand, then would travel through Morty (sitting on Rick's shoulders), and come out Rick's "Pickle Rick" dick perfectly chilled.

The fountain was the most Instagrammed photo of the party.

Steven's parents' only new rule this year was that there would be no smoking cigarettes inside because of the fifteen-million-dollar Matisse-cigarette-burn incident of last year's soiree. Solving this problem was easy. They simply opened their roof access, the stairs in the hallway outside of Steven's front door. (Steven's parents shared the floor with only one other family and the C.s were gifted the K.s' Parisian pied-à-terre keys for their holidays to ensure they wouldn't be home to deal with three-hundred-plus teenagers rampaging on the rooftop.)

After wandering from room to room in the main party, Dustin decided to go check out the roof before he dumped his coat in Steven's sister's bedroom. Upstairs he found throngs of people smoking spliffs and cigarettes under heat lamps, a Ping-Pong table and an ice hockey table in full action, and a pop-up shop from Serendipity 3 manned by someone dressed in a penguin suit. Overwhelmed by the sheer insanity, Dustin got himself a hot chocolate and walked over to check out the view. Central Park was breathtakingly beautiful, still blanketed in white from the first early snowfall of winter. As Dustin stared out across the park, he couldn't help but wonder if Steven's dad had paid for it to snow.

Turning to scan the crowd of faces, Dustin didn't see one person that he knew, and he realized the only people who had spoken to him since

arriving were paid waitstaff. He made the decision, after finishing his hot chocolate, to leave before Steven even knew he had shown up. This party was obviously not his scene and these were not his people, and admitting this allowed him to finally relax. When Dustin checked the time on his iPhone, he saw an alert reminding him that OSIRIS-REx was going into orbit around the asteroid Bennu, and even though this was happening 70 million miles away he looked up anyway and found the night sky to be quite calming. He was gazing upward when he heard a sweet voice ask him what he was looking at with such fierce concentration.

When he looked down to see who had spoken, his first thought was that he had gotten a contact high from mistakenly walking into the kitchen pantry earlier, which was being hotboxed by three Dalton seniors, because the girl standing before him looked like a blond angel, otherworldly and ethereal, sparkling in a silver dress with a pale pink pashmina wrapped around her shoulders to cover her wings.

As a man of reason Dustin did not believe in the phenomenon known as “love at first sight,” but in that moment it absolutely happened to him. He spoke to this gorgeous girl about how he had the *New York Times* Astronomy and Space calendar alerts on his phone and how he had just received a notification, and she told him that she never really “got the whole stargazing thing” until she spent a year living out West where there were no tall buildings and the sky was bigger than she ever believed possible, chock-full of a zillion stars. Dustin adored her use of “chock-full” and how she guilelessly admitted she hadn’t understood that bright city lights were the reason why she never saw the stars in Manhattan.

Dustin gently corrected her, explaining that on a clear night it was possible to see a few constellations if you knew where to look. He then explained why the spacecraft OSIRIS-REx’s first orbit around the asteroid Bennu was significant and how exciting it was that such a thing was happening in space while they were standing there. “Can you even imagine the years of preplanning that went into this one event? It’s such a huge accomplishment for all involved.”

“Sure sounds that way,” the angel, whose name he didn’t even know,

replied and then shivered in the wind. Pulling her wrap tight around her shoulders she told him she needed to go find her sister, but she hoped they could talk more later. And then she was gone. If she hadn't touched his arm telling him it was nice to talk stars with him, he would have wondered if she had ever really been there at all.

He ended up staying at the party until a little after midnight, which he owed to the good fortune of running into two girls he knew from SAT prep class who let him tag along with them for the evening. Stephanie and Tasha were friends of Steven's girlfriend from Camp Laurel in Maine, and they both admitted to being first-time party attenders as well. Dustin was relieved to hear they were as overwhelmed as he was by the spectacle, but they said they were sticking it out to the bitter end, unsure if they'd ever score an invite again.

Luckily the two girls were chatterboxes, so Dustin stayed his usual quiet self and just listened while secretly scanning the crowd for the girl from the rooftop. It was only minutes after the New Year was welcomed, via screams and confetti cannons, that he saw her again. He was in the library sitting on a couch with Tasha and Stephanie, when his mystery blonde hurried by the doorway. He pointed her out to Stephanie, and she matter-of-factly informed him the angelic beauty was Kimmie, the little sister of their friend Lolly.

"I didn't know Lolly had a sister," was all he had to say before Stephanie and Tasha unpacked Kimmie's entire life story. Kimmie had just started Spence as a sophomore, because her freshman year had been spent living in Nevada and training to be an Olympic ice dancing hopeful. Six months ago, she moved back home after a terrible spill during a competition when Gabe, her skating partner and gay BFF, mistimed a deep outside edge lift, lost his balance, and fell backward, causing her to fall forward and shatter her kneecap. She spent the whole summer recovering from surgery and was told her career as an ice dancer was over.

Tasha then added, "Well, if I had to choose between the Olympics or being on the Hot List, I'd pick the Hot List for sure."

At the mere mention of the list, Dustin choked on his now-warm champagne, which escalated into an embarrassing coughing fit. After getting pounded on the back by both girls, he finally managed to get

out in a raspy voice, "She's on the list?" Dustin tried to sound as casual as possible, because truth be told, he hadn't known the list was even out yet.

Stephanie nodded. "She came in at number three, which is incredible since she didn't even campaign for it."

Tasha added, "And she doesn't dress slutty like all the other girls."

"Well, not at school," Stephanie said. "But there's plenty of videos of Kimmie in some skimpy-ass ice dancing outfits on YouTube."

"Do you think it sucks for Lolls to have such a gorgeous little sister?"

"Nah. I'd rather have a bf like Steven than be on the list."

"Same."

Newly awash in so much information, Dustin, not wanting to give either girl reason to be suspicious, artfully changed the subject and then left the party twenty minutes later. He chose to walk home across the snowy park so he could replay the night in his head, marveling at how every choice he'd made in his entire life led him to that serendipitous encounter on the roof. As much as he tried to stop himself from going there, near the end of the walk he couldn't help but imagine what it would be like to walk into his prom with Kimmie S., the third hottest sophomore in all of Manhattan.