

SHE
GETS
THE
GIRL

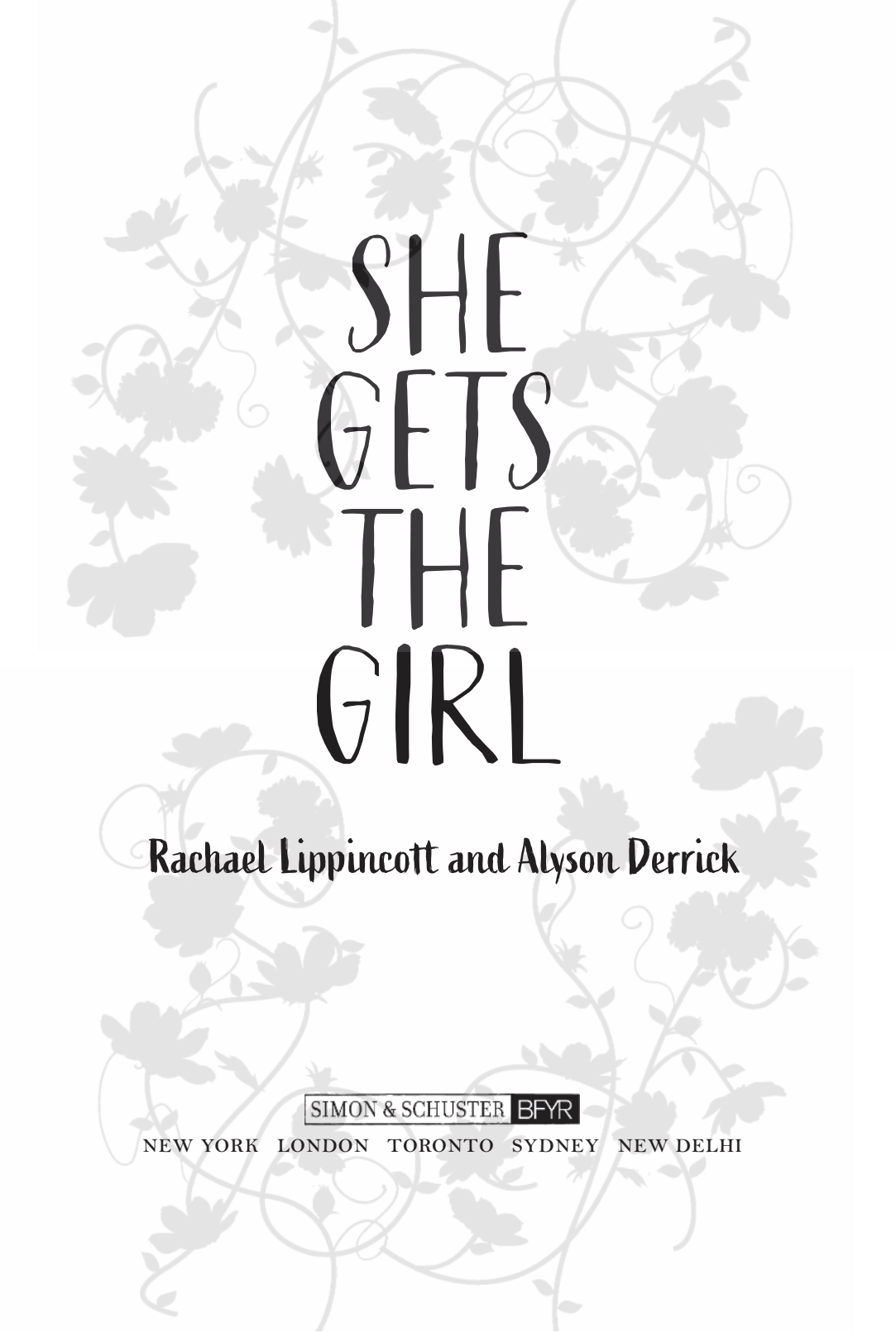
ALSO BY RACHAEL LIPPINCOTT

The Lucky List

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Five Feet Apart

All This Time



SHE GETS THE GIRL

Rachael Lippincott and Alyson Derrick

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This one's for us
—R. L. & A. D.

SHE
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A decorative illustration in the top right corner of the page, featuring a branch with several stylized flowers and leaves, rendered in a light gray color.

CHAPTER 1

ALEX

Every single person in this room is looking at Natalie Ramirez.

The hipster dude clutching an IPA like it's his firstborn son. The girl wearing a faded Nirvana shirt that *screams* Urban Outfitters. Brendan, the bartender, too distracted to realize he's made not one but *two* rumless rum and Cokes. All of them have their eyes glued to the stage.

I finish wiping up a few water rings clinging to the counter and throw my white bar towel over my shoulder, craning my neck around the sea of people to get a better view.

The stage lights cast an odd purplish hue over everything. Her face is outlined in shades of lilac and violet, and her long black hair shines a deep burgundy. I watch as her hands move up and down the neck of the guitar without so much as a second glance, every fret memorized, the feel of the strings ingrained in her fingertips.

Because while all eyes are on her, Natalie Ramirez is only looking at me.

She gives me a small, secret smile. The same one that gave me butterflies five whole months ago, when her band first performed at Tilted Rabbit.

It was the best performance I've seen in the three years I've worked here. Being a small local venue, we've had our fair share of Alanis Morissette wannabes and weekend warrior cover bands. There was a guy just last week who tried to go full Neutral Milk Hotel and play a saw for an hour straight, the sound so screeching that everyone except my coworkers and his girlfriend left the building.

To be honest, between the iffy music, the weird hours, and the less-than-ideal pay, the turnover rate here is pretty high. I'd have quit ages ago, but . . . my mom needs money for rent. Plus, I do too, now that I'm leaving for college.

And I guess it's all right. Because if I had quit, I wouldn't have been there that night five months ago, and I wouldn't be here right now, catching Natalie Ramirez's gaze from behind the bar.

My stomach sinks as I realize this is the last time I'll hear her play for a while, and even though I try to push that feeling away, it lingers. It sticks around through saying a final farewell to the ragtag crew of coworkers that let me study at the bar on school nights, through waiting for Natalie to get done with her celebratory drinks backstage before her band goes

on their first-ever tour next week, and through the two of us veering off to spend my last night here at home exactly how I want to spend it.

With her.

We're barely through the door of her cramped Manayunk apartment before she's kissing me, her lips tasting like the cheese pizza and warm beer she has after every show.

It's a blur of kicked-off Converse shoes and hands sliding up my waist as she pulls off my black T-shirt, the two of us stumbling across the space she escaped to after graduating last year from Central High, the public school just across the city from mine.

This place has pretty much been my escape all summer too, so I lead us effortlessly across the worn wooden floor into her room, dodging her bandmates' instruments and sheet music and scattered shoes. Her bedsprings squeak as we tumble back onto her messy sheets, the door clicking shut behind us.

The moment is so alive, so perfect, but that feeling I had earlier still sits heavy on my chest. It's impossible to not think about the bus that will whisk me away to college in the morning. The prickling nervousness I feel over leaving the place where I've lived my whole life. My mom, on the other side of the city, probably half a handle of tequila deep after spending the afternoon guiltling me over "leaving her" just like Dad left us.

But, most importantly, I want to finally have the conversation

I've been avoiding. The conversation about how I want to make this work long distance.

I zero in on the feeling of Natalie's skin under my fingertips, her body pressed up against mine, working up the courage to pull away, to *say something*, when I feel her soft whisper against my lips.

"I love you."

I pull her closer, so wrapped up in her that I hardly register what she just said. So wrapped up in what I'm struggling to say that I almost say it back.

More than almost. My mouth forms around the words. "I lo—"

Wait.

My eyes fly open and my heart hammers in my chest as I jerk away, those three words bringing with them a flood of moments *much* different from this one.

Thrown plates and screaming. My dad stooping down to say "I love you" before he got in the car and drove away, into a new life.

A life without me. Never to be seen or heard from again.

I can't possibly say them to her now. Not like this. Not when *I'm* the one leaving.

I see the question in her face illuminated in the glow of the yellow streetlight outside her window, so I quickly disguise my sudden movement by reaching out to run my fingertips along the black strap of her bra.

"I, uh. I loved that new song you guys played tonight," I whisper, trying my best to cover the words that almost came out of my mouth. I kiss her again, harder now, the kind of kiss that usually ends any conversation. But what she said lingers in the air around us like a thick fog.

"Alex," she says, pulling her lips off mine. She studies my face, her eyes searching for something.

"Yeah?" I say, avoiding her gaze as I look down at her fingers laced with mine, the chipped black paint on her nails.

"Sometimes . . ." She lets out a long sigh. "Sometimes I wonder what exactly this *is* to you."

I lean back and squint at her, finally meeting her gaze. "What do you mean?"

"I mean my band is going on tour. You're leaving tomorrow for college. You're going to be all the way in *Pittsburgh*," she says as she sits back and pulls her black hair into a bun, a sign the moment is slipping away. *Fast*.

There's a long pause. I can tell she's still searching. Still waiting for me to say the words she wants me to say. "It's our last night, and I want to know what *we* are. That I mean something to you. That this is going to work long distance, and you won't just ghost me and see other people. That I'm not just . . ."

Yes. "Natalie." I scooch closer to her. "I wanted to talk to you about that. I—"

My phone vibrates loudly on the white sheets beneath us,

the screen lighting up to show a text from Megan Baker, littered with winky face emojis, and a message reading: **HMU if ur ever back in the city!**

Natalie squeezes her eyes shut, angry now, like she's found the answer, but it's one she didn't want. "Megan Baker? That girl that plays the triangle in that Fleetwood Mac cover band? For real, Alex?"

"Natalie," I say as I reach out for her. "Come on. It's not—"

"No," she says as she pushes my hands away and stands up, her jaw locking. I notice her hazel eyes are glistening, tears threatening to spill out of the corners. "This is so . . . typical. This is so *fucking* typical. I try to get close and you pull this. We've been seeing each other for *five* months, and I haven't been able to trust you for a single one of them."

"Natalie. Come *on*. We've been over this. I went on, like, *three* dates. Four, max. I thought things were ruined between us. I thought we were done." I swing my legs over the bed and stand, all of this feeling *very* familiar, in *exactly* the way I didn't want tonight to go. "And only one was with Megan. She means *nothing* to me."

"How can I trust you in Pittsburgh, when you're getting texts like this when we're in the *same city*?" she asks, glowering up at me.

"Texts like *what*?" I snort, and turn the phone to face her. "She wished me safe travels and *all* I said was thanks. Then she's the one that—"

“Just *admit* it, Alex. It’s impossible for you to have a conversation without flirting. I saw you tonight talking to that girl at the bar during my set. It’s why you said no when I asked you to change your plans and come on tour with us last month. Why you avoided every conversation about what happens when you leave. You would rather flirt around in Pittsburgh than actually have a *real* connection.” She shakes her head, her voice breaking as she looks away, out the window. “You’ve never chosen me. Never really been all the way in.”

A familiar wave of guilt washes over me. For those dates I went on at the very beginning, and the times I’ve maybe crossed the line between talking and flirting during my shifts at Tilted Rabbit.

But I *am* in. I didn’t date anyone like this all through high school. I kept it casual with everyone because, well . . . I never wanted them to know the truth. The part of me I keep hidden. A wrecked home life and a mom too drunk off her ass to even take care of herself, let alone me.

But Natalie’s different.

She’s been different since she tried to surprise me with takeout after our third date and found my mom passed out on our porch. I ghosted her for two whole weeks out of embarrassment, going on other dates, sure she would never want to stick around after that, but . . . she didn’t give up. She’s the only person to get close enough to know the truth and stick by me anyway, baggage and all.

Now, though, her voice is cold when she talks next. Distant. “You may have a phone filled with numbers, but at the end of the day, without me, you have no one. You’re *alone*.”

I’m taken aback. We’ve had fights before, but I’ve never seen her quite like this. “*Alone?* That’s ridiculous.”

“Is it? Friends. Relationships. You push *everyone* away when they get too close. It’s a miracle *I’m* still here! We’ve been together for *five* months and I haven’t met *any* of your friends. Just your past hookups. Because that’s all you have, Alex. *You don’t have any friends.*” She turns her head back to face me. “I’m here, and I care about you. I’ve supported you through all the shit with your mom, when no one else *ever* would. I mean, you almost said ‘I love you too,’ Alex. I know you did,” she says. “But you stopped yourself. *Why?*”

“I . . . I don’t know. I just . . .”

I’m stumbling over words. I don’t know how to say *because it was more than I was expecting*.

“All right, Alex,” she says, crossing her arms over her chest. “I’ll give you another chance. Actually tell me how you feel. Tell me you love me too.”

She has me cornered, and she knows it. *Why* is she doing this? “Natalie, look, I . . .”

My voice trails off into silence.

“Wow.” Natalie lets out a huff of air as she shakes her head. “Sometimes I think you really might end up just like your mom.”

I stand there, stunned. She, more than anyone, knows that was a low blow. How nothing in this world scares me more than that.

I try to steady myself as the room starts to feel smaller and smaller, my chest tight when I try to take a breath as memories swim to the surface. My parents screaming at each other from across the house. The sound of glass shattering into a million pieces. The back bumper of my dad's car fading into the distance.

And for the first time in five whole months, I feel like running away, just like I always have.

I grab my T-shirt and angrily pull it back on. "You think you know *everything*, huh? You want me to tell you how I feel, Natalie?" I say, the fear and rage boiling to the surface. "I feel like you don't know shit about me."

"And whose fault is that?"

We stare at each other for a long moment, her chest heaving, the sharp lines of her collarbones intensifying.

"Get out," she says finally, her voice low.

I don't even fight it. "*Gladly*," I say, plastering a smirk on my face, like I don't care. It feels familiar, and I hate it.

I push past her out the bedroom door and grab my duffel bag off the floor, pulling it onto my shoulder as I angrily jam my feet into my shoes. The heel folds in and gets caught under my foot, so I jimmy my ankle around, twisting it back into place while I yank open the apartment door.

I give her one last glare as I grab the handle of my suitcase, that small smile she gave me onstage tonight long gone, those butterflies from five months ago and every time I see her play certifiably crushed. Then, with all the might I can muster and enough force to piss off old Mrs. Hampshire two apartments down, I slam the door behind me.

My head spins as I jog down the uneven steps, my suitcase clunking noisily behind me. I push through the door and out onto the street, trying to *calm down*, but the warm late-August air only makes me angrier.

It's the middle of the night and the temperature still hasn't dropped.

I storm down the block and around the corner, almost running smack into a group of barhoppers as I turn onto Main Street, a blur of faces and shapes and colors. I look to the side and slow down as I catch sight of the small coffee shop we went to on our first date, where we talked about her band, the Cereal Killers, and my upcoming graduation, and our favorite places in the city.

Adjacent to the coffee shop is the diner where we would hang out every Saturday in the corner booth, stealing kisses between bites of pancakes bigger than our heads.

We'd have been there tomorrow morning before I left, but now . . .

I duck my head and look away, the anger giving way to

another feeling. *Loss*. For those Saturdays at the diner, for the night we could have had, and for the girl who stuck around even though she knew the worst parts of me. Even if she just threw them all in my face.

My chest is heaving by the time I get to the SEPTA station. I collapse onto a bench and pull out my phone. The screen lights up to show it's only . . . 1:00 a.m.

It's one o'clock in the morning? Shit. My bus isn't until eight.

And . . . I can't go home. I can't spend one more night scraping my mom off the floor while she berates me for leaving. I'm afraid I'll never leave if I go back.

So, where the hell am I going to—

My eyes land on the text from Megan.

It's . . . worth a shot. She's about to be a sophomore at Temple, and her new dorm is pretty close to the bus station.

I tap on the notification and then the call button, holding my breath as it rings.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Megan," I say, a wave of relief washing over me when she picks up. "Can I come over?"

"*Oh*," she says, her voice changing ever so slightly. "I'd love it if you . . . *came over*."

I cringe. Jesus. No wonder Natalie was mad I went on a date with her.

“I mean, I, uh,” I say as I shift the phone to my other ear. “I was just planning to, like . . . sleep since my bus isn’t until eight tomorrow, but . . .”

But . . . *what have I got to lose?* Shit just hit the fan with Natalie. And Megan’s clearly not looking for anything serious. Would it really be so bad to forget everything, just for a night?

“*Oh*,” she says, jumping in before I have a chance to back-track. “You could, but, uh . . . my roommate is sick.”

“Julie?” I frown. “I just saw her at Natalie’s concert tonight. She was—”

“Yeah, I think . . . I think she must have come down with something after,” she says. Her voice is muffled as she pretends to call out to her roommate, “What’s that, Julie? You’re throwing up? I’ll be right there to help!”

Wow is this girl bad at lying.

“Alex! I think I’ve got to go,” she says in an attempt to wrap up her one-woman show. “Julie just started—”

I hang up before she can finish, saving her from having to keep up the act for even a second longer.

Sighing, I pull open my contact list, scrolling through it as I search for someone else to call. The *As* alone are about a mile long. Natalie may have been right about Megan, but that doesn’t mean there aren’t a million other people I know and can stay with.

My eyes glaze over as I pause on individual names: Melissa, Ben, Mike. Coworkers that never became more than