1. Spring 2

She makes sure the front of the Bennets' house stays dark, and the lights in the kitchen and backyard are the only ones on. But the party grows quickly. Somebody must've posted it online because it seems like the whole school's here.

As she walks around the backyard, she watches her classmates, most of them she doesn't even recognize. Some are in swimsuits, others in shorts. Six people are playing at the ping-pong table, and the football players are tossing a football. One of them slams into the bear bush, breaking off a couple of limbs. She tries not to think about it. Henny is being petted by people sitting around the lit fire pit, the glow of the coals red and black like lava flow.

No one knows or cares that she's the one who lives here. Or the one who opened the doors. She's trying to be blasé about it, but she's beginning to get nervous.

Jomo is standing in the gazebo and waves her over. He has an aluminum can in his hands. She grabs a beer out of the metal basin filled up with ice. Where that came from, she has no idea.

"Hi," he says, straightening up from the post. "Great party. Thanks for asking me." He looks around and adds, "Though I guess most everyone got asked."

"I only asked you and Katelyn." It's important to her that he knows this.

"I didn't know you even knew this many people at school."

"I don't!" She realizes he's kidding, and she relaxes.



He tells her about this great idea he has about her coming to his lacrosse games to take candid shots. "You'd be so much better than that yearbook guy. He's worthless."

She's trying to focus, but her eye keeps catching on somebody streaking by naked to jump into the pool, or a tennis ball arcing over the fence into the neighboring property.

"Hey, I wanted to ask you something else," he says, drawing her back to him. "Would you like to come to prom with me?"

"Me?" she blurts out before she can think about it. "I thought you'd ask Katelyn."

"Katelyn?" He shakes his head. "No. I mean, she's nice and all, but the only thing she talks about is gaming. All the time. I mean, like all the time."

She wishes the world could stop for just a moment, so she could process this. He's not setting her up, is he? She looks around to see if there are any phones filming this to be put on social so people can laugh at her. Nobody seems to be interested in them at all. She looks back at him, and he seems to be puzzled by her lack of response.

"If you don't want to go with me—."

"I do. I do want to go with you," she says, hurriedly, and can't help but grin stupidly at him.

He smiles back. "Good. We'll have fun."

He takes a swig from his can, and she realizes it's soda, not beer. He sees her eyeing it. "Lacrosse contract," he says. "No alcohol."

She wishes she knew that before as she takes a sip of her beer. But she doesn't cough, so it feels like another win. She's going to go to the prom. With Jomo. She wants to call Quince right now and ask her if she'll take her dress shopping. Something sexy. Strapless or backless or a slit right up the leg to the hip. She has a vision of red carpets and flashing lightbulbs and people yelling, "Over here, Zareen! Smile! Show some leg."

Jomo tips his soda back again and suddenly stiffens, his mouth going slack. Zareen turns around. Quince is standing there, her forehead shiny and her eyes wild, two neighborhood security officers flanking her.