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opening extract from

Summers of the Sisterhood Forever in Blue

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published by

Random House Children's Books

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PROLOGUE

Once upon a time there were four girls. Young women, you might even say. And though their lives travelled in different directions, they loved each other very much.

Once upon a time before that, these same girls found a pair of pants, wise and magical, and named them the Travelling Pants.

The Pants had the magic of teaching these girls how to be apart. They taught them how to be four people instead of one person. How to be together no matter where they were. How to love themselves as much as they loved each other. And on a practical level, the Pants had the magic of fitting all four of them, which is hard to believe but true, especially considering only one of them (the blonde) was built like a supermodel.

OK. Full disclosure. I am one of these girls. I wear these Pants. I have these friends. I know this magic.

I am in fact the blonde, though I was kidding about the supermodel part.

But anyway, as it happens with most kinds of magic, these Pants did their job a little too well. And the girls, being extraordinary girls (if you don't mind my saying so), learned their lesson a little too well.

And so when the girls' lives changed that final summer, the Pants, being wise, had to change too.

And that is how this tale of sisterhood began, but did not end.

Gilda's was the same. It always was. And what a relief too, Lena found herself thinking. Good thing you could count on human vanity and the onward march of fitness crazes requiring mats and mirrors.

Not much else was the same. Things were different, things were missing.

Carmen, for instance, was missing.

'I can't really see how we can do this without Carmen,' Tibby said. As was the custom, she'd brought her video camera for posterity, but she hadn't turned it on. Nobody was quite sure about when posterity started, or if maybe it already had.

'So maybe we shouldn't try,' Bee said. 'Maybe we should wait until we can do it together.'

Lena had brought the candles, but she hadn't lit them. Tibby had brought the ceremonial bad eighties aerobics music, but she hadn't put it on. Bee had gamely set out the bowls of Gummi Worms and Cheetos, but nobody was eating them.

'When's that going to be?' Tibby asked. 'Seriously, I think we've been trying to get together since last September and I don't think it has happened once.'

'What about Thanksgiving?' Lena asked.

'Remember I had to go to Cincinnati for Great-grandma Felicia's hundredth birthday?' Tibby said.

'Oh, yeah. And she had a stroke,' Bee said.

'That was after the party.'

'And Carmen went to Florida over Christmas,' Lena said. 'And you two were in New York over New Year's.'

'All right, so how about two weekends from now? Carmen will be back by then, won't she?'

'Yeah, but my classes start on June twentieth.' Lena clasped her hands around her knees, her large feet bare on the sticky pine floor. 'I can't miss the first day of the pose or I'll end up stuck in a corner or staring at the model's kneecap for a month.'

'OK, so July fourth,' Tibby said reasonably. 'Nobody has school or anything that Friday. We could meet back here for a long weekend.'

Bee untied her shoe. 'I fly to Istanbul on June twenty-fourth.'

'That soon? Can you go later?' Tibby asked.

Bridget's face dimmed with regret. 'The programme put us all on this charter flight. Otherwise it's an extra thousand bucks and you have to find your own way to the site.'

'How could Carmen miss this?' Tibby asked.

Lena knew what she meant. It wasn't OK for any of them to miss this ritual, but especially not Carmen, to whom it had mattered so much.

Bee looked around. 'Miss what, though?' she asked, not so much challenging as conciliating. 'This isn't really the launch, right?' She gestured to the Pants, folded

obediently in the middle of their triangle. 'I mean, not officially. We've been wearing them all school year. It's not like the other summers, when this was the huge kickoff and everything.'

Lena wasn't sure whether she felt comforted or antagonized by this statement.

'Maybe that's true,' Tibby said. 'Maybe we don't need a launch this summer.'

'We should at least figure out the rotation tonight,' Lena said. 'Carmen will just have to live with it.'

'Why don't we keep up the same rotation we've had going till now?' Bridget suggested, straightening her legs in front of her. 'No reason to change it just because it's summer.'

Lena bit the skin around her thumbnail and considered the practical truth of this.

Summer used to be different. It was the time they left home, split up, lived separate lives for ten long weeks, and counted on the Pants to hold them together until they were reunited. Now summer was more of the same. Being apart wasn't the exception, Lena recognized, it was the rule.

When will we all be home again? That was what she wanted to know.

But when she thought about it logically, she knew: it wasn't just the answer that had changed, it was the question. What was home any more? What counted as the status quo? Home was a time and it had passed.

Nobody was eating the Gummi Worms. Lena felt like she should eat one or cry. 'So we'll just keep up the rotation,' she echoed wanly. 'I think I get them next.'

'I have it written down,' Tibby said.

'OK.'

'Well.'

Lena looked at her watch. 'Should we just go?'

'I guess,' Tibby said.

'Do you want to stop at the Tastee Diner on the way home?' Bridget asked.

'Yeah,' Tibby said, gathering the effects of a ritual that hadn't happened. 'Maybe we can see a late movie after. I can't handle my parents tonight.'

'What time are you guys taking off tomorrow?' Bee asked.

'I think our train's at ten,' Tibby said. Lena and Tibby were taking the train together: Tibby was getting off in New York to start film classes and her Movieworld job, and Lena was heading up to Providence to change dorm rooms for the summer. Bee was spending time at home before she left for Turkey.

Lena realized she didn't want to go home just yet either. She picked up the Pants and cradled them briefly. She had a feeling she could not name exactly, but one she knew she had not had in relation to the Pants before. She had felt gratitude, admiration, trust. What she felt now still contained all that, but tonight it was mixed in with a faint taste of desperation.

If we didn't have them, I don't know what we would do, she found herself thinking as Bee pulled the door of Gilda's shut behind them and they walked slowly down the dark stairs.

'Carmen, it is beautiful. I can't wait for you to see it.'

Carmen nodded into the receiver. Her mother sounded so happy that Carmen had to be happy. How could she not be happy?

'When do you think you'll move in?' she asked, trying to keep her voice light.

'Well, we will need to do some work. Some plastering, painting, refinishing the floors. There's some plumbing and electrical to do. We want to get most of it out of the way before we move in. I hope it will be by the end of August.'

'Wow. That soon.'

'*Nena,* it has five bedrooms. Is that unbelievable? It has a beautiful backyard for Ryan to run around in.'

Carmen thought of her tiny brother. He could barely walk yet, let alone run. He was going to grow up with such a different life than the one Carmen had.

'So no more apartment, huh?'

'No. It was a good place for the two of us, but didn't we always want a house? Isn't that what you always said you wanted?'

She'd also wanted a sibling and for her mother not to

be alone. It wasn't always easy getting what you wanted.

'I'll have to pack up my room,' Carmen said.

'You'll have a bigger room in the new house,' her mother rushed to say.

Yes, she would. But wasn't it a bit late for that? For having a house with a yard and a bigger room? It was too late to redo her childhood. She had the one she had, and it had taken place in her small room in their apartment. It was sad and strange to lose it and too late to replace it.

Where did that leave her? Without her old life and not quite coming up with a new one. In between, floating, nowhere. That seemed all too fitting, in a way.

'Lena dropped by yesterday to say hi and see Ryan. She brought him a Frisbee,' her mother mentioned a little wistfully. 'I wish you were home.'

'Yeah. But I've got all this stuff going on here.'

'I know, *nena.*'

After she hung up with her mother, the phone rang again.

'Carmen, where are you?'

Julia Wyman sounded annoyed. Carmen glanced behind her at her clock.

'We're supposed to be doing a run-through on set in . . . now!'

'I'm coming,' Carmen said, pulling on her socks as she held the phone with her shoulder. 'I'll be right there.'

She hustled out of her dorm and to the theatre. She remembered along the way that her hair was dirty and she'd meant to change her pants, because the ones she was wearing made her feel particularly

fat. But did it matter? Nobody was looking at her.

Julia was waiting for her backstage. 'Can you help me with this?' For her role in the production, Julia wore a long tweed skirt, and the waist was too big for her.

Carmen bent down to work on the safety pin. 'How's that?' she asked, pinning the waistband in the back.

'Better. Thanks. How does it look?'

Julia looked good in it. Julia looked good in most things, and she didn't need Carmen to tell her so. But Carmen did anyway. In a strange way, it was Julia's job to look good for both of them. It was Carmen's job to appreciate her for it.

'I think Roland is waiting for you onstage.'

Carmen stepped onto the stage, but Roland didn't appear to be waiting for her. He didn't react in any way when he saw her. These days she felt her presence had the same effect as a ghost – nobody noticed her, but the air suddenly got cold. Carmen squinted and tried to make herself small. She did not like being onstage when the lights were on. 'Did you need something?' she asked Roland.

'Oh, yeah.' He was trying to remember. 'Can you fix the curtain in the parlour? It's falling off.'

'Sure,' she said quickly, wondering if she should feel guilty. Was she the one who put it up last?

She positioned the ladder, climbed up three rungs, and aimed a staple gun at the plywood wall. Set building was strange in that it was always about the impression, made to be seen from particular angles and not made to last. It existed in space and time not as a thing, but as a trick.

She liked the *chunk* sound of the staple clawing into

the wall. It was one of the things she'd learned at college: how to operate a staple gun. Her dad was paying a lot of money for that.

She'd learned other stuff too. How to gain seventeen pounds eating cafeteria food and chocolate at night when you felt lonely. How to be invisible to guys. How to not wake up for your nine o'clock psychology class. How to wear sweatshirts almost every day because you felt self-conscious about your body. How to elude the people you loved most in the world. How to be invisible to pretty much everyone, including yourself.

It was lucky she'd gotten to know Julia. Carmen was very fortunate, she knew. Because Julia was one of the most visible people on campus. They balanced each other out. Without Julia on the campus of Williams College, Carmen privately suspected she might disappear altogether.

To: Carmabelle@hsp.xx.com
From: Beezy3@gomail.net
Subject: Carmen-the-Bear
We are having carmic disturbances around here.
I know you're in your hibernation and I, of all people,
get what that's about.
But Carma, it's June. Time to come out and be with
your friends who love you.
We tried to go to Gilda's, but without you we could not go on.
Could not.
The buzzing Bee

It was different being a girl with a boyfriend.

Bridget meditated upon this as she walked along

Edgemere Street on the way from Lena's house to her own. Her meditation had begun moments before, when a guy she knew vaguely from high school leaned out of his car and yelled 'Hey, gorgeous!' and blew her a kiss.

In the past she might have shouted something at him. She might have blown him back a kiss. She might have given him the finger, depending on her mood. But somehow, it all seemed different now that she was a girl with a boyfriend.

She had spent almost a year getting used to it. It was particularly complex when you only saw that boyfriend for a day or two every month – when he went to school in New York City and you went to school in Providence, Rhode Island. Your status was more theoretical. For every guy who shouted from his car window, for every guy you passed on the way to Freshman Psychology who sort of checked you out, you thought, *What he doesn't realize is that I have a boyfriend.*

Each time she saw Eric's remarkable face, each time he appeared at the door of her dorm room or came to meet her at Port Authority in New York, it all came back. The way he kissed her. The way he wore his trousers, the way he stayed up all night with her getting her ready for her Spanish midterm.

But it became theoretical again after Eric told her about Mexico. He'd gotten a job as assistant director at their old camp in Baja.

'I'm leaving the day after classes end,' he'd told her on the phone in April.

There was no uncertainty in it, no question or lingering pause. There was nothing for her.