

Forever - Judy Blume

by PupleHairSwag

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NOT MY STORY

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I found this story on the web and wanted to put it on wattpad.

Enjoy :)

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Chapter 1

1

Sybil Davison has a genius I.Q. and has been laid by at least six different guys. She told me herself, the last time she was visiting her cousin, Erica, who is my good friend. Erica says this is because of Sybil's fat problem and her need to feel lovedthe getting laid part, that is. The genius I.Q. is just luck or genes or something. I'm not sure that either explanation is 100 percent right but generally Erica is very good at analyzing people.

I don't know Sybil that well since she lives in Summit and we live in Westfield. Erica and I decided to go to her New Year's party at the last minute for two reasonsone, because that's when she invited us, and, two, we had nothing better to do.

It turned out to be a fondue party. There were maybe twenty of us sitting on the floor around a low table in Sybil's family room. On the table were a couple of big pots of steaming liquid Swiss cheese and baskets of bread chunks. Each of us had a long two-pronged fork, to spear the bread, then dip it into the cheese. It tasted pretty good. I had gotten about two bites when this guy said, "You've got some on your chin."

He was on Erica's other side, sort of leaning across her. "You want me to wipe it off?" He held out his napkin.

I couldn't tell if he was putting me on or what. So I told him, "I can wipe my own chin," and I tried to swallow the bread that was still in my mouth.

"I'm Michael Wagner," he said.

"So?" I answered, and Erica shot me a look. She introduced herself to Michael, then tapped me on the head and said, "This idiot is my friend, Katherine. Don't mind her ... she's a little strange."

"I noticed," Michael said. He wore glasses, had a lot of reddish-blond hair and a small mole on his left cheek. For some crazy reason I thought about touching it.

I looked away and went back to spearing chunks of bread. The guy on my other side said, "My name's Fred. I live next door to Sybil. I'm a freshman at Dartmouth." Unfortunately he was also a creep.

After a while I tuned him out but he didn't know and kept blabbing away. I was more interested in what Michael was saying to Erica. I wondered where he went to school and hoped it was some place close, like Rutgers. Erica told him that we're from Westfield, that we're seniors, and that we're spending the night at Sybil's. Then Michael introduced her to somebody named Elizabeth and I turned around in time to see him put his arm around this pale dark-haired girl sitting next to him. I pretended to be interested in Fred the Creep after all.

At midnight Sybil flashed the lights on and off and Fred wished me a Happy New Year, then tried to stuff his tongue in my mouth. I kept my lips shut tight; while he was kissing me I was watching Michael kiss Elizabeth. He was much taller than I first thought and thin, but not skinny.

After the party we helped Sybil and her parents clean up and somewhere around 3:00 a.m. we trudged upstairs to bed. Sybil conked out as soon as her head hit the pillow but Erica and I had trouble getting to sleep, maybe because we were on the floor in sleeping bags, or maybe because Sybil was snoring so loud.

Erica whispered, "Michael's a nice guy ... don't you think so?"

"He's much too tall for you," I told her. "You'd only come up to his belly button."

"He might enjoy that"

"Oh, Erica."

She propped herself up on an elbow and said, "You like him, don't you?"

"Don't be silly ... we barely met" I rolled over, facing the wall.

"Yeah ... but I can tell anyway."

"Go to sleep!"

"He asked me for your last name and your phone number."

I turned around. "He did?"

"Uh huh ... but I guess you don't care about that." She buried herself inside her sleeping bag.

I gave her a half-hearted kick. Then we both laughed and fell asleep.

Erica and I have been friends since ninth grade. We're a good pair because she is outspoken and uninhibited and I'm not. She says she has to be that way to compensate for her size. She's just four-feet-tenso when I said that she would come up to Michael's belly button I wasn't kidding. Everyone in her family is tiny. That's how her great-grandfather got their last name. He came to this country from Russia, not speaking a word of English. So when he stepped off the boat and the man in charge asked him his name, he didn't understand. Instead of just calling him Cohen or Goldberg, the way the immigration officers did with so many Jewish refugees, this man sized him up and wrote down Mr. Small. Erica swears if she ever marries she will choose someone huge so that if they decide to have children the kids will at least have a chance to grow to normal size.

Not that being little has hurt anyone in her family. Her mother is Juliette Small, the film critic. You can read her reviews in three national magazines. Because of her Erica is positive she's going to get into Radcliffe, even though her grades aren't that hot. I have a 92 average so I almost died when I saw my college board scores. They were below average. Erica scored much higher than I did. She doesn't fall apart over really important things and I'm always afraid I might. That's another difference between us.

The phone rang at noon the next day and woke me. Sybil jumped up and ran to answer it. When she came back she said, "That was Michael Wagner. He's coming over to get his records." She yawned and flopped back on her bed. Erica was still out cold.

I asked Sybil, "does he go with that girl, Elizabeth?"

"Not that I know of ... why, are you interested?"

"No ... just curious."

" ... because I could drop a hint if you want me to ... "

"No ... don't."

"I've known him since kindergarten."

"He's in your class?"

"My homeroom."

"Oh ... I thought he was older."

"He's a senior ... same as us."

"Oh ... " He seemed older. "Well ... as long as I'm awake I might as well get dressed," I said, heading for the bathroom.

Sybil and I were in the kitchen when the bell rang. I was picking raisins out of a breakfast bun, piling them in the corner of my plate. Sybil leaned against the refrigerator, spooning strawberry yoghurt out of the carton.

She answered the front door and showed Michael into the kitchen. "You remember Katherine, don't you?" she asked him. "Sure ... hi ... " Michael said. "Oh ... hi," I said back.

"Your records are still downstairs," Sybil told him. "I'll get them for you."

"That's okay," Michael said. "I'll get them myself."

A few seconds later he called, "Who's K.D.?"

"Me," I answered. "Some of those albums are mine." I went downstairs and started going through the pile.

"Are yours marked?"

"No."

I was making a stack of K.D.s when he said, "Look ... " and grabbed my wrist. "I came over here because I wanted to see you again."

"Oh, well ... " I saw my reflection in his glasses.

"Is that all you can say?"

"What am I supposed to say?"

"Do I have to write the script?"

"Okay ... I'm glad you came over."

He smiled. "That's better. How about a ride? My car's out front."

"My father's coming to pick me up at 3:00. I have to be back by then."

"That's okay." He was still holding my wrist.

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Chapter 2

Everyone says that Erica has insight. I suppose that's how she knew I was interested in Michael before I admitted it to anyone, including myself. It's true that I come on strong with my sarcastic act sometimes, but only when I'm interested in a guy. Otherwise I can be as nice and friendly as they come. Erica says that means I'm insecure. Maybe she's rightI just don't know.

A few minutes after we pulled out of Sybil's driveway we drove past Overlook Hospital. I told Michael I work there every Thursday after school. "I'm a Candy Striper," I said, "and I was born there too."

"Hey ... so was I," he said.

"What month? Maybe we slept next to each other in the nursery."

"May," he said.

"Oh ... I'm April." I sneaked a look at him. His profile was nice but I could see he'd broken his nose more than once. His hair reminded me of Erica's golden retriever, Rex. It was exactly the same color.

Michael drove down the hill into the Watchung Reservation. "I used to ride here," he said.

I pictured him on a Honda XL 70.

"I had this one favorite ... Crab Apple ... until the time she threw me and I fractured my arm."

"Oh ... a horse!" I laughed.

He glanced over at me.

"I thought you meant a motorcycle," I said. "I've never ridden a horse."

"I figured that ... you're not the horsey type."

Was that good or bad? "How can you tell?" I asked.

"I just can."

"What else can you tell?"

"I'll let you know later." He smiled at me and I smiled back. "You have nice dimples," he said.

"Thanks ... everyone in my family has them."

He parked the car and we got out. It was cold and windy but the sun was shining. We walked down to the lake. It was partly frozen. Michael picked up a handful of stones and tossed them across the water. "What are you doing next year?"

"Going to college."

"Where?"

"State, Michigan and Denver. I have to see where I'm accepted. What about you?"

"University of Vermont, I hope. Either there or Middlebury." Michael took my hand and pulled off my mitten, which he shoved into his pocket. Holding hands, we started walking

around the lake.

"I wish it would snow," he said, squeezing my fingers.

"Me too."

"You ski?"

"No ... I just like snow."

"I love to ski."

"I know how to water ski," I told him

That's different."

"Are you good ... at skiing, I mean?"

"You might say that. I could probably teach you."

"To ski?"

"Yeah."

"That'd be nice."

We walked all the way to the Trailside Museum and had a look inside, before Michael checked his watch and said, "We better head back."

"Already?"

"It's after 2:00."

My teeth were chattering and I knew that my cheeks would be bright red from the wind. I didn't mind though. My father says I look good that way very healthy.

When we were back in the car I rubbed my hands together, trying to get warm, while Michael started up the engine. It stalled a few times. When it finally caught he pumped the gas. "I better give it a minute to make sure," he said.

"Okay."

He turned to face me. "Can I kiss you, Katherine?"

"Do you always ask first?"

"No ... but with you I don't know what to expect."

"Try me ... "I said.

He took off his glasses and put them on the dashboard.

I wet my lips. Michael kept looking at me. "You're making me nervous," I told him. "Stop staring."

"I just want to see what you look like without my glasses."

"Well?"

"You're all blurred."

We both laughed.

Finally he kissed me. It was a nice kiss, warm but not sloppy.

Before he let me out at Sybil's house, Michael stopped the car and kissed me again. "You're delicious," he said.

No boy had ever told me that. As I opened the car door all I could think of to say was, "See you ... " but that wasn't at all what I meant.

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Chapter 3

"I met a very nice boy," I told my mother that night, "even though he's still in high school." Mom was in her bathroom, trimming her toenails. "He has this reddish-blond hair and wears glasses. He likes to ski."

"What's his name?" Mom asked.

"Michael Wagner ... isn't that a nice name?"

She looked up and smiled at me. "It must have been a good party."

"It was okay ... I'm seeing him Friday night ... and Saturday too."

"Where's he from?"

"Summit ... he goes to school with Sybil. Can I borrow your nail scissors when you're done? I can't find mine."

"Here ... " Mom handed them to me. "But don't forget to return them this time."

"I won't"

My mother's name is DianaDiana Danziger. It sounds like she should be a movie star or something. Actually, she's a librarian, in charge of the children's room at the public library. Mom is naturally thin, so she can eat four cupcakes at one sitting or polish off as much beer as she wants. We are exactly the same sizefive-feet-six and 109 poundsbut she is sort of flat chested and never wears a bra.

While I was cutting my toenails my sister, Jamie, came into my room, holding up a pair of jeans. I embroidered them while you were at Sybil's. What do you think?"

"They're just great," I told her. "They're fantastic!"

"Want me to do a pair of yours?"

"Would you?"

"Sure."

"By next weekend?"

"Yeah ... I guess I could."

"Jamie ... " I said, hugging her, "you are an absolute angel!"

Jamie is in seventh grade and looks a lot like me but her eyes are fabulousbig and roundand if you look into them you get the feeling you can see deep inside her. Sometimes they seem very dark, with just a rim of green and other times they sparkle and are greenish-gray all over, like my grandfather's. The rest of us have ordinary brown eyes but my father's brows grow straight across the bridge of his nose. He told me that when he was in college he used to shave them up the center.

Jamie untangled herself from me. "What's next weekend?" she asked.

"I'm seeing someone I met last night," I told her, "and the truth is, I don't know how I'm going to live through this week."

"You mean you're in love again?"

"I have never been in love."

"What about Tommy Aronson?"

"That wasn't love ... that was childish infatuation."

"You said it was love ... I remember."

"Well, I didn't know anything then."

"Oh."

"Some day you'll understand."

"I doubt it," Jamie said.

I wish she hadn't brought up the subject of Tommy Aronson, because I did like him a lot last year, but only for a few months. Now he's at Ohio State and the news I get is he's so busy making it with every female on campus he may flunk out. I hope he does. Sex was all he was ever interested in, which is why we broke upbecause he threatened that if I wouldn't sleep with him he'd find somebody who would. I told him if that was all he cared

about he should go right ahead. So he did. Her name was Dorothy and she turned up in my English class this year.

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Chapter 4

My father is a pharmacist. He owns Danziger's Drugs in town and Danziger's Two in Cranford. He is also very big on physical activity. He works out at a gym four times a week and plays tennis every morning from 7:30 to 8:30.

I suppose I get my physical coordination from him. I've been playing tennis since I was eight. I play a good game. One of Jamie's goals is to play tennis like me, even though when it comes to sports she is hopeless. I think she should stick to the things she does well. I mean, you can't excel at everything. I know better than to want to be great at music and art, like Jamie. I'm realistic about myself. I think a person has to be.

My father keeps warning my mother that if she doesn't start to work out at the gym soon, she'll wind up with flabby thighs. I can't imagine my mother with flab anywhere but just a few months ago I overheard her divorced friend tell her, "You really should take better care of yourself, Diana. Roger is so attractive and he's at that dangerous age."

"Bullshit," my mother answered. But when I was nine and Jamie was four we had this babysitter who had a thing for Dad. As soon as my parents left the house she would run up to his closet and touch all his things. She even smelled some of them. Finally, I told Mom and we never had that sitter again.

During Christmas vacation when both of our stores are fantastically busy I help out selling cosmetics and Jamie sometimes gift wraps. You wouldn't believe how many people buy last minute Christmas presents. They'll take absolutely anything they can get their hands on.

In January business slows down and toward the end of the month my parents go away for a week, usually to Mexico. Then my grandparents come to stay with us. They are my mother's parents. My father's are both dead. My grandmother, Hallie Gross, once ran for Congress, but she lost. She and my grandfather practice law together in New York. Since Grandpa had his stroke he hasn't handled any cases but he still goes to the office every day. My Uncle Howard, who is my mother's brother, really runs the show. Grandma is too busy with politics and Planned Parenthood and NOW to see many clients. I can't believe that she is almost seventy years old.

The night before my parents left for their vacation they said it would be all right for me to have some friends over. Michael brought Artie Lewin and I asked Erica. One thing about Erica you never have to worry about her getting along with anyone. You can fix her up with the worst guy in the world and she'll act like he's someone special. That doesn't mean she'll make out with him but she will find something to talk about and he'll always call and ask to see her again. Grandma says Erica would make a great politician.

Artie turned out to be my height, with a good build, nice speckled eyes and terrific teeth.

He was perfect for Erica. She goes for guys with good teeth.

For a while we all sat around and talked, then Artie said, "How about a game of backgammon?"

"We don't have it," I told him.

"Never mind that," Artie said, "I have mine in the car."

"You brought it with you?" Erica asked.

"I always bring it along ... just in case."

"In case ... what?" Erica said.

"In case we run out of things to do. But if you don't play backgammon I have Monopoly, Clue, Yahtzee, chess ... "

"Scrabble," Michael added.

"Oh yeah ... Scrabble ... "

"A regular traveling game show," Erica said.

"So what do you say?" Artie asked.

"Backgammon," Erica told him.

"Great ... don't go away ... I'll be right back."

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Chapter 5

Another thing about Jamie is, she can cook. Not hotdogs and hamburgers like me, but real, honest-to-god gourmet stuff. When my grandparents came to stay with us the first week in February, Jamie did all the cooking. Every night, before they went to sleep, Grandma and Jamie pored over cookbooks deciding on the menu for the following day. While Jamie was at school Grandma did the grocery shopping. Once she drove all the way back to New York to get special spices for a recipe. After school they both went to work in the kitchen, preparing the feast. Jamie gave Grandma small jobs, like chopping shallots, but did all the important things herself. Since they went to so much trouble they usually invited guests for dinner. My grandmother knows everybody, from the mayor to the man behind the counter at the fish market, so you never could tell who might turn up.

While they cooked, Grandpa would wander into the kitchen, lifting lids off pots and sniffing inside. Since his stroke he walks with a cane and has trouble talking. He can't always get the right words out. It's sad to see him struggle over a simple sentence and hard to keep from trying to finish it for him. My mother was very close to Grandpa while

she was growing up and now when they're together I can see how painful it is for her to watch him. But my grandmother treats him the same as always, like there's nothing wrong at all.

I've heard that people who come from happy homes, with parents who really care about each other, like my grandparents, tend to have good marriages themselves. And I believe it. My mother and father are certainly the happiest married couple I know. They really enjoy being together, which doesn't mean they agree on everything, because they definitely don't. But after an argument they laugh about it and I like that.

On Thursday night of the week my parents were away Michael picked me up at the hospital and drove me home. "What floor do you work on?" he asked.

"Third," I told him, "in geriatrics."

"Geriatrics ... that's old people, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Why'd they put you in there?"

"I requested it."

"How come?"

"Oh ... it's a long story ... "

"I'm listening."

"It's hard to explain ... "

"Come on ... I'm interested ... really ... "

"Well ... when I was a little kid my father's mother lived in an old age home in Trenton and every Sunday we had to drive down to see her and I always wound up crying ... you sure you want to hear this?"

"Uh-huh ... "

"Okay ... so my parents would explain it by saying I was just overtired from the long ride ... but the truth was, I hated the place. Just the smell of it made me feel sick ... you know?"

"Go on ... "

"Well ... I never really knew my grandmother ... as a person, that is ... she was just some old lady with crooked fingers and wrinkled skin and I was kind of afraid of her ... and of the other old people too ... I was scared that one of them might grab me and hide me in a closet and my parents wouldn't be able to find me ... " I looked over at Michael before I went on. "Then, when I was about seven, my grandmother died, and I was glad ... because we didn't have to go to Trenton anymore ... God, I've never told anybody this story ... " I took a deep breath. " ... so anyway, when my grandfather that's my mother's

father ... you'll meet him tonightwhen he got sick last year and I went to the hospital to visit him I realized that he was old too ... but I wasn't afraid of him ... because I loved him. I guess this doesn't make much sense to you ... but that's why I asked to work in geriatrics ... "

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Chapter 6

"How'd it go with Artie?" I asked Erica on Monday. We were in zoology, classifying mollusks.

"I'll tell you how it went," Erica said, " ... it didn't!"

"He never showed up?"

"Oh, he showed up all right."

"So?"

"Still nothing ... not even a kiss."

"Weird."

"And I'm sure he likes me. He asked me to his school play ... he's got the lead."

"I heard. I'm going with Michael."

"I know ... Artie said he'll arrange for you two to bring me."

"Fine."

"If he doesn't try anything after the play I'm going to do something about it. I can't sit around waiting forever."

Mr. Kolodny looked up from his desk. "Will you girls in the back please stop talking and get to work."

I pulled out a sheet of notebook paper, wrote Like what? and shoved it at Erica.

She wrote back, Something drastic!

On the night of the play Michael, Erica and I sat together in the fourth row of the auditorium at Summit High. The play was Butterflies Are Free and Artie played the blind boy trying to make it on his own. Michael was rightArtie really surprised me. He was as good as a professional. Somehow, he seemed different on stagemore sure of himself. He made me forget he was Artie Lewin, game freak.

Sybil played his mother and Elizabeth played his girlfriend but they couldn't compare to

Artie. It didn't help that Sybil looked fatter than ever and kept fidgeting with her gray wig. Elizabeth's costume consisted of the world's skimpiest bikini and when she first came on stage Erica nudged me with an elbow. For some stupid reason I felt I had to say something to Michael something to show I'm not the jealous type. So I leaned over and whispered, "She's very pretty." How did I ever think up such a clever remark?

"Uh huh," Michael said.

When the play ended Artie got a standing ovation.

"I had no idea ... " Erica said over and over. "I just can't believe it."

"Me neither."

"I told you," Michael said. "It's the most important thing in his life."

As I watched Artie take another bow I could see that Michael was right again.

We tried to go backstage but there were two teachers in charge of keeping everyone out since the custodians were anxious to lock up the school for the night. Erica said she'd wait for Artie and that we should go on to the party.

I wasn't looking forward to going to Elizabeth's house and facing her close up. But there was nothing I could do about it without being obvious. Besides, how would Artie feel if his best friend didn't show?

Elizabeth's house was on a street a lot like mine. Her mother answered the door.

"Michael ... " Mrs. Hailey said, "It's so nice to see you again."

"Mrs. Hailey ... this is Katherine Danziger," Michael told her.

"Hello," I said.

"Come in ... come in ... " Mrs. Hailey said, looking me over. "Everyone's downstairs ... Michael, you know the way."

Could she have said that for my benefit, just to let me know that Michael had been there before?

It was a big party maybe thirty or forty kids and as soon as the cast arrived everyone surrounded them, offering congratulations. Michael gave Artie a couple of friendly slugs, then bent down and whispered something to him, and Artie smiled, nodded and said, "Thanks, buddy."

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Chapter 7

"Guess where we're going over Washington's Birthday?" Michael asked.

I shifted the phone to my other ear. "I give up."

"Skiing."

"But I don't know how."

"I'm going to teach you."

"Really?"

"Yeah ... we're going to my sister's place in Vermont ... she'll be calling in a little while to fill your mother in on the details."

"You're serious?"

"You better believe it Listen, you'll like Sharon, and her husband, Ike, is okay too."

"It sounds great."

"It will be ... and Kath, wait till you see the snow."

When I hung up I ran into the living room. "Guess where Michael's invited me?"

"To his prom?" Dad asked.

"No ... nothing like that."

"Well, tell us," Mom said.

"To Vermont ... to go skiing ... his sister's got a place there. She's going to call you."

My mother looked at my father.

"I can go, can't I?" I said.

"Well ... "Dad began.

"Please?"

"You can't expect us to say yes just like that, Kath," Mom said.

"Well have to think about it," Dad told me. "After we hear the details."

Later, when the phone rang, I said, "That must be Michael's sister ... her name's Sharon."

"I'll take it upstairs," Mom said, but by then Jamie had already answered and was calling, "Hey, Mom ... telephone ... somebody named Sharon something."

"What'd she say?" I asked when my mother came back downstairs. "Did you tell her I can go?"

"She sounded very nice," Mom said.

"Go on ... "

"She said she and her husband would drive you up to Vermont on Friday. It's about a seven hour trip. Their place is near Stowe."

"When would they come home?" Dad asked.

"Monday afternoon."

"That's three nights."

"What's the difference?" I said.

"They have plenty of room, Roger," Mom told him, and I knew then that she was on my side that she would let me go. "They share the house with two other couples but they'll have it all to themselves over the weekend. She said there are three bedrooms."

"I don't know," my father said.

"Her husband's a resident in internal medicine," Mom said.

"So you won't have to worry about me getting sick," I told my father.

"Just breaking a leg or two," Dad said.

"I'll be very careful ... I promise."

"I don't know ... skiing is a dangerous sport."

"No more dangerous than riding in a car," I argued.

"Give us a chance to talk about it tonight," my father said. "And well let you know tomorrow."

"I don't see what there is to discuss ... it's all very simple."

"I don't like making hasty decisions."

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Chapter 8

As soon as we got to the ski house Michael jumped out of the car and bombarded me with snowballs. There was beautiful fresh snow everywhere and miles and miles of woods, with icicles hanging from every tree. I ran from him, half-laughing and half-screaming, but he didn't listen until Ike grabbed him by the arm and said, "Work now ... play later." He led Michael back to the car, opened the trunk and pointed to all the stuff that had to be

lugged inside.

I helped Sharon unpack the groceries. She was tall and thin, like Michael, with the same color hair, but the shape of her eyes made her look like she was squinting, even when she wasn't. Dee was shorter than Sharon but very broad, with practically no neck. He had a bald spot on the top of his head. I wondered if it will grow until he's totally bald and if it does, will Sharon care? How would I feel if Michael was bald? I'm not sure. I love his hair the color, the way it feels, the smell of it. I'd be disappointed if it all fell out.

After everything was put away in the kitchen I explored the house. There was one big room with a gray stone fireplace, a beat-up shaggy rug, and a bunch of pillows scattered on the floor. The kitchen opened right into it. Then there was Ike and Sharon's bedroom. They had a private bath. Upstairs there were two more bedrooms, connected by another bathroom, which meant that Michael and I would be sharing. I was glad I'd been honest with him when he picked me up that afternoon. I'd led him into the kitchen while my mother was talking with Sharon and Ike in the living room.

"I have something to tell you," I said.

"Go ahead."

"I got my period this morning."

"Oh."

"A week early."

"Oh."

"My mother says it probably happened because I was so excited about going away and all ... I just thought you should know."

"You're right."

"In case I have to make some stops on the drive up ... "

"You don't feel sick or anything, do you?"

"No, I'm fine ... just disappointed ... I hope you're not."

"Hell, no ... why should I be disappointed as long as you can still come with us," he'd said, taking my hand.

When Michael and Ike had finished unloading the car and we were all unpacked, the four of us sat around the fire, sipping mugs of steaming coffee laced with brandy. Sharon told me all about her job. She's an anthropologist, working for the Museum of Natural History, but she hopes to go on a field trip soon, maybe this summer. When I heard that I asked her if she'd be a speaker at our Career Day program in April, because most kids don't get to meet anthropologists every day. Sharon said she'd like that a lot. My guidance counselor, Mrs. Handelsman, will be pleased since she's having trouble finding enough interesting speakers, especially young women.

We were all tired from the trip and when Sharon started yawning the rest of us joined her. "Let's hit the sack," Ike said, and he and Sharon said goodnight and went to their room.

Michael and I looked at each other.

"You can use the bathroom first," he told me.

"Okay."

We went upstairs. "I'll wake you at 7:30 so we can get an early start."

"Okay ... fine."

He kissed me on the cheek. "Just yell when you're done in the bathroom."

"I will."

"Well ... goodnight."

"Goodnight ... " I put my forehead against his chest. "You're sure you're not mad?"

"No ... come on, Kath ... it's okay. Get a good night's sleep and I'll see you in the morning."

I nodded, then went to my room while Michael went to his. I felt like crying. Our goodnight hadn't been at all the way I'd wanted it I put on my long white nightgown. It's the prettiest one I own, made out of soft brushed nylon, with angel sleeves and tiny buttons shaped like hearts. I was hoping Michael would see me in it.

I used the bathroom, called, "Finished ... " and got into bed. I listened as Michael ran the water and flushed the toilet. When it was quiet I called out again. "Goodnight, Michael ... "

"Kath ... "

"Yes?"

"Can I come in for a second?"

"Sure." I sat up in bed and hugged the covers to me.

Michael was wearing baggy blue pajamas. He sat down on the bed and I put my arms around him and a funny sound came out of his throat and we kissed.

"Your sister ... " I muttered, when we came up for a breath.

"Don't worry."

We kissed again. Then Michael held me away and said, "I wasn't going to touch you tonight ... just to prove I didn't get you up here for sex."

"I'd have been disappointed," I told him. "I even wore my best nightgown. Do you like

it?"

"It covers too much of you but it's nice and soft." Michael reached over and turned out the lamp on the night table. "How do you work these crazy buttons?" he asked, trying to undo my nightgown.

I unbuttoned them myself.

"I want to feel you against me," Michael said and he took off the top of his pajamas. Then he lay down and put his arms around me.

"Oh ... it feels nice this way," I whispered, as my hands wandered across his naked shoulders and down his back.

Michael kissed me and reached down between my legs but I caught his hand and moved it away. "No ... not tonight ... "

"I don't care."

"But I do." It wasn't so much that I didn't want him to touch me, because I did it was just that I didn't think it was a good idea for either one of us to get carried away. "Michael ... don't get too worked up ... okay ... "

"I'm already worked up."

He didn't have to tell me.

We kissed one more time and then he touched my face gently and said, "I love you, Katherine. I really mean it ... I love you."

I could have said it back to him right away. I was thinking it all along. I was thinking, I love you, Michael. But can you really love someone you've seen just nineteen times in your life?

"I've never said that before," he told me.

"I'm glad."

"I want to hold you all night."

"I want you to."

We slept with our arms around each other till Ike's voice woke us in the morning.

Forever - Judy Blume

by PupleHairSwag

Chapter 9

It was a sunny cold day, but not windy. Michael said it was perfect for skiing. I got

dressed in my long underwear, turtleneck shirt, ski pants, sweater, two pairs of socks and snow boots. I could hardly move.

Sharon was still asleep but Ike had breakfast on the table cereal, eggs and buns. "No raisins," Michael said, passing the plate to me.

"How'd you know I don't like raisins?"

"New Year's Day ... remember?"

"Oh, that ... " I said, picturing myself at Sybil's table, picking raisins out of a bun. "You have a good memory."

"For some things," Michael said and he smiled.

After breakfast Ike gave Michael the car keys and told him to drive me into town to rent my equipment. "Their prices are better than at the lodge. With a little luck Sharon should be ready to go when you get back."

We went to the Alpine Ski Shop. When Michael was finally satisfied that I had the right size boots he showed me how to work the buckles and also how to walk in them without killing myself, which wasn't easy.

Sharon was dressed and ready to go when we got back to the house. From there it was just a short ride to the slopes. They had season tickets and Michael bought mine. When I saw the prices I said, "I never knew skiing was such an expensive sport."

"That's its only drawback," Michael told me.

"Let's go to the Ladies' Room before we get our skis on," Sharon said. "It's such a pain to have to come in before lunch."

I followed her into the lodge and downstairs. We both used the toilets. While we were washing our hands Sharon said that the reason so many beginners get hurt is because they try to learn to ski themselves. "I just want you to know that Michael is a qualified instructor ... otherwise Ike and I would insist that you take class lessons."

"He's really that good?"

"Just wait till you see him in action."

I smiled. Sharon caught on and laughed. "I meant skiing action," she said.

"I know it."

"My brother's a very nice boy, isn't he?"

"I think so."

"But he seems so ... well ... vulnerable."

"How do you mean?"

"Oh ... he's so open ... I wouldn't want to see him get hurt."

She didn't look at me when she said that. She looked into the mirror and rubbed some kind of ointment on her lips. I didn't know what to say to her after that. Did she think Michael would get hurt because of me? Did she think I was just using him or what?

"Well ... let's get going." Sharon put the tube of ointment into her pocket. "And Katherine ... "

"Yes?"

"I'm sorry if I sounded like a mother hen just now ... I've really got to stop worrying about Michael. After all, he's all grown up, isn't he?"

"Yes," I said, "he is." It's funny that Sharon worries about Michael in the same way that my father worries about me.

We went upstairs, found Michael and Ike waiting outside, and arranged to meet at the lodge at noon. Sharon and Ike went off to ski the more difficult slopes.

Michael got me onto my skis. They were very short and hardly stuck out at all behind me. He said it's much easier to learn with the short kind and as I improve I'll get longer ones. I didn't think that would be likely.

Forever - Judy Blume

by PupleHairSwag

Chapter 10

"Do you still like each other?" Jamie said, as soon as I got back from Vermont. She and Mom and Dad were waiting up for me in the den. I collapsed on the sofa. Seven hours in a Volkswagen is a long time.

"Well, of course we do ... why shouldn't we?"

"Daddy said sometimes spending a lot of time together can end a romance faster than anything else."

My father actually blushed when I looked at him. "Were you hoping this would end it?" I asked.

"Don't be silly, Kath," Dad said.

"Then why would you have said such a thing?"

"It was a general discussion ... not one about you and Michael."

"We also discussed how being together can make a romance even stronger," my mother said, to rescue my father, I think.

"Well, that's more like it!" I said, looking at Dad. "Being together made ours stronger."

"I'm glad," Jamie said.

When I got into bed, half an hour later, my father came to my room. "You think I don't approve of you and Michael ... " he began.

"Do you?"

"Of course I do. I'm just afraid you'll get too involved ... that's all."

"What's wrong with being involved?"

"Maybe that's the wrong word. What I mean is, I don't want to see you tied down."

"Who's tied down?"

My father sighed. "Will you stop throwing questions back at me ... what I'm trying to say is, you're too young to make lifetime decisions."

"I'm not making lifetime decisions."

"You have to consider the future, Kath."

"What about it?"

"There you go again."

"I'm sorry," I said, " ... but the future will take care of itself."

The next morning I waited until my father had gone off to his tennis game and Jamie left for school. Then I caught my mother on her way into the shower and asked, "Does Daddy want me to stop seeing Michael?"

"Of course not."

"Because I won't ... not even if he asks me to ... "

"He's not going to ask you ... he'd just like to see you get around more with other people ... the way you used to ... "

"But I don't want to ... I don't want to be with any other boy."

"I understand, Kath ... and deep down inside, so does Dad ... he's just having trouble accepting it ... "

"I can tell."

"Say, aren't you going to be late for school?"

"So I'll miss first period study hall ... big deal!"

"If you want I'll drive you over as soon as I'm dressed."

"Okay."

I got my books together and found my clean gymsuit in the laundry room. Then I went out to the garage and started the car. I've had my license since September but I hardly ever get any driving practice.

Mom came out of the house pulling on her hat and gloves. She wears the same kind of white knitted hat that I do only she doesn't pull it over her forehead the right way. She shoves it back on her head because she says it makes her face itch.

Forever - Judy Blume

by PupleHairSwag

Chapter 11

Usually March is a slow month. There aren't any school holidays, the weather is still cold and dreary, the teachers get after you to work harder, and I can't believe that it will ever be spring.

This March was different. I felt on top of the world. Michael and I saw each other whenever we could. We went skiing at Great Gorge, twice, and one Sunday we went to Madison Square Garden to a Rangers' game with Erica and Artie. The Rangers lost and Artie took it very hard, as if he'd been personally responsible or something. I tried to cheer him up on our way out of the Garden.

"Win some ... lose some ... " I said.

Artie shook his head.

"Look ... it was just a game."

"Nothing is just a game."

"So they'll win next time."

"Next time isn't good enough."

We walked to a Beef & Brew and were seated in a booth. While we were waiting to give our orders Erica said, "Did you know Artie's been accepted at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts?"

"Hey ... that's great," I said. "You're really on your way now ... "

"On my way nowhere ... " Artie said. "My old man won't let me go."

Erica turned to him. "You didn't tell me that ... "

"Yeah ... well ... he just made up his mind. It's a four year college or nothing."

"He can't do that," Erica said.

"No ... who do you think's paying the tuition?"

"Listen ... " I said, "you can major in drama anyway."

"The eternal optimist speaks again," Artie said.

"I'm sorry ... I was just trying to look on the bright side of things." I glanced over at Michael, hoping he would come to my rescue but he didn't say anything. I guess he knew about Artie's father already.

"You've got to stand up for your rights!" Erica said. "Refuse to go anywhere but the American Academy ... "

"Lay off!" Michael said, suddenly, and something in his voice made Erica stop.

All four of us studied our menus then, or pretended to, and the silence in our booth was uncomfortable. Finally the waitress came along and said, "Okay ... what'll it be?"

Later, when Michael and I were at my house, alone, I said, "I've never seen Artie that way ... he was so depressed."

"I know."

"Usually he's all fun and games."

"That's his public image."

"Is the private Artie different?"

"Just sometimes ... "

"Did you hear him jump on everything I said?"

"I heard ... but I've seen him that way before. Hell be okay in a couple of days. You've got to understand how he feels about school ... he really hates it I don't think he'll make it through one year of college, let alone four ... "

"I didn't know ... "

"It wasn't your fault."

"Do you think he and Erica are good for each other?"

"That's not my business ... besides, every girl at school has the hots for him since the play and he's not interested ... that must prove something."

"Would you be ... interested ... "

"Oh, sure. I only go with you because I can't get anything better." He pulled me down next to him. "We can't do anything to help Artie, right now."

by PupleHairSwag

Chapter 12

Sharon and Ike live in a garden apartment in Springfield. All the outside doors are painted green. "I hope nobody thinks we're trying to break in," I said, as Michael put the key in the lock, "because there's an old lady watching us." I pointed to a window.

"Don't worry about her." Michael pushed the door open. "That's Mrs. Cornick ... she lives downstairs ... she's always in the window." He waved at her and she dropped her shade. "Come on ... their place is upstairs."

The stairs led into the living room. "If s nice," I said, looking around. There wasn't much furniture but they had a fantastic Persian rug and three posters of chimpanzees riding bicycles. I walked over to a plant and held up a leaf. "Too much water ... that's why the edges are turning brown."

"I'll tell Sharon you said so."

"No, don't ... then she'll know I've been here."

"So?"

"So, I just don't want her to know ... okay?"

"I don't see why ... but okay. You want something to eat?"

"Maybe ... " We went to the kitchen which was small and narrow with no outside window.

Michael opened the refrigerator. "How about an apple ... or a grapefruit? That's about all I see."

"I'll have an apple."

He polished it off on his shirt, then tossed it to me. "I'll show you around the place," he said.

Since I'd already seen the living room and the kitchen we started with the bathroom. "Notice the indoor plumbing." Michael demonstrated how to flush the toilet.

"Very interesting," I told him.

"And hot and cold running water." He turned on both faucets.

"Luxurious."

"Also, a genuine bathtub." He stepped into it and I pulled the curtain around him. While he was in there I wrapped the apple core in some toilet paper and hid it in my pocketbook.

Michael jumped out of the tub, grabbed my hand and said, "Onward ... "

We both knew there was just one room left to see. "Presenting ... " Michael said, and he bowed, "the bedroom."

There was a brass bed, covered with a patchwork quilt and a LOVE poster hanging on the wall, above it. There were also two small chests, piled high with books.

Michael jumped up and down on the bed while I watched from the doorway. "Good mattress ... " he said, "nice and firm ... in case you're interested."

"For jumping, you mean?"

"For whatever ... " He lay down and looked at the ceiling. "Kath ... "

"Hmmm ... "

"Come here ... "

"I thought we were just going to talk."

"We are ... but you're so far away ... I don't want to shout."

"I can hear you fine."

"Cut it out ... will you?"

I went to the bed and sat on the edge. "There's one thing I'd really like to know ... "

"What's that?"

"Have you brought any other girls up here?"

"Your jealous streak is showing."

"I admit it ... but I still want to know."

"Never," he said. "I've never brought a girl up here."

Forever - Judy Blume

by PupleHairSwag

Chapter 13

We were sitting around the kitchen table the next day, having Sunday brunch. I thought for sure that as soon as my parents saw me they'd be able to tell. But after a while I realized that they were acting the same as always, so I guess my experience doesn't show, after all.

I smoothed some cream cheese on my bagel and decorated the top with a few dots of lox.

My father and Jamie pile their bagels high but I can't eat mine that way. Mom is the same as me. She sort of mashes hers in, making a spread out of it

When the phone rang, Dad said, "I'll get it ... " He can reach the wall phone from his seat at the table. "Hello ... who's calling, please t' .. just a minute ... " He covered the phone with one hand and said, "It's for you, Kath."

"Who is it?"

"Tommy Aronson."

Tommy Aronson? I mouthed his name and my father nodded. "I'll take it upstairs," I said.

I picked up the extension in my parents' bedroom and cleared my throat before I said, "Hello ... "

"Katherine?"

"Yes?"

"This is Tom Aronson ... remember me?"

"I remember."

"I'm home for the weekend."

"The weekend's just about over."

"I'm not going back until tomorrow morning."

"Have a nice trip." "I see you haven't changed."

"Have you?"

"Why don't you come out with me tonight and decide for yourself?"

"Sorry ... I can't make it."

"Oh, come on ... I'll behave."

"It's not that ... "

"Then what?"

"I'm going with someone."

"Oh ... anyone I know?"

"No."

"Well ... in that case ... what's your girlfriend's number?"

"I have a lot of girlfriends."

"The little one ... you know ... "

"Erica?"

"That's the one."

"Her last name's Small and she's listed in the book." I hung up before he could say anything else. The nerve of him, coming back into my life today, of all days! And asking for Erica's number just to make me jealous as if I care one way or the other!

I went back to the kitchen and sat down at the table. My cheeks were burning. "That was Tommy Aronson," I said.

"We know," Mom told me.

"What did he want?" Jamie asked.

"To go out tonight."

"Are you going?"

"Of course not ... I wouldn't be caught dead with him!"

"You used to like him," Jamie said.

"A long time ago ... things have changed."

"Is Michael going to be your only boyfriend?"

"For now," Mom answered, before I could. She smiled and offered me another half bagel.

I shook my head. The phone rang again. "That Tommy can't take no for an answer," I said, picking it up. "Hello ... " I sounded irritated.

"Kath?" It was Michael.

Forever - Judy Blume

by PupleHairSwag

Chapter 14

"There's no school on Friday," Erica said. We were in the locker room, changing into our gym-suits.

"I know ... some kind of special teacher's meeting."

"So you want to see a preview of a new Robert Redford picture?"

"Are you kidding? I'd love to!"

"We're taking the 8:45 train."

"I'll meet you at the station."

"No ... we can pick you up ... say around 8:30."

"Great ... and tell your mother thanks for asking me."

When I got home from school I found a small package in the mail, from my grandmother. As I ripped it open I wondered if it could be a birthday present two weeks early. As soon as I saw what was inside I knew it wasn't. First I read the note.

%Dear Kath,

I hear that you and Michael are officially going together. Thought these might come in handy. And remember, if you ever need to talk, I'm available. I don't judge, I just advise.

Love, Grandma

I pulled out a whole bunch of pamphlets from Planned Parenthood on birth control, abortion and venereal disease.

At first I was angry. Grandma is jumping to conclusions again, I thought. But then I sat down and started to read. It turned out she had sent me a lot of valuable information. Could my mother have put her up to it?

I went to the phone and dialed her office.

"Gross, Gross and Gross ... Good afternoon ... "

"Hallie Gross, please," I said.

"Who's calling?"

"Katherine Danziger."

"One moment ... "

"Kath?" It was Grandma.

"Hi," I said. "I got the stuff you sent."

"That was fast. I just mailed it yesterday."

"It was here when I got home from school."

"You're not angry, are you?" Grandma asked.

"Me? Why should I be angry?"

"You shouldn't be ... but sometimes you jump to conclusions."

"Me ... jump to conclusions?"

"You."

"Look ... I'm glad you sent that stuff ... it's very interesting ... not personally or anything ... but in general."

"I'm glad you think so. Do me a favor though ... don't tell your mother and father ... "

"Why not?"

"Sometimes it's hard for parents to accept the facts ... so let's keep it between the two of us, okay?"

"Sure ... okay. I'm coming into New York on Friday ... maybe I could meet you and Grandpa for lunch."

"We'd love it," she said. "I'll make a reservation at Basil's ... 12:30?"

"Fine."

"See you then."

"Right ... bye."

That night I got into bed early and read all the pamphlets. When I'd finished I thought, well, I can start a service in school I know so much, which might not be a bad idea, considering there is a girl in my gym class who, until this year, never knew that intercourse was how you got pregnant, and she's already done it!

Forever - Judy Blume

by PupleHairSwag

Chapter 15

I got to the clinic at 2:45. I went inside and gave my name to the receptionist. There were seven other people in my group session, including two young couples. First we had a general discussion with a physician and a social worker. They explained all the methods of birth control. You could ask questions if you wanted. I didn't.

Next came a private session called Personal Counseling just me and a social worker. She was young and very pretty with long hair, tied back, and tinted glasses. Her name was Linda Kolker. I wondered if she was sexually experienced and decided she must be or else she wouldn't have the job.

We talked about the weather and my family for a minute and then she asked me my reason for coming to the clinic.

I told her, "I think it's my responsibility to make sure I don't get pregnant."

She nodded and said, "Do you have one special boyfriend?"

"Yes."

"Have you discussed this with him?"

"Not really."

"How do you think he'll feel about it?"

"I'm sure he'll be very happy. He approves of birth control."

"But coming here was all your idea?"

"Yes ... absolutely."

"Good. Some of the questions I have to ask you are rather personal, Katherine ... so that we can determine what method of birth control will be best for you."

"I understand."

"Have you already had sexual intercourse?"

"Yes."

"Have you been using a birth control device?"

"Yes."

"Which one?"

"A rubber ... that is, a condom."

"Combined with foam or by itself?"

"By itself."

"And you find that method unacceptable?"

"Well ... it's hard for me to say because we just did it one time."

"Oh ... I see ... "

Now I nodded.

"But you plan to have intercourse regularly?"

"Yes."

"About how often?"

"How often?" I repeated.

"Yes ... how often do you plan to have intercourse?"

"Well ... I don't know exactly."

"Would you say weekends and holidays or every day or once a month or a few times a year?"

"I guess on weekends mainly."

"Do you think you'll know in advance or will it be a spontaneous decision?"

"I guess I'll know in advance."

"Okay ... so much for that. I'll need a little medical history now. How old were you when you began to menstruate?"

"Almost fourteen."

"And are your periods regular?"

"Sort of ... I get it every four to five weeks."

"And how long does each period last?"

"About five days."

"Any bleeding in between periods?"

"No."

"Vaginal discharge?"

"Sometimes."

"Color?"

"Just clear."

"That's normal ... any severe cramping?"

"No ... just some low back pain the first day ... nothing bad."

"How about your mother ... is she in good health?"

"Yes, she's fine."

"Does she take birth control pills?"

"No ... she uses a diaphragm."

"Quite a good method if it's used properly."

"I'd rather take the Pill."

"Yes ... it has esthetic advantages but it's not the answer for everyone." I guess I must have looked unhappy when she said that because she added, "Well see what the doctor has to say ... okay? The whole idea of coming here is to find the birth control device that best suits the individual."

I nodded again.

"Now then ... I need your written consent for the gonorrhea culture ... " She hesitated for a moment, then added, "It's simple and painless."

"But I can't possibly have gonorrhea," I told her.

"There's always a possibility ... and it's often difficult for the woman to tell ... "

"But Michael ... besides ... "

"Look ... it only takes a few seconds and it's so much safer to be sure ... "

"All right," I said, deciding it was easier to agree. I signed my name. I tried not to think of Michael and that girl on the beach in Maine.

"Good," she said, standing up. She held out her hand and I shook it. "I'll see you after your physical, Katherine."

"Okay," I said. "And thank you."

My physical consisted of weight and blood pressure, a routine breast exam, with the doctor explaining how I should check my breasts each month, then my first pelvic examination. I tried to act as if I was used to it, but I didn't fool the doctor, who said, "Try to relax, Katherine. This isn't going to hurt." And it didn't either, but it was uncomfortable for a minute, like when he pushed with one hand from inside and with the other from outside.

Then he slipped this cold thing into my vagina and explained, "This is a vaginal speculum. It holds the walls of the vagina open so that the inside is easily seen. Would you like to see your cervix?"

"I don't know ... "

"I think it's a good idea to become familiar with your body."

He held a mirror between my legs and I looked down while he explained what I was seeing. It reminded me of the time that Erica taught me to use tampons. I had to hold a mirror between my legs then too, to find the right hole.

"That's interesting," I told the doctor. "Yes ... the human body never ceases to amaze me." He took the mirror away and I lay back on the table.

"I'm almost done now, Katherine ... just a Pap smear ... there," he said, passing a long Q-tip kind of thing to his assistant. "And the gonorrhea culture ... okay ... that does it." He took off his rubber glove. "Now ... do you have any preference concerning birth control devices?"

"Yes," I told him. "I'd like to try the Pill."

"I don't see any reason why you shouldn't ... you're in excellent health ... get dressed now and Ms. Kolker will see you back in her office."

"How did it go?" she asked.

"Oh, it was nothing," I told her.

"Here's your prescription." She passed it across her desk, then gave me a two-month supply of pills with instructions, making sure I understood every detail. We also discussed possible side-effects, in which case I am to call the clinic immediately.

I took a taxi to Penn Station and caught the 5:17 train. I couldn't wait to tell Michael my news.

But when I got home my mother said, "Michael called ... he's got the flu."

Forever - Judy Blume

by PupleHairSwag

Chapter 16

Two days later I came down with the same bug. My temperature went up to 104°. I could barely swallow, my head hurt something awful and I was so weak and dizzy I couldn't make it to the bathroom by myself. The doctor prescribed aspirin, bed rest and plenty to drink.

I felt like I was dying.

Mom and Dad took turns staying home from work to take care of me. My father is a super nurse. He concocts delicious fruit drinks in the blender, knows just when you need a cold compress on your head, and loves to play gin rummy.

I stayed in bed for four days. Jamie wasn't allowed anywhere near me but every night she stood in my doorway and told me about her day. On Thursday I got up for an hour and walked around. I'd lost five pounds and had no strength. That night I called Michael.

"Hi ... how are you?" he asked.

"I'm a lot better ... I walked around for a while today and tomorrow I'm getting out of bed for good."

"Don't be surprised if you feel like jumping back in ... " He coughed.

"You don't sound so good ... can't you take something for that?"

"Yeah ... I've got a whole mess of stuff."

"I miss you," I said.

"You wouldn't if you could see me ... I look like the creature from the green lagoon."

"I don't look so good myself. Are you going back to school tomorrow?"

"No ... not till Monday."

"Can you come over this weekend?"

"I hope so ... Ill call you tomorrow and let you know."

"Okay ... and take it easy."

"You too." He coughed again.

On Sunday afternoon he was well enough to drive over for a short visit. I begged Mom to let me wash my hair but she wouldn't. So I tucked it up inside a beach hat, remembering that's what Grandma does. I knew I looked awful but so did he. He had dark circles under his eyes.

"What's with the hat?" he asked.

"It's hiding my hair ... I don't want you to see it this way."

"You think it'd make a difference?"

It might."

"You look tired."

"And you look green," I said, starting to laugh.

"I told you, didn't I?" He laughed with me until he started to cough. "Want a coughdrop?" he asked, popping one into his mouth.

"Thanks."

We sat in the den, holding hands, listening to music and talking.

I waited until my birthday, the following Friday, to tell Michael about the Pill. He had planned a special celebration. First we went to see Candide at the Paper Mill Playhouse and then we stopped at Mario's for a spaghetti supper. When we were just about through Michael reached into his pocket arid pulled out a small black jewelry box. "Happy birthday," he said, pushing it across the table.

"For me?" I never know how to act when I get a present. I'm always embarrassed. "What is it?"

"Open the box."

"Okay ... " I opened it slowly. Inside was a small silver disk, with Katherine engraved across it, on a slender silver chain. "Oh, Michael ... it's just beautiful."

"Turn it over," he told me.

I did, and on the other side it said, Forever ... Michael. Eight away I knew I was going to cry. I bit my lip and tried to hold back the tears but nothing worked.

Forever - Judy Blume

by PupleHairSwag

Chapter 17

Jamie is in love. His name is David and he's in her math class. She says he looks a lot like Michael. They've decided to act as if they hate each other in public so no one will be able to guess the truth and tease them. When I hear that I'm glad I'm not thirteen anymore. He's been calling Jamie every night, tying up the phone for ages, which makes it hard for Michael to get through to me. So my parents have limited both our calls to fifteen minutes each.

This summer Jamie is going back to camp in New Hampshire. She says she can't wait. It doesn't seem to matter to her that she won't see David for seven weeks, which proves that love at thirteen is nothing like love at eighteen.

I don't know what I'm going to do about the summer. I've been job hunting, but so far, no luck. Mrs. Handelsman says I shouldn't worry, that something will turn up by June. But it's already the middle of April and I'm worried. So is Michael. He hasn't found anything either and he's counting on a good summer salary to help with next year's expenses at school.

On Monday morning Erica was waiting outside my homeroom. "I got the job on The Leader," she said.

The Leader is Westfield's weekly newspaper. There were at least a hundred kids after that job. "You're really lucky," I told her. "I wish I could find something exciting like that."

On Tuesday morning she was waiting for me again. "Sybil's pregnant," she said, shifting her books from one arm to the other. "I found out last night."

"Oh no ... "

"And she doesn't know who the father is."

"Oh God ... "

"And she's too far gone to have an abortion ... the baby's due in early July."

I counted on my fingers. "That means she got pregnant in October ... "

"Uh huh ... and never even missed a day of school."

"Jesus ... why didn't she say anything?"

"She wanted to have the baby and she knew if her parents found out they'd make her have an abortion."

"You mean they didn't notice?"

"She's so fat ... you know ... she just kept wearing those tents of hers and nothing showed ... "

"Didn't she go to a doctor?"

"Yeah ... but she told him she was married and gave him a phony name and address ... "

"What's she going to do with a baby?"

"Oh, she knows she can't keep it. She'll put it up for adoption as soon as it's born."

"Then why have it in the first place?"

"For the experience, she told me."

"Will she be able to graduate?"

"I guess so ... nobody knows but my aunt and uncle, my parents and us. And the only reason she told in the first place was they wanted to send her to Duke University for the summer ... to this fat people's clinic."

I shook my head. "I can't believe it."

"I know ... neither can I."

"I'd have an abortion ... wouldn't you?"

"In a minute ... my mother's so worked up about Sybil she made an appointment for me to see her gynecologist ... she wants me to take the Pill. I told her, Relax, Mom! I'm still a virgin, but she said she'd feel better if she knew that I was prepared for college, in every way."

"Are you going to take it?"

"Sure ... I like the idea of being ready for anything ... and maybe it'll even help Artie ... make him feel more secure."

The last Thursday in April is Career Day at our school. This year I was hostess to Sharon and my grandmother so I got to eat lunch in the teachers' cafeteria. The food wasn't any better there. Grandma and Sharon hit it off very well, trading anecdotes about their work.

After lunch there was a special assembly and all the guests gave short talks about their careers. Then the audience split up into groups and visited with the three speakers of their

choice. Both Grandma and Sharon were among the most popular and had full classrooms at all three sessions.

At the end of the day Mrs. Handelsman couldn't thank me enough. We walked back to her office together. "I've been waiting to hear from you about those extra schools," she said. "What ever happened?"

"My parents wouldn't give me permission," I answered.

She touched my shoulder. "I'm sure everything will work out for the best."

"I hope so."

I didn't tell her that Michael and I have another plan. Since both the University of Vermont and Middlebury are on the trimester system, he will take off the winter semester and teach skiing in Colorado. He'll make up the lost credits at summer school and that way he can still graduate in four years and we can be together every weekend, all winter long. He's already written to Vail, Aspen and Steamboat Springs, stating his qualifications.

"But suppose I'm not accepted at Denver?" I said to him.

"You'll be accepted ... don't worry."

So on Career Day my mind wasn't really on Sharon or Grandma or any other speakers.

There was just one thing I could think about: college acceptances which were due in the mail any day.

Two days later they arrived and I was rejected at Michigan, but accepted at Penn State and Denver. Michael got into University of Vermont but not Middlebury. A week after we heard from our schools, Erica was accepted at Radcliffe.

"I'm really not surprised," she said, when I called to congratulate her. "Did you hear about Sybil?"

"No ... what now?"

"She got into Smith, Wellesley, Holyoke and Stanford ... everywhere she applied. She didn't tell them she was pregnant."

"She's too much ... What about Artie?" I asked, "anything new?"

"So far he's on the waiting list at Temple but that's it."

"Maybe if he's not accepted anywhere else his father will change his mind and let him go to the American Academy."

"That's what I said but Artie doesn't believe it."

I wrote to Denver right way, accepting, even though my parents felt I should wait a few weeks and think it over since Denver is so far away. Then I explained to them about Michael's plan. They weren't overjoyed.

by PurpleHairSwag

Chapter 18

When the weather turns warm we have a salad for supper once a weektunafish, hard-boiled eggs, cheese and raw vegetablesusually on Wednesdays, because that's my mother's late day at the library.

I was peeling foil off a wedge of cheese when my father said, "How would you like to play tennis all summer and get paid for it?"

"Are you kidding ... I'd love it," I told him, popping the cheese into my mouth.

He smiled. "I was hoping you'd say that."

"You're serious?" I asked. "Is the tennis club looking for someone?"

"No ... but Foxy is."

"Foxy?"

"Sam Fox ... the director of Jamie's camp," Dad said. "I spoke to him this morning ... he's built three new courts ... all weather composition ... and he needs an assistant tennis counselor ... the boy he originally hired has hepatitis."

"I can't go to Jamie's camp," I said, spearing an egg yolk.

"Hell pay you \$350," Dad said.

"I don't care if it's \$3000 ... I'm not going to New Hampshire."

Mom and Dad exchanged looks.

"It's out of the question," I told them, suddenly having trouble getting the egg down.

"I told Foxy I was sure you'd be interested in the job ... "

"Well, you can tell him you were wrong?"

"May I be excused?" Jamie asked.

"Go ahead," my mother said. When she was gone Mom turned to me. "Daddy went to a lot of trouble to find you a good job."

"Who asked him to?"

My mother put down her knife and fork. "I can't say I like your attitude."

I fought back tears. "Do you think I'm stupid ... do you think I can't see what you're trying

to do ... "

"This had nothing to do with Michael," my father said.

"Don't lie ... please!"

"All right," Mom said. "We both think you could use a change of scenery ... "

"A change of scenery! Did you forget I'm going to Denver ... you know Michael and I only have until September."

"Camp is just seven weeks," my father said.

"Just seven weeks!"

"Will you stop repeating everything I say," Dad shouted.

"Seven weeks may not be a lot to you but to me it's forever!"

"Let's try to discuss this rationally," Mom said.

My father lowered his voice. "Look, Kath ... I already told Foxy it was a deal ... that you'd take the job."

"You told him! What right have you to answer for me? I'm not a child anymore ... I'm eighteen ... " I didn't care that I was crying now. I wiped my nose and eyes with my dinner napkin.

"Last summer you said you'd love to be a counselor at Jamie's camp," Mom reminded me.

"That was last summer ... things have changed!"

"I'd like you to give it some thought," Dad said.

"I already have ... and my mind's made up ... so you can call Foxy and tell him to find somebody else." I threw down my napkin and stood up.

"No," my father said.

It hit me then that his mind was made up too. I understood the whole thing, just like that. "Let me get this straight," I said, very slowly. "You're telling me that I have no choice ... is that right?"

Forever - Judy Blume

by PupleHairSwag

Chapter 19

On Thursday morning, Michael's birthday, Artie hung himself from the shower curtain rod in his bathroom. Luckily, the rod broke and he fell into the tub, winding up with a

concussion and an assortment of cuts and bruises. He was stitched up at Overlook, then transferred to Carrier Clinic, a private psychiatric hospital near Princeton.

Both Michael and Erica blamed themselves. Neither one of them believed me when I said that maybe this was the best thing that could have happened because now, at least, Artie will get the kind of professional help he's needed all along.

Michael said he should have listened on Saturday night, when Artie was driving home. "He wanted to talk ... I knew it but I didn't care ... I was so wrapped up in my own problems I pretended to sleep all the way to my house. I wish I had it to do over again ... I'd listen this time."

Erica was convinced it was all her fault. Wednesday afternoon, when she got home from school, Artie was parked out front, waiting for her. She told him that she'd meant what she'd said on Saturday night, and even though she still liked him as a person and always would, they were through and she didn't want him coming around anymore. "I shouldn't have ended it that way," she said. "I should have waited ... "

We weren't in the mood to celebrate but I gave Michael his birthday present anyway. On the card I wrote, To keep you warm next winter ... until we can be together. And I signed it, Forever, Kath.

"It's perfect," he said. "I'll wear it every day."

The next night Michael and Erica got drunk. The three of us went to The Playground, this singles bar on Route 22. We flashed our new I.D. cards at the bartender and ordered a round of screwdrivers. But even with her I.D. the bartender refused to serve Erica until she'd shown him her driver's license and her birth certificate, which she carries in her bag at all times.

Michael and Erica belted their drinks down and ordered a second round while I sipped my first slowly, the way my father said I should. After that I stuck to ginger ale. In less than two hours Michael and Erica each polished off another three drinks and were acting really dumb, singing school songs and laughing hysterically. Finally, I threatened to walk out and drive home myself if they wouldn't leave then and there.

Getting them to the car was another story. Neither one of them could walk and if it hadn't been for this very nice guy who offered to help we might still be there.

Erica got sick first, in the parking lot. When she was done we got her into the back seat of the car, where Michael was slumped in the corner. I thanked my friend and said goodbye. "Good luck," he told me. I waved. A few miles down the highway Michael heaved all over Erica, but she was so out of it she didn't even notice.

I brought them back to my house since I didn't know what else to do. My mother and father were very generous about helping them, because the truth is, they looked and smelled disgusting. Mom put Erica under the shower while Dad hosed off both Michael and his car. I made a pot of coffee.

I'd been very cool to my parents since the camp scene, but watching them help my friends, knowing that they cared, made me glad I hadn't done anything stupid.

Dad called the Wagners and the Smalls and explained the situation to them. We got Michael to bed in the den and Erica to bed in my room. Then I went to the bathroom, sat down on the toilet, and cried.

Forever - Judy Blume

by PupleHairSwag

Chapter 20

June the month most seniors live for the end of one life and the beginning of another. I read that once, on the cover of a paperback. And in a way it's true. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't caught up in the mood myself.

Yesterday I did something I've never done before. I cut all my afternoon classes. Michael picked me up right after lunch. His mother and father had gone up to the Shakespeare Festival at Stratford. We spent the rest of the day in his bed. We had no trouble with Ralph this time and I could tell that Michael was relieved. So was I. Somehow I thought I might have been to blame ...

We didn't go to Michael's prom or mine. We'd talked about making one or the other, with Artie and Erica, but now it didn't seem right. Artie's parents told Michael there was no chance he'd be home for graduation. They asked him to write Artie short, cheerful notes, but not to expect any answers.

Jamie baked a special cake for Mom's fortieth birthday. We hid the layers in the downstairs freezer last week and defrosted them this morning, so they'd be ready to decorate when we got home from school. Jamie's icing flowers are better than any bakery's. We'd also chipped in for a big, beautiful plant that looks something like a palm tree. I drove down to the greenhouse to pick it up while Jamie put the finishing touches on the cake. I guess from now on I'll feel uneasy about birthday celebrations but as I helped Jamie get ready for Mom's party I tried to think of only happy things.

Grandma and Grandpa sent forty yellow tea roses, enough to fill up every vase in the house, plus a check. We had a really nice dinner and Mom got tears in her eyes when Jamie and I carried in her cake, singing "Happy Birthday." Then we gave her the plant. She loved it.

Dad's official present to her was a chunky silver bracelet she'd picked out in Mexico but he handed her a surprise package too inside was a pink and orange bikini. She laughed when she saw it, kissed him, and told us it was great to be forty that it sounded much worse than it felt. I wished Artie could have been there to see her.

Later, Mom tried on her new bikini and modeled it for us. When she came to my room she said, Tell the truth, Kath ... are my thighs getting flabby?"

I said, "No ... of course not."

"Then what's this?" she asked, squeezing some extra flesh.

I didn't come right out and say it was flab. I told her, "I can teach you some exercises to

get rid of it."

"I may take you up on that," she said. "And Kath ... thank you for a lovely birthday."

"Any time," I answered.

The phone rang that night at 11:30. We never get calls that late because everyone knows my parents sack out early. I heard my father answer and say, " ... just a minute ... I'll see ... "

He came to my door. "Are you awake?" he asked.

"Half ... who is it?"

"Erica."

"At this hour?"

"She says it's important."

"Okay ... Ill take it downstairs."

I picked up the phone in the kitchen and yawned. "Hello ... "

"Sybil had a baby girl!"

I came awake very fast. "She did ... when?"

"Tonight ... her mother just called ... six pounds, one ounce."

"But it's only the middle of June."

"I know ... she was two weeks early."

"Is she okay?"

"Fine ... so's the baby."

"I'm glad."

"Me too ... see you tomorrow."

Erica and I went to visit Sybil in the hospital. Instead of going directly to her room we stopped off at the nursery first. Babies are on view twice a day, during afternoon and evening visiting hours. You can watch them through the glass wall. Sybil's baby had a headful of black hair and was fast asleep.

"What do you think?" Erica asked.

"She's very small."

"They all are."

"Yeah ... I guess so."

"Do you think she looks like Sybil?" Erica said.

"I can't tell ... they're not at their best until they're a few months old."

"I know ... new ones look all shriveled up and distorted."

"I suppose if it's yours, you feel different," I said.

"Do you think just having a baby automatically makes you love it?"

"I'm not sure ... you might have to learn to love it, like any other person."

We brought Sybil a bouquet of daisies. I arranged them in a disposable vase, the way I do when I'm working at the hospital. She was expecting us since Erica had phoned earlier to make sure she wanted company.

"Hi ... " she said, and before either one of us had a chance to say anything she began to talk. "I want you to know it was no big deal ... those movies showing women screaming in labor are plain bullshit ... there's nothing to it ... you just push and push and finally the baby pops out ... to tell you the truth I don't even remember that much about it except there was this very nice guy standing over me and every time a strong contraction started he gave me a whiff of gas ... did you see her yet? Isn't she adorable? Oh, thanks for the daisies ... I love daisies ... you know tonight's my graduation ... I really planned to be there ... but you can't fight Mother Nature ... they're going to mail me my diploma ... did I tell you I've decided to take off fifty pounds and go to Smith?"

She stopped to take a breath and Erica and I looked at each other.

"I'm getting an IUD so I won't get pregnant again because I've no intention of giving up sex ... but the next time I have a baby I want to make sure I can keep it ... did you see how much hair she has? My mother says it will probably all fall out and her regular hair will be completely different." She sighed, then smiled at us. "Thanks for coming. I'm glad you did. Are you going to Michael's graduation?" She directed this question to me.

"Yes."

"Then you'll hear them call my name."

"I'll clap for you ... okay?"

"Sure ... for me and Artie," Sybil said. Then she looked up at Erica and shook her head. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay."

"I'd rather be here than where he is," Sybil said.

"When are you coming home?" Erica asked.

"Day after tomorrow ... but I'm supposed to take it easy for a week or two after that."

"Maybe you'll come to the beach with us ... "

"Maybe ... the baby leaves on Friday with her adoptive parents ... I hope she has a good life ... " Sybil reached for a tissue and blew her nose. I hoped she wouldn't cry. I already had a lump in my throat.

"I figure two people who really want a kid will take good care of her ... don't you think?"

"Sure," Erica said, If s the best way."

"It's not like I could keep her ... that wouldn't be fair ... "

"You're doing the right thing," I told her, wondering why she hadn't thought about all that before.

"Are you sleeping with Michael?" she suddenly asked me.

"That's a very personal question," I answered.

She nodded. "I could have had an abortion but I wanted the experience of giving birth."

"Could have ... should have ... " Erica said, "it doesn't matter now ... what's done is done."

"I've asked to see the baby one more time," Sybil told us, brightening. "The doctor said I can give her a bottle tonight ... I hope they name her Jennifer ... "

Forever - Judy Blume

by PupleHairSwag

Chapter 21

It was a beautiful, clear night and Michael's graduation was held outside. I sat with Sharon and Ike and finally met Michael's parents. His mother took my hand and said, "Well, at last ... we've heard so much about you." She had red hair and freckles and wore eye make-up.

His father said, "So you're Katherine ... "

And I told him, "Yes, I am."

He had a beer belly and a lot of grayish hair and a nice voice, deep, hike a disc jockey's.

I choked up when Sybil's name was called, when Artie's wasn't, but should have been, and again when it was Michael's turn to accept his diploma. I kept dabbing my eyes, pretending I had something in one of them, in case Sharon or Ike were wondering.

After graduation there was a party at Michael's, a kind of Open House in the back yard, for his relatives. His mother introduced me to everyone as "Michael's little friend." I didn't much care for that but I wasn't about to say anything.

Sharon handed me a glass of champagne. "I hear you're going to be a tennis counselor this summer."

"Just an assistant."

"Sounds like fun. I'd love to get away for a while."

"What about your trip?"

"That fell through. I can't leave my job right now."

"Oh. That's too bad."

"There'll be other opportunities ... "

I sipped my drink. Some of the bubbles went up my nose.

Ike said, "I like your hair that way."

"It's the same as always," I told him.

"Oh ... I guess I never noticed." We each took a little hotdog in a blanket as Michael's mother passed with a tray. "You're graduating too, aren't you?" Dee asked.

"Thursday night." I had to answer with my mouth half open because the hotdog was burning my tongue.

"Well ... congratulations in advance."

"Thank you."

Sharon wandered off and an uncle of Michael's joined us. "I hear you're going to Denver," he said.

I nodded and finished my champagne.

"Wonderful city ... plenty of sunshine ... fresh air ... "

"Excuse me," Ike said, and left me alone with him.

"You have a lot to look forward to."

"Yes, I know," I said. "You're not from North Carolina, by any chance, are you?"

"No ... that's my brother, Stephen."

"Oh." I looked around for Michael.

The uncle picked something out of his teeth, examined it, then flicked it off his finger. "So tell me," he said, "what do you want to do with your life?"

"Do?" I repeated.

"Yes ... you've thought about it, haven't you?"

"Sure."

"So?"

"I want to be happy," I told him. "And make other people happy too."

"Very nice ... but not enough."

"That's all I know right now." I turned and walked away from him.

My parents were asleep when Michael and I got to my house. We locked ourselves into the den, took off our clothes and held each other.

"Let's lie down on the rug," I said.

Michael looked at it. We were used to the sofa.

"For old time's sake ... "

"Sure," he said, "why not ... "

We stretched out on it, kissing. "Remember the first night we were together on the rug ... with the fire ... "

"And Erica and Artie in the other room ... " Michael said.

"Yes ... and after you left and Erica had gone upstairs I sat on the rug for a while thinking that it was very special ... that it was ours ... " I kissed his ears, running my tongue around the edges. I used my hands on his body while I worked my way down, kissing his neck, his chest, his belly.

"You're aggressive tonight ... "

I hadn't thought about that until he said it. I was surprised myself. "Do you mind?"

"I like it."

I lay on top of him, feeling Ralph against my stomach. "Can we try it this way?" I whispered.

"Any way you want," he said.

I straddled him, helping Ralph find the right angle, and when he was inside me I moved slowly up, down and around up, down and around until I couldn't control myself anymore. "Oh, God ... oh, Michael ... now ... now ... " And then I came. I came before he did. But I kept moving until he groaned and as he finished I came again, not caring about anything anything but how good it felt

"Happy graduation ... " I laughed. After, we lay in each other's arms and I thought, there are so many ways to love a person. This is how it should be forever.

My graduation was held indoors at the last minute because of a tremendous thunderstorm that began at 4:30 and lasted for hours, on and off. Each senior was allowed only two tickets for an indoor graduation so Michael had to wait for me at home, with Jamie and my grandparents. He didn't get to see me in my cap and gown.

We had a party at our house too, with a table full of sandwiches, fresh fruits and a big chocolate graduation cake.

The next morning Michael and I left for Long Beach Island. We'd been invited to Erica's house at Loveladies Harbor. It's a two hour trip from Westfield, straight down the parkway. We took turns driving.

Erica's house stands on stilts, right on the beach. From the outside it looks like three boxes a big one in the middle and two smaller ones on either side. The side of the house facing the ocean is all glass. There's a large living room with a white tile floor and white wicker furniture with green cushions. Then there are two smaller wings, each with two bedrooms and a bathroom. Mr. and Mrs. Small use one wing for themselves. Erica's room is in the other. I was sharing with her and Michael's room was opposite ours. None of us mentioned Artie or the fact that we'd planned this weekend long ago, for the four of us.

After lunch we walked up and down the beach, tossing a football around. Erica introduced us to all the summer kids she's known them for ages. There's a surfing beach a few miles down, in Harvey Cedars, and we sat there for a while, watching a couple of guys trying to catch a wave. We used up a roll of film posing on their surfboards.

That night, after dark, most of the kids we'd met earlier dropped by. One girl brought her guitar and sang for us. Some kids smoked grass but I didn't want to, so Michael drank beer instead, but not enough to get sick. And later, when everyone had gone home and Erica went to bed, Michael and I took a sleeping bag out to the beach and we made love. We woke up at dawn and watched the sun come up together.

Four days later Jamie and I left for camp.

Forever - Judy Blume

by PurpleHairSwag

Chapter 22

Wednesday, June 26

Dear Michael,

Here I am at camp! The bus ride up was bad news. The air conditioning broke after an hour and we sweltered the rest of the way. One kid heaved in the aisle so we had to stop and let everyone out while the staff cleaned up the mess. I am considered staff!

There are 75 campers, all between the ages of 12 and 15 and every one of them is talented in music or art or both, like Jamie. Tennis is the only organized sport here, besides waterfront. The head tennis counselor is called Theo. He told me right off that I will be teaching the kids with less ability.

The girls live in a big old house and the boys have a sleeping dorm (a converted barn) and the 15 staff members are scattered around. My room is in the house and my roommate is from Seattle. She's a weaving expert. Her name is Angela and she doesn't believe in shaving any body hair and thinks natural body smells beat deodorant. Don't ask!!!

As soon as we got here, Foxy, the director, called a staff meeting and gave us a big lecture about drugs, which are prohibited. As far as I can tell that's the only rule.

To tell you the truth, I don't know what I'm doing here. I wish I was with you. Only 49 days until we can be together. I hope I live that long.

Love forever,

Kath

Friday night

June 28

Dear Kath,

I just got your letter. I read it eight times. I wish I could be your roommate instead of Angela. As you know I have plenty of deodorant. You wouldn't believe how hot it is here. It's impossible to breathe. I picked up my plane ticket today. I leave Wednesday night. Yesterday I ran into Erica. We were both ordering sandwiches to go at the Robert Treat% Deli. There are a lot of things I would like to tell you but I'm not very good at writing them down. If you were here I'd show you what I mean. I guess you get the picture.

I miss you so much!

Love forever,

Michael

P.S. Ralph also misses you.

Monday July 1

Dear Michael,

I hope you get this before you leave. It rained all day today. This morning I was assigned a co-ed modern dance group. They weren't bad I was really surprised. I slept all afternoon and I feel better now. I've been so tired since I got here. Do you know it's been eight days since we've been together but I'm trying hard not to think about that because every time I do I miss you more and more. I have all your pictures taped on the wall above my bed. Angela says you're very natural looking. I think that's supposed to be a compliment. I didn't tell her that you usually wear eyeshadow and color your hair. Ha ha.

Yesterday I waterskied and fell down in the middle of the lake. I almost lost my bathing suit. Luckily, only Kerrie was in the boat. She's Australian and is in charge of water sports with her husband, Poe.

Jamie says hello.

Have a safe trip to North Carolina but Do Not talk to any strangers on the plane, especially female ones. And don't forget that I love you! And that I miss you more than I can say.

Forever,

Kath

July 2

Tuesday night

Dear Kath,

I'm so excited! I wrote an editorial for The Leader and its going to be printed in next week's issue. It deals with senior year. I'll send you a copy. I'm leaving for the beach tomorrow night for Fourth of July weekend. Sybil's coming too.

Forever - Judy Blume

by PupleHairSwag

Chapter 23

The campers have to report to their rooms at 10:00 every night. Then the staff gets together in the retreat, which is a small cottage with some comfortable furniture. Usually I write my letters there.

Sometimes, while I'm trying to think of what to say I'll look up for a minute and catch Theo watching me. He doesn't get embarrassed and turn away but I do. His eyes are light green and Nan says every time she looks into them she melts. His hair is brown and hangs into his face. On the courts he has to wear a headband to keep it away so he can see the ball. He's got a moustache that turns down around the corners of his mouth and he's very tan, including his back and chest, because he hardly ever wears a shirt.

The other day, Theo, Nan and I were on the

dock. I laughed when he took off his socks and

sneakers because his feet were so white. So he

picked me up and tossed me into the lake. I was wearing jeans and a shirt and I wanted to kill him.

The truth is, he's not the wise-ass I thought he was going to be when we first met. He's very patient with the kids and is even helping me improve my game. Sometimes, after dinner, we play a set or two. He says I'm the only one here who can give him a decent workout.

One night, during the first week of camp, Theo came over and pointed to my necklace. "What's it say?" he asked.

"This ... " I said, holding up the disk.

"Yes."

"It says Katherine on one side and Michael on the other."

"The guy you're always writing to?"

"Uh huh."

"Can I see?"

"Sure."

He stood very close to me and took it in his hand. He looked at the side that said Katherine first, then turned it over. "What's forever supposed to mean?"

"What do you think?" I asked.

"I think forever's one hell of a long time for a kid like you."

"I'm not a kid. I happen to be eighteen."

"Congratulations," he said.

Right after that I asked him to please stop calling me Kat.

He said, "I can't stop now ... I'm used to it ... besides, it suits you."

Now everyone at camp calls me Kat. I don't mind as much as I did then. I got a letter from Michael.

Dear Kath,

I'm getting settled here. I've got my own room since my cousin, Danny, is away for the summer. His twin sisters are thirteen and remind me of Jamie. Tell her I said hello. I'm getting to be a first rate lumber stacker. Next week I get to work the saw. That's a big step up. I think about you every nightall night.

Love forever,

Michael

Dear Michael,

Be careful with the saw! I don't want anything to happen to your hands. I love them (and the rest of you isn't bad either). Ha ha.

Love forever, Kath

Each staff member gets two short and one long night off each week. A long night means you don't have to hang around for evening activity. You can leave right after supper and you don't have to report in until the next morning.

This week Theo asked if Nan and I would like to go into Laconia with him to see a movie. He has a car and we don't. Naturally we accepted.

I tried to arrange it so that I would sit next to Nan and she would sit between me and Theo but he decided it was only fair that he sit in the middle, since he was the only guy. He put one arm around each of us but I knew it was just a joke. It's funny, the way you get to know summer friends so well in a short period of time, especially at camp, when you are thrown together morning, noon and night

Sometimes I dream that Michael and I are making love. I can understand that. But in the middle of the night after the movie, I woke up drenched with perspiration and ashamedmore ashamed than I've ever been in my life. I dreamed I was with Theo. It was so realI could smell him, taste him, feel himand I wanted him so much. I did things to him that I have only read about.

I wrote Michael a four-page letter the next day, to keep my mind where it belongs. I stayed as far away from Theo as I could. Even so, I knew there was something growing between us. Something I was afraid to even think about.

Every night, from 8:00 to 10:00, the canteen is open and the campers can hang out in there, listening to music, dancing and getting snacks. Theo dances with the younger kids, like Jamie, but avoids the older ones, like Marsha. You can tell he's not looking for trouble. Nan doesn't dance at all. She says she has two left feet That presents a real problem because dancing can be a very good way to get two people together. And Theo likes to dance. If only he would look at Nan the way he looks at me. If only my insides didn't turn over every time our eyes meet.

Tonight, Marsha put on this slow song and all the kids booed her because they prefer hard rock. They don't even know how to touch-dance. But Marsha wouldn't change the record and she came slithering over to Theo and tried to drag him to his feet. He told her, "Sorry, Marsha ... but I promised this one to Kat." And he took my hand and pulled me up. I shook my head but he didn't care. He said to the kids, "Watch carefully ... and I'll show you a new way to dance." Then he put his arms around me and the kids whistled and cheered and Theo laughed and held me tighter. Soon, some of the kids got up to try touch-dancing and Theo started the record from the beginning again.

He's not much taller than I amjust three or four inchesand I was wearing clogs, so that as we danced our bodies came together. We didn't talk or look at each other but there was a lot going on between us. When the record ended I broke away from him and ran out of the canteen. I went down to the lake where it's cool and dark and I sat on a rock and I cried. How can you love one person and still be attracted to another?

The next day I got a long letter from Michael. I kissed it and showed it to Nan to prove that I am not the least bit interested in anyone but him.

On visiting day I spent the morning on the courts rallying with the campers so their parents could see how much their games had improved. Foxy gave me the afternoon off to be with Mom and Dad. I was the only counselor who had visitors. After lunch Jamie

showed them her oils and watercolors and the fabric she's weaving with Angela's help. Then my father changed into tennis shorts and he and I played two sets. I beat him 6-3, 7-5. He was very impressed.

Later, I took Mom up to see my room. "It's nice and cozy." She sat on my bed and looked at the pictures of Michael taped to the wall. "You seem to be getting along very well ... I'm glad."

"I'm managing ... " I told her. I went to my closet and took out a shoe box full of letters. "Look at this," I said, " ... all from Michael. We write every day."

Mom nodded.

"I'll bet you thought we wouldn't."

"No ... I never thought that."

Forever - Judy Blume

by PupleHairSwag

Chapter 24

On the following Sunday night I was in the retreat answering Erica's letter, when Foxy poked his head in and said there was a phone call for me. I looked at my watch. It was 10:30. Who would call me at 10:30?

Nan walked me over to the office.

My mother was on the line.

I said, "Mom ... what's wrong?"

She said, "Bad news, Kath ... "

"What is it?" I felt tears in my eyes before I even knew.

"It's Grandpa, honey ... "

"What ... ?"

"Another stroke ... he didn't make it this time, Kath. He died two hours ago."

"No ... " I said and I started to cry for real. "No!"

"Yes, Kath ... I'm sorry I have to tell you this way ... " Her voice trailed off and my father got on. "Kath?"

I couldn't talk.

"Kath ... are you still there?"

I made a small noise.

"Listen, Kath ... he didn't suffer ... he just passed out and when they got him to the hospital he was gone."

"Dead?"

"Yes ... dead."

"Oh, Daddy ... I didn't want him to die ... "

"None of us did ... but we didn't want him to suffer either."

"But he was so nice ... so good ... "

"I know ... "

"What about Grandma?"

"She's okay."

"I want to talk to Mom again."

"Kath ... " Mom said.

"I want to come home," I told her, "right away ... I want to be with you and Grandma ... I'll pack tonight and leave first thing in the morning."

"No, honey ... we've talked it over and we don't want you to come home."

"But I have to ... "

"Please listen ... Grandpa didn't want a funeral ... you know that ... If you stay at camp with Jamie for another ten days Grandma will have a chance to get herself together. She wants you to do this for her."

"Is she all right ... you're telling me the truth, aren't you?"

"She's right upstairs ... resting ... Uncle Howard's with her."

"I want to talk to her."

"Tomorrow."

"What about Jamie?" I asked. "Who's going to tell her?"

"Do you think you could do it?"

"I don't know."

"Please try ... in the morning ... and then call us."

"Okay ... I'll try."

"Get some sleep now ... and well talk tomorrow."

"Tell Grandma I'm sorry ... will you?"

"I will."

"I loved him."

"We all did."

I told Nan what had happened and that I needed to be alone for a while. I went down to the lake and sat on my rock and I thought about Grandpa. I remembered how he'd played horsey with me when I was just a little kid and how he'd read aloud, using a different voice for each character. I thought of him sniffing around in the kitchen when Jamie and Grandma were preparing their feasts. I thought of how he'd looked after his first stroke, small and white and how he'd held out his hand to me when I visited him in the hospital. I tried to remember all the good things the way he'd toasted Grandma in the restaurant. To love, he'd said, raising his glass.

Forever - Judy Blume

by PurpleHairSwag

Chapter 25

On Saturday afternoon, right before activities ended, I was called to the office. Theo told the kids on the courts to rally by themselves and he walked me over, holding my hand, sensing how scared I was. Please don't let it be Grandma, I prayed ... please don't let it be anything bad this time.

When we got there Foxy looked up from his desk and said, "Hi, Kat ... you've got a visitor." He pointed to the bathroom but before I could ask any questions the door opened. And there was Michael.

Theo and I were standing side by side, both of us dressed in cut-off shorts, him with no shirt and me in a halter, covered with sweat, smudged with dirt and still holding hands, which we dropped immediately.

"Michael ... " I said, going to him. "How can you be here?"

"I was worried," he said. "You didn't answer my letters so I flew in a few days early and decided to surprise you."

"Well ... you did. You really did. Look at me.. .I'm a mess!"

"Not to me, you're not." He hugged me hard, then I introduced him to Theo and they shook hands.

"I've heard a lot about you," Theo said.

"I've heard a lot about you too," Michael told him, which wasn't exactly true because I only wrote about Theo now and then and it always had something to do with Nan.

Theo said, "I'll see you later ... I've got to get cleaned up for supper." I wasn't sure if he'd meant that for me or for Michael. He walked out of the office.

Foxy said, "You can take a long night off, Kat."

I went back to the house, stood under a hot shower and shampooed my hair, thinking, what can I say to himhow can I explainhow can I make him understand without hating me? And now that he's herenow that I've seen him againI don't know what I want. I let the water run off my hair into my face but it wasn't just the shampoo that made my eyes burn.

I put on the only dress I'd brought to camp. Michael was waiting for me downstairs. He took my hand and we walked to his car. He drove to a restaurant on the wharf and ordered lobsters and a bottle of white wine. We talked about Grandpa and Michael pulled two obituaries out of his pocketone from The New York Times and one from The Leader. Erica had written it herself. Then we talked about North Carolina and lumber yards and tennis and Jamie and the weather and the food. We didn't get around to the most important thing at dinner, but I knew before long we would. And what then?

After dinner we went to Michael's room at the motel. He took off his shirta yellow polo with an alligator above the pocketand tossed it onto a chair. We sat on the bed and as we kissed he unbuttoned my dress. All I had on under it was a pair of bikinis. He got out of his jeans, then his underpants. We lay side by side. Michael pushed my dress up, kissing me all the time. I couldn't really kiss him back. "I've missed you so much ... " he said, "so much ... " I didn't let my tongue wander into his mouth the way I used to. I just lay there, waiting. I couldn't let myself feel anything.

He put his hand inside my dress and held my breasts, squeezing one, then the other. I thought of pretending. Some people do that. They think of other things while they're making love. They pretend they are with other partners. He ran his hand up the inside of my thigh, resting it between my legs. I didn't wiggle out of my bikinis. I'm no good at pretending. And anyway, pretending isn't fair.

"Come on, Kath ... " he whispered.

"No, wait," I said. "Wait, Michael ... "

"I can't."

I rolled away from him. "You have to." I got off the bed and crossed the room. "We've got to talk."

"I thought that's what we've been doing for the last couple of hours."

Forever - Judy Blume

by PupleHairSwag

Chapter 26

We saw each other one more time before we left for school. Erica and I were shopping in Hahne's and there he was, at the stationery counter.

I said, "Hi."

And he said, "Oh ... hi."

I said, "How are you?"

And he said, "Okay ... and you?"

"Okay ... how's Artie?"

"He's home. I saw him yesterday."

"I'm glad."

Erica disappeared down another aisle and Michael and I stood there, looking at each other.

"Well ... " I said, "good luck at school."

"You too." Thanks."

"Oh, by the way, I got that job in VaU .% . ."

"Are you going to take it?"

He shrugged. "It all depends ... "

"Michael ... "

"Yeah?"

I wanted to tell him that I will never be sorry for loving him. That in a way I still do that maybe I always will. I'll never regret one single thing we did together because what we had was very special. Maybe if we were ten years older it would have worked out differently. Maybe. I think it's just that I'm not ready for forever.

I hope that Michael knew what I was thinking. I hope that my eyes got the message through to him, because all I could manage to say was, "See you around ... "

"Yeah," he answered, "see you around."

When I got home Jamie was out back with David and my mother was pruning her birthday tree.

"It looks nice," I said. "It's getting fatter."

"It needs a lot of water," she told me. "Did you get everything at Hahne's?"

"Almost everything."

"Are you all right ... you don't look well ... "

"I've had better days ... but I'm okay. I think I'll take a shower before dinner."

"Go ahead ... and Kath ... "

"Yes?"

"Theo called."