

ANN BRASHARES

The #1 *New York Times* bestselling series

forever in blue

the fourth summer of
the sisterhood



Forever in Blue
The Fourth Summer of the Sisterhood

Ann Brashares

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Excerpt from Sisterhood Everlasting

*For my sweet Susannah...
when she's ready*

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I thank my parents, Jane Easton Brashares and William Brashares, and my brothers, Beau, Justin, and Ben Brashares. You can't pick your family, they say, but I would pick them.

I lovingly acknowledge my husband, Jacob Collins, and our three children, Sam, Nate, and Susannah.

PROLOGUE

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

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

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


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

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

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

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

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



The only true paradise is
paradise lost.

—Marcel Proust

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

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

Carmen, for instance, was missing.

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

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

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

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

"What about Thanksgiving?" Lena asked.

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

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

"That was after the party."

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

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

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

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

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

“That soon? Can you go later?” Tibby asked.

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

“How could Carmen miss this?” Tibby asked.

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

Bee looked around. “Miss what, though?” she asked, not so much challenging and more conciliating. “This isn’t really the launch, right?” She gestured to the Pants, folded obediently in the middle of their triangle. “I mean, not officially. We’ve been wearing them all school year. It’s not like the other summers, when this was the huge kickoff and everything.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I have it written down,” Tibby said.

“Okay.”

“Well.”

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

"I guess," Tibby said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

One's real life is so often
the life that one does
not lead.

—Oscar Wilde

“Carmen, it is beautiful. I can’t wait for you to see it.”

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

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

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

“Wow. That soon.”

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

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

“So no more apartment, huh?”

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

She’d also wanted a sibling and for her mother not to be alone. It wasn’t always easy getting what you wanted.

“I’ll have to pack up my room,” Carmen said.

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

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

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

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

“Yeah. But I’ve got all this stuff going on here.”

“I know, *nena*.”

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

“Carmen, where are you?”

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

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

“I’m coming,” Carmen said, pulling on her socks as she held the phone with her shoulder.

“I’ll be right there.”

She hustled out of her dorm and to the theater. She remembered along the way that her hair was dirty and she’d meant to change her pants, because the ones she was wearing made her feel particularly fat. But did it matter? Nobody was looking at her.

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

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

“Better. Thanks. How does it look?”

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

“I think Roland is waiting for you onstage.”

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

“Oh, yeah.” He was trying to remember. “Can you fix the curtain in the parlor? It’s falling off.”

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

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

She liked the *chunk* sound of the staple clawing into the wall. It was one of the things she learned at college: how to operate a staple gun. Her dad was paying a lot of money for that.

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

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

To: Carmabelle@hsp.xx.com

From: Beezy3@gomail.net

Subject: Carmen-the-Bear

We are having carmic disturbances around here.

I know you're in your hibernation and I, of all people, get what that's about.

But Carma, it's June. Time to come out and be with your friends who love you.

We tried to go to Gilda's, but without you we could not go on.

Could not.

The buzzing Bee

It was different being a girl with a boyfriend.

Bridget meditated upon this as she walked along Edge-mere Street on the way from Lena's house to her own. Her meditation had begun moments before, when a guy she knew vaguely from high school leaned out of his car and yelled "Hey, gorgeous!" and blew her a kiss.

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

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

Each time she saw Eric's remarkable face, each time he appeared at the door of her dorm room or came to meet her at Port Authority in New York, it all came back. The way he kissed

her. The way he wore his pants, the way he stayed up all night with her getting her ready for her Spanish midterm.

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

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

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

She clamped her hand harder around the phone, but she didn't want to betray the chaotic feelings. She wasn't good at being left. "When do you get back?" she asked.

"End of September. I'm going to stay for a month with my grandparents in Mulegé. My grandmother already started cooking." His laugh was light and sweet. He acted as though she would be as pleased for him as he was for himself. He didn't fathom her darkness.

Sometimes you hung up the phone and felt the bruising of your heart. It hurt now and would hurt more later. The conversation was too unsatisfying to continue and yet you couldn't stand for it to end. Bridget wanted to throw the phone and also herself against the wall.

She had presumed her and Eric's summer plans would unfold together in some way. She thought having a boyfriend meant you planned your future in harmony. Was it his certainty about her that made it so easy for him to leave, or was it indifference?

She went for a long run and talked herself down. It wasn't like they were married or anything. She shouldn't feel hurt by it. She knew it wasn't personal. The assistant director job was a windfall—it paid well and put him close to his faraway family.

She didn't feel hurt, exactly, but in the days after he told her, she got that fitful forward-moving energy. She didn't feel like hanging around missing him. If she hadn't been caught by surprise, caught in a painful presumption, she probably wouldn't have signed up for the dig in Turkey quite so fast.

Eric couldn't expect her to sit around waiting for him. That was not something she could do. How long could she coast on having a boyfriend when that boyfriend planned to be away from May to late September? How long could they coast as a couple? She wasn't a theoretical kind of person.

It was after the conversation about Mexico that she really started to wonder about these things. After that it seemed like for every guy she saw on her way to class, she had the feeling that her status as a girl with a boyfriend was something demanded of her rather than something she had very eagerly given.

Tibby glanced at the time on her register. There were four minutes left in her shift and at least twelve people in line.

She scanned in a pile of six movies for a prepubescent girl wearing sparkly silver eye shadow and a too-tight-looking choker. Were the girl's eyes bulging or was Tibby imagining it?

"You're gonna watch all these?" Tibby asked absently. It was Friday. Late fees kicked in on Monday. The girl's gum smelled strongly and fakely of watermelon. As the girl swallowed, Tibby thought of fishermen's pelicans, with the rings around their necks so they couldn't gulp down their catch.

" 'Cause I'm having a sleepover. There'll be, like, seven of us. I mean, if Callie can come. And if she can't, I shouldn't be getting that one, because everybody else hates it."

Were we like that? Tibby wondered while the girl went on to describe each of her friends' specific movie requirements.

Now her shift was over by two minutes. Tibby cursed herself for having begun the conversation in the first place. She always forgot that annoying fact of question-asking: People tended to answer.

She had eleven customers still to serve before she could reasonably close down her register, and she was no longer getting paid. "This one's closing," she called to incipient number twelve before he could invest any time in her line.

The next person up was a goateed young man with a Windbreaker over his doorman coat. When it flapped open, Tibby could see that his name was Carl. She wanted to tell him that his movie was all right, but the ending stank and the sequel was an insult to your brain, but she made herself think the comment and not say it. That would be her rule going forward. She might as well admit to herself that she liked talking more than listening.

She closed out her register, said her good-byes, and walked along Broadway before turning onto Bleecker Street and then into the entrance to her dorm. The bad thing about her job was that it paid barely over minimum wage. The good thing about her job was that it was three blocks away.

The lobby of her dorm was cool and empty but for the security guard at his desk. It was a different now that it was summer. No students jabbering, no cell-phonic symphony of ring tones. A month ago, the big bulletin board had been laden with notices twenty thick. Now it was clear right down to the cork.

During the school year, the elevator ride was socially taxing. Too much time to stare and appraise and judge. In the normally crowded space she'd felt a need to be something for each of her fellow passengers, even the ones whose names she didn't know. Now, with it empty, she felt herself merging into the fake wood-grain wall.

Tonight the halls would be empty. The summer programs didn't start until after July fourth. And even then there would just be new, temporary people, not her friends, and not the kind you worried about in the elevator. They'd be gone by the middle of August.

It was a strange thing about college. You felt like you were supposed to be finding your life there. Each person you saw, you thought, *Will you mean something to me? Will we figure in each other's lives?* She'd made a few actual friends on her floor and in her film classes, but for most people she saw she kind of knew off the bat wouldn't mean anything. Like the swim team girls who decorated their faces with purple paint to demonstrate school spirit, or the guy with the fuzzy facial hair who wore the Warhammer T-shirt.

But then again, chimed in the voice she'd recently come to think of as Meta-Tibby (her default right self, never hurried or snappish), who would have guessed that first day in the 7-Eleven that Brian would become important?

In the four years since she'd first met Brian, many things had changed. Though Brian insisted he'd loved her from the first time he met her, she'd thought he was a doofus for three years. She'd been wrong. She was often wrong. Now she got a deep abdominal tingling whenever she thought of being near him. It had been nine months since they'd...what? She hated the term *hooked up*. Nine months since they'd swum in their underwear after hours at the public pool and kissed fiercely and pressed themselves together until their hands and toes turned pruney and their lips blue.

They hadn't had sex yet. Not officially, in spite of Brian's pleas. But since that night in August, she felt as though her body belonged to Brian, and his body to her. Ever since that night in the pool, the way they loved each other had changed. Before it they each took up their own space. After it they took up space together. Before that night if he touched her ankle to hers under the dinner table, she blushed and obsessed and sweated through her shirt. After that night they always had some part touching. They read together on a twin bed with every part of their bodies overlapping, still concentrating on their books. Well, concentrating a little on their books.

Tonight this place would be quiet. On some level she missed Bernie, who practiced his opera singing from nine to ten, and Deirdre, who cooked actual food in the communal floor kitchen. But it was restful being alone. She would write e-mails to her friends and shave her armpits and legs before Brian came tomorrow. Maybe she would order pad thai from the place around the corner. She would pick it up so she wouldn't have to pay the tip for delivery. She hated to be cheap, but she couldn't afford to lay out another five dollars.

She fit her key into the loose lock. So imprecise was the lock she suspected it would turn for virtually any key in the dorm. Maybe any key in the world. It was a tarty little lock.

She swung open the door and felt once again the familiar appreciation for her single. Who cared if it was seven by nine feet? Who cared if it fit more like a suit of clothes than an actual room? It was hers. Unlike at home, her stuff stayed the way she left it.

Her gaze went first to the light pulsing under the power button on her computer. It went second to the steady green light of her camera's battery, fully charged. It went third to the glimmer of shine in the eyeball of a large, brown-haired nineteen-year-old boy sitting on her bed.

There was the lurch. Stomach, legs, ribs, brain. There was the pounding of the heart.

“Brian!”

“Hey,” he said mutedly. She could tell he was trying not to scare her.

She dropped her bag and went to him, instantly folding up in his eager limbs.

“I thought you were coming tomorrow.”

“I can't last five days,” he said, his face pressed into her ear.

It was so good to feel him all around her. She loved this feeling. She would never get used to it. It was too good. Unfairly good. She couldn't dislodge her worldview that things balanced out. You paid for what you got. In happiness terms, this always felt like a spending spree.

Most guys said they'd call you tomorrow and they called you the next Saturday or not at all. Most guys said they'd be there at eight and showed up at nine-fifteen. They kept you comfortless, wanting and wishing, and annoyed at yourself for every moment you spent that way. That was not Brian. Brian promised to come on Saturday and he came on Friday instead.

“Now I'm happy,” he said from her neck.

She looked down at the side of his face, at his manly forearm. He was so handsome, and yet he wore it lightly. The way he looked was not what made her love him, but was it wrong to notice?

He rolled her over onto the bed. She pried off her running shoes with her toes. He pulled up her shirt and laid his head on her bare stomach, his arms around her hips, his knees bent at the wall. If this room was small for her, it barely contained Brian when he stretched out. He couldn't help kicking the wall now and then. Tonight she was glad not to have to feel guilty toward the guy in 11-C.

It was something like a miracle, this was. Their own room. No hiding, no fibbing, no getting away with it. No parent to whom you must account for your time. No curfew to bump up against.

Time stretched on. They would eat what they felt like for dinner—or at least, what they could afford. She remembered the night they'd had two Snickers bars apiece for dinner and ice cream for dessert. They would fall asleep together, his hand on her breast or the valley of her waist, and wake up together in the sunshine from her east-facing window. It was so good. Too good. How could she ever afford this?

“I love you,” he murmured, his hands reaching up under her shirt. He didn't hang around for that beat, that momentary vacuum where she was meant to respond in kind. His hands were already up under her shoulders, unbending himself over her for a real kiss. He didn't need her to say it back.

She used to have the idea—an untested belief, really—that you loved someone in a kind of mirror dance. You loved in exact response to how much they were willing to love you.

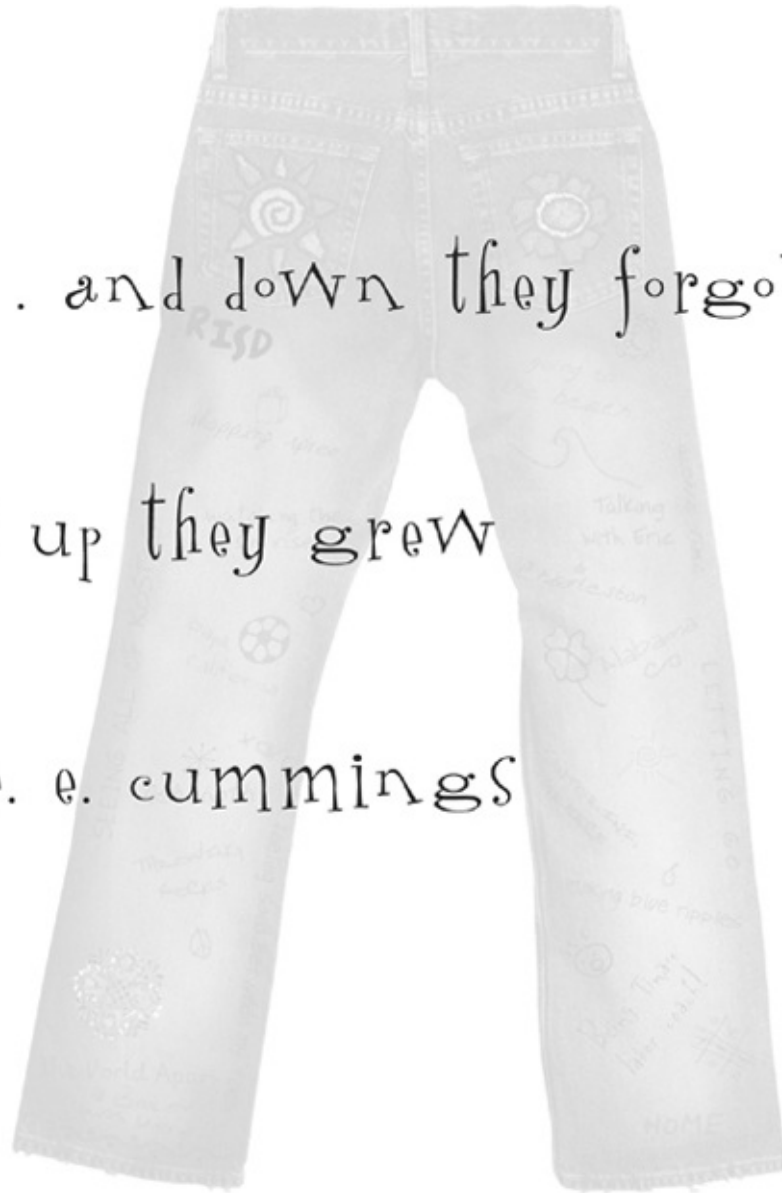
Brian wasn't like that. He did his loving openly and without call for reciprocation. It was something that awed her, but that set him apart, as though he spoke Mandarin or could dunk a basketball.

She plunged her hand under his T-shirt, feeling his warm back, his angel bones. “I love you,” she said. He didn't ask for the words, but she gave them.

... and down they forgot

as up they grew

-e. e. cummings



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