

where love lies

a novel



RAZ TAL SCHENIRER



GREENLEAF
BOOK GROUP PRESS

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either a product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Published by Greenleaf Book Group Press
Austin, Texas
www.gbgroup.com

Copyright © 2024 Raz Tal Schenirer
All rights reserved.

Thank you for purchasing an authorized edition of this book and for complying with copyright law. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without written permission from the copyright holder.

Distributed by Greenleaf Book Group

For ordering information or special discounts for bulk purchases, please contact Greenleaf Book Group at PO Box 91869, Austin, TX 78709, 512.891.6100.

Design and composition by Greenleaf Book Group and Mimi Bark
Cover design by Greenleaf Book Group and Mimi Bark
Cover image used under license from ©Shutterstock.com/Welry

Publisher's Cataloging-in-Publication data is available.

Print ISBN: 979-8-88645-153-5

eBook ISBN: 979-8-88645-154-2

To offset the number of trees consumed in the printing of our books, Greenleaf donates a portion of the proceeds from each printing to the Arbor Day Foundation. Greenleaf Book Group has replaced over 50,000 trees since 2007.

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

First Edition

I



The Princess

Tel Aviv

Chapter 1

What does it mean to take control of your life?

Does it start with drinking green juice in the morning and end with a sleep meditation at night? Or is it something bigger than that? Does it mean you're free to be yourself without the burden of a raised eyebrow? Or does taking control of your life mean doing what's in your heart, even if you're bound to hurt someone you love along the way? Maybe it's saying yes. Yes to sex, yes to stretching out like a starfish on satin sheets with the breathlessness of love's endless potential, yes to tangled limbs and dewy mornings, yes to more wine, yes to dessert, yes to youth, yes to life.

These were the thoughts that circled my mind as I sat watching the sunset alone on Tel Aviv's Gordon Beach, my toes nestled in the damp sand, the crisp blue water of the Mediterranean Sea glimmering with each subtle wave. Only a month before, I was throwing back tequila shots in carpeted basements with my high school friends, the Connecticut suburbs our playground of experimentation. And now, here I was, dropped onto a beach in a foreign country, with nothing but the smell of the ocean to comfort me.

I could officially say goodbye to initialed L.L.Bean backpacks and oversized college sweatshirts, goodbye to driving around Greenwich

in my best friend Julia's Range Rover Sport looking for a McDonald's drive-through, goodbye to smoking weed behind the bleachers, to drinking warm vodka out of plastic water bottles, goodbye to all of that. It was time to say hello to Tel Aviv's Tamara Juice Bar fruit smoothies, to tahini dripping down the forearms of people standing in line on Frishman Street, hunched over a pita overflowing with falafel; hello to the Levinsky Market, where teenage girls and boys sat on the sidewalks to smoke cigarettes; and hello, of course, to the unimaginable: joining the Israeli army, against my will. Tomorrow. Talk about losing control.

Just a few minutes before, I'd bought a bottle of Sancerre to drink on the beach, and the clerk at the liquor store—a man in his fifties in a yellow-stained white T-shirt and a beer belly peeping out from underneath it—had a gaze so sharp I felt like he was undressing me with his eyes.

“Who's the lucky guy?” he asked, a lit cigarette hanging from the side of his mouth as he scanned the wine bottle and handed it to me with a few paper cups hanging loosely from its neck.

I could barely hear him over the yelling on the television behind him blaring a Maccabi Haifa soccer game. “Oh, come on!” he yelled at the screen.

I laughed nervously, a drunk-in-the-back-seat-of-an-Uber-at-three-o'clock-in-the-morning laugh trying to make light of the driver's idiotic jokes. *You're so hilarious, a real comical talent. Just don't rape and murder me, please.*

“What, are you alone?” the clerk said, his eyes back on me. “What's a nice girl like you doing drinking a bottle of wine alone? You sure you don't want any company?” He scratched his stomach.

As if.

“Oh, no, I'm meeting my boyfriend,” I lied and turned to walk out

of the shop. The idea of a man waiting for me at the beach was enough to send his attention back to the game.

Alone. I needed to be alone. I wanted the wine to wash away this feeling of doom, of not knowing where I was going to be when the sun rose the next morning, the same way the waves washed away the tracks in the sand. I needed to hear my own thoughts, without the constant interruption of my parents' opinions. *Open your mind, Ella. Think of the army as an experience. You'll thank us in the end.*

I had snuck out of the house a few hours before, without telling them where I was going, shutting the door behind me and leaving the two of them sitting together at the kitchen table drinking tea with mint leaves, their relationship the epitome of what a marriage was supposed to be, at least to spectators. I had imagined the beach as the perfect escape from the stuffy apartment we had temporarily rented, with its creaky electric blinds and worn-out hardwood floors, but now, the humidity made me feel even more smothered, not to mention that it was seriously ruining my hair. I breathed in deeply, but the air didn't fill my lungs the same way the Connecticut breeze did, and at that moment, I missed home so much. Here, the wind stood still, and while the swishing sound of the waves was meant to calm me, sweat sprinkled down the backs of my knees, and sand stuck to my skin in all the wrong places, so it was impossible for me to appreciate the setting. My only company were the beach bugs disappearing into the sand, digging their heads deep down, ignoring the world around them. I wished I could do the same. I looked to my left at a young couple making out a few feet away from me, their mouths seemingly stuck open, their tongues grossly at war. *Ew*, I mouthed to myself, but inside they made me feel only more single and alone than I already was.

An entire month had passed since that dreadful Wednesday afternoon when our three-story Greenwich home was packed up and

emptied. Boxes lined the entrance, and the smell of fresh paint lingered in the air. Before my mother stepped out the front door for the last time, I watched her look back, lean over, and kiss the wall of the home that had fulfilled her American dream. From the time of having to sneakily buy a slice of pizza she couldn't afford in the littered streets of south Tel Aviv to her years of owning a three-story suburban house in America—*America*—my mother had admired the land of the free, and I knew her heart broke at the mere thought of going back to where she had come from.

When we landed at Ben Gurion Airport in Israel, a part of her stayed behind, and so did a part of me. I spent each day in Tel Aviv lying in bed, drinking chocolate milk from a small plastic bag, a common way to drink it in Israel, hoping my mother would stop cleaning the apartment maniacally and tend to me, which she never did. She was so invested in her own sorrow that she put me on hold, with nothing else to do than dread the future.

And boy, did I dread it. In what universe was I, Ella Davidson, expected to know how to prepare for army service? I was born in Israel—that was true—but my parents and I moved to the United States when I was just a baby, before I could even crawl. I had no patriotic connection to Israel; if anything, I felt like an all-American girl. Would there be anything to eat? Did they have gluten-free options? Did I seriously have to wear a uniform? Where the hell was I going to sleep? And the question that didn't stop haunting me: How was I going to get out?

"Ella, you're worse than Kim Kardashian when she lost her diamond earring in the ocean," my sister Natalie said as she stood at the entrance to the bedroom we now shared, leaning on the wall of hand-painted pink peonies.

"Get out!" I said, throwing the empty chocolate milk bag in her direction. Wise beyond her thirteen years, Natalie was the introverted,

less-emotional one of the two of us, although if I hadn't been so obsessed with my own misery, I would have noticed that she, too, was dealing with her preteen life having been turned upside down.

"There's people that are dying!" she yelled from the hallway, quoting Kourtney Kardashian. I grabbed the pillow beside me and smothered my face into it, muffling a scream.

At least here, at the beach, I could look out at the ocean and remember that it was bigger than me, bigger than the nightmare my life had become. I had felt insignificant from the moment the plane landed in Tel Aviv, and here, watching the waves break, the white foam disappearing against my toes, I was tiny, which somehow seemed to minimize my problems. If I was tiny, so were they.

I felt the tears well up behind my eyes, and I inhaled the saltiness of the sea in an effort to relax. I needed to surrender. To let go. To accept my fate. And what better way to let go than to break down? I took another sip of the wine, my tears mixing with the alcohol. Unless I was going to pull a Virginia Woolf and drown myself in the ocean, there was nothing I could do to stop tomorrow from coming.

As I tried to accept my fate, a runner sprinted past me, flinging sand all over me and into my paper wine cup. I spit the sand out and wiped my face with my Reformation sundress. *Seriously? With the wide expanse of space on this beach, he had to run close enough to kick sand into my face?*

"Asshole!" I yelled after him. Was I that insignificant? I felt invisible and ignored, and there's nothing worse than feeling ignored by a hot guy. I closed my eyes and sighed quietly, cursing the world for snatching away the last few moments of my mope session. It was bad enough that I was going to be waking up before the sun the next morning and getting on a bus to an army base in the middle of nowhere. Did the universe really have to send over a hot, sweaty runner to make me feel even worse?

All of a sudden, the runner turned around and ran back toward me, his golden hair bouncing up and down, his tall frame magnified with each stride. He was annoyingly handsome, hotter than I'd initially thought. The dewy hour of sunset highlighted his cheekbones, stepping stones to his hazel eyes. I rolled mine.

I thought I heard him mumble “sorry” under his breath in Hebrew, but I couldn't really tell. “What?” I said.

“I'm sorry,” he said, this time in accented English. “I didn't see you there.”

“You didn't see me?” I waved my hands in the air. “You need glasses, then. I'm sitting right here.”

He knelt down to look at me, his AirPods still in his ears. I practically fell backward when his eyes locked with mine. In a matter of seconds, I was lost in the yellow specks of his irises. It was like the world around us had stopped. Even the waves seemed to silence, and I could hear him catch his breath. My mind wandered to him panting like that on top of me. I shook my head. His eyelashes were so long they almost looked fake, and his smile was so straight and white and bright that I felt my tongue gloss over my own teeth in insecurity. He had a tiny birthmark on the side of his neck that resembled a heart, and I imagined where other birthmarks hid. He had broad shoulders, in stark contrast to my fragile frame, and he had a deep golden tan—probably from all those runs on the beach past other girls lost in thought.

Why did he have to see me like this, with my shoulder-length brown hair tousled and ratty from the beachy wind and my eyes puffy from crying? Why couldn't we have met a few months before, when my life was normal, when I was perfectly put together, strolling through Greenwich in my Burberry trench coat without a care in the world?

I watched as his eyes glanced over my face, the look behind them softening when he noticed the tears welling up in my eyes.

He held out his hand for me to shake. "I'm Liam," he said.

"Ella," I said, regaining my composure.

When my hand touched his, I felt my blood surging through the galaxy of my arteries, rushing all the way down to my toes. Handshakes weren't supposed to be felt in the toes. Or in the stomach, or between the legs, if we're going to go there. His touch didn't stop in the palm of my hand like it should have. It hit me like a lightning bolt, waking up even the idlest nerves in my body. I watched in slow motion as he ran the hand I'd touched through his hair.

"Hey, you okay?" he asked.

I glanced down at my feet again and looked back up at him. The sincerity of his voice and the gentle look on his face made me pity myself even more, and I started choking up.

Liam bit the inside of his cheek, like he was working up the courage to say something. "Listen, I owe you a drink," he said. He lifted his chin and nudged his head toward the sandy wine cup. "There's a cool place around the corner. Want to go?"

I shook my head.

"Come on, get up," he said when I couldn't come up with a reason not to. It sounded like a demand, despite the way he smiled when he said it.

"What? Now? No, I can't," I said.

Liam slipped his hand into the pocket of his shorts and pulled out a coin. "Heads or tails?"

"Um, heads?"

He flicked the coin into the air and slapped it into his other palm. "Tails it is! I win. We're going."

I laughed. "No offense, but I want to be alone," I said, enunciating each word slowly, like I was speaking to a child. He couldn't be gorgeous *and* smart, could he?

He reached out his hand. “I don’t take no for an answer,” he said, even slower than I had, half-mocking me. *Are all Israeli guys this aggressive?* “Come on, just half an hour. Let’s go.”

“Fine,” I said, the wine hitting me as he helped me up. I brushed the sand off my Louis Vuitton tote bag and threw it over my shoulder. “Half an hour.”

We walked toward the boardwalk, the fluorescent lights revealing the crinkled corners of his eyes. His phone screen was cracked, and his shoes were so worn I had to look twice to make sure they weren’t Golden Goose sneakers. But with my manicured nails and overplucked eyebrows, I felt free in the aura of his carelessness. I looked over at the restaurants we were walking by, trying not to show him how interested I was in what this evening had to offer.

When we reached the bar, Liam spoke to the hostess in Hebrew, and I felt a sudden sense of relief at being able to understand the language. Back in Connecticut, my parents made it a rule to speak Hebrew at home so that my siblings and I wouldn’t forget the language. I understood everything, but my accent was thick and my vocabulary minimal. Another reason added to my mental *Why I Will Never Survive the Army* list.

We stepped past a neon sign that read “The Pineapple Bar” into a dim, yellow-lit room with an exaggerated amount of pineapple décor. There were pineapple-shaped seat cushions and pineapple wallpaper. Even the waitress wore a pineapple scrunchie in her hair. The hostess sat us in the corner at the only available table, and though the bar was full of people, as soon as Liam started talking, they blurred and faded into the background, only sharpening his image.

“Let me get a bottle of—” He turned to me. “What was that wine you were drinking?”

“Sancerre,” I said.

He shook his head and pointed his thumb toward me. “What she said.”

I laughed a real laugh for the first time that month. I liked how confident Liam was in his unfamiliarity with French wine. I glanced over at him. He was staring at me.

“What?” I asked.

“Nothing,” he said.

“What?” I asked again. *Do I have a piece of food stuck in between my teeth?*

“Nothing. I just—I didn’t realize how beautiful you are,” he said. He took his phone out and tried to snap a picture of me.

“Not so close up!” I said as I turned my head. I heard the click of the camera. At least he only got the back of my head. I rolled my eyes. *Is that the best he can do?*

The waitress brought us our wine, and I eyed the Corona the blonde girl at the next table was drinking out of the bottle.

Liam noticed. “You want a beer?” he asked.

I shook my head. I used to go to bars in Westport using Julia’s older sister’s ID, listening to immature college guys spend hours talking about themselves as I sipped a Corona with lime. Liam was nothing like them. He was a man, and his intimidating demeanor gave his compliments more weight. He had deep-set eyes, and I hated to admit that the mystery behind them excited me. I was used to having everything laid out on the table, but with Liam, I realized I’d have to work to peel back each layer.

“Do you have a girlfriend?” I asked, the wine loosening my lips. With the half bottle I had downed at the beach and now another glass, I felt my muscles relax. Finally, the tension disappeared into the pineapple universe.

Liam laughed, adjusting himself on the barstool so that he was facing me. “You don’t hold back, do you?” he said, fingering the stem of the glass.

“Well, do you or not?” I asked, surprised by my own straightforwardness.

“No, I don’t. I’m not the girlfriend type.”

“Not the girlfriend type?” I repeated. “Oh, so you’re one of those.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You’re one of those. You know. The hot, tough guy with issues. The one who’s been heartbroken in the past and needs fixing. The one who’s ‘better off alone,’” I said, using my fingers as quotation marks.

“If only my life were that simple,” he said, calling the bartender over with the swift motion of his hand. My heart dropped. He was going to ask for the check.

“We’ll have another bottle,” Liam said, without asking me. *Have we really already finished this one?* “And a large pizza. I’m hungry,” he said.

Finally, a guy who ordered for me. American guys were constantly worried about what I wanted, how much, how little, but Liam made me feel like he knew what was best. For both of us. I was annoyed at my own relief. Wasn’t I a feminist? A decision-maker? The daughter of two educated, liberal parents? I wasn’t used to letting go, to letting somebody else take the reins, but after a month of lying in bed, feeling like each day was a battle of survival, I was pleased to be *taken* care of instead of *taking* care.

The bartender, a redhead who couldn’t have been older than twenty-one, with freckles splattered across his nose, returned fifteen minutes later with the pizza and the wine bottle. He poured a tasting of the wine into Liam’s glass. Liam nodded for him to keep pouring.

“What’s your favorite sex position?” Liam asked me with a straight face, the bartender smirking as he overheard.

I swallowed so hard I almost choked on the single slice of pizza I was letting myself eat.

“I’m not going to answer that,” I said, shaking my head. I wiped the

corners of my mouth with a pineapple napkin. “I don’t even know you.” I had been intimate with only one person in my life, Ethan Santos, my high school boyfriend who’d moved to Connecticut from Madrid two years before.

While technically I was considered inexperienced, Ethan and I had experimented with each other the way only horny teenagers could, expanding each other’s sexual worlds, pushing them to the limit. I let him watch me sit around naked while we studied for midterms; I gave him blow jobs under the desk during his math private tutor sessions on Zoom; I let him fall asleep inside of me. The openness we felt with each other was a sacred space of trust and, more than that, of immaculate wonder.

Liam placed both of his hands on the tabletop. “Okay, you want to know me? I’m Liam Levine. I’m twenty-five years old. My mother’s from Australia; my father’s Moroccan. I’m originally from a small town down south, but now I live here, with my little brother, David. My mom has cancer; my dad’s an abusive asshole who refuses to pay for anything since the divorce, so I work to take care of her medical bills. I work in—”

Oh, God, no. Enough. When I’d snuck out of the house that evening, it was for the sole purpose of escaping. I had promised myself that I would let nothing and no one interrupt me. I even left my phone at home, throwing it on the couch before opening the front door. I didn’t want to hear the problems of a guy I would never see again, no matter how attracted to him I was, not only because I wanted to enjoy one last night of freedom but also because Liam’s issues made mine seem shallow and trivial.

“Reverse cowgirl,” I said, interrupting his monologue. Liam squinted his eyes in confusion. “Your question,” I said. “My favorite position. It’s reverse cowgirl.”

Before I had time to think, Liam leaned in, his lips a centimeter from my mouth. I could smell the garlicky scent of pizza sauce on his breath. I closed my eyes, expecting him to kiss me, but when I opened them, he was still there, a centimeter away, not touching me. “Mine, too,” he whispered before pulling away.

“So what’s your story, cowgirl?” he said between bites of another slice. He had eaten more than half the pie, leaving only two beautiful, shining slices of cheesy goodness on the tray. The alcohol had heightened my appetite, but I couldn’t possibly eat more than one slice on a first date, regardless of whether I saw a future with him. “Why were you crying on the beach?” he asked, as if we didn’t just experience the most sexually charged moment in the history of my life.

God, he is so sexy.

I didn’t feel like telling him my story, especially after he fake almost-kissed me. How embarrassing. Who said I even wanted to kiss him in the first place? Plus, from the little I’d learned about Liam’s hard-knock life, his serious problems minimized my own in a way that made me look spoiled and pathetic. Liam’s mother was battling cancer, and I was sobbing on a beautiful beach because my family had moved out of the Connecticut suburbs into an apartment in Tel Aviv overlooking the ocean? I had no choice but to justify my tears with a few white lies.

“I live on the Upper East Side,” I said, “and believe it or not, I’m in medical school. I’m only here on a break before my residency starts.” I was slurring my words.

“New York City?” Liam said, his eyes widening; finally I had impressed him. “I’ve always wanted to go there, to walk around Times Square, to visit the Statue of Liberty, to have a picnic in Central Park.”

“Sounds like your very own American Dream,” I said.

He shrugged and pointed to the window of the bar that faced the water, where a row of yachts lined the dock. “That’s my dream. To have

enough money to buy a yacht. I don't care what I do or where; I just want to make money doing it."

"You shouldn't do something for money. You should do what you love, and the money will come," I said, repeating a quote my father loved.

"Easy for you to say, Miss Louis Vuitton. You wouldn't understand what it's like to think about money, to check the price tag before you swipe Daddy's credit card. Not everyone has everything handed to them on a silver platter."

My jaw fell open so wide it almost hit the floor.

"You are such an asshole," I said, pouring myself the last of the wine, secretly amused. He was wrong. I had it all, and now, my world was falling apart.

"This is the second time in one night you've called me an asshole. I might have outdone myself," he said. I could tell by his smile that his lips started feeling looser, too, his eyelids heavy. "That's all you're eating?" he asked, looking at the half-eaten pizza slice on my plate.

"I'm so full," I lied, rubbing my slushy, wine-filled stomach. Liam promised we'd only be there for half an hour, but when I looked at the pineapple clock on the wall, it was already past midnight, and we were the only ones left in the bar.

"You probably go to fancy Pilates studios and wear matching workout clothes, don't you?" he said.

I wasn't used to feeling like I had to prove myself around people. Maybe it was the wine, but the ruder he became, the sexier he was.

"What's with you thinking you know everything?" I asked.

"Your eyes give it away. You look like a girl who hasn't had a taste of real life yet," he said.

"Based on what notion, exactly? You don't even know my last name. You don't know how old I am. You have no idea what I've been through," I said.

“Well, I know your favorite sex position,” Liam said. “I think that’s enough.”

Liam stood up to go to the bathroom, and I was left staring at the pizza in front of me. “Fuck it,” I said out loud to no one in particular. I inhaled the last two slices of pizza, my mouth overflowing with mozzarella cheese and saucy dough. With my mouth still stuffed, I called the redheaded bartender over to pick up the empty pizza tray before Liam came back.



About the Author

RAZ TAL SCHENIRER holds an MFA from Columbia University. She is founder of the dating advice column *Smart Girl Knows*. Her work has appeared in *Elite Daily*, the *Rumpus*, and *Betches*, among other publications. *Where Love Lies* is her first novel. Visit her online at smartgirlknows.com or on Instagram: [@razschenirer](https://www.instagram.com/razschenirer).