EMERY LORD



The Map from Here to There

What happens after
happily ever after?

BLOOMSBURY

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Open Road Summer
The Start of Me and You
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The Names They Gave Us

The Map from Here to There



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CHAPTER ONE

Of all the places to spend a hot August day in suburban Indiana, Cinema 12 had to be one of the best. Snacks, ice-cold air-conditioning, and endless opportunities for screenwriting analysis. At least, I thought so when I got the job in July.

Instead, Cin 12 gave me spilled nacho cheese, coagulating on the floor. Gray-haired men demanding student ticket prices but yelling at me when asked for a student ID. People complaining about strong perfume, about back-row make-outs, about the movie's ending, about the ice-cold air-conditioning itself.

Every time I tugged on my itchy, ill-fitting tuxedo uniform, I chanted: *College tuition. Room and board. Meal plan.* I got to wear my own white collared shirt, at least, but no shade flattered me in the low theater light. I'd gone through more blush in half a summer than I usually did in half a year, coaxing my skin from "vampire-adjacent" to "peachy."

"Okay, if you didn't know what happened in these last five

minutes," Hunter said, his voice low in the darkness, "how would you write the ending from here on out? Same way?"

"Hmm." I shifted my weight, leaning against the broom handle. Hunter's taste skewed toward big explosions or heart-warming football movies, but he'd taken to asking me about screen writing. "I'd end it more quietly. Instead of her running after his cab, I'd have him turn around, walk back to her front door, and knock. Roll credits."

"What?!" He glanced up at the smattering of viewers, all too enraptured to notice his outburst. "Hancock, you're kidding me."

My other coworkers called me Paige, but not Hunter. Hunter Chen spoke to all of us like we were his baseball teammates.

"You don't like the sprinting-after-him scene? Those are classic."

"No, I do," I said, damping down a smile. In fact, on the last day of school in June, I had sprinted after Max Watson, and I'd kissed him in the empty junior hallway. It was adrenaline and a lifetime of rom-coms, yes, but also something very true. "It shows the pivotal moment of dropping everything to chase what matters."

This summer, my screen-writing-program friends had teased me for preferring TV shows to film. When a movie closed with an inevitable, iconic kiss—atop a building, at the altar—I liked it fine. But I grew up with miserably married and then divorced parents, so I'd always known that wasn't really the end of the story. A TV relationship, though, could

bear out for years, through the mundanity and will-they-make-it lows. It made small moments big.

On-screen, the beautiful lead reached the taxi, her russet hair tousled. She was breathless and lovely, no trace of sweat even after sprinting. The musical score held its note, violins in waiting.

"Oh my God." Hunter squeezed my arm in mock suspense. "Is he going to get out of the cab? He is!"

Of course he was. We'd seen the end a dozen times. They kissed as cars around them honked, and I shook my head. "See? A quiet realization would be more poetic—something as quotidian as showing back up. Choosing each other when there's no fanfare."

"Quo-what-ian? Okay, Honor Roll."

"Commonplace. So everyday."

He waved me off. "I like the running scene. Cheesy, sure. But packs a punch."

"Oh my God." I snorted. "It's, like, the closest you can get to an action movie sequence. That's why you like it."

"Or maybe," he said, hands on his chest, "underneath this stone-cold exterior, I'm a big softie."

I rolled my eyes, used to this after a month of coworkerdom. For a while, I'd wondered if Hunter's friends ribbed him about his good looks, about his training regimen. Maybe he made the jokes before anyone else could. Or, I wondered, was he possibly a little vain and drawing attention to himself? Finally, I realized: it's definitely both.

We rotated through three stations at Cin 12: box office,

concessions, and usher shifts. Our manager, Donna, had taken to pairing me with Hunter because he'd worked here long enough to help train me. And I, apparently, "kept him in line" better than Hunter's best friend, Lane, whom he'd sweet-talked Donna into hiring.

The credits rolled to the beat of "Say Yes," this summer's "Live in the moment!" anthem. People filed out of the theater, and I smiled thinly as they passed. "Have a good one."

"Take that chance with me," Hunter added, speaking the song lyrics. The girl he directed this toward glanced away, bashful and thrilled. He had one of those full, semicircle grins, with dimples and a square chin to frame it. "Make a running leap and see."

In June, "Say Yes" had pulsed out of bodega speakers and open windows as I walked to classes in New York. I'd bobbed my head happily. By mid-July, I was groaning at the intro's percussive handclaps as I swept up crushed M&M's. Now, though, Hunter and I had come back around to "Say Yes." Was it because the song was terrible and we'd succumbed? Was the song great and we'd embraced it? I had no idea; it was simply part of us now.

"'*Say yes, say yes*,'" Hunter sang in an atrocious falsetto, shimmying up the steps. He'd apologized early on for his terrible voice and for the fact that it would not stop him. The universe, I'd supposed out loud, would only allow him greatness in one type of pitch. He was delighted by my willingness to both mock him *and* laud his baseball prowess, which I'd gotten a crash-course on these past few weeks. Hunter used to be singularly focused on playing Major League Baseball

someday, but the rigor of year-round ball had twinged his elbow and his enjoyment. He'd scaled back, healed, and landed a full athletic scholarship to Indiana University, on his way to PT school or school counseling. But he still hoped to play pro ball—following in the footsteps of his hero, and fellow Chinese American pitcher, Vance Worley.

I knew at least a thousand percent more baseball trivia than I had at the start of summer. And Hunter, I suspected, knew a thousand percent more about screenwriting.

"So, what's the countdown on The Boyfriend? Cutting it pretty close to the start of school," Hunter said. My coworkers called Max "The Boyfriend" with implied air quotes, like they didn't fully believe he was real.

Perfectly real, in fact. Just in Italy for the second half of the summer, thriving in his preferred lifestyle of Latin, ancient relics, and gelato.

"He's home Friday morning." The closer Max's arrival, the joltier my pulse. I imagined the sharp lines on an EKG, its alarm beeping with increasing urgency. Even with good anticipation, my body didn't handle feelings well sometimes.

"Friday morning? Don't you mean thirty-six hours, twelve minutes, and forty-two seconds?" Hunter clutched his hands together like a Disney princess daydreaming of her true love. "Forty-one. Forty!"

I chucked an empty popcorn tub at him, which he dodged, laughing. I didn't even talk about Max that much! Or maybe I did. But who wouldn't? I'd spent the first half of summer in Manhattan. By the time I got home, Max had left for his Italian study abroad. And since I hadn't confessed my feelings for

him till the last day of school, our relationship had been spent almost entirely apart.

I leaned down to an aisle seat, examining what appeared to be—yep, lovely—a small glob of white gum, newly stuck to the armrest. "Honestly. What compels a person to remove something from *inside their mouth* and press it somewhere another human being will sit?"

Hunter smiled, looking past me like a sailor gazing fondly at the horizon. "You've truly become one of us, Hancock."

He pretended to be jaded by this job after two years of part-timing it. As far as I'd witnessed, though, Cinema 12 was Hunter Chen's personal center stage. He flirted with elderly ladies, let his many buddies in with discounts, and wheedled every grumpy coworker until they smiled.

"Yeah, it's a real treat." I reached for a napkin, wrinkling my nose before I even neared the gum.

"So, hey," he said. "You tell your parents?"

Yesterday afternoon, I'd shocked myself by confessing to Hunter that my parents didn't know I planned to apply to film school in New York and LA. We were in the box office during a lull and venting about college anyway—Hunter may have been committed to IU for baseball, but he still worried about injury and balancing his coursework. And the words fell out, clumsy and unbidden. I hadn't even told my best friend yet. And I hadn't told Max.

"I did. Last night."

I was hoping the screen-writing thrill would dim as summer wore on. I expected to stay the course: an English degree in-state, with screen writing as a quirky side interest. But when

I helped my friend Maeve begin her writing portfolios for applications, I ended up starting my own, almost helplessly. Ideas that energized me, new pieces that challenged me.

"And it went well . . . ?" Hunter prodded.

"Okay, I think."

My dad went on about his pride in my go-get-'em aspirations, and my mom tempered the conversation with reason—ruminating about loans, job prospects, the fact that screen writing would likely keep me on either coast beyond college. It was like watching a bizarre table-tennis match: My dad on the left, rallying about my big dreams with the fervor of someone giving a commencement speech. Volley to my mom, reminding me that Indiana has great schools, that education is what I make of it.

Now I just had to tell Max. We'd talked about college abstractly, always assuming we'd both stay in the Midwest. Before this summer, I'd figured I'd land at IU like half my friends planned to. Then, even if Max went to Notre Dame or Purdue, we'd be a two- or three-hour drive apart—totally doable for weekend visits or meeting halfway.

Max would be supportive; I knew that. But as a helpless devotee to worst-case-scenario planning, I feared he'd also want to break up now, before we could get any more attached.

"Good thing this is our last showing," Hunter said. "That look on your face . . . man. You need a drink. And not just coffee at Alcott's."

I wrinkled my nose at him, and we bagged the remaining trash, working silently and fast. Once in the lobby, Hunter spun back.

"Hey, for real, what are you doing tonight? You should come out with us." He threw a glance at Lane, who was finishing up ice-bin clean-out behind the concession counter. Hunter described their best friendship as "siblinghood" after years of living in the same condo building. "Tell her to come out with us."

"You should!" Lane ran a hand through her red hair—a pixie cut with long layers that she wore pushed back. "Bella said the more, the merrier."

I had no idea who Bella was. Maybe someone from Linwood High—Oakhurst's neighboring town and rival, where Hunter and Lane were seniors. But they seemed to know everyone at my school, too, plus the local private school and a bunch of college campuses. Always a party, always open invitation.

"Maybe next time," I said, moving toward the door. "I have curfew. But thanks for the invite."

"She always says that," Hunter grumbled to Lane.

"Hey, I go out sometimes."

"Only when we're going to Waffle House." Hunter cupped both hands around his mouth. "It's senior year, Hancock. Say yes!"

"Have fun!" I called. "Be safe!"

The first time we met, Hunter rattled off the names of his friends at Oakhurst, hoping that I knew them. Aditi Basu? A little—I really liked her. Nate Song? I knew of him. Kara Cisse? *I'll save you some trouble*, I wanted to say. *At that enormous public high school, I socialize with between three and six other people*. I figured Hunter—star athlete with an endless stream

of high-fiving friends stopping by the theater—would be glibly nice and not retain my name.

But during the second shift Hunter and I worked together, one of my mom's PTA friends walked up to the snack counter. I knew, with slow-motion certainty, what was about to happen. And sure enough, she very kindly mentioned that she thought of Aaron often, and of me, and hoped I was well. I said I was; I thanked her. I handed her a box of Sno-Caps.

Hunter didn't ask what happened because he didn't have to; everyone in the tristate area knew that an Oakhurst student named Aaron Rosenthal had drowned in a freak accident right before our sophomore year. And plenty of people knew he was my boyfriend at the time. He was sweet and smart and I liked him as much as you can like anyone you've known for two months when you're fifteen. Grieving him was slow, in jerky stops and starts, and it had never become easier to feel people's thoughts of him like a projector flickering images across my face.

"You wanna hide in the stockroom?" Hunter had asked. "Scarf some Reese's? I'll cover for you."

"I'm good," I'd assured him. "Although, good guess with Reese's. Peanut butter is at the nexus of all my emotional eating."

"The *nexus*?" Hunter repeated. "Okay, Hermione Granger."

I tipped my head. "Did you just mock my nerdiness by . . . citing Harry Potter?"

After that, Hunter invited me to every place he and Lane were cruising off to after work. But I'd always preferred being

poolside at Tessa's, sneaking out to Kayleigh's rooftop with a laptop, watching a movie under the stars. I visualized myself at one of Hunter's parties: pressed into the corner of a sofa, praying for someone to talk to me and also fearing that someone would talk to me.

I walked outside into what felt like a screen door of August humidity—heat so heavy it seemed nearly visible. The feeble AC in my car tried its best, more an exhale than a gust. I was finally thinking of the sedan as my car—formerly my dad's and recently bequeathed to me for my seventeenth birthday. It was ancient, and not a cool car even when it was new. But I loved it—the console stocked with hand sanitizer, wipes for dashboard dust, a few old CDs for the player. Driving home from work was a small pleasure, me and the quiet, tree-lined roads.

When I pulled onto my street, I startled to see my dad's current car in the driveway so late. I used to consider my parents' marriage a tragedy, with bitterness that lingered even after they signed divorce papers. So when they started dating each other last year, I could only see a dark comedy. These days, though, even I could admit it had romantic dramedy potential. They were really happy, but obsessed with "maintaining boundaries," which included my dad staying at his own apartment.

I stepped around a hulking armoire in the garage, then a rolltop desk and a corner hutch, all furniture models posing in wait. After my grandmother died last spring, my mom refurbished her old desk for me, in the kicky red lacquer of a maraschino cherry. Since then, she'd been transforming flea market finds and free roadside furniture in her spare time—channeling

grief, I suspected. Our garage looked like a re-creation of *Beauty and the Beast*'s penultimate scene, servants frozen in household form.

When I put my hand on the doorknob, I caught a raised voice from inside. My mom—not angry, but stricken. "It's not just the tuition and debt. We wouldn't be able to afford to see our daughter, Dan!"

I settled back on my heels, stunned. I knew my mom wasn't thrilled that Way-Out-of-State was my Plan A, but I genuinely hadn't expected this level of strife.

"We couldn't fly out there on a whim," my dad reasoned. "But in an emergency . . ."

I shook my head, sure that my mom's chin was quivering at the mention of an emergency. *Rookie move, Dad.*

"She's never even been to LA," my mom said. "*I've* never been to LA."

I needed to de-escalate, so I stamped my feet, as if just arriving home, noisily.

"Heyyy." I opened the door and pretended to look surprised that they were both right there at the kitchen table, papers spanning its surface. My dad was pointing at two different pages like a cartographer charting a course.

"Hey," my mom said, straightening. Her eyes flicked to the kitchen clock, not nearly as subtly as she probably intended. The cinema's last showing was a little earlier than usual tonight.

I stood there, tuxedo jacket held at my side. "Everything okay?"

"'Course." My dad's voice was clear. Confident. And he wasn't necessarily lying, in his own mind. My dad viewed most

problems as challenges, obstacles on the way to greater good. But I knew the thin-pressed line of my mom's lips.

"Is this college stuff?"

My mom started stacking the nearest papers. "Yep. Boring parent to-do list. Forms due in October."

I examined her through squinted eyes. My mom was not a "yep" person. She said "yes"—maybe a "yeah" here or there if she was feeling tense.

Even if I hadn't overheard them, I'd have smelled the money stress like a trail of smoke. When you grow up with occasional income dips—a lag in freelance work, layoffs at the paper—you sense the tension long before you witness the fire. My parents' work had stabilized, as far as I could tell, in the past few years. My mom primarily wrote for and edited a parenting magazine, and my dad was at the city paper. But most of my life, their bickering had spiked highest around finances.

"So, honey," my mom said to me, all false cheer, "I was reading online today that there are some very good screenwriting master's programs. Lots of people go that route!"

"Right . . ." But I could also get my screen-writing degree in only four years of undergrad. Why would I tack on more time and debt?

"You *could* still get a more versatile English degree in-state, like you planned. And if you still want to pursue screen writing then, you can move on to grad school!"

If. I nodded slowly, not because I agreed but because I heard her loud and clear. I'd changed the plan on her last night, and

she didn't like it one bit. Fine—I'd rather know where she stood.

"Katie," my dad said, quiet.

"Well, she could!"

"Or," my dad said, "she could pursue it now, full on. You read what her professors said."

I flushed, taken aback. I'd shared copies of two glowing recommendations to prove I might have a future in this. I hadn't necessarily expected them to be referenced.

"No, I know," my mom said. "Just a thought!"

For the first time since I was little, I walked upstairs feeling entirely sure my parents would have a whisper-fight in my wake. *Because* of me.

"Hey," I said, nudging my sister's half-open door. Cameron's room was eternally messy, more clothes on her floor than in her closet. She looked up at me from behind her laptop. "You happen to overhear anything downstairs?"

"Not really." Cam believed wholeheartedly in my parents' togetherness because she didn't remember the pre-divorce years as well as I did. Sometimes it felt like the three-year age gap between us made for two different childhoods under the same roof. "They were just discussing your college stuff from different points of view."

So, bickering. "Was dance good?"

"Mm-hmm," she said, eyes already back on her baking show, and I shut the door behind me.

I stripped off my work uniform, the smell of stale popcorn clinging to every fiber, and I keeled onto my bed, straight as a

felled tree. Before this past spring, I would have called my grandmother for reassurance—waiting to hear her voice from a few miles away in her retirement community.

When I hauled myself up, it was only to read the sole finished piece in my writing portfolio. To remind myself why all this was worth it—why it had to be this way.

Why Screen Writing?

500-word maximum

My grandmother, for all her efficiency and no-nonsense worldview, loved watching television. Sometimes I think her recollection of *The Wizard of Oz* airing on TV in the 1950s was the first love story I ever heard. For most of my childhood, I hopscotched around my parents' disagreements and, eventually, between their houses when they split. Through it all, I loved TV; I loved Lucy. And I loved sitting beside my grandmother. She taught me about Madelyn Pugh, who had *GIRL WRITER* on the back of a director's chair on set. She was a girl and a writer. But she was also a writer of girls—Lucille Ball's character, specifically—and she had lived in Indianapolis, like me.

Shortly after I turned fifteen, the boy I'd been dating over the summer drowned in a freak accident. I spent days—weeks—in my room, curled around my laptop and desperate not to be alone in my mind. The television shows I watched in those days seeped in—fused with

who I am. Eventually, I began to wonder, *Why do I like this particular show so much? What makes it good? Why am I invested?* Those questions became Google searches and script reading and every podcast that has ever featured a writers' room.

My grandmother died last spring, right after I found out I'd gotten into NYU's summer screen-writing program. I had the nerve to go, in part, because I was reeling again. Grief-stricken and desperate for distraction. Hoping to honor her.

I found more than that. I found my TV-writing spark could be easily fanned to fire—by professors, by classmates, by critique. By the sketch comedy class I hated but grew from, by the late-night debates with my bright, weird, interesting classmates.

Screen writing is my path because it's my passion, the creative space I come home to. But it's also a love story. The first act: my childhood with TV as a reprieve from hurt. In the second act, I learned to harness my pain to create. The story needs a third act, and in it, I plan to become one of the people who makes TV—for little girls whose parents are splitting up, for teenagers shocked by heartache, for anyone who needs to live in another world for a while.

I've been a grateful inhabitant. I'm ready to be a builder.

Things would be so much easier if the essay were an exaggeration. But I really felt this way—clear-eyed and certain.

I switched over to my e-mail, hoping for something from Max in Sicily, his last excursion before heading across the Atlantic. We'd texted and video-chatted all summer, but when the other person was asleep and we couldn't wait, we e-mailed. I was glad for the documentation, snippets of who we were, how we were. Thirty-five hours, two minutes, and counting.

CHAPTER TWO

The next day, I hustled into Alcott's for my lunch break—a daily practice that had been Max's idea. Why eat my paper bag lunch in the dingy cinema break room when my favorite place in Oakhurst was one intersection away? This bookstore had been my small salvation more times than I could count, the cove I steered toward in any storm. Now I ate my sandwiches by a sunny window, book in hand. This week, *Americanah* on recommendation from Tessa's girlfriend, Laurel. I nursed a small iced coffee—cheapest thing on the menu—and nestled in.

My break was almost over when something swooped into my line of vision. Blinking, I set my book down.

A tiny paper airplane hit the wall and dropped back onto the table beside me.

Max. The word rushed through me like a whisper, a quiet magic that could only ever be his. But he couldn't be here. Not till tomorrow morning—I'd taken the day off work, even. I swiveled my head a full one-eighty, searching, but no.

My heart punched at my rib cage as I reached for the airplane, its sharp nose bent from impact. *OPEN*, it said across the flat wing. In his handwriting. On what appeared to be a folded-up boarding pass. My fingers trembled, nearly ripping the neat angles of paper.

In the dead center, two words: *Miss me?*

I rocketed up, combing both hands through my hair. Why—WHY—had I clipped my bangs back this morning instead of doing something with them? In less than zero of my daydreams about our reunion was I wearing my work shirt and stupid baggy-legged tuxedo pants.

"Max?" I stepped into the nearest aisle, searching, but only glossy-magazine-cover faces looked back at me.

"Are you serious?" I said, louder. Because I couldn't get out the full sentiment: *You're home early? You have the patience to wait even one more second?*

He stepped into view, grinning and different and exactly the same. His denim button-up shirt and Converse and Maxness. I squealed something unintelligible—"Oh my God!" or "You're here!" or "It's you!"—and flew at him like a freed bird. It was nearly a tackle, sending him off balance.

"Hey, girl," he said, laughing. I kept my arms around his neck, stunned by the realness of him, solid and graspable.

This time last year, I didn't even know Max Watson. He'd started as the dorky cousin of my actual crush, Ryan Chase. Max had transferred to Oakhurst from private school, sat beside me in English class, and, somewhere along the way, became a true, trusted friend. He slid into my life like some part of my heart had always been saving a seat for him—this

boy who matched wits like fencing, who read me like a favorite book.

Max eased his hold, freeing me to drop down, but I stayed pressed against him.

"Sorry," I said. "You have to live like this now."

It was some kind of ecstasy, to hear Max's laugh right next to my ear. To feel his chest rise and fall against mine. No *ha-ha* via text message, no laughter distorted through computer screens. Sometimes I imagined my feelings for him rivaled any commercial airplane. They could soar out of Indiana, over Ohio and Pennsylvania, cut through Connecticut. They'd propel themselves across the Atlantic and flamenco through Spain and then swim the final sea-length to Italy.

When my feet hit the ground, I took him in, trying to believe he wasn't a mirage. His darkest-brown hair, grown out and thick. His usually pale skin, as tan as I'd ever seen it—a souvenir from the Italian sun. New glasses I hadn't seen in person until now, frames that looked nice with the green of his eyes.

I could feel the goofiness of my smile, but Max's smile was just content—the feeling of waking up late on a Saturday morning.

"You're here," I said, only barely convinced. "How are you here?"

"One of our excursions in Sicily was canceled, so I caught an earlier flight. I got in at four a.m."

"You could have told me!" I said, stepping back to push his shoulder. "I would have tried to switch shifts!"

I didn't add "I would have looked cute," even though

I thought it. On some level, he was still my friend Max, and I didn't want to admit how much I cared what he thought of me. How he thought of me.

"And miss seeing the tuxedo in person?" His eyes flicked up and down the work uniform he'd been joking about since I got the job. "I don't think so."

"Oh my God." I attempted to cover the awful pants with both arms.

"I didn't think I'd actually make my connection at JFK. Figured I'd rather surprise you if I did." He linked our hands together. So many times last year, I'd imagined reaching for his hand, and now it was simple—an invisible barrier dropped.

"How am I supposed to go back to work?" I demanded. "My break's almost over. I can't stay there knowing you're a few miles away!"

"Well, good. But I need a nap, and I want to catch up with my mom. But tonight, do you want to—"

"Yes."

He glanced down at his sneakers, smile tucked into his mouth.

"Oh," I said. "Wait. Laurel's bon voyage party is tonight."

Tessa had plans to send her girlfriend off to college in style, with favorite snacks and a nautical theme.

"Oh, right." Max's mind was working quickly, his eyes ticking around before they landed on mine. "How about a quick dinner, then we can head over there? I'll have to modify my excellent first-date plans, but . . . needs must."

I would have eaten dinner curbside in the smoldering

cinema parking lot, wearing my tuxedo, if he was the one sitting beside me. "Sounds great."

"Oh, and I'm, uh, not going to mention to anyone else that I'm home," he said, watching for a light of understanding in my eyes. No influx of text messages from our friends, no demands to see him right away. One dinner, just us.

I mimed zipping my lips.

"Good. I'll text you later?"

"You'll *see* me later," I said, and he squeezed both my hands.

I reentered the theater in a haze, a cartoon with hearts circling my head. Donna was standing with Hunter, glancing between her watch and me. "Cutting it a little close, aren't we?"

I did not care for Donna, overall.

"I'm here," I said, fingertips quick on the clock-in screen.

She turned toward her office, perhaps to note that I'd been flippant about my near lateness. It didn't matter. Even the hideous theater carpet—drab maroon with flecks of teal—suddenly looked celebratory, like confetti on a velvet backdrop. I turned back to Hunter, close to bursting. "Max got home early!"

"Yeah, he stopped by, looking for you. Told him you were at Alcott's." Hunter crossed his arms, appraising me. "Wow. I knew The Boyfriend was a big deal, but you are *beside* yourself."

"I am, yes."

"Go 'head," he said. "Do the little dance that you're clearly bottling up. Let's get it over with."

I did a little skip-around thing, with a twirl, then some hip movements.

"Wow," Hunter said, leaning his cheek against his hand. "Cute."

"Yeah, pretty good, right? I think it's only missing . . ." I turned to him, continuing the whole routine with my tongue stuck out at him.

"You could take this on the road! Stage show. The big time."

Lane walked past us, halfway out of her jacket for break. "Do I want to know?"

"It's a good day, Lane!" I said.

After work, I raced home for the quickest shower of my life, where I frantically scrubbed the smell of butter and salt from my skin. I tousled my hair as I blow-dried it, hoping to override Max's memory of my clipped-back greasiness. Scrutinizing the finished product in the mirror, I tried to believe I was a cute and together person, capable of minimal awkwardness in a date scenario.

Downstairs, my sister hunched over her latest batch of sugar cookies, a hobby she'd picked up around the time my mom started taking in stray furniture. I'd learned by now not to interrupt her while she was piping—a process that required a stern, almost glaring concentration.

When she stood back up, surveying her work, I cleared my throat and gestured to my outfit. "Yeah?"

Cameron looked over the rims of her trendy glasses, inscrutable. I'd chosen a striped T-shirt dress, a SoHo clearance-bin find. "Let me see the shoes."

I lifted one foot. She had no particular love for my Keds, but they were me and, in my opinion, immune to criticism.

"Good," she said simply.

I pointed at the cookies, glossy red apples in neat little rows. The pencil shapes were cooling, waiting for goldenrod icing—an homage to our school colors. "Back-to-school bake sale?"

"Mm-hmm. Practice run." She tapped one finger against her lip. While baking, she kept her hair piled like a haystack on top of her head, apron knotted at her waist. We'd always looked alike, but lately I saw more flashes of my mom's features on Cameron's face than on my own. "I added lemon zest to the base recipe this time, so we'll see. Max on his way?"

"Uh-huh."

"Are you, like . . . nervous?" Cameron peered at me. I hadn't realized I was rapping my fingers on the island until she nodded toward the sound.

"No." I pulled my hand back.

She gave me a look as if anxious behaviors were a new development for me. "Why? It's just you and Max."

Before I could reply, my mom came in from the backyard, blotting her face with a bandanna. "You look nice, sweetie!"

"Thanks." Why did I care so much? This boy had seen me in ratty, study-marathon clothes, on the school mornings when I'd hit snooze too many times.

"She's flipping out," Cameron said, twisting the icing bag for better control.

I glared at her. "No, I'm just rushed. We don't have a lot of time before we need to be at Tessa's."

Cameron gave my mom a knowing look. "Translation: Max and I don't have time to talk to you two."

"That's not—" I began, but what was the point? She wasn't wrong. I feared they would pull Max in, ask him about Italy, and fawn like this was senior prom instead of a casual first date.

"Oh, honey," my mom said. "We won't keep you! And we won't embarrass you."

"I know," I lied. At any point, Cameron could tell Max how long I'd taken to do my hair. She didn't need that kind of power.

My mom picked up a mixing bowl Cameron had left by the sink. "You do realize . . . we have met Max before? He's been in this home? Repeatedly?"

I did know. Still, I bolted up when Max knocked. I strode down the hallway, affecting the posture of a more confident girl. I had hated my required improv class at NYU, truly, but at least it had some real-life applicability.

I opened the door expecting the Max from earlier today, with tired eyes and thick hair rumpled. Instead, he looked bright-eyed, his hair neater on the sides.

"When did you get a haircut?" I asked.

"My mom cleaned it up," he said, sighing. "She said I wasn't presentable."

"It looks good!"

"Yeah?" His hand went to the back of his neck. "She was overenthusiastic, in my opinion."

"Well, I like it."

"Good." He'd stood in this same place at least a dozen

times before. Coming over to study. Picking me up for Quiz-Bowl practice. After my grandmother's funeral, wearing dress pants and a worried frown. And one windy afternoon last April, before the first time we'd ever really fought.

I motioned him in, but before we even made it to the kitchen, my mom and sister popped into view like two nosy little birds on a windowsill. *Please, God. Make them not be like this.*

"Hey, sweetie! Oh, look at you." My mom gave Max a quick hug. "Tell us about Italy. Was it a dream?"

"Absolutely. Like walking around in a movie." Max gestured at the countertop, full of Cameron's icing handiwork. "Gotta say, they're even better in person."

"Why, thank you." Cameron dipped her head, a little bow. So often, my snippy back-and-forth with my sister seemed inevitable. I assumed she bickered with everyone in her life. But I had noticed, all summer, Cameron commenting on Max's photos on social media: *OMG* and *so jealous!!!* and *bring some of that gelato back to Indiana*. The most I'd ever gotten from her, on one photo of me that Tessa had taken, was *cute.* Max, in turn, liked every one of her baking posts.

"I know you two have to get going," my mom said. "But come over for dinner soon, okay? You're welcome anytime."

"I'll be here," Max said. Then, to me, "You ready?"

He smiled over at me as we settled into his car, and I shoved away the guilt, the weight of my film school plans hidden in my back pocket. He'd asked once, when I first got home from the city, if I would apply to NYU. And I wasn't lying when

I said no. It was too expensive, too far, too improbable a career. *You're playing small!* Maeve had huffed on one of our last nights in the city.

"So," I said, straining. "Where are we off to, maestro?"

Why did I just call him that? I mean, he was orchestrating the date, sure. *But honestly, self, at least* try *to act normal.*

"Well, the original plan was Arpeggio's," Max said, "Then the drive-in, to see *Ghostbusters*. Only movie I could find that's set in New York. But you've seen it before anyway, right?"

Arpeggio's for Italy, *Ghostbusters* for Manhattan. Both our summers in one night—who thinks of that? I looked over at Max, at his profile while he watched the road. He glanced over, a lopsided smile—puzzled about why I hadn't responded to his simple question. *Because sometimes, Max, you are literally a bit breathtaking.*

"It's one of my dad's favorites," I managed. "He got *emotional* about the reboot, obviously."

"Really?"

"Oh yeah. Sitting with his two daughters, watching women bust ghosts? Dan Hancock Kryptonite. As soon as the theme song played, he was a goner."

"I guess that doesn't surprise me. His column's pretty sentimental sometimes." My dad was one of the few old-school newspaper writers hanging on to his weekly column. It made him what he called a "Z-list" local celebrity. Since his headshot was featured, he was occasionally stopped at brunch by readers with a kind word. Or a less than kind word, especially as his columns had become more blatantly political.

"Yeah, he's such a kidder usually, but when it comes to me and Cam . . ." I raised my eyebrows. "He'll openly cry at graduation."

Max considered this. "Come to think of it, I bet my mom will, too. She's normally good at compartmentalizing. But ceremony really gets her."

He pulled into the parking lot near the Little League fields and Riddle Park, the spot where a couple of food trucks often congregated, including Oakhurst favorite Pagano's Italian To-Go.

"Perfect," I decided, though Max looked a bit reluctant.

"Some first date, eh?" he joked. "Cheap food from an idling vehicle. You're welcome."

"Hey, food trucks serve some of the best cooking in the world—Tessa's always saying that. And I love cheap. I *prefer* cheap."

He grinned, quick and sly—a sight I'd missed terribly all summer. "I'm, uh, not sure how to take that, as the person you've chosen as your boyfriend."

We ate Italian subs messily at a picnic bench, napkins like drop cloths in front of us. Sharp red wine vinaigrette and salty salami. We split a sparkling water, and my heart fluttered each time I put my lips to the bottle where his had been.

"So," I said, during a brief lull. It was a weird spot, being old friends in a new context. What did most people reuniting in August discuss? "How was your summer?"

Max laughed, immediately in on the joke. "Um, not bad! Saw a bit of the world, learned a lot."

"Sounds lovely."

"Mm-hmm." He reached for the bottle. "It was. But I started going out with my dream girl, and I didn't get to see her at all."

I blanched, losing control of this comedy bit. Heat filled my cheeks, and I struggled to connect with my brain's language center. "Dream girl"—it should have been cheesy, but he said it with a lilt. Not a joke, exactly, but not serious.

"Well, hope you two can pick back up," I managed.

He nodded solemnly. "I'm working on it. Plying her with cheap food."

"Do you miss Italy yet?"

"I miss Liam and everyone," he said. Max's summer *coinquilino*—roommate—was a Welsh rugby player, burly and soft-spoken and excellent at Latin. They'd gone from trepidation to good mates in mere days. "And I really miss the antiquity."

He said it so earnestly, like he *yearned* for columned cathedrals and palazzi, for bricks cracked with age. I didn't say a word, but I also couldn't suppress my *oh, Max* face—a closed-mouth smile that betrayed my adoration for this total nerd. He must have noticed because he added, "I'm serious! Most of Oakhurst was built in the past fifty, seventy-five years. Rome was founded in 753 BC. *Before Christ!*"

"I *know* you're serious." And now I definitely couldn't quash the smile.

He laughed, too, fidgeting with his watch. I hadn't even realized how much I missed the full effect of him, the

physicality. His laced fingers, his habit of jamming rolled shirtsleeves farther up his forearms. The way he leaned back in a chair when he knew he was right, arms crossed like an arrogant young professor.

"What about you?" Max asked. "You miss New York?"

There it was, the perfect segue to college plans, but I couldn't fathom launching into why I'd changed my mind about film school. It would ruin our dynamic before we'd even reestablished it. "I do. The energy of it, the food, the art."

My first week in Manhattan had been hard—so hard. The search for subway entrances, the beautiful but disorienting Village streets, the unmoving summer heat that made the city feel like a sewer grate. In my first workshop, my classmates—*especially* some know-it-all named Maeve Zaher—eviscerated my spec script, and I barely made it to the bathroom before crying. I missed my friends and Max like physical pain. At night, struggling to fall asleep, I chocked the week up to an expensive lesson: screen writing and big cities weren't for me.

But I couldn't go home—not when it cost so much money, not when my grandmother had been so proud. So I did a gut job on my script, editing it as mercilessly as it had been criticized. Because why not? It didn't matter. To my surprise, the instructor heralded my revision as the strongest in the room and, to my greater surprise, Maeve Zaher strode up to me after class and asked if I wanted to work together over coffee—the first of many. I met people I liked, friends who wanted to debate the merits of classic sitcoms, of laugh tracks, of voice-overs. And then, New York buzzed electric—late nights

spilling into the streets, shared appetizers at the cheapest diners we could find. Working on scenes, trying to get lottery Broadway tickets. Walking the same streets as so many renowned writers. It felt like being part of something, this long history mapped out behind us. Waiting for us to add to the story.

"Janie . . . ?" Max said, calling me back to earth.

I laughed at myself. "Sorry! Yes. Hi."

His eyes narrowed, the briefest study of me. Wondering where I'd gone. *This week*, I promised myself. I'd tell him.

"So, does Ryan know you're home?" I asked.

"Yeah. He stopped over to say hey, but promised he wouldn't tell anyone. So I'd say there's a fifty-fifty chance that everyone already knows."

Maybe some people inch closer, but for the next hour, Max and I millimetered closer—true last year, emotionally, and true physically now. I adjusted my position, getting comfortable, but wound up grazing his leg with mine. He leaned in at one point, but he was reaching for a napkin.

Last time I kissed Max—the first and only time I'd ever kissed him—I flew on pure moxie, unstoppable. Now I'd had three months to sit with reality: I'd only ever really kissed one other boy, and that was two years ago. Could you forget how? Had I ever really known?

We stayed until Tessa texted, wondering if I was on my way. As Max and I gathered up our trash, my nerves sang with the particular anticipation of a pending surprise. "They're going to flip out when they see you."

And when they saw us, together. I bit a groove into my lower lip as Max drove and wished for a week of alone time with him, figuring out togetherness in the same zip code. Our friends had rooted for us all last year, and I loved them for it. But I dreaded the attention, the expectation—their eyes like spotlights on a relationship I didn't want to perform. Max parked on Tessa's street, the driveway already full of cars, and I wiped my palms on my dress.

"They're out back," I told him.

The McMahon house was the kind of fancy that included landscape lights on a stone path, which we followed toward the pool. Our friends' laughter floated above the tall wooden fence—Kayleigh telling a work story to guffaws and *Whats?!* Outside the gate, Max turned to me. "Ready?"

It was rhetorical, I knew. Was I ready to make our entrance as Max and Paige, Couple? I hadn't even kissed him yet, and this would be our last minute alone for the next few hours. He was watching my face closely enough to see my hesitation.

Of all the places I'd imagined kissing Max Watson again, "a dimly lit side-yard with our friends nearby" was not in the Top 100. I'd envisioned that cinematic passion, frantic mouths—the way we'd kissed the first time.

But instead, I looked up at a boy who was being so careful, reading me slowly. His hand on my cheek—the whir of my heart, almost pained by anticipation. He leaned down most of the way and paused. Giving me a beat—letting me choose, and I did.

I'd been worried about remembering how to do this. But

that wasn't relevant, as it turned out. I'd never kissed anyone like this, like Max right now—familiar but entirely surprising. I gripped his shirt to steady myself, relaxing once he got an arm around me.

When we pulled away, dazed, I bit both my lips, shy after such intensity. Sure, we'd flirted from afar all summer. But I had almost a year of friendship muscle memory, and being so obviously into Max felt a bit embarrassing, a side of me he didn't know.

"Okay," I said, smiling. "Ready."

Max blinked at me, then nodded back up to the car. "Well, now I think we should definitely ditch these guys."

I laughed and opened the gate.

Our friends were bunched around the patio table, hands reaching into snack bowls. Laurel with a white captain's hat over her waist-length box braids and Tessa on her lap, wearing yellow water wings. Morgan lounged in a purple halter suit and green capris, an homage to fellow lily-pale redhead Ariel. Kayleigh was luminous in a long seafoam-green wig. Malcolm and Josiah were pirates in tricorn hats, and Ryan made a shorter, broader Gilligan in a red polo. A few of Laurel's friends who hadn't left for college yet sat together, in everything from foam lobster pincers to some kind of anime costume.

"I'm guessing we missed a theme here," Max whispered.

Before I could apologize for blanking on that part, Morgan spotted us. "Hey, there you are! . . . Oh my God! Wait! What?"

"I brought a plus-one," I said. "Hope that's okay."

Every head snapped in our direction, where Max stood

with a hand in his pocket, casual as could be. Our friends became a flurry of arms and shrieks. Tessa got there first, nearly plowing Max over.

Considering that she was my best friend and he was my boyfriend, Tessa and Max's friendship didn't really have much to do with me. They had taken to each other right away during a shared lunch period, bonding over snobby music tastes and dry humor. While I spent my June scampering between purple-flagged buildings in New York, Max and Tessa carried on, at record shops and lunches they sent selfies of. I liked the idea of them together at home, even when I felt vaguely sick with missing them.

"Interesting," I said as Tessa pulled away from him. She had her blond curls in a low ponytail, a style she'd taken up this summer. "I recall no such greeting when I got home from New York."

"Well, that wasn't a surprise!" Tessa huffed. Morgan squeezed him with a side hug.

"Pasta did you good, Max-O," Kayleigh said, sizing him up. She'd highlighted her cheeks with a mermaid palette, reflecting like a prism on her golden brown skin.

Max pretended to doff his cap, but I could feel him go squirmy. Even with all that confidence, he sometimes faltered under the attention of my adoring friends.

"Excuse me," Laurel said, hands on her hips. The pose showcased the temporary tattoos Tessa had ordered: glittery boats on Laurel's dark brown arms, sailing toward an anchor and a pinup mermaid. "It's my party and I'm last in line?"

Max gave her a good solid hug. "Came home early to see you off."

"Yeah," she said, laughing. "Just me, I bet."

Max greeted Laurel's friends and Malcolm, a friend of his since elementary school. I knew Malcolm through QuizBowl, and was pleased that he'd started hanging out with our friends this summer, bringing his boyfriend, Josiah, into the mix, too.

Laurel's gaze slid from Max down to me, then back. "This is wild. Like that very satisfying moment in Concentration."

We must have looked confused, because she laughed. "You know, the card game? Trying to remember where all the cards are so you can match them? I finally got the pair together!"

"But no costumes?" Ryan chided. "Boo."

He swung an arm around Max's neck anyway, drawing him into the fray. After everyone was settled in back around the table, Tessa stood up. She cleared her throat and raised her glass—a girl Gatsby, presiding over the festivities.

"To Laurel King and her reign at Northwestern, which begins tomorrow. You will . . ." She paused, searching Laurel's face for the right word. "Dazzle them."

The apples of Laurel's cheeks went rounder because, well, Tessa was proclaiming this from firsthand experience. I'd never seen Tessa so grandiose, baring her heart. When she looked around, she seemed briefly surprised that the rest of us were still there. "To Laurel!"

I was close enough to hear Laurel whisper, "Thanks, baby," and I flushed at the grown-upness of it. Max had called me Janie almost as long as he'd known me, a reference to the shyer,

eldest Bennet sister. I could never imagine him calling me "baby"—it was . . . sexy, or something, in a way I couldn't imagine Max seeing me.

Shortly after, Ryan cannonballed into the water, and Tessa, never to be outsplashed in her own pool, followed behind. Everyone else eased in, but Max and I sat near the shallow end, our bare feet pale in the water. Last year, he'd nudged me back toward swimming, an attempt to help with what had become a full-blown drowning phobia after Aaron's death, and it didn't go well. I'd needed to jump back in on my own. But when I did, I wore Max's belief in me like wings.

He leaned back, one arm stretched behind me, and I moved close, my right leg warm against his left.

"Hey." His eyelids looked heavy, jet lag catching up with him.

"Hi." I nodded to the other side of the pool. "Happy to be back with this bunch?"

"Happy." The way he looked at me when he said it—with a sigh and the slightest smile. Being together was like sharing a docking station, finally able to rest and refuel. "But feeling a little underdressed. I mean, Kayleigh ordered a *wig* for this?"

"Oh no. She's had that for years. Sixth-grade Halloween, I think?" Kayleigh had collected illustrations of Black mermaids since childhood—something her mom started and her aunts continued. They swam in their framed kingdom above her desk, near Kayleigh's rainbow of volleyball ribbons and a Polish-style paper chandelier her *babcia* made. "Mermaids are a thing with her."

Max smiled, unsurprised to hear it. “My life had so much less whimsy before I met you all.”

“You were missing out.”

He looked over and said, seriously, “I really, really was.”

How to explain why I kissed Max Watson, for the third time ever, in full view of our closest friends? I don’t know. I couldn’t not.

Brake, I warned myself. *Slow it down*. Hadn’t I seen how love could pulverize someone? Didn’t I still have to tell him what next year might have in store? Instead, I rested my hand on his chest, electricity conducting up my arm.

My heart blew through the red like a girl in a convertible, already gone.