AS FAR AS YOU'LL TAKE ME

Also by Phil Stamper

The Gravity of Us

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To my family.
The one I was born into,
and the one I found along the way.

ONE

AS IT TURNS OUT, I'm pretty good at lying.

On paper, there's nothing about me that says I'd be a great liar. I follow whatever obscure rules have been set by fake authority figures—*No running near the pool! Turn off your phone in the theater!* I won't even jaywalk. I was shoved into Christian youth groups for most of my upbringing, and, well, the Bible is pretty clear on what happens to liars.

But maybe that's why I'm so good at it. I'm incognito. Why *would* Marty possibly lie? The answer, of course, is simple:

I'm gay, and I'm suffocating.

I came to a realization about the former a long time ago, but the suffocating? That crept slowly into my chest, shortening my breaths until I realized I wasn't breathing at all.

"You're being melodramatic." Keeping one hand on the steering wheel, Megan flips her long hair out the car window so strands sway and tangle in the wind.

She has a habit of doing that. The hair flip *and* the dismissal. Like my worries don't matter. Like my *looming international trip* is nothing.

"My flight leaves in five hours. I don't have a return ticket. My parents don't *know* I don't have a return ticket." I grip the oh-shit handle harder. "I'm freaked."

"I can tell. You're panting louder than when we did that hot yoga class."

"God, don't remind me."

"You've got to believe me when I say this. You know how I hate giving compliments, but this is just fact. You are the most competent seventeen-year-old on the planet."

Her voice puts me at ease. It's a suspended chord—unsettling at first, both soft and harsh, followed by a clear resolution that feels like home. I lift my double chocolate Oreo milkshake out of the cup holder and wipe the French fry crumbs off the bottom of the cup, these now-ancient reminders of all the fast-food adventures we've gone through in this car. Megan in the driver's seat. Me, the passenger.

Always the passenger.

"I don't know how I could have prepared so much, yet still feel so unprepared," I say. "It defies logic."

I know it's partly because of Megan. We've got this yin-yang thing going on. She's so chill it's like she's constantly high on pot, and I'm about as high-strung as Hilary Hahn. (Because she's a violinist. And violins are high-pitched and have strings. High-strung? Okay, never mind.)

"You graduated early," she says. "You saved money working

at that shit diner all year. You performed in about every ensemble in the tristate area to beef up your resume. You figured out your dual citizenship and visa process in the middle of Brexit." She lowers her voice to a whisper, the wind in the car taking away the words as soon as they leave her mouth. "You've been trying to escape Avery for years. You're more than prepared for it, Marty."

Her words sting and soothe at the same time. Is she bitter that I'm abandoning her? My best of two friends—no offense to Skye. But a lot of history is there. It took me ten years to meet her, five years to stop hating her, and two years of hanging out near constantly to get where we're at now.

"I'm not escaping." Of course I'm not escaping.

"Finish your milkshake," she says. I do. "We've got two more ice cream stops before I roll you into the airport."

My gaze drifts out my window at the glory that is I-75 just before rush hour. The evidence of downtown Cincinnati evaporates from the exit signs, and we're left with the suburbs—Arlington Heights, Lockland, Evendale.

"Maybe we should abandon the milkshake plan. 275 will take us right there, and I'll have extra time."

She sighs. I knew she'd sigh. "And what, exactly, would you do with this extra time?"

"Read?"

"If by 'read' you mean get to the gate and stare at the screen, freaking about delays that aren't going to happen, then—"

Now *I* sigh. It's like a steam engine in here. "I get it. Carry on. What's next?"

"Young's Jersey Dairy. We can feed the goats there. This is going to be an *experience*."

I appreciate Megan's need to make even the most mundane drives to the airport into an adventure, but I can't let it go this time. In just a few hours I'll be up in the air. Away from Avery, Kentucky. Away from the shitheads at my school and the shittier shitheads who ate at the diner where I waited tables.

Away from my parents.

"Maybe I feel bad for lying to them," I say.

"The Bible-thumpers?"

"Yes, that's their official name." I roll my eyes. "Though I call them Mom and Dad."

Megan hasn't said two words to my parents since everything went down last year in London. Not like she was even there, but she got the full story. And, well, she is not one for nuance.

"You know how I feel about *them*." Her voice softens and I soak it up. "But I get that this is hard for you, Mart. Really I do. When do you think you'll tell them you're not coming back?"

The planner in me wins out this time, and a confidence rises along with my chest. "The summer program lasts three months, which means I have plenty of time to get a paying gig. Maybe that's what I'll do. Once one of these auditions works out, I can announce it. They'll be so happy their son got a spot in the London Philharmonic, they won't be mad that I'm—"

Megan butts in. "—never seeing them again?"

"Okay, *now* who's being melodramatic?"

Three months. That's plenty of time—and it's not like I'm super picky. It doesn't have to be the London Phil. It could be

the Royal Opera House, or a regional theatre like the open-air one in Regent's Park, or . . . well, we'll see.

"It would have been a lot less complicated if I actually got into that summer program." I'm kind of rambling, but what else do you do when you're nervous? Make sense? Not a chance. "But I think it's a good thing. Because otherwise, I'd be wasting so much time in class and not out there booking gigs."

The program is at the Knightsbridge Academy of Music. According to what I told my parents, I auditioned last year and got accepted. I even have a letter to prove it.

But that's not the truth. Unbeknownst to my parents, I flopped at the audition after the whole London Pride meltdown. Hell, technically, that program started a couple of weeks ago. Thank god no one researches everything to the extent I do.

After everything happened last year, it didn't take me long to realize how much I actually *needed* this London thing to work out. How much I needed to get away from them. Get out of that tiny place. And all it would take was a forged letter, some time to ease my mom into the idea of going back to *that sinful place*, plus a little help from my cousin Shane.

Long story short, I was able to convince them to let me go this year. Fully on my own dime. I'm going to London, but I'm not attending the academy. I've got my own plan, and I'm not coming back.

Megan's right. I was trying to escape.

And I freaking did it.

* * *

Well, it was almost a clean escape.

Megan just drove off, her hair flying out the window (and she calls me melodramatic?), and I'm standing here just inside the Columbus airport, trying to mentally prepare myself for everything to come:

- Being lost in this behemoth of a building.
  - Maneuvering around this building while also being lost.
- Going through security.
  - Waiting in lines.
  - Emptying my pockets.
  - Taking out my toiletries and laptop.
  - Triple-checking that I've followed every rule.
  - Inevitably ending up leaving a full water bottle in my bag somewhere.
- Finding my gate and flying off to *an entirely new life in a new country*.

What I did *not* account for is that standing between me and security right now are my mom, my dad, and my grandma. For a moment, I'm stricken with the kind of fear that grips your lungs and sends shocks through your whole body, because the downside to lying is that at some point you'll probably get found out. And I was really hoping to not get found out until sometime after I touched down on UK soil. (Preferably not until I turn eighteen in a few months and there's even less they can do about it.)

But then I see Mom's holding one of those shiny metallic balloons, helium shortage be damned, in the shape of a rectangle with the Union Jack on it.

"Mom?" I ask. She's scurrying toward me with an emotion that's half panic, half grief, and hands me the balloon before wrapping her arms around me. I drape an arm around her in response, still kind of dumbstruck.

"Nana wanted to say goodbye," Dad explains, "and we thought with all your planned milkshake detours we could beat you here."

Grandma insists on being called Nana, but she's never really struck me as the nana type. She's so fit she moves faster than I do half the time, which is not bad for someone who just turned seventy a few weeks ago.

Mom takes my rolling suitcase from me as I greet them. Mom's family is spread throughout Europe, but Dad's side never left Avery. Long as the census goes back, really.

The four of us exchange oddly formal pleasantries, like they didn't drive an hour and a half just to pop up and say one last goodbye, and I feel way too many emotions churning in my stomach along with the ice cream. It doesn't feel great.

"We really should let you go," Mom says, after a lull in the conversation. "Looks like everything's still on time. We'll follow your flight on that tracker. Once you get your SIM card set back up, just send us a text so we know you're okay."

"Three months," Dad says. "That's not so long."

I'm lying to you.

"I made sure Pastor Todd added you to the prayer chain at church," Mom says.

Even if I get a good gig, after finding a place to live and rehearsals and performances, there's no way I'll be able to come back.

"Not long at all," my grandma says. "Take lots of pictures for your nana, and send me a postcard if you have a chance."

I force a smile and walk toward airport security. I'm making my big escape, and everyone I love is watching me do it, completely unaware. My parents were shitty to me before, I know that, but is this any better?

What am I doing? What have I done?

They'll never forgive me for this.

TWO

THE EAGLE HAS LANDED.

I've just gotten off the plane, and I feel like I've been walking for a half mile just to get to customs. My eyelids are heavy. Sticky, almost. It may feel like a dream world, but nothing's too different yet.

I take a step into the customs area, and I let all the other passengers rush around me and split into two lines. On the left, Europeans. On the right, Americans. Well, that's what it looks like, at least. I roll my shoulders. Stretch my arms.

Good morning, Heathrow Airport.

I reach into my shoulder bag to grab my passport, but stop when I see a pale green envelope. *Marty Pierce* is written on the front, in too-perfect cursive to be Megan's handwriting. She and Skye gave it to me at my posh bon voyage party—or what Megan and I dubbed the *My Mom Still Uses Pinterest* party—and forbade me to open it until I landed in London.

Don't get me wrong; the party was definitely *cute*. The invites were red, white, and blue. Not our stars, but their stripes. Dozens of our church friends were there along with extended family I hadn't seen since Easter. Mom set up a fancy tea station that I didn't touch because tea is disgusting, but I *did* eat the pastries and biscuits. By "biscuits," I mean cookies. And though every detail was polished and fit perfectly with whatever aesthetic she'd found online, my mom bought one tacky thing, just because she knew I'd love it.

A large cake. Big Ben in the night sky, with four children flying around the side. Three in pajamas, and one in bright green tights. Admittedly, I had a weird obsession with Peter Pan as a kid. Like, I dressed up as him for every Halloween I can remember. We're not too different, he and I. I'm half a year from being an *adult*, but as I'm obviously gay and completely unable to grow a beard, I still identify with Mr. Pan.

Being a gay kid with sometimes shitty parents isn't easy. Their red voting record contradicts every "I love you" that comes out of their mouths. The money they spend at Chick-Fil-A used to go right to the organizations that want to make sure I never marry. To make sure I can never be truly happy. On the flip side, it felt like the cake was a peace offering, a subtle nod that "I know who you are."

This thought causes more thoughts about lying and how long it'll be until I see my parents, which . . . brings out all the tension in my body, then the guilt for feeling sorry for people who don't deserve it.

But I can't think about that. I won't. I'm always reading into the little things, but the big things never change.

Love is complicated.

I take in my surroundings. White walls, red rope to keep us lined up properly. (Properly! Sounding like a Brit already.) I'm technically in England, so I'm allowed to tear into Megan and Skye's letter. I pull out the card and examine the front. It's the kind of design you look at and know it costs more than a Hallmark card. The typeface you see boasting about artisanal foods in your local overpriced organic market. Kombucha. Kimchi. It's Skye's style if I've ever seen it—he's careful and neat, while Megan's not above doodling over a used index card and handing it to you unceremoniously.

I open the card.

Marty,

As your best friends from the small, lowly state of Kentucky, we want to wish you, Mr. Britain, the best of luck in London.

However, this serves as a binding legal contract. You, the undersigned (we've forged your name, so don't worry about signing), commit to one (1) hour of FaceTime, every Friday night. We'll still need an excuse to miss all of those Avery High bonfires.

You're going to do great. And we're going to miss you, Mart.

Love,
M&S

P.S. It's Skye—Now that you're too far away to kill her, I need to confess. Megan told me. And I think you're awesome, dude.

Crap. Of course she told him.

My tidy, five-person out list has just become six. Mom, Dad, Shane, Aunt Leah, Megan, and now Skye? He's a friend, a good one, but how did that give Megan the right to out me like that?

I clench my hands, and the edge of the overly designed card crinkles within my fist.

A presence behind me clears her throat. She's dressed sharply in a uniform that notes her status as a customs officer. "Keep moving along."

"Right, sorry." I jam the card back into my bag and start riffling around for my passport. Instinctively, the officer ushers me toward the US passport holder line. The *queue*, that is, because every word apparently needs a different word in London.

I stop again, and the lady's stare ventures dangerously close to glare territory.

That's just *not* how you welcome someone to your country.

Finally, I spot the red passport and flash it at her. The passport that took ages to get, and is the only reason I'm even on this journey. I pray a silent thanks for my mom being born in Ireland. Her birthright citizenship meant I had this chance to come here. For school, for work, for anything.

I separate from the officer and join the (much shorter) queue to the electronic passport check. Where the other Americans

with me on the flight get inundated with queuing, questions, and stamps, I simply walk through with a blank look at a camera and a scan of my passport.

As soon as I leave the area, I look up and see an ad showcasing a wildly British—albeit gaudy—vision. A pub dinner, a pint of beer, and the Union Jack in the background. "Welcome to London."

The words swirl around in my head. Welcome. To. London. Every step is a new revelation, a new reminder of this mess I've gotten myself into. Okay, maybe not a *mess*, but it's causing me some anxiety.

Some questions:

- What if I don't like living here? I have no backup plan.
- What if the charming accents lose their charm?
- How long is it going to take for my luggage to come out on that carousel?
- What if it doesn't? They've definitely lost it.

Cue the panting. Again.

Almost instantaneously, my fears about luggage negligence turn out to be for nothing. I grab my suitcase, which was maybe the fourth one to hit the carousel, and I'm on my way.

As I'm shuffled through the airport, I get bombarded by airport shopping. We go from point A to point B in a snake pattern through the shops, carefully placed so you're forced to see as much merchandise as possible. Toblerones out the ass. Do I look like I need a perfume sample? And why would I want

a sample shot of honey bourbon at ten thirty in the morning? I can see the exit, but I can't get to it, and I don't need to make a list because that alone will make me lose my shit if people don't stop rushing by.

Imagine being in a corn maze back in the States. It's like that, but you're sneezing because of perfume, not hay. It's wild. But as I walk through the green passageway, declaring that I have nothing to declare to customs, my confused fury melts into confused . . .

Feelings. There are definitely feelings here.

Some guy's holding a sign that reads *Pierce*. My last name. There's a smiley face after it. It takes me a second to process this information because I'm a little too busy looking at his face, but by the time I do, he's running around the rope and stanchion (which I don't think you're allowed to do) and coming toward me.

"Marty!"

"You're not my cousin," I say. I've got to assume he knows this, but forming words is hard for . . . well, a few reasons right now. But he greets me with such instant familiarity that I ask, "Have we met?"

Which is the most ridiculous thing to say to this perfect creature. I'd have remembered us meeting. Trust me.

"Ha, no. We haven't met, and you're right—I'm not your cousin Shane. But I'm a friend of his!"

He's got a great face, a perfect-yet-too-flawed-to-be-on-the-cover-of-*GQ* face with a faded scar above his right eye, patchy stubble, and one dimple that just won't quit. Under the

fluorescent lights, I see the slightest bit of pink brushing his otherwise light tan cheeks.

It's like he just looks at me and I know I'm having my sexual awakening. (Not really; that crown goes to Ryan Reynolds in *The Proposal*. I had an early start.) But I can actually see his pecs through his sweater, and that's a lot? I pull down my T-shirt. It's a little short, and I've got zero abs there. I consider grabbing my hoodie to further cover up my flabby stomach, but it's a little warm in here. And . . . I'm staring and not saying anything. Shit.

"Sorry. Um, zoning out. I didn't get an ounce of sleep on that red-eye."

I actually slept okay, but the spontaneous lie that leaves my mouth sounds better than "*A combination of jetlag and infatuation has made me fall madly, immediately in love with you, random dude, because you smiled at me once. Yes, we can all see the red flags from here.*"

I don't even know his name.

"I'm Marty. Who are . . . and, um, sorry, why are you here?" I stretch out my hand to meet his. Mine's sweaty, which shouldn't be a surprise at this point, and his is dry and smooth.

"Right, a real introduction. Hi, Marty Pierce," he says by way of introduction, then points at the sign he's holding. "I'm Pierce, oddly enough. And a certain world-renowned stage production phoned Shane this morning about an audition. So he sent me instead."

Silence creeps between us as I process what he said. My cousin finally got an audition? A *real* audition? A pang of

jealousy hits me, and I curse myself for it. Shane's been balancing a near-full-time job at a local bookshop with applications and rehearsals since he graduated in May.

But it's what we decided to do together. We even joked about ending up in the same orchestra. The unease of doing this alone hits me, which fits in well with the unease I have about being so selfish about this.

"*Les Mis*," he continues. "If that wasn't clear."

I nod, remembering the extensive application process it took to get him there. My chest starts to untangle when I think about how excited he must have been to finally get a call. *The* call.

"I hope that's okay?" Pierce strikes me as someone who doesn't enjoy silence.

"Yeah, of course. That's amazing! I hope he gets it."

"He deserves it," Pierce says with a laugh. "Don't tell him I said this, but I'm extremely jealous. I was in orchestra with him in school, and now I go to Knightsbridge Academy of Music just down the street from his place."

"Oh, you go to the academy?" Meeting another musician calms me down a bit. It's like we've already got this shared experience, even if we've never been in the same room. "What do you play?"

"Trumpet." He looks away as he says it, then changes the topic. "You ready to go? Shane planned on hiring a cab, but I was hoping we could take the tube? The subway, that is. And I could show you the academy—for when you describe the

place to your parents. They still think you're attending, right?"

"Oh. We're going to take the train?"

- That wasn't in the plan.
- I'm carrying a lot of shit, and I'm going to get left behind.
- If I get lost, I will not be able to find my way without a working cell.
- I want to appear to be chill and breezy, so I can't *not* be okay with this.
- We didn't even take the tube the last time we were here. I knew I'd have to do it at some point, but not now. Not here.

I shrug, trying not to let the panic creep into my muscles. "Um, yeah. Smart! I guess a cab would be more expensive, anyway."

"Ah, plus! You'll get to take the Piccadilly line toward Cockfosters. Americans usually find that name hilarious."

He has to raise his voice at the end of that sentence because of my snickering. The sudden laughter kind of shakes me out of my spiral, just enough that I can get a grip on the situation.

I am doing this for me, I remind myself. I need to be uncomfortable. I need to try new things. And if I can just get past the burning feeling in my core, I might even enjoy this.

Maybe.

"Let me help you with your bags," Pierce says. The gesture,

while a little much, causes a smile to creep across my face. He leads the way, almost triumphantly, as he carries my bags. He *is* a trumpet, from the volume of his voice to how he commands attention in a space like this.

Suddenly, we're standing at a coffee bar, and the smell of freshly ground espresso hits my nose.

"Quick diversion. Want some tea?" Pierce asks, then narrows his gaze. "Or, let me guess, the American wants coffee? Hot chocolate? A mocha?" He pronounces it *mock-uh*, which brings another smile to my face, despite the fact that he's *mock*-ing me.

He makes a gagging sound, and I laugh, even though my mouth waters at the thought of chocolate in *any* form. "Just coffee is fine. With milk and sugar if you don't mind. Here, let me get this." I reach into my pocket and pull out a few bills. Dead American presidents look back at me. "And . . . I just realized this is basically Monopoly money here. Can I Venmo you? Or I can go to a currency exchange. Or—"

He places his free hand on my shoulder and looks me in the eyes.

"No worries. It's my treat." He laughs. "Well, technically, it's Shane's treat. He may have given us money for the cab."

He winks, and my cheeks heat up. There's something about his smile. The fact he's holding my bag. The way he can poke fun at me but not make my defenses tighten up. It makes all the lies that got me here feel worth it for the first time, and it reminds me of the unusual path my life is taking. I feel older than I was before. Which, okay, sure, technically is true—I

understand how the passage of time works—but there's something tugging at the corners of my brain, at my emotions. It's something like infatuation, sure, but as I watch Pierce rock on the balls of his feet, bringing a whole new intensity to something as mundane as ordering coffee, it's also totally different. Something like home.

Pierce hands me a steaming Americano and guides us toward the tube. He flashes a soft smile at me, the kind of smile that's brimming with possibility. With hope of what's to come.

"Welcome home, Marty."

Now *that's* how you welcome someone to your country.

12 MONTHS AGO

DIARY ENTRY 8

I'M GOING TO REWRITE this entire journal. It's a shitty piece of shitty homework for shitty teachers at this shitty school and shitty town full of shitty people. Am I missing anyone? Basically, it's all shit.

But, fictional reader, you'd know that if you read my other entries.

Shane is the only one here who gives me hope. Maybe Aunt Leah too. Now that we're leaving for Ireland to see my extended family—days earlier than expected—I think my aunt really understood me for once.

A few years ago, me and Shane decided we would both come out to our parents on the same day. There were tears all around, in both families. Shane's? Beautiful, artistic tears. Like when Jennifer Garner tells her son "You get to exhale now" in *Love, Simon*.

Mine took a different path. Different tears. Hotter, heavier ones, weighed down with the last strands of hope I had. And I've been grappling with this fire in my stomach ever since.

As no one will read this, I might as well give out some more details about the whole *coming out* extravaganza. Shit hit the fan, and I barely left my bedroom for days. I took my entire family's numbers out of my phone, Shane and Aunt Leah included. I deleted my social media accounts, fell off the grid completely. But . . . it turns out taking someone's number out doesn't really stop them from reaching out to you, and we live in 2020, where you're ALWAYS on the grid.

Shane didn't take the hint. And neither did his mom. They spent weeks clawing their way back into my life. They even got my mom to come back to Europe for the first time since she was a kid, *and* bring us all! She and Dad inched further and further outside their comfort zones. And . . . now it's all pretty much destroyed.

Again.

THREE

"HOW'D YOU MEET SHANE, again?" I ask Pierce as an escalator takes us deep into the underground.

He scoffs. "I'm honestly a bit offended he hasn't mentioned me. Truly, I've known him since we started secondary school. Though I guess we weren't close mates until a few years ago."

"My best friend and I are like that," I say. "We've known each other since we were, like, ten. But god, I hated her for ages."

"Nothing so dramatic for us. I . . ." He hesitates. "I came out a few years before Shane did, and I think he worried people would catch on if he hung out with the only other queer guy in school."

A chill runs through my body, just from the confirmation that Pierce likes dudes. Even with the eye contact and apparent interest, the connection we had, how was I supposed to know? It's like how Megan used to joke that she always "knew" I was gay. Mom and Dad, too, always "knew" I was gay. But, fuck, if

they really knew I was gay, why'd they leave me in queer isolation for a full-ass decade?

We stand on the train platform, and though there are dozens of people brushing past me and Pierce, we're still able to lock eyes for one brief moment. One smirk, and he's driven some emotion straight into my heart. I don't know what this connection is, but it sure as hell isn't anything I'm used to. We step into the train car and take our seats.

Let me count the ways in which I am overwhelmed.

- I have just traveled—no, *relocated*—to a different country. Over an entire ocean.
- I am very aware of the amount of money in my bank account. I always knew it wasn't much, but for some reason, I didn't think about the conversion rate until I stopped to get some cash out of an ATM here, and let's just say the American dollar isn't doing so great.
- I am squeezed into a tiny-ass seat, rubbing upper arms with one of the most attractive men in the whole country. I'm exaggerating. Kind of.

I'm nearly silent, but Pierce talks and talks. I only get the gist of it, because instead of focusing on that dream-world accent—lazy A's shoot from his mouth in a reservedly bouncy cadence—I'm focusing on his lips. His thin beard. Or how I can see his sculpted arms even though he's just rolled up the sleeves of his sweater. Or how his arm hair is totally touching *my* arm hair.

"It's a shame you're not actually going to Knightsbridge. The summer program has been pretty interesting so far, and it's preparing me for officially starting uni there in September. I tried out for every trumpet solo, even though first-years rarely land one. And guess what? I didn't make it. They made me play third trumpet, which was just a huge step down. We're auditioning again next week, but I don't think I'll move up. The lecturers here definitely have their favorites. But . . ."

I expect his words about the academy to hurt more. In any other version of last year's audition, I would have made it too, and I'd be right here bitching about solos or placements alongside him. But spending the last nine months revising my plan has actually done me some good.

I let him drone on about the school. It's time for me to focus. I look around the train car and try to get my bearings. I'm on the Piccadilly line, I know that. After studying the big train map, I can locate the line. The dark blue one. They all have names: the Northern line is black, the Central line is red, the Bakerloo line is brown. I've never seen a subway map with so many colors (colours?) before.

"I know Shane's really excited to introduce you to our friend group," Pierce cuts in. "You'll get on with the lot, I'm sure. Dani and Rio are probably our closest friends—they're both in the program too. Well, for now, at least. There's a lot of drama between Rio and another clarinet. I wouldn't be surprised if one of them dropped out. Of all the audition pieces in the world, they picked the same solo, and they both nailed it in totally different ways. Right now, they're sharing principal

clarinet duties. Which . . . is not how that works. So there's been tension."

"Do people drop out a lot? The tuition is not cheap."

A more serious look comes over his face. "It happens. It's already happened, for a couple who just didn't like the program, or the people. I've heard of people dropping out for better reasons, though! Like they booked a great gig, or something."

"I can't imagine giving it all up," I say. "When I commit to something, I will complete it. To my own detriment, even."

He runs a hand through his hair. "I wish I could say the same thing. Maybe I'm not as disciplined as you."

"I wouldn't call it discipline."

He pauses, and looks at me. My cheeks feel hot, and I know I'm supposed to say something, but I wish he'd go back to his monologue. There's comfort in that. I did that enough with Megan. Always the passenger.

"So, you talk a lot." I wince. Why did I say that?

"I do, when I'm nervous." He doesn't stop looking at me. "And I get a bit nervous meeting new people, don't you?"

"I think that's why I'm *not* talking."

He laughs, and I join in.

"Anyway," he starts, "I can't wait to hear you play. There aren't any oboes at Knightsbridge. And the ones in our school orchestra were all off-key and annoying—or maybe that's just how they're supposed to sound?"

I roll my eyes at the oboe slander, but he nudges me with his elbow. "It's a joke, Marty. I've been working up this oboe and

trumpet duet for my end-of-term recital with my friend Dani, but she plays it on the flute, and it's not the same."

A chuckle leaves my lips. I can play both instruments—the flute was my first way back in middle school—and I know the differences well. They're two woodwind instruments, both in the key of C, but their similarities don't go far beyond their key signature.

"If you're half as good as Shane says you are, I might have to enlist your help."

"Sure," I say. It's hard to tell if it's genuine, or if it's just one of those polite offers. But I can picture it, briefly—me on stage at the academy. It'd be nothing like my botched audition.

A jolt in the train car brings me back to the present. I've been on subways before. The metro in DC is easy; there aren't nearly as many stops. Though there aren't nearly as many trains, so you end up waiting on the platform for two years just to get downtown. New York is fast, like this, but it's dark and dirty—you need to take an acid bath just to get the bacteria off you. I wouldn't say I love the tube, but it has its benefits. (But seriously, why don't people make more sexual jokes referring to tubes? It seems so obvious.)

"But anyway, I think you'll have a good time here."

"I . . . think I will too," I say. *If everyone's as welcoming as you.*

Though he probably knows little about me, he's already treating me like an old friend. And for once, I feel myself opening up to this unknown situation.

A brief silence settles between us. It could be awkward, but the train's wheels rattle and the car squeaks, and no one else in

the train car is talking, either. I welcome the silence in the stress of the morning, but my leg bounces against his, restless.

Near the doors, a woman stands guard over her behemoth of a suitcase. I think I recognize her from the flight. As the train pulls up to the next stop—Baron's Court; possibly the fanciest named station, in my opinion—her suitcase rolls away, crashing into three or four people. The woman apologizes, giggles (meanwhile, I'm so embarrassed for her *I* could die), and a businessman in a well-tailored suit flashes a strained smile, but doesn't offer to guide the suitcase back to its owner. The moment she turns, the guy scowls and shakes out his newspaper.

"That's British generosity for you," Pierce says. "Note the fake smile, the passive-aggressive demeanor. It's an art form."

"Hopefully I'll have time to practice this art," I say. "Though my parents would probably say I have the passive-aggressive thing down. Megan would too. Okay, maybe I will fit in here."

"You're seriously going to love this country. You planning to travel?"

I think back to the money in my bank account, and my palms start to sweat again. Or maybe they never stopped. "No way. I mean, *this* is travel enough. For me."

"Ha. You say that now. Don't you realize you're in Europe? You can fly anywhere for cheap."

A shallow breath. One country at a time.

"It's overwhelming," I say. "This is only my second time in Europe, and really we never did any traveling when I came last

year, unless you count staying with my extended family outside of Dublin. I'm from Kentucky, so, it's all foreign to me."

"The place with the chicken, right?"

I cringe. A state with a two-hundred-year history rendered down to a piece of mediocre fried chicken.

"It's more than that," I say. I keep my eyes open, looking around the car. "I don't *hate* it there. It's the farmlands—cute houses, fields, open spaces, and bright stars the moment the sun goes down. I'm the only one who left. Of that side of my family, that is."

"So let's say your plan works out and you get to live here for a while. Do you think you'll ever go back?" Pierce's draped arm drifts closer. So close his fingers graze my shoulder, making me shudder.

"No." I wouldn't. "I'll figure something out. There's just nothing for me there. I'd like to tour in a symphony someday, but I don't know. There are plenty of gigs out there. I'll find something."

At that last bit, I turn to him. His face is inches from mine. The edges of his lips perk up, and I pull back on instinct. His eyes flicker to the train map, and my gaze follows. We're just three or four stops away. We're supposed to get off at Green Park; that's why I'm so surprised when Pierce jumps up at Gloucester Road.

"But this is *Glow-chester* Road?" I say.

"It's pronounced *Gloh-ster*, but never mind that. You never got to see Big Ben, right? Without all the scaffolding?"

"Right."

"Let's get off here. I can show you Big Ben, Westminster Abbey. Downing Street. Let's be proper tourists. Then it's a straight shot to the Sondheim Theatre, where we can go surprise Shane after his audition—what do you say?"

My face feels hot. Really hot. Like in eighth grade, when Megan and I split a bottle of NyQuil because we thought it'd get us drunk (but it really just made us sleep for fourteen hours). My anxiety levels are off the charts.

- This was not in the plan.
- I'm carrying a suitcase.
- There are going to be a *lot* of people up there.

My brain also chooses this time to remind me how long it's been since I've had a shower.

He smiles—not a beaming smile, but a smirk. The doors have opened. I grab my bag and suitcase, while Pierce reaches out to me. My shoes feel glued to the ground. There's something in his eyes—a sparkle? A twinkle? Reflection of the dingy train lighting? Okay, probably the last of those, but fuck it. I'm going to see this city. I'll follow that smirk anywhere.