

ANNA AND THE FRENCH KISS SERIES

STEPHANIE PERKINS

"Magical...really captures the feeling of being in love."
CASSANDRA CLARE, author of THE MORTAL INSTRUMENTS series

ANNA and the FRENCH ♥ KISS

AN INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER
STEPHANIE PERKINS

About this book

Here is everything I know about France: Madeline and Amélie and Moulin Rouge. The Eiffel Tower and the Arc de Triomphe... And, I'm moving to Paris for a year. To boarding school. Alone.

Anna had everything figured out – she was about to start senior year with her best friend, she had a great weekend job, and her huge work crush looked as if it might finally be going somewhere... Until her dad decides to send her 4383 miles away to Paris. On her own.

But despite not speaking a word of French, Anna finds herself making new friends, including Étienne St. Clair, the smart, beautiful boy from the floor above. But he's taken – and Anna might be too. Will a year of romantic near-misses end with the French kiss she's been waiting for?

Praise for *Anna and the French Kiss*

“Smart dialogue, fresh characters and plenty of tingly interactions... Sarah Dessen fans will welcome another author who gracefully combines love and realism.”

KIRKUS REVIEWS, starred review

“Tantalizing pacing, sparkling repartee, vibrant supporting characters...”

GAYLE FORMAN, bestselling author of *If I Stay* and *Where She Went*

“Anna and the French Kiss charms [readers] with its Parisian setting and a *très bien* boy.”

MTV.com

“From the magical streets of Paris to its charming narrator, *Anna and the French Kiss* has it all. A wonderfully winning book!”

ROBIN BENWAY, author of *Audrey, Wait!*

“Anna’s richness of character and clever turns of phrase will endear her to any reader.”

ROMANTIC TIMES BOOK REVIEWS

ANNA
and the
FRENCH
 **KISS**

STEPHANIE PERKINS



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For Jarrod, best friend & true love



Chapter one

Here is everything I know about France: *Madeline* and *Amélie* and *Moulin Rouge*. The Eiffel Tower and the Arc de Triomphe, although I have no idea what the function of either actually is. Napoleon, Marie Antoinette, and a lot of kings named Louis. I'm not sure what they did either, but I think it has something to do with the French Revolution, which has something to do with Bastille Day. The art museum is called the Louvre and it's shaped like a pyramid and the *Mona Lisa* lives there along with that statue of the woman missing her arms. And there are cafés or bistros or whatever they call them on every street corner. And mimes. The food is supposed to be good, and the people drink a lot of wine and smoke a lot of cigarettes.

I've heard they don't like Americans, and they don't like white sneakers.

A few months ago, my father enrolled me in boarding school. His air quotes practically crackled over the phone line as he declared living abroad to be a "good learning experience" and a "keepsake I'd treasure for ever". Yeah. Keepsake. And I would've pointed out his misuse of the word had I not already been freaking out.

Since his announcement, I've tried yelling, begging, pleading, and crying, but nothing has convinced him otherwise. And now I have a new student visa and a passport, each declaring me: Anna Oliphant, citizen of the United States of America. And now I'm here with my parents – unpacking my belongings in a room smaller than my suitcase – the newest senior at the School of America in Paris.

It's not that I'm ungrateful. I mean, it's *Paris*. The City of Light! The most romantic city in the world! I'm not immune to that. It's just this whole international boarding school thing is a lot more about my father than it is about me. Ever since he sold out and started writing lame books that were turned into even lamer movies, he's been trying to impress his big-shot New York friends with how cultured and rich he is.

My father isn't cultured. But he is rich.

It wasn't always like this. When my parents were still married, we were strictly lower middle class. It was around the time of the divorce that all traces of decency vanished, and his dream of being the next great Southern writer was replaced by his desire to be the next *published* writer. So he started writing these novels set in Small Town Georgia about folks with Good American Values who Fall in Love and then contract Life-Threatening Diseases and Die.

I'm serious.

And it totally depresses me, but the ladies eat it up. They love my father's books and they love his cable-knit sweaters and they love his bleachy smile and orangey tan. And they have turned him into a bestseller and a total dick.

Two of his books have been made into movies and three more are in production, which is where his real money comes from. Hollywood. And, somehow, this extra cash and pseudo-prestige have warped his brain into thinking that I should live in France. For a year. Alone. I don't understand why he couldn't send me to Australia or Ireland or anywhere else where English is the native language. The only French word I know is *oui*, which means "yes", and only recently did I learn it's spelled o-u-i and not w-e-e.

At least the people in my new school speak English. It was founded for pretentious Americans who don't like the company of their own children. I mean, really. Who sends their kid to boarding school? It's so Hogwarts. Only mine doesn't have cute boy wizards or magic candy or flying lessons.

Instead, I'm stuck with ninety-nine other students. There are twenty-five people in my *entire senior class*, as opposed to the six hundred I had back in Atlanta. And I'm studying the same things I studied at Clairemont High except now I'm registered in beginning French.

Oh, yeah. Beginning French. No doubt with the freshmen. I totally rock.

Mom says I need to lose the bitter factor, pronto, but she's not the one leaving behind her fabulous best friend, Bridgette. Or her fabulous job at the Royal Midtown 14 multiplex. Or Toph, the fabulous boy at the Royal Midtown 14 multiplex.

And I still can't believe she's separating me from my brother, Sean, who is only seven and way too young to be left home alone after school. Without me, he'll probably be kidnapped by that creepy guy down the road who has dirty Coca-Cola towels hanging in his windows. Or Seany will accidentally eat something containing Red Dye #40 and his throat will swell up and no one will be there to drive him to the hospital. He might even die. And I bet they wouldn't let me fly home for his funeral and I'd have to visit the cemetery alone next year and Dad will have picked out some god-awful granite cherub to go over his grave.

And I hope Dad doesn't expect me to fill out college applications to Russia or Romania now. My dream is to study film theory in California. I want to be our nation's greatest female film critic. Someday I'll be invited to every festival, and I'll have a major newspaper column and a cool television show and a ridiculously popular website. So far I only have the website, and it's not so popular. Yet.

I just need a little more time to work on it, that's all.

"Anna, it's time."

"What?" I glance up from folding my shirts into perfect squares.

Mom stares at me and twiddles the turtle charm on her necklace. My father, bedecked in a peach polo shirt and white boating shoes, is gazing out my dormitory window. It's late, but across the street a woman belts out something operatic.

My parents need to return to their hotel rooms. They both have early morning flights.

"Oh." I grip the shirt in my hands a little tighter.

Dad steps away from the window, and I'm alarmed to discover his eyes are wet. Something about the idea of my father – even if it is *my father* – on the brink of tears raises a lump in my throat.

"Well, kiddo. Guess you're all grown up now."

My body is frozen. He pulls my stiff limbs into a bear hug. His grip is frightening. "Take care of yourself. Study hard and make some friends. And watch out for pickpockets," he adds. "Sometimes they work in pairs."

I nod into his shoulder, and he releases me. And then he's gone.

My mother lingers behind. "You'll have a wonderful year here," she says. "I just know it." I bite my lip to keep it from quivering, and she sweeps me into her arms. I try to breathe. Inhale. Count to three. Exhale. Her skin smells like grapefruit body lotion. "I'll call you the moment I get home," she says.

Home. Atlanta isn't my home any more.

"I love you, Anna."

I'm crying now. "I love you, too. Take care of Seany for me."

"Of course."

"And Captain Jack," I say. "Make sure Sean feeds him and changes his bedding and fills his water bottle. And make sure he doesn't give him too many treats because they make him fat and then he can't get out of his igloo. But make sure he gives him at least a few every day, because he still needs the vitamin C and he won't drink the water when I use those vitamin drops—"

She pulls back and tucks my bleached stripe behind my ear. "I love you," she says again.

And then my mother does something that, even after all of the paperwork and plane tickets and presentations, I don't see coming. Something that would've happened in a year anyway, once I left for college, but that no matter how many days or months or years I've yearned for it, I am still not prepared for when it actually happens.

My mother leaves. I am alone.



Chapter two

I feel it coming, but I can't stop it.

PANIC.

They left me. My parents actually left me! IN FRANCE!

Meanwhile, Paris is oddly silent. Even the opera singer has packed it in for the night. I *cannot* lose it. The walls here are thinner than Band-Aids, so if I break down, my neighbours – my new classmates – will hear everything. I'm going to be sick. I'm going to vomit that weird eggplant tapenade I had for dinner, and everyone will hear, and no one will invite me to watch the mimes escape from their invisible boxes, or whatever it is people do here in their spare time.

I race to my pedestal sink to splash water on my face, but it explodes out and sprays my shirt instead. And now I'm crying harder, because I haven't unpacked my towels, and wet clothing reminds me of those stupid water rides Bridgette and Matt used to drag me on at Six Flags where the water is the wrong colour and it smells like paint and it has a billion trillion bacterial microbes in it. Oh God. What if there are bacterial microbes in the water? Is French water even safe to drink?

Pathetic. I'm pathetic.

How many seventeen-year-olds would kill to leave home? My neighbours aren't experiencing any meltdowns. No crying coming from behind *their* bedroom walls. I grab a shirt off the bed to blot myself dry, when the solution strikes. *My pillow*. I collapse face-first into the sound barrier and sob and sob and sob.

Someone is knocking on my door.

No. Surely that's not my door.

There it is again!

"Hello?" a girl calls from the hallway. "Hello? Are you okay?"

No, I'm not okay. GO AWAY. But she calls again, and I'm obligated to crawl off my bed and answer the door. A blonde with long, tight curls waits on the other side. She's tall and big, but not overweight-big. Volleyball player big. A

diamond-like nose ring sparkles in the hall light. “Are you all right?” Her voice is gentle. “I’m Meredith; I live next door. Were those your parents who just left?”

My puffy eyes signal the affirmative.

“I cried the first night, too.” She tilts her head, thinks for a moment, and then nods. “Come on. *Chocolat chaud*.”

“A chocolate show?” Why would I want to see a chocolate show? My mother has abandoned me and I’m terrified to leave my room and—

“No.” She smiles. “*Chaud*. Hot. Hot chocolate, I can make some in my room.” Oh.

Despite myself, I follow. Meredith stops me with her hand like a crossing guard. She’s wearing rings on all five fingers. “Don’t forget your key. The doors automatically lock behind you.”

“I know.” And I tug the necklace out from underneath my shirt to prove it. I slipped my key onto it during this weekend’s required Life Skills Seminars for new students, when they told us how easy it is to get locked out.

We enter her room. I gasp. It’s the same impossible size as mine, seven by ten feet, with the same mini-desk, mini-dresser, mini-bed, mini-fridge, mini-sink, and mini-shower. (No mini-toilet, those are shared down the hall.) But...unlike my own sterile cage, every inch of wall and ceiling is covered with posters and pictures and shiny wrapping paper and brightly coloured flyers written in French.

“How long have you *been* here?” I ask.

Meredith hands me a tissue and I blow my nose, a terrible honk like an angry goose, but she doesn’t flinch or make a face. “I arrived yesterday. This is my fourth year here, so I didn’t have to go to the seminars. I flew in alone, so I’ve just been hanging out, waiting for my friends to show up.” She looks around with her hands on her hips, admiring her handiwork. I spot a pile of magazines, scissors, and tape on her floor and realize it’s a work in progress. “Not bad, eh? White walls don’t do it for me.”

I circle her room, examining everything. I quickly discover that most of the faces are the same five people: John, Paul, George, Ringo, and some soccer guy I don’t recognize.

“The Beatles are all I listen to. My friends tease me, but—”

“Who’s this?” I point to Soccer Guy. He’s wearing red and white, and he’s all dark eyebrows and dark hair. Quite good-looking, actually.

“Cesc Fàbregas. God, he’s the most incredible passer. Plays for Barcelona. The Spanish football club? No?”

I shake my head. I don’t keep up with sports, but maybe I should. “Nice legs,

though.”

“I know, right? You could hammer nails with those thighs.”

While Meredith brews *chocolat chaud* on her hotplate, I learn she’s also a senior, and that because our school doesn’t have a programme, she only plays soccer during the summer, but that she used to rank All-State in Massachusetts. That’s where she’s from, Boston. And she reminds me I should call it “football” here, which – when I think about it – really does make more sense. And she doesn’t seem to mind when I badger her with questions or paw through her things.

Her room is amazing. In addition to the paraphernalia taped to her walls, she has a dozen china teacups filled with plastic glitter rings, and silver rings with amber stones, and glass rings with pressed flowers. It already looks as if she’s lived here for years.

I try on a ring with a rubber dinosaur attached. The T-rex flashes red and yellow and blue lights when I squeeze him. “I wish I could have a room like this.” I love it, but I’m too much of a neat freak to have something like it for myself. I need clean walls and a clean desktop and everything put away in its right place at all times.

Meredith looks pleased with the compliment.

“Are these your friends?” I place the dinosaur back into its teacup and point to a picture tucked in her mirror. It’s grey and shadowy and printed on thick, glossy paper. Clearly the product of a school photography class. Four people stand before a giant hollow cube, and the abundance of stylish black clothing and deliberately mussed hair reveals Meredith belongs to the resident art clique. For some reason, I’m surprised. I know her room is artsy, and she has all of those rings on her fingers and in her nose, but the rest is clean-cut – lilac sweater, pressed jeans, soft voice. Then there’s the soccer thing, but she’s not a tomboy either.

She breaks into a wide smile, and her nose ring winks. “Yeah. Ellie took that at La Défense. That’s Josh and St. Clair and me and Rashmi. You’ll meet them tomorrow at breakfast. Well, everyone but Ellie. She graduated last year.”

The pit of my stomach begins to unclench. Was that an invitation to sit with her?

“But I’m sure you’ll meet her soon enough, because she’s dating St. Clair. She’s at Parsons Paris now for photography.”

I’ve never heard of it, but I nod as if I’ve considered going there myself someday.

“She’s *really* talented.” The edge in her voice suggests otherwise, but I don’t push it. “Josh and Rashmi are dating, too,” she adds.

Ah. Meredith must be single.

Unfortunately, I can relate. Back home I'd dated my friend Matt for five months. He was tall-ish and funny-ish and had decent-ish hair. It was one of those "since no one better is around, do you wanna make out?" situations. All we'd ever done was kiss, and it wasn't even that great. Too much spit. I always had to wipe off my chin.

We broke up when I learned about France, but it wasn't a big deal. I didn't cry or send him weepy emails or key his mom's station wagon. Now he's going out with Cherrie Milliken, who is in chorus and has shiny shampoo-commercial hair. It doesn't even bother me.

Not really.

Besides, the break-up freed me to lust after Toph, multiplex co-worker babe extraordinaire. Not that I didn't lust after him when I was with Matt, but still. It did make me feel guilty. And things were starting to happen with Toph – they really were – when summer ended. But Matt's the only guy I've ever gone out with, and he barely counts. I once told him I'd dated this guy named Stuart Thistleback at summer camp. Stuart Thistleback had auburn hair and played the stand-up bass, and we were totally in love, but he lived in Chattanooga and we didn't have our driver's licences yet.

Matt knew I made it up, but he was too nice to say so.

I'm about to ask Meredith what classes she's taking, when her phone chirps the first few bars of "Strawberry Fields Forever". She rolls her eyes and answers. "Mom, it's midnight here. Six-hour time difference, remember?"

I glance at her alarm clock, shaped like a yellow submarine, and I'm surprised to find she's right. I set my long-empty mug of *chocolat chaud* on her dresser. "I should get going," I whisper. "Sorry I stayed so long."

"Hold on a sec." Meredith covers the mouthpiece. "It was nice meeting you. See you at breakfast?"

"Yeah. See ya." I try to say this casually, but I'm so thrilled that I skip from her room and promptly slam into a wall.

Whoops. Not a wall. A boy.

"Oof." He staggers backwards.

"Sorry! I'm so sorry, I didn't know you were there."

He shakes his head, a little dazed. The first thing I notice is his hair – it's the first thing I notice about everyone. It's dark brown and messy and somehow both long and short at the same time. I think of The Beatles, since I've just seen them in Meredith's room. It's artist hair. Musician hair. I-pretend-I-don't-care-but-I-really-do hair.

Beautiful hair.

“It’s okay, I didn’t see you either. Are you all right, then?”

Oh my. He’s English.

“Er. Does Mer live here?”

Seriously, I don’t know any American girl who can resist an English accent.

The boy clears his throat. “Meredith Chevalier? Tall girl? Big, curly hair?” Then he looks at me like I’m crazy or half deaf, like my Nanna Oliphant. Nanna just smiles and shakes her head whenever I ask, “What kind of salad dressing would you like?” or “Where did you put Grandad’s false teeth?”

“I’m sorry.” He takes the smallest step away from me. “You were going to bed.”

“Yes! Meredith lives there. I’ve just spent two hours with her.” I announce this proudly like my brother, Seany, whenever he finds something disgusting in the yard. “I’m Anna! I’m new here!” *Oh God. What. Is with. The scary enthusiasm?* My cheeks catch fire, and it’s all so humiliating.

The beautiful boy gives an amused grin. His teeth are lovely – straight on top and crooked on the bottom, with a touch of overbite. I’m a sucker for smiles like this, due to my own lack of orthodontia. I have a gap between my front teeth the size of a raisin.

“Étienne,” he says. “I live one floor up.”

“I live here.” I point dumbly at my room while my mind whirrs: French name, English accent, American school. Anna confused.

He raps twice on Meredith’s door. “Well. I’ll see you around then, Anna.”

Eh-t-yen says my name like this: *Ah-na*.

My heart *thump thump thumps* in my chest.

Meredith opens her door. “St. Clair!” she shrieks. She’s still on the phone. They laugh and hug and talk over each other. “Come in! How was your flight? When’d you get here? Have you seen Josh? Mom, I’ve gotta go.”

Meredith’s phone and door snap shut simultaneously.

I fumble with the key on my necklace. Two girls in matching pink bathrobes strut behind me, giggling and gossiping. A crowd of guys across the hall snicker and catcall. Meredith and her friend laugh through the thin walls. My heart sinks, and my stomach tightens back up.

I’m still the new girl. I’m still alone.



Chapter three

The next morning, I consider stopping by Meredith's, but I chicken out and walk to breakfast by myself. At least I know where the cafeteria is (Day Two: Life Skills Seminars). I double-check for my meal card and pop open my Hello Kitty umbrella. It's drizzling. The weather doesn't give a crap that it's my first day of school.

I cross the road with a group of chattering students. They don't notice me, but together we dodge the puddles. An automobile, small enough to be one of my brother's toys, whizzes past and sprays a girl in glasses. She swears, and her friends tease her.

I drop behind.

The city is pearl grey. The overcast sky and the stone buildings emit the same cold elegance, but ahead of me, the Panthéon shimmers. Its massive dome and impressive columns rise up to crown the top of the neighbourhood. Every time I see it, it's difficult to pull away. It's as if it were stolen from ancient Rome or, at the very least, Capitol Hill. Nothing I should be able to view from a classroom window.

I don't know its purpose, but I assume someone will tell me soon.

My new neighbourhood is the Latin Quarter, or the fifth *arrondissement*. According to my pocket dictionary, that means district, and the buildings in my *arrondissement* blend one into another, curving around corners with the sumptuousness of wedding cakes. The sidewalks are crowded with students and tourists, and they're lined with identical benches and ornate lamp posts, bushy trees ringed in metal grates, Gothic cathedrals and tiny *crêperies*, postcard racks, and curlicue wrought iron balconies.

If this were a vacation, I'm sure I'd be charmed. I'd buy an Eiffel Tower key chain, take pictures of the cobblestones, and order a platter of escargot. But I'm not on vacation. I am here to live, and I feel small.

The School of America's main building is only a two-minute walk from Résidence Lambert, the junior and senior dormitory. The entrance is through a

grand archway, set back in a courtyard with manicured trees. Geraniums and ivy trail down from window boxes on each floor, and majestic lions' heads are carved into the centre of the dark green doors, which are three times my height. On either side of the doors hangs a red, white, and blue flag – one American, the other French.

It looks like a film set. *A Little Princess*, if it took place in Paris. How can such a school really exist? And how is it possible that I'm enrolled? My father is insane to believe I belong here. I'm struggling to close my umbrella and nudge open one of the heavy wooden doors with my butt, when a preppy guy with faux-surfer hair barges past. He smacks into my umbrella and then shoots me the stink-eye as if: (1) it's my fault he has the patience of a toddler and (2) he wasn't already soaked from the rain.

Two-point deduction for Paris. Suck on that, Preppy Guy.

The ceiling on the first floor is impossibly high, dripping with chandeliers and frescoed with flirting nymphs and lusting satyrs. It smells faintly of orange cleaning products and dry-erase markers. I follow the squeak of rubber soles towards the cafeteria. Beneath our feet is a marbled mosaic of interlocking sparrows. Mounted on the wall, at the far end of the hall, is a gilded clock that's chiming the hour.

The whole school is as intimidating as it is impressive. It should be reserved for students with personal bodyguards and Shetland ponies, not someone who buys the majority of her wardrobe at Target.

Even though I saw it on the school tour, the cafeteria stops me dead. I used to eat lunch in a converted gymnasium that reeked of bleach and jockstraps. It had long tables with pre-attached benches, and paper cups and plastic straws. The hairnetted ladies who ran the cash registers served frozen pizza and frozen fries and frozen nuggets, and the soda fountains and vending machines provided the rest of my so-called nourishment.

But this. This could be a restaurant.

Unlike the historic opulence of the hall, the cafeteria is sleek and modern. It's packed with round birch tables and plants in hanging baskets. The walls are tangerine and lime, and there's a dapper Frenchman in a white chef's hat serving a variety of food that looks suspiciously fresh. There are several cases of bottled drinks, but instead of high-sugar, high-caf colas, they're filled with juice and a dozen types of mineral water. There's even a table set up for coffee. *Coffee*. I know some Starbucks-starved students at Clairemont who'd kill for in-school coffee.

The chairs are already filled with people gossiping with their friends over the shouting of the chefs and the clattering of the dishes (real china, not plastic). I

stall in the doorway. Students brush past me, spiralling out in all directions. My chest squeezes. Should I find a table or should I find breakfast first? And how am I even supposed to order when the menu is in freaking *French*?

I'm startled when a voice calls out my name. Oh please oh please oh please...

A scan through the crowd reveals a five-ringed hand waving from across the room. Meredith points to an empty chair beside her, and I weave my way there, grateful and almost painfully relieved.

"I thought about knocking on your door so we could walk together, but I didn't know if you were a late sleeper." Meredith's eyebrows pinch together with worry. "I'm sorry, I should have knocked. You look so lost."

"Thanks for saving me a spot." I set down my stuff and take a seat. There are two others at the table and, as promised the night before, they're from the photograph on her mirror. I'm nervous again and readjust my backpack at my feet.

"This is Anna, the girl I was telling you about," Meredith says.

A lanky guy with short hair and a long nose salutes me with his coffee cup. "Josh," he says. "And Rashmi." He nods to the girl next to him, who holds his other hand inside the front pocket of his hoodie. Rashmi has blue-framed glasses and thick black hair that hangs all the way down her back. She gives me only the barest of acknowledgements.

That's okay. No big deal.

"Everyone's here except for St. Clair." Meredith cranes her neck around the cafeteria. "He's usually running late."

"Always," Josh corrects. "Always running late."

I clear my throat. "I think I met him last night. In the hallway."

"Good hair and an English accent?" Meredith asks.

"Um. Yeah. I guess." I try to keep my voice casual.

Josh smirks. "Everyone's in luurve with St. Clair."

"Oh, shut up," Meredith says.

"I'm not." Rashmi looks at me for the first time, calculating whether or not I might fall in love with her own boyfriend.

He lets go of her hand and gives an exaggerated sigh. "Well, I am. I'm asking him to prom. This is our year, I just know it."

"This school has a prom?" I ask.

"God no," Rashmi says. "Yeah, Josh. You and St. Clair would look really cute in matching tuxes."

"Tails." The English accent makes Meredith and me jump in our seats. Hallway boy. Beautiful boy. His hair is damp from the rain. "I insist the tuxes have tails, or I'm giving your corsage to Steve Carver instead."

“St. Clair!” Josh springs from his seat, and they give each other the classic two-thumps-on-the-back guy hug.

“No kiss? I’m crushed, mate.”

“Thought it might miff the ol’ ball and chain. She doesn’t know about us yet.”

“Whatever,” Rashmi says, but she’s smiling now. It’s a good look for her. She should utilize the corners of her mouth more often.

Beautiful Hallway Boy (am I supposed to call him Étienne or St. Clair?) drops his bag and slides into the remaining seat between Rashmi and me. “Anna.” He’s surprised to see me, and I’m startled, too. He remembers me.

“Nice umbrella. Could’ve used that this morning.” He shakes a hand through his hair, and a drop lands on my bare arm. Words fail me. Unfortunately, my stomach speaks for itself. His eyes pop at the rumble, and I’m alarmed by how big and brown they are. As if he needed any further weapons against the female race.

Josh must be right. Every girl in school must be in love with him.

“Sounds terrible. You ought to feed that thing. Unless...” He pretends to examine me, then comes in close with a whisper. “Unless you’re one of those girls who never eats. Can’t tolerate that, I’m afraid. Have to give you a lifetime table ban.”

I’m determined to speak rationally in his presence. “I’m not sure how to order.”

“Easy,” Josh says. “Stand in line. Tell them what you want. Accept delicious goodies. And then give them your meal card and two pints of blood.”

“I heard they raised it to three pints this year,” Rashmi says.

“Bone marrow,” Beautiful Hallway Boy says. “Or your left earlobe.”

“I meant the menu, thank you very much.” I gesture to the chalkboard above one of the chefs. An exquisite, cursive hand has written out the morning’s menu in pink and yellow and white. In French. “Not exactly my first language.”

“You don’t speak French?” Meredith asks.

“I’ve taken Spanish for three years. It’s not like I ever thought I’d be moving to Paris.”

“It’s okay,” Meredith says quickly. “A lot of people here don’t speak French.”

“But most of them do,” Josh adds.

“But most of them not very well.” Rashmi looks pointedly at him.

“You’ll learn the language of food first. The language of love.” Josh rubs his belly like a skinny Buddha. “*Oeuf*. Egg. *Pomme*. Apple. *Lapin*. Rabbit.”

“Not funny.” Rashmi punches him in the arm. “No wonder Isis bites you. Jerk.”

I glance at the chalkboard again. It’s still in French. “And, um, until then?”

“Right.” Beautiful Hallway Boy pushes back his chair. “Come along, then. I haven’t eaten either.” I can’t help but notice several girls gaping at him as we wind our way through the crowd. A blonde with a beaky nose and a teeny tank top coos as soon as we get in line. “*Hey, St. Clair. How was your summer?*”

“Hallo, Amanda. Fine.”

“Did you stay here, or did you go back to *London?*” She leans over her friend, a short girl with a severe ponytail, and positions herself for maximum cleavage exposure.

“I stayed with my mum in San Francisco. Did you have a good holiday?” He asks this politely, but I’m pleased to hear the indifference in his voice.

Amanda flips her hair, and suddenly she’s Cherrie Milliken. Cherrie loves to swish her hair and shake it out and twirl it around her fingers. Bridgette is convinced she spends her weekends standing before oscillating fans, pretending to be a supermodel, but I think she’s too busy soaking her locks in seaweed papaya mud wraps in that never-ending quest for perfect sheen.

“It was *fabulous.*” Flip, goes her hair. “I went to *Greece* for a month, then spent the rest of my summer in Manhattan. My father has an *amazing* penthouse that overlooks Central Park.”

Every *sentence* she says has a *word* that’s *emphasized*. I snort to keep from laughing, and Beautiful Hallway Boy gets a strange coughing fit.

“But I *missed* you. Didn’t you get my *emails?*”

“Er, no. Must have the wrong address. Hey.” He nudges me. “It’s almost our turn.” He turns his back on Amanda, and she and her friend exchange frowns. “Time for your first French lesson. Breakfast here is simple and consists primarily of breads – croissants being the most famous, of course. This means no sausage, no scrambled eggs.”

“Bacon?” I ask hopefully.

“Definitely not.” He laughs. “Second lesson, the words on the chalkboard. Listen carefully and repeat after me. *Granola.*” I narrow my eyes as he widens his in mock innocence. “Means ‘granola’, you see. And this one? *Yaourt?*”

“Gee, I dunno. Yogurt?”

“A natural! You say you’ve never lived in France before?”

“Har. Bloody. Har.”

He smiles. “Oh, I see. Known me less than a day and teasing me about my accent. What’s next? Care to discuss the state of my hair? My height? My trousers?”

Trousers. Honestly.

The Frenchman behind the counter barks at us. Sorry, Chef Pierre. I’m a little distracted by this English French American Boy Masterpiece. Said boy asks

rapidly, “Yogurt with granola and honey, soft-boiled egg, or pears on brioche?”

I have no idea what brioche is. “Yogurt,” I say.

He places our orders in perfect French. At least, it sounds impeccable to my virgin ears, and it relaxes Chef Pierre. He loses the glower and stirs the granola and honey into my yogurt. A sprinkling of blueberries is added to the top before he hands it over.

“*Merci*, Monsieur Boutin.”

I grab our tray. “No Pop-Tarts? No Cocoa Puffs? I’m, like, totally offended.”

“Pop-Tarts are Tuesdays, Eggo waffles are Wednesdays, but they never, ever serve Cocoa Puffs. You shall have to settle for Froot Loops Fridays instead.”

“You know a lot about American food for a British dude.”

“Orange juice? Grapefruit? Cranberry?” I point to the orange, and he pulls two out of the case. “I’m not British. I’m American.”

I smile. “Sure you are.”

“I am. You have to be an American to attend SOAP, remember?”

“Soap?”

“School of America in Paris,” he explains. “SOAP.”

Nice. My father sent me here to be cleansed.

We get in line to pay, and I’m surprised by how efficiently it runs. My old school was all about cutting ahead and incensing the lunch ladies, but here everyone waits patiently. I turn back just in time to catch his eyes flicker up and down my body. My breath catches. The beautiful boy is checking *me* out. He doesn’t realize I’ve caught him. “My mum is American,” he continues smoothly. “My father is French. I was born in San Francisco, and I was raised in London.”

Miraculously, I find my voice. “A true international.”

He laughs. “That’s right. I’m not a *poseur* like the rest of you.”

I’m about to tease him back when I remember: *He has a girlfriend*. Something evil pokes the pink folds of my brain, forcing me to recall my conversation with Meredith last night. It’s time to change the subject. “What’s your real name? Last night you introduced yourself as—”

“St. Clair is my last name. Étienne is my first.”

“Étienne St. Clair.” I try to pronounce it like him, all foreign and posh.

“Terrible, isn’t it?”

I’m laughing now. “Étienne is nice. Why don’t people call you that?”

“Oh, ‘Étienne is nice’. How generous of you.”

Another person gets in line behind us, a tiny boy with brown skin, acne, and a thick mat of black hair. The boy is excited to see him, and he smiles back. “Hey, Nikhil. Did you have a nice holiday?” It’s the same question he asked Amanda, but this time his tone is sincere.

That's all it takes for the boy to launch into a story about his trip to Delhi, about the markets and temples and monsoons. (He went on a day trip to the Taj Mahal. I went to Panama City Beach with the rest of Georgia.) Another boy runs up, this one skinny and pale with sticky-uppy hair. Nikhil forgets us and greets his friend with the same enthusiastic babble.

St. Clair – I'm determined to call him this before I embarrass myself – turns back to me. "Nikhil is Rashmi's brother. He's a freshman this year. She also has a younger sister, Sanjita, who's a junior, and an older sister, Leela, who graduated two years ago."

"Do you have any brothers or sisters?"

"No. You?"

"One brother, but he's back home. In Atlanta. That's in Georgia. In the South?"

He raises an eyebrow. "I know where Atlanta is."

"Oh. Right." I hand my meal card to the man behind the register. Like Monsieur Boutin, he wears a pressed white uniform and starched hat. He also has a handlebar moustache. Huh. Didn't know they had those over here. Chef Handlebar swipes my card and zips it back to me with a quick *merci*.

Thank you. Another word I already knew. Excellent.

On the way back to our table, Amanda watches St. Clair from inside her posse of Pretty Preppy People. I'm not surprised to see the faux-surfer hair stink-eye guy sitting with her. St. Clair is talking about classes – what to expect my first day, who my teachers are – but I've stopped listening. All I know is his crooked-tooth smile and his confident swaggery walk.

I'm just as big a fool as the rest of them.



Chapter four

The H-through-P line moves slowly. The guy ahead of me is arguing with the guidance counsellor. I glance at A-through-G, and see Meredith (Chevalier) and Rashmi (Devi) have already received their class schedules and exchanged them for comparison.

“But I didn’t ask for theatre, I asked for computer science.”

The squat counsellor is patient. “I know, but computer science didn’t fit with your schedule, and your alternate did. Maybe you can take computer science next—”

“My *alternate* was computer programming.”

Hold it. My attention snaps back. Can they do that? Put us in a class we didn’t ask for? I will die – DIE – if I have to take gym again.

“Actually, David.” The counsellor sifts through her papers. “You neglected to fill out your alternate form, so we had to select the class for you. But I think you’ll find—”

The angry boy snatches his schedule from her hands and stalks off. Yikes. It’s not like it’s her fault. I step forward and say my name as kindly as possible, to make up for the jerk who just left. She gives a dimpled smile back. “I remember you, sweetie. Have a nice first day.” And she hands me a half sheet of yellow paper.

I hold my breath while I scan it. Phew. No surprises. Senior English, calculus, beginning French, physics, European history, and something dubiously called “La Vie”.

When I registered, the counsellor described “Life” as a senior-only class, similar to a study hall but with occasional guest speakers who will lecture us about budgeting and renting apartments and baking quiches. Or whatever. I’m just relieved Mom let me take it. One of the decent things about this school is that math, science, and history aren’t required for seniors. Unfortunately, Mom is a purist and refused to let me graduate without another year of all three. “You’ll never get into the right college if you take ceramics,” she warned,

frowning over my orientation packet.

Thanks, Mom. Send me away for some culture in a *city known for its art* and make me suffer through another math class. I shuffle towards Meredith and Rashmi, feeling like the third wheel but praying for some shared classes. I'm in luck. "Three with me and four with Rash!" Meredith beams and hands back my schedule. Her rainbow-coloured plastic rings click against each other.

Rash. What an unfortunate nickname. They gossip about people I don't know, and my mind wanders to the other side of the courtyard, where St. Clair waits with Josh in Q-through-Z. I wonder if I have any classes with him.

I mean, *them*. Classes with them.

The rain has stopped, and Josh kicks a puddle in St. Clair's direction. St. Clair laughs and says something that makes them both laugh even harder. Suddenly I register that St. Clair is shorter than Josh. Much shorter. It's odd I didn't notice earlier, but he doesn't carry himself like a short guy. Most are shy or defensive, or some messed-up combination of the two, but St. Clair is confident and friendly and—

"Jeez, stare much?"

"What?" I jerk my head back, but Rashmi's not talking to me. She's shaking her head at Meredith, who looks as sheepish as I feel.

"You're burning holes into St. Clair's head. It's not attractive."

"Shut up." But Meredith smiles at me and shrugs.

Well. That settles that. As if I needed another reason not to lust. Boy Wonder is officially off-limits. "Don't say anything to him," she says. "Please."

"Of course," I say.

"Because we're obviously just friends."

"Obviously."

We mill around until the head of school arrives for her welcome speech. The head is graceful and carries herself like a ballerina. She has a long neck, and her snow-white hair is pulled into a tidy knot that makes her look distinguished rather than elderly. The overall effect is Parisian, although I know from my acceptance letter she's from Chicago. Her gaze glides across us, her one hundred handpicked pupils. "Welcome to another exciting year at the School of America in Paris. I'm pleased to see so many familiar faces, and I'm even happier to see the new ones."

Apparently school speeches are one thing France can't improve.

"To the students who attended last year, I invite you all to give a warm welcome to your new freshman class and to the new upperclassmen, as well."

A smattering of polite applause. I glance around, and I'm startled to find St. Clair looking at me. He claps and lifts his hands in my direction. I blush and

jerk away.

The head keeps talking. Focus, Anna. Focus. But I feel his stare as if it were the heat of the sun. My skin grows moist with sweat. I slide underneath one of the immaculately pruned trees. Why is he staring? Is he still staring? I think he is. Why why why? Is it a good stare or a bad stare or an indifferent stare?

But when I finally look, he's not staring at me at all. He's biting his pinkie nail.

The head wraps up, and Rashmi bounds off to join the guys. Meredith leads me inside for English. The *professeur* hasn't arrived yet, so we choose seats in the back. The classroom is smaller than what I'm used to, and it has dark, gleaming trim and tall windows that look like doors. But the desks are the same, and the whiteboard and the wall-mounted pencil sharpener. I concentrate on these familiar items to ease my nerves.

"You'll like Professeur Cole," Meredith says. "She's hilarious, and she always assigns the best books."

"My dad is a novelist." I blurt this without thinking and immediately regret it.

"Really? Who?"

"James Ashley." That's his pen name. I guess Oliphant wasn't romantic enough.

"Who?"

The humiliation factor multiplies. "*The Decision? The Entrance?* They were made into movies. Forget it, they all have vague names like that—"

She leans forward, excited. "No, my mom loves *The Entrance!*"

I wrinkle my nose.

"They aren't *that* bad. I watched *The Entrance* with her once and totally cried when that girl died of leukaemia."

"Who died of leukaemia?" Rashmi plops her backpack down next to me. St. Clair trails in behind her and takes the seat in front of Meredith.

"Anna's dad wrote *The Entrance*," Meredith says.

I cough. "Not something I'm proud of."

"I'm sorry, what's *The Entrance*?" Rashmi asks.

"It's that movie about the boy who helps deliver the baby girl in the elevator, and then he grows up to fall in love with her," Meredith says as St. Clair leans back in his chair and nabs her schedule. "But the day after their engagement, she's diagnosed with leukaemia."

"Her father pushes her down the aisle in a wheelchair," I continue. "And then she dies on the honeymoon."

"Ugh," Rashmi and St. Clair say together.

Enough embarrassment. "Where's Josh?" I ask.

“He’s a junior,” Rashmi says, as if I should have known this already. “We dropped him off at pre-calc.”

“Oh.” Our conversation hits a dead end. Lovely.

“Three classes together, Mer. Give us yours.” St. Clair leans back again and steals my half sheet. “Ooo, beginning French.”

“Told you.”

“It’s not so bad.” He hands back my schedule and smiles. “You’ll be reading the breakfast menu without me before you know it.”

Hmm, maybe I don’t want to learn French.

Argh! Boys turn girls into such idiots.

“*Bonjour à tous.*” A woman wearing a bold turquoise dress strides in and smacks her coffee cup down on the podium. She’s youngish, and she has the blondest hair I’ve ever seen on a teacher. “For the—” Her eyes scan the room until they land on me.

What? What did I do?

“For the singular person who doesn’t know me, *je m’appelle Professeur Cole.*” She gives an exaggerated curtsy, and the class laughs. They swivel around to stare.

“Hello,” I say in a tiny voice.

Suspicious confirmed. Out of the twenty-five people present – the entire senior class – I’m the only new student. This means my classmates have yet another advantage over me, because every one of them is familiar with the teachers. The school is so small that each subject is taught by the same *professeur* in all four grades.

I wonder what student left to vacate my position? Probably someone cooler than me. Someone with dreadlocks and pin-up girl tattoos and connections in the music industry.

“I see the janitorial staff has ignored my wishes once again,” Professeur Cole says. “Everyone up. You know the drill.”

I don’t, but I push my desk when everyone else starts pushing theirs. We arrange them in a big circle. It’s odd to see all of my classmates at the same time. I take the opportunity to size them up. I don’t *think* I stand out, but their jeans and shoes and backpacks are more expensive than mine. They look cleaner, shinier.

No surprise there. My mom is a high school biology teacher, which doesn’t give us a lot of extra spending money. Dad pays for the mortgage and helps with the bills, but it’s not enough, and Mom is too proud to ask for more. She says he’d refuse her anyway and just go buy another cross-trainer.

There may be some truth to that.

The rest of the morning passes in a blur. I like Professeur Cole, and my math teacher, Professeur Babineaux, is nice enough. He's Parisian, and he waggles his eyebrows and spits when he talks. To be fair, I don't think the spitting is a French thing. I think he just has a lisp. It's hard to tell with the accent.

After that, I have beginning French. Professeur Gillet turns out to be another Parisian. Figures. They always send in native speakers for foreign language classes. My Spanish teachers were always rolling their eyes and exclaiming, "*¡Aye, dios mio!*" whenever I raised my hand. They got frustrated when I couldn't grasp a concept that seemed obvious to them.

I stopped raising my hand.

As predicted, the class is a bunch of freshmen. And me. Oh, and one junior, the angry scheduling guy from this morning. He introduces himself enthusiastically as Dave, and I can tell he's as relieved as I am not to be the only upperclassman.

Maybe Dave is pretty cool after all.

At noon, I follow the stampede to the cafeteria. I avoid the main line and go straight to the counter with the choose-your-own fruit and bread, even though the pasta smells amazing. I'm such a wuss. I'd rather starve than try to order in French. "*Oui, oui!*" I'd say, pointing at random words on the chalkboard. Then Chef Handlebar would present me with something revolting, and I'd have to buy it out of shame. *Of course I meant to order the roasted pigeon! Mmm! Just like Nanna's.*

Meredith and her friends are lounging at the same table as this morning. I take a deep breath and join them. To my relief, no one looks surprised. Meredith asks St. Clair if he's seen his girlfriend yet. He relaxes into his chair. "No, but we're meeting tonight."

"Did you see her this summer? Have her classes started? What's she taking this semester?" She keeps asking questions about Ellie to which he gives short replies. Josh and Rashmi are making out – I can actually see tongue – so I turn to my bread and grapes. How biblical of me.

The grapes are smaller than I'm used to, and the skin is slightly textured. Is that dirt? I dip my napkin in water and dab at the tiny purple globes. It helps, but they're still sort of rough. Hmm. St. Clair and Meredith stop talking. I glance up to find them staring at me in matching bemusement. "What?"

"Nothing," he says. "Continue your grape bath."

"They were dirty."

"Have you tried one?" she asks.

"No, they've still got these little mud flecks." I hold one up to show them.

St. Clair plucks it from my fingers and pops it into his mouth. I'm hypnotized by his lips, his throat, as he swallows.

I hesitate. Would I rather have clean food or his good opinion?

He picks up another and smiles. "Open up."

I open up.

The grape brushes my lower lip as he slides it in. It explodes in my mouth, and I'm so startled by the juice that I nearly spit it out. The flavour is intense, more like grape candy than actual fruit. To say I've tasted nothing like it before is an understatement. Meredith and St. Clair laugh. "Wait until you try them as wine," she says.

St. Clair twirls a forkful of pasta. "So. How was French class?"

The abrupt subject change makes me shudder. "Professeur Gillet is scary. She's all frown lines." I tear off a piece of baguette. The crust crackles, and the inside is light and springy. Oh, *man*. I shove another hunk into my mouth.

Meredith looks thoughtful. "She can be intimidating at first, but she's really nice once you get to know her."

"Mer is her star pupil," St. Clair says.

Rashmi breaks apart from Josh, who looks dazed by the fresh air. "She's taking advanced French *and* advanced Spanish," she adds.

"Maybe you can be my tutor," I say to Meredith. "I stink at foreign languages. The only reason this place overlooked my Spanish grades was because the head reads my father's dumb novels."

"How do you know?" she asks.

I roll my eyes. "She mentioned it once or twice in my phone interview." She kept asking questions about casting decisions for *The Lighthouse*. Like Dad has any say in that. Or like I care. She didn't realize my cinematic tastes are a bit more sophisticated.

"I'd like to learn Italian," Meredith says. "But they don't offer it here. I want to go to college in Rome next year. Or maybe London. I could study it there, too."

"Surely Rome is a better place to study Italian?" I ask.

"Yeah, well." She steals a glance at St. Clair. "I've always liked London."

Poor Mer. She's got it bad.

"What do you want to do?" I ask him. "Where are you going?"

St. Clair shrugs. It's slow and full-bodied, surprisingly French. The same shrug the waiter at the restaurant last night gave me when I asked if they served pizza. "Don't know. It depends, though I'd like to study history." He leans forward, like he's about to share a naughty secret. "I've always wanted to be one of those blokes they interview on BBC or PBS specials. You know, with the

crazy eyebrows and suede elbow patches.”

Just like me! Sort of. “I want to be on the classic movies channel and discuss Hitchcock and Capra with Robert Osborne. He hosts most of their programmes. I mean I know he’s an old dude, but he’s so freaking cool. He knows *everything* about film.”

“Really?” He sounds genuinely interested.

“St. Clair’s head is always in history books the size of dictionaries,” Meredith interrupts. “It’s hard to get him out of his room.”

“That’s because Ellie’s always in there,” Rashmi says drily.

“You’re one to talk.” He gestures towards Josh. “Not to mention...Henri.”

“Henri!” Meredith says, and she and St. Clair burst into laughter.

“One frigging afternoon, and you’ll never let me forget it.” Rashmi glances at Josh, who stabs his pasta.

“Who’s Henri?” I trip over the pronunciation. *En-ree*.

“This tour guide on a field trip to Versailles sophomore year,” St. Clair says. “Skinny little bugger, but Rashmi ditched us in the Hall of Mirrors and threw herself at him—”

“I did not!”

Meredith shakes her head. “They groped, like, all afternoon. Full public display.”

“The whole school waited on the bus for two hours, because she forgot what time we were supposed to meet back,” he says.

“It was NOT two hours—”

Meredith continues. “Professeur Hansen finally tracked her down behind some shrubbery in the formal gardens, and she had teeth marks all over her neck.”

“Teeth marks!” St. Clair snorts.

Rashmi fumes. “Shut up, English Tongue.”

“Huh?”

“English Tongue,” she says. “That’s what we all called you after your and Ellie’s *breathtaking* display at the street fair last spring.” St. Clair tries to protest, but he’s laughing too hard. Meredith and Rashmi continue jabbing back and forth, but...I’m lost again. I wonder if Matt is a better kisser now that he has someone more experienced to practise on. He was probably a bad kisser because of me.

Oh, no.

I’m a bad kisser. I am, I must be.

Someday I’ll be awarded a statue shaped like a pair of lips, and it’ll be engraved with the words WORLD’S WORST KISSER. And Matt will give a

speech about how he only dated me because he was desperate, but I didn't put out, so I was a waste of time because Cherrie Milliken liked him all along and she totally puts out. Everyone knows it.

Oh God. Does *Toph* think I'm a bad kisser?

It only happened once. My last night at the movie theatre was also the last night before I left for France. It was slow, and we'd been alone in the lobby for most of the evening. Maybe because it was my final shift, maybe because we wouldn't see each other again for four months, maybe because it felt like a last chance – whatever the reason, we were reckless. We were brave. The flirting escalated all night long, and by the time we were told to go home, we couldn't walk away. We just kept...drawing out the conversation.

And then, finally, he said he would miss me.

And then, finally, he kissed me under the buzzing marquee.

And then I left.

"Anna? Are you all right?" someone asks.

The whole table is staring at me.

Don't cry. Don't cry. Don't cry. "Um. Where's the bathroom?" The bathroom is my favourite excuse for any situation. No one ever enquires further once you mention it.

"The toilets are down the hall." St. Clair looks concerned but doesn't dare ask. He's probably afraid I'll talk about tampon absorbency or mention the dreaded P-word.

I spend the rest of lunch in a stall. I miss home so much that it physically hurts. My head throbs, my stomach is nauseous, and it's all so unfair. I never asked to be sent here. I had my own friends and my own inside jokes and my own stolen kisses. I wish my parents had offered me the choice: "Would you like to spend your senior year in Atlanta or Paris?"

Who knows? Maybe I would have picked Paris.

What my parents never considered is that I just wanted a choice.



Chapter five

To: Anna Oliphant <bananaelephant@femmefilmfreak.net>
From: Bridgette Saunderwick <bridgesandwich@freebiemail.com>
Subject: Don't look now but...

...the bottom right corner of your bed is untucked. HA! Made you look. Now stop smoothing out invisible wrinkles. Seriously. How's Le Academe du Fraunch? Any hotties I should know about? Speaking of, guess who's in my calc class?? Drew! He dyed his hair black and got a lip ring. And he's totally callipygian (look it up, lazy ass). I sat with the usual at lunch, but it wasn't the same without you. Not to mention freaking Cherrie showed up. She kept flipping her hair around, and I swear I heard you humming that TRESemmé commercial. I'll gouge out my eyes with Sean's Darth Maul action figure if she sits with us every day. By the way, your mom hired me to babysit him after school, so I'd better go. Don't want him to die on my watch.

You suck. Come home.

Bridge

P.S. Tomorrow they're announcing section leaders in band. Wish me luck. If they give my spot to Kevin Quiggley, I'll gouge out HIS eyes with Darth Maul.

Callipygian. Having shapely buttocks. Nice one, Bridge.

My best friend is a word fiend. One of her most prized possessions is her *OED*, which she bought for practically nothing at a yard sale two years ago. *The Oxford English Dictionary* is a twenty-volume set that not only provides definitions of words but their histories as well. Bridge is always throwing big words into conversations, because she loves to watch people squirm and bluff their way around them. I learned a long time ago not to pretend to know what she was talking about. She'd call me on it every time.

So Bridgette collects words and, apparently, my life.

I can't believe Mom hired her to watch Sean. I know she's the best choice, since we were always watching him together, but still. It's weird she's there without me. And it's weird that she's talking to my mom while I'm stuck here on the other side of the world. Next she'll tell me she got a second job at the movie theatre.

Speaking of, Toph hasn't emailed me in two days. It's not like I expected him to write every day, or even every week, but...there was an undeniable *something* between us. I mean, we *kissed*. Will this thing – whatever it is – end now that I'm here?

His real name is Christopher, but he hates being called Chris, so he goes by Toph instead. He has shocking green eyes and wicked sideburns. We're both left-handed, we both love the fake nacho cheese at the concession stand, and we both hate Cuba Gooding Jr. I've crushed on Toph since my first day on the job, when he stuck his head under the ICEE machine and guzzled it straight from the tap to make me laugh. He had Blue Raspberry Mouth for the rest of his shift.

Not many people can pull off blue teeth. But believe me, Toph can.

I refresh my inbox – just in case – but nothing new appears. I've been planted in front of my computer for several hours, waiting for Bridge to get out of school. I'm glad she emailed me. For some reason, I wanted her to write first. Maybe because I wanted her to think I was so happy and busy that I didn't have time to talk. When, in reality, I'm sad and alone.

And hungry. My mini-fridge is empty.

I had dinner in the cafeteria but avoided the main food line again, stuffing myself with more bread, which only lasts so long. Maybe St. Clair will order breakfast for me again in the morning. Or Meredith; I bet she'd do it.

I reply to Bridge, telling her about my new sort-of-friends, the crazy cafeteria with restaurant-quality food, and the giant Panthéon down the road. Despite myself, I describe St. Clair, and mention how in physics he leaned over Meredith to borrow a pen from me, right when Professeur Wakefield was assigning lab partners. So the teacher thought he was sitting next to me, and now St. Clair is my lab partner for the WHOLE YEAR.

Which was the best thing that happened all day.

I also tell Bridge about the mysterious Life class, La Vie, because she and I spent the entire summer speculating. (Me: "I bet we'll debate the Big Bang and the Meaning of Life." Bridge: "Dude, they'll probably teach you breathing techniques and how to convert food into energy.") All we did today was sit quietly and work on homework.

What a pity.

I spent the period reading the first novel assigned for English. And, wow. If I hadn't realized I was in France yet, I do now. Because *Like Water for Chocolate* has sex in it. LOTS of sex. A woman's desire literally lights a building on fire, and then a soldier throws her naked body onto a horse, and they totally do it while galloping away. There's no way they would have let me read this back in the Bible Belt. The sexiest we ever got was *The Scarlet Letter*.

I must tell Bridge about this book.

It's almost midnight when I finish the email, but the hallway is still noisy. The juniors and seniors have a lot of freedom because, supposedly, we're mature enough to handle it. I am, but I have serious doubts as to my classmates. The senior across the hall already has a pyramid of beer bottles stacked outside his door because, in Paris, the drinking age is eighteen.

Another thing that feels totally weird around here.

I wonder if my mother had any idea it'd be legal for me to get wasted when she agreed to this. She looked pretty surprised when they mentioned it at the Life Skills Seminars, and I got a long lecture on responsibility that night at dinner. But I don't plan on getting drunk. I've always thought beer smells like urine.

There are a few part-timers who work the front desk, but only one live-in Résidence Director. His name is Nate, and his apartment is on the first floor. He's in graduate school at some university around here. SOAP must pay him a lot to live with us.

Nate is in his twenties, and he's short and pale and has a shaved head. Which sounds strange but is actually attractive. He's soft-spoken and seems like the kind of guy who'd be a good listener, but his tone exudes responsibility and a don't-mess-with-me attitude. My parents loved him. He also has a bowl of condoms next to his door.

I wonder if my parents saw that.

The freshmen and sophomores are in another dormitory. They have to share rooms, and their floors are divided by sex, and they have tons of supervision. They also have enforced curfews. We don't. We just have to sign a log whenever we come and go at night so Nate knows we're still alive. Yeah. I'm sure no one ever takes advantage of this high security.

I drag myself down the hall to use the bathroom. I take my place in line – there's always a line, even at midnight – behind Amanda, the girl who attacked St. Clair at breakfast. She smirks at my faded jeans and my vintage Orange Crush T-shirt.

I didn't know she lived on my floor. Super.

We don't speak. I trace the floral pattern on the wallpaper with my fingers. Résidence Lambert is a peculiar mix of Parisian refinement and teenage practicality. Crystal light fixtures give the dormitory halls a golden glow, but fluorescent bulbs hum inside our bedrooms. The floors are glossy hardwood but lined with industrial-grade rugs. Fresh flowers and Tiffany lamps grace the lobby, but the chairs are ratty love seats, and the tables are carved with initials and rude words.

“So you’re the new *Brandon*,” Amanda says.

“Excuse me?”

“Brandon. Number twenty-five. He was expelled from school last year; one of the teachers found *coke* in his backpack.” She looks me over again and frowns. “Where are you *from*, anyway?” But I know what she’s really asking. She wants to know why they picked someone like me to take his place.

“Atlanta.”

“*Oh*,” she says. As if that explains my complete and utter hick-ness. Screw her. It’s one of the largest cities in America.

“So you and St. Clair seemed pretty *friendly* at breakfast.”

“Um.” Is she threatened by me?

“I wouldn’t get any ideas if I were you,” she continues. “Not even *you’re* pretty enough to steal him from his girlfriend. They’ve been together *for ever*.”

Was that a compliment? Or not? Her emphasizing thing is really getting on my nerves. (My *nerves*.)

Amanda gives a fake, bored yawn. “Interesting *hair*.”

I touch it self-consciously. “Thanks. My friend bleached it.” Bridge added the thick band to my dark brown hair just last week. Normally, I keep the stripe tucked behind my right ear, but tonight it’s back in a ponytail.

“Do you like it?” she asks. Universal bitch-speak for *I think it’s hideous*.

I drop my hand. “Yeah. That’s why I did it.”

“You know, I wouldn’t pull it back like that. You kinda look like a *skunk*.”

“At least she doesn’t reek like one.” Rashmi appears behind me. She’d been visiting Meredith; I’d heard their muffled voices through my walls. “Delightful perfume, Amanda. Use a little more next time. I don’t know if they can smell you in London.”

Amanda snarls. “Nice *glasses*.”

“Good one,” Rashmi deadpans, but I notice she adjusts them anyway. Her nails are electric blue, the same shade as her frames. She turns to me. “I live two floors up, room six-o-one, if you need anything. See you at breakfast.”

So she doesn’t dislike me! Or maybe she just hates Amanda more. Either way, I’m thankful, and I call goodbye to her retreating figure. She waves a hand and moves into the stairwell as Nate comes out of it. He approaches us in his quiet, friendly manner.

“Going to bed soon, ladies?”

Amanda smiles sweetly. “Of course.”

“Great. Did you have a nice first day, Anna?”

It’s so peculiar how everyone here already knows my name. “Yeah. Thanks, Nate.”

He nods as if I've said something worth thinking about, and then says goodnight and moves on to the guys hanging out at the other end of the hallway.

"I *hate* it when he does that," Amanda says.

"Does what?"

"Check up on us. What an *asshole*." The bathroom door opens, and a tiny redhead manoeuvres around Amanda, who just stands there like she's Queen of the Threshold. The girl must be a junior. I don't recognize her from the circle of desks in senior English. "God, did you fall in?" Amanda asks. The girl's pale skin turns pink.

"She was just using the restroom," I say.

Amanda sashays onto the tile, her fuzzy purple slippers slapping against her heels. She yanks the door shut. "Does it look like I care? *Skunk Girl*?"



Chapter six

One week into school, and I'm knee-deep in Fancy International Education.

Professeur Cole's syllabus is free of the usual Shakespeare and Steinbeck, and instead, we're focusing on translated works. Every morning she hosts the discussion of *Like Water for Chocolate* as if we were a book club and not some boring, required class.

So English is excellent.

On the other hand, my French teacher is clearly illiterate. How else to explain the fact that despite the name of our textbook – *Level One French* – Professeur Gillet insists on speaking in French only? She also calls on me a dozen times a day. I never know the answer.

Dave calls her Madame Guillotine. This is also excellent.

He's taken the class before, which is helpful but obviously not *really* helpful, as he failed it the first go-round. Dave has shaggy hair and pouty lips, and the peculiar combination of tan skin and freckles. Several girls have a crush on him. He's also in my history class. I'm with the juniors, because the seniors take government, and I've already studied it. So I sit between Dave and Josh.

Josh is quiet and reserved in class, but outside of it, his sense of humour is similar to St. Clair's. It's easy to understand why they're such good friends. Meredith says they idolize each other, Josh because of St. Clair's innate charisma, and St. Clair because Josh is an astounding artist. I rarely see Josh without his brush pen or sketchbook. His work is incredible – thick bold strokes and teeny exquisite details – and his fingers are always stained with ink.

But the most notable aspect of my new education is the one that takes place outside of class. The one never mentioned in the glossy brochures. And that is this: attending boarding school is like *living inside* a high school. I can't get away. Even when I'm in my bedroom, my ears are blasted by pop music, fist-fights over washing machines, and drunk dancing in the stairwell. Meredith claims it'll settle down once the novelty wears off for the juniors, but I'm not holding my breath.

However.

It's Friday night, and Résidence Lambert has cleared out. My classmates are hitting the bars, and I have peace for the first time. If I close my eyes, I can almost believe I'm back home. Except for the opera. The Opera Diva sings most evenings at the restaurant across the street. For someone with such a huge voice, she's surprisingly small. She's also one of those people who shaves her eyebrows and draws them back on with a pencil. She looks like an extra from *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*.

Bridge calls as I'm watching *Rushmore* from the comfort of my mini-bed. It's the film that launched Wes Anderson. Wes is amazing, a true auteur involved in every aspect of production, with a trademark style recognizable in any frame – wistful and quirky, deadpan and dark. *Rushmore* is one of my favourites. It's about a guy named Max Fischer who is obsessed with, among many things, the private school that kicked him out. What would my life be like if I were as passionate about SOAP as Max is about Rushmore Academy? For starters, I probably wouldn't be alone in my bedroom covered in white pimple cream.

"Annnnn-uhhhhhh," Bridge says. "I haaaaate themmmm."

She didn't get section leader in band. Which is lame, because everyone knows she's the most talented drummer in school. The percussion instructor gave it to Kevin Quiggley, because he thought the guys on the drumline wouldn't respect Bridge as a leader – because she's a girl.

Yeah, well, now they won't. Jerk.

So Bridge hates band and hates the instructor and hates Kevin, who is a twerp with a disproportionately large ego. "Just wait," I say. "Soon you'll be the next Meg White or Sheila E., and Kevin Quiggley will brag about how he *knew you back when*. And then when he approaches you after some big show, expecting special treatment and a backstage pass? You can sashay right past him without so much as a backwards glance."

I hear the weary smile in her voice. "Why'd you move away again, Banana?"

"Because my father is made of suck."

"The purest strain, dude."

We talk until three a.m., so I don't wake up until early afternoon. I scramble to get dressed before the cafeteria closes. It's only open for brunch on Saturdays and Sundays. It's quiet when I arrive, but Rashmi and Josh and St. Clair are seated at their usual table.

The pressure is on. They've teased me all week, because I've avoided anything that requires ordering. I've made excuses ("I'm allergic to beef", "Nothing tastes better than bread", "Ravioli is overrated"), but I can't avoid it for ever. Monsieur Boutin is working the counter again. I grab a tray and take a

deep breath.

“*Bonjour*, uh...soup? *Sopa? S’il vous plaît?*”

“Hello” and “please”. I’ve learned the polite words first, in hopes that the French will forgive me for butchering the remainder of their beautiful language. I point to the vat of orangey-red soup. Butternut squash, I think. The smell is extraordinary, like sage and autumn. It’s early September, and the weather is still warm. When does fall come to Paris?

“Ah! *Soupe*,” he gently corrects.

“*Sí, soupe*. I mean, *oui. Oui!*” My cheeks burn. “And, um, the uh – chicken-salad-green-bean thingy?”

Monsieur Boutin laughs. It’s a jolly, bowl-full-of-jelly, Santa Claus laugh. “Chicken and *haricots verts*, *oui*. You know, you may speak Ingleesh to me. I understand eet vairy well.”

My blush deepens. Of course he’d speak English in an American school. And I’ve been living on stupid pears and baguettes for five days. He hands me a bowl of soup and a small plate of chicken salad, and my stomach rumbles at the sight of hot food.

“*Merci*,” I say.

“*De rien*. You’re welcome. And I ’ope you don’t skeep meals to avoid me any more!” He places his hand on his chest, as if brokenhearted. I smile and shake my head no. I can do this. I can do this. I can—

“NOW THAT WASN’T SO TERRIBLE, WAS IT, ANNA?” St. Clair hollers from the other side of the cafeteria.

I spin around and give him the finger down low, hoping Monsieur Boutin can’t see. St. Clair responds by grinning and giving me the British version, the V-sign with his first two fingers. Monsieur Boutin tuts behind me with good nature. I pay for my meal and take the seat next to St. Clair. “Thanks. I forgot how to flip off the English. I’ll use the correct hand gesture next time.”

“My pleasure. Always happy to educate.” He’s wearing the same clothing as yesterday, jeans and a ratty T-shirt with Napoleon’s silhouette on it. When I asked him about it, he said Napoleon was his hero. “Not because he was a decent bloke, mind you. He was an arse. But he was a short arse, like myself.”

I wonder if he slept at Ellie’s. That’s probably why he hasn’t changed his clothes. He rides the *métro* to her college every night, and they hang out there. Rashmi and Mer have been worked up, like maybe Ellie thinks she’s too good for them now.

“You know, Anna,” Rashmi says, “most Parisians understand English. You don’t have to be so shy.”

Yeah. Thanks for pointing that out now.

Josh puts his hands behind his head and tilts back his chair. His shirtsleeves roll up to expose a skull-and-crossbones tattoo on his upper right arm. I can tell by the thick strokes that it's his own design. The black ink is dark against his pale skin. It's an awesome tattoo, though sort of comical on his long, skinny arm. "That's true," he says. "I barely speak a word, and I get by."

"That's not something I'd brag about." Rashmi wrinkles her nose, and Josh snaps forward in his chair to kiss it.

"Christ, there they go again." St. Clair scratches his head and looks away.

"Have they always been this bad?" I ask, lowering my voice.

"No. Last year they were worse."

"Yikes. Been together long, then?"

"Er, last winter?"

"That's quite a while."

He shrugs and I pause, debating whether I want to know the answer to my next question. Probably not, but I ask anyway. "How long have you and Ellie been dating?"

St. Clair thinks for a moment. "About a year now, I suppose." He takes a sip of coffee – everyone here seems to drink it – then slams down the cup with a loud CLUNK that startles Rashmi and Josh. "Oh, I'm sorry," he says. "Did that bother you?"

He turns to me and opens his brown eyes wide in exasperation. I suck in my breath. Even when he's annoyed, he's beautiful. Comparing him to Toph isn't even possible. St. Clair is a different kind of attractive, a different species altogether.

"Change of subject." He points a finger at me. "I thought southern belles were supposed to have southern accents."

I shake my head. "Only when I talk to my mom. Then it slips out because she has one. Most people in Atlanta don't have an accent. It's pretty urban. A lot of people speak gangsta, though," I add jokingly.

"Fo' shiz," he replies in his polite English accent.

I spurt orangey-red soup across the table. St. Clair gives a surprised ha-HA kind of laugh, and I'm laughing, too, the painful kind like abdominal crunches. He hands me a napkin to wipe my chin. "Fo'. Shiz." He repeats it solemnly.

Cough cough. "Please don't ever stop saying that. It's too—" I gasp. "Much."

"You oughtn't to have said that. Now I shall have to save it for special occasions."

"My birthday is in February." Cough choke wheeze. "Please don't forget."

"And mine was yesterday," he says.

"No, it wasn't."

“Yes. It was.” He mops the remainder of my spewed lunch from the tabletop. I try to take the napkins to clean it myself, but he waves my hand away.

“It’s the truth,” Josh says. “I forgot, man. Happy belated birthday.”

“It wasn’t really your birthday, was it? You would’ve said something.”

“I’m serious. Yesterday was my eighteenth birthday.” He shrugs and tosses the napkins onto his empty tray. “My family isn’t one for cakes and party hats.”

“But you have to have cake on your birthday,” I say. “It’s the rules. It’s the best part.” I remember the *Star Wars* cake Mom and Bridge and I made for Seany last summer. It was lime green and shaped like Yoda’s head. Bridge even bought cotton candy for his ear hair.

“This is exactly why I never bring it up, you know.”

“But you did something special last night, right? I mean, Ellie took you out?”

He picks up his coffee, and then sets it back down again without drinking. “My birthday is just another day. And I’m fine with that. I don’t need the cake, I promise.”

“Okay, okay. Fine.” I raise my hands in surrender. “I won’t wish you happy birthday. Or even a belated happy Friday.”

“Oh, you can wish me happy Friday.” He smiles again. “I have no objection to Fridays.”

“Speaking of,” Rashmi says to me. “Why didn’t you go out with us last night?”

“I had plans. With my friend. Bridgette.”

All three of them stare, waiting for further explanation.

“Phone plans.”

“But you’ve been out this week?” St. Clair asks. “You’ve actually left campus?”

“Sure.” Because I have. To get to other parts of campus.

St. Clair raises his eyebrows. “You are such a liar.”

“Let me get this straight.” Josh places his hands in prayer position. His fingers are slender, like the rest of his body, and he has a black ink splotch on one index finger. “You’ve been in Paris for an entire week and have yet to see the city? Any part of it?”

“I went out with my parents last weekend. I saw the Eiffel Tower.” From a distance.

“With your parents, brilliant. And your plans for tonight?” St. Clair asks. “Doing some laundry, perhaps? Scrubbing the shower?”

“Hey. Scrubbing is underrated.”

Rashmi furrows her brow. “What are you gonna eat? The cafeteria will be closed.” Her concern is touching, but I notice she’s not inviting me to join her

and Josh. Not that I'd want to go out with them anyway. As for dinner, I'd planned on cruising the dorm's vending machine. It's not well stocked, but I can make it work.

"That's what I thought," St. Clair says when I don't respond. He shakes his head. His dark messy hair has a few curls in it today. It's quite breathtaking, really. If there were an Olympics competition in hair, St. Clair would totally win, hands down. Ten-point-oh. Gold medal.

I shrug. "It's only been a week. It's not a big deal."

"Let's go over the facts one more time," Josh says. "This is your first weekend away from home?"

"Yes."

"Your first weekend without parental supervision?"

"Yes."

"Your first weekend without parental supervision *in Paris*? And you want to spend it in your bedroom? Alone?" He and Rashmi exchange pitying glances. I look at St. Clair for help, but find him staring at me with his head tilted to the side.

"What?" I ask, irritated. "Soup on my chin? Green bean between my teeth?"

St. Clair smiles to himself. "I like your stripe," he finally says. He reaches out and touches it lightly. "You have perfect hair."



Chapter seven

The party people have left the dorm. I munch on vending machine snacks and update my website. So far I've tried: a Bounty bar, which turned out to be the same thing as a Mounds, and a package of madeleines, shell-shaped cakes that were stale and made me thirsty. Together they've raised my blood sugar to a sufficient working level.

Since I have no new movies to review for Femme Film Freak (as I'm severed from everything good and pure and wonderful about America – the cinema), I fiddle with the layout. Create a new banner. Edit an old review. In the evening, Bridge emails me:

Went with Matt and Cherrie M (for meretricious) to the movies last night. And guess what? Toph asked about you!! I told him you're great BUT you're REALLY looking forward to your December visit. I think he got the hint. We talked about his band for a minute (still no shows, of course) but Matt was making faces the whole time, so we had to go. You know how he feels about Toph. OH! And Cherrie tried to talk us into seeing your dad's latest tearjerker. I KNOW.

You suck. Come home.

Bridge

Meretricious. Showily attractive but cheap or insincere. Yes! That is so Cherrie. I just hope Bridge didn't make me sound too desperate, despite my longing for Toph to email me. And I can't believe Matt is still weird around him, even though we're not dating any more. Everyone likes Toph. Well, sometimes he annoys the managers, but that's because he tends to forget his work schedule. And call in sick.

I read her email again, hoping for the words *Toph says he's madly in love with you, and he'll wait for all eternity* to appear. No such luck. So I browse my favourite message board to see what they're saying about Dad's new film. The reviews for *The Decision* aren't great, despite what it's raking in at the box office. One regular, clockworkorange88, said this: *It sucked balls. Dirty balls. Like I-ran-a-mile-in-July-while-wearing-leather-pants balls.*

Sounds about right.

After a while I get bored and do a search for *Like Water for Chocolate*. I want to make sure I haven't missed any themes before writing my essay. It's not due for two weeks, but I have a lot of time on my hands right now. Like, all night.

Blah blah blah. Nothing interesting. And I'm just about to recheck my email when this passage leaps from the screen: *Throughout the novel, heat is a symbol for sexual desire. Tita can control the heat inside her kitchen, but the fire inside of her own body is a force of both strength and destruction.*

"Anna?" Someone knocks on my door, and it startles me out of my seat.

No. Not *someone*. St. Clair.

I'm wearing an old Mayfield Dairy T-shirt, complete with yellow-and-brown cow logo, and hot pink flannel pyjama bottoms covered in giant strawberries. I am not even wearing a bra.

"Anna, I know you're in there. I can see your light."

"Hold on a sec!" I blurt. "I'll be right there." I grab my black hoodie and zip it up over the cow's face before wrenching open the door. "Hisorryaboutthat. Come in."

I open the door wide but he stands there for a moment, just staring at me. I can't read the expression on his face. Then he breaks into a mischievous smile and brushes past me.

"Nice strawberries."

"Shut up."

"No, I mean it. Cute."

And even though he doesn't mean it like *I-want-to-leave-my-girlfriend-and-start-dating-you* cute, something flickers inside of me. The "force of strength and destruction" Tita de la Garza knew so well. St. Clair stands in the centre of my room. He scratches his head, and his T-shirt lifts up on one side, exposing a slice of bare stomach.

Foomp! My inner fire ignites.

"It's really...er...clean," he says.

Fizz. Flames extinguished.

"Is it?" I know my room is tidy, but I haven't even bought a proper window cleaner yet. Whoever cleaned my windows last had no idea how to use a bottle of Windex. The key is to only spray a little at a time. Most people spray too much and then it gets in the corners, which are hard to dry without leaving streaks or lint behind—

"Yes. Alarmingly so."

St. Clair wanders around, picking up things and examining them like I did in Meredith's room. He inspects the collection of banana and elephant figurines

lined up on my dresser. He holds up a glass elephant and raises his dark eyebrows in question.

“It’s my nickname.”

“Elephant?” He shakes his head. “Sorry, I don’t see it.”

“Anna Oliphant. ‘Banana Elephant’. My friend collects those for me, and I collect toy bridges and sandwiches for her. Her name is Bridgette Saunderwick,” I add.

St. Clair sets down the glass elephant and wanders to my desk. “So can anyone call you Elephant?”

“Banana Elephant. And no. Definitely not.”

“I’m sorry,” he says. “But not for that.”

“What? Why?”

“You’re fixing everything I set down.” He nods at my hands, which are readjusting the elephant. “It wasn’t polite of me to come in and start touching your things.”

“Oh, it’s okay,” I say quickly, letting go of the figurine. “You can touch anything of mine you want.”

He freezes. A funny look runs across his face before I realize what I’ve said. I didn’t mean it like *that*.

Not that *that* would be so bad.

But I like Toph, and St. Clair has a girlfriend. And even if the situation were different, Mer still has dibs. I’d never do that to her after how nice she was my first day. And my second. And every other day this week.

Besides, he’s just an attractive boy. Nothing to get worked up over. I mean, the streets of Europe are filled with beautiful guys, right? Guys with grooming regimens and proper haircuts and stylish coats. Not that I’ve seen anyone even remotely as good-looking as Monsieur Étienne St. Clair. But still.

He turns his face away from mine. Is it my imagination, or does he look embarrassed? But why would he be embarrassed? I’m the one with the idiotic mouth.

“Is that your boyfriend?” He points to my laptop’s wallpaper, a photo of my co-workers and me goofing around. It was taken before the midnight release of the latest fantasy-novel-to-film adaptation. Most of us were dressed like elves or wizards. “The one with his eyes closed?”

“WHAT?” He thinks I’d date a guy like *Hercules*? Hercules is an assistant manager. He’s ten years older than me and, yes, that’s his real name. And even though he’s sweet and knows more about Japanese horror films than anyone, he also has a ponytail.

A ponytail.

“Anna, I’m kidding. This one. Sideburns.” He points to Toph, the reason I love the picture so much. Our heads are turned into each other, and we’re wearing secret smiles, as if sharing a private joke.

“Oh. Uh...no. Not really. I mean, Toph was my almost-boyfriend. I moved away before...” I trail off, uncomfortable. “Before much could happen.”

St. Clair doesn’t respond. After an awkward silence, he puts his hands in his pockets and rocks back on his heels. “Provide for all.”

“What?” I’m startled.

“*Tout pourvoir.*” He nods at a pillow on my bed. The words are embroidered above a picture of a unicorn. It was a gift from my grandparents, and the motto and crest are for the Oliphant clan. A long time ago, my grandfather moved to America to marry my grandmother, but he’s still devoted to all things Scottish. He’s always buying Seany and me things decorated with the clan tartan (blue-and-green-chequered, with black and white lines). For instance, my bedspread.

“Yeah, I know that’s what it means. But how did you know?”

“*Tout pourvoir.* It’s French.”

Excellent. The Oliphant clan motto, drilled into my head since infancy, turns out to be in FRENCH, and I didn’t even know it. Thanks, Grandad. As if I didn’t already look like a moron. But how was I supposed to know a Scottish motto would be in French? I thought they hated France. Or is that just the English?

Argh, I don’t know. I always assumed it was in Latin or some other dead language.

“Your brother?” St. Clair points above my bed to the only picture I’ve hung up. Seany is grinning at the camera and pointing at one of my mother’s research turtles, which is lifting its neck and threatening to take away his finger. Mom is doing a study on the lifetime reproductive habits of snapping turtles and visits her brood in the Chattahoochee River several times a month. My brother loves to go with her, while I prefer the safety of our home. Snapping turtles are *mean*.

“Yep. That’s Sean.”

“That’s a little Irish for a family with tartan bedspreads.”

I smile. “It’s kind of a sore spot. My mom loved the name, but Grandad – my father’s father – practically died when he heard it. He was rooting for Malcolm or Ewan or Dougal instead.”

St. Clair laughs. “How old is he?”

“Seven. He’s in the second grade.”

“That’s a big age difference.”

“Well, he was either an accident or a last-ditch effort to save a failing marriage. I’ve never had the nerve to ask which.”

Wow. I can’t believe I just blurted that out.

He sits down on the edge of my bed. “Your parents are divorced?”

I hover by my desk chair, because I can’t sit next to him on the bed. Maybe when I’m used to his presence, I might be able to manage that particular feat. But not yet. “Yeah. My dad left six months after Sean was born.”

“I’m sorry.” And I can tell he means it. “Mine are separated.”

I shiver and tuck my hands underneath my arms. “Then I’m sorry, too. That sucks.”

“It’s all right. My father’s a bastard.”

“So is mine. I mean, obviously he is, if he left us when Seany was a baby. Which he totally did. But it’s also his fault I’m stuck here. In Paris.”

“I know.”

He does?

“Mer told me. But I guarantee you that my father is worse. Unfortunately, he’s the one here in Paris, while my mum is alone, thousands of miles away.”

“Your dad lives here?” I’m surprised. I know his dad is French, but I can’t imagine someone sending their child to boarding school when they live in the same city. It doesn’t make sense.

“He owns an art gallery here and another in London. He divides his time between them.”

“How often do you see him?”

“Never, if I can help it.” St. Clair turns sullen, and it dawns on me that I have no idea why he’s even here. I say as much.

“I didn’t say?” He straightens up. “Oh. Well. I knew if someone didn’t come and physically drag you outside, you’d never leave. So we’re going out.”

A strange mix of butterflies and churning erupts in my stomach. “Tonight?”

“Tonight.”

“Right.” I pause. “And Ellie?”

He falls back, and now he’s lying down on my bed. “Our plans fell through.” He says this with a vague wave of his hand, in a way that keeps me from enquiring further.

I gesture at my pyjama bottoms. “I’m not exactly dressed for it.”

“Come on, Anna. Do we honestly have to go through this again?”

I give him a doubtful look, and the unicorn pillow flies at my head. I slam it back, and he grins, slides off the bed, and smacks me full force. I grab for it but miss, and he hits me again twice before letting me catch it. St. Clair doubles over in laughter, and I whack him on the back. He tries to reclaim it, but I hold on and we wrestle back and forth until he lets go. The force throws me onto the bed, dizzy and sweaty.

St. Clair flops down beside me, breathing heavily. He’s lying so close that his

hair tickles the side of my face. Our arms are almost touching. Almost. I try to exhale, but I no longer know how to breathe. And then I remember I'm not wearing a bra.

And now I'm paranoid.

"Okay." He's panting. "Here's the –" *pant pant* – "plan."

I don't want to feel this way around him. I want things to be normal. I want to be his friend, not another stupid girl holding out for something that will never happen. I force myself up. My hair has gone all crazy and staticky from the pillow fight, so I grab an elastic band off my dresser to pull it back.

"Put on some proper trousers," he says. "And I'll show you Paris."

"That's it? That's the plan?"

"The whole shebang."

"Wow. 'Shebang'. Fancy."

St. Clair grunts and chucks the pillow at me. My phone rings. It's probably my mom; she's called every night this week. I swipe my cell off my desk, and I'm about to silence the ringer when the name flashes up. My heart stops.

Toph.



Chapter eight

“I hope you’re wearing a beret.” This is how Toph greets me.

I’m already laughing. He called! Toph called!

“Not yet.” I pace the short length of my room. “But I could pick one up for you, if you’d like. Get your name stitched onto it. You could wear it instead of your name tag.”

“I could rock a beret.” There’s a grin in his voice.

“No one can rock a beret. Not even you.”

St. Clair is still lying on my bed. He props up his head to watch me. I smile and point to the picture on my laptop. *Toph*, I mouth.

St. Clair shakes his head.

Sideburns.

Ah, he mouths back.

“So your sister came in yesterday.” Toph always refers to Bridge as my sister. We’re the same height with the same slender build, and we both have long, stick-straight hair, although hers is blond and mine is brown. And, as people who spend tons of time together are prone to do, we talk the same. Though she uses bigger words. And her arms are sculpted from the drumming. And I have the gap between my teeth, while she had braces. In other words, she’s like me, but prettier and smarter and more talented.

“I didn’t know she was a drummer,” he says. “She any good?”

“The best.”

“Are you saying that because she’s your friend, or because she’s actually decent?”

“She’s the best,” I repeat. From the corner of my eye, I see St. Clair glance at the clock on my dresser.

“My drummer abandoned ship. Think she’d be interested?”

Last summer Toph started a punk band, the Penny Dreadfuls. Many member changes and arguments over lyrical content have transpired, but no actual shows. Which is too bad. I bet Toph looks good behind a guitar.

“Actually,” I say, “I think she would. Her jerkwad percussion instructor just passed her up as section leader, and she has some rage to funnel.” I give him her number. Toph repeats it back as St. Clair taps an imaginary wristwatch. It’s only nine, so I’m not sure what his rush is. Even I know that’s early for Paris. He clears his throat loudly.

“Hey, I’m sorry. I need to go,” I say.

“Is someone there with you?”

“Uh, yeah. My friend. He’s taking me out tonight.”

A beat. “*He?*”

“He’s just a friend.” I turn my back to St. Clair. “He has a girlfriend.” I squeeze my eyes shut. Should I have said that?

“So you’re not gonna forget about us? I mean...” He slows down. “Us here in Atlanta? Ditch us for some Frenchie and never return?”

My heart thrums. “Of course not. I’ll be back at Christmas.”

“Good. Okay, Annabel Lee. I should get back to work anyway. Hercules is probably pissed I’m not covering the door. *Ciao.*”

“Actually,” I say. “It’s *au revoir.*”

“Whatever.” He laughs, and we hang up.

St. Clair gets up from the bed. “Jealous boyfriend?”

“I told you. He’s not my boyfriend.”

“But you like him.”

I blush. “Well...yeah.”

St. Clair’s expression is unreadable. Maybe annoyed. He nods towards my door. “You still want to go out?”

“What?” I’m confused. “Yeah, of course. Lemme change first.” I let him out, and five minutes later, we’re headed north. I’ve thrown on my favourite shirt, a cute thrift-store find that hugs me in the right places, and jeans and black canvas sneakers. I know sneakers aren’t very French – I should be wearing pointy boots or scary heels – but at least they aren’t white. It’s true what they say about white sneakers. Only American tourists wear them, big ugly things made for mowing grass or painting houses.

It’s a beautiful night. The lights of Paris are yellow and green and orange. The warm air swirls with the chatter of people in the streets and the clink of wine glasses in the restaurants. St. Clair has brightened back up and is detailing the more gruesome aspects of the Rasputin biography he finished this afternoon.

“So the other Russians give him this dose of cyanide in his dinner, lethal enough to kill five men, right? But it’s not doing *anything*, so Plan B – they shoot him in the back with a revolver. Which *still* doesn’t kill him. In fact, Rasputin has enough energy to strangle one of them, so they shoot him *three*

more times. And he's still struggling to get up! So they beat the bloody crap out of him, wrap him in a sheet, and throw him into an icy river. But get this—"

His eyes shimmer. It's the same look Mom gets when she's talking about turtles, or Bridge gets when she's talking about cymbals.

"During the autopsy, they discovered the actual cause of death was hypothermia. From the river! Not the poisoning or the shooting or the beating. Mother Nature. And not only that, but his arms were found frozen upright, like he'd tried to *claw his way out* from underneath the ice."

"What? No—"

Some German tourists are posing in front of a storefront with peeling golden letters. We scoot around them, so as not to wreck their picture. "It gets better," he says. "When they cremated his body, he *sat up*. No, he did! Probably because the bloke who prepared his body forgot to snip the tendons, so they shrank up when he burned—"

I nod my head in appreciation. "Ew, but cool. Go on."

"—which made his legs and body bend, but still." St. Clair smiles triumphantly. "Everyone went mad when they saw it."

"And who says history is boring?" I smile back, and everything is perfect. Almost. Because this is the moment we pass the entrance to SOAP, and now I'm further from the school than I've ever been before. My smile wavers as I revert to my natural state of being: nervous and weird.

"You know, thanks for that. The others always shut me up long before—" He notices the change in my demeanour and stops. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine."

"Yes, and has anyone ever told you that you are a terrible liar? Horrid. The worst."

"It's just—" I hesitate, embarrassed.

"Yeeesss?"

"Paris is so...foreign." I struggle for the right word. "Intimidating."

"Nah." He quickly dismisses me.

"Easy for you to say." We step around a dignified gentleman stooping over to pick up after his dog, a basset hound with a droopy stomach. Grandad warned me that the sidewalks of Paris were littered with doggie landmines, but it hasn't been the case so far. "You've been acquainted with Paris your whole life," I continue. "You speak fluent French, you dress European..."

"Pardon?"

"You know. Nice clothes, nice shoes."

He holds up his left foot, booted in something scuffed and clunky. "*These?*"

"Well, no. But you aren't in sneakers. I totally stick out. And I don't speak

French and I'm scared of the *métro* and I should probably be wearing heels, but I hate heels—"

"I'm glad you're not wearing heels," St. Clair interrupts. "Then you'd be taller than me."

"I *am* taller than you."

"Barely."

"Please. I've got three inches on you. And you're wearing boots."

He nudges me with his shoulder, and I crack a smile. "Relax," he says. "You're with me. I'm practically French."

"You're English."

He grins. "I'm American."

"An American with an English accent. Isn't that, like, twice as much for the French to hate?"

St. Clair rolls his eyes. "You ought to stop listening to stereotypes and start forming your own opinions."

"I'm not stereotyping."

"Really? Please, then, enlighten me." He points to the feet of a girl walking ahead of us. She's yakking in French on a cell phone. "What *exactly* are those?"

"Sneakers," I mumble.

"Interesting. And the gentlemen over there, on the other side of the pavement. Would you care to explain what the one on the left is wearing? Those peculiar contraptions strapped to his feet?"

They're sneakers, of course. "But hey. See that guy over there?" I nod towards a man in jean shorts and a Budweiser T-shirt. "Am *I* that obvious?"

St. Clair squints at him. "Obviously what? Balding? Overweight? Tasteless?"

"American."

He sighs melodramatically. "Honestly, Anna. You must get over this."

"I just don't want to offend anyone. I hear they offend easily."

"You're not offending anyone except me right now."

"What about her?" I point to a middle-aged woman in khaki shorts and a knit top with stars and stripes on it. She has a camera strapped to her belt and is arguing with a man in a bucket hat. Her husband, I suppose.

"Completely offensive."

"I mean, am I as obvious as her?"

"Considering she's wearing the *American flag*, I'd venture a no on that one." He bites his thumbnail. "Listen. I think I have a solution to your problem, but you'll have to wait for it. Just promise you'll stop asking me to compare you to fifty-year-old women, and I'll take care of everything."

"How? With what? A French passport?"

He snorts. “I didn’t say I’d make you French.” I open my mouth to protest, but he cuts me off. “Deal?”

“Deal,” I say uncomfortably. I don’t care for surprises. “But it better be good.”

“Oh, it’s good.” And St. Clair looks so smug that I’m about to call him on it, when I realize I can’t see our school any more.

I don’t believe it. He’s completely distracted me.

It takes a moment for me to recognize the symptoms, but my heels are bouncing and my stomach is fluttering. I’m finally excited to be out! “So where are we going?” I can’t keep the eagerness from my voice. “The Seine? I know it’s up here somewhere. Are we going to sit on the riverbank?”

“Not telling. Keep walking.”

I let this pass. What’s wrong with me? That’s the second time in one minute I’ve let him keep me in suspense. “Oh! You have to see this first.” He grabs my arm and pulls me across the street. An angry scooter honks its puny horn, and I laugh.

“Wait, what—” And then I’m knocked breathless.

We’re standing in front of an absolute beast of a cathedral. Four thick columns hold up a Gothic facade of imposing statues and rose windows and intricate carvings. A skinny bell tower stretches all the way into the inky blackness of the night sky. “What is it?” I whisper. “Is it famous? Should I know it?”

“It’s my church.”

“You go here?” I’m surprised. He doesn’t seem like the church-going type.

“No.” He nods to a stone placard, indicating I read it.

“Saint-Étienne-du-Mont. Hey! Saint-Étienne.”

He smiles. “I’ve always been a bit proprietary about it. Mum used to bring me here when I was young. We’d take a picnic lunch and eat it right here on the steps. Sometimes she’d bring her sketchbook, and she’d draw the pigeons and the taxis.”

“Your mother is an artist?”

“A painter. Her work is in the New York MoMA.” He sounds proud, and I remember what Meredith once said – that St. Clair admires Josh because he can draw so well. And that St. Clair’s father owns two art galleries. And that St. Clair is taking studio art this semester. I wonder aloud if he’s also an artist.

He shrugs. “Not really. I wish I were. Mum didn’t pass on that particular talent, just the appreciation. Josh is much better. So is Rashmi, for that matter.”

“You get along well with her, don’t you? Your mom?”

“I love my mum.” He says this matter-of-factly, with no trace of teenage shame.

We stand before the cathedral's double doors and look up, and up, and up. I picture my own mom, typing snapping turtle data into our home computer, her usual evening activity. Except it's not night-time in Atlanta. Maybe she's grocery shopping. Wading in the Chattahoochee River. Watching *The Empire Strikes Back* with Sean. I have no idea, and it bothers me.

At last, St. Clair breaks the silence. "Come along, then. Loads to see."

The further we go, the more crowded Paris gets. He talks about his mom, how she makes chocolate chip pancakes for dinner and tuna noodle casserole for breakfast. How she painted every room of her flat a different colour of the rainbow. How she collects misspellings of her name on junk mail. He says nothing of his father.

We pass another enormous structure, this one like the ruins of a medieval castle. "God, there's history everywhere," I say. "What *is* that place? Can we go in?"

"It's a museum, and sure. But not tonight. I believe it's closed," he adds.

"Oh. Yeah, of course." I try not to let my disappointment show.

St. Clair is amused. "It's only the first week of school. We have all the time in the world to visit your museum."

We. For some reason, my insides squirm. St. Clair and me. Me and St. Clair.

Soon we enter an area even more touristy than our own neighbourhood, crammed with bustling restaurants and shops and hotels. Street vendors everywhere shout in English, "Couscous! You like couscous?" and the roads are so narrow that cars can't drive on them. We walk down the middle of the street and through the jostling crowd. It feels like a carnival. "Where are we?" I wish I didn't have to ask so many questions.

"In between the rue St. Michel and the rue St. Jacques."

I shoot him a look.

"*Rue* means 'street'. And we're still in the Latin Quarter."

"Still? But we've been walking for—"

"Ten? Fifteen minutes?" he teases.

Hmph. Obviously Londoners or Parisians or whatever he is aren't used to the glory of car ownership. I miss mine, even if it does have trouble starting. And no air-conditioning. And a busted speaker. I say this, and he smiles. "Wouldn't do you any good even if you did have one. It's illegal to drive here if you're under eighteen."

"You could drive us," I say.

"No, I couldn't."

"You said you had a birthday! I *knew* you were lying, no one—"

"That's not what I meant." St. Clair laughs. "I don't know how to drive."

“You’re serious?” I can’t help the evil grin that spreads across my face. “You mean there’s something I know how to do that you don’t?”

He grins back. “Shocking, isn’t it? But I’ve never had a reason. The transit systems here, in San Francisco, in London – they’re all perfectly sufficient.”

“Perfectly sufficient.”

“Shut up.” He laughs again. “Hey, you know why they call this the Latin Quarter?”

I raise an eyebrow.

“Centuries ago, the students at La Sorbonne – it was back there.” He gestures with his hand. “It’s one of the oldest universities in the world. Anyway, the students were taught in, and spoke to each other in, Latin. And the name stuck.”

A moment of reserve. “That was it? The whole story?”

“Yes. God, you’re right. That was pants.”

I sidestep another aggressive couscous vendor. “Pants?”

“Rubbish. Crap. Shite.”

Pants. Oh heavens, that’s cute.

We turn a corner and – there it is – the River Seine. The lights of the city bob in the ripples of the water. I suck in my breath. It’s gorgeous. Couples stroll along the riverbank, and booksellers have lined up dirty cardboard boxes of paperback books and old magazines for browsing. A man with a red beard strums a guitar and sings a sad song. We listen for a minute, and St. Clair tosses a few euros into the man’s guitar case.

And then, as we’re turning our attention back towards the river, I see it.

Notre-Dame.

I recognize it from photographs, of course. But if St.Étienne is a cathedral, then it is nothing, NOTHING compared to Notre-Dame. The building is like a great ship steaming downriver. Massive. Monstrous. Majestic. It’s lit in a way that absurdly reminds me of Disney World, but it’s so much more magical than anything Walt could have dreamed up. Mounds of green vines spill down the walls and into the water, completing the fairy tale.

I slowly exhale. “It’s beautiful.”

St. Clair is watching me.

“I’ve never seen anything like it.” I don’t know what more to say.

We have to cross a bridge to get to it. I hadn’t realized it was built on an island. St. Clair tells me we’re walking to the Île de la Cité, the Island of the City, and it’s the oldest district in all of Paris. The Seine twinkles below us, deep and green, and a long boat strung with lights glides underneath the bridge. I peer over the edge. “Look! That guy is so trashed. He’s totally gonna fall off the bo —” I glance back and find St. Clair toddling on the road, several feet away from

the edge of the bridge.

For a moment, I'm confused. Then it hits me. "What? You aren't afraid of heights?"

St. Clair keeps his eyes forward, on the illuminated figure of Notre-Dame. "I just can't fathom why anyone would stand on a ledge when there's a respectable amount of walking space right next to it."

"Oh, it's about walking space, is it?"

"Drop it, or I'll quiz you about Rasputin. Or French verb conjugation."

I lean over the side of the bridge and pretend to wobble. St. Clair turns pale. "No! Don't!" He stretches out his arms like he wants to save me, then clutches his stomach like he's about to vomit instead.

"Sorry!" I jump away from the ledge. "I'm sorry, I didn't realize it was so bad."

He shakes a hand, motioning for me to stop talking. The other hand still clings to his queasy stomach.

"I'm sorry," I say again, after a moment.

"Come on." St. Clair sounds peeved, as if I was the one holding us back. He gestures to Notre-Dame. "That's not why I brought you here."

I can't fathom anything better than Notre-Dame. "We're not going inside?"

"Closed. Plenty of time to see it later, remember?" He leads me into the courtyard, and I take the opportunity to admire his backside. Callipygian. There *is* something better than Notre-Dame.

"Here," he says.

We have a perfect view of the entrance – hundreds and hundreds of tiny figures carved into three colossal archways. The statues look like stone dolls, each one separate and individualized. "They're incredible," I whisper.

"Not there. *Here*." He points to my feet.

I look down, and I'm surprised to find myself standing in the middle of a small stone circle. In the centre, directly between my feet, is a coppery-bronze octagon with a star. Words are engraved in the stone around it: *POINT ZÉRO DES ROUTES DE FRANCE*.

"Mademoiselle Oliphant. It translates to 'Point zero of the roads of France'. In other words, it's the point from which all other distances in France are measured." St. Clair clears his throat. "It's the beginning of everything."

I look back up. He's smiling.

"Welcome to Paris, Anna. I'm glad you've come."



Chapter nine

St. Clair tucks the tips of his fingers into his pockets and kicks the cobblestones with the toe of his boots. “Well?” he finally asks.

“Thank you.” I’m stunned. “It was really sweet of you to bring me here.”

“Ah, well.” He straightens up and shrugs – that full-bodied French shrug he does so well – and reassumes his usual, assured state of being. “Have to start somewhere. Now make a wish.”

“Huh?” I have such a way with words. I should write epic poetry or jingles for cat food commercials.

He smiles. “Place your feet on the star, and make a wish.”

“Oh. Okay, sure.” I slide my feet together so I’m standing in the centre. “I wish—”

“Don’t say it aloud!” St. Clair rushes forward, as if to stop my words with his body, and my stomach flips violently. “Don’t you know anything about making wishes? You only get a limited number in life. Falling stars, eyelashes, dandelions—”

“Birthday candles.”

He ignores the dig. “Exactly. So you ought to take advantage of them when they arise, and superstition says if you make a wish on *that* star, it’ll come true.” He pauses before continuing. “Which is better than the other one I’ve heard.”

“That I’ll die a painful death of poisoning, shooting, beating, and drowning?”

“Hypothermia, not drowning.” St. Clair laughs. He has a wonderful, boyish laugh. “But no. I’ve heard anyone who stands here is destined to return to Paris someday. And as I understand it, one year for you is one year too many. Am I right?”

I close my eyes. Mom and Seany appear before me. Bridge. Toph. I nod.

“All right, then. So keep your eyes closed. And make a wish.”

I take a deep breath. The cool dampness of the nearby trees fills my lungs. What do I want? It’s a difficult question.

I want to go home, but I have to admit I’ve enjoyed tonight. And what if this

is the only time in my entire life I visit Paris? I know I just told St. Clair that I don't want to be here, but there's a part of me – a teeny, tiny part – that's curious. If my father called tomorrow and ordered me home, I might be disappointed. I still haven't seen the *Mona Lisa*. Been to the top of the Eiffel Tower. Walked beneath the Arc de Triomphe.

So what else do I want?

I want to feel Toph's lips again. I want him to wait. But there's another part of me, a part I really, *really* hate, that knows even if we do make it, I'd still move away for college next year. So I'd see him this Christmas and next summer, and then...would that be it?

And then there's the other thing.

The thing I'm trying to ignore. The thing I shouldn't want, the thing I can't have.

And he's standing in front of me right now.

So what do I wish for? Something I'm not sure I want? Someone I'm not sure I need? Or someone I know I can't have?

Screw it. Let the fates decide.

I wish for the thing that is best for me.

How's that for a generalization? I open my eyes, and the wind is blowing harder. St. Clair pushes a strand of hair from his eyes. "Must have been a good one," he says.

On the way back, he leads me to a walk-up sandwich stand for a late-night snack. The yeasty smell is mouthwatering, and my stomach growls in anticipation. We order panini, sandwiches pressed flat on a hot grill. St. Clair gets his stuffed with smoked salmon and ricotta cheese and chives. I order Parma ham and Fontina cheese and sage. He calls it fast food, but what we're handed looks nothing like the limp sandwiches from the usual fast-food places back home.

St. Clair helps with the euro situation. Thankfully, euros are easy to understand. Bills and cents come in nice, even denominations. We pay and stroll down the street, enjoying the night. Crunching through the crusty bread. Letting the warm, gooey cheese run down our chins.

I moan with pleasure.

"Did you just have a foodgasm?" he asks, wiping ricotta from his lips.

"Where have you been all my life?" I ask the beautiful panini. "How is it possible I've never had a sandwich like this before?"

He takes a large bite. "Mmmph grmpa mrpha," he says, smiling. Which I'm assuming translates to something like, "Because American food is crap."

“Mmmph mrga grmpa mmrg,” I reply. Which translates to, “Yeah, but our burgers are pretty good.”

We lick the paper our sandwiches were wrapped in before throwing them away. Bliss. We’re almost back to the dormitory, and St. Clair is describing the time he and Josh received detention for throwing chewing gum at the painted ceiling – they were trying to give one of the nymphs a third nipple – when my brain begins to process something. Something odd.

We have just passed the third movie theatre in one block.

Granted, these are small theatres. One-screener, most likely. But *three* of them. In one block! How did I not notice this earlier?

Oh. Right. The cute boy.

“Are any of those in English?” I interrupt.

St. Clair looks confused. “Pardon?”

“The movie theatres. Are there any around here that play films in English?”

He cocks an eyebrow. “Don’t tell me you don’t know.”

“What? Don’t know what?”

He’s gleeful to know something I don’t. Which is annoying considering we’re both aware that he knows everything about Parisian life, whereas I have the savvy of a chocolate croissant. “And I was under the impression that you were some kind of cinema junkie.”

“What? Know *what*?”

St. Clair gestures around in an exaggerated circle, clearly loving this. “Paris... is the film appreciation...capital...of the world.”

I stop dead. “You’re kidding.”

“I’m not. You’ll never find a city that loves film more. There are hundreds, maybe even thousands, of theatres here.”

My heart feels like it’s falling inside my chest. I’m dizzy. It can’t be true.

“More than a dozen in our neighbourhood alone.”

“*What?*”

“You honestly didn’t notice?”

“No, I didn’t notice! How come no one told me?” I mean, this should have been mentioned Day One, Life Skills Seminars. This is very important information here! We resume walking, and my head strains in every direction to read the posters and marquees. *Please be in English. Please be in English. Please be in English.*

“I thought you knew. I would have said something.” He finally looks apologetic. “It’s considered pretty high art here. There are loads of first-run theatres, but even more – what do you call them? – revival houses. They play the classics and run programmes devoted to different directors or genres or obscure

Brazilian actresses or whatever.”

Breathe, Anna, breathe. “And are they in English?”

“At least a third of them, I suppose.”

A third of them! Of a few hundred – maybe even thousand! – theatres.

“Some American films are dubbed into French, but mainly those are the ones for children. The rest are left in English and given French subtitles. Here, hold on.” St. Clair plucks a magazine called *Pariscope* from the racks of a news-stand and pays a cheerful man with a hooked nose. He thrusts the magazine at me. “It comes out every Wednesday. ‘VO’ means *version originale*. ‘VF’ means *version française*, which means they’re dubbed. So stick to VO. The listings are also online,” he adds.

I tear through the magazine, and my eyes glaze over. I’ve never seen so many movie listings in my life.

“Christ, if I’d known that’s all it took to make you happy, I wouldn’t have bothered with the rest of this.”

“I love Paris,” I say.

“And I’m sure it loves you back.”

He’s still talking, but I’m not listening. There’s a Buster Keaton marathon this week. And another for teen slasher flicks. And a whole programme devoted to 1970s car chases.

“What?” I realize he’s waiting for an answer to a question I didn’t hear. When he doesn’t reply, I glance up from the listings. His gaze is frozen on a figure that has just stepped out of our dorm.

The girl is about my height. Her long hair is barely styled, but in a fashionable, Parisian sort of way. She’s wearing a short silver dress that sparkles in the lamplight, and a red coat. Her leather boots snap and click against the sidewalk. She’s looking back over her shoulder towards *Résidence Lambert* with a slight frown, but then she turns and notices St. Clair. Her entire *being* lights up.

The magazine slackens in my hands. She can only be one person.

The girl breaks into a run and launches herself into his arms. They kiss, and she laces her fingers through his hair. His beautiful, perfect hair. My stomach drops, and I turn from the spectacle.

They break apart, and she starts talking. Her voice is surprisingly low – *sultry* – but she speaks rapidly. “I know we weren’t gonna see each other tonight, but I was in the neighbourhood and thought you might want to go to that club I was telling you about. You know, the one Matthieu recommended? But you weren’t there, so I found Mer and I’ve been talking to her for the last hour, and where were you? I called your cell three times but it went straight to voicemail.”

St. Clair looks disoriented. “Er. Ellie, this is Anna. She hadn’t left the dorm all

week, so I thought I'd show her—”

To my amazement, Ellie breaks into an ear-to-ear smile. Oddly enough, it's this moment I realize that despite her husky voice and Parisian attire, she's sort of...plain. But friendly-looking.

That still doesn't mean I like her.

“Anna! From Atlanta, right? Where'd you guys go?”

She knows who I am? St. Clair describes our evening while I contemplate this strange development. Did he tell her about me? Or was it Meredith? I hope it was him, but even if it was, it's not like he said anything she found threatening. She doesn't seem alarmed that I've spent the last three hours in the company of her very attractive boyfriend. Alone.

Must be nice to have that kind of confidence.

“Okay, babe.” She cuts him off. “You can tell me the rest later. You ready to go?”

Did he say he'd go with her? I don't remember, but he nods his head. “Yeah. Yeah, let me grab my, er—” He glances at me, and then towards the entrance of our dorm.

“What? You're already dressed to go out. You look great. C'mon.” She tugs his arm, linking it to hers. “It was nice to meet you, Anna.”

I find my voice. “Yeah. Nice to meet you, too.” I turn to St. Clair, but he won't look at me properly. Fine. Whatever. I give him my best I-don't-care-that-you-have-a-girlfriend smile and a cheerful “Bye!”

He doesn't react. Okay, time to go. I bolt away and pull out my building key. But as I unlock the door, I can't help but glance back. St. Clair and Ellie are striding into the darkness, arms still linked, her mouth still chattering.

As I pause there, St. Clair's head turns back to me. Just for a moment.



Chapter ten

It's better this way. It is.

As the days pass, I realize that I'm glad I met his girlfriend. It's actually a relief. There are few things worse than having feelings for someone you shouldn't, and I don't like where my thoughts were headed. And I certainly don't want to be another Amanda Spitterton-Watts.

St. Clair is just friendly. The whole school likes him – the *professeurs*, the popular kids, the unpopular kids – and why wouldn't they? He's smart and funny and polite. And, yes, ridiculously attractive. Although, for being so well liked, he doesn't hang out with many people. Just our little group. And since his best friend is usually distracted by Rashmi, he's taken to hanging out with, well...*me*.

Since our night out, he's sat next to me at every meal. He teases me about sneakers, asks about my favourite films, and conjugates my French homework. And he defends me. Like last week in physics when Amanda called me *la moufette* in a nasty way and held her nose as I walked by her desk, St. Clair told her to “bugger off” and threw tiny wads of paper into her hair for the rest of class.

I looked up the word later, and it means “skunk”. So original.

But then, just as I feel those twinges again, he disappears. I'll be staring out my window after dinner, watching the sanitation workers tidy the street in their bright green uniforms, when he'll emerge from our dorm and vanish towards the *métro*.

Towards Ellie.

Most nights I'm studying in the lobby with our other friends when he comes home. He'll plop down beside me and crack a joke about whatever drunken senior is hitting on the girl behind the front desk. (There's always a drunken senior hitting on the girl behind the front desk.) And is it my imagination, or is his hair more dishevelled than usual?

The thought of St. Clair and Ellie doing – *things* – makes me more jealous than I care to admit. Toph and I email, but the messages have never been more

than friendly. I don't know if this means he's still interested or if it means he's not, but I do know that emailing is not the same as kissing. Or *things*.

The only one who understands the St. Clair situation is Mer, but I can't say anything to her. Sometimes I'm afraid *she* might be jealous of *me*. Like I'll catch her watching the two of us at lunch, and when I ask her to pass me a napkin, she'll kind of chuck it at me instead. Or when St. Clair doodles bananas and elephants into the margins of my homework, she'll grow rigid and silent.

Maybe I'm doing her a favour. I'm stronger than she is, since I haven't known him as long. Since he's always been off-limits. I mean, poor Mer. Any girl faced with daily attention from a gorgeous boy with a cute accent and perfect hair would be hard-pressed not to develop a big, stinking, painful, all-the-time, all-consuming crush.

Not that that's what's happening to me.

Like I said. It's a relief to know it won't happen. It makes things easier. Most girls laugh too hard at his jokes and find excuses to gently press his arm. To touch him. Instead, I argue and roll my eyes and act indifferent. And when I touch his arm, I shove it. Because that's what friends do.

Besides, I have more important things on my mind: movies.

I've been in France for a month, and though I have ridden the elevators to the top of La Tour Eiffel (Mer took me while St. Clair and Rashmi waited below on the lawn – St. Clair because he's afraid of falling and Rashmi because she refuses to do anything touristy), and though I have walked the viewing platform of L'Arc de Triomphe (Mer took me again, of course, while St. Clair stayed below and threatened to push Josh and Rashmi into the insane traffic circle), I still haven't been to the movies.

Actually, I have yet to leave campus alone. Kind of embarrassing.

But I have a plan. First, I'll convince someone to go to a theatre with me. Shouldn't be too difficult; everyone likes the movies. And then I'll take notes on everything they say and do, and then I'll be comfortable going back to that theatre alone. And one theatre is better than no theatres.

"Rashmi. What are you doing tonight?"

We're waiting for La Vie to begin. Last week we learned about the importance of eating locally grown food, and before that, how to write a college application essay. Who knows what they'll drag out today? Meredith and Josh are the only ones not here, Josh because he's a junior, and Mer because she's taking that extra language class, advanced Spanish. For fun. Crazy.

Rashmi taps her pen against her notebook. She's been working on her essay to Brown for two weeks now. It's one of the only universities to offer an Egyptology degree, and the only one she wants to attend. "You don't

understand,” she said, when I’d asked why she hadn’t finished it yet. “Brown turns away *eighty per cent* of its applicants.”

But I doubt she’ll have any problems. She hasn’t received less than an A on anything this year, and the majority were perfect scores. I’ve already mailed in my college applications. It’ll be a while before I hear back, but I’m not worried. They weren’t Ivy League.

I’m trying to be friendly, but it’s tricky. Last night, while I was petting her rabbit, Isis, Rashmi reminded me twice not to tell anyone about her, because animals are against dorm rules. As if I’d tattle. Besides, it’s not like Isis is a secret. The smell of bunny pee outside her door is unmistakable.

“Nothing, I guess,” she says, in response to my question about her evening.

I take a deep breath to steady my nerves. It’s ridiculous how difficult a question can be when the answer means so much. “Wanna go to the movies? They’re showing *It Happened One Night* at Le Champo.” Just because I haven’t gone out doesn’t mean I haven’t pored over the glorious *Pariscope*.

“They’re showing what? And I’m not gonna tell you how badly you just butchered that theatre’s name.”

“*It Happened One Night*. Clark Gable and Claudette Colbert. Won five Academy Awards. It was a big deal.”

“In what century?”

“Ha ha. Honestly, you’ll like it. I hear it’s great.”

Rashmi rubs her temples. “I don’t know. I don’t really like old movies. The acting is so, ‘Hey buddy, ol’ pal. Let’s go wear our hats and have a big misunderstanding.’”

“Aw, come off it.” St. Clair looks up from a thick book about the American Revolution. He sits on my other side. It’s weird to think he knows more American history than I do. “Isn’t that the charm? The hats and the misunderstandings?”

“So why don’t *you* go with her?” Rashmi asks.

“Because he’s going out with Ellie,” I say.

“How do you know what I’m doing tonight?” he asks.

“Please?” I beg her. “Pretty please? You’ll like it, I swear. So will Josh and Mer.”

Rashmi opens her mouth to protest just as the teacher arrives. Every week it’s someone new – sometimes administration, sometimes a *professeur*. This time, I’m surprised to see Nate. I guess all staff members are forced to take a turn. He rubs his shaved head and smiles pleasantly at our class.

“How do you know what I’m doing tonight?” St. Clair repeats.

“Pleeeeeease,” I say to her.

She gives a resigned grimace. “Fine. But I’m picking the next movie.”

Yippee!

Nate clears his throat, and Rashmi and St. Clair look up. That’s one thing I like about my new friends. They respect the teachers. It drives me nuts to see students talk back or ignore them, because my mom is a teacher. I wouldn’t want anyone being rude to her. “All right, people, enough. Amanda, *enough*.” In his quiet but firm way, Nate shuts her up. She flips her hair and sighs, with a glance towards St. Clair.

He ignores her. Ha.

“I have a surprise for you,” Nate says. “Since the weather is turning, and there aren’t many warm days left, I’ve arranged for you guys to spend the week outdoors.”

We’re going outside for class credit. I love Paris!

“I’ve organized a scavenger hunt.” Nate holds up a stack of papers. “There are two hundred items on this list. You’ll be able to find them all in our neighbourhood, but you may have to ask the locals for help.”

Oh hell no.

“You’ll be taking pictures of the items, and you’ll be working in two teams.”

Phew! Someone else can talk to the locals.

“The winning team will be determined by the total number of items found, but I’ll need to find photos on *everyone*’s phone or camera, if you expect to earn credit.”

NOOOOOOOOOOOO.

“There’s a prize.” Nate smiles again, now that he finally has everyone’s attention. “The team that finds the most items by the end of Thursday’s class… gets to skip class on Friday.”

Now *that* might be worth it. The classroom erupts in whistles and clapping. Nate picks captains based on who begs for it the loudest. Steve Carver – the guy with the faux-surfer hair – and Amanda’s best friend, Nicole, are chosen. Rashmi and I groan in a rare moment of camaraderie. Steve pumps a fist in the air. What a meathead.

The selecting begins, and Amanda is chosen first. Of course. And then Steve’s best friend. Of course. Rashmi elbows me. “Bet you five euros I’m picked last.”

“I’ll take that bet. Because it’s totally me.”

Amanda turns in her seat towards me and lowers her voice. “That’s a safe bet, Skunk Girl. Who’d want *you* on their team?”

My jaw unhinges stupidly.

“St. Clair!” Steve’s voice startles me. It figures that St. Clair would be picked early. Everyone looks at him, but he’s staring down Amanda. “Me,” he says, in

answer to her question. “I want Anna on my team, and you’d be lucky to have her.”

She flushes and quickly turns back around, but not before shooting me another dagger. What have I ever done to her?

More names are called. More names that are NOT mine. St. Clair tries to get my attention, but I pretend I don’t notice. I can’t bear to look at him. I’m too humiliated. Soon the selection is down to me, Rashmi, and a skinny dude who, for whatever reason, is called Cheeseburger. Cheeseburger is always wearing this expression of surprise, like someone’s just called his name, and he can’t figure out where the voice is coming from.

“Rashmi,” Nicole says without hesitation.

My heart sinks. Now it’s between me and someone named *Cheeseburger*. I focus my attention down on my desk, at the picture of me that Josh drew earlier today in history. I’m dressed like a medieval peasant (we’re studying the Black Plague), and I have a fierce scowl and a dead rat dangling from one hand.

Amanda whispers into Steve’s ear. I feel her smirking at me, and my face burns.

Steve clears his throat. “Cheeseburger.”



Chapter eleven

“You owe me five bucks,” I say.

Rashmi smiles. “I’ll buy your movie ticket.”

At least we’re on the same team. Nicole divided up Nate’s list, so Rashmi and I went out on our own. The week shouldn’t be *too* bad. Because of Rashmi, I’ll actually earn class credit. She let me take some of the pictures – a statue of some guy named Budé and a group of kids playing football in the street – even though she was the one who found both items.

“I miss football.” Meredith pouts as we tell her our story. Even her springy curls look limp and sad tonight.

A breeze whips down the broad avenue, and we hold our jackets tight and shiver. A dusting of brown leaves crunches underneath our feet as Paris hovers on the edge of autumn. “Isn’t there some league you can join or something?” Josh asks, putting his arm around Rashmi. She burrows into him. “I see people playing around here all the time.”

“Boo!” A familiar dishevelled head pops between Mer and me, and we jump like startled cats.

“Jeez,” Mer says. “Give me a heart attack. What are you doing here?”

“*It Happened One Night*,” St. Clair says. “Le Champo, right?”

“Don’t you have plans with Ellie?” Rashmi asks.

“Am I not invited?” He wedges his way between Meredith and me.

“Of course you’re invited,” Mer says. “We just assumed you’d be busy.”

“You’re always busy,” Rashmi says.

“I’m not *always* busy.”

“You are,” she says. “And you know what’s weird? Mer’s the only one who’s even seen Ellen this year. Is she too good for us now?”

“Aw, get off it. Not this again.”

She shrugs. “I’m just saying.”

St. Clair shakes his head, but it doesn’t escape our notice that he doesn’t deny it. Ellie may be friendly enough in person, but it’s clear she no longer needs her

SOAP friends. Even I can see that.

“What do you guys even do every night?” The words slip out before I can stop them.

“It,” Rashmi says. “They do it. He’s ditching us to screw.”

St. Clair blushes. “You know, Rash, you’re as crude as those stupid juniors on my floor. Dave what’s-his-name and Mike Reynard. God, they’re arses.”

Mike Reynard is Dave-from-French-and-history’s best friend. I didn’t know they lived next to him.

“Watch it, St. Clair,” Josh says. There’s an edge in his normally relaxed demeanour.

Rashmi whips into St. Clair’s face. “Are you calling me an ass?”

“No, but if you don’t back off, I bloody might.”

Their bodies are tense, like they’re about to bash antlers in a nature documentary. Josh tries to pull Rashmi back, but she shakes him away. “God, St. Clair, you can’t be all chummy during the day and blow us off every night! You can’t come back whenever you feel like it and pretend like everything’s fine.”

Mer tries to cut them off. “Hey, hey, hey—”

“Everything *is* fine! What the hell is wrong with you?”

“HEY!” Mer uses her considerable height and strength to force her way between them. To my surprise, she begins pleading with Rashmi. “I know you miss Ellie. I know she was your best friend, and it stinks that she’s moved on, but you still have us. And St. Clair...she’s right. It hurts not to see you any more. I mean, away from school.” She sounds like she’s about to cry. “We used to be so close.”

Josh puts his arm around her, and she hugs him tightly. He glares at St. Clair through her curls. *This is your fault. Fix it.*

St. Clair deflates. “Yeah. Okay. You’re right.”

It’s not quite an apology, but Rashmi nods. Mer exhales in relief. Josh delicately prises her off and moves beside his girlfriend again. We tread in awkward silence. So Rashmi and Ellie used to be best friends. It’s hard enough being temporarily separated from Bridge, but I can’t imagine how awful it would be if she ditched me completely. I feel guilty. No wonder Rashmi’s bitter.

“Sorry, Anna,” St. Clair says after another muted block. “I know you were excited about the film.”

“It’s okay. It’s not my business. My friends fight, too. I mean...my friends back home. Not that you guys aren’t my friends. I’m just saying...all friends fight.”

Argh. How distressing.

Gloom cloaks us like a thick fog. We resume silence, and my thoughts circle around. I wish Bridge were here. I wish St. Clair wasn't with Ellie, and Ellie hadn't hurt Rashmi, and Rashmi were more like Bridge. I wish Bridge were here.

"Hey," Josh says. "You. Check it out."

And then the darkness gives way to white neon. An Art Deco font, burning into the night, announces our arrival at the *CINÉMA LE CHAMPO*. The letters dwarf me. *Cinéma*. Has there ever been a more beautiful word? My heart soars as we pass the colourful film posters and walk through the gleaming glass doors. The lobby is smaller than what I'm used to, and though it's missing the tang of artificially buttered popcorn, there's something in the air I recognize, something both musty and comforting.

True to her word, Rashmi pays for my ticket. I take the opportunity to slip out a scrap of paper and a pen that I'd hidden in my jacket for this very purpose. Mer is next in line, and I transcribe her speech phonetically.

Oon ploss see voo play.

St. Clair leans over my shoulder and whispers, "You've spelled it wrong."

My head jerks up in embarrassment, but he's smiling. I drop my face, so that my hair shields my cheeks. They blush more for his smile than anything else.

We follow blue rope lights down the aisle of the theatre. I wonder if they're blue everywhere here, rather than the golden glow of American cinemas. My heart beats faster. Everything else is the same.

Same seats. Same screen. Same walls.

For the first time in Paris, I feel at home.

I smile at my friends, but Mer and Rashmi and Josh are distracted, arguing about something that happened over dinner. St. Clair sees me and smiles back. "Good?"

I nod. He looks pleased and ducks into the row after me. I always sit four rows up from the centre, and we have perfect seats tonight. The chairs are classic red. The movie begins, and the title screen flashes up. "Ugh, we have to sit through the credits?" Rashmi asks. They roll first, like in all old films.

I read them happily. I love credits. I love everything about movies.

The theatre is dark except for the flicker of blacks and whites and greys on-screen. Clark Gable pretends to sleep and places his hand in the centre of an empty bus seat. After a moment of irritation, Claudette Colbert gingerly plucks it aside and sits down. Gable smiles to himself, and St. Clair laughs.

It's odd, but I keep finding myself distracted. By the white of his teeth through the darkness. By a wavy bit of his hair that sticks straight out to the side. By the soft aroma of his laundry detergent. He nudges me to silently offer the armrest,

but I decline and he takes it. His arm is close to mine, slightly elevated. I glance at his hands. Mine are tiny compared to his large, knuckly boy hands.

And, suddenly, I want to touch him.

Not a push, or a shove, or even a friendly hug. I want to feel the creases in his skin, connect his freckles with invisible lines, brush my fingers across the inside of his wrist. He shifts. I have the strangest feeling that he's as aware of me as I am of him. I can't concentrate. The characters on the screen are squabbling, but for the life of me, I don't know what about. How long have I not been paying attention?

St. Clair coughs and shifts again. His leg brushes against mine. It stays there. I'm paralysed. I should move it; it feels too unnatural. How can he not notice his leg is touching my leg? From the corner of my eye, I see the profile of his chin and nose, and – oh, dear God – the curve of his lips.

There. He glanced at me. I know he did.

I bore my eyes into the screen, trying my best to prove that I am Really Interested in this movie. St. Clair stiffens but doesn't move his leg. Is he holding his breath? I think he is. I'm holding mine. I exhale and cringe – it's so loud and unnatural.

Again. Another glance. This time I turn, automatically, just as he's turning away. It's a dance, and now there's a feeling in the air like one of us should say something. Focus, Anna. Focus. "Do you like it?" I whisper.

He pauses. "The film?"

I'm thankful the shadows hide my blush.

"I like it very much," he says.

I risk a glance, and St. Clair stares back. Deeply. He has not looked at me like this before. I turn away first, then feel him turn a few beats later.

I know he is smiling, and my heart races.



Chapter twelve

To: Anna Oliphant <bananaelephant@femmefilmfreak.net>
From: James Ashley <james@jamesashley.com>
Subject: Gentle Reminder

Hello, honey. It's been a while since we've spoken. Have you checked your voicemail? I've called several times, but I assume you're busy exploring Paree. Well, this is just a gentle reminder to call your dear old dad and tell him how your studies are going. Have you mastered French yet? Tasted foie gras? What exciting museums have you visited? Speaking of exciting, I'm sure you've heard the good news. *The Incident* debuted at number one on the *NY Times*! Looks like I've still got the magic touch. I'm leaving for a south-eastern tour next week, so I'll see your brother soon and give him your best. Keep laser-focused on school, and I'll see YOU at Christmas.

Josh leans his lanky body over my shoulder and peers at my laptop. "Is it just me, or is that 'YOU' sort of threatening?"

"No. It's not just YOU," I say.

"I thought your dad was a writer. What's with the 'laser-focused' 'gentle reminder' shit?"

"My father is fluent in cliché. Obviously, you've never read one of his novels." I pause. "I can't believe he has the nerve to say he'll 'give Seany my best'."

Josh shakes his head in disgust. My friends and I are spending the weekend in the lounge because it's raining again. No one ever mentions this, but it turns out Paris is as drizzly as London. According to St. Clair, that is, our only absent member. He went to some photography show at Ellie's school. Actually, he was supposed to be back by now.

He's running late. As usual.

Mer and Rashmi are curled up on one of the lobby couches, reading our latest English assignment, *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress*. I turn back to my father's email.

Gentle reminder...your life sucks.

Memories from earlier this week – sitting next to St. Clair in the dark theatre,

his leg against mine, the look that passed between us – flood back in and fill me with shame. The more I’ve thought about it, the more I’m convinced nothing happened.

Because nothing DID happen.

When we left the movie, Rashmi announced, “The ending was too abrupt. We didn’t get to see any of the good stuff.” And by the time I’d finished defending it, we were already back inside the dorm. I wanted to talk to St. Clair, get a sign that *something* between us had changed, but Mer broke in and hugged him goodnight. And since I couldn’t hug him without exposing my thudding heart, I lingered behind.

And then we had this lame wave goodbye.

And then I went to bed, confused as ever.

What happened? As thrilling as it was, I must have exaggerated it in my mind, because he didn’t act any differently at breakfast the next day. We had a friendly conversation, as always. Besides, he has Ellie. He doesn’t need me. All I can guess is that I must have projected my own frustrated feelings about Toph onto St. Clair.

Josh is examining me carefully. I decide to ask him a question before he can ask me one. “How’s your assignment going?” My team in La Vie actually won (no thanks to me), so Rashmi and I didn’t have to go on Friday. Josh ditched his last class to spend the hour with us. It earned him detention and several pages of additional homework.

“Eh.” He flops down in the chair beside me and picks up his sketchbook. “I have better things to do.”

“But...won’t you get in more trouble if you don’t do it?” I’ve never ditched. I don’t understand how he can just shrug everything off.

“Probably.” Josh flexes his hand and winces.

I frown. “What’s the matter?”

“It’s cramped,” he says. “From drawing. It’s okay, it’s always like this.”

Strange. I’d never considered art injuries before. “You’re really talented. Is that what you want to do? For a living, I mean?”

“I’m working on a graphic novel.”

“Really? That’s cool.” I push my laptop away. “What’s it about?”

The corner of his mouth rises in a sly smile. “A guy forced to attend a snobby boarding school, because his parents don’t want him around any more.”

I snort. “I’ve heard that one before. What do your parents do?”

“My dad’s a politician. They’re working on his re-election campaign. I haven’t talked to ‘Senator Wasserstein’ since school started.”

“Senator? As in a *senator* senator?”

“Senator as in *senator* senator. Unfortunately.”

Again. What was my dad thinking? Sending me to school with the children of US SENATORS? “Does everyone have a terrible father?” I ask. “Is it a requirement for attendance?”

He nods towards Rashmi and Mer. “They don’t. But St. Clair’s dad is a piece of work.”

“So I hear.” Curiosity gets the best of me, and I lower my voice. “What’s his deal?”

Josh shrugs. “He’s just a jerk. He keeps a tight leash on St. Clair and his mom, but he’s really friendly to everyone else. Somehow that makes it worse.”

I’m suddenly distracted by an odd purple-and-red knitted stocking cap walking into the lobby. Josh turns to see what I’m staring at. Meredith and Rashmi notice his movement, and they look up from their books.

“Oh God,” Rashmi says. “He’s wearing The Hat.”

“I like The Hat,” Mer says.

“You would,” Josh says.

Meredith gives him a dirty look. I turn to get a better look at The Hat, and I’m startled to realize it’s right behind me. And it’s sitting atop St. Clair’s head.

“So The Hat is back,” Rashmi says.

“Yup,” he says. “I know you missed it.”

“Is there a story behind The Hat?” I ask.

“Only that his mother made it for him last winter, and we all agreed it was the most hideous accessory in Paris,” Rashmi says.

“Oh, yeah?” St. Clair pulls it off and yanks it down over her head. Her two black braids stick out comically from underneath. “Looks great on you. Really fetching.”

She scowls and tosses it back, then smoothes her parting. He shoves it over his messy hair again, and I find myself agreeing with Mer. It’s actually pretty cute. He looks warm and fuzzy, like a teddy bear.

“How was the show?” Mer asks.

He shrugs. “Nothing spectacular. What have you been up to?”

“Anna’s been sharing her father’s ‘gentle reminder’,” Josh says.

St. Clair makes a yuck face.

“I’d rather not go there again, thank you.” I shut my laptop.

“If you’re done, I have something for you,” St. Clair says.

“What? Who, me?”

“Remember how I promised I’d make you feel less American?”

I smile. “You have my French passport?” I hadn’t forgotten his promise but figured he had – that conversation was weeks ago. I’m surprised and flattered he

remembered.

“Better. Came in the mail yesterday. Come on, it’s in my room.” And, with that, he puts his hands in his coat pockets and struts into the stairwell.

I shove my computer into my bag, sling it over my shoulder, and shrug at the others. Mer looks hurt, and for a moment I feel guilty. But it’s not like I’m stealing him from her. I’m his friend, too. I chase him up five flights of stairs, and The Hat bobs ahead of me. We get to his floor, and he leads me down the hallway. I’m nervous and excited. I’ve never seen his room before. We always meet in the lobby or on my floor.

“Home sweet home.” He pulls out an “I Left My ♥ in San Francisco” key chain. Another gift from his mother, I suppose. Taped to his door is a sketch of him wearing Napoleon’s hat. Josh’s work.

“Hey, 508! Your room is right above mine. You never said.”

St. Clair smiles. “Maybe I didn’t want you blaming me for keeping you up at night with my noisy stomping boots.”

“Dude. You *do* stomp.”

“I know. I’m sorry.” He laughs and holds the door open for me. His room is neater than I expected. I always picture guys with disgusting bedrooms – mountains of soiled boxer shorts and sweat-stained undershirts, unmade beds with sheets that haven’t been changed in weeks, posters of beer bottles and women in neon bikinis, empty soda cans and chip bags, and random bits of model airplanes and discarded video games.

That’s what Matt’s room looked like. It always grossed me out. I never knew when I might sit on a sauce packet from Taco Bell.

But St. Clair’s room is tidy. His bed is made, and there’s only one small pile of clothing on the floor. There are no tacky posters, just an antique world map tacked above his desk and two colourful oil paintings above his bed. And books. I’ve never seen so many books in one bedroom. They’re stacked along his walls like towers – thick history books and tattered paperbacks and...an *OED*. Just like Bridge.

“I can’t believe I know two people crazy enough to own the *OED*.”

“Oh, yeah? Who’s the other?”

“Bridge. God, is yours *new*?” The spines are crisp and shiny. Bridgette’s is a few decades old, and her spines are cracked and splintering.

St. Clair looks embarrassed. *The Oxford English Dictionary* is a thousand bucks new, and even though we’ve never talked about it, he knows I don’t have spending money like the rest of our classmates. It’s pretty clear when I order the cheapest thing on the menu every time we eat out. Dad may have wanted to give me a fancy education, but he isn’t concerned about my daily expenses. I’ve

asked him twice for a raise in my weekly allowance, but he's refused, saying I need to learn to live within my means.

Which is difficult when he doesn't give me enough means to begin with.

"Whatever happened with her and that band?" he asks, changing the subject. "Is she going to be their drummer?"

"Yeah, their first practice is this weekend."

"It's that one guy's band – Sideburns, right?"

St. Clair knows Toph's name. He's trying to get a rise out of me, so I ignore it. "Yeah. So what do you have for me?"

"It's right here." He hands me a yellow padded envelope from his desk, and my stomach dances like it's my birthday. I rip the package open. A small patch falls to the floor. It's the Canadian flag.

I pick it up. "Um. Thanks?"

He tosses his hat onto his bed and rubs his hair. It flies up in all different directions. "It's for your backpack, so people won't think you're American. Europeans are much more forgiving of Canadians."

I laugh. "Then I love it. Thank you."

"You aren't offended?"

"No, it's perfect."

"I had to order it online, that's why it took so long. Didn't know where I could find one in Paris, sorry." He fishes through a desk drawer and pulls out a safety pin. He takes the tiny maple leaf flag from my hands and carefully pins it to the pocket of my backpack. "There. You're officially Canadian. Try not to abuse your new power."

"Whatever. I'm totally going out tonight."

"Good." He slows down. "You should."

We're both standing still. He's so close to me. His gaze is locked on mine, and my heart pounds painfully in my chest. I step back and look away. Toph. I like Toph, not St. Clair. Why do I have to keep reminding myself of this? St. Clair is taken.

"Did you paint these?" I'm desperate to change the mood. "These above your bed?" I glance back, and he's still staring at me.

He bites his thumbnail before replying. His voice is odd. "No. My mum did."

"Really? Wow, they're good. Really, really...good."

"Anna..."

"Is this here in Paris?"

"No, it's the street I grew up on. In London."

"Oh."

"Anna..."

“Hmm?” I stand with my back to him, trying to examine the paintings. They really are great. I just can’t seem to focus. Of course it’s not Paris. I should’ve known—

“That guy. Sideburns. You like him?”

My back squirms. “You’ve asked me that before.”

“What I meant was,” he says, flustered, “your feelings haven’t changed? Since you’ve been here?”

It takes a moment to consider the question. “It’s not a matter of how *I* feel,” I say at last. “I’m interested, but...I don’t know if he’s still interested in me.”

St. Clair edges closer. “Does he still call?”

“Yeah. I mean, not often. But yes.”

“Right. Right, well,” he says, blinking. “There’s your answer.”

I look away. “I should go. I’m sure you have plans with Ellie.”

“Yes. I mean, no. I mean, I don’t know. If you aren’t doing any—”

I open his door. “So I’ll see you later. Thank you for the Canadian citizenship.” I tap the patch on my bag.

St. Clair looks strangely hurt. “No problem. Happy to be of service.”

I take the stairs two at a time to my floor. What just happened? One minute we were fine, and the next it was like I couldn’t leave fast enough. I need to get out of here. I need to leave the dorm. Maybe I’m not a brave American, but I think I can be a brave Canadian. I grab the *Pariscope* from inside my room and jog downstairs.

I’m going to see Paris. Alone.



Chapter thirteen

“*Un place s’il vous plaît.*”

One place, please. I double-checked my pronunciation before stepping up to the box office and sliding over my euros. The woman selling tickets doesn’t blink, just rips my ticket in half and hands me the stub. I accept it graciously and stammer my thanks. Inside the theatre, an usher examines my stub. She tears it slightly, and I know from watching my friends that I’m supposed to give her a small tip for this useless tradition. I touch the Canadian patch for luck, but I don’t need it. The handoff is easy.

I did it. I did it!

My relief is so profound that I hardly notice my feet carve their way into my favourite row. The theatre is almost empty. Three girls around my age are in the back, and an elderly couple sits in front of me, sharing a box of candy. Some people are finicky about going to the theatre alone, but I’m not. Because when the lights go down, the only relationship left in the room is the one between the movie and me.

I sink into the springy chair and lose myself in the previews. French commercials are interspersed between them, and I have fun trying to guess what they’re for before the product is shown. Two men chase each other across the Great Wall of China to advertise clothing. A scantily clad woman rubs herself against a quacking duck to sell furniture. A techno beat and a dancing silhouette want me to what? Go clubbing? Get drunk?

I have no idea.

And then *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* begins. James Stewart plays a naive, idealistic man sent into the Senate, where everyone believes they can take advantage of him. They think he’ll fail and be driven out, but Stewart shows them all. He’s stronger than they gave him credit for, stronger than they are. I like it.

I think about Josh. I wonder what kind of senator his father is.

The dialogue is translated across the bottom of the screen in yellow. The

theatre is silent, respectful, until the first gag. The Parisians and I laugh together. Two hours speed by, and then I'm blinking in a street lamp, lost in a comfortable daze, thinking about what I might see tomorrow.

"Going to the movies again tonight?" Dave checks my page number and flips his French textbook open to the chapter about family. As usual, we've paired up for an exercise in conversational skills.

"Yup. *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*. You know, to get into the holiday spirit." Halloween is this weekend, but I haven't seen any decorations here. That must be an American thing.

"The original or the remake?" Professeur Gillet marches past our desks and Dave quickly adds, "*Je te présente ma famille. Jean-Pierre est...l'oncle.*"

"Um. What?"

"*Quoi*," Professeur Gillet corrects. I expect her to linger, but she moves on. Phew.

"Original, of course." But I'm impressed he knew it was remade.

"That's funny, I wouldn't have taken you for a horror fan."

"Why not?" I bristle at the implication. "I appreciate any well-made film."

"Yeah, but most girls are squeamish about that sort of thing."

"What's that supposed to mean?" My voice rises, and Madame Guillotine jerks her head up from across the room. "*Marc est mon...frère*," I say, glancing down at the first French word I see. Brother. Marc is my brother. Whoops. Sorry, Sean.

Dave scratches his freckled nose. "You know. The chick suggests a horror movie to her boyfriend so she can get all scared and cling onto him."

I groan. "Please. I've seen just as many scared boyfriends leave halfway through a movie as scared girlfriends—"

"And how many movies will this make this week anyway, Oliphant? Four? Five?"

Six actually. I saw two on Sunday. I've settled into a routine: school, homework, dinner, movie. I'm slowly making my way across the city, theatre by theatre.

I shrug, not willing to admit this to him.

"When are you gonna invite me along, huh? Maybe I like scary movies, too."

I pretend to study the family tree in my textbook. This isn't the first time he's hinted at this sort of thing. And Dave is cute, but I don't like him that way. It's hard to take a guy seriously when he still tips over backwards in his chair, just to annoy a teacher.

"Maybe I like going alone. Maybe it gives me time to think about my

reviews.” Which is true, but I refrain from mentioning that usually I’m *not* alone. Sometimes Meredith joins me, sometimes Rashmi and Josh. And, yes, sometimes St. Clair.

“Right. Your reviews.” He yanks my spiral notebook out from underneath *Level One French*.

“Hey! Give that back!”

“What’s your website again?” Dave flips through the pages as I try to grab it. I don’t take notes while watching the films; I’d rather hold off until I’ve had time to think about them. But I like to jot down my first impressions afterwards.

“Like I’d tell you. Give it back.”

“What’s the deal with these, anyway? Why don’t you go to the movies for fun, like a normal person?”

“It *is* fun. And I’ve told you before, it’s good practice. And I can’t see classics like these on the big screen back home.” Not to mention I can’t see them in such glorious silence. In Paris, no one talks during a movie. Heaven help the person who brings in a crunchy snack or crinkly cellophane.

“Why do you need to practise? It’s not like it’s hard or something.”

“Yeah? I’d like to see you write a six-hundred-word review about one. ‘I liked it. It was cool. There were explosions.’” I snatch again at my notebook, but he holds it above his head.

He laughs. “Five stars for explosions.”

“Give. That. BACK!”

A shadow falls over us. Madame Guillotine hovers above, waiting for us to continue. The rest of the class is staring. Dave lets go of the notebook, and I shrink back.

“Um...*très bien, David*,” I say.

“When you ’ave finished zis fascinating dee-scussion, plizz return to ze task at ’and.” Her eyes narrow. “And *deux* pages about *vos familles, en français, pour lundi matin*.”

We nod sheepishly, and her heels clip away. “For *lundi matin*? What the heck does that mean?” I hiss to Dave.

Madame Guillotine doesn’t break stride. “Monday morning, Mademoiselle Oliphant.”

At lunch, I slam my food tray down on the table. Lentil soup spills over the side of my bowl, and my plum rolls away. St. Clair catches it. “What’s eating you?” he asks.

“French.”

“Not going well?”

“Not going well.”

He places the plum back on my tray and smiles. “You’ll get the hang of it.”

“Easy for you to say, Monsieur Bilingual.”

His smile fades. “Sorry. You’re right, that was unfair. I forget sometimes.”

I stir my lentils aggressively. “Professeur Gillet always makes me feel stupid. I’m not stupid.”

“Of course you aren’t. It’d be mad for anyone to expect fluency. It takes time to learn anything, especially a language.”

“I’m just so tired of going out there –” I gesture at the windows – “and being helpless.”

St. Clair is surprised at my suggestion. “You aren’t helpless. You go out every night, often on your own. That’s a far cry from when you arrived. Don’t be so hard on yourself.”

“Hmph.”

“Hey.” He scoots closer. “Remember what Professeur Cole said when she was talking about the lack of translated novels in America? She said it’s important to expose ourselves to other cultures, other situations. And that’s exactly what you’re doing. You’re going out, and you’re testing the waters. You ought to be proud of yourself. Screw French class, that means sod-all.”

I crack a smile at his Bricicism. Speaking of translation. “Yeah, but Professeur Cole was talking about books, not real life. There’s a big difference.”

“Is there? What about film? Aren’t you the one who’s always going on about cinema as a reflection of life? Or was that some other famous film critic I know?”

“Shut up. That’s different.”

St. Clair laughs, knowing he’s caught me. “See? You ought to spend less time worrying about French, and more time...” He trails off, attention snagged by something behind me. His expression is of growing revulsion.

I turn to find Dave, kneeling on the cafeteria floor behind us. His head is bowed, and he thrusts a small plate in the air before me. “Allow me to present this éclair with my humblest apologies.”

My face burns. “What are you doing?”

Dave looks up and grins. “Sorry about the extra assignment. That was my fault.”

I’m speechless. When I don’t take the dessert, he rises and delivers it in front of me with a grand flourish. Everyone is staring. He nabs a chair from the table behind us and wedges himself between St. Clair and me.

St. Clair is incredulous. “Make yourself at home, David.”

Dave doesn’t seem to hear him. He dips his finger in the sticky chocolate

icing and licks it off. Are his hands clean? “So. Tonight. *Texas Chain Saw Massacre*. I’ll never believe you aren’t afraid of horror films if you don’t let me take you.”

Oh my God. Dave is NOT asking me out in front of St. Clair. St. Clair hates Dave; I remember him saying it before we saw *It Happened One Night*. “Uh... sorry.” I grasp for an excuse. “But I’m not going. Any more. Something came up.”

“Come on. Nothing could be *that* important on a Friday night.” He pinches my arm, and I glance desperately at St. Clair.

“Physics project,” he cuts in, glaring at Dave’s hand. “Last minute. Loads to do. We’re partners.”

“You have all weekend to do homework. Loosen up, Oliphant. Live a little.”

“Actually,” St. Clair says, “it sounds like Anna has quite a bit of additional work to do this weekend. Thanks to you.”

Dave finally turns around to face St. Clair. They exchange scowls.

“I’m sorry,” I say. And I mean it. I feel awful for turning him down, especially in front of everyone. He’s a nice guy, despite what St. Clair thinks.

But Dave looks at St. Clair again. “It’s cool,” he says after a moment. “I get it.”

“What?” I’m confused.

“I didn’t realize...” Dave motions between St. Clair and me.

“No! No. There’s nothing. There. I mean it, we’ll see something soon. I’m just busy tonight. With the physics thing.”

Dave looks annoyed, but he shrugs his shoulders. “No biggie. Hey, you going to the party tomorrow night?”

Nate is throwing a Halloween bash for Résidence Lambert. I wasn’t planning to attend, but I lie to make him feel better. “Yeah, probably. I’ll see you there.”

He stands up. “Cool. I’m holding you to that.”

“Right. Sure. Thanks for the éclair!” I call after him.

“You’re welcome, beautiful.”

Beautiful. He called me beautiful! But wait. I don’t like Dave.

Do I like Dave?

“Wanker,” St. Clair says, the moment he’s out of earshot.

“Don’t be rude.”

He stares at me with an unfathomable expression. “You weren’t complaining when I made an excuse for you.”

I push the éclair away. “He put me on the spot, that’s all.”

“You ought to thank me.”

“*Thank you,*” I say sarcastically. I’m aware of the others staring at us. Josh

clears his throat and points at my finger-smudged dessert. “You gonna eat that?” he asks.

“Be my guest.”

St. Clair stands so suddenly that his chair clatters over.

“Where are you going?” Mer asks.

“Nowhere.” He stalks away, leaving us in surprised silence. After a moment, Rashmi leans forward. She raises her dark eyebrows. “You know, Josh and I saw them fighting a couple nights ago.”

“Who? St. Clair and Dave?” Mer asks.

“No, St. Clair and Ellie. That’s what this is about, you know.”

“It is?” I ask.

“Yeah, he’s been on edge all week,” Rashmi says.

I think about it. “That’s true. I’ve heard him pacing his room. He never used to do that.” It’s not like I make a point of listening, but now that I know that St. Clair lives above me, I can’t *help* but notice his comings and goings.

Josh gives me a weird look.

“Where did you see them?” Mer asks Rashmi.

“In front of the Cluny *métro*. We were gonna say hi, but when we saw their expressions, we went the other way. Definitely not a conversation I wanted to interrupt.”

“What were they fighting about?” Mer asks.

“Dunno. Couldn’t hear them.”

“It’s *her*. She’s so different now.”

Rashmi frowns. “She thinks she’s so much better than us, now that she’s at Parsons.”

“And the way she dresses,” Mer says, with an unusual bitter streak. “Like she thinks she’s actually Parisian.”

“She was always that way.” Rashmi huffs.

Josh is still quiet. He polishes off the *éclair*, wipes the white fluff from his fingers, and pulls out his sketchbook. The way he focuses on it, deflecting Meredith and Rashmi’s conversation, is...purposeful. I get the feeling he knows more about St. Clair’s situation than he’s letting on. Do guys talk about things like that with each other? Could it be possible?

Are St. Clair and Ellie breaking up?



Chapter fourteen

“Don’t y’all think it’s kind of a cliché to have a picnic in a graveyard on Halloween?”

The five of us – Mer, Rashmi, Josh, St. Clair, and I – are traipsing through the Cimetière du Père-Lachaise, located on a hillside overlooking Paris. It’s like a miniature city itself. Wide pathways act as roads through neighbourhoods of elaborate tombs. They remind me of tiny Gothic mansions with their arched doorways and statuary and stained-glass windows. A stone wall with guardsmen and iron gates runs the perimeter. Mature chestnuts stretch their branches overhead and wave their last remaining golden leaves.

It’s a quieter city than Paris, but no less impressive.

“Hey, did y’all hear Anna say ‘y’all’?” Josh asks.

“Oh my God, I so did not.”

“You so did,” Rashmi says. She adjusts the pack on her shoulders and follows Mer down yet another path. I’m glad my friends know their way around, because I’m lost. “I told you you’ve got an accent.”

“It’s a cemetery, not a graveyard,” St. Clair says.

“There’s a difference?” I ask, thankful for an opportunity to ignore The Couple.

“A cemetery is a plot of land set specifically aside for burial, while a graveyard is always located in a churchyard. Of course, now the words are practically interchangeable, so it doesn’t *really* matter—”

“You know more useless crap, St. Clair. Good thing you’re so darn cute,” Josh says.

“I think it’s interesting,” Mer says.

St. Clair smiles. “At least ‘cemetery’ sounds classier. And you must admit – this place is pretty classy. Or, I’m sorry.” He turns back to me. “Would you rather be at the Lambert bash? I hear Dave Higgenbottom is bringing his beer bong.”

“Higgenbaum.”

“That’s what I said. Higgenbum.”

“Oh, leave him alone. Besides, by the time this place closes, we’ll still have plenty of time to party.” I roll my eyes at this last word. None of us have plans to attend, despite what I told Dave yesterday at lunch.

St. Clair nudges me with a tall Thermos. “Perhaps you’re upset because he won’t have the opportunity to woo you with his astonishing knowledge of urban street racing.”

I laugh. “Cut it out.”

“And I hear he has exquisite taste in film. Maybe he’ll take you to a midnight showing of *Scooby-Doo 2*.”

I whack St. Clair with my bag, and he dodges aside, laughing.

“Aha! Here it is!” Mer calls out, having located the appropriate patch of greenery. She unrolls a blanket onto the small lawn while Rashmi and I unpack tiny apples and prosciutto sandwiches and stinky cheeses from our backpacks. Josh and St. Clair chase each other around the nearby monuments. They remind me of the little French schoolboys I see in our neighbourhood. All they need are the matching woollen sweaters.

Mer pours everyone coffee from St. Clair’s Thermos, and I sip happily, enjoying the pleasant warmth that spreads throughout my body. I used to think coffee was bitter and disgusting, but like everyone else, I’m up to several cups a day. We tear into the food and, like magic, the guys are back. Josh sits cross-legged next to Rashmi, while St. Clair scoots between Meredith and me.

“You have leaves in your hair.” Mer giggles and pulls one of the brown skeletons from St. Clair’s locks. He takes it from her, crunches it to dust, and blows it into her curls. They laugh, and my gut twinges.

“Maybe you should put on The Hat,” I say. He asked me to carry it before we left. I chuck my bag into his lap, perhaps a little too hard. St. Clair *oofs* and jerks forward.

“Watch it.” Josh bites into a pink apple and talks through a full mouth. “He has parts down there you don’t have.”

“Ooo, parts,” I say. “Intriguing. Tell me more.”

Josh smiles sadly. “Sorry. Privileged information. Only people with parts can know about said parts.”

St. Clair shakes the rest of the leaves from his hair and puts on The Hat. Rashmi makes a face at him. “Really? Today? In public?” she asks.

“Every day,” he says. “As long as you’re with me.”

She snorts. “So what’s Ellen doing tonight?”

“Ugh. Ellie’s attending some terrible costume party.”

“You don’t like costume parties?” Mer asks.

“I don’t do costumes.”

“Just hats,” Rashmi says.

“I didn’t realize anyone outside of SOAP was celebrating Halloween,” I say.

“Few people are,” Josh says. “The shopkeepers tried to turn it into a commercial thing years ago. It didn’t catch on. But give a college chick the chance to dress up like a slutty nurse, and she’s gonna take it.”

St. Clair lobs a chunk of *chèvre* at Josh’s head, and it smacks his cheek. “Arse. She’s *not* going as a slutty nurse.”

“Just a regular one?” I ask innocently. “With a low-cut dress and really big breasts?”

Josh and Rashmi crack up, and St. Clair tugs The Hat down over his eyes. “Ughhh, I hate you all.”

“Hey.” Meredith sounds hurt. “I didn’t say anything.”

“Ughhh, I hate you all but Mer.”

A small group of American tourists hovers behind us. They look confused. A bearded guy in his twenties opens his mouth to speak, but Rashmi interrupts him. “Jim Morrison is that way.” She points down the path. Bearded guy smiles in relief, thanks her, and they move on.

“How’d you know what they wanted?” I ask.

“It’s what they always want.”

“When they *should* be looking for Victor Noir,” Josh says. Everyone else laughs.

“Who?” It’s frustrating being in the dark.

“Victor Noir. He was a journalist shot by Pierre Bonaparte,” St. Clair says, as if that explains anything. He pulls The Hat up off his eyes. “The statue on his grave is supposed to help...fertility.”

“His wang is rubbed shiny,” Josh elaborates. “For luck.”

“Why are we talking about parts again?” Mer asks. “Can’t we ever talk about anything else?”

“Really?” I ask. “Shiny wang?”

“Very,” St. Clair says.

“Now that’s something I’ve gotta see.” I gulp my coffee dregs, wipe the bread crumbs from my mouth, and hop up. “Where’s Victor?”

“Allow me.” St. Clair springs to his feet and takes off. I chase after him. He cuts through a stand of bare trees, and I crash through the twigs behind him. We’re both laughing when we hit the pathway and run smack into a guard. He frowns at us from underneath his military-style cap. St. Clair gives an angelic smile and a small shrug. The guard shakes his head but allows us to pass.

St. Clair gets away with everything.

We stroll with exaggerated calm, and he points out an area occupied with people snapping pictures. We hang back and wait our turn. A scrawny black cat darts out from behind an altar strewn with roses and wine bottles, and rushes into the bushes.

“Well. That was sufficiently creepy. Happy Halloween.”

“Did you know this place is home to three *thousand* cats?” St. Clair asks.

“Sure. It’s filed away in my brain under ‘Felines, Paris’.”

He laughs. The tourists move on to the next photo opportunity, and we’re both smiling as we approach Victor Noir. His statue is life-size and lying flat on the ground above his tomb. His eyes are closed, his top hat beside him. And despite the fact that his grey-green patina is clothed, his pants have a remarkable bulge that has, indeed, been stroked to a shiny bronze.

“If I touch it, do I get another wish?” I ask, remembering Point Zéro.

“Nope. Victor deals strictly in fertility.”

“Go on. Rub it.”

St. Clair backs into another grave. “No, thank you.” He laughs again. “I don’t need that kind of problem.” My own laughter catches in my throat as I get his meaning. Shake it off, Anna. That shouldn’t bother you. Don’t let him see how it bothers you.

“Well. If you won’t touch him, I will. I’m not in any danger of *that*.” I lower my voice to a mock whisper. “You know, I’ve heard you *actually have to have sex* to get pregnant.”

I see the question immediately pop into his head. Crap. Maybe I was too hasty with my joke. St. Clair looks half embarrassed, half curious. “So, er, you’re a virgin, then?”

ARGH! ME AND MY BIG MOUTH.

My overwhelming desire is to lie, but the truth comes out. “I’ve never met anyone I cared about that much. I mean, I’ve never *dated* anyone I cared about that much.” I blush and pet Victor. “I have a rule.”

“Elaborate.”

The statue is still warm from the previous visitors. “I ask myself, if the worst happened – if I *did* get knocked up – would I be embarrassed to tell my child who his father was? If the answer is anywhere even remotely close to yes, then there’s no way.”

He nods slowly. “That’s a good rule.”

I realize I’m resting my hand on Victor’s victor and yank it away.

“Wait wait wait.” St. Clair pulls out his phone. “One more time, for posterity.”

I stick out my tongue and hold the ridiculous pose. He takes a picture. “Brilliant, that’ll be what I see every time you call—” His cell rings, and he

starts. “Spooky.”

“It’s Victor’s ghost, wanting to know why you won’t touch him.”

“Just my mum. Hold on.”

“Woooooo, stroke me, St. Clair.”

He answers, trying to keep a straight face, as Meredith and Rashmi and Josh trudge up behind us. They’re lugging the remains of our picnic.

“Thanks for ditching us,” Rashmi says.

“It’s not like we didn’t tell you where we were going,” I say.

Josh grabs the statue’s privates. “I think this is seven years’ bad luck.”

Mer sighs. “Joshua Wasserstein, what would your mother say?”

“She’d be proud that the Fine Institute of Learning she’s sent me to is teaching me such refined manners.” He leans over and licks Victor.

Mer and Rashmi and I squeal.

“You are so getting oral herpes.” I whip out my hand sanitizer and squeeze a glob into my hands. “Seriously, you should put some of this on your lips.”

Josh shakes his head. “You are so neurotic. Do you take that everywhere?”

“You know,” Rashmi says. “I’ve heard if you use too much of that stuff, you can actually desensitize yourself to germs and get *more* sick.”

I freeze. “What? No.”

“HA!” Josh says.

“Ohmygod, are you okay?”

At the sound of Mer’s alarm, I quickly turn my head.

St. Clair has fallen against a tomb. It’s the only thing keeping him from collapsing to the ground. The four of us rush to his side. He’s still holding the phone to his ear, but he’s not listening any more. We talk over each other. “What happened? Are you okay? What is it?”

He won’t answer us. He won’t look up.

We exchange worried glances. No, terrified. Something is *really* wrong. Josh and I lower him to the ground before he falls. St. Clair looks up, surprised to find us holding on to him. His face is white.

“My mum.”

“What happened?” I ask.

“She’s dying.”



Chapter fifteen

St. Clair is drunk.

His face is buried between my thighs. Under favourable circumstances, this would be quite exciting. Considering he's minutes away from vomiting, it's less than attractive. I push his head towards my knees into a slightly less awkward position, and he moans. It's the first time I've touched his hair. It's soft, like Seany's when he was a baby.

Josh and St. Clair showed up fifteen minutes ago, stinking of cigarettes and alcohol. Since neither of them smoke, they'd obviously been to a bar. "Sorry. He said wehadtuh comeup 'ere." Josh dragged his friend's limp body inside my room. "Wouldn't shuttup about tit. Tit. Ha ha."

St. Clair burbled in heavy, slurred British. "My dad issa bastard. I'm gonna kill 'im. Gonna kill 'im, I'm sooo pissed." Then his head rolled, and his chin smacked violently against his chest. Alarmed, I guided him to my bed and propped him up against the side for support.

Josh stared at the picture of Seany on my wall. "Tit," he said.

"Ahhh-nuhhh, he's an arse. I'm *serious*." St. Clair widened his eyes for emphasis.

"I know, I know he is." Even though I didn't know. "Will you stop that?" I snapped at Josh. He stood on my bed with his nose pressed against Sean's picture. "Is he okay?"

"His mom is dying. I dontthinkhe's OKAY." Josh stumbled down and reached for my phone. "Told Rashmi I'd call her."

"His mother is not *you-know-what*. How can you say that?" I turned back to St. Clair. "She'll be fine. Your mom is fine, you hear me?"

St. Clair belched.

"Jesus." I was so not equipped for this type of situation.

"Cancer." He hung his head. "She can't have cancer."

"Rashmi iss me," Josh said into my phone. "Mer? Put Rashmi on. Iss emergency."

“It’s not an emergency!” I yelled. “They’re just drunk.”

Seconds later, Meredith pounded on my door, and I let her in. “How’d you know we’re here?” Josh’s forehead creased in bewilderment. “Where’s Rashmi?”

“I heard you through the wall, idiot. And you called my phone, not hers.” She held up her cell and then dialed Rashmi, who arrived a minute later. They just stood there staring, while St. Clair babbled and Josh continued to look shocked by their sudden appearance. My small room felt even smaller stuffed with five bodies.

Finally, Mer kneeled down. “Is he okay?” She felt St. Clair’s forehead, but he smacked her hand away. She looked hurt.

“I’m fine. My father’s an arse, and my mum is dying and – oh my God, I’m so pissed.” St. Clair looked at me again. His eyes were glassy like black marbles. “Pissed. Pissed. Pissed.”

“We know you’re pissed at your dad,” I said. “It’s okay. You’re right, he’s a jerk.” I mean what was I supposed to say? He just found out his mother has cancer.

“*Pissed* is British for ‘drunk’,” Mer said.

“Oh,” I said. “Well. You’re definitely that, too.”

Meanwhile, The Couple was fighting. “Where have you been?” Rashmi asked. “You said you’d be home three hours ago!”

Josh rolled his eyes. “Out. We’ve been out. Someone had to help him—”

“And you call that helping? He’s completely wasted. Catatonic. And you! God, you smell like car exhaust and armpits—”

“He couldn’t drink alone.”

“You were supposed to be watching out for him! What if something happened?”

“Beer. Liquor. Thatsswhat happened. Don’t be such a prude, Rash.”

“Fuck you,” Rashmi said. “Seriously, Josh. Go fuck yourself.”

He lunged, and Mer shoved him back onto my bed. The weight of his body hitting the mattress rattled St. Clair, and his head fell forward again, chin hitting chest with another disturbing *smack*. Rashmi stormed out. A small crowd had gathered outside in the hallway, and she shouted further obscenities as she fought her way through them. Mer chased behind – “Rashmi! RASHMI!” – and my door slammed shut.

And that was the moment St. Clair’s head landed between my thighs.

Breathe, Anna. Breathe.

Josh appears to be passed out. Fine. Good. One less boy for me to deal with.

I should probably get St. Clair some water. Isn’t that what you’re supposed to

give drunk people? So they don't get alcohol poisoning or something? I ease him off my legs, and he grabs my feet. "I'll be right back," I say. "I promise."

He snuffles. Oh, no. He's not going to cry, is he? Because even though it's sweet when guys cry, I am so not prepared for this. Girl Scouts didn't teach me what to do with emotionally unstable drunk boys. I grab a bottle of water from my fridge and squat down. I hold up his head – the second time I've touched his hair – and angle the bottle in front of his lips. "Drink."

He shakes his head slowly. "If I drink any more, I'll puke."

"It's not alcohol. It's water." I tilt the bottle, and it spills into his mouth and dribbles down his chin. He takes the bottle and then drops it. Water pours across my floor.

"Ohhh no," he whispers. "I'm sorry, Anna. I'm sorry."

"It's okay." And he looks so sad that I lie down next to him. The puddle soaks into the butt of my jeans. *Ack*. "What happened?"

St. Clair sighs. It's deep and exhausted. "He's not letting me visit my mum."

"What? What do you mean?"

"It's what my father does, what he's always done. It's his way of staying in control."

"I don't und—"

"He's jealous. That she loves me more than she loves him. So he's not letting me visit her."

My mind spins. That doesn't make any sense, none at all. "How can he do that? Your mom is sick. She'll need chemo, she *needs* you there."

"He doesn't want me to see her until Thanksgiving break."

"But that's a month away! She could be—" I stop myself. The moment I finish the sentence in my head, I feel sick. But there's no way. People my age do not have parents who die. She'll have chemotherapy, and of course it'll work. She'll be fine. "So what are you gonna do? Fly to San Francisco anyway?"

"My father would murder me."

"So?" I'm outraged. "You'd still get to see her!"

"You don't understand. My father would be very, very angry." The deliberate way he says this sends a chill down my spine.

"But...wouldn't she ask your dad to send for you? I mean, he couldn't say no to her, could he? Not when she's...sick?"

"She won't disobey my father."

Disobey. Like she's a child. It's rapidly becoming clear why St. Clair never talks about his father. Mine might be self-absorbed, but he'd never keep me away from Mom. I feel awful. Guilty. My problems are so insignificant in comparison. I mean, my dad sent me to France. Boo-freaking-hoo.

“Anna?”

“Yeah?”

He pauses. “Never mind.”

“What?”

“Nothing.”

But his tone is definitely not *nothing*. I turn to him, and his eyes are closed. His skin is pale and tired. “What?” I ask again, sitting up. St. Clair opens his eyes, noticing I’ve moved. He struggles, trying to sit up, too, and I help him. When I pull away, he clutches my hand to stop me.

“I like you,” he says.

My body is rigid.

“And I don’t mean as a friend.”

It feels like I’m swallowing my tongue. “Uh. Um. What about—?” I pull my hand away from his. The weight of her name hangs heavy and unspoken.

“It’s not right. It hasn’t been right, not since I met you.” His eyes close again, and his body sways.

He’s drunk. He’s just drunk.

Calm down, Anna. He’s drunk, and he’s going through a crisis. There is NO WAY he knows what he’s talking about right now. So what do I do? Oh my God, what am I supposed to do?

“Do you like me?” St. Clair asks. And he looks at me with those big brown eyes – which, okay, are a bit red from the drinking and maybe from some crying – and my heart breaks.

Yes, St. Clair. I like you.

But I can’t say it aloud, because he’s my friend. And friends don’t let other friends make drunken declarations and expect them to act upon them the next day.

Then again...it’s St. Clair. Beautiful, perfect, wonderful—

And great. That’s just great.

He threw up on me.



Chapter sixteen

I'm mopping up his mess with a towel when there's a knock on my door. I open it with my elbows to keep the vomit from touching my doorknob.

It's Ellie. I nearly drop my towel. "Oh."

Slutty nurse. I don't believe it. Tiny white button-up dress, red crosses across the nipples. Cleavage city.

"Anna, I'm soooo sorry," St. Clair moans behind me, and she rushes to his side.

"Ohmygod, St. Clair! Are you okay?" Again, her husky voice startles me. As if the nurse get-up weren't enough to make me feel completely juvenile and inadequate.

"Course he's not okay," Josh grumbles from the bed. "He just puked on Anna."

Josh is awake?

Ellie smacks Josh's feet, which hang over the edge of my bed. "Get up. Help me move him to his room."

"I can get up by my bloody self." St. Clair tries to push himself up, and Ellie and I reach out to steady him. She glares at me, and I back up.

"How'd you know he was here?" I ask.

"Meredith called, but I was already on my way. I'd just gotten his message. He called a few hours ago, but I didn't get it, because I was getting ready for this stupid party." She gestures at her costume, upset with herself. "I should have been here." She brushes St. Clair's hair from his forehead. "It's okay, babe. I'm here now."

"Ellie?" St. Clair sounds confused, as if he's just noticed her. "Anna? Why is Ellen here? She's not supposed to be here."

His girlfriend shoots me a hateful look, and I shrug with embarrassment. "He's really, *really* drunk," I say.

She thwacks Josh again, and he rolls off the bed. "All right, all right!" Amazingly, he stands and pulls St. Clair off the floor. They balance him between

their shoulders. “Get the door,” she says sharply. I open it, and they stagger out.

St. Clair looks back. “Anna. Anna, I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. I’ve already cleaned it up. It’s fine, it’s not a big deal.”

“No. About everything else.”

Ellie’s head jerks back to me, angry and confused, but I don’t care. He looks so awful. I wish they’d put him down. He could sleep in my bed tonight; I could stay with Mer. But they’re already manoeuvring him into the rickety elevator. They push aside the metal grate and squish inside. St. Clair stares at me sadly as the door shuts.

“She’ll be fine! Your mother will be fine!”

I don’t know if he hears me. The elevator creaks upwards. I watch it until it disappears.

Sunday, November 1, All Saints’ Day. Oddly enough, this is the actual day that Parisians visit cemeteries. I’m told people are dropping by the graves of loved ones and leaving flowers and personal tokens.

The thought makes me ill. I hope St. Clair doesn’t remember today is a holiday.

When I wake up, I stop by Meredith’s. She’s already been to his room, and either he’s out cold or he’s not accepting visitors. Most likely both. “It’s best to let him sleep,” she says. And I’m sure she’s right, but I can’t help but tune my ear to the floor above. The first movements begin in the late afternoon, but even these are muffled. Slow shuffles and laborious thuds.

He wouldn’t come out for dinner. Josh, who is cross and bleary, says he checked in with him on his way here – a pizza place, where we always eat on Sunday night – and St. Clair didn’t want company. Josh and Rashmi have patched things up. She looks smug to see him suffering through a hangover.

My emotions are conflicted. I’m worried for St. Clair’s mother, and I’m worried for St. Clair, but I’m also furious with his father. And I can’t focus on anything for more than a second before my mind whirls back to this:

St. Clair likes me. As more than a friend.

I felt truth behind his words, but how can I overlook the fact that he was drunk? Absolutely, positively, one hundred and ten per cent smashed. And as much as I want to see him, to be assured with my own eyes that he’s still alive, I don’t know what I’d say. Do we talk about it? Or do I act like it never happened?

He needs friendship right now, not relationship drama. Which is why it’s *really* crappy that it’s become a lot harder to kid myself that St. Clair’s attention hasn’t been as flattering – or as welcome – as it has.

Toph calls around midnight. We haven’t talked on the phone in weeks, but

with everything happening here, I'm distracted the entire time. I just want to go back to bed. It's too confusing. Everything is too confusing.

St. Clair was absent again at breakfast. And I think he's not even coming to class today (and who could blame him?), when he appears in English, fifteen minutes late. I worry that Professeur Cole will yell at him, but the faculty must have been notified of the situation, because she doesn't say a word. She just gives him a pitying look and pushes ahead with our lesson. "So why aren't Americans interested in translated novels? Why are so few foreign works published in English every year?"

I try to meet St. Clair's gaze, but he stares down at his copy of *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress*. Or rather, stares through it. He's pale, practically translucent.

"Well," she continues. "It's often suggested that as a culture, we're only interested in immediate gratification. Fast food. Self-checkout. Downloadable music, movies, books. Instant coffee, instant rebates, instant messaging. Instant weight loss! Shall I go on?"

The class laughs, but St. Clair is quiet. I watch him nervously. Dark stubble is beginning to shadow his face. I hadn't realized he needed to shave so often.

"Foreign novels are less action-oriented. They have a different pace; they're more reflective. They challenge us to *look* for the story, find the story *within* the story. Take *Balzac*. Whose story is this? The narrator's? The little seamstress's? China's?"

I want to reach out and squeeze his hand and tell him everything will be okay. He shouldn't be here. I can't imagine what I'd do if I were in his situation. His dad should have pulled him from school. He should be in California.

Professeur Cole taps the novel's cover. "Dai Sijie, born and raised in China. Moved to France. He wrote *Balzac* in French, but set the story in his homeland. And then it was translated into English. So how many steps away from us is that? Is it the one, French to English? Or do we count the first translation, the one the author only made in his mind, from Chinese to French? What do we lose each time the story is reinterpreted?"

I'm only half listening to her. After class, Meredith and Rashmi and I walk silently with St. Clair to calculus and exchange worried glances when he's not looking. Which I'm sure he knows we're doing anyway. Which makes me feel worse.

My suspicions about the faculty are confirmed when Professeur Babineaux takes him aside before class begins. I can't follow the entire conversation, but I hear him ask if St. Clair would rather spend the hour in the nurse's office.

St. Clair accepts. As soon as he leaves, Amanda Spitterton-Watts is in my face. “What’s with *St. Clair*?”

“Nothing.” Like I’d tell her.

She flips her hair, and I notice with satisfaction that a strand gets stuck to her lipgloss. “Because Steve said he and Josh were *totally* wasted Saturday night. He saw them staggering through the Halloween party, and St. Clair was *freaking out* about his dad.”

“Well, he heard wrong.”

“Steve said St. Clair wanted to *kill* his father.”

“Steve is full of shit,” Rashmi interrupts. “And where were you on Saturday, Amanda? So trashed you had to rely on Steve for the play-by-play?”

But this shuts her up only temporarily. By lunch, it’s clear the whole school knows. I’m not sure who spilled – if it was the teachers, or if Steve or one of his bonehead friends remembered something else St. Clair said – but the entire student body is buzzing. When St. Clair finally arrives in the cafeteria, it’s like a scene from a bad teen movie. Conversation screeches to a halt. Drinks are paused halfway to lips.

St. Clair stops in the doorway, assesses the situation, and marches back out. The four of us chase after him. We find him pushing through the school doors, heading to the courtyard. “I don’t want to talk about it.” His back is to us.

“Then we won’t talk about it,” Josh says. “Let’s go out for lunch.”

“Crêpes?” Mer asks. They’re St. Clair’s favourite.

“That sounds amazing,” Rashmi chimes in.

“I’m starving,” Josh says. “Come on.” We move forward, hoping he’ll follow. He does, and it’s all we can do not to sigh in relief. Mer and Rashmi lead the way, while Josh falls back with St. Clair. Josh talks about little nothings – a new pen he bought for their art class, the rap song his neighbour keeps blasting about sweaty rumps – and it helps. At least, St. Clair shows minimal signs of life. He mumbles something in reply.

I hover between the groups. I know it’s goody-goody of me, but as concerned as I am about St. Clair, I’m also worried about ditching. I don’t want to get in trouble. I glance back at SOAP, and Josh shoots me a look that says, *The school won’t care today*.

I hope he’s right.

Our favourite *crêperie* is only minutes away, and my fear of skipping school eases as I watch the crêpe man ladle the batter onto the griddle. I order mine the way I always do here, by pointing at the picture of a banana and Nutella crêpe and saying please. The man pours the warm chocolate-hazelnut spread over the thin, pancakelike crêpe, folds the banana in, and then drizzles more Nutella on

top. As a final flourish, he adds a scoop of vanilla ice cream. Real vanilla, which is tan with black flecks.

I moan as I sink into the first bite. Warm and gooey and chocolatey and perfect.

“You have Nutella on your chin,” Rashmi says, pointing with her fork.

“Mmm,” I reply.

“It’s a good look,” Josh says. “Like a little soul patch.”

I dip my finger in the chocolate and paint on a moustache. “Better?”

“Maybe if you didn’t just give yourself a Hitler,” Rashmi says.

To my surprise, St. Clair gives a snort. I’m encouraged. I redip and paint one side up in a swirl.

“You’re getting it wrong,” Josh says. “Come here.” He dabs his finger in the edge of my sauce and adds the other half carefully, with his steady artist’s hand, and then touches up my half. I look at my reflection in the restaurant’s glass and find myself with a massive, curly moustache. They laugh and clap, and Mer snaps a picture.

The men in elaborately tied scarves sitting at the table beside us look disgusted, so I pretend to twirl the ends of my Nutella moustache. The others are cracking up, and finally, *finally* St. Clair gives the teeniest of teeny smiles.

It’s a wonderful sight.

I wipe the chocolate from my face and smile back. He shakes his head. The others launch into a discussion of weird facial hair – Rashmi has an uncle who once shaved off all of his hair except what grew around the edge of his face – and St. Clair leans over to speak with me. His face is close to mine, and his eyes are hollow. His voice is scratchy. “About the other night—”

“Forget about it, it wasn’t a big deal,” I say. “It cleaned right up.”

“What cleaned right up?”

Whoops. “Nothing.”

“Did I break something?” He looks confused.

“No! You didn’t break anything. You just, kind of, you know...” I mime it.

St. Clair hangs his head and groans. “I’m sorry, Anna. I know how clean you keep your room.”

I look away, embarrassed to be called out on this. “It’s okay. Really.”

“Did I at least hit the sink? Your shower?”

“It was on the floor. And my legs. Just a little bit!” I add, seeing the horrified expression on his face.

“I vomited *on your legs*?”

“It’s okay! I’d totally have done the same if I were in your situation.” The words are out before I have a chance to stop them. And I was trying so hard not

to mention it. His face is pained, but he passes by this subject to one equally excruciating.

“Did I...” St. Clair glances at the others, ensuring they’re still distracted by facial hair. They are. He scoots his chair even closer and lowers his voice. “Did I say anything peculiar to you? That night?”

Uh-oh. “Peculiar?”

“It’s just...I only vaguely remember being in your room. But I could have sworn we had a conversation about...something.”

My heart beats faster, and it’s hard to breathe. He remembers. Sort of. What does that mean? What should I say? As anxious as I am for answers, I’m not prepared for this conversation. I bide for more time. “About what?”

He’s uncomfortable. “Did I say anything odd about... our friendship?”

And there it is.

“Or my girlfriend?”

And there that is. I take a long look at him. Dark under-eye circles. Unwashed hair. Defeated shoulders. He’s so unhappy, so unlike himself. I won’t be the one to add to his misery, no matter how badly I want the truth. I can’t ask him. Because if he likes me, he’s not in any state to begin a relationship. Or deal with the break-up of an old one. And if he *doesn’t* like me, then I’d probably lose his friendship. Things would be too weird.

And right now St. Clair needs friendship.

I keep my face blank but sincere. “No. We talked about your mom. That’s all.”

It’s the right answer. He looks relieved.



Chapter seventeen

The *pâtisserie* has thick planks of creaky hardwood and a chandelier draped with tinkly strings of topaz crystals. They glow like drops of honey. The women behind the counter lay extravagant cakes into brown-and-white-striped boxes and tie each package with turquoise ribbon and a silver bell. There's a long line, but everyone here is patiently basking in the ambience.

Mer and I wait between tiered displays as tall as we are. One is a tree made from *macarons*, round sandwich cookies with crusts as fragile as eggshells and fillings so moist and flavourful that I swoon on sight. The other is an arrangement of miniature cakes, *gâteaux*, glazed with almond frosting and pressed with sugared pansies.

Our conversation is back on St. Clair. He's all we talk about any more. "I'm just afraid they'll kick him out," I say, on tiptoe. I'm trying to peek inside the glass case at the front of the line, but a man in pinstripes carrying a wiggling puppy blocks my view. There are several dogs inside the shop today, which isn't unusual for Paris.

Mer shakes her head, and her curls bounce from underneath her knitted hat. Unlike St. Clair's, hers is robin's egg blue and very respectable.

I like St. Clair's better.

"He won't be kicked out," she says. "Josh hasn't been expelled, and he's been skipping classes for a lot longer. And the head would never expel someone whose mother is...you know."

She's not doing well. Cervical cancer. Stage 2B. An advanced stage.

Words I never want to hear associated with someone I love – external radiation therapy, chemotherapy – are now a daily part of St. Clair's life. Susan, his mother, started treatments one week after Halloween. His father is in California, driving her five days a week to radiation therapy and once a week to chemo.

St. Clair is here.

I want to kill his father. His parents have lived separately for years, but his

father won't let his mother get a divorce. And he keeps mistresses in Paris and in London, while Susan lives alone in San Francisco. Every few months, his father will visit her. Stay for a few nights. Re-establish dominance or whatever it is he holds over her. And then he leaves again.

But now *he's* the one watching her, while St. Clair suffers six thousand miles away. The whole situation makes me so sick I can hardly bear to think about it. Obviously, St. Clair hasn't been himself these last few weeks. He's ditching school, and his grades are dropping. He doesn't come to breakfast any more, and he eats every dinner with Ellie. Apart from class and lunch, where he sits cold and stone-like beside me, the only times I see him are the mornings I wake him up for school.

Meredith and I take turns. If we don't pound on his door, he won't show up at all.

The *pâtisserie* door opens and a chilly wind whips through the shop. The chandelier sways like gelatin. "I feel so helpless," I say. "I wish there was something I could do."

Mer shivers and rubs her arms. Her rings are made of fine glass today. They look like spun sugar. "I know. Me too. And I still can't believe his dad isn't letting him visit her for Thanksgiving."

"He's not?" I'm shocked. "When did this happen?" And why did Mer know about it and not me?

"Since his dad heard about his dropping grades. Josh told me the head called his father – because she was concerned about him – and instead of letting him go home, he said St. Clair couldn't fly out there until he started 'acting responsibly' again."

"But there's no way he'll be able to focus on *anything* until he sees her! And she needs him there; she needs his support. They should be together!"

"This is so typical of his dad to use a situation like this against him."

Gnawing curiosity gets the best of me again. "Have you ever met him? His father?" I know he lives near SOAP, but I've never seen him. And St. Clair certainly doesn't own a framed portrait.

"Yeah," she says cautiously. "I have."

"And?"

"He was...nice."

"NICE? How can he be nice? The man is a monster!"

"I know, I know, but he has these...impeccable manners in person. Smiles a lot. Very handsome." She changes the subject suddenly. "Do you think Josh is a bad influence on St. Clair?"

"Josh? No. I mean, maybe. I don't know. No." I shake my head, and the line

inches forward. We're almost in viewing range of the display case. I see a hint of golden apple *tarte tatins*. The edge of a glossy chocolate-and-raspberry *gâteau*.

At first everything seemed too sophisticated for my tastes, but three months into this, and I understand why the French are famous for their cuisine. Meals here are savoured. Restaurant dinners are measured in hours, not minutes. It's so different from America. Parisians swing by the markets every day for the ripest fruit and vegetables, and they frequent specialty shops for cheese, fish, meat, poultry, and wine. And cake.

I like the cake shops the best.

"It just seems like Josh is telling him it's okay to stop caring," Mer presses. "I feel like I'm always the bad guy. 'Get up. Go to school. Do your homework.' You know? While Josh is like, 'Screw it, man. Just leave.'"

"Yeah, but I don't think he's telling St. Clair not to care. He just knows St. Clair can't deal with things right now." But I squirm a bit. I do wish Josh would be supportive in a more encouraging way.

She opens her mouth to argue when I interrupt. "How's soccer?"

"Football," she says, and her face lights up. Meredith joined a local girls' league last month, and she practises most afternoons. She updates me on her latest adventures in soccer drills until we reach the front case. It shimmers with neat rows of square-shaped *tarte citrons*, spongy cakes swelling with molten chocolate, caramel *éclairs* like ballet slippers, and red fruity cakes with wild strawberries dusted in powdery sugar.

And more *macarons*.

Bin after bin of *macarons* in every flavour and colour imaginable. Grass greens and pinky reds and sunshine yellows. While Mer debates over cakes, I select six.

Rose. Blackcurrant. Orange. Fig. Pistachio. Violet.

And then I notice cinnamon and hazelnut praline, and I just want to die right there. Crawl over the counter and crunch my fingers through their delicate crusts and lick out the fragrant fillings until I can no longer breathe. I am so distracted it takes a moment to realize the man behind me is speaking to me.

"Huh?" I turn to see a dignified gentleman with a basset hound. He's smiling at me and pointing at my striped box. The man looks familiar. I swear I've seen him before. He talks in friendly, rapid French.

"Uhh." I gesture around feebly and shrug my shoulders. "*Je ne parle pas...*"

I don't speak...

He slows down, but I'm still clueless. "Mer? Help? Mer?"

She comes to the rescue. They chat for a minute, and his eyes are shining until she says something that makes him gasp. "*Ce n'est pas possible!*" I don't need to

speak the language to recognize an “Oh, no!” when I hear it. He considers me sadly, and then they say goodbye. I add in my own shaky farewell. Mer and I pay for our treats – she’s selected *un millefeuille*, a puff pastry with custard – and she steers me from the shop.

“Who was that? What did he want? What were you talking about?”

“You don’t recognize him?” She’s surprised. “It’s the man who runs that theatre on rue des écoles, the little one with the red-and-white lights. He walks Pouce in front of our dorm all the time.”

We pick our way through a flock of pigeons, who don’t care we’re about to step on them. They rumble with coos and beat their wings and jostle the air. “Pouce?”

“The basset hound.”

A light bulb goes off. Of course I’ve seen them around. “But what did he want?”

“He was wondering why he hasn’t seen your boyfriend in a while. St. Clair,” she adds, at my confused expression. Her voice is bitter. “I guess you guys have seen a few films there together?”

“We watched a spaghetti-western retrospective there last month.” I’m baffled. He thought St. Clair and I were dating?

She’s quiet. Jealous. But Meredith has no reason for envy. There’s nothing – *nothing* – going on between St. Clair and me. And I’m okay with it, I swear. I’m too worried about St. Clair to think about him in that *other* way. He needs the familiar right now, and Ellie is familiar.

I’ve been thinking about the familiar, too. I miss Toph again. I miss his green eyes, and I miss those late nights at the theatre when he’d make me laugh so hard I’d cry. Bridge says he asks about me, but I haven’t talked to him lately, because their band is so busy. Things are good for the Penny Dreadfuls. They’ve finally scheduled their first gig. It’s just before Christmas, and I, Anna Oliphant, will be in attendance.

One month. I can hardly wait.

I should be seeing them next week, but Dad doesn’t think it’s worth the money to fly me home for such a short holiday, and Mom can’t afford it. So I’m spending Thanksgiving here alone. Except...I’m not any more.

I recall the news Mer dropped only minutes ago. St. Clair isn’t going home for Thanksgiving either. And everyone else, his girlfriend included, is travelling back to the States. Which means the two of us will be here for the four-day weekend. Alone.

The thought distracts me all the way back to the dorm.



Chapter eighteen

“Happy Thanksgiving to you! Happy Thanksgiving to youuuu! Happy Thanksgiving-ing, St. Cla-airrr—”

His door jerks open, and he glares at me with heavy eyes. He’s wearing a plain white T-shirt and white pyjama bottoms with blue stripes. “Stop. Singing.”

“St. Clair! Fancy meeting you here!” I give him my biggest gap-toothed smile. “Did you know today is a holiday?”

He shuffles back into bed but leaves his door open. “I heard,” he says grumpily. I let myself in. His room is...messier than the first time I saw it. Dirty clothes and towels in heaps across the floor. Half-empty water bottles. The contents of his school bag spill from underneath his bed, crinkled papers and blank worksheets. I take a hesitant sniff. Dank. It smells dank.

“Love what you’ve done with the place. Very college-chic.”

“If you’re here to criticize, you can leave the way you came in,” he mumbles through his pillow.

“Nah. You know how I feel about messes. They’re ripe with such *possibility*.”

He sighs, a long-suffering noise.

I move a stack of textbooks off his desk chair and several sketches fall from between the pages. They’re all charcoal drawings of anatomical hearts. I’ve only seen his doodles before, nothing serious. And while it’s true Josh is the better technical artist, these are beautiful. Violent. Passionate.

I pick them off the floor. “These are amazing. When did you make them?”

Silence.

Delicately, I place the hearts back inside his government book, careful not to smudge them any more than they already are. “So. We’re celebrating today. You’re the only person I know left in Paris.”

A grunt. “Not many restaurants are serving stuffed turkey.”

“I don’t need turkey, just an acknowledgement that today is important. No one out there —” I point out his window, even though he’s not looking — “has a clue.”

He tugs his covers tight. “I’m from London. I don’t celebrate it either.”

“Please. You said on my first day you were an American. Remember? You can’t switch nationalities as suits your needs. And today our country is gorging itself on pie and casseroles, and we need to be a part of that.”

“Hmph.”

This isn’t going as planned. Time to switch tactics. I sit on the edge of his bed and wiggle his foot. “Please? Pretty please?”

Silence.

“Come on. I need to do something fun, and you need to get out of this room.”

Silence.

My frustration rises. “You know, today sucks for both of us. You aren’t the only one stuck here. I’d give anything to be at home right now.”

Silence.

I take a slow, deep breath. “Fine. You wanna know the deal? I’m worried about you. We’re *all* worried about you. Heck, this is the most we’ve talked in weeks, and I’m the only one moving my mouth! It sucks what happened, and it sucks even harder that there’s nothing any of us can say or do to change it. I mean there’s *nothing* I can do, and that pisses me off, because I hate seeing you like this. But you know what?” I stand back up. “I don’t think your mom would want you beating yourself up over something you can’t control. She wouldn’t want you to stop trying. And I think she’ll want to hear as many good things as possible when you go home next month—”

“IF I go home next month—”

“WHEN you go home, she’ll want to see you happy.”

“Happy?” Now he’s mad. “How can I—”

“Okay, not happy,” I say quickly. “But she won’t want to see you like this either. She won’t want to hear you’ve stopped attending class, stopped trying. She wants to see you graduate, remember? You’re so close, St. Clair. Don’t mess this up.”

Silence.

“Fine.” It’s not fair, not rational, for me to be this angry with him, but I can’t help it. “Be a lump. Drop out. Enjoy your miserable day in bed.” I head for the door. “Maybe you aren’t the person I thought you were.”

“And who is that?” comes the acid reply.

“The kind of guy who gets out of bed, even when things are crap. The kind of guy who calls his mother to say ‘Happy Thanksgiving’ instead of avoiding talking to her because he’s afraid of what she might say. The kind of guy who doesn’t let his asshole father win. But I guess I’m wrong. This —” I gesture around his room, even though his back is to me; he’s very still — “must be working for you. Good luck with that. Happy holidays. I’m going out.”

The door is clicking shut when I hear it. “Wait—”

St. Clair cracks it back open. His eyes are blurry, his arms limp. “I don’t know what to say,” he finally says.

“So don’t say anything. Take a shower, put on some warm clothes, and come find me. I’ll be in my room.”

I let him in twenty minutes later, relieved to find his hair is wet. He’s bathed.

“Come here.” I sit him on the floor in front of my bed and grab a towel. I rub it through his dark hair. “You’ll catch a cold.”

“That’s a myth, you know.” But he doesn’t stop me. After a minute or two, he gives a small sigh, some kind of release. I work slowly, methodically. “So where are we going?” he asks when I finish. His hair is still damp, and a few curls are forming.

“You have great hair,” I say, resisting the urge to finger-comb it.

He snorts.

“I’m serious. I’m sure people tell you all the time, but it’s really good hair.”

I can’t see his expression, but his voice grows quiet. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome,” I say with formality. “And I’m not sure where we’re going. I thought we’d just leave and...we’ll know when we get there.”

“What?” he asks. “No plan? No minute-by-minute itinerary?”

I wallop the back of his head with the towel. “Careful. I’ll make one.”

“God, no. Anything but *that*.” I think he’s serious until he turns around with half a grin on his face. I swat him again, but truthfully, I’m so relieved for that half grin that I could cry. It’s more than I’ve seen in weeks.

Focus, Anna. “Shoes. I need shoes.” I throw on my sneakers and grab my winter coat, hat, and gloves. “Where’s your hat?”

He squints at me. “Mer? Is that you? Do I need my scarf? Will it be cold, Mummy?”

“Fine, freeze to death. See if I care.” But he pulls his knitted stocking cap out of his coat pocket and yanks it over his hair. This time his grin is full and dazzling, and it catches me off guard. My heart stops.

I stare until his smile drops, and he looks at me questioningly.

This time, it’s my voice that’s grown quiet. “Let’s go.”



Chapter nineteen

“There it is! That’s my plan.”

St. Clair follows my gaze to the massive dome. The violet grey sky, the same sky Paris has seen every day since the temperature dropped, has subdued it, stripped away its golden gleam, but I am no less intrigued.

“The Panthéon?” he asks warily.

“You know, I’ve been here three months, and I still have no idea what it is.” I jump into the crosswalk leading towards the gigantic structure.

He shrugs. “It’s a pantheon.”

I stop to glare, and he pushes me forward so I’m not run over by a blue tourist bus. “Oh, right. A pantheon. Why didn’t I think of that?”

St. Clair glances at me from the corner of his eyes and smiles. “A pantheon means it’s a place for tombs – of famous people, people important to the nation.”

“Is that all?” I’m sort of disappointed. It looks like it should’ve at least crowned a few kings or something.

He raises an eyebrow.

“I mean, there are tombs and monuments everywhere here. What’s different about this one?” We climb the steps, and the full height of the approaching columns is overwhelming. I’ve never been this close.

“I don’t know. Nothing, I suppose. It’s a bit second rate, anyway.”

“Second rate? You’ve gotta be kidding.” Now I’m offended. I like the Panthéon. No, I LOVE the Panthéon. “Who’s buried here?” I demand.

“Er. Rousseau, Marie Curie, Louis Braille, Victor Hugo—”

“*The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* guy?”

“The very one. Voltaire. Dumas. Zola.”

“Wow. See? You can’t say that’s not impressive.” I recognize the names, even if I don’t know what they all did.

“I didn’t.” He reaches for his wallet and pays our admission charge. I try to get it – since it was my idea in the first place – but he insists. “Happy Thanksgiving,” he says, handing me my ticket. “Let’s see some dead people.”

We're greeted by an unimaginable number of domes and columns and arches. Everything is huge and round. Enormous frescoes of saints, warriors, and angels are painted across the walls. We stroll across the marble in awed silence, except for when he points out someone important like Joan of Arc or Saint Geneviève, the patron saint of Paris. According to him, Saint Geneviève saved the city from famine. I think she was a real person, but I'm too shy to ask. When I'm with him, I'm always aware of how much I don't know.

A swinging brass sphere hangs from the highest point in the centre dome. Okay, now I can't help it. "What's that?"

St. Clair shrugs and looks around for a sign.

"I'm shocked. I thought you knew everything."

He finds one. "Foucault's pendulum. Oh. Sure." He looks up in admiration.

The sign is written in French, so I wait for his explanation. It doesn't come. "Yes?"

St. Clair points at the ring of measurements on the floor. "It's a demonstration of the earth's rotation. See? The plane of the pendulum's swing rotates every hour. You know, it's funny," he says, looking all the way up at the ceiling, "but the experiment didn't have to be this big to prove his point."

"How French."

He smiles. "Come on, let's see the crypt."

"Crypt?" I freeze. "Like, a *crypt* crypt?"

"Where'd you think the dead bodies were?"

I cough. "Right. Sure. The crypt. Let's go."

"Unless you're scared."

"I didn't have a problem at the cemetery, did I?" He stiffens, and I'm mortified. I can't *believe* I brought up Père-Lachaise. Distraction. Quick, I need a distraction! I blurt out the first thing that comes to mind. "Race you!" And I run towards the closest crypt entrance. My pounding feet echo throughout the building, and the tourists are all staring.

I. Am. Going. To. Die. Of. Embarrassment.

And then – he shoots past me. I laugh in surprise and pick up speed. We're neck and neck, almost there, when an angry guard leaps in front of us. I trip over St. Clair trying to stop. He steadies me as the guard shouts at us in French. My cheeks redden, but before I can try to apologize, St. Clair does it for us. The guard softens and lets us go after a minute of gentle scolding.

It is like Père-Lachaise again. St. Clair is practically strutting.

"You get away with everything."

He laughs. He doesn't argue, because he knows it's true. But his mood changes the moment the stairs come into view. The spiral staircase down to the

crypt is steep and narrow. My irritation is replaced by worry when I see the terror in his eyes. I'd forgotten about his fear of heights.

"You know...I don't really wanna see the crypt," I say.

St. Clair shoots me a look, and I shut my mouth. Determined, he grips the rough stone wall and moves slowly downwards. *Step. Step. Step.* It's not a long staircase, but the process is *excruciating*. At last we reach the bottom, and an impatient herd of tourists stampedes out behind us. I start to apologize – it was so stupid to bring him here – but he talks over me. "It's bigger than I thought. The crypt." His voice is strained and rushed. He won't look at me.

Deflection. Okay. I take his cue. "You know," I say carefully, "I just heard someone say that the crypt covers the entire area underneath the building. I was picturing endless catacombs decorated with bones, but this isn't so bad."

"No skulls or femurs, at least." A fake laugh.

In fact, the crypt is well lit. It's freezing down here, but it's also clean and sparse and white. Not exactly a dungeon. But St. Clair is still agitated and embarrassed. I lunge towards a statue. "Hey, look! Is that Voltaire?"

We move on through the hallways. I'm surprised by how bare everything is. There's a lot of empty space, room for future tombs. After exploring for a while, St. Clair relaxes again, and we talk about little things, like the test last week in calculus and the peculiar leather jacket Steve Carver has been wearing lately. We haven't had a normal conversation in weeks. It almost feels like it did...before. And then we hear a grating American voice behind us. "Don't walk behind *him*. We'll be stuck here all day."

St. Clair tenses.

"He shoulda stayed home if he was so afraid of a couple stairs."

I start to spin around, but St. Clair grips my arm. "Don't. He's not worth it." He steers me into the next hallway, and I'm trying to read a name chiselled into the wall, but I'm so furious that I'm seeing spots. St. Clair is rigid. I have to do something.

I squint at the name until it comes into focus. "Emily Zola. That's only the second woman I've seen down here. What's up with that?"

But before St. Clair can answer, the grating voice says, "It's *Émile*." We turn around to find a smug guy in a Euro Disney sweatshirt. "Émile Zola is a *man*."

My face burns. I reach for St. Clair's arm to pull us away again, but St. Clair is already in his face. "Émile Zola *was* a man," he corrects. "And *you're* an arse. Why don't you mind your own bloody business and leave her alone!"

Leave her alone, alone, alone! His shout echoes through the crypt. Euro Disney, startled by the outburst, backs into his wife, who yelps. Everyone else stares, mouths open. St. Clair yanks my hand and drags me to the stairs, and I'm

nervous, so scared of what will happen. Adrenaline carries him an entire spiral up, but then it's as if his body has realized what's happening, and he abruptly halts and dangerously sways backwards.

I steady him from behind. "I'm here."

He squeezes my fingers in a death grip. I gently march him upwards until we're back under the domes and columns and arches, the open space of the main floor. St. Clair lets go of me and collapses onto the closest bench. He hangs his head, like he's about to be sick. I wait for him to speak.

He doesn't.

I sit on the bench beside him. It's a memorial for Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, who wrote *The Little Prince*. He died in a plane crash, so I suppose there aren't any remains for a tomb downstairs. I watch people take pictures of the frescoes. I watch the guard who yelled at us earlier. I don't watch St. Clair.

At last, he raises his head. His voice is calm. "Shall we look for a turkey dinner?"

It takes hours of examining menus before we find something suitable. The search turns into a game, a quest, something to lose ourselves in. We need to forget the man in the crypt. We need to forget that we aren't home.

When we finally discover a restaurant advertising an "American Thanksgiving Dinner", we whoop, and I perform a victory dance. The maître d' is alarmed by our enthusiasm but seats us anyway. "Brilliant," St. Clair says when the main course arrives. He raises his glass of sparkling water and smiles. "To the successful locating of a proper turkey dinner in Paris."

I smile back. "To your mom."

His smile falters for a moment, and then is replaced with one that's softer. "To Mum." We clink glasses.

"So, um. You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to, but how's she doing?" The words spill from my mouth before I can stop them. "Is the radiation therapy making her tired? Is she eating enough? I read that if you don't put on lotion every night, you can get burns, and I was just wondering..." I trail off, seeing his expression. It's as if I've sprouted tusks. "I'm sorry. I'm being nosy, I'll shut—"

"No," he interrupts. "It's not that. It's just...you're the first person who's known any of that. How...how did...?"

"Oh. Um. I was just worried, so I did some research. You know, so I'd... know," I finish lamely.

He's quiet for a moment. "Thank you."

I look down at the napkin in my lap. "*It's nothing—*"

“No, it *is* something. A big something. When I try talking to Ellie about it, she has no bloody clue—” He cuts himself off, as if he’s said too much. “Anyway. Thank you.”

I meet his gaze again, and he stares back in wonder. “You’re welcome,” I say.

We spend the rest of dinner talking about his mother. And when we leave the restaurant, we keep talking about her. We walk along the Seine. The moon is full and the lamps are on, and he talks until it’s as if he weighs an entire person lighter.

He stops. “I didn’t mean to do that.”

I breathe deeply, inhaling the pleasant river smell. “I’m glad you did.”

We’re at the street we’d turn on to go back to the dorm. He looks down it hesitantly, and then blurts, “Let’s see a film. I don’t want to go back yet.”

He doesn’t have to ask *me* twice. We find a theatre showing a new release, a slacker comedy from the States, and stay for the double feature. I don’t remember the last time I laughed so hard, and beside me, St. Clair laughs even harder. It’s two in the morning before we get back to the dorm. The front desk is empty, and Nate’s light is off.

“I think we’re the only ones in the building,” he says.

“Then no one will mind when I do this!” I jump onto the desk and parade back and forth. St. Clair belts out a song, and I shimmy to the sound of his voice. When he finishes, I bow with a grand flourish.

“Quick!” he says.

“What?” I hop off the desk. Is Nate here? Did he see?

But St. Clair runs to the stairwell. He throws open the door and screams. The echo makes us both jump, and then together we scream again at the top of our lungs. It’s exhilarating. St. Clair chases me to the elevator, and we ride it to the rooftop. He hangs back but laughs as I spit off the side, trying to hit a lingerie advertisement. The wind is fierce, and my aim is off, so I race back down two flights of stairs. Our staircase is wide and steady, so he’s only a few feet behind me. We reach his floor.

“Well,” he says. Our conversation halts for the first time in hours.

I look past him. “Um. Goodnight.”

“See you tomorrow? Late breakfast at the *crêperie*?”

“That’d be nice.”

“Unless—” He cuts himself off.

Unless what? He’s hesitant, changed his mind. The moment passes. I give him one more questioning look, but he turns away.

“Okay.” It’s hard to keep the disappointment out of my voice. “See you in the morning.” I take the steps down and glance back. He’s staring at me. I lift my

hand and wave. He's oddly statuesque. I push through the door to my floor, shaking my head. I don't understand why things always go from perfect to weird with us. It's like we're incapable of normal human interaction. *Forget about it, Anna.*

The stairwell door bursts open.

My heart stops.

St. Clair looks nervous. "It's been a good day. This was the *first* good day I've had in ages." He walks slowly towards me. "I don't want it to end. I don't want to be alone right now."

"Uh." I can't breathe.

He stops before me, scanning my face. "Would it be okay if I stayed with you? I don't want to make you uncomfortable—"

"No! I mean..." My head swims. I can hardly think straight. "Yes. Yes, of course, it's okay."

St. Clair is still for a moment. And then he nods.

I pull off my necklace and insert my key into the lock. He waits behind me. My hand shakes as I open the door.



Chapter twenty

St. Clair is sitting on my floor. He tosses his boots across my room, and they hit my door with a loud *smack*. It's the first noise either of us has made since coming in here.

"Sorry." He's embarrassed. "Where shall I put those?"

But before I can reply, he's blabbering. "Ellie thinks I ought to go to San Francisco. I've almost bought the plane ticket loads of times, but it's not what Mum would want. If my father doesn't want it, she doesn't want it. It'd put too much additional stress on the situation."

I'm startled by the outburst.

"Sometimes I wonder if she – Ellie – if she, you know..." His voice grows quiet. "Wants me gone."

He never talks about his girlfriend. Why now? I can't *believe* I have to defend her. I line his boots beside my door to avoid looking at him. "She's probably just tired of seeing you miserable. Like we all are," I add. "I'm sure...I'm sure she's as crazy about you as ever."

"Hmm." He watches me put away my own shoes and empty the contents of my pockets. "What about you?" he asks, after a minute.

"What about me?"

St. Clair examines his watch. "Sideburns. You'll be seeing him next month."

He's re-establishing...what? The boundary line? That he's taken, and I'm spoken for? Except I'm not. Not really.

But I can't bear to say this now that he's mentioned Ellie. "Yeah, I can't wait to see him again. He's a funny guy, you'd like him. I'm gonna see his band play at Christmas. Toph's a great guy, you'd really like him. Oh. I already said that, didn't I? But you would. He's really...funny."

Shut up, Anna. Shut. Up.

St. Clair unbuckles and rebuckles and unbuckles his watch strap.

"I'm beat," I say. And it's the truth. As always, our conversation has exhausted me. I crawl into bed and wonder what he'll do. Lie on my floor? Go

back to his room? But he places his watch on my desk and climbs onto my bed. He slides up next to me. He's on top of the covers, and I'm underneath. We're still fully dressed, minus our shoes, and the whole situation is *beyond* awkward.

He hops up. I'm sure he's about to leave, and I don't know whether to be relieved or disappointed, but...he flips off my light. My room is pitch-black. He shuffles back towards my bed and smacks into it.

"Oof," he says.

"Hey, there's a bed there."

"Thanks for the warning."

"No problem."

"It's freezing in here. Do you have a fan on or something?"

"It's the wind. My window won't shut all the way. I have a towel stuffed under it, but it doesn't really help."

He pats his way around the bed and slides back in. "Ow," he says.

"Yes?"

"My belt. Would it be weird..."

I'm thankful he can't see me blush. "Of course not." And I listen to the slap of leather as he pulls it out of his belt loops. He lays it gently on my hardwood floor.

"Um," he says. "Would it be weird—"

"Yes."

"Oh, piss off. I'm not talking trousers. I only want under the blankets. That breeze is horrible." He slides underneath, and now we're lying side by side. In my narrow bed. Funny, but I never imagined my first sleepover with a guy being, well, a sleepover.

"All we need now are *Sixteen Candles* and a game of Truth or Dare."

He coughs. "Wh-what?"

"The movie, pervert. I was just thinking it's been a while since I've had a sleepover."

A pause. "Oh."

"..."

"..."

"St. Clair?"

"Yeah?"

"Your elbow is murdering my back."

"Bollocks. Sorry." He shifts, and then shifts again, and then again, until we're comfortable. One of his legs rests against mine. Despite the two layers of trousers between us, I feel naked and vulnerable. He shifts again and now my entire leg, from calf to thigh, rests against his. I smell his hair. Mmm.

NO!

I swallow, and it's so loud. He coughs again. I'm trying not to squirm. After what feels like hours but is surely only minutes, his breath slows and his body relaxes. I finally begin to relax, too. I want to memorize his scent and the touch of his skin – one of his arms, now against mine – and the solidness of his body. No matter what happens, I'll remember this for the rest of my life.

I study his profile. His lips, his nose, his eyelashes. He's so beautiful.

The wind rattles the panes, and the lights buzz softly in the hall. He sleeps soundly. How long has it been since he's had a decent night's rest? There's another uncomfortable tug on my heart. Why do I care so much about him, and why do I wish I didn't? How can one person make me so confused all of the time?

What is that? Is it lust? Or something else altogether? And is it even possible for me to feel this way about him without these feelings being reciprocated? He said that he liked me. He did. And even though he was drunk, he wouldn't have said it if there wasn't at least *some* truth to it. Right?

I don't know.

Like every time I'm with him, I don't know anything. He scoots closer to me in his sleep. His breath is warm against my neck. I don't know anything. He's so beautiful, so perfect. I wonder if he...if I...

A ray of light glares into my eyes, and I squint, disoriented. Daylight. The red numbers on my clock read 11:27. Huh. Did I mean to sleep in? What day is it? And then I see the body in bed next to me. And I nearly jump out of my skin.

So it wasn't a dream.

His mouth is parted, and the sheets are kicked off. One of his hands rests on his stomach. His shirt has hiked up, and I can see his abdomen. My gaze is transfixed.

Holy crap. I just slept with St. Clair.



Chapter twenty-one

I mean I didn't SLEEP sleep with him. Obviously. But I slept with him.

I slept with a boy! I burrow back down into my sheets and grin. I can't WAIT to tell Bridge. Except...what if she tells Toph? And I can't tell Mer, because she'd get jealous, which means I can't tell Rashmi or Josh either. It dawns on me that there is *nobody* I can tell about this. Does that mean it's wrong?

I stay in bed for as long as possible, but eventually my bladder wins. When I come back from the bathroom, he's looking out my window. He turns around and laughs. "Your hair. It's sticking up in all different directions." St. Clair pronounces it *die-rections* and illustrates his point by poking his fingers up around his head like antlers.

"You're one to speak."

"Ah, but it looks purposeful on me. Took me ages to realize the best way to get that mussed look was to ignore it completely."

"So you're saying it looks like crap on me?" I glance in the mirror, and I'm alarmed to discover I do resemble a horned beast.

"No. I like it." He grins and picks his belt up off the floor. "Breakfast?"

I hand him his boots. "It's noon."

"Thanks. Lunch?"

"Lemme shower first."

We part for an hour and meet back in his room. His door is propped open, and French punk rock is blaring down his hall. I'm shocked when I step inside and discover he's straightened up. The heaps of clothing and towels have been organized for laundry purposes, and the empty bottles and chip bags have been thrown out.

He looks at me hopefully. "It's a start."

"It looks great." And it *does* look better. I smile.

We spend the day walking around again. We catch part of a Danny Boyle film festival and take another stroll beside the Seine. I teach him how to skip stones; I can't believe he doesn't know how. It starts drizzling, so we pop into a bookshop

across from Notre-Dame. The yellow-and-green sign reads SHAKESPEARE AND COMPANY.

Inside, we're struck by chaos. A horde of customers crowds the desk, and everywhere I turn there are books, books, and more books. But it's not like a chain, where everything is neatly organized on shelves and tables and end caps. Here books totter in wobbly stacks, fall from the seats of chairs, and spill from sagging shelves. There are cardboard boxes overflowing with books, and a black cat naps beside a pile on the stairs. But the most astonishing thing is that all of the books are in *English*.

St. Clair notices my awed expression. "You've never been here before?"

I shake my head, and he's surprised. "It's quite famous. Hey, look—" He holds up a copy of *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress*. "This is familiar, eh?"

I wander in a daze, half thrilled to be surrounded by my own language, half terrified to disturb anything. One wrong touch might break the entire store. It could collapse, and we'd be buried in an avalanche of yellowed pages.

The rain patters against the windows. I push my way through a group of tourists and examine the fiction section. I don't know why I'm looking for him, but I can't help it. I work backwards. Christie, Cather, Caldwell, Burroughs, Brontë, Berry, Baldwin, Auster, Austen. Ashley. James Ashley.

A line of my father's books. Six of them. I pull a hardcover copy of *The Incident* from the shelf, and I cringe at the familiar sunset on the cover.

"What's that?" St. Clair asks. I startle. I didn't realize he was standing beside me.

He takes the novel from me, and his eyes widen with recognition. He flips it over, and Dad's author photo grins back at us. My father is overly tanned, and his teeth gleam fake white. He's wearing a lavender polo shirt, and his hair blows gently in the wind.

St. Clair raises his eyebrows. "I don't see the relation. He's *much* better looking."

I sputter with nervousness, and he taps my arm with the book. "It's worse than I thought." He laughs. "Does he always look like this?"

"Yes."

He flips it open and reads the jacket. I watch his face anxiously. His expression grows puzzled. I see him stop and go back to read something again. St. Clair looks up at me. "It's about cancer," he says.

Oh. My. God.

"This woman has cancer. What happens to her?"

I can't swallow. "My father is an idiot. I've told you, he's a complete

jackass.”

An excruciating pause. “He sells a lot of these, does he?”

I nod.

“And people enjoy this? They find it entertaining, do they?”

“I’m sorry, St. Clair.” Tears are welling in my eyes. I’ve never hated my father as much as I do right now. How could he? How dare he make money off something so horrible? St. Clair shuts the book and shoves it back on the shelf. He picks up another, *The Entrance*. The leukaemia novel. My father wears a dress shirt with the first few buttons casually undone. His arms are crossed, but he has that same ridiculous grin.

“He’s a freak,” I say. “A total...goinky freak.”

St. Clair snorts. He opens his mouth to say something, but then sees me crying. “No, Anna. Anna, I’m sorry.”

“I’m sorry. You shouldn’t have seen this.” I snatch the book and thrust it back onto the shelf. Another stack of novels tumbles off and crashes to the floor between us. We drop to pick them up and bash heads.

“Ow!” I say.

St. Clair rubs his head. “Are you all right?”

I wrench the books from his hands. “I’m fine. Just fine.” I pile them back on the bookcase and stumble to the back of the store, as far from him, as far from my father, as possible. But a few minutes later, St. Clair is back at my side.

“It’s not your fault,” he says quietly. “You don’t pick your parents. I know that as well as anyone, Anna.”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Fair enough.” He holds up a collection of poetry. Pablo Neruda. “Have you read this?”

I shake my head.

“Good. Because I just bought it for you.”

“What?”

“It’s on our syllabus for next semester in English. You’d need to buy it anyway. Open it up,” he says.

Confused, I do. There’s a stamp on the front page. SHAKESPEARE AND COMPANY, *Kilometre Zero Paris*. I blink. “Kilometre Zero? Is that the same thing as Point Zéro?” I think about our first walk around the city together.

“For old times’ sake.” St. Clair smiles. “Come on, the rain’s stopped. Let’s get out of here.”

I’m still quiet on the street. We cross the same bridge we did that first night – me on the outside again, St. Clair on the inside – and he keeps up the conversation

for the both of us. “Did I ever tell you I went to school in America?”

“What? No.”

“It’s true, for a year. Eighth grade. It was terrible.”

“Eighth grade is terrible for everyone,” I say.

“Well, it was worse for me. My parents had just separated, and my mum moved back to California. I hadn’t been since I was an infant, but I went with her, and I was put in this horrid public school—”

“Oh, no. *Public* school.”

He nudges me with his shoulder. “The other kids were ruthless. They made fun of everything about me – my height, my accent, the way I dressed. I vowed I’d never go back.”

“But American girls love English accents.” I blurt this without thinking, and then pray he doesn’t notice my blush.

St. Clair picks up a pebble and tosses it into the river. “Not in middle school, they don’t. Especially when it’s attached to a bloke who comes up to their kneecaps.”

I laugh.

“So when the year was over, my parents found a new school for me. I wanted to go back to London, where my mates were, but my father insisted on Paris so he could keep an eye on me. And that’s how I wound up at the School of America.”

“How often do you go back? To London?”

“Not as often as I’d like. I still have friends in England, and my grandparents – my father’s parents – live there, so I used to split my summers between London and San—”

“Your grandparents are English?”

“Grandfather is, but Grandmère is French. And my other grandparents are American, of course.”

“Wow. You really are a mutt.”

St. Clair smiles. “I’m told I take after my English grandfather the most, but it’s only because of the accent.”

“I don’t know. I think of you as more English than anything else. And you don’t just sound like it, you look like it, too.”

“I do?” He’s surprised.

I smile. “Yeah, it’s that...pasty complexion. I mean it in the best possible way,” I add, at his alarmed expression. “Honestly.”

“Huh.” St. Clair looks at me sideways. “Anyway. Last summer I couldn’t bear to face my father, so it was the first time I spent the whole holiday with my mum.”

“And how was it? I bet the girls don’t tease you about your accent any more.”

He laughs. “No, they don’t. But I can’t help my height. I’ll always be short.”

“And I’ll always be a freak, just like my dad. Everyone tells me I take after him. He’s sort of...*neat*, like me.”

He seems genuinely surprised. “What’s wrong with being neat? I wish I were more organized. And, Anna, I’ve never met your father, but I guarantee you that you’re nothing like him.”

“How would you know?”

“Well, for one thing, he looks like a Ken doll. And you’re beautiful.”

I trip and fall down on the sidewalk.

“Are you all right?” His eyes fill with worry.

I look away as he takes my hand and helps me up. “I’m fine. Fine!” I say, brushing the grit from my palms. Oh my God, I AM a freak.

“You’ve seen the way men look at you, right?” he continues.

“If they’re looking, it’s because I keep making a fool of myself.” I hold up my scraped hands.

“That guy over there is checking you out right now.”

“Wha—?” I turn to find a young man with long dark hair staring. “Why is he looking at me?”

“I expect he likes what he sees.”

I flush, and he keeps talking. “In Paris, it’s common to acknowledge someone attractive. The French don’t avert their gaze like other cultures do. Haven’t you noticed?”

St. Clair thinks I’m attractive. He called me beautiful.

“Um, no,” I say. “I hadn’t noticed.”

“Well. Open your eyes.”

But I stare at the bare tree branches, at the children with balloons, at the Japanese tour group. Anywhere but at him. We’ve stopped in front of Notre-Dame again. I point at the familiar star and clear my throat. “Wanna make another wish?”

“You go first.” He’s watching me, puzzled, like he’s trying to figure something out. He bites his thumbnail.

This time I can’t help it. All day long, I’ve thought about it. Him. Our secret.

I wish St. Clair would spend the night again.

He steps on the coppery-bronze star after me and closes his eyes. I realize he must be wishing about his mother, and I feel guilty that she didn’t even cross my mind. My thoughts are only for St. Clair.

Why is he taken? Would things be different if I’d met him before Ellie? Would things be different if his mom wasn’t sick?

He said I'm beautiful, but I don't know if that was flirty, friends-with-everyone St. Clair, or if it came from someplace private. Do I see the same St. Clair everyone else does? No. I don't think so. But I could be mistaking our friendship for something more, because I *want* to mistake it for something more.

The worrying gradually slips away at dinner. Our restaurant is covered with ivy and cosy with wood-burning fireplaces. Afterwards, we stroll in a comfortable, full-bellied chocolate mousse trance. "Let's go home," he says, and the word makes my heart drum.

Home. My home is his home, too.

There's still no one behind the front desk when we get back, but Nate peeks his head out his door. "Anna! Étienne!"

"Hey, Nate," we say.

"Did you have a nice Thanksgiving?"

"Yeah. Thanks, Nate," we say.

"Do I need to check up on you guys later? You know the rules. No sleeping in opposite-sex rooms."

My face flames, and St. Clair's cheeks grow blotchy. It's true. It's a rule. One that my brain – my rule-loving, rule-abiding brain – conveniently blocked last night. It's also one notoriously ignored by the staff.

"No, Nate," we say.

He shakes his shaved head and goes back in his apartment. But the door opens quickly again, and a handful of something is thrown at us before it's slammed back shut.

Condoms. Oh my God, how humiliating.

St. Clair's entire face is now bright red as he picks the tiny silver squares off the floor and stuffs them into his coat pockets. We don't speak, don't even look at each other, as we climb the stairs to my floor. My pulse quickens with each step. Will he follow me to my room, or has Nate ruined any chance of that?

We reach the landing, and St. Clair scratches his head. "Er..."

"So..."

"I'm going to get dressed for bed. Is that all right?" His voice is serious, and he watches my reaction carefully.

"Yeah. Me too. I'm going to...get ready for bed, too."

"See you in a minute?"

I swell with relief. "Up there or down here?"

"Trust me, you don't want to sleep in my bed." He laughs, and I have to turn my face away, because I *do*, holy crap do I *ever*. But I know what he means. It's true my bed is cleaner. I hurry to my room and throw on the strawberry pyjamas

and an Atlanta Film Festival shirt. It's not like I plan on seducing him.

Like I'd even know how.

St. Clair knocks a few minutes later, and he's wearing his white bottoms with the blue stripes again and a black T-shirt with a logo I recognize as the French band he was listening to earlier. I'm having trouble breathing.

"Room service," he says.

My mind goes...blank. "Ha ha," I say weakly.

He smiles and turns off the light. We climb into bed, and it's absolutely positively completely awkward. As usual. I roll over to my edge of the bed. Both of us are stiff and straight, careful not to touch the other person. I must be a masochist to keep putting myself in these situations. I need help. I need to see a shrink or be locked in a padded cell or straitjacketed or *something*.

After what feels like an eternity, St. Clair exhales loudly and shifts. His leg bumps into mine, and I flinch. "Sorry," he says.

"It's okay."

"..."

"..."

"Anna?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks for letting me sleep here again. Last night..."

The pressure inside my chest is torturous. What? What what *what*?

"I haven't slept that well in ages."

The room is silent. After a moment, I roll back over. I slowly, slowly stretch out my leg until my foot brushes his ankle. His intake of breath is sharp. And then I smile, because I know he can't see my expression through the darkness.



Chapter twenty-two

Saturday is another day of wandering, food, and movies, followed by an awkward conversation in the stairwell. Followed by a warm body in my bed. Followed by hesitant touches. Followed by sleep.

Even with the uncomfortable bits, I've never had a better school break.

But Sunday morning, things change. When we wake up, St. Clair stretches and accidentally smacks my boobs. Which not only *hurts* but also mortifies us both equally. Then at breakfast, he grows distant again. Checks his phone for messages while I'm talking. Stares out the café windows. And instead of exploring Paris, he says he has homework to do in the dorm.

And I'm sure he does. He hasn't exactly kept up with it. But his tone strikes me as off, and I know the real reason for his departure. Students are arriving back. Josh and Rashmi and Mer will be here this evening.

And so will Ellie.

I try not to take it personally, but it hurts. I consider going to the movies, but I work on my history homework instead. At least that's what I tell myself I'm doing. My ears are tuned to the movements above me in his room, tuned to distraction. He's so close, yet so far away. As students arrive back, Résidence Lambert gets louder, and it becomes difficult to pick out individual noises. I'm not even sure if he's there any more.

Meredith bursts in around eight, and we go to dinner. She chatters about her holiday in Boston, but my mind is elsewhere. *He's probably with her right now.* I remember the first time I saw them together – their kiss, her hands tangled in his hair – and I lose my appetite.

"You're awfully quiet," Mer says. "How was your break? Did you get St. Clair out of his room?"

"A little." I can't tell her about our nights, but for some reason, I don't want to tell her about our days either. I want to keep the memories for myself, hidden. They're mine.

Their kiss. Her hands tangled in his hair. My stomach churns.

She sighs. “And I was hoping he might come back out of his shell. Take a walk, get some fresh air. You know, something craa-zy like that.”

Their kiss. Her hands tangled—

“Hey,” she says. “You guys didn’t do anything crazy while we were gone, did you?”

I nearly choke on my coffee.

The next few weeks are a blur. Classes pick up with the *professeurs* anxious to get to the halfway point in their lesson plans. We pull all-nighters to keep up, and we cram to prepare for their finals. For the first time, it strikes me how competitive this school is. Students here take studying seriously, and the dormitory is almost as quiet as it was when they were gone for Thanksgiving.

Letters arrive from universities. I’ve been accepted into all of the schools I applied to, but there’s hardly time to celebrate. Rashmi gets into Brown, and Meredith gets into her top picks, too – one in London, one in Rome. St. Clair doesn’t talk about college. None of us know where he’s applied or *if* he’s applied, and he changes the subject whenever we bring it up.

His mother is done with chemo, and it’s her last week of external radiation. Next week, when we’re home, she’ll have her first internal radiation treatment. It requires a three-day hospital stay, and I’m thankful St. Clair will be there for it. He says her spirits are up, and she claims she’s doing well – as well as can be expected under the circumstances – but he’s impatient to see it with his own eyes.

Today is the first day of Hanukkah and, in its honour, the school has given us a break from homework assignments and tests.

Well, in honour of Josh.

“The only Jew in SOAP,” he says, rolling his eyes. He’s understandably annoyed, because jerks like Steve Carver were punching his arm and thanking him at breakfast.

My friends and I are in a department store, trying to get some shopping done while we have an actual afternoon off. The store is beautiful in a familiar way. Shiny red and gold ribbons hang from dangling wreaths. Green garlands and white twinkle lights are draped down the escalator and across the perfume counters. And American musicians sing from the speakers.

“Speaking of,” Mer says to Josh. “Should you even be here?”

“Sundown, my little Catholic friend, sundown. But actually –” he looks at Rashmi – “we need to go, if we want to catch dinner in the Marais in time. I’m craving latkes like no one’s business.”

She glances at the clock on her phone. “You’re right. We better scoot.”

They say goodbye, and then it's just the three of us. I'm glad Meredith is still here. Since Thanksgiving, things have regressed between St. Clair and me. Ellie is his girlfriend, and I'm his friend-who-is-a-girl, and I think he feels guilty for overstepping those boundaries. I feel guilty for encouraging him. Neither of us has mentioned anything about that weekend, and even though we still sit next to each other at meals, there's now this *thing* between us. The ease of our friendship is gone.

Thankfully, no one has noticed. I think. Once I caught Josh mouthing something to St. Clair and then motioning towards me. I don't know what he said, but it made St. Clair shake his head in a "shut up" manner. But it could have been about anything.

Something catches my attention. "Is that...the *Looney Tunes* theme?"

Mer and St. Clair cock their ears.

"Why, yes. I believe it is," St. Clair says.

"I heard 'Love Shack' a few minutes ago," Mer says.

"It's official," I say. "America has finally ruined France."

"So can we go now?" St. Clair holds up a small bag. "I'm done."

"Ooo, what'd you get?" Mer asks. She takes his bag and pulls out a delicate, shimmery scarf. "Is it for Ellie?"

"Shite."

Mer pauses. "You didn't get anything for Ellie?"

"No, it's for Mum. Arrrgh." He rakes a hand through his hair. "Would you mind if we pop over to Sennelier before we go home?" Sennelier is a gorgeous little art supply store, the kind that makes me wish I had an excuse to buy oil paints and pastels. Mer and I went with Rashmi last weekend. She bought Josh a new sketchbook for Hanukkah.

"Wow. Congratulations, St. Clair," I say. "Winner of today's Sucky Boyfriend award. And I thought Steve was bad – did you see what happened in calc?"

"You mean when Amanda caught him dirty-texting Nicole?" Mer asks. "I thought she was gonna stab him in the neck with her pencil."

"I've been busy," St. Clair says.

I glance at him. "I was just teasing."

"Well, you don't have to be such a bloody git about it."

"I wasn't being a *git*. I wasn't even being a twat, or a wanker, or any of your other *bleeding* Briticisms—"

"Piss off." He snatches his bag back from Mer and scowls at me.

"HEY!" Mer says. "It's Christmas. Ho-ho-ho. Deck the halls. Stop fighting."

"We weren't fighting," he and I say together.

She shakes her head. "Come on, St. Clair's right. Let's get out of here. This

place gives me the creeps.”

“I think it’s pretty,” I say. “Besides, I’d rather look at ribbons than dead rabbits.”

“Not the hares again,” St. Clair says. “You’re as bad as Rashmi.”

We wrestle through the Christmas crowds. “I can see why she was upset! The way they’re hung up, like they’d died of nosebleeds. It’s horrible. Poor Isis.” All of the shops in Paris have outdone themselves with elaborate window displays, and the butcher is no exception. I pass the dead bunnies every time I go to the movies.

“In case you hadn’t noticed,” he says, “Isis is perfectly alive and well on the sixth floor.”

We burst through the glass doors and onto the street. Shoppers rush by, and for a moment, it feels like I’m visiting my father in Manhattan. But the familiar lamp posts and benches and boulevards appear, and the illusion disappears. The sky is white grey. It looks like it’s about to snow, but it never does. We pick our way through the throngs and towards the *métro*. The air is cold, but not bitter, and tinged with chimney smoke.

St. Clair and I continue bickering about the rabbits. I know he doesn’t like the display either, but for whatever reason, he wants to argue. Mer is exasperated. “Will you guys cut it out? You’re killing my holiday buzz.”

“Speaking of buzzkills.” I look pointedly at St. Clair before addressing Mer. “I still want to ride one of those Ferris wheels they set up along the Champs-Élysées. Or that big one at the Place de la Concorde with all the pretty lights.”

St. Clair glares at me.

“I’d ask you,” I say to him, “but I know what your answer would be.”

It’s like I slapped him. Oh God. What’s wrong with me?

“Anna,” Mer says.

“I’m sorry.” I look down at my shoes in horror. “I don’t know why I said that.”

A red-cheeked man in front of a supermarket swears loudly. He’s selling baskets filled with oysters on ice. His hands must be freezing, but I’d trade places with him in a second. *Please, St. Clair. Please say something.*

He shrugs, but it’s forced. “S all right.”

“Anna, have you heard from Toph lately?” Mer asks, desperate for a subject change.

“Yeah. Actually, I got an email last night.” To be honest, for a while I’d stopped thinking about Toph. But since St. Clair has moved clearly, definitively out of the picture again, my thoughts have drifted back to Christmas break. I haven’t heard much from Toph or Bridge, because they’ve been so busy with the

band, and we've all been busy with finals, so it was surprising – and exciting – to get yesterday's email.

"So what'd it say?" Mer asks.

sorry i haven't written. its been insane with the practising. that was funny about the french pigeons being fed contraceptive seeds. those crazy parisians. they should put it in the school pizza here, there've been at least six preggos this year. bridge says ur coming to our show. lookin forward to it, annabel lee. later. toph.

"Not much. But he's looking forward to seeing me," I add.

Mer grins. "You must be so psyched."

We startle at the sound of breaking glass. St. Clair has kicked a bottle into the gutter.

"You okay?" she asks him.

But he turns to me. "Have you had a chance to look at that poetry book I got you?"

I'm so surprised, it takes a moment to answer. "Uh, no. We don't have to read it until next semester, right?" I turn to Mer and explain. "He bought me the Neruda book."

She whips her head towards St. Clair, who adjusts his face away from her scrutiny. "Yeah, well. I was just wondering. Since you hadn't mentioned it..." He trails off, dejected.

I give him a funny look and return to Mer. She's upset, too, and I'm afraid I've missed something. No, I *know* I've missed something. I babble to cover the peculiar silence. "I'm so happy to be going home. My flight leaves at, like, six in the morning this Saturday, so I have to get up insanely early, but it's worth it. I should make it in plenty of time to see the Penny Dreadfuls.

"Their show is that night," I add.

St. Clair's head shoots up. "When does your flight leave?"

"Six a.m.," I repeat.

"So does mine," he says. "My connecting flight is through Atlanta. I bet we're on the same plane. We ought to share a taxi."

Something twinges inside me. I don't know if I want to. It's all so weird with the fighting and the not-fighting. I'm searching for an excuse when we pass a homeless man with a scraggly beard. He's lying in front of the *métro*, cardboard propped around him for warmth. St. Clair roots around his pockets and places all of his euros into the man's cup. "*Joyeux Noël.*" He turns back to me. "So? A taxi?"

I glance back at the homeless man before replying. He's marvelling, dumbfounded, at the amount in his hands. The frost coating my heart cracks.

“What time should we meet?”



Chapter twenty-three

A fist pounds against my door. My eyes jolt open, and my first coherent thought is this: *-ai, -as, -a, -âmes, -âtes, -èrent*. Why am I dreaming about past-tense *-er* verb endings? I'm exhausted. So tired. Sooo sle— WHAT WHAT WHAT? Another round of rapid-fire knocking jerks me awake, and I squint at my clock. Who the heck is beating down my door at four in the morning?

Wait. Four o'clock? Wasn't there something I was supposed to—?

Oh, no. NO NO NO.

"Anna? Anna, are you there? I've been waiting in the lobby for fifteen minutes." A scrambling noise, and St. Clair curses from the floorboards. "And I see your light's off. Brilliant. Could've mentioned you'd decided to go on without me."

I explode out of bed. I overslept! I can't believe I overslept! How could this happen?

St. Clair's boots clomp away, and his suitcase drags heavily behind him. I throw open my door. Even though they're dimmed this time of night, the crystal sconces in the hall make me blink and shade my eyes.

St. Clair twists into focus. He's stunned. "Anna?"

"Help," I gasp. "Help me."

He drops his suitcase and runs to me. "Are you all right? What happened?"

I pull him in and flick on my light. The room is illuminated in its dishevelled entirety. My luggage with its zippers open and clothes piled on top like acrobats. Toiletries scattered around my sink. Bedsheets twined into ropes. And me. Belatedly, I remember that not only is my hair crazy and my face smeared with zit cream, but I'm also wearing matching flannel Batman pyjamas.

"No way." He's gleeful. "You slept in? I woke you up?"

I fall to the floor and frantically squish clothes into my suitcase.

"You haven't packed yet?"

"I was gonna finish this morning! WOULD YOU FREAKING HELP ALREADY?" I tug on a zipper. It catches a yellow Bat symbol, and I scream in

frustration.

We're going to miss our flight. We're going to miss it, and it's my fault. And who knows when the next plane will leave, and we'll be stuck here all day, and I'll never make it in time for Bridge and Toph's show. And St. Clair's mom will cry when she has to go to the hospital without him for her first round of internal radiation, because he'll be stuck in an airport on the other side of the world, and it's ALL. MY. FAULT.

"Okay, okay." He takes the zipper and wiggles it from my pyjama bottoms. I make a strange sound between a moan and a squeal. The suitcase finally lets go, and St. Clair rests his arms on my shoulders to steady them. "Get dressed. Wipe your face off. I'll take care of the rest."

Yes, one thing at a time. I can do this. I can do this.

ARRRGH!

He packs my clothes. Don't think about him touching your underwear. Do NOT think about him touching your underwear. I grab my travel outfit – thankfully laid out the night before – and freeze. "Um."

St. Clair looks up and sees me holding my jeans. He sputters. "I'll, I'll step out—"

"Turn around. Just turn around, there's no time!"

He quickly turns, and his shoulders hunch low over my suitcase to prove by posture how hard he is Not Looking. "So what happened?"

"I don't know." Another glance to ensure his continued state of Not Looking, and then I rip off my clothes in one fast swoop. I am now officially stark naked in the room with the most beautiful boy I know. Funny, but this isn't how I imagined this moment.

No. Not funny. One hundred per cent the exact opposite of funny.

"I think I maybe, possibly, vaguely remember hitting the snooze button." I jabber to cover my mortification. "Only I guess it was the off button. But I had the alarm on my phone set, too, so I don't know what happened."

Underwear, on.

"Did you turn the ringer back on last night?"

"What?" I hop into my jeans, a noise he seems to determinedly ignore. His ears are apple red.

"You went to see a film, right? Don't you set your mobile to silent at the theatre?"

He's right. I'm so stupid. If I hadn't taken Meredith to *A Hard Day's Night*, a Beatles movie I know she loves, I would have never turned it off. We'd already be in a taxi to the airport. "The taxi!" I tug my sweater over my head and look up to find myself standing across from a mirror.

A mirror St. Clair is facing.

“It’s all right,” he says. “I told the driver to wait when I came up here. We’ll just have to tip him a little extra.” His head is still down. I don’t think he saw anything. I clear my throat, and he glances up. Our eyes meet in the mirror, and he jumps. “God! I didn’t...I mean, not until just now...”

“Cool. Yeah, fine.” I try to shake it off by looking away, and he does the same. His cheeks are blazing. I edge past him and rinse the white crust off my face while he throws my toothbrush and deodorant and make-up into my luggage, and then we tear downstairs and into the lobby.

Thank goodness, the driver has waited, cigarette dangling from his mouth and annoyed expression on his face. He yammers angrily at us in French, and St. Clair says something bossy back, and soon we’re flying across the streets of Paris, whizzing through red lights and darting between cars. I grip the seat in terror and close my eyes.

The taxi jerks to a stop and so do we. “We’re here. You all right?” St. Clair asks.

“Yes. Great,” I lie.

He pays the driver, who speeds off without counting. I try to hand St. Clair a few bills, but he shakes his head and says the ride is on him. For once, I’m so freaked out that I don’t argue. It’s not until we’ve raced to the correct terminal, checked our luggage, passed through security, and located our gate that he says, “So. Batman, eh?”

Effing St. Clair.

I cross my arms and slouch into one of the plastic seats. I am so not in the mood for this. He takes the chair next to me and drapes a relaxed arm over the back of the empty seat on his other side. The man across from us is engrossed in his laptop, and I pretend to be engrossed in his laptop, too. Well, the back of it.

St. Clair hums under his breath. When I don’t respond, he sings quietly. “Jingle bells, Batman smells, Robin flew away...”

“Yes, great, I get it. Ha ha. Stupid me.”

“What? It’s just a Christmas song.” He grins and continues a bit louder. “Batmobile lost a wheel, on the M1 motorway, hey!”

“Wait.” I frown. “What?”

“What what?”

“You’re singing it wrong.”

“No, I’m not.” He pauses. “How do you sing it?”

I pat my coat, double-checking for my passport. Phew. Still there. “It’s ‘Jingle bells, Batman smells, Robin laid an egg’—”

St. Clair snorts. “Laid an egg? Robin didn’t *lay an egg*—”

“Batmobile lost a wheel, *and the Joker got away.*”

He stares at me for a moment, and then says with perfect conviction, “No.”

“Yes. I mean, seriously, what’s up with the motorway thing?”

“M1 motorway. Connects London to Leeds.”

I smirk. “Batman is American. He doesn’t take the *M1 motorway.*”

“When he’s on holiday he does.”

“Who says Batman has time to vacation?”

“Why are we arguing about Batman?” He leans forward. “You’re derailing us from the real topic. The fact that you, Anna Oliphant, slept in today.”

“Thanks.”

“You.” He prods my leg with a finger. “Slept in.”

I focus on the guy’s laptop again. “Yeah. You mentioned that.”

He flashes a crooked smile and shrugs, that full-bodied movement that turns him from English to French. “Hey, we made it, didn’t we? No harm done.”

I yank out a book from my backpack, *Your Movie Sucks*, a collection of Roger Ebert’s favourite reviews of bad movies. A visual cue for him to leave me alone. St. Clair takes the hint. He slumps and taps his feet on the ugly blue carpeting.

I feel guilty for being so harsh. If it weren’t for him, I would’ve missed the flight. St. Clair’s fingers absent-mindedly drum his stomach. His dark hair is extra messy this morning. I’m sure he didn’t get up that much earlier than me, but, as usual, the bed-head is more attractive on him. With a painful twinge, I recall those *other* mornings together. Thanksgiving. Which we still haven’t talked about.

A bored woman calls out rows for boarding, first in French and then in English. I decide to play nice and put away my book. “Where are we sitting?”

He inspects his boarding pass. “Forty-five G. Still have your passport?”

I feel my coat once more. “Got it.”

“Good.” And then his hand is inside my pocket. My heart spazzes, but he doesn’t notice. He pulls out my passport and flicks it open.

WAIT. WHY DOES HE HAVE MY PASSPORT?

His eyebrows shoot up. I try to snatch it back, but he holds it out of my reach. “Why are your eyes crossed?” He laughs. “Have you had some kind of ocular surgery I don’t know about?”

“Give it back!” Another grab and miss, and I change tactics and lunge for his coat instead. I snag his passport.

“NO!”

I open it up, and it’s...baby St. Clair. “Dude. How old is this picture?”

He slings my passport at me and snatches his back. “I was in *middle school.*”

Before I can reply, our section is announced. We hold our passports against

our chests and enter the line. The bored flight attendant slides his ticket through a machine that rips it, and he moves forward. I hand mine over. “Zis iz boarding rows forty through fifty. Plizz sit until I call your row.” She hands back my ticket, and her lacquered nails click against the paper.

“What? I’m in forty-five—”

But I’m not. There, printed in bold ink, is my row. Twenty-three. I forgot we wouldn’t be sitting together, which is dumb, because it’s not like we made our reservations together. It’s a coincidence we’re on the same flight. St. Clair waits for me down the walkway. I shrug helplessly and hold up the boarding pass. “Row twenty-three.”

His expression is surprised. He forgot, too.

Someone growls at me in French. A businessman with immaculate black hair is trying to hand his ticket to the flight attendant. I mutter my apologies and step aside. St. Clair’s shoulders sag. He waves goodbye and disappears around the corner.

Why can’t we sit together? What’s the point of seat reservations, anyway? The bored woman calls my section next, and I think terrible thoughts about her as she slides my ticket through her machine. At least I have a window seat. The middle and aisle are occupied with more businessmen. I’m reaching for my book again – it’s going to be a long flight – when a polite English accent speaks to the man beside me.

“Pardon me, but I wonder if you wouldn’t mind switching seats. You see, that’s my girlfriend there, and she’s pregnant. And since she gets a bit *ill* on airplanes, I thought she might need someone to hold back her hair when... well...” St. Clair holds up the courtesy barf bag and shakes it around. The paper crinkles dramatically.

The man sprints off the seat as my face flames. His *pregnant girlfriend*?

“Thank you. I was in forty-five G.” He slides into the vacated chair and waits for the man to disappear before speaking again. The guy on his other side stares at us in horror, but St. Clair doesn’t care. “They had me next to some horrible couple in matching Hawaiian shirts. There’s no reason to suffer this flight alone when we can suffer it together.”

“That’s flattering, thanks.” But I laugh, and he looks pleased – until take-off, when he claws the armrest and turns a colour disturbingly similar to key lime pie. I distract him with a story about the time I broke my arm playing Peter Pan. It turned out there was more to flying than thinking happy thoughts and jumping out a window. St. Clair relaxes once we’re above the clouds.

Time passes quickly for an eight-hour flight.

We don’t talk about what waits on the other side of the ocean. Not his mother.

Not Toph. Instead, we browse *SkyMall*. We play the if-you-had-to-buy-one-thing-off-each-page game. He laughs when I choose the hot-dog toaster, and I tease him about the fogless shower mirror and the world's largest crossword puzzle.

"At least they're practical," he says.

"What are you gonna do with a giant crossword poster? 'Oh, I'm sorry, Anna. I can't go to the movies tonight. I'm working on two thousand across, *Norwegian Birdcall*.'"

"At least I'm not buying a Large Plastic Rock for hiding 'unsightly utility posts'. You realize you have no lawn?"

"I could hide other stuff. Like...failed French tests. Or illegal moonshining equipment." He doubles over with that wonderful boyish laughter, and I grin. "But what will *you* do with a motorized swimming-pool snack float?"

"Use it in the bathtub." He wipes a tear from his cheek. "Ooo, look! A Mount Rushmore garden statue. Just what you need, Anna. And only forty dollars! A bargain!"

We get stumped on the page of golfing accessories, so we switch to drawing rude pictures of the other people on the plane, followed by rude pictures of Euro Disney Guy. St. Clair's eyes glint as he sketches the man falling down the Panthéon's spiral staircase.

There's a lot of blood. And Mickey Mouse ears.

After a few hours, he grows sleepy. His head sinks against my shoulder. I don't dare move. The sun is coming up, and the sky is pink and orange and makes me think of sherbet. I sniff his hair. Not out of weirdness. It's just...there.

He must have woken earlier than I thought, because it smells shower-fresh. Clean. Healthy. Mmm. I doze in and out of a peaceful dream, and the next thing I know, the captain's voice is crackling over the airplane. We're here.

I'm home.



Chapter twenty-four

I'm jittery. It's like the animatronic band from Chuck E. Cheese is throwing a jamboree in my stomach. I've always hated Chuck E. Cheese. Why am I thinking about Chuck E. Cheese? I don't know why I'm nervous. I'm just seeing my mom again. And Seany. And Bridge! Bridge said she'd come.

St. Clair's connecting flight to San Francisco doesn't leave for another three hours, so we board the train that runs between terminals, and he walks me to the arrivals area. We've been quiet since we got off the plane. I guess we're tired. We reach the security checkpoint, and he can't go any further. Stupid airport regulations. I wish I could introduce him to my family. The Chuck E. Cheese band kicks it up a notch, which is weird, because I'm not nervous about leaving *him*. I'll see him again in two weeks.

"All right, Banana. Suppose this is goodbye." He grips the straps of his backpack, and I do the same.

This is the moment we're supposed to hug. For some reason, I can't do it.

"Tell your mom hi for me. I mean, I know I don't know her. She just sounds really nice. And I hope she's okay."

He smiles softly. "Thanks. I'll tell her."

"Call me?"

"Yeah, whatever. You'll be so busy with Bridge and what's-his-name that you'll forget all about your English mate, St. Clair."

"Ha! So you *are* English!" I poke him in the stomach.

He grabs my hand and we wrestle, laughing. "I claim...no...nationality."

I break free. "Whatever, I totally caught you. Ow!" A grey-haired man in sunglasses bumps his red plaid suitcase into my legs.

"Hey, you! Apologize!" St. Clair says, but the guy is already too far away to hear.

I rub my shins. "It's okay, we're in the way. I should go."

Time to hug again. Why can't we do it? Finally, I step forward and put my arms around him. He's stiff, and it's awkward, especially with our backpacks in

the way. I smell his hair again. Oh heavens.

We pull apart. "Have fun at the show tonight," he says.

"I will. Have a good flight."

"Thanks." He bites his thumbnail, and then I'm through security and riding down the escalator. I look back one last time. St. Clair jumps up and down, waving at me. I burst into laughter, and his face lights up. The escalator slides down.

He's lost from view.

I swallow hard and turn around. And then – there they are. Mom has a gigantic smile, and Seany is jumping and waving, just like St. Clair.

"For the last time, Bridgette said she was sorry." Mom pays the grumpy woman in the airport parking deck's tollbooth. "She had to practise for the show."

"Right. Because it's not like we haven't seen each other in four months."

"Bridge is a ROCK STAR," Seany says from the back seat. His voice is filled with adoration.

Uh-oh. Someone has a crush. "Oh, yeah?"

"She says her band is gonna be on MTV someday, but not the lame one, one of the cool ones you can only get with a special cable package."

I turn around. My brother looks strangely smug. "And how do you know about special cable packages?"

Seany swings his legs. One of his freckled kneecaps is covered with *Star Wars* Band-Aids. Like, seven or eight of them. "Duh. Bridge told me."

"Ah. I see."

"She also told me about praying mantises. How the girl mantis eats the boy mantis's head. And she told me about Jack the Ripper and NASA, and she showed me how to make macaroni and cheese. The good kind, with the squishy cheese packet."

"Anything else?"

"Lots of other things." There is an edge to this. A threat.

"Oh. Hey, I have something for you." I unzip my backpack and pull out a plastic shell. It's an original *Star Wars* Sand Person. The purchase on eBay ate my entire meal fund one week, but it was worth it. He really wants this. I was saving it for later, but he clearly needs coaxing back to my side.

I hold up the package. The angry little figurine glares into the back seat. "Merry early Christmas!"

Seany crosses his arms. "I already have that one. Bridge got him for me."

"Sean! What did I say about thanking people? Tell your sister thank you. She must have gone through a lot of trouble to get that for you."

“It’s okay,” I mumble, placing the toy back in my bag. It’s amazing how small a resentful seven-year-old can make me feel.

“He just missed you, that’s all. He’s talked about you non-stop. He just doesn’t know how to express it now that you’re here. Sean! Stop kicking the seat! What have I told you about kicking my seat while I’m driving?”

Seany scowls. “I’m hungry.”

Mom looks at me. “How’re you doing? Did they feed you on the plane?”

“I could eat.”

We pull off the interstate and hit the drive-through. They aren’t serving lunch yet, and Seany throws a fit. We decide on hash browns. Mom and Seany get Cokes, and I order coffee. “You drink coffee now?” Mom hands it to me, surprised.

I shrug. “Everyone at school drinks coffee.”

“Well, I hope you’re still drinking milk, too.”

“Like Sean’s drinking milk right now?”

Mom grits her teeth. “It’s a special occasion. His big sister is home for Christmas.” She points to the Canadian flag on my backpack. “What’s that?”

“My friend St. Clair bought it for me. So I wouldn’t feel out of place.”

She raises her eyebrows as she pulls back onto the road. “Are there a lot of Canadians in Paris?”

My face warms. “I just felt, you know, stupid for a while. Like one of those lame American tourists with the white sneakers and the cameras around their necks? So he bought it for me, so I wouldn’t feel...embarrassed. American.”

“Being American is nothing to be ashamed of,” she snaps.

“God, Mom, I know. I just meant – forget it.”

“Is this the English boy with the French father?”

“What does that have anything to do with it?” I’m angry. I don’t like what she’s implying. “Besides, he’s American. He was born here? His mom lives in San Francisco. We sat next to each other on the plane.”

We stop at a red light. Mom stares at me. “You like him.”

“OH GOD, MOM.”

“You do. You like this boy.”

“He’s just a friend. He has a girlfriend.”

“Anna has a booooy-friend,” Seany chants.

“I do not!”

“ANNA HAS A BOOOY-FRIEND!”

I take a sip of coffee and choke. It’s disgusting. It’s sludge. No, it’s worse than sludge – at least sludge is organic. Seany is still taunting me. Mom reaches around and grabs his legs, which are kicking her seat again. She sees me making

a face at my drink.

“My, my. One semester in France, and suddenly we’re Miss Sophisticated. Your father will be thrilled.”

Like it was my choice! Like I asked to go to Paris! And how *dare* she mention Dad.

“ANNNN-A HAS A BOOOY-FRIEND!”

We merge back onto the interstate. It’s rush hour, and the Atlanta traffic has stopped moving. The car behind ours shakes us with its thumping bass. The car in front sprays a cloud of exhaust straight into our vents.

Two weeks. Only two more weeks.



Chapter twenty-five

Sofia is dead. Because Mom only took her out three times since I left, now she's stuck in some repair shop on Ponce de Leon Avenue. My car may be a hunk of red scrap metal, but she's *my* hunk of red scrap metal. I paid for her with my own money, earned with the stench of theatre popcorn in my hair and artificial butter on my arms. She's named after my favourite director, Sofia Coppola. Sofia creates these atmospheric, impressionistic films with this quiet but *impeccable* style. She's also one of only two American women to have been nominated for the Best Director Oscar, for *Lost in Translation*.

She should have won.

"Why don't you carpool with your friends?" Mom asks, when I complain about driving her minivan to the Penny Dreadfuls show.

"Because Bridge and Toph will already be there. They have to set up." Captain Jack *wheek wheek wheeks* for guinea pig treats, so I pop an orange pellet into his cage and scratch the fuzz behind his ears.

"Can't Matt drive you?"

I haven't talked to him in months. I guess he's going, but ugh, that means *Cherrie Milliken* is also going. No thanks. "I'm not calling Matt."

"Well, Anna. It's Matt or the minivan. I'm not making the choice for you."

I choose my ex. We used to be good friends, so I'm sort of looking forward to seeing him again. And maybe Cherrie isn't as bad as I remember. Except she is. She *totally* is. After only five minutes in her company, I cannot fathom how Bridge stands sitting with her at lunch every day. She turns to look at me in the back seat, and her hair swishes in a vitamin-enriched, shampoo-commercial curtain. "So. How are the guys in Paris?"

I shrug. "Parisian."

"Ha ha. You're funny."

Her lifeless laugh is one of her lesser attributes. What does Matt see in her?

"No one special?" Matt smiles and glances at me through the rear-view mirror. I'm not sure why, but I forgot that he has brown eyes. Why do they make

some people look *amazing* and others completely average? It's the same with brown hair. Statistically speaking, St. Clair and Matt are quite similar. Eyes: brown. Hair: brown. Race: Caucasian. There's a significant difference in height, but still. It's like comparing a gourmet truffle to a Mr. Goodbar.

I think about the gourmet truffle. And his girlfriend. "Not exactly."

Cherrie pulls Matt into a story about something that happened in chorus, a conversation she knows I can't contribute to. Mr. Goodbar fills me in on the who-is-who details, but my mind drifts away. Bridgette and Toph. Will Bridge look the same? Will Toph and I jump in where we left off?

It's really hitting me now. I'm about to see Toph.

The last time we were together, *we kissed*. I can't help but fantasize about our reunion. Toph picking me out of the crowd, being unable to prise his eyes from me, dedicating songs to me. Meeting him backstage. Kissing him in dark corners. I could be on the verge of an *entire winter break* spent making out with Toph. By the time we arrive at the club, my stomach is in knots, but in such a good way.

Except when Matt opens my door, I realize we aren't at a club. More like...a bowling alley. "Is this the right place?"

Cherrie nods. "All of the best underage bands play here."

"Oh." Bridge hadn't mentioned she was playing in a bowling alley. But that's okay, it's still a huge deal. And I'd forgotten about the whole underage thing. Which is silly, because it's not like I've lived in France that long.

Inside, we're told we have to buy a lane in order to stay for the show. This also means we have to rent bowling shoes. Um, no. There's no way I'm wearing *bowling shoes*. Hundreds of people use those things and, what, one spritz of Lysol is supposed to kill all of their nasty stinky feet germs? I don't think so.

"That's okay," I say when the man drops them on the counter. "You can keep them."

"Lady. You ain't allowed to play without shoes."

"I'm not playing."

"Lady. Take the shoes. You're holdin' up the line."

Matt grabs them. "Sorry." He shakes his head. "I forgot how you are with stuff like this." And then Cherrie huffs, so he carries her shoes, too. He hides them underneath some plastic orange shell chairs, and we stroll over to the stage, which is pushed against the far wall. A small crowd has gathered. Bridge and Toph aren't anywhere to be seen, and I don't recognize anyone else.

"I think they're going first," Matt says.

"You mean they're the opening act in an underage bowling alley?" I ask.

He cuts his eyes at me, and I feel about two feet tall. Because he's right. This

is still awesome! It's their first show! But the sinking feeling returns as we mill around. Giveaway T-shirts stretched over monstrous beer bellies. Puffy NFL jackets and porky jowls. Granted, I'm in a bowling alley, but the differences between Americans and Parisians are shocking. I'm ashamed to see my country the way the French must see us. Couldn't these people have at least brushed their hair before leaving their houses?

"I need a liquorice rope," Cherrie announces. She marches towards the snack stand, and all I can think is *these people are your future*.

The thought makes me a little happier.

When she comes back, I inform her that just one bite of her Red Dye #40-infused snack could kill my brother. "God, *morbid*," she says. Which makes me think of St. Clair again. Because when I told him the same thing three months ago, instead of accusing me of morbidity, he asked with genuine curiosity, "Why?"

Which is the polite thing to do when someone offers you such an interesting piece of conversation.

I wonder if St. Clair has seen his mom yet. Hmm, he's been in California for two hours. His father was going to pick him up and drive him straight to the hospital. He's probably with her right now. I should send him a text, some well-wishes. I pull out my phone just as the tiny crowd erupts with cheers.

I forget about the text.

The Penny Dreadfuls emerge, pulsating with excitement and energy, from... the staff room. Okay. So it's not as glamorous as emerging from a backstage, but they do look GREAT. Well, two of them do.

The bassist is the same as always. Reggie used to come into work, mooching free tickets off Toph for the latest comic book movies. He has these long bangs that droop over half his face and cover his eyes, and I could never tell what he thought about anything. I'd be like, "How was the new *Iron Man*?" And he'd say, "Fine," in this bored voice. And because his eyes were hidden, I didn't know if he meant a good fine, or a so-so fine, or a bad fine. It was irritating.

But Bridgette is radiant. She's wearing a tank top that shows off her toned arms, and her blonde hair is in Princess Leia buns with chopsticks through them. I wonder if that was Seany's idea. She finds me immediately, and her face lights up like a Christmas tree. I wave as she lifts the sticks above her head, counts off the song, and then she's *flying*. Reggie drives out a matching bass line, and Toph – I save him for last, because I know that once my eyes lock on him, they aren't moving.

Because Toph. Is still. Totally. Hot.

He's slashing at his guitar like he wants to use it for kindling, and he has that

angry punk rock scream, and his forehead and sideburns are already glistening with sweat. His pants are tight and bright blue plaid, something that NO ONE else I know could pull off, and it reminds me of his Blue Raspberry Mouth, and it's so dead sexy I could die.

And then...he spots me.

Toph raises his eyebrows and smiles, this lazy grin that makes my insides explode. Matt and Cherrie and I thrash and jump around, and it's so exhilarating that I don't even care that I'm dancing with *Cherrie Milliken*. "Bridge is fantastic!" she says.

"I know!" My heart bursts with pride. Because she's *my* best friend, and I've always known how talented she was. Now everyone else does, too. And I don't know what I was expecting – maybe that Reggie's bangs would get in the way of his playing – but he's also pretty great. His hand tears over the strings, pushing a wicked bass line that whips us into a frenzy. The only teeny tiny minor weakness in the whole thing is...Toph.

Don't get me wrong. His anti-establishment, I'm-a-loser lyrics are perfect. Catchy. There's so much rage and passion that even the redneck behind the shoe counter is bobbing his head. And, of course, Toph looks the part.

It's his actual guitar playing that's weak. But it's not like I know that much about guitars. I'm sure it's a difficult instrument, and he'll totally get better with practice. It's hard to master something if you're always stuck behind a snack counter. And he plays loud, and it riles us up. I forget I'm in a bowling alley, and I forget I'm rocking out with my ex-boyfriend and his girlfriend, and it's all over way too quickly.

"We're the Penny Dreadfuls, thanks for coming out to see us. My name is Toph, that's Reggie on bass, and the hottie in the back is Bridge."

I whoop and holler.

She beams at Toph. He waggles his eyebrows back and then turns to the crowd and leers. "And, oh yeah. Don't screw her, 'cause I already am. SUCK IT, ATLANTA. GOODNIGHT!"



Chapter twenty-six

Wait. What?

I'm sorry, what did he just say?

Toph kicks over the microphone stand in a grand, asshole gesture, and the three of them jump off the stage. It's a little less dramatic when they have to come right back to take apart their stuff before the next band comes on. I try to catch Bridge's eye, but she won't look at me. Her gaze is locked on her cymbal stands. Toph takes a swig of bottled water, gives me a wave, then grabs his amp and heads for the parking lot.

"Woo! They were great!" Cherrie says.

Matt claps me on the back. "What'd ya think? She played me some of their stuff a few weeks ago, so I knew it'd be awesome."

I'm blinking back tears. "Um. What did he just say?"

"He said she played some of their songs for us a few weeks ago," Cherrie says, too close to my face.

I back up. "No. What did *Toph* just say? Before the Atlanta part?"

"What, 'Don't screw my girlfriend'?" Cherrie asks.

I can't breathe. I'm having a heart attack.

"Are you okay?" Matt asks.

Why won't Bridge look at me? I stumble forward, but Matt grabs me. "Anna. You knew she and Toph were dating, right?"

"I've gotta talk to Bridge." My throat is closing. "I don't understand—"

Matt swears. "I can't believe she didn't tell you."

"How...how long?"

"Since Thanksgiving," he says.

"*Thanksgiving?* But she didn't say...she never said..."

Cherrie is gleeful. "You didn't know?"

"NO, I DIDN'T KNOW."

"Come on, Anna." Matt tries to lead me away, but I push him aside and jump onstage. I open my mouth, but no words come out.

Bridge finally looks at me. “I’m sorry,” she whispers.

“You’re sorry? You’ve been dating Toph for the last month, and you’re sorry?”

“It just happened. I meant to tell you, I wanted to tell you—”

“But you lost control over your mouth? Because it’s easy, Bridge. Talking is easy. Look at me! I’m talking right—”

“You know it wasn’t that easy! I didn’t mean for it to happen, it just did—”

“Oh, you didn’t mean to wreck my life? It just ‘happened’?”

Bridge stands up from behind her drums. It’s impossible, but she’s taller than me now. “What do you mean, *wreck your life*?”

“Don’t play dumb, you know exactly what I mean. How could you do this to me?”

“Do what? It’s not like you were dating!”

I scream in frustration. “We certainly won’t be now!”

She sneers. “It’s kind of hard to date someone who’s not interested in you.”

“LIAR!”

“What, you ditch us for Paris and expect us to put our lives on hold for you?”

My jaw drops. “I didn’t ditch you. They sent me away.”

“Ooo, yeah. To Paris. Meanwhile, I’m stuck here in Shitlanta, Georgia, at the same shitty school, doing shitty babysitting jobs—”

“If babysitting my brother is so shitty, why do you do it?”

“I didn’t mean—”

“Because you want to turn him against me, too? Well. Congratulations, Bridge. It worked. My brother loves you and hates me. So you’re welcome to move in when I leave again, because that’s what you want, right? My life?”

She shakes with fury. “Go to hell.”

“Take my life. You can have it. Just watch out for the part where my BEST FRIEND SCREWS ME OVER!” I knock over a cymbal stand, and the brass hits the stage with an earsplitting crash that reverberates through the bowling alley. Matt calls my name. Has he been calling it this entire time? He grabs my arm and leads me around the electrical cords and plugs and onto the floor and away, away, away.

Everyone in the bowling alley is staring at me.

I duck my head so my hair covers my face. I’m crying. This would have never happened if I hadn’t given Toph her number. All of those late-night practices and...he said they’ve had sex! What if they’ve had it at my house? Does he come over when she’s watching Seany? Do they go in my bedroom?

I’m going to be sick. I’m going to be sick. I’m going to be—

“You’re not going to be sick,” Matt says, and I didn’t know I was talking out

loud, but I don't care because my best friend is dating Toph. She's dating Toph. She's dating Toph. She's dating – Toph.

Toph's here.

Right in front of me, in the parking lot. His slender body is relaxed, and he leans his blue plaid hips against his car. "What's up, Annabel Lee?"

He was never interested in me. She said that.

Toph opens his arms for a hug, but I'm already bolting for Matt's car. I hear his peeved, "What's with her?" and Matt replying something in disgust, but I don't know what, and I'm running and running and running, and I want to be as far away from them, as far away from this night, as possible. I wish I were in bed. I wish I were *home*.

I wish I were in Paris.



Chapter twenty-seven

“Anna. Anna, slow down. Bridgette’s dating Toph?” St. Clair asks over the phone.

“Since Thanksgiving. She’s been ly-lying to me this whole time!”

The Atlanta skyline is a blur outside the car window. The towers are illuminated in blue and white lights. They’re more disjointed than the buildings in Paris; they have no relationship. They’re just stupid rectangles designed to be taller, better than the others.

“I need you to take a deep breath,” he says. “All right? Take a deep breath and start from the beginning.”

Matt and Cherrie watch me in the rear-view mirror as I relate the story again. The line grows quiet. “Are you there?” I ask. I’m startled when a pink tissue appears in my face. It’s attached to Cherrie’s hand. She looks guilty.

I accept the tissue.

“I’m here.” St. Clair is angry. “I’m just sorry I’m not *there*. With you. I wish there was something I could do.”

“Wanna come beat her up for me?”

“I’m packing my throwing stars right now.”

I sniffle and wipe my nose. “I’m such an idiot. I can’t believe I thought he liked me. That’s the worst part, knowing he was never even interested.”

“Bollocks. He was interested.”

“No, he wasn’t,” I say. “Bridge said so.”

“Because she’s jealous! Anna, I was there that first night he called you. I’ve seen how he looked at you in pictures.” I protest, but he interrupts. “Any bloke with a working prick would be insane not to like you.”

There’s a shocked pause, on both ends of the line.

“Because, of course, of how intelligent you are. And funny. Not that you aren’t attractive. Because you are. Attractive. Oh, bugger...”

I wait.

“Are you still there, or did you hang up because I’m such an idiot?”

“I’m here.”

“God, you made me work for that.”

St. Clair said I’m attractive. That’s the second time.

“You’re so easy to talk to,” he continues, “that sometimes I forget you’re not one of the guys.”

Scratch that. He thinks I’m Josh. “Just drop it. I can’t take being compared to a guy right now—”

“That’s not what I meant—”

“How’s your mom? I’m sorry, I’ve hogged our entire conversation, and this was supposed to be about her, and I didn’t even ask—”

“You did ask. It was the first thing you said when you answered. And technically I called you. And I was calling to see how the show went, which is what we’ve been talking about.”

“Oh.” I fiddle with the stuffed panda on Matt’s floorboard. It’s carrying a satin heart that reads I WUV U. A gift from Cherrie, no doubt. “But how is she? Your mom?”

“Mum’s...all right.” His voice is suddenly tired. “I don’t know if she’s better or worse than I expected. In some ways, she’s both. I pictured the worst – bruised and skeletal – and I’m relieved it’s not the case, but seeing her in person...she’s still lost loads of weight. And she’s exhausted, and she’s in this *lead-lined* hospital room. With all of these plastic tubes.”

“Are you allowed to stay with her? Are you there now?”

“No, I’m at her flat. I’m only allowed a short visit because of the radiation exposure.”

“Is your dad there?”

He doesn’t say anything for a moment, and I’m afraid I’ve crossed a line. But finally he speaks. “He’s here. And I’m dealing with him. For Mum’s sake.”

“St. Clair?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m sorry.”

“Thank you.” His voice is quiet as Matt’s car pulls into my neighbourhood.

I sigh. “I need to go. We’re almost home. Matt and Cherrie are giving me a ride.”

“Matt? Your ex-boyfriend, Matt?”

“Sofia’s in the shop.”

A pause. “Mmph.”

We hang up as Matt parks in my driveway. Cherrie turns around and stares. “That was interesting. Who was that?”

Matt looks unhappy. “What?” I ask him.

“You’ll talk to that guy, but you won’t talk to us any more?”

“Sorry,” I mumble, and climb out of his car. “He’s just a friend. Thanks for the ride.”

Matt gets out, too. Cherrie starts to follow, but he throws her a sharp look. “So what does that mean?” he calls out. “We aren’t friends any more? You’re bailing on us?”

I trudge towards the house. “I’m tired, Matt. I’m going to bed.”

He follows anyway. I dig out my house key, but he grabs my wrist to stop me from opening the door. “Listen, I know you don’t want to talk about it, but I just have this one thing to say before you go in there and cry yourself to sleep—”

“Matt, please—”

“Toph isn’t a nice guy. He’s never been a nice guy. I don’t know what you ever saw in him. He talks back to everyone, he’s completely unreliable, he wears those stupid fake clothes—”

“Why are you telling me this?” I’m crying again. I pull my wrist from his grasp.

“I know you didn’t like me as much as I liked you. I know you would have rather been with him, and I dealt with that a long time ago. I’m over it.”

The shame is overwhelming. Even though I *knew* Matt was aware that I liked Toph, it’s awful to hear him say it aloud.

“But I’m still your friend.” He’s exasperated. “And I’m sick of seeing you waste your energy on that jerk. You’ve spent all this time afraid to talk about what was going on between you two, but if you’d ever bothered to just *ask him*, you would have discovered that he wasn’t worth it. But you didn’t. You never asked him, did you?”

The weight of hurt is unbearable. “Please leave,” I whisper. “Please just leave.”

“Anna.” His voice levels, and he waits for me to look at him. “It was still wrong of him and Bridge not to tell you. Okay? You deserve better than that. And I sincerely hope whomever you were just talking to —” Matt gestures towards the phone in my purse — “is better than that.”



Chapter twenty-eight

To: Anna Oliphant <bananaelephant@femmefilmfreak.net>
From: Étienne St. Clair <etiennebonaparte@soap.fr>
Subject: HAPPY CHRISTMAS

Have you gotten used to the time difference? Bloody hell, I can't sleep. I'd call, but I don't know if you're awake or doing the family thing or what. The bay fog is so thick that I can't see out my window. But if I could, I am quite certain I'd discover that I'm the only person alive in San Francisco.

To: Anna Oliphant <bananaelephant@femmefilmfreak.net>
From: Étienne St. Clair <etiennebonaparte@soap.fr>
Subject: I forgot to tell you.

Yesterday I saw a guy wearing an Atlanta Film Festival shirt at the hospital. I asked if he knew you, but he didn't. I also met an enormous, hairy man in a cheeky Mrs Claus get-up. He was handing out gifts to the cancer patients. Mum took the attached picture. Do I always look so startled?

To: Anna Oliphant <bananaelephant@femmefilmfreak.net>
From: Étienne St. Clair <etiennebonaparte@soap.fr>
Subject: Are you awake yet?

Wake up. Wake up wake up wake up.

To: Étienne St. Clair <etiennebonaparte@soap.fr>
From: Anna Oliphant <bananaelephant@femmefilmfreak.net>
Subject: Re: Are you awake yet?

I'm awake! Seany started jumping on my bed, like, three hours ago. We've been opening presents and eating sugar cookies for breakfast. Dad gave me a gold ring shaped like a heart. "For Daddy's sweetheart," he said. As if I'm the type of girl who'd wear a heart-shaped ring. FROM HER FATHER. He gave Seany tons of *Star Wars* stuff and a rock polishing kit, and I'd much rather have those. I can't believe Mom invited him here for Christmas. She says it's because their divorce is amicable (um, no) and Seany and I need a father figure in our lives, but all they ever do is fight. This morning it was about my hair. Dad wants me to dye it back, because he thinks I look like a "common prostitute", and Mom wants to re-bleach it. Like either of them has a say. Oops, gotta run. My grandparents just arrived, and Grandad is bellowing for his bonnie lass. That would be me.

PS Love the picture. Mrs Claus is totally checking out your butt. And it's *Merry* Christmas,

weirdo.

To: Anna Oliphant <bananaelephant@femmefilmfreak.net>
From: Étienne St. Clair <etiennebonaparte@soap.fr>
Subject: HAHAHA!

Was it a PROMISE RING? Did your father give you a PROMISE RING?

To: Étienne St. Clair <etiennebonaparte@soap.fr>
From: Anna Oliphant <bananaelephant@femmefilmfreak.net>
Subject: Re: HAHAHA!

I am so not responding to that.

To: Anna Oliphant <bananaelephant@femmefilmfreak.net>
From: Étienne St. Clair <etiennebonaparte@soap.fr>
Subject: Uncommon Prostitutes

I have nothing to say about prostitutes (other than you'd make a terrible prostitute, the profession is much too unclean), I only wanted to type that. Isn't it odd we both have to spend Christmas with our fathers? Speaking of unpleasant matters, have you spoken with Bridget yet? I'm taking the bus to the hospital now. I expect a full breakdown of your Christmas dinner when I return. So far today, I've had a bowl of muesli. How does Mum eat that rubbish? I feel as if I've been gnawing on lumber.

To: Étienne St. Clair <etiennebonaparte@soap.fr>
From: Anna Oliphant <bananaelephant@femmefilmfreak.net>
Subject: Christmas Dinner

MUESLI? It's Christmas, and you're eating CEREAL?? I'm mentally sending you a plate from my house. The turkey is in the oven, the gravy's on the stovetop, and the mashed potatoes and casseroles are being prepared as I type this. Wait. I bet you eat bread pudding and mince pies or something, don't you? Well, I'm mentally sending you bread pudding. Whatever that is. No, I haven't talked to Bridgette. Mom keeps bugging me to answer her calls, but winter break sucks enough already. (WHY is my dad here? SERIOUSLY. MAKE HIM LEAVE. He's wearing this giant white cable-knit sweater, and he looks like a pompous snowman, and he keeps rearranging the stuff in our kitchen cabinets. Mom is about to kill him. WHICH IS WHY SHE SHOULDN'T INVITE HIM OVER FOR HOLIDAYS.) Anyway. I'd rather not add to the drama.

PS I hope your mom is doing better. I'm so sorry you have to spend today in a hospital. I really do wish I could send you both a plate of turkey.

To: Anna Oliphant <bananaelephant@femmefilmfreak.net>
From: Étienne St. Clair <etiennebonaparte@soap.fr>
Subject: Re: Christmas Dinner

YOU feel sorry for ME? I am not the one who has never tasted bread pudding. The hospital was the same. I won't bore you with the details. Though I had to wait an hour to catch the bus back, and it started raining. Now that I'm at the flat, my father has left for the hospital. We're each making stellar work of pretending the other doesn't exist.

PS Mum says to tell you "Merry Christmas". So Merry Christmas from my mum, but Happy Christmas from me.

To: Étienne St. Clair <etiennebonaparte@soap.fr>
From: Anna Oliphant <bananaelephant@femmefilmfreak.net>
Subject: SAVE ME

Worst. Dinner. Ever. It took less than five minutes for things to explode. My dad tried to force Seany to eat the green bean casserole, and when he wouldn't, Dad accused Mom of not feeding my brother enough vegetables. So she threw down her fork, and said that Dad had no right to tell her how to raise her children. And then he brought out the "I'm their father" crap, and she brought out the "You abandoned them" crap, and meanwhile, the **WHOLE TIME** my half-deaf Nanna is shouting, "WHERE'S THE SALT! I CAN'T TASTE THE CASSEROLE! PASS THE SALT!" And then Granddad complained that Mom's turkey was "a wee dry", and she lost it. I mean, Mom just started *screaming*.

And it freaked Seany out, and he ran to his room crying, and when I checked on him, he was **UNWRAPPING A CANDY CANE!!** I have no idea where it came from. He knows he can't eat Red Dye #40! So I grabbed it from him, and he cried harder, and Mom ran in and yelled at ME, like I'd given him the stupid thing. Not, "Thank you for saving my only son's life, Anna." And then Dad came in and the fighting resumed, and they didn't even notice that Seany was still sobbing. So I took him outside and fed him cookies, and now he's running around in circles, and my grandparents are still at the table, as if we're all going to sit back down and finish our meal.

WHAT IS WRONG WITH MY FAMILY? And now Dad is knocking on my door. Great. Can this stupid holiday get any worse??

To: Anna Oliphant <bananaelephant@femmefilmfreak.net>
From: Étienne St. Clair <etiennebonaparte@soap.fr>
Subject: SAVING YOU

I'm teleporting to Atlanta. I'm picking you up, and we'll go someplace where our families can't find us. We'll take Seany. And we'll let him run laps until he tires, and then you and I will take a long walk. Like Thanksgiving. Remember? And we'll talk about everything **BUT** our parents...or perhaps we won't talk at all. We'll just walk. And we'll keep walking until the rest of the world ceases to exist.

I'm sorry, Anna. What did your father want? Please tell me what I can do.

To: Étienne St. Clair <etiennebonaparte@soap.fr>
From: Anna Oliphant <bananaelephant@femmefilmfreak.net>
Subject: Sigh. I'd love that.

Thank you, but it was okay. Dad wanted to apologize. For a split second, he was almost human. Almost. And then Mom apologized, and now they're washing dishes and pretending like nothing happened. I don't know. I didn't mean to get all drama queen, when your problems are so much worse than mine. I'm sorry.

To: Anna Oliphant <bananaelephant@femmefilmfreak.net>
From: Étienne St. Clair <etiennebonaparte@soap.fr>
Subject: Are you mad?

My day was boring. Your day was a nightmare. Are you all right?

To: Étienne St. Clair <etiennebonaparte@soap.fr>
From: Anna Oliphant <bananaelephant@femmefilmfreak.net>

Subject: Re: Are you mad?

I'm okay. I'm just glad I have you to talk to.

To: Anna Oliphant <bananaelephant@femmefilmfreak.net>

From: Étienne St. Clair <etiennebonaparte@soap.fr>

Subject: So...

Does that mean I can call you now?



Chapter twenty-nine

In the history of terrible holidays, this ranks as the worst ever. Worse than the Fourth of July when Grandad showed up to see the fireworks in a kilt and insisted on singing “Flower of Scotland” instead of “America the Beautiful”. Worse than the Halloween when Trudy Sherman and I both went to school dressed as Glinda the Good Witch, and she told everyone her costume was better than mine, because you could see my purple “Monday” panties through my dress AND YOU TOTALLY COULD.

I’m not talking to Bridgette. She calls every day, but I ignore her. It’s over. The Christmas gift I bought her, a tiny package wrapped in red-and-white-striped paper, has been shoved into the bottom of my suitcase. It’s a model of Pont Neuf, the oldest bridge in Paris. It was part of a model train set, and because of my poor language skills, St. Clair spent fifteen minutes convincing the shopkeeper to sell the bridge to me separately.

I hope I can return it.

I’ve only been to the Royal Midtown 14 once, and even though I saw Hercules, Toph was there, too. And he was like, “Hey, Anna. Why won’t you talk to Bridge?” and I had to run into the restroom. One of the new girls followed me in and said she thinks Toph is an insensitive douchebag motherhumping assclown, and that I shouldn’t let him get to me. Which was sweet, but didn’t really help.

Afterwards, Hercules and I watched the latest cheesy Christmas movie and made fun of the actors’ matching holiday sweaters. He told me about the mysterious package of roast beef he found in theatre six, and he said he’s been enjoying my website. He thinks my reviews are getting better. At least that was nice.

It was also nice when Dad left. He kept grilling me about French monuments and making these irritating calls to his publicist. We were all relieved to see him go. The only consistent bright spot has been St. Clair. We talk every day – calls, emails, texts. It doesn’t escape my attention that when Toph and I were

separated, our communications fizzled out, but now that I'm not seeing St. Clair every day, we talk even more.

Which makes me feel worse about Toph. If we'd been better friends, we *would* have kept in contact. It was dumb to think there was a chance we might make it. I can't believe Matt, of all people, was the one to point out how poorly I handled it. And, honestly, now that I've had time to reflect on it, Toph isn't even that huge of a loss. It only hurts so much to think about him because of Bridgette. How could she keep this a secret from me? Her betrayal is infinitely more painful.

I didn't have anywhere to go this New Year's, so Seany and I are staying in. Mom went out with some work friends. I order a cheese pizza, and we watch *The Phantom Menace*. This is how much I want to prove to my brother I love him – I'll sit through Jar Jar-freaking-Binks. Afterwards, he drags out the action figures while we watch the Times Square countdown on television. "*Pkschoo! Pkschoo!*" Han Solo fires at my Storm Trooper before ducking behind a sofa cushion for cover.

"It's a good thing I wore my laser-proof jacket," I say, marching forward.

"There's no such thing as a laser-proof jacket! You're DEAD!" Han goes running across the back of the couch. "YEHH-AHHHH!"

I pick up Queen Amidala. "Han, you're in danger! Go the other way! The Storm Trooper is wearing his laser-proof jacket."

"An-nuhhhh, stop! *Pkschoo pkschoo!*"

"Fine," Amidala says. "Leave it to a woman to do a man's work." She bashes the Storm Trooper's head with her own. "GHHNNOOOO!" He falls off the couch.

Han jumps down to the carpet and begins shooting again.

I pick up young Obi-Wan. "Ooo, Amidala. You look radiant. *Kiss kiss kiss.*"

"No!" Seany snatches Obi-Wan from my hand. "No kissing."

I pull another figure from Seany's toy box. It's a Sand Person, the one Bridgette must have bought him. Oh, well. "Ooo, Amidala. *Kiss kiss kiss.*"

"Sand People don't kiss! They ATTACK! RARRRRR!" He steals this one, too, but then pauses to examine its bumpy little head. "Why aren't you talking to Bridge?" he asks suddenly. "Did she hurt your feelings?"

I'm startled. "Yes, Sean. She did something that wasn't very nice."

"Does that mean she's not going to babysit me any more?"

"No, I'm sure she will. She likes you."

"I don't like her."

"Sean!"

"She made you cry. You cry all the time now." He throws the Sand Person in

the bottom of his box. “Do you still have the one you bought me?”

I smile. I get my backpack and start to hand the toy over, but something nags at me. *Sigh*. “You can have this on one condition. You have to be nice to her. It’s either Bridgette or Grandad, those are Mom’s only babysitting options. And Grandad’s getting too old for this.” I gesture towards the pile of discarded action figures.

“Okay,” he says shyly. I give him the package, and he cradles it. “Thank you.”

The kitchen phone rings. Mom checking up on us, no doubt. Seany gets up to answer it while I look for a suitable new boyfriend for Amidala. “I don’t understand you,” he says. “Please speak English.”

“Sean? Who is it? Just hang up.” Aha! Luke Skywalker! The one missing a hand, but oh well. Amidala and Luke kiss. Wait. Isn’t she his mom? I toss Luke aside, as if he’s personally offended me, and dig through the box again.

“Your voice is weird. Yeah, she’s here.”

“Sean?”

“Is this her BOYFRIEND?” My brother laughs maniacally.

I lunge into the kitchen and grab the phone. “Hello? St. Clair?” There’s laughter on the other end of the line. Seany sticks out his tongue, and I push him away by his head. “GO. AWAY.”

“Sorry?” the voice on the phone says.

“I was talking to Sean. Is that you?”

“Yeah, it’s me.”

“How’d you get this number?”

“Well, you see, there’s this book. It has white pages. And it has all of these phone numbers listed inside it. It’s also online.”

“Is that your booooy-friend?” Seany asks directly over the receiver.

I push him away again. “He’s a boy who’s a friend. Go watch the countdown.”

“What happened to your mobile?” St. Clair asks. “Did you forget to charge it?”

“I can’t believe it! That’s so unlike me.”

“I know, I was shocked to be sent to voicemail. But I’m glad to have your real number now. Just in case.”

The extra effort it took for him to call me makes me happy. “What are you up to? Shouldn’t you be out celebrating?”

“Eh. Mum wasn’t feeling well, so I’m staying in tonight. She’s sleeping, so I suppose I’ll be watching the countdown alone.” His mom came home from the hospital a few days ago. The situation has been up and down.

“What about Ellie?” The words fall out before I can stop them.

“I, er...talked to her earlier. It’s the New Year in Paris, after all. She went back the day after Christmas,” he adds.

I picture them making Amidala kissing noises over the phone. My heart sinks.

“She’s out partying.” His voice is sort of glum.

“Sorry to be your second choice.”

“Don’t be stupid. Third choice. Mum’s asleep, remember?” He laughs again.

“Thanks. Well, maybe I should hang up before *my* first choice falls asleep.” I glance at Seany, who has become quiet in the other room.

“Nonsense, I’ve only just called. But how is your man? He sounded good, even if he didn’t understand a word I said.”

“You do talk funny.” I smile. I love his voice.

“Speak for yourself, Atlanta. I’ve heard the southern accent slip out—”

“No!”

“Yes! Several times this week.”

I hmph, but my smile grows bigger. I’ve spoken with Meredith a few times over the break, too, but she’s never as much fun as St. Clair. I walk the phone into the living room, where Seany is curled up with my Sand Person. We watch the countdown together. I’m three hours ahead of St. Clair, but we don’t care. When my midnight hits, we toot imaginary horns and throw imaginary confetti.

And three hours later, when his midnight hits, we celebrate again.

And for the first time since coming home, I’m completely happy. It’s strange. Home. How I could wish for it for so long, only to come back and find it gone. To be here, in my technical *house*, and discover that home is now someplace different.

But that’s not quite right either.

I miss Paris, but it’s not home. It’s more like...I miss this. This warmth over the telephone. Is it possible for home to be a person and not a place? Bridgette used to be home to me. Maybe St. Clair is my new home.

I mull this over as our voices grow tired and we stop talking. We just keep each other company. My breath. His breath. My breath. His breath.

I could never tell him, but it’s true.

This is home. The two of us.



Chapter thirty

It saddens me how relieved I feel to be going back to France. The plane ride is quiet and long. It's my first flight alone. By the time the plane lands at Charles de Gaulle, I'm anxious to get back to the School of America, even if it means navigating the *métro* by myself. It's almost as if I'm not afraid of riding it any more.

That can't be right. Can it?

But the train ride back to the Latin Quarter is smooth and easy, and before I know it, I'm unlocking my door and unpacking my suitcase. Résidence Lambert rumbles pleasantly with the sound of other students arriving. I peek through my curtains at the restaurant across the street. No opera singer, but it's only the afternoon. She'll be back tonight. The thought makes me smile.

I call St. Clair. He arrived last night. The weather is unseasonably warm, and he and Josh are taking advantage of it. They're hanging out on the steps of the Panthéon, and he says I should join them. Of course I will.

I can't explain it, but as I stroll down my street, I'm suddenly racked with nerves. Why am I shaking? It's only been two weeks, but what a peculiar two weeks. St. Clair has morphed from this confusing *thing* into my closest friend. And he feels the same way. I don't have to ask him; I know it like I know my own reflection.

I stall and take the long way to the Panthéon. The city is beautiful. The gorgeous Saint-Étienne-du-Mont appears, and I think about St. Clair's mother packing picnic lunches and drawing the pigeons. I try to picture him racing around here in a young schoolboy's uniform, shorts and scabby knees, but I can't. All I see is the person I know – calm and confident, hands in his pockets, strut in his step. The kind of person who radiates a natural magnetic field, who everyone is drawn to, who everyone is dazzled by.

The January sun peeks out and warms my cheeks. Two men carrying what can only be described as man-purses stop to admire the sky. A trim woman in stilettos halts in wonder. I smile and move past them. And then I turn another

corner, and my chest constricts so tightly, so painfully, that I can no longer breathe.

Because there he is.

He's engrossed in an oversize book, hunched over and completely absorbed. A breeze ruffles his dark hair, and he bites his nails. Josh sits a few feet away, black sketchbook open and brush pen scribbling. Several other people are soaking up the rare sunshine, but as soon as they're registered, they're forgotten. Because of him.

I grip the edge of a sidewalk café table to keep from falling. The diners stare in alarm, but I don't care. I'm reeling, and I gasp for air.

How can I have been so stupid?

How could I have ever for a moment believed I wasn't in love with him?



Chapter thirty-one

I study him. He bites his left pinkie nail, so his book must be good. Pinkie means excited or happy, thumb means thinking or worried. I'm surprised I know the meaning of these gestures. How closely have I been paying attention to him?

Two elderly women in fur coats and matching hats shuffle past. One of them pauses and turns back around. She asks me a question in French. I can't make the direct translation, but I know she's concerned if I'm okay. I nod and tell her thank you. She flashes me another look of unease but moves on.

I can't walk. What am I supposed to say? Fourteen consecutive days of telephone conversations and now that he's here in person, I doubt I can stammer a hello. One of the diners at the café stands up to help me. I let go of the round table and stumble across the street. I'm weak in the knees. The closer I get, the more overwhelming it gets. The Panthéon is huge. The steps seem so far away.

He looks up.

Our eyes lock, and he breaks into a slow smile. My heart beats faster and faster. Almost there. He sets down his book and stands. And then this – the moment he calls my name – is the real moment everything changes.

He is no longer St. Clair, everyone's pal, everyone's friend.

He is Étienne. Étienne, like the night we met. He is Étienne; he is *my* friend.

He is so much more.

Étienne. My feet trip in three syllables. é-ti-enne, é-ti-enne, é-ti-enne. His name coats my tongue like melting chocolate. He is so beautiful, so perfect.

My throat catches as he opens his arms and wraps me in a hug. My heart pounds furiously, and I'm embarrassed, because I know he feels it. We break apart, and I stagger backwards. He catches me before I fall down the stairs.

"Whoa," he says. But I don't think he means me falling.

I blush and blame it on clumsiness. "Yeesh, that could've been bad."

Phew. A steady voice.

He looks dazed. "Are you all right?"

I realize his hands are still on my shoulders, and my entire body stiffens

underneath his touch. “Yeah. Great. Super!”

“Hey, Anna. How was your break?”

Josh. I forgot he was here. Étienne lets go of me carefully as I acknowledge Josh, but the whole time we’re chatting, I wish he’d return to drawing and leave us alone. After a minute, he glances behind me – to where Étienne is standing – and gets a funny expression on his face. His speech trails off, and he buries his nose in his sketchbook. I look back, but Étienne’s own face has been wiped blank.

We sit on the steps together. I haven’t been this nervous around him since the first week of school. My mind is tangled, my tongue tied, my stomach in knots. “Well,” he says, after an excruciating minute. “Did we use up all of our conversation over the holiday?”

The pressure inside me eases enough to speak. “Guess I’ll go back to the dorm.” I pretend to stand, and he laughs.

“I have something for you.” He pulls me back down by my sleeve. “A late Christmas present.”

“For me? But I didn’t get you anything!”

He reaches into a coat pocket and brings out his hand in a fist, closed around something very small. “It’s not much, so don’t get excited.”

“Ooo, what is it?”

“I saw it when I was out with Mum, and it made me think of you—”

“Étienne! Come on!”

He blinks at hearing his first name. My face turns red, and I’m filled with the overwhelming sensation that he knows *exactly* what I’m thinking. His expression turns to amazement as he says, “Close your eyes and hold out your hand.”

Still blushing, I hold one out. His fingers brush against my palm, and my hand jerks back as if he were electrified. Something goes flying and lands with a faint *dink* behind us. I open my eyes. He’s staring at me, equally stunned.

“Whoops,” I say.

He tilts his head at me.

“I think...I think it landed back here.” I scramble to my feet, but I don’t even know what I’m looking for. I never felt what he placed in my hands. I only felt *him*. “I don’t see anything! Just pebbles and pigeon droppings,” I add, trying to act normal.

Where is it? What is it?

“Here.” He plucks something tiny and yellow from the steps above him. I fumble back and hold out my hand again, bracing myself for the contact. Étienne pauses and then drops it from a few inches above my hand. As if he’s avoiding

touching me, too.

It's a glass bead. A banana.

He clears his throat. "I know you said Bridgette was the only one who could call you 'Banana', but Mum was feeling better last weekend, so I took her to her favourite bead shop. I saw that and thought of you. I hope you don't mind someone else adding to your collection. Especially since you and Bridgette... you know..."

I close my hand around the bead. "Thank you."

"Mum wondered why I wanted it."

"What did you tell her?"

"That it was for you, of course." He says this like, *duh*.

I beam. The bead is so lightweight I hardly feel it, except for the teeny cold patch it leaves in my palm. Speaking of cold...

I shiver. "Has the temperature dropped, or is it just me?"

"Here." Étienne unwraps the black scarf that had been tied loosely around his neck, and hands it to me. I take it, gently, and wrap it around mine. It makes me dizzy. It smells like freshly scrubbed boy. It smells like him.

"Your hair looks nice," he says. "You bleached it again."

I touch the stripe self-consciously. "Mom helped me."

"That breeze is wicked, I'm going for coffee." Josh snaps his sketchbook closed. I'd forgotten he was here again. "You coming?"

Étienne looks at me, waiting to see how I answer.

Coffee! I'm dying for a real cup. I smile at Josh. "Sounds perfect."

And then I'm heading down the steps of the Panthéon, cool and white and glittering, in the most beautiful city in the world. I'm with two attractive, intelligent, funny boys and I'm grinning ear to ear. If Bridgette could see me now.

I mean, who needs *Christopher* when Étienne St. Clair is in the world?

But as soon as I think of Toph, I get that same stomach churning I always do when I think about him now. Shame that I ever thought he might wait. That I wasted so much time on him. Ahead of me, Étienne laughs at something Josh said. And the sound sends me spiralling into panic as the information hits me again and again and again.

What am I going to do? I'm in love with my new best friend.



Chapter thirty-two

It's a physical sickness. Étienne. How much I love him.

I love Étienne.

I love it when he cocks an eyebrow whenever I say something he finds clever or amusing. I love listening to his boots clomp across my bedroom ceiling. I love that the accent over his first name is called an acute accent, and that he *has* a cute accent.

I love that.

I love sitting beside him in physics. Brushing against him during labs. His messy handwriting on our worksheets. I love handing him his backpack when class is over, because then my fingers smell like him for the next ten minutes. And when Amanda says something lame, and he seeks me out to exchange an eye roll – I love that, too. I love his boyish laugh and his wrinkled shirts and his ridiculous knitted hat. I love his large brown eyes, and the way he bites his nails, and I love his hair so much I could die.

There's only one thing I don't love about him. *Her*.

If I didn't like Ellie before, it's nothing compared to how I feel now. It doesn't matter that I can count how many times we've met on one hand. It's that first image, that's what I can't shake. Under the street lamp. Her fingers in his hair. Any time I'm alone, my mind wanders back to that night. I take it further. She touches his chest. I take it further. His bedroom. He slips off her dress, their lips lock, their bodies press, and – oh my God – my temperature rises, and my stomach is sick.

I fantasize about their break-up. How he could hurt her, and she could hurt him, and all of the ways I could hurt her back. I want to grab her Parisian-styled hair and yank it so hard it rips from her skull. I want to sink my claws into her eyeballs and *scrape*.

It turns out I am not a nice person.

Étienne and I rarely discussed her before, but she's completely taboo now. Which tortures me, because since we've gotten back from winter break, they

seem to be having problems again. Like an obsessed stalker, I tally the evenings he spends with me versus the evenings he spends with her. I'm winning.

So why won't he give her up? Why why why?

It torments me until I cave, until the pressure inside is so unbearable that I have to talk to someone or risk explosion. I choose Meredith. The way I see it, she's probably obsessing over the situation as much as I am. We're in her bedroom, and she's helping me write an essay about my guinea pig for French class. She's wearing soccer shorts with a cashmere sweater, and even though it's silly-looking, it's endearingly Meredith-appropriate. She's also doing crunches. For fun.

"Good, but that's present tense," she says. "You aren't feeding Captain Jack carrot sticks *right now*."

"Oh. Right." I jot something down, but I'm not thinking about verbs. I'm trying to figure out how to casually bring up Étienne.

"Read it to me again. Ooo, and do your funny voice! That faux-French one you ordered *café crème* in the other day, at that new place with St. Clair."

My bad French accent wasn't on purpose, but I jump on the opening. "You know, there's something, um, I've been wondering." I'm conscious of the illuminated sign above my head, flashing the obvious – I! LOVE! Étienne! – but push ahead anyway. "Why are he and Ellie still together? I mean they hardly see each other any more. Right?"

Mer pauses, mid-crunch, and...I'm caught. She knows I'm in love with him, too.

But then I see her struggling to reply, and I realize she's as trapped in the drama as I am. She didn't even notice my odd tone of voice. "Yeah." She lowers herself slowly back to the floor. "But it's not that simple. They've been together *for ever*. They're practically an old married couple. And besides, they're both really...cautious."

"Cautious?"

"Yeah. You know. St. Clair doesn't rock the boat. And Ellie's the same way. It took her ages to choose a university, and then she still picked one that's only a few neighbourhoods away. I mean, Parsons is a prestigious school and everything, but she chose it because it was familiar. And now with St. Clair's mom, I think he's afraid to lose anyone else. Meanwhile, she's not gonna break up with him, not while his mom has cancer. Even if it isn't a healthy relationship any more."

I click the clicky-button on top of my pen. *Clickclickclickclick*. "So you think they're unhappy?"

She sighs. "Not unhappy, but...not happy either. Happy enough, I guess. Does

that make sense?”

And it does. Which I hate. *Clickclickclickclick*.

It means I can't say anything to him, because I'd be risking our friendship. I have to keep acting like nothing has changed, that I don't feel anything more for him than I feel for Josh. Who, the next day, is ignoring our history lecture for the billionth class in a row. He has a graphic novel, Craig Thompson's *Good-bye, Chunky Rice*, hidden on his lap. Josh scrawls something into the sketchbook beneath it. He's taking notes, but not about the storming of the Bastille.

Josh and Rashmi had another blow-up at lunch. No one is worried about Étienne dropping out any more, but Josh is ditching with an alarming frequency. He's stopped doing homework altogether. And the more Rashmi pushes him, the more he pulls away.

Professeur Hansen paces the front of the classroom. He's a short man with thick glasses and wispy hair that flies out whenever he bangs our desks for emphasis. He teaches the dirty parts of history and never makes us memorize dates. I can see why Étienne is interested in the subject when he's had a teacher like this for four years.

I wish I could stop bringing everything back to Étienne.

I look at the juniors surrounding me, and discover I'm not the only one ravaged by hormones. Emily Middlestone bends over to pick up a dropped eraser, and Mike Reynard leers at her breasts. Gross. Too bad for him she's interested in his best friend, Dave. The eraser drop was deliberate, but Dave is oblivious. His eyes glaze over as they follow Professeur Hansen's pacing.

Dave notices me staring and sits up. I quickly turn away. Emily glares at me, and I smile blandly back. She returned to school with a stripe in her hair. It's pink and the rest is blonde, so it's not *quite* like mine. Still.

Professeur Hansen relays the details of Marie Antoinette's execution. I can't concentrate. Étienne and I are going to the movies after school. And, okay, Josh and Rashmi are also coming – Mer can't because she has soccer practice – but that still makes this week's score: Anna 4, Ellie 1. The teacher bangs another desk, and the redhead to my left jumps and drops her papers.

I lean over to help her pick them up, and I'm startled to discover an entire page of doodles of a familiar skull tattoo. I look up in surprise, and her face burns as red as her hair. I glance towards Josh and then raise my eyebrows at her. Her eyes widen in horror, but I shake my head and smile. I won't tell.

What's her name? Isla. Isla Martin. She lives on my floor, but she's so quiet I often forget about her. She'll have to be louder if she likes Josh. They're both shy. It's a shame, because they'd look cute together. Probably fight less than he and Rashmi, too. Why is it that the right people never wind up together? Why

are people so afraid to leave a relationship, even if they know it's a bad one?

I'm still contemplating this later, while Étienne and I wait outside Josh's room on the first floor, ready for the movies. Étienne presses his ear against Josh's door but then shoots back like it's on fire.

"What is it?"

He grimaces. "They've made up again."

I follow him outside. "Rashmi's in there?"

"They're having it off," he says bluntly. "I'd rather not interrupt."

I'm glad he's ahead of me, so he can't see my face. It's not like I'm ready to sleep with anyone – I'm not – but it's still this stupid wall between us. I'm always *aware* of it. And now I'm thinking about Étienne and Ellie again. His fingertips stroking her bare shoulder. Her lips parted against his naked throat. *Stop thinking about it, Anna.*

Stop it, stop it, STOP IT.

I switch the conversation to his mother. She's finished treatments, but we won't know if the disease is gone until March. The doctors have to wait until the radiation leaves her system before they can test her. Étienne is always trapped between worry and hope, so I steer him towards hope whenever possible.

She's feeling well today, so he is, too. He tells me something about her medication, but my attention wavers as I study his profile. I'm jolted back to Thanksgiving. Those same eyelashes, that same nose, silhouetted against the darkness in my bedroom.

God, he's beautiful.

We walk to our favourite cinema, the one we've dubbed the "Mom and Pop Basset Hound Theatre". It's only a few blocks away, and it's a comfortable one-screener run by the gentleman who walks Pouce, the dog from the *pâtisserie*. I don't actually think there's a "Mom" around – Pouce's owner is more likely a "Pop and Pop" kind of guy – but it's still a fitting nickname. We walk in and the friendly, dignified man behind the counter calls out, "*Jo-ja! Atlanna, Jo-ja!*"

I smile back. I've been practising my French with him, and he's been practising his English. He remembers I'm from Atlanta, Georgia (Jo-ja!), and we have another brief chat about the weather. Then I ask him if Pouce is a happy dog and if he, the gentleman, likes to eat good food. At least I'm trying.

The movie this afternoon is *Roman Holiday*, and the rest of the theatre is empty. Étienne stretches his legs and relaxes back into his seat. "All right, I have one. Being bad has..."

"*Never looked so good.*"

"Yes!" His eyes sparkle. This is one of our favourite games, where one of us creates the beginning of a clichéd tagline and the other finishes it.

“With friends like these...”

He matches my darkened voice, “*Who needs enemies?*”

As my laughter bounces off the curtained walls, Étienne struggles to keep his expression straight. He fails and grins wider because of it. The sight makes my heart skip a beat, but I must make an odd face, because he covers his mouth.

“Stop staring.”

“What?”

“My teeth. You’re staring at my bottom teeth.”

I laugh again. “Like I have the right to make fun of anyone’s teeth. I can shoot water incredible distances through this gap, you know. Bridge used to tease me all the ti—” I cut myself off, feeling ill. I still haven’t talked to Bridgette.

Étienne lowers his hand from his mouth. His expression is serious, maybe even defensive. “*I like your smile.*”

I like yours, too.

But I don’t have the courage to say it aloud.



Chapter thirty-three

The front-desk girl smiles when she sees me. “I ’ave package for you!”

Résidence Lambert’s door opens again, and my friends troop in behind me. The girl hands over a large brown box, and I happily sign for it. “From your mom?” Mer asks. Her cheeks are pink from the cold.

“Yes!” Today is my birthday. And I know exactly what’s inside. I carry the box eagerly to the lobby sofas and dig for something to open it with. Josh pulls out his room key and slices through the tape.

“AHH!” he screams.

Rashmi, Mer, and Étienne peek inside, and I gloat triumphantly.

“No!” Mer says.

“Yes,” I say.

Étienne picks up a slender green box. “Cookies?”

Josh snatches it from him. “Not just any cookies, my fine English fellow. *Thin Mints*.” He turns to me. “Can I open this?”

“Of course!” Every year, my family celebrates my birthday with a feast of Girl Scout cookies instead of cake. The timing is always perfect.

Rashmi pulls out a box of Lemon Chalet Cremes. “Your mom is the best.”

“What’s so special about...Tagalongs?” Étienne says, inspecting another box.

“TAGALONGS?” Mer rips them from his hands.

“They’re only the tastiest morsels on the entire planet,” I explain to Étienne. “They only sell them this time of year. Haven’t you ever had a Girl Scout cookie?”

“Did someone say *Girl Scout* cookies?”

I’m surprised to find Amanda Spitterton-Watts peering over my shoulder. Her eyes bulge when she sees my stash.

“Girl Scout cookies?” Another face appears behind us, wearing a familiar expression of confusion. It’s Cheeseburger. Amanda curls her lip in disgust and turns back to me.

“You *have* to give me a Thin Mint,” she says.

“Uh, yeah. Sure,” I say. Josh makes a face, but I hand one over anyway. Amanda sinks her teeth into the chocolate wafer and grips Étienne’s arm. She groans with pleasure. He tries to pull away, but her grasp is tight. She licks her lips. I’m amazed she doesn’t have crumbs on her mouth. How does she do that?

“Have you ever *tasted* one of these?” she asks him.

“Yes,” he lies.

Rashmi snorts.

There’s a cough behind me, and I find Cheeseburger staring anxiously at my box. I glare at Amanda, the Arm-Toucher, and pull out an entire sleeve of Thin Mints. “Here you go, Cheeseburger.”

He looks at me in surprise, but then again, that’s how he always looks. “Wow. Thanks, Anna.” Cheeseburger takes the cookies and lumbers towards the stairwell.

Josh is horrified. “*Why are you giving away the cookies?*”

“Seriously.” Mer gives Amanda an irritated glance. “Let’s go someplace private.” She grabs my package and carries it upstairs. Always prepared, she has fresh milk in her mini-fridge. They wish me happy birthday, and we clink glasses. And then we stuff ourselves until bursting.

“Mmm.” Étienne moans from the floor. “Tagalongs.”

“Told you,” Mer says, licking chocolatey peanut butter from her rings.

“Sorry we didn’t get you anything.” Rashmi collapses. “But thanks for sharing.”

I smile. “I’m happy to.”

“Actually –” Étienne sits up – “I was planning to give this to you at dinner, but I suppose now is as good a time as any.” He reaches into his backpack.

“But you hate birthdays!” I say.

“Don’t thank me yet. And I don’t hate them, I just don’t celebrate my own. Sorry it’s not wrapped.” He hands me a spiral notebook.

I’m confused. “Um...thanks.”

“It’s left-handed. See?” He flips it the other way. “Your old one is almost filled with notes and film reviews, so I thought you’d need a new one soon.”

No one ever remembers I’m left-handed. A lump rises in my throat. “It’s perfect.”

“I know it’s not much—”

“No. It’s perfect. Thank you.”

He bites his pinkie nail, and we smile at each other.

“Aw, St. Clair. That’s sweet,” Josh says.

Étienne chucks one of Mer’s pillows at his head.

“So you’ve never explained it to me,” Rashmi says. “What’s the deal with

that? The reviews?”

“Oh.” I tear my gaze from Étienne. “It’s just something I’ve always wanted to do. I like talking about movies. And it’s hard to get into the business – it’s kind of like a lifetime position – so I need all the practice I can get.”

“Why don’t you want to be a director? Or a screenwriter or an actress or something?” she asks. “No one wants to be a critic, it’s weird.”

“It’s not weird,” Étienne says. “I think it’s cool.”

I shrug. “I just like...expressing my opinion. That possibility of turning someone on to something really great. And, I dunno, I used to talk with this big critic in Atlanta – he lived in my theatre’s neighbourhood, so he used to go there for screenings – and he once bragged about how there hadn’t been a respectable female film critic since Pauline Kael, because women are too soft. That we’ll give any dumb movie four stars. I want to prove that’s not true.”

Mer grins. “Of course it’s not true.”

Étienne props himself up. “I don’t think anyone who knows you would say it’s easy to earn your good review.”

I look at him, puzzled. “What does that mean?”

“Yawn,” Josh says, not actually yawning. “So what’s the plan?”

I wait for Étienne to reply, but he doesn’t. I turn to Josh, distracted. “Huh?”

“Let’s not sit here all evening. Let’s go out.”

He doesn’t mean to the movies. I shift uncomfortably. “I like staying in.”

Josh’s eyes shine. “Anna. Haven’t you ever drunk before?”

“Of course,” I lie. But a blush destroys my cover. They all scream.

“How can you have gone half a school year without drinking?” Rashmi asks.

I squirm. “I just...don’t. It’s still illegal, you know.”

“You’re turning eighteen, and you’re in France,” Josh says. “You should at least try it.”

And now they’re all jumping up and down. You’d think they’d just turned of age. “YES! Let’s get Anna drunk!” they say.

“I don’t know—”

“Not drunk.” Étienne smiles. He’s the only one still sitting. “Just...happy.”

“Happy birthday drunk,” Josh says.

“Happy,” Étienne repeats. “Come on, Anna. I know the perfect place to celebrate.”

And because it’s him, my mouth answers before my brain does. “Okay,” I say.

We agree to meet later tonight. What was I thinking? I’d much rather stay in and hold a Michel Gondry marathon. I’m ooky with nerves, and it takes ages to find something to wear. My wardrobe isn’t exactly stocked with clothes for bar-hopping. When I finally come down to the lobby, everyone’s already there, even

Étienne. I'm surprised he's on time for once. His back is to me.

"All right," I say. "Let's get this party started."

At the sound of my voice, he turns around. And his head nearly snaps off.

I'm in a short skirt. It's the first time I've worn one here, but my birthday feels like the appropriate occasion. "Woo, Anna!" Rashmi fake-adjusts her glasses. "Why do you hide those things?"

Étienne is staring at my legs. I tuck my coat around myself self-consciously, and he startles and bumps into Rashmi.

Maybe she's right. Maybe I should wear skirts more often.



Chapter thirty-four

The band in the club is rocking so hard, screaming guitars and furious drumming and shouting lyrics, I can hardly hear myself think. All I know is that I feel good. Really good. Why have I never drunk before? I was such an idiot – it's not a big deal. I totally understand why people drink now. I'm not sure *what* I've been drinking, but I do know it was something fruity. It started out disgusting, but the more I drank, the better it got. Or the less I noticed it. Something like that. Man, I feel weird. Powerful.

Where is Étienne?

I scan the dark room, through the thrashing bodies of disillusioned Parisian youth, getting their anger out with a healthy dose of French punk rock. I finally find him leaning against a wall talking to Mer. Why is he talking to her? She laughs and tosses her curly hair. And then she touches his arm.

Meredith has turned into an Arm-Toucher. I don't believe it.

Before I know it, my feet are propelling the rest of my body towards them. The music thrums through my veins. I stumble over some guy's feet. He curses at me in French, and I mumble an apology as I lurch away. What's his problem?

Étienne. I need to talk to Étienne.

"Hey." I shout in his face, and he flinches.

"Jeez, Anna. Are you okay? How much have you had to drink?" Mer asks.

I wave my hand. Three fingers. Four fingers. Five. Something like that.

"Dance with me," I say to Étienne. He's surprised, but he hands Mer his beer. She fires me a dirty look but I don't care. He's more my friend than hers. I grab his hand and pull him onto the floor. The song changes to something even rowdier, and I let it take me over. Étienne follows my body with his eyes. He finds the rhythm, and we move together.

The room spins around us. His hair is sweaty. My hair is sweaty. I grab him closer, and he doesn't protest. I writhe down his body to the beat. When I come up, his eyes are closed, his mouth slightly parted.

We match each other thrust to thrust. The band launches into a new song.

Louder and louder. The crowd is in a frenzy. Étienne screams the chorus with the rest of them. I don't know the words – even if I spoke French, I doubt I could make out the lyrics over the roar – all I know is this band is SO MUCH BETTER than the Penny Dreadfuls. HA!

We dance until we can't dance any longer. Until we're gasping for breath and our clothes are soaked and we can hardly stand up. He leads me to the bar, and I grip onto it with everything left in me. He falls next to me. We're laughing. I'm crying, I'm laughing so hard.

A strange girl shouts at us in French.

"Pardon?" Étienne turns around, and his eyes widen in shock when he sees her. The girl has sleek hair and a hard face. She keeps yelling, and I pick out a few choice swear words. He replies in French, and I can tell by his stance and tone of voice that he's defending himself. The girl shouts again, gives him a final sneer, then spins away and pushes her way back through the pulsing mass.

"What was that about?" I ask.

"Shite. *Shite*."

"Who was that? What happened?" I lift my hair to get some air on my neck. I'm hot. It's so hot in here.

Étienne pats his pockets, panicked. "Fuck. Where's my phone?"

I fumble in my purse and pull out my cell. "USE MINE!" I shout over the music.

He shakes his head. "I can't use yours. She'll know. She'll fucking know." He pulls at his hair, and before I know it, he's making his way for the door. I'm on his heels. We burst through the club into the cold night.

Snowflakes are falling. I don't believe it. It never snows in Paris! And it's snowing on my birthday! I stick out my tongue, but I don't feel them hit. I stick it out further. He's still searching frantically for his phone. Finally, he finds it in a coat pocket. He calls someone, but they must not pick up, because he screams.

I jump backwards. "What's going on?"

"What's going on? *What's going on?* I'll tell you what's going on. That girl in there, the one who wanted to kill me? That's Ellie's roommate. And she saw us dancing, and she's called her, and she's told her all about it."

"So what? We were just dancing. Who cares?"

"Who cares? Ellie's freaked out about you as it is! She hates it when we're together, and now she'll think something's going on—"

"She hates me?" I'm confused. What did I do to her? I haven't even *seen* her in months.

He screams again and kicks the wall, then howls in pain. "FUCK!"

"Calm down! God, Étienne, what's with you?"

He shakes his head, and his expression goes blank. “It wasn’t supposed to end like this.” He runs a hand through his damp hair.

What was supposed to end? Her or me?

“It’s been falling apart for so long—”

Oh my God. Are they breaking up?

“But I’m just not ready for it,” he finishes.

My heart hardens to ice. Screw him. Seriously. SCREW. HIM. “Why not, St. Clair? Why aren’t you ready for it?”

He looks up at me when I say his name. St. Clair, not Étienne. He’s hurt, but I don’t care. He’s St. Clair again. Flirty, friends-with-everyone St. Clair. I HATE him. Before he can answer, I’m stumbling down the sidewalk. I can’t look at him any more. I’ve been so stupid. I’m such an idiot.

It’s Toph, all over again.

He calls after me, but I keep moving forward. One foot in front of the other. I’m focusing so hard on my steps that I bump into a street lamp. I curse and kick it. Again and again and again and suddenly St. Clair is pulling me back, pulling me away from it, and I’m kicking and screaming and I’m so tired and I just want to go HOME.

“Anna. Anna!”

“What’s happening?” someone asks. Meredith and Rashmi and Josh surround us. When did they get here? How long have they been watching us?

“It’s all right,” St. Clair says. “She’s just a little drunk—”

“I am NOT DRUNK.”

“Anna, you’re drunk, and I’m drunk, and this is ridiculous. Let’s just go home.”

“I don’t want to go home with you!”

“What the hell has gotten into you?”

“What’s gotten into *me*? You’ve got a lot of nerve asking that.” I stagger towards Rashmi. She steadies me while giving Josh an appalled look. “Just tell me one thing, St. Clair. I just want to know one thing.”

He stares at me. Furious. Confused.

I pause to steady my voice. “Why are you still with her?”

Silence.

“Fine. Don’t answer me. And you know what? Don’t call me either. We’re done. *Bonne nuit*.”

I’m already stomping away when he replies.

“Because I don’t want to be alone right now.” His voice echoes through the night.

I turn around to face him one last time. “You *weren’t* alone, asshole.”



Chapter thirty-five

“Wow, Anna. You are such a mean drunk.”

I pull the covers over my head. Rashmi is on the phone. My head is killing me.

“How much did you and St. Clair drink last night?”

Étienne. What happened last night? I remember the club. I remember the music and— Was there dancing? I think there was dancing – and, oh yeah, some girl was yelling at us, and then we went outside and...oh no.

Oh no, oh no, oh no.

I sit up quickly and ohmyfreakinggod my head is THROBBING. I close my eyes to shut out the painful light, and slowly, slowly sink back down into bed.

“You guys practically had sex on the dance floor.”

We did?

I open my eyes again and regret it immediately. “I think I have the flu,” I croak. I’m thirsty. My mouth is dry. Disgusting. It tastes like the bottom of Captain Jack’s cage.

“More like a hangover. You should have some water. But not too much, you might puke again.”

“Again?”

“Look in your sink.”

I groan. “I’d rather not.”

“Josh and I practically carried you home. You should be thanking me.”

“Thanks.” I am so not in the mood for Rashmi right now. “Is Étienne okay?”

“Haven’t seen him. He went to Ellie’s last night.”

Just when I thought I couldn’t feel any worse. I twist the corners of my pillow. “Did I, uh, say anything weird to him last night?”

“Apart from acting like a jealous girlfriend and saying you never wanted to speak to him again? No. Nothing weird at all.” I moan as she recounts the night for me blow by blow. “Listen,” she says when she finishes, “what’s the deal with you two?”

“What do you mean?”

“You know what I mean. You two are inseparable.”

“Except when he’s with his girlfriend.”

“Right. So what’s the deal?”

I groan again. “I don’t know.”

“Have you guys...you know...done anything?”

“No!”

“But you like him. And he likes you, too.”

I stop choking my pillow. “You think?”

“Please. The boy gets a boner every time you walk in the room.”

My eyes pop back open. Does she mean that figuratively or has she actually *seen* something? No. Focus, Anna. “So why—”

“Why is he still with Ellie? He told you last night. He’s lonely, or at least he’s scared of being lonely. Josh says with all of this stuff with his mom, he’s been too freaked out to change anything else in his life.”

So Meredith was right. Étienne is afraid of change. Why haven’t I talked about this with Rashmi before? It seems obvious now. Of course she has inside information, because Étienne talks to Josh, and Josh talks to Rashmi.

“You really think he likes me?” I can’t help it.

She sighs. “Anna. He teases you all the time. It’s classic boy-pulling-girl’s-pigtail syndrome. And whenever anyone else even remotely does it, he always takes your side and tells them to shove it.”

“Huh.”

She pauses. “You really like him, don’t you?”

I’m struggling not to cry. “No. It’s not like that.”

“Liar. So are you getting up today or what? You need sustenance.”

I agree to meet her in the cafeteria in half an hour, but I have no idea why, because the moment I’m out of bed, I want to crawl back in. I’m nauseous, and my head feels like someone smacked it with a Wiffle ball bat. And speaking of whiffs, that’s when I catch a smell of myself. My pores are boozy and sour. My hair reeks of stale cigarettes. And my clothes. Oh, *gross*. I run to my sink, dry-heaving.

And that’s when I discover last night’s vomit. And I puke for real. Again.

In the shower, I find weird bruises on my legs and feet. I have no idea what they’re from. I slump in my tiny tiled corner and let the hot water run. And run. And run. I’m twenty minutes late for breakfast. Lunch. Whatever it is. Paris is blanketed in several inches of snow. When did that happen? How could I sleep through the first snowfall? The white glare makes me shade my eyes.

Thankfully, Rashmi is alone at our table when I stumble in. I couldn’t face

anyone else right now. “Morning, sunshine.” She smirks at my wet hair and puffy eyes.

“What I don’t understand is how people actually think drinking is fun.”

“You were having fun when you were dancing last night.”

“Too bad I can’t remember.”

Rashmi slides a plate of dry toast towards me. “Eat this. And drink some water, but not too much. You might throw up again.”

“I already did.”

“Well. You’re off to a good start.”

“Where’s Josh?” I take a small bite of toast. *Yuck*. I’m not hungry.

“You’ll feel better if you eat it.” She nods at my plate. “He’s still asleep. We don’t spend every minute together, you know.”

“Yeah. Right. That’s why you and I hang out all the time.”

Whoops.

Rashmi’s brown skin reddens. “I know this’ll be a shock to you, Anna, but you aren’t the only one with problems. Josh and I aren’t exactly on the best of terms right now.”

I slink down in my seat. “I’m sorry.”

She fiddles with her juice lid. “Whatever.”

“So...what’s going on?” It takes a minute of prodding, but once she starts, it’s as if a dam has burst. It turns out they’re fighting more often than I’d thought. Over Josh skipping school. Over her pushing him. She thinks he’s upset because she’s leaving next year, and he’s not. We’re all leaving for college, and he’s not.

I hadn’t thought of that before.

And she’s upset about her younger sister, Sanjita, who’s hanging out with Amanda’s crowd, and worried about her brother, Nikhil, who’s getting bullied, and angry with her parents, who won’t stop comparing her to her older sister, Leela, who was the School of America’s valedictorian two years ago. And Mer is always too busy with soccer to hang out, and Étienne and I are always buddy-buddy, and...she lost her best friend.

Ellie still hasn’t called her.

And the whole time she’s spilling her guts, I feel so ashamed. I never realized she didn’t have anyone to talk with. I mean, I know Ellie was her best friend, and she wasn’t around any more, but somehow I forgot that meant Rashmi didn’t have anyone else. Or maybe I assumed Josh was enough.

“But we’ll work through it,” she says about him. She’s trying not to cry. “We always do. It’s just hard.” I hand her a napkin, and she blows her nose. “Thanks.”

“Of course. Thanks for the toast.”

She gives me half a smile, but it disappears as she notices something behind me. I turn in my seat to follow her gaze.

And there he is.

His hair is completely dishevelled, and he's wearing his Napoleon shirt, which is more wrinkled than ever. He shuffles towards Monsieur Boutin with a plate of...dry toast. It looks like he hasn't slept in a week. And he's still beautiful. My heart shatters. "What do I say? What am I supposed to say to him?"

"Deep breath," Rashmi says. "Take a deep breath."

Breathing is impossible. "What if he won't talk to me? I told him not to talk to me any more."

She reaches out and squeezes my hand. "You're fine. And he's coming over, so I'm letting go now. Act natural. You're *fine*."

Right. I'm fine. Right.

His walk to our table is excruciatingly slow. I close my eyes. I'm worried he won't sit with us, that he really WILL never speak to me again, when his tray clatters down across from me. I don't remember the last time he didn't sit beside me, but that's okay. As long as he's here.

"Hey," he says.

I open my eyes. "Hey."

"Shoot!" Rashmi says. "I gotta call Josh. I said I'd wake him before I ate, and I totally forgot. Seeyouguyslater." And she scurries away as if we're contagious.

I push my toast around my plate. Try another bite. Gag.

Étienne coughs. "You all right?"

"No. You?"

"Feel like hell."

"You look like hell."

"Says the girl with hair dripping like a wet beastie."

I sort of laugh. He kind of shrugs.

"Thanks a lot, Étienne."

He prods his toast but doesn't pick it up. "So I'm 'Étienne' again?"

"You have too many names."

"I have one name. People just split it oddly."

"Whatever. Yeah. You're Étienne again."

"Good."

I wonder if this interaction counts as an apology. "How was she?" I don't want to say her name.

"Vicious."

"I'm sorry." And I'm not, but I have an overwhelming urge to prove we can still be friends. There's an actual ache inside of me that needs him. "I didn't

mean to mess things up, I don't know what got into me—”

He rubs his temples. “Please don't apologize. It's not your fault.”

“But if I hadn't dragged you out to dance—”

“Anna.” Étienne speaks slowly. “You didn't make me do anything I didn't want to do.”

My face grows hot as the knowledge explodes inside of me like dynamite.

He likes me. Étienne really does like me.

But as soon as the information hits, it's replaced by confusion, by a notion so sickening it thrusts my emotions to the opposite end of the spectrum. “But... you're still with her?”

He shuts his eyes in pain.

I can't control my voice. “You spent the night with her!”

“No!” Étienne's eyes jerk back open. “No, I didn't. Anna, I haven't...*spent the night* with Ellie in a long time.” He looks at me beseechingly. “Since before Christmas.”

“I don't understand why you won't break up with her.” I'm crying. The anguish of being so close to what I want, and it still being so far away.

He looks panicked. “I've been with her for a long time. We've been through loads together, it's complicated—”

“It's not complicated.” I stand and shove my tray across the table. The toast bounces off the plate and hits the floor. “I put myself out there, and you rejected me. I won't make that mistake again.”

I storm away.

“Anna! Anna, wait!”

“Oliphant! Feeling better?” I jump back, having nearly run into Dave. He's smiling. His friends Mike and Emily Middlestone, aka the Girl with the Pink Stripe, wait behind him with lunch trays.

“Um. What?” I look over, and Étienne is on his feet. He was about to follow me, but now that he's seen Dave, he isn't sure any more.

Dave laughs. “I saw you in the lobby last night. Guess you don't remember. Your friends were struggling to get you in the elevator, so I helped them carry you.”

Rashmi didn't mention this.

“You yakked something fierce in your sink.”

Dave was in my room?

“You okay today?” He tucks a shaggy lock of hair behind an ear.

Another glance at Étienne. He steps forward but then hesitates again. I turn back to Dave, something new and ugly hardening inside of me. “I'm fine.”

“Cool. So we're going to this Irish pub in Montmartre tonight. Wanna come?”

I've had enough drinking for a while. "Thanks, but I'd rather stay in."

"That's cool. Maybe some other time?" He grins and nudges me. "When you're feeling better?"

I want to punish Étienne, hurt him in the way that he hurt me. "Yeah. I'd like that."

Dave's eyebrows lift, perhaps in surprise. "Cool. See you around, then." He smiles again, shyly this time, and then follows his friends to their usual table across the room.

"Cool," Étienne says behind me. "It was really cool talking to you, too."

I whirl around. "What's your problem? So you can keep dating Ellie, but I can't even talk to Dave?"

Étienne looks shamed. He stares at his boots. "I'm sorry."

I don't even know what to do with his apology.

"I'm sorry," he says again. And this time, he's looking at me. Begging me. "And I know it's not fair to ask you, but I need more time. To sort things out."

"You've had the entire year." My voice is cold.

"Please, Anna. Please be my friend."

"Your friend." I give a bitter laugh. "Right. Of course."

Étienne looks at me helplessly. I want to tell him no, but I've NEVER been able to tell him no. "Please," he says again.

I cross my arms, protecting myself. "Sure, *St. Clair*. Friends."



Chapter thirty-six

“I can’t believe you had lunch with David.” Mer watches him swagger down the hall and shakes her head. We’re headed in the opposite direction from him, towards physics.

“Dave,” I correct. “What? He’s a nice guy.”

“If you like rodents,” St. Clair says. “You’d think with those big bucked teeth, it’d be hard for him to chew.”

“I know you don’t like him, but you could at least try to be civil.” I refrain from pointing out we’ve already had a conversation about our own less-than-perfect chompers. The last few weeks have been terrible. St. Clair and I are still friends – in theory – but now that *thing* is back, even larger and nastier than it was after Thanksgiving. It’s so huge it feels physical, an actual weight and body keeping us from getting close.

“Why?” His voice is suspicious. “Are you two going out now?”

“Yeah, we set up our first date right after he asked me to marry him. Please. We’re just friends.”

Mer grins. “Dave doesn’t want to be just friends.”

“Hey, did you catch what our assignment was in English?” I ask.

“Subject-changer, thy name is Anna,” Rashmi says. But in a friendly way. Since my post-birthday breakfast, things have been easier between us.

“I’m not changing the subject. I just didn’t hear what our homework was.”

“That’s odd,” St. Clair says. “Because I saw you write it down.”

“I did?”

“Yes,” he says. It’s a challenge.

“Oh, come on, you guys,” Mer says. Our friends are sick of us fighting, even though they still don’t know the details of our current situation. Which is how I prefer it. “Anna, it’s a comparative essay between the two stories in *Kitchen*. Remember?”

Of course I remember. I’m actually looking forward to this assignment. We just finished reading a book by Banana Yoshimoto, a Japanese author, and it’s

my favourite so far. Both of her stories are about heartache and mourning, but they're tinged with this...simplicity and romance. I can't help but think of my father's work.

He writes about love and death, too. But while his books are filled with sappy melodrama, Yoshimoto reflects on the healing process. Her characters are also suffering, but they're putting their lives back together. Learning to love again. Her stories are harder, but they're also more rewarding. The characters suffer in the beginning and the middle, but not the end. There's positive resolution.

I should mail my dad a copy. Circle the happy endings in red.

"Er," St. Clair says. "Shall we work on the paper together, then? Tonight?"

He's making an effort to be friendly. It sounds painful. He keeps trying, and I keep shooting him down. "I don't know," I say. "I have to get measured for my wedding dress."

St. Clair's face flickers with frustration, but for some reason this doesn't make me feel as satisfied as it should. Argh, fine. "Sure," I say. "That'd be...nice."

"Yeah, I need to borrow your calculus notes," Mer says. "I must have missed something. It just wasn't clicking for me today."

"Oh," St. Clair says. Like he just noticed she's standing here. "Yeah. You can borrow them. When you join us."

Rashmi smirks but doesn't say anything.

He turns back to me. "So did you enjoy the book?"

"I did." Discomfort lingers between us. "Did you?"

St. Clair considers it for a moment. "I like the author's name the best," he finally says. "*Ba-nah-na.*"

"You're pronouncing it wrong," I say.

He nudges me gently. "I still like it best."

"Oliphant, what'd you get for number nine?" Dave whispers.

We're taking a quiz. I'm not doing so hot, because conjugating verbs isn't my strong point. Nouns I can handle – boat, shoelace, rainbow. *Le bateau, le lacet, l'arc-en-ciel*. But verbs? If only everything could be said in the present tense.

I go to store yesterday for milk!

Last night he ride bus for two hours!

A week ago, I sing to your cat at beach!

I make sure Professeur Gillet is distracted before replying to Dave. "No idea," I whisper. Though I actually do know the answer. I just hate cheating. He holds up six fingers, and I shake my head. And I *don't* know the answer to that one.

"Number six?" he hisses, not sure if I've understood him.

"Monsieur Higgenbaum!"

Dave tenses as Madame Guillotine advances. She rips the quiz from his hands, and I don't need to speak French to understand what she says. Busted. "And you, Mademoiselle Oliphant." She snatches my quiz as well.

That's so unfair! "But—"

"I do not tolerate chee-ting." And her frown is so severe I want to hide underneath my desk. She marches back towards the front of the classroom.

"What the hell?" Dave whispers.

I shush him, but she jerks back around. "Monsieur! Mademoiselle! I zought I made eet clear – zere iz no talking during tests."

"Sorry, *professeur*," I say as Dave protests he *wasn't* saying anything. Which is dumb, because everyone heard him.

And then...Professeur Gillet kicks us out.

I don't believe it. I've never been kicked out of a class. We're instructed to wait in the hall until the period is over, but Dave has other plans. He tiptoes away and motions for me to follow. "Come on. Let's just go in the stairwell so we can talk."

But I don't want to go. We're in enough trouble as it is.

"She'll never know. We'll be back before the hour is up," he says. "I promise."

Dave winks, and I shake my head but follow him anyway. Why can't I say no to cute boys? I expect him to stop once we're in the stairwell, but he descends the entire way. We go outside and onto the street. "Better, right?" he asks. "Who wants to be stuck inside on a day like today?"

It's freezing out, and I *would* rather be in school, but I hold my tongue. We sit on a chilly bench, and Dave is prattling about snowboarding or skiing or something. I'm distracted. I wonder if Professeur Gillet will let me make up the quiz points. I wonder if she's checking the hallway. I wonder if I'm about to get in more trouble.

"You know, I'm kinda glad we got kicked out," Dave says.

"Huh?" I turn my attention back to him. "Why?"

He smiles. "I never get to see you alone."

And then – just like that – Dave leans over, and we're kissing.

I. Am kissing. Dave Higgenbaum.

And it's...nice.

A shadow falls over us, and I break apart from his lips, which have already grown overactive. "Crap, did we miss the bell?" he asks.

"No," St. Clair says. "You have five more minutes of teeth gnashing to enjoy."

I shrink back in mortification. "What are you doing here?"

Meredith stands behind him, holding a stack of newspapers. She grins. “We should be asking you that question. But we’re running an errand for Professeur Hansen.”

“Oh,” I say.

“Hiii, Dave,” Mer says.

He nods at her, but he’s watching St. Clair, whose face is cold and hard.

“Anyway! We’ll let you get back to...what you were doing.” Mer’s eyes twinkle as she tugs on St. Clair’s arm. “See you, Anna. Bye, Dave!”

St. Clair shoves his hands in his pockets. He won’t meet my gaze as he stalks away, and my stomach turns over. “What’s that guy’s problem?” Dave asks.

“Who? Étienne?” I’m surprised when this name rolls out of my mouth.

“Étienne?” He raises his eyebrows. “I thought his name was St. Clair.”

I want to ask, *Then why did you call him that guy?* But that’s rude. I shrug.

“Why do you hang out with him, anyway? Girls are always going on and on about him, but I don’t see what’s so great.”

“Because he’s funny,” I say. “He’s a really nice guy.”

Nice. That was how I described Dave to St. Clair the other day. What’s wrong with me? As if Dave is anything like St. Clair. But he looks disgruntled, and I feel bad. It’s not fair to compliment St. Clair to Dave’s face. Not after kissing him.

Dave shoves his hands into his pockets. “We should get back.”

We slump upstairs, and I imagine Professeur Gillet waiting for us, smoke pouring from her nostrils like an incensed dragon. But when we get there, the hall is empty. I peek into her classroom window as she finishes up her lecture. She sees me and nods.

I don’t believe it.

Dave was right. She never knew we were gone.



Chapter thirty-seven

Okay, so Dave isn't as attractive as St. Clair. He's kind of gangly, and his teeth are sort of bucked, but his tanned-but-freckled nose is cute. And I like how he brushes his shaggy hair from his eyes, and his flirty smile still catches me off guard. And, sure, he's a *little* immature, but he's nothing like his friend Mike Reynard, who's always talking about the Girl with the Pink Stripe's chest. Even when she's within hearing distance. And though I don't think Dave would ever get excited by a history book or wear a funny hat made by his mom, the important thing is this: Dave is available. St. Clair is not.

It's been a week since we've kissed, and we're dating now by default. Sort of. We've taken a few walks, he's paid for some meals, and we've made out in various locations around campus. But I don't hang out with his friends, and he's never hung out with mine. Which is good, because they tease me about Dave relentlessly.

I'm lounging around with them in the lobby. It's late Friday night, so there isn't a crowd. Nate is behind the front desk, because the regular workers are on strike. Someone is always striking in Paris; it was bound to happen here sooner or later. Josh sketches Rashmi, who is talking on the phone with her parents in Hindi, while St. Clair and Meredith quiz each other for a government test. I'm checking my email. I'm startled when one appears from Bridgette. She hasn't written in nearly two months.

I know you don't want to hear from me, but I thought I'd try one last time. I'm sorry I didn't tell you about Toph. I was afraid, because I knew how much you liked him. I hope someday you'll understand that I didn't mean to hurt you. And I hope your second semester in France is going well. I'm excited there are only two months until graduation, and I can't wait till prom! Does SOAP have a prom? Are you going with someone? Whatever happened to that English guy? It sounded like a more-than-friends situation to me. Anyway. I'm sorry, and I hope you're okay. And I won't bug you again. And I didn't use any big words because I know you hate that.

"Are you all right, Anna?" St. Clair asks.

"What?" I snap my laptop shut.

“You look like the Mom and Pop Basset Hound Theatre closed,” he says.

Bridgette and Toph are going to prom. Why am I upset? I’ve never cared about prom before. But they’ll get those wallet-size pictures. He’ll be in a tux that he’s punk-rocked out with safety pins and she’ll be in a fabulous vintage gown and he’ll have his hands on her waist in some awkward pose and they’ll be captured for all eternity together. And I am never going to prom.

“It’s nothing. I’m fine.” I keep my back to him and wipe my eyes.

St. Clair sits up. “It’s not nothing. You’re crying.”

The front door opens, and the decibel level rises as Dave, Mike, and three junior girls arrive. They’ve been drinking, and they’re laughing loudly. Emily Middlestone, the Girl with the Pink Stripe, clutches Dave’s arm. One of his hands rests casually on her waist. Prom picture. The stab of jealousy surprises me.

Emily’s cheeks are flushed, and she laughs harder than anyone else. Mer nudges me with the toe of her shoe. The others, even Josh and Rashmi, watch the situation with interest. I open my laptop back up, determined not to look as pissed off as I feel.

“Anna!” Dave gives me a gigantic, exaggerated wave. Emily’s face sours. “You missed it!” He shakes her off and staggers towards me with limp arms. He looks like a newly hatched chick with useless wings. “You know that café with the blue window? We stole their outside tables and chairs and set them up in the fountain. You should’ve seen the look on the waiters’ faces when they found them. It was awesome!”

I look at Dave’s feet. They are, indeed, wet.

“What are you doing?” He flops down next to me. “Checking your email?”

St. Clair snorts. “Give the lad a medal for his brilliant skills in detection.”

My friends smirk. I’m embarrassed again, for both Dave and myself. But Dave doesn’t even look at St. Clair, he just keeps grinning. “Well, I saw the laptop, and I saw the cute frown that means she’s concentrating so hard, and I put two and two together—”

“NO,” I tell St. Clair, who opens his mouth to say something else. He shuts it, surprised.

“Wanna come upstairs?” Dave asks. “We’re gonna chill in my room for a while.”

I probably should. He *is* sort of my boyfriend. Plus, I’m annoyed with St. Clair. His hostile stare only makes me more determined. “Sure.”

Dave whoops and pulls me to my feet. He trips over St. Clair’s textbook, and St. Clair looks ready to commit murder. “It’s just a book,” I say.

He scowls in disgust.

Dave takes me to the fifth floor. St. Clair's floor. I forgot they were neighbours. His room turns out to be the most...American place I've seen in Paris. The walls are covered in tacky posters – 99 BOTTLES OF BEER ON THE WALL, *REEFER MADNESS*, a woman with huge boobs in a white bikini. Her cleavage is covered with sand, and she's pouting as if to say: *Can you believe this? Sand! At the beach!*

The girls pile onto Dave's unmade bed. Mike hurls himself on top of them, and they squeal and bat at him. I hover in the doorway until Dave pulls me inside and onto his lap. We sit on his desk chair. Another guy comes in. Paul? Pete? Something like that. One of the juniors, a girl with dark hair and tight jeans, stretches in a move designed to show off her belly button ring to Paul/Pete. Oh, please.

The party divides and people make out. Emily doesn't have a partner, so she leaves, but not before shooting me another bitchy look. Dave's tongue is in my mouth, but I can't relax, because he's slobbering tonight. His hand creeps underneath my shirt and rests against the small of my back. I glance down at his other hand and realize they aren't much bigger than mine. He has little-boy hands.

"I need to take a leak." Mike Reynard stands, knocking tonight's date to the floor. I expect him to exit the room, but, instead, he does the unforgivable. He unzips his pants – right there in front of all of us – and *pees in Dave's shower*.

And no one says anything.

"Aren't you going to stop him?"

But Dave doesn't reply to my question. His head has fallen back, and his mouth is open. Is he *asleep*?

"Everyone pisses in the showers." Mike curls his lip at me. "What, you wait in line for the bathroom?"

I fight revulsion as I fly down the stairs to my floor. What was I thinking? I could've just contracted any number of life-threatening diseases. There's no way Dave has EVER cleaned his room. I think back to St. Clair's tidy, pleasant space, and I'm jealous of Ellie in an entirely new way. St. Clair would never hang up a poster of beer bottles or hold house parties in his room or use his shower as a toilet.

How did I end up with Dave? It was never a decision, it just happened. Was I only with him because I'm mad at St. Clair? The thought strikes a nerve. Now I feel ashamed as well as stupid. I reach for my necklace, and a new panic sets in.

Key. I don't have my key.

Where did I leave it? I curse, because there's no way I'm going back to

Dave's room. Maybe it's downstairs. Or maybe I never grabbed it in the first place. Does this mean I have to go to the front desk? Except – I swear again – they're striking. Which means I have to go to Nate's, which means I have to wake him up in middle of the night. Which means he'll get mad at me.

Mer's door flies open. It's St. Clair.

"Night," he says, clicking her door shut. She calls goodnight back. He glares at me, and I flinch. He knew I was out here.

"You and Higgenbaum have a nice time?" he sneers.

I don't want to talk about Dave. I want to find my freaking room key, and I want St. Clair to go away. "Yes. Great. *Thank you.*"

St. Clair blinks. "You're crying. That's the second time tonight." A new edge to his voice. "Did he hurt you?"

I wipe my eyes. "What?"

"I'll KILL that bloody—"

He's already halfway to the stairs before I can yank him back. "No!" St. Clair looks at my hand on his arm, and I hastily remove it. "I'm locked out. I'm just upset because I lost my stupid key."

"Oh."

We stand there for a moment, unsure of what to do with ourselves. "I'm going downstairs." I avoid his gaze. "Maybe I left it there."

St. Clair follows me, and I'm too exhausted to argue. His boots echo in the empty stairwell. *Clomp. Clomp. Clomp.* The lobby is dark and empty. The March wind rattles the glass on the front door. He fumbles around and switches on a light. It's a Tiffany lamp, red dragonflies with bulbous turquoise eyes. I start lifting couch cushions.

"But you were on the floor the whole time," he says. I think back, and he's right. He points to a chair. "Help me lift this. Maybe it was kicked under here."

We move it aside. No key.

"Could you have left it upstairs?" He's uncomfortable, so I know he means at Dave's.

"I don't know. I'm so tired."

"Shall we check?" He hesitates. "Or...shall I check?"

I shake my head no, and I'm relieved when he doesn't press me.

He looks relieved, too. "Nate?"

"I don't want to wake him."

St. Clair bites his thumbnail. He's nervous. "You could sleep in my room. I'll sleep on the floor, you can have my bed. We don't have to, er, sleep together. Again. If you don't want to."

That's only the second time, apart from one of his emails at Christmas, either

of us has mentioned that weekend. I'm stunned. The temptation makes my entire body ache with longing, but it's one hundred different kinds of a bad idea. "No. I'd— I'd better get it over with now. Because I'd still have to see Nate in the morning, and then I'd have to explain about...about being in your room."

Is he disappointed? He takes a moment before replying. "Then I'll go with you."

"Nate's gonna be mad. You should go to bed."

But he marches over to Nate's room and knocks. A minute later, Nate opens his door. He's barefoot and wearing an old T-shirt and boxer shorts. I look away, embarrassed. He rubs his shaved head. "Ungh?"

I stare at his diamond-patterned rug. "I locked myself out."

"Mmm?"

"She forgot her key," St. Clair says. "Can she borrow your spare?"

Nate sighs but motions us inside. His place is much larger than ours, with a private bath, a sitting room, and a full-size (though tiny by American standards) kitchen in addition to a separate bedroom. He shuffles over to a wooden cupboard in his sitting room. It's filled with brass keys hanging on nails, a painted golden number above each one. He grabs 408 and hands it to me. "I want that back before breakfast."

"Of course." I grasp the key so hard it dents my palm. "I'm sorry."

"Out," he says, and we scurry into the hall. I catch a glimpse of his condom bowl, which brings back another uneasy Thanksgiving memory.

"See?" St. Clair switches off the dragonfly lamp. "That wasn't so terrible."

The lobby is cloaked in darkness again, the only light coming from the screen saver on the front desk's computer. I stumble forward, patting the walls for guidance. St. Clair bumps into me. "Sorry," he says. His breath is warm on my neck. But he doesn't adjust his body. He stays close behind me as we stumble down the hall.

My hand hits the stairwell door. I open it, and we shield our eyes from the sudden brightness. St. Clair shuts it behind us, but we don't walk upstairs. He's still pressed against me. I turn around. His lips are only a breath from mine. My heart beats so hard it's practically bursting, but he falters and backs away. "So are you and Dave...?"

I stare at his hands, resting on the door. They aren't little-boy hands.

"We were," I say. "Not any more."

He pauses, and then takes a step forward again. "And I don't suppose you'll tell me what that email earlier was about?"

"No."

Another step closer. "But it upset you. Why won't you tell me?"

I step back. “Because it’s embarrassing, and it’s none of your business.”

St. Clair furrows his brow in frustration. “Anna, if you can’t tell your best mate what’s bothering you, who can you tell?”

And just like that, I have to fight to keep from crying for a third time. Because even with all of the awkwardness and hostility, he still considers me his best friend. The news fills me with more relief than I could have imagined. I’ve missed him. I hate being mad at him. Before I know it, the words spill out about Bridgette and Toph and prom, and he listens attentively, never taking his eyes from me. “And I’ll never go to one! When Dad enrolled me here, he took that away from me, too.”

“But...proms are lame.” St. Clair is confused. “I thought you were glad we didn’t have one.”

We sit down together on the bottom step. “I was. Until now.”

“But...Toph is a wanker. You hate him. And Bridgette!” He glances at me. “We still hate Bridgette, right? I haven’t missed anything?”

I shake my head. “We still hate her.”

“All right, so it’s a fitting punishment. Think about it, she’ll get dolled up in one of those satin monstrosities no rational girl would ever wear, and they’ll take one of those awful pictures—”

“The picture,” I moan.

“No. They’re awful, Anna.” And he looks genuinely revolted. “The uncomfortable poses and the terrible slogans. ‘A Night to Remember’. ‘This Magic Moment’—”

“‘What Dreams Are Made Of’.”

“Exactly.” He nudges me with his elbow. “Oh, and don’t forget the commemorative photo key chain. Bridgette is bound to buy one. And it’ll embarrass Toph, and he’ll break up with her, and that’ll be it. The prom picture will be their complete undoing.”

“They still get to dress up.”

“You hate dressing up.”

“And they still get to dance.”

“You dance here! You danced across the lobby desk on Thanksgiving.” He laughs. “There’s no way Bridgette will get to dance on a desk at the prom.”

I’m trying to stay upset. “Unless she’s trashed.”

“Exactly.”

“Which she probably will be.”

“No ‘probably’ about it. She’ll be bombed out of her skull.”

“So it’ll be really embarrassing when she loses her dinner—”

He throws up his hands. “The terrible prom food! How could I have

forgotten? Rubbery chicken, bottled barbecue sauce—”

“—on Toph’s shoes.”

“*Mortifying*,” he says. “And it’ll happen during the photo shoot, I guarantee it.”

I finally crack a smile, and he grins. “That’s more like it.”

We hold each other’s gaze. His smile softens, and he nudges me again. I rest my head on his shoulder as the stairwell light turns off. They’re all on timers.

“Thanks, Étienne.”

He stiffens at hearing his first name. In the darkness, I take one of his hands into my lap and squeeze it. He squeezes back. His nails are bitten short, but I love his hands.

They’re just the right size.



Chapter thirty-eight

Now I know why people are always carrying on about Paris in the springtime. The leaves are bright green with birth, the chestnut trees are clustered with pink buds, and the walkways are lined with lemon yellow tulips. Everywhere I look, Parisians are smiling. They've shed their woollen scarves for scarves that are thinner, lighter, softer. Le Jardin du Luxembourg, the Luxembourg Gardens, is busy today, but it's a pleasant crowd. Everyone is happy because it's the first warm day of the year. We haven't seen sunshine in months.

But I'm grateful for a different reason.

This morning, Étienne received a phone call. Susan St. Clair is *not* going to be the protagonist in a James Ashley novel. Her PET/CT scan was clear – no evidence of cancer. She'll still be tested every three months, but as of right now, this very moment, his mother is alive in the fullest sense of the word.

We're out celebrating.

Étienne and I are sprawled before the Grand Bassin, an octagonal pool popular for sailing toy boats. Meredith is playing a league football game in an indoor field across the street, and Josh and Rashmi are watching. We watched, too, for a while. She's fantastic, but our attention to organized sports only lasts so long. Fifteen minutes into it, and Étienne was whispering in my ear and prodding me with lifted brows.

I didn't take much convincing. We'll head back in a bit, to catch the end.

It's strange that this is my first time here, because the garden rests against the Latin Quarter. I've been missing out. So far Étienne has shown me a beekeeping school, an orchard, a puppet theatre, a carousel, and a courtyard of gentlemen lost in *boules*, lawn bowling. He says we're in the best park in all of Paris, but I think it's the best park in the world. I wish I could take Seany here.

A tiny sailboat breezes behind us, and I sigh happily. "Étienne?"

We're lying next to each other, propped up against the ledge of the Bassin. He shifts, and his legs find a comfortable spot against me. Our eyes are closed. "Hmm?" he asks.

“This is sooo much better than a football game.”

“Mm, isn’t it, though?”

“We’re so rotten,” I say.

He slaps me with a lazy arm, and we laugh quietly. Sometime later, I realize he’s calling my name.

“Wha?” I must have drifted asleep.

“There’s a sailboat in your hair.”

“Huh?”

“I said, ‘There’s a sailboat in your hair.’”

I try to lift my head, but it snaps back, snagged. He wasn’t kidding. An agitated boy about Seany’s age approaches, speaking in rapid French. Étienne laughs as I try to prise the toy’s sails from my head. The boat tips over, and my hair dips into the Bassin. The young boy shouts at me.

“Hello, help?” I throw an exasperated look at Étienne, whose laughter has reduced him into a fit of giggles. He struggles up as the boy reaches for my hair, tearing at the wet tangles.

“OUCH!”

Étienne snaps at him, and the boy lets go. Étienne’s fingers wrap around my hair and gently work the cloth and string and wood from it. He hands the boat back to the boy and says something else, this time in a softer voice, hopefully warning him to keep the boat away from innocent bystanders. The boy clutches his toy and runs away.

I wring out my hair. “Ugh.”

“That’s very clean water.” He grins.

“Sure it is.” But I love how he knows what I’m thinking.

“Come on.” He stands and offers his hand. I take it, and he helps me up. I expect him to drop it, but he doesn’t. Instead, he leads me to a safe spot away from the pool.

It’s nice holding hands. Comfortable.

I wish friends held hands more often, like the children I see on the streets sometimes. I’m not sure why we have to grow up and get embarrassed about it. We sit in the grass underneath a canopy of pink blossoms. I glance around for the Grass Police in their little conductor hats, always eager to remove citizens from the lawns, but I don’t see them. Étienne is a good-luck charm when it comes to this sort of thing. My hair drips through the back of my shirt but, somehow, it’s not so bad right now.

We are still holding hands.

Okay, we should let go. This is the point where it would be normal to let go.

Why aren’t we letting go?

I force my gaze to the Grand Bassin. He does the same. We're not watching the boats. His hand is burning, but he doesn't let go. And then – he scoots closer. Just barely. I glance down and see the back of his shirt has crawled up, exposing a slice of his back. His skin is smooth and pale.

It's the sexiest thing I have ever seen.

He shifts again, and my body answers with the same. We're arm against arm, leg against leg. His hand crushes mine, willing me to look at him.

I do.

Étienne's dark eyes search mine. "What are we doing?" His voice is strained.

He's so beautiful, so perfect. I'm dizzy. My heart pounds, my pulse races. I tilt my face towards his, and he answers with an identical slow tilt towards mine. He closes his eyes. Our lips brush lightly.

"If you ask me to kiss you, I will," he says.

His fingers stroke the inside of my wrists, and I burst into flames.

"Kiss me," I say.

He does.

We are kissing like crazy. Like our lives depend on it. His tongue slips inside my mouth, gentle but demanding, and it's nothing like I've ever experienced, and I suddenly understand why people describe kissing as melting because every square inch of my body dissolves into his. My fingers grip his hair, pulling him closer. My veins throb and my heart explodes. I have never wanted anyone like this before. Ever.

He pushes me backwards and we're lying down, making out in front of the children with their red balloons and the old men with their chess sets and the tourists with their laminated maps and I don't care, I don't care about any of that.

All I want is Étienne.

The weight of his body on top of mine is extraordinary. I feel him – all of him – pressed against me, and I inhale his shaving cream, his shampoo, and that extra scent that's just...him. The most delicious smell I could ever imagine.

I want to breathe him, lick him, eat him, drink him. His lips taste like honey. His face has the slightest bit of stubble and it rubs my skin but I don't care, I don't care at all. He feels wonderful. His hands are everywhere, and it doesn't matter that his mouth is already on top of mine, I want him closer closer closer.

And then he stops. Instinct. His body is rigid.

"How *could* you?" a girl cries.



Chapter thirty-nine

My first thought is Ellie.

Ellie found us, and she's going to strangle me with her bare hands, right here, with the puppeteer and carousel horses and beekeepers all as witnesses. My throat will turn purple, and I'll stop breathing, and I'll die. And then she'll go to prison and write Étienne psychotic letters on parchment made from dried skin for the rest of his life.

But it's not Ellie. It's Meredith.

Étienne springs off me. She turns her head away, but not before I notice that she's crying. "Mer!" She runs away before I can say anything else. I look at Étienne, and he's rubbing his head in disbelief.

"Shite," he says.

"Shite is right," Rashmi says. I'm startled to discover she and Josh are here, too.

"Meredith." I moan. "Ellie." How could we let this happen? He has a girlfriend, and we both have a friend who is in love with him – the secret that isn't a secret and never has been.

Étienne jumps to his feet. His shirt is covered with dried grass. And then he's gone. He races after Meredith, shouting her name. He disappears behind a copse of trees, and Josh and Rashmi are talking, but I don't comprehend their words.

Did Étienne just leave me? For *Meredith*?

I can't swallow. My throat is closing. Not only have I been caught with someone I had no right to be kissing – and not only was it the greatest moment of my life – but he's rejecting me.

In front of everyone.

There's a hand in front of me, and in a daze, I follow it to its wrist, its elbow, its skull-and-crossbones tattoo, its shoulder, its neck, its face. Josh. He grips my hand and helps me stand. My cheeks are wet, and I don't even remember starting to cry.

Josh and Rashmi don't speak as they steer me onto a bench. They let me

blubber about how I don't know how it happened, and I didn't mean to hurt anyone, and please don't tell Ellie. How I can't believe I did that to Mer, and she'll never talk to me again, and I'm not surprised Étienne ran away because I am so, so awful. The worst.

"Anna. *Anna*," Josh interrupts. "If I had a euro for every stupid thing I've done, I could buy the *Mona Lisa*. You'll be fine. You'll both be fine."

Rashmi crosses her arms. "Your lips weren't the only ones working out there."

"Meredith, she's so," I choke. "Nice." Again, that word. So inadequate. "How could I do that to her?"

"Yeah. She is," Rashmi says. "And that was pretty crappy of you guys to do that just now. What were you thinking?"

"I *wasn't* thinking, it just happened. I've ruined everything. She hates me. Étienne hates me!"

"St. Clair definitely doesn't hate you," Josh says.

"Though if I were Mer, I'd hate him." Rashmi scowls. "He's been leading her on for way too long."

Josh is indignant. "He's never once given her the impression that he liked her more than a friend."

"Yeah, but he's never discouraged her!"

"He's been dating Ellie for a year and a half. You'd think that'd be discouragement enough – oh. Sorry, Anna."

I sob harder.

They stay with me on the bench until the sunlight dips behind the trees, and then they walk me from *le jardin* back to Résidence Lambert. When we arrive, the lobby is empty. Everyone is still out enjoying the nice weather.

"I need to talk to Mer," I say.

"Oh, no, you don't," Rashmi says. "Give her time."

I slink into my room, scolded, and pull out my key. The night I lost it, I'd just left it in my room. The Beatles thump from the wall between Mer and me, and I remember my first night here. Is "Revolution" covering the sound of her crying? I tuck the key back into my shirt and flop onto my bed. I pop up and pace my room, and then lie back down.

I don't know what to do.

Meredith hates me. Étienne has disappeared, and I don't know if he likes me or hates me or thinks he made a mistake or what. Should I call him? But what would I say? "Hi, this is Anna. The girl you made out with in the park and then ditched? You wanna hang out?" But I *have* to know why he left. I *have* to know what he thinks about me. My hand shakes as I put my phone to my ear.

Straight to voicemail. I look at my ceiling. Is he up there? I can't tell. Mer's music is too loud to hear footsteps, so I'll have to go up. I check my reflection. My eyes are puffy and red, and my hair looks like an owl pellet.

Breathe. One thing at a time.

Wash your face. Brush your hair. Brush your teeth, for good measure.

Breathe again. Open door. Walk upstairs. My stomach churns as I knock on his door. No one answers. I press my ear against the drawing of him in the Napoleon hat, trying to hear inside his room. Nothing. Where is he? Where IS he?

I go back to my floor, and John Lennon's scratchy voice is still blasting down the hall. My feet slow as I pass her room. I have to apologize, I don't care what Rashmi says, but Meredith is furious when she opens her door. "Great. It's you."

"Mer...I'm so sorry."

She gives a nasty laugh. "Yeah? You looked really sorry with your tongue lodged down his windpipe."

"I'm sorry." I feel so helpless. "It just happened."

Meredith clenches her hands, which are oddly ring-free. She's not wearing any make-up either. In fact, she's completely dishevelled. I've never seen her look anything but polished before. "How could you, Anna? How could you do this to me?"

"I...I..."

"You *what*? You knew how I felt about him! I can't believe you!"

"I'm sorry," I say again. "I don't know what we were thinking—"

"Yeah, well, it doesn't matter anyway. He's not choosing either one of us."

My heart stops. "What? What do you mean?"

"He chased me down. Told me he wasn't interested." Her face reddens. "And then he went to Ellie's. He's there right now."

Everything turns hazy. "He went to Ellie's?"

"Just like he always does when there's trouble." Her voice changes to smug. "Now how does it feel? Not so hot any more, huh?" And then she slams her door in my face.

Ellie. He's choosing Ellie. *Again*.

I run to the bathroom and yank up the toilet lid. I wait to lose my lunch, but my stomach just churns, so I put the lid back down and sit on it. What's wrong with me? Why do I always fall for the wrong guy? I didn't want Étienne to be another Toph, but he is. Only it's so much worse because I only liked Toph.

And I love Étienne.

I can't face him again. How could I possibly face him again? I want to go back to Atlanta, I want my mom. The thought shames me. Eighteen-year-olds

shouldn't need their mother. I don't know how long I've been in here, but suddenly I'm aware of irritated sounds in the hallway. Someone bangs on the door.

"God, are you gonna be in there *all night*?"

Amanda Spitterton-Watts. As if things could get any worse.

I check my reflection. My eyes look like I've mistaken cranberry juice for Visine, and my lips are swollen like wasp stings. I turn the tap marked *froid* and splash cold water on my face. A scratchy paper towel to dry, and then I hide my face with my hand as I escape to my room.

"Hello, *bulimic*," Amanda says. "I heard you, you know."

My back bristles. I turn, and her pale eyes widen in innocence over her beaky nose. Nicole is here, too, along with Rashmi's sister Sanjita, and...Isla Martin, the petite, red-haired junior. Isla lags behind. She's not a part of their crowd, just someone waiting in line for the bathroom.

"She was *totally* puking her dinner. Look at her face. She's *disgusting*."

Nicole sniggers. "Anna always looks disgusting."

My face burns, but I don't react because that's what Nicole wants. I can't, however, ignore her friend. "You didn't hear anything, Amanda. I'm not bulimic."

"Did you just hear La Moufette call me a *liar*?"

Sanjita raises a manicured hand. "I did."

I want to smack Rashmi's sister, but I turn around. Ignore them. Amanda clears her throat. "What's this about you and St. Clair?"

I freeze.

"Because while you were *puking*, I heard Rashmi talking to the dyke through her door."

I spin around. She did NOT just say that.

Her voice is like poisoned candy, sweet but deadly. "Something about the two of you hooking up, and now the *big freaky dyke* is crying her eyes out."

My jaw drops. I'm speechless.

"It's not like she ever stood a chance with him anyway," Nicole says.

"I'm not sure why *Anna* here thinks she stood a chance with him either. Dave was right. You *are* a slut. You weren't good enough for him, and you're *definitely* not good enough for St. Clair." Amanda flicks her hair. "He's *A-list*. You're *D*."

I cannot even begin to process that information. My voice shakes. "Don't you ever call Meredith that again."

"What, *dyke*? Meredith Chevalier is a big. Freaky. DYKE!"

I slam into her so hard that we burst through the bathroom door. Nicole is

shouting and Sanjita is laughing and Isla is begging us to stop. People run from their rooms, surrounding us, egging us on. And then someone tears me off of her.

“What the hell is going on here?” Nate says, holding me back. Something drips down my chin. I wipe it and discover it’s blood.

“Anna attacked Amanda!” Sanjita says.

Isla speaks up. “Amanda was goading her—”

“Amanda was defending herself!” Nicole says.

Amanda touches her nose and winces. “I think she broke it. Anna broke my nose.”

Did I do that? Tears sting my cheek. The blood must have been a scratch from one of Amanda’s fingernails.

“We’re all waiting, Mademoiselle Oliphant,” Nate says.

I shake my head as Amanda launches into a tirade of accusations. “Enough!” Nate says. She stops. We’ve never heard him raise his voice before. “Anna, for goodness’ sake, what happened?”

“Amanda called Mer—” I whisper.

He’s angry. “I can’t hear you.”

“Amanda called—” But I cut myself off when I see Meredith’s blonde curls hovering above everyone else in the crowd. I can’t say it. Not after everything else I’ve done to her today. I look down at my hands and gulp. “I’m sorry.”

Nate sighs. “All right, people.” He gestures to the crowd in the hall. “Show’s over, back to your rooms. You three.” Nate points at me and Amanda and Nicole. “Stay.”

No one moves.

“Get back to your rooms!”

Sanjita makes a hasty exit down the stairs and everyone else scrambles away. It’s just Nate and the three of us. And Isla. “Isla, go back to your room,” he says.

“But I was here.” Her soft voice grows braver. “I saw it happen.”

“Fine. All four of you, to the head’s office.”

“What about a doctor?” Nicole whines. “She totally broke Amanda’s nose.”

Nate leans over and inspects Amanda. “It’s not broken,” he says at last.

I exhale in relief.

“Are you sure?” Nicole asks. “I totally think she should go to a doctor.”

“Mademoiselle, please refrain from speech until we get to the head’s office.”

Nicole shuts her mouth.

I can’t believe it. I’ve never been sent to the principal’s office! My principal at Clairemont High didn’t even know my name. Amanda limps forward into the elevator, and I trudge behind with increasing dread. The moment Nate turns his

back to us, she straightens up, narrows her eyes, and mouths this: *You're going down. Bitch.*



Chapter forty

The head gave me detention.

ME. DETENTION.

Amanda was given one weekend, but I have detention after school for the next two weeks. “I’m disappointed in you, Anna,” the head said, massaging the tension from her ballerina neck. “What will your father say?”

My *dad*? Who cares about my dad? What will Mom say? She’ll kill me. She’ll be so angry that she’ll leave me here, imprisoned in France for ever. I’ll end up like one of those bums near the River Seine who smell like underarms and cabbage. I’ll have to boil my own shoes for food like Charlie Chaplin in *The Gold Rush*. My life is RUINED.

The detention was divided unfairly because I refused to tell her what Amanda said. Because I hate that word. Like being gay is something to be ashamed of. Like because Mer likes sports, it automatically makes her a lesbian. The insult doesn’t even make sense. If Meredith were gay, why would she be upset about Étienne and me?

I hate Amanda.

When the head asked Isla for the story, she defended me, which is the only reason I don’t have detention for the rest of the year. She also took my cue; she didn’t tell the head what Amanda said about Mer. I thanked her silently with my eyes.

We return to Résidence Lambert, and everyone is hanging around the lobby. Word of our fight has spread, and our classmates are looking for bruises. They shout questions at us, as if this is a press conference for shamed celebrities, but I ignore them and push my way past. Amanda is already holding court, spreading her side of the story.

Whatever. I’m too furious to deal with that crap now.

I pass Dave and Mike in the stairwell. Mike does that dumb thing jerks do where they purposely bump your shoulder with theirs to throw you off balance.

“What the hell is your problem?” I shout.

Dave and Mike exchange surprised, self-satisfied smirks.

I stomp into my room. Everyone hates me. Étienne ditched me for his girlfriend. AGAIN. Meredith hates me, and Rashmi and Josh certainly aren't pleased. Dave and Mike hate me. And Amanda and her friends, and now everyone else downstairs, too. If only I'd taken Rashmi's advice. If only I'd stayed in my room, Mer wouldn't have yelled at me. I wouldn't know Étienne chose Ellie. I wouldn't have attacked Amanda. And I wouldn't have detention for the next two weeks.

WHY IS ÉTIENNE CHOOSING ELLIE? WHY?

Étienne. Who has perfect lips and perfect kisses. Who tastes like honey. Who will never, ever, EVER give up his stupid girlfriend! I'm startled by a knock on my door. I'm worked into such a frenzy that I didn't hear the footsteps.

"Anna? Anna are you in there?"

My heart seizes. The voice is English.

"Are you all right? Amanda's downstairs, talking complete bollocks. She says you hit her?" He knocks again, louder. "Please, Anna. We need to talk."

I throw open the door. "*Talk?* Oh, you'd like to talk now?"

Étienne stares at me in shock. The whites of my eyes are still red, I have a two-inch scratch down my cheek, and my body is poised for attack. "*Anna?*"

"What, you didn't think I'd find out you went to Ellie's?"

He's thrown. "Wh-what?"

"Well?" I cross my arms. "Did you?"

He didn't expect me to know this. "Yes, but...but—"

"But *what?* You must think I'm a complete idiot, right? That I'm just some doormat who'll wait for you on the sidelines for ever? That you can keep running back to her every time things get difficult, and I'll just be okay with it?"

"It's not like that!"

"It's ALWAYS like that!"

Étienne opens his mouth but then snaps it shut. His expression flips between hurt and fury a thousand times. And then it hardens. And then he storms away.

"I THOUGHT YOU WANTED TO TALK!" I say.

I slam my door.



Chapter forty-one

Let's see. Yesterday, I: (1) made out with my best friend, even though I swore to myself I never would, (2) betrayed another friend by that same make-out session, (3) brawled with a girl who was already out to get me, (4) earned two weeks of detention, and (5) verbally attacked my best friend until he ran away.

Correction. Until he ran away *again*.

If there were a contest to see who could do more damage to herself in a single day, I'm pretty confident I would win. My mother spat fire when she found out about my fight with Amanda, and now I'm grounded for the entire summer. I can't even face my friends. I'm ashamed of what I've done to Meredith, and Rashmi and Josh have clearly taken her side, and St. Clair...he won't even look at me.

St. Clair. Once again, he's no longer Étienne, *my* Étienne.

That hurts worse than anything.

The whole morning is hideous. I skip breakfast and slip into English at the last possible second. My friends don't acknowledge my existence, but everyone else whispers and stares. I guess they're taking Amanda's side. I just hope they don't know about the St. Clair situation, which is unlikely considering how loudly I shouted at him in the hallway last night. I spend the class sneaking peeks at him. He's so exhausted that he can barely keep his eyes open, and I don't think he's showered.

But he's still beautiful. I hate that. And I hate myself for desperately wanting him to look at me, and I hate it even more when Amanda catches me staring, because then she smirks in a way that says, *See? I told you he was out of your league*.

And Mer. She doesn't have to turn her body away from me in her seat like St. Clair – although she does, they both do – because her waves of hostility crash into me, again and again, all period long. Calculus is an extension of this misery. When Professeur Babineaux hands back our homework, St. Clair passes the stack of papers behind his head without looking at me. "Thanks," I mumble. He

freezes, just for a moment, before settling back into a rigid state of ignorance to my being.

I don't try talking to him again.

French is predictably bad. Dave sits as far from me as possible, but the way he ignores me is strange and purposeful. Some of the freshmen pester me about it, but I don't know what Dave's problem is, and thinking about him only makes me feel gross inside. I tell the annoying classmates to shove it, and Madame Guillotine gets mad at me. Not because I told them to shove it, but because *I didn't say it in French*. What is wrong with this school?

At lunch, I'm back in the bathroom stall, just like my first day.

I don't have an appetite anyway.

In physics, I'm grateful we don't have a lab, because I can't bear the thought of St. Clair finding a new partner. Professeur Wakefield drones on about black holes, and halfway through his lecture, Amanda gives an exaggerated stretch and drops a folded piece of paper behind her head. It lands at my feet. I read it underneath my desk.

HEY SKUNK GIRL, MESS WITH ME AGAIN & I'LL GIVE YOU MORE THAN A SCRATCH. DAVE SAYS YER A SLUTBAG.

Wow. Can't say anyone's ever called me that before. But why is Dave talking to Amanda about me? That's the second time Amanda has said something like this. And I can't believe I'm being called a slut for just *kissing* someone! I ball up the note and chuck it at the back of her head. For better or worse, my aim is so abysmal that it hits the back of her chair. It bounces and catches in her long hair. She doesn't feel it. I feel the slightest bit better. The note is still stuck in her hair.

Still there.

Still th— Whoops. She shifts, and it falls to the ground, but Professeur Wakefield chooses this moment to walk down our aisle. Oh, no. What if he finds it and reads it aloud? I really, truly don't need another nickname at this school. Next to me, St. Clair is also eyeing the note. Professeur Wakefield is almost to our table when he casually slides out his boot and steps on it. He waits until the *professeur* strolls away before retrieving the paper. I hear him uncrumple it, and my face flushes. He glances at me for the first time all day. But he still doesn't say anything.

Josh is quiet in history, but at least he doesn't switch seats. Isla smiles at me, and incredibly, this singular moment of niceness helps. For about thirty seconds. Then Dave and Mike and Emily huddle together, and I hear my name thrown

around while they look back at me and laugh. This situation, whatever it is, is getting worse.

La Vie is a free period. Rashmi and St. Clair sketch for their art class while I pretend to bury my nose in homework. There's a tinkly laugh behind me. "Maybe if you weren't such a little slut, Skunk Girl, you might still have friends."

Amanda Spitterton-Watts, the biggest cliché in school. The pretty mean girl. Perfect skin, perfect hair. Icy smile, icy heart.

"What's your problem?" I ask.

"You."

"Excellent. Thank you."

She tosses her hair. "Don't you want to know what people are *saying* about you?" I don't answer, because I know she'll tell me anyway. She does. "Dave says you only *slept* with him to make St. Clair *jealous*."

"WHAT?"

Amanda laughs again and struts away. "Dave was right to *dump* your sorry ass."

I'm shocked. Like I'd ever sleep with Dave! And he told everyone that he broke up with me? How dare he? Is this what everyone thinks of me? Oh my God, is this what St. Clair thinks of me? *Does St. Clair think I slept with Dave?*

The rest of the week, I flip-flop between total despair and simmering rage. I have detention every afternoon, and every time I walk down the halls, I overhear my name spoken in hushed, gossipy tones. I look forward to the weekend, but it ends up being worse. I finished my homework in detention, so I have nothing to do. I spend my weekend at the movies, but I'm so distraught that I can't even enjoy it.

School has ruined cinema. It's official. There's nothing worth living for.

By Monday morning, my mood is so foul that I have the reckless courage to confront Rashmi in the breakfast line. "Why aren't you talking to me?"

"Excuse me?" she asks. "*You* aren't talking to *me*."

"What?"

"I never threw you from our table. You stopped coming." Her voice is tight.

"But you were mad at me! For...for what I did to Mer."

"All friends fight." She crosses her arms, and I realize she's quoting *me*. I said it last autumn after she fought with St. Clair about Ellie.

Ellie. I've ditched Rashmi, just like Ellie.

"I'm sorry." My heart falls. "I can't do anything right."

Rashmi's arms loosen, and she tugs one of her long braids. She's

uncomfortable, an unusual emotion for her. “Just promise me next time you attack Amanda, you’ll actually break something?”

“I didn’t mean to!”

“Relax.” She shoots me an uneasy glance. “I didn’t realize you were so sensitive.”

“You know, I still have another week of detention for that fight.”

“That was a harsh punishment. Why didn’t you just tell the head what Amanda said?”

I nearly drop my tray. “What? How do you know what she said?”

“I don’t.” Rashmi frowns. “But it must have been something seriously nasty to make you react like that.”

I avert my eyes, relieved. “Amanda just caught me at a bad time.” Which isn’t entirely untrue. I place my order with Monsieur Boutin – a large bowl of yogurt with granola and honey, my favourite – and turn back to her. “You guys...don’t believe what Amanda and Dave are saying, do you?”

“Dave is a jerk. If I thought you’d slept with him, we wouldn’t be talking right now.”

I’m gripping my tray so tightly that my knuckles are turning white. “So, um, St. Clair knows I never slept with him?”

“Anna. We *all* think Dave is a jerk.”

I’m quiet.

“You should talk to St. Clair,” she says.

“I don’t think he wants to talk to me.”

She pushes her tray away. “And I think he does.”

I eat breakfast alone again, because I still can’t face Mer. I’m five minutes late to English. Professeur Cole is sitting on top of her desk, sipping coffee. She narrows her eyes as I creep into my seat, but she doesn’t say anything. Her orange sundress sways as she swings her feet. “People. Wake up,” she says. “We’re talking about the technical aspects of translation again. Do I have to do all the work here? Who can tell me one of the problems translators face?”

Rashmi raises her hand. “Well, most words have different meanings.”

“Good,” Professeur Cole says. “More. Elaborate.”

St. Clair sits next to Rashmi, but he’s not listening. He scribbles something fiercely in the margins of his book. “Well,” Rashmi says. “It’s the translator’s job to determine which definition the author means. And not only that, but there could be other meanings in relation to the context.”

“So what you’re saying,” Professeur Cole says, “is that the translator has a lot of decisions to make. That there are multiple meanings to be found in any word, in any sentence. In any situation.”

“Exactly,” Rashmi says. And then she cuts her eyes at me.

Professeur Cole laughs. “And I’m sure none of us have ever mistaken something someone has said or done to mean something else, right? And we’re all speaking the same language. You can see how challenging this gets once things like...figures of speech are added. Some things just don’t translate between cultures.”

Misinterpretations swarm my mind. Toph. Rashmi. St. Clair?

“Or how about this?” Professeur Cole strolls over to the tall windows. “The translator, no matter how true he thinks he’s staying to the text, still brings his own life experiences and opinions to the decisions he makes. Maybe not *consciously*, but every time a choice is made between one meaning of a word or another, the translator determines which one to use based on what *he believes is correct*, based on his own personal history with the subject.”

Personal history. Like because St. Clair was always quick to run back to Ellie, I assumed he did it again. Is that it? And did he? I’m not sure any more. I’ve spent my entire senior year suffocating between lust and heartache, ecstasy and betrayal, and it’s only getting harder to see the truth. How many times can our emotions be tied to someone else’s – be pulled and stretched and twisted – before they snap? Before they can never be mended again?

Class ends, and I stumble in a fog towards calculus. I’m almost there when I hear it. So quiet, it could almost be someone clearing his throat. “Slut.”

I freeze.

No. Keep moving. I hug my books tighter and continue down the hall.

A little louder this time. “Slut.”

And, as I turn around, the worst part is that I don’t even know who it’ll be. So many people hate me right now. Today, it’s Mike. He sneers, but I stare past him at Dave. Dave scratches his head and looks away.

“How could you?” I ask him.

“How could *you*?” Mike says. “I always told Dave you weren’t worth it.”

“Yeah?” My eyes are still locked on Dave. “Well, at least I’m not a liar.”

“*You’re* the liar.” But Dave says it under his breath.

“What was that? What did you say?”

“You heard me.” Dave’s voice is louder, but he’s squirming, blinking at his friend. A wave of disgust rolls over me. Mike’s little lapdog. Of course. Why didn’t I see it before? My hands clench. One more word from him, one word...

“Slut,” he says.

Dave slams into the floor.

But it wasn’t my fist.



Chapter forty-two

“Arghhh!” St. Clair cradles his hand.

Mike lurches for St. Clair, and I jump between them. “No!”

Dave moans from the floor. Mike pushes me aside, and St. Clair throws him into the wall, his voice filled with rage. “Don’t touch her!”

Mike is shocked, but he bounces back. “You psycho!” And he lunges towards St. Clair just as Professeur Hansen steps between them, bracing himself for blows.

“Hey hey HEY! What is going ON out here?” Our history teacher glares at his favourite student. “Monsieur St. Clair. To the head’s office. NOW.” Dave and Mike simultaneously proclaim innocence, but Professeur Hansen cuts them off. “Shut it, the both of you, or follow Étienne.” They shut up. St. Clair doesn’t meet my eyes, he just storms away in the direction told.

“Are you okay?” Professeur Hansen asks me. “Did any of these morons hurt you?”

I’m in shock. “St. Clair was defending me. It – it wasn’t his fault.”

“We don’t defend with our fists at this school. You know that.” He gives me a wry look before departing downstairs to join St. Clair in the head’s office.

What just happened? I mean, I know what happened, but...*what just happened?* Does this mean St. Clair doesn’t hate me? I feel my first surge of hope, even though there’s a chance that he just hates Dave and Mike more. I don’t see him for the rest of the school day, but when I arrive in detention, he’s already sitting in the back row.

St. Clair looks weary. He must have been here all afternoon. The *professeur* in charge today isn’t here yet, so it’s just the two of us. I take my usual seat – it’s sad I have a usual seat – on the opposite side of the room. He stares at his hands. They’re smudged with charcoal, so I know he’s been drawing.

I clear my throat. “Thank you. For sticking up for me.”

No reply. Okay. I turn back to the chalkboard.

“Don’t thank me,” he says a minute later. “I ought to have punched Dave ages

ago.” His boots kick the marble floor.

I glance over again. “How much detention did you get?”

“Two weeks. One per asshole.”

I give a small snort of laughter, and his head jerks up. My own hope flashes at me, mirrored in his expression. But it disappears almost instantly. Which hurts.

“It’s not true, you know,” I say bitterly. “What Dave and Amanda are saying.”

St. Clair closes his eyes. He doesn’t speak for several seconds. When he opens them again, I can’t help but notice how relieved he looks. “I know.”

His delayed reaction irks me. “You sure about that?”

“Yes. I am.” He faces me for the first time in over a week. “But it’s still nice to hear it from your own lips, all right?”

“Right.” I turn away. “I can only imagine.”

“And what, exactly, is that supposed to mean?”

“Forget it.”

“No. Let’s not forget it. I’m sick and tired of forgetting it, Anna.”

“*You’re* tired of forgetting it?” My voice shakes. “I’ve had to do nothing BUT forget it. Do you think it’s easy sitting in my room every night, thinking about you and Ellie? Do you think *any* of this has been easy for me?”

His shoulders drop. “I’m sorry,” he whispers.

But I’m already crying. “You tell me I’m beautiful, and that you like my hair and you like my smile. You rest your leg against mine in darkened theatres, and then you act as if nothing happened when the lights go up. You *slept in my bed* for three nights straight, and then you just...blew me off for the next month. What am I supposed to do with that, St. Clair? You said on my birthday that you were afraid of being alone, but I’ve been here this whole time. *This whole time.*”

“Anna.” He rises and edges towards me. “I am so sorry that I’ve hurt you. I’ve made terrible decisions. And I realize it’s possible that I don’t deserve your forgiveness, because it’s taken me this long to get here. But I don’t understand why you’re not giving me the chance. You didn’t even let me explain myself last weekend. You just tore into me, expected the worst of me. But the *only truth I know* is what I feel when we’re together. I thought you trusted those feelings, too. I thought you trusted me, I thought you *knew* me—”

“But that’s just it!” I burst from my chair, and suddenly he’s right on top of me. “I *don’t* know you. I tell you everything, St. Clair. About my dad, about Bridgette and Toph, about Matt and Cherrie. I told you about being a *virgin.*” I look away, humiliated to say it aloud. “And what have you told me? Nothing! I know nothing about you. Not about your father, not about Ellie—”

“You know me better than *anyone.*” He’s furious. “And if you ever bothered to pay attention, you’d understand that things with my father are beyond shite

right now. And I can't believe you think so poorly of me that you'd assume I'd wait the entire year to kiss you, and then the moment it happened, I'd...I'd be *done* with you. OF COURSE I was with Ellie that night. I WAS BLOODY BREAKING UP WITH HER!"

The silence is deafening.

They broke up? Oh God. I can't breathe. I can't breathe. I can't—

He stares me directly in the eyes. "You say that I'm afraid of being alone, and it's true. I am. And I'm not proud of it. But you need to take a good look at yourself, Anna, because I am *not* the only one in this room who suffers this problem."

He's standing so close that I feel his chest rising and falling, quick and angry. My heart pounds against his. He swallows. I swallow. He leans in, hesitantly, and my body betrays me and mimics his in response. He closes his eyes. I close mine.

The door flies open, and we startle apart.

Josh enters detention and shrugs. "I ditched pre-calc."



Chapter forty-three

I can't look at him for the rest of detention. How can I be afraid of being alone, if it's the only thing I've been lately? It's not like I've had a boyfriend all year, like he's had a girlfriend. Though I did cling to the idea of Toph. Kept him as – the thought makes me wince – a reserve. And Dave. Well. He was there, and I was there, and he was willing, so I was, too. I've been worried that I was only with Dave because I was mad at St. Clair, but perhaps...perhaps I was tired of being alone.

But is that so wrong?

Does that mean it's not wrong that St. Clair didn't want to be alone either? He's afraid of change, afraid to make big decisions, but so am I. Matt said that if I'd just talked with Toph, I could have saved myself months of anguish. But I was too scared to mess with the relationship we *might* have, to deal with what we really *did* have. And if I'd bothered to listen to what Matt was trying to tell me, maybe St. Clair and I would have had this conversation ages ago.

But St. Clair should have said something! I'm not the only one at fault.

Wait. Isn't that what he was just saying? That we're both at fault? Rashmi said I was the one who walked away from her. And she was right. She and Josh actually helped me that day at the park, and I ditched them. And Mer.

Oh my God, Meredith.

What's wrong with me? Why haven't I tried apologizing again? Am I incapable of keeping a friend? I have to talk to her. Today. Now. Immediately. When Professeur Hansen releases us from detention, I tear for the door. But something stops me when I hit the hall. I pause beneath the frescoed nymphs and satyrs. I turn around.

St. Clair is waiting in the doorway, staring at me.

"I have to talk to Meredith." I bite my lip.

St. Clair nods slowly.

Josh appears behind him. He addresses me with a peculiar confidence. "She misses you. You'll be fine." He glances at St. Clair. "You'll both be fine."

He's said that to me before. "Yeah?" I ask.

Josh lifts an eyebrow and smiles. "Yeah."

It's not until I'm walking away that I wonder if "both" means Meredith and me, or St. Clair and me. I hope both means *both*. I return to Résidence Lambert, and I knock on her door after a quick trip to my own room. "Mer? Can we talk?"

She cracks open her door. "Hey." Her voice is gentle enough.

We stare at each other. I hold up two mugs. "*Chocolat chaud?*"

And she looks like she could cry at the sight. She lets me in, and I set down a cup on her desk. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Meredith."

"No, *I'm* sorry. I've been a jerk. I had no right to be angry with you."

"That's not true, I knew how you felt about him, and I kissed him anyway. It wasn't right. I should have told you that I liked him, too."

We sit on her bed. She twists a glittery star-shaped ring around her finger. "I knew how you felt about each other. *Everyone* knew how you felt about each other."

"But—"

"I didn't want to believe it. After so long, I still had this...stupid hope. I knew he and Ellie were having problems, so I thought maybe—" Meredith chokes up, and it takes a minute before she can continue.

I stir my hot chocolate. It's so thick it's nearly a sauce. She taught me well.

"We used to hang out all the time. St. Clair and me. But after you arrived, I hardly saw him. He'd sit next to you in class, at lunch, at the movies. *Everywhere*. And even though I was suspicious, I knew the first time I heard you call him Étienne – I knew you loved him. And I knew by his response – the way his eyes lit up *every time* you said it – I knew he loved you, too. And I ignored it, because I didn't want to believe it."

The struggle rises inside me again. "I don't know if he loves me. I don't know if he does, or if he ever did. It's all so messed up."

"It's obvious he wants more than friendship." Mer takes my shaking mug. "Haven't you seen him? He suffers every time he looks at you. I've never seen anyone so miserable in my life."

"That's not true." I'm remembering he said the situation with his father is really terrible right now. "He has other things on his mind, more important things."

"Why aren't the two of you together?"

The directness of her question throws me. "I don't know. Sometimes I think there are only so many opportunities...to get together with someone. And we've both screwed up so many times –" my voice grows quiet – "that we've missed our chance."

“Anna.” Mer pauses. “That is the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard.”

“But—”

“But what? You love him, and he loves you, and you live in the most romantic city in the world.”

I shake my head. “It’s not that simple.”

“Then let me put it another way. A gorgeous boy is in love with you, and you’re not even gonna *try* to make it work?”

I’ve missed Meredith. I return to my room feeling both solaced and saddened. If St. Clair and I hadn’t fought in detention today, would I have tried to apologize again? Probably not. School would have ended, we’d have gone our separate ways, and our friendship would have been severed for ever.

Oh, no. The horrible truth knocks me over.

How could I have missed it? It’s the same thing. The exact. Same. Thing.

Bridge couldn’t help it. The attraction was there, and I *wasn’t* there, and they got together, and *she couldn’t help it*. And I’ve blamed her this entire time. Made her feel guilty for something beyond her control. I haven’t even tried to listen to her; I haven’t answered a single phone call or replied to a single email. And she kept trying anyway. I remember what Matt and Rashmi said *again*. I really do abandon my friends.

I yank out my luggage and unzip the front pocket. It’s still there. A little beat-up, but a small package wrapped in red-and-white-striped paper. The toy bridge. And then I compose the most difficult letter I’ve ever written. I hope she forgives me.



Chapter forty-four

The rest of the week is quiet. I mail Bridge's package, I rejoin my friends at our table, and I finish my detention. St. Clair and I still haven't talked. Well, we've spoken a bit, but not about anything important. Mostly we sit beside each other and fidget, which is ridiculous, because isn't that what this is all about? That we won't talk?

But breaking old habits isn't easy.

We sit a row apart in detention. I feel him watching me the entire hour, the entire week. I watch him, too. But we don't walk together to the dorm; he packs his things slowly to allow me time to leave first. I think we've arrived at the same conclusion. Even if we managed to begin *something*, there's still no hope for us. School is almost over. Next year, I'll attend San Francisco State University for film theory and criticism, but he still won't tell me where he's going. I flat-out asked him after detention on Friday, and he stammered something about not wanting to talk about it.

At least I'm not the only one who finds change difficult.

On Saturday, the Mom and Pop Basset Hound Theatre screens my favourite Sofia Coppola movie, *Lost in Translation*. I greet the dignified man and Pouce, and slide into my usual seat. It's the first time I've watched this film since moving here. The similarities between the story and my life are not lost on me.

It's about two Americans, a middle-aged man and a young woman, who are alone in Tokyo. They're struggling to understand their foreign surroundings, but they're also struggling to understand their romantic relationships, which appear to be falling apart. And then they meet, and they have a new struggle – their growing attraction to each other, when they both know that such a relationship is impossible.

It's about isolation and loneliness, but it's also about friendship. Being exactly what the other person needs. At one point, the girl asks the man, "Does it get easier?" His first reply is "no", and then "yes", and then "it gets easier". And then he tells her, "The more you know who you are, and what you want, the less

you let things upset you.”

And I realize...it's okay. It's okay if St. Clair and I never become more than friends. His friendship alone has strengthened me in a way that no one else's ever has. He swept me from my room and showed me independence. In other words, he was exactly what I needed. I won't forget it. And I certainly don't want to lose it.

When the film ends, I catch my reflection in the theatre's bathroom. My stripe hasn't been retouched since my mother bleached it at Christmas. Another thing I need to learn how to do myself. Another thing I *want* to learn how to do myself. I pop into the Monoprix next door – which is kind of like a mini SuperTarget – to buy hair bleach, and I'm walking back out when I notice someone familiar across the boulevard.

I don't believe it. St. Clair.

His hands are in his pockets, and he's looking around as if waiting for someone. My heart swells. He knows Sofia is my favourite director. He knew I'd come here, and he's waiting for me to appear. It's finally time to talk. I soar over the crosswalk to his side of the street. I feel happier than I have in ages. And I'm just about to call his name, when I realize he's no longer alone.

He's been joined by an older gentleman. The man is handsome and stands in a way that's strangely familiar. St. Clair is speaking in French. I can't hear him, but his mouth moves differently in French. His gestures and his body language change, they become more fluid. A group of businessmen passes by and temporarily bars him from view, because St. Clair is shorter than them.

Wait a second. The man is short, too.

I startle as I realize I'm staring at St. Clair's father. I look closer. He's immaculately dressed, very Parisian. Their hair is the same colour, although his father's is streaked with silver and is shorter, tidier. And they have that same air of confidence, although St. Clair looks unsettled right now.

I feel shamed. I did it again. Everything is not always about me. I duck behind a *métro* sign, but I've unwittingly positioned myself in hearing distance. The guilty feeling creeps back in. I should walk away, but...it's St. Clair's biggest mystery. Right here.

“Why haven't you registered?” his father says. “It was due three weeks ago. You're making it difficult for me to convince them to take you.”

“I don't want to stay here,” St. Clair says. “I want to go back to California.”

“You hate California.”

“I want to go to Berkeley!”

“You don't know what you want! You're just like her. Lazy and self-centred. You don't know how to make decisions. You need someone to make them for

you, and I say you stay in France.”

“I’m not staying in bloody France, all right?” St. Clair bursts out in English. “I’m not staying here with you! Breathing down my neck all the time!”

And that’s when it hits me. I’ve been following their entire conversation. In French.

Oh. Holy. Crap.

“How dare you talk to me like this?” His father is enraged. “And in public! You need a smack in the head—”

St. Clair switches back to French. “I’d like to see you try. Here, in front of everyone.” He points at his cheek. “Why don’t you, *Father?*”

“Why, you—”

“Monsieur St. Clair!” A friendly woman in a low-cut dress calls from across the boulevard, and St. Clair and his father both turn in surprise.

Monsieur St. Clair. She’s talking to his dad. That’s so weird.

She strolls over and kisses his father on both cheeks. His father returns *les bises*, smiling graciously. His whole manner is transformed as he introduces her to his son. She looks surprised at the mention of a son, and St. Clair – Étienne – scowls. His father and the woman chat, and St. Clair is forgotten. He crosses his arms. Uncrosses them. Kicks his boots. Puts his hands in his pockets, takes them out.

A lump rises in my throat.

His father keeps flirting with the woman. She touches his shoulder and leans into him. He flashes a brilliant grin, a dazzling grin – St. Clair’s grin – and it’s odd to see it on another person’s face. And that’s when I realize what Mer and Josh said is true. His father *is* charming. He has that natural charisma, just like his son. The woman continues to flirt, and St. Clair trudges away. They don’t notice. Is he crying? I lean forward for a better look and find him staring right at me.

Oh, no. Oh no oh no oh NO.

He stops. “Anna?”

“Um. Hi.” My face is on fire. I want to rewind this reel, shut it off, destroy it.

His expression runs from confusion to anger. “Were you listening to that?”

“I’m sorry—”

“I can’t believe you were eavesdropping!”

“It was an accident. I was passing by, and...you were there. And I’ve heard so much about your father, and I was curious. I’m sorry.”

“Well,” he says, “I hope what you saw met your grandest expectations.” He stalks past me, but I grab his arm.

“Wait! I don’t even speak French, remember?”

“Do you promise,” he says slowly, “that you didn’t understand a single word of our conversation?”

I let go of him. “No. I heard you. I heard the whole thing.”

St. Clair doesn’t move. He glares at the sidewalk, but he’s not mad. He’s embarrassed.

“Hey.” I touch his hand. “It’s okay.”

“Anna, there’s nothing ‘okay’ about *that*.” He jerks his head towards his father, who is still flirting with the woman. Who still hasn’t noticed his son has disappeared.

“No,” I say, thinking quickly. “But you once told me no one chooses their family. It’s true for you too, you know.”

He stares at me so hard that I’m afraid I’ll stop breathing. I gather my courage and lace my arm through his. I lead him away. We walk for a block, and I ease him onto a bench beside a café with pale green shutters. A young boy, sitting inside, tugs at the curtains and watches us. “Tell me about your father.”

He stiffens.

“Tell me about your father,” I repeat.

“I hate him.” His voice is quiet. “I hate him with every fibre of my being. I hate what he’s done to my mother and what he’s done to me. I hate that every time we meet, he’s with a different woman, and I hate that they all think he’s this wonderful, charming bloke, when really he’s a vicious bastard who’d sooner humiliate me than discuss my education rationally.”

“He’s chosen your college for you. And that’s why you didn’t want to talk about it.”

“He doesn’t want me to be near her. He wants to keep us apart, because when we’re together we’re stronger than he is.”

I reach over and squeeze his hand. “St. Clair, you’re stronger than him *now*.”

“You don’t understand.” He pulls his hand away from mine. “My mum and I depend on him. For everything! He has all of the money, and if we upset him, Mum is on the street.”

I’m confused. “But what about her art?”

He snorts. “There’s no money in that. And what money there *was*, my father has control over.”

I’m silent for a moment. I’ve blamed so many of our problems on his unwillingness to talk, but that wasn’t fair. Not when the truth is so awful. Not when his father has been bullying him his whole life. “You have to stand up to him,” I say.

“It’s easy for you to say—”

“No, it’s *not* easy for me to say! It’s not easy for me to see you like this. But

you can't let him win. You have to be smarter than him, you have to beat him at his own game."

"His own game?" He gives a disgusted laugh. "No, thank you. I'd rather not play by his rules."

My mind is working in overdrive. "Listen to me, the second that woman showed up, his personality completely changed—"

"Oh, you noticed, did you?"

"Shut up and listen, St. Clair. This is what you're gonna do. You're going back there *right now*, and if she's still there, you're telling her how happy you are that he's sending you to Berkeley."

He tries to interrupt, but I push forward. "And then you're going to his art gallery, and you're telling everyone who works there how *happy* you are that he's sending you to Berkeley. Then you're calling your grandparents, and you're telling them how *happy* you are that he's sending you to Berkeley. And then you're telling his neighbours, his grocer, the man who sells him cigarettes, EVERYONE in his life how *happy* you are that he's *sending you to Berkeley.*"

He's biting his thumbnail.

"And he'll be pissed as hell," I say, "and I wouldn't trade places with you for a second. But he's clearly a man who believes in keeping up appearances. So what's he gonna do? He'll send you to Berkeley to save face."

St. Clair pauses. "It's mad, but...it's so mad it might work."

"You don't always have to solve your problems alone, you know. This is why people talk to their friends." I smile and widen my eyes for emphasis.

He shakes his head, trying to speak.

"GO," I say. "Quick, while she's still there!"

St. Clair hesitates again, and I push him up. "Go. Go go go!"

He rubs the back of his neck. "Thank you."

"Go."

He does.



Chapter forty-five

I return to Résidence Lambert. I'm anxious to know what's happening, but St. Clair has to deal with his father on his own. He has to stand up for himself. The glass banana bead on my dresser snags my attention, and I cradle it in my hand. He's given me so many gifts this year – the bead, the left-handed notebook, the Canadian flag. It feels good to have finally given him something back. I hope my idea works.

I decide to pull out my homework. I'm flipping through my papers when I discover the assignment for English. Our last unit, poetry. The Neruda book. It sits on the shelf above my desk in the same place it's been since Thanksgiving. Because it was a school book, right? Just another gift?

Wrong. So very, very wrong.

I mean, it *is* a school book, but it's also love poetry. Really sexy love poetry. Why would he have given this to me if it didn't mean anything? He could have given me the Banana Yoshimoto book. Or one of our translation textbooks.

But he bought me love poetry.

I flip back to the front, and the stamp stares at me. SHAKESPEARE AND COMPANY, KILOMETRE ZERO PARIS. And I'm back on the star, that first night. Falling in love with him. And I'm back on the star, over Thanksgiving break. Falling in love with him. And I'm back in my room, staring at this ill-timed book – Why didn't he just *tell* me? Why didn't I open this when he asked me about it last Christmas? – when I'm struck by a need to return to Point Zéro.

I only have a few weeks left in Paris, and I still haven't been inside of Notre-Dame. What am I doing in the dormitory on a Saturday afternoon? I yank on my shoes, run out of the building, and race down the boulevards at the speed of sound. I can't get there fast enough. I have to be there. Now. I can't explain it.

The eyes of the city are fastened to me as I shoot across the Seine and onto the Île de la Cité, but this time, I don't care. The cathedral is as breathtaking as ever. A crowd of tourists is gathered around Point Zéro, and I admire the star as I fly by, but I don't wait for a turn, I just keep pushing pushing pushing forward until

I'm inside.

Once again, Paris leaves me awed.

The high-vaulted ceiling, the intricate stained glass, the gold-and-marble statuary, the delicately carved woodwork...Notre-Dame is mesmerizing. Organ music and the murmurs of many languages surround me. The warm scent of burning candles fills the air. And I've never seen anything lovelier than the jewel-coloured light shining through the rose windows.

An enthusiastic tour guide passes behind me, waving his hands about. "Just imagine! In the early nineteenth century, this cathedral was in such a state of disrepair that the city considered tearing it down. Luckily for us, Victor Hugo heard about the plans to destroy it and wrote *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* to raise awareness of its glorious history. And, by golly, did it work! Parisians campaigned to save it, and the building was repaired and polished to the pristine state you find today."

I smile as I leave them, wondering what building my dad would try to save with his writing. Probably a baseball stadium. Or a Burger King. I examine the high altar and the statues of the Virgin Mary. It's peaceful, but I'm restless. I examine my visitor's guide and my attention is snagged by the words *Galerie des Chimères*.

The chimera. The gargoyles. Of course!

I need to go up, I need to see the city while I still can. The entrance to the towers – to the top of Notre-Dame – is to the left of the main doors. While I'm paying to get in, I swear I hear someone call my name. I scan the courtyard but don't see anyone familiar.

So I climb the stairs.

The first landing leads to a gift shop, so I keep going up. And up. And up. *Oof*. There sure are a lot of stairs. Holy crap, will these things ever end?

Seriously?

MORE STAIRS?

This is ridiculous. I'm never buying a house with stairs. I won't even have steps to my front door, just a gradual incline. With each step, I loathe the gargoyles more and more, until I reach the exit and—

I'm really high up. I follow the tight walkway that leads from the North Tower to the South. There's my neighbourhood! And the Panthéon! Its massive dome is impressive, even from here, but the tourists around me are snapping pictures of the gargoyles.

No. Not gargoyles. Chimera.

St. Clair once told me that what most people think of when they hear the word "gargoyle" is really a chimera. And gargoyles are these skinny things that stick

straight out and are used as rain gutters. I don't remember the purpose of the chimeras. Were they protecting the cathedral? A warning to demons? If he were here, he'd tell me the story again. I consider calling him, but he's probably still busy with his father. He doesn't need me bothering him with vocabulary questions.

The Galerie des Chimères is pretty cool. The statues are half man and half beast, grotesque, fantastic creatures with beaks and wings and tails. My favourite holds his head in his hands and sticks out his tongue, contemplating the city. Or maybe he's just frustrated. Or sad. I check out the belfry. And it's...a big bell.

What am I doing here?

A guard waits beside another set of stairs. I take a deep breath. "*Bonne soirée,*" I say. He smiles and lets me pass. I squeeze inside. It's a tight corkscrew, and the staircase grows narrower and narrower as I climb. The stone walls are cold. For the first time here, I'm paranoid about falling. I'm glad I'm alone. If someone came down, someone even a little bigger than me, I don't know how we'd pass each other. My heart beats faster, my ears prick for footsteps, and I'm worried this was a mistake when—

I'm there. I'm on top of Paris.

Like the chimera gallery, there's a protective wire structure to keep people from falling or jumping. And I'm so high up, that I'm grateful for it. I'm the only one here, so I sit on one of the quiet stone corners and watch the city.

I'm leaving soon. I wonder what Dad would say if he could see me, melancholy about saying goodbye when I fought so hard to stay in Atlanta. He meant well. Observing the steady boats gliding down the Seine and the proud Eiffel Tower stretched above the Champ de Mars, I know this now. A noise on the stairwell startles me – a screech, followed by pounding feet. Someone is running up the stairs. And I'm alone.

Relax, Anna. I'm sure it's just a tourist.

A running tourist?

I prepare for the onslaught, and it doesn't take long. A man bursts onto the viewing platform. He's wearing teeny tiny running shorts and athletic sneakers. Did he just climb those stairs *for fun*? He doesn't acknowledge me, just stretches, jogs in place for thirty seconds, and then bursts back down the stairs.

That was weird.

I'm settling back down when I hear another yell. I bolt up. Why would the running man be screaming? There's someone else there, terrified by the runner, afraid of falling. I listen for more footsteps but don't hear anything. Whoever it is has stopped. I think about St. Clair, about how frightened he is of heights. This person may be trapped. With growing dread, I realize perhaps someone *did* fall.

I peek down the stairs. “Hello? *Bonsoir? Ça va?*” No response. I climb down a few spirals, wondering why it’s *me* doing this, not the guard. “Is someone there? Do you need help?”

There’s a strange shifting, and I continue down cautiously. “Hello?” They must not speak English. I hear them panting. They’re just below me, just around this corner—

I scream. He screams.



Chapter forty-six

“What the hell are you doing here? Jeez, St. Clair! You scared the crap out of me.”

He’s crouched down, gripping the stairs, and looking more freaked out than I’ve ever seen him before. “Then why did you come down?” he snaps.

“I was trying to *help*. I heard a scream. I thought maybe someone was hurt.”

His pale skin is beet red. “No. I’m not hurt.”

“What are you doing here?” I ask again, but he’s silent. “At least let me help you.”

He stands, and his legs wobble like a baby goat. “I’m fine.”

“You’re not fine. You are clearly not fine. Give me your hand.”

St. Clair resists, but I grab it and start herding him down. “Wait.” He glances up and swallows. “I want to see the top.”

I give him a look that I hope is incredulous. “Sure you do.”

“No,” he says with a new determination. “I want to see the top.”

“Fine, go.” I release his hand.

He just stands there. I take his hand again. “Oh, come on.” Our climb is painful and slow. I’m thankful no one is behind us. We don’t speak, but his grip is crushing my fingers. “Almost there. You’re doing good, so good.”

“Piss. Off.”

I should push him back down.

At last we reach the top. I let go of his hand, and he collapses to the ground. I give him a few minutes. “You okay?”

“Yes,” he says miserably.

And I’m not sure what to do. I’m stuck on a tiny roof in the centre of Paris with my best friend, who is scared of heights and also apparently angry with me. And I have no idea why he’s even here in the first place. I take a seat, lock my eyes on the riverboats, and ask a third time. “What are you doing here?”

He takes a deep breath. “I came for you.”

“And how on EARTH did you know I was up here?”

“I saw you.” He pauses. “I came to make another wish, and I was standing on Point Zéro when I saw you enter the tower. I called your name, and you looked around, but you didn’t see me.”

“So you decided to just...come up?” I’m doubtful, despite the evidence in front of me. It must have taken superhuman strength for him to make it past the first flight of stairs alone.

“I had to. I couldn’t wait for you to come down, I couldn’t wait any longer. I had to see you now. I have to know—”

He breaks off, and my pulse races. What what what?

“Why did you lie to me?”

The question startles me. Not what I was expecting. Nor hoping. He’s still on the ground, but he stares up at me. His brown eyes are huge and heartbroken. I’m confused. “I’m sorry, I don’t know what—”

“November. At the *crêperie*. I asked you if we’d talked about anything strange that night I was drunk in your room. If I had said anything about our relationship, or my relationship with Ellie. And you said no.”

Oh my God. “How did you know?”

“Josh told me.”

“When?”

“November.”

I’m stunned. “I...I...” My throat is dry. “If you’d seen the look on your face that day. In the restaurant. How could I possibly tell you? With your mother—”

“But if you had, I wouldn’t have wasted all of these months. I thought you were turning me down. I thought you weren’t interested.”

“But you were drunk! You had a girlfriend! What was I supposed to do? God, St. Clair, I didn’t even know if you meant it.”

“Of course I meant it.” He stands, and his legs falter.

“Careful!”

Step. Step. Step. He toddles towards me, and I reach for his hand to guide him. We’re so close to the edge. He sits next to me and grips my hand harder. “I meant it, Anna. I *mean* it.”

“I don’t under—”

He’s exasperated. “I’m saying I’m in love with you! I’ve been in love with you this whole bleeding year!”

My mind spins. “But Ellie—”

“I cheated on her every day. In my mind, I thought of you in ways I shouldn’t have, again and again. She was nothing compared to you. I’ve never felt this way about *anybody* before—”

“But—”

“The first day of school.” He scoots closer. “We weren’t physics partners by accident. I saw Professeur Wakefield assigning lab partners based on where people were sitting, so I leaned forward to borrow a pencil from you at just the right moment so he’d think we were next to each other. Anna, I wanted to be your partner *the first day.*”

“But...” I can’t think straight.

“I bought you love poetry! ‘I love you as certain dark things are loved, secretly, between the shadow and the soul.’”

I blink at him.

“Neruda. I starred the passage. God,” he moans. “Why didn’t you open it?”

“Because you said it was for *school.*”

“I said you were beautiful. I slept in your bed!”

“You never made a move! You had a girlfriend!”

“No matter what a terrible boyfriend I was, I wouldn’t actually cheat on her. But I thought you’d know. With me being there, I thought you’d know.”

We’re going in circles. “How could I know if you never said anything?”

“How could I know if *you* never said anything?”

“You had Ellie!”

“You had Toph! And Dave!”

I’m speechless. I blink at the rooftops of Paris.

He touches my cheek, pulling my gaze back to him. I suck in my breath.

“Anna. I’m sorry for what happened in Luxembourg Gardens. Not because of the kiss – I’ve never had a kiss like that in my life – but because I didn’t tell you why I was running away. I chased after Meredith because of *you.*”

Touch me again. *Please, touch me again.*

“All I could think about was what that bastard did to you last Christmas. Toph never tried to explain or apologize. How could I do that to Mer? And I ought to have called you before I went to Ellie’s, but I was so anxious to just *end it*, once and for all, that I wasn’t thinking straight.”

I reach for him. “St. Clair—”

He pulls back. “And that. Why don’t you call me Étienne any more?”

“But...no one else calls you that. It was weird. Right?”

“No. It wasn’t.” His expression saddens. “And every time you say ‘St. Clair’, it’s like you’re rejecting me again.”

“I have *never* rejected you.”

“But you have. And for Dave.” His tone is venomous.

“And you rejected me for Ellie *on my birthday*. I don’t understand. If you liked me so much, why didn’t you break up with her?”

He gazes at the river. “I’ve been confused. I’ve been so stupid.”

“Yes. You have.”

“I deserve that.”

“Yes. You do.” I pause. “But I’ve been stupid, too. You were right. About... the alone thing.”

We sit in silence. “I’ve been thinking lately,” he says after a while. “About my mum and dad. How she gives in to him. How she won’t leave him. And as much as I love her, I hate her for it. I don’t understand why she won’t stand up for herself, why she won’t go for what *she* wants. But I’ve been doing the same thing. I’m just like her.”

I shake my head. “You aren’t like your mom.”

“I am. But I don’t want to be like that any more, I want what *I* want.” He turns to me again, his face anxious. “I told my father’s friends that I’m studying at Berkeley next year. It worked. He’s really, *really* angry with me, but it worked. You told me to go for his pride. You were right.”

“So.” I’m cautious, hardly daring to believe. “You’re moving to California?”

“I have to.”

“Right.” I swallow hard. “Because of your mom.”

“Because of *you*. I’ll only be a twenty-minute train ride from your school, and I’ll make the commute to see you every night. I’d take a commute ten times that just to be with you every night.”

His words are too perfect. It must be a misunderstanding, surely I’m misunderstanding—

“You’re the most incredible girl I’ve ever known. You’re gorgeous and smart, and you make me laugh like no one else can. And I can *talk* to you. And I know after all this I don’t deserve you, but what I’m trying to say is that I love you, Anna. Very much.”

I’m holding my breath. I can’t talk, but my eyes are filling with tears.

He takes it the wrong way. “Oh God. And I’ve mucked things up again, haven’t I? I didn’t mean to attack you like this. I mean I did but...all right.” His voice cracks. “I’ll leave. Or you can go down first, and then I’ll come down, and I promise I’ll never bother you again—”

He starts to stand, but I grab his arm. “No!”

His body freezes. “I’m so sorry,” he says. “I never meant to hurt you.”

I trail my fingers across his cheek. He stays perfectly still for me. “Please stop apologizing, Étienne.”

“Say my name again,” he whispers.

I close my eyes and lean forward. “*Étienne*.”

He takes my hands into his. Those perfect hands, that fit mine just so. “Anna?”

Our foreheads touch. “Yes?”

“Will you please tell me you love me? I’m dying here.”

And then we’re laughing. And then I’m in his arms, and we’re kissing, at first quickly – to make up for lost time – and then slowly, because we have all the time in the world. And his lips are soft and honey sweet, and the careful, passionate way he moves them against my own says that he savours the way I taste, too.

And in between kisses, I tell him I love him.

Again and again and again.



Chapter forty-seven

Rashmi clears her throat and glares at us.

“Seriously,” Josh says. “We were never like that, were we?”

Mer groans and chucks her pen at him. Josh and Rashmi have broken up. In a way, it’s strange they waited this long. It seemed inevitable, but then again, so did other things. And those things took a while, too.

They’ve split as amicably as possible. It didn’t make sense for them to keep this up long distance. They both seem relieved. Rashmi’s excited about Brown, and Josh...well, he still has to come to terms with the fact that we’re leaving and he’s staying. And he *is* staying. He squeaked by again, barely. He’s losing himself in his drawings, and his hands are in a constant state of cramps. Truthfully, I’m worried. I know how it feels to be alone. But Josh is an attractive, funny guy. He’ll make new friends.

We’re studying for exams in my room. It’s dusk, and a warm breeze blows my curtains. Summer is almost here. I’ll see Bridge again soon. I received a new email from her. Things are shaky, but we’re trying. I’ll take that.

Étienne and I are sitting side by side, feet intertwined. His fingers trace swirly patterns on my arm. I burrow into him, inhaling that scent of shampoo and shaving cream and that something else that’s just *him* that I can never get enough of. He kisses my stripe. I tilt my head, and his mouth moves onto mine. I run a hand through his perfect, messy hair.

I LOVE his hair, and now I get to touch it whenever I want.

And he doesn’t even get irritated. Most of the time.

Meredith has been very accepting of our relationship. Of course, it doesn’t hurt that she’s attending college in Rome. “Imagine,” she said, after registering, “a whole city of gorgeous Italian guys. They can say anything to me, and it’ll be sexy.”

“You’ll be so easy,” Rashmi said. “*Would you like-ah to order-ah the spa-ghe-tti? ‘Oh, do me, Marco!’*”

“I wonder if Marco will like football?” Mer asked dreamily.

As for us, Étienne was right. Our schools are only a twenty-minute transit ride away. He'll stay with me on the weekends, and we'll visit each other as often as possible during the week. We'll be together. We both got our Point Zéro wishes – each other. He said he wished for me every time. He was wishing for me when I entered the tower.

“Mmm,” I say. He’s kissing my neck.

“That’s it,” Rashmi says. “I’m outta here. Enjoy your hormones.”

Josh and Mer follow her exit, and we’re alone. Just the way I like it.

“Ha!” Étienne says. “Just the way I like it.”

He pulls me onto his lap, and I wrap my legs around his waist. His lips are velvet soft, and we kiss until the street lamps flicker on outside. Until the opera singer begins her evening routine. “I’m going to miss her,” I say.

“I’ll sing to you.” He tucks my stripe behind my ear. “Or I’ll take you to the opera. Or I’ll fly you back here to visit. Whatever you want. Anything you want.”

I lace my fingers through his. “I want to stay right here, in this moment.”

“Isn’t that the name of the latest James Ashley bestseller? *In This Moment*?”

“Careful. Someday you’ll meet him, and he won’t be nearly as amusing in person.”

Étienne grins. “Oh, so he’ll only be mildly amusing? I suppose I can handle *mildly* amusing.”

“I’m serious! You have to promise me right now, this instant, that you won’t leave me once you meet him. Most people would run.”

“I’m not most people.”

I smile. “I know. But you still have to promise.”

His eyes lock on mine. “Anna, I promise that I will never leave you.”

My heart pounds in response. And Étienne knows it, because he takes my hand and holds it against his chest, to show me how hard his heart is pounding, too. “And now for yours,” he says.

I’m still dazed. “My what?”

He laughs. “Promise you won’t flee once I introduce you to my father. Or, worse, leave me for him.”

I pause. “Do you think he’ll object to me?”

“Oh, I’m sure he will.”

Okay. Not the answer I was looking for.

Étienne sees my alarm. “Anna. You know my father dislikes anything that makes me happy. And you make me happier than anyone ever has.” He smiles.

“Oh, yes. He’ll hate you.”

“So that’s...a good thing?”

“I don’t care what he thinks. Only what you think.” He holds me tighter. “Like if you think I need to stop biting my nails.”

“You’ve worn your pinkies to nubs,” I say cheerfully.

“Or if I need to start ironing my bedspread.”

“I DO NOT IRON MY BEDSPREAD.”

“You do. And I love it.” I blush, and Étienne kisses my warm cheeks. “You know, my mum likes you.”

“She does?”

“You’re the only thing I’ve talked about all year. She’s ecstatic we’re together.”

I’m smiling inside and out. “I can’t wait to meet her.”

He smiles back, but then his expression grows worried. “So will your father object to me? Because I’m not American? I mean, not fully American? He’s not one of those mad, patriotic nuts, is he?”

“No. He’ll love you, *because* you make me happy. He’s not always so bad.”

Étienne raises his dark eyebrows.

“I know! But I said *not always*. He still is the majority of the time. It’s just... he means well. He thought he was doing good, sending me here.”

“And was it? Good?”

“Look at you, fishing for compliments.”

“I wouldn’t object to a compliment.”

I play with a strand of his hair. “I like how you pronounce ‘banana’. *Ba-nah-na*. And sometimes you trill your *r*’s. I love that.”

“Brilliant,” he whispers in my ear. “Because I’ve spent loads of time practising.”

My room is dark, and Étienne wraps his arms back around me. We listen to the opera singer in a peaceful silence. I’m surprised by how much I’ll miss France. Atlanta was home for almost eighteen years, and though I’ve only known Paris for the last nine months, it’s changed me. I have a new city to learn next year, but I’m not scared.

Because I was right. For the two of us, home isn’t a place. It’s a person.

And we’re finally home.

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Deleted scenes

Get a sneak peek at these deleted scenes from *Anna and the French Kiss*

The following material was deleted from Anna and the French Kiss. Readers will no doubt recognize many of the passages, because they were readjusted to fit the current, published book. You maybe – perhaps – might even find a few of these descriptions repurposed in Isla and the Happily Ever After. My editor – the brilliant Julie Strauss-Gabel – and I cut this material for two reasons:

(1) PACING. The novel, which ended up around 80,000 words, was originally 100,000. We'd already removed 15,000+ words that weren't helpful to the story, but the pacing in the first half was still dragging. This was the expendable scene.

(2) CLICHÉ. The original Chapter Twelve, though fun, felt too familiar. There are a number of contemporary YA novels that feature a protagonist who is terrible at sports. It's probably because so many AUTHORS are terrible at sports. (Because, you know, we were too busy reading to exercise. Or maybe we read because we were terrible at exercise. It's all very chicken or egg.) I am certainly one of these authors. Throughout my entire schooling, I was picked honest-to-goodness last in gym class. Nevertheless . . . I still enjoy this scene. I hope you will, too.

Stephanie Perkins

We'll pick up toward the end of *Chapter ten*.

Rashmi opens her mouth to protest just as the teacher arrives. Every week it's someone new – sometimes administration, sometimes a *professeur*. This time, I'm surprised to see Nate. I guess all staff members are forced to take a turn. He rubs his shaved head and smiles pleasantly at our class.

“How do you know what I'm doing tonight?” St. Clair repeats.

“Pleeeeeease,” I say to her.

She gives a resigned grimace. “Fine. But I’m picking the next movie.”

Yippee!

Nate clears his throat, and Rashmi and St. Clair look up. That’s one thing I like about my new friends. They respect the teachers. It drives me nuts to see students talk back or ignore them, because my mom is a teacher. I wouldn’t want anyone being rude to her. “All right, people, enough. Amanda, *enough*.” In his quiet but firm way, Nate shuts her up. She flips her hair and sighs, with a glance toward St. Clair.

He ignores her. Ha.

“I have a surprise for you,” Nate says. “Since the weather is turning, and there aren’t many warm days left, I’ve arranged for this class to have a spot in the park for the rest of the week.”

We’re sitting in a park for class credit. I love Paris.

“We’re going to have a football tournament,” Nate says.

NOOOOOOOOOO. I hate Paris!

“Soccer,” he clarifies, as if that makes it better. But, for some reason, my classmates are excited. Steve Carver pumps a fist in the air. What a meathead. Rashmi and I groan in a rare moment of camaraderie.

“Mer’ll be gutted when she hears she’s missing this,” St. Clair says.

“Since we don’t have time for you to change and get down there today, I thought we’d go over the rules...” Nate says.

One less day of soccer!

“...and pick teams.” Oh hell no. Nate picks captains – Steve Carver and a girl named Nicole, Amanda’s best friend – and the selecting begins. Amanda is chosen first. Of course. And then Steve’s best friend. Of course. Rashmi elbows me. “Bet you five euros I’m picked last.”

“I’ll take that bet. Because it’s totally me, those people hate me.”

“St. Clair!” Steve’s voice startles me. Everyone turns to look at St. Clair who shrugs and heads to the front of the class.

“He’s always picked early,” Rashmi says.

Hmph. Must be nice.

Pretty soon it’s down to me, Rashmi, an obese girl named Sarah, and a skinny dude that, for whatever reason, is called Cheeseburger. Cheeseburger is always wearing this expression of surprise, like someone’s just called his name, and he can’t figure out where the voice is coming from.

Amanda whispers in Steve’s ear. He nods. “We’ll take Sarah.”

“Rashmi,” Nicole says without hesitation.

My heart sinks. It’s between me and someone named *Cheeseburger*. I can’t

even look up. Instead, I focus on a picture of me that Josh drew earlier today in history. I'm dressed like a medieval peasant (we're studying the Black Plague), and I have a fierce scowl and a dead rat dangling from one hand.

Amanda whispers again. I can feel her smirk, and my face burns.

Steve clears his throat. "Cheeseburger."

Chapter eleven

"You owe me five bucks," I say.

Rashmi smiles. "I'll buy your movie ticket."

"I can't believe I'm missing football." Meredith is pouting. Even her springy curls look limp and sad tonight. "We aren't playing it in phys ed until spring."

A breeze whips down the street. We hold our jackets tight and shiver. A dusting of brown leaves crunches underneath our feet as Paris hovers on the edge of autumn. "Isn't there some league you can join or something?" Josh asks, putting his arm around Rashmi. She burrows into him. "I see people playing around here all the time."

"Boo." A familiar dishevelled head pops between Mer and me, and we jump like startled cats.

[The rest of this chapter plays out the same. Everyone sees It Happened One Night, and Anna and St. Clair have A Moment. We'll pick up again at...]

Chapter twelve

I dread La Vie all day. Nate instructed us to change into exercise clothes before class. We're meeting at a park not far from campus. So, not only do I get to humiliate myself in front of my peers, but I also get to do it in front of sophisticated ladies walking Yorkies and elderly gentlemen playing chess. Not to mention the other local students, ditching to smoke clove cigarettes and soak in the last warm rays of the year.

Even memories of last night – sitting next to St. Clair in the dark, his leg against mine, the look that passed between us – aren't enough to relieve my despair.

Besides, the more I think about it, the more I'm convinced nothing happened. Because nothing DID happen. When we left the movie, Rashmi announced, "The ending was too abrupt. We didn't get to see any of the good stuff." And by the time I'd finished defending it, we were already back inside our dorm. I wanted to talk to St. Clair, get a sign that *something* between us had changed, but

Mer broke in and hugged him good night. And since I couldn't hug him without exposing my thudding heart, I lingered behind.

And then we had this lame wave goodbye.

And then I went to bed, confused as ever.

What happened? As thrilling as it was, I must have exaggerated it in my mind, because he didn't act any differently at breakfast. We had a friendly conversation, as always. Besides, he has Ellie. He doesn't need me. All I can guess is that I must have projected my own frustrated feelings about Toph onto St. Clair. Toph and I are still talking, but nothing has changed. It's like our kiss didn't even happen.

And now the ticking clock in history – my last class before the Dreaded Event – is like the ticking suitcase bomb in a bad summer blockbuster. And I don't know which wire to cut, so I'm waiting for it to explode in my face. Josh isn't being helpful. He drew a picture of me tangled up in a soccer net, which might be funny if it weren't so close to what would actually happen if I got near the goal.

When class ends, I slink into the restroom to change and find Amanda Spitterton-Watts and Nicole Burby, captain of my unfortunate team, already in short shorts and strappy tank tops. They're all smooth legs and boobs. No wonder they're popular.

Being allergic to exercise, I don't own any athletic clothes, so I put on pyjama bottoms (Oliphant clan tartan) and a black T-shirt (Atlanta Film Festival) instead. Too bad I don't own any Parisian-park-coloured camouflage. Perhaps I'll note my surroundings during the game and wear more appropriate colours tomorrow. I'll be Sue Storm, the Invisible Woman in *Fantastic Four*. Except that movie sucked, and I'd rather be Violet Parr, the invisible girl from *The Incredibles*, instead—

“Watch it, *Skunk Girl*.” Amanda sneers as I exit the bathroom stall. I wasn't even remotely close to her. She points to my pyjamas. “Is your *mommy* going to read you a *bedtime story*?”

Is that the best she can come up with? Lame. I wash my hands. Nicole pulls her hair back into her usual tight ponytail – I swear she's cutting off circulation to her brain – and then says, “Maybe her legs are deformed.”

So much for being invisible. I scam from the bathroom. Their laughter echoes against the tiles as I run *smack* into Josh's lanky frame. He steadies me and notices my red face. He frowns. “What's their problem?”

“Nothing,” I mumble. “Aren't you going to be late for class?”

Josh examines me carefully, but he decides not to press. “Not going.”

“What? Why?”

He follows me outside. “Pre-calc blows. I’m in the front row, and Professeur Babineaux drowns me in spit.”

“Oh, I know. Mer sits up front and always leaves spotted.” I check the sky, hoping at the word “spotted”, it might decide to rain. No such luck. “But that’s it? You’re just gonna ditch?”

“Yup.”

I’ve never ditched, and I don’t understand how he can be so casual about it. For the briefest of moments, I wonder what would happen if I skipped La Vie. Detention might be better than football. “Won’t you get in trouble?”

“Probably.” Josh flexes his hand and winces.

“You okay?”

“Cramped,” he says. “From drawing. It’s okay, it’s always like this.”

It’s true that I rarely see him without his brush pen. Strange. I’d never considered art injuries before. “You’re really good,” I say. “Is that what you want to do? For a living, I mean?”

We pass a typical *brasserie* – six round tables with cane chairs. A waiter in a long apron bulging with jangling change places coffee before a man with a newspaper. All but one of the tables is filled. I long to sit at that empty table.

“I’m working on a graphic novel,” Josh says.

“Really? That’s cool. What’s it about?”

The corner of his mouth rises into a sly smile. “A guy forced to attend a snobby boarding school, because his parents don’t want him around any more.”

I snort. “I’ve heard that one before. What do your parents do?”

My dad’s a politician. They’re working on his re-election campaign. I haven’t talked to ‘Senator Wasserstein’ since school started.”

“Senator? As in a *senator* senator?”

“Senator as in *senator* senator. Unfortunately.”

Again. What was Dad was thinking? Sending me to school with the children of U.S. SENATORS? We reach the park, and my classmates are already gossiping in the middle of a field. Locals amble along the gravel footpath and eye us suspiciously.

“Does everyone have a terrible father?” I ask. “Is it a requirement for attendance?”

“Rashmi and Mer don’t, but St. Clair’s dad is a piece of work.”

“So I hear.” Curiosity gets the best of me. “What’s his deal?”

Josh shrugs. “He’s just a jerk. He keeps a tight leash on St. Clair and his mom, but he’s really friendly to everyone else. Somehow that makes it worse.”

Rashmi stalks up to us. “What the hell are you doing, Josh? Are you *trying* to get kicked out of school?”

I edge away. Speaking of St. Clair, where is he? As usual, he's late. Nate arrives and calls roll. He doesn't notice the extra body – Josh, who isn't even in exercise clothes – and it's hard to tell if this makes Rashmi more or less furious.

“Anna!” Nate says. “Where's your pal? Is he coming?”

I startle. The knowledge that Nate knows St. Clair is my particular friend shouldn't make me feel gloaty, but it does. He could have asked Josh, he could have asked Rashmi. But he asked me. “I don't know,” I say. “Yeah.”

We start without him. Nate calls us to the centre of the field. He's carrying a large, canvas bag over his shoulder, which is filled with soccer balls, no doubt. But he unzips it, and my horror intensifies. Jerseys. Red, mesh jerseys.

Oh my God.

Many things in life gross me out: those tiny, white airplane pillows covered in other people's hair. My ex-boyfriend's grease-splotched polo shirt from KFC. Public swimming pools filled with urinating children. Also on that list?

Used sports equipment.

“Nicole,” Nate says. “Why doesn't your team wear the jerseys today?”

The torture never ends. My teammates pull the jerseys over their heads. I pluck one off the ground with my fingertips and hold it as far away as possible. Josh and Rashmi stare. I try not to make a big deal out of it but fail miserably.

“It won't bite,” Josh says.

“No, but it may give me some kind of fungus.”

“It won't give you a fungus,” Rashmi says, perfectly at home in her own jersey.

I glare at her as I put on mine.

“You might want to relax your arms,” Josh says. “You look like you're doing the chicken dance.”

And risk the mesh touching my bare arms? No, thank you.

We take our places on the field, and I position myself as far away from the ball as possible. Nate blows the whistle and everyone scatters. I shuffle around, trying to look like I'm playing without actually doing anything. I glance at my watch. Where's St. Clair? It's unfair he's missing this, when I'm stuck here. He'd also be something nice to look at.

No! I force my thoughts away from him.

I wonder what Toph's doing right now? I wonder what he's wearing? I loved those rare days when I'd see him in street clothes, when he'd come in to pick up his pay cheque and he'd be decked out punk-style, bondage pants and safety-pin covered jacket—

“Move it, Skunk Girl!” I'm jerked out of my daydream by the terrifying image of Amanda Spitterton-Watts barrelling down on me with the ball. I hurtle aside,

and my teammates scream at me.

What? I don't want to get hit.

Amanda streaks down the field, and Josh zips by to block someone from stealing her ball. "Amanda's a bitch to everyone," he shouts. "Don't take it personally." Easy for him to say. He's clearly capable of ball handling.

Ball handling. I smirk to myself.

"What's so funny?"

I'm startled to find St. Clair beside me. His pale cheeks are flushed, I suppose from running here. He's changed into black soccer – *football* – shorts and a faded green T-shirt. My hormones take note of his lean, muscular legs. Who knew?

"I was just thinking that Josh is good at handling balls," I say, prying my eyes from St. Clair's calves.

"Ah, but not as talented as Steve." He points downfield to where Steve Carver is pushing aside his own teammate to take possession of the ball. Poor Cheeseburger falls to the ground. Steve kicks the ball and *whoomp* – it flies into the net. "Now there's a bloke who knows his way around balls."

"Where've you been?"

"I forgot to bring a change of clothing. Had to go back to my room. Love the clan tartan, by the way." He nods to my pyjamas. "Do you have a matching smoking jacket? A hat with tartan earflaps, perhaps?"

"Shut up." The ball whizzes by. I dangle out a leg half-heartedly to stop it and miss.

"Football's only a week. It'll be over before you know it."

"Easy for you to say."

"Would you like to know a secret, Anna?"

I struggle to keep scowling. I love the way he says my name.

St. Clair steps closer and whispers. His breath is clean and spicy like cinnamon toothpaste. "I'm absolutely, positively rubbish at football. A complete embarrassment to my country."

"But—" I start to ask why he was picked ahead of so many people, but that's rude. Besides, I know the answer. He's attractive and funny and people will always like him. That's so irritating.

"Mind if I hide back here with you?" he asks.

"Whatever. I bet you're not even that bad."

"Oh, believe me, I am. Terrible."

"Sure you are." I'm annoyed. No one that confident could actually be awful.

"I am!"

Steve and Nicole whiz past. This time I don't even pretend to try to stop them.

“So prove it, Golden Boy.”

“Did you just call me ‘Golden Boy’?”

I place my hands on my hips, and then immediately throw them off. *Ick*. I touched the jersey. “Prove to me you suck at something. I want to see you out there –” I gesture vaguely around – “Sucking. Hard.”

“*Golden Boy?*”

“Because I’ve only been here a month, and even I know you’re good at everything.” He opens his mouth to protest, but I stop him with a raised hand. “You’re good at school, good with the teachers, good with our classmates. You dress well, tell the right jokes, speak fluent French, AND have a girlfriend in college.”

His jaw hangs open.

“I’m also willing to bet that you’ve memorized the periodic table, you’re a master of tae kwon do, and you’ve never had a cavity. Ever.” I square my shoulders. “So prove it. Golden Boy.”

St. Clair shuts his mouth and shakes his head. And then he takes off running. Oh, no. He’s angry. I can’t *believe* I said that. And now he knows I think he’s perfect! I could die, DIE, of humiliation.

Wait a second. He’s playing. And...he’s right.

I don’t believe it. St. Clair is really, *really* bad. He dodges between Nicole and a beefy guy named Michel. Beefy kicks the ball, and St. Clair tries to steal it, but he trips and jabs his elbow into Beefy’s stomach instead. Beefy doubles over and moans like a wounded hippopotamus.

“What the hell, St. Clair?” Steve yells, “He’s on our team!”

Nicole snatches the ball and tears in the opposite direction, ponytail flying behind her. St. Clair chases after her, his arms flailing like limp fettuccini noodles. He moves in front of her for a steal, but she manoeuvres around him, and he blocks Amanda instead, who’s trying to save the ball from his clutches. Nicole kicks it in for a goal.

His team shouts and boos, but St. Clair keeps crashing into them. Finally, Nate blows the whistle. “Étienne! What are you doing? Get back to the other side of the field!”

St. Clair lifts a hand in a gesture of apology. “Sorry, sir.”

Everyone in the park – Josh and Rashmi included – is shaking their head like they can’t believe what just happened. Neither can I. St. Clair jogs back to me. His hair is sweaty, and he grins, waiting for my reaction. The game restarts behind us.

“Wow. I don’t think I’ll ever be picked last again,” I finally say.

He laughs in his usual confident manner. “Aw, they’ll forget about it by the

time rugby rolls around.”

“*Rugby?*”

He pokes me. “Only kidding. So how was I?”

“On a scale from one to ten?”

“Ten being Beckham, one being Posh.”

“I’m gonna have to go with a *deux*.”

He whistles. “And I was hoping for *trois*.”

“I’m impressed. You stuck with it.”

“Stick with me, and you’ll never have to touch that ball.”

I hold out my hand. “Deal.” St. Clair shakes it. His skin is hot and damp, but I shiver.

He’s right again. Everyone steers clear of us for the remainder of class, which allows us to discuss the best movie trilogies of all time. I vote for *The Lord of the Rings*, but he thinks it’s the original *Star Wars* – Seany would love him – even after I point out that it’s not a trilogy, because you have to count the newer episodes. To which he replies, “Blasphemy!”

I’m glad he didn’t say *The Godfather*, which is such a male cliché. I cringe, remembering that Toph claims it as his favourite. I’m not even sure he’s seen the whole thing, because when I argued the pitfalls of Part III – it doesn’t work as a standalone, the plot is convoluted, the ending weak – he changed the subject.

Nate blows the whistle again, and the game is over. I’m surprised. That was fast. I carefully peel off the jersey and toss it toward Nate’s bag.

Josh finds us. “What the hell was that, St. Clair?”

Rashmi rolls with laughter. “I had no idea.”

“Yeah, yeah,” St. Clair says. He’s in a good mood.

“No, seriously,” Josh says. “I’ve never seen anything like it, and we’ve been friends for – how many years now?”

St. Clair shrugs.

“Whatever it was, it was awesome,” Rashmi says. “Wait ’til we tell Mer.”

“I’ve seen you play before,” Josh insists. “You are *not* that horrible.”

Startled, I look at St. Clair, but he won’t meet my gaze. He did that on purpose? Why would he embarrass himself like that? For me? I don’t know how I feel about this. Angry because he *is* good at sports, and he lied. Flattered because he likes me enough to draw the attention away from me. Embarrassed because he thinks I need his help.

“Anyone catch what Professeur Wakefield’s paper is on?” St. Clair asks. “I wasn’t paying attention when he assigned it.”

Rashmi fills him in, while I think, *Yes, you were. Stop changing the subject.* As his lab partner (and, okay, someone who watches him a little too closely), I

know for a fact that he jotted down our homework, because he wrote it next to this cute scribble of an elephant he made during a lecture on magnetic fields.

The wind picks up, and the chestnut trees rustle their yellow leaves. I rub the chill from my arms. St. Clair drops behind the others and walks beside me. “Oh, and Anna. One more thing.”

“Yeah?”

He grins. “Don’t ever call me Golden Boy again.”

If you've loved *Anna and the French Kiss*, read on
for a sneak preview of *Lola and the Boy Next
Door...*

I have three simple wishes. They're really not too much to ask.

The first is to attend the winter formal dressed like Marie Antoinette. I want a wig so elaborate it could cage a bird and a dress so wide I'll only be able to enter the dance through a set of double doors. But I'll hold my skirts high as I arrive to reveal a pair of platform combat boots, so everyone can see that, underneath the frills, I'm punk-rock tough.

The second is for my parents to approve of my boyfriend. They hate him. They hate his bleached hair with its constant dark roots, and they hate his arms, which are tattooed with sleeves of spiderwebs and stars. They say his eyebrows condescend, that his smile is more of a smirk. And they're sick of hearing his music blasting from my bedroom, and they're tired of fighting about my curfew whenever I watch his band play in clubs.

And my third wish?

To never ever ever see the Bell twins ever again. Ever.

But I'd much rather discuss my boyfriend. I realize it's not cool to desire parental approval, but honestly, my life would be so much easier if they accepted that Max is *the one*. It'd mean the end of embarrassing restrictions, the end of every-hour-on-the-hour phone-call check-ins on dates, and – best of all – the end of Sunday brunch.

The end of mornings like this.

“Another waffle, Max?”

My father, Nathan, pushes the golden stack across our antique farmhouse table and towards my boyfriend. This is not a real question. It's a command, so that my parents can continue their interrogation before we leave. Our reward for dealing with brunch? A more relaxed Sunday-afternoon date with fewer check-ins.

Max takes two and helps himself to the homemade raspberry-peach syrup. “Thanks, sir. Incredible, as always.” He pours the syrup carefully, a drop in each square. Despite appearances, Max is careful by nature. This is why he never drinks or smokes pot on Saturday nights. He doesn't want to come to brunch looking hungover, which is, of course, what my parents are watching for.

Evidence of debauchery.

“Thank Andy.” Nathan jerks his head toward my other dad, who runs a pie bakery out of our home. “He made them.”

“Delicious. Thank you, sir.” Max never misses a beat. “Lola, did you get enough?”

I stretch, and the seven inches of Bakelite bracelets on my right arm knock against each other. “Yeah, like, twenty minutes ago. Come on,” I turn and plead to Andy, the candidate most likely to let us leave early. “Can’t we go now?”

He bats his eyes innocently. “More orange juice? Frittata?”

“No.” I fight to keep from slumping. Slumping is unattractive.

Nathan stabs another waffle. “So. Max. How goes the world of meter reading?”

When Max isn’t being an indie punk garage-rock god, he works for the City of San Francisco. It irks Nathan that Max has no interest in college. But what my dad doesn’t grasp is that Max is actually brilliant. He reads complicated philosophy books written by people with names I can’t pronounce and watches tons of angry political documentaries. I certainly wouldn’t debate him.

Max smiles politely, and his dark eyebrows raise a titch. “The same as last week.”

“And the band?” Andy asks. “Wasn’t some record executive supposed to come on Friday?”

My boyfriend frowns. The guy from the label never showed. Max updates Andy about Amphetamine’s forthcoming album instead, while Nathan and I exchange scowls. No doubt my father is disappointed that, once again, he hasn’t found anything to incriminate Max. Apart from the age thing, of course.

Which is the real reason my parents hate my boyfriend.

They hate that I’m seventeen, and Max is twenty-two.

But I’m a firm believer in age-doesn’t-matter. Besides, it’s only five years, way less than the difference between my parents. Though it’s no use pointing this out, or the fact that my boyfriend is the same age Nathan was when my parents started dating. This only gets them worked up. “I may have been his age, but Andy was thirty,” Nathan always says. “Not a teenager. And we’d both had several boyfriends before, plenty of life experience. You can’t jump into these things. You have to be careful.”

But they don’t remember what it’s like to be young and in love. Of course I can jump into these things. When it’s someone like Max, I’d be stupid not to. My best friend thinks it’s hilarious that my parents are so strict. After all, shouldn’t a couple of gay men sympathize with the temptation offered by a sexy, slightly dangerous boyfriend?

This is so far from the truth it's painful.

It doesn't matter that I'm a perfect daughter. I don't drink or do drugs, and I've never smoked a cigarette. I haven't crashed their car – I can't even drive, so they're not paying high insurance rates – and I have a decent job. I make good grades. Well, apart from biology, but I refused to dissect that fetal pig on principle. And I only have one hole per ear and no ink. Yet. I'm not even embarrassed to hug my parents in public.

Except when Nathan wears a sweatband when he goes running. Because really.

I clear my dishes from the table, hoping to speed things along. Today Max is taking me to one of my favourite places, the Japanese Tea Garden, and then he's driving me to work for my evening shift. And hopefully, in between stops, we'll spend some quality time together in his '64 Chevy Impala.

I lean against the kitchen countertop, dreaming of Max's car.

"I'm just shocked she's not wearing her kimono," Nathan says.

"What?" I hate it when I space out and realize people have been talking about me.

"Chinese pyjamas to the Japanese Tea Garden," he continues, gesturing at my red silk bottoms. "What will people think?"

I don't believe in fashion. I believe in costume. Life is too short to be the same person every day. I roll my eyes to show Max that I realize my parents are acting lame.

"Our little drag queen," Andy says.

"Because that's a new one." I snatch his plate and dump the brunch remains into Betsy's bowl. Her eyes bug, and she inhales the waffle scraps in one big doggie bite.

Betsy's full name is Heavens to Betsy, and we rescued her from animal control several years ago. She's a mutt, built like a golden retriever but black in colour. I wanted a black dog, because Andy once clipped a magazine article – he's always clipping articles, usually about teens dying from overdoses or contracting syphilis or getting pregnant and dropping out of school – about how black dogs are always the last to be adopted at shelters and, therefore, more likely to be put down. Which is totally Dog Racism, if you ask me. Betsy is all heart.

"Lola." Andy is wearing his serious face. "I wasn't finished."

"So get a new plate."

"Lola," Nathan says, and I give Andy a clean plate. I'm afraid they're about to turn this into A Thing in front of Max, when they notice Betsy begging for more waffles.

“No,” I tell her.

“Have you walked her today?” Nathan asks me.

“No, Andy did.”

“Before I started cooking,” Andy says. “She’s ready for another.”

“Why don’t you take her for a walk while we finish up with Max?” Nathan asks. Another command, not a question.

I glance at Max, and he closes his eyes like he can’t believe they’re pulling this trick again. “But, Dad—”

“No buts. You wanted the dog, you walk her.”

This is one of Nathan’s most annoying catchphrases. Heavens to Betsy was supposed to be mine, but she had the nerve to fall in love with Nathan instead, which irritates Andy and me to no end. We’re the ones who feed and walk her. I reach for the biodegradable baggies and her leash – the one I’ve embroidered with hearts and Russian nesting dolls – and she’s already going berserk. “Yeah, yeah. Come on.”

I shoot Max another apologetic look, and then Betsy and I are out the door.

There are twenty-one stairs from our porch to the sidewalk. Anywhere you go in San Francisco, you have to deal with steps and hills. It’s unusually warm outside, so along with my pyjama bottoms and Bakelite bangles, I’m wearing a tank top. I’ve also got on my giant white Jackie O sunglasses, a long brunette wig with emerald tips, and black ballet slippers. Real ballet slippers, not the flats that only look like ballet slippers.

My New Year’s resolution was to never again wear the same outfit twice.

The sunshine feels good on my shoulders. It doesn’t matter that it’s August; because of the bay, the temperature doesn’t change much throughout the year. It’s always cool. Today I’m grateful for the peculiar weather, because it means I won’t have to bring a sweater on my date.

Betsy pees on the teeny rectangle of grass in front of the lavender Victorian next door – she always pees here, which I totally approve of – and we move on. Despite my annoying parents, I’m happy. I have a romantic date with my boyfriend, a great schedule with my favourite co-workers, and one more week of summer vacation.

We hike up and down the massive hill that separates my street from the park. When we arrive, a Korean gentleman in a velveteen tracksuit greets us. He’s doing tai chi between the palm trees. “Hello, Dolores! How was your birthday?” Mr. Lim is the only person apart from my parents (when they’re mad) who calls me by my real name. His daughter Lindsey is my best friend; they live a few streets over.

“Hi, Mr. Lim. It was divine!” My birthday was last week. Mine is the earliest

of anyone in my grade, which I love. It gives me an additional air of maturity. “How’s the restaurant?”

“Very good, thank you. Everyone asking for beef galbi this week. Goodbye, Dolores! Hello to your parents.”

The old lady name is because I was named after one. My great-grandma Dolores Deeks died a few years before I was born. She was Andy’s grandmother, and she was fabulous. The kind of woman who wore feathered hats and marched in civil rights protests. Dolores was the first person Andy came out to. He was thirteen. They were really close, and when she died, she left Andy her house. That’s where we live, in Great-Grandma Dolores’s mint green Victorian in the Castro district.

Which we’d never be able to afford without her generous bequeathal. My parents make a healthy living, but nothing like the neighbours. The well-kept homes on our street, with their decorative gabled cornices and extravagant wooden ornamentation, all come from old money. Including the lavender house next door.

My name is also shared with this park, Mission Dolores. It’s not a coincidence. Great-Grandma Dolores was named after the nearby mission, which was named after a creek called *Arroyo de Nuestra Señora de los Dolores*. This translates to “Our Lady of Sorrows Creek”. Because who wouldn’t want to be named after a depressing body of water? There’s also a major street around here called Dolores. It’s kind of weird.

I’d rather be a Lola.

Heavens to Betsy finishes, and we head home. I hope my parents haven’t been torturing Max. For someone so brash onstage, he’s actually an introvert, and these weekly meetings aren’t easy on him. “I thought dealing with one protective father was bad enough,” he once said. “But two? Your dads are gonna be the death of me, Lo.”

A moving truck rattles by, and it’s odd, because suddenly – just that quickly – my good mood is replaced by unease. We pick up speed. Max must be beyond uncomfortable right now. I can’t explain it, but the closer I get to home, the worse I feel. A terrible scenario loops through my mind: my parents, so relentless with inquiries that Max decides I’m not worth it any more.

My hope is that someday, when we’ve been together longer than one summer, my parents will realize he’s the one, and age won’t be an issue any more. But despite their inability to see this truth now, they aren’t dumb. They deal with Max because they think if they forbade me from seeing him, we’d just run off together. I’d move into his apartment and get a job dancing naked or dealing acid.

Which is beyond misguided.

But I'm jogging now, hauling Betsy down the hill. Something's not right. And I'm positive it's happened – that Max has left or my parents have cornered him into a heated argument about the lack of direction in his life – when I reach my street and everything clicks into place.

The moving truck.

Not the brunch.

The moving truck.

But I'm sure the truck belongs to another renter. It has to, it always does. The last family, this couple that smelled like baby Swiss and collected medical oddities like shrivelled livers in formaldehyde and oversize models of vaginas, vacated a week ago. In the last two years, there's been a string of renters, and every time someone moves out, I can't help but feel ill until the new ones arrive.

Because what if *now* is the time they move back in?

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About the author

STEPHANIE PERKINS was born in South Carolina, raised in Arizona and attended universities in San Francisco and Atlanta before settling in the mountains of North Carolina with her husband and cat, Mr Tumnus, in a house where every room is painted a different colour of the rainbow.

Having always worked with books – as a bookseller, librarian, and now as a novelist – Stephanie is most usually found writing at her desk with a cup of tea or coffee, except for at the weekends where she can be found at the movies, waiting for the actors to kiss. (She firmly believes that all novels and films should have more kissing.)

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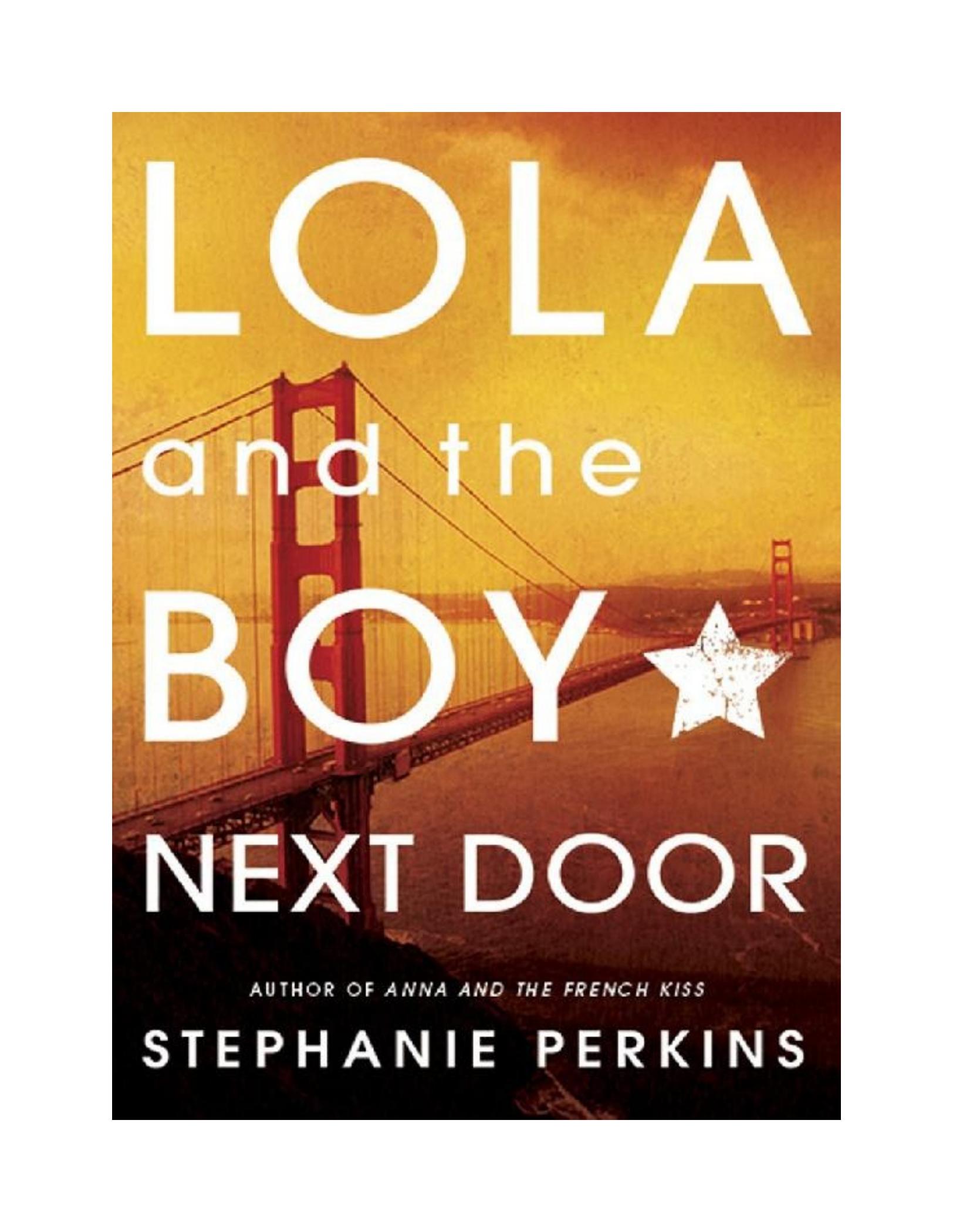
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For Jarrod, best friend & true love

chapter one

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“And the band?” Andy asks. “Wasn’t some record executive supposed to come on Friday?”

My boyfriend frowns. The guy from the label never showed. Max updates Andy about Amphetamine’s forthcoming album instead, while Nathan and I exchange scowls. No doubt my father is disappointed that, once again, he hasn’t found anything to incriminate Max. Apart from the age thing, of course.

Which is the real reason my parents hate my boyfriend.

They hate that I’m seventeen, and Max is twenty-two.

But I’m a firm believer in age-doesn’t-matter. Besides, it’s only five years, way less than the difference between my parents. Though it’s no use pointing this out, or the fact that my boyfriend is the same age Nathan was when my parents started dating. This only gets them worked up. “I may have been his age, but Andy was thirty,” Nathan always says. “Not a teenager. And we’d both had several boyfriends before, plenty of life experience. You can’t jump into these things. You have to be careful.”

But they don’t remember what it’s like to be young and in love. Of course I can jump into these things. When it’s someone like Max, I’d be stupid not to. My best friend thinks it’s hilarious that my parents are so strict. After all, shouldn’t a couple of gay men sympathize with the temptation offered by a sexy, slightly dangerous boyfriend?

This is so far from the truth it’s painful.

It doesn’t matter that I’m a perfect daughter. I don’t drink or do drugs, and I’ve never smoked a cigarette. I haven’t crashed their car—I can’t even drive, so they’re not paying high insurance rates—and I have a decent job. I make good

grades. Well, apart from biology, but I refused to dissect that fetal pig on principle. And I only have one hole per ear and no ink. Yet. I'm not even embarrassed to hug my parents in public.

Except when Nathan wears a sweatband when he goes running. Because really.

I clear my dishes from the table, hoping to speed things along. Today Max is taking me to one of my favorite places, the Japanese Tea Garden, and then he's driving me to work for my evening shift. And hopefully, in between stops, we'll spend some quality time together in his '64 Chevy Impala.

I lean against the kitchen countertop, dreaming of Max's car.

"I'm just shocked she's not wearing her kimono," Nathan says.

"What?" I hate it when I space out and realize people have been talking about me.

"Chinese pajamas to the Japanese Tea Garden," he continues, gesturing at my red silk bottoms. "What *will* people think?"

I don't believe in fashion. I believe in costume. Life is too short to be the same person every day. I roll my eyes to show Max that I realize my parents are acting lame.

"Our little drag queen," Andy says.

"Because that's a new one." I snatch his plate and dump the brunch remains into Betsy's bowl. Her eyes bug, and she inhales the waffle scraps in one big doggie bite.

Betsy's full name is Heavens to Betsy, and we rescued her from animal control several years ago. She's a mutt, built like a golden retriever but black in color. I wanted a black dog, because Andy once clipped a magazine article—he's *always* clipping articles, usually about teens dying from overdoses or contracting syphilis or getting pregnant and dropping out of school—about how black dogs are always the last to be adopted at shelters and, therefore, more likely to be put down. Which is totally Dog Racism, if you ask me. Betsy is all heart.

"Lola." Andy is wearing his serious face. "I wasn't finished."

"So get a new plate."

"*Lola*," Nathan says, and I give Andy a clean plate. I'm afraid they're about to turn this into A Thing in front of Max, when they notice Betsy begging for more waffles.

"No," I tell her.

"Have you walked her today?" Nathan asks me.

"No, Andy did."

"Before I started cooking," Andy says. "She's ready for another."

“Why don’t you take her for a walk while we finish up with Max?” Nathan asks. Another command, not a question.

I glance at Max, and he closes his eyes like he can’t believe they’re pulling this trick again. “But, Dad—”

“No buts. You wanted the dog, you walk her.”

This is one of Nathan’s most annoying catchphrases. Heavens to Betsy was supposed to be mine, but she had the nerve to fall in love with Nathan instead, which irritates Andy and me to no end. We’re the ones who feed and walk her. I reach for the biodegradable baggies and her leash—the one I’ve embroidered with hearts and Russian nesting dolls—and she’s already going berserk. “Yeah, yeah. Come on.”

I shoot Max another apologetic look, and then Betsy and I are out the door.

There are twenty-one stairs from our porch to the sidewalk. Anywhere you go in San Francisco, you have to deal with steps and hills. It’s unusually warm outside, so along with my pajama bottoms and Bakelite bangles, I’m wearing a tank top. I’ve also got on my giant white Jackie O sunglasses, a long brunette wig with emerald tips, and black ballet slippers. *Real* ballet slippers, not the flats that only look like ballet slippers.

My New Year’s resolution was to never again wear the same outfit twice.

The sunshine feels good on my shoulders. It doesn’t matter that it’s August; because of the bay, the temperature doesn’t change much throughout the year. It’s always cool. Today I’m grateful for the peculiar weather, because it means I won’t have to bring a sweater on my date.

Betsy pees on the teeny rectangle of grass in front of the lavender Victorian next door—she always pees here, which I totally approve of—and we move on. Despite my annoying parents, I’m happy. I have a romantic date with my boyfriend, a great schedule with my favorite coworkers, and one more week of summer vacation.

We hike up and down the massive hill that separates my street from the park. When we arrive, a Korean gentleman in a velveteen tracksuit greets us. He’s doing tai chi between the palm trees. “Hello, Dolores! How was your birthday?” Mr. Lim is the only person apart from my parents (when they’re mad) who calls me by my real name. His daughter Lindsey is my best friend; they live a few streets over.

“Hi, Mr. Lim. It was divine!” My birthday was last week. Mine is the earliest of anyone in my grade, which I love. It gives me an additional air of maturity. “How’s the restaurant?”

“Very good, thank you. Everyone asking for beef galbi this week. Goodbye, Dolores! Hello to your parents.”

The old lady name is because I was named after one. My great-grandma Dolores Deeks died a few years before I was born. She was Andy's grandmother, and she was fabulous. The kind of woman who wore feathered hats and marched in civil rights protests. Dolores was the first person Andy came out to. He was thirteen. They were really close, and when she died, she left Andy her house. That's where we live, in Great-Grandma Dolores's mint green Victorian in the Castro district.

Which we'd never be able to afford without her generous bequeathal. My parents make a healthy living, but nothing like the neighbors. The well-kept homes on our street, with their decorative gabled cornices and extravagant wooden ornamentation, all come from old money. Including the lavender house next door.

My name is also shared with this park, Mission Dolores. It's not a coincidence. Great-Grandma Dolores was named after the nearby mission, which was named after a creek called *Arroyo de Nuestra Señora de los Dolores*. This translates to "Our Lady of Sorrows Creek." Because who wouldn't want to be named after a depressing body of water? There's also a major street around here called Dolores. It's kind of weird.

I'd rather be a Lola.

Heavens to Betsy finishes, and we head home. I hope my parents haven't been torturing Max. For someone so brash onstage, he's actually an introvert, and these weekly meetings aren't easy on him. "I thought dealing with one protective father was bad enough," he once said. "But two? Your dads are gonna be the death of me, Lo."

A moving truck rattles by, and it's odd, because suddenly—just that quickly—my good mood is replaced by unease. We pick up speed. Max must be beyond uncomfortable right now. I can't explain it, but the closer I get to home, the worse I feel. A terrible scenario loops through my mind: my parents, so relentless with inquiries that Max decides I'm not worth it anymore.

My hope is that someday, when we've been together longer than one summer, my parents will realize he's *the one*, and age won't be an issue anymore. But despite their inability to see this truth now, they aren't dumb. They deal with Max because they think if they forbade me from seeing him, we'd just run off together. I'd move into his apartment and get a job dancing naked or dealing acid.

Which is beyond misguided.

But I'm jogging now, hauling Betsy down the hill. Something's not right. And I'm positive it's happened—that Max has left or my parents have cornered him into a heated argument about the lack of direction in his life—when I reach my

street and everything clicks into place.

The moving truck.

Not the brunch.

The moving truck.

But I'm sure the truck belongs to another renter. It has to, it always does. The last family, this couple that smelled like baby Swiss and collected medical oddities like shriveled livers in formaldehyde and oversize models of vaginas, vacated a week ago. In the last two years, there's been a string of renters, and every time someone moves out, I can't help but feel ill until the new ones arrive.

Because what if *now* is the time they move back in?

I slow down to get a better look at the truck. Is anyone outside? I didn't notice a car in the garage when we passed earlier, but I've made a habit out of not staring at the house next door. Sure enough, there are two people ahead on the sidewalk. I strain my eyes and find, with a mixture of agitation and relief, that it's just the movers. Betsy tugs on her leash, and I pick up the pace again.

I'm sure there's nothing to worry about. What are the chances?

Except . . . there's *always* a chance. The movers lift a white sofa from the back of the truck, and my heart thumps harder. Do I recognize it? Have I sat on that love seat before? But no. I don't know it. I peer inside the cramped truck, searching for anything familiar, and I'm met with stacks of severe modern furniture that I've never seen before.

It's not them. It can't be them.

It's not them!

I grin from ear to ear—a silly smile that makes me look like a child, which I don't normally allow myself to do—and wave to the movers. They grunt and nod back. The lavender garage door is open, and now I'm positive that it wasn't earlier. I inspect the car, and my relief deepens. It's something compact and silver, and I don't recognize it.

Saved. Again. It *is* a happy day.

Betsy and I bound inside. "Brunch is over! Let's go, Max."

Everyone is staring out the front window in our living room.

"Looks like we have neighbors again," I say.

Andy looks surprised by the cheer in my voice. We've never talked about it, but he knows something happened there two years ago. He knows that I worry about their return, that I fret each moving day.

"What?" I grin again, but then stop myself, conscious of Max. I tone it down.

"Uh, Lo? You didn't see them, by any chance, did you?"

Andy's concern is touching. I release Betsy from her leash and whisk into the kitchen. Determined to hurry the morning and get to my date, I swipe the

remaining dishes from the table and head toward the sink. “Nope.” I laugh. “What? Do they have another plastic vagina? A stuffed giraffe? A medieval suit of armor—what?”

All three of them are staring at me.

My throat tightens. “What is it?”

Max examines me with an unusual curiosity. “Your parents say you know the family.”

No. NO.

Someone says something else, but the words don’t register. My feet are carrying me toward the window while my brain is screaming for me to turn back. It can’t be them. It wasn’t their furniture! It wasn’t their car! But people buy new things. My eyes are riveted next door as a figure emerges onto the porch. The dishes in my hands—*Why am I still carrying the brunch plates?*—shatter against the floor.

Because there she is.

Calliope Bell.

chapter two

She's just as beautiful as she is on television." I poke at the complimentary bowl of cookies and rice crackers. "Just as beautiful as she always was."

Max shrugs. "She's all right. Nothing to get worked up over."

As comforted as I am by his state of unimpress, it's not enough to distract me. I sag against the railing of the rustic teahouse, and a breeze floats across the reflecting pool beside us. "You don't understand. She's *Calliope Bell*."

"You're right, I don't." His eyes frown behind his thick Buddy Holly frames. This is something we have in common—terrible vision. I love it when he wears his glasses. Badass rocker meets sexy nerd. He only wears them offstage, unless he's playing an acoustic number. Then they add the necessary touch of sensitivity. Max is always conscious of his appearance, which some people might find vain, but I understand completely. You only have one chance to make a first impression.

"Let me get this straight," he continues. "When you guys were freshmen—"

"When I was a freshman. She's a year older."

"Okay, when you were a freshman . . . what? She was mean to you? And you're still upset about it?" His brows furrow like he's missing half of the equation. Which he is. And I'm not going to fill him in.

"Yep."

He snorts. "That must have been some pretty bitchy shit for you to break those plates over."

It took fifteen minutes to clean up my mess. Shards of china and eggy frittata bits, trapped between the cracks of the hardwood floor, and sticky raspberry-peach syrup, splattered like blood across the baseboards.

"You have no idea." I leave it at this.

Max pours himself another cup of jasmine tea. "So why did you idolize her?"

"I didn't idolize her then. Only when we were younger. She was this . . . gorgeous, talented girl who also happened to be my neighbor. I mean, we hung out when we were little, played Barbies and make-believe. It just hurt when she turned on me, that's all. I can't believe you haven't heard of her," I add.

"Sorry. I don't watch a lot of figure skating."

"She's been to the World Championships twice. Silver medals? She's the big Olympic hopeful this year."

"Sorry," he says again.

"She was on a Wheaties box."

“No doubt selling for an entire buck ninety-nine on eBay.” He nudges my knees with his underneath the table. “Who the hell cares?”

I sigh. “I loved her costumes. The chiffon ruffles, the beading and Swarovski crystals, the little skirts—”

“Little skirts?” Max swigs the rest of his tea.

“And she had that grace and poise and confidence.” I push my shoulders back. “And that perfect shiny hair. That perfect skin.”

“Perfect is overrated. Perfect is boring.”

I smile. “You don’t think I’m perfect?”

“No. You’re delightfully screwy, and I wouldn’t have you any other way. Drink your tea.”

When I finish, we take another stroll. The Japanese Tea Garden isn’t big, but it makes up for its size with beauty. Perfumed flowers in jewel-toned colors are balanced by intricately cut plants in tranquil blues and greens. Pathways meander around Buddhist statuary, koi ponds, a red pagoda, and a wooden bridge shaped like the moon. The only sounds are birdsong and the soft click of cameras. It’s peaceful. Magical.

But the best part?

Hidden nooks, perfect for kissing.

We find just the right bench, private and tucked away, and Max places his hands behind my head and pulls my lips to his. This is what I’ve been waiting for. His kisses are gentle and rough, spearmint and cigarettes.

We’ve dated all summer, but I’m still not used to him. Max. *My boyfriend*, Max. The night we met was the first time my parents had let me go to a club. Lindsey Lim was in the bathroom, so I was temporarily alone, perched nervously against Verge’s rough concrete wall. He walked straight up to me like he’d done it a hundred times before.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “You must have noticed me staring at you during the set.”

This was true. His stare had thrilled me, though I didn’t trust it. The small club was crowded, and he could’ve been watching any of the hungry girls dancing beside me.

“What’s your name?”

“Lola Nolan.” I adjusted my tiara and shifted in my creepers.

“Lo-lo-lo-lo Lo-la.” Max sang it like the Kinks’ song. His deep voice was hoarse from the show. He wore a plain black T-shirt, which I would soon discover to be his uniform. Underneath it, his shoulders were broad, his arms were toned, and right away I spotted the tattoo that would become my favorite, hidden in the crook of his left elbow. His namesake from *Where the Wild Things*

Are. The little boy in the white wolf suit.

He was the most attractive man who'd ever spoken to me. Semicohherent sentences tumbled around in my head, but I couldn't keep up with any of them long enough to spit one out.

"What'd you think of the show?" He had to raise his voice above the Ramones, who'd started blasting from the speakers.

"You were great," I shouted. "I've never seen your band before."

I tried to yell this second part casually, like I had just never seen *his* band before. He didn't have to know it was my first show ever.

"I know. I would have noticed you. Do you have a boyfriend, Lola?"

Joey Ramone echoed it behind him. *Hey, little girl. I wanna be your boyfriend.*

The guys at school were never this direct. Not that I had much experience, just the odd monthlong boyfriend here and there. Most guys are either intimidated by me or think I'm strange. "What's it to you?" I jutted out my chin, confidence skyrocketing.

Sweet little girl. I wanna be your boyfriend.

Max looked me up and down, and the side of his lips curled into a smile. "I see you already need to go." He jerked his head, and I turned to find Lindsey Lim, jaw agape. Only a teenager could look that awkward and surprised. Did Max realize we were still in high school? "So why don't you give me your number?" he continued. "I'd like to see you sometime."

He must have heard my heart pounding as I sifted through the contents of my purse: watermelon bubble gum, movieticket stubs, veggie burrito receipts, and a rainbow of nail-polish bottles. I withdrew a Sharpie, realizing too late that only kids and groupies carry Sharpies. Luckily, he didn't seem to mind.

Max held out a wrist. "Here."

His breath was warm on my neck as I pressed the marker to his skin. My hand trembled, but somehow I managed to write it in clear, bold strokes below his tattoos. Then he smiled—that signature smile, using only one corner of his mouth—and ambled away, through the sweaty bodies and toward the dimly lit bar. I allowed myself a moment to stare at his backside. Despite my number, I was sure I'd never see it again.

But he did call.

Obviously, he called.

It happened two days later, on a bus ride to work. Max wanted to meet in the Haight for lunch, and I nearly died turning him down. He asked about the next day. I was working then, too. And then he asked about the next, and I couldn't believe my luck that he was still trying. Yes, I told him. Yes.

I wore a pink soda-fountain-style waitress dress, and my natural hair—I'm a brunette, average in color—was in two buns like Mickey Mouse ears. We ate falafel and discovered we were both vegetarians. He told me he didn't have a mother, and I told him I didn't really either. And then, as I wiped the last crumbs from my mouth, he said this: "There's no polite way to ask, so I'm just gonna go for it. How old are you?"

My expression must have been terrible, because Max looked stricken as I struggled to come up with a suitable answer. "Shit. That bad, huh?"

I decided delay was my best tactic. "How old are you?"

"No way. You first."

Delay again. "How old do you think I am?"

"I think you have a cute face that looks deceptively young. And I don't want to insult you either way. So you'll have to tell me."

It's true. My face is round, and my cheeks are pinchable, and my ears stick out farther than I'd like. I fight it with makeup and wardrobe. My curvy body helps, too. But I was going to tell the truth, I really was, when he started guessing. "Nineteen?"

I shook my head.

"Older or younger?"

I shrugged, but he knew where this was headed. "Eighteen? Please tell me you're eighteen."

"Of course I'm eighteen." I shoved the empty plastic food basket away from me. Outside, I was an ice queen, but inside I was freaking out. "Would I be here if I wasn't?"

His amber eyes narrowed in disbelief, and the panic rose inside of me. "So how old are *you*?" I asked again.

"Older than you. Are you in college?"

"I will be." *Someday*.

"So you're still living at home?"

"How old are you?" I asked a third time.

He grimaced. "I'm twenty-two, Lola. And we probably shouldn't be having this conversation. I'm sorry, if I had known—"

"I'm legal ." And then I immediately felt stupid.

There was a long pause. "No," Max said. "You're dangerous."

But he was smiling.

It took another week of casual dating before I convinced him to kiss me. He was definitely interested, but I could tell I made him nervous. For some reason, this only made me bolder. I liked Max in a way I hadn't liked anyone in years. Two years, to be exact.

It was in the main public library, and we met there because Max had deemed it safe. But when he saw me—short dress, tall boots—his eyes widened into an expression that I already recognized as an uncustomary display of emotion. “You could get a decent man in trouble,” he said. I reached for his book, but I brushed the boy in the wolf suit instead. His grip went loose. “Lola,” he warned.

I looked at him innocently.

And that was when he took my hand and led me away from the public tables and into the empty stacks. He backed me against the biographies. “Are you sure you want this?” A tease in his voice, but his stare was serious.

My palms sweated. “Of course.”

“I’m not a nice guy.” He stepped closer.

“Maybe I’m not a nice girl.”

“No. You’re a very nice girl. That’s what I like about you.” And with a single finger, he tilted my face up to his.

Our relationship progressed quickly. I was the one who slowed things back down. My parents were asking questions. They no longer believed I was spending that much time with Lindsey. And I knew it was wrong to keep lying to Max before things went further, so I came clean to him about my real age.

Max was furious. He disappeared for a week, and I’d already given up hope when he called. He said he was in love. I told him that he’d have to meet Nathan and Andy. Parents make him edgy—his father is an alcoholic, his mother left when he was five—but he agreed. And then the restrictions were placed upon us. And then last week, on my seventeenth birthday, I lost my virginity in his apartment.

My parents think we went to the zoo.

Since then, we’ve slept together once more. And I’m not an idiot about these things; I don’t have romantic delusions. I’ve read enough to know it takes a while for it to get good for girls. But I hope it gets better soon.

The kissing is fantastic, so I’m sure it’ll happen.

Except today I can’t concentrate on his lips. I’ve waited for them all afternoon, but now that they’re here, I’m distracted. Bells ring in the distance—from the pagoda? from outside the gardens?—and all I can think is *Bell. Bell. Bell.*

They’re back. There were three of them this morning, Calliope and her parents. No sign of Calliope’s siblings. Not that I’d mind seeing Aleck. But the other one . . .

“What?”

I’m startled. Max is looking at me. When did we stop kissing?

“What?” he asks again. “Where are you?”

My eye muscles twitch. "I'm sorry, I was thinking about work."

He doesn't believe me. This is the problem of having lied to your boyfriend in the past. He sighs with frustration, stands, and puts one hand inside his pocket. I know he's fiddling with his lighter.

"I'm sorry," I say again.

"Forget it." He glances at the clock on his phone. "It's time to go, anyway."

The drive to the Royal Civic Center 16 is quiet, apart from the Clash blasting through his stereo. Max is ticked, and I feel guilty. "Call me later?" I ask.

He nods as he pulls away, but I know I'm still in trouble.

As if I needed another reason to hate the Bells.

chapter three

My supervisor is rearranging the saltshakers. She does this with an alarming frequency. The theater is in a betweenfilms nighttime lull, and I'm using the opportunity to scrub the buttery popcorn feeling from my arm hair.

"Try this." She hands me a baby wipe. "It works better than a napkin."

I accept it with genuine thanks. Despite her neuroticisms, Anna is my favorite coworker. She's a little older than me, very pretty, and she just started film school. She has a cheerful smile—a slight gap between her front teeth—and a thick, singular stripe of platinum in her dark brown hair. It's a nice touch. Plus, she always wears this necklace with a glass bead shaped like a banana.

I admire someone with a signature accessory.

"Where in the bloody hell did that come from?" asks the only other person behind the counter. Or more precisely, on top of the counter, where her ridiculously attractive, English-accented boyfriend is perched.

He's the other thing I like about Anna. Wherever she goes, he follows.

He nods toward the baby wipe. "What else are you carrying in your pockets? Dust rags? Furniture polish?"

"Watch it," she says. "Or I'll scrub *your* arms, Étienne."

He grins. "As long as you do it in private."

Anna is the only person who calls him by his first name. The rest of us call him by his last, St. Clair. I'm not sure why. It's just one of those things. They moved here recently, but they met last year in Paris, where they went to high school. *Paris*. I'd kill to go to school in Paris, especially if there are guys like Étienne St. Clair there.

Not that I'd cheat on Max. I'm just saying. St. Clair has gorgeous brown eyes and mussed artist hair. Though he's on the short side for my taste, several inches shorter than his girlfriend.

He attends college at Berkeley, but despite his unemployment, he spends as much time here at the theater as he does across the bay. And because he's beautiful and cocky and confident, everyone loves him. It only took a matter of hours before he'd weaseled his way into all of the employee areas without a single complaint by management.

That kind of charisma is impressive. But it doesn't mean I want to hear about their private scrubblings. "My shift ends in a half hour. Please wait until I've vacated the premises before elaborating upon this conversation."

Anna smiles at St. Clair, who is removing the giant ASK ME ABOUT OUR

MOVIE-WATCHERS CLUB! button from her maroon work vest. “Lola’s just jealous. She’s having Max problems again.” She glances at me, and her smile turns wry. “What’d I tell you about musicians? That bad boy type will only break your heart.”

“They’re only bad because they’re lame,” St. Clair mutters. He pins the button to his own outfit, this fabulous black peacoat that makes him look very European, indeed.

“Just because, once upon a time, you guys had issues with someone,” I say, “doesn’t mean I do. Max and I are fine. Don’t—don’t do that.” I shake my head at St. Clair. “You’re ruining a perfectly good coat.”

“Sorry, did you want it? It might balance out your collection.” He gestures at my own maroon vest. In between the required Royal Theater buttons, I have several sparkly vintage brooches. Only one manager has complained so far, but as I politely explained to him, my jewelry only attracts *more* attention to his advertisements.

So I won that argument.

And thankfully no one has said anything about the vest itself, which I’ve taken in so that it’s actually fitted and semiflattering. You know. For a polyester vest. My phone vibrates in my pocket. “Hold that thought,” I tell St. Clair. It’s a text from Lindsey Lim:

u wont believe who i saw jogging in the park. prepare yrself.

“Lola!” Anna rushes forward to catch me, but I’m not falling. Am I falling? Her hand is on my arm, holding me upright. “What happened, what’s the matter?”

Surely Lindsey saw Calliope. *Calliope* was the one exercising in the park, as a part of her training. Of course it was Calliope! I shove the other possibility down, deep and hard, but it springs right back. This parasite growing inside of me. It never disappears, no matter how many times I tell myself to forget it. It’s the past, and no one can change the past. But it grows all the same. Because as terrible as it is to think about Calliope Bell, it’s nothing compared to the pain that overwhelms me whenever I think about her twin.

They’ll be seniors this year. Which means that despite the no-show this morning, there’s no reason why her twin *wouldn’t* be here. The best I can hope for is some kind of delay. I need that time to prepare myself.

I text Lindsey back with a simple question mark. *Please, please, please*, I beg the universe. *Please be Calliope*.

“Is it Max?” Anna asks. “Your parents? Oh God, it’s that guy we kicked out

of the theater yesterday, isn't it? That crazy guy with the giant phone and the bucket of chicken! How did he find your numb—"

"It's not the guy." But I can't explain. Not now, not this. "Everything's fine."

Anna and St. Clair swap identical disbelieving glances.

"It's Betsy. My dog. Andy says she's acting sick, but I'm sure it's prob—" My phone vibrates again, and I nearly drop it in my frantic attempt to read the new text:

calliope. investigation reveals new coach. shes back 4 good.

"Well?" St. Clair asks.

Calliope. Oh, thank God, CALLIOPE. I look up at my friends. "What?"

"Betsy!" they say together.

"Oh. Yeah." I give them a relieved smile. "False alarm. She just threw up a shoe."

"A shoe?" St. Clair asks.

"Dude," Anna says. "You scared me. Do you need to go home?"

"We can handle closing if you need to go," St. Clair adds. As if he works here. No doubt he just wants me to leave so that he can tongue his girlfriend.

I stride away, toward the popcorn machine, embarrassed to have made a public display. "Betsy's fine. But thanks," I add as my cell vibrates again.

u ok?

Yeah. I saw her this morning.

Y DIDNT U TELL ME???

I was gonna call after work. You didn't see . . . ?

no. but im on it. call me l8r ned.

Lindsey Lim fancies herself a detective. This is due to her lifelong obsession with mysteries, ever since she received the Nancy Drew Starter Set (*Secret of the Old Clock* through *Secret of Red Gate Farm*) for her eighth birthday. Hence, "Ned." She tried to nickname me Bess, Nancy's flirty, shop-happy friend, but I wasn't pleased with that, because Bess is always telling Nancy the situation is

too dangerous, and she should give up.

What kind of friend says that?

And I'm definitely not George, Nancy's other best friend, because George is an athletic tomboy with a pug nose. George would never wear a Marie Antoinette dress—even with platform combat boots—to her winter formal. Which left Ned Nickerson, Nancy's boyfriend. Ned is actually useful and often assists Nancy during life-threatening situations. I can get down with that. Even if he is a guy.

I picture Lindsey parked in front of her computer. No doubt she went directly to the figure-skating fansites, and that's how she knows about the new coach. Though I wouldn't put it past her to have walked up to Calliope herself. Lindsey isn't easily intimidated, which is why she'll make a great investigator someday. She's rational, straightforward, and unflinchingly honest.

In this sense, we balance each other out.

We've been best friends since, well . . . since the Bells stopped being my best friends. When I entered kindergarten, and they realized it was no longer cool to hang out with the neighbor girl who only spent half days at school. But that part of our history isn't as harsh as it sounds. Because soon I met Lindsey, and we discovered our mutual passions for roly-poly bugs, sea-green crayons, and those Little Debbies shaped like Christmas trees. Instant friendship. And later, when our classmates began teasing me for wearing tutus or ruby slippers, Lindsey was the one who growled back, "Shove it, fartbreath."

I'm very loyal to her.

I wonder if she'll find out anything about the other Bell?

"Pardon?" St. Clair says.

"Huh?" I turn around to find him and Anna giving me another weird look.

"You said something about a bell." Anna cocks her head. "Are you sure you're okay? You've been really distracted tonight."

"I'm great! Honestly!" How many times will I have to lie today? I volunteer to clean the fourth-floor bathrooms to stop incriminating myself, but later, when Andy shows up to take me home—my parents don't like me riding the bus late at night—he eyes me with the same concern. "You okay, Lola-doodle?"

I throw my purse at the floorboard. "Why does everyone keep asking me that?"

"Maybe because you look like . . ." Andy pauses, his expression shifting to barely masked hope. "Did you and Max break up?"

"Dad!"

He shrugs, but his Adam's apple bobs in his throat, a dead giveaway that he feels guilty for asking. Maybe there's hope for Max and my parents after all. Or,

at least, Max and Andy. Andy is always the first to soften in difficult situations.

Which, by the way, doesn't make him "the woman." Nothing annoys me more than someone assuming one of my dads is less-than-dad. Yeah, Andy bakes for a living. And he stayed at home to raise me. And he's decent at talking about feelings. But he also fixes electrical sockets, unclogs kitchen pipes, squashes cockroaches, and changes flat tires. And Nathan may be the resident disciplinarian and a tough lawyer for the ACLU, but he also decorates our house with antiques and gets teary during sitcom weddings.

So neither is "the woman." They're both gay men. Duh.

Besides, it's not like all *women* fit into those stereotypes either.

"Is it . . . our neighbors?" Andy's voice is tentative. He knows if it is about them, I won't talk.

"It's nothing, Dad. It was just a long day."

We ride home in silence. I'm shivering as I climb out of the car, but it's not because of the temperature drop. I stare at the lavender Victorian. At the bedroom window across from my own. There's no light on. The cold gripping my heart loosens, but it doesn't let go. I *have* to see inside that room. Adrenaline surges through me, and I jolt up the stairs, into the house, and up another flight of stairs.

"Hey!" Nathan calls after me. "No hug for your dear old pop?"

Andy talks to him in a low voice. Now that I'm at my bedroom door, I'm afraid to go in. Which is absurd. I'm a brave person. Why should one window scare me? But I pause to make sure Nathan isn't coming up. Whatever waits for me on the other side, I don't want interruptions.

He isn't coming. Andy must have told him to leave me alone. Good.

I open my door with false confidence. I reach for the light switch but change my mind and decide to enter Lindsey Lim style. I creep forward in the shadows. The rows of pastel houses in this city are so close that the other window, the one that lines up perfectly with my own, is mere feet away. I peer through the darkness and search for habitation.

There aren't any curtains on the window. I squint, but as far as I can tell, the bedroom is . . . empty. There's nothing in there. I look to the right, into Calliope's room. Boxes. I look down, into their kitchen. Boxes. I look straight ahead again.

No twin.

NO TWIN.

My entire body exhales. I flick on my light and then my stereo—Max's band, of course—and turn it up. Loud. I sling off my ballet slippers, tossing them onto the shoe mountain that blocks my closet, and yank off my wig. I shake out my

real hair and throw down my work vest. The stupid short-sleeved, collared shirt they make me wear and the ugly boring black pants follow the vest to the floor. My red silk Chinese pajama bottoms come back on, and I add the matching top. I feel like myself again.

I glance at the empty window.

Oh, yes. I definitely feel like myself again.

Amphetamine blasts from my speakers, and I dance over to my phone. I'll call Lindsey first. And then Max, so that I can apologize for being such a space case at the Tea Garden. Maybe he's even free tomorrow morning. I don't have to work until two, so we could go to brunch on our own terms. Or maybe we could *say* we're going to brunch, but we can *really* go to his apartment.

My eyes close, and I jump and thrash to the pounding drums. I spin in circles and laugh and throw my body. Max's voice is pissed off. His lyrics taunt. The energy of his guitar builds and builds, and the bass thrums through me like blood. I am invincible.

And then I open my eyes.

Cricket Bell grins. "Hi, Lola."

chapter four

He's sitting in his window. Literally sitting in it. His butt is on the windowsill, and his legs—impossibly long and slender—are dangling against the side of his house, two stories above the ground. And his hands are folded in his lap as if spying on his unsuspecting female neighbor was the most natural thing in the world.

I stare, helpless and dumbfounded, and he bursts into laughter. His body rocks with it, and he throws back his head and claps his hands.

Cricket Bell *laughs* at me. And *claps*.

"I called your name." He tries to stop smiling, but his mouth only opens wider with delight. I can practically count his teeth. "I called it a dozen times, but your music was too loud, so I was waiting it out. You're a good dancer."

Mortification strips me of the ability to engage in intelligent conversation.

"I'm sorry." His grin hasn't disappeared, but he visibly squirms. "I only wanted to say hello."

He swings his legs back inside of his bedroom in one fluid motion. There's a lightness to the way he lands on his feet, a certain grace, that's instantly recognizable. It washes me in a familiar aching shame. And then he stretches, and I'm stunned anew.

"Cricket, you're . . . tall."

Which is, quite possibly, the stupidest thing I could say to him.

Cricket Bell was always taller than most boys, but in the last two years, he's added half a foot. At least. His slender body—once skinny and awkward, despite his graceful movements—has also changed. He's filled out, though just slightly. The edge has been removed. But pointing out that someone is tall is like pointing out the weather when it's raining. Both obvious and irritating.

"It's the hair," he says with a straight face. "Gravity has always been my nemesis."

And his dark hair *is* tall. It's floppy, but . . . inverted floppy. I'm not sure how it's possible without serious quantities of mousse or gel, but even when he was a kid, Cricket's hair stood straight up. It gives him the air of a mad scientist, which actually isn't that far off. His hair is one of the things I always liked about him.

Until I didn't like him at all, that is.

He waits for me to reply, and when I don't, he clears his throat. "But you're taller, too. Of course. I mean, it's been a long time. So obviously you are. Taller."

We take each other in. My mind spins as it tries to connect the Cricket of the present with the Cricket of the past. He's grown up and grown into his body, but it's still *him*. The same boy I fell in love with in the ninth grade. My feelings had been building since our childhood, but that year, the year he turned sixteen, was the year everything changed.

I blame it on his pants.

Cricket Bell had always been . . . *nice*. And he was cute, and he was intelligent, and he was older, and it was only natural that I would develop feelings for him. But the day everything fell into place was the same day I discovered that he'd become interested in his appearance. Not in an egotistical way. Simply in a "maybe baggy shorts and giant sneakers aren't the most attractive look for a guy like me" way.

So he started wearing these pants.

Nice pants. Not hipster pants or preppy pants or anything like that, just pants that said he cared about pants. They were chosen to fit his frame. Some plain, some pinstriped to further elongate his height. And he would pair them with vintage shirts and unusual jackets in a way that looked effortlessly cool.

So while the guys in my grade could barely remember to keep their flies zipped—and the only ones who DID care about their appearance were budding homosexuals—here was a perfectly friendly, perfectly attractive, perfectly dressed straight boy who just-so-happened to live next door to me.

Of course I fell in love with him.

Of course it ended badly.

And now here he is, and his dress habits haven't changed. If anything, they've improved. Both his pants and his shirt are still slim-fitting, but now he's accessorized. A thick, black leather watchband on one wrist, a multitude of weathered colorful bracelets and rubber bands on the other. Cricket Bell looks good. He looks BETTER.

The realization is surprising, but the one that follows stuns me even more.

I'm not in love with him anymore.

Instead, looking at him makes me feel . . . hollow.

"How've you been?" I give him a smile that's both warm and cool. One that I hope says, *I'm not that person anymore. You didn't hurt me, and I never think about you.*

"Good. Really, really good. I just started at Berkeley, so that's where my things are. You know. In Berkeley. I stopped by to help my parents unpack." Cricket points behind him as if the boxes are right there. He was always a hand-talker.

"Berkeley?" I'm thrown. "As in . . . ?"

He looks down into the alley between our houses. “I, uh, graduated early. Homeschooling? Calliope did, too, but she’s skipping the college thing for a few years to concentrate on her career.”

“So you’re staying there?” I ask, hardly daring to believe it. “In a dorm?”

“Yeah.”

YES. OH MY GOD, YES!

“I mean, I’ll bring a few things over,” he says. “For weekends and school breaks. Or whatever.”

My chest constricts. “Weekends?”

“Probably. I guess.” He sounds apologetic. “This is all new to me. It’s always been the Calliope Parade, you know?”

I do know. The Bell family has always revolved around Calliope’s career. This must be the first time in Cricket’s life that his schedule doesn’t revolve around hers. “I saw her on TV last year,” I say, trying not to sound distressed by the idea of seeing him regularly. “World Championships. Second place, that’s impressive.”

“Ah.” Cricket sags against his window frame. He scratches the side of his nose, revealing a message written on the back of his left hand: REVERSE CIRCUIT. “But don’t let her hear you say that.”

“Why not?” I stare at his hand. It’s surreal. He always wrote cryptic reminders there and always in that same black marker. I used to write on mine sometimes just to be like him. My stomach clenches at the memory. Did he notice? Did Calliope tease him about it when I wasn’t around?

“You know Cal. It doesn’t count if it’s not first.” He straightens up, on the move again, and holds out both hands in my direction. “But how are you? I’m sorry, I’ve completely taken over this conversation.”

“Great. I’m great!”

I’m great? Two years of revenge fantasies, and *that’s* what I come up with? Of course, in my daydreams, I’m never wearing matching pajamas either.

Oh, no. I’m wearing matching pajamas.

And my hair! I have wig hair! It’s totally flat and sweaty!

Everything about this moment is wrong. I’m supposed to be dressed in something glamorous and unique. We’re supposed to be in a crowded room, and his breath is supposed to catch when he sees me. I’ll be laughing, and he’ll be drawn toward me as if by magnetic force. And I’ll be surprised but uninterested to see him. And then Max will show up. Put his arm around me. And I’ll leave with my dignity restored, and Cricket will leave agonizing that he didn’t go for me when he had the chance.

Instead, he’s staring at me with the strangest expression. His brow has creased

and his mouth has parted, but the smile has disappeared. It's his solving-a-difficult-equation face. Why is he giving me his difficult equation face?

"And your family?" he asks. "How are they?"

It's unnerving. That face.

"Um, they're good." *I am confident and happy. And over you. Don't forget, I'm over you.* "Andy started his own business. He bakes and delivers these incredible pies, every flavor. It's doing well. And Nathan is the same. You know. Good." I glance away, toward the dark street. I wish he'd stop looking at me.

"And Norah?" His question is careful. Delicate.

There's another awkward silence. Not many people know about Norah, but there are certain things that can't be hidden from neighbors. Things like my birth mother.

"She's . . . Norah. She's in the fortune-telling business now, reading tea leaves." My face grows warm. How long will we stand here being polite? "She has an apartment."

"That's great, Lola. I'm glad to hear it." And because he's Cricket, he *does* sound glad. This is all too weird. "Do you see her often?"

"Not really. I haven't seen Snoopy at all this year." I'm not sure why I add that.

"Is he still . . . ?"

I nod. His real name is Jonathan Head, but I've never heard anyone call him that. Snoopy met Norah when they were both teenagers. They were also alcoholics, drug addicts, and homeless gutter punks. When he got Norah pregnant, she came to her older brother for help. Nathan. She didn't want me, but she didn't want to get an abortion either. And Nathan and Andy, who'd been together for seven years, wanted a child. They adopted me, and Andy changed his last name to Nathan's so that we'd all have the same one.

But yes. My father Nathan is biologically my uncle.

My parents have tried to help Norah. She's hasn't lived on the streets in years—before her apartment, she was in a series of group homes—but she still isn't exactly the most reliable person I know. The best I can say is that at least she's sober. And I only see Snoopy every now and then, whenever he rolls into town. He'll call my parents, we'll take him out for a burger, and then we won't hear from him again for months. The homeless move around more than most people realize.

I don't like to talk about my birth parents.

"I like what you've done with your room," Cricket says suddenly. "The lights are pretty." He gestures toward the strands of pink and white twinkle lights

strung across my ceiling. “And the mannequin heads.”

I have shelves running across the top of my bedroom walls, lined with turquoise mannequin heads. They model my wigs and sunglasses. The walls themselves are plastered with posters of movie costume dramas and glossy black-and-whites of classic actresses. My desk is hot pink with gold glitter, which I threw in while the paint was drying, and the surface is buried underneath open jars of sparkly makeup, bottles of half-dried nail polish, plastic kiddie barrettes, and false eyelashes.

On my bookcase, I have endless cans of spray paint and bundles of hot glue sticks, and my sewing table is collaged with magazine cutouts of Japanese street fashion. Bolts of fabric are stacked precariously on top, and the wall beside it has even more shelves, crammed with glass jars of buttons and thread and needles and zippers. Over my bed, I have a canopy made out of Indian saris and paper umbrellas from Chinatown.

It’s chaotic, but I love it. My bedroom is my sanctuary.

I glance at Cricket’s room. Bare walls, bare floor. Empty. He acknowledges my gaze. “Not what it used to be, is it?” he asks.

Before they moved, it was as cluttered as my own. Coffee canisters filled with gears and cogs and nuts and wheels and bolts. Scribbled blueprints taped up beside star charts and the periodic table. Lightbulbs and copper wire and disassembled clocks. And always the Rube Goldberg machines.

Rube was famous for drawing those cartoons of complex machines performing simple tasks. You know, where you pull the string so that the boot kicks over the cup, which releases the ball, which lands in the track, which rolls onto the teeter-totter, which releases the hammer that turns off your light switch? That was Cricket’s bedroom.

I give him a wary smile. “It’s a little different, CGB.”

“You remember my middle name?” His eyebrows shoot up in surprise.

“It’s not like it’s easy to forget, Cricket *Graham Bell*.”

Yeah. The Bell family is THAT Bell family. As in telephone. As in one of the most important inventions in history.

He rubs his forehead. “My parents did burden me with unfortunate nomenclature.”

“Please.” I let out a laugh. “You used to brag about it all the time.”

“Things change.” His blue eyes widen as if he’s joking, but there’s something flat behind his expression. It’s uncomfortable. Cricket was always proud of his family name. As an inventor, just like his great-great-great-grandfather, it was impossible for him not to be.

Abruptly, he lurches backward into the shadows of his room. “I should catch

the train. School tomorrow.”

The action startles me. “Oh.”

And then he bounds forward again, and his face is illuminated by pink and white twinkle lights. His difficult equation face. “See you around?”

What else can I say? I gesture at my window. “I’ll be here.”

chapter five

Max picks his black shirt off his apartment floor and pulls it on. I'm already dressed again. Today I'm a strawberry. A sweet red dress from the fifties, a long necklace of tiny black beads, and a dark green wig cut into a severe Louise Brooks bob. My boyfriend playfully bites my arm, which smells of sweat and berry lotion.

"You okay?" he asks. He doesn't mean the bite.

I nod. And it *was* better. "Let's get burritos. I'm craving guacamole and pintos." I don't mention that I also want to leave before his roommate, Amphetamine's drummer, comes home. Johnny's a decent guy, but sometimes I feel out of my depth when Max's friends are around. I like it when it's just the two of us.

Max grabs his wallet. "You got it, Lo-li-ta," he sings.

I smack his shoulder, and he gives me his signature, suggestive half grin. He knows I hate that nickname. No one is allowed to call me Lolita, not even my boyfriend, not even in private. I am not some gross old man's obsession. Max isn't Humbert Humbert, and I am not his nymphet.

"That's your last warning," I say. "And you just bought my burrito."

"Extra guacamole." He seals his promise with a deep kiss as my phone rings. Andy.

My face flushes. "Sorry."

He turns away in frustration but says softly, "Don't be."

I tell Andy we're already at the restaurant, and we've just been walking around. I'm pretty sure he buys it. The mood killed, Max and I choose a place only a block away. It has plastic green saguaro lights in the windows and papier-mâché parrots hanging from the ceiling. Max lives in the Mission, the neighborhood beside mine, which has no shortage of amazing Mexican restaurants.

The waiter brings us salty chips and extra-hot salsa, and I tell Max about school, which starts again in three days. I'm so over it. I'm ready for college, ready to begin my career. I want to design costumes for movies and the stage. Someday I'll walk the red carpets in something never seen before, like Lizzy Gardiner when she accepted her Oscar for *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* in a dress made out of golden credit cards. Only mine will be made out of something new and different.

Like strips of photo-booth pictures or chains of white roses or Mexican *lotería*

cards. Or maybe I'll wear a great pair of swashbuckling boots and a plumed hat. And I'll swagger to the stage with a saber on my belt and a heavy pistol in my holster, and I'll thank my parents for showing me *Gone with the Wind* when I had the flu in second grade, because it taught me everything I needed to know about hoop skirts.

Mainly, that I needed one. And badly.

Max asks about the Bell family. I flinch. Their name is an electric shock.

"You haven't mentioned them all week. Have you seen . . . Calliope again?" He pauses on her name. He's checking for accuracy, but, for one wild moment, I think he knows about Cricket.

Which would be impossible, as I have not yet told him.

"Only through windows." I trace the cold rim of my mandarin Jarritos soda. "Thank goodness. I'm starting to believe it'll be possible to live next door and not be forced into actual face-to-face conversation."

"You can't avoid your problems forever." He frowns and tugs on one of his earrings. "No one can."

I burst into laughter. "Oh, that's funny coming from someone whose last album had *three* songs about running away."

Max gives a small, amused smile back. "I've never claimed I'm not a hypocrite."

I'm not sure why I haven't told him about Cricket. The timing just hasn't felt right. I haven't seen him again, but I'm still a mess of emotions about it. Our meeting wasn't as bad as it could have been, but it was . . . unsettling. Cricket's uncharacteristic ease compared to my uncharacteristic *unease* combined with the knowledge that I'll be seeing him again. Soon.

He didn't even mention the last time we saw each other. As if it didn't matter. More likely, it didn't affect him. I've spent so many dark nights trying to forget about Cricket. It doesn't feel fair that he could have forgotten about me.

It's too much to explain to Max.

And I don't want him to think Cricket Bell means something to me that he doesn't. That chapter of my life is *over*.

It's over, unlike my conversation with Lindsey the next day, the same one we have every time we talk now. "I like Max," I say. "He likes me. What's wrong with that?"

"The law," she says.

It's the last Friday of our summer break, and we're squished together on my tiny front porch. I'm spray-painting a pair of thrift-store boots, and she's scoping out the lavender Victorian. Lindsey supports my relationship for the most part,

but she's relentless when it comes to this one sticking point.

"He's a good guy," I say. "And our relationship is what it is."

"I'm not saying he isn't a good guy, I'm merely reminding you that there could be consequences to dating him." Her voice is calm and rational as her eyes perform a quick scan of the neighborhood before returning to the Bell house.

Lindsey never stops examining her surroundings. It's what she does.

My best friend is pretty, bordering on plain. She wears practical clothing and keeps her appearance clean. She's short, has braces, and has had the same haircut since the day we met. Black, shoulder length, tidy bangs. The only thing that might seem out of place is her well-worn, well-loved pair of red Chuck Taylors. Lindsey was wearing them the day she tripped a suspect being chased by the police on Market Street, and they've since become a permanent wardrobe fixture.

I laugh. Sometimes it's the only option with her. "Consequences. Like happiness? Or love? You're right, who'd want a thing like tha—"

"There he is," she says.

"Max?" I swivel mid-spray, barely missing her sneakers in my excitement.

"Watch it, Ned." She slides aside. "Not everyone wants shoes the color of a school bus."

But she's not talking about my boyfriend. My heart plummets to discover Cricket Bell waiting to cross the street.

"Oh, man. You got it on the porch."

"What?" My attention jerks back. Sure enough, there's an unsightly splotch of yellow beside the newspaper I'd spread out to protect the wood. I grab the wet rag I brought outside, for this very purpose, and scrub. I groan. "Nathan's gonna kill me."

"Still hasn't forgiven you for dyeing the grout in his bathroom black?"

The splotch smears and grows larger. "What do you think?"

She's staring at Cricket again. "Why didn't you tell me he was so . . ."

"Tall?" I scour harder. "Unwanted?"

". . . colorful."

I look up. Cricket is striding across the street, his long arms swinging with each step. He's wearing skinny mailmanesque pants with a red stripe down the side seam. They're a tad short—purposely, I can tell—exposing matching red socks and pointy shoes. His movements suddenly become exaggerated, and he hums an unrecognizable tune. Cricket Bell knows he has an audience.

There's a familiar clenching in my stomach.

"He's coming over," Lindsey says. "What do you want me to do? Kick him in the balls? I've been dying to kick him in the balls."

“Nothing,” I hiss back. “I’ll handle it.”

“How?”

I cough at her as he leaps up the stairs with the ease of a gazelle. “Lola!” His smile is ear to ear. “Funny meeting you here.”

“Funny that. You being on her porch and all,” Lindsey says.

“*Your* house?” Cricket stumbles back down the top steps and widens his eyes dramatically. “They all look so similar.”

We stare at him.

“It’s good to see you again, Lindsey,” he adds after a moment. Now there’s a touch of genuine embarrassment. “I just passed your parents’ restaurant, and it was packed. That’s great.”

“Huh,” she says.

“What are you doing here?” I blurt.

“I live here. Not here-here, but there-here.” He points next door. “Occasionally. On the weekends. Well, my parents told me they set up my bed, so I assume it’s a go.”

“They did. I saw them move it in yesterday,” I say, despite myself. “There still aren’t any curtains on your window,” I add, not wanting him to think that I’ve been *purposefully* watching his room.

One hand fiddles with the bracelets on his other. “Now, that’s a shame. Promise you won’t laugh when you see me in my underwear.”

Lindsey’s eyebrows raise.

“I cut a pathetic figure undressed,” he continues. “Dressed, too, for that matter. Or half dressed. One sock on, one sock off. Just a hat. No hat. You can stop me at any time, you know. Feel free to tell me to shut up.”

“Shut up, Cricket,” I say.

“Thanks. Did you dye your hair? Because you weren’t blond last weekend. Oh, it’s a wig, isn’t it?”

“Ye—”

“Hey, cool shoes. I’ve never seen boots that color before. Except rain boots, of course, but those aren’t rain boots.”

“No—”

The front door opens, and Andy appears in a white apron. He’s holding a flour-dusted wooden spoon as if it were an extension of his arm. “Could I persuade you ladies to sample—”

Cricket pops back onto the porch and stretches his lengthy torso between Lindsey and me to shake my dad’s hand. “It’s nice to see you again, Mr. Nolan. How are you?”

Lindsey mouths, *What’s he been smoking?*

I'm as baffled as she is. He's like Cricket times ten.

"I'm good." Andy glances at me, trying to determine if he should throw him off our property. I give my dad the smallest shake of my head, and he turns his attention back to Cricket. Which, frankly, would be impossible not to do, considering the sheer energy radiating off him. "And you? Still inventing mysterious and wondrous objects?"

"Ah." Cricket hesitates. "There's not really a market for that sort of thing these days. But I hear you're running a successful pie operation?"

My father looks flattered that the news has spread. "I was just about to ask the girls if they'd mind testing a new pie. Would you like a slice?"

"I would *love* a slice." And he springs ahead of Andy, who follows him inside.

The porch is silent. I turn to Lindsey. "What just happened?"

"Your father invited the former love of your life in for pie."

"Yeah. That's what I thought."

We're quiet for a moment.

"There's still time for an excuse," she says. "We don't have to go in there."

I sigh. "No, we really do."

"Good. Because that guy demands observation." And she marches inside.

I take another look at the paint splotch and find that it's dried. Crap. I spray the last side of my shoes, move the project where it won't get tripped on, and head inside for whatever torture awaits me. They're standing around one of the islands in our kitchen. We have an unusually large kitchen for the city, because my parents removed the dining room to add space for Andy's business. Everyone already has a plate of pie and a glass of milk.

"Unbelievable." Cricket wipes the crumbs from his lips with his long fingers. "I would have never thought to put kiwi in a pie."

Andy spots me hovering in the doorway. "Better hurry before this one eats it all." He nods toward his guest. Outwardly, my dad is collected, but I can tell that inside he's gloaty beyond belief. How quickly one's allegiance changes under the influence of a compliment. I smile as if none of this is a big deal. But I'm *freaking out*. Cricket Bell. In my kitchen. Eating kiwi pie. And then I take the empty space beside him, and I'm stunned *again* by his extraordinary height. He towers over me.

Andy points his fork at the other half of the green pie. "Have the rest, Cricket."

"Oh, no. I couldn't." But his brightened eyes suggest otherwise.

"I insist." My dad nudges the dish toward him. "Nathan's always complaining that I'm trying to make him fat, so it'll be better if it's gone before he comes

home.”

Cricket turns to me with his entire body—head, shoulders, chest, arms, legs. There are no half gestures with Cricket Bell. “Another slice?”

I motion toward the piece in front of me, which I haven’t even started.

“Lindsey?” he asks.

She shakes her head. “I’m not exactly pie-deprived, visiting here so often.”

Why is he here? Isn’t there some campus party he should be at? The more I think about it, the more incensed I become. How dare he show up and expect me to be friendly? People can’t just *do* that.

“How’s your family?” Andy asks.

Cricket swallows. “They’re good. My parents are the same. Dad’s a little too exhausted, Mom’s a little too enthusiastic. But they’re good. And Cal is busy training, of course. It’s a big year with the Olympics coming up. And Aleck is married now.”

“Is he still composing?” Andy asks. Alexander, or Aleck as dictated by the family nickname, is the twins’ older brother. He was already in high school when Calliope started training, so he escaped most of the family drama. I never knew him well, but I do vividly recall the complicated piano concertos that used to glide through our walls. All three Bells could be considered prodigies in their fields.

“And teaching,” Cricket confirms. “And he had his first child last year.”

“Boy or girl?” Lindsey asks.

“A girl. Abigail.”

“Uncle . . . Cricket,” I say.

Lindsey and Andy both let out an uncontrolled snort, but Andy instantly looks horrified for doing it. He glares at me. “*Lola.*”

“No, it’s okay,” Cricket says. “It’s completely ridiculous.”

“I’m sorry,” I say.

“No, please. Don’t be.” But there’s a catch in his voice, and he says it so quickly that I look at him in surprise. For the briefest moment, our eyes lock. There’s a flash of pain, and he turns away. He hasn’t forgotten.

Cricket Bell remembers everything.

My face burns. Without thinking, I push away my plate. “I need to . . . get ready for work.”

“Come on.” Lindsey grabs my hand. “You’ll be late.”

Andy glances at the Frida Kahlo wall calendar where I post my schedule. He frowns toward Frida’s unibrow. “You didn’t write it down.”

Lindsey is already pulling me upstairs. “I’m covering for someone!” I say.

“Am I supposed to pick you up?” he hollers.

I lean over the banister and look into the kitchen. Cricket is staring at me, parted mouth and furrowed brow. His difficult equation face. As if *I'm* the problem, not him. I rip away my gaze. "Yeah, the usual time. Thanks, Dad."

Lindsey and I run the rest of the way into my bedroom. She locks my door. "What'll you do?" Her voice is low and calm.

"About Cricket?"

She reaches underneath my bed and pulls out the polyester vest. "No. Work."

I search for the remaining pieces of my uniform, trying not to cry. "I'll go to Max's. He can drive me to work before Andy gets there."

"Okay." She nods. "That's a good plan."

It's the night before school starts, and I'm working for real this time. Anna and I—and her boyfriend, of course—are inside the box office. The main lobby of our theater is enormous. Eight box-office registers underneath a twenty-five-foot ceiling of carved geometric crosses and stars. Giant white pillars and dark wooden trim add to the historic opulence and mark the building as not originally a chain movie theater. Its first incarnation was a swanky hotel, the second a ritzy automobile showroom.

It's another slow evening. Anna is writing in a battered, left-handed notebook while St. Clair and I argue across the full length of the box office. She just got another part-time job, unpaid, writing movie reviews for her university's newspaper. Since she's a freshman, they're only giving her the crappy movies. But she doesn't mind. "It's fun to write a review if you hate the movie," she told me earlier. "It's easy to talk about things we hate, but sometimes it's hard to explain exactly why we like something."

"I know you like him," St. Clair says to me, leaning back in his chair. "But he's still far too old for you."

Here we go again. "Max isn't *old*," I say. "He's only a few years older than you."

"Like I said. Too old."

"Age doesn't matter."

He snorts. "Yeah, maybe when you're middle-aged and—"

"Golfing," Anna helpfully supplies, without looking up from her notebook.

"Paying the mortgage," he says.

"Shopping for minivans."

"With side air bags."

"And extra cup holders!"

I ignore their laughter. "You've never even met him."

"Because he never comes in here. He drops you off at the curb," St. Clair

says.

I throw up my hands, which I've been mehndi-ing with a Bic pen. "Do you have any idea how difficult it is to park in this city?"

"I'm just saying that if it were Anna, I'd want to meet her coworkers. See where she's spending her time."

I stare at him, hard. "*Obviously.*"

"Obviously." He grins.

I scowl back. "Get a job."

"Perhaps I will."

Anna finally looks up. "I'll believe that when I see it." But she's smiling at him. She twirls the glass banana on her necklace. "Oh, hey. Your mom called. She wanted to know if we're still on for dinner tomorrow—"

And they're off in their own world again. As if they don't see each other enough as it is. He stays in her dorm on weekdays, and she stays in his on weekends. Though I do admit that their trade-off is appealing. I hope Max and I share something like it someday. Actually, I hope Max and I share *one* place someday—

"Oy!" St. Clair is talking to me again. "I met your friend today."

"Lindsey?" I sit up straighter.

"No, your old neighbor. Cricket."

The ornamental ceiling tilts and bends. "And how do you know that Cricket Bell was my neighbor?" My question is strangled.

St. Clair shrugs. "He told me."

I stare at him. *And?*

"He lives on my floor in my dorm. We were talking in the hall, and I mentioned that I was on my way to meet Anna, and where she works—"

His girlfriend beams, and I'm struck by a peculiar twinge of jealousy. Does Max tell people about me?

"—and he said he knew someone who worked here, too. You."

One week, and already I can't escape him. It's just my luck that Cricket would live beside my only Berkeley acquaintance. And how does he know where I work? Did I mention the theater? No. I'm positive that I didn't. He must have asked Andy after I left.

"He asked about you," St. Clair continues. "Nice bloke."

"Huh," I finally manage.

"There's a story behind that *huh*," Anna says.

"There's no story," I say. "There is definitely NOT a story."

Anna pauses in consideration before turning toward St. Clair. "Would you mind making a coffee run?"

He raises an eyebrow. After a moment, he says, “Ah. Of course.” He swoops in for a kiss goodbye, and then she watches his backside leave before turning to me with a mischievous smile.

I huff. “You’ll just tell him later, when you guys are alone.”

Her smile widens. “Yep.”

“Then no way.”

“Dude.” Anna slides into the seat beside me. “You’re dying to spill it.”

She’s right. I spill it.

chapter six

When I was five years old, Cricket Bell built an elevator. It was a marvelous invention made from white string and Tonka truck wheels and a child-size shoe box, and because of it, my Barbies traveled from the first floor of their dollhouse to the second without ever having to walk on their abnormally slanted feet.

The house was built in my bookcase, and I'd desired an elevator for as long as I could remember. The official Barbie Dream House had one made of plastic, but as often as I begged my parents, they wouldn't budge. No Dream House. Too expensive.

So Cricket took it upon himself to make one for me. And while Calliope and I decorated my bookcase with lamp shades made from toothpaste caps and Persian rugs made from carpet samples, Cricket created a working elevator. Pulleys and levers and gears come to him as naturally as breathing.

The elevator had completed its first run. Pet Doctor Barbie was enjoying the second floor and Calliope was pulling down the elevator to fetch Skipper, when I stood on my tiptoes, puckered my lips, and planted one on her very surprised brother.

Cricket Bell kissed me back.

He tasted like the warm cookies that Andy had brought us. His lips were dusted with blue sugar crystals. And when we parted, he staggered.

But our romance was as quick as our kiss. Calliope proclaimed us "grody" and flounced back to their house, dragging Cricket behind her. And I decided she was right. Because Calliope was the kind of girl you wanted to impress, which meant that she was *always* right. So I decided that boys were gross, and I would never date one.

Certainly not her brother.

Not long after the elevator incident, Calliope decided that I was grody, too, and my friendship with the twins ended. I imagine Cricket complied with the arrangement in the easy way of anyone under the sway of someone with a stronger personality.

For several years, we didn't talk. Contact was limited to hearing their car doors slam and glimpsing them through windows. Calliope had always been a talented gymnast, but the day she switched to figure skating, she burst into a different league altogether. Her parents bragged to mine about *potential*, and her life turned into one long practice session. And Cricket, too young to stay at home without a parent, went with her.

On the rare occasions that he *was* at home, he busied himself inside his bedroom, building peculiar contraptions that flew and chimed and buzzed. Sometimes he'd test one in the small space between our houses. I'd hear an explosion that would bring me racing to my window. And then, but only then, would we exchange friendly, secretive smiles.

When I was twelve, the Bell family moved away for two years. Training for Calliope. And when they came back, the twins were different. Older.

Calliope had blossomed into the beauty our neighborhood had expected. Confidence radiated from every pore, every squaring of her shoulders. I was awed. Too intimidated to talk to her, but I chatted occasionally with Cricket. He wasn't beautiful like his sister. Where the twins' matching slenderness made Calliope look ballet-esque, Cricket looked gawky. And he had acne and the peculiar habits of someone unused to socializing. He talked too fast, too much. But I enjoyed his company, and he appeared to enjoy mine. We were on the verge of actual friendship when the Bells moved again.

They returned only a few months later, on the first day of summer before my freshman year. I would be turning fifteen that August, and the twins sixteen that September. Calliope looked exactly as she had before they left.

But, once again, Cricket had changed.

Lindsey and I were on my porch, licking Cherry Garcia in waffle cones, when a car pulled up next door and out stepped Cricket Bell as I'd never seen him before—one beautifully long pinstriped leg after another.

Something deep inside of me *lurched*.

The stirring was as startling and unpleasant as it was thrilling and revolutionary. I already knew that this image—his legs, those pants—would be imprinted in my mind for the rest of my life. The moment was that profound. Lindsey called out a sunny hello. Cricket looked up, disconcerted, and his eyes met mine.

That was it. I was gone.

We held our gaze longer than the acceptable, normal amount of time before he shifted to Lindsey and raised one hand in a quiet wave. His family materialized from the car, everyone talking at once, and his attention jerked back to them. But not without another glance toward me. And then another, even quicker, before disappearing into the lavender Victorian.

I took Lindsey's hand and gripped it tightly. Our fingers were sticky with ice cream. She knew. Everything that needed to be said was spoken in the way I held on to her.

She smiled. "Uh-oh."

Verbal contact happened that same night. The odd thing is that I no longer

remember what I wore, but I know I chose it carefully, anticipating a meeting. When I finally pulled aside my curtains, I wasn't surprised to discover him standing before his window, staring into mine. Of course he was. But he was taken aback by my appearance. Even his hair seemed more startled than usual.

"I was . . . getting some fresh air," I said.

"Me, too." Cricket nodded and added a great, exaggerated inhalation.

I'm still not sure if it was a joke, but I laughed. He gave me a nervous smile in return, which quickly broke into his fullwattage grin. He's never had any control over it. Up close, I saw that his acne had disappeared, and his face had grown older. We stood there, smiling like fools. What do you say to someone who is not the same and yet completely the same? Had I changed, too, or had it just been him?

Cricket ducked away first. Some excuse about helping his mom unpack dishes. I vowed to initiate a real conversation the next day, but . . . his close proximity fizzled my brain, tied my tongue. He didn't fare any better.

So we waved.

We'd never waved through our windows before, but it was unavoidably clear that we were aware of each other's presence. So we were forced to acknowledge each other all day and all night, still having nothing to say but wanting to say *everything*.

It took weeks before this torturous situation changed. Betsy and I were leaving the house as he was strolling home, those pinstriped pants and his hair looking like it was trying to touch the sky.

We stopped shyly.

"It's nice to see you," he said. "Outside. Instead of inside. You know."

I smiled so that he'd know I knew. "I'm taking her for a walk. You wouldn't want to join—"

"Yes."

"—us?" My heart thrummed.

Cricket looked away. "Yeah, we could catch up. Should catch up."

I looked away, too, trying to control my blush. "Do you need to drop that off?"

He was carrying a paper bag from the hardware store. "OH. Yeah. Hold on." Cricket shot up his stairs but then stopped halfway. "Wait right there," he added. He bounded inside and came back only seconds later. He held out two Blow Pops.

"It's so lame," he said. "I'm sorry."

"No, I love these!" And then I did blush, for using the word *love*.

Our tongues turned green-apple green, but we talked for so long that by the

time we returned home, they were pink again. The feeling inside of me grew. We began bumping into each other at the same time every afternoon. He'd pretend to be running an errand, I'd pretend to be surprised, and then he'd join Betsy and me on our walk.

One day, he didn't appear. I paused before his house, disappointed, and looked up and down our street. Betsy strained forward on her leash. The Bells' door burst open, and Cricket flew down so quickly that he almost toppled into me.

I smiled. "You're late."

"You waited." He wrung his hands.

We stopped pretending.

Cricket defined the hours of my day. The hour I opened my curtains—the same time he opened his—so that we could share a morning hello. The hour I ate my lunch so that I could watch him eat his. The hour I left my house for our walk. The hour I called Lindsey to dissect our walk. And the hour after dinner when Cricket and I chatted before closing our curtains again.

At night, I lay in bed and pictured him lying in his. Was he thinking about me, too? Did he imagine sneaking into my bedroom like I imagined sneaking into his? If we were alone in the dark instead of daylight, would he find the courage to kiss me? I wanted him to kiss me. He was the boy. He was *supposed* to make the first move.

Why wasn't he making the first move? How long would I have to wait?

These feverish thoughts kept me awake all summer. I'd rise in the morning, covered in sweat, with no recollection of when I'd finally fallen asleep and no recollection of my dreams, apart from three words echoing in my head, in his voice. *I need you.*

Need.

What a powerful, frightening word. It represented my feelings toward him, but every night, my dreams placed it inside his mouth.

I needed him to touch me. I was obsessed with the way his hands never stopped moving. The way he rubbed them together when he was excited, the way he sometimes couldn't help but clap. The way he had secret messages written on the back of his left. And his fingers. Long, enthusiastic, wild, but I knew from watching him build his machines that they were also delicate, careful, precise. I fantasized about those fingers.

And I was consumed by the way that whenever he spoke, his eyes twinkled as if it were the best day of his life. And the way his whole body leaned toward mine when I spoke, a gesture that showed he was interested, he was listening. No one had ever moved their body to face me like that.

The summer sprawled forward, each day more agonizing and wonderful than the last. He began hanging out with Lindsey and my parents, even with Norah, when she was around. He was entering my world. But every time I tried to enter his, Calliope was hostile. Cold. Sometimes she pretended that I wasn't in the room, sometimes she'd even leave while I was speaking. This was the first time he'd chosen someone over her, and she resented me for it. I was stealing her best friend. I was a threat.

Rather than confront her, we retreated to the safety of my house.

But . . . he still wasn't making any moves. Lindsey supposed he was waiting for the right moment, something significant. Maybe my birthday. His is exactly one month after mine, also on the twentieth, so he'd always remembered. That morning, I was heartened to see a sign taped to his glass: HAPPY LOLA DAY! WE'RE THE SAME AGE AGAIN!

I leaned out my window. "For a month!"

He appeared with a smile, his hands rubbing together. "It's a good month."

"You'll forget about me when you turn sixteen," I teased.

"Impossible." His voice cracked on the word, and it shook my heart.

Andy took over Betsy's afternoon walk so that we could have complete freedom. Cricket greeted me at the usual time, raising two pizza boxes over his head. I was about to say I was still stuffed from lunch when . . . "Are those empty or full?" My question was sly. I had a feeling this wasn't about pizza.

He opened up a box and smiled. "Empty."

"I haven't been there in years!"

"Same here. Calliope and I were probably with you the last time I went."

We took off running down the hill, toward the park at the other end of our street—the one that barely counted because it was tiny and sandwiched between two houses—back up another hill, past the spray-painted sign warning NO ADULTS ALLOWED UNLESS ACCOMPANIED BY CHILDREN, and to the top of the Seward Street slides.

"Oh God." I had a jolt of terror. "Were they always this steep?"

Cricket unfolded the boxes and laid them long and greasy side down, one on each narrow concrete slide. "I claim left."

I sat down on my box. "Sucks to be you. The right side is faster."

"No way! The left side always wins."

"Says the guy who hasn't been here since he was six. Keep your arms tucked in."

He grinned. "There's no way I've forgotten *those* scrapes and burns."

On the count of three, we took off. The slides are short and fast, and we flew to the bottom, holding in our screams so as not to disturb the Seward Witch, the

mean old lady who shouted obscenities at people enjoying themselves too loudly and just another reason why the slides were so much fun. Cricket's feet flew off first, followed quickly by his bottom. He hit the ground with a *smack* that had us rolling with laughter.

"I think my ass is actually smoking," he said.

I bit down the obvious comment, that his pants had made this fact abundantly clear in June.

We stayed for half an hour, sharing the slides with two guys in their twenties who were high and a playgroup of moms and preschoolers. We were waiting behind the moms, about to go down for the last time, when I heard snickering. I looked over my shoulder and discovered the arrival of three girls from school. My heart sank.

"Nice dress," Marta Velazquez said. "Is it your mommy's?"

I was wearing a vintage polka-dot swing dress—two sizes too large that I'd tightened with safety pins—over a longsleeved striped shirt and jeans rolled greaser-style. I wanted to look pretty for my birthday.

I no longer felt pretty.

Cricket turned around, confused. And then . . . he did something that changed everything. He stepped deliberately in front of them and blocked my view. "Don't listen to them. I like how you dress."

He liked me just as I was.

I sat down quietly on my pizza box. "It's our turn."

But what I ached to say was, *I need you*.

On the walk home, he had me joking and laughing about the people who'd tormented me for years. I finally realized how absurd it was that I'd worried so much about what my classmates thought about me. It's not like I wanted to look like *them*.

"Cricket!" Andy said, when he saw us approaching. "You're coming over for the birthday dinner, right?"

I looked at Cricket hopefully. He put his hands in his pockets. "Sure."

It was simple and perfect. My only guests were Nathan, Andy, Lindsey, and Cricket. We ate Margherita pizza, followed by an extravagant cake shaped like a crown. I ate the first piece, Cricket ate the biggest. Afterward, I walked my friends outside. Lindsey gave me a nudge in the back and disappeared.

Cricket shuffled his feet. "I'm not great with gifts."

My heart leaped. But instead of a kiss, he removed a fistful of watch parts and candy wrappers from his pocket. Cricket sifted through the pile until he found a soda-bottle cap, metallic pink. He held it up. "Your first."

Perhaps most girls would've been disappointed, but I am not most girls. We'd

recently seen a belt made out of bottle caps in a store window, and I'd said that I wanted to make one. "You remembered!"

Cricket smiled in relief. "I thought it was a good one. Colorful." And as he placed it in my open palm, I reread the message scrawled onto the back of his hand for the hundredth time that day: FUSE NOW.

This was the moment.

I gripped the cap and stepped forward. His breathing quickened. So did mine.

"You promised you'd be there!"

We jumped apart. Calliope was on the porch next door, seemingly on the verge of tears. "I needed you, and you weren't there."

An unmistakable flash of panic in his eyes. "Oh God, Cal. I can't believe I forgot."

She was wearing a delicate cardigan, but the way she crossed her arms was anything but soft. "You've been forgetting a lot of things lately."

"I'm sorry. It slipped my mind, I'm so sorry." He tried to shake the wrappers and watch parts back into his pocket, but they spilled onto my porch.

"Smooth, Cricket." She looked at me and scowled. "I don't know why you're wasting your time."

But she was still talking to *him*.

"Thanks for dinner," he mumbled, shoving everything back into his pockets. "Happy birthday." He left without looking at me. From their porch, Calliope was still glaring. I felt slapped in the face. Ashamed. I didn't have anything to be ashamed about, but she had that effect. If she wanted you to feel something, you would.

Later, Cricket told me that he was supposed to have gone to some meeting. He was vague about it. After that, it was as if we'd taken a small step backward. We started school. He hung out with Lindsey and me, while Calliope made new friends. There was a quiet tension between the twins. Cricket didn't talk about it, but I knew he was upset.

One Friday after school, he showed me a video of the Swiss Jolly Ball—a mechanical wonder he'd seen while visiting a museum in Chicago. I hadn't been inside his house since Calliope's icy behavior at the beginning of summer. I'd hoped this was an excuse to go into his bedroom, but his laptop was in the living room. He sat on one side of a love seat, leaving space to sit beside him. Was it an invitation? Or a gesture of kindness, in that he was offering me the room's larger couch?

WHY WAS THIS SO HARD?

I took a chance and sat beside him. Cricket pulled up the video, and I scooted closer, under the guise of seeing it better. I couldn't concentrate, but as the

machine's silver ball shot through tunnels, set off whistles, and zoomed across tracks, I laughed in delight anyway. I inched closer until I was in the dip between the cushions. I smelled the faintest twinge of his sweat, but it wasn't bad. It was very far from bad. And then the side of my hand brushed the side of his, and my heart *collapsed*.

He was very still.

I cleared my throat. "Are you doing anything special for your birthday tomorrow?"

"No." He moved his hand into his lap, flustered. "Nothing. I'm not doing anything."

"Okay . . ." I stared at his hand.

"Actually, Calliope has some skating thing. So it'll be another afternoon of bad rink food, skating vendors, and squealing girls."

Was that an excuse to avoid me? Had I been wrong this whole time? I went home upset and called Lindsey. "No way," she said. "He likes you."

"You didn't see him. He's been acting so weird and cagey."

But the next morning, I met up with Lindsey to find a present for him. I wasn't ready to give up. I *couldn't* give up. I knew he needed an obscurely sized wrench for a project, and I also knew he was having trouble finding it online. We spent the entire day hunting the city's specialty shops, and as I walked home that night so proud of procuring one, I felt a nervous hope again. And then I saw it.

A party in full swing.

The Bell house was loud and packed, and there were strings of tiki lights hanging in their bay windows. This wasn't a party that happened at the last second. It was a planned party. A planned party that I had not been invited to.

I froze there, devastated, holding the tiny wrench and taking in the spectacle. A pack of girls rushed past me and up the stairs. How had the twins made so many new friends so quickly? The girls knocked on the door, and Calliope opened it and greeted them with happy laughter. They moved past her and into the house. And that's when she saw me, staring up from the sidewalk.

She paused, and then made a face. "So what? Too good for our party?"

"Wh-what?"

"You know, after spending so much time with my brother, it seems like the least you could do is pop your head in and wish him a happy birthday."

My mind reeled. "I wasn't invited."

Calliope's expression changed to surprise. "But Cricket said you couldn't come."

Explosion. *Pain*. "I . . . he didn't ask. No."

“Huh.” She eyed me nervously. “Well. Bye.”

The lavender door slammed shut. I stared at it, burning with hurt and humiliation. Why didn't he want me at his party? I stumbled inside my house, yanked my curtains closed, and burst into racking sobs. What happened? What was wrong with me? Why didn't he like me anymore?

His light turned on at midnight. He called my name.

I tried to focus on the catastrophic blow inside my chest. He called my name again. I wanted to ignore him, but how could I? I opened my window.

Cricket stared at his feet. “So, um, what did you do tonight?”

“Nothing.” My voice was curt as I threw back his own words. “I didn't do anything.”

He looked upset. It only made me despise him more, for trying to make *me* feel guilty. “Good night.” I started to close my window.

“Wait!” He yanked at his hair, pulling it taller. “I—I just found out that I'm moving.”

It felt as if I'd been knocked in the skull. I blinked, startled to discover fresh tears. “You're leaving? Again?”

“Monday.”

“Two DAYS from now?” Why couldn't I stop crying? I was such an idiot!

“Calliope is going back to her last coach.” He sounded helpless. “It's not working out here.”

“Is *everything* not working out here?” I blurted. “There's *nothing* you want to say to me before you leave?”

Cricket's mouth parted, but it remained silent. His difficult equation face. A full minute passed, maybe two. “At least we have that in common,” I finally said. “There's nothing I want to say to you either.”

And I slammed my window closed.

chapter seven

He was doing it right there in the open!" I say. "I'm serious, Charlie was admiring your derriere in chemistry."

Lindsey brushes it off. "Even if he was, which I sincerely doubt, you know my policy. No guys—"

"Until graduation. I just thought that since it was Charlie . . . and since his eyes *did* follow you across the room . . ."

"No." And she takes a ferocious bite of her almond-butter-and-jelly sandwich to end the conversation. I hold up my hands in a gesture of peace. I know better than to keep arguing, even if she has had a silent crush on Charlie Harrison-Ming ever since he won twice as many points as her in last year's Quiz Bowl.

Our first week as juniors at Harvey Milk Memorial High has been as expected. The same boring classes, the same nasty mean girls, and the same perverted jerks. At least Lindsey and I have lunch together. That helps.

"Hey, Cleopatra. Wanna take a ride down my Nile?"

Speaking of jerks. Gregory Figson bumps knuckles with a muscled friend. I'm wearing a long black wig with straight bangs, a white dress I made from a bedsheet, chunky golden jewelry, and—of course—ancient Egyptian eyes drawn in kohl.

"No," I say flatly.

Gregory grabs his chest with both hands. "Nice pyramids," he says, and they swagger away, laughing.

"Just when I thought he couldn't get any more disgusting." I set down my veggie burger, appetite eliminated.

"And as if I needed another reason to wait," Lindsey says. "High school boys are morons."

"Which is why I don't date high school boys. I date men."

Lindsey rolls her eyes. Her main reason for waiting to date is that she believes it'll get in the way of her agenda. *Agenda* is her term, not mine. She thinks guys are a distraction from her educational goals, so she doesn't want to date until she's firmly settled in post-high-school life. I respect her decision, even though I'd rather wear sweatpants in public than give up my boyfriend.

Or give up my first opportunity to attend the winter formal. It's for upperclassmen only, and it's still months away, but I'm thrilled about my Marie Antoinette dress, which I've already started collecting materials for. Shimmering silk dupioni and crisp taffeta. Smooth satin ribbon. Delicate ostrich feathers and

ornate crystal jewelry. I've never attempted a project this complex, this huge, and it'll take my entire autumn to create.

I decide to begin when I get home. It's Friday, and for once I don't have to work. Also, Amphetamine is playing in a club tonight that doesn't accept anyone under twenty-one. And won't allow Max to sneak me in.

From everything I've read online, I need to start with the undergarments.

I've already bought a ton of fabric for the dress, but the costume still has to be built from the inside out so that when I take the measurements for the actual gown, I can take them over the bulky stays (an eighteenth-century word for corset) and the giant panniers (the oval-shaped hoop skirts Marie and her ladies wore).

I search for hours for instructions on making historically accurate panniers and come up with zilch. Unless I want to make them with hula hoops, and I don't, I'll have to go to the library for more research. Searching for stays brings more success. The diagrams and instructions are overwhelming, but I print out several pages and begin taking measurements and creating a pattern.

I've been sewing for three years, and I'm pretty decent. I started with the small stuff, like everyone does—hemming, A-line skirts, pillowcases—but quickly moved on to bigger items, each more complex than the last. I'm not interested in making what's easy.

I'm interested in making what's beautiful.

I lose myself in the process: tracing out patterns on tissue paper, fitting them together, retracing, and refitting. Nonsewers don't realize how much problem solving goes into garment making, and beginners often quit in frustration. But I enjoy the puzzle. If I looked at this dress as one massive *thing*, it would be too overwhelming. No one could create such a gown. But by breaking it into tiny, individual steps, it becomes something I can achieve.

When my room finally grows too dark, I'm forced to rise from the floor and plug in my twinkle lights. I stretch my sore muscles and stare at my window.

Will he come home this weekend?

The idea fills me with unease. I don't understand why he's been asking Andy and St. Clair questions about me. There are only three possible solutions, each more improbable than the last. Maybe he's not making friends at school and, for some twisted reason, has decided I'd make a decent pal again. I mean, he's come home for the last two weekends. Obviously no one is interesting enough to keep him in Berkeley. Or maybe he feels bad about how things ended between us, and he's trying to make up for it. Clear his conscience.

Or . . . maybe . . . he likes me. In that other way.

I was fine before he came back, perfectly happy without this complication. It would've been better if he'd ignored me. Calliope and I haven't talked yet; there's no reason why Cricket and I should have to either. I drift toward my window, and I'm surprised to discover striped curtains hanging in his room.

And then his light turns on.

I yank my curtains closed. My heart pounds as I back against the wall. Through the gap between curtain fabrics, I watch a silhouette that is undeniably Cricket Bell toss two bags to his floor—one shoulder bag and one laundry bag. He moves toward our windows, and dread lurches inside of me. What if he calls my name?

There's a sudden brightness as he pulls back his own curtains. His body changes from a dark shadow into a fully fleshed human. I slink back farther. He pauses there, and then startles as another figure enters his room. I can barely hear the sound of a girl talking. Calliope.

I can't hide forever. My curtains are thick, and I need to trust them. I take a deep breath and step away, but I trip backward over my project and tear a pattern. I curse. Laughter comes from next door, and for one panicked second, I think they've witnessed my clumsy maneuver. But it's paranoia talking. Whatever they're laughing about has nothing to do with me. I hate that they can still get to me like that.

I know what I need. I call him, and he picks up just before his voice mail.

"HEY," Max says.

"Hi! How is it tonight? When are you guys going on?" The club is loud, and I can't hear his response. "What?"

"[MUFFLE MUFFLE] AFTER ELEVEN [MUFFLE]."

"Oh. Okay." I don't have anything to add. "I miss you."

"[MUFFLE MUFFLE MUFFLE. MUFFLE.]"

"What? I'm sorry, I can't hear you!"

"[MUFFLE MUFFLE] BAD TIME [MUFFLE]."

I assume he's saying he has to go. "Okay! I'll see you tomorrow! Bye!" A click on the other end, and he's gone. I should have texted him. But I don't want to now, because I don't want to bother him. He doesn't like talking before shows.

The call leaves me feeling more cold than comforted. The laughter continues next door, and I resist the urge to throw my sewing shears at Cricket's window to make them shut up. My phone rings, and I answer eagerly. "Max!"

"I need you to tell Nathan to come get me."

Not Max.

"Where are you?" I'm already hustling downstairs. Nathan is crashed in front

of the television, eyes half closed, watching *Antiques Roadshow* with Heavens to Betsy. “Why can’t you tell him yourself?”

“Because he’s gonna be pissed, and I can’t deal with pissed right now.” The voice is cranky and exhausted.

I stop dead in my tracks. “Not again.”

“Landlord changed my locks, so I was forced to break into my apartment. My own apartment. They’re calling it an incident.”

“Incident?” I ask, and Dad’s eyes pop open. I thrust out my phone to him without waiting for a response, disgusted. “Norah needs you to bail her out.”

Nathan swears and grabs my cell. “Where are you? What happened?” He pulls answers from her as he collects his car keys and throws on his shoes. “I’m taking your phone, okay?” he says to me. “Tell Andy where I’m going.” And he’s out the door.

This is not the first time my birth mother has called us from a police station. Norah has a long record, and it’s always for stupid things like shoplifting organic frozen enchiladas or refusing to pay fines from the transit authority. When I was young, the charges were usually public intoxication or disorderly conduct. And believe me, a person has to be pretty darn intoxicated or disorderly to get arrested in this city.

Andy takes the news silently. Our relationship with Norah is hard on everyone, but perhaps it’s hardest on him. She’s neither his sister nor his mother. I know a part of him wishes we could ditch her entirely. A part of me wishes that, too.

When I was little, the Bell twins asked me why I didn’t have a mom. I told them that she was the princess of Pakistan—I’d overheard the name on the news and thought it sounded pretty—and she gave me to my parents, because I was a secret baby with the palace gardener, and her husband, the evil prince, would kill us if he knew I existed.

“So you’re a princess?” Calliope asked.

“No. My mom is a princess.”

“That means you’re a princess, too,” Cricket said, awed.

Calliope narrowed her eyes. “She’s not a princess. There’s no such thing as evil princes or Pakistan.”

“There is, too! And I am!” But I still remember the hot rush of blood I felt when they came back later that afternoon, and I realized I’d been caught.

Calliope crossed her arms. “We know the truth. Our parents told us.”

“Does your mom really not have a house?” Cricket asked. “Is that why you can’t live with her?”

It was one of the most shameful moments of my childhood. So when my

classmates began asking, I kept it simple: “I don’t know who she is. I’ve never met her.” I became a regular adoption story, a boring one. Having two fathers isn’t an issue here. But a few years ago, Cricket and I were watching television when he turned to me and unexpectedly asked, “Why do you pretend like you don’t have a mom?”

I squirmed. “Huh?”

Cricket was messing with a paper clip, bending it into a complicated shape. “I mean, she’s okay now. Right?” He meant sober, and she had been for a year. But she was still Norah.

I just *looked* at him.

And I could see him remembering the past. The Bells had heard my screaming birth mother for years, whenever she’d show up wasted and unannounced.

He lowered his eyes and dropped the subject.

I’m grateful that my genetics don’t bother Max. His father is a mean drunk who lives in a dangerous neighborhood of Oakland, and he doesn’t even know where his mother lives. If anything, Norah makes my relationship with Max stronger. We understand each other.

I leave Andy and head back upstairs. Through my window, I notice Calliope has left Cricket’s bedroom. He’s pacing. My torn pattern mocks me. The sumptuous, pale blue fabrics stacked on my sewing table have lost their luster. I touch them gently. They’re still soft. They still hold the promise of something better.

I’m determined to make up for last night. “Today is all about sparkling.”

Heavens to Betsy cocks her head, listening but not understanding. I place a rhinestone barrette in my pale pink wig. I’m also wearing a sequined prom gown that I’ve altered into a minidress, a jean jacket covered in David Bowie pins, and glittery false eyelashes. I scratch behind Betsy’s ears, and then she trots behind me out of my room. We run into Andy on the stairs, carrying up a basket of clean laundry.

“My eyes!” he says. “The glare!”

“*Très* funny.”

“You look like a disco ball.”

I smile and push past. “I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“When is Max bringing you home?”

“Later!”

Nathan is waiting at the bottom. “When, Dolores? A specific time would be helpful.”

“Your hair is doing the swoopy thing.” I set down my purse to fix it. Nathan

and I have the same hair—thick, medium brown, and with a strange wave in the front that never behaves. No one ever doubts that Nathan and I are related. We also share the same wide brown eyes and childish grin. When we allow ourselves to grin. Andy is more slender than Nathan and keeps his prematurely gray hair cropped short. Still, despite his hair and despite his additional nine years on this planet, everyone thinks Andy is younger because he's the one who's always smiling. And he wears funny T-shirts.

"When?" Nathan repeats.

"Um, four hours?"

"That's five-thirty. I'll expect you home no later."

I sigh. "Yes, Dad."

"And three phone-call check-ins."

"Yes, Dad." I don't know what I did to deserve the world's strictest parents. I must have been seriously hardcore evil in a past life. It's not like I'm Norah. Nathan didn't get home until after midnight. Apparently, her lock was changed because she hasn't been paying rent, and she caused a scene by smashing in her front window with a neighbor's deck chair to get back inside. Nathan is going to visit her landlord today to discuss back payments. And that whole broken window situation.

"All right, then." He nods. "Have a good time. Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

I hear Andy as I'm walking out the front door. "Honey, that threat doesn't work when you're gay."

I laugh all the way down to the sidewalk. My heavy boots, tattooed with swirls of pink glitter to match my wig, leave a trail of fairy dust as I tramp. "You're like a shooting star," a voice calls from the porch next door. "Sparkly."

My cheer is immediately rendered null and void.

Cricket leaps down his stairs and joins me on the sidewalk. "Going somewhere special?" he asks. "You look nice. Sparkly. I already said that, didn't I?"

"You did, thanks. And I'm just going out for a few hours." It's not like he's earned full truths or explanations. Of course, now I feel ashamed for thinking that, so I add with a shrug, "I might hit up Amoeba Records later."

Why does he make me feel guilty? I'm not doing anything wrong. I don't owe him anything. I shake my head—more at myself than at him—and move toward the bus stop. "See ya," I say. I'm meeting Max in the Upper Haight. He can't take me, because he's picking up a surprise first. *A surprise*. I have no idea what it is; it could be a gumball for all I care. The fact that I have a boyfriend who brings me surprises is enough.

I feel Cricket's stare. A pressure against the back of my neck. Truthfully, I wonder why he's not following me. I turn around. "What are you doing today?"

He closes the distance between us in three steps. "I'm not doing anything."

I'm uncomfortable again. "Oh."

He scratches his cheek, and the writing on his hand instructs him to CARPE DIEM. Seize the day. "I mean, I have some homework. But it won't take long. Only an hour. Two at the most."

"Right. Homework." I'm about to say something else equally awkward when I hear the grunt of my approaching bus. "That's me!" I sprint away. Cricket shouts something, but I can't hear it over the blast of exhaust as the bus sags against the curb. I grab a seat next to a bony woman in a paisley smock reading *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*.

I glance out the window. He's still watching me. Our eyes lock, and this time, his smile is shy. For some reason . . . it makes me smile back.

"Ooo," the woman beside me says. "You're sparkly."

chapter eight

I should've wished for the gumball.

"It'll be great for gigs," Max says, with more animation than usual. "You know how bad it was, loading our stuff into three separate cars. The parking in this city, for one thing. Impossible."

"Excellent! Right! Exactly!"

It's a van. Max bought a van. It's big, and it's white, and it's a *van*. As in, it's not a '64 Chevy Impala. As in, my boyfriend traded in his car to buy a van.

He walks around it, admiring its . . . what? Wide expanse? "You know we've wanted to tour the coast. Craig knows some guys in Portland, Johnny knows some guys in L.A. This is what we needed. We can do it now."

"Touring! Wow! Great!"

TOURING. Extended periods of time without Max. Sultry, slinky women in other cities flirting with my boyfriend, reminding him of my inexperience. TOURING.

Max stops. "Lola."

"Hmm?"

"You're doing the girl thing. Saying you're happy, when you're not." He crosses his arms. The spiderwebs tattooed onto his elbows point at me accusingly.

"I'm happy."

"You're pissed, because you think when I leave, I'll meet someone. Someone older."

"I'm not angry." I'm *worried*. And how much do I hate that we've had this conversation before, so he knows exactly what I'm thinking? "I'm . . . surprised. I just liked your old car, that's all. But this is good, too."

He raises a single brow. "You liked my car?"

"I loved your car."

"You know." Max backs me into its side. The metal is cool against my spine. "Vans are good for other things."

"Other things?"

"Other things."

Okay. Maybe this whole van situation isn't a *complete* loss. My hands are in his yellow-white bleached hair, and our lips are smashed against each other, when there's a loud, rude "Got any change, man?"

We break apart to find a guy in head-to-toe dirty patchwork corduroy glaring

at us.

“Sorry,” I say.

“No need to be sorry.” He glowers at me underneath his white-boy dreadlocks. “I’m only fucking starving.”

“ASSHOLE,” Max shouts as the guy slumps off.

San Francisco is positively crawling with homeless. I can’t walk from home to school without running into a dozen. They make me uneasy, because they’re a constant reminder of my origins, but usually I can ignore them. Look past them. Otherwise . . . it’s too exhausting.

But in the Haight, the homeless are passive-aggressive jerks.

I don’t like coming here, but Max has friends who work in the overpriced vintage clothing boutiques, head shops, bookstores, and burrito joints. Despite the psychedelic graffiti and the bohemian window displays, Haight Street—once the mecca of sixties free love—is undeniably rougher and dirtier than the rest of the city.

“Hey. Forget that guy,” Max says.

He sees that I need cheering, so he leads me to the falafel place where we had our first date. Afterward, we wander into a drag shop to try on wigs. He laughs as I pose in an absurd purple beehive. I love his laugh. It’s rare, so whenever I hear it, I know I’ve earned it. He even lets me put one on his head, a blond Marilyn. “Wait till Johnny and Craig see you,” I say, referring to his bandmates.

“I’ll tell them I decided to grow it out.”

“Rogaine works,” I say in my best Max voice.

“Is that another old man joke?” Max laughs again as he tosses back my pale pink wig. “We should go. I told Johnny I’d meet him at three-thirty.”

I tuck my real hair underneath it. “Because you don’t see him enough at home.”

“You rarely see him,” Max says.

Johnny Ocampo—Amphetamine’s drummer, Max’s roommate—works at Amoeba Records, the one thing I do love about this neighborhood. Amoeba is a vast concrete haven of rare vinyl, band posters, and endless rows of CDs in color-coded genre tabs. There’s still something to be said for music you can hold in your hands.

“I was only teasing. Besides,” I add, “you never hang out with Lindsey.”

“Come on, Lo. She’s nosy and immature. It’s weird between us.”

His words are true, but . . . ouch. Sometimes lying is the polite thing to do. I frown. “She’s my best friend.”

“I’d just rather spend time with you.” Max takes my hand. “Alone.”

We’re quiet as we enter Amoeba. Johnny, a pudgy but muscled Filipino, is in

his usual place behind the information desk, which is raised as if the guys behind it hold the end-all truth about Good Musical Taste and Knowledge. Johnny and Max exchange jerks of the head in acknowledgment as Johnny finishes up with a customer. I wave hello to Johnny and disappear into the merchandise.

I listen mainly to rock, but I browse everything, because I never know when I'll discover something that I didn't know I liked. Hip-hop, classical, reggae, punk, opera, electronica. Nothing grabs my attention today, so I wander over to rock. I'm browsing the *Ps* and *Qs*, when the small, invisible hairs on the back of my neck rise. I look up.

And there he is.

Cricket Bell is standing front and center, searching for something. Someone. And then his gaze locks onto mine, and his face alights like the stars. He smiles—a full smile that reaches all the way to his eyes—and it's sweet and pure and hopeful.

And I know what is about to happen.

My palms break into a sweat. *Don't say it. Oh, please God, don't say it.* But this traitorous prayer follows: *Say it. Say it.*

Cricket weaves easily around the other customers as if we're the only two people in the store. The music over the loudspeakers changes from a sparse pop song into a swelling rock symphony. My heart pounds faster and faster. How badly I once wished for this moment. How badly I wish it would end now.

How badly I wish it would continue.

He stops before me, tugging at his bracelets. "I—I hoped I'd find you here."

Blood rushes to my cheeks. NO. This feeling isn't real. It's an old emotion, stirred up to torment and confuse me. I hate that. I hate him!

But it's like I only hate Cricket because I *don't* hate Cricket. I cut my eyes away, down to the Phoenix album in my hands. "I told you I was coming."

"I know. And I couldn't wait any longer, I have to tell you—"

The panic rises, and I grip the French band tighter. "Cricket, please—"

But his words pour forth in a torrent. "I can't stop thinking about you, and I'm not the guy I used to be, I've changed—"

"Cricket—" I look back up, feeling faint.

His blue eyes are bright. Sincere. Desperate. "Go out with me tonight. Tomorrow night, every ni—" The word cuts off in his throat as he sees something behind me.

Cigarettes and spearmint. I want to die.

"This is Max. My boyfriend. Max, this is Cricket Bell."

Max jerks his head in a small nod. He heard everything, there's no way he didn't.

“Cricket is my neighbor.” I turn to Max. “Was my neighbor. Sort of is again.”

My boyfriend squints, almost imperceptibly, as his mind sorts this information. It’s the exact opposite of Cricket, who is at a complete loss to hide his emotions. His face is stricken, and he’s backing up. I doubt he even realizes he’s doing it.

Max’s expression changes again, just slightly. He’s figured out who Cricket is. He knows Cricket Bell must be related to Calliope Bell.

And he knows that I’ve purposely excluded him from our conversations.

Max places an arm around my shoulders. The gesture probably looks casual to Cricket, but Max’s muscles are strained. He’s jealous. The thought should make me happy, but I only see Cricket’s embarrassment. I wish I didn’t care what he thought.

Does this mean we’re even? Is this what being even feels like?

The air between us is as thick as bay fog. I have to act, so I give Cricket a warm smile. “It was nice running into you. See you later, okay?” And then I lead Max away. I can tell my boyfriend wants to say something, but as usual, he’s keeping his thoughts to himself until they’re formed in the exact way he wants them. We walk stiffly, hand in hand, past his friend at the information desk.

I don’t want to look back, but I can’t help it.

He’s staring at me. Staring *through* me. For the first time ever, Cricket Bell looks small. He’s disappearing right before my eyes.

chapter nine

It's embarrassing to admit, but whenever Max and I are on a date, I want to stay out longer, walk farther, talk louder, so more people will see us together. I want to run into every classmate who's ever teased me for wearing pointed elf shoes or beaded moccasins, because I know they'll take one look at Max with his dark eyebrows, inked arms, and bad attitude and know that I'm doing *something* right.

Usually, I'm bursting with pride. But as we trudge back to his new van, I don't notice the face of anyone we pass. Because Cricket Bell asked me out. *Cricket Bell asked me out.* What am I supposed to do with that information?

Max unlocks the passenger-side door and holds it open for me. Neither of us has spoken since we left Amoeba. I mumble a thanks and get in. He climbs in the driver's side, turns the key in the ignition, and then says, "I don't like him."

The flatness of his tone makes my stomach turn. "Cricket? Why?"

"I just don't."

I can't reply. I don't know what I'd say. He doesn't break the silence again until we pass the Castro Theatre's landmark neon sign, only blocks from my house. "Why didn't you tell me about him?"

I look at my hands. "He's not important."

Max waits, jaw tense.

"He just hurt me, that's all. It was a long time ago. I don't like talking about him."

He turns to me, struggling to stay calm. "He hurt you?"

I sink into my seat, wanting anything *but* this conversation. "No. Not like that. We used to be friends, and we had a falling-out, and now he's back, and I'm running into him everywhere—"

"You've run into him before." He's staring at the road again. His knuckles tighten on the steering wheel.

"Just . . . in the neighborhood. He's not important, okay, Max?"

"Seems like a glaring omission to me."

I shake my head. "Cricket means nothing to me, I swear."

"He wants to take you out *every night*, and you expect me to believe there's nothing going on?"

"There's not!"

The van jerks to a halt in front of my house, and Max pounds on the steering wheel. "Tell me the truth, Lola! Why can't you tell me the truth for once?"

My eyes sting with tears. “I *am* telling the truth.”

He stares at me.

“I love you.” I’m getting desperate. He has to believe me. “I don’t love him, I don’t even like him! I love *you*.”

Max closes his eyes for what feels like an eternity. The muscles in his neck are tense and rigid. At last, they relax. He opens his eyes again. “I’m sorry. I love you, too.”

“And you believe me?” My voice is tiny.

He tilts my chin toward his and answers me with a kiss. His lips press hard against mine. I push back even harder against his. When we break apart, he looks deep into my eyes. “I believe you.”

Max speeds away in his van, the Misfits blasting in a musical cloud of dust behind him. I slump. So much for my day off.

“Who was that?”

I startle at the sharp voice behind me. And then I turn to face her for the first time in two years. Her dark hair is pulled back into a tight ponytail, and she’s wearing warm-up clothes. Yet she still manages to look more beautiful than I ever will.

“Hey, Calliope.”

She stares at me as if to say, *Why haven’t you answered my question?*

“That was my boyfriend.”

Calliope looks surprised. “Interesting,” she says, after a moment. And I can tell she is, in fact, interested. “Did my brother find you? He went out looking for you.”

“He did.” I speak the words cautiously. She’s waiting for more, but I’m not giving it to her. I don’t even know what *more* would be. “Nice seeing you again.” I move toward the stairs.

I’m halfway to my front door when she says, “You look different.”

“And you look the same.”

I shut the door, and Nathan is waiting on the other side. “You didn’t call.”

Oh, no.

He’s furious. “You were supposed to check in over an hour ago. I called five times, and it went straight to your voice mail. Where have you been?”

“I forgot. I’m sorry, Dad, I forgot.”

“Was that Max’s van? Did he get a new car?”

“You were WATCHING?”

“I was worried, Lola.”

“SO YOU DECIDED TO SPY ON ME?”

“Do you know why guys buy vans? Do you?”

“TO HOLD THEIR GUITARS AND DRUMS? To go on TOUR?” I storm past him, upstairs and into my bedroom.

My dad pounds up the stairs behind me. “This conversation isn’t over. We have an agreement when you go out with Max. You check in with us.”

“What do you think will happen? Why don’t you trust me?” I rip off the pink wig and throw it across my room. “I’m not getting drunk or doing drugs or breaking windows. I’m not *her*. I’m not Norah.”

I’ve taken it too far. At the mention of his sister, Nathan’s face grows so hurt and twisted that I know I’ve hit bull’s-eye. I brace for him to tear into me. Instead, he turns without a word. Which, somehow, is worse. But it’s his fault for punishing me for things that I haven’t done, for things SHE’S done.

How did this day get so awful? When did this happen?

Cricket.

His name explodes inside of me like cannon fire. I move toward our windows. His curtains are open. The bags he brought home are still on his floor, but there’s no sign of him. What am I supposed to say the next time we see each other? Why won’t he stop ruining my life?

Why does he have to ask me out *now*?

And Max knows about him. It shouldn’t matter, but it does. Max isn’t the type to keep bringing it up, but he is the type to hold on to it. Save it for when he needs it. Did he believe me when I told him that I love him? That I don’t even like Cricket?

Yes, he did.

And I’m in love with Max. So why don’t I know if the other half was a lie?

I’m not the only one with guy problems. Lindsey has been remarkably distracted this week. She didn’t notice when our math teacher misused the quadratic formula on Monday. Or when Marta Velazquez, the most popular girl in school, forgot to peel the size sticker off her jeans on Tuesday. Her leg said: 12 12 12 12. How could Lindsey not notice that when she sat behind it for *an entire hour* in American history?

It’s not until Thursday at lunch when Charlie Harrison-Ming walks past us and says, “Hi, Lindsey,” and she stutters her “Hey, Charlie” back, that I realize the issue. And then I realize they’re wearing the exact same red Chucks. Lindsey’s great at solving other people’s problems, but her own? Hopeless.

“You could say something about the shoes,” I suggest.

“You’re the clothes girl,” she says miserably. “I sound dumb talking about that stuff.”

Today I'm wearing cat-eye glasses and a cheetah-print dress I made last spring. I've pinned oversize red brooches like bullet wounds to the front of the dress, and I have bloodred ribbons tied up and down my arms and throughout my natural hair. I'm protesting big-game hunting in Africa.

"You never sound dumb," I say. "And I'm not the one wearing his sneakers."

"I told you, I don't want to date." But she doesn't sound so convinced anymore.

"I'll support you no matter what you choose. You know that, right?"

Lindsey plants her nose inside a hard-boiled detective novel, and our conversation is over. But she's not reading it. She's staring through the pages. The look gives me a familiar jolt—the expression on Cricket's face the last time I saw him. He never came back home last weekend. His curtains are still open, and his bags are still on his floor. I've been strangely fascinated by the shoulder bag. It's an old, brown leather satchel, the kind that should be worn by a university professor or a jungle explorer. I wonder what's in it. Probably just a toothbrush and a change of underwear.

Still. It looks lonely. Even the mesh laundry bag is sad, only half full.

My phone vibrates once against my leg, through the backpack at my feet, signaling a text. Whoops. We're supposed to have them turned off at school. But who'd text me now, anyway? I bend over to reach for it, and my glasses—a vintage pair that doesn't fit well—clatter to the cement. They've got to be right beneath me, but I can't see them. I can't see anything. I hear the loud prattle of a mob of girls heading our way.

"Oh crud, oh crud, oh crud—"

Lindsey swipes up my glasses just before the girls hit. They buzz past, a swarm of perfume and laughter. "Did your vision get worse again?"

I slide them on, and the world comes back into focus. I frown. "Please. It gets worse every year. At this rate, I'll be blind by twenty."

She nods at my glasses. "And how many pairs do you own now?"

"Only three." I wish they weren't so expensive. I order them online for a discount, but they still eat up entire paychecks. My parents pay for my contacts, but I like variety. I'd prefer *more* variety. I peek at my phone, and I'm thrilled to find the text is from Max:

saw two fallen branches in the shape of a heart. thought of you.

I grin like an idiot.

"Who was it?" Lindsey asks.

"Max!" But then I catch the look on her face. I shrug and turn off my phone.

“It’s nothing. He saw . . . something.”

She flips her novel back open. “Oh.”

And then I have it: the perfect solution to her problem. Charlie is totally interested in her, Lindsey just needs someone there to guide her through those first difficult steps. She needs *me* there. A double date! I’M A GENIUS! I’m . . . dating Max. Who would never agree to such a thing. I glance at my best friend, who is staring through her mystery novel again. Trying to solve her own mystery. I cradle my phone in my hands and keep my mouth shut.

And I feel so disloyal to her.

I have an early shift on Saturday. I closed last night. It feels like I never leave, like I should just get it over with and put my old Disney Princess sleeping bag underneath the seventh-floor concessions counter. When I arrive at the theater, I’m surprised to find St. Clair behind the box office. Anna isn’t scheduled to work today. I’m further surprised when I notice what he’s wearing.

“What’s with the uniform?” I ask.

He shrugs. It’s a slow, full-bodied shrug that makes him seem . . . more European. “One of the managers said I spent so much time here, I ought to be working. So I am.”

“Wait. You got a job here?”

“Yeah, but don’t tell anyone. It’s a secret.” He widens his eyes, joking.

“You. Working?” St. Clair never discusses it, but everyone knows his family is rolling in it. He doesn’t need to work. Nor does he strike me as someone who’d want to.

“You don’t think I can handle ripping tickets?”

“My exhausted feet say it’s a little more than that.”

St. Clair grins, and my heart skips a beat. He really IS attractive. What’s my problem? I must be more tired than I thought. And I’m not interested in Anna’s boyfriend—he’s too short, too cocky—but the fact that I’m noticing him bothers me. I dive into work on another floor to distract myself from increasingly uncomfortable thoughts. But St. Clair approaches me a few hours later, once we’ve calmed down from a rush. “My feet feel dandy,” he says. “In fact, I’m considering forming a dance troupe. Would you be interested?”

“Oh, bite me.” I’m still irritated. The six people who complained to me about our parking garage didn’t help the situation. “Seriously, why did you get a job?”

“Because I thought it would build character.” He hops onto my concessions counter. “Because all of my teeth have fallen out, and I can’t afford dentures. Because—”

“Fine. Whatever. Be a dillhole.”

“I should be doing something productive, shouldn’t I?” St. Clair hops back down and grabs a broom from the supply closet. “All right, all right. I’m saving for our future.”

“Our future?” I give him a coy smile. “I’m flattered, really, but that’s unnecessary.”

He pokes my back with the tip of the broom.

“And is Anna aware that you’re saving for your future together?”

“Of course.” St. Clair sweeps the fallen popcorn around my ankles while I take someone’s Diet Coke—and-soft-pretzel order. When I’m done, he continues. “Do you think I’d get a job and not discuss it with her first?”

“No. But still, I thought . . . you know . . .” He looks confused, and I’m forced to finish the thought out loud. “I thought you had money.”

St. Clair bursts out laughing as if I’ve said something foolish. “My father has money. And I’d like to keep him out of my future.”

“That sounds . . . ominous.”

The European shrug again. This time, to change the subject. “And it’d be nice to have a bit of spending cash so that I could take her out. We tend to dine mainly in our dormitory cafeterias.” He frowns. “Come to think of it, we’ve *always* dined mainly in school cafeterias.”

“In Paris?”

“In Paris,” he confirms.

I sigh. “You have no idea how lucky you are.”

“Actually, I’m confident that I do.” St. Clair props the broom against the wall. “So why do *you* work? To support your unhealthy costuming habit? And what IS your hair about today?”

“I wanted to see what it’d look like in tiny buns. And then I added the feathers, because they looked like nests.” He’s right. That *is* why I work. Plus, my parents said when I turned sixteen I had to get a part-time job to learn about responsibility. So I did.

St. Clair examines my hair closer. “Spectacular.”

I back away. “Exactly how far into the future are you planning?”

“Far.”

The word hangs between us, loaded with strength and meaning. Max and I talk about running away to Los Angeles and starting a new life together—me designing elaborate costumes by day, him destroying rock clubs by night—but I get the sense that St. Clair’s conversations with Anna are more serious than the ones I have with Max. The thought makes me uneasy. I stare at St. Clair. He’s not that much older than me.

How can he be so confident?

“When it’s right, it’s simple,” he says to my unasked question. “Unlike your hair.”

chapter ten

The moon is fat, but half of her is missing. A ruler-straight line divides her dark side from her light. She hangs low over the bustling Castro, noticeably earlier than the night before. Autumn is coming. For as long as I can remember, I've talked to the moon. Asked her for guidance. There's something deeply spiritual about her pale glow, her cratered surface, her waxing and waning. She wears a new dress every evening, yet she's always herself.

And she's always there.

Since my shift was early, I rode the bus and train home. I'm not sure why I'm so relieved to be back in my neighborhood. It's not like the work itself was hard. But the familiarity of Castro Street comforts me—the glitter in the sidewalks, the chocolate-chip warmth radiating from Hot Cookie, the groups of chattering men, the early Halloween display in the window of Cliff's Variety.

I'm lucky to live in a place that's doesn't have to hide what it is. Businesses like the Sausage Factory (restaurant), Spunk (hair salon), and Hand Job (manicures) are clear about the residents, but there's a genuine sense of love and community. It's a family. And like a family, everyone knows everyone's business, but I don't think it's a bad thing. I like that the guys at Spike's Coffee wave as I pass by. I like that the guys at Jeffery's know Betsy needs the large container of fresh Lamb, Yams & Veggies. I like—

“LOLA !”

A stab to my gut. With dread, I turn to find Cricket Bell performing a spin move around an elderly couple entering Delano's grocery as he's exiting. He's carrying a carton of freerange eggs in each hand. “Are you headed home? Do you have a minute?”

I can't meet his eyes. “Yeah.Yeah, of course.”

As he jogs to catch up, I keep moving forward. He's wearing a white dress shirt, a black vest, and a black tie. He'd look like a waiter, except he's also wearing his colorful bracelets and rubber bands.

“Lola, I want to apologize.”

I freeze.

“I feel like a jerk, a total ass for . . . for putting you in that situation last week. I'm sorry. I should have asked if you had a boyfriend, I don't know why I didn't ask.” His voice is pained. “Of course you'd have a boyfriend.You've just always been this cool, gorgeous girl and seeing you again brought up this whole wreck of emotions and . . . I don't know what to say, but I messed up, and I'm sorry. It

won't happen again."

I'm shocked.

I don't know what I expected him to say, but it certainly wasn't this. Cricket Bell thinks I'm cool and gorgeous. Cricket Bell thinks I've *always* been cool and gorgeous.

"And I hope this doesn't make things even weirder," he continues. "I just want to clear the air. I think you're amazing, and being your friend that summer was the happiest summer of my life, and . . . I just want to be a part of your life. Again."

I can hardly think straight. "Right."

"But I'd understand if you don't want to see me—"

"No," I say quickly.

"No?" He's nervous. He doesn't understand how I mean it.

"I mean . . . we can still hang out." I proceed carefully. "I'd like that."

Cricket droops with relief. "You would?"

"Yeah." I'm surprised by how obvious it is. Of course I want him back in my life. He's always been a part of my life. Even when he was gone, some fragment of his spirit lingered behind. I felt it in the space between our windows.

"I want you to know that I've changed," he says. "I'm not that guy anymore."

His body energetically turns to face mine, and the movement startles me. I trip toward him and smack into his chest, and one of the egg cartons drops from his hand and topples toward the sidewalk. Cricket swiftly grabs it before it lands.

"Sorry! I'm so sorry!" I say.

The place where his chest touched mine *burns*. Every place where his body touched mine feels alive. What kind of guy did he think he was, and who is he now?

"It's okay." He peeks inside the carton. "No harm done. All eggs accounted for."

"Here, let me take that." I reach for a carton, but he holds it above his head. It's *way* out of my reach.

"It's okay." He smiles softly. "I have a much better grip on things now."

I make for the other carton. "The least I can do is carry one."

Cricket starts to lift the other one up, too, but something solemn clouds his eyes. He lowers them and gives one to me. The back of his hand reads: EGGS. "Thanks," he says.

I look down. Someone has drawn a game of hopscotch onto the sidewalk in pink chalk. "You're welcome."

"I'll need them back, though. My mom was craving deviled eggs, and she asked me to pick those up. Very important mission."

Silence.

This is the moment. Where I either make things permanently awkward or I make genuine on our friendship. I look up—and then up again, until I reach his face—and ask, “How’s college?”

Cricket closes his eyes. It’s only for a moment, a breath, but it’s enough to show me how thankful he is for my question. *He wants to be in my life.*

“Good,” he says. “It’s . . . good.”

“I sense a *but*.”

He smiles. “But it’s been a while since that whole surroundedby-other-students thing. I guess it takes time to get used to.”

“You said you were homeschooled? After you moved?”

“Well, we moved so often that it was easier than enrolling over and over, always taking the same classes. Always being the new kid. We’d done it before, and we didn’t want to do it again. Plus, it allowed us to work around Cal’s schedule.”

The last sentence sticks to me in an unpleasant way. “What about your schedule?”

“Ah, it’s not as bad as it sounds. She only has so long to do this. She has to make a run for it while she can.” I must look unconvinced, because he adds, “Another five years, and it’ll be my turn in the family spotlight.”

“But why can’t it be your turn now, too? Maybe I’m being selfish, because I’m an only child—”

“No. You’re right.” And I catch the first glimpse of tiredness between his forehead and his eyes. “But our circumstance is different. She has a gift. It wouldn’t be fair for me not to do everything I can to support her.”

“And what does she do to support you?” I ask before I can stop myself.

Cricket’s expression grows sly. “She does the dishes. Takes out the trash. Leaves the cereal box out for me on weekends.”

“Sorry.” I look away. “I’m being nosy.”

“It’s okay, I don’t mind.” But he doesn’t answer my question.

We walk in silence for a minute, when something strikes me. “Today. Today is your birthday!”

His face turns away from mine as fast as a reflex.

“Why didn’t you say something?” But I know the answer before I finish asking the question. Memories of the last time I saw him on his birthday fill me with instant humiliation.

Cricket fidgets with his bracelets. “Yep. Eighteen.”

I follow his lead to keep the conversation moving forward. “An adult. Officially.”

“It’s true, I feel incredibly mature. Then again, maturity has always been my greatest strength.”

This time, his usual self-deprecation makes me flinch. He *was* always more mature. Except, perhaps, around me. “So . . . you’re here to visit Calliope?” I shake my head as the embarrassment continues. “Of course you are. It’s her birthday, too. I’m just surprised to see you since it’s Saturday night. I assumed you’d be at some party across the bay, chugging beer in the handstand position.”

He scratches the side of his neck. “Cal would never admit this, but it’s been a rough adjustment for her. Me being away while she’s still at home. Not that I wouldn’t have come home tonight otherwise, of course I would. And I actually *did* drop by one of those parties for a minute as a favor to someone, but . . . perhaps you didn’t notice.” Cricket adjusts his tie. “I’m not the kegger type.”

“Me neither.” I don’t have to explain that it’s because of Norah. He knows.

“What about your boyfriend?” His voice betrays a forced cool.

I’m embarrassed he’d assume it, but I can’t deny that Max looks the type. “He isn’t a party guy either. Not really. I mean, he drinks and smokes, but he respects my feelings. He never tries to get me to join him or anything.”

Cricket ducks underneath a pink-flowered branch in our path. Our neighborhood blooms year-round. I walk below it without having to bend. “What do your parents think about you dating someone that old?” he asks.

I wince. “You should know that I’m really tired of having that conversation.”

“Sorry.” But then like he can’t help it, “So, uh . . . how old is he?”

“Twenty-two.” For some reason, admitting this to him feels uncomfortable.

A long pause. “Wow.” The word is slow and heavy.

My heart sinks. I want to be his friend, but on what planet would that work? There’s too much history between us for friendship. We quietly climb our street’s hill until we reach my house. “Bye, Cricket.” I can’t meet his eyes again. “Happy birthday.”

“Lola?”

“Yes?”

“Eggs.” He points. “You have my eggs.”

Oh.

Embarrassed, I hold out the carton. His long fingers reach for it, and I find myself bracing for the physical contact. But it doesn’t come. He takes the carton by its edge. It’s a cautious, deliberate move. It reminds me that I shouldn’t be with him.

And it reminds me that I can’t tell Max.

chapter eleven

The more I think about our conversation, the more frustrated I get. Cricket says he's changed, but changed *what*? A willingness to speak his mind? To finally say he likes me? Or is there something else? Toward the end of our friendship, he grew so strange and distant until he cut me off completely by not inviting me to that stupid party. Which he still doesn't want to talk about. And now he wants to be friends again, but then he leaves early the next morning and doesn't come home for TWO WEEKS?

Whatever.

"Lola can't play today." Andy is banging around among his pots and pans, which is why we hadn't heard Cricket knock on our front door. We left it open to let the heat escape, because our kitchen gets hot when all of the ovens are running. "She's on pie duty. There was a huge, emergency, last-minute change to an order this morning."

"*Dad*. He didn't come over to *play*."

Cricket holds up a box. "This was delivered to our house. It's yours."

Andy looks up.

"Lola's," Cricket clarifies. He places it on the floor outside the kitchen while Betsy runs in circles around him. She's always loved Cricket.

"Thanks." I say the word cautiously, a warning if he's listening for it. I set down a bag of flour and move to examine the package. "Cool! It's the boning for my stays."

"Stays?"

"Corset," Andy says distractedly. "Lola, get your butt back in here."

Cricket reddens. "Oh."

Point number two for Andy in today's embarrassment department. Cricket leans over to pet Betsy, who collapses belly-up, and I pretend not to notice his blush. Though I'm not sure he's earned that particular favor. Or my dog's belly.

"It's for a dress," I explain.

Cricket nods without looking at me. "Pie emergency?" A final rub, and then he enters the kitchen, rolling up his sleeves and removing his bracelets. "Need a hand?"

"Oh, no." I'm alarmed. "Thanks, but we've got it."

"Grab an apron, they're in the top drawer there." Andy points across the room.

"You can't ask him to help," I say. "It's not his job."

"He didn't ask." Cricket ties a long, white apron around his waist. "I

volunteered.”

“See?” Andy says. “The boy makes sense. Unlike some teenagers I could mention.”

I narrow my eyes at him. It’s not my fault I’d rather spend my only weekend day off with Lindsey. I had to cancel our plans for sushi and shopping in Japantown. When I asked if she wanted to come over and help, she said, “No thanks, Ned. I’ll make new plans .” And I get that. But if she doesn’t hang out with me, she’ll just stay in and watch a marathon of *CSI* or *Veronica Mars*.

Which makes her happy. But still.

“Those pumpkins need to be seeded before I can toss them into the oven. Put the seeds and strings on that pile for compost,” Andy says.

“Pumpkins. Got it.” Cricket washes his hands and grabs the biggest pumpkin.

I resume weighing flour for two dozen crusts. When you bake in large quantities, scales are required, not measuring cups. “Really, we’re okay. I’m sure you have homework.”

“It’s no problem.” Cricket shrugs. “Where’s the other Mr. Nolan?”

Andy closes his eyes. Cricket tenses, realizing he’s said something wrong. “Nathan is with Norah today,” I explain.

“Is . . . everything all right?” he asks.

“*Peachy*,” Andy says.

“It’s just some financial stuff.” I hand Cricket our largest knife for slicing open the pumpkins, along with an apologetic look for Andy’s snippiness. Cricket gives me a discreet smile back. He knows my dad isn’t normally like this.

Andy’s voice is the only one we hear for the next hour as he guides us through production. The original order was for six pies total, but now we’re making six of each: classic pumpkin, vegan apple crumble, pear ginger, and sweet potato pecan. I’ve been helping him bake for years, so I’m pretty good in the kitchen. But I’m surprised by how quickly Cricket adapts. Andy explains that baking is actually a science—leavening and acids, proteins and starches—and Cricket *gets* it. Of course he’s a natural. Good chemists are good bakers.

But why is he spending his Saturday making pies when he doesn’t have to? Is it that nice-guy thing? Or does he think by spending time with me, I might fall for him? But he doesn’t even try to flirt. He stays away from me, focused on his work. It’s maddening how someone so easy to read can be so impossible to understand.

When the timer rings at noon, Andy lets out a funny noise of surprise. “We’re making good time. We can do this.” And he smiles for the first time all day.

Cricket and I exchange relieved grins across the counter. Andy flips on the radio to a station that plays classics from the fifties, and the kitchen relaxes.

Cricket slices apples with rhythm and precision to the beat of “Peggy Sue,” while Andy and I roll out dough in perfect synchronization.

“We could put this routine on ice and take it to Nationals,” Cricket says.

At the mention of ice, Andy pauses. My dad loves figure skating. It is—and I don’t use this expression lightly—the gayest thing about him. When I was little, he took me to see *Stars on Ice*. We cheered for the skaters with the prettiest spins and we licked blue cotton candy from our fingers and he bought me a program filled with photographs of beautiful people in beautiful costumes. It’s one of my happiest memories. When Calliope started figure skating, I wanted to do it, too. We weren’t friends, but I still thought of her as someone worthy of admiration. Which meant copying.

“This is okay,” I said after my first lesson. “But when do I get a costume?”

Andy pointed at my plain pink leotard. “That IS your costume, until you’re more experienced.”

I lost interest.

My parents were peeved. The lessons were expensive, so they made me finish out the season. Thus, I can state that figure skating is *hard*. Andy talked me into another *Stars on Ice* when I was thirteen, but my daydreams of doing triple axels in sequined skirts were long gone. I still feel bad that I didn’t even try to enjoy it. He’s never asked again.

Andy must have inquired about Calliope, because Cricket is talking about her schedule. “It’s a busy year, because of the Olympics. It just means more: more practices, more promotion, more stress.”

“When will she know if she’s made the Olympic team?” Andy asks.

“If she places in Nationals, she’ll go. That’s in January. Right now she’s working on her new programs, which she’ll take to a few of the early Grand Prix competitions. This year, she’s doing Skate America and Skate Canada. Then it’s Nationals, Olympics, Worlds.” He ticks them off on his fingers.

“Do you go to *all* of those?” I ask.

“Most of them. But I doubt I’ll make it to Canada. It’s during a busy school week.”

“You’ve seen a lot of figure skating.”

Cricket pulls the softened pumpkin flesh from the ovens. “Oh, have I? Is that unusual?” He keeps a straight face, but his eyes spark.

I resist throwing a dish towel at him. “So what’s the deal with her and second place? You said on your first night back—”

“Cal’s been the most talented ladies’ figure skater for years, but she’s never skated two clean programs in a row in a major competition. She’s convinced that she’s cursed. It’s why she’s always switching coaches, and it’s why she’d rather

get third than second. When she gets third, at least she's happy to have placed. But second. That's too close to first."

I've stopped working again.

"Second hurts." He stares at me for a moment before lowering his head back to the pumpkins.

Andy has been rolling piecrusts slowly, following our conversation with interest. He sets down his rolling pin and dusts the flour from his PRAISE CHEESES! shirt. "What have you been up to, Cricket? What are you studying at Berkeley?"

"Mechanical engineering. Not very cool, is it?"

"But it's perfect for you," I say.

He laughs to himself. "Of course it is."

"I *meant*, it's perfect because you've always built, you know, mechanical things. Contraptions and robots and—"

"Automaton," he corrects. "It's like a robot but completely useless."

The negative tone that's crept into his voice is disconcerting. It's a rare thing from Cricket Bell. But before I can say anything, he shakes it off with a smile. "But you're right. It suits me."

"I've never seen anyone do what you can do," Andy says. "And from such a young age. I'll never forget when you fixed our toaster with that coat hanger when you were, what, five years old? Your parents must be so proud of you."

Cricket shrugs uncomfortably. "I guess."

Andy's head tilts. He studies Cricket for a long moment.

Cricket has returned to work, and it reminds me to return to mine. I begin mashing sweet potatoes. The repetition is actually soothing. As much as I hate losing a day off, I love my father's business. He stumbled into it accidentally when he baked a classic cherry pie with a lattice top for a dinner party, and everyone freaked out. They'd never tasted a homemade piecrust before.

Someone there asked him to make one for another party, and then someone at *that* party asked him to make several for another. It was a business in the blink of an eye. Nathan jokingly called it City Pie Guy, and the name stuck. The logo is a retrolooking man with a mustache and a gingham apron, winking and holding out a steaming pie.

As the drop-off hour approaches, we talk less and less. By the time the last pies are out of the oven and into their boxes, Andy is on edge again. We're all sweating. My dad races outside to open the car doors, and I grab two boxes and run out behind him. We've just tucked the pies safely inside when the front door opens.

Andy gasps.

I look up to find Cricket holding six boxes . . . in each hand. And flying down the stairs. “Ohmygod, ohmygod, ohmygod,” Andy whispers. I grip his arm in horror, but Cricket bounds easily onto our driveway.

“Ready for these?” he asks.

The pies are still perfectly stacked.

Andy pauses for a moment. And then he bursts into laughter. “Into the car.”

“What?” Cricket asks me as my dad walks away.

“Maybe carry a few less the next time you take a jog down our stairs?”

“Oh.” He grins.

“You’d be an excellent circus juggler.”

He gestures to his legs. “Wouldn’t even have to rent the stilts.”

I notice the opening for a question I’ve had, but I hesitate. “I hope this isn’t rude—”

“Then it definitely is.”

But he’s teasing, so I continue. “Exactly how tall *are* you?”

“Ah, the height question.” Cricket rubs his hands together. There’s a mathematical equation written there today. “Six four.” He grins again. “Not including hair.”

I laugh.

“And being thin makes me look even taller.”

“And your tight pants,” I add.

Cricket makes a startled choking noise.

OH DEAR GOD. WHY WOULD I SAY THAT?

Andy reappears, slaps him on the back, and then we throw ourselves into the welcome distraction of loading the remainder of the pies. I climb into the backseat to keep them steady. Cricket follows in behind me, and even though he doesn’t have to be here, it feels natural that he should come along for the delivery. Our neighborhood’s traffic is predictably sluggish, but Andy speeds the rest of the way to Russian Hill, past views of Alcatraz and cable cars, and into the area of some of the city’s most expensive real estate.

We find parking at the bottom of the famous part of Lombard Street, the steep hill with switchback curves nicknamed “The Crookedest Street in America.” The narrow, zigzag road is paved with red bricks and bursting with vibrant flowers. We grab the pies—I’m amazed when Andy stacks most of them on Cricket’s arms, trusting him—and run to make the delivery two blocks away.

“You’re ten minutes late, Pie Guy.” A harsh woman with slicked-back hair opens the door for us. “Put them in there. Wipe your feet,” she adds to Cricket as he crosses the threshold, blinded by his pies.

He backs up, wipes them, and moves forward.

“Dirt,” she says. “Again.”

I look at her rug. Cricket isn’t tracking in dirt. He repeats the process one more time, and then we set down the boxes beside an array of crystal decanters in her dining room. She’s glaring at Cricket and me as if she doesn’t like what she sees. That teenagers had anything to do with her party. We stand in uneasy silence as she writes Andy a check. He folds it once and places it in his back pocket.

“Thank you.” He glances in our direction before continuing. “And never call me again. Your business isn’t welcome.”

And then he walks away.

The woman is stunned with indignation. Cricket’s eyebrows pop to his forehead, and I’m barely keeping my laughter under control as we file past her and out the door.

“*Hag*,” Andy adds, when we join him. “You busted your asses for her.”

Cricket examines himself. “I should have covered my gang tattoos.”

“I wouldn’t let you in my house,” Andy says.

I hug my stomach from laughing so hard.

“Speaking of appearances.” Cricket turns to me. “I’d almost forgotten what you look like.”

The laughter stops dead in my mouth. There wasn’t time for anything fun when Andy woke me up this morning, so I threw on a pair of jeans and a plain black T-shirt. It’s one of Max’s. I’m not wearing makeup, and my hair is hanging loosely. I didn’t think I’d see anyone but my parents today.

“Oh.” I cross my arms. “Uh, yeah. This is me.”

“It’s a rare occurrence to see Lola in the wild,” Andy says.

“I know,” Cricket says. “I haven’t seen the real Lola since my first night back.”

“I like being different.”

“And I like that about you,” Cricket says. “But I like the real you best.”

I’m too self-conscious to reply. The car ride home is unbearable. Andy and Cricket do the talking, while I stare out my window and try not to think about the boy beside me. His body takes up so much room. His long arms, his spindly legs. He has to hunch so that his head won’t hit the ceiling, though his hair still does.

I scoot closer to my window.

When we get home, we’re greeted by a wagging Heavens to Betsy and the sugary warmth of baked goods. I throw my arms around her and breathe in her doggie scent. It’s safer to focus on Betsy. Cricket offers to help with the dishes, but Andy refuses as he reaches for his wallet. “You’ve already done too much

today.”

Cricket is surprised. “That’s not why I helped.”

Andy holds out a few twenties. “Please, take something.”

But Cricket puts his hands in his pockets. “I should get home. I just came over to deliver your package.” He nods to the box addressed to me, which is still on the floor outside the kitchen.

Alarm dawns across Andy’s features. “Did you call your parents? Do they know where you are?”

“Oh, it’s fine. They had a big day with Cal planned. I doubt they noticed I was gone.”

But Andy doesn’t look reassured. Something is bothering him.

“See you around.” Cricket reaches for the doorknob.

Andy steps forward. “Would you like to go with us to Muir Woods next Sunday? We’re having a family outing. I’d be honored if you joined us, it’s the least I can do.”

Muir Woods? A family outing? *What is he talking about?*

“Uh.” Cricket glances at me nervously. “Okay.”

“Great!” Andy says. He’s already talking about picnic baskets and avocado sandwiches, and my mind is going haywire. Not only is this the first mention of a day trip, but . . . Max.

“What about Sunday brunch?” I interrupt. Betsy squirms as I hold her tighter.

Andy turns back to me. “It’s still on for tomorrow.”

“No. Next Sunday.”

“Oh,” Andy says, as if the thought has just occurred to him. Even though it hasn’t. “We’ll have to skip it next week.”

I’m dumbfounded as they say goodbye and Cricket leaves. My parents would NEVER ask Max to join us. And Max is my BOYFRIEND. And Cricket is . . . I don’t know what Cricket is! How am I supposed to explain the cancellation to Max? I can’t tell him that *I’m going on an outing with Cricket Bell*. I open my mouth in outrage, but I’m too furious for words.

Andy locks the door and sighs. “Now, why couldn’t you date a boy like that?”

chapter twelve

Andy said that?” Lindsey asks. “Kiss of death.”

“I know. As if I’d ever go for him now that *my dad* wants me to date him.”

“As if you’d ever go for him again, period.”

“Right . . . right.”

There’s a weighty pause on the other end of the line. “Lola Nolan, please tell me you are not thinking about Cricket Bell in that way.”

“Of course I’m not!” And I’m not. I’m definitely not.

“Because he broke your heart. We’ve spent two good years hating him. Remember that sixteen-page letter you buried in my backyard? And the ceremonial tossing of the pink bottle cap into the surf at Ocean Beach?”

Yeah. I remember.

“And your boyfriend? You do remember your boyfriend? Max?”

I frown at his picture beside my bed. His picture frowns back. “Who’s leaving me to go on tour.”

“He’s not leaving you. Stop being such a drama queen, Ned.”

Except he is. Max announced at brunch this morning that Johnny had already secured a show in Southern California. The miracle is that it’s for next Saturday night, so he couldn’t have made it to our next brunch anyway. So there was no need to invent an excuse for canceling it.

“I don’t wanna talk about guys anymore,” I say. “Can’t we just rehash *Alias* instead?”

There’s only one type of television show that Lindsey and I agree on: shows that involve solving crimes while wearing cool disguises. *Alias*, *Pushing Daisies*, *Dollhouse*, *Charlie’s Angels*, and *The Avengers* are our favorites. My best friend is happy to comply, so we don’t talk about ANY guy for the rest of the week. But they’re on my mind.

My boyfriend. Cricket. My boyfriend. Cricket.

How could Andy put me in this position? How could he make up a dumb family outing on the spot like that? And I’m frustrated because since the Bells moved back, every important event seems to happen on weekends. School has always dragged, but it’s nothing compared to now. Endless.

And work? Forget it. I lose count of how many wrong tickets I print, wrong soft drinks I pour, wrong theaters I sweep. Even Anna—my most good-natured supervisor, someone I’ve begun to consider one of my few friends—finally loses it on Saturday when I come back from my dinner break twenty minutes late.

“Where have you been? I’m dying out here.” She gestures with her head toward the packed box-office lobby as she hands someone their change and takes the ticket order of the person behind them.

“I’m sorry, I lost track of time. There’s this thing tomorrow—”

“You did it yesterday, too. You left me hanging. There were, like, sixty people in the lobby with these screaming children and bad hair, and this one lady projectile sneezed all over my window, and it was totally on purpose, and—”

“I’m so sorry, Anna.”

She holds up a hand in panicked frustration, like she doesn’t want to hear any more, and I feel terrible. I went to a Turkish coffee shop down the block for a pick-me-up and ended up lost in my thoughts. I don’t feel picked up at all.

By the time my shift ends and Andy brings me home, the Bell house is dark. Did Cricket come home? His curtains haven’t moved. If he doesn’t show up tomorrow, will I be relieved? Or disappointed?

I plan my outfit. If this is going to happen, I need to look better than the last time I saw him, but I can’t look *too* interesting. I don’t want to encourage him. I choose a red-and-white checked top (cute) with jeans (boring). But by morning I’ve decided it’s hopelessly lame, and I change my shirt twice and my pants three times.

I settle on a similarly checked red-and-white halter dress, which I made from an actual picnic blanket for the last Fourth of July. I add bright red lipstick and tiny ant-shaped earrings for theme, and my big black platform boots because walking will be involved. They’re the sportiest shoes I own. I smooth my dress, erect my posture, and parade downstairs.

No one is there.

“Hello?”

No reply.

My shoulders sag. “What’s the point of a staircase if no one is here to watch my entrance?”

Behind me, a slightly breathless “hi.”

I spin around to find Cricket Bell sitting in my kitchen, and for some reason, the sight of him makes me slightly breathless, too. “I—I didn’t know you were there.”

Cricket stands, almost knocking over his chair in a rare moment of clumsiness. “I was having some tea. Your parents are loading the car. They were giving you three more minutes.” He glances at his watch. “You had thirty seconds left.”

“Oh.”

“It was good entrance,” he says.

Nathan bursts into the room. “There you are! With twenty seconds to spare.” He wraps me in a hug, but quickly pulls away and looks me up and down. “I thought you understood we were going into *nature* today.”

“Ha ha.”

“A dress? Those boots? Don’t you think you should change into something less—”

“It’s not worth the fight.” Andy pops in his head. “Come on. Let’s go.”

I follow him outside to avoid further chastising from Nathan. Cricket walks several steps behind me. It’s a careful distance.

I wonder if he’s looking at my butt.

WHY DID I JUST THINK THAT? Now my butt feels COLOSSAL. Maybe he’s looking at my legs. Is that better? Or worse? Do I want him looking at me? I hold on to the bottom of my dress as I climb into the backseat and crawl to the other side. I’m sure he’s looking at my butt. He has to be. It’s huge, and it’s right there, and it’s huge.

No. I’m acting crazy.

I glance over, and he smiles at me as he buckles his seat belt. My cheeks grow warm.

WHAT IS WRONG WITH ME?

As always, he chats easily with my parents. The more relaxed everyone else gets, the more worked up I am. We’re already approaching the Golden Gate Bridge, so we’ve been driving for . . . fifteen minutes? How can that be?

“Lola, you’re awfully quiet,” Nathan says. “Do you feel okay?”

“Is it motion sickness?” Andy asks. “Because you haven’t had that in years.”

“WE AREN’T EVEN OUT OF THE CITY. IT’S NOT MOTION SICKNESS.”

There’s a shocked silence.

“Maybe it’s motion sickness,” I lie. “Sorry. I have ... a headache, too.” I cannot believe I’m screaming about motion sickness a foot away from Cricket Bell.

Deep breaths. Take deep breaths. I adjust my dress, but the fabric sticks to my leg, and I accidentally flash Cricket my thigh. This time, I catch him looking. His fingers are messing with his bracelets and rubber bands. Our eyes lock.

A rubber band snaps and shoots into the windshield.

Nathan’s and Andy’s heads jolt back in fright, but they laugh when they realize what happened.

Cricket’s body shrinks up in his seat. “Sorry! Sorry.”

And I’m strangely relieved to know that I’m not the only one freaking out.

chapter thirteen

It's been years since I've been here, but Muir Woods still makes me feel as if I've stepped into a fairy tale. It's an enchanted forest, I'm sure of it. Amid the trees are devilish wood sprites and red mushroom caps with white spots and faeries tempting mortals with golden fruit. The redwoods have the same soothing effect on me as the moon. They seem as old as the moon. Ancient and beautiful and wise.

And I need that right now.

The remainder of the drive was restless, but at least it passed quickly. The park is only forty minutes from home. After strolling the trail for a while, we split up. Nathan and Andy, Cricket and me. We'll meet back at the car in a few hours, and because it's not Max, my parents don't ask me to check in with them. If I didn't know any better, I'd swear they're trying to set me up.

Wait. Are my parents trying to set me up?

No, they know I have a boyfriend. And Nathan hates the idea of me dating *anyone*. They must see Cricket as the trustworthy friend he is. Right?

"Is it okay if I eat this in front of you?" Cricket sounds hesitant.

We're sitting beside the creek that runs through the park, half of the picnic spread before us. He holds up the sandwich Andy made for him. It's smoked salmon with cream cheese and sliced avocado.

"Of course. Why wouldn't it be?"

He points at my hummus wrap. "You're still a vegetarian, right?"

"Oh. Yeah. But it doesn't bother me to see other people eating meat, I just can't stomach the thought for myself." I pause. "Thanks for asking. Most people don't ask."

Cricket turns toward the bubbling creek and stretches out his legs. His pants are well-worn, faded pinstripes and frayed hems. It's appropriate for the outdoors as far as his wardrobe is concerned, and once again, I find myself admiring his sense of style.

God, he has good taste.

"I just don't want to offend you." He sets down his sandwich but picks at the poppy seeds on the bread. "I mean, any more than I already have."

A lump forms in my throat. "Cricket. You've never *offended* me."

"But I hurt you." His voice grows quiet. "I wish that I hadn't."

The words are tumbling out before I can stop them. "We were so close, and then you just dropped me. I felt like such an idiot. I don't understand what

happened.”

He stops flicking poppy seeds. “Lola. There’s something I need to tell you.”

The acceleration of my heartbeat is sudden and painful. “What is it?”

Cricket faces me with his entire body. “When we talked at our windows that last night,” he says, “I knew something was wrong. I could tell you were hurt, when I thought *I* was the one who was supposed to be hurt. But I was so upset about the moving thing that it took me weeks to put the pieces together.”

I draw back from him. Why should he be the hurt one? *He’d* excluded *me*.

There’s an excruciating pause as his fingers tense and flex. “My sister lied. I didn’t know about the party until we got home and a crowd of people jumped out and yelled ‘surprise.’ Cal told me that she’d invited you, and that you’d turned her down. I believed her. It wasn’t until later that I realized you were hurt because she hadn’t.”

Anger swells inside of me. “Why would she do that?”

He looks ashamed. “She dodged the question, but it’s obvious, isn’t it? She claimed she was trying to do something nice—throw a party for me, not for her or for the both of us. Sometimes . . . I get overlooked. But she did it out of fear, because she thought she was losing me.”

“You mean, she did it out of spite, because she’s a bitch.” My own fury startles me.

“I know it seems that way, but it’s not. And it is.” Cricket shakes his head. “It’s been the two of us for so long. Her career hasn’t given her much of an outside life. She was scared of being left behind. And I’m just as guilty; I let her get away with acting like that, because she was all I had, too.”

No. She wasn’t.

He stares at his hands. Whatever word he wrote there, it’s been crossed off. There’s only a black box. “Lola, you were the *only* person I wanted there that night. I was crazy about you, but I didn’t know what to do. It was paralyzing. There were so many times when I wanted to take your hand, but . . . I couldn’t. That one small move felt impossible.”

Now I’m staring at my hands, too. “I would have let you take it.”

“I know.” His voice cracks.

“I had a present for you and everything.”

“I’m sure I would have loved it. Whatever it was.” He sounds heartbroken, and the sound breaks mine. “I had something for you, too.”

“On *your* birthday?” That’s so like him. There’s another sharp pain in my chest.

“I made this mechanism that could run between our windows, and I thought we could use it to send each other letters or gifts. Or whatever. It sounds stupid

now, I know. Something a little kid would think up.”

No. It doesn't sound stupid.

“It was supposed to be ready on your birthday, but I wanted it to be perfect. At least, that’s what I kept telling myself. But I was stalling. I blew it. I messed up everything.”

I rip off the end of my hummus wrap. “*Calliope* messed up everything.”

“No. She never would have been a problem if I’d told you how I felt. But I didn’t, not even when I knew we were moving—”

“You knew you were moving?” I’m shocked. For some reason, this news is worse than Calliope’s betrayal. How could he keep that from me?

“I couldn’t tell you.” His body twists in misery. “I thought you’d give up on me. And I kept hoping the move wouldn’t actually happen, but it was confirmed that night.”

He waits for me to look at him. Somehow, I do. I’m overwhelmed by sadness and confusion. I can’t take any more. I want him to stop, but he doesn’t. “I’ll only say this once more. Clearly, so there’s no chance of misinterpretation.” His eyes darken into mine. “I like you. I’ve always liked you. It would be wrong for me to come back into your life and act otherwise.”

I’m crying now. “Cricket . . . I have a boyfriend.”

“I know. That sucks.”

It surprises me, and I give a choked laugh. Cricket pushes a napkin toward me to blow my nose. “I’m sorry,” he says. “Was it wrong for me to say that?”

“No.”

“Are you sure?”

“No.”

We’re able to laugh as I wipe away my mascaraed tears, but our lunch is resumed in agonizing silence. The distance between us feels too close, too far, too close. It’s warmer than it should be underneath this green canopy. My mind throbs. *I’ve always liked you*. What would my life have been like had I known this unquestionably?

He still would have moved away.

I’ve always liked you, I’ve always liked you, I’ve always liked you.

But maybe we would have stayed in contact. Maybe we’d even be together now. Or maybe I would have lost interest. Am I only fixated on Cricket because of our traumatic history? Because he was my first crush? Or does something about him transcend that?

He’s polishing the skin of a golden apple against his arm. Faeries. Temptation.

“Remember that day I made you the elevator?” he suddenly asks.

I give him a faint smile. “How could I forget?”

“That was the day I had my first kiss.”

My smile fades.

“I’m better now.” He sets the apple beside me. “At kissing. Just so you know.”

“Cricket . . .”

He holds my gaze. His smile is sad. “I won’t. You can trust me.”

I try not to cry again. “I know.”

Despite this complication—knowing he liked me then, knowing he likes me now, and knowing he never purposefully hurt me—as we walk through the woods, the smoky haze between us lifts. The air is tender but clear. Am I that selfish? Did I just need to feel desired? But when I study him on the drive home . . . I can’t help but notice his eyes.

There’s something about blue eyes.

The kind of blue that startles you every time they’re lifted in your direction. The kind of blue that makes you ache for them to look at you again. Not blue green or blue gray, the blue that’s just blue.

Cricket has those eyes.

And his laugh. I’d forgotten how easy it is. The four of us are laughing about something dumb in that silly way that happens when you’re exhausted. Cricket tells a joke and turns to see if I’m laughing, if I think he’s funny, and I want him to know that I *do* think he’s funny, and I want him to know that I’m glad he’s my friend, and I want him to know that he has the biggest heart of anyone I’ve ever known. And I want to press my palm against his chest to feel it beat, to prove he’s really here.

But we cannot touch.

Everyone laughs again, and I’m not sure why. Cricket looks for my reaction again, and I can’t help but laugh. His eyes light up. I have to look down, because I’m smiling so hard back. I catch my parents in the rearview mirror. They have a different kind of smile, like they know a secret that we don’t.

But they’re wrong. I know the secret.

I close my heavy eyes. I dream about reaching across the backseat and touching his hand. Just one hand. It closes slowly, tightly around mine, and the sensation of his skin against mine is *astounding*. I’ve never felt anything like it before.

I don’t wake until I hear his voice. “Who’s that?” he asks sleepily.

Some people claim to know when something bad is about to happen, right before it actually occurs. I feel dread at his question, though I can’t say why. His tone was innocent enough. Maybe it’s the silence in the front seat that’s so

deafening. I open my eyes as the car stops in front of our house. And I discover the deep feeling in my gut is right. It's always right.

For there, passed out on the front porch, is my birth mother.

chapter fourteen

Skin and bones. I haven't seen Norah in months. I don't know how it's possible, but she's lost more weight. For as long as I can remember, Norah has been too skinny. Now—body propped against the porch railing, sweater balled into a pillow to support her head—she looks like a pile of twigs wrapped in hippie rags.

Is she just asleep? Or has she been drinking again?

I flush with shame. *That's my mother.* I don't want Cricket to recognize her, even though it's obvious the pieces have been put together, now that the question hangs in the air. Nathan is rigid. He pulls the car into our driveway and turns off the engine. No one gets out. Andy swears under his breath.

"We can't leave her there," he says, after a minute passes.

Nathan climbs out, and Andy follows. I turn in my seat to watch them prod her, and she immediately startles awake. I release a breath that I didn't realize I'd been holding. I get out of the car, and I'm blasted by the stench of body odor. Cricket is beside me, and he's talking, but his words don't reach my ears.

Because it's my mother.

Smelling.

On my porch.

I duck away from him and push up the stairs, past Norah and my parents. "I fell asleep waiting for you to come home," she snaps to them. "I'm not drunk. Just evicted." But I focus on my key in my hand, my key in the lock, my feet to my bedroom. I collapse in bed, but a voice says something about a curtain, it won't stop talking about a curtain, so I haul myself up to shut it and then I'm back down. I hear them in the living room.

"Eighteen months?" Nathan asks. "You told me it'd been twelve since your last payment. I thought we'd worked this out. What do you expect me—"

"I DON'T NEED YOUR HELP. I JUST NEED A PLACE TO CRASH."

The whole neighborhood can hear that. It takes nine long minutes before she lowers her voice. I watch the clock on my phone.

Lindsey calls. I stare at her name, but I don't answer.

When I was little, I thought my parents were just best friends who lived together. I wanted to live with Lindsey when I grew up. It took a while for me to understand that the situation was more complicated than that, but by the time it happened, it didn't matter. My parents were my parents. They loved each other, and they loved me.

But there's always been this nag in the darkest corner of my mind.

I was right for Nathan and Andy, like they were right for me. Why wasn't I right for Norah? I know she wasn't in any condition to take care of me, but why wasn't I enough for her to *try*? And why aren't we—the three of us, her family—enough for her to try now? She may not be on the streets anymore, but . . . well, this time, she *is*. Why is it so impossible for her to be a normal adult?

My phone buzzes. Lindsey has sent a text:

i heard. what can i do? xoxo

My heart falls like a stone. She heard? How long was Norah outside? How many people saw her? I imagine what my classmates will say when they find out that I have *loser* wired into half of my genetic code. *Figures. It's the only explanation for someone that screwed up. She must have been wasted while Lola was in the womb.* But that's not even true. I'm not half loser. I'm one hundred percent. I was created from street trash.

Andy knocks on my door. "Lo? Can I come in?"

I don't reply.

He asks again, and when I don't answer, he says, "I'm coming in." My door opens. "Oh, honey." His voice is heartbroken. Andy sits on the edge of my bed and places a hand on my back, and I burst into tears. He picks me up and holds me, and I feel small and helpless as I cry all over his sleeve.

"She's so embarrassing. I hate her."

He hugs me harder. "Sometimes I do, too."

"What's gonna happen?"

"She'll stay here for a while."

I pull back. "For how long?" I've left a puddle of red eye shadow on his shoulder. I try to wipe it away, but he gently takes my hand. The shirt doesn't matter.

"Only a week or two. Until we can find a new apartment for her."

I stare at my red fingertips, and I'm angry that Norah has made me cry again. I'm angry that she's in *my* house. "She doesn't care about us. She's only here because she doesn't have any other options."

Andy sighs. "Then we don't have any option but to help her, do we?"

It grows dark outside. I call Lindsey.

"Thank God! Cricket called two hours ago, and I've been so worried. Are you okay? Should I come over? Do you want to come over here? How bad is it?"

An explosion in my mind. "Cricket told you?"

“He was concerned. I’m concerned.”

“*Cricket* told you?”

“He called the restaurant and gave my parents his number, and then told them to tell me to call him. He said it was an emergency.”

I grip my phone harder. “So you didn’t see her, then? Or hear her? Or hear about it from anyone else?”

Lindsey realizes what the issue is. Her voice softens. “No. I haven’t heard anything, neighborhood-wise. I don’t think anyone noticed her.”

And I’m relieved enough to let the sadness and frustration flood back in. After nearly a minute of silence, Lindsey asks again if I’d like to stay with her. “No,” I say. “But I might take you up on it tomorrow.”

“She wasn’t . . . was she?”

It’s easy enough to fill in her blank. “Not wasted, not high. Just Norah.”

“Well,” she says. “At least there’s that.”

But it’s humiliating that she had to ask. There’s a beep on the other line. Max. “I have to go.” I switch calls with dread. A vision of my boyfriend at brunch with Norah flashes through my head. This is bound to put an even bigger strain on his relationship with my family. What will he think of her? Will it change his opinion about me? And what if . . . what if he finds something of myself in Norah?

“I missed you,” he says. “You coming to the show tonight?”

I’d forgotten about it. I’ve been so fixated on last night’s show that I didn’t remember he’d be back here for another one tonight. “Um, I don’t think so.” The tears are already building. *No, no, no. Don’t cry. I’m sick of crying today.*

I practically hear him sitting up. “What’s going on?”

“Norah is here. She’s staying with us.”

Silence. And then, “Fuuuuck.” He says it like an exhale. “I’m sorry.”

“Thanks. Me, too,” I add.

He gives a small, understanding snort of laughter, and then I’m surprised by how angry he gets when I tell him the full story. “So she expects you guys to bail her out of this?”

I roll onto my side, still on my bed. “Like we always do.”

“It’s messed up your dads are letting her take advantage of them again.”

The thought has occurred to me many times over the years, but I still don’t know if it’s true. Are they—Nathan, especially—enabling her? Or would she be even more lost without them? “I don’t know,” I say. “She doesn’t have anyone else to turn to.”

“Listen to yourself. You’re defending them. If I were you, I’d be pissed. I’m not you, and I’m *still* pissed.”

His anger refuels my own. It's getting easier to talk about it, to talk about everything. We go for another hour until he needs to pack the van for his show. "Do you want me to pick you up?" he asks.

I tell him yes.

I get dressed with a fury I haven't felt in years. I find a gauzy black dress that I've never liked in the back of my closet, and I rip the hem shorter. Orange-and-yellow makeup. Red wig. Boots that lace to my knees.

Tonight, I'm fire.

I storm downstairs. My parents are talking quietly in the kitchen. I have no idea where Norah is, and I don't care. I throw open the front door, and there's a loud, "HEY!" but I'm already blazing down to the sidewalk. Where's Max? Where *is* he?

"Dolores Nolan, get your ass back in here," Nathan says from the doorway.

Andy is behind him. "Where do you think you're going?"

"I'm going to Max's show!" I yell back.

"You aren't going anywhere in that mood OR dressed like that," Nathan says. A familiar white van turns the corner and speeds up our hill. Andy swears, and my parents push out the door but block each other in the process. The van jerks to a halt. Johnny Ocampo slides the door open.

"Do *not* get in that van," Nathan shouts.

I give Johnny my hand. He pulls me inside and slams the door. I crash into a folded cymbal stand as the van lurches forward, and I shriek in pain. Max lets out a rapid string of profanity at the sight of blood running down my arm. The van jerks to another stop as he leans back to make sure I'm okay.

"I'm fine, I'm fine! Go!"

I look out the window to see my parents on the sidewalk, frozen in disbelief. And behind them, sitting on the steps of the lavender Victorian—as if they've been there for a long, long time—are Cricket and Calliope Bell.

The van roars away.

chapter fifteen

I shouldn't have come here.

It takes the band forever to set up, and I'm left alone the entire time. I didn't bring my phone, so I can't call Lindsey. The club is cold and unfriendly. I cleaned the blood off my arm in the bathroom, but it was only a scratch. I'm restless. And I feel stupid. My parents will be enraged, Norah will still be in my house, and the twins were witness to another foolish act. The memory of their expressions is almost too much to bear: the scorn of Calliope, the hurt of Cricket, the shock of my parents.

I'm in so much trouble.

As always, my mind returns again and again to Cricket Bell. Muir Woods seems like a lifetime ago. I remember *what* I felt, but I can no longer remember *how*.

"Lola?"

WHAT'S THAT? WHO'S HERE? Who did my parents send? I'm almost surprised they haven't showed up themselves—

"We thought it was you." It's Anna.

"Hard to tell sometimes ." And St. Clair.

They're holding hands and smiling, and I'm so relieved that I fall back against the club's brick wall. "Ohthankgod, it's you."

"Are you *drunk*?" she asks.

I straighten and hold up my chin. "NO. What are you doing here?"

"We're here to see Max's band," St. Clair says slowly.

"Since you invited us? Last week? Remember?" Anna adds at my confusion.

I don't remember. I was so worried about Max touring and the day trip with Cricket that I could have invited the editor of *TeenVogue* and forgotten about it. "Of course. Thanks for coming," I say distractedly.

They don't buy it. And I end up spilling another private story to them: the story of my birth parents. Anna grasps the banana on her necklace as if the tiny bead is a talisman. "I'm sorry, Lola. I had no idea."

"Not many people do."

"So Cricket was with you when you found her on your porch?" St. Clair asks.

His question snags my full attention. I'd purposefully left Cricket out of the story. I narrow my eyes. "How did you know that?"

St. Clair shrugs, but he looks self-chastised. Like he said something he shouldn't have. "He mentioned something about taking a road trip with you.

That's all."

He knows.

St. Clair knows that Cricket likes me. I wonder if they've already talked this evening, if St. Clair already knew what happened with my mother. "I don't believe it," I say.

"Pardon?" he says.

"Cricket told you. He told you about all of this, about my mother." Anger rises inside of me again. "Is that why you're here? Did he send you to check up on me?"

St. Clair's countenance hardens. "I haven't spoken with him in two days. You invited Anna and myself here, so we came. You're welcome."

He's telling the truth, but my temper is already boiling. Anna grabs my arm and walks me forward. "Fresh air," she says. "Fresh air would be good."

I throw her off and feel terrible at the sight of her wounded expression. "I'm sorry." I can't look at either of them. "You're right. I'll go alone."

"Are you sure?" But she sounds relieved.

"Yeah. I'll be back. Sorry," I mumble again.

I spend a miserable fifteen minutes outside. When I come back, the club is packed. There's hardly standing room. Anna has snagged a wooden bar stool, one of the few seats here. St. Clair stands close to her, facing her, and he smooths the platinum stripe in her hair. She pulls him even closer by the top of his jeans, one finger tucked inside. It's an intimate gesture. I'm embarrassed to watch, but I can't look away.

He kisses her slowly and deeply. They don't care that anyone could watch. Or maybe they've forgotten they aren't alone. When they break apart, Anna says something that makes him fall into silly, boyish laughter. For some reason, that's the moment that makes me turn away. Something about their love is painful.

I turn toward the bar for a bottle of water, but Anna calls out to me again. I head back, feeling irrationally aggravated that they're here.

"Better?" St. Clair asks, but not in a mean way. He looks concerned.

"Yeah. Thanks. Sorry about all that."

"No problem." And I think we're leaving it at that when he adds, "I understand what it's like to be ashamed of a parent. My father is not a good man. I don't talk about him either. Thank you for trusting us."

His serious tone throws me, and I'm touched by this rare glimpse into his life. Anna squeezes his hand and changes the subject. "I'm looking forward to this." She nods toward the band onstage. Max's guitar is slung low as he adjusts something on his amplifier. They're about to start. "You'll introduce us to him afterward, right?"

Max has been too busy to come out and say hello. I feel bad about this. I feel bad about *everything* tonight. “Of course. I promise.”

“You neglected to mention that he’s much cooler than us.” Worry has crept into her voice.

St. Clair, back to himself, is clearly ready with a catty reply, and I’m pleased that the moment he opens his mouth is the same moment Amphetamine explodes into their set. His words—all words but my boyfriend’s—are lost.

The intensity radiating from Max mirrors what I feel burning inside of myself. His lyrics are by turn tender and sweet, scathing and cruel. He sings about falling in love and breaking up and running away, and it’s nothing that hasn’t been sung before, but it’s the way he sings it. Every word is saturated in bitter truth.

Johnny and Craig push an aggressive rhythm, and Max attacks his guitar with string-breaking ferocity. The songs become openly malicious, as if even the assembled crowd is to be distrusted, and when it’s time for the acoustic number, his usual soul-searching turns belligerent and cynical. His amber eyes lock with mine across the room, and I’m filled with his vicious attitude. I know it’s wrong, but it only makes me want him more. The crowd is fevered and delirious. It’s the best performance he’s ever given.

And it’s for me.

When it’s over, I turn to my friends for their reaction. Anna and St. Clair look shocked. Impressed but . . . definitely shocked.

“He’s good, Lola. He’s *really* good,” Anna says at last.

“Has he considered therapy?” St. Clair asks, and Anna elbows him in the ribs. “Ow.” I glare at him, and he shrugs. “It was incredible,” he continues. “I’m merely pointing out the presence of untempered rage.”

“How can you—”

“I need the bathroom,” Anna says. “Please don’t kill my boyfriend while I’m gone. And don’t leave until I’ve met Max!”

He’s weaving his way toward us now. People are clapping him on the back and trying to engage him in conversation, but Max’s eyes are only on mine as he brushes past them. My heart beats faster. The dark roots of his bleached hair and his black T-shirt are sweaty. I’m reminded of the night we met, and there’s a flare inside of me that’s near animalistic.

Max stiffens as he reaches for an embrace. He’s noticed St. Clair. Max’s jaw tightens as he sizes him up, but St. Clair slides in an easy introduction. “Étienne St. Clair. My girlfriend Anna”—he points to her retreating figure—“and I work with Lola at the theater. You must be Max.”

My boyfriend relaxes. “Right.” He shakes St. Clair’s outstretched hand, and then he’s already pulling me away. “Come on. Let’s get out of here.”

Max. Yes, I want to be with Max.

“Thanks for coming. Tell Anna bye for me, okay?”

St. Clair looks royally pissed. “Yeah. Sure.”

Max leads me down the block to his van. He opens the door, and I’m surprised to discover it’s still empty. We climb in. “The next band is using Johnny’s drums. I asked the guys to wait a few minutes before loading the rest.”

I slam the door, and we’re on top of each other. I want to forget everything. I kiss him hard. He pushes back harder. It doesn’t take long.

We collapse.

I close my eyes. My temples are still throbbing with the sound of his music. I hear the flick of Max’s lighter, but the smell that greets me isn’t cigarette smoke. It’s sweet and sticky. He nudges me in a silent offer. I refuse. The contact high is enough.

Max drops me off around two in the morning. I forget my wig in his van. I feel like a disaster. Once again, I’m racked with guilt and anger and confusion. I drag myself inside, and my parents are there, as if they’ve been waiting by the door since I left. They probably have. I brace myself for their wrath.

It doesn’t come.

“Thank God.” Andy crumples onto our chaise longue.

My parents are both on the verge of tears, and the sight makes me cry for the hundredth time today, huge embarrassing hiccuping sobs. “I’m sorry.”

Nathan embraces me in an iron-tight hug. “Don’t you *ever* do that again.”

I’m shaking. “I won’t. I’m sorry.”

“We’ll talk about this tomorrow, Dolores.” Nathan leads me upstairs, and Andy trails behind. I’m closing my bedroom door when Nathan says, “You smell like pot. We’ll talk about that tomorrow, too.”

I open my window and look into the night sky. “I need your help.”

The moon is thin, a sliver of a waning crescent. But she’s listening.

It’s four in the morning. I can’t sleep, so I tell her about my last twenty-four hours. “And I don’t know what to do,” I say. “It’s all happening at once, but everything I do seems to be wrong. *What am I supposed to do?*”

Cricket’s window slides open. I dive for my closest pair of glasses so that I can see him. His hair is puffy from sleep, even taller than usual, and his eyes are half shut. “You still talk to the moon?” His question isn’t condescending, it’s curious.

“Pretty dumb, huh?”

“Not at all.”

“Did I wake you up? Did you hear me?”

“I heard you talking, but I didn’t hear what you said.”

I let out a slow exhale of relief. I need to be more careful. It doesn’t escape my attention that it’s nice to know when someone is telling the truth. “What are you doing here?” I ask. “It’s Sunday night, you should be in your dorm.”

Cricket is quiet. He’s deciding how to answer. A car with thumping club music cruises down our street, looking for parking. When the bass fades away, he says, “I wanted to make sure you were okay. I was waiting for your light to come on. I fell asleep.” He sounds guilty.

“Oh.”

“I’ll leave early in the morning.” Cricket glances across his room at a clock. He sighs. “In two hours, actually.”

“Well, I’m here. I made it. Barely.”

He stares at me. It’s so intense that it’s almost invasive. I look down at the alley between our houses, and a stray cat is wandering through Andy’s compost pile. “You didn’t have to do that,” I say.

“I probably shouldn’t have. I’m not the right person for you to talk to.”

“Is that why you called Lindsey?”

He shrugs uncomfortably. “Did you talk with her? Before you left?”

“Yeah.” The cat jumps onto our recycling bin. It looks up, and its haunted eyes flash at me through the darkness. I shiver.

“You’re cold,” Cricket says. “You should go to bed.”

“I can’t sleep.”

“Do you feel better?” he blurts. “Did Max help?”

I’m filled with shame. “I don’t know,” I whisper.

We’re silent for several minutes. I turn my head and watch the street, the moon, the street. I feel him watch me, the stars, me. The wind is biting. I want to go inside, but I’m afraid to lose his company. Our friendship is teetering on the verge of extinction again. I don’t know what I want, but I do know that I don’t want to lose him.

“Cricket?”

“Yeah?”

I peel my gaze from the sky to meet his eyes. “Will you come home next weekend?”

He closes them. I get the strangest sense he’s thanking someone.

“Yes,” he says. “Of course.”

chapter sixteen

Nathan wakes me up early so we can talk before school. Also as punishment, I assume. I've only had three hours of sleep. As I'm getting dressed, I peek through my curtains and discover that Cricket has left his open. His usual leather satchel and laundry bag are gone.

There's a pang in the hollow of my chest.

I drag myself downstairs. Andy is awake—he's never awake this early—and he's making scrambled eggs. Nathan is checking his email at the table in one of his nicest suits. There's no sign of Norah. She's probably on the foldout couch in Nathan's office.

"Here." Andy slides a mug of coffee toward me. He doesn't approve of me drinking coffee, so this is serious. We take seats beside Nathan, and he sets aside his phone.

"Lola, we understand why you left last night," he says.

I'm shocked. I'm also relieved that I'm Lola, not Dolores.

Nathan continues, "But it doesn't excuse your behavior. You scared us to death."

Now that sounds about right.

The lecture I'd expected follows. It's painful, it's extensive, and it ends with me receiving a month of grounding. They don't believe me when I tell them I didn't smoke the pot, which they know was Max's, and I can't convince them otherwise on either point. I get a lengthy side lecture about the hazards of drug use, to which I could just as easily point to the closed office door and say, "Duh."

But I don't.

My walk to school is long, my day at school even longer. Lindsey tries to entertain me with stories about the twitchy man her parents hired to help in the restaurant. She's convinced he has a dark secret like a hidden identity or the knowledge of a government cover-up. But all I can think about is tonight. I don't have work. I don't have a date with Max, and I *won't* have one apart from Sunday brunch—if he'll even show up anymore—for another month. And . . . no Cricket.

At least the next month will give me plenty of time to work on my dress.

The thought doesn't cheer me. The stays are progressing faster than expected, and I've even started the wig, but the panniers are frustrating. I still can't find any satisfying instructions. I spend my afternoon doing homework, chatting

online with Lindsey, and adding chicken wire to the top of my white base wig. Marie Antoinette wore ENORMOUS wigs. The wire will give it the necessary height without drastically increasing the weight. I'll cover it later with matching fake hair.

Norah is talking with Andy in the kitchen. They picked up her things today, and the boxes have covered Nathan's antiques and taken over our entire living room. The cardboard smells like incense and grime. Norah's voice is weary, and I wince and turn up my music. I still haven't seen her. I'll have to soon, but I'm putting it off as long as possible. Until dinner, I guess.

The doorbell rings at six-thirty.

I pause—my pliers on the wire, my ears perked. Cricket?

But then I hear Max's deep and gravelly voice. My pliers drop, and I'm skidding downstairs. *There's no way, there's no way, there's no way.* Except . . . there he is. He's even abandoned his usual black T-shirt for a striped button-up. His tattoos poke out of the bottom of his sleeves. And he's wearing his glasses, of course.

"Max," I say.

He smiles at me. "Hey."

Andy looks as surprised as I feel. He's clueless about what to do next. I throw my arms around Max. He hugs me back tightly but pulls away after only a moment. "*Wanted to make sure you're surviving,*" he whispers.

I squeeze his hand and don't let go. I had no idea how much I needed to see him again, to know everything is okay between us. I'm not sure why I thought things would be different, other than last night *felt* different. He's apologizing to my father. I know it must be killing him to do this. He states his words calmly and briefly.

"Thank you for saying that, Max." Andy hesitates, despising what he knows has to come next. "Won't you stay for dinner?"

"Thank you. I'd love to."

Max knew my parents would be out to get him, and he's called them on it by showing up tonight. He's so smart.

"So you're the boyfriend."

Max, Andy, and I grow rigid as Norah leans against the door frame between our living room and the kitchen. Even though Nathan is several years older than his sister, Norah looks at least a decade older. In their childhood, she shared the same round face as Nathan and me, but time and substance abuse have left her frail and worn. Her skin hangs as loose as her straggled hair. At least she's had a shower.

"Max. Meet Norah," I say.

He nods at her. She stares back, her expression dead.

“You have a *lot* of nerve showing up here.”

Everyone freezes again at the sound of Nathan’s voice. Still holding hands, Max and I turn around. My father sets down his briefcase beside the front door. The muscles in Max’s hand twitch, but he keeps his speech devoid of the emotion I know he feels. “I came to apologize. It was irresponsible for me to take Lola away last night. She was upset, and I wanted to help her. It was the wrong way.”

“Damn straight it was the wrong way.”

“*Dad.*”

“Nathan,” Andy says quickly. “Let’s talk in the office.”

The wait is unbearable before Nathan removes his glare from Max and follows Andy. The office door shuts. I’m sweating. I let go of Max’s hand and realize my own is shaking. “The worst is over,” he says.

“I’m grounded for a month.”

He pauses. “Shit.”

There’s a rude snort in the kitchen doorway, and I’m about to completely lose it.

“I’m sorry.” Now Max *does* sound pissed off. “I didn’t realize this conversation was any of your business.”

Norah gives a cruel smile. “You’re right. What would I know about a teenage girl running away and getting into trouble with her boyfriend?”

“I didn’t run away,” I protest as Max says, “You’re out of line.”

She strolls into the kitchen and out of sight. “Am I?” she calls out.

I want to die. “I’m so sorry. For all of this.”

“Don’t apologize.” He’s harsh. “I’m not here for them. I’m here for you.”

The office door bangs open, and Nathan marches straight upstairs to their bedroom without looking at us. Andy gives a tense, fake smile. “Dinner in ten minutes.”

Nathan has changed out of his work clothes. He’s trying, but barely. I didn’t know it was possible to pass a dish of vegetarian lasagna with such hostility. “So. Max. How was the show in L.A.? We didn’t realize you’d be back so soon.”

Could this get any worse?

“It was in Santa Monica, and it went well. We’ve booked two more shows there.”

Yes. It *could* get worse.

“Do you plan on doing a lot of touring?” Andy asks. I can’t decide if he

sounds hopeful or skeptical.

“We’d like to do more. I don’t want to read meters for the rest of my life.”

“So you think this is a valid career choice?” Nathan asks. “You think it’s reasonable to expect success?”

“OH MY GOD,” I say.

Nathan holds up his hands in apology, but he doesn’t say anything. Max stews silently beside me. Norah stares out the window, no doubt longing to be anywhere but here. I scrape the spinach lasagna across my plate without picking it up.

“I only mentioned the show,” Nathan says a minute later, “because it was unfortunate that it meant you had to miss our trip. We went to Muir Woods with —”

“A picnic basket!” I say.

Nathan gives me a smug expression. It was a test. He was testing *me*, to see if Max knew about the trip with Cricket.

“You didn’t miss anything,” I say. “Besides the food. Of course.”

Max smells the lie, though he doesn’t dare approach it in front of my parents. But I feel the wall build between us.

“Hey, I have an idea,” I say. “Let’s talk about Norah.”

“Lola,” Andy says.

She snaps her head toward me as if coming out of a trance. “What?” And then she blinks. “What are you wearing?”

“Excuse me?”

“What is that? What are you supposed to be?”

I’m in a dress with rainbow tulle poking out from underneath, and my hair is in two long braids that I’ve gelled with glitter. I glare at her. “Me. I’m *me*.”

Norah frowns her disapproval, and Nathan turns to her. “Enough. Back off.”

“Of course she has the right to complain about my wardrobe.” I gesture to her saggy sweater, the one she’s had forever that’s the color of oatmeal left in the sink. “She’s clearly on the cutting edge of fashion.”

Max smirks.

“O-kaaaaay!” Andy jumps up. “Who wants pie?”

“Wait until you see my dress for the winter formal,” I tell Norah. “It’s big and it’s lavish and it’s beautiful, and you’re just going to *love* it.”

Norah jerks her face back toward the window. Like she has any right to feel hurt after attacking me. Max stiffens again, and Nathan can’t resist pouncing upon it. “What will you wear to the dance, Max?”

“He’ll wear a tux,” I snap. “I wouldn’t make him wear a matching costume.”

Max stands. “I gotta go.”

I burst into tears. Nathan looks shamed. Max takes my hand and walks me to the front door. We step outside. I don't care that I'm grounded. "I'm s-sorry."

This time he doesn't tell me not to apologize. "That was messed up, Lola."

"I know."

"So tell me, did Nathan approve of Norah's 'career choice' as a fortune-teller?"

I feel sick. "It won't be that bad on Sunday."

"Sunday." Max lifts a dark brow. "Brunch. Right." He drops my hand and puts his own in his pockets. "So are you serious about that dance?"

I'm startled. I've talked about my dress a hundred times before. I wipe the tears from my cheeks, wishing I had something other than my fingers. "What?"

"Lola. I'm twenty-two." Max reacts quickly to my crushed expression. He reaches for both of my hands this time, and he draws me into and against his body. "But if it makes you happy, I'll do it. If I can survive these stupid meals, I can survive one stupid dance."

I hate that it sounds like a punishment.

chapter seventeen

Ta-da!” St. Clair bursts into the lobby with the flourish of a magician. He’s showing off for Anna as he always does. It’s Thursday, and he isn’t scheduled to work, but of course he’s here anyway. Though tonight is different.

He’s brought someone.

Here’s the thing about Cricket Bell. You can’t NOT notice him when he walks into a room. The first thing that registers is his height, but it’s quickly followed by recognition of his energy. He moves gracefully like his sister, but with an enthusiasm he can’t quite seem to control—the constantly moving body, hands, feet. He’s been subdued the last few times I’ve seen him, but he’s fully revived now.

“Anna,” St. Clair says. “This is Cricket.”

Cricket dwarfs St. Clair. They look like Rocky and Bullwinkle, and the comfortable manner between them makes it appear they’ve been friends just as long. I suppose when one overly kind person and one overly outgoing person become friends, it’s easy like that.

Anna smiles. “We keep missing each other in the dorm. It’s nice to finally meet you.”

“Likewise,” Cricket says. “I’ve heard nothing but good things. In fact, if I weren’t standing next to your boyfriend, I’d be tempted to ask you out myself.”

She blushes, and St. Clair bounds inside the box office and wrestles her into a hug. “Miiiiiiiiine!” he says. The couple buying tickets from me eyes him warily.

“Cut it out .” Anna pushes him off, laughing. “You’ll get fired. And then I’ll have to support your sorry *arse* for the rest of our lives.”

The rest of their lives.

Why does this always make me uneasy? I’m not bothered that *they’re* happy, am I? He hops into his usual sitting position on the counter, and they’re already laughing about something else. Cricket waits on the other side of the glass, looking amused. I hand the couple their change. “So . . . what are you doing in the city on a weekday?” I ask him.

“I ran into St. Clair an hour ago, and he talked me into coming along. He said we’d see a movie,” he adds loudly.

“RIGHT,” St. Clair says. “That moving-pictures thing. Let’s do it.” But he returns to his conversation with Anna.

Cricket and I exchange smiles. “Come in.” I nod at the box-office door. A man in a fuzzy chartreuse sweater approaches my window, but even that’s not

enough to distract me from watching Cricket as he moves toward the door. Those long, easy strides. My chest swells with both heartache and heartbreak. He enters, and I jerk away my gaze.

“Enjoy the show,” I tell the sweater man. Cricket waits behind me while I print tickets for two more people. It’s impossible to concentrate with him standing there. The lobby empties again, and he takes the chair beside me. His hems rise and reveal his socks. Blue and purple stripes. On his left hand is a list: CH 12, SHAMPOO, BOX.

“How are you?” he asks. It’s not a casual question.

I remove my glasses for a moment to rub my tired eyes. “Surviving.”

“But she won’t be there for much longer.” He fidgets with his watch. “Will she?”

“Her credit is shot, and she’s failed the background check for every potential apartment.”

He grimaces. “In other words, she’s not leaving tomorrow.”

“The break-in charges from when she tried to get back inside her apartment aren’t helping either.” I cross my arms. “She wants Nathan to sue to have the charges against her dropped, but he won’t. Not when she was in the wrong.”

Cricket’s frown deepens, and I realize that he doesn’t know about Norah’s recent arrest. I fill him in, because . . . he already knows everything else.

“I’m sorry.” His voice turns to anguish. “Is there anything I can do to help?” There’s a certain restraint in his muscles as he struggles to keep from reaching out to me.

“What’s box?” I blurt.

He’s thrown. “What?”

I point at his hand. “Read chapter twelve and buy shampoo, right? What’s box?”

His right hand absentmindedly covers his left. “Oh. Uh, I need to find one.”

I wait for more.

He looks away, and his body follows him. “And I did. Find one. I’m moving some stuff back into my parents’ house. My room at school is crowded. And my other bedroom is empty. It has lots of space. For things.”

“You . . . you *do* spend a lot of weekends there.”

“Andschoolbreaks andsummers.” The words tumble out, and his face darkens as if shamed by his eagerness. No conversation is safe anymore. St. Clair interrupts with timing so perfect that he must have been listening. “Hey, did you know that *Cricket Bell* is related to *Alexander Graham Bell*?”

“Everyone who knows Cricket knows that,” I say.

“Really?” Anna looks genuinely interested. “That’s cool.”

Cricket rubs his neck. “No, it’s dumb trivia, that’s all.”

“Are you joking?” St. Clair says. “He’s one of the most important inventors in the entire history of the world. Ever! And—”

“It’s nothing,” Cricket interrupts.

I’m taken aback, but then I remember that first night he was home, when I mentioned his middle name and our conversation grew awkward. Something has changed. But what?

“Forgive his enthusiasm.” Anna grins at her boyfriend. “He’s a history nerd.”

I can’t resist bragging. “Cricket happens to be a brilliant inventor himself.”

“I’m not.” Cricket squirms. “I mess around. It’s not a big deal.”

St. Clair looks enraptured. “Just think. You’re the direct descendant of the man who invented”—he pulls out his cell—“this !”

“He didn’t invent that,” Cricket says drily.

“Well, not *this*,” St. Clair says. “But the idea. The first one.”

“No.” This is the most frustrated I’ve ever seen Cricket. “I mean he didn’t invent the telephone. Period.”

The three of us blink at him.

“Anna confused,” Anna says.

“Alexander Graham Bell didn’t invent the telephone, a man named Elisha Gray did. My great-great-great-grandfather stole the idea from him. And Gray wasn’t even the first. There were others, one before Alexander was even born. They just didn’t realize the full implications of what they’d created.”

St. Clair is fascinated. “What do you mean, he stole the idea?”

“I mean, Alexander stole the idea, took credit for it, and made an unbelievable sum of money that shouldn’t have been his.” Cricket is furious now. “My family’s entire legacy is based on a lie.”

Well. That would explain the change.

St. Clair looks guilty for unintentionally goading Cricket into telling us. He opens his mouth to speak, but Cricket shakes his head. “Sorry, I shouldn’t let it get to me.”

“When did you learn this?” I ask quietly.

“A couple of years ago. There was a book.”

I don’t like the expression on his face. Further memories of his reluctance to talk about his inventions creep into my mind. “Cricket . . . just because he stole the idea doesn’t mean what *you* do is—”

But he launches toward St. Clair. “Movie?”

Anna and I stare at him in concern, but St. Clair easily takes over again. “Yes, if you ladies no longer require our services, I believe we’re off.” Cricket is already halfway to the door. My heart screams in surprised agony.

He halts. It's as if he's physically stopped by something we can't see. "Will you be here later?" he asks me. "When the movie gets out?"

My throat dries. "I should be here."

He bites his bottom lip. And then they're gone.

"He's so into you," Anna says.

I rearrange a stack of quarters and try to calm my thumping chest. What just happened? "Cricket's a nice guy. He's always been like that."

"Then he's always been into you."

Yes. He has.

Anna whisks out the glass cleaner and sprays a smudge that St. Clair left behind on the window. Her smile fades as she grows deeper in thought. "What's the matter?" I ask. I'm desperate for a topic change.

"Me? Nothing, I'm fine."

"No way," I say. "It's your turn. Spill it."

"It's . . . my family is coming to visit." She sets down the cleaner, but her hand tightens on the nozzle. "They met Étienne at our graduation last year, and they liked him, but my mom is pretty freaked out by how fast we're moving. This visit could be so uncomfortable."

I pry the cleaner away from her. "Do you think you're moving too fast?"

Anna loosens and smiles again, love-struck. "Definitely not."

"Then you'll be fine." I nudge her. "Besides, everyone loves your boyfriend. Maybe your mom has just forgotten how gosh darn *charming* he is."

She laughs. Another patron comes to my window, and I print his ticket. When he leaves, Anna turns back to me and asks, "What about you? How are things with Max these days?"

I'm struck by a terrible realization. "Oh, no. You wanted to meet him. We left!"

"You had a bad night." She shrugs. "Don't worry about it."

"Yeah, but—"

"It's okay, I swear. Everyone makes mistakes." Anna stands and grabs her work keys. "The important thing is to not make the same mistake twice."

My guilt deepens. "I'm sorry about last week. When I came back from dinner late."

She shakes her head. "That's not what I was thinking about."

"Then what?"

Anna looks at me carefully. "Sometimes a mistake isn't a what. It's a who."

And she goes to rip tickets down the hall, leaving me with thoughts as jumbled as ever. Does she mean Max? Or Cricket? An hour later, Franko wanders in. He's about thirty, and his hair is unevenly shorn. Like, he has

random bald spots.

“Heeeeeey, Lola. Have you seen the thing?”

“What thing?”

“You know . . . the thing with . . . our schedules on it and stuff?”

“You mean our schedule?”

“Yeah. Have you seen it?”

I glance around. “Not in here. Sorry.” But Franko is already sifting through a pile of papers on the counter. He knocks the phone off its hook, and I grab it. “Careful!”

“Did you find it?” Franko spins around as I’m coming up. His elbow jams into my face and knocks my glasses to the floor. “Whoops. I got it, Lola.”

There’s a sickening crunch of plastic.

“FRANKO!” My world has turned into blobs of color and light.

“Whoa. Sorry, Lola. Were those real?”

Anna rushes in. “What? What happened? Oh.” She bends over to pick up what I assume are my glasses. Her voice doesn’t sound promising. “Dude.”

“What is it?” I ask.

“You can’t see?” She holds them closer to my face. Pieces. Many, many pieces.

I moan.

“Sorry,” Franko says again.

“Will you please go back to second-floor concessions?” Anna asks. He leaves. “Do you have another pair? Contacts? Anything?” she asks. I moan again. “Okay, no problem. Your shift is almost over. Your dad will be here soon to pick you up.”

“I was supposed to take Muni.” Of course tonight is the night my parents are busy and leave me to public transportation.

“But you can still take it, right?”

“Anna, you’re two feet away, and I can’t tell if you’re smiling or frowning.”

“Okay . . .” She sits down to think but immediately jumps back up. “Étienne and I will take you home! You’re only a quick detour from my school.”

“You don’t have—”

“It’s not a question,” she interrupts. And I’m relieved to hear her say it. I’m useless for the remainder of my shift. We’re ready to leave when the guys return, and Anna approaches the St. Clair-shaped blob. “We’re taking Lola home.”

“Why? What happened?” the Cricket-shaped blob asks.

I stare toward my shoes as I explain the situation.

“You can’t see me?” St. Clair asks. “You have no idea what I’m doing?”

“Stop it,” Anna says, and they laugh. I don’t know what’s happening. It’s

humiliating.

“I’ll take you home,” Cricket says.

St. Clair protests. “Don’t you have—”

“I’m next door. It’s not out of my way.”

I’m ashamed of my own helplessness. “Thank you.”

“Of course.” The sincerity behind this simple statement tugs at me. He’s not teasing me or making me feel bad about it. But Anna sounds worried as she hands me my purse. “Are you sure you’ll be okay?”

The implied question: *Are you sure you’ll be okay with Cricket?*

“I’m fine.” I give her a reassuring smile. “Thanks.” And it’s true until we step outside, and I trip over the sidewalk.

Cricket grabs me.

And I collapse again from the shock of his touch. He lifts me up, and despite the coat between us, my arm is buzzing like a fire alarm. “The sidewalks here are the worst,” he says. “The earthquakes have buckled them into land mines.” Cricket removes his hand. I blink at him, and he cautiously offers his arm.

I hesitate.

And then I take it.

And then we’re so close that I smell him. I *smell* him.

His scent is clean like a bar of soap, but with a sweet hint of mechanical oil. We don’t speak as he leads me across the street to the bus stop. I press against him. Just a little. His other arm jumps, and he lowers it. But then he raises it again, slowly, and his hand comes to rest on top of mine. It scorches. The heat carries a message: *I care about you. I want to be connected to you. Don’t let go.*

But then . . . he does.

He sits me on the bus stop’s fold-down seats, *and he lets go*, and he won’t look at me. We wait in agitated silence. The distance between us grows with each passing minute. Will he take my arm again, or will I have to take his? I steal a glance, but, of course, I can’t see his expression. Our bus exhales against the curb, and the door whooshes open.

Cricket reaches for me.

I look at the yellow glow in the sky that can only be the moon. *Thank you.*

We climb aboard, and before I can find my Muni pass, he’s paid for my ticket. The bus is empty. It rumbles forward, not waiting for us to sit, and he grabs me tighter. I don’t need to hold on to him, but I do anyway, with both hands. We lower ourselves into a seat. Together. I’m clutching his shirt, and his heart is pounding like a drum.

“Hi,” I whisper.

He peels off my hands and turns toward the aisle. “Please don’t make this any

harder than it already is,” he whispers back.

And I feel like the world’s biggest jerk.

“Right.” I sink as far away from him as possible. “Sorry. No.”

Max’s ghost takes a seat between us. It spreads out its legs territorially. The bus is cold, and the ride to the station is short. This time, I have to take his arm. He leads me robotically. Our trip from Van Ness to the Castro is bleak. The train rocks back and forth through the dark tunnels, and my humiliation grows bigger and bigger with each forced jostle against his shoulder. I need out. NOW. The doors open, and I race through the station and out the turnstile. He’s on my heels. I don’t need him.

I don’t need him, I don’t need him, I don’t need him.

But I trip on the sidewalk again, and his arm is around my waist, and when I pull from his grasp, he only tightens it. There’s a silent struggle between us as I try to wriggle my way out. “For a skinny guy, your arms are like a steel trap,” I hiss.

Cricket bursts into laughter. His grip loosens, and I break away, stumbling forward.

“Oh, come on, Lola.” He’s still laughing. “Let me help you.”

“I’m never going anywhere again without a backup vision plan.”

“I should hope not.”

“And I’m only accepting your help because I don’t want to run into something and accidentally rip this glorious polyester uniform.”

“Understood.”

“And *none* of this has changed *anything* between us.” My voice shakes.

“Also understood,” he says softly.

I take a deep breath. “Okay.”

Neither of us moves. He’s leaving it up to me. I tentatively reach for him again. He extends his arm, and I take it. The gesture of one friend helping another. There’s nothing more, because as long as there’s Max, there can’t be anything more. And I love Max.

So that’s that.

“So,” Cricket says, one quiet block later. “Tell me about this famous dress.”

“What dress?”

“The one you’re making the stays for. It sounds important.”

My conversation with Max rushes back in, and I’m embarrassed. Dances are such feminine affairs. I can’t bear to hear scorn from Cricket, too. “It’s for my winter formal,” I say. “And it’s *not* important.”

“Tell me about it.”

“It’s . . . just a big dress.”

“Big like a parachute? Big like a circus tent?”

As always, he makes me smile when I’m determined not to. “Big like Marie Antoinette.”

He whistles. “That *is* big. What are those things called? Hoop skirts?”

“Sort of. In that period, they were called panniers. They went out to the side, rather than around in a perfect circle.”

“Sounds challenging.”

“It is.”

“Sounds fun.”

“Maybe it would be if I had any idea what I was doing. Panniers are these giant, structural contraptions. Making them isn’t sewing; it’s construction. And I have illustrations, but I can’t find decent instructions.”

“Do you want to show me the illustrations?”

My brow creases. “Why?”

He shrugs. “Maybe I could figure it out.”

I’m about to say I don’t need his help, when I realize . . . he’s *exactly* the right person for the job. “Um. Yeah. That’d be nice, thanks.” We’ve reached my steps. I gently squeeze his arm and let go. “I’ve got this part.”

“I’ve taken you this far.” His voice becomes unsteady. “I can take you that much farther.” And he reaches for me one last time.

I brace myself for the contact.

“Cricket!” A call from between our houses, and his arm drops like an anchor. She must have been taking out the trash. Calliope hugs him from behind, and I can’t really see her, but she sounds like she’s about to cry. “Practice was a nightmare. I can’t believe you’re here, you said you couldn’t come. God, it’s good to see you. I’ll make hot cocoa and tell you all—Oh. Lola.”

Cricket is oddly petrified into silence.

“Your very kind brother walked me home from work,” I explain. “My glasses broke, and I’m completely blind.”

She pauses. “Where is it you work again? The movie theater?”

I’m surprised she knows. “Yeah.”

Calliope turns back to Cricket. “You went to the movies? What about that huuuge project due tomorrow? I thought that’s why you couldn’t come home. How *strange*.”

“Cal—” he says.

“I’ll be in the kitchen.” She stalks away.

I wait until she’s inside. “You have a project due tomorrow?”

He waits a long time before answering. “Yes.”

“You weren’t coming home tonight, were you?”

“No.”

“You came home for me.”

“Yes.”

We’re quiet again. I take his arm. “Then take me home.”

chapter eighteen

I'm encouraging him. And I can't stop.

Why can't I stop?

I press my palm against the front door, and my forehead comes to rest against it, too. I listen to his footsteps descend on the other side. They're slow, unhurried. I'm the one making our lives harder. I'm the one making this friendship difficult. *But he's the one who won't stop coming back.* He's smarter than that. He should know it's time to move on and to stay away from me.

I don't want him to stay away.

What DO I want? The answers are murky and unreadable, though it's clear I don't want another broken heart. Not his and certainly not mine. He needs to stay away.

I don't want him to stay away.

"That Bell boy grew up well," Norah says.

I startle. She's in the turquoise chaise longue that rests against the front bay window. How long has she been here? She must have seen us. Did she hear us? She watches him, until I assume his figure disappears, before turning her attention to me.

"You look tired, Lola."

"Speak for yourself."

"Fair enough."

But she's right. I'm exhausted. We stare at each other. Norah is blurry, but I can see enough. Her gray shirt hangs loosely against her chest, and she's wearing one of Andy's grandmother's old quilts wrapped around her for warmth. Her long hair and her thin arms are limp. Everything about her hangs. It's as if her own body has rejected her.

I wonder what she sees when she looks at me.

"You know what we need?" she asks.

I don't like her use of the word *we*. "What?"

"Tea. We need tea."

I sigh. "I don't need tea. I need to go to bed."

Norah pulls herself up. She groans as if her joints are sore, as if they were as old as the blanket around her shoulders. She takes my arm, and I flinch. The warm, comforting feeling of Cricket's hand disappears and is replaced by hers, clammy and sharp. She leads me into the kitchen, and I'm too worn out to stop her.

Norah pulls out a chair at the table. I sag into it.

“I’ll be right back,” she says. I hear her climb the stairs, followed by the sound of my bedroom door being opened. Before I can get worked up, my door shuts again. She returns and hands me another pair of eyeglasses.

I’m surprised. “Thanks.”

“What happened to the pair you left in?”

“They got stepped on.”

“Someone stepped on your glasses?” Now she sounds pissed.

“Not on purpose. Jeez.” I scowl. “Are my parents still on their date?”

“I guess. Why should I care?” She fills the copper teakettle with tap water and sets it down with more force than necessary. It shakes the stove.

“You had another fight,” I say.

Norah doesn’t respond, but the manner in which she roots through her cardboard box of tea is resentful and angry.

Her box of tea.

“No!” I jump up. “You’re not reading my leaves.”

“Nonsense. This is what you need—”

“You don’t know a thing about what I really need.” The bitter words spit out before I can stop them.

She freezes. Her hair falls before her face like a shield. And then she tucks it behind her ears as if I didn’t say anything, and she removes something from her box. “Fenghuang dancong oolong. Fenghuang means ‘phoenix.’ This is the one for you.”

“No.”

Norah opens our cabinet of drinking glasses and takes out a pink teacup. I don’t recognize it, so it must be one of hers. My blood fires again. “You put your cups in our cabinets?”

“Just two.” She pulls out another, the color of jade. “This one is mine.”

“So where’s your crystal ball? Beside the television? Will I find your turban in the laundry room?”

The empty cups rattle against their saucers as she sets them on the table. “You know I hate that crap. A costume doesn’t signify meaning or experience. It’s a lie.”

“And what you do *isn’t* lying?”

“Sit down,” she says calmly.

“I’ve never let you read my leaves before, so why would I start now?”

Norah thinks for a moment. “Aren’t you the least bit curious?”

“No.” But I say it too quickly. She spots a waver as the back corners of my mind answer differently. Who isn’t the least bit curious? I know fortune-telling

is a deception, but my life has become such a struggle that I can't help but hope for an answer anyway. Maybe the fortune will tell me something about Cricket. Maybe it knows something I don't, or maybe it will make me think of something I wouldn't have otherwise realized.

Smugness on her lips. I sit back down but avert my eyes to show how much I dislike being here. The kettle whistles, and Norah scoops a spoonful of tea directly into it. The house creaks quietly while the oolong steeps. The longer we wait, the edgier I become. I almost get up to leave a dozen times, but curiosity has a strong hold on me.

"Drink," Norah says, when it's finished. "Leave about half a teaspoon of liquid."

I sip the tea, because it's hot. The flavor is light, and it tastes like a peach, but with something darker hidden inside. Like smoke. Norah doesn't mind the heat. She gulps hers down and pours another cup. I finally reach the bottom. I hold the pink cup close and frown at the brown-green leaves, looking for symbols. It's all lumped together.

"Now what?"

"Take the cup with your left hand."

"Is that my magic hand?"

She ignores this, too. "Now turn it three times, counterclockwise—faster than that. Yes, good. Turn it over onto your saucer."

"Won't all the leaves run out?"

"Shh. Keep your hand on the bottom of the cup. And close your eyes and take a moment to think about what you'd like to know."

I feel stupid. THAT is what I think about. And . . . I think about Cricket Bell.

"Turn it back over. Carefully," she adds. I slow down and right my teacup. The leaves have used the last remaining droplets of liquid to stick to the sides. "I'll take that now." She's silent for many minutes. Her bony hands tilt the cup every which way, to gain different perspectives or perhaps just to see the shapes better in the dimmed kitchen light. "Well." Norah sets it down and gestures for me to scoot closer. I do. "Do you see this cloud here, close to the handle?"

"Sort of. Yeah."

"That means you're in a stage of confusion or trouble. But with me living here, we didn't need leaves to tell us that. And this triangle down here, that means you possess a natural talent for creativity. But we didn't need them to know that either."

I'm surprised by her frankness, as well as the rare compliment. I scoot a little closer.

"But do you see these dots, traveling around the edge of the cup?"

I nod.

“A path of dots means a journey. This one will be taken over the course of several months. If it circled all the way back around, it would have been at least a year,” she explains. “But the journey ends here, into this shape. What does that look like to you?”

“Um. A moon, maybe? With a . . . stick coming out of it?”

“How about a cherry?”

“Yeah! I see that.”

“Cherries represent first love. In other words, this path you’re on leads to first love.”

I jolt, and my legs smack the table. The way she doesn’t startle makes me believe she expected this reaction. Does she know how I feel about Cricket? Or, should I say, how I felt about him in the past? She was certainly around, but how much did she observe?

Norah is messing with me.

She pauses. “Why don’t you tell me what shapes you see in the cup?”

I stare into it for several minutes. I look for dogs or shoes or anything recognizable, but all I see are wet leaves. My eyes keep returning to the cherry. I set the cup down. “I don’t know. There’s a pile of sticks on that side. And a curlicue thing.”

“Okay. The loop is near the rim, so that means you’ve been making—or you’ll soon be making—impulsive actions.”

“Good or bad?” I quickly ask.

She shrugs. “Could be either, but are things done on impulse ever really a good idea?”

“Is that something your therapist told you?” I snap.

Norah’s tone darkens. “And see how the sticks are crossed, all on top of each other? That suggests a series of arguments. It usually leads to a parting.” Her voice is short.

“A parting.” I stand. “Yes, thank you. This was very educational.”

Arguments, partings, impulses. Clouds of confusion. I thought fortunes were supposed to make people feel BETTER about their lives. I thought that’s why people paid money to hear them. And a journey to first love? Just because Max insulted her doesn’t mean she has to steer me into the arms of another guy.

Though it did look like a cherry.

I don’t know why I’m giving any of this crap my consideration. Norah thinks my costumes are lies, that they lack meaning? She should look in the mirror. Her entire livelihood—what’s left of it—lacks meaning. I’m steaming as I brush my teeth and get ready for bed. I turn off my lights just as a light behind my curtains

flicks on.

So he's staying the night.

Has he been talking to Calliope? I wonder if he'll be able to complete his project for school, whatever it is. Probably not. I toss in my bedcovers, unable to sleep from the guilt over Cricket, from the caffeine in the tea, from that stupid freaking cherry. Maybe cherries don't mean first love. Maybe they mean the person you lose your virginity to. It would make more sense, and in that case, my path leads to Max.

Which means I'm on the right path?

I hear his window slide open.

And then . . . nothing more.

I don't know why, but I think he'll call my name. He doesn't. I grab my glasses and creep out of bed. I peer through the darkness. Cricket is looking up, staring at the sky. I watch him silently. He doesn't move. I reach for my curtain, that impulse I can't control, and open my window. "Hi," I say.

He looks directly at me. His eyes are deepened as if he's still staring at the stars.

"Is everything okay with your sister?"

Cricket nods slowly. "She'll survive."

"I'm sorry about your project."

"Don't worry about it."

"Will you get to make it up?"

"Maybe."

"Do . . . do you want those illustrations?"

A small smile. "Sure."

"Okay. Hold on." I dig through the piles on my floor until I find the binder of pictures printed from the internet and photocopies xeroxed from books—all of the inspiration for my dress that I've collected since I met Max at the beginning of summer. I return to my window, and Cricket is sitting in his, just like the first time I saw him again. At the end of summer. "Should I toss it to you?" I glance at Andy's compost pile below.

A split second of thought and he says, "I'll be right back."

He disappears, leaving me to observe his room. It's still bare, but traces of him have begun to appear—a science magazine by his bed, a pile of tangled rubber bands on his dresser, a half-filled juice glass on his desk, an unusual coat hanging on the back of his desk chair. Cricket returns a minute later with a broom and a metal basket of fruit. He removes the fruit, one by one, and sets them on his dresser.

I'm terrified he'll pull out a cherry.

He doesn't.

He places the empty basket on the wooden broom handle, raises the end, and the basket slides down to his hand. Cricket leans out his window and stretches out the broom handle. His arms are long enough that it reaches me with room to spare.

“Ready?”

I prepare for the catch. “Aye, Captain.”

He tilts the broom, and the basket flies down the stick and into my arms. I laugh in delight. “You know, I really could have thrown it.”

“Wouldn't want to take the chance. I might have missed it.”

“You never miss a catch.” I tuck the binder inside the basket. “It's kinda heavy.”

“I've got it.” Cricket holds the broom steady and up at an angle. I stretch on my toes to slide the basket's handle onto the broom. I drop it. The weight lowers the broom, but he raises it in just enough time to send the basket flying back to him. “HA!” His belt buckle clicks against the window frame as he moves his body back inside, and I'm startled to recognize it. It's the same belt he's had for years—black, cracked leather. He pulls down his shirt, which has come up a bit. His torso is so long that shirts are always a little short on him. Another detail I'd forgotten.

I shake my head, trying to push away thoughts of his abdomen. But I'm smiling. “That was both ridiculously easy and way more complicated than it should have been.”

He smiles back. “That's my specialty.”

chapter nineteen

I'm ambushed as I pass the Bell house the next morning, but not by the preferred twin.

"We need to talk." Calliope's arms are crossed, and she's dressed in pale blue running clothes, the same shade of blue as her eyes. Cricket's eyes. The twins also share the same almost-black hair, although hers lies down neat and tidy. But their smiles are night and day. Cricket's looks as if it can't be helped, as if it can't *possibly* be contained, while Calliope's looks practiced. No doubt it is. I know how dedicated she is to practice.

She's clearly been waiting for me to come outside before beginning her daily run. To say that I'm unnerved would be a monumental understatement. "Talk about what?" I move today's schoolbag—a vintage glittery vinyl bowling bag—in front of my chest.

"What do you think you're doing?"

I glance around our street. "Um. Going to school?"

"With *my brother*." Her voice grows even harder. "This stops now. I'm sick of watching you take advantage of him."

"Ex—excuse me?"

"Don't play dumb. You know exactly what I'm talking about. He's always been this total sucker for you; he'll do anything you say. So, tell me. Did you break up with your boyfriend last night before arriving home on Cricket's arm?"

My face reddens. "He offered to help me because my glasses broke. I couldn't see."

"And all of that flirting and pressing your chest into his arm? Did that also help?"

I'm too stunned to reply.

"My brother isn't like you," she continues. "He doesn't have a lot of experience. He's only had one girlfriend, and it wasn't for long, and she was barely that. I seriously doubt he's done anything more than kiss."

The blush grows deeper. The implication is that I *have* done more, which is *none* of her business.

"In other words, my brother is pretty freaking clueless when it comes to girls, and he can't tell when he's being had. But *I* can tell, so I'm telling you to BACK OFF."

My vision is blurring. I still can't find the words to speak.

Calliope takes a step closer. "The special trips home to see you, the crushing

disappointment whenever he discovers you're out with Max. Stop jerking him around."

ENOUGH.

"You're mistaken." I straighten my spine, bone by bone. "Cricket and I are friends. Haven't you ever heard of friends?" I pause and then shake my head. "No, I guess not."

"I have a *best* friend. And you're messing with his head."

"Messing . . . *messing with his head*? What about you lying to him, two years ago? Telling him that I didn't want to come to his party?"

This time, she's the one who reddens.

"You're just worried you're losing him again. Now that he's gone to college, your life must be so *lonely*." I push past her. "It must be hard when your head cheerleader moves on and gets a life."

She grabs my coat to stop me. "This isn't about me."

"It's always about you." I shake her off, furious. "But just so you know, your brother has a life, too. He may not be performing for crowds, but he's just as talented. But you'd never notice it because your entire family is stuck in selfish Calliope world."

"Actually." The word is slow and venomous. "I have two talented brothers. And Cricket knows that we care about him."

"Does he? Are you sure about that?"

"He would say something." But suddenly she looks unsure.

"He does," I say through a clenched jaw. "To me, to *my* family. Now, if you don't mind, I'm going to be late for school."

Calliope's accusations hang over my head like black clouds. *Taking advantage of him*. I'm not doing anything on purpose—I would *never* intentionally hurt Cricket—but I was already aware that I haven't been doing him any favors. Hearing her point it out was awful, and I cringe every time I remember her mentioning the flirting.

More uncomfortable is the knowledge that Cricket had a girlfriend. Even if he is inexperienced, knowing he once dated someone shouldn't make me feel this way. Like my intestines are made of worms. I have Max, and Cricket should be allowed to have dated someone, too. To be dating someone now.

Oh God. The thought of Cricket with a new girlfriend makes me ill. *Please, please, please don't let him get a girlfriend until I become comfortable with this whole friendship thing.*

And then I feel worse, because jeez, what a selfish wish.

Max calls me after school to announce another Saturday night in Santa

Monica. I knew the band had scheduled more shows down there, but the way he neglected to mention it earlier this week makes me paranoid that this is something additional, something booked to escape our brunch. I haven't seen him since that awful dinner. All I want to do is burrow into his arms and know that everything is still good between us.

He offers to take me out during my dinner break at work. We meet at a crappy Thai diner, and I can't keep my hands off him. I'm craving closeness. The owner shoots us dirty looks as we make out in the corner table.

"Come to my place after work?" he asks.

"Andy's picking me up, and I'm still grounded. What about tomorrow, before you leave? I can pretend like I have an early shift?"

"We're heading out early. There's a music store in L.A. we want to check out. Don't make that face, Lola-girl," he says when a pout slips onto my lips. He laces his fingers through mine. "I'll see you in a few days."

The weekend passes slowly without him. It also passes without Cricket. All I see of him is a sign, and not a sign like something in a teacup, but a sign written in black marker and taped to his window: SKATE AMERICA. SEE YOU NEXT WEEKEND. Why didn't he say earlier that he'd be out of town? Did Calliope tell him about our fight?

I want to call him, but I don't have his number. And I could ask Lindsey—I'm sure it's still saved in her phone—but it'd give the wrong impression for me to go out of my way like that. Calliope would probably bite me if she found out. So I do homework and stare at his sign instead.

Now it's Wednesday. It's still there.

And the more I've stared at his handwriting—very blocky, very boy—the more I want to prove to myself that we can be friends. I like Cricket. He likes me. It's not fair to let Calliope intimidate us out of even *trying*.

Which is, somehow, why I'm on a train to Berkeley. I think. In addition to the friendship thing, I've had increasingly distressing thoughts about my dress binder. I can't believe I gave it to him! THE WHOLE THING. Not, "Here are the relevant five pages." But six months of planning and daydreaming. What does he think when he looks at it? I recall each floofy, frilly, over-the-top picture, and my scribbled hearts and notes and doodles, and I want to die. He must think my brain is made of cake.

I have to get it back.

Besides, I'll also need my notes this week. I have a ton of work to do on the dress. So, really, it's practicality that led me onto a train as soon as school let out. The ones that run to the surrounding cities are sleeker than the ones that

rumble through San Francisco. They rocket through the stations with fierce howls, but their passengers share the same tired and bored expressions. I fidget with my red, heart-shaped sunglasses and watch the dirty, industrial side of Oakland whiz by.

It's a lonely ride. It's only twenty minutes, but including the wait for the train at the station and the local train I took to get to *this* train, I've been traveling for over an hour. I can't believe St. Clair does this every day. Now I know when he does his homework. He travels an hour—two hours, since he has to return!—to see Anna. And she does this every weekend to see him.

What will Cricket say when I show up? He knows it's not a quick trip. Maybe I should tell him that I was vintage clothes shopping in the area, so I thought I'd drop by. Friends drop by, right? And then I can casually mention the binder and take it home. Yes, the friend thing and then the binder thing. Because that's why I'm going.

So why haven't you told Max?

I squirm in my seat and push away the question.

Apparently, I'm only grounded from things that involve my boyfriend. When I told Andy today that I was going to Lindsey's for a *Pushing Daisies* marathon, he didn't blink. He even gave me money to pick up a pizza. I think he feels guilty about Norah. It's been a week and a half, and there's still no sign of her leaving. Last night, one of her usuals even stopped by for a reading. My parents and I were already in bed when someone began pressing our doorbell like it was a panic button. I imagine that when Nathan gets home tonight, there'll be another hostile dispute. I bet Andy would rather be watching old television and eating pizza, too.

I'm not sure why I didn't tell him I'm visiting Cricket. I honestly don't think Andy would mind. Maybe I'm afraid my parents would mention it to Max. I mean, I *will* tell Max eventually, when it's really, really, really clear that Cricket and I are just friends.

When we're comfortable around each other.

I exit at the Downtown Berkeley station and head toward campus. Thanks to conversations with St. Clair, I know what dormitory Cricket lives in. I've printed out a map online. It shouldn't be too difficult to find, even though it's been a while. I used to drag Lindsey here sometimes on weekends to go shopping on Telegraph Avenue, but since last summer—and since Max—we haven't left the city together.

The buildings in this town look more California, less San Francisco. They're pretty, but they're newer and squarer. Instead of gingerbread Victorians with stained glass and peeling paint, they're made from stable brick. And there are

beautiful trees everywhere, lining streets that are wider and cleaner and quieter. It's busy enough, though, and everyone walking or bicycling around me is college-aged.

I push back my shoulders to appear more confident.

It's weird to think about Cricket living here. My memories of him are so connected to the lavender house in the Castro that it's difficult to picture him anywhere else. But that might be his drugstore. And that might be his taqueria. And that might be where he buys his Cal Golden Bears memorabilia!

No. It's impossible to picture Cricket in a T-shirt with a school mascot on it.

Which is why we are friends.

It takes another fifteen minutes to walk the long, sloping road to the Foothill Student Housing, and my mind can't help but add the time to St. Clair and Anna's tally. It's obscene how much time they spend getting to each other every day. And I've never heard them complain, not once. I can't even believe how often Cricket returns home. Lugging his laundry, no less!

An unsettling thought occurs to me.

His laundry bag. It's never full. Cricket has a large wardrobe for a guy; there's no way he's bringing *all* of his dirty clothes home. Which means he's doing some of his laundry here. Which means . . . what? The laundry is an excuse to come home? But he doesn't need an excuse to hang out with Calliope. She wants him there. So the excuse must have been crafted to strengthen a different reason for coming home.

Calliope's voice rings inside my head: *The special trips home to see you.*

An uncomfortable question lodges itself in the pit of my stomach. And what am I doing right now? *Making a special trip to see him.*

Oh, no—

I stop dead in my tracks. The Foothill Student Housing is TWO dormitories, on opposite sides of the street. I'd been expecting a high-rise. And I thought I'd be able to waltz in to some kind of . . . help desk. But I don't see anything resembling a help desk, and not only are there TWO dormitories, but each is made up of a series of labyrinth-like buildings shaped like Swiss chalets. Evil, evil Swiss chalets surrounded by tall gates.

WHAT AM I SUPPOSED TO DO?

Okay, calm down, Dolores. There's probably an easy solution. You can figure this out. No biggie. You've made it this far.

I try one of the gates. Locked.

ARRRRRGHHHHHH.

Wait. Someone's coming! I pull out my cell and start chatting like crazy. "Ohmygod, I know. Did you see those spurs that urban cowboy was wearing at

the gas station?” I pretend to reach for the gate just as the girl on the other side exits. She holds it open, and I give her a wave of thanks as I keep walking and chatting to no one.

I’m inside. I’M INSIDE.

Lindsey would be so proud! Okay, what would she do next? I examine the courtyard, and I’m dismayed to find the situation looks even worse from in here—endless buildings, floors, and hallways. Locks *everywhere*. On *everything*. It’s a freaking fortress.

This was such a stupid idea. This was the stupidest idea of all of the stupid ideas I have ever had in my entire stupid life. I should go home. I’m still not even sure what I’d say to Cricket when I saw him. But I hate that I’ve already come this far. I crumple onto a bench and call Lindsey. “I need help.”

“What kind of help?” She’s suspicious.

“How do I find Cricket’s building and room number?”

“And you need that information *why*?”

My voice grows tiny. “Because I’m in Berkeley?”

A long pause. “Oh, Lola.” And then a sigh. “You want me to call him?”

“No!”

“So you’re just gonna show up? What if he’s not there?”

Crud. I hadn’t thought about that.

“Forget it,” Lindsey says. “Okay, call what’s-his-name. St. Clair.”

“Too embarrassing. Don’t you have access to school records or something?”

“If I had access to something like that, don’t you think I would have used it by now? No, you have to use a source. Your source is St. Clair.”

“It’s not you?”

“Bye, Lola.”

“Wait! If my parents call, tell them I’m in the bathroom. We’re eating pizza and watching *Pushing Daisies*.”

“I hate you.”

“I love you.”

She hangs up.

“All right,” an English accent says to me. “(A) You’re not in the toilets, (B) You’re not eating pizza, and (C) Whom do you love?”

I jump up and throw my arms around him. “I don’t believe it!”

St. Clair hugs me back before prying me off. “What are you doing at my dormitory?”

“I chose the right one? You live here? Which building?” I look around wildly as if it were about to light up.

“I don’t know. Should I trust a lying girl wearing a yellow raincoat on a sunny

day?”

I smile. “Why are you always in the right place at the right time?”

“It’s a particular talent of mine.” He shrugs. “Are you looking for Cricket?”

“Will you show me where he lives?”

“Does he know you’re coming?” he asks.

I don’t answer.

“Ah,” he says.

“Do you think he’ll mind?”

St. Clair shakes his head. “You’re right. I sincerely doubt it. Come along, then.” He leads me across the courtyard to a brown-shingled building in the back. We climb a set of stairs, and he unlocks another door, which puts us inside the building’s second floor, in an ugly, battered hallway. He struts ahead of me, but his scuffed boots make heavy clomping noises on the carpet. Cricket doesn’t make any noise when he moves.

Does Max make noise?

“Here’s my room.” St. Clair nods to a cheap-looking wooden door, and I laugh when I see the worn drawing taped to it. It’s him wearing a Napoleon hat. “And here . . .” We walk down four more doors. “. . . is Monsieur Bell’s room.” There’s also something taped to his door. It’s an illustrated miniposter of a woman thrusting a battle-ax toward the heavens and straddling a white tiger. Naked.

St. Clair grins.

“Are you . . . sure this is his room?”

“Oh, I’m *quite* sure.”

I stare at the naked tiger lady. She’s skinny and blond and doesn’t look anything like me. Not that it matters. Not that I should care for the opinion of someone who’d hang that on his door. But still. “And now I have a train to catch,” St. Clair says. “Best of luck.” He darts out the building.

If he’s screwing with me, I’ll kill him.

I take a deep breath. And then another.

And then I knock.

chapter twenty

Lola?” Cricket looks astonished. “What are you doing here?”

“I—” Now that I’m standing before his door, my excuses sound ludicrous. *Hey, I was in the neighborhood, so I thought I’d drop by to hang out. Oh! And I wanted to get back that embarrassing binder, which I only lent to you because you were nice enough to offer to make something that would enable me to attend a dance with another guy.* “I came to see if you had any ideas for the panniers. I’m . . . in a bit of a time crunch.”

Time crunch? I have never used the phrase time crunch before.

Cricket is still in shock.

“I mean, I came to see you, too. Of course.”

“Well. You found me. Hi.”

“Everything okay?” A girl pops out her head behind him. She’s taller than me, and she’s slender. And she has golden hair in natural waves and a glowing tan that says surfer girl rather than fake-and-bake.

And she looks totally pissed to see me here.

She places a hand possessively on his arm. His sleeve is pushed up so her bare skin is touching his. My stomach plummets. “S-sorry. It was rude of me to show up like this. I’ll see you later, okay?” And then I’m speed-walking down the hall.

“LOLA!”

I stop. I slowly turn around.

He looks bewildered. “Where are you going?”

“I didn’t mean to interrupt. I was in the neighborhood, um, shopping and . . . and of course you’re busy.” *Stop freaking out. He can date or make out with or—oh God—sleep with whomever he wants.*

“Is it raining?” The girl frowns at my raincoat and rain boots.

“Oh. No. They matched my dress.” I unsnap the coat to expose a pretty dress in the same shade of yellow. Cricket startles like he’s just noticed the girl’s hand. He slides from her grasp and into the hall.

“This is my friend Jessica. We were working on our physics homework. Jess, this is Lola. The one . . . the one I told you about.”

Jessica does not look pleased by this information.

HE TOLD HER ABOUT ME.

“So you came to work on the dress?” he asks.

“It’s not a big deal.” I move toward him. “We can do it later.”

“No! You’re here. You’re never here.” He glances at Jessica. “We’ll finish

tomorrow, okay?”

“Right.” She fires me a death glare before storming away.

Cricket doesn't notice. He opens his door wide. “Come in. How did you find me?”

“St. Cla—OH.”

“What? What is it?”

Two beds. Beside one, a constellation chart, a periodic table, and a desk crowded with papers and wires and small metal objects. Beside the other, more naked fantasy women, a gigantic television, and several gaming consoles.

“You have a roommate.”

“Yeah.” He sounds confused.

“The, um, picture on your door surprised me.”

“NO. No. I prefer my women with . . . fewer carnivorous beasts and less weaponry.” He pauses and smiles. “Naked is okay. What she needs are a golden retriever and a telescope. Maybe then it would do it for me.”

I laugh.

“A squirrel and a laboratory beaker?”

“A bunny rabbit and a flip chart,” I say.

“Only if the flip chart has mathematical equations on it.”

I fake-swoon onto his bed. “Too much, too much!” He's laughing, but it fades as he watches me toss and turn. He looks pained. I sit up on my elbows. “What's the matter?”

“You're in my room,” he says quietly. “You weren't in my room five minutes ago and now you are.”

I pull myself up the rest of the way, suddenly conscious of both the bed and its lingering scent of bar soap and sweet mechanical oil. I glance at a space close to his head but not quite at it. “I shouldn't have barged in on you like this. I'm sorry.”

“No. I'm glad you're here.”

I find the courage to meet his eyes, but he's not looking at me anymore. He reaches for something on his desk. It's overflowing with towers of graphing paper and partially completed projects, but there's one area that's been cleared of everything. Everything except for my binder. “I did some sketches this weekend in Pennsylvania—”

“Oh, yeah.” I looked up Skate America, and it was held in Reading this year. I ask the polite question. “How did Calliope do?”

“Good, good. First.”

“She broke her second-place streak?”

He looks up. “What? Oh. No. She always gets first in these early seasonal

competitions. Not to take anything away from her,” he adds distractedly. Since he’s not bothered by the mention, I gather that he doesn’t know we spoke. Best to keep it that way. “Okay,” he says. “Here’s what I was working on.”

Cricket sits beside me on his bed. He’s in scientist inventor professional mode, so he’s forgotten his self-imposed distance rule. He pulls out a few illustrations that he’d tucked inside, and he’s rambling about materials and circumferences and other things I’m not thinking about, because all I see is how carefully he’s cradling my binder in his lap.

Like it’s fragile. Like it’s important.

“So what do you think?”

“It looks wonderful,” I say. “Thank you.”

“It’ll be big. I mean, you wanted big, right? Will you have enough fabric?”

Oops. I should have been paying closer attention. I study the dimensions. He hands me a calculator so I can punch in my numbers, and I’m surprised at how perfect it is. “Yeah. Wow, I’ll even have the right amount of spare fabric, just in case.”

“I’ll collect the materials tomorrow so I can start it this weekend at my parents’ house. I’ll need . . .” His cheeks turn pink.

I smile. “My measurements?”

“Not all of them.” Now red.

I write down what he needs. “I’m not one of *those* girls. I don’t mind.”

“You shouldn’t. You’re perfect, you look beautiful.”

The words are out. He’s been so careful.

“I shouldn’t have said that.” Cricket sets aside my binder and jolts up. He moves as far away from me as possible without stepping on his roommate’s side. “I’m sorry.” He rubs the back of his head and stares out his window.

“It’s okay. Thank you.”

We’re quiet. It’s grown dark outside.

“You know.” I snap and unsnap my raincoat. “We spend a lot of time apologizing to each other. Maybe we should stop. Maybe we need to try harder to be friends. It’s okay for friends to say things like that without it getting weird.”

Cricket turns back around and looks at me. “Or to show up unannounced.”

“Though if you gave me your number, I wouldn’t have to.”

He smiles, and I pull out my cell and toss it to him. He tosses his to me. We enter our digits into each other’s phone. The act feels official. Cricket throws mine back and says, “I’m listed under ‘Naked Tiger Woman.’”

I laugh. “Are you serious? Because I entered myself as ‘Naked Tiger Lady.’”

“Really?”

I laugh harder. “No. I’m Lola.”

“The one and only.”

I walk his phone to him and place it in his open palm. “That’s a mighty fine compliment coming from you, Cricket Bell.”

His eyebrows rise slowly in a question.

And then the bedroom light flicks on.

“Whoops.” A guy half the height of Cricket and twice as wide tosses a bag of Cool Ranch Doritos onto the other bed. “Sorry, man.”

Cricket springs backward. “This is my roommate, Dustin. Dustin, this is Lola.”

“Huh,” Dustin says. “I thought you were gay.”

“Um,” Cricket says.

“You’re always in the city, and you ignore Heather whenever she comes by.”

Heather? There’s another one?

“Guess I was wrong.” Dustin shakes his head and flops down beside his chips. “Good. Now I don’t have to worry about you looking at my junk anymore.”

I tense. “How do you know he’d be interested in *your* junk? It’s not like you’re attracted to every girl in the world. Why would he be attracted to every boy?”

“Whoa.” Dustin looks at Cricket. “What’s the deal?”

Cricket throws on a coat. “We should go, Lola. You probably need to catch the train.”

“You don’t go here?” Dustin asks me.

“I attend school in the city.” I slide my binder into my bag.

He looks me up and down. “One of those art students, huh?”

“No. I go to Harvey Milk Memorial.”

“What’s that?”

“A high school,” I say.

Dustin’s eyebrows shoot up. He turns to Cricket. “Is she legal?” His voice is tinged with appreciation and respect.

“Bye, Dustin.” Cricket holds the door open for me.

“IS SHE LEGAL?” he says as Cricket slams the door shut behind us.

Cricket closes his eyes. “I’m sorry.”

“Hey. No apologizing. Especially not for *him*.” We head outside, and I shudder. No wonder Cricket comes home most weekends. “Besides,” I continue, “I’m used to it. I get stuff like that alllll the—”

Cricket has stopped moving.

“—time.” Crud.

“Right. Of course you do.” With excruciating effort, he pushes through Max’s

ghost. Always present. Always haunting us. “So what’s the boyfriend doing tonight?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t talked to him today.”

“Do you usually talk to him? Every day?”

“Yeah,” I say uncomfortably. I’m losing Cricket. His body is moving physically farther from mine as his mind rebuilds the barrier he built to protect us. “Do you want to get dinner or something?” I blurt. He doesn’t answer. “Forget it, I’m sure you have things to do. Or whatever.”

“No!” And then, with control, “Dinner would be good. Any particular craving?”

“Well . . . Andy gave me money for pizza.”

Cricket tours me through his campus, pointing out the various buildings—all grand and immense and named Something-or-Other Hall—where he takes classes. He tells me about his teachers and the other students, and once again, I’m struck by how strange it is that he has this other life. This life I’m not a part of.

We wind up Telegraph Avenue, the busiest street in downtown Berkeley. It’s the most San Francisco–like place here, with its bead stores, tattoo shops, bookstores, record stores, head shops, and Nepalese imports. But it’s also overrun with street vendors selling cheaply made junk—ugly jewelry, tie-dyed shoelaces, bad art, and Bob Marley’s face on everything. We have to walk through a group of dancing Hare Krishnas in sherbet-colored robes and finger cymbals, and I nearly run smack into a man wearing a fur hat and a cape. He’s draping a supertiny table with velvet for tarot readings, right there on the street. I feel relieved that Norah’s distaste for costumes means at least she doesn’t look like this guy.

There are homeless everywhere. An older man with a weatherhardened face comes out of nowhere, limping and staggering in front of us like a zombie. I instinctively jolt backward and away.

“Hey,” Cricket says gently, and I realize that he caught my reaction. It’s comforting to know he understands why. To know I won’t have to explain, and to know he’s not judging me for it. He smiles. “We’re here.”

Inside Blondie’s, I insist on paying with Andy’s twenty. We sit at a countertop overlooking the street and eat one slice of pesto vegetarian (me) and three slices of beef pepperoni (him). Cricket sips a Cherry Coke. “Nice of Andy to give us dinner money,” he says. “But why pizza?”

“Oh, the pizza place was on the way,” I say. He looks confused. “On the way to Lindsey’s house. They think I’m with Lindsey.”

Cricket sets down his drink. "Please tell me you're joking."

"No. It was easier than explaining to Andy . . ." I trail off, unsure of what the rest of that sentence is.

"Explaining that you wanted to hang out with me?"

"No. Well, yeah. But I don't think my parents would mind," I add quickly.

He's exasperated. "So why didn't you tell them? Jeez, Lola. What if something happened to you? No one would know where you were!"

"I told Lindsey I was here." *Well, I told her later.* I push the Parmesan shaker away. "You know, you're starting to sound like my parents."

Cricket hangs his head and runs his hands through his dark hair. When he looks up again, it's sticking up even taller and crazier than usual. He stands. "Come on."

"What?"

"You have to go home."

"I'm eating. *You're* eating."

"You can't be here, Lola. I have to take you home."

"I don't believe it. You're serious?"

"YES. I'm not having this on my . . . permanent record."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"It means if your parents find out you've been here without their permission, they won't like me very much."

Now I stand. He's nearly a foot taller, but I try to make him feel as small as possible. "And why are you so concerned about my parents liking you? Is it necessary to remind you—AGAIN—that I have a boyfriend?"

The words are cruel, and I'm horrified as soon as they leave my mouth. Cricket's blue eyes become startlingly angry. "Then why are you here?"

I'm panicking. "Because you offered to help me."

"I *was* helping you, and then you just showed up. In my bedroom! You knew I was coming back next weekend—"

"You didn't come back last weekend!"

"And now I require your permission to go somewhere? Do you take pleasure in knowing I'm over there . . . *pinning* for you?"

I throw my half-finished slice in the trash and flee. As always, he's on my heels. He grabs me. "Lola, wait. I don't know what I'm saying, this conversation is moving too fast. Let's try again."

I yank my arm from his grasp and resume my race toward the train station. He's beside every stride. "I'm going home, Cricket. Like you told me to."

"Please don't go." He's desperate. "Not like this."

"You can't have it both ways, don't you get it?" I jerk to a halt and sway. *I'm*

talking to myself, not to Cricket.

“I’m trying,” he says. “I’m trying so hard.”

The words shatter my heart. “Yeah,” I say. “Well. Me, too.”

Confusion.

And then . . . “You’re trying? Are you trying in the same way as me?” His words rush out, toppling over each other.

Life would be so much easier if I could say that I’m not interested, that he stands no chance with me. But something about the way Cricket Bell is looking at me—like nothing has ever mattered more to him than my answer—means that I can only speak the truth. “I don’t know. Okay? I look at you, and I think about you, and . . . I don’t know. No one has ever so completely confounded me the way you do.”

His difficult equation face. “So what does that mean?”

“It means we’re right back where we started. And I’m back at the train station. So I’m leaving now.”

“I’ll go with you—”

“No. You won’t.”

Cricket wants to argue. He wants to make sure I get home safely. But he knows if he comes with me, he’ll cross a line that I don’t want crossed. He’ll lose me.

So he says goodbye. And I say goodbye.

And as the train pulls away, I feel like I’ve lost him again anyway.

chapter twenty-one

I love watching Max onstage. He's playing his current favorite cover. The first time he sang "I Saw Her Standing There"—*Well, she was just seventeen/You know what I mean*—with a mischievous glance in my direction, I thought I'd die. I was one of *those* girls. Girls who had songs dedicated to them.

It's still thrilling.

Lindsey and I are at Scare Francisco, an all-day, twelve-stage Halloween rock festival in Golden Gate Park. It's Saturday, and I'm still grounded, but we've had these tickets for months. Plus, Norah is inescapable. After being denied every low-income apartment in the city, she made arrangements to move in with her friend Ronnie Reagan. Ronnie stands for Veronica, and she is a he, and the only problem is that Ronnie's old roommate won't be moving out until *January*. My parents feel rotten and guilty about this. So they let me come today.

Per annual tradition, I'm wearing jeans, a nice blouse, a black wig with straight bangs, and red sneakers. Lindsey is wearing a fifties housewife dress, a vintage apron, four-inch heels, a blond wig with a flip, and large sparkly clip-on earrings.

We're dressed as each other, of course. I wear pretty much the same thing every year. She's always something new.

Amphetamine finishes on stage four, and they take apart their gear while the next band, Pot Kettle Black, sets up. I fan myself with a flyer for a haunted house, trying not to draw attention to the fact that I'm fanning my armpits more than my face. But I don't want to smell gross for Max. He hasn't seen me yet. The sun beats down, and my nose is burning, despite my SPF 25. The city tends to get its rare heat waves in the autumn.

"I can't wait until you're a detective, and I get to wear your badge," I say. "I'd totally arrest any girl who came here dressed as a sexy cat. Snooze."

"I can't wait until your podiatrist forbids you from wearing heels."

"But you look *fabulous*, darling."

"Lola?" a girl calls out from behind us.

I turn around to find Calliope, head tilted to the side. "That *is* you. You were right." She looks over her shoulder, and I follow her gaze as the other Bell twin appears from behind a monstrously large Hell's Angel. Or a guy dressed as a Hell's Angel. I fan my cheeks with the flyer, feeling hot again. I'm not sure which twin is more troubling "How could you tell?" Calliope continues. "She looks so . . . normal."

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” Lindsey whispers to me.

“She always looks like Lindsey on Halloween,” Cricket says. Neither twin is costumed, but Cricket’s hand *does* say BOO. “Cool outfit, Lindsey. You look great.”

For all her I-don’t-care-ness, Lindsey looks pleased by the compliment. “Thanks.”

He’s having trouble looking directly at me. Did he see Max’s band? What did he think of them? The only contact I’ve had with him since Berkeley was that same night when I received a text from NAKED TIGER WOMAN asking if I’d made it home okay. If anyone else had done that after a fight, I would have found it insufferable. But Cricket seriously cannot help being a nice person.

I can’t tell if Calliope knows that I visited him. I assume not, since she’s speaking with me. Thank goodness for small miracles.

“Hey,” I say, kinda sorta meeting Cricket’s eyes. “What are you doing here?”

“Same thing you are.” Calliope’s voice is clipped. “Listening to music. Practice was canceled. Petro is sick.”

“Petro?” Lindsey asks.

“My coach. Petro Petrov.”

Lindsey and I stifle our laughter. Calliope doesn’t notice. It’s odd, but I suddenly realize that I haven’t seen the twins stand beside each other in ages. They have a similar body shape, though Calliope is the petite version. This still means she’s taller than her competitors. After her growth spurt, it took several years for her to adjust on the ice. Cricket once told me that when you’re tall, your center of balance is also higher, and this accentuates mistakes. Which makes sense. But now her confidence and strength are forces to be reckoned with. She could kick my ass any day of the week.

I feel her noting the extra space and awkwardness between Cricket and me, and I have no doubt that she’s considering it.

“Why didn’t you guys dress up?” Lindsey asks.

“We did.” Calliope cracks her first smile. “We’re dressed as twins.”

Lindsey grins back. “Hmm, I see it now. Fraternal or identical?”

“You’d be surprised how many people ask,” Cricket says.

“What do you tell them?” Lindsey asks.

“That I have a penis.”

Oh God. My cheeks burn as they all burst into laughter. *Think about something else, Dolores. ANYTHING else. Cucumbers. Bananas. Zucchini. AHFFF! NO NO NO NO NO NO NO.* I turn my face away from them as Calliope fakes a yakking sound.

“Definitely time to change the subject,” she says.

“Hey, are you guys hungry?” I blurt. *SERIOUSLY?* I’m so thankful that mind readers aren’t real.

“Starving,” Cricket says.

“Says the guy who just ate three taco salads,” Calliope says.

He rubs his stomach. His bracelets and rubber bands rattle. “Jealous.”

“It’s so unfair. Cricket eats all day long, the most horrendous things—”

“The most delicious,” he says.

“—the most horrendous *and* delicious things, and he doesn’t gain a pound. Meanwhile, I have to count calories every time I swallow an alfalfa sprout.”

“What?” Lindsey says. She’s as baffled as I am. “You’re in perfect shape. Like, *perfect*.”

Calliope rolls her eyes. “Tell that to my coach. And to the commentators.”

“And Mom,” Cricket says, and Calliope cuts him a glare. He glares back. It’s spooky to see that they have the same glare.

And then they burst into laughter. “I win!” Cricket says.

“No way. You laughed first.”

“Tie,” Lindsey says authoritatively.

“Hey.” Calliope turns to me, and the smile disappears. “Isn’t that your boyfriend?”

Oh. Holy. Graveyards.

I’ve been so thrown that I forgot Max would be here any second. I want to shove Cricket back behind that Hell’s Angel, and he looks like he wouldn’t mind a disappearing act either. Max slinks through the crowd like a wolf on the prowl. I raise my hand in a weak wave. He nods back, but he’s staring down Cricket.

Max pulls me into his tattooed arms. “How’d we sound?”

“Phenomenal,” I say truthfully. His grip is tight, forcing me to point out the well-dressed elephant in the room. “This is my neighbor Cricket. Remember?” As if any of us could have forgotten.

“Hi,” Cricket says, shrinking up.

“Hey,” Max says in a bored voice. Which isn’t even his regular bored voice. It’s the mask of a bored voice that says, *See how much I don’t care about you?*

“And this is his sister, Calliope.”

“We saw your show,” she says. “You were great.”

Max looks her over. “Thanks,” he says after a moment. It’s polite but indifferent, and his coolness disconcerts her. He turns back to me and frowns. “What are you wearing?”

The way he says it makes me not want to answer.

“She’s *me*,” Lindsey says.

Max finally acknowledges her presence. “So you must be Lola. Well. Can’t

say I'll be sorry when this holiday is over."

I'm aghast. Cricket's presence has made him reckless.

"I think they look terrific." Cricket straightens to his full height. He towers over my boyfriend. "I think it's cool that they do it every year."

Max leans over and speaks quietly so that only I can hear it. "I'm gonna load some stuff into the van." He kisses me, quickly at first, but then something changes in his mind. He slows down. And he REALLY kisses me. "I'll text you when I'm done." And he leaves without saying goodbye to anyone else.

I am so mortified. "Groups . . . make him uncomfortable."

Calliope looks disgusted, and my insides writhe, because I know she thinks I've been stringing along Cricket to keep dating *that*. But *that* was not my boyfriend. The disdain in Cricket's expression makes me feel even more humiliated. I imagine conversations in which Calliope uses this as proof that I'm shallow and not worthy of his friendship.

I turn to Lindsey. "I'm sorry. I'm sure he didn't mean it like that."

"Whatever." She rolls her eyes. "You know he hates me. I'm not crazy about him either."

I lower my voice. "Max doesn't hate you."

She shrugs. I can't bear for the twins to hear any more of this, so I take Lindsey's hand and lead her away. "We have to go, sorry. There's a band on stage six I've been dying to hear."

"Good, we'll follow," Calliope says. "You know these local bands better than us."

I'm howling on the inside as they follow a dead-silent Lindsey and me across the grass and through the skeletons, ghosts, and pirates to stage six, where a mediocre punk band is butchering "Thriller." I squint at the bass drum. My colored contacts are an old prescription. "The Flaming Olives?"

"The Evening Devils," Lindsey corrects, annoyed.

"That's a stupid name," I say.

"Olives would be worse," Calliope says. "I thought you were *dying* to hear them."

"I thought they were gonna be someone else," I grumble.

"Ah," Cricket says.

It's a disbelieving *ah*, and it furthers my shame. I stand my ground and try to lose myself in the band, but I can't believe my boyfriend just treated Lindsey like dirt. I can't believe Cricket just saw him treat Lindsey like dirt. And I'm glad he stepped in before Max could do further damage, but why did it have to be *him*? It should have been me. The orange sun beats down, and I'm sweating again. My wig is trapping heat. I wonder how bad my hair looks underneath, and

if I can get away with removing it. At long last, I catch a break as a cloud passes over the sun. I release a tiny sigh.

“You’re welcome,” Cricket says.

And then I realize that he’s standing behind me. Cricket is the cloud.

He gives an oddly grim smile. “You looked uncomfortable.”

“This band blows, and my feet are killing me,” Lindsey says. “Let’s go.”

My phone vibrates in my pocket. A text from Max:

@ marx meadow near first aid. where are you?

The plan was to hang out with Max and Lindsey for a few hours and then go home at dusk. I love Halloween. The Castro used to close off the streets and throw an insane party that attracted over a hundred thousand people, but a few years ago, someone died in the fray. The city stopped closing it off and urged people to stay in their own neighborhoods. Still. As far as places to be on October thirty-first, a crowd of drag queens can’t be beat.

But now I don’t want to hang out with Lindsey and Max together. And I want to stay with my friend, but I haven’t been alone with Max in two weeks.

No. I should stay with Lindsey.

“Max?” she asks.

“Yeah. He’s ready to meet up, but I’m gonna tell him we’re going home early.”

“He’ll be pissed if you don’t show.”

“He won’t be pissed,” I say, with a nervous glance at Cricket. Even though Lindsey’s right. But the way she said it makes it sound worse than it is.

“Yeah, well, you haven’t seen him in forever. Don’t let me stand in the way of your amorous pursuits.”

I wish Lindsey would stop talking in front of Cricket.

“It’s fine,” she continues. “I’ll hang out with them for a little while longer”—she gestures to the Bells—“and then I’ll catch the bus home. I’m tired.”

She’s pushing me away out of spite. There’s no good way of dealing with her when she’s like this, except to give her what she wants. “So, um, talk to you tonight?”

“Go,” she says.

I sneak another glimpse at Cricket before leaving. I wish I hadn’t. He looks tortured. As if he’d do anything to stop me, but he’s being held back by his own invisible demons. I mumble my goodbye. As I walk to the meadow, I take off the wig. I don’t have a purse—Lindsey never carries one—so I drape it on the branch of a Japanese maple. Maybe someone will find it and add it to their

costume. I shake out my hair, unbutton the top of my shirt, and roll up the sleeves. It's better, but I still don't look like me.

Actually, I look *more* like me. I feel exposed.

Max is leaning against the first-aid station, and his shoulders relax when he sees me. He's glad I'm alone. But when I lean up to kiss him, he hardens again, and it sends a chill down my spine. "Not now, Lola."

His rebuke stings. Is it because of how I look?

"You're still hanging out with him," he says.

No, it's because he's jealous. I'm sweating again. "Who?" I ask, buying time.

"Grasshopper. Centipede. Praying Mantis."

It makes me cringe to hear Max mock his name. "That's not funny. And that wasn't nice what you said to Lindsey earlier either."

He crosses his arms. "How long have you been seeing him?"

"I'm not seeing him. We just bumped into him and his sister, I promise." His silence intimidates me into blabbering. "I swear, Lindsey and I ran into them, like, three minutes before you showed up."

"I don't like the way he stares at you."

"He's just my neighbor, Max."

"How many times have you seen him since Amoeba?"

I hesitate and decide to go with a slant truth. "Sometimes I see him through my window on the weekend."

"Your window? Your *bedroom* window?"

I narrow my eyes. "And then I close my curtains. End of story."

"Lola, I don't believe—"

"You never believe me!"

"Because you lie your ass off all the time! Don't think I don't know you're still hiding things from me. What happened at Muir Woods, Lola?"

"*What?*"

"You heard me. Nathan was trying to get you to tell me something at dinner. He was there, wasn't he? The neighbor boy."

"Ohmygod, you're crazy. It was a family picnic. You're getting paranoid, and you're making things up." I'm panicking. *How does he know?*

"Am I?"

"YES!"

"Because one of us is getting pretty worked up right now."

"Because you're accusing me of horrible things! I can't believe you think I'd lie to you about something like that." *Oh God, I'm going to hell.* I'm crying.

"Why are you so convinced I'm ready to cheat on you?"

"I don't know. Maybe because I've never seen the same you twice. Nothing

about you is real.”

His words stop my heart.

Max sees he’s taken it too far. He jerks forward as if a spell has broken. “I didn’t mean that. You know I love the crazy outfits.”

“*You always say what you mean,*” I whisper.

He rubs his temples for a long moment. “I’m sorry. Come here.” He wraps his arms around me. I hug him tightly, but it feels as if he’s vanishing. I want to tell him that I’m sorry, too, but I’m scared to tell him the truth. I don’t want to lose him.

When two people are in love, it’s supposed to work. It *has* to work. No matter how difficult the circumstances are. I think about the sweet songs he’s written, the ones he plays in his apartment, the ones for my ears only. I think about our future, when I’m no longer tied to my parents. Costumes by day, rock clubs by night. We’ll both be a success, and it’ll be because of each other.

Our love should make us a success.

Max kisses my neck. My chin. My lips. His kisses are hungry and possessive. Max is the one. We love each other, so he *has* to be the one.

He tears himself away. “This is the real me. Is this the real you?”

I’m dizzy. “This is me.”

But it tastes like fear on my lips. It tastes like another lie.

chapter twenty-two

I'm discussing Max with the moon, but it's supremely unsatisfying. Her beams are casting an eerie luminescence on Cricket's window. "Max doesn't like it when I dress down, but he throws my usual appearance into my face when we fight. I'm never what he needs me to be."

The moon darkens by cloud cover.

"Okay, I've lied to him. But you saw how jealous he gets. It makes me feel like I *have* to. And I shouldn't have to defend my right to be friends with another guy."

I wait. The sky remains dark.

"Fine. The you-know-who situation is weird. Maybe . . . Max and Calliope aren't so far off. But if I'm never given Max's trust to begin with, how can he expect me to trust him in return? Do you see what I mean? Do you see how confusing it is?" I close my eyes. "Please, tell me. What do I do?"

The light behind my lids softly brightens. I open my eyes. The clouds have moved, and Cricket's window is illuminated by moonlight.

"You have a sick sense of humor," I say.

Her beams don't waver. And without knowing how it happens, I find myself removing a handful of bobby pins from my desk. I chuck them at his panes. *Dink! Dink! Dink dink!* Seven bobby pins later, Cricket opens his window.

"Trick-or-treat," I say.

"Is something wrong?" He's sleepy and disoriented. He's also only wearing his boxer briefs, and his bracelets and rubber bands.

OHMYGOD. HE'S ONLY WEARING BOXER BRIEFS.

"No."

Cricket rubs his eyes. "No?"

DON'T STARE AT HIS BODY. DO NOT STARE AT HIS BODY.

"Did you go anywhere fun tonight? I stayed in and handed out candy. Nathan bought good stuff, name-brand chocolate, not the cheapo mix he usually gets, you know with the Tootsie Pops and Dots and those tiny Tootsie Rolls flavored like lime, I guess you got a lot of kids at your house, too, huh?"

He stares at me blankly. "Did you wake me up . . . to talk about candy?"

"It's still so hot out, isn't it?" I blurt. **AND THEN I WANT TO DIE.**

Because Cricket has turned into stone, having realized the practically naked situation his body is in. Which I am not, not, not looking at. At all.

"Let's go for a walk!"

My exclamation unfreezes him. He edges out of sight, trying to play it cool. “Now?” he calls from the darkness. “It’s . . . two forty-two in the morning.”

“I could use someone to talk to.”

Cricket pops back up. He has located his pants. He is wearing them.

I blush.

He considers me for a moment, pulls a T-shirt over his head, and then nods. I sneak downstairs, past my parents’ bedroom and Norah’s temporary bedroom, and I reach the street undetected. Cricket is already there. I’m wearing sushi-print pajama bottoms and a white camisole. Seeing him fully dressed again makes me feel *undressed*, a feeling intensified when I notice him take in my bare skin. We walk up the hill to the corner of our street. Somehow, we both know where we’re going.

The city is silent. The raucous spirit of Halloween has gone to sleep.

We reach the even bigger hill that separates us from Dolores Park. Eighty steps lead to the top. I’ve counted. About twenty up, he stops. “Are you gonna say what’s on your mind, or are you gonna make me guess? Because I’m not good at guessing games. People should say what they mean to say and not make other people stumble around.”

“Sorry.”

He smiles for the first time in ages. “Hey. No apologizing.”

I smile back, but it falters.

His disappears, too. “Is it Max?”

“Yes,” I say quietly.

We walk slowly up the stairs again. “He seemed surprised to see me today. He doesn’t know we hang out, does he?”

The sadness in his voice makes me climb slower. I wrap my arms around myself. “No. He didn’t know.”

Cricket stops. “Are you embarrassed by me?”

“Why would I be embarrassed by you?”

He puts his hands in his pockets. “Because I’m not cool.”

I’m thrown. Cricket isn’t cool in the same sense as Max, but he’s the most *interesting* person I know. He’s kind and intelligent and attractive. And he’s well dressed. Cricket is REALLY well dressed. “How can you think that?”

“Come on. He’s this sexy rock god, and I’m the boy next door. The stupid science geek, who’s spent his life on the sidelines of figure-skating rinks. With his sister.”

“You’re not . . . you’re not a geek, Cricket. And even if you were, what’s wrong with that? And since when is science *stupid*?”

He looks unusually agitated.

“Oh, no,” I say. “Please tell me this isn’t about your great-great-whatever grandfather. Because that doesn’t mean any—”

“It means *everything*. The inheritance that paid for our house, that pays for Calliope’s training, that pays for my college education, that bought everything I’ve ever owned . . . it wasn’t ours. Do you know what happened to Alexander Graham Bell after he became famous? He spent the rest of his life hiding in a remote part of Canada. In shame of what he’d done.”

“So why did he do it?”

Cricket rakes a hand through his hair. “For the same reason everyone makes mistakes. He fell in love.”

“Oh.” That hurts. I’m not even sure why it hurts so much, but it does.

“Her father was wealthy and powerful. Alexander wasn’t. He had *ideas* for the telephone, but he couldn’t get them to work. Her father discovered that someone—Elisha Gray—was about to patent it, so they went to the patent office on the same day as Elisha, copied his idea, turned it in, and claimed they were there first. Alexander became one of the wealthiest men in America and was allowed to marry my great-great-great-grandmother. By the time Elisha realized he’d been had, it was too late.”

I’m astounded. “That’s terrible.”

“History books are filled with lies. Whoever wins the war tells the story.”

“But Alexander was still a smart man. He was still an inventor. You get *that* much honestly. Life isn’t about what you get, it’s about what you DO with what you get.”

“I build things that have no use.” His tone is flat. “It’s just as bad. I should be creating something that makes a difference, something to . . . make up for the past.”

I’m getting angry. “What do you think would happen if I believed genetics played that kind of role in my life? If I believed that because my birth parents made certain decisions, it meant that my life, my dreams were forfeit, too? Do you know what that would do to me? Do you have any idea what it HAS done to me?”

Cricket is devastated. “I wasn’t thinking, I’m sorry—”

“You should be. You have a gift, and you’re doubting it.” I shake my head to clear my thoughts. “You can’t let that kind of shame dictate who you are. You aren’t your name. Your decisions are your own.”

He stares at me.

I return the stare, and my senses surge. The energy between us ricochets so fiercely that it scares me.

I break our gaze.

We climb the rest of the way to the top, and the entire city stretches before us. The jutting houses, the golden hills, the highrises, the glittering bay. It's stunning. We sit on an empty slab of asphalt overlooking the view. It's someone's driveway, but no one will see us. The eucalyptus tree dangling above us releases its soothing fragrance into the night air.

Cricket inhales, long and slow. He sighs his exhale. "I've missed that. Eucalyptus always reminds me of home."

And I fill with warmth because, even with his second life in Berkeley, he still thinks of this as home. "You know," I say. "When I was little, my parents were embarrassed by the way I dressed."

"Really? That's surprising."

"They were terrified that people would think **THEY** were dressing me like that. That **THE GAYS** were corrupting me with false eyelashes and glitter."

He laughs.

"But they learned it's who I am, and they accepted it. And their support gave me some confidence. And then, that summer, you taught me how to accept it for myself. To not worry about what other people said. And then . . . things weren't bad at all."

"I did?"

"Yeah, you. So I'm telling you this now. I will *never* forget that mechanical bird you made. The one that only sang when you opened its cage door?"

"You remember that?" He's mystified.

"Or the fifty-step Rube Goldberg machine that sharpened a pencil? Or that insane train of dominoes that took you two weeks to set up, but was over in a minute? It was incredible. Just because something isn't practical doesn't mean it's not worth creating. Sometimes beauty and real-life magic are enough."

I turn to face him, cross-legged. "It's like my Marie Antoinette dress. It's not practical, but . . . for that one moment, arriving at a dance in a beautiful, elaborate dress that no one else is wearing and that everyone will remember? I want that."

Cricket stares across the city lights toward the bay. "You will. You'll have it."

"Not without your help." I want to give him a friendly shove, but I settle for a verbal jab. "So are you gonna get started on my panniers tomorrow or what?"

"I already started them." He meets my eyes again. "I stayed in tonight, too. I didn't just hand out candy."

I'm touched. "Cricket Bell. You are the nicest guy I know."

"Yeah." He snorts. "The nice guy."

"What?"

"That was what my one-and-only girlfriend said when she broke up with me."

“Oh.” I’m taken aback. The Girlfriend, at last. “That’s . . . a really, *really* stupid reason.”

Cricket scooches forward, and his knees almost bump mine. Almost. “It’s not uncommon. Nice guys finish last and all.”

There’s a dig at Max amid his self-deprecation, but I ignore it. “Who was she?”

“One of Calliope’s friends. Last year.”

“A figure skater?”

“My social scene doesn’t extend much further.”

The news makes me unhappy. Skaters are *gorgeous*. And *talented*. And, like, *athletically gifted*. I stand, my heart pounding in my ears. “I need to get home.”

He looks at his wrist, but he’s not wearing his watch. “Yeah, I guess it’s really late. Or really early.”

We descend the eighty stairs to our street corner before Cricket unexpectedly halts. “Oh, no. You wanted to talk about Max. Do you—”

“I think we were supposed to talk tonight,” I interrupt him with a glance toward the moon. She’s a waxing gibbous, almost full. “And I thought it was supposed to be about Max, but I was wrong. We needed to talk about you.” I point at my feet.

I’m standing over the word BELL.

It’s imprinted on the grate for Pacific Bell, the phone company. They’re everywhere, on every street. “See?” I say.

“Every time I see Dolores Street, I think of you.” His words rush out. “Dolores Park. Dolores Mission. You’re everywhere in this neighborhood, you *are* this neighborhood.”

I close my eyes. He shouldn’t say things like that, but I don’t want him to stop. It’s become impossible to deny he means something to me. I don’t have the courage to name it. Not yet. But it’s there. I open my eyes, and . . . he’s gone.

He’s walking swiftly up the stairs to his home.

Another vanished spirit on Halloween.

chapter twenty-three

I like to try new things. Like when I went vegan my freshman year. It only lasted three days, because I missed cheddar, but I tried it. And I'm constantly trying on hats in stores. They're the one item I can't make work for me, but I keep trying, because I'm positive that someday I'll find the right one. Maybe it'll be a vintage cloche dripping with faux peonies, or maybe it'll be a Stetson laced with a red bandanna.

I'll find it. I just have to keep trying them on.

So it annoys me when Lindsey suggests I'm not trying hard enough to find something to curl my hair. My fake hair. She's balancing chemistry equations while I borrow her parents' handheld steamer to bend my white hair into the appropriately sized curls. Later, I'll spray-glue them to my Marie Antoinette wig. But first I need to curl the stupid curls.

"Don't you have anything bigger? Or smaller?" I gesture to the cylindrical shapes—pens, markers, glassware, even a monocular spy scope—spread before me. None of them is the right size.

She flips a textbook page. "Got me. It's your wig. Try harder."

I search her room, but I know I won't find anything. Her bedroom is so well ordered that I would have already seen it if she had it. Lindsey's walls are painted classic Nancy Drew—spine yellow. Her complete collection of the novels is lined up in neat rows across the top shelves of her bookcase and below them, alphabetical by author, are titles like *History's Greatest Spies*, *Detecting for Dummies*, and *The Tao of Crime Fighting*. Beside her bed are meticulously organized magazine holders with four years' worth of back issues of *Eye Spy Intelligence Magazine* and a dozen *Spy Gear* catalogs tabbed with sticky notes marking wishlist items.

But her room is devoid of any further cylindrical objects.

"And in the closest race of the night, New York senator Joseph Wasserstein is still fighting to hold on to his seat," the toupee-d newsman says. It's Election Day, and since the Lims don't get cable, every channel is filled with boring coverage. The only reason the television is on is to drown out the sound of Mrs. Lim blasting Neil Diamond. He's this superold pop singer who wears sequined shirts. Even the sparkles aren't enough to sway me, though I'd never tell her that. When she's not cooking killer Korean barbecue at the restaurant, she blogs for his secondlargest fansite.

I point at the newsman. "I bet that guy could help me. Does he seriously think

that rug on his head looks real?” It switches to a clip of Senator Wasserstein and his family waiting for the final tallies. His wife has that perfectly coiffed hair and that toothy political smile, but his teenage son looks uncomfortable and out of place. He’s actually kinda cute. I say so, and Lindsey looks up at the screen. “God. You are so predictable.”

“What?”

“He looks miserable. You only like guys who look pissed off.”

“That’s not true.” I turn off the television, and Neil’s vibrato shakes the floor.

Lindsey laughs. “Yeah, Max is known for his charming smile.”

I frown. Two Sundays have passed, and we didn’t have brunch on either one. Max called the morning after Halloween and told me he wouldn’t be coming—that day or any Sunday after. I can’t blame him for being tired of the scrutiny. I told my parents that he had more shows scheduled, and they’re still too frazzled by Norah to inquire further. Truthfully, I hope my parents will just sort of *forget* that brunch was ever a requirement.

I’ve been seeing Max at odd times—before a weekend shift at the theater, during a dinner break, and once at his apartment after school. My parents thought I was at Lindsey’s. But I’ve seen a lot of Cricket. It only took him one more night to finish the panniers, plus an afternoon at my house with final fittings. They’re gigantic and amazing. It’s like wearing the framework of a horizontal skyscraper.

And I’ve finished the stays, so I’m working on the best part now: the gown itself. Cricket helped measure and cut the fabric. It turns out that not only is he handy because of his math and science skills, but he also knows a little about sewing because of Calliope’s costumes, which are in constant need of repair.

I’ve only had one more run-in with Calliope, another before-school incident, although this was accidental. She actually ran into me when she was leaving her house and didn’t see me coming. At least, I think it was accidental. “You just can’t stay away, can you?” she grumbled, before jogging away.

“I LIVE HERE!” I said, rubbing my bruised arm.

She ignored me.

But since Cricket and I have been busy with my project, it’s been easier to be friends. There was only one awkward moment, when he came over the first time. I hadn’t thought to clean up my room, and there was a hot pink bra thrown on the center of my floor. He turned the same shade of magenta when he saw it.

To be fair, I did, too.

Cricket. Wait a second.

I know EXACTLY what I need to curl my wig. “I’ll be right back,” I tell Lindsey, and I pop downstairs, where Mrs. Lim is at the family computer. I raise

my voice above Neil's. "Where do you keep the broom?" Then I add, "I didn't break anything."

"In there." She gives a distracted gesture to the hall closet. "Troll on the message board. He's saying Wayne Newton is better than Neil Diamond. Do you believe?"

"Totally ridiculous." I grab the broom. It actually looks just like the one Cricket used to collect my binder. I race upstairs and thrust the handle at Lindsey. "Aha! The perfect circumference."

She smiles. "And plenty of room for us to steam multiple strands at once. Nice."

"You're gonna help?"

"Of course." And thank goodness she does, because it turns out to be a horrible, time-consuming job. "You're lucky I love you, Lola."

Another strand slips to the carpet before curling, and I stifle a scream. She laughs in an exhausted, slaphappy way, and it makes me laugh, too. "This really is one of the worst ideas I've ever had," I say.

"Not one of the worst. *The* worst." Her strand slips to the floor. "AHH!" she says, and we topple over with laughter. "Let's hope Cricket is right, and 'the beauty will be worth the effort.'"

It's like being hit by a train. "When did he say *that*?"

Lindsey's laughter fades. "Oh. Um. Sunday afternoon."

"Sunday? This last Sunday? You talked to Cricket on Sunday?"

She keeps her eyes on a new strand of white hair. "Yeah, um, we went out."

I drop the broom. "WHAT?"

"Not like that," she says quickly. "I mean, we hung out in a group. As friends."

My brain is fizzing and popping. "What group? Who?"

"He called to see if I wanted to go bowling with him and Calliope. And . . . with Charlie. You were at work, so you were busy. That's why we didn't ask."

I've lost the ability to speak. She lifts my side of the broom and puts it into my hands. I take it numbly. "I told them about Charlie at Scare Francisco, after you left to meet Max," she continues. "I don't know why. It just spilled out. Maybe I was bummed you were with Max again, and I was alone."

Guilt. Guilt, guilt, *guilt*.

"Anyway, Cricket thought it'd be a good idea if I hung out with Charlie as friends first, in a group. You know. To make it easier."

THAT WAS MY IDEA. MINE!

"So we went bowling, and . . . we had a fun time."

I'm not sure what hurts more: that she hadn't mentioned this until now, that

she hung out with Cricket without me, that she hung out with Calliope *at all*, or that Cricket came up with the same brilliant idea that I did and got to take credit for it.

Okay, so my idea was a double date, and obviously Cricket isn't dating his sister. BUT STILL. It seems to have worked. And I wasn't there. And I'm supposed to be the best friend. "Oh. That's . . . that's great, Lindsey."

"I'm sorry. I should have told you sooner. But I didn't know how you'd feel about me hanging out with the twins, and I really wanted to go. And you were busy. You've been busy a lot in the last few months."

Since you met Max. She might as well have said it. I look back at my work. "No, I'm glad you went. I'm glad you had a nice time with Charlie." Half of that is true.

"I had a nice time with the twins, too," she says cautiously. "Once Calliope relaxes, she's kinda fun. She's under an insane amount of pressure."

"Hmph. So people tell me."

"Honestly, Lo, I don't think she's the mean girl she once was. She's just protective."

I glare at her. "Her brother is in college. I think he can handle himself."

"And he does speak his mind now. However strangely it might come out," she adds. "You know that he never hurt you on purpose. And when you're not around, he asks a hundred questions about you. About Max, too. He likes you. He's *always liked you*, remember?"

I stop steaming curls.

"And I don't want you to bite my head off for saying this," she says rapidly, "but it's pretty clear you like Cricket Bell, too."

It's like something is caught in my throat. I swallow. "And why do you think that?"

She takes the steamer from me. "Because anyone with the power of observation can see you're still crazy about him."

I'm setting the dinner table when I discover a newspaper clipping tucked under the corner of my place mat. Andy strikes again. It's an article about an increase in STDs among teenagers. I shove it into the recycle bin. Do my parents know I'm having sex?

I know Max slept with many girls—many *women*—before me. But he's been tested. He's clean. Still, these mystery women haunt me. I picture Max in dark corners of bars, in his apartment, in beds across the city with glamorous succubi, intoxicated and infatuated. Max assures me the truth is far less exciting. I almost believe him.

It doesn't help that tonight, a night I have off from work, Amphetamine has a gig at the Honey Pot, a burlesque club that I'm not old enough to get into. I'm trying not to let it bother me. I know burlesque is an art, but it makes me uncomfortable. It makes me feel young. I hate feeling young.

But there are many things troubling me tonight.

It's Friday. Will Cricket come home this weekend?

Lindsey's words have been looping inside my head all week. How is it possible for me to feel this way? To be interested in Cricket and still be concerned about my relationship with Max? I want things to be okay with my boyfriend, I do. It's supposed to be simple. I don't want another complication. I don't *want* to be interested in Cricket.

During dinner, Andy and Nathan exchange worried looks over the veggie potpie. "Anything wrong, Lo?" Andy finally asks. "You seem distracted."

I tear my eyes from the window in our kitchen, from which I can barely see the Bell family's front porch. "Huh? Yeah. Everything's fine."

My parents look at me doubtfully as Norah comes in and sits at the table. "That was Chrysanthemum Bean, the one with the duck voice. She's coming over early tomorrow for a reading before buying her weekly scratch-offs."

Nathan winces and grinds more pepper on top of his potpie. And grinds. And grinds.

Andy shifts in his seat. He's always complaining that Nathan ruins his meals by adding too much pepper.

"Christ. Stop it, would you?" Norah says to her brother. "You're raising his blood pressure. You're raising MY blood pressure."

"It's fine," Andy says sharply. Even though I can see it's killing him.

We haven't had a relaxed meal since she—and her clients, none of whom should be spending their limited finances on tea-leaf readings or lottery scratch-offs—arrived. I turn away in time to catch a lanky figure running up the steps next door. And I sit up so fast that everyone stops bickering to see what's caused the disturbance. Cricket pats his pockets for his house key. His pants are tighter than usual. And the moment I notice this is the same moment that I'm knocked over by the truth of my feelings.

Lust.

He locates his key just as the front door opens. Calliope lets him inside. I sink back down in my chair. I didn't even realize that I'd partially risen out of it. Andy clears his throat. "Cricket looks good."

My face flames.

"I wonder if he has a girlfriend?" he asks. "Do you know?"

"No," I mumble.

Nathan laughs. “I remember when you two used to *accidentally* run into each other on walks—”

Andy cuts Nathan a quick look, and Nathan shuts his mouth. Norah smirks. So it’s true, our embarrassing crush was obvious to everyone. Fantastic.

I stand. “I’m going upstairs. I have homework.”

“On a Friday night?” Andy asks as Nathan says, “Dishes first.”

I take my plates to the sink. Will Cricket eat dinner with his family or go straight to his bedroom? I’m scrubbing the dishes so hard that I slice myself with a paring knife. I hiss under my breath.

“Are you okay?” All three ask at the same time.

“I cut myself. Not bad, though.”

“Be careful,” Nathan says.

Parents are excellent at stating the obvious. But I slow down and finish without further incident. The dishwasher is chugging as I race upstairs and burst into my room. My shoulders sag. His light is off.

Calm down, it’s only Cricket.

I busy myself by sewing pleats into my Marie Antoinette dress. Twenty minutes pass. Thirty, forty, fifty, sixty.

What is he doing?

The Bells’ downstairs lights are on, so for all I know, the entire family could be parked in front of the television watching eight hours of . . . something. Whatever. I can’t concentrate, and now I’m angry. Angry at Cricket for not being here and angry at myself for caring. I wash off my makeup, remove my contacts, change into my pajamas—careful to close my curtains first—and flop into bed.

The clock reads 9:37. Max’s band hasn’t even started playing yet.

Just when I thought I couldn’t feel like a bigger loser.

I toss and turn as images flash through my mind: Cricket, Max, burlesque dancers sitting in oyster shells. I’m finally drifting into a restless sleep when there’s a faint *plink* against my window. My eyes shoot open. Did I dream it?

Plink, my window says again.

I leap out of bed and pull aside my curtains. Cricket Bell sits on his windowsill, feet swinging against his house. Something tiny is in one hand and the other is poised to throw something else. I open my window and a thousand bottled emotions explode inside of me at the full sight of him.

I like Cricket. Like *that*.

Again.

He lowers his hand. “I didn’t have any pebbles.”

My heart is stuck in my throat. I swallow. “What were you throwing?” I

squint, but I can't make it out.

"Put on your glasses and see."

When I come back, he holds it up. He's smiling.

I smile back, self-conscious. "What are you doing with a box of toothpicks?"

"Making party trays of cubed cheese," he says with a straight face. "Why was your light off?"

"I was sleeping."

"It's not even ten-thirty." His legs stop swinging. "No hot date?"

I don't want to go there. "You know"—I point at his legs—"if you stretch those out, I bet they could touch my house."

He tries. They fall a few feet short, and I smile again. "They looked long enough."

"Ah, yes. Cricket and his monstrously long legs. His *monstrously* long body."

I laugh, and his eyes twinkle back. "Our houses just need to be closer together," I say. "Your proportions are perfect."

He releases his legs and stares at me carefully. The moment lasts so long that I have to look away. Cricket once said he thought my body was perfect, too. I blush at the memory and for revealing something unintentionally. At last, he speaks. "This isn't working for me." He throws his legs inside and disappears into his room, out of view.

I'm startled. "Cricket?"

I hear him rustling around. "Five minutes. Take a bathroom break or something."

It's not a bad idea. I'm not sure how much he can see in the darkness, but a little makeup wouldn't hurt. I'm raising the mascara wand to my lashes when I'm struck by how . . . not smart this is. Applying makeup. For someone who isn't my boyfriend. I settle for just a cherry-flavored lip gloss, but as soon as the scent hits me, I'm shaking.

Cherry flavored. Tea leaves. First love.

I return to my bedroom, wiping the gloss off on my hand, as there's a *CLANG* against my window. And then I see what he's about to do. "Oh God! No, Cricket, don't!"

"It'll hold my weight. Just grab onto that side, okay? Just in case?"

I clutch it tightly. He's removed one of his closet shelves, the thick wire kind that's coated in a white plastic, and he's using it as a bridge between our bedrooms.

"Careful!" I shout too loudly, and the bridge shakes.

But he smiles. "It's okay. I've got it."

And he does. Cricket scoots across quickly, right to where I'm holding it. His

face is against mine. “You can let go now,” he whispers.

My hands throb from gripping it so hard. I step back, allowing him room to enter. He slides down, and his legs brush against mine lengthwise. My body jolts. It’s the first time we’ve touched in ages. He’s so tall that his heart beats against my cheek.

His *heart*.

I falter backward. “What were you thinking?” I hiss, feeling all kinds of anxious. “You could have fallen and broken your neck.”

“I thought it’d be easier to talk face-to-face.” He keeps his voice low.

“We could’ve met on the sidewalk, gone for another walk.”

He hesitates. “Should I go back?”

“No! I mean . . . no. You’re already here.”

A knock on my door startles us even farther apart. “Lola?” Nathan says. “I heard a crash. Are you all right?”

My eyes widen in panic. My parents will KILL me if they find an unexpected boy in my room. Even if it is Cricket! I push him on the floor behind my bed, where he can’t be seen from my door. I jump in and pray Nathan doesn’t question the sound of bedsprings. “I fell out of bed,” I say groggily. “I was exhausted. I was having a nightmare.”

“A nightmare?” The door opens, and Nathan peeks his head in. “It’s been a long time since you’ve had one of those. Do you want to talk about it?”

“No, it was . . . stupid. A wolverine was chasing me. Or a werewolf. I dunno, you know how dreams are. I’m fine now.” *Pleeeeeease go away*. The longer my dad stands there, the more likely he is to see the bridge.

“Are you sure you’re okay? You were so distant at dinner, and then when you cut yourself—”

“I’m fine, Dad. Good night.”

He pauses and then, resigned, begins to shut the door. “Good night. I love you.”

“Love you, too.”

And he’s almost gone, when . . . “Why are you wearing your glasses in bed?”

“I—I am?” I fumble and pat my face. “Oh. Wow. I must have been more tired than I thought.”

Nathan frowns. “I’m worried about you, Lo. You haven’t been yourself lately.”

I *really* don’t want to have this conversation in front of Cricket. “Dad—”

“Is it Norah? I know things haven’t been easy since she got here, but—”

“I’m fine, Dad. Good night.”

“Is it Max? Or Cricket? You turned strange when you saw him tonight, and I

didn't mean to embarrass you when I said—”

“*Good night, Dad.*”

PLEASE STOP TALKING.

He sighs. “Okay, Lola-doodle. But take off your glasses. I don't want you to crush them.” I set them on my bedside table, and he leaves. Cricket waits until the footsteps hit the landing below. His head pops up beside my own, and even though I know he's there, it makes me jump.

“My dad was talking about . . .” I struggle for a nonincriminating answer. “I saw you come home, and it was at the same time Norah was telling us about this awful client. I must have been making a terrible face.”

I hate myself.

He's quiet.

“So . . . now what?” I ask.

Cricket turns away from me. He leans his back against the side of my bed. “If you want me to go, I will.”

Sadness. Desire. An ache inside of me so strong that I don't know how I believed it had ever left. I stare at the back of his head, and it's like the oxygen has disappeared from my room. My heart has turned to water. I'm drowning.

“No,” I whisper at last. “You just got here.”

I want to touch him again. I *have* to touch him again. If I don't touch him again, I'll die. I reach toward his hair. He won't even notice. But just as my fingertips are about to make contact, he turns around.

And his head jerks backward as I nearly poke out an eye.

“Sorry! I'm sorry!” I whisper.

“What are you doing?” But he grins as he lunges to poke out mine. I grab his finger, and then—just like that—I'm holding on to him. My hand is wrapped around his index finger. But he zeros in on my rainbow Band-Aid. “Is that where you cut yourself?”

“It was nothing.” I let go of him, self-conscious again. “I was doing the dishes.”

He watches me wring my hands. “Cool nails,” he finally says.

They're black with a pink stripe down the center of each nail. And then . . . I know how I can touch him. “Hey. Let me paint yours.” I'm already getting up for my favorite dark blue polish. Somehow, I know he won't protest.

I carry it to the floor, where he's still leaning against my bed. He sits up straight. “Will this hurt?” he asks.

“Badly.” I shake the bottle. “But try to keep your screams low, I don't want Nathan coming back.”

Cricket smiles as I reach for my chemistry textbook. “Put this on your lap, I'll

need a steady surface. Now place your hands on it.” We’re close to each other, much closer than we’ve been while working on my dress. “I’m going to take your left hand now.”

He swallows. “Okay.”

Cricket holds it up slightly. Tonight the back of his hand has a star drawn on it. I wonder what it means as I slide my hand underneath his fingers. His hand twitches violently. “You’ll have to hold it steady,” I say. But I’m smiling.
Contact.

I paint his nails Opening Night blue by the light of the moon. Our grips relax as I focus on my work. Slow, careful strokes. We don’t talk. My skin and his skin. Only a book between my hand and his lap. I feel him watch me the entire time—not my hands, but my face—and his gaze burns like an African sun.

When I finish, I lift my eyes to his. He stares back. The moon moves across the sky. Her beams hit his eyelashes, and I’m struck anew that I’m alone, in the dark, with a boy who once shattered my heart. Who would kiss me, if I didn’t have a boyfriend. Who I would kiss, if I didn’t have a boyfriend.

Who I want to kiss anyway.

I bite my bottom lip. He’s hypnotized. I lean forward, moving the curves of my body into the slender shadow of his. The air between us is physically hot, painfully so. He glances down my shirt. It is very, very close to his line of vision.

I part my lips.

And then he’s stumbling away. “I want to,” he croaks. “You know I *want* to.”

He tests the bridge for firmness and springs onto it. Cricket Bell doesn’t look back, so he doesn’t see the tears spilling down my face. The only thing he leaves behind is a smudge of blue polish on my window frame.

chapter twenty-four

Loooo-laaaa. Beautiful Lola.” Franko’s eyes are red and dilated. As usual.

I dig through the box-office drawers, throwing dry pens and dusty instruction manuals to the floor. “Have you seen the ink cartridges for the tickets?”

“No, but have you seen the popcorn today? It’s so . . . aerodynamically inclined. I think I might’ve eaten some. Do I have kernels in my teeth?”

“No kernels,” I snap.

“I think I have kernels in my teeth. Like, right between my front teeth.” He stands, and his tongue explores his own mouth in a disgusting form of self-French kissing. “The strings are beautiful tonight.”

“Sure. The strings.”

“I mean, I wouldn’t cut one, but if I did, I’d say . . . *that’s a beautiful string.*”

Seriously, if he doesn’t shut up soon, I’m strangling him. My patience is at an all-time low. I wave my arms at St. Clair, who is ripping tickets tonight. There’s no one around, so he strolls over. “For the love of God, you two have to switch jobs,” I say.

“You’re beautiful, St. Clair,” Franko says.

“Everyone is beautiful to you when you’re high.” He sits in Franko’s seat. “Scat.”

Franko lumbers away.

“Thank you,” I say. “I just . . . can’t handle that right now.”

He gives me a full-bodied shrug. “Right now or for the entire month of November?”

“Don’t even,” I warn. But it’s true. Since my complete and total humiliation with Cricket two weeks ago—and his subsequent disappearance from my life—I’ve been extremely unpleasant. I’m hurt, and I’m angry. No, I’m furious, because it’s my stupid fault. I *threw* myself at him. What does he think of me now? Obviously, not much. I’ve called him twice and sent three apology texts, but he’s ignored them all.

So much for Mr. Nice Guy.

“Mr. Nice Guy?” St. Clair asks. “Who’s that?”

Oh, no. I’m talking out loud again. “Me,” I lie. “Mr. Nice Guy is gone.”

He sighs and checks the clock on the wall. “Fantastic.”

“I’m sorry.” And I mean it. My friends—Lindsey, Anna, and St. Clair—have all been patient with me. More than I deserve. I told Lindsey what happened, but St. Clair, and through him, Anna, must have heard some version of something

from Cricket. I'm not sure what. "Thank you for taking Franko's place. I appreciate it."

The European shrug again.

We work quietly for the next hour. As the minutes tick by, I feel more and more guilty. It's time to change my attitude. At least around my friends. "So," I say during the next customer lull. "How did it go with Anna's family? Didn't her mom and brother visit for Thanksgiving?"

He smiles for the first time since coming in here. "I wooed them off their feet. It was an excellent visit."

I grin and then give him a nod with exaggerated formality. "Congratulations."

"Thank you," he says with equal formality. "They stayed with my mum."

"That's . . . weird."

"Not really. Mum is cool, easy to get along with."

I raise a teasing eyebrow. "So where did YOU guys stay?"

"Where we always stay." He stares back solemnly. "In our *very* separate dormitories."

I snort.

"What about you?" he asks. "Did you spend Thanksgiving with the boyfriend?"

"Uh, no." I stumble through an explanation about Norah being difficult and Max being busy, but it sounds hollow and forced. We're silent for a minute. "How do you . . ." I'm struggling to find the right words. "How do you and Anna make it work? You make it seem easy."

"Being with Anna is easy. She's the one."

The one. It stops my heart. I thought Max was the one, but . . . there's that *other* one.

The first one.

"Do you believe in that?" I ask quietly. "In one person for everyone?"

Something changes in St. Clair's eyes. Maybe sadness. "I can't speak for anyone but myself," he says. "But, for me, yes. I have to be with Anna. But this is something you have to figure out on your own. I can't answer that for you, no one can."

"Oh."

"Lola." He rolls his chair over to my side. "I know things are shite right now. And in the name of friendship and full disclosure, I went through something similar last year. When I met Anna, I was with someone else. And it took a long time before I found the courage to do the hard thing. But you have to do the hard thing."

I swallow. "And what's the hard thing?"

“You have to be honest with yourself.”

“Lola. You look . . . different.”

The next afternoon and I’m on Max’s doorstep, sans wig and fancy makeup. I’m wearing an understated skirt and a simple blouse, and my natural hair is loose around my shoulders. “Can I come in?” I’m nervous.

“Of course.” He moves aside, and I enter.

“Is Johnny here?”

“No, I’m alone.” Max pauses. “Do your dads know you’re here?”

“They don’t have to know where I am *all the time*.”

He shakes his head. “Right.”

I wander toward his couch, pick up the Noam Chomsky book on his coffee table, flip through the pages, and set it back down. I don’t know where to begin. I’m here for answers. I’m here to find out if he’s the one.

Max is staring at me strangely, about something other than my sudden presence. It makes me even more uncomfortable. “What?” I ask. “What’s that look?”

“Sorry. You . . . look a little young today.”

My heart wrenches. “Is that bad?”

“No. You look beautiful.” And he gives me that gorgeous half smile. “Come here.” Max collapses onto his beat-up couch, and I climb into his arms. We sit in silence. He waits for me to speak again, aware that I’m here for a reason. But I can’t form the words. I thought being here would be enough. I thought I’d know when I saw him.

Why is the truth so hard to see?

I trace his spiderwebs. Max closes his eyes. I lightly brush the boy in the wolf suit in the crook of his elbow. He releases a moan, and our lips find each other. He pulls me onto his lap. I’m helpless against the current.

“*Lolita*,” he whispers.

And my entire body freezes.

Max doesn’t notice. He lifts the edge of my shirt, and it’s enough to wake me up. I yank it back down. He startles. “What? What’s the matter?”

I can barely keep my voice steady. “Which one, Max?”

“Which one, what?” He’s unusually dazed. “What are we talking about?”

“Which Dolores Nolan are you in love with? Are you in love with me, Lola? Or are you in love with Lolita?”

“And what is *that* supposed to mean?”

“You know exactly what it means. You call me Lolita, but you get weird when I’m not dressed up, when I look my age. So which one? Do you like the

older me or the younger me?” A worse thought occurs. “Or do you only like me *because* I’m young?”

Max is furious. He pushes me off his lap and stands up. “You really want to have this conversation? Right now?”

“When would be a better time? When, Max?”

He swipes up his lighter from the side table. “I thought we’d been over the age thing. I thought it was something that bothered *other* people.”

“I just want the truth. Do you love me? Or do you love my age?”

“How the HELL can you say that?” Max throws his lighter across the room. “In case you’ve forgotten, let me remind you. You chased ME down. I didn’t want this.”

“What you mean you ‘didn’t want this’? You didn’t want *me*?”

“That’s not what I said!” he bursts out. “Oh, I wanted you. But guys like me aren’t supposed to go after girls like you, remember? Isn’t that what we’re talking about? Jesus. I don’t know what you want me to say. It sounds like every answer I give you will be the wrong one.”

The truth hits me with a vicious punch to the gut. *Every answer is the wrong one.*

“You’re right,” I whisper.

“Damn right, I’m right.” A pause. “Wait. Right about what?”

“There’s no right answer. It doesn’t exist. There’s no way this can end well.”

He stares me down. For several moments, neither of us speaks.

“You’re not serious,” he says at last.

I force myself to stand. “I think I am.”

“You *think* you are.” His jaw hardens. “After your parents. After *Sunday brunch*? Do you have any idea what I’ve put up with to be with you?”

“But that’s just it! You shouldn’t have to ‘put up’ with—”

“Did I have a choice?” Max closes the distance between us.

“Yes. No! I don’t know . . .” I’m shaking. “I’m just trying to be honest.”

“Oh.” His nose is an inch from mine. “You’re ready to be honest.”

I swallow hard.

“*Honestly*,” he says, “I don’t know who you are. Every time I see you, you’re someone different. You’re a liar, and you’re a fake. Despite what you think, despite what your dads have told you, there is nothing *special* about you. You’re just a little girl with a lot of issues. *That* is what I think about you.”

And then . . . my world goes black.

“Love,” I blurt. “I thought you loved me.”

“I thought I did, too. Thank you for making things so clear.”

I stumble backward in horror. For one crazy moment, I want to throw myself

at his feet and beg for his forgiveness. Promise to be someone else, promise to be *one* person.

Max crosses his arms.

And then . . . I want to hurt him.

I step back into him, *my* nose against *his*. “Guess what?” I hiss back. “I am a liar. I do like Cricket Bell. You’re right. I’ve been hanging out with him this whole time! And he’s been in my bedroom, and I’ve been in his. And I want him, Max. I *want* him.”

He’s shaking with rage. “Get. Out.”

I grab my purse and throw open his front door.

“I never want to see you again.” His voice is deathly low. “You are nothing to me. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” I say. “Thank you for making things so clear.”

chapter twenty-five

I'm dizzy. Seeing spots. Stumbling. Walk or bus? Walk or bus? I'm walking. Yes, I'll walk home. But then I see the bus and somehow I'm on the bus and I'm sobbing my guts out. A hipster with an ironic mustache shifts down a row. An elderly man in a baseball cap knits his brows at me, and the woman with the quilted jacket looks as if she actually wants to say something. I twist away and continue weeping.

And then I'm pulling the cord and I'm off the bus and I'm staggering uphill. Toward home. It feels like someone is clawing at my stomach, my chest, my heart. Like my insides are being ripped from my body and stitched to my skin for the world to ridicule.

How could he? How could he say those things?

How could my life change so drastically, so quickly? One minute we were fine. The next . . . oh God. *It's over.* I want to crawl into bed and disappear. I don't want to see anyone. I don't want to talk to anyone. I don't want to think or do anything.

Max. I clutch my chest. I can't breathe.

Get inside, Dolores. You're almost there.

I'm only two houses away when I see them. The Bell family. They're wrapped in a heated discussion in the center of their small driveway. Mr. Bell—tall and slender like the twins, but with sandy hair—is shaking his head and gesturing at the road. Mrs. Bell—shorter, but with the twins' same dark hair—is rubbing her fingers against her temples. Calliope's back is to me, hands on her hips. And Cricket . . . he's staring straight at me. He seems shaken, no doubt by both my sudden appearance and how I actually appear. The rest of his body turns to face me, which reveals another surprise.

There's a baby on his hip.

I hide my face with a curtain of hair and run up the stairs to my house. The Bells have stopped talking. They're watching me and listening to my choked sobs. I glance over as I'm opening the front door. Alexander is there, too. The twins' older brother. I didn't see him because he's standing behind Cricket, several inches shorter.

The baby. Right. Aleck's daughter, Abigail.

Max. His name strikes again like whiplash, and the Bells are forgotten, and I'm slamming the door and racing into my bedroom. Nathan hears my pounding footsteps and chases after me. "What is it, Lola? What's going on, what

happened?”

I lock my door and fall against it. I collapse. Nathan is knocking and shouting questions and soon Andy and Norah have joined him. Betsy’s tail thumps rapidly against the wall.

“MAX AND I BROKE UP, OKAY? LEAVE ME ALONE.” The last word is cut off as my throat swells and blocks it. There’s an agitated murmuring on the other side. It sounds like Norah is pulling away my parents, and I hear Betsy’s jingling dog tags follow everyone back downstairs.

The hall is quiet.

I’m alone now. I’m actually *alone*.

I throw myself into bed, shoes and all. How could Max be so cruel? How could I be so cruel back? He’s right. I’m a liar, and I’m a fake, and . . . I’m not special. *There’s nothing special about me*. I’m a stupid little girl crying on her bed. Why does my life keep cycling back to this moment? After Cricket, two years ago. After Norah, almost two months ago. And now, after Max. I’ll *always* be the little girl crying on her bed.

The thought makes me cry harder.

“Lola?” I’m not sure how much time has passed when I hear the faint voice outside my window. “Lola?” Louder. He tries a third time, a minute later, but I don’t get up. How convenient of Cricket to appear *now*, when I haven’t seen him in two weeks. When he hasn’t returned my calls. When my soul is bluer than blue, blacker than black.

I’m a bad person.

No, Max is a bad person. He’s difficult, he’s condescending, he’s jealous.

But I’m worse. I’m a child playing dress-up, who can’t even recognize herself under her own costume.

chapter twenty-six

The rational side of me knows that I need some kind of release. But I can't cry anymore. I'm empty. I'm drained. And I can't move.

Not that I'd want to.

Because that's the thing about depression. When I feel it deeply, I don't *want* to let it go. It becomes a comfort. I want to cloak myself under its heavy weight and breathe it into my lungs. I want to nurture it, grow it, cultivate it. It's mine. I want to check out with it, drift asleep wrapped in its arms and not wake up for a long, long time.

I've been spending a lot of time in bed this week.

When you're asleep, no one asks you to do anything. No one expects anything of you. And you don't have to face any of your troubles. So I've been dragging myself to school, and I've been dragging myself to work. And I've been sleeping.

Max is gone. And not just gone as in he's not my boyfriend anymore, but gone as in he's *gone*. I asked Lindsey to retrieve a textbook I'd left at his apartment, and his roommate said he left the city on Tuesday. Johnny wouldn't say where Max went.

He finally ran away. Without me.

I wish it didn't hurt to think about him. And I'm not upset because I want to be with him, I don't, but he was so much to me for so long. He was my future. And now he's nothing. I gave him *everything*, and now he's nothing. He was my first, which means I'll never be able to forget him, but I'll fade from his memory. Soon I'll just be another notch on his bedpost.

I didn't know it was possible to simultaneously hate and ache for someone. I thought Max and I would be together forever. No one believed me. We were going to prove them wrong, but we were the ones who were wrong. Or maybe I'm the only one who was wrong. Did Max think of me as forever?

The question is too painful, either way, to consider.

My parents are worried, but they've been leaving me alone so that I can heal. As if it were possible to ever heal from heartbreak.

It's around midnight—not quite Friday, not quite Saturday—and the moon is full again. Traditionally, farmers called the December full moon the Cold Moon or the Long Nights Moon. Both feel appropriate tonight. I opened my window to better absorb her coldness and longness, to use it feed it to my own, but it was a dumb mistake. I'm freezing. And I had another long shift at the theater, and I'm

exhausted, and I can't find the energy to shut it.

But I can't sleep.

The silk fabric of my Marie Antoinette gown, draped across my sewing table, shimmers with a pale blue glow in the moonlight. It's so close to completion. The winter formal is still a month and a half away, there was plenty of time.

It doesn't matter anymore. I'm not going.

And I don't even care about not having a date. It's the idea of showing up in something so ridiculous, that's what hurts. Max was right. The dance is stupid. My classmates wouldn't be impressed by my dress; they'd be merciless. I don't know how long I've been staring at its folds when a yellow light flicks on outside my window.

"Lola?" A call through the night.

I close my eyes. I can't speak.

"I know you're in there. I'm coming over, okay?"

I stiffen as the *CLUNK* of his closet-bridge hits my window. He called out to me once more last weekend, but I pretended that I didn't hear him. I listen to the creak of his weight against the bridge, and a moment later, he drops quietly onto my floor. "Lola?" Cricket is on his knees at the side of my bed. I feel it. "I'm here," he whispers. "You can talk to me or not talk to me, but I'm here."

I close my eyes tighter.

"St. Clair told me what happened. With Max." Cricket waits for me to say something. When I don't, he continues. "I'm—I'm sorry I didn't call you back. I was angry. I told Cal about that night in your bedroom, and she went ballistic. She said she'd warned you to stay away from me, and we got into this huge fight. I was angry with her for talking behind my back, and I was angry with you for not telling me. Like . . . you didn't think I could handle it."

I cringe and curl into a ball. Why *didn't* I tell him? Because I didn't want him to realize that her accusations were true? Because I was afraid that he'd listen to her words over mine? I'm such a jerk. As fearful of Calliope as she is of me.

"But . . . this is coming out backward." I hear him shift on his knees, agitated. "What I was trying to say—what I was getting at—is that I've been thinking a lot about everything, and I'm not actually angry with you at all. I'm angry with myself. I'm the one who keeps climbing in your window. I'm the one who can't stay away. All of this weirdness is my fault."

"Cricket. This is *not* your fault." It comes out in a croak.

He's silent. I open my eyes, and he's watching me. I watch him back. "The moon is bright tonight," he says at last.

"But it's cold." The tears have found me again. They fall.

Cricket reaches out and brushes my neck. He traces upward, along my jaw,

and then my cheek. I close my eyes at the unbearable sensation of his thumb drying my tears. He presses down gently. I turn my head, and it becomes cradled in his hand. He holds the weight for several minutes.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you that I talked with Calliope,” I whisper.

He pulls away, carefully, and I notice another star drawn on the back of his hand. “I’m only upset that she spoke with you in the first place. It wasn’t any of her business.”

“She was just worried about you.” As the words spill out, I realize that I believe them. “And she had every right to be worried. I’m not exactly a good person.”

“That’s not true,” he says. “Why would you say that?”

“I was a terrible girlfriend to Max.”

There’s a long pause. “Did you love him?” he asks quietly.

I swallow. “Yes.”

Cricket looks unhappy. “And do you still love him?” he asks. But before I can answer, he says in one great breath, “Forget it, I don’t want to know.” And suddenly Cricket Bell is inside my bed, and his torso is flattening against mine, and his pelvis is pressing against mine, and his lips are moving toward mine.

My senses are detonating. I’ve wanted him for so long.

And I need to wait a little longer.

I slide my hand between our mouths, just in time. His lips are soft against my palm. I slowly, slowly remove it. “No, I don’t love Max anymore. But I don’t want to give you this broken, empty me. I want you to have me when I’m *full*, when I can give something *back* to you. I don’t have much to give right now.”

Cricket’s limbs are still, but his chest is pounding hard against my own. “But you’ll want me someday? That feeling you once had for me . . . that hasn’t left either?”

Our hearts beat the same wild rhythm. They’re playing the same song.

“It never left,” I say.



Cricket stays through the night. And even though we don’t talk anymore, and even though we don’t do anything *more* than talk, it’s what I need. The calming presence of a body I trust. And when we fall asleep, we sleep heavily.

In fact, we sleep so heavily that we don’t see the sun rise.

We don’t hear the coffeepot brewing downstairs.

And we don’t hear Nathan until he’s right above us.

chapter twenty-seven

Nathan grabs Cricket by the shoulders and throws him off my bed. Cricket scrambles into a corner while I flounder for my closest eyeglasses. My skin is on fire.

“What the hell is going on in here? Did he sneak in while—” Nathan cuts himself off. He’s noticed the bridge. He stalks up to Cricket, who shrinks so low that he almost becomes Nathan’s height. “So you’ve been climbing into my daughter’s bedroom for how long now? Days? Weeks? *Months?*”

Cricket is so mortified he can hardly speak. “No. Oh God, no. Sir. I’m sorry, sir.”

Andy runs into the room, sleep disheveled and frenzied. “What’s happening?” He sees Cricket cowering beneath Nathan. “*Oh.*”

“Do something!” I tell Andy. “He’ll kill him!”

Murder flashes across Andy’s face, and I’m reminded of what Max said ages ago, about how much worse it was dealing with *two* protective fathers. But it disappears, and he takes a tentative step closer to Nathan. “Honey. I want to kill him, too. But let’s talk to Lola first.”

Nathan is terrifyingly still. He’s so angry that his mouth barely moves. “You. Out.”

Cricket lunges for the window. Andy’s eyes bulge when he sees the bridge, but all he says is, “The front door, Cricket. Out the *front* door.”

Cricket holds up both hands, and in the daylight, it’s the first time I see that there are still scattered shreds of blue paint on his nails. “I just want you to know that we didn’t do anything but talk and sleep—*sleep* sleep,” he quickly adds. “Like with eyes closed and hands to oneself and dreaming. *Innocent* dreams. I would never do anything behind your back. I mean, never anything dishonorable. I mean—”

“*Cricket,*” I plead.

He looks at me miserably. “I’m sorry.” And then he tears downstairs and out the front door. Nathan storms out of my room, and the master bedroom door slams shut.

Andy is silent for a long time. At last, he sighs. “Care to explain why there was a boy in your bed this morning?”

“We didn’t do anything. You have to believe me! He came over because he knew I was sad. He only wanted to make sure I was okay.”

“Dolores, that’s how boys take advantage of girls. Or other boys,” he adds.

“They attack when your guard is down, when you’re feeling vulnerable.”

The implication makes me angry. “Cricket would never take advantage of me.”

“He climbed into your bed fully aware that you’re hurting over someone else.”

“*And we didn’t do anything but talk.*”

Andy crosses his arms. “How long has this been going on?”

I tell the truth. I want him to believe me so that he’ll also believe Cricket is innocent. “There was only one other time. But he didn’t stay the night.”

He closes his eyes. “Was this before or after you broke up with Max?”

My head sinks into my shoulders. “Before.”

“And did you tell Max?”

It sinks farther. “No.”

“And that didn’t make you wonder if there was something wrong with it?”

I’m crying. “We’re friends, Dad.”

Andy looks pained as he sits on the edge of my bed. “Lola. Everyone and their grandmother knows that boy is in love with you. *You* know that boy is in love with you. But as wrong as it was for him to be here, it’s so much worse for you to have led him on. You had a boyfriend. What were you thinking? You don’t treat someone like that. You shouldn’t have treated either one of them like that.”

I didn’t know it was possible to feel any worse than I already did.

“Listen.” The look on Andy’s face means he’d rather eat glass than say what he’s about to say. “I know you’re growing up. And as hard as it is, I have to accept that there are certain . . . *things* you’re doing. But you’re an intelligent young woman, and we’ve had the talk, and I know—from this point on—you’ll make the right decisions.”

Oh God. I can’t look at him.

“But you have to understand this part is difficult for us, especially for Nathan. Norah was your age when she ran away and got pregnant. But you can talk to me. I *want* you to talk to me.”

“Okay.” I can barely get the word out.

“And I *don’t* want to find a boy in your room again, you hear me?” He waits until I nod before standing. “All right. I’ll talk to Nathan and see what I can do. But don’t for a second think you’re getting out of this easily.”

“I know.”

He walks to the door. “Never. Again. Understand?”

“What . . . what about when I’m married?”

“We’ll buy a cot. Your husband can sleep on that when he visits.”

I can’t help it. I let out a tiny snort of laughter. He comes back and hugs me.

“I’m not kidding,” he says.

The punishment arrives in the afternoon. I’m grounded through the end of my upcoming winter break from school. Another month of grounding. But, honestly, I don’t even care. It’s the other half of the punishment—the unspoken half—that makes me feel terrible.

My parents no longer trust me. I have to earn it back.

Throughout the day, I try to catch Cricket at our windows, but he never goes inside his bedroom. Around three o’clock, I see his figure dart past his kitchen window, so I know he’s still at home. Why is he avoiding me? Is he embarrassed? Is he angry? Did my parents call his parents? I’ll die if they called Mr. and Mrs. Bell, but I can’t ask, because if they haven’t, it might give them the idea.

I’m a wreck by the time Cricket’s light turns on. It’s just after eight. I throw aside my English homework and run to my window, and he’s already at his. We open them at the same time, and the misty night air explodes . . . with *wailing*.

Cricket is holding Aleck’s daughter again.

“I’m sorry!” he shouts. “She won’t let me put her down!”

“It’s okay!” I shout back.

And then I realize something. I slam my window shut. Cricket looks startled, but I hold up a finger and mouth *ONE SECOND*. I rip out a page from my spiral notebook and scribble on it with a fat purple marker. I hold the message against my window.

MY PARENTS!!! TALK LATER? WHEN NO BABY!!!

He looks relieved. And then panicked as he slams his own window shut. The next minute is rife with tension as we wait for my parents to tear into my bedroom. They don’t. But even with our windows closed, I hear Abigail’s cries. Cricket bounces her on his hip, pleading with her, but her face remains contorted in misery.

Where is Aleck? Or Aleck’s wife? Shouldn’t they be taking care of this?

Calliope bursts through Cricket’s door. She takes Abigail from him, and Abigail screams harder. Both of the twins wince as Calliope thrusts her back into Cricket’s arms. The baby grows quieter, but she’s still crying. Calliope glances in my direction. She freezes, and I give a weak wave. She scowls.

Cricket sees her expression and says something that causes her to stalk away. Her bedroom light turns on seconds later. He’s turning back toward me, still bouncing Abigail, when Mrs. Bell enters. I yank my curtains closed. Whatever is going on over there, I don’t want his mom to think I’m spying on it.

I sit back down with my five-paragraph essay for English, but I can’t

concentrate. That familiar, nauseating feeling of guilt. When I saw the Bells in their driveway last week, they were clearly in distress about *something*. And I never asked Cricket what it was about. He was in my bedroom for an entire night, and I didn't even think to ask. And he's always concerned about what's happening in my life. I'm so selfish.

A new kind of truth hits me: *I'm not worthy of him.*

His light turns off, and the sudden darkness acts as a confirmation of my fears. He's too good for me. He's sweet and kind and honest. Cricket Bell has integrity. And I don't deserve him. But . . . I want him anyway.

Is it possible to earn someone?

He doesn't return for nearly two hours. The moment he's back, I raise my window again. Cricket raises his. Exhaustion has settled between his brows, and his shoulders are sagging. Even a lock of hair has flopped onto his forehead. I've *never* seen Cricket's hair fall down. "I'm sorry." His voice is tired. He keeps it low, conscious that the parental threat has not passed. "For last night. For this morning, for tonight. Your parents didn't come up, did they? I'm such an id—"

"Stop, please. You don't have to apologize."

"I know. Our rule." He's glum.

"No. I mean, don't apologize for last night. Or this morning. I wanted you there."

He raises his head. Once again, the intensity of his eyes makes my heart stutter.

"I—I'm the one who's sorry," I continue. "I knew something was going on with your family, and I didn't ask. It didn't even cross my mind."

"Lola." His brow deepens farther. "You're going through a difficult time. I would never expect you to be thinking about my family right now. That would be crazy."

Even when I'm in the wrong, he puts me in the right. *I don't deserve him.*

I hesitate.

Earn him.

"So . . . what's going on? Unless you don't want to tell me. I'd understand."

Cricket leans his elbows against his windowsill and looks into the night sky. The star on his left hand has faded from washing, but it's still there. He waits so long to answer that I wonder if he heard me. A foghorn bleats in the distance. Mist creeps into my room, carrying the scent of eucalyptus. "My brother left his wife last week. Aleck took Abby, and they're staying here until he figures out what to do next. He's not in great shape, so we're kinda taking care of them both right now."

"Where's his wife? Why did he take the baby?"

“She’s still at their apartment. She’s going through . . . a lifestyle crisis.”

I wrap my arms around myself. “What does that mean? She’s a lesbian?”

“No.” Cricket pries his eyes from the sky to glance at me, and I see that he’s uncomfortable. “She’s much younger than Aleck. They married, got pregnant, and now she’s rebelling against it. This new life. She stays out late, parties. Last weekend . . . my brother found out that she’d cheated on him.”

“I’m so sorry.” I think about Max. About Cricket in my bedroom. “That’s awful.”

He shrugs and looks away. “It’s why I finally came back. You know, to help out.”

“Does that mean you’re still fighting with Calliope?”

“Maybe. I don’t know.” Cricket runs his fingers through his dark hair, and the part that had flopped down sticks back up. “Sometimes she makes things so difficult, more than they have to be. But I guess I’m doing the same thing right now.”

I allow the thought to hang, and my mind returns to Max. It fills with shameful, retired fantasies about our future. “Do you think . . . did Aleck’s wife do that because she got married too young?”

“No, they got married too *wrong*. The only person in my family who thought it would last was Aleck, but it was clear she wasn’t the one.”

The one. There it is again.

“How did you know? That she wasn’t the one for him?”

Now he’s staring at his hands, slowly rubbing them together. “They just didn’t have that . . . natural magic. You know? It never seemed easy.”

My voice grows tiny. “Do you think things have to be easy? For it to work?”

Cricket’s head shoots up, his eyes bulging as they grasp my meaning. “NO. I mean, yes, but . . . sometimes there are . . . extenuating circumstances. That prevent it from being easy. For a while. But then people overcome those . . . circumstances . . . and . . .”

“So you believe in second chances?” I bite my lip.

“Second, third, fourth. Whatever it takes. However long it takes. If the person is right,” he adds.

“If the person is . . . Lola?”

This time, he holds my gaze. “Only if the other person is Cricket.”

chapter twenty-eight

Cricket isn't the only thing I have to earn. I have to earn back my parents' trust.

I'm a good daughter, *I am*. I have plenty of faults, but I keep up with my homework, I do my chores, I rarely talk back, and I like them. I'm one of the few people my age who actually cares what her parents think. So I'm dressing like someone responsible (all black, very serious), and I studied like crazy for my finals, and I'm doing whatever they ask. Even when it's awful. Like taking Heavens to Betsy for her late-night walk when it's forty degrees outside, which, by the way, I have done every night this week.

I want my parents to remember that I'm good, so they'll also remember that Cricket is good. Better than good. He came over to formally apologize to them, though I don't think it helped. His name is still banned from our household. Even after Mrs. Bell told Andy what was happening with Aleck, and my parents were tut-tutting for the family over dinner, they skipped over Cricket's name. It was, "Calliope and . . . *hmph*."

At least Mr. and Mrs. Bell don't know what happened. My parents didn't call them. I probably have Andy to thank for that, maybe even Norah. She's been surprisingly cool about all of this. "Give them time," she says. "Don't rush anything."

Which is what I know I need anyway. Time.

The memory of Max is still bitter and strong. I didn't realize it was possible to have such an ugly breakup when you were the one who did the breaking up. And I'm pretty sure I'm the one who did the breaking up. At least, I did it first.

And then he did it better.

I feel terrible about how it ended, and I feel terrible for not being honest with him while we were together. I want to apologize. Maybe it would get rid of these bad feelings, and I'd be able to move on. Maybe then it wouldn't sting whenever my mind summons his name. I've left several messages on his voice mail, but he hasn't called me back. And he's still gone from the city. I even went to Amoeba to ask Johnny.

Max's last words haunt me. *Am I nothing to him? Already?*

I'm not ready for Cricket, and his hands are full anyway. With Aleck too depressed to give Abigail his attention, she's decided that Cricket is the next best thing. He's home for winter break—we're both on winter break—and I rarely see him without Abby hanging from his arms or wrapped around his legs. I recognize that feeling, that *need*, inside of her. I wish there was someone I could

hold on to.

Lindsey helps. She calls every day, and we talk about . . . not Max. Not Cricket. Though she did guiltily announce that she's attending the winter formal. She asked Charlie, and of course he said yes. I'm happy for her.

A person can be sad and happy at the same time.

I've moved my Marie Antoinette dress and wig and panniers into Nathan's office, aka Norah's room. I don't like looking at them. Maybe I'll finish the dress later, for Halloween next year. Lindsey can wear it. But I'm still not going to the dance, and at least I know *that* was the right decision. The last few weeks of school were miserable.

"Who died and turned you Goth?" Marta sneered, turning up her nose at my all-black ensemble. Her friends, the trendiest clique at Harvey Milk Memorial, joined in, and soon everyone was accusing me of being a Goth, which—even though it's not true—would have been fine. Except then the Goth kids accused me of being a poseur.

"I'm not a Goth. And I'm not in mourning," I insisted.

At least my new wardrobe helps me blend into my neighborhood. In the winter, the Castro turns into a sea of trendy black clothing. Black helps me disappear, and I don't want to be seen right now. It's amazing how clothing affects how people see—or *don't* see—you. The other day I waited for the bus beside Malcolm from Hot Cookie. He's served me dozens of rainbow M&M cookies, and we're always debating the merits of Lady Gaga versus Madonna, but he didn't recognize me.

It's odd. Me, the *real* me, and I'm unknown.

The few people who do recognize me always ask if I'm feeling okay. And it's not that I feel great, but why does everyone assume something is wrong because I'm not costumed? Our usual bank teller went so far as to mention his concern to Nathan. Dad came home worried, and I had to assure him, again and again, that I'm fine.

I am fine.

I'm not fine.

What am I?

The blinking Christmas lights and flickering menorahs in the windows of the houses, hardware store, bars and clubs and restaurants . . . they seem false. Forced. And I'm unnaturally aggravated by the man dressed as sexy Mrs. Claus handing out candy canes in front of the Walgreens and collecting money for charity.

I spend my break working at the theater—I take extra shifts to fill my spare time—and watching Cricket. Throughout the day, I can usually spot him through

one of the Bells' windows, playing with Abigail. Abby has sandy-colored hair like her father and grandfather, but there's something sweet and pure about her smile that reminds me of her uncle. He bundles her up and takes her on walks every day.

Sometimes, I grab a coat and run after them. I've gone with them to the park for the swings, to the library for picture books, and to Spike's for espresso (Cricket and me) and an organic gingerbread man (Abby). I try to be helpful. I want to earn him, deserve him. He always bursts into a smile when he sees me, but it's impossible to mistake the silent examination that follows. As if he's wondering if *now* I'm okay. If today is the day. And I can tell by his expression, always a little confused and sad, that he knows it's not.

I wish he wouldn't look at me like that. I've become his difficult equation face again.

In the evenings, after Abby has gone to bed, I'll see him tinkering in his bedroom. I can't tell what he's making, it must be something small, but the telltale signs of mechanical bits and pieces—including objects opened and stripped for parts—remain scattered about his desk. *That's* making me happy.

Christmas passes like Thanksgiving, without a bang. I go to work—movie theaters are always packed on Christmas Day—and Anna and St. Clair are both there. They try to cheer me up by playing this game where we get a point every time someone complains about the ticket price or yells at us because a show is sold out. Whoever has the most points at the end of the day gets the unopened bag of gummy lychee candy St. Clair found in theater twelve. It's not a great prize. But it helps.

The managers bought Santa hats for everyone to wear. Mine is the only one that's hot pink. I appreciate the thought, but I feel ridiculous.

I get yelled at the most. I win the lychee candy.

New Year's Day. It's cold, but the sun is out, so I take Betsy to Dolores Park. She's sniffing out places on the hillside to leave her mark when I hear a tiny, "O-la!"

It's Abby. I'm flattered she spoke my name. At one and a half years old, her vocabulary isn't immense. She tears toward me from the playground. She's dressed in a tiny purple tutu. Cricket walks in long strides behind her, hands in his pockets, smiling.

I get on my knees to hug Abby, and she collapses into my arms, the way really little kids do. "Hi, you," I say. She lunges for the turquoise rhinestone barrette in my hair. I'd forgotten to take it out. Norah—NORAH, of all people—snapped it

in at breakfast. “It’s the New Year,” she said. “Sparkles won’t kill you today.”

Cricket pulls off Abby before she can rip out the barrette. “All right, all right. Abigail Bell, that’s *enough*.” But he’s grinning at her. She grins back.

“You’ve made quite the new best friend,” I say.

His expression turns to regret. “Children do have questionable taste.”

I laugh. It’s the first time I can remember laughing this week.

“Though she has great taste in hair accessories,” he continues. Betsy rolls onto her stomach for him, and he scratches her belly. His rainbow bracelets and rubber bands shake against her black fur. The back of his entire left hand, including fingers, is crammed with mathematical symbols and calculations. Abby leans over hesitantly to pet my dog. “It’s nice to see you in something sparkly again,” he adds.

My laughter stops, and my cheeks redden. “Oh. It’s stupid, I know. It’s New Year’s, so Norah thought . . .”

Cricket frowns and stands back up. His shadow stretches, tall and slender, out for infinity behind him. “I was being serious. It’s nice to see a little bit of Lola shining through.” The frown turns into a gentle smile. “It gives me hope.”

And I can’t explain it, but I’m on verge of tears. “But I *have* been me. I’ve been trying hard to be me. A better me.”

He raises his eyebrows. “On what planet does Lola Nolan not wear . . . color?”

I gesture at my outfit. “I have this in white, too, you know.”

The joke falls flat. He’s struggling not to say something. Abby bumps into his left leg and grips it with all of her might. He picks her up and sets her on his hip.

“Just say it,” I tell him. “Whatever it is.”

Cricket nods slowly. “Okay.” He collects his thoughts before continuing. He speaks carefully. “Being a good person, or a better person, or whatever it is you’re worried about and trying to fix? It shouldn’t change who you are. It means you become *more* like yourself. But . . . I don’t know this Lola.”

My heart stops. I feel faint. It’s just like what Max used to say.

“What?” Cricket is alarmed. “When did he say that?”

I flush again and look down at the grass. I wish I didn’t talk out loud when I’m distressed. “I haven’t seen him again, if that’s what you mean. But he said . . . before . . . that because I dressed in costume, he didn’t know who I really was.”

Cricket closes his eyes. He’s shaking. It takes me a moment to realize that he’s shaking with *anger*. Abby squirms in his arms. It’s upsetting her. “Lola, do you remember when you told me that I had a gift?”

I gulp. “Yes.”

His eyes open and lock on mine. “You have one, too. And maybe some people

think that wearing a costume means you're trying to hide your real identity, but I think a costume is more truthful than regular clothing could ever be. It actually says something about the person wearing it. I knew that Lola, because she expressed her desires and wishes and dreams for the entire city to see. For *me* to see."

My heart is beating in my ears, my lungs, my throat.

"I miss that Lola," he says.

I take a step toward him. His breath catches.

And then he takes a step toward me.

"Ohhhh," Abby says.

We look down, startled to discover that she's still on his hip, but she's pointing into the winter-white sky. San Francisco's famous flock of wild parrots bursts across Dolores Park in a flurry of green feathers. The air is filled with beating wings and boisterous screeching, and everyone in the park stops to watch the spectacle. The surprising whirl disappears over the buildings as swiftly as it arrived.

I turn back to Abby. The unexpected explosion of color and noise and beauty in her world has left her awed.

chapter twenty-nine

It's the Sunday night before school resumes, and my parents are on a date. I'm hanging out with Norah. We're watching a marathon of home decorating shows, rolling our eyes for different reasons. Norah thinks the redesigned houses look bourgeois and, therefore, boring. I think they look boring, too, but only because each designer seems to be working from the same tired manual of modern decorating.

"It's nice to see you looking like yourself again," she says during a commercial break.

I'm wearing a blue wig, a ruffled Swiss Heidi dress, and the arms from a glittery golden thrift-store sweater. I've cut them off, and I'm using them as glittery golden leg warmers. I snort. "Yeah, I know how much you like the way I dress."

She keeps her eyes on the television, but that familiar Norah edge returns to her voice. "It's not how *I* would dress, but that doesn't mean I don't appreciate it. It doesn't mean I don't like you for who you are."

I keep my eyes on the television, too, but my chest tightens.

"So," I say a few minutes later as the show recaps what we've already seen. "What's happening with the apartment? Has Ronnie set a move-in date yet?"

"Yep. I'll be gone by the end of the week."

"Oh. That's really . . . soon."

She snorts. *Her snort sounds like mine.* "Soon can't come soon enough. Nathan's been suffocating me from the moment I arrived."

And there's the ungrateful Norah I know. Suddenly her impending departure is welcome. But I only shake my head, and we watch the rest of the episode in discontented silence. Another commercial break begins.

"Do you know the secret to fortune-telling?" she asks, out of the blue.

I sink into the couch cushions. Here we go.

Norah turns to look at me. "The secret is that I don't read leaves. And palm readers don't read palms, and tarot readers don't read cards. We read people. A good fortune-teller reads the person sitting across from them. I study the signs in their leaves, and I use them to give an interpretation of what I know that person wants to hear." She leans in closer. "People prefer paying when they hear what they want to hear."

I cringe, sure that I don't want to hear whatever's coming next.

"Say a woman comes in," she continues. "No wedding ring, tight shirt,

cleavage up to her chin. Asks about her future. This is a woman who wants me to say that she's about to meet someone. And, usually, if the shirt is tight enough and with confidence gained from a good fortune, guess what? She'll probably meet someone. Now, it may not be the *right* someone, but it still means her fortune came true."

My frown deepens. I stare at the television screen, but the flashing commercials are making it hard to focus. "So . . . when you looked at me, you saw someone who wanted arguments and confusion and partings? And you wanted it to come true?"

"No." Norah scoots even closer. "You were different. I don't have many chances to talk to you when you might actually listen to what I have to say. Reading your leaves was an opportunity. I didn't tell you what you wanted to hear. I told you what you *needed* to hear."

I'm confused and hurt. "I needed to hear bad things?"

She places a hand on mine. It's bony, but somehow it's also warm. I turn to her, and her gaze is sympathetic. "Your relationship with Max was waning," she says, using her fortune-teller voice. "And I saw that you had a much more special one waiting right behind it."

"The cherry. You *did* know how I felt about Cricket back then."

She removes her hand. "Christ, the mailman knew how you felt about him. And he's a good kid, Lola. It was stupid of you to get caught with him in bed—you know your parents are strict as hell about that shit—but I know he's good. They'll come around to it, too. And I know *you're* good."

I'm quiet. She thinks I'm a good person.

"Do you know my biggest regret?" she asks. "That you turned into this bright, beautiful, fascinating person . . . and I can't take credit for any of it."

There's a lump in my throat.

Norah crosses her arms and looks away. "Your fathers piss me off, but they're great parents. I'm lucky they're yours."

"They care about you, too, you know. *I* care about you."

She's silent and stiff. I take a chance and, for the first time since I was a little girl, burrow into her side. Her hard shoulders melt against me.

"Come back and visit," I say. "Once you've moved."

The lights of the commercials flash.

Flash.

Flash.

"Okay," she says.

I'm in my bedroom later that night when my phone rings. It's Lindsey. "On

second thought,” she begins, “maybe I shouldn’t tell you.”

“What?” Her unnaturally disturbed tone gives me an instant chill. “Tell me what?”

A long, deep breath. “Max is back.”

The blood drains from my face. “What do you mean? How do you know?”

“I just saw him. My mom and I were shopping in the Mission, and there he was, walking down Valencia.”

“Did he see you? Did you talk to him? What did he look like?”

“No. Hell no. And like he always does.”

I’m stupefied. How long has he been back? Why hasn’t he called? His continued silence means that he must have been telling the truth: *I’m nothing to him anymore.*

Lately, I’ve gone several hours—once, an entire day—without thinking of him. This is a fresh dig into my wounds, but somehow . . . the blow isn’t as crushing as I thought it would be. Perhaps I’m becoming okay with being nothing to Max.

“Can you breathe?” Lindsey asks. “Are you breathing?”

“I’m breathing.” And I am. An idea is quickly mushrooming inside of me. “Listen, I have to go. There’s something I need to do.” I grab a faux-fur coat and my wallet, and I’m racing out my door when I hear a faint *plink*.

I stop.

Plink, my window says again. *Plink. Plink.*

My heart leaps. I throw open the panes, and Cricket sets down his box of toothpicks. He’s wearing a red scarf and some sort of blue military jacket. And then I notice the leather satchel slung over his shoulder, and this blow *is* crushing. His break is over. He’s going back to Berkeley.

His arms slacken. “You look incredible.”

Oh. Right. It’s been a month since he’s seen me in anything other than black. I give him a shy smile. “Thank you.”

Cricket points at my coat. “Going somewhere?”

“Yeah, I was on my way out.”

“Meet me on the sidewalk first? Would your parents mind?”

“They’re not home.”

“Okay. See you in a minute?”

I nod and hurry downstairs. “I’ll be back in an hour,” I tell Norah. “There’s something I have to do. Tonight.”

She mutes the television and raises an eyebrow in my direction. “Does this mysterious errand have to do with a certain guy?”

I’m not sure which one she means, but . . . either is correct. “Yeah.”

She studies me for several excruciating seconds. But then she un-mutes the television. “Just get back here before your parents do. I don’t wanna have to explain.”

Cricket is waiting at the bottom of my stairs. His willowy figure looks exquisite in the moonlight. Our gazes are fixed on each other as I walk down the twenty-one steps to my sidewalk. “I’m going back to school,” he says.

I nod at his bag. “I guessed as much.”

“I just wanted to say goodbye. Before I left.”

“Thank you.” I shake my head, flustered. “I mean . . . I’m glad. Not that you’re going. But that you found me before leaving.”

He puts his hands in his pockets. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

We’re quiet for a minute. Once more, I smell the faintest trace of bar soap and sweet mechanical oil, and my insides nervously stir.

“So . . . which way?” He gestures in both directions down the sidewalk. “Where are you going?”

I point in the opposite direction from where he’ll go to catch his train. “That way. There’s, uh, some unfinished business I have to attend to.”

Cricket knows, from my hesitation, what I’m talking about. I’m afraid he’ll tell me not to go—or, worse, ask to escort me—but he only pauses. And then he says, “Okay.”

Trust.

“You’ll come home soon?” I ask.

The question makes him smile. “Promise you won’t forget me while I’m gone?”

I smile back. “I promise.”

And as I walk away, I realize that I have no idea how I’ll manage to *stop* thinking about him.

The dread doesn’t hit until I arrive at his apartment and see the familiar brown stucco walls and pink oleander bush. I glance up at Max’s apartment. The light is on and there’s movement behind the curtain. Doubt creeps in like a poisonous fog. Was it wrong of me to come here? Is it selfish for me to want to apologize if he doesn’t want to hear it?

I climb the dark stairwell that leads to his front door. I’m relieved when he opens it, and not Johnny, but my relief is shortlived. Max’s amber eyes glare at me, and the scent of cigarettes is strong. No spearmint tonight.

“I—I heard you were back.”

Max remains silent.

I force myself to hold his stony gaze. “I just I wanted to tell you that I’m sorry. I’m sorry for lying, and I’m sorry for the way things ended. I didn’t treat you fairly.”

Nothing.

“Okay. Well. That was it. Bye, Max.”

I’m on the first step back down when he calls out, “Did you sleep with him?”

I stop.

“While we were together,” he adds.

I turn and look him in the eye. “No. And that’s the truth. We didn’t even kiss.”

“Are you sleeping with him now?”

I blush. “God, Max.”

“Are you?”

“No. And I’m leaving now.” But I don’t move. This is my last chance to know. “Where have you been for the last month? I called. I wanted to talk with you.”

“I was staying with a friend.”

“Where?”

“Santa Monica.” Something about the way he says it. As if he wants me to ask.

“A . . . girl?”

“A woman. And I *did* sleep with her.” Max slams his door.

chapter thirty

Max has always known what to say—and when to say it—to make it hurt the worst. His words stung, but it only took a moment for me to realize why. It's not because I care that he's been with another woman. It's because I can't believe that I ever loved him. I viewed Max in such a willfully blind way. How could I have ignored his vindictive side? How could I have committed myself to someone whose knee-jerk reaction was always anger and cruelty?

I apologized. He reacted in his typical fashion. I went to his apartment for absolution, and I got it.

Good riddance.

Winter break comes to an end, and with it, so does my grounding. School resumes. I'm surprised when three of my classmates—three people I don't know well—approach me the first day and say that they're happy to see I'm dressing like myself again.

It makes me feel . . . gratified. Appreciated.

Even Lindsey sits taller and prouder, a combination of Charlie and his friends (who have joined us at lunch) and seeing me colorful again. It's nice to have more people around. The hard part is waiting for the weekend. I miss that *chance* of seeing Cricket at any moment. The pale blue glass of my window looks dull without him on the other side.

Friday is the longest school day in the history of time. I watch the clock with eyeballs like Ping-Pong balls, driving Lindsey crazy. "It'll come," she says. "Patience, Ned." But as the last bell rings, my phone does, too. A text from NAKED TIGER WOMAN:

Not coming home this weekend. Unexpected project. On the first week! This sucks.

My world caves in. But then a second text appears:

I miss you.

And then a third:

I hope that's ok to say now.

My heart is cartwheeling as I text back:

Miss you, too. Miss you even more this weekend.

!!!!!!!!! = chirping crickets + ringing bells

We text for my entire walk home, and I'm floating like a pink fluffy cloud. I let him go so that he can work, and he protests for several texts, which makes me even happier. Throughout the night, my phone blinks with new messages—about his roommate Dustin's hideous friends, about being hungry, about not being able to read his own notes. I fill his phone with messages about Norah repacking her boxes, about Andy's seasonal clementine pie, about accidentally leaving my math book in my locker.

In the morning, my parents are taken aback when I wake up early and materialize downstairs while they're still eating breakfast. Andy examines the calendar. "I thought your shift didn't start until four."

"I'd like to go to Berkeley. Just for a few hours before work."

My parents trade an unsettled glance as Norah shuffles into the room behind me. "Oh, for God's sake, let her go. She'll go anyway."

They give me permission. Hourly phone-call check-ins, but I gladly accept. I'm bouncing out the door when a split-second decision has me returning for something tiny that I keep stashed away in my sock drawer. I slip it into my purse.

I stop by New Seoul Garden, and Lindsey packs a bag of takeout, which causes the entire car—on both of the trains it takes to get to Berkeley—to smell. Whoops. I decide to be brave this time and call him when I reach his dormitory gates, but someone is leaving as I'm arriving, and it's not necessary. I pass through the landscaped courtyard and the other doors just as easily.

And then I'm at *his* door.

I lift my hand to knock as a girl laughs on the other side. My knuckles land against the wood in a tremble. Is that Jessica? Again?

The door pops open, and . . . it's Anna.

"Hey, space cowgirl!" She's already taken in the silver fringe dress and my red cowboy boots. For one nightmarish second, I'm consumed by suspicion, but the door swings back and reveals St. Clair. Of course. He and Cricket are sitting against the side of Cricket's bed. And then Cricket Bell sees me, and the atmosphere *lights up*.

My soul lights up in response.

“Hi.” He springs to his feet. “Hi,” he says again.

“I was worried that you wouldn’t have time to eat lunch today.” I hold up the takeout as I notice a spread of empty Chinese boxes on the floor. “Oh.”

Anna gives me a gap-toothed grin. “Don’t worry. He’ll eat what you’ve brought, too.”

“His stomach is quite tall,” St. Clair says.

“And yours is so wee,” Anna says. He shoves her legs from his place on the floor, and she shoves his back. They’re like puppies.

Cricket gestures me forward with both arms. “Here, come in, sit down.”

I glance around. Every surface is covered.

“Uh, hold on,” he says. There’s a mound of school papers spread across the surface of his bed, which he bulldozes aside. “Here. Sit here.”

“We should go,” Anna says. “We just stopped by to feed Cricket and grill him about the Olympics. Did you know they’re in France this year?” She sighs. “I’m dying for a visit.”

Her boyfriend bites a pinkie nail. “And I’m trying to convince her that if Calliope makes the team, we should consider it a sign and take the holiday.”

I smile at Anna. “Lucky you.”

St. Clair turns toward Cricket and points an accusing finger. “I’m counting on you to ensure your sister wins at Nationals next weekend, all right?”

My heart selfishly plummets. Next weekend. More time away from Cricket.

“She only has to get one of the top three spots,” Cricket says. “But I’ll take out an opponent’s kneecap if I have to.”

Anna prods St. Clair’s shoulder. “Come on. Weren’t you gonna show me that thing?”

“What thing?”

She stares at him. He stares back. She cocks her head toward Cricket and me.

“Ah, yes.” St. Clair stands. “That thing.”

They rush out. The door shuts, and St. Clair shouts, “Lola, Cricket wants to show you his thing, too-oo!” They’re laughing as their feet echo down the hall.

Cricket hastily looks away from me and places the carton of Bibimbap in his microwave.

“Oh. I got something beef-y for you,” I say, because he’s heating the vegetarian dish first.

He shrugs and smiles. “I know. I saw.”

I smile, too, and sit on the edge of his bed. “So all three of you are going to France, and I’m staying here? Talk about unfair.” I’m only half kidding.

“You should come.”

I snort. “Yeah, my parents would definitely be cool with that.”

But Cricket looks thoughtful. “You know, Andy loves figure skating. If you had a free ticket, he might bite.”

“And where, exactly, would I find a free ticket?”

He sits beside me. “Courtesy of my great-great-great-grandfather Alexander Graham Bell, the world’s richest liar?”

I stop smiling. “Cricket. I could never accept that.”

He nudges one of my cowboy boots with one of his pointy wingtips. “Think about it.”

My foot tingles from the shoe-on-shoe contact. I nudge his shoe back. He nudges mine. The microwave beeps, and he hesitates, unsure if he should get up. I reach out and take his wrist, over his rubber bands and bracelets. “I’m not that hungry,” I say.

Cricket looks down at my hand.

I slide my index finger underneath a red bracelet. My finger brushes the skin of his inner wrist, and he releases a small sound. His eyes close. I twine my finger in and out of his bracelets, tying myself against him. I close my eyes, too. My finger guides us onto our backs, and we lie beside each other, quietly attached, for several minutes.

“Where’s Dustin?” I finally ask.

“He’ll be back soon. Unfortunately.”

I open my eyes, and he’s staring me. I wonder how long his eyes have been open. “That’s okay,” I say. “I came here to give you a late Christmas present.”

His eyebrows raise.

I smile. “Not *that* kind of present.” I untangle my finger from his wrist and roll over to grab my purse from his floor. I rummage through it until I find the tiny something taken from my sock drawer. “Actually, it’s more like a late birthday present.”

“How . . . belated of you?”

I roll back toward him. “Hold out your hand.”

He’s smiling. He does.

“I’m sure you don’t remember anymore, but several birthdays ago, you needed this.” And I place a tiny wrench into his palm. “Lindsey and I went everywhere to find it, but then . . . I couldn’t give it to you.”

His expression falls. “Lola.”

I close his fingers around the gift. “I threw away your bottle cap, because it killed me to look at. But I never could throw away this. I’ve been waiting to give it to you for two and a half years.”

“I don’t know what to say,” he whispers.

“I’m almost full,” I say. “Thank you for waiting for me, too.”

chapter thirty-one

The doorbell rings early the next Saturday. It wakes me from a deep slumber, but I immediately fall back asleep. I'm surprised when I'm being shaken awake moments later. "You're needed downstairs," Andy says. "Now."

I sit up. "Norah? She was kicked out already?"

"Calliope. It's an emergency."

I tear out of bed. An emergency with Calliope can only mean one thing: an emergency with Cricket. We've been texting, so I know he planned to come home before leaving for Nationals. But his light was off when I got back from work last night. I couldn't tell if he was there. What if he *tried* to come home, and something happened along the way? "Oh God, oh God, oh God, oh God, oh God." I throw on a kimono and race downstairs, where Calliope is pacing our living room. Her normally smooth hair is unwashed and disheveled, and her complexion is puffy and red.

"Is he okay? What happened? Where is he?"

Calliope stops. She cocks her head, muddled and confused. "Who?"

"CRICKET!"

"No." She's momentarily thrown. "It's not Cricket, it's me. It's . . . this." Her hands tremble as she holds out a large brown paper bag.

I'm so relieved that nothing is wrong with Cricket—and I'm so upset for thinking that something *was* wrong—that I snatch the bag a bit too harshly. I peer inside. It's filled with shredded red gauze.

And then I gasp with understanding. "Your costume!"

Calliope bursts into tears. "It's for my long program."

I carefully remove one of the shimmering strips of torn fabric. "What happened?"

"Abby. You'd think she was a dog, not a child. When Mom came down for breakfast, she discovered her playing in . . . *this*. I'd left my costume downstairs for cleaning. Who would've thought she could rip it?" Calliope's panic grows. "I didn't even know she was strong enough. And we're leaving tomorrow! And my seamstress is out of town, and I know you can't stand the sight of me, but you're my only hope. Can you fix it in time?"

As intriguing as it is to be her only hope, there's no hope to be had. "I'm sorry," I say. "But I can't fix this *period*. It's ruined."

"But you **HAVE** to do something. There has to be something you can do!"

I hold up a handful of shreds. "These are barely big enough to blow your nose

on. If I sewed them back together—even if I could, which I can’t—it’d look terrible. You wouldn’t be able to compete in it.”

“Why can’t you wear one of your old costumes?” Nathan interrupts.

Andy looks horrified. “She can’t do that.”

“Why not?” Nathan asks. “It’s not the outfit that wins competitions.”

Calliope shudders, and that’s when I remember her second-place curse. She must have already been racked by nerves, and then to add this on top of it? I do feel sorry for her. “No,” she says. The word barely comes out. “I can’t do that.” She turns to me with her entire body, an eerily familiar gesture. “Please.”

I feel helpless. “I’d have to make a new one. There’s no—”

“You could make a new one?” she asks desperately.

“No!” I say. “There’s not enough time.”

“Please,” she says. “Please, Lola.”

I’m feeling frantic. I want her to know that I’m a good person, that I’m not worthless, that I deserve her brother. “Okay. Okay,” I repeat. Everyone stares at me as I stare at the tatters. If only I had bigger pieces to work with. These are so small that they wouldn’t even make a full costume anymore.

It hits me. “About those old costumes—”

Calliope moans.

“No, listen,” I say. “How many do you have?”

She gives me another familiar gesture, the parted mouth and furrowed brow. The difficult equation face. “I don’t know. A lot. A dozen, at least.”

“Bring them over.”

“They don’t all fit anymore! I can’t wear them, I won’t—”

“You won’t have to,” I reassure her. “We’ll use the parts to make something new.”

She’s on the verge of hysterics again. “You’re Frankensteining me?”

But I feel calm now that I have a plan. “I won’t Frankenstein you. I’ll revamp you.”

She’s back in five minutes, and she returns with . . . Cricket. Their arms are piled high with stretchy fabric and sparkly beads. His hair is still sleep-tousled, and he’s not wearing his bracelets. His wrists look naked. Our eyes meet, and his thoughts are just as exposed: gratitude for helping his sister and the unmistakable ache of longing.

The ache is reciprocated.

I lead them upstairs to my bedroom. Cricket hesitates at the bottom, unsure if he’s allowed to go up. Andy gives him a prod on the back, and I’m relieved. “We’ll definitely find something in all of this,” I tell Calliope.

She’s still on edge. “I can’t believe my stupid niece did this to me.”

My facial muscles twinge, but I'd say the same thing if I were in her situation. "Let's spread out the costumes and see what we have."

"Spread them out *where*?"

I almost lose my cool, when I look at my floor and realize she has a point. "Oh. Right." I shove the piles of discarded shoes and clothing into corners, and Andy and Cricket join in. Nathan waits in the doorway, eyeing the situation—and Cricket—warily. When my floor is clear enough, we lay out her costumes.

Everyone stares at the spread. It's a little overwhelming.

"What's your music?" Andy asks.

Our heads snap to look at him.

"What?" He shrugs. "We need to know what she's skating to before Lo can design the right costume. What's her inspiration?"

Nathan blinks.

I smile. "He's right. What are you skating to, Calliope?"

"It's a selection from 1968's *Romeo and Juliet*."

"No idea what that sounds like." I point her to my laptop. "Download it."

"I can do better than that." She sits in my chair and types her own name into a search engine. One of the first entries is a video from her last competition. "Watch this."

We gather around my computer. Her music is haunting and romantic. Fraught with drama and strung with tension, it collapses into sorrow, and ends with a powerful crescendo into redemption. It's beautiful. *Calliope* is beautiful. It's been a while since I've seen her perform, and I had no idea what she'd become. Or I'd forgotten.

Or I'd forced myself to forget.

Calliope moves with passion, grace, and confidence. She's a prima ballerina. And it's not only the way she skates—it's the expressions on her face, which she carries into her arms, hands, fingers. She acts every emotion of the music. She *feels* every emotion of the music. No wonder Cricket believes in his sister. No wonder he's sacrificed so much of his own life to see her succeed. She's extraordinary.

The clip ends, and everyone is silent. Even Nathan is awed. And I'm filled with the overwhelming sensation of Calliope's presence—this power, this beauty—in the room.

And then . . . I'm aware of another presence.

Cricket stands behind me. The faintest touch of a finger against the back of my silk kimono. I close my eyes. I understand his compulsion, his need to touch. As my parents burst into congratulating Calliope, I slide one hand behind my back. I feel him jerk away in surprise, but I find his hand, and I take it into mine.

And I stroke the tender skin down the center of his palm. Just once.

He doesn't make a sound. But he is still, so still.

I let go, and suddenly *my* hand is in *his*. He repeats the action back. One finger, slowly, down the center of my palm.

I cannot stay silent. I gasp.

It's the same moment Mrs. Bell explodes into my bedroom, and, thankfully, everyone turns to her and not me. Everyone except for Cricket. The weight of his stare against my body is heavy and intense.

"What's the progress?" Mrs. Bell asks.

Calliope sighs. "We're just getting started."

I spring forward, trying to shake away what has to be the most inappropriate feeling in the world to have when three out of our four parents are present. "Hi, Mrs. Bell," I say. "It's good to see you again."

She tucks her cropped hair behind her ears and launches into a heated discussion with Calliope. It's like I don't even exist, and I'm embarrassed that this hurts. I want her to like me. Cricket speaks for the first time since entering our house. "Mom, isn't it great that Lola is helping us?" His fingers grasp at his wrists for rubber bands that aren't there.

Mrs. Bell looks up, startled at his awkward intrusion, and then scrutinizes me with a severe eye. I make her uncomfortable. She knows how I feel about her son, or how he feels about me. Or both. I wish I were wearing something respectable. My justrolled-out-of-bed look makes me feel trashy.

This is not how I would choose to represent myself to her.

Mrs. Bell nods. "It is. Thank you." And she turns back to Calliope.

Cricket glances at me in shame, but I give him an encouraging smile. Okay, so we need to work on our parents. We'll get there. I turn around to grab a notebook, and that's when I catch Nathan and Andy exchanging a private look. I'm not sure what it means, but, perhaps, it holds some remorse.

I feel a surge of hope. Strength.

I step forward to work, and things become crazy. Everyone has an opinion, and Mrs. Bell's turns out to be even stronger than her daughter's. The next half hour is hectic as arguments are had, fabric is trod upon, and garments are ripped. I'm trying to measure Calliope when Andy bumps into me, and I crunch against the sharp edge of my desk.

"OUT," I say. "Everybody out!"

They freeze.

"I'm serious, everyone except Calliope. I can't work like this."

"GO," Calliope says, and they scatter away. But Cricket lingers behind. I give him a coquettish smile. "You, too."

His smile back is dazed.

Nathan clears his throat from the hallway. “Technically, you aren’t even allowed in my daughter’s room.”

“Sorry, sir.” Cricket tucks his hands in his pockets. “Call me if you need anything.” He glances at Calliope, but his eyes return to mine. “If either of you need anything.”

He leaves, and I’m grinning all the way down to my glittery toenail polish as I resume taking her measurements. She picks up an eyelash curler from my desktop and taps it against her hand. “Why isn’t my brother allowed in your room?”

“Oh. Um, I’m not allowed to have any guys in here.”

“Please. Did Nathan catch you doing something? NO. Yuck. Don’t tell me.”

I yank the measuring tape around her waist a little too hard.

“Ow.”

I don’t apologize. I finish my work in silence. Calliope clears her throat as I write down the remaining measurements. “I’m sorry,” she says. “It’s nice of you to do this for me. I know I don’t deserve it.”

I stop mid-scratch.

She slams down my eyelash curler. “You were right. I thought he knew, but he didn’t.”

I’m confused. “Knew what?”

“That he’s important to our family.” She crosses her arms. “When Cricket was accepted into Berkeley, that was when I decided to return to my old coach. I wanted to move back here so that I could stay close to him. Our parents did, too.”

It looks like Calliope has more to say, so I wait for her to continue. She lowers herself into my desk chair. “Listen, it’s not a secret that I’ve made my family’s life difficult. There are things that Cricket hasn’t had or experienced because of me. And I haven’t had them either, and I’ve hated it, but it was my choice. He didn’t have a choice. And he’s accepted everything with this . . . exuberance and good nature. It would’ve been impossible for our family to hold it together if we didn’t have Cricket doing the hardest part. Keeping us happy.” She raises her eyes to meet mine. “I want you to know that I feel *terrible* about what I’ve done to my brother.”

“Calliope . . . I don’t think . . . Cricket doesn’t feel that way. You know he doesn’t.”

“Are you sure?” Her voice catches. “How can you be sure?”

“I’m sure. He loves you. He’s proud of you.”

She’s silent for a minute. Seeing such a strong person struggle to hold it

together is heartbreaking. “My family should tell him more often how remarkable he is.”

“Yes, he is. And, yes, you should.”

“He thinks you are, too. He always has.” Calliope looks at me again. “I’m sorry I’ve held that against you.”

And I’m too astonished by this admission to reply.

She rests her hand on the ruffled costume beside her. “Just answer this one question. My brother never got over you. Did you ever get over him?”

I swallow. “There are some people in life that you *can’t* get over.”

“Good.” Calliope stands and gives me a grim smile. “But break Cricket’s heart? I’ll break your face.”

We work together for a half hour, picking out pieces, throwing ideas back and forth. She knows what she wants, but I’m pleased to discover that she respects my opinion. We settle on a design using only her black costumes, and she collects the others to take home.

“So where’s your dress?” she asks.

I have no idea what she’s talking about. “What dress?”

“The Marie Antoinette dress. I saw your binder.”

“You *what*?”

“Cricket was carrying it around at one of my competitions, practically fondling the damn thing. I teased him mercilessly, of course, but . . . it was interesting. You put a lot of work into those pages. He said you’d put a lot of work into the real thing, too.” She looks around my room. “I didn’t think it was possible to hide a giant-ass ball gown, but apparently I was wrong.”

“Oh. Uh, it’s not in here. I stopped working on it. I’m not going to the dance.”

“What? WHY? You’ve been working on it for a half a year.”

“Yeah, but . . . it’s lame, right? To show up alone?”

She looks at me like I’m an idiot. “So show up with my brother.”

I’m thrilled by her suggestion—*permission!*—but I’ve already considered it. “The dance is next weekend. He’ll still be on the other side of the country for Nationals.”

Nationals are a full week. Practice sessions, acclimation to the ice and rink, interviews with the media, two programs, plus an additional exhibition if she medals. Cricket will be staying with her the entire time for support.

“Oh,” she says.

“Besides, it’s stupid anyway.” I stare at the notes for her costume, and I tug on a strand of hair. “You know, big dance. Big dress. What’s the point?”

“Lola.” Her tone is flat. “It’s not stupid to want to go to a dance. It’s not

stupid to want to put on a pretty dress and feel beautiful for a night. And you don't need a date for that."

I'm quiet.

She shakes her head. "If you don't go, then you *are* stupid. And you *don't* deserve my brother."

chapter thirty-two

I work all day and night on Calliope's costume—seamripping the old ones, stitching new pieces together, adding flourishes from my own stashes—only stopping for a quick break at my window around midnight. Cricket joins me. He leans forward, elbows resting against his windowsill. The position looks remarkably *insectlike* with his long arms and long fingers. It's cute. Very cute.

"Thank you for helping my sister," he says.

I lean forward, mimicking his position. "I'm happy to."

Calliope leans out her window. "STOP FLIRTING AND GET BACK TO WORK."

So much for my break.

"Hey, Cal," he calls. She looks over as he removes a green rubber band from his wrist and shoots it at her head. It hits her nose with a tight *snap* and falls between our houses.

"Really mature." She slams her window shut.

He grins at me. "That never gets old."

"I knew you wore those for a reason."

"What color would you like?"

I grin back. "Blue. But try not to aim for my face."

"I would never." And he swiftly flicks one into the space beside me.

It lands on my rug, and I slide it onto my wrist. "You're good with your fingers." And I give him a pointed look that means, *I am not talking about rubber bands*.

His elbows slide out from underneath him.

"Good night, Cricket Bell." I close my curtains, smiling.

"Good night, Lola Nolan," he calls out.

The rubber band is still warm from his skin. I work for the rest of the night, finishing the costume as the moon is setting. I collapse into bed and fall asleep with my other hand clasped around the blue rubber band. And I dream about blue eyes and blue nails and first-kiss lips dusted with blue sugar crystals.

"Where is it?"

"Mmph?!" I wake up to the frightening vision of Calliope and her mother hovering above my bed. People have GOT to stop doing this to me.

"Did you finish? Where is it?" Calliope asks again.

I glance at my clock. I've only been asleep for two hours. I roll out of bed and

onto my floor. “Iss in my closet,” I mumble, crawling for the closet door. “Needed to hang it up pretty.”

Mrs. Bell reaches the closet first. She throws open the door and gasps.

“What? What is it?” Calliope asks.

Mrs. Bell takes it out and holds it up for her to see. “Oh, Lola. It’s *gorgeous*.”

Calliope grabs it from the hanger and strips down in that way only beautiful, athletic girls can do—without shame and with a crowd. I look away, embarrassed.

“Ohhh,” she says.

I look back over. She’s standing before my full-length mirror. The black costume has long, slender, gossamer sleeves—delicate and shimmering and seductive—but they’re almost more like fingerless evening gloves, because they stop at the top of her arms, allowing for an elegant showing of shoulder skin. The body has a skirt to echo this feeling, but the top ends in a halter, and I added a thin layer to peek out from underneath, so it’s multistrapped and sequined and sexy.

The overall effect is romantic but . . . daring.

Calliope is in awe. “I was afraid you’d give me something crazy, something Lola. But this is me. This is my song, this is my program.”

And even with the insult thrown in, I glow with happiness.

“It’s better than your original,” Mrs. Bell says to Calliope.

“You really think?” I ask.

“Yes,” they both say.

I pick myself up from the floor and inspect the costume. “It could use some altering, here and here”—I point to two loose places—“but . . . yeah. This should work.”

Mrs. Bell smiles, warm and relieved. “You have a special talent, Lola. Thank you.”

She likes me! Or at least my sewing skills, but I’ll take it.

For now.

There’s a knock on my door, and I let in my parents. They *ooh* and *aah*, and Calliope and I are both beaming. I mark the costume for quick alterations, which I can do in an hour. Which I *have* to do in an hour, because that’s when they leave for the airport. I shoo everyone away, and as I’m stitching, I glance again and again at Cricket’s window. He’s not there. I pray to an invisible moon that I’ll see him before he leaves.

Sixty-five minutes later, I run into the Bells’ driveway. Calliope and her parents are loading the last suitcases. Aleck is there with Abby on his hip. He looks as

sleep-deprived as I feel, but he jokingly offers out Abby's hand to hold the new costume.

Calliope does not find the joke funny.

Aleck and Abby are staying while everyone else goes. The time alone will hopefully force him back into motion, but Andy and I have secret plans to check up on them. Just in case. I'm opening my mouth to ask about Cricket, when he races from the house. "I'm here, I'm here!" He comes to an abrupt halt six inches from me, when he finally notices there's someone else in the driveway.

I look up. And up again, until I meet his gaze.

"Get in the car," Calliope says. "We're leaving. Now."

"You're still wearing the rubber band," he says.

"I'm still wearing everything you last saw me in." And then I want to kick myself, because I don't want it to sound like I *forgot* I was wearing it. I am very, very aware of wearing his rubber band.

"CRICKET." This time, Mr. Bell.

I'm filled with a hundred things I want to say to Cricket, but I'm conscious of his entire family watching us. So is he. "Um, see you next week?" he asks.

"Good luck. To your sister. And you. For . . . whatever."

"CRICKET!" Everyone in the car.

"Bye," we blurt. He's climbing in when Aleck leans down and whispers something in his ear. Cricket glances at me and turns red. Aleck laughs. Cricket slams his car door, and Mr. Bell is already pulling away. I wave. Cricket holds up his hand in goodbye until the car turns the corner and out of sight.

"So." Aleck ducks his head out of reach from Abby's grabbing hands. "You and my brother, huh?"

My cheeks flame. "What did you say to him?"

"I told him your loins were clearly burning, and he should man up and make a move."

"You did not!"

"I did. And if he doesn't, then I suggest you jump *his* bones. My brother, in case you haven't noticed, is kind of an idiot about these things."



Cricket has left a new message for me in his window. It's written in his usual black marker but with one addition—a crayon rubbing of my name, imprinted from the sidewalk corners on Dolores Street.

The sign reads: GO TO THE DANCE DOLORES

I am going to the dance.

“I heard about Calliope,” Norah says on Friday night. “Sixth place?”

I sigh. “Yep.” In her post-short-program interview, Calliope was quiet but poised. A professional. “I’m disappointed,” she said, “but I’m grateful to have another chance.”

“That’s a shame,” Norah says.

“It’s not over yet.” My voice is sharp. “She still has a shot.”

Norah gives me a wary look. “You think I don’t know that? Nothing is ever over.”

My family, Lindsey, and I are gathered around the television. Everyone is working on my Marie Antoinette gown. The last few decorative details are all that remain, and I appreciate the help as we wait for Calliope’s long program to begin.

The ladies’ short program was two nights ago. We saw the end from the beginning, in the moment the camera cut to Calliope’s first position. It was in her eyes and underneath her smile. *Fear*. The music started, and it was clear that something was wrong.

It happened so quickly.

Her most difficult sequences were in the beginning—they usually are, so that a skater has full strength to perform them—and the commentators were in a tizzy over her triple jump, which she hadn’t been landing in practice.

Calliope landed it, but she fell on the combination.

The expression on her face—only for a moment, she picked herself up instantly—was terrible. The commentators made pitying noises as she bravely skated to the other end of the rink, but our living room was silent. An entire season’s worth of training. For nothing.

And then she fell *again*.

“It’s not all about talent,” the male commentator said. “It’s also about your head. She’s not been able to do what people have expected of her, and it’s taken its toll.”

“There’s no greater burden than potential,” the female commenter added.

But as if Calliope heard them, as if she said *enough*, determination grew in every twist of her muscles, every push of her skates. She nailed an extra jump and earned additional points. Her last two-thirds were solid. It’s not impossible for her to make the Olympic team, but she’ll need a flawless long program tonight.

“I can’t watch.” Andy sets down his corner of my Marie Antoinette dress. “What if she doesn’t medal? In Lola’s costume?”

This has been bothering me, too, but I don't want to make Andy even more nervous, so I give him a shrug. "Then it won't be my fault. I only made the outfit. She's the one who has to skate in it."

The rest of us abandon my dress as the camera cuts to her coach Petro Petrov, an older gentleman with white hair and a grizzled face. He's talking with her at the edge of the rink. She's nodding and nodding and nodding. The cameraman can't get a good shot of her face, but . . . her costume looks *great*.

I'm on TV! Sort of!

"You made that in one day?" Norah asks.

Nathan leans over and squeezes my arm. "It's phenomenal. I'm so proud of you."

Lindsey grins. "Maybe you should have made my dress."

We went shopping earlier this week for the dance. I'm the one who found her dress. It's simple—a flattering cut for her petite figure—and it's the same shade of red as her Chuck Taylors. She and Charlie have decided to wear their matching shoes.

"You're going to the dance?" Norah is surprised. "I thought you didn't date."

"I don't," Lindsey says. "Charlie is merely a friend."

"A cute friend," I say. "Whom she hangs out with on a regular basis."

She smiles. "We're keeping things casual. My educational agenda comes first."

The commentators begin rehashing Calliope's journey. About how it's a shame someone with such *natural talent* always *chokes*. They criticize her constant switching of coaches and make a bold statement about a misguided strive for perfection. We boo the television. I feel sadness for her again, for having to live with such constant criticism. But also admiration, for continuing to strive. No wonder she's built such a hard shell.

I'm yearning for the network to show her family, which they didn't do AT ALL during the short program. Shouldn't a twin be notable? I called him yesterday, because he's still too shy to call me. He was understandably stressed, but I got him laughing. And then he was the one who encouraged me to invite Norah today.

"She's family," he said. "You should show encouragement whenever you can. People try harder when they know that someone cares about them."

"Cricket Bell." I smiled into my phone. "How did you get so wise?"

He laughed again. "Many, many hours of familial observation."

As if the cameramen heard me . . . HIM. It's him! Cricket is wearing a gray woolen coat with a striped scarf wrapped loosely around his neck. His hair is dusted with snow and his cheeks are pink; he must have just arrived at the arena.

He is winter personified. He's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.

The camera cuts to Calliope, and I have to bite my tongue to keep from shouting at the television to go back to Cricket. Petro takes one of Calliope's clenched hands, shakes it gently, and then she glides onto the ice to the roar of thousands of spectators, cheering and waving banners. Everyone in my living room holds their breath as we wait for the first clear shot of her expression.

"And would you look at that," the male commentator says. "Calliope Bell is here to fight!"

It's in the fierceness of her eyes and the strength of her posture as she waits for her music to begin. Her skin is pale, her lips are red, and her dark hair is pulled into a sleek twist. She's stunning and ferocious. The music starts, and she melts into the romance of it, and she *is* the song. Calliope *is* Juliet.

"Opening with a triple lutz/double toe," the female says. "She fell on this at World's last year . . ."

She lands it.

"And the triple salchow . . . watch how she leans, let's see if she can get enough height to finish the rotation . . ."

She lands it.

The commentators drift into a mesmerized hush. Calliope isn't just landing the jumps, she's performing them. Her body ripples with intensity and emotion. I imagine young girls across America dreaming of becoming her someday like I once did. A gorgeous spiral sequence leads into a dazzling combination spin. And soon Calliope is punching her arms in triumph, and it's over.

A flawless long program.

The camera pans across the celebrating crowd. It cuts to her family. The Bell parents are hugging and laughing and crying. And beside them, Calliope's crazy-haired twin is whooping at the top of his lungs. My heart sings. The camera returns to Calliope, who hollers and fist-pumps the air.

No! Go back to her brother!

The commentators laugh. "Exquisite," the man says. "Her positions, her extensions. There's no one like Calliope Bell when she's on fire."

"Yes, but will this be enough to overcome her disastrous short program?"

"Well, the curse remains," he replies. "She couldn't pull off two clean programs, but talk about redemption. Calliope can hold her head high. This was the best performance of her career."

She puts on her skate guards and walks to the kiss-and-cry, the appropriately nicknamed area where scores are announced. People are throwing flowers and teddy bears, and she high-fives several people's hands. Petro puts his arm around her shoulders, and they laugh happily and nervously as they wait for her scores.

They're announced, and Calliope's eyes grow as large as saucers.
Calliope Bell is in second place.
And she's ecstatic to be there.

chapter thirty-three

The wig comes on, and I'm . . . almost happy.

There's something wrong with my reflection.

It's not my costume, which would make Marie Antoinette proud. The pale blue gown is girly and outrageous and gigantic. There are skirts and overskirts, ribbons and trim, beads and lace. The bodice is lovely, and the stays fit snugly underneath, giving me a flattering figure—the correct body parts are either more slender or more round. My neck is draped in a crystalline necklace like diamonds, and my ears in shimmery earrings like chandeliers. I sparkle with reflected light.

Is it the makeup?

I'm wearing white face powder, red blush, and clear red lip gloss. Marie Antoinette didn't have mascara, so I felt compelled to cheat there. I've brushed on quite a bit over a pair of false eyelashes. My gaze travels upward. The white wig towers at two feet tall, and it's adorned with blue ribbons and pink roses and pink feathers and a single blue songbird. It's beautiful. A work of art. I spent a *really long time* making it.

And . . . it's not right.

"I don't see me," I say. "I'm gone."

Andy is unlacing my buckled platform combat boots, preparing to help me step inside of them. He gestures in a wide circle. "What do you mean? ALL I can see is you."

"No." I swallow. "There's too much Marie, not enough Lola."

His brow furrows. "I thought that was the point."

"I thought so, too, but . . . I'm lost. I'm hidden. I look like a Halloween costume."

"When *don't* you look like a Halloween costume?"

"Dad! I'm serious." My panic rapidly intensifies. "I can't go to the dance like this, it's too much. Way too much."

"Honey," he shouts to Nathan. "You'd better get in here. Lola is using new words."

Nathan appears in my doorway, and he grins when he sees me.

"Our daughter said"—Andy pauses for dramatic effect—"*it's too much.*"

They burst into laughter.

"IT'S NOT FUNNY." And then I gasp. My stays crush my rib cage, making the outburst labored and painful.

“Whoa.” Nathan is suddenly beside me, his hand on my back. “Breathe. Breathe.”

I was already nervous about going to the dance and seeing my classmates. At least I won't be alone—I'm meeting Lindsey and Charlie there—but I can't go like this. It'd be humiliating. I need Lindsey here; she'd take control. But she's in the middle of a murder-mystery dinner party, and Charlie has wagered a month of school lunches that he'll solve the mystery before she does. It's important to Lindsey that she wins.

“Phone,” I pant. “Give me my phone.”

Andy hands it to me, and I dial Cricket instead. I'm sent directly to his voice mail, like I have been all afternoon. He called this morning to make sure I was going to the dance, but we haven't talked since. I keep fantasizing that we can't get in touch because he's on an airplane, planning to surprise me by magically appearing at my school during the first slow song, but it's most likely a snowstorm wreaking havoc with his connection. Tonight is the Exhibition of Champions, and Calliope is performing in it. He has to be there.

But tomorrow . . . he'll be home.

The thought temporarily calms me. And then I see my reflection again, and I realize that tomorrow helps nothing about *tonight*.

“O-kaaaay.” Andy pries the phone from my death grip. “We need a plan.”

“I have a plan.” I tear at the pins holding the wig to my head. “I'll take it apart. I'll do a modern reinterpretation of it in my own hair.” I'm flinging the pins to the floor like darts, and my parents step back nervously.

“That sounds . . .” Nathan says.

“Complicated,” Andy says.

I rip off the wig and throw it onto my desk.

“Are you sure you want to—” Nathan's words die as I wrench the pink roses from the wig. Half of them tear, and Andy clamps a hand over his mouth. The songbird is yanked off next. “It's fine,” I say. “I'll put them in my own hair, it'll be fine.” I push the rest of the wig to the floor, look up, and cry out. My hair is matted and tangled, bushy and flattened. It's every bad thing that can happen to someone's head, all at once.

Andy gingerly removes another stray pin as I try to tug a brush through the disaster. “Careful!” he says.

“I'M BEING CAREFUL.” The brush snags in my hair, and I explode into tears.

Andy spins around to Nathan. “Who do we call? Who do we know who does hair?”

“I don't know!” Nathan looks blindsided. “That queen with the big order last

week?”

“No, she’d be working. What about Luis?”

“You hate Luis. What about—”

“I’ll wear the wig! I’ll just wear the wig, forget it!” I feel my black mascara trailing through my white face powder as I trip backward, and my right foot lands on the wig. The chicken wire structure underneath it smashes flat.

My parents gasp. And the last remaining vision I had of entering my winter formal as Marie Antoinette disappears.

I pull at my stays, forcing room to get air inside my chest. “It’s over.”

There’s a *thud* beside my window as someone drops into the room. “Only the wig is over.”

I lunge toward him instinctively, but my dress is so heavy that I crumple face-first into my rug. My gown falls around me like a deflated accordion. I didn’t realize it was possible to die of embarrassment. But I think it might actually happen.

“Are you okay? Are you hurt?” Cricket drops to his knees. His grip is strong as he helps me sit up. I want to collapse into his arms, but he carefully lets go of me.

“What . . . what are you . . . ?”

“I left Nationals early. I know how important the dance is to you, and I wanted to surprise you. I didn’t want you to have to walk in alone. Not that you couldn’t handle it,” he adds. Which is gracious of him, considering my current status. “But I wanted to be there, too. For your big entrance.”

I’m wiping rug burn and mascara from my cheeks. “My big entrance.”

My parents are frozen dumbstruck by the sudden appearance. Cricket turns to them apologetically. “I would have used the front door, but I didn’t think you’d hear me. And the window was open.”

“You’ve always been . . . full of surprises,” Andy says.

Cricket smiles at him before swiveling back around to me. “Come on. Let’s get you ready for the dance.”

I turn my head. “I’m not going.”

“You have to go.” He nudges my elbow. “I came back so that I could take you, remember?”

I can’t meet his eyes. “I look stupid.”

“Hey. No,” he says softly. “You look beautiful.”

“You’re lying.” I lift my gaze, but I have to bite my lip for a moment to keep it from quivering. “I have mascara clown face. My hair screams child-eating storybook witch.”

Cricket looks amused. “I’m not lying. But . . . we should clean you up,” he adds.

He takes my arms and begins to help me stand. Nathan steps forward, but Andy grabs one of his shoulders. My parents watch Cricket rearrange the skirt of my dress to get me safely to my feet. He leads me to the bathroom attached to my bedroom. Nathan and Andy follow at a careful distance. Cricket turns on the sink’s tap and searches the bottles and tubes on my countertop until he finds what he’s looking for. “Aha!”

It’s makeup remover.

“Calliope uses the same kind,” he explains. “She’s been known to need this after particularly brutal performances. For the, uh,”—he gestures in a general way toward my face—“same reason.”

“Oh God.” I blink at the mirror. “It looks like I’ve been vomited on by an inkwell.”

He grins. “A little bit. Come on, the water is warm.”

We scoot around awkwardly until I’m positioned in front of the sink, and then he drapes a towel over the front of my dress. I—very difficultly—lean over. His fingers slide through my hair and hold it back while I scrub. His physical presence against me is soothing. The face powder, mascara, false eyelashes, and blush disappear. I dry my face, and my eyes find his in the mirror. My skin is bare and pink.

He stares back with unguarded desire.

Nathan clears his throat from the doorway, and we startle. “So what are we going to do about your hair?” he asks.

My heart falls. “I guess I’ll wear a different wig. Something simple.”

“Maybe . . . maybe I can help,” Cricket says. “I do have some experience. With hair.”

I frown. “Cricket. You’ve had that same hair your entire life. Don’t tell me you style it that way yourself.”

“No, but . . .” He rubs the back of his neck. “Sometimes I help Cal with hers before competitions.”

My eyebrows raise.

“If you’d asked me yesterday, I would have said it was a seriously embarrassing skill for a straight guy.”

“You’re the *best*,” I say.

“Only you would think that.” But he looks pleased.

It’s in this moment that I finally register what he’s wearing. It’s a handsome skinny black suit with a shiny sheen. The pants are too short—on purpose, of course—exposing his usual pointy shoes and a pair of pale blue socks that match

my dress *exactly*.

And I totally want to jump him.

“Tick tock,” Nathan says.

I scooch past Cricket, back into my bedroom. He gestures to my desk chair, so I lift my skirts up and around the back, and I find a way to sit down. And then he finger-combs my hair. His hands are gentle and quick, the movements smooth and assured. I close my eyes. The room is silent as his fingertips untangle the strands from roots to tips and run loose throughout my hair. I lean back into him. It feels like my entire body is blossoming.

He leans over and whispers in my ear, “They’ve gone.”

I look up, and, sure enough, my parents have left the door ajar. But they’re gone. We smile. Cricket resumes his work, and I nestle into his hands. My eyes close again. After a few minutes, he clears his throat. “I, um, have something to tell you.”

My eyes remain shut, but my eyebrows lift in curiosity. “What kind of something?”

“A story,” he says.

His words become dreamlike, almost hypnotic, as if he’s told this to himself a hundred times before. “Once upon a time, there was a girl who talked to the moon. And she was mysterious and she was perfect, in that way that girls who talk to moons are. In the house next door, there lived a boy. And the boy watched the girl grow more and more perfect, more and more beautiful with each passing year. He watched her watch the moon. And he began to wonder if the moon would help him unravel the mystery of the beautiful girl. So the boy looked into the sky.

“But he couldn’t concentrate on the moon. He was too distracted by the stars.”

I hear Cricket remove a rubber band from his wrist, which he uses to hold a twist of my hair.

“Go on,” I say.

I hear the smile in his voice. “And it didn’t matter how many songs or poems had already been written about them, because whenever he thought about the girl, *the stars shone brighter*. As if she were the one keeping them illuminated.

“One day, the boy had to move away. He couldn’t bring the girl with him, so he brought the stars. When he’d look out his window at night, he would start with one. One star. And the boy would make a wish on it, and the wish would be her name.

“At the sound of her name, a second star would appear. And then he’d wish her name again, and the stars would double into four. And four became eight, and eight became sixteen, and so on, in the greatest mathematical equation the

universe had ever seen. And by the time an hour had passed, the sky would be filled with so many stars that it would wake his neighbors. People wondered who'd turned on the floodlights.

“The boy did. By thinking about the girl.”

My eyes open, and my heart is in my throat. “Cricket . . . I'm not *that*.”

He stops pinning my hair. “What do you mean?”

“You've built up this idea about me, this *ideal*, but I'm not that person. I'm not perfect. I am far from perfect. I'm not worth such a beautiful story.”

“Lola. You are the story.”

“But a story is just that. It isn't the truth.”

Cricket returns to his work. The pink roses are added. “I know you aren't perfect. But it's a person's imperfections that make them perfect for someone else.”

Another pin slides into place as I catch sight of the back of his hand. A star. Every star he's drawn onto his skin has been for *me*. I glance at my doorway to make sure it's still empty, and I grab his hand.

He looks at it.

I trace my thumb around the star.

He looks at me. His eyes are so painfully, exquisitely blue.

And I pull him down into me, and I plant my lips against his, which are loose with surprise and shock. And I kiss Cricket Bell with everything that's been building inside of me, everything since he moved back, everything since that summer, everything since our childhood. I kiss him like I've never kissed anyone before.

He doesn't move. *His lips aren't moving.*

My head jerks back in alarm. I've acted rashly, I've pushed him too quickly—

He collapses to his knees and yanks me back to his lips.

His kiss isn't even remotely innocent. There's passion, but there's also an urgency verging on panic. He pulls me closer, as close as my dress and my chair allow, and he's gripping me so tightly that I feel his fingers press through the back of my stays.

I pull back, gasping for breath. Reeling. His breath is ragged, and I place my hands on his cheeks to steady him. “Is this okay?” I whisper. “Are you okay?”

His reply is anguished. Honest. “I love you.”

chapter thirty-four

Moonlight shines into my bedroom and reveals his fragile state. “I didn’t say it so you’d say it back,” he says. “Please don’t say it if you don’t mean it. I can wait.”

I rise and detach my gown from the chair. And then I help him stand, and I place his hands around my waist. I lean onto my tiptoes, rest my fingers against the back of his neck, and kiss him gently. Slowly. His tongue finds mine. Our hearts beat faster and faster, and our kisses grow hotter and hotter, until we burst apart from breathlessness.

I smile, dizzily, and touch my swollen lips. These are *not* the kisses of a sweet, wholesome boy next door. I draw him closer by his tie and whisper into his ear, “Cricket Bell, I have been in love with you for my entire life.”

He doesn’t say anything. But his fingers tighten against the back of my bodice. I ache to press my body into his, but my dress is making full contact impossible. I wiggle into a slightly better position. He glances down and notices that I’m still wearing a certain blue something, and, this time, it’s *his* index finger that wraps underneath *my* rubber band.

I shiver wonderfully. “I’m never taking it off.”

Cricket brushes the delicate skin of my wrist. “It’ll fall off.”

“I’ll ask you for another one.”

“I’ll give you another one.” He smiles and touches his nose to mine.

And then he spasms violently and pushes me away.

Someone is coming upstairs. Cricket grabs the songbird off my desk and shoves it into my hair as Andy pops his head in. My dad gives us a look. “Just making sure everything is okay. It’s getting late. You should get going.”

“We’ll be down in a minute,” I say.

“You’re not even wearing shoes. Or makeup.”

“Five minutes.”

“I’m timing it.” Andy disappears. “And it’ll be Nathan up here next,” he calls out.

“So what do you think?” Cricket asks.

“You’re good. Very, very good.” I poke his chest, giddy with the knowledge that I can touch him now whenever I want. “How did you get so good?”

“It’s safe to say that you’re the one who brings it out of me.” He pokes my stomach. “But I meant your hair.”

I’m beaming as I turn toward the mirror, and . . . “OH.”

The updo looks professional. It's tall and splendid and elaborate, but it doesn't overwhelm me. It complements me. "This is . . . it's . . . perfect."

"You will never tell anyone I did that on pain of death." But he's grinning.

"Thank you." I pause, and then I look down at my pale blue fingernails. "You know that thing you said about someone being perfect for someone else?"

"Yeah?"

My eyes lift back to his. "I think you're perfect, too. Perfect for me. And . . . you look amazing tonight. You always do."

Cricket blinks. And then again. "Did I black out? Because I've daydreamed those words a thousand times, but I never thought you'd *actually* say them."

"THREE MINUTES," Andy calls from downstairs.

We break into nervous laughter. Cricket shakes his head to refocus. "Boots," he says. "Socks."

I point them out, and while he finishes prepping them, I mascara my lashes, powder my face, and gloss my lips. The makeup is dropped into my purse. I have a feeling I'll need retouching before I come home. Cricket sweeps me up by my waist and carries me to the bed, and I'm lifting my skirts as he sets me down on the edge. His eyes widen, but it turns into more laughter when he sees how many layers are underneath.

I grin. "There's more than panniers under here."

"Just give me your foot."

From downstairs: "ONE MINUTE."

Cricket kneels and takes my left foot into his hands. The sock comes on too fast. My boot squeaks as he slides it over my leg. His careful, quick fingers lace it all the way up to my knee, where they linger ever so slightly. I close my eyes, praying for the clock to stop. He tugs and tightens the buckles. And then he repeats everything on the other side.

Somehow, this is the sexiest thing that has ever happened to me.

"I wish I had more feet," I say.

"We can do this again." He tightens the last buckle. "Anytime."

There's a knock against my door frame as Betsy eagerly bounds toward us. My parents are both here. Cricket helps me stand.

Nathan's expression softens into astonishment. "Wow."

I hesitate. "Good wow?"

"Standing ovation wow," Cricket says.

The way everyone is staring makes me nervous again. I turn toward the mirror, and I see . . . a magnificent gown and beautiful hair and a glowing face. And the reflection smiling back at me is *Lola*.

“One more,” Andy says. “From the side, so we can see the bird in your hair.”

I turn my head to pose for another picture. “This is the last one.”

“Did you get a shot with the boots?” Nathan asks. “Show us the boots.”

I lift my hem and smile. “Tick tock.”

“I am trying *really* hard not to use the word ‘fabulous’ right now,” Andy says.

But I feel fabulous. My parents take two more rounds of pictures—one with both of us and one with just Cricket—before we make our escape into the foggy night. Getting to the sidewalk requires folding the panniers, lifting my skirts, and stepping sideways down the stairs. We’re walking to my school, because it’s close.

Also, because I can’t fit into a car.

“Hey! There they are!”

Aleck appears on the porch next door. Abby is on his hip. I wave, and her eyes grow HUGE like when she saw the wild green parrots in the park. “Ohhhh,” she says.

“You guys look great,” Aleck calls down. “Crazy. But great.”

We grin our thanks and say goodbye. Unsurprisingly, the dress makes it difficult to maneuver down the sidewalk—I frequently have to turn to the side, and hand-holding is tricky—but we make our way down the first block.

“Are they still watching?” I ask.

Cricket looks back. “All four of them.”

My stomach is fluttering, but the butterflies are happy and anticipatory. We’re both waiting for the same moment. We finally turn a corner, and Cricket pulls me into the purple-black shadows of the first house. Our mouths crush against each other. My hands rake through his hair, tugging him closer. He tries to back me against the wall, but I bounce off it. Our lips are still touching as we laugh.

“Hold on.” I hoist up the structure of my dress, but I fold it the other way this time, so that the lifted, flat surface is in the back. “Okay. Try again.”

He does it slowly this time, pushing his entire figure against mine, using his hips to press me against the house. It doesn’t matter how much fabric is between us, the solid strength of his body against mine is electric. Charged. And then our arms are enveloping and our fingers are digging and our mouths are searching and our bodies find this *lock*.

And if I’m the stars, Cricket Bell is entire galaxies.

The winter wind spirals around us, cold and bitter, but the space between us is hot and sweet. His scent makes me ravenous. I kiss his neck in a downward trail, and I can’t hear it over the wind, but I feel him moan. His fingers easily, gracefully slide through the laces of my stays and work their way around the chemise underneath. They stroke only the smallest square of my back, but the

tremor runs the full length of my spine.

Our mouths clasp again. We press against each other harder. His fingers slip out of my stays. They move from my back to my front, and for the first time ever, I wish this dress were less complicated. My next one will be much smaller, a single layer, with a thin silk that will allow me to feel *everything*.

Cricket breaks away, his eyes wild. “We have to stop. If we don’t stop now . . .”

“I know.” Even though all I want to do is keep going.

But he wraps his arms around me, and he holds me as if I were about to fly away with the wind. He holds me until our hearts stop pounding so furiously. He holds me until we can breathe again.

The fog is still heavy, and the sidewalks are packed, but everyone sees us coming. They part aside with claps and cheers. Our smiles are full as our hearts. As we promenade down the glittery sidewalks of the Castro, I feel as if we’re in a music video. A woman with a pompadour gives Cricket a fist pump, and the man with the Care Bears tattoo who owns the environmentally friendly dry cleaners gives us both wolf whistles.

Or maybe just Cricket. He *does* look hot.

We turn the last corner toward my school, and he pulls me into the privacy of another gap between houses. I look up at him teasingly through my eyelashes. “You know, I just reapplied my lip gloss.”

But Cricket is suddenly nervous. Very nervous.

His expression fills me with apprehension. “Is . . . everything okay?” I ask.

He places a hand inside the inner pocket of his suit jacket. “I wanted to give you this for Christmas, and then for New Year’s. But I couldn’t get it ready in time. And then I thought it’d make a better gift for tonight anyway, assuming, of course, that you’d come with me to the dance. But then I couldn’t give it to you in your bedroom, because it was too bright inside, so I had to wait until we were outside, because it’s dark outside—”

“Cricket! What is it?”

He swallows. “Sohereitis, Ihopeyoulikeit.”

And he removes his hand from his pocket and thrusts a slender golden object into my palm. The disk is warm from his body heat. It’s round like a makeup compact, and there’s a tiny button to open it, but it’s deeper than a compact.

And the metal has been etched with stars.

The sound of my heart is loud inside my ears. “I’m almost afraid to open it. It’s perfect as it is.”

Cricket takes it and holds it at my eye level. “Press the button.”

I extend a shaky index finger.

Click.

And then . . . the most wondrous thing appears. The lid pops back, and a miniature, luminous universe rises up and unfolds. A small round moon glows in the center, surrounded by tiny twinkling stars. I gasp. It's intricate and alive. Cricket places the automaton back into my palm. I cradle it, enchanted, and the stars wink at me lazily.

"The moon is what took so long. I had trouble getting the cycle correct."

I look up, mystified. "The cycle?"

He points to the real moon. She's a waxing gibbous—a slice of her left side is dark. I look back down. The little moon is *almost* entirely illuminated. A slice of its left side is dark. I'm stunned into silence.

"So you won't forget me when I'm gone," he says.

I raise my eyes in alarm.

Cricket reacts quickly. "Not gone-gone. I meant during the week, when I'm at school. No more moving. I'm here. I'm wherever you are."

I let out a relieved breath, one hand clutching my tight stays.

"You haven't said anything." He plucks at a rubber band. "Do you like it?"

"Cricket . . . this is the most extraordinary thing I've ever seen."

His expression melts. He enfolds me into his arms, and I rise on my platform tiptoes to reach his lips again. I want to kiss him for the rest of the night, for the rest of our lives. *The one*. He tastes salty like sea fog. But he tastes sweet, too, like . . .

"Cherries," he says.

Yes. Wait. Was I talking out loud?

"You taste like cherries. Your hair smells like cherries. You've always smelled like cherries to me." Cricket presses his nose against the top of my head and inhales. "I can't believe I'm allowed to do that now. You have no idea how long I've wanted to do that."

I bury my face against his chest and smile. Someday I'll tell him about my teacup.

The sound of laughter and music floats through the night air, swirling and ephemeral. It's beckoning us. I look up and deep into his eyes. "Are you sure you want to do this? A high school dance? You don't think it's . . . kind of lame?"

"Sure, but aren't they supposed to be?" Cricket smiles. "I don't know. I've never been to one. And I'm happy. I'm *really* hap—"

And I interrupt his words with another ecstatic kiss. "Thank you."

"Are you ready?" he asks.

“I am.”

“Are you scared?”

“I’m not.”

He takes my hand and squeezes it. With my other, I hitch up the bottom of my dress. My platform combat boots lead the way. And I hold my head high toward my big entrance, hand in hand with the boy who gave me the moon and the stars.

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ISLA

and the



HAPPILY

EVER AFTER

AUTHOR OF ANNA AND THE FRENCH KISS

STEPHANIE PERKINS

About this book

The café is boiling. The atmosphere is clouded with bittersweet coffee. Three years of desire rip through my body and burst from my lips: “Josh!” His head jolts up. For a long time, a very long time, he just stares at me. And then...he blinks. “Isla?”

Hopeless romantic Isla has had a crush on brooding artist Josh since their first year at the School of America in Paris. And, after a chance encounter in Manhattan over the summer break, romance might be closer than Isla imagined. But as they begin their senior year back in France, Isla and Josh are forced to face uncertainty about their futures, and the very real possibility of being apart.

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EVER AFTER

STEPHANIE PERKINS



For Jarrod, best friend & true love

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Chapter one

It's midnight, it's sweltering, and I might be high on Vicodin, but that guy – that guy *right over there* – that's him.

The him.

His posture is as familiar as a recurring dream. Shoulders rounded down, head cocked to the right, nose an inch from the tip of his pen. Absorbed. My heart swells with a painful sort of euphoria. He's close, only two tables over and facing my direction. The café is boiling. The atmosphere is clouded with bittersweet coffee. Three years of desire rip through my body and burst from my lips:

“Josh!”

His head jolts up. For a long time, a very long time, he just stares at me. And then...he blinks. “Isla?”

“You know my name. You can *pronounce* my name.” Most people call me Iz-la, but I'm Eye-la. Island without the *nd*. I erupt into a smile that immediately vanishes. *Ouch*.

Josh glances around, as if searching for someone, and then cautiously sets down his pen. “Uh, yeah. We've sat beside each other in a ton of classes.”

“Five classes beside each other, twelve classes together total.”

A pause.

“Right,” he says slowly. Another pause. “Are you okay?”

A guy who looks like a young Abraham Lincoln with a piercing fetish tosses a single-page laminated menu onto my table.

I don't look at it. “Something soft, please.”

Abe scratches his beard, weary.

“But no tomato soup, chocolate pudding, or raspberry applesauce. That's all I've had to eat today,” I add.

“Ah.” Abe's mood lightens. “You're sick.”

“No.”

His mood darkens again. “Whatever.” He snatches up the menu. “Allergic to

anything? You kosher? Vegetarian?”

“Huh?”

“I’ll have a look in the kitchen.” And he stalks away.

My gaze returns to Josh, who is still watching me. He looks down at his sketchbook, and then back up, and then back down. Like he can’t decide if we’re still having a conversation. I look down, too. I’m getting the increasingly alarming notion that if I keep talking, tomorrow I might have something to regret.

But...as if I can’t help it – because I *can’t*, not when I’m around him – I glance up. My veins throb as my eyes drink him in. His long, beautiful nose. His slender, assured arms. His pale skin is a few shades darker from the summer sun, and his black tattoo peeks out from underneath his T-shirt sleeve.

Joshua Wasserstein. My crush on him is near unbearable.

He looks up again, too, and I blush. Blushing. The curse of redheads everywhere. I’m grateful when he clears his throat to speak. “It’s strange, you know? That we’ve never run into each other before.”

I leap in. “Do you come here often?”

“Oh.” He fidgets with his pen. “I meant in the city? I knew you lived on the Upper West, but I’ve never seen you around.”

My chest tightens. I knew that about him, but I had no idea that *he* knew that about *me*. We attend a boarding school for Americans in Paris, but we spend our breaks in Manhattan. Everybody knows that Josh lives here, because his father has one of the New York seats in the United States Senate. But there’s no reason for anyone to remember that I live here, too.

“I don’t get out often,” I blurt. “But I’m starving, and there’s nothing to eat at home.” And then, somehow, I’m dropping into the empty seat across from him. My compass necklace knocks against his tabletop. “My wisdom teeth were removed this morning, and I’m taking all of these medications, but my mouth is still sore so that’s why I can only eat soft foods.”

Josh breaks into his first smile.

Accomplishment puffs up inside of me. I return the smile as full as I can, even though it hurts. “What?”

“Painkillers. It makes sense now.”

“Oh, shit.” I tuck up a leg and smack my kneecap on the table. “Am I acting that loopy?”

He laughs with surprise. People always laugh, because they don’t expect words like *shit* to come out of someone so petite, someone with a voice so quiet, so sweet. “I could just tell something was different,” he says. “That’s all.”

“Side effects include the cruel combination of exhaustion and insomnia.

Which is why I'm here now."

Josh laughs again. "I had mine extracted last summer. You'll feel better tomorrow."

"Promise?"

"Not really. But definitely in a few days."

Our smiles fade into a reflective silence. We've rarely spoken to each other at school and never outside of it. I'm too shy, and he's too reserved. Plus, he had the same girlfriend for, like, for ever.

Had.

They broke up last month, right before her graduation. Josh and I still have our senior year to go. And I wish there were a logical reason for him to show a sudden interest in me, but...there's not. His ex was tenacious and outspoken. My opposite. Maybe that's why I'm startled when I find myself pointing at his sketchbook, eager to prolong this temporary state. This miracle of conversation.

"What are you working on?" I ask.

His arm shifts to block the exposed drawing, someone resembling a young Abe Lincoln. "I was just...messaging around."

"That's our server." I grin. *Ouch.*

He looks a bit sheepish as he pulls back his arm, but he only shrugs. "And the couple in the corner."

We're not alone?

I twist around to discover a middle-aged man and woman, all the way in the back, sharing a copy of the *Village Voice*. There isn't anyone else here, so at least I'm not too out of it. I don't think. I turn back to Josh, my courage rising.

"May I see that?"

I asked. I can't *believe* that I asked. I've always wanted to look inside his sketchbooks, always wanted to *hold* one. Josh is the most talented artist at our school. He works in several mediums, but his real passion is the comic form. I once overheard him say that he's working on a graphic novel about his life.

An autobiography. A diary. What secrets would it contain?

I content myself with doodles viewed over his shoulder, paintings drying in the art studio, sketches tacked to the doors of his friends. His style is almost whimsical. It's melancholy and beautiful, completely his own. The lines are careful. They reveal that he pays attention. People don't think he does, because he daydreams and skips class and neglects his homework, but when I see his drawings, I know they're wrong.

I wish he would look at me the way that he looks at his subjects. Because then he'd see there's more to me than *shy*, just like I see there's more to him than *slacker*.

My cheeks burn again – as if he could hear my thoughts – but then I realize... he is studying me. Have I overstayed my welcome? His expression grows concerned, and I frown. Josh nods towards the table. His sketchbook is already before me.

I laugh. He does, too, though it's tinged with confusion.

His book is still open to the work in progress. A thrill runs through me. On one page, Abe's face stares with boredom at the sketchbook's spine. Even the rings in his septum, eyebrows and ears seem dull and annoyed. On the opposite page, Josh has perfectly captured the middle-aged couple's studious, gentle frowns.

I touch a corner, one without ink, oh so lightly. To prove to myself that this moment is real. My voice turns reverent. "These are amazing. Is the whole thing filled with portraits like this?"

Josh closes the sketchbook and slides it back towards himself. Its pages are thick with use. On the cover is a blue sticker shaped like America. A single word has been handwritten across it: WELCOME. I don't know what that means, but I like it.

"Thanks." He gives me another smile. "It's for whatever, but yeah. Mainly portraits."

"And you're allowed to do that?"

His brow creases. "Do what?"

"Like, you don't need their permission?"

"To draw them?" he asks. I nod, and he continues. "Nah. I'm not using these for anything special. This isn't even my good sketchbook. See? I can't remove the pages."

"Do you do this a lot? Draw strangers?"

"Sure." He reaches for his coffee cup with an index finger. There's a splotch of black ink near his nail. "To be good at anything you have to practise."

"Do you wanna practise on me?" I ask.

Pink blossoms across Josh's cheeks as Abe slaps down two dishes. "Chicken broth and cheesecake," Abe says to me. "That's all we had."

"*Merci*," I say.

"*De nada*." Abe rolls his eyes and walks away.

"What's with that guy?" I ask, shovelling in the cheesecake. "Ohmygod, sogood." I mumble this through a full mouth. "Youwannabite?"

"Uh. No, thanks." Josh seems flustered. "You look hungry."

I begin happily devouring the rest.

"So you live close by?" he asks, after a few moments.

I swallow. "Two minutes away."

“Me too. Ten minutes.”

I must look surprised, because he continues. “I know. Weird, right?”

“That’s cool.” I glug my broth. “Ohmygod. This is incredible.”

He watches me quietly for another minute. “So...you were serious? You wouldn’t mind if I sketched you?”

“Yeah, I’d love that.” *I love youuuuuuuuuuu.* “What should I do?”

“Don’t worry about it. Just keep doing what you’re doing.”

“Ha! You’ll draw me eating like a horse. No. A pig. I meant pig. Do I mean a pig or a horse?”

Josh shakes his head in amusement. He opens the sketchbook to a new page and looks up. His eyes lock on to mine. I’m dumbstruck.

Hazel.

The word adds itself to my internal list of Facts About Josh. Sometimes his eyes had seemed green, sometimes brown. Now I know why.

Hazel. Josh’s eyes are *hazel*.

I float into a green-brown fog. The *scritch* of his pen mingles with the *scratch* of an old folk song coming from the speakers. Their combined tune is yearning and turmoil and anguish and love. Outside, storm clouds burst. Rain and wind join the score, and I hum along. My head clunks against a window.

I sit up, startled. My bowl and plate are empty. “How long have I been here?”

“A while.” Josh smiles. “So. Those drugs you’re on. Good stuff, huh?”

I moan. “Tell me I wasn’t drooling.”

“No drool. You look happy.”

“I *am* happy,” I say. Because...I am. My eyes dim.

“*Isla*,” he whispers. “*It’s time to go.*”

I lift my head from the table. When did it get there?

“Kismet is closing.”

“What’s Kismet?”

“Fate,” he says.

“What?”

“The name of this café.”

“Oh. Okay.” I follow him outside and into the night. It’s still raining. The drops are fat and warm. I cover my head with my bare hands as Josh stuffs his sketchbook underneath his shirt. I catch a glimpse of his abdomen. *Yummy.*

“Yummy tummy.”

He startles. “What?”

“Hmm?”

A smile plays in the corners of his lips. I want to kiss them, one kiss in each corner.

“Okay, Loopy.” He shakes his head. “Which way?”

“Which way to what?”

“To your place.”

“You’re coming over?” I’m delighted.

“I’m walking you home. It’s late. And it’s pouring.”

“Oh, that’s nice,” I say. “You’re nice.”

The traffic lights glow yellow on the wet asphalt. I point the way, and we run across Amsterdam Avenue. The rain pours harder. “Up there!” I say, and we duck underneath a city block covered in scaffolding. Weighty raindrops clang against the aluminium like a pinball machine.

“Isla, wait!”

But it’s too late.

Scaffolding is generally ideal for escaping bad weather, but occasionally the bars will cross together to create a funnel, which can collect water and soak a person completely. I am soaked. Completely. My hair clings to my face, my sundress clings to my figure, and water squishes between my sandals and the soles of my feet.

“Ha-ha.” I’m not sure it’s real laughter.

“Are you okay?” Josh stoops under the scaffolding, swerves around the waterfall, and then stoops back in beside me.

I *am* laughing. I clutch my stomach. “Hurts...mouth...to laugh. My mouth. My mouth and my stomach. And my mouth.”

He laughs, too, but it’s distracted. His eyes suddenly, pointedly move up to my face, and I realize he’d been looking elsewhere. My smile widens. *Thank you, slutty funnel.*

Josh shifts away, his posture uncomfortable. “Almost there, yeah?”

I gesture towards a row of gabled buildings across the street. “The second one. With the copper-green windows and the tiled roof.”

“I’ve sketched those before.” His eyes widen, impressed. “They’re gorgeous.”

My parents’ apartment is located in a line of Flemish-inspired homes built in the late nineteenth century. We live in one of the only neighbourhoods that’s nice enough for residents to have flowers on their stoops, and passers-by won’t destroy them.

“Maman likes them, too. She likes pretty things. She’s French. That’s why I go to our school.” My voice drifts as Josh guides me towards the entrance with the climbing pink roses above the door. Home. He removes his hand from the small of my back, and it’s only then that I realize it was there in the first place.

“*Merci*,” I say.

“You’re welcome.”

“Thanks,” I say.

“*De rien.*”

The air is heavy with the perfume of rain-dripped roses. I fumble my way inside the building, and he waits on the sidewalk, statuesque. His dark hair is as wet as mine now. A stream of water cascades down his nose. One arm clutches the sketchbook against his chest, underneath his T-shirt.

“Thank you,” I say again.

He raises his voice so that I can hear him through the glass door. “Get some rest, Loopy. Sweet dreams.”

“Sweet,” I echo. “Dream.”



Chapter two

Ohmygod what the hell did I do last night??????????



Chapter three

“And the whole thing is a blur! And I don’t remember anything I said, or anything *he* said, and he must have walked me home because he knew I was so high that I’d get run over by a taxi.”

Kurt Donald Cobain Bacon keeps his eyes fixed upon my ceiling. “So Josh paid for your food.”

It takes a moment for this statement to register. My best friend and I are lying beside each other on top of my bed. One of my hands slowly reaches out of its own accord and twists the front of his shirt into a tight knot.

“Don’t do that.” His tone is brusque – as it often is – though not impolite.

I remove my hand, which travels straight to my swollen, throbbing, worse-than-yesterday gums. And then I emit a rather frightening moan.

“You said he woke you up, and then you left the café,” Kurt says. “That means he paid your bill.”

“I know. *I know.*” But I’m scrambling out of bed anyway. I grab my bag, dump it upside down, and shake it frantically.

“You won’t find it,” he says.

A well-loved paperback about hiking disasters on Mount Everest thunks against my rug. Pens and lipsticks and quarters shower out and roll away. My wallet. An empty pack of tissues, a pair of sunglasses, a crumpled flyer for a new bagel store. Nothing. I shake it harder. Still nothing. I check my wallet even though I already know what I won’t find: a receipt from the café.

“Told you,” he says.

“I have to apologize for being such a lunatic. I have to pay him back.”

“Pay who back?” Hattie asks.

My head whips around to find my younger sister appraising me from the doorway. She’s leaning against the frame with crossed arms, but she still looks way too tall. Which she is. Not only did she surpass me in height last year, but she far exceeded me.

“I know what you did last night,” she says. “I know you snuck out.”

“I didn’t *sneak out*. I just left for a few hours.”

“But Maman and Dad don’t know.”

I don’t reply, and Hattie smiles. She’s as smug as a house cat. She won’t tell. With information this valuable, she’ll hold on to it until it’s useful. Hattie swipes my wallet from the floor and – staring me down, lording over me with her stupid growth spurt – drops it back into my bag. And then she’s gone.

I throw the bag at her vacated space and crawl into bed. I wrap both of my arms around one of Kurt’s. “You have to go with me,” I say. “To the café. Tonight.”

His eyebrows furrow into their familiar V shape. “You think Josh is a regular?”

“Maybe.” I have no reason to think this. I just *want* him to be a regular. “Please, I have to explain myself.”

His shoulders shrug against me. “Then I’ll find the Right Way.”

Kurt likes routine, and he always likes to know where he’s going ahead of time. He’s obsessed with mapping out the best route to get anywhere...even a café that’s only a few minutes away. He calls these routes the Right Way. The Right Way never involves mass transit, crowded intersections, or streets containing Abercrombie & Fitch-type stores that blast noxious music and/or cologne.

Cartography has fascinated him since he was six, when he discovered *The Times Atlas of the World* weighing down one of my older sister’s gluey craft projects. The book became an obsession, and Kurt pored over its pages for years, memorizing names and shapes and distances. When we were young, we’d lie on my floor and draw our own maps. Kurt would make these tidy, detailed, to-scale maps of our neighbourhood while I’d create England-shaped islands with Old English-sounding names. They’d have dense woods and spidery rivers and snowcapped peaks, and I’d surround them with shark triangles and sea-monster arches. It drove Kurt crazy that I wouldn’t draw anything real.

I’ve known him for ever. Our mothers are also best friends – and they’re both Frenchwomen living in New York – so he’s just...always been around. We went to the same schools in Manhattan, and now we attend the same high school in Paris. He’s thirteen months younger than me, so there was only one year when we were apart – when he was in eighth grade, and I was a freshman. Neither of us likes to think about that year.

I blow a lock of his scruffy blond hair from my face. “You don’t think...”

“You’re gonna have to finish that sentence.”

“It’s just...Josh and I *talked*. I remember feeling happy. You don’t think it’s possible that last night was...not some embarrassing mishap, but...my way in?”

He frowns again. “Your way into what?”

Kurt isn’t good at filling in blanks. And even though he’s always known how I feel about Josh, I still hesitate before saying it aloud. This tiny, flickering hope. “A relationship. *Kismet*, you know?”

“Fate doesn’t exist.” He gives me a dismissive huff. “Catalogue last night as another embarrassing mishap. It’s been a while since you’ve had one,” he adds.

“Almost a year.” I sigh. “Right on schedule.”

Josh and I have had exactly one meaningful interaction per year, none of which have left me looking desirable. When we were freshmen, Josh saw me reading Joann Sfar in the cafeteria. He was excited to find someone else interested in European comics, so he began asking me this rapid string of questions, but I was too overwhelmed to reply. I could only gape at him in silence. He gave me a weird look and then left.

When we were sophomores, our English teacher partnered us up for a fake newspaper article. I was so nervous that I couldn’t stop tapping my pen. And then it slipped from my grasp. And *then* it flew into his forehead.

When we were juniors, I caught him and his girlfriend making out in an elevator. It wasn’t even at school. It was inside BHV, this massive department store. I bumbled an unintelligible hello, let the doors close, and took the stairs.

“But,” I persist, “I have a *reason* to talk to him now. You don’t think there’s any chance that it might lead to something?”

“Since when is human behaviour reasonable?”

“Come on.” I widen my eyes like an innocent doe. “Can’t you pretend with me? Even for a second?”

“I don’t see the point in pretending.”

“That was a joke,” I explain, because sometimes Kurt needs explanations.

He scowls at himself in frustration. “Noted.”

“I dunno.” I burrow against the side of his body. “It’s not logical, and I can’t explain it, but...I think Josh will be there tonight. I think we’ll see him.”

“Before you ask” – Kurt barges into my new dorm room in Paris, three months later, narrowly missing a run-in with an empty suitcase – “no. I didn’t see him.”

“I wasn’t going to ask.” Although I was.

My last ember of hope gutters. Over the summer, it faded and faded until it was barely visible at all. The ghost of a hope. Because Kurt was right, human behaviour isn’t reasonable. Or predictable. Or even satisfying. Josh wasn’t there at midnight, nor was he there the *next* night. Nor the following day. I checked the café at all hours for two weeks, and my memories of happiness disintegrated as I was faced with reality: I didn’t hear any music. I didn’t feel any rain. I didn’t

even see any Abe.

It was as if that night had never happened.

I looked for Josh online. I pulled his email address from last year's school handbook, but when I tried to send a casual/friendly explanation/apology – an email that took *four hours* to compose – the server informed me that his account was inactive from disuse.

Then I tried the various social networks. I didn't get far. I don't actually have any accounts, because social networking has always felt like a popularity contest. A public record of my own inadequacies. The only thing I found was the same black-and-white, again and again, of Josh standing beside the River Seine, staring sombrelly at some fixed point in the distance. I confess I'd seen it before. He'd been using the picture online for months. But it was too pathetic to sign up anywhere just to become his so-called friend.

So then I did the thing that I swore to myself I would never do: I Googled his home address. The waves of my shame were felt across state lines. But it was in this final step towards stalkerdom that I was led to the information I'd been seeking all along. His father's website featured a photo of the family exiting an airport terminal in DC. The picture had been taken two days after Kismet, and the caption explained that they'd remain in the capital until autumn. The senator looked stately and content. Rebecca Wasserstein was waving towards the camera, flashing that toothy, political-spouse smile.

And their only child?

He trailed behind them, head down, sketchbook in arm. I clicked on the picture to make it bigger, and my eyes snagged on a blue sticker shaped like America.

I'm in there. I'm in that sketchbook.

I never saw his drawing. What would it have revealed about me? About him? I wondered if he ever looked at it. I wondered about it all summer long.

Kurt jiggles the handle of my new door, shaking me back into France. "This is catching. You need to get it fixed."

"The more things change, the more they stay the same," I say.

He frowns. "That doesn't make sense. The door you had last year worked fine."

"Never mind." I sigh. Three months is a long time. Any confidence I had in speaking to Josh has crumbled back into shyness and fear. Even if Kurt *had* just seen him in the hallway, it's not like I would've left my room to speak with him.

Kurt pushes his body weight against the door, listens for its telltale click, and then flops down beside me on the bed. "Our doors are supposed to lock automatically. I shouldn't be able to walk in like that."

“And yet—”

“I keep doing it.” He grins.

“It’s strange, though, right?” My voice is tinged with the same awe that it’s had since our arrival two days ago. “*Whose door that used to be?*”

“Statistically unlikely. But not impossible.”

I have a lifetime’s worth of experience shaking off Kurt’s wonder-killing abilities, so his response doesn’t bother me. Especially because, despite a summer of disappointments and backtracking...

I, Isla Martin, am now living in Joshua Wasserstein’s last place of residence.

These were his walls. This was his ceiling. That black grease mark on the skirting board, the one right above the electrical outlet? He probably made that. For the rest of the year, I will have the same view of the same street outside of the same window. I will sit in his chair, bathe in his shower, and sleep in his bed.

His bed.

I trace a finger along the stitching of my quilt. It’s an embroidered map of Manhattan. When I’m in Manhattan, I sleep underneath a quilt that’s an embroidered map of Paris. But underneath *this* blanket and underneath *these* sheets, there’s a sacred space that once belonged to Josh. He dreamed here. I want this to mean something.

My door bursts back open.

“My room is bigger than yours,” Hattie says. “This is like a prison cell.”

Yeah. I’m gonna have to fix that door.

“True,” Kurt says, because the rooms in *Résidence Lambert* are the size of walk-in closets. “But how many roommates were you assigned? Two? Three?”

This is my sister’s first year attending SOAP – the School of America in Paris. When I was a freshman, our older sister, Gen, was a senior. Now I’m the senior, and Hattie is the freshman. She’ll be living in the underclass dormitory down the street. Students in *Grivois* have roommates, tons of supervision, and enforced curfews. Here in *Lambert*, we have our own rooms, one *Résidence Director*, and significantly more freedom.

Hattie glowers at Kurt. “At least I don’t have to hide from my roommates.”

“Don’t be an assrabbit,” he says.

Last year – when I was in this dorm, and he was still in *Grivois* – he slept in my bed more often than his own, because he couldn’t get along with his roommates. But I didn’t mind. We’ve been sharing beds since before we could talk. And Kurt and I are *strictly* friends. There’s none of that he’s-my-best-friend-but-we’re-secretly-in-love bullshit. A relationship with him would feel incestuous.

Hattie narrows her eyes. “Everyone’s waiting in the lobby for dinner.” She’s

referring to both his parents and ours. “Hurry up.” She slams my door. It pops back open, but she’s already gone.

I haul myself off the bed. “I wish my parents could’ve sent her to boarding school in Belgium. They speak French there, too.”

Kurt sits up. “That’s a joke, right?”

It is. It’s important to my parents that my sisters and I receive a portion of our education in France. We’re dual citizens. We all received our early schooling in America, and we’ve all been sent here for high school. It’s our choice where to go next. Gen chose Smith College in Massachusetts. I’m not sure where I want to live, but soon I’ll be applying to both la Sorbonne here in Paris and Columbia back in New York.

Kurt pulls up the hood of his favourite charcoal-grey sweatshirt, even though it’s warm outside. I grab my room key, and we leave. It takes both of his hands to yank my door closed. “You really do need to talk to Nate about that.” He nods to our Résidence Director’s apartment, only two doors down.

Okay. So Josh’s old room does have its drawbacks. It’s also located on the ground floor so it’s loud. Extra loud, actually, because it’s also located beside the stairwell.

“There he is,” Kurt says.

I assume he means Nate, but I follow his gaze and grind to a halt.

Him.

Josh is waiting for the elevator in the lobby. In less than a second, an entire summer of daydreaming and planning and rehearsing explodes into nothingness. I close my eyes to steady myself. I’m dizzy. It physically hurts to look at him. “I can’t breathe.”

“Of course you can breathe,” Kurt says. “You’re breathing right now.”

Josh looks alone.

I mean, he is alone, but...he *looks* alone. He’s carrying a cloth grocery bag and staring at the elevator, completely detached from the crowd behind him. Kurt drags me towards the lobby. The elevator dings, the door opens, and Josh pushes back its old-fashioned gate. Students and parents bustle in behind him – way too many people for such a small space – and as we pass by, he flinches at being shoved into a corner. But the flinch is just that, one quick moment, before his expression slides back into indifference.

The crowd jostles and smashes buttons and someone’s dad forces the gate shut, but that’s when an odd thing happens. Josh looks out over the sea of passengers and through the metal cage. And his eyes go from blank to seeing. They see me.

The elevator door closes.



Chapter four

The head of school is finishing up her usual first-day, post-breakfast, welcome-back speech. Kurt and I are in the back of the courtyard, nestled between two trees pruned like giant lollipops. The air smells faintly of iron. The school looms over us, all grey stone and cascading vines and heavy doors. Our classmates loom before us.

There are twenty-five students per grade here – always one hundred students in total – and it’s difficult to get accepted. You have to have excellent grades, high test scores, and several letters of recommendation. It helps to have connections. Gen got in because Maman knew someone in the administration, I got in because of Gen, and Hattie got in because of me. It’s cliquey like that.

It’s also expensive. You have to come from money to attend.

When my father was only nineteen, he built an overdrive pedal called the Cherry Bomb for guitarists. It was red and revolutionary and turned him from the son of a Nebraskan farmer into a very wealthy man. It’s one of the most copied pedals ever, but musicians still pay top dollar for the original. His company’s name is Martintone, and even though he still tinkers with pedals, as an adult he works mainly as a studio engineer.

“I have one final announcement.” The head’s voice is as poised as her snow-white chignon. She’s American, but she could easily pass for French.

Kurt studies a map on his phone. “I’ve found a better route to the Treehouse.”

“Oh, yeah? After all this time?” I’m scanning the courtyard for Josh. Either he slept in or he’s already skipping. I planned my outfit carefully, because it’s the first day in months when I *know* I’ll see him. My style tends to be rather feminine, and today I’m wearing a dress patterned with tiny Swiss dots. It has a scoop neck and a short hem, both of which help me look taller, but I’ve added a pair of edgy Parisian heels to keep me from looking too innocent or vanilla. I can’t imagine Josh falling for someone vanilla.

Not that Josh would ever fall for me.

But I wouldn’t want to ruin any chance.

Even though I don't have a chance.

But just in case I do.

Even though I don't.

"But I'll let him tell you in his own words," the head says, continuing a sentence whose beginning I did not hear. She moves aside, and a short figure with a shaved head steps forward. It's Nate, our Résidence Director. This is his third year here. He's also American, but he's young, working on his doctorate, and known for being lax with the rules yet firm enough to keep us under control. The kind of person that everybody likes.

"Hey, guys." Nate shifts as if his own skin were the wrong fit. "It's come to the faculty's attention—" He glances at the head and changes his story. "It's come to *my* attention that the situation in Lambert got a little out of hand last year. I am, of course, referring to the habit of opposite-sex students hanging out in each other's rooms. As you know, we have a strict policy—"

The student body snickers.

"We have a *strict policy* that ladies and gentlemen are only allowed to visit each other with their doors propped open."

"Isla." Kurt is annoyed. "You're not looking at my phone."

I shake my head and nudge him to pay attention. This can't be good.

"Things will be different this year, upperclassmen. To remind you of the rules —" Nate rubs his head and waits for the gossip to stop. "One. If a member of the opposite sex is in your room, your door must be open. Two. Members of the opposite sex must be gone from your room by nightfall according to the weekday and weekend hours listed in your official school handbook. This means that, three, there will be no *spending the night*. Are we clear? The consequences to breaking these rules are big, you guys. Detention. Suspension. Expulsion."

"So, what, you'll be doing random room checks?" a senior named Mike shouts.

"Yes," Nate says.

"That's unconstitutional!" Mike's sidekick Dave shouts.

"Then it's a good thing we're in France." Nate steps back into the gathered faculty and shoves his hands into his pockets. He's clearly aggravated by this new hassle in his life. The crowd breaks as abruptly as his announcement, and everyone is griping as we make our way towards first period.

"Maybe it won't apply to us," I say, hoping to convince myself. "Nate knows we're just friends. And shouldn't there be exemptions for friends who are in no way interested in each other's bodies?"

Kurt's mouth grows small and tight. "He didn't say anything about exemptions."

Because of our grade difference, our only period together is lunch. I head towards senior English alone and take my usual seat beside the leaded-glass windows. The classroom looks the same – dark wooden trim, empty whiteboards, chairs-attached-to-desks – though it still carries that feeling of summer emptiness.

Where is Josh?

Professeur Cole arrives as she always does, just as the bell is ringing. We have the same *professeurs* for each subject every year. She's loud for a teacher, friendly and approachable. "*Bonjour à tous.*" Professeur Cole smacks down her coffee cup on the podium and looks around. "Good. No new students, no need for an introduction. Ah, *pardon.*" She pauses. "One empty desk. Who's missing?"

The door creaks open with her answer.

"Monsieur Wasserstein. Of course the empty desk is yours." But she winks as he slips into the remaining desk beside the door.

Josh looks tired, but...even tired looks good on him. He's wearing a dark blue T-shirt with artwork that I don't recognize, no doubt something obscure from the indie comic world. It fits him well – a bit tightly – and when he reaches for a copy of the syllabus, his sleeve creeps up to reveal the tattoo on his upper right arm.

I love his tattoo.

It's a skull and crossbones, but it's whimsical and simple and clean. Clearly his own design. He got it our sophomore year, despite the fact that minors in France are required to have parental approval. Which I seriously doubt he had. Which, I'm somewhat ashamed to admit, makes it even sexier. My heart pounds feverishly in my ears. I glance around the room, but the other girls appear to be at ease. Why doesn't he have the same effect on them that he has on me? Don't they see him?

Professeur Cole makes us push our desks into a circle. She's the only teacher here who forces us to look at one another during class. I take my seat again, and – suddenly – Josh's desk is opposite my own.

My head jerks down. My hair shields my face. I'll never be able to talk to him about that night in New York.

Halfway through class, the guy beside him asks a question. The temptation is too strong, so I steal the opportunity for another glance. Josh immediately looks up. Our eyes meet, and my cheeks burst into flames. I avert my gaze for the remainder of the hour, but his presence grows larger and larger. I can practically feel it pressing up against me.

Despite the fact that our schedule is, thus far, identical – English, calculus, government – I manage to evade him for the rest of the morning. It helps that he’s skilled at both disappearing between classes and arriving late to them. Even when the next class is literally across the hall. When the bell rings for lunch, it’s comforting to resume Kurt’s company. We take the back staircase, the one less travelled. It’s the Right Way.

“Did you speak to him?” he asks.

My sigh is long and forlorn. “No.”

“Yeah. That sounds like you.”

Kurt launches into something about a freshman in his computer programming class, a girl who is tall and serene and already fluent in several internet languages – totally his type – but I’m only half paying attention. I know it’s dumb. I know there are more important things to think about on a first day back to school, including whatever it is my best friend is saying. But I like Josh so much that I actually feel *miserable*.

He has yet to make an appearance in the cafeteria, and it’s doubtful that he will now, because I saw him weaving through the crowd in the opposite direction. His friends graduated last year. All of them. If only I were courageous enough to invite him to sit with us at our table. But his friends were so much cooler than us.

Besides, Josh is aloof. Untouchable. We are not.

In the lunch line, Mike Reynard – the senior who was the first to shout during Nate’s speech – proves my point when he slams his tray into Kurt’s spine. A bowl of onion soup splashes its entire contents onto the back of his hoodie.

Mike pretends to look disgusted. “Watch it, retard.”

Kurt stares straight ahead in shock. A slice of baguette covered in melted Gruyère falls from his back to the floor with a *splat*. A soggy onion noiselessly follows.

My cheeks redden. “Jerk.”

“Sorry, didn’t catch that,” Mike says. Even though he did. He’s making fun of my soft voice.

I raise it so that he can hear me. “I said you’re an asshole.”

He smiles, an orthodontic row of unnaturally sharp teeth. “Yeah? And what are you gonna do about it, sweetheart?”

I clench the compass on the end of my necklace. Nothing. I am going to do nothing, and he knows it. Kurt shoves his hands into his hoodie’s pockets, which begin to shake. I know his hands are flapping. He makes a low sound, and I link my arm through his and lead him away, abandoning our food trays. Pretending like I don’t see Mike’s and Dave’s pantomimes or hear their cretinous guffaws.

In the quiet of the hall, Kurt races into the men's room. I sit on a bench and listen to the tick of a gilded clock. Count the number of pear-shaped crystals on the chandeliers. Tap my heels against the marble floor. Our school is as grand and ostentatious as anything in Paris, but I wish it weren't filled with such horrible, entitled weasels. And I know I'm just as privileged, but...it feels different when you live on the social ladder's bottom rung.

Kurt reappears. His hoodie is balled in his arms, wet from scrubbing.

"Everything okay?" I ask.

He's calm, but he's still frowning with severe agitation. "Now I can't wear it until it's clean."

"No worries." I help him shove it into his bag. "First thing after school."

The lunch line is empty. "I had ze feeling you would return." The jolly, pot-bellied head chef removes our trays from behind the counter and slides them towards us. "Leek tart for mademoiselle, *un croque-monsieur* for monsieur."

I'm grateful for this gesture of kindness. "*Merci, Monsieur Boutin.*"

"Zat boy iz no good." He means Mike. "You do not worry about him."

His concern is simultaneously embarrassing and reassuring. He swipes our meal cards, and then Kurt and I sit at our usual table in the far corner. I glance around. As predicted, Josh isn't here, which is probably a good thing. But Hattie isn't here either. Which is probably not.

This morning I saw her eating *un mille-feuille* and – even though I don't blame her for wanting to start the day with dessert – I tried to stop her. I thought it might be dusted with powdered almonds, and she's allergic to almonds. But my sister always does the opposite of whatever anyone wants her to do, even when it's completely idiotic and potentially life threatening. We're not supposed to have our phones out at school, so I sneak-text her: *ARE YOU ALIVE?!*

She doesn't reply.

The day worsens. In physics, Professeur Wakefield pairs us alphabetically to our lab partner for the year. I get Emily Middlestone, who groans when it's announced, because she is popular, and I am not. Sophie Vernet is paired with Josh.

I hate Sophie Vernet.

Actually, I've never given Sophie Vernet much thought, and she seems nice enough, but that's the problem.

My last two classes are electives. I'd like to say that I'm taking art history for my own betterment – not so that I'll have more to hypothetically converse about with Josh – but that would be false. And I'm taking computer science, because it'll look better on my transcripts than *La Vie*, the class that I wish I could take. *La Vie* means "life", and it's supposed to teach us basic life skills, but it's better

known as the school's only goof-off class. I have zero doubt it's where Josh is currently located.

Professeur Fontaine, the computer science teacher, pauses by my desk while she's handing out our first homework assignment. Her chin is pointy, and her forehead is huge. She looks like a triangle. "I met your sister this morning."

I didn't even know Professeur Fontaine knew *me*. This school is way too small. I try to keep my voice nonchalant. "Oh, yeah?" When the sister in question is Hattie, whatever follows this statement is generally unpleasant.

"She was in the nurse's office. Very ill."

Hattie! I told you so.

Professeur Fontaine assures me that my sister isn't dying, but she refuses to let me see for myself. When the final bell rings, I shoot a see-you-later text to Kurt, hurry towards the administration wing, push through its extravagantly carved wooden door, and—

My heart seizes.

Josh is slumped on the waiting room couch. His legs are stretched out so far and so low that they're actually *underneath* the coffee table. His arms are crossed, but his eyebrows rise – perhaps involuntarily, for someone sitting with such purposeful displeasure – at the sight of me.

My response is another deep, flaming blush. Why can't I have a normal face? Genetics are so unfair. I hasten towards the desk and ask the receptionist in French about Hattie. Without glancing up, she waves me towards the couch. A bracelet with a monogrammed charm jingles daintily from her wrist.

I can't move. My stomach is in knots.

"Wait there," she says, as if I didn't understand her gesture. Another wave and another jingle.

Move, feet. Come on. Move!

She finally looks at me, more annoyed than concerned. My feet detach, and I plant one in front of the other like a wind-up doll until I'm sitting on the other side of the couch. The small couch. *Love seat*, really.

Josh is no longer in full recline. He sat up while my back was turned, and now he's leaning forward with his elbows propped against his knees. He's staring straight ahead at an oil painting of a haloed Jeanne d'Arc.

It is now officially more awkward to ignore him than to acknowledge his presence. I search for an opener – something elementary – but my throat remains thick and closed. His silence is a confirmation of my fears. That I was a mess in the café, that his help was given in pity, that he wouldn't actively choose to interact with me and never will again—

Josh clears his throat.

It seems like a good sign. *Good*. “Good first day?” I ask.

A funny expression crosses his face. Was that a dumb question? Did it make me sound like his mother? Hattie is always accusing me of sounding like Maman.

“I’ve had better.” He nods towards the head of school’s office door.

“Oh.” But *then* I get it. “Oh! Sorry. I’m here for the nurse, so...I assumed...”

“It’s okay.” And he says it like it is.

I wonder why he was called to her office. Because he skipped her welcome-back speech? Because he was tardy to his classes? It seems harsh to punish him for these things on our first day. And, great, now we’ve been silent for at least twenty seconds.

Tell him. Tell him. Just tell him already!

“Listen,” I blurt. “I’m really embarrassed about last June. I was taking a lot of medication, and I don’t remember much about that night, but I’m pretty sure you paid for my meal so I’d like to pay you back. And I’m sorry. For being weird. And thank you for walking me home. And for paying for my food.”

He waits until I’m done. “It’s okay,” he says again.

And I feel stupid.

But Josh frowns as if he feels stupid, too. He scratches his head, somehow managing to muss his close-cropped hair. “I mean...don’t worry about it. There’s nothing to be embarrassed about. And you don’t need to pay me back, it was only a few bucks.”

This is the moment. Right here. This is the moment to place a hand on his arm, lean in, and say *the least* I can do is treat him to a meal in return. Instead, I just think it.

“Are you okay?” Josh asks. And then he makes another face.

It takes me a few seconds to figure it out, but that’s the third time he’s said the word *okay*. His embarrassment gives me a surge of confidence. “What do you mean?” I ask.

“You’re here to see the nurse?”

“Oh! No, I’m checking in on my sister. She’s sick.”

He looks confused. “Geneviève?”

I’m thrown. He remembers Gen, and he remembers that we’re related. He knows something about me. I shake my head. “My younger sister, Hattie. It’s her first day.”

He winces. “That makes more sense.”

I can actually see Josh beating himself up in his head. The role reversal is fascinating. Somehow, I’ve made *him* nervous.

“So...how are your teeth?” he asks. “Everything heal?”

I smile, more to ease his discomfort than my own. “No problems.”

“Good. Glad to hear it.”

But I look away, down at the rug, unable to hold his gaze. *The sketchbook*. It’s right there. Poking out of his bag. It’s black and it has the blue sticker and it’s definitely the same one. I should ask to see the drawing. I should just...open my mouth and ask. One question. It’s one frigging question!

“You can see your sister now,” the receptionist says.

I startle. “*Merci*.” I stand hastily and grab my bag. “Good luck,” I tell Josh, but then I’m flustered all over again. Just because it’s him. I scramble down the hall before he can reply. The nurse’s door is open, and Hattie watches me enter from a paper-sheet-covered cot. She tucks her bobbed, choppy hair behind her ears as if preparing for battle.

I tuck my long, wavy hair behind mine. “How do you feel?”

“What are you doing here?” Her question is accusatory.

“I wanted to make sure you’re okay. Are you breathing all right?”

“No, I’m dying, and I only have fifteen minutes to live. I want a pony.”

The nurse enters from an adjacent room. She’s tiny like me but stronger and rounder. “Isla! It’s nice to see you, dearie. Your sister gave us quite the scare. But we shot her with epinephrine, and she’s been resting all day. The swelling in her throat is gone, and her breathing is back to normal.”

“I told you I was fine,” Hattie says.

I want to scream. I ask calmly, “Do Maman and Dad know?”

“They’re on an airplane back to New York, duh.”

My jaw tightens. “Are you going to call them later?”

“Why would I do that when I know you will?”

The nurse steps in. “The school will call your parents tonight.” She glances uneasily between us, no doubt wondering how three sisters who look so alike can be so different. We have the same pale white skin and bright red hair, but Gen is ambitious, Hattie is contrary, and I’m...the quiet one. Who never causes trouble.

“Is she allowed to go back to her room?” I ask.

Hattie fumes. “God, Isla.”

“What?”

“Stop being such a freaking *mom!*”

Her favourite accusation strikes with unexpected force. The shout reverberates around the room. I’m blinking back tears as I turn to the nurse. “I— I’m sorry.”

“It’s all right.” But her eyes remain wary. “Hattie, I’m almost done with your paperwork. You’ll be able to leave in just a minute.”

It’s a dismissal for me, too. I rush towards the exit, head ducked, straight past

Josh in the waiting room. There's no doubt that he overheard everything. I'm barreling through the door when he says in a loud and clear voice, "Your sister's kind of a bitch, huh?"

I stop.

My love for him quadruples.

When I turn around, he grimaces. "I shouldn't have said that."

"No!" I say it too quickly. "I mean, she is. Thank you," I add for good measure.

Josh grins. It's wide and relieved and reveals a rarely seen pair of dimples. I could live inside those dimples for the rest of my life. "Do you, uh..." he says. But I don't think he had a question to begin with.

I tilt my head.

The head of school's door opens, and we both jump. She leans out. "Monsieur Wasserstein. Has it already been three months? It's as if you never left." But her voice is droll, almost amused. "Come in."

Josh's expression falls back into that familiar blankness. He stands slowly and hefts his bag over his shoulder. As he disappears into her office, he gives me one last glance. His face is unreadable. The head of school follows his gaze and discovers me by the exit.

"Isla." She's surprised. "Is your sister feeling any better?"

I nod.

"Good. Good," she says again.

She's delaying, searching my face for something, but I don't know what. I hope Josh will be okay. I glance at her office door. When I look back, she's frowning as if she's just found trouble.



Chapter five

The next few days are unsettling.

Josh is *aware* of me.

Whenever he enters a room, an unmistakable mass of chaotic energy enters with him. It rattles the air between us. It buzzes and hums. And every time we surrender – every time our eyes meet in a flash of nerve – a shock wave jolts throughout my entire system. I feel frayed. Excited. Unravelled.

And then...I'll lose the transmission. His signal will go cold.

I don't understand what's happening.

In calculus and physics, we're separated by alphabetical order. In English, we're stuck where we sat on the first day, on opposite sides of that circle. But our government teacher waited until today, Thursday, to pass out his seating chart. Josh arrived late, saw it being handed around, and sat down beside me. Just like that.

He still hasn't said a word.

Professeur Hansen paces the front of the classroom, lecturing with wild gestures about the US Declaration of Independence and the French *Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen*. Josh and I are in the back. He opens his bag, and I catch a glimpse of his sketchbook. He removes a cheap spiral notebook instead. In the past, I've watched him create elaborate illustrations related to our lesson plans, but today his work is abstract. Dense patterns and clusters and whorls and—

I let out a quiet – and involuntary – gasp of recognition.

His head jerks up.

My instinct is to pretend that something else caused the exclamation. I fight it. “Kind of conceited, don't you think?” I whisper, and I'm delirious that a good line escapes me.

His eyes widen. But he smiles as he neatly prints the word *CAUGHT!* underneath his sketch of a gnarled, spiny Joshua tree. I let out a snort of laughter that I turn into a cough. Professeur Hansen glances at me, but he doesn't give it

another thought. Phew.

Josh turns the page and draws our teacher, a teeny version with flyaway hair and the jaunty gleam of madness. Our classmates' heads begin to fill the space around him. Mike and his bonehead friend, Dave; my snobby lab partner, Emily; and...Sanjita Devi. Who was once *my* friend. Who is now Emily's friend.

Josh gives Sanjita her own page. He dresses her in a suit of armour without gloves. The suit is as polished as her exposed fingernails, but she's looking down and away, as if she's afraid that we can see through the steel to what's really underneath.

It gives me the chills. He tilts it in my direction for approval.

"Wow," I whisper. "Yes."

Professeur Hansen doesn't hear it, but Sanjita turns around in her seat to glare at me. Her mouth forms a perfect circle of surprise. Few people know about my crush, but she's one of them. In the corner of my eye, Josh discreetly turns the page. I hold Sanjita's gaze. She recedes, battle lost. I clutch my necklace for comfort.

A moment later, Josh extends a slender arm across the aisle. He crooks a finger. I hold out the compass on its long, antique chain, and as he leans forward to take it, his hand carelessly brushes against mine. Or...not carelessly? He cradles the compass in his palm, studying it, head mere inches from my own and...*citrus*. His shampoo. Oranges, maybe tangerines.

"Ahem."

We startle, and Josh drops the necklace. It swings back against my chest and lands with an audible *thump*. Professeur Hansen has surprised us from behind. The other students laugh, having seen the set-up. It's always amusing when he catches someone not paying attention. Except when that someone is you. He comically raps the back of Josh's chair. "As fascinating as Mademoiselle Martin's *necklace* is, I assure you that the philosophies of Rousseau are far more likely to appear on next week's test."

"Yes, sir." Josh looks apologetic. But not fazed.

"You there." Professeur Hansen smacks my desktop with his fist, eliciting more laughter. "You can do better than this riff-raff." He gestures towards Josh.

I've sunk into the deepest depths of my seat. They're waiting for me to reply. The whole class is waiting.

"I know I can." Josh's expression is deadpan. "She's a terrible influence."

Even the *professeur* laughs at that. Satisfied, he pushes up his glasses on his nose and launches back into the lesson. My eyes stay glued to him for the rest of the period. When the bell rings, Josh hands me a sheet of spiral-notebook paper. He's drawn my compass perfectly, down to the filigree on the needle.

Underneath it, he's written: *WHY DOES SHE WEAR IT EVERY DAY?*

It shakes me to the core.

I place it beneath the cover of my textbook and try to play it cool, try to swallow the thrill of possessing something that he made. And the absolute wonder that he noticed. I move towards the exit, glancing over my shoulder with a smile. I hope it looks flirtatious. "I wear it so that I won't get lost, of course."

"Is that something that happens often?" he asks.

There's a traffic jam at the door. Josh is directly behind me, and when I turn my head to reply, his own smile is lopsided – *unquestionably* flirtatious – and I can no longer remember my name or my country or even my place in the universe.

"I'm over here," Kurt says.

Not only am I still staring at Josh, but I've also turned the wrong way down the hall. The stupidity blush is immediate. I lower my head and double back.

Amazingly, Josh follows.

"We're going to the cafeteria," Kurt tells him. "You're never there. Where do you eat?" It sounds like an interrogation.

Josh's smile wavers. "Uh, my room. Usually. Not always."

"You'll get detention. We aren't allowed to leave campus while school is in session."

Josh's smile disappears altogether.

"You should join us sometime." I say it quickly, because I'm embarrassed about Kurt. He's so rigid. And awkward. But the shame that follows these traitorous thoughts is instantaneous. "Or now. Or, you know, whenever."

As if I'm any *less* awkward.

My best friend frowns. It's not that he doesn't like Josh. But this invitation would mean a change in our routine, and Kurt is a creature of habit.

Unfortunately, Josh catches the expression. He crosses his arms – uneasiness in every line of his body – and turns back to me. "Yeah, maybe. Sometime."

My blood ices.

Sébastien.

He was my first, last, and only boyfriend. He attends another school nearby. We dated last winter, and I thought he was a decent guy until I introduced him to Kurt. Sébastien was uncomfortable around Kurt. This made Sébastien aggressive, which intensified Kurt's nervous habits, which turned Sébastien cruel. Which made me dump Sébastien.

Josh knows that Kurt has high-functioning autism. Everyone here knows. When a stranger misinterprets Kurt's behaviour as rudeness and reacts poorly, I can usually forgive them. But when someone who knows him doesn't even want

to *try* to understand him?

No. I can't forgive that.

My heart plummets with dead weight. "Well. Thanks for the drawing."

Kurt pulls down his hoodie – laundered the evening of the soup incident, no longer stained – and his sandy hair sticks out in a hundred directions. "You finally saw your portrait? The one from summer?"

I glance at Josh, and he takes a step backwards. "No," I tell Kurt. "It was a drawing he made in class. Just now."

Josh rubs the side of his neck. "I should get going."

"But I wanna see the drawing of you." Kurt turns towards Josh. They're both tall, about the same height, but Kurt is broader, and his stare is forceful. "Do you have it?"

"N–no," Josh says. "No, I'm sorry. I don't."

"It's okay. Maybe some other time." I press my lips together.

Josh crosses his arms again, and his muscles tighten. "It's just that I don't have that sketchbook here. In France. That's all. Otherwise I'd show you." And then he rushes away. We watch him until he disappears from view.

"Was that weird?" Kurt asks. "I think that turned weird."

"Yeah. It was weird."

But it wasn't. It was a moment of truth buried inside a lie. I saw Josh's sketchbook less than an hour ago. He wanted to get away from us. Or, more likely, he wanted to get away from Kurt. My chest constricts. It's sudden and painful, but I hold back my tears. I don't want to have to explain them.

After lunch, I resume the habit of not looking at Josh. It's easier now.

It's also not easier.

I think he likes me. I don't even know how that's possible, but I do know that it doesn't matter any more. It *can't* matter. In physics, I feel his stare – a string as delicate and gossamer as a spider's web, gently tugging at the back of my skull. I imagine snipping it loose with a pair of sharp scissors. I don't know if he'll try to talk to me after class, and I don't know what I should say if he does. When the bell rings, I bolt.

He's not at school the next day. I don't know why.

I don't see Josh over the weekend. I remove his drawing from my government textbook and carefully place it inside the top drawer of my desk. I open the drawer. Shut it. Open it. Shut it. Open it, and touch it, and worship it.

Slam it shut and feel so disloyal to Kurt.

Open it again.

Josh is back on Monday. In English, I feel him glancing at me repeatedly. When I finally lift my eyes and look across the circle, he gives me the softest smile.

Oh, it melts me.

The rest of the day is filled with these tiny moments. Another warm smile here, a friendly wave there. Something has changed...but what? On Tuesday, he asks me if I've read the new Joann Sfar. I haven't, but I'm stunned that he remembers our freshman-year, one-sided conversation. And then he's gone again.

Wednesday.

Thursday.

Friday.

Where is he?



Chapter six

An old man with a busted piano is playing “*La Vie en rose*” on the street outside my window. He hauls it around this part of the city, from one corner to another, but I’ve never seen how he moves it. It’s early evening on Friday, and the tinkly, fractured music is a bizarre contrast to the rough, powerful memoir I’m reading about being lost at sea.

There are two knocks against my door.

“Just kick it,” I shout from bed. “I haven’t gotten it fixed yet.”

I turn the page of my book, and the door gently swings open, sans kick. I glance up. A double take, and I’m scrambling to my feet. “I’m sorry, I thought you were—”

“Kurt,” Josh says.

“Yeah.”

We stare at each other.

Ohdeargod, he’s attractive. He looks recently showered, and his clothes seem even more carefully put together than usual. Behind his casual American attire, I can always still spot his artist’s eye. His T-shirts and jeans fit, he wears the right colours, the right shoes, the right belt. It’s subtle. But he never just throws something on.

“How did you know this was my room?” I finally ask.

“I saw you come in here the other day while I was waiting for the elevator. It caught my attention, because...this used to be mine.” Josh glances around, taking everything in. This must be strange for him.

It’s strange for *me*.

Along with the quilt of Manhattan, my bed is mounded with soft pillows and cosy blankets. I’ve squeezed in a skinny, antique bookcase that overflows with adventure books of all kinds – novels, non-fiction, comics. I have a curvy glass lamp and sheer lace curtains and, instead of posters on my walls, I’ve hung scarves and jewellery. My closet is jam-packed with clothing, and I have an additional chest of drawers wedged beneath the school’s chest of drawers.

Indulgent bath products line the corners of my tiny sink and equally tiny shower. My desk is organized with special nooks for homework, and my pens, pencils and highlighters are arranged like bouquets in matching vases.

“I knew that,” I admit. “That this was yours.”

Josh raises his dark eyebrows. “Why didn’t you say something?”

I can only shrug, but he nods as if he understands. And I think he does. He places his hands in his pockets, nervous and unsure.

“You’re still in the hallway.” I shake my head. “Come in.”

He does, and the door swings shut behind him.

“Careful!” I grab a textbook and shove it underneath to prop it back open. “Nate’s enforcing the new rules, you know.”

Immediately, I feel like a dork.

But Josh looks confused, and I realize he doesn’t understand because he missed Nate’s speech. I fill him in. “And I don’t want to get in trouble,” I add. “Because then he might not allow Kurt in here any more, and we’ve already been caught once.” It happened during a room check on the second day. We got off with a warning, but we’ve spent most of our afternoons since at the Treehouse, our secret refuge across the river.

Josh rubs the back of his neck. “Yeah. Of course.”

He wants to leave.

I flush with panic. I don’t know why he’s here, but I do know that my heart will break if he goes. I gesture towards the desk chair. He takes it. I can barely contain my exhale of relief. I sit across from him on the edge of the bed. I smooth my wrinkled skirt. I stare at my coral-painted toenails.

“It’s prettier in your hands,” he says at last. “The room. Mine always gets messy.”

I tuck a loose strand of hair behind my ear, and then I look down and let it fall forward again. “Thanks.” I force my eyes to meet his. *Hazel*. My stomach twists. “My mother is a window dresser. She always tells me that small spaces can still be beautiful.”

“Hard to get smaller than these rooms.”

“You know those crazy holiday department-store displays that people actually wait in line to see? She does them for Bergdorf Goodman.”

“Those are a big deal.” He leans forward, impressed. “Your mom is French, right?”

My heart skips as it does every time he remembers something about me. “Yeah. She started working here, moved there for a better internship, met my dad, and...stayed.”

Josh smiles. “I like that.”

“How did your parents meet?”

“Law school. Yale. Boring story.”

“I’m sure it’s not boring to them.”

He laughs, but my own smile fades. “Where have you been this week?” I ask. “Were you sick?”

“No. I’m fine.” But he sits back again, and his expression becomes impenetrable. “It’s Sukkoth.”

Sue-coat. “Sorry?”

“The Jewish holiday?”

The humiliation blush is instant. Ohmygod.

“I’m off from school until next Thursday,” he continues.

I search for something intelligent to say, something I’ve picked up from living in New York, but my mind is blank. *Sukkoth*. That’s not a holiday people take off, is it? It can’t be. As my brow furrows, Josh’s eyes brighten. They look... almost hopeful. He shakes his head as if I’d asked the question aloud. “Nope. Most American Jews don’t take it off. And even then, it’s only the first two days.”

“But you’re taking an entire week?”

“I also took off last Friday, even though Yom Kippur didn’t start until sundown. Same thing, the day before Sukkoth.”

“But...*why*?”

He leans forward. “Because you’re the first person to question it.”

I’m not sure whether I’m more stunned by his deception or by being singled out. I laugh, but even to my ears, it sounds apprehensive. “Exactly how many holidays are you planning to take off?”

Josh grins. “All of them.”

“And you think you’ll get away with it?”

“I did last year. As the only student here of the Hebrew persuasion, the faculty feels *uncomfortable* questioning my religious observance.”

I laugh, but this time it’s for real. “You’re going to hell.”

“Then it’s a good thing I don’t believe in hell.”

“Right. That whole Jewish thing.”

“More like that whole atheist thing.” Josh sees my surprise and adds a verbal asterisk. “Don’t tell the press. My father can’t afford to lose the Jewish vote.” But he rolls his eyes as he says it.

“Your dad doesn’t practise, either?”

“No, he does. My parents both do, in that whole go-to-temple-twice-a-year way. But politics and media, can’t be too careful.” His tone suggests that he’s quoting something they’ve told him at least a thousand times.

I pause. And then I decide to push the subject one step further. “Your dad is running for re-election this year. That must be weird.”

“Not really. In our house, there’s always something that needs campaigning. It’s just a pain in the ass, that’s all.”

I expected this reaction. I’ve always assumed that the dark shadow he carries – the one that defies the rules and manipulates the system, the one that’s inked into the very skin of his arm – has something to do with his parents. But I know better than to keep questioning him. Kurt has given me both practice and patience when it comes to getting someone to open up. Because of this, I’m also skilled at subject changes.

“You know,” I tease, “you still haven’t told me why you’re here. You were... passing by? Wanted to brag about getting a week off from school?”

“Oh. Uh, right.” Josh sort of laughs and glances out my window. “I was just wondering if you wanted to go out.”

Holy.

Shit.

“I’m on my way to Album,” he continues, referring to a nearby comics shop. “Since we were talking about that new Sfar earlier, I thought if you weren’t busy, you might want to come along.”

...Oh.

My heart beats like a cracked-out drummer. Josh, don’t *do* that to a lady. I’m still clutching the book about the shipwreck, so I set it down to wipe my sweaty palms. “Sure. I’m meeting Kurt in two hours for dinner, but yeah. Sure.”

At the mention of Kurt, Josh winces slightly. Which makes *me* wince. But then, as if he’d been waiting for the opportunity, he leans over and nabs my book. Reads the back cover. And then holds it up along with a single raised eyebrow.

“I like stories about adventure. Especially if there’s some kind of disaster involved.”

The eyebrow remains arched.

I laugh. “I read the ones with happy endings, too.”

Josh gestures towards my shelves. “You read a lot.”

“Safer than going on a real adventure.”

Now he’s the one who laughs. “Maybe.”

Leave it to me to admit cowardice to the object of my long-time infatuation. I jump to my feet in embarrassment. “Speaking of adventure.”

Josh watches me remove a pair of platform sandals from underneath my bed. I turn my head to smile at him and catch his eyes dart from my cleavage to the ceiling. He closes them as if cursing himself. My pulse quickens, but I feign

ignorance. I slide into my shoes. “Ready?”

He nods without meeting my gaze. I grab my bag, and we head for the door. He pulls out the textbook, pushes it across my floor, and shuts the door behind us.

It pops open.

He slams it again.

It pops open.

I yank it closed while tugging the handle down just so. We watch it. It stays.

“Sorry. My door sucks.”

“Um, actually.” Josh’s hands are in his pockets again. His shoulders are practically up to his ears as we head towards the exit. “I should be the one apologizing. It’s my fault that your door sucks.”

“It is?” I’m not sure why, but this delights me. “What’d you do?”

He glances at me. “I might have kicked it.”

“On purpose?”

“Yeah.”

“Were you angry?”

“No.” His face scrunches up. “It was a stupid reason.”

“Oh, come on. You can’t hold out on me now.”

Josh groans with good nature. “Fine. I kicked the lock last winter to break it so that my ex-girlfriend – girlfriend at the time – could come and go as she pleased. And before you ask, yes, I did try to get a duplicate key made first.”

I can’t help but laugh. “That’s...kind of ingenious. Kurt and I just trade ours around. Sometimes I forget to get mine back, and I get locked out of my own room. Well. I *used* to. Oddly enough, it hasn’t happened this year.”

He snorts as he holds open the main door for me.

“Using your hands this time,” I say. “A novel approach.”

As if on cue, he flinches and looks at his right hand. But it’s a moment of genuine pain. My smile disappears. “Are you okay?”

“It’s nothing.” But my expression must be so *bullshit* that he laughs. “Really, I’m fine. I’ve been drawing more than usual—”

“Because of the holidays?”

“Exactly.” He grins. “It’s just a little tendinitis.”

“*Tendinitis*? Don’t you have to be old to get that?”

Josh glances over his shoulder. “Can you keep a secret?” He lowers his voice. “You have to promise not to tell anyone, okay?”

“Okay...”

“I’m eighty-seven years old. I have terrible hands but *amazing* skin.”

I burst into laughter. “Scientists should study you.”

“Why do you think I’m in France? Because it’s the home of the world’s best dermatological universities, that’s why.”

His straight face only makes me laugh harder. He glances at me, pleased, and then smiles to himself. We cross the narrow street. Somehow, our strides are in sync despite our difference in height. His entire body is lean and lovely. I want to lace his long, gorgeous fingers through mine. I want to bury my nose against his long, gorgeous neck.

Josh is overly focused on the cobblestones.

Something is happening between us. Is it friendship? It doesn’t *feel* like friendship, but it’s possible that I’m projecting my own desires. And I’m ashamed for even thinking about him like this after what happened last week. Because I’m not thinking. I’m hoping. People aren’t supposed to be able to change, but...I’ve never bought that. Maybe Josh could learn to like Kurt. Maybe I misinterpreted his actions. There could have been any number of reasons for him to want to escape from Kurt so quickly. Maybe.

“So tell me what you’re working on,” I say.

“Oh, man.” Josh rubs his neck. This seems to be his most frequently used gesture of unease. “It’s always sort of embarrassing to tell someone new.”

“What is it? I promise I won’t laugh.”

“You say that now.” He grimaces and keeps his eyes on the jumble of bicycles and scooters parked alongside the road. “I’m making a graphic novel about my life here at school. A graphic memoir, I guess. There’s not a phrase for it that makes it sound any less egotistical. Unfortunately.”

So it’s true. “How big is it?”

“Um, about three hundred pages. So far.”

My jaw actually drops.

“I *really* like myself.”

“You don’t have to turn it into a joke.” I shake my head. “That’s incredible. I’ve never done anything like it, that’s for sure.”

“Well, I’m not done yet. One more year of school.”

The colossal white dome of the Panthéon appears before us, illuminated like a beacon. We live on the Left Bank in the bottom of the Latin Quarter, along the edge of a residential neighbourhood. It’s peaceful but – because there are several other schools nearby – it’s not very quiet during the day. But it *is* magnificent at dusk. Sometimes I forget how lucky I am to live here.

“Have you always been this passionate about drawing? I mean, a lot of kids are, but then we’re sort of taught to stop.” I look up at him. “You never stopped, did you?”

“Never.” Josh finally meets my eyes, but his expression has turned

mischievous. He points at my necklace. “Tell me the real story.”

I stop walking. “Try flipping it over this time.”

“Oh?”

I smile and hold it out on its chain. He takes the compass, angles it into the light, and reads the engraving on the back – first silently and then aloud. His voice is deep, clear but quiet. “Isla. May you always find the Right Way. Love, Kurt.”

“It’s the only sentimental gift he’s ever given me. I suspect his mom helped, but it doesn’t matter. He has this thing about maps and directions and finding the best route. But I like that the words have more than one meaning.”

Josh places it back into my hands. “It’s beautiful.”

He turns contemplative as we trek up the rue Saint-Jacques. Perhaps he is reconsidering Kurt. There has to be a way to approach the subject. I’ll *find* a way. A siren wails past with its French *ooo-WEE ooo-WEE*, but it only heightens the return of our silence. I’m relieved when we emerge into a bustling district of retail.

Album is a chain, but this particular location is split into two stores that sit across a busy intersection from each other. One sells American superhero-type imports and figurines. The other sells Franco-Belgian books called *les BD*, *les bandes dessinées*. French comics tend to have a better presentation than their American counterparts. They’re hardcover, taller, glossier. They have a wider range of stories and, because of it, they’re also more widely read. Comic shops are everywhere here, and it’s not uncommon to find businessmen and -women browsing their aisles in expensive haute couture.

Without having to discuss it, Josh and I enter the location with *les BD*. We’re greeted by the heavenly perfume of freshly printed text, and a youngish man with a trim beard gives us an amiable *salut* from behind the counter. I nod a greeting in return.

“Isla.”

It startles me to hear Josh speak my name. I turn around, and he holds up a book from the edge of the first display table. It’s the new Sfar, of course. I take it, and it opens with the delicious crack of a hard spine being tested for the first time. I’m thrilled to discover that it’s one of his *fantastique* titles – the pages are filled with woods and monsters and swords and royalty and love. Adventure.

“Yeah?” Josh asks.

I beam. “Yeah.”

He looks happy, and then sad, and then he turns so that I can’t see his face. It worries me. I want to know what’s wrong, but his body language tells me not to ask. But then he turns back around – as if he’d made up his mind about a

conversation that I didn't even know we were having – and blurts, “Does your boyfriend like comics?”

For a moment, I think he's joking.

The word was a *joke*. But his expression is serious, and it looks like he expects a serious reply, and I am very, very thrown.

I swallow. “Excuse me?”

“Sorry.” He frowns at the table of new releases. “I don't know why that sounded so harsh.”

My heart hammers against my chest, but I speak the words slowly. “Kurt. Isn't. My boyfriend.”

Josh freezes. Several seconds pass. His eyes are fixed on a Tintin reissue. “He's not?”

“No.” I pause. “*No*.”

“But...you're always together. You're so close.”

“We *are* close. Best friends close. Practically brother and sister close. Not – *not* – boyfriend and girlfriend close.”

“But...the necklace. You share keys...”

“Because we're *friends*. Who *hang out*.”

His ears have turned a deep crimson. “So...you've never gone out with him?”

“No! I've known him since we were in diapers.” My mind is reeling. “I can't believe you thought we were dating. For how long?”

“I— I guess this whole time.”

A new and terrible panic stirs within me. “This whole time as in this year or this whole time as in since Kurt was a freshman?”

Josh seems to have a lump in his throat. “Since he was a freshman?”

“Does *everyone* think we're a couple?” Our classmates joke about it, but I never thought that they were serious.

“I don't know.” Josh shakes his head vigorously, but he says, “Probably?”

“Ohmygod.” I'm finding it difficult to breathe.

He lets out a strange laugh. It's near hysterical, but it stops as abruptly as it starts. “So *are* you dating anyone? Someone else?”

“No. No one since last year.”

“Cool.” His fingers tap rapidly against the stack of Tintins.

I fight to keep my voice steady. “And you? Are you seeing anyone?”

“Nope. No one since last year.”

I want to weep with joy. He liked me, but he thought he *couldn't* like me. It's difficult to wrap my mind around this idea. I suspected his attraction, but the full truth of the situation is unbelievable. How is it possible that my crush – my three-year-long crush – has a crush on *me*? This doesn't happen in real life.

Josh is equally thrown. He's grasping for something to say when his eyes catch on the Sfar. "There's more downstairs, right? Should we go down there?"
"No." I hug the book with both arms. "This is exactly what I wanted."



Chapter seven

I'm still clutching the book – now through a blue Album bag – as we wander towards the Seine. We have another hour before I'm supposed to meet Kurt for sushi in the Marais. Night time has officially arrived, and the streets are abuzz. I feel as if I'm floating. Glancing, smiling, blushing. Both of us. My voice has abandoned me. Josh's left hand grasps his right elbow, an anchor to keep him in one place.

How does one proceed in a situation like this? If only the discovery of mutual admiration could lead promptly into making out. If only I could say, "Listen. I like you, and you like me, so let's go find a secluded park and touch each other."

We steer around a group of tourists pawing through bins of miniature Notre-Dames. Josh swallows. "Just so we're clear," he says, "I wasn't, like, trying to steal you away from Kurt when I asked if you wanted to go to the store with me. I was trying to, you know...be your friend. I don't want you to think I'm a creep."

I smile up at him. "I don't think you're a creep."

But Josh looks at an ornate iron balcony, a carved stone archway, an enormous poster for the Winter Olympics in Chambéry. Anything but me. "It's just that last weekend I realized that even if you were, um, taken, I still wanted to hang out with you."

He wanted me as *more* than a friend first. My chest tightens happily. "Last weekend?"

"Yom Kippur?" Josh glances at me to see if I'm following his train of thought. I'm not, and I'm grateful when he launches into it without me having to ask. He seems relieved for the new topic. "Okay, so the period of time between Rosh Hashanah – which was the day before we came back to school—"

"That's the Jewish New Year?"

He nods. "Yeah. So the period between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur is for reflection. You're supposed to think about mistakes, ask forgiveness, make resolutions. That sort of thing. And then Yom Kippur is, essentially, the

deadline.”

We split apart to pass a gentleman walking a basset hound, and when we reunite, the distance between us halves. “So. Wait. You contemplated your life and...resolved to become my friend? Even though you’re no longer a practising Jew?”

Josh gives me a wicked smile. “Is that a requirement for your friendship?”

I give him a look.

He laughs, but he follows it with a wistful shrug. “I don’t know. There’s something...poetic about this time of year. And it’s not like I’ve figured out everything spiritually or whatever, but I do think it’s still okay to make resolutions. On my own terms.”

“Sure it’s okay. My family is Catholic, both sides, but they never go to Mass. I don’t even know if my parents believe in God. But we still put up a Christmas tree, and it still gives us a sense of peace. Traditions can be nice.”

“Do you believe in God?” he asks.

For some reason, his directness doesn’t surprise me. The real Notre-Dame is ahead of us, gigantic and humbling, and its reflection shimmers in the dark river below. I stare at it for a while before answering. “I don’t know what I believe. I guess that makes me a Christmas Tree Agnostic.”

He smiles. “I like it.”

“And you’re a Yom Kippur Atheist.”

“I am.”

I’ve never had a conversation like this before, where something so sensitive was discussed with such ease. We cross a bridge towards the cathedral. It’s on the Île de la Cité, the larger of the two islands that comprise the centre of Paris.

“I have a question,” Josh says. “But I’m not sure how to ask it.”

I wish that I could give him a playful nudge. “I’m sure you’ll do fine.”

There’s an excruciating pause as he searches for the right phrasing. “Kurt has...autism?”

Internally, I cringe. But I spare him as he spared my own ignorance. “Yeah. What the DSM *used* to call Asperger’s, and what they now call high-functioning autism. It’s the same thing. But it’s not a problem, it’s not like it’s something that needs to be cured. His brain works a little differently from ours. That’s all.”

Josh gestures towards a bench in the cathedral’s small park, and I reply by moving towards it. We sit down about two feet apart.

“So how *does* his brain work?”

“Well.” I take a deep breath. “He’s super-rational and literal. So sarcasm, metaphor? Not his strengths.”

Josh nods. “What else?”

“It’s difficult for him to read faces. He’s worked on it a lot, so he’s way better than he used to be. But he still has to remember to make eye contact and smile. I mean, obviously he smiles, but he only does it when he means it. Unlike the rest of us.” I’m rambling, because I’m struck *again* by the fact that I’m sitting on a bench – a bench not even on school property – beside Joshua Wasserstein.

“So he’s honest.”

“Even when you don’t want him to be.” I laugh, but it immediately turns into worry. I don’t want Josh to get the wrong idea. “He doesn’t *mean* to be rude, though. Whenever he finds out that he’s accidentally hurt someone’s feelings, he’s devastated.”

“It’s kind of French, you know? Not the hurting-people’s-feelings thing. Only smiling when it’s sincere. Americans will smile at anyone, for any reason.”

“You don’t.” The words leave my mouth before I can stop them.

Josh is taken aback. It takes him a moment to gather his thoughts. “Yeah, I’ve been told that I have a hard time...concealing my displeasure.”

“I know.” I hesitate. “I like that about you.”

His eyebrows shoot up. “You do?”

I stare at the bench’s wooden slats. Somehow, the two feet between our bodies has halved into one. “It means that when you do smile? I know it’s not false. You’re not just smiling to make me” – I shake my head, and my hair bounces – “*whomever*, feel better. If they’re saying stupid things. And can’t seem to stop talking.”

His mouth spreads into a slow smile.

“Yeah.” I laugh. “Like that.”

“What else?”

I tilt my head. “What else what?”

“What else do I need to know about Kurt?”

His phrasing implies that we’ll be spending more time together. The happy tightness returns to my chest. “Not much else to know. It’s not like he’s a card-counting savant or a mathematical genius or anything. I mean, don’t get me wrong. He’s brilliant. But those stereotypes are the worst. Though he *does* love routine.”

Josh smiles again. “Let me guess. Sushi?”

“Same day, same time, same restaurant.” Kurt and I meet after his weekly therapy session, but Josh doesn’t need to know that.

“Same entrée?”

“Shrimp nigiri and miso soup. But I get the special, whatever it is. I ask the server to surprise me.”

The bells of Notre-Dame peel out from the towers. We startle, covering our

ears and laughing. The bells are loud – a cacophony of chimes crashing over one another. From this close, it’s hard to even make out a pattern. They ring and ring and ring, and we’re helpless, completely bowled over with laughter, until they cease their clattering.

The distance between us has disappeared.

His jeans rub softly against my bare legs. I’m too aware of my movements, too aware of my nerves, too aware of everything. All five senses are overloading. I jerk my head towards the cathedral. “That was my cue.”

“Mind if I walk with you?” Josh’s question sounds anxious, like he’s trying to catch his breath. “I need to pick up a brush. At Graphigro.” It’s an art supply store a few blocks away from the restaurant. I don’t know whether he really does need a new brush or whether this is an excuse to spend a few more minutes with me. But I’ll take it either way.

This entire evening has been surreal. We cross another bridge, the Pont d’Arcole, onto the Right Bank. The scent of metal and urine wafts up from the Seine, but even this barely registers. We’re in a two-person bubble. The noises that I should be hearing – cars speeding, pedestrians rushing, construction clattering – are muffled. Instead, I hear my heart thumping against my ribcage. Josh’s steady footsteps against the pavement. The occasional swish of his pant legs catching against each other.

Ask me out. I chant it like a mantra. *Ask me out, ask me out, ask me out.*

“What are you doing this weekend?” It ruptures from my mouth, far less casual than I’d hoped. “I mean, you don’t have detention, do you?”

Aaaaaand way to make it worse.

But Josh glances at me with a smile. “The head called me into her office, because she wanted to make sure that we ‘get off to the right start’ this year. But she didn’t give me detention. Not yet.”

I have no idea how I’m supposed to respond.

“Actually,” he says, “I’m going to Munich.”

I freeze, mid-step. It’s against school rules to leave the city without permission, never mind the entire *country*. Someone bumps into me from behind. I stumble forward, and Josh reaches out to grab me, but I’ve already steadied myself. His hand hesitates in the space between us. And then it returns to his pocket.

I kind of wish that I’d fallen.

“So, um. Munich. This weekend?”

Josh is studying me, making sure that I’m really okay. “Yeah. Oktoberfest.”

I frown. “Even though it’s still September?”

“Ah, but most of the festival happens this month. Misleading, I know.” He

grins, and there's an enticing flash of dimples. My insides go wobbly. "But I want to visit as many countries as possible before graduation. And I've never been to Germany."

"And you're travelling alone?" I'm impressed. Maybe even awed.

"Yep. My train leaves in the morning."

Kurt appears on the opposite side of the street. He's checking his phone, no doubt preparing to text because I'm a full minute late. I shout his name. He pulls down his hoodie and brushes the hair from his eyes, thrown to discover me with Josh.

I shuffle my feet against the kerb. "Well. This is my stop."

Josh kicks the kerb once, too. "Maybe sometime I can join you guys for dinner?"

Ohmygod. "I am *such* an assweed."

He bursts into laughter.

"Sorry. I'm so sorry! Would you like to have dinner with us?"

He's still laughing. "I was only teasing."

"Please." I clasp a hand around my compass. "Eat with us."

"It's okay. I really do need to pick up a brush before tomorrow. Besides" – he glances at Kurt – "I wouldn't want to impose."

"You wouldn't be imposing."

But Josh is already walking backwards down the side street. He's still facing me. "See you in a few days," he shouts. "Enjoy your raw fish."

"Enjoy your schnitzel!"

I laugh at the unexpected perverseness of our final exchange as Kurt pops up over my shoulder. His brow wrinkles. "Why was he here? How did *that* happen?"

Josh turns around. I admire the back side of his physique as the street lamps illuminate him, one after another. His figure grows smaller. He reaches a curve in the road and looks over his shoulder. One hand raises in a wave. I mirror the gesture, and he vanishes.

"I don't know." I'm mystified. "I was alone in my room. And then he was there."

It's Sunday – just before midnight – and I'm curled in bed with Joann Sfar, when there are two knocks against my door. The sound is so soft that I'm not sure I actually heard it. My mind races to Josh, but I push it away as improbable. Kurt? No, he'd text. Maybe it was next door. Or maybe it was a practical joke; it wouldn't be the first.

I wait for a voice.

Nothing.

I settle back into my book, warily, when I hear it again. *Knock-knock*. Low to the ground. I'm still gripping the hard cover, which might make a serviceable weapon, as I climb out of bed and tiptoe forward. "Hello?" I whisper.

"It's me," the other side says. "Josh."

He adds his name, because he does not yet realize that I'd recognize his voice anywhere, under any circumstance. I've had this fantasy before: Midnight. Him. Here. My heartbeat accelerates. I shake out my pillow-limp hair and take a steadying breath. It doesn't work. I turn the handle silently, but my hand trembles.

"Hi," he says. His face is close to mine, as if his cheek, or maybe his ear, had been pressed against the wood.

"Hi," I reply.

Josh leans against the doorframe. His body is several inches lower to the ground, which makes our eyes nearly level. We study each other in silence. He looks different this close. He looks real. Complete, somehow. I glance down the hallway. It's dark and empty. This fantasy is *definitely* familiar...until he holds up a beer stein.

I frown, but it clicks only a second later. "You went! You really did go."

Josh lifts the stein in a mock cheers. "I did."

I smile. "How was it?"

"Crowded. Loud." He sounds depleted. "A fairground with wall-to-wall frat boys and drunken parents trying to escape from their own bratty children. Mike and Dave would've fit right in."

"Yikes. That bad, huh?"

"It's safe to say that I'll be selecting a new destination next weekend."

"Germany's loss."

The corner of his mouth lifts into a smile. He holds out the stein, and I tuck my book underneath my arm to accept it. The stein is made out of traditional earthenware, heavy and gaudy and carved, with a pointed tin lid.

I laugh. "This is really, really hideous."

"They all were. And the ones in the beer tents were even worse, plain glass with this badly designed Oktoberfest logo. At least this one has a sword fight. See the tiny knights in front of the Bavarian castle? It was the most *adventurous* one I could find."

And that's when I realize...this is a gift. Josh picked this out for *me*. Suddenly, the stein is beautiful. I clutch it against my chest. "Thank you."

He nods at my book. "How is it?"

"Good. You can borrow it. If you want."

Josh looks down at his sneakers, and then back up, and then back down. “You know that I like you. Right?”

My heart pounds so hard that he can probably feel the reverberations. But – for once – the words fall easily from my lips. “So stay here next weekend. Go out with me.”



Chapter eight

Josh isn't in school the next day. He has three more days off for a holiday that he doesn't celebrate. I wish I could get away with it, but the idea of potentially missing an important class or being late on an assignment makes me break out in hives. But I understand that his priorities are elsewhere – his art. So I'm shocked when I enter first period on Tuesday, and he's slouched at his desk...a full five minutes before the bell rings.

A rush of adrenalin removes any last trace of morning sleepiness. "What are you doing here?" I hug a notebook to my chest, glowing with happiness.

"H-hey." He sits up straighter. "Yeah. Funny story."

I raise my eyebrows.

"Perhaps the head of school grew suspicious about the length of my absence. Perhaps she called my parents. Perhaps my parents confirmed that we don't celebrate Sukkoth."

My shoulders fall. "Perhaps you have a shit-ton of detention?"

Josh shrugs, but it's a shrug of affirmation.

"That sucks. I'm sorry."

He clasps his hands on top of his desk. "Actually." Josh lowers his voice and leans in. "The situation isn't all bad."

I crinkle my nose. "It's not?"

He stares at me. He stares harder.

"Oh." My gaze drops in a sheepish sort of pleasure. "Um. How much detention did you receive?"

Josh sits back again, resuming his slouch. "Only three weeks, but—"

That snaps my head back up.

"Including Saturdays." Another shrug. "It's not a big deal, I can use the time to work. But I'm also on my final warning. Didn't take long," he adds.

My heart stops – literally stops – for a full beat. "Final warning? As in *expulsion*?"

"Seriously. Not a big deal." But my panic must be showing, because he scoots

forward in his seat. “Let’s just say that for a ‘final’ warning? It’s not my first.”

I wait. I have no idea how he can be so calm about this.

“Last year,” he explains. “In fact, I was on my final warning once in the winter and once in the spring. So, somehow, I got two. This is number three.”

“Well...be careful.” It sounds so lame. “I mean, the leaves haven’t even changed, and you wouldn’t want to miss that. Though they *are* prettier in New York—”

“I’ll be careful.” His voice is deliberate. He smiles.

I fiddle with a curl in my hair.

Two desks away, Emily Middlestone leans over. She’s wearing a pair of designer glasses that I’m sure are fake. “You know, that’d be really stupid if you got kicked out in your last year of school.”

Josh’s expression wipes blank. “Yeah, Emily. That *would* be stupid.”

Professeur Cole bursts into the room and grinds to a halt. “Am I late?” she asks Josh.

He shakes his head once. “Nope.”

“Well. How fortunate that you have finally learned how to tell the time.” But her smile is sly. She marches up to her podium, and I take my seat.

The one directly across from Josh.

We glance at each other with more openness throughout the week, but there’s still a shyness between us, an unwillingness to look or talk for too long. Our relationship has yet to be solidified. Anticipation – of *something* – hovers in the air. At night, it takes me hours to fall asleep. I place the beer stein on top of my mini-fridge, beside my bed, so that I can see it from my pillow. Proof that he’s thinking about me, too.

He doesn’t visit my room. His afternoon detention runs until dinner, and he still isn’t eating in the cafeteria. And then, after dinner, opposite-sex visitation hours are over. He’s cut back on rule breaking, and apparently that’s one he’s not willing to risk any more. So I continue my usual schedule of homework and studying, and I try to bite back the analysing. Kurt has been giving me dirty looks.

On Thursday, before government, Josh removes a pen from between his teeth. “So. Saturday. I’m out of detention at eighteen hours. Anytime you want to meet after that...”

Paris runs on a twenty-four-hour clock. Eighteen hours is six p.m. My stomach butterflies emerge from their chrysalises. “Yeah?”

He points the pen at me. “You know that because you asked me out, you’re the one who has to pick the place, right?”

Throat. Dry.

Dry throat.

All of the dryness in my throat.

Josh places the pen back between his teeth and then immediately takes it out again. “Whatever you suggest.” He grins. “I’ll say yes. You’ll definitely get a yes. If that helps.”

My response is another hot blush.

The rest of my school week is spent in freak-out mode, a situation that leaves me with a new-found respect for guys. Sébastien planned and organized most of our dates. It’s an alarmingly high-pressure job. Kurt reminds me that it’ll be *Nuit Blanche*. White Night. A night that never grows dark. The first Saturday of every October, museums and galleries open their doors for free until dawn. The tradition started in Saint Petersburg, Russia, travelled here, and has continued to spread around the world. But – even speaking as someone used to its decadence – there’s still no greater city than Paris for an all-night festival.

I’m not the only one watching the clock. At precisely *vingt et une heures* – just as the numbers on my phone tick from 20:59 to 21:00 – I hear a sound that’s instantly recognizable: two light knocks, down low. My nerve endings jolt. Yesterday, I told Josh *when* to arrive but not *where* we’re going. Mainly because I hadn’t figured it out yet.

Three years of anxiety flood throughout my body. What if I’m wrong? What if this isn’t what I’ve always wanted?

What if it is?

I open the door.

Josh is knee-bucklingly sexy. It’s the first cool night of autumn, and he’s dressed in a striking wool coat. The collar is turned up in that self-confident yet unkempt way that only artists can pull off. I’ve seen him wear this coat before, this beautiful going-on-a-date coat, but this is the first time that he has worn this coat for *me*.

“Youlookamazing.”

But the words tumble from his lips, not mine.

I’m wearing a swishy dress, and my hair is in neat, pretty waves. My mouth is painted red. Maman once told me to place the boldest colour where I want people to look. I bite my bottom lip. “Thanks. You do, too.”

Josh tucks his hands into his pockets. His shoulders rise nervously.

My breathing is shallow. Like I can’t get enough oxygen. “So I thought we’d go to the Pompidou? They have an exhibition of this weird photographer from Finland. He’s supposed to be totally nuts, and I thought it might be interesting,

but I don't know, maybe that's stupid, we can do something else if you want—"

"No."

Blood rises to my cheeks. "No?"

"I meant we should go. That sounds cool."

"Oh." I swallow the goose egg that's been stuck in my throat. "Okay. Good."

There's a long pause. Josh takes an exaggerated step to the side. "Unfortunately, you *will* have to leave your room."

I laugh, and it sounds like I've been sucking helium. "Right. Been a while since I've been on one of these. A date. I forgot how they worked." I close the door behind me, internally exploding with humiliation. We're only two steps down the hall before my door jack-in-the-boxes back open.

Josh slams it shut with a move that's both calculated and knowing. "Oh, man. It really is too bad that some asshole broke your lock."

Finally, I laugh. Genuine and normal sounding. And then my date says the best thing that he could possibly say: "It's okay. I haven't been on one of these in a while either."

My smile triples in size.

Josh grins. "Just give me your hand."

"W-what?"

"Your hand," he repeats. "Give it to me."

I extend my shaking right hand. And – in a moment that is a hundred dreams come true – Joshua Wasserstein laces his fingers through mine. A staggering shock of energy shoots straight into my veins. Straight into my heart.

"There," he says. "I've been waiting a long time to do that."

Not nearly as long as I've been waiting.



Chapter nine

The Centre Pompidou is the modern-art museum, a huge box of a building that looks as if it's been turned inside out. Its inner structure is exposed and colour-coded: green pipes for plumbing; blue for heating and cooling; yellow for electricity; and red for safety. The bold primary colours clash with the noble grey elegance of the rest of the city. For some reason, that makes me like it even more.

I wouldn't have minded the walk here – my sushi place is right around the corner, not to mention the Treehouse – but Josh took one look at my heels and led me straight to the nearest taxi stand. I *am* wearing my tallest pair. He's still over half a foot taller than I am, but I know I can reach his lips if he tries. I hope he tries.

The museum's lobby is silver metal and blinding neon. As we pass the information desk, Josh takes my hand again. Our palms are sweaty. It's heaven. We ride the crowded escalators up, up, up beside a wall of steel and glass. The glittering streets of Paris stretch all the way to the horizon. We talk about the shiny little nothings we see – people and cars and cathedrals, even la Tour Eiffel – but it's not that we don't have anything meaningful to say. The feeling is that we have *everything* to say.

And where do you begin with everything?

We switch escalators from level four to five, and I ride backwards on the stair above him. Our eyes are level. We're laughing, I'm not even sure why, and he's holding both of my hands now, and – suddenly – he's leaning in.

This is the moment.

Josh hesitates. He second-guesses himself and pulls back. I lean forward to say the timing is right, I'm ready, let's do this thing, and his smile returns and our eyes are closing and his nose is bumping against mine and – *blip!*

We jump. His pocket blips again.

“Sorry,” he says, flustered. “Sorry.” Our hands unclasp, and he pulls out his phone to silence it. And then he bursts into an unexpected laugh.

Everything inside of me is throbbing. “What is it?”

“He got a job.” Josh shakes his head. “He really got one.” He holds up the screen, and a snapshot of a guy with mussed hair and a polyester vest grins back at me. He’s giving the V sign, the English finger. It’s his best friend, Étienne St. Clair.

I smile, despite our thwarted kiss. “Where’s St. Clair going to school now?” For reasons unknown to me, Josh’s friend goes by his last name.

“California. Berkeley. He said he was getting a job at a movie theatre, but I didn’t believe him.” Josh shakes his head again as we grab the final escalator. “He’s never worked a day in his life.”

“Have you?” Because not many people who’ve been to our school have.

Josh frowns. He’s ashamed of his answer, and it comes out like a one-word confession. “No.”

“Me neither.” We both hold the guilt of privilege.

Josh glances at his phone again. I lean in and examine the picture closer. “Oof. That’s one seriously ugly uniform. Does anyone look good in maroon polyester?”

He cracks a smile.

The escalator ends. Josh types a quick reply, silences his phone, and returns it to his pocket. I wonder if he told St. Clair about our date. I wonder if I’m newsworthy.

We head towards the galleries, but the mob inside the top-floor restaurant gives us pause. The tables have been removed, and an army of svelte models in frizzy white wigs, white lipstick, and marionette circles of white blush are manoeuvring trays of champagne through the swarm of bodies. Josh turns to me and cocks his head. “Shall we?”

“Why, yes.” I respond with a matching twinkle. “I believe we shall.”

We slip inside, and he grabs two flutes as the first tray whizzes by. We’re the youngest people here, by far. It must be a private party. The clamour of excited voices and the outlandish, kaleidoscopic music make the room unusually loud for Paris. “It’s like New Year’s Eve in here,” I shout.

He bends down to shout back. “But not the real one. That glamorous, fake one you see in films. I always spend the real one watching television alone in my bedroom.”

“Yes! Exactly!”

Josh hands me a glass and nods towards one of the restaurant’s giant decorative-aluminium shells. We duck underneath it. The noise becomes somewhat muffled, and I raise my glass. “To the new year? Our new school year?”

He places a dramatic hand across his heart. “I’m sorry. But I can’t toast that place.”

I laugh. “Okay, how about...comics? Or Joann Sfar?”

“I propose a toast” – Josh raises his glass with mock gravitas – “to new beginnings.”

“To new beginnings.”

“And Joann Sfar.”

I laugh again. “And Joann Sfar.” Our glasses clink, and his eyes stay carefully fixed upon mine in the French tradition. My smile widens into a grin. “Ha! I knew it.”

“Knew what?”

“You held eye contact with me. I’ve seen you pretend like you don’t know how things go around here, but you do know. I *knew* you knew. You’re too good of an observer.” I take a triumphant sip of champagne. The pristine fizz tickles the tip of my tongue, and my smile grows so enormous that he breaks into laughter.

Thank you, France, for allowing alcohol to be legal for teenagers.

Well, eighteen year olds. And we’re close enough.

Josh is amused. “How do you know I wasn’t looking at you simply because I *want* to look at you?”

“I’ll bet you speak French better than you let on, too. You never use it at school, but I bet you’re fluent. People can play dumb all they want, but they always give themselves away in actions. In the small moments, like that.”

The bubbles seem to go down the wrong hole. He coughs and sputters. “Play dumb?”

“I’m right, right? You’re fluent.”

Josh shakes his head. “Not all of us grew up in a half-French household.”

“But I’ll bet you’re still good.”

“Maybe. Maybe not.” Thankfully, he’s amused again.

“So why do you pretend not to know things?” My fingers play with the stem of my glass. “Or not to care?”

“I *don’t* care. About most things,” he adds.

“But why play dumb?”

He takes another sizable gulp of champagne. “You know, you ask really tough questions for a first date.”

A painful blush erupts across my face and neck. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. I like girls who challenge me.”

“I didn’t mean to be challen—”

“You aren’t.”

I raise an eyebrow, and he laughs.

“Really,” he says. “I like smart girls.”

My blush deepens. I wonder if he knows that I’m the top student in our class. I never talk about it, because I don’t want people to judge me. But it’s true that his ex-girlfriend was smart, too. Rashmi was last year’s salutatorian.

Josh says something else, but the noise level in the restaurant has been increasing, and it’s finally reached its maximum volume. I shake my head. He tries again, but I still can’t hear him so he takes my hand. We down the rest of our drinks as we squeeze through the revellery. He plunks the empty glasses on a passing tray, leads me past a final throng of partygoers, and we emerge gasping and laughing into the hall.

“Well,” Josh says. “Now that *that’s* done.”

I gesture towards the galleries. We stroll through them hand in hand. But the air here is cold, almost reminiscent of mortuaries, and the sparsely furnished rooms grow stranger and stranger. Miniature sculptures of mundane objects that you have to get on your knees to see. A short film of a fast-food joint being purposefully flooded with water. A collection of puppets with crayons shoved up their asses.

“That looks...”

“Uncomfortable?” Josh finishes.

“I was going to say like a very colourful suppository.”

He bursts into laughter, and an elderly woman with a dead fox around her shoulders glares at us. The fox has been dyed an alarming shade of purple. Josh whispers into my ear, “That’s how it became such a vibrant colour. Crayons. Up its butt.”

I cover my giggling, but it’s no use. She glares again, and we scurry into the next room. “Ohmygod. This whole thing is...not what I’d hoped.”

“Don’t say that.” But he’s still laughing.

I shake my head. “I wanted weird, but maybe it’s *too* weird?”

“It doesn’t matter. I’m with you. I’m happy to be anywhere with you.”

My heart puddles. “Me too.”

Josh squeezes my hand. “Come on.” He pulls me closer as we walk, and our bodies bump against each other. It’s amazing how *solid* he is. How real. Muscle and skin and bone. “We still haven’t seen your Finnish artist. Maybe he’s over here?”

We find the exhibit hidden away in a back corner of the museum. The walls are collaged with hundreds, maybe thousands, of grainy, unframed photographs. We peer closer at one of a crumpled single-serving potato-chip bag. The artist had laid a scribbled note beside the object as some kind of label before snapping

the picture. It's written in Finnish, but it's also been marked with a date.

"Huh." We say it together.

Josh points to another photograph. It's an empty bus seat, also labelled. "So he's cataloguing his day-to-day life? I guess?"

I look around for a sign in French and find it beside the door. I walk over to read it. "These aren't his things. They're some woman's."

Josh gives a low whistle. "No wonder this looks like a stalker's bedroom." He bends over. "Oh, shit! Look at this one. Yeah, I think that's *actually* shit."

I race back to his side. "How did he get her shit?!"

"Maybe he went into a public restroom after her? He was probably gonna take a picture of the seat and got lucky. Maybe it wouldn't flush."

I snort loudly.

"I mean, I've been waiting for *you* to leave something behind for ages, but you keep picking all of these working toilets."

I fake-gasp and shove him. He laughs and shoves me back, and I squeal as the purple-fox lady enters the room. She shoots us *daggers*. We straighten up, but our sniggering is barely contained as we attempt to focus our attention on a picture of a discarded Coke can. "This guy's lady love is kind of a slob, don't you think?" he whispers.

I cover my mouth with my hands again.

"A reaaaaaaaal litterbug."

"Stop it," I hiss. My eyes are watering. "Ohmygod, look at this one! How did he get her toenail clippings?"

"If you were my girl," he whispers, "I'd take creepy pictures of your trash when I knew you weren't looking."

"If you were *my* girl," I whisper back, "I'd put the creepy pictures in a foreign museum so you wouldn't know that I take creepy pictures."

A single belly laugh escapes from Josh, and the woman spins around and actually stomps her foot. Like a cartoon character. It's the last straw. We lose control, cracking up hysterically, as we run from the room and towards the escalators.

"If you were my girl," I say, barely able to catch my breath, "I'd remove your skin, dye it purple, and wear you like a scarf at fancy gatherings!"

He stops and bends at the waist, he's laughing so hard. "Oh, fuck." He wipes a tear from his eye. Two museum guards whip around the corner. "Go, go, go, go, go!"

We tear down the hall, and the guards take off after us. We hit the escalators, and – for some reason – they give up. After, like, ten whole yards. They cluck their tongues as we disappear from view. "So much for security." Josh is

cheerfully dismayed. “Maybe we should steal a painting?”

I laugh, and he watches me from the step below. Beaming. The current between us is so intense that it’s almost visible. He takes my hand and turns it over, examining it. It’s so much tinier than his. “If you were my girl?” he says. “I’d steal you away from the fancy gathering and take you somewhere less pretentious.”

I rest my thumb against an ink stain on his index finger. “And if you were mine, I’d tell you that I know a good place just up the street.”

He lifts his head. His eyebrows rise.

I smile.

“If you were my girl,” he says, but there’s an explosion outside in the courtyard, and I miss the punchline. Fireworks crackle in showers of pink, green, blue, white, green, pink, orange. The museum-goers on the escalators heading upwards erupt in a frenzy of applause as we continue heading down. “If you were my girl,” Josh says, pressing his nose against my ear. I turn my head, and the lights and the noise and the people disappear. The distance between us disappears.

Our kiss is anything but shy.

His lips press deeply against mine, and mine press deeply back. Our mouths open. Our tongues meet. We’re hungry, deliriously so. Even with my eyes closed, the shape of his body flashes before me, lit by the spectacle outside. Light, dark, light, dark. He tastes like champagne. He tastes like desire. He tastes like my deepest craving fulfilled.



Chapter ten

Our mouths are still attached when Josh hits the ground floor. A number of things follow in rapid succession: his chin smacks my nose on its upwards trajectory as he quickly reclaims his height over me; I lose my balance, stumble forward, and take both of us crashing to the museum's polished concrete floor.

"Holy shit." Josh looks up at me, and his eyes widen. "Holy shit!"

Blood is pouring from my nose.

"Is it broken? Did I break your nose?"

I touch it and wince, but I shake my head like it's not a big deal. I shove my dress back down over my indecently exposed upper thighs. "I'm fine." *Imb fimb.*

Josh pulls me up and out of the escalator's path. He pats his coat frantically, searching for something, but he's coming up empty. A concerned observer whisks out a stylish floral pocket square and hands it to me.

"*Merci*," I tell the dapper man. *Mbear-see*. I hold it to my nose for a few seconds, and it comes down looking like a crime scene.

"No. No." Josh can't stop repeating himself. "I'm sorry. I am *so sorry*."

"It's okay!" I hope he can understand my voice. "It's only a bloody nose." I hold out the pocket square, unsure, and the man furiously waves his hand. *Thatsokaykeepit*. I nod another thanks as Josh leads me to the closest restroom. "Really, I'm fine," I assure him. But he touches his forehead in horror as I disappear inside.

Damage inspection. My nose is still running, my chin is stained like a tomato, and tomorrow I'll be sporting a vicious bruise. At least my dress is still clean? A woman with flawless ebony skin and to-die-for cheekbones emerges from a stall. She gasps. "What happened?" she asks in French. She's already producing an entire pack of tissues from her bag. She pushes them into my hands.

"I get these all of the time," I say. "It's so embarrassing."

Only the first half is a lie.

I hold up a tissue, carefully pinch the bridge of my nose, and wait for the bleeding to stop. And wait. And wait. I urge her to leave, because it's weird to

have a stranger, even a well-meaning one, stare at me for this long. She finally does. Immediately, I hear Josh ask her in manic – but word-perfect – French if I’m okay.

Aha! I *knew* it.

When the blood comes to a standstill, I reappear with a whopping smile. Josh wrings his hands. “Isla, I am so sorry. Are you sure it’s not broken?”

My smile turns into a full-blown grin. “Positive.”

His discomfort eases, but only momentarily. His brow refurrows in confusion.

“*Un nouveau record*,” I say. “*Combien de temps ça t’a pris? Une heure?*” A new record. How long did that take? An hour?

Josh’s eyes narrow. He realizes that I caught him speaking in fluent French, even though he implied upstairs that he can’t. “*Au moins quatre-vingt-dix minutes*,” he admits grudgingly. *At least ninety minutes*. It only took this long for me to learn the truth.

I stare at him. I stare harder.

Finally, he shakes his head and laughs. I smile – sweetly, this time – to let him know that his secret is safe. Josh rubs the back of his neck. “I don’t suppose you’d still want to show me that other place? That less pretentious, date-continuing place?”

“I don’t know,” I tease. “It’s a secret place. Can I trust you?”

“I’m *great* at keeping secrets.”

I nudge him gently. “I know you are.”

The air outside is gusty and crisp, and it adds to my feeling of recklessness. I don’t know if I’ll be able to tell Kurt what I’m about to do, if this is breaking some sort of friendship code. It might be. But I don’t care.

We’re radiant, the thrill of the evening having been returned, as we hurry up the next four blocks. I take a left on rue Chapon and lead him to a building with white peeling paint and red wooden shutters. I stop at the keypad. Josh look surprised, maybe even shocked. “Don’t tell me you have an *apartment*.”

I punch in the code, and the door buzzes. I give him a mischievous smile. “Come in.”

“I figured we were going to a bar or club or something. Colour me intrigued, Martin.”

I wrinkle my nose.

Josh cringes. “Yeah. That doesn’t work with a male surname, does it?”

I head upstairs, smiling to myself, and he follows quietly. After we’ve passed several floors, he shoots me a curious look. “All the way up,” I say. We spiral and spiral until we reach the top landing. Josh glances at the purple door with the

leopard-print mat, expectantly. Nervously. “Not that one.” I steer him around a hidden corner towards a second, smaller door. “*This one.*”

He tugs on the knob and discovers that it’s locked. I fish out the skeleton key from the bottom of my bag. It’s heavy and iron. “You know,” he says, “if you weren’t tiny, cute, and remarkably innocent looking, I’d be running away right now. This feels like the set-up to some torture porn.”

“Never trust a girl because she *looks* innocent.” I wag the key at him, but my heart pounds faster. *He said I’m cute.* I turn the key, the lock thunks, and the door creaks open.

Josh squints into the darkness. “Ah. More stairs. Of course.”

“Last set, I promise.”

He follows me inside, and I gesture for him to shut the door. We’re enveloped in pitch black. “Wait here,” I whisper.

“Are you getting your axe?”

“Handcuffs.”

“Kinky. But, okay, I’ll try it.”

I laugh as I climb the final set of stairs. They’re narrow, rough, and steep, so I ascend with caution. I raise an arm above my head until my fingers hit the trapdoor. One more turn of the key, a powerful shove with the heel of my hand, and it pops open. The stairwell illuminates. I look down. Josh looks up at me, bathed in starlight and wonder.

He steps onto the rooftop balcony with silent reverence. I close the trapdoor, and we’re surrounded by a sparkling, winking cityscape.

“You can see everything from here,” he says. It’s the first time I’ve heard him speak with awe. The serpentine river and crumbling cathedrals and sprawling palaces and everything, yes, *everything* is visible from here. The view is even better than the Pompidou’s. The City of Light pulses with life, Nuit Blanche celebrations in full swing.

“Welcome to the Treehouse.” I shine with a buoyant pride. “I’ve never had a real one, but it makes for a good substitute. The only part that requires an imagination is the tree itself.”

“I can’t believe it. This is yours?”

“My aunt’s. Tante Juliette lives in the apartment with the purple door. I used to play up here when I was a little girl, but then she gave me the key during my sophomore year. Kurt and I need somewhere...to escape.”

Josh is taking in the space, lingering on and processing each item. The balcony is square, snug, and crammed with a variety of worn objects: a wooden ladder, two mismatched cane chairs, a mossy terracotta pot holding a miniature

rosebush, stacked piles of round stones, a cracked mirror with a gilt frame, a collection of pale green soda bottles, a steamer trunk with a broken lock, and the head of a white carousel horse. A low concrete wall holds everything in.

“They’re all found objects,” I explain. “We pick them up off the street. We have a rule that none of our *décor*” – I say this word somewhat jokingly, somewhat seriously – “can be purchased.”

Josh squats down and delicately touches the horse’s mane. “People leave things like this on the street?”

“In front of their houses. They set them out for the garbage-men to take away.”

“What about this?” He points to a chipped porcelain bowl that’s filled to the top with fresh water.

“That’s for Jacque. He’s the stray cat who sometimes hangs out with us.”

Josh shakes his head. “This...yeah. This is incredible. You must bring all of your *paramours* here.”

It’s a tease, but as he stands back up, I sense a real question underneath. “There’s only been one. And, no, he didn’t receive an invitation.” I bend over to remove a thick, plaid blanket from the steamer trunk. “Okay. I lied.”

“You did bring him here?”

I hold up the blanket and laugh. “No. I bought this. I didn’t find it on the street.”

Josh emits a barely discernible but clearly relieved breath of held air. It makes me smile. I lay the blanket down. We sit, facing each other with crossed legs. “So tell me about him,” he says. “Tell me who I should be jealous of.”

“Well. His name is Jacque, he’s about yea-high, and he has the most *delightful* little paws.”

“Come on.”

“The guy isn’t important. It’s not like I dated him for two years,” I add pointedly.

“Ugh, don’t remind me.” But after a few seconds, he nudges my knee. “Go on.”

I sigh. “His name was Sébastien. He’s French. He attends a school ten minutes away from ours. And my *aunt* set us up.”

“Oy.” Josh winces. “The same aunt who lives below?”

“The very one. Tante Juliette is friends with his *maman*, and they invited us both to brunch last winter, not telling us that the other one would also be there. It was humiliating. But, oddly enough...we clicked. We dated quietly for a few months.”

“Dated quietly?”

“We didn’t want to tell our nosy families that their plan worked.” I pause for a well-timed grin. “So we didn’t.”

“Did anyone know?”

“Of course. Kurt knew. And Sébastien’s friends.”

“So...what happened?”

My gaze lowers. “Turns out, he wasn’t a nice guy. He didn’t really like Kurt.”

“I’m sorry.” Josh winces again. “How serious were you guys? Before that?”

“You mean did we have sex.”

He’s taken aback by my bluntness. He ducks his head, abashed.

“Yes,” I say.

He tries to cover his surprise. Again. I suppose everyone at school assumes that I’m a virgin – that is, if they don’t already think I’m banging my best friend.

“But we were never serious-serious,” I explain. “I mean, when you grow up half French, it’s not like sex is this big taboo. And, yeah, you have to be careful and you need protection and blah blah blah, but it’s not that American Puritanical be-all, end-all. You know? Sébastien was the only one, though. I don’t want you to get the wrong—”

“No.” He shakes his head rapidly. “I know.”

A long pause. “How about you?”

“The same. Just the one.”

The wind picks up, and I rub my bare arms. “But you loved her.”

“I thought I did.” Josh stares out over the city. “And then I knew I didn’t, and *she* knew she didn’t, but we stayed together, because...I don’t know why. Maybe because we thought we *should* be in love. At least I did. I wanted to be in love.” He looks back at me. “Have you ever been in love?”

“No.” *Yes. With you.*

A motorcycle passes on the road below. We listen until its guttural roar fades away. Josh glances at me, and then he double-takes. “You’re shivering.”

“Oh, I’m fine. I like the chill.”

But he’s already on his knees, removing his coat. He swings it up and around my shoulders, and the weight of it stuns me in more ways than one. My body weakens with lust. The coat smells like citrus and ink and *him*.

“I saw you that next night,” he says.

“Huh?” My eyes open. “What night?”

“Last summer. I went back to the café at midnight the next night, and I saw you there. I knew it was a long shot, but...I had this feeling you might be there. And you were.”

I know that feeling. I *had* that feeling. “Why didn’t I see you?”

“I never went inside. I saw you through the window, and you...”

“I was with Kurt,” I finish.

“So I kept walking. I felt like such an idiot. If only I’d known, I *wish* I’d known. You’d been so funny and flirty, and—”

“*Flirty?*”

“Yeah.” He grins. “I could kinda tell you liked me.”

“Ohmygod.” I’m mortified.

“No! It was cute. Trust me, it was really, really cute.”

“Yeah, nope. I want to die now, thanks.”

“No. I’m serious. I always liked you, but I thought you didn’t like me. You would never talk to me. So I didn’t think you were even an option, and then I got together with Rashmi, and that was that. But I realized last summer that you’re just shy.”

Back up, back up, back up. “You always liked me?”

“A supersmart hot girl who reads comics? Are you kidding? You were definitely on my radar.”

Hot. I’ve been upgraded to hot. No one has *ever* called me hot. Cute? Yes. Adorable? Yes, often, and it makes me want to punch them. I didn’t know short girls could even *be* hot. I thought I’d been permanently relegated to elfin-pixie-child status.

“Well, bloody noses.” I hug his coat tighter. “Those are definitely hot.”

Josh buries his head in his hands. He moans. “I can’t believe I did that.”

“I believe the laws of physics did that.”

“And my chin.”

I laugh. “But until that last part, it was pretty great, right? I mean, we had actual *fireworks*. Talk about a credits-rolling, happily-ever-after kind of a kiss.”

“If only I could take credit for those.”

“You know...you can always try again.”

He raises his head. “Setting off fireworks?”

“A second first kiss.”

“I think that’s just called a second kiss.”

I bump my knees against his. “Are you seriously going to make me ask again?”

“Um. No.” Josh quickly leans forward.

“Unless.” I put a hand on his chest. “Are you sure? Because. If you don’t want?”

He smiles. “You’re ruining our second first kiss.”

“I just...wanted to make sure,” I say.

“I’m sure.” But he stops before he reaches me. “Wait. Are *you* sure?”

“Of course I’m sure.”

“Okay. So we’re both sure.” Josh smiles again. He places one hand on each side of my face. His fingers are cold, but I warm beneath their touch. We stare at each other for several seconds. His smile fades, and then, slowly, he leans over and kisses me.

It’s a gentle kiss, lips slightly parted. Soft.

Josh pulls back a few inches. He studies my forehead. My cheeks. My chin, my ears, my nose, my lips.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“I wanted to know what you look like up close.”

“Oh.” It comes out like a breath.

“You have freckles on your eyelids,” he says.

I close my eyes, and he kisses them – one delicate kiss on each lid. His nose trails down the side of mine, and his mouth comes to a rest above my own. My arms wrap around the back of his neck. Our lips meet with more urgency. More exploration. We kiss until it can no longer be called kissing, it’s definitely making out, as his hands slide underneath the coat and around my waist.

We sink into the blanket.

Our fingers are in each other’s hair, and his breath is in the hollow of my neck, and I wish the world would swallow us here, whole, in this moment. And that’s when it hits me that this – *this* – is falling in love.



Chapter eleven

We kiss on the stairs, on the streets of the Right Bank, on the bridge over the Seine, on the streets of the Left Bank. We kiss until our mouths are sore and our lips are numb. It's so intense that I don't realize my feet are blistered until we're only a few blocks away from the dorm. I pop off my heels on the steps of Saint-Étienne-du-Mont, a church across from the Panthéon, and release a pained hiss of relief.

"Blisters and a bloody nose." Josh sits down beside me. "This went well."

I smile and kiss him again.

"Those shoes are insane," he says.

I wiggle my red feet. "Maybe they were a *bit* much."

"Your footwear tends to run on the exceedingly tall side. You know we all know you're short, right? It's not, like, a secret."

"Hush."

"I like that you're tiny. I like that I could carry you around in my pocket."

I shove his arm with my shoulder. "I said hush."

"And if we ever vacation together, you can sit on my lap to save airfare."

I shove him harder, and he laughs. He tries to push me back, but I'm faster, and he tumbles against the steps. He laughs even harder. I do, too. "You deserve that," I say.

"And now I'll pay my penance." Josh jumps to the ground and faces his backside towards me. "Get on."

"What?"

"You can't walk in those shoes, and the streets are covered in broken glass."

"I'm sorry. Are you offering me a *piggyback ride*?"

He sighs in fake exasperation. "Will you just get on already?"

"Just because I'm short doesn't mean that I don't weigh anything."

"Just because I'm skinny doesn't mean that I can't carry someone short. You're what, five one?"

"Yeah." I'm surprised that he guessed it exactly. "What are you?"

“Six one. So there.”

“Freak.”

He grins at me over his shoulder. “Get on.”

I stand, my heels in hand. “Okay. You asked for it.”

Josh squats down, and I climb on. It’s like trying to mount a thoroughbred. He hops in a way that bounces me up higher, above his waist, and I settle into him. My arms wrap around his shoulders. His hands rest above my dress, holding on to my lower thighs.

“Ah, I see. This was all a clever ruse.”

He heads towards our dormitory. “A ruse?”

“To get under my dress on our first date.”

The back of his neck instantly warms. “I promise it wasn’t.”

“Mm-hm.”

His neck grows even hotter. I breathe in his scent deeply, delirious with happiness. In the distance, Paris is still celebrating, but our own neighbourhood is quiet – the only sound, his footfalls. “You know my friend St. Clair?” he says after a few minutes. “He’s only a few inches taller than you, and his girlfriend, Anna? She’s taller than he is.”

“Kurt only likes tall girls. Maybe it’s made me paranoid that all guys might prefer partners closer to their own mouth height.” It feels strange to confess this aloud.

“I’d like to point out that we’ve had zero problem reaching each other’s mouths.” There’s a smile in his voice. I smile back against his neck.

Josh walks the next few blocks in silence. Unfortunately, it’s not *actually* comfortable to sit like this, and – judging by his laboured breath – it’s not comfortable to carry me, either. But he gallantly piggybacks me all the way to our dorm, through the empty lobby, and straight to my door. The dismount is awkward, and we’re both in at least moderate pain, but it doesn’t matter. Our lips find each other again. He’s out of breath, but he pushes me against my door until it bursts open. We collapse into the room.

Kurt blinks at us from my bed. “You really do need to fix that door.”

Sunday is Josh’s only detention-free day, and he texts me right as I’m waking up. I’m glad we remembered to exchange numbers. I squeeze my phone and roll over in bed.

“Watch it,” Kurt mumbles.

“He says *good morning*.”

“It’s the afternoon. Tell him he’s wrong.”

I text Josh a good morning in return and suggest that he ask for next Saturday

off, too. After all, that's *his* Sabbath. Winking smiley face. He texts me back a long line of exclamation points followed by a WHY DIDN'T I THINK OF THAT??

I hug Kurt. "He likes me. He liiiiiikes me."

"Duh." But he settles into my hug. "I've missed this."

"Me, too."

Last night we cheated on the rules. Nate was out for *Nuit Blanche* so Kurt decided to stay in. Which worked out perfectly, because it meant that I got to rehash every detail of every second of my date. Until I was told to shut up.

His eyes widen. "Half of your nose is purple."

I scramble out of bed and lunge towards the mirror. Damn. I gently prod my nose, wince at the tenderness, and sigh. "At least it's proof that yesterday really happened?"

But Kurt is already thinking about today. "I have a history essay due tomorrow, and you need to study for that calculus test. Do you want to work here or in my room?" And then he grins. His room is disgusting, and I refuse to hang out in it. Tidiness – in his bedroom, in his school bag, in his appearance – is *never* on Kurt's agenda.

I lean in closer to my reflection. "I don't know. Josh and I didn't make plans, but it seemed kinda understood that we'd hang out."

Kurt clambers off my bed and puts on his hoodie. "That sucks."

"You suck."

"I'm about to bring you breakfast. I'm so far from sucking that you can't even handle it." And he slams my door shut behind him. I wait for it to pop open, but – for once – it doesn't. He kicks it back open. We laugh.

"Back in ten," he says.

Every Sunday, we have fresh baguettes from the *boulangerie* two streets over. I remove a jar of Nutella, a knife, and two antique jade mugs from their designated drawer and turn on the electric kettle. A heaping spoonful of instant coffee mix – Kurt's favourite, unpalatable American brand – is added to each cup. And then I return to the mirror. My nose resembles a small eggplant. Even with a thick layer of concealer, the proof of our date will last for at least a week.

Kurt returns as the kettle *dings*. Our routine is meticulously orchestrated. He's pouring the water into our mugs when there are two knocks, low on my door. The sound gives me an instant jolt. A hit stronger than caffeine. But Kurt looks at me in confusion as if to say, *I'm already here?*

"I could let myself in," Josh says, in cheerful spirits. "But I won't, because that'd be rude. Also, you might be getting dressed, and that'd be—"

"She's dressed," Kurt says. "Come in."

I yank open the door before Josh gets the wrong idea.

“Hey,” he says. There’s an uneasy pause. “So I guess you’ve stopped propping this open?”

I actually, literally smack my forehead. “We forgot! I can’t believe we forgot.”

Kurt slides over my physics textbook with his foot, and I shove it underneath the door. “Nate was out last night,” he says, “so I stayed over.”

Josh enters the room, but his arms are crossed. Unsure. “You slept here?”

“Yes,” Kurt says.

I smile grimly. “Not to be a cliché? But it’s *really* not what it sounds like.”

Josh uncrosses his arms. “No, I know.” He shakes his head and starts to cross them again, but he catches himself. His hands move to his pockets. “I should’ve called. I thought you might want to get some breakfast. Lunch. Whatever it is. I’ll come back—”

“No!” I say. “Join us. We have bread and terrible coffee. Yeah? Huh, huh?”

“You do make it sound tempting.”

My smile softens. “Come on. Stay.”

Josh returns the smile, at last. “Fine. But only because I feel sorry for you. Clearly an angry gang member punched you in the face last night.”

“It’s astounding what one chin can do.”

Kurt studies us from the bed as if he’d chanced upon a pair of wild beasts in their natural habitat.

Josh’s expression falls. “I’m sorry. Does it hurt?”

“Stop apologizing.” My smile widens as I drop a spoonful of powdered coffee into the Oktoberfest stein. “I only have two mugs. Sorry.”

Josh sits in my desk chair. “*You* stop apologizing.”

I add the hot water and give him the stein. He grins. I take a seat beside Kurt and thrust half of my baguette at Josh, who protests with a waved hand. I insist. He accepts. We’re bordering on uncomfortable silence territory.

I’m relieved when Josh turns to Kurt. “You know, there’s something I’ve always been curious about. I once saw your name written down on a list in the head’s office. Your *full* name.”

Kurt sighs. Heavily. “I was born the week Kurt Cobain died. My parents were friends with him, so they named me in his honour.”

Josh freezes, Nutella-smearing knife mid-air. “They were *friends* with him?”

“My dad is Scott Bacon. He was the lead guitarist for Dreck.”

“The early nineties grunge band,” I say. “They had that one hit, ‘No One Saw Me’?”

“Yeah.” Josh shakes his head. “Yeah, I know who they are.”

“The song made him rich and famous, and that attracted my mother. She was a runway model here in Paris,” Kurt says matter-of-factly.

Josh freezes again.

I always forget how surprising it is for people to learn about Kurt’s parents. It seems like he should come from a family of neurosurgeons or astronomical engineers, but the giveaway is that – underneath the unkempt hair and messy wardrobe – Kurt is handsome. Strangers often mistake him for an athlete, because he’s tall and angular and muscular. But he’s only in shape because he hates mass transit and walks everywhere. I wonder if his appearance is another reason why Josh thought we were dating.

“But their relationship isn’t like that,” I explain. “Kurt’s mom had her own money. They married for love, they’re still together.”

Josh takes a huge bite of bread and talks before swallowing. “I can’t believe they knew Kurt Cobain. That’s so cool.”

I used to watch Josh in the cafeteria, and he’s always been a sloppy eater. I feel oddly pleased to see this bad habit up close. Maybe because it reminds me of the Josh that his friends knew – the relaxed, barriers-down, inner-circle Josh. Or maybe because it reminds me of Kurt, and Kurt is safe.

“No,” Kurt says. “It blows. I was named after a guy who committed suicide. Also, people assume I’m this huge Nirvana fan, which isn’t even logical, because it’s not like I named myself.”

“Do you like them at all?” Josh asks.

“No. We can switch names, if you want.”

“Kurt Cobain Wasserstein.” Josh says it slowly and laughs. “Nah. Doesn’t have the same ring.”

“Kurt *Donald* Cobain Wasserstein. You can’t forget his middle name. I can’t.”

“Which would make you...Joshua Elvis Aaron Presley Bacon.”

Kurt startles. “Are you serious? That’s your middle name?”

Josh’s stone countenance makes me snort with laughter.

“Isla, is he serious?” Kurt asks again, but then he reads my own expression correctly. “Oh.” He wilts. “Never mind. You were just...”

But then a perfect moment occurs as Kurt straightens back up. He grins.

Josh points a finger. “You are *not* going to say it.”

“...*joshing* me.”

Josh clutches his chest in agony as Kurt explodes into loud belly laughter. My heart might burst from happiness. Josh shakes his head. “I’m only letting you get away with that because I’m trying to make a good impression on your lady friend, okay? My real middle name is David.”

Kurt considers it for several seconds. “Deal. I’ll take it.”

Josh takes his first sip of coffee. “Oh, man. You weren’t kidding. This is terrible.”

“So what should we call Isla?” Kurt asks.

Josh sets down the stein to properly examine me. He gazes into my eyes as I think, *David*. Josh’s middle name is *David*. Thanks to sleepless nights on Wikipedia, I know it’s also his father’s middle name.

“Isla is a good name,” he finally says. “The right name.”

Kurt isn’t impressed. “Isla was named after something, too, you know.”

“Don’t you dare,” I say.

Josh sits forward. His eyes shine. “Do tell.”

“Prince. Edward. Island,” Kurt says.

There’s a long pause. And then I’m the one sighing. “Yeah, so my parents did that horrible thing where they named me and my sisters after where we were conceived.”

Another pause.

“They did not,” Josh says.

“Alas. Geneviève was named after the patron saint of Paris. ‘Hattie’ is short for Manhattan, and, yeah...Prince Edward Island. My parents were on vacation. I mean, don’t get me wrong, I’m glad my name isn’t Prince or Edward. But the notion of island travel? *Completely* ruined for me.”

Their laughter is interrupted as the stairwell door opens with a booming metallic *clang*. A swarm of girls peer in at us as they pass by my open door. More than one eyebrow is raised. I hear my name murmured down the hall and into the lobby, accompanied by laughter that’s not nearly so friendly.

“You know,” Josh says, with a glance towards me. “I’d almost forgotten how annoying this room is. Those stairs drove me nuts.”

“I don’t like the window,” Kurt says.

“Seriously. The prisonlike bars, the traffic. Do you remember that opera singer who used perform out there?”

“So what are you doing today?” I ask, pushing the girls from my mind.

My question catches Josh off guard. “Um, working. Drawing. By myself. In my room. On the top floor?”

“Oh. Cool!” I try to sound chipper. How naive for me to assume that we’d be hanging out. Of course he’s busy. “We’ll be working down here. On homework. Like usual.”

But Josh seems...confused. Disappointed.

It takes me a moment. And then I realize that he’s just told me that he’ll be alone in his room *and* where his room is located. And I told him that I’ll be here with Kurt. The guy who slept in my bed last night.

“Unless you wanted to hang out?” The words spill from my lips. “I’ll come up. To your room. If you want.”

Josh’s entire body brightens. “Yeah?” He glances at Kurt. “You’re invited, too, of course.”

“I don’t think you mean that.” Kurt drains the last of his coffee. “And I’d pass, anyway. I’d rather not watch you guys feel each other up.”



Chapter twelve

The sixth floor isn't a regular floor. True, it has the same peculiar contrast of crystalline fixtures and fluorescent bulbs, antique wallpaper and industrial rugs, but it's what the French call *les chambres de bonne*. The maids of the aristocracy used to live up here. The ceilings are lower, and there are fewer rooms. It's also silent. No voices, no music. Eerie.

I pass a door that's been plastered with a dozen images of the same boy band, another with a small whiteboard that has a phone number scribbled on it, and another with a large whiteboard that's been tagged with the words *DAVE HAS TINY BALLS!*

Room 604's door is blank.

In previous years, Josh would tack up silly illustrations of himself in various costumes – cowboy, pirate, clown, robot, bear. My heart tugs at yet another reminder of his current state of unhappiness at our school.

I smooth the front of my dress. It's been an hour since breakfast, because I needed to take a shower. I also needed to apply some serious bruise-covering make-up. I take a deep breath and copy his signature knock.

Josh opens the door with a knowing smile.

I return it shyly.

He steps aside, and I enter. I expect him to close the door behind me, because, well, *he's Josh*, but he props it open with a book about Parisian architecture. I'm touched by this gesture of respect...even though I wouldn't mind the privacy right now.

"Sorry, it's such a mess." He shoves his hands into his pockets. "I cleared off the bed, though, and the sheets are clean."

My eyebrows practically hit my hairline.

"*To sit on.*" His accusation is made jokingly, but his skin turns melon pink. "Nice shoes, by the way."

I'm wearing flats. "Nice deflection, by the way."

"Nice to see you, by the way."

“Nice save, by the way.”

Josh grins as I drop my homework-stuffed bag to the floor. In theory, I’m going to study, and he’s going to draw. In reality? I hope we make out.

His bedroom is *spectacular*. The small space feels extra small, because of the sheer volume of artwork, which is everywhere. But the room doesn’t feel cramped. It feels like a cocoon. His drawings are on his desk – which isn’t even our standard-issue desk, it’s some kind of drafting desk – on his dresser, on the floor, on top of his fridge. And they cover nearly every inch of his ceiling and walls.

“I feel like I’m inside of your head.” And then I regret saying it. Because, creepy.

But Josh seems to relax. “My friends used to say that, too.”

I examine his work closer. The illustrations are in black ink, and I recognize locations from all across the city: the rose window and spires of la Sainte-Chapelle, the hedge maze inside le Jardin des Plantes, a wall of human skulls and femurs inside les Catacombes, a caged bird in le Marché aux Fleurs, the opulent exterior of le Palais Garnier – the phantom’s famous opera house.

And the faces. So many faces.

St. Clair; his girlfriend, Anna; his ex-girlfriend Ellie; St. Clair and Josh’s mutual friend Meredith; and of course...Rashmi. My eyes fall on a drawing beside Josh’s window. Rashmi is lounging across a lobby sofa – her head on one armrest, her feet on the other – reading a novel. Her long hair is draped over the back of the armrest in rich, black waves.

“Wow,” I say quietly. “Rashmi looks really pretty.”

Josh swallows. “I did that one a long time ago. Did you see this?” He points to a funny picture of St. Clair poking Anna’s back with someone else’s arm, but now I’m distracted and disoriented. I’m *surrounded*. Rashmi alone. Rashmi with friends.

Rashmi with Josh.

“She’s my friend, Isla. Or she was. I haven’t even talked to her in months.”

“No, I know.” And I shake my head, because I *do* know. I’m not sure why this caught me by surprise. I sit on his bed and smile to show him that I’m fine. She’s his friend, and he clearly misses his friends, so it’s good that these drawings are here. Sure. If I can convince him, maybe I can convince myself.

Josh stares at me for a long time. I keep my eyes on his bedspread – blue-and-white plaid, very male – and try to remember how Isla-of-the-past would have fainted if she could see Isla-of-the-present. “If I show you something,” he finally says, “you have to promise me that you’ll take it as a compliment. No judging.”

I tilt my head in question.

“I’m serious. You have to promise.”

“Why? Is it bad?”

“No, I just...wasn’t planning on showing it to you. At least not yet.”

“And now you’re worrying me.” I’m only half joking. “Is this the part where you confess that you’ve been taking pictures of my discarded yogurt cups?”

“I lied,” Josh says.

My worry becomes whole as he slides open a drawer, removes a battered sketchbook, and places it in my hands. I turn it over. WELCOME, the blue sticker says. “That’s the one I was using last June,” he says. “I didn’t leave it in New York. Obviously.”

“This is it?” My relief is profound. “Yeah, I know. I’ve seen it in your bag.”

He blanches. “You have?”

“It’s okay. I understand. I mean, the drawing isn’t flattering, right? I was so out of it. I understand why you wouldn’t want to show me.”

“Uh, no.” He’s squirming. “That’s not it. Not even a little bit. Not even at all.”

Consider my curiosity way more than piqued.

Josh sits down beside me. He sighs. I open the book, and it flips right to it. As if he looks at it. A lot.

I stare at the page. *Pages*. There are *two* drawings of me. In the first, my elbow is propped up against the table in *Kismet*. My head rests in my hand, and my hair tumbles loosely around my face. My eyes are closed in reverie. In the second, my head rests on my arms, which I’m using as a pillow. My hair spreads across the table in sweeping waves and curls. My lips are oh-so-slightly parted.

The pictures are...*sexy*. His brushstrokes are all curves.

Josh reaches over and turns the page.

There’s a third drawing.

This one is from memory. I’m standing in the rain. My hair is wet. My sundress is soaked. More curves – *mine* – are exposed. A giant garden rose floats behind my head like a halo, and I’m staring straight ahead at the viewer. The artist.

My heartbeat pounds in my ears. I look up at Josh, eyes wide.

“Kurt asked to see it,” he says. “When I thought you were dating. I thought he’d kick my ass.”

“My dress *is* rather clingy.”

Josh groans. “And now you think I’m a pervert.”

I smile. “Only if the rest of the book is like this.” I bump his shoulder softly as I proceed to thumb through it. At first I don’t realize what’s happening, but...I *am* looking for others. There are plenty of women, of all ages, inside – even some pretty ones – but as I continue to search, it’s clear that mine are unique.

They're the only drawings that look like *that*.

Josh bumps my shoulder in return. "Feel better? Or am I still on par with that Finnish photographer?"

"No." I'm still smiling as I set down the book. "Definitely not. For sure not."

"Good." His voice is deeper, quieter.

I stare at him. He stares back. His fingers comb through my hair, and he cradles my head in his hands. My eyes close. I slide my own hands up the nape of his neck, and then further upward, nails raking against his scalp. Our mouths hover, a murmur apart. Our breathing is fast and warm. He parts my lips with his.

And then we clash together like the ravenous animals we are.

I climb onto his lap, *needing* closeness, pushing my hips against his. The skirt of my dress rides upward. I feel desperate, in agony. A ragged sound escapes from between his lips. Our kisses grow frantic, and his mouth is assertive and his hands are strong and—

"*Ah hem.*"

We bolt upright. Nate is standing in the doorway. I tumble off Josh, and he grabs the sketchbook and lunges into his desk chair, strategically planting the book on his lap. Every square inch of my skin is on fire.

"Have a nice day," Nate says wearily. He trudges away.

I groan. "I can't decide if the new rules suck more for him or for us."

Josh bangs his forehead once against his desk. "Definitely us." Before I can reply, his phone rings. He lifts his head to peek at the screen. And then he swears under his breath. "I have to take this, or she'll never stop calling." He picks it up. "Hey, Mom."

Don't think about the sketchbook. Do not think about what it is covering.

"Yep. Everything's fine." Pause. "I'm doing homework." Pause. "No." Pause. "No, I'm not." Pause. "Yeah. I know." Josh rolls his eyes as he tosses the sketchbook back to the bed, a twofold message that the mood is beyond repair, and I'm welcome to look at anything inside. "No. I know." Their conversation continues like this for five minutes until he cuts her off. "Oh, man, fire drill. Gotta run, bye." He hangs up. And then he slings his phone across the desk and drops his head into his hands.

I give him a moment before asking. "Fire drill?"

Josh lifts his head. "Usually I come up with a better excuse." He stretches out a leg and taps one of my shoes with his. "Hard to think with you sitting there."

I tap back. "I take it you aren't close with your parents?"

"No. I'm not."

I wonder how often they talk. I only talk to mine about once a week, but our

calls always last for at least an hour. “Is that why you’re here? In France? I have to admit, I’ve always thought it was kind of odd that a senator would send his kid to a foreign country to be educated.”

“Paris wasn’t exactly their first choice.” And then he gets this strange expression, as if he’s surprised by his own words.

“What do you mean?”

“I...I’ve never admitted that to anyone before.”

My brow furrows.

Josh stares at his hands, massaging his left thumb into his right palm. “My friends were aware that I don’t get along with my parents, so...they sort of *assumed* that I was shipped here because I’m *difficult*. Or whatever. And I never corrected them. I guess I wanted them to believe it, because...it’s less embarrassing than the truth.” He looks back up at me and holds my gaze. “I chose this. Being stuck here is my own fault.”

My eyes widen. I wait for him to explain.

“When my parents started looking at private high schools in New York and DC, I talked them into believing that sending me overseas would be better for my education. And I was immature, and I was dumb, and Paris sounded romantic and artistic and all of that bullshit, but the moment I got here, I realized...it’s just a city. You know? And, yeah, it’s beautiful and cultured and everything the cliché says it is. But, I don’t know. It’s always felt like I’m killing time here until my real life can begin.”

Killing time. I don’t think he counts me as a part of this, but the words are still wounding. I try not to let it show. “So where would you like to be? New York? DC?”

“No. And *definitely* no. I’m going to Vermont next year.”

I frown. “Vermont? What’s in Vermont?”

“The Center for Cartoon Studies.” Josh perks up at my confusion. He scoots closer in his chair. “It’s the only one of its kind – it completely focuses on sequential art. And it has this insane faculty, all of the best cartoonists visit to teach there.”

“Cartoonists? Like, what? The guy who draws *Calvin and Hobbes*?”

He shakes his head. “No, anyone who draws sequential art is a cartoonist. Superhero stuff, graphic novels, graphic non-fiction. It doesn’t just apply to the people who draw comic strips.”

“Oh.” And now I feel dumb. “How big is the school?”

“It’s not big. It’s about half the size of SOAP.” He picks up a pencil and rocks it between two fingers. “So what’s next for you?”

The nerve is struck. Just like that. “I...I don’t know.”

His pencil stops.

I should have seen the question coming, but it blindsides me. I'm humiliated to find myself fighting back tears. "I'm applying to both la Sorbonne and Columbia, but I don't know where I want to go. I don't know where I belong."

Josh moves onto the bed, beside me again. "Hey. It's okay. You still have plenty of time to decide."

"No. I don't. And you wanna know the worst part? I kind of *hope* one of them will reject me so that I won't have to make the decision myself."

His eyebrows raise. He's silent for a long time, debating something in his head. "I've seen the charts in the head's office." He's choosing his words carefully. "You're the best student in our class. Both schools are going to accept you."

So he *does* know. I scratch at my peachy-pink nail polish. Chip it away, bit by bit.

"What do you want to study?"

The pit in my stomach grows deeper. "Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"I mean...I don't know. I don't know what I want to do, or who I want to be, or where I want to live. It's like everyone else has their entire future mapped out except for me."

Josh's expression falls. "You know that's not true."

"Maybe at other schools, but at ours? People have plans. *You* have plans."

"Well. Which city do you like better?"

I tug on my compass. "They both feel like home. When I was young, my family spent summers here and the rest of the year there. Now it's the reverse. I'm a citizen of both countries, I'm fluent in both languages, and I'm comfortable in both cities."

"Comfortable."

Something about the way he says it. "What?" I ask.

"It's just...don't you want to try something new? What about all of those adventure stories weighing down your bookshelves?"

I don't know. *I don't know*. I like reading about adventure, sure, but I also like doing it from the safety of home. But what *is* home, besides a quilt-covered bed? Where is it?

Josh sees that I'm getting upset with myself, so he tries to lighten the mood. "You know where I think you should go? Dartmouth."

"Yeah. I don't even know where that is."

"It's in New Hampshire, on the Vermont border. And the Center for Cartoon Studies? Just so happens to be on the other side. And I've heard that Dartmouth

has an amazing programme in Nothing. The best Nothing programme in the world. That's what people say."

I finally crack a smile. He's teasing, but it's still nice to know that he wouldn't mind me living nearby. Or, at least, that he likes me enough to joke about it. I nod at his drafting table. "So show me your real work. Show me what you do in here all day."

Josh is surprised and happy to give me a tour through his workspace: dozens upon dozens of brushes, pens and pencils, India ink, oil paints, watercolours, nibs, erasers, reference photographs, a hair dryer for speeding up ink-drying time, several different-size pads of what he calls his semi-precious paper, and an elephantine box where he keeps his best. Like me, he's crammed a skinny bookcase into his room, but his shelves are packed with bound sketchbooks, art books, reference books, and what appears to be every graphic memoir ever written – Jeffrey Brown, Craig Thompson, Alison Bechdel, James Kochalka, Lucy Knisley, and tons of others I've never seen before.

There is a distinct absence of school-related work. The strap of his bag pokes out from underneath his bed, so I assume the rest has been shoved down there, as well. And below his dresser – where I've placed a second dresser for more clothing – he's placed a large metal flat-file. His own graphic memoir has been divided between its drawers. They're labelled: BSB FRESHMAN, BSB SOPHOMORE, and BSB JUNIOR.

"Do you have a senior drawer?" I ask.

"Not yet." Josh taps his temple with a finger. "I'm still storyboarding last summer." He shows me what he's been working on – blue-pencilled thumbnails of his annoyed self in DC, attempting to block out the sound of his father recording an attack ad about Terry Robb. Terry is his opponent in the upcoming election. "It's easier to start like this. It keeps me from making bigger mistakes later."

"What do your parents think about you writing about this? About your private lives?"

He shrugs. "They don't *know* I write about our private lives."

I wonder if that's actually true. "What does 'BSB' stand for?"

"*Boarding School Boy*. That's the title."

I glance at the top drawer, his junior year, and then at him. He nods. I slide it open and find a stack of thick paper with fully inked illustrations. The top sheet is a drawing of his friends in graduation caps, smiling, arms around one another. Josh stands apart from them, small and distant. I lift it up, delicately, to peer at what's below. It's a multi-panelled page of Josh wandering around a city that is unmistakably Venice, Italy.

Cartoon Josh is familiar. It's the same Josh that I used to see wearing silly costumes on his door. It's an accurate – though exaggerated – portrait of who he really is. His nose is more prominent, his frame skinnier. But he's still beautiful. He looks sad and angry and tender and lonely. I lower the top illustration and slide the drawer shut. His work is so personal. I don't feel as if I've earned the right to look at it. Not yet.

"I hope I get to read this someday."

I know he'd let me, right here and right now, but he looks relieved that I've chosen not to. "You will," he says.

The rest of our day is spent in companionable silence – Josh with his sketches, myself with my textbooks. When the sun begins to set, he turns on his desk lamp and scrounges for food. His fridge is packed tight with ready-made items.

"Aha!" Josh yanks out something from behind the orange juice.

I cap my highlighter. "You do remember where the cafeteria is located, yes?"

"And *you* remember that I saw your electric kettle? The one against school rules?"

"As if you don't have one."

"I have two." He grins. "And a hotplate."

"The cafeteria serves food. Fresh food. Made by actual chefs! If it wasn't closed for dinner on Sundays, I'd prove it to you right now."

Josh holds up a plastic cup. "Crème brûlée?"

I smile. "Please don't ruin my favourite dessert."

"Really?" He pauses, mid-foil removal. "It's mine, too."

My heartbeat picks up, pleased by this tiny discovery, as if it's more evidence for the case of *us*. But I don't speak of it. I only release a sigh. "Lavender crème brûlée. Ginger crème brûlée. Espresso crème brûlée."

"I had rosemary once. Unbelievable."

I grip his comforter with both hands. "No."

Josh consumes his dessert in two bites. He tosses the empty cup into his trash can and hops once. "I'll take you there right now. Come on, come on!"

I laugh. "Sorry. Sunday night is pizza night."

He deflates. "Damn."

"Join us."

Josh plops down beside me on the bed. "That's...actually kinda weird. My friends and I used to have pizza on Sunday nights, too."

"I know. I used to see you guys at our restaurant."

"Seriously? Pizza Pellino?"

I nod. It wasn't a coincidence.

“Hey.” Josh grows uneasy. “About Kurt. About *your* bed.” He bounces twice to demonstrate where he found the subject change.

“Yeah. He sleeps in it.”

I’ve correctly identified his question *and* given him the wrong answer. He tries to act as if it doesn’t matter, but his expression resembles what mine must have looked like when I realized I was surrounded by the likeness of his ex-girlfriend. “We’ve slept in the same beds our entire lives,” I say. “There’s nothing sexual about it. I promise.”

“That’s not how *I’d* feel lying beside you.” But before I can enjoy this thrilling and perfect response, an even more alarming question has popped into his head. “Have you ever woken up and seen...you know. In the morning?”

“If you expect me to answer that, you have to say it.”

“I am not saying it.”

I pause. “Fine. Yes.”

Josh baulks.

“But it’s not like it’s, ugh, *aimed at me* or anything. And it’s not like we sleep naked. I mean, we’ve been friends for ever, so, yeah, we’ve seen stuff, but—”

“Has he seen *you* naked?” he blurts. And then he notices my expression and instantly regrets it. “Sorry. That’s none of my business.”

I’m opening my mouth to agree when I’m struck by a startling new truth. The situation has changed. Or maybe it’s *about* to change. “No,” I say. “It is your business. If you want it to be.”

“I do.”

I swallow. “Me, too.”

His brow lifts.

“Does this...does this mean you want to be my boyfriend?” My question sounds both immature and momentous. But Josh doesn’t flinch.

“Yes,” he says. “I want.”



Chapter thirteen

Josh is my boyfriend.

Josh is my boyfriend.

It's a miracle that after only a single weekend, we are a real-life, not-just-in-my-dreams couple. Every morning, he arrives at my door before Kurt so that we can have a few minutes alone before breakfast. And then he joins us in the cafeteria. I think, maybe, he needed reassurance that he wouldn't be sitting at an empty table. It's strange to realize that Josh – detached Josh, composed Josh – worries about these things, too.

It might even explain the detachment.

We're inseparable until our schedules split apart in fifth period. But we reunite after school, and I walk him to detention. If Kurt is the expert of roads less travelled, Josh is the expert of rooms long forgotten. All day long, he sneaks me into spaces that are cramped and hidden and neglected, and we kiss through the darkness until the warning bells ring.

I work on homework while he's in detention, and when it ends, we all have dinner in the cafeteria. And then we re-separate from Kurt. We leave campus for the privacy that our dormitory no longer allows. It means that I usually visit the Treehouse twice – once with Kurt in the afternoon and once with Josh in the evening. We spend our nights in liplocks, sweet and earnest, while fumbling sublimely around things less innocent.

When Josh dated Rashmi, they were notorious for their public displays of affection. It was torturous. I was both envious and repulsed. With me, he's quiet. He holds my hand and steals my kisses, but he saves most of his affection for when we're alone. I think he understands that I don't enjoy drawing attention myself. I also think, perhaps, he's placed a higher value on his own privacy.

Even so, our relationship hasn't escaped the notice of our classmates. But I'm happy. Despite my shyness, I still want to parade him in front of the entire school. I want to shout, *Look! Look at this perfect boy who wants to hold my hand!*

On Friday, Hattie startles us from behind in the hall. “So you’re the guy who busted my sister’s nose. Either you have the best aim or the worst. Which is it?”

“Pleasure to meet you,” Josh says.

“Whatever. Isla, I need forty-six euros.”

“Why?” I touch my nose self-consciously.

“Because I want to buy a weasel skull and put it on this one girl’s pillow.”

I try not to sigh. I’m not successful.

“She’s my friend,” Hattie says.

“No,” I say.

“Ugh, fine. *Maman.*”

We watch her stalk away. “Was she for real?” Josh asks.

“I’m never sure.”

He shakes his head, mystified. “Your older sister isn’t like that, is she? We had studio art together my freshman year. She always *seemed* cool—”

“She is.”

“Yeah. She always seemed like...she had things figured out. Like she had the motivation and confidence to do anything.”

I smile. “That’s Gen, all right. Last summer? She shaved her head and came out as bi. My parents really like her new girlfriend. But my mother is *pissed* about her hair.”

Josh laughs. When I drop him off at detention that afternoon, I run into another opinionated force. The head of school stops me. “I’d be concerned,” she says, “but Monsieur Wasserstein has been remarkably punctual, as of late. You must be the reason.”

I’m not sure how to respond.

The head looks down at me through her glasses, which are perched on the tip of her nose. “You’re a bright girl. Be careful there.” And then she strides away.

I don’t appreciate her tone. Or her presumption that hormones might be getting in the way of my intelligence. Is she afraid that Josh’s attitude will rub off on me? That I’ll stop caring about my education? Well, she can take her concern and shove it up her ass. But when I open my bedroom door a few hours later, Josh is also unusually cross.

“It backfired,” he says. “You know that whole detention-on-the-Sabbath idea? I asked the head about it, and she went straight to my parents.”

I wince.

“Yeah. And even though this time the excuse is – in theory – legitimate, my parents agreed that I’m being *impudent*, and now I have two additional weeks of detention.”

I’m shocked. “Two *weeks*? But that means—”

“Detention through the end of October.”

“That’s insane! What the hell is the head’s problem?”

He kicks off his shoes and flops onto my bed. “Welcome to the latest attempt at trying to get me to take this school more seriously.”

“I’m sorry. The Sabbath thing was my idea. My stupid, stupid—”

“Hey.” Josh sits up on his elbows. “Only because I didn’t think of it first.”

There’s a commotion in the hallway. “Look who’s on Izla’s bed,” Mike says. “Give us a show, girlie girl! Give us a sneak peek.”

Emily hoots. “Is Kurt jealous?”

Dave pushes his shaggy hair away from his eyes. “Nah. They’re getting ready for a threesome.”

I want to punch them all in the throat. But Josh is staring down Mike. “Her name is Eye-la. It must be difficult to remember when your brain is smaller than your penis. Which, rumour has it, isn’t that big in the first place.”

“Fuck you, Wasserstein.”

“Good one.”

The stairwell door *clangs* open, and Sanjita appears behind them. Her gaze is fixed on something ahead in the lobby. It’s an unnatural position that tells me she already knows this is my room. “Come on, Mike.” She tugs on his arm. “I’m hungry.”

He’s still puffed up like an angry baby owl. He points a finger at Josh. “I’ll get you.”

They swagger away, and Josh scowls at the doorway with supreme irritation. “Has there ever been an emptier threat?”

“What is *with* people today?”

“I don’t know. But I hate them. I hate everyone in the world but you.”

“And Kurt.”

“And Kurt,” he agrees. “Where *is* Kurt?”

“It’s sushi night. Remember?”

He sinks into my pillows. “Oh. Right.”

We discussed it earlier and decided that Kurt and I should keep Friday nights, and then Saturday nights will be ours. But I’m disappointed, too. The schedules, the rules, the people.

As soon as his Sabbath detention is over, he’s back at my door.

“I want to draw you again,” he says. “Before dinner. While there’s still light.”

My bloodstream courses with euphoria as he hurries me towards the Arènes de Lutèce, an amphitheatre long abandoned by the Romans. Once, it was immense and crowded and used for gladiatorial combat. Now, it’s smallish and empty and park-like. It’s only a few blocks away from our school, but it’s

wholly concealed behind its surrounding apartments. No matter how many times I visit, I'm always still surprised to find an *entire ancient arena* hidden back here.

The park tends to stay quiet. Today, a father is teaching his young son how to dribble a football in its large and dusty centre. Josh and I climb the stairs to the original stone niches above the field. Each niche contains a modern bench, and we pick the one with the best view. Against his knees, Josh props up a sketch pad (one with thick, removable pages) and immediately commences drawing with his favourite brush pen (a capped pen with a brush tip). He works as he always does, with his thumb tucked underneath his index finger. I love watching his hand.

"What should I do?" I ask. "How should I sit?"

"Sit however you want. But try not to move *too* much," he adds with a smile.

There's nothing like being openly stared at by an attractive member of the opposite sex to make me feel as if all of my limbs were in the wrong place. I search for a distraction. "So...what's the story behind your sticker?"

Josh flips over the pad, expecting something to have appeared.

"The one on your sketchbook. The American WELCOME one."

"Oh." He snorts. "There's no story. My dad had a huge stack of them in his office, and I just took one. There were a lot of assholes on Capitol Hill ragging on Mexican immigration that week, so I drew the word I *wished* they were talking about instead. But it wasn't an original idea. I saw an Australian sticker like it once."

"You know what I like about you?" I ask, after a few minutes.

"My dynamite moves on the dance floor."

"You've crafted this bored veneer, but you're always giving yourself away in moments like that. In the moments that really matter."

"I *don't* care about anything," he says. "But I care about you."

"Nope. You have a mushy heart, Joshua Wasserstein. I can see it."

He smiles to himself and keeps drawing. There's a fragrant gust of wind, and the first leaves of the season rain down upon us. A nip pierces the air. I watch the tiny boy in the arena dart between his father's legs and listen to the faint crunch of gravel as an elderly couple walks the footpath behind us. The sun grows lower on the horizon. There's a new stillness, and I realize that Josh has stopped working.

He's staring at me. Spellbound.

"What is it?" I'm afraid to move. "What's wrong?"

"I've never seen the sun shine directly through your hair before."

"Oh." I glance down at the glowing curtain. "It never looks the same, does it?"

Inside, it's auburn. Outside, it's more of a red."

"No." Josh reaches out. He softly touches one of the waves. "Red isn't the right word. It's not auburn or orange or copper or bronze. It's *fire*. It's like being mesmerized by the flames of a burning building. I can't look away."

I've blushed far less around him lately, but – at this – my cheeks warm.

"And *that*," he says, as I look down at my lap. "That rosy blush. And your rose-scented perfume. God, it drives me mad."

I lift my eyes in surprise. "You've noticed? I don't wear much."

"Trust me. You wear exactly the right amount."

"You smell like tangerines." I say it before I can take it back.

"Satsuma." He pauses. "You have a good nose."

"Yours is better. At least, the shape of it is."

"My nose is huge." He laughs, and it makes his throat bob. "Yours is like a bunny rabbit's. What the hell are you talking about?"

I laugh, too. "It's not huge. But it *is* interesting."

"Interesting." He raises a teasing eyebrow.

I smile. "Yes."

Josh smiles back. His ink-stained fingers thread through my hair, and he leans in towards my lips. But then he pauses to smell my neck. A shiver runs through me. He kisses my neck softly and slowly, and my eyes close.

I want him to kiss me there for ever. But he pulls back, languid, letting his fingers fall back out gently through my hair. He smiles at me again. "Roses," he says.

My head and heart are in full swoon. "Thank you. And thanks for saying such nice things about my hair," I add. "Not everyone is that nice."

"Who wouldn't say nice things about it?"

"Ha-ha," I say.

But he appears to be genuinely confused.

"Really?" I take a deep breath. "Well, okay. When I was little? Every grandmother would stop me on the street to tell me how much I looked like one of her grandchildren. 'She has hair *just like yours*,' they'd always say. 'Except hers is more orange' or 'hers is more auburn'. It was so uncomfortable, especially for someone as shy as me. Hattie's the only one who ever talked back. 'Then it's not *just like mine*, is it?' she'd say."

Josh laughs.

"And when a redhead hits puberty? You become this magnet for gross men. A month doesn't pass without one telling me that I must be good in bed because all redheads are sex fiends, or I must be a bitch because all redheads have fiery tempers. Or they'll tell me that they *only* date redheads, or that they *never* date

redheads, because we're all ugly."

Josh is stunned. "They say those things to you? Strangers?"

"At least a dozen men have asked if 'my carpet matches my drapes'. And now there's the ginger insult – thank you, England – and some cultures think we're unlucky, and ohmygod, you know what the French say about redheads, right? They think we *smell*."

"Like roses?"

"Then there's the crap that comes with it naturally. The sunburn, the freckles —"

"I love the freckles." Josh taps his sketch pad with an index finger. "I have plans to hang these on my walls, you know."

He does?

He does. The next day, my face appears in all of his prime-viewing locations – above his desk, beside his bed, on his fridge. Drawings with leaves in my hair and my eyes closed in rapture. Drawings with delicately exposed collarbones and neatly tucked legs. Drawings with a stare as direct as it is vulnerable.

I feel like his muse. Maybe I am.

"It's still so surreal," I tell Kurt, one afternoon in the Treehouse, "to be the object upon which *his* eyes are focused."

"Object," Kurt says.

"I don't mean *object* object."

"It's wrong to objectify people."

"You're right. I used the wrong word." It's easier to agree than to explain the perplexing and disconcerting truth. When it's Josh looking at me...I don't mind.

Kurt is petting Jacque. He scratches underneath his chin, Jacque's favourite place, and the grey tabby purrs accordingly. "Where'd you find that?" He inclines his head towards a heart-shaped stone.

"Oh. Um, near the Arènes de Lutèce?"

"So your boyfriend found it."

"We found it together."

"And you brought it here together?"

I pause. And then I nod.

Jacque jumps onto his lap, but Kurt pushes him off. "I have to work." He yanks out his chemistry textbook, and someone else's ballpoint-pen-drawn map of underground Paris flies out of his bag and hits my arm.

I hand it back to him. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you. We come here sometimes at night."

"*Mm*," Kurt mumbles. We work until dinnertime, but the next day, when I ask if he wants to study at the Treehouse, he declines.

The following Sunday at the Treehouse, Josh surprises me with three brushes and a large plastic jar of cheap dark-green tempera paint. “The brushes are my own, but the paint was found. And free.”

“Where’d you find it?”

His expression turns devilish. “The art room.”

“Cheater.” But I return his smile. “What are you gonna paint?”

“I like that. Not what *do* you want to paint, but what *are* you going to paint.”

“I trust you, if that’s what you mean.” I tug out the plaid blanket from its trunk. “Not that I should. Art thief.”

“Paint thief, thankyouverymuch. The art will be my own.” He helps me arrange the blanket, folding it over an additional time so there’s more space than usual around the rooftop’s perimeter. “I’ll need the space to work.”

I shrug happily. It’s sunny, probably one of the last warm days of the year, so I’m already slathered in SPF. I slip out of my wedge sandals and wiggle my toes in the air.

He studies the concrete wall. “Where will we go when the weather turns?”

“I tough it out through mid-November. And some winter days aren’t so bad, you know? But Kurt and I usually hole up in the dorm, sometimes the library.”

Josh glances at me. It’s so sexy that my heart misses a beat. “But where will we go?”

“Everywhere,” I reply. “We’ll go everywhere together.”

“I want to show you my favourite portraits. The Van Gogh self-portrait at the d’Orsay. And there’s this Van Dyck that I’ve always loved at the Louvre. *Le Roi à la chasse*. I don’t even know why I love it so much. Maybe you could tell me.”

I close my eyes to feel the sunshine against my lids. “I’d like to take you to the restaurant inside the mosque. We’ll have mint tea and honeyed desserts.”

“We’ll ride the Ferris wheel at the Place de la Concorde.”

“And then we’ll walk through the Tuileries and drink *vin chaud* to stay warm.”

“The flea market in Montmartre,” he says. “We’ll shop for rusted bicycles and broken mirrors.”

“We’ll ride the *métro* to its furthest stops, just to see what’s at the end of each line.”

“Those,” Josh says to the wall, “are *perfect* days.” I open my eyes. He dips a small brush into the paint and pauses mid-air.

And then...he comes alive.

His plan unfolds quickly. He’s painting a mural on the inside of the rooftop’s wall. He begins with a sketch, an outline, and moves around the interior in a complete circle. It’s already clear what this mural will be.

I smile and let him work in silence.

Josh switches to a larger brush and bolder strokes. Fat green leaves and thick green branches appear across the wall's peeling white paint. I lose myself in a book about the search for an ancient lost city in the Amazon, glancing up occasionally to watch the tree grow. But when he circles around again, unexpected shapes appear between the leaves. He's creating a mock-up of the surrounding skyline. It's precise but with his usual touch of whimsy – certain buildings rounder, others more square.

Jacque visits. He purrs against Josh's leg.

When Josh doesn't notice – which is a first, Josh adores Jacque – he scowls and saunters towards me. I feed him scraps of duck gizzard from the salad I had for lunch, and he allows me to pet him for a few minutes before disappearing back over the rooftops.

The sun beats down. Josh takes off his shirt. He's so deep into his work that he's forgotten I'm here. He's a work of art himself. The lines of his back and arms are strong, more so than his slender body would suggest. He has a small mole on his right shoulder blade and a faded scar on his lower back. The skull-and-crossbones on his arm looks even more *him* against this backdrop of similar brushstrokes.

And...his hips. They jut out skeletally from the top of his jeans, and I find my eyes returning to this area again and again. This right-above-the-pants area.

Christ.

Josh removes a second jar of paint from his shoulder bag. As he circles a fourth time, yet another unexpected layer appears behind Paris. Towering skyscrapers. Suspension bridges. Statues of lions. He paints a Flemish building with climbing garden roses and a tiled roof, and then a brownstone with ivy window boxes and an American flag. What surely must be *his* house.

I was wrong. Josh didn't just turn my rooftop into an actual tree house. He turned it into a tree house with a view of the world. Our world. Paris and New York.

He circles around one last time, sprinkling in a few birds among the tree branches. Some look almost real. Others are so fantastical that they must exist exclusively in his imagination. The complete mural takes less than six hours.

When Josh emerges from his trance, he is dazed and art-drunk. He blinks at me. Inexplicably, I burst into tears. He continues to stare at me without expression, and I continue to sob – embarrassingly fat tears. He tilts his head. Another blink. And then he drops to the blanket. His eyes are wild with fear.

"It's...it's *beautiful*," I say.

Every muscle in his body relaxes. He laughs so hard that he collapses

backwards. His paint-covered hands clutch the blanket, and his body shakes with uncontrollable laughter.

“It’s not funny.” I dab at my face with the blanket.

He doubles up even harder.

“I’ll have to wash this blanket now anyway.” I gesture towards his paint smears.

Josh slowly stops laughing. He smiles up at me – a beatific, godlike smile – and holds out his long arms. I nestle into them, green paint and all. He hugs me tightly. My ear is pressed against his naked chest, and his heart is beating a thousand times a minute. I run my hands down his body. He closes his eyes. I kiss his skin and the paint and his sweat. He lifts my face towards his and kisses away my tears. “Thank you,” he says. “That was the best reaction that anyone has ever given me. For anything.”



Chapter fourteen

My heart reacts to his news by shattering. A heap of fragile glass shards. “You’re going home? Why didn’t you tell me this could happen?”

It’s been exactly one week since Josh turned the Treehouse into a *tree house*. But tonight is too chilly for an open-air rooftop, so we’re slumped against each other on the top of my bed. At least he looks miserable, too. “I don’t know,” he says, tossing aside his phone. “I guess I hoped that maybe, somehow, they might...forget about me.”

“Your parents wouldn’t *forget* about you.”

“You’d be amazed at how many minutes we’ve spoken to each other since school began. Twenty? Maybe? And most of them just now?”

I sigh. “Happy birthday to you.”

Josh’s parents chose today – of all days – to inform him that they’re flying him home for the entire week of elections. He’ll be an interest story for the news: the eighteen-year-old who gets to vote for his father for the first time. His parents want footage at the polls, a gushing post-vote interview, the whole charade. “It’s so sleazy,” he says. “They’re bringing me into their world of sleaziness, and they want me to sleaze for their cameras.”

“Voting for your dad isn’t sleazy.”

“Everything else is.”

“Agreed.” The worst part is the timing. He’s leaving right after his run of detention ends, just as we’d be gaining full-time access to each other. “But,” I continue. “At least there’s cake.”

His brow raises hopefully. “Cake?”

I smile and slide off the bed.

“You’ve already done too much,” he protests, though it’s clear he’s okay with it. “The crème brûlée. The gifts.”

I laugh. “Only one of those gifts counted.”

“But I like them equally.”

After lunch, I gave him a – poorly made, by myself – papier-mâché fox with

purple crayons glued into its butt. And then I gave him his real present, original artwork by one of his favourite cartoonists. I had it shipped overseas the week we started dating, right after he offhandedly mentioned his October 24th birthday. I've been worried that it's too much too soon, but he seemed genuinely delighted by both.

My birthday is in late June. I won't be able to vote until the next election.

I'm heading towards the mini-fridge for his cake, when...something stops me. The quiet. I peer into the hall. For once, it's empty. Nate's door is closed. There's not a single person in sight. A wave of recklessness washes over me. Or maybe it's desperation, the impending separation pounding throughout my body. My hand hovers above my door handle. And then I take action.

I shut my door.

Josh swallows. We've been so careful to follow the rules. "Are you sure?"

"Positive."

"My birthday is looking *much* better."

I flick off the overhead light.

"Also much darker," he says.

I fumble towards my desk, turn on a lamp, and remove something small and round from the fridge – a glossy chocolate mousse and hazelnut cake. I light a perfect ring of candles around the edge and softly sing "*Joyeux anniversaire*". It has the same tune as its English counterpart. Josh grins at my singing voice, which he's never heard before.

"Sultry," he says.

I can tell he approves. It's embarrassing, but pleasing. Josh closes his eyes and all eighteen candles are extinguished in a single blow.

"You got your wish!"

Josh nods at my door. "I did."

I swat him with our forks. He grabs them and uses them to pull me down beside him. We're laughing as we dig into the cake, but it doesn't take long before I'm dizzy with sugar. I fall backwards into the bed. Josh makes it a few more minutes before shoving away the platter and collapsing beside me. He groans a happy groan. I lace my fingers through his right hand, and he winces in the lamplight.

I immediately let go. "Tendinitis?"

"It's fine."

I give him a look.

"Okay," he admits. "It's kind of bad right now."

We stare at his hand. It twitches.

"Oh-oh," I say sadly. "*Mon petit chou.*"

Josh's head shoots up in surprise. It's the first time I've called him by a term of endearment. *My little cabbage*. It's like calling someone "sweet pea". His expression melts, but he looks down and away. "You still make me nervous, you know."

"I do?"

"I feel like this...awkward giant around you. You're like this perfect porcelain doll. Delicate and sweet and pretty."

I smile. "I won't break."

Josh returns the smile. "No?"

"No. And neither will you." I take his hand back into mine and massage his fingers gently. The tendons are so tight that they feel like cords of rope beneath his skin. He grimaces. I pause, but his expression turns weak. Pleading. I press harder, and he closes his eyes. Harder still. He moans. I rub each finger slowly, up and down, one after the other. The muscles loosen, but they never relax. They're too overworked.

"I should do this more often. Your poor hand needs help."

Josh cracks one eye. "I'm all right."

"Are you kidding? At this rate, you'll be crippled by twenty." I continue massaging. "Have you been to a doctor?"

He takes his hand back from me. "It feels better now."

"I'm sorry." The rebuke stings.

But Josh gives me a teasing smile. "That's not what I meant." He bends over, reaches into his bag on my floor, and removes...his brush pen.

"Oh." My shoulders sag. "You want to draw."

"Yes. You."

That perks me up. I try to hand him a sketchbook, but he refuses it.

"No," he says. "I want to draw *on* you."

The air is charged. I swallow. Josh notices the movement and kisses my throat. My eyes close. He trails faint kisses around my neck, over my jawline. Onto my lips. I respond with a deeper kiss, harder, starved for his taste. A hand slides across my bare legs, touching the line where my skirt meets my thighs. The other hand tugs on the bottom of my sweater. A question.

Our eyes open. His pupils are dark and dilated.

I don't drop his gaze as I pull off the sweater. Underneath, I'm wearing a silk camisole. I reach down to take it off, too, but he places a hand on my arm to stop me.

"I want to start here," he says.

Josh pulls me to my feet. His head tilts as he studies his canvas – my milky white skin. I don't blush. He moves in. The tip of his brush touches my shoulder

first. His strokes are long and careful, delicate and swift. My eyes close. The ink sweeps smoothly across my skin. The brush tickles the top of my chest, my neck, my arms, my hands. My feet, my calves, and the back of my knees. My thighs.

My breath catches.

“*There,*” he whispers.

I open my eyes before a full-length mirror. I’m covered in garden roses, spinning compasses, falling leaves, desert islands, Joshua trees, and intricate geometric patterns. It’s beautiful. *I’m* beautiful. I turn to him in wonder, and he holds out the pen.

“Your turn,” he says.

My stomach clenches. “You know I can’t draw.”

“That’s not true. Everyone can draw.”

I shake my head, gesturing down my body. “Not like this.”

Josh removes his shirt. Heavenly gods. He’s so gorgeous I could weep.

“I don’t know where to begin,” I say.

He clasps my hand around his pen, and he kisses one side of my mouth. And then the other. “I’ll get you started.” Together, we draw a simple heart over his real heart. I laugh, which makes him laugh. “See?” he says. “It’s easy.”

So...I draw.

My lines are not as confident, and my illustrations are not as recognizable. I decide to stick with circles and swirls. Josh watches me work. I cover his chest, his neck, his back, his arms, his fingers. His abdomen.

“There,” I say. “I’m out of skin.”

He stares into the mirror for a long time. I sit on the edge of the bed. At last, he turns to me. “Thank you.”

For some reason, *now* is the moment I blush. “You like?”

“I love.”

His words hang in the air. The atmosphere begins to shake. Does he mean...?

Josh sits beside me. He touches his forehead to mine. He closes his eyes and says, “Isla Martin. I’m in love with you.”

My universe explodes.

“I love you, too. Josh. I love you *so much.*”

Our bodies press against each other, and the ink on his chest stamps a reverse image onto my camisole. His heart over mine. I fall backwards and pull him down with me. His hips arch away as he tries to hide what this is doing to him, but that only makes me press against him harder. We kiss with abandon. Together, we remove my camisole. The ink smears. It spreads from his chest onto mine. It spreads across our bodies in handprints, across my blankets in

smearred limbs. I undo his belt buckle and unzip his jeans, and we roll into the cake, and there's hazelnut glaze and chocolate mousse and black ink—

The fluorescent light is blinding. "You really should fix—"

"Jesus, Kurt!" I say.

Josh blocks my body with his. "Shut the fucking door!"

But Kurt is frozen.

"Shut the door!" we shout.

He does. The stairwell beside my door *clangs* open, and his feet race upward. My heart slams against my chest. I throw Josh's shirt at him. "Nate will have heard that."

Josh yanks it on. "Shit. Shit, shit, shit."

"I'm sorry. He didn't mean it. Kurt."

My boyfriend kisses me, quick as a dart, and he's gone. Another *clang* and Nate's door *fwoomps* open as the stairwell door *clangs* shut again. Maybe Nate didn't see Josh. Maybe he doesn't know the shouting came from my room. Maybe.

There's a sharp rap on my door.

"Hnngh?" I say in my best I-was-asleep voice.

"That was the second time," Nate says from the hall. "If it happens again, I have to report you to the head of school, and she *will* suspend you both." He waits. "Just say 'okay', Isla."

"Okay." It barely leaves my throat. I'm dying. The junior in the room beside mine shifts around in her bed. I pray that she's still asleep.

"What was that?" Nate calls out.

"OKAY."

"Thank you. Goodnight." Nate pads away, his door *fwoomps*, and the world is silent. I exhale. I'm shaking. And then I'm crying, but it's not because I'm scared or humiliated. It's because the most amazing moment of my entire life has just happened.

Josh loves me.

I trace the ink on my body. His beautiful illustrations are smeared with streaks of gooey chocolate. Reluctantly, I turn on my shower. The steam is already billowing when I climb in. The hot water hits me, and purple-black ink floods down my body.

It touches everything.

He is everywhere.



Chapter fifteen

Josh appears over my shoulder. “I thought we’d agreed you’re going to Dartmouth.”

His detention must have just ended. I’m working on an essay for Columbia University, so I finish my sentence, look up at him, and smile from my desk chair. “Remind me again where that’s located?”

“Four-point-nine miles from the Center for Cartoon Studies. Maybe. I’m not sure. I’d have to check.”

“She’s already filled out the application,” Kurt says, spoiling my surprise.

Josh freezes. And then he drops to his knees. “Is he serious? Are you serious?”

I slide out the hidden paperwork from Dartmouth. “We’re serious.”

He rips away the Columbia papers and throws them to my floor. “You don’t need those, you really don’t need those.”

I laugh as I pick them back up. “I do.”

“You don’t.”

“These are tough schools.” My smile fades as I gesture to the folders on my desk labelled LA SORBONNE, COLUMBIA, and DARTMOUTH. “You know I have to apply to them all.”

“And you’ll get into them all. But you’ll *accept* Dartmouth. And we’ll get a studio on the river – which will still be bigger than this – and a cat that looks like Jacque, but we’ll call him Jack. And we’ll get a crappy car, something that doesn’t even have AC, but it’ll have a great radio, and we’ll drive someplace new every weekend.”

“I want that,” I say.

“Me too.”

Kurt shakes his head in disgust. He’s sitting on my bed. “I still don’t understand why you’d alter your plans after all these years.”

I swivel around in my chair to stare him down. “My plans were never that planned.”

But it's too late. Josh's face has already fallen. "I'm sorry," he says. "I'd never ask you to do this if it's not what you wanted."

That makes me laugh again. "Yes, you would."

His frown deepens. "No. I wouldn't."

"I *do* want it. You know I don't know what I want to do with my life. So I might as well do whatever it is I'm going to do...there."

Kurt groans as if in physical pain. "Your parents will be furious."

"If I get accepted" – my gaze is still locked upon Josh – "they'll be fine with it."

"No, they won't." Kurt clenches his entire body in frustration. "They'll be worried that you're throwing your life away for some guy."

Now he has my attention. "Hey. Don't say that."

"You've been dating him for less than a month."

"We wouldn't even be attending the same college. And neither of us has gotten in yet, so just stop it, okay?"

Kurt glares at me. "I'm the one trying to finish my homework. You're the one bringing *him* in here."

"Actually, I brought myself in here. And I'm still here." Josh points at himself. "Hi."

"This is *my* room," I say to Kurt.

"So I don't have a say in it any more?" he asks.

"No!" I say.

"I'm gonna go," Josh says.

"Don't," I say as Kurt says, "Good."

I get up to follow Josh, but he stops me. "You should stay," he says quietly. I start to protest, and he cuts me off. "I refuse to be the person who messes things up between the two of you. Work it out." He kisses my cheek. And then he's gone.

I scowl at Kurt. "Well? Do you wanna talk about it?"

"Talk about what?" he says testily.

I lower my voice, because my door is still open. "Last night?"

"When you screamed at me?"

"When you came in here and found something you weren't expecting."

Kurt slams shut his textbook so hard that it makes me jump. "You're the one person who's never supposed to talk to me like that," he says. "Like I don't understand. You've wanted to screw him for three years. Why wouldn't you now that you're dating? I'm not the idiot that you think I am."

I'm stung. "I don't think that. You *know* I don't think that."

"You do."

There's truth to what he's saying. It shames me.

"Listen. I don't want to tag along on your dates, and I don't want you to stop going out, but it'd be nice to know if you still gave a shit about me."

I crumple down beside him onto the bed. "I'm sorry."

"Don't say you're sorry. Say you're still my friend."

"I'm still your *best* friend." I lean against his shoulder and sigh. "What can I do to make it up to you?"

"For starters, you can fix your lock. I never want to see your breasts again."

"Ohmygod, Kurt."

He snorts with laughter. "They're bigger than the last time I saw them."

I shove him away. "Do you want me to leave? Because I'm seriously about to vomit."

"No." His expression becomes solemn again. "I don't ever want you to leave."

"Come with me this weekend," Josh says. "Out of the country."

It's Friday, and we're making out in a custodial closet between second and third period. It's been a long, tension-filled week. Today is Josh's last day of detention, and this will be our final weekend before he has to fly to New York for the election.

I think he's kidding until I see his expression. "Josh. We can't just *go*."

"Why not? I went to Germany last month."

"Yeah, but." A broom falls against my back, and I shove it aside. "That's different."

"The only difference is that it'd be better, because you'd be with me."

I want to go. I want to go with him so badly.

The broom falls on me again, and Josh throws it into the corner. "Stay," he tells it.

"I hate this closet."

"Come on. Let's go someplace where we won't have to prop open our doors and hide between mops."

"I want to, I really do. But it's too risky." I pause. "Isn't it?"

"No, you see. Because here's what we'd do: we'd catch a train early tomorrow morning, spend the afternoon and evening wherever, crash in a hotel, and then catch the train back on Sunday morning. We'd only be gone for one night."

"And...how many times have you done this?"

He shrugs. "A few times last year. Just the once this year."

"And you've never been caught."

"Never." Josh squeezes my hands. "Nate practically *expects* us to be out all

night on the weekends. He doesn't freak out if we aren't in our rooms. This stratagem has only two rules: one, we limit ourselves to a single night away. Anything can happen in a night, and excuses are easy to make. And, two, we tell our plan to the people we're in regular contact with so that they won't go asking around for us."

"So...Kurt." This bothers me. He'd keep our secret, but he'd also be disappointed in my rash behaviour.

"He's the only person who'd notice our absence."

I bite my lower lip.

"Where would you go?" he asks. "Name a place that you've never been before."

"Barcelona." I'm surprised at how fast I answer.

Josh is less surprised. "Why?"

"Gaudí."

"The architect?" Of course my boyfriend knows about Antoni Gaudí. He was a Modernista revered by artists of all kinds.

"I saw his work in an old *National Geographic*. It looked almost magical. I've never seen anything like it, not in real life. But maybe that's stupid, maybe it's too touristy—"

"No. It's perfect. It'd be my first time, too." Josh stops. His words have accidentally triggered the real subject beneath the surface of this conversation. He swallows a lump in his throat. "It'd be our first time together."

And now we're discussing something else. Something we both ache for.

The thought of Josh returning to America is unbearable. It's only a week – I know this – but whenever I imagine his plane touching down at JFK, I feel...not just *ill*, but *wrong*. As if our impending separation were something so much worse. I want to be alone with him. No detention, no election. No Kurt, no Nate. Just the two of us, together, in all of the ways that two people in love can be together.

The bell rings. Our time in the closet is over.

"Let's do it," I say. "Let's go."

Our train is already speeding through the countryside when dawn breaks across France. The car is nearly empty, and we've selected a pair of seats with a table. Josh sits beside the window, because he needs the light to draw. He pencils thumbnails into a new sketchbook while I read about a cannibalistic plane crash in the Andes. One of his shoes rubs gently against mine. I rub it back. I've always thought the best relationships are those that are as happy and content in silence as they are in action, but until Josh, I'd only ever experienced it with

Kurt.

My eyes grow heavy as the sun grows brighter. I lean against Josh's shoulder only to feel his hand stop moving. "Oh. Sorry." I sit up so that he can resume drawing.

But Josh removes his dark blue hoodie, places it on his lap, and guides me onto the makeshift pillow. I breathe deeply, inhaling his comforting scent. I'm lucky. I am so, so lucky. I feel his arm moving again as I drift into a half-awake slumber. A dreamlet. An image of one bed and two bodies, his curled protectively around my own. At some point, I fall into a real sleep, because soon he's brushing my hair away from my face.

"This is our change," he whispers.

We're in Figueres, Spain. Catalonia. It's the birthplace of Salvador Dalí and just across the border from France. I clamber into a sitting position as our train approaches the station. Josh grabs his sketchbook and flips back the tabletop. He groans as he stands. His limbs are crunched and stiff.

"You should have woken me up. You were in that position for hours."

He slips back into his hoodie. "But *you* needed the rest."

We've packed light – a backpack each – and we shove our books into them. The train comes to a stop, we hop out, and I shiver at an unexpectedly strong wind. The brilliant dawn has turned into a dusky morning. The sky continues to darken as our connecting train rattles towards Barcelona. The French countryside was green and grey, and the Spanish countryside is green and golden. But the threatening clouds deaden its warmth.

"I don't suppose you brought an umbrella?" I ask.

"I don't even own an umbrella."

"Ah, that's right. I forgot that your skin is water-repellent."

Josh laughs in amusement. "I like you."

I smile at my lap. An entire month of making out, and he can still do that to me. Who cares if it might rain?

Two hours later, we exit the Barcelona Sants railway station. The neighbourhood is urban and sort of...grubby. We pass a group of skaters, and the *clack* of a board hitting the cement is echoed by a much louder *clack* from the sky. The downpour erupts. The skaters shoot off across the street, and – on instinct – we chase after them into the closest café.

"Ohthankgod." Josh weakens at the sight of lunch. "That worked out well."

Our wet shoes squeak against an orangey-red tiled floor. Behind the glass counter, slender baguettes are stuffed with spicy pork, buttery cheeses and thick slices of potato. I order three different *bocadillos* – *chorizo*, *un jamón serrano* y

queso manchego, y una tortilla de patatas – and we split them at a counter overlooking the congested cars.

Josh rips off an enormous hunk of the chorizo sandwich. “You know what’s great? We’ve never had to discuss it, but we share the same philosophy when it comes to food.”

“Variety?”

“And lots of it.” He points an accusing finger. “So, hey. You speak Spanish.”

“Spanish, *sí*. Catalan, no.” Catalan is the native language of Barcelona, though both are spoken here. “Taking a French class would’ve been cheating.”

“Any other languages I should know about?”

“Only Mandarin. Oh, and a little Russian.”

Josh freezes, mid-bite.

I smile. “Kidding.”

“Maybe that’s what you could do someday. You could be an interpreter.”

My nose wrinkles.

“Sandwich artist? Professional skateboarder? Train conductor?”

I laugh. “Keep trying.”

Our spontaneous lunch is delicious, because Spanish pork is beyond belief. It’s like fish in Japan or beef in Argentina. Or *anything* in France. Though admittedly, I’m biased. I study the custom map that Kurt drew for us last night. He stopped being disappointed in me when he realized I’d given him the perfect excuse to play cartographer. “Should we take a cab to La Pedrera?” I ask. It’s the first landmark that Kurt has marked. “Or should we check into our hotel first?”

Josh lifts away a lock of my wet hair. “This reminds me of last June.”

I raise my head and find him absorbed in memories. He wraps the lock around an ink-stained index finger. He uses it to gently pull me closer into a deep, open-mouthed kiss.

The hotel.

Definitely the hotel.



Chapter sixteen

The hotel that Josh reserved online is gorgeous. It has mosaicked columns and a babbling courtyard fountain and dozens of succulents dangling from planters on the walls.

Unfortunately, it was too early to check in.

The tension inside our cab is heavy. Tangible. I don't know how we're supposed to wait, but we've been left with no choice but to explore the city first.

We're splashing towards the heart of Barcelona. Red-and-yellow-striped flags – some with the blue triangle and star of independence, some without – hang everywhere from apartment balconies, soaked with storm. The city's appearance is distinctly Western European, but it's also filled with colourful architecture and steep hills. Palm trees and leafy trees. Purple vines and red flowers.

"It's almost like a Parisian San Francisco," Josh says.

Either he's trying to change the subject from the obvious one, or he's thinking about his friends in California. Probably best to change the subject. "Speaking of, how are St. Clair and Anna doing these days?" I ask.

"Good." He sits up straighter. "They're pretty much living together now."

"Wow. Already? Do you think they'll last?"

Josh frowns. "Yeah, of course." And then he sees my expression. "Sorry. Sometimes I forget that you don't really know them."

I don't forget.

They watch me, stare back at me, every time I'm in his room. The wall-to-wall drawings make his friends a constant, unspoken presence. I wish I knew them better. I want them to know that *I* exist, that I'm a part of Josh's life now, too.

"St. Clair and Anna are one of those couples that seem like they were made for each other," he says. "Instant friendship, instant chemistry. He was obsessed with her from the moment they met. She was the only thing he ever wanted to talk about. Still is, actually."

"I like Anna. I mean, I like St. Clair, too – he was always friendly to me – but

I don't know him as well. Not that Anna and I ever hung out." I don't know why I'm babbling. Maybe so I won't feel untethered from this part of his life. "But she did live on my floor. And the first week of school, she told off Amanda Spitterton-Watts on my behalf."

Josh grins. "She punched her, too. Last spring."

"I know. That was weird." I laugh. "But also awesome."

Amanda was the Emily Middlestone of last year – the school's most popular mean girl. I saw Anna throw the unexpected punch, and it was my testimony that kept her from being suspended. I felt like I owed her. And not just for sticking up for me in the past, but...she knew about my crush on Josh. She once caught me absent-mindedly doodling his tattoo. I thought for sure she'd tell him, but she never did. He never side-eyed me with that particular brand of I-know-you-like-me weirdness.

Anyway. I was grateful.

Our cabbie pulls over on Passeig de Gràcia, a large thoroughfare where every shop is emblazoned with an expensive name. Dolce & Gabbana. Salvatore Ferragamo. Yves Saint Laurent. But amid this luxury shines an actual jewel: Casa Milà, aka La Pedrera.

We dash below an awning and squint through the rain, across an intersection, at its curious stone facade. Over a century ago, a wealthy man named Milà commissioned Gaudí to design the building. Its grandiose structure is made entirely of waves and curves. There's not a single straight line of construction. It was the home of Milà's family, as well as several renters, but most of the locals despised it as an eyesore – exactly how the same generation of Parisians felt about their own recently built Eiffel Tower.

I wonder how I would have felt about it back then. I'd like to think I would have been one of the people who understood that it was special. That being singular is the exact thing that makes something – or someone – amazing.

"Nice roof," Josh says. "But your Treehouse is better."

I nudge him, my own singular and amazing someone, and he nudges me back. La Pedrera's rooftop terrace is famous. It's covered in strange, bulky chimneys. Some of them look like giant soft-serve ice-cream cones, others like soldiers in medieval helmets. Tourists march up and down Escher-esque staircases, around and around the chimneys, bumping umbrellas. They're like boats adrift at sea.

"It's like an ocean." Josh's voice is filled with admiration. "The wavy limestone, the iron railings." And the balconies look like twists of tentacles and seaweed. Though it's *possible* that the weather is adding to our overall perception. Our eyes travel towards the unsheltered line of people waiting to get inside.

“That’s, uh, some crowd,” I say.

“And some rain.”

I glance at him and give a tentative shrug. “Next?”

He grins with relief. “I don’t want to waste a single minute of this day.”

I feel the same way, I think, staring at his dimples.

Kurt’s map walks us down the street towards a second Gaudí-designed house. We affix ourselves to the sides of buildings for protection from the rain, but it doesn’t matter. It soaks us anyway. “It’s your turn,” Josh says. “Tell me about your friends. Sanjita. What happened there?”

“So...you remember.”

“I remember that you were friends with her our freshman year. Did you split because she wanted to be popular? I asked Rashmi once, but she said her sister refused to talk about you.”

The stab to my heart is sharp and unexpected. “You asked your *ex-girlfriend* about my friendship with her sister?”

“Whoa. No. Not recently. While we were dating.”

“Oh.” Though I’m still confused.

Josh guides me below a neon-green cross, the sheltered entrance of a *farmàcia*. “Isla. I would *never* do that to you. I’ve had exactly one exchange with her since school began. About three weeks ago, she texted me to ask how I was doing. I told her I’m great, because I’m seeing you. She wished us well. She’s dating some dude at Brown.”

I wish this knowledge wasn’t as welcome as it is. I try not to think about Rashmi. I try not to think about her and Josh in my room last year. I try not to think about how they probably had sex in my bed. And maybe my shower. And maybe my floor, too.

I try.

Josh interprets my silence as a need for further explanation. “I spent some time with her family one summer. Sanjita was acting out, and I could tell she was depressed. That’s why I asked Rashmi about you guys. So what happened?”

I’ve never told anyone this story before. It takes me a minute to gather my courage. “She’s the only female friend that I’ve ever had, apart from my sisters. When I showed up at our school...I didn’t even know *how* to make friends.”

Josh removes my hands from my coat pockets. He pulls me closer.

“I mean, Kurt and I were friends before we even knew what the word meant. So it felt like a miracle when Sanjita wanted to hang out with me. And we had fun. And we could talk about boys, and she was interested in fashion, and she was emotional. She was the anti-Kurt. So I should’ve known what would happen when he joined us the following year, but I didn’t. I thought my friends would

automatically become friends with each other through...I don't know. The divine egotistical magic of me."

Josh winces. "I'm sorry."

"So he comes to Paris, and she's embarrassed by him. And I can tell that she wants me to ditch him, and he keeps asking me why she doesn't like him, and... I'm just *stuck* between the two of them."

"Like you were with Sébastien."

"Worse, because this came first. I wasn't expecting it." My voice catches. "She — She made me choose. *She actually said it.* She said Kurt was holding us back."

He squeezes my hands. "Kurt would never ask you to choose."

"I know." Tears spill over my eyes. "And that's why I chose him."

Josh looks for something to dry my tears, but we're already so wet that it's pointless. We laugh as he tries to dry them with the inner sleeve of his hoodie.

"I'm sorry that happened," he says. "I'm sorry she hurt you."

I shrug at my boots.

"If it makes you feel any better? Sanjita was miserable for, like, a full year after you guys stopped hanging out. Even after her social-climbing aspirations had been met, and she'd become friends with Emily. I think she still has regrets about what she did."

"I know she does. When I look at her, I see them, too."

"Do you have any regrets?"

"Only that I stopped trying to make new friends. Between her and Sébastien? Ugh." I give our connected hands a single swing. "But *someone* recently taught me that not everyone is so judgemental."

Josh shakes his head. "I don't know. I can be pretty judgemental."

"Yeah, but...it's like you're on the right side of the law."

He smiles.

I poke his chest. "You wanna see something cool?"

"I'm looking at it."

"Shut up." I laugh. "Turn around."

We're standing across the street from Casa Batlló, another Gaudí masterpiece. The surface is covered in ceramic-shard mosaics – aqua and cobalt, rust and gold – in rough, skinlike patterns. And it has another spectacular rooftop, an animalistic arch of metallic tiles that's curved like the back of a mighty dragon. I like this building even more.

Josh's eyes widen with speechlessness.

"See that turret with the cross?" I point to the roof. "Some people think it's supposed to be the lance of Saint George who's just slayed the dragon."

“Architecture. Maybe *this* is your future.”

“It’s more art than architecture.”

“Same thing,” he says.

I ponder this, but if my interest was that strong, I’d want to rummage around through its insides. I’d want to inspect every angle from as close a vantage point as possible. “Nah,” I finally say. “I just like the story. And the way it looks.”

Josh places an arm around me. “Every art needs its connoisseurs.”

I happily burrow into his wet side.

“What’s next?” he asks, glancing at the clock on his phone.

I look at him in question.

He shakes his head, and we try not to be disappointed. It’s still too early to check in.

Sagrada Família is next. The map easily leads us to the closest transit station. The *métro* is an unaccented *metro*, but apart from that, it’s identical to its brother in Paris. When we exit the station, the rain has slowed to a drizzle. And then we see it. Casa Batlló may be a dragon, but Sagrada Família?

It’s a monster.

It wants me to cower. It wants me to weep. It wants to save my soul from hell. Gaudí started work on this church in the late nineteenth century, but it won’t be finished for at least another decade. It stretches twice as high as the tallest cathedrals of France. It looks like a fantasyland castle – wet sand dripped through fingers, both sharp and soft. Bright construction lights are everywhere, and workers are tinkering around its massive spires in dangerously tall cranes.

We circle the entire structure, shading our eyes from the rain, as we look skyward towards the figures that are carved into every inch of its facade. So much is happening, everywhere, that the overall style defies categorization. Some of the spires are topped with mounds of rainbow-coloured grapes, while the west side is austere and tormented, drawing the eyes to an emaciated Jesus on an iron cross. Stone women wail beside a pile of skulls at his feet. But then the east side is an abundance of life – humans and angels and animals and wheat – and topped by a green tree covered in white doves.

“It’s beautiful,” Josh says. “*Fuck*, that’s beautiful.” Something occurs to me. I’m off running. “Hold that thought!”

“Where are you going?” he shouts.

“I’ll be right back! Don’t move!” I dart across the street and down two blocks until I find a convenience store with a display of umbrellas beside their entrance. I grab the first one, pay for it, and race back with a cheap clear kiddie umbrella.

Josh is confused and upset. “Don’t you think it’s too late for that?”

I hold it above his head as I dig into his backpack. I toss him tomorrow’s T-

shirt. “Dry your hands.” He obeys, and then I replace the shirt with his sketchbook and pen. “You have to draw it. When will you get another chance?”

“Isla, I...”

I zip up his bag, step aside, and hold the tiny shelter above his body.

He watches the rain roll down my face. “Thank you,” he says quietly.

I beam back at him. He kisses my cheek and then bends over his pages, further protecting them, as he uncaps his pen with his teeth. He draws quickly, and I have to urge him to slow down. I don’t mind the rain. He focuses on the dove-covered tree. “We have maybe two hours until sundown,” he says, after nearly twenty minutes of silence. “How are you doing? Are you cold?”

“A bit, but I’m okay. There’s only one more destination marked on our map.”

“Do we win a prize if we check off every box?”

“The grand prize.”

He raises an eyebrow as he caps his pen. “Then we’d better do it.”

We admire his drawing together. I like it even better than the real thing. I only see the beauty, not the accompanying fear. Everything Josh touches is beautiful to me.

He puts his sketchbook away as I search for our map. “Oh, no!” I glance in the direction of the convenience store. “I must have dropped it while I was running.”

“Do you remember its name?” He takes the umbrella and holds it over my head. “Not the convenience store. The name of our final destination?”

“Yeah, of course.”

Josh smiles. He unbuttons my coat, places his fingers against my collarbone, and fishes out my necklace from below my dress.

It’s *incredibly* sexy.

He holds up the compass. “Then we’ll find the Right Way.”



Chapter seventeen

We take the metro north and emerge into a neighbourhood that's emptier and dirtier. No one exits the station with us, and there are no street signs for our last destination.

"Is this the right place?" I ask.

Josh scratches his head. "I think so. Let's try up there."

He points towards an area that looks less barren. We hike up the street, sharing the umbrella as best we can. The drizzle has turned into a fine mist. Weeds spill out through ruptures in the sidewalk. Everything feels abandoned. We finally chance upon a long hill with several grouped sets of stairs and escalators. *Escalators*. I've never seen them outside like this, sandwiched between residential apartments and souvenir shops. But despite these promising signs...the street is still deserted.

As we ride the rickety escalators, the mist gets lighter and lighter. And as we reach the top of the hill, it evaporates into a clear sky. Sunshine.

We tilt our heads backwards and marvel at the heavens.

There's another, smaller hill across the street. "Looks like it's right up there," I say.

With a burst of energy, Josh scoops me over his shoulder and runs towards it. I scream with laughter. He shouts with mad glee. I pound on his back with my fists, but he doesn't set me down until we're through the gates and on the summit. He throws up his arms in triumph. "I win!" And then he buckles like a weak hinge. "I'm dying."

I grin. "Serves you right."

Josh lifts his head. "Oh, yeah?" And then he sees my expression change as I notice what lies behind him. He turns to look. His entire body straightens in astonishment.

We're not just at the top of the final hill. We're at the top of Barcelona.

The jumble of the city stretches to every corner of the horizon, sharp rectangles of brown and grey and yellow and red. Towering above it all are the spires and

construction cranes of Sagrada Família, but directly below us, there's a seemingly endless path winding its way down through a landscape of Mediterranean greens.

Parc Güell.

In the far distance, we can see the turrets and sculptures that Gaudí designed for this park – and its accompanying crowds – but, up here, everything is trees and serenity. The air is so fresh and clean that my lungs are *surprised*. For the first time in months, the world stills. Since before Paris, since before New York...actually, I can't remember the last time I felt such an overwhelming sense of calm.

"We must've come up the back way," I say.

"We should lose the map more often."

We wander down the main path in silence, our hands clasped together. I'm in awe. Several minutes pass before we see anyone else. It's a young vendor with a blanket on the ground, attempting to sell feathery earrings to two Japanese women. Josh nods towards a narrow side-path through the trees. We take it.

I squeeze the water from my hair as we stroll, and he rubs a hand briskly through his scalp. Droplets fly everywhere. "Hey, now," I say. "Watch where you aim that thing."

Josh points his head in my direction and rubs harder.

"You are such a boy."

"You love me."

I smile. "I do."

The air smells of mountains and pines. There are so many trees here. Cypress trees and olive trees and palm trees and mystery trees with plump red berries.

Josh holds out a hand to stop me.

And then I hear it. Behind a covering of bushes, a couple is having sex. My mouth opens in delighted shock. Josh laughs silently. We move ahead so as not to disturb them. There's a good chance that they're our age. Most European teenagers don't have cars, and they often live with their parents through the end of college. Parks are somewhat notorious for amorous pursuits.

Josh gestures towards a secluded area, off path. He's suddenly nervous.

But I was about to point it out, too.

It didn't take long for the thought of the other couple to transfer onto us. We sneak through the foliage. I lean up on my tiptoes, our lips meet, and our bodies sink to the ground. Our hearts pound like crazy against each other. He unbuttons my coat, and his hands are around my back and under my dress. I wish I wasn't wearing tights. But as quickly as our making out begins, he pulls away, gasping. "Never mind. Can't do this. If we go any further, the stopping part will be

excruciating. It already is.”

“I’m sorry.” I reach out to touch him, but he rolls away.

“No, it’s fine. Just...give me a minute.”

The other couple appears between the leaves on the nearby path. They sense our presence and giggle, exactly the reason why we’re waiting until our hotel room. I drape my coat over a thick branch to dry. I unzip my boots and strip off my wet tights.

Josh covers his face. “You’re killing me.”

I smile at him as I wring out the bottom of my dress.

He moans. “Unfair. Girls are so mean.”

I laugh. “Give me your hoodie. I’ll hang it up.”

Obediently, he takes it off. His T-shirt rises with it, and my eyes lock on the lowest portion of his abdomen until he readjusts it. My boyfriend doesn’t realize that he’s killing me, too. I hang up his hoodie and lie down beside him. We stare at the sky. His head rests against his backpack, and my head rests against his chest. The wind rustles, swirling the scent of pine around our temporary campsite.

“Your eyes remind me of pine trees,” Josh says.

“I always wished they were a brighter green. They’re so dull.”

“Don’t say that.” He kisses the top of my head. “Have I ever told you about the cabin?”

“Uh-uh.” I’m listening to his heartbeat.

“There was this cabin upstate that my family used to rent in the autumn – rough walls, stone fireplace, beds with patchwork quilts. The works. And when we were there, my dad would forget to be worried about politics, and my mom would forget to be worried about my dad. And we’d go hiking, and we’d pick apples from this abandoned orchard. And there’d be so many that we’d throw them into the creek just to watch them float downstream. And we’d play board games at night—”

“What games?”

“My favourite was Pictionary.”

I snuggle into him. “Of course.”

“My mom’s favourite was Cluedo, and my dad’s was Risk. And my parents would cook these home-style dinners like pot roast with mashed potatoes and baked apples—”

“From the orchard?”

“Yeah. And while they’d cook, I’d be spread out on the rug in front of the fireplace with these giant stacks of paper, and I’d draw. And...I’d look up, and my parents would be in the kitchen with this perfectly round window behind

them. And all I could see outside of that window – from my position on the floor – were those pine trees.

“So I like pine trees,” he finishes. “A lot.”

I curl my hand around his thumb and squeeze it.

“What about you? Where were you the happiest?”

I have to think about it for a while. “Well, there was this one trip to Disney World—”

“Did you have mouse ears? Please tell me you had those mouse ears with your name stitched on underneath.”

I poke him. “No.”

“I’m gonna picture you with the mouse ears anyway. Continue.”

I poke him harder. “So Gen was ten, I was seven, and Hattie was four. Gen was adorable. She has those perfect corkscrew curls, you know? Plus, she was always in charge of everything. And Hattie was...Hattie. So they were getting all of the attention, like always, but then my parents surprised me with this Disney Princess breakfast. Just for me. And Belle and Snow White and Cinderella were there, and Jasmine told me that my dress was pretty, and that *I* was pretty, and it was amazing. My parents...they *knew*. They knew I was the one who needed it.”

“This,” Josh says, “is my new favourite story.”

“Of course, the whole thing was supposed to be a secret. But the second I saw my sisters, I was like, ‘Princess Jasmine thinks I’m prettier than you!’ Which wasn’t even true, but it *felt* true. Mom wanted to kill me, and Hattie threw this massive tantrum that lasted the rest of the trip, but it was worth it. Best day ever.”

“You *are* prettier than your sisters. You’re way prettier than your sisters.”

“That is...the most romantic thing that you’ve ever said to me.”

He laughs again. “It’s true.”

An unseen bird warbles, and another unseen bird answers its call. “You know,” I say, “I can’t remember the last time I was in a place where I couldn’t hear any traffic.”

“Ah, you’re a nature girl at heart. You’ve just never been given the opportunity.”

“And you’re a nature boy?”

“Definitely. See, if you come with me to New England, we can learn how to do all of those outdoorsy things you read about in your books. Exploring, camping, rock-climbing, rafting, stargazing, building fires—”

“Building fires?” I smile.

“That’s right. Fires. Plural.”

The sun dips below the treeline, and suddenly, Josh is backlit by a stunning

golden light. He looks perfect even when he's damp and sweaty and dirty. I wiggle upward until I reach his lips. We kiss, heavily, until I can't handle it any more.

"Let's go," I say. It comes out ragged.

Josh freezes.

And then he's lunging for his hoodie and backpack, tripping over himself to get moving. I grab my things, and he takes my hand as we sprint onto the narrow path. We're laughing, completely blissed out. We run down, down, down, and the further we go, the more crowded the park gets. We race through an area that looks like a cave – perfect for making out, complete with a classical Spanish guitarist – but making out is no longer enough. We pass Gaudí sculptures, Gaudí buildings, Gaudí's famous lizard fountain, but they barely earn a glance as we whiz by. We only have eyes for each other.

We grab the first cab outside of the park. We're breathless. Josh hands the driver our hotel's address, and our tongues and limbs and hands are touching, searching, groping as the streets of Barcelona whiz past our windows. We pay our distressed cabbie way too much, mainly out of guilt, and tumble back out.

Josh kisses my neck as we check in. Our surroundings are a blur. The clerk, the stairs, the hallway. We slam our room door shut and toss our backpacks to the floor. We have the entire night, but we can't wait another minute.

We kiss fiercely. Urgently. I throw off my coat as Josh scrambles out of his hoodie. I remove his T-shirt as we collapse onto the bed. His chest drums against mine. I roll over, climb on top of him, and find that he's as ready as I am. He lifts my dress up and around my hips and then over my head. I pull back, breathless. "Do you have?"

"Backpack."

I bend over backwards, stretching for his bag on the floor. I reach it and yank it closer. I find them in the front pouch. I grab one, and he helps me sit back up. He stares openly at my matching pale pink underwear. Josh has seen all of me, but never all at once.

I unhook my bra. He takes it off.

He kisses my breasts, my stomach, the line above my underwear. And then the line below it as my last remaining clothing slides from my hips. I unbuckle his belt, unzip his jeans, and tug them down at the same time as his boxers. His breathing is shallow. Rapid. I lower myself onto him. We gasp. Our arms wrap around each other, and we move together, watching each other, checking in with each other with our eyes. *Is this okay? What about this? This?*

It builds. Faster.

I want him closer. I want him deeper. I want him, want him, want him. His

eyes close and so do mine, and we finish as we started. Together.



Chapter eighteen

Josh's stomach rumbles against my ear. The room is black. I unfurl from his body and lean towards the hotel's digital clock. It's nearly two in the morning. Josh feels me stir. "*Tapas*," he mumbles. "We haven't had *tapas*."

"I think we missed dinner."

"s okay." He hugs me against his chest. "Too tired to get up anyway."

"We'll just have to come back."

"*Tapas* and *cerveza*. And then we'll make love on the altar of the Sagrada Família."

I pull away, he tugs me close, I pull away. "Be right back," I say. "Bathroom."

After I pee, I return for my toothbrush and toothpaste. He follows me in, and we brush our teeth. We can't stop smiling at each other. I can't believe that adults get to do this every day. And I don't even mean sex, though it's wonderful, but things like *this*. Brushing our teeth at the same sink. Do adults realize how lucky they are? Or do they forget that these small moments are actually small miracles? I don't want to ever forget.

We climb back in bed and make sleepy, happy, minty-fresh love. He's careful to make sure that I'm taken care of first before he collapses against me. Moonlight shines in through the windows, and I trace the outline of his tattoo with an index finger.

"You've never told me about this," I say.

"You've never asked."

"I love it."

I didn't mean for that to slip out in such a gushy way. Josh laughs, but it's the tired laughter of relief. "Thank goodness."

"Tell me the story."

He shifts into a more comfortable position while carefully keeping me nestled against his body. "When I was sixteen, St. Clair convinced an artist in Pigalle that I was eighteen. Except he didn't *really* convince him. He was just so pushy and persuasive that the guy gave up. It was definitely illegal." I laugh as he

continues. “St. Clair can persuade anyone to do anything. He’s, like, drowning in charisma. It’s so unfair to the rest of us.”

“Eh,” I say. “He’s okay.”

Josh pauses. And then I hear a smile in his voice. “This must be how you felt when I told you that you’re hotter than your sisters.”

I laugh louder this time. “I suppose it is.”

“Anyway, it was just the two of us, and I was the only person who got one. It was a few days after my birthday—”

“Like now!”

“Like now. I’d decided on my birthday that I’d get a tattoo, so I designed this one for the incredibly inspired reason that...it seemed cool at the time.”

“It is cool.”

“I consider myself unbelievably lucky that I still like it.”

“Oh, come on. You have taste. You’d never put something lame on your body.” I pause, a new thought occurring to me. “Do you want any more tattoos?”

“I don’t know. Maybe someday I’ll get a big garden rose on my other arm.”

“Ha-ha.”

“I would.” And he sounds hurt that I don’t believe him. “I want a lot more of these nights with you, Isla. I want *all* of my nights with you.”

When the sunlight streams in through the windows, it’s the happiest morning of my life. We’ve shifted in the early hours, but our legs are still hooked together.

I stare at his adorable, sleep-rumpled hair and his long, lovely spine. I touch the skin of his back with the tip of one finger. He rolls over. He smiles at me languorously. With contentment, I scoot in closer for a kiss. “Mm,” he says. “Is next weekend too soon to do this again? Switzerland. Let’s go to Switzerland.”

“You’ll be in New York next weekend.”

His smile falls.

“Next-next weekend,” I say.

“Deal.” He brushes my hair away from my shoulder, leaving it bare. “So. Tell me. Who’s the better bedmate? Me or Kurt?”

“Kurt, obviously.”

“I knew it.” He kisses my nose and hops from bed. “I’ll be right back.”

“Hand me my phone? I wanna double-check our departure time.”

Josh digs it out from my bag, tosses it to me, and goes into the bathroom. The door shuts. I flip the volume switch from silent to on. The screen illuminates. My heart stops.

“No,” I whisper.

Twenty-nine new messages. Kurt. Nate. Hattie. The school. My parents.

“Josh? Josh!”

The bathroom door bursts open. “What happened? Are you okay?” And then he sees the way I’m clutching my phone. The blood drains from his face.

“No,” he whispers.

I start crying. He tears apart his own backpack, yanks out his phone, and swears at its screen. “Kurt. Nate. My mom, like, a hundred times. My *dad*.”

I’m sobbing now.

He paces the room. He rakes his scalp with both hands. “It’s okay. It’ll be fine. I’ve messed up before. It’ll be fine.”

“How will it be fine? This’ll go on my record!” My entire college future vanishes. I feel faint. My stomach churns, threatening upheaval.

“No. I’ll take full credit for this. You won’t get in trouble.”

“How won’t I get in trouble? I’m just as *here* as you are. In *Spain*.” I scroll through the texts, trying to piece together a timeline of events. But I can’t focus.

I listen to Kurt’s voicemail, and he’s completely freaked out. *Hattie was asking around for you, and Nate overheard, and then they noticed that Josh was missing, too, and they came to me, and I had to tell them where you were. I’m sorry, Isla. I had to tell them.*

I’m an idiot.

I am *such* an idiot.

How could I have forgotten about Hattie? She’s the one person that I can always count on to say or do the wrong thing. Of course she’s behind this. And of course Kurt was the one who couldn’t keep his mouth shut.

Josh sinks beside me onto the bed. He places one hand on each side of my face and touches his forehead to mine. “Breathe,” he says. “Breathe. Breathe.”

“I don’t wanna breathe!”

“It’s okay,” he says. “I’ll call the school. You call your parents.”

Everyone is furious with us. Maman screams so loudly that I have to hold the phone away from my head. Josh gets an earful from Nate, and then I force him to call his mom. She won’t pick up, so he leaves a message. He refuses to call his dad, but I insist, so he calls his dad’s security aide instead.

And then he makes me text Kurt and Hattie.

They aren’t furious – they just want to know that we’re okay – but I’m not feeling so charitable towards them. I tell them we’re fine, we’re coming back, the end.

The train ride to Paris is the opposite of the one we took to Barcelona. The sky is sunny, but our car is dark. We hold hands, we don’t let go, but our grasp still feels like that. Like *grasping*. Like we’re trying to hold on to something that’s

slipping away. Neither of us speaks of the thing that we fear is about to happen. I cry, and Josh holds me. It was selfish to think about my problems first. What he's facing is much, much worse.

Our dread and terror grow. We're almost back to the dormitory when Josh can't take it any longer. He pulls me into someone's private garden. There's a pair of French students on lounge chairs, smoking clove cigarettes and soaking in the last warm rays of the year. They hardly even blink at us.

"I want you to know that I love you," Josh says. "And I want to be with you. No matter what happens."

My eyes fill back with tears. "Don't say that."

"It might happen."

"Don't say that!"

His shell is cracking. "I love you. Do you still love me?"

"How could you ask me that?" The change in Josh's demeanour is frightening. It's as if he could shatter at any moment. "Of course I love you. This hasn't changed anything."

"But it was my fault. This whole weekend was my idea." He's breathing too fast, and his eyes aren't focusing. He's having a panic attack.

"Hey. Hey." I wrap my arms around him and place my head against his chest. "I wanted to go. It was my decision, too."

But he can only cling to me. His fingers grip my shoulders so hard that it hurts.

"I love you," I say quietly. "I have *always* loved you."

His heart rate slows. And then again. "What do you mean? Always?"

I pull back to meet his gaze. I hold it, steady. "I mean that you never have to worry about me leaving you, because I've been in love with you since our freshman year."

My confession leaves him stunned.

"There's no story," I say. "I saw you one day, and I just knew."

Josh stares at me. He looks *inside* of me. And then he kisses me with more passion than he's ever kissed me with before. It gives us the strength to face our future. It gives us the strength to return to our dorm. And it gives us the strength to knock on Nate's door.

Unfortunately, Nate doesn't open it.

Mrs. Wasserstein does.



Chapter nineteen

“I had to catch a flight, and I *still* beat you here. Outstanding.” Mrs. Wasserstein throws up her hands in anger. Nate stands behind her, tense, a prisoner of his own apartment.

Josh is in shock.

“Do you realize what an inconvenience this is?” she continues. “Being called overseas *one week* before the election? Do you even care?” Mrs. Wasserstein is petite, much shorter than I’d realized, though you’d never dwell on it. Her presence is huge. She looks as strong as she does on camera, but – in this moment – far more frightening. She sizes me up with hazel eyes that are startlingly familiar. “And you must be Isla.”

My name sounds as unwelcome as I feel. My eyes drop to the floor. “Hello.”

Josh stands partially in front of me, shielding me. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry, Mom.”

“You will be.”

Nate steps in. “I’m glad you guys made it home safely. Isla—”

“We have an appointment early tomorrow morning with the head of school,” Mrs. Wasserstein says.

A catch in my throat. “All of us?”

“No.” She frowns. “My *son* and I.”

My face burns with the shame of being put in my place.

“Isla,” Nate says, “your appointment is on Tuesday. Why don’t—”

“Thank you for your help,” Mrs. Wasserstein says to him. “I understand that my son has been making your job difficult. I’m sorry to have inconvenienced you like this.”

I get the sense that *she’s* been making his job difficult, but Nate only rubs his shaved head. “It’s what I do. And it’s okay, he’s a good kid.”

She clearly doesn’t believe him. Maybe she would if she knew Mike and Dave. She gives him a brusque nod before turning back to Josh. “We’re leaving.”

His eyes widen. “Where are we going?”

“Your room. We have much to discuss, young man.” She holds open the door and nods again, her farewell to me. “Isla.”

My ribcage is compressing my heart into a tiny, painful stone. As he’s led away, Josh squeezes my hand with the same unbearable force. Our hands let go only when they can no longer reach. There’s a final exchange of anguished expressions, and he’s gone. I’m rigid with silence. Nate sighs.

“We’re in a lot of trouble, aren’t we?” I finally manage.

“You’ll be all right.”

“Will Josh?”

Nate gives me a sad look.

Another horrible thought occurs to me. “Are *my* parents coming? Is that why my appointment isn’t until Tuesday?”

“No. Your appointment is on Tuesday, because tomorrow is a holiday. Remember?”

Tomorrow is the first of November. All Saint’s Day. It’s a national holiday in France, which means that...the head of school is coming in on her day off to speak with Josh.

It’s understood that Josh and I won’t be seeing each other until after his appointment. But that doesn’t stop me from checking my phone for texts every sixty seconds.

I hate my sister. Hate. Her.

If it wasn’t for Hattie, I’d be in Josh’s room right now – and his mother would not – and we’d be planning our Swiss rendezvous. My phone blips. I lunge for it, but the text is from Kurt: *Train timetable says you should have arrived 3 hrs ago.*

I reply: *We did.*

Are you ok?

NO.

A minute later, he knocks on my door. “Why don’t you just push it open, like you always do?” I shout.

Kurt does. “You sound angry.”

“I am.”

“Are you angry with me?”

“Yes.”

He wedges a textbook underneath my door. “I had to, Isla. They asked me.”

“What did Hattie even want?”

“She wanted to borrow your hair dryer.”

“My *hair dryer*?”

“Yeah. The...diffuser? Is that the thing you put on the end? She wanted to try to curl her hair.”

“And she couldn’t borrow one from somebody in her own stupid dorm?”

His left eye twitches. “I don’t know.”

A hair diffuser. I can’t believe this entire situation was caused by a freaking *hair diffuser*. A pirate and a devil stroll past my open door, heading towards the lobby for Résidence Lambert’s annual Halloween party. It’s unfathomable to me that anyone would be in the mood for a celebration.

“Why – for once in your life – couldn’t you just lie? That’s *all* you had to do.”

Kurt pulls up his hoodie. “They asked me a question. I gave them the answer.”

“Yeah, well? Thanks to you? My boyfriend is about to be kicked out of school.”

“That’s not my fault. I didn’t do that. He did that.”

I don’t care that he’s speaking the truth. I don’t care that it’s our fault. It still wouldn’t be happening if Kurt could’ve kept his mouth shut. He’s supposed to be my best friend. I yank out the textbook and hold open the door even wider. “Go. Away.”

He flaps his hands, upset. “Isla.”

I close my eyes. “I can’t deal with you right now. Just go.”

He’s still there. I sense the movement of his hands. I squeeze my eyes tighter, so tight that it hurts, until I feel him brush past me. The stairwell door *clangs* open.

“Boo!” a male voice says.

My eyes pop open. Someone in a *Scream* mask is two inches away from my nose. There’s laughter down the hall as I slam my door shut in the jerk’s face. I collapse into bed. I’m crying again. Maybe Mrs. Wasserstein is here to keep Josh from getting expelled. She’s a powerful woman. I’ll bet even the head of school is scared of her.

I’m scared of her.

She probably blames me for all of this. I wanted to make a good first impression on Josh’s parents. I didn’t know if they’d like me – if they’d think I was exceptional enough for their son – but now I don’t stand a chance. I don’t even know if they were aware of my existence before yesterday.

Josh still hasn’t texted. I’m afraid his mom might be monitoring his phone, so I only text him once more. I keep it short and non-incriminating: I love you.

A few minutes later, there’s a rapid-fire knocking. I spring from my bed and throw open the door. But it’s Hattie. The sight of her fills me with a scarlet rage. She’s wearing an oversize Hawaiian shirt that’s been buttoned up wrong. Her

hair is ratted out in every direction. She has dark under-eye circles, fake bruises, and a pencil-thin moustache.

“What are you supposed to be?” I ask, as calmly as possible. Which isn’t calm at all.

She holds up a piece of cardboard. It’s been painted white, and it has black lines labelled with inches and feet. “I’m a mugshot.”

“Practising for your future?”

“*Oui.*” She just stands there.

“What? What do you want, Hattie?”

“I wanna apologize, jeez.”

I wait.

She waits.

“Was that it?” I ask. “That was your apology?”

“Yeah.”

“Wow. I hope you feel better now. Because I sure do. I feel *so much better* knowing my boyfriend might be expelled because you were *that* impatient for a hair diffuser.”

Her stone expression falters. “I didn’t know I was gonna get you guys in trouble. I’m sorry. I’m really sorry.”

“Me, too.” I slam my door shut.

It pops open. Hattie looks at me with a startled hope until she realizes it was an accident. We scowl at each other as I slam it back shut. I push against it, hard, until I feel the *click* beneath my palms.

The party carries on all night. Josh never texts. I don’t remember falling asleep, but I startle awake around eight in the morning. There’s a swollen hush over the dormitory. Everyone is finally in bed. I was dreaming about the need to catch a train, but I couldn’t stop putting on make-up. I was helpless as I applied layer after sluggish layer, watching the clock tick closer and closer and closer to my departure time.

Two knocks, low on my door.

I jolt into a sitting position. *That’s* what woke me up. That’s his second knock. The sound is heavy and foreboding. I lurch out of bed, but I’m terrified to open the door. I press my ear against the wood.

“*Josh?*” I whisper.

There’s no reply.

I’m gripped by a new fear. He’s already gone. I’m hearing sounds that never existed. I tear open the door, but he’s there – of course he’s there – and he looks devastated. He falls towards the floor. I rush forward, and he collapses into my

arms with a cry that's primal. Screw the rules. Screw this school. I shut the door and lead him to my bed. I cradle his body as he slams and slams his fist against his own leg.

"It's okay." I have to be strong. One of us always has to be strong. "Everything will be okay." I grab his fist and hold it between my hands. I kiss the crown of his head.

"It's not okay."

"You had the meeting?"

"I'm gone. She finally kicked me out."

My bedroom spins. "And...when do you have to be gone by?"

"*This* is my last day. Today."

The world goes black. There's a loud buzzing in my ears. My eyes focus, refocus, refocus like an automatic camera that can't get it right.

"One of the custodians took my mom to get shipping boxes. And then she's coming back, and we're gonna pack up all of my stuff."

Refocus. Refocus. Refocus.

Josh pulls out his hand from mine to claw at me with all ten fingers. "But we'll see each other soon. Thanksgiving. You're still coming home for Thanksgiving, right?"

I nod robotically.

"And then there's winter break. We'll spend every day together, and on New Year's Eve, we'll meet at Kismet for a kiss. At midnight. Okay? And then we'll have spring break, and then it'll be summer again. It'll be over."

I swallow. "What will you do? Where will you finish high school?"

"My mom doesn't want to talk about it until the election is over. They're pissed. My parents are *so pissed*. I had to talk to my dad last night, and then my mom took away my phone. That's why I couldn't call or text you. I'm eighteen, and my *parents* took away my *phone*."

"It's okay. It's okay." I can't stop saying it. "We'll be okay."

There's another knock, and Nate starts talking without preamble. "Josh, I let your mom into your room so that you and Isla could have a few minutes alone. But you need to go up there now."

Even Nate feels sorry for us.

My lie was more severe than I realized. Nothing – absolutely nothing – is okay.



Chapter twenty

The head of school sits behind a desk as intimidating as it is large. Its mahogany is polished, and it carries the scent of musk and wealth. Two flags on indoor poles rest on each side – one American, one French. An overstuffed leather chair sits behind the desk, and two diminutive leather chairs sit before it. I am in one of the diminutive chairs.

“Your grades are slipping,” the head says.

I stare at her.

“Not by much, mind you,” she continues. “But there’s enough of a difference in the quality of your work for more than one of your *professeurs* to have mentioned it to me. They’re concerned. Can you guess when they noticed the change?”

I’m not actually here. I’m still in Josh’s room. Yesterday.

We packed his life into cardboard boxes. His mom was angry at him, angry at me, angry at every call. And she received a lot of calls. There was nothing I wanted more than to be away from that awful room, but I wasn’t about to waste our final hours.

Josh took down the drawings from his walls. He laid them in a box – one on top of another, on top of another. He slipped the drawings of me from the Arènes de Lutèce into a separate, protective envelope. Compared with the number of drawings that he had of his friends, there weren’t many of me yet. We’ve only been together for a month.

How has it only been a month?

“A month ago,” the head says. “That’s when you stopped giving your homework the time and attention that it takes to maintain your position at the top of your class.”

She says this as if being school valedictorian is my singular ambition, when, really, it just happened. There are only twenty-four other seniors – twenty-*three* – and all of them have friends to hang out with and places to go and things to do. I’ve never had anything better to do than study. But for one month...I had

something better to do.

Josh slipped the envelope inside his shoulder bag. It went on the plane with him.

Everything happened so fast. In one day, his room went from chaotic, bursting with art and food and life, to barren. We were only given five minutes to say goodbye. His mother left us in that empty space, and I cried again. Josh used his favourite pen to ink four letters onto the back of my fingers: *L-O-V-E*.

He held my face with both hands. "I love you," he said. "I love you. I love you."

I could hardly see him through my tears. "I love you," I said. "I love you. I love you."

"Isla," the head says. "You're going to meet many boys on this journey. You can't let them distract you from becoming the woman you are meant to become."

She's wrong. There's only one boy.

And who am I to become without him?

I stare at my fingers. The letters are fading, but the word still burns against my flesh.

Beside his mother's waiting car, the letters were sharp and dark. We kissed desperately. Mrs. Wasserstein opened the back door and called to him from the inside. "We're late. Let's go."

His hands gripped mine. "Thanksgiving."

I nodded.

He kissed me again, but this time, it was quick. And then he dropped my hands as if they stung, as if he physically *couldn't* hold them any longer, and he rushed into the car. The windows were tinted black. I couldn't see him, but I watched his window anyway until the car disappeared from view.

The head of school clears her throat. My gaze had drifted towards her window.

"For one month of reckless behaviour? I'm giving you one month of weekday detention. I think you'll agree that it's a fair punishment. In addition, this gives you ample time to recommit to your classwork without any...distractions."

"Josh wasn't a distraction."

The head looks me over carefully. "No," she says, at last. "Perhaps, for you, that was the wrong word. Though I have my concerns about the other way around."

It's a cruel jab. How dare she suggest that I care more about Josh than he cares about me? What could she possibly know about our relationship?

I storm out of her office and into detention. For all of my time spent frequenting its threshold, I've never actually crossed it. But it looks like any

other classroom. There's only one other student here, a sophomore. He doesn't look up from keying his desk. Professeur Fontaine – the computer-science teacher with the triangle-shaped head – is on detention duty. "Pick a seat, any seat," she says. She sounds like a street magician.

I wish I knew where Josh used to sit. I try to conjure his image. A figure with rounded shoulders and a furrowed brow materializes in the back corner. He's pencilling his life into tidy panels. I step into this shadow, wanting to believe in its reality, and take the desk. The window beside us has a view of the school's courtyard, but everyone is gone for the day. Only the cobblestones and pigeons remain.

I never got to read those panels.

What if I'm the one who blew it? What if I can't get into Dartmouth any more? Josh will still get into his college. All he needs is a GED. Perhaps he ruined *this* year, but I might have ruined our next four. If only I could hear his voice again. He made it back to New York this morning, where his mom granted him this single text: *Miss you like crazy. Internet also confiscated. Don't know when we can talk next. I LOVE YOU.*

After detention, I walk straight to the Treehouse. The night air is freezing, and my coat isn't warm enough. I remember Josh placing his own coat around my shoulders – right here on our first date – and cry for the hundredth time. I wrap myself in the blanket and place my hand on his mural. I press my palm against the house with the ivy window boxes and American flag. I press my palm against it so hard that it hurts.

Here, I think. He is here.

I try to be there, too.

"Turn that off." Kurt barges into my room and points at my laptop. "You're supposed to be studying. You need a perfect score on your physics test tomorrow."

"This poll is saying Josh's dad and Terry Robb are locked in a dead heat. It's still too close to predict a winner."

"Stop reading that stuff. The election isn't for five more days." And then he frowns. "Terry Robb. People shouldn't have two first names."

I've finally put in a request to get my door fixed. I'm tired of my privacy being violated. Our friendship is intact, technically, but an unpleasant tension cloaks every interaction. Kurt is unhappy that I'm unhappy. He wants our lives to go back to the way they were, pre-Josh. And I'm unhappy with Kurt. I know he didn't mean for any of this to happen, but it did happen. And he could've stopped it.

As for Hattie, I haven't spoken to her since she was a mugshot. She might as well *be* in prison, for all I care. I've been glued to the news. I downloaded an app that tricks my laptop into thinking I'm in America, because international restrictions were blocking too many important video feeds. Knowing what's happening in the election, minute by minute, is the only way that I feel close to Josh. His dad has to win. And not just for the obvious reasons, but selfishly, I hope it might relax his parents enough so that they'll give him back his phone.

"You," Kurt says. "Physics. Study."

"Don't be such an assjacket."

"Asswaffle," he replies.

"Asspickle."

"Asshopper."

He looks pleased with that last one. My mouth twitches, but I'm still annoyed. To cap off this perfect week, I feel my period coming on. I close my laptop. "Fine. You win. But I'm going to the bathroom first."

"Assroom," I hear him say as I go down the hall. When I return, our game is over. "You missed a call from a two-one-two area code."

"What?" I race to my phone. Someone from Manhattan has left me a voicemail. "Why didn't you answer it?"

"Because that's not my phone."

"What if that was Josh?"

"Then your screen would have said 'Josh' instead of 'unknown caller'."

I barely muffle my scream of frustration. "His phone was taken away! If anyone calls when I'm not here, *answer it*. And if it's Josh, tell him to wait until I *can* get here."

Hey, Isla. My heart splits in two at the sound of his tired voice, which he's attempting to raise above a jumbled commotion of shouting and ringing and clanging. It's, uh, Thursday. I guess it's already night in Paris? I'm calling from a volunteer's desk at election headquarters. This is the first time that I've been left alone near a phone. It's pretty bad here, but... I don't know. None of it even matters. I miss you. I'll try again as soon as I can. A pause. I hope you're all right. Okay, bye. I love you.

I call back. After two rings, a woman with a nasal timbre answers. I hang up.

I listen to the voicemail again. And again. And again and again and again, and I don't know how many times I've listened to it before I realize that Kurt is gone.

A locksmith fixes my door. I never leave my phone.

I turn up the ringer as high as it goes before I shower, and then I keep the

volume there, even in class. My paranoia grows. I can't stop checking it – checking for messages, checking to make sure it's charged, checking to make sure that I haven't accidentally muted it. I want to speak with him so badly I might combust.

On Saturday before dawn, another 212 startles me awake. “Josh?”

“Ohthankgod,” he whispers, exhausted and relieved. “I'm sorry it's so early, but I couldn't sleep. I'm calling you from the kitchen. If my parents catch me, I'm dead. But I had to hear your voice.”

I grasp my phone harder. “I miss you so much.”

“How is it possible that it hasn't even been a week?”

“It feels like a year.”

“How are you? What happened with the head? Were you suspended?”

“No. She gave me detention, because it's my first offence. But it's for the entire month.”

His voice grows heavier. “I'm sorry.”

“The suckiest part? The moment that I have detention, you don't.”

It gets a single glum laugh. “I'd take detention over this.”

“I know.” I soften. “How is it? How are your parents?”

“Pissed off. Busy. They're running me around everywhere with them, but they can hardly even look at me.”

“They'll come around.”

“Maybe.”

One question is weighing on me, heavier than any other. I clutch my necklace for support. “Hey...”

“Yeah?”

“Never mind.”

“Isla. Say it.”

“I was just...did your parents know about me? I know you guys didn't talk often, but I was wondering if you ever mentioned me. Before all of this.” My voice cracks. “I'd hate it if that was your mom's first impression of me.”

His long pause gives me the answer before he does. “I was gonna tell them before Thanksgiving,” he finally says. “I didn't want them asking about you.”

I cry in silence. “Were you worried that they'd think I'm not good enough for you?”

“No. No. I just wanted to keep you for myself. We were in that perfect bubble, you know? Of course they'll like you.”

“I highly doubt that.”

“They will. They know this is my fault. And when the election is over, I'll tell them all about you. How smart you are, and how kind, and—”

“How ambitious? How I have no plans for my future?”

“Isla.”

“Sorry.”

“No, I’m sorry. I should’ve told them.” There’s another pause. “Did your parents know about me?”

“Of course.”

Josh exhales.

“They were looking forward to meeting you.”

“And now they aren’t.” He gives a sad little snort. “You worry about *my* parents, but I’m the one who was expelled.” Suddenly, his voice grows lower. “Someone’s moving around. I gotta go I love you bye.”

I don’t even get to say “I love you” back.

On Monday after detention, I find him in the background of some photographs taken over the weekend at a Brooklyn YMCA, a last-chance campaigning effort. He’s tall and handsome and smiling. He looks *almost* like my boyfriend. I can tell that his smile – no doubt convincing to others – is forced. There are no dimples.

“I didn’t wake you up this time, did I?” he asks. The call arrives in the dead of night. There’s a racket of people in the background, a general buzz of stress and excitement. Headquarters again. The election is only hours away.

“No.” I hug my pillow, wishing it were him. “Getting sleepy, but I’m still reading.”

“That’s my girl. What’s the subject tonight?”

“Orchid hunting. Did you know it was a surprisingly dangerous occupation?”

“Maybe *that’s* your future career.” A real smile creeps into his voice. “Orchid hunter. And I’ll join you on the expeditions. We can wear those khaki hats with mosquito nets.”

“How is it over there?” I ask.

“I’d rather be hunting orchids.”

“I hope your dad wins.”

“Me, too. Otherwise he’ll be intolerable for at least six months.” The sort-of joke falls flat, and he sighs. “Speaking of. Guess who’s sending a camera crew to my polling station? Guess who’ll be on the morning news?”

“Guess who’ll be glued to CNN’s live stream, hoping to catch a glimpse?”

“Guess who’ll be in class when it happens?”

“Oh.” My heart sinks. “Right.”

“Don’t worry, it’ll be uploaded to my dad’s website. Aaaaaand my mom’s back.”

“I love you!” I say.

“I love you, too.” Josh laughs in surprise. “Thanks for the enthusiasm.”

“I didn’t get to say it last time.”

“Ah, well. From now on” – and I hear his smile grow into a dimple-bearing grin – “let’s start with it.”



Chapter twenty-one

When school ends, I duck into a bathroom stall. I have ten minutes before I need to be in detention. I yank out my laptop from my bag. The race is still way too early for any of the poll numbers to be in, but I quickly scroll down the senator's website. *There*. The video.

Josh enters the polling station with his parents. He's cleaned up, as in...he looks *clean-cut*. He's wearing a suit that fits so well it must have been tailored just for him. He smiles and waves at the cameras. His parents exit their booths. "Who did you vote for?" somebody shouts, and Josh's dad says, "Was I supposed to vote in there? I thought I was placing a to-go order for breakfast!" Hardy-har.

It cuts back to Josh. He enters a booth while his parents look on proudly. A female reporter with large teeth shoves a microphone at Josh upon his exit. "How does it feel to vote for your father for the first time?"

"Surreal." Josh flashes the camera a startling amount of charm. "It feels great."

He's not lying. And even though I understand that this *is* a genuinely remarkable moment in his life, it's...it's as if I were looking at a stranger. I rewatch the segment and pause it as he answers the reporter's question. I touch his image onscreen.

If we hadn't gone to Barcelona, he'd be back in Paris in twenty-four hours.

I push the thought down and away. Because if we hadn't gone to Barcelona, we also wouldn't have Parc Güell. Or a moonlit hotel room.

When detention ends, I run straight to my bedroom. I scour the internet, but the earliest poll numbers all read the same. The race is neck and neck.

Kurt shows up, and – to my surprise – he shuts the door behind him. "*Bœuf bourguignon suivi d'un clafoutis aux poires*. For you." He sets down a plastic cafeteria tray onto my desk. "I didn't know what to do, so I took the whole thing."

His embarrassment is touching, somehow. The still-warm dinner and pear

dessert both smell intoxicating. “Thank you.”

He pushes back his hoodie. “Nate said I could wait up with you so long as no one else ever finds out, under penalty of beheading. But I don’t think he’d actually behead us.”

My breath is bottling up inside my chest.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t lie for you,” he says. “And I’m sorry that Josh is gone.”

I tackle him with a hug. It feels like the old days, even though we spend the night combing through the news instead of doing homework. Kurt crashes after midnight, but the race is too close for me to sleep. It’s still early in the States. A live feed plays softly, volume turned down. Predicted winners from all across America are announced one after another. At two in the morning, I’m given a six seconds of joy when it shows a clip from the Wasserstein headquarters.

Josh is standing beside his mother and father and a few hundred red, white and blue balloons. The camera moves, and the balloons obscure his face. The feed switches to the gubernatorial race in Florida. An hour later, my eyes are barely open when I hear the newsmen with the bad toupee say, “And in the closest race of the night, New York senator Joseph Wasserstein is still fighting to hold on to his seat.”

I lean in towards the screen. As they watch the tallies, Mrs. Wasserstein still looks fresh and cheerful – ever the supportive wife – although I assume a make-up artist has given her a touch-up. The senator seems a bit haggard, but he’s keeping a brave face.

Josh looks exhausted and annoyed. I hope his parents don’t see this footage later.

Still...this is *my* Josh. Not the stranger from before. A tense-looking man, perhaps the campaign manager, whispers something into his ear, and Josh stands up straighter. The man must have told him that he’s on TV. The camera cuts away.

The news drones on. My burst of adrenalin fades.

I wake up to my morning alarm. Kurt is gone, and the covers have been neatly tucked around me. There’s a one-word note beside my pillow: VICTORY.

I have severely underestimated Josh’s parents. In the wake of the senator’s success, I imagined – at the very least – that they’d allow their son a celebratory phone call. No such luck. I wish I could tell Josh how happy I am for his family. I wish I could tell Josh *anything*. I’ve never before felt this helpless or cut off.

Two days later, the biggest morning news programme in New York has an exclusive with Senator Wasserstein. I find the link on his website, of course. The

interview is standard political fluff, but the background. Well. It's captivating.

It's Josh's house.

The camera follows his dad from the dining room into the living room. Everything is impeccably decorated, though perhaps too orderly. Delicate china plates hang in patterns on the walls. Extravagant vases are stuffed with seasonal grasses and pheasant feathers. It's hard to imagine anyone living here. Mrs. Wasserstein joins him on the sofa beneath a prominently displayed, seemingly out-of-place oil painting of the Saint-Michel *métro* station – an Art Nouveau beauty that's heaped in chained bicycles and dull graffiti. A teenaged boy languishes against one of the bike racks. It's St. Clair. Josh painted this portrait of his friend last year. I saw it drying inside our school's studio.

The interviewer, a beaky woman with shiny pale lips, knowingly asks about it, and Josh's parents gush about their son's promising future. It's a jarring response. I've always assumed that the rift between Josh and his parents was caused by his desire to pursue a career in the arts, but their praise and support seems genuine.

"He gets it from his mother," the senator says, beaming at his wife.

"His appreciation for art, yes," she says. "But the talent is all his own."

The interview flashes back to the polling station footage – Josh, so handsome, so charming – and when it returns, he's joined them. My heart picks up speed. It's that odd, clean-cut look again. An inexplicable pressure mounts inside of me.

The interviewer smiles, nosy and ominous. "We've heard that after that clip aired, young ladies flooded your father's office with inquiries about you. What do you think will happen now that they know not only are you easy on the eyes, but you're also an artistic genius?"

What?

Josh laughs politely. "I'm not sure."

"Tell us." She leans towards him. "New York is dying to know. Do you have a girlfriend?"

He pauses before giving another modest laugh. "Uh, no. Not at the moment."

My ears ring. I rewind, heart reeling.

Uh, no. Not at the moment.

A dark churning rumbles in my gut. I blink. And then again. Pinprick stars obliterate my vision as they replay a clip from election night. It's the one where Josh looks miserable, but now the interviewer says he looks *nervous* because he *cares so much* about his dad, and how it'll be a *lucky lady* who lands such a *compassionate young bachelor*. "You won't be single for long," she teases, and his parents chuckle.

Rewind. *Uh, no. Not at the moment.*

You won't be single for long.

Chuckle chuckle.

I reach for my phone and actually scream as I remember that I can't call him. I do it anyway. No answer. I send a text: *CALL ME.*

Kurt receives a second text: *911.*

"What's the matter? What happened?" he asks, two minutes later. He's out of breath.

I gesture frantically at my laptop. "Watch that. Tell me...what...just watch it!"

When it's over, his brow furrows. "When did you guys break up?"

"We didn't!"

"So why would he say that?"

"I don't know! You tell me."

His shrug is helpless. "You're asking the wrong person."

"No, there has to be a rational reason. Tell me! Tell me before I completely lose it!"

"Stop shouting." Kurt pulls up his hoodie. "Is it possible that he broke up with you, and you didn't realize it? People are confusing. They say one thing and mean the other."

"I would definitely be aware of Josh breaking up with me."

"Maybe...I don't know. Maybe his dad wants to work this as a new angle for popularity. But he's already won the election, so I doubt—"

"Of course!" I throw my arms around him. "Of course it's his father's idea."

But Kurt isn't convinced. I spend the next half-hour talking him through it, building my case, but by the time he leaves in fatigued irritation, even I don't believe it. What if Josh panicked because this sudden influx of interest – *Why the hell didn't I know about this sudden influx of interest?* – has him curious about other girls? And who *are* these other girls, anyway?

I type his name into a search engine, click on the most recent results, and discover him in the comments of several different websites, including the home page of that infuriating morning news programme. My spirit plummets even lower. They're the typical boy-crazy, stalker-y comments that one usually finds online, but this time they're different. This time they're talking about *my boyfriend*.

At one a.m., my phone finally rings. My hands shake with anxiety and anger.

"I love you," Josh says.

I'm thrown.

"Are you there? Isla?"

“Hi.” I say it cautiously.

“I thought we were starting every call with ‘I love you’ now.”

“I – I saw the interview.”

“Yeah.” He sighs. “I figured. My mom told me that you texted. She said I could call you to explain. I’m using her phone.”

There’s hope in my heart, but my voice cracks anyway. “Why did you say that?”

“I’m sorry.” His voice turns anguished. “I wanted to warn you, but I couldn’t. I said I was single, because I didn’t want to drag you into all of this.”

“I’m the girlfriend of a senator’s son. No one gives a crap about me.”

“You’d be surprised,” he says darkly. “I didn’t think anyone gave a crap about me, either.”

“So...it’s true? Girls are really calling for you?”

“Ugh. Yeah. Sort of. It’s weird. I wish they’d stop.”

Something glass, maybe a bottle, shatters on the pavement outside my window. A group of students drunkenly crack up. “So why wouldn’t you want to say you’re taken? It’s not like you had to give them my name and social security number.”

“I didn’t mean to hurt you.” He sounds pained. “That’s the last thing I want. I was trying to protect you, I was trying to keep you in the *good* part of my life.”

“But I want to be in all of it. Ugly parts included.”

“You sure about that? Because I have a lot of ugly parts.”

“Everyone does.”

“What are yours?”

“I get jealous when I think about other girls liking my boyfriend.”

“I get jealous when I think about Sébastien. And all of the guys at school who still get to see you every day.”

I snort. “You can stop worrying. No one is interested in me.”

“Nikhil likes you.”

I’m startled. “What?”

“Nikhil Devi. I overheard him talking about you to one of his friends once.”

Nikhil is the younger, nerdier brother of Rashmi and Sanjita. Not that I’m in any position to judge. He’s a sophomore this year. “That’s weird. What’d he say?”

Josh laughs once. “Oh, so you can leave me for him?”

“Yeah.”

“Nikhil likes your caboose.”

“I take it back. I didn’t want to know that.”

He laughs again.

“I’ve missed your laugh. I miss *you*.” I want to reach through our phones and touch his hand on the other side. “Thirteen days until I’m home. How will we survive?”

Josh sucks in his breath, and there’s a long and terrible pause. “That’s...the other thing I got permission to call you about.”

Oh, no. Please. No.

“My family has been invited to Thanksgiving dinner at the White House.”

The...what now?

“Isla?”

“The White House,” I say.

“Yeah.”

“As in, where the president lives? That White House?”

“Yeah.”

“Ha,” I choke out. “Ha!”

“It’s insane. I mean, a ton of families were invited, not just us. But still.”

“My *boyfriend* was invited to the *White House*.”

“Your boyfriend – who was expelled from high school – was invited to the White House.”

I begin laughing for real.

“My dad used to know the president, back in the day.”

I laugh harder. And I’m crying.

“Oh, Isla.” It sounds like his heart is breaking through the receiver. Whenever he says my name, he takes a part of my soul. I want him to say it again. “Please tell me that you know I’d give anything not to attend this dinner.”

“I guess it’s hard to say no to the White House.”

“Impossible.”

“What about winter break?”

“New York, I swear.”

I pick at a loose thread on my map quilt, a green thread that belongs to Central Park. “You’re sure you won’t be invited back for Christmas?”

“We’re Jewish.”

Shit. “I’m sorry. I know that.”

“I know you do.”

“I’m just upset. I feel so far away from you.”

“I know.” And his voice disappears into the ether. “Me, too.”



Chapter twenty-two

“You look sad to be home,” Maman says with her light accent. She just made a fuss over Hattie’s wild, self-trimmed hair, and she’s gearing up for a second fuss over me.

The cab pulls away with Kurt still inside, headed the final two blocks to his house. Dad picks up my suitcase in one hand and Hattie’s in the other, and we trundle upstairs to our landing. Our house smells like pumpkin bread. Maman has decorated everything in leaves and acorns and gourds. A garland of ribbons and red berries wraps around the bannister leading upstairs, and beeswax candles glow inside every room. Maman loves the holidays. And she loves having all three of her daughters at home.

“I’m not sad,” I assure her, thinking about the airport. Josh departed a mere two hours before our arrival. The timing still feels freshly cruel.

“You are. And you’re never the sad one.”

“When does Gen get in?”

She tuts at my obvious evasion but cheers as she answers. “Late tonight. Just in time for Thanksgiving Day.” Hattie shoots past us and slams her door shut, and Maman grows mournful again. “*Oh, mon b b s*. You will not ruin your beautiful hair, *non?*”

“No, Maman,” I say.

She’s the only family member without red hair – though, scientifically speaking, she must carry the gene somewhere – and this has made her overly protective of ours. Her own hair is the colour of coffee beans. Maman and I do share the same height and the same upturned nose. Gen is tiny like us, while Hattie takes after our dad, tall and slim with sharp features. But Dad’s the only one with a scruffy, burnt-orange beard.

“A package arrived for you this morning,” he says. My father is generally mellow, so the way he announces this news is peculiar. It’s hesitant. Maybe even a tad hostile. “I put it in your bedroom.”

My brow furrows. “What kind of package?”

“It was delivered by courier. I think it’s from Joshua.”

Joshua. I’m getting the sense that he does not like this *Joshua*, but my entire being perks up. “Really? I wasn’t expecting anything.”

“The box is heavy.”

I’m already bolting upstairs.

“He is still your boyfriend, *oui?*” Maman says, and I grind to a halt. “Because we saw him on television saying that he does not have a girlfriend. I do not like this, *Isla.*”

I frown. “He was protecting me. Josh didn’t want the press to hassle me.”

She shrugs, slow and full-bodied. “It sounded like he was looking for tail.”

“Tail? *Oh mon dieu.*” I can’t believe she’s forcing me to defend this. I haven’t even been home for five minutes.

“Why didn’t he deliver the box himself?” Dad asks. “He’s been in this city for three whole weeks, but he can’t be bothered to introduce himself to your parents? It’s the least he could do after what he’s put us through.”

“What he’s put *you* through?” I throw my hands into the air. “No, forget it. I’m not going over this with you again. And he sent a courier because he had a plane to catch. To go to the *White House*. To have dinner with the *president*. Remember?”

“It’d still be the polite thing to do,” Dad says.

“Why? So you can harass him about school?”

“We do want to know what his plans are for the future, yes.”

“Do you even hear yourself?”

Maman cuts back in. “We just want to meet this boy who is so important to you.”

“You’ll meet him next month.” And I storm the rest of the way upstairs.

“Will we?” Dad calls up. “*Will we?*”

In spite of everything, I’d been looking forward to coming home. Now I’m not so sure. My energy levels are at an all-time low. It’s taken everything I have to maintain my grades – *Dartmouth* – and, even though we’re okay, things still aren’t back to normal with Kurt. I’m in detention so much that we hardly see each other. Josh has sneaked in a few more calls, here and there, but it’s harder now because his mom is less distracted now that the election is over.

And Dad harassing me about Josh’s future is particularly stressful, because the last time we talked, Josh said his mom wants him to finish the year at a private school in DC. When I suggested he take the GED instead, he replied, “Why would I waste my time when they’re just gonna put me in another stupid school anyway?”

I changed the subject after that.

My bedroom smells uninhabited and clean, that vacant scent it carries whenever I come home from abroad. A large box is in the centre of my floor. I don't recognize the return address, and there's no name, but it's unquestionably Josh's exquisite handwriting. My pulse quickens. I slice through the tape with a pair of scissors, peel back the flaps, and cry out in a grateful sort of agony. *This air smells like him.*

On the top is a dark blue T-shirt, one of his favourites. He wore it on the first day of school this year. I press my nose against its cotton. *Citrus, ink, him.* My knees weaken. I hug it to my chest as I examine the contents below. The rest of my body weakens.

Boarding School Boy, bound in string.

There's a note slipped underneath the manuscript's binding. I LOVE YOU. I love that he starts with this even in his letter. I'M SORRY THAT I CAN'T BE WITH YOU IN PERSON, BUT I HOPE THAT YOU'LL ACCEPT THIS PATHETIC SUBSTITUTE. I'VE SPENT ALL WEEK SCANNING AND PRINTING THE PAGES. I'VE NEVER SHOWN THE WHOLE THING TO ANYONE BEFORE. I'M NOT DONE, BUT HERE'S WHAT I HAVE SO FAR. I HOPE YOU STILL LIKE ME AFTER YOU'VE SEEN THE UGLY PARTS. YOURS, J.

My eyes well with tears of happiness. I want to climb into bed with it this instant, but I have to wait. I want privacy. I don't want to be interrupted mid-read. I place Josh's shirt beside my pillow, but I push the box into my closet. My parents aren't the snooping type, but anything left out in the open is considered fair game.

I spend the rest of the day with them. When they inquire about the box, I give them a vague "Oh, you know. It was a care package. A letter, a shirt." But as soon as dinner is over, I claim jet lag and retire. I drag out the box to the side of my bed, switch on a lamp, and crawl beneath the covers. I'd wear the T-shirt, but I don't want to lose his scent. I snuggle with it instead. And then I untie the string and remove the first page.

The book is divided, as it was in his dorm room, into four sections beginning with freshman. Josh has drawn himself as skinny and naive, slack-jawed, as he takes in his new surroundings. He finds Paris equal parts intimidating and awe inspiring, but little time passes before he falls into homesickness. It's not that he misses his actual home – not the flights between cities, the endless campaigning, the neglectful parents. He misses the life that he glimpsed when he was younger. The cabin and the pine trees. A family in one place. He recognizes almost immediately that instead of trading in two lives for one, he now has three. And

it's too late.

A single-panel page: him in the corner, small and crouched, looking up at home, while the rest of the page – where home is supposed to be – is a blank space. He misses somewhere that doesn't exist. And he knows that Paris will not fill the void.

He *tries* to fill it by throwing himself into his art. He befriends St. Clair in their studio art class. St. Clair is a year older, but he's attracted to Josh's natural talent while Josh is attracted to St. Clair's natural charisma. At night, Josh lies awake in bed, rehashing things his new friend has said or done, hoping to learn from him. Emulate him. The pages are sad and sweet and full of humiliating truths.

St. Clair has a bushy-haired friend named Meredith, and Josh befriends her, too, and the three of them are uncannily reminiscent of Harry, Ron and Hermione. St. Clair is the leader, Josh is the clown, and Meredith is the brainiac. But in this version, Hermione is clearly in love with Harry.

The scenes with his friends are fun. They feel like characters, not like the real people that I used to see around school. Though they do trigger that accompanying, always-underlying twinge of hurt. I'll never know this part of his life. But the scenes where Josh is alone, he becomes *Josh* again, and everything is heightened. I pour over these panels with an intensity that makes me feel uncomfortable, maybe guilty, but the harder the scenes are to read, the faster I turn the pages. Josh thinks about girls *constantly*. He sees a beautiful, too-tall French girl on the street, and I'm horrified to flip the page and find him masturbating back in his room to the thought of her. Over the summer, he gets his first kiss with an older girl who works at his favourite comics shop in Manhattan, but the next time he goes to see her, she brushes him off in embarrassment.

It took guts to draw these things. It's a different kind of excruciating to read about them.

SOPHOMORE begins. St. Clair starts dating a girl named Ellie. She's two years older than Josh, and he struggles with feeling cool enough to hang out with them. He and Meredith swap unkind words about Ellie – each out of a different type of jealousy – but his eventual coming to terms with Ellie means getting to know *her* best friend.

Rashmi Devi.

She's pretty and smart and sarcastic. And I hate her. She flirts with Josh one day in their art class – *of course* she can draw, when I can't – and he becomes consumed by thoughts of her. Page after page of Rashmi shining like a gorgeous Hindu goddess. They go on for ever. He woos her pathetically, desperately, until

she agrees to go on a date with him. And then I'm forced to relive the painful moments of *my* past as they engage in on-the-page PDA.

It gets worse. Josh tells her that he loves her. She says it back. He touches her. She touches him back. And then they're losing their virginity on the floor of her bedroom beside her pet rabbit, Isis.

A rabbit.

Josh literally lost his virginity in front of a metaphor for sex.

There's another single-panel page, and this time Rashmi has been drawn naked like the ancient Egyptian goddess Isis, who – it turns out – is the goddess of *fertility*, and she's holding her pet rabbit, and she's surrounded by more rabbits, and *enough with the stupid rabbits and fertility and sex already*.

Ohmygod. I *hate* rabbits.

And I feel ill and furious, but there's no way I'm stopping now. It's masochism. There's a weird, out-of-place flashback to Josh getting his tattoo. It doesn't make sense. But it's probably because he was so eager to draw more naked pictures of his girlfriend that he figured the story of his own body modification could wait. Or whatever. I grab the next stack of pages from the box and realize, at some point, that I've pushed his T-shirt onto my floor. I don't pick it up.

Finally, Josh and Rashmi are fighting. And it's nasty. She's pissed because he's skipping school, and he lashes back at her in full force. I relish his anger. And I feel vindicated because *I* never yelled at him for skipping class to work on this book. Though maybe I would've if I'd known what was in here. But then the school year ends, and he flies out to join her family at their vacation home in Delhi.

He once told me that he'd spent "some time" with her family one summer, but...an entire month? In India? No wonder he knew so much about Sanjita. Somehow, the idea of Josh spending an entire month with the Devi family hurts almost as much as the rabbit.

JUNIOR begins without any mention of Josh's time in New York. His parents were everywhere in the beginning, but they've almost entirely disappeared. It's a strange omission.

School kicks off, and St. Clair moons over Ellie's absence, even though she's attending a college nearby. Anna shows up. I remember watching her in the cafeteria that first week of school, seething with jealousy because she made the leap to their table so effortlessly. I wanted her luck. I wanted her confidence.

And then, suddenly, Josh is alone.

St. Clair gets a crush on Anna. He's torn between her and Ellie, and he spends so much time running between them that he hardly has time left for Josh. And

the more time that Josh spends alone, the more he realizes how alone he actually is. All of his friends will be gone the next year. Josh grows increasingly antagonistic towards school, which makes Rashmi increasingly antagonistic towards him, which makes him increasingly antagonistic towards her. And she's upset because Ellie dropped her as a friend, and Meredith is upset because now St. Clair likes *two* girls who aren't her, and Anna is upset because St. Clair is leading her on, and *then* St. Clair's mom gets *cancer*.

It's a freaking soap opera.

As the drama between his friends grows, Josh pulls away and into himself. His illustrations become darker. The slack-jawed freshman is long gone, the oversexed sophomore has disappeared, and now he's a sullen junior. His parents briefly, randomly, appear to hassle him about the election. He wants to break up with Rashmi, but he's too depressed to find the energy. He stops drawing and skips class to sleep. The head of school – having called him into her office for the hundredth time – tells him, “I think you're passively trying to get me to kick you out. So I'm not going to.”

I've never thought about their actual interactions. I'm shocked as the head pulls out his records and informs him that he had the highest pre-acceptance test scores that she'd seen in years. He's the brightest student in our class.

Josh is the brightest student. Not me.

I'm ashamed to admit that this hurts. It definitely hurts. And yet...I've always known it to be true. I've always known that he's been putting on an act. That he can see through the bullshit, and he's not willing to participate in it. It's one of the reasons I was attracted to him in the first place.

“For a certain type of person, high school will always be brutal,” the head says. “The best advice that I can give you is to figure out what comes next, and work towards that.”

The following scene shows him in detention. My skin flushes when I see him hunched over in the back corner of the classroom beside the window overlooking the courtyard with the pigeons.

I *have* been sitting at his desk. I knew it. Somehow, I knew it.

Josh throws himself back into his work. He wants to lose himself in it...and maybe find himself in return. But when St. Clair breaks up with Ellie, St. Clair's new-found joy with Anna only further cements Josh in solitary misery. And by the time Josh and Rashmi break up, they both know it's coming, and they're both ready. They're exhausted. Too tired to keep fighting. He begins travelling to other countries every weekend – in secret and alone – separating himself from his friends before they can do it to him.

And then it's summer. *Our* summer.

My heart is hammering as I grab the last stack from the box. On the first page, he's alone inside Kismet. And then I'm on the second, shouting his name and startling him out of a waking slumber. There's a dreamlike tone here. It mirrors both how I acted and how he reacted. I cringe at everything I say, but the way he draws me is like a beacon of light.

There's a flashback to our freshman year, and his brushstrokes become softer. He sees me reading Joann Sfar. He tries to talk to me, but he's a bumbling idiot. And then *I'm* the one who gives him a crazy look.

The story returns to Kismet. Josh realizes that I'm flirting with him, which he finds puzzling and hilarious. But also pleasing. He walks me to my door and then hurries home to draw me again – the garden-rose-halo illustration – before falling asleep. The next night, he returns to the café and discovers me with Kurt. He curses, drags himself home, and then he's back in DC, where he spends a miserable summer dreading his senior year.

The last few pages are loose, rough sketches of his first day of school. Hard to follow. His interactions with me are flattering, but the messy panels make it feel less concrete. Like the ideas inside of them are still subject to change.

And then...I'm out of pages. The box is empty.



Chapter twenty-three

I'm filled with too many strong emotions at once. Jealousy. Sadness. Anger. There's certainly an acknowledgement, though it's unreasonably begrudging, of the fearlessness it took for him to create this, but the negative thoughts keep shoving their way to the top. They sour the positive. I thought I knew my boyfriend, but it turns out that I had only an out-of-focus snapshot. Now I have the full picture.

Josh had...this entire *life* before me.

How can something so obvious be so shocking?

And Rashmi. I knew she'd be in there, but how could I know *all* of her would be in there? I didn't want to see her. With Josh. Like that. It's not fair that I've seen it, because I'll never be able to un-see it.

I kick at my sheets. I'm thinking about rabbits. I'm thinking about too-tall French girls. I'm thinking about Josh thumbing his nose at an education that I've chosen to take seriously. It's never bothered me before. Why is it bothering me now? I toss and turn for hours until I'm jolted awake – out of a restless sleep I didn't even know I'd succumbed to – by a flying leap. An oddly fuzzy sister is bouncing up and down on my bed.

“Wake up!” Gen bounces the bed harder. “Hattie and I are already dressed and coffee'd. Those balloons won't make fun of themselves.”

Great. Because this is exactly what today needs. A parade.

Our house is on the wrong side of Broadway to see or hear the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, but it only takes a few minutes to walk someplace where we can witness the grotesque spectacle first-hand. My sisters and I have a tradition of poking around the parade's outskirts in the early hours of daylight.

My head is throbbing from crying all night long. “I don't feel well.”

“You have to get up so Maman will stop bugging me about my hair.”

Her orange-red fuzz is about two inches long. It sticks out in a thick sphere around her head. “You look like a corgi,” I say. “Are you growing it back out?” But Gen is rifling through the papers on my bed. I lunge between her and the

manuscript.

“Did Josh draw this?”

I snatch at the paper that’s still in her hands. “Give it!”

“Jeez, calm down. I just wanna see.” She extends her arm, holding it as far away from me as she can. “Wow. What is all of this?”

“Please.” I’m on the verge of tears.

Gen looks at me, startled. She hands it back slowly. “Sorry.”

“It’s just...it’s private. Don’t tell Hattie, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Seriously. You know how she is.”

“Yes, darling. I *seriously* won’t tell her about your *seriously* weird reaction to something I *seriously* don’t understand.”

I clutch my pillow against my chest. She stares at me for a long time. Finally, she stands and heads for my door. “Five minutes.”

“I’m not going. I don’t feel good.”

“It’s not optional.”

When Gen wants something, it’s impossible to stop her. I know better than to try. I place the manuscript back into the box. I’m careful not to crease the pages – any more than they’re already creased – but I don’t bother putting them in order. I shove the box back into my closet, throw on some clothes, and meet my sisters at the door.

Hattie frowns. “What’s up with you?”

“Leave her alone,” Gen says.

“Your hat clashes with your gloves,” Hattie says to me. “And they look even worse with that coat. Won’t you, like, *die* or something if you don’t look perfect?”

I pull down the woollen hat further over my eyes. Gen links her arm through mine and marches me outside before I can change my mind. Or my outfit. Hattie trudges behind us.

The feeling in New York in the autumn is what you’d expect elsewhere in the spring. Renewal. Locals are happy to be outside again. The subways have cooled, the humid stench of summer has passed. Celebrations and festivals are everywhere. The air is crisp, and its accompanying scarves and boots are a comforting return. I try to appreciate my surroundings. I search for yellow or orange or golden leaves, my own favourite aspect of the season, but the branches are already bare. I’m too late. Everything is dead.

Gen chatters away about her life in Massachusetts while Hattie interjects with colourful commentary. I don’t really pay attention. We cross Columbus, and the streets grow crowded with families and dancers and cheerleaders and police

officers. Several marching bands are warming up – there’s a hum of brass, staccato drills on snare drums, and airy scales on woodwinds. The enormous Horton the Elephant balloon peeks out from behind a building, a street ahead, and its trunk is holding a bright pink flower.

“Cheer up,” Gen says to me. “I’ve signed you up to walk the route with them this year.” She points at a group of dancers in blue cowboy chaps and goofy fringed vests.

At least a dozen horrifying clowns in tattered rainbow jumpsuits pop into the drugstore beside us. “Over there,” I say. “They’re looking for you, Gen. They need you.”

“Have you seen those tap-dancing Christmas trees? They asked if you’d swing back around and have a second go with them. You won’t be too tired, right? I mean, I already paid for your tinsel pants.”

“I’m glad you guys didn’t sign me up for anything,” Hattie says. “Because it’s really awesome doing nothing.”

I shoot her an annoyed look. When Gen sees that I’m still not willing to fulfil my usual role as peacekeeper, she steps in. I sink back into myself. Back into the manuscript. I can’t erase this image from my mind: Rashmi, covered in rabbits. The Kermit balloon floats out from behind another building, and I think about rabbits. We get cold and walk home, and I think about rabbits. Maman calls us into the kitchen, and I help her make crescent rolls. Rabbits. I help her set the table. Rabbits. The turkey is carved, the drinks are poured, the toast is made. Rabbits, rabbits, rabbits. The plates are cleared, the mashed potato and gravy remains are scraped into the trash can. My boyfriend loses his virginity, and, oh, who’s that looking on?

It’s a rabbit.

My family parks around the television for a feel-good movie. I’m still thinking about rabbits an hour later, when I hear the faint sound of my phone ringing inside my bedroom. My heart catapults into my throat. I sprint upstairs and barely catch it in time.

“I love you,” Josh says. “Hold on.” There’s laughter and loud voices, and then the sucking sound of a sliding door being shut. “Okay, I’m on a patio. Or a private balcony. Or something. Actually, I don’t know where the hell I am.”

“But you’re at the White House?”

“Yeah.”

Rabbit.

“I know,” he says, when I don’t say anything. “It’s weird. I’m sorry.”

“No, it’s not that.” *Rabbit rabbit.* “I’m just tired. It’s been a long day.”

“My mom said I could call you. I’m using her phone again.”

“So, um. How is it?”

“Did you get my package?” he asks over my question. I can practically hear his sweat dripping into the receiver.

“I did. I read it last night. It was great.”

There’s a long, dead pause. “Wow.” His voice is as dull as my delivery. “That didn’t sound convincing even to you, did it?”

“No. I just—” And then I burst into tears, hating myself.

“What’s the matter?” He turns panicked. “What is it? Which part?”

“No. It’s good.” I can’t stop crying.

“Please,” he begs. “Don’t. Listen, I know I was a dick to Rashmi, especially when we fought, but I swear that won’t happen with us. It’s so different with you. I would never be like that with you.” It’s the fastest I’ve ever heard him speak. “I was younger, and I was so much stupider—”

“It wasn’t the fighting. It was…” My tears explode into gut-wrenching sobs. “*The rabbits.*”

“Rabbits?” But his confusion is only momentary. “Oh. *Oh.*”

“Why would you draw those things? Why would you show them to me?”

“I-I didn’t think it would be that big of a deal—”

“You didn’t think it would be a big deal for me to see your ex-girlfriend *naked*? To learn the explicit details of you guys losing your virginity together?”

“I don’t know.” He’s reached a full panic now. “I wrote about it because it happened. And I shared it with you, because I wanted to be honest with you. I wanted to show you everything. *The ugly parts, too*, remember?”

“Well. Maybe not everything belongs in a book.”

“I’m sorry. Ohmygod. I’m so sorry, Isla.”

I don’t say anything. It’s unfair, but I’m hurt. I want him to hurt, too.

“Please don’t hang up. What about the end, the part with you? How was that?”

“Yeah, those eight whole pages were fine.” I regret the words the moment they leave my mouth. I’ve never said anything more selfish in my life. It’s not like he’s even had time to draw us yet. It takes for ever to do the kind of work he does. He shared something personal with me, and I threw it in his face.

His silence is terrible.

“I shouldn’t have said that. I’m sorry.” Tears and snot are rolling down my face. “Your book is great, really.”

Josh snorts, but now he’s crying. My guilt quadruples.

“It is. It just caught me off guard. I *know* what you draw. I should’ve known what would be in there. We shouldn’t even be talking about this, I should be telling you about all of the parts that I loved—”

“And now you’re apologizing to me, and that’s insane.”

“It’s not!” I clutch my phone harder. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

There’s no reply.

“Hello? Josh? *Hello?*”

“My mom is calling me. Shit. They’re about to serve dessert or something.”

“No!”

“Do you still love me?” His panic rises again. “You didn’t say it when you answered.”

I pull out a handful of tissues from a box. “Of course I do!”

“I can’t believe I have to hang up right now.”

“Don’t go. I love you.”

“I’ll call you back as soon as I can.” And the line goes dead.

Like the sucker I am, I stay beside my phone all night hoping that *soon* means “soon”. It doesn’t. How could I have lashed out at him like that? He trusted me. He bared his soul, and I held it against him. I hate this. I hate that I hurt him. And I hate that I’m still upset about his work, and I *really* hate that I’m gonna have to pretend like I’m not.

I keep the box in my closet, hoping for an out-of-sight, out-of-mind experience, but it’s impossible. It’s the *only* thing on my mind. By Saturday night, I still haven’t heard from him. Fear of my wrongdoing reaches a critical peak. I have to do something. I add a small peace offering to the box and carry it to the Wasserstein residence, using the return address already on the package. The weight of the box is heavy, burdensome. But it still doesn’t take me long to get there.

Their brownstone looks similar to the others on the street – beautiful, old and well kept. They have miniature evergreens and ivy in the window boxes, an American flag hanging from the second storey, an autumn wreath on the door, and a silver filigree mezuzah affixed to the door frame. The curtains are drawn.

I knock, hoping for an answer from the Secret Service or whatever organization it is that watches over this nation’s more famous senators. No one answers. I knock again, and a stocky man with broad shoulders, stylish grey hair, and a security earpiece opens the door. “May I help you?” His voice is as solid and sturdy as his appearance.

“Isla Martin.” My own voice trembles. “I’m Josh’s girlfriend. From France? I know he won’t be home until tomorrow, but that’s when I’m leaving, so I was hoping you could pass this along to him.”

“I know who you are.”

“You *do?*”

The tough guy act is dropped for a moment. He smiles, and it’s surprisingly

warm. “I’m paid to know that.”

“Oh.” My cheeks turn pink. “Well, would you please give this to him?”

He takes the package from me. “Sure. But I’ll have to scan it for explosives first. As long as it passes, he can have it upon his return.”

I laugh.

“That was a serious statement. All parcels are checked.”

My cheeks deepen into red. “Of course. Thank you, sir.” And I scuttle away.

The next night, when I check my phone in Paris, I have a text from an unknown Manhattan number. He doesn’t mention the return of the manuscript – nor the fact that I left its pages wildly out of order – but he does say this: *I can’t believe how much I missed your scent. Merci for the scarf, my sweet rose.*



Chapter twenty-four

The pallor of winter further overcasts the already grey city. Olympic rings, bright and colourful, provide the only visual relief. They're plastered on every advertising surface, including the sides of entire buildings. This February, the Winter Olympics will be in the Rhône-Alpes region of south-eastern France, though, by the adverts, you'd never know they weren't in Paris proper. The French athletes are the stars of the posters, naturally, but a few of the biggest names from other countries have also made the cut.

Kurt and I exit the Denfert-Rochereau *métro* station and pass a larger-than-life poster of a fierce-looking American figure skater named Calliope Bell.

"Who do you root for?" I ask. "The Americans or the French?"

The Olympics have always been a source of mixed feelings for me. I know I'm supposed to feel a sense of national pride, but which nation? I feel loyalty towards both.

Kurt glances at the poster. "I root for the best athlete in each event. They don't have to be American or French."

"So...you root for the winner. Isn't that sort of cheating?"

"No. I root for the person who appears to be working the hardest."

It's a strange answer, but it's still a good one. It gives me something to think about. We enter a small, nondescript, dark-green building. It's empty of tourists today. We pay a guard, pass by another guard, and tromp down a spiral staircase until we reach a long, low tunnel. Water drips overhead. We splash through shallow puddles. It's cool down here in the catacombs, but not cold, because there's no wind.

Kurt points towards a tunnel that's been gated off from the public. "Have I told you there are over a hundred and eighty miles of abandoned tunnels in Paris?"

Yes. He *has* told me. He's been talking about the tunnels non-stop since our return to school. In the last month, he's gone from intrigued to full-blown obsessed. While I sat in detention, he read everything about them – the *métro*

tunnels, limestone quarries, utility lines, sewer systems and crypts – which together make one of the most extensive underground networks in the world.

He wants to map it, of course.

It's odd how the two most important people in my life are both interested in maps. Kurt in the most literal sense. But Josh, too. By chronicling the major events in his life, Josh is also drawing a map. I wonder how long I'll be a part of it. Where and when does my story fall away from his?

"Maps of the tunnels exist," Kurt continues, "but none of them are complete. And they're often purposefully misleading to keep people away."

Exploring them is illegal, and as a bona fide rule-follower, this is Kurt's greatest frustration. But that hasn't stopped others from doing it. The tunnels attract all types, known collectively as cataphiles – historians, graffiti artists, ravers, cavers, musicians, treasure hunters. Some have gone into the tunnels to restore priceless art. One group ran an underground cinema. The French resistance hid down here during the Nazi occupation, and then the Nazis used the exact same tunnels to flee.

It won't be long before Kurt's obsession overpowers his need to follow the rules. But, for now, he's been visiting and revisiting the legal part – les Catacombes. More than six million bodies were carted down here in the late 1700s, and the endless walls of their stacked bones are available for viewing at a small fee. Some of the bones are arranged into simple shapes like crosses or hearts. Some are arranged by size or type. But most of them were thrown in at random for practicality's sake.

As a child, I found the catacombs frightening. As I got older, they grew fascinating. Now they're almost tranquil. But maybe all of these skulls are just reminding me of a certain someone's tattoo. I sit on a folding chair that's meant for a guard while Kurt surreptitiously pokes around.

It feels fitting to be here. Quiet yet undeniably gloomy, much like my state of mind. Since Thanksgiving, I've finished detention, toiled over homework assignments, and crammed for exams. I haven't been reading for fun. Schoolwork is better at distracting me from the enforced silence between Josh and myself.

How did my parents live before texting? Before the internet? I'm used to *knowing* things and all of this *unknowing* is driving me mad. We send each other handwritten letters, but it takes so long for the mail to arrive that he's often in the wrong city by the time my correspondence reaches him. His family has been travelling non-stop between New York and DC.

I *think* he's in DC right now. At least, that's where I mailed his Atheist Hanukkah present, a box of his favourite pre-packaged French foods. If only I

could talk to him, I know I'd feel better. I carry his letters in my bag, I use his stein as my everyday drinking glass, and I've hung up his drawings beside my bed – the one of my necklace from the first week of school as well as the Sagrada Família's dove-covered tree, which he gave me after he was expelled. But he still feels so far away.

And the more time we spend apart, the more I can't shake the ending of *Boarding School Boy*. Our time together was only eight rough pages. The head of school thinks I was a distraction for Josh, which means she thinks that I take our relationship more seriously than he does. But that's not true. He did take it seriously.

Does he still?

He hasn't given me any reason to doubt him, but the more time we spend apart, the more clearly I see that our relationship was founded on unstable ground. His loneliness. How long will it take before he realizes that having me as a girlfriend was easier than being alone? I was convenient. I was a distraction.

Josh is a romantic. He likes being in love, and he craves love to fill the void left by his absentee parents. Maybe our relationship didn't happen quickly because we're perfect for each other, but because we each got swept away by it – him because of this insatiable *need*, me because of my pre-existing crush. Did those three years of longing cloud my perception of reality? How well do I really know him? Since I've last seen him in person, I've been faced with several incarnations that I didn't even know existed.

And he still hasn't made a decision about finishing high school. What if Dartmouth accepts me, and I move to New England, and he's not there? What am I supposed to do without him? I still don't have a plan for myself, nothing that doesn't involve him. But his plans are no longer concrete. They're as fragile as a wall of bones.

I get through midterms on the hope that I'm only plagued by these doubts because I've been away from him for so long. Seeing him again will fix this. The night before my last day of class, I'm surprised by a call from Mrs. Wasserstein's phone.

I answer, praying that it's actually Josh. It is. But a follow-up worry kicks in, and I'm instantly on the verge of hysteria. "You're staying in DC for winter break."

Josh laughs. "No, I'm calling with happy news. For once. It's an invitation to a Christmas party at the Met. Black tie. Movers and shakers. It'll probably be atrocious, but my parents invited you, so that's a good sign."

It is a good sign.

“And you’ll get to wear a fancy dress, and I’ll get to show you off. As my *girlfriend*,” he says pointedly. “So long as you still want this world to know you exist?”

“Yes! Yes, please.”

He laughs again. “Then it’s a date.”

When his mother reclaims her phone, I leave my room for a stretch down the hall. My heart is lighter than it’s been in weeks. Josh was laughing. We’re going on a public date. His parents want to spend time with me.

I stop in my tracks. *His parents want to spend time with me.*

No. Stay positive. This is a good sign, really. I check my mailbox. There are two envelopes stuffed into the back, one fat and one skinny. I pull them out, giddy with renewed cheer, until I realize that neither envelope is from Josh.

One is from la Sorbonne, and the other is from Columbia.

One is an acceptance letter, and the other is a rejection.



Chapter twenty-five

“I can’t decide which is better, your hair or your dress.” Maman sighs. “They are *perfect* together.”

My wavy locks have been swept to one side and fixed, cascading over my shoulder, and my dress – which we spent all of yesterday frantically shopping for – is a dark shade of emerald green. For once, my pale skin is glowing thanks to a healthy dusting of shimmery powder and my natural flush at being reunited with my boyfriend. He flew in from DC only three hours ago. We haven’t seen each other yet.

Gen grins at us from my doorway. “It looks like prom night in here.”

“*Prom Night*, the slasher film,” Hattie says.

Much to the dismay of girls like Sanjita and Emily, the School of America in Paris doesn’t have any formal dances. I’ve never minded, but – now that I’m dressed up – I’m *almost* on their side. I twirl in a complete circle. “I feel like Cinderella.”

“Cinderella was blonde,” Hattie says. “Redheads are never the princess.”

“Bullshit,” Gen says, and Maman tut-tuts her. “Amy Adams. *Enchanted*.”

“Hello, Ariel?” I say. “She was a princess, too.”

“She was a fish,” Hattie says.

“Isla!” Dad’s voice booms from downstairs. “Your date is here!”

Is it possible to be both clammy *and* feverish? I don’t know what’s more nerve-racking: seeing Josh for the first time in two months, introducing him to my parents, or hanging out with *his* parents. Except, no. It’s definitely the last one. The thought of speaking to his mother again has kept me from being able to eat all day. At least my parents are glad – and relieved – to finally be meeting Josh. They’re also impressed that he’s taking me to such a prestigious party.

Maman acknowledges my worried expression with an encouraging smile. “Prince Charming awaits.”

“I wonder if he’s as skinny and weird as I remember,” Gen says.

“Hey,” I say.

I wait for Hattie to cattily agree with Gen, but she's silent. She hasn't spoken a single word on the subject of Josh since Halloween. Maman shoos them both downstairs. My stomach is in knots. I can't decide which of his parents scares me more.

"There's nothing to be afraid of," Maman says, reading my mind. "His father will love you. His mother will learn to love you. You're intelligent, charming, and kind."

"Of course *you* think that."

"I would never describe your younger sister as charming."

That gets me to crack a smile.

"Come on. Don't you want to see what your boyfriend looks like in a tux?" Maman nudges me before whisking away. She calls out from the top of the stairs, "Joshua, *mon cher*. Lovely to finally meet you."

"Great to meet you, too." There's a smile – that professional, political smile – in his voice. "It's hard for me to believe, but your home looks even better than your windows at Bergdorf Goodman. I saw them last week. They're extraordinary."

She laughs. "Don't *you* know exactly what to say."

My legs turn gelatinous. Until this moment, I honestly don't know if I believed that I'd see him tonight. Excitement overtakes my nerves. I grab the jewelled clutch borrowed from Maman, dash from my room, and promptly freeze at the top of the stairs. Josh looks *immaculate*. His tuxedo is not a rental. He's saying something to my dad and wearing his trustworthy, son-of-a-senator face. And then he follows my father's upturned gaze, and absolutely everything about him changes as he stops talking mid-sentence.

Josh *weakens*.

There's a lump in my throat. It looks as if he's so grateful to see me that he's in physical pain. The feeling is reciprocated. The house vanishes, the voices disappear, and the air holds its own breath. Our eyes remain locked as I descend. Closer. Closer. Our hands outstretch, our fingers are about to touch—

"Green and red." My dad gestures from my dress to my hair. "You look just like Mrs. Claus!"

The needle scratches across the record. Everyone turns and stares.

He blushes. "I meant Christmas. She looks like Christmas."

"You can't tell a girl that she looks like a *holiday*," Gen says.

"He was right the first time," Hattie says. She's standing on the periphery, as far away from Josh as possible. "You look like an old lady."

"Isla." Josh's voice catches on my name. "You look beautiful."

Because I see it in his eyes, I feel it in my heart. He takes my hand. His skin

touches mine, and he's *real* again. And then we lose restraint, and he sweeps me into an embrace and kisses my cheek. And then again. I hug him. He squeezes me too hard in return, but it's wonderful and perfect and sublime.

Dad examines Josh with a renewed distrust. "When will you be home?" he asks me.

"I don't know," I say honestly.

"The gala is usually over by midnight, so she'll be home no later than that," Josh says. "Would you like to speak with Brian? He's our driver-slash-security tonight."

My dad brightens at the mention of security. He peeks through our curtains and then waves at someone down on the street. Brian, I assume. "That's okay." He scratches his thick beard, worries somewhat assuaged. "Midnight it is."

I make a move for the front door. "Don't want to be late."

"Wait!" Gen holds up her phone. "Just one picture."

"Two," Maman says, reaching for her own.

I groan with embarrassment, but Gen cuts me off. "Oh, come on. It's not every day that my little sis gets all dolled up."

"What do you mean? Isla wears a stupid dress every stupid day," Hattie says.

"Manhattan. Darling. Shut your mouth," Maman says.

A dozen pictures later, Josh and I are out the door and in the hall. As soon as we turn the corner – away from the gaze of the keyhole – I throw my arms around his neck. He leans into me but quickly pulls back. "Your lipstick."

"I don't care."

Josh pushes me against the wall. We kiss with everything we have, tasting each other, aching for each other. His lips are cracked with winter. He's brushed his teeth recently, and his mouth is sharp and clean. His hands slide across my back and down my hips. Our kissing grows more intense, frenzied from longing. A tremor runs through my body into his, and he bursts apart from me, gasping for breath.

"Your parents," he says. "They'll be watching from the window. Waiting for us to appear."

We stumble downstairs, laughing and hurrying. He wipes off the lipstick from his mouth, I wipe it off the skin *around* my mouth, and then we stroll out of the building as if we've been deep in conversation. I'm sure we look guilty as hell. I glance up to the window, between the bare limbs of the climbing rose, and Maman and Gen wave down happily. Dad gives a brisk nod. Hattie isn't there.

A solid-looking man with stylish grey hair and a security earpiece opens the backseat door of a black town car. It's the same man who took the package from me at Josh's house over Thanksgiving. "Good evening, *mademoiselle*."

“Oh! *You’re* Brian.”

He gives me a wide grin. “It’s nice to see you again. You look enchanting. Easy to see why our boy here talks of little else.”

I glance at Josh, pleased, and he shrugs in a “what did you expect?” way.

We climb into the car, but as Brian moves towards the driver’s side, Josh’s smile drops. “This isn’t my usual mode of transportation, you know.”

“I *don’t* know,” I tease. “Seems like the two of you spend a lot of time together.”

“Well, yeah, but usually at home. Or my dad’s office. I don’t want you to think that I’m always...chauffeured around like this. I take the subway.”

I soften. “It’s okay. I wasn’t judging you.”

“I know, I just—”

The driver’s side door opens, and Brian slides in with a surprising amount of elegance and pizzazz. He turns out to be a great storyteller, which is helpful, because it keeps me from wishing that this posh car were even more posh – say, a limousine with a partition for privacy – because all I want to do is re-jump my boyfriend. Instead, I touch up my make-up. I don’t want to arrive looking like a dishevelled floozy. Even though that’s probably what his mother thinks about me anyway.

Brian wasn’t lying. He knows enough about me to ask if I’ve heard back from Dartmouth. He winks at Josh in the rear-view mirror, but Josh doesn’t notice. His eyes are only on me. I tell Brian the truth – I’m waiting to hear back from them. I still haven’t told Josh that I’ve heard from the other two schools. I still haven’t told him that, so far, the only school that wants me is in France.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art is one of the most European-looking structures in Manhattan. As Josh leads me towards the entrance, it feels as if we’ve time-travelled back to October. Back to Paris. The white facade, the gargantuan columns, the long steps. If only we were headed towards a date at the Musée d’Orsay and not this meet-the-parents extravaganza. If Josh’s mom is that intimidating, what will his *dad* be like?

Josh catches my expression and squeezes my arm. “You’ll do great.”

“Your parents hate me,” I say.

“They don’t hate you. They hate me.”

“Let’s go back to my place and make out in the hallway.”

He grins down at me. “This place has *a lot* of hallways.”

I’ve been here many times before, but the museum’s Great Hall is still impressive. The domes and arches of its grand entryway – so reminiscent of the Panthéon near our dorm – are decked with gold ribbons, swags of evergreens,

and giant ornaments and baubles. The echoing hall is filled with a buzzing stream of men and women in black tie. I'm glad Maman helped me dress for the occasion. At least I have confidence *there*.

Josh hands our tickets to an elderly woman in pearls and a black spangled top, and then we follow the crowd towards the party in the Medieval Sculpture Hall. He leads me in a gentlemanly manner, adultlike and formal. The surrounding couples move in a similar fashion. They look as if this stilted sort of behaviour is routine, but it's a first for us. I want to walk against him, wrapped *into* him, arms and hands entangled in one mess of limbs. This careful entrance only heightens my self-consciousness.

He guides me like this towards the distant sound of a string quartet – aside the main staircase, through a narrow room of Byzantine artefacts, through another room with a masterfully marble-carved altar canopy, and straight into the bustling Sculpture Hall. The room is larger and taller, though still not as big as I'd remembered. Banners of heraldry in mixed patterns of red, blue, yellow and white hang down on each side. Below them, the walls are covered in tapestries of stags and ladies in medieval garb. And in the centre of the room – the clear star of the collection – is a massive iron gate. From previous visits, I know it's a choir screen from a cathedral in Spain.

Centred before the screen is an equally massive blue spruce surrounded by hundreds of crèche figures from the eighteenth century. The tree itself is covered in angels and cherubs and lights that look like candles. It's dramatic, to be sure, but it's also...stiff.

"Merry Agnostic Christmas," Josh says. "Welcome to the most Jewish Christmas party in America."

I smile.

"There." He smiles back. "More of that."

We scan between the alabaster sculptures for his parents. Best to get this over with. We find them along the edge of the room beside a rough-looking statue of a clown. When we get closer, I realize that the statue's pointy red hat is a *pope* hat. It doesn't matter that I didn't say any of this out loud. I still feel stupid.

Josh's parents have their backs to us. They're holding glasses of white wine and conversing with a short man in perfectly round spectacles. "*Judge Lederman*," Josh whispers in my ear. "*New York Supreme Court*."

Yeah. Sure. No big deal.

"Joshua." The judge smiles and waves us over.

I try to act like it's normal for a state supreme court judge to know my boyfriend on a first-name basis. Josh's parents turn around. Their initial reaction is happiness, but it's quickly masked by a demeanour better described as

professionally pleased. With a layer of curiosity. And perhaps another layer of mistrust.

Josh guides me forward by the small of my back. I imagine that I look like a mouse, weak and easy to discard from the premises. “Judge Lederman,” Josh says. “It’s good to see you.” How bizarre to hear his interview voice being spoken live from his actual mouth. “This is my girlfriend, Isla Martin.”

The judge shakes my hand. “A pretty little thing you are.”

Gross. I smile. “It’s nice to meet you, sir.”

“Mom, you remember Isla,” Josh continues as if our last encounter wasn’t a shame-filled agonyfest. “Dad, I’d like to introduce you to my girlfriend. Isla, this is my father.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Senator.”

Wait. Was I supposed to call him Senator? Mr. Wasserstein? Senator Wasserstein? I should have said “sir”. Why didn’t I say “sir”? Oh no! I called the judge “sir”. Was I supposed to call him “your honour”, or is that only in court? But Josh’s dad smiles and reveals a comforting pair of familiar dimples. He pumps my hand. “Great to meet you. I’ve heard so many stories that I feel like I already know you.”

I’m taken aback. He sounds sincere, but...is he? It must be that practised politico charm. I hadn’t realized how lucky it is that our first meeting is in public. Josh’s father has to pretend like everything is cool, even if it’s not.

“Sam,” he says to Judge Lederman. “Isla studies abroad.”

“Ah, that’s right,” the judge says to Josh. “I forgot you lived overseas. England?”

“France. Though I’m finishing my schooling here in America.” Josh’s reply is smooth. Anticipated. His parents smile with ease, and it occurs to me that everyone playing this game is a pro. Everyone but me.

“Isla is the top student in her class,” the senator says.

My face pinkens as a surreal conversation occurs in which I am the subject, and Josh’s parents are bragging about my accomplishments. It’s uncomfortable to hear them praise me when they can’t possibly mean what they’re saying. There’s no reason for them to like me. I’m a nobody. A nobody who took their son to Spain for sex and then got him expelled from high school. This situation is so unexpected that I can’t even answer their questions, and Josh is forced to pick up my end of the dialogue. Before I know it, the whole thing is over, and Josh is pulling me away.

“We’re off to find something to eat,” he tells his parents. “It was good seeing you again,” he tells the judge, shaking his outstretched hand while steering me in the opposite direction.

“Nice to meet you,” I call out. Which is the only thing I’ve said to any of them this entire time. Josh’s parents probably think that he’s been lying about my intelligence, too.

“That went well,” Josh says.

“Did it?”

He glances at me. “We’ll talk to them again later – just the four of us – after they’ve had a few more glasses of wine.”

That’s not an answer.

Josh swiftly pushes us through a cluster of uptight partygoers. He heads straight towards the canapés, grabs an uncharacteristically small sampling, and parades us past his parents again. He lifts his plate to them in a toast. His mother raises her glass in return. And then he’s ducking and weaving us into the thickest crush in the room. His plate vanishes somewhere in the mix.

“Excuse me, pardon me,” he says.

I’m scrambling to keep up. “These heels. They weren’t built for this.”

Josh throws me a mischievous smile, and I recognize a plan behind it. He continues threading us through a neighbouring gallery – past stained-glass windows and a Pietà, glazed jugs and earthenware – until we come to an abrupt halt before a closed door.

A closed door *and* a museum guard.

But the middle-aged guard in the navy suit loses all rigidity the moment he recognizes Josh. He breaks into an unexpected grin. Josh jerks up his chin in the universal guy-nod. The guard returns the nod, whisks open the door, and lets us pass.

The door shuts behind us.

The sound of the party instantly dims. We’re in a very large, very dark, and very empty room. It’s a vast indoor sculpture garden. We’re in the American wing, but it feels as if we’re back in Paris thanks to a gorgeous pair of flickering turn-of-the-century electric street lamps. I wonder if the guard left them on for us.

“What,” I whisper, “was that?”

“We,” Josh says at normal volume, “are taking a break from the soirée.”

My heartbeat accelerates. “We are?”

He takes my hand – the way he did at school, comfortable and relaxed and himself – and strolls me past the street lamps.

My heels click and echo. “Who was that guard? How do you know him?”

“Chuck Nadelhorn. We’ve taken a lot of art classes together over the years.” He sees my furrowed brow and grins. “Don’t be ageist.”

I laugh, caught.

“I was the odd one out. I was the youngest in each class, by far. Chuck was one of the few people who treated me with respect.”

“Then I like him even more than I already did.”

Josh plants a singular kiss on my lips. “This way.”

He moves forward, and I follow. “I assume you set this up – whatever it is – with Chuck in advance?”

“There were a few people involved. I’ve had some time to prepare,” he says slyly. “But we’d better hurry, we only have twenty minutes. Nineteen now.”

“As long as I’m not about to be arrested for trespassing. Or for stealing a nondescript, though no doubt priceless, artefact.”

“Only if we’re caught.”

I stop.

He tugs me forward by our clasped hands. “Come on, come on!”

We race through the room into a corridor gift shop, and we’re no longer in Paris, we’re in Barcelona – two crazy kids running away to discover our own private world. Exploring. Taking risks. A sharp right, and we enter an even darker and even more vast room, but this one couldn’t be mistaken for anything else. Anyone who has visited this museum would know it.

“The Temple of Dendur.” Josh says it with a finality that tells me we’ve reached our destination – the ancient Egyptian sandstone temple.

I’m intrigued. But baffled. “Any particular reason?”

Josh shrugs in a way that’s almost bashful. “I like the temple’s reflecting pool. I kind of just wanted to sit beside it and make out with you.”

It’s actually the best answer he could have given me.

This time he leads me quietly, delicately, to the ledge beside the pool. The reflecting pool is beautiful in its dignified silence. An entire wall of this room is a window, and the lights of the city twinkle inside the still water. We sit down. The air is cold, the granite ledge even colder. He takes off his tuxedo jacket and swings it up and around my shoulders. And then he uses his own lapels to pull me into him. His mouth is warm. We slip into each other as if no time had passed between now and Spain. If there wasn’t a thousand museum cameras on us, we’d lie down and make love. But touching him is enough. Smelling him is enough. Tasting him is enough.

Being here with him is enough.

And then...we’re lying down anyway. His body is on top of mine. We press against each other, our hands and mouths travelling everywhere. We do everything except the one thing we *can’t* do right now. After what feels simultaneously like no time at all and eternity, Josh unwraps his limbs from mine, and we readjust our clothing.

“Before we go.” He picks up his jacket from the floor and reaches into an inside pocket. He removes a small tube. I can’t believe I didn’t feel it earlier. “*Joyeux Noël.*”

My heart is in my throat. It has to be a drawing. I pop open the cap, and sure enough, there’s a thick scroll inside. I slide out the paper. I unroll it slowly, because I know that, whatever it is, it’s more valuable than anything inside this museum.

It’s a tiny island. But instead of the stereotypical single palm, he’s drawn a prickly Joshua tree in its centre. Underneath it are two entwined figures. It’s impossible to tell where one ends and the other begins. They’ve become a single naked body. The entire illustration is done in rich black ink...with the exception of the girl’s bold red hair.

He’s nervous. “Do you like it?”

“Let’s move to this island tonight. Right this second.” I can’t hide the genuine longing from my voice. Nor the fear and dread of our upcoming re-separation.

Josh tucks a loose strand of my hair back into place. “We’ll move there next autumn, maybe even this summer. And then we’ll never be apart ever again.”



Chapter twenty-six

Back at Chuck's door, Josh returns the tube to his jacket pocket. My fancy jewelled clutch is too fancy to be of any actual use. Josh knocks – a normal knock, not his special knock – and the door opens. Chuck nods his approval. “With thirty seconds to spare.”

“Anything you need, you let me know,” Josh says as we steal back inside.

Chuck's smile widens into a grin. “Oh, I'll let you know.”

“Thank you so much,” I say.

Chuck gestures towards the right strap of my dress, which has loosened and keeps falling off my shoulder. I shove it back up. My boyfriend's ensuing blush matches my own. Chuck laughs. “You kids have a good night now, you hear?”

As soon as we're out of earshot, Josh says, “Nothing like an adult to remind you that you aren't one.”

I laugh, but as we place our drink order at the bar, our matching ginger ales make the sort-of joke feel all too real. It's always uncomfortable to come home from school only to be faced with even fewer freedoms. The last time we were at a party, we drank champagne. We stayed out as late as we wanted. And zero family members were involved. “Should we find your parents again?” *Please say no.*

He sighs. “Yeah.”

“Ohmygod. Is that the *mayor*?”

A snappily dressed, elderly photographer is taking pictures of an equally elderly man with tipsy-red cheeks and a sober-looking, much younger partner.

“Yep,” Josh says, unenthused.

As we pass them, I follow Josh's blasé lead, and I don't turn my head to stare. Even though I want to. This evening will never stop being weird.

We wander, searching for his parents, but it's a slow-moving process. Everybody seems to know Josh, and they all want to congratulate him on the re-election. Political lifers. Josh remembers the names of children and locations of vacation homes, and he introduces me to everyone. I munch on bland canapés.

This is the type of conversation that he despises, but his distaste never shows. It strikes me that if he had the desire...he could be one of them, too. He's a good actor.

It's a little unsettling.

But not nearly so unsettling as the other type of partygoer who keeps pulling Josh aside. Society girls. The female version of him – always someone's daughter – but with a drive that's both alarming and intimidating. They laugh. They flirt. I eat more canapés. They tower over me. Even the ones who aren't tall *still* manage to tower over me through their confidence alone. A brunette with an unwinterlike tan does a particularly swell job of pretending that I don't exist. Her hand touches the sleeve of Josh's jacket twice.

After the third sleeve-touch, Josh makes our excuses and steers us away. But even that doesn't stop her from following him with her eyes as we move throughout the room.

Over an hour later, after emoting my most sociable holiday cheer during countless conversations in which I am invisible, we locate his parents beside a large copper...vat? I read the sign. *Baptismal font*. Unexpectedly, I'm relieved to see them. At least I know they won't ignore me.

As Josh predicted, they've partaken of a few more glasses of wine. They're relaxed and happy. Mrs. Wasserstein even compliments my shoes. But soon another stranger interrupts us, some famous journalist, and then the pushy brunette re-approaches Josh from behind. She stands in a way that forces him to turn his head away from us to hear what she's saying, which means that *I* can't hear what she's saying.

The journalist envelops Josh's parents in a conversation about tax incentives. They glance at me occasionally, including me in the discussion with their eyes, but I contribute nothing, feeling dumb and unimportant. The brunette laughs. Josh turns his head to shoot me an apologetic look. I smile as if everything were fine.

We've only been here for two hours, but I'm ready to leave.

A tapestry of a medieval lady snags my gaze. She's giving me a distinctly incredulous "oh, no, this is *not* happening" face, and I'm grateful that *someone* sees what's going on here. Even if she is woven.

Josh finally cuts off the brunette, and his father sweeps him back into their conversation. "I'm sorry," Josh says, "but Isla and I are heading out."

What now? I perk up.

The senator looks disappointed. "Come by the house for dinner this week," he tells me. "I'd like to have a real chance to get to know you."

I'm touched. And panicked to think about an evening with them unprotected by a public safety net. "Thank you. I'd like that."

"Marvellous seeing you again." Mrs. Wasserstein gives me a limp, one-armed hug. The words sound friendly enough, but the warmth in her action is debatable.

"It was nice seeing you, too. Thank you for inviting me."

"Are you going straight home?" she asks Josh.

"Nah, we're gonna get some real food first. But I'll probably still beat you back."

"Is Brian taking you?"

"I just texted him." Josh holds up her phone and grins.

She snatches it back, but she's smiling as she hugs him goodbye. "Pickpocket."

"Warden."

It's the first Josh-like exchange that I've heard in a while. His mom is placated enough by his answers, so he puts an arm around my waist and guides me towards the exit. "It's strange," I say, the moment we're alone. "The way you've been steering me around like this tonight."

He yanks away his arm as if it'd been caught in a com-promising position. "Sorry, I didn't mean—"

"No, I know. It was the environment. It just feels...weird."

"That whole *scene* is weird, right?" He gestures towards the fading laughter and string quartet.

"You seem comfortable in it, though. If I didn't know any better, I'd never guess that you hate it."

"Well, I do." He sounds defensive.

"I know. I'm only saying that you're a good actor."

Josh shoves his hands into his pockets, and the museum's dim light catches the sheen of the tuxedo stripe on his pants. "I don't think that was a compliment," he says at last.

"That's not what I meant."

But...it was. And Josh knows it. For some reason, now that I've started, I can't hold back. "The whole thing reminded me of Televised Josh. You, looking so polished. Speaking in that voice. Standing so straight."

Josh opens the museum door for me. His teeth are gritted.

"Knowing all of these people and things that I don't." *Shut. Up.*

"Yeah, because they've been a part of my life for, like, ever. I'm not gonna be a dick in front of the people who keep my dad in office."

"I know! And I know you're a part of this life, so you *have* to act like that—"

“I don’t *have* to do anything. I *choose* to be a decent person.”

It’s a sword through the chest. I’ve gone too far. I’ve gone way, way too far. “I’m sorry. I don’t...I don’t know why...”

“Forget it.” But his head is turned away from mine. He’s scanning the line of cars for Brian, but, really, it’s an excuse not to look at me. I can’t blame him. Why couldn’t I keep my stupid insecurities to myself?

It’s freezing, and I wish I’d brought my winter coat. For the first time ever, either Josh doesn’t notice that I’m shivering or he chooses not to offer me his jacket. Not that he should *have* to give it to me. It’s my own fault for leaving my coat behind during the excitement of his arrival at my house.

“I’m sorry,” I say again.

He shrugs.

“Do you still wanna get something to eat?”

“Of course.” Josh sounds surprised. He pulls his hands from his pockets and crosses his arms. After a minute of uneasy silence, he uncrosses them and rubs the back of his neck. “I’m sorry, too. For bringing you. Not that I didn’t want you here,” he adds quickly, “but because I knew it would suck. These things always do. Not that *all* of that sucked,” he adds again. “Twenty minutes of it were fantastic.”

“You don’t have to apologize.” I stare at the pavement. “You have this big life that I’m not a part of. And I wanted to see it.”

Josh’s frown deepens.

I open my mouth to try again when a black town car pulls up to the kerb and flashes its lights. The wind turns abrasive as we hurry towards it. The locks pop, Josh opens the back door, and we slide inside.

“Sorry I’m late,” Brian says. “I wasn’t expecting you for at least another hour.”

Josh shakes his head. “No problem. You know how these events are.”

“Do I ever.” Brian grins at us in the rear-view mirror. “You’ve got ninety minutes before curfew. Can I take you somewhere else?”

Josh leans forward in his seat. “You know that café on Amsterdam? Kismet?”

Brian snorts. It tells me that he already knows the story. “I think I can find the place.”

“Thanks.” Josh sits back. And then he turns to me with a sudden alarm. “Is that okay? Sorry, I’m still in stupid party mode. I didn’t even ask. I know we’re going there for New Year’s, but I thought an early visit would be nice. For nostalgia’s sake.”

“No, it’s perfect.” I force a smile. “Thanks, Brian.”

“That’s what I’m here for,” he says.

But the feeling inside the car is not perfection. There's no hand holding. We're quiet and ill at ease. As Brian merges into traffic, he tries to lighten the mood. "So, Isla. Did you get to see any of the museum?"

It's a leading question. Clearly, Josh tells him a lot of things. "I did."

"Aaaaand?"

I force another cheerful smile. "It was a beautiful gift."

He pumps his fist. "Nice."

"Went off without a hitch," Josh says. "Thank you, Chuck."

"Thank you, Chuck!" Brian repeats.

They discuss the plan, some last-minute part of the arrangement with Chuck that Brian hadn't heard yet, and I squirm in my seat. How many people knew about this? Has Josh done this sort of thing before? The less private it gets, the more uncomfortable I feel.

There's something I shouldn't say, but for some terrible and unknown reason, I have to say anyway. I should save it for a more appropriate, less emotionally stressed day. I should save it for when we're alone. I shouldn't *ever* say it. *Don't say it.*

"Rashmi likes ancient Egypt, doesn't she?" I ask.

Shit.

"What?" Josh's response is sharp as his attention snaps from Brian to me.

"I— I mean, in your book. Her rabbit, Isis. And then she goes to Brown to study Egyptology."

"Yeah, she goes to Brown because she *goes* there. Those things are true."

"And there's that drawing of her as an Egyptian goddess." I can't believe I'm saying this out loud. *And* I'm saying it in front of *Brian*. I don't know what's happening, but something inside of me has short-circuited. I'm freaking out. The Egyptian thing is a coincidence, I know this, but I can't stop. "Was that how you knew about the temple?"

His brow furrows in angry confusion. "Huh?"

"The Temple of Dendur. Did you ever take her there?"

Josh gathers himself. "First of all, I *like* the reflecting pool. I wanted some time alone with you tonight, so I chose – what I thought was – the museum's nicest room. Second of all, *no*. I did *not* take you someplace where I previously made out with my ex-girlfriend. Or whatever else it is you think we might have done in there."

"Well, I know that much. If you'd done anything more, I would have read about it. Very graphically! In your graphic memoir."

Time stops.

And that's when I know that I've just said the worst thing that I'll ever say in

my entire life. And I've said it to the person whom I love the most.

Josh's voice is deadly quiet. "Anything else you'd like to share with me right now? Any additional criticisms of me or my work?"

I want to speak. I want to apologize. This isn't about his ex or his work. I have no idea why I just said those things. I'm confused. I'm not sure why I feel this upset, why I'm picking fights about things that don't even matter.

Brian glances at me in the rear-view mirror, and his expression is unbearably strained, as if he'd jump through the car window if he could fit through the hole.

"No. Really," Josh continues. "As long as you're finally opening up to me, why don't you go on? Tell me what else is wrong with my book."

I've backed myself into the furthest corner possible. "Nothing is wrong with it."

"But there are things you'd change?"

"No! I mean, yeah, but...small things. You know?" *Stop talking.* "It's not a big deal. All books require a little bit of editing."

The street lights cast Josh in shadow. I can't see his expression, but it doesn't *feel* nice. He remains silent. Waiting.

"Okay." I gulp. "Well. There was this one flashback that was in a weird place. When you get your tattoo? That scene...it just didn't flow with what came before and after it."

"All right." It comes out like ice.

"And your parents. They were, like, this big deal in the beginning, but by the end, it was like you didn't even *have* parents. They completely dropped out."

"Because they live in another *country*."

"Yeah, but that doesn't mean they weren't in your life any more. Even if it's their *absence* that matters, it's still something that should be acknowledged."

His jaw is clenched. "Anything else?"

"Um." My voice lowers to a near whisper. "There were a lot of drawings of Rashmi. In the middle."

"*Shocker.*"

"No," I say quickly. "I mean, there were a ton of one-page panels that were just...*there*. Completely unnecessary. They didn't contribute anything to the story." I can't believe that I'm saying this – *all of this* – aloud. A good girlfriend would keep her mouth shut. "And then sections of your junior year were really crowded. You needed more variation between the panels. More space."

"More space."

"Um, yeah. Spaces. Breaks. For the reader to contemplate things. To figure out what's important, on their own."

"Spaces," he says. "To figure out what's important."

“I’m sorry.” I’m drowning in a river of my own making. “I didn’t say anything earlier, because I didn’t want to hurt your feelings. It’s *great*, I promise.”

“You’ve used that word to describe it in the past. And yet, I still don’t believe you.”

“I’m sorry.” I say it again, my voice desperate.

“Are you sure you aren’t just pissed off? Maybe because it isn’t about you?”

“No!” The shame is overwhelming. “I wasn’t even in your life until this year. I know that. I know I’m not an important part of your story.”

For the first time in several minutes, Josh is thrown. “What do you mean, you’re not important to my story?”

“I haven’t been around that long. And you had this whole life before me, and you’ll have this whole life after me—”

“*After* you?” His voice gets an octave higher. “What do you mean *after*?”

“Vermont. Your school. Your future.”

Josh is baffled. “But...you’re coming with me.”

“Am I?”

“When Dartmouth accepts you—”

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” I say.

He punches his fist against the seat. “Stop saying that. Why are you always putting yourself down? You’re gonna get in. There’s no way that you’re not getting in.”

“Tell that to Columbia.”

And now he’s thrown again. “What?”

“I didn’t get in.”

“*What?* When? Why didn’t you tell me?”

I can’t look at him. My failure is humiliating. “A few days ago.”

“I’m so sorry. God, I wish you’d told me. I had no idea.”

“I got a letter from la Sorbonne, too. Accepted.”

Josh deflates with visible relief. “That’s great. You deserve it.” But there’s sadness, too, as his posture sinks further. Because if I attend la Sorbonne, there will still be an ocean between us. “So what if Dartmouth does accept you? Where will you go?”

“I don’t know.” And I realize I’m crying. “I haven’t decided.”

“But...I thought...I thought we had a plan.”

“No, you had a plan. You *have* plans.”

Josh shakes his head in disbelief. “What are you talking about?”

“You know exactly who you are.” Tears stream down my cheeks. “You know how to be yourself, but you also know how to be a different kind of yourself on

television and in society. And you've *always* had a passion for art, and you've *always* known where you're attending college. You already even know what kind of apartment you'll rent when you move there! Not to mention what kind of car you'll drive, what kind of cat you'll adopt, and how you'll spend your weekends in the woods. I don't know any of that. I've never cared about *anything* like you've cared about your work. I don't even belong to a single country. I'm nobody. I'm nothing."

"Isla..." My words have stunned him again. He has no idea what to say.

"And you're right, maybe I *am* upset about your book for selfish reasons. I know you haven't had the time, I know it takes months for you to draw them, but...eight pages. I was only *eight pages*." My voice cracks, hollow and desperate. "I thought maybe I'd finally learn something if I could see myself through your eyes. But I wasn't even there."

Josh strains against his seat belt. He reaches for a hand, but I pull them both into my lap. "You'll be in it," he says. "Of course you'll be in it."

"I used to think so." My chest is splitting in two. "Don't you see? Don't you get it? I'm a placeholder."

"What do you mean?"

He's trying desperately to get me to look at him, but I can't. I'm in agony. "Your friends left school, and I was there, but I wasn't enough to *keep* you there. You had to keep breaking rules. And then you left me."

"It wasn't like that. You know it wasn't like that!"

"No," I say. "It was. You tried *really* hard for a *really* long time to get expelled, because you couldn't admit to your parents that you didn't want to be there. Your plan just succeeded at the wrong time. And now that you're gone – now that you're here, and I'm not – sooner or later, you're gonna realize that I was only a distraction. Something to keep your mind off your misery. Something to keep you going until the next phase of your very carefully planned-out life could begin. But I no longer believe that you'll actually want me there. And" – I swallow loudly – "I don't want to be around when you discover it."

Josh is reeling. "Wh-what are you saying?"

"I'm saying that I don't see myself in your future."

"Isla." His voice shakes. "Are you...are you breaking up with me?"

And there it is. The question that, once spoken aloud, is always inevitably its own undoing.

"You don't love me like you think you love me," I whisper.

Now he's crying, too. "Why are you doing this?"

My entire world is crumbling, but I have to finish the destruction. I have to destroy what's left of my heart before he can do it for me. "Because if it hurts us

this much now,” I say, “I can’t imagine how much it’ll hurt when you come to this realization yourself.”

I’m as shocked by my words as he is.

I don’t understand how this could happen in one car ride, but as a deathly sombre Brian pulls over in front of Kismet, I already know that I’m getting out. And Josh isn’t.



Chapter twenty-seven

“Isla? Are you okay?” Kurt’s dad is watching me on the camera installed outside their building. I ran all three blocks from Kismet.

“Let me in. Please let me in!”

The door buzzes open and then slams shut behind me. I race up the two flights of stairs to their apartment, and Scott and Sabine are already in the hall. Kurt’s parents refuse to let me call them Mr. and Mrs. Bacon, because they refuse to believe that they’re old. “What happened? Are you okay? Are you hurt?” Their questions all come at once.

“Is Kurt here?” I ask.

“Of course he is here,” Sabine says in a French accent. She ushers me inside with a slender, gentle arm. “He went to bed an hour ago, but he is probably awake. What happened? Why are you dressed up like this?”

I blurt it out. “I’ve broken up with my boyfriend, and I don’t want to go home.”

Their bodies tense.

“Did he hurt you?” Scott undergoes a Hulk-like transformation, which looks peculiar on his strung-out ex-rocker body.

“Yes!”

Scott’s body completes the Hulk transformation.

“No.” I sob hysterically. “*Emotionally.*”

Scott shrinks back into his natural form. Sabine exchanges a look with him. “Of course you can stay,” she says.

“Will you call my parents? I don’t want to have to explain. Not tonight.”

She leads me to Kurt’s bedroom. “I’ll call your *maman* right now.” She hugs me, and the comforting familiarity of her violet perfume keeps me in her arms, crying.

Kurt opens his door. “What’s going— Oh. What happened?”

Sabine releases me into his care. I flop onto his unmade bed, and he closes the door behind me. “It’s...it’s over!” I say.

Kurt places a solid hand on my back as I emit huge, gut-wrenching sobs. “Josh broke up with you?”

“No. *I* broke up with *him*.”

He’s quiet for nearly a minute. “I don’t get it,” he finally says.

I tell him the story to the best of my current ability, and when I’m done, he scratches his head. “So you broke up with Josh before he could break up with you.”

“No.” My head is swimming. “It wasn’t like that. Or... it was *more* than that. I don’t know.”

“You’ve never been able to believe that he could like you as much as you like him. You were afraid he’d dump you. So you picked those fights to get a conversation going in which you could dump him first.”

“No,” I say again. But something awful and truth-y stings inside of me.

Still. That doesn’t mean it was wrong to break up with him. I *do* believe that Josh would have left me, most likely before college even began. But maybe he wouldn’t have until *after* we were already in New England, already living together. Which would’ve been even worse. My heart couldn’t take it – moving someplace new and strange and then losing the person who’d brought me there. Because eventually, no matter what the circumstances, he *would* see the real me. Josh is a beautiful, messy, passionate work of art, and I’m...a blank canvas.

There’s nothing here to love.

“You told him that you’re a placeholder in his life,” Kurt says. “So does that make me or Josh the placeholder in yours?”

My attention jerks back to him. “Huh?”

“Now that Josh is gone, you came straight to me. In his place.”

The word *gone* is a sucker punch, but what he’s suggesting is even worse. “That’s not the same thing. Not at all. You guys don’t...share the same space. You don’t” – I struggle to put it in terms he’d understand – “perform the same function in my life.”

“Because you and I aren’t romantically involved?”

“Exactly.”

“Josh and I don’t perform the same function,” Kurt agrees, “but we do take up the same amount of your time. And you gave him the time that you used to give to me.”

The guilt. I can’t deal with it on top of everything else. A shrill ring from inside the jewelled clutch saves me from having to reply. We sit up, alert. My phone rings again. Kurt pulls it out and examines the screen. “It’s a Manhattan number. Do you want me to answer it?”

I shake my head.

“It’s probably Josh.”

“I know.”

“He’s probably using Brian’s phone.”

“I know.”

“You told me that I should always answer it if I think it might be Josh.”

“That’s not valid any more.”

“Okay.”

The phone stops ringing. A minute later, it blips with a voicemail. I turn off the volume, but I see the Manhattan number call me again. And then again. Kurt throws my phone underneath his bed to curb my temptation to answer it.

“I’m tired,” he says. “Go brush your teeth.”

I brush them with his toothpaste and an index finger, and I wash off my make-up with his liquid hand-soap. My face is a blotchy mess. I ditch my dress and replace it with one of the worn T-shirts from the pile on his bathroom floor. When I return to his room, he’s asleep. I tuck myself up against him, and – all night long – I lie awake and watch the green light of my phone flashing out from underneath his bed.

Forty-two missed calls. Three voicemails.

Merry Christmas Eve.

I listen to the voicemails on my walk home. Josh is angry and sad. He begs me to call him back. He begs me to reconsider. He says he doesn’t understand what happened. It was all a mistake, a misunderstanding. Something we can fix.

He says it over and over and over again.

This is Brian’s phone. I’ll have access to it for the rest of the night. Please call me. Don’t do this to us. I think you’re afraid. I don’t know why – I don’t know what I could’ve said or done to make you distrust me – but for once in your life, Isla, take a risk. Take a fucking risk. If you keep playing it safe, you’ll never know who you are. I know who you are, and I love who you are. Why don’t you trust me?

His voice fills my heart with pain. His words rip it apart.

I believe Josh – that he thinks he loves me. But I also still believe he’s missing the point. Between his expulsion from school and the pressures from his family, he’s too distracted to see that he’s repeating the same mistake with me that he made with Rashmi. He stayed with her for so long because he liked the *idea* of being in love. He has an empty well in his heart that needs to be filled by someone. Anyone. But that’s not enough for me, and it won’t be enough for him either once he finally realizes the truth.

Brian must have taken pity on him, because a few hours later – after what I

estimate to be three hours of sleep on Josh's behalf – the calls begin again. I don't know what to do, so I don't do anything. My fear is paralyzing. I turn my phone on silent and hide it in my sock drawer. I hate myself for this.

Josh refuses to be silent. He comes to our house in the evening, and my parents turn him away. A minute later, there's a knock on my door. It's Maman. She hands me a small tube. "He wanted you to have this."

I stare at it.

"What's inside?" she asks.

"My Christmas present."

"Was it a nice one?"

"Yeah."

She sits beside me on my bed. "I'm sorry."

I cry. She stays with me until I can't cry any longer.

Christmas Day. Mainly I hang out beside the tree and attempt to read one of my presents. It's a book about a man-eating tiger, but I can't muster up any of my usual enthusiasm. My parents don't ask me to help them in the kitchen, and Gen picks up the extra slack. Even Hattie silently takes over my portion of the dirty dishes.

That's when I know things are really bad.

I peek at my phone before bed and discover only two missed calls. No messages. Either he's getting the picture, or he's respecting my Christmas Tree Agnosticism.

Even *thinking* that phrase hurts.

"May I come in?" But Gen is inside before I can answer. I drop the phone back between my socks and slam the drawer shut. "I used a desk drawer," she says. "When my girlfriend broke up with me."

"Sarah broke up with you?" Now I feel awful about that, too.

"Yeah. Right after Thanksgiving, actually."

"Did she call you a lot afterward?"

"No." Gen gives me a sad smile. "I hid my phone for the opposite reason."

"Oh. I'm sorry."

She shrugs. "Doesn't matter. It sucks either way, right?"

I sit on my bed, and she sits beside me and places her head on my shoulder. We're the same height. Strangers have often mistaken us for twins. "Do you still miss her?" I ask.

"A little. It's better every day, though."

"Why'd you break up?"

She sort of laughs. “Apparently, I’m domineering.”

“I’m replaceable.”

Gen lifts her head, hackles raised. “He *said* that?”

“No, but it’s true. He fell for me because I was there. I could’ve been anyone.”

“Don’t say that. Why do you say things like that?”

“Because that’s what happened.”

She stares at me in disbelief. “You’ve always been so hard on yourself.”

I stare at my hands. I *am* hard on myself. But isn’t it better to be honest about these things before someone else can use them against you? Before someone else can break your heart? Isn’t it better to break it yourself? I thought honesty made people strong.

“Hey.” Gen nudges me. “Show me what’s in the tube.” My head shoots up, and she shrugs. “I saw him drop it off yesterday.”

I can’t stop myself. “How’d he look?”

“Like you’d torn out his heart and stomped on it with your tallest stilettos.”

I’m a bad person. I’ve hurt him. I never wanted to hurt him, and somehow it happened anyway.

“Do you really think breaking up with him was the right thing to do?” Gen asks.

“I don’t know.” But I shake my head. “That’s not true. It was right. It *was*.”

“But you still love him.”

I swallow. “Yeah.”

“A lot.”

“Yeah.”

She pauses. “Would it make it better or worse if you showed me what’s in the tube?”

“Ohmygod. You’re relentless.”

“The word was ‘domineering’. Get it right.”

“Ugh. Fine.”

Gen opens my sock drawer. “I had a feeling I’d find you here,” she tells the tube. She pops off the top and gently taps out the paper. She unrolls it. “Whoa, Nelly.”

Shit. I’d forgotten he drew us naked.

“So. You guys were serious.”

“Please, Gen. Don’t.”

“Is that a Joshua tree? On an island?”

“Yeah.”

“Well...fuck. That’s a *really* romantic gift.”

“I know.”

“He’s good. The art,” she clarifies. “I mean, he was good when he was a freshman, but this doesn’t look like it was drawn by someone in high school. Not even a talented someone in high school. This is, like, the real deal.”

“Will you please stop complimenting my ex-boyfriend?”

Ex-boyfriend. The word tastes sick on my tongue. I hadn’t even let myself think it until now. Every single part of me wants to take the word back.

“I’m just saying he’s talented.”

“Why don’t you tell me more about Sarah?”

Gen rolls up the drawing and slides it back into the tube. “You win.”

But she’s wrong. I’ve lost everything.

One miserable week and no phone calls later. No messages. New Year’s Eve. There’s shouting and singing and general drunken revellery down on the street. Our neighbours have been blasting dubstep for the last three hours. I’ve been watching television in my bedroom alone. Just like Josh and I talked about on our first date.

Ten minutes until midnight.

Josh and I were planning to meet at Kismet. We were going to ring in the new year with a kiss. I’ve never had a New Year’s kiss.

Nothing about this decision has gotten any easier. That awful word torments me. *Ex-boyfriend.* I can’t accept it as the truth. I don’t think...I don’t...I don’t know why I’m doing this any more. I think I freaked out that night in the car. I *know* I freaked out. And I have a very deep, very ugly gut feeling that I’ve made a mistake.

Josh told me that I’ll never know what kind of person I am if I don’t take any risks. Apologizing would be a risk, grovelling would be a risk, begging for his forgiveness on my knees would be a risk.

What have I done? I love him.

Of course he’s worth the risk.

Suddenly, I’m ripping off my pyjamas and throwing on a dress and coat and boots. I’m racing past my sleepy parents in the living room, and I’m shouting that I’ll be right back. I’m ignoring their cries of concern. I’m running downstairs, onto the pavement, across the street. The air is frosty and sharp, and the wind is strong.

Josh, I’m coming. I know you’re there. Please don’t leave.

I tear around the corner, and there it is. My beacon of hope. I race towards its glowing front window, dodging taxis and bumping into a guy being shouldered home by a friend. There’s a loud cry of anger, but I keep running until I burst

through Kismet's shining glass door. The café is still open. But it's empty.

Two employees are sitting at a table. They look up at my entrance, surprised.

"Excuse me, but is there a guy here?" I'm panting, but I have to raise my voice over the loud rock music blasting from the speakers. "Was there a guy here? About my age?"

A woman with a chest covered in electric-bright tattoos shakes her head. "Sorry, honey. We've been dead for nearly two hours."

In the distance, there's an eruption of explosions and cheering. Cars honk, people shout from their windows.

It's midnight.

I run back outside, frantically looking up and down the street, but he's nowhere to be found. Two college-aged girls run past the café hollering at the top of their lungs.

No, he's coming. He'll feel me here, like he felt me the last time.

"Are you okay? You don't look so well." The tattooed woman is standing beside me, and her forehead is wrinkled in concern.

"My boyfrie— my Josh. Josh. He's coming. He should be here any second."

The other employee, a wiry guy whom I belatedly recognize as pierced Abe Lincoln, pops his head out the door. "You forgot my kiss, Maggie."

"I forgot nothing," she says.

"He's coming," I say again.

Maggie side-eyes me. "How old are you? Do your parents know you're out?"

I shoot her a nettled glance. "I'm petite. Not a child."

She shrugs. "O-kay. But I'm still gonna wait out here with you."

"You don't have to do that." The cold wind howls, carrying with it the continued sounds of celebration. I hug my coat around myself tighter.

"Jesus." Abe shivers. "At least wait inside."

They coax me back into the café, and I sit at the table in the window. The one I sat at more than half a year ago. They turn up their music even louder. My ears hurt. I glance at my phone, watching the minutes tick past. Ten. Fifteen. Twenty. Josh hasn't called me since Christmas Day. Before I can talk myself out of it, I call Brian's number. It goes straight to the voicemail of a scary-sounding protective service agency. His employer. I leave a message explaining where I am, pleading for Josh to meet me, and then I run outside again as if that should be enough to make him appear.

He's not there.

I sit back down, wait until two minutes have passed, and then bolt outside again. I repeat this pattern for an hour. I call again. I leave another message. I look outside, but nothing has changed. Josh isn't coming.

He's not coming.

I crumple in the doorway, vaguely aware of Maggie and Abe rushing towards me. It's the deathblow. It's over.



Chapter twenty-eight

It's been a month. Josh never called me back. This gaping, bloody, open wound – the wound that *I* created – still rubs me raw. I have to keep convincing myself that I was right in the first place, that I was right to break up with him, because it's clear that he's realized the truth of what I've always feared. That what he felt for me wasn't love, after all, but convenience.

He's moving on.

I wish that I could move on. I'm clinging with every last fibre of my being.

At night, I lie awake in bed, pretending that his body is pressed against mine. I close my eyes and imagine the weight of his arms draped across me. Holding me tight. In class, I daydream about placing a love lock on le Pont de l'Archevêché, a bridge near Notre-Dame. Couples write their initials on padlocks and snap them onto the gates as a public declaration of their love. I ache for this sort of unbreakable, permanent connection.

After New Year's, my father and I took a train to Dartmouth. I didn't want to go, because how can I possibly say yes to them, even if I *am* accepted? But Dad wanted me to see the school in person. He's excited that I've applied somewhere unexpected.

Everything was covered in a thick layer of pristine white snow. Dad had scheduled an interview for me, and the encouraging woman behind the desk showed me pamphlets of the campus in the spring and autumn. It looked even more beautiful. She was impressed with my transcripts, and she assured me that a lot of students don't know what they want to study when they arrive, and I left the interview feeling hopeful and buoyant and alive.

I died again somewhere on the train ride home. Dartmouth is a future that I might've had, but I lost. It's no longer mine. Furthermore, my ugly secret wish has been granted: a college rejected me, and my choice was made for me. I'll stay here in Paris and attend la Sorbonne. Maybe I'll meet someone someday, and he'll make me forget about Josh. Maybe we'll get married. Maybe I'll live in France for ever.

But some things *have* changed.

Kurt's placeholder comment has returned to haunt me. *I've* been replaced. While I spent a month in detention, he started talking to these two sophomores, Nikhil Devi – I cannot escape that family – and Nikhil's best friend, Michael. Kurt had overheard them talking about the tunnels, and he discovered that they're obsessed with them, too. He mentioned their names a few times last semester, but I was so preoccupied by my own problems that I didn't realize they were actually *hanging out*. They kept in touch over the winter break, and now their friendship has reached the next natural level.

Nikhil and Michael are sitting at our cafeteria table.

This must be how Kurt felt when Josh ate with us. And it's not that Nikhil and Michael are ignoring me – they don't, just like Josh never ignored Kurt – but they're not exactly sitting at our table because they like me. Though, okay, maybe Nikhil does seem to *like* like me, which is yet another awkward situation.

It's weird knowing that Nikhil has spent a significant amount of time with Josh, through Rashmi. I wish that I could ask him about them. What were they like as a couple? And how did Josh and I compare?

But that would be mean. Not that I'm a good person any more.

I can't help but think that Kurt is pulling away from me on purpose. And not just because he got tired of sitting in my backseat, but also because Josh did this same thing when he was a junior, when his friends were close to graduation. He pulled away from them. And Kurt will always be my best friend, of course he will, but things have changed. For the first time ever, Kurt wasn't the most important person in my life. That's hard for me to deal with. It must have been hard for Kurt, too.

And yet...he's thriving. Which has only made it that much more clear that I'm the reason why we haven't had any other friends. Not Kurt. *I've* held us back. When I disappeared, he found new people to hang out with, but I still don't have anyone else. How do people even make friends? How does that happen?

I can't stop thinking about risk. I took one risk in going to Kismet and another in calling Brian's phone. Neither worked out. It takes the entire month of January for me to build up the courage to attempt another. Even though Josh is no longer an option, I still want to tackle these other problems – my lack of friends and lack of everyday courage.

It happens one evening in the cafeteria. There's a rare conversational break between Kurt and his friends, and I pounce before I lose my nerve. "Angoulême is this weekend. You guys wanna go with me?"

Angoulême is the name of a town about three hours south-west of Paris by train, but it's also shorthand for the largest comics festival in Europe. Its black-

and-white wildcat mascot has been crunched in every advertising space not already occupied by the Olympics. It feels like a symbol of everything that I've lost. If Josh were still here – and if we were still together – we'd take the day trip without a second thought. I need to prove to myself that I can do it without him. And I've seen Nikhil and Michael reading comics, so surely this is not an unattractive offer?

"I thought you were done with leaving this city without permission," Kurt says.

"It's one afternoon," I say. "The school will never know."

Nikhil sits up eagerly. He's tiny and excitable, a kittenish ball of energy, and he always speaks in an enthusiastic babble. "That sounds fun. Yeah, guys, let's do it! We should totally do it."

Michael grins at him with a full mouth of braces. "I wonder why *you* want to go."

"It's because he wants to bone Isla," Kurt says.

"*Kurt.*" I'm mortified.

"Yeah." Michael rolls his eyes. "I know."

"Oh." Kurt sinks. They may be friends, but they don't have each other's rhythms down yet. And then he immediately perks back up, because he still has the upper hand on information. "It won't happen. She's still hung up on Josh."

"Kurt, I'm sitting right here." I try to give Nikhil an apologetic wince, but he stares determinedly at his food tray. His dark brown skin has taken on a pinky-red undertone. Crushes are so awful. I wonder if they suck worse for the crush-er or the crush-ee. I consider my three years of watching Josh from afar. Yeah, definitely the crush-er.

Poor Nikhil.

Poor me.

"It doesn't matter anyway," Michael says. He speaks with a shrewd authority that's belied by his ungroomed, sticky-uppy hair. "Saturday is the only day Arnaud can take us underground."

"Who's Arnaud?" I ask.

Kurt stabs a roasted potato with his fork. "Our first connection. Michael found him. He works at the sewer system museum."

"There's a sewer system museum?" On the upside, at least this means there are still things for me to learn about Paris. Since I'll be here for a while. If Kurt stays interested in this stuff, I suppose someday I'll be crawling around underground, too. It doesn't sound so bad. Cramped and dirty, yes. But it'd be an adventure. I suppose.

"Yes, of course," Kurt says. As if all cities have sewer museums. "Why don't

you come with us this weekend instead?”

I imagine drainage and mud and darkness. And then I imagine a train and the open countryside and a sleepy town filled with comic books.

Yeah. I'll make friends another day.

That night, there's a letter waiting for me. I stare into my mailbox, afraid to pick it up. I want it to be from him. I want it to be from him so badly.

My arm trembles as I reach inside and pull it out.

It's not from him.

The blow to my chest is as strong as ever. I'm still not any closer to being over Josh. Not even a centimetre closer, not even a millimetre. People say that the only thing that heals heartbreak is time. But how much time will it take?

The return address comes into focus, and I'm hit with a second shock wave. I shred open the envelope, right there in the hall, and rip out the letter. My head reels. I read the first sentence again, but the words haven't changed. It's a different kind of heartbreak. *On behalf of the faculty and staff, it is with great pleasure that I inform you of your admission to Dartmouth College.*

The streets of Angoulême overflow with red balloons and swarms of happy readers. But their excitement can't stop the rain. Why does it rain every time I travel? This time, I don't wait to buy an umbrella. I haven't seen the last one since Barcelona. Josh must have it. Or maybe we left it in the park. Umbrellas are so small and sad and easy to forget.

I wander through the town, the venues, the comics museum. Festivals like this aren't as crazed as their American counterparts – and there are far fewer people in costume – but the Europeans in attendance are still showing less restraint than usual. I try to get caught up in their enthusiasm, and occasionally it works. Like when I discover a new-to-me author-illustrator who writes about a split life between China and America. It's only after I purchase two volumes that I realize how much Josh would like her work, too. And the fact that I can't share it with him makes my heart hurt all over again.

It gets worse when I find myself faced with a large display featuring only titles by Joann Sfar. And then even worse when I discover one of Josh's favourite artists in the flesh, and I have to talk myself out of getting a book signed for him. It feels selfish, so I talk myself back into it, thinking I'll just have something signed. No personalization. If I ever see him again, he can have it. But the moment the cartoonist asks, I blurt, “To Josh’, please.” And before I can correct my mistake, my ex-boyfriend's name – at least I can say *that word* now – has been inked onto the front page beside an illustration of a rose.

Of all things. A rose.

I can't win.

Back in Paris, the posters for the Olympics make me wonder if I should buy a ticket to Chambéry next month. But the thought of another crowded train, another crowded town, all of those crowded hotels...ugh. No.

That's how I'm feeling about everything these days: ugh. No.

The city remains as cold as ever. A few days after Angoulême, I pop into one of the Latin Quarter's identical gyro joints, seeking warmth in the form of hot *frites*. Or French fries, which should really be called Belgian fries, if America wants to get correct about it.

Ohmygod. No wonder I don't have any friends.

The restaurant is empty. I sit in the back with the second volume of the Chinese-American split-life autobiography. I haven't been able to put it down. Much of it is depressingly, satisfyingly familiar.

The door *dings*, and another customer enters the restaurant.

Sanjita looks as startled to see me as I am to see her. She waves, uncertain. I return the gesture. She also purchases a sleeve of *frites*, and I'm thankful that she's the one who has to make the decision: leave or join me. The restaurant is too small, and we have too much of a history, for her to sit alone.

She's hesitant. Fearful. She joins me anyway.

"It's freezing out there," she says.

I'm surprised by how grateful I am for her company. "I know. I wish it'd hurry up and snow already."

"Me, too. It feels wrong for it to be this cold without it."

There's an uncomfortable pause. It's the kind that follows any general statement about the weather, the kind that's filled with everything we *aren't* saying. I'm trying to come up with another neutral topic when she asks, "How's Josh doing?"

The blood drains from my face.

Sanjita doesn't notice. She pokes at her fries. "I felt so bad for you guys when he had to leave."

This unexpected moment of compassion tugs on my heart. "I...don't know how he's doing. I think he's okay. We broke up last month."

"You *did*?" She raises her head in surprise. "But you were perfect for each other."

The floor dips. "You thought so?"

"Of course. And you'd been in love with him for, like, ever. That must have been crazy when you actually started dating him."

The relief I feel at being understood – really and truly understood – is profound. The emptiness inside of me transforms into an instant flood of emotion. “It was crazy. It was amazing. It was...the best thing that’s ever happened to me.”

Sanjita scoots forward, and her dangly gold earrings sway. “So what went wrong?”

“I liked him – I *loved* him – but I don’t think he loved me the same way in return.”

Her shoulders fall. “He broke up with you.”

“No. I broke up with him.”

She winces. “Oh. *Ouch.*”

“I know.”

But her frown only grows. “I don’t get it. You guys were glued to each other. I saw the way he looked at you. He never looked at Rashmi like that.”

My heart stops. I could never ask Nikhil, but...Sanjita.

“Wh-what were they like as couple? Your sister and Josh?”

She shrugs, and her long earrings sway again. “I don’t know. They bickered constantly. I think they were more similar, more stubborn and determined, than they realized. It was why they sort of worked together, but why it never could’ve lasted. There was no balance.”

Josh and I had balance. Didn’t we?

“Not like she ever told *me* anything.” Sanjita scowls. “But, from the outside, it seemed like they’d both be better off with partners who were softer. Like you.”

I’m not sure I like that word. *Softer.*

She sees my expression and shakes her head. “Not, like, *weak* soft. I meant... someone who’d give them the space they need to flourish. Who wouldn’t try to change them. Who’d support them – even when they were being dumbasses – but who’d be ready to guide them back when they needed it.”

“And...you think that’s me?”

“Are you kidding? You’re the most patient and forgiving person I know.”

A strange thing is happening. Something deep inside of me recognizes her words as true. I *am* patient and forgiving.

Just not with myself.

She looks away from me again, re-hiding her face, and I know she’s thinking about Kurt. About how she tested me for months. About how I wanted to be friends with them both, but how she forced me to choose anyway. I can see her shame. She clears her throat, pushing herself back into the present. “So why don’t you think Josh loved you?”

“I felt like I was...a nice distraction. He was so unhappy here, you know?”

“Phones are distracting. The internet is distracting. The way he looked at you? He wasn’t distracted. He was *consumed*.”

I get the sense that she’s being extra nice to me to make up for the past without having to say she’s sorry. It feels cowardly. But it also appears as if she believes what she’s saying. It’s simultaneously my greatest fear *and* my greatest hope. Is it possible, after all of this second-guessing, that Josh really did love me as much as I loved him? Is it possible that he saw something in me that I have trouble seeing in myself?

Is it possible that I’m worthy of being loved by someone whom I love?

My heart pounds at double its usual speed. “Either way,” I say. It sounds defensive. Like I’m making an excuse, which I suppose I am. “He needs to get his act together. The last time we talked, he still hadn’t figured out what he was going to do about school. He’s a semester away from graduation, and he’s just *sitting* on it. And he can’t go to New England without a degree. So, basically, he’s not going anywhere.”

Sanjita looks confused. “New England?”

I tell her about his school and everything else spills out, too. “And I thought I was getting used to the idea of la Sorbonne, but I don’t know. Back when we were dating, it sounded exciting to go someplace new. I did all this research, and Dartmouth seemed really cool, you know? Different. And when I went up there a few weeks ago, it was even better than I’d imagined. But when we broke up, it became *his* place again—”

“I thought you said he wasn’t going anywhere.”

“Well, I don’t know that for sure—”

“Who cares? Go to Dartmouth.”

“Yeah, but what if he thinks I want to move there for him?”

“Do you?”

“No, but—”

“So go to Dartmouth.”

I frown, and she stares at me like I’m dense. “I’m not sure what’s so difficult about this,” she says. “You got into the school that you wanted to get into. *So go to it.*”

Holy shit. She’s right. Is it really that simple?

Sanjita crosses her arms, smug. She knows she’s won her argument.

“You used to want to be a lawyer,” I say. “Do you still want that? Because you’re good at arguing your case.”

She grins. “What else do you need me to fix?”

“I don’t know. My sister? Can you fix her?”

“Hattie, I assume?”

“She’s relentless.” I grind *une frite* into its paper sleeve. “She showed up in my room the other day – unmasked, of course – and immediately started rifling through all of my belongings. I told her to cut it out, but that only made her push this huge stack of books off my desk.”

“Maybe she’s just curious about you. Maybe she didn’t mean anything by it.”

I shake my head. “Hattie never does anything without purpose. She was doing it to get under my skin, and it worked. Like it always does.”

Sanjita arches an eyebrow. “I don’t know. It sounds like you’re treating her like a child so she’s responding like one.”

I can’t contain the surprise from my expression. Or the outrage.

She holds up her hands in defence. “I have three older sisters. They might as well be three mothers. I’ve been making a conscious effort not to do it to Nikhil this year.”

One of my hands clutches my necklace. “Like...how?”

“Have you ever *invited* her to your room? Or anywhere else, for that matter?”

There’s a long and empty silence. Sanjita correctly interprets it. “What about Gen? Do you guys ever hang out, just the two of you?”

“She lives on the other side of the Atlantic.” It comes out pricklier than intended.

“But you do, don’t you? Over the holidays.”

I think about Gen in my bedroom over Thanksgiving. And then again over Christmas. The truth washes over me in a tidal wave. It’s true. Hattie has been trying to tell me for years. I treat Gen like a friend, and I treat her like a child.

I mother her.

Hattie hasn’t been my baby sister in ages. I’ve been condescending, and I’ve never seen nor treated her like an equal. She needs me to be a confidante. A friend. And then the unexpected flip side illuminates inside of me: I need her to be mine even more.

“You should consider a double major,” I say. “Law *and* psychology.”

Sanjita smiles as if she’s pleased to be seen. Just like me.



Chapter twenty-nine

Sanjita and I talk more about college and the future. But we don't talk about Kurt. And we don't talk about Emily. And as January rolls into February, I realize that we probably never will. We've grown too far apart, and our past hurts were too big. Real friendship is no longer an option. But I don't feel melancholy about it – I feel relieved. There's a measure of respect and well wishes between us. And that's not nothing.

Our conversation also made me realize how much I've missed having a female friendship in my life. Sanjita and I may never hang out again, but there's someone else here that I've been ignoring for far too long: Hattie.

It's time to let go of this stupid grudge. I know she didn't mean to get Josh and me in trouble. And she *didn't* get us in trouble. She *didn't* get Josh expelled. We got ourselves in trouble, and Josh got himself expelled.

The pain of losing him is as visceral as ever. The only way I'll ever move past it is to make sure that the loss wasn't in vain. That I've learned something. At the very least, being proactive will feel better than sitting around and feeling sorry for myself. It takes me a while to figure out the right way to simultaneously apologize *and* make a gesture of friendship, but it takes me even longer to work up the nerve to talk to her.

She's my sister, but she's still intimidating as hell.

I find the courage on an empty Sunday afternoon when Kurt is out potholing with his friends. Or...maybe it's not so much that I find the courage. Maybe it's more that I'm forced into it, because every time my world comes to a standstill, all I can think about is the Josh-size hole in my heart. It's too sad for me to be alone.

Hattie is sceptical at my text, but she agrees to meet me more willingly than I would've guessed. I wait outside her dorm. "Why did you want me to dress warmly?" she asks. "Are you taking me to a Siberian prison?"

I smile and cross the street without her. "Nope."

She hesitates. And then she catches up and walks beside me. "Abandoned

research station in Antarctica?”

“Nope.”

“You’re taking me to practise for our two-person skeleton race at the Olympics.”

“Yes.”

“Do you think it’s finally gonna snow?”

I’m thrown by her question, which sounds like a real one. She’s staring at the sky. “I doubt it,” I say. “We haven’t been lucky so far. Why would that change now?”

“You used to be the positive sister,” Hattie grumbles. We walk together silently to the other side of the Seine, and she’s only further exasperated when we reach our destination. “Tante Juliette’s. Is this an intervention? Did you find out about my sex addiction? So I like old men in baby diapers, what’s the big deal?”

“I didn’t bring you to Tante Juliette’s.”

She snarls. “I’ve been here, like, a million times, remember?”

“Just shut up and follow me.”

For some reason, Hattie does. She follows me up the stairs. Around the third floor, I look back over my shoulder and say, “Diapers, huh?”

“And those adult-size cribs. That’s hot.”

I laugh.

There’s the quickest hint of a smile before she drops back into deadpan. “And unibrows. I like a geezer with a giant, coarse unibrow.”

I laugh again. “Oh god, Hattie.”

We pass by the purple door with the leopard-print mat. “Yeah, see, that’s definitely Tante Juliette’s door,” she says.

I lead her to mine. “And this?”

“Her stupid roof. Gen once threw my teddy bear over the edge, and a car ran over him. Sludge was never the same.”

“She did? For real?” I’m startled. I don’t remember this.

“Yeah, for real.”

I unlock the door and head up the rickety steps. “Well. Sludge is safe. I promise I’m not leading you up here to re-enact a traumatic moment from your childhood.”

“I know you wouldn’t.” I almost don’t hear her say it, it’s so quiet.

I pop open the trapdoor, and she squints into the sunlight. I reach for her hand and help her onto the roof. Her eyes widen. My unmovable, unshakable sister looks surprised by her surroundings. “Who did this?” she asks. “It’s yours, isn’t it? This looks like you.”

I'm not sure if that's good or bad. "It's on loan. I've been using it for a few years."

Hattie whips around and narrows her eyes at me. "So Gen gave it to you? This is your place? The two of you?"

"Gen? No, Tante Juliette gave it to me sophomore year. It was a place where Kurt and I could escape from...everyone else. Gen doesn't know about it."

"She doesn't?" There's a heartbreaking note of hope in her voice. And I know that everything Sanjita said is true.

I smile gently. "Nope. It's a secret. She doesn't know."

"It's pretty," Hattie finally says.

"Thanks. I'm glad you like it. Because it's yours now."

For the second time in a single minute, Hattie looks surprised. I hold out the key. She takes it slowly. "Don't you want to give this to Kurt? Isn't it his, too?"

"Kurt has new places to explore. And...he's not you. He's not my sister."

She almost appears to be shaken. Almost.

"And, you know, you don't have to keep any of this stuff, it's just junk we've picked up over the years—"

"No! No, I like it." She glances around, and her eyes catch on the mural, which I've been trying my best to ignore. "You brought Josh up here, too."

I tuck my hands inside my coat pockets. "Yeah."

"So was this some sort of gross sexual playground? Did you do it on top of this carousel horse-head?"

"Hattie!"

She laughs at my reddened cheeks, and after a moment, I can't help but join in. "No," I say. "But *maybe* you should wash the blanket in that trunk."

My sister squeals with genuine horror, which only makes us both laugh harder. When we finally stop, she pulls her gaze away from mine again. She focuses on the river. "It's cool of you to give this to me. So...thanks."

"I'm sorry." I take a deep breath. "For being so awful to you this year. And for blaming you for something that wasn't your fault."

Hattie nods. She doesn't take her eyes off the Seine. But I know we're okay.

I take another deep breath, and...*there it is*. A new and distinct smell in the air. Hattie turns her head and smiles at me as the first snowflakes of the year swirl down upon Paris. The city is cold and hushed and beautiful.

"Will you miss this next year?" she asks, and when I look at her in surprise, she adds, "Maman told me they mailed the first cheque to Dartmouth."

I hesitate, and then I tell her the truth. "I *will* miss Paris. And I'll miss New York. I'm excited and scared, but...I think I'm more excited than scared. I think," I say again.

“You think?”

“I think.” I slide down the wall until I’m sitting down. She sits beside me. We cross our arms, shivering. “When Josh and I were in Spain, we went to this park. This really, really beautiful park. And it started these ideas in my head about how maybe I wasn’t the person that I thought I was. Maybe I’m *not* a city girl. Maybe I was only thinking about Paris versus New York, because nothing else seemed real, somehow. Like, everywhere else just seemed like something—”

“You’d read about in a book.”

“*Exactly*. But being in this beautiful park with this beautiful boy talking about this alternate future in which I’m someone who learns how to camp and climb rocks and build fires and sleep below the stars...in that moment, it seemed possible.”

“So what? You’re gonna be a park ranger?”

I laugh. “I just want to try those things. They sound fun.”

“What about Josh?”

My eyes catch on his mural. On the brownstone with ivy window boxes and the American flag. “What about him?”

“He’s not a part of your plans any more?”

“Well...no. We broke up. And I don’t need him to do those things.”

“Yeah, duh,” Hattie says. “But that’s not what I meant. I meant don’t you still *want* to do those things with him?”

“Yes,” I whisper. “I still want to do everything with him.”

“Isla...why do you think that Josh didn’t love you?”

My voice grows even smaller. “Because I thought no one could love me.”

“And why did you think *that*?”

“Because I didn’t think I was worth loving.”

Hattie takes this in. And then she hits me in the stomach. I yowl in surprise, and she hits me again. “Don’t be stupid.”

“Ow.”

“Everyone is worthy of love. Even a dumb sister like you.”

I snort. “Yeah, thanks. I got that. I’m okay now.”

“Are you? Because you don’t act like a person who is okay. You mope around school, and you hardly ever leave your room, and you always look unhappy.”

“Says the sister with the permanent scowl.”

“You need to talk to him.”

I sigh and stare at my lap. “I know.”

“So why haven’t you?”

“Because now I do believe that he loved me. And I’m afraid that after all this time, after everything I’ve put him through...he doesn’t any more.”

“Ugh. So take a risk and find out. The sooner you ask him, the sooner you can get on with your life. Either way,” she adds.

Thanks to Josh, I *am* taking risks. I’ve learned that if I never leave those areas of my life that feel comfortable, I’ll never have a chance at a greater happiness. Accepting Dartmouth was a risk. Asking my sister to hang out with me was a risk. But the biggest risk of all is still Josh himself. I don’t yet have the courage to give him the opportunity to say no. It’s impossible, the not-knowing, but it’s better than getting the wrong answer.

There’s a muffled ring from inside my coat pocket. I pull out my phone to silence it, and then it drops from my hands and bounces against the concrete.

Josh.

It’s his *actual name*. I haven’t seen it on the screen of my phone since before Barcelona. My heart wrenches. “Is that him? How can that be him?”

“Whoa. He heard us.”

I pick up my phone. “What do I do?”

“One more ring until voicemail.” Hattie peers over my shoulder. “Tick-tock.”

I scramble to answer. “He— Hello?”

There’s a strange hiccup of silence. And then he speaks, and his voice – *It’s him, it’s him, it’s him* – is awash with strangled relief. “I didn’t know if you’d answer.”

“You got your phone back.”

“Yeah. Last week.”

I feel a stab of sadness that he didn’t call me immediately. And then a second stab, this one of guilt. I broke up with him. Of course he shouldn’t call me.

“It’s Sunday night,” he continues. “You aren’t at Pizza Pellino.”

“No, I’m at the Treehouse with Hattie.” And then I’m so dizzy that my vision goes black. “How...how did you know that I’m not there?”

But I’ve already anticipated his answer.

“Because *I’m* here.”



Chapter thirty

I'm trembling. Hattie's ear is pressed against my head, listening in. Silver-white flakes catch in our tangle of red hair.

"Isla?" Josh says. "Isla, are you still there?"

"I'm here."

"I was hoping you'd be *here*. At Pellino's. My friends and I are on our way to the Olympics, so we stopped by for old times' sake. I wanted to introduce you. I mean, I know you already know them. But I wanted you to *know* them."

My head swims. "You want me to know your friends?"

"Is that too weird?"

"I don't know."

"I'd like to see you again. We could talk?" His question is tentative.

He's caught me off guard. I'm not ready for this. I have to *prepare* for this. "How long will you be in town?"

"Just tonight. We're catching the train to Chambéry in the morning."

Hattie is nodding her head like a madwoman.

"Um," I say. "Sure. I guess I could be there in...twenty minutes?"

"Great!" Josh says. "Okay, bye."

I stare down at my phone's screen. "He hung up."

"He was afraid you'd take it back," Hattie says.

I put my head between my legs. "I feel ill."

"That was the strangest timing. *The strangest*. It's like fate, if I believed in fate. I don't know. Maybe I believe in fate now."

The tone of her voice makes me lift my head. She grins.

"Hattie." My heart seizes. "What did you do?"

"Jeez, nothing."

"Tell me what you did!"

"Ow." She covers her ears at my shouting. "Maybe I mailed your stupid book to his dad's stupid office in DC, I don't know."

I frown. "Huh? What book?"

“The one you brought home from Angoulême, thanks for not inviting me, that I stole from your room to read and discovered you’d had personalized? I thought it was so sad and pathetic that I mailed it to him. And maybe I attached a note saying how much you were totally still in love with him, and he should try calling you again.”

It’s the only thing that could shock me more than Josh’s call. Finding out that I have *Hattie* to thank for it. I’m speechless.

“You’re welcome,” she says.

“Thank you? I think? I’ll let you know when this is all over.”

“You’d better.” She pulls me to my feet, leads me through the trapdoor and down the stairs, locks the door, and slides the key into her pocket.

The pressure inside my chest grows at a paralysing rate. “I don’t know about this.”

“Shut up. You’re being annoying again.” Hattie leads me, stumbling, into the closest *métro* station. I feel like I’m moving both too fast and too slow. She shoves me through the turnstile and says, “Don’t be a chickenshit. Tell him how you feel.”

“What if he doesn’t love me?”

“He does.”

“What if he doesn’t?”

“Ugh, then who cares? You won’t lose anything you haven’t already lost.” She flicks a snowflake from the tip of my nose. “For once in your life, listen to your younger sister. She’s taller, and she knows better than you.”

The flakes are scattered, here and there, as they float down to earth. I glance at the grey-white sky. If only a blizzard would burst from above and bury me alive. That would be better than what I’m about to do. The temperature is below freezing, but I’m sweaty and feverish and short of breath. My feet touch Pellino’s threshold, but my body won’t go any further. *One step at a time*. I place my hand on the door.

Pushing it open has never felt so impossible.

A chain of brass bells signals my entrance. The *maître d’* brightens at the sight of me. “*Où est Monsieur Bacon?*”

“Kurt has other plans tonight,” I reply in French as my gaze darts around the room.

“Oh. Are we sad?”

“No, it’s fine. I’m actually meeting—”

“Isla!”

It comes from the corner table. St. Clair is waving me down as Josh turns

around in his chair. Everything transitions into slow motion. The maître d', the noisy chatter, the smoky fragrance of the wood-fired pizza – they vanish as I wait for his eyes to find mine.

We lock.

The entire contents of my heart reflect back at me in his expression. *Joy, pain, strength, wonder, sadness, beauty, hope.* He is everything.

“Ah,” the maître d' says. “Of course.”

He guides me towards the table as my heartbeat thumps in my throat. The room closes in. My soul aches with attraction. There are four empty seats, and the maître d' pulls out the chair beside Josh. I'm shaking as I place my coat onto the back of it. I'm shaking as I sit down. I'm shaking as Josh glances at the maître d' with a look of unmistakable gratitude. Does that glance mean what I want it to mean?

“Where's Kurt?” Josh asks.

“He's out with some new friends. Underground. It's a long story.”

Josh lifts his eyebrows in surprise as the rest of the table beams at me – St. Clair, Anna and Meredith. “Wow,” I say. “The gang's all here.”

“Everyone but Rashmi,” St. Clair says.

Anna gives him a swift kick below the table, but I catch it. “It's okay,” I say awkwardly. At least it's answered a question. They know about my history with Josh. I glance at the three empty seats. “Is she coming?”

“One of those was for Kurt,” Josh says, and I'm touched.

“The others are for our friends who got us into the Olympics,” Anna says. “We split up today, and they're still out sightseeing. They should be here any minute.”

“Friends from California?” I grab the opportunity to show them that I'm not completely in the dark. Just mostly.

She nods. “Yeah, Lola and Cricket. Étienne and I—”

“Étienne,” Josh says, and Meredith cracks up.

“They're teasing me because I'm the only person who calls him that,” Anna explains.

“You're the only person *allowed* to call him that,” Josh says. “You and his mom.”

St. Clair smiles. “The only two ladies I need.”

“That's sick,” Meredith says, but she's still laughing. She has a wonderful, friendly laugh. A tiny nose ring catches the light and twinkles. Everything about her is cheerful.

It's unreal to be surrounded here, in person, by his friends. Those faces from his artwork.

Anna is one of those naturally beautiful girls who has no idea that she's beautiful. She dresses in jeans and T-shirts, and she has this gap-toothed smile and a bleached stripe in her long brown hair. She's comfortable in her own skin. Her boyfriend is also beautiful, but he's aware of it. Not that St. Clair acts like a jerk. He's just loaded with confidence. He's short, but it's never gotten in his way. Nearly every girl at school was in love with him, not to mention most of the guys and half the *professeurs*.

But I was never in love with him. Not when Josh was around.

Anna clears her throat. "Anyway. *Étienne* and I—"

Josh and Meredith snicker.

Anna grins. "—work with Lola at a movie theatre. Cricket is her boyfriend, and Cricket's twin sister is Calliope Bell. The figure skater?"

My eyebrows shoot up. "I've seen her face on about a billion advertisements."

"That's the one. She's going for the gold."

"And you're all here to cheer her on?" I glance at Josh. He appears to be calm, but it's superficial. A frenetic energy is pulsating from his core. Vibrating against me. I rub my arms, hair on end, but the others don't seem to notice.

"Sort of." St. Clair shrugs. It's slow and full-bodied, very French. Maman has the same one. "Mainly we're using it as an excuse to visit."

I turn to Meredith. "Did you come in from Rome? That's where you're attending university, right?"

"Yeah." She puts an arm around Josh and her curly head on his shoulder, but they're clearly gestures of friendship. "When I heard everyone was coming, I couldn't resist."

"And you?" I don't look at Josh. He knows the question is for him.

He can't meet my eyes either. "Same for me, I guess. Couldn't resist."

St. Clair waggles his eyebrows at Josh, but the moment he sees that I've caught him, his expression changes to a flirtatious grin. "Aw, mate," he says to Josh. "Admit it. You couldn't resist *me*."

Josh relaxes into a smile. "You're like a gorgeous little bonbon."

"Delicious in every way," St. Clair says.

Anna rolls her eyes. "Wait until you try his creamy centre."

St. Clair bursts into laughter as Meredith squeals. The chemistry between the four of them is as if they hadn't spent a day apart. My heart squeezes, but it's not from jealousy. It's out of happiness for Josh's sake. He leans across the table to jostle St. Clair, but he knocks against my arm instead.

"Sorry," Josh says quickly. His voice turns strained. He sits, and the jovial mood crashes down with him, but his touch shudders through me in waves.

Longing. As fierce and powerful as ever.

I look away, not wanting him to see how badly I wish he would touch me again. And then I discover a strange apparition outside the restaurant's window. I blink. It's still there. In the winter, the streets of Paris are grey and the coats that walk them are black.

So this...this is like...

"The circus," Josh says, finishing my thought out loud. "It's like the circus has come to town."

"Brilliant," St. Clair says. "That must be Lola and Cricket."

A boy and a girl enter the restaurant. The boy is ridiculously tall and skinny – far more extreme than Josh – and it's only emphasized by the tightness of his pinstriped pants. He could almost be wearing stilts. He's wearing a bright blue military jacket, and his wrists are covered in rainbow-coloured bracelets and rubber bands. The girl is wearing a gigantic, poufy skirt with pink and yellow and turquoise crinoline peeking out from underneath. She also has a military jacket, Vietnam-era army green, but hers has been decorated with pink glitter. And she has matching pink hair.

"Hi!" Lola plops down beside me, and her skirt *fwoomps* up and onto my lap. "Yikes. Sorry about that." She smiles as she jams it underneath the table.

"How did you manage to fit all of that into a suitcase?" I'm impressed.

Her smile grows from ear to ear. "I'm a championship-level packer."

St. Clair snorts. "She also brought three times the amount of luggage as the rest of us."

"But she *is* a good packer," Cricket says. "You'd be amazed at how much she managed to squish into those extra suitcases."

He pulls out the chair beside her, and she reaches up with both arms to hold him as he sits down. Not because he needs steadying, but because they're clearly in the earliest stages of love. She simply *needs* to touch him. They double-hold-hands below the table. I feel a sharp pang as I remember doing the same with Josh. Lola gives Cricket a kiss, square on the lips, and he looks as if he might explode from happiness.

"Hey," Lola says, suddenly seeing Josh. "I think I saw you on TV a few months ago."

"It's possible," Josh says.

"You must be Isla and Josh," Cricket says.

I almost correct him – *Oh, no, we aren't a couple* – when I realize he means Isla and Josh. Not Isla-and-Josh. I shake his extended hand, feeling sad. "And Meredith," he says, leaning over me to shake hers.

"I like your hair," she says.

"Thanks," he says. It stands on end, further adding to his manic height.

“So none of you have to ask,” Lola says. “Six four. Without the hair.”

“Étienne is five four,” Anna says. “*With* his boots.”

“Without,” St. Clair protests. But his grin tells another story.

“You’re shorter than I thought.” I say it without thinking. “Sorry.” I wince. “I only meant you don’t seem that small.” I wince again.

“*Confidence*, darling.” He leans across the table and touches a finger to my cheek. “You could learn something from me, you know.”

My face turns pink. But I laugh, pleased to be included in their good-natured ribbing. Josh looks at me, worried, and I turn in my seat to face him full on. I smile. He exhales with relief, and I lean in closer.

“We’re okay,” I whisper. “Aren’t we?”

“It’s all I want,” he says.

Our server appears. We startle apart, and my heart races. Does that mean he wants to be friends again? Or am *I* what he wants? With all that *wanting* connotes?

We place an order for a ton of pizzas, and normally I’d be thrilled about the variety, but all I want to do is return to the previous conversation. But our window of privacy is gone. The table pulls us into discussion about the Olympics. Apparently, Cricket’s twin would be a shoo-in for the gold medal, but she’s convinced that she has a second-place curse. Everyone says they’re sure she’ll be fine, but Cricket is weird and jittery. I get the sense that he believes in the curse, too, though he won’t admit it. Talk turns to everyone’s schools. I wait for Josh to chime in, but he never does. I wonder if that means he still hasn’t enrolled anywhere. But maybe he’s waiting for me to speak first.

The silence in our corner grows.

The pizza arrives. With each bite, I beg myself to ask if he’s finishing high school. I beg myself to ask if he’s still moving to Vermont. But, the truth is, I’m afraid of his answer. It’s been less than two months, and I left him broken-hearted. How could he have already found the energy to attend – or care about – a new school?

My guilt and fear push us further apart.

“Are you okay?” Josh asks. “You’ve hardly eaten anything.”

I look at his plate. “Neither have you.”

He opens his mouth to reply, when St. Clair stands. “We’re off,” he says, meaning him and Anna and no one else. She looks as surprised as the rest of us.

“We haven’t even had dessert,” Meredith says.

“I’m taking my lady friend somewhere special for dessert.”

“You are?” Anna says.

“I am.”

Anna looks happy enough. “Okay.” She gathers her things and looks bewilderedly at the rest of us. “Guess I’ll see you guys tomorrow?” Her eyes fall on me. “Oh, no! I wanted to catch up. Well, hopefully, we’ll be seeing each other again. Soon. Good luck.”

I pounce on her words. *Soon. Good luck.* They’re general statements, but they feel specific. They feel promising. Anna and St. Clair hug everybody goodbye, even me. The hug between Josh and St. Clair lasts the longest. It’s a real hug, not a lame guy-hug. My heart breaks a little more. Anna and St. Clair leave the restaurant. Meredith, Lola and I sit down, but Josh and Cricket exchange a meaningful look.

Josh flags down the server. “*L’addition, s’il vous plaît.*” Check, please.

“We’re leaving?” I can’t hide the disappointment from my voice. A proper French dinner should keep us here for at least another hour.

Josh pauses, mid-reach for his wallet. He looks at me, searching, and I find hope in his eyes. It makes me feel hopeful, too. He smiles. “Something better is about to happen.”

“Hurry, hurry, hurry.” Cricket bounces on the balls of his feet.

“Do you know what’s happening?” Lola asks me.

I shake my head as Meredith looks between Josh and Cricket. “Didn’t you two *just* meet? How can you already have secrets?”

Josh grins so wide that his dimples appear. My heart flutters at the well-missed sight. He and Cricket toss down some bills from their wallets, and then Josh is yanking out a bulging shoulder bag from behind the table. “Come on.” He’s still smiling at me as he throws on his coat. It’s his going-on-a-date coat, of course.

That coat. It hurts how much I love it.

The five of us race through the snowy white streets towards the River Seine. The sun has gone down, and most of the Latin Quarter appears to be staying inside tonight. Josh glances at my feet. I’m wearing heeled boots, but I’m keeping in stride with everyone else. He shoots me an impressed eyebrow-raise as we burst out of the neighbourhood, directly across from Notre-Dame.

“Where?” Cricket asks Josh.

“In the square, near the main entrance.” Josh points across the bridge. We run across it towards Notre-Dame’s courtyard.

“Oh,” Meredith says, understanding. “Seriously?”

Lola looks at me, and we explode into helpless laughter. Neither of us has any idea what’s happening. We’re panting, out of shape and out of breath.

“Stop!” Josh says.

We tumble to a halt behind him. We’re on the edge of the square facing the

massive cathedral. “I assume we didn’t run all the way here to see a structure that hasn’t left this spot in hundreds of years?” Lola readjusts her pink hair, and I realize it’s a wig. “What am I looking at?”

But then I see them.

Several yards away – closer to the cathedral’s legendary carved doorways – Anna and St. Clair are standing on top of Point Zéro. It’s been hand-brushed clear of its dusting of snow. Point Zéro is the bronze marker, a star, which designates the official centre of France. There are at least two superstitions about it. One is that anyone who stands on the star will return to France. The other is that you can use it to make a wish.

“Wait for it,” Josh says.

Lola stands straighter, excited. “No!”

“Yes,” Cricket says.

I’m the last one in the dark, until – suddenly – it happens. St. Clair removes something from his pocket. And then he gets down on one knee.

Anna’s entire body lights with shock and joy and love. She nods a vigorous yes. St. Clair places the ring on her finger. He stands, she throws her arms around him, and they kiss. He spins her in a circle. They kiss again. Deep, hungry, long. And then he turns to us and waves – with the biggest smile I’ve ever seen – clearly aware that we’ve been standing here the whole time.



Chapter thirty-one

I've never witnessed a moment like this. I didn't even know that I was *old enough* for a moment like this. Friends – are they friends? They feel like they might be friends to have included me here tonight – getting engaged to be married. At nineteen!

Anna shows off her ring. It's small and simple and lovely. Her eyes suddenly shine, and she wheels around to face St. Clair. "So *this* is why you got a job."

He grins. "I wasn't about to buy you a ring with my father's money."

Josh bear-hugs St. Clair. "I'm only sorry you're off the market."

"Don't tell Anna, but I bought one for you, too," St. Clair says.

Lola throws her arms around Cricket. "I can't believe you didn't tell me this was gonna happen."

"I wanted to," he says. "But sometimes you think about things...out loud."

"I do not!"

"You do," Anna and St. Clair say together.

Lola grumbles, but she's smiling.

"Attention, attention," St. Clair says. "My fiancée and I—"

Everyone laughs at how strange and foreign the word sounds. It's like discovering a new language or being a part of a new culture. The culture of adults. And we don't yet know how it works, but it feels good so far.

St. Clair clears his throat. "My *fiancée* and I are headed out for a celebratory dessert. I'd ask you all to join us, but I don't want you there."

We laugh. Everyone hugs one another goodbye again, and this time, Anna and Meredith have the longest hug. Meredith whispers something to her, and Anna looks moved. She hugs Meredith again. And then Anna and St. Clair are bouncing off into the distance, weaving a path through the accumulating snow. He loudly hums a happy tune.

Lola glances at the full moon. "You know...it's not *that* late."

Cricket extends his arm. "Shall we stroll?"

She slips her arm through it and hugs him closer against her body. "I can't

believe we're in *Paris. Together.*"

"It was nice meeting you," Cricket says to me, and I feel sad that everyone is leaving. "See you in the morning?" he asks Josh.

Josh nods.

Lola and Cricket stroll away, a splash of brilliant colour in a white night. And now there are three. Josh's expression turns solemn. He places an arm around Meredith, and the gesture makes me recall that, once upon a time, she was in love with St. Clair.

"You okay, Mer?" he asks.

"I am," she says. "But thank you for asking."

Another hug, a long one filled with memories. She pulls away first. "Sorry," she says. "You'll have to forgive me. My day started early, and I'm beat. I'm gonna head back to the hostel." But Meredith is definitely not *beat*. She's bowing out to let us talk. She's choosing to be alone – on a night that might be bittersweet for her – to give us a chance at...I'm not sure what.

"It was nice seeing you again," I say. And I mean it. I'm grateful for this sacrifice.

"Don't get too sad. I'm sure we'll see each other again someday." And she winks before leaving. "See you tomorrow, Josh," she shouts.

Josh's hands are in his pockets, and his shoulders are up to his ears. "She's not my most subtle friend. Which is saying something. Sorry about that."

"It's okay. She's really nice."

"She is."

"All of your friends are nice."

He looks at me. "I'm glad you think so."

We're quiet. The snow falls softly against his dark hair.

"So," I say.

"So." He glances at his feet. "Can I walk you home?"

My body flushes. "Yes. Please. Thank you." I look away, embarrassed.

Without needing to say it aloud, we choose a route towards the dorm that will have fewer people. We walk in silence. The flakes are getting fatter. The hush should feel peaceful, but the nervousness inside of me only grows.

He looks so beautiful in the lamplight. I think I was wrong about him. I *hope* I was wrong about him. I know I was wrong about myself. We don't say a word until we reach the dormitory. The first time we walked here together, it was ours. Now it's only mine. He's brave for coming back here again, and I can be brave, too.

"Would you..." I say.

Josh watches me. He waits for me to finish the question. He wants me to say

it.

“Do you wanna come inside?” I ask. “And talk?”

It looks as if what he’s about to say might kill him. “I wish that I could, but I don’t think I’d be welcome in there.”

Please don’t reject me. “Since when do you care about the rules?”

“I don’t want you to get in trouble.”

“I don’t care,” I say.

“I do.”

My heart twists harder, heavier. “Will you at least be around for breakfast? When does your train leave?”

“I’m not sure,” he says.

I close my eyes. How could he not know the answer to that question? What kind of excuse is that?

“I want you to have this,” he says.

I open my eyes again. He’s struggling to remove a manuscript from his bag, and now I can see that it’s the reason why it’d been so bulky. The papers take up the entire thing.

My heart breaks. *This* is why he wanted to meet me tonight.

Against my better judgment, I hold down the bottom of his bag so that he can pull it out. He clutches the manuscript against his chest before presenting it to me with shaking hands. I don’t know if they shake from nervousness or from the weather.

I take it. There’s a new title. *Spaces*.

“You were right,” he says. “About...a lot of stuff. I’ve been working really hard on it, and I’d love your opinion. On the changes.”

Please don’t make me read this again. “Um, okay.”

He turns hopeful. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. Sure.” The weight of his work grows heavier in my arms. “Uh, when would you like this back?”

“Oh, no. That’s yours. To keep.”

Silence.

“Okay,” I finally say.

He tucks his hands back inside his coat. “Will you call me as soon as you’re done?”

I’m startled. “You want me to read it now?”

“Yeah. I mean, no. You don’t have to. But I’m leaving tomorrow—”

“No, it’s okay. I can read it now.”

“Yeah?” he asks.

“Yeah.”

“All right. So. You have my number.”

This now ranks as the most awkward conversation that we’ve ever had. It’s way worse than anything before we dated.

I nod. “Yep.”

Josh leans in for a hug. He hesitates, just as I’m leaning in. So he leans in again. The manuscript sits cold and heavy between our bodies. And as he awkwardly pats me on the back, I realize that this is the last time that we will ever touch.



Chapter thirty-two

I set the manuscript down on my bed. I'm exhausted.

I remove my wet shoes, my coat, my leggings.

I wash my face.

I brush my teeth.

The manuscript's paper eyes bore into the back of my head. I stare at it in the mirror's reflection above my sink. It seems both tragically dead and frighteningly alive. And I have no choice but to climb into bed with it. I fiddle with a stubborn wave of hair. I poke at the pores on my nose. I take a long time turning on my lamp.

I slip into bed. I'm listening for the snow, which is coming down harder, but I can't hear it. I can only see it streaming through the street light outside.

I pull the manuscript into my lap. I read.

It has a new beginning. It no longer starts with his first day as a wide-eyed, slack-jawed freshman. It starts with an older, wiser, and more embittered Josh. It's the summer before his senior year. He's sitting alone, drawing in a café.

And then...I'm there.

I appear like a dream, and Josh is whisked into a surreal, blissful night that makes him forget his troubles. It makes him feel hope for the first time in years. There's the page that I've seen before of him racing home to draw me, but then there's a new full-page illustration of me with the garden-rose halo. I glow on the page like something sacred. Josh is on his knees at the bottom of the illustration, looking up at me, weeping, his hands clasped. The word *Salvation* pours from his lips.

My own hands are trembling so hard that I can barely get to the next page.

FRESHMAN, it says. And the story I'm familiar with begins. Most of this section is the same. It's funny, it's sad, it's sweet. It's innocent. But there are some differences. He's added subtle brushstrokes to draw attention towards areas of the story that I know will have greater meaning later on. Things that he couldn't have known would be so important when he drew them years ago.

And then there's me. Again. He's chronologically added the panels of the first time we spoke, when he saw me reading the Sfar book in the cafeteria. He's even added a tiny heart above his head while he speaks. And then a broken one when he thinks that I don't like him.

I touch the broken heart with the tip of my finger.

The story turns familiar again, but this time the panels with Rashmi are less painful. The sadness I feel comes from remembering how much they hurt me the first time. He's trimmed down her scenes and the excessive one-page panels. She's still a large part of the story, as she should be, but the focus remains squarely on him. Also as it should be.

Last summer. Kismet. A callback panel signals a return to the beginning of the story, and then it cuts back to him discovering me with Kurt the following night.

New pages appear. Josh with his parents. There's an increasing distance between them – now self-created, out of spite – as he simultaneously yearns to be closer. He wants them to fight for his attention. He returns to school for his senior year. When I read this in November, these pages were rough sketches. Now they've been lovingly inked in. It gives everything a new sense of permanence.

And then I'm reading about his crush on me, and I'm reading about him longing for me at Oktoberfest, and I'm reading about our first date. I'm reading about him falling in love with me. I'm reading about the Treehouse and the college applications and his birthday, and we're going to Spain, and we're making love. He draws us beautifully. The emotions on the page are so much bigger than anything he's drawn before.

And then it's a two-page spread: a single panel being ripped in half. I'm on one side, and he's on the other. Our hands grasp at the space between. *Almost touching.*

My cheeks are wet. I'm not sure how long I've been crying.

The pages turn angry and wild, swirled around the election and parents, who are always present yet always absent. He grieves for our loss. He blames himself. He's depressed, and he doesn't know how to tell me that we won't be seeing each other for Thanksgiving. I want to tell Josh-on-the-page that it's okay, but I can't. It won't be okay.

He fights with his parents. They want him to finish at a private school. He wants to take his GED. Neither happens. He sinks deeper into depression, and he won't leave his room, and he draws me again and again and again. And then he draws my Christmas present. I don't know if I can handle reading about Christmas, but it's coming anyway.

I pick a fight. I am cruel. I annihilate him.

He thought we'd be together for ever. Images of New England, a wedding, children, old age crumble into the background of a dark panel in which he's curled on the ground in the foetal position. He tries to call me. I won't answer. His devastation turns into fury. New Year's Eve arrives, and he sits alone in his bedroom watching television. He thinks about our first date, just like I did. Brian calls his house shortly after midnight with the urgent message that I'm waiting for him at Kismet. There's still time to make it.

I turn the page, fearing what I'll find next.

Josh chooses not to go. He wants me to suffer in the way that I've made him suffer. It's awful to read, though it's no less than I deserved. But as the days pass, Josh realizes that he's made a mistake. And as they continue to pass, it gets harder to call me. He's afraid that now I will have given up on him for good.

And then...his naked figure tumbles into space.

A completely black two-page spread. On the following page, no illustration, only my own words written in Josh's beautiful handwriting: "SPACES... BREAKS...TO CONTEMPLATE THINGS...TO FIGURE OUT WHAT'S IMPORTANT..."

A series of near-identical panels are next, showing an excruciating passage of time. A certain truth is settling in. That one of the most hurtful things I said to him – that he passively campaigned for his own expulsion, because he couldn't admit to his parents that he'd made a mistake in moving to France – only hurts so much because it's true. And that the head of school and his ex-girlfriend had been telling him that for years, but it didn't matter until he heard the words from the person who mattered the most. Me.

But he's also still angry with me for invalidating his own feelings. He loves me, and I won't let him. He decides that he has to prove it. He confesses to his parents that leaving home for Paris was a mistake, but that he's ready for Vermont. He won't mess it up this time. They say they'd like to believe him, but they're concerned with his ability to see things through. An offer is put on the table. They'll send him to Vermont if he can finish the project that means the most to him, the project that will also serve as his official portfolio for admission: this graphic memoir.

They understand that he's been writing about his private life – and that some of it includes *them*. They give him their support anyway.

His parents are understanding and supportive about... *a lot* of things.

I'm reading faster now, flipping the pages more and more quickly, as Josh throws himself back into his work. He locks himself away in his room in order to reconnect with the world. Day and night, he makes the changes and pushes ahead. Pushes through. His resolve is admirable as he forces his way through the

monotonous long hours and the renewed shooting pains in his right hand to bring his vision onto the page.

He signs up to take the GED and nails it in a weekend. He talks to St. Clair, learns of the engagement ring and the upcoming trip, and he marks the date on his calendar. But he marks it with the word *Isla*.

His mother sees it. She nods.

My heart is racing. The pages are no longer inked, they're pencilled sketches. A month of hard work in January turns into two weeks of agonizing work in February. Doubt creeps back in. He considers cancelling his flight, but that's when Hattie's package arrives, and he's overwhelmed and overjoyed, and it gives him the courage to press forward. He flies across the Atlantic. He meets his friends, and he takes them to Pizza Pellino for dinner, where he knows he'll find Kurt and me. Because it's Sunday.

I have now exited Josh's real past and entered into what he *hopes* is his future.

The sketches get rougher. Kurt and I are at the restaurant, and Josh and his friends – St. Clair, Anna and Meredith – join us for dinner. Our table's conversation is similar to what occurred earlier tonight, except that Josh is more vocal. He tells me it was important for me to meet his friends, because they're the people that he chooses to have in his life. Not like the people at the Christmas party whom he deals with for his family's sake. He wants me to be friends with his friends, too.

He asks me about Dartmouth, and I tell him that I was accepted. "I knew you would be," he whispers. We watch the proposal, glancing at each other with hope and nervousness. We split apart from the others, he walks me home, and he hands me a copy of this manuscript. He tells me to call his phone when I'm done reading it.

I'm holding my breath. I can hardly turn the page...

There I am. I'm reading this book by lamplight. I finish it, call him, and he tells me that he's on the corner outside of my window. His hands are tucked into his pockets, and he's shivering in the freezing February night.

Isla-on-the-page runs outside. Josh embraces her.

"I'm in love with you," he says. "I'll do anything to be with you."

"I'm in love with you," Isla-on-the-page says. "I'll wait for you."

I tell him that I'll wait for him to finish his book and earn his passage to college. I tell him that we'll meet again this summer. And then, he tells me, we'll never be apart again.

It's after two in the morning when I set down the manuscript. My heart is drumming so loudly that I can't hear myself think, and I can hardly see through

my tears. I climb out of bed, pull aside the curtain, and peek out my window.

He's there.

I drop the curtain, and it swings back into place. I pick it up and look outside again. He's still there. He's on the corner with his head ducked underneath his coat, shivering. The snow is falling like crazy. It covers him as if he were a mere postbox or bicycle or tree. He doesn't see me. I yank on my boots, grab my key, and race down the hall. I throw open the door, and he must hear me running, because he turns the corner just as I reach it.

"You forgot to call," he says.

I throw open my arms. He pulls me into him, and we kiss, and his lips are cold, and I think he's crying, and I'm definitely crying, and I pull back to say, "I am so in love with you, Joshua Wasserstein. Of course I'll wait for you."



Chapter thirty-three

His voice is a whisper. “I don’t want to get you in trouble.”

I shut my door with precision silence. “I’m not on a final warning, and you’ve already been expelled. What’s the worst that could happen?”

“I don’t know.” Josh is genuinely worried. “Maybe it could go on your permanent record and keep Dartmouth from accepting you?”

I smile. “My parents have already sent them the first tuition cheque.”

His knees weaken. And then rest of his body follows. I guide him onto the edge of my bed. “Do you mean?” he says. “Are you...?”

“I’m going to Dartmouth.”

Josh’s head drops into his hands. His whole body shakes. I sit beside him and press my head against his shoulder. Because I *can* again. He lifts his head, and his eyes shine with tears. “I’m sorry. I’m just...really overwhelmed right now.”

“Me, too.”

“I love you. I’ve always loved you, Isla.”

“I know.” I take his freezing hands and rub them between mine, trying to warm them. “I’m sorry I didn’t believe you. I doubted myself, and that made me doubt you. But you weren’t the problem. You were *never* the problem. I should have trusted you, but I didn’t, because I couldn’t trust myself.”

“But you do now? Trust yourself?”

“I’m...getting there. I’m beginning to think that maybe it’s okay to be a blank canvas. Maybe it’s okay that my future is unknown. And maybe,” I say with another smile, “it’s okay to be inspired by the people who *do* know their future.”

“It goes both ways, you know.”

I link his icicle fingers through mine. “What does?”

“Artists are inspired by blank canvases.”

My smile grows wider.

“A blank canvas,” Josh continues, “has unlimited possibilities.”

I close my eyes, lean over, and kiss his cold lips. “Thank you.”

His shivering grows more severe.

I jump to my feet. “*Oh, mon petit chou.*” I pull out his arms from his snow-soaked coat. “I can’t believe you were waiting out there this whole time.”

His teeth chatter. “I-I would have waited all night.”

I hang up his coat inside my shower and return for his shirt. “This, too.” I tug it off, over his head. His skin is pale. Almost lavender-coloured. “And these.” I remove his shoes and socks, but his pants prove to be a challenge. They’re practically frozen to his legs. When they finally release, I topple over backwards.

He smiles through his shivers. “Not...quite...how I imagined...undressing with you again.”

I hang up his shirt and pants beside his coat to dry. Over my head, his socks and boxers go flying onto the shower floor. I laugh. He’s wrapped himself up inside my quilt, and only his face is peeking out.

“This doesn’t mean you can take advantage of me,” he says.

I laugh again.

Josh sweeps out a hand across the surface of my bed as a gesture for me to sit beside him, but the quilt catches on the manuscript. It knocks over on to the floor in a loud, crashing, never-ending nightmare. We freeze in horror. We listen for Nate. Nothing.

We smile at the miracle that has been granted to us.

I sit beside him. He scoots in towards me, but I pull back my head. “Don’t you want to know what I thought about your book first?” I ask.

“I don’t know.” He laughs nervously. “Do I?”

“You know it’s good. You know it’s really, *really* good.”

His face disappears as his entire body slumps into the mound of blankets. “You can’t even begin to imagine how relieved I am to hear you say that.”

“I’ve always known you’re brilliant. And you’ve just proved it to the world.”

A hand pokes out from underneath the quilt. I squeeze it. “For what it’s worth?” he says. “You’d make a great editor someday. Everything you yelled at me was true.”

I look away from him in shame. “I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be.”

“No. I am. I’m sorry about so many things. And I’m especially sorry for... using your ex-girlfriend to fuel my own stupid insecurities. I want you to know that I don’t love this” – I gesture towards his manuscript, scattered across my hardwood – “because there’s less of her in it. Or more of me. I want you to know that I love it because it has *you* in it – the good parts *and* the ugly parts. I love you. I love *all* of you.”

He grips my hand harder. “Thank you.”

“The praise is a long time coming.” I rub my thumb against his index finger.

“And I have so much more of it to give.”

“Tomorrow. Right now, I only want you.”

But my heart grows heavy again. “You mean *today*. Did you find out when your train leaves?”

“Isla.” He looks surprised. Like I should already know this. “I never bought a ticket.”

My breath catches. “What?”

“I’m not going to the Olympics. I came here for you.”

“Does...does that mean you’re staying?”

He scoots in closer. “Two weeks. Through the end of the games, if you’ll have me. But then I’m stuck in DC until June.”

“Yes. Yes, I’ll have you!”

Josh smiles impishly. “Oh, you will?”

I shove him through the blankets. He topples over onto his side, laughing, pulling me down with him. He stares into my eyes. His smile fades. “I’ve missed you so much.”

I rub my arms against the chill. “I’ve missed *you*.”

“You’re cold.” He holds open the quilt. “Come here.”

I scoot forward into the blankets and sheets and pillows. Into him. The quilt falls against my back, enveloping me against his body. I press my cheek against his bare chest. He tightens his grip around me. We lie very, very still. The world is silent except for the steady beat of our hearts. After several minutes, I look up at him.

Josh stares back. His heartbeat quickens.

I slide upward until our noses are pressed against each other. I kiss the corner of his mouth, and I feel him smile as he kisses the corner of mine. His fingers trail down my back as he unzips my dress. He pulls it all the way down, past my ankles, and lets it drop onto the floor. He removes my bra and then my underwear.

He removes my compass necklace last.

Our kisses are soft. Teasing. Restrained. Our skin is clammy, and then warm, and then hot. Our kisses grow longer. Our breathing gets faster. I fumble for a condom. He presses against me, and it feels so good, so intense that I cry out. He meets my gaze to make sure that everything is all right, everything is *more* than all right, and my hips arch against him in response. His eyes close in rapture, and he’s guiding my body, and we’re finding our rhythm, and we’re together again, at last.

We can’t say the words enough.

I love you.

They're a chant through the night as we move together slowly. Then quickly. Slowly. Then quickly. We don't fall asleep until the break of dawn. Josh's body curls around mine. Our hands clasp together over my heart. We're still in this position when my alarm rattles us awake an hour later. I roll over and turn it off, groaning with deep annoyance, and then roll back into him. I resettle against his chest. I sigh happily.

He moves my tentacle arms away from his body. "Mm, no you don't," he mumbles.

I give a tiny whimper.

"School," he says.

"But you're here. That's not fair."

He hugs me, despite himself. "I have to pick up my suitcase. It's still in Meredith's room at the hostel. And I wanna say goodbye to everyone before they leave."

"Can't I do that with you?"

Josh nuzzles his nose against my cheek. "I'll be here when you return."

"I fixed my door. You'll need a key."

"I'll take good care of it."

"What if I won't give it to you?"

"Then I'll break the door again."

"This dormitory makes me feel so safe."

He smiles and pushes me from the bed. "Goooooooooooo."

I force him to get ready with me. The building is loud and active now, so we can move around without tiptoeing. We shower and brush our teeth and dry our hair, and everything seems twice the miracle that it did in Barcelona. Because this time we know it can't be taken away from us. This *will* be our future.

His clothes are still wet, so I dry his pants with my hair dryer and give him back the T-shirt that he gave me over Thanksgiving. It's tucked inside one of my pillows. When he sees it, he looks sad and happy and amazed. "I thought you probably threw this away. I still sleep with the scarf you gave me."

"I want that back, you know."

"The scarf?"

I smile. "That shirt."

Josh returns my smile as he pulls the shirt over his head. "I'll give it back with extra me-scent."

I hug him, tucking my head against his chest. "Do I really have to go to school today?"

"I'm *not* getting you in trouble again."

I look pointedly at my closed door. And then back at him.

“Okay.” He grins. “Maybe I’m willing to throw you under the bus for that one.”

When Kurt hears that Josh is in my bedroom, he insists on sneaking back to the dorm with me for lunch. I’m proud of him for breaking another rule, but I’m worried about what will happen. There’s not the slightest hesitation when they see each other. Josh greets Kurt with the same genuine and enthusiastic embrace that he gave St. Clair.

“I hope those are tears of happiness,” Kurt says, when he looks at me.

“They are,” I say.

“I’m glad you’re back together,” Kurt tells Josh. “And I’m glad you’re here.”

“Me, too,” Josh says.

“I like Isla better when you’re dating. I didn’t think that would be true – I thought I liked her more *without* you – but that wasn’t the case at all.”

Josh laughs. “I’m glad to hear it.”

“She’s been miserable company,” Kurt says.

Josh laughs harder, delighted for this news, as I whack Kurt’s arm. But I’m grinning, too.

“Will you be staying here?” Kurt asks Josh.

Josh and I immediately tense. I’m sure he’s reliving the same memory – Kurt, unable to lie. Barcelona.

“I am,” Josh says. “I don’t want to get Isla in trouble, but I’m good at keeping quiet.”

“I won’t say anything to anyone,” Kurt says quickly. “And if Nate corners me, I’ll tell him you’ve been staying at a hostel. Not here.”

I can tell that Josh is as surprised as I am. “I appreciate that,” he says. “But I won’t let you lie for me. If we’re caught, we’ll deal with the consequences ourselves.”

Kurt ponders this for a moment. “You’ve changed.”

Josh smiles. “So have you.”

“Oh,” Kurt says. “You guys should tell Hattie this time, though.”

“Definitely,” Josh and I say together.

We stay together happily and quietly. Josh doesn’t let me skip any more school lunches or break any additional rules. Only the big, obvious, boy-in-my-room one.

It’s wonderful sharing a space with him.

While I do my homework, he draws. We each have our own space inside of this shared space. I imagine that our apartment next fall might feel like this. The

thought fills me with more joy than I thought possible. I borrow Hattie's television, and from the opening ceremonies onward, the games are never turned off. The spirit of the events – of being in the host country – is thrilling. But, even better, the sound of the television is *incredibly* handy when it comes to muffling untoward noises.

As always, the women's figure skating isn't until the end of the games. The short programme is first, and we're excited when Cricket's twin, Calliope, bursts into first place with an acrobatically powerful performance. In the stands, the camera shows Cricket and Lola exploding from their seats with joy, but the announcers focus on Calliope's curse instead. Predictions are made that she'll be too scared to pull off her second event.

"Why can't they let her enjoy this moment?" I say.

"Don't worry," Josh says. "Assholes always eat their own words."

Two nights later, it happens. It's the free skate. Her gaze is sharp, and her black costume is shimmering and transcendent. Her music is from the 1968 film *Romeo and Juliet*, and she becomes Juliet – in love, in death – before the entire world. She wins the gold medal by a landslide. Cricket and Lola clutch each other and cry. I even see Anna and St. Clair jumping up and down behind them. But Calliope is all triumphant grin.

"Told you," Josh says, as if he can predict the future. But maybe he can. He's always known what he's wanted, and he's getting everything that he asked for. I haven't always known. But now I have what I want, too. The rest, the unknown...it'll come.

And I'm looking forward to it.

The medal programme ends, we turn off the television, and – as we wrap ourselves around each other – we're faced with the truth that our time together is coming to an end, too. Josh holds me tighter, but it's not enough to stop the clock. The next evening, the Olympic flame is extinguished. The games are over. And he's gone.



Chapter thirty-four

It's midnight. It's sweltering.

It's the top of June.

I cross Amsterdam Avenue underneath a clear sky. I'm nervous, but it's a good nervous. An anticipatory nervous. In the past few months, the last traces of shyness and doubt have been removed from my step. I've found the Right Way.

And I'm walking straight towards it.

The golden light of Kismet winks at me. *There*. In the window. Everything about this moment is exactly how I pictured it. His shoulders are rounded down, and his head is cocked to the right. His nose is nearly touching the tip of his pen. He arrived earlier this evening on a flight from DC.

I stop directly in front of the window. The light changes on the surface of his paper, and he looks up. We smile softly.

I touch my hand to the glass. *Hi*, I mouth.

Josh touches the other side. *Hi*.

He nods towards the door for me to come in. I open it, and I'm greeted by the warm fragrance of strong coffee. He stands. I walk straight into his embrace. We kiss, and we kiss, and we kiss. He tastes like Josh. He smells like Josh. He feels like Josh.

"You're so real," I say.

He touches my cheek. "I was thinking the same thing. I love the real you. I've *missed* the real you." His finger is splashed with fresh ink, and I feel the tiniest wet drop against my skin. He tries to wipe it away, but I stop him.

"Please," I say. "Leave it. I've missed the real you, too."

Josh squeezes both of my hands with both of his.

"What are you working on?" I ask.

"The last page." He gestures towards the table, where a pencilled sketch is being turned into inked brushstrokes. It's a drawing of us, in this café, in this moment.

I smile up at him. "It's beautiful. But what comes next?"

“The best part.” And he pulls me back into his arms. “The happily ever after.”

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If you've loved *Isla and the Happily Ever After*, read on for a sneak preview of *Anna and the French Kiss*...

Here is everything I know about France: *Madeline* and *Amélie* and *Moulin Rouge*. The Eiffel Tower and the Arc de Triomphe, although I have no idea what the function of either actually is. Napoleon, Marie Antoinette, and a lot of kings named Louis. I'm not sure what they did either, but I think it has something to do with the French Revolution, which has something to do with Bastille Day. The art museum is called the Louvre and it's shaped like a pyramid and the *Mona Lisa* lives there along with that statue of the woman missing her arms. And there are cafés or bistros or whatever they call them on every street corner. And mimes. The food is supposed to be good, and the people drink a lot of wine and smoke a lot of cigarettes.

I've heard they don't like Americans, and they don't like white sneakers.

A few months ago, my father enrolled me in boarding school. His air quotes practically crackled over the phone line as he declared living abroad to be a "good learning experience" and a "keepsake I'd treasure for ever". Yeah. Keepsake. And I would've pointed out his misuse of the word had I not already been freaking out.

Since his announcement, I've tried yelling, begging, pleading, and crying, but nothing has convinced him otherwise. And now I have a new student visa and a passport, each declaring me: Anna Oliphant, citizen of the United States of America. And now I'm here with my parents – unpacking my belongings in a room smaller than my suitcase – the newest senior at the School of America in Paris.

It's not that I'm ungrateful. I mean, it's *Paris*. The City of Light! The most romantic city in the world! I'm not immune to that. It's just this whole international boarding school thing is a lot more about my father than it is about me. Ever since he sold out and started writing lame books that were turned into even lamer movies, he's been trying to impress his big-shot New York friends with how cultured and rich he is.

My father isn't cultured. But he is rich.

It wasn't always like this. When my parents were still married, we were strictly lower middle class. It was around the time of the divorce that all traces of

decency vanished, and his dream of being the next great Southern writer was replaced by his desire to be the next *published* writer. So he started writing these novels set in Small Town Georgia about folks with Good American Values who Fall in Love and then contract Life-Threatening Diseases and Die.

I'm serious.

And it totally depresses me, but the ladies eat it up. They love my father's books and they love his cable-knit sweaters and they love his bleachy smile and orangey tan. And they have turned him into a bestseller and a total dick.

Two of his books have been made into movies and three more are in production, which is where his real money comes from. Hollywood. And, somehow, this extra cash and pseudo-prestige have warped his brain into thinking that I should live in France. For a year. Alone. I don't understand why he couldn't send me to Australia or Ireland or anywhere else where English is the native language. The only French word I know is *oui*, which means "yes", and only recently did I learn it's spelled o-u-i and not w-e-e.

At least the people in my new school speak English. It was founded for pretentious Americans who don't like the company of their own children. I mean, really. Who sends their kid to boarding school? It's so Hogwarts. Only mine doesn't have cute boy wizards or magic candy or flying lessons.

Instead, I'm stuck with ninety-nine other students. There are twenty-five people in my *entire senior class*, as opposed to the six hundred I had back in Atlanta. And I'm studying the same things I studied at Clairemont High except now I'm registered in beginning French.

Oh, yeah. Beginning French. No doubt with the freshmen. I totally rock.

Mom says I need to lose the bitter factor, pronto, but she's not the one leaving behind her fabulous best friend, Bridgette. Or her fabulous job at the Royal Midtown 14 multiplex. Or Toph, the fabulous boy at the Royal Midtown 14 multiplex.

And I still can't believe she's separating me from my brother, Sean, who is only seven and way too young to be left home alone after school. Without me, he'll probably be kidnapped by that creepy guy down the road who has dirty Coca-Cola towels hanging in his windows. Or Seany will accidentally eat something containing Red Dye #40 and his throat will swell up and no one will be there to drive him to the hospital. He might even die. And I bet they wouldn't let me fly home for his funeral and I'd have to visit the cemetery alone next year and Dad will have picked out some god-awful granite cherub to go over his grave.

And I hope Dad doesn't expect me to fill out college applications to Russia or Romania now. My dream is to study film theory in California. I want to be our

nation's greatest female film critic. Someday I'll be invited to every festival, and I'll have a major newspaper column and a cool television show and a ridiculously popular website. So far I only have the website, and it's not so popular. Yet.

I just need a little more time to work on it, that's all.

"Anna, it's time."

"What?" I glance up from folding my shirts into perfect squares.

Mom stares at me and twiddles the turtle charm on her necklace. My father, bedecked in a peach polo shirt and white boating shoes, is gazing out my dormitory window. It's late, but across the street a woman belts out something operatic.

My parents need to return to their hotel rooms. They both have early morning flights.

"Oh." I grip the shirt in my hands a little tighter.

Dad steps away from the window, and I'm alarmed to discover his eyes are wet. Something about the idea of my father – even if it is *my father* – on the brink of tears raises a lump in my throat.

"Well, kiddo. Guess you're all grown up now."

My body is frozen. He pulls my stiff limbs into a bear hug. His grip is frightening. "Take care of yourself. Study hard and make some friends. And watch out for pickpockets," he adds. "Sometimes they work in pairs."

I nod into his shoulder, and he releases me. And then he's gone.

My mother lingers behind. "You'll have a wonderful year here," she says. "I just know it." I bite my lip to keep it from quivering, and she sweeps me into her arms. I try to breathe. Inhale. Count to three. Exhale. Her skin smells like grapefruit body lotion. "I'll call you the moment I get home," she says.

Home. Atlanta isn't my home any more.

"I love you, Anna."

I'm crying now. "I love you, too. Take care of Seany for me."

"Of course."

"And Captain Jack," I say. "Make sure Sean feeds him and changes his bedding and fills his water bottle. And make sure he doesn't give him too many treats because they make him fat and then he can't get out of his igloo. But make sure he gives him at least a few every day, because he still needs the vitamin C and he won't drink the water when I use those vitamin drops—"

She pulls back and tucks my bleached stripe behind my ear. "I love you," she says again.

And then my mother does something that, even after all of the paperwork and plane tickets and presentations, I don't see coming. Something that would've

happened in a year anyway, once I left for college, but that no matter how many days or months or years I've yearned for it, I am still not prepared for when it actually happens.

My mother leaves. I am alone.

Fall in love with more from Stephanie
Perkins...

ANNA and the FRENCH KISS

Anna had everything figured out – she was about to start senior year with her best friend, she had a great weekend job, and her huge work crush looked as if it was finally going somewhere... Until her dad decides to send her 4383 miles away to Paris. On her own.

But despite not speaking a word of French, Anna finds herself making new friends, including Étienne St. Clair, the smart, *beautiful* boy from the floor above. But he's taken – and Anna might be too. Will a year of romantic near-misses end with the French kiss she's been waiting for?

“Very sly. Very funny. Very romantic. You should date this book.” *Maureen Johnson*

Kindle ISBN 9781409579960

"Magical...really captures the feeling of being in love."
CASSANDRA CLARE, author of THE MORTAL INSTRUMENTS series

ANNA and the FRENCH ♥ KISS

AN INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER
STEPHANIE PERKINS

LOLA and the BOY NEXT DOOR

Budding designer Lola Nolan doesn't believe in fashion...she believes in costume. The more sparkly, more fun, more wild – the better. And life is pretty close to perfect in Lola's world, especially with her hot rocker boyfriend. That is, until the dreaded Bell twins, Calliope and Cricket, return to the neighbourhood and unearth a past of hurt and anguish that Lola thought was long buried.

So when talented inventor Cricket steps out from his twin sister's shadow and back into Lola's life, she must finally face up to a lifetime of feelings for the boy next door.

“Another unputdownable read from Stephanie.” *MTV.com*

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"Magical...really captures the feeling of being in love."

CASSANDRA CLARE, on *ANNA AND THE FRENCH KISS*

LOLA

and the

BOY



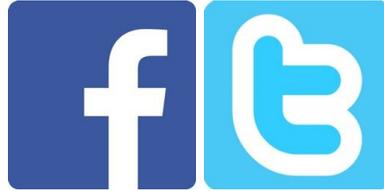
NEXT DOOR

AN INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER

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About the author

STEPHANIE PERKINS was born in South Carolina, raised in Arizona and attended universities in San Francisco and Atlanta before settling in the mountains of North Carolina with her husband and cat, Mr Tumnus, in a house where every room is painted a different colour of the rainbow.

Having always worked with books – as a bookseller, librarian, and now as a novelist – Stephanie is most usually found writing at her desk with a cup of tea or coffee, except for at the weekends where she can be found at the movies, waiting for the actors to kiss. (She firmly believes that all novels and films should have more kissing.)

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