

# HAPPY AGAIN

by the author of *The Statistical Probability of Love at First Sight*

JENNIFER E. SMITH

NOVEL



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# Happy Again

by Jennifer E. Smith



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[Begin Reading](#)

[A Sneak Peek of \*Hello, Goodbye, and Everything in Between\*](#)

[Table of Contents](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

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## One

Even before she saw the explosion of flashes at the far end of the block, Ellie knew somehow that he was there.

It had been exactly one year, two months, and twenty-one days since she'd last seen him, but he'd always been like a radio signal, scrambling her thoughts. Just being near him was enough to fill her head with static.

It was her first time in New York City—a weekend trip with her new roommate and a couple of other girls from their dorm—and standing beneath the towering buildings, the sky fading above them, she couldn't help being shocked by the smallness of the place.

For more than a year, the world had felt too big.

And now here she was in the middle of Manhattan, one of the largest cities on the planet, surrounded by thick crowds of people hurrying home from work and out to dinner, carrying umbrellas and suitcases and shopping bags, wearing hats and sunglasses, staring at guidebooks and phones, many of them drifting in much the same direction, drawn like moths toward the huge, sweeping spotlights set up in front of the Ziegfeld Theater, where they stood on tiptoe and craned their necks and whispered to those who were next to them, trying to figure out what all the fuss was about.

And somehow, in the midst of all this, he was here too.

Ellie had known it even before she saw the police barricades, before she noticed the red carpet and the lights and the security guards, before she saw the glowing marquee.

There were a thousand reasons to dismiss that prickle up her spine. The odds of this happening were insane. To stumble across him here, of all places, after all this time—it was too improbable, too coincidental, too unbelievable.

But still, a part of her knew.

That radio static, that tingling, fizzy lightness that was clouding her

head: It was the world shrinking again. It was the awful, lurching nearness of him.

It was the unexpected jolt of joy at the thought.

And that's when she saw it: the name at the top of the marquee, laid out in black print across the white background so that, from a distance, it almost looked like a chain of letters typed across a too-bright computer screen, like an e-mail, like a message, like a memory:

GRAHAM LARKIN

## Two

As it turned out, she'd been nervous about this weekend for all the wrong reasons.

When Lauren, her new roommate, had asked if she wanted to drive down to New York for the long weekend with her and some friends, Ellie's first reaction had been panic. Her first response to most invitations was panic, but she'd been at Harvard for three weeks now, and she'd vowed to get better about this.

After all, college was her chance to leave the old Ellie behind. The one who preferred books to people and who had only ever really had one friend; who enjoyed hanging out with her mom more than with kids her own age and who scribbled poetry on napkins; who missed even the most obvious pop-culture references and worked three jobs.

The old Ellie was shy and quiet and a little bit awkward. She tried her best not to stand out, wore flats so she didn't look too tall, tied her red hair back into a ponytail, and made an effort to go unnoticed whenever possible.

But she wanted college to be different.

She wanted to learn how to ignore her instincts.

She wanted to fit in.

So far, Harvard had already taught her a lot: that she should never be late to her Shakespeare section, or leave her toothpaste in the communal bathroom, or eat the tacos in the dining hall.

But she'd also learned this: that making new friends was not something that came easily to her.

Pretty much every night so far had been a struggle between the awareness that she should be going out and meeting people and having fun and the much more powerful temptation to put on her pajamas and burrow under the covers with a book.

"You're welcome to come along," Lauren always said as she finished

getting ready, pinning her short, dark hair up on one side and putting on her bright red lipstick. Ellie could never tell if her roommate really meant it or if she was just being polite, and a part of her was curious what would happen if she actually said yes. But in the end, it didn't really matter, because she never did.

"Maybe tomorrow," she said again and again.

Sometimes she sat with them in the dining hall—Lauren and her two friends from the floor above, Kara and Sprague—and they were all perfectly nice to her, even though Ellie mostly just ended up smiling and nodding like some kind of good-natured idiot when she was around them.

But it was pretty obvious she didn't fit in. If this had been a game of *One of These Things Is Not Like the Others*, even a three-year-old could have picked her out. It was partly that they wore expensive clothes and talked about vacations to places like Bali and Rio as if they were nothing. And they all used similar phrases, a shorthand that was like a whole new language to Ellie. Even their names—a surprising number of which sounded like last names but were actually not—suggested a certain kind of background: Collis and Smith and Conway and Sprague.

But it wasn't just that. It was that they were all so effortlessly cool. And they all seemed to know almost instinctively how to navigate something as big and unknowable as college: how to find parties, how to schedule their classes just right, how to look like they belonged.

Because they *did* belong. In fact, they all seemed to know one another already: from boarding school at Andover or Exeter, from lacrosse camp in New Hampshire or their country clubs in Connecticut, from summers in the Hamptons and ski vacations in Aspen and carpooling up from "the city" (which Ellie had wrongly assumed meant Boston but had turned out to mean New York).

Nobody, of course, knew the financial-aid kid from a small town in Maine.

Watching them, Ellie often felt like a scientist observing some strange new species of bird, these girls who were so impossibly confident. She couldn't believe that they had bags as expensive as her entire wardrobe, and that none of them had ever had a paying job, and that they never thought twice about throwing down a credit card. In turn, they seemed to be just as mystified by her, endlessly amused when she pronounced *Greenwich* like

*Green-witch* or said things like *good grief* or declined an invitation to a party because she wanted to finish writing a poem that wasn't an assignment for any sort of class.

Ellie didn't mind. They weren't friends in the way that Quinn—whom she'd known since she was little—was a friend, and they probably never would be. But whatever this was seemed like a first step on the path to belonging, and that was enough for now.

So yesterday, when Lauren mentioned they were going away this weekend and asked if Ellie might want to come along, she paused before saying no.

“Really?” she asked, looking up from her psychology book.

Lauren had shrugged. “Well, my parents are out of town, so we have the apartment to ourselves. And we were thinking it'd be nice to do some shopping, get manicures, that sort of thing. I just really need a New York fix, you know?”

“Totally,” Ellie said, afraid to admit that she'd never been to New York. She glanced down at her pajama pants, which had little ducks on them and which she hadn't taken off all day, and surprised herself by saying, “I'd love to come.”

Lauren had been making her bed, and she paused with a blanket in her hands, the corners lined up, mid-fold. “Well, great,” she said, clearly taken aback. But Ellie was relieved to see that she looked pleased too. “We'll leave right after my econ seminar.”

And so this morning, Ellie had sat in the backseat of the car as it flew down the expressway, singing quietly under her breath as the other three girls shouted the words to song after song, the music so loud it made the doors vibrate. When they reached the city—a jagged landscape of buildings so striking that Ellie forgot to be self-conscious for a moment, pressing her forehead against the window with wide eyes—they dropped their bags at Lauren's apartment, in a building that looked like a museum. The living room alone was bigger than an entire floor of Ellie's house.

Afterward, they spent a few hours shopping on Fifth Avenue—which for Ellie turned out to be an exhausting exercise in trying not to look too shocked by the prices—and then went to the Museum of Modern Art, where she pretended to appreciate a series of paintings that looked as if they'd been done by a four-year-old.

By the time they started walking back across town, on their way to dinner at an Asian fusion restaurant that Lauren and Kara and Sprague were apparently desperate to try, the sky was dusky and pale, the light of the buildings already starting to glow. Ellie could no longer hide the fact that she was lagging behind the others. Being with them felt a little like being on camera for an extended period of time, and trying to maintain a brighter, cheerier, cooler version of herself for so long was completely draining. All she wanted to do was sit down in a dark restaurant and eat her noodles while the others talked.

But as they neared the corner of Fifty-Fourth and Sixth, they saw a series of blue police barricades cordoning off the street, and beyond that an enormous crowd gathered beneath an old-fashioned marquee that read ZIEGFELD in sweeping letters.

“Must be a premiere,” Lauren said before they’d even crossed the street, and Kara’s face lit up as she stepped off the curb, already moving in that direction.

“I wonder what movie it is,” she said, but somehow Ellie already knew.

## Three

No matter how you looked at it, one year, two months, and twenty-one days was a very long time.

But sometimes it didn't seem that way to Ellie at all.

Sometimes it felt like she was still in the middle of a conversation with him, that they'd only paused for a beat; that this was nothing more than the space between musical notes, the timeout on a playing field, the long, slumbering winter before an inevitable spring.

At other times it felt like the whole thing had just been a dream.

## Four

When Graham left the beach that morning last summer, Ellie didn't go with him.

They agreed that they didn't want to say good-bye in front of his trailer, or in the lobby of his hotel, or even at her own house, with her mother hovering nearby, pretending not to listen. They didn't want to be on display in town, now that their secret was out, and they didn't want to walk up the road together, each step heavier than the last, each one closer to good-bye.

Instead, Ellie wanted to remember him like this: at their spot on the beach, the pink-streaked sky behind him so brilliant it almost looked like a scene from one of his movies.

But it wasn't.

If it had been one of his movies, they'd have been making promises right then. They'd have been making plans. They'd have been saying they loved each other.

But they didn't do any of those things.

Graham was going back to his life, and Ellie was staying right there in Henley.

In two weeks, she'd be going to Harvard for a summer poetry course, while Graham would be on a soundstage in L.A., wrapping the film they'd been shooting all summer.

A few weeks after that, Ellie would be starting her senior year of high school, while Graham would be taking off on a worldwide publicity tour for the last movie of the trilogy that had made him a star.

Their lives would be a million miles apart in a million different ways.

Standing there on the beach, Graham had blinked at her a few times. He was already late for his last day on set, and would be leaving right after he finished his final scenes.

"Listen," he said, clearing his throat. They'd spent the whole night on

the beach, and he looked windswept and ruffled, his cheeks a little pink and his eyes a little watery. He didn't look like a movie star. He looked like someone trying to say good-bye.

"Graham," Ellie said, and his eyes flicked up to meet hers. "Let's not do this."

"What?" he asked with a frown. "Say good-bye?"

"No, I just meant...let's not make any speeches," she said, stepping into him so that his arms folded automatically around her. "We already said everything last night. I think now it's just good-bye."

He breathed out, ruffling her red hair. "I'm not sure I'm quite finished saying hello yet," he said, and Ellie couldn't help herself; she began to cry, sniffing into his shirt, remembering those words from their very first e-mail exchange, which had been sparked by the smallest of typos, unexpectedly connecting two complete strangers across all those many miles.

Somehow, that one mistake—that one missing letter in an e-mail address—had managed to start all this: first, the long correspondence between them; then the arrival of the movie set in Henley, which Ellie later learned had been orchestrated by Graham in an elaborate effort to meet her; and then his appearance on her porch that first night, looking hopeful and uncertain and decidedly unlike a movie star, and her realization that all that time she'd been writing to Graham Larkin.

She stepped back from him now with a wobbly smile. "How about we just go with *sayonara* then?"

Graham laughed. "Or *au revoir*."

"*Arrivederci*."

"*Hasta la vista*, baby," he said, and then he stepped forward and kissed her again, sending a shiver through her in spite of the warmth of the early-morning sun.

"Good-bye," he said, and Ellie felt her heart drop.

"Good-bye," she said, holding his gaze—willing him to stay, wishing things were different—but he spun around and walked back up the beach toward the line of trees, turning only once more to wave before disappearing entirely.

## Five

For the first few weeks, it was just like it had been at the beginning.

They wrote to each other at all hours of the day, a frantic, feverish volley of e-mails that felt so urgent, so burning, so exciting, that they could hardly type fast enough.

Only now it was even better. The first time around, Ellie had no idea who was on the other end of all those notes. But this time, she knew the sound of his voice and the exact color of his eyes and the precise shape of his smile. This time, she had memories to go along with the words: the saltiness of that last kiss, the feel of his hand on her hip, the way his hair fell over his eyes.

Sometimes they talked on the phone or texted, of course, and they tried video chatting a few times too. But this whole thing had started with an e-mail exchange, and it just seemed fitting to continue that way. Besides, Ellie found she liked the anticipation of it, waiting to see his name appear in her inbox, each message crafted like a little gift. There was something more thoughtful about it, less hasty and dashed off. They weren't just chatting; they were corresponding.

Graham wrote to her about the wrap party for the new movie (where his costar, Olivia Brooks, had impulsively decided to launch her singing career, to disastrous effect), and about the tour schedule for the final Top Hat film (which, to his delight, would take him to Paris for the very first time), and about the next project he'd decided on (a modern retelling of *Pride and Prejudice*, where he'd be playing the Bingley character), so that she knew about these things days before they started leaking into the magazines that Quinn was always reading at lunch.

He told her about how he'd invited his parents over for dinner as soon as he got back, and how his mom had ended up cooking enough meals to last him three weeks while his dad fell asleep on the couch with Wilbur, his pet

pig, who was looking very dashing in the lobster bow tie Ellie had sent for him.

When Ellie was away at her poetry course, Graham insisted she send him every single poem she wrote, which she did, a little sheepishly, since some of them were quite obviously about him (particularly the one called “Him”).

*Better than Wordsworth* was always his response, until one day she’d asked him to name a single Wordsworth poem, and he couldn’t. *That’s why you’re better than him*, he’d written back, and she couldn’t help laughing.

They mused about when they would see each other again, but Ellie was stuck in high school in a small town in Maine for another year, and once his press tour was over, Graham would be leaving for Vancouver to shoot his next film.

“Any chance his publicity tour will include Henley?” her mom had asked, unhelpfully, one night when she caught Ellie out on the porch swing, staring at the bluish screen of her phone.

“Unlikely,” Ellie told her.

Still, it was fun to imagine.

She took to daydreaming: sitting in a school assembly, wondering what would happen if Graham walked through the double doors of the gymnasium, or ducking through the branches on the way down to the water, picturing him sitting on the rock—*their* rock—with the ocean at his back and a huge smile, waiting there just for her.

But this wasn’t a movie. And things like that didn’t happen in real life.

Their lives had intersected briefly, here in this small corner of Maine, and maybe that was it.

## Six

After a while, the spaces between e-mails grew longer—not so much because it wasn't the same as it used to be, but because it wasn't enough anymore.

They knew now what it could be like when they were together. And so being apart—even when connected by the thin thread of an e-mail chain—just wasn't good enough.

Besides, they were both busy. Ellie was applying to colleges, and Graham's tour meant long days filled with press junkets and photo calls, followed by long plane rides to do the whole thing over again in the next city. Ellie read about all of it in Quinn's magazines as they sat together in the ice-cream shop where they both worked after school.

"It's not like we promised each other anything," she said one day, tossing a magazine aside. It slid along the counter, then fell onto the floor in a heap of crinkled pages. Neither of them moved to pick it up. It was a cold, rainy day in October, which was the off-season for tourists. Nobody was coming in for ice cream.

"Stop being so sensible," Quinn said, leaning against the counter. "You're allowed to be frustrated."

"Well, what am I supposed to do?" Ellie asked. "Hop on a plane to Sydney or London or Vancouver? Tag along like some kind of weird groupie while he gets interviewed and goes to parties and hangs out with Olivia Brooks?"

"Now you're just being dramatic."

"I can't be too sensible and too dramatic at the same time," she pointed out with a sigh. "All I'm saying is that it was probably doomed from the start, right?"

"Still overly dramatic," Quinn said, raising one eyebrow. "But I take your point. It's admittedly a little easier when your boyfriend sits behind

you in physics.”

“You sit behind *him*,” Ellie said, laughing in spite of herself, “so you can look at his answers.”

“Yeah, well,” Quinn said, flushing a little, as she did whenever the subject of Devon came up, “that’s not the point.”

But more weeks slipped by, and the fewer e-mails that passed between Ellie and Graham, the more ordinary they became. Instead of their sharing secrets, trading intimate thoughts and feelings, the correspondence started to feel like an activity log, nothing more than a generic report on what they were each doing from day to day.

The week before Christmas, Ellie learned she didn’t get into Harvard after applying early action. She couldn’t have known then that she’d be accepted only a few short months later; at the time, it felt like the worst kind of failure, and she was absolutely crushed. Her first instinct, of course, was to write to Graham, who was traveling back to L.A. for the holidays. But when she sat down to e-mail him, she found she couldn’t.

Google had just helpfully alerted her about an award he’d been nominated for and a big role in an action movie he’d won over two other popular young actors. Compared to those things, this seemed minor.

With all his success, it was harder to share her own failure.

And so she didn’t.

Instead, she waited another week and then sent him an e-mail wishing him a merry Christmas.

By the time he wrote back, it was January, and his e-mail said only this: *Hi, stranger. Sorry it’s taken me so long. Things have been crazy. How are you?*

It could have been written to an old friend from fourth grade, or a girl he’d once met at a party, or even his dentist.

It could have been written to anyone.

Ellie didn’t even bother to reply.

It seemed to her that there was nothing more to be said.

## Seven

As they walked toward the theater, Ellie's heart was so loud in her ears that she could hardly hear the excited murmurs of her friends.

"Do you think he'll be there?"

"Is it supposed to be good?"

"Is he still dating Olivia Brooks?"

"Was he ever?"

Beyond the crowd, they could see a row of black town cars pulled to the curb on one side of the street, and on the other, a wall of photographers and reporters and screaming fans. A long red carpet had been rolled out over the sidewalk in front of the theater, and the crowds were pressed up against the metal barricades that surrounded it, straining to get a better look.

Ellie trailed blindly after the other girls, feeling numb and weak-kneed and a little bit dizzy. She was still shocked to have stumbled across this of all movie premieres. She'd known the film was coming out soon; back home, everyone was giddy about it. Last summer, they'd spent a month shooting at various locations around town: the harbor and the beach, the main street and the shops, even the one shady-looking bar in the middle of all those postcard-perfect storefronts. And because of this, the movie seemed to belong as much to the town of Henley as it did to anyone else.

There was supposed to be a special screening on the village green at some point, in the same spot where she and Graham had watched the fireworks that Fourth of July, the explosions overhead not nearly bright enough to make them look away from each other.

"Everyone's been asking if you'll come back for it," her mom had said the last time they talked. "But I told them you're a very busy and important college student now, and you don't have time to be jetting in for small-town celebrations anymore—"

"Mom."

Her mother's voice had softened. "I just thought you should know."

"Thanks," Ellie said, thinking that it was pretty much the last film she'd ever want to see. She'd gone to the final Top Hat movie when it came out last fall, and it had been hard enough watching him on the big screen without having her hometown as the backdrop.

"Well, if you change your mind—"

"Honestly, I'd rather sing karaoke in front of everyone I know," she said. "I'd rather go swing dancing. I'd rather get punched in the face."

Her mom laughed. "You know, El," she said, "you really shouldn't bottle up your feelings like that..."

Ellie had laughed too, but she was serious. In the wake of the filming, even after the whole circus had packed up and left town, she'd become a minor celebrity of sorts, at least in Henley. She'd hated everything about it: the unwanted attention and curious questions, the pointing and whispering and undisguised stares, all of which had forced her to spend the remainder of the summer darting nervously around the town where she'd lived most of her life.

Quinn, of course, had loved it. "This is your moment," she kept saying, reveling in all the reflected glory. "You might only get fifteen minutes, so enjoy it."

"I don't want fifteen minutes," Ellie told her. "I don't want any minutes."

"Well, you don't have a choice. So you'll just have to run out the clock."

And she had. It only took a few weeks for the excitement to die down as the memory of the shoot faded and school started up again. But now, walking back into the thick of it—the noise and the lights and the great flashy drama of it all—Ellie was once again wishing she were anywhere else.

Ahead of her, Kara was elbowing a path through the knots of people, working her way from the casual observers in the back—who, like them, had simply wandered over to see what was going on—up toward the front, where the most devoted fans had been lined up along the barricades for hours. Farther down, the press was waiting, their lenses all angled toward the line of black cars, and each time someone stepped out, there was a flurry of flashes and a deafening round of cheers.

As the other girls pushed forward, Ellie found herself backpedaling. It wasn't a decision she could remember making, exactly, but her legs seemed

to be moving all the same. She stumbled over the woman just behind her, then tripped over someone else's shoe, drifting farther away from her friends, allowing herself to be squeezed to the back of the crowd.

When she caught a glimpse of Mick—the director—hurrying past the line of cameras with a tight-lipped smile, she froze, and then ducked. After a moment, she straightened again, feeling self-conscious and overly dramatic, especially given that they'd never actually met and there was practically no chance he would remember her. But the sight of him had caught her off guard, and she was still feeling startled and a little bit shaky when Lauren appeared, grabbing her elbow with an impatient look and dragging her toward the front.

“The key is to sort of post up,” she was saying, demonstrating by throwing out an elbow as they passed a group of younger girls. “Protect your space.”

“I'm not great with crowds,” Ellie muttered, and Lauren rolled her eyes.

“You've gotta be more aggressive,” she said, half pulling Ellie into a spot just behind Kara and Sprague, who were so fixated on the sight of Olivia Brooks getting out of her car that they didn't even notice. The noise from the crowd rose as Olivia—who had eyes only for the cameras—began to pose with a hand on her hip and a pouty smile on her heart-shaped face.

Ellie stared ahead unseeingly, her thoughts jumbled. She knew it was only a matter of time before Graham would also appear, handsome and smiling and achingly familiar, and she didn't feel remotely prepared for it. Everything seemed dreamlike and surreal, as if she might snap awake at any moment and find herself back in her dorm room in her ducky pajamas.

“I bet he's next,” Kara said, and Ellie felt her breath quicken, wondering if it was too late to try to leave again. She wasn't aggressive. She didn't know how to post up. And she certainly didn't belong here. Maybe there was no such thing as a new Ellie; there was only this one, the one who had once gotten an e-mail from a boy in California, who had—without knowing what might happen—written him back, and who had then stood by and simply watched as it all slipped away.

“Do you think he's really that hot in person?” Sprague asked, half turning to them with a dreamy look. “I mean, his eyes can't be *that* blue, right?”

Kara shrugged. “I heard he wears contacts.”

“I heard he never washes his jeans.”

“I heard he has six cars, and that he’s always paying off cops when they stop him for driving too fast.”

“I heard that too.”

“I heard he has his own racetrack in his backyard.”

“I heard he got a special car seat made for his pet monkey.”

“Pig,” Ellie said quietly, and they all turned to look at her. She blinked back at them. “It’s a pet pig.”

But nobody answered. Because that’s when a car door opened, and a roar went up, and a series of flashes lit the sky, and just like that, all eyes were on Graham Larkin.

## Eight

The only truly crazy thing Ellie had ever done in her life was to fall for a movie star.

And now, all these months later, it didn't seem quite real to her anymore. It felt like something an entirely different person might do, someone she didn't even recognize.

It was like when she was little, and she refused to go anywhere without her stuffed rabbit. She slept with it every night, propped it on the chair next to hers at the dinner table, dragged it to school and in the car and to her mother's shop. Once, she accidentally left it in a restaurant, and she didn't realize it until they were already home and the place was closed. She spent a sleepless night sobbing into her pillow, and in the morning, her mom drove her—puffy-eyed and still hiccupping—back to the restaurant, where she was reunited with the little bunny, who had spent the night in a lost-and-found box beside a Velcro wallet and a single mitten.

Just last year, Ellie had found the bunny again in a box in the attic. She'd sat on the dusty floor and stared at the thing, trying to summon up those same feelings. It was nubby and bald and worn, the seams coming apart on one of the ears and an eyeball missing from when their dog, Bagel, had gotten hold of it. There was definitely something sweet about it, and she certainly felt nostalgic, but she couldn't for the life of her remember why she'd ever been so obsessed with it.

And that's kind of how she felt about Graham now.

Like the little bunny, he, too, was stored away, tucked between the shiny pages of all those magazines, his life playing out in the endless depths of the Internet, a never-ending series of photos and interviews and rumored girlfriends and fast cars, all of it so far away from her own life—so far removed from the guy on the beach that summer—that it was almost impossible to recall why she'd ever been so attached in the first place.

## Nine

The figure in the distance stood alone in the middle of the red carpet.

There was a constellation of people orbiting around him—assistants and publicists and hairstylists, reporters and photographers and security guards—keeping a thin cushion of space between them, as if he were electric, as if at any moment he might start throwing off sparks.

When Graham turned to wave at the crowd, a collection of high-pitched screams split the Manhattan night, and even from this far away, she could see his smile shift from the stiff, guarded one he was always wearing at these types of things to something more real, something bordering on genuine amusement.

“He’s *gorgeous*,” Kara breathed, and the other two nodded in agreement, straining to get a better look.

But Ellie said nothing. It felt to her like the rest of the world should be disappearing right about now. It felt like at any moment, he should look over and spot her there, and their eyes should lock, and he should start moving in her direction, and everything else should fade away, and then... and then, what?

Even if it were to happen this way, she wasn’t sure she’d want that. Or that *he* would. After all, she was the one who’d stopped writing—who had ignored the last few e-mails he sent this past winter, all of them wondering where she was, asking if everything was okay—and he had every right to be angry with her.

So it almost didn’t matter what happened next. Too much time had gone by, and this particular chapter was long over now. Graham was packed away in some dusty corner of her heart, and even if she found him again, there was no way it would ever be the same.

How could it?

He was closer now, maybe twenty yards away, making his way down the

line, shaking hands and signing autographs and taking photos with fans. His movie-star smile had returned, his face friendly but vacant, his eyes a little glazed, and to her surprise, Ellie felt suddenly desperate to see his real smile again. The thought made her chest so tight it was almost hard to breathe.

She reached between Kara and Sprague, gripping the cool metal barricade with one hand to steady herself as he approached, not sure whether she was waiting anxiously or bracing herself, whether she was trying to hide or be seen. Her palms were sweaty and her vision was blurry from the flashes and the noise, the press of bodies and the nervous energy. It almost felt like something was short-circuiting inside her as she stood there, completely paralyzed, watching him approach as if in slow motion.

“Get your phone out,” Sprague said under her breath, her eyes still glued to Graham, who was only ten yards away now. Obediently, Lauren dug through her bag, fumbling to capture the moment, to leave with some sort of proof that they had been here.

And then there he was: only a few feet away, half-bent as he scrawled his name across a piece of paper while a little girl—no more than eight or nine—stared, dumbstruck, from the other side of the makeshift fence.

“Hope you like the movie,” Graham said as he handed it back, and the girl burst into happy tears. Everyone around her laughed, but Ellie understood. Something about the moment made her want to cry, too, because he sounded like Graham just then—not the guy in the interviews, or the one on-screen, but the one on her porch in Maine: humble and hopeful and human.

“So cute,” Sprague said, snapping a few blurry pictures on her phone. A girl with an earpiece walked over and whispered something to Graham, and then he lifted his hand and grinned apologetically at the crowd, which broke into feverish applause, before he was steered sharply toward the entrance of the theater.

As they watched him disappear, Kara sighed.

“I love him,” she said, and Ellie nodded miserably.

She was pretty sure she did too.

## Ten

Once he was gone, the crowd seemed to wilt.

A few people began to leave, while others shifted restlessly, still looking off toward the line of cars as if a surprise guest might step out at any moment. But with the departure of the film's two stars, the red carpet was now mostly filled with publicists and producers and assistants.

"I wish we'd gotten a selfie," Kara said, spinning around.

"Or at least something better than this," Sprague said, thrusting her phone at them. Ellie leaned close to see a muddled picture of the back of Graham's head. But even that was enough to make her throat go thick, and she stared at it for a beat too long, blinking fast, still shell-shocked by the nearness of him.

"You okay?" Lauren asked, and Ellie realized there were tears in her eyes.

"I'm fine," she said quickly, brushing them away. "Just a little cold."

Once she said it, she realized it was true. It was only September, but with the sun gone, there was a chill in the air, and she rubbed at her bare arms, wishing she were wearing more than just jeans and a T-shirt. She could picture her gray hoodie in the backseat of Sprague's car, and was annoyed she hadn't remembered to bring it.

"Dinner?" Lauren asked, raising her eyebrows at the others. Sprague shrugged, and Kara gave the red carpet one last hopeful look before agreeing.

But just as they turned, ready to make their way toward Seventh Avenue, Ellie heard her name.

She hesitated, her whole body tense, before swiveling around.

She hadn't realized how high her heart had lifted until she felt it fall again. For a moment, she'd thought it might be Graham. But instead she found herself staring at the round, bearded face of his manager, Harry

Fenton, who was standing a few feet away, in the middle of the red carpet, wearing a look of confusion that made it seem like she'd been the one to call out to him.

"Ellie, right?" he asked, taking a few steps closer. "Ellie O'Neill?"

Ellie glanced nervously at the other three girls, who were all staring at her.

"Yeah," she said eventually, in a voice that didn't quite sound like hers.

She'd never properly met Harry Fenton—she'd only seen him from afar during some of the shoots in Henley—but she knew enough to know that he hadn't been a fan of hers. Even before she and Graham got in trouble for a scuffle with the paparazzi and that incident with a stolen boat, Harry had been worried that Ellie was a distraction for his biggest client.

So it was no small surprise to see him smiling at her now, holding out a hand, and Ellie had to inch past Kara to greet him.

"I thought that was you," he said, pumping her hand up and down. "Does —"

"No," she said quickly. "We were just walking by, and—"

"Oh, well, you have to come in then," he said, gesturing at the theater behind him with the friendly enthusiasm of a game-show host. "You probably haven't seen it yet, have you?"

Ellie shook her head, wondering how he thought she might have seen it, given that this was the world premiere. Her face was burning now for no real reason except that she could feel everyone watching her, and she wished she had the power to make herself invisible.

"I can't," she finally managed to say. "I don't...I'm not dressed for it, and we've, um, got dinner plans, and..."

Harry's gaze shifted to the semicircle of girls standing behind her with what Ellie could only assume were mystified expressions. "Bring your friends. There's popcorn inside."

Ellie had just opened her mouth to refuse once more when Lauren appeared at her side, jabbing her hard in the ribs.

"We'd love to," Lauren said, beaming at Harry. "That's so nice of you."

"Well, great," he said, looking pleased. "How many are you? Four? Super. Let me just..."

He held up a finger and then spun around, walking over to a girl with a headset, who nodded immediately and started punching at her phone.

“Whoever that is,” Lauren said, her eyes still trained on Harry, “he’s my new favorite person.”

“Who is it?” Kara asked, unable to hide her excitement. “What’s even happening right now?”

“We’re going to a movie premiere,” Lauren said triumphantly. She gave Ellie a little slap on the back. “This night just got *much* more exciting.”

“Yeah, but how do you know him?” Sprague asked, staring at Ellie. “This is so random...”

“He’s a...family friend,” Ellie lied, her stomach churning. But it would be impossible to sum up the whole story without sounding ridiculous. Even the long version was pretty hard to believe.

Besides, she had bigger things to worry about right now. Already, she was making frantic calculations about the odds of seeing Graham in there. Harry would probably have to find seats for them somewhere way in the back, and surely they’d be getting there so late that the movie would start almost immediately, which meant the chance of her running into Graham was tiny.

When Harry motioned them forward, a huge security guard with a wire in his ear lifted the barricade and swung it open just enough for them to slip through. The other girls whispered excitedly as they walked past jealous fans, but Ellie just stared at her feet, taking in the grubby flip-flops and chipped nail polish on her toes.

As they passed a life-size cutout of Graham near the entrance to the theater, Harry handed over their tickets with a half smile. “So how’ve you been?”

“Fine,” Ellie said, glancing around nervously as they made their way into the lower lobby, which was filled with women in cocktail dresses and men in suits and silk ties. The walls were velvety red and trimmed with gold, and there were huge crystal chandeliers hanging overhead; the whole place had an elegance that made Ellie feel even more out of place.

“He’ll be excited to see you,” Harry said as they stepped onto the escalator. The other girls were behind them, and Ellie checked to be sure they weren’t listening before shaking her head.

“No,” she said, and Harry looked surprised. “I don’t want to...I mean, it’s just that...you know, we haven’t really talked in a while, and I don’t think...”

“Look,” he said, ignoring her confused stammering as they stepped off the escalator and into another lobby, this one just as crowded. “I owe you an apology for last summer. You might’ve noticed that I wasn’t too thrilled about the two of you. But ever since you...well, ever since things ended, I think Graham’s been a little...”

Ellie held her breath, waiting for him to continue.

*Graham’s been a little too preoccupied with other girls.*

*Graham’s been a little too out of control.*

*Graham’s been a little too busy.*

But instead he said this: “Graham’s been a little bit lonely.”

Ellie stared at him. “Oh.”

“Yeah,” he said, rubbing at the back of his neck. They were standing in the middle of the upper lobby now, though Ellie couldn’t remember when they’d stopped walking. “I think you were actually a good influence on him,” Harry continued. “He’s just not himself lately, and he’s always taking off in these cars, and...I don’t know. I guess I’d just hate it if anything *I* did —”

“We’re gonna head in, okay?” Lauren said, appearing at Ellie’s side. Behind her, the other two girls were waiting near the entrance to the main theater.

“Hey, don’t let me keep you,” Harry said, reaching out to take Ellie’s hand and giving her a meaningful look. “But it’s really, really good to see you.”

“You too,” Ellie managed to say, her head spinning.

“And enjoy the movie.”

“We will,” Lauren said, hooking her arm through Ellie’s and leading her into the cavernous theater, where they paused for a moment at the top of the aisle, taking it all in. The seats were almost entirely filled with people, though many of them were still standing, leaning across rows to say hello to old friends or business associates. Their voices bounced around the red walls and the huge gold curtains surrounding the screen. Behind them were more seats, which rose up like bleachers toward the ceiling, but Ellie followed Lauren down the far left aisle of the mezzanine, where they found their seats, only a few rows from the back.

“I can’t *believe* you got us in here,” Lauren said as they scooted by a couple on the end, and then past Kara and Sprague, who had sat down

nearest the aisle, leaving Ellie a seat closer to the middle. “This is just completely insane...”

“Seriously,” Kara said. “It’s *beyond*.”

“Beyond,” Ellie agreed absently, her eyes raking the front of the theater for Graham. She assumed there’d be a cluster of people around him, the way there’d been outside, but she couldn’t see him anywhere. Maybe the actors snuck in after the lights went down, or maybe they didn’t come at all. Or maybe it was just that the sort of people invited to an event like this were simply too cool to gawk at celebrities.

Above them, the lights blinked twice, and a hush fell over the audience as the stragglers hurried to find their seats before the theater went dark.

Ellie leaned back and let out a long breath. All she wanted to do was close her eyes and attempt to process all of this: that she was presumably in the same room as Graham, that Harry seemed to think he was lonely, that she was about to see the movie they’d filmed in her hometown, and that she was in a ritzy New York theater with three girls from school she hardly knew, who had no idea of the real reason they’d been invited inside.

“You okay?” Lauren asked, and Ellie nodded.

“Fine.”

“You just seem a little...off. Are you mad we said yes?”

“No, it’s fine,” she said again, though her voice sounded oddly tense, even to her. “Who wouldn’t have?”

She wanted to mean it. In fact, she wanted to revel in it, the fact that they were all here because of her. That after weeks of tagging along and wishing she fit in, she had turned out to be their ticket into such an exclusive event. But she was too nervous to enjoy it, too fidgety to relax.

“Really?” Lauren asked, and this time, Ellie attempted a smile.

“Really,” she said, and this seemed to satisfy Lauren, who bumped her shoulder against Ellie’s with a grin just as the lights snapped off.

For a moment, just before the screen winked to life, it felt to Ellie like they were floating in the dark. But then the image appeared, a landscape shot of the Henley harbor at sunrise, and Ellie felt such a gut punch of homesickness that she nearly lost her breath. There was scattered clapping as the first credits appeared at the edge of the screen, the shot panning to reveal the docks and the boats—including the *Go Fish*, which she and Graham had once stolen to sail north on an ill-fated quest—and all of it was

so painfully familiar that she felt for her phone in her pocket, wanting to text her mom.

When the title appeared in bold letters across the screen, everyone in the theater clapped again, and then the camera moved through the center of town, landing on a boy making his way through the gray dawn, his head bent and his back to the camera, and all at once, Ellie was struck by a thousand memories of last summer, of seeing this very boy in these very places:

Watching him walk into the ice-cream shop on that first day.

Talking to him near the gazebo while the cast and crew waited for him to return to the set.

Stepping off the bus with him over by the post office.

Staring at each other across the lawn on the Fourth of July as the fireworks went off overhead.

And then, just like that, he was there.

Not in her memory and not on the screen—though he was both of those places, too—but a few feet away, a shadowy figure squinting at her from the aisle.

“Ellie?” he whispered, and she sat up a little in her seat, her heart hammering.

Behind them, a few people made shushing noises, and of the other three girls, only Kara—who was closest to the aisle—was looking up at the boy hovering at the end of the row.

“Ellie,” Graham whispered again, leaning over a little bit. The middle-aged couple nearest him—whose gazes were fixed on the screen, where another version of Graham was climbing into a boat—turned in his direction too.

It only took a second for them to recognize him, and their surprise seemed to travel down the row.

“Oh my god,” Sprague said, clapping a hand over her mouth, and then she leaned across Lauren to jab Ellie, who had sunk down low in her seat.

“Can we talk?” Graham asked from the aisle, and the other three girls whipped their heads back and forth between them as Ellie hesitated. She’d forgotten what it felt like to be with Graham in public, the way the attention settled over her like snow, blanketing everything, freezing her in place.

After a moment, Lauren grabbed her arm and gave it a little shake. “Go,”

she said through gritted teeth, her face a picture of astonishment, and then she swung her legs to the side to leave room for Ellie to pass, which she did, awkwardly scooting by her friends, trying to ignore the curious stares of the people in the row behind her.

As she neared the aisle, moving past the confused couple, Graham stepped back to let her out. But she still couldn't bring herself to look at him directly. He nodded at the back of the theater, where a faint light shone through from the lobby, and together, they walked toward it, hurrying up the aisle as the music swelled behind them: a sure sign that the girl had finally appeared on-screen and the love story was about to begin.

## Eleven

In the quiet of the lobby, they stood staring at each other for a moment.

“You’re here,” Graham said finally.

“I am,” Ellie said.

He frowned, his expression hard to read. He was the same, but he wasn’t. His eyes seemed bluer than ever, and his hair was a little bit shorter, but not by much. The shape of his mouth, the way he slouched a little, the scar above his left eyebrow: all of it was as it had been last summer. But still, there was something different about him, something hardened, a wariness he carried like a weight, and she was once again uncomfortably aware of just how much their lives had diverged over the past year.

Here was Graham in his designer suit, the pants so tight she wondered how he’d managed to sit down in the theater. His hair was combed to the side in a way she’d never seen before, and he had a little handkerchief folded in his pocket the way men often did in old-fashioned movies.

He looked like someone from the pages of a magazine.

Which, of course, he was.

“How did you...?”

“It wasn’t planned,” Ellie said quickly. “I’m just down with some friends for the weekend, and we were walking past, and—I didn’t know it was your film, and I never expected to see—it was just that Harry spotted me in the crowd, and then he—”

Graham held up a hand. “It’s okay,” he said with a hint of his usual smile. “I was just surprised when he told me. I had to see for myself.”

“See what?”

“You,” he said, his eyes going soft. “You’re the last person I expected to run into tonight.”

“Honestly, I didn’t really count on seeing you, either.”

He tilted his head to one side. “So how are you?”

Across the lobby, two women in black dresses were leaning against the counter of the concession stand, pretending to look at their phones, though Ellie could tell they were really watching Graham. Behind him, a huge security guard with a thick neck and a shock of red hair had a finger on his earpiece, and he was speaking softly, his eyes trained on them. From the theater, a roar of laughter went up, muffled by the doors.

“I’m fine,” Ellie told him, sounding brusquer than she’d intended. Above them, a chandelier the size of a small car was hanging from the ceiling, and in the corner, a few assistants were setting up a table full of lavish-looking gift bags, sneaking glances at the handsome movie star standing with one hand in his pocket, talking to a girl in a blue T-shirt and jeans with a hole in the knee.

“I’m sure you have to get back,” she said after a moment. “I know it’s a big night for you.”

He looked stung by this. “It’s fine. It just started.”

“Yeah, but I don’t want you to miss it because of me.”

His eyes traveled over to the popcorn counter, and then back to Ellie. “Can I tell you something?” he said, and his voice was so serious that she felt her stomach drop.

“What?” she asked nervously.

“I’m *starving*.”

In spite of herself, she laughed. “The popcorn is free.”

“Yeah, but I’m not popcorn hungry. I’m, like, burger-and-fries hungry. I’m Wilbur-level hungry.”

Ellie nodded. “That sounds serious.”

“It is.”

“Don’t they ever feed the celebrities at these things?”

“Nope,” he said. “Otherwise, how would they ever fit us into these pants?”

“Good point,” she said. “So what are you proposing?”

“I propose,” Graham said, glancing around furtively, like a robber about to case the joint, “that we make a break for it.”

“Don’t you have to be here?”

He shrugged. “I’ve already seen it. And they won’t miss me as long as I’m back in time for the Q and A.”

“There’s a Q and A?”

“Yeah,” he said. “So you better start thinking up some questions...”

“Oh, I’ve got questions,” she assured him. “But I suppose I could probably ask them over some food.”

“Great,” he said, his face brightening. “What are our chances of finding a whoopie pie around here?”

## Twelve

It was fun watching Graham work his magic to get them out of there. To Ellie, he was always more attractive when he was trying *not* to be famous, and seeing him shake hands with the various security guards, slap the back of an usher who lent him a Yankees cap, thank the girl from the concession stand who told them about the back staircase where the deliveries came in: all of it gave her a little thrill.

It wasn't exactly a major operation. All they were doing was trying to walk out of a movie theater, which to most people wouldn't have seemed like anything extraordinary. But by the time they spilled out into the alley alongside the theater, Ellie was feeling almost giddy at their newfound freedom.

"Where to?" Graham asked, clapping his hands, equally elated. There was a small floodlight on the brick building, and standing there in its glare, he almost looked like he was onstage.

"I thought you had a plan."

"You just saw it," he said. "Now it's your turn."

"I've been in New York for, like, six hours," she said, but even as she did, she remembered a diner she'd passed on the walk over from the museum, and once Graham had shoved the Yankees cap onto his head—an odd contrast to his designer suit—they headed back out of the alley, turning east on Fifty-Fifth Street.

In the dark, nobody seemed to notice Graham, who walked with his head low, his face shadowed by the brim of the cap. Neither of them spoke as they wove around metal grates and mailboxes and piles of trash bags, picking their way past people walking in the opposite direction.

When they reached the diner, Ellie stopped and gave Graham a little shrug. She'd only walked by it quickly before, so she hadn't really gotten a chance to tell what it looked like inside. Now, peering through the window,

she could see that the booths were mint green with pink accents, and the walls were lined with signed pictures of movie stars and comedians and athletes in grease-spattered frames. There was an elderly man eating a piece of pie by himself at the counter, and a family of four up front near the window. Otherwise, the place was empty.

“I can’t vouch for the menu, obviously,” she said, “but I’m willing to bet it’s more exciting than popcorn. Though probably less exciting than whoopie pies.”

“I can live with that,” Graham said, swinging open the door for her.

The woman behind the counter barely looked up when they walked in; she just made a vague gesture at all the open tables. They walked straight to the far corner, where they slid into a booth, with Graham facing the wall, his back to the rest of the restaurant. He slid off the baseball cap as he flipped through the enormous menu, and Ellie couldn’t help smiling at the way his hair was now tousled again, just as she remembered it.

“So how long is this movie?” she asked, pushing aside her menu.

“Couple hours,” he said without looking up. “We’re fine.”

The waitress appeared with two glasses of water, which sloshed over the rims as she set them down on the table. “What can I get you?” she asked, her thin face completely impassive as she pulled a notepad out of the pocket of her black apron.

“I’ll have everything on the menu,” Graham said, and when she started to write this down, Ellie shook her head.

“He’s kidding. Sorry. I’ll have a grilled cheese, and he’ll have a burger and fries.”

“And two milk shakes,” Graham said, holding up a couple of fingers. “Chocolate for me.”

“Make mine vanilla,” Ellie said, and the waitress stifled a yawn as she marked this down, then scooped up the heavy menus and walked back toward the kitchen.

“So,” Graham said, leaning forward on the table.

Ellie smiled. “So.”

“Tell me everything.”

“Everything?”

He nodded. “I have a million questions.”

“Ah,” she said. “So we’ve reached the Q and A portion of the evening

already. How about you start with just one?"

"Okay," he said, twisting his mouth up at the corner. "Why'd you stop writing me?"

Ellie gave him a level stare. "How about a different one?"

"You can't do that."

"I just did."

He sighed. "Fine. But I'm circling back to that later, okay?"

"Okay."

He pulled the salt and pepper shakers toward him as he thought about his next question. "You said you drove down from school. Are you at Harvard?"

"I am."

"I knew it," he said with a satisfied smile. "I knew you had to be. How do you like it so far?"

"You already asked your question," she told him. "Now it's my turn."

"Oh, so that's how it's gonna be?"

She nodded. "Is all that stuff on the blogs true?"

"You read gossip blogs now?"

"Well, Quinn fills me in," she said, which was mostly accurate.

He laughed. "How's Quinn?"

"Still my turn."

"Okay, what stuff?"

"About you and the cars. And the speeding tickets. And the clubs. You and that girl from that stupid zombie movie. You and Olivia." She felt her cheeks go hot at this last one, but she couldn't stop herself from asking.

Graham reached for his water glass, though he didn't take a sip. Instead, he spun it around in slippery circles on the table. "Some of it," he said eventually.

"Which parts?"

"Isn't it my turn yet?"

"Graham," she said, and he raised his eyes to meet hers.

"Not the parts about the girls."

Ellie let out a breath she hadn't realized she was holding. "The clubs?"

"Here and there," he said. "But nothing too crazy. Really. It's mostly just the car stuff."

She waited for him to continue.

“I don’t know what it is,” he said. “The only car I ever drove before all this was my mom’s minivan. And when I bought my own, I just...I don’t know. My life is so claustrophobic sometimes. I guess driving feels like a way to sort of get clear of it.”

“Yeah, but you’ve got to be careful...”

“I don’t want to be worried when I’m in the car,” he said, a slight edge to his voice. “It’s the one place where I don’t have to deal with the cameras or the pressure or everybody telling me what to do or what they think I should do.”

“Except for the police.”

“It’s the one place where I feel free,” he said, ignoring her, and then he shook his head and looked down at the table. “I know that sounds melodramatic.”

She studied him for a moment. “Do you really have a racetrack in your backyard?”

“No,” he said, surprised. “Where’d you hear *that*?”

“Do you have a car seat for Wilbur?”

“Are you kidding? He gets dizzy when he comes trotting around a corner too fast. I promise you—the last thing I’d want is a carsick pig for a copilot. Where are you getting this stuff?”

“There are a lot of rumors out there...”

“Yeah, well, let me set the record straight: I haven’t been driving around a backyard racetrack with my pig like some kind of eccentric billionaire.” He brightened. “I did teach him a new trick, though.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah,” he said, looking proud. “I ask him to give me a kiss, and he does.”

“That doesn’t sound like much of a trick. I think half the girls in the world would be happy to do that on command.”

“Only half?” Graham teased, and Ellie rolled her eyes.

“Well, I’m glad to hear you’ve mostly just been making out with Wilbur.”

He laughed. “I’m pretty sure he feels the same way. Is it my turn again?”

She nodded.

“Tell me more about Harvard.”

“It’s only been a few weeks,” she said. “Not much to tell.”

Graham gave her a look. "Come on."

"It's fine."

"It's fine?"

"It's Harvard. You know."

"I don't, actually," he said, rapping on his head with his knuckles. "As you may recall, I don't go to college, so my brain is filled with movie fluff."

"What's movie fluff?"

"You know, happy endings and unlikely friendships and secret societies and janitors who turn out to be geniuses. That sort of thing."

They both leaned back as the waitress returned with their milk shakes, each topped with a lopsided pile of whipped cream. Ellie watched Graham take a long sip of his until the glass was half-empty.

"You definitely should've worn a different pair of pants," she said, and he laughed and patted his stomach.

"I need to find a role that requires me to gain some weight. Then it'll be milk shakes all day and all night..."

"So what *are* you doing next?"

He narrowed his eyes. "How come you're avoiding the subject?"

"What subject?"

"Harvard. You hate it that much, huh?"

Ellie took a pull from her straw. "I wouldn't go right to *hate*..."

"Well, what, then?"

"I'm just not sure it's the right fit."

"Come on," Graham said, leaning forward. "You've wanted to go there forever. And you loved it when you were there for the poetry course." He sat back again, looking suddenly concerned. "Didn't you?"

"Yes," she said quickly. "I loved it. But that was different. That was two weeks. This is four *years*."

"Yeah, but you're only a few weeks in. So what's the problem?"

"I don't know. It's not really Harvard. It's me."

Graham laughed just as he was about to take a sip, and little bits of whipped cream went flying off the top of his glass. "That's the oldest line in the book," he said, wiping at his chin. "Does Harvard know you want to break up with it yet?"

"I'm not breaking up with it," Ellie said, tossing her balled-up straw wrapper at him. "It's just been harder than I thought. Everyone seems to

know everyone else already, and they're all sort of the same, and I'm..."

"You're different," Graham said matter-of-factly.

Ellie nodded. "But not in a good way. I feel like a foreign exchange student or something."

"What, they don't speak Henley up there at Harvard?"

"I think it's more that I don't speak New York City. Or Greenwich. Or Hamptons. Or whatever. Everyone's perfectly nice, but it just takes so much effort to keep up, you know?"

"My best friend is a pig," Graham said. "Trust me, I get it."

"Yeah, well, he's a pretty magnificent pig."

"Humble," he agreed with a smile.

"Radiant."

"So what about the other book nerds?"

"What about them?"

"Well, why don't you hang out with them? There must be tons up there."

Ellie chose to ignore this. "It's not just about that. It's more that I...I can't seem to find my footing. I don't know what's wrong with me. Even in class—"

"Even in class?"

Ellie nodded. "For some reason, I haven't said a word."

"At all?"

"At all," she confirmed as their food arrived.

Graham had begun eating his burger almost before the plate was fully on the table, but the waitress didn't seem to mind. She simply pulled a few extra napkins from her pocket—as if to suggest that he'd need them—and headed back to the counter.

"So yesterday," Ellie said around a mouthful of grilled cheese, "in my Shakespeare section—which is my favorite—the professor called on me for the first time."

"Uh-oh," Graham said without looking up from his food.

"Exactly. I completely froze. I just kind of stuttered a little, and then I turned really red, and then there was this ridiculously long silence, and then she gave up on me."

"Did you know the answer?" he asked, lowering his burger.

"That's the worst part," Ellie said with a nod. "The thing is...I know I'm a huge chicken in other ways, and I can be completely hopeless about stuff

like this, but school was always the one place where I was fine.”

Graham looked thoughtful as he chewed. “I think you just need more of a game face.”

“What?”

“A game face,” he said, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. “It’s like, when I’m about to do a big scene, where I need to act like someone bigger and braver and bolder than I really am, I stand in front of the mirror first and practice my game face.”

He demonstrated it for her now, furrowing his brow and twisting his mouth into a deep scowl, so that he managed to look both utterly intimidating and completely clownish at the same time.

Ellie was trying not to laugh. “I’m not sure that will help me much in *Early Plays of Shakespeare*.”

“You don’t have to actually *do* the face,” he said, his features relaxing again. “I mean, it definitely helps if you need to get psyched up. But it’s more about the way it makes you feel. The idea is to sort of pretend you’re as tough as you look just then.”

“Even if you’re not.”

He nodded. “Even if you’re not.”

Ellie thought about that moment in class when she’d sat numbly beneath the heavy gaze of the other students. She thought about the way she’d been trailing Lauren and Kara and Sprague all day, and how her first instinct when she realized Graham would be showing up on the red carpet had been to flee.

“*Though she be but little, she is fierce*,” she said, and Graham—who had been swirling a fry into the pool of ketchup on his plate—looked up.

“What?”

“That was the answer. In my Shakespeare class. The thing I couldn’t say.” *The thing I want to be*, she almost added, but didn’t. “It’s from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.”

“Shakespeare, huh?” he said, sitting back and slinging one arm over the top of the booth. “Not the first person who comes to mind when you think *tough*.”

“*The pen*,” Ellie told him, picking up one of the triangular halves of her grilled cheese, “*is mightier than the sword*.”

“Okay, Hamlet,” he said with a grin. “Let’s see it, then.”

“See what?”

“Your game face.”

Ellie was about to say no. She was about to scoff at the very idea. But then she realized that was her reaction to pretty much everything lately, and she thought better of it. Instead, she set down her grilled cheese and licked her fingers, and then she leaned across the table so that her face was very close to Graham’s.

“Ready?” she asked, and he nodded, though she could tell he was trying not to smile. She ignored him, forcing her mouth into a straight line, and then into a frown, scrunching up her forehead, thinking of what Lauren had said earlier—*be more aggressive*—and what Graham had just told her—*bigger, braver, bolder*—all the while glaring at him with as menacing a look as she could possibly muster.

But to her surprise, he began to laugh, the kind of laugh that’s helpless and impossible to stop, that starts in your belly and works its way right up to your eyes.

“Come on,” she said, breaking character as she slumped back in the seat. “It couldn’t have been that bad.”

Graham’s eyes were watering, and he reached for one of the extra napkins, dabbing at them theatrically. “I can honestly say that was the least intimidating thing I’ve ever seen in my life.”

This only made her glower at him for real this time, and he waved the napkin, as if in surrender, still laughing.

“Now that,” he admitted, “is a step in the right direction.”

## Thirteen

By the time they finished eating, it was fully dark and a little bit chilly, the kind of night that's caught somewhere between summer and fall, old and new.

Outside the restaurant, Ellie bounced up and down on her toes a few times, glancing reluctantly in the direction of the theater. She didn't feel ready to let go of Graham just yet, to return him to the throngs of screaming fans and hyperefficient handlers who were tasked with moving him around from city to city, film to film, as if he were a piece on a game board.

Ellie looked over at him, and her stomach fluttered.

They'd only just found each other again. And for the first time in a long time, there was still so much to say.

Graham pulled his phone from his pocket, and Ellie could see that there were several new texts and messages, no doubt many of them from Harry.

"We still have a little time," he said, shoving it back into his jacket without reading them. "Should we take the long way back?"

She nodded, not quite trusting herself to say more. Graham stuck the Yankees cap back on his head, pulling down the brim, and then, to her delight, they began to walk in the exact opposite direction of the Ziegfeld.

Fifth Avenue looked magical at this time of night, a sea of bobbing lights from cars and taxis, the shop windows like aquariums in the dark. Neither of them spoke as they crossed Fifty-Eighth Street, and the pale facade of the green-roofed Plaza Hotel came into view. Beyond that was the great blue-black sweep of Central Park, and without any discussion, they turned toward it.

"I like this place," Ellie said as they waited for the light to change, standing so close that the fabric of Graham's jacket brushed against her bare arm, making her shiver. "I wasn't sure I would."

"You've never been?"

She shook her head.

“I’ve been here a lot lately.”

“You’ve been everywhere a lot lately.”

“It’s kind of weird,” he said as they began to cross over to the park. “I never went anywhere as a kid. And now I’m all over the place. Sydney, London, Paris, Tokyo...I can’t even remember all the cities.”

Ellie glanced over at him. “But?”

“But I get homesick,” he said with a shrug. “Which I realize is crazy, since all that’s waiting for me there is a pig. But still.”

They were just inside the park now, tracing a path along the edge of a murky pond, where a ring of streetlamps made blurry reflections in the water. They stopped beside an empty bench, and Ellie sat down on one end, waiting for Graham to do the same. But he just stood there, staring down at her with a thoughtful expression, his hands deep in his pockets and the tail of his suit jacket fluttering in the breeze.

“I can’t tell if you’re happy,” she said, trying to meet his gaze beneath the brim of the baseball cap, and he ducked his head, hesitating a beat too long before answering.

“Honestly,” he said, “I can’t really tell, either.”

He sat down beside her, leaving too much space between them. A woman walked by with an enormous dog, straining hard on its leash, and when they were gone and the path was empty again, Graham shook his head.

“I don’t really mean that,” he said, sounding frustrated. “I know I’m lucky. And I know people would kill for this kind of life, these types of opportunities...”

“I’m not a reporter,” Ellie reminded him. “You can be honest with me.”

He’d been absentmindedly curling the end of his tie, and now he let it drop, and they both watched it unwind again. “Sometimes it’s just a lot.”

“I can imagine,” she said, but she saw him wince and changed her mind. “No, you’re right. I can’t.”

“Lately, I’ve just been feeling kind of suffocated. Like I can’t get enough air. Which is why it’s nice to escape sometimes.”

“By driving way too fast.”

“It’s not *that* fast.”

“I’ve seen at least three stories about you getting pulled over.”

“I can handle it.”

Ellie gave him a hard look. “Just be careful, okay?”

“You sound like my parents,” he said, and then his face softened. But before she could ask him whether things were better now—whether he still worried over the distance between them in the aftermath of his sudden fame—he nodded.

“I’ve been seeing them a lot more lately, which is good,” he said. “My dad’s gotten completely obsessed with the landscaping at my house. I’ve got a whole crew that comes out twice a week, but whenever I’m in town, he usually just ends up dragging the mower out himself. And my mom—she thinks I eat too much takeout, so she’ll come over and spend a whole day cooking, and then my fridge ends up looking like I’m preparing for the apocalypse or something.”

Ellie smiled. This is where most guys she knew would stop, concluding the story with an eye roll. But not Graham. She knew what it meant to him, these kinds of mundane gestures, and how hard earned they were.

“And Wilbur loves having them around,” he said, leaning back against the bench, more relaxed now. “My mom even knitted him a sweater last Christmas.”

Ellie laughed. “Pig in a blanket?”

“Don’t even joke,” Graham said, giving her a stern look.

“I’m happy for you,” she said, swiveling so that they were facing each other again. “That all sounds really...normal.”

“I’m trying,” he said, pulling off his cap and ruffling his hair. “I mean... things are okay. I can’t really complain, obviously. But happy? I don’t know about that. I think maybe the last time I was truly happy was last summer.”

Ellie turned to look out at the pond. The water rippled just slightly in the breeze, and she thought again of that last night she and Graham had spent together back in Henley. Everything had felt so big then: the rough stretch of beach and the churning water and the endless night sky. And now here they were again, on a smaller stage, hemmed in on all sides by trees and bushes, buildings and people, everything stifling and somehow much too close.

What had Graham said? That it felt like suffocating, like it was hard to get enough air.

“Me too,” she said finally, and he flinched at the words.

“You’re supposed to be happier without me,” he said, looking pained. “Otherwise, what was the point of all this?”

“All what?”

“The last year,” he said, kicking at the ground with his heel. “Not talking for so long. I mean...why else did you stop writing?”

“Because you did.”

“That’s not true,” he said, jerking forward, suddenly tense. “I wrote you a bunch of times last winter, and you never wrote back.”

“Come on,” Ellie said, annoyed. “You were basically just talking about the weather at that point. It was starting to seem like a chore for you. And I didn’t want to be that. I mean...you had all these exciting things going on, and reading about my stupid high school drama while you’re busy meeting the prime minister of France—”

“It was the president, actually.”

“I just figured you’d moved on,” she said, ignoring this.

He shook his head. “You were the one who was pulling away. You stopped talking about anything that mattered. You stopped daydreaming with me about college, or telling me about the letters you were writing to your dad. You stopped sending me poems.”

“That’s because they were all about you,” she said, her face burning. “And it was embarrassing, okay? I was supposed to be over you by then.”

“Who says?”

“Well, you,” she said, glaring at him. “I had to see pictures of you with other girls pretty much every single day, while I was stuck in Henley, writing poems about you like a complete idiot.”

“Were they at least better than Wordsworth?” he asked with a smile. “That guy was a total hack.”

She laughed. “He was okay.”

“Hey,” Graham said, sliding a little bit closer to her. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know. Honestly, it felt like you were the one who was over it. I thought you were moving on. I thought I was boring you.”

“How could you—”

“All I was doing was working,” he said with a shrug. “You were actually having a life.”

“Do you have any idea how boring Henley is?” she asked, then shook her head. “It wasn’t so bad before you showed up. But once you left...”

“Trust me, it wasn’t boring to me. There have been so many times I wished...” He trailed off, giving her a long, searching look. “I haven’t been sleeping lately, so I got this noise machine that plays ocean sounds. Now I fall asleep every night thinking of that beach, wishing I was back there again. I just didn’t know how to tell you that.”

“I wish you had.”

“It hurt too much,” he said, his eyes on the ground. “Writing to you.”

She stared at him. “What do you mean?”

“There was so much I was trying not to say. I guess it was easier to talk about nothing than about how much I missed you.”

“I missed you too,” she said, her heart tumbling around in her chest at the thought of all that lost time. They’d both been trying to protect themselves, and in doing so, had managed to push each other away. And now it was too late.

“And besides,” Graham was saying, “I figured you were better off without me and all my craziness.”

Ellie sighed. “I happen to like you and your craziness.”

They both fell silent, looking out at the trees and the pond and the silhouettes of the people walking over the footbridge on the far side of it.

“Maybe we peaked last summer,” he said after a moment. “Maybe we’ll never be that happy again.”

In spite of herself, Ellie laughed. “There’s a cheerful thought.”

He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “You know how I always think of my life in terms of before and after—”

“The first movie?”

“Yeah. But lately I’ve been thinking about you too.”

“What do you mean?”

“Like...before and after you.”

Ellie blinked at him, suddenly annoyed again. “Then you should’ve tried harder. You should’ve come to visit. Or said something sooner. You should’ve done *something*.”

A couple in dark jackets walked past, but they didn’t look over. This was clearly a city used to minding its own business, and the anonymity of the place gave Ellie a little thrill. Even without his hat, it was too dark now to see Graham clearly. They were just another couple having an argument in the park tonight.

“Why didn’t *you*?” he asked, standing abruptly.

“My life got split too,” she said, rising to her feet as well. “That was the old me. That’s not...that’s not me anymore. At least I don’t want it to be.”

He looked confused. “So who are you now, then?”

“I’m not someone who falls for movie stars,” she said, giving him a stubborn look. “And I’m not someone who waits around for them to write back. I don’t want to go to premieres, and I don’t want to be reading gossip blogs or those stupid magazines at the grocery store. I don’t want to care about any of this stuff.”

Graham looked at her evenly. “You mean you don’t want to care about me.”

“It makes no sense,” she said, her voice cracking a little. “You and me.”

“I know that,” he said, reaching out and taking her hand, and the feel of his skin on hers nearly knocked the breath right out of her. “Sort of. But sometimes I think...”

“What?”

“That maybe it’s the *only* thing that makes sense.”

Ellie glanced down at their hands, which were swaying between them, and below that, to Graham’s shoes, shiny even in the dark. Around them, there was the rustle of leaves, and beyond that the muffled hum of the rest of the city, punctuated by the occasional honk of a car horn. Across the pond, another couple was perched on the bridge, but otherwise it was just the two of them here in this quiet oasis, where Ellie could hear her own heart beating, could feel the pulse in Graham’s hand, could picture what would happen if she were to tip her head back right now to look up at him.

But she didn’t.

Instead, she cleared her throat. “Look, I know it’s not fair to you—”

“Ellie...”

“It’s not who you are, all that craziness. I get it. But it *is* your life,” she continued, her head still bowed. “And the hardest part isn’t the travel or the cameras or the press, you know? It’s the rest of it. The waiting and worrying and wondering. I don’t want that, and I know it’s ridiculous for someone like me to be saying that to someone like you, but I’m just not sure I could—”

“Ellie,” he said again, and this time, he stooped so that she was forced to look at him, and something in his eyes stopped her short. “I’m not asking

you for anything.”

She stiffened. “I know.”

“I know how hard that would be,” he said. “How unrealistic.”

“This isn’t a movie,” she reminded him—reminded herself—and he gave her a weak smile.

“I know that too,” he said. “I just wanted to...”

“What?”

He gave her hand a squeeze, just the smallest bit of pressure in the center of her palm, but Ellie felt it travel up her arm like an electric current. She hadn’t realized how cold she was, but now she started to shake, and Graham dropped her hand, taking off his jacket and swinging it over her shoulders.

When she pulled her arms through, the sleeves were much too long, and without saying anything, he began to roll them up for her, one at a time, which for some reason made her feel like crying.

“It was real,” she said, her voice thick. “Wasn’t it?”

He looked up at her. “What was?”

“Us,” she said. “Last summer.”

“Yeah,” he said, stepping back again. “It was.”

Ellie had spent so much time trying to convince herself that it wasn’t, that he was just a movie star who came to town and that she was just the sucker who fell for him. But standing here now, his coat hanging from her shoulders, her hands poking out of the carefully rolled sleeves, she knew for sure that she’d been wrong.

“I want to be happy again,” she said quietly. “I want that for both of us.”

Graham smiled. “I do too.”

“And I want...”

He raised his eyebrows, waiting.

“I want you to be more careful when you drive.”

“I told you, I *am* careful—” he began, but she cut him off.

“And there are so many things I always wish I could tell you. I want to be able to write to you and not worry about what it means. I just want to know you’re out there.”

Graham nodded. “I’d like that.”

“I want to feel the way I did last summer,” Ellie said, tipping her head back to look at the purple sky. “And I want to be big and brave and bold.”

He laughed. “You already are. You’re the boldest person I know.”

“I’m not,” she said, shaking her head.

“Remember when we stole the boat?”

“That was your idea. I never would’ve done it alone.”

“Yeah, but it was because you wanted to find your dad. That was *your* idea. And that was one of the bravest things I’ve ever seen.”

Ellie sat back down on the bench, feeling suddenly drained. “Not that it did much good.”

“What about the letters?” Graham said, joining her there, sitting closer this time, so that their arms brushed against each other. “Did you ever send them?”

“No,” Ellie said miserably.

“Not any?”

“There’s a whole stack of them in my sock drawer,” she said, and he bumped his knee against hers.

“You’ll get there.”

“I hope so,” she said, leaning her head on his shoulder without even thinking about it. Above them, a helicopter was moving across the sky, and they could hear the distant thrum. “I want to take more chances,” she said. “And not be so afraid.”

“I want that too,” he said. “I want to remember why I love what I do, and what makes me happy, and try to forget about all the other stuff.”

“What else?”

“I want to know you’re out there too.”

She nodded into his shoulder. “I’m right here.”

“I want to be challenged. And I want to speak up more. And I want to learn to say no to wearing pants that are way too tight.”

Ellie laughed. “I think that’s probably a good idea.”

“And I want to spend more time at home.”

“I want to be able to stand in front of a room full of people and actually be able to say the thing I want to say,” she told him.

“And I want to be able to stand in front of just one person and say the thing I want to say.”

She lifted her head. “Graham...”

But he only slid an arm around her shoulders and pulled her into him again. “Your turn.”

“I want,” she said, “to be the kind of person who says yes more often.”

“That’s a good one.”

“And I want us to be happy again.”

“You already said that.”

“Yeah,” she said, “but I figure it’s worth repeating.”

“Well, it must be working,” he said, tightening his arms around her. “I don’t know about you, but I feel about a million times happier already.”

## Fourteen

Not long after that, they emerged from the park. Ellie's arm was linked through Graham's, and they were leaning into each other like the two sides of a pup tent. She was still wearing his jacket, and he'd put the Yankees cap on again, and when they spilled out onto Fifty-Ninth Street, they became just two more in a sea of people, falling into step alongside the tourists with cameras and the men in suits and the women hailing taxis, blending in with the lights and the traffic and the noise.

"I wish we didn't have to go back," Graham muttered as they crossed the street, and she knew he was talking about more than just the premiere. She'd been thinking the exact same thing, but she tilted her head up to look at him with an overly cheerful expression.

"Game face," she said with a little grin.

He laughed. "I've created a monster."

"Not yet," she said. "I still need a little practice."

Graham stopped abruptly. They were standing in front of the Plaza Hotel, beside a huge fountain with several tiers and a metal sculpture of a woman perched on top. Nearby, a man was playing a song on the guitar that Ellie didn't recognize, a jangly tune that rose and fell in the purple dark.

"You're right," he said, his eyes roving the little square. "You want to be bolder, right?"

She narrowed her eyes at him, not sure where this was heading. "Yeah."

"So let's see it."

"What?"

"Your game face."

"Here?"

He nodded. "This is as good a place as any, right?"

"I'm not doing that—"

"Bigger, braver, bolder," he reminded her. "Remember, it's not about the

face. It's just about getting psyched up to do something."

She stared at him, suddenly nervous. "Well, what am I supposed to do?"

"Anything," he said, turning to hop up onto the stone ledge of the fountain. He stood there, grinning down at her in his shirtsleeves and too-tight pants, and Ellie couldn't help laughing.

"You're crazy."

He reached out to her, and Ellie shrugged the sleeves of his jacket back to take his hand, stepping up there with him. Behind them, the water bubbled in the fountain and the lights of the Plaza were moonlike and glowing. On the sidewalk, people continued to hurry down Fifth Avenue, paying no attention to the couple on the ledge. With a little frown, Ellie turned to face Graham.

"What now?" she asked, and he shrugged.

"You could tap-dance," he suggested, doing a little jig right there on the fountain.

She shook her head.

"Sing?" he asked, pointing to the guy with the guitar.

"You must be joking."

"Fine," he said. "Shout?"

"This is stupid—"

"It's not," he said, grabbing her shoulders. "You said you wanted to take more chances. Well, now's the time to get started."

"Everyone will look."

"This is Manhattan," he said. "Nobody cares. Trust me."

Ellie took a deep breath, turning to face the street. She hated that her heart was pounding even now, when this was nothing more than a silly game, when it didn't mean anything. *Nobody's looking*, she reminded herself. *Nobody cares*.

Except Graham.

She glanced at him sideways. "What would I even say?"

"Say 'I heart NY,'" he suggested, and she rolled her eyes. He shrugged, then spread his arms wide. "Fine, then... 'I'm the king of the world!'"

He yelled this last part, and she burst out laughing as an elderly man on a nearby bench looked over at them with a frown.

Graham's cheeks were flushed, and his eyes were dancing. "Too much movie fluff?"

“Just a little.”

“Okay,” he said, thinking. “Then how about ‘I love Graham Larkin!’”

He half shouted this himself, and a group of girls who were cutting across the plaza glanced at him briefly before continuing on their way.

But Ellie just stared at him.

She knew how he meant it.

He meant it the way most people love him: like a fan, like a guy on a movie poster, like the figure on the red carpet.

He meant it as a joke.

But something about the words—even spoken as they were, full of humor and self-awareness and a little bit of scorn—tugged at something inside Ellie.

She was suddenly aware of how close they were, of the rush of water just behind them, a sound like the waves that night in Henley, when they’d huddled together above the wild and foamy ocean, and Graham had looked at her the same way he was looking at her now, his eyes burning a hole right through her.

“I love Graham Larkin,” she said quietly, her voice full of emotion, and there was a flicker of surprise on his face, and then his expression softened.

“You’re supposed to shout it,” he said, smiling as she tugged on the brim of the cap, forcing him to lower his face, bringing him closer and closer until their lips met. And even though they were in the middle of one of the biggest cities in the world, lost in a sea of concrete and wood and metal, she could almost swear he tasted like the ocean.

## Fifteen

As they approached the theater, Ellie dropped Graham's hand.

They were greeted by an enormous poster for the movie, which was propped on an easel just inside the entrance. She'd missed it earlier because of the crowds, but now it stared down at them, huge and shiny and jarring: a nearly life-size picture of Graham, his mouth only inches away from Olivia's.

Ellie stared at it, and Graham stared at her.

"No," he said when she finally turned to him. "Don't do that."

"What?"

"Don't look at me like that."

Ellie put a reassuring hand on his arm. "I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't mean to...I know you're not that guy."

"Exactly," he said with a little nod. "I'm the guy who tap-danced on the edge of a fountain."

"And whose best friend is a pig?"

"And who has a ketchup stain on his handkerchief," he said, looking down at his suit with a frown, then rotating the handkerchief to hide the stain.

Ellie laughed. "And who carries a handkerchief."

"See?" he said, pointing at the poster. "I'm not nearly as romantic in real life."

"Well," she said, reaching for his hand, "maybe a little."

There was a security guard at the door to the lower lobby, but he seemed to recognize Graham immediately and stood back to let them pass without a word. Everyone else was still upstairs.

"I guess we should..." Ellie began, but then she saw a pair of legs appear on the escalator, and then a tie, and then the face of Harry Fenton, who bent to peer down at them with a look of relief.

“There you are,” he said, blinking fast as he stepped off the escalator. “Hi.”

“Hey,” Graham said, holding on tighter when Ellie tried to let go of his hand. “We were just on our way back up.”

“Well, good,” Harry said, glancing over at Ellie with a hint of a smile. “Enjoy the movie?”

“I did,” she said with a nod. “It was very...romantic.”

Harry looked to Graham. “They’re just about ready.”

“Be up in a minute,” Graham said in a way that managed to be polite without leaving room for argument, and Harry gave a weary sigh before walking over to the other escalator and stepping on.

“It was good to see you again, Ellie,” he said, already on his way up. “Hope it won’t be the last time.”

“Thanks for the tickets,” she called, but he was already gone.

When she turned back to Graham, he was watching her with an unreadable expression. Without saying anything, she slipped the dark jacket from her shoulders, holding it out for him. He took it, and for a moment both of them held on to it, their hands only inches apart, gripping the jacket as if it were something more binding than just fabric.

But then Ellie let go, and Graham sighed as he swung it over his shoulders again.

“I should go up there,” she told him, her eyes drifting to the escalator. “My friends are probably still in the theater. And you’ve got some questions to answer.”

“I guess I do,” he said, looking over her shoulder at the two theater employees, who were whispering to each other. This part of the lobby was glassed in on all sides, and suddenly, she could tell, he felt exposed. He grabbed her hand and walked her over to the dark wedge of space beneath one of the escalators, where they stood in the red glow of an emergency-exit light.

“I hate that we have to do this again,” she said, a gnawing feeling in her stomach that felt too familiar already.

“Yeah, but it’s different this time.”

“Is it?”

He tucked a piece of hair behind her ear. “We’ll see each other again.”

“We said that last time.”

“And here we are,” he said with a grin.

“That was just luck.”

He wiggled his eyebrows. “Or fate.”

“We’ll write,” she said, because she wasn’t sure she wanted to depend on fate again for something as important as this.

“We will,” he agreed, wrapping his arms around her.

“I wish I could see you again later. How long are you here?”

“Well, there’s an after-party,” he said, leaning back to look at her. “But I’m only stopping by for pictures, and then I’ve gotta fly to Manila.”

“Oh, that’s too bad,” she said, letting her head fall against his chest again. “I’m going to straight to Paris after this.”

He laughed. “*Bon voyage.*”

“*Sayonara.*”

“Happy trails.”

Upstairs, they could hear the sound of applause, a sign that the movie had come to an end and the credits were now rolling.

But still, it took them a long time to let go of each other.

When he finally pulled back, Graham’s eyes were rimmed with red. “I guess I’d better go.”

“Game face,” she told him, trying her best to imitate his, and he shook his head with a faint smile.

“Pathetic,” he said, taking her hand, and together, they walked around to the escalator, where they stood watching the metal steps at the bottom appear one after another like magic. After a moment, Graham leaned forward to kiss her one more time, and then he gave a helpless shrug before stepping on.

Ellie stood alone at the bottom, watching him get farther and farther away, waiting to see if he’d turn back to look at her once more, the way it always happens in the movies. But he didn’t.

## Sixteen

Ellie could hear the applause when the panel was introduced: the actors and director, the writers and producers. Still, she didn't go in. There was no point in torturing herself by watching him from afar. Her friends would find her out here when it was over.

The lobby was nearly empty, with just the girl behind the concession stand and a few people in line for the bathroom. There was a red velvet banquette beneath the huge chandelier, and she sat there for a while, watching the popcorn rise in the glass box, watching the security guard shift from foot to foot outside the door, watching two women who even she could tell must be publicists whispering furiously as they read something on their phones.

Every now and then, someone would walk out of the theater, and the door would open, the amplified voices of the panel drifting out. At one point, Ellie heard the sound of Graham's laughter, and her leaden heart sank lower in her chest.

Finally her curiosity got the best of her, and she walked over uncertainly, pulling the door open just enough to slip through, then inching slowly along the dark corridor until she was standing at the very back of the aisle.

Onstage, a row of eight people sat on stools, and just beside them was a man at a podium. The enormous white screen above showed a close-up of the whole panel, and Ellie saw that Graham was in the middle, right between Mick and Olivia, his posture as casual and relaxed as if he were simply sitting in his kitchen at home, rather than on display before a thousand people.

She glanced to the right, where she could see the backs of her friends' heads, and beside them the empty seat where she was supposed to be. But she stayed where she was, leaning against the wall, tucked back where nobody could see her.

Except Graham.

Even from a distance, even with a whole theater full of people between them, she saw him notice her there, saw his attention shift in her direction, and her whole body felt alive with it, tingling beneath that gaze of his. She stood up a little straighter, lifting her chin and staring right back at him.

“Any others?” asked the moderator, who was standing behind the podium. Dozens of hands shot up around the theater, and Ellie realized that this must be the audience portion of the question-and-answer period. In each aisle, there were a few ushers holding portable microphones, ready to run them over to whoever might be chosen.

But before the moderator could pick anyone, Graham raised his own microphone.

“Actually,” he said, his voice bouncing around the cavernous space, “I see someone in the back by the exits there.”

The whole crowd seemed to turn as one, swiveling in their seats to see who he was pointing at, and there was a moment of confusion when they couldn’t spot any raised hands.

“Where are you...?” said the moderator, a hand shading his eyes as he squinted out over the crowd. A bewildered usher had run halfway up the aisle and stood panting a little as he scanned the faces in the back.

“Yeah,” Graham said, the word echoing. “There by the exit.”

It took Ellie a moment to realize he was talking about her, and when she did, her face went prickly with heat. She started to take a step backward, but the usher had already zeroed in on her and was moving fast in her direction.

She glared across all that space at Graham, knowing he was too far away to see the look on her face. But all the lovely thoughts she’d been thinking about him—all the joy she’d been feeling over their unexpected reunion—drained right out of her.

She was going to kill him.

“Oh, yes,” the moderator was saying as the audience twisted in their seats to look at the red-faced girl in the back whom Graham Larkin had singled out. “Go ahead, then.”

The usher—a pale, bespectacled guy who couldn’t have been much older than Ellie—thrust the microphone at her so hard it made a little popping sound when it hit her in the stomach, and she fumbled it for a second before getting a good grip.

For a moment, everything stood still. She peered out across the enormous theater, the microphone slipping a little in her sweaty hand, and saw Lauren and Kara and Sprague watching her with baffled expressions, staring as if they didn't really know her—which was true. They *didn't* know her. Not really.

She was someone who had fallen in love with a movie star, even though it was a crazy thing to do.

She was someone who'd been determined to make it to Harvard, even though the odds were against her.

She was someone who stole a boat once, who took leaps, who was big and brave and bold, or who was at least getting closer.

She was someone who said *yes*.

As the silence lengthened, the moderator cleared his throat, then prompted her again: "Did you have a question?"

This time, Ellie lifted her eyes to the screen, half expecting to see Graham laughing. But instead, to her surprise, he scowled at her.

And then she knew.

He was giving her a chance to be that person.

As she watched, he mouthed two words, which were impossible to make out. But it didn't matter. She knew what he was trying to say: *game face*.

When he saw that she understood, his face rearranged itself into a grin, and even from that far away, there was something so contagious about it, so genuine, that without quite meaning to, Ellie found herself smiling too.

The moderator asked her once more: "Is there anything you want to say?"

And this time, she lifted the microphone, her eyes still on Graham.

"Yes," she said.

# Epilogue

From: GDL824@yahoo.com  
Sent: Friday, September 26, 2014 11:11 PM  
To: EONeill22@hotmail.com  
Subject: what happy looks like to me

So, I have a confession to make. I was lying before...

---

From: EONeill22@hotmail.com  
Sent: Friday, September 26, 2014 11:12 PM  
To: GDL824@yahoo.com  
Subject: re: what happy looks like to me

You don't say!

---

From: GDL824@yahoo.com  
Sent: Friday, September 26, 2014 11:13 PM  
To: EONeill22@hotmail.com  
Subject: re: what happy looks like to me

Well, you sort of put me on the spot there.

---

From: EONeill22@hotmail.com  
Sent: Friday, September 26, 2014 11:15 PM  
To: GDL824@yahoo.com  
Subject: re: what happy looks like to me

Only because you put me on the spot first.

---

From: GDL824@yahoo.com  
Sent: Friday, September 26, 2014 11:16 PM  
To: EONeill22@hotmail.com  
Subject: re: what happy looks like to me

And look what happened: game face. Boom.

---

From: EONeill22@hotmail.com  
Sent: Friday, September 26, 2014 11:17 PM  
To: GDL824@yahoo.com  
Subject: re: what happy looks like to me

So are you trying to tell me that happiness *isn't* making a great movie with a great cast?  
I'm shocked!

---

From: GDL824@yahoo.com  
Sent: Friday, September 26, 2014 11:18 PM  
To: EONeill22@hotmail.com  
Subject: re: what happy looks like to me

Well, I didn't want to let the whole world in on the secret...

---

From: EONeill22@hotmail.com  
Sent: Friday, September 26, 2014 11:20 PM  
To: GDL824@yahoo.com  
Subject: re: what happy looks like to me

What secret?

---

From: GDL824@yahoo.com  
Sent: Friday, September 26, 2014 11:21 PM  
To: EONeill22@hotmail.com  
Subject: re: what happy looks like to me

Of what happy really looks like to me.

---

From: EONeill22@hotmail.com  
Sent: Friday, September 26, 2014 11:22 PM  
To: GDL824@yahoo.com  
Subject: re: what happy looks like to me

Which is?

---

From: GDL824@yahoo.com  
Sent: Friday, September 26, 2014 11:24 PM  
To: EONeill22@hotmail.com  
Subject: re: what happy looks like to me

This: 😊

---

From: EONeill22@hotmail.com  
Sent: Friday, September 26, 2014 11:25 PM  
To: GDL824@yahoo.com  
Subject: re: what happy looks like to me

Very funny. What does it really look like?

---

From: GDL824@yahoo.com  
Sent: Friday, September 26, 2014 11:26 PM  
To: EONeill22@hotmail.com  
Subject: re: what happy looks like to me

Isn't it obvious?

---

From: EONeill22@hotmail.com  
Sent: Friday, September 26, 2014 11:27 PM  
To: GDL824@yahoo.com  
Subject: re: what happy looks like to me

Not especially...

---

From: GDL824@yahoo.com  
Sent: Friday, September 26, 2014 11:28 PM  
To: EONeill22@hotmail.com  
Subject: re: what happy looks like to me

You. It looks like you.

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*This Is What Happy Looks Like*  
*The Statistical Probability of Love at First Sight*  
*The Storm Makers*  
*You Are Here*  
*The Comeback Season*

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# PROLOGUE

When Aidan opens the door, Clare rises onto her tiptoes to kiss him, and for a moment, it feels like any other night.

“Hi,” she says, once she’s stepped back again, and he smiles.

“Hi.”

They stare at each other for a few long seconds, neither quite sure how to begin.

“So,” Clare says eventually.

Aidan attempts a smile. “So.”

“I guess this is it.”

He nods. “I guess it is.”

“The last night,” she says, and he tilts his head at her.

“You know it doesn’t have to be.”

“Aidan . . .”

“I know, I know,” he says, holding up his hands. “But you can’t really blame me, right? I’ve still got a little bit of time to change your mind.”

“Only twelve hours,” she says, glancing at her watch. “I can’t believe that’s all we have left.”

“And that’s only if we don’t sleep.”

“We’re definitely not wasting any time on sleep,” she tells him, pulling a folded piece of notebook paper from the pocket of her dress. “We have way too much to do.”

Aidan raises an eyebrow. “That’d better not be a list of reasons why we should break up. . . .”

“It’s not,” she says as she hands it over to him, watching as he scans the page with a bemused expression. “I just figured maybe we could use a plan.”

“And this is it?”

She nods. “This is it.”

“Okay,” he says, taking a deep breath. “Then I guess we should get going.”

Together, they start to walk in the direction of the car, but halfway there, Clare stops short, suddenly and unaccountably nervous, her heart drumming hard in her chest. She looks over at Aidan with slightly panicked eyes. “This is kind of crazy, isn’t it?”

“What?” he asks.

“That we leave tomorrow,” she says, her voice rising a little. “That after all this time, we only have twelve hours left. I mean . . . we’re finally here, you know? At the end of the road.”

“Or,” he reminds her, “the beginning.”

Clare doesn’t say anything; she wants desperately to believe him, but standing here on the edge of something so big, it seems impossible.

“Trust me,” Aidan says, reaching for her hand. “A lot can happen in twelve hours.”

# STOP # 1

The High School

6:24 PM

In the car, Aidan pauses before turning the key in the ignition, and for a brief second, Clare lets herself imagine that they're on their way out to dinner or a movie, or anywhere, really, even just the kind of aimless, purposeless drive that's been the only thing on the agenda so many times before. Their nights always seem to begin in this way: the two of them sitting in Aidan's dusty Volvo, trying to decide what to do.

But tonight is different.

It's not a beginning at all. Tonight is an ending.

Aidan's hand is still hovering over the keys, and Clare glances down at the piece of notebook paper on her lap. During the short walk over to the Gallaghers' house—a walk she's made about a thousand times in the past two years—she folded and refolded the page so many times that it's already soft and wrinkled.

“Maybe we should just take off or something,” Aidan says, looking at her sideways. “Just keep driving till we hit Canada.”

“Canada, huh?” Clare says, raising her eyebrows. “Are we going on the lam?”

He shrugs. “Fine. Maybe just Wisconsin, then.”

She reaches over, resting a hand on the back of his neck, where his reddish hair is newly trimmed, cut close in a way that makes him look older somehow. “I'm leaving first thing in the morning,” she says gently. “The

car's already packed. And your flight's at noon."

"I know," he says, but he won't look at her. His eyes are fixed on the closed door of the garage. "That's my point. Let's skip it all."

"College?" she says with a smile, letting her hand drop.

"Yeah," he says, nodding now. "Who needs it? Let's run away together instead. Just for a year or so. We'll start a new life. In the country. Or better yet, a deserted island."

"You *would* look nice in a hula skirt."

"I'm serious," he says, though she knows he's not. He's just desperate and sad, nervous and excited, wildly unsure of everything as they barrel toward the invisible line that will separate their lives into a before and an after. Same as her.

"Aidan," she says quietly, and this time, his eyes find hers. "This is happening. Tomorrow. No matter what."

"I know," he admits.

"Which is why we have to figure out what to do about it."

"Right, but—"

"Nope," she says, cutting him off. She holds up the piece of paper. "No more talking. We've been talking all summer, and it's gotten us nowhere. We've just been going around in circles: Stay together, break up, stay together, break up. . . ."

"Stay together," Aidan finishes, grinning a little.

Clare laughs. "The point is that we're hopeless. So no more talking. For now, let's just drive, okay?"

He leans forward, reaching for the keys, and then turns over the engine.

"Okay," he says.

Their first stop isn't far away, and they drive in silence, all the familiar sights of the town slipping by outside the window: the bridge over the ravine, the road lined with pine trees, the gazebo in the park. Clare tries to absorb each one of them as they whip past, because by the time she returns at Thanksgiving, she knows she might be someone entirely different, and she suspects that—because of that—all this might look different, too. And something about that scares her. So one by one, she tries to pin them in place: each tree, each road, each house.

This is how it all started this morning, when she woke up in a panic about how many goodbyes she still had to say. Not just the people: Aidan,

of course; and her best friend, Stella; Aidan's sister, Riley; and his pal, Scotty; plus the handful of their other friends who are still around.

But there was also the town itself. All the landmarks that had been the background to her childhood. She couldn't leave without going to the village green one more time, or getting one last slice of pizza at their favorite spot. She couldn't possibly take off without one more trip to the beach, one final party, one last drive past the high school.

And so she made a list. But it didn't take long for her to realize that most of the things that meant something to her were inextricably tied to Aidan. This place was a ghost town of sorts, littered with milestones and memories from their nearly two-year relationship.

So it had turned into something else, this night: a nostalgia tour, a journey into the past, a walk down memory lane. It would be a way for her to say goodbye to this town where she'd lived her whole life, and maybe—somehow—to Aidan, too.

She can't help shivering a little at the thought of this, and she presses the button on the car door, closing her window.

Aidan glances over. "Too windy?" he asks, rolling up his own window, and she nods. But it's more than that. It's the same icy dread that fills her each time she starts to imagine it; not just the goodbye, but everything that's to come afterward: the hurt that will surely trail them to opposite coasts, so strong that she can already feel it even now, when he's only inches away.

The truth is, she's still waiting for her heart to get on board with the decision her head has made. But she's running out of time.

When they reach the long drive leading up to the high school, Aidan frowns. "So tell me," he says as they pull up to the front of the sprawling building and into one of the empty parking spots. "Why exactly are we here?"

It's early evening on a Friday toward the end of August, and the school sits hushed and empty. Though she spent four years here, Clare's already having trouble remembering the feel of the place when it's full of students, everyone spilling out the wooden doors and onto the front lawn. It's only been two months, but somehow, all that seems like a very long time ago.

"Because," she says, turning to Aidan, "it's the first stop on the list."

"I know *that*," he says. "But how come?"

"It's where we met," she explains as she gets out of the car. "And the

idea is to start at the beginning.”

“So this is a *chronological* scavenger hunt, then.”

“It’s not a scavenger hunt at all. Think of it more like a refresher course.”

“A refresher course in what?”

She smiles at him over the top of the car. “Us.”

“So kind of like our greatest hits,” he says, twirling the keys on his finger as he walks around to her, and for a moment, it’s like none of the rest of it happened. Just now, just for this second, he’s not the person she knows best in the world, but the new kid again, the one who’d shown up on the very first day of junior year, all red hair and freckles and ridiculous height, appearing out of nowhere and turning her inside out.

The slanted light is at his back, forcing Clare to squint as she studies him for a few long seconds. “Did I ever tell you,” she says, “that I used to be late to English every single day, just so I could bump into you on your way to Pre-calc?”

“Well, now I feel kind of bad,” Aidan says, his eyes creasing at the corners. “If I’d known *that*, I would’ve tried to be more punctual.”

“It wouldn’t have mattered,” she says, remembering the way he used to come loping around the corner, his books tucked under his arm like a football, always missing the bell, at first because he’d get lost, and later because he’d always manage to lose track of time. “I would’ve waited all day. I probably would’ve waited forever.”

She’s not serious, of course, but there’s something wistful in his smile.

“Yeah?” he says.

She shrugs. “Yeah.”

“I wish you still would,” he says, though not spitefully; he says it quietly, evenly, a simple truth, an earnest request.

But it still leaves a mark.

“You have to stop doing that,” Clare says. “Stop being the romantic one.”

Aidan looks surprised. “What?”

“It’s not fair,” she says. “I hate that you get to be the good guy here. It’s not like I *want* to break up with you. It kills me just thinking about it, but I’m trying to be practical. Starting tomorrow, we’re gonna be a million miles away from each other, and it doesn’t make sense to do this any other way. So you have to stop.”

“Stop . . . being romantic?” Aidan asks, looking amused.

“Yes.”

“Have you ever thought that maybe you need to stop being so practical?” Clare sighs. “One of us has to be.”

“The one who planned a romantic scavenger hunt for our last night?” he says, looping an arm around her shoulders and giving her a little squeeze.

She rolls her eyes. “It’s not a scavenger hunt.”

“Well, whatever it is, I think it’s suspiciously romantic for someone so annoyingly practical,” he says, drawing her closer. Her head only comes up to his chest, so she has to tip her chin up to look at him. When she does, he leans down to kiss her, and even though they’ve kissed a thousand times before—have kissed, even, in this very parking lot—it still makes her stomach go wobbly, and she’s seized by a sudden worry over how few of these they have left.

Together, they walk up the front steps of the school, and Clare tugs on the handle of the big wooden door, but it refuses to budge. She knocks a few times, in case there might be a security guard inside, but nobody answers.

“It’s still a couple weeks till classes start,” Aidan points out. “I’m sure nobody’s here on a Friday night.”

“I thought maybe there’d be summer school or something. . . .”

“Let’s just skip to whatever’s next.”

Clare shakes her head, not sure how to explain that this is the whole point of the night. To fit two whole years into one final evening; to dump all the pieces out of the box and then put them back together again in the right order so that they can see the whole thing spread out before them.

And so that they can say goodbye.

But to do that, they need to start at the beginning.

“No,” she says, looking up at the stone building. “There has to be a way in. It’s the first place we saw each other. . . .”

Aidan smiles. “Mr. Coady’s Earth Science class.”

“Exactly,” she says. “Not that you remember.”

“Of course I do.”

“You do not. At least not that first day.”

“Oh, come on,” Aidan says, laughing. “How could anyone not remember *you*?”

“Impossible,” she agrees, though she knows that’s not true. Clare’s been called a lot of things—smart and funny, driven and talented—but memorable certainly isn’t one of them. The most important things about her—the ones she’s most proud of—are apparent only once you get to know her. At first glance, she’s almost entirely unremarkable: brown hair and brown eyes, average height and ordinary looks. Mostly, she just blends in, which has always been fine with her: You could do a lot worse in high school. But that meant that before Aidan, no boy had ever really noticed her before.

That first day, he’d sat down at the desk right behind hers. The teacher was handing out geodes to pass around the room, and when it was her turn with one of them, Clare cupped it in her hands. It looked like a regular old rock on the outside, but inside, it was full of glittering purple crystals. When she turned to pass it to the new kid, he kept his eyes on the stone. But later—after he’d finally noticed her, after they’d both realized that this was the start of something—she would come back to that moment again and again. Because that’s how she felt when she was with him—like she’d been a rock her whole life, ordinary and dull, and it wasn’t until she met him that something cracked open inside her, and just like that, she began to shine.

“We have to get inside,” she says now, feeling oddly desperate.

Aidan gives her a strange look. “Does it really matter?”

“Yes,” she says, rattling the door handle once more, though it’s clearly useless. “We have to start this thing right.”

She knows he doesn’t understand why this is so important to her, and she’s not sure she could tell him even if she tried. It’s just that the clock is ticking down fast toward tomorrow, when everything will change. And this—this plan for their last night together—was supposed to be the one thing she could control.

All summer, Clare has been poring over class descriptions and campus maps and messages from her new roommate, trying to get a clearer picture of what her life will soon look like. But as much as she’s read, as much as she’s tried to find out, it’s impossible to imagine the details. And it’s the not knowing that’s the hardest part.

There’s so much of it, too. She doesn’t know whether she’ll be able to balance Intro to Psychology with History of Japan, or whether she’ll find someone to sit with in the dining hall during those first few crucial days,

when loose collections of strangers start to solidify into groups of friends like hardening cement.

She doesn't know whether she'll get along with her roommate, a girl from New York City named Beatrice St. James, who seems to only want to talk about what bands she's been seeing this summer, and who—Clare suspects—will end up wallpapering their room with concert posters.

She doesn't know whether it's a mistake to leave her winter coat behind until Thanksgiving break, whether she'll find it unbearable to share a bathroom with twenty other people, whether girls from the East Coast will dress differently than the girls here in Chicago. She doesn't know whether she'll stand out or blend in, sink or swim, feel homesick or independent, happy or miserable.

And mostly, she doesn't know if she'll be able to survive all this without having Aidan on the other end of the phone.

Now she steps back from the wooden doors of the school with a defeated sigh.

"This," she admits, "is not a great start."

Aidan shrugs. "Who cares? I mean, don't you think this is close enough?"

"Close enough isn't good enough."

"Of *course* not," he says, rolling his eyes, but he follows her anyway as she makes her way along the building, past the staff parking lot and the auditorium and the whole east wing until they loop around to the back. Each time they pass another door, one of them jogs over to try it, but they're all locked, every single one of them.

Finally, just behind the school, they stand at the ground-floor window of Mr. Coady's classroom, their hands cupped against the glass as they peer inside. The room is dark and quiet, the chalkboard wiped clean, the black tables coated in a thin layer of dust, the rocks and other samples stacked neatly in cases along the opposite wall.

"It looks different," Aidan says. "Doesn't it?"

Beside him, Clare nods. "It almost seems like it's smaller or something."

"That must be because we're such big-time college students now," Aidan says with a grin, and they both step back again. He puts a hand on her shoulder. "I'm sorry we couldn't get inside."

She doesn't answer him; instead, she lifts her gaze to the top of the

enormous window, then runs her fingers along the edges before rapping on the glass.

“I wonder if—” she begins, but Aidan cuts her off.

“No way,” he says. “Don’t even say it.”

“I wonder if we could break in somehow,” she says, ignoring him.

“Are you kidding?”

She blinks at him. “Not entirely.”

“I don’t think this is exactly the right time for either of us to get arrested,” he says, the color rising in his cheeks, as it always does when he gets frustrated with her. “I have a feeling UCLA might frown upon that sort of thing, and I don’t need to give my dad another excuse to be disappointed in me. Not when I’m just about out of here.”

“Yeah, but—”

He holds up a hand, stopping her before she can continue. “I bet Dartmouth wouldn’t be too thrilled about it, either,” he reminds her, then gestures at the window. “Besides, we’re right here. I realize the phrase ‘close enough’ isn’t in your vocabulary, but why is this so important to you?”

“Because,” she says, holding out the piece of paper, which is now balled up in her hand, “because this is our last night. And it’s supposed to be perfect. And if we can’t even get this right . . .”

Aidan’s face softens. “This isn’t a metaphor,” he says. “If we don’t check off everything on this list, all that means is we’re flexible. We can roll with the punches. And that’s a good thing, you know?”

“You’re right,” she says, swallowing hard. “I know you’re right.”

But still, she feels inexplicably sad. Because of course Aidan would think that. He wants desperately for everything to work out between them. If he walked over a patch of sidewalk right now that read CLARE AND AIDAN SHOULD ABSOLUTELY BREAK UP TONIGHT in brightly colored chalk, he’d still manage to somehow explain it away, to turn it around and make it into something positive.

Maybe the world isn’t full of signs so much as it’s full of people trying to use whatever evidence they can find to convince themselves of what they hope to be true.

For Clare, it seems pretty clear that a start like this doesn’t bode well,

and she feels a small glimmer of satisfaction at this: the prospect that she's been right all along, and that now, even the universe agrees that the only logical thing to do is part ways with Aidan.

But this is followed by a powerful wave of grief over the thought of actually having to do this, and she inches closer to him, feeling a little unsteady.

Aidan circles his arms around her automatically, and they stand there like that for a moment. In the distance, a car engine roars to life, and a few birds cry out overhead. Around them, the sky is fading from blue to gray, the edges going blurry, and Clare presses her cheek against the soft cotton of Aidan's shirt.

"Has anyone ever suggested that you might have some control issues?" he says with a smile, stepping back again. He takes the paper gently from her hand and smooths it out again. "Looks like this rules out number eight, too."

"The fall formal," she says with a nod. "Our first dance."

"Right," he says. "No chance of getting into the gym, either. Too bad I'm not allowed to be romantic, or else I'd make you dance with me right here."

"That's okay," she says. "I've already seen your moves."

"Not all of them. But don't worry. The night is still young. I'm saving my best stuff for later."

"I can't wait," she tells him, realizing just how much she means it.

Whatever happens later, they still have the rest of tonight.

And maybe that will be enough.

She links her arm with his, leaning into him as they start to walk back to the car. A breeze picks up, and for the first time Clare notices there's a bite to it: an early hint of autumn. Normally, she loves this time of year, and for weeks now, whenever she's told someone about Dartmouth, they've brought up the fall foliage in New Hampshire: the brilliant reds and yellows and oranges spread out over the campus and beyond. Clare has no doubt she'll find it enchanting once she gets there. But right now, she doesn't want to think about the coming of a new season. She just wants to live in this one for as long as she possibly can.

They're nearly to the car when she stops short.

"Shoot," she says, glancing back over her shoulder. "I meant to get a souvenir."

“So this is a scavenger hunt.”

“I just thought it might be nice. You know, to have something from each place we stop tonight.”

Aidan tilts his head at her. “You sure this wasn’t just an elaborate plan to steal all those precious gemstones from the Earth Science classroom?”

“I think precious might be overstating it,” she says. “But no.”

“Okay, then,” he says, stooping to grab an ordinary-looking rock from the ground at his feet. It’s slate gray and rounded at the edges, and he rubs at it with the end of his plaid shirt before handing it over with a solemn look.

“Here,” he says, and Clare feels the weight of it in her palm. She runs her thumb over the smooth surface, thinking back to that first day she’d seen him in class, the way his face had lit up when he turned over the rock to find all those purple crystals, like it was a fortune cookie or an Easter egg, the best kind of surprise.

“By my authority,” Aidan is saying now, “as a B-plus student in Mr. Coady’s junior year Earth Science class, I’m pleased to inform you that this little gem is now officially considered precious.”

And here’s the amazing thing: Now it was.

# Contents

[Cover](#)

[Title page](#)

[Welcome](#)

[One](#)

[Two](#)

[Three](#)

[Four](#)

[Five](#)

[Six](#)

[Seven](#)

[Eight](#)

[Nine](#)

[Ten](#)

[Eleven](#)

[Twelve](#)

[Thirteen](#)

[Fourteen](#)

[Fifteen](#)

[Sixteen](#)

[Epilogue](#)

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