



## Isla and the Happily Ever After

By Stephanie Perkins

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

#### **A *New York Times* bestseller!**

"Stephanie Perkins is the Jane Austen of our generation. Her stories ache, soothe, and leave you breathless with joy; there's true magic in these pages — it's an experience you won't soon forget." —Tehereh Mafi, author of the bestselling *Shatter Me* series.

"Fans of literary heart flutters will love it." —*Booklist*

"Realistic characters, spot-on dialogue, and a **truly delightful** romance make for a novel that will delight the author's fans and win her legions of new ones." —*School Library Journal*, **starred review**

"Engaging teen characters with page-turning love lives offer ample vicarious pleasures. **A satisfying dose of first love's physical and emotional thrall.**" —*Kirkus Reviews*

"Dazzling and full of raw emotion...**With a smooth plot, colorful characters and witty dialogue**, Perkins **further establishes herself as an expert writer** whose career is sure to be long and full of bright things." —*RT Book Reviews*, Top Pick

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"Smart and sensual, *Anna and the French Kiss* is everything your heart is longing for. You'll want to live inside this story forever. More, *s'il vous plaît!*" —Lisa McMann, *New York Times* bestselling author of the *Wake* Trilogy

"You're going to fall in love with *Lola and the Boy Next Door*. Madly in love! Every page sparkles." —Sarah Mylnowski, author of *Ten Things We Did (And Probably Shouldn't Have)* and the *Whatever After* series

#### About the Author

Stephanie Perkins ([www.stephanieperkins.com](http://www.stephanieperkins.com)) has always worked with books—first as a bookseller, then as a librarian, and now as a novelist. Stephanie lives in the mountains of North Carolina with her husband. Every room of their house is painted a different color of the rainbow.

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## chapter one

It's midnight, it's sweltering, and I might be high on Vicodin, but that guy—that guy *right over there*—that's him.

*The* him.

His posture is as familiar as a recurring dream. Shoulders rounded down, head cocked to the right, nose an inch from the tip of his pen. Absorbed. My heart swells with a painful sort of euphoria. He's close, only two tables over and facing my direction. The café is boiling. The atmosphere is clouded with bittersweet coffee. Three years of desire rip through my body and burst from my lips:

“Josh!”

His head jolts up. For a long time, a very long time, he just stares at me. And then. . . he blinks. “Isla?”

“You know my name. You can *pronounce* my name.” Most people call me Iz-la, but I’m Eye-la. Island without the *nd*. I erupt into a smile that immediately vanishes. *Ouch*.

Josh glances around, as if searching for someone, and then cautiously sets down his pen. “Uh, yeah. We’ve sat beside each other in a ton of classes.”

“Five classes beside each other, twelve classes together total.”

A pause.

“Right,” he says slowly. Another pause. “Are you okay?”

A guy who looks like a young Abraham Lincoln with a piercing fetish tosses a single-page laminated menu onto my table.

I don’t look at it. “Something soft, please.”

Abe scratches his beard, weary.

“But no tomato soup, chocolate pudding, or raspberry applesauce. That’s all I’ve had to eat today,” I add.

“Ah.” Abe’s mood lightens. “You’re sick.”

“No.”

His mood darkens again. “Whatever.” He snatches up the menu. “Allergic to anything? You kosher? Vegetarian?”

“Huh?”

“I’ll have a look in the kitchen.” And he stalks away.

My gaze returns to Josh, who is still watching me. He looks down at his sketchbook, and then back up, and then back down. Like he can’t decide if we’re still having a conversation. I look down, too. I’m getting the

increasingly alarming notion that if I keep talking, tomorrow I might have something to regret.

But . . . as if I can't help it—because I *can't*, not when I'm around him—I glance up. My veins throb as my eyes drink him in. His long, beautiful nose. His slender, assured arms. His pale skin is a few shades darker from the summer sun, and his black tattoo peeks out from underneath his T-shirt sleeve.

Joshua Wasserstein. My crush on him is near unbearable.

He looks up again, too, and I blush. Blushing. The curse of redheads everywhere. I'm grateful when he clears his throat to speak. "It's strange, you know? That we've never run into each other before."

I leap in. "Do you come here often?"

"Oh." He fidgets with his pen. "I meant in the city? I knew you lived on the Upper West, but I've never seen you around."

My chest tightens. I knew that about him, but I had no idea that *he* knew that about *me*. We attend a boarding school for Americans in Paris, but we spend our breaks in Manhattan. Everybody knows that Josh lives here, because his father has one of the New York seats in the United States Senate. But there's no reason for anyone to remember that I live here, too.

"I don't get out often," I blur. "But I'm starving, and there's nothing to eat at home." And then, somehow, I'm dropping into the empty seat across from him. My compass necklace knocks against his tabletop. "My wisdom teeth were removed this morning, and I'm taking all of these medications, but my mouth is still sore so that's why I can only eat soft foods."

Josh breaks into his first smile.

Accomplishment puffs up inside of me. I return the smile as full as I can, even though it hurts. "What?"

"Painkillers. It makes sense now."

"Oh, shit." I tuck up a leg and smack my kneecap on the table. "Am I acting that loopy?"

He laughs with surprise. People always laugh, because they don't expect words like *shit* to come out of someone so petite, someone with a voice so quiet, so sweet. "I could just tell something was different," he says. "That's all."

"Side effects include the cruel combination of exhaustion and insomnia. Which is why I'm here now."

Josh laughs again. "I had mine extracted last summer. You'll feel better tomorrow."

"Promise?"

"Not really. But definitely in a few days."

Our smiles fade into a reflective silence. We've rarely spoken to each other at school and never outside of it. I'm too shy, and he's too reserved. Plus, he had the same girlfriend for, like, forever.

*Had.*

They broke up last month, right before her graduation. Josh and I still have our senior year to go. And I wish

there were a logical reason for him to show a sudden interest in me, but . . . there's not. His ex was tenacious and outspoken. My opposite. Maybe that's why I'm startled when I find myself pointing at his sketchbook, eager to prolong this temporary state. This miracle of conversation.

"What are you working on?" I ask.

His arm shifts to block the exposed drawing, someone resembling a young Abe Lincoln. "I was just. . . messing around."

"That's our server." I grin. *Ouch.*

He looks a bit sheepish as he pulls back his arm, but he only shrugs. "And the couple in the corner."

We're not alone?

I twist around to discover a middle-aged man and woman, all the way in the back, sharing a copy of the *Village Voice*. There isn't anyone else here, so at least I'm not too out of it. I don't think. I turn back to Josh, my courage rising.

"May I see that?"

I asked. I can't *believe* that I asked. I've always wanted to look inside of his sketchbooks, always wanted to *hold* one. Josh is the most talented artist at our school. He works in several mediums, but his real passion is the comic form. I once overheard him say that he's working on a graphic novel about his life.

An autobiography. A diary. What secrets would it contain?

I content myself with doodles viewed over his shoulder, paintings drying in the art studio, sketches tacked to the doors of his friends. His style is almost whimsical. It's melancholy and beautiful, completely his own. The lines are careful. They reveal that he pays attention. People don't think he does, because he daydreams and skips class and neglects his homework, but when I see his drawings, I know they're wrong.

I wish he would look at me the way that he looks at his subjects. Because then he'd see there's more to me than *shy*, just like I see there's more to him than *slacker*.

My cheeks burn again—as if he could hear my thoughts—but then I realize. . . he *is* studying me. Have I overstayed my welcome? His expression grows concerned, and I frown. Josh nods toward the table. His sketchbook is already before me.

I laugh. He does, too, though it's tinged with confusion.

His book is still open to the work in progress. A thrill runs through me. On one page, Abe's face stares with boredom at the sketchbook's spine. Even the rings in his septum, eyebrows, and ears seem dull and annoyed. On the opposite page, Josh has perfectly captured the middle-aged couple's studious, gentle frowns.

I touch a corner, one without ink, oh so lightly. To prove to myself that this moment is real. My voice turns reverent. "These are amazing. Is the whole thing filled with portraits like this?"

Josh closes the sketchbook and slides it back toward himself. Its pages are thick with use. On the cover is a blue sticker shaped like America. A single word has been handwritten across it: *WELCOME*. I don't know what that means, but I like it.

“Thanks.” He gives me another smile. “It’s for whatever, but yeah. Mainly portraits.”

“And you’re allowed to do that?”

His brow creases. “Do what?”

“Like, you don’t need their permission?”

“To draw them?” he asks. I nod, and he continues. “Nah. I’m not using these for anything special. This isn’t even my good sketchbook. See? I can’t remove the pages.”

“Do you do this a lot? Draw strangers?”

“Sure.” He reaches for his coffee cup with an index finger. There’s a splotch of black ink near his nail. “To be good at anything you have to practice.”

“Do you wanna practice on me?” I ask.

Pink blossoms across Josh’s cheeks as Abe slaps down two dishes. “Chicken broth and cheesecake,” Abe says to me. “That’s all we had.”

“*Merci,*” I say.

“*De nada.*” Abe rolls his eyes and walks away.

“What’s with that guy?” I ask, shoveling in the cheesecake. “Ohmygod, sogood.” I mumble this through a full mouth. “Youwannabite?”

“Uh. No, thanks.” Josh seems flustered. “You look hungry.”

I begin happily devouring the rest.

“So you live close by?” he asks, after a few moments.

I swallow. “Two minutes away.”

“Me too. Ten minutes.”

I must look surprised, because he continues. “I know. Weird, right?”

“That’s cool.” I glug my broth. “Ohmygod. This is incredible.”

He watches me quietly for another minute. “So. . . you were serious? You wouldn’t mind if I sketched you?”

“Yeah, I’d love that.” *I love youuuuuuuuu.* “What should I do?”

“Don’t worry about it. Just keep doing what you’re doing.”

“Ha! You’ll draw me eating like a horse. No. A pig. I meant pig. Do I mean a pig or a horse?”

Josh shakes his head in amusement. He opens the sketchbook to a new page and looks up. His eyes lock on to mine. I’m dumbstruck.

*Hazel.*

The word adds itself to my internal list of Facts About Josh. Sometimes his eyes had seemed green, sometimes brown. Now I know why.

*Hazel.* Josh's eyes are *hazel*.

I float into a green-brown fog. The *scritch* of his pen mingles with the *scratch* of an old folk song coming from the speakers. Their combined tune is yearning and turmoil and anguish and love. Outside, storm clouds burst. Rain and wind join the score, and I hum along. My head clunks against a window.

I sit up, startled. My bowl and plate are empty. "How long have I been here?"

"A while." Josh smiles. "So. Those drugs you're on. Good stuff, huh?"

I moan. "Tell me I wasn't drooling."

"No drool. You look happy."

"I *am* happy," I say. Because. . . I am. My eyes dim.

"*Isla*," he whispers. "*It's time to go.*"

I lift my head from the table. When did it get there?

"Kismet is closing."

"What's Kismet?"

"Fate," he says.

"What?"

"The name of this café."

"Oh. Okay." I follow him outside and into the night. It's still raining. The drops are fat and warm. I cover my head with my bare hands as Josh stuffs his sketchbook underneath his shirt. I catch a glimpse of his abdomen. *Yummy.* "Yummy tummy."

He startles. "What?"

"Hmm?"

A smile plays in the corners of his lips. I want to kiss them, one kiss in each corner.

"Okay, Loopy." He shakes his head. "Which way?"

"Which way to what?"

"To your place."

"You're coming over?" I'm delighted.

“I’m walking you home. It’s late. And it’s pouring.”

“Oh, that’s nice,” I say. “You’re nice.”

The traffic lights glow yellow on the wet asphalt. I point the way, and we run across Amsterdam Avenue. The rain pours harder. “Up there!” I say, and we duck underneath a city block covered in scaffolding. Weighty raindrops clang against the aluminum like a pinball machine.

“Isla, wait!”

But it’s too late.

Scaffolding is generally ideal for escaping bad weather, but occasionally the bars will cross together to create a funnel, which can collect water and soak a person completely. I am soaked. Completely. My hair clings to my face, my sundress clings to my figure, and water squishes between my sandals and the soles of my feet.

“Ha-ha.” I’m not sure it’s real laughter.

“Are you okay?” Josh stoops under the scaffolding, swerves around the waterfall, and then stoops back in beside me.

*I am* laughing. I clutch my stomach. “Hurts. . . mouth. . . to laugh. My mouth. My mouth and my stomach. And my mouth.”

He laughs, too, but it’s distracted. His eyes suddenly, pointedly move up to my face, and I realize he’d been looking elsewhere. My smile widens. *Thank you, slutty funnel.*

Josh shifts away, his posture uncomfortable. “Almost there, yeah?”

I gesture toward a row of gabled buildings across the street. “The second one. With the copper-green windows and the tiled roof.”

“I’ve sketched those before.” His eyes widen, impressed. “They’re gorgeous.”

My parents’ apartment is located in a line of Flemish-inspired homes built in the late nineteenth century. We live in one of the only neighborhoods that’s nice enough for residents to have flowers on their stoops, and passersby won’t destroy them.

“Maman likes them, too. She likes pretty things. She’s French. That’s why I go to our school.” My voice drifts as Josh guides me toward the entrance with the climbing pink roses above the door. Home. He removes his hand from the small of my back, and it’s only then that I realize it was there in the first place.

“*Merci,*” I say.

“You’re welcome.”

“Thanks,” I say.

“*De rien.*”

The air is heavy with the perfume of rain-dripped roses. I fumble my way inside the building, and he waits on the sidewalk, statuesque. His dark hair is as wet as mine now. A stream of water cascades down his nose.

One arm clutches the sketchbook against his chest, underneath his T-shirt.

“Thank you,” I say again.

He raises his voice so that I can hear him through the glass door. “Get some rest, Loopy. Sweet dreams.”

“Sweet,” I echo. “Dream.”

chapter two

Ohmygod what the hell did I do last night?????????

chapter three

And the whole thing is a blur! And I don’t remember anything I said, or anything *he* said, and he must have walked me home because he knew I was so high that I’d get run over by a taxi.”

Kurt Donald Cobain Bacon keeps his eyes fixed upon my ceiling. “So Josh paid for your food.”

It takes a moment for this statement to register. My best friend and I are lying beside each other on top of my bed. One of my hands slowly reaches out of its own accord and twists the front of his shirt into a tight knot.

“Don’t do that.” His tone is brusque—as it often is—though not impolite.

I remove my hand, which travels straight to my swollen, throbbing, worse-than-yesterday gums. And then I emit a rather frightening moan.

“You said he woke you up, and then you left the café,” Kurt says. “That means he paid your bill.”

“I know. *I know.*” But I’m scrambling out of bed anyway. I grab my purse, dump it upside down, and shake it frantically.

“You won’t find it,” he says.

A well-loved paperback about a hiking disaster on Mount Everest thunks against my rug. Pens and lipsticks and quarters shower out and roll away. My wallet. An empty pack of tissues, a pair of sunglasses, a crumpled flyer for a new bagel store. Nothing. I shake it harder. Still nothing. I check my wallet even though I already know what I won’t find: a receipt from the café.

“Told you,” he says.

“I have to apologize for being such a lunatic. I have to pay him back.”

“Pay who back?” Hattie asks.

My head whips around to find my younger sister appraising me from the doorway. She’s leaning against the frame with crossed arms, but she still looks way too tall. Which she is. Not only did she surpass me in height last year, but she far exceeded me.

“I know what you did last night,” she says. “I know you snuck out.”

“I didn’t *sneak out*. I just left for a few hours.”

“But Maman and Dad don’t know.”

I don’t reply, and Hattie smiles. She’s as smug as a house cat. She won’t tell. With information this valuable, she’ll hold on to it until it’s useful. Hattie swipes my wallet from the floor and—staring me down, lording over me with her stupid growth spurt—drops it back into my purse. And then she’s gone.

I throw the purse at her vacated space and crawl into bed. I wrap both of my arms around one of Kurt’s. “You have to go with me,” I say. “To the café. Tonight.”

His eyebrows furrow into their familiar V shape. “You think Josh is a regular?”

“Maybe.” I have no reason to think this. I just *want* him to be a regular. “Please, I have to explain myself.”

His shoulders shrug against me. “Then I’ll find the Right Way.”

Kurt likes routine, and he always likes to know where he’s going ahead of time. He’s obsessed with mapping out the best route to get anywhere. . . even a café that’s only a few minutes away. He calls these routes the Right Way. The Right Way never involves mass transit, crowded intersections, or streets containing Abercrombie & Fitch-type stores that blast noxious music and/or cologne.

Cartography has fascinated him since he was six, when he discovered *The Times Atlas of the World* weighing down one of my older sister’s gluey craft projects. The book became an obsession, and Kurt pored over its pages for years, memorizing names and shapes and distances. When we were young, we’d lie on my floor and draw our own maps. Kurt would make these tidy, detailed, to-scale maps of our neighborhood while I’d create England-shaped islands with Old English-sounding names. They’d have dense woods and spidery rivers and snowcapped peaks, and I’d surround them with shark triangles and sea-monster arches. It drove Kurt crazy that I wouldn’t draw anything real.

I’ve known him forever. Our mothers are also best friends—and they’re both Frenchwomen living in New York—so he’s just. . . always been around. We went to the same schools in Manhattan, and now we attend the same high school in Paris. He’s thirteen months younger than me, so there was only one year when we were apart—when he was in eighth grade, and I was a freshman. Neither of us likes to think about that year.

I blow a lock of his scruffy blond hair from my face. “You don’t think. . .”

“You’re gonna have to finish that sentence.”

“It’s just. . . Josh and I *talked*. I remember feeling happy. You don’t think it’s possible that last night was. . . not some embarrassing mishap, but. . . my way in?”

He frowns again. “Your way into what?”

Kurt isn’t good at filling in blanks. And even though he’s always known how I feel about Josh, I still hesitate before saying it aloud. This tiny, flickering hope. “A relationship. *Kismet*, you know?”

“Fate doesn’t exist.” He gives me a dismissive huff. “Catalog last night as another embarrassing mishap. It’s been a while since you’ve had one,” he adds.

“Almost a year.” I sigh. “Right on schedule.”

Josh and I have had exactly one meaningful interaction per year, none of which have left me looking desirable. When we were freshmen, Josh saw me reading Joann Sfar in the cafeteria. He was excited to find someone else interested in European comics, so he began asking me this rapid string of questions, but I was too overwhelmed to reply. I could only gape at him in silence. He gave me a weird look and then left.

When we were sophomores, our English teacher partnered us up for a fake newspaper article. I was so nervous that I couldn’t stop tapping my pen. And then it slipped from my grasp. And *then* it flew into his forehead.

When we were juniors, I caught him and his girlfriend making out in an elevator. It wasn’t even at school. It was inside BHV, this massive department store. I bumbled an unintelligible hello, let the doors close, and took the stairs.

“But,” I persist, “I have a *reason* to talk to him now. You don’t think there’s any chance that it might lead to something?”

“Since when is human behavior reasonable?”

“Come on.” I widen my eyes like an innocent doe. “Can’t you pretend with me? Even for a second?”

“I don’t see the point in pretending.”

“That was a joke,” I explain, because sometimes Kurt needs explanations.

He scowls at himself in frustration. “Noted.”

“I dunno.” I burrow against the side of his body. “It’s not logical, and I can’t explain it, but. . . I think Josh will be there tonight. I think we’ll see him.”

“Before you ask”—Kurt barges into my new dorm room in Paris, three months later, narrowly missing a run-in with an empty suitcase—“no. I didn’t see him.”

“I wasn’t going to ask.” Although I was.

My last ember of hope gutters. Over the summer, it faded and faded until it was barely visible at all. The ghost of a hope. Because Kurt was right, human behavior isn’t reasonable. Or predictable. Or even satisfying. Josh wasn’t there at midnight, nor was he there the *next* night. Nor the following day. I checked the café at all hours for two weeks, and my memories of happiness disintegrated as I was faced with reality: I didn’t hear any music. I didn’t feel any rain. I didn’t even see any Abe.

It was as if that night had never happened.

I looked for Josh online. I pulled his email address from last year’s school handbook, but when I tried to send a casual/friendly explanation/apology—an email that took *four hours* to compose—the server informed me that his account was inactive from disuse.

Then I tried the various social networks. I didn’t get far. I don’t actually have any accounts, because social networking has always felt like a popularity contest to me. A public record of my own inadequacies. The only thing I found was the same black-and-white, again and again, of Josh standing beside the River Seine, staring somberly at some fixed point in the distance. I confess I’d seen it before. He’d been using the picture

online for months. But it was too pathetic to sign up anywhere just to become his so-called friend.

So then I did the thing that I swore to myself I would never do: I Googled his home address. The waves of my shame could be felt across state lines. But it was in this final step toward stalkerdom that I was led to the information I'd been seeking all along. His father's website featured a photo of the family exiting an airport terminal in DC. The picture had been taken two days after Kismet, and the caption explained that they'd remain in the capital until autumn. The senator looked stately and content. Rebecca Wasserstein was waving toward the camera, flashing that toothy, political-spouse smile.

And their only child?

He trailed behind them, head down, sketchbook in arm. I clicked on the picture to make it bigger, and my eyes snagged on a blue sticker shaped like America.

*I'm in there. I'm in that sketchbook.*

I never saw his drawing. What would it have revealed about me? About him? I wondered if he ever looked at it. I wondered about it all summer long.

Kurt jiggles the handle of my new door, shaking me back into France. "This is catching. You need to get it fixed."

"The more things change, the more they stay the same," I say.

He frowns. "That doesn't make sense. The door you had last year worked fine."

"Never mind." I sigh. Three months is a long time. Any confidence I had in speaking to Josh has crumbled back into shyness and fear. Even if Kurt *had* just seen him in the hallway, it's not like I would've left my room to speak with him.

Kurt pushes his body weight against the door, listens for its telltale click, and then flops down beside me on the bed. "Our doors are supposed to lock automatically. I shouldn't be able to walk in like that."

"And yet—"

"I keep doing it." He grins.

"It's strange, though, right?" My voice is tinged with the same awe that it's had since our arrival two days ago. "Whose door that used to be?"

"Statistically unlikely. But not impossible."

I have a lifetime's worth of experience shaking off Kurt's wonder-killing abilities, so his response doesn't bother me. Especially because, despite a summer of disappointments and backtracking . . .

I, Isla Martin, am now living in Joshua Wasserstein's last place of residence.

These were his walls. This was his ceiling. That black grease mark on the baseboards, the one right above the electrical outlet? He probably made that. For the rest of the year, I will have the same view of the same street outside of the same window. I will sit in his chair, bathe in his shower, and sleep in his bed.

*His bed.*

I trace a finger along the stitching of my quilt. It's an embroidered map of Manhattan. When I'm in Manhattan, I sleep underneath a quilt that's an embroidered map of Paris. But underneath *this* blanket and underneath *these* sheets, there's a sacred space that once belonged to Josh. He dreamed here. I want this to mean something.

My door bursts back open.

"My room is bigger than yours," Hattie says. "This is like a prison cell."

Yeah. I'm gonna have to fix that door.

"True," Kurt says, because the rooms in Résidence Lambert are the size of walk-in closets. "But how many roommates were you assigned? Two? Three?"

This is my sister's first year attending SOAP—the School of America in Paris. When I was a freshman, our older sister, Gen, was a senior. Now I'm the senior, and Hattie is the freshman. She'll be living in the underclass dormitory down the street. Students in Grivois have roommates, tons of supervision, and enforced curfews. Here in Lambert, we have our own rooms, one Résidence Director, and significantly more freedom.

Hattie glowers at Kurt. "At least I don't have to hide from my roommates."

"Don't be an assrabbit," he says.

Last year—when I was in this dorm, and he was still in Grivois—he slept in my bed more often than his own, because he couldn't get along with his roommates. But I didn't mind. We've been sharing beds since before we could talk. And Kurt and I are *strictly* friends. There's none of that he's-my-best-friend-but-we're-re-secretly-in-love bullshit. A relationship with him would feel incestuous.

Hattie narrows her eyes. "Everyone's waiting in the lobby for dinner." She's referring to both his parents and ours. "Hurry up." She slams my door. It pops back open, but she's already gone.

I haul myself off the bed. "I wish my parents could've sent her to boarding school in Belgium. They speak French there, too."

Kurt sits up. "That's a joke, right?"

It is. It's important to my parents that my sisters and I receive a portion of our education in France. We're dual citizens. We all received our early schooling in the United States, and we've all been sent here for high school. It's our choice where to go next. Gen chose Smith College in Massachusetts. I'm not sure where I want to live, but soon I'll be applying to both la Sorbonne here in Paris and Columbia back in New York.

Kurt pulls up the hood of his favorite charcoal-gray sweatshirt, even though it's warm outside. I grab my room key, and we leave. It takes both of his hands to yank my door closed. "You really do need to talk to Nate about that." He nods to our Résidence Director's apartment, only two doors down.

Okay. So Josh's old room does have its drawbacks. It's also located on the ground floor so it's loud. Extra loud, actually, because it's also-also located beside the stairwell.

"There he is," Kurt says.

I assume he means Nate, but I follow his gaze and grind to a halt.

*Him.*

Josh is waiting for the elevator in the lobby. In less than a second, an entire summer of daydreaming and planning and rehearsing explodes into nothingness. I close my eyes to steady myself. I'm dizzy. It physically hurts to look at him. "I can't breathe."

"Of course you can breathe," Kurt says. "You're breathing right now."

Josh looks alone.

I mean, he is alone, but . . . he *looks* alone. He's carrying a cloth grocery bag and staring at the elevator, completely detached from the crowd behind him. Kurt drags me toward the lobby. The elevator dings, the door opens, and Josh pushes back its old-fashioned gate. Students and parents bustle in behind him—way too many people for such a small space—and as we pass by, he flinches at being shoved into a corner. But the flinch is just that, one quick moment, before his expression slides back into indifference.

The crowd jostles and smashes buttons and someone's dad forces the gate shut, but that's when an odd thing happens. Josh looks out over the sea of passengers and through the metal cage. And his eyes go from blank to seeing. They see me.

The elevator door closes.

#### chapter four

The head of school is finishing up her usual first-day, post-breakfast, welcome-back speech. Kurt and I are in the back of the courtyard, nestled between two trees pruned like giant lollipops. The air smells faintly of iron. The school looms over us, all gray stone and cascading vines and heavy doors. Our classmates loom before us.

There are twenty-five students per grade here—always one hundred students total—and it's difficult to get accepted. You have to have excellent grades, high test scores, and several letters of recommendation. It helps to have connections. Gen got in because Maman knew someone in the administration, I got in because of Gen, and Hattie got in because of me. It's cliquey like that.

It's also expensive. You have to come from money to attend.

When my father was only nineteen, he built an overdrive pedal for guitarists called the Cherry Bomb. It was red and revolutionary and turned him from the son of a Nebraskan farmer into a very wealthy man. It's one of the most copied pedals ever, but musicians still pay top dollar for the original. His company's name is Martintone, and even though he still tinkers with pedals, as an adult he works mainly as a studio engineer.

"I have one final announcement." The head's voice is as poised as her snow-white chignon. She's American, but she could easily pass for French.

Kurt studies a map on his phone. "I've found a better route to the Treehouse."

"Oh, yeah? After all this time?" I'm scanning the courtyard for Josh. Either he slept in or he's already skipping. I planned my outfit carefully, because it's the first day in months when I *know* I'll see him. My style tends to be rather feminine, and today I'm wearing a dress patterned with tiny Swiss dots. It has a scoop neck and a short hem, both of which help me look taller, but I've added a pair of edgy Parisian heels to keep

me from looking too innocent or vanilla. I can't imagine Josh falling for someone vanilla.

Not that Josh would ever fall for me.

But I wouldn't want to ruin any chance.

Even though I don't have a chance.

But just in case I do.

Even though I don't.

"But I'll let him tell you in his own words," the head says, continuing a sentence whose beginning I did not hear. She moves aside, and a short figure with a shaved head steps forward. It's Nate, our Résidence Director. This is his third year here. He's also American, but he's young, working on his doctorate, and known for being lax with the rules yet firm enough to keep us under control. The kind of person that everybody likes.

"Hey, guys." Nate shifts as if his own skin were the wrong fit. "It's come to the faculty's attention—" He glances at the head of school and changes his story. "It's come to *my* attention that the situation in Lambert got a little out of hand last year. I am, of course, referring to the habit of opposite-sex students hanging out in each other's rooms. As you know, we have a strict policy—"

The student body snickers.

"We have a *strict policy* that ladies and gentlemen are only allowed to visit each other with their doors propped open."

"Isla." Kurt is annoyed. "You're not looking at my phone."

I shake my head and nudge him to pay attention. This can't be good.

"Things will be different this year, upperclassmen. To remind you of the rules—" Nate rubs his head and waits for the gossip to stop. "One. If a member of the opposite sex is in your room, your door must be open. Two. Members of the opposite sex must be gone from your room by nightfall according to the weekday and weekend hours listed in your official school handbook. This means that, three, there will be no *spending the night*. Are we clear? The consequences to breaking these rules are big, you guys. Detention. Suspension. Expulsion."

"So, what, you'll be doing random room checks?" a senior named Mike shouts.

"Yes," Nate says.

"That's unconstitutional!" Mike's sidekick Dave shouts.

"Then it's a good thing we're in France." Nate steps back into the gathered faculty and shoves his hands into his pockets. He's clearly aggravated by this new hassle in his life. The crowd breaks as abruptly as his announcement, and everyone is griping as we make our way toward first period.

"Maybe it won't apply to us," I say, hoping to convince myself. "Nate knows we're just friends. And shouldn't there be exemptions for friends who are in no way interested in each other's bodies?"

Kurt's mouth grows small and tight. "He didn't say anything about exemptions."

Because of our grade difference, our only period together is lunch. I head toward senior English alone and take my usual seat beside the leaded-glass windows. The classroom looks the same—dark wooden trim, empty whiteboards, chairs-attached-to-desks—though it still carries that feeling of summer emptiness.

*Where is Josh?*

Professeur Cole arrives as she always does, just as the bell is ringing. We have the same *professeurs* for each subject every year. She's loud for a teacher, friendly and approachable. "*Bonjour à tous.*" Professeur Cole smacks down her coffee cup on the podium and looks around. "Good. No new students, no need for an introduction. Ah, *pardon.*" She pauses. "One empty desk. Who's missing?"

The door creaks open with her answer.

"Monsieur Wasserstein. Of course the empty desk is yours." But she winks as he slips into the remaining desk beside the door.

Josh looks tired, but. . . even tired looks good on him. He's wearing a dark blue T-shirt with artwork that I don't recognize, no doubt something obscure from the indie comic world. It fits him well—a bit tightly—and when he reaches for a copy of the syllabus, his sleeve creeps up to reveal the tattoo on his upper right arm.

*I love his tattoo.*

It's a skull and crossbones, but it's whimsical and simple and clean. Clearly his own design. He got it our sophomore year, despite the fact that minors in France are required to have parental approval. Which I seriously doubt he had. Which, I'm somewhat ashamed to admit, makes it even sexier. My heart pounds feverishly in my ears. I glance around the room, but the other girls appear to be at ease. Why doesn't he have the same effect on them that he has on me? Don't they *see* him?

Professeur Cole makes us push our desks into a circle. She's the only teacher here who forces us to look at one another during class. I take my seat again, and—suddenly—Josh's desk is opposite my own.

My head jerks down. My hair shields my face. I'll never be able to talk to him about that night in New York.

Halfway through class, the guy beside him asks a question. The temptation is too strong, so I steal the opportunity for another glance. Josh immediately looks up. Our eyes meet, and my cheeks burst into flames. I avert my gaze for the remainder of the hour, but his presence grows larger and larger. I can practically feel it pressing up against me.

Despite the fact that our schedule is, thus far, identical—English, calculus, government—I manage to evade him for the rest of the morning. It helps that he's skilled at both disappearing between classes and arriving late to them. Even when the next class is literally across the hall. When the bell rings for lunch, it's comforting to resume Kurt's company. We take the back staircase, the one less traveled. It's the Right Way.

"Did you speak to him?" he asks.

My sigh is long and forlorn. "No."

"Yeah. That sounds like you."

Kurt launches into something about a freshman in his computer programming class, a girl who is tall and

serene and already fluent in several internet languages—totally his type—but I’m only half paying attention. I know it’s dumb. I know there are more important things to think about on a first day back to school, including whatever it is my best friend is saying. But I like Josh so much that I actually feel *miserable*.

He has yet to make an appearance in the cafeteria, and it’s doubtful that he will now, because I saw him weaving through the crowd in the opposite direction. His friends graduated last year. All of them. If only I were courageous enough to invite him to sit with us at our table, but his friends were so much cooler than us.

Besides, Josh is aloof. Untouchable. We are not.

In the lunch line, Mike Reynard—the senior who was the first to shout during Nate’s speech—proves my point when he slams his tray into Kurt’s spine. A bowl of onion soup splashes its entire contents onto the back of his hoodie.

Mike pretends to look disgusted. “Watch it, retard.”

Kurt stares straight ahead in shock. A slice of baguette covered in melted Gruyère falls from his back to the floor with a *splat*. A soggy onion noiselessly follows.

My cheeks redden. “Jerk.”

“Sorry, didn’t catch that,” Mike says. Even though he did. He’s making fun of my soft voice.

I raise it so that he can hear me. “I said you’re an asshole.”

He smiles, an orthodontic row of unnaturally sharp teeth. “Yeah? And what are you gonna do about it, sweetheart?”

I clench the compass on the end of my necklace. Nothing. I am going to do nothing, and he knows it. Kurt shoves his hands into his hoodie’s pockets, which begin to shake. I know his hands are flapping. He makes a low sound, and I link my arm through his and lead him away, abandoning our food trays. Pretending like I don’t see Mike’s and Dave’s pantomimes or hear their cretinous guffaws.

In the quiet of the hall, Kurt races into the men’s room. I sit on a bench and listen to the tick of a gilded clock. Count the number of pear-shaped crystals on the chandeliers. Tap my heels against the marble floor. Our school is as grand and ostentatious as anything in Paris, but I wish it weren’t filled with such horrible, entitled weasels. And I know I’m just as privileged, but. . . it feels different when you live on the social ladder’s bottom rung.

Kurt reappears. His hoodie is balled in his arms, wet from scrubbing.

“Everything okay?” I ask.

He’s calm, but he’s still frowning with severe agitation. “Now I can’t wear it until it’s clean.”

“No worries.” I help him shove it into his bag. “First thing after school.”

The lunch line is empty. “I had ze feeling you would return.” The jolly, potbellied head chef removes our trays from behind the counter and slides them toward us. “Leek tart for mademoiselle, *un croque-monsieur* for monsieur.”

I’m grateful for this gesture of kindness. “*Merci*, Monsieur Boutin.”

“Zat boy iz no good.” He means Mike. “You do not worry about him.”

His concern is simultaneously embarrassing and reassuring. He swipes our meal cards, and then Kurt and I sit at our usual table in the far corner. I glance around. As predicted, Josh isn’t here, which is probably a good thing. But Hattie isn’t here either. Which is probably not.

This morning I saw her eating *un mille-feuille* and—even though I don’t blame her for wanting to start the day with dessert—I tried to stop her. I thought it might be dusted with powdered almonds, and she’s allergic to nuts. But my sister always does the opposite of whatever anyone wants her to do, even when it’s completely idiotic and potentially life threatening. We’re not supposed to have our phones out at school, so I sneak text her: ARE YOU ALIVE??!

She doesn’t reply.

The day worsens. In physics, Professeur Wakefield pairs us alphabetically to our lab partner for the year. I get Emily Middlestone, who groans when it’s announced, because she is popular, and I am not. Sophie Vernet is paired with Josh.

I hate Sophie Vernet.

Actually, I’ve never given Sophie Vernet much thought, and she seems nice enough, but that’s the problem.

My last two classes are electives. I’d like to say that I’m taking art history for my own betterment—not so that I’ll have more to hypothetically converse about with Josh—but that would be false. And I’m taking computer science, because it’ll look better on my transcripts than *La Vie*, the class that I wish I could take. *La Vie* means “life,” and it’s supposed to teach us basic life skills, but it’s better known as the school’s only goof-off class. I have zero doubt it’s where Josh is currently located.

Professeur Fontaine, the computer science teacher, pauses by my desk while she’s handing out our first homework assignment. Her chin is pointy, and her forehead is huge. She looks like a triangle. “I met your sister this morning.”

I didn’t even know Professeur Fontaine knew *me*. This school is way too small. I try to keep my voice nonchalant. “Oh, yeah?” When the sister in question is Hattie, whatever follows this statement is generally unpleasant.

“She was in the nurse’s office. Very ill.”

*Hattie! I told you so.*

Professeur Fontaine assures me that my sister isn’t dying, but she refuses to let me see for myself. When the final bell rings, I shoot a see-you-later text to Kurt, hurry toward the administration wing, push through its extravagantly carved wooden door, and—

My heart seizes.

Josh is slumped on the waiting room couch. His legs are stretched out so far and so low that they’re actually *underneath* the coffee table. His arms are crossed, but his eyebrows rise—perhaps involuntarily, for someone sitting with such purposeful displeasure—at the sight of me.

My response is another deep, flaming blush. Why can’t I have a normal face? Genetics are so unfair. I hasten toward the desk and ask the receptionist in French about Hattie. Without glancing up, she waves me toward

the couch. A bracelet with a monogrammed charm jingles daintily from her wrist.

I can't move. My stomach is in knots.

"Wait there," she says, as if I didn't understand her gesture. Another wave and another jingle.

*Move, feet. Come on. Move!*

She finally looks at me, more annoyed than concerned. My feet detach, and I plant one in front of the other like a windup doll until I'm sitting on the other side of the couch. The small couch. *Love seat*, really.

Josh is no longer in full recline. He sat up while my back was turned, and now he's leaning forward with his elbows propped against his knees. He's staring straight ahead at an oil painting of a haloed Jeanne d'Arc.

It is now officially more awkward to ignore him than to acknowledge his presence. I search for an opener—something elementary—but my throat remains thick and closed. His silence is a confirmation of my fears. That I was a mess in the café, that his help was given in pity, that he wouldn't actively choose to interact with me and never will again—

Josh clears his throat.

It seems like a good sign. *Good*. "Good first day?" I ask.

A funny expression crosses his face. Was that a dumb question? Did it make me sound like his mother? Hattie is always accusing me of sounding like Maman.

"I've had better." He nods toward the head of school's office door.

"Oh." But *then* I get it. "Oh! Sorry. I'm here for the nurse, so . . . I assumed..."

"It's okay." And he says it like it is.

I wonder why he was called to her office. Because he skipped her welcome-back speech? Because he was tardy to his classes? It seems harsh to punish him for these things on our first day. And, great, now we've been silent for at least twenty seconds.

*Tell him. Tell him. Just tell him already!*

"Listen," I blurt. "I'm really embarrassed about last June. I was taking a lot of medication, and I don't remember much about that night, but I'm pretty sure you paid for my meal so I'd like to pay you back. And I'm sorry. For being weird. And thank you for walking me home. And for paying for my food."

He waits until I'm done. "It's okay," he says again.

And I feel stupid.

But Josh frowns as if he feels stupid, too. He scratches his head, somehow managing to muss his close-cropped hair. "I mean. . . don't worry about it. There's nothing to be embarrassed about. And you don't need to pay me back, it was only a few bucks."

This is the moment. Right here. This is the moment to place a hand on his arm, lean in, and say *the least* I can do is treat him to a meal in return. Instead, I just think it.

“Are you okay?” Josh asks. And then he makes another face.

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