

Also by
RACHEL LYNN SOLOMON

You'll Miss Me When I'm Gone

Our Year of Maybe

We Can't Keep Meeting Like This

Today

Tonight

Tomorrow

RACHEL LYNN SOLOMON

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*For Kelsey Rodkey,
who loved this book first*

MESSENGER

I see, lady, the gentleman is not in your books.

BEATRICE

No; an he were, I would burn my study.

—*Much Ado about Nothing* by William Shakespeare

I used to dream of you nightly

I would wake up screaming

—“Make Good Choices” by Sean Nelson



5:54 a.m.

McNIGHTMARE

Good morning!

This is a friendly reminder that you have three (3) hours and counting before suffering a humiliating defeat at the hands of your future valedictorian.

Bring tissues. I know you're a crier.

The text jolts me from sleep a minute before my 5:55 alarm, three quick pulses to let me know my least favorite person is already awake. Neil McNair—"McNightmare" in my phone—is annoyingly punctual. It's one of his only good traits.

We've been text-taunting since we were sophomores, after a series of morning threats made both of us late for homeroom. For a while last year, I decided to be the mature one, vowed to make my room a McNair-free zone. I'd put my phone on silent before slipping into bed, but beneath the pillow, my fingers twitched with combative responses. I couldn't sleep thinking he might be texting me. Baiting me. *Waiting.*

Neil McNair has become my alarm clock, if alarm clocks had freckles and knew all your insecurities.

I fling back the sheets, ready for battle.

oh, I didn't realize we still thought
crying was a sign of weakness

in the interest of accuracy, I'd like to
point out that you've only seen me cry
once, and I'm not sure that necessarily
makes me "a crier"

Over a book!

You were inconsolable.

it's called an emotion

I highly recommend feeling one (1)
sometime

In his mind, the only thing you're supposed to feel while reading a book is a sense of superiority. He's the kind of person who believes all Real Literature has already been written by dead white men. If he could, he'd bring Hemingway back to life for one last cocktail, smoke a cigar with Fitzgerald, dissect the nature of human existence with Steinbeck.

Our rivalry dates back to freshman year, when a (small) panel of judges declared his essay the winner of a school-wide contest

about the book that had impacted us the most. I came in second. McNair, in all his originality, picked *The Great Gatsby*. I picked *Vision in White*, my favorite Nora Roberts, a choice he scoffed at even after he'd won, insinuating I shouldn't have gotten second place for picking a *romance novel*. This was clearly a really valid stance for someone who'd likely never read one.

I've despised him ever since, but I can't deny he's been a worthy antagonist. That essay contest made me determined to beat him the next chance I got, whatever it happened to be—and I did, in an election for freshman-class rep. He turned around and narrowly edged me in a history-class debate. So I collected more cans than he did for environmental club, further cementing us as competitors. We've compared test scores and GPAs and clashed on everything from school projects to gym-class pull-up contests. We can't seem to stop trying to one-up each other . . . until now.

After graduation this weekend, I'll never have to see him again. No more morning texts, no more sleepless nights.

I am almost free.

I drop my phone back onto the nightstand next to my writing journal. It's open to a sentence I scribbled in the middle of the night. I flip on the lamp to take a closer look, to see if my two a.m. nonsense makes sense in the daylight—but the room stays dark.

Frowning, I toggle the switch a few more times before getting out of bed and trying the ceiling light. Nothing. It rained all night, a June storm tossing twigs and pine needles at our house, and the wind must have snapped a power line.

I grab my phone again. Twelve percent battery.

(And no reply from McNair.)

“Mom?” I call, racing out of my room and down the stairs. Anxiety pitches my voice an octave higher than usual. “Dad?”

My mom pokes her head out of the office. Orange glasses lie crooked across the bridge of her nose, and her long dark curls—the ones I inherited—are wilder than usual. We’ve never been able to tame them. My two great nemeses in life: Neil McNair and my hair.

“Rowan?” my mom says. “What are you doing up?”

“It’s . . . morning?”

She straightens her glasses and peers down at her watch. “I guess we’ve been in here awhile.”

The windowless office is dark, except for a few candles in the middle of their massive desk, illuminating stacks of pages slashed with red ink.

“Are you working by candlelight?” I ask.

“We had to. Power’s out on the whole street, and we’re on deadline.”

My parents, author-illustrator duo Jared Roth and Ilana García Roth, have written more than thirty books together, from picture books about unlikely animal friendships to a chapter book series about a tween paleontologist named Riley Rodriguez. My mom was born in Mexico City to a Russian-Jewish mother and a Mexican father. She was thirteen when her mother remarried a Texan and moved the family north. Until she went to college and met my Jewish father, she spent summers in Mexico with her father’s family,

and when they started writing (words: Mom, pictures: Dad), they wanted to explore how a child might embrace both cultures.

My dad appears behind her, yawning. The book they're working on is a spin-off about Riley's younger sister, an aspiring pastry chef. Pastel cakes and pies and French macarons leap off the pages.

"Hey, Ro-Ro," he says, his usual nickname for me. When I was a kid, he used to sing "row, row, Rowan your boat," and I was devastated when I learned those weren't the real lyrics. "Happy last day of school."

"I can't believe it's finally here." I stare at the carpet, suddenly gripped by nerves. I've already cleaned out my locker and taken my finals breakdown-free. I have too much to do today—as student council copresident, I'm leading the senior farewell assembly—to get nervous now.

"Oh!" my mom exclaims, as though suddenly waking up. "We need a picture with the unicorn!"

I groan. I was hoping they'd forgotten. "Can it wait until later? I don't want to be late."

"Ten seconds. And aren't you signing yearbooks and playing games today?" My mom cups my shoulder and gently shakes me back and forth. "You're almost done. Don't stress so much."

She always says I carry too much tension in my shoulders. By the time I'm thirty, my shoulders will probably touch my earlobes.

My mom rummages around in the hall closet, returning with the unicorn-shaped backpack I wore on my first day of kindergarten. In that first first-day photo, I am all sunshine and optimism. When

they snapped a picture on the last day of kindergarten, I looked like I wanted to set that backpack on fire. They were so amused, they've taken photos on the first and last days of school ever since. It was the inspiration for their bestselling picture book, *Unicorn Goes to School*. It's odd, sometimes, to think about how many kids grew up knowing me without really knowing me.

Despite my reluctance, the backpack always makes me smile. The unicorn's poor horn is hanging on by a thread, and one hoof is missing. I stretch the straps as far as they'll go and strike a tortured pose for my parents.

"Perfect," my mom says, laughing. "You really look like you're in agony."

This moment with my parents makes me wonder if today will be a day of lasts. Last day of school, last morning text from McNair, last photo with this aging backpack.

I'm not sure I'm ready to say goodbye to everything yet.

My dad taps his watch. "We should get back to it." He tosses me a flashlight. "So you don't have to shower in the dark."

Last shower of high school.

Maybe that's the definition of nostalgia: getting sappy about things that are supposed to be insignificant.

After showering, I wrestle my hair into a damp bun, not trusting it to air-dry into a flattering shape. On my first try, I draw a flawless cat-eye with liquid liner, but I have to settle for a mediocre little

flick on the left side. My kingdom for the ability to apply a symmetrical face of makeup.

Last cat-eye of high school, I think, and then I stop myself because if I get weepy about eyeliner, I have no chance of making it through the day.

McNair, with his punctuation and capital letters, pops back up like the world's worst game of Whac-A-Mole.

Aren't you in that neighborhood without power?

I'd hate to mark you late . . . or have you lose the perfect attendance award.

Have they ever had a student council (co) president win zero awards?

The outfit I planned days ago waits in my closet: my favorite sleeveless blue dress with a Peter Pan collar, the one I found in the vintage section at Red Light. When I tried it on and dipped my hands into the pockets, I knew it had to be mine. My friend Kirby once described my style as hipster librarian meets 1950s housewife. My body is what women's magazines call "pear shaped," with a large chest and larger hips, and I don't have to struggle with vintage clothes the way I do with modern ones. I finish the look with knee socks, ballet flats, and a cream cardigan.

I'm poking a simple gold stud through one earlobe when the envelope catches my eye. Of course—I set it out at the beginning

of the week, and I've been staring at it every day since, a mix of dread and excitement warring in my stomach. Most of the time, the dread is winning.

In my fourteen-year-old handwriting, which is a little larger and loopier than it is now, it says *OPEN ON LAST DAY OF HIGH SCHOOL*. A time capsule of sorts, in the sense that I sealed it four years ago and have only fleetingly thought about it since. I'm only half certain what's inside it.

I don't have time to read it now, so I slide it into my navy JanSport, along with my yearbook and journal.

how have you not run out of ways to mock me after four years?

What can I say, you're an endless source of inspiration.

and you are an endless source of migraines

"I'm leaving, love you, good luck!" I call to my parents before shutting the front door, realizing, with a twinge of my heart, that I won't be able to do this next year.

Excedrin and Kleenex, DON'T FORGET.

My car is parked around the block, since most Seattle garages are barely big enough for our Halloween decorations. Once inside, I plug my phone into the charger, pluck a bobby pin from the cup holder, and plunge it into my mountain of hair, imagining I'm jabbing it into the space between McNightmare's eyebrows instead.

I'm so close to valedictorian. Three more hours, like his first message so helpfully reminded me. During the farewell assembly, the Westview High School principal will call one of our names, and in my perfect-last-day fantasy, it's mine. I've only been dreaming of it for years: the rivalry to end all rivalries. The velvet bow wrapped around my high school experience.

At first, McNair will be so devastated he won't be able to look at me. His shoulders will hunch and he'll stare down at his tie because he always dresses up on assembly days. He'll feel so embarrassed, this loser in a suit. Beneath his freckles, his pale skin will flush to match his fiery red hair. He has more freckles than he has face. He'll cycle through five stages of grief before arriving at acceptance of the fact that after all these years, I have finally bested him. I have *won*.

Then he'll glance up at me with an expression of utmost respect. He'll dip his head in deference. "You've earned this," he'll say. "Congratulations, Rowan."

And he'll mean it.



Meet Delilah Park TONIGHT in Seattle!



Delilah Park Publicity <updates@delilahpark.com>

to undisclosed-recipients

June 12, 6:35 a.m.

Good morning, lovers of love!

Internationally bestselling author Delilah Park's *Scandal at Sunset* tour continues this evening with a stop at Seattle's Books & More at 8:00 p.m. Don't miss your chance to meet her in person and take your photo with a ten-foot replica of the Sugar Lake gazebo!

And be sure to grab Delilah's new book, *Scandal at Sunset*, on sale now!

X's and O's,
Delilah Park's publicity team

6:37 a.m.

McNIGHTMARE

Ticktock.

Gray skies rumble with the threat of rain, cedar trees shuddering against the wind. Coffee is my first priority, and Two Birds One Scone is on my way to school. I've been working there since I turned sixteen, when my parents made it clear there was no way we could afford out-of-state tuition. While I've spent my entire life in Seattle, I always wanted to leave for college if I could. Scholarships will cover most of my first semester at a small liberal arts school in Boston called Emerson. My Two Birds money will cover everything else.

The café is decorated like an aviary, plastic ravens and hawks watching you from every angle. They're famous not for their scones but for their cinnamon rolls, which are about the size of a small baby, slathered with cream cheese icing, and served warm.

Mercedes, a recent Seattle U grad who works mornings so she can play in her all-female Van Halen cover band, Anne Halen, at night, waves at me from behind the counter.

“Hey, hey,” she says in her too-chipper-before-seven-a.m. voice, already reaching for a compostable cup. “Hazelnut latte with extra whip?”

“You’re wonderful. Thank you.” Two Birds is small, a staff of about eight with two working per shift. Mercedes is my favorite, mainly because she plays better music than anyone else.

My phone buzzes while I’m waiting, Mercedes humming along to Heart’s *Greatest Hits*. I’m positive it’s McNair—but it’s something much more exciting.

Delilah Park’s book signing has been on my calendar for months, but in the midst of my last-day-of-school-isms, I somehow forgot that tonight I am going to meet my favorite author. I even stashed a few paperbacks in my bag earlier this week. Delilah Park writes romances with feminist heroines and shy, sweet heroes. I devoured *These Guarded Hearts* and *Lay It on Me* and *Sweet as Sugar Lake*, for which she won the country’s highest romance-novel award when she was twenty.

Delilah Park is the person who makes me think my journal scribbles could be something someday. But going to a book signing where the books being signed are romance novels means admitting I am someone who loves romance novels, which I stopped doing after that fateful ninth-grade essay contest.

And maybe admitting I am someone who is writing a romance novel too.

Here is my dilemma: my passion is, at best, someone else’s guilty pleasure. Most of the world takes any opportunity to belittle

this thing that centers women in a way most other media doesn't. Romance novels are a punch line, despite being a million-dollar industry. Even my parents can't find respect for them. My mom has called them "trash" more than once, and my dad tried to take a box of them to Goodwill last year, simply because I'd run out of space on my bookshelf and he thought I wouldn't miss them. Fortunately, I caught him on his way out the door.

These days, I have to hide most of my reading. I started writing my novel in secret, assuming I'd tell my parents at some point. But I'm a few chapters from the end, and they still don't know.

"The finest hazelnut latte in all of Seattle," Mercedes says as she presents it to me. The light catches the six piercings in her face, none of which I could pull off. "You working today?"

I shake my head. "Last day of school."

She holds a hand to her heart in mock nostalgia. "Ah, school. I remember it fondly. Or, at the very least, I remember what the bleachers looked like when I was behind them sneaking joints with my friends."

Mercedes won't charge me, but I drop a dollar bill into the tip jar anyway. I pass the kitchen as I leave, calling out a quick hello/goodbye to Colleen, the owner and head baker.

The traffic lights are out all along Forty-Fifth, making every intersection a four-way stop. School starts at 7:05. I'll be cutting it close, a fact that delights McNair, based on how often he's lighting up my phone. While I'm stopped, I voice-text Kirby and Mara to let them know I'm stuck in traffic, and I sing along with my

rainy-day soundtrack: the Smiths, always the Smiths. I have a new-wave-obsessed aunt who plays them nonstop when we spend Hanukkahs and Passovers at her house down in Portland. Nothing goes better with gloomy weather than Morrissey's lyrics.

I wonder how they'll sound in Boston, beating against my eardrums as I stroll through a snow-dusted campus in a peacoat, my hair tucked into a knit hat.

The red SUV in front of me inches forward. I inch forward. Tonight unfolds in my mind. I glide into the bookstore, head held high, none of that shoulder-scrunching my mom is always scolding me about. When I approach Delilah at the signing table, we trade compliments about each other's dresses, and I tell her how her books changed my life. By the end of our conversation, she finds me brimming with so much talent, she asks if she can mentor me.

I don't realize the car in front of me has slammed on its brakes until I'm crashing into it, hot coffee splashing down the front of my dress.

"Oh, *shit*." I take a few deep breaths after recovering from the shock of being thrown backward, trying to process what happened when my brain is stuck at an exclusive authors-only after-party Delilah invited me to. The harsh metal-on-metal sound is ringing in my ears, and cars behind me are honking. *I'm a good driver!* I want to tell them. I've never been in an accident, and I always go the speed limit. Maybe I can't parallel park, but despite present evidence to the contrary, I am a *good driver*. "Shit, shit, shit."

The honking continues. The SUV's driver sticks an arm out the window and motions me to follow them onto a residential street, so I do.

I fumble with my seat belt, coffee dripping down my chest and pooling in my lap. The driver stalks toward the back of his car, and the knot of dread in my stomach tightens.

I rear-ended the boy who dumped me a week before prom.

"I am so sorry," I say as I stumble out of my car, and then, because I didn't recognize it: "Um. Did you get a new car?"

Spencer Sugiyama scowls at me. "Last week."

I inspect Spencer inspecting the damage. With longish black hair obscuring half his face, he kneels next to his car, which is barely scratched. Mine has a mangled front bumper and a bent license plate. It's a used Honda Accord, gray and completely uninteresting, with an odd interior smell I've never been able to get rid of. But it's *mine*, paid for in full with my Two Birds One Scone money last summer.

"What the hell, Rowan?" Spencer, a second-chair clarinetist I partnered with on a history project earlier this year, used to look at me like I had all the answers. Like he was awed by me. Now his dark eyes seem filled with a mix of frustration—and relief, maybe, that we're no longer together. It gives me a surge of pleasure that he never got first chair. (And oh yes, he tried.)

"You think I did this on purpose?" Needless to say, the breakup was not a cordial one. "You stopped really abruptly!"

"It's a four-way stop! Why were you going so fast?"

Obviously, I don't mention Delilah. It's possible the accident was mostly my fault.

Spencer wasn't my first relationship, but he was my longest. I had a couple one-week boyfriends freshman and sophomore year, the kind of relationships that end over text because you're too awkward to make eye contact at school. At the end of junior year, I dated Luke Barrows, a tennis player who could make anyone laugh and liked partying a little too much. I thought I loved him, but I think what I really loved was how I felt around him: fun and wild and beautiful, a girl who liked five-paragraph essays and also fooling around in the back seat of a car. By the time school started in the fall, we'd broken up. He wanted to focus on tennis, and I was glad to have the extra time to spend on my college apps. We still say hi when we see each other in the halls.

Spencer, though—Spencer was complicated. I wanted him to be my perfect high school boyfriend, the guy I'd one day reminisce about with my friends over cocktails with scandalous names. I dreamed of that boyfriend all through middle school, assuming I'd get to high school and he'd be sitting behind me in English, tapping my shoulder and shyly asking to borrow a pen.

I was running out of time to find that boyfriend, and I thought if we spent enough time together, Spencer and I could get to that point. But he acted withdrawn, and it made me clingy. If I liked who I was with Luke, I hated who I was with Spencer. I hated feeling so insecure. The obvious solution was

break up with him, but I hung on, hoping things would change.

Spencer pulls his insurance card out of his wallet. “We’re supposed to swap info, right?”

I vaguely remember that from driver’s ed. “Right. Yeah.”

It wasn’t always terrible with Spencer. The first time we had sex, he held me for so long afterward, convinced me I was a precious, special thing. “Maybe we can still be friends,” he said when he broke up with me. A coward’s breakup. He wanted to get rid of me, but he didn’t want me to be mad at him. He did it at school, right before a student council meeting. Said he didn’t want to start college with a girlfriend. “Spencer and I just broke up,” I told McNair before we called the meeting to order. “So if you could not be vile to me for the next forty minutes, I would appreciate it.”

I’m not sure what I expected—that he’d congratulate Spencer? Tell me I deserved it? But his features softened into an expression I hadn’t ever seen and couldn’t name. “Okay,” he said. “I—I’m sorry.”

The apology sounded so foreign in his voice, but we started the meeting before I could linger on it.

“I really did hope we could stay friends,” Spencer says after we take photos of each other’s insurance cards.

“We are on Facebook.”

He rolls his eyes. “Not what I meant.”

“What does that even mean, though?” I lean against my car, wondering if now I’ll finally get closure. “Are we going to text each

other our college class schedules? See a movie together when we're home on break?"

A pause. "Probably not," he admits.

So that's a no on closure.

"We should get to school," Spencer says when I'm silent a beat too long. "We're already late, but they probably won't care on the last day."

Late. I don't even want to think about the McMessages waiting for me on my phone.

I give a little wave of my insurance card before tucking it back into my wallet. "I guess your people will call my people. Or whatever."

He speeds off before I can start my engine. My parents don't need to know about this yet, not while they're on deadline. Still shaky—from the impact or the conversation, I'm not sure—I try to relax my shoulders. There really is a lot of tension there.

If I were in a romance novel, I'd have gotten into a fender bender with the cute guy who owns a bar and also works part-time in construction, the kind of guy who's good with his hands. Most of the heroes in romance novels are good with their hands.

I convinced myself if I just waited long enough with Spencer, he would turn into that guy and what we had would turn into love. While I love romance, I've never believed in the concept of soul mates, which has always seemed a little like men's rights activism: not a real thing. Love isn't immediate or automatic; it takes effort and time and patience.

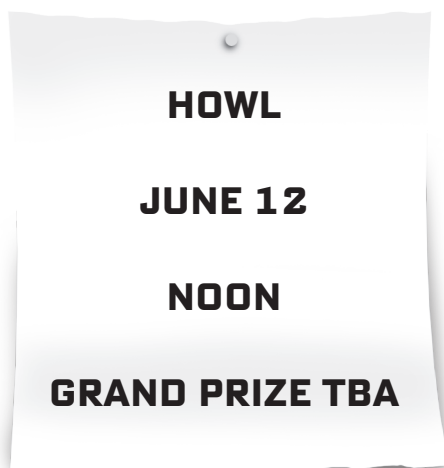
The truth of it was that I'd probably never have the kind of luck with love the women who live in fictional seaside towns do. But sometimes I get this strange feeling, an ache not for something I miss, but for something I've never known.

It starts raining again as I approach Westview High School because Seattle. Homeroom's already started, and I'll admit, my vanity is stronger than my need to be on time. I'm already late. A few more minutes won't matter.

When I reach the bathroom and get a clear view of myself in the mirror, I nearly gasp. The stain fully covers one and a half boobs. I run some soap and water on my dress, scrubbing at it with all the strength I can muster, but after five minutes, the stain is still very brown and all I've accomplished is groping myself in the first-floor bathroom.

It's not my perfect last-day outfit anymore, but it's all I have. I blot at the dampness with a paper towel so it looks a little less like I'm lactating and adjust my sweater so it hides the stain as best as possible. I mess with my bangs, finger-combing them to the right and then to the left. I can never decide whether to grow them out or keep them short. Right now they skim my eyebrows, just long enough for me to fidget with. Maybe I'll trim them for college, try a Bettie Page kind of look.

I'm almost done fidgeting when something catches my eye behind me in the mirror: a red poster with block letters.



Another thing that slipped my mind in the morning rush. Howl is a Westview High tradition for graduating seniors. It's a game that's part Assassin, part scavenger hunt. Players chase each other down while trying to decipher riddles that lead them all over Seattle. The first to complete the clues wins a cash prize. It's put on by the student council juniors every year as a send-off to that year's graduates, and last year McNair and I nearly murdered each other trying to organize it. Of course I'll play, but I can't think about it until after the assembly.

As I exit the bathroom, Ms. Grable, my sophomore and junior English teacher, hurries out of the teachers' lounge across the hall.

"Rowan!" she says, eyes lighting up. "I can't believe you're leaving us!"

Ms. Grable, who must only be in her late twenties, ensured our

reading list was majority women and authors of color. I loved her.

“All good things must come to an end,” I say. “Even high school.”

She laughs. “You are maybe one of five students of mine who’s ever felt that way. I shouldn’t tell you this, but”—she leans in, cups a conspiratorial hand over her mouth—“you and Neil were my favorite students.”

That is when my heart plummets to my toes. At Westview, I’ve always been packaged with McNair. We are never not mentioned in the same breath, Rowan versus Neil and Neil versus Rowan, year after year after year. I’ve observed everything from terror to sheer joy pass over a teacher’s face at the beginning of the year upon realizing they have both of us in their class. Most find our rivalry entertaining, pitting us against each other in debates and partnering us on projects. Part of the reason I want valedictorian so badly is that I want to end high school as myself, not half of a warring pair.

I force myself to smile at Ms. Grable. “Thanks.”

“You’re going to Emerson, right?” she asks, and I nod. “Your essays were always so insightful. Planning to follow in your parents’ footsteps?”

How difficult would it be to say yes?

While of course I’m worried about how people respond to romance novels, there’s another fear that pulls my shoulders into a shrug when people ask what I want to be when I grow up. As long as being a writer is a dream that stays in my head, I don’t have to face the reality of potentially not being good enough. In

my head, I'm my only critic. Out there, everyone is.

As soon as I declare myself a writer, there will be expectations that come with being Ilana and Jared's daughter. And if I somehow fail to meet them, if I'm messy and imperfect and still learning, the judgment would be harsher than if my parents were podiatrists or chefs or statisticians. Telling people means I think I might be okay at this—be *good* at this—and while I desperately want that to be true, I'm terrified of the possibility that I'm not.

At least no one expects me to know my major yet, so while I picked Emerson largely because of its great creative writing program, I've been telling people "I'm not sure yet" when they ask what I'm going to study. I never expected to want to follow in my parents' footsteps, but here I am, dreaming of running a finger along my name on a cover. Ideally in a glossy raised font.

"Maybe," I concede at last, which feels like a half-confession, but I justify it with the fact that I won't see Ms. Grable again after graduation. For someone who loves words, I'm occasionally not great at speaking them.

"If anyone could publish a book, it would be you! Unless Neil manages to beat you to it."

"I should get to class," I say as gently as I can.

"Of course, of course," she says, and wraps me in a hug before heading down the hall.

Today is full of so many lasts, and maybe most important is that it's the last day I can one-up McNair once and for all. As valedictorian, I'll end our academic tug-of-war. I will be Rowan Luisa

Roth, valedictorian of Westview High School, with a period at the end. No comma, no “and.” Just me.

My inner rule-follower guides me to the main office instead of homeroom. I’ll feel worse walking into class without a late pass, even on the last day. When I reach the office, I push open the door, square my shoulders—and come face-to-face with Neil McNair.



Rowan Roth versus Neil McNair: A Brief History

SEPTEMBER, FRESHMAN YEAR

The essay contest that started it all. It's announced the first week of school to welcome us back from summer break. I am used to being the best writer in class. It's who I've been all through middle school, the same way, I imagine, this skinny redhead with too many freckles has been at his school. First place, McNair and his beloved Fitzgerald, second place, Roth. I vow to beat him at whatever comes next.

NOVEMBER, FRESHMAN YEAR

The student council president visits homerooms to ask for volunteers for freshman-class rep. Leadership will look good on my future college apps, and I need scholarships, so I volunteer. So does McNair. I'm not sure if he actually wants it or if he just wants to further ruffle me. Nevertheless, I win by three votes.

FEBRUARY, SOPHOMORE YEAR

We are both forced to take gym for a physical education requirement, despite the hour we spend trying to convince the counselor we need the space in our schedules for our advanced classes instead. Neither of us can touch our toes, but McNair can do three pull-ups, while I can only do one and a

half. His arms have no definition whatsoever, so I don't understand how this is possible.

MAY, SOPHOMORE YEAR

McNair scores a perfect 1600 on the SAT, and I score a 1560. I retake it the next month and score 1520. I do not tell a soul.

JANUARY, JUNIOR YEAR

Our AP Chemistry teacher makes us lab partners. After a handful of arguments, chemical spills, and a (small) fire, which was maybe mostly my fault but I'll carry that with me to the grave, he separates us.

JUNE, JUNIOR YEAR

In the election for student council president, the vote is sliced perfectly down the middle. Neither of us concedes. Reluctantly, we become copresidents.

APRIL, SENIOR YEAR

Before college acceptances start rolling in, I challenge him to see who can rack up the most yeses. McNair suggests we compare percentages instead. Assuming we're both casting wide nets, I agree. I get into 7 of 10 schools I apply to. It's only after all the deadlines have passed that I learn McNair, crafty and overconfident as he is, applied to just one school.

He gets in.

7:21 a.m.

“ROWAN ROTH,” MY worst nightmare says from behind the front desk. “I got you something.”

My heart rate spikes, the way it always does before a sparring match with McNair. I’d forgotten he’s an office assistant (aka Suck-Up 101—please, even I’m better than that) during home-room. I’d been hoping to keep him confined to my phone until the assembly.

With his hands clasped in front of him, he looks like an evil king sitting on a throne made from the bones of his enemies. His auburn hair is damp from a morning shower, or maybe from the rain, and as predicted, he’s in one of his assembly-day suits: black jacket, white shirt, blue patterned tie with the crispest, tightest knot I’ve ever seen. Still, I manage to spot his flaws right away: his pants a half-inch too short, his sleeves a half-inch too long. A fingerprint smudge on the left lens of his glasses, one stubborn piece of hair behind his ear that won’t lie flat.

His face, though—his face is the worst part, his lips bent in a smirk he perfected after winning that ninth-grade essay contest.

Before I can respond, he reaches inside his jacket pocket and

tosses me a travel pack of Kleenex. Thank God I catch it, despite a serious lack of hand-eye coordination.

“You shouldn’t have,” I deadpan.

“Just looking out for my copresident on the last day of our term. What brings you to the office on this stormy morning?”

“You know why I’m here. Just give me a pass. Please.”

He furrows his brow. “What kind of pass, exactly, do you want?”

“You know what kind of pass.” When he shrugs, continuing to feign ignorance, I lower myself into a deep, dramatic bow. “O McNair, lord of the main office,” I say in a voice that oozes melodrama, intent on answering his question as obnoxiously as possible. If he’s going to turn this into a production, I’ll play along. After all, I only have a few more chances to mess with him. Might as well be ridiculous while I still can. “I humbly ask that you grant me one final request: a fucking late pass.”

He swivels his chair to grab a stack of green late slips from the desk drawer, moving at the pace of maple syrup on a thirty-degree day. Until I met McNair, I didn’t know patience could feel like a physical piece of me, something he stretches and twists whenever he has a chance.

“Was that your impression of Princess Leia in the first twenty-five minutes of *A New Hope*, before she realized she wasn’t actually British?” he asks. When I give him a puzzled look, he clucks his tongue, like my not getting the reference pains him on a molecular level. “I keep forgetting my great vintage *Star Wars* lines are wasted on you, Artoo.”

Because of my alliterative name, he nicknamed me Artoo, after R2-D2, and while I've never seen the movies, I get that R2-D2 is some kind of robot. It's clearly an insult, and his obsessive interest in the franchise has killed any desire I might have once had to watch it.

"Seems only fair when so many things are wasted on you," I say. "Like my time. By all means, go as slow as humanly possible."

Sabotage has been part of our rivalry nearly since the beginning, though it's never been malicious. There was the time he left his thumb drive plugged into a library computer and I filled it with dubstep music, the time he spilled the cafeteria's mystery chili on my extra-credit math assignment. And my personal favorite: the time I bribed the janitor with a signed set of my parents' books for her kids in exchange for McNair's locker combination. Watching him struggle with it after I changed it was priceless.

"Don't test me. I can go much slower." As though to prove it, he takes a full ten seconds to uncap a ballpoint pen. It's a real performance, and it takes all my willpower not to dive across the desk and snatch it from him. "I guess this means no perfect attendance award," he says as he writes my name.

Even his hands are dotted with freckles. Once when I was bored during a student council meeting, I tried to count every freckle on his face. The meeting ended when I hit one hundred, and I wasn't even done counting.

"All I want is valedictorian," I say, forcing what I hope is a sweet smile. "We both know the lesser awards don't really mean

anything. But it'll be a nice consolation prize for you. You can put the certificate on your wall next to the dartboard with my face on it."

"How do you know what my room looks like?"

"Hidden cameras. Everywhere."

He snorts. I crane my neck to see what he's writing next to "reason for tardiness."

Attempted to dye her dress brown. Failed spectacularly.

"Is that really necessary?" I ask, pulling my cardigan tight across my dress and the latte stain that shouts *here's where my boobs are!* "I was stuck in traffic. All the lights in my neighborhood were out." I don't tell him about the fender bender.

He checks the box marked UNEXCUSED and tears the pass from the pad—ripping it down the middle. "Oops," he says in a tone that suggests he doesn't feel bad at all. "Guess I have to write another one."

"Cool. I don't have anywhere to be."

"Artoo, it's our last day," he says, holding a hand to his heart. "We should cherish these precious moments we have together. In fact"—he reaches inside his jacket pocket for a fancy pen—"this would be a great time to practice my calligraphy."

"You're not serious."

Unblinking, he peers at me over the top of his thin oval glasses. "Like Ben Solo, I never joke about calligraphy."

Surely this is my villain origin story. He presses the pen's tip to the paper and begins forming the letters of my name again, his

glasses slipping down the bridge of his nose. McNair's Concentration Face is half hilarious, half terrifying: teeth gritted and jaw tight, mouth scrunched slightly to one side. The suit makes him look so rigid, so stiff, like an accountant or an insurance salesman or a low-level manager at a company that makes software for other companies. I've never seen him at a party. I can't imagine him relaxing enough to watch a movie. Not even *Star Wars*.

"Really impressive. Great job." I say it sarcastically, but my name actually does look good in that delicate black ink. I could picture it on a book cover.

He passes the slip to me but holds it tight, preventing me from escaping. "Wait a second. I want to show you something."

He lets go of the slip so suddenly that I stumble backward, then hops off his chair and heads out of the office. I'm annoyed but curious, so I follow him. He stops in front of the school trophy case, gives it a theatrical wave of his arm.

"I've been here for four years, so I have, in fact, seen this trophy case before," I say.

But he's pointing at one particular plaque, engraved with names and graduation dates. With his index finger, he taps the glass. "Donna Wilson, 1986. Westview's first valedictorian. Do you know what she ended up doing?"

"Saved herself four years of agony by graduating three decades before you enrolled here?"

"Close. She became the US ambassador to Thailand."

"How is that close?"

He waves his hand. “Steven Padilla, 1991. Won a Nobel Prize for physics. Swati Joshi, 2006. Olympic gold medalist for pole vault.”

“If you’re trying to impress me with your knowledge of past valedictorians, it’s working.” I step closer to him, batting my lashes. “I am so turned on right now.”

It’s over the top, I know, but this has always been the easiest way to ruffle this seemingly unruffle-able guy. He and his last girlfriend, Bailey, didn’t even acknowledge each other at school, and I wondered what they were like outside of it. When I thought about him shedding his stony exterior long enough for a make-out session, I felt a strange little tremor in my belly. That was how horrific I found the idea of someone kissing Neil McNair.

Just as I hoped, he blushes. His skin is so fair beneath his freckles that he’s never able to hide how he really feels.

“What I’m trying to say,” he says after clearing his throat, “is Westview High has a history of successful valedictorians. What would it say for you—Rowan Roth, romance-novel critic? It’s not quite at the same level as the others, is it?”

I’ve told Kirby and Mara I don’t really read them anymore, but McNair brings up my romance novels whenever he can. His derogatory tone is the reason I keep them to myself these days.

“Or maybe you’d graduate to writing one of your own,” he continues. “More romance novels—exactly what the world needs.”

His words push me backward until his freckles blur together. I don’t want him to know how much this infuriates me. Even if I

get to the point where “romance author” is attached to my name, people like McNair won’t hesitate to tear me down. To laugh at the thing I love.

“It must be sad,” I say, “to despise romance so much that the thought of someone else finding joy in it is so repulsive to you.”

“I thought you and Sugiyama broke up.”

“I—what?”

“The joy you find in romance. I assumed that was Spencer Sugiyama.”

I feel my face heat up. That is . . . not where I thought this was going.

“No. Not Spencer.” Then I go for a low blow: “You look different today, McNair. Did your freckles multiply overnight?”

“You’re the one with the hidden cameras.”

“Alas, they’re not HD.” I refrain from making a dirty joke I really, really want to make. I flash the green slip in front of his face. “Since you were kind enough to write me a late pass, I should probably, you know, use it.”

Last homeroom. I hope the walk to class is enough to get my blood flowing normally again. My adrenaline always works overtime when I’m talking to McNair. The stress he’s caused me has probably sliced a half-decade off my life span.

With a nod, he says, “End of an era. You and me, I mean.” He wags his index finger between the two of us, his voice softer than it was ten seconds ago.

I’m quiet for a moment, wondering if today carries the same

sense of finality for him that it does for me. “Yeah,” I say. “I guess so.”

Then he makes a shooping motion with one hand, snapping me out of my nostalgia and replacing it with the contempt that’s been both a warm blanket and a bed of nails. A comfort and a curse.

Goodbye, goodbye, goodbye.

