

SEE
YOU
YESTERDAY

ALSO BY RACHEL LYNN SOLOMON

You'll Miss Me When I'm Gone

Our Year of Maybe

Today Tonight Tomorrow

We Can't Keep Meeting Like This

SEE
YOU



YESTERDAY

RACHEL LYNN SOLOMON

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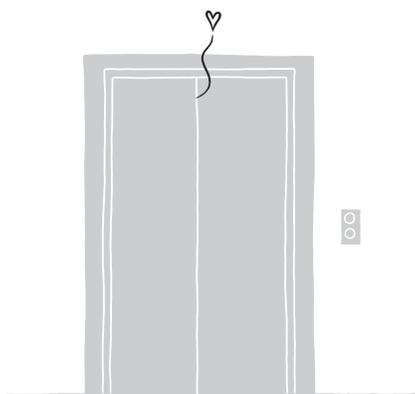
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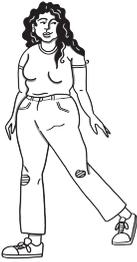
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*For Rachel Griffin and Tara Tsai—
I'd meet you at the bookstore café
again and again and again*



If we belong to each other, we belong
anyplace, anywhere, anytime

—NENA



WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 21

DAY ONE

|

Chapter 1

"THIS HAS TO BE A MISTAKE."

I pull the extra-long twin sheets up over my ears and mash my face into the pillow. It's too early for voices. Much too early for an accusation.

As my mind unfuzzes, the reality hits me: *there's someone in my room.*

When I fell asleep last night after testing the limits of my dorm's all-you-can-eat pasta bar, which involved a stealth mission to sneak some bowls upstairs that were forbidden from leaving the dining hall, I was alone. And questioning my life choices. All those lectures about campus safety, the little red canister of pepper spray my mom made me get, and now there is a stranger in my room. Before seven a.m. On the first day of classes.

"It's not a mistake," says another voice, a bit quieter than the first, I imagine out of respect for the blanket lump that is me. "We underestimated our capacity this year, and we had to make a few last-minute changes. Most freshmen are in triples."

“And you didn’t think it would be helpful for me to know that before moving in?”

That voice, the first voice—it no longer sounds like a stranger. It’s familiar. Posh. Entitled. Except . . . it can’t possibly belong to her. It’s a voice I thought I left back in high school, along with all the teachers who heaved sighs of relief when the principal handed me my diploma. *Thank god we’re done with her*, my newspaper advisor probably said at a celebratory happy hour, clinking his champagne glass with my math teacher’s. *I’ve never been more ready to retire.*

“Let’s talk out in the hall,” the second person says. A moment later, the door slams, sending something crashing to the carpet.

I roll over and crack one wary eye. The whiteboard I hung on Sunday, back when I was still dreaming about the notes and doodles my future roommate and I would scribble back and forth to each other, is on the floor. A designer duffel bag has claimed the other bed. I fight a shiver—half panic, half cold. The tree blocking the window promises a lack of both heat and natural light.

Olmsted Hall is a freshmen-only dorm and the oldest on campus, scheduled for demolition next summer. “You’re so lucky,” the ninth-floor RA, Paige, told me when I moved in. “You’re in the last group of students to ever live here.” That luck oozes, sometimes even literally, from the greige walls, wobbly bookshelves, and eerie communal shower with flickering light bulbs and suspicious puddles *everywhere*. Home sweet concrete prison.

I was the first one here, and when two, three, four days passed without an appearance from Christina Dearborn of Lincoln, Nebraska, the roommate I’d been assigned, I worried there’d been a

mix-up and I'd been given a single. My mom and her college roommate are still friends, and I've always hoped the same thing would happen for me. A single would be another stroke of bad luck after several years of misfortune, though a tiny part of me wondered if maybe it was for the best. Maybe that was what the RA had meant.

The door opens, and Paige reenters with the girl who made high school hell for me.

Several thousand freshmen, and I'm going to be sleeping five feet from my sworn nemesis. The school's so huge I assumed we'd never run into each other. It's not just bad luck—it has to be some kind of cosmic joke.

"Hi, roomie," I say, forcing a smile as I sit up in bed, shoving my Big Jewish Hair out of my face and hoping it's less chaotic than it tends to be in the mornings.

Lucie Lamont, former editor in chief of the *Island High School Navigator*, levels me with an icy glare. She's pretentious and petite and terrifying, and I fully believe she could kill a man with her bare hands. "Barrett Bloom." Then she collects herself, softening her glare, as though worried how much of that conversation I overheard. "This is . . . definitely a surprise."

It's one of the nicer things people have said about me lately.

I should be wearing something other than owl-patterned pajama shorts and the overpriced University of Washington T-shirt I bought from the campus bookstore. Medieval chain mail, maybe. An orchestra should be playing something epic and foreboding.

"Aw, Luce, I've missed you, too. It's been, what, three months?"

With one hand she tightens her grip on her matching designer suitcase, and with the other she white-knuckles her purse. Her

auburn ponytail is coming loose—I can't imagine the stress my appearance has caused her, poor thing. "Three months," she echoes. "And now we're here. Together."

"Well. I'll leave you two to get acquainted!" Paige chirps. "Or—reacquainted." With that, she gives us an exaggerated wave and escapes outside. *If there's anything you need, day or night, just come knock on my door!* she said the first night when she tricked us into playing icebreaker games by making us microwaved s'mores. College is a web of lies.

I hook a thumb toward the door. "So *she's* great. Amazing meditation skills." I hope it'll make Lucie laugh. It does not.

"This is unreal." She gazes around the room, seeming about as impressed with it as I was when I moved in. Her eyes linger on the stack of magazines I shoved onto the shelf above my laptop. It's possible I didn't need to bring all of them, but I wanted my favorite articles close by. For inspiration. "I was supposed to have a single in Lamphere Hall," she says. "They totally sprung this on me. I'm going to talk to the RD later and try to sort this out."

"You might have had better luck if you moved in this weekend, when everyone was supposed to."

"I was in St. Croix. There was a tropical storm, and we couldn't get a flight back." It's wild that Lucie Lamont, heir to her parents' media company, can get away with saying these things, and yet I was the pariah of the *Navigator*.

Also wild: the fact that for two years, she and I were something like friends.

She sets her purse down on her desk, nearly knocking over one of my pasta bowls. Spinach ravioli, from the look of it.

“There’s an all-you-can-eat pasta bar.” I get up to collect the bowls and stack them on my side of the room. “I thought they would cut me off after five bowls, but nope, when they say ‘all you can eat,’ they aren’t messing around.”

“It smells like an Olive Garden.”

“I was going for a ‘when you’re here, you’re family’ vibe.”

I take back what I said about killing a man with her bare hands. I’m pretty sure Lucie Lamont could do it with just her eyes.

“I swear, I’m usually not this messy,” I continue. “It’s only been me for the past few days, and all the freedom must have gone to my head. I thought I was rooming with a girl from Nebraska, but then she never showed up, so . . .”

We both go silent. Every time I fantasized about college, my roommate was someone who’d end up becoming a lifelong friend. We’d go on girls’ trips and yoga retreats and give toasts at each other’s weddings. I’d be shocked if Lucie Lamont went to my funeral.

She drops into her plastic desk chair and starts the breathing techniques she taught the *Nav* staff. Deep inhales, long exhales. “If this is really happening, the two of us as roommates,” she says, “even if it’s just until they move me somewhere else, then we’ll need some ground rules.”

Feeling frumpy next to Lucie and her couture tracksuit, I throw on the knitted gray cardigan hanging lopsided across my own chair. Unfortunately, I think it only ups my frump factor, but at least I’m no longer shivering. I’ve always felt *less* next to Lucie, like when we teamed up on an article about the misogyny of our middle school’s dress code for the paper we were convinced was the epitome of

hard-hitting journalism. *By Lucie Lamont*, read the byline, our teacher elevating Lucie's status above my own, and in tiny type: *with Barrett Bloom*. Thirteen-year-old Lucie had been outraged on my behalf. But whatever bond had once existed between us, it was gone by the end of ninth grade.

"Fine, I'll bring back guys to hook up with only every other night, and I'll put this sock on the door so you know the room is occupied." I reach over to the closet, which is just wider than an ironing board, and toss her a pair of knee socks that say RINGMASTER OF THE SHITSHOW. Well—just one sock. The ninth-floor dryer ate one yesterday, and I'm still in mourning. "And I'll only masturbate when I'm positive you're asleep."

Lucie just blinks a few times, which could be interpreted as lack of appreciation for my shitshow sock, a visceral fear of the *M* word, or horror that someone would want to hook up with me. Like she didn't hear about what happened after prom last year, or laugh about it in the newsroom with the rest of the *Nav*. "Do you ever think before you speak?"

"Honestly? Not often."

"I was thinking more along the lines of keeping the room clean. I'm allergic to dust. No pasta bowls or clothes or anything on the floor." With a sandaled foot, she points underneath my desk. "No overflowing trash bins."

I bite down hard on the inside of my cheek, and when I'm quiet a moment too long, Lucie lifts her thin eyebrows.

"Jesus, Barrett, I really don't think it's too much to ask."

"Sorry. I was thinking before I spoke. Was that not the right amount of thinking? Could you maybe set a timer for me next time?"

"I'm getting a migraine," she says. "And god help me for needing to acknowledge this, but I feel like it's common courtesy not to . . . you know. Indulge in that particular brand of self-love when someone else is in the room. Sleeping or not."

"I can be pretty quiet," I offer.

Lucie looks like she might combust. It's too easy, really. "I didn't realize this was so important to you."

"It's a very normal thing to need to navigate as roommates! I'm looking out for both of us."

"Hopefully by next week, we won't be roommates anymore." She moves to her suitcase and unzips a compartment to free her laptop, then uncoils the charger and bends down to search for an outlet. Sheepishly, I show her that the sole outlets are underneath my desk, and we discover there's no way for her to type at her desk without turning the charger into a tightrope. With a groan, she returns to her suitcase. "I can only imagine what your priorities would have been as editor in chief. We're lucky we dodged that one."

With that, she unpacks a familiar wooden nameplate and sets it on her desk. EDITOR IN CHIEF, it declares. Mocking me.

It was ridiculous to think I had a chance at editor when asking people if I could interview them sometimes felt like asking if I could give them an amateur root canal.

It doesn't matter, I tell myself. Later today, I'll interview for one of the freshman reporter positions on the *Washingtonian*. No one here will care about the *Nav* or the stories I wrote, and they won't care about Lucie's nameplate, either.

"Look. I'm also not entirely enthused about this," I say. "But

maybe we could put everything behind us?” I don’t want to carry this into college, even if it’s followed me here. Maybe we’ll never be the yoga-retreat type of friends, but we don’t have to be enemies. We could simply coexist.

“Sure,” Lucie says, and I brighten, believing her. “We can put your attempt to sabotage our school behind us. We’ll braid our hair and host parties in our room and we’ll laugh when we tell people you gleefully annihilated an entire sports team and ruined Blaine’s scholarship chances.”

Okay, she’s exaggerating. Mostly. Her ex-boyfriend Blaine, one of Island’s former star tennis players, ruined his own scholarship chances. All I did was point a finger.

Besides—I’m pretty sure the Blaines of the world won in the end anyway.

“I just have one more question,” I say, shoving aside the memory before it can sink its claws in me. “Is it uncomfortable to sit down?”

She looks down at the chair, at her clothes, forehead creased in confusion. “What?”

Lucie Lamont may be a bitch, but unfortunately for her, so am I.

“With that stick up your ass. Is it uncomfortable to—”

I’m still cackling when she slams the door.



College was supposed to be a fresh start.

It’s what I’ve been looking forward to since the acceptance email showed up in my inbox, holding out hope that a true reinvention,

the kind I'd never be able to pull off in high school, was just around the corner. And despite the roommate debacle, I'm determined to love it. New year, new Barrett, better choices.

After a quick shower, during which I narrowly avoid falling in a puddle I'm only half certain is water, I put on my favorite high-waisted jeans, my knitted cardigan, and a vintage Britney Spears tee that used to be my mom's. The jeans slide easily over my wide hips and don't pinch my stomach as much as usual—this has to be a sign from the universe that I've endured enough hardship for one day. I've never been small, and I'd cry if I had to get rid of these jeans, with their exposed-button fly and buttery softness. My dark ringlets, which grow out as opposed to down, are scrunched and sulfate-free-moussed. I tried fighting them with a straightener for years to no avail, and now I must work with my BJH instead of against it. Finally, I grab my oval wire-rimmed glasses, which I fell in love with because they made me look like I wasn't from this century, and sometimes living in another century was the most appealing thing I could imagine.

It was an understatement when I told Lucie the freedom had gone to my head. Every other hour, I've been hit with this feeling that's a mix of opportunity and terror. UW is only thirty minutes from home without traffic, and though I imagined myself here for years, I didn't think I'd feel this adrift once I moved in. Since Sunday, I've been shuffling from one welcome activity to another, avoiding anyone who went to Island, waiting for college to change my life.

But here's something to be optimistic about: it doesn't seem to matter if you eat alone in the dining hall, even as I remind myself

that I'm New Barrett, who's going to find some friends to laugh with over all-you-can-eat pasta and the Olmsted Eggstravaganza even if it kills her.

After breakfast, I cross through the quad, with its quaint historic buildings and cherry trees that won't bloom until spring, slackliners and skateboarders already claiming their space. This has always been my favorite spot on campus, the perfect collegiate snapshot. Past the quad is Red Square, packed with food trucks and clubs and, in one corner, a group of swing dancers. Eight in the morning seems a little early for dancing, but I give them a *you do you* tilt of my head regardless.

Then I make a fatal mistake: eye contact with a girl tabling by herself in front of Odegaard Library.

"Hi!" she calls. "We're trying to raise awareness about the Mazama pocket gopher."

I stop. "The what?"

When she grins at me, it becomes clear I've walked right into her trap. She's tall, brown hair in a topknot tied with UW ribbons: purple and gold. "The Mazama pocket gopher. They're native to Pierce and Thurston Counties and only found in Washington State. More than ninety percent of their habitat has been destroyed by commercial development."

A flyer is thrust into my hands.

"He's adorable," I say, realizing the same image is printed on her T-shirt. "That face!"

"Doesn't he deserve to eat as much grass as his little heart desires?" She taps the paper. "This is Guillermo. He could fit in the palm of your hand. We're hosting a letter-writing campaign to local government

officials this afternoon at three thirty, and we'd love to see you there."

I'm annoyed by what *we'd love to see you there* does to my camaraderie-deprived soul. "Oh—sorry," I say. "It's not that I don't care about, um, pocket gophers, but I can't make it." My interview with the *Washingtonian's* editor in chief is at four o'clock, after my last class.

When I try to hand her back the flyer, she shakes her head. "Keep it. Do some research. They need our help."

So I tuck it into my back pocket, promising her I will.

The physics building is much farther away than it looked on the campus map I have pulled up on my phone and keep sneaking glances at, even though every third person I pass is doing the same thing. It wouldn't be as bad if I were excited about the class. I've been planning to switch out—registration was a nightmare and everything filled up so quickly, so I grabbed one of the first open classes I saw—but damn it, New Barrett is a rule follower, so here I am, trudging across campus to Physics 101. Monday-Wednesday-Friday, eight thirty a.m.

My T-shirt is pasted to my back and my perfect jeans' perfect buttons are digging into my stomach by the time I spot the building. Still, I force myself to remain hopeful. This probably isn't an omen. I don't think omens are usually this sweaty.

In my pocket, my phone buzzes just as I'm walking up the front steps.

Mom: How do I love thee? Joss and I are wishing you SO MUCH LUCK today!

The text is time-stamped forty-five minutes ago, which I attribute to the campus's sketchy service, and there's a picture attached:

my mom and her girlfriend, Jocelyn, in the matching plush robes I gave them for Hanukkah last year, toasting me with mugs of coffee.

My mom's water broke in her sophomore year British Poetry class, and as a result, I was named after Elizabeth Barrett Browning, most famous for *How do I love thee? Let me count the ways*. College is where the two best things in my mom's life happened: me and the business degree that enabled her to open the stationery store that's supported us for years. She's always told me how much I'm going to love college, and I've held tight to the hope that at least one of these forty thousand people is bound to find me charming instead of unpleasant, intriguing instead of off-putting.

"I'm just so excited for you, Barrett," my mom said when she helped me move in. I wanted to cling to her skirt and let her drag me back to the car, back to Mercer Island, back to the HOW DO I LOVE THEE? cross-stitch hanging in my bedroom. Because even though I'd been lonely in high school, at least that loneliness was familiar. The unknown is always scarier, and maybe that's why it was so easy to pretend I didn't care when the entire school decided I wasn't to be trusted, after the *Navigator* story that changed everything. "You'll see. These four or five years—but please don't get pregnant—are going to be the best of your life."

God, I really hope she's right.

Chapter 2

PHYSICS 101: WHERE EVERYTHING (AND EVERYONE) Has Potential, declares the PowerPoint. Beneath the text is an image of a duck saying “Quark!” I can appreciate a good pun, but two on one slide might be a cry for help.

The lecture hall is thick with the scent of hair products and coffee, everyone chattering away about their class schedules and the petitions they signed in Red Square. The professor is tinkering with a cluster of cables behind the podium. It’s one of the larger auditoriums on campus and fits nearly three hundred students, though so far it’s only a quarter full. Or three-quarters empty, but I’m trying not to be a pessimist this year.

I’ve never been a back-of-the-classroom person, despite how much some of my old teachers might have wished I’d been, so I climb the stairs and pause by an empty seat at the end of the fifth row, next to a tall, thin Asian guy glaring at his laptop.

“Hey,” I say, still a little out of breath. “Are you saving this for anyone?”

“It’s all yours,” he says in a flat voice, without even looking up from his screen.

Yay, a friend.

I strip off my sweater and take out my computer, and I must make some amount of noise while doing this because the guy lets out a low hum of a sigh.

“Do you know the Wi-Fi password?” I ask.

Still no eye contact. Even the floppy collar of his plaid red flannel looks thoroughly annoyed by me. “On the board.”

“Oh. Thanks.”

Fortunately, I don’t have any additional opportunities to bother him before the professor, a middle-aged Asian woman in a tangerine blazer with black hair cropped to her chin, switches on the podium mic. Eighty thirty on the dot. “Good morning,” she says. “I’m Dr. Sumi Okamoto, and I’d like to welcome you to the spectacular world of physics.”

I open a fresh Word doc and start typing. New Barrett, better Barrett, takes notes even for a class she’s not sold on yet.

“I was nineteen when physics entered my life,” she continues, her gaze flicking up and down the rows of the auditorium. “It was my last semester before I needed to declare a major, and I was stressed, to put it lightly. I’d never considered myself a science person. I started college entirely unsure of what I’d study, and my introductory class was life-changing. Something clicked for me in a way it hadn’t in my other classes. There was poetry to physics, a beauty in learning to understand the world around me.”

There’s a clear sincerity in the way she speaks. The class is rapt, and I’m half compelled to stick it out.

“This course is going to be hard—”

Welp, never mind.

“—but that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t reach out if you need help,” she says. “This may be an intro class, but I still expect you to take it seriously. I have tenure—I don’t have to teach 101 classes. In fact, most people in my position wouldn’t touch this class with a ten-foot pendulum.” Laughter, I assume from the people who get the joke. “But I do, and I only teach it one quarter a year. Physics 101 is typically a survey course for non-science majors—well, not the way I teach it. Some of you are here because you’re hoping to major in physics. Some of you are probably just here for a science credit. Whatever the reason, what I want you to take away from this class is the ability to keep asking questions. To wonder *why*. Sure, I’m not going to complain if this class ends up being some small part of your journey to, say, a PhD in physics.” She allows herself a chuckle at that. “But I’ll consider myself successful if I’ve gotten you to think about the *whys* of our universe more than you did prior to today.

“Moving on to some basic housekeeping: this university has a zero-tolerance policy for plagiarism. . . .”

“You’re taking notes on this?” the guy next to me asks, freezing my hands on the keyboard. I stare down at what I’ve written. *Something about a pendulum. Questions: good. Course: hard. Plagiarism: bad.*

“Are you looking at my screen?” I hiss. “I’m trying to pay attention. You’re the one who’s been on Reddit this whole time. I think”—I crane my neck—“r/BreadStapledToTrees will be okay without you.”

“So you were looking at *my* screen.”

I slant my hand into the sliver of space between our seats. “It’s impossible not to.”

“Then I’m sure you know it’s a very creative and uplifting subreddit.”

Dr. Okamoto is heading up the stairs on the opposite side of the hall, passing out the course syllabus.

“I don’t really need one,” I say when my delightful neighbor hands one to me, though I take it anyway. “I’m switching out.” Alas, he must know that despite the undeniable spark between us, our love may not be able to withstand the separation.

He actually laughs at this, a gruff under-his-breath sound. “All that note-taking, and you’re switching out?”

“I took AP Physics last year, so.” And got a two on the exam, which he doesn’t need to know.

“Sorry, I didn’t realize I was in the presence of a former AP Physics student.” He taps the syllabus. “Then I’m sure you already know all about electromagnetism. And quantum phenomena.”

This guy must have also gone to Lucie Lamont’s School of the Outrageously Uptight and majored in Taking Everything Personally. I can’t think of any other explanation for why he’s so combative at 8:47 in the morning. In this economy? Who has the energy?

“You know, my brain’s still waking up, so I’m going to have to take a rain check.”

He looks unimpressed. His ears, I’ve noticed, stick out just a little. “My—Dr. Okamoto said she only teaches this class once a year. There’s a waiting list. For physics majors.”

“Which I imagine is what you are,” I say.

“Let me guess: you’re undecided.”

I’m about to tell him that I have in fact decided, I just haven’t declared it yet, but Dr. Okamoto is back at the podium and launching into today’s lecture, which is all about what physics is and what physics isn’t.

“I’m not the kind of professor who’s satisfied with talking *at* my students for fifty minutes straight,” she says. “Class participation is encouraged, even if you don’t have the right answer. In fact, much of the time there may not even be a right answer, let alone *one* right answer.” She gives us a Cheshire-cat grin. “And this is the moment when I pray to Newton, Galileo, and Einstein that more than two of you did the reading I emailed about last week. Let’s start with the absolute basics. Who can tell me what physics is the study of?”

The reading she emailed about last week. Which I imagine is sitting in the school email inbox I haven’t checked yet because there was a mix-up with another B. Bloom, and UW only assigned me a new username yesterday: *babloom*, which I believe is the sound one makes upon realizing they haven’t done the assigned reading.

The guy next to me flings his arm into the air like he’s a kindergarten desperate to use the bathroom. If I can’t get into another class right away, I am definitely picking a different seat next time. “She’s been taking really meticulous notes,” he says. “I’d be curious to hear what she has to say.”

And he’s pointing at *me*.

What the fresh hell?

The professor throws him an odd look and then says, “All right. You—name, please?”

Shit. I consider giving a fake name, but the only thing that

comes to mind is Namey McNameface. I'd kill at improv. "Uh. Barrett. Barrett Bloom."

"Hello, Barrett Bloom." She strides across the stage, leaving the mic on the podium. Her voice is strong enough to carry without it. "What is physics the study of? Assuming, of course, that you did the reading."

"Well . . ." That two in AP Physics is doing nothing for me. I adjust my glasses, as though seeing better will somehow illuminate the answer. "The study of physical objects?" Even as I say it, I know it's not right. We studied plenty of things last year that were intangible. "And also . . . nonphysical objects?"

Someone behind me muffles a laugh, but Dr. Okamoto holds up a hand. "Could you get more specific?"

"Truthfully, I'm not sure I can."

"That's why we're starting here. Miles, did you want to expand on that?"

The guy next to me scoots to the edge of his seat. Of course the professor already knows his name. I bet he got here early, brought her coffee and a muffin, told her how much he loved the assigned reading. "Physics is the study of matter and energy," he says smoothly, words slicked with confidence, "and how they relate to each other. It's used to understand how the universe behaves and predict how it might behave in the future."

"Perfect," Dr. Okamoto says, and I can practically feel the heat of how pleased Miles is with himself.

By the end of class, which Dr. Okamoto ends at 9:20 exactly, my neck aches from forcing myself to look straight ahead the whole time, never to my right.

Miles takes his time putting everything into his backpack. PHYSICS MATTERS, says one of the stickers on his laptop. There really is no shortage of puns about this branch of science.

“You didn’t go to Island High School, did you?” I ask. It’s possible I just don’t remember him and he’s carrying around the same grudge most of my classmates did.

“No. West Seattle.” Ah. A city kid.

“I don’t know what I did to offend you, aside from gently insinuating that I am not in love with physics, but there’s a seventy percent chance my roommate is going to slip Nair into my shampoo later, so it’s been a bit of a rough day. And what you did kind of made it worse.”

His face scrunches in this strange way, dark eyes unblinking. “Yeah. Me too,” he says quietly, folding a hand through a wave of dark hair. “The rough day, I mean. Not the Nair.”

“I’m sure it was a real challenge,” I say, “deciding which seat would best position you as the likeliest candidate for suck-up of the year.”

“And yet you’re the one who sat next to me.”

“A mistake I won’t make again.” I grab my backpack and narrow my eyes at him, waiting for his façade to crack. I should be relieved—I’ve found the one other person who probably has more trouble making friends than I do. I’m no stranger to hostile, but this much, this early, and from someone I don’t know? That’s new. “Well. I want to say see you in class on Friday, but I’m on my way to see an advisor, so odds are this is the last time our paths will cross.” I flutter my hand toward the classroom. “Have a great time understanding the universe.”



Another thing college has an excess of: lines. In the dining hall, in the bathroom, in the freshman counseling center as all of us who messed up during registration wait to hear our fates. When I finally get to the front, I have to fill out a form and check my *babloom* email to see whether it's been approved.

My two-hour afternoon class is a freshman English requirement taught by a bored-looking but casually hot TA who spends half the time diagramming sentences. I get the feeling most professors aren't as lively as Dr. Okamoto, which makes me feel a little guilty about switching out but not guilty enough to stay.

What I've really been waiting for is my *Washingtonian* interview, since journalism classes filled up fast with upperclassmen and I may not have the chance to take any until later this year. The journalism building is just off the quad, near Olmsted Hall, which seems like a promising sign. On my way there, I watch a skateboarder ignoring the NO SKATEBOARDING signs in Red Square crash into the group of swing dancers, and in true conflict-averse Pacific Northwest fashion, all of them end up apologizing to one another.

I climb three flights of steep stairs and accumulate three times more sweat than I'd like before reaching the newsroom on the top floor. My phone tells me it's seventy-five degrees outside, unseasonably warm for late September in Seattle. I have to stop in the bathroom to make sure my makeup hasn't melted off my face.

The newsroom door is open and the place is already boiling, despite a few fans going. Inside are several pods of computers divided by newspaper section, with the fancier equipment in one

corner for the videographers and the larger monitors for designers in the middle of the room. And then there are the walls, painted orange and scribbled over with Sharpie graffiti I learned the history of during the info session I went to yesterday. If I hadn't already committed myself to working for this paper, the walls would have done it. Every piece of writing is a quote attributed, without context, to someone who used to work for the *Washingtonian*, and at least a third of them are sexual. The newsroom rule is that if you say something someone else thinks is worthy, they yell out, "Put it on the wall!" It immediately became a dream of mine: to say something so witty that it got immortalized in Sharpie.

"Hi," I say awkwardly to no one in particular. "I'm here for an interview with Annabel Costa? The editor in chief?"

A girl with a blond pixie cut hovering over a designer's computer swivels her head toward me. "Barrett? I remember you from the info sesh! You were the one who asked all the questions."

I fight a grimace. "Sorry about that."

"Oh gosh, don't apologize! Asking questions is, like, sixty percent of being a reporter. You're already doing great."

She leads me into an office on one side of the room and tucks her long black dress underneath her as she sits down. The dress is simple, and she's wearing large tortoiseshell glasses, no makeup. And yet there's something about her that feels so much older than a junior or senior. More sophisticated, like she's had the time to figure out the true essence of Annabel Costa. There's a warmth to her that no one has shown me in a while—not anyone at Island, not Lucie, not physics stan Miles. It puts me at ease right away.

"You know the basics from yesterday, yeah?" Annabel says. "We

used to be daily, but now we're Mondays and Wednesdays because of budget cuts. We usually bring on a half dozen new reporters every fall quarter, depending on what our staff looks like for each section." She leans back in her chair to see if the window behind her will open any further and sighs when it won't. "These interviews are always more fun when they're a little casual. Informal. I'm not going to sit here and ask you to tell me where you see yourself in five years. I have your résumé and the links to stories you did for"—she checks it—"the *Navigator*. Really impressive. You wrote . . . almost fifty articles in four years? For a monthly paper?" She lets out a low whistle.

"I didn't have many friends," I say, and her laugh is worth the drag of my own self-esteem.

"What initially drew you to journalism?" She wrinkles her nose, shoves her glasses higher. "Sorry, I guess that's one of those typical interview questions, but I swear, I really am curious!"

I smile back at her. Annabel and I could be coworkers—we could be *friends*, even.

"As we've already established, I'm extremely obnoxious. It's a natural fit." She laughs again, and I continue. "When I was little, my mom and I would geek out over celebrity profiles, the kind that would make you see someone in a completely different light."

Some of my favorites: a decade-old interview of Chris Evans in *GQ* that makes the reader question whether the writer had an intimate relationship with him. An oral history of *Legally Blonde*. And of course "Frank Sinatra Has a Cold" by Gay Talese, arguably the most impactful piece of pop-culture journalism. Sinatra refused to speak with him, but Talese followed him around for three months regardless, simply observing, talking to anyone close to Sinatra who'd allow it.

The result was a piece of narrative writing that rocked the journalism world—a vivid, personal story that read like fiction but wasn't.

“I love stories that take someone untouchable and make them *real*,” I continue. “There’s so much hidden beneath the surface most of us don’t get to see on a regular basis.”

None of this is a lie, but it’s hiding an uncomfortable truth: I’ve never known how to talk to people in the way that comes easily to others. My whole life, I’ve been closer to my mom than to anyone else. In elementary school, I used that to avoid making other friends: *I have my mom; I don’t need to hang out with other ten-year-olds!* Given she had me so young, my mom didn’t fit in with the other parents, either.

Once I hit middle school, I realized that having my mom as my best friend didn’t exactly make me cool, though it didn’t feel that way when we stayed up late brainstorming borderline-inappropriate greeting cards she could absolutely never sell at her shop, or when we had themed movie marathons—Judy Greer Is Doing the Most Night, Modern Austen Weekend. I inherited both her taste in pop culture and her dry humor. By the time I thought I might want other people in my life, everyone had their solidly established friend groups, and it felt like I’d been left behind. Like I’d missed out on making those connections when I was younger, when everyone was supposed to.

And then I found journalism. In seventh grade, I was eating lunch alone in the library when a guy I didn’t know approached my table. An eighth grader. “Hi!” he chirped. “Could I ask you a few questions?”

“I . . . don’t think we know each other?” I said.

He laughed, the confident laugh of an upperclassman who didn’t eat lunch in the library. “I know. It’s for the school paper.”

The guy’s article was a fluff piece about the remodeled library that included some talking heads, with me saying “I love eating lunch in here!” along with a photo mid-blink. When it was time to sign up for classes for the next semester, I picked newspaper, and what began as something of a social experiment grew into a deeper love for storytelling.

Seeming satisfied with my answer, Annabel cycles through a few basic interview questions before getting more specific. “We have openings on every section—news, features, arts, sports,” she says. “Would you have a preference?”

“I did a handful of news and features—well, as much ‘news’ as you can get in high school, which was usually a new pizza topping on the cafeteria menu,” I say. “Honestly, I’d report on the school sewer system if you wanted me on staff.”

“It’s a very in-demand beat.” On her computer, she gestures to something I can’t see. “What I’m really curious about is this article you did a couple years ago on the tennis team.”

“Are you sure? Because I think ‘Down the Drain: Secrets of the Sewer System’ could be very hard-hitting journalism. I’m ready to run with it.”

Annabel’s smile falters. Whatever amount of charm I have, it’s wearing off. “There’s a note here that says comments have been disabled,” she continues, “which doesn’t seem to be the case with other articles.”

I force myself to take a few deep breaths. It’s not that I’m

ashamed of the story itself—it's everything that happened afterward that I can't allow my mind to linger on. And I won't. Not here. "I found out that a bunch of tennis players had cheated on a test," I say, working to keep my voice level, choosing my words carefully. "There was this one trig midterm that was impossible—almost no one did better than a B-minus. But all the tennis players in my class managed to get As, and when I started poking around, I realized that was the case in every one of that teacher's classes."

Mercer Island: a wealthy Seattle suburb where the public schools feel like private schools. Because of our moody weather, you pretty much had to belong to a club to play tennis, and those clubs were expensive. The tennis players owned Island High, with their shiny racquets and polo shirts and district championship banners. When they won state for the first time in the spring of my freshman year, the school canceled classes for half the day and threw them a special assembly.

Ms. Murphy had a terrible poker face, and when I confronted her, she immediately confessed. The most ridiculous thing was that I actually felt *proud* when I broke the story. I imagined myself winning student-journalism awards, maybe even scholarships—for about five minutes. The evidence was so damning that Island was disqualified and a dozen players wound up in summer school. Blaine, Lucie's boyfriend at the time, was one of them, and she blamed me for their subsequent breakup. Stopped talking to me, except when necessary. Made sure her wealthy, powerful friends did the same.

Just like that, I turned the entire school against me.

"Oh, I heard about this," Annabel says. "I went to Bellevue, but everyone was talking about it."

It has to be some kind of accomplishment that my notoriety spread to schools I didn't even go to.

"The aftermath was a little rough, as you can imagine." A shaky breath, and then I can keep going. If I make it to the end of the week with all the buttons on these jeans intact, it will be proof there is a god. "But I think it helped me become a better journalist."

"How so?"

"For one, I'm not afraid to make enemies."

Annabel frowns. "We may be a student paper, but this is a professional environment," she says. "We don't want anyone using our name to tarnish our reputation."

"I'm not phrasing that right," I say, anxious to get this interview back on track. "What I mean is—I don't have a problem ruffling some feathers for the sake of a story. If you need anyone to get in there and ask the questions no one's asking, even if it means acting like a complete asshole, I'm your girl." I force a laugh, trying to sound self-deprecating. "I've had plenty of experience with people hating me. Take my roommate, for example—"

"Your roommate already hates you?"

"No, no," I rush to say. *Rein it in*. "Well—yes, but only because we went to the same high school. It's . . . hard to explain."

And somehow I've made it worse.

"Ah." Annabel's gaze drifts toward a stack of paper on her desk. Other students' résumés. *Shit*. I'm losing her. Telling someone you're capable of acting like a complete asshole: a great interview strategy.

Surely my high school reputation can't cling to me forever. I spent so many nights convincing myself of that while I dug through *Vanity Fair* archives, so many days walking the halls with

metaphorical armor. Logically, I knew not everyone cared about the tennis team, but *god*, it felt that way. I had to act like I didn't give a shit—not when kids mimed smacking tennis balls in my direction, not when they paused at my desk to assure me they weren't cheating when they handed in a test. Not when a history teacher assigned me a report on Benedict Arnold and my classmates muttered “traitor” under their breath when I got up to present.

Because the alternative, letting them break me again and again, was just . . . so much worse.

For months I wondered whether I'd done the right thing, but I always came back to the same place: this was a preview of what I'd be dealing with as a real journalist. My skin just had to get tougher.

Despite where it led me, my love for journalism has never wavered, and I've remained one of a dwindling number of print subscribers to the *New York Times* and *Entertainment Weekly*. A job on this paper would mean New Barrett really is an upgrade from the previous model. That journalism is the right place for me.

“This has been really enlightening, Barrett,” Annabel says after a couple more questions, but I can tell her heart's not in it. She gets to her feet and extends a hand across her desk. “Like I said, we only have a few open staff positions, and it might be competitive, so . . . we'll let you know.”

Game, set, and match.

Chapter 3

WAITING IN YET ANOTHER LINE IN THE DINING hall sounds about as appealing as the acrobatic act that is shaving my legs in Olmsted's microscopic shower. Instead I take a long, long walk through campus, the almost-fall foliage and the century-old brick buildings contrasting with the newer, energy-efficient ones with their sharp angles and glass walls.

It always felt magical when my mom took me here as a kid, pointing out her favorite spots, pausing by the building she was in when she went into labor. The relationship between my mom and dad didn't last much longer than the pregnancy, and he wasn't interested in becoming a father. But my mom is all I've ever needed. It was tough, finishing her degree with a new baby, but with some help from her parents, she did it, and I've always admired her for it. "This school is in your DNA," she'd tell me. Part of me thought it was cheesy, but I believed her. We had a connection, the university and I.

Now all I feel is how astoundingly easy it is to blend in with everyone else. The *Washingtonian* was the one thing I was certain

about, and I screwed it up. Because somehow, even when I knew it was going off the rails, I couldn't stop talking.

My mom calls while I'm mope-walking, but I send it to voice-mail. Then she texts me, and I feel guilty for not answering.

Mom: If you miss your dear old mom yet, what say you about Thai takeout tonight? I'm dying to hear about your first day.

Mom: Fine, it's me. I'm the one who misses you.

The first thing I want to do is tell her what happened, but she doesn't know the full extent of what high school was like for me. She's never overly mommed me, and I didn't want Island's post-tennis witch hunt to change that. If she swept in and tried to solve my problems, it might wreck the balance between us.

Barrett: Drowning in homework. Day was good. How about this weekend?

It's dusk when I get back to my dorm. I'm not expecting the sheer delight that overcomes me when I unlock the door and find Lucie inside our room, an array of makeup and clothes spread across her bed and both our desks, despite the cleanliness lecture she gave me earlier. An extension cord connects her curling iron to the outlets beneath my desk, and she's blasting something I don't recognize.

Lucie Lamont can be a mess too. I'm going to give her such shit for this.

She rims one eye with liquid liner. "Don't worry," she says to the mirror attached to her sliver of closet. "I'll be out of here soon, and then you can perform whatever ritualistic sacrifices you have planned."

"It's actually really helpful if I get a lock of your hair first." I shut

the door, and we awkwardly move around each other before I flop onto my bed.

“Rough day?”

“You could say that,” I mutter into my pillow. “We don’t have to talk just because we’re in the same room.”

“If that’s what you want.” Her good mood is both unexpected and a little alarming.

“Did you talk to the RD? Are our days together numbered?”

“Even better,” she says. “I’m going to rush a sorority.”

“So you couldn’t get a single.”

Her cheery tone falters. “I’d been thinking about rushing anyway. I’m a legacy—my mom is a Gamma Tau. And . . . I couldn’t get a single.”

I roll over so I’m not crushing my phone. I pull it out of my pocket, but no one’s texting me. No one’s calling me.

“Anyway,” Lucie says, winding a section of red hair around her curling iron, “rush is this week, and I’m meeting up with some girls to go to a party on Greek Row. But I think there’s a movie playing in the quad tonight, if you’re still looking for something to do. *Groundhog Day*, I think?”

“Assuming I don’t already have a wild Wednesday night planned?”

“We both know your idea of fun involves watching *Veronica Mars* with your mother.”

My mom shared all her favorite TV shows with me, and during our brief fragment of friendship, Lucie even came over to watch with us. We’d only just bridged the gap between school acquaintances and rest-of-the-time friends. Her bringing it up now makes me wonder if she remembers too.

“Don’t drag *Veronica Mars*. It’s a mid-2000s classic.” I gesture to Lucie’s oversize bell-sleeved shirt, which she’s paired with expensive-looking black leggings that might be made of leather. “It’s a themed party, yeah? Dress like your favorite founding father? Or the least-racist founding father?”

“I’m pretty sure all of them were racist. And the theme is go fuck yourself,” she says sweetly, but she does roll up her sleeves and untuck the shirt to knot it at her navel.

“I might. It’s a wild Wednesday night, after all.”

It might be wishful thinking on my part, but I think she muffles a laugh.

There’s this moment where I’m almost *disappointed* that she’s going to be rushing, though I know her minute of decency was sparked only by the knowledge that she won’t be living with me. For a second, I even want to ask if Lucie interviewed for the *Washingtonian* too, but I’m afraid to learn she won a coveted spot.

It’s also possible that the day has simply been too much, and my emotions are manifesting in strange ways. That sounds far more realistic.

“The party’s at Zeta Kappa,” she’s saying. “It’s that big frat on Fiftieth Street, the one with the massive husky statues outside?” The husky is UW’s mascot, and they parade around a puppy named Dubs at sporting events. It’s the kind of thing that could inspire me to attend a sporting event.

I’ve driven by that frat plenty of times—it’s the gaudiest one. “Why are you telling me?”

“I . . . don’t know.” Lucie unplugs her curling iron. Her hair is so pin-straight, it’s already struggling to hold a wave. “We’re

roommates. For now, at least. If one of us is going off campus at night, it just makes sense.”

“Okay.” I root around in my bag for my pepper spray. “Do you want to take this?”

She unzips a metallic clutch and holds up her own canister. “Already covered.” After tidying up the room, she assesses herself in the mirror again, fluffing her hair in a final attempt to give it volume. “Well. Night.”

I grunt at her in response, and it’s only once she leaves that I get the idea—a way to salvage if not my entire college experience, then at the very least this disaster first day.



It’s a good thing I didn’t lend Lucie my pepper spray, because I have one hand on it as I trek north through campus. Do I know how to use it if someone leaps out of the bushes and demands all seven dollars in my wallet? No. Do I trust my brain to adequately react to the situation and hit the red button instead of screaming, running away, and inevitably tripping over something? Also no.

The walk is uphill, and a minute in, I’m already panting. College is either going to kill me or turn me into a division-one power walker. I will carry UW to our first championship. Shoe companies everywhere will beg to sponsor me. *How did you do it?* they’ll want to know. *Perseverance*, I’ll say. *Perseverance, and grit, and the right pair of sneakers.*

“Barrett?” calls a male voice.

I whirl around to spot a shadowy figure approaching. I don’t know where he came from or who he is or how he knows my name,

but the guy has his hands in front of his face and my finger is on the trigger thingy and I squeeze my eyes shut and I probably should have read the instructions and—

“Wait—I’m not—”

I’m so startled I drop the can of pepper spray. “Oh my god oh my god oh my god. I’m so sorry.”

“You almost pepper-sprayed me.”

“I’m sorry,” I repeat, my hands still shaking, and then he comes into view and maybe I’m not actually that sorry. Miles, Mr. PHYSICS MATTERS. Who better to run into on a darkened path at . . . well, it’s only a quarter past nine, but still. The only ideal time to run into someone who publicly humiliated you is never o’clock.

“Campus can be dangerous at night,” he says. “You shouldn’t be walking alone.”

He’s changed into a plain navy T-shirt and his dark hair is mussed, like he’s been scraping his hands through it. The way his ears stick out isn’t so dramatic that it was the first thing I noticed about him, but it’s enough to make me wonder whether bullies made life hell for him at some point. And while he’s tall, much taller than my five-three frame, he doesn’t carry it in an imposing way. Maybe it’s the way the streetlight catches the angles of his face, but there’s a weariness to him I didn’t notice in class. A resignation.

“Maybe strange guys shouldn’t yell out my name and scare me half to death?”

“Fair point. I’m sorry.” And he does look a little sorry as he rakes a hand through his hair, confirming my theory: Miles, whoever he is, is a fiddler.

“And besides. I have this.” I retrieve my trusty red canister and

hold it up. I swear I'm going to end up spraying myself in the face.

"Please don't wave that thing around," he says, and he has a point there, so I drop it into my bag. "Where are you heading?"

"A party. You?"

"Meeting a friend."

It's gotten chilly, and I pull my sweater tighter. The drama building is on our right, the business school on our left. If we're heading off campus on the same path, then we're kind of forced to walk together.

"So, did you switch out of physics?" he asks just when the silence is moments from becoming unbearable. He's fiddling again, this time with the smart watch on his wrist.

"Not yet. I had to fill out a form, and now I guess I pray to the gods of people who don't do the assigned reading that it's approved."

"Ah. Those gods. I think they're usually pretty busy preventing those people from being called on in class, but hopefully they'll find the time to help you."

His sense of humor catches me off guard. "Speaking of being called on in class," I say, "you aren't going to apologize for what happened in physics today?"

"Refresh my memory."

I stop walking. "Seriously? You raised your hand and told the professor you wanted to hear what I had to say about the study of physics. On the *first day*. And for some reason, the professor listened to you!"

Miles blinks, like maybe I really did need to refresh his memory, but come on—it happened only hours ago. Something that may

be regret passes over his face, his brows scrunching, and he relents. “You’re right. That was shitty of me, and I’m sorry. It’s been . . . a weird week.”

Maybe it’s the shock of a man admitting he did something wrong, but I might actually forgive him. I’d probably have found some other way of humiliating myself if he hadn’t sped the process along.

Though he doesn’t elaborate on his weird week, I let out a resigned breath. Fine, he can walk with me. No, not *with* me—next to me.

I check the map on my phone as we hit the first intersection at the campus entrance, the one with the giant bronze *W*. We cross the street together, though I have to hoof it to keep up with his longer strides. I will not lose my power-walking title.

“Where does your friend live?” I ask.

Another scratch at his wrist. “Couple blocks away.”

And yet he doesn’t veer from my path, even as we reach the house with the husky statues in front.

I stop.

He stops.

We both turn to go up the walk.

“I thought you said you were meeting a friend,” I say.

“I am. At a party.”

As melodramatically as I can, I thrust out my arms, gesturing for him to go in front of me, and after a moment’s hesitation, he does. Of course we wound up at the same party. Of course the universe would find this hilarious.

“You two together?” the guy at the door asks as Miles approaches, craning his neck to get a look at me. I wonder if bouncer is a job for someone very high or very low in the frat