### Amy and Jake's Epic Detour!

**by** [hotelsweet](http://archiveofourown.org/users/hotelsweet)

**Summary**

when 18 yr old Amy Santiago needs to make the trip to New York City for her first year of college, family friend Jake Peralta steps in as a favour- but the week that's about to follow is one that neither of them could have predicted.

**Notes**

**HI PLS READ ME SO THIS FIC MAKES SENSE**

hellooooooo, my sweets!! look it's me I'm back!!! w a hideously large amount of jake/amy!!!

just a quick intro to this fic before I post the first chapter: this fic is loosely based around Amy & Roger's Epic Detour by Morgan Matson, which is an absolutely gorgeous book I would totally recommend you read!! I've pretty much just used the idea of playlists and receipts in the way that Matson does because I loved the way it established the setting/characters.

for each chapter I will link a spotify playlist with all the music I've included, so if you want, you can listen along and get a feel for each part of the story!

anyway, without further ado, pls enjoy Amy & Jake's Epic Detour!!

chapter 1 playlist:
“Are you ready, Mija?”

That’s a complicated question, Amy Santiago thinks, looking, for the last time in what will be a long while, at her childhood home. She decides to go for the simplified answer.
“Yeah, mom, I’ve got everything.” She glances briefly at the backpack and the duffle bag stuffed in between her feet.

Her mother smiles knowingly, and rubs her daughter’s shoulder, grazing her thumb comfortably over the planes of the side of her collarbone, bare above the neckline of an old boat-neck sweater. The familiar smell of an expensive perfume drifts over, probably Chanel, now Amy thinks of it—perhaps it wouldn’t be noticeable to her if she wasn’t about to leave her mother for the first time for more than a couple of weeks for a summer camp.

“I meant to leave.” She says gently.

“I know,” Amy says, smiling half-heartedly.

The truth is, she’s never been more certain that she’s not ready for something. She’d know—though the countless checklists and information packets, not to mention the truck full of her stuff waiting at her grandmother’s place in Portland, might tell her she most certainly is ready to start her first year of college, the lingering concoction of nerves and anxiety is telling her otherwise.

She worked so hard to get here. She’s dreamed - no, literally - of this moment, finally leaving her home, finally stepping out into the world, satisfied at last knowing the work she put into her senior year has paid off, and although it sounds bad, she knows it’s true: she feels genuinely underwhelmed.

“Okay, my love, let’s go. Give them a wave!” Amy’s mom nods to the seven male family members standing outside their house- six of her seven brothers, and her father. In an awkward little formation, they stand watching her about to go; her two younger brothers, Daniel and Edgar, are fidgeting, poking each other whenever their father isn’t looking, while most of her older brothers, Hugo, Luis, and Rafael, stand chatting and waiting for the car to pull out of the drive. All aside from Marco, that is, whose eyes are glued to his phone. Amy would bet anything he’s talking to a girl.

As the sound of the car starting fills their front yard, they all spring to life – apart from Marco, who duly receives a shove from Luis – and begin waving, pulling faces, and shouting their goodbyes. Amy can’t help but smile at the image of her family waving goodbye. She’d never admit it out loud, but something small inside her, perhaps her young self, is loving having all the attention on her – she’s a middle child, as well as the only girl. Every day of her life she’s fought for attention.

“Bye!” She shouts out of the window, waving, then sticks her tongue out at Edgar, who she notices is doing the same to her.

“Don’t take anything those crazy New Yorkers offer you!” Luis shouts back.

“Unless it’s free!” Hugo yells, accompanied by a wink, grinning cheekily as Marco and Rafael laugh along with him. Luis rolls his eyes, but can’t hold back his smile, shooting Amy a knowing look.

Perhaps it’s because this is just the drive from Albany to Portland, but she feels like it should be bigger than this. As they pull out of the drive and, finally, out of sight of her home, she pulls her phone out of her pocket, and clicks open the lock screen, looking quickly at the picture she’s had as her background for the last six months: the New York City skyline. It’s slightly obscured by one outstanding text message:

**Kylie - now**

*have fun, Ames! I love you ❤️ (also, rate roadtrip dude /10 when you meet him pls ok thanks)*

She smiles and swipes the message away, reminding herself to reply in a minute or two. For now, all
she wants to look at is New York.

It’s cheese. It’s every cliché rolled into one. And she knows it. Amy has dreamed of NYC since she was a young teenager and indulged in several rom-coms (and, for a brief stint in 9th grade, the Gossip Girl books), taking in promises of the exciting city life; millions of diverse, passionate, friendly people, parties, not to mention all the art, theatre, and literature she can absorb concentrated into one place- and, thus, the location of her first-choice college, NYU.

Her teachers warned her that she might not get in. *It's competitive, Amy. You'll have to really work for it. You mustn’t take it personally if you don’t get in.*

So, she worked. Harder than she’s ever worked for anything. And she got it. And in that moment, opening her acceptance letter, she knew that these horrendous years of high school didn’t really matter, because this was what she was meant for; a place where she could enjoy her work and meet like-minded people, every day.

And yet, as their car pulls onto the freeway, her mother requesting her favourite CD to be put into the stereo- “Would you mind, Mija? The one your father gave me for my birthday”, Amy can’t help but worry things aren’t going to change.

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*Isabel’s CD #1 – Albany to Portland*

*feliz cumpleaños, mi amor!*

*‘te amo desde lo más profundo de mi alma.’ ♥*

*Some of our early favourites…*

I Think We’re Alone Now – Tiffany
Don’t You (Forget About Me) – Simple Minds
You Spin Me Round – Dead or Alive
Bidi Bidi Bom Bom – Selena
Heart of Glass - Blondie
I Feel Love – Donna Summer
Tainted Love – Soft Cell

(turn cover over for more!)

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Amy watches her mother bop around in her seat to Donna Summer, still equally as astounded by her mother and father’s shared taste in music as she was when her father first gifted her mother this CD, several years back, and she’d watched them dance out every single song in their kitchen.

Her mom maintains that, in her own words, “half the reason” she married Victor Santiago was his ability to pick any song and get her dancing. For the most part, Amy finds it incredibly sweet; in her mother she sees a part of herself she has yet to experience- she’s never known a woman more in love, even now, and yet so hardworking and strong. On the other hand, some of their routines have
become close to choreographed (see: Don’t You Want Me by the Human League), which, at a family event, without sneaking a few sips of her grandmother’s whisky, can be, in Amy’s experience, a little embarrassing.

“How are you feeling? You’re very quiet,” her mother says, the tone of concern in her voice stirring Amy’s nerves.

“I’m okay, Mom.” Her mother doesn’t respond- her cue to explain herself. “I’m a little nervous, I guess.”

“You’re going to love it. And you get a nice road trip before you go, with Jacob.”

Amy’s heart sinks. She’d not thought about that – that being the 21 year-old boy she’s not seen in just over a decade driving her to New York – for a good ten minutes.

“He barely knows me, mom,” she can’t help but moan, “I feel bad making him drive me across the country.”

“You’re friends!”

“We played together as children, Mom. That’s very loose framework for friendship.”

Her mother tuts, flicking Amy’s knee.

“Amy, you were friends. For a year or two, whenever we’d come up to visit my mother, you’d ask to see him.”

“Which I imagine became highly embarrassing for him when he was thirteen or fourteen and I was still knocking at his door asking him to play.” She cringes at the memory of it, vaguely recollecting her 9-year-old excitement at the prospect of seeing her friend.

“It was sweet. Plus, it’s no sweat off his back – he’s going back to college too.”

“I know, Mom.” She tries not to snap, but on top of the nerves, she’s now thinking about the three or four days she’ll have to spend with this boy, who’d probably rather do anything else than sit in a vehicle with her, as if this whole situation wasn’t awkward and daunting enough already-

“Would you like to pick some music?”

Amy’s heart warms for her mom- she can tell she’s picking up on her nerves. Picking the music in the Santiago car is a rare treat.

“That’s okay, I like your music,” she says, but her mother makes a noise of disapproval, so she fiddles with the CDs in the door of the car until she finds something she thinks she’ll like.

“Here,” she says, popping a 90s: Greatest Hits CD out of its case and sliding it into the CD player. Music hums softly around them, stifled slightly from the few bags and boxes in the back of the car that have yet to be transferred into the moving truck.

“Amy?”

“Yes, mom?”

“Everything will be fine. What is meant to be will be. I promise.”
Amy swallows thickly, but part of her relaxes.

In the pit of her stomach, she swears she even feels the spark of someone sincerely excited.

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“Abuela!” Amy throws her arms around her grandmother, who chuckles softly as she enjoys embracing her granddaughter for the first time in months.

Since she can remember, Amy has been conscious of how small this woman is, her small frame and her age exacerbating just how little she looks, totally contrasting her huge personality; a fiery, fiercely patriotic and excitable woman who told her grandchildren stories of romance and excitement from her younger days, every time she’d have them to visit.

“Amy, come in, come in, darling,” she pulls away, “one last drink with your grandmother before you go to college!”

“Mom,” Isabel moans, conscious of her mother’s attempts to introduce Amy to a new alcoholic beverage every time she’s visited since she turned sixteen. “Amy’s about to hit the road.”

“I know, I know, but we are celebrating!” She hurries into her kitchen, followed by the other two. “Champagne?”

“Why not?” Amy smiles. If it goes to her head quick enough, perhaps she’ll find this whole ordeal a little easier on her head.

“That’s the spirit! Come through, come through,” she says, guiding them through the house. “You can join my new drinking partner,” she says. Amy and her mother look to each other immediately, stopping in their tracks. After Amy’s grandfather had passed away they’d worried about her giving in to buying a pet she couldn’t take care of for a while she’d spoken about getting a whole litter of puppies.

“Drinking partner, Abuela?” Amy asks carefully, beginning to follow her again largely out of worry. But she needn’t have asked: sat at the kitchen table, with a bottle of beer in front of him, quite happily surveying his surroundings, is Jake Peralta.

A much taller, much more grown-up looking Jake Peralta.

The chaotic dark curls she can remember sitting in a dark mop over his ten-year-old face are no more, his hair now in a short, wavy cut on his head. His jaw is slightly shaded by stubble, and he’s about a thousand times taller than when she last saw him. It sounds silly to her, in her head, but all she can think is that he’s a grown-up; his shoulders are broader, his body firmer and bulkier (just, manlier, Amy realises), and, perhaps most notably, he’s not dressed in that huge oversized Nakatomi Plaza shirt he was obsessed with when he was little. She remembers that clearly, the symbol with its three central circles engrained permanently in her mind.

“Jacob! Wow,” Isabel says, as soon as she sees him. “As if I didn’t feel old enough already,” she says, chuckling, to her mother, taking a small glass of champagne from her outstretched hand.

“It’s nice to see you again, Mrs Santiago,” he says, standing up and holding out an arm to her,
shaking her hand. “Is Amy here yet?”

“Yup, present,” Amy stammers, laughing awkwardly and stepping out from behind her mother in the doorway. His face changes when he sees her, into what she thinks is shock. “Hi.” She manages.

“Hey,” he says, “you look very different to how I remember you.” His smile is warm, genuinely friendly, the kind that makes you feel immediately at ease.

This might not be so difficult after all.

“Ditto,” she says, trying not to think about the fact that it’s the first time she’s ever said the word ‘ditto’, and takes the glass of champagne from her grandmother’s hand, sipping at it eagerly.

“Yeah, I, uh… I’m sorry I’m so early- I went to the hire place to insure myself on the truck, and there were so few people there they basically tossed me the keys as soon as I walked in.”

“Right,” Amy says shyly, half-relieved he seems like a decent dude and half-desperate she could think of literally anything to say.

They all stand in silence for a beat, Amy and Jake observing each other for a moment, before her grandmother steps in.

“Come through and we can go over your trip,” she says, walking into the small sun room backing onto her kitchen.

“Firstly, sweetheart- you’re definitely happy you know how to drive the truck?” Isabel asks as they all settle themselves in the little wicker chairs with which Amy’s grandmother has managed to fill this small conservatory.

“Yeah,” Amy replies, as though it’s obvious. She shifts in her seat uneasily at the thought of her mother and grandmother babying her in front of Jake for the next half an hour. Or perhaps that’s just a bit of the chair sticking into her butt.

“I’ve packed some essentials, in case you are stuck,” she explains, gesturing to a few packets of crackers, big blankets, and some bottles of water. She can’t see exactly, but Amy swears she can make out small candles, a torch, matches, and extra batteries. Pretty safe to say that her organisational skills have trickled down from her mother’s side. “How long are you driving?”

“How long are you driving?” Jake says apologetically at Amy, clearly trying to hide his amusement.

“I’ve packed some essentials, in case you are stuck,” she explains, gesturing to a few packets of crackers, big blankets, and some bottles of water. She can’t see exactly, but Amy swears she can make out small candles, a torch, matches, and extra batteries. Pretty safe to say that her organisational skills have trickled down from her mother’s side. “How long are you driving?”

“Shouldn’t take us more than five days or so, if we stay on track,” Jake says, “I’ve already mapped out our best bets for motels and pit stops. You don’t need to worry. I’ve done the drive a couple times before, too, so it’s familiar.”

Amy can’t help it- her insides go warm, even if only for a second. Not only is he tall, pretty good-looking, and friendly, but he’s planned it all out. She fidgets awkwardly with the top of her mom jeans, trying to distract herself, making sure her sweater is tucked in neatly.
“Wonderful. And then you’ll have a few days to explore the city! I’m so excited for you, my love, your Abuelo and I met in Brooklyn…” She smiles longingly. Amy chuckles softly.

“Julian’s going to let me crash at his, depending on how early we are.”

“Julian? Oh, is that your brother?” Jake asks.

“Yeah, he has a place on the Upper West Side with his wife.” She explains politely.

“Oh, cool, so they’ll never be too far from campus if you need them, that’s useful,” Jake chatters.

“Of course, I almost forgot… this is your fourth trip back to NYU, right?” Isabel asks him warmly, glossing over her mother’s musings.

“Yeah.”

“Wow, senior year, huh?”

“Mom,” Amy interjects, smiling, only too aware of the way Jake’s about to be interrogated by her mother. Isabel tuts. Jake chuckles.

“Yeah, final year.”

“Exciting. Your major?”

“Philosophy and Politics.” He barely hesitates before he replies. Amy can relate to that immediacy, relaying information about your school, about your future, to questioning adults. “Essentially just talking about what’s right and wrong a lot and pretending I know the difference between about forty different old white dudes and their ideas.”

“Sounds great,” Isabel snickers, “well- I won’t hassle you about it anymore, but I will say good luck in your last year.” She smiles warmly.

“Thank-you, Mrs Santiago.”

“Please, Isabel. Oh, that reminds me,” she starts, putting her hand on his arm. “You have my number, yes? And my husband’s? Just in case.”

“Already saved in my phone.”

“That’s what I like to hear.” She sits back, satisfied. “You’ll both have a great time.” Amy knows she means well, but she can’t help but cringe a little- even here she feels like she’s being babied. Her mom has always had a soft spot for her, her only daughter, and while it mostly means she’s at an advantage, it also means her mom is, and has always been, incredibly protective.

Amy knows that, ultimately, she’s been no threat to that protectiveness as a teenager, certainly not in comparison to her brothers- Kylie was the only visitor she’s ever actually had in the house and she was almost as introverted as her.

She has a suspicion that her mother has been, secretly, quite grateful for Kylie’s tendency to encourage Amy out and into the world, during these last few years; she made it clear to Amy that she believed every teenager should have their share of stupid mistakes and life experiences, and were it not for Kylie, Amy might not have stumbled home so drunk she could hardly see after a homecoming party in her Senior year, so hungover the next morning she couldn’t even muster the energy to organise her bedroom. She might not have met a boy and been notably angsty for a day
when, as she would later tell her mother, he stopped texting her back. She might not have gone to prom- even if it was, technically, as a chaperone- were it not for Kylie.

“Let’s raise a glass to Amy,” Isabel pipes up, gazing at her daughter, unable to wash away the pride evoked by the nostalgia seeping in and out of her head.

“Maybe even more than a glass,” her grandmother starts, giggling mischievously.

“Abuela,” Amy responds, her cheeks flushing as she smiles.

“I’m so proud. I just know you’ll have such a marvellous time. Plus, this champagne was just short of forty dollars, and I don’t want to waste it.”

“To Amy,” Isabel says proudly.

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“You’re certain you have everything?” Isabel asks for the third time, brushing her daughter’s hair behind her ear. Her heart aches at how grown-up she looks, leaning against the door of the truck, about to go.

“Yes, mom. I promise.” Amy smiles, touched by the sadness she picks up on in her mother’s voice. “It’s okay, before you know it I’ll be home visiting.” She pulls her into a hug, squeezing her tight. “I love you.”
“I love you too. So much.” Her mother’s voice is muffled in her hair. “Amy, will you promise me something?”

They pull away, but her mother keeps brushing through her hair with her fingers, the way she did when she was a little girl.

“What is it?”

Isabel hesitates, as though contemplating what she’s about to say, but clears her throat to speak anyway.

“Take risks. Don’t be afraid to enjoy yourself.” She smiles at Amy’s slightly confused reaction. “You can’t prepare for everything, and that’s okay. Exciting, even.”

“Okay, mom,” Amy says, smiling knowingly, but her mom stops her.

“I mean it.” She looks into her daughter’s eyes intently. Amy nods once, sincerely, before her mom pulls her into one final hug. “Now go. Have fun. Update me!”

“I will,” Amy says, opening the door to the truck and hauling her backpack into the leg room in front of her seat, before giving her mom one more smile – and a quick wave to her grandmother, who’s standing in the front door – and climbing into the passenger seat.

Something young in her feels so grown-up in the front of a 12ft moving truck. Finally, she thinks, a bit of excitement setting in. It’s real now.

“Ooookay,” comes Jake’s voice as he swings into the driver’s seat. “Ready?” He flashes that reassuring smile again.

“Yes. I’m ready.”

And though she doesn’t know it yet, part of her really, truly means it.

Jake turns the ignition and the truck rumbles to life around her. Immediately, she puts the window down, waving goodbye to her mom and her grandmother, both standing in the entrance of the house. For a moment, she swears her mother is tearing up.

“Bye! I love you!” She yells out of the window as the truck turns out onto the road, and finally pulls away down her grandma’s street and onto the main road. “Hey.”

Jake glances over at her.

“What’s up?”

“Just… hey. I know we didn’t really get to talk over my mom and my grandma – sorry for that, by the way-”

“Oh, no,” he cuts in quickly, “they’re both so nice, seriously, don’t worry. Plus, I mean, I’ve lived next to your grandparents my whole life, so it’s not like I don’t know her.”

“Right. I keep forgetting-”

“Do you want-”

“Oh, sorry,” Amy stumbles, both of them smiling awkwardly at their stunted communication. “What were you going to say?”
“Oh, I was just going to ask if you wanted to put some music on. Official role of the passenger seat.”

“Right, I mean… yeah, I guess.” She fiddles with the stereo for a moment. “Does this have an aux cord?”

“Nope, I think it’s radio or CDs.”

“Oh, right. That’s fine, I’m not really big on music, we can just use the radio—”

“Woah, woah, woah.” He stops her. “You’re not ‘big’ on music?”

“No, I guess not,” she says, a little sensitively. “I was raised on almost entirely 70s and 80s music and I just kind of know whatever songs are popular from whatever’s on the radio.”

“Oh dear,” he says, his mouth splaying into a smug grin, “we are gonna have to deal with that.”

“I’m surprised you’re not just glad you can pick whatever music you want,” she laughs half-heartedly. “What, did you bring CDs with you?”

“We’re gonna be driving, non-stop, for like, four, five days. Obviously I brought CDs.” He looks over at her, eyes narrowed a little, as though it’s the most evident thing in the world. She folds her arms inadvertently, feeling her defiance stir again. “Check the compartment in front of you.”

She clicks open the glove compartment, and, sure enough, inside is a large black CD case, just like her dad’s, as well as about a hundred stray CDs and albums littered around inside.

“It looks like the Music section of a Best Buy threw up in here. Then had children, which also threw up in here.” She mutters.

To her surprise, he laughs.

“Take the big black book, pick a mix.”

“A mix?” She can’t keep the mocking tone out of her voice.

“Shut up,” he quips back, still smiling at the road ahead. “Those first few parts of the CD book are basically just hard copies of my shuffled up Spotify library, then I’ve got actual playlists – since you don’t like the word ‘mix’ – towards the back.”

She picks the first CD she sees. On the back, scrawled in sharpie, are the names of at least 12 songs.

*Jake #1*

Ruby – Kaiser Chiefs
Busy Earnin’ – Jungle
How Good Does it Feel – Empires
She’s Got You High – Mumm-ra
Late At Night – Joy Room
Houdini – Foster the People
Read My Mind – The Killers
The Bends – Radiohead
Reptilia – The Strokes
Dreams – The Cranberries
Tuesday – Hippo Campus
No Hope – The Vaccines
“This must have taken forever,” she says as she pushes the CD into the player and closes the book on her lap. “Oh, hey, I know this one!” She enthuses as the first song comes on.

“Yeah, so do most people in the English-speaking world.” He can’t keep his grin off his face. “I can’t believe you’re not into music,” he mutters again, teasingly this time.

“Okay, let me elaborate, I’m into music, everyone’s into music, I just don’t have actual playlists or CDs.” She surveys the tracklist of each CD. “Could these get any more indie?”

“They’re what I listen to! Wait, okay, so what do you listen to when you work out?”

“I don’t really work out. I swim sometimes.”

“Studying?”

“I work best when it’s silent.”

“Wild,” he mutters. Perhaps it’s a reflex from growing up with seven annoying brothers, but she has to restrain herself from hitting him. “Okay, what about in your spare time?”

She thinks.

“I like podcasts, I guess?”

“Okay,” he says, as if he’s processing how that could even be a viable option.

Pulling her phone out of her pocket, she distracts herself for a little while, still irritated and grateful for the lull in conversation. No emails—apart from all the latest ones from NYU flagged and sitting at the top of her inbox—and no notifications, aside from a couple of likes on her mom’s Facebook status about her leaving. A guilty pang reminds her she still needs to reply to Kylie, so she pulls up their conversation.

Thank you, Kyle ❤

She almost smiles to herself—she can picture Kylie’s reaction, reading her least favourite nickname.

He’s okay. A little annoying, but nice. Solid 6/10. I’ll update you. X

Almost immediately, a reply pops up.

6/10???? R u kidding? That’s incredible for a Santiago rating. Ur super judge-y

I’m not judgemental, Kylie, the only boys we’ve ever dealt with have all been dicks. Jake’s older— that’s an instant maturity bonus point.

She looks over at him, bopping in his seat, humming along to the song, pulling faces at a dog in the back of the car in front.

Plus, she types, there’s always time for that point to be revoked.

… u told me u thought alex henderson was a 3 at best. He’s the hottest dude we know

& do update me if the rating changes x

Amy sighs.
Can’t I just NOT rate people? It’s integrally mean.

Booooorrrrinnnggg

Okay listen I have to get back to work otherwise that super rude shift manager (I actually think he’s called Griffin?! Like, not as a joke) will kill me, have fun tho!!

Also update me as the trip goes on, I want to hear it all!!! Love u

Smiling to herself, she puts her phone back into her pocket.

“Texting your boyfriend?” He sounds amused.

“Huh?”

“You’re grinning at your phone, it’s either nudes or someone you really like.” He looks at her momentarily, raising his eyebrows expectantly.

“It’s my friend, Kylie,” she says. He nods, his mouth frowning in a way that almost reads as not bad. That defiance stirs up inside her again- is he holding back the urge to make fun of her? It sure as hell feels like it.

She watches him tapping his fingers against the steering wheel to the rhythm of the music as they come to a set of traffic lights. He’s got virtually nothing with him- all his stuff for college has been loaded into the back of the truck, but the only other thing aside from his phone and wallet that he seems to have brought with him is a pack of gum, which sits on the dashboard in front of the speedometer. In an instant, she realises what’s missing, and her stomach drops so hard she almost feels heavier in her seat.

“The map! You forgot the map!”

He jumps in his seat, looking extremely startled at her.

“I don’t… have a map,” he says, as if it’s obvious.

“You… what?”

“I don’t have a map.”

“But… back at my grandma’s… you said-”

“I’m about to drive their child over 3000 miles away from them, I wasn’t going to let them think I was guessing.”

“You’re guessing?” Amy almost shudders.

“Well, not completely, I mean, I’ve done this a few times.”

An odd pause falls between them.

“What, so you don’t have their numbers, either?”

“Actually, I do. I’m not an idiot, I just happen to know this drive pretty well.” He says defensively.

“It’s not a drive, Jake, it’s a long-ass road trip and I need to know, specifically, where we’re going.” He looks over at her, his face screwed up, like something smells bad. “Next gas station we see we’re
“Pulling in and buying a road atlas.” She says firmly, her nerves bubbling up again.

“Woah, fine.”

They fall into a tense silence. Amy feels a little bad, given that they’ve barely been on the road an hour and they’ve already pissed each other off, but at the same time doesn’t want to apologise- why should she? Being ready is important, and this is the most important trip she’ll take all year.

“I guess you’re still pretty into organisation then, huh.” His voice eventually comes a few minutes later, cautious, a little amused. She can’t help the irritation his teasing tone stirs in her.

“Still?”

“Don’t you remember?”

She shakes her head. He just laughs.

“When you were, like, seven, you’d refuse to play anything until you’d rearranged that big toy box in the corner of my room.” He smiles over at her. “My mom was in love with you- that is, right as soon as I stopped telling her it was me who’d cleaned it so she’d buy me candy.”

“I can’t believe I didn’t remember that,” she sighs, leaning back into her seat. She can picture his childhood bedroom now, the rocket curtains and the dark blue sheets on his bed- and, now he’s mentioned it, a big tub full of toys in the corner of his room. She can’t help but warm to the nostalgia. “I’m sorry for snapping, I’m nervous. It’s a big day.”

“Don’t be silly, you thought I’d planned this trip, and I haven’t. Admittedly, I’ve never known someone who cares so much, but, y’know.” She narrows her eyes. Is this meant to be an apology? “Speaking of which, do you wanna-?” He gestures to a road sign indicating an oncoming gas station.

A mix of guilt and irritation whirs around in her head. A road atlas would be sensible, she thinks. But part of her doesn’t want to seem like that girl, just for once. Plus, he’s done the drive before- how wrong can he go?

“No, it’s okay.” She smiles at him apologetically when he looks over at her. “I trust you.”

“Y’sure?”

“Yeah. Anyway, it’s already, like, four in the afternoon, and we’re going to have to drive through the night. Let’s just get as far as we can before we need dinner.”

“Okay,” he says, and for a moment she thinks he’s going to say something else. In the corner of her eye she can see him glancing over at her. Fleetingly, she even thinks he might be a little impressed.

She relaxes against her headrest, still a little disconcerted by how high the seats feel in comparison to her mom’s car. Out of curiosity, she looks over at Jake, trying to see if he seems annoyed. Since they started driving, she’s had more conversation with him than she’s probably ever had with anybody else in her whole life, apart from Kylie- yet she doesn’t feel like she’s forcing it. However, in this short amount of time, she’s also made fun of his CDs, nagged at him, and forgotten one of the only things he remembers about their young friendship.

They drive in silence for a while, the only noise accounted for by the music from the CD and the as the daylight begins to dim.
“So, any tips?” She asks quietly later, trying not to let the overt awkwardness affect her.

“Tips?”

“Um, NYU. This is your senior year, right?”

“Oh, right. And yeah, it is.”

Another pause.

“It’s okay if you can’t think of anything right now—”

“No, no, it’s just… I’m trying to remember my freshman year and… you know, the things I should have known.”

“Right.”

She watches him think, his brows furrowed as he chews on his lip in thought.

“Oh,” he says, and she almost has to hold herself back from breathing a sigh of relief, just from the sound of someone talking, “Don’t get a fake ID, they never work. You’re better off just paying an older student a few bucks to buy you your alcohol.”

“Oh, okay.”

“And try not to let everyone overwhelm you in the first couple months. Everyone’s showing off because they’re excited, nobody’s actually going to stay that crazy or charismatic. Unless they’re a med grad or basically any science major, those guys are wild.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, they have way more time working because of all those labs and extra seminars- there’s actually this student thing, the Guide Dog theory—”

“A theory?” Amy feels like she should be taking notes.

“Yeah,” he laughs, “so like, you know how guide dogs are trained to be good and work hard all the time? It’s like, the second you take them off the leash, they go absolutely insane.”

Amy giggles.

“Oh god,” he starts, “please don’t say you’re planning on going to med school and I’ve just seriously insulted you.”


“Okay okay okay okay okay, noice noice noice,” he chatters happily. Amy smiles to herself. This dude is really nice, as nice as she remembers him being when they were little, she thinks- anyone else, and she probably would have killed the conversation by now. If she could just stop making it so awkward, that’d be great.

So, for now, she just stays quiet.

Gradually, daylight fades entirely, leaving only the glow of the dashboard, a blend of reds, oranges, and pale yellows from other cars, and, occasionally, the rhythmic passing of streetlights. The music, playing softly underneath it all, seems to fit the calm, Amy thinks.
“I like this song,” she murmurs softly, as the sky darkens and she feels herself becoming weary.

“Of course you do, it’s the Cranberries.”

***

**Blacktop Diner**

08/20/16 22:41
SERVER: JUSTIN

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*Total $22*

Thanks for your visit!

***

**Night Drives / Evening Mix / Slow stuff / whatever ((WIP!!))**

*Just Kiss Her – Concorde*
Redbone – Childish Gambino
Dang! – Mac Miller
Someone That Loves You – HONNE
I Wanna Be Yours – Arctic Monkeys
I Still Remember – Bloc Party
Cigarette Daydreams – Cage The Elephant
Out Of My System – Youngr

***

A knock at the window of the truck nearly startles Amy out of her skin. Just below her is Jake, holding two bags, each displaying the token symbol of the diner outside which they’re parked. She opens the door, smiling politely, and takes the bag he offers her.

“Is this-?” Jake tilts his head slightly in response to the music he can hear coming from the stereo.

“Yeah! It even said ‘night drives’ on the cover, so I figured,” she shrugs, grabbing a fry from the bag and putting it in her mouth.
"Well observed, you’re learning," he says, a hint of friendly sarcasm in his voice. He shuts her door and walks round the front of the truck to his side, climbing into his seat.

“Y’know,” she says through a mouthful of burger, “I know I don’t have like, a definitive taste in music, but from what I’ve seen so far you are definitely above average on the obsessed scale.”

“Okay, I will admit, I am a little too into the whole CD thing. It could be worse, though.”

“Oh?”

“I actually made mixtapes until I was eighteen.”

“No way,” she laughs. “God, just when I thought I was an awkward 18 year old.”

“Hey!”

“No offence, no offence! I just mean, y’know, you seem way more together than me, or, y’know, you’re like, older,” she stammers, caught off guard by the **definitely not** attractive smile he’s giving her right now, “it’s just encouraging to hear that you’ve got a nerdy obsession, is all I’m saying.”

“God,” he exclaims, a low chuckle escaping him, “I don’t think anybody has ever described me as ‘together’.”

Amy smiles, but can’t help curiosity creeping over her- he really seems surprised at that. She doesn’t know him well enough to ask, not by a long shot. It can wait. “Do you want some slushy?” He offers up a large cup, full to the brim with a swirl of different colours.

“Ew, I’m good, thanks.”

“Ew? Dear God, you don’t like slushies?”

“They’re a thousand red flags, Jake. That’s essentially just a cup full of sugar.”

He pulls a face, something between frowning and looking flat-out disgusted, and goes straight back to sipping it.

“Your loss. I happen to think it’s a fantastic combo,” he says, as if consoling his slushy.

“Call me in five years when you have your first heart attack so I can say ‘I told you so’,” she jibes.

“Gladly,” he mutters.

Out of the corner of her eye, he looks back over at her as she gets back to her food, eyebrows raised, like he can’t decide whether he’s impressed or annoyed by her.

Lazily, she takes another bite out of her burger. It’s been such a long day that, at this point, she’s not sure she really cares what he thinks.

Illuminated only by the parking lot lights, Amy Santiago and Jake Peralta eat, and talk, and argue, for the first time in over ten years.

And when Amy falls asleep in the passenger seat, and music is the only soft sound left, there’s only one truth that whirs around in the air.

*Nothing has changed.*
day 2 on the road, y'all! are you as excited as Jake Peralta and his extensive collection of music and dance moves? Probably not tbh

chapter 2 playlist:
https://open.spotify.com/user/hotelsweet/playlist/1DRDVpOfEs4CYOLsqsFC8q

Miles to NYC: 3,002
“Rise and shine, Santiago.”

A voice comes, so quietly, so distant, Amy can’t tell if it’s in her dream or in real life.

“It’s your turn to drive.”

That new, yet soothingly familiar voice rouses her, its sound hazy and muffled as her brain tries to fight it away. Just a few minutes of more sleep, her mind whispers. That’ll do it. She relaxes, letting herself fall back into sleep.

“Amy,” his voice comes again. “Aaaaaaaammmyyy,” he croons, to some made-up tune.

“Urrgeggggggggggggghhhmmmmmmmmmm.”

“Aaaaaaammmyyyyy!”

“Not the singing,” she manages. “Not again.”

“I know, but we need to keep going.” He says gently, like he’s talking to a child. When she doesn’t respond, he nudges her shoulder. “C’mon, I got you some breakfast,” he says promisingly.

She rubs her eyes. Opening one eye, she immediately regrets not taking her makeup off overnight, the tackiness of her lashes a tad too gross to comprehend at-

“What time is it?” She murmurs.
“Five-thirty.”

-at half five in the morning.

“Wait, did you leave me in the truck alone while you got food?” She closes her eyes again, staying tucked in with her blanket up to her chin.

“Drive-through. I got out of the car at each window.”

“Wow, you’re so committed,” she mumbles.

“Y’know, achieving that kind of sarcasm before you’ve even woken up is actually sorta impressive.”

She opens her eyes again when she hears a low crunch, to see him tucking into a hash brown.

“Oooh, breakfast,” she says sleepily.

“Yup,” he says, handing her warm brown paper bag, which she stretches an arm out of her blanket to retrieve.

“Thanks.”

“No problem.”

She winds her window down, letting the mild early-morning breeze seep into the car- partially because she’s wary of the smell that the food might create, and partially because she’s a little concerned about her own smell. She showered yesterday morning, before she and her mom left, which should mean her hair is fine, but she’ll definitely need to freshen up. Her fingers escape the blanket and find her hair to check.

“So,” she smiles politely over at Jake, “how was the drive?”

She feels stupidly self-conscious the second she says it. How was the drive? Honestly, Amy. She shoves almost half a hash brown into her mouth just to shut herself up.

“It was cool,” he says, “I prefer driving at night. Especially when my road trip partner is asleep- I tried out so many new behind-the-wheel dance moves you missed.”

She chuckles softly, watching him grin at her.

“Thank you, I appreciate it. I got, like, a solid six hours.”

“Yeah, you were out cold,” he chuckles. “You missed some of my best stuff so far.”

“Remind me never to fall asleep while you’re at the wheel again.”

They eat in silence for a few minutes, watching the traffic speed past on the freeway in front of them. The sky is a cold blue, the sun not yet fully risen, a lingering summery warmth in the air promising a hot day.

“Where are we?” Amy asks, breaking the stillness.

“Just coming into Salt Lake City,” Jake mumbles through a mouthful of his food, not looking up from his phone.

“We’re in Utah?!”
“Yup. The traffic held us back a ton yesterday and I read there’d been a couple of pretty major accidents coming into Wyoming, so I figured we’d skip it altogether and go round.”

“Right.” Amy crumples up the bag Jake had handed her, now empty, and notices a second coffee in the cupholder closest to her. “Is that for me?”

“Nope, I’m just super thirsty and figured you could live off your own spit.”

“Ha-ha.”

She takes the coffee and practically inhales it, unaware of how badly she needed it. The taste, she thinks, will always remind her of finals week, of the nerves and excitement and determination leading up to each last exam.

“I should probably text my mom,” Amy says softly, patting around her pockets for her phone. “Hey, have you seen my-”

“You left it on your seat, so I put it on charge.” Jake nods down at the tray under the stereo, where, sure enough, her phone is sat, plugged into a cord powered by the cigarette lighter.

“Thanks,” she says, smiling over at him as she takes it. She barely has any notifications since she checked it last night- an email, and two texts. One from Kylie, and one from her mom.

Mom – 23:14
how’s it all going? X

Kylie – 00:16
just finished my shift. Please for the love of god have something juicy to tell me

Hurriedly, Amy texts her mother, explaining apologetically that she’d fallen asleep before the text had even come through, then Kylie, informing her that there’s nothing “juicy” to disclose and wishing her a better shift.

Outside, the sky is spreading out into soft yellows and pinks, the sun finally rearing its head, heat beginning to stream through the windshield. The sudden warmth makes Amy hyperaware of how badly she wants to change her clothes, and brush her teeth, and use some deodorant.

“Hey, if I go and change in the back of the truck do you promise not to start the engine and drive away?”

Jake chuckles at this, sipping at his coffee.

“I will do my ab-solute best, but you should know, just for the record, that you’ve made that idea sound very, very tempting.”

He crumples his bag and throws it in front of him, mimicking a basketball-like swoosh, so it lands at his feet.

“Uh-” Amy can’t help but make a noise, almost twitching at watching someone litter the truck’s floor in front of her. He glances over at her, noticing her frozen, wide-eyed face.

“Oh-”

“Yeah-”
“Right-” He says, leaning over to pick up the bag.

“It just, y’know, feels so pointless to make a mess,” she babbles, feeling a little bad at his discomfited expression, but relieved at removing the mess. They watch each other for a moment, waiting for the other to say something, anything.

“I’m going to go and get changed.” She opens her door and slides out of the truck.

“I’ll come with you,” Jake says casually, then freezes- “I mean, to get my things, out of the back, so that I can change. Somewhere else.”

“Yeah.”

“Okay.”

***

_Note:  Jake Mix #18_

way it goes – Hippo Campus
Limousine – Beach Baby
You Shook Me All Night Long – AC/DC
Word Up - Cameo
Fire – Kasabian
Gameshow – Two Door Cinema Club
The Safety Dance – Men Without Hats
Stuck In The Middle With You – Stealers Wheel
Norgaard – The Vaccines
Yeah Yeah – Willy Moon
This Charming Man – The Smiths
Rawnald Gregory Erikson II - STRFKR

***

Amy first hears blaring music as she’s spraying deodorant under her arm with one hand and brushing her teeth with the other. She must look strange, she thinks, standing in the back of a moving truck with its hatch wide open, amongst stacks of bedroom furniture and moving boxes. Thankfully, the only thing in front of her aside from the freeway off to her side is a field full of cows- all of whom, Amy realises, have just watched her change – so, aside from them, she’s not exactly putting herself on show.

The view from here is actually kind of unbelievable, she realises, observing it with an arm under her shirt and the other up to her mouth; the sky is a beautifully fleeting mix of orange and pink, radiating the colours over everything in sight, as far as the mountains grazing the horizon that seem to border them. It’s so amazingly peaceful.

Or, it was.

Amy takes her bottle of water and washes out her mouth, spitting in a bush behind the truck, even glancing round the parking lot from the hatch to see if she can spy who’s playing the music, before pulling on a loose sweater over her vest, one whose crimson colour matches the small patch of embroidery her aunt put on the side of her shorts. Her fingers dig around her hair tie as she pulls her hair from its ponytail, deciding her hair stands a better chance without a shower if it’s free- her head
breathes a sigh of relief as she lets it out of its tight tie for the first time in just under a day. The satisfaction is real; her hair feels softer, she’s swapped her bra for a wireless bralette that just about keeps her boobs under control without flattening or hurting them, and she can still faintly smell the floral body spray she’s doused herself in.

She checks her reflection in her front camera, and, to her surprise, her makeup- that is, her concealer and mascara- from yesterday is remarkably still intact. She decides to brush some powder over her face and leave it at that- they’ll be in a motel this evening, and then she can properly wash. Her heart flutters at the thought of an actual bed- her shoulders ache from sleeping in the passenger seat. Carefully, she puts everything back into her duffle bag, and buries it between a couple of boxes.

A clatter behind her makes her jump. She turns around to see Jake dumping his bag in the back of the truck.

“You ready?” He asks. “By the way, I’ve decided I’m not going to sleep until tonight at the motel, that way I won’t screw up my body clock too much.”

“Oh, sure. Smart.” She looks down at him. He’s changed into a different plaid shirt, with the same hoodie thrown over the top- but other than that, he doesn’t look much different. As she steps towards him she can faintly smell his body spray, a warm, masculine scent. “Any idea who’s blasting that music?”

Jake doesn’t seem to think she’s serious, and when he realises she is, he smiles softly.

“That would be us.”

“What?! That’s us?” Embarrassment heats up her cheeks and her chest. “It’s not even six in the morning!”

He rolls his eyes.

“Well, I can see why you’re so worried, what with all these people we might disturb,” he jibes sarcastically, looking round at the effectively empty parking lot and the fields surrounding them. “C’mon, it’s fun! We’re wakin’ up, we’re getting back on the road, ready for another super fun day,” he enthuses, bopping his head side to side, grinning widely. She can’t help a brief smile, looking away, which only encourages him further. “I saw that smile, you’re feelin’ it!” He points at her, eyebrows raised, still dancing to himself.

“We need to get going,” she smiles.

She goes to jump down from the back of the truck, but stops- it’s just a bit too far, so she stumbles, wobbling at the edge. She clutches the edge of the truck and tries to scale down the side, but almost slips. Glancing around her, she sighs as she realises she’s not even going to be able to sit down and hop off without knocking over a handful of boxes. All the while, Jake watches her, bemused.

“Help me down?” She says, admitting defeat, refusing to make eye contact with him.

“Oh thank god, I was starting to think I’d graduate before you asked.”

“Very funny.”

He stretches out his hand, into which she slips her own, initially taken aback at how warm he is. It’s nice. She jumps down, resting her weight on his arm, and lands just a bit too close to him, their torsos bumping together. Hastily, she steps back, as, with a loud clunk, he pulls the hatch shut.
“Come on, let’s go,” she smiles, briskly nudging his shoulder, before darting back to the driver’s seat. Jake watches her run to the front of the truck. “You’re going to have to make sure I’m going the right way!” Jake follows her, opening his own door. She looks over at him from the driver’s seat. “Y’know, seeing as we have no map.”

Jake jumps into the passenger seat and shuts the door, seemingly hesitant, she thinks, as though considering the implications of commenting on what she’s just said.

“You said you didn’t want to pick one up yesterday,” he says lightly.

“I know, just making the point that you didn’t bring one.” She smiles acerbically.

“I’m honestly just surprised you haven’t memorised the route.” he says. Amy rolls her eyes, and busies herself with starting up the car. “Have you even driven one of these things before?” He asks cockily, watching her.

“A vehicle? Once or twice, yeah,” she says sarcastically, turning the keys and reversing the truck out of its spot with ease. She smiles smugly over at Jake. “Yes, I have. I practised twice every week, after debate on Mondays and student council on Wednesdays.”

“Wow,” he chuckles. Annoyance pangs in Amy’s stomach as she watches him smirk to himself. She’s getting tired of him making fun of her, she thinks, feeling her cheeks warm a little. They’ve been on the road together less than a day, and she knows she’ll say something stupid if she listens to him quip at her for too long without saying something.

“Wow?” She asks cloyingly, intentionally coating her voice in the most sickly sweet tone she can muster.

“What?”

“You said ‘wow’,” she says, matter-of-factly, pulling the truck onto the freeway as precisely as she can.

“It was nothing!”

“I get it, Jake, okay?” She says sweetly, smiling tartly over at him, “you’re immune to actually trying at things, and you think it’s funny that I like to plan, and organise, and just be ready, and I understand, because it clearly goes against your super-fun-let’s-do-whatever mantra,” she says, imitating his voice, “but I start college in a week and I need to get there, on time, without the pent-up rage of somebody who desperately wants to hit you.”

A little out of breath, she looks over at him, and her chest is heated, but to her surprise, he seems genuinely wound up.

“Okay, when did I say any of that stuff?”

“You didn’t! But every time I say something about…” She trails off, trying to think of examples.

“About?” He asks, his eyebrows raised, irritating her even more- she’s not sure why, but she wasn’t expecting him to argue back. The few people she’s ever called out like this before have just gone quiet and apologetic, like she’s a crazy person.

“I don’t know,” she mutters, “my podcasts. Oh, or my extra-curriculars. Or even the damn toybox I used to clean out, okay?” A pause. “I’m not… there’s nothing wrong with liking all that stuff.”
“I didn’t say that.”

“Well, you implied it. I keep seeing you trying not to laugh at me.”

“I’m not laughing at you… I just,”

“What?”

“Well, I mean… I don’t wanna sound rude, but,” he starts, and her ears prick up. This had better be good.

She glances over at him, away from the road, and his face is kind of screwed up, like he’s seriously reconsidering what he’s about to say.

“Haven’t you ever just, like, done something purely because it’s fun?”

“That’s such a crazy question,” she retorts, but it permeates her mind a lot quicker than she anticipates. “Obviously I do stuff because it’s fun.” Doubt tiptoes into her insistent voice, unwelcome, harshly exposing her.

“Sure,” he says coolly, “but is it only ‘fun’ because it’s productive or organised or whatever?”

“I go out,” she says, but she can hear herself speak, and it’s obvious she’s trying to convince herself as much as she’s trying to convince him. “I mean, that’s what you mean, right? Parties, music, that kind of stuff.”

“Not necessarily. I mean, I guess, if you find it fun.”

“I do, but I like my stuff more.”

“I’m not trying to be a dick,” he says steadily, “I just feel like you could benefit from letting go of everything for five minutes. You’re not going to die if you miss one goal or deadline you’re going for, y’know? Sometimes it happens.”

Amy doesn’t reply, focusing on the road. She chews her lip, thinking.

“I just mean, y’know, you’re fun! And friendly, and smart,” he says unconcernedly, not reacting when she looks at him inquisitively, trying to figure out if he’s for real, “but, a few times, since I started talking to you yesterday, it’s just sounded like you don’t want to let yourself have fun.”

They sit in silence for a moment, a tension lingering in the air between them like a drawn bow.

“Also, if we’re being open about annoying each other, can I file a formal complaint against your litter patrol? Oh, and against that face you do when I rap!”

She laughs weakly, grateful for the relief of loitering unease.

“This is a rental truck! I’d rather not spend an hour cleaning your crap out when we arrive in New York. As for the rapping thing… I mean, I can’t be the only one to have pointed out how bad you are.”

“Hey! I’m great at it. And, actually, I’ve had no complaints so far,” he starts, but then his face falls, as if he’s remembered something. “Oh, no, actually, you’re right.”

“I normally am,” she says under her breath, fully aware that he can hear her.
“Yeah, no, my girlfriend actually made fun of me for something pretty similar last year.”

Amy hesitates.

“Really?” She responds quietly, pushing down the unimportant, small sting delivered to the gut by the word ‘girlfriend’. He keeps talking, chatting about some story from dorms last year- she thinks- but she’s not listening, hit by the realisation that this whole time she’s just been assuming he’s single. Or maybe she just wasn’t thinking about it at all.

Now she is.

“Anyway, thank you for reminding me.”

“What?”

“I’m in the passenger seat, which means I’m in control of music…”

“Oh, god.”

***

Jake Mix #23

Signed, Sealed, Delivered – Stevie Wonder
Video Killed The Radio Star – The Buggles
Feel Good Inc. – Gorillaz
Hustlin’ – Rick Ross
Don’t Stop Believin’ - Journey
Brimful Of Asha (Norman Cook Remix) – Cornershop
Bohemian Like You – The Dandy Warhols
Good Times – CHIC
21 Flights – Heavy English
You’re The Best – Joe Esposito
Dangerous – Big Data
Loaded – Primal Scream

***

“And singing, illuminate the main streets and the cinema aisles!”

“Are you sure we’re going the right way?” Amy practically yells over the music, anxiously trying to focus on the road in front of her.

“We don’t care about no government warnings, bout their promotion of a simple life-”

“Jake!”

“BRIMFUL OF ASHA ON THE- FORTY FIVE!”

In a rapid- but deft- movement, Amy blindly whacks the stereo, praying to God she hits it in the right place to turn it off, or, should she luck out, break the damn thing. Divine intervention, however, is the last thing on her mind when it shuts off, her head instead filling with pure, unadulterated relief.

“I mean… you have to know that was mean, right?” Jake’s voice teases, flattened, after a moment’s silence. “Now I’m not gonna give you directions because I’m sad.”
“I don’t think that’s going to be an issue,” she replies, facing the sight of a huge chunk of traffic coming up in front of them. “God, the quiet is so nice. At least we have that.”

“Rude.”

“You’re so restless. Aren’t you tired? You’ve been awake for like, a day and a half.”

“I’m only scared I’ll fall asleep and you’ll program me to adore vegetables, and replacing paper towels, and changing my sheets.”

“I’m sorry, you don’t change your sheets?”

“Here we go,” he says dryly.

“That’s not normal, Jake, that’s flat-out disgusting. What if you spill food? What if you get product on them? What if you, y’know…”

“Huh?” He looks over at her. She makes an odd expression. “What, are you constipated?”

“Ugh,” she huffs, “sex! What about after sex?”

“Oh,” he laughs, leaning back into his seat. “I have a nifty little system for that, not that it’s put into use as often as I’d like-”

“Please don’t-” She moans, the grin splayed over his face she keeps catching out of the corner of her eye cruelly making her aware that he’s deliberately pushing it to wind her up.

“First off, protection is a must-have, which normally helps out- but, y’know, thanks for assuming I never use it.”

“I was… it’s not… I was speaking hypothetically-” She stammers.

“But aside from that, I find it pretty useful to just have sex literally anywhere except my own bed,” he says, matter-of-factly, clearly trying not to laugh as her face scrunches up in response.

“Ew, ew, ew, ew-”

“God,” he chuckles, watching her squirm in her seat, “you are going to love college.”

She doesn’t reply- he thinks nothing of it, going back to his phone.

College.

“Oh my god,” she says quietly.

He looks over at her. She’s gone blank, and starkly pale.

“What?”

“College.”

There’s a pause as he waits for her to say more, but nothing comes.

“Yup,” he says slowly, “what about it?”

“It’s going to be full of people like you, isn’t it?”
“Well, I mean, that feels a little harsh.”

“No, no, not like that, I just mean… I’m going to have no idea.”

“No idea?”

“About anything. All I’ve done is work and work and hang out with Kylie and work some more,” she babbles, the words feeling heavy falling out of her mouth, “and you were right, I need to let go, and do something stupid, otherwise I’m going to be that kid all over again—”

“What kid?” Jake watches her carefully, thankful that they’re practically at a standstill thanks to the traffic. “Amy. You’re fine. You don’t need to do something stupid.”

“Oh, please, like I’d even know where to start.” She sits back against her seat and, for the first time in a good few minutes, actually looks over at him. Her frown carves her lips into the perfect upside-down U shape. She laughs tensely, letting it change into a groan, as she runs her hands through her hair. “Ignore me, I’m just freaking out. This has happened at least twice a week since my high school graduation.”

“It’s fine! You’re fine.” He tries, but she can tell he feels a little out of his depth.

She turns back to him again. He seems a little jarred by her change in mood, watching her hopefully, yet still seeming a little uneasy. They both lean back, looking at each other in silence.

“Jake?” She asks, looking him in his dark eyes, hoping she can make him pity her at least a little.

“Yeah?” He replies quietly, sincerely, still seeming a little alarmed. Score.

“If I pay for your lunch will you give me college advice?”

“My advice is literally invaluable. You can’t put a price on intellect like mine.”

“Oh, so we’ll both buy our own lunch and you’ll give me advice for free?”

“Okay, okay, how much advice are we talking?”

“Depends how hungry you are.”

She watches his face change into total excitement. A loud honk from the car behind shocks them both, and Amy realises the traffic has started to move.

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DESERT EDGE
PUB / BREWERY

551S600E SALT LAKE CITY, UT
13:03 08/21/16

LEMONADE L $2.50
WATER $0.00
PUB CLUB SAND. $9.95
- WHEAT
CHICKEN CAESAR $11.50
NACHOS $8.95
Thank you for visiting Desert Edge

***

Dina’s Playlist – work/whatever Stephen will let me play behind the bar

Human Touch – Betty Who
Thinking About It (KVR Remix) – Nathan Goshen
Kids (Seeb Remix) – OneRepublic
Capsize – FRENship

***

“Thank you so much,” Amy says, practically salivating over the salad that her server, a short, young teenager with a name tag reading DINA, puts in front of her.

“No worries, can I get anything else for you guys while I’m here?” She smiles, but both Amy and Jake already have their mouths full with food. “Don’t be afraid to shout if you need something,” she says sweetly, then scurries off to the back of the restaurant.

Amy can’t believe how good it feels to eat something that isn’t candy or junk food. She douses her salad with some dressing, then tucks in, savouring each bite of her first fresh food in just under two days. Maybe she wouldn’t feel it as bad if she didn’t normally eat so well, she thinks.

Or, y’know, if she ate like that.

In front of her, Jake is devouring a huge sandwich, filled with bacon, cheese, and chicken, occasionally grabbing a few of the fries that came with it or picking a nacho from the entire bowl he ordered for himself. She looks at him, blank, unsure of whether to laugh or cry at his eating habits.

“How is it?” She asks, nodding at his food.

“It’s good, thanks,” she smiles right back, “even better when I think about how little it’s going to affect my bowel movements,” she says, glaring at the towering pile of nachos in front of him.

“Joke’s on you, I hardly ever go to the bathroom.”

“Oh, Jake, ew. You’re the worst.”

“And yet here you are, about to literally beg for my advice.” He beams, hot cheese in his teeth.

“Hey! That’s not how this works at all,” she corrects him, trying to ignore how gross he is, “I bought your lunch, now you’re obligated to give me advice.” She picks at her salad lazily. “Anyway, I never said your advice was going to be useful.”

“And, on that note, what do you want to know?” He asks sarcastically, shoving almost a whole handful of nachos into his mouth,

“Okay…” she pulls her phone out of her pocket and puts it on the table, opening her notes.

“You’ve got a list?”
“The other day, before we left my place in Albany, I was desperately trying to figure out why I didn’t feel ready to go, and it basically just ended up being a rough list of my personal issues,” she rambles, looking up to see him- to her surprise- looking genuinely interested, more sincere. “You’re not allowed to be patronising. Don’t pity me.”

“I’m not!”

“Good, because I’m eighteen, nineteen in under a month, and it’s not like I’m the only one who’s thinking about this stuff, and it makes sense to ask you, because you’re twenty-one, so you automatically have more experience. It’s just logical.”

“I know,” he says, indignant, but clearly trying to reassure her.

“Good. I think. Okay,” she starts looking down the list, “let’s start with something simple. Oh, and one last thing,” she looks at him earnestly. “You’re not allowed to laugh.”

“Okay,” he says, but it sounds more like a question than a promise.

“I guess the main thing I’m stressing over is keeping up with assignments, given that I’ll obviously be taking extra classes,” she begins, but Jake immediately blows raspberries against the palm of his hand, using the other one to give a firm thumbs-down. “What?!” She asks irately.

“You’re smart. Assignments aren’t a biggie.”

“How do you know how smart I am?”

“Are you seriously arguing with me over a compliment?” He asks. She shrugs. “I can just tell, okay? Trust me when I say you’re not going to be the sort of person who struggles with that kind of thing.” He sips his lemonade through the curly straw he specifically requested. “C’mon, ask something juicy.”

“Okay… um. Be real. How bad is the peer pressure?”

“Uh, what, like, drinking and stuff?”

“Yeah, I guess. And other stuff.”

“Drugs?”

“Sure, but also, I mean, if we’re splitting hairs-”

“Oh,” he realises, “sex?”

A woman at the table opposite them looks over, confused. Jake shrugs back at her.

“Yeah. I mean, all of that stuff.” Amy hushes her voice, embarrassed that anyone can hear their conversation in the first place.

“Right. I mean, people are more kicked back about all of it, but it’s only because they’re away from home. Nobody takes any of it as seriously as they do in high school, though. The worst situation you’ll find yourself in is somebody offering you a joint or groping you in a club, if you manage to get in.”

“Oh. That’s a pleasant surprise.”

“Really?”
“Yeah. The way my brothers talk about it, you’d think they’re visiting a crack den with a brothel next door and coming out with a degree.”

He laughs deeply, and she feels her insides bubble happily.

“I mean, I don’t care, I’ll do what I want, I just don’t want to lose friends over it.”

“It’s honestly pretty relaxed. I didn’t actually end up sleeping with anyone I met at college until the end of my second year.”

“You lost your virginity in your second year?” She asks, surprised, without thinking- and immediately regrets it. They both stiffen. He freezes, eyebrows raised, before he laughs awkwardly. She cringes, looking at him apologetically.

“Wow, okay- uh, no. I, uh- I, it- when I was seventeen. I met the girl I’m seeing now in my second year.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to pry. I forgot I was speaking to someone I’ve not seen since I was seven,” she says ruefully, wishing she’d never brought it up in the first place. Better yet, that the ground will open up and swallow her whole.

“It’s fine, seriously.”

“So, a girlfriend, huh?” She wiggles her eyebrows.

“What is that?” He snorts at this new movement of hers. She can’t help but laugh- even she’s aware she’s got no idea what she’s doing. “And yeah, kinda.”

“Kinda?”

“It’s complicated.”

“Ah, an angsty, emotional college relationship, I see. Can’t wait for that,” she says cynically, leaning for her glass of water and taking a sip.

“You don’t have to worry about that,” he says, which catches her attention. She looks at him questioningly. “You’ll do way better than some idiot like me,” he laughs, throwing another nacho into his mouth.

She’s not sure what to say to that- I know? Thanks? Don’t be silly!

So instead, she snatches a nacho, and gestures to her list.

“Okay, let’s talk student finance in New York City.” She grins at the immediate look of exasperation on his face. “Remember, lunch is paid for, so you have no choice.”

“Please, God, no.”

“Let’s start with accommodation and living costs,” she says, stifling a grin when she hears him groan. “Do you want to see my budget?”

***

Amy takes a deep breath, enjoying the silence – bar the faint white noise of the freeway – around her. Next to her, Jake is fast asleep, and has been for a good five hours. It’s nearing half six in the evening, the traffic isn’t too bad, the sky is a beautiful, hopeful lilac- and best of all, she’s managed to
swap the CDs. After he crashed out, she dug around in the book, and found a CD entitled *Golden Oldies #1* - and to her surprise, she knows virtually every song she’s heard so far.

She’s beginning to understand Jake’s style of music, or at least she thinks she is. And perhaps it’s because she was raised on all this stuff, but she’s almost certain that this is *her* style of music, all these old tunes. It makes her stomach warm, at home, nostalgic.

“God only knows what I’d be without youuuu,” she sings quietly, unable to keep a smile off her face as she pictures the time her mom played this song to her, aged eight, over and over and over again, dancing her round the kitchen to cheer her up when Hugo and Luis locked her in the cupboard under the stairs for almost forty-five minutes.

She glances over at Jake, whose head is leant against his hoodie, bundled up into a kind of makeshift pillow against the window. He’s still, peaceful, his arms falling out of where they’d been folded against his torso earlier on, his flannel starting to look a little crumpled, she notes.

For the first time all summer, she feels vaguely at ease. Talking to him about NYU actually, astonishingly, helped- she’d not even known she’d cared about half that stuff before she’d spoken to him about it. And he wasn’t patronising, or awkward, or uncomfortable. He was easy. Friendly. Warm. It’s rare she talks to someone that simply, knowing they’ll understand what she means; even with Kylie she sporadically finds she has to explain herself.

He’s alright, she thinks. They’re nearing on forty-eight hours together now, and she can safely say they’ve pushed past the initial awkwardness, and sure, he’s a royal pain in the ass, but he’s okay. She’d even go as far to say that – at certain moments – he’s genuinely funny. He’d make a good friend. He always did.

“Mmm,” Jake groans quietly.

“Y’okay?” She murmurs softly, after a couple of minutes, unable to tell if he’s waking up or just making noises in his sleep. He goes quiet again, aside from occasional heavy breathing. Glimpsing over at him again, she almost laughs, feeling amusement fizz in her stomach, for no reason other than how quiet and innocent he looks in comparison to his normal self.

The backend of the rush hour traffic brings the truck to a standstill, almost the entirety of the light glowing over the two of them accounted for by the bright reds of the brake lights of cars in front. Amy decides to check her phone while the traffic is so still, pulling it out of her pocket.

*Mom – 15:34*

*Sounds fun. Safe journey to the motel ❤*

She smiles, partially at the message from her mother, and partially at the thought of a motel- she’s so close to a hot shower and a comfortable bed she can almost taste it.

*Kylie – 16:05*

*how’s Utah??*

Amy swipes the message open, sending a response and balancing her phone on her leg.

*Boring. Don’t you have other people to talk to?*

*Hey!! I’ll have you know I’m currently talking in three group chats*
Amy’s cheeks heat up as she pictures Kylie stalking Jake online as soon as she figured out his surname. He stirs in his sleep, breathing in sharply through his nose and another low grumble coming from his throat. He’s not _not_ attractive, she supposes, watching him. For a college student with the eating habits of a ten-year-old let loose in a candy store, he’s surprisingly fit, and his fluffy curls are pretty cute, if you want to think about him like that, she thinks. She looks back to her phone.

**Well, don’t get too excited, because a. I don’t think he’s cute, and b. he has a girlfriend.**

**Prude**

She chuckles as she puts her phone back into the tray, grateful for the traffic picking up again. Kylie’s words ring around in her head- and she’s sure there’ll be plenty more, given that Kylie is starting college a couple of weeks after her.

“Hey.” Jake’s voice is lusciously sleepy, the kind of voice that can only make you want to go back to bed. Amy swallows thickly, trying not to let Kylie’s text get to her.

“Hi, sleepy,” she says softly, smiling briefly over at him. “You want to stop for some food soon?”

“I’m actually okay,” he says, pausing to yawn, “I’m still full from lunch.”

“Can’t think why,” she says, unable to remove the picture of the sheer amount of food he had in front of him earlier in the day.

“Yeah, maybe the nachos were overkill.”

“Maybe.”

In the corner of her eye, she sees him sit up, adjusting his posture.

“I’m happy to stop for food if you want something, though.”

“Would you mind? I don’t want dinner or anything, I just need the bathroom. I’ll grab some candy while I’m in there.”

“You don’t need to bribe me with junk food just so you can pee, Amy,” he chuckles dozily. “Pull over, we can swap seats. You’ve been driving for twelve hours.”

“Wait, really?”

“Yeah, sure. I’ll only fall asleep again, then I won’t be able to sleep tonight.”

“Okay, cool, thanks,” she says, smiling over at him, heartened when he smiles back.

She pulls the truck into an oncoming gas station, suddenly aware of just how badly she needs to pee, and dashes out as soon as they arrive, grabbing her backpack from under her seat.-

After what is potentially the longest pee of her life, she heads into the store, and buys a few bags of candy, paying quickly and hurrying back out to find Jake, who’s leaning against the front of the truck, sporting a leather jacket she’s not seen him wear until now, looking down at his phone.

“I come bearing gifts,” she says, the slightly brisk air against her bare legs energising her as she heads over to the truck. She throws a bag of skittles at him, which he catches in his held-up hand.

“You okay?”
“Yeah, just thought I’d stretch my legs a little.” He slips his phone into his pocket and pops open the bag of Skittles, offering it to her. She takes a few and drops them into her mouth.

“Hey, Jake?”

“Uh-huh?” He says, trying, unsuccessfully, to catch his food in his mouth.

“Thanks for earlier. It actually really helped.” She smiles softly at him, uncaring of the wild waves her hair has fallen into that threaten to obscure her face as they’re tossed around by the warm evening breeze. “I’ve been super nervous and I think I just need a stupid adventure. I think college will help.”

“No sweat,” he says, “although, now I know how much you value my advice, you should be aware I’ll be offering it at literally any given opportunity.”

“Can’t wait,” she jibes, rolling her eyes.

For just a moment, their eyes don’t leave each other.

“C’mon, let’s go.”

***

Amy’s not sure what it is exactly that wakes her up. In fact, she can’t actually remember when it was that she fell asleep.

Perhaps it’s the bright lights, in their kaleidoscope of colours, that keep darting across her eyelids. Perhaps it’s the soft sound of Jake’s music, some guitar riff buzzing along excitedly underneath them. She doesn’t remember falling asleep, let alone how she positioned herself to be leaning on Jake’s hoodie, the unfamiliar smell spooking her a bit as her mind seems to come back to life.

She sits up. Exhaustion aches in her head. She’s so tired, that nothing could really wake her up right now.

“Jake,” she mumbles, “what time is it?”

“Uh, just gone midnight.”

Well, that’ll do it.

“Midnight? We were only a couple hours off the motel when we left! What the hell happened-” She begins to ramble, but immediately trails off when she takes in their surroundings. Bright lights whizz past, billboards and signs and streetlights, and they’re surrounded by too many cars for them to be going the right way, she thinks, panic setting in.

Palm trees line the streets, each with a twirling set of lights twisting around their trunk, and bright buildings tower over them tauntingly, some even with their own light installations, vibrant rainbows of colours swirling across their surfaces. Music, chatter, and traffic hums around them softly.

“So, slight change of plan,” Jake responds cheerfully, cheekily- she can hear the smile in his voice.

“Are we where I think we are?” Her voice is almost in a whisper.

Maybe half a second later, her question is answered: as they move forward, a tall- but not quite tall enough- sparkling, golden Eiffel Tower reveals itself, and Amy honestly feels her heart stop for a moment.
“Remember when you mentioned the possibility of a stupid adventure?” He grins smugly.

“Oh my god,” she manages, the words barely escaping through a whisper.

“I was thinking- how about Las Vegas?”

Chapter End Notes

wooooooooOOoah plot twist (kinda)

hi!!! I hope you enjoyed the second part of this fic!!!

honestly I'm enjoying the playlists and stuff so much that I keep having to remind myself that my writing needs to be semi-coherent lol I've never written anything like this and I'm loving it!!!

thank you so much for the kudos and comments on the first chapter, they got me through this weekend and kept a smile on my face which I appreciate so much, so thank you <3
Chapter Summary

vegas, baby!

Chapter Notes

chapter 3 playlist:
https://open.spotify.com/user/hotelsweet/playlist/13sfZnU6tWbl3yvNwUp1Ji

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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Miles to NYC: 2,521
Daydream: Bar & Dance – Las Vegas
Summer 2016 Music – Evenings

- please contact HR regarding the use of unlicensed music or personal playlists
- this list has been approved for use by: Angela Miller (Manager)

Everyday My Life – LVNDSCAPE
Let Me Love You (AFTR:HRS Mix) – Tiesto
This Girl – Kungs
Roses (The Him Remix) – Chainsmokers
Talking Body (KREAM Remix) – Tove Lo
Show You Love – Kato
Don’t Leave (Throttle Remix) – Snakehips
Midnight Hearts – Sam Feldt
Aloha – Møme
Here For You – Kygo
We’ll Be Coming Back – Calvin Harris, Example

(cont. next page)

This is real. She’s here. It’s happening.

The night is flying by in such a rush that she’s not even sure she remembers their first few moments here- but as Amy takes in the view in front of her, something deep inside her relaxes, sighing, I don’t care.

Perched in front of a huge window that stretches from the ceiling to the floor, she’s several storeys high, overlooking hundreds of thousands of twinkling lights that, collectively, form the Las Vegas Strip. Down the wall behind her- and the one at the other end of the room- are huge, long streams of warm fairy lights, which account for most of the dim orangey light in the room, except for the flickering candles dotted around on the tables surrounding the dancefloor. The room is packed, with people chatting and laughing, all dressed up, all, somehow, beautiful, as though it’s not a Sunday night and they have places to be. A DJ stands at the other end of the room, slightly elevated, the noise of the music seemingly concentrated on the dancefloor, where indistinguishable forms dance
and meld between the flickering orange and red shapes created by the dancefloor lights. Out of the
window, the balcony is visible to her, currently accommodated by a good handful of people, some
holding drinks, some dancing, every single one of them laughing or smiling.

What Amy can’t take her eyes off, though, is the pool, situated along the exterior half of the balcony,
with an infinity edge, the type she’s only ever seen in pictures on the internet, overlooking all the
lights stretching out ahead of them. Fixated, she watches a young couple, two young men, both
around the same age as Jake, she thinks, whose bodies are lit up by the aquatic swirls of pink and
purple lights being projected around the pool. Both are leaning on the edge, talking, laughing,
smiling, their legs kicking out slowly, childlike, in the water underneath them. She’s enchanted by
them, by how happy, how content, how in love they look, watching them share a kiss, totally lost in
their own world in amongst the bustle and music that surrounds them.

“Okay,” Jake announces, snapping her out of her trance as he walks over to the raised table at which
Amy is sat, “we officially have a hotel for the night.” He puts their second round of beers on the
table.

“A hotel,” Amy says, impressed, still unable to wipe the grin off her face.

“Yup! It even has one whole star on Yelp.”

“Yikes.”

“Yeah, our budget isn’t too steep. But,” he says, sitting down in front of her, “it’s central, not too far
from where we left the truck, and even has a working shower. It’s basically luxury.”

“I’ll drink to that,” Amy says, lifting her beer, which Jake taps with the neck of his own. “I still can’t
believe I got in,” she says excitedly, in a hushed voice.

He smiles admiringly, teasingly, she thinks, like he’s happy for her but desperately stifling a sarcastic
comment.

“I can’t help it, I feel so grown up,” she confesses, looking round at all the people crowding this bar,
trying to ignore the fact that she’s still in a sweater and a pair of shorts with little to no makeup or hair
product while everyone around her is nicely done up.

“Have you seriously never gotten into a bar before?” He asks disbelievingly.

“Obviously not, I’m only eighteen.”

“Oh, so this is your first bar?”

“Yeah, I guess, technically-”

“Oh my god, that makes so much more sense,” he laughs, taking a sip from his beer. She watches the
rim of the bottle go to his lips, and wonders how he manages to maintain that amazingly annoying
smirk even while he’s drinking.

“Huh?”

“I just mean,” he says, leaning forward onto his folded arms, “you’re so excited that you got in, that
you got served- you have no idea.”

“About what?” She asks eagerly.
“This is your turf.”

“My… turf?”

“Hot girls get into bars no matter how old they are,” he explains, and suddenly she’s grateful for how dimly lit this place is, otherwise he’d be able to see how red she feels herself go. “You’ll also be able to get pretty much anything for free, if you feel like it.”

“I’m sorry,” she grins, “could you repeat that first part?” She flicks her hair over her shoulder, beaming widely.

He looks confused for a moment, then realises, and rolls his eyes, leaning back. She lets herself laugh at him.

“Okay, you know I didn’t mean- I wasn’t saying anything-”

She giggles, watching him flounder, enjoying being the one teasing him for once, and takes an enthusiastic swig of her beer.

“Very funny,” he says sarcastically, but she can see him smiling to himself.

“Okay, so what’s the plan?” She asks, topping the last of her first beer and moving onto the second. Jake watches on, impressed.

“Not to freak you out, but we don’t have a plan. That’s the idea.”

“Right,” she says, furrowing her brows in thought.

“Can I just point out how much more you’re enjoying this than I think you thought you would?”

She sighs, exasperated.

“I don’t know how often you take people four hundred miles off-course when you’re on road trips, Jake, but you can’t expect people to be immediately overjoyed about it. I freaked out,” she admits, picturing her initial reaction back in the truck, “but that’s only because I’m mentally sound.”

“I don’t know, I think people should take surprise trips to Las Vegas in the middle of the night more often,” he beams, admiring the lights of the strip beneath them.

“It is pretty cool here,” she says quietly, secretly surprised at how much energy she has given that it’s almost one in the morning and she’s not slept in a bed for two nights.

“What do you want to do tonight?”

“Huh?” Amy looks over at him confusedly. “This is what we’re doing, isn’t it?”

“You want to sit at this table all night?”

“I was thinking more like an hour, before we retreat to our hotel and get enough sleep to fuel us for the road-”

“Boooooooring!” Jake cuts in loudly, “we’re in Vegas! Come on. What about a drinking game?”

“I don’t know.”

“Don’t worry, nothing hardcore.” He pauses, thinking to himself. “What about truth or dare or
“Drink?”

“Huh?”

“You pick truth or dare, then once it’s been picked, you can either choose to do it, or drink.” He smiles, clearly familiar with what he’s talking about.

“Okay,” she agrees steadily, “that seems reasonable.”

“America, I give you: the first teenager in the history of western culture to find a drinking game appealing because it’s ‘reasonable’.”

“Shut up. You go first, I can’t think of anything.”

“Truth or dare?” He asks, rolling up the sleeves of his plaid shirt so they sit comfortably beneath his elbows.

“Truth.”

“Uuh…” he deliberates, then his face lights up. “Have you ever had a crush on a teacher?”

“Ugh, Jake,” Amy cringes, but what she’s had of her beer has gone to her head- naturally, given that she’s had no dinner – and a slightly tipsy fizzing in her stomach is teasing her, because she knows she has, and he’ll know that now, whether she drinks or she answers. He’s watching her expectantly, his eyebrows raised. “Yes, I have,” she says reluctantly, and he laughs triumphantly.

“Amazing! Who?”

“My tenth grade English teacher. Mr Brady,” she admits, unable to stop herself smirking as Jake sniggers at her.

“Sounds like a real stud,” he jibes flippantly, tilting the rim of his bottle towards her as he says it.

“No, no, it was just,” she laughs, “he was really tall, and handsome, and wore really well-fitting shirts,” she rambles, a stubborn, nervous smile remaining on her face.

“Well-fitting shirts, the number one trait people look for in a soulmate,” Jake says wistfully, “oh, Amy, did he smell like old books?” He looks at her longingly.

“Shut up. Like you never had a crush on a teacher.”

“Mmm, Miss Stratton. Thanks for the reminder.” He waggles his eyebrows. “My first time.”

“Ew! What?!”

“No, no, not her, oh my god,” Jake laughs at Amy’s disgusted expression, “her daughter.”

“Nope! Don’t make me listen to this!”

“I feel like you’re missing my point, I’m talking about sex, are you familiar with the concept? It’s when-”

“Shut up, Peralta.”

Jake smiles cheekily as she squirms in her seat.
“It’s your turn, anyway.”

“Right. Truth or dare?”

“Dare.”

“Of course,” she mutters, watching him sit up, bracing himself for whatever she’s about to ask him to do. She glimpses around the bar, her eyes falling on a cluster of girls not far from where they’re sat. “I dare you to try and get as many numbers as you can from that group of girls over there,” she says, nodding to a group of women at the bar, “and for every number you get I’ll buy you another drink.”

“High stakes! Well, obviously I’m going to take a shot at that action,” he says, standing up, adjusting his shirt and ruffling his hair with his hand. “How do I look?”

She looks at him, his dark hair adorably fluffy, his shirt wrapped around just the right parts of his arms to make them look firm, his warm, excited eyes smiling over at her. He takes a quick swig of his beer, tucking his phone into his pocket, his Adam’s apple dipping deliciously in his throat.

“Yeah, you look fine,” she says gently.

“Fine?! Oh, how you flatter me,” he teases, shooting her a wink, then heads off merrily towards the bar.

She can’t hear them from here, but she’s good a pretty good view of them. Jake bounces over, jovially, grinning- as per usual- and he must tell a joke, because within seconds, the girls are laughing. They chat for a while, and Amy can’t quite believe it, but she’s almost certain that a couple of them are flirting with him- one girl, a short, cute blonde, tucks her hair behind her ear, giggling incessantly. Could she be any more obvious?

He chats easily, with charm- lord only knows what he’s talking about- making the girls laugh and smile and look between each other knowingly. Amy watches on, a little annoyed- only because he’s winning. He looks back over at her, smiling cheekily, and in an instant, all the girls are looking at her. She halts, trying to figure out what he’s playing at, but then all the girls smile, one even giving a quick wave. Amy waves back once, a smile tugging at the edge of her lips, then, to her dismay, she sees one of the girls take his phone out of his hand. Then another. And then, all too quickly, he’s headed back to the table, victoriously waving his phone in the air like he’s taking a bow, and all she can do is applaud him, reluctantly clapping at him as he comes back.

“What, did you cheat?” She asks almost as soon as he sits down. He puts a hand to his chest, wounded, feigning heartbreak.

“Why assume I cheated?”

“You looked over at me!”

“I was inviting them to hang out with us later!”

“What?” She laughs heartily, unable to help herself. “That doesn’t count as getting their numbers!”

“Uh, yes it does- I then went and asked the first one out, and, get this,” he leans in towards her secretively so she can faintly smell his aftershave, “the second one asked if she could come along.”

“No way.”

“I’m serious!”
“Oh my god,” she giggles. “I guess I owe you a drink, then.”

“Yup!” He follows her up to the bar. She looks over at him as if to ask why he’s behind her. “It’s my turn!”

“Okay, go on,” she says, waiting at the bar.

“Truth or dare?”

Amy bites her lip in thought, considering what he might try and get her to do if she asks for a dare, but aware that he’ll only press her for embarrassing life details if she keeps asking for truths.

“Dare.”

“Huh. Wasn’t expecting that.”

“Yeah, well, I’m tipsy, four hundred miles away from where I’m meant to be right now, and haven’t seen a bed or a shower since Friday, so I think there’s plenty of unexpected to go round.”

As she orders their next round of drinks, she catches him in the corner of her eye, his face washed over in astonishment and amusement.

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“No way,” Amy snorts, “I’m not doing that.”

“Okay, fine- I mean, you can always drink instead.” Jake looks uncomfortably at Amy’s drink, which is, thanks to an earlier dare, now a combination of several people’s drinks from around the bar.

“I’d rather die,” she retorts, eyeing the liquid in her cup, which is now, somehow, a light purple colour. She sets it down decisively.

“Then I think you only have one option.” Jake looks at the pool, next to which they’re both stood, the deeper end of the water shimmering pink and blue.

So far, largely thanks to Jake’s dares, she’s managed to get three free drinks from a particularly friendly bartender, two of which she’s traded- one for a picture with a lady who, for some reason, had a chihuahua with her, and the other for a man’s number. Jake, on the other hand, has spent ten minutes communicating with a group of girls in only baby-talk, requested six Britney Spears songs, and attempted to convince a bartender he’s a time traveller.

However fun their previous dares have been, every signal in Amy’s brain is telling her this is a bad idea. She’s drunk, on the roof of a building in the middle of Las Vegas, and she’s done so much dancing her legs feel sore. But she’s excited. She’s having fun, actual fun, and her heart is soaring, content and exhilarated and youthful.

“Oh god, okay, fine,” she says, stifling giggles between her words, “but not in all of this.”
She pushes her feet out of her shoes with her toes, sliding them to the side of the outdoor bar, then puts her drink down.

“You’re not allowed to take your clothes off, that ruins the whole point!”

“Do you use that line on all the girls?” she jibes, and, in one, quick movement, pulls her sweater off her head, and unbuttons her shorts, shimmying out of them until they fall to the ground. “If I’m jumping into this pool, I’m doing it wearing whatever I want.” She scoops them up with her foot and looks at Jake expectantly. “Do you mind?”

“Oh, sure,” he realises, putting his drink down, and takes her clothes in his arms.

“Oh, so, on the count of three?” She says, feeling her nerves kick in, now she’s standing here in virtually nothing other than a black tank top and her underwear. She daren’t turn away from Jake, instantaneously aware of how little she has covering her body, and goosebumps dot their way over her legs as a surprisingly warm waft of air tickles them.

“Wait, for real?”

She looks at him for a moment, and, in a horrifyingly sobering moment, it all comes crashing in on her- she’s half-naked, in Las Vegas, at 3am, no, 4am, or somewhere inbetween, on a Monday morning, about to completely soak her own body without any of the proper attire to comfortably get herself back to their hotel. She could easily insist they go back to the hotel right now, and get some sleep, have a shower, and plan out their trip tomorrow. It’d ruin the fun, she knows, but Jake’s decent enough, he’d understand.

“Amy?” He asks firmly, his voice calm over the sounds encompassing them. His expression is reassuring, warm, soft, and she can’t help it - it’s the alcohol, not her - but she feels safe. Everything worry in her head washes away at once, and in that instant, she knows precisely what she wants to do.

And so she throws herself, backwards, into the pool, air rushing around her skin as she falls.

The water is warm, and seems to gloss over her body as she falls in, her speed softened by the water. Too quickly, she’s above the water again, laughing at how ridiculous this whole thing is, acknowledging a few people cheering her on at the side of the pool. Jake stands at the side of the pool, still holding her clothes, laughing so hard he’s almost in hysterics.

“I bow down to the queen of Truth or Dare or Drink,” he chuckles, as she swims back to where he stands. “Which, I believe, means I owe you.”

“Yes!” She gives a short fist pump, triumphant. “I’ll have a gin and tonic.”

“Fine, but neither of us are having anything else after this, otherwise we won’t be able to sleep it off.”

“For someone who has spent two days teasing me about being responsible all the time,” she says, pushing wet hair out of her face, “that is awfully responsible.”

He smiles down at her, at which point she realises just how odd she must look, her hair in a mop over her head, standing, utterly saturated, in a pool, with only extremely thin, skin tight clothes to provide any modesty.

“Oh, whatever,” he laughs, heading for the bar.
Amy looks down at her bare legs, kicking them back and forth in the water, then looks to all the people around her. She swims over to the glass edge, clutching it with all of her strength, and, if only momentarily, looks down. Satisfaction warms her insides as she realises she was right when she’d looked at this part of the pool earlier from inside— the lights look even more exciting from here.

“Hey!” Jake’s voice beckons— so she swims back over to him, and climbs out of the pool. “Here you go,” he says, handing her a drink. “You want me to see if I can get you something to dry off?”

“No, it’s okay. Not like I’m the only one,” she says, looking round at a few women in their bikinis.

“Fair enough,” he says, “Cheers.”

“I think we’ve had a pretty successful evening,” she says proudly.

“You’ve had fun?” He says, still giggling, beaming as he watches her.

“What?” she giggles.

“Nothing, I just, I wasn’t expecting you to let loose as much as you did!” His eyes dart up and down over her, “I just wanted to make sure you’re doing it for yourself and not because you want to prove me wrong.”

“Don’t flatter yourself,” she says, nudging him with a wet elbow. “I think I needed it. Thank you.”

“That’s okay— that’s good,” he starts, but is cut off when another male voice comes from behind Amy.

“Amy Santiago?”

She spins round, and immediately recognises the tall, built figure who’s greeting her. He’s as daunting as he was the last time she saw him, boyishly attractive, muscular, incredibly tall, and seemingly always wearing a teasing smirk. Nerves bubble within her.

“Dylan, hi!”

“It is you, hey!”

“I’d give you a hug, but, y’know,” she says politely, gesturing to her still-soaked body, pulling one-handedly at the edge of her vest in an attempt to cover more of her legs. He laughs. “Um, Jake, this is Dylan, a friend of my brother Rafael.” As she turns back to Jake, she flashes him a warning look, wide-eyed. He looks at her oddly for a moment.

“Hey, man, I’m Jake.”

“Good to meet ya, bro! This your new squeeze, Ames?”

Jake snorts. She stammers, about to correct Dylan, still inwardly writhing at his use of her nickname—I’d always insisted on using it, even though he only knew her when she was about fourteen.

“No, no, Jake’s an old friend.”

“Yeah, no, nothing romantic happening here,” Jake says.

“Sure,” Dylan laughs, “sure, man, I see you.” He winks at Jake, whose expression twists into one that might read as if he can’t quite hear what Dylan said, narrowing his eyes. “How are you?” He puts his hand on Amy’s bare shoulder.
“I’m okay, I’m good, yeah.”

“You guys should come join us! It’s actually Joey’s bachelor party, remember Joey?!” he says, looking back to a small group of men all laughing around a table only a few feet away, giving Amy’s shoulder a squeeze.

“Joey’s getting married?” Amy says, trying- and failing- to hide the shock in her tone. “Joey, who kept a pocket book of every girl he ever got with in high school?”

Jake looks at her urgently, clearly communicating a Seriously?!, to which she gives a brief nod, rolling her eyes.

“Yeah, yeah, met his fiancé in college at a kegger, y’know, cute lil’ frat-sorority romance, y’know…” he rambles repetitively, and Amy genuinely has to hold herself back from laughing. “I should probably head back, but you know where to find us,” he winks at her, squeezing her arm, before heading back off to his friends.

“He seems delightful,” Jake says sardonically, as soon as Dylan’s out of earshot.

“He used to be friends with my brother,” Amy explains, “oh, that is, right up until they made him buy an ounce of weed for them for a party, and he got caught with it in his bag at school.”

“Oh, God,” Jake responds, uncomfortably.

“Yeah. It was pretty much just a hazing thing, y’know, they were the cool kids, Rafael wanted to be friends with them, so they used him, but after it happened they didn’t pay him and pretty much blanked him so the school wouldn’t suspect them.” She shakes her head, watching these men gabble and yell in the corner. “The school weren’t stupid, they knew Rafael wasn’t carrying that much for himself.”

“Wow. Assholes.”

“Yeah, pretty much.” She sighs.

“The worst drama I faced in high school was when I cut my hair and got disowned by the dudes who thought it was cool because it was long.” Jake says, disappointedly, “but that turned out to be an advantage. They mostly referred to me as ‘The Jakester’.”

“Right. Further questions on your long hair later.”

“Pass.”

“Oh God, y’know what I just realised? I barely ever spoke to Dylan- in fact, he made fun of me, like, a lot- which I can only assume means, given my current state, he recognised me by my ass.”

“Jesus,” Jake says, half-amused, half-exasperated.

“Although…” she says slowly, looking over at Dylan and his friends, deep in thought.

“Amy, I understand you’re extremely sexually depraved-”

“Oh, God, please, as if I’d ever even consider that,” she scoffs, “I was thinking something more along the lines of payback.”

“Go on.”
“How do you feel about one last bet?” She asks devilishly.

He folds his arms. He’s interested, her hazy mind thinks.

“What are we talking?”

“I’m thinking… if I can convince Dylan that he and I might, y’know…” She says, waggling her eyebrows cheekily.

“Yeah?”

“Then I get to pick the music for the rest of the trip.”

“Oh, come on, that’s way too easy, he’s been drooling over you since he realised you were here.”

For a moment she feels an impulse to ask how he knows, but she ignores it, watching him quietly instead. He’s observing Dylan with an expression Amy can’t quite decipher.

“What if I try and get him to meet me somewhere, somewhere where he could potentially embarrass himself? Then we watch, see if he goes.”

“You’re a sociopath.”

“I’m protective. He hurt my brother.”

“Okay, what do I get if you can’t do it?”

“Full control over the music, and I will buy all your food until we get to NYC. Vice versa if I win.”

“Oh, now we’re getting spicy. That’s a deal,” he says, shaking her hand firmly.

Okay,” she says excitedly, a little nervous. “Pass me my sweater.” She slips it over her- now mostly dry- top half, and runs her fingers through her hair, ruffling it around her shoulders. The dark red fabric skirts the top of her thighs, and she knows she must look slightly out of place, but she’s cold, so she couldn’t care less. “Thoughts?” She gestures to her appearance.

“Very alluring,” he chuckles.

“Okay. Let’s go,” she says, grabbing her drink.

She wanders over to Dylan and his friends, and starts chatting, mimicking the movements of the girls she saw with Jake earlier in the evening. She giggles. She tucks her hair behind her ears. She speaks a couple pitches higher than she normally does. Minutes pass, five, then ten, the only breaks made by her occasionally glancing back at Jake to see if he’s watching, occasionally catching his amused face.

She slides her hands over Dylan’s chest, and smiles sweetly up at him, and he’s actually playing along, so she’s about to whisper something into his ear, make a move- when her phone smacks onto the floor, hard, in front of her, creating a loud slapping noise accompanied by the shocked noises of a few of Dylan’s friends.

“Oh,” she panics, dropping down to pick it up, annoyed at its disruption of her plan.

On her knees, scrambling tipsily for her phone, she wonders how it dropped- she knows, with certainty, that she put it safely on the table.

She stands back up, making some joke about her clumsiness, and reaches for her drink, ready to keep
her plan in motion.

Then it happens.

She hears one word being yelled before it begins- her own name, urgent, ripping through the air. This voice, undoubtedly, belongs to Jake.

In an instant, all hell has broken loose.

“Are you fucking kidding me?”

“Fuck!”

“Back off, man!”

By the time Amy zones back in, Jake is at the table, shoving Dylan backwards, yelling indiscernibly. People are yelling, backing up, wide-eyed and shocked. No words seem to come through. Or perhaps it’s just the panic distorting the angered words she’s trying so desperately to hear.

“What the fuck are you doing, man?”

“Get away from her!”

Amy’s not sure whose voices are whose. At first, it’s Jake, she knows that, but she’s scared, struck by how angry he is, physically launching himself at Dylan until he’s got him away from her. Quickly, they’re no longer unsupervised; there are bouncers, a bartender, most of them going for Dylan and a couple of his friends, another asking Jake to leave, a hand firmly grasped on his arm. Amy stands in the middle of it all, cold, desperate for someone to explain, for everything to slow down.

“Jake,” she manages quietly, a little self-conscious of how fearful, unhindered, her voice sounds. He’s already being pulled away by a taller man in all-black, and, with a pang, all she can think is that she needs to get out, follow him.

“Are you with him, ma’am?” A stout female bouncer asks her urgently, and she nods frantically, a lump rising in her throat. The bouncer calls over her colleague, who stops pushing Jake away. “Are you okay, sweetheart?” Her voice is earnest.

All at once, Amy realises how many eyes are on her.

“Yeah, I- I’d like to leave, please,” she stammers clumsily, irritated and self-conscious of how childish she sounds. “I just… I need my clothes…”

“We’ve got them, honey, don’t worry. We’re going to get you home. Where are you going?”

“I’m… I’m on a trip…”

“Did you come from a hotel?”

“My friend- has the details,” Amy tries to explain, the lump in her throat starting to hurt. Shrivelling away in embarrassment, she wants to hide, wishing more than anything she could speak to Jake, see that he’s okay, understand why everyone keeps talking to her, looking at her, like she’s been hurt. She’s walking towards the exit, a firm hand pressed against the small of her back pushing her.

Homesickness wrenches her, crawling out from her anxiety, and she wants nothing more than to hug her mom, to feel safe, to be anywhere but here. A tear spills onto her cheek, hot against her skin.
And then another, and then another, and, as quickly as it started, she’s crying.

***

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***

“I still can’t sleep.”

“Neither.”

Jake’s reply comes quicker than she’s expecting. She sits up in her bed, looking over at his, by the window. He’s lying on his back. A drowsy groan escapes him as he rubs the bridge of his nose between his thumb and his index finger. It can’t be later than half six, seven in the morning.

“We should probably give in and get going,” she says softly, rubbing her eyes. “Do you mind if I have a shower? I still smell like chlorine,” she laughs weakly.

“Yeah, sure, smort.”

She smiles politely and grabs her bag, hurriedly scurrying into the small ensuite in the corner of their room. As soon as she shuts the door, she runs the shower, desperate for some kind of noise to fill the silence that’s rung in her ears for the past few hours.

To put it simply, it’s like they’re back to square one.

Since last night, they’ve hardly spoken. They’ve tiptoed around each other. It’s like they’re afraid - every time she looks at him he’s already watching her, cautiously, like he’s checking up on her.

She’ll admit it- for a while, when they returned, she wanted to crawl into his arms, just feel human
contact, relax against him, but they’ve avoided each other like opposite ends of magnet, a tense concern enduring between them.

She adjusts the temperature of the shower, a small, cheap, slightly grubby looking thing, holding her hand under the head until the water feels warm enough, and peels off her clothes, stepping under the water. The water is hot, almost scolding, but she doesn’t care; she wants every trace of the last twelve hours gone.

It was a powder, emptied swiftly and silently into her drink as she’d dropped to the ground. It was in a split second but Jake swears he saw it. He’d launched himself at them instinctively. They’d kicked back, going crazy on him. Jake was fuming that the cops wouldn’t do anything when they were called- there was nothing they could do, they explained, the drink was already gone, and they’d been kicked out onto the street, wasn’t that good enough?

Embarrassment doesn’t describe the way Amy feels right now. At some point, she’ll have to explain what happened to her mom, or at least why they’re so far behind on their route. She was reckless, and stupid, and didn’t just think- she should never have doubted herself. She got carried away. What if, God forbid, she’d had that drink? Would she be safe right now? Would she know where Jake is? A dull ache in her head throbs in response to her anxiety, a cruel reminder of her mild hangover and how little sleep she’s had.

The concern on his face as they were reunited was almost humiliating; he was so, so worried, and it was obvious. It’s not that he was doting, or condescending, Amy thinks, not at all- it was that she was so clearly had no idea how to deal with any of it. She froze, she couldn’t stand up for herself or compose herself. Instead, she’d been brought out to him, having changed back into her clothes, with her mascara smudged messily around her eyes, and she’d seen the way his face had changed, the expression of yearning and worry he had tried to play off casually but couldn’t wipe off his face. They’d awkwardly walked back to the hotel, keeping apart, as though they wanted to talk about it but didn’t feel close enough to do it.

She wishes she could make it up to him. He stood up for her, protected her from being drugged- and now they’re trying so hard to be polite around each other that it’s as though it never happened at all.

As she finishes up, having dried off, she pulls out clothes for the day from her duffle, a pair of leggings and a hoodie, deciding that today she needs to be comfortable. Her reflection only affirms her concerns about how tired she must look; her face is pale, her hair tied up in a messy bun, her expression absent. Were she about to spend the whole day with anyone else, perhaps she’d put on some makeup. After the state Jake saw her in last night, she figures this is pretty good.

She grabs her duffle and goes for the door. As she opens it, he pushes it open, leaving them awkwardly stood in front of each other, chuckling awkwardly.

“I got breakfast. It looks semi-consumable.” He says, making a face.

She gasps.

“Woah, that’s my favourite level of consumable!” She teases sarcastically. He laughs hoarsely. “Hungover?” She asks.

“Surprisingly not, I’m just tired.”

She nods.

“Can I, uh-” He looks into the bathroom.
“Oh!” She smiles apologetically and steps out of the bathroom, firmly bumping into his hip as she moves. The door closes behind her, and, reminded of human touch by bumping into him, all she can think is how badly she wants a hug from her mom.

Sure enough, sat on her bedside table is a small white plate, with a slice of toast, some scrambled egg, and some bacon sat scruffily on its surface. Her appetite hits her immediately; she realises, as she starts to eat, that she hasn’t eaten since their lunch yesterday, if you don’t count the handful of Skittles she’d snacked on during the afternoon. The plate is empty in minutes.

The sound of the shower starting to run in the bathroom filters into the room. Amy leans back into the headboard of her bed, breathing deeply. She feels disgustingly anxious. Exhaustion sluggishly twists at her mind and aches in her muscles, and her nagging inner voice is begging her to get back on course, back on the route they’re meant to be following. She needs some normal.

Immediately, she knows who she needs to speak to.

“Pick up, pick up, pick up,” she mutters under her breath, holding her phone to her ear.

“Hello?” A voice finally comes from the other end, and mechanically, automatically, Amy relaxes. “Amy?”

“Hi,” she manages, “I really need to speak to you.” She speaks carefully—she’s so happy to hear Kylie’s voice that she could actually cry.

“Is everything okay?” Kylie’s voice hides no concern—she knows something’s wrong, Amy thinks.

“It’s…” How on earth is she meant to describe last night? “It’s fine, now. I had kind of a crazy night.”

“Are you hurt? Where’s Jake? If he’s made you do something dumb, I swear to god—”

“I- I’m in Las Vegas.”

“What?!”

“Yeah. Jake drove us here while I was asleep.”

Kylie laughs faintly.

“Brave man, going against Amy Santiago’s plans. Is he with you now?”

“He’s in the shower.”

“Right. What happened?”

“We went out, to this bar, and we were having a pretty good time—”

“I’m sorry, you went to a bar?! How’d you get in?”

Amy smiles at Kylie’s excitement.

“Jake said it was because I’m a girl.”

“Actually, that checks out.”

“Apparently,” Amy laughs.
“Then what?”

“Well, do you remember Rafael’s friend Dylan?”

“Unfortunately.”

“He was there, and he roofied my drink. Or one of his friends did, I’m not sure—”

“What the fuck? Amy, are you okay?”

“I know, I’m fine— Jake went, like, crazy on them, before I even got to the drink—”

“Wow. Thank god he noticed.”

“I know. He was so angry, Kylie,” she says, hushing her voice. “I didn’t know how to react. I got kind of upset, it was embarrassing.”

“Embarrassing? Someone tried to drug you and then an old friend who you’ve hung out with for less than three days went apeshit just to help you. You’re gonna have a lot on your brain.”

“I guess,” Amy murmurs, listening to Jake hum loudly to himself in the shower. “I owe Jake.”

“He reacted the way any good person would have done, he just responded quickly because he had to. Otherwise you would have been hurt.”

“Groove is in the heeaaaart!” Jake’s voice wails from the bathroom.

“Is that him?” Kylie laughs.

“Yup.”

“He seems pretty relaxed.”

“Oh, he’s always like that. That’s moderate for him, if the last couple of days are anything to go by.” She listens to him singing. “It just feels like it’s lingering between us, like he feels bad for being protective of me or something. I also cried in front of him, so he’s probably feeling weird about that.”

“Okay, but can I ask you something?”

“Yeah?”

“Did you have a good night before that all happened?”

“Yeah,” Amy says, without hesitating for breath. She catches herself off guard, surprised at how quickly she replies, but as she thinks about it, it makes sense; it was like a release, like her work had paid off, laughing and chatting and meeting new people and dancing the night away. “I think he knew I needed to come here. Does that sound weird?”

“What do you mean?”

“We’d had this argument, not a big one, not a big deal,” she reassures her, “and he told me I needed to let go, let loose, and I kind of admitted that I wanted to do something stupid and fun. Or something. So he took me to Vegas.”

“Wow.” Kylie says quietly.
Amy waits for her to continue, but she stays silent. It’s rare that Kylie has nothing to say, which makes it all the weirder.

“Kylie?”

“Yeah, hi, sorry… I’m just glad you’re safe and okay. As for Jake, he sounds like a really good dude, Amy.” She manages, her voice earnest.

Amy looks over to the bathroom, where he’s now wailing the next verse of Groove Is In The Heart.

“He is.”

***

“Okay,” Jake leans back into the driver’s seat, “We’re officially back on track. I think we’ll even manage Colorado before we need to stop,” he smiles over at Amy.

“You have no idea how much inner peace that brings me.”

“I mean, I have an idea,” he teases. “This is you we’re talking about.”

It’s been a quiet day. That’s the best way Amy can describe it- uneventful as well as, quite literally, quiet; Jake hasn’t tried to put on any music, Amy’s fallen in and out of sleep, and they’ve spoken so sparsely, so considerately, that the last six hours or so have felt, largely… odd.

Two days ago, Amy would have considered this the ideal state for their road trip.

Now, she’s losing the will to live.

“Blue?” He offers her some indiscernible energy drink.

“Not in a thousand years. Put that down, you’ll spill it and it’ll be all sticky and get Jake everywhere.”

“Rude.”

“Can we talk about last night?” It slips out, like it was never going to stay put. The air changes around them immediately. “I just want to thank you.”

“Amy, honestly, I didn’t do anything worth thanking-” he starts, his slight discomfort indicating, at least to her, that he really means it.

“-I don’t mean for what happened with Dylan,” she cuts in.

“Huh?” he glances over at her. “What for?”

“For driving us to Las Vegas.”

He looks over at her confusedly.
“I actually thought that was pretty selfish, on my part.” He considers, cheerfully, making her smile.

“Well, yeah, it was.”

He looks over at her oddly.

“Okay.”

“But I think at least part of you did it because you wanted me to have a fun night.”

“Sure.”

“And I had a really good night.”

For some reason, he looks genuinely surprised, looking at her ingenuously.

“I mean, if nothing else, because I got to watch you try and convince a bartender that you were from the past.” She grins.

He laughs warmly, and she relaxes.

“All credit goes to you for thinking of that dare.”

“My point stands,” she chuckles.

A comfortable silence falls between them, that contented atmosphere of something having been resolved. Outside, the sky is darkening, the last light of the day exposing the dark clouds swarming above them, signifying a night of rain.

“Music?” Jake’s voice asks after a little while.

“Mhm,” Amy mumbles in agreement. “In fact, I don’t think you have to ask anymore.”

“What?”

“Our bet.”

“Are you kidding? You didn’t win that bet because you were busy getting roofied. I think exceptions can be made.”

“I mean, you could pay for my food, so it’s not like you’re totally winning from this.”

“I guess,” he says.

“Would it make you feel less guilty if I spent an ass-load of your money on food tonight?”

He looks over at her, faking sincere gratitude, putting a hand on her shoulder.

“That’s the sweetest thing anyone’s ever offered me.”

“I do my best.”

***
Jake Mix #5

Lost It – Circa Waves
Get Down On It – Kool & The Gang
Tighten Up – The Black Keys
Wig Wam Bam - Sweet
Lady Madonna – The Beatles
Do I Wanna Know? – Arctic Monkeys
C’est La Vie – Stereophonics
Wreckin’ Bar – The Vaccines
Keep on Loving You – REO Speedwagon
I Want You So Bad I Can’t Breathe – OK Go
Common People – Pulp
Hate To Say I Told You So – The Hives

***

McDonald’s
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08/22/16

QTR POUNDER CHEESE – MEAL $6.66
- SPRITE NO ICE
10PC CHICKEN MCNUGGETS – MEAL $7.46
- COKE

TOTAL: $14.12

***

“This may be our classiest endeavour yet,” Amy says, before taking a bite of her burger, legs kicked up on top of the dashboard. In her other hand is a leaflet from their motel for the evening.

“Oh yeah, this is one for the scrapbook.” Jake agrees, surveying the building slightly disparagingly. “Oh well!” He chirps, “here for a good time, not a long time.”

Parked in front of one of the scruffiest motels they’ve ever seen- or so they both claim- they sit in the dark eating their food. Music hums softly beneath them.
“Oh, hey, look!” Amy enthuses, “this room has a TV! And we can watch whatever we want, because, and get this,” she says, mockingly enthusiastic, “it has a VHR.”

“Oh god,” Jake laughs. “I haven’t touched a video tape since I totally wrecked that tape of Die Hard my dad left me.”

“I remember! It had a sticker on the label, the plane.” Amy reminisces, able to picture the tape in her head. “You made me watch that movie so many times.”

“Duh, it’s the best film ever made. I can’t believe you remember the sticker,” he laughs to himself.

“I never got it, a random airplane on the tape. I do remember you saying it was so nobody could steal it,” she chuckles softly. “Ingenious for a nine-year-old.”

“I was pretty proud of it,” he admits, “my dad sent me a sheet of stickers in a birthday card one year and I guess it never occurred to me that any other kid could have the same ones.”

“How is he?” She asks carefully, remembering only too well the day her mother explained to her that Jake’s father wasn’t going to be at his house any more.

Jake’s face changes, into something indiscernible, not anger, or hurt, or upset- more like he’s thinking hard, really hard, about how exactly to answer that question.

“He’s the same,” he says, nodding at her. “He still flies, and I last saw him at Christmas,” he says casually, but Amy’s chest swells for him. That’s eight months without a glimpse of his father. “He seems okay. He’s always okay.”

“Right,” Amy murmurs, trying not to dote, catching glances of him as often as she can.

“What about your folks? Your brothers all still super intimidating slash totally cool?”

“Exactly the same,” Amy replies, “and my brothers were never intimidating, there were just a lot of them.”

“When you’re hanging out with their only sister, there’s no difference.”

“You were like, ten!” Amy laughs.

“Oh, sure, but I was totally in love with you,” he laughs, as if it’s obvious.

“What?!” She can’t help but laugh, entirely convinced that he’s joking.

“You were my only female friend until I turned thirteen, apart from Gina, and I only saw you every couple months, so I think I pretty much decided you were my wife,” he admits nonchalantly, occasionally tossing a handful of fries into his mouth.

“Gina, I remember her, did I meet her once? A little bit insane and obsessed with the song Crazy In Love?”

“Yup, that’s her,” Jake laughs, pulling out his phone, “I have to tell her you said that.”

“You’re still friends?”

“Yup,” he grins, one-handedly typing out a text message while he uses his other hand to eat.

Amy rolls her eyes and gets back to her food, thinking about that video tape, with the airplane
“That movie always had me convinced I’d be a cop,” she finds herself saying out loud.

“Oh, not like me. I found an old book which had a list of police codes in it and I learnt that page off by heart. Hands down the most reading I’ve ever done.”

“Ha-ha,” she says sarcastically, then looks back at him. “Wait, seriously?”

“Yeah, my main talent in high school was passing classes without reading anything.”

“Oh my god, just the idea of that makes me sweat.”

“Yum,” he grimaces.

“How? Why?”

“Cliffsnotes, and because I’ve got better, more fun stuff to do.”

“Like eating your way into type 2 diabetes and memorising the most explicit rap you can find?”

“I’m not memorising it because it’s explicit, I’m memorising it because it is, as we say in the business-”

“The business?” Amy sniggers.

“- dope as hell.” He grins toothily, self-aware, already laughing at the reaction his words evoke from her.

“Oh my god,” she snorts, “please never say those words in that order again.”

She crumples up her food bag, now finished, and puts it into their makeshift trash bag- a small plastic bag hooked onto the side of her chair.

“Hey.” He looks over at her, his face more serious, excluding the slight smirk that she’s learning seems to permanently reside on his face.

“What?”

“I had fun last night.”

“Yeah, me too.”

“I’m sorry those dicks ruined it.”

“So am I.”

They watch each other for a second. “It’s fine,” Amy cuts in, desperate to break the silence, “seriously.”

“I know, but I was thinking, what if we tried again?”

“Huh?”

“An honest-to-goodness bender. A real night out. One that doesn’t get ruined by potential date-rapists.”
“And doesn’t take us off-course by twelve hours?” She mutters, but the look in his eyes catches her attention— he’s being serious. “Okay, what are you thinking?”

“Chicago. Y’ever been?”

“No. You?”

“Nope. But,” he says, and holds up a finger, wait, as he pulls his phone out of his back pocket, “it’s only thirty-five minutes off the route we’ll be taking, so we could stay overnight and make a real thing out of it.” He shows her a page open on his browser with a map open.

“You looked it up?” She grins.

“I figured you’d want to know,” he says simply. “Clearly we both feel weird about last night and I feel like this would undo it. Equilibrium.”

“Sure,” she agrees, warmth washing over her as she watches her friend talk to her about these big plans as if they’re nothing.

“Plus, I want to finish our game of truth or dare. Or at least make up for the one that almost ended in you getting drugged.”

He babbles sweetly, chatting away about some bar he’s heard about, and she joins in, grateful and excited and happy for this friend. In fact, she realises, as she agrees to going to Chicago with him, and they start to make their plans, this is a friendship that never ended.

She hopes it never will.

Chapter End Notes

welp this chapter ended up being like 2000 words too long but I had a lot of stuff I needed to get out of my system so it's all here in this lil guy

thank u for ur comments and stuff (as per), I have genuinely had days this week where I've woken up to some of these comments and had a good day bcos of the good mood they've put me in <3

more to come sooooooon
part 4

Chapter Summary

to put it simply
two young adults + a heatwave + hours on the freeway = chaos

Chapter Notes

chapter 4 playlist:
https://open.spotify.com/user/hotelsweet/playlist/2FbEj5vjRJT6u9UBN5B0iH

See the end of the chapter for more notes

***

Miles to NYC: 2,016
Rosie’s Place  
24hr Diner  

1212 North Ave, Grand Junction, CO 81501  

Register: 604  
Server: Linda  
Order: To Go  

Fruit Salad $3  
Hash Brown x2 $3  
Signature: Breakfast Burger $4.50  
- Xtra Cheese  
OJ $2  

Thanks! Come Again!  

Total $12.50  
08/23/16  

Jake Mix #9  

Cobrastyle – Teddybears  
Ante Up – B2K  
Waterloo – ABBA  
Crazy Little Thing Called Love – Queen  
Don’t Take The Money - Bleachers  
Whatta Man – Salt-N-Pepa  
When Did Your Heart Go Missing? - Rooney  
Surfin’ USA – The Beach Boys  
Young Folks – Peter Bjorn and John  
Changing Of The Seasons – Two Door Cinema Club  
Electric Feel - MGMT  
Everywhere – Fleetwood Mac  

“Okay, let me think… Oh! I know, first kiss!”  

“Oh, god. Okay. I was fifteen, it was this girl called Sarah, it was at a house party, it sucked.”
At eight in the morning, in a parking lot tacked onto the side of route 70, two young adults, a raven-haired Latina and a fluffy-haired boy with half a burger in his mouth, are sitting in the front of a moving truck, laughing, with the doors wide open. The girl has explained why these doors should be open- and she’s entirely aware that she’ll explain it again. She sits cross-legged, facing her counterpart, whose legs are kicked up, diagonally, over the dashboard. Music purrs merrily from the stereo, which might be a little inconsiderate, were it not that their surroundings are comprised entirely of grit, mountains, grass, and road. Already a warm day, the sun blasts down on them through the windshield.

“Do I want to know?”

“I went full washing-machine,” Jake confesses, grinning as he watches Amy descend into giggles, “I’m fairly certain my tongue actually hit her tonsils.”

“Oh my god,” she winces, snickering as she picks at her fruit salad.

“You?”

“Um, I was fourteen, he was called Max, and he had an after-school job at the library.”

“Of course!” Jake laughs. “Of course, it was studying-related.”

“He was a year older than me,” she reminisces, ignoring Jake’s cooing noises of disgust, “and he was very cute.”

“Boy, I bet.”

“Hey! You’re the one who wanted to ‘catch up’,” she says, mimicking him with air quotes, “you asked for the truth, you’re getting the truth. He’s not even the only boy I’ve met at the library.”

“Ew, no more!”

“Okay, fine, next question?”

“Okay, best birthday you’ve ever had?”

“Easy. My eleventh,” he begins, but Amy already remembers-

“Oh my GOD! The roller-skates!”

“June 17th, 2006,” he laughs, “a day to go down in the history of the best birthday parties of all time.” He throws the final chunk of burger into his mouth.

“I was up for the weekend,” Amy recollects, “I remember your mom driving us to this old basketball court and putting out sandwiches and a speaker and then all these skates arrived,” she giggles, as if she can’t believe it even now, “and then everyone else arrived-”

“And it was the best day of all time. Even if I did cut open my knee and get super sunburnt. What’s yours?”

“Well, for my sixteenth, Kylie and I drove out to the beach with a couple of friends, this boy I dated for like, two months, and this guy from my lab class-”

“Woah, woah, hold on,” he’s beaming, and she already knows what he’s going to say. “You had a boyfriend? You met him in the library too?”
“No need to sound so surprised.” She looks away. “And yes,” She admits, ignoring the snort it evokes from Jake.

“I’m not surprised, no way! Just excited to hear about the person who fell for your insane cleanliness and administrative day-to-day processes.”

“Maybe they’re just insane because you’re so fundamentally disorganised.”

“Yes, Amy, I’m sure nobody else would find this weird,” he says, looking at each side of the truck, where their doors are both swung wide open.

“You decided to eat a burger for breakfast-”

“A breakfast burger,” he corrects her-

“- with beef, bacon, cheese, and egg. Newsflash, Peralta, that’s disgusting.” He rolls his eyes at her. She could not care less. “And it would stink up the truck. It’s a hot day. Do you know what heat and bad smells make?”

“My gross uncle’s apartment in Arizona?”

“A full day of driving in a vehicle that reeks of your breakfast. You’ll thank me for it later,” she says irritably.

She sips at her bottle of water, which she then tucks into the door of the car behind her. Her knee bops to the music playing underneath them.

“Is this… Salt-N-Pepa?”

“Yeah, my friend Charles got me into ‘em, and now I can rap almost every verse of most of their music.”

“Is that meant to be a brag?”

“The opposite, actually.”

“Good to know we’re on the same page.”

A pleasantly warm gust of wind blows through the truck, against Amy’s bare- and, now, thanks to the luxury of a motel with a semi-functioning shower, freshly shaved- legs, reminding her of where they are.

“We should get going, we need to get as far as we can today.”

“Right. When did you say was your move-in day?”

“The 28th, why?” Amy asks, swinging her door closed and starting the engine.

Jake looks over at her expectantly, as if he’s waiting for her to say something else.

“What?”

“That’s in five days, Amy.”

“Exactly!”
“We’re in Colorado. If we drive all day and the traffic isn’t too bad we’re probably going to be closing in on Omaha before we need to stop.”

“Your point?”

“That’s, like, over halfway to New York. Don’t stress.”

“Sure, but if we’re early, I’ll have a day or two there before I move in.”

“I hate to break this to you, but once you move in, you pretty much have infinite days there. That’s how living somewhere works.”

“Y’know, Jake,” she says, smiling as patronisingly as she can and gently placing her hand on his shoulder, “I understand that it must be really difficult to think about this trip ending, about not spending any more time with me,” she gives his shoulder a little squeeze, prompting a slightly withering look from him. “But we both have places in New York waiting for us.”

“I’m just saying, you don’t need to worry. We’ll arrive with time to spare, and you can go and do whatever it is you want to do in the city.”

“Interestingly, now you say that- I have my eye on this small, temporary thing at the Met,” she explains, ignoring the groan this elicits from him, “they’re displaying all the essays and artwork from local colleges they’ve awarded for special scholastic achievement.”

“A grown-up dork circus.”

“Or a place where, as a future History of Art major, I can go and scope out my competition.”

“I like how whenever I think your interests can’t get more boring, there ends up being some kind of dark twist.” He smiles sarcastically.

“Thanks,” Amy smiles proudly, as the truck rolls reluctantly onto the freeway.

***

“This is insane.”

“This can’t be happening. Oh my god, you jinxed it!”

“I did not jinx it.”

As far as the eye can see, the road is completely packed with cars, all at a total standstill. The midday sun beats down on them, swelteringly, torturously, and occasionally someone aggressively hits their horn, as though in an effort to ease off the traffic. The picturesque image of the mountains that surround them wobbles slightly in the extreme warmth, an unforgiving portrait against the beautifully clear blue sky, radiant behind them.
“You absolutely jinxed it,” Amy moans, rolling down the window and fanning herself, feeling her forehead begin to get clammy.

“We’ve been stuck for like, fifteen minutes,” Jake retorts, his voice noticeably more casual than hers, “we’re bound to start moving soon.”

She watches him, annoyed that he doesn’t seem half as irate as her. He’s down to a tight, dark button-down, his jeans, and has threatened to kick off his sneakers- but he doesn't actually seem as affected by the heat.

“Have you checked if there’s been an accident?”

“You do it!”

“Low battery,” she mutters, briefly waggling her phone up by her side. She puts her fingers to her forehead, patting at her clammy skin. “It’s so hot,” she complains. “Are you hot?”

“I like to think so,” he mumbles, looking at his phone. “Yes, it’s boiling,” he says, meeting her disapproving gaze. “But it’s fine! It won’t spoil our day. We have plenty to occupy ourselves with.”

“Sure! We could take a guided tour of my duffle bag, or eat some crackers, or you could continue mercilessly bullying me over my teenage years so far.”

“Scrolling to the bottom of your mom’s Facebook page and finding old photos of you,” he chuckles, “doesn’t count as bullying. It’s research.”

“You are so, so annoying.”

“C’mon, don’t be a stick in the mud, it’s funny.”

“So you wouldn’t mind if I did the same thing with you?” Amy asks, pulling her phone out of her pocket.

“I don’t need to worry,” he leans back in his chair, “every photo of me on the internet is mind-blowing. Wait, no-” He jolts forward as soon as he sees his mother’s social media open on Amy’s phone.

“’My Jakey has always loved to cook!’,” Amy reads dramatically, giggling at a side-by-side picture of a young Jake, naked except for an apron, grinning over his shoulder with his hands in a bowl of cake mix in front of him, a tiny butt barely concealed by the ties of the bib. Next to it is a picture of him which she can only assume is more recent; he’s stood over a pot of pasta, smiling down to himself, as though he’s in the middle of telling a joke. “You were right,” she smiles, “this is mind-blowing.”

“Oh man, I didn’t even know you had my mom on Facebook.”

“Jake, you can play piano?” Amy asks, mockingly sincere, holding up a picture of fifteen year-old Jake donning rectangular, Stevie Wonder-esque sunglasses and throwing his head back, his face splayed into a wide grin.

“Ha-ha, hilarious. Gimme that,” he says, snatching the phone out of her hand, which buzzes, as though on cue. “Ew, you have traffic alerts? Oh, hey, I guess you were right.”

“What?”
“Something’s happened, an accident,” he says, his brows furrowing as he examines the phone. Amy surveys him, trying to get a look. His face drops, his eyes widening. “Oh god.”

“What? What is it?”

“Look,” he says, handing her back the phone.

ROUTE 70 – HANGING LAKE PARK – AVALANCHE

A large rockfall around 20km east of Glenwood Springs has left several hurt and blocked a significant section of the freeway. Updates to follow.

“Oh my god,” she murmurs, “I feel bad for complaining now.”

“Same.”

They sit in silence, their breathing weighted in the suffocating heat.

“I mean, to be fair, it is, like, a hundred degrees,” Jake says, to which Amy nods eagerly, “so we’re obviously going to be a little stressed.” He’s starting to look flushed, Amy thinks, as he rolls down his window.

“Right. It’s out of our hands.”

“Plus, we’re about to sit here for god knows how long waiting.”

“Exactly! We have the right to be pissed.”

Silence falls, thick and uncomfortable in the claustrophobic humidity.

“So.”

“So,” Amy looks over at him, but he’s already looking at her, with the pained expression of someone out of breath despite not having moved, exasperated from the heat.

“What now?”

***

“Your vent looks comfier than mine,” Amy says quietly, shifting in her seat awkwardly.

She and Jake, both leaning forward, rest their heads on the dashboard, the air conditioning vents blowing a pathetic amount of cold air into their faces. They watch each other lazily, both red-faced and sweaty in the warmth.

“If yours is more uncomfortable than this, I honestly pity you.”
It’s been just short of an hour. The doors of the truck are wide open in an attempt to bring in some air, mimicking several other drivers stuck on the road in front of them. It’s doing absolutely nothing, Amy thinks, achingly hot despite the slight gust propelled against her face by the AC.

“Okay, I give in, I’m going to get some water from the back.” She lifts herself up slowly.

“Get me some,” he whines, fake-sobbing into the dashboard. “Please, before dehydration finally takes me.”

“I’m not carrying bottles of water back like your servant,” she says firmly, ignoring the eye-roll that follows from Jake. “If you want some, come and get it.”

“Title of your sex tape.”

“Okay,” she exclaims dryly, ignoring his mischievous grin and jumping out of the truck, heading for the back. She clicks open the hatch and awkwardly climbs into the opening.

It’s like stepping into a sauna, the air immediately more steamy and confining. Hurriedly, she searches for the basket her grandmother gave her, from which they’ve gradually been taking bottles of water since they left. She pulls it out from under her bedroom dresser, which stands against the inside wall of the truck, and kicks open the flap.

“Oh, my god, noooooooooooo,” she moans, sinking to her knees. “Jake!” She yells, looking away, realising, to some dismay, that she’s being watched with rather odd expressions by several drivers stuck behind them. “Bite me,” she hisses bitterly under her breath, wiping a bead of sweat away from her forehead. “Jaaaaaaaake!” She shouts again, louder this time.

He appears at the back of the truck, an arm up against the side of the hatch revealing a dark sweat patch in the underarm of his shirt. His hairline is dotted with sweat, baby hairs clinging to his forehead.

“What?” He snaps irritatedly, “why are you calling me?”

“There’s only two bottles of water left.”

Jake watches her demandingly, clearly aggravated by the heat. He raises his eyebrows expectantly.

“And?”

“And...” she looks between him and the basket, as if it’s obvious, but she just can’t find the words for it. “and that’s not enough! Also, where did all the graham crackers go?” She holds up the singular remaining pack, which has already been opened. “I’ve only had, like, three.”

“I got snacky on the drive to Vegas,” he says defensively. “I also took some to bed last night.”

“That’s what that crunching was? I just assumed it was a super invasive badger, or maybe a raccoon.”

He shrugs, and she lets out a small cry of despair, clutching the two bottles of water in one hand and half a pack of crackers in the other.

“This is all we have until the traffic starts to move again, unless we have any candy left.” she says eventually.

“Nope, they were dessert.” He smiles apologetically. “We’ll be fine. Let’s rummage through your
boxes or something while we wait.”

“That’s an awful idea, Jake. Everything’s organised a certain way.”

“Yeah, so what, you can redo it, right? You love that stuff.”

He scrambles into the back of the truck and pulls out a box, ripping it open before Amy has a chance to intervene. Irritation grasps at her, exacerbated by the heat.

“I’m not here to clean up your mess, Jake.”

“Oh, mom,” he says, not looking away from the box he’s digging through. “Woah, these are music books, what do you play?” He asks, standing up. “Oh, sweet, they’ve got CDs in the back-wanna listen to the backing tracks to twelve pieces foooor…” he surveys the book, and gasps loudly. “French horn?!”

“Oh man.”

He jumps out of the back of the truck excitedly. “C’mon!”

“Oh my god,” she sits up. “This whole thing is your fault.”

“What?” Jake snaps, watching her come to the edge of the entrance, looking up at her.

“You! If you’d not taken us off-route, we wouldn’t be here right now. We’d be way closer, and we’d be driving so fast we’d be able to have air rushing over our faces, I wouldn’t be sweating like this-”

“I think the heat’s making your brain go backwards.”

“No it’s not!” She goes to jump down, trying to ignore on the confused expressions of the two young women in the car behind them as she desperately tries to clamber out of the truck. “Will you… could you… help me?”

“Admit it’s not my fault and I’ll help you down.”

“Fine. It may not, entirely, be your fault…” she says, taking his warm hand and allowing the other to grasp her waist, firmly hoisting her to the ground. However, as soon as her feet touch the ground—except for the part where you drove us hundreds of miles away and now we’re stuck in Colorado when we could be somewhere else, not sweating our asses off with only a litre of water and half a pack of crackers left to keep us alive.”

“Ooooh, my god,” Jake groans, rolling his eyes. He grasps for the cable to shut the hatch. “I should have just shut you in,” he complains, heading back to the front of the truck.

“See!” She follows him to his door. “You’re ignoring me because you know I’m right!” He jumps into his seat, kicking his legs up on the dashboard and sighing into his chair, pulling out his phone.

“Can I have some of that water?” He smiles sweetly. “Two bottles should be enough to drown myself, right?”

“Really? You’re actually not even going to argue back?” She chuckles, exasperated.

“Arguing with you involves muscular movement, which involves getting even hotter.”

“Maybe you’re enjoying it,” she continues, “after all, being stuck here would mean going against
literally the *only* plan we have, which I know is probably part of the big road-trip-adventure-fun-time thing you’ve got going on.”

He looks up from his phone, his face crimson from the temperature.

“Note to self, she goes crazy when she overheats,” he says cheerfully, smiling ironically to himself.

Defiance whirs around inside her, angry, gnashing aggressively. She knows, she supposes, that half of it is the scorching heat, but she doesn’t *care*, because he’s wound her up, and she’d be halfway to New York right now were it not for him.

She steps up onto the small stair underneath his door, bringing her up to his level.

“Stop ignoring me.”

“Fine,” He finally snaps, “You’re pissing me off.” He looks at her now, frustrated, his dark eyes heatedly fixated on hers. She doesn’t back down, staring right back.

An incongruous feeling creeps up on her; taken aback, angry, challenged- you name it, it’s there. Amy’s mind is melting, and each feeling is as feverous as the next, infecting her until her unconscious mind doesn’t recognise the difference between wanting to punch him and wanting to kiss him. It’s uncertain, an urge to react, to lash out at him somehow, like they’ve been waiting to fight, maybe just to be comfortable enough to fight, and the sun has toppled the build-up over the edge.

“Yes, I drove us to Vegas, and now we’re behind. But I’m *not* the reason a few rocks fell down a mountain, Amy, and just because I’m trying to make light of it doesn’t mean I’m an asshole.”

“We’re stuck! Without enough water. Or food. And you’re still kicking back like it’s summer camp.”

“Oh, my god,” he whinges, “what is it with your vendetta against having fun?” He turns away from her and pulls at his shirt, attempting to get some air flowing between his skin and the overpowering heat trapped in his clothing.

“Vendetta? Did you learn that one in one of those high school books you never read?” Amy mutters in disbelief, stepping down from the stair to his door and slamming his door shut.

“Really? Okay, fine.” He watches her as she starts back round the front of the truck to the driver’s seat. He trails off as she reaches her door, jumping into her seat and leaning back, fanning herself eagerly. “You want to keep moaning about how lazy I am? You’re bossy, anal, and a pain in the ass.”

“I’m a pain in the ass? I’ve spent four days sat with someone who claims to be the curator of the world’s greatest music collection and spends his time rapping, making mess, and playing with his phone. You’re two and a half years older than me-”

“Three.”

“- and I’m basically babysitting you.”

Amy tugs at the flannel she’s got on over her the strappy vest she pulled on this morning, jerking it off her head and throwing it onto the dashboard, a slight relief embracing her as her skin cools in the air.

“I get it, Amy. You’re smart, and organised, and you have a plan. Newsflash- I’ve not got a plan, I
don’t insist on keeping everything around me spotless, and not only do I like it that way, but I can do just as well as you.”

“God, your attitude drives me up the wall.”

“Maybe we should just avoid talking, so it doesn’t ruin your day.”

“Good.”

“Fine.”

They both reach out quickly to take a bottle of water, their hot hands briefly touching, and, for a moment, Amy feels his skin burn against hers, blistering heat jumping over her skin in a fury of goosebumps. They jolt away from each other, and as Amy catches his gaze, she realises just how exhausted they both are, just from that conversation.

The water, despite being lukewarm, is a sweet respite in her throat. She lies still, looking out over the road ahead of her, feeling her temperature begin to drop, thankful for the thin fabric constituting her clothing. She scoops her hair to the side and leans as far back as she can make her seat go, lengthening herself out in a stretch, attempting desperately to relax into the beams of sunlight cast over their bodies.

A few minutes pass, and the tension sinks away, like it always seems to, until the silence feels almost sleepy, slow, succumbing to the heat.

“It’s too damn hot.” She says after a while.

She turns to him, but he’s already looking at her. With her fingers, she brushes her hair back over her shoulders nervously, inadvertently conscious of how much hot bare skin she has exposed.

“You’re telling me.”

“I wasn’t” she starts, trying to explain herself, “I didn’t… I know it’s not really your fault we’re here.”

“You want to get to the city as fast as possible. I get it.”

“It’s the heat talking. You were right,” she says, “I do go crazy when I’m hot.”

He smiles over at her, amused, meeting her apologetic gaze.

“What are your Jake-like instincts telling you to do right now?”

“Huh?”

“I can tell you’re itching to try and make this fun. Do it.” She smiles contritely. “Otherwise I think we may actually end up killing each other.”

***
“Okay,” Amy says, “I think that’s nice and straight.”

“Oh yeah, that’s a winner. Beautifully in-line,” he says, and Amy doesn’t care if he’s being sarcastic or not- she’s proud.

Kneeling on their seats, facing backwards, they observe the inside wall of the truck tractor, which is now adorned with various decorations that they’ve taken from Amy’s moving boxes.

In the centre, an A3 poster of the periodic table. Tacked all around the edge are photographs, tons of them, of Amy and her family and of Kylie and of high school (much to Jake’s amusement- he’s already taken four pictures of photographs of Amy with her French horn), all layered over each other, taking up the entire back wall. Old dress-up items from past Halloween costumes hang from a few stick-on hooks Amy has bought for dorms: a witch’s hat, a pair of thick-rimmed prop glasses, a beard, and, strewn aside, a kiddy microphone that echoes whatever you say into it- an early favourite of Amy’s and a key part of the Britney Spears costume she insisted on wearing, aged nine, to a family Halloween party.

The part Amy loves most, though, by far, are the fairy lights they’ve somehow manoeuvred around their seats, the back wall, and the ceiling- even in the bright sunlight, they look so pretty. She won’t tell him- though she’s sure he can tell from the grin she can’t keep off her face- but she can’t wait to see them when it gets dark.

“Cheers,” Amy says proudly, lifting her only drink - half a bottle of warm water.

“Cheers,” Jake says, his smile rich, comforting, clear in his voice.

It’s been three hours since they got stuck here, now somewhere between half four and five in the afternoon, Amy’s guessing. The heat hasn’t passed, not by any means, but the sun has ducked behind a tall mountain, the luminous yellow and orange of the early summer evening keeping their surroundings bright without blistering whatever sits beneath it.

They both gaze proudly over their work, the inside of the truck transformed with its new additions in a way that might suggest someone has tried to replicate Amy’s old bedroom in here. And though she knows they’ll have to take it all down, and drop the truck off at a hire location in New York, and make sure it doesn’t leave any marks, she will admit that it looks, it feels, truly homely.

“We make a good team,” she says matter-of-factly. Jake looks over at her. “We didn’t even have to come up with a system back there,” she thinks out loud, impressed, remembering the odd looks of other drivers as she’d shouted the names of boxes he could dig around inside and he’d worked quickly, passing objects back and rearranging the boxes exactly how she’d left them, without even asking.

“Yeah,” he says happily.

A low, long grumble interrupts their moment.

“Was that-”

“I’m hungry, okay?!?” Jake’s face falls and he drops into his seat, turning round so he’s facing the road again.

“Yeah, me too,” Amy agrees, following him suit and sitting herself down. “We may starve.”
“Ew, the last thing I would have eaten would be a graham cracker.”

“Sure, but at least you had that massive “breakfast” burger.”

“It’s for breakfast, it doesn’t count like a regular burger.”

“I’m over here surviving off a pot of fruit!”

“Actually, that explains a lot, attitude-wise,” he grins.

“Shut up,” Amy mutters, flicking his shoulder, allowing herself a small chuckle.

“So. This is where we die.”

“A tad dramatic, Jake.”

“Anything you want to get off your chest before we surrender to starvation?”

“Actually,” she says lowly, smiling over at him remorsefully, “I do want you to know that you’ve been incredibly annoying and if you die before me you’re not allowed to haunt me.”

“Of course,” he says, feigning sincerity, “so, haunt this truck, exclusively, and then your dorms, should you arrive without me.”

“Oh my god.”

“I know, I know, but I honestly think you’ll miss me if I don’t-”

“No, Jake, look!”

In front, ever so slowly, cars are beginning to move, converging on one lane which—Amy’s guessing—has been opened to let people through.

“Oh my god!” Jake sits up. “Food!”

“I actually feel dizzy with hunger,” Amy agrees. “We need to keep our energy up until we get there.”

“I may have an idea for that.”

Amy looks over at him suspiciously, but can’t help her curiosity.

“Go on.”

With a grin on his face, he clicks open the glove compartment.
“Mommy, what are they doing?”

Abigail Winslow sighs, her brain aching from the day, even the sound of her son’s voice stinging in her temples. Four hours stuck in traffic, in blistering heat, with little to no food or water, and an incredibly inquisitive seven-year-old will do that to you; she can only take so many who-would-win-in-a-fight scenarios. Even now, the traffic barely moves, everyone attempting to converge on one lane. It’ll be another half an hour, if she’s lucky, before she sees the other side.

“What?” She murmurs, “sorry, Ben, sweetie, I didn’t hear.” She runs a hand over his soft head apologetically.

“Over there,” he says, pointing at a moving truck, maybe 40ft ahead in the lane next to them. “What are they doing?”

Abigail narrows her eyes, trying to see what her son’s talking about. She waits a few seconds, no movement around the truck visible at all- and then it happens.

A young man opens his door, and steps onto the stair underneath it, gyrating his hips rhythmically while he holds onto the frame of the door for support. He’s decked out in odd props and costume parts, wearing what she thinks is a witch’s hat, a tiny pair of sunglasses, and he appears to be singing into an oversized, bright blue plastic microphone.

“I have no idea, darling,” she says quietly, and she means it, genuinely taken aback by what she’s watching. Nobody will believe her if she tells them about this.

She clicks down her son’s window, and leans up against him so she can see.

Blaring from the truck’s speakers, Cyndi Lauper sings what was one of Abigail’s favourite songs as a young girl. She smiles unintentionally at the nostalgia it summons within her.

“He’s funny,” her son giggles, as the man jumps down from his door and walks in front of the truck, throwing some serious disco moves up to the front window. He’s performing to someone. “Look!”

A head full of dark hair pokes out of the door, a young woman, who seems to be beckoning him back into the vehicle, motioning with her hands, but clearly can’t stop laughing, her shoulders dipping weakly as she tries to maintain composure. He comes back round, meeting her at the door.
Abigail can’t make out what they’re saying, but she seems genuinely astounded, unable to contain her giggles- the boy she’s with isn’t listening to her, still dancing confidently.

And then, the girl notices them staring from the car window. Abigail leans back into her seat self-consciously, feeling a little caught out, but the young woman flashes an apologetic look over at them, holding up her hand, then looking round at all the cars in front of her. She holds out her hand to the boy, a disciplined look on her face, as if she’s holding back another fit of giggles. He takes it, as soon as the song comes to a close, looking around the freeway and giving small bows, waves, to his audience.

“Bye!” Ben shouts out of the window, and Abigail is about to stop him, when the man turns round and gives him a wave, before the girl yanks at his arm and pulls him into the truck. “Mom, who was the girl?”

She watches the door close, and hears the music die down, and something young stirs in her, something she hasn’t felt in a long while.

“Just the dancing man’s girlfriend, I think,” she says, smiling warmly at her son.

***

“What the hell do you mean, eight out of ten?!”

“Only because of the use of props! There was missed potential in the feather boa!”

“How?”

“You were performing *Girls Just Want To Have Fun*, Jake, so I think Kylie assumed the feather boa would be a given!”


They’ve been performing for the last half an hour, picking songs, and filming each other dancing and singing, before sending the clips to Kylie – aka their official Karaoke Commissioner – to receive a score. This currently sits at a tie, Amy having won a round with her exciting performance to the Backstreet Boys (which may or may not have involved some dance moves her mother taught her), and Jake having won a round after a particularly dramatic rendition of Mamma Mia. Winner picks a spot for dinner. It’s simple enough, but has evolved into a political game.

“Okay,” Amy says, examining the tracklist, picturing where she’ll make him go if she wins- after all, he’s buying all the food. If he wins he’ll undoubtedly land them in a McDonald’s again. Her tummy moans hungrily.

She knows what she has to do.

“Track seven,” she demands, “oh, and I’ll need your grey sweater. The one you had on last night, over that checked shirt.”
“Sure,” Jake says suspiciously, pulling it out from the side of his chair.

Amy ties it around her shoulders as best as she can so it looks like a school sweater, and digs around in her bag, tying her hair into bunches on either side of her head. With a grin, she snatches the sunglasses off his head and the microphone laying discarded by his seat. Jake, with her phone camera pointed at her, clicks the stereo, and the track begins to play.

“Oh baby baby, how was I supposed to KNOW,” She sings dramatically, channelling her inner Britney. Jake watches on, entertained. It couldn’t be more obvious that she knows the dance off by heart.

“My loneliness, is killing me,” she sings, then holds the mic out to Jake.

“Aaaaand I!” He sings back, laughing-

“I must confess, I still believe-

“STILL BELIEVE!”

“When I’m not with you I lose my mind,” she continues, unashamed of how proud she is that Jake seems not only hysterically amused, but pretty awestruck. Even she’s surprised at herself.

She pulls at her bunches, bopping her head side to side, and Jake laughs heartily. She’s trying desperately hard not to break down into giggles herself - she’s got to push it if she wants to win.

Her competitiveness kicks in all at once- she opens her door and swings out of the truck like a monkey, holding onto the doorframe to let herself down, landing perfectly posed to continue as the song comes to the bridge, the piano blasting out of the truck’s speakers. She knows she’s being watched by every driver around her, and though normally she’d panic- she won’t pretend this is the easiest thing to do- the overwhelming desire to spend Jake’s money on a feast for her starved stomach is winning her over.

She knocks on the window of the car beside them, full of young men, and the man inside, potentially in his mid-twenties, opens it, laughing in disbelief. Amy offers him the mic, and for a moment she has a horrible feeling he’ll ignore her, or look at her weirdly, but to her surprise, he sings.

“Oh pretty baby, I shouldn’t have let you goooo,” he sings, horrendously out of tune, and Amy gives him a thumbs up as his friends give him a round of applause.

She skips forward so she’s in front of the truck, singing and waving her arms around, abandoning all trace of choreography, and as the song finally comes to a close, she looks around desperately for a finale.

Catching the eye of a truck driver in another lane, she gestures one honk signal with her fist, and, against all odds, he blares his horn. She laughs in disbelief.

With a bow, she skips back hurriedly to the truck.

Through the window, she sees Jake, stood up- laughing madly, and applauding exultantly.

***
Jake Evening Mix #4

No. 1 Party Anthem – Arctic Monkeys
Still Want You – Brandon Flowers
The World Is Watching – Two Door Cinema Club
stuck on the puzzle – Alex Turner
Feels Like We Only Go Backwards – Tame Impala
Fast Lane – Rationale
Wetsuit – The Vaccines
America – Razorlight
Saltwater - Geowulf
Bros – Wolf Alice
These Girls – Sticky Fingers
Somebody Else – The 1975
Happy Family – Sundara Karma

***

TARGET
EXPECT MORE. PAY LESS:

14500 W COLFAX AVE, LAKEWOOD CO 80401
08/23/16  9:24PM

STARBURST 41oz  $7.79
TOOTSIE ROLL 16oz  x2  $5.38
MEGA CHIPS SALTED 24PC  $25.03
TURKEY SANDW  $4
ITALIAN SANDW  $4
GATORADE 8PC  $6
WATER 2L X2  $3
FRUIT PARTY TRAY  $5
CURLY STRAWZ  $0.80

TOTAL $97.00

***

“Target was such a good idea,” Amy beams proudly, looking at what feels like hundreds of bags
stacked around her feet.

“Sure. Any chance we’ll be able to eat within the next ten years?” Jake says, looking confusedly at his surroundings. They’re awkwardly climbing a small stretch of woodland area, and have been driving uphill for a good ten minutes. He’s following her directions, if reluctantly, after she insisted she knew the best place for dinner.

“It’ll be worth it, I promise.”

“Where’s this spot we’re meant to be finding?”

“Anytime now,” she says, looking uncertainly at the bumpy, almost entirely concealed hill Jake is currently attempting to get the moving truck to climb, leaves and overgrown foliage littering the path. “Promise.”

“Good, cause I don’t think I’ve ever been this hungry in my life.”

“Same. Oh, hey! This is it! On the left!”

The truck veers over to the side and onto a small clearing, empty save a few bushes and a little bench, positioned perfectly so it looks out onto the Denver skyline, currently comprised of thousands of tiny yellow and greenish-blue dots, each an office or an apartment or a street lamp- perhaps even more incredible against the harshly rosy cerise clouds lengthened against the sky in the sunset. The sky seems to be desperately clinging onto that lemony yellow that’s remained all evening, now seeping away in flushes of amber and coral.

“Not bad, Santiago,” Jake remarks. “Where’d you say you knew this place from again?”

“Our cousins used to live in Fort Collins,” she explains, handing Jake a bag of food, “and once we came down to Denver, and our aunt brought us here for a picnic.”

“That’s sweet.” He smiles over at her. “Food?”

“Yup,” she agrees, emptying their bags onto the dashboard.

First, tumbling out of the bags, is the candy, packs and packs of it, spilling out in front of them. Then it’s packets of fruit, pre-packaged sandwiches, what could feasibly be hundreds of bags of chips, and, in the last bags, by Amy’s feet, two huge bottles of water. She picks one up and hands it to Jake.

“Ahem,” he looks at her expectantly.

“Oh, right!”

She grabs a pack of curly straws from the bottom of the grocery bag and picks one out for him, which he takes with a childlike grin.

“Thanks.”

“No problem.”

They tuck into their food, and, within ten minutes, at least half of it is gone.

As she eats, Amy tends to her phone, finally explaining the delay in their trip- Vegas, the rockfall, everything- to her mother. She feels a weight lift off her shoulders as she does it- glancing over at Jake, also scrolling through his phone, she knows not just that she’ll get there on time, undoubtedly,
but that this whole time, she’s been safe. Images of him lunging at Dylan only a few nights ago appear in her head. Anyone willing to stand up for her like that is, she thinks, worth getting into trouble with.

She glances over the conversation with Kylie from earlier, smiling at all the videos they’d sent and the scores she’d sent back, marked out of five for costume and performance.

“Oh my god,” she murmurs, “I looked like a certified crazy person,” she says, looking at the video of her Britney act earlier in the day. She slinks into her seat, exhausted, and pulls her hair out of the bun she’d scraped it into in the store. It falls over her bare shoulders, warm, feeling like it’s retained the heat the sun has poured into it throughout the day.

“It was badass,” Jake laughs.

“Shut up,” she mutters, smiling at his teasing.

“I’m serious! Not every day you see something like that when you’re stuck on the freeway.”

“I’ve never done anything like that.”

“I could tell,” Jake replies, still grinning, and Amy grimaces in embarrassment. “No, no, not like that. It was awesome. And also hilarious.”

“I think it was hysteria. I was so hungry, and hot, that I think at one point I’d genuinely accepted my imminent death,” she admits, trying to ignore how childishly sleepy her voice sounds. It’s been a long day.

“Oh, no, same, I was actually preparing my last words.”

“Oh,” Amy laughs, “final confessions?”

“Exactly,” Jake chuckles.

“Anything damning I should know about you in case the truck starts getting shot at and it turns out you’re being hunted down by a mob?” She asks sincerely, taking the last bite out of her turkey sandwich.

“Actually,” he says, turning to her, “once I watched a load of conspiracy theory videos and got kinda spooked that the FBI would track me down because I know too much.”

Amy snorts.

“Like?”

“Well, the moon-landing was obviously fake.”

“Oh my god,” she laughs.

“And Taylor Swift definitely has subliminal messages in her music.”

“Sure,” she nods, more to humour him than anything else, watching on admiringly as he nods excitedly.

“The short answer is that I’m not being hunted by the mob. You should probably know that I’m allergic to bees, though. If I could sting it could be fatal,” he says casually, through a mouthful of food.
“Really?” Amy says, a little amused, “that’s so you.”

“Huh?”

“Of all the big things we could not know about each other, all the big secrets we might have missed out on after years apart, that’s your most pressing issue,” she chuckles, “bees.”

Amy looks over at him, smiling, but he’s gone quiet, looking down at his hands, deep in thought. He fiddles with his phone, spinning it around in his hands.

Just as she’s about to speak up, he does first.

“I don’t have a girlfriend.” He looks up, ahead, at first, before turning to her, a sincere look of hurt and confusion in his eyes. “Not anymore, anyway.”

She’s got no idea how she’s supposed to respond to this; an apology? Asking for an explanation? Trying to say something funny? She opts to say nothing, instead watching him sincerely, jolted by his sudden change in demeanour.

“That’s the first time I’ve-” he starts, but brushes the sentence off, shaking his head softly. “I think I’ve just been denying it, and I need to move on.”

There’s a nonchalance in his voice – forced, certainly, Amy thinks, - like it’s not a big deal.

“I figured you oughta know in case I annoyed you so much you tried to kill me and needed to contact those close to me,” he teases, smiling confidently.

“Well, that’s fair,” she agrees, playing along, but doesn’t take her eyes off him. “You want to talk about it?”

“Eh,” he exclaims, motioning away with his hand, “there’s nothing to talk about. Went out for a year, I took it way more seriously than her, too seriously, I think,” he glances over at Amy, and her heart surges for him, “so she dumped me. Over text.”

“Ouch.” She pauses. “I kind of want to curse her out for you but I feel kind of rude, because I don’t know her.” Jake laughs lowly at this. “Just picture me coming up with perfectly appropriate insults for her, whoever she is.”

“Sophia,” he says, “her name’s Sophia.”

“Well,” Amy says carefully, “if Sophia’s willing to throw away a relationship with you over text, she’s not worth your time anyway.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right,” he says casually, throwing a chip into the air and trying to catch it in his mouth. “Just a weird, messy break-up.”

“Not as bad as mine.”

“Ah, yes, library lover! Do tell,” he grins.

“You’ve nicknamed my ex-boyfriend now?” She says exasperatedly, secretly relieved that he’s cheered up a little and the conversation seems to be moving on.

“Well, obviously. It was between that and ‘study steady’. Or maybe ‘study suitor’?”

“Wow.”
“Go on, I want details.”

“It was barely even a relationship,” Amy laughs. “We hung out a few times, it was nice, we had all
the same interests, but then he’d get pretty pissy if we were together, and, uh, y’know…I didn’t want
to do everything at once,” she says suggestively.

“No! Library lover turned out to be a regular ol’ fuckboy?”

“Pretty much.” Amy can’t keep the amusement out of her voice, Jake’s seemingly genuine
disappointment tickling her. “I think he thought cause I was kind of shy at first I’d just do whatever.
As soon as I realised, I got rid of him.”

“Sinister.”

“Mm,” she hums in agreement, taking a swig from her bottle of water. “If by sinister you mean a
carefully constructed break-up letter.”

“I don’t,” he explains amusedly, “but I can’t say that surprises me.”

In front of them, the sky has darkened, deep purples and pinks now the only lighter colours
remaining on the horizon. The city lights are dazzling, and might be the only thing keeping the front
of the truck lit were it not for the fairy lights tacked around the ceiling.

It’s comforting, her things decorating the truck. And after the last few days, she could use it; finally,
looking around her and over the view of the Denver skyline, she feels completely at ease, the slight
front from being around someone unfamiliar worn off and her biggest worries dispelled. She looks
over to Jake to see if he seems to be as relaxed, but he’s smirking at his phone.

His eyes dart up, noticing her gaze, and he holds out his phone, on which a gif of a small bird riding
a dog plays on loop. He grins at her, chuckling through his smile, before throwing a handful of
gummy bears into his mouth.

He’s five years old, she thinks, watching him thoughtfully, amused.

“Oh, come on, it’s genius,” he remarks at her silence.

“It’s something,” she says, her stomach tickling with the urge to laugh.

“People like you are how pieces of art like this go unnoticed.”

He saves the picture to his phone, and she watches him proceed to send it to several different people,
the cold glow of his phone illuminating his face.

“This looks good, right?” Amy looks around the inside of the truck, now a microcosm of her old
bedroom, glowing warmly in the dark.

“Yeah,” Jake agrees, turning himself round to look at the wall behind them. “I barely even looked at
these photos before you put them up,” he says, looking at each one carefully. Amy can already feel
the teasing that’s about to come- and, sure enough, he laughs heartily and fully.

“Which one?”

He pulls a photo down from the metal, one of Amy grinning toothily, her mouth thickly decorated
with her braces, unable to contain his laughter. He pulls out his phone and takes a picture.

“Hey!” She yells, snatching his phone from him. “Unfair.”
“Who would I send it to, other than you?”

“You have my number?”

“Oh my god,” Jake brings a hand to his mouth, shutting himself up, “I completely forgot.”

“What are you talking about?” Amy looks at him in confusion. He looks absolutely, gleefully delighted, as though Christmas has come early.

“Do you happen to know someone called Dixon Butts?” He grins childishly, waiting for her to understand.

Her eyes narrow- but then she realises, and she barely pauses for breath before she speaks.

“That was you?!”

Jake bites his lip, bringing his fingers to his mouth, desperately holding back laughter.

“You wouldn’t stop texting me!” Amy brings up the conversation on her phone, gasping as puts two and two together, the texts this unknown number refused to stop sending suddenly making sense. “May twenty-fifth,” she reads, “Hi, this is Dixon Butts-”

“Ha, you just said it,” Jake snorts-

“- is this Amy?” She continues reading, “And I replied yes, then you pestered me for weeks sending knock-knock jokes and refusing to stop texting until I joined in.”

“Can you guess my personal favourite?”

She looks at him, deadpan.

“It’s the Jehovah’s Witnesses joke!”

“Is that the one where you just sent ‘knock knock’ so many times my phone crashed?”

“Your phone crashed?! Oh, that’s gold.” He can’t stop sniggering, leaning in towards her to read through the conversation. His warmth radiates off his body, a musky, masculine scent passing under Amy’s nose. “Oh my god, this is the week I only sent you jokes about ducks,” he laughs.

“Yup,” Amy says, the memory of her brothers giggling over her phone while she desperately tried to stop the tide of poorly-put-together duck jokes that flooded her phone.

“Oh! I have another one,” he says, sitting up, facing her.

“Fantastic, I don’t have nearly enough.”

“Okay, ready?” Jake ignores her, “How do you turn a duck into a soul singer?”

Amy looks at him, still, raising her eyebrows as she waits for him to tell the punchline.

“C’mon, it’s not a fun joke if you don’t join in,” Jake pushes. She rolls her eyes.

“I don’t know, Jake, how do you turn a duck into a soul singer?”

“You put it in the microwave until it’s Bill Withers.” He grins, laughing softly.

She sighs, her face sinking into her hand, unable to stop the long laugh that warms over her. Giggles
delightfully tumble out of her chest, and she can’t help it, because he’s laughing at her laughing- and before she knows it, she’s descended into hystericis. He watches her, tickled by her reaction, his face scrunching up as he laughs.

“That is,” she manages, “the stupidest joke I’ve ever heard.”

“That’s one of my best.”

Their giggles die down, until the only noise remaining is the faint noise of traffic, visualised by the tiny red and white dots that whizz past beneath them.

Then Amy feels it; a moment. That odd sensation, as though your brain is whispering that this is one you’ll remember, jolting you into awareness of your surroundings, your mind unconsciously clinging to, relaxing into the way you feel. For Amy, it goes a little something like this; her stomach aches, just a little, from her laughter. Her hair tickles the nape of her neck as it’s pleasantly tossed over her skin by the still-warm wind filtering through the window, almost making her shiver. She’s a little sleepy, but that couldn’t begin to undercut how content she feels, fixated on the lights around her. Safety and warmth and even a faint rush of excitement whizzes around her body- it’s okay. It’s all okay.

She takes a deep breath, focused on the sensation of her chest rising and falling, from the oddly specific satisfaction of the hair it allows to fall off her shoulders, and the way it unbunches a part of her shirt from her bra, to the strong peacefulness that settles within her.

Her mind wakes up, and she realises she’s gone silent on Jake, not even paying attention to what he’s doing, really just assuming that he’s gone back to his phone or his food or is taking in the view like her. She turns her head to look at him.

He’s already looking at her.

It’s not… anything. His face is controlled, fixated, like he’s thinking about a math question, she thinks- but it’s only for a second. As soon as he registers her looking at him his eyes shift, and he turns away, his entire demeanour shifting into what Amy can only think to describe as… nervous.

“It’s late, we should… a motel, or-” His voice comes, thick.

“Yeah.”

He turns the keys and the truck’s engine hums in acknowledgement.

She stares at him, she can’t help it, she wants to know what she did or why he was looking so intently at her- but he doesn’t look back. In fact, she realises, he’s looking everywhere except at her.

As they pull away from that incredible view and into the darkness of the woods behind them, Amy sinks into her seat, her eyes remaining tensely on the boy sat next to her.

As she rests, her contentedness finally joining with her sleepiness and taking hold, the image of those eyes on her burns into her mind. The last picture her eyes take in before they close is quite distinct, one she’ll remember for a long while: the soft swell of his lips, slightly parted, dimly glowing orange in residual streetlight, mere inches below thoughtful, focused eyes gazing straight ahead, uncaring of the soft, messy tufts of hair waving out of control on the top of his head. Strong, sure arms stretch out in front of him as he steers them home for the evening.

For a second, a glimmer of excitement sparks within her, rushing around in her belly while her thoughts of him evolve into dreams.
As this glimmer of excitement fades, Amy Santiago falls asleep.

Chapter End Notes

hi !!!! wow this was super long too lol

some notes:
1) can u FEEL that sexual tension? bc I can damn I'm hot under the collar
2) and hey look the truck got a makeover!! idk about u guys but the truck is, imo, the star character of this fic
3) that karaoke was loosely based off a real event in my life and is honestly a highly amusing competition I highly recommend it
4) scrappy and lovable (or: lovable and lovable) are the loves of my life and I care very deeply for them

a quick shout out to myself for deciding to start writing this fic in the middle of exam season (oops) and taking forever to get each part up. some of the comments on the last couple chapters filled me w so much joy and make me wish I've finished this fic so I could upload it nice n quick (but hey where's the fun in that)

anywho I think it's worth mentioning that the music in this chapter is definitely my favorite set of playlists so far so I hope u enjoy them as much as I do <3

anyway I should be off editing the next chapter, I hope u enjoyed this one and are enjoying this fic so far!! thank u again for the sweetest comments on earth I love u guys :) <3
part 5

Chapter Summary

what do two romantically charged young people need after a day stuck on the road? a really bad motel room with one bed? yeah, I thought so too

Chapter Notes

chapter 5 playlist:
https://open.spotify.com/user/hotelsweet/playlist/7yu6xbwKXAYnT8wnFXkbSF

See the end of the chapter for more notes

***

Miles to NYC: 1,790
Motel 6

12020 E 39th Ave, Denver, CO 80239, USA
(303) 371-1980

Your services today:

Queen Room x1  $70

- Price reduction $25

Total: $45

Additional Notes / Requirements : contact the attached number if a room with more than one bed becomes available (Jake Peralta, Cardholder)

Thanks for your visit! Find attached the numbers for the front desk should you have any more questions.

---

“Hey, c’mon,” Jake’s voice comes, gentle, “We’re here.” His hand is on her shoulder, warm, still.

Amy stirs quickly, opening her eyes to the sight of a relatively dark parking lot. They’re parked directly outside the front desk, dim warm light filtering into the car in misshaped patterns.

“I feel bad waking you up,” he smiles, “but it’s the car seat or an actual bed.”

“How long have I been asleep?”

“Like, half an hour?”
“Oh.”

“Yeah. Ames,” He pats her shoulder as she starts to lull again. “You got your stuff?”

“Yeah,” she mumbles, her voice still sleepy, and she reaches down for her bag, sat at her feet. Jake walks around the front of the truck to her door, where he watches her get her things.

“Pass me your backpack.”

“I’ve got it,” she says drowsily, fiddling with her bags as she unsuccessfully attempts to put both of them on her shoulders. He watches her calmly. “Okay, fine,” she gives in, handing it to him.

“C’mon, sleepy, only another five minutes then you can go to bed.”

“So many minutes,” she murmurs, evoking a low chuckle from Jake as he helps her out of the truck and shuts her door.

She follows him into the small, slightly barren reception area, and retreats to a small red chair placed awkwardly in the corner aside a plastic potted plant while Jake speaks to a bored-looking woman behind the front desk.

An hour ago she was sat in front of the Denver skyline, pretty in love with her life. Now, she’s splayed out over a plastic chair in a motel reception, her head leant on her hand, so exhausted she could easily pass out on the spot. She’s struggling to keep her eyes open, her lids heavy- she lets them drop for a few seconds at a time, counting to herself so she doesn’t actually fall asleep. The numbers lose themselves as she find herself succumbing to her drowsiness, her head leant against the wall.

It’s not as though it’s been a particularly exhausting day- she’s mostly just been arguing with, talking to, ignoring (or dancing with) Jake, under the blistering heat that made being trapped in traffic so much more claustrophobic. It’s just that she’s never relaxed like this, never felt her mind slip away from her for a little while, never felt an absence of awareness for the things that need to get done around her.

Jake’s voice is muffled in the background as she drifts in and out of sleep. Gradually, it becomes more urgent, even a little hushed, like he’s arguing, or trying to explain himself, and she considers forcing herself awake. She needn’t bother.

“Hey, Amy.” His voice is close, quiet, just for her. “Hey. Wake up.”

“Sorry,” she murmurs, “are you okay?” She opens her eyes, and he’s perched in front of where she sits, watching her with a slight smile on his face. “Why are you smiling at me?”

“Nothing,” he lets his smile spread out over his face, “You just look really tired and I realised how exhausted you must be, because you just apologised to me. Did you hear yourself do that?”

“Ugh,” she rolls her eyes, sitting up. She smiles reluctantly at his persistent smirk. “So?”

“Bad news about our room.”

“What?”

“Well,” Jake furrows his brow, consideration flashing over his face for a moment, “there’s a few things.”
“Oh god. If you think it’s bad it must be awful. Get it over with.”

“Hey, I’m classy! I bought a cheese board the other week,” he says indignanty. Amy raises her eyebrows. “Okay, fine. Well, the main thing is that there’s no hot water.”

Amy groans.

“I can still feel where I was sweaty when we were stuck on the road.” She pulls at her shirt.

“Same.”

“Ugh, okay, what else?”

“Well, the heating is busted.”

“What?!”

“They said something about the controls being broken. It’s either freezing in there or boiling hot. I guess that’s a fun surprise for when we arrive.”

“How are they still selling this room?”

“It’s the last thing they have available.”

“Did they offer you anything free?”

“I complained and asked them to lower the price- which they did,” he says cheerfully, as if he’s trying to persuade her of the room, “and they said they’d contact me if anything else became available within the next couple of hours. C’mon, quicker we go the quicker we sleep,” he says, standing up, slinging his back around his shoulder and picking up Amy’s duffle.

“It’s eleven at night, Jake. Nobody’s going to free up a room this late at night.” She follows him out of the reception area and into the warm night.

“Probably true, but worth it if it means we get separate beds, right?”

Amy stops dead in her tracks.

“Huh?”

“Oh, right,” Jake that’s the last thing about the room- one bed.”

“Oh,” Amy says quietly, reading Jake’s expression as if it’ll provide the appropriate way to respond to this. He doesn’t seem fussed. “That’s fine, I guess,” she decides.

“Right, I figured we could just throw a cushion in the middle of us or I could sleep on the floor, if you wanted.”

“Don’t be stupid, I’m not making you sleep on the floor.”

Their eyes lock onto each other for a moment, and that tension that made her want to kill him only twelve hours ago pounds in her chest again. He seems equally conflicted, watching her carefully.

“We should go.”

“Yeah.”
“Oh my god!”

Amy can’t help but yell as she steps into a freezing cold shower, her body jolting out of its fatigue quicker than she anticipated.

“Oh, thanks,” Amy smiles self-consciously, looking down at the black shirt that, even now- despite having grown at least six inches since her father gave it to her- seems to almost entirely envelope her,

“Told you!” Jake’s voice comes cheerfully from outside the bathroom, and she scowls to herself. Only minutes ago, while he’d been in here, complaining so loudly she feared he’d wake the whole motel, she’d told him to shut up.

Stepping out of the shower does anything except let her escape the horrors of this room- both the bathroom and the bedroom, thanks to the yo-yo heating, are as blisteringly hot as the truck had been earlier in the day. Amy dries herself off as quickly as she can, with as little movement as possible, desperate not to start sweating again.

With a brief thud, she swings her duffle onto the counter, and digs around for clothes, her damp hair falling in soggy locks around her face. Instantaneously, she realises she’ll be within a few feet of Jake for the night, which should ultimately cut out anything thin or revealing. She cringes at a fleeting image of waking up next to him with her clothes ridden up around her body and continues to rifle through her bag, settling for one of her dad’s old tour shirts, a comfort item of hers, and a pair of shorts.

“Blondie, not bad,” Jake remarks as she walks out of the bathroom, towel-drying her hair as best as she can without making herself sweat again. He’s sat up against the headboard with one of his two earphones in, plugged into his phone.

The room smells of whatever deodorant he’s used, a warm, masculine scent, and the summer air filtering in through the window. A bright, peeling orange covers the wall behind their bed, lit awkwardly by a flickering wall light and the fading bulb hanging from the ceiling, which Amy clicks off as she comes in, encasing the room in almost total darkness.

Hurriedly, she rubs herself down with a body wash, desperate to scrub away every patch where she’s felt even slightly sweaty over the course of the day, rubbing vigorously under her arms and behind her ears. The freezing cold water practically dribbling out of the shower has become numbing, by this point, uncomfortably washing away the suds all over her goosebump-ridden body.

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baggily skirting the top of her legs and almost entirely concealing any evidence that she’s wearing shorts. Self-aware, she tucks the shirt in at the side, as if to prove that her shorts are there.

She feels for him- he must be significantly warmer than her in the plaid sweats and close-fitting navy shirt he’s wearing, a noticeably larger amount of clothing than the last couple of nights when he’s crashed in his boxers and a shirt. At least she’s not the only one conscious of spending the night centimetres apart, she thinks.

“Are you listening to music?”

Jake nods, chewing on his lip as he focuses on something on his phone.

“What really don’t stop with that stuff, do you?”

“I’ve done this every night we’ve travelled so far,” he says quietly, a small smile on his face.

“You have?” Amy folds her towel and hangs it out of the window, which they’ve forcibly pushed as far open as it will go. “How come?”

“Just helps me relax.”

“Insomniac?” Amy asks, walking round to her side of the bed. She looks at the relatively little space left for her next to Jake, and a lump poking out of the top of the mattress, which, if she wants to avoid, will mean she’ll be hip-to-hip with him the whole night, and can’t help the nerves that simmer within her.

“Not exactly,” he says thoughtfully.

Amy looks at him oddly as she perches on her side of the bed, fiddling as she goes to plug her phone charger into the wall.

“I don’t really know what it is, I just can’t sleep when something big is coming up.”

“Huh,” Amy says, peering over at him. “I’ll be honest, you don’t seem like the kind of person who’d get nervous over going back to college.”

“Actually, my dad’s in the state during the first couple weeks of the semester,” he says casually, catching her attention and sending a pang of guilt through her system, “and he’s asked me to meet him in the city. It’s always super weird and tense.”

“Well, I mean, understandably,” she says, drawing her knees to her chest. “I don’t know the specifics, but even I found it weird the first few times I was at yours and he wasn’t there. God only knows how it was for you.”

“It sucked ass.” He laughs weakly. She chuckles sympathetically. “If he could have just cheated on my mom, like, five years later, I think I would have been old enough to understand it.”

“I didn’t know that was what happened,” Amy says quietly, “I’m sorry.”

“It’s cool. Means me and my mom are pretty close, which is nice.”

“Right,” she replies, thinking about the pictures of Jake littering his mom’s Facebook page.

“It’s fine, I’ve got a few days before he wants to see me.” He shrugs. “Hey, you’re the one about to go somewhere totally new,” he says, nudging her with his elbow. She laughs softly, pivoting herself round so she’s facing him, her toes touching the worryingly cheap-feeling headboard against which
he leans. “Weird that we’re pretty much halfway now.”

“I know,” she says, smiling nervously at him. He widens his eyes, mimicking her excitement. “I’ll think about it tomorrow,” she says drowsily.

“For the record, despite the incessant bullying, I think you’re going to do fine.”

“Thanks,” she says quietly, the corners of her mouth rising. He smiles back.

“Uh, do you want-?” Jake says, breaking the eye contact, offering an earphone.

“Sure,” she responds, twisting over and lying down next to him, sticking it in her ear. Music gently floods into her ear, the dulcet tones immediately calming her down. “This is very mellow,” she comments, staring up at the ceiling. Out of the corner of her eye, she sees Jake smile, before he lies on his back next to her.

“If you’re half as tired as I am, trust me when I say it’ll be worth it.”

***

Untitled Playlist
user jperalta95

Avril 14th – Aphex Twin
Dancing Two Hundred Times – Sad Souls
What Youth – Hazing
Lost In The Light – Bahamas
Suzanne – Leonard Cohen
O - Coldplay
What are you searching for – Alice Boman
monsoon – Hippo Campus
Fashion Coat – The National
Concerning the UFO sighting near Highland, Illinois – Sufjan Stevens
Float Forever – Peace
Blackbird – The Beatles
Open Season – High Highs
My Darling – Wilco
Mykonos – Fleet Foxes
Black Cherry – Goldfrapp
Me – The 1975
Flume – Bon Iver
Wait For Me – Motopony
Ends of the Earth – Lord Huron
I’ve Fallen For You – Kelvin Jones
In total darkness, Amy Santiago is stirred by a loud, urgent rattling noise. Instinctively, her brain tells her someone’s breaking into their room. Panic floods into her system so quickly that she jumps awake, propping herself up on her elbows. Listening intently, her heart races in her chest, her eyes fixated on the door.

That aggressive rattle comes again, and, intuitively, she grabs the arm of the boy softly snoring next to her.

Jake’s response is immediate, a short gasp jolting in his throat and his hand clutching quickly to her wrist.

“What’s wrong?” He whispers urgently, his eyes flashing wide in concern up at her.

“I think someone’s trying to get in.”

The rattling comes again, in several short bursts, making Amy jump. She turns back to him, focused, a little fearful.

“Wait,” he says, climbing out of bed quietly, his sudden absence creating a chill over Amy’s skin where he’d been holding her. She too jumps out of bed, tiptoeing over to the door.

Another noise comes, this time a loud whirring, and both of them look at each other confusedly.

“Oh my god,” Jake exclaims exasperatedly, his voice back at a regular volume. “It’s the AC.”

Amy breathes a sigh of relief, grateful for the blast of cool air on her skin.

“I’m guessing that means the heating is dead,” she murmurs, now jarred awake, pressing the back of her hand against a radiator on the wall, which, sure enough, has gone cold. She turns to Jake for a response but he’s already thrown himself back into bed, groaning into the sheets as he lays splayed out on his front.

“So tired,” he moans sleepily.

“Sorry. I genuinely thought it was someone trying to get in.”

“No, me too, I’m just…” he trails off, sighing into the sheets. “What time is it?”

“Only, like, 1AM,” Amy replies distractedly, shivering under the air blasting at full force into the centre of the room. “This is actually pretty cold.”

“You’re seriously cold?”

“Yeah, I seriously am,” she mimics him, going to her bag and digging around for a hoodie. With a
sigh, she realises she’s left it in the truck, and reluctantly goes back to bed.

She perches at the edge, trying to figure out a way to get into this bed that won’t involve sitting on him. His arms are wrapped around a pillow, his legs lengthened out behind him, like an exhausted starfish.

“Jake.”

“Whaaaat?”

“Move,” she says firmly, kneeing his shoulder gently. “C’mon, I’m tired.”

“Make me,” he says tiredly, and she swears she can actually hear the smirk in his voice.

She kneels his shoulder again, hard, and with a groan of pain, he rolls over, freeing up space on the mattress.

“Fair play,” he mutters. “God, you’re right, it is kind of cold.”

Amy rolls her eyes, pulling the duvet up over herself and lying back down.

In the dark, she waits for Jake’s snoring to come back, but it doesn’t.

“Jake?”

“Yeah?”

“May I listen to your music?”

She waits for a response, but instead, after a few seconds, all she hears is one long, full laugh.

“What?” She asks indignantly.

“That was, hands-down, the most polite request I have ever heard in my life.”

“Oh, shut up,” she murmurs, but a tap on her shoulder presents her with his phone. “Thanks.”

She fiddles with his phone, scrolling through hundreds of playlists, desperately trying to find the one she’d listened to with him earlier on. Inadvertently, she opens one, and it begins to play into her ear.

The noise is so loud that even Jake jumps. Amy rips the earphone out of her ear and laughs in disbelief.

“Having trouble there?” His drowsy voice comes from behind her.

“I didn’t check the volume before I played it.”

“Clearly.”

He sits up on his elbows and shimmies down so he’s next to her, leaning forward to find the playlist on the phone. Her view of the phone is obscured by the back of his head, where she focuses on one big, cow-lick curl of hair on his scalp, smiling to herself at how childish it looks. “There,” he murmurs, his voice intimately close to her. He rolls back onto his stomach, his head next to her torso, faced away.

She rests her hands on her stomach as the music starts to play in her ears.
Deliberately or not, Amy has found herself, over the last couple of days, yearning for Jake’s music. It complements what she already knows so well that it works perfectly for her, a combination of nostalgia, and new, all, somehow, tinted with Jake’s attitude. Happy, fun, and a little silly. Song after song passes by, and she listens to each as carefully as she can, savouring the opportunity to count each rhythm and listen to every instrument as precisely as she can manage.

By her side, Jake twists over in his sleep, his nose centimetres from her waist. Her breathing hitches as she feels his warm breath against her, released in a sleepy sigh.

She watches him curiously, boyishly relaxed into the pillow he’s holding, his thick eyelashes flickering slightly.

It’s quite safe to say that she’s never known anybody quite like him. He’s so fiercely loyal, so charismatic, and friendly, and funny, yet simultaneously so set in parts of his immaturity, utterly attached to his gummy bears and sneakers and comical YouTube videos. He’s a child. But, she thinks, fighting the urge to run her fingers through the head full of hair in front of her, he’s had the experiences of a man beyond his years. She knows Karen well-enough, has heard of her eccentric, often ditsy stories as told by Isabel, and is beyond certain that Jake has spent the last ten years caring for her. Warmth stirs within her when she thinks about the things he must have dealt with, the conversations he must have had.

Suddenly he moves, his hand reaching for his phone, balanced on her stomach. The electric feeling of his fingers against her stomach almost makes her jump, having been watching him for a good few minutes.

He observes his phone, and places it back on her stomach.

“Good song.”

“Can’t sleep?”

“Nope.”

“Me neither.” She turns onto her side, facing him. “You want one?” She asks, offering him the other earphone.

“Sure,” he mumbles, pushing himself up the bed so he’s closer to her, and taking it from her hand.

They lie side by side, music playing softly, but Amy’s starkly aware that neither of them are sleeping. It’s an entirely different experience to listening to his music in the truck; the silence and the darkness that surrounds them means she knows he’s hearing exactly what she’s hearing, a tiny connection exclusive to her and Jake.

“This might sound dumb,” she murmurs after several songs, “but I missed being your friend. Even if I didn’t know.”

Jake is quiet, and for a moment she cringes, thinking he’s fallen asleep, or she’s said something dumb, but when she glimpses over at him he tilts his head to her, only centimetres away.

“Me too,” he says sincerely, looking at her intensely, a small smile on his lips.

“In fact, I should probably admit it,” she mumurs, seeing an opportunity and turning onto her side. Jake follows suit, she assumes because he’s expecting something big.

“What?”
“I think I’m in love with you.” She says, shaking her head softly, as if she can’t believe it, staring deep into his eyes.

His face washes over with shock, and perhaps a dash of panic.

“Amy-” He says softly, regretfully, then as soon as she allows herself to grin, he realises she’s teasing him. She descends into giggles. “Oh, my god,” he laughs, shoving her shoulder and lying back down, still chuckling to himself.

“No, go on, please,” she giggles, for which she receives another soft shove.

She lies back, her stomach warm, that recurring feeling spinning round inside her; *my friend, my friend, my friend.*

“It does suck that we missed out as much time as we did, though,” he remarks. “I can’t imagine the kind of phases you went through that I could have used against you.”

“Says you,” Amy scoffs, “Jakester.”

Jake laughs sleepily.

“That was actually mostly between the ages of sixteen and seventeen.” He pulls the blanket over himself, tight. “I’m so cold.”

“That’s it!” Amy turns over to look at him, lying on her front and leaning her head against her arm, twisting awkwardly so her earphone slots under her arm accordingly.

“What?” He watches her. “No, hold on, I don’t like that look, that look happened just before you came up with using those door hooks to hold up a makeshift trash bag on the inside of the truck.”

“We go year by year,” she smiles warmly. His brows furrow slightly. “So, for example, how old were you when I stopped coming to visit you?”

“Thirteen,” he says, without a breath of hesitation. He stiffens, and Amy pauses for a moment, feeling her lip twitch with the urge to grin at how quickly he recalled that- but she decides to move past it.

“Okay, so I would have been ten, almost eleven. We go year by year- you tell me about thirteen, I tell you about ten. We keep going until we get to now. Then we’re all caught up.”

“Okay, okay, okay, okay,” he chatters, perking up. “So, thirteen, right?”

“Yup,” Amy says, letting herself sink into her pillow, so she can comfortably stay face to face with him. She shivers a little in the cold.

“Well, actually, when I was thirteen, a buddy at school sold me a few bootleg copies of all the Die Hard movies that were out.”

“Oh god.”

“- so the obsession became pretty intense for most of that year. It was all I talked about. My uncle even taught me how to shoot cans and bottles in his yard.”

“Woah.”

“Yeah. So that was thirteen. What about your ten?”
“Ten. I read all the Harry Potters for the first time,” she smiles.

“I’ve never read them.”

“No way, you have to.”

“Only if you buy them all for me.”

“Deal.”

“What’s next?”

“Your year as a fourteen year-old, my year as an eleven year-old.”

“Okay, fourteen…” He says, lying on his back and smiling up at the ceiling. “Oh. My first major crush.”

“Oh, spill.”

“Her name was Jenny and she dumped me at my bar mitzvah, but I was still, like, obsessed. Hey, stop laughing-”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, that’s just so tragic.”

“Just wait til we get to sixteen,” he grins, while Amy giggles next to him.

***

Warmth is the first thing of which Amy is totally aware when she wakes up. Her mind, gradually coming back to life, is certain of it, the very first thing it clings onto as it rouses. It encompasses her; the small of her back pleasantly hot in sunlight pressing against her bare skin, her shirt slightly ridden up her torso. Underneath her, warmth immediately greets her skin, reassuring, safe, unassuming. Blissfully comfortable, she could stay here forever.

After warmth comes, for some reason, a stark awareness of breath, long, heavy inhales and the rising and falling of her body. A deep breath takes her chest, longingly filling her before leaving her again, her entire body loosening.

Her fingers curl like a child’s, briefly clinging gently to the fabric against the bottom of her fingertips.

In a matter of microseconds- to be precise, from the exact instant her fingers start to move to the
precise moment they stop- Amy wakes up.

Her hand freezes in its position. The material which her fingers had grazed only seconds ago, was too thin to be her bedsheet, and what was underneath it was too firm, too warm, too alive, to be her side of the bed.

Groggily, she forces one eyelid open, her eyelashes sticking together slightly. The room is filled with soft, dim, yellow light- it can’t be later than five or six in the morning.

Her hand lies on Jake’s chest, against which, she realises, her head is buried. He breathes sharply in his sleep, so she closes her eyes, her heart starting to race for fear of him noticing her awake, but this flies out of her mind when she feels his thumb soothingly graze over the bottom of her forearm and onto her elbow, back and forth. Their legs are tangled together, the fabric of his pyjamas bundled awkwardly around her legs.

She should move, she thinks, pull away, turn over. She almost wishes she could see his face, examine him, as though his sleeping expression might offer an explanation into this situation- unfortunately, with his chin just above her forehead, this isn’t really an option.

The thing is, she doesn’t want to move.

He’s warm underneath her, comfortable, reassuring, even. She won’t pretend she’s not craved human touch over the last four or five days, particularly with what happened in Vegas. Somehow, they’re not even that uncomfortable- they seem to have melded together, into one big, sleepy lump. She stays still, relaxed against his firm chest, taking in the soft scent of his body wash, a surprisingly floral scent, familiar-

Hers. It’s her body wash.

She rolls her eyes to herself, picturing his insistence in Target the night before that he had enough toiletries.

A low, languid hum comes from his throat, and she almost jumps out of her skin, afraid she’s been caught out.

“Hmmmmm,” his voice comes again, muffled, and his body shifts a little beneath her. “It’s in the… when you go to the…” He murmurs, words dipping in and out of his speech as he talks in his sleep.

His hoarsely sleepy voice makes her lids heavy, yearning to go back to sleep. Instead of moving away, she pushes against her leg, bringing herself even closer to him, her nose against his lower neck. She doesn’t dismiss, or ignore, or push away the warmth that whirs around in her stomach, or the whispering in the back of her mind asking her why this feels so natural, why it’s so easy.

No, she thinks happily, settling into him, her heart contented by the feeling of his skin on hers.

No- those are questions for later.

***
Jake Mix #6

Slam – Onyx
Dancing in the Moonlight – Toploader
Rockefeller Skank – Fatboy Slim
Here It Goes Again – OK Go
Jenny From The Block – Jennifer Lopez
Paint It Black – The Rolling Stones
Greek Tragedy – The Wombats
Car Wash – Rose Royce
Edge of Seventeen – Stevie Nicks
Gettin’ Jiggy Wit It – Will Smith
When You Were Young – The Killers
Are You Gonna Be My Girl – Jet

***

“Pass me some candy, I’m snacky,” Jake says, not looking away from the road.

Amy reaches into the upturned witch’s hat between their seats, now filled with a mix of Starbursts and leftover skittles, and scoops a small handful into Jake’s upturned hand.

“Y’know, we could always stop for some actual food,” she mutters, going back to her phone.

“We’ve only been on the road for a few hours.”

“Sure, but our breakfast was leftover fruit and half a bag of chips, both of which had been left in a warm moving truck overnight.”

“Good point. Hey, look.”

Amy looks up. Coming up alongside them is a large, dark green sign, that looks like it’s been there for several decades.
“Yes! So satisfying.”

“New state means our new state song.”

“Huh?”

“We said whenever we crossed state lines we’d put on Dancing In The Moonlight, remember?”

“We’ve already been into four different states! Five if you count the corner of Arizona we had to go through coming back from Vegas.”

“Well, I’m enforcing this rule now, because I think it’s the only song so far we both enjoy as much as each other. Plus, we have a load more states to go through…”

“Oh, okay…”

She leans over and starts to fiddle with the CD player, forcing herself not to roll her eyes when she catches his toothy grin out of the corner of her eye.

All morning, she’s been thanking her lucky stars that she woke up after him, at which point he was already out of bed and retrieving their food from the truck, a note left on the bedside table. She still has no idea whether he woke up with her splayed out over him, cradled in his arms, but winces at the thought of it- she should have moved off him when she had the chance.

“Oh, yes, this is such a good song,” Jake enthuses, wriggling in his seat as the song comes on. Amy can’t help but chuckle. “C’mon, you know you wanna,” he says, waggling his eyebrows over at her.

“Dancing in the moonlight!” He sings-

“Everybody’s feeeeelin warm and bright, it’s such a fine and natural sight-” she joins in,

“Everybody’s dancing in the moooooonlight!”

Jake leans over and turns up the music so it blasts through the truck, and initially Amy itches to slap his hand away or just turn it down a little, but she’s enjoying herself so much that she doesn’t really care, singing along with him as loud as she can.

Gradually, they pick up a small dance routine- or rather, Jake copies Amy throwing herself back and forth and clapping her hands- which she has to insist he stops for their own safety.

She gets it, she thinks, with the music, especially this song- it’s one of her father’s family favourites, brought out towards the end of any family event. Blurred memories of swirling kaleidoscope lights and bubbles, smoke machines (anything the cheesy DJ could get his hands on), all whirling round her as she danced on her brothers’ toes are still prominent in her mind. That childlike excitement of being up past her bedtime, dressed up, with her family, it all comes flooding back to her.

As the song ends, Amy kicks back into her seat, unable to wipe the smile off her face.

“Oh my GOD!” Jake yells, only seconds later.
“What?” Amy says, panicked.

“Souvenirs!”

Before she can objects, Jake pulls the truck onto the side of the road as they come up to a small van with a shack outside the front. It looks like a toss-up between a taco truck and a souvenir tent, she thinks.

“You’re kidding me.”

“I’ll be so quick, you won’t even know I’m gone.” He parks the truck and opens his door to get out. “Although, it doesn’t look majorly legit, so just in case…” he drops his phone and his keys onto his seat. “Look after these.”

“Right.” Amy says exasperatedly, watching him jump out and practically skip over to the souvenir truck.

Out of the window she watches him chatting to the two women at the stall, both of whom smile at him a little wearily as he browses through a rack of postcards.

After a few minutes, his phone buzzes repeatedly on his chair. She leans over and flips it onto its back, assuming the consistent noise signifies a phone call. Instead, his phone is flooded with texts from Gina, boldly visible in the stupidly large font he uses on his phone.

Gina – now

Hahahahahahahaha Jake’s got a GIIIIRLFRIEND

Gina – now

That 100% counts as snuggling ur not getting out of this 1 my friend

Amy jolts back from the phone, her eyes desperately jumping to Jake to see if he’s noticed her looking at his phone. Thankfully, he’s laughing about something with one of the women working the stall, holding a different postcard in each hand and waving them around comically.

So.

That means he noticed the whole being-asleep-on-top-of-each-other thing, she thinks nervously.

Of course he did, she scolds herself inwardly- what was she expecting? That by some chance she’d rolled off him and he’d woken up by himself, like it had never happened? She leans back in her seat, a little frustrated, before it hits her that he’d actually reached out and told Gina about it.

She won’t lie- she’d considered texting Kylie about it. But something intrinsic held her back. It felt like admitting there was something weird or wrong about it, when she knew that there wasn’t. Not really. But this, this is different, because it’s coming from anywhere other than her own head. In fact, it’s coming from him. Jake.

Jake, who, she learnt last night, aged sixteen, had a three-month phase where he would only watch and quote lines from The Fresh Prince of Bel Air. Jake, who she caught using her concealer to cover a zit on his chin just this morning. She smiles to herself.

Now, she really wants to talk to Kylie about it.
It’s nerves bubbling within her, certainly- at what, she’s not quite sure, perhaps the clear flirtation with somebody boundlessly kind and funny, somebody withholding only a glimmer of unknown, the kind that comes from a decade of absence relieved in five days squashed together.

“Check it out!” Jake beams, the tiny gap in his teeth goofily exposed as he jumps back into the truck.

“Okay, show me the loot,” Amy says knowingly, then watches him empty a small brown paper bag onto his lap, from which several small postcards, key rings, and a mug fall out. “Are you kidding?”

“I don’t want to forget Nebraska!”

“We’re driving through it! Wait,” Amy realises, watching him load everything back into the bag, “do you do this every year? How much of this stuff do you have?”

“Some,” he murmurs innocently. She giggles softly.

Amy’s chest hitches when he picks up and unlocks his phone, carefully watching his face.

His expression doesn’t change, a small smirk staying on his face as his dismisses the notifications and puts his phone in his pocket. Amy relaxes.

“I already feared for the state of your dorm,” she mutters, “but knowing it’s probably filled with souvenirs instead of furniture actually almost adds a level of weird.”

“Shut up,” he grins. He reaches for the ignition and starts up the truck. “Where to?”

“Lunch?”

“One of my five favourite things.”

“Please don’t list them,” she moans, leaning back as they start to move, but it’s too late.

“Lunch, boobs, Die Hard, winning stuff, and candy.” He grins over at her.

“Stay classy, Jake,” Amy sighs.

“I do what I can.”

***

wall flower diner

1313 S Dewey St, North Platte, NE 69101, USA
“This is incredible.”

“Show me,” Amy demands, muffled through her cheeseburger. In response, Jake holds up his burger- if you can call it that- dripping with cheese, bacon and beef (and, Amy thinks, chicken) visible in its middle. No sign of a vegetable in sight, though, she notes. “Woah.”

“Pretty gnarly, huh.”

“That’s a heart attack in a piece of food.”

“I’m hungry!”

Amy smiles as she watches him tuck in, enjoying the taste of her own food. Contended, satisfaction washes over her- they’re on time, barely halfway through the morning and having made a good distance into Nebraska, and things are okay.

A blunt buzz against her thigh draws her attention away.

Kylie – 4m ago

Have u mentioned it?
Amy almost smiles to herself, picturing Kylie thinking about the situation as much as her— for a good few months in junior year she claimed to have “Amy-Vision”, through which she could envision all the overthinking Amy might do in any given instance. Much to Amy’s annoyance, Kylie has never been wrong.

_No, I don’t think I will. It’s okay, everything’s normal._

A reply comes microseconds after her message.

**have fun lovebirds**

Amy rolls her eyes, locks her phone, and slides it into her pocket. She tosses the last part of her burger into her mouth and empties the crunchy remains of fries at the bottom of their little carton into her mouth.

“Hungry?”

“Nope, just scared I’ll become as dizzily hungry as I was yesterday.”

“That’s fair.”

“It’s basically survival.”

“Sure.” He looks back to his phone. “Hey, are you free on Monday night?”

“Huh?” Amy looks over at him, taken aback.

“Monday night,” he says slowly, “are you free?”

“I’m about to move to a new city, to college, with a whole new group of people that I don’t know. Why would I have plans?”

“Hey,” he chuckles, “I’m asking to be polite.”

“Now there’s a first.”

“Do you want to come out with me or not?”

She freezes. Is he asking her out? Her mouth parts as she goes to reply, but no words come out. He watches her calmly.

“I…” she manages, at which point his face washes over in realisation.

“Oh, no, not like that,” he corrects himself quickly.

“I didn’t mean it in a bad way-” She stammers-

“No, no, I should have been more clear,” he insists, “I’m invited to a big party at my friend’s apartment.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. It’ll mostly be seniors and juniors so if you wanted to come with a few people from your dorm they’d probably all love you.”

“Instant brownie points?”
“You bet.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, it’s no sweat, this guy’s one of my closest buddies, so he doesn’t really mind how many people I bring.”

“That’s actually really nice of you,” Amy can’t help but grin, “thank you.”

“So you’ll come.”

“Yes.”

“And you promise not to get so drunk I have to carry you out in the first hour?”

“Ha-ha,” she smiles, turning away, going back to her phone.

It doesn’t feel like she’s being obvious- or so she can only hope- but inside, she’s lit up. She’s not even arrived at college yet and she has a friend, not just a road trip friend, or a family friend, but somebody who wants to see her after this trip is over.

“Hey, Jake?”

“Yup?”

“Thank you, she says sincerely, smiling over at him in the dark.

For a moment, she thinks he’ll say something cheeky back, but instead, he nods, once, smiling knowingly.

Under the cool glow of a diner’s sign, casting soft pink and orange over their faces, she knows they look at each other for a little too long.

A fluttering under every centimeter of her skin, lighting her up from the inside in a rush around her body, goes, for the first time, untouched, whirling around inside her in a whisper that begs to laugh and smile and bicker and touch in the ways she has done over the last few days.

Chapter End Notes

HI OKAY FIRST OFF I'M SORRY FOR TAKING ABOUT FIVE YEARS TO UPDATE

finals are ruining my life and I've got so much work to do AND (I'm not kidding when I say this) I was really majorly thrown off about halfway through writing this chapter, because what I'd written HAPPENED TO ME a few days later and I was honestly shook it was confusing

I hope you enjoyed some sweet trope-y goodness and I will try my absolute best to take less than 29387498 years to get the next part up!

anywaaaaaaay thank you for continuing to leave kudos and commenting despite the fact I've essentially abandoned all of you for a couple of weeks, my love for you guys is
endless and honestly it's the most stressful time right now in so many ways and when an email pops up on my phone with a comment or something it just makes my day <3

can I also just take a moment to thank not only god but jesus for b99's renewal?! I was lowkey worried but we get another year!!! woo
Chapter Summary

jake & amy fought the law, and the, LAW WON

Chapter Notes

chapter 6 playlist:
https://open.spotify.com/user/hotelsweet/playlist/04tQz4HsEdEWhM10Ee2CJ

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

***

Miles to NYC: 1,248
Jake Mix #19

Unbelievers – Vampire Weekend
Golden Skans - Klaxons
Kiss Me – Sixpence None The Richer

I Fought the Law – The Clash
Killing Me Softly with His Song - Fugees
Take Me Out – Franz Ferdinand
Don’t Look Back into the Sun – The Libertines
Disco 2000 – Pulp
Come On Eileen – Dexys Midnight Runners
Acceptable in the 80’s – Calvin Harris
O-o-h Child – The Five Stairsteps
Chelsea Dagger – The Fratellis

“Stop!”

“Buh is fuuuuuuuun,” Jake’s voice comes from the passenger seat, his words barely discernible thanks to the odd shape he’s making with his mouth.
Amy glances over, and, sure enough, despite numerous requests, he has his head stuck out of the window, his tongue stuck out of his mouth as he tries to lap up the rain like… well, like-

“You’re like a puppy.”

“Extremely cute and super fun-loving? Thank you so much,” he beams over at her.

She rolls her eyes, but can’t deny an ounce of amusement.

“You’re soaked,” she says, observing the dark curls tousled sloppily over his head.

“I’ll dry off,” he says, as if it’s obvious, going back to stick his head out of the window. “It’s been too humid, I’m just happy it’s raining.”

“It is nice,” she admits, noting the smell of petrichor in the air, “but driving in it isn’t super useful, plus it’s getting heavier-”

“If you want me to drive, just ask,” he says, putting his hands behind his wet head and kicking back, finally leaving the window alone.

“I don’t need you to drive.”

“What if you hit an adorable little animal?”

“Shut up, I’m fine.”

“Just saying,” he chirps, “safety first.”

“We’re going to have to stop soon anyway,” she ignores him, “we’ve been on the road for like, ten hours.”

“Actually, that’s a good point, can we get dinner?”

“As soon as we get into Des Moines,” she repeats for what must be the fortieth time this hour, or so she inwardly swears as Jake groans in response, “we will stop for dinner.”

“That’s like, another forty-five minutes.”

“Eat some more candy.”

“Any more candy and I will, indisputably, poop myself.”

“Gross. Don’t you have some gum you can distract yourself with?”

“Nope,” he says, and annoyance stirs within her- she could swear he almost sounds gleeful about it. “Guess I’ll just have to use the music.”

“Please no.”

“Oh, yeah, this is the one,” he says, fiddling with the CD player. “Get ready for almost a whole CD turned into a Jake-y karaoke session!”

“Ugh,” she grumbles, sitting upright and trying desperately to focus on the road. They’ve come to measuring time on the road by how many of his mixes any amount of distance might take- and yet she’s entirely aware that one mix is more than enough to wind her up beyond belief.
The rain is picking up, pummelling against the windscreen in angry, blurred swirls, the wipers futile in their effort to counter its effect. Amy leans forward, narrowing her eyes, desperately trying to keep her focus on the road. The enthusiastic bopping from the boy at her side remains incessant.

She can’t help it- she can feel her focus starting to slip. Perhaps it’s tiredness, but all she can think about is avoiding crashing this damn truck, the clicking of the fairy lights bumping against the corner of the window behind her fast becoming irritating. Jake’s singing and dancing only exacerbates her annoyance.

“Shut up!” She snaps, to which he only giggles. “Jake,” she starts, but immediately stops when a sharp wailing from behind the truck startles her.

As she listens, her stomach drops.

“No way,” Jake murmurs, looking at her- for a moment she thinks he looks genuinely amused, but panic glistens under those dark eyes. She’d feel smug, were the exact same feeling not paralysing her from within at this very second.

Amy checks the side mirror, and, sure enough, matching the loud crying of sirens that seems to ring in the very centre of her head, a patrol vehicle is tailing them.

“We’re being stopped by the police?” She whispers.

“Well,” Jake says carefully, “you’d actually have to stop for that to be an option.”

“Oh my god, right,” she jumps, suddenly aware that she’s not even slowed down, and, as respectfully and as perfectly as she can, pulls the truck onto the side of the road. “What the hell? What the hell?”

“Amy, calm down,” his voice is cautious.

“Don’t tell me to calm down, Jake,” she snaps, “we’re getting pulled over by the cops.”

“I know-” he starts, but she’s already nervously rambling-

“Okay, my license, my license,” she fidgets in her seat, searching her backpack. “Okay, here. Now we need to clean this up a little, it looks like a child’s bedroom in here.”

“It’s fine.”

“We don’t have time,” she says nervously, noticing the officer walking towards her side of the car in the side mirror, “just put everything behind our seats.”

“You already have it organised, Ames, it’s just our bags. It’s going to be okay.”

“Ames?” She asks, taken aback by him using her nickname again.

They look at each other for a moment.

It’s not like he hasn’t used that nickname for her before- it was actually the norm when they were kids, and she’s fairly certain she’s heard him say it once or twice over the last couple of days, but there’s something different about him using it to calm her down. He looks at her blankly.

A loud knock at the window jumps them apart.

Amy smiles apologetically through the window and opens the door.
The officer stood next to the truck is uncaring of the rain that pummels over him - in fact, he’s wearing a pair of sunglasses, standing quite still, rhythmically chewing a piece of gum.

“Hi, officer, sorry about that-”

“Ma’am, are you aware that you were speeding back there?”

“I…” She stammers. Is there a right answer? “I’m sorry. It was an accident. I was distracted by the weather.”

“If you’re distracted by the weather, maybe you shouldn’t be driving at all,” he says coolly. Amy feels herself go red.

“She’s not the only one,” Jake pipes up awkwardly, “I’m pretty sure I saw an old lady in her Prius who had two pairs of glasses on just to see.”

“You think that’s funny?”

Amy looks back at Jake, whose eyes have widened as he stiffens in his seat.

“Do you need my license?” Amy manages in a small voice. The officer, in response, only shoots out his hand, lifting his head slightly while he waits for her to hand him her license.

“So, what is this,” he says, snatchng her ID out of her hand as soon as she presents it to him, still indifferent to the rain soaking him, “you and your boyfriend moving out?”

“We’re not… I’m not…” Amy stammers.

“We’re not dating,” Jake says quietly. “Not that it’s really any of your business,” he adds, under his breath.

“Watch the attitude, man,” the officer snaps, and Amy nudges Jake, more out of worry than in an actual attempt at discipline. “Hm. You photograph better than you actually look,” he says, handing Amy her license.

“Excuse me?”

“Listen, sweetheart, we can do this one of two ways. We can go through the boring legal crap or you and your date can compensate for wasting my time and I’ll be on my way.”

Amy looks back at Jake, astounded.

“Are you seriously asking us for a bribe?” Jake asks.

“Y’know, just suggesting that is an offence.”

“No it’s not,” Jake almost laughs. Amy’s stomach churns as she sees a hint of defiance flash across his eyes. She couldn’t trust this cop less, and she knows exactly how he’s winding Jake up.

“Okay, sir, I’m going to have to ask you to step out of the vehicle.”

“What?! No,” Amy falters- “he’s just irritated. Long day, all the rain, tight schedule,” she tries, but to no avail. “Please, officer. Give me a ticket and we’ll be on our way- I’ll even make Jake drive so you know I’m not behind the wheel.”

“You seem awful keen to keep him out of trouble,” he responds, smirking a little. “Probably best I
give you guys a quick search, y’know, just in case.”

“This is a moving truck,” Amy manages, her stomach knotting in anger. “It’ll take hours to search.”

“Just a quick once-over can’t hurt,” he mutters, beckoning to Jake, who hops out of the truck and comes round to Amy’s side. His face is still, watching the officer quietly.

“Can I ask your name and badge number?” Amy asks politely. This asshole won’t go unnoticed, she’s decided.

“Officer Pembroke,” he says, no hesitation, no doubt or worry or guilt in his tone. “0185.”

“Thanks,” Amy mutters, taking it down in her phone. “With all due respect, sir, is this really necessary?”

“No, no,” he laughs, “you don’t get to question my methods, sweetie.”

“Would you mind not speaking to me like that?” She asks politely, through gritted teeth, and, stood with his hands against the truck as he’s being patted down, she catches Jake smirk.

“Okay, I get it, he’s the scruffy idiot, you’re the spicy Latina-”

“C’mon, man,” Jake mutters irritatedly at this comment, rolling his eyes.

“Can we speed this up?” Amy asks firmly, trying to ignore the racial jibe, arms folded, officially tired of this absolute asshat of a human being.

“Sure. Open the hatch,” he demands, nodding to the back of the truck. Reluctantly, Jake heads over. Pembroke follows suit.

Amy jumps out of the truck, and follows them, watching on anxiously.

With a loud click, the hatch opens, Amy’s moving boxes and items of furniture exposed. Nervously, she pushes a few of them back, worried of the potential damage from the rain.

Pembroke cuts a couple of them open, rifling through her books, checking in between each of the boxes. When he comes to the corner of the truck, he stops.

“What’s this?”

He taps the back of her bedside table, wedged neatly into the corner.

“My… my bedside table.”

"Any reason the back is detached?"

Amy looks at Jake urgently, in utter confusion. It’s not detached, it’s not detached, it’s not detached, her head seems to insist. Jake wears a similar expression.

“It’s not,” she manages. “It’s pretty old, it’s probably just falling apart.”

“Could you please step aside for a moment?” He asks, and takes the small pistol out from where it sits on his hip.

“Woah, okay,” Jake begins at the sight of the gun, stepping back so that a good half of his body shields Amy’s- but before either of them can say anything else, Pembroke, in one swift whack, hits
the back of the dresser. The small frame of wood on the back wobbles, clearly a little loose, but
doesn’t give way. “Seriously?” Jake mutters.

Stepping forward, he hits the dresser again— and this time, the frame comes loose, clattering out of the
hatch and onto the road. Amy scrambles for it quickly, nervous of the rain, despite how utterly
saturated her and Jake have now become. She clings it to her chest as she stands up.

Pembroke’s face has splayed into a wide grin.

“Bingo.”

Amy’s stomach drops so hard she feels nauseous.

Sat awkwardly between the back of the dresser and a moving box full of books, sits a small bag of
weed.

***

“Do you think they’re even allowed to keep us in here?” Jake murmurs, shifting awkwardly against
the crumbling pale blue of the brick wall behind him. A small flapping noise comes from the soggy
T-shirt uncomfortably peeling on and off his skin around his torso.

“Yes, they are,” Amy says, exhausted.

In a tiny holding cell, they’ve been sat, waiting for Pembroke to return, for at least two hours.

“My back hurts.”

“Mine too,” Amy agrees, noting the numbness in her butt brought on by this bench.

“Maybe we should go over it again.”

“We don’t need to.”

“We’re getting tired, I don’t want that jackass to try and use that against you or manipulate your
words. We just need to be certain, in case he pushes more than a fine.”

“Okay.” She sits up. “That end table belonged to Raf. When he was involved with his friends—”
“With Dylan-”

“Sure, with Dylan. He would have had to hide his drugs somewhere. We just found it.”

“Right. And?”

“And it was a tiny baggie, clearly neither of us were using it. There’s barely anything there. It would be unreasonable to arrest us.”

“Exactly. Amy?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m sorry about this.”

She watches him, a sincerity in his eyes. Her thumbs twiddle around each other anxiously- she catches herself, stops, in an effort not to concern him.

“You have nothing to apologise for, Jake.”

“I provoked him.”

“He was on a mission to have us arrested from the second he saw us. It’s honestly a miracle one of us didn’t punch him.”

“One of us?”

“Yeah. Only, I’m pretty certain I would have thrown a decent punch before you.”

“Not true. I learnt all my greatest moves from the best action franchise of all time.”

“I took self-defence at a precinct in the city.”

“Same difference.”

Amy chuckles softly, rolling her eyes, briefly calm as she sits uncomfortably in the one place, she thinks, nobody would ever expect to find her.

A holding cell in a police precinct just outside Des Moines.

“I think it’s safe to say we’re not going to arrive in New York as quickly as we wanted,” Jake says, smiling weakly at her.

“That’s okay,” she says, leaning back. “At this point, I think it’s pretty safe to say that this trip so far has proved that being on time or sticking to a plan is pretty overrated.”

“Wow,” Jake laughs, “of all the people I thought I’d hear saying that…”

“Yup. I’m truly broken.”

They chuckle feebly under the cold wash of the flickering light above them.

“Do you think they’re searching the rest of the truck?”

“I think so, yeah,” Amy replies. “God, the whole organisational system will be ruined. Move-in day is going to be a nightmare.”
“I hate to break this to you, but it would have been a nightmare either way.”

“But-”

“Nope,” he interrupts, “no list, system, or reminder will make moving into dorms bearable. I promise.”

“I’d end up improvising a plan on the spot anyway,” she murmurs, to which she receives an amused mumble of agreement. “It would’ve been the actual meeting people that would be the issue.”

“Oh, please,” he laughs, rolling his eyes.

“What?” She asks, a little defensively.

“You’ll make friends so quickly, Amy.”

Her insides warm, admittedly with a rush of excitement.

“Not that it really matters what I think, but you’re funny, and smart, and friendly, and in college you only need to be one of those three things to have a few friends. You’ll probably have a fanbase within a week.”

“A fanbase,” Amy laughs, evoking a few giggles from him, too.

“Okay, not Bieber-style, but you get my point.”

Their giggles die down, slowly, but surely.

“Thanks, Jake.”

“It’s okay.”

“Hey, you love this one,” she says quietly, after a little while.

“What?”

“The radio.”

Jake looks over into the small bullpen in front of them, relatively empty – perhaps given that it’s a Thursday night – aside from a couple of officers working quietly at their desks. Sure enough, his ears seem to prick up as he notices the radio playing softly in the corner.

“Oh, yeah,” he smiles, squinting a little as he tries to hear the radio. “You remembered.”

“Kind of hard not to, after the fuss you made.”

“I wanted it loud, you didn’t-”

“There’s loud, and then there’s deafening-”

“You admitted it was worth it.” He grins at her.

She looks at him, stubborn, eventually allowing herself to smile back. After a moment, she replies.

“It was.”
Amy stirs at the sound of Jake’s sleep-talking, soft against her shoulder. She sits up awkwardly, as best as she can. She didn’t even realise she’d fallen asleep. The bullpen in front of the holding cell is now totally empty, apart from one or two desk lamps left on.
Noticeably, one of these desks belongs to officer Pembroke, she realises.

“One less,” Jake gabbers in his sleep, leant against her shoulder, his voice croaky and soft.

His voice warms her, lusciously sleepy and calm.

“Jake,” she murmurs, “Jake, wake up.”

“Huh,” he manages, sitting up. “Oh, sorry,” he says, lifting himself off her shoulder.

“I guess falling asleep on each other is becoming a habit,” she mutters, and immediately regrets it, freezing up as she realises that she’s just confessed to total awareness of last night in the motel.

“Right,” he says finally.

“What time is it?”

“Eleven-something.”

“What?”

“There’s a clock by the entrance, but it’s too dark for me to see the minutes,” Jake explains.

“Oh my god. We’ve been here for like, four hours. Where is this asshole?”

“No clue. Guess he wasn’t kidding when he said he’d add another ten minutes for every look I gave him.”

“He said that?”

“Yup.”

“Damn it, Jake.”

“If I’d known we were going to be held up this badly I would have just bribed him.”

“No, you wouldn’t.”

“I know,” he admits, “I’m just making a point.”

She stands up and walks to the edge of the cell, looking around. “Hello?”

“I don’t think anybody’s here,” Jake starts, but immediately stops when the sound of a door closing comes from off to the side.

“Alright, losers,” that familiar, irritating voice comes as Pembroke walks through the door, “your truck’s clean.”

“We know,” Amy murmurs.

“As for this bad boy,” he says, waggling the offending bag in front them, “we’re going to have to give you a warning and a small fine.”

“Okay,” Amy manages, desperately restraining herself from saying anything stupid. The last thing she needs is more time here.

He heads over and opens the cell, a smirk residing on his face as he lets them out.
“You’ll need to sign these.”

“No worries,” Jake says, a little too quickly.

When everything’s signed and sorted, they leave as quickly as they can, practically skipping out of the precinct.

“We’re free, we’re free, we’re free!” Jake sings, evoking a weak giggle from Amy. “I never thought I’d know what life’s like on the inside... but now I’ve seen it all…”

“We sat in an empty holding cell for four and a half hours, then walked five minutes to our truck.”

“I know. And I can honestly say I feel blessed to have made it out alive. God is real.”

“Okay then,” she smiles, “let’s just get going, please, I’m so tired.”

“Wait, I’m driving?”

“You bet your ass you’re driving,” Amy says matter-of-factly, swinging open the passenger door. “No way am I risking being at the wheel with someone as distracting as you sat next to me the whole time again.”

“That is fair enough,” he chuckles.

She jumps into her seat, slinging her backpack over behind the chair, and as Jake starts the truck, feeling the familiar grumble around her as it comes to life, she does a double take.

In the last few hours she has been caught with drugs she didn’t know she had, detained by the police, fallen asleep in a holding cell, and been set back a good couple hundred miles of their journey.

And sure, it’s unsettling. Definitely abnormal.

But somehow, it’s not surprising.

She watches him as he settles into his seat, making himself comfortable for the journey. Nobody she’s ever known has had the ability to remain as calm and unshaken by moments like these- even in Vegas, when he’d realised something had gone wrong, he’d acted immediately, then pushed forward as quickly as he could when they needed to keep moving.

Maybe it’s because he’s spent so much time doing the exact same thing at home, she thinks. He doesn’t seem immune to these few big events, not by any means- he’s tired, she can tell, a croak having crept into his voice and the creases in his button-down suddenly more appropriate to his entire demeanour, and he’s slightly quieter than normal, but by the morning she knows he’ll be back to regular Jake.

It’s calming, reassuring, yet exciting, the presence of somebody utterly willing to take on and handle these big challenges when they’re thrown their way. In it lies a kind of unpredictability, she thinks-

“Fuck!”

-Like the capacity to suddenly start swearing like a sailor, apparently.

“What is it?” Amy responds, jumping out of her train of thought.

“You’re telling me you can’t hear that?”
She stops, listens- and instantaneously an almost disgustingly noisy spitting noise becomes evident to her, as though somebody’s hitting the underside of the truck.

“Pull onto the shoulder,” she says calmly, “we need to check it over.”

“Right,” he agrees, steering the already slowing vehicle onto the side of the road.

The truck comes to a stop, and Jake gets out of the truck as quickly as he can, jumping down so he can check… well, Amy’s not entirely sure what he’s checking, she thinks, watching him crawl around next to them.

It occurs to her quite quickly that not everyone would have been taken through and taught the various stages of vehicle maintenance and repair. Sue her, it comes with living with eight males and a mother intent on stressing the importance of her independence.

She crawls over into the driver’s seat, still warm from where Jake’s been sitting despite only having been on the road for about five minutes, and watches him tiredly. As she stifles a yawn, her eyes drift lazily over the dashboard.

“Oh my god,” she murmurs, sinking into the seat as soon as she sees it. “Jake.”

“What?”

“It’s gas. We’re just out of gas.”

“Wait, what?”

He climbs up onto the step under his door, bringing himself up next to her, and look at the dashboard, where the little fuel light is flickering uncertainly, signifying the age of the truck.

“Oh my goooollllddd,” he sighs, leaning his forehead on her shoulder. “Whyyyyyyyyyy?!”

“Get off, loser,” she mutters, nudging him off her.

“Real nice, Amy. Good to know that in my desperate, aching moment of need-”

“-Please never use ‘aching’ and ‘need’ in a sentence together again,” she grimaces-

“- you are casting me aside.”

“Fine,” she says, crawling back into her seat.

“What now?”

“We try and get gas, I guess.”

“Say ‘gas, I guess’ five times fast.”

“You’re hysterically tired, aren’t you?” She laughs.

He only laughs in response, a tad exasperatedly, letting out a long, tired groan, stretching himself out before running a hand through his hair, his other propped up by the elbow against the window.

Dark, messy hair shifts under his fingers, a vein pronounced in his forearm under the warm lamplight outside as he tenses in his stretch, his eyes tired and unfocused, with his thick lashes occasionally fluttering wearily against his skin as he struggles to keep himself awake.
Heat pools within her as she watches him.

Briefly, only for a second, his tongue glides over his bottom lip, before his lips purse. He does this sporadically, she’s seen it, but not like this, not in a way that makes her want to mimic his movements with her own lips, do it for him.

An inkling of *Stop!* flutters through her head at this quite obvious, pulsing attraction to him, but her exhaustion overwhelms it, a sleepy haze that whispers *go on* as she looks at him. She knows what she’d do if she could, right now, wildly exhausted and hazy in the head.

She’d climb over, slot her knees over either side of him, finally weave her fingers into that hair and feel each strand against her fingertips. She’d move forward slowly, so, so slowly, and as carefully as she can, taste his lips, find out if that big mouth is good for anything other than relentlessly smirking, teasing-

“Amy?”

Aaaaand she’s back.

“Hm?”

“You’re looking at me kinda weird, there, are you okay?”

“Yes, I’m just, I’m tired,” she stammers, feeling herself flush with heat.

Nope. No *way* was she just thinking the things she was thinking. Her whole body recoils in embarrassment.

“So what do you want to do? I think there’s a gas station just up the road.”

“Yes,” she says, too quickly, granting a slightly odd look from Jake. She clears her throat. “Um, yeah. Let’s try… and see if we can get gas.”

“Right.”

“Okay.”

“Cool.”

***
At three in the morning, in a motel room coldly lit by an old blue lamplight outside, Amy is out cold. One thing from her surroundings keeps her clinging onto those last threads of consciousness, though-the soft, repetitive drums escaping Jake’s earbuds from across the room.

She’s been trying to sleep with the sound of it niggling at her for the last hour or so, mostly successfully- arriving at a motel after spending a night in a police precinct and wandering around trying to find gas for a truck for a couple of hours, all after a long day of driving, makes sleep pretty easy.

Eventually, she lifts her head, trying to see if he’s asleep in the twin bed across from her. He’s totally still, lying face down with his arms wrapped around a pillow into which he head is buried.

She slips her legs out of bed, then tiptoes over to him, searching silently in the dark for his phone, eager to turn off his music. If nothing else, she thinks, he’ll give himself brain damage, with music that loud in his ears while he sleeps.

Gently, she tugs an earphone out of his ear, then the next, taking them as carefully as she can. Thankfully, it doesn’t seem to affect him- he barely even stirs, still fast asleep.

Trapped under his arm sits the remainder of the wire, Amy realises, giving it a cautious tug in an attempt to retrieve it from beneath him. It doesn’t move, wedged firmly underneath him. Amy withdraws, deciding instead to look for his phone so she can stop the music altogether- she starts at his charger, following the cord with her eyes in hopes of finding it.

Obviously, he can’t even sleep with his phone on a bedside table- somehow, his phone, too, is buried beneath him, the corner sticking out from next to his waist, slightly concealed by the white fabric of his T-shirt that’s come loose as he’s rolled over. Amy pulls at the corner of his phone, once, twice, before it finally releases itself from his body.

Just as she’s about to congratulate herself for doing this in the dark, in silence, a loud cry startles the life out of her, and it takes everything within her not to yell.

“Oh my god,” Jake jumps, “what the hell are you doing?”

“What?” Amy looks at him incredulously, backing up, stumbling into the wall next to his bed, “Oh,” she puts two and two together- he just woke up in the middle of the night to see her, crouched over his sleeping body, holding his phone. Right.

“Y’okay there?”

“Yeah, no, that was just a little freaky,” she hands him back his phone.

“Title of your sex tape.” He beams sleepily, his eyes still wearily narrow.

“Shut up,” she gives his shoulder a firm shove before diving back for her own bed. “Your music was still playing and it was annoying.”

“Oh, right. God, of all the people I’ve ever thought I’d wake up underneath.”

“Huh?” Amy stiffens, grateful for the darkness of the room.

“Underneath… ahem,” he clears his throat, “like, several feet underneath. Not, like…”
“Right.”

“Yeah.”

Tense silence falls in the room, thick in the late-August warmth.

“Kind of a crazy day, huh?” Amy asks, eventually, somehow intrinsically aware that neither of them are asleep.

“That’s one way of putting it,” his tired voice responds, in a low chuckle.

“Are all your road trips back to NYU this exciting?”

“No,” he says, straight away, laughing, “I don’t think any road trip is gonna compare after this one.”

Inadvertently, her heart takes off, fluttering warmly in her chest.

“Hey,” she says, checking the time on her phone, “it’s almost been a week.”

“Huh?”

“A week tomorrow since we left Portland.”

“Woah.”

“Yeah.”

“Sorry we’re a little off-schedule.”

“My fault as much as yours.”

“Well, I mean, not really.”

“No. Not really,” she says, and they both giggle. “It’s definitely more your fault,” she laughs-

“There it is-”

“But I haven’t stopped you. And not everything that’s held us back has actually been us.”

“And we’ve, like, chosen to stay together at some points, right?”

This catches Amy off-guard. His voice sounds uncertain, like he’s really asking a question.

Chosen to be together? She considers it. There have plenty of instances, sure, she realises, every single day this week, where they’ve chosen to stop to eat together, stayed a tad too long, gone to sleep or gone to dinner instead of driving just a few hours more.

“Yes,” she agrees quietly, and she doesn’t know how, but she feels it in the room, and she knows Jake is smiling. “Basically, we shouldn’t be trusted with a moving truck and a time limit.”

“I think we’ve done pretty well given the stuff we’ve dealt with.”

Amy laughs.

“Right. A surprise trip to Vegas, an entire day stuck in a heatwave,”

“You forgot the first major hurdle.”
“Huh?”

“The infamous map incident.”

“Oh, shut up.”

“I’m considering referring to it as MapGate.”

“You’re the worst.”

“I was petrified. I actually briefly considered jumping out of the truck and running home.”

“Oh, really,” she mocks, “what stopped you, the promise of your next burger?”

“Something like that,” he says, “that and the fact I’ve never been sat next to someone so sure of herself and where she’s going. Kind of impressive.”

Amy smiles to herself, looking up at the ceiling. If you’d have told her a week ago that she’d be lying here, laughing along with, even being complimented by the irritating, messy boy with whom she left Portland, she wouldn’t believe you for a second.

“Honestly, I think we do pretty well together,” she says quietly.

“Same.”

***

BREW’D AWAKENING

5045 NE 14TH ST DES MOINES IA 50313

SERVER: KAT

COFFEE X2       $4
BREAKFAST WRAP – BACON   $3
BREAKFAST WRAP – EGG   $3
TOTAL $10

COME AGAIN!

***

Jake Mix #11

Two Weeks – Grizzly Bear
Heavy – POWERS
Un-Break My Heart – Toni Braxton
Spaceman – The Killers
Adventure of a Lifetime – Coldplay
Lonely Boy – The Black Keys
Complicated – Avril Lavigne
Modern Love – Courteeners
Teenage Kicks – The Undertones
I Get Around – The Beach Boys
Little Talks – Of Monsters and Men
Electric Love – BØRNS
September – Earth, Wind & Fire

***

“That makes NO sense!”
“Right? She wouldn’t let me have it!”

“You’re telling me… your ninth grade math teacher gave you detention-”

“-Yup-”

“- because she thought Die Hard wasn’t a Christmas movie and you did?”

“Yes!”

“No.”

“I’m for real!”

“I just don’t believe it. You must have done something else.”

“My mom has the detention slip framed in our kitchen.”

“I want pictures.”

“Fine!” Jake pulls his phone out of his pocket and opens his texts. “Be prepared, it’s the most iconic piece of paper known to the Western world this century.”

“I look forward to it.”

“I still get angry over this argument, y’know,” he continues, sliding his phone onto the dashboard when he’s texted his mom. “The whole movie is Home Alone but better.”

“Plus, his wife was called Holly…”

“Right!”

“And at the end they finally discover the importance of family unity and love.”

“Exactly,” Jake enthuses, eyes wide with his passion for this subject, his mouth half-full of his breakfast. Amy watches him amusedly. “And Hans Gruber falls thirty floors and dies the most awesome death of all time.”

“That too,” Amy smiles.

It’s a warm morning, yet cooler than normal, yesterday’s torrential downpour seemingly having cleared the air. Both of them sit in what feels to be becoming a typical position: either legs kicked up on the dashboard or sat cross-legged, facing the other. Amy is currently positioned as the latter, sipping eagerly at her coffee, still a little worn down from yesterday’s events.

“Hey, is that yours?”

Amy looks up to see him gesturing to her phone, which is buzzing repeatedly on the dashboard.

“Oh, yeah,” she says, a little taken aback- nobody ever calls her apart from her mom or Kylie.

She picks up her phone, on which clearly reads one name she was not expecting to see: Julian.

“I should take this,” she smiles apologetically, jumping out of the truck. Jake looks at her questioningly, confused. “My brother.”

“Ah.”
She hops out of the truck and slides open her phone, accepting the call.

“Hello? Julian?”

“Ames, hi,” that friendly, authoritative voice comes, as if he’s taking a business call.

Amy is, and always has been, in awe of, best friends with, and totally petrified of her oldest brother. Maybe it’s because he’s almost a decade older than her, or maybe it’s because he’s the closest in personality to her, just as organised and on-task and mature for his age as she’s always been told she is. Maybe it’s because he’s the trailblazer of her and her siblings; top grades, a scholarship to an Ivy League college, law school, married to his high school sweetheart and the sweetest, most away-with-the-fairies woman on earth. Amy wouldn’t be surprised if they started popping out grandkids soon- if there’s something that would please their parents that he hasn’t done yet, you can bet it’s round the corner.

The magical thing about Julian is that she’s never been jealous of him- she’s never had to compete against him for attention like she has with the other boys, because he was out of the house before she turned nine, and up until then he was essentially a third parental figure. She’d never admit it, but there’s nobody in the world she admires more.

“Hi, are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” he says carefully, “I was actually wondering if everything’s okay on your end.”

“What?” Amy asks, then she remembers that inconvenient truth- she and Jake have been on the road for almost a week. She should be in New York by now. “Oh, yeah, I’m good.”

“How’s the trip?” He asks, and Amy can tell, just through his voice, that he’s holding back, a hell of a load more questions bubbling under the surface.

“It’s…” she tries to find the words. “It’s been eventful.”

“Uh-huh…” he responds slowly, “Mom said something about Vegas?”

“Yeah. Kind of a surprise detour.” She laughs awkwardly.

“You took a surprise detour?”

“Well, Jake took the detour, I kind of… happened to be in the vehicle at the time.”

“Right.”

A pause falls between them.

“How is Jake?” Julian asks eventually.

“Pretty much the same as he was when we were kids, but taller, and not eleven.”

“Sure, he must be in his twenties now, right?”

“Twenty-one, yes.”

“God, that makes me feel old.”

“You’re twenty-nine.”
“Still.”

“Anyway,” she continues, “I know I’m a little late, but I’ll definitely make it into the city for my move-in day.” She kicks a piece of rock by her feet as she paces, dust flaring around her.

“The 28th?” He asks incredulously- of course he’s memorised the date, she thinks. “How far off are you?”

“Well, we’re in Des Moines right now-”

“You’re only in Iowa?!”

“Julian, it’s okay, I’ve got a few days, and we got caught up with this officer last night so we were a little stuck,” she says, instantly regretting it.

“An officer? What the hell did you do that got you involved with the police?”

“Well,” she mumbles, “I was speeding.”

Julian doesn’t respond, which only makes her more anxious.

“Can I speak to Jake?”

“Why do you want to speak to Jake?”

“I just… the police, Vegas, wherever the hell else you’ve been, it’s not you.”

“What?”

“You don’t get into this kind of trouble, Amy, it’s not you.” His voice is firm. “You don’t even sound mildly panicked about the fact that you’re whole days behind schedule.”

“Because I’m not!” She feels her volume raise. “I’m safe, I’m happy, and I’m having fun, Julian.”

“Are you having fun or is he having fun?”

“Excuse me?”

“Jake. When you guys were kids he was always the one that initiated whatever competition or plan got you into trouble, I remember.”

“I just told you it was me who was speeding.”

“I know, but I’m willing to bet it was because of him,” he says, and Amy feels herself withdraw when he does, because it’s true. “Does this mean you’re not going to hand the phone over?”

“No, Julian, because I’m eighteen years old. I’m not a child. I can make my own decisions and I’ve decided to have as much fun as I’ve had this last week.” She looks back up into the truck window, where Jake is grinning childishly at his phone, warmth stirring instantly within her in response to his youthful happiness. “He’s my friend.”

“Riiiiight. I get it now.” Julian’s voice is sarcastic, but warmer, as if he’s teasing her.

“Huh?”

“Now, correct me if I’m wrong, but I think someone’s got a crush.”
She goes quiet. Her first instinct is to deny it, but nobody’s said it yet, and to hear someone pick up on that part of her relationship with Jake—over the phone, no less—from Julian…it evokes something excited, something scared in her.

“Maybe.”

There. She’s said it out loud.

“I’m sorry for being harsh, you know I worry about my little sister.”

“I know.”

“You promise that you’re safe?”

“I promise I’m safe. And as soon as I’m in the city I’ll tell you, and come to yours.”

“Ames?”

“Yeah?”

“You don’t have to come to ours straight away.”

“I know. Actually,” she realises, “I’m meant to be stopping in Chicago.”

“Chicago? Dare I ask?”

“For fun.”

“As long as it’s for you, then good.”

“It is.”

“Good.”

“Good.”

“I should probably go, I really just wanted to check you were safe.”

“I know. And I am, I promise. I’m not just saying this for the sake of it, but I genuinely trust Jake.”

“Me too. I think.”

“Really?”

“Yes,” Julian responds carefully. “Just be careful and call me if you need anything. Anything, Amy, okay?”

“Yes, Julian,” she drones teasingly, “I love you, I’ll see you soon.”

“I love you too.”

She hangs up, clicking her phone shut, and looks back to the front of the truck, where Jake sits. He notices her, a smile spreading over his face before he tilts his head questioningly.

“Just wanted to check where we were,” she explains as she walks back. “Probably should have explained the delay to him a little earlier.”
“Potentially.”

“Did I hear you tell him about Chicago?”

“You did,” she smiles, settling into her seat.

“So?”

“So…”

“You want to go?”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

“Well, I mean, we do kind of attract trouble,” he chuckles.

“I don’t know, I’ve got a good feeling about Chicago.”

“Really?”

“Yeah,” she smiles. “I say let’s go now, get ourselves a place to stay, go explore the city, then have a night out. What was it you called it?”

“A bender?” He asks, watching her with that look, astonishment and excitement and warmth and intrigue all packed into his dark eyes.

“Yes. A bender.”

“Okay, let’s do it.”

“Right now?” Amy almost laughs in excitement.

“Right now,” he beams back. “Music, maestro?”

“Of course,” she chuckles, picking out a new CD.

They buckle their seatbelts, and Jake starts the truck, the engine roaring to life much quicker than normal. Outside, the sun casts warm light over everything in sight, the beginning of another bout of warmth.

“Okay,” Jake says as they start to pull onto the freeway again.

“Here we go.”

Chapter End Notes

helllllooooo I'm back again with a fresh dose of sexual tension/ will they won't they/ please-dear-god-let-them-get-together <3
okay let me start by saying- THAT FINALE THO. #stopsplittingjakeandamyup2k17

I was honestly convinced there was going to be a bigger jake/amy moment in the finale but I was still SHOOKETH with the jake/rosa plot and there were so many brilliant parts and I can't believe we have to wait until September again :( It feels like the hiatus only ended yesterday!

as for this fic, as per fckin usual my emails come up with the comments and kudos and stuff and I'm just always taken aback and my heart warms and I can't stop smiling when I read some of the stuff you guys leave on this fic. I feel so bad for updating as irregularly as I do and I do NOT deserve some of you guys!!!

I can't believe I'm more than halfway through with this fic in all honesty and I am SO EXCITED for these last few chapters that are coming next. I'm enjoying writing this so so so much and never want it to stop <3

I hope u enjoyed and I will see u next tiiiime
part 7

Chapter Summary

"going to Chicago was like going out of the world" - muddy waters

Chapter Notes

chapter 7 playlist:
https://open.spotify.com/user/hotelsweet/playlist/3NyRjtOjOsZ0Rc1vyVKJwN

See the end of the chapter for more notes

***

Miles to NYC: 854
“Ring of fire?”

“Nope, that requires making friends with a huge group of people.”

“C’mon, Amy, it’s fun!”

“Well, do you have a pack of cards?”

“No.”

“So that settles that one, then.”

Amy crosses off *Ring of Fire* from a tall list of drinking games, currently taking up an entire A4 page, which sits on her lap. Jake, at the wheel, has suggested 80% of them, and truthfully, she now has a newfound respect for his liver.

“Ah! Look!” Amy beams at another sign displaying the distance to Chicago. “We’re barely an hour out.”

“OH! That reminds me,” Jake jumps. “Power Hour.”
“Huh?”

“I think we should cross out Power Hour.”

“Wait,” she says, pulling out her phone and googling it. “Yes,” she agrees as soon as she reads it, “that one goes. We’re not doing that.”

“I tried it in my freshman year to try and impress this guy who said he’d buy me drink.”

“Oh, god.”

“Yeah. To be fair, I managed it, but needless to say, I didn’t need the extra alcohol.” He grimaces.

“I think we have a pretty good selection here now,” she says, surveying her carefully constructed list.

“You may be the only person I’ve met who prepares for both pregaming and going out with a meticulous list.”

“I think you secretly adore it,” she replies happily, tearing the list from her refill pad and putting it on the dashboard in front of her. “Now for the actual bars.”

“Bars? Plural?”

“Yeah, we’re going on a bender.”

“Sure, but you’re not even legal.”

“Well, I guess I’ll just have to make myself look really hot, then,” she smiles tartly. He laughs. “What?” She can’t keep the defensiveness out of her voice. “I got in at that bar in Vegas and I was virtually makeupless and wearing shorts and a sweater.”

“Fair enough. Where’re you thinking?”

“Why would I know any bars in Chicago? I’ve never been,” she says indignantly, looking away. She looks back to see Jake looking over at her, eyebrows raised.

“Okay, fine,” she admits. “I’ve got eight finalists.”

“Eight?!” He laughs.

“Yeah. I figured we should aim for three to five, get all the best spots.”

“Sounds sensible,” he chuckles. He catches her looking at him expectantly, waiting for an explanation of his amusement. “Sorry, you’re just so beautifully anal.”

“Thank you,” she replies, ignoring the jibe and smiling with genuine pride. “I’ll read you what I think are the worst three bars, and then we’ll eliminate them and go for the others.”

“Alrighty, go ahead.”

“First up for eviction, a place called Kingdom.”

Jake blows a raspberry against his hand.

“Wow, okay, instant elimination,” Amy says, shutting the tab open with Kingdom’s information on her phone. “Jake takes no prisoners.”
“Not when it comes to a good night out.”

“Next up, a place called the Oculus.”

“The what now huh?”

“The Oculus.”

“That sounds like a science lab.”

“Right? Also, I checked their bar food, and it’s all about a hundred dollars.”

“Oh, yeah, that’s an instant loser.”

“Okay, bye-bye Oculus,” she says, swiping away another tab. “This last one is a little dicey.”

“Dicey?”

“You’ll see.”

“Okay, hit me up.”

“It’s called Up.”

“No way.”

“What?”

“Is that the one with the zipline on the roof?”

“Yeah, how did you know?” Amy sits back, a tad deflated.

“No, no, don’t worry, that’s all I know about it, I still need to hear your list,” he says, noticing her disappointment, “Go on. Tell me why it’s on the potential elimination list.”

“Well,” Amy starts, beginning to perk up again, “For one, there’s a pretty big entry fee.”

“Ew.”

“Right? Then we have to trust ourselves drunk with a zipline.”

“That’s your biggest concern?”

“Yes, Jake. Funnily enough, that is absolutely my biggest concern.”

“I say keep your five and we’ll just see where we end up. I bet they’re all well-researched and perfectly appropriate.”

“They are,” she says proudly, then, catching him grinning toothily at her, “Oh, you’re teasing me.”

“Yup.”

“Well, the joke’s on you, because I’m going to have plenty of teasing material tomorrow morning.”

“Huh?”

“I’m riding on a list of bets about us that I made with Kylie over text.”
“What? We’ve been only been on the road for a few hours, and we’ve been talking non-stop. When did you have time?”

“Don’t underestimate me, Peralta.” She smiles to herself.

“Read them to me. I love bets.”

“Okay,” Amy chuckles, “number one, Jake makes a stupid drunk call.”

“Hey!” He objects, then stops to think. “What are the odds?”

“1/4,”

“Seriously? An eighty-percent chance?”

Amy shrugs, still smiling.

“Number two, I end up too hungover to drive.”

“You came up with that one?”

“Obviously not,” Amy rolls her eyes. “And, for the record, I think I’ll be fine.”

“Oh,” Jake says, glancing over at her. “In that case, I want in on that bet too, tell Kylie.”

“You’re betting on it because I think it won’t happen?”

“Yep,” Jake chuckles. “Trust me.”

“Rude.”

“Don’t object, or I won’t hold your hair back.”

“You won’t have to, because I’m not going to be sick!”

“Whatever you say.”

“Number three, one of us gets with somebody. Again, Kylie’s, not mine.”

Jake laughs lowly.

“What does Kylie get if that’s true?”

“Twenty bucks.”

“Twenty bucks? For a non-specific bet? That girl is crafty,” he chuckles.

“What? Do you think that’ll actually happen?”

“I don’t know,” he mutters, “with one or two of the right drink I’d bet my soul I could get you to kiss a stranger.”

“Oh, please,” Amy rolls her eyes.

“I’m serious!” Jake smiles simply.

“Fine, what do you want for it?”
“Really?”
“Yes, c’mon!”
“Ten bucks, I don’t know.”
“Good. And if you get with someone, you have to buy me something for my new room at NYU.”
“Anything I want.”
“Sure, but it has to fit to my personality at least marginally.”
“Deal.” He stretches out his hand under the arm using the steering wheel, which Amy gives a brief shake. “Wait, did we just create a night out where we’re both going to actively avoid making out with anybody?”
“Hm. Maybe.”
“That’s definitely a first.”

***

Stood underneath the Cloud Gate sculpture, holding tightly onto several leaflets, Amy Santiago watches Jake Peralta pull faces at his reflection, waving his arms around and giggling at the shapes it makes.

“You’re a child.”

“Look!” Jake laughs as his reflection, skewed, shooting off in several directions as he darts from side to side.

Taking him out is, really, she thinks, like taking out a dog.

“Okay, come on,” she says, trying not to laugh as she grabs his elbow and pulls him away from knocking over a small kid.

“You’re no fun.”

“I’m all the fun,” she responds, holding up her brochures and leaflets. “Where next?”

“I don’t know, we’ve seen almost all the big things now.”

“And thanks to whose plan?”
“That’d be yours,” he admits. “All in the space of an afternoon. Why don’t we just walk for a while?”

“Walk? You hate walking. You said it was for ‘dumb-dumbs who hadn’t figured out skateboards.’ Not that I’m even convinced you can skate.”

“I’m going to ignore that hurtful assumption,” he starts, prompting an eye roll from Amy. “And it’s like, four in the afternoon. We should probably get food then get ready to go out soon, right?”

“Oh, right, good point. Should we just head back to our hotel?”

“I guess so.”

They begin walking, slower than Amy would like, largely thanks to the afternoon heat blazing over them.

“Favourite part of the city so far?”

“Buckingham fountain was pretty awesome,” she smiles, “my mom loved the pictures, too.”

“That’s so cute, sending it all to your mom,” he teases.

“Earlier I literally watched you send three cat videos off Facebook to your mom. In a row. In the space of less than five minutes.”

“I’m annoying her, like a normal kid.”

“Right.”

Something in Amy’s chest bubbles excitedly. She can’t quite place it, but she knows it’s because she’s in a city. It’s an environment with which she’s always resonated, being surrounded by different people, different voices, different stories, all the time. It’s the constant movement, being surrounded by cars and construction and buildings and the sense that there’s always something new, that things are never finished.

As for Chicago, it’s more than she was expecting. That’s all there is to it; she’s seen pictures, heard about it a few times, seen it on TV- she’s been aware of it, but being here now, with Jake, in the sun, on the cusp of this new and big and overwhelming thing… it’s like it’s what this whole trip has been for in the first place.

Suddenly, Amy’s stomach gurgles, making a noise so loud Jake actually looks relatively startled.

“Told you we need food,” he says, smirking to himself.

“Don’t act like you’re not starving, too.”

“True,” he says, “where’re we thinking?”

“I don’t care, I just want a huge burger.”

“Mmm, a burger.”

“Or a pizza.

“Mmm, pizza.”
“Or a massive cake.”

“Hey, cake!”

“Yeah, the repetition thing is getting annoying now, strangely,” she quips, but he’s stopped in his tracks, looking across the street. “What is it?” She says, a hint of irritation creeping into her voice. She’s too hungry to make stops.

“Look,” Jake says, beaming, nodding across the road.

On the other side of the street, lodged in between two boutiques, sits a crisp, modern storefront, glass panels covering the storefront as to reveal the minimalist design of the inside, bar the golden chaise sofas and huge chandeliers that adorn the room inside, with small white coffee tables in front of them.

In widely-spaced, modern lettering above the doors, reads this place’s name:

** tiers of joy **

“A cake place?” Amy looks at Jake questioningly.

“Amy. They’re a catering company. Free samples.”

“Oh my god, you’re a genius,” she says, already heading for the crossing over the road.

“Wow, no hesitation?”

“I thought about it, but then I thought about cake.”

“I see,” he says, amused, now jogging to keep up with her as she heads for the store.

As soon as she reaches the door, she brushes herself down, feeling far too underdressed in a cami, shorts, and sneakers, to be stepping into a place as pristine and fancy as this. She checks over Jake, whose slightly worried expression seems to express the same concern.

“Act fancy,” he says, poising himself into some stupid pose, pursing his lips and looking wistfully at her. She giggles, nudging him to stop.

“We won’t make it three seconds if you do that.”

“Noted.”

She presses open the door, immediately greeted with a blast of cold air, presumably from the A/C. The place is virtually empty, aside from a young woman who appears to be having some kind of consultation towards the back of the store, perched calmly in the centre of a long sofa, sipping on what Amy thinks might be a mimosa as she chats coolly to a well-dressed staff member sat across from her.

“Sir, Ma’am, hi,” a young woman approaches them, tall, beautifully dressed in a pencil skirt and a neatly tucked-in blouse. Amy can’t help but wonder how she’s surviving this weather wearing something like that, even with the air conditioning blasting throughout the room. “Do you have an appointment with us today?”

Jake looks at Amy, his expression not changing whatsoever, aside from his widened eyes flickering over with urgency.
“Actually,” Amy starts, “we just flew in, as you can probably tell,” she giggles, gesturing to her clothes. She nudges Jake softly, who feigns amusement, chuckling.

“Right,” the woman eventually smiles, chuckling along. “So, no booking?”

“No, unfortunately not,” Jake takes over, “but I believe my mother called in earlier today?”

Amy looks at him awkwardly. What are you doing? He looks back knowingly.

“She’s anxious that we just get this damn cake organised already,” he smiles, and before Amy knows it, his arm is around her shoulder, squeezing her arm tight. He’s pleasantly warm, strong around her. “Told us to come by on our way back from the airport, make our choice, then it’s another thing off the list. Y’know,” he smiles sheepishly, “before I have to head out to Tokyo again tomorrow.

“Right,” Amy plays along, trying to ignore the fact that she’s now his fiancé. “So, if we could be as quick as possible?”

“Certainly,” the assistant smiles calmly, despite quite clearly having no clue what’s going on, Amy thinks. Kudos to her skills as a sales assistant. “If you’ll allow me a moment or two, I’ll find you a consultant. Please take a seat,” she says, gesturing to the nearest chaise, before scurrying off into the back of the store.

“This is insane,” Amy whispers as soon as they’ve sat down.

“You don’t need to whisper, Amy, it’s just us here,” Jake grins. “This is awesome, I feel super fancy. Wait,” he sits up, “what if the cake is all gross and rich-people-y?”

“I think, given the lying, that’s a consequence we may have to accept,” she says, struggling to keep the amusement out of her voice. “Oh, look someone’s coming,” she sits herself up.

A short, slim woman in a tight mauve dress saunters over, indifferent to the towering black heels propping her up, which actually turn Amy’s stomach a little when she thinks about wearing them for a whole shift. Before this woman sits down, Amy is already mildly intimidated by her.

“Hi, I’m Lili,” she smiles, “I’ll be your consultant today.” She sits herself down opposite them. “Might I ask your names, and when the big date is?”

Amy panics for a moment, that they’re being interrogated because she knows they’re lying, but then three smartly-dressed waiters emerge from the same doors she did only seconds ago and present several small platters, each with tiny, perhaps even tapas-sized pieces of cake dotted sequentially over their surfaces.

“I’m Amy, this is Jake, and it’s Christmas Eve,” Amy responds sweetly, surprised at her ability to improvise so calmly when inside, her head is panicked, working like a computer to give her every possible outcome.

“Oh, that’s gorgeous,” Lili replies, pressing a perfectly manicured hand to her heart. “A Christmas wedding, how precious.”

“Exactly how she’s always dreamed it,” Jake smiles. “She’s such a hopeless romantic, dropping hints about weddings since the second I met her.”

Amy looks at him, deadpan, and his lips twitch into a smirk, threatening to break his feigned sincerity. Two can play at that game.
She slides her hand down his leg, her fingers grazing the fabric of his shorts from the centre of his thigh to his knee, which she gives a small squeeze as she smiles sweetly at him. His eyes are taken aback, but he only pulls her waist closer, smiling as though he desperately wants to say something else, briefly scrunching up his face.

“So, if you don’t mind, I’d like to just hear about you two, and your relationship, and your wedding.”

“How?” Jake says automatically, meriting a pinch in the back from Amy. Lili looks at him oddly.

“Well, as part of our company’s guarantee to deliver something personal, we like to get an idea of what you’re like as people, then look at your favourite tastes, which we combine into an individualised, unique product.”

“Of course,” Amy takes over, ignoring the fact that her heart is going at a million miles an hour. “So, us.”

And all for some cake.

“Well, our families have been in business together for a long time,” Jake says easily, “Good friends, too.”

“Every Thanksgiving, every Christmas, a dinner together,” Amy says, hoping she sounds half as nostalgic as she’s trying to sound.

“I see,” Lili says, looking up from a small notepad she appears to have produced, “and will that be part of your occasion? Seeing as it’s a Christmas wedding,” she explains.

“Yes,” Amy says, too quickly, grateful for being given something to work from. “Yes, at Jake’s family’s lodge in Alaska. In the snow.”

“Very small event, only our nearest and dearest.”

“We had to fight my mother on that one,” Amy giggles hysterically, “she wanted every ambassador, every senator, every contact she has at this thing.”

“For a while there was even talk of Lady Gaga,” Jake says, amusement creeping into his voice, and with her foot, Amy presses, hard, on his toes.

“It all sounds wonderful, incredibly romantic,” Lili says, shutting her notebook. “Now I just want to talk about you two, get an idea for what kind of imagery we want to achieve with your cake, what kind of tastes we want to incorporate.”

*Whatever happened to plain chocolate cake?* Amy thinks, but overwhelmingly, her attention turns to Jake, into whom she is still quite comfortably nestled, in public no less.

“Let’s start at the beginning. When did you become more than just family friends?”

For the first time, both of them go silent, and, in unison, look at each other, unsure of how to answer. Amy opens her mouth to talk, and Jake seems to wash over with relief.

“We played together all the time as little kids, y’know, he was my *first* major crush,” she smiles, to which Lili smiles warmly. “And, uh, we started dating when we were fifteen.”

“Fifteen, wow. How old are the two of you now?”
“I’m twenty, he’s twenty-one.”

“Okay, quite a youthful event, then, I suppose. The wedding, I mean.”

“Um, yes, I think,” Amy responds, looking over urgently at Jake.

“Yes,” he manages, his voice thick.

“What are you both like?” Lili asks, met again with silence. “I’m sorry, that wasn’t very clear. I meant to each other- Amy, what’s Jake like as a partner?”

“As a partner?” She squeaks. “Well, he’s very romantic, and kind, and sweet-”

“Sorry, I don’t mean to interrupt,” Lili starts, “I meant the real nitty gritty. Go as personal as you can. It’s just between us and the cake.” She winks, and Amy just knows Jake is trying not to laugh next to her.

“Right,” Amy agrees, desperately hoping her stomach won’t grumble at the sight of all the cake sat in front of her. “Babe?” she looks at Jake.

“Oh, me? Okay,” he says, unable to keep the cluelessness out of his voice. “Well, she’s just so… uh, fierce.”

“Fierce?” Amy and Lili ask at the same time.

“Well, she’s a lot of things… but she’s fiercely intelligent, fiercely funny, y’know?” He says, very much in thought, and for a moment, Amy thinks he might not be kidding. “Every part of her personality is so, um,” he stammers, avoiding her glance, looking straight at Lili, “it’s so alive and so amazing that you just want to be part of it.”

Amy’s heart is beating so fast she briefly worries of a heart attack, hammering on the inside of her chest, and yet, somehow, her entire body is swooning. Nobody, even those who love her the most, has ever spoken about her like that. Ever.

She takes the hand clasped around her waist, weaving her fingers into his, surprised again by the warmth of his skin and smiling quickly at him when she feels him stiffen, so he relaxes into her touch.

“What about Jake?” Lili asks quietly.

“He’s, uh,” Amy starts, unsure of how to follow what he’s said about her. “He’s funnier than I think I’d ever let him know,” she smiles, evoking a gentle chuckle from Lili, “and he’s very open, and receptive, y’know?”

“Explain that for me.”

“Okay. Um. He fits the mould he’s been given, this cool, funny guy,” she explains slowly, “but he’s the most kind-natured, open-minded man I know. He’s loyal, and gentle, and childlike, but he’s the most caring person I’ve ever met.”

Her toes curl in her shoes as she says it, aware of the implications of admitting this out loud, whether he thinks it’s real or not. What’s got her anxious, excited, thrill rushing under and over her skin, is that she knows every single word was true, and if Jake’s reaction was anything to go by, there’s a chance his words were, too.
“That’s just wonderful,” Lili says softly, after a pause, watching the two of them admiringly. “What I’m going to do now is give you some options, and I want you to taste them and talk to each other about each choice, until we come to an agreement. Please take as much time as you want.” She goes to take two small plates from next to her. “I genuinely think you two are the sweetest couple we’ve had in here in a long while,” she says quietly, sincerely.

“Thank you,” Jake responds, his voice heavy.
“I like this,” Amy comments, looking round the bar in which they’re currently sat, neon signs decorating the wall and casting bright colours around the room. “It’s busier than I thought it’d be.”

“I know, right? Thank you,” Jake smiles as the bartender brings over their second round of drinks—two beers and two shots.

“Hey, I never agreed to the shots!”

“Rule number one of the bender,” Jake grins, “embrace adventure.”

“There’s embracing adventure and then there’s drinking,” she pauses, taking one of the shots and observing the bright red liquid it contains, “whatever the hell this is.”

“Something fruity, I’m guessing.”

“Oh, lord.”

“Okay! I say we stop with all this friendly chatter and get on it,” he proposes, sitting up. “We’re playing the Name Game.”

“Oh, god. Okay.”

“We’re clear on the rules?”

“Yes.”

“Famous names, but each one starts with the last letter of the name before it—”

“-Yes, Jake, I know-”

“-With a five second hesitation limit,” he explains nevertheless, to which Amy nods vigorously. “Okay. Scarlett Johansson.”
“Uh, um,” she thinks, cursing how much harder this is on the spot, “Natalie Portman.”

“Naomi Watts,” he says, without hesitation, which is when she realises he’s had practice.

“Selma Blair.”

“Rihanna.”

“Ariana Grande.”

“Eva Mendes.”

“Um… Oh,” she smiles devilishly, “Selena Gomez.”

“Oh, for the love of…” Jake stops, thinking for a moment, evoking a giggle from Amy.

“Three, two-”

“No!”

“-One! Drink!” She laughs, her competitive spirit satisfyingly fuelled. “Ha! Gotcha.”

“Another round,” he says, eyes narrowed in a grimace from the shot. “That was gross.”

“Aw, Jake,” she smiles, laughing a little, giving his shoulder a squeeze, as if she’s about to comfort him. “Rule number one of the bender,” she says with a shrug, trying not to laugh at the withering look she receives from him.

“You’re going down,” he replies, waving to a bartender for more shots. “Salma Hayek.”

This game continues for a good fifteen minutes, and becomes fairly heated, the bartender, a lanky, bearded man, even watching for a couple of minutes, a slight concern washing over his face at the volumes they reach as the game keeps going. Amy loses once, much to her dismay, but it’s nothing against the five or six times Jake loses, eventually having to drink his beer instead of shots in an effort to reduce his chances of, as he puts it, “being found dead in the Chicago River.”

Amy’s thankful for the distraction. Since that cake shop, her mind has been going at a thousand miles an hour, ticking over every word Jake offered and the ones she gave back, totally aware of how much more alert they’ve become towards each other since they left- not to mention how little they’ve actually spoken about it, aside from their favourite flavours (hers, Amaretto-soaked fruitcake, his, chocolate mint fudge) and what exactly they’re going to do when their phones ring in a few weeks’ time asking for billing information.

They’d giggled and chattered and felt a little sick, full of sugar, before retreating to the hotel and getting ready. It’s been a blur, an excited, youthful blur, as if she’s been drunk this whole time, though she’s only just started drinking.

She’s on fire, and she never wants to be put out.

Nothing has ever felt more present in her life, more alive and more exciting and more her. What it is, exactly, she’s not sure, but she knows- whether she likes it or not- a large part of it is him. Maybe all of it.

The recurring thing, whirring around confusedly, eagerly in her head, is the fact that nobody, nobody, has spoken about her like that before. She’s been hailed as intelligent, perhaps witty, by those who know her, but never as exciting, and alive, and intriguing. That’s not to say nobody’s
thought it, not necessarily, she considers, but she didn’t realise until now that she’s never thought it.

And now, she can feeling her confidence animated. She’s thriving, chatting and laughing and teasing with him, utterly naturally, relaxed and entirely at ease. What makes it so easy, though, is the knowledge, or perhaps the awareness, rather, that he’s in the same position, ten times more engaged and happy and friendly than she ever could have imagined him to be in the first couple of days they spent together.

“Amy! You’ve got a little-” Jake raises his voice over the noise of the crowd. “Your hand.”

“Huh?” Amy lifts up her wrist, where a small splodge of red lipstick has inexplicably printed itself over her skin. “This is why I never wear this stuff,” she laughs, rolling her eyes. “I need to pee anyway, I’ll fix it while I’m there.”

She grabs her beer and worms through groups of people as she heads for the bathroom, already mildly tipsy from a couple of drinks, despite the stomach full of cake.

After what may very well be the most satisfying pee of her life, she walks through the dimly lit bathroom to the mirrors, washing her hands, observing herself in the mirror. She takes a piece of tissue and tries to blot her lipstick.

In black shorts and a crimson bardot top, fluted sleeves floating around her forearms, she keeps doing a double take at the amount of her skin on show. It’s Kylie’s top, a little baggier around the top than she’d like thanks to Kylie’s more sizeable bust, yet still clinging gently around her shoulders, shaping her just the way she wants it to- not too much, just enough, the soft curves of her body visible under the fabric. Her hair is loose, surprisingly warm against her bare shoulders, perhaps because she hardly ever lets it down.

She feels more on show than she’s ever felt before, though she’s worn much less flattering clothing around other people. Perhaps it’s because of Jake.

No, she thinks, fiddling nervously with a tissue around her lips, not that, not right now. She’s here to have a good night, not go into an in-depth analysis on her potential feelings for a boy with whom she’s spent approximately seven days.

In an effort to distract herself, she observes her appearance, paying attention to parts of herself she hasn’t ever really cared about.

The thing is, she thinks, observing herself in the bathroom mirror, warming as she sees herself, she looks _good_. It would be useless- and untrue- to say she’s never paid attention to her appearance, but she’s managed to draw a good line tonight, manoeuvre the makeup on her face into something that looks like _her_, subtle, warm brown eyeshadow and her long eyelashes coated in black. And she’s proud, because she feels genuinely confident, excited, more certain of herself than she was mere days, weeks ago. She’s felt like this once or twice before, that she can think of: being told by her principal that she’d be her high school’s valedictorian, dizzyingly dancing with her father at Julian’s wedding aged sixteen in a swirling violet bridesmaid dress, opening her NYU acceptance letter.

What she’d been particularly proud of, until now, was the lipstick- it matches her shirt, a deep, dark red thinly coating her lips. Undoubtedly, it makes her look grown up, a good few years older, but it’s also a royal pain her ass, somehow managing to smear over everything she even looks at.

She gives up trying to blot the lipstick and rubs at her lips until there’s only soft residue, her lips stained a gentle red.
With a final glance over herself, she leaves the bathroom, and wriggles back through the bar to find Jake, who’s chatting to a young couple- or so Amy assumes, as they stand in front of Jake, a tall boy stood close to a small woman, who hovers next to his arm.

“Hi, I’m back,” she says as casually as she can, hoping for an explanation as to why these people are here.

The man has the appearance of one who could easily be in his thirties, or turn out to be nineteen, ruggedly handsome and youthful, clean, dark stubble accentuating his perfectly carved jawline. The girl stood next to him can’t be taller than 5’3, even in her heels, wild blonde curls escaping her head in a beautiful mane of hair. Her big blue, almost bug-like eyes are covered in glitter, shimmering, iridescent under the warm light. Clearly, they’re pre-gaming to go somewhere else; she’s donned a skimpy, strappy sequinned dress, hanging loosely over her body. It’s pretty, Amy thinks, but she couldn’t bring herself to wear anything close to it in a thousand years.

“Ames!” Jake cheer as he sees her, “this is Steph, and, and, and, guess what her friend’s name is,” he beams toothily, giddily pointing at the tall, handsome man stood next to him.

“Uh,” Amy smiles confusedly-,

“Jake! His name is Jake!”

“Nice to meet you,” smiles the other Jake, Taller Jake, Amy decides to name him, offering Amy his hand.

“Hi, Jake, Steph, I’m Amy,” she shakes his hand firmly, struggling to keep the amusement out of her voice at the grin remaining on Jake’s face as he looks at Taller Jake.

“These two were just telling me about this dance place a couple blocks away that only plays super cheesy music,” Jake laughs.

“It’s awesome, you guys should definitely come!” Steph smiles sweetly. Her heavy eye makeup does a poor job of concealing her adorable babyface, Amy thinks, the kind of face that makes you warm just from a glance. “We were with a group of friends, but they’ve all already left.”

“They said they’d buy a round if we brought people with us, though,” Taller Jake offers.

Amy looks at Jake, biting her lip to keep down her grin. He does nothing to hide his grin, waggling his eyebrows at her.

“What do you think?” She smiles.

“Rule number one of the bender,” he says, shrugging, as if to suggest they have no choice.

“Have you guys got a phone?” Amy asks, smiling cheekily.

Taller Jake and Steph momentarily glance at each other confusedly, before Steph gives Amy a nod.

“Text your friends and tell them to order me a vodka and lemonade.”
“Oh baby when you talk like that, you make a woman go mad!” everyone in the room yells in unison.

Jake, Taller Jake, Steph, Amy, and several new friends, the names of whom Amy is not entirely certain, are in the centre of the dancefloor, only a few of them still clutching onto their drinks, the rest having ditched their glasses for sake of dancing.

Taller Jake takes Amy’s hand, twirling her round under his arm. They giggle, gyrating and mimicking each other’s movements, cheered on by their friends.

The only way in which Amy could even possibly describe this place is: Jake. This is precisely what Jake would create, were he tasked with building a club. She’s pretty tipsy, but she knows three things, for certain, about this place:

- Everything is so colourful that anyone sober would have a migraine within two seconds of stepping into the building.
- Occasionally, one of the following things is released from the ceiling: balloons, glitter, or confetti.

Huh. What was the third one?

“Oh have you all finished your drinks?!” Steph yells over the music, receiving a round of cheers in response. “Okay! C’mon! Let’s go to the ball pit!”

Oh, right-

3) There’s a ball pit.

Amy beams over at Jake, who seems equally disbelieving of this place as her. They follow the group, tagging onto the back of the group as they weave through the crowd towards- presumably- the ball pit.

“Bender!!” Jake yells as soon as they come together again.

“This place is insane,” Amy laughs. “And aren’t Steph and Jake so nice?!”

“Ha, I knew it,” he laughs, jeering at her. “You’re gonna lose the bet.”

“What?”

“Taller Jake!”

“What about him?” Amy asks, unable to totally follow this conversation.
“He hasn’t stopped looking at you since we left the bar,” Jake says, as if it’s the most evident thing in the world.

Amy laughs, giggling from the pit of her stomach.

“Why… how did you…” She starts, as questions she wants to ask him begin to bubble over the surface. He seems to get it, nevertheless, smiling sheepishly, cheekily.

“It’s obvious,” he says defensively.

“Well, he’s nice, but I won’t be kissing him any time soon, if nothing else because I’d need a step ladder,” she laughs. Out of the corner of her eye, she sees Jake about to reply, smiling to himself, but as soon as she regains focus, she realises where they are, thousands of coloured balls just in front of them. “Oh my god.”

She kicks off her sneakers, leaving them in a small pile next to the little plastic steps leading up into the ball pit, just like one made for kids, but full size- netting around the side, brightly coloured padded sides on each wall. A burly bouncer stands next to the entrance, ensuring that everyone entering is only in their socks, offering small disposable pairs to girls taking off their heels to bare feet.

The group tumbles into the dimly lit ball pit, separating quickly as they each clamber for space. Lights flash in and out through the netting, pinks and purples and reds and oranges darting enthusiastically over the people laughing and playing on the inside.

Amy pushes through the balls, unable to stop her giggling. That is, right up until one hits her head. She spins around, trying to see who it was. Nobody seems obvious- she dismisses it as a mistake.

Then another one hits her, in the shoulder this time, and she knows it’s Jake.

“Hey! Where are you, jackass?!?” She yells, wading through the balls, up to her hips, as she tries to find him. As if on cue, another ball hits her in the back. With a pivot, she turns to where it came from, catching a familiar head of hair diving back under the balls. “Marco!”

“Polo,” his voice comes, muffled.

She follows his voice, moving as quickly as she can.

A firm grasp on her shoulder, just as she’s about to find Jake, stops her in her tracks. By her side is Taller Jake, smiling down at her.

“You okay?”

She nods, then brings a finger to her lips, shushing him, nodding to where Jake is (badly) hidden under the balls. Taller Jake laughs gently.

“Having a good night?” He gives her arm a squeeze, smiling warmly at her. “You look really good.”

For a moment, Amy does a double take- was Jake right? But Taller Jake’s focus wavers, eyes elsewhere.

She follows his gaze, and finds, laughing sweetly at the entrance of the ball pit, but constantly checking back in their direction- Steph.

“Oh,” Amy exclaims, smiling warmly up at Taller Jake.
“No, no,” he responds, as soon as he realises she’s noticed. “That’s not-”

“It’s okay,” Amy reassures him, “just don’t do the making-her-jealous thing. Go get her, now.”

“Really?”

“I’m serious, do it before it’s too late.”

He pats her arm briskly, then starts wading back through the ball pit. Amy watches him in silence, allowing the colourful chaos of the room around her to fill her ears.

Eventually, he reaches Steph, who doesn’t actually seem to manage a sentence before he’s kissing her, using her position on the steps to his advantage and pulling her close by the waist. Immediately, her tiny arms are wrapped around his neck, tightly holding onto him. After a moment, their friends realise, and descend into whoops and cheers. Amy has a feeling that Jake and Steph have been in the works for a while.

“What, do you want me to drown down here?”

Amy turns round to see Jake standing behind her, having given up on hiding.

“You can’t drown, Jake, they’re plastic balls.”

“We were playing Marco Polo. You killed Marco.”

“I killed Marco?” She laughs. “He was asking for it!”

“How dare you!” He begins to move away.

“Nope, not without revenge,” she giggles, picking up several balls from her side and throwing them with as much force as she can at him, with surprisingly good aim for a 5’6, non-athletic girl who’s had four beers, two vodka-lemonades, and two shots.

“Ow! Ow! I surrender, I surrender,” he whinges, eventually succumbing in the corner of the pit.

“Hey,” he says as they settle against the wall, neck-deep in plastic balls, “any luck with Mr six-foot-five over there?”

“Actually,” Amy says, nodding over at where Taller Jake and Steph are still embracing each other, laughing, kissing. “He was flirting with me to make her jealous. Thank God.”

“Thank God?”

“I don’t know, even back at the bar I picked up on something, y’know…” she tries, aware- and totally uncaring- of the fact that she’s not making so much sense.

“You,” he laughs, looking at her tipsily, those dark eyes the only thing focused about him, “you picked up on something?”

“Yeah,” she says cheerfully, smiling over at him, a little out of breath.

Their eyes linger.

Neither of them move, the only change in each other’s faces the colours that swirl over them every couple of seconds.

“I’m pretty good at picking up on something, y’know, if it’s there.” She says softly.
He nods, once, before his mouth splays out into that huge, stupid grin, and Amy feels her toes curl in her socks.

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In a kaleidoscope, different shades of pink and blue swirl around, illuminating this club from the inside out, darting across Amy’s eyelids even in the moments she lets her eyes close as she sinks into the music. She’s never been a huge fan of dance music, but part of her gets it now, she thinks, following the beat as best as she can and letting herself move freely and happily, totally uncaring of what she might look like to anyone else.

Jake is nowhere to be seen.

She doesn’t know what time it is.

Or how she got here.

Wait, no- rule number one of the bender, she thinks, but that’s all she remembers right now.

“Amy! There you are,” his voice comes, sounding relieved, a little worn.

“Hi! I came up with a new dance move,” she laughs, “Hey, guy!” She prods a man next to her, who she’d previously forced into an odd routine of hip-bumping and hand-shaking. “One more time?”

“Sure,” he says nonchalantly, and with utter ease, they recreate their moves, jumping, bumping their hips, and finishing with a chest bump.

“You’ve been busy, huh?” Jake laughs.

“Yeah! What about you,” she yells, “where are the others?”

“Well, Steph and Jake have disappeared,” he speaks straight into her ear, the music far too loud for an actual conversation here on the dancefloor, “but one of the other girls suggested a food van, then there’s some other place a block away.”

“Oh,” Amy groans, “food.”

“I know,” Jake laughs, “I’m hungry too!”

“Well, let’s go,” she laughs, nudging him gently. He takes her wrist and they weave their way out of the crowd, and, eventually, out of the club, a small, familiar group of people waiting outside.

As they begin to walk, Amy feels herself sober up, just a little, her ears adjusting to the lack of pounding music and the warm, dim, still lights of the outside. She’s slow, slower than normal, and
they begin to drop behind the group.

“Y’okay?” Jake asks.

“Yeah,” she smiles, “I’m drunk, and hungry,” she half-laughs, “but I’m happy.”

“Same, and same,” he agrees, and they both giggle a little. “It’s been a good night.”

“What time is it?” She says breathily, allowing herself to cool down in the late-night air. With a sniff, she checks her palms, only traces of her perfume on her skin now.

“Uh,” he pulls his phone out of his pocket, “just gone quarter-past two.”

“Woah,” she laughs.

“Yeah, we’ve done pretty well.”

“Jake, oh my god,” she interrupts, as they turn the street. At a huge intersection, they’re completely surrounded by buildings, glistening with lights against the night sky. In front of them, the Trump tower, exactly as she saw it on her phone, which means-

“The monument!”

“Huh?”

“The Heald Square monument, the one I wanted to see earlier today. We missed it.”

“Is it here? We’ll go.”

“Really? I think it’s down there somewhere, do you mind? We’ll catch up-”

“Amy.” Jake stops her, smiling warmly, a little amused. “I don’t care about catching up.”

“Okay, down here,” she says, almost running along the concrete opening as she recognises it leading to the monument.

Eventually, it’s there, in front of them, lights glimmering in the reflection of the marble base, and Amy knows he must be unexcited by it, here in the dark, but she’s too pleased to be here- she takes a picture, quickly, and sends it to her mom.

“It’s almost half-two in the morning,” Jake laughs.

“So she can wake up to it,” Amy shrugs stubbornly, “one more.”

She lifts her phone in front of her so that his face is in the bottom-left corner, taking up a good half of the picture. He screws up his face, crossing his eyes goofily in front of the camera.

“That one goes to Kylie.”

“Oh, god, the impression that girl must have of me,” Jake laughs, swaying slightly into her shoulder.

“Trust me,” Amy responds, “her impression of you is just fine.”

She feels him about to respond, but she’s admiring the view, looking up- in the corner of her eye she sees him do the same, taking in the thousands of warm lights, each an office, a home, a different story.
“Chicago was not a bad idea,” she says quietly. “Not bad at all.”

“Not bad?” Jake chuckles, “It was epic.”

“It was okay, adequate, I think,” she teases, restraining her giggle and not looking at him, able to picture the way his face scrunches up and a dimple forms in his cheek as he laughs, that rich, wholesome laugh of somebody truly, childishly tickled- somebody a little drunk.

When her eyes finally go back to him, his sniggers are dying down. He looks back at her, his smile not fading. Lips parted, eyes fixated and dark, she can’t read his expression, something hungry and isolated about the way he watches her.

It’s not as though there’s much distance to move, perhaps only centimetres between them, but as their faces edge closer, Amy could swear- if the racing heart and pounding excitement within her is anything to go by- it’s hours, whole days, until she can feel his breath on her lips. There’s barely any gap to close.

And then, as naturally as every laugh, every sentence she’s uttered to him, every stop for gas, every moment spent looking at each other a little too long, over the last week, it does.

Gently, their lips touch, only grazing against each other cautiously for a microsecond, at most.

In an instant, they sink into each other.

It’s a gentle kiss, careful, slow, as if weighted with a promise.

_We’ve got all the time in the world._
_We’ve got all the time in the world._
_We’ve got all the time in the world._

The faint taste of whatever strawberry-flavoured shot he made her take earlier, sweet, warm, remains on his lips. That’s the first thing she realises as she comes back into focus, having lost herself in the first, fleeting seconds of his lips against hers.

Instinctively, Amy’s hands go to his waist, then travelling up his shirt and pulling at the fabric gently as he kisses her, her fingertips etch a confession over his chest, granting him permission, asking him for more.

As her fingers curl over his firm chest, his hands find her waist, warm, supportive, one drifting to the middle of her shoulder blades, so he’s cradling her, his arm wrapped around her so he’s holding her as close as he possibly can. Immediately, intuitively, she follows, her hands going to his jaw, feeling every millimetre of skin, the ever-so-slight stubble from where he’s shaved his sideburns- the sort she knows you can’t see, only feel, if you’re close enough- under the skin of her fingers.

Part of her wonders, intermittently, if, with their chests pressed this closely together, he can feel how hard her heart is beating.

Part of her begs that he does.

She lets her fingers slip into his hair, and as his tongue glides over her lower lip, her fingers tighten impulsively, gently tugging at a tuft of his thick, messy hair. A soft groan escapes him at this- it’s a sound she will never forget.
Her thumb traces the corner of his lips when, for a moment, they break apart. Every part of her works to remember this, memorising his supple lips, his flickering eyelashes against hers, his comforting scent enveloping her.

He intoxicates her, filling her up from her lips, until she’s drunk on him, so full and so certain of him that she starts to forget everything else.

This incredible moment, certainly the most romantic one of her entire life so far, is the last one she will remember in its entirety when she wakes up tomorrow morning.

Chapter End Notes

hehehehe HELLO

was that okay? we all good? do we need a moment to recover? I know I do. *fans self aggressively*

have you ever been on a night out as weird/eventful as this? because I've had a very similar night and parts of it felt stupidly unrealistic, writing it down, but I was determined to stick to what I felt would be happening w/ these two (rule number one, embrace the bender, right?)

I'm not kidding when I say I have been neglecting literally all of my responsibilities to get this chapter finished. I've been too excited to get it written! I'm not even 100% sure it's edited properly even now but it's here, I'm putting it up, it's happening! Sigh. Look how far we've come since chapter 1 <3

side note: how the HELL are we seven parts in? only three to go :( 

what next? I hear you ask (it's myself, I'm excitedly asking myself what's next even though I know): there is plenty more to come, so stay tuned

see you next time my sweets <3
Chapter Summary

!!! it's about to get fluffy as fuck up in here

Chapter Notes

chapter 8 playlist:
https://open.spotify.com/user/hotelsweet/playlist/4MoHfC6XeGFiSnWxMPqhZT

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

***

Miles to NYC: 789
CARD PAYMENT RECEIPT
GREASY GUS / FOOD ON THE MOVE
03:12 08/25

CARD PAYMENT XXXXXXXXXXXX7386

CHEESE FRIES X4 $10
CHEESE BURGER X2 $6

TOTAL $16

***

Up – Fly High

Entry Receipt

Please keep your receipt in case of potential loss or damage to your stamp.

Entry x2 total $25

Payment type: Cash

***

thank you for visiting our stall at Falcon Body Paint!
please follow our links below and find us at an event near you!

facebook: falcon body paint
snapchat: falconart
The first time Amy Santiago wakes up on the 26th of August goes a little something like this.

Piercing through her skull, achingly throbbing in her temples, thrashing sharply against her brain, she is harshly awoken by a ringing telephone.

The sound is tortuous, ear-splitting, so intense she could cry. As she opens her eyes, she comes close to doing just that— the bright daylight that fills the room is invasive on her eyes, sending a pounding ache into her head almost as soon as she is exposed to it.

“Mrs Carlisle, as requested, this is your wake-up call. Good morning from everyone here at the Four Seasons.” a cool, saccharine female voice comes once the ringing finally stops, making Amy jump out of her skin, pushing herself up on her elbows. It’s coming from the phone next to her bed, she realises, a little more at ease, before sinking, with a groan, back into her sheets.

Just as her throbbing brain begins to rest, she pauses.

Mrs Carlisle?

The Four Seasons?

She sits bolt upright, and immediately regrets it, mainly due to the dizzying nausea that appears to accompany any kind of movement.

“Oh, god,” she manages, her voice a pathetic croak, barely escaping her throat.

As slowly as she can, she examines her surroundings.

Perhaps it’s the hangover. But with a mere glimpse, Amy finds herself completely speechless.

Marble floors. Pristine cream walls. Art deco pieces so fancy that— Amy thinks— selling off just one or two would pay off her tuition. So much space that this room is basically an apartment, a large archway revealing a small living area. Her body feels punily small, perched on the edge of a super-king-sized bed, with huge, fluffy sheets puffed up around her.
It’s at this point her eyes find her own body. The same clothes from last night, she realises. One shoe on, one shoe off, her stripy trainer sock sticking out like a sore thumb.

Carefully, she pushes herself off the bed, feeling the cold marble through the sock on her oddly dressed foot as she stands up. Her stomach lurches with dizziness once more, and she almost sits herself down again, but a nervous mixture of emotion is brewing within her; a hazy, tired uncertainty of her location, fear of getting into trouble, sheer confusion, and just a tiny part of curiosity.

In a tiptoe she walks across the room, passing through the archway opposite the bed, which, she realises now, is ornately decorated, carved into intricate patterns. As soon as she has stepped into the living area, she stops, totally taken aback by the view she faces; the morning Chicago skyline, beams of orange and yellow sunrise bouncing off the glass of buildings around and below her.

In a violent twist, her stomach recognises just how far up she is, as she walks closer to the window. She must be on the top floor, or at least close to it.

As if it wasn’t obvious before, it comes crashing down on her, the beauty of this place shattering in her head- she’s not in the right place. She’s not Mrs Carlisle, and she most certainly didn’t check into the Four Seasons when she and Jake arrived in Chicago yesterday afternoon-

“Oh my god.”

Jake.

“Oh my god,” she finds herself repeating, over and over, in an alarmingly sobering moment.

He kissed her.

He kissed me. Her hands find her face, clapping over a cheek in denial as she remembers it; her fingers in his hair, him holding her against him so firmly she could feel his heart in his chest, the sweetness of his lips and the paused moments for soft smiles and murmurs meant just for her.

Well, she reconsiders, allowing a grin to creep over her face as she stands alone in this suite, I kissed him too.

But where then? She has no idea how long they were there, holding each other, trying each other in the city’s early hours. In her memory, it spans hours, days, weeks, the minutiae flashing through her brain in snippets, fond memories of the soft moans she found herself teasing out of him, her confidence upped by her alcohol intake as the kiss evolved from gentle and soft into something more heated, something she can’t quite describe. Despite being entirely alone, she finds herself blushing, sensing her cheeks redden.

Her hands pat around her pockets for her phone, but it’s nowhere to be found.

“Shit,” she mutters, double-checking her pockets, and then her bra, before she resorts to searching the room, hastily checking under pillows, her eyes scanning every centimetre of the floor. “Shit, shit, shit,” panic creeps into her voice, her search becoming more frantic, more desperate by the second.

In the back of her mind, she tries to piece together what happened after she and Jake kissed, but it’s blank, comprised only of second-long snippets of faces, shapes, lights, a jumbled, fuzzy blur with no beginning and no end. Guilt courses through her- she’s never been so drunk that she’s not remembered parts of her night the next day. At least her first time experiencing it happened outside of college, she thinks.

All at once, her stomach tightens, a totally certain indication that she’s about to throw up, and she has
to stop in her tracks, stood, shoeless, phoneless, in the middle of what she’d bet is one of the most expensive rooms in a five-star hotel in Chicago.

She brings her fingers to her face, trying to slow the dizzying, and lifts her chin, trying to ground herself, feel a little more stable.

In the corner of a tall lampshade sitting directly across from her sits her phone, poking out of the side awkwardly.

“Seriously?” She mutters, climbing awkwardly onto the side of a white armchair to retrieve it.

The instant her eyes meet her phone screen, her stomach drops.

\[
\text{Jake – 03:14}
\]

\[
\text{The apace I found has Ches fries. !}
\]

\[
\text{Jake – 04:29}
\]

\[
\text{Where. Are you}
\]

\[
\text{Jake – 04:36}
\]

\[
\text{Amy}
\]

\[
\text{Kylie – 05:23}
\]

\[
\text{Woah. Just woke up for work to see all of these messages}
\]

\[
\text{Kylie – 05:23}
\]

\[
\text{Text me in the morning u minx}
\]

Her eyes dart to her battery, and she breathes a sigh of relief- by some miracle, she has 22% left. Inwardly, she says a prayer that Jake has his phone with him. Her fingers feel around her phone case, where, sure enough, her bank card sits, the only item other than her phone she took out with her last night.

\[
\text{Hey, she types, opening his messages, where are you?}
\]

She sends it quickly, anxious as soon as there isn’t an immediate response, placing her phone down on the bed. Her other shoe is strewn across the room. Hurriedly, she fetches it, pulling it over her foot.

The message won’t send, a frustrating little red exclamation mark appearing next to it- irritatedly Amy presses it again, and again, and again, until it’s made clear that Jake’s phone is either dead or lost.

Sickness grips her body again as that panic creeps up on her once more- she ties her shoe as quickly as she can and jumps up, grabbing her phone and heading straight for the door.
In the hallway, there don’t seem to be any more rooms, only rich, red carpet and wide, floor-to-ceiling windows taking up the vast majority of space in front of her. At the end, the elevator, for which she now finds herself jogging, pressing the button eagerly as soon as she reaches its entrance.

As she waits, she pulls out her phone, hastily opening her calls, pressing Kylie’s name and holding her phone to her ear.

This is, perhaps, the first time in her whole life, Amy thinks, where she’s not known what she’s doing.

The phone only rings a few times before Kylie picks up.

“Spill.”

“Kylie, oh my god,” Amy gasps.

“Jesus, you sound ill. Do a lot of singing last night?”

“Kyles-”

“-obviously I’m teasing, since I’ve seen the videos-”

“The videos?” Amy asks meekly.

“You haven’t even read through our texts yet, have you?”

“No, I haven’t had time,” she responds, stepping into the elevator before the doors have even fully opened- “Kylie, I don’t know where I am.” She finds herself saying this in a hushed voice, despite the fact that there is absolutely nobody else around her. A swelling in her throat forces her to swallow thickly when her eyes meet the her current floor number- forty-six.

“What?” Kylie only laughs in response, which stirs irritation within Amy. “What do you mean?”

“I’ve woken up in a hotel I didn’t check into,” Amy confesses, cursing how rough her voice sounds, and almost laughs herself when Kylie gasps on the other end, giggling whole-heartedly. “I was in the penthouse suite and got a wake-up call under the name Mrs Carlisle.”

“Oh my,” Kylie manages through laughter. “I don’t know whether I’m proud or horrified. Where’s Jake?”

“I have no idea, but Kyles-”

“Hey, that reminds me, how much money did you make me last night?”

“Huh? Kylie, I don’t know, I’m-”

“Well, you’re definitely too hungover to drive, so I win on that one.”

“Kylie!” Amy almost shouts, the sudden raise in volume in her voice exposing a harsh, tired croak in the back of her throat.

“What?”

“We kissed.”

“What?!”
“I know,” Amy manages, before Kylie descends into passionate chatter, so loud she has to hold the phone away from her ear for a moment.

The elevator stops, and as the doors slide open and a young couple steps in, one young man giving Amy a particularly odd look. Amy can only smile apologetically, holding her phone a few centimetres from her still-throbbing temple. Kylie’s excited voice hums delightedly through her phone’s speaker.

Eventually, they come to the ground floor, and Amy steps out into the lobby, a cool, beautifully marbled and designed room stretching for what feels like miles in her hungover mind, thinking about how far she’ll have to move. The room is decked out in extravagant furniture, armchairs and long coffee tables and large chandeliers hanging from the ceiling.

“Okay, that’s it, time’s up,” Amy says, cutting Kylie’s babble off. “More freaking out later. Right now, I need your help.” Her head darts frantically from point to point in the room, desperately searching out Jake’s face.

“Oh my god, I still can’t believe it, I mean I can, obviously, because it’s been obvious since last week-”

“Kylie.”

“Okay, okay, I’m sorry- you remember nothing after that? Did he text you at all last night?”

“We got cheese fries… I think we went to another bar… and yes, he did-”

“Does he have location switched on for his messages?”

“Already checked.”

“Of course you have,” Kylie laughs warmly, “wait, where are you now?”

“The lobby,” Amy says quietly, suddenly aware of how huge and echoing this place is, the clacks of a businesswoman’s heels clearly audible despite coming from the other side of the hall.

“Where are you going?”

“I don’t know! I was going to try and get back to the truck, hope he’d come back.”

“Good plan. Ames, it’s okay, stay on the phone to me, he’s around somewhere.”

“I know, I know, I’m just panicking. What am I supposed to say to him?” She finds herself whispering now, practically hissing down the phone.

“How about ‘where the hell have you been?’”

“That was going to be my opener.”

“Great minds think alike. Do you like him?”

“Yes,” Amy stops for a moment. “Oh god, I do.” She smiles to herself as she picks up her pace again, coming down a set of steps into the main entrance of the building.
“Then it’ll be simple enough. You’re a good natural improviser when it matters.”

“Oh my god,” Amy murmurs.

“What? Amy?” Kylie’s voice comes inquisitively, gentle, but Amy can hardly focus, what with the image that she’s walked towards. “Ames, are you okay?”

Sprawled out over a couch next to the reception desk, Jake is fast asleep, dozing away peacefully. From behind the front counter a young woman looks on, concerned, rolling her eyes when she sees Amy, beginning to approach her as soon as she realises she knows Jake.

He’s wearing a white tank top and a pair of basketball shorts that are at least three sizes too big for him, any traces of his clothes from the night before totally missing. Most notable, though, is the black harness strapped around his legs and arms, clipped together firmly in metal clasps around his waist and over his stomach. Neon body paint forms- now slightly cracked from wear- flowers over his arms, dotted messily over his clothes.

Her whole body melts into something absolutely indescribable when she see, on the underside of his jaw, in a colour distinctly tied to the beginning of her evening, the trace of her lipstick, in a kiss mark over his skin.

“Found him.”

***

“Okay, this is us,” Jake says quietly, sliding a newly-acquired room key into the door of the room in which they were supposed to sleep last night. His hand pauses over the handle. Amy feels his glance burn into her shoulder. “Y’okay?”

She daren’t look at him, nerves rushing through her like she’s a little kid, her whole body fluttering excitedly just by his standing there. Cursing herself inwardly, she nods hastily, aware of how sickeningly pale she must look right now.

As the door clicks open she leaves no room for hesitation before she rushes into the room and scoops up her bag, left neatly on the bed after she’d gotten ready to go out last night. Keeping her eyes off Jake she ducks into the bathroom, breathing deeply as she closes the door behind her, finally concealed from the rest of the world.

Perhaps it’s the adrenaline of being around him, after last night- but the nauseating dizziness saves itself for any breath, any microsecond she’s not looking at him, as if some Santiago-like reflex within her knows she has to keep a clear head when she speaks to him.

Stretching her arm into the shower, she turns on the water, grateful for the noise the water creates.
Groggily, she surveys herself in the wide bathroom mirror.

To say that she’s a mess would be an understatement.

Her hair is wild, from dancing and collapsing into Mrs Carlisle’s bed and being tugged at by Jake’s fingertips.

Every touch seems to mimic him; her clothes feel too tight, this stupid shirt clinging to her waist exactly where his hands had been, sliding over her back.

She wriggles out of her shorts. Her whole body pauses when she feels something slightly crusty on the back of her leg.

Standing up, she spins around and raises herself onto her toes, trying to get a view of the back of her legs.

In neon pink body paint, along the back of her right thigh, reads A + J.

Simple as that, she thinks, chewing on her lip nervously as she realises she’s been walking around with it visible to anyone and everyone all morning. Internally, she reminds herself to punish Jake for not telling her.

She watches it for a moment, her eyes focused on the now-crumbling fuchsia lettering on her skin, before she finds herself hurriedly undressing and stepping into the shower, desperate to wash off what remains of the night, feel a little more like herself, speak to Jake like normal.

Once she’s washed up, standing in front of the mirror in her designated outfit for the day- denim shorts and her father’s Blondie shirt- she towel-dries her hair carefully, letting it hang loosely around her face, and brushes her teeth as quickly as she can. Part of her itches to put on a little bit of makeup, try and make her hair look a little nicer, but she resists- she’s too tired, and it’s him.

“I’m all done,” she says quietly as she leaves the bathroom, to find Jake looking over his phone, plugged into the wall by the bed on which he’s sitting.

“Cool, thanks,” he smiles over at her, “Hey, I’m sorry I missed that text earlier. You must have been freaking out.”

“It’s no big deal,” she laughs awkwardly, brushing it off.

Their eyes lock, a million things waiting still waiting to be said.

“You should, uh-” she murmurs, tilting her head to the bathroom. “I’ll go get us breakfast and meet you in the truck?”

“Right, yes, noice, smort,” he agrees hastily, grabbing his things and hurrying past her into the bathroom.

The familiar cool metal of the truck’s keys slips between her fingers as she takes them from the counter by the door, slinging her back over her arm and getting out of the room as quickly as humanly possible.

Last night is lingering, aching, pulsating beneath the surface of each conversation they’ve had since she found him in the lobby- and it’s killing her.

They’d discussed that harness, first, giggling and laughing like they weren’t both majorly hungover
and a little confused- not to mention standing in the middle of a five-star hotel dressed like they
should be in a club- and then the first moment had come. A lingering. Should we?

So, being Amy Santiago, she’d proposed a set of criteria to fulfil, before that conversation could take
place.

“Criteria?” He’d laughed tiredly, smirking teasingly, and she’d had to fight the temptation to kiss that
stupid grin off his face straight away. Or hit him. Y’know, one of the two.

“Before we talk about it,” she’d explained.

“Go on.”

“First, we get cleaned up. Second, we figure out where we actually went. Third, we get a huge,
super greasy breakfast.”

“Works for me,” he’d nodded, evidently amused by her listing these off on her fingers as he waited
for a replacement hotel room key.

Now, they’re about halfway there, she thinks, stepping out of their hotel and into the street. A small
shot of pain darts through her head in response to the bright outdoor light against her exhausted eyes,
which are desperately searching for a Starbucks, or a café, or just somewhere, her mind begs, with
something greasy she can buy them for breakfast.

They’ve spoken briefly about their night, largely about the fact that they’d somehow successfully
managed to find- and enter- Up, and Jake had most certainly drunkenly used the zipline. In Amy’s
pocket, a receipt from a food truck, where they’d somehow managed to spend ten dollars on cheese
fries alone. In Jake’s pocket, a business card for whatever slightly-tacky artists left them covered in
neon body paint. So far, that’s all, no clear timeline in Amy’s head; only blurred, foreign memories.

Now, though, Amy thinks, they need to talk.

They’ve known each other, properly, as adults, for a week. Amy was quite happily embracing him
as a friend, a close friend, and this has the potential to complicate it beyond belief. It would be a
dreadful idea to let a drunken kiss ruin their friendship.

That is, she thinks, provided that it was just a drunken kiss.

Her tummy sinks a little. It didn’t feel like that, a stubborn part of her mutters inwardly. It was more.

It resides in her head in technicolour; in amongst a youthful haze of an evening, memories thin and
uncertain, she is absolutely sure of every detail of him, the way his skin felt under hers, the warmth
of him, the tiny freckles and dark eyelashes and slight turning up of his lips into a small smile
noticeable only in the few seconds she allowed herself to pull away from him, resting her forehead
against his.

“So what now, doofus?” A mutter under her breath to herself escapes her as she pushes open the
door to a small café, breathing deeply as the air-conditioning washes over her in a sweet breeze.

Be his girlfriend? Keep being his friend? Accept that sometimes she might kiss him out of nowhere?

Without thinking, Amy snatches a discarded- presumably lost- pair of sunglasses abandoned on a
two-seater table next to her, ignoring the odd look from the woman in front of her in the queue. She
slides the sunglasses on, almost groaning at how much it relieves her eyes, which are aggravated by
the bright overhead lights.
Kissing a new boy, stealing things in public, looking like a total moron in public, she lists the last twelve hours to herself.

*God, you’re going to love college.*

Jake’s voice rings in the back of her head, and she suddenly feels that wave of nausea jump right back, prompting an acidic churn in her empty stomach.

College. This time in two days, she’ll be moving in. And all her dumb brain can think about is him.

“Ma’am?” A chipper little woman cheeps up at her from behind the counter.

Amy zones back into the real world, where she is currently stood at the front of a long queue of people, all of whom are staring her down impatiently. She must be an absolute sight for sore eyes, she thinks, with wet hair, a pale, hungover face, and dressed to the nines in ill-fitting stolen sunglasses, her dad’s T-shirt, a pair of shorts, and her converse.

“Don’t take this the wrong way,” the woman says happily, “but can I fix you up with some coffee?”

***

Jake Mix #4

Wages – Bad Sounds
Hungry Heart – Bruce Springsteen
We Built This City – Starship
Don’t Look Back In Anger – Oasis
Johnny B. Goode – Chuck Berry
Ain’t No Rest for the Wicked – Cage The Elephant
I Don’t Feel Like Dancin’ – Scissor Sisters
One Way or Another - Blondie
Wasted – Kasabian
It’s Raining Men – The Weather Girls
Sugar – Maroon 5
No Scrubs – TLC
“Oh, god, gimme,” Jake says as soon as he reaches the truck, where Amy is already tucking into her breakfast roll. “Mmmmm,” he moans after one bite.

“I know, right?” She drones in response, sinking into her seat until she’s almost lying down, her legs totally slumped over the dashboard.

“God, I’ve never seen you like this,” he remarks after a few minutes of contented eating.

“I hope you never do again,” she deadpans. “I feel disgusting.”

Music hums softly beneath them, a CD left in from yesterday afternoon, apparently.

“Hm. I believe that’s a win for me. On one of those bets.”

“Huh?”

“Me and Kylie both have money on you being so hungover that you can’t drive, remember?”

“Oh, man!” Amy scolds herself. “For the record, I really want to prove you wrong, but I care about traffic violations too much.”

“Of course you do.”

“Hey, you’re not a total winner. Don’t be so smug.”

“What do you mean?” He looks over inquisitively. “Also, since when do you have sunglasses. Are those aviators?”

“None of your business,” she dismisses him, earning a confused expression in response. “And what I mean,” she starts, sitting herself up a little. Here goes nothing. “Is that bet about neither of us getting with anybody.”

“Oh.” Jake smiles a little uncomfortably. “Right.”

“In fact, I think we owe Kylie twenty bucks each.”

“Bummer.”

Another pause, a held glance.

“What do-”

“Are we-”

“Oh,” Amy stumbles, laughing awkwardly as they talk over each other, “you go first.”

“No, you, go on,” he seems to have frozen, confusion and discomfort washed over his face.

“So…” She starts, unsure of where to take this conversation. “We made out.”

“We did.”
“Thoughts?” She squeaks, and immediately regrets it, wincing a little.

“…thoughts?” His eyes narrow, but Amy swears she sees a flash of amusement cross over his lips.

“Yes?”

“Well. It was… uh, very enjoyable,” he offers, as if he’s an old woman discussing a nice café or a walk round a park. He looks ahead, as if he’s figuring out what to say in front of himself before he turns to her and offers it up.

“Agreed,” Amy jumps in, as if to reassure him that he’s saying the right thing. “Very enjoyable. Some of your best work.”

“Thank you, vice versa,” he chuckles softly. “What?” He asks, catching her cringe a little.

“Nothing, it’s kind of weird hearing you tell me… I’m good at kissing?” She laughs half-heartedly.

“Oh, you are,” he beams, deliberately provoking her laugh- “No, I’m serious! That thing you did? With my hair? And your thumb-”

“Yes, yes, I’m aware,” she laughs, a little embarrassed, leaning sideways into her seat exasperatedly.

“Ten out of ten,” he says confidently, still smiling over at her, clearly enjoying her reaction.

“Perfect score,” she mutters proudly, smiling to herself.

“Did you just compare my rating to a test?”

“Maybe.”

“I can’t believe I’m attracted to you.”

“Ditto, Sir breakfast-burger.”

“Listen, Amy…” he straightens himself up a little. “I don’t want to mess this, us, up, because of something I did- we did, when we were drunk.”

“Oh,” she hears herself say, unable to stop the disappointment that, unnervingly, floods her body.

“Me too.”

Lie.

“Right, I’m glad you feel the same,” he says, somehow sounding even less certain of himself than her, slightly discomfited. “This trip has been amazing, and I don’t want it to be awkward or messy because we…”

“…boinked?” She finishes the sentence for him, absolving him of the responsibility to carry this sentence any further. He laughs relievedly.

“Absolutely, that was exactly the word I was looking for.”

“I thought so.” She smiles weakly. “If you don’t want to complicate things, I totally get that. We’re old friends, and we’ve spent, what, a week together? We’d have no idea what we’re getting ourselves into.”

“Right…” He watches her expression carefully. “Do… uh, do you want to complicate things?”
“No, obviously not,” she says indignantly, “I like where we are right now, and I’ve only just
discovered the capacity to tolerate you for more than a couple hours at a time. Dating you would be a
suicide mission.”

Jake laughs, somewhat undercutting the withering feeling within her.

“Well, ditto.”

“So that’s that,” she says simply.

“Yes,” he agrees.

“So.”

“So,” she echoes.

“I guess I’m driving.” He smiles warmly, starting the keys in the ignition. The engine hums in
response.

“Yup.”

“Music?”

“You pick something, I have a feeling I’m going to zone out.”

“Noice, noice, noice. To the music,” he quickly explains, “not the passing out.”

A little reservedly, she watches him fiddle with his CDs, picking something new, his tired eyes
ticking over each track list scrawled messily in sharpie over the front. She curses the fizzing feeling
within her as a small smile paints itself over his face- he’s found the one he wants to listen to.

As the truck pulls out of the parking lot and into Chicago’s city centre, Amy leans against her
window, observing every window, every light, every person that she can, desperately trying to
memorise it. If she has to recreate this place in her head, she wants it to be right.

Jake’s voice hums in his throat along to the music playing quietly from the stereo- and two thoughts
become prominent in her head: first, that he’s not even tried to play it louder than a volume she’ll
allow, which means he’s being careful around her. She sinks in realisation. He either pities her, or
he’s being overly cautious.

Her second thought has no conclusion. No start, and no finish. Only the clinging to the humming
from that throat, a sound that was so close to her only hours ago, a sound she was teasing from him.

Eventually, reluctantly, she relaxes, her final thoughts on the matter, for now, forming an odd blend
of the touch of his lips and a prayer that this entire, confusing feeling of discontentedness residing
uncomfortably within her will melt away.

Somewhere inside, she knows that’s a little optimistic.
“Amy. Aaaaaamy!”

“What? Huh?” She replies, as though she’s waking up, completely zoned out and confused, her mind elsewhere.

“Your phone has been buzzing for like, five years,” Jake says, as if it’s obvious.

“Oh,” she manages, exhausted. “Right.” She leans over and pulls her phone from the small tray between them.

Momentarily, she catches her reflection in her phone screen. The paleness of her face is horrifying. She’s never drinking again.

Her mom is calling, the screen darkened with the option to open the call. A sinking feeling in her gut reminds her that she hasn’t contacted her mother for a couple of days, largely assuming Julian would have filled her in.

“I’m going to have to put it on speaker, my phone has too little battery to take it off the charger.”

“Oh, sure,” he says, taking a hint and turning down the music slightly.

“Hi, Mom,” she greets loudly.

“So, how is it?!?”

“How’s what?” She asks automatically, then it hits her, realisation crushing her so quickly that a wave of nausea threatens to hit her once more.
Her mom thinks she’s in New York.

“The city,” her mother replies impatiently.

Jake looks over at her concernedly. She sighs; she can’t lie to anyone even vaguely authoritative in her life—especially not her mother, and he knows it.

“Actually, Mom, I’m not there yet.” She catches herself clearing her throat, her voice still a croak after all the singing along to music last night.

There’s a pause on the other end, and Amy’s stomach twists, because she can picture the exact look of confusion and suspicion that will surely be passing over her mother’s face right now.

“Where are you?”

Amy looks at Jake urgently.

“How many times have we played the new state song?” He teases. Amy slaps his shoulder.

“Not the time,” she hisses, “tell me!”

“Indiana,” he says quietly.

“Indiana,” she echoes, louder. “Almost Ohio, though, I think.”

“Ohio?! Amy, what happened?”

“Did Julian not talk to you?” Amy asks in a small voice, even though she knows the answer.

“No, he didn’t, what’s going on?!” Her mother’s voice becomes louder, worry seeping in.

“Well, Jake and I decided to stop in Chicago yesterday, have a day out. And a night out. Which,” she continues quietly, “ended up with a small morning out, too.”

“So, you went out partying.”

“Uh, yes.”

“Julian knows?”

“Yes,” Amy says cautiously, trying to tread lightly, uncertain of where her mother’s mood is taking her— if she’s feeling chipper, this shouldn’t be an issue. If she’s not, Amy wouldn’t be surprised to find her waiting in NYC just to scold her.

It’s rare, if ever, that Amy gets into trouble, particularly with her own parents. Perhaps that’s what makes it so scary, she thinks, waiting anxiously for her mother’s response.

“Amy, let me tell you a story.”

“Okay…”

“In 2005, we came to Portland for almost a month in the summer, while our roof was fixed. Do you remember?”

“Yes,” Amy replies, ignoring a nodding Jake out of the corner of her eye, who appears to remember it, too.
“Well, one night, you and Jacob had one of your sleepovers,” she explains, and Jake lights up next to her, realising this might be about him, smiling expectantly over at Amy. “We sent you next door that afternoon, and heard nothing all night. We never did, you were always so happy to go over—”

“- Yeah, I remember, Mom,” Amy hurries her along, partially but largely due to the smirk that’s growing on Jake’s stupid mouth. The stupid mouth she hasn’t stopped thinking about all afternoon.

“Anyway, at about midnight, maybe later, your father and I heard giggling. The loudest, most infectious giggles I’ve ever heard, Amy, honestly. Right outside our bedroom window. So,” she explains, “I got up, looked out of the window, and who do I see, but my little Amy, in her pyjamas, running round Karen Peralta’s garden, arms full of nothing other than a huge pile of water balloons.”

Amy can’t help it, she giggles instinctively, hardly able to believe it. She doesn’t remember this at all. Next to her, Jake beams wide, laughing quietly.

“I didn’t know what to do! You’d never misbehaved, not a day in your life, and there you were, in your penguin pyjamas, barefoot, your hair all down your arms, too long- we hadn’t had it cut in months. I marched out into the garden to find you, in my robe, and I told you off, told you to go back inside, but do you know what you did?”

“No,” Amy croaks.

“You stood there, totally resilient, and you said, but Mama, I’m having fun.”

A whole-hearted laugh frees itself from Amy’s chest, and, to her surprise, she finds herself emotional. She can’t picture herself like that, but it’s almost comforting, knowing that part of her has always existed.

“I knew it wasn’t your idea, it couldn’t have been, running around in the dark throwing water balloons at each other. And so I kept telling you to go and find Jacob, take him inside, go to sleep. But you were totally swept away, Mija, hyper on candy and having so much fun, and I couldn’t stop you if I tried.”

“Right,” Amy responds lowly.

“My point is, I had nothing to warn you against, then, because you were just being a child, following your little curly-haired friend round his garden. Now it’s different.”

Amy sighs. Another lecture? She’d come too close to this with Julian the other day.

“How, Mom?”

“I’m not telling you how to live, my love. Party all you want, heaven knows it runs in the family. But I want you to know, especially going into college, that you need to stay aware, even if you do get swept away, playing with water balloons or taking a detour into Chicago,” she chuckles, her voice warmer, “because if you come too far off-track, like you might with someone like Jacob, you’ll be left unsure. And if there’s one thing us Santiago women do not do, it’s doubt ourselves.”

Defiance riles itself up in the pit of Amy’s stomach.

“Mom, I wanted to go to Chicago. I promise I haven’t doubted myself for a second. And I don’t… doubt myself, not when I’m with Jake,” she goes on, noticing guiltily how he’s deflated slightly after her mother’s comment, “he’s not the sort of person who leads you off-track.”

“He drove you to Vegas on the second night you spent together, Amy. You can see where I’m
coming from. I love him dearly, but he’s always been curious, very daring.”

“I spend my whole life playing it safe, Mom. I’m lucky to have a friend who’s half as curious or daring, or as kind,” she adds, looking over at Jake softly, “as him.”

“As long as you’re certain, Mija, as long as you’re happy. I’m just weary, after everything that’s happened to you two over the last week.”

“I know, Mom,” she says quietly, though a part of her says me too.

“Promise you’ll call me when you arrive.”

“I will. I love you,” Amy replies gently.

“I love you too. Say hello to Jacob from me, tell him thank you, you two have taken care of each other well this week.”

“I will. I’ll see you later, Mom.”

She hangs up, and sighs into her seat, closing her eyes, desperately trying to ignore Jake’s gaze, feeling him consistently turn to look at her while he drives.

Clenching her lids closed, she prays for sleep, prays for anything that will remove the image of a young Jake bringing out her confidence as a child, unable to ignore the similarities with the Jake who’s brought out her confidence, her defiance, her laughter, you name it, just this week.

Eventually, thanks to her hangover, no doubt, it comes, washing over her and grasping at her in her sleep, occasional rushes of nerves, or longing, or confusion, shooting through her.

Never quite asleep, she’s aware of the bumps in the road, the end of each CD as it comes to pass, the uncharacteristic stillness of the boy next to her.

***

TARGET
EXPECT MORE. PAY LESS:

3100 W 117th St, Cleveland, OH 44111, USA

08/26/16  8:11PM

SMARTFOOD POPCORN SALT  X2   $6
PLANTERS PEANUT 16OZ               $3.62
LAYS LG 2PC                                 $4
The second time Amy wakes up on the 26th of August is especially pleasant, in comparison to the dizzying, confusing arousal she experienced this morning. Her eyes aren’t shocked by bright light, greeted instead by a warm, summery evening haze, and the spots of surrounding lamplights.

A languid, sleepy breath welcomes the scent of Jake into her nose. She straightens herself up in her seat and looks over to his seat- he’s gone. They’re parked outside some superstore off a highway, as far as she can tell, squinting across the parking lot.

As she sits up, a layer of fabric, her blanket, falls from her, and her chest swells the second she realises why she could smell him.

Jake’s hoodie remains draped over her, rolled over where it’s fallen from her shoulders as she’s sat up.

Gently, she pulls it back up, just enough so that its warmth shelters her again, his scent all over her.

There’s something mildly peaceful, yet mildly panicking, not knowing how long she’s been asleep, or where she is- but all she knows is that she feels a thousand times better, the sleep and the huge breakfast the perfect antidote to her hangover.

Tacked to the dashboard, directly in the middle, is a post-it note, scrawled over in practically illegible handwriting. Unmistakably, this handwriting belongs to Jake.

She pulls it off and reads it carefully.

*Was gonna stop 4 dinner but u’ve been passed out 4 seven hrs so I’m buying us food in here*

*Woulda texted you but your phone’s dead and our car charger broke so I’m getting another one*

*Stay safe don’t let any weirdos in the truck! Unless they offer a free, working charger*
Part of her, even if only for a moment, panics about the thought of being left alone, sleeping, in a moving truck- but their surroundings are relatively quiet, only a few cars spattered around the parking lot. The smell of the pen is still fresh on the note, burning strong in her nostrils. He’s not been gone long.

Her fingers curl into the fabric of his hoodie, and, her mind drifting, she can’t help but wonder, picturing him draping it over her in her sleep, tucking it in carefully behind her shoulders where it was lodged before she sat up.

For all his teasing, for all his immaturity, she knows she meant what she’d said yesterday in Chicago. He is caring, genuinely so, and incredibly loyal. It’s almost disconcerting, knowing these things to be true, not only from their friendship and the time they’ve spent together over the last week or so, but from the way he kissed, held, touched her. Even if he was drunk, she thinks weakly, he was him, open, generous, and strong. For her.

Discomfort swirls within her, a pang to her chest.

It feels wrong, doesn’t sit right, that he’s all of these things, and yet from what he’d said earlier, she can only come to assume that he regrets it. Or he’s scared, doesn’t think it’s worth it, doesn’t think she’s worth it, she realises, her chest dipping a little bit further. What it is, she’s not sure- dating, talking, hell, even just making out once in a while.

Does it matter?

Before she knows what she’s doing, she’s abandoning the truck, the familiar clunk of the less-than-structurally-sound door opening slamming behind her as she jumps out, pacing her way towards the store. She’ll find him, speak to him, then something else, she supposes; were this a list, her third point would be a question mark.

Walking as quickly as she can, she realises she’s still clutching his hoodie in her fist. She doesn’t care, not at all, her pace quickening, her feet hitting the ground hard, almost breaking out into a jog as she approaches the store.

Hastily, she turns a large corner, bringing her to the entrance, three glass-panelled sliding doors.

Out of nowhere, a neat blow to her shoulder almost knocks her over, causing her to stumble, dropping to her knee.

“Oh my gosh, I’m sorry,” she mutters quickly, eager to get past whoever she’s just hit.

“Amy?”

She looks up to see Jake standing over her, holding three wide plastic bags, full to the brim with… well, she’s not sure. Her gaze settles on him, and all at once, the night before comes flooding back to her, a wave of intoxication prompted by the sight of him; those dark eyes, confused, parted lips, and tousled, boyishly thick hair.

“I was going to come and find you,” she says faintly, standing back up. He’s looking straight at her, his eyes conflicted. Everything she’d wanted to say to him has flown out of her head at lightspeed.

“What did you get?” She manages eventually, her voice defying the pause fallen between them.

“Well, actually…” He smiles knowingly to himself, settling a couple of bags on the ground. He seems caught out, she thinks, like he was hoping to wait. “I don’t even know if you’ll want half this
“stuff.” He seems almost amused by himself, tired.

“Is it… for me?” She can’t help the confusion in her tone.

“If I’m being honest, I just realised, about earlier…” he drops to one of the bags, rifling through it at her feet, before standing back up again. In his hand is a huge book. “I wasn’t being honest with you. I mean, I don’t think I knew I wasn’t being honest, but, still…”

“What?” Her voice comes, genuinely inquisitive.

“About… complicating things. Getting taken off-track,” he laughs a little, referencing her phone call with her mother.

“I…” Amy doesn’t know how to respond.

“I know this is going to sound blunt, and maybe even confusing, but I really, really like you.” His eyes narrow a little, as if he’s trying to figure out whether that sentence worked or not. “Not just as… a family friend, not just as a college friend…”

He trails off, watching her expression, which she can only assume is of total amazement, confusion, if the incessant racing of her heartbeat in her chest is anything to go by.

“Anyway,” he clears his throat, when she doesn’t reply, “When I was driving, earlier, you passed out pretty quickly, after your mom called. And you were there, asleep, but it wasn’t just my friend, or someone I know…”

She watches him as he trails off, looking for the right words.

“It was this girl, this really pretty girl,” he chuckles, and they both cringe for a moment, laughing, wincing at each other a little. “And I just felt weird, y’know? I’d sold this big Jake idea of going into the city and getting hammered and doing all this crazy crap, and I then I kissed you, and we both woke up in the wrong place, tired and ill and late to get on the road. Again. Then I’m telling you I don’t want to risk our friendship when it’s my fault that we even ended up in that situation in the first place. Which is a lie.”

Speechless, she watches him, wide-eyed and utterly lost for the right words, aside from the next two as they fall out of her mouth—

“What’s that?”

She gestures to the book he’s holding in his hands.

He laughs, turning it over and handing it to her.

“This is going to sound so dumb,” he mutters to himself, a smile spread across his face as he chuckles to himself. “It’s a peace offering. Y’know, for making out with you, confusing you, leaving you alone in a Target parking lot…” He smirks.

She takes it, and can’t help the wide smile she feels splaying out over her face when she recognises it, a low giggle escaping her. It’s a road atlas, exactly the sort she’d have forced him to buy a week ago, the second he told her he didn’t bring a map.

He laughs with her, softly, pleased with her reaction.

“Truce?” His voice comes eventually.
“Do you know why I didn’t make you get one of these?”

“Uh…”

“Because I trusted you. We’d been together less than an hour and I knew I was safe with you.”

He watches her carefully.

“Last night was one of the best nights I’ve had in a long time.” He smiles.

“Me too.”

Amy looks up at him, smiling warmly at her, seemingly relaxed by her reaction to all of this, and can’t help but beam back, and it’s cheesy, she knows it, but she’s utterly aware that this is the most romantic moment of her life so far, and she doesn’t care, she doesn’t care, she thinks, dropping the road atlas and his hoodie at her side.

She wastes no time, her hands sharing responsibility- one takes his lower waist, another his cheek, and then her lips are on his again, at last, gratitude and excitement and joy overflooding her system. He doesn’t move, for a moment, but then she feels him lean into her, deepening the kiss, smiling against her lips. Everything unsaid, every oddly stunted part of communication is resolved, conveyed quite clearly through each modicum of physical contact.

It’s been less than a day, but kissing him again feels like an oasis, as though she’s been in need of it ever since she left it behind. He fills her from the inside out, tightly pulling her close, breathing her in.

Me too, I like you too, I like you too, her mind aches to whisper, but she’d rather do anything than break away from him, instead allowing these thought to motivate each touch.

His hands move to her waist, fingertips grazing up her side, encouraging a tide of shivers over her skin as her shirt briefly lifts from her skin, the warm evening breeze fleetingly kissing her skin. She can’t help a small laugh, in the back of her throat, utterly joyous and blissful and uncaring of anything except Jake, and the way he feels, heated against her torso and teasingly soft over the small of her back and blissfully slow against her lips.

It’s sweetness, and warmth, and light, and she never wants to let go.

Eventually, they begin to break apart, a mutual awareness of their surroundings beginning to lure its head, perhaps. Jake holds her close as they rest against each other, dotting a few final slow pecks on the centre of her lips as they slow themselves, before they finally pull apart. A minute or so passes like this, as if to seal the experience, close off this kiss, give it the closure last night’s didn’t have.

“I do still have a couple of questions,” she murmurs quietly, eventually.

“Oh, go ahead.”

“Well, I don’t actually know where we are,” she laughs, evoking a chuckle from him in response, “and you still haven’t told me what’s in those bags.”

“We’re in Ohio,” he explains simply, “and the bags are kind of the second part of my peace offering.”

“You don’t need to give me a peace offering, tonto,” she mutters, laughing to herself, “I wanted to go to Chicago just as much as you. I wanted to get as drunk as I did.” Her fingers graze his. “I had a
really, really good night.”

“Good,” he smiles.

“So, the bags?”

“Well, y’know when you were talking the other day about your sleepovers with Kylie? Every other weekend, right?”

“Sure,” she responds slowly, secretly swooning at his remembering this tiny detail of conversation, certain that it was part of a much larger story.

“Well I figured, since we had a kind of Jake-centred night yesterday, we could have an Amy night tonight.”

“An Amy night?” She asks, unable to wipe the grin off her face, fighting every bone in her body not to jump him here and now.

“Snacks, movies, at least the stuff I know you like,” he explains as she starts to go through the bags. Fargo, No Country For Old Men, and Die Hard, obviously, she thinks, chuckling a little.

“They’re all cop movies,” she realises out loud, putting them back into the bag and picking it up.

“Sure, so we can study for our future jobs as brooding, super smart detectives.”

“Apart from this one,” she smiles, holding up a copy of The Holiday, Cameron Diaz and Kate Winslet smiling happily on the front.

“Oh, that one’s for me,” he says flippantly, and she can’t help but laugh.

“This is… uh,” she clears her throat, finding it swelling at her understanding that nobody has done anything like this for her, not ever- “this is all perfect. Thank you.”

Perhaps she does it just because she’s allowed, just for fun, just because, but she finds herself leaning up slightly, pressing a kiss against the corner of his mouth.

And she knows it’s because she’s young, and she knows she feels like every PDA-heavy couple she’s ever secretly hated, but she can’t get enough of him, giggling at the joy on his face that perfectly matches hers, soon finding herself pressed up against him once more, woozy with the blossoming he produces within her.

***
The third time Amy wakes up on the 26th of August, she is comfortably entangled in the body of Jacob Peralta.

Come to think of it, she realises, stirring softly in the dim light falling over the room, it’s probably the 27th of August, now.

Excitement rushes around her- technically, she starts college tomorrow.

Blissfully, she relaxes into his warm chest.

Today, specifically this evening, has been the most wonderful thing she’s known in a long time.

They’d watched Die Hard and Fargo, before Amy had figured out he’d wanted so badly to watch The Holiday. She swore she’d never tell anyone about his obsession, watching him smile, satisfied, when Kate Winslet excitedly ran through Cameron Diaz’s huge house.

He’d caught her watching. They’d spoken about their day. She’d thanked him. He’d kissed her, and she’d finally felt what it’s like to be part of a kiss initiated by Jacob Peralta; being drawn in by the waist, cradled carefully, handled as sweetly and as delicately as precious goods.

Heat grew between them, hungry, feverous, and within minutes the entire movie-night premise was out of the window, both entirely focused on each other.

What strikes her about this boy, for someone so obviously comfortable with himself and confident, is that he seems thoughtful with her, only going as far as she’ll let him. She’d turned over, climbed- slightly awkwardly, due to an incredibly springy mattress- onto his lap, swinging her leg over his side, pushing him just that little bit further.

From there, she’s not sure where, exactly, the time went. Hours went by, just breathing each other in, constantly experimenting, changing pressure. She’s certain that an entire five minutes went by of mere teasing, pulling away at the last second, never closing the gap between them, heat amalgamating within her lower belly until it hit a dull ache, desperate to be satisfied, as Jake kissed over her neck, sourcing a sweet spot behind her ear she didn’t know she had.

Somehow, almost by a miracle, it died down to sleepiness, likely a combination of full stomachs- from snacks, pizza, and the pride of winning movie trivia five times in a row, in her case- and the irritatingly repetitive background music of the DVD’s home screen.

They’d relaxed, talking about college, and New York, and bars and museums and dorms and professors and, for a brief twenty minutes, several who-would-win-in-a-fight scenarios.

Sleep must have taken them at some point, Amy thinks, sleepily drawing small circles over the small patch of Jake’s skin revealed where his shirt has ridden up around his waist. In his sleep, he mumbles, a small sound of content, and hoists her closer by her waist, planting an exhausted kiss in her hair.

When she presses herself closer to him and returns the favour, experiencing the warmth of his jaw under her lips and the tightening of his arms around her, it’s difficult not to feel like the luckiest person in the world.
WHEW.

OKAY.

this chapter was EXTRAORDINARILY LONG lmao help I really need to learn to cut myself off

aaaaaanyhoozle I'm so in love w these two and cannot ACTUALLY believe how far in we are now. 80% done. AGH.

the response to the last chapter made my whole life (I guess unsurprisingly so, given the end). you GUYS. the comments had me grinning and laughing and just losing my shit altogether basically lol I LOVE you guys so much thank you thank you thank you for keeping me going and keeping me motivated during the actual hell hole that is my life at present

anyway it's worth noting that I'm about to head into the final stretch of exams (literally like a week and a half to go now) so I'm most likely going to be dead & gone for a couple of weeks (I'm SORRY) but I'm just so glad to be able to get this part out because I wasn't sure I'd be able to get it right before I had to buckle down and cut myself off the internet but HERE WE ARE KIDS

I hope u all enjoyed,, see u soon for a fresh slice of chapter 9? x

<3

UPDATE: a few people have asked for my tumblr over the last few days, I was under a different url but as of today I am OFFICIALLY hotelsweet.tumblr.com !!! A new era

I genuinely never spoke about anything I wrote anywhere, ever- and you guys, this INCREDIBLE fandom, has made me feel like I can. thank you. see u on tumblr my buds x
part 9

Chapter Summary

the last stretch!

Chapter Notes

chapter 9 playlist:
https://open.spotify.com/user/hotelsweet/playlist/29uN8gsI1rQvwLk8G6eOz4

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

***

Miles to NYC: 462
There is, perhaps, no greater contrast, no crueller difference, than between the opening and closing seconds of the twenty-four hours before Amy Santiago moves into her dorm at New York University.

It begins sweet, fizzing, a glowing, youthful moment she’ll never forget.

It does not end this way.

Warm tickling against her bare shoulder rouses her into a giggle, and just like that, he’s got her laughing before she’s even entirely awake. Softly so, but enough that her now-well-rested body sings with joy, as warm as the sunlight streaming into their motel room.

Eventually she pries her eyes open, rubbing them gently, and sees him, is allowed to know him, in all his incredible, sleepy glory; messy dark hair and tired eyes lean over her, a creased green shirt skirting broad shoulders not far below. He’s pressing lazy kisses into her shoulder, slowly, his eyes still closed- doing his absolute best while managing to do very little, she realises fondly.

“Morning.” His voice is muffled in the middle of a kiss, low, a slight croak- still husky from sleep.

“Hi,” Amy manages, actively fighting off every impassioned urge in her body telling her to abandon all tact and climb on top of him. “What time is it?” She asks quietly, lowering her hand to where he’s holding her by her torso, skimming her fingertips over his forearm.

“Like, nine, ten?”

“Crap,” Amy props herself up a little on her elbows, what’s left of the blanket falling from her, a loose strappy top and checked set of pyjama shorts now harshly exposed to the sunlight warming her side of the bed. “We need to get moving.”

“Woah, woah.” He interrupts her as she begins to get up, his hold securing over her waist. “We don’t need to go right now.”

“We have another eight hours on the road.” She moves away slightly, but he’s got her, and he knows it, she thinks, hyperaware of the smile creeping onto her face.

“C’mooommm, five more minutes,” he persists, giving her a real pull this time, and she’s dragged back into bed, landing softly on her back next to him. He slings an arm around her waist, simultaneously
dragging the blanket over her with his fingers. “Mm, see? Warm. Good,” he murmurs, his voice reverberating against the side of her neck, just below where she can feel the ridge of his nose.

“You’re so warm,” she finds herself murmuring as the heat of his body from under the blanket radiates over to her, turning her head to him. He presses himself up so his face is slightly above hers, wearing a proud smile.

“Warmth and sleeping are my main talents,” he explains quietly, tilting his head sincerely as he says it, as though he’s being serious- Amy can’t help but chuckle softly as she watches him. “Fun fact,” he says, relaxing into this position, smiling down at her, “I’m so good at sleeping that I can do it with my eyes closed.”

“Shut… up,” she responds in a whisper, but she can barely get through the second word before she’s laughing at his stupid joke, beaming ear to ear, looking up at him where he’s relaxed, his face just above hers. His eyes stay focused on her as she laughs, initially, before she lets out a small snort and in response he starts laughing too, their gentle giggles combining into an intimate wall of sound, meant solely for the two of them.

Eventually the laughter slips away, becoming, if possible, even softer, until Amy finds herself just looking at him, quietly.

“Good morning,” she replies, finally, delicately, still fixated on him, unable to wipe the smile off her face.

Intent, fixated, but retaining an innocent glow of playfulness, his gaze doesn’t shift from her, holding eye contact. This close, she could take him in forever, new flecks of copper visible in the dark chocolate of those kind eyes. The only visible movement on his face is the ghost of a smile, fleetingly tugging at the corner of his lips, as if he’s about to break out into a grin, but decides against it.

Instead, he moves. They both do, at once, Amy pushing herself up on her arms to come closer to him. Her lips meet his all over again, indifferent to anything she knows she’d normally worry about right now; bed hair, morning breath, the way her shorts have ridden up her legs just a little- you name it, it doesn’t matter. She’s awake and she wants him as much as she has every time he’s kissed her, as much as, as a child, she’d know she wanted her friend the second her family’s car pulled into her grandmother’s drive.

It’s a summery, sunny morning outside, but his warmth remains comforting, rather than stifling- the millimetres of his skin that catch against hers are soft, pleasantly flushed, and she thanks every star in the sky she didn’t get out of bed.

The kiss is unhurried, lazy, but easily as deliberate and attentive as any other kiss they’ve shared over the last couple of days. Whether he’s tired, or just holding back, she’s not sure, but she’s certain of herself when her fingers curl into the material just under the neckline of his shirt and pull him closer. His hand, still resting over her stomach, secures itself around her waist, his thumb grazing languidly back and forth, rhythmic waves over the side of her waist. The sensation, first thing in the morning, comes close to a tickle, shooting electricity over her skin and drawing a soft groan from her throat. Against her lips, she feels a smile tighten his mouth, that competitiveness seeping through once more, smug at the noises he’s eliciting from her.

This is perhaps the only thing she finds even mildly confusing about Jake, she thinks briefly- when he touches her, when he kisses her, he’s so careful, edging further bit by bit, never without her permission, and yet he manages to maintain that confidence, that self-assurance, playfully resolute in his intention to evoke a response from her.
Two can play.

She draws back, parting her lips slightly so he’s made to deepen the kiss, before, as swiftly and as teasingly as she may, she darts her tongue over his lower lip, an invitation. He follows suit, moving now so he’s positioned a little more elegantly above her, the warmth of his torso burning from above her. As he presses more firmly against her, taking a moment of control, she lets her hand slide from his waist over his back, trying desperately to restrain herself from gripping against his firm shoulder blades when, gently, he bites her lower lip.

They find a rhythm in each other, learning how they move together, the only gap occasionally created by one of them pulling away slightly, forcing the tension to linger, before coming back in for more.

He’s in his element, she thinks, almost amused- but certainly not surprised- at the amount of confidence with which he now moves. Her chest bubbles with sweetness and she can’t help but laugh quietly when he begins to kiss down her neck, soft curls of hair tickling her cheek as he tastes the underside of her jaw. It’s not amusement, not by any means- perhaps just giddiness, happiness, disbelief at the way she’s waking up. Thankfully, he doesn’t seem to mind the chuckle that escapes her, instead taking it as encouragement, the corners of his mouth smiling against her skin as he kisses her.

Intuitively, she finds herself biting her lip, mindful of how flushed she’s becoming, conscious not to make any noises she might regret. His hand runs up and down her waist, slowly, and, carefully, eventually, she feels his fingers curl around the front of the strap of her shirt, pulling lightly at the fabric- the back of his fingers graze the top of her breast and her breath hitches sharply. Her hand finds the crown of his head and she allows her fingers to respond for her, pulling gently at his hair.

“God, your fingers are freezing,” he murmurs softly, chuckling, and that’s it- with the sound of his laugh that close, that intimate, her attempts to subdue the twisting heat pooling within her are out of the window.

In one movement, praying it doesn’t backfire and make her look like she’s making some odd move trying to escape, she hooks her leg around his waist and pushes him over so she’s on top of him, her legs on either side of his hips. Automatically, he moves up slightly so he’s against the wall, so she’s comfortably on his lap. Gliding her hands over his chest, she lets herself take control. Gently, she uses her index finger, slightly crooked, to lift his chin.

When she’s greeted with his expression, she can’t tell if he’s astonished, excited, turned on, or a slick, blurred mix of the three. Her heart races but she focuses, grateful for that ability of hers to work well under pressure, kissing him with as much heat as she can muster, hands going for his jaw, for his hair, all over again.

Taking advantage of their position, his hands are on her waist, slipping under what little material covers her. Her whole body thrums in agreement, wishing she could get closer, as if that’s even possible. Becoming used to each other’s movements, it becomes rhythmic, the touching, the shifting, the kissing, and Amy’s not sure how long they’ve been like this, but her breath is beginning to thicken, becoming heavier and heavier.

That initial sweetness, the caution and care in the way they’ve kissed each other over the last couple of days, has almost completely melted away.

Very little fabric is between them right now, if any at all, Amy realises, sighing heavily as his fingers slide gently- but firmly- over and under her thighs, skirting sensitive spots that take her mind to a place she can quite safely say it does not normally visit first thing on a Saturday morning.
The boundary keeps getting pushed, bit by bit, electricity pulsing between them, hot, quickfire. Amy can feel it rushing around her, down to her toes, blood pumping round her body like she’s running a race. Delicately, her fingers seep down his chest like treacle, and soon enough she’s toying with the waistband of his sweats, testing the water. He loses focus almost immediately, his breath dropping against her mouth as she teases him, her fingers in and out of the fabric- his gaze falls to where she’s touching him, hypnotised, briefly breaking off their kiss.

He looks back up at her, but neither of them move, and despite the lascivious haze clouding her mind, Amy knows exactly why.

It’s now.

They either slow themselves, stop, or they keep going. God only knows she’ll lose what little sight of productivity she has left if she gets any closer to him, touches any more of him. Her mind plays with the thought of it, a pulse urging her on.

“Maybe…” her voice is breathy, huskier than she imagined it would be, “…we should…slow down.” She pulls away a little, even though she knows it’s obvious she would rather do anything than break this off.

“Yeah, sure,” he agrees, his voice hoarse. “Probably a good idea.”

“I mean, it’s not like… do you have any…”

“No,” he admits.

They watch each other for a moment.

“I mean, do you want to?”

“Oh my god, yes,” He replies quickly, reassuring her so fast she almost laughs, “I just… I don’t know about you, but I have a feeling if we keep this up there’s a very real chance I won’t leave this room all day.”

*Good answer,* her mind hums unconsciously.

She sits back, relaxing on his lap, her hand meeting his where he continues to rub the top of her thigh, smiling softly at his reaction.

“And then I’ll be late moving into college because I spent the whole day in bed with somebody I’ve been reacquainted with for just over a week,” she says bluntly, evoking a laugh from him, a small wave of relief breaking over her system.

“Fashionably late.”

“You wish,” she laughs, relaxing back into his lap. For a few seconds, in an exhausted stretch, she runs a hand through her hair, very awake now and very aware of the day ahead. When she stops rubbing her eye, a glimpse reveals Jake staring at her intently, his eyes narrowed a little, mouth still parted. She tilts her head a little, narrowing her eyes in questioning the look he’s giving her.

“Yeeeaahh…” he drones, “you’re gonna have to not do that.”

“What?” She laughs.

“Uh, sat on top of me, touching your hair, stretching, just, that whole thing,” he explains simply,
sitting up a little. “Not to be cheesy, but I literally can’t *not* want to make out with you when you do that.” He says it matter-of-factly; she can’t help but laugh.

“If it makes you feel any better, I’m not finding it any easier.”

“Really?”

“Mm,” she smiles.

He chuckles smugly.


She rolls her eyes, clambering off him awkwardly, leaving the warmth of him behind, and pacing across the room. Not letting him see the smirk on her face, she grabs her bag off the counter so she can use the bathroom.

“This just in, world,” he teases, “Amy Santiago thinks I look cute when I’ve just woken up.”

“Don’t flatter yourself, Peralta,” she says coolly, slinging her bag over her shoulder and heading back towards the bathroom. “You’re hardly one to talk.”

“Oh really?”

“Uh-huh. Evidence says you’re *totally* into me too,” she says, mimicking his voice.

“You’re not *that* great,” he teases, grinning widely, earning himself a blunt nudge as she moves back past the bed. She only feels herself smiling, full to the brim with the confidence he brings out in her, knowing for perhaps the first time in her life that she has him, maybe even that he’s as obsessed with her as she is with him. “What’re you smiling at?” He laughs.

“Those sweatpants aren’t nearly as thick as you think they are,” she smiles tartly, and closes the bathroom door behind her, excitement and a pinch of shock fizzing in her belly at the fact she just said *that*.

The last glimpse of his face, wearing that admiring, surprised look she’d seen him make in their first couple of days together, makes it all worth it.

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Jake Mix #8

Sunlight – The Magician ft. Years and Years
Alright – Supergrass
Crossing into Pennsylvania is bittersweet, to say the least.

Blazing heat means sunshine illuminates the North-Eastern greenery of trees and fields that seem to stretch on for miles around the freeway; occasionally, Amy catches a glimpse of yellowing leaves, even one or two dashes of red, a gentle, picturesque reminder of summer beginning its grand finale. Fall has always, without a shadow of a doubt, been her favourite season, a familiar warmth stirring within her at the sight. The start of a new school year, her birthday, warm sweaters against the fresh autumnal chill creeping into the air.

And now, she thinks, looking over at the boy sat beside her, her fall is going to be this, too, whatever it is. In an effort to alleviate the brightness of the road ahead of him, he’s wearing the sunglasses she stole yesterday morning. They’re an odd shape on his face. He doesn’t care.

Outstretched, tapping along to their new-state-song, playing softly beneath them, are his fingers. Long patches of shade caused by the shelter of the trees alongside the road stretch over them for a minute or so at the time, offering some relief from the clear sky and the blistering late-August heat it exudes, a sweet, promising coolness that only late summer can deliver.

“This feels really weird,” Amy eventually manages, five or ten minutes after the new-state-song. “This is it. The last stretch.”
“Yup,” Jake affirms cheerfully, “by tonight you’ll be a bonafide New Yorker.”

“Yeah,” she smiles, excited. She glances over at him, but he’s already catching a glimpse of her, warmed by her reaction- his smile would mirror hers exactly, were it not for that slight dash of amusement that always seems to exist under it.

“Y’ready to get super angry at tourists all the time?” He grins. She can only laugh. “Become deeply neurotic and have a lot to say about the subway?”

“Give me a couple months, and I think I can handle it,” she chuckles.

“Oh, man. You’re going to love it, Amy.”

She glances over, biting her lip to subdue those final nerves bubbling over, but as soon as she sees him smiling reassuringly at her, warmth floods her system.

“I just can’t get over how fast this last week has gone by,” she thinks out loud, watching the stretch of trees outside flurry past in whirring shades of green as nostalgia distracts her. “But also… how slow it’s been?”

“Hm. Who’d have thought,” he says casually. “Vegas, crappy motels, traffic, getting arrested-”

“We got detained, not arrested.”

“Party pooper.”

“I’m just saying, it’s been pretty wild. An epic road trip, if you ask me.”

“It has,” she grins over at him. “There’s a made-for-TV movie in amongst all of this somewhere.”

“Amy and Jake, starring in Life is a Highway,” he deepens his voice, mimicking a TV presenter’s voice.

“Gear up,” she joins in, deepening her voice.

“Going where no moving truck has gone before.”

“Keepin’ it wheel,” she says, breaking into a laugh not seconds after she finishes the sentence as Jake scrunches his face up in a grimace at the pun.

“Oh my god, awful,” he half-laughs. “If you’d have told me seven days ago that you’d be able to come up with puns worse than mine I wouldn’t have believed you.”

“Yeah, well,” Amy scoffs, “if you’d have told me seven days ago that I’d be waking up in a motel room making out with you then I probably wouldn’t believe that, either.”

“Touché.”

“Ah, to think, I left Portland with a total pain in the ass,” she smiles sweetly over the noise of objection he makes in response to this, “and I’m going to arrive in New York with…”

Stumbling, she trails off. What exactly is she arriving in New York with?

As if on cue, their lines of sight find each other. He looks a little discomfited, more than anything, she thinks- but she’s straight-up lost for words, and knows it’s evident on her face.
“It’s okay,” he says reassuringly, “we’ve not really spoken about that yet.”

“Right,” she agrees, partially relieved. “I mean, we’ve done a lot of not-talking.”

“We have,” he laughs.

“With which I have absolutely no issue, just for the record.”

“Makes two of us.”

She smiles at his brazen attitude- he’s clearly enjoying being honest about it.

“And I definitely don’t want to stop doing the… uh, not-talking, y’know, in New York.” Inwardly, she feels herself wince at her poorly-strung-together sentence.

“Right- I mean, not to be that guy, but I would really like to date you. If that works with you.”

Her eyes find his, and in doing so find that look he’s giving her, a concoction of childlike excitement, smugness, even a dash of wonder. Against the Pennsylvania forestry surrounding them, whirring past, it’s a microsecond of magic.

“I’ll check my schedule,” she smiles back light-heartedly, “see if I can fit you in.”

“Hey, I saw the colour coding just in the calendar on your phone, I’d be honoured to be part of the schedule,” he chuckles, teasing her gently- pride swells in her chest nevertheless, along with the fondness at him remembering the calendar.

“I’m glad you respect it,” she grins. “Because I’d really like to date you too,” she continues, ignoring the grin this prompts from him and the way it makes her chest soar, “and that’d mean squeezing you in between some obviously unmovable appointments.”

“You haven’t even started college yet,” he laughs, “what appointments?”

“Well, from what I’ve seen of my classes so far, I’ll be busy almost all week, with at least one study group taking up a couple hours every other day. Then I’ll have time for a few hours in the library almost every day… oh, apart from Tuesday, where almost my whole day is open-”

“I want those.”

“Huh?”

“Tuesdays. I want your Tuesdays.”

“You… want my Tuesdays?”

“Sure,” he says casually, “I’ll spend half my time annoying you anyway but every Tuesday we should try and do something, split up the week.”

“Right, okay, yes,” she agrees, feeling herself smile, “like… museums.”

“Movies.”

“Lunch.”

“Or just sitting around in bed eating shrimp.”
"What? No, you’re not eating anything in my bed messier than a handful of grapes."

"So you’re in?" He asks, beaming over at her again, seemingly unaffected by the fact that she’s just told him he’s restricted to fruit as a non-messy snack.

"Yes, I’m in. You get my Tuesdays," she replies, rolling her eyes, secretly enjoying the bubbling of excitement at this new part of her life, only hours away, with college and this boy, a boy with whom she wouldn’t pair herself in a thousand years.

"Good.” He smiles self-assuredly. “I just want you to know, while we’re talking about it…”

She looks over at him. His eyes have narrowed a little, as though he’s weighing up the best way to explain himself.

“What is it?”

“It’s just… I’m not screwing around with you. I don’t know…” he stammers, trying to find the words, “you said your last boyfriend, the library guy… he sounded like he just wanted to sleep with you, or whatever.”

“Right,” she says quietly, taken aback by his sincerity.

“I just, I’m not… I like you a lot. I’m in this for realz.”

“For realz?” Relieved, she finds herself almost laughing at this.

“With a ‘z’. That’s how you know it’s legit.” He shrugs, the flicker of a smirk on his lips.

“Well, so am I,” she says slowly, and as soon as she’s said it she knows she means it. “For realz.”

For just a moment, coinciding with the slight slowing of traffic, a few seconds are allowed of them, just smiling over at each other, and every micrometre of her lights up. It takes everything, in this moment, not to let him crash the truck and clamber over, use her lips to show him how wonderful she thinks he is and how irrevocably excited she is for whatever’s coming next.

“So, what about you?”

“What?”

“Any requests? I get your Tuesdays, so…”

“Right,” she smiles, thinking for a moment. “Well… last night was fun. We should have a movie night every couple weeks.”

“Take it in turns to pick what we’re watching.”

“Yeah,” she perks up at his encouragement. “The other provides the snacks.”

“Spending limit ten dollars. Oh,” he continues, glancing over at her thoughtfully, “and there’s a dress code.”

“The dress code being?”

“Pajama Jammy Jam-style.”

“So… pajamas.”
“Yup.” He smiles simply.

“Okay. Movie nights, and Jake gets my Tuesdays. Both going into the calendar.”

“I have to say, this is easily the most planning I’ve ever put into the beginnings of a relationship,” he grins.

“Get used to it,” she smiles proudly.

Part of her ignites with concern in response to… well, in response to how easy this all is. She’s barely been brought back together with this boy for a week, and they’re talking about a romantic relationship as if they’ve been dating for months.

“So! How’re we gonna decide who gets first pick for our movie night?”

“Hm. First person to count eight yellow cars.”

“What? That’s so random-”

“One!” He points at a yellow car on the other side of the highway.

“Oh, for the love of God. Clearly you picked this game because you saw one coming-”

“Don’t cry just because you’re not as alert as me. Up your game.”

“I’m not crying!”

“Two!”

“Oh my god-”

She stares out of her window, alert, but there don’t seem to be any more in sight, at least for now.

“Y’know, I cannot think of a single reason to buy a yellow car,” he remarks eventually.

“What about… liking the colour yellow?” She suggests sarcastically.

“I think they were all tricked by people they liked into doing it.”

“Tricked?” She giggles. “Could I convince you to get a yellow car?”

“Honestly, if you’d have told me to get a yellow car earlier this morning, during all that not-talking,” he grins over at her, and she feels herself blush- “I probably would have done it. Now, I realise that makes me sound like a douche…”

He trails off as their attention is diverted by a blunt jolting noise on the dashboard.

His phone is buzzing, repeatedly. Amy’s eyes follow his- this is perhaps the only time she’s seen him get a phone call over the last week, which makes it all the more intriguing for her.

“Who’s that?” He nods to the phone. Something changes in his voice, something she can’t quite pinpoint- a quietness, certainly, managing to totally shift the mood, something ulterior rearing its head. He’s trying not to let his face change, she can see it, which only has her more concerned.

Amy picks his phone up off the dashboard, and as soon as she reads the name her stomach coils uncomfortably, because it all makes sense.
“It’s your dad.”

Jake nods once, pressing his lips together for a moment.

“Cool, cool, uh…” his eyes narrow as he searches the road ahead, presumably for somewhere to stop. “Do you mind if we pull over?”

“Pull over?” She asks, the real message of her words painfully obvious- are you sure you want to speak to him?

“Yeah, it’s just- he never really calls, so it’s probably important.”

“Right, sure,” she agrees quickly.

After a few moments Jake manages to pull the truck onto the shoulder of the road, coming to an excruciatingly slow stop as the phone continues to vibrate aggressively.

“I’ll be quick,” he reassures her, grabbing his phone- she opens her mouth to assure him she doesn’t mind, but he’s already stepping down from his side of the truck, phone against his ear, greeting his father as he shuts the truck door.

From what she can see from here, it seems a relatively calm conversation; Jake talks rather contentedly, nodding, glancing around their surroundings casually. What’s notable, though, what keeps Amy watching with some insistence, is the total lack of amusement in his face.

That smirk, the one that never seems to abandon the sweet curves of his lips, no matter who’s on the receiving end, has entirely disappeared. The nodding, the upbeat pace of his speech, is completely absent. He looks grown-up, she realises, his expression still, pensive as he replies carefully, his brows furrowed as he listens. At one point she even sees him rubbing his index finger and his thumb over his jaw, and it’s like she’s watching a different person, someone talking about a board meeting or a contractor or a mortgage.

Someone who’s not Jake.

Briefly, a flash of anger passes over his face, and a kick in her gut reminds her, again, of just how little she’s seen him look even remotely pissed over the last week. He’s a good soul- which only makes her worry more about whatever the hell his father is telling him.

Minutes pass. Five, then ten, then fifteen, then twenty, and finally he’s hanging up, running a hand exasperatedly through his hair, sighing deeply as he swings back up into the truck.

“Hey,” she says quietly as he gets back in, trying to ignore how awkward it feels, greeting him-

“How was it?”

“Yeah,” he glances over, “it was pretty normal.”

“…Normal?”

“He’s visiting, uh, this week.” His eyes are narrow, avoiding Amy’s gaze, like he’s trying to figure something out. “I mean, I already told you that.”

“Is that good?”

“Well,” he says, finally looking up at her, “he’s… uh, not just visiting, he’s actually staying.”

“What? He’s moved here? Doesn’t he have to fly?” Amy tries to keep her voice calm, aware that
these questions have probably run through Jake’s head a thousand times already.

“He’s here for a month.” He tilts his head a little, his brows still knotted together, as though genuinely baffled, running a tough math problem through his head. “He’s getting married.”

Amy opens her mouth to respond, but only manages a weak, simple-

“Woah.”

“Yeah.”

“What’s she like?”

“Never met her.”

“Never?” Amy begins to feel her expression matching his, confusion and surprise buzzing around in her head.

“Nope. She has a daughter, older than me. So… I guess I’m gonna have a step-sister, which is kinda dope, right?”

“Wow, Jake…”

“It’s cool,” he says flippantly, “it’s just… a surprise, right?”

“Yes, Jake, I’d say this would definitely constitute a surprise.” She can’t help the sarcasm that seeps into her voice in response to his nonchalance over it. He chuckles softly, and she smiles feebly over at him.

This is big. They both know it. But she can already see him internalising, compartmentalising, working through it, trying to resume his cheerfulness.

“So when’s the wedding? Must be soon if he’s staying.”

“Yeah, it’s in just under a month, September 23rd.”

“I can’t believe he’s just telling you about it now,” she mutters.

“Eh,” he says, brushing it away, “it’s kind of his style. I’m used to it.”

“Doesn’t mean it’s okay.”

“Sure, but some people don’t change.”

“You seem like you have a lot of patience with him,” she says quietly, smiling sympathetically.

“Well, yeah. I think…” he chews on his lip for a second, before looking back to her, “I think that sometimes the worst parts of people come from their best parts, y’know?”

Her heart flutters watching him—his maturity is rare, but very real.

“What d’you mean?”

“Like, how you’re an uptight pain in the ass who can be a bit of a killjoy—”

“Harsh words for someone you’re expecting to make out with you, but go on,” she says indignantly,
but grins when she sees his smile.

“- but that comes from you being organised and on-time, and so ambitious and determined. It’ll get you anywhere.”

“Sure,” she nods, aware of the heat that flushes under her cheeks.

“My dad… he’s irresponsible and kind of an asshole- well, I mean, definitely an asshole, but I think he’s only so stupidly childish because he wants to experience everything at once, for himself. He has adventures.”

“So, from your fathers’ multiple affairs, lack of family responsibility, and frequent absence of human decency,” she half-laughs, “you take the positive that he’s just… ambitious?”

“It’s not a positive,” he admits, “it’s just his nature. People aren’t born awful, they learn it. My dad just happened to learn that he could, and should, have what he wants.”

“You really are used to him, huh.”

She smiles softly over at him, a smile he mirrors back. Gently, she places her hand over his, squeezing it softly, a mutual understanding without any words necessary; it’s an apology, an act of admiration, a reassurance, in response to everything he’s dealt with since that man walked out and left him alone.

“Listen, Ames…” he says, sincerely, grazing his thumb over her and looking straight at her- “I think this is actually really good.”

“Really? That’s really great, Jake, and I think you’ll learn-”

“It’s just, I’m gonna have to wear a sick tux, so…”

She nudges his arm, laughing, rolling her eyes at him.

“Oh my god, I thought you were going to get all emotional and serious for a moment.”

“I am serious! I’m going to look incredible. Plus, they’ve got the Brooklyn Botanical Gardens as their venue.”

“Oh my god, booking it this early?”

“Yeah. My new stepmom knows a guy, apparently.”

“That sounds really… nice.”

“Y’mean fancy as hell?”

“Yes, Jake. Fancy as hell,” shelaughs, relaxing into her seat.

“So, I mean… d’you wanna come?”

She looks over at him.

“To the wedding?”

“Yeah. Come as my date, it’ll make the day more tolerable.”
“Really?” She grins. He nods, raising his eyebrows, as if it’s obvious. “Yeah, I’ll come.”

“You’ll need something fancy to match the tux.”

“Obviously.”

They share a moment, as if they’ve found their own resolution to this objectively emotionally conflicting moment in his life.

“Ugh,” he sighs, running his hands over his face again, as though waking himself up from his conversation with his father. “We should probably get moving.”

“Let’s swap, I’ll drive,” she offers, clicking open her door.

“For real?”

“Yup, it’s the least I owe you.”

“You don’t owe me anything.”

“Jake,” she says, leaning towards him a little- “you’ve just allowed me to build a fantasy schedule for a relationship that is two days old, and asked me to be your date to what’s probably going to be the biggest family event of your year.”

He shrugs, but that smile is returning to his expression. Leaning forward, she gives him a brief kiss, sliding her hand over his jaw and bringing his warm lips towards her.

They remain this for a moment, facing each other, the only sound left the music still playing quietly from the stereo and the occasional airy swooping sounds of passing traffic. Amy allows her hand to trickle down his neck, over his shoulders and onto his chest. He smiles warmly, returns a soft peck on her cheek before he pulls away, grateful, and then slides out of the truck.

“Oh, y’all, we’re doin’ this!”

“What?!” Amy laughs at his sudden burst of energy.

“This is it! In a few hours we’ll be in the city.” He’s reached her door, opening it and gesturing for her to get out. “C’mon, I’m not letting my family life dampen the last part of our trip.”

She grins down at him, then, taking his outstretched hand, leans onto him as he offers to help her down. As he helps her down, she lands wonderfully close to him, narrowly missing his feet.

In a slight pause, with the rush of traffic, intermittent scattering of leaves starting to fall around them, and the late-summer finality in the warm breeze kissing her skin, Amy presses herself onto her toes and firmly wraps her arms around Jake’s neck, kissing him as sweetly and as slowly as she cares. His arms automatically slide around her waist, pulling her as close to him as he can. With everything set out ahead of them, and the feeling him this close, she can’t help but find herself convinced that together they can do absolutely anything.

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With her index finger, Amy picks mindlessly at the peeling red leather of the small diner booth in which she and Jake are sat. It’s a dimly lit place- more likely due to age, lack of maintenance, rather than an aesthetic or a stab at ambience. Black and white tile-style linoleum covers most of the floor, an odd spot next to the entrance missing several shapes. It’s virtually empty, somehow, aside from the two of them, and a young woman behind the counter, dressed head to toe in a typical 50s diner-doll dress, a little red sash around her neck and even a pair of roller skates on her feet, which she navigates with ease. This entire image might add something to this place, were it not for the fact that she’s leant against the counter on her iPhone.

They’ve barely touched their food, most of it still sat out in front of them, despite having started eating at least half an hour ago. Under the table, their legs are intertwined, pressing against each other playfully as they talk.

They’ve been here too long.

She’s felt it since they stepped back into the truck- the two of them actively pushing away the end of this trip. In all honesty, it frightens her; whether they’re scared of being with each other, or simply don’t want to let go of the trip, she’s not sure- but she’s found it all too easy to follow him, and he’s been exactly the same in response. They’ve made stops, they’ve driven under the limit, and now they’re here.
“And that’s why he stopped talking to me. Weird dude,” Jake finishes a story, some boy he’d known in high school, a fight, a girl, something else- guilt pangs in Amy’s chest as she realises she’s not really been listening. It must be evident on her face, too, because he smiles knowingly as soon as her gaze meets his again. “We’re putting this off, aren’t we?” He says simply.

“Yes,” she agrees, aware of the mutual confession. “I’m kind of… uh, scared.”

“Scared?”

“I just… I don’t want to arrive and for things to be so new and so… different, that I can’t handle them. I like you, so much,” she says, her fingers slipping into his on the table, “and I want everything to fit together.” She finds herself grateful for the dim lighting in this place and the yellowing sky outside as the sun begins to set- her cheeks are heated as she admits this.

“You should have said,” he replies, gently tightening his clasp over her fingers. That warmth, that constant warmth, soothes her, the heat spreading from her fingertips over her skin. “I’ve been delaying arriving because… well, I mean- I don’t want this to stop.”

“Me too.”

“We’re going to be fine, Amy. You’re going to be fine. What’s the worst that can happen?

“Um. We show up and Manhattan sinks into the ocean.”

“That’s… okay, yeah, fair enough.” He almost laughs at her still slightly anxious demeanour. “We need something that’d make it feel better.”

“What?”

“Soften the blow, y’know,” he says casually, picking at a couple of fries in front of him.

“Like?” She asks, interested.

“Well, I mean… I don’t know whether you’ll want to drive, or fly, or whatever… but at some point next year we’ll both have to go back to Portland, right?”

She nods.

“Right,” he continues- “so what if we both do the drive again?”

“Wait, really?” She sits up, surprised at how taken aback this has her. Making plans together for next week is one thing. Next month, another. Next year- it’s a whole new ball game, and maybe he’s just saying it to make her feel better, but his loyalty is obvious, and it feels like more.

“Sure,” he says, as if it’s obvious, softly squeezing her legs against his under the table. Inside, she melts at the warmth in the feel of him, at his openness, at his trustworthiness. “I think we’re pretty good at this road trip business.”

“We could plan each of our detours this time, go see places we didn’t get to see this time round. All the landmarks. Oh!,” she perks up, “we could book actual hotels.”

“Yeah! And we can go get the world’s biggest pizza.”

“The… world’s biggest pizza?”

“Yeah, it’s somewhere in Chicago, and it’s so big that people have to take it home on top of their
cars.” He babbles with excitement, a toothy smile on his face as he explains it. “I’m just curious about how they keep all the toppings on there, right?! There has to be a secret. Those pizzas are too big to hold those toppings up by themselves.”

“What are you, a pizza conspiracy theorist?”

“Grow up, Amy. I’m practically a scientist.”

She grins, briefly rolling her eyes. With her free hand, she fiddles with her straw, poking it around her cup aimlessly.

“This week has been insane,” she says quietly, avoiding his gaze but feeling his fingers graze soothingly over hers in response. “I can’t believe it’s over.”

They fall into an accepting silence for an entirely bittersweet moment; outside, the sky is dipping and gushing through different shades of orange and yellow, a reminder of every sunset that’s hung over them over the last week. Traffic rushes by in this busy hour, a sound of traffic that seems to have rung in the background almost consistently for seven days, Amy thinks.

“Amy?”

“Mm?” He breaks her distraction once more- her gaze turns from the sky outside to him, looking over at her sincerely, happily, soft reds from the neon décor of the diner partially glowing over his slightly messy dark hair and kind face.

“It’s not over.”

***

Summer Evening mix #2/ Wip !

Lady (Hear Me Tonight) – Modjo
Chocolate – The 1975
Cameos – Swimming Tapes
Riptide – Vance Joy
“Tell me when!”

“I already said I would!” Jake laughs.

“Is it when yet?”

“No! Keep your eyes closed, Amy!”

Sat in the passenger seat, Amy aggressively squeezes her eyes shut, even placing her hands over her face to make sure she doesn’t get a peek until Jake says she can.

They’re inside the Holland Tunnel- Jake has been insisting on making sure her first sight in Manhattan is perfect, and as a result, she’s been blind for the last ten minutes, waiting until he gives her the go-ahead.

Underneath her, she feels the ground raising slightly- the truck is going up.

“We’re here! We’re coming out of the tunnel!”

“Don’t open your eyes yet!” He interjects, nudging her arm from the driver’s seat. “God, it’s like you want to have the crappiest first moment in New York ever.”

“I’m here, I’m here, oh my god!” She bubbles, barely able to contain her excitement.

“Okay, now!”

She doesn’t need to be told twice- her eyes shoot open and she takes in her surroundings.

It’s everything she could have wanted, everything she’s ever pictured, and just a little bit more.

Currently, the truck has stopped in a line of traffic down a narrow street. Ahead, someone honks their horn, yells out of their window. Tall, on both sides of the street, are what she recognises as
classic old-style New York apartments, painted deep red, then light brown, then dark green, all with high windows and rickety fire escapes on the outside- outside their front doors, stone steps, leading onto the sidewalk.

The street is, somehow, full of trees, several of which have been decorated with fairy lights. It’s dark now, but people are still in the streets, walking with purpose, only one or two people visibly taking their time. Towering above, in the distance, is the One World Trade Centre, standing brightly lit against the night sky. It’s bustling, and brilliant, and completely beautiful.

“Welcome to NYC,” Jake says happily, after a moment, at which point Amy realises she’s gone completely silent, observing it all at once, like a child.

“You’re so cheesy,” she mutters, laughing, turning to him. He’s already looking at her, smiling proudly. She unbucks her seatbelt and props herself up onto her knees, leaning across the gap between their seats. They both close the break with ease, pressing against each other in a long, slow kiss.

A honk from behind startles them- Amy feels Jake jump against her, and they almost bump heads. The traffic has started to move in front of them, and the driver behind seems less than impressed with their totally still truck.

“Where are we going?”

“Well, I mean, it’s up to you…” Jake says quietly. “It’s getting late. Do you want to head to Julian’s?” He looks over at her, wide-eyed.

Part of her says he’s just asking to be polite, but she still feels her whole body wrench in response- no, of course I don’t, idiot.

“No,” she says simply, maintaining her gaze on him- she shakes her head, granting herself a coquettish smile. “I want to spend the night with you.”

“Oh, good! Uh,” he responds, clearing his throat- she just wants to kiss him, completely disbelieving that a boy like this could actually be nervous at the prospect of her. “I know a place I kinda promised I’d visit, if you want to see it. It’s only a few blocks away.”

“Sure, I’d like that.”

The traffic eases off as they weave into a less busy street, similar in appearance to the one they’ve just left. Quietness holds between them, an unanswered tension in the air, soft sounds of the city all that remains. Eventually, Jake parks outside a small bodega.

“What’s this?”

“Just- come in,” he says, hopping out of the truck. He sprints round to her side, opening her door and helping her down.

His hand stays on the small of her back as they walk in.

It’s nothing special, as far as she can tell; an old bodega, the words Deli Grocery crumbling on a red sign on the centre of the storefront. The windows are full of ads and posters, meaning the inside, lit by a steel-blue, fluorescent light, is barely visible. Why Jake would promise to meet someone here, though, is beyond her.

“Hello?” Jake calls out as soon as they enter.
A shuffling from the back of the store indicates someone else’s presence, but they don’t respond.

“Mr Asfar?” Jake tries again.

“Jake?!”

A short, moustached, middle-aged man appears from a small aisle, and as soon as he catches sight of Jake, he breaks into a huge smile, and comes towards them.

“Aaah, it’s so good to see you,” he continues, pulling Jake into a brusque hug, patting his back happily.

“It’s good to see you too, buddy,” Jake smiles, “oh— this is Amy. Amy, this is Mr Asfar—”

“Mo,” the man interjects, offering his hand, which Amy shakes firmly, reciprocating his smile.

“In my first year of college my roommate Charles and I lived in a set of dorms in an apartment just up this street, and I came here every day. Now I just come back all the time,” he shrugs, already looking around the store, slightly distracted by a shelf full of candy.

“I’m pretty certain Jake’s snacking has kept us running for the last three years,” Mo affirms warmly. “My wife even started making him meals because she was so concerned about how much candy he ate.”

“Understandably,” Amy laughs, watching Jake pick up and briefly observe a bar of chocolate.

“Is it your first night back?” Mo asks.

“Oh, it’s way more important than that,” Jake enthuses, “it’s Amy’s first ever night in New York City.”

“No!” Mo responds in disbelief, gasping. Amy chuckles softly, endeared by his complete, fatherly warmth towards the two of them.

“Yeah, I start NYU tomorrow,” she responds.

“Oh! Then you must use the roof,” he mutters, rushing behind the counter.

“Oh, don’t worry, we can always head back to my apartment,” Jake says politely, but Amy can tell he’s not saying it with conviction—this is only confirmed when a huge smile splays onto his face as Mo offers him a set of keys.

“No, I insist. It’s her first night! There’s even a blanket, you can sleep if you want— here,” he says, pressing the keys into Jake’s hand. “Have a good night. Take what you need from here, anything—we’ll start up a new tab. It’s good to have you back, Jakey.” He gives Jake a firm pat on the back, smiling at him admiringly.

Jake looks at the keys, then at Amy, who can only provide a glance of happy confusion back at him.

“C’mon,” he says, nodding towards the back of the store. First, though, he drops a few notes on the counter—thirty bucks, Amy would guess— and grabs a few bags of chips off the shelves, a bottle of wine, some candy, and starts heading for the back of the store.

“He’s sweet,” she remarks, as Jake leads her to a door, which opens onto a small interior staircase.

“He’s like a father,” Jake says quietly. “Mr and Mrs Asfar are like… my New York parents.”
“Did he say something about a tab?”

“Each year I’ve gone to college here he’s had a running tab for whenever I’ve not had money but needed something, and I pay it off before each holiday.”

“That’s so generous.”

“They’re awesome,” Jake agrees, as they come to the stop of the staircase. “Oh god, I love it up here.”

Amy’s not surprised- once she’s clambered over the tricky opening, they’re in a small rooftop patio, lined only with a low-bearing brick wall. They’re surrounded by buildings, some close, some far, but somehow, the downtown Manhattan skyline seems to poke through the gaps, so almost every skyscraper is visible. Lights of bedrooms, offices, living rooms, overwhelm this roof, filling it with dim light. It’s like being buried, Amy thinks, submerged in the heart of New York City.

“Have a seat, m’lady,” Jake offers, nodding to a long outdoor loveseat in the centre of the patio. He cracks open the bottle of wine, offering it to her.

It’s at this point she realises how often he must have come here before; he’s familiar with the space, and small parts of it remind her of him- in the corner, an old beer box, empty. A speaker on a little coffee table about a meter away. A blanket tossed over the back of the loveseat. It’s not just a family’s space that he uses; it’s an extension of his home.

“Thanks,” she says, sitting herself on the loveseat. “No glasses?” She wiggles the bottle of red she’s been handed.

“Nope! Too classy for a college student such as yourself, especially a freshman,” he says, sitting next to her.

“Right,” she laughs, “Here’s to making the most of it all.”

“Huh?”

“Like… taking long-ass road trips, and when our dumb parents remarry someone we don’t know, making a date out of it.”

“Okay, okay, okay, noice, noice, noice,” he beams, raising his glass.

“Cheers!”

“Cheers.”

They sit like this for a while, toasting and drinking to everything from the NYU admissions office to Mo and his bodega.

“I can’t believe I’m actually here. It all feels real now,” she says slowly, passing Jake the almost-empty bottle, still unable to keep her eyes off the skyline surrounding her. “It’s amazing.”

“Knew you’d like it,” he grins, putting the wine down. “You were made for a place like this.”

This steals her attention, her eyes shooting to him- her heart races in her chest, fluttering thickly. He’s looking at the buildings around them, but, noticing her move, turns to her, a small smile on his face. He seems sincere, a little nervous, and she gets it. This is it, now, their last night.

“Y’know,” she says quietly, “I was so reluctant about this whole thing.”
“What d’you mean?”

“I couldn’t see a reason for someone to drive me, let alone you, just someone I knew when I was a kid.” She takes him in, watching his slight chuckle, looking down, entirely overwhelmed with her feeling for him. “But… this has been one of the best weeks of my life. I’m so happy it was you.”

His eyes find hers in response, soft, a communication of awe and thankfulness mixed with that endless happiness of his.

Words don’t quite seem within his reach right now, but he doesn’t need them—these few seconds, interlocking eye contact, says it all, electricity shooting over her skin at lightspeed, her heart pounding so hard in her chest she’s surprised she can’t hear it.

He moves first, taking her gently with his lips, where the taste of his sip of wine greets her. The second he’s touching her again, she lights up; she knows now, where to skim her fingers, how to follow his rhythm, when to tease those groans from his throat.

They follow each other for what feels like an eternity. Any sign of hesitation, any uncertainty, has completely melted away; Amy finds herself lost for breath, so hot she almost feels faint, pleasantly dizzy, drunk off the feel of him. Her entire body hums in agreement, heat pooling in a dull ache in her lower abdomen.

His lips are hot on her skin, sucking softly as he moves from her neck, to her collarbone, to a spot barely skirting the cup of her bra, the straps of which start to fall loosely over her skin.

She can hardly handle it, moaning softly into his hair. He’s no better; sat on his lap, she can feel him pressed against her leg, where she deliberately presses as she shifts herself up and down over him. The groan this pulls from his throat is worth the brief gyration; he’s just as lost for breath as her, and the low noise he makes is guttural, uninhibited.

For perhaps the first time this week, thankfulness for the warm summer night makes an appearance in Amy’s mind as Jake helps her pull her shirt away. The air is heated, gentle, a friendly greeting to the skin of her exposed torso. His warm hands, sliding over her back, move down to her hips, pulling her closer to him. Momentarily, a hand slides over her ass, squeezing her softly, before sliding under her thigh, his fingers skirting the inside of her thighs—and the noise she makes almost embarrasses her. Jake smiles against her jaw where he kisses her, and inwardly she curses how much that mischievous grin turns her on.

This seems to encourage his confidence; he secures his hands on the underside of her legs and picks her up, swiftly turning her round and placing her on the couch, so she’s sat down and he faces her, on his knees. She sighs; his hands move, secured on her waist, and he’s kissing down her torso, fingers sliding under the waistband of her shorts. She helps him, tugging them off quickly—he returns the favour, pulling off his shirt when her hands begin to slip underneath it. Before long, they’re both almost entirely undressed, skin to skin—Amy almost laughs at the expression on his face at the sight of her like this, stifling a small giggle.

Every movement that follows this is both a promise and a dare, pushing further and further, and despite only having been together for a little while, Amy can’t help but feel like each touch is long overdue. It’s feverish, hungry, as though they’ve been starved of each other.

It’s not all perfect, these fumblings, giggles, the first time they try each other; only shortly after his mouth finds itself between her legs, he almost falls off the loveseat, his knee slipping over the edge, prompting a fit of giggles as he falls against her. More than once, her hair is in the way, constantly pushing it out of her face. Muffled snorts and mutterings of “idiot” do more than make up for it; there
is nothing more magnificent, Amy decides, than a giggling, naked Jake, laughing nervously and happily as her hands run through his hair.

As they lose their nerves, they fall into that undeniable, seamless rhythm that they share. There is no single thing imperfect about the way he laughs, increases the pressure of his touch as she groans against him, whispers intimately into her ear, or, finally, when he’s inside her, and she loses her breath, holding him, kissing him with everything she has. His name on her mouth has never felt sweeter, and her name on his has never sounded better.

Hours pass, the two of them unable to keep away from each other, going on and on until they’re both so tired it would be cruel to try any more. Amy makes a mental note- as she’s finally falling asleep on top of him, intertwined, skin to skin- to make a joke about how aptly this fits her first night in the city that never sleeps.

When she wakes up, she checks her phone, prodding it on the ground from where she lies on Jake, and, observing the time, realises it’s been almost twenty-four hours since she woke up in a similar position in a motel room in Cleveland. Dawn dimly lights the city, creeping in in flushes of purple and light blue.

She scoops her phone off the ground and holds it next to Jake’s head. Uncaring, fast asleep, he barely moves. Worryingly, she realises she should probably inform her mother she’s here, safe- she’ll say the text must have sent late, should she ask why it arrived at just short of 4am.

As she unlocks her phone, it promptly dies, hitting that frustrating black screen with its little white loading symbol. She tuts, drops it back onto the floor- she’ll have to use Jake’s.

As gently as possible, she clambers off him, tucking the blanket in over him as soon as she gets up. She pulls on her underwear from the night before and her shirt, both discarded close to the couch.

Eventually, she spots his phone, poking out of the pocket of his jeans where they lie a few meters away. She pulls it out quietly and opens it.

All at once, everything comes crashing down.

When she sees the only notification on his phone, her heart drops so hard she swears she feels about ten times heavier.

Sophia  00:30

Yeah. You’re right. I’ll come tomorrow

Chapter End Notes
ok first: I'M SORRY

just... take a minute... think about how you actually love me and don't want to hit me for
that ending... or mayB u do I can't control u

anyway now we've got that out of the way: hello!!!!111!

I have had the most stressful couple months ever and the last four weeks especially have
been Hell On Earth because I've purely been sitting exams and not having any time to
write or chill out (been too occupied w a lil thing we call in the business: CRYING over
university). but I finished my exams and hopped right back on it and it's like I'm free
again aaaaah

I can't believe it's only one more chapter to go. I only started writing this fic a couple
months ago, but it feels like I've been at it for ages!! It's going to be very bittersweet
saying goodbye.

thank you so much if you've come and said hello on tumblr since I linked my accounts!!
you lot are gorgeous and I feel so lucky talking to new friends who are all fellow fans of
b99 thank u thank u thank u <3

speaking of which, I'd like to formally dedicate this chapter to Vicky (aka
theartofdreaming1 over on tumblr) who drew fanart (yeah. actual drawings. for my fic)
for this and absolutely made my week and blew my mind!!! thank you so much my love
part 10

Chapter Summary

thanks for the ride <3

Chapter Notes

chapter 10 playlist:
https://open.spotify.com/user/hotelsweet/playlist/0aXs6WZGmcxxDIHfMDa5NV

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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Miles to NYC: 0
Amy’s shoulder tightens as she slings her bag onto it. It’s heavier today, she thinks— but, almost a month into her first semester, she’s getting used to it. Fridays mean an 8am class and then another at midday, followed by, of course, an afternoon in the library. Today, she can’t focus, so she’s packing up and taking all her work back to her dorm; if the library won’t work for her, then only her sweats and her bed will.

Pressing an earphone into her ear, to keep her head occupied for the twelve-minute (if she’s quick) walk back to her room, she pushes through the turnstile at the entrance of the library— giving a quick nod and a smile to the librarian on the front desk— and heads out straight onto West 4th.

The sunlight is harshly bright in comparison to the dim, warm tones of the library, which has her blink back a little as she walks out into the busy city. There’s a slight chill in the air, October only a matter of days away; it’s welcoming, despite her perpetual coldness— she pulls her sweater over her wrists and relishes the brief warmth it brings her against her surroundings.

Even if abnormally chilly, it’s a beautiful autumnal day, one that fills her with happiness from the inside out, red and brown leaves littering the street, people beginning to don their jackets, the smell of the cold air a faint reminder of bonfires and fireworks and the cold that’s yet to come.

Yet, in the back of her head, something niggles at her. The same something that’s kept her from focusing all day.

The same someone, she corrects herself internally.

Hurt rears its ugly head in the pit of her stomach, aching awkwardly within her until she feels herself go numb. Don’t go there, her entire body seems to tell her, dismissing a vivid memory of escaping the roof of a bodega to her brother’s house at four in the morning on her first full day in New York. Dismissing watching her phone buzz for days afterwards, until he finally got the message— don’t.

“Amy!”

The sound of someone greeting her is a relief, snapping her out of that memory. Approaching her is Danielle, a short, red-headed girl from her Classics class— also hoping to major in History of Art, apparently.

“Hey,” Amy greets her, immediately aware of the exhaustion in her tone.

“Busy week?!”
“Yeah, kinda,” she replies politely.

“Same, oh my gosh. Barely sleeping.” She grins up at her with a smile that’s almost infectious. “Sorry for stopping you, are you headed to class?”

“Oh, no,” Amy reassures her, “just back to my dorm. Library’s not doing it for me.”

“At least you’re studying at all,” Danielle laughs, “you’re like, ten times more committed than half the freshmen I’ve met. Including me. Anyway,” she continues, before Amy has a chance to respond to what she’s almost certain was a compliment, “are you coming out tonight?”

“Oh, tonight?”

“Don’t you remember the guy I was telling you about? Max? Kegger? It’s at Rubin Hall, tonight, I’m on my way to see him now and help set up.” She speaks so quickly Amy almost struggles to keep up, her face intent as she chats.

“Oh, the guy you like.”

“Shut up,” Danielle chuckles, her cheeks going pink. “Seniors are hot.”

“Sure,” Amy giggles, internally pushing away the fact that only a month ago she was travelling the country with- and falling for- a senior of her own.

“So? Will I see you?”

“Sure, I’ll text you if I feel like it.”

“You better. I have to go, but text me, okay? It’s not a pregame if Santiago’s not there.”

Amy laughs.

“I will.”

Danielle hurries off, disappearing into the crowd of people moving around them.

_It’s not a pregame if Santiago’s not there._

Now, there’s an example of a sentence Amy thought she’d never hear.

She’s heard a lot of these sentences lately. The fact is, somehow, starting at college- she’s popular. Perhaps it’s just the overwhelming friendliness of everyone here, desperate to make friends, desperate to feel comfortable and have a good time. But already she seems to have picked up a small group of friends from each of her classes, is being invited out pretty regularly, and it’s all… for being herself.

Her friends like that she’s bookish and organised, asking her for advice and praising her effort rather than becoming intimidated or stepping away. Here it’s acceptable, rather than harsh, if a girl asks her for boy advice and she tells that girl that he’s not worth her time.

There’s also the undeniable fact that, thanks to a certain someone, she’s got a fresh repertoire of drinking games under her belt, which nobody seemed to expect, making her something of a novelty
on a night out.

The only person she has yet to really bond with is her roommate, Rosa, who seems to be something of an enigma anyhow; tall, dark, quiet, and brooding, the majority of the talking she’s done has comprised of brief demands and threats about going near her stuff. That relationship’s one Amy’s not sure she knows how to navigate right now, focusing instead on maintaining the few groups of people who seem interested in her. Eventually, she figures, close friends will come about - the initial excitement of starting freshman year hasn’t completely worn off yet, and she’s pretty sure that’s part of why they like her so much.

It would be completely wrong to act like this isn’t, in part, thanks to Jake. And she knows it.

Always having prided herself on being an independent soul, she can’t help the odd concoction of thankfulness, resent, and confusion that’s been churning over and over in her head in response to the way that week with Jake brought her out of her shell.

That week, that whole week, was magic.

From start to finish, she was challenged, and experiencing something new, and as soon as she found herself alone in her room on her move-in day, watching Julian drive off that moving truck, their moving truck, back to a rental centre, it all hit her at once. The way she’d spoken back to her mother over the phone. The way she’d adventured off to Chicago when she was already behind schedule. The way she’d really, truly, not cared, just for a little while, engrossed in her own bubble of excitement and happiness and freedom.

It came crashing down so quickly that she responded in the only way she knew how; get out, get out quick, and push it down.

She’s relived that moment in her head so many times it doesn’t affect her anymore, only the mild residual tinge of humiliation left within her. It plays through her head in sections- picking up the phone and seeing the text, hurriedly dressing herself and grabbing the keys, calling Julian at four in the morning, her voice cracking, as she fled down the stairs of the bodega and into the street. Getting behind the wheel of that truck, like she’d done so many times over that week, and driving to Julian’s, where she crawled into bed, left surprisingly unquestioned by him and his wife, Annie.

Truthfully, fixating on it felt a little… pointless. So what- she and Jake had existed in the road-trip-bubble, only with each other, idealistic and optimistic about their relationship when they’d only even known each other again for a week. It was childish. Real life was bound to catch up with them eventually.

It just so happens that for Jake, that meant Sophia, whether with her or not, and for her it meant starting college alone.

She won’t lie- it’s been incredible. Jake was- everyone was- right; she’s slotting right into the routine of classes and studying so well it’s been a practically seamless change, she’s had plenty of fun going out with new friends, her budget so far has worked perfectly, and she’s done it all by herself.

Turning the corner onto her block, she immediately feels a little relieved just at the sight of her building, picturing the pair of grey sweats in her drawers that she’ll slip into, tying her hair up, studying more comfortably as a chill seeps through the window and her toes curl into the fluffiest socks she owns. Maybe she’ll even go out later, with Danielle, have a few drinks and a dance and come home feeling pleasantly tired, ready for her bed.

Despite this relief, that annoyance, that’s been at her all morning, still grasps for attention at the back
of her mind.

It’s got to be *something*, she decides—over this last month, she’s obviously had moments where Jake’s been on her mind. But this feels like she’s missing something, like she’s forgotten something major.

Drawing her keycard from her purse, she brushes it aside—anything she has planned would be in her organiser, which she’s checked multiple times today, alongside the normal scanning-over it receives every morning and evening.

As she enters the building she thanks her lucky stars for what must be the thousandth time since she moved in that she’s only on the first floor, her and Rosa’s room sporting two long windows looking directly out onto the street. There’s no elevator in their building, meaning the stairs are the only option, and somehow, Amy always finds herself a little tired out just by climbing her flight.

With a click, she opens their bedroom door and comes in, breathing a sigh of relief at her solitude. Call her a stereotypical introvert, but being alone with her work and her softest clothes energises her in a way she can’t describe.

“Hey.”

Amy jumps out of her skin when Rosa’s monotonous, cool voice comes from the other side of the room. Perhaps not *quite* alone.

She glances over, where Rosa is nowhere to be seen.

“Down here.”

Amy crouches down, looking confusedly under and around Rosa’s bed. Eventually, she catches sight of her as her head moves up—she’s stretching, sat with her legs straight out in front of her, her body folded over herself in a yoga-like position that keeps her practically invisible. She’s wearing all-black, as per usual, a long-sleeved shirt and long yoga leggings. This, plus her mop of curly black hair, seems to have her almost camouflaged in the shadow of her furniture.

“Hey,” Amy says shyly. Frankly, she’s still quite frightened of Rosa, and has no idea how to relate to her; she seems to keep herself to herself, never seems to talk about her friends or her family, occasionally leaving for several hours—once even a couple of days—then arriving back with no explanation.

Amy moves back to her desk and begins to unload her books and stationary, putting everything in its assigned position. Pride combines with contentedness once it’s all there; her desk is perfect, exactly what she’d pictured, right up against the window so it’s constantly bathed in light, overlooking the street and framed by the orange leaves that brush up against the window from the trees outside. A good study spot is important, and hers is perfect.

Even now, with everything set out, something feels wrong.

Unconsciously, she busies herself, making her bed again, turning on the fairy lights on her wall, organising her drawers and her laundry after she’s changed into her comfy clothes.

Absently tapping her fingers against the keyboard, she opens her laptop, and starts opening random tabs, desperately searching for a way to distract herself. Her calendar seems a good start; organise, clear, clean.

*September 2016* appears in front of her, and she finds herself surveying all of her classes, events, and
plans.

It’s at this exact moment that she realises exactly why she’s been feeling so weird all day.

*Friday, 23 September 2016.*

It’s the day of Jake’s father’s wedding.

If there’s one thing Amy Santiago does not do, it’s forget plans, whether they’re finalised or not; her mind’s like a filing cabinet, storing every piece of potential information needed to organise or plan in a perfect system.

All day, she realises, this wedding’s been ticking over, waiting for her to remember, a biting reminder of that week, of the time that’s passed. Of Jake.

“Okay, I’m sick of this,” Rosa interrupts, rolling her eyes, after Amy’s spent an indiscernible amount of time staring at the screen, “what’s up?”

“What?”

It’s a little jarring, hearing her speak to her, apparently deliberately. She and Rosa, somehow, have never really spoken, aside from an occasional “hey” or “sup”.

“What’s going on?” Rosa’s voice sounds so intent that it’s almost angry- she raises her eyebrows expectantly and Amy feels herself swallow thickly, intimidated by her normally withdrawn roommate. “You’re so restless that you’re ten times more annoying than normal, and now you’re staring at your laptop like it’s just told you your puppy died.”

“Oh,” Amy replies meekly. She shuts the laptop and tucks her knees into her chest, fearful that Rosa will march over and look herself, though there’s nothing incriminating there. “Just a weird day,” she manages, her voice thick.

“Is it…” Rosa grimaces as she finds the words, clearly not enjoying needing to pry into an emotional issue. “A boy?”

Amy’s can’t quite think of a response to this, but her face must change, as Rosa adds- “a girl?”, shrugging awkwardly.

“A boy, I guess,” Amy admits. “It’s not a big deal.”

“You’ve been a full-on dork since you arrived,” Rosa presses, “studying and making friends and going to all your classes, or whatever,” she says, as if she doesn’t see the appeal.

“Thanks?”

“Whatever. You don’t seem like the kind of girl to get hung up on a boyfriend. You seem better than that. I figure it must be bad if it’s got you… like this.”

Pride swells in her, if only briefly, that her badass roommate- who is essentially the human embodiment of a motorcycle- sees her as an independent woman.

The fact is, Rosa’s right- she *isn’t* that kind of girl, never has been, but Jake’s different. She’s never known anyone like him. If her deadpan, monotone roommate can pick up on it, then it’s got to be worth talking out.

“There was a guy. *Is* a guy.”
“There it is,” Rosa mutters. “What’d he do? Want me to hurt him?”

“Uh, no, that’s fine,” Amy reassures her, “it’s kind of a long story. I don’t want to bore you.” She can feel herself treading lightly- speaking to Rosa properly for the first time is one thing, and spilling details about her life is another.

“Tell me, so I can decide if he’s worth a punch.”

“Okay. So. Um. I’m from Oregon. Albany, actually. And I needed to get all my stuff here, which meant driving- and there’s this guy, Jake, who I’ve known since I was a kid, who’s a senior here, and offered to drive me on his way back to college…”

At first, it comes out in chunks, stammering her words like she’s not sure what she should be telling this girl, what she should be admitting to. But as she keeps going, it comes back, piece by piece, and it’s like she’s reliving the whole week; she tells her about an atlas, and a detour to Vegas, and spending a day stuck in traffic making up games. Then it’s sharing a crappy motel room, and another detour, to Chicago, this time, and feeling things for someone she’s not seen in years, then feeling everything for someone she’s not seen in years.

She’s not sure how long she ends up talking, but it must be at least an hour- the sun shifts outside, and the orange patch of light from the sunset streaming through the window shifts all the way over her bed and to the other side of the room. Rosa, for the most part, stays quiet, staring intensely at her as she speaks, standing by her bed, arms folded.

“And then, we arrived, and we had our last night together, and things were really… perfect.” She feels herself smiling.

“Huh? No!” Amy feels her chest heat up, frowning indignantly. A smirk passes over Rosa’s face. “Well, yeah,” she admits, and Rosa laughs once, looking away, and sits herself on the end of her bed, opposite Amy. “I think I just got caught up. I loved everything about being with him. I loved the travelling, and the food, and the dumb conversations and jokes… and the good conversations and jokes, and even that stupid obsession of his with those CDs. It was just all too good to be true.”

“Wait,” Rosa says quietly. “Did you say CDs?” Her expression has changed, her brows furrowed, eyes wide. It’s discomfiting, to say the least- she looks genuinely concerned, a look Amy’s not seen cross over this girl’s face since the day she moved in.

“Yeah, CDs… why?”

“Oh god.” Rosa jumps up off her bed and gets onto her knees, digging around under the bed. “I didn’t think anything of them.”

“Of… of what?”

Amy watches her as she pulls awkwardly at boxes from under her bed, trying to ignore just how much Rosa’s managed to stash under there- at one point, she swears she even sees a pair of nunchucks, but decides she’ll ask another day. Speaking to Rosa for the first time has been an experience enough. Bringing weaponry into their relationship seems like a bit of an overstep.

“These,” Rosa mutters, pulling out a small cardboard box and surveying it as she stands up. She stretches it out, offering it out to her. “Look.”

Utterly confused, Amy takes the box, a little concerned about what she’s about to find.
The top is easily openable—this must be one of Rosa’s old moving boxes. Inside seem to be five, ten, twenty, square plastic cases.

They’re CDs.

A guttural punch delivers itself when she notices the familiar messy scrawling over one of the covers—

Jake Mix #18

Carefully, she takes out each one, looking carefully at the cases, reading each tracklist, bringing a fluttering, a swelling in her chest so strong she wants to punch him, and kiss him, and everything in between.

“They’re… the CDs we played during the trip,” she manages quietly, after a minute or so. “He remembered every single one. This one was from our first day,” she explains, holding up Jake #1 to Rosa, who looks on more seriously now, if that’s even possible.

“How d’you know?”

“It’s got this song, by the Cranberries, that I really liked. I told him.”

“Woah. That’s an eye for detail. He must really like you to remember something like that.”

“I can’t… believe this. There’s so many.” Amy almost laughs in disbelief at what she’s holding.

“They didn’t all come at once,” Rosa offers, like a disclaimer- “it was, like, one every day. I assumed some creepy dude was trying to hook up with one of us and thought I was saving both our asses. Mixes are dorky as hell.”

“Yeah, they are,” Amy grins, unable to wipe the smile off her face as she looks over each and every one. Each has a white cover, with his big writing on the front in black sharpie, some with goofy little smiley faces, others with doodles of a truck, a little sunshine- one even has a road sign that says Vegas This Way! on it. On the back of each CD case he’s even drawn a little copyright sign, next to the words Amy Santiago & Jacob Peralta.

Each one is just for the two of them.

It’s not even like these are straight out of the case in his car- they’re newly-made, his messy handwriting ever-so-slightly less messy, and the fresh CDs shining, iridescent with newness.

Everything, in this moment, seems to come bubbling up, confusion and nerves and excitement spilling over as that familiar fluttering, a feeling she’s only ever known to be brought about by Jake. What do these mean? Are they apologies? That’s what they feel like, she thinks, her mind going at a thousand miles an hour.

“He must really like you. These only stopped coming a couple days ago,” Rosa remarks, and Amy’s chest tightens just a little bit more.

“Really?”

“Yeah. The red one was last, if that’s any help.”

“Red? I didn’t see any red,” Amy asks, panicked, going straight back to the box. For a moment, she’s worried she’s missing it, that somehow, in this brief moment, she’s lost it- but then she sees it,
buried at the very bottom of the box.

Her heart starts to race as she picks it out.

This one is different to the others, she realises, holding it carefully, not daring to touch it with anything more than her fingertips.

On the front, written in the neatest she’s ever seen his handwriting, is, quite simply:

Amy Mix #1

Her throat begins to swell, and for a moment, she even thinks she might cry— not because she cries at this sort of thing, not really, but because of the sheer amount of emotion propelling through her at once, coming straight after reopening the wound talking to Rosa.

Gently, she turns it over, and lets her eyes find the tracklist.

_Praise You – Fatboy Slim_
I’m Gonna Be (500 Miles) – The Proclaimers
Tuesday – Hippo Campus
Summer Of ’69 – Bryan Adams
Chicago – Sufjan Stevens
T-Shirt Weather – Circa Waves
Bohemian Rhapsody - Queen
Charlie Brown – Coldplay
Your Love – The Magic Gang
I Wanna Get Better – Bleachers
Someone Else – Henry Wolfe
These Words – The Lemon Twigs
Bittersweet Symphony – The Verve

“What is it?” Rosa asks quietly after a little while.

“It’s… everything,” she replies, the only word she can honestly use to describe it, “it’s my favourite songs from the trip, it’s a few songs I remember him saying he wanted me to listen to… and then there’s just ones that are about us, I guess?”

“About you?” Rosa sounds a little disgusted, like this is all getting a tad too sappy.

“Well, one of the songs is called Chicago.”

“Where you first kissed,” Rosa murmurs.

“And Tuesday.”

There’s a pause.

“I don’t get that one.”
“We agreed that when we came here, he could have my Tuesdays, like our date day, I guess?”

“Gross.”

“Thanks.” Amy can’t help it- her smile remains entirely intact. She doesn’t care if Rosa thinks it’s all dorky.

No human being could put this much effort into someone if they actually wanted someone else.

Perhaps she’s being idealistic. Or perhaps it’s just… the truth. The attention he must have been paying to her, the whole time, to be able to put together something like this, and his sincerity about starting a relationship with her, his desperate calls and texts that followed that night- maybe, just maybe, this boy is for real, she thinks.

“What time is it?” Her voice is roughened, tight, on the brim of the built-up tension of the last few weeks.

“Uh, almost six.”

“I need to get to that wedding,” she says decisively, placing Amy Mix #1, her first ever playlist, her first ever mix, back into the box, so the message left on a post-it note against the back cover faces upwards, telling Jake’s message to anyone who dares see it.

I’m sorry.

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“So, once you’re in, you’re gonna wanna make sure you come down Flatbush Avenue. Not Prospect Park West. You’re aiming for Palm House. Okay? Y’understand?”

Rosa’s phone sits propped up on Amy’s dresser, with the voice of an incredibly lively- and incredibly demanding- Gina Linetti coming through the speaker.

In all honesty, Amy’s not sure how this happened as fast as it did; one second they were talking about who had enough money to get them from their dorm to Brooklyn, the next about what she should wear- at which point it occurred to Amy that neither of them knew where, specifically, they needed to go.

Her heart is pounding.

Rosa had grilled her, asking about potential friends or family members of Jake they could find on the internet who’d actually be willing to help. At first, Amy considered using Karen’s number- but reminding her of her ex-husband’s remarriage and convincing her to give over the details seemed a little harsh. Rosa had asked about Gina, having spotted her on Jake’s Instagram. The only means of contact was an email, and yet somehow, within half an hour, they had her on the phone.
She’s so flustered her cheeks and chest burn with heat.

“Palm House. Gotcha,” Rosa replies as she pulls on a long, tight, black bodycon dress. Amy shoots her a questioning look. “What? We’re going to a wedding we’re not invited to. Least I can do is dress the part.”

“I’ll wait outside for you when you arrive. Word of advice, wear flat shoes until you get to the door. It’s a bitch of a walk,” Gina chats away.

“Thank you,” Amy returns, finishing off the last of her makeup, “by the way, not to be rude, but how are you on the phone right now? Aren’t you involved in the wedding?”

“Mm, yeah, but they’re just doing some lame cake-cutting thing right now and this Jake-y drama is so much more exciting.”

“Right. Rosa, thoughts?”

She stands up, so Rosa can see her full outfit, a navy, mid-length, bardot dress, the only even slightly fancy one she owns.

“Hot.”

“I wanna see! Rosa, do you have FaceTime?” Gina’s voice chirps up from the speaker.

“Uh, yeah,” Rosa mumbles, clearly a little taken aback, taking her phone from where it sits and fiddling with it for a moment. “There.”

“Heeeeey, girl!” Gina sings as her face appears on the screen. “Okay, show me the dress.”

Rosa points the camera at Amy.

“I mean, you look kind of like a nun, but in a cute way, I guess,” Gina says after a moment. Rosa snorts.

“Thanks? C’mon, we have to go,” Amy urges her roommate.

“Hey! Tall, dark, and handsome- I want to see your dress, too.”

Rosa’s face scrunches up cumbersomely- whether at the demand or the nickname from the girl on her phone screen Amy’s not sure- slowly pulling the camera away so her whole body is visible. It’s at this moment that Amy realises, in some amusement, that Rosa is not used to being told what to do.

“Mmm. Rosa Diaz, setting an example for women everywhere,” Gina drawls.

Rosa smirks at this, even if only briefly. It is, undoubtedly, the first time Amy has seen even the glimmer of a smile on her face. Nevertheless, there are more pressing matters at hand.

“Hey!” She cuts in, “stop flirting! We have a wedding to get to.”
“Okay, seriously, how the hell are you doing that?”

Amy glances over at Rosa, currently jogging through Prospect Park in five-inch heels like it’s no big deal. Meanwhile, Amy jogs alongside her, holding her heels- much shorter in comparison- in her hand. Almost 80 minutes since they left, they’ve abandoned their cab and taken to attempting the remainder of their route by foot.

Everything inside her is lighting up at once, warning signals and alarms and excitement and happiness, like her entire body is one big exclamation mark. All she’s thought about for the last hour or so is getting here, making sure she arrives at all, but not for a second about what she’s actually going to do once she arrives. Rosa’s been little to no help on that front- in all fairness, she’s been an incredibly good listener, but still doesn’t seem much of a talker.

“Focus, we need to find this place.” This is the only response Rosa offers.

“Gina said we’d see stairs, then there’s a pond, with lily-pads,” Amy pants, “and then you can see the fountains and Palm House-”

“There!”

By some miracle, Rosa picks up speed, running at full force towards the building. “C’mon!”

“Okay,” Amy replies breathily, nerves twining in her stomach, and a slight resentment springing up towards the thin sheen of sweat dotting her forehead as she realises she’s going to have to see Jake for the first time in weeks while she’s sweating and out of breath.

“Hey! Gina!” Rosa’s voice yells at a young woman standing a little while away, tiny in the distance. It must be her, because- if the deep purple dress with gold detailing wasn’t enough to characterise her at a mere glance- she waves, and starts moving towards them.

Eventually, they meet, just behind a large stone fountain facing the entrance, trickling water gently and lit only by the stringed lamp-lights decorating the entrance, spots of which seem to glimmer in the water. For just a second, Amy pauses at the sight of it, reminded of the fairy lights in the front of that truck, of the fairy lights coating the wall of a bar somewhere in Las Vegas.

“Oookay- Amy, I’m going to have to request that you put your shoes on,” Gina says coolly, smiling oddly.

“I was going to, I just-”

“Oh. He’s right, you are cute,” she pouts, a tad condescending for Amy’s liking, but it seems like she means it well enough. The reminder that Jake’s been talking about her helps. Her focus shifts immediately to Rosa, her facing splaying out into a huge smile. “So! Rosa! D’you want a drink?”
“As long as it’s not bubbly.”

“Whiskey it is,” Gina grins.

“Hey, what about me?” Amy pipes up, not enjoying the almost nauseating concoction of excitement and nerves that has her almost woozy.

“Oh, I’ve texted Jake telling him he needs to meet me out here, so he’ll probably be here any second. Here,” Gina mutters, briefly licking her finger then fiddling with Amy’s hair. “There. Perfect. Go get him, hot stuff.”

And with that, she and Rosa are gone, walking into the hall and chatting calmly, not taking their eyes off each other for a second.

If everything goes wrong, Amy thinks, at least one couple had a notable moment today. The only sound that’s left is the hummed beat of music. As she listens, she realises she recognises it, a favourite of her father’s.

“Oh what a night, late December… back in sixty-three…” she murmurs along. Frankie Valli, she thinks, before momentarily realising that she wouldn’t know this were it not for Jake and his half-hour-long analysis of music in the sixties on their second day on the road.

She can’t stand still like this, out here, forever. The nerves are too much. If nothing else, it’s starting to become cold- and she’s in a dress that has her neck, arms, and legs exposed to the breeze. She walks around the fountain slowly, one foot at a time, trying not to totter over in her heels.

Left alone, out here, the questions she’s been mentally avoiding for the last hour begin to flood her brain. What now? Jump into a relationship with Jake? What if he’s given up?

The image of that final CD, sent only a few days ago, immediately cuts off this last objection. Amy doesn’t know much about relationships, but she knows that’s not the work of a boy who’s given up.

What about Sophia? Questions about that text have beaten her up for weeks. Was he texting her while they were on the road, or was it Sophia initiating conversation? Should she even feel like she can initiate conversation with him?

Her stomach drops, the nerves getting the better of her.

Does she even want to know what that text was about?

“Gina?”

A voice, soft in volume but undoubtedly his, seems to come from the side of the building.

In a feat she’s never experienced of her body before, everything within Amy both relaxes and combusts at the same time; her heart’s soaring, but she feels completely at ease, and her mind’s thrumming, but she knows it’s all going to be okay. Even now, the way he makes her feel is unbelievable.

“Ginaaaaaa, c’mon, what’s up?” His voice is louder this time, but still coming distinctly from her right. She walks round the fountain until she’s stood facing the direction from which his voice seems to echo.

And, as simple as that, he’s there.
He walks around the corner casually, not seeming incredibly fussed about missing whatever’s going on inside. He looks good, she thinks, dressed in a crisp, tailored black tuxedo—though part of her itches to readjust his bowtie. He’d meant it when he’d bragged excitedly about the opportunity to wear a super dope outfit.

In the few moments that he doesn’t see her, she takes his appearance in for the first time in several weeks, surprised at how much, specifically, she’s forgotten of him; the slight swell in the centre of his lower lip, the tufts of curled hair that often slip out of place, the upturned corner of his lips that seems to maintain a constant smile.

She’s stood completely still now, holding her clutch—borrowed from Rosa—patiently against her stomach, feeling the bottom of her dress fluttering around her legs in the breeze. It’s during this ticklish feeling against her skin that his eyes meet hers, and he stops dead in his tracks.

Neither of them move, just for a moment, but then they’re walking towards each other, cautiously at first, and then he breaks out into a completely uninhibited grin, and she finds herself in a small jog.

Perhaps it’s cliché, but aside from the biting chill, it’s everything, it’s like a movie—the second they meet, she pulls him against her, into the softest, yet tightest embrace she’s ever known. All at once, her arms are thrown around his neck, her fingers are grazing his hair again, she’s breathing in his scent, and she can feel the tightness of his cheeks where he’s smiling against her neck.

He doesn’t move back at first, as though still cautious, apologetic, in sheer disbelief that she’s come here—but then, when she doesn’t pull away, his arms come over her waist and up her back, pulling her towards him in a movement that, in a sigh, reminds her, quite clearly, of the first time she kissed him.

She could stay here forever, holding him like this, the soft pumping of the music from the hall like the revival of a heartbeat that only the two of them share, a kind reminder of gentle melodies playing beneath their conversations as they drove in the dark. Against the dark path, the rhythmic spraying of the fountain behind them, and the orange fairy lights sparkling in the leaves above, it’s easily one of the most perfect moments she’s had in New York so far.

“Hi.”

He’s the first to break the silence, his voice half-amused, half-joyous, and somehow, completely grateful.

“Hey,” she replies quietly, feeling her voice muffled into his shoulder.

Gently, she pulls away a little, bringing her hands to his shoulders—he loosens his hold around her, so she seems to rest back into his arms.

“Amy, listen. I know you probably don’t want to hear it, but I have to explain that night—”

“No, it’s okay,” she interjects, “I know it wasn’t… what I thought it was.”

“You do?” He says, surprised, genuine confusion appearing on his face. “I just… it was a reply to something I’d said months before, and I wanted to show you the proof,” he begins to gush, “because I didn’t… want… I don’t want… anyone except you.”

He’s looking at her with the raw desperation of a young child, and she realises he’s probably been wanting to say this for a while, in person, and now he’s stammering over his words.

So, in a way she knows so well, she shows him that she knows, pressing herself up onto the balls of
her feet and kissing him in a way she can only hope will tell him all of this, every worry and every
dream she’s had of him. Her lips tell him of every moment, every second she’s spent filled with gut-
wrenching nostalgia thinking about tipsily kissing him in Chicago and laughing with him, cross-
legged in the dim front seat of the truck parked outside a crappy motel. They tell him of endless
burgers and fries and waking up in his arms and a case full of CDs, and feeling, for the first time, like
she’s invincible.

When they finally break apart, she notices two things: how her toes have curled up in her shoes, and
how he’s already smiling again.

“I was frightened, and I should have spoken to you about it… but everything was changing and I
guess I just had this insecurity that everything between you and I was too good to be true,” she finds
herself admitting, all of it coming out at once.

“Amy,” he reassures her softly, “you don’t have to justify yourself.”

“I know,” she says quickly, and they both chuckle- “I just want to be honest. I’ve never liked
someone so much that it scares me.”

“And I’ve never liked someone so much that I’m not scared at all,” Jake offers, “which kind of has
me scared, too.”

She gives him one more soft kiss for this.

“So,” she smiles gently, leaning back a little, “you’ve got a step-family now, huh.”

“Yup,” he inhales sharply regarding this, “a new era.”

“What did I miss? Any wedding highlights?” She pulls away and walks over to a small stone wall
lining the path, where she sits down.

“Well,” he starts, following suit and sitting down next to her. Both of them, lit only by the little lights
in the trees, watch over the glass roof of the conservatory, from which arise small bursts of pink, red,
blue, and green, darting through the roof in indescribable patterns- presumably the DJ’s set. “You
missed my father realising he’d accidentally invited one of his previous mistresses.”

“Wild.”

“Only way the Peraltas know how.”

She smiles over at him.

“How’s it all been?” She feels stupid the second she says it, scolding the way she’s worded it.
“Everything,” she elaborates, “not just today.”

He takes a deep breath, evidently not sure where to start.

“I mean, after that morning, I just wanted to figure out a way to show you I meant everything I said,
without infringing on your freshman experience. I wasn’t gonna be that asshole that shows up
uninvited and won’t leave. So I went through the CDs, which I’m guessing you got?”

“All of them, just this afternoon,” she explains. He looks at her oddly. “My roommate thought they
were from a stalker, or something.”

“Roommate! You’re in a dorm! Exciting,” he enthuses, “what’s she like?”
“Scary as hell, but I think she’s cool,” she replies- “You’d like her. Anyway, back to you.”

“Cool, cool, cool… so I started senior year, and I’m already sleep-deprived, broke, and losing my shit.”

“Of course,” she smiles.

“What about you?”

“Yeah. I love NYU. I love my classes. I love the people I’ve met.”

“Well, of course you do,” he says, and she fills up with warmth.

“How’s Charles?”

“He’s good! He and I are all moved into our new place, which is cool. It’s tiny, and way too expensive, but it’s ours- and I think both of us’ll end up staying in the city, so it’s a good starter apartment.”

“You’re gonna stay?”

“Yeah. Don’t laugh,” he goes on, “but I actually think I’m gonna join the Academy.”

“For real?” She grins, thinking back to their conversations over Die Hard and detective work. It feels distant, far out of reach, but perfectly him.

“I think so, yeah. I don’t know, Detective Peralta has a nice ring to it.”


“Pff,” he brushes her off, “you couldn’t stay a detective.”

“What?!”

“Captain Santiago.”

“Huh,” she exclaims, slipping her fingers into his, “I like that.”

***

Chilled Mornings
user playlist: jperalta95

Take Care – Beach House
Until We Get There – Lucius
Class Historian – BRONCHO
All My Love – Trudy and the Romance
First Day Of My Life – Bright Eyes
Sunlight, ever the charmer, kisses Amy’s neck sweetly as she rouses.

Warmth seems to be a constant in her experience with Jake Peralta, encompassing and permeating every part of her life.

His lips were warm as he kissed her last night, and, sat outside Palm House, there was the warmth of his jacket draped over her shoulders, and a strong arm on the small of her back. Heat occupied her body as they danced with the rest of the guests, sipping on drinks from a free bar and twirling round the dancefloor, laughing hysterically at her two left feet and his uncanny elegance. Warmth flooded her in tides as they stayed up in his apartment, talking, and laughing, and catching up.

And now it’s here.

Her eyelids are heavy, soft, taking their time to open- she’s safe here, wherever she is, and she knows it. The smell of him envelopes her.

Oh, and toast.

At this smell, her belly aches numbly for food, and with that, she finds herself waking up, properly now. Becoming aware of her surroundings, she realises she’s splayed out, alone, over a double bed, like a starfish.

It’s in the softness of the sheets, so comfortable she could die happily here, that she remembers she’s at Jake’s.

Or at least she’d hope so, what with her total lack of clothing under these sheets.

If the bed wasn’t enough, the sound of music playing from another room, just loud enough that she can hear it here, would be the giveaway. It’s relaxed, romantic, completely matching the time of day, the mood, however he’d describe it, like it always does- it’s him.

Stretching lazily, she pulls the duvet over her body, a little self-consciously, even though nobody appears to be nearby. Sweetness and satisfaction rings in her body after last night, aching in all the right places; soft spots on her neck feel tender from where he’s kissed her, her feet tingle a little from dancing all night in those shoes, which now lie in the corner of the room next to her dress, now a crumpled pile on the floor.

Jake’s singing along to whatever song this is, his voice echoing through the apartment into his bedroom. It’s not like he’s the best singer, she thinks, but it’s hauntingly beautiful, the sound of a boy who loves his music more than anything in the world enjoying it to himself-
“Jake! Be careful.”

Or, by the sounds of it, enjoying it with his roommate, judging by the sound of the exasperated male voice she can hear scolding him.

Quickly, Amy sits herself up, and pulls on Jake’s dress shirt from the floor next to her, buttoning it carefully—she’s doubtful he has more than one in as good a condition as this one. Luckily, it’s long enough that it skirts over the top half of her thighs, but for safety, she steps into her underwear, too.

The music becomes louder as she follows the sound- and the smell- out of his bedroom and into the living area.

He’s stood over the stove, looking delightfully sleepy in a messy t-shirt and a pair of swear. In front of him is a small pot of scrambled eggs, and in another several slices of bacon.

“Jake, when I said you were stirring the eggs too much, that didn’t mean stop stirring them,” that voice comes again, and a shorter man, clearly a couple of years older than Jake, hurries out from behind the open fridge door and to the stove. “Imagine when you’re touching them you’re nurturing them softly into their flavour-”

“Charles! What did I say about you making this overtly sexual?!”

“Sorry, sorry,” his roommate concedes, “you’re the one who asked me to help make her breakfast! You must be in love with her, or something,” he says, his voice muffled as he licks his fingers of what Amy is assuming-slash-hoping is pancake batter.

Amy watches on from around the corner, enjoying a moment of them not noticing her. Charles seems sweet, if a little overzealous, passionately overtaking most of the jobs Jake seems so intent on doing.

“Hey,” she says eventually, quietly, stepping forward a little. At the sudden exposure of her body she feels an immediate instinct to explain the shirt. “Oh, I’m sorry, I, uh… I only have my dress.”

“Hi,” he stops, smiling. “No, don’t be silly, take whatever you want,” he assures her after a moment, moving away from the stove. Charles jumps in so fast, so urgently, that you’d think Jake had left it for whole hours. “Breakfast?” Jake asks simply, like all this effort isn’t a big deal.

“That sounds perfect,” she agrees, and for a moment her ribs struggle to contain the fondness and familiar fluttering that fills her body with excitement and love when he grins toothily in response, before turning straight back to the kitchen.

“Okay, sit down, sit down,” he says excitedly, gesturing to the barstools on the other side of the counter. It’s actually a pretty smart use of the space, she thinks, given that the counter has nothing underneath it- there’s no way you’d be able to get a table into this room along with their couch and TV. “Juice? Coffee? Tea?”

“Coffee sounds beyond incredible,” she says happily, trying with everything she has not to melt at his desperation to have this perfect. “So, tired from last night?”

“A little,” Jake laughs.

“Steady on, you two,” Charles teases in a forced, insinuating voice, just a little too loud, giving an exaggerated wink. Amy looks at Jake a little confusedly, before they seem to realise in unison that he’s talking about sex. “Oh,” Charles deflates in embarrassment, “you meant the wedding.”
Amy laughs fully, completely taken aback by the mere possibility that she’s the least nervous person in this room right now.

“Amy, this is Charles.”

“Hi,” Amy offers her hand, which Charles shakes firmly.

“Hey,” he chuckles a little sheepishly. “You’re about to have the best breakfast in New York. And most of it was made by Jake!” He beams as she laughs at this. “It’s nice to meet you. Finally.”

He gives Jake a suggestive wink as he exits the kitchen, giving the food one final inspection.

“Finally,” she repeats smugly, grinning at Jake.

“Yeeaaah,” Jake says slowly, “in case you didn’t realise, y’know, from those CDs- I’m a tad obsessed with you.”

“I think I’ll learn to live with it.”

He laughs softly and brings her coffee over to the counter at which she sits, then leans over, planting a gentle kiss against her lips.

After a couple of seconds, they break apart, resting against each other by foreheads, which is where he leaves another small peck before he says the one thing that fills her with all the contentedness in the world.

“I’m so happy you’re here.”

Me too, she thinks, wondering if any of this could be any more perfect, sunlight pouring through the window into a kitchen full of food and warmth and love and a boy with messy hair and a smile she’s missed with all her heart.

“Me too.”
NINE MONTHS LATER
Summer 2017 – New York City to Portland!
- this is a collection of playlists by user jperalta95.
- sharing/collaborative use is ENABLED for these playlists for the following users: amy.santiago

Amy & Jake Mix #1

She’s So Lovely – Scouting For Girls
Zombie – Jamie T
(Your Love Keeps Lifting Me) Higher & Higher – Jackie Wilson
A-Punk – Vampire Weekend
I Want You Back – The Jackson 5
20/20 – The Vaccines
The Sweet Escape – Gwen Stefani
Everybody Talks – Neon Trees
Don’t Stop Believin’ - Journey
Moves Like Jagger – Maroon 5
Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da – The Beatles
Groove Is In The Heart – Deee-Lite
Miles to Portland: 2,903
“Okay, my ride’s here, I’m out.”

Amy turns around to see Rosa, stood across from her in the doorway of their dorm room. It’s late June, the summer heat already becoming blistering, but, as per usual, her long frame dons black leather pants, a black tank top, and hevyset biker boots, completely unaffected by the weather.

“Okay. You’re sure you’ve got everything?”

“Yes, mom.” She rolls her eyes bitterly and turns to go. “God, sharing a room with you has been a nightmare.”

Amy only looks at her, raising her eyebrows.

“Thank God we’re going to have our very own apartment next year, huh,” she replies, unable to stop the smile that creeps onto her face.

No matter how cool Rosa acts from here on out, she can’t deny that she likes Amy at least enough to have found a cute, affordable place to share with her- oh, and Gina, who’s planning to move into the city in September. Understandably, given that they’ve only been dating a few months, her and Rosa swear it doesn’t actually count as moving in together.

“Thank God,” Rosa agrees, a brief smile flashing over her face. “Have a good summer, Ames.”

“You too, RoRo,” she teases, deliberately using a nickname she knows she hates. Rosa laughs once, in more of a grunt, flipping her off sarcastically as she leaves the room. Amy smiles to herself and
goes back to taping up her last box.

The room, the whole building, now, feels eerily quiet, the usual movement and hubbub of students completely absent.

Amy’s fingertips skim the cardboard beneath them and firmly press the last piece of tape against the small slit in the material. It’s nothing important, this box, only a few books, some electrics, and a couple of old diaries. Still, it feels like more, leaving this room behind.

A year ago she wouldn’t have believed you if you’d told her where she is now- aside from the solid, close group of friends she’s developed over the year, she’s also aced all her classes, survived her first ever set of college finals, had the most fun she’s ever had in her life, and managed to keep hold of the most incredible boyfriend of all time.

And now it’s coming to a close, just for now, and although she knows her summer will be incredible, and sophomore year will probably be even more challenging and exciting, there’s something a little bittersweet about seeing her room like this. All plain walls, and cheap floor, and no her-and-Rosa.

A loud honk from outside window catches her a little off-guard. She dismisses it quickly, automatically, used to the sounds of traffic and occasionally, angry New-Yorkers outside her window.

Just as she begins to sink back into her moment of nostalgia, however, another, longer honk comes. And one more, just for safety.

Rolling her eyes, she turns and walks up to her window, sliding it up and open.

“Y’know, that gets annoying after a while,” she jibes loudly into the street.

“Don’t care!”

Parked in a moving truck directly opposite her building, feet kicked up, leaning out of the window, is her boyfriend, grinning toothily up at her window. He’s wearing a huge pair of sunglasses, which he props up with one hand while the other rests on the horn.

She itches to tell him off for being inconsiderate, a little too loud, but the love he stirs in her overwhelms this urge, instead forcing her into a stifled smile, an admittance of defeat.

It’s perhaps a good thing that she doesn’t scold him, given that it’d make no difference- he’s already leant forward and fiddled awkwardly with the car’s speaker, and is now blasting the first song on their shared playlist,

“C’mon! It’s official! We’re back on the road, baby! Amy and Jake 2: The Moving Truck’s Revenge.”

She cringes, looking apologetically at a few passers-by, but can’t help the giggle that the sight of him dancing in the front seat of the car to music, their music, prompts from her.

“Okay, I’m coming down!” She shouts, closing the window and slinging her bag over her shoulder, before grabbing that final box and hurrying out of her room.

She speeds down the stairway, leaving that room behind, beyond ready to jump into the future, no
matter what it is, with the boy waiting for her outside.

Her feet hit the ground hard as she runs out into the street and jumps into the truck, sharing a kiss and blasting the music. The engine jumpstarts, and just like that, it’s starting all over again.

She doesn’t look back.

Chapter End Notes

well, there it is!!! we did it, we’re here, it's over,,,, i’m crying,,,,,

first off, and most obviously:

THANK YOU.

thank you for the comments and the kudos and the friends I've made through writing this fic. thank you for following my playlists and enjoying my music. thank you for even an ounce of enthusiasm towards something that I do. thank you for keeping me inspired and motivated to create something, to keep my own ideas going, even if just for the sake of a story. thank you. THANK YOU.

WHEW okay now I've dried my eyes let me also offer you this: https://open.spotify.com/user/hotelsweet/playlist/2Jlx27Yf8zwb5j1DbGUm

^ this sucker is the full playlist! yep! you heard me! all 305 songs used in this fic. everything from amy's mom's car to a restaurant in Utah to a bar in Chicago. it's all there. pls enjoy it if u want it

the last three months have been so intense and fun and I've enjoyed writing this bad boy SO MUCH. like I've spent whole days just sat writing and thinking and planning over something I always thought was just going to be for myself. thank you for everything however!! there is more to come!!! if you like my writing lmao

I'm now pretty regularly updating my tumblr with prompts/headcanons, if you're into that kinda thing (please come n hmu with ideas/requests!! I'm bored and sad and have all the time in the world). I'm also hoping to move onto newer & bigger thingssss which means more WIPs, more requests, you name it I'm here for it

okay. that's pretty much it. so I'm gonna post this then head off somewhere to feel mildly lost for a moment without any more epic detour to write?? I guess?

thank you.

<3

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