Summary

Riley glances at all of them, and in that moment it hits her how much they’ve all grown. Sure, a picture can show the physical change, but the atmosphere of their dynamic has grown and shifted with them. They’re a group of energy, boundless energy, and Maya’s determined to make it kinetic before they’re separated. For some reason, a lesson from years ago echoes through her head.

“We need to circle the ones we love for as long as they’re here. We need to hold them close, because no matter how far we travel, they are the ones who hold us in place. It’s gravity, and without it, we would just all float away from each other.”

She’s not ready to float away just yet. After a deep breath, she nods consent. “Let’s go before I change my mind.”
Considering the amount of schools Isadora Smackle applied to, there wasn’t a whole lot of surprise when she basically got her pick of the lottery.

What surprises Riley is the sheer amount of scholarship offers they’re throwing in her face. Every time Smackle makes a point of deciding, one of the competing schools will come back with an even larger financial aid offer and even more promises of success. M.I.T. is practically breaking down her door, and Princeton is throwing money her way like it’s going out of style. Harvard is promising her prestige, Yale’s promising her brand recognition.

“Aren’t all of these schools going to give you brand recognition?” Zay asks as they’re sitting in Topanga’s, sorting through all of the letters. “There’s not one school in here that I don’t recognize. I feel like I’m looking at the Buzzfeed list of the hardest schools to get into.”

“Buzzfeed?” Farkle’s face is skeptical. “You’re trusting Buzzfeed over Forbes? Or any other possible source?”

“Hey, you get your information how you do, and I’ll get mine.”

“This is amazing, Smackle,” Riley says enthusiastically, reaching over the table to lightly pat her hand in congratulations. “How on Earth are you going to decide?”

After nearly six years of friendship, Smackle has acclimated to Riley’s friendly touches, even if she’s not particularly enthused by them. She tentatively pats Riley’s hand in return, before slipping from her grasp to pick up a couple of the letters. “It’ll come down to logistics. Which choice will ultimately maximize educational opportunities and future career possibilities whilst simultaneously requiring the lowest amount of funding.”

Maya blinks, exchanging an amused look with Lucas before shaking her head. “I still don’t understand a word she says. Guess that’s why all these letters are for her and not for me.”

“But you must have some inkling,” Riley urges. “Not one of these schools speaks to you more than anything else? There’s not a little voice in your head screaming at you to pick a certain one?”

Smackle shakes her head adamantly as she flips through them, although Riley catches her linger on one and cranes her neck slightly to see. John Hopkins University. Glancing back up and noticing the excited gleam in Smackle’s eyes, Riley’s smile widens. It seems she’s not so undecided after all.

“Well, it’ll have to be whichever school has the best program for aeronautical or aerospace engineering,” Farkle says quickly, also catching her linger on the letter. “If you want to end up at NASA, you’ll have to think about that.”

“That’s correct,” she admits, looking up to meet his eyes. “Impressive how you know my ambitions so well, dearest one.”

He smiles and puts his arm around her shoulders, hugging her closer and looking over the letters proudly. But something about the interaction seems off to Riley. There was an unusual hesitancy that neither of them had ever displayed with one another before, a hesitancy between Farkle and Smackle that seemed so unnatural Riley didn’t see how anyone could miss it.

No one else seems to notice.
Maya picks up the offer from Harvard, holding it gingerly by the corner as if it’s dangerous or unpleasant. “If you end up at one of these super prestigious schools, will you get me a jacket and send it to me? I want to wear it around my college for us normals and freak everyone out. They’ll be all psyched because I can be like ‘oh, yeah, I got in to Harvard, but I figured, eh, pass.’ How hilarious will that be?”

One of Riley’s favorite moments of senior year is when Zay tells her he wants to be a dancer.

It’s still somewhat rare to find a time where the two of them are without Lucas or Maya, and that time was barely an exception. It was the annual Matthews New Year’s Eve party, and the two of them were having a lively discussion about the last semester of their high school careers. Maya was across the roof picking on Josh for lamely attempting to grow a goatee, and Lucas had just left them to grab a drink for Riley. So, really, the moment happened rather coincidentally.

Zay gazes out over the skyline of Manhattan, glittering with even more light than usual thanks to the New Year. The din of the crowd in Time Square almost sounds like a pre-recorded track considering how often they’ve heard it every year.

“You know, I remember when I came here from Texas I was worried I wasn’t gonna like it,” Zay says softly.

Riley feigns offense, gasping loudly. “Not like New York? Not possible!”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” he laughs, grinning at her antics. She smiles back. “But all I knew about it was the reputation, and that my best friend was here. Which was worth the chance, but compared to Texas this place is noisy and crazy and a little intimidating. City that never sleeps, and all that stuff.”

Riley tilts her head curiously. “And now?”

“Well, I’m glad I’m here,” he sighs. He hesitates, before locking eyes with her. “Can I tell you something?”

She nods encouragingly. “I’m the person you go to if you want to tell someone something. Kind of my reputation for the last six years. We could even go to the bay window, if you’d be so inclined.”

“I’m fine here,” he assures her. After a moment of silence, he takes a deep breath. “I applied to be a dance major.”

“Really? Ballet?”

He nods slowly, avoiding her eyes and staring at the skyline again. “It seemed so stupid at the time. I mean, for the last six years I never really… I never actually thought it was something I should actually do. But then when I was applying and stuff, all I could think was what would actually make me happy? What could I see myself enjoying for the rest of my life? No harm in trying, right?” He glances at her. “It was almost like I had your peppy little voice in my head.”

“Aw, how sweet.”

“It was a little annoying.” Riley shoves him lightly. “But don’t say anything yet, okay? I haven’t even told Lucas yet. I don’t know why I’m telling you now.”

“Reputation,” she reminds him. “And Lucas will support you no matter what. You know that.”
“Yeah, I know, I know.”

“We all will.” She rubs his shoulder affectionately. “I guess my question is, if you get accepted, are you going to go?”

His expression becomes distant. It’s evident he hasn’t even really considered that possibility to himself yet.

Lucas rejoins them, effectively ending the conversation. Riley never hears a definitive answer.

Acceptance letters arrive for Zay Babineaux, including admission to the University of North Carolina School of the Arts. When he tells the group about majoring in dance, all of them are predictably supportive, especially Lucas. Just like Riley knew they would be.

--

Farkle’s very own hoard of acceptance letters doesn’t shock any of them.

The moment he hears back from Princeton University offering scholarship, Stuart Minkus practically loses it. He’s so proud, almost unbearably so. For weeks leading up to decision day, he jokes with Farkle about how he’ll need to stock up on spirit wear and maybe the whole family should just move to New Jersey. His mom is equally proud, albeit less openly enthusiastic.

The only one who doesn’t seem downright set on Farkle Minkus going to Princeton is Farkle Minkus.

Riley and Maya try to get him to talk about it, but he always shrugs them off. Both of them know this is a big indicator that something isn’t right, as Farkle tends to close himself off when he’s dealing with something emotional rather than logical. Still, neither of them get very far with him.

Smackle reports that she also had trouble getting him to admit what the issue is. He’d be perfectly fine, both of them playfully arguing about the probability of some quantum theory that none of the others would begin to pick apart, but the moment Smackle brought up college and deciding where to go, he’d noticeably freeze up and stop talking. One hundred to zero, thanks to one topic change.

Lucas attempts a similar approach, bringing it up while expressing his own anxiety about acceptances. It doesn’t go as well as he hopes, Farkle just getting defensive and throwing around some comment about how Lucas’s face is going to get him anywhere as it usually does and shutting down the conversation before it even starts.

Long story short, Farkle spends a lot of time snapping at them at the beginning of second semester.

His world is rocked completely when his grandfather passes away.

Riley didn’t realize they were so close, but the loss totally breaks Farkle in a way none of them have seen before. After getting him to stop pushing them all away, one late night at Topanga’s finally knocks the walls down and he opens up to them about everything. Why he’d been so distant, why he wasn’t excited for college, how he felt trapped by his dad’s excitement that he himself didn’t share. How while being accepted to all the ivy leagues is a nice ego boost, he doesn’t feel like he’d belong at any of them.

Once the others comfort Farkle as best as they can and head home, Riley and Maya take him back to the bay window to help him piece through his emotions together. He hands them one of the his acceptance letters, where he’s been admitted with a full ride to Washington University in St. Louis.
“My grandpa went there,” he explains in a murmur, watching Maya and Riley read over the letter. “Sure, he never went on to win an award or make some big discovery, but he was still a man of science. And he was happy.”

“You want to go here,” Riley says, locking eyes with him. “Don’t you?”

“My dad is so excited about me going to Princeton. I can’t do that to him.”

“This isn’t about him,” Maya snaps, getting heated as she always does when it comes to Farkle. That’s one of Riley’s favorite things about her, how fiercely protective she is of her friends. Especially when they won’t protect themselves. “This is about you. You’re the one who has to survive wherever for four years. At least.”

“She’s right, Farkle,” Riley chimes in, patting his shoulder. “If you want to go to St. Louis, you should follow your heart there. It’s telling you that for a reason. The universe is trying to tell you something—listen to it.”

He glances away from both of them, nodding in defeat. Maya and Riley exchange a look, before Maya reaches forward to pat his knee. “Farkle?”

“What?”

Maya nods to Riley, who speaks for both of them. “Your grandfather would be so proud of you.”

When Farkle does tell his father how he feels, he’s amazed by how sympathetic and supportive his parents are. Stuart apologizes profusely for pressuring him into feeling like he had to go one place or another, and immediately launches into an equally enthusiastic rant about how much Washington U gear he’s going to need to stock up on.

His mother reminds him how proud his grandfather would be of him. At that point, Farkle finally feels like he would be.

 Lucas spends most of junior year and senior year working hard to get into UC Davis.

It’s the undisputed top veterinary school in the nation, and Riley can see the hope in his eyes when he talks about it. How his whole face lights up when he is working on the application and how easily he can go off on a tangent about all the different opportunities they have and accolades they’ve received. Sometimes, she asks him a question about it for no other reason than to see his eyes light up and listen to him ramble on and on.

Despite how excited he is, the process of polishing his college application isn’t all fun and games. Although he’s the definition of a scholar-athlete, he pushes himself to take some classes that the others aren’t sure he can handle and drives himself into the ground studying. Certain college-level courses like advanced biology and anatomy really stress him out, and Riley finds herself spending more time helping him study than focusing on her own course work.

Both Maya and Zay suggest dropping a couple of classes during first semester senior year, seeing how exhausted he is, but he won’t hear anything like that. He waves them both off, throwing himself harder into the work. He even quits the baseball team in junior year, unable to effectively balance all of his work with his interests.

Maya comments many times about how there’s no way vet school can possibly be worth all the strain. And in some ways, she’s right.
Because despite all the hard work and sweat and tears invested into it, Lucas is ultimately denied acceptance to UC Davis.

He’s practically inconsolable for the first couple days after he finds out, and most of the group doesn’t even see him. It’s only Riley and Zay who actually interact with him during those rough couple of days, trying to encourage him and remind him that one college acceptance doesn’t define who he is. And they have evidence to prove it, as all of his other applications returned acceptances.

The second night after finding out, a quiet Saturday night while everyone is stressfully preparing for midterms, it’s Riley’s turn to cheer up Lucas. She helps get Auggie out to the movies with his friends, and makes sure Cory and Topanga make it out the door for their date. Then, she waits patiently in her room for him to knock at the bay window, letting him in the moment he appears.

They do what they usually do, starting by watching a movie they haven’t seen before only to end up pausing it halfway through because they got reminded of some topic that sends them spiraling into a conversation that they never quite return from. That’s what Riley loves about them—once they start talking, they just can’t stop. Even if they jump topics a hundred times, they never run out of things to say.

As the night gets later their voices get softer. Sometimes they’re quiet for long periods of time, not because they don’t have something to say, but simply because they enjoy the quiet. As crucial as conversation is to their relationship, as they’ve gotten older they’ve found solace in the peacefulness each of them brings out in the other, too.

They’re sprawled on the floor in front of the bay window, a habit they’ve fallen into since a particularly nasty fight in sophomore year where Maya declared that sitting in the bay window to talk was “hers and Riley’s thing.” A fight over how much time Riley spends between the two of them was unpleasant but sort of unavoidable, and for all intents and purposes it cleared up relatively painlessly. She’s glad they got it out of the way—the dynamic between the three of them is much better now.

Riley’s laying on the floor with her feet propped up against the window, Lucas leaning against the window seat so they can face each other. After a bout of silence, Lucas speaks first.

“What if Farkle is right?”

Riley shrugs. “It wouldn’t be surprising. He’s a genius, he’s right about a lot of things. What would Farkle be right about, in your case?”

There’s a long pause. He swallows before he speaks again. “About me.”

Riley diverts her gaze from the ceiling to look at him. She’s alarmed by how solemn his expression is, and the blueish glow cast over them from moonlight doesn’t really help the effect. “What about you?”

He shrugs wordlessly, opening his mouth and closing it when he can’t find the words. He props his elbows on his knees and presses his thumbs together in a fidgety way, focusing on them rather than her. “Maybe I am just a face. Maybe that’s all I’m good for.”

“What?” Riley says, shock laced through her words. She sits up immediately. “No. That’s not true.”

“Clearly, Davis thinks so,” he murmurs, pressing his thumbs more firmly together. He starts to speak again but nothing comes out, just a shaky exhale. His lower lip trembles and he turns his
head away, clearing his throat.

“Lucas, you’re not just a face,” Riley states, scooting closer to him and kneeling in front of the window, touching his knee gently. He still won’t look her in the eyes, but she can see how glossy his are.

Even though she can cry at the drop of a hat without shame, none of her friends have ever been that way. She’s seen all of them cry over the past six years, sure, but never often and sometimes only once or twice. Smackle’s only cried once in front of her, and Riley’s not sure she’ll ever witness it again. Lucas is almost equally as rare, once or twice in all the time they’ve known each other.

This would mark the third time.

She leans forward and wraps her arms around him, embracing him tightly and tucking her head against his shoulder. To her relief he allows it, hugging her back and taking the opportunity to be vulnerable. They’re quiet again for a while as she holds him close and he gets all the tears out, something he would never do in front of Zay despite how close they are. It’s been bottled up for a while, and Riley allows him all the time he needs to let it out.

Once he’s calmed down, Riley talks him through all of his options, reminding him how UC Davis is in no way, shape, or form the end of the world.

“It’s the best school—,” he argues.

“Yeah, I know, so everyone keeps saying,” she talks over him, pressing a finger to his lips playfully to get him to shut up. “But who cares? The really brilliant people don’t all come from the same place. It’s about the person, not the place. Like, my mom would have succeeded no matter where she went because that’s who she is. You’re the same way. You’re going to be an amazing vet no matter where you get your start, Lucas. You have to know that.”

“Topanga is a whole other tier of human being.”

Riley rolls her eyes, taking his face in her hands and making him look at her. “Will you listen to me, please? You’re going to be a veterinarian, UC Davis or not. And if it’s that important, you can always apply to transfer. But you can’t just give up on it now. Go somewhere, keep on the track, and see where you end up. Isn’t that one of the best parts about all of this growing up stuff? Seeing where the journey takes us.”

He can’t help but smile, shaking his head slightly. “I don’t know how you do it.”

“What?”

“Make everything better. Clear my head without even trying.”

She melts a little bit at the earnest tone of his words, smiling shyly as he leans forward to kiss her. She accepts it happily, before settling down against the bay window next to him. “You know, you got into all those other schools. One of them has to have a good veterinary program.”

“They do,” he admits. “A&M isn’t bad.”

She rests her head softly against his shoulder. “Maybe you’ll end up back in Texas after all.”

“As long as I’ve still got you, I don’t really care where I end up.”

“Well, then you’ll be fine,” she says confidently, taking his hand in both of hers. “Because you’ve
Maya does a very good job of outwardly treating the college acceptance process like a big joke.

She teases them for stressing so hard over their applications, but only Riley knows how much effort she puts into her portfolio. She spends entire weekends upstate with Shawn to avoid distraction, or holed up in the bay window sketching away, trying to display as much of her talent as she can. Riley finds the effort a little futile—Maya can never truly capture how much talent she has in one silly portfolio.

She submits other applications, of course, to schools she doesn’t care about and majors she’s only mildly interested in. Much like Lucas with veterinary school and Zay with ballet, Maya is hoarding up all of her hope into a very specific plan for the future. And the first step is getting into a school that offers that major, to the strongest possible degree.

“CalArts and Rhode Island School of Design are the best options, I mean, after Royal College,” Maya tells Riley one afternoon while she’s in one of those moods, crafting sketch after sketch after sketch. Riley picks at her own work and watches from her bed, fond of how engrossed Maya gets in her art. Her whole face softens, although her eyes are fierce with concentration. “But that’s in the UK, and there’s no way I’m going that far away.”

“CalArts?”

“Yes, honey, keep up with me here,” she says without looking up. “California Institute of the Arts. It’s actually like the fifth on the list or something, but I put it higher up because of its location. How cool would it be to go to school in Los Angeles?”

Riley grins, giving her best friend a nod. “But wouldn’t that be just as far as London? Only the other way?”

“Well, the water in the way of Britain kind of mentally adds way more space.”

“If you got into one of those, would you go that far away? Like, would you take the chance?”

Maya lifts her eyes from the sketchbook, gazing blankly at the wall in front of her. Then, she shakes herself out of it, continuing to sketch. “Los Angeles would be amazing. But it doesn’t even matter. I’m not going to get in anyway.”

“You don’t know that. You haven’t even submitted an application yet!”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah.” She waves Riley off.

When acceptance letters do arrive, however, CalArts is welcoming Maya with eagerly open arms.

Her whole family is thrilled. Her mom is in tears, and Riley and Maya aren’t much better as they’re discussing their college choices in the bay window that night. Although none of her friends are really criers, Riley has a special talent of bringing out the tears from Maya.

She wipes her face, inhaling shakily. “It’s three thousand miles away.”

“I know,” Riley cries.

“You’re going to be here, and I’m going to be all the way out there.”
Riley wants to reply but she’s crying too hard. She can’t tell if it’s predominantly due to how happy she is for her best friend, how thrilled she is that her talent is finally being recognized, or how terrified she is at the prospect of being so far away from her thunder.

Maya takes a deep breath, wiping the tears from her cheeks again before turning to face Riley head on, giving her a serious look. “Tell me to stay.”

“What?”

“If you think I should stay, just tell me.” Maya’s eyes are deadly serious. “If you don’t want me to go, I won’t go.”

There’s a small part of Riley, the icky, selfish part, that wants to tell her to stay. While it’s been a long time since she was truly scared of change, everything that’s going to happen within the next year is going to be so much of it, all at once. It would be nice to have one of the most important things in her life stay consistent.

But as she looks into Maya’s eyes, she remembers that same expression of concentration staring down at a sketchbook. Soft but determined. Working and working towards doing something she loves. Maya loves Riley, but art is her passion. An opportunity like this could never be let go, especially since nothing is going to change how important they are to one another—three thousand miles apart or not.

In her heart, Riley doesn’t regret it one bit. Nothing would make her happier than seeing Maya do what she was brought into this world to do. The distance will hurt, but it will be so, so worth it.

She reaches forward and takes Maya’s hand, lifting it between them. “Go to California.”

Maya’s mouth drops open slightly. Riley squeezes her hand.

“You really think… you think I should go?”

She nods. After a moment, Maya grins and breaks into teary giggles, keeping their fingers locked together.

“I’m going to go to Los Angeles.”

“Peaches in Los Angeles!”

Both of them burst into laughter, before Riley hiccups, which makes them laugh even harder.

Maya Hart is going to the California Institute of the Arts.

--

Time passes too quickly. Before she knows it, Riley is face-to-face with the impending reality that within the next week, all of her friends will head off to their respective universities, as will she. A whole new chapter of their lives is about to begin, and she’s not sure she’s ready to move on yet.

She lies awake in her room, staring at the ceiling late into the night. She can’t help but think about how this is the room she’s lived in her whole entire life, and she’s never known anything different. How Auggie is going to start and finish high school without her always around. Sure, NYU isn’t so far away, but she won’t be living here anymore. She’ll be starting an entirely new life.

Everything has just zoomed by. Her parents always warned her it would, but now that she’s stuck
there with the future in front of her, all of this is hitting her in hindsight. How quickly she flitted through senior year, and Prom, and Graduation. How summer has just flown away from her.

Restless, she climbs out of bed and walks over to her desk. She glances at the photo pinned to her bulletin board, all of her friends together in their graduation robes.

She looks at Zay grinning in the photo with one arm around Lucas, the other one lifting his gown to show off the ballet slipper he’s wearing underneath as a prank for himself. Lucas is laughing and grinning with that smile Riley likes so much, genuine and warm and thrilled to be free from his advanced placement classes forever.

Maya is just finishing a hair flip, raising her eyebrow with her typical dramatic flair. Farkle is reeling from getting hit in the face with her hair, Smackle leaning up to brush the remaining blonde strands from his face.

And in the center of it all, there she is. Standing between Maya and Lucas, beaming like an idiot at how much she loves these people she is lucky enough to call her friends. There’s a whole world out there, it’s true, and she’s days away from starting to explore it—but these people, this little orbit, that’s truly her entire universe.

It’s almost funny how things have already started to change, but how they mostly stay the same too. Everyone was surprised when Smackle and Farkle informed the group that they had mutually agreed to break up. The way they talked about it, it seemed like the obvious thing to do. “Long distance relationships never last” was thrown around in such a scientific manner, it nearly gave Riley a heart attack.

She’s grateful Lucas isn’t one to blindly believe in science. They don’t plan on breaking up any time soon, and she’s thankful for that.

Besides, while Farkle and Smackle both seem convinced that they’re making the smart decision, neither of them seem very happy about it.

Riley digs in her bottom desk drawer and pulls out her senior yearbook, plopping it on the desk and settling into the rolling chair. She opens it and flips through a couple of pages, finding Zay’s senior photo. She continues searching to find Lucas’s, then Maya’s, then hers and Farkle’s almost right next to one another. A page or so later and there’s Smackle.

She’s shaking her head, marveling at how they’ve all grown, when a knock at her window scares her out of her skin. She yelps and turns to look over her shoulder, where Maya is pressing up against the glass of the window.

Riley scrambles to her feet and climbs onto the bay window, opening it to let Maya poke her head in. “What is it? Are you alright?”

“Please, come on.” She rolls her eyes. “Of course I’m fine. Do I look like I’m not okay?”

“Well, when you’re climbing in the bay window at one in the morning.”

“No, no, you’re mistaken,” she says with a slight shake of the head. “I’m not climbing in. You’re coming out.”

“Maya, I’m not going outside. It’s late!”

She makes a face, mimicking Riley’s complaints softly. “Riley, we’re graduates now. We’re eighteen. We’re adults. We make the rules now. It’s our world. How many more clichés do I have
to include? Just come on. And hurry up.”

The next moment, she’s gone, the only evidence she was ever there the open window and the echo of her moving just out of view.

Although the prospect makes her nervous, she can’t help but want to go. Not only because she’s curious, but because the fact that this is her last week with Maya’s antics is making her unfairly emotional. Rather than cry, she figures she should just go along with it. For one last time.

“Fine,” Riley relents.

Maya reappears, smiling triumphantly. “Atta girl. Bring anything you can’t live without.”

A strange request, but Riley takes it seriously as she quickly changes her clothes and put some shoes on. She grabs her phone and charger, stuffing them into a NYU drawstring bag along with her wallet and keys. Instinctively, she pulls the photo of them at graduation off her bulletin board and puts it in there as well. She slings the bag over her shoulder, crawling out the window.

She hesitates to touch the chain around her neck, making sure her jellybean ring is still attached and secured, before shutting the window and continuing after Maya.

“Where are you?” Riley whispers into the night, scaling around the house to get to the front.

After a moment, Maya’s voice calls to her from the front of the building. “Round the corner. You can do it, keep going.”

Riley rounds the corner and scales down the side carefully, getting to the stoop and running down the front steps. Maya’s waiting for her by the street where an old mini-van is parked, headlights on and engine running. It takes Riley a couple of moments to realize they’re not alone—Lucas comes around the front of the car to join them, the driver’s side door open. In the next moment, the back door slides open and Zay beams at her.

“What is going on?” she asks hesitantly. “Zay? Lucas?”

“We’re here too!” Farkle calls, craning his head around Zay’s seat to wave at her from the back. Smackle’s head pops up next to his, smiling.

“Good morning, Riley. You look as though you didn’t get much sleep.”

“Why are you all here?” Riley fixes her gaze on Maya, narrowing her eyes expectantly. “What did you do?”

“It’s not what I did, it’s what we’re going to do.” She leans back and pats the car affectionately. “This is Cory. Cory, meet Riley.”

“Is that supposed to be a joke?”

“Cory is going to take us on a little adventure,” she informs Riley, walking back to stand in front of her and taking her arms. “So hop in.”

Lucas smirks at her. Zay wiggles his eyebrows. It takes Riley an admittedly long time to get it.

“Are you guys crazy?” she nearly shouts, her jaw dropping. “We can’t just take off right before we have to go to college. Smackle, don’t you have to be at Hopkins in two days for early orientation?”

“I do, Riley. You’re right.”
Maya raises her eyebrow inquisitively, sharp as always. “Where do you think we’re going?”

“We’ve all got to get to our schools at some point in the next week. Almost perfectly in order,” Farkle explains.

“So, we figured, why not make a trip of it?” Zay adds.

Lucas nods at them, before looking back at Riley. “One last adventure.”

“And you know how I love adventure,” Maya says with a devious smirk, shrugging her shoulders with faux bashfulness.

Riley can’t believe her eyes. She can’t believe she’s not accidentally asleep and dreaming this insanity. “We cannot do this. Do your parents know?”

All of them except for Maya give some sort of indication of agreement.

“Most of them are going to meet us there.”

“This trip is mostly funded by Minkus International,” Farkle says proudly. “My dad thinks doing something adventurous will help me before I go off on my own. Better to do it with friends, and with relative safety.”

Riley widens her eyes at Maya. “Does your mom know? Shawn?”

“Well, they’ll know soon enough. Once they see ol’ Cory here is gone. Don’t give me that look,” she says exasperatedly. “Cory is coming with me to California anyway. He’s going to be my ride. So we have to get it all the way out there anyway. I’d rather spend fifty hours with you guys on the road than my parents.”

Riley's curiosity is beginning to morph into excitement, despite her mortification. “No. No way, we can’t do this. We’ll get into so much trouble. Is it really worth that?”

“Riles,” Maya says patiently, clutching her fist in her other hand and sighing. “Don’t make me do this.”

Riley glances down at her hands, narrowing her eyes. “You wouldn’t.”

“Don’t make me.”

“You wouldn’t dare.”

“What nonsense are they doing now?” Smackle asks from behind Zay.

Maya shakes her head disdainfully, raising her fist in the air and inhaling deeply. “Ring power,” she declares, locking eyes with Riley, all determination and no softness.

“Oh, she really did that,” Zay murmurs.

Riley opens her mouth to argue, but can’t find the power. Ring power is law. It always has been. “We can’t,” she repeats.

“You can’t break ring power,” Maya states flatly.

“I don’t even have a bag! I’m not even packed!”
“As if I didn’t think about that? I already packed for you. Suitcase is in the back,” Maya fires back.

Riley struggles to think of other possible ways this could go wrong. “Do we know where we’re going?”

“Fully scheduled days, driving shifts, and marked map.”

“What about money? Food? Hotels?”

“Minkus International!” Farkle repeats.

“We’ve got all of it covered,” Lucas assures her.

It feels crazy. There’s no way they can actually do this. “This kind of stuff just doesn’t happen.”

“Most people don’t have their dad teach them all through middle and high school either,” Maya proclaims. She’s high on adventure tonight, and it shows in her confidence. “Most people don’t get to watch their mother find love again with their best friend’s dad’s best friend. A lot of stuff that happens to us isn’t necessarily realistic. I’ve kind of learned to just go with it. Are you in, or are you in?”

Riley glances at all of them, and in that moment it hits her how much they’ve all grown. Sure, a picture can show the physical change, but the atmosphere of their dynamic has grown and shifted with them. They’re a group of energy, boundless energy, and Maya’s determined to make it kinetic before they’re separated. For some reason, a lesson from years ago echoes through her head.

“We need to circle the ones we love for as long as they’re here. We need to hold them close, because no matter how far we travel, they are the ones who hold us in place. It’s gravity, and without it, we would just all float away from each other.”

She’s not ready to float away just yet. After a deep breath, she nods consent. “Let’s go before I change my mind.”

All of them cheer, both Lucas and Maya reaching forward to take her hands and lead her to the car. She hops in the passenger seat and closes the door, glancing up at the brownstone in front of her. The place she’s called home for eighteen years.

“I’ll be back soon,” she promises her family, and herself, as the car doors shut and Lucas pulls away from the sidewalk.
By the time they’re heading onto the highway, Riley relaxes enough to actually enjoy the drive. All of her nerves convert into excitement, giving her a jolt of energy that shocks away the exhaustion. Part of her still can’t believe only twenty minutes ago she was lying in bed, losing sleep over what would happen to all of her friends within the next week, and now she’s on the open road with them all, heading off on the next journey together.

Still, the excitement can’t cancel out her organizational nature. “You sure about the scheduling? That we’ll get everyone to school in time?”

“Plenty of it,” Maya says smugly, leaning back in her seat and crossing her arms. Riley looks over her shoulder to lock eyes with her, watching her nod towards the dashboard. “Map is in the glove compartment, if you’re so inclined to question my judgment.”

“Smackle and I checked it over too,” Farkle pipes up, “Since you have every right to question Maya’s judgment.”

“You got something to say about me? Say it to my face.”

“Technically,” Smackle says helpfully, “He did.”

Riley ignores Maya’s grumbling and reaches forward to open the glove compartment, pulling out a folded up map and the small spiral notebook underneath. She spreads out the map first, smoothing the edges against her knees crisscrossed on the seat.

In each city where one of their schools is located, a small sparkly star is stuck over the dot marking the location. Purple for Riley, starting the trail. Red for Smackle in Maryland. Orange for Zay in North Carolina. Green for Farkle in Missouri, blue for Lucas in Texas. And all the way in Los Angeles is a yellow star, indicating the last stop and Maya’s final destination.

The harsh reality of just how far Maya is going washes over Riley as she stares at the black line of Sharpie connecting their travel plan. She pushes the map closed and opens the notebook instead, taking in Lucas’s neat scrawl listing the tentative itinerary for each day, possible activities, driving rotation, and notes about time allotted for an emergency, should it arise.

“Figured you’d like to see it all written out rather than just in theory,” he says from the driver’s seat.

She nods enthusiastically. “Certainly makes it look a lot more possible.”

He glances from the road to smile at her, eliciting one in return from her easily.
“Hey, hey, no googly eyes now,” Zay chides from behind her, “Watch the road!”

Riley giggles in spite of herself and averts her gaze from Lucas to looking out the window. The Manhattan skyline twinkles charmingly, and it sort of feels like a friendly goodbye. Like the city is wishing her luck.

But how starkly the cityscape stands out against the dark sky reminds her just how late it is. “We’re not traveling too far, are we? I mean, tonight. It’s not safe for us to drive hours at a time this late at night.”

“Gee, it’s like you didn’t even read the itinerary,” Maya teases, propping her feet up on the back of Riley’s armrest. “The actual journey starts tomorrow. Tonight, we just had to get you out of the city.”

“The thinking was if we get you past the state line, you won’t be as likely to chicken out and want to go back,” Zay explains further.

Riley gasps, bringing a hand to her chest in offense. “Why is it that you all think I would be the one to chicken out? What on Earth about my personality makes you all come to that horrible assumption about my ability to be dangerous and spontaneous?”

“Because you’re responsible,” Farkle says.

“Because you’re in love with rules,” Zay adds.

“Because your conscience is stronger than your need to rebel,” Lucas offers.

“Because you’ve never proven otherwise which would lead us to a different conclusion,” Smackle suggests.

“Because Cory is going to have a fit when he finds out,” Maya finishes, grinning one of her devilish smiles that always makes Riley wonder what mess she’s going to have to clean up next. In this case, that mess is going to be her father. “And to be honest, I’m a little sad I’m not going to be there in person to witness it.”

Zay nods. “Yeah, that too.”

“He is going to freak,” Riley agrees, already feeling a little bit of guilt over the situation. She knows he’ll call the moment he finds out and she’ll be able to explain it then, but something in her makes her want to call now. That exact part that her friends just pinpointed so well. She reaches into her drawstring bag and pulls out her phone. “Maybe if I just give him a call…”

“No!”

All five voices shout at once and three hands fly towards her in unison, Lucas’s from her left and Zay and Maya’s from behind. Lucas nudges her phone out of her hand and tosses it to Zay, who hands it to Maya.

“Hands on the wheel, Lucas!” Farkle snaps from behind the chaos.

“Actually,” Smackle chimes in, leaning forward between the seats to insert herself into the fray. “Being able to drive with one hand, although moderately more risky, is a symbol of driving skill. It signals a less rigid grip on the wheel which indicates more relaxed posture, hence more confidence on the road.”
“Nah, Lucas really ain’t that good.”

“Thanks, Zay.”

Riley lunges for the phone and Maya jerks back and raises her eyebrows, holding it out of her reach. “Just what do you think you’re doing?”

“What did I do?” Riley whines, attempting another swipe. “Why can’t I call him and let him know?”

“Riley, if you call your father right now and tell him what’s happening, he’ll drive out here after us and make you go back home.” Farkle locks eyes with her, speaking in his most matter-of-fact tone. “That’s why we’re relying on the state line theory—if you get that far, you’re already on your way. He’s less likely to force you home.”

“The more distance traveled, the more freedom you obtain,” Smackle fills in, earning an affirmative nod from Farkle. They exchange a smile.

“And if you call him now, you’ll ruin the entire trip.” Maya cuts right to the chase. “Do you want to ruin the trip?”

“Alright, calm down,” Lucas says pointedly to Maya, glancing at her in the rear view mirror. She makes a face at him. “Riley, listen. If you are seriously uncomfortable with this, I can turn the car around and take you back.”

“Aw, boo!” Maya cries out. “Who let him drive first?”

“Lucas the Good, on patrol once again,” Farkle adds.

Ignoring their jeers, Lucas reaches out and pats Riley’s hand, resting on her armrest. “You tell me, and I’ll do it. This is only going to be worth it if all of us are in. Just say the word.”

Farkle presses his fingers against his temple. “Lucas, if you take your hand off that wheel one more time I’m calling the cops.”

Riley glances down at his hand on top of hers, then to all of her friends piled into the van behind her. Although she’s slightly terrified of what’s going to happen when morning comes and the real adventure begins, and what consequences may come from it, she’s so happy already being here with them. If what’s to come in college and life is always going to be a little terrifying, what’s to stop her from starting to take it on right now?

“I’m okay,” she says with an exhale, giving Lucas a reassuring smile before nodding to the back. “I’m in for the journey. I won’t freak out and call my dad.”

Maya whoops loudly and holds out her hand, gesturing for Riley to hand over her bag. “I’ll just hold onto it for the night, if you don’t mind. I trust you, but for good measure.”

She does, a tad reluctantly. Maya hums triumphantly and opens the bag, poking her head in as she drops the phone back into its depths.

Riley takes a deep breath, readjusting to face forward and clasping her hands together on her lap, straightening up. “Okay. This is it. I’m invested, I’ve given up my agency, I’m ready for this to be amazing. Just know that if I get home and my father locks me in a tower for the rest of my life, it’s your fault.”
“Oh, Mr. Matthews could be more creative than that,” Zay says, propping up his legs over Maya’s. She attempts to nudge him off with limited success. “He’d probably make you be a student in his class for the rest of your natural life.”

“Oh, so that was punishment? I thought that was just our luck,” Maya jokes.

“Look!” Smackle suddenly hollers, pointing out the front window to the road in front of them. Just in the glow of the headlights, the big sign brandishing a happy welcome to the state of Pennsylvania greets them.

“Welcome to the state line,” Farkle proclaims.

“Hear, hear!”

“Great!” Lucas cheers. “Now someone tell me where the hell I’m going.”

“I would look it up on my phone,” Riley says coyly, crossing her legs and shrugging. “But I don’t have my phone.”

“You’re fun when you’re sassy,” Zay says with a laugh, leaning forward to clap her on the shoulders.

“It’s okay, I’m pulling it up.” There’s a pause as Farkle enters the address, his phone lighting up his and Smackle’s faces a translucent blue. “You’re going to be on this for another forty miles. Then there’s an exit. Head towards Philadelphia.”

“Aw, Philly,” Riley coos.

Smackle nods. “We’ll get to see all of it tomorrow.”

“But for now, we got forty miles of darkness and the open road ahead of us.” Maya holds her hand out expectantly. “Hand me the aux cord. Time to crank up the music!”

The moment they pull into the parking lot of the motel, Farkle clambers over Maya to hop out of the car before Lucas even turns off the engine.

“I’ll go check us in. Make sure the card my dad gave me is working out and everything.” He disappears before any of them has a chance to argue.

Zay shakes his head, unbuckling his seatbelt. “You know, I’ve known that kid for almost five years and I still can’t believe he talks that fast. I thought I was a talker, but man.”

“Yeah, he’s a twitchy one,” Maya grumbles, brushing her hair out of her face from Farkle’s hike over her seat.

The group unloads, waiting around by the car until Farkle comes back to show them which room. Riley closes the passenger door and walks around the hood to the other side where Lucas is leaning against the driver’s side door, stretching his arms and shoulders.

“You okay?” Riley questions, approaching him.

He nods, shrugging. “We’re going to be doing a lot more driving than this. This is nothing.”

“Well, you shouldn’t drive tomorrow,” she chides, leaning against the door as well and facing him.
"You don’t want to overwork yourself."

"Gee, Riley, if you’re already worried about how much people are driving we’re in for a long trip,” Maya teases, coming up to her other side. “Just wait until we get to the middle of the country and there’s only three of us. And miles and miles of Cowtown."

"Yeah, and it’ll take you a whole year to get there since Lucas doesn’t go more than five miles over the speed limit."

"Again, thank you, Zay."

"Aw, what’s the matter Huckleberry?" Maya pouts at him, resting her elbow on Riley’s shoulder. Considering she’s taller than her, it looks less comfortable than it should. “You mad someone is criticizing your ability to ride the open range?"

"Okay, okay, very funny."

“I can see it now. Ranger Rick, out on the open trail with nothing but his horse, his ten-gallon hat, and the sunset on the horizon around him. A beautiful, idyllic Western scene. Then a turtle passes through the frame because he won’t let the horse go more than three clip-clops per minute.”

"Ha ha ha."

“And in the music swells,” Maya says dramatically, inhaling deeply and tilting her head back, singing to the sky. “Ha hurr… ha hurr, ha hurr…”

Smackle interrupts the torment right as Lucas reaches over Riley to swat at Maya, earning a smack back from her. Riley holds her arms out to split them up. “It’s okay, Riley. I’ll drive most of the day tomorrow, seeing as I’ll be present for the smallest duration of the trip. It’s the least I could do.”

“It’s all in the driving rotation,” Zay agrees from the trunk, pulling out suitcases. “No one is going to be pushing themselves too hard. Our parents never would have let us go otherwise. It’s common sense. Now get over here and help a guy out.”

Riley leads the way over, leaning into the back to pull out a couple of suitcases. Under the pile she finds the one Maya packed for her, all kept in her favorite suitcase, a dark purple one that she’s had for years. She yanks it out from the back with a grin, Maya mirroring it as she comes to stand next to her. “You got my favorite one.”

“Of course I did,” she says casually. “I know you, Riles. Well enough to pack for you at least. I don’t know how you didn’t notice a good chunk of your closet was empty.”

Farkle comes out of the lobby entrance and heads towards them, and Riley can immediately tell there’s a problem. He’s keeping his head down, a hard job considering how tall he is now. But the sheepish look on his face is hard to miss. “So, we have a problem.”

“That was fast,” Zay murmurs.

“Problem?” Lucas asks with an eyebrow raise, dropping the last suitcase on the ground. “What problem?”

“Farkle, if you tell us we’re stuck sleeping in this van, I’ll kill you.”

“No, Maya, we do have a room,” he says in exasperation, waving her off. “That’s just the
There’s a long pause, all of them waiting for him to explain. Riley watches Maya’s eyebrow inch into an arch the longer Farkle stays quiet.

Finally, Zay breaks the silence. “You know, for someone who claims to live by science and logic, you sure do love your dramatic pauses.”

“We have a room,” he exhales, “But we only have one room. They only gave us one.”

“Farkle, are you kidding?” Maya snaps, crossing her arms. “You had one job!”

“Look, this was the last minute addition!” Farkle raises his arms in surrender, but his expression is defensive. “All the rest were perfectly booked and accounted for, and then you called me three hours ago saying that we had to leave tonight and that I better work fast so I did my best.”

“I’m sure it’ll be fine,” Riley offers diplomatically, smiling at all of them and clasping her hands together. “We’re going to be spending hours together in a car, what’s a little more time in a room? I’m sure we’ll be able to spread out and get enough rest.”

“Well,” Farkle trails off, earning another testy glare from Maya’s direction.

“What else?”

“It’s… you’ll just see when we get there. Hand me my suitcase.”

Farkle takes the lead, going through the outdoor hallways and taking the stairs to the second floor. They go all the way down to the corner edge of the building, stopping at the last room.

“I just want everyone to stay calm,” he repeats, digging the key out from his pocket and sliding it into the lock.

Upon opening the door, the subject of Farkle’s concerns are revealed—not only is there only one room for the six of them, there’s only one bed.

“Congratulations, Farkle Minkus, you’ve just discovered your death bed.”

“Shut up, Maya!”

Riley straightens her shoulders and strides forward into the room first, turning on the light and dropping her suitcase on the ground. She puts her hands on her hips, managing a smile and turning to face her friends. “This is good, guys. Nothing we can’t handle! We’ll be fine, come on, get in here.”

The rest of them grumble as they file in, designating a space to stack their suitcases. Smackle reaches out and gently takes Farkle’s arm, giving him a forgiving smile. He returns it gratefully, lightly touching her fingers in reply.

Maya flops onto the bed, staring at the ceiling and sighing dramatically. “At least we made it this far. I was seriously worried we weren’t going to get Riley out of the city. But we did. It’s like some reckless, mischievous spirit is watching out for us from above and letting this mayhem happen. How did you put it, Lucas? ‘A guiding hand with your best interests at heart.’”

“That’s not quite what I was referring to, but sure, we can go with that.”

“A guiding hand with your best roguish, wild interests at heart. Amen.”
Zay suddenly jumps up from sitting on the suitcases, clapping. “That reminds me. I know exactly how we should celebrate.” He grabs his backpack and unzips it, digging into the bottom to produce a tupperware container. Opening the lid, he tilts it down for all of them to see the contents.

“Cookies!”

“Grandma’s specially made cookies, packaged and sent for this very trip. And there’s enough for everyone and then some,” he says, looking pointedly at Riley. She smiles innocently. “Everyone take one, let’s go.”

He holds out the container and passes them around, stopping in front of Farkle and snapping the lid shut. “Nah, you don’t get one. Get a room with more than one bed next time and then you can have your cookie.”

“It wasn’t my fault!”

Zay shrugs, locking eyes with Farkle while he takes a bite of his cookie. “Mm, delicious.”

“This is going to be a sorry last few days with you all,” Farkle mumbles. Riley catches Smackle break her cookie in half and hand him the other piece. The way his eyes light up appreciatively makes the whole room feel a little bit brighter.

Riley still can’t believe they willingly decided to break up.

“It’s crazy that this is going to be one of the last times for a while where we’re all talking to one another at the same time,” she says thoughtfully, looking at each of them.

Maya hums indignantly and holds up a finger to silence Riley, unable to speak with her mouth full of cookie. When she swallows, she shakes her head firmly. “No getting sappy yet. It’s way too early for that. I know it’s gonna happen eventually but not one night in. Keep it together, honey.”

“Besides, we’ll be able to talk to each other as a group,” Lucas says, “Smackle’s already talked about organizing a Skype chat.”

“Yes, it’ll be simple to work out, after finding the best times for everyone.”

“Yes.” Maya pats Riley’s back, hugging her close. “We’ll sit on our laptops and talk for hours just like we do now, only it’ll be slightly more awkward because all we’ll get is a glimpse of each other’s dorm rooms and nothing else. Ten p.m., be there or be square.”

Riley’s jaw drops. “It’ll start at ten?”

“You and Zay and Smackle will be on east coast time, but Lucas and I are going to be an hour behind,” Farkle notes.

“And I’ll be three hours behind!” Maya says delightedly. “Ironic, that as the night owl of this group, I’m the one going three hours back.”

“So our Skype chats are really just going to be the five of us watching Riley sleep,” Zay laughs. Smackle smiles. “It’ll be as though we never even left Manhattan.”

Once the group finishes laughing at Riley’s expense, all of them scoot around each other as they get ready for bed. It isn’t until everyone is up and moving that Riley realizes most of them are in sweatpants or other sleep pants of some kind already. She wonders just how unexpected it was that
Maya decided to jump start the trip tonight rather than in the morning.

Farkle manages to find some movie on the channel guide and the group of them settle in to watch, dozing off over the course of the film. Even squished onto one bed, Riley’s one of the first to fall asleep, head drooping onto Lucas’s shoulder. As long as she’s with these people, she’s comfortable.

As she’s early to bed, Riley is early to rise and the first to wake up the next morning.

She lays there with her eyes closed, trying to recollect the events from last night and piece them together in a way that makes sense. The only reason she isn’t sure she dreamt it is because she’s surrounded on both sides, Maya’s knee digging into her back. Pressing her face into the pillow and taking a deep breath, Riley gives in to the sunshine and opens her eyes.

Lucas is there next to her and the first thing she sees, still sound asleep despite the sun filtering in through the curtains that are only half-drawn. She watches him rest for a few moments, his fingers resting inches from hers. He must’ve fallen asleep holding her hand, but she can’t remember.

There’s something about the way he looks when he’s sleeping that Riley loves, but she can’t quite put her finger on it. Not to mention the fact that she only has about a week to figure it out before things change and the prospect of seeing it again becomes a lot more uncertain.

Sitting up slowly as not to disturb him or Maya, Riley stretches out her legs and almost knocks Farkle right off the edge of the bed. It’s amazing how the four of them have configured themselves to fit—Maya curled up in a ball, Farkle laying somewhat diagonally and managing not to roll away, his long legs draped over Lucas’s and dangling off the side. Getting to her knees, Riley can see that Zay and Smackle both cleverly chose alternatives for the mattress, the former on the floor with a pillow and blanket and the latter in the armchair by the window.

Somehow managing to tip-toe off the center of the bed, she checks her phone. To her relief, there are not a thousand messages from her father, but it occurs to her it’s far too early for him to freak out. If they found her bedroom empty, Topanga probably rightfully assumed that she went out with Maya and will be back later in the day. In this case, she’s half-right.

No, the volcanic eruption of Mt. Matthews is more likely to come tonight, when they’re well on their way down the coast.

After dancing around Zay as to not trip over him and stopping at the bathroom, Riley slips on her sandals and grabs one of the room keys. She hesitates to lean over and tuck the blanket more snugly over Smackle, then she steps out of the room and into the warm morning air.

She’s a little bummed she missed the sunrise. The sky is a cloudy grey, no orange or pink in sight as the sun creeps higher and higher up. She wonders how many of them it’ll take to get Maya out of bed within the hour when the door opens behind her.

Smackle, blanket still wrapped around her shoulders, walks over to the railing and leans forward next to her. Still waking up and without her glasses, she looks much more serene than usual. It would probably take her a couple seconds longer to recite pi than usual. “Good morning, Riley.”

“Morning,” she chirps, giving her a smile. “You sleep okay in that chair?”

“Yes, the comfort was more than sufficient. Considering the amount of space, I’m impressed you all slept as well as you did sharing that bed.”
“I don’t know how Farkle managed to sleep along the bottom of the bed,” Riley laughs. “Did you see his legs hanging off the end?”

Smackle smiles lightly, breaking into a giggle. Riley smiles wider.

“Are you excited for John Hopkins? It’s crazy that in a day you’ll be starting your college experience.”

Smackle’s expression softens, becoming more pensive as she looks out to the cloudy horizon. It’s an expression Riley is certain she’s going to see on all of their faces many times over the next few days. A balanced mixture of excitement and terror. “It will be a learning experience, that’s all I can say for sure. Anything else would be inconclusive speculation.”

Riley nods understanding. She knows the feeling, and appreciates Smackle’s logical approach to the situation. “Maya used to say I worried about things I couldn’t control all the time, which I guess we know is true through the years. I guess that’s sort of the exact opposite approach.”

“I would concur with that assumption,” Smackle says with a teasing smile.

“I’m glad you’re going somewhere you really want to go.” There’s movement from the room that Riley catches out of the corner of her eye, but she wants to take advantage of this moment alone with Smackle. “I know you weren’t certain and wanted to weigh your options, but it makes me happy to see that you chose your heart over anything else.”

“I think I learned that from you,” Smackle admits openly. “To do otherwise would have felt like a disservice to my own ambitions.”

Riley grins. “I think we learned a lot from one another.”

“I can only hope to have acquaintances as good as you all when I get there. You, and Maya, and Lucas, and Zay…”

“And Farkle,” Riley fills in, smirking in spite of herself.

“And Farkle.” Smackle nods, looking distant again. “You’re irreplaceable. It will be hard to find people who match your caliber.”

“Smackle?”

“Yes?”

“Bay window. Bay window right now.”

“Bay window?” Smackle asks, raising her eyebrows in confusion. “Riley, your bay window is across the state line. Please tell me you know this.”

“Yes, I do. This is emergency bay window time. In times of great need but limited resources, we must imagine the bay window and allow its energies to do their magic,” she explains, holding out her hands. “And in this moment, we need the bay window. Hands, please.”

Tentatively, Smackle reaches out and places her hands in Riley’s. She hums, imagining the feeling of being in the bay window and allowing that memory and warmth to give her the courage to approach the subject head on.

“Smackle, why are you and Farkle not together?”
“What do you mean?” she asks, tilting her head. “We have been over this multiple times. It’s the most logical thing to do. Statistically speaking, long distance relationships don’t—,”

“Smackle, I’m not talking about statistics.” Riley squeezes her hands, making her meet her eyes. “It’s obvious that you still care about him, and he cares about you. If you still like each other, why not take the chance and see if you’ll be a part of the statistics that go against the trend? The exception to the rule, or however you want to put it.”

Smackle takes a deep breath, shaking her head slightly. “We’re scientists. We work by logic, it’s why we work well together.”

“Well, scientists are always trying to prove something new, aren’t they? Discover something different. Test the boundaries of what has already been established. Why not take that scientific approach? Don’t simply listen to what statistics have already proven—be scientists and set out to test the boundaries.”

She knows she shouldn’t meddle, but the curious look on Smackle’s face at this possibility feels like a breakthrough. And she knows in her heart that while she’d like to take the credit, no one in their group has done more for Smackle than Farkle. She needs him, even if she’s going to journey off on her own, and he needs her. Riley knows this better than she thinks she knows anything about herself.

Before Smackle can reply, the door opens behind them and Zay pokes his head out, looking relieved. “There you are. Next time, leave a note or something, yeah?”

“We went five feet out the door.”

“Yeah, well, I worry,” he says haughtily. “Now get in here and help. Maya’s refusing to get out of bed, it’s going to take all of us to get her up and moving.”

It ultimately takes Lucas, Farkle, Riley and Zay each taking one of Maya’s limbs and lifting her off the bed to get her to relent. Riley points out that if she can’t get up in the morning it’s going to be a long trip of them being constantly late, to which Maya merely shrugs before dramatically storming off to the bathroom.

“She loves an exit,” Farkle comments.

“And she thinks you’re dramatic,” Lucas adds to Riley.

Once all of them cycle through and get dressed and freshened up—a process that requires an additional page in the travel notebook giving everyone a turn—they lug their suitcases back out the door and down the steps to the van.

“Goodbye, devil motel!” Maya shouts gleefully, before dropping her suitcase in front of the trunk and pressing up against the van, pretending to hug it. “Good morning, Cory. I can’t wait to see your namesake blow sky high at some point today.”

Lucas tosses the keys to Smackle, who just manages to catch them. “You ready?”

“Born ready,” she affirms, Lucas and Zay exchanging amused smiles as she pushes past them to hop into the driver’s seat.

Lucas and Zay climb into the very back, Riley and Maya climbing in after them to the middle. Farkle slams the passenger door closed behind him and pulls up the directions, turning around to face them. “This is it. No turning back now.”
“The adventure is about to begin for real,” Maya says ominously to Riley, giving her an eyebrow wiggle. “You ready?”

Riley grins at all them, before linking her pinky with Maya’s. “Born ready.”

Smackle turns on the engine, pulling out of the parking lot. Maya rolls down the window and Zay whoops, yelling out towards the road.

“Philadelphia, here we come!”
About fifteen minutes into the drive, Maya is dozing off.

Riley leans forward and nudges the back of Farkle’s head, attempting to get his attention. He swivels around to face her, giving her an indignant look. “Yes? Can I help you?”

“Can you get the notebook from the glove compartment? I want to see the itinerary for the day.”

He obliges, handing it to her. Smackle glances at them out of the corner of her eye. “Riley, why are you whispering?”

“Maya’s sleeping. I don’t want to wake her up.”

Zay and Lucas exchange a mischievous look, clearing their throats.

“Maya? Asleep?” Zay shouts.

“Oh, what a shame it would be if we were to be loud and wake her up from her slumber!” Lucas adds. “It’s not as if she was the last one to wake up.”

“Or the one of the ones who got to sleep on the actual bed!”

“You know, I’d put forth the effort to argue with you idiots,” Maya says, not bothering to open her eyes, “But that would require more energy than I can currently offer.”

Riley shakes her head at her friends and their antics, opening the notebook to the first few pages and finding the notes that include Philadelphia. The suggestions are relatively generic—wander, see some sights, eat something before getting back on the road—but she sort of figures that the actual activity doesn’t really matter. The point of the trip is them getting to spend time together. What they’re doing doesn’t make much of a difference.

The closer they get to the city, the more excited Riley gets. In a weird way, it feels like a homecoming of sorts. Although she’s dreading the return of her father into her narrative in this particular case, she knows this is where he grew up and she can remember all the times they would visit when she was younger. It’s a second home, even if she’s never actually had a permanent place of residence within the city limits.
They find a parking spot by sheer dumb luck and clamber out of the van, rambling off a list of possible activities to do before just starting down the street, setting off to explore. Zay takes his phone out and begins documenting the trip, claiming he’s the social media expert of the team and that if he doesn’t, no one will ever have any proof that this whole ordeal occurred.

Farkle and Smackle insist on getting to see the Liberty Bell, and the only reason Maya relents is because it’s Smackle’s last day and she doesn’t want to cause that much of a fuss. They run rampant through the Museum of Art as well, an activity all of them find enjoyable in one way or another. By the time they’re heading down the steps back into the sunlight, the group has changed gears and is debating what to grab for lunch in the city before they head back out on the road.

As they’re rounding the corner, Maya suddenly freezes, hesitating for half a second before grabbing Riley and pulling her back into the shadows of the building next to them. She shrieks instinctively but Maya sees this coming, putting a hand over her mouth and pushing her up against the brick.

Lucas is right behind them, taking Maya’s arm to pull her away from Riley. “What are you doing?”

“Hush!” Maya barks, peering around the corner again. She furrows her brow, shaking her head and cursing under her breath.

Zay looks appropriately unsettled as he backs into the shadows, Farkle following his lead. “Okay, was this whole road trip actually some kind of criminal get away? Are we on the run? Are the cops coming for Maya?”

“Will you let Riley breathe,” Lucas snaps, pulling at Maya’s hand clamped over Riley’s mouth. She elbows him out of the way.

“No until she looks me in the eye and promises not to question me for the next five minutes.” Maya raises her eyebrows, and it strikes Riley just how intimidating Maya can be in a time of crisis. Not that she didn’t know it, but seeing it face to face is a grisly reminder. “Do you promise?”

“Oh my God, we’re going to go to jail for aiding an abetting a criminal,” Zay continues. “Farkle, go for me instead. Please, spare me.”

“What makes you think I’m cut out for prison? I’m an intellectual, I wouldn’t survive lock up. Send Lucas instead.”

“Deal. If asked, turn in Lucas?”

“Deal,” Farkle nods, shaking Zay’s hand. Lucas rolls his eyes.

Maya ignores their shenanigans, keeping eye contact with Riley. “Promise?”

She nods uncertainly, exhaling a sigh of relief when Maya removes her hand from her face. She doesn’t think her best friend is really on the run from the police, but her demeanor certainly makes her wonder. “Maya, what is—?”

“We have to go. Now.”

“I don’t want prison, I just want to dance!”

“Look,” Smackle says cheerfully, still standing in plain view and soaking up the sun. All of them
turn to look as she points across the street, grinning widely. “It’s Maya’s Boing!”

Before Maya can stop her Riley jogs over to join Smackle and squints in the sunlight, straining to see exactly what all the fuss is about.

Smackle is in fact correct—her Uncle Josh is walking down the sidewalk across the street, dressed for the summer heat but still wearing a signature beanie. From the looks of it, he’s visiting with some of his Philly friends before going back to NYU for his senior year, laughing with a couple of other young adults. Riley had completely forgotten he might be here rather than back in New York with the rest of her family. Cory isn’t the only one with his roots here in Philly.

Maya’s hand finds the back of Riley’s shirt and yanks her back into the shade, Farkle doing the same to Smackle. Riley frowns. “Why are you hiding from Josh?”

She hesitates, blinking. “I’m not. We all are.”

“Not to be that guy, Maya, but this does seem to be a lot more of a you problem,” Zay mutters.

“Look, I’m just trying to keep this trip afloat, alright? Matthews hasn’t called yet, but the moment he does he’s going to be reaching out to all his resources to get a hold of Riley. And who do you think is going to be his number one agent?” Her fiery glare rests on all of them before landing on Riley again. The determination is back in her eyes, fiercer than ever. “I won’t let that happen. We’re getting out of here and back on the road even if it kills me.”

“So, what do we do?” Farkle asks, matching Maya’s glare. They’ve always fed off of each other, Riley realizes—sharing their energy and constantly trying to equal the other. Although his dad is paying, she doubts the trip was ever Farkle’s idea in the first place. In the same way Maya gets Riley to loosen up, she gets Farkle to step up his game—to be adventurous.

His enthusiasm earns a devious smile, Maya glancing around the corner one last time before releasing Riley’s shirt. “Time to play a little game I like to call ‘Get Back to the Car Without Being Seen.’”

“You know, I have to say, I think that name could use a little more workshopping.”

“Thanks for your input, Ranger Rick. Now come on, follow my lead. And everyone act natural!”

Despite the ridiculousness of thinking that any of them could act natural, Maya’s escape tactics work pretty well. She leads them down side streets and in and out of store fronts, full of rogueish confidence. It’s easy enough to lose sight of Josh, and by the time they make it back to the van they’ve escalated their theatrics, making a show of playing spies and cracking up at one another.

If they were really spies, Riley is sure they’d be fired for too much giggling.

Maya rams into Van Cory and exhales dramatically, tilting her head back and smiling towards the sun. “Mission accomplished. Nice job, team.”

“Nice job, yeah. Only now we’ve missed lunch,” Zay points out. “Guess we’re eating on the road.”

“Blah, blah, blah,” Maya mimics his complaining tone, reaching forward to pat Smackle’s shoulder. “Hand me the keys, I’ll take over. Since I made us leave and apparently that’s such a big deal. Even though I’m just trying to—.”

“Keep the trip going,” Farkle and Lucas say in unison. “Yeah, we got it.”
Maya makes a face at both of them as they climb into the car. Riley watches them disappear into the van, lost in thought. She’s admittedly a little surprised her father hasn’t contacted them yet, and she has no idea what she’s going to do when he does. The assumption that she and Maya are just off together is only going to hold for so long. At some point, Shawn, Katy, Cory and Topanga are going to get wise and realize that something is seriously amiss.

She’s not ready for the trip to be over yet. It feels like it’s barely started.

“Riles,” Maya says, snapping in her face to get her attention. “You there?”

“What? Yes,” she says offhandedly. “Out of curiosity, where are we going next?”

“Minkus got us a reservation at this lodge near a beach about an hour away from Hopkins, and like three hours from here. It’ll probably be the nicest place we stay this entire trip, so we better enjoy it.” Maya nudges her shoulder. “But we won’t get there until we get going, so let’s move.”

“Riley?” a familiar voice shouts from the intersection behind them. Both girls freeze.

Turning to glance over her shoulder, Riley sees Josh scoot around a car as he jogs through the crosswalk, squinting to get a better look at them. Maya inhales sharply.

“Riley! Maya?”

“Shoot,” Riley mutters.

“Maya!”

“Go, go!” Maya commands, shoving her around the car and darting to the driver’s side. They yank the doors open and climb in, Maya not wasting a second as she puts the key in the ignition. Lucas and Zay both shout protests from the middle as she backs out of her space precariously fast, stepping on the gas the moment they’re back on the road.

Riley glances out the window and briefly makes eye contact with her uncle just as they careen past him down the street, but the look on his face is one she doesn’t think she’ll ever forget. One half dumbfounded, one fourth confused, and one fourth wounded that they’d ever run from him—rather than explain what the hell they were doing in Philadelphia.

“What the hell is going on?” Zay yells, wincing as Maya swerves to make an exit. “Maya, please, I’d love to live to start my college career.”

“Yeah, seriously, slow down,” Lucas warns, frowning as he watches the side of the road speed past them in a blur.

Maya flips her hair off her shoulder, exhaling a sigh with her eyes trained firmly on the highway in front of her. “Sorry, boys. We’ve got ground to cover. I’ll lay off when we get out of the Philly area, yeah?” she says offhandedly, making her way into the far left lane.

Riley swivels around in her seat, Lucas and Zay leaning in close to speak. When they get this close Riley’s natural instinct is to give Lucas a kiss, but she restrains herself considering the situation at hand.

“What’s wrong with her?” Zay whispers.

“You do know I can still hear you, right? This is a compact car. Not a lot of place for the sound to travel.”
“Josh saw us,” Riley informs them, making eye contact with Farkle and Smackle. Both of their faces fall slightly.

Lucas exchanges a disappointed look with Zay. “Well, maybe he won’t say anything,” he offers optimistically, searching for the bright side. Riley admires that they share that instinct. “He’s pretty cool about stuff like that. He didn’t say anything about when you guys visited NYU.”

“That’s not the problem!” Maya snaps, frustration evident in her voice. She curses to herself and bites her lip, more upset than seemingly necessary. “I can’t believe he saw me.”

“I thought the problem was him seeing Riley,” Farkle says slowly. Questioning Maya when she’s in one of her moods can be a dangerous game, but it’s obvious her concern over Josh goes much further than keeping them on the open road.

Maya ignores him, fiddling with the controls on the dashboard so that music floods the car once again. “Start thinking about what junk you all want to eat, since you’re all so damn hungry all the sudden,” she says mockingly.

Lucas locks eyes with Riley, giving her a questioning look. Without saying a word she nods a reply, indicating she’ll figure out what’s up when she has the chance. Then the three of them lean back and adjust back in their seats, settling into the ride.

--

After grabbing some food and being well on their way towards Maryland, the car settles into a plaintive quiet. The further away they get from Philadelphia and consequently, from New York, the more serious the journey feels. Each mile is closer to the future and further from the familiar.

Riley reaches forward and turns down the music slightly, shifting in her seat to face Maya as best she can. “Why are you running from Josh?”

“Riley, I’m not running from anybody,” she says defensively, keeping her eyes on the road in front of her. It’s a convenient excuse to avoid eye contact. “I meant what I said about him being your dad’s go-to man for keeping an eye on you. I’d expect a call from your dad any minute now.”

“You said that you couldn’t believe he saw you, not me.” There’s a pause. “Have you talked to him at all this summer? I don’t think I’ve seen you two interact at all recently.”

She shrugs. “I’ve been busy.”

“We see each other all the time, you can’t be that busy.”

“Well, you’re a very special case.”

Riley tilts her head and gives Maya a smile, waiting a moment before pushing the issue further. “You didn’t want to talk to him, did you? It would be too hard.”

Maya doesn’t once tear her eyes away from the road, but Riley catches softness cross her features for a fraction of a second. Just long enough to give away her vulnerability. “Believe it or not, Riles, I’m not that open a book. And I’m not running from Josh Matthews. I just ran out of time. It flew by, got away from me. And if I were going to choose talking to Josh about me leaving for the other side of the country or going on this road trip with you, I hope you know which one I would choose. Every time.”

“I do.”
Maya sneaks a glance at her out of the corner of her eyes, smiling in spite of herself.

Zay clears his throat, leaning forward again and interrupting their conversation. “Guys, take a look in the back.”

Riley wiggles around in her seat and makes eye contact with Lucas, who’s grinning like an idiot. He nods behind him, adjusting so that she can see over his shoulder to the backseat.

Smackle and Farkle have both dozed off, her head resting contentedly on his shoulder and her lips parted just slightly. His head dips forward occasionally until he straightens back up again, letting his head rest more securely against hers. It’s amazing how comfortable they seem with one another, although after almost six years of friendship and a relationship it makes sense. Riley still doesn’t understand what game they’re playing, acting as if suppressing their feelings for one another is some grand, wise move.

“What?” Maya mutters, imitating the volume level of her peers. She cranes her neck to get a look through the rear view mirror. “What am I missing?”

The three of them watch them rest for a few moments. Finally, Zay shakes his head. “You know, for a couple of geniuses, they sure can be stupid.”

---

By the time they pull into the parking lot of the lodge, the sun is beginning to set on the horizon.

“This isn’t a ski lodge, is it?” Zay asks as they’re pulling suitcases out of the back.

Farkle gives him an exhausted look, gesturing around them. “We’re in Maryland. Near the beach. Where do you think we’re going to go skiing?”

“Sorry, just gotta cover my bases. Ski lodges give me war flashbacks.”

“Funny,” Riley says, closing the trunk. “That’s what my parents always say.”

“History is just a constant cycle of the same events,” Smackle says wisely. “Those who don’t learn from history are doomed to repeat it.”

“Trust me, the lesson was learned,” Lucas says flatly.

Farkle leads the way to get them all checked in, and it’s the first time the six of them have to endure the curious looks from the concierges. To Riley, they all look grown up and it feels like ages since they were kids. But she figures to the outside world, the people out of her orbit that didn’t watch them all grow up together, they must look like six children who have no idea where they are or what they’re doing.

The concierge hands over the keys and Farkle proudly places one pack in Riley’s palm. “There. Two rooms. See? I can handle this. Where’s my cookie, Zay?”

“Well, we’ll go drop off all this crap,” Maya says, kicking her suitcase. “Meet back here in fifteen?”

The group breaks, the boys taking the stairs up to the second floor and the girls heading the other way to find the elevator to the third floor. When they get into the room, Riley’s rather impressed with the cozy set-up and theming of the space. Everything is a rich dark wood, and even though it’s the middle of summer the room gives off the impression of being trapped in the dead of winter.
She finds herself wishing for a fire to curl up in front of.

Smackle excuses herself to the bathroom. Maya drops her suitcase on the bed by the window and draws the curtains back, peering out to the ocean just down the trail. After unloading her bags Riley joins her, crossing her arms and admiring the hazy grey that has settled over the town as the clouds roll in and the sun sets.

“ Weird,” Maya mutters.

“What is?”

She blinks, licking her lips. “Just thinking that… in one day, things are going to be…” she trails off, glancing over her shoulder towards the bathroom. The curtain slips from her fingers as she walks away from the window. “Nothing.”

Riley thinks about pushing the issue, but Smackle reenters the room and Maya builds back up her confident façade. The moment is lost to the evening.

Quickly freshening up, the girls head back down to the lobby and make it just before the boys emerge from the stairwell. Maya raises her eyebrows at them, clicking her tongue in disapproval.

“You’re late. What, Lucas hold you up perfecting his grin?”

“As if that takes work,” Farkle says with an eye roll. Lucas flashes him said grin and he rolls his eyes again, more dramatically than the first time. “Dinner, yes? What’s the plan?”

They decide on eating something quick from the food joint within the lodge, anxious to get out to the beach before it gets too dark. Maya and Zay debate heatedly over who is going to drive after her little stint in Philly, and Smackle looks up facts about Wildwood Beach to share them with Farkle across the table. She shows the screen to Lucas, who smiles at her before locking eyes with Riley across the table.

These are her people. For all their craziness and idiosyncracies and quirks, she is happier than ever to be sitting in some random lodge in the middle of Maryland as long as its with them.

It’s ultimately Zay who takes the wheel, a unanimous vote keeping Maya out of the driver’s seat for the rest of the day. The trip down to the shore is about thirty minutes, filled with music and excited chatter. Smackle sits in the passenger seat next to Zay, reading more facts about the nearby Maryland beaches aloud for him to hear. Although he doesn’t seem particularly interested, he’s got a goofy smile on his face, nodding along to everything she reports.

Even with the upbeat vibe, something in the atmosphere between them is shifting. Riley can feel it. Amidst the vibrant energy there’s this occasional sense of melancholy, a beat of silence throughout the music and laughter and conversation. It’s bouncing around between them, trying to stick but not quite finding a strong enough hold. It held Maya for those few moments at the window, it struck Riley for an instant during dinner. But it hasn’t stuck. Not yet.

Currently, the feeling is with Lucas. He’s quiet during the ride, holed up in the backseat with Riley and smiling at the babble of his friends, but his mind is somewhere else. Riley watches while he continues to smirk absentmindedly, staring down at their intertwined hands and playing with her fingers idly.

“You okay?” she murmurs softly, tilting her head down to get his attention.

He glances up distractedly, taking a minute to focus on her. “Huh?”
“Are you okay?”

“What? Yeah. Yeah, I’m great,” he assures her, the smile reaching his eyes. The sensation doesn’t get the chance to take root with him either.

In the seat in front of Riley, Maya makes a retching sound, sticking her tongue out at them like she’s vomiting. Lucas brings his foot up to kick her.

Once they pull up at the shore, the group hops out of the car and heads down the sand towards the coast. Behind them, the silhouette of an amusement park looms in the skyline. The sun is just finishing up setting, coloring ripples on the surface of the water purple and gold.

While Lucas, Zay and Farkle attempt to find materials to start a bonfire, Maya, Smackle and Riley wander down to the edge of the water, stripping off their shoes to let it run over their toes.

“One of the most beautiful sights in the world is the coast at nightfall,” Smackle says thoughtfully, clasping her hands together. “No matter how bright civilization makes the night, when you get down to the water and look out to the horizon, it’s just infinite darkness. As if it goes on forever. It reminds me just how small and insignificant we are, as human beings on this one planet, amidst a galaxy of other celestial bodies. An entire universe exists, and here we are, standing on this beach together staring out at the infinite possibilities across the water.”

Riley nods, actually understanding what Smackle is trying to say for once. She glances to Maya on her right, her blue eyes focused on the sun disappearing into the ocean. Riley can practically see the artist gears turning in her head, memorizing the color of the waves and the glimmer of the light. It’s one of her favorite Maya expressions, and she has many.

“Ahem!” Zay exclaims from behind them, gesturing to the sand as Lucas and Farkle drop a few pieces of driftwood and branches into the firepit provided. “The men, we have returned.”

“Brought wood,” Lucas states, imitating a primitive man to the best of his ability. “Build fire.”

Riley’s grateful—being this close to the ocean, the wind is creating a chill she wasn’t expecting this late in the summer. She shivers, crossing her arms.

Farkle drops to his knees and starts fiddling with the kindling, attempting to get a spark going. Maya approaches him, crouching down next to him and giving him a disdainful look. “What are you doing?”

“Starting a fire, what does it look like I’m doing?”

“Well, you could just do this,” she says flatly, pulling out a lighter from her pocket and flicking it on, lighting a piece of driftwood dangerously close to Farkle. It sets the small bonfire ablaze and Farkle scrambles back to his full height, nearly tripping and stumbling into Lucas in the process.

He stabilizes himself on his shoulder, exchanging a look with him. “I almost died.”

“I know, buddy,” Lucas replies, patting his back.

Maya and Lucas run back to the van to grab some supplies while the rest of the group settles in, planting themselves comfortably in the sand. Farkle sits down next to Smackle and glances over his shoulder at the ocean behind them, sighing. “There’s something fascinating about the ocean at night. It feels like it goes on forever, even though logically it’s just as broad as it is during the day, no more or less.”
Smackle smiles lightly, nodding in agreement. “I said just the same.”

When Lucas and Maya return, they’ve got a bundle of blankets, jackets, and towels to situate with, and Maya’s carrying her guitar. The sun officially gone, the only light comes from the fire in front of them and the city lights in the distance. Once they get close enough Maya pauses, holding up a warning hand. “Be careful, Huckleberry. That’s firelight. I know how that gets to you.”

“I’m going to throw you into the fire if you don’t stop.”

Maya plops down in between Zay and Riley, tuning her guitar while Lucas hands out the blankets. When he gets to Riley he hands her a sweatshirt, surprised to discover it’s the Brooklyn sweatshirt he was wearing moments earlier.

“I can’t wear this. You need it.”

“I saw you shivering earlier. I’ve got a blanket, I’ll be fine.”

She knows she could argue, but he seems pretty determined and besides, she isn’t going to pass up the opportunity to wear his sweatshirt. She smiles gratefully and takes it gently, pulling it on over her head. She instantly feels warmer, inside and out.

Lucas sits down next to Farkle, who is just finishing up draping a blanket around his and Smackle’s shoulders. She smirks and scoots closer to him under the guise of convenience, considering they’re now sharing and the blanket fits better when they’re closer together. Riley can’t help but beam—she’s always been impressed with how smart Smackle is, but she doesn’t give her nearly enough credit for her cleverness.

Maya clears her throat, strumming a tune on her guitar to warm up that’s vaguely familiar. But it doesn’t sound like any song Riley can actually remember.

“Hello,” she says in a deep voice, tilting her head back and looking up to the stars. “I’m Bucky McBoing Boing.”

“Unbelievable,” Lucas says, propping his elbows on his knees and hiding his head against them. The torment is brief, Maya changing tracks and starting to hum a different tune, figuring out exactly how she wants to start before launching into a song. They sit like this for a half an hour or so, letting Maya perform for them and occasionally joining in. Riley has always been a good harmonizer with Maya, and Zay proves himself adept at carrying half a tune. The singing only ends when they get so tired they’re giggly, unable to hold any sort of pitch.

“I can’t believe your dad made us do that research assignment in the first place,” Maya says after a couple of moments of silence, still a bit punchy from the giggles. “I mean, he legit let Lucas stand in front of the class and make a fool of himself.”

“Wasn’t that, like, every lesson, though?” Lucas wonders aloud, poking at the fire with a stick.

“Nuh uh,” Zay says, waving his hands for emphasis, “The worst lesson by far was when your dad made you get up in front of the entire class and explore your dark side. And my grandma’s cookie had to suffer for it.”

“What about the time he just wrote Riley. Maya. Lucas. on the board in eighth grade?” Farkle adds.

“I’ll never forgive him for making me dress up as Benjamin Franklin,” Maya grumbles, resting her arm along the side of her guitar. “Like, there are many other boys in our class who could’ve worn
that terrible wig. Dave! Why didn’t Dave play Ben? Or Yogi!”

“I’ll never forgive you guys for destroying all photo evidence of that event.”

“Oh, you haven’t seen the pictures, Zay?” Smackle asks curiously. “Farkle has them, I’m sure he would—!” Farkle’s hand finds her mouth and covers it quickly.

Maya’s eyebrow slowly arches. “You still have photos, Farkle?”

“Uh, no?”

“We agreed to destroy them,” Lucas says warily. “Are you trying to tell me they still exist?”

Farkle just blinks at them, gulping. “You know, this is feeling a lot like the time Cory left us alone in detention and you guys threatened to eat me.”

Lucas and Maya exchange a smile. “Good times.”

“How about the time my dad let us be communists for like a week?” Riley pipes up.

“What an interesting time in our lives,” Maya says thoughtfully. “A good, explorative phase to go through.”

“I wouldn’t be proud of it,” Lucas murmurs.

She shrugs. “I’m not ashamed. I stand by my decisions.”

“You cheated!” he shouts, hesitating after his words echo down the beach. He clears his throat. “That was loud.”

“I see someone is still not over it,” Farkle teases.

“I’m not over the fact that we had an entire lesson that ended with Lucas getting to call me flatbutt,” Zay comments, shaking his head. “Like, all we got out of that conversation was that I don’t got a booty. Why did we need a whole lesson for that? Why does your dad hate me?”

Riley laughs, thinking about all the lessons and antics her dad put them through over the years. The giggling dies down, and a ripple of that silence runs through them. That empty feeling, attempting to find footing. “He had some pretty good ones, though, didn’t he?”

“Yeah, he did,” Farkle says softly, gazing into the fire. “People change people.”

“What us does for them,” Maya mutters.

They fall into nostalgic silence, all lost in their own train of thought and watching the fire ever so slowly dim into embers. After a long moment, Smackle speaks.

“This is it, isn’t it?” She looks between all of them. “Our American revolution. This is the beginning of our revolution.”

“Independence,” Zay says vaguely, keeping his eyes on the glow of the firelight.

More silence. That feeling is finally beginning to take root within them, no matter how hard they attempt to keep it away. Riley wishes she knew exactly what it was. She sort of wishes her father was there with them to give them one last lesson on how to stop it.
Lucas lifts his gaze to look around the circle at them, taking a deep breath. “Just for a moment, we’re all together.”

All of them smile, softly. Riley glances at each of her friends, absorbing the fact that they really are just tiny specks in the universe. But also that amidst the grand expanse of the universe, they’re sitting on this beach together.

“Let’s really look at one another.”

--

The fire dims down to the last few embers when the six of them pack up to head back to the lodge.

Smackle and Maya take things back to the car. Farkle and Lucas somehow avoid the work, wandering down to the water together and looking out into the inky blackness.

Riley stays with Zay to help him stamp out the fire. As a Texan, he considers himself an authority on the subject, encouraging her to put all her frustrations into stomping the daylights out of this pile of burnt driftwood. She obliges, putting them down with an enthusiasm that doesn’t surprise him in the slightest. She gets so into she almost falls over and Zay catches her, balancing her back on her feet.

He kicks the wood to the side and then joins Riley in watching Lucas and Farkle stand by the water’s edge. Farkle points out towards the horizon and Lucas crosses his arms, nodding at whatever he’s saying.

“It’s weird that Farkle is so tall now,” Riley says casually.

“You know, your dad is right. About people changing people.” Zay turns to meet her eyes. “Lucas isn’t anything like I thought he’d be when we grew up and graduated. If he even made it that far.”

“You really thought that?”

Zay shrugs, putting his hands in his pockets. “Lucas was different then, that’s not an exaggeration. I mean, he was the same at his core, caring about his friends and all. But his priorities were all different. You know all the stuff with his family and self-perception—that stuff really messed him up. I don’t know what would’ve happened if he hadn’t come here and met you. And he’s still figuring it out.”

“He will,” Riley says confidently, clasping her hands together anxiously in front of her. “I know he will.”

“I think so, too. But for a while there, I wasn’t sure. Coming here changed that. Changed him.” He hesitates. “Honestly, changed me too. For the better, if I’m being honest.”

Riley smiles at him, putting her arm around his shoulder and hugging him. He acts indignant but leans into her anyway, accepting the embrace.

“Hey, Zay,” Maya says from behind them, approaching with Smackle on her heels. “You’re social media man for this trip, right?”

“You could say so, yes,” he replies proudly, pulling his phone out of his pocket.

She nudges his shoulder. “Get your video camera ready. You’re going to want this.”
Riley and Zay exchange an uncertain look as Maya jogs down the beach, heading towards Lucas and Farkle. She slows down when she gets closer, tip-toeing in their direction. She takes one more glance back towards them, gesturing a thumbs-up to Zay to make sure he’s filming. He returns it.

In the next moment, Maya runs forward and jumps onto Lucas’s back. It’s an action she’s done a million times, but usually Lucas is somewhat prepared for it and ready enough to balance out the both of them. This time, he’s completely caught off-guard, and the second Maya latches onto him he stumbles and both of them collapse, falling sideways into the tide.

Zay bursts into laughter as Riley lifts her hands to her face in shock, trying hard to hold back her own amusement. Smackle’s face is dumbfoundedly happy. Farkle jumps away from the two of them as they struggle to back to their feet, rushing to get away from them. He’s not fast enough, and Lucas grabs him by the waist long enough for Maya to take his arm and send him tumbling into the water with them.

“Please, tell me you’re getting all of this,” Smackle hoots.

Zay sticks his tongue out, overwhelmed with glee. “I’ll never let this video die. I’m taking this to my grave.”

Lucas, Maya, and Farkle finally stumble towards them, soaked and covered in globs of sand. The others try to control their laughter, but the closer they get the harder it becomes.

“You recorded that?” Farkle cries out.

“It’s gonna live forever!” Maya shouts triumphantly.

Lucas raises an eyebrow at them, smirking. “You laughing at me, Riley?”

“What?” she gasps, shaking her head but unable to handle the smile on her face. “No.”

“Alright, that’s fine,” he says, holding his arms out. “Then give me a hug.”

Zay starts to back away, stuffing his phone deep into his pocket for safe-keeping. “Uh oh.”

“You’re mine, Zay Babineaux!” Maya screams, before she and Lucas launch into a run towards them. Farkle takes off immediately after them, the three of them chasing Riley, Zay, and Smackle up the beach towards the van.

--

Riley is still brushing stray sand off of her from Lucas’s hug when Maya emerges from the shower, all cleaned up with an impish gleam in her eyes.

“All right, gals,” she says authoritatively, “We have business to attend to.”

“What?”

“All right, that’s fine,” he says, holding his arms out. “Then give me a hug.”

Zay starts to back away, stuffing his phone deep into his pocket for safe-keeping. “Uh oh.”

“You’re mine, Zay Babineaux!” Maya screams, before she and Lucas launch into a run towards them. Farkle takes off immediately after them, the three of them chasing Riley, Zay, and Smackle up the beach towards the van.

--

Riley is still brushing stray sand off of her from Lucas’s hug when Maya emerges from the shower, all cleaned up with an impish gleam in her eyes.

“All right, gals,” she says authoritatively, “We have business to attend to.”

“What?”

“Business?”

“What business would you be referring to, Maya?” Smackle asks interestedly, scooting forward to the edge of her bed.

Maya kneels down in front of her suitcase and unzips the front pocket, pulling out a pair of scissors. She dips her head down to pull the towel off, giving her hair one last dry rub before standing back up with a dramatic hair flip. She brandishes the scissors, opening and closing them a couple of times. “We’re giving me a haircut.”
Smackle reacts with intrigued enthusiasm, just as Maya was going for. But Riley’s simply shocked, her jaw dropping.

“Maya, you can’t cut your hair,” she states blankly.

“This is our world now, honey.” She holds out the scissors in her direction, waiting for her to take them. “We can do whatever we want. And I need something different. This trip is screaming for a sacrifice, can’t you feel it? I want you to take the first snip.”

“A sacrifice? This isn’t eighth grade science. There’s no Yogi to offer up.”

Smackle looks back and forth between the two of them, evidently enjoying the drama. “Perhaps we could sacrifice Lucas’s hair? He would look just fine with or without it.”

“Maya,” Riley repeats firmly, locking eyes with her best friend. “What are you doing?”

She maintains eye contact, not backing down for even a second. Riley has always loved Maya’s determination, but in moments like this where she doesn’t know how to contain it, it worries her more than she’d like to admit.

“Riley,” Maya says sweetly, albeit with a bit of condescension. “Everything is changing. I’m not going to let life make the first move. I’m doing this. You can earlier participate, or watch. But I’m doing it.” When Riley doesn’t immediately relent, Maya holds the scissors out to Smackle instead.

She takes them without hesitation. “How short are we cutting?”

Riley blinks, reeling from the minor confrontation she just shared. She and Maya don’t have face-offs like that, not anymore. Not since junior year, if her memory serves her correctly. It wasn’t a big deal, but the unexpected nature of it sends her off kilter.

On the bed, her phone buzzes. Checking her messages, a text message from Uncle Josh lights up her screen.

Joshie: Why were you in Philly? Is everything okay?

She doesn’t have the emotional energy to give a reply, and at this point she’s not sure she could give an accurate answer. Glancing over her shoulder as Smackle makes the first chop, Riley snaps her phone shut and crawls into bed.

Riley takes the opportunity of being the first one up to go explore the lobby of the hotel, feeling particularly sensitive in the dawn of their first goodbye.

She’s stunned to find Farkle already awake and in the lobby, sitting in a cushioned seat by one of the windows and watching the sunrise over the ocean. She makes her way over to him, sliding into the seat next to him and bringing her legs up to mirror his, wrapping her arms around them.

“Morning,” he greets her quietly.

“I’m so glad you found the bay window,” she says happily, giving him a warm smile. “It’s nice to know we’ll manage to find one along the road whenever we need it. The spirit of the bay window is with us on this journey.”

He nods curtly. “I guess it’s nice. Kind of feels like a bay window kind of day,” he admits.
They exchange soft smiles, settling into silence to watch the sun creep its way into the sky and turn it blue rather than pink. Riley examines him, trying to gauge just how open he would be to talking about what she knows he must be dying to talk about. Considering he mentioned being a bay window mood, she figures now is as good a time as any.

“Farkle.”

“Hmm?”

“Are you going to miss Smackle?”

He whips his head away from looking out the window to lock eyes with her, an incredulous expression on his face. “Am I going to miss Isadora Smackle? What kind of question is that? That’s not even worth my time to answer.”

“Well, since you two aren’t together anymore and all, I was just curious.”

He pauses, swallowing hard before avoiding her eyes, staring at the floor instead. “It’s always nice to have an intellectual equal around. The rest of the trip is going to be tough, stuck with only my dumb dumbs for company.”

“How sweet,” she jokes.

“Look, Riley, I know what you’re trying to do, okay?” He locks eyes with her, and although his voice is stern his expression is soft. “I appreciate your intentions. But I know what I’m doing. I’m a man of science, and I trust what statistics have shown me is the trend. Chances are Isadora and I would end up worse off if we attempted to make this work so far apart than if we just made a clean break. Please respect that.”

“I do, Farkle. I respect everything you say. You know how much I do.” She waits for his nod of understanding. “But I also remember what you told me in eighth grade. You told me not to let you forget what love is.”

“Love isn’t just romantic,” he says defensively. “Platonic love is just as important. It’s what I’ve felt for you and Maya for the last thirteen years.”

“You’re telling me that as if I don’t know it?” Riley says in amusement. “Farkle, when I sit in the car with you all, or at a table sharing a meal, or at that beach last night, the feeling I get—that’s love. I know it is, and I know you do too. I feel it so much I sometimes wonder how on Earth one human being could possibly be allowed to feel this loved.”

Farkle smiles affectionately, dipping his head down bashfully. Riley takes his hand.

“But I also know that my understanding of love is so much greater because I allow myself to experience it in all its forms. It’s a much richer experience, having what I have with you guys, with my family, with Lucas, knowing that they’re all distinct feelings manifesting from the same core emotion. That’s understanding love, and it’s the greatest breakthrough I think any scientist could make.”

Farkle doesn’t meet her eyes, but she can see him thinking. She’s known that look for most of her life—in the classroom, in the bay window, here in front of her now. Like Maya’s artistic expression, Farkle’s contemplative expression is practically branded into her memory.

“We should get ready to go,” he says finally, getting to his feet and offering her a hand. She takes it gratefully.
When Riley returns to the room, Maya and Smackle are up and moving, a feat within itself. It takes Riley a moment to adjust to Maya’s new hair—short and choppy and a couple of inches above her shoulders, but cut with expert precision. She supposes if the NASA thing doesn’t work out, Smackle could get a job as a hair dresser.

“What do you think?” Maya asks, raising her eyebrow.

It looks wonderful—it’s Maya, so of course it does. “Looks dangerous.”

“Excellent. Just what I want.”

The three of them head down to the lobby, meeting the boys who are already waiting at checkout. Zay whistles as Maya approaches, making non-verbal commentary about her new do.

“Wow, Maya, you cut your hair,” Lucas says in astonishment.

“Wow, Huckleberry, you have a working pair of eyes.”

Farkle pulls back from the counter, indicating they’re good to go. He stops cold at the sight of Smackle, hair pulled back out of her face in a ponytail and proudly wearing a John Hopkins t-shirt. Riley can see the reality of the situation hitting him.

“Nice shirt,” he says dryly, at a loss for words.

“Yeah, looks good on you, Smackle,” Lucas adds.

She gives him a grin, lightly shoving his arm as she leads the charge out the doors to the van. “Do I need to give you a lecture on the flirting, or can we let this one slide?”

--

Smackle drives the short hour to campus, pulling onto John Hopkins University grounds with time to spare. The group unloads and Lucas and Zay go to help Smackle grab her things. Farkle stands by the car, clearly at a loss for what to do. Riley and Maya exchange a troubled look.

Smackle keeps up the conversation as they head towards the admissions center, explaining what activities she’ll be participating in during her early orientation and what classes she’ll be taking first semester. Lucas takes up the slack of conversing back, because the rest of them are beginning to feel the sting of a goodbye coming up and don’t have many words to contribute. Riley can already feel the tears pricking the corners of her eyes, but she wipes them away before anyone else notices.

They come to a stop on the edge of the main lawn, Smackle turning to face them. “My father is meeting me inside,” she says matter-of-factly. “So I believe this is where we say our goodbyes.”

Everyone shuffles for a moment, uncertain of what to do. Already feeling emotional and knowing she may as well get the ball rolling, Riley steps forward and wraps Smackle in a tight hug.

“You’re going to do so amazing,” she says tearfully, only choking up more when Smackle actually hugs her back.

“I plan to,” she assures her, smiling when Riley pulls away. “Thank you, Riley. For accepting me into your world.”

“You’re welcome any time,” Maya says delicately, relying on being quiet to keep the tears from
coming. Lucas nods in agreement.

Zay steps forward next and gives her a brief hug, patting her shoulder. “Thanks for helping me deal with these weirdos. It would’ve been harder without you.”

“Well, it was my pleasure,” she says with a chuckle. Zay steps back, and the six of them stand there in silence. She tosses a glance to Farkle, but he keeps his head down, hands in his pockets and eyes on the ground.

Smackle gazes over her shoulder at the campus looming behind her. The twinkle of excitement in her eyes only makes Riley cry harder. It’s painful, she thinks, to be so happy for someone you care about.

“Look at you.” She breaks into a smile, her voice cracking just slightly. Clearing her throat, Smackle takes one last look at them all, shaking her head slightly. “You’re all so deeply beautiful.”

Lucas clenches his jaw, reaching out to take Riley’s hand. Searching for a sense of gravity. Riley squeezes back.

“Especially you, Farkle.” Smackle lets her gaze linger on him, meeting his eyes with a smile when he finally lifts his head. He doesn’t say anything in return, looking as contemplative as ever. Finally, Smackle gives them one last nod, taking her suitcase handle and turning to trek towards the admissions building on her own.

“Smackle, wait!”

Farkle jogs the short distance to catch up to her, leaving the rest of the group thunderstruck. He takes her arm and pulls her back around to face him.

“Farkle, what are you doing?”

“Screw science.” It’s clear the words are painful to say, but he evidently means them. “Just this once, I don’t want to live by science. I don’t want us not to be together.”

Maya’s jaw drops open. Riley raises her free hand to her face again, covering her mouth.

Smackle looks equally shocked, gazing up at Farkle with her eyes the widest Riley has ever seen them. “But, what about statistics—,”

“I don’t care. Sometimes, science can be wrong,” he says hastily. “And I may not know a lot about emotions, or love, or anything, but I think I know that what you and I have is special. I don’t want to throw away that hypothesis without at least testing to see if it’s true.”

There’s a brief pause as Smackle processes this, but it feels like an eternity. Riley is holding her breath. None of them have moved since the moment Farkle broke away from the group.

Finally, Smackle breaks into a relieved smile. “It would be intriguing to be a scientist setting out to prove something new.”

Farkle smiles back, hesitating only for a moment before leaning down to pull Smackle into a hug. She wraps her arms around him, tight, exhaling all of the stress from the last few weeks in anticipation of setting off into the new adventure.

“This is new,” Farkle promises.
Smackle nods into his shirt. “Don’t let go,” she murmurs.

When the moment comes for them to break apart, Farkle wanders back over to the others and stands with them as Isadora Smackle walks onto campus, the entire future ahead of her. She tosses them one last excited glance over her shoulder, a beautiful smile blooming across her face.

They feel immovable, rooted to the spot. In her absence, some of that lingering feeling Riley can’t quite pinpoint takes root.

Maya gazes up at Farkle next to her, stoic but shaken. She takes his arm and wraps hers around it, leaning her head against his shoulder. Zay clears his throat.

“This is just going to get harder and harder, ain’t it?”

Lucas swallows. “Yeah. Yeah, it is.”

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I wanted to put a special note here with this chapter just considering the news of the end of Girl Meets World. This fic is sort of going to be my love letter to this show and these characters and their friendships, and if you’ve started on this journey with me, thank you!! I hope you’re enjoying it and that I can do this show justice and give it the ending I would’ve loved to see on screen.
Chapter Notes

Songs from the Road Trip Playlist (Isadora Smackle's contributions):

Autumn Leaves - Ed Sheeran
She Will Be Loved - Maroon 5
Good Life - OneRepublic
Saints Out of Sailors - Flannel Graph
A World Alone - Lorde
Eet - Regina Spektor
Everything Will Be Alright - The Killers
Don't You Remember - Adele

-SOPHOMORE YEAR-

Sophomore year is the year Isadora Smackle learns about family.

Not to imply that she doesn’t have a fundamental understanding of the concept, of course. She can recite the dictionary definition like she can recite her home address, considering how many spelling bees she’s studied for.


Observing her friends gives her plenty of material to parse through when trying to investigate the true meaning of the word. Riley’s home life offers the most obvious example of exactly what the dictionary is hoping to describe—a core unit of people connected by blood who would do anything for one another. Two parents, happily married and invested in their children. Two children, happily growing and appreciative of what their parents have to offer. They’re a family that seems to continue to grow, considering how often the six of them find themselves hanging out in Topanga’s business or in the Matthews apartment.

Early in sophomore year the group spends a lot of time at the apartment. Usually, it’s in the afternoons and under the pretense of studying, but tenth grade is also when the dynamic of their friendship begins to shift. The older they grow, the more intimate and intertwined their lives seem to become, and the more comfortable they grow with one another. Afternoon hangouts turn into late nights sitting up talking. Stuart Minkus is always a little irritable when he has to drive her and Farkle home after eleven.

Smackle still finds it a little strange that Cory Matthews is both their teacher and their group dad, for all intents and purposes, but she is grateful for how understanding he is and how willing he is to let them run their apartment at all hours after having been stuck with them for eight hours in a school building.

Around October, as homecoming is rolling around, Riley spends one afternoon in Topanga’s eagerly explaining to them their plans for the weekend festivities.

“We’re going to be organized about it this year,” she says primly, propping her hands on her knees.
“I don’t want a repeat of last year when all of us left the dance because of drama.”

“It was your fault!” Farkle barks from next to Smackle, his arm draped around her shoulder. She’s become very accustomed to his touch over the last couple years. “It was the stupid triangle. Lucas asked you to dance because he has no sense of chill, and then of course Maya had to get pissy about it because she had to get evened up.”

“Well, sorry,” Maya says, crossing her legs and flipping her hair over her shoulder. “But you know how a girl just loves to get evened up.”

“Look, all of that is in the past, isn’t it?” Lucas’s expression makes it clear he would rather be having any other conversation. “Riley’s right, we’ll just think of this year as a brand new slate. Maybe Zay will actually show up this year.”

“Oh, yeah, that was my bad,” he replies, making a face. “I read my calendar wrong.”

“What are you talking about, Zay?” Smackle asks, giving him an eyebrow raise. “You told me and Farkle that you just didn’t want to have to stand at a dance with the three of them for more than you absolutely had to—,”

Zay gestures aggressively to Farkle from across the table. “Will you shut her up?”

Smackle grins at him. Lucas shoves him.

“Oh, shoot,” Maya pipes up suddenly, realization coloring her features. “Riley, when is homecoming?”

“Next weekend. Why?”

She curses under her breath, hesitating before making eye contact with her best friend. “I can’t go.”

“What do you mean? What do you mean you can’t go?”

“Shawn is taking me and my mom upstate for the weekend.” Maya’s eyes light up when she mentions her new stepfather.

The evolution of Maya and her mother is one of the greatest examples of the flexibility of family Smackle’s ever studied. She’s watched Maya be broken, come from a place of limited hope, and end up here. With lit up eyes and hope for the future and a family that feels more complete than ever before. Riley’s family may be the dictionary definition, but Maya’s new one tugs on the heart strings. Ever since freshman year when it all became official, Smackle has never seen her so happy.

Riley currently doesn’t look so thrilled. “Maya, you knew about homecoming. You guys go upstate like once a month. Can’t you just tell him to postpone it?”

“Oh, as if you and Huckleberry will miss me anyway,” Maya snaps. Riley straightens up at the dig, blinking for a moment before ducking her head down and dropping the argument.

It’s hard not to catch the stiffness between the three of them. It’s different than freshman year, but it feels more insidious than the triangle nonsense. There’s something changing in the dynamic between them, and Smackle’s not sure she wants to investigate and see what happens. She and Farkle exchange an uncomfortable look.

“Here’s a suggestion,” Zay says, clearing his throat. “No homecoming this year.”
“No homecoming?” Riley cries out.

“No homecoming. Let’s all just take a chill pill and do things we actually want to do that weekend. Maya’s got her upstate family thing. Lucas, you and I have been eyeing that baseball convention that’s coming to Yankee Stadium since like January.”

Lucas tilts his head thoughtfully, shrugging in admittance. Riley looks back and forth between the two of them.

“You never told me about that.”

“Well, I knew homecoming was important to you. That made it important to me.”

Maya makes a retching sound. Lucas shoots her a glare.

“I think Zay is right,” Farkle says, sensing the mounting tension. “We should all just spend some time doing whatever we want to do. There will be two more homecomings before we get out of this town, it’s not like we’ll be missing much.” He gets to his feet, slinging his backpack over his shoulder and offering Smackle a hand. “Ready?”

She nods, grabbing her own bag and taking his hand. “Don’t worry, Riley,” she says helpfully, “Homecoming does not exist for any other reason than allowing our fellow students to grind against one another. You’re going to have a much better time doing something else.”

Riley looks appropriately dismayed. Lucas pats her shoulder comfortingly.

Farkle leads the way out of Topanga’s, leaving their friends behind and entering the chilly autumn air. They briefly disconnect hands to zip up their jackets, Smackle immediately reaching out for his hand again once they’re situated.

“You warm enough?” he asks once they reach the top of the stairs.

She nods. “Objectively, the temperature only requires a light jacket at best. With my cardigan, I’m more than prepared.”

He grins at her explanation, drifting closer to her as they walk down the street. They chatter about the current lesson in their chemistry class as they head to the subway, only changing topics when they head underground. Farkle offers her the available seat on the train and stands next to her, leaning against the railing.

“So, what do you want to do for homecoming if we’re not dancing?”

“I’m not sure. I hope Riley will find something else to do.”

Farkle shrugs. “I’m positive Zay and Lucas will invite her along to the baseball thing. She’ll have a good time because it’ll be with them. And she’s Riley, she can make anything into a good time.”

“Excellent point.” Smackle pauses. “Did you notice the weird atmosphere between Lucas and Maya? She seemed particularly snappy this afternoon.”

“Oh yeah. I’ve seen this coming for a while now.”

“Seen what? What am I missing?”

The train reaches the next stop and the person in the seat next to Smackle leaves, allowing Farkle to slide into the seat next to her. He waits until the train gets moving again, adjusting to face her
and wearing his educating expression. It’s a thoughtful, somewhat smug expression—and one of Smackle’s favorites.

“Here’s the thing about Riley, Maya, and Lucas. In whatever way the triangle resolved—,”

“Although all signs pointed to Riley and Lucas,” Smackle interjects.

He nods in agreement. “Obviously. But the thing is, no matter what, they were going to end up with this problem eventually. Not of who has romantic feelings for who, but of who is more important to who.”

“What do you mean?” Smackle is genuinely curious. While they long ago agreed that they were intellectual equals for all intents and purposes, she has always admired how apt Farkle is at understanding people. It’s something she wishes she were more skilled at herself. But she loves learning, and when he is the one teaching her, she’s even more fascinated.

“For all the time Maya and Riley have been friends, Maya has always been Riley’s number one. She’s gotten used to it, and nothing has ever come close to threatening it. But Lucas has entered their orbit in a way that now puts that at risk. Not in Riley’s eyes, she sees them as separate entities completely out of competition with one another. But to Maya, she’s struggling with the concept that Riley may suddenly be giving her energies to someone else as passionately as she does to her. And for Lucas, it’s a frustrating situation, because he doesn’t want to get in the way of Riley and Maya, but he wants the attention from Riley he deserves, both as her boyfriend and as her close friend.”

Smackle blinks, absorbing all of this intel. “And they told you this?”

“Nope.”

She shakes her head, smirking lightly. “You’re truly brilliant, you know that?”

“Thank you. But nowhere near as brilliant as you,” he counters easily. “You know what I’d really like to do on homecoming?”

“What?”

“I’d like to have dinner at your house. With your father.” There’s an earnest twinkle in his eyes, and both the request and the excitement emanating off of him catch her off-guard. “Would that even be a possibility?”

Part of her feels like running, like jumping off at the next stop and avoiding the question until the end of days. She’s not sure why—her family isn’t distressing, not in the way Maya’s was. She doesn’t quite feel like she needs to hide it the way Lucas seems to. But something about the situation makes her uncomfortable, more shy than she already is.

Farkle Minkus comes from a wealthy household, with a father who is overinvolved and a mother who is prouder than ever. Although their marriage is imperfect, they are still together and still supportive of one another, and both are extremely active in their son’s life. All the times Smackle has had dinner at the Minkus house, it’s been a wonderful, cohesive, loving event. They fit the definition of family, according to the dictionary.

Certainly, hers does too. But it doesn’t feel like it adds up to what he has, or what Maya now has, or what Riley has.

Still, the look on his face makes it downright near impossible to say no. Logically, Smackle knows
she could if she tried hard enough, but she’s always had a soft spot for Farkle Minkus.

This, she’s always known.

“Perhaps that could be arranged,” she says tentatively, immediately mirroring the smile that blooms across his face. Even if all else fails in the coming weekends, that smile will have been worth it.

She gets off at her stop and Farkle insists on walking up to her building with her, even though he has one more stop to go and she informs him every single time that it’s illogical to get off the subway just to walk her one block. But he does it anyway. Feelings, she figures, aren’t dictated by the laws of logic.

She pulls him into a hug when they stop in front of her brownstone, smiling into his shoulder when he places a quick kiss on the top of her head. They’re hesitant with these new forms of affection, taking them slowly, but as Smackle gets used to each one she likes them more and more. She’s grateful for Farkle for many reasons, but she will never know how she was lucky enough to find someone so patient and willing to learn and understand.

“You’ll let me know?” he asks, propping his chin on her head.

“Yes,” she promises, pulling away from him and giving him a nod. “I’ll ask my father tonight and report to you as soon as I have a definitive answer.”

She starts up the steps as Farkle heads back towards the station, stuffing his hands in his jacket pockets and glancing both ways before crossing the street. Smackle finds herself smiling as she watches him go, shaking her head at her own silliness and stepping into the house.

The group has never come over to her house. She doesn’t see why she should be under scrutiny for this choice, considering they have never been to Lucas’s or Zay’s house either, but every time they go over to the Matthews apartment she feels a little twinge of guilt that she doesn’t understand. Riley and the others never pick on her for it, yet the shame never fails to poke at her for a brief moment as they all get settled in to wherever they’ve taken over for the afternoon.

She heads to her room and sits down at her desk, unloading her bag while lost in thought. Glancing at the cozy bedroom, she tries to imagine the six of them cramped into the space. Maya would probably take over the bed, possibly letting Zay squeeze on as well if he bargained hard enough. Lucas and Riley would probably sit by the window, regardless of the fact that Smackle is lacking the bay window Riley’s room is so famous for. Farkle would be by her.

Wherever she ends up, she hopes Farkle would be with her.

Her phone buzzes in her pocket, making her jump slightly.

Former Arch-Nemesis: Home safe.

She thinks about typing a reply, but she doesn’t see what she could say until she talks to her father and has something to offer him. So she locks her phone and gets to work, finishing her calculus homework and just starting on chemistry when the door opens from the main living area.

“Isadora?” her father calls from the hall, “You back yet?”

“I am home!” she calls back.

“Alright. I’ll start on dinner. Lime chicken sound okay?”
She listens to the sound of her father rummaging around in the kitchen and chicken sizzling in the pan as she finishes the rest of her assignments. When she finally is able to close her world history textbook, she grabs her phone and heads back out into the living area.

Her father smiles at her as she settles in her spot at the small table. It doesn’t have to be much larger—just enough to fit the two of them, but it could fit four with a couple extra chairs. “How was your school day?”

“Perfectly average. I definitely enjoy calculus the most out of all my classes, it offers me a challenge that the other courses don’t quite match.”

He gives her a funny look, shaking his head slightly. “I think you may be the only daughter on this big, green planet who says they enjoy calculus.”

“I suppose it is just another part of me that’s different.”

“It’s just another part of you that’s unique,” he corrects her, placing a plate of food in front of her and settling in across from her.

Santiago Smackle likes to describe himself as a representative of the common man. What Smackle knows this means is that he doesn’t consider himself an intellectual, and he will never strive to be one. He’s content with being of average intelligence, working as a sales associate for one of their good friend’s small businesses and picking up work as an Uber driver on weekend where he could use the extra cash. Money has never been a motivating factor for him, and it’s a trait he instilled in his daughter as well.

Although their relationship has improved vastly in the last few years, it wasn’t always so mutually beneficial. When her mother passed away in sixth grade, it affected her father in a rather negative way. He became distant, and it was increasingly evident as the year went on and she entered seventh grade that he had no idea how to handle her on his own. Not only because he was suddenly a single dad, which would make any parent nervous, but because she was different. Her autism made her different, and they both knew it.

Her mother was the intellectual. The one who did a lot of the hard work in researching autism since her daughter’s diagnosis, the one who looked into ways to further her opportunities like Einstein Academy, the one who showed up to every award ceremony no matter how small. The loss was hard on both Smackle and her father, albeit in different ways.

Seventh grade was probably the worst year. Santiago sort of avoided her for all intents and purposes, and when she would reach out to him to come help her at Einstein Academy, or come see her win an award, or even when she would lie about needing help with her assignments just to get his attention, he had an alibi ready. Combined with the very real truth that they were suddenly strapped for cash and he was required to work more hours to keep them in their apartment, he had a viable excuse.

They’ve made leaps and bounds since seventh grade. In some ways, Smackle thinks its thanks to Riley and Farkle and the rest of their group—they give her confidence to be true to herself and not be ashamed of her intelligence. Riley always confronts a problem head-on if it’s important enough, and Smackle knows how important her familial relationship should be. They gave her the nerve to confront her father, and she’s been better for it ever since.

Still, she and her father have a lot to keep learning about one another. And one of the things Santiago has to learn about her is how prominently Farkle Minkus factors into her life.
It’s not that she doesn’t want them to meet. She knows logically how important it is for a healthy couple to go through these sort of proceedings like meeting the parents, and she would love to show him off. Farkle is so proud of her every time he brings her over for dinner at his house, and she likes to think she’s won his parents over fairly easily. But when it comes to her end of the deal, she just cannot fathom how well it could work out.

Santiago Smackle and Farkle Minkus come from alternate universes. She sees no foreseeable way an interaction between them could have an overall positive conclusion.

“Father,” she says hesitantly, pushing her rice around on her plate. “Would you be opposed to having dinner with one of my friends next weekend?”

“Dinner? Here?” he looks understandably surprised. “You want to have dinner with me?”

“Yes. My friends and I have decided to do our own activities on homecoming weekend rather than attending the school festivities. Farkle Minkus is hoping to join us for a family dinner. He’s quite interested in meeting you.”

Santiago chews thoughtfully, before making eye contact with Smackle across the table. “Farkle. He’s the one you like, right? The boyfriend.”

“We prefer arch lovesis.” Her father chuckles. “But yes. That would be Farkle Minkus.”

He nods slowly. Smackle feels like she’s sitting on the edge of her seat. Normally, expressions like that are obvious exaggerations, but this time she’s not so sure.

“Well, sure. I’ll cook something nice,” her father finally says. Smackle feels the weight of the world lift off her shoulders.

--

“It’s going to arguably be the greatest weekend of my life,” Zay says happily, holding the ticket for the baseball convention in his hand and holding it up to the light. “I’m so glad we decided to fu—,”

“Zay,” Maya warns cheekily.

“… Fudge homecoming this year. I’m going to finally feel alive. I gotta get some baseballs so I can force every player in that stadium to sign them.”

“Yeah?” Lucas says with a grin, holding an identical ticket. “With what money?”

“I gotta get some money so I can get some baseballs so I can force every player in that stadium to sign them.”

Riley plays with her ticket in her fingers, smiling contently. “You know, Zay, I think you’re right. Maybe blowing off homecoming will be a good decision. Maya will get to go upstate with her family, we’ll get to see some cool baseball stuff, and Farkle…” Her gaze comes to rest on the two of them, tilting her head curiously. “What are you two doing instead?”

“Farkle is coming over to have dinner with me and my father,” Smackle says. Farkle smiles proudly.

Maya and Riley exchange goofy looks, raising their eyebrows. They coo in unison. “Ooh.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” Farkle waves them off. “It’s going to be a good weekend.”
“What’s your house like, Smackle?” Riley asks, leaning forward and propping her elbows on her knees. “I just realized we’ve never even been over. I feel bad, we always go to my house.”

“Trust me, that’s intentional,” Maya says flatly. Lucas nods in agreement.

Smackle shrugs. “As a resident of the establishment, I’m sure my description would be biased in one way or another. Farkle can give you all a detailed report at the end of the weekend, his observations would be much more intriguing.”

“That reminds me,” Lucas pipes up, waiting for all of them to look at him. “Even though we’re all doing different stuff for a majority of the weekend, I think we should still do something together on Sunday night. I get why we’re doing it the way we are, but the whole point of homecoming is spending time together. We need at least one event where we’re all together.”

The others nod consent. Riley gives him an enchanted smile.

“You see that?” Zay points to the two of them. “That’s what my weekend is going to look like. I’ve got that to deal with for the next three days.”

“Oh, Zay,” Riley says, giving him a pout. “I can smile at you just as much if you’d like.”

“Yeah, she can even us up,” Lucas offers.

Zay shudders. “I don’t want to start the triangle part two. No, you can keep the lovey-dovey looks for yourselves. Just don’t third wheel me, alright?”

Riley hops off the couch next to Lucas and squeezes onto the armchair next to Zay, wrapping her arms around him and hugging him tightly. “No third wheels here! You, Zay Babineaux, are one of a kind. We would never be so foolish as to ignore your beautiful, magical presence when we are so graced to get to spend a whole weekend with it.”

Zay pats her arm, giving Lucas a tired look. “She lays it on thick, doesn’t she?”

--

On Friday evening, Farkle and Smackle leave Topanga’s and take the subway as they usually do. Only this time, when Farkle gets off at her stop to walk her to her door, he doesn’t turn around and head back underground.

Smackle feels an unnecessary amount of reservation as she opens the front door and allows him to step in first, shutting the door behind them. He’s quiet as he takes in the quaint living area, and for the sake of filling the silence Smackle shrugs off her jacket before reaching out her hand to take his. “Coat?”

He hesitates a moment, distracted by the new surroundings. But he takes off his jacket and passes it off, waiting patiently as Smackle hangs them both on the coat rack by the door.

“I like your place,” Farkle states. “It’s very homey.”

“Well, it certainly isn’t much.”

He shakes his head. “That doesn’t mean anything. It’s the same thing I told Maya when we went to her house, it feels appreciated here. Lived in. That’s a nicer feeling than you’d think.”

There’s a new expression on his face that Smackle hasn’t gotten to examine yet. It’s thoughtful, as
most of his expressions are. But there’s no smugness, no spark, no sharpness. His features are very
soft, an association she doesn’t usually pair with thoughtfulness. But she decides she likes it just
the same.

“Would you like to see the rest of the apartment?” she asks tentatively.

He nods, smiling. “Of course. Lead the way.”

She shows him the kitchen even though standing in the living room is practically standing in the
kitchen already, and then she leads him back to the hall. After pointing out the bathroom and
gesturing offhandedly towards her father’s room, she pushes open the door to her bedroom.

“This is where the genius works,” she says, immediately going to sit at her desk out of habit. “Feel
free to explore.”

He does so, not making a sound as she steps around the small space. He stands by her bulletin
board for a while, examining the stellar grade reports and certificates of achievement. His eyes stop
on the photo of the six of them tacked amidst the intellectual nonsense. He smirks at her over his
shoulder. “How nice, putting the dumb dumbs amidst your achievements.”

Smackle smiles at the silly nickname for their friends. “In some ways, they feel like the greatest
achievement on that board.”

Farkle nods, wandering over to sit on the edge of her bed. He clasps his hands together, exchanging
eye contact with her. “So, what do you do when you’re not hanging out with us?”

“Homework. Research. Field calls from NASA.”

“Oh, right, of course.”

The mention of homework gets them both to pull out their notebooks and get working on their
chemistry projects, an assignment they both anticipate to be doing the majority of the work for in
both their groups. By the time they make significant headway in completing an annotated
bibliography, Santiago Smackle returns from work and gets to work cooking in the kitchen.

Farkle perks his head up at the noise. “Is that your dad?”

“Yes. He said he’d cook dinner, if that’s okay with you.”

“Of course.” Farkle glances towards the hall, excitement ghosting over his features. “Should we go
say hi?”

For some reason, Smackle wants to keep both parts of her world separate for as long as she possibly
can. But her weakness for Farkle Minkus wins again. “If you wish.”

He’s on his feet in seconds, offering her a hand to help her up. Once they’re both standing upright,
Farkle bursts out the door and into the hall before Smackle can properly prepare herself for the
event. Instead, she’s jogging to catch up.

“You must be Farkle Minkus,” her father is saying as she catches up to them, stepping out of the
hall. He’s shaking the hand Farkle put out in greeting. “Isadora has said a lot about you.”

“I consider it an honor, sir,” he replies. “Your daughter is absolutely brilliant. It’s been a challenge
trying to best her for the last few years.”
“Challenge?”

“Oh, yes. But I love a challenge,” he clarifies, smiling at Smackle as she approaches them. “Like education, life is much more fulfilling when you’re being challenged to do your best. Isadora never lets me rest for too long before raising the bar.”

It’s obvious to Smackle that her father is overwhelmed with how much Farkle can talk in a few brief moments, but he doesn’t seem uncomfortable with his presence otherwise. This, she concludes, can only be good news.

To her surprise, Farkle insists on staying in the kitchen to converse while her father cooks dinner. He carries a brunt of the conversation, but her father is being much more receptive to his topics of discussion than she expected he would be. She even catches him grin a few times at Farkle’s wit. She doesn’t even realize how swiftly they transition into eating until the plate is in front of her.

No two people are more different than Santiago Smackle and Farkle Minkus. But by some science-defying miracle, they get along all evening. Although it seems silly, Smackle can’t help but theorize that the unifying link that keeps them rolling along is her.

After dinner, Farkle thanks her father for an amazing evening and Smackle takes him out on the front stoop to make sure he gets back to the subway okay. They sit on the steps and talk for a little while longer, Smackle not ready for the evening to end just yet.

“I’m glad we did this instead of going to homecoming,” she admits, reaching lightly for his fingers. He allows her to take his hand. “It was much more interesting, to say the least.”

“It was great,” he agrees. “How come you don’t want the rest of the group to meet your dad? He’s very nice. Nothing like what I was expecting, considering he wouldn’t come to any of your award shows when we were in middle school.”

Smackle hesitates, looking at their hands rather than his eyes. “Middle school was a difficult time for him. You can’t blame him.”

“What happened? If you would like to tell me.”

“My mother passed away.” She says it quickly, plainly, because she’s not sure she could get it out otherwise. “Heart failure. They still don’t know exactly what triggered it.”

She doesn’t see it happen, but she can imagine the way his face falls at the news. There’s a long moment of silence.

“I’m sorry,” he finally murmurs.

“It’s fine. We’ve come a long way since then. As father and daughter, and as individuals.” She lifts her eyes to meet his. “I think I didn’t want to bring you all into it because we don’t feel quite like a normal family. You and Riley are so lucky to have the situation at home that you do. The dictionary definition of family, essentially. Maya now has that too, even if it originated a little differently. I don’t know about Lucas and Zay—I assume they have the same reservations I do.”

“But, Smackle, family doesn’t have a set definition,” Farkle argues. “Yes, the dictionary lays down some authority, but most families don’t fit the definition to a tee. You and your father care about each other, and it’s evident, even if there were rough patches along the way. That’s all any of us would think about when defining family. Not to mention I’m sure that if you asked Riley, she would argue that we all have two families.”
“How’s that?”

“Well, we have our families by blood,” he explains. “Then we have each other.”

Smackle processes this, smiling in spite of herself. Whatever definition Riley is using to identify family, she would certainly like a copy of that dictionary. The dictionary of Rileytown undoubtedly has many new ways of looking at concepts that Smackle would find intriguing.

The two of them get to their feet, heading down the steps. Farkle glances over his shoulder towards the subway, before locking eyes with her again. “Isadora.”

“Farkle.”

“As scientists, it’s our job to explore, correct? To investigate the unknown and figure out what we can discover in uncharted territory. Would you agree?”

She nods. “I would agree, that’s a fair statement.”

“Well, I’d like to investigate something unknown.” He takes a deep breath, dropping his eyes to the ground before forcing himself to lock eyes with her again. “Isadora, I’d like to kiss you. Would that even be a possibility?”

She’s frozen to the spot, unable to formulate a proper response. It’s certainly new territory, a kind she was uncertain she’d ever get to explore. Part of her is terrified, debating running back into the house and slamming the door and never stepping out into the world again.

But it’s Farkle Minkus. And she has such a weakness for Farkle Minkus.

She still can’t find words so she nods hesitantly, knotting her fingers together in front of her nervously. Farkle takes another deep breath, before closing his eyes and leaning forward. She finds herself closing her eyes without thinking about it.

It feels like it’s over in an instant. His lips brush against hers for a millisecond and then it’s over. Her first kiss comes and goes just like that, in a second of contact and holding her breath.

But the feeling inside her is going to stay with her for the rest of her life. She’s warm even though it’s chilly outside, and although the closeness set her slightly on edge she’s equally relaxed. The use of the word “melting” when referring to a human being has never made sense to her, but all of the sudden she understands it. One instant into exploring new territory, and she already understands something new.

When she opens her eyes, she sees that expression on Farkle’s face again. The thoughtful, soft one. She suddenly decides she likes it the best of all his thoughtful expressions.

“That was new,” she finally says, dying for the silence to end.

He nods slowly, blinking at her. She ventures another attempt at breaking the silence.

“What did you discover?”

“Everything I thought I knew about this is wrong,” he says breathlessly. Then, to her relief, he breaks into a grin. “I’m eager to continue to be proven wrong with you.”

She watches him walk back towards the subway, feeling different. But in a good way.

When the group gets together at the Matthews apartment Sunday night, she spends a majority of
the evening observing them and thinking about Riley’s definition of family. Although she doesn’t outright ask her, knowing Riley, she’s able to surmise an approximation of what she thinks the Rileytown dictionary entry would say.

*Family.* Noun. A group of people who love each other, bound by blood or not.

---

**Junior Year**

Junior year is the year Isadora Smackle learns about affection.

It was only a matter of time, considering Riley is one of the most naturally affectionate people Smackle has ever met. She has a theory that Riley is secretly not human and is more likely a robot who has perfected the art of empathy and love, only now it’s her only primary function and she can no longer control. She told Zay about this hypothesis, and he concurred it was a possibility.

Another reason for the timing of the lesson comes from the fact that junior year brings a lot of changes for all of them in ways they weren’t expecting. After a nasty fight at the end of sophomore year, Riley and Maya decided to spend junior year with a degree of separation. They’re at a good place now, but they do not hang out as often as they used to and are trying to build lives for themselves outside of each other. It’s clearly hard for both of them, but Smackle assured them she thought their effort was noble and quite mature and responsible.

In a natural reflection of their parallel nature to Riley and Maya, Lucas and Zay finds themselves at odds during the school year as well. Smackle never gets all the details and is unable to piece together the entire story, but from what she understands from her own observation and Farkle’s insights their spats are stemming from strong disagreements about how both of them are spending their year.

Zay is upset that Lucas is spending all his time studying and won’t have any fun, Lucas is furious with Zay that he’s wasting all his time partying and blowing off his classes. It’s weird to see them fight, but Farkle advises Smackle that it’s best to let them work it out on their own.

Speaking of Farkle, he too has been having a rough year. Smackle does her best to help him, but he seems to be struggling with a lot of internal things, so she can’t exactly offer constructive solutions. She goes to Cory after school one day out of concern for him, but Mr. Matthews merely assures her that he’s aware of the problem and that he’s working on it with him. It’s frustrating to not be able to do much else, but she relents and lets the adult take care of it.

She and Riley bond over the fact that while all of their friends seem to be falling apart at the seams, they’re hurting from being unable to do any good.

“It’s empathy,” Riley explains. “It’s amazing to be able to feel so strongly for someone else, but it hurts.”

Smackle doesn’t see how feelings that belong to someone else can hurt her, but they do. She’s starting to realize that when it comes to emotions, science doesn’t hold much weight. That scares her more than she’d like to admit.

Despite how difficult the year is, the group somehow manages to hold it together. And by the time they’re getting to the end of the second semester, Riley has an entirely new focus she’s pouring all her energy into.

“We can’t just not go to junior prom,” she says fiercely at the lunch table one March afternoon. She points emphatically at the poster hanging on the wall next to them. “It’s going to the be the
“event of the year. We didn’t go to homecoming last year.”

“And wasn’t that a great idea?” Zay comments.

Riley gives him a nod. “Yes, it was, Zay. But this is prom. We only get two, and I’ve been looking forward to it legitimately my entire life.”

“It’s true,” Maya says, eating a French fry. “Rumor has it her first words were promposal.”

Farkle raises his eyebrows at Lucas. “Good luck with that.”

“Actually, Lucas already asked me. And I said yes, obviously.”

The entire table erupts at once.

“What?”

“When? When was this?”

“Where’s the picture proof? I didn’t see any posts on social media!”

“Riley, you didn’t tell me about this at all!” Maya says indignantly, her jaw hanging open. “I can’t believe you didn’t tell me about your first Huckleberry proposal.”

Lucas and Riley exchanging a look, before both clasping their hands together and placing them primly on the table in front of them. It’s clear they were expecting this reaction from their peers.

“Well, Maya,” Lucas begins, “Maybe we didn’t tell you because it isn’t any of your business.”

“Don’t make me come for you, Ranger Rick. We just started liking each other again.”

“The bottom line is that Lucas and I are going, and we want the rest of you to come too,” Riley says diplomatically. “We’re running out of things like this, and before we know it we’re going to be going to college and everything is going to change. Let’s take advantage of the moments we have now.”

Farkle gives Smackle a curious look, trying to gauge her opinion on the matter. After a moment, she nods consent. “It’ll be better than homecoming simply because it’s not homecoming. Farkle and I will come, Riley.”

Maya makes a face at her lunch tray. “Great. I’m so excited to hang out with two couples all night and try not to throw up.”

“Hey, we’re in this together,” Zay says defensively, linking arms with Maya. She plays along, hugging closer to him and leaning away from the rest of them. “I’m trying not to catch cooties. It’s going to take both of us to survive the night.”

Plans are completely subverted, however, when Maya is asked to junior prom by someone outside of their group.

He’s a soccer player for the school team, a lanky, dark-haired guy named Brett Ryan. Apparently, he’s been eyeing Maya since sophomore year and this promposal is not the first time they’ve interacted. As Smackle is recapping the event with the girls in the bay window, Riley looks absolutely shocked to discover the history of Brett Ryan actually goes back a bit.

“You’ve kissed him?” she shrieks, her eyes as wide as dinner plates. Smackle watches the entire
exchange with quiet curiosity. “Maya, you’ve never once mentioned this guy to me. Ever. All I know about him is that he’s in our physics class and he plays soccer. And now you’re telling me you’ve kissed him? More than once?”

“Well, Riley, maybe I didn’t tell you because it isn’t any of your business.” Maya immediately regrets the sass, seeing the hurt in her best friend’s features. Although the drama from the previous year has mostly dissipated, it’s clear there are still some raw patches between them. “It was just at a couple of parties, Riles. We’re not official or anything. Zay was there, I’m surprised he didn’t say anything.”

“He was intoxicated, are you sure he even remembers?” Smackle asks.

“Oh, that’s right,” Maya says with a half-hearted laugh. “Maybe he wouldn’t.”

Riley leans forward and takes Maya’s hand, making her meet her eyes. “You’re going with him because you like him, right? Not because you feel like you have to? I want prom to be fun for all of us. I don’t want you feeling like it’s an obligation to go with this guy.”

Maya pats her hand in response. “It’ll be more fun to not be going stag. I’ll be okay, I promise.”

The subject is dropped, but Smackle continues to notice Riley’s concern over the issue whenever Brett is brought up. Zay and Lucas don’t seem too fond of him either, taking on protective demeanors whenever he approaches their group to talk to Maya.

“He’s got two first names as his first and last name,” Zay says matter-of-factly. “I don’t trust a man with two first names. Look at Josh Matthews. Don’t trust him either.” He pauses. “No offense, Riley.”

Most of the drama dies down as Maya sets her attention on a completely new task, pulling in all of them aside from Riley to help her.

“Listen,” she says when they’re all cramped in her bedroom one afternoon after school. Lucas and Riley are notably absent. “We all know the one thing Riley wants out of this junior prom but will not admit. Anyone care to take a venture?”

Smackle raises her hand. Maya gives her a fond smile. “Yes, Smackle?”

“Prom queen.”

“Ding! Correct. Very good. She wants to be queen so badly but she will not make a big deal about it, so it’s up to us to do the campaigning for her. It’s going to be a complete underground coup. Riley Matthews is going to be junior prom queen even if we have to die accomplishing it.”

Farkle glances around the room. “Shouldn’t Lucas be here? I’m sure he’d want to help.”

“Oh, don’t worry, Huckleberry is in on it as well. He’s just currently distracting Riley, as she’d notice our assembly otherwise. I gave him the job because, well, it’s not hard for him to distract her. All he has to do is exist.”

“Gross,” Zay says, making a face.

“You and me both, Babineaux,” Maya says offhandedly. “Anyway, this is our mission. Time to talk logistics.”

“What’s going to happen if we fail?” Smackle wonders aloud. “If we campaign and she still isn’t
voted in? What do we do then?”

Maya smirks mischievously. “I have my back-up plans. The downfall of high school democracy is nigh, should everything else fall apart. But for now, we’ll take the legal route. Time to brainstorm. Everyone get out your pencils. And someone give me one, because I lost mine again.”

By the time Prom actually rolls around in the middle of May, junior year has proven itself to be a mighty opponent.

Smackle doesn’t know exactly what happened to Lucas, but she knows from the grape vine that it’s been a tough year for him. Not that she couldn’t tell—he was a little less golden, a little more drained, never looking like he’d gotten a decent night of sleep.

Farkle went through a similar experience, although Smackle never gets the full detail on what exactly happened to him. She just has assurance from him, Lucas, and Cory that everything has been worked out and that he now knows how to handle whatever the issue was. She figures he’ll tell her eventually, when he’s ready. He’s been patient with her in so many aspects—she can easily return the favor, as long as he’s okay otherwise.

Maya, Riley, and Smackle get ready together at the Matthews, helping each other with hair and makeup. Riley absolutely insists on minimal make-up, considering they’re all beautiful as they are and should only accentuate it rather than hide it, but Maya reminds her that make-up is just as much a feminist tool as not wearing make-up, and that she’ll have to pry her winged eyeliner from her cold, dead hands.

Riley stares at her reflection in the mirror while Smackle stands behind her, braiding her hair into a fancy up-do. Although she much prefers science and mathematics, she’s has always had a minor interest in hair design. “Maya, it’s not right.”

“What’s not, honey?” Maya asks, focusing on painting her toenails.

“That you’re not going to be with us,” Riley huffs. Smackle steps back to let her move and she whips around to face Maya, pouting. “We’re all going to eat together and you have to go with Brett to whatever thing he’s doing with his soccer pals.”

“I’ll be fine. We’ll see each other as soon as we get to the dance.” Maya gets to her feet and puts the nail polish away. “Besides, Shawn is gonna scare the living daylights out of Brett when he gets here, so you can have that happy thought as you send me off into the sunset.”

Smackle watches Riley accept this reality, harsh as it may be. It’s amazing that their affection for one another can make them hurt each other so easily. She figures affection is supposed to be a good thing, regardless of how powerful it is. But it’s starting to feel like the more affection you hold for someone, the deeper it hurts.

They hear the boys arrive at the door, assuming it’s them based on the yelling that Cory immediately launches into about not wanting to let Riley go. Taking this as their cue to get changed, they grab their dresses and make the swap, shouting at Zay when he pops his head in to tell them to hurry up because they’re burning daylight and he’s starving.

“Thank God that wasn’t Lucas or Farkle,” Riley says pointedly, having Smackle zip up her dress. “It’s bad luck to see the dress before the grand reveal.”

“This is Prom, Riley, you’re not getting married,” Maya retorts.
Riley, in her flowy, purple dress and Maya in her long, sleek red one, both drop their jaws when they get a good look at Smackle. She’s uncertain about her knee-length black choice, especially now with the looks on their faces. “What? I’m not wearing this correctly, am I?”

“Smackle,” Maya says, shaking her head. “You look so amazing.”

Riley moves forward and wraps her in a hug, typically moved by emotion as she so classically is. “You’re so beautiful. Farkle has no idea what he’s in for.”

She blushes, unsure of what to say. She lightly hugs Riley back. “If I’m half as lovely as you two, then I’d consider myself lucky.”

The three of them make sure they have everything they need, then step out into the hall together to join the crowd in the living room.

The room immediately goes quiet, both the boys and the parents going silent at the sight of the girls walking out in their dresses together. Riley exchanges a smile with Smackle, squeezing her arm affectionately before letting her go.

The silence is affection too, Smackle realizes. So much affection you run out of words.

She watches Riley step down from the kitchen and into the living area, approaching Lucas bashfully. He looks thunderstruck, completely overwhelmed. This doesn’t surprise Smackle, considering what Farkle has told her about their first date. What does surprise her is turning to head over to Farkle and seeing him wearing the exact expression, looking right at her.

She walks up to him, managing as confident a smile as she can muster. She hopes she doesn’t look as shell-shocked as he does, but the sight of him in a tuxedo is a serious threat to her cool demeanor. She’s glad she decided to go with heels after all—she’s just realizing how tall Farkle is getting.

“I hope I’ve mastered the Prom look sufficiently enough,” she murmurs.

Farkle is out of words. He simply nods.

“Gee, Zay, no need to stare,” Maya says loudly, attempting to lighten the mood. “I’m only a humble city girl.”

Topanga launches into action, forcing them all to assemble in front of the living room bay window for a group picture. Zay, Lucas, and Riley aggressively gesture for Maya to get up there with them, who is standing awkwardly with her date.

She tosses him a look. Brett nods her forward. “Go on.”

Maya leaps up and runs into Riley’s arms, giving her an excited hug and earning laughter from the group. A cycle of photography ensues, and Smackle enjoys observing the proud faces of everyone’s parents. Shawn is trying hard not to be choked up, and Katy Hart looks as though she might cry at any second, her hands clasped together in front of her mouth. Cory is frantically wiping tears in between throwing warnings in Lucas’s direction about where he should keep his hands, even though they’re only on Riley’s waist.

When they’re finally freed from the paparazzi, Maya and Brett take off and the rest of them prepare to go to dinner. Stuart Minkus informs them that the limo has arrived, before joining his wife and saying goodbye to the pair of them.
“You look absolutely wonderful, Isadora,” Jennifer compliments her. She reaches forward and brushes some hair from her son’s forehead. “Don’t know how this guy managed to snatch you up.”

Farkle smacks her hand away. Smackle smiles shyly. “Thank you, Mrs. Minkus.”

“Oh, don’t forget,” Stuart says, reaching behind him on the kitchen table to hand them the corsages. “You’ll want to get this done before you go.”

Farkle takes the flower from his father, turning to face Smackle and placing it in her fingers. She beams up at him and does her best to pin it to his lapel without puncturing him. Farkle takes her hand and starts to say something but Riley pops up in between them, taking their arms and yanking them towards the door. “Time to go!”

The parents usher them out the door, warning them to be safe and take care of each other and have an amazing time as an afterthought. When she’s almost out the door, Riley hesitates, turning back to look at her parents. Lucas waits at the door for her.

“Dad?” she says softly. Waiting for some sort of approval.

Cory pauses, before breaking into a proud smile and holding his arms out. “You look magnificent,” he tells her, patting her shoulders when she pull away. “Go have fun.”

Smackle catches one last glance at the parents, assembled in the living room and watching their children run off to explore the world. Although her father isn’t among them, she knows he’s feeling the same things. She saw the same look of affection when Riley and Maya picked her up earlier in the day.

“Time to party,” Zay says gleefully, interrupting her thoughts. “Let’s get lit!”

Maya finally rejoins them about halfway into the dance, having slipped away from Brett long enough to breathe.

“Isn’t this the best night of your life?” Riley shouts when she approaches, wrapping her arms around her and swaying them back and forth. “This is the best night of my life. I want tonight to go on forever and ever and ever.”

Maya hugs her back, giving them a weird look. “How much has she had to drink?”

“None.”

“Typical.” She lightly pries Riley off of her, giving her an endearing smile. “Riles, relax. They’re going to announce the prom court any minute now and I need you to maintain your chill.”

“Oh, no,” Riley’s face immediately changes, worry taking over her features. “I hadn’t even thought about that.”

“Wow, that feels like a tiny miracle,” Zay says, giving Lucas an impressed nod. “You’re a very good distraction.”

“Why, thank you.”

There’s a mini-commotion by the DJ and then the principal is standing on the stage, holding the mic and looking somewhat uncertain as to what he’s supposed to be doing. He gives a small speech
about how proud he is of the junior class, including a comment about their sports records that earns a cheer from the crowd of jocks where Maya’s date is standing.

Smackle gives her a look. “That’s your date.”

“Thank you for reminding me.” Maya’s eyes are wide with disdain.

“Well, now we’ll get to what I know you all are waiting for,” he says with an air of mystery, holding up an envelope in his hands. “Prom court for the junior class.”

There’s an assortment of cheers. The group of them huddle together and put their arms around each other, bracing for whatever comes next.

“Now, Riley,” Maya says condescendingly, giving her a look. “Whatever happens, you’ll stay calm. Won’t you?”

“Yes, Maya,” she says with an eye roll. “I didn’t even campaign. I have realistic expectations.”

Maya nods, giving the rest of them a knowing smirk.

“We’re going to do this a little differently this year, thanks to a push from the feminism club—,”

“Hell yeah!” Riley shouts with other members of the crowd.

“We’ll be starting with Prom Queen, rather than Prom King. So, without further ado…”

There room falls into anticipative silence. The envelope crinkles into the microphone as he pulls out the name, taking a deep breath. Although she claimed to be calm, Smackle catches Riley screw her eyes shut.

“And it is with great joy that I can announce your junior class Prom Queen is Riley Matthews.”

The crowd erupts in cheers, no corner of the room louder than theirs. Riley looks as though she’s about to pass out as Maya and Farkle tackle her with a hug, and Lucas has to help her walk to the stage considering how shaky she is with surprise.

When he rejoins them, Smackle gives him a playful nudge. “You’re dancing with royalty,” she informs him.

He shrugs, exchanging a smile with her. “Yeah, but I always knew that.”

They all applaud as Riley gets crowned, looking one half overwhelmed and one half elated. Smackle finds it impressive that an entire room, and entire class of students can have so much affection for one single person. But Riley Matthews is like that, she knows. She’s a gravitational force of love, receiving just as much as she gives out. Which is to say, a whole lot.

“And now, for your Prom King,” the principal continues, nudging Riley to side to access the microphone again. “Junior class, please join me in crowning your junior Prom King, Charlie Gardener.”

Although the room erupts in cheers, their corner of the room is dead silent. Smackle’s jaw drops, as does Farkle’s. Maya looks as though she’s just run over a deer. Lucas looks thunderstruck again, but for completely different reasons.

“You know,” Zay says, “Although we did a good thing, I don’t think we thought it all the way through.”
The moment Charlie is crowned and he and Riley head onto the dance floor to share a dance, Farkle takes Smackle’s hand and pulls her away from the group. “Well, we’re just going to—?”

“Yes, that would be lovely, let’s do that,” she agrees, sprinting off into the crowd. Whatever happens with Charlie and Lucas, she’s not sure she wants to see the immediate aftermath.

Once they’ve hidden themselves fairly well in the crowd, Farkle takes Smackle’s other hand and starts to sway them back and forth, allowing them some distance for her benefit. She appreciates the thought, moving closer to him on her own accord. He doesn’t look disappointed.

“What do you think is going to happen now?” she asks him, glancing over her shoulder to catch a glimpse of Riley and Charlie.

Farkle makes a face. “Nothing. Lucas is going to be stung for a little while, but Riley will make him forget about it by the end of the night. It’s pretty obvious Charlie isn’t any competition. Besides, I’m pretty sure he has a new girlfriend. Or boyfriend, I can’t remember.”

Smackle nods. She could believe all of that to be true, having learned all she has about Riley and Lucas in the last few years.

They continue to sway together in content silence, drifting closer together as the song goes on. Smackle gets lost in thinking about affection, about all the things she’s never understood but is finally beginning to understand after years with these people and their antics. Particularly Farkle. Farkle, who is just as smart as her but so intuitive of others. Farkle, who is so cognizant of her feelings, even if she doesn’t fully recognize them herself. Farkle, who has been her rival since they were in middle school but has always, always had her full attention.

“You look stunning, Smackle,” he says matter-of-factly, dipping his head down to lock eyes with her. “You always do, but even more so tonight. I’m honored to be your date tonight.”

“I love you, Farkle.”

The words are out of her mouth before she even realizes she’s said them. Both of them freeze, taking in the weight of the phrase she just threw out there. Farkle’s eyes are wider than she’s ever seen them. She immediately feels like sinking into the floor.

He swallows. “What?”

It was affection. Affection so strong that there were words, only three words she could possibly say to sum it up, that made her throw them out there so callously. She doesn’t even quite understand them herself and yet she’s suddenly throwing them around as if she does. She can feel the blush coloring her cheeks. Her hands are cold. Farkle won’t stop staring at her.

Affection is warm, and proud, and loving. But it’s also scary, and unpredictable, and cold. And it hurts. Sometimes, it hurts.

--

Although she feels like she’s ruined the night, and would completely understand if Farkle wanted to leave her as quickly as possible, he insists on getting her home like usual.

He walks up her up the front steps, standing in front of her door like they have a million times before. She straightens his tie instinctively, nitpicking as a result of her nerves.
“Well, I had a great time,” he says, breaking the silence.

“I’m sorry for my outburst,” she says softly, hating how embarrassed she feels. She may be learning to appreciate the complexity of feelings, but she resents how unprepared she is to experience them. “I shouldn’t have… I’m sorry. I’m working on thinking about what I say, you know that.”

“It’s okay,” he assures her.

“It’s was completely out of line. I’m saying these things as if I understand them, I don’t.”

“I don’t either,” he reminds her. He waits for her to meet his eyes, giving her a sympathetic smile. “We’re both exploring this new territory. And I understand exactly why you said it. I feel it. I just… I think I need to… figure it out more before I can…”

“I understand,” she promises him, although a part of her deflates. For a genius, she is sure is stupid. “Really, I do.”

He gives her a warm smile, brushing some of her hair behind her ear. Then, he leans forward and presses a kiss to her cheek. “See you tomorrow. Thank you for being my date.”

“Thank you,” she replies, leaning forward to kiss his other cheek. She opens the door and steps inside, leaving him slightly flustered on the doorstep. “See you tomorrow.”

She shuts the door behind her, exhaling and leaning back against it. She has no idea how Riley lives with so much affection in her life. She can barely handle this much, and she barely understands it as it is. And now, she’s pretty sure she’s ruined everything.

The moment she starts away from the door there’s a light knock, confusing her. When she pulls open the door, Farkle is still standing exactly where he left her, looking even more flustered than when she closed the door.

“I don’t understand anything,” he says quickly. “I love you, too.”

He steps halfway into the house and kisses her, catching her off-guard in a way she doesn’t mind so much. Although neither of them have any clue about feelings or emotions or all the rest of it, they’re exploring it together. And she doesn’t ever want that to change.

Affection, she realizes, is addictive, and it’s actually no wonder Riley loves dealing in it so much. To feel as warm and needed and appreciated as she does when she’s with her father, or her friends, or particularly with Farkle, is a life-changing feeling. Something she’s eager to learn more about.

- S E N I O R  Y E A R -

Senior year is the year Isadora Smackle learns about doubt.

It’s not so much in the events of senior year—applying for colleges, preparing to move away, participating in senior activities like skip day and Prom—but in the moments where she finds herself alone, left with just her thoughts and the future looming ahead of her.

There’s doubt in the decisions of which classes to take to round out her applications. There’s doubt in which schools to apply to, and when the acceptances start pouring in, which path to ultimately take. The group spends hours with her going through the pros and cons, trying to whittle her options down into something where the answer seems obvious. It gets tiring though, and eventually it’s only Farkle and Riley still sitting with her trying to parse it out.
“If you’re thinking about NASA,” Farkle keeps saying, starting all of his sentences with the same thought.

“All of them have excellent programs for aerospace, we’ve gone over this,” Smackle says in frustration, tossing another letter onto the table and hiding her head in her hands.

Riley is also repeating a one-note philosophy, and it’s one that Smackle can’t even begin to fathom following. “One of these schools is the one you want to go to, Smackle. You’ve exhausted every other way of looking at it, this is the only determination you have left to make. All of these schools would be amazing, but only one of them would make you happy.”

She stares at the letter offering acceptance to John Hopkins. For some reason, she can’t bring herself to admit that Riley is right.

There’s doubt in the sanctity of their group, how long their dynamic will hold. No one is willing to address it, but after the turbulence of last year and the uncertainty of the future, their entire friendship feels precarious. They’re tied together, but it used to feel like they were bonded by iron, and now it feels more like floss. All it will take is one tug in any direction to send them all flying apart.

To Smackle, nothing had ever felt more certain than science. For a while, the strength of their friendship challenged that. Now, she’s starting to regret the fact that science is becoming more certain once again.

As they begin to definitively decide where they’ll all be going at the end of the summer, Smackle keeps a tally of how many miles will be between them. With Maya’s ultimate decision to attend CalArts, she stops counting. Not worth trying to pin a quantity to it. It’s too many miles.

When Farkle decides to go to Washington University in St. Louis, that’s when the doubt really settles in. Because the distance between Maryland and Missouri is way more than Smackle even wants to contemplate, and it already feels like there’s a world between them the further they get into the school year.

The day that Smackle sends in her acceptance to John Hopkins, the two of them hang out at her house to have dinner with her father again. She’s in awe of how good the relationship has developed between Farkle and her father. Santiago Smackle looks forward to having Farkle Minkus over for dinner. It’s a conclusion Smackle never saw coming.

That night after dinner, Farkle and her sit on the front stoop like they have a hundred times. They tried switching to her room in the winter junior year, but Smackle resented that they couldn’t see the night sky from her window very well, and Farkle stated he didn’t want to make her father think he was doing anything uncouth. So the front steps became their spot, and so it was for the rest of their high school careers.

Taking all she’s learned from her years with her friends, she approaches the topic both of them have been avoiding head-on. “You’ve researched it, haven’t you?”

Farkle gives her a look. “Researched what?”

“The success rate of long distance relationships. What’s the percentage?”

His expression softens. He clears his throat, dropping his gaze to the stone rather than her eyes. “Not good. Let’s leave it at that.”

Sackle doesn’t know what to say. Both of them have been thinking about it, as she knew they
were. As scientists, it’s their job to consider all the angles of a potential problem and come up with solutions. But there doesn’t seem to be a plausible solution to this. The only one is the one that she can’t even consider without feeling the hurt from affection. The affection that won’t let her think logically.

“It’s not even the statistics that bother me, you know?” Farkle mutters, evidently feeling a similar frustration. “It’s how badly these things seem to blow up. It’s like a bad chemical reaction, and the longer it gets left to fester the worse it becomes. A long distance break up is never quiet and mutual and respectful—it's always messy and loud and everyone gets hurt. Good graces break apart. It’s destruction.”

Smackle merely nods. He locks eyes with her again.

“I don’t ever want to put our relationship in ruins.”

She can feel it coming. She feels the end coming before either of the words leave their mouths and all she can think of to say is how unfair it all is. How Riley Matthews would never stand for this nonsense. How it doesn’t make sense to let go of him now when she finally understands exactly what affection means, when she’s just starting to figure out the rest of the world that seems like such a mystery, when she cares about him more than she’s cared about anyone else. She can’t reconcile that with the logic of the situation, even though she knows it makes sense.

Still, she makes a minimal effort. “Lucas and Riley aren’t concerned about this.”

“Yeah,” Farkle scoffs, looking unimpressed. “And we’ll see what happens to them. Lucas and Riley have also never really respected science or logic. I mean,” he stops himself, trying to phrase his words correctly in the way he wants them. “I know Riley likes science and all that. But they’ve never had the fundamental understanding of probability and sense like we have.”

At the moment, Smackle doesn’t feel like she understands anything. “Right.”

There’s a long silence. Smackle focuses her attention on the streetlights, only looking away when she’s worried she’s going to seriously affect her eyesight. “So, what? What happens now?”

Farkle’s quiet—something Smackle has learned is a rarity. He keeps his eyes on his shoes. “You know I care about you. Right?” He lifts his eyes, meeting her gaze. “Tell me you know that.”

“I do.” She wants to feel fond of how well she knows this fact, but all she can feel is dread.

He lets his gaze linger on her for a long moment, before dropping his head down. He reaches forward and takes her hand. “Then I think you know what we have to do. If you care about me as much as I care about you…I don’t want to put our relationship in ruins.”

Smackle knows exactly what he’s implying. They’ve both anticipated it for weeks now. But she doesn’t have any words, so she just nods.

They sit in silence for a few more minutes, before Farkle gets to his feet to leave. They walk down the steps, Farkle giving her one last hug. Maybe it won’t be the last, she doesn’t know, but it certainly feels like it. She feels him kiss the top of her head.

Then they break apart. And it’s done.

He gives her a tight smile. “See you at school tomorrow.”

She walks him walk towards the subway like she has a million times before. Only this time, she
figures he’ll never come back. After a shaky sigh, she heads back up the steps and inside, shutting the door behind her.

--

The night before she’s set to leave on the road for their final group adventure, her father and her have dinner like they usually do. But it’s quieter.

“So, you’re leaving tomorrow?” Santiago asks, staring at his plate rather than across the table as he eats.

She nods. “Correct. Early departure. You may be gone for work already, but we’ll see each other when we meet at Hopkins.”

“Right.” He takes a moment of silence to chew. “Farkle going along?”

It’s been weeks since the separation, but every time he’s brought up it feels brand new. Smackle wants Riley to explain to her why it still hurts after so much time, but she doesn’t want to give anyone the impression that she regrets taking the scientific route. “Yes. We all are.”

“That’ll be good. You guys will have a lot of fun.”

Smackle pushes her rice around on her plate for a little while longer, before getting to her feet. “May I be excused? I should make sure all of my belongings are accounted for. Don’t want to forget anything in the rush tomorrow.”

“Of course, right,” he says, watching her rise to her feet and drop her dish in the sink. He’s silent until she gets to the hall. “Isadora?”

She stops, turning to look at him over her shoulder. “Yes?”

“I just…” He collects his thoughts, giving her a smile. “I’m very proud of you. Your mother would be, too. You know?”

Affection swells again. She smiles back. “I do.”

She spends the rest of the evening making sure all of her things are packed up, preparing for bed and consumed with thoughts of what the next week is going to bring her. One last trip with her friends, one last rendezvous with Farkle, and then the future. It’s staring her right in the face, and she feels wildly unprepared despite how much time she’s put into being the opposite. It’s amazing she gets any sleep at all that night with her thoughts running so rampant.

Especially considering the phone call she gets at midnight.

“Zay? Why are you calling me at midnight? It’s late.”

“You think I don’t know that?” She’s surprised to hear he sounds half-asleep as well. “Get your stuff ready. We’re coming to get you.”

“What? Why? Where are we going?”

The phone shuffles from his hand and there’s a commotion that Smackle can’t make out. Finally, Maya’s voice comes through the phone, much more awake than the former speaker. “Change of plans. We leave tonight. Grab all your stuff. We’ll be there in ten. Five, if Lucas would pick up the pace a little here.”
Maya then hangs up, leaving Smackle feeling appropriately unprepared. But at least this time she feels like she’s earned it.

She gathers all of her belongings and lugs them out to the living area. Tossing them onto the front stoop, she takes one last glance over her shoulder at the home she’s known her whole life, at her father’s bedroom door where he’s sleeping away, at the place where her mother used to walk and laugh and teach her about the world.

Now, it’s time for her to see the world for herself.

Smackle shoulders her bag and steps into the night to wait for the van, closing the door behind her.
Wounded from their first departure, the five of them are relatively silent on the drive out of Maryland.

Zay takes the wheel and puts on some classical music to reflect the mood, which no one protests. Maya stretches out in the backseat and claims she’s taking a nap, but Riley is pretty sure she’s simply teary-eyed and doesn’t want anyone to see. Lucas is in the passenger seat, pressing his fist against his lips and continuously clenching and unclenching his jaw. Riley knows that look very well—it’s the look he takes on when he’s repressing his emotions.

Nothing hurts more than glancing in the seat next to her where Farkle is seated. He’s dead silent, cramped against the edge of the seat and leaning his head against the window. He’s gazing out at the scenery passing them by, but he’s not really seeing anything, his eyes unfocused.

He’s looking out to the road ahead, but his heart is stuck in Maryland.

Riley feels a similar sense of displacement. Certainly not as much as Farkle, but it does feel as though she left a tiny piece of herself with Smackle at John Hopkins. Every stop they take, she’s going to leave a little more and a little more. When they finally get to Los Angeles, she’s worried there won’t be anything left.

She’ll be going back to New York an empty shell. That won’t impress the Gamma Gamma girls very much.

When the car finally pulls off the road to refuel, Maya sits up in the backseat and brushes her hair out of her face. She looks confident as usual, but her eyes are ever-so-slightly rimmed with red. Riley is the only one who notices.

“Alright, enough of this moping around. Zay Babineaux, you turn that depressing string quartet off immediately.”

He obeys, turning off the car anyway for Lucas as he hops out to fill up the tank.

“Get ready to shuffle, I’m driving next,” she continues, propping her elbows on Riley and Farkle’s seats in front of her. She stretches her leg out to nudge Farkle. “We need to get this car jumping again. Someone lift the mood. Someone say something funny.”

“Your grades last semester,” Farkle offers.
Zay cracks up. Riley smiles in spite of herself, not feeling so guilty when Maya merely rolls her eyes in response.

“Hilarious. Anyone else?”

There’s a moment of silence. Zay glances over his shoulder to watch Lucas pump gas, a grin slowly growing across his face. He whips back around and faces them, raising his eyebrows. “Y’all wanna hear a great Lucas story?”

Maya hums loudly, closing her eyes and pressing her hands together in mock prayer. “Zay Babineaux, I love it when those beautiful little words come out of your beautiful big mouth.”

Farkle leans forward interestedly. “Tell us.”

“Alright. So, back when we were in like fourth grade, we both joined the school choir. Everyone did, it was like the only elective you could take in elementary school that early so it was just like, a rite of passage. Me, Lucas, Asher, we all joined. We weren’t really planning on singing—I just stood and mouthed words for the entirety of my elementary school career.”

Riley frowns. “But Zay, you have such a nice voice.”

“Yeah, not in fourth grade I didn’t. No one did.”

Maya gestures offhandedly. “Go on.”

“So anyway, it comes time for the Spring concert, and every year the choir does this God awful rendition of *Don’t Stop Believin’*. This was before *Glee*, too, I mean, Austin was very ahead of the curve when it came to their choir selection.”

Riley watches a smirk start to form on Farkle’s lips. “I get the feeling I know how this ends.”

“Don’t spoil it,” Maya warns, smacking his shoulder. “Zay, continue. Don’t let Farkle spoil it.”

“Right, okay, okay,” he says, speaking more quickly. Riley finds herself admiring little things about him, like how often he gesticulates when he talks. Knowing he’s going to be the next to go, it feels a little bit like enjoying him while she can. “So in this choir version there are like three solos, and even though no fourth grader in their right mind wants to stand in front of the student body and their parents and squeak the phrase “the smell of wine and cheap perfume,” we all have to audition because our choir instructor wants to make sure she gets the absolute best voices for the part.”

“Oh no.” Maya gasps with faux sympathy, pressing her hand to her lips. “Huckleberry’s choir dreams were crushed?”

“No, no, it was much worse than that.” Zay shakes his head. “He got one of the solos.”

“What? Lucas can sing?”

“No, not at all. Especially not in fourth grade. But no one can in fourth grade, and well, he was a real cutie so I guess the teacher went with what she had.”

Farkle makes a face. “I’m telling you, that face does a lot for him.”

“Anyway, the day of the solo comes,” Zay resumes. “Packed audience, full of Austin helicopter parents and their bratty kids. And we start this God awful song, I’m up there mouthing the words,
gleefully pushing my best friend off the risers so he can sing his solo.”

Riley winces. “This isn’t going to end well, is it?”

“Go on,” Maya says with delight, her eyes wide with intrigue.

“Lucas takes one look at the crowd, hears the piano play his cue, and promptly passes out in front of the entire school and their helicopter parents.”

Maya and Farkle launch into hysterics, and even though she can imagine how traumatizing it was Riley can’t help but giggle at the story. Zay is grinning mischievously, obviously amused by their reactions. They only manage to quell their laughter long enough for Lucas to poke his head in the passenger side, checking if there’s any trash that needs to be taken out.

“What?” he says, giving Maya a disgruntled look. “What’s so funny?”

“Nothing, nothing. No trash here.”

When he disappears again, Riley shakes her head at Zay. “He’s going to be annoyed you told us. Even if it is funny in retrospect.”

“Who says he’s going to know? And listen, I’ll have you know I love that story because I was a real hero. He went down, and Asher and I both leapt over hordes of squirming children to help him back to his feet. We were at his side before the principal.” Zay pauses, trying to come up with more justifications. “Besides, it’s not my fault. Elementary school choir is a rough business.”

When Lucas finally returns and the car is all set to go, Maya jumps into the front to drive and Zay hops into the passenger seat. Lucas makes the effort to climb into the very back, having to fight with Riley and Farkle to get past the middle.

“Will you let me sit?” he chides, almost falling over as Riley throws her arms around him, hugging him and keeping him from moving forward.

Farkle grins at Riley and leans forward as well, embracing him from the other side. “You’re not going anywhere. We’re never leaving!”

“We’re going to stay in this gas station and you’re going to stay in our arms for the rest of your natural born life!” Riley chirps, pressing her cheek against his side.

Zay and Maya watch them over their shoulders, mildly amused. “They’re a bunch of straight up weirdos,” Zay comments.

“Yes, Zayby, they are,” Maya agrees, patting his shoulder. “But they’re our weirdos.”

Lucas finally breaks free, collapsing into the back seat and laughing as Riley and Farkle reach for him again. He swats at their hands as Maya starts up the car, plugging in her phone and adjusting the mirrors.

“And now,” she says proudly, buckling her seatbelt. “For the tunes.”

She hits play on her phone and turns up the volume. A piano riff starts and it takes about five seconds for them to recognize the song. Immediately, as Don’t Stop Believin’ fills the vehicle, Farkle and Riley burst out laughing.

Lucas glances between them and at Maya’s smug smirk before turning his glare on his best friend
in the front seat. “Zay!”

“What?”

“Did you tell them about fourth grade?”

“They made me!”

“Oh my God…”

“I said, y’all wanna hear a great Lucas story?” Zay clasps his hands together matter-of-factly.

“They said yes.”

--

In some ways, getting back on the highway is cleansing. They’re well on their way down the east coast, and although there’s sadness in leaving a piece of them behind, the anticipation of what’s coming next keeps them moving forward.

The bittersweet feeling lulls them into a sense of peace. Riley tilts her head against the window, propping her feet up on the driver’s armrest and watching little drops of rain start to fall on the dashboard window. Maya and Zay quietly discuss what classes he’s going to be taking first semester.

“Hey, Riles,” Maya says softly, glancing at her over her shoulder. “Everyone okay back there?”

She tosses a glance at Farkle across from her, resting soundly with his head drooping, nodding occasionally. Turning in her seat, she props her head against the seatback and looks at Lucas stretched out in the back, also dozing.

Riley’s smile is soft. “We’re okay.”

Maya returns the beam, focusing back out on the road. She and Zay continue their conversation in murmurs.

Riley reclines more comfortably against the seat, keeping her gaze on Lucas. She spends a little more time trying to figure out what it is about his expression when he’s asleep that fascinates her so much. He looks the same for what it’s worth—charming even in rest. But she doesn’t think it has anything to do with that. There’s something about him in moments like this that is noticeably different than during the busy daylight hours, when they’re all running around confronting challenges and taking on the world. Something special, but she has no idea how to identify it.

Still, the view makes her feel more at rest. She lets her eyes flutter closed, willing herself to get some sleep of her own after that particularly emotional morning. The car is quiet, the rain is gentle. For a few moments, life is peaceful.

Someone’s phone buzzes, breaking the silence.

It continues vibrating, indicating a call rather than a text message. Riley opens her eyes and looks around, curious. Lucas and Farkle aren’t stirring, so it’s not either of them. Maya makes a face, searching around her for the source.

Zay whips around to face Riley. “Where is that coming from?”

“Hey, hey losers!” Maya shouts, making Farkle and Lucas jump awake. “Who’s phone is that?
“Someone pick it up.”

Farkle blinks, trying to rouse himself. Lucas sits up, glancing back and forth uncertainly. The two of them exchange a look, their gazes drifting to Riley’s string bag on the floor in front of her.

Riley stares at it. Tentatively, she leans over and reaches inside, pulling out her phone and immediately regretting it.

*Call from Daddy Matthews.*

“It’s him!” Farkle shouts.

Riley wants to throw the phone out the window. “What do I do?”

“Answer it, Riley,” Lucas advises, scooting forward and leaning around her seat to get a better look at the screen. “It’s only going to be worse if you don’t.”

“Do not answer that, are you nuts?” Farkle argues.

Zay waves his hands. “Throw it out the window!”

The phone stops ringing, her phone displaying a missed call. The car falls silent. Riley exchanges eye contact with Lucas.

“Crisis averted?”

The phone begins ringing again a second later. *Call from Daddy Matthews.*

Riley presses the call button and lifts the phone but Maya intercepts it wildly from the front, smashing at whatever piece of the screen she can. All they catch is a roaring “Riley Erica Matthews!” from the other end before the call gets disconnected and her phone hits the car floor, face down.

Lucas, Farkle, and Riley are all sporting dropped jaws, staring at the phone in horror. Zay is gawking at Maya, dumbfounded.

“You just hung up on Cory Matthews!”

“I’m sorry!” she shouts, slamming her hands against the steering wheel. “I panicked!”

Farkle takes charge, shouting orders with his most authoritative tone.

“Maya Penelope Hart, you keep your eyes on the road in front of you and do not make any more sudden moves. Zay, if she so much as twitches in this direction, stop her. Riley, pick up that phone right now and if he calls again, do something about it.”

“I thought you didn’t want her to—,”

“Don’t argue with me, face!” Farkle commands, holding up a hand in front of Lucas. He rolls his eyes. “Riley, phone. Now.”

She hesitantly picks it up off the floor by Farkle’s feet, flipping it over. Two missed calls. Before she can unlock it the ringing starts again, only from a different source this time around.

*Call from Mommy Matthews.*
Riley locks eyes with Lucas, then Farkle, who gives her a tough nod. Taking a deep breath, she lifts the phone to her ear and picks up. “Hello?”

There’s a pause. “Riley? Are you there?”

It’s somewhat of a relief to hear Topanga’s calm, reasonable voice. She exhaled. “Yes. Sorry about before, Maya took the phone.”

“Oh, throw me under the bus, real nice.”

“Where are you? Your father is in hysterics,” Topanga begins, before there’s a loud shuffling from her end. A couple of incoherent shouts are made and Riley pulls her phone away from her face, checking to make sure there’s not something wrong with the call.

“What is it?” Farkle asks.

“Phone’s being weird.”

“Try speaker?” Lucas suggests.

The moment Riley hits the speaker button, Cory Matthews has gotten control of the phone, blasting his shrieks through the car.

“Riley Erica Matthews, wherever you are you come home right now. Right this instant. Where are you? No, I don’t want to know. Come home. Now.”

Although the situation is tense, the look of horror on all the boys’ faces does amuse Riley just slightly. “Dad, please don’t panic.”

“Oh, panic? I’m not at panic, Riley,” he says. His tone is one half hysterical, one half furious. “I am beyond panic. Do you have any idea how worried we’ve been? When we went into your room yesterday and you just weren’t there?”

“Dad.”

“But Topanga, she had to be logical. She said well, you were just out with Maya. You’d be back before we knew it. But then you weren’t. And we started to wonder. And then Shawn and Katy come to us in a frenzy because not only are you gone, and is Maya gone, but the car Maya is supposed to be taking to college is MIA as well. So we go to contact the others.”

Farkle frowns. “Uh oh.”

“And do you know what Stuart Minkus says to us, Riley? Do you know?” He doesn’t give her a chance to answer. “He tells us about the little trip you all planned. And then he says to your mother, ‘gee, Topanga, it’s funny that you didn’t know this, and I did. I thought you knew everything, Topanga.’ Imagine your mother’s reaction.”

“It really wasn’t that bad,” Topanga calls from the background.

“It was. Don’t lie to make her feel better, Topanga!”

Maya’s eyes are narrowed in thought. “My parents were really in a frenzy?”

“Oh, you just wait, Maya Hart,” Cory says in a hiss. “You’ve got another thing coming.”

Despite the threat, the ghost of a smile passes over Maya’s lips. Although she does a great job of
playing the rebellious friend, Riley can tell the notion that her parents are worried about her gives her more joy than she’d ever admit out loud.

“Dad, please, give me a minute to explain.”

Cory immediately launches into a thousand reasons why he should not, but Topanga’s voice gets louder as she comes towards the phone. She shouts over him.

“Let her talk, Cory.”

There’s silence on the other end. Zay watches the phone warily, as if it’ll explode any second.

Cory clears his throat. “Alright. Fine. Explain.”

“Okay,” Riley begins, inhaling deeply to make sure she can get through it properly. “Maya just showed up at my window a couple nights ago and told me we were going. I didn’t know this plan existed. And I wanted to call you, but the others said I had to wait because of the state line theory.”

“The what?” Topanga interrupts.

“The state line theory. Anyway, we’ve been on the road for a couple days now and we’re already in…” She trails off, mouthing to the others the question as to where exactly they are. They glance up just as they pass the big, blue Welcome to Virginia sign.

“Virginia,” Zay fills in.

“Virginia!” Cory repeats. Riley can imagine the astonishment on his face.

“Yes. We’ve already left Smackle in Maryland and we’re on our way to North Carolina for Zay.” Riley takes a deep breath, trying to keep her voice even. “This is our Belgium 1831, dad. It’s really happening this time. I can’t not be there to say goodbye.”

She lifts her gaze to lock eyes with her friends. They give her loving smiles.

“We hear you, Riley, we do,” Topanga says calmly. “We just want to know that you’re okay and safe. Are there plans? What if something happens? Do you guys have a first aid kit? Do the parents know when and where to meet you all?”

“Mrs. Matthews, we have everything structured and planned out,” Lucas assures her. “No one is driving longer than a few hours at a time, we’ve allotted time for unexpected delays, and I made sure to put the first aid kit in the back first thing when Maya picked me up.”

Riley smiles proudly at him. There’s silence on the other end of the phone.

Cory finally speaks. “Is that Friar? Is he there with you? Keep your hands to yourself, Mr. Friar!”

Lucas raises his hands in surrender, officially giving up. Zay laughs at him as he slouches back against the seat, crossing his arms.

“Dad, he’s being a perfect gentleman. We’re all being responsible, just like he said.”

“Yes, Mr. Matthews,” Maya says innocently, “He was a perfect gentleman when they shared a bed in Pennsylvania. Perfect gentleman!”

“Maya!”
Farkle covers his face in disdain. Lucas mouths curse words at Maya, making sure she can see them through the rear view mirror.

There’s a moment of silence. “Riley, take us off speaker phone, please.”

She does, lifting the phone back to ear and curling up on the seat. Her gaze is trained on the world passing her by out the window, bracing herself for the worst. “I did.”

“Thank you.” Both her parents a silent for a moment, obviously contemplating exactly how to handle the situation. Riley does feel bad putting them in this unfair position, but she’s not sure what would’ve happened otherwise.

Cory sighs. “You’re okay? This is the time to tell me if you’re not fine. As long as you’re okay…”

“I am. I promise I’m okay.”

“She’s with them, Cory,” Topanga states. Riley wishes she was home solely so that she could give her mother a hug. “As long as she’s with her friends, she’ll be fine.”

There’s another pause. When Cory speaks again, Riley can just catch the hesitation in his voice. “Be safe. Take care of each other. And please, keep us updated on what’s going on. Do us that favor.”

All of the weight rises off her shoulders. “I will.”

“And do not share a bed with Lucas Friar. Do not. You’re not allowed.” Riley rolls her eyes before she remembers he can’t see her. She imagines Topanga is probably doing it for her. “And Riley?”

“Yes?”

Cory takes a moment to collect his thoughts. “Hug them real tight for us. And tell them we’ll see them soon.”

Her smile grows. “I will.”

When she hangs up the phone, there’s a new sense of bittersweet running through her veins. It’s flattering and a relief that her parents are letting her take this journey, as they’re willing to let her go and venture off on her own. At the same time, she feels like she’s officially not a little girl anymore. And while that’s a part of life, she’s not sure she’s completely ready to let go of that security yet.


Riley glances at her phone before meeting his eyes. She merely smiles. “Keep driving, Maya. We’ve got a long way to go before we get to North Carolina.”

Once they get close to Richmond, they pull off at a rest stop to switch drivers.

The boys disappear into the establishment while Maya and Riley crawl around the back to clean up trash. After Maya shows Riley the stash of food in the grocery bag situated right behind the driver’s seat and gives her the full low-down of the car now that the trip is officially Cory sanctioned, the two of them sit out on the picnic benches to get some fresh air. Maya sits cross-legged on top of the table, taking any opportunity to break convention.
Riley gazes up at the sky, some dark clouds rolling in behind them. “The rain is going to be chasing us all day.”

“So, how badly did Matthews freak after you went off speaker?” Maya asks, raising her eyebrows and eyeing her best friend curiously.

Riley shrugs, twisting the ring on her necklace subconsciously. “Surprisingly, not bad at all. He and my mom were both understanding. I think they get it, you know? How everything is about the change. It’s Belgium 1831, just like my dad warned, and he’s allowing us the last time to adventure together as a united front. Although, he did say I could not share any sort of space with Lucas.”

Maya makes a face, then smirks. “Don’t worry, I won’t rat you out.”

“Thank you. I won’t rat you out for going way over the speed limit. Don’t think Katy would be very happy with that.”

“Hey! I was good today!” Maya giggles, nudging her. “I’m glad to get a break though. I can’t believe I missed so much of the live Matthews drama because I had to watch the road like a sucker.”

Lucas is the first to rejoin them, sliding in the seat next to Riley. “Must you sit on the table?”

“Yes, Huckleberry, I must.”

Riley shakes her head at their antics. She props her elbows on the table, tilting her head and looking back and forth between the two of them. “What’s been your favorite part so far?”

“Riles, we’ve barely even put a dent in this thing. You want me to say my favorite part?”

“That’s why I said so far.”

Lucas taps his fingers against the wood. “Driving through D.C. was pretty cool. I’ve never been there before.”

“Oh, yeah,” Maya says, her gaze softening as she loses herself in thought. “Me either.”

Riley huffs. “Why didn’t you guys saying something? We could’ve stopped and gotten out. Walked around a little bit or something. Farkle and Smackle have been there before because of academic decathlon, but I don’t think Zay has. I’ve only been there briefly to support Uncle Eric. We could’ve set aside time for it.”

Lucas and Maya exchange a look. He shrugs. “It’s okay. It’s not a big deal.”

“Kind of nice to maintain the air of mystery,” Maya agrees. “Besides, it’s not like we’ll never go back. This is only the first of many road trips I expect us to have before we leave this big, stupid world.”

Riley’s surprise isn’t very well concealed. “Really?”

Maya grins at her, amused. “Yes, really. Can you believe her, Ranger Rick? Thinking this would be our last trip to the rodeo.”

Lucas shakes his head, smiling at Riley when she turns her eyes on him instead. She has a sudden realization that in just a few days, this is all that’s going to be left of their group. It’ll come down to her, Maya, and Lucas by the midpoint of their journey. She doesn’t know how to feel about that
particular thought. Happy, because they’re the two most important people in her life and she’ll take as much time with them as she can get. But also terrified, because when it gets down to the three of them, it also means it’s getting closer to goodbye.

She’s not ready for goodbye.

Zay comes up behind her and takes her by surprise, grabbing her shoulders and shaking her slightly. Thankfully, it gets her out of her own head before she gets too emotional. “Alright, y’all. I’d like to get to school on time, so let’s get moving, please.”

Maya leans back on her palms, giving him a challenging look. “What if we don’t? What if we just stayed at this rest stop forever and never went anywhere again? So much for that dance major. Boo.”

“You know, Maya, I may be sinewy, but I will drag you back to that car if I have to. Don’t think I won’t.”

Maya raises her eyebrows, dropping her gaze to Riley. She offers her a hand. “Are you with me?”

“I’m always with you,” Riley agrees, grinning and taking her hand as she climbs up onto the table as well. “We’re Riley and Maya and we’re not going anywhere!”

“Thunder!”

“Lightning!”

Zay raises his eyes to the sky, sighing in exhaustion and cocking his head in Lucas’s direction. “They’re really gonna make us do this, aren’t they?”

Lucas gets to his feet, standing next to his best friend and clasping his hands together. They’re a mirror image of her and Maya, Riley realizes. “Yep. They definitely are.”

“Bring it, cowboys!”

Zay and Lucas charge towards them, Maya immediately shrieking and jumping away before Riley has a chance to properly react. When she turns back in front of her she’s swept right off the table, Lucas throwing her over his shoulder and carrying her away as she bursts into laughter.

“Riley, you’re the worst sidekick ever! Stop swooning!” Maya screams as Zay chases her around the trees, heading towards the parking lot.

“You jumped ship first!”

Zay doesn’t catch Maya and detain her until Lucas and Riley are already at the car. As they watch them saunter over, Lucas adjusts her on his shoulder.

“I’m going to put you down now. You all good? You done being rebellious?”

“Well, yes, but you don’t have to put me down,” Riley says, hoping as usual that her flirting comes off as such as not as strange like she always worries it will.

Evidently it translates as she intends, because when Maya and Zay approach them, Maya makes a disgusted face. “Whatever you said to Lucas don’t ever say it again. He’s got his Riley eyes on and it grosses me out.”

They climb back into the car, Riley getting into the driver’s seat and Maya shifting into the
passenger seat. She grabs the map from the glove compartment as Riley pulls out of the parking lot, heading back towards the highway.

“You sure you okay to drive?” Maya questions. “I know you don’t like the highway.”

“I can handle it, we’ve got a lot of ground to cover. Especially once we get to the middle of the country.” Riley gives her a smile. “I’ve got it under control.”

Lucas beams at her proudly through the rear view mirror.

“I’m just impressed Farkle hasn’t critiqued your driving ability yet. He’s gotten in a backseat dig at all of us so far. Why so quiet, Minkus? Huh?”

There’s no response. Zay glances over his shoulder at the empty backseat.

A second later, the car erupts in chaos.

“Oh my God, turn around!”

“We forgot Farkle!” Riley cries out, attempting to maneuver the car around as quickly as she can.

“Hurry!”

“Oh my God, we forgot him!”

They continue to shout over this fact the entire way back to the rest stop, Riley screeching to a stop in the parking lot and immediately killing the engine. She and Maya are out of the car before Zay and Lucas have a chance to unbuckle their seatbelts, running to the building.

Farkle is waiting patiently on the picnic table, looking at them with his mouth pressed into a flat line. His hands are locked together neatly on his lap. Maya and Riley freeze, looking at him tentatively. Uncertain as to what to do next.

He leaps off the table, pointing at them. “You forgot me!”

“Never!” they bellow in reply, both of them sprinting to him and tackling him with a hug. The force of their embrace is so powerful all three of them go sprawling onto the grass, Farkle getting crushed under Maya and Riley just narrowly avoiding being decapitated by his bony elbow.

Lucas and Zay approach at a jog. When they get close enough, Lucas holds out his hands and helps pull Farkle to his feet, yanking him into a bone-crushing hug. Zay piles on, sandwiching Farkle between them.

“We forgot you!” Zay wails. “We’re the worst parents ever!”

“You’re never leaving my side ever again, do you understand?” Lucas says. “My side. All times. You got it, buddy?”

“I just want to breathe!” Farkle pleads, finally getting the two of them to release him.

He takes the passenger seat when they all climb back into the car, Maya insisting on behalf of her guilty conscience. Once they’re on the highway and back on track once again, Riley glances at Farkle out of the corner of her eye.

“You know we’d never forget you, really. Right, Farkle?”
He gives her an affectionate smile, propping his feet up on the dashboard. “I know.”

Her heart swells. Even in her worst moments, she’s grateful her friends know just how much she means to them. In those moments, that’s when her heart feels truly full.

“Watch your miles per hour though, you’ll want to maintain your speed on the highway.”

“And there it is,” Zay says triumphantly.

--

By the time they’re well into the southern half of Virginia, the storm clouds have rolled in and long since caught up to them. Rain is falling torrentially, and Riley has the wipers going so fast she’s somewhat worried they may snap right off and fly away. She’s squinting to see through the downpour, relying heavily on the taillights of cars ahead of her.

“We’re going to die,” Maya whines from the very back.

Farkle attempts to shout directions, but the rain is hitting the roof and windows so heavily everything sounds like a distant din, vague and hard to catch. “Don’t use your lights, it’ll just reflect. Go slow, you might skid. Do not turn those wipers down a notch, they’re not going to fly off!”

“Oh my God, just pull over,” Zay pleads, gripping the armrest for dear life with his eyes shut tight.

“Huh?” Riley calls back.

“Pull over!” Lucas and Zay shout in unison, grimacing as water hits the side of the car when another vehicle speeds by them in the left lane.

Farkle watches the driver zoom away through the storm, offended. “They’re going to get someone killed. There’s no way they can see in this. How dare they put other lives at risk just to play speed demon in the near-hurricane.”

“That’s what you’re concerned about right now?” Maya yells.

Riley grits her teeth, hands gripping the steering wheel so tightly her knuckles are white. “It’s okay. I’ve got it under control. I can handle it.”

Lucas leans forward to talk over her shoulder. “Riley?”

She doesn’t make an effort to look at him, but she hopes he knows how distracting he is when she’s trying to drive. The sound of his voice so close and his breath tickling her ear—it’s unfair and should not be allowed when she’s trying to make sure they don’t get killed. “Yes?”

“Please,” he murmurs. “Pull over.”

Zay whimpers. “I just want to live long enough to get to dance school. That’s all I want.”

Relenting, Riley concentrates as she gradually eases on the brakes, guiding the car off the side of the road and onto the gravel shoulder. There’s nothing around them but grass and trees and farmland—not that they could see it through the storm anyway.

She removes the key from the ignition and exhales a huge sigh of relief. It didn’t occur to her how tightly she was holding herself until the pressure of survival was removed. Lucas reaches forward and pats her shoulder, squeezing lightly.
Maya glances up at the roof. “Well, it would be nice if we could hear each other.”

“What?” Farkle barks.

“Get back here, you loser!” she commands, gesturing him forward.

Farkle unbuckles and climbs over the median first, a Herculean task considering how long his legs are. Lucas and Zay take his hands and guide him successfully into Maya, where he collapses into the back seat with her. Riley moves next, taking Zay and Lucas’s hands as she steps her way carefully into the back of the car from the front seat.

She stumbles and falls into Lucas’s lap. Embarrassingly enough, it’s somewhat of a habit with her, but he’s always reliable when it comes to catching her.

He smirks at her. “You okay?”

“Well, we didn’t die. I consider that a resounding success.”

Maya raises an eyebrow at them, gesturing between them. “You just gonna sit there like that and rub your cuteness in our faces?”

Riley exchanges a look with Lucas, a smile growing across her face as she wraps her arms more securely around his shoulders. “Yep.”

“I’m perfectly comfortable,” he agrees.

Zay and Maya have matching expressions of disdain. “Gross.”

Farkle squints at the dashboard window, marveling at how the rain makes visibility near zero. “How long do you think it’s gonna be like this? I don’t want to sleep on the side of the road.”

“Nah, it’ll clear up at least enough to get moving again in an hour or so,” Zay assures him. “The southeast has freak storms like this pretty often. At least we’re off the roads and not trying to power through like those idiots.”

“An hour?” Maya frowns. “What are we going to do for an hour?”

“Well, we could… I don’t know… talk? We’re supposedly pretty good at that.”

Riley brightens as an idea hits her. “I’ve got a discussion topic. Okay. So we know that high school is done now and all that. And we’ve talked about, and probably will talk about, all the good things that happened before this trip is done.”

“This is going to be sappy, isn’t it?” Maya mutters.

“But we also know high school was far from perfect,” she continues, glancing around at them all. It’s amazing to watch all of their expressions sober simultaneously, each lost in their own thoughts about the darker parts of the last three years. “So, I wanna know. What was your biggest regret?”

Zay scoffs. “I thought we agreed Riley Matthews didn’t do dark well.”

“This isn’t dark,” she argues. “This is reflection. We all know there were pieces of these years we’d fix. Especially looking back on it. We’re about to go off to universities and colleges and be faced with more decisions that we may or may not regret—this is the time to be reflective.”

“I regret wasting a whole half a year pushing Smackle away.” Farkle jumps right in, eyes still fixed
on the car window. His mind somewhere else, far away. “I wasted so much time being stubborn about the scientific way of looking at things, I think I missed the bigger picture. And I lost a lot of valuable time with her. I regret that.”

Maya gives him a sympathetic look, wrapping her arm around his and resting her head against him.

“I guess I wish I hadn’t spent so much time losing myself to find myself,” Zay admits softly. He’s avoiding eye contact, staring at his fingers as he picks at a stray thread on the armrest in front of him. “You know, junior year I made such an effort to get away from you guys and throwing myself into partying because I felt like I had to find myself on my own. And maybe that’s true. I’m real lucky I had Maya.”

She smiles. “You always got me, Zayby,” she says softly.

He lifts his eyes, locking eyes with Lucas. “Just wondering if maybe I didn’t have to shut you out entirely. I’m sorry about that.”

Lucas nods in understanding.

“How about you, Huckleberry?” Maya asks, propping her chin on Farkle’s shoulder. “What are your regrets?”

“Well, I’ve got a couple,” he says slowly. “First, I wish I had done something about the triangle sooner. Didn’t let it go on so long.”

Maya frowns. “That wasn’t just your fault.”

“No, I know. But it was partially my responsibility. I wish I’d had the courage to say exactly what I wanted to say. I think it would’ve saved us a lot of turmoil. And like Farkle said,” he murmurs, holding Riley more snugly. “I lost a lot of valuable time.”

“What’s the second one?” Zay asks.

This one is clearly harder to talk about, his expression clouding over as he hesitates. Riley feels his fingers fidget against her knee.

“I wish I’d asked for help.” He raises his gaze to glance at all of them, coming to rest on her. “Before it got as bad as it did.”

Riley gives him a soft smile, tilting her head against his affectionately. Zay nods.

“I regret wasting so much energy on so many petty things,” Maya says. She tucks her head against Farkle’s back as she collects her thoughts, returning her chin back to his shoulder when she’s figured out what she wants to say. “I made things so difficult for the three of us sophomore year because I was jealous. Then I spent so much of junior angry over things that I really didn’t need to be upset about. Like Zay, I pushed people away who just wanted the best for me.” She takes a deep breath, locking eyes with Riley. “I don’t know if I should regret all of it. I think it was good for us, to find some time apart from one another.”

Riley nods in agreement. As much as it hurt, she knows that in the long run, the distance they had junior year probably saved their friendship.

“But it doesn’t mean I don’t have regrets about it. I’m glad that things worked out, that we’re back here together.” She smiles at Zay, nudging Farkle lovingly again. “I’m very blessed.”
“We all are,” Riley concurs.

“And you, Riley?” Farkle questions. “What are your high school regrets?”

She thinks on it for a moment. She shifts her gaze around at the four of them, landing on Lucas’s curious expression.

“We know how I feel about not having complete control over a situation, especially when I just want what’s best for those involved,” she begins thoughtfully. “I guess I wish I had given us more credit. I spent so much time worrying, particularly about what was going to happen to us in whatever capacity, that I didn’t focus on what was happening as much as I could’ve.”

“Well, we’re at the future now,” Zay says delicately. “What do you think?”

Riley takes one more long look at them, huddled in the back of the van as the rain falls down around them. Still moving forward regardless. Still together. Still a united front.

She locks eyes with Maya, who smirks.

“Good,” Riley decides, pressing her forehead against Lucas’s temple and smiling. “Very good.”

Here they are, stuck on the side of the road in a torrential downpour, but they’re all together. All things considered, the trials they went through in high school strengthened their bond rather than weakened it. And seeing the beautiful smiles on all her friends’ faces, it doesn’t feel like a rainy day at all.

In their beat up van in the middle of nowhere amidst the southern downpour, there’s nothing but sunshine.
When they finally arrive at their hotel for the night, rain is still pouring, lightning flashing through the sky in brilliant, bold streaks. The wind has picked up considerably, the American flag on the porch of the old-fashioned hotel whipping dangerously. Above it, a small wooden sign bears the words The South Hill Hotel.

Riley peers over Farkle’s shoulder as he opens the back door, a rush of wind immediately making its way through the van. He squints out into the dark, holding up a hand to keep the rain mist out of his face. “This is insane. Zay, you’re going to drown in North Carolina.”

“Hey, now,” he says from the driver’s seat, killing the engine. “This is still Virginia. We’re right on the border. If you look out there, a few miles away, there’s another state line. And that’s where I’ll be going to school. Not this hellhole.”

Riley gives him a smile, leaning forward to pat his shoulder. “Good for you. You should be proud of your school state!”

“Oh, don’t misunderstand me. North Carolina’s still a hellhole. Just a different kind.”

The group makes quick proposals about how to effectively get all of their things into the building without getting completely drenched. Farkle starts launching into a three-layered plan of action when Maya rolls her eyes, climbing to her feet and hopping over the back seat into the trunk with the luggage.

“Maya, are you even listening?” Farkle complains.

She gives him a smile. “Of course I am, darling. I’m just sick of planning and ready to start moving.”

She wrenches her luggage out from the pile. Lucas carefully clambers over the median from the passenger seat and kneels on the back seat, helping her wrench her bag free from under the others. “You sure you know the plan? It’s not going to work if you’re not—,”

“Yes, yes, Huckleberry, blah, blah blah.” She pats his cheek condescendingly, earning an eye roll from him. “Zay, would you pop this back door open already? Let’s get this train moving.”

He leans over and presses a button, the back door rising slowly into the air. Maya takes her bag and
hops from the trunk, standing under the cover of the door for a moment to give her travel mates a cheeky wave.

“Wait, Maya, you’re supposed to—!” Farkle starts.

“Sorry, places to go. See ya, suckers!” Maya shouts, hair blowing wildly in the wind as she ducks her head and takes off at a run through the downpour towards the stairs of the hotel. The car erupts in complaints in her direction, lost to the storm before Maya can hear them.

The rest of the crew imitates her nerve and makes a run for the back of the car, pulling luggage out and slamming doors closed behind them. Farkle almost slips in the mud as they’re sprinting towards the cover of the porch, Lucas barely managing to catch him.

Riley leaps up onto the stairs and holds out a hand for Zay, yanking him out of the rain. Both of them are soaked, Zay grinning triumphantly as he hits the lock button on the key ring. Van Cory chirps at them. The lights blink once before dimming, becoming just another blur in the downpour.

“It’s so close,” Riley says distantly, looking towards the darkness where Zay pointed earlier. “North Carolina. You nervous?”

He shrugs, making a face. “Nah. I’ve already made my drastic move once. And that turned out alright. Think I’ll be just fine.”

Riley exchanges a grin with him, linking their arms together and walking into the lobby.

She’s surprised by how dated the hotel feels, sporting a Victorian vibe with dark, polished wood and elegantly patterned upholstery on the furniture. The weak, lantern-style lighting bathes the room in a dim, yellowish glow. The only signs of current advancements in technology are the elevator down the hall, and the small flat screen television sitting on a coffee table nearby. It’s on, running static, but no one is sitting around to watch.

Aside from the five of them, the place feels deserted.

“Farkle,” Maya says, flipping the wet hair out of her face. Considering how short her hair is now, the gesture has lost a lot of its bravado. “Where the hell did you book us?”

“It’s a historic hotel,” he explains, taking in the aesthetic with a critical eye. “It was built in the early twentieth century. I picked it mostly because it had rooms available and was near the state line, where we agreed to stop for the night. I’m just following protocol, Maya.”

“Well, did you check to make sure the place was still in business?” Zay jokes, making a point of looking both ways. “Because I’m pretty sure we’re the only living beings in this place.”

Lucas nudges Farkle, nodding towards the front desk. “Go ring the bell.”

The rest of them observe as Farkle makes his way over, glancing around as he lightly taps the bell sitting on the desktop. He waits patiently, drumming his fingers against the wood. Another ding. Another moment of silence. After the third ring and no answer, he glances over his shoulder at his friends.

Riley frowns. “Maybe it is deserted?”

“What’s deserted, dear?”

The voice comes from behind them and all four of them jump, whipping around. Zay backs into
Lucas, holding his arm out protectively.

Standing in front of them is a petite, older woman, hair pulled back in a bun and dressed rather conservatively. On her lapel, a small name tag spells out the name Toni. She gives them a welcoming smile, dropping the package she was holding and scooting around them towards the desk. “Y’all checking in with us this evening?”

“Oh, yes,” Farkle says uncertainly, eyeing the others before straightening up to his full height. Minkus confidence now intact. “Reservation under Minkus. Two rooms. Just for the night.”

“Let me see,” she hums, flipping through a guest log in front of her. It strikes Riley that there isn’t a computer. When Farkle said historic, he wasn’t kidding around. “Ah, yes. Here we are. I’ve got you in the conjoined room. Lucky you reserved ahead of time, we’re very busy this time of year!”

They glance around them at the empty lobby. Zay raises an eyebrow. “You don’t say?”

Toni hands over the keys and Maya leads the way, trudging towards the elevator. Right as her finger is hovering over the call button, Toni clears her throat from the desk to catch their attention. “Oh, dears, I’m sorry, but the elevator is currently down for maintenance. You’ll have to take the stairs, just keep going down the hall.”

Maya flashes Toni a grateful smile, one that dissolves swiftly into disgruntlement when her eyes are on Farkle. “Which floor are we?”

He pauses. “Four?”

Zay covers Maya’s mouth before her cursing shocks the living daylights out of the management.

The ascending trek is full of complaints from Maya and Zay, as well as Farkle attempting to defend himself. By the time they make it to their rooms and Farkle hands over one key to Riley, she’s a little relieved they’ll all be getting a break from each other for a while. It will probably do them some good.

Stepping into the room she’ll be sharing with Maya, she’s surprised to discover once again that there’s only one bed. This isn’t an issue for the two of them, but she wonders what the boys must be thinking on the other side of the door connecting their rooms.

Maya moves forward and flops onto the mattress, getting her wet clothes all over the comforter. “I swear, Farkle is the worst trip planner I’ve ever met. For someone with a lot of brains, he doesn’t seem to have a lot of street smarts, does he?”

“Oh, come on,” Riley says, moving further into the room and examining the antique decor. She glances up at the rounded mirror on the wall in front of her, grimacing at her drenched reflection. But she forces a smile, turning to face Maya. “He’s just figuring it out. And the other hotels haven’t been so bad. Plus, this place has its vintage charm.”

Maya sighs. “Okay, thanks, Smiley Riley.”

She gets to her feet, heading over to the door between their rooms and unbolting the lock. Riley joins her, poking their heads into the boys room.

“Hey losers.”

Lucas, Farkle, and Zay are piled on the bed, obviously trying to assert dominance over the space.
Lucas is pinning Farkle, and Zay is seated primly on his best friend, legs crossed and looking rather pleased with himself. “Oh, there you are. Wondering when you’d pop in.”

Lucas grins, maintaining a casual air. He props his elbow on Farkle’s rib. “How’s it going?”

“You’re going to break my limbs!” Farkle cries out, wiggling in an attempt to shove both of them off of him. It’s a futile endeavor.

Riley and Maya burst out laughing, leaning against the doorframe for support. Once they decide Farkle has suffered enough, they rush forward and nudge the others off of him, Maya taking his hands and pulling him to his feet.

Farkle huffs, swiveling around and crossing his arms. “You know what? I don’t deserve this. Sure, this place isn’t perfect, but at least we’re not stuck sleeping in the van! And you know what—!”

The door slams shut behind Riley, spooking all of them. Zay stares at it, holding up a finger to silence the others. “Riley?”

“Yes?”

“Did you close that door?”

“No?”

There’s a pause. Zay slowly lowers his arm. “Alright, well, I’m out. Bye.”

“Where are you going?”

“I’m sleeping in the van. See you all in the morning.”

Lucas reaches out and pulls Zay back as he turns to leave, patting his shoulder reassuringly. “Would you relax? The door just closed. Maybe there’s a draft. Big deal.”

“See, this is why people like you always get killed in horror movies. Nah, I’m not rooming with ghosts. Sorry. Not playing that game. For the millionth time, I want to get to school alive tomorrow afternoon.”

Riley glances over her shoulder at the door again. Farkle rolls his eyes. “There is no such thing as ghosts.”

Maya grabs him suddenly, holding his shoulders tightly. “Farkle, shh! The ghosts will hear you.”

“Enough of this,” Farkle says, pushing Maya and her smug grin away from him. “I’m taking a shower. You all can debate the sanctity of life and death on your own time.” He grabs his suitcase and pulls out a change of clothes, stamping off to the bathroom and shutting the door.

Maya moves onto the bed, sitting cross-legged. “So, Zay, you believe in ghosts?”

“I’m not saying I do or don’t. I just prefer not to take any chances. There’s a difference.”

“Will you get off our bed?” Lucas says with a frown. “You’re all wet.”

Maya shrugs, falling back and rolling back and forth all over their bed. “I don’t know. It’s almost as if I can’t control my own body.” She gasps. “What if I’m possessed?”

“Ha ha ha,” Zay says mockingly. “You’re laughing now. But when you all die because you keep
messing around, I’m not saying one nice thing at your funerals.”

There’s a loud shriek from the bathroom, causing Maya to immediately spring to her feet. She doesn’t waste a second, running to Farkle’s aid. Riley and Lucas are right behind her, standing in the doorway as she darts in without waiting for an invitation.

Luckily, Farkle is still fully clothed, standing in disbelief by the side of the shower. Maya is at his side in an instant, gripping his arm and looking at him in concern. “What? Why did you scream?”

He just shakes his head, pointing to the showerhead. Riley leans further into the room to get a better look at what all the fuss is about, Zay rising on his tip-toes behind her.

The water is on, but it’s not exactly water coming out from the pipes. It’s a strange, reddish-brown liquid, running down the wall and along the sides of the shower, heading towards the drain in a sickly, sluggish way.

“Is that blood?”

“Oh my God, we’re going to die in here.”

Farkle shakes himself out of it, releasing himself from Maya’s grip and pushing past them all. He puts on his shoes.

Maya follows him out. “What are you doing?”

“There is no such thing as ghosts!” he shouts defensively, taking a deep breath. “I’m going down to the front desk to put in a maintenance order. I’m sure there’s a logical explanation for this. Riley, Lucas, come on.”

The two of them exchange a look. “Why us?” Lucas asks.

“Because Zay really thinks we’re about to get haunted, and Maya’s going to make jokes the entire way down the stairs. I need sane people. Come on.”

--

It takes another three bell rings and a substantial wait for Toni to appear behind the desk again.

“Hi, there, dears. What can I do for you?”

“Yes, hi,” Farkle says flatly, clearly in business mode and in no mood for frivolities like politeness. “We’ve discovered a problem with our pipes. They don’t seem to be running properly. When we turn it on, there’s not any water coming out of the faucets.”

“Do you by any chance have blood running through your pipes?” Riley questions innocently, earning a glare from Farkle and a smirk from Lucas.

Toni gives the three of them a perplexed look, before her eyes light up in recognition. “Oh, wait a minute. Wait one minute. You’re on the fourth floor, correct?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Oh, silly me, I forget to mention!” She laughs airily, shaking her head at her own mistake. There’s an abnormally long pause. Riley wonders if she’s going to forget to mention whatever detail she just remembered again. “The fourth floor just had some work done, so the pipes were out of commission for a while. Is the material coming from the faucet a reddish-brown color?”
“Yeah.”

“Oh, then yes! That’s just rust, dears. If you let the faucet run on its own for a little while, it’ll clear out just fine and you’ll be all set to go.”

Farkle breathes a sigh of triumph, but Riley catches a hint of relief in it too. “Excellent. Thank you. We won’t bother you any longer.”

All the way back up the stairs, Farkle goes on and on about how he knew there had to be a logical explanation. Obviously, blood wouldn’t be coming from the pipes, and blood doesn’t look that color anyway, and as science would have it, etc., etc. By the time they get back to his room, he’s got his confident expression set back up.

“It’s like I said,” Farkle says, sliding the key into the lock and opening the door. “There’s no such thing as—,”

Two white forms jump out into the hallway at them. Farkle, Riley, and Lucas all scream, Farkle scrambling backwards into their arms and nearly knocking them over.

The sheets are thrown off and Maya and Zay are revealed, cackling and leaning into each other for support. They start to say something, but get riled up looking at their friends and their pale faces and launch into more laughter. Zay points between Lucas and Farkle, clutching his sides in pain.

Riley recovers first, smirking bashfully. “Very funny, guys.”

There are literal tears streaming down Zay’s cheeks. “Your… oh God… your faces… Farkle’s eyes were about to pop right outta his head…”

“They were not,” Farkle grumbles, scowling.

“Show them the faces, Zay,” Maya begs, hitting his arm playfully. “Show them.”

Zay mimics their screams, sending Maya into another spiral of hilarity. Farkle pushes past them into the room, heading back into the bathroom to start the faucet running again. The others follow his lead.

Maya approaches him as he reenters the bedroom, reaching out to touch his arm affectionately. “Oh, come on, Farkle, we’re just messing with you.”

He shrinks away from her, walking to the bed and standing his ground. “I know you’re all just playing games. But I’m adamant on this, and I will not let us go nuts over the possibility of being haunted. Listen to me when I say this! Read my lips! *There’s no such thing as ghosts!*”

A huge rumble of thunder outside shakes the building. All of the sudden the power cuts out and the five of them are thrown into darkness. Riley instinctively reaches out for Lucas, his hand finding hers in the pitch black. She’s always been a little afraid of the dark, so she’s grateful when his touch grounds her in reality.

Lightning flashes, brightening the room for a brief moment. She catches a glimpse of Maya’s surprised face before she’s shrouded in darkness again.

“You know what?” Farkle mutters. “I’m going to bed.”
Riley is scared awake when the fire alarm goes off, rousing her pretty easily. Maya is so spooked she reacts instinctively and falls right off her side of the bed with a yelp.

Her head pops up a moment later. “What the hell?”

The two of them jog over to the door, knocking right as Zay opens the door to head over to their side. The alarm is going off in their room as well. “Are you guys okay?”

“Yeah, we’re fine,” Riley says off-handedly, peering over Zay’s shoulder. Farkle and Lucas are both still waking themselves up, but the fire alarm is certainly hurrying the process. “Do you guys smell smoke or anything? I don’t think there’s a fire.”

“Do you guys not know how fire alarms work?” Farkle grumbles, getting to his feet. “Just because there’s no fire here doesn’t mean there’s not one somewhere else in the building. Come on, we need to evacuate now.”

Maya makes a face, raising her eyebrows. “Uh, you’re out of your mind if you think I’m going out in that downpour in my pajamas.”

“Yeah,” Lucas says, crossing his arms. He looks exhausted, although in a completely reasonable way. Nothing like the exhaustion he wore all through junior year. Riley much prefers seeing this kind in his features. “And depending on where the fire is, don’t you think the rain would sort of help put it out? Are we really in that much danger?”

“Are you guys really arguing with me over whether we should evacuate a possibly burning building?” Farkle has reached his wit’s end. He waves them all off, grabbing his jacket and heading towards the door. “I miss Smackle. All of you are crazy.”

Riley jogs to catch up with him, stepping into the hallway and ramming into him when she realizes he’s stopped. He’s got a confused, thoughtful expression on his face. Something is off—Riley notices it too. They stand there in silence for a moment, before it dawns on Riley how quiet it is.

Farkle drops his jaw, turning to lock eyes with Lucas, Maya, and Zay waiting in the doorway. All of them focus on the fire alarm, flashing and blaring above them. Riley wanders a bit down the hallway, finding the nearest alarm on the wall. It’s silent.

Zay opens his mouth to speak.

“Don’t.” Farkle says, holding up his hand. “Say. Anything. We’ll go figure this out. Come on, Riley.”

He takes her hand and pulls her towards the stairs, not waiting for a response. Once they’re halfway down the staircase, he can’t hold in his frustration anymore. He launches right into it, nearly smacking her in the face with his gesticulating.

“This doesn’t make sense, okay? There are no ghosts, ghosts do not exist, there’s no scientific foundation to support to existence of such sentient beings from the afterlife. The afterlife doesn’t even exist. When you die, they put your corpse in the ground and that’s it. That’s the end of you.”

“That’s optimistic,” Riley comments.

Farkle stops at the door, whipping around to face her and locking eyes with her. He’s got his scientist eyes on, the intense glare that Riley both admires and detests, depending on the day. This
evening, she’s not too fond of it. “I’m not wrong.”

“Didn’t say you were.”

He nods a thank you and pushes the door open, not lingering for her to catch up.

Farkle is all out of patience, ringing the bell rapidly until Toni appears from the door leading to the back office. She looks half-asleep, but Riley’s pretty sure she doesn’t actually sleep back there. “Hi, again, dears. What can I help you with at this midnight hour?”

“The fire alarm is going off in our room.”

Toni’s expression shifts in alarm. “Oh, well, did you check the hallway for the extinguisher? You shouldn’t have wasted time coming to me, if there’s a fire—,”

“You misunderstand me,” Farkle snaps, clasping his hands together. Riley swears she catches his eye twitch. “The fire alarm is not going off. There is no fire. The alarms are only going off in our rooms. Just 406 and 407.”

Toni’s urgency fades, but there’s a strange sense of foreboding still etched in her features. Riley wonders if maybe she’s making it up, sleep deprivation and all, but the look doesn’t go away.

“Oh.” That’s all she says. She opens the guest book and starts scribbling some notes. Riley sees her cross out their names under the room reservations.

Farkle taps his foot, obviously itching for a reasonable explanation. “Well?”

“We’ll just have you moved. No bother at all. We’ll send in maintenance to fix it in the morning, but they live across the lake, see, and won’t be able to get here tonight.”

“You don’t have a maintenance worker on staff?” As if on cue, lightning cracks outside, thunder following behind not long after.

Toni doesn’t seem fazed by Farkle’s judgmental tone. Riley admires her for that, even if her behavior is creeping her out. “It’s a small town, dear. But here we are. Unfortunately all we have is the master suite left, so you’ll all have to squeeze in there if the alarm is enough of a convenience to swap out. There’s a bed and a couch though, two rooms essentially. You’ll be able to figure it out, I’m sure.”

She hands over the key, Farkle snatching it with a brief murmur of gratitude. Riley gives her an apologetic smile and hurries after him back towards the stairs.

Lugging everything from one room to the other is an unwelcome task, especially considering it’s another walk down the stairs. The alarm blaring as they pack doesn’t help matters much. Everyone is grumpy and irritable as they swap spaces, and once they settle into the new suite Farkle immediately disappears into the bedroom to get away from them all.

Maya pulls out her sketchbook and situates on the end of the couch, settling into working on the same page she’s been picking at for a couple days now. Since the trip started, she’s found little bits of time to sit and toil away at this one sketch, pouring an astounding amount of effort into it.

Riley plops down next to her and attempts to take a peek, but Maya lifts the page up to her chest, hiding it from her. Riley pouts. “Why can’t I see it?”

“Because, honey, it’s not finished. You can see it when it’s done.”
“You promise?”

“I do.”

Although curiosity is still killing her, she relents due to fatigue. Instead, she stretches out and lays her head against Maya’s leg, closing her eyes and drifting back into sleep with the sound of the rain on the windows and Maya’s pencil scratching the paper. The fire alarm blaring two floors above them is only a distant memory.

--

A huge crack of thunder startles her awake again, her heart pounding wildly in her chest. She stares at the upholstery of the couch, getting a hold on her surroundings. It’s darker than before, the lights having been turned off. Maya’s no longer seated beside her. She’s grateful the fire alarm isn’t going off.

Glancing up at the clock on the wall, she sees that it’s about three in the morning. Lightning flashes, illuminating the clock face as thunder follows close behind.

She rolls onto her other side, mildly surprised to see Lucas and Zay still awake.

Zay’s perched on top of the stacked suitcases, legs dangling above the floor. Lucas is sitting on the coffee table, arms wrapped around his knees. They’re watching the storm roll overhead through the windows, murmuring to one another as not to wake Riley. She knows she shouldn’t eavesdrop, but if she’s quiet and pays close attention she can mostly make out their words.

“What do you think the other dancers are going to be like?” Lucas asks him, watching rain pattern the glass rather than making eye contact with his best friend.

“Dunno,” he admits, “Probably pretentious. Some of them have to be. It’s okay, Farkle and Maya have given me a lot of practice. Smackle and Riley too.”

“In dealing with pretentiousness?”

“No. Well, Farkle, yes, sometimes. But more just in dealing with a bunch of different types of people.” He pauses, before tilting his head. “I don’t know if you know this, but when you decided to make friends in New York you rounded up the biggest bunch of weirdos you possibly could.”

Lucas laughs. “Glad I did.”

“You fit right in.”

“Gee, thanks.”

They fall into content silence. Thunder booms, but for some reason it suddenly doesn’t seem so threatening. The atmosphere of the room is peaceful. Riley gets that feeling just from being in the same room with the two of them.

Zay lifts his gaze to look at Lucas for a long moment, before he clears his throat. “Can I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“And you gotta be honest with me. None of your nice guy, empathetic bullshit, alright? I need you to be real with me for a second.”
Lucas smirks, nodding him onward. “Yes, yes, okay. What?”

Zay pauses, swallowing his hesitation. “Is there anything I could do that would make you not want to be my friend anymore?”

Lucas squints down at the floor, making a show of really thinking about it. He hums. “No.”

“What if I hated Texas?”

“No.”

“What if I got facial reconstruction surgery and changed my identity and went off the radar for fifteen years and only contacted you after such an allotment of time?”

“Nope.”

“Being bisexual? Hating Fleetwood Mac? What about everything in junior year? What if I killed a man?”

Lucas is hardly listening at this point, simply shaking his head. “No, no, no. Nope. Nope. No. No.”

Zay opens his mouth again and Lucas raises his eyebrows at him, challenging him to try and find another possibility. “No.”

There’s a pause. Finally, Zay nods, looking back out the window. Lucas smiles at him proudly. Riley closes her eyes as he glances over his shoulder to check on her, pretending to be asleep.

She thinks about the fact that he and Zay really do parallel her and Maya so well, almost to a weird, metaphysical degree. She doesn’t believe in coincidences, so she figures there has to be some distinct reason the universe threw the four of them together. To learn from each other, in one way or another.

She opens her eyes again just as Lucas nudges Zay softly, getting his attention again.

“You will always be my best friend. There’s nothing you could do to change that.”

Zay smiles in spite of himself, before narrowing his eyes suspiciously. “What about Farkle?”

“Farkle is… his own special category,” Lucas says diplomatically, earning a laugh from him. “But you are my best friend. No matter who else comes in and out of my life. You always will be.”

Zay grins, reaching out and draping his arm around Lucas’s shoulders. After a moment of silence, he speaks again. “You know what?”

“What?”

He makes a face. “I think you may be the cute friend.”

Lucas shakes his head, cracking up as quietly as he can and hugging Zay back.

Riley smiles, closing her eyes again. She knows she and Maya are the best friends in the entire world—this she’s always known. But she’s suddenly realizing that maybe, all this time, they’ve had stronger competition than she thought.

--

To Riley’s relief, everyone is in much better spirits the next morning, despite how little sleep they
all managed to get. Farkle’s eager to recount the nightmare that was sharing a bed with Maya Hart.

“She spent the entire night kicking me. Straight in the back. Why are you so violent even in rest?”

Maya smiles coyly, shrugging. “Who said I was asleep?”

While they go out and get the car ready to go, Lucas, Zay, and Riley stop by the front desk to
check out. Toni’s there waiting, bright and early and looking exactly the same as the night before. 
The whole ordeal at the South Hill Hotel sort of feels like a weird fever dream—years from now,
she’s pretty sure she won’t be able to remember whether she just dreamed the whole thing up or not.

“So, how was your stay?” Toni asks as Lucas hands over the keys. “Restful?”

Zay snorts. Lucas gives him a look, gracing Toni with one of his sympathetic smiles. “It was fine. It was all a little ridiculous, actually—my friend here thinks the place is haunted.”

Toni tilts her head, giving the three of them a curious look. “Oh, it is. Didn’t you know that?”

Zay slams his hand down on the desktop. “Um, what?”

“That’s the usual reason people come to stay here anyway,” she tells them pointedly, crossing their
names off the list. “It was a busy evening yesterday because this was the anniversary of the first
time this building burned down, back in 1921.”

Riley blinks, thinking about the fire alarm going off in their room. “Does it have a history of fire
problems?”

“Oh, dear, this place has burned down three times in the last century. That’s it’s whole history. I figured you all were just a bunch of kids hoping to get spooked.” She leans forward slightly, glancing over their shoulders at Maya and Farkle loading the car outside. “Between you and me, I think your beanpole friend got a serious fright.”

“Yeah, he did,” Zay agrees, smirking in amusement.

Riley places her fingers lightly on the desktop. “Toni, ma’am. How exactly is this place haunted? The spirits aren’t angry, are they?”

“It’s okay, Riley, we survived.”

“I know that. I’m more concerned for them than us. Can you imagine being so upset you have to haunt somewhere for a century after you’ve passed on?”

Riley’s concern is entirely genuine. Lucas gives her a fond smile. Zay rolls his eyes.

“Lucky for us, they’re not embittered at all,” Toni assures her. “They’re just mischievous. Spirits of fire always are. Messing with the fire alarms, slamming doors. One of them absolutely loves that TV over there, turning it on even when no one is watching. One year when we were decorating for Christmas, another attendant and I went into the back to get more decorations, and when we came back all the ornaments we’d pulled out were lined up in a row on the floor, waiting for us to step on them. They’re never vengeful. Just roguish.”

As the three of them join Maya out by Van Cory, Farkle is already getting in the driver’s seat. Maya gives Riley a curious look. “What took you guys so long? She trying to immortalize you in the haunted hotel forever? Become a permanent resident?”
“No, no. She was just telling us about how the place is actually haunted.”

The smile on Maya’s face is pure glee. It amazes Riley, how her best friend revels in these small moments of mischief. She hopes that whatever happens in the afterlife—if they don’t just get put in the ground and end, like Farkle thinks—that Maya gets to come back as a spirit of fire.

No one is more full of fire than Maya Hart.

--

The drive to the University of North Carolina School of the Arts is shorter than Riley anticipated. Before she knows it, they’re parking by the admission center and hopping out.

Zay insists on giving them a tour of the campus before they unload his stuff and send him off, and none of the others have any complaints about it. It’s fun to watch him try to explain how the campus is laid out, not quite familiar with it yet himself. But he’s clearly eager to learn, and it makes Riley happy to see his face light up as he points out the dance hall. Just like seeing Smackle standing in front of John Hopkins, there’s a sense of belonging surrounding Zay that makes this whole trip feel worthwhile.

He drops his bags at his feet, standing in front of the admissions building and holding out his arms. “Well, mom and dad are inside waiting. Looks like the end of the show. Zay Babineaux, signing off.”

He takes a bow. The other four applaud.

Farkle reaches forward and high fives him, doing some sort of handshake that Riley has never seen them do before. It’s always a surprise to remember that all her friends have their own complex friendships outside of her orbit. But it makes her love them more. “Good luck. Tell us all about your first week.”

“You too, man. And I will.”

“If you don’t take a tap class, I’ll sue you.”

“Alright, alright,” Zay laughs, pushing Farkle away lightly. When he sees Riley step forward his eyes widen. “Oh, here she comes.”

Riley tackles him with a hug and he braces himself just in time, wrapping his arms around her and hugging back. “I can’t wait to see all of the amazing stuff you do! You’ll post pictures, won’t you?”

“Oh, no. After you guys leave, I’m never speaking to any of you ever again.”

Riley nudges him, pouting. He cracks up, reaching forward and flicking the tears off her cheeks. “Chin up, buttercup. Everything’s gonna be just fine.”

The next hug, he initiates. Riley is grateful she gets an extra embrace.

Maya steps forward, patting Riley’s shoulder. Taking that as a cue, she steps back and lets Maya have her moment, going to stand in between Farkle and Lucas.

Zay just looks at Maya for a moment, exhaling and managing a smile. “I don’t know what to… you know I’m no good at this stuff.”
“I know,” she says, smiling back. She clasps her hands together. Riley can tell she’s struggling to contain her emotions. “Me neither. But I just want you to know that…” Maya trails off, taking the time to think about what she’s trying to say. “Riley was right when she said we weren’t complete without you. Back in ninth grade. I know we didn’t say it much after that crisis was averted, but it’s true.”

She takes a deep breath, her eyes glossing over with tears. “I’m very grateful you showed up in our history class.”

He smiles faintly, reaching forward to pull her into a hug. She responds enthusiastically, holding him tight. “I’m grateful for you, too. I’m glad you got my back.”

“You’ve always got me, Zayby,” she repeats breathlessly. She’s the first to break away, pulling away from him before it gets too difficult to let go. As she moves back to stand with Farkle, Lucas approaches tentatively, hands stuffed in his pockets.

They don’t really say anything. As Riley knows, they covered the important things the night before.

Zay reaches out and pats his arm, giving him a light shake. “You’re gonna be a good boy? I don’t have to worry about you, do I?”

“Don’t worry, we’ll make sure he’s well-behaved,” Maya assures him, allowing Riley to link arms with her. She rests her head on Riley’s shoulder, squeezing her arm.

Both of them are thinking about the same thing, Riley’s sure—what it’s going to be like to have to say goodbye. Watching Lucas and Zay try to do it is hard enough.

There’s nothing left to say. They could stand there forever and never move forward, but Riley knows that in his heart Lucas wants to let him go. It’s the same feeling she has about Maya—the distance is tough, and the goodbye feels impossible. But they’re going to go off and do amazing things, and the best thing either of them can do is let them go off and take the world by storm.

Lucas takes a deep breath, reconciling with this reality. He steps forward and pulls Zay into a hug.

Zay hugs him back. No words necessary.

They watch him sling his bags over his shoulders and give them one last wave and a signature Zay Babineaux grin. Then, he turns away and heads up the steps towards the admissions office, disappearing through the glass doors and leaving them standing there in the Southern humidity.

“He didn’t even look back,” Farkle says in a murmur, staring at where they last saw him.

Maya shakes her head. “Too hard.”

Lucas wipes his eyes as subtly as possible. Riley takes his hand.

One goodbye heavier and one friend lighter, the four of them head back towards the van.
**girl meets zay babineaux (intermission)**

Chapter Notes

Songs from the Road Trip Playlist (Zay Babineaux's contributions):

***Flawless - Beyoncé
Wannabe - Spice Girls
Maybe You're Right - Miley Cyrus
Drink to Get Drunk - Sia
Gimme More - Britney Spears
Drunk - Ed Sheeran
Into You - Ariana Grande
Starboy - The Weeknd

**- SOPHOMORE YEAR -**

Sophomore year is the year Zay Babineaux learns about friendship.

He likes to consider himself a pretty good friend already, for all intents and purposes. Sure, sometimes he ruins important conversations with humor when he’s feeling uncomfortable. Occasionally he’ll say the wrong thing and make someone feel worse rather than better, but he makes an effort to correct himself when such a situation occurs. He knows he’s not perfect—God knows that’s not true—but he’s trying his best, and nothing is more important to him than being a solid friend.

For as long as he can remember, most of this effort goes into being best friends with Lucas Friar.

It’s been that way since they met in first grade. Some friendships take a while to develop, others happen instantaneously. To Zay, theirs was definitely instantaneous. They’ve been each other’s ride or die since they were in elementary school, and that was never going to change. No matter who else came into the picture, no matter who started dating who or who ended up where, they would always be best friends. Some days, that feels like the only thing he’s sure of.

He has to laugh to himself whenever Maya and Riley go on about how they’re the best friends to ever friend, because it’s simply not accurate. But he never has to say anything. He and Lucas always make eye contact and exchange a knowing smile. They may not say it aloud, but they both know what’s true.

There were never better friends than Zay Babineaux and Lucas Friar. They’ve always held each other at number one.

Now, heading into tenth grade, that’s starting to feel a little less true.

It all starts in September and it comes out of nowhere.

Zay gets out of math class and heads towards the science hall, his usual path on Friday afternoons. He catches a glimpse of Riley and Lucas by his locker, slowing down to sneak up behind them. Maya comes along and tugs Riley away, leaving Lucas alone to gather his things. The moment
he’s close enough and Lucas’s hands are out of range, Zay leaps forward and slams his locket shut.

“Pow!”

“Oh my God!” Lucas shouts, shoving Zay lightly as he cackles. “Why do you always do this?”

“Why are you always spooked if I always do it?” he challenges, patting Lucas’s shoulder and leading him down the hall. “I just think you’re tense, man. I don’t think Riley is all that good for you. I think she stresses you out. Gets you on edge, you feel me?”

Lucas rolls his eyes. “Riley is not bad for me.”

“Hey, now, I didn’t say that. That’s not what I said.” They make their way towards the lunch room, Lucas shouldering his backpack. “I just said she makes you tense. I didn’t specify in what way. You gonna argue with me on that one?”

Lucas pauses, thinking about it. He gives him the side-eye. “Alright. Touché.”

Zay grins. “Yeah, I know I’m right. Anyway, how pumped are you for tonight?”

“Pretty pumped,” Lucas says with a light smile. “Why are you? What’ve you got planned?”

Lucas nearly runs into Zay as he freezes, holding up a hand and whipping around to face him.

“What do you mean what do I have planned? It’s the third Friday of the month.” Lucas gives him a vacant look, waiting for him to elaborate. “It’s game night. You know, video game night. That thing we coined before the Matthews hijacked it.”

Lucas’s face lights up with recognition. But the next words out of his mouth aren’t very reassuring.

“Oh, crap.”

Zay frowns. “No. No, no. You take that back. Don’t you oh, crap, me. Not on video game night. Take it back.”

“Zay,” Lucas starts carefully, frowning slightly.

“No, no. Don’t look at me with those sad cow eyes. Take back the crap and put those away. Do not… no crap!” He lifts his hands and covers his best friend’s face, praying that whatever he says next doesn’t completely ruin their weekend plans.

“I’m still looking,” Lucas states, muffled by Zay’s hands.

He pulls away, debating whether or not to let Lucas speak. Maybe he has an emergency. Maybe his mother is in the hospital. Maybe he got test results back and he only has a couple of weeks to live. That would certainly be a much bigger problem than missing game night, but anything else doesn’t seem like a valid enough reason.

“I promised Riley I’d help her babysit,” Lucas explains, restarting their journey to the cafeteria at a leisurely pace. He grips the strap of his backpack anxiously.

Zay clasps his hands together, pressing them to his lips. “Let me get this straight. You’re ditching me, on video game night, to play house with Riley.”

Lucas tilts his head, making a face. “I wouldn’t refer to it as such, but sure.”

“You cannot do this. You can’t just suddenly do this to me!”
“Come on, Zay.” They push through the doors to the lunch room, heading to their usual table and putting their bags down. Lucas slides into a seat and Zay settles in across from him, giving him a demanding glare. “I’m sorry, I spaced, but it’s not that big a deal. We do this every month.”

“Yes. It’s a tradition. That’s what traditions are, man.”

Lucas taps his fingers on the table, giving him a pleading look. “Listen, I’m sorry. Seriously. But this is really important to me, I really want the Matthews to like me.”

“Why are you worried about that? They already like you. Cory’s had like three years to warm up to you, figure if he hasn’t at this point you’re already screwed.”

“No, I know that,” he admits, rubbing his hands together. Zay’s known him long enough to recognize his nervous tick—he’s really serious about this. “I know they like me, but I’m Riley’s boyfriend now, and I want them to know they can trust me. I want to make that known, you get what I’m saying?”

He wants so badly to be stubborn about this. They’ve had this video game tradition since they were in elementary school. The fact that Lucas forgot stings, and he has the right to get petty about this. He has every right to look in those sad green eyes and tell him off.

But he can tell how important this is to him. He can tell how much stock he’s putting into his place with the Matthews, how genuinely compassionate he is about his relationship with Riley—he spends enough time telling him about it. It would be so easy to be petty, but he’s a good friend. Zay Babineaux is nothing if not a good friend. And he has to let his best friend do this.

Still, he’s not going to drop it without a final word.

“So, just to be clear,” he says, clearing his throat and lifting a finger in the air. “You’d really, instead of spending a night getting destroyed by me at every game I own, rather spend an evening hanging around with your girlfriend, who you are very fond of, and who you might actually get to spend some alone time with while her parents aren’t…” He trails off, narrowing his eyes at Lucas’s amused expression. “Alright, I see how this isn’t going in my favor.”

Lucas pats his hand across the table. “Glad you recognize that.”

They’re joined in the next moment by Maya and Riley, the former striding up to the table and pressing her hands to her heart in mock affection. “Aw, look at them. Hands together, picture of love.”

“Get a good look,” Zay says, beaming up at them. Lucas grins as well, matching his level of cheek. “This is the best view of friendship you two are ever gonna get.”

Maya rolls her eyes, walking around the table and nudging Lucas up from his seat. He makes an irritated face but doesn’t argue, sliding down one as Maya settles in the center seat. Riley notices the moment but doesn’t say anything, plopping into the seat on Zay’s right.

“Afternoon, dumb dums,” Farkle greets them, holding hands with Smackle as they approach. They slide into the remaining seats, pulling out their lunches.

“It’s the weekend,” Smackle states, happily accepting the grape Farkle hands her across the table. Zay finds it wild that the two of them practically share their lunches every day, combining whatever they packed and dividing it between them. He supposes it’s pretty cute, but it seems like a big waste of time when they could just pack whatever they want in their own lunches for themselves. “What is everyone doing this coming evening?”
“My parents are having date night, so Lucas is coming over to help me babysit Auggie,” Riley informs them, exchanging a soft smile with Lucas. Maya gags.

“How about you?” Lucas asks.

“Trip to the planetarium,” Farkle says proudly, accepting the carrot stick Smackle hands him. He takes a bite and chews quickly so that he can finish his thought. Zay wonders if he’d just talk with his mouth full if Smackle wasn’t right there across from him. “There’s a new exhibition on the existence of possible other life forms in the galaxy.”

“We’re sure much of it is going to be factually incorrect. We’re planning on keeping a tally.”

Zay raises his eyebrows. “Well, gee, that sounds… fun.”

“How about you, Zay?” Smackle replies, splitting an oatmeal cookie in half and passing it off to her boyfriend. “What are your weekend plans?”

He tosses a quick glance in Lucas’s direction. “Oh, you know me. Big plans. Just gonna play some video games. Have some well-needed alone time. No biggie.”

Lucas gives him a grateful smile. In some ways, that makes him feel a little bit better.

Lucas doesn’t miss video game night again, but Zay realizes the pattern doesn’t exactly go away.

Other events suddenly get postponed. Plans get cancelled. Lucas is a lot busier than he used to be all of the sudden, between balancing a part-time job at the veterinary office downtown, and baseball, and school, but that’s not the real reason he’s no longer readily available. No, the months go by and Lucas Friar becomes more and more preoccupied with a certain pretty brunette.

The worst part is, Zay can’t even hate Riley Matthews. That’s always the easy way, it seems, when your best friend gets into a relationship and runs out of time to hang out. If you can hate the significant other, all of your resentment can be easily transferred onto them and none of the more complicated emotions of the situation ever have to be dealt with. Zay wishes it could be that way, that he could just hate Riley and be mad at her and move on with his life.

But he doesn’t hate Riley. It’s nearly impossible to hate her, and the fact of the matter is he actually really likes her. She’s nice, and funny, and she makes Lucas happier than he’s ever seen him. He’s her friend too, and he’s very grateful for her.

All in all, this makes things much more complex for him. Because he likes Riley, but he doesn’t know how to make it clear that sometimes he wants to hang out with just Lucas rather than the both of them. He likes Riley, and he doesn’t know how to tell her that he feels like she’s absorbing his favorite person in the world and soon there won’t be anything left to share. He likes Riley, and he knows it’s not fair to be so possessive of Lucas when he’s allowed to have other friends.

He knows he’s being irrational, but the feelings don’t go away so he’s stuck stewing in them. Brooding over the situation when he’s alone and acting like everything is fine when push comes to shove. That’s being a good friend, isn’t it?

But then, what kind of friend is Lucas being all things considered? Is Zay the one being unfair, expecting him to spend more time with him and drop his blossoming relationship? Or is Lucas the one being unfair, prioritizing someone he’s only known for a couple years over the friend he’s known for most of his life? Are either of them actually right or wrong at all?
He thought he knew what it meant. Being a good friend. Now, he doesn’t think he knows anything about friendship at all.

As they get deeper into the school year, other people start to notice his mood. His mom and dad are surprised when Lucas doesn’t come over for dinner on the weekends, and even more surprised that Zay doesn’t complain about it.

“Are you guys doing okay? You’re still getting along?” his mom questions after dinner one night as Zay is washing the dishes.

“Yes, ma, alright?” he assures her, wanting the conversation to drop. “We’re not like mad at each other or anything. He’s just busy.”

“He still going with Riley?” his dad calls from the table, raising his eyebrows interestedly over his glasses.

Zay nods. “Yes. And?”

His dad smiles to himself, shrugging nonchalantly. Zay loves his dad, but he hates the smug little look he gets when he knows he’s about to learn a life lesson. He’d rather not learn life lessons—he gets enough of those from Cory.

His mom pats his shoulder, handing him another dish. “If it’s bothering you, talk to him. Lucas has always had your back, he’ll understand. He’ll want to listen, I’m sure.”

Zay shrugs his mom off and ultimately escapes the conversation as quickly as he can, but he doesn’t find better luck with his other friends. When he Skypes Vanessa and Dylan that weekend, they basically read him the same riot act.

“Well, Zay, I don’t know what you’re expecting from us,” Vanessa chides, painting her toenails without bothering to look up at the webcam. “You’re here complaining to us that you feel like Lucas won’t hang out with you as much, but who’s the one person you won’t complain to?”

“I mean, what’s Lucas supposed to do? Read minds?” Dylan jokes, attempting to balance a pen on his nose. He fails miserably, disappearing out of frame to grab the writing utensil off the floor.

Zay rolls his eyes. “No. But don’t you think he’d miss me too? I mean, if he cared? I don’t want to bother him.”

Dylan pops up from under the desk, staring at him with wide eyes. “Zay, my man, tell me you hear yourself.”

“What? What’s so crazy about that?”

He slides back into his chair, slamming his hands down authoritatively. The gesture is enough to get Vanessa to lift her eyes from her paint job. “You’re telling me you don’t understand why Lucas is spending so much time obsessing over his new girlfriend?”

“Right to the point, Dyl,” Vanessa says flatly.

He waves her off. “Zay, this is Riley. This is the girl that Lucas literally spent three hours rambling about when he first Skyped me and Asher to thank us for that stupid middle school election thing. Lucas is actually dating her now—you expected him not to get all wrapped up in her? He’s got Riley vision.”
“What the hell is Riley vision?”

“You know, like tunnel vision. Can only see Riley.” Dylan glances at them, throwing his hands up defensively. “He’s in love, dude! That’s what I’m saying. He’s not thinking about your feelings right now. He’s got enough of his own.”

“Dylan’s point is,” Vanessa says pointedly, flopping onto her stomach and giving Zay her full attention. “You have to talk to Lucas if you want to fix this. He’s being stupid, but he’s not gonna realize it until you confront him about it.”

“Yeah, and you know Lucas,” Dylan adds, smiling supportively. “He’ll probably want to die for making you feel bad. Just get all the drama over with now so you can both move forward and stop being so weird about the whole thing.”


“You boys,” Vanessa says exasperatedly, shaking her head. “So dramatic.”

“That’s men to you, missy,” Dylan says, dropping the pen again and fumbling as he attempts to catch it, falling right out of his desk chair. Vanessa and Zay crack up. He’s glad he’s still got his original crew, even when they’re thousands of miles away.

Zay plans to act on his decision to confront Lucas about it, but is adequately distracted the next time he sees him. He’s covered head to toe in baking supplies and obviously ready to go kick a tree.

It takes them a while but they manage to get all the egg out of Lucas’s hair, and as they’re picking flour out of his clothes he gets the story piece by piece. How Lucas and Maya were given after school detention for failing to finish their cake for home economics, and how brutal Maya’s been lately in regards to her teasing. When he tried to get her to talk about it she hit him with an egg instead. Things escalated, obviously, and only ended when Riley came to pick them up and got a pie right in the face.

“Now Riley isn’t talking to either of us. And like, I don’t blame her, but it’s still not fair.” Lucas ruffles his hair, grimacing at the remaining oily feeling from the egg yolk. “I’m just trying to get Maya to be real with me and this happens. Now my girlfriend won’t talk to me, and I’ve got detention for a week. And I still haven’t finished this stupid cake!”

Zay opens his mouth to answer when his mom pokes her head in the doorway. She takes in the view, obviously debating whether or not to question it. Finally, she smiles. “Hi there, Lucas.”

“Hi, Donna.”

She places her hand on her hip, giving both of them a curious squint. “Do I want to ask?”

They exchange a look. Lucas shakes his head, matching Zay’s comic expression. “I wouldn’t.”

“Alright,” she relents, holding her hands up surrender. “You staying for dinner?”

“Sure, that would be great. Thanks.”

His mom disappears, shutting the door behind her. It never fails to stun Zay how quickly Lucas can deconstruct his charming façade. The moment the door clicks shut he completely deflates, the
smile disappearing from his lips and his eyes becoming sad again.

He wonders if he knows just how sad his eyes are. He wishes he knew how to make them not be, but he’s never known in all the years they’ve been friends. It’s the one reason he’s never been the best friend he could be.

“I just don’t get it,” Lucas snaps again, digging his heels into the carpet. He scowls. “Why is Maya being like this? She just keeps saying that Riley is her best friend. As if I don’t know that. As if I would do anything to get in the way of that.”

Zay ponders this, sitting on the bed next to Lucas and crossing his legs. He props his chin on his hands, holding his tongue because he wants to be there for his best friend. But he feels like maybe he gets why Maya is acting the way she is. Sure, it’s not the approach he would ever take, but he knows the feeling. He knows what it feels like to worry the most important person in your life is suddenly going in another direction, and you’re not along for the ride.

“I don’t know man,” Zay lies. “What are you going to do about it?”

He sighs, rubbing his face and shrugging. “I don’t know. Talk to Riley, first of all. Try to talk to Maya again. But if she doesn’t give, I don’t know what I’m going to do. I don’t want Riley to feel like I’m contributing to this or hiding my opinions from her, but I don’t want to put Maya in a bad light. She’s her best friend. I wouldn’t do that to her.” He sighs again, hiding his head in his hands.

“The triangle is supposed to be over. I still feel stuck.”

Zay makes a sympathetic face, patting his shoulder. “I’m sorry, man.”

“What do you think?” Lucas asks, locking eyes with him.

He should tell him. He should tell him that he feels like they’re in the same boat, that he misses him and that he has no idea how to fix the rift forming between them. That he feels like there’s a gaping hole forming at the center of their friendship, and Lucas can’t even see it. That while he doesn’t think Maya is going about it the right way, he gets why she’s holding onto Riley so tight. Because he wants to do the same to him.

But that’s not what Lucas needs right now. So, as he usually does, Zay resorts to humor instead.

“I think you think way too much,” he teases.

Lucas breaks into a grin, laughing and nudging his arm away. Zay grins, shoving him back and getting him to his feet. When the going gets tough, the tough distract themselves with video games and avoid life’s problems.

--

By the time spring semester rolls around, the Maya situation doesn’t get any better.

Lucas and Maya are arguing basically all the time, and not in the teasing, friendly way they used to. There’s real anger there under the name-calling and sly digs, and everyone is slightly uncomfortable. Farkle and Smackle don’t seem too surprised, as they saw this coming a mile away. Zay spends a lot more time with them, because hanging out with Riley, Lucas, and Maya kind of feels like waiting for a volcano to erupt and he just can’t handle that level of unease.

“You know, Zay,” Smackle says one afternoon as they’re studying in Topanga’s, the three of them taking up the space comfortably in absence of the others. “I have to say, I’m rather enjoying your presence being around us more often. I’m honored you decided to spend more of your valuable
“Well, thanks, Smackle.” He smiles, clicking his pen in her direction. “I’ll remember to thank you in my Oscar speech.”

“Oscar speech? Since when are you an actor?” Farkle asks.

“I could be an actor.”

Farkle rolls his eyes, focusing back on his textbook. They settle into focused silence for a few more moments, before Smackle raises her head again and clears her throat. “There’s just one thing I don’t quite understand.”

“There’s always a condition with you, isn’t there?”

Smackle clasps her hands together on her lap, eyeing Zay curiously. “Although I enjoy your company, I’m sure you’d rather be hanging out with Lucas. Which you haven’t seemed to be doing a lot of lately. Why is that?”

Zay hesitates, not sure how to respond to such a blunt accusation. Though, it is Smackle, so he figures he really shouldn’t be so surprised. “He’s just busy. We’ve got things to do, you know? I’m a busy man too. I’ve got things on my plate.”

“And yet, here you are with us.” Farkle closes his textbook, realizing the studying has been effectively derailed for now. “Curious, isn’t it?”

He looks back and forth at their inquisitive gazes, holding up his hands in surrender. “Okay, you wanna psychoanalyze me? Go ahead. Tell me what’s going on in my head. I’d like to see y’all try.”

Smackle smiles, tilting her head at Farkle next to her. “Dearest?”

Farkle examines Zay for a long moment, bringing his arm up around Smackle’s shoulders. He leans over and whispers something to her, to which she nods eagerly. He watches them keep up this bit for a minute or so, staring up at the ceiling disdainfully and making a point of checking his wristwatch.

“You about done?”

Farkle shifts his gaze from Smackle to Zay, lifting his chin slightly and getting one final look over. Zay raises his eyebrows, challenging him.

“Here’s what I’m getting,” Farkle begins, keeping his arm around Smackle and leaning back in the loveseat. “The tension going on between Maya and Lucas isn’t fun for any of us, particularly Riley, but also particularly you. It makes you a lot more uncomfortable than you’d like to admit.”

“Why’s that?” Smackle questions.

“The thing is, Smackle, Zay knows exactly how Maya is feeling because he’s feeling the same things. Lucas and Riley are in a relationship now, and they’re both happier together. But they’re also suddenly splitting a lot of their time that used to be reserved for their best friends, and we’re witnessing said best friends cope with that. Maya, she’s lashing out. Zay, he’s bottling it up. He doesn’t want to confront Lucas because it doesn’t seem like a fair argument, but he doesn’t want to let it all go and end up losing his best friend.”

Zay blinks, hating the smug expression on Farkle’s face. Being friends with a genius is too much
emotional stress. “Yeah, well, you just get out of my head, alright?”

Smackle smiles sympathetically. “It’s okay, Zay. I find your approach to the situation admirable. It reflects positively on you that you would put Lucas’s feeling above your own.”

“But it doesn’t doing anything emotionally positive for you,” Farkle says pointedly. “Are you going to tell him?”

Zay shrugs, averting his eyes to the floor rather than their critical gaze. “I don’t know. The issue’s already grown old, it would feel weird to bring it up now. Besides, with whatever is going on with Maya, I don’t want add another factor into things. Someone has to look out for him.”

“Yeah, but who’s going to look out for you?” Farkle squints slightly, knowing Zay won’t have an answer to his very relevant question.

The room goes silent, save for the other NYU students lightly chatting or typing away at their computers. Smackle glances at Farkle before leaning forward and waiting for Zay to meet her eyes. “We’re your friends, Zay. We’re looking out for you.”

This elicits a smirk from him. He nods thankfully, locking eyes with Farkle and giving him the same appreciative smile. Although Lucas has always been his number one, he’s happy he’s lucky enough to have found some other strong friends as well.

things start to reach a serious boiling point as summer gets closer and closer.

Maya’s teasing becomes relentless. Lucas is not only constantly irritated, but his sad eyes are starting to look angry, a fact that makes Zay very uneasy. He doesn’t want Lucas to go back to being the guy he was when they were friends in Texas. He thought he did when he first joined them in New York, but he realized quickly that the friend he knew in Texas was just an angrier, harsher version of who Lucas actually is. He never wants to see him become that again, if he can help it.

The volcano erupts on a different, warmer afternoon at Topanga’s as the summer heat starts to roll in. Lucas and Maya start throwing jabs at each other that quickly spirals into an argument. Riley tries to get them to stop, but she’s become less and less effective the worse the strain has gotten.

“Well, you know what, Huckleberry? I do what I want, so you can either deal with it or find somewhere else to plant your briar patches. I was here first.”

“I’m so sick of this!” Lucas snaps.

“Yeah, well welcome to the club, Ranger Rick.”

“Will you stop calling me names? Stop coming at me all the time.”

“Guys, *stop*,” Riley demands, wringing her hands together on her lap. Zay wants to help her, but he has no idea how to step into the middle of this crossfire. He’s not sure he’d make it out alive.

“Keep telling me what to do and you’ll just get more,” Maya starts, prepping another nickname.

Before she can get it out Lucas finally breaks, slamming his textbook closed and dropping it loudly on the table. “Will you just let it drop!” he shouts, raising his voice loud enough that most of the coffee shop goes quiet.
Riley stares at him, wide-eyed. Zay can see the embarrassment coloring his cheeks before he even has time to properly catch up with what’s happening. Lucas stares down at his textbook, lifting his eyes to meet Riley’s across the table.

“I’m sorry, Riley,” he mutters, grabbing his books and bag and getting to his feet. “Sorry.”

He’s out the door before any of them can stop him. Riley swivels in her chair to watch him go, obviously debating chasing after him. Zay’s fighting the same instinct.

Maya chews on her lip, before rising to her feet and walking out as well. She doesn’t bother to take her textbook with her.

“Maya,” Riley says, but she’s already out the door.

Silence falls over them. Zay catches the glossy quality taking over Riley’s eyes, meaning she’s about to cry any second. Although a big part of him wants to run at the sight of tears, he figures this is the time to be a good friend. If he ever was one to begin with, this is the time to prove it.

He gets up and settles down in Maya’s previous spot, reaching forward and wrapping an arm around Riley’s shoulders. She sighs, leaning into him and resting her head on his shoulder. He lets her breathe for a few minutes, not saying anything.

“I don’t get what’s happening,” she says shakily, pressing her hands into her knees stressfully. “I don’t get why they’re being like this. I know they’ve always been picky when it comes to one another but it’s never been this bad.”

“You really have no idea?” Zay says incredulously, causing Riley to lift her head to give him a confused look. “You don’t have any clue why Maya is acting this way.”

“No. Do you? Did she talk to you?”

He shakes his head, hesitating. “No. She didn’t have to. I think I get it on my own.”

“Why? What’s wrong? What are you talking about?”

Zay takes a moment to think carefully about what to say next. He shifts to face Riley fully, placing his hands in his lap and staring down at them rather than at her. “Maya’s scared, Riley. She’s scared that your friendship isn’t going to be the same.”

“What?” She looks genuinely shocked. “Why wouldn’t it be?”

“Look, you and Lucas are becoming more important to each other,” Zay says flatly, cutting right to the chase. It’s easier that way. “You’re spending more time together, learning more about each other. And that’s fine. That’s good. You’re dating and all, and Lucas doesn’t ever look more content than when he’s with you.”

Despite the harsh situation, this earns a glimmer of pride from Riley. She smiles softly, dropping her gaze down to her hands as she plays with a thread on her skirt anxiously.

“But to me and Maya, it’s new for us. We’ve both had you our whole lives as our number one people. For that to suddenly change… well, it’s not easy. It takes a lot of getting used to. It can lead to a lot of resentment.”

Riley takes this in, her eyes widening. She locks eyes with him, worry etched into her features. “Zay, you don’t resent me, do you?”
“No,” he assures her. “Wish I did, would be way easier for me. But no, I don’t resent you. And I don’t think Maya really resents Lucas either. She’s just scared, like I said. And her instinct when she’s cornered is to lash out. Mine’s usually to retreat. Hence why I’ve been spending a lot of time with Farkle and Smackle.”

“I thought you just liked hanging out with them.”

“Well, that too, I guess.”

She smiles lightly, nudging Zay’s knee after a brief moment of silence. “I’m sorry I’m taking your best friend,” she says timidly, twiddling her thumbs together.

“See, that’s the thing,” he says thoughtfully, leaning back and putting his arm up on the seatback, rubbing his chin. “The weird thing is, I want this for him. You’re good for him, you know. He likes being with you. He deserves that. I want him to be happy. So, in that regard, I’m not really that mad. I just don’t want to lose him entirely in the process.”

Riley nods in understanding. “You need to tell him that.”

Zay looks towards the stairs where Lucas disappeared. He sighs. “Yeah, I know.”

“What happens?” she asks, settling back as well and smoothing out her skirt to distract herself. “I mean, when all is said and done. What’s going to happen to us? Are we still going to be friends when all this exploration is done?”

“I hope so,” Zay says, exchanging a contemplative look with her. “Guess we’ll find out.”

She nods, trying to grapple with the uncertainty of the future. He knows how hard that is for her. “So,” he says slowly, aiming to change the subject. “You love him?”

“Huh?” Her cheeks flush, and she nervously pushes some hair behind her ear. “Please. Come on. I don’t… Come on.”

“Uh huh, okay,” he says knowingly. Riley’s been in love with Lucas since like eighth grade, even he knows that. It’s only weird to discuss now because suddenly love seems like a real feeling they could experience. “Whatever you say.”

In the final week of sophomore year, Zay finally comes clean.

He and Lucas are studying for finals, and he’s just packing up his bag to head home when he hesitates. He could just walk away and pretend everything is okay for another day, and the doorway looks awfully tempting.

But he’s also growing more and more concerned that the longer he holds back, the worst the consequences are going to be. Riley’s concern for the future seems entirely warranted—who knows what junior year is going to hold? God forbid senior year, and that’s just on the horizon.

He glances over his shoulder at his best friend, finishing up a sentence in his notes and sticking his tongue out in concentration. He doesn’t want to lose him. No matter what the future holds, he and Lucas are together. He’s not going to blow that with his own stupidity.

“Lucas?”
“Yeah?”

Zay drops his bag on the desk chair, climbing back onto the bed and clasping his hands together primly. “You wanna hear a great Zay story?”

Lucas gives him a weird look, smirking. “I don’t think that’s normally how these things start. You sure you don’t mean me? Farkle? Riley?”

“No, no, this one’s on me,” he says, taking a deep breath. Willing himself the courage to be upfront and get to the point. He’s never been one to hold back, and now is not the time to start. “I haven’t been honest with you. Recently. Like, this whole year.”

Lucas’s smirk is gone. “Huh? What are you talking about?”

“Relax, okay?” Zay says, waving off his concern. “You didn’t do anything. Just, let me talk, okay?”

After a moment, he nods.

“I’ve been having problems this year too. Nothing serious, don’t give me that wounded hero look. Put the sad cow eyes away. Nothing you could’ve helped with, really. I’ve just sort of felt like you and I aren’t as close as—no, that’s not what I’m trying to say. We’re as close as we’ve always been, but it’s sort of felt like we’re not spending as much time together. Like we’re not… the same, if that makes sense.”

Lucas is staring at him, giving him his full attention. “What do you mean that’s not my fault? That is my fault! Zay, why didn’t you say anything?”

“No, listen, would you let me talk?” He raises his eyebrows at him until he backs down, gesturing for him to go on. “Thank you. It’s not your fault because you’re not technically in the wrong. All the time you’re spending with Riley, that’s acceptable. You’re a couple. You care about her. She makes you happy. You deserve to be able to enjoy that. You have every right. It was just an adjustment for me to get used to. But it’s sort of why I understood where Maya was coming from. Not her methods, obviously, but the emotion behind it. Kind of felt like I was going through the same thing.”

“Well, what can I do?” Lucas says earnestly. “Tell me what to do and I’ll do it. I’ll fix it.”

Zay can’t help but smile. He shakes his head, shrugging. “I don’t think you can. I don’t think there’s anything for you to do. I think that maybe, this is just the way things are supposed to happen. We have to take this time to figure it all out.”

“Well, I can dedicate more time to you. I can talk to Riley. We can balance it out.”

“Look, man,” Zay says, waving off his offers and patting his arm. He pauses, exhaling. “Listen. I don’t want that. I don’t want to come between you and Riley. I don’t want it to become some business of splitting your time and putting one over the other—I don’t want that. I want us to coexist. I think it’s just going to take some time to find the balance naturally.”

Lucas thinks it over.

“You and Riley are just going to get closer. I mean, I don’t see you guys breaking up any time soon.” Zay laughs at the look of horror on Lucas’s face. “Yeah, that’s what I mean. Bottom line is, I want you to be able to figure that out. I want you to be able to experience that. I don’t want you questioning how your relationship is going to affect me. That’s not how friendship is supposed to
work.”

There’s a long moment of silence. Lucas twists his fingers together, avoiding eye contact with him. “So, what do you want to do?”

Zay examines him for a moment, thinking. “Junior year is going to be different. Just a feeling I got. Things are going to change, we’re going to change. I’m sure that includes you and Riley. Me, too. All of us. I don’t want to let fear stop us from allowing those changes to happen. You know, like Farkle says, organisms gotta be able to change to grow and all that jazz. So let’s not… force anything.”

Lucas meets his eyes. It’s a relief to see them curious rather than sad.

“You know I’m here for you. I know you got my back. We’re always going to be best friends. But maybe, we just need to be okay with not being together all the time for a while. Let’s try it out. Independence, and all that. Like, we know the other is still there no matter what. But maybe it’s time to try standing on our own. Of our own free will—not like the bullshit from seventh grade.”

This earns a laugh. After a moment, Lucas squints at him, smirking. “So, we’re playing the long game?”

Zay makes a disgusted face. Lucas cracks up, nudging him playfully. “Don’t you ever say that stupid phrase to me. The most nonsensical…”

Lucas laughs harder, and Zay gets the feeling that things are going to be okay. No matter what hits them in the next couple of years, they’ve got each other’s backs.

That’s never going to change. After all, there were never better friends than Zay Babineaux and Lucas Friar.

Zay is very surprised to have a late visitor at his window that night.

At first he thinks it’s Lucas, considering all the stuff they talked about. He’s still reeling over the decisions they made, trying to process it and reconcile the reality that they may not be as joined at the hip as they were previously. He’s not over it yet, but he will be. He’ll figure it out.

The figure at his window is blonde, but that’s where the similarities to Lucas end. Zay pries open the panel and Maya climbs into his room, marching forward to the center of the room and launching into nervous pacing.

“You know, I don’t have a bay window,” Zay says flatly, putting the panel back in place. He turns around to face her, crossing his arms. “You can’t just come climbing in here like Riley’s.”

“Let’s not talk about her right now,” Maya says haughtily, running her fingers through her hair. Immediately, Zay guesses that something between the two girls has finally bubbled over. Now, Maya’s alive with restless energy. It’s a dangerous kind of vitality. “You talk to Lucas?”

He nods slowly. “I did. I’m guessing you must’ve just talked to Riley.”

Maya shrugs, placing her hands on her hips. “You know what, Zay?”

“Yes?”
“We’re wasting away,” she says breathlessly, nodding to encourage her own words. “We’re wasting away. We’ve been sitting around, dallying the years away and now we’re about to be juniors in high school. Juniors. Then seniors. Then off we go into the world.”

“Well, that’s frightening.”

She holds out her arms, huffing indignantly. “What have we done? I feel like I haven’t lived an actual day in my high school career. We’re going out into the world in less than two years and I feel like I have no life experience. I’m not prepared.”

He can tell she’s got an idea forming in her brain. He can practically see the wheels turning in her pretty blonde head.

“You and me, we’re artists,” she says confidently, striding forward and taking his hands excitedly. “We can’t stay stuck in this stagnant state of motion forever. We need to move. We need to explore. We’re artists! Artists live.”

Although he has no idea what she’s going on about, he’s intrigued. Some of her excitement is contagious, and he’s catching it. “Go on.”

“You and I are both walking into junior year on our own. What do you say we make it a team effort?” She steps back and holds out her hand. “You and me, Zayby. This year, we’re really going to live.”

It feels like the whole world of the possibilities is there in her hand, held out in front of him like bait. And she’s right—without Lucas to guide him, he’s sort of drifting off into the void on his own. It would sure be nice to have a partner in crime when he’s learning about the world.

After a brief moment of hesitation, he takes her hand and shakes it. Firmly. Without indecision. He’s ready for the future. As he’s learned, he’s got plenty of friends to face it with him.

- JUNIOR YEAR -

Junior year is the year Zay Babineaux learns about identity.

He doesn’t know what it is, but something about their second to last school year sets his world upside down in a way he wasn’t anticipating. There’s this weird, anxious feeling in the pit of his stomach at all times, even though in reality nothing has truly changed. The group still sits together at lunch. The school is the same old school. His classes aren’t anything special, and he’s stuck with Cory for the fourth year in a row. He doesn’t understand how in a scenario where so much is the same, he can feel so severely displaced.

He’s relieved to have Maya, who keeps him out of his own head and constantly on the move. Taking her freedom from Riley to the full extreme, she leads him out of the safety of their comfortable surroundings and into the crazy, surreal world of the high school party scene.

Maybe New York is wilder than most, because Zay wasn’t expecting the hype to be as lively as it seemed on television. Yet NYC kids seem to party hard, and he’s quickly absorbed into the music and the haze and the fuzzy feeling only alcohol can provide.

It’s a bad move, he knows it is, but he can’t help but become infatuated with how at ease the whole scene makes him feel. He’d never really had anything before, just a couple of drinks with Dylan and Asher back in seventh grade when trying to prove how cool they were. But as he drinks his way through first semester, he considers himself quite the expert. Particularly, he specializes in
what will get you drunk as fast as possible.

Sure, he can’t remember good portions of the semester. He remembers Lucas coming along with him, Farkle, and Maya one time, but he can’t remember how it ended. Lucas never said anything about it one way or the other. Farkle was doped, so he doesn’t remember either. Maya’s too preoccupied locking lips with Brett Ryan to pay attention to much else. At least the triangle can officially be confirmed dead.

All he knows is that for whatever reason, the alcohol settles that displacement in his stomach. When he’s buzzed, he can’t feel anything. And that’s enough for him.

As the semester is coming to an end, winter break just over the horizon, Cory writes a solitary word up on the board. Limits.

“I see he thinks it’s math class again,” Zay jokes, earning a chuckle from Smackle in front of him. Farkle rolls his eyes.

“Limits,” Cory begins, clasping his hands together. “What are they?”

“According to Lindsay Lohan, they don’t exist,” Maya says cheekily, exchanging a grin with Zay. Cory gives them an exhausted look.

“Why do I even bother?”

“Why are we still in your class? It’s been four years!” Zay bites back, slamming his hands down on the desk. Maya mimics him, giving Cory an eyebrow raise.

“Because the universe hates us both,” he says sharply, pointing to the board to put the lesson back on track. “What are they? Riley?”

Riley lowers her hand. “They mark the end. They represent how far you can push something before it won’t let you move forward anymore.”

“Very good. What happens when you push past a limit?”

“That depends,” Farkle states. “Sometimes, when you push something to its limit, it grows stronger. It breaks that boundary and is able to develop further.”

“And the other times?”

Smackle takes up the slack. “It breaks. End of sentence.”

Zay zones out, doodling on his notebook and glancing up at the clock to countdown the minutes. He’s surprised when someone taps him on the shoulder, passing a note to him. He takes it and opens it under the desk, recognizing Maya’s familiar scrawl.

*Party at Sarah’s dad’s studio tonight. Rager. Dead if we don’t go.*

Zay looks up from the paper, making eye contact with her. He nods slightly, earning a smirk from her. He jumps when Cory says a name, convinced he’s been caught. This isn’t the kind of note he wants Cory Matthews to see him holding.

It takes him a moment to catch up and process the call wasn’t directed towards him.

“Lucas?”
Zay glances over his shoulder towards his desk. Lucas glances up distractedly from staring at his pen, which he’d been idly flipping in his fingers.

“You still with us?” Cory asks, raising his eyebrows.

Lucas nods. Zay turns away, the anxious feeling back in his stomach again. He doesn’t think the issue has anything to do with Lucas, but for some reason it always get worse when he’s around. Like he’s some kind of subconscious reminder. Zay wonders if maybe he has deep-seated trauma that he’s blocked out of his head for the last ten years that is just now attempting to resurface.

The moment the bell rings, Zay and Maya are out of their seats and out the door. She rams into him and dances around him, taking his hands and leading him down the hall. “We’re going to go so hard tonight, my friend. Do you know how rad an abandoned studio is going to be?”

“As long as there’s booze it could be in the woods for all I care.”

Farkle jogs to catch up to them, eyeing them expectantly. Maya attempts to hide her excited grin, pressing her lips together in a thin line.

“No, don’t give me that look,” Farkle complains. “What did I miss? What’s the plan for tonight?”

“Rager at Sarah’s. Well, her dad’s, technically.”

“Aw, no, Sarah?” Farkle makes a face. “Why did it have to be Sarah?”

They start heading down the hall making their way towards the math corridor. “What you got against Sarah, Farkle?”

“She’s pretty annoying. And I still haven’t forgiven her for that dumbass movie script she had made about us. No wonder her dad’s studio is abandoned, he can’t pick compelling scripts for shit. Really, who would consume media content about the group of us just living our lives?”

“Farkle, darling,” Maya says pacifyingly, linking her arm with his. “No one cares about who’s hosting. We’re not going because we like Sarah. We’re going because we want to get trashed, and Sarah’s terrible director dad has the funds to get some serious goods. Eye on the prize.”

Maya leaves them at the intersection with the science hallway, but Farkle hangs back with Zay to chat for a few more minutes before the bell rings. As Farkle’s pulling out his binder for AP Bio, Zay catches his phone buzz in his hand with a couple of texts from Smackle.

“She ever care?” Zay wonders aloud. Farkle lifts his eyes and gives him a questioning look, inviting him to elaborate. “Smackle. She doesn’t party. Does she care that you’re always going out on the weekends without her?”

“No.” Farkle sounds certain, but the thoughtful expression that ghosts over his features indicates that he’s not so sure. “I mean, she’s never said anything.”

“Right.” The warning bell rings, and Zay backs towards his math class. “See you tonight?”

“Count on it. Better be revolutionary to make up for the fact that Sarah’s hosting.”

Zay laughs, giving Farkle a wave before heading into class. He has the feeling that this night is going to be legendary.
The night is legendary, but for all the wrong reasons.

By the time he, Maya, and Farkle arrive, the feeling in his stomach is especially prominent and he’s eager to forget it. Luckily, Sarah delivers and there’s a host of substances for him to lose himself in. The three of them don’t hesitate to jump right in.

Once they’re comfortably buzzed and the night gets later, he’s back to feeling at ease. The only issue, he’s realizing, is that it’s taking more and more alcohol to make it go away every time he tries to get rid of it. He isn’t even sure which drink he’s on at this point, dancing on the dance floor with Maya. He’s completely lost track of Farkle, but that’s not unusual—he usually disappears with the stoners to smoke so they rarely actually interact during parties as it is.

Brett approaches them, catching Maya from behind and startling her. She giggles, giving him a flirtatious look. Even though he’s drunk, and even though Brett’s not an unfamiliar entity at this point, Zay still doesn’t trust him. He’s too pretty. Too perfect. Too into soccer.

“Mind if I cut in?” he asks, pulling Maya from behind.

She gives Zay an eyebrow raise. “You good?”

The world could implode at this point and Zay probably wouldn’t notice, he’s trashed enough. He waves her onward. “Go forward. Dance. Kiss. Otherwise co-mingle.”

Maya rolls her eyes, turning her smirk on Brett and letting him pull her deeper into the party. Zay drifts over to grab another drink, blinking the dizziness out of his eyes. The colored lights aren’t helping all that much.

He wanders through the crowd until he’s greeted by a familiar face, Dave waving him over to join. He nods appreciatively and comes to stand by him, giving him a sloppy high-five. It takes him a moment to fully recognize the other two standing with him—Jeff and Wyatt, naturally.

“Hey, man, you look wasted,” Dave comments. He smells a little like weed, a little like corn chips. It’s a strangely compelling scent.

“I feel wasted, man,” Zay says cheerfully, raising his cup. “Cheers, am I right?”

Jeff, Wyatt, and Dave all cheer with him, taking a drink of their beverages. Jeff tosses his cup to the floor, kicking it into the crowd.

“How about that lesson today?” Dave murmurs, putting his hands in his pockets. “Do you think Mr. Matthews is ever going to run out of vague word association games?”

“I think he just opens the dictionary to a random page and goes from there,” Jeff laughs. The others burst into hysterics, a little more than warranted for the actual humor of the joke.

“How about how he called out Lucas in the middle of class?” Dave takes another sip of his drink, adding vodka to the unique cocktail of aromas he’s playing around with. “That was wild. Was he even doing anything?”

“No, but he was spacing,” Wyatt jumps in. “Always is.”

The room is spinning slightly. Zay has to keep his eyes on his cup to stay steady. “What are you talking about?”

“Friar’s always off in outer space. Not just Cory’s class—apparently he’s like that all the time.”
Sarah has math with him and says he spends the whole class period staring at out the window. One time he picked a hangnail and started bleeding in class and didn’t even notice until she pointed it out to him. Then he acted like it was nothing."

“That’s not good,” Dave says. Zay tries to focus on the conversation, but the bass from the music is deafening. It feels like it’s rattling his skull. “Why you think he’s like that?”

“Well, from what I’ve heard,” Wyatt starts, a small smirk growing on his face. He takes a quick sip of his drink to build suspense. “It sounds like he might be doping up, if you get me.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

Wyatt rolls his eyes. “He’s taking steroids, dude. Building up for the baseball team or whatever.”

“That can’t be right,” Jeff argues, shaking his head. “Homeboy has like, no acne. Acne is a side effect of steroids. He’d be uglier if he was taking steroids.”


“Would you listen to me?” Wyatt snaps, trying to regain their attention. “That’s not the entire story. He’s taking steroids, right? But it makes him all jittery, so he has to dope up to keep his nerves down. But it doesn’t entirely work, which is why he’s always like, flipping his pencils and stuff like that.”

“No,” Zay finally manages to speak, shaking his head as adamantly as he can without making himself too dizzy. “No, you’re wrong. Lucas doesn’t do drugs.”

“Oh, what do you know, Zay?”

“I know that you’re full of shit, Wyatt. Lucas doesn’t do drugs.”

He rolls his eyes. “Well, of course you’re going to defend him.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Zay hisses, trying hard to keep his vision steady. Not that he wants to look at Wyatt’s obnoxious face more than he has to.

“It’s not like you’re anything but Friar’s lap dog. He says speak and you bark. Woof.”

The anxious feeling in his stomach suddenly reemerges, despite the alcohol. He scowls, crumbling his cup slightly as he tightens his grip on it for a sense of balance. “Shut the hell up.”

“Yo, chill,” Dave says, holding his hands up between the two of them. “We’re here to chill, not go after each other.”

“Yeah, Wyatt, so why don’t you stop going after people who aren’t even here to defend themselves?”

“Woof!”

“You’re full of shit!” Zay shouts. He can’t tell if he’s actually upset about the things Wyatt is saying about Lucas, or if he’s more upset about the fact that he’d finally escaped this disgusting feeling and now it was back with a vengeance. He makes a move to throw his cup at Wyatt but stumbles instead, Dave barely managing to stabilize him.

“Zay, you okay?”
Before he can answer another form is giving him support. Maya’s at his side, putting his arm around her and straightening him up. “Okay, I think it’s time for us to go. Come on. Walk Zay. Straight.”

They begin to stumble through the crowd. “Where’s Farkle?” Zay slurs.

“I don’t know. I think he left. Come on, you need to walk. Two feet.” She gives him a concerned look, but it’s hard to focus on considering how blurry the room is getting. “How much have you had to drink? How much, Zay?”

He shrugs. “One. Two. Don’t remember. Lost count.”

“Oh, God.” She continues to drag him towards the back exit. Zay’s pretty sure the look on her face is fear, but he can’t exactly tell. “This isn’t good. This is not good.”

She pushes open the door and the winter air hits them as they escape into the chilly night.

When Zay wakes up the next morning, the first thing he feels is regret. The second is nausea. He scrambles out of bed and stumbles towards the nearest door, darting into the bathroom in the hall just in time to vomit into the bathtub.

He’s hunched over for a few minutes, heaving up what feels like a week’s worth of food and probably all of his inner organs. When he finally stops for longer than thirty seconds, he collapses back against the wall. He presses his hands together, alarmed by how clammy they are.

There’s a light knock at the door. Glancing up, he’s surprised to find Maya leaning against the doorjamb, arms crossed.

It’s then that he realizes he’s not even in his own house.

“Can I come in?” she asks without waiting for an answer, leaning over to grab some toilet paper and sitting down across from him on the bathroom floor. She eyes him cautiously, balling up the paper in her fingers.

He tilts his head back against the wall. “Sorry about your bathtub.”

“It’s okay. It’s seen worse.” She tentatively lifts the toilet paper, leaning forward and dabbing the vomit from his chin. “Do you remember how much you drank last night?”

“The way I feel right now? I’m guessing the entire selection.”

“Not quite. One second,” she says, holding up a finger to pause him as she gently rubs at the corner of his mouth. “Okay. Better.”

“Did everything go okay last night? I can’t remember anything. I have this feeling that it was bad. Like, really bad.”

There’s a glimmer in Maya’s eyes, a knowing gleam that indicates she’s seen things she doesn’t ever want to see again. She’s haunted by whatever happened last night, and Zay was part of the cause of it. Ultimately, she shakes her head.

“Everything worked out. We’re both safe. That’s what matters.” She narrows her eyes at him. “Zay, you can’t keep doing this. Like, partying for fun is one thing. But this isn’t like, just partying.
This is spiraling in a way I don’t know how to handle.”

He nods, closing his eyes. “I know.”

“You can’t keep going like this. You’re killing yourself.”

“I don’t know who I am,” he murmurs suddenly, barely above a whisper.

Maya gives him a look, expression full of concern. “What?”

He swallows, an unpleasant experience considering the taste of liquor and bile still burning his throat. The only thing he can remember from the previous night are the words Wyatt threw at him, and the horrible feeling in his stomach he’s been fighting since last summer. Finally, like some magical alcoholic epiphany, he’s put two and two together.

“I don’t know who I am,” he repeats, feeling tears form in the back of his throat. An even more repulsive combination. “I’m almost a senior in high school and I’m just now realizing I have no idea who I am or who I’m supposed to be.”

“What are you talking about?” Maya says incredulously. “You’re Zay Babineaux!”

“Yeah, and what does that mean?”

She shakes her head slightly, obviously unsure how to answer. “It’s… you’re Zay.”

“The class clown? The cute friend? Lucas Friar’s best friend.” He sighs, hating the couple of tears that manage to slip down his cheeks. He wipes them away furiously. “I’m Lucas Friar’s friend. That’s all I am. And now that I’m standing on my own, I don’t have anything. I have no identity.”

“Feel like I know the feeling,” Maya mutters, tossing the toilet paper into the trash can. She examines him for a long moment, frowning and scooting forward to wrap her arms around him. It makes him more likely to cry, which irritates him, but he’s glad for the comfort. “If you feel like you don’t know who you are, then we’ll figure it out. We’ll go searching for it. Alcohol isn’t going to show you. You have to find it yourself.”

He nods, wiping his eyes again. He adjusts and collapses against her side, feeling listless. “Thanks, Maya.”

“Any time, Zayby,” she promises him, resting her head against his. “We’re gonna find Zay Babineaux. And I’m sure he’s going to be just as amazing as I know he is.”

Starting spring semester, Maya’s first plan to find his identity comes through in pursuit of art.

She takes him the art room after school, leading him into what he knows is her sacred place. Once they enter the supply closet, she pulls out a can of paint and opens it, grabbing a stirring stick.

“Maya, I don’t know if you know this, but all art forms aren’t interchangeable,” he points out. “I don’t paint. That’s your thing.”

“Oh, the paint isn’t for the brushes,” she says offhandedly. She daintily lays the stick on the table, hefting the bucket into her arms. She gives him a once over, before tossing the bucket in his direction and dousing him in orange paint.

He shrieks, scrambling away from her and wiping the paint from his eyelids. “Maya, what the
“Trust me, this has worked for me. It helped when I had my identity crisis.”

“You just poured paint all over me! Trust you? Not in this lifetime.”

She tosses the bucket in his direction again, hitting him with another whammy of orange. He scrambles around the stools in a desperate attempt to get away from her. “Right now, you’re a blank canvas.”

“Oh, no, don’t you get all artsy on me. I may an artist, but I’m not insane.”

“You’re a blank canvas, and until you take responsibility for how you present yourself for others to see, you’re always going to be letting other people paint their strokes on you with no sense of how you perceive yourself.” She stands in front of him, holding out the bucket. “Take responsibility. Take control.”

It seems completely crazy, but then, he acknowledges that so many of the shenanigans he’s gotten into with these friends since he moved from Texas have been crazy. Locking eyes with Maya, he takes the remainder of the paint from her hands and into his own.

He takes a deep breath, before lifting the bucket over his head and dumping the rest squarely on top of himself.

He drops the bucket on the ground, shaking his head and wiping the paint dripping down his face. Maya grins eagerly, nodding in approval. “There. Now we’re ready to get somewhere.”

After school at Topanga’s, Farkle and Smackle take great interest in Zay’s quest to find himself.

“I find it honorable,” Smackle tells him as Farkle gets up to get her another coffee. “In some ways, I think knowing yourself and who you are on the inside is the most important trait to survival.”

“Really?” Zay asks, raising an eyebrow. “Not like, having scientific adaptability or something intellectual like that?”

“That would certainly be more logical,” she admits, before shrugging. “But I’ve been spending a lot of time with Riley.”

“Yeah, that sounds like something she would say.”

“I don’t know if you’re looking for help,” she says tentatively, locking her fingers together and placing them on her knees. “But I find your humor to be one of your greatest assets. It really adds definition to your overall first impression.”

“You think so? Doesn’t that just make me seem like the funny friend?”

She shrugs. “I don’t see how that’s a bad thing. It’s often rather desirable to be the comical one in any given situation. It makes you more likeable, and certainly more approachable. I’ve always admired your wit. Not everyone is lucky enough to have it.”

Farkle returns, settling into the loveseat next to Smackle and handing her the mug. She takes it appreciatively, snuggling into his side as he drapes his arm around her shoulders. “So you’re trying to figure out who you are?”
Zay makes a face, gesturing offhandedly. “That’s the gist.”

“Well, I think it could do you some good to investigate activities you like. I mean, so many of your extracurriculars are based around Lucas. I mean, environmental club, baseball…”

“Actually, I heard Lucas quit the baseball team.”

The words sound so impossible, Zay’s jaw drops open hearing them. Farkle looks equally stunned.

“What?”

“Yes. Riley told me the other day. He’s no longer on the team.”

Something about this is very, very wrong. Baseball is important to Lucas, there’s no way he’d just quit because he wasn’t feeling it anymore. And considering how last semester he ended up getting into a fight around the same time that Zay hit the deep end…

“Anyway, my point still stands,” Farkle says flatly, shaking Zay out of it. “You need to do some experimenting and find where your passions lie. Like, what happened to dance? When was the last time you took a class in ballet? Or tap? I could take a tap class with you, if you want.”

Zay gives him a look. “You’d do that for me?”

“I could make the sacrifice,” Farkle says humbly, bowing his head. Zay grins at him. “But you get what I’m saying. Don’t be afraid to reestablish hobbies that feel distinctly yours. You’re an adventurous guy, an explorer at heart. You’ll find something, I’m sure.”

“You think I’m an explorer?”

Farkle nods, smiling lightly. “It’s one of the things I admire most about you.”

This touches him. When Farkle Minkus is sincere, it’s a rare tender moment. “Thanks, Farkle.”

--

By the time summer rolls around, Zay is starting to feel a little better about his own self-perception. It’s not complete, he’s still got some exploring to do, but he feels a lot better than he did at the beginning of the year. He feels more like a unique person than a blank canvas. This time, the paint strokes are his own, although a few additions from his friends didn’t hurt anybody.

Maya helps him reinvigorate his love of dance, freestyling with him at the studio downtown. Farkle does end up taking a tap class with him. The more time he spends there, the more he starts to realize that dance is truly a core part of him. He even daydreams about going to school for dance, but that possibility seems so far off he doesn’t humor it too often.

Still, senior year is looming just ahead of them. He’s got to start thinking about these things. And the one person he wants to talk it through with is Lucas.

Weirdly, Lucas has been ghosting him since summer started. He won’t answer his texts, or return his calls, or even show up at Topanga’s. At first he figures Lucas finally got sick of his drama last year and decided to freeze him out, but it doesn’t take long to learn that he’s apparently not answering Maya either. Or Farkle. Or Smackle.

The only person who hasn’t commented on the situation is Riley.
Fed up, Maya convinces Zay to join her in a midnight siege of the bay window, intending to get Riley to tell them exactly why Lucas is being such a jackass (her words, not his). As they’re climbing up the fire escape, Zay lingers behind as Maya takes the path she practically knows like the back of her hand.

“You know, I still don’t think it’s very polite that y’all just break into her house like this,” he comments, watching as Maya kneels in front of the bay window.

“You get used to it,” she says offhandedly, reaching forward to tap at the window when she suddenly hesitates. She’s frozen, fingers centimeters from the window. It occurs to Zay that it’s been ages since Maya climbed in the bay window, a year at least. She’s probably terrified that Riley isn’t going to let her back in.

Nevertheless, in typical Maya fashion, she steels her nerves and goes through with it anyway. She taps lightly on the window, and Riley immediately gets up from her bed. It’s obvious she was expecting someone else—likely Lucas. It wouldn’t surprise Zay at all that even if Lucas was avoiding the rest of the world, he’d still sneak in to hang out with her. But there’s a weird twinkle in her eyes that he can’t pinpoint—the moment she recognizes who it is, the glimmer fades.

Riley wanders over to them and opens the window, stepping back to let them climb through. Maya clambers to her full height, crossing her arms as Zay joins her.

“Alright, Riles. We want answers.”

She gives them a confused look. “On what? Also, you’re aware it’s midnight, yes?”


Something about the way her face falls makes him incredibly uneasy. But it’s obvious she knows something they don’t.

“Well? What you got, Peaches? Is he that upset with us that he’s just not answering our texts? That seems rather petty for Huckleberry, don’t you think? What’s the story?”

Riley’s mouth is hanging half-open, an explanation lost in the back of her throat. Her expression hasn’t brightened, only affirming the feeling of unsettlement taking root in his chest. Riley’s always been expressive, and in moments like this it gives her away. She can’t be subtle.

Maya’s caught on too, because her teasing demeanor is long gone. She stares Riley down. “Riley. Where is he?”

There’s a moment of silence. Riley gulps.

“He went back to Texas.”

It feels like the floor drops out from under him. Zay physically stops breathing. He can’t have heard her right. He can’t even speak.

“What?” Maya whispers for the both of them, shock prevalent on her face. Zay’s surprised to find his hands shaking. He stuffs them in his pockets. “You can’t be serious.”

“He went back to Texas. He hasn’t answered me since he told me.” That glossy look is in Riley’s eyes again. She swallows hard. “He’s with Pappy Joe and he’s alright, but that’s all I know. When you knocked at the window, I thought maybe—,”
“How do you know he’s alright?” Maya huffs, attempting to shield her panic with anger. As Zay knows, when she feels cornered she lashes out. And he retreats, stumbling over to the bay window and landing on the cushions. He feels numb. “He’s obviously not alright if he got up and left. Why did he?”

“I don’t know,” Riley says defensively, clearly distraught at her lack of information. Considering how he feels at this news, he can only imagine how she must be feeling. Riley and Maya continue to argue as Zay pulls out his phone, pulling open his text message thread with Lucas. The last time he replied was almost a week ago, and only two words long.

Lucas: All good.

Obviously, that was a lie.

“Is he coming back?” Zay finally manages to croak out, locking eyes with Riley. Maya looks back and forth between the two of them.

He can see the hurt in her eyes. He figures he probably looks the same. “I don’t know.”

“This is bullshit,” Maya stammers, pulling out her phone and climbing back out the window. “I’m calling him. I’m calling him and he’s going to explain this. Don’t try and argue with me.”

She disappears. Neither Zay nor Riley moves to stop her.

“What’s wrong with him?” Zay asks, not sure he wants to know the answer.

Riley wanders over to him, settling down stiffly in the window next to him. She shrugs, chewing her lip and staring at the floor. “I don’t know. He just… he had a really bad year.”

The only feeling Zay recognizes churning through him at that point is guilt. Guilt, eating him from the inside out. He spent so much of the year attempting to distance himself from being simply Lucas Friar’s friend that he actually shut him out. He literally pushed Lucas out of his life. And apparently, he had the worst year of his life while Zay just stood around drinking and did nothing to help.

“I always thought the best thing about me, the one thing I knew about myself, was that I was a good friend,” he murmurs, shaking his head in disbelief. “Can’t believe how wrong that was.”

“What are you talking about?” Riley questions, frowning at him. “You can’t blame yourself for this. You didn’t know. It’s something he’s dealing with—,”

“Am I supposed to believe you’re not blaming yourself, too?” Zay challenges her.

She doesn’t argue. She can’t. She knows he’s right.

“That’s his favorite thing about you,” she says after a long silence. “How loyal you are.”

“And yet, here I am, sitting in your window without him.”

Silence. She doesn’t have anything left to say. The two of them sit there, stewing in their own feelings of guilt and listening to Maya angrily attempt to reach Lucas from the fire escape.

It’s about three weeks of radio silence until Lucas reappears.
Zay’s just coming back from practice, dropping his bag on the floor of his room and changing out of his dance attire when his mom calls him from the living room. She warns him she’s sending someone back to see him, and he just pulls his t-shirt on over his head when Lucas emerges in the doorway.

For a moment, time feels frozen. It’s such a shock to see him, Zay finds himself relieved that he looks the same. He’s hovering just outside the room, looking guilty and uncertain and wearing those goddamn sad cow eyes.

Zay moves forward and barrels him with a hug, feeling the weight of the world lift off his shoulders when Lucas hugs him back.

It’s surprisingly easy to talk to him again, even with everything that’s happened. Zay catches him up on the tidal wave that was junior year, and explains all the shenanigans that lead to him sort of freezing him out. Lucas mentions his own experiences but doesn’t go into much detail, but Zay doesn’t care so much. He knows he’ll tell him when he’s ready. Right now, he’s just glad he’s back in New York and not two thousand miles away.

“So, you’ve found yourself,” Lucas says interestedly, raising his eyebrows. “Who are you?”

It’s weird, to be faced with the question so blatantly. He taps his fingers together, thinking it through. “I’m still figuring it out. Think I always will be. But, for starters, I’m the cute friend.”

“Of course.”

“I’m funny, which apparently is a pretty good asset. I’m an artist. I’m an explorer. And I’m pretty loyal, or so I’ve been told. And it’s okay for me to still be figuring it all out.”

Lucas nods. “Well, I could’ve told you all that. We could’ve skipped this whole year of bullshit if you’d just asked me.”

Zay cracks up, earning a grin from Lucas.

He’s witty, and funny, and loyal. He’s an explorer. He’s a dancer. He’s an artist. But he’s also Lucas Friar’s best friend, and he’s realizing they don’t have to be mutually exclusive.

All things considered, he thinks being Lucas Friar’s best friend is his favorite thing about himself.

-S E N I O R  Y E A R -

Senior year is the year Zay Babineaux learns about pride.

He’s always been a fan of himself to some degree—hating yourself seems like it would take a lot of energy, and he doesn’t see what’s wrong with liking yourself as long as you acknowledge and work on the things that aren’t so likeable. As they learned when Farkle had to confront his fatal flaw in sophomore year (being so goddamn stubborn it’s deadly, as Zay likes to describe it), pride can be dangerous, but it’s healthy in moderation. Having figured himself last year, he’s even more confident in how he views himself.

Still, he’s constantly discovering new things about himself, and senior year does not disappoint.

He’s not exactly sure when he started to realize that the way he was paying attention to guys in their grade was starting to match how he’d look at girls. It didn’t feel like a shocking realization, but he definitely noticed that he was just as intrigued by the attractive guys on the soccer team as the pretty girls on dance team.
Except Brett Ryan. He still doesn’t trust Brett Ryan.

The more time he spends thinking about it, the more he starts to identify moments from his adolescence where this behavior seemed to match up. Like when Dylan joked they should go to the after school dance together in seventh grade since they probably wouldn’t get dates otherwise, and it didn’t seem so weird. Or when he was equally excited to see Vanessa and her new, cute friend Jake when he went to visit Texas before the school year started. When he and Maya would hang out in Central Park and point out cute guys and girls, he was never inclined to shy away from admitting how good-looking one of Maya’s male finds was.

The second he starts to question his attraction, he does a little digging.

“So, Charlie Gardner,” he says one day at lunch, launching into the conversation as subtly as he can manage—which is to say, not subtly at all. “He’s gay, right?”

“Actually, he’s bi,” Riley corrects him, a smile growing across her face. “He and his boyfriend are so cute. Did you see that picture they posted from homecoming?”

“Bi. Like bisexual. Like, liking both genders, right?”

Maya makes a face, stabbing her French fries with her fork. “Come on, though. Aren’t we all a little bisexual? Isn’t everyone?”

Farkle gives her a look. “No, Maya. That’s not how sexuality works.”

“Why do you ask?” Lucas wonders, giving him a curious look.

“Oh, no reason, no reason.” Zay covers, waving him off and shrugging. “Just wondering. Like to keep myself up-to-date, you know.”

“Come on, Farkle. You can’t tell me you’ve never once looked at your good buddy Lucas and maybe wondered if you’d like to kiss him. Like, just once. A moment of curiosity.” Maya points her fork in Lucas’s direction. He grins at Farkle.

The look on Farkle’s face is a mixture of puzzlement and terror. “No, I haven’t!”

“Denial,” Maya mutters, popping the French fry in her mouth.

Zay plays it cool for the rest of the day, and thinks on it idly up until the moment he’s able to catch up to Charlie outside of his English class later that week. He swoops up beside him and pats him on the back, giving Yogi and Darby a nod of greeting.

“Charlie! Just the person I wanted to see. Friends, if you’ll allow me to borrow him for one second.”

“Hi, Zay. Darby and I are really excited to see you perform at the football game tonight.”

“Well, thanks, Yogi,” Zay says, flashing his showman grin. “Me and my ladies on the dance team sure do appreciate your support. If you want, I can get you an autograph. You got something to sign?”

Darby giggles affectionately, waving Zay off. “Don’t let your ego get too big.”

“Never! Now, if you’ll excuse us for a moment.”

Charlie looks confused as Zay wheels him away and walks him down the hall. After looking
around them dramatically, he points to himself, raising his eyebrows at Zay with a smile. “You want to talk to me? Cheese soufflé? You sure about that?”

“Oh, please, Maya’s the one with beef,” he replies, brushing off the jab. “You and me, we’re friends. You know, distantly.”

“Oh, right. How could I forget?”

“Listen.” He stops in the corner by the stairwell, glancing around to make sure no one else is listening. Most of the people rushing by don’t pay them any attention. “You have a boyfriend, yeah? The one guy from government class. Stan?”


“That’s cool, that’s cool. I was just… wondering, you know,” he stammers, gripping the straps of his backpack. “Well, how did you know? That you were like, bi?”

Charlie gives him a strange look, obviously guarded. But after examining him for a couple moments, his expression softens. “Do you think you might be bi?”

“I’m not saying anything. I just asked a question.”

“I’m not sure I’m a lot of help,” Charlie says with a sympathetic smile, putting his hands in his pockets. “I know some people say they’ve known their whole lives, but it wasn’t really like that for me. It took time to figure it out. And I don’t think there was a real moment. So I’m not sure how to explain it, which renders me pretty unhelpful.”

“Yeah, thanks Gardner. You’re useless.”

Charlie laughs. The warning bell rings, and he pats Zay on the shoulder in a supportive way. “Good luck, man. I’m sure you’ll figure it out.”

“Gee, thanks.” Charlie starts to walk away. “Tell Dan I say hello!”

He turns around to face him, walking backwards. “You’ve never even spoken to him.”

“We’re friends. You know, distantly.”

Charlie rolls his eyes and heads back towards his class, leaving Zay in the stairwell alone. After a hell year spent learning about himself, he’s disappointed to feel like he’s barely even scratched the surface.

--

By the time Zay is going to auditions for dance school, he’s pretty sure he’s one hundred percent bisexual.

He’s spent months thinking about it, and these admission events only further his belief considering he’s distracted all the time. The problem with dance academy is that everyone is healthy and fit and good-looking, and that’s like torture. There’s nowhere safe to look. All the boys, all the girls—everyone is pretty.

Despite a brief period of stress where he tries to hide it from his friends, he’s relieved when they’re all highly accepting of this new identifier he’s putting on himself. In fact, most of them don’t seem all that surprised.
Maya throws an arm around his shoulders, tilting his head against hers. “Welcome to the club, Zayby! You and me, artists and bisexuals in residence.”

He knows he’s lucky, because not only are his New York friends more than tolerant of his newfound sexuality, his Texas friends aren’t fazed either. Asher claims he’s known it since they were kids, as he’s a fellow gay and could sense it. Vanessa points out that she still owned his ass for like two years, so she’s not losing anything. Dylan is surprised, but proud of Zay for feeling like he could tell them.

Zay’s pretty proud of himself too.

“It’s just so weird, though,” he says to Riley as they’re studying in Topanga’s one day. Farkle and Smackle are off at a debate tournament in Washington D.C., and Lucas is out of town visiting UC Davis. Maya’s working on her portfolio, holed away for hours at a time.

“Like, all the sudden I’m realizing all these things I used to do that maybe hinted at it sooner. Like…” he hesitates, eyeing Riley’s intrigued gaze. “This is going to sound weird, but I think I may have liked Lucas when we were in elementary school.”

“Well, I didn’t know you all then, but I’m pretty confident in saying I’m sure I’d relate,” she says with a giggle.

“I mean, we’ve always been best friends, you know. And I don’t feel this way now, but I can remember being kind of like obsessed with him in sixth grade. Ironically, when things started to go bad for him. But he’d do all these stupid cool things and I’d always encourage them because he fascinated me. I’d always be fighting for his attention. Like, it never would’ve occurred to me at the time, but looking back on it, I don’t know.”

Riley nods in understanding. “I get what you mean. I think Maya went through a similar thing with me. I sort of did too, I think, when we were younger.”

“Wait a minute,” Zay says, holding up a hand to stop her. “Riley, are you bisexual too?”

She shrugs, neutral. “I don’t know. I don’t really know what I am. Doesn’t really matter, considering I love Lucas and don’t see that changing any time soon. But I also kind of like not knowing. Not putting a label on it, you know?”

Zay hums interestingly, leaning back in his chair. “Maybe Maya’s right. Maybe we are all a little bisexual.”

As the school year comes to a close and college acceptances come in, Zay’s amazed to discover he’s been accepted into every dance program he applied to. All of his friends are thrilled, but no one is prouder of him than Lucas. As Zay’s learning, pride can be dangerous, but it can also be good. And having his best friend be so proud of him is really, really good.

Even though it’s scary and seems totally crazy, he ends up choosing to major in dance. He’s got talent, at least his schools seem to think so, and he wants to work on being a little more proud of that part of him as well as everything else.

Graduation comes and goes, and as Maya plots their summer road trip with his assistance he reminds himself that none of this is goodbye forever. Sure, they’re all going on their separate paths, but they did the same thing in junior year and still survived. He managed a whole year without his best friend back in seventh grade. He convinces himself they’re all going to be just fine, because he
doesn’t want to consider the alternative.

His mom helps him tape up one last box, before both of them glance around at his now emptier bedroom. She sighs. “Feels like just yesterday we were unpacking all this crap and you were starting eighth grade. Now we’re sending you off.”

“Mom, what are you talking about? That was yesterday. I start eighth grade tomorrow. Why’d you repack this box?”

She chuckles and swats at him playfully, hefting the box into her arms and headings towards the hall. “So you’re leaving tomorrow?”

“Yeah. I’ll say goodbye to y’all in the morning. Is Jada gonna be able to meet us there?”

“Mhm. She just called a couple hours ago and said she’d be able to get some time off work and come help you move in. It’s amazing, you can get your sister to take the time to call just by moving out, and yet when I just want to chat she’s suddenly so busy.”

“Hey, she’s a working woman now. Cut her a break.”

Donna rolls her eyes, wandering over to her son and pressing a kiss to his forehead. “Stop growing up! Both of you. See you in the morning.”

Zay nods and collapses onto his bed, reaching over and turning off the light. He stares at the suitcase and backpack waiting by the window, trying to process the fact that in less than twenty-four hours, he’ll be heading off towards the future. He can’t believe the future is now.

His phone buzzing rouses him awake just as he’s dozing off. He curses lightly, seeing Farkle Minkus light up on his caller ID. He swipes to accept the call, immediately launching into a slew of curse words the moment Farkle says hello.

“Yikes. Someone isn’t a night owl, evidently.”

“Farkle, it’s almost midnight. Why are you calling me? Unless you’re dying, this better be good.”

“Get your stuff ready. We’re coming to get you.”

Zay sits up, ruffling his hair. “Huh?”

He hears the phone shift, passing from one set of hands to another. Maya’s voice comes through the phone towards him next, awake and lively as ever. “We’ll be there in five. The journey starts tonight. Be ready.”

The line goes dead. Zay stares at his phone for a couple of seconds, before leaping out of bed and getting presentable as quickly as he can.

He grabs his things and throws his duffle bag over his shoulder, stumbling towards the door without glancing back at his room. He keeps this mindset all the way up to the front door, only hesitating when his hand is hovering over the doorknob.

He glances over his shoulder at the apartment he’s called home for the past five years. He’s not worried about his parents—he knows they’ll be peeved, but they’ll forgive him. And while it feels weird to be moving off in a completely new direction, he’s not so scared. He’s done it before. He knows that before he drops dead, he’ll probably do it again.
His phone buzzes. A text from Maya.

_Blonde Beauty:_ Here.

He’s going to keep moving forward towards the new thing. But he’ll have these guys to help him get there.

Holding his duffle tightly on his shoulder, he pulls open the door and steps into the summer air, shutting the door without looking back.
In Zay’s absence, that empty feeling takes up an even greater mass in the van.

They’re starting to feel it. Riley can tell. Usually the driving is filled with some semblance of conversation between the group of them, but since they left the North Carolina School for the Arts, it’s been absolutely silent. Farkle turns on his music and stares straight ahead as he heads towards the highway. Lucas sits in the passenger seat and stares out the window, pressing his thumbs together restlessly.

Maya puts her headphones in and curls up on the seat behind the driver, pulling out her sketchbook and attempting to continue work on her latest project. The antsy feeling permeating the atmosphere between them combined with the jittering of the road beneath them is making it difficult for her. Her brow is furrowed, and she spends more time erasing and scowling than actually making substantial progress.

Riley’s phone buzzes in her pocket, calling her attention.

Mommy Matthews: How is it going? Zay get to school okay?

She puts in the effort to reply and confirm that Zay is all settled and off to be an amazing dancer. That’s what she has to keep telling herself, each time they get further into the country and another person leaves the van. Her friends are going off to better things—they’re off to become the people they’re meant to be.

It’s not a goodbye, it’s a for now. She has to keep reminding herself of that.

The drive is a lot less bearable in the silence. An hour passes before someone finally speaks, Farkle glancing to his right and lightly smacking Lucas on the arm.

“Hey, can you get the map?”

“Both hands on the wheel, Farkle,” Lucas nags, sitting forward to open the glove compartment.

Farkle doesn’t miss a beat with his eye roll. “Just check and make sure we’re on the right interstate. We should be heading towards Louisville, but we’re not going to go through it. Can you check that for me?”

Lucas squints at the map, lifting his gaze to watch the road signs and compare them. Farkle taps his
fingers impatiently on the steering wheel, obsessively torn between checking the map and watching the road in front of him. “Any day now, face.”

“I’m looking! It looks right to me.” Lucas folds up the map as Farkle relaxes. He hesitates as he slides it back into the compartment, listening curiously. “Do you hear that?”

“What?”

“That.” Lucas tilts his head to indicate the sound, blinking as he concentrates. Farkle gives him an irritated look, clearly not hearing whatever he’s supposed to be. “It’s sound like clicking. Or something. Whirring, maybe.”

“Just because you say a bunch of synonyms doesn’t mean I’m suddenly going to hear it. I don’t hear anything.” Lucas opens his mouth to argue but Farkle clears his throat, lifting his index finger to pause him. “Lucas, who took auto tech all four years of high school?”

“Um, not you.”

“Exactly. Because I didn’t have to. I know about cars, alright? As much as I need to know, at least. There’s nothing wrong with Cory. If there was, I’d hear it and I’d know.” He gives Lucas a condescending smile before training his eyes back on the road. “Don’t overwork yourself. Focus on being pretty, you’re good at that.”

Lucas leans back in the passenger seat, crossing his arms. “Okay.”

Riley considers stepping into the conversation, not liking the tone passing between the two of them, but Maya beats her to it. She pulls her headphones out of her ears, lightly kicking the armrest of Lucas’s seat. “Hey, losers. I’m starving. What’s a girl got to do to eat around here?”

Farkle glances at her through the rear view mirror. “Maya, we have serious ground to cover before we get close to Missouri. You can’t already be expecting us to stop.”

“Can’t hear you over the growling of my stomach,” she says weakly, dropping her head back against the head rest and sighing. Riley is somewhat amazed her best friend never got into theater in high school—she’s certainly dramatic enough. “Slowly… losing… will to live. Might have to… eat a Huckleberry… if things get desperate.”

Lucas tosses Farkle a look of disdain. He waves all of them off, searching for the nearest exit. “Alright, alright.”

They spend some time perusing the food options as they drive along the road. Riley is charmed by the small town feel of this nowhere land in the middle of Virginia, and ultimately suggests that they stop in one of the independent diners sprinkled on the side of the road. Considering how hungry she is for a real meal, Maya backs the idea and the group of them pull up to Emma’s Diner.

A nice waitress named Starr seats them and takes their order, before leaving them alone. Lucas pulls out the map and notebook, jotting down notes about their current status and how well they’re doing on time. Farkle smirks as he unwraps a straw, taking a sip of his water. “Someone named Starr. I feel like by the time we finish this trip, I’ll have seen everything.”

“Farkle, it’s the South,” Riley says matter-of-factly. “You met Lucas’s neighbor named Cletus and Starr has you amused?”

“Oh, sweetie,” Maya chimes in, pouting at Farkle across the table from her. “How are you gonna survive in Missouri for four years?”
Farkle smiles proudly, tilting his chin upwards and pushing his straw through the ice floating in the top of his glass. “I’m a New York intellectual, Maya. That’s who I am, and the other students can either take it or leave it. You can’t just go somewhere and be someone completely new to fit in. Where’s the integrity in that?”

Lucas lifts his head from the notebook, tapping the pen against his lip thoughtfully and smirking. “Huh. It’s almost as if Maya shouldn’t have told me to stop wearing my belt buckles when I moved to New York back in seventh grade.”

“Oh no, no,” she says defensively, wagging her finger at him. “I was doing you a favor, Ranger Rick. I saved your pathetic seventh grader life with that advice. Even that pretty face wouldn’t have saved you from that humiliation.”

The conversation stalls as Starr returns with their food, Maya’s eyes widening in delight. Riley cuts the burger she ordered in half, giving one half to Lucas and taking a half of his chicken club in return. She catches Farkle watching them out of the corner of his eye. She wonders if maybe he’s remembering how he and Smackle used to share their meals during the school day. It’s hard not to find herself remembering little details like that about both Zay and Smackle the longer they’re gone.

As they eat, the tension in the air between them alleviates somewhat. It’s a welcome change, Riley smiling a little wider as her best friends goof off and gorge on diner food. An Elvis Presley song comes on the jukebox and Lucas and Maya both sing along, the former making a point of nudging Farkle into bouncing along to the rhythm and embarrassing him by singing extra dramatically.

Riley cracks up, both at Lucas’s performance and Farkle’s reactions. Maya laughs as well, leaning into Riley and resting her head against her shoulder affectionately.

This. This is what they’re supposed to feel like. Emptiness has no place within these people who she cherishes so much.

“Okay,” Lucas says, taking a pause to chew a French fry. He slides the map to the center of the table, pointing the pen at a point in the middle of the pan handle of Virginia. “We’re here, heading up through West Virginia. We’re going to be stopping just outside Missouri, but there’s still a lot to cover today. We’ll want to get out of here within the next thirty minutes if we don’t want to take up too much of our buffer window.”

Riley reaches for another French fry from their shared plate, her hand brushing Lucas’s as he goes to grab one as well. He takes her hand without even looking up from the map, twisting their fingers together. Suddenly, she doesn’t care so much about the potatoes anymore.

“Right. I can get us to Kentucky easy,” Farkle says. “Then Maya said she’d take over.”

She nods in agreement. “That I did. But first, I’m finishing this burger.”

Lucas glances out the window, leaning around Farkle to get a better look. “There’s a car shop across the sheet. Maybe we should stop in, just to get a general checkup. They can check out and make sure the tires are inflated, we’re running smooth. They can check that weird rattling—,”

“The weird rattling that no one else hears?” Farkle snaps, sending Lucas a warning look. “I thought I told you to trust me on this. Why don’t you trust me on this?”

“I’m not saying I don’t,” Lucas says patiently, trying very hard to keep his cool. Riley can tell by how his hold on her fingers stiffens slightly. “But it’s right there. Wouldn’t it be smart to just get
“How about you let me handle the smarts, alright?”

Lucas clenches his jaw, turning away from him and poking at the French fries with his fork.

“Okay.”

Riley doesn’t understand how this icky feeling keeps coming back into their little bubble. Everything was fine. These are her favorite people in the world, who all love and care about each other as much as she does each of them. She doesn’t know why there’s a weird sense of tension. She doesn’t know why Farkle is so irritable when he’s been fine up until now. She doesn’t understand why they’re all the sudden butting heads.

She doesn’t understand it, and she definitely doesn’t like it.

Starr comes around and gives them the check, instructing them to take it up to the counter when they’re all set to go. Lucas chats with her for a couple minutes while Maya and Farkle agree where to split driving for the day on the map. He and Riley learn all about her history as a wannabe actress, how she did a stint on Broadway in the eighties but ended up coming home to Virginia as she missed the small town feeling and hospitality. It’s a fascinating story, and Riley loves getting a tiny insight into the complex life of a complete stranger. It’s one of her favorite things.

Another one of her favorite things is how charming and friendly Lucas is. She watches contently as he converses with Starr, turning on the Southern hospitality that’s a natural part of his charisma and mirrors their waitress to a tee. He looks genuinely interested as she explains her Broadway turn, all smiles and bright eyes. She can’t believe she’s lucky enough to get to interact with those bright eyes every day.

While Farkle and Maya take the check to the counter, Riley leads Lucas over to look at the jukebox set up by the entrance. They poke at it for a couple moments before a new song starts, an upbeat early rock hit from the late 50s she doesn’t know by name but vaguely recognizes. Regardless, it gets her tapping her feet the minute it starts, filling her with renewed energy.

Lucas smirks at her, encouraging her to dance a little bit in her own little circle. She takes his hand, swinging their arms to the beat and bouncing on the balls of her feet.

“Oh, no,” he says teasingly, still grinning.

“Oh, yes,” she giggles, grabbing his other hand and pulling him into dancing with her, swiveling on her toes. “Come on, cowboy.”

He obliges, and she’s fully aware of the fact that the only reason he’s indulging is because it’s her. She takes full advantage of this privilege, really attempting to get him into the song and get him back to the goofy, happy attitude he had at the table with Elvis earlier. They keep one hand together at all times, and she laughs when he twirls her under his arm.

He pulls her to him and they sway together in a bouncy, swing sort of way. Riley hides her head in his shoulder, glancing at the other patrons in the diner. An elderly couple is enjoying a late breakfast, the wife smiling warmly at the two of them dancing together. Starr and another waitress are watching them from behind the counter, amused grins on their faces.

The song comes to an end and Riley steps back from him, feeling warm inside when he places an affectionate kiss on her cheek.

A few of the diner patrons applaud them. Starr calls to the two of them, giving them a thumbs-up.
“You two wanna hang around and do that forever? You may get some tips out of it.”

“Unfortunately,” Maya answers for them, wandering over and wrapping an arm around Riley’s shoulders. “They’ve got schools to get to. As do we all. So, this show’s coming to an end.” She salutes Starr. “Farewell!”

Starr salutes back, beaming at Maya’s spunk. “Safe travels!”

They load back into the van, same positions as when they stopped. Riley stares out the window as they pull back onto the road, trying the commit the details of this tiny nowhere town to memory. Just for a moment, they existed in this galaxy, and now they’re just a piece of its history. Travelers passing through. But she doesn’t ever want to forget it.

--

It’s peaceful for a couple more hours as they make their way through West Virginia. Maya had complained that Virginia had nothing to look at, but West Virginia is infinitely more barren. The prickliness seeps back into the air between them all. The car feels too cramped. The world outside is too empty.

The noise of the engine is off as well.

When they pass a sign for Huntington, Lexington, and Louisville, now well into Kentucky, Riley hears the rattling. Maybe it was subtle when Lucas pointed it out earlier, but it’s impossible to miss now. She glances nervously at the front of the car before nudging Maya, urging her to take out her headphones.

“What?”

“Do you hear that?”

Before Maya has a chance to respond, Lucas clears his throat front the passenger seat. He taps his fingers against his knee indignantly, staring out the front window. “I do, Riley. I did hours ago.”

Farkle’s grip on the steering wheel is tight. He rolls his neck, trying to get the tension out of his posture. “I told you. It’s fine. The car is running fine, isn’t it?”

Maya, now aware of more than her sketchbook and headphones, furrows her brow with a frown. “That doesn’t sound good. What is that?”

“We should have checked it out,” Lucas mutters.

Farkle slams his hands against the steering wheel, evidently frustrated with the lack of faith in him. “I told you it was fine! The car is driving fine!”

And just like that, it’s not.

Van Cory lurches suddenly, stalling. Farkle’s expression changes in an instant, going from angry to scared as he attempts to keep control of the car. Lucas immediately instructs him to pull over, to which he snaps back that he knows what he’s doing as he eases the car towards the shoulder. There’s another frightening lurch and Maya reaches out to take Riley’s hand, eyes wide with terror.

The car crawls to the edge of the road, Farkle shuttering off the engine just as smoke starts pouring out from under the hood. Riley shrieks in spite of herself, unbuckling as quickly as she can. The others follow suit, abandoning the car in record time.
“Is that smoke?” Maya croaks, shocked.

“Please tell me it’s not going to blow up,” Riley whimpers, backing away from it and wringing her hands together nervously.

Farkle and Maya come darting around from the other side of the car, away from the oncoming traffic. Fortunately, they’re one of the only ones on the road. Unfortunately, they’re one of the only ones on the road and if they explode, Riley doesn’t think anyone will be around to scrape them off the asphalt.

Lucas moves tentatively towards the hood of the car, but she wishes he wouldn’t. She doesn’t want any of them blown sky high, but imagining him being the first to go feels like the worst case scenario. She has to hold back the instinct to ask him to kiss her goodbye.

He pops the hood, ducking out of the way as steam pours out from the engine. He waves it out of the way as Farkle jogs to join him, Maya and Riley taking the hint and assuming it’s safe to approach.

“Not smoke,” Lucas explains, propping the hood open with the stand and stepping back a bit to let it air out. “Steam. I think the engine overheated. There must be a leak, if not more than one. Do we have extra coolant? There should be some in the back with the emergency supplies.”

Maya disappears to go check. Riley comes up behind him apprehensively, resting her chin lightly on his upper arm as he leans forward to inspect the damage with the flashlight on his phone. “It’s not going to blow up?”

“I don’t think so,” he says with a sigh, standing up straight again. “But it’s not good. I can try to fix it, but I don’t know if I can. We should’ve gotten it fixed way earlier.”

Farkle huffs, getting their attention. He crosses his arms. “No need to throw shade, Lucas.”

“I’m not. I’m just saying if we had gotten it checked like I said—,”

Maya returns with the tool kit, holding it out for one of them to take. When no one immediately steps forward, she rolls her eyes and drops it on the ground, surprising both of them.

“Really, Maya?”

“Well, someone had to take it. Guess the gravel wants it now.”

Riley drops to her knees, collecting the tools that spilled out of the box. She passes the flashlight to Lucas, who pockets his phone and takes it gratefully, disappearing back under the hood. Farkle observes over his shoulder.

“Hold it higher, you’re not going to be able to see anything like that.”

Lucas tightens his grip on the flashlight, hesitating before allowing himself to speak. “You know, Farkle, I think you’ve offered enough help on the subject of automobiles. I think you can sit this one out.”

Maya helps Riley back to her feet, dusting her off. Glancing around them, it really spooks Riley how deserted she feels. The side of the road is just dust, dirt, and a whole lot of nothing for miles. She doesn’t want to check her phone and see how service is—she’s not sure she’s ready to confront the possibilities of how dangerous this actually is.
Farkle makes an annoyed noise in the back of his throat, clenching his fists. “Fine. I’m just trying to help. But if you have to have something to lord over me, then that’s whatever I guess. If that makes you feel better.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Nothing, forget it.” He stuffs his hands in his pockets, biting his lip. “Whatever, freak face.”

Riley’s startled when Lucas emerges quickly from the hood, facing Farkle with a frustrated gleam in his eyes. His entire expression screams exhausted—she’s seen that expression before. She hates when that expression is on Lucas’s face.

“Is that what you think, Farkle? Honestly.”

Farkle looks taken aback. “What?”

“Is that all you see me as?” He holds out his arms, dropping them at his sides indignant. “Am I really just a face?”

Farkle hesitates, sputtering to find words. “That’s not what we’re talking about right now. We’re trying to fix the car.”

“Well, now we’re talking about it.” Lucas raises his eyebrows. “So?”

The tension has reached a boiling point, and Riley has no idea what to do or how to stop it. She stands there frozen with Maya, looking back and forth between the two boys. Steam is still wafting from the engine, although in much smaller bouts than before. The engine may be cooling down, but things outside the hood don’t seem to be getting much better.

Farkle coughs, gesturing noncommittally in front of him. “Look, I don’t know why you’re making a big deal out of this. You came for me, I come for you. I’ve always called you this, I don’t see how it’s a big deal.”

“Yeah, exactly. You’ve always called me this. And when did I come for you?”

“Intellect is my thing!” Farkle snaps, obviously getting defensive. “So, I didn’t realize the car was a bigger problem than I thought. Whatever! You don’t have to act like that changes everything.”

“I’m not doing anything like that!”

Maya is less than helpful, staring at Lucas and Farkle arguing with a dumbstruck look on her face. Riley hates the route this conversation is taking. She debates saying something, but Farkle bulldozes over the pause in the conversation, growing more heated the longer they stand in the sun and fight about this.

“Genius is my thing, so what if I don’t want you to intrude on that?” he states, his voice rising with each word. Lucas opens his mouth to retort but Farkle isn’t finished. “I’m sorry that you’re perfect and attractive and smart, but you can’t have it all, okay? I’m the genius. You can’t just take that out on me! It’s not my fault the car broke down! It’s not my fault you can’t be the best at everything!”

“That really what you think of me? You think I care about that?”

“It’s not my fault you didn’t get into UC Davis!”

Riley’s jaw drops open, horrified. The shouting stops instantly, vicious silence settling between the
four of them. Farkle realizes what he’s said a second too late, looking for a split second like he wants to swallow his own words but straightening up instead. Falling back on pride, like he always does.

Lucas stares at Farkle for a long moment, thunderstruck. Slowly, he presses his lips together into a thin line and gulps, turning away from him. Absorbing the hit. He clenches his jaw, resting his fingers anxiously against the rim of the hood. No one moves.

In an instant, Lucas knocks the stand down and slams the hood shut. All of them jump, especially Farkle. Maya is staring at them, her mouth parted open uncertainly.

Lucas focuses on Farkle, his eyes flashing dangerously. Riley knows he would never, ever hurt any of them—she knows this better than she knows anything else. But she doesn’t blame Farkle for the uneasy expression on his face.

“You the genius?” Lucas asks through grit teeth, keeping his hands firmly at his sides. Riley can see his fingers fidgeting just slightly. “You fix the car.”

With that, Lucas whips around and storms away from them, walking off the road and towards the endless horizon all around them.

“Lucas,” Maya calls after him shakily, still frozen in place. Riley starts after him but then thinks better of it. Considering the circumstances, she figures he probably needs to be alone. But she doesn’t want him to go too far though, in the summer heat in the middle of nowhere.

Maya turns on Farkle, narrowing her eyes at him. “What the hell, Farkle?”

“Oh, don’t come for me, Maya,” he hisses, matching her angry squint.

“Lucas told you we should get the car checked. And then you go off on him? I thought you got your lesson on not being an arrogant ass sophomore year. I thought we were through with that whole routine. But I guess not.”

Farkle shrugs dismissively, settling into full-on defensive mode. “Sure. Fine. I’m a jackass. I’m a prick. I’m the sexist pig. That’s me! Go ahead, call me names.”

Riley can feel the tears pricking the corners of her eyes. “Guys, stop,” she pleads.

“Just stay out of this, Riley,” Maya advises.

“No, I’m not going to just stay out of it,” Riley barks, spurred by the negative energy that has sparked between all of them. She feels a couple of tears slip down her cheeks, wiping them furiously. “I’m not twelve anymore. You can’t just Riley Committee me all the time. Especially not when you guys are turning on each other.”

“Well, why do you think we do?” Farkle says exasperatedly, pointing at her. “Look at you!”

Maya steps in front of her, shaking her head warningly. “Nuh uh. You can snap at Huckleberry, but you aren’t going off on her. You want to knock someone down a peg, you take it out on me.”

“Fine. You want me to knock you down a peg?”

“I’d like to see you try,” Maya provokes, raising an eyebrow critically.

Riley hates how easily she cries. She wipes her cheeks again, glancing over her shoulder to make
sure Lucas is still in view. She doesn’t want to lose him. “Guys, please.”

“Fine. I don’t know what the hell has been going on with you, but you can’t change your whole persona and make yourself over just because you’re jumping coasts. You can’t run from the people in your past. Josh isn’t going to just forget about you and let you treat him like dirt because you want to be adventurous. You can’t just cut your hair and decide you’re a changed woman. That’s not how it works. That doesn’t make you cool or edgy—it just makes you confused and scared. And frankly, Maya, it’s not a good look.”

Maya just stares at him, her eyes glossing over with tears. But unlike Riley, she’s much more adept at keeping them reeled in. Instead, she spits in Farkle’s direction, darkening the dirt at his feet.

“Go to hell, Farkle,” she mutters, walking away from him.

He raises his arms out in surrender, scowling. “I’m already there!”

Riley steps forward, forcing herself to be more assertive as her best friend leaves her behind. “Why are you being like this?” she asks Farkle as he leans against the hood of the car, screwing his eyes shut and taking a deep breath. “Why are you saying all that?”

“Do you remember what you said to me in ninth grade, Riley?” He swivels to face her, giving her a full dose of his intense squint. She almost looks away, but she holds her ground. “Do you?”

She shrugs uncertainly. “Lots of things.”

“We don’t leave. That’s what you said to me on the first day of ninth grade. We don’t leave.” His voice cracks. “What the hell do you think we’re doing now?”

Straightaway, Riley gets it. She sees through the defenses and realizes exactly why Farkle is lashing out at them like this, why the tension has increased between all of them, why all of these feelings are coming out at once. She tilts her head at him, looking past the harsh scowl and seeing what’s really resting at the center of his actions.

At his core, Farkle Minkus is hurt.

Before she can say anything, he completes the pattern and walks away from her, heading in the opposite direction of Maya and stamping along the side of the road. She watches him march off, feeling all of them drift further and further away from one another. Farkle to her left, Maya to her right, Lucas behind her. Three points of an ever-growing triangle.

She’s never liked triangles.

Nervously, she pulls out her phone, relieved to discover there’s still service. Ducking into the passenger side of the car, she searches the glove compartment for the triple A card, dialing the number as soon as she finds it.

“Yes, hi,” she says with an exhale. “I’d like to request a towing service and pick up. We’re stuck with a bad engine.”

She gives all the information she has to the kind woman on the other end of the line. She assures her they’ll be out there within the hour, and will get them to a station in Lexington where the car can be repaired. Riley thanks her and hangs up, standing uncertainly by the front of the car. Eventually, she lowers herself into a sitting position and wraps her arms around her knees, waiting alone on the side of the road.
Lucas is the first to return to the car within the hour.

He comes up behind her without any words, settling down next to her and propping his elbows on his knees. She gazes at him but he keeps his eyes on the gravel, picking at the palm of his hand.

“You call triple A?”

“Yep.”

He nods. She examines him, hating the melancholy that has permeated his expression. After junior year, she never wants to see it again.

“Farkle is wrong,” she says softly, tilting her head at him.

He shrugs, tearing at a hangnail on his thumb instead. “It doesn’t even matter.”

“Farkle is wrong,” she repeats, waiting for him to meet her eyes. Gently, she reaches out and takes his hand in hers, stopping him from doing any more damage to himself. He glances at her before dropping his gaze down to their hands. Cautiously, he puts his other one on top of hers, nodding.

Maya is the next to wander back, and Farkle rejoins them just as the tow truck arrives. Riley debriefs the driver and AAA agent on exactly what she knows, which isn’t much. Then the four of them pile into the back of the tow truck, settling in for the short ride to a town just outside Lexington.

It’s silent the whole way there. No one looks at one another. Just static and emptiness swirling around between them.

They pull into the quaint Kentucky town, just a couple of strips of food stops, motels, and a car repair service along the roadway. Farkle immediately heads towards the motel to secure them last minute rooms while Maya and Lucas head to the van to unload their things before the tow truck takes it to the shop.

Riley lugs Farkle’s bags as Lucas shoulders hers with his own, the three of them heading into the motel welcome area. They catch up to Farkle just as he’s thanking the desk attendant, accepting two sets of keys. When he turns around, Riley drops his bags in front of him. Lucas takes one set of keys from him without a word, heading out towards the doors. Maya follows him.

Farkle rolls his eyes, staring down at the remaining keys in the palm of his hand. Riley stands there awkwardly for a moment, before backing towards the door. “I’m going to go check on the car.”

“Yeah, you do that.”

She heads back out into the heat, jogging along the road to get to the brightly painted repair shop standing out against the sunset. Although the mood of the day is overwhelmingly abysmal, getting to experience another little pocket town in the middle of the nowhere is still a treat in her eyes. She steps through the open garage and scans the cars and tires for a sign of Van Cory.

She spots the peeling paint and worn down tires, heading through the workers to get to it just as a girl not much older than her approaches, dressed in a baggy blue jumpsuit and tying her frizzy dark hair back into a bun. It doesn’t do much to tame it.

They lock eyes as Riley approaches, prompting the girl to pull the pencil from between her lips.

“You Riley?”
“That’s me,” she says as cheerfully as she can muster. “And you’re…?”

Riley glances at the nametag pinned to her jumpsuit just as she speaks. “Kate. Nice to meet ya.”

They shake hands.

“I’ve read the file, but I’d like to hear it from you before I give you the lowdown,” she starts, patting the hood of Van Cory. “What’s the situation?”

“Well, my friends and I were traveling when the engine started to rattle. One of them heard it pretty early on, but we didn’t think much of it. Which I guess was our mistake. It got worse, then the car started acting weird, and when we pulled off the road all this steam poured out of it. My friend thinks it may be a leak of some kind.”

Kate raises her eyebrows, nodding. “Your friend is smart. Fluid leak, more than a couple. Luckily, it’s easy to fix. Unluckily, it’s gonna cost ya.”

“Oh, that’s okay,” Riley says offhandedly, clasping her hands together. “I’m not paying, so do what you must.”

She raises her eyebrows again, amusement coloring her features. “Alrighty then, Riley. I’d suggest rotating the tires and getting some new ones too, if this journey is going to be much longer. They’re really starting to go.”

“Go ahead. We’re headed all the way to California.”

“Cali?” Kate whistles, popping the hood and ducking behind it. “Maybe I shouldn’t ask, maybe that’s uncouth, but what are a bunch of kids doing driving all the way to Los Angeles?”

“College road trip. We’re dropping each other off at our respective universities. My best friend is going to Cal Arts.”

She whistles again. “Artsy?”

“You could say that.”

There’s a long minute of silence as Kate focuses on inspecting the hood more closely. Riley’s phone buzzes in her pocket, catching her attention.

**Uncle Joshie: How’s it going?**

“Good news, I can probably get this wrapped up for y’all by tomorrow,” Kate says optimistically, closing the hood again. “Evening, likely, but tomorrow. Better than a week or something, if you’re on a tight schedule.”

“That would be great, thank you.”

Kate smiles, examining her curiously. “Can I be honest with you, Riley? Like, brutally honest.”

“I’d be disappointed if you didn’t,” she laughs nervously.

“For a group of friends supposedly going cross-country to take one another to college, you all don’t seem very friendly,” Kate says pointedly, crossing her arms and leaning back against the van. “I saw you pull in. Y’all didn’t say one word to each other. Sorry if I’m overstepping here. Just something I observed.”
Although she knows the reason why, Riley resents the fact that their friendship looks fractured even to passive observers. Strangers can tell how tense the four of them are. They were never, ever supposed to be like that. “Trust me, I’m aware.”

Kate smiles sympathetically. “Well, your car is getting repaired. May as well take some time to work on tuning that up too, huh?”

Riley nods, exchanging a few more words with the people of the shop before heading back out in the direction of the motel. Outside the building, she finds a seat on the steps outside the lobby and pulls out her phone, trying to formulate a response to Josh. But it’s nothing she can say through text. It’s too much to even comprehend in her own head. Desperate for someone to talk to, she pulls up the dial pad.

Josh answers on the second ring.

“Hey, killer. You’re not dead, are you?”

Just hearing a familiar voice that isn’t currently at odds with someone she cares about is a relief. She chuckles. “If I was dead, I wouldn’t be calling you.”

“Touché. But I’m guessing if you’re calling me, rather than just sending me a text to get me to leave you alone, things aren’t going in your favor.”

Riley pauses, picking at the sole of her shoe. Josh takes the silence as an affirmation.

“What’s up?”

She sighs, running a hand through her hair and shaking her head. “I don’t even know. Everything just kind of… exploded.”

“Literally or figuratively? Everyone is still in one piece, yeah?”

She appreciates how her Uncle Josh can get her to laugh so easily. He’s great at reminding her how what feels like the end of the world is just another minor problem that can be tackled, even without outright saying anything of the sort. “Yes, we’re all still in one piece. But I don’t know, things just snapped all the sudden. Everyone is mad. People are saying things. I don’t know what to do.”

Josh hums. “How long have you guys been on the road now? Three days? Four?”

“About. Why?”

“Listen, people get testy on road trips. You’re stuck together in close quarters for an obscene amount of time, even for the best of friends. It makes sense that you might get snippy with each other. Add onto that the fact that this is a huge transition for all of you, so you’re already emotionally stressed. People are gonna be hypersensitive. It makes sense.”

Riley takes this in, exhaling in relief. “So you don’t think there’s something seriously wrong with us?”

“No more so than usual. You’ll be fine.”

“It’s not hopeless?”

“You’re a Matthews, girl,” he chides. She can imagine the goofy, stern expression on his face. “Nothing is hopeless.”
“So how do I fix it?”

“You do what you always do,” Josh says simply. “Talk it out. I know you’re short a bay window, but I’m sure you can make it work. I believe in you.”

Riley nods, before remembering he can’t actually see her. She smiles. “Right. Okay. Thank you, Josh.”

“Of course. You know you can call me any time.”

“I do.” She pauses, glancing over her shoulder towards the rooms behind her. “Well, I guess I’d better go.”

“Wait, one more thing.” He clears his throat. “Is Maya alright? I mean, considering everything that happened? She doing okay?”

Obviously, she’s still freezing him out for whatever reason. Although this behavior does seem weird for Maya, Riley can’t help but grin at her uncle’s concern for her best friend. “I think she’s okay. I can let her know to call you, if you’d like.”

“Oh, no, no. That’s not necessary. I mean, if you wanted to… no. Don’t worry about it. Focus on your friends. I’m fine. You know what? Nevermind. I’m hanging up.”

She cracks up. “Night, Josh. Thanks again.”

“Night.”

She drops the phone from her ear, feeling a little bit better about the whole situation. She’s gotten perspective, and she remembers that Josh is right—she’s a Matthews. Nothing is hopeless. And her greatest weapon has always been words.

--

She steps up to the rooms on the second floor of the outdoor motel just as Maya is exiting one of their assigned rooms, waving her over and clasping her hands together. She clears her throat, rocking on her heels awkwardly.

“Huckleberry would like me to inform you that he refuses to share a room with the egotistical genius jerk in the other room.” She hesitates to let that sink in, making a face. “Then, he tried to come up with something meaner to say and got frustrated when it couldn’t do it. He really sucks at insults.”

Riley, despite her exhaustion from the events of the day, can’t help but laugh. “Yeah, he does.”

“Bottom line, he doesn’t want to share a room with Farkle right now. And personally, I don’t either.” Maya frowns, twiddling her thumbs. “But if someone has to…”

“No, it’s good.” Riley shakes her head, managing a smile. “I’ll room with him.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. I don’t know, maybe I can talk to him.”

Maya gives her a pitiful look. “Well, if he says anything rude, you tell me, alright? I’ll give him a piece of my mind. Just because he’s Farkle doesn’t mean I won’t go off.”
“I don’t think that’ll be necessary. But thank you.”

Maya nods, getting ready to head back to the other room. Riley hesitates. “Maya?”

She turns around to face her, getting a quick look at the expression on her face before understanding. They come together in a soft embrace, finding solace in one another after the disastrous day they faced. Maya tucks her head against Riley’s shoulder, squeezing her tight before pulling back.

“Night, Riles.”

“Goodnight, Peaches.”

Maya gives her an affectionate smile, heading back towards the other room.

“You’ll make sure Lucas is okay?”

“I’ll try my best,” Maya says with a sigh, acting as though it’s a burden. But Riley knows she really will give it her best effort. “I’ll tell him you say goodnight.” She starts walking again, before tossing a look over her shoulder. “But I’m not kissing him for you.”

“I think all of us would prefer it that way.”

Riley waits until Maya disappears into the room, before taking a deep breath and knocking at the door in front of her. It doesn’t take long for Farkle to open the door, but he looks dissatisfied when he sees who it is.

“Oh, it’s you.”

“It’s me,” Riley agrees, stepping around him and into the room. “Your roomie for the evening.”

Farkle closes the door behind her, making a face that’s a mixture of disgruntlement and disbelief. “Is Lucas really being that petty? He’s really not going to room with me?”

Riley collapses onto the bed that doesn’t have Farkle’s backpack on it, shrugging. “I think you really hurt his feelings, Farkle.”

“I didn’t mean to.”

“You brought up Davis,” Riley says pointedly, tilting her head at him as he sits on his bed across from her. “That wasn’t supposed to hurt?”

“Well, okay, I guess that, yeah.” He scratches his ear, staring at the floor with a frown. “I don’t know how it got so bad. Stuff just started… happening. I don’t know. I don’t know what’s happening. I don’t know what’s up with me.”

Riley crosses her legs, propping her elbows on them. “Think about it.”

“I can’t believe he thinks I just think of him as a face.”

“Well, you do call him that. A lot.”

“Yeah, but it doesn’t have anything to do with… that’s my thing. It’s my problem. It’s not his fault.” Farkle has always struggled with understanding people, despite how good he is at observing them. Riley knows this about him, but it’s never been more clear than right now. “He’s more to me than that. He has to know that.”
“Then you need to tell him that! Farkle,” she says emphatically, sitting forward and waiting for him to lock eyes with her. “We only have one more day together before you go to school. We’re running out of time to work things out.”

Farkle gulps, blinking at her. She’s mildly surprised when his eyes become glossy. “I know that. That’s all I’ve been thinking about.”

She remembers his outburst towards her. *We don’t leave. What are we doing now?*

Riley gets to her feet, sitting next to him and lightly placing her hand on his shoulder. “I know.”

He tilts his head to look at her, moving forward and wrapping his arms around her. She hugs him back, squeezing him tight. Hugs from Farkle are rare, and she knows he really needs it right now. With one more day left, she’s going to hold on as tight as she can before she has to let go.

“We’ll talk tomorrow,” Riley promises him, giving him a soft smile when he pulls away and wipes his eyes. “All of us. We will get this worked out. But you have to be willing to actually confront it. No more throwing around insecurities.”

He nods eagerly, taking a deep breath. “Okay. Yeah, okay.”

Both of them get ready for bed in plaintive silence. Riley sets her alarm to meet with the repair shop in the morning, already wondering what tomorrow is going to bring. There’s a lot of emotions on the horizon, but she’s sort of come to expect that on this trip.

“Riley?” There’s a moment of silence in the darkness. “I’m really sorry. About everything.”

There are a lot of things she could say. Reassurances, explanations, a whole gambit of options. But she sticks to the simplest response, and what she thinks Farkle actually needs the most. The lesson of one of her father’s most polished teachings that she’s very grateful to have learned.

“I forgive you.”
When Riley wakes up the next morning, there’s this brief moment where she forgets about everything that’s happened. She doesn’t remember that they’re stuck in Kentucky, she doesn’t remember that all of her friends are currently at odds. She doesn’t even remember, for a quick, strange moment, that they’re on a road trip at all.

She imagines she’s at home in her bed, that another day of school at Abigail Adams High School is what awaits her when she opens her eyes. She’ll wake up, nudge Lucas next to her to get him up, have breakfast with the family and head off to school. Another day in Manhattan. Another day with the way things have always been.

Then, she remembers.

Opening her eyes reveals the dull, grey walls of the motel room, even more dim with the shades drawn. Farkle is already up and moving, the shower running in the bathroom. Riley rolls onto her back and sighs, rubbing her eyes and staring at the ceiling above her. Just as dull as the walls. Just as dull as she feels after yesterday.

She forces herself to get out of bed, changing into a pair of shorts and t-shirt before stepping out of the room and into the muggy Kentucky morning. She jogs down the steps to the ground level and makes her way along the side of the road to the car shop.

Although the motel was relatively quiet for the early morning, the auto repair is alive with activity. Drills buzz, engines whir, pumps crank in a harsh fashion that makes Riley jump. She weaves her way through the chaos until she finds Van Cory, relieved to see it’s familiar peeling paint.

Kate appears around the other side of the van, grinning when she spots Riley. “Morning! You’re up early for a tourist.”

Riley smiles, tilting her head curiously. “Does this town get a lot of tourists?”

“Well, if you count folks like you who are here against their own free will, then yeah, we get a good amount every now and then.” She wipes her hands on a grease rag from her pocket. “There’s a reason this shop gets so much business, you know. We’re the only establishment in this hellhole that does.”
“Any update?”

“Sure.” Kate pats Cory’s passenger side door, examining him. “Just started work on the engine leaks. Tires won’t take too long. Once my pal Noshin comes in for the day, it’ll take us a couple hours to get the work done. Should have it up and running by late afternoon? But don’t hold me to that.”

“Awesome. That sounds perfect.”

Kate crosses her arms, leaning against the van and raising her eyebrows. “Any update from you?”

Riley pauses, clasping her hands together. She glances over her shoulder, back where her friends are. “Working on it. Let’s hope for late afternoon. But don’t hold me to it.”

“Sounds like a plan. Good luck.”

Riley heads back out towards the motel, surprised to see Maya walking in her direction from the second floor when she gets into the motel parking lot. The two of them meet up and settle down on the stairs where she sat the night before talking to Josh.

“Morning, sunshine.” Maya grumbles, earning a laugh from Riley. She nudges her with her shoulder. “How’d you sleep?”

“Sleep? Oh, fine. Before sleep? I had to listen to Huckleberry go on and on about how irritated he was that you had to share a room with Farkle, because no one deserves to have to put up with that. Least of all you. He was very fired up on your behalf.”

“Aw, how sweet.”

Maya makes a face. “I think he was really just pissed that he had to share with me and I ruined his scheme to get the two of you alone for a night.”

Riley nudges her again, blushing in spite of herself. Maya raises her hands in surrender. They’re silent for a minute or so, slowly melting in the summer heat.

“I just don’t get it,” Maya mutters, pushing some hair out of her face and staring across the street at the deserted gas station. She bites her lip, thinking for a second before continuing. “I don’t get why Farkle is being like this. He does get that we only have one more day with him, right? Why is he deciding now is the best time to write out every grievance he’s ever had with us?”

“That’s not what he’s doing,” Riley says diplomatically, wrapping her arms around her knee.

“Then what? Why is he doing this? Why is he getting all upset?”

Riley lifts her eyes from the dusty gravel to examine her best friend. She hesitates, disliking the hurt in Maya’s eyes and hoping that she can get rid of it by the end of the day. “A wise friend once told me that people only get upset when what they’re talking about is important to them.”

Maya narrows her eyes at her, obviously wondering how the hell that’s relevant, when realization colors her features. Her jaw drops slightly and she looks back out towards the other side of the road, releasing a sigh.

“Oh, Farkle.”

“He’s never been good at expressing his feelings,” Riley points out, propping her chin on her hand.
Maya shakes her head, closing her eyes and pressing her hand to her lips. She sighs again, biting her lip before tilting her head to look at Riley next to her. “So, what happens next?”

She pauses. Reaching forward, she gently pushes some stray hair from Maya’s forehead. “I guess we’re going to find out.”

The two of them get to their feet, going their separate ways when they reach the second floor. Riley slides the key into the lock and steps back into the motel room, glad to see Farkle out of the shower and fully dressed. He straightens up from going through his suitcase, putting his hands in his pockets and eyeing her nervously.

She holds a hand out to him. “Ready?”

He takes a deep breath, glancing at the clock on the bedside table before nodding. He accepts her hand, smiling gratefully when she links their arms together and squeezes lightly. It’s obvious he’s uneasy, and she wants him to know how proud she is that he’s willing to swallow his pride and work things out. She knows how hard that is for him.

Steeling her resolve, Riley leads the way out the door and down the walkway, towards the other motel room where her best friends are waiting.

--

Just like fixing a car, confronting their issues isn’t the easiest job in the world.

It’s awkwardly silent for the first few minutes after Lucas and Maya let them in, all of them tip-toeing around each other and not really saying anything. Once they get settled—Riley and Farkle on one bed, the other two facing them on the other—the room settles into tense silence.

Farkle gulps, tapping his fingers on his thighs. Lucas stares at the floor, picking anxiously at his nails again. Riley has to resist the urge to get up and make him stop.

“Well,” Maya says loudly, sitting cross-legged next to Lucas and clearing throat. “I guess we should start with some apologies. I’m sorry that I was very unhelpful when the car broke down. I should have been more accommodating. Dropping the tool kit was immature. I’m sorry.”

Lucas and Farkle don’t acknowledge her. Riley nods at her, playing along. “I forgive you, Maya.”

“Thanks, Riles.” She smiles, tilting her head at Farkle. “Your turn.”

“You don’t really think I think of you as just a face, do you?” Farkle asks suddenly, not casting a second glance at Maya. His attention is solely focused on Lucas across from him.

Lucas doesn’t answer right away, keeping his eyes on the floor. He manages a shrug.

“How could you think that?”

“Because you say it all the time,” Lucas says dejectedly. “I know you always have, but—,”

“I don’t think that. I don’t think that’s true at all. I would never actually think that, and there’s no way I’d want you to think that of yourself. There’s no scenario where I’d want you to think less of me because you think I think less of you.” Farkle’s tone is uncertain, stumbling over the words in a rush to get them out. But the sincerity in his voice is evident. “You are my best friend. You’re really important to me, and I don’t waste my time on things that don’t have a lot of inner value.”
Lucas finally lifts his gaze, locking eyes with Farkle timidly. Riley glances at Maya, exchanging a hopeful smile.

“You are so much more than a face. I know that. You know that.” Farkle frowns, narrowing his eyes. “You have to know that.”

Lucas examines him for a long moment, lips pressed together tightly. Finally, his fingers stop fidgeting. “I do.”

“I’m sorry,” Farkle says seriously.

Lucas nods. His features soften considerably. “I forgive you.”

In an instant, Riley feels the weight of the world lift off her shoulders. So much of the tension between them dissipates, and she feels as though she can physically feel it leaving the atmosphere. Farkle breaks into a smile, Lucas mirroring it. Riley and Maya make eye contact again, laughter escaping them simply out of relief.

“I’m sorry to all of you,” Farkle repeats, patting Riley’s hand when she links their arms together and leans her head on his shoulder. “I know what I said wasn’t right. I’m very aware of how little time we have left together, and I’m still figuring out how to handle… stuff like that.”

Maya bumps her shoulder against Lucas, giving him a grin before turning her beam on Farkle. “We know. Well, Riley knew and she explained it to me.”

“You’re figuring it out,” Riley adds, glancing at the other two. Farkle tilts his head to look at her when she turns her gaze back on him. “But don’t push us away faster because of it. That’s what we’re here for. We have to make the most of it while we can.”

Farkle nods, smiling gratefully at all of them. Silence settles over them, but it’s not foreboding anymore.

When he speaks again, Farkle’s tone is softer. “I’m going to ask a question, and I’m sure you’ll all let me know if it’s insensitive in some way I don’t understand.”

“We always do,” Maya agrees.

He nods, focusing on Lucas again. “Why does the face thing matter now? I mean, I know I shouldn’t have been saying it so often or for so long. I get that. But why are you suddenly upset about it now? What changed?”

It’s quiet as the question hangs in the air. Lucas drops his eyes down to his hands, twiddling his fingers again. “I’ve just been…” he says slowly, debating whether or not to get into it. “I’ve been going through some stuff.”

Maya furrows her brow at him. Farkle’s watching him attentively.

“What? What’s going on?” When no one immediately answers, his expression grows worried. “Oh my God, you’re not dying, are you? You’re not going to tell me you only have a few months to live or something like that?”

This gets a laugh out of Lucas, defusing some of the new, unfamiliar tension in the room. He shakes his head. “No. No, I’m not dying.”

“Good.” When he doesn’t elaborate, Farkle leans forward impatiently. “Then what’s wrong?”
Lucas stares at his hands for a moment longer, before lifting his gaze to lock eyes with Riley. His expression is thoughtful, unsure—clearly looking for help in deciding what to do next. She gives him an encouraging smile.

He exhales quietly, getting to his feet and heading towards the door. When he opens it, he looks over his shoulder and nods at Farkle to get up and follow him.

Farkle rises apprehensively, exchanging a confused look with Maya as he approaches Lucas. He holds the door open, tossing a glance back to Riley over his shoulder. “You’ll take care of the van?”

Riley nods affirmatively. “We’ve got it. Don’t worry.”

Lucas gives Farkle a shy smile, stepping out of the motel room. Farkle follows, leaving Riley and Maya alone. Now that the friction between her favorite people in the world is resolved, Riley feels as though she can experience other needs again. And what she’s very aware of is how insistently her stomach is growling.

“Well, I’m starving,” she announces, getting to her feet and offering Maya a hand. “Let’s eat.”

After Riley and Maya grab some lunch at the burger joint across the road, they make their way to the repair shop and wait for Kate to give them the all clear on the van. Farkle and Lucas are gone for about an hour, off wandering down the road as they converse.

While they’re waiting around for the car to be fixed, it hits Riley that in a few days, this is what it’s going to be like for the rest of the trip. Farkle is leaving tomorrow, Lucas will be gone after the weekend. In a few days it’ll just be her and Maya, driving all the way to California with their friends and thousands of miles of road behind them.

She’s not exactly sure how she feels about that.

Taking advantage of the break in activity, Maya sits on a stack of tires and works on her sketch. Riley plays on her phone, not bothering to ask any more about what she’s been working on. The longer and more involved Maya becomes with this particular project, the less she’ll tell Riley about it. She tries not to let it bother her.

**Mommy Matthews:** As long as Farkle gets to school on time tomorrow to meet Stuart and Jennifer, I’m sure this detour won’t derail your progress too badly. Enjoy the evening and don’t stress too much about it. And let’s not tell your father about the mishap until AFTER you get home.

“Hey, Riles,” Maya says suddenly, interrupting her text back to her mother.

Riley lifts her eyes, humming in response to urge Maya to continue. Her best friend keeps her eyes on the pencil in her fingers, twirling it absentmindedly and tapping the eraser against the sketchpad. Her expression is a little distant, her mind obviously somewhere else.

“Something’s really going on with Lucas. Something serious,” Maya finally mutters, forcing herself to meet her eyes. “Isn’t it?”

Riley isn’t sure how to respond. Yes, something is going on with Lucas. It has been for the last couple of years. But she isn’t sure what to say—it’s not her place to share. She’s involved, and she’s trying to help in whatever ways she can. But it’s not her problem, and not hers to get into with whoever she wants.
“Yes,” she says cautiously, deciding to be somewhat straightforward. “But he’s working on it.”

Maya accepts this answer, nodding thoughtfully. “Is he okay?”

“He will be,” Riley states, speaking as confidently as she can. Despite all that’s happened, she believes this much to be true.

There’s a silence as Maya processes the limited information she’s been given. Riley wishes she could tell her more, just to assuage her concerns, but she knows in her heart she’s doing the right thing. If Lucas wants Maya to know, he’ll tell her on his own. It’s not serious enough to warrant everyone getting involved, and he’ll tell people as he sees fit. Him telling Farkle as they speak is a huge step.

“If he wasn’t going to be okay,” Maya says after a long moment, “You’d tell me, right?”

“No,” Riley says, shaking her head. Maya frowns at her, about to argue, when she finishes her thought. “But he would.”

The irritation disappears from Maya’s features. She opens her mouth to speak but nothing comes out, so she just closes it and nods instead. Although she does a great job of acting tough, Riley can see the hint of a touched, content smile ghosting over her lips.

Maya and Lucas have never been an easy duo to handle, but Riley knows how much they care about one another. There may have been confusion over in what way and how much over the years, and there may have been moments where they were less than fond of one another. But at the end of the day, they’re looking out for each other.

She’s grateful that the two most important people in her life care about each other almost as much as she cares about the two of them.

Kate whistles triumphantly and the car hood slams, capturing both Maya and Riley’s attention. She disappears into the back office before wandering back over to them with a clipboard. “Van’s all set to ride. Those tires are going to do you a lot of good in getting through the west. It’s probably fate that you got stuck on the side of the road. Better here than in the middle of Death Valley.”

Riley takes the clipboard, seeing the signature line and handing it to Maya. “You have to sign.”

“Oh, yeah, I keep forgetting this piece of shit is mine,” she says flatly, accepting the clipboard and scribbling on the dotted line.

Lucas and Farkle return just as Maya is handing the papers back to Kate, wandering through the auto parts to join them. Riley hops off the tires, examining the two of them and trying to get a read on how the conversation went. Farkle looks thoughtful, inquisitive, and little bit guilty—exactly how she figured he’d look. Lucas looks relieved.

“There’s the other two,” Kate says cheerfully, flipping through the papers. “I was wondering if I’d ever get to actually see you all together.”

“We’re quite the spectacle,” Farkle admits, stuffing his hands in his pockets.

“I’ll say. Which one of y’all was worried there might be a leak?”

Lucas raises his hand sheepishly.

“You,” Kate says, pointing at him and giving him a smirk. “I like you. You keep these
chuckleheads safe on the road, alright?”

“Been doing it for six years, don’t see why I should stop now.”

Maya slides down the stack of tires, sticking the landing and bowing lightly when Farkle applauds her. When she flips her hair back and rises to her full height again, she tucks her sketchbook under her arm. “Well, we’re not going to be able to leave until tomorrow. What the hell do you do in this town for fun?”

Kate cracks up. “There’s not a whole lot on this strip, but if you walk about half a mile, the neighboring town has some cool stuff. Pizza place, movie theater, stuff like that. It’s where all the kids hang out on the weekends. You all like bowling?”


“Bowling sounds like the perfect date,” Farkle snickers. Riley gives Lucas a goofy smile.

Kate watches all of them, shaking her head slightly. “Well, clearly this is some inside joke I don’t understand. But I’m glad to be of service. Come on, I’ll point you in the right direction.”

Bowling turns out to be the best way to pass the time. Riley can’t remember the last time she went bowling, but watching her best friends play and laughing over crappy alley food makes the entire previous day’s events seem like a distant memory.

Farkle struggles, insisting that physics is going to give him the win but bowling more gutter balls than the three of them combined. Riley holds her own, but the real competition comes down to Maya and Lucas, who have an impressive amount of skill in scoring strikes. They make an effort to distract one another until it gets to the point where they’re just bowling at the same exact time in their adjacent lanes. They’re both vying for the victory, more to lord it over the other than to actually enjoy winning.

“It’s bad bowling etiquette,” Farkle explains to Riley as they launch their balls at the same time, Maya shouting at Lucas’s to head for the gutter as if that’ll make any difference. “You’re never supposed to roll when a bowler in the next lane is going.”

Lucas lands a strike, Maya only knocking over about two-thirds of the pins. She groans in annoyance, leaping at Lucas and shoving him lightly as he gives her a cocky grin. Riley smiles at both of them. “Maya’s never been amazing at etiquette.”

They go for about three rounds, and by the third one Riley is long past trying to win and much more focused on improving her ability. She convinces Lucas to help her polish her technique, utilizing her age-old strategy of asking for assistance to get him to touch her. It’s one of her favorite parts of the evening, Lucas guiding her arms and whispering advice into her ear.

She manages to bowl a strike with his assistance as well, so it’s truly a win-win situation.

Maya catches onto her scheme as she usually does, muttering to Farkle. He gets up to bowl, grabbing his ball and sighing dramatically. “Wow, I just don’t know how to use this thing at all. If only I could get a strike. Maya, do you think you could help me?”

Maya gasps, jumping to her feet. “Sure thing, darling! Anything for you.”
The two of them make a show of mocking Riley and Lucas, and considering the stark height
difference it’s genuinely amusing to watch. Amazingly, Farkle does actually bowl a strike when
their charade is done.

Once their rounds run out, the four of them sit at the table and finish off the food. Maya pops a
French fry into her mouth. “So, what now? Back to the sad, dull motel to count down the hours
until we’re out of this hellhole?”

“Actually,” Farkle pipes up, focusing on his phone with intense concentration. “I have an idea for
something else we can do. But it’s a drive, and we’re going to need the car. Do you think Kate will
let us check out Cory?”

Riley shrugs. “She said it was all set to ride. Assuming she’s still around, it shouldn’t be a
problem.”

The four of them begin the walk back to the other town, the sun setting below the horizon line.
When they get to the shop, Kate isn’t around, but a peppy, bright-eyed girl helps them check out
Cory instead. Riley smiles when she reads the nametag Noshin on her uniform, recognizing the
name from her conversation with Kate earlier in the day.

“Is this your last night here?” Noshin asks, handing the keys over to Farkle.

Maya does a pathetic job of hiding her excitement. “Sure is.”

“Well, you shouldn’t leave without a souvenir of some kind. Does one of you have a phone?”

Riley pulls her cell out and hands it to her. Noshin then instructs them to get together, picking a
pose of some kind so that she can get a photo to document their existence. Proof that they were
once a part of this tiny town, no matter how accidental it was.

Riley takes Lucas’s hand, lacing her fingers through his as Maya takes her other hand. They
discuss what kind of pose they want to make when Noshin informs them she already got the shot,
handing her phone back with a mischievous grin. Looking at the photo, it’s a perfectly candid shot
of the four of them, laughing and debating and enjoying each other’s company. Like so much of
this trip, so much of their friendship, it screams serendipity—things falling into place because
that’s the way they’re supposed to be.

They get Van Cory out of the shop and Farkle drives them down the road, heading off towards
some unknown destination that he won’t reveal to them. It’s notable how much easier the van
drives with its new tires and tuned up engine.

After about twenty minutes, Farkle takes a sudden turn and peels off the main road, driving into
the endless expanse of grass and dirt around them. Maya leans forward and peers out the dashboard
window, eyes wide. “What the hell are you doing?”

“Arriving,” he says, putting the car in park and killing the engine. He checks his watch.

“Gee,” Lucas murmurs, glancing around them. “I love it when we end up in the middle of
nowhere.”

Farkle unbuckles and climbs out of the car, slamming the door and reappearing when he opens the
back door. He starts collapsing the backseat, clearing the back of the car to give them enough room
to sit. Once the seat is successfully hidden, he leaps into the back of the van and crouches, looking
up at all of them. “We’ve got about half an hour to kill before the stars really come out. Might as
well get comfortable.”
Riley smiles, unbuckling and moving to the back with him. “Stars?”

Farkle nods. Maya and Lucas make their way back as well, collapsing against the sides of the car and stretching their legs out. Lucas rests next to Farkle while Maya cuddles up close to Riley. “I looked it up when we were at the bowling alley. This town may not have much, but it’s in one of the best spots for star-gazing. Makes sense, considering there’s nothing around for… well, miles.”

Riley glances out at the road. Without any light pollution, it sort of feels like being back at the shore in Maryland. Nothing but infinite blackness, but overflowing with possibility.

“You excited about tomorrow?” Maya asks him.

Farkle pauses, thinking about it. “Yeah. I am. It’s going to be weird, but I think I’m ready. After all, the only way I’m going to evolve as a person is by putting myself in new situations. I’m trying not to think of change as being all that scary.”


“No one has been more accepting of change than you, Farkle,” Riley points out, wrapping her arms around her knees. “You’ve always been the one willing to let things happen. Willing to experiment, like a true scientist, I guess.”

“But you always kept an eye on us,” Maya says warmly. “Made sure we were on the right track.”

Farkle smiles, propping his elbow on his knee. “Well, someone had to make sure you didn’t keep that stupid love triangle going.”

“Oh, come on.”

“Please stop.”

“This was a nice moment and you had to bring that up.”

Farkle cracks up, and his laughter is infectious considering how stoic he usually is. Eventually, the four of them escalate into hysterics, cackling at nothing in particular yet everything all at once. It’s a strange, inexplicable kind of feeling, an energy between them that Riley has never quite been able to put into words but always cherished.

Maya, Lucas, Farkle—they’re her universe. They’ve been constants in her life for so long, and the indescribable feeling she gets when she’s with them is something she knows she’ll never be able to properly replicate. When the four of them are together, the world feels unlimited.

“I’m not worried though,” Farkle says through his chuckles. “I got lucky enough when I ended up with all of you. If whatever force that made that happen—randomness, fate, what have you—if that force is still looking out for me, then I’ll be okay.”

“I thought you didn’t believe in stuff like that?” Maya says with an eyebrow raise.

“Like I said, I don’t know what the force is, and I don’t know if I believe in it. But I trust it.”

“Why?”

He squints at Lucas next to him, then at Riley and Maya. “It gave me you.”

Farkle’s watch beeps, shaking him out of the moment. He jumps up excitedly, nudging Lucas to move with him and leading the way out the back. Maya follows after them but Riley hangs back.
for a moment, processing Farkle’s words and committing them to memory. She doesn’t ever want to forget this feeling, this moment, the amount of affection she feels towards these people she gets to call her best friends.

Once she leaps out of the back of the car and rounds to the front, Farkle and Maya are already climbing up onto the roof. Lucas stops on the hood, leaning back against the dashboard window and crossing his arms. Riley hefts herself up onto the metal and joins him, reclining back next to him and gazing up at the night sky.

“Wow,” Maya mutters breathlessly.

She remembers the similar sensation of seeing the night sky so brightly lit with stars when they went to Texas all those years ago, but seeing it again is just as exhilarating as the first time. She loves living in the city with its restless energy and glowing spectacle, but the charm of natural beauty like this is hard to stay away from.

Without a word, Lucas’s hand finds hers on the hood and links their fingers together. Her heart skips a beat. Talk about natural beauty that’s hard to stay away from.

“I know I’m a New York intellectual,” Farkle says quietly, “But I could get used to this. Appreciating this. Maybe it’s not such a bad thing to be a little flexible about who you are.”

Maya lowers her gaze from the sky to smile at him, raising an eyebrow. It’s not a direct apology, but the message is clear about how he feels about what he said to her. She scoots closer to him and wraps her arms around his, resting her head against his shoulder. He tilts his head against hers.

“You know what the crazy thing about stars is?” Riley says, overwhelmed at the vast expanse of them twinkling at her. “When we look at them from all the way down here, on our little planet, they seem so close together. Centimeters apart. We can practically fit them in the tiny distance between our fingers. But they’re really millions and billions of miles apart. Lightyears, even. There’s so much time and space separating them, and yet to us they’re as close as ever.”

Lucas tilts his head to gaze at her. Maya and Farkle have gone quiet, hanging on her every word.

“That’s going to be us,” she says decisively. She smiles as Maya’s foot nudges her shoulder, turning her head to lock eyes with Lucas. “Miles between us, but centimeters apart.”

Maya hums in understanding. Lucas squeezes her hand.

“Everything in existence came from the Big Bang,” Farkle lectures. “Scientifically, in theory, we have stardust in us right now. Every living thing does.”

He leans forward to ruffle Riley’s hair, earning a grin from her. “So, we’re stars?”

Farkle nods, leaning back on his palms. The four of them fall quiet, lost in thought and speechless at the glittering sight above them.

“We’re stars.”

--

The group of them pack up the car early the next morning, knowing there’s a lot of road to cover to get Farkle to Missouri by mid-afternoon.

Lucas drives with Farkle keeping him company in the passenger seat, the two of them putting on
Abbey Road by The Beatles and chatting about the band in between singing along. Although they’re so distinctly different from one another, Riley loves that they can find weird instances of things that seem to perfectly combine their sensibilities. The Beatles is a prime example—they’re the classic rock of Lucas mixed with the experimental, pretentious alternative of Farkle.

By the time they get to the ending medley, Lucas is tapping his hands against the steering wheel in an imitation of the drums and Farkle is aggressively playing an imaginary guitar. He doesn’t even tell Lucas to keep both his hands on the wheel.

Riley grins at them, tossing Maya an amused look.

Maya rolls her eyes. “That’s not even close to how you play a guitar.”

“You can hate the artist, but don’t hate the art,” Farkle calls back to her.

When they pull into the parking lot of Washington University, Riley’s in awe of the campus around her. It feels vast and looming and intimidating—each campus they get to feels more and more daunting. But Farkle has no apparent uncertainty, leaping out of the car without hesitation and heading to the back to grab his things.

Lucas helps him pull out his suitcase. Farkle shoulders his backpack and grabs the luggage, smiling at Maya as she wraps an arm around his back. He drapes her arm over her shoulders, the two of them leading the way onto the school grounds.

It’s weird to see a familiar face after so much time away from the city, so when they see Stuart and Jennifer Minkus waiting to greet them on campus it throws Riley through a bit of an emotional loop. She makes a mental note to give her parents a call sometime soon.

“There he is!” Stuart cheers, grinning widely as the four of them approach. He gives his son a tight hug as soon as he drops his bags at their feet, bracing his shoulders and shaking him slightly. “You ready?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be,” Farkle says truthfully, accepting a hug from his mother as well. He glances over his shoulder at the three of them, turning back to his parents with wide eyes. “Could I have more second alone with them? I’ll be quick, I promise.”

They nod. Jennifer fixes his hair lovingly, nudging him back in their direction.

Farkle whips around and walks back to stand in front of the three of them. Despite all the emotions that have run their course during the last couple days, it’s hard to find the words to say now that they’re standing at the end of the line.

No one wants to actually say goodbye.

He takes a moment to examine each of them carefully, taking them in with his inquisitive squint. After a deep breath, he gestures noncommittally and shrugs. “I already sort of said what I needed to say. You guys know how I feel about you. I can only say it so many different ways.”

Not the most poignant speech, but Riley tears up all the same. Farkle gives her a disdainful look, but there’s fondness in his features when he clicks his tongue at her. “Look at you.”

She laughs, wiping her eyes. He holds out his arms and gestures her forward, ready to stabilize them when she barrels into him with a hug. It’s crazy, she realizes, how tall he’s gotten. How much he’s grown.
“Thank you, for not letting me forget about love,” he tells her. “All of you.”

“We would never.” She sniffs, burying her head in his shoulder before forcing herself to pull away. She has to let him go, just as she let Smackle and Zay go. Just as she’ll have to let Lucas and Maya go in a few days. They’re going off to do amazing things. As much as it hurts, she has to let them go.

He pats her shoulder. “I’ll work hard on the Pluto front. Smackle and I are going to make a concentrated effort. It’ll be back on the planet list someday soon.”

Lucas steps forward next, giving him a tight hug. When they break apart and exchange a smile, Farkle clears his throat. “Thanks.”

“For what?”

“Just… thanks,” Farkle repeats. “Still ready for me to take over the world?”

“Still right by your side, buddy,” Lucas assures him.

“Good. I never want that to change.”

Lucas backs off to let Maya step forward. Despite his cool façade he’s managed to maintain since they started out on the road this morning, Farkle is shaken when she steps in front of him. Because for all of her toughness and fierceness and strength, Maya Hart is not unshakeable.

And she’s got tears in her eyes at the prospect of saying goodbye to Farkle Minkus.

He reaches forward to pull her into hug the moment she starts forward to embrace him, the two of them colliding and stumbling slightly at the force of their impact. She tucks her head into his chest and holds on tight, trying not to cry but ultimately failing. “Promise me you’re going to be okay.”

“I promise,” he mutters croakily, his own steely exterior betraying him as a tear slips down his cheek. “I’m tougher now than I used to be. I learned from the best.”

Maya laughs, swaying them back and forth for a while longer until she powers through the difficult act of letting him go. He allows her to release him but takes her hand, holding out his other hand for Riley. She links her hand in his, giving him a proud smile.

“Both of you the same,” he reminds them, taking a deep breath. He looks back and forth between the two of them, the same admiration coloring his features that has each time he’s looked at them for the last ten years. “Always. Forever.”

Maya grins, wiping her cheeks with her free hand. “Go get them, Canada. Give them hell from New York City.”

Farkle squeezes both their hands, giving one last nod to Lucas before he pulls away. He whips around on his heels, striding back over to his parents with his award-winning confidence intact. His mother helps him grab his bags and begins walking him towards the admission center.

He doesn’t look back. Even with all that confidence, he can’t look back.

Stuart surprises the three of them by heading towards them rather than following his family, jogging to stand in front of them. “If I could have a minute more of your time, there’s something I’d like to give you.”
He reaches into the coat pocket of his blazer, pulling out a thick wad of cash. Riley’s jaw drops, stunned. Maya’s eyebrows arch higher than she’s ever seen them.

“I want you guys to take this. Use it on the rest of your trip.”

Lucas is equally shocked, his mouth parted open slightly. “Sir, we can’t take this.”

“You sure can. And you better, because I’m not letting you leave until you do. I’d hate for you to miss your own college move-ins.” Riley opens her mouth to argue but Stuart bulldozes over her in the same determined tone his son is so famous for. “I said Minkus International was funding this trip. Just because my son is no longer included doesn’t mean I’m going to leave you all without financial support. This belongs to you. Take it.”

“Well, if you’re going to insist.” Maya smirks, taking the money with far less hesitation than Riley or Lucas would.

Stuart grins at her as she runs her fingers over the edge of the bills, before lifting his gaze to make eye contact with Riley. “Thank you for getting him here. And I don’t just mean on the road.”

Riley knows exactly what he means. She’s sure that if she’s feeling overwhelmed by how much Farkle Minkus has grown and matured in all their years of friendship, Stuart must be an internal wreck. There’s so much she wants to say, but all she can manage is a nod of understanding.

Maya, thankfully, speaks for the three of them. Her features are soft again, sincerity shining through her blue eyes. “Well, we really love him.”

“He knows it,” Stuart promises them. He gives them one final nod of gratitude. “Good luck on the rest of your trip.”

Riley, Maya, and Lucas watch as Stuart sprints to catch up with Farkle and Jennifer. Their resident genius, growing smaller and smaller as he heads off into the future. Going off to be something amazing.

Maya turns away first, gazing towards the parking lot and sighing. Van Cory awaits them, ready to move on to the second half of the journey. They’ve still got miles to go before all is said and done.

*Miles between them, but centimeters apart.* Riley repeats this over and over in her head like a mantra, willing it to be true.

Lucas’s hand finds hers. Maya links their arms together.

Together, the three of them head back towards the van.
Sophomore year is the year Farkle Minkus learns about hubris.

It all starts with the word Mr. Matthews slaps on the board in the middle of the year, turning to the class with an excited smirk on his face. Farkle both appreciates and detests that look—it means there’s an intriguing lesson coming their way, but knowing Cory, it probably won’t be delivered with a whole lot of tact.

Hamartia.

“Can anybody tell me what this word means?”

Farkle keeps his hand on his desk, glancing around the room to see if any of his classmates will try to take the bullet for once. Riley’s hand is hovering a couple of inches above the surface of her desk, an uncertain gleam in her eyes as if she wants to give it a go but doesn’t trust herself to get it right. Maya’s squinting at the board behind her, obviously completely lost but making a show of being interested.

Behind him, he hears the fabric of Smackle’s outfit rustle as she shoots her hand in the air, not waiting around for their peers to catch up. He smirks to himself.

Cory tilts his head, smiling at Maya. “You look pretty deep in thought there, Miss Hart.”

“You always seem to think I am,” she admits, crossing her legs and raising her eyebrows at him.

“Give it a guess. What do you think it means?”

She hums, licking her lips before lighting up with an idea. “It’s an instrument. That instrument that Lucas plays to all the cows back on the farm. You know, when he’s hanging out with his friends. Because the cows are his friends.”
Farkle doesn’t even have to turn around to know Lucas is rolling his eyes. Cory narrows his eyes. “Are you talking about a harmonica?”

“Oh, yeah, that’s right. That’s what that’s called.”

“When are you going to sick of the Texas jokes?” Lucas asks tiredly, tapping his pen against his binder.

Maya whips around, giving him a challenging look. “You really gonna tell me you don’t have a harmonica in your backpack right now?”

“No, I don’t!”

“Zay, check his bag.”

Lucas pulls his backpack away from Zay’s grasp, shoving it under his chair. Riley attempts to put the lesson back on track, clasping her hands in front of her on her desk and looking up at her father eagerly. “So, if it’s not a musical instrument, then what is it?”

Cory casts a glance to Farkle’s corner of the room. It’s become tradition for him to turn to the Smarkle Corporation every class. Although Farkle wonders why the two of them don’t just take over the school at this point, there’s a small part of him that really enjoys being needed so reliably.

He gestures offhandedly behind him, allowing his girlfriend to take the reins.

“Hamartia is a literary term. Coming originally from the Greeks, it refers to the weakness of the protagonist that ultimately leads to their downfall when they cannot overcome it. It’s classically used in all tragedies, from the Greeks to Shakespeare.”

Cory nods, opening discussion back up to the classroom with a wave of his hands. “Also known as?”

Lucas raises his hand tentatively. “Fatal flaw?”

“Very good, Mr. Friar. Fatal flaw. All of us have one. Fatal flaws have brought the greatest heroes and villains in history down to their knees.”

Maya flips her hair over her shoulder, leaning forward in her seat to object. “Haven’t we already done a whole flaws thing? Haven’t we moved past this?”

Farkle clears his throat. Back in middle school he’d pipe up whenever he knew the answer, but as he’s gotten older he’s found a lot more enjoyment in picking just the right thing to say. He usually waits for the best moment to step into the conversation—it at least makes Cory’s straight-forward lessons a little more interesting if he tries to play along with the game.

“A fatal flaw isn’t just another one of those everyday flaws like ‘nothing’ or ‘insecure.’ It’s something intrinsic, something so built into our sense of being that we don’t even recognize it as a flaw. That’s why it’s so easy to be destroyed by it.”

Cory points emphatically at Farkle, accentuating his point. “This is something that goes deeper than your surface insecurities, Maya. It requires introspection. And that’s why I want to start you all on the path as early as possible. So, with that, your assignment.”

Farkle grins. The rest of the class groans.
“Take some time this week and examine your strengths and your weaknesses. What makes you the person that you are? What would it take to take you down? Can you recognize your own hamartia? Think on it. That, as well as the assigned reading on ancient Greece. See how these things line up?”

Cory spends the rest of the class going on about Greek and Roman history, but Farkle doesn’t pay a whole lot of attention. He zones out and focuses on doodling out a periodic table on his notes, attempting to commit it to memory with repeated reinforcement.

Any time Smackle speaks up from behind him, he smirks in spite of himself and loses his train of thought. He doesn’t understand anything about emotions, and if he’s being honest he finds them frankly terrifying, but he can’t help the proud little pang in his chest whenever he thinks about her.

She’s the only person in the world with whom he’s perfectly fine being the less impressive one. That alone feels inexplicable.

--

At Topanga’s later that week, it’s obvious that the group is struggling with this assignment.

Maya leans back in the armchair and flips through a magazine, feet propped up on table without any consideration for the food sitting only a few inches away. Zay sits next to Lucas and Riley on the loveseat, chewing a pencil between his teeth and frowning at his history textbook.

“Anyone having any luck?” Smackle questions.

Maya drops the magazine on her lap, throwing her hands into the air. “You know, Mr. Matthews said so himself that this stuff can take years to figure out. How am I supposed to figure out my biggest weakness in a week?”

“What are you supposed to do if you don’t have any flaws?” Zay asks innocently. “Because that’s the real reason I’m struggling.”

Riley brushes some hair behind her ear, sitting forward and reaching to grab her laptop off the table. “Maybe that’s the point,” she suggests. She lifts her eyes to lock eyes with all of them, shrugging. “You know, my dad can be tricky like that. Maybe he doesn’t expect us to figure it out by the end of the week. Just wants us to start thinking about it.”

Farkle makes a face, catching the attention of Maya across from him. She raises an eyebrow, sitting up straighter in her seat. “What’s up with you, Farkle? What’s with the face?”

“Oh, nothing.” Maya narrows her eyes at him. Riley, Lucas, and Zay turn their attention on him expectantly, but he doesn’t go on until Smackle elbows him insistently. “Ow. Thank you, Isadora. Really, it’s nothing. I just find it funny that all of you seem to think this assignment is so difficult.”

“Most assignments are,” Maya grumbles. “Mostly because I don’t want to do them.”

Riley frowns at Farkle, tilting her head curiously. “Do you find it easy or something?”

“What doesn’t Farkle find easy?” Zay mutters, focusing back on his textbook and placing the pencil back between his teeth.

“Thanks, Zay.” Farkle smiles, holding his hands up in surrender. “I don’t think it’s particularly simple or challenging either way. It’s only funny that you all or struggling when your fatal flaws are all so painfully obvious.”
“What?” Lucas squints at him. “What are you talking about?”

“I mean, come on! I could tell all three of you your fatal flaw right here, right now. It’s written all over you. I don’t even need to be perceptive to get it.”

He can tell Riley’s processing his words, and the slight crinkle at the corner of her eyes indicates she’s not too thrilled with his assumption. But it’s Maya who jumps in first, leaning forward on her elbows with a wide grin on her face.

“You think you got us figured out? Let’s hear it. I’m so ready to hear this.”

Farkle nods appreciatively at Maya, jumping to his feet and walking around the loveseat to stand behind Zay. He reaches forward and pats his shoulders, shaking him slightly. “Zay here suffers from sarcasm as a defense mechanism. He uses humor to cover up for his genuine insecurities.”

Zay rolls his eyes. “Alright, sure, genius. How is that gonna kill me though?”

“I don’t know. Guess we’ll find out if you don’t work on it, huh?” The two of them exchange a brief stare-off, before Zay grumbles and wiggles out of his grasp.

Farkle slides on down to stand behind Lucas, taking his shoulders. “Lucas has the uniquely paradoxical flaw of being too pretty. He’s so pretty that no one is ever going to take him seriously, which is really going to suck in a few years when we’re all trying to make it or break it in this world.” Lucas frowns and tries to shake him off, but Farkle merely moves his hands to his face instead, patting his cheeks condescendingly. “There, there, face. There, there.”

Riley hops to her feet as Lucas slaps his hands away, waiting for Farkle to come around to the other side of the couch. “That’s not true. You can’t just decide what our fatal flaws are going to be.”

“I’m not deciding. I’m observing and then constructing a theory based on presented evidence. It’s the scientific method. There’s a difference.”

Lucas looks between the two of them, still a little stung from Farkle’s evaluation of him. “Yeah, but you can’t know our flaws. Only we can know them. We have to figure them out on our own. You can’t just swoop in and point them out.”

“Exactly. You can’t just become an authority on a subject that’s supposed to be introspective,” Riley argues, glancing over his shoulder at Maya. “Back me up here.”

“Sorry, honey,” she replies with a shrug, falling back against the chair. “I don’t think Farkle is necessarily wrong. Honestly, I kind of want him to tell me my flaw. Keeps me from having to do the homework myself.”

Riley bites her tongue at her best friend’s nonchalance. Farkle shrugs, crossing his arms. “Sorry, Riley. But what I’ve observed speaks for itself. When have I ever been wrong about what’s going on with you guys? I think I know what I’m talking about. And like I said, the scientific method speaks for itself. Right, Smackle?”

There’s a pause. The silence from the other side of the group causes Riley to turn around and Farkle to lean around her to lock eyes with Smackle, both of them in relative shock.

Smackle clears her throat, smoothing her skirt out anxiously. “I am sorry, Farkle. But I believe I have to side with Riley on this particular argument.”
“What?” Farkle pushes past Riley and stares at Smackle, stunned, before whipping back around to face her again. “What did you do to my girlfriend?”

“I simply agree that this problem is introspective,” Smackle says loudly, regaining all of their focus. “It’s not a homework assignment that we can get help on from one another. It’s something we have to figure out individually. It’s certainly impressive that you seem to have such a grasp on all of their personal plights, but I don’t know if that’s the correct answer or the one we’re looking for.”

“The point is that you may know us, but you don’t know everything going on inside us,” Riley states, matching Farkle’s glare when he spins back to lock eyes with her. “Just because you’re a genius doesn’t mean you’re always right.”

He scoffs, standing straighter and jutting his chin out. “The point is, Riley, that you’re practically putting your fatal flaw on display right now.”

“What? What are you talking about?”

“Naivety. It’s your greatest weakness. Goes along with that whole believing people are inherently good and all that. Hence, why you’re disagreeing with me. You’re naïve enough to believe that there’s pieces of the human nature that others can’t perceive. Thankfully, I’ve just helped you loads on your assignment. You’re welcome.”

Riley stares at him, taking a deep breath before leaning down to grab her things. “Come on.”

Lucas starts when she nudges his arm, immediately starting to gather their books. Farkle rolls his eyes. “Are you really going to storm off now? Just because you’re wrong?”

“Well, if you’re so good at recognizing our flaws, you know what your flaw is, Farkle?” she huffs, standing tall and not backing down from his inquisitive gaze. “You’re stubborn.”

“Stubborn?” Farkle laughs, shaking his head. “You think that’s a fatal flaw? A flaw grand enough to bring a god to its knees?”

“You’re stubborn. And…” she trails off, working up the courage to say what’s on her mind. “And arrogant!”

“Whoa,” Zay says, exchanging a surprised look with Maya.

Lucas shoulders his bag and picks up Riley’s off the couch. Riley narrows her eyes at Farkle for a second longer, swallowing her frustration.

“Good luck on the homework,” she says offhandedly to the group, leading the way out of the café. Lucas is right on her heels, following along like the reliable boyfriend Farkle knows he is. He kind of thinks of him like a golden retriever most days.

Right now, he just thinks emotions don’t make any sense, and he certainly doesn’t get why Riley’s so full of them over this. He sneers at the door where she disappear through, shrugging at Maya before settling back down next to Smackle.

“You guys think I’m arrogant?”

“Absolutely,” Zay says. He glances at Farkle’s flat expression. “Oh, was I supposed to say no?”

--
The further into the week they get, the more irritated each of Farkle’s friends becomes at the assignment at hand. Maya gives up entirely, choosing to believe she’s perfect instead. She claims this will go off well in class, as Cory will be proud of her for choosing self-esteem over self-deprecation. Zay decides to go with the comedy thing just to get through the week.

Riley is still icing Farkle out, and this gets to him way more than trying to figure out what to deem his own hamartia. He complains about it after school to Smackle and Maya as they’re hanging out on the sidewalk outside his place.

“I just don’t get why she’s so upset over it,” Farkle whines as Smackle holds his hands, lightly tugging him down the sidewalk as he attempts to teach himself how to skateboard. Maya made fun of him for it, but he’ll be damned if he goes to college with no other form of transport besides his own two feet. A bike is too much maintenance. A skateboard, he figures, is something he can carry around without too much of a hassle.

Besides, when he puts his mind to something, he knows he can learn anything. Skateboarding included.

“It’s self-perception,” Maya points out, reclining back against the stairs that lead up to the entrance of Minkus International. “This is Riley’s favorite sort of assignment, and you’re stealing her thunder. Not only that, but you went for Lucas’s appearance. That’s a big no-no in the Riley Matthews handbook.”

“Someone sounds bitter,” he teases.

Maya rolls her eyes. Smackle slowly lets go of Farkle’s hands and watches as he propels himself a few feet down the pavement before stumbling and tripping as the skateboard flies out from under him for the first time that afternoon. He curses and Maya breaks into laughter, shaking her head in disappointment.

Smackle stops the skateboard with her foot and picks it up, holding it out for him to take. He does, tossing Maya a glare. “Have you had enough?”

“Look, I know you two would rather be alone,” she says slyly, showing off a devious grin. “And trust me, this wasn’t my first choice for afternoon activities. But when I went to the bay window, the curtain was down. Did you guys know those curtains actually moved? I thought they were just decorative. I didn’t even bother trying to see if it was locked. I did not want to get close to it. If Riley and Lucas were hanging out and made a point of closing the curtain…”

The shudder Maya gives is motivated by genuine horror.

Farkle smirks at her disdain, but he feels a similar sense of uneasiness at the harsh reality that the dynamic of their friend group is going to shift. He doesn’t know how, and he doesn’t know quite when, but at some point in the next three years it has to shuffle and shift and grow into something new. That’s the nature of any community, and he knows he just has to handle it as best he can when it happens.

It’s likely that Lucas and Riley’s slowly evolving romantic relationship is going to be a catalyst in one way or another. Whether they intend for it to be or not is irrelevant. If locking Maya out of the bay window to spend some alone time together is the first step, Farkle is bracing himself for the meteor that’s bound to be hurtling towards their little universe any day now.

He figures he could bring this up to Maya, or reference the harsh way she’s been treating Lucas since the school year began (also a possible contender for the role of catalyst), but he chooses to
ignore it for now. He’s got bigger problems to focus on.

“Well, you’re here. So you might as well make yourself useful.” Farkle puts the skateboard back on the ground and steps onto it. He stabilizes himself on Smackle’s shoulders, before locking eyes with her and nodding towards the steps. “You take a break. Maya’s turn to do some heavy lifting.”

Smackle nods, stepping back and gesturing for Maya to take over.

She does, reluctantly getting to her feet and groaning to make it clear how much effort this requires. They link hands and she begins lugging him down the sidewalk, severely less gentler than Smackle.

“Plant your foot when you push forward. Okay, don’t break my hands here. Balance—God, Farkle, would you support yourself a little bit here?”

It takes less than a minute for Farkle to fall off the board. He shoves Maya away from him, climbing back to his feet. “Nevermind. I want Smackle back.”

“Course you do.”

Farkle scrapes the skateboard off the ground and wanders back over to the front steps, collapsing onto the them as Maya slings her backpack over her shoulder. “Look, just give Riley some time to cool off. You know she’ll get over it. She always does.”

He nods. “If it’s for her friends, she’ll do anything.”

“Exactly. So relax.” Maya walks backwards towards the subway, winking at Smackle. “Have fun trying to teach this idiot how to keep his balance.”

“Goodbye, Maya,” Smackle says with a chuckle, waving her off as she turns on her heel and disappears around the corner.

Farkle places the skateboard on the step in front of them, putting his foot on it and wheeling it back and forth absentmindedly. The two of them are quiet for a moment, not in any rush to fill the silence with conversation. It’s one thing he appreciates about Smackle—they both understand the benefit of thoughtful silence every once and a while.

“You’re always quiet when she’s around,” Farkle comments. “Maya.”

“Am I?” Smackle asks curiously. She locks eyes with him, clasping her hands together on her lap. “I’m not purposefully being that way. I suppose she’s imposing a personality enough that I feel as though I don’t need to fill the air with anymore volume. Also, she sure knows how to dominate a conversation.”

He smiles at her, leaning forward to rest his hand on top of hers. She gazes down at their hands gratefully. “She definitely does.”

Smackle removes one hand from underneath his to lay it on top, lightly ghosting her fingers over the back of his hand. Farkle examines her, for some reason getting caught on her lips. He’s been doing that a lot lately, ever since they had their first kiss a couple months back. There’s no logic behind it, no reason. But every time they kiss he gets the urge to stare at her lips a little bit longer.

Maybe if studies them long enough, he’ll discover all the secrets to emotionality. All the answers are hidden somewhere in her smile and the shades of red that color her lips.
“Farkle?” she says softly, obviously having asked him a question that he wasn’t paying attention to. He clears his throat, nodding at her to go on. “I asked whether or not you’d figured out your hamartia yet. Since you’ve spent so much time working out everyone else’s.”

“Not yet. Haven’t spent a lot of time working on it.” He forces himself to raise his gaze from her mouth to meet her eyes. “Can I ask you a question?”

“You know I love it when you do.”

He grins, adjusting slightly to face her more fully. He nearly slips on the skateboard in the process, earning a laugh from her as he kicks it out of the way. “Why did you agree with Riley? Do you really think she’s right? That we can’t see weakness in others?”

“Well, yes and no. That’s essentially two separate questions.”

“How so?”

Smackle pushes her glasses higher up on her nose, gazing out towards the park across the street. When she returns her hand to his, he gently links their fingers together. “I don’t think we’re not capable of seeing weakness in others. Certainly, that’s not true. I can make observations about your behavior and assume particular traits are a detriment rather than an asset to your overall success.”

“Yes. Thank you.”

“But I think Riley’s right in the sense that only each individual person can recognize what their own hamartia is. Like, even if you were right about Riley, or Zay, or Lucas, unless they admitted it to themselves they wouldn’t be able to see it as such. We can help one another see our weaknesses, but it’s up to the person with them to actively determine them as such.” She exhales quietly. When her eyes meet his again, her expression is quizzical. “Does that make sense?”

He knows that he’s supposed to be the people expert between the two of them, but he feels like she’s always teaching him something new. She’s rather perceptive, even if she doesn’t believe it to be true. “It does, yeah. But why is Riley so upset?”

“I don’t know about that. You’re the observer of human nature. But if I had to hypothesize, I’d say she’s probably offended that you think you can make such broad assumptions about them. This sort of assignment is deeply personal. Not to mention she has whatever you mentioned going on with Maya and Lucas, so she’s likely hypersensitive at the moment.”

Farkle nods, thinking. She’s certainly right that a lot of Riley’s frustration is probably stemming from factors that actually have very little to do with him, and she’s simply taking it out on him because it’s an available outlet. Luckily, he’s not fazed by it, but does prefer to be on good terms with Riley rather than with her giving him the cold shoulder. Considering how genuinely kind she is, getting the silent treatment from Riley stings worse than it would from others.

“So if we can help others figure out their flaws,” Farkle says slowly, tilting his head at her. “What do you think mine is?”

“Is this an appropriate conversation to have? You’re not going to get upset if I’m honest, right? You’re not going to leave.”

“I would never leave,” he assures her. It’s a phrase they’ve said back and forth more than a couple of times in many different contexts, but it holds a lot of weight between the two of them for some reason Farkle doesn’t think he’ll ever quite understand. More of that emotional nonsense. But it’s a comforting phrase for the both of them.
She breaks into a shy smile, glancing down at their hands. Farkle’s distracted by her lips again until she continues speaking.

“I don’t think Riley is necessarily wrong about the core of your weakness, but I don’t think arrogance is the right word. The term I’d use is hubris.”

“Hubris? Like pride?”

Smackle nods, choosing her words carefully as she goes on. “Pride so powerful it can bring even the most powerful of gods to their own destruction. Oedipus suffered from it, as did Achilles. There’s a common phrase that stems from it. Pride goeth before the fall. Essentially, if you’re unwilling to admit when you’re wrong, that’ll take you down before you ever get to be right in a meaningful way.”

He hates the fact that despite encouraging her to be honest, the harsh bluntness of her hypothesis stings a little bit. It didn’t bother him much when Riley accused him of being arrogant, but having Isadora Smackle think of him as prideful rubs him the wrong way. He doesn’t want her to think of him that way.


“No, no,” he says thoughtfully, patting her hand. “I think you said just the right thing. I certainly have a lot to consider before class tomorrow.”

She smiles. Giving her a tentative look, he leans forward and presses a quick kiss to her lips. When he pulls away, the smile is even wider than before. Just like holding hands and hugging, they’re warming up to the kissing thing. They’re figuring it out together.

“I didn’t even bother to ask,” he says after they’ve been silent for a few long moments, ruminating on the peck. “Have you completed the assignment?”

“Farkle, dearest, I’m me,” she says matter-of-factly. “Do you even need to ask that question?”

He laughs. “Then let me rephrase it. What do you think your fatal flaw is?”

She pauses, her expression becoming pensive. It’s quiet for a couple seconds. “No amount of intelligence felt very useful if I couldn’t properly interface with others. Back at Einstein Academy, even though I was succeeding academically, I was worried about the fact that I didn’t really understand how to get my thoughts across. And it was a little lonely. That would have eventually done my future a great disservice, I think.”

She sighs, adjusting her glasses again out of habit. They lock eyes again and she smiles at the affectionate beam on his face.

Her grip tightens on his hand. “That’s why I love spending time with you and Riley so much. All of them, really. I figure, everything I learn from you all is helping me overcome that. I’m already well on my way to overcoming my hamartia.”

Farkle swallows, unsettled by the way his heart is pounding in his chest and the way his ears feel hot. But he sort of likes the feeling too. “I’m glad you like spending time with me.”

“I always have.”

He scoots closer to her, allowing her to link her arm around his and rest her head on his shoulder. They settle into contemplative silence again, Farkle placing his foot back on the skateboard and
rolling it absentmindedly back and forth on the first step.

--

In class on Friday morning, the moment the bell rings Farkle is on his feet and heading towards the blackboard.

Cory places his hands on his hips. “I haven’t even asked a question yet.”

“Farkle time, sir,” he says determinedly, grabbing the chalk from the tray and giving Cory a resolute look. “It’s important.”

For all his teaching tricks, Cory has never been one to argue against Farkle time. He raises his hands in surrender, wandering to the side of the classroom and leaning against the windowsill. Farkle catches Maya and Riley exchange a look as he turns to write a word on the board underneath hamartia. Once he’s finished, he wipes the chalk dust from his hands and comes to stand in the front of the room, as they always do when they’re giving a report.

“Hubris. Pride so powerful it brought down some of the greatest heroes in history. If I have a fatal flaw, this would be it.”

Smackle gives him an inspiring smile. He clears his throat and steps forward to stand in front of Riley’s desk, waiting for her to make eye contact with him.

“Standing up here and doing this, especially in front of the whole class, is killing me. Believe me when I say that. But I know it needs to be done.” Farkle takes a deep breath, not breaking his gaze. “I was wrong. I’m not always right. And I think the first step to overcoming my own hamartia, rather than being destroyed by it, is to acknowledge that my friendships are more important than my sense of ego preservation.”

After a long moment of examining him, Riley breaks into a satisfied grin. “Thank you. I know that was hard for you.”

Cory comes up next to him, patting his back supportively. “Looks like you’re on the right track, Farkle. Take a seat.”

He does, sliding back into his desk. He feels Smackle tap the back of his head, grinning instinctively and swiveling around to face her. She blows him a kiss.

“How about the rest of you? How did the assignment go? Riley? Maya?” He makes his way down the aisle, stopping amidst the six of them. “Lucas?”

“I’m not sure, sir,” Lucas admits. He glances around at the rest of the class, folding his hands together. “I couldn’t figure it out in time.”

A few other students nod in agreement. Zay shrugs apathetically.

Cory leans forward and touches the edge of his desk, raising his eyebrows. “You know what? That’s okay. It’s okay that you don’t know yet.”

“Oh, thank God,” Maya exhales. “Getting a failing grade for an assignment I actually tried on was going to be a rough experience.”

Cory shoots her an amused glare, straightening back up and heading back towards the front of the classroom. “As I said, this isn’t necessarily something you can discover in a week’s time. It takes
years, decades sometimes. A whole lot of self-evaluation. But I wanted to get you all started on the path now, because once you do discover it, the awareness that comes with it can give you a whole new perspective on things.”

“But what if it destroys us?” Riley asks, insecurity coloring her features. “What if it destroys us before we can figure it out?”

“It won’t. Because you have a whole classroom of friends here who are going to help you figure it out before it comes to that. Even though it’s an introspective process, you don’t have to tackle it alone.”

Riley absorbs this, glancing over her shoulder to glance at Lucas and Maya. The six of them exchange knowing smirks. Just as they’ve tackled everything else that’s come at them so far, they’ll handle their fatal flaws together. Farkle knows this, even if he’ll have to sacrifice a little bit of pride along the way.

The morning after the meteorite hits them that summer, Farkle heads to the bay window to check in on Riley. Considering what he’d heard from Maya the night before, he figures it’s within his best interest to get her side of the story.

The curtain isn’t drawn when he climbs up the fire escape and kneels in front of the bay window, tapping against the glass. Riley appears from the other side of the room where the door is, opening the pane and stepping back to let him climb in.

“Hey,” Farkle says casually, hopping into the seat and looking around. “Lucas here?”

“Uh, no,” she replies distractedly, wandering over to the bed and straightening out the covers in a nervous fashion. “He’s coming over later.”

“Ah.”

Riley settles down on the edge of the bed, twiddling with the jellybean necklace around her neck. She chews her lip, only lifting her eyes to look at him after the silence becomes unbearable. They have a tacit exchange, sort of mentally catching up to everything that has happened in the past twenty-four hours.

Her lower lip trembles. “I’m assuming Maya told you.”

“She visited, yes.”

Riley opens her mouth to speak, but nothing comes out. Farkle gets up from his spot in the bay window and joins her on the bed, wrapping an arm around her shoulders bracingly. She exhales shakily, wiping her eyes frantically.

“I didn’t think she was going to just walk out,” she croaks, trying very hard not to cry.

Farkle tightens his arm around her in a side hug. “Maya’s got to figure out her own stuff now. Based on what she told me and what I witnessed all year, I don’t think you’re necessarily in the wrong. You made a decision, even worse that it was one you shouldn’t have been forced to make. Now, both of you have to live with it and see how it pans out. She’s just hurt because she thinks you’re choosing Lucas over her.”

“But that’s not what this is!” Riley snaps, throwing her hands up in the air before dropping them
back against her legs. “I’m not choosing either of them over the other. I’m just trying to balance them both, but she’s made it this thing where it’s either/or. I never wanted it to be that way.”

“I know that.”

“And when I told her last night, it wasn’t about choosing Lucas. It was…” She takes a long, calming breath. Regardless, her voice still cracks when she continues. “I couldn’t let her dominate my relationship with Lucas. And it wasn’t fair of her to be so mean to him all year.”

“I know that, too.”

She sighs, hiding her head in her hands. Farkle is genuinely sorry to see things panning out this way, even though he’s not surprised. If anyone deserved to be spared of emotional turmoil, it would be Riley Matthews without a doubt.

“I still love her. She’s still my best friend. But she doesn’t seem to think that’s possible.”

“She just needs space,” Farkle says diplomatically. “To be honest, I think this separation will be good for the two of you. Give you time to figure both of yourselves out. Then, when you come back together—,”

“What if we don’t?”

“When you come back together,” Farkle repeats, assuaging her concerns with emphasis. “You’ll be able to talk things out. Look at it with a clear head. Come out stronger than you were before. If I’ve learned anything about emotions in the last few years, that would be my best hypothesis.”

Riley glances at him, smiling gratefully at him despite the dewy look in her eyes. She leans her head on his shoulder. Farkle is very aware of how different the gesture feels coming from her rather than Smackle. With Riley, it’s commonplace. When it’s Isadora, it’s far more significant.

He still doesn’t understand how a person can make an identical action feel so dissimilar.

“You know,” Farkle says briskly, aiming for a change of subject. “I think I figured out your hamartia.”

Riley pulls away from him, giving him a warning glare. “You’re not going to lecture me, are you? I’m not in the mood.”

“No. I’m just offering guidance this time. Not trying to teach you a lesson.” When her guard lowers and her features soften again, he continues. “Altruism.”

“Definition, please? Could you use it in a sentence?”

“Altruism. Noun. The belief in selflessness and putting others needs before your own.” Farkle watches as realization dawns on her. With the meaning, she suddenly understands exactly why he brought it up. It’s obvious she’s familiar with the term. “You’re one of the best friends I’ve ever known, Riley. You always put us before yourself. The whole Texas debacle is one thing. You tearing yourself apart to keep both Lucas and Maya happy while she’s waging war against him is another. You’d set yourself on fire just to keep the rest of us warm.”

A tear manages to slip down her cheek. She wipes it away furiously with the heel of her hand. “What’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing. It’s a good thing. So is pride, in a lot of ways. But too much of it can destroy you. That’s
where the ‘fatal’ comes into fatal flaw. You burn yourself up to give us warmth, but you melt away in the process. Don’t melt away, Riley.”

She exhales with a laugh. The smile she offers him is strained. “I’ll try.”

“Don’t worry. I think with this whole thing with Maya, you’re on the right track. Standing up for yourself is the first step.” He returns her smile. “Hopefully, you and I both are well on our way to tackling our hamartia.”

The hug she gives him is full of warmth. More of the firelight she’s burning herself up to produce.

As he’s climbing out the bay window, she leans out after him. “Farkle?”

“Riley?”

She hesitates. “You’ll keep an eye on Maya, right?”

It’s not even a question. Farkle nods sharply. “I will.”

He climbs down the fire escape, grabbing the skateboard he stashed in the bushes and stepping back onto the sidewalk. Slapping the board on the ground in front of him, he starts a tentative roll towards the subway station. He’s still a beginner, but he’s learning the ropes.

Bracing himself for the worst, he skates down the sidewalk towards the uncertain prospects of the year ahead. In the midst of the world boiling around them in the aftermath of the meteorite, he’s determined that they’re going to make it out alive.

- J U N I O R Y E A R -

Junior year is the year Farkle Minkus learns about perception.

He’s always considered himself a rather discerning person, and seeing how his friends always get miffed at how well he can figure them all out he knows he’s got some knack for it. But as the prequel to senior year begins and everything gets harder—classes, relationships, maintaining some semblance of sanity—Farkle decides he wants to explore as many different perspectives as he can.

So when Maya and Zay invite him along to the latest party at Wyatt’s, he certainly doesn’t say no.

Even though he has Riley’s nagging voice in his head the first time he takes a drag from the communal joint of marijuana (“There’s absolutely no way that’s sanitary, what if you get mono?”), he manages to convince himself that he’s just experimenting. That’s what they’re supposed to do while they’re young, after all.

By the time he actually starts to feel any effects he’s thinking about how if the Beatles had never tried weed, then Abbey Road probably wouldn’t exist, or Revolver, not to mention Dark Side of the Moon. If Pink Floyd can get stoned and find some dazzling musical genius waiting in the back of their heads, then Farkle figures there’s something locked away in the back of his brain just screaming to be unlocked. If drugs are going to do the trick to get it free, so be it.

Although nothing brilliant suddenly dawns on him like a great epiphany, he finds the trip fun for the most part and isn’t hesitant to tag along with Maya and Zay to more parties in the future. In some ways, it feels nice to be included in the hubbub of the popular scene. When he hangs out with the two of them, there’s always something exciting and crazy happening. It’s never boring, to say the least.
He also spends a lot of time at home in his room, sparking up in an attempt to perfect the craft and be able to use it when he needs a blast of inspiration. It becomes sort of a pattern for him—he drops Smackle off, heads home, puts on Beck and zones out. Waiting for the epiphany. Waiting for something extraordinary to happen.

All that aside, however, he’s still keeping up on his schoolwork and maintaining his promise to Riley. He’s always got one eye on Maya at every party they go to, making sure she doesn’t push it too far. He doesn’t know exactly what’s going on with Brett Ryan, but Zay assures him that nothing too serious has happened and that he’ll keep informed in case something does.

Surprisingly, though, Riley doesn’t seem too preoccupied with Maya’s shenanigans. If Farkle’s perception hasn’t been skewed too badly by the drugs, he’s pretty sure she seems to be spending a lot more time worrying about Lucas. Which doesn’t make sense, because he seems fine to him.

In AP Biology that afternoon, Farkle jots down some notes for another class while daydreaming about what the party at Sarah’s is going to be like that evening. He only looks up when Smackle elbows him, nodding eagerly towards the front of the room.

“Tests. Tests are coming back.”

“Oh, nice,” Farkle says, giving Lucas a smirk across from him. “Hoffman’s probably giving them back a little early so we can use them to study for the midterm. You know, presuming we’d need to study.”

“Ha,” Lucas says, looking immediately back down at his binder.

Farkle grins pleasantly at Hoffman as he hands them their tests, flipping his over to glance at his grade. Perfect score, just as he expected. He exchanges a look with Smackle, who smiles as well and shows off her hundred percent.

“How’d you do, Lucas?” Smackle asks, watching as Lucas stuffs the test into the folder of his binder.

“How?” He crumbles the edges as he rushes to put it away. “Oh, fine. You know, whatever.”

Farkle leans forward to pull the exam from the binder pocket but Lucas yanks it out of his reach. He raises his eyebrows at him. “Come on, let us see.”

“It’s my test. I don’t have to show you if I don’t want to.”

“This is like the third test you’ve refused to show us. Come on.”

Smackle watches with slight amusement as Farkle practically launches himself over the lab tables, Lucas dangling the binder just out of his reach. He raises his eyebrows at him. “Come on, let us see.”

“It’s my test. I don’t have to show you if I don’t want to.”

“This is like the third test you’ve refused to show us. Come on.”

Smackle watches with slight amusement as Farkle practically launches himself over the lab tables, Lucas dangling the binder just out of his reach. “Really, Lucas. There’s no shame in getting good grades. I know you’re modest, but you’re among friends. We should share in each other’s successes.”

“It’s okay, I’m fine being modest. We’ll stick with that.”

The bell rings, releasing them for the day. Lucas darts from his chair the moment he can, leaving Smackle and Farkle to pack up on their own. They join hands as they head out into the hallway, sauntering towards the front lobby where they always meet up with the others to walk to the subway.

“What are your weekend plans?” Smackle asks, grinning a little bit when he drops his head down
slightly to listen to her better. Although he knows her height is something she’s a bit insecure about, he enjoys the fact that she seems to find their height difference a positive in their relationship rather than a negative.

He hums. “Maya, Zay, and I are going to this thing at Sarah’s tonight. Then, Saturday afternoon, I have this executive lunch with my father. He’s meeting with all these sponsors from the east coast chains to try and strike up some partnerships. Figure I should if I want to inherit the family business someday.”

“Sarah? Why Sarah?”

“Location, mostly.” They stroll to a stop under the giant clock on the wall of the lobby. Farkle leans back against the wall and brushes some hair behind Smackle’s ear. He can’t help but think about what Zay asked him earlier in the day—about whether or not Smackle actually minds him going out to party every weekend. She’s never said anything, but now that she’s asking he can’t help but wonder. “You know, I could use a companion for the luncheon. My dad said I could bring a guest.”

Smackle smiles bashfully, raising an eyebrow interestedly. “I’m assuming you have someone in mind?”

“I guess,” he says teasingly, feeling a weird flutter in his chest as Smackle reaches up to straighten out the collar of his jacket. “Depends on whether she wants to spend an entire afternoon with her intellectual inferior.”

“I am fairly certain there is nothing she would rather spend an afternoon doing.” After a moment, Smackle glances around them and leans in close to whisper. “We are talking about me, right?”

Farkle laughs, closing the space between them to give her a peck on the lips.

Maya and Zay approach just as they’re pulling apart, making an assortment of disgusted noises. “Please, we’re just children,” Maya whines. “Spare us.”

Things get out of hand at Sarah’s studio rager, and although he doesn’t know all the details Farkle can tell it’s bad by the way things shape up over the next few days.

Smackle is rather short with him at the luncheon, but they’re constantly being accosted by rich executive friends of his father and he hardly has the chance to pull her aside and talk to her about it. It’s not until they’re heading home and he’s walking her back to her apartment that he finally gets the opportunity to confront her about it.

They stand in front of the steps to her door. She clears her throat, giving him a tight smile and squeezing his hand. “Thank you for inviting me. I had a wonderful time.”

“You’re welcome.” He leans forward to press a kiss to her cheek, noticing when she doesn’t immediately smile like she usually does. She starts to pull her hand away but he holds on tight. “Wait. Is something wrong?”

“No. Why would something be wrong?”

“You’ve been cold like this entire afternoon. Metaphorically, not literally. You barely said more than fifteen words to me the whole lunch.” She drops her gaze down to the floor, avoiding eye contact. He dips his head down to get her attention again. “Did I do something wrong?”
“No. Not exactly.”

He blinks. “Not exactly? What are you talking about?”

“Do you not remember last night? Anything that happened last night?”

A wave of uncertainty rushes through him like electricity. They’re parlaying into emotional territory, the one area of expertise he hasn’t mastered and doesn’t trust himself to handle properly. And the fact of the matter is, he has no idea what she’s referring to. He was so stoned last night, he doesn’t remember when he left the party or even if Maya and Zay got home okay.

“What are you talking about?”

Smackle bites her lip anxiously, guiding him to the stairs so that they can sit. She still avoids his eyes, staring at the railing over his shoulder instead. “I don’t know all the details about everyone else, but something definitely went down last night. Riley called me last night saying that Lucas hadn’t answered her in a while. But he didn’t go to the party with you all, or at least I thought, so I called you to see if you knew where he was.”

Farkle swallows, horror setting in. “You called me?”

“Yes. I suppose maybe I shouldn’t have.”

“Did I…” Farkle isn’t sure he wants to know the answer to his question. “Did I answer?”

“You did. You sounded very far-off, though. I’m assuming that would be the intoxication speaking.”

“Oh my God.” He doesn’t like the way his palms are sweating. “I didn’t… I didn’t say anything bad, did I?”

“Oh, no,” she assures him, patting his hand tentatively. “As I said, you didn’t do anything. It was just… weird. Talking to you, but not really talking to you. I don’t know, it doesn’t make a lot of logical sense to me either.”

He doesn’t know what to say. Smackle finally meets his eyes, giving him a soft smile.

“I don’t think there’s anything inherently wrong with experimenting, Farkle. I think in some ways, it’s something we’re supposed to do. I don’t want you to feel like you’ve done something wrong. Especially if you enjoy it.” She hesitates, dropping her eye contact again as she stumbles over her words. “I just miss you. That’s all.”

He hardly has time to process all of what he’s just been told when she leans forward to kiss his cheek, getting to her feet and removing her hand from his. “See you on Monday.”

She leaves him sitting on the steps alone, feeling closer to an epiphany than the weed ever got him. But he’s not liking the taste of realization.

--

Come Monday, it’s definitely apparent that something went down on Friday night.

Maya and Zay aren’t saying anything, but both of them are shaken and not talking excitedly about any future weekend activities. Zay outright refuses to speak on the subject, claiming that he just went a little too hard and there’s nothing more to discuss. But it’s not really the two of them that
sets off alarm bells in his head.

It’s the fact that Lucas is sporting more than a couple bruises and a busted lip, and no one seems to have any clue where he got them. Not even Riley.

Of course, Wyatt has the rumor mill churning by third period that afternoon, but Farkle knows the best way to get the facts is to go to the closest primary source. He knows Lucas won’t talk, so he corners Maya in the hallway before lunch hour.

“I know you know what happened to Lucas,” Farkle demands, using his height to his advantage to block Maya’s escape routes as she tries to dash away from him. He may be lanky, but he’s got six feet of nerve and gangly limbs to help him catch her if she fakes him out.

She rolls her eyes, moving to sidestep him but he’s quicker. “Whatever goes on with Lucas is his business. If he’s fighting that’s not my problem.”

“It is your problem. Partially because you know why it happened, I know you do. But also because if something is happening to Lucas, it’s happening to all of us. That’s the way we work. You know this.”

“When was the last time we were actually a group?” Maya snaps, locking eyes with him. Despite the harsh demeanor, he knows she’s still stinging from the fallout last summer and that’s where the anger stems from. “Look, if Lucas wanted people to know why he looks like the stunt double from a bad remake of *Rocky*, he’d tell them. So why don’t you go ask him?”

“Maya,” he says insistently, taking her arms to keep her from squirming away. He waits for her to meet his eyes. “I don’t have to be a genius to figure out that whatever happened to him has to do with the fact that you and Zay keep getting wilder and wilder every time you go out. I know this is all just fun and games to you. But don’t you think maybe things are getting a little bit out of hand?”

She blinks at him, torn between tearing down her walls and putting up more defenses. The moment her brow furrows, Farkle knows he’s lost her and she’s going for the latter.

Maya wrenches out of his grasp, backing a bit down the hallway. “You’re really telling me about going too far? Really, Farkle?” She laughs, shaking her head. “Why should I take advice from you?”

“Because I’m your friend.”

“So? You’re the last person I should take advice from. You’re just... you’re just a pothead!”

Although he promised himself to remain rational, this dig from one of his closest friends hurts in a way he wasn’t anticipating. He swallows, straightening his posture and jutting his chin out. “If that’s what you think, then fine.”

Maya stares at him, absorbing the recoil from her own words. She shakes her head again, starting to back away. “I’m just gonna go. I’m gonna walk away.”

Farkle watches her go. “I’m just looking out for you, Maya.”

She glances at him over her shoulder. Her eyes are dangerously bright.

“I can take care of myself.”

With that, she stalks around the corner and disappears from view. Farkle has to wonder if he’ll ever
see her again, or if she’ll take that stride out of his life for good. It’s Maya. He could never be completely certain one way or the other.

--

When the weekend rolls around, Farkle doesn’t go to the parties popping up all around the city. He doesn’t answer the inquisitive text from Zay asking whether or not he’s going to turn out. He lays on his bed and stares at the constellations on his ceiling, trying to figure out how to move forward and where he goes from here.

The stars always know where they’re supposed to go. They follow a clear path, determined by the cosmos and gravity and not by their own free will. Farkle supposes he’s the lucky one, able to carve out his own path. But as far as junior year is concerned, it doesn’t feel like a very nice burden to carry.

Breaking his resolve, Farkle jumps to his feet and grabs his jacket and keys. Heading out the door with his skateboard, he goes straight for the subway and tries to let gravity pull him in the direction he needs to go. When he emerges from the station and walks a little ways down the street, he finds himself standing just where he figured he’d end up.

Right outside the Matthews apartment building.

He uses the age old trick of claiming he’s the pizza guy to get someone else to buzz him in, because he’s not completely sure he’s not going to get to their front door and then bolt at the last second. He did sort of ditch Riley in favor of Maya, and even though he knows she doesn’t mind he doesn’t feel all that great about it.

He knocks at the door anyway.

When Riley pulls open the door, she looks genuinely shocked to see him standing there. Her eyes are wide with surprise. “Farkle? What are you doing here?”

“Hello to you too,” he mumbles. Glancing over her shoulder, he sees Lucas and Smackle sitting at the dining table just like he assumed they’d be. Smackle whips around to lock eyes with him, just as surprised as Riley. “Can I come in?”

She steps back without hesitation, gesturing for him to walk in. He does, making his way over to the table and plopping down on the bench next to Smackle. It’s silent for a long moment as Riley makes her way back, sitting back down next to Lucas.

Farkle stares at the biology books on the table in front of them, notes spread out. He glances at Smackle’s, somewhat messy but distinguishable enough. Across from hers, Lucas’s are neatly organized but smudged with eraser dustings. He must’ve erased certain words like a thousand times.

He never takes notes. He wonders if maybe he should.

“Farkle?” Smackle prods, sensing he’s there for a reason.

“I’ve been out of it this year,” he admits, barreling through the emotions like he always does. It’s hard to say, so he just rushes through it and hopes for the best. “I know that. I think I got what I needed out of the experience, and it was worth it overall. But I’ve learned what I needed to learn.”

Riley tilts her head at him, smiling lightly. “All done experimenting?”
“Experimenting? Never. And sorry Riley, but I like weed. I’m not gonna apologize for that.” She giggles at him. “But I don’t think I need to dedicate my entire year to it. Think I’m ready to come back home.”

Smackle nudges him slightly, getting him to look at her. “Why did you come here?”

He examines her for a long moment, casting a glance at Lucas and Riley before breaking into a smirk. He drapes his arm around her shoulder. “I just miss you. That’s all.”

There’s nothing scientific about it, but he decides that her smile is his favorite thing in the world. Marijuana is one thing, but Isadora Smackle is something else.

“What about Zay?” Lucas asks, breaking his silence. Focusing on him, it’s still somewhat of a jolt to see the healing bruises on his face. But underneath the now tougher-looking exterior, the soft concern of the Lucas Farkle knows very well is still obviously apparent. “I mean, is he okay?”

“And Maya.”

Farkle bites his lip, placing his hand on the table and tapping his fingers. “I don’t know what’s going on with them,” he admits. “But they’ve got each other. I can assure you of that.”

Riley locks eyes with Lucas, bringing her hand up to take his on the table in front of them. Normally, this sort of public display of affection would warrant a comment of some kind, but Farkle keeps quiet. He knows they’re both really struggling with being apart from their best friends. No matter how necessary it is for the four of them.

She turns her eyes to him. “You’ll still watch out for her. Right? As best as you can?”

It’s not even a question. Farkle nods. “I will. Always.”

Riley’s smile is soft. She kicks him lightly under the table—a gesture of thanks.

Farkle allows Smackle to scoot closer to him, leaning forward to pull the notes towards him. “So, what are we working on? Single-celled organisms? Mitosis? Didn’t realize this was a big old study session.”

“You don’t have to help,” Lucas says quickly, trying to avoid the subject.

Farkle lifts his head to meet his eyes, making him hold his gaze. “If you need help, you can tell me. I’ll help you study. We’ll get you to pass this class. You have my word on that, and I’m as good as my word.”

Smackle nods. “He’s pretty good on his word.”

Lucas hesitates, only betraying a small smile after a long moment of uncertainty. “Thanks.”

“Of course. Now, let’s get cracking. Someone get me a coffee. This is going to be a long night.”

--

Farkle is grateful that by the time the summer before senior year is staring them in the face, the group manages to find their way back together again. He had the feeling they would in the end—stars always know where they’re supposed to go—but it’s a relief when it seems as though everything is going to be back to the way things were. Only better, because they’ve grown.

It wasn’t easy or smooth-sailing, of course. He doesn’t know the details, but whatever that went on
with Lucas and made him disappear back to Texas to a month threw Riley and Zay through a real loop. He and Smackle don’t spend too much obsessing over it the way Maya does—they both know that whatever Lucas did, he had a serious reason for doing so. He’d come back when he was ready. Farkle believed in that, if nothing else.

And come back he did. The day that Farkle came by to check on Riley and saw the bay window curtain closed, he figured he had to have finally returned. He sent a text to Riley asking if Lucas was okay and left it at that. He’d see them soon enough.

Once all of the drama from the previous year seemed to have been resolved, all there was left was the last year of their high school careers just beyond the horizon. And with that thought in mind, Farkle makes a point of crossing off any last minute things he wants to do while he’s here, with these people, in this place they’ve been practically their whole lives.

One of those last minute things is getting Lucas Friar high.

“You can’t go into college with absolutely no experience,” Zay argues as they’re sitting on the floor in Farkle’s room. “Like, I get it, you don’t want to party. You don’t trust alcohol. I get that, I do. But you can’t go into college with nothing to show for it because what happens when you eat a pot brownie and don’t realize it? I can’t spend my entire college career worrying about you, man. Because you know I will.”

Lucas, arms wrapped around his knees and looking about as closed off as he can possibly managed, gives Zay a deadpan look. “You absolutely will not. You’ll be too busy chasing down whatever girls will give you the time of day.”

“Hey, now.”

Farkle snorts, finishing up rolling the joint and giving Zay a sympathetic look. “Don’t take it personally. You know how Lucas gets when he’s nervous.”

“I’m not nervous.”

“I’m not nervous. I’m not afraid of anything! Let’s go Charlie Gardner, let me destroy you at the couples game!”

Farkle cracks up. Lucas shoves Zay lightly and he holds his hands up in surrender. Once they’ve stopped kicking at each other, Farkle grabs his lighter from the floor next to him and lights the joint, taking the first drag. “It’s not scary, Lucas. I promise. You’re just here with me and Zay, and they say you should experiment with this stuff in a safe space. What safer space is there than the two of us?”

Zay nods in agreement, giving Lucas an encouraging smile. “We’re here for you, man. We just want you to try it.”

“This is peer pressure.”

“Yes, it is. Well spotted.”

Farkle takes another drag, exhaling and raising his eyebrows. “You know I can do smoke rings.”

“I don’t believe you. That’s some bullshit.”

He takes one more drag and exhales the smoke in as creative a way as he possibly can. Lucas looks mildly horrified. Zay just looks miffed. “Alright. Okay, show off, we get it.”
Farkle holds out the joint for Lucas to take. “Your turn.”

He looks back and forth between the two of them, Zay’s excited nod finally breaking him. “Fine, fine.”

Farkle and Zay cheer, applauding him as he makes an attempt to take a first puff. It takes him a minute to figure out how to do it and Zay is already cackling at his expense. When he finally inhales he immediately starts coughing, covering his mouth and grimacing.

“Oh, listen to those baby coughs. So pure and clean,” Farkle jokes.

Zay whips the joint from his fingers, leaning back and getting a hit of his own. “Look at him. He looks like a dog when it’s eaten something sticky and can’t get the taste out of its mouth.”

It’s a surprisingly accurate description. Lucas is sitting there, squinting in distaste and licking his lips repeatedly. “That’s disgusting. That was so gross.”

“Oh, you get used to it,” Farkle comments. Zay hums in agreement, taking another hit.

Lucas glares at him, before lunging forward and taking the joint back. “Give me that.”

They laugh and whoop again as Lucas takes another drag, even though he looks as though he’d rather throw up. But he pushes through, shaking his head disdainfully. “When is this supposed to work, exactly?”

“Give it a little time, dude,” Farkle says sagely, returning the joint back to his possession. “Give it time.”

Time given, by the time all of them are actually somewhat under the influence Lucas turns out to be surprisingly talkative. He goes off on a tangent about horses for about five minutes before they somehow get the topic back on the girls. Zay hasn’t stopped chuckling for the last ten minutes.

Lucas leans his head back against the side of the bed, exhaling loudly. “I just cannot believe like… Can you believe there was a legitimate love triangle in our friend group? We lived a love triangle.”

“Um, you lived a love triangle,” Farkle corrects him. “Keep me out of that nonsense.”

“But listen,” he says urgently, sitting up and reaching out to pat Farkle’s arm to get his attention. “Like, listen. The wildest thing is like, how much of the triangle didn’t make any sense? Like, Maya didn’t care about me half the time, really, and we know I didn’t care about her. So what were we really doing anyway? And then all the bullshit that followed in sophomore year with Riley, it’s just like…”

He stops talking abruptly, his jaw dropping open slightly. Zay and Farkle exchange a concerned look, both slapping his arms to shake him out of it. “What?”

“Oh my God!” Lucas shouts, shifting restlessly from his spot on the floor and pointing to himself. His eyes are wider than Farkle has ever seen them. “I wasn’t the point in the triangle. Riley was! The triangle was about Riley! Me versus Maya for Riley!”

Farkle isn’t completely sure this statement is true, but Lucas delivers the truth bomb with such gusto that it’s hard not to believe it. That, and the drugs.

“This is a god damn breakthrough!” Zay yells.
Lucas slumps back against the bed again, completely dumbstruck by his epiphany. Farkle is a little jealous he still hasn’t had his mind-blowing realization yet, but he hopes it’s a little more groundbreaking than this one.

All the sudden, Lucas sits up and rummages through his pocket. “You know what I wanna do? I wanna call Riley.”

Farkle immediately tries to stop him. “Are you sure you wanna—?”

Zay lunges forward and slaps Farkle’s hand away, an entertained gleam in his eyes. “Let him do it. Please, let him call Riley.”

Lucas is already dialing the number, lifting the phone to his ear and leaning back against the bed again. He gives the two of them an impatient look, tapping his feet against the floor. “Fuck, why does this thing just ring forever?”

“That’s how a phone works.”

Zay snorts. “Put it on speaker. Put it on speaker now.”

“Riley? Hey,” Lucas says, his entire face lighting up at her voice. Farkle figures he’d light up at Riley no matter how much influence he was put under. He makes a mental note to draft an experiment. “I just had the biggest realization. You’re never going to believe this.”

There’s a pause as Riley responds on the other end. Zay kicks at Lucas, mouthing for him to put the phone on speaker.

Lucas shoves him off, making an effort to fumble with the phone and put it on speaker. “Fuck, why is this so hard to use,” he mutters, finally managing to hit the right button.

“What?” Riley’s voice echoes through the room. “Lucas, are you okay?”

“Am I okay?” he asks loudly. “Riley, I’m good. I’m so good. I’m so good! How are you? Are you okay? You doing okay?”

“I’m fine,” she says slowly. “You said you had a realization?”

“Did I?” Lucas lays the phone on the floor, flopping onto his stomach and propping his chin on his hand. “I can’t even fucking remember. But listen. Listen.”

“I’m listening.”

“Okay, but, listen.” Lucas takes a deep breath, obviously trying to formulate some very important thought into words. “Oh my God, I love you.”

Zay is trying very hard not to laugh out loud. He hides his head in his sweatshirt, physically shaking from silent hysterics.

“Like, I’m in love with you. Holy shit.”

Riley is silent for a long moment. “I love you, too. Are you sure you’re okay?”

Lucas presses his hand to his forehead, legitimately overwhelmed with the topic at hand. He shakes his head, speechless. Farkle isn’t completely sure he’s not about to cry. “You’re just like… you’re like a sheep. You’re a soft, little sheep.”
“Um, okay. Thank you?”


Marijuana and secondhand embarrassment is truly a combination like no other. Farkle covers his mouth and tucks his forehead against his knee, trying to keep quiet. Zay is practically losing it, curled up on the floor and crying from holding back his laughter.

“Lucas? You’d tell me if you weren’t okay, right?”

“Of course I would!” Lucas sits up, cradling the phone in his hand and collapsing back against the bed once more. He kind of looks like he wants the hug the phone, as if it’ll be the same as hugging her. “Riley, I would never keep something from you. Not anymore. Listen. I have to go. But I love you. Okay? You know that? I love you.”

“I know that. I love you, too.”


Riley barely gets a goodbye in before he hangs up, tossing the phone on the ground and releasing a loud sigh. He clasps his hands together and stares at the wall for a long moment, completely deadpan. Farkle is the first one to break the silence.

“You called her a sheep.”

Lucas glances at him. “I did.”

Immediately, the three of them burst into hysterical laughter. Farkle has an epiphany in that moment—not a grand one, not the realization, but he realizes that no matter happens in the future he’s got this group. They’re his constellation, and they’re always going to lead him in the right direction eventually.

Nothing like a little experimentation in perception to make an important discovery.

-S E N I O R  Y E A R -

Senior year is the year Farkle Minkus learns about loss.

He gets the logistics of it, obviously. Something you once had, you no longer have. It’s taken from you, in one way or another. The absence of something that once felt permanent. He understand what loss is, he knows the definition, there’s not exactly a whole lot to learn.

Back at the end of junior year, he can remember poking fun at Lucas when he got so upset over one of his twenty-four houses passing away. Not an outright jab, considering the sensitive subject matter, but it did seem a little ridiculous to be so distraught over an animal that he hadn’t seen in over three years.

Besides, emotions have never been Farkle’s thing, and he figures loss is sort of one of those things that’s steeped dangerously in them. Not something he wants to get into.

But loss certainly wants to come after him. It comes when he’s least expecting it, while he’s dragged to their senior year homecoming game by the rest of the group.

They’re deep in the student section, Lucas, Riley, Maya, and Zay decked out in their best red attire and cheering at the top of their lungs. Smackle is next to him, dressed normally but sporting a red
headband for some semblance of belonging. The marching band is conveniently right next to them on the bleachers, so it’s impossible to hear anything. It’s a miracle any of them aren’t deaf.

Also a miracle is the fact that Farkle feels his phone vibrate in his pocket at all. He pulls it out, seeing his father light up on the caller ID and lifting the phone to his ear. “Hello?”

“Farkle, are you—?”

Something happens on the field and cheers erupt from the student body around him. He scowls, squeezing his way through the crowd and heading towards the stairs of the bleachers. “What? I can’t hear you.”

“You need to—!” Another roar from the student section. “Something—!”

Farkle leaps off the last step and treads off the main path where game patrons are filing in and out. The band blares the fight song. He has to plug his other ear with his finger to have even a chance of catching anything his dad is saying.

“Dad, I can’t hear you. What’s going on?”

“Farkle, your grandfather just passed away. You need to come home immediately. Right now.”

He almost drops the phone. It almost slips from his fingers onto the dirt at his feet. The band suddenly doesn’t sound so loud anymore. It seems kind of far away. His hands feel numb. There’s this lump in the back of his throat, and he feels a little bit like he’s having a heart attack.

Before he knows it, a hand clamps on his shoulder and suddenly Lucas, Riley, and Smackle are around him. He must look messed up if they spotted his expression from all the way up the bleachers.

Riley steps in front of him, saying something to him. He doesn’t catch it right away. He’s pretty sure he hasn’t hung up the phone yet.

“Farkle? What’s wrong?”

“I have to go,” he chokes out. He wiggles out of Lucas’s grasp and slides between Riley and Smackle, shaking his head slightly. “I have to get home. I have to go.”

The three of them watch him go, but don’t make any move to stop him.

Your grandfather passed away.

The words rattle around in his skull, but for some reason his brain won’t process them. His genius brain, capable of anything, suddenly isn’t working.

--

It’s a tough week in the immediate aftermath of hearing the news.

Riley and Maya are surprised to hear that he and his grandfather were so close, but Smackle doesn’t seem surprised. She points out that he’s always very protective of the things that are very important to him—he doesn’t like to share them. To her, it’s no shock at all that he’s so torn up over this.

Still, it’s a shock to him. It’s more emotion than he’s ever had to handle at one time, even more than when he realized he loved Smackle. Even more, and a lot less fulfilling. This type of emotion
is just draining, and he finds himself wanting to spend more time alone ruminating over it than actively trying to combat it.

He starts going to school earlier in the morning, hoping to avoid the discussion and pseudo-therapy session with Riley on the subway. He knows she’s just trying to help, but he can’t stomach her optimism at the moment. She may be the expert on emotions, but this is something he’s sure he wants to understand.

With his grandfather’s funeral service right around the corner, however, he figures he’s going to have to soon enough.

Wandering the school grounds early that Friday morning, he’s surprised to see a familiar figure there at the crack of dawn as well. Lucas is sitting alone up in the bleachers, squinting through the mist and staring out at the dull, grey New York winter morning.

“Lucas?” Farkle calls as he climbs the stairs, stuffing his hands in his pockets.

It takes a couple of moments for Lucas to come back down to Earth from wherever his mind was. He blinks at him, smiling when he recognizes him. “Hey, Farkle.”

“Hey.” He slides down onto the bleacher next to him. “What are you doing here?”

Lucas shrugs, adjusting the sleeves of his jean jacket restlessly. “I like to come up here sometimes. Just think. It’s quiet, you know?”

Farkle nods, glancing around at the barren field around them. It’s crazy, how dead the place can be despite being so filled with noise and life during games. “Sure is.”

They sit in the silence. Time seems to pass more quickly up in the bleachers. Farkle clasps his hands together and rests them on his knee, clearing his throat. “Lucas?”

He hums.

“I’m sorry that I made fun of you for getting upset about your horse. You know, when she passed.”

“Sophia,” Lucas automatically fills in, tilting his head to look at him. “I wasn’t mad at you.”

“I know. Still sorry. I just… didn’t get it.”

Lucas examines him for a second, smiling softly. “Okay. Apology accepted.”

More silence. Farkle’s impressed by how unimposing the silence feels. He suddenly understand why Riley likes spending so much time alone with Lucas. “Can you do me a favor?”

“Normally, I’d say yes. But your favors tend to be weird and involve experimentation, so depends.”

This gets a chuckle of Farkle. Lucas grins at him.

“My grandfather’s funeral service is this weekend.” Farkle hesitates. “I was wondering if maybe you’d come with me.”

“Me?” Lucas gives him a skeptical look. “I didn’t know your grandpa.”

“I know,” Farkle says quietly. He props his foot up on the bleacher in front of them, slipping slightly on the condensation. “But you know me. And you’re good with this stuff, you know. All of it.”
“Emotions?”

“Yeah, that.”

There’s a long pause. Lucas nods, nudging his arm. “I’d be honored.”

Farkle gives him an appreciative smile. They settle back into silence, letting the mist coat them until life returns back to campus for the school day.

--

With his friends help, Farkle comes around to dealing with loss.

It’s not easy, and it doesn’t happen right away. He still finds himself wounded even months after the fact, if he thinks about it at the wrong time of day or gets reminded of his grandfather in a way he wasn’t anticipating. But Lucas and Riley are there to give him guidance, and Smackle is there to comfort him without any lesson involved.

Until she isn’t. Until Farkle makes the decision to push her away.

All the statistics make it very clear that long distance doesn’t work out. It doesn’t work, and it ends in nasty, vicious ways and he doesn’t ever want to see that happen to him and Smackle. He never wants anything like that to befall Isadora Smackle.

So he steps back. Like he said he would if it was ever necessary, he steps back.

Thankfully, the college decision process distracts him from the harsh reality of how much separating from her stings. He’s torn between Princeton and Washington University, only he hasn’t actually told anybody about this divide and everyone has basically made up their minds that he’s going to Princeton. Especially his father, who he doesn’t want to disappoint.

He doesn’t want to disappoint anyone. But as Riley and Maya keep telling him, the person he should be most focused on not disappointing is himself.

At the end of his rope, he takes Riley’s seemingly convoluted advice and takes a trip to the cemetery one afternoon. It’s a particularly creepy place and Farkle isn’t fond of it, but it’s where his grandfather now rests so he figures he should get used to it.

He picks his way through the assorted graves, not doing a great job of hiding his chagrin, until he finally gets to the new plot where his grandfather resides. His headstone looks fresh and clean, a far cry from some of the older grave markers he avoided on the way over.

Farkle kneels down, dropping the flower he was carrying on the grass in front of the tombstone. He clears his throat. “Riley gave me that. She said I should put it here. She also told me that coming here and talking to a piece of stone would make me feel better. I think she’s crazy.”

The headstone doesn’t answer. Of course it doesn’t. Farkle debates getting up and walking away but finds himself settling into a sitting position instead. He brings his knees up and props his elbows on them, chewing the inside of his cheek uncertainly.

“I don’t know what I’m supposed to do here. I don’t think talking to you as if you’re still here is going to make all of my problems suddenly go away. Or am I supposed to pretend I think you’re listening? You’re dead. That’s the fact of the matter. You’re dead and that’s it and now your rotting corpse is in the ground underneath me. And that’s supposed to make me feel better.”
He trails off, shaking his head at the ridiculousness of the situation. Somewhere nearby, a morning dove coos. It’s weird, how this plot of land feels so far away from the noise of the city when it’s really only a couple stops on the subway.

“I broke up with Isadora,” he finds himself saying. He links his fingers together. “It’s was just going to be worse if I didn’t. I know that, logically. But what I don’t get is why it hurts so badly when I know it’s exactly what I’m supposed to do. It’s what’s best for everyone. And now I sound like a lunatic because I’m sitting here talking to you about it. And it’s not even you. It’s a headstone. It’s a piece of stone stuck in the ground. As if you’re going to tell me what to do.”

The morning dove coos again. A couple of meters away, a family approaches a headstone and lays down some flowers. There’s a little girl with them. She looks a lot more comfortable in the graveyard than he does.

He feels that pain in the back of his throat again.

“I don’t want to go to Princeton,” he whispers, not trusting his voice to stay even. It cracks, just like he thought it would. “I wish you were here to tell me what to do.”

The family across the way walks away. Farkle wipes his eyes, cursing under his breath and getting to his feet.

“But you’re not. I have to do this on my own.” He glances down at the grave, swallowing hard. “You’re just a headstone.”

He stuffs his hands in his pockets, heading back towards the entrance. In the back of his mind, he hates the fact that despite the nonsensical nature of the conversation, he does feel a little bit better.

--

After sending in his acceptance to Washington University in St. Louis, Farkle feels the weight of the world lift off his shoulders.

The rest of the year seems to go by in a flash. The last high school musical. Their final debate tournament in which he and Smackle secured Abigail Adams the championship title for the first year ever. Senior skip day, senior prom. Topanga and Cory’s wedding vow renewals.

All the sudden, he’s packing up his things and preparing for the road trip. When Maya mentioned the idea to him after the vow reception he immediately went to work, organizing hotels and possible food locations. Lucas helps him structure out the driving rotation. The truly impressive part is that they managed to do all of the planning under Riley’s nose.

As he’s packing up the last box in his room, his dad wanders over and tapes it shut for him. The two of them drop it on the ground and look around at the large room, even more vast with so much of his stuff packed away. He’s only taking the necessities, the things that feel important to him, but just removing that makes the room feel so different.

Emotions, at play again. But he’s less afraid of them now than he used to be.

“Hey, dad?” he says timidly, mustering up his courage when his father turns his critical eye on him. It’s a look he’s always respected, and attempted to emulate in a lot of ways. “You’re okay with me going to WashU, right? Like, you’re cool with it?”

“Well, we just packed up your entire room to send it there, didn’t we?”
“I know, I know. I just… I just want you to be proud of me. I know Princeton was really important to you.”

Stuart’s expression softens considerably. He steps forward and pulls Farkle into a hug—rare, in this family, but not unwelcome. “Wherever you go, I will be proud of you. You’re going to do amazing things no matter where you are.”

Farkle feels that pain in his throat one more time. But this time, it’s a good pain. “Thanks, dad.”

The two of them finish stacking boxes and then Stuart says goodnight, leaving him alone to go over the itinerary one last time. He flips through the notebook Lucas filled with their ideas. He’s glad to see less eraser marks on these notes than the ones he saw in junior year.

He’s just gearing up to turn off the light and settle into bed when his phone buzzes on his side table. He stretches to grab it, seeing Maya’s name lighting up the caller ID.

“Hello? What do you want, Penelope?”

“Hilarious! Listen. Can you book a hotel for tonight?”

Farkle glances up at the constellations above him, making a face. “I could, yeah. But I’m not going to unless you give me a good reason.”

“We’re leaving tonight. Get your stuff ready and book a hotel for just inside Pennsylvania. I’ll be there in like fifteen minutes.”

“Wait.” Farkle sits up, sliding to the end of the bed. “Maya, what’s happening?”

“I’ll explain everything. I promise. Just book that hotel, and make it quick. Be there soon.”

She hangs up before he has the chance to argue, leaving him utterly confused but buzzing with energy. Maya has this contagious effect, he’s felt it ever since they were kids. And he has the feeling that whatever she’s planning, it’s going to be an adventure full of that energy.

Farkle scrambles to grab his suitcase and backpack, booking on hotel on his Expedia app as fast as he can manage. He’s just hitting confirm when his phone buzzes again, indicating that Maya is waiting for him outside. He’s not sure if the transaction went through, but he’ll find out when they get wherever they’re going.

He takes the stairs all the way down, two at a time. When he gets to the front door and is staring out the glass doors at the ratty old van waiting for him he pauses, feet rooted to the floor in a brief instance of nostalgia.

He glances behind him at the home he’s leaving behind. He’ll see it again in the winter, but it’s going to be the longest he’s ever been away. He’s lived here his whole life, and suddenly everything about his life is going to change. He has to convince himself that he’s ready.

Outside, the car honks. Maya, jolting him out of his reservations as she always does.

No time to be hesitant. Time to move forward.

Grabbing his suitcase, Farkle steps out the doors and out into the late night. Darting to the car where Maya Hart is waiting for him, eager to start whatever crazy adventure awaits them down the road.
With Farkle officially gone, it’s startling how empty the van feels.

Riley has a hard time wrapping her brain around it. They started this road trip with a full car, and now they’re only taking up half the space. Three of her friends are off at university, already starting a new chapter in their lives. For all intents and purposes, they’re living through a big bang and creating new galaxies of their own.

Smackle, Zay, Farkle—they have their own gravity now, and it’s stronger than hers. She can’t keep them contained in her orbit forever. She has to let them drift away.

Despite the physical emptiness of Van Cory, Riley is relieved that the two people left on the road with her are two of her favorite people in the entire universe. With Lucas and Maya, that icky feeling that was haunting her for so much of the first half of the trip doesn’t stand a chance. That darkness is back in Kentucky, buried for good.

Maya is determined to get out of Missouri after leaving Farkle behind, so she stays behind the wheel. Riley maintains passenger duty as she’s done for a majority of the car time—an exhausting but important role that she’s honored to have. Lucas sits in the back behind the driver’s seat, and Riley finds herself sitting sideways most of the time to make sure he’s still included in the conversation.

With only three of them, someone is always going to be tucked away in the back seat.

Still, they’re not short for entertainment. Lucas and Maya get into a war over who can play the worst possible road trip song, Riley’s phone being passed back and forth as Maya dictates to her what to type in and Lucas comes back with an even more cringe-worthy choice. By the time they’ve cycled through an entire discography of terrible music, Lucas puts on the *Main Street Electrical Parade* theme from Walt Disney World Resorts and Maya surrenders.

“Okay, okay. You win, Huckleberry. You *win*. Turn this shit off. Turn it off!”

Lucas turns the volume up instead, dancing in his seat and kicking the back of the driver’s seat. Riley is laughing so hard her sides hurt.
Maya wrenches the aux cord out from Riley’s phone, prompting Lucas to hand it back to her just as they pass a big blue sign welcoming them into another state.

“Welcome to Arkansas!” Maya cheers in her infamously bad Southern accent. “Okay, hold up. I do not understand why it’s spelled that way. Can someone please explain this to me? Why pronounce it with saw at the end if it’s spelled like Kansas? Your father taught me nothing.”

Riley gets to take over the music for about an hour more, keeping Maya attentive with whatever discussion topics she can come up with on the fly. Just as it’s starting to get dark, Lucas leans forward and swats at Riley’s shoulder lightly.

“Turn down the music,” he says distractedly, focused on his phone.

“What? Why?”

Lucas presses a button and there’s a moment of silence, Riley lowering the volume as requested. Then, a familiar voice fills the car.

“I can’t believe y’all are actually surviving without me,” Zay says in a lively tone. “Gotta say, I’m a little offended.”

Lucas is grinning at the screen, turning it slightly to show Riley. Zay is walking across his new campus back in North Carolina, talking to them through Facetime. His face is aglow with the flashlight on his phone, using it to keep him visible in the dim lighting of nightfall back on the east coast.

“Zayby!” Maya shouts, hitting the steering wheel gleefully. “Why did you have to call when I’m driving? I can’t see your beautiful, beautiful face.”

“Sorry, Maya. Next time, I promise. How’s it going?”

Riley glances at Lucas, who is smiling down at his phone like an idiot. She shrugs. “We haven’t died yet. Still considering that a success.”

“I’ll say,” Zay snorts. “Well, I just wanted to call because I wanted to show you guys something. I’m passing by on my way back to the dorms and I figured, y’all are stuck in a car, it’s not like you have anything better to do.”

“Except, well, drive,” Maya grumbles.

There’s a long pause as Zay disappears into a dark building, his humming the only indication that he’s still on the call. They can hear his footsteps echoing against the floor. “Okay, are y’all ready for this?”

“Show us!” Riley cheers.

The screen is flooded with light. In the time it takes to adjust accordingly, Zay slides into the middle of the room he’s standing in. It takes Riley a long moment to realize he’s showing them his reflection in a mirror.

He’s in a ballet studio. A very nice, state of the art dance studio.

“Check! This! Out!” he says enthusiastically, wheeling around to give them the full tour with the phone. He shows off the sound system, the wall of mirrors, the bars and the flooring that he swears is impeccable for dance. Riley doesn’t understand, but she believes him. Just from the amount of
excitement on his face and in his voice, she believes he’s in the perfect place.

Zay does a little leap, spinning slightly as he lands. Riley’s grateful for the mirror so she can see him doing all of this goofy stuff he’d probably never do in front of her in person. “It’s so wild, y’all. They have like, six of these studios. Maybe not that many, but it sure feels like it. And I’ve already met so many other dancers. Some of these people have been training since pre-school, can you believe that?”

“Still have to work hard to be better than you,” Lucas points out.

Zay waves him off, back to wandering out of the building and onto campus. “You flatter me.”

Riley examines Lucas, watching his affectionate grin as Zay goes on and on about his first couple of days on campus. She can tell he misses him, but that the joy of seeing him so eager about his college experience so far makes the sacrifice worth it.

She knows there was a time where the two of them talked about maybe going to A&M together. But it’s obvious Lucas wouldn’t have Zay be anywhere other than exactly where he is now, pursuing his dream.

“Well, that’s all. Just wanted to show that off. I’ll let you guys get back to driving and all that. Good luck, Maya.”

“I hate you, Zay Babineaux. No respect for your elders.”

“Next time! I swear!”

Goodbyes are exchanged and Zay ends the video call, sending the car into momentary silence. Riley immediately leans forward and turns the music back up, hoping to fill it.

Lucas leans back in his seat, pocketing his phone. He’s still smiling, but it’s not as strong as it was before—more like the ghost of one lingering behind. Bittersweet.

That’s the feeling Riley is afraid of. Not the goodbye, not the happiness from seeing her friends succeed in all of their own endeavors. It’s the feeling right after, when they move past it but she’s still there thinking about them. The echo of the happiness, emphasizing their absence.

She wants to reach out and take Lucas’s hand, but he’s too far away the way they’re seated. Already, he feels too far away.

They don’t get to the hotel until long after dark. Maya is exhausted as she slips from the driver’s seat, obviously enough that Lucas volunteers to carry her bags considering all the miles she put in for the day. She doesn’t argue with him.

When they get into the room and drop their bags, Maya walks to the center of the room and clears her throat. Once Riley and Lucas are facing her, she straightens up and clasps her hands together authoritatively.

“Let’s just cut to the chase. You two probably want to share a bed. And you know what?” Lucas and Riley exchange an uncertain look, opening their mouths to speak. Maya bulldozes over them. “I don’t care. You guys can share, that’s fine. I’m tired, I’d kill for my own bed, and I’m not twelve years old. So pick your bed and lay in it so I can crash and get the beauty rest I so sorely deserve.”
With that, she turns on her heel and stomps towards the bathroom.

When she closes the door, both of them take a moment to catch up with the speech just delivered. Riley wasn’t anticipating getting to share with Lucas, but she’s definitely not going to complain if Maya’s going to hand it to her.

Lucas clearly has the same thought. He makes a face, shrugging. “You can choose which one. I’m not picky.”

Once all three of them have gotten ready for bed and settled in for the night, Maya leans over and switches off the light. There’s a shuffle as she situates back under her covers, before silence falls over the room.

Maya breaks it a couple seconds later. “Do you guys think Zay is going to be famous? Like, a famous dancer.”

Riley hums thoughtfully, staring up at the ceiling as her eyes adjust to the dark. Lucas adjusts next to her, instinctively finding her hand and linking their fingers together.

“Maybe,” he says.

Riley sighs. “Can’t wait to find out.”

--

To her amazement, Riley isn’t the first one to wake up the next morning. When she rouses awake and rubs her eyes, she can hear the shower running. Maya’s bed is empty across from her. She has to wonder if maybe she’s still dreaming and making this up.

She rolls over onto her other side instead, being greeted with the friendly reminder of Lucas resting next to her. Considering she hasn’t seen him asleep since the very first night of the trip when they all crammed into that small motel room together, the admiration she feels watching him doze is at a much higher degree than usual.

There are few things Riley Matthews loves more than waking up next to Lucas Friar. She can’t quite put her finger on it, but things just feel settled when he’s there beside her. Sharing his warmth, sharing his presence, sharing the quiet that they can really only find with each other.

It’s the same unidentified feeling she sees on his face when she wakes up before him, which is more often than not. It’s in how soft his features are, how even his breathing is, how for those few hours each day his fingers aren’t fidgeting and picking himself apart. For those brief moments in the early morning—when it’s just her and him and the sun rising out the window painting him in a halo of grey-blue—Lucas is actually at peace.

She tries very hard to ignore the fact that this may be the last time she gets to see it for a long time. Instead, she reaches forward and touches his face, stroking his cheekbone as gently as she can. She continues this pattern along his jawline, smiling lightly when he hums indignantly. As usual, her affectionate way of waking him up proves to be successful.

“What time is it?” he mutters, voice still raspy with drowsiness. Another one of her favorite morning things.

Her thumb brushes softly against his lower lip. She matches his tone, not speaking any louder than a murmur. “About eight, I think.”
He pouts. “Five more minutes.”

“We don’t have to get up yet,” she laughs. When his eyes flutter open to gaze at her, she feels her heart skip a beat. “We just have to get out by nine if we want to get to Austin by dinner. That’s when Pappy Joe is expecting us, right?”

“Yeah. He’s not the one we have to worry about though.” He brings his hand up to take hers from his face, holding it in both of his own. “It’s Dylan who’s going to blow a gasket if we’re late. This is the only night he can see us before he leaves for Baylor and he said he’d kill me if he missed me again.”

Riley ponders over the fact that although he hasn’t seen him in years, Dylan still considers Lucas one of his best friends. She hopes that it’ll be the same way for all of them.

“Also,” Lucas says softly, playing with her fingers idly. “He really wants to meet you. I actually think that’s what he’s more interested in.”

She feels herself blush. “Aw, how sweet. But I’m sure that’s not true.”

“I think if we asked anyone on this Earth who they’d rather anxiously wait around to meet, everyone and their mother would say you over me in like, three seconds. There wouldn’t even be a hesitation.”

“Stop that.”

“I’m not doing anything, I’m just stating facts.” She kicks him lightly in the shin and he smirks. “But yes, Dylan and Asher both are eagerly anticipating your arrival. Vanessa is looking forward to seeing both you and Maya again.”

Riley beams, before tossing a glance towards the bathroom. “To be honest, I’m a little floored Maya is already awake.”

“I know. Are we sure she’s not dead in there?”

“We could knock and ask.”

Lucas makes a face, finding her other hand and taking it as well. “Five more minutes.”

Riley giggles again, scooting closer and pressing a quick kiss to his lips. He smiles and wraps his arm around her waist snugly, nudging his forehead against hers. Allowing herself one more peck, she bumps their noses together and bats her eyelashes at him. “Careful, cowboy. I don’t want Maya stepping out here and insisting she has to scrub us with holy water.”

He snorts. “As if I would ever do anything with you with Maya in the same room. Or the same building. Or within a fifty-mile radius. That’s just not a comfortable scenario.”

Riley hums in a mixture of agreement and disdain, grimacing when she imagines even for a second how badly a situation like that would turn out.

Lucas laughs at her expression, raising his eyebrows at her. “Exactly. You see what I mean? That’s what I’m saying.”

They exchange a look and descend into giggles. Riley hides her head against his chest, biting her lip with a bashful grin.
“You know, I can hear you laughing,” Maya calls from behind the bathroom door. The shower stops running. “I swear if you guys are doing something you don’t want me to see you better stop in the next five seconds.”

Both of them crack up, and when Maya steps out of the bathroom a minute or so later she glares at them as they continue to laugh into the pillows. Riling each other up, as they so often do.

Maya rolls her eyes. “Losers.”

--

After a lengthy shift on the road where Riley takes the driver’s seat, they pull off for lunch. The three of them eat as quickly as possible, running on what feels like borrowed time in order to get to Texas before nightfall.

When they head back out to the van, Riley immediately heads for the passenger side door. She’s surprised when Maya takes her arm and pulls her away from it, nudging her towards the back.

“No, no, honey. You won’t be sitting shotgun this time.”

“What?” She’s a little wounded. “Why not?”

Lucas comes to stand next to Maya, clasping his hands together. Both of them give her a patronizing look. “Riles, you’ve done passenger duty practically this whole trip, and you just stopped driving. You haven’t gotten to nap this entire time and you look like you’re about to drop any second.”

Riley blinks. “What are you talking about? I got a full night of sleep, I’m fine!”

“You’re telling me that if you had the chance to knock right now, like just crash and get some extra rest, you wouldn’t take it? Because you’re so well-rested?”

She hesitates. The more they point it out, the more fatigued she feels. In some ways, this journey has been a lot of running on adrenaline and emotion. It’s going to catch up to her eventually.

Lucas Narrow his eyes at her. Maya nods triumphantly. “Yeah, that’s what I thought.”

“Okay, but really, I’m—!”

“Riley, either you get in that backseat and get some sleep, or I set Huckleberry on you and he puts you in the backseat against your will.”

“I wouldn’t do that.”

Maya raises her arm and shushes him, smacking her hand against his face. Her eyes stay on Riley, pointing with her other hand to the back door. “Rest.”

Whatever argument Riley attempts to make, she knows Maya will have a comeback. That’s the way she is. Besides, a nap could do her some good. She sighs defeat, raising her arms in surrender and pulling the back door open.

“There she goes. Atta girl, honey.” Maya pulls open the passenger door and hops in as Lucas walks around to drive. “Okay, Hop-a-long, you better have something mildly interesting to say because Riley’s out of commission and I’m out of smoothies.”

Lucas’s groan of annoyance is the last thing Riley registers before she curls up on the seat behind
him, closing her eyes as they pull out of the parking lot and back out on the road.

--

She’s not sure what pulls her out of dozing off, but about an hour later she finds herself drifting back into consciousness. What’s unexpected to her is that there’s no music playing, although she assumes Lucas and Maya couldn’t agree on what to listen to and gave up.

Even more surprising is the fact that the two of them seem to be keeping up a solid conversation, speaking in low, quiet voices as not to disturb her.

Riley knows she shouldn’t eavesdrop. She knows it. But curiosity gets the better of her. She adjusts in her seat, still feigning sleep but straining to listen.

“I’m not saying you have to tell me,” Maya murmurs, keeping her eyes on her shoes up on the dashboard. It doesn’t seem strange to Riley that they’re avoiding eye contact as much as possible. As much as Lucas and Maya are friends, especially considering all the work it took to get there, she figures there will always be an atmosphere of discomfort between them. “I just don’t see why I’m the last to know.”

“You’re not,” Lucas argues. “Smackle doesn’t know.”

“Okay, you didn’t tell her, but I’m pretty sure she knows. She spent all of junior year with you guys while Farkle was getting stoned, it’s not like she’s oblivious.”

“Look, it’s not that I don’t feel like you deserve to know or anything.” Lucas pauses, clearing his throat softly. Riley doesn’t have to look to guess that his fingers are fidgeting, tapping against the steering wheel. “It’s just something I’m figuring out on my own. It’s not something everyone needs to know. But it’s not about you. Okay?”

Maya holds her tongue, pouting and looking out the window. She crosses her arms, both of them falling silent for a few minutes.

“Just promise me that if there was something I could do to help, you’d tell me.”

There’s a long pause. Finally, Lucas speaks again.

“I would.”

This seems to satisfy Maya for now. She nods, focusing back on the dashboard window rather than looking in the opposite direction. “You know, you’re really lucky you have Riley. She’s so protective of you, it’s wild. And I’m guessing that whatever is going on, she’s helping fix it.”

Riley jumps a bit at the mention of her name, thinking maybe she’s been caught. But the conversation moves right along, so they haven’t noticed her one way or the other.

“I know. I’ve known that since I met her.” Lucas hesitates, choosing his next words carefully. “Sometimes it just feels like… I don’t know.”

Maya smirks slightly, raising her eyebrows. “We about to have a heart to heart, Ranger Rick? We going to do this?”

“No if you call me that.”

She rolls her eyes, crossing her ankles. “Alright, I’m sorry. Are we going to have a heart to heart,
Lucas James Friar? Or do you prefer Friar-Matthews? Lucas James Matthews?"

“Alright, alright. That’s enough.”

Maya grins to herself, resting her elbows on her knees. Riley’s a little amazed they can have a whole conversation without looking at one another. Maybe she’s biased, since she spends so much time looking at Lucas anyway, but it seems like an impressive amount of avoidance.

“So, you were saying? Sometimes you feel like…”

“I know how lucky I am to have Riley. And I know she cares about me, genuinely and honestly and with everything she has and all that. But sometimes it’s hard to believe. Just because…”

He trails off. Riley can hear the hesitancy in his voice, his reluctance towards being so vulnerable. It took her years to earn the level of trust where he doesn’t hesitate that way anymore. Even then, it still sneaks in occasionally in their more serious conversations.

He clears his throat again. “I’m pretty sure I don’t deserve her.”

“Join the club,” Maya snorts. “Been here for over a decade and counting.”

Silence settles over them for a brief period of time. Both of them lost in thought.

“Riley is one of those rare people that doesn’t have to work towards being a positive influence. She just is. She’s all of this support and warmth and hope packaged in this cute little wrapper.” Maya squints out towards the road, biting her lip anxiously. “People like you and me, we’re drawn to that. That’s what pulls us in. She’s got this gravity, and we spend all of our lives chasing it regardless of whether we’ll ever get it or not. I guess we’re the lucky ones, because she chose to let us in.”

Lucas shakes his head. His next words are almost inaudible. “I’m not good enough for her.”

“Neither am I.” Maya sighs, digging her heel into the dashboard. “No one is.”

There’s a part of Riley that wishes she hadn’t decided to eavesdrop. She knows that no matter what she says, what she does, Lucas and Maya are never going to believe how important they are to her. They’re never going to believe how much she loves them, how perfectly worthy they are to have her in their lives and how lucky she is to have them in hers.

“Maya?”

“Huckleberry.”

Lucas chooses to ignore the nickname, indicating a return to form. “Just want to make sure you know it goes both ways. The helping thing. If something is happening with you, now or later, you can tell me. And I’ll try to help in whatever way I can.”

She absorbs this, nodding slowly. “Well, thanks.”

“I just want you to be happy,” he says softly, repeating the mantra he’s been spouting for years. Practically since he met them all. Riley knows that if Lucas believes he’s good for anything, it’s protecting his friends.

Maya finally tilts her head to look at him. The ghost of a smile passes over her lips. “I know.”

He turns his head for a quick second to return the beam. Then the two of them settle into silence,
retreating back into their own heads.

Maya and Lucas have never been an easy duo to handle. But it’s moments like these that let Riley know all her assumptions about them are true. They may not be close, they may not agree on most things, but at their cores both of them care about one another. And they both care about her more than either of them care about themselves.

If they’re going to spend their whole lives chasing her warmth, she’s going to spend her whole life trying to show them how much they deserve it.

---

One driving rotation, one state line, and about fifteen ha-hurrs later, the three of them are well on their way across Texas towards Pappy Joe’s place. Riley is back in the driver’s seat, Maya relegated to the backseat for a turn. Lucas keeps up the conversation as Riley concentrates on the road, asking her questions about which friend she’d choose in certain situations.

“You have to defuse a bomb in fifteen seconds and only one friend can help you. Who do you choose, Zay or Farkle?” Riley hesitates and Lucas pats the dashboard urgently, an amused grin growing across his face. “You’re not allowed to think about it! You’re supposed to say the first one that comes to mind!”

Riley gradually descends into a stressed scream. “I don’t know! Zay!”

Maya, who up to that point had been putting a great deal of effort into ignoring them and working on her sketchbook, lifts her head to stare at her through the rearview mirror. “Zay? To defuse a bomb?”

“Yeah. I don’t know. I was just thinking about how Farkle would probably yell at me and I’d get overwhelmed and start crying. Then we’d all blow up and it would be all my fault.”

Lucas rubs her shoulder. “Maybe we should stop playing this game.”

Riley opens her mouth to assure them she’s fine when Van Cory suddenly rattles, bouncing along the road in a strange, lopsided manner. Maya immediately sits up straight, exchanging a look with Lucas before rolling her eyes in exasperation. “My God, what now?”

“I’m guessing I should pull over?” Riley asks tentatively, locking eyes with Lucas. He nods, glancing out the window.

She pulls to a stop on the shoulder, hitting the hazard lights and hopping out of the car. She’s careful to wait until a large truck goes zooming by before jogging around to the other side of the vehicle.

Maya climbs out just as Lucas walks over to examine the back right tire. He puts his hands on his hips. “It’s just a flat. Must’ve been some stuff on the road or something. Luckily, we can fix this.”

“I swear,” Maya hoots, slapping the hood of the van. “I swear, Van Cory is trying to kill me. Van Cory is out to get me and make sure I never get to California. Why? Why is he doing this? Why is your father doing this to me?”

Riley reaches out and takes her shoulders, pulling her into a soothing hug. “There, there. Shh.”

“I just want to be a California girl.”
“I know, Peaches. We’ll get you there.”

Lucas crouches down in front of the tire, examining it. “We’re going to need the tool kit. And the spare. Can someone grab it?”

Maya pulls away from Riley, holding up her hands and making a face. “I know, I know, I said I’d be more helpful. I’m on it.”

As she trudges her way to back of the van, Riley wanders over and joins Lucas, kneeling down on the gravel next to him. “How do you think we’ll be on time? I’d hate to upset Dylan.”

Lucas smirks. “Dylan will be just fine. And we should still make it in time. Hopefully we can get this done quickly. Just make sure Maya doesn’t do something like whine her way into the middle of the road and get run over.”

“Hey, now, play nice.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah.”

“Hey, Lucas,” Maya calls. She hands him the tools but her eyes are on the road, watching another vehicle head their way. “That car is slowing down. Why do you think they’re doing that?”

Lucas glances up, spotting the pickup truck in question. “Maybe they’re going to help us.”

“Why the hell would they do that?”

Riley stands up straight again and shrugs. “We are in the South, Maya. People are supposedly nicer here. More willing to help a friend in need. Southern hospitality and all that.”

“Yeah, alright. Sure.”

All of them watch as the truck slows down and pulls onto the shoulder in front of them. Lucas jumps to his feet, standing in between Riley and Maya. The engine turns off and the passengers emerge.

It’s an older couple, a match of opposites by the looks of them. The man is round-faced with slightly pink, sunburnt skin. The woman is lanky and sharp-featured. Both have friendly expressions on their faces. It’s obvious they’re residents of the land, although the Texas license plate does make it even more clear.

The man tips the front of his baseball cap. “Hey there.”

“Howdy,” Lucas says cheerfully, offering his hand. The two of them shake, as if they’re old acquaintances reuniting rather than strangers who just met on the side of the road.

Maya’s eyes widen. She leans into Riley, whispering in her ear. “Oh my God, there’s more of him. There’s a whole region of Huckleberries.”

Riley can’t help but giggle.

“Y’all having some car trouble?”

“Yeah, just a flat.” Lucas nods towards the rear of the van, crossing his arms and appraising it with the older man. “Figure it shouldn’t take too long to fix, but it’s mighty nice of you guys to stop by and check in on us.”
“You want some help? Probably get the job done quicker.”

“Sure, that’d be great.”

The longer the two of them talk, the more his Southern drawl slowly creeps back into Lucas’s voice. Riley can’t help but find it adorable. Maya looks like she’s about to lose it.

While Lucas leads the man over to grab the spare tire from the back, the wife of the couple walks over to join the girls.

“You really didn’t have to stop and help,” Maya says awkwardly, stuffing her hands in her pockets.

“Oh, of course we did.” she says offhandedly, waving her off. “We saw you kids on the road here and we both agreed. Didn’t even have to debate on it. Rob, he looked at me and he said, ‘Andii, you see those kids there?’ And I sure did. And here we are. Forgive me if you’d rather not say, but what are a trio of sweet kids like you doing driving along the ’59 on your own?”

Riley smiles, keeping her arm linked with Maya’s. “College road trip. Well, pre-college, I guess.”

“Oh, you don’t say? Well that’s just swell.” Andii tosses a glance to her husband, watching for a bit as he and Lucas start working on fixing the tire. “Looks like you got at least one guy who knows what he’s doing. He your brother?”

It takes Maya a second to realize Andii is addressing her. She opens her mouth to correct her but hesitates, looking over her shoulder at Lucas behind her. After a moment, she smiles. “Yeah, he is. He’s pretty cool.”

Riley grins. Crazy, how different this trip to Texas already is.

She leaves Maya to chat with Andii and strides over to help with the tire, stooping down next to Lucas. She bumps his shoulder and he turns his head to smirk at her, nudging her back.

“Well, I’ll tell ya,” Rob says as they pull the ruined tire off and immediately get to work at situating the new one in its place. “You got yourself a resourceful young man right here. Y’all would’ve gotten on just fine whether we’d shown up or not.”

Lucas smiles bashfully. Riley feels her heart swell with pride. “Yeah, I think he’s a keeper.”

“Now, you don’t sound like you’re from around here,” Rob notes, giving her an intrigued eyebrow raise. “You a city girl?”

“New York City, born and raised.”

“You must be a fan of those Northern sports teams then. Don’t tell me you’re a Giants fan.”

“Good sir, I can list the things I love on this hand.” Riley straightens up, holding up one of her hands. She points to each of her fingers as she goes on. “My friends. My family. This cowboy right here. Pluto. And the New York Knicks.”

Lucas dips his head down, biting his lip to keep from laughing. Rob gives her an amused grin, full of good-natured fun. “So long as you aren’t an Eagles fan, you and I are gonna get along just fine.”

Rob helps them secure the new tire and then pack up the tools. He offers to take the ruined tire as well, as he works part-time at a car repair shop and can dispose of it easily. Riley and Lucas thank him and Andii a thousand times over, Maya nodding along.
When they climb back in the car and get going back on the road, Riley glances at the clock. 5:30. They should be able to get to Pappy’s Joe well before dark.

Glancing out at the sun just starting to set, she’s in awe of how beautifully golden the world around them looks. Nothing but miles and miles of gilded road.

She looks over her shoulder from the passenger seat. Maya is already back at work on her sketch. “Hey, Peaches.”

Her eyes linger on the page for a second longer. She raises an eyebrow inquisitively.

“We’re gold.”

Maya’s expression falters slightly as the memory hits her. Her features soften considerably, a small smile forming on her lips.

“Yeah, honey, we are.”

When they finally pull into Pappy Joe’s driveway the sun is just setting below the horizon line, the last bits of daylight seeing them through until they put the car in park and kill the engine.

The first thing that catches Riley’s attention is the barking.

A huge, rowdy hound comes bolting out the front door and leaping down the steps, ramming into Lucas the minute he hops out of the van. He laughs and wrestles with it for a few seconds, dropping down to his knees and letting it lick his face in greeting. Despite appearing rather intimidating at first glance and with such a loud bark, Lucas doesn’t seem at all nervous towards the dog.

Maya points at it, exchanging a look with Riley. “That’s new, right?”

Lucas turns his delighted grin up to gaze at her and she feels every piece of her instantaneously melt. Every once and a while she forgets how passionately he loves animals, and it’s always a stunning moment when she’s reminded.

Riley wanders over to him, hesitantly holding out her hands for the dog to smell. “Who is this?”

“Sheila. Pappy Joe got her a couple years ago when he needed a little more help keeping track of the horses. Also, figure she keeps him company.” He gets to his feet, watching happily as Riley leans down to scratch Sheila behind the ears. “She’s an Anatolian Shepherd. Real sturdy, very strong.”

“She’s a queen,” Riley agrees, giving Sheila an open-mouthed smile.

“Now, there’s only one reason Sheila would be barking up a storm like that,” Pappy Joe booms from the porch, eyes lighting up proudly seeing his grandson standing in the yard with his dog. “Looks like someone made it home.”

Lucas smiles and jogs over as Pappy Joe makes his way down the steps, accepting the embrace he gives him. Considering how uncertain and disjointed their relationship was the last time Riley was here, she’s so grateful to see how much their dynamic has improved.

Pappy Joe slaps him on the shoulder, shaking him slightly when they pull apart. “Glad you made it
“Me too.”

“Come on over, ladies, don’t be shy,” Pappy Joe says, lumbering over to them and heading towards the back of the van. “Let’s get y’all unpacked. Dylan’s going to be here any minute yanking you out to the city so we best hurry fast.”

The four of them manage to grab all their things in one trip, Sheila prancing around their legs as they make their way into the house. Pappy Joe directs Maya and Riley to the stairs to deposit their stuff in the guest room they’re sharing, Lucas disappearing down the hall the other way to the room that’s practically been his since he was a kid.

When Riley descends back down the steps and takes in the living room again, a weird sense of nostalgia washes over her. It’s not unpleasant like she expected it would be, considering the consequences of their last trip here.

Eighth grade happened, yes. But everything happens for a reason. Here they are, everything having fallen into place. She could stand in the exact same spot and relive it—looking Lucas in the eyes, kissing his cheek, telling him they were just friends. More like siblings.

As if that were ever actually true.

Lucas and Maya parade down the stairs a couple of seconds later, breaking her out of her memories. Without thinking, Lucas links his hand in hers the moment he’s close enough to touch her.

She and Lucas are now very good at holding hands. And they’ve never been good at being just friends.

“You know, I gotta say,” Pappy Joe says, meandering back into the room and reclining back into the armchair by the couch. “I’m a little disappointed the scrappy New York intellectual isn’t here. Would’ve loved to see how he turned out. And Zay, of course.”

“He turned out just fine,” Riley assures him, smiling. “Actually, he’s going to school in the South.”

Pappy Joe lets out a resounding laugh. “Well, best of luck to him! So, how was the drive?”

“Okay, not a lot of trouble,” Lucas says with a shrug. Riley leads the way to couch and they settle down on it. Pappy Joe observes their interlaced hands with a tickled twinkle in his eye. “We had a flat along ’59, but luckily some folks stopped and gave us a hand.”

“It was wild. Truly crazy,” Maya says, hopping onto the armrest next to Lucas and propping her elbow on the back of the couch. “I swear, I gotta get back in touch with my Southern roots. All of this is so shocking to me.”

Pappy Joe raises his eyebrows. Riley knows that he’s always found Maya entertaining, to say the least. She’s the next biggest character of their group after Farkle. “Southern roots?”

“Well, you know, since you’re my Pappy and all that. You do remember making that offer all those years ago, don’t you? Also, me and Lucas are big time siblings now.” She ruffles Lucas’s hair, earning a swipe from him that she narrowly dodges. “Like, best brother ever. Mm, well, not best. Mediocre. Average. Best average brother ever.”

Pappy Joe shakes his head, grinning at Riley. “Well, good thing she figured that out, huh?”
Outside, a car door slams. Sheila gets up from the floor next to Pappy Joe and launches into barks, skidding towards the door and jumping at it defensively.

“Well, here they come. Y’all best get ready.”

“Where is he?” a vaguely familiar voice shouts from outside. Footsteps jog up the porch steps and there’s a knock at the door. Then another. Then many at once. “Lucas Friar! Lucas Friar, get your ass to the door this instant!”

The three of them get to their feet, Lucas heading over to answer. He tosses a look over his shoulder to Riley and Maya. “You ready?”

They nod, gesturing for him to go on. After a second of hesitation, Lucas pulls open the front door.

It’s pure spectacle watching Lucas’s original Texas friends storm into the house. One of the boys propels through the doorway and tackles Lucas with a hug, nearly knocking him over.

Vanessa and the other boy, slightly shorter and with close-cropped strawberry blonde hair, make their way over to the girls. Riley tugs Maya forward to meet them halfway.

Riley is a little struck by how beautiful Vanessa is. Sure, she was pretty when they met her back in eighth grade, but just like the rest of them she’s grown up into someone truly gorgeous. She gives both of them a knowing smile. “Riley. Maya. Good to see you guys again.”

“Yes is,” Maya agrees. “Especially since you actually know who we are now and I’m not having an identity crisis. Seriously, wouldn’t recommend it.”

The boy smiles genially at both of them, before holding his hand out to Riley. She recognizes him from the campaign video in seventh grade—soft features and kind eyes and a slight blush to his cheeks—but she isn’t sure which one is which. “I’m Asher. Please tell me I’m right in assuming you’re Riley.”

“That’s me,” she says happily, shaking his hand excitedly. “It’s so cool to meet you. Lucas has said so much about you.”

“Wicked, considering I was gonna say the exact same thing to you.”

The other boy—Dylan, she now knows—finally releases Lucas from his bear hug. He looks more noticeably different from his seventh grade self than Asher, having found a suitable haircut and having lost his remaining baby fat on his cheeks.

He takes Lucas’s face in his hands. “Look at this face. Look at this face! Can’t believe it’s been eighty-four years since I last seen this mug.”

“Relax, Dyl. Boy’s gotta breathe.”

Dylan grins widely and slides over to the rest of them, bowing to Riley and Maya. “Ladies. Pleasure to finally meet you both. Who’s who?”

“Maya.” She introduces herself, holding out her hand.

He shakes it enthusiastically. “Heard a lot about you. Which means you must be Riley.”

Riley nods, accepting his hand shake. “That’s what they call me.”

“Heard a lot about you too. A lot. I mean, a lot. Too much. I know too much.” He tugs her forward
slightly, putting on the theatrics and giving her a desperate look. “Please, put me out of my misery before I have to hear Lucas tell me how soft your hands are again.”

“Okay, I think that’s enough for introductions,” Lucas says, pulling Dylan back by the shoulders. He pats them, giving his friend a warning smile.

Asher grins at all of them, nodding. “We should get going, I bet you guys are starving. We’re gonna take you to this one dive Vanessa is obsessed with since she claims she’s the only one of us with any class.”

Vanessa shrugs. “I call it like I see it. Only problem is we have to take Asher’s piece-of-shit minivan, so prepare for that.”

“Her name is Rhonda, and she doesn’t appreciate it when you talk about her in such a degrading manner.”

The group of them head out, Dylan leading the way. Maya follows right after him, charmed by his vibrant energy.

Asher takes a moment to exchange a hug with Lucas, less exaggerated than Dylan’s but just as full of fondness. It warms Riley’s heart, not only knowing there are people who love and appreciate Lucas Friar just as much as she does, but getting to witness it firsthand.

When they break apart, Asher gives him a curious look. “You doing better?”

Lucas hesitates, then nods reassuringly. The smile on his face is genuine. “Yeah. Working on it.”

Riley steps forward and joins them, finding Lucas’s hand and lacing their fingers together. He beams warmly at her, making her stomach flip.

Asher smirks at them both before nodding towards the door. “Shall we go?”

“We shall,” Riley declares. She links her arm through Asher’s and leads him out the door, pulling Lucas along behind them.

Dinner with the Texas friends is an entertaining endeavor. Riley didn’t believe there could be another friend group as wacky and unique as her own, but spending just one night with Lucas, Vanessa, Dylan and Asher proves that theory very wrong. It leaves her thinking about how many little pockets of friends there must be that exist just like she does with hers, little families of quirkiness and drama and energy and love. All over the country—all over the world.

Her galaxy is just one of many in the infinite universe, and that thought comforts her.

Vanessa is full of wit and ambition, reminding Riley so much of Zay and a little bit of Smackle. She keeps the boys in check, calling them on their bullshit and acting as fact-checker to all of Dylan’s random outbursts and declarations. It’s on this trip to Texas that Riley learns Vanessa is just as beautiful inside as she is on the outside. She’s thrilled to discover that she’ll be going to Texas A&M as well, so Lucas already has an ally going forward. She doesn’t feel as though she’s leaving him completely abandoned.

Dylan Orlando is one of the liveliest, most vivacious personalities Riley has ever had the pleasure of meeting, and she’s known Maya for most of her life. She gets a kick out of watching him and Maya goof off all evening long, feeding off of each other’s mischievous vigor and throwing good-
natured digs at Lucas for a laugh or two. Dylan finds the nickname Huckleberry absolutely hysterical, and Maya’s evening is made when he tells her that the group of them used to call Lucas Cowlick.

“Haven’t you ever noticed he’s always got like three pieces of hair on the back of his head that won’t stay down? Yeah, well, when he was younger it was worse. Like, it always looked like one of those cattle back on Asher’s farm gave him a bath. It was horrible. But super funny.”

Riley’s evening is made when she learns that Asher is attending NYU for journalism. She excitedly tells him all about it and promises that she’ll show him around and be his personal New York guide when they meet up upon her return.

“Uh oh, Lucas,” Maya says pointedly, wiggling her eyebrows. “Better watch out.”

“Oh, he doesn’t have to worry about that,” Dylan comments. “Asher is hella gay.”

Asher Garcia is also one of the nicest, most endearing people Riley has ever met. He’s relatively soft-spoken and rather observant, allowing his friends to do a majority of the talking. But noticing how fondly he looks at his best friends, Riley has no doubt that he is just as important to their dynamic as the rest of them. In a lot of ways, she looks at Asher and sees herself.

After dinner, Asher drives them around downtown Austin to show them the nightlife. Vanessa instructs Lucas which station to tune the radio to, her and Dylan dancing animatedly in the very back and singing along to the music. Maya encourages Asher to open the sun roof, unbuckling her seatbelt and pulling Riley up with her to stare out at the lights.

Standing tightly with Maya, the wind whipping her face and the city of Austin zooming past her in a brilliant flash of light and color, Riley can imagine growing up somewhere else other than New York. She can imagine growing up here, or in any city where these pockets of friends exist and there’s music and color and cars to drive down the highway.

When she collapses back into her seat, Asher says something she doesn’t catch. But it doesn’t matter that she didn’t hear it. All that matters is the pure, unfiltered laughter that escapes Lucas’s lips, and the joyful expression on his face. Even if she had grown up in another city, with another pocket of friends, she hopes that she would always end up falling into Lucas Friar’s lap and get to experience that laughter and that joy.

--

Despite the exhausting task of driving all day and the exhilarating events of the night out, Riley finds herself unable to sleep when they head to bed that night. Maya is knocked out cold next to her, having crashed practically the moment they got back to the guest room.

All she can do is lay there, feeling a strange combination of happiness and dread. Happiness for the way things have panned out so far, the welcoming aura of Pappy Joe’s place, the adoration on the faces of Lucas’s childhood friends as they pulled the three of them into their world. Dread for what’s waiting at the end of the weekend, the goodbye that’s rearing its ugly head just beyond the horizon.

She knows she’s lucky she gets a whole extra day. A whole weekend to prepare. But it’s still keeping her up at night.

Restless and knowing she won’t be falling asleep any time soon, Riley climbs out of bed as quietly as she can and pads towards the door. She steps out into the hall and tip-toes down the stairs,
looking for a distraction.

She nearly jumps out of her skin when she finds another figure still awake. Pappy Joe is still seated in the armchair, reading a book and enjoying a mug of hot chocolate before bed. Sheila rests tiredly at his feet, hiding her nose under her paws.

He gives Riley an amused smile as she flinches at his presence. “Everything alright there?”

“Yeah. Sorry,” she murmurs, clasping her hands together nervously. “I was just… um…”

“No worries. Sheila and I here were just getting ready for bed. I’m assuming you must be having a spot of trouble getting some shut eye, considering you’re wandering about at this hour.”

Riley shrugs, tilting her head back and forth noncommittally.

He chuckles, rising to his feet and gesturing for her to take over the living area. “Feel free to entertain yourself with any of the films set by the television. Remote is on the table there. Hope you find some rest soon.”

“Thanks,” she says timidly, smiling down at Sheila as she patters past her to follow Pappy Joe up the stairs. Riley waits until she hears his bedroom door shut to move, heading over to kneel in front of the unassuming television set.

It’s a shock to see a VCR rather than a DVD player, and the stack of movies on the shelf are of the VHS variety rather than CDs. Riley can’t remember the last time she watched a VHS. It’s weird, how quickly little things like that slip away from her.

None of the movies are familiar or appeal much to her outright, so she pulls a few off the shelf to check the ones stacked in the back. When she pulls one out and takes a look at it, she’s confused to find a blank VHS case staring back at her. Opening it, a plain tape with a handwritten label on it greets her.

Lucas – First Day of School.

Riley hesitates, not entirely sure she’s actually holding what she thinks she’s holding. She places the tape gently on the floor next to her, reaching back further into the cabinet and pulling out the other blank cases hidden away. She collects about five in total, confirming that all of them bear completely empty cases and similarly handwritten titles.

Taking a chance, she takes First Day of School and pops it into the VCR, grabbing the remote and making sure the volume is down low before pressing play. She can hear the tape whirring in the device. She realizes she’s holding her breath.

The screen is black for a few seconds, then the familiar scenery of Pappy Joe’s living room appears on the screen. A second passes of someone muttering some words Riley doesn’t catch with the volume so low. Suddenly, a smaller, livelier Lucas Friar darts across the screen, running from the kitchen into the living room and jumping onto the couch.

“Lucas? Lucas, where you going?” The voice behind the camera is feminine, but too old to be Grace.

Lucas whips around from looking over the back of the couch and flashes a grin. One of his teeth is missing. “I’mma go to school!”

Riley feels rooted to the spot. It’s surreal, seeing Lucas exist in such a young and enthusiastic form.
Not held back by anything from his past—there’s no past to be held back by yet. Not burdened by his own self-doubt. Just him, little and bright-eyed and full of toothy grins.

She finally manages to remind herself how to move, grabbing the remote and a throw from the back of the couch. She bundles herself up in the blanket and raises the volume a couple of clicks, settling in to watch.

The camera asks him a few more questions about the day ahead, if he’s excited and what he’s going to do at pre-school. Lucas responds enthusiastically to each query, talking so animatedly that he has to take dramatic pauses to breathe. He keeps tripping over his own words but tumbles right along, rambling unreservedly as he bounces back and forth on the couch cushions.

Riley absentmindedly wonders when he learned to keep quiet. What it was that taught him that his voice wasn’t worth hearing.

“Yesterday, mama went to the store and got me a new pack,” Lucas explains breathlessly, bounding off the couch and leading the camera towards the front door. He picks up a tiny blue backpack off the floor, holding it out for the person to see. “So I’m gonna bring that. And then I’m wearing my new…” He catches his breath. “My new shirt, because it’s blue and blue is my favorite color an’ stuff.”

He rambles on for another minute or so until a younger and fresher Pappy Joe emerges from the stairs on screen, greeting Lucas cheerfully and asking where his mother is. He informs him that his mama is in the kitchen and that his dad couldn’t come this morning because he had to work.

Although the moment passes without comment in the video, a small part of Riley stings a bit at this matter-of-fact statement from the young Lucas on display in front of her. Maybe it didn’t seem like much at the time, but she knows how much the absence of his father messed with him. She wishes she could reach into the television and protect him from it, from any and all of the stuff that’s going to happen to him in the years ahead.

He’s unfazed, hopping towards the camera person excitedly and laughing right into the camera. Riley can’t help but grin in spite of herself, hiding her face halfway beneath the blanket.

She watches the rest of the tape in full, watching tiny Lucas have a birthday party (with a tiny version of Asher in attendance), go to a fair of some kind, and open presents on Christmas morning. As sappy as she is, she’s impressed that she only cries about three times.

Once the first tape is done, she sets it to rewind and chooses from the others at her disposal. Thinking about how she’s eager to see other familiar faces, she picks one of the later tapes in the set and pops it in the VCR, returning comfortably back to her burrow on the couch.

This one opens with a birthday party, indicating that Lucas has just turned seven. Riley almost gasps out loud when she sees a tiny Zay Babineaux has joined the clique of Lucas’s childhood inner circle, seated one on side of Lucas while Asher sits on the other. They’re getting ready to blow out candles.

Zay inhales deeply and looks as though he’s going to steal the moment from Lucas, when a younger Donna Babineaux appears on screen and leans over her son’s shoulder to scold him. He grins sheepishly, shrugging at the camera.

“Make a wish, Lucas!” the voice behind the camera encourages. The gathered children join in, Asher banging his small fists on the table as he chants the command over and over again. Lucas presses his fingers together, making a big show of deliberating on what important thing to wish for.
“Blow out the candles already!” Zay shouts, making Riley laugh at how high and screechy his voice sounds. A far cry from the nearly grown man she knows today.

“How fun?”

It takes Riley an embarrassingly long time to realize the question exists in reality and not in the world from the past she was so absorbed in. She glances over her shoulder.

Lucas—the actual one she knows and loves—smirks at her as he finishes coming down the stairs. He’s dressed for bed in his t-shirt and sweats, hair unkempt. He looks tired, but in a completely ordinary way. The same tired she’s feeling. Nothing like the exhaustion she’s become so skilled at noticing in his features.

“I am,” she admits, watching him as he pads over to join her. She pauses the tape as he climbs onto the couch next to her, squinting at the television in an attempt to figure out what life event of his she’s vicariously living. “Are you okay?”

“Oh, yeah,” he says, shrugging. “Just couldn’t sleep.”

Riley tilts her head at him. She certainly knows the feeling.

He doesn’t elaborate further, indicating the issue isn’t any deeper than her own inability to sleep. He drapes his arm over the back of the couch behind her and she naturally scoots closer to him, leaning into his side and resting her head against his chest.

“What are you watching?”

“Your entire life. You just turned seven. Congratulations.”

Lucas hums in recognition. “You may not want to keep watching this one.”


“Just trust me,” he says distantly, propping his feet up on the coffee table.

“Well, if you’re not going to tell me, then I don’t see why I shouldn’t,” she coos, raising her eyebrows at him teasingly. He shrugs in response, raising a hand in surrender.

“Look, I tried. I tried to warn you.”

She hums at him, bringing up hand up to his lips and silencing him as she presses play on the remote.

The two of them watch him go through the school year, the camera capturing various school functions and his first little league game. When he runs up to the camera and shows off his bat, Riley leans up and presses a kiss to Lucas’s jaw.

“You’re cute,” she murmurs.

“Thanks.”

By the time the tape reaches summer, it finally becomes clear why Lucas suggested she skip the rest. They’ve come up to the day Lucas is gearing up to ride Judy the Sheep, and Riley has to watch the whole event go horribly wrong. She has to watch a seven year old fall off a sheep. She watches all of his family members present go from proud to awkward in the aftermath.
And worst of all, she has to watch Lucas go from upbeat and excited to sobbing and embarrassed, caught on footage and forever immortalized.

“Mabel, turn that off. Come on, turn it off.”

The last shot is young Lucas’s tearful face. Then, the tape ends.

Riley sits in silence for a long moment, trying to get the image of him crying out of her head. She feels like it’s going to stay there forever, engrained in her memory along with the more recent instances of seeing just the same expression on his face. Although he’s older, wiser, more worn down, there are pieces of his appearance when he’s crying that look exactly the same as they did when he was seven. Apparently, some things don’t change with age.

She lifts her eyes to look at him. He gazes at her expectantly.

“How could you let me watch that?”

Lucas drops his jaw, nudging her slightly. “No, no, no. I tried to warn you. I’m not taking the fall for this one.”

“I know, I know,” she says guiltily. She turns off the television and places the remote back on the table. “Guess I should listen to you more.”

“Well, I’m not gonna argue with that.”

Riley smiles sheepishly, lifting her head up to kiss his cheek. He wraps his arm more tightly around her shoulders, tilting her chin slightly so he can lock their lips together.

She doesn’t think she’ll ever get over how kissing Lucas Friar feels. Like summer rain and the grey-blue sunrise and coming home.

“Why are you up anyway?” he whispers, nudging their foreheads together and brushing some hair behind her ear. He brushes his thumb across her cheekbone. “You look tired.”

“Same as you,” she breathes. “Couldn’t sleep.”

He examines her for a moment, leaning forward to kiss her slowly. When he pulls away she instinctively goes in for another one, not questioning it when he reclines back against the arm of the couch and pulls her down with him.

Situating more comfortably, Riley cuddles between him and the back of the couch. She always feels a little bad when they adjust like this for laying half on top of him, but he never has any complaints and she knows he’d express them if he did.

Lucas reaches up to turn off the lamp on the side table as Riley frees herself from the blanket to drape it over both of them, tucking her head against the crook of his neck. She feels him kiss the top of her head, grinning into his shirt as his fingers begin to comb their way through her hair.

“Who’s Mabel?”

“Huh?”

“Mabel, the name at the end of the video.” She drapes her arm over his torso, hugging him. “The one always behind the camera, I’m assuming.”

“Ah, yes. Mabel Friar, love of Pappy Joe’s life and grandmother to yours truly.”
Riley always feels a deep sense of pride when she learns something new about Lucas’s life. She wants to know everything about him. She wants to be able to write a biography about him, or an encyclopedia, or ten encyclopedias. An entire box set. “What was she like?”

“I don’t remember a whole lot, but she was Pappy Joe’s whole world. They met when they were young and all that. High school sweethearts. She was kind of like Topanga, I think. The real brains of the operation, the one running the show.” He pauses, evidently trying to remember. “But I think Pappy Joe liked it that way. That was what he liked most about her.”

Riley absorbs this, smiling absently when Lucas presses his lips against her forehead. She lets her eyes drift closed. “What do you remember about her?”

“Not a whole lot.”

“Okay, but there must be something. Like, when I say Mabel, when I mention your grandmother, what’s the first thing you think of?”

“ Toothpaste,” he says without thinking.

Riley opens her eyes and tilts her head back to give him a weird look.

He waits a moment before meeting her eyes, laughing shyly at the expression on her face. “I know that’s weird. But it’s true.”

The loving smile that drifts across her face is so natural she wonders how she ever survived a day on Earth without knowing him. “Tell me about it.”

“When I was younger,” he begins, continuing to run his fingers through her hair. “Any time I was sad, or frustrated, or angry, my grandma would always tell me the same thing. She’d tell me to go brush my teeth. Like, no matter what the reason or the situation, if I was in a bad mood or my temper flared, she’d make me go brush my teeth.”

Riley gazes at him, admiring his thoughtful expression. “Why?”

“I don’t know,” he admits. “I think because it gave me something to do. Sort of like a distraction, you know? And in some ways, it felt like cleaning something up. Even if the thing I was mad about couldn’t be easily fixed, at least brushing my teeth was productive. I guess that’s what she was going for, getting me to channel my emotions into something else. I never got to ask her.”

She figured as much. Considering the tapes abruptly stop after age seven, she has a pretty good hunch she knows what happened to her.

“I don’t know, it was weird.” He stares at the wall across from them, before dropping his gaze down to match hers. “But I always had super nice teeth.”

“Oh, I’m sure,” Riley giggles. He grins, showing off said teeth with his signature dazzling smile.

She laughs harder and sits up slightly to kiss him. They stay pressed together for a long moment, both of them slouching back against the couch when they break for breath.

For the first time that night, she feels as though she could get some sleep. Lucas tilts his head against hers, obviously thinking the same thing.

“It’s obvious she loved you a lot,” Riley murmurs, tracing patterns on his arm with her fingertips.
He hums in agreement, closing his eyes. “She did.”

“Your girlfriend loves you a lot, too,” Riley whispers, letting her eyes drift closed again.

It’s silent for a few moments. She wonders if maybe he’s fallen asleep. But after a minute or so, he whispers a response after a soft hum of agreement.

“She does.”

She tries not to think about how she’s only got a weekend left. She tries not to think about how many miles are going to be between them. Right now, she just wants to focus on his heartbeat and his fingers in her hair and how close they are—no miles between them at all.
Lucas is already gone when Riley wakes up on the couch the next morning.

A jolt of panic rushes through her before she remembers the reality of her surroundings and the situation at hand. He didn’t run off to college without saying goodbye—it’s a whole day away. He didn’t simply disappear—there’s nowhere for him to disappear to, and she knows he isn’t ever going to do that again. It’s been over a year and he’s still here.

Lucas said he wasn’t going anywhere, and Riley believes him.

She sits up and rubs her eyes, squinting slightly at the sunlight brightening the room. Sun feels so much brighter here than in New York, where the sky is often overcast and skyscrapers do an impressive job of casting shadows across the city. It’s not better or worse than the endless expanse of Texas, it’s merely different. But it definitely explains why Lucas is so much tanner than the rest of them.

“Lucas left a couple hours ago,” Pappy Joe informs her, his gruff voice making her jump.

She swivels around from her spot on the couch until she sees him back in the kitchen, passing by as he rummages around. Sheila trots along behind him, her little claws clicking against the tile floor.

“Oh,” Riley says, debating whether or not she wants to ask the question on the tip of her tongue. In the past, it’s been hard to get a definitive answer. “Where did he go?”

“When Lucas is home, it’s his responsibility to feed the horses down at the stable. With twenty-three to take care of, as you can imagine it takes a bit of time to get done. Stands to reason he’d get up early to get it outta the way while you girls are here.” Riley hears the clattering of pans and something sizzling, then Pappy Joe reappears in the archway to the kitchen. “Looks like you managed to get some shut eye, though.”
Riley feels a blush crawl up her cheeks. If Pappy Joe was awake to see Lucas leave, it’s not unlikely he was awake to see them crashed out on the couch together too. “We weren’t… we didn’t…”

Pappy Joe laughs, a booming, cheerful sound that makes Sheila bark on instinct. Almost as if she’s laughing along as well. “You don’t have explain yourself to me. Why don’t you come on over here and have some breakfast? I’ve certainly made too much for me and the pup.”

She smiles sheepishly, getting to her feet and strolling over to the kitchen. The openness of the floor plan is a little surprising to her, considering how open her floor plan is back at home. It’s weird how a ranch house in Texas and a tiny apartment in New York can feel so similar.

While Pappy Joe finishes up cooking, Riley wanders the space, taking in the rustic décor. On a wooden hutch is an assortment of tea cups, a strange collection that she suspects belonged to Mabel rather than her tough, Texan counterpart. Remembering how Lucas described the dynamic between the two of them, it doesn’t surprise her at all that Pappy Joe still has them on display.

Dispersed amongst the cups are a few small photographs, somewhat hidden behind the ceramics. The first one is of a much younger Pappy Joe and a bright-eyed, round-faced woman Riley guesses must be Mabel. They’ve got their arms around each other and Mabel is laughing at the camera, causing Pappy Joe to break his tough exterior and crack a smile.

Across on the other side of the shelf is another photo featuring Mabel, only two new people have entered the frame—Kenneth and Grace Friar, the four of them dressed for their wedding. It shocks Riley that while Pappy Joe has certainly aged in the last twenty-something years, Kenneth and Grace almost look the same in person now as they do in this photograph. Hardly like they’ve grown up and had a fully grown son.

The two photos in the middle are both of Lucas, spanning the entirety of almost two decades in the two inches of space between them. On the left, Mabel holds a smaller, cheerier toddler Lucas in her arms, both of them grinning widely. On the right is the Lucas she knows, smiling pensively at her in his senior photo. It feels strange to see it all the way here in Texas, since she has the same picture pinned up on her bulletin board at home. But it doesn’t necessarily surprise her.

Riley remembers that when Pappy Joe came bursting into their classroom in eighth grade, he claimed he had never told another human being he loved them. Although she still doubts that was ever really true, she now realizes he doesn’t have to. The photographs and home videos say it loud and clear.

“You think Blondie is gonna want some as well?” Pappy Joe asks, breaking her out of her own head as he sets a plate down on the little round table for her. “She gonna be up any time soon?”

“With Maya, you can never know for sure,” Riley admits, sliding into the chair in front of her. Sheila paces the floor, torn between gazing up at her with her big, brown eyes and begging for scraps from Pappy Joe across the table from her. “Thank you for making breakfast.”

He makes a face as he settles in to eat. “What did you think, I was just gonna give y’all room and board but not feed ya?”

“No, no. It’s just really nice to eat something homemade.” Riley takes her time to savor the taste of an actual home-cooked meal, pausing. A small piece of her heart pangs for home, thinking about Topanga and Cory and Auggie. “We’ve been eating a lot of junk on the road.”

“Yeah, so I figured. I was going to ask how y’all are fronting the bill, but then I figured, better just
Riley cracks up, and the two of them settle into light conversation as they dig in. Pappy Joe tells her she can give some scraps to Sheila if she so chooses, so she does. When they’ve both finished up they sit at the table and converse for a while longer. She’s a little amazed by how easy it is to talk to him.

“So we just fell asleep after the tape ran out,” she explains, taking a sip of her orange juice. “I’m sure it must’ve been weird to come downstairs and see that this morning, so sorry about that.”

“Hey now. I can remember what it was like, being a young buck and being in love,” Pappy Joe says with an offhand wave.

Riley giggles a bit in spite of herself, still feeling a weird sense of shyness at the insinuation that she and Lucas are in love even though she knows it’s objectively true. In some ways, it feels too serious. But in a lot of ways, it doesn’t feel quite serious enough.

She loves her family. She loves her friends. What she feels for Lucas is something else entirely.

Riley takes another drink and finishes off the juice, nodding and smiling lightly in Pappy Joe’s direction. “He told me all about Mabel. Or what he can remember of her, at least. Only good things.”

There’s a twinkle in his eyes that wasn’t there a moment earlier. He smiles down at his hands, nodding in agreement. “Aren’t any bad things to say.”

“Is that her in those photographs? On the shelf.”

Pappy Joe hums an affirmation. “Always laughing. There wasn’t a moment where that silly girl wasn’t laughing like an idiot at something or other.”

“Well, if you don’t mind me saying so, it looks like she got you laughing a little bit there, too,” Riley teases. She can’t help but notice the similarities between his thoughtful expression and Lucas’s. She knows Lucas looks more like his father than anyone else, but he’s got a little bit of Pappy Joe in him as well.

He pauses, obviously lost in memories. Finally, he nods. “Yeah, she sure did.”

Silence settles over the two of them, the only sound coming from Sheila nosing around their feet for crumbs. Riley wonders if maybe she struck a nerve. She’s debating apologizing when Pappy Joe clears his throat, speaking again.

“I’m not sure the best way to go about this here, but I feel it’s important that I thank you.”

Riley blinks, tilting her head. “Thank me?”

“You know what Lucas was like before he went up North and joined y’all,” he begins. “You at least have an idea. Fact of the matter is, that’s just the way we raise ‘em. There’s that… disconnect. It’s the way I raised his papa, and it’s the way he raised him. Or didn’t raise him. I suppose that would be more truthful.”

She drops her gaze to the table, staring at the grain in the wood. Giving him some space to work through what he wants to say.

“With everything that happened with him in the last few years… well, I can’t help but feel I’m
partly to blame. More I coulda done that I didn’t do.” He takes a deep breath, reaching down to scratch Sheila behind the ears. “But you never did that. You helped him figure out exactly what he needed to do. Even when you first met him, you welcomed him into your world with open arms. He needed that, and it was something I sure as hell couldn’t give him. I screwed up my shot at that. You gave him that place.”

Riley lifts her eyes to meet Pappy Joe’s. His expression is serious, a little guarded, but mostly genuine.

“For that, I can’t thank you enough. So I’m glad I got the chance to tell ya. And you better tell your folks the same. They’re good people.”

She nods, smiling bashfully. “I will.”

As if on cue, Maya emerges from the living room still dressed for bed. Her presence automatically lifts the emotional weight of the conversation, an obvious relief to Pappy Joe. “Morning there, Maya.”

“Is it still morning? Then I’ve failed,” she yawns, running a hand through her hair. It’s a much easier task after the haircut. “Oh my God, is that food? Like, real food?”

“Sure is. Fix yourself a plate.”

Riley takes the opportunity to get to her feet, dropping her plate in the sink. “I think I’m going to go find Lucas. He shouldn’t miss breakfast, after all.”

“Mhm, right, yeah, that’s why,” Maya mutters. Riley elbows her, earning a chuckle.

Pappy Joe nods towards the back door. “Stables are right down the hill there. Hard to miss. Sheila can show you the way though, she’s never one to pass up a little walk around the premises. Sheila?”

He whistles and Sheila jumps to her feet from laying on the floor, prancing around the kitchen excitedly and skidding to a stop in front of the back door. She sits patiently, staring up at the door knob with her tail twitching impatiently.

Riley grins, walking over to join her and patting her head. “She doesn’t need a leash or anything?”

“This ain’t the city, girl. Here, we let ‘em run free.”

She takes his word for it, pulling open the door and watching as Sheila immediately takes off. She tosses a wave to Maya over her shoulder before stepping out into the warm Texas morning, following Sheila down the hill towards the stables.

--

Riley finds it wild that there is so much of the property she didn’t explore the first time they visited back in eighth grade. Even if she had more than just a weekend, if she had a whole month, she feels as though she wouldn’t be able to see the whole thing.

Sheila veers off and chases a rabbit back around the side of the stables, leaving her to head in on her own.

All the way along the sides of the stables are rows of horses, their heads poking out from over little wooden doors. There’s about twelve on either side, creating a clear pathway from one end of the
stable to the other. Having braced herself for it, the smell of horses and hay doesn’t throw her off nearly as much as she thought it would.

Standing at the other end of the path is Lucas, already dressed for the day, a plain black t-shirt tucked halfway into his jeans. He’s conversing with the horses, smiling so naturally and looking so at ease Riley can practically feel the room brighten with his presence.

She hesitates by the doors to watch for a few moments before making her way over to him. He turns his head slightly to catch a glimpse of her and double takes when he realizes it’s her, immediately grinning wider as she approaches. “Morning.”

“Good morning,” she repeats, accepting the kiss he leans down to place on her cheek.

“I’m almost done, you didn’t have to come all the way out here.”

“Oh, no, it’s totally fine.” She looks at the beautiful brown horse Lucas is currently grooming, giving him a curious look.

He smirks. “Go ahead. Divine here is definitely one of our calmer residents.”

Riley smiles, reaching forward and tentatively petting the bridge of her nose. She doesn’t seem particularly fazed either way.

Glancing at Lucas next to her, she watches idly as he focuses on braiding a section of Divine’s mane. Although the procedure is evidently second nature to him at this point he’s giving it his full attention, working as delicately as he can. Looking to her right, she sees that each of the horses behind them have a similar plait.

“What’s that for?” Riley questions, nudging his arm. He raises an eyebrow at her and she nods towards his fingers.

“Oh, right. Well, it’s kind of like a checkmark,” he explains, keeping his eyes on the job in front of him. “It’s how I make sure I’ve fed all of them and spent some time checking in on them. Like a tag, so I know I didn’t forget anybody.”

“Interesting method.”

“I’ve been doing it for years. My mama taught me how and then it just sort of happened. Gives me something to do with my hands.” He shrugs, a small smirk growing across his lips. “It’s kind of funny because Pappy Joe hates it. He has to come and undo all of them every night when he does the night run. But I figure he’s gotten used to it by now.”

Riley smiles up at him affectionately. He completes the braid, stepping back and letting her admire his handiwork. “Very nice.”

“Why, thank you.”

Lucas does one more check to make sure he’s fed everyone before leading the way out of the stables, whistling for Sheila. Despite being all the way across the field she bounds back over to them in record time, galloping around their feet as they trudge their way back up the hill.

When they step back inside, Maya drops her fork onto her plate and raises her hands dramatically. “Look at that. Perfect timing!”

“Do I want to know?” Lucas mumbles, shutting the door behind them.
Maya makes a face at him. “Pappy Joe and I were just discussing what we thought our plans for the day were. And I was just saying that I was thinking the two of you were probably going to spend some time together without little old me.”

“What?” Riley crosses her arms, frowning slightly. “We’re not going to just shun you, Maya. We wouldn’t do that to you. That was never in the plans.”

Lucas nods in agreement when Riley throws a glance his way, looking for approval. He leans back against the counter, Stuffing his hands in his pockets.

Maya is uncharacteristically blasé about the idea. “I know, I know. You two would never admit to me that that’s something you’d like to do on your last weekend together. But I know both of you. And you know what? I think I could use a day to myself.”

Riley can’t help it when her jaw drops open slightly. She knows Maya has mellowed out since sophomore year, but giving up a whole day to the two of them seems like a wild amount of sacrifice for her. “Maya. Are you serious?”

“Come on, Riles. It’s no big deal.” She shrugs, getting to her feet and walking her dishes over to the sink. “I’m gonna take a breather and get some work done. Work on my sketches. Reconnect with my Southern roots. Maybe get to know a horse or two. Who knows? Sky’s the limit.”

Riley blinks at her best friend, turning to lock eyes with Lucas. “Thoughts?”

He looks appropriately unprepared for this turn of events. He shrugs vaguely, exchanging a look with Maya. The ghost of a smile appears on his face for a fraction of a second, but it’s gone in a blink. Riley wonders if she imagined it. “I could figure something out.”

“That settles it then,” Maya declares, marching over to them and patting both of their shoulders. “You have my blessing. Livestrong. Have a wonderfully gooey, sappy day. And Riles, I do hope you’re going to change into something a little nicer than that.”

Riley glances down at her sleep clothes—her ratty leggings and Topanga’s old John Adams t-shirt. She smooths out the wrinkles, raising her chin proudly. “I think I look perfectly cute.”

Lucas and Maya both beam at her, the latter shaking her head. “You sure do. Don’t know how you manage it.”

--

Riley steps around the guest room as quickly as she possibly can, prepping for her sudden date with as much grace as she can under pressure.

Maya is reclined on the bed, still in her pajamas and already sketching. She doesn’t even bother to look up from her art. “Riley, would you relax?”

“I’m relaxed. I’m cool.”

“You’re rustling an awful lot. Chill people don’t rustle.”

Riley huffs, almost tripping over Maya’s suitcase on the floor and holding her arms out to stabilize herself. She brushes her hair out of her face, closing her eyes and taking a deep breath. When she opens them, Maya is giving her a sympathetic pout.

“You want some help, honey?”
She doesn’t respond but meanders over to the bed anyway, sitting down on the edge. Maya gets to her knees and grabs her hairbrush from the side table, kneeling behind Riley and combing the tangles out of her hair.

“I know it’s not a big deal,” Riley murmurs, smoothing out the bottom of her dress against her knees. “But I wasn’t expecting a whole date. You could’ve warned me, given me a little heads up that you were going to decide to pull the rug out from under us.”

Maya hums delightedly, taking a small portion of hair and braiding it back. “Oh, but where would the fun in that have been? If I’m gonna be generous, it’s only worth it if Huckleberry squirms a little bit. Make him work for it, you know what I’m saying?”

“Ha, ha, ha.”

“Besides,” Maya continues, doing the same with a portion of hair on the other side of Riley’s head, making the two miniature braids meet at the back of her head and tying them together. “You know Lucas would like anything you wore. You could come down in a trash bag and he would still look at you as though you invented walking downstairs.”

Riley smiles in spite of herself. “Maybe.”

“Definitely. It’s gross.” She finishes styling Riley’s hair and squeezes her shoulders. “But my point stands. He’d like you no matter what you were wearing.”

With a sigh, Riley gets to her feet and wanders over to grab her shoes. She’s grateful she can get away with wearing her Keds, simply because it’s Texas and she has no idea if sandals would be ideal for whatever activity they end up getting into. When she finishes tying the laces and straightens up again, she turns to face her best friend, holding her arms out and waiting for approval.

Maya’s eyes are wide with awe. She smiles lightly, climbing off the bed and adjusting the collar of Riley’s dress. “Even last notice, you’re giving him one hundred percent. You go way too easy on him. Although white is a bold choice.”

Riley looks down at herself and her white sundress, tugging slightly on the ends of the fabric just above her knees. “As long as we’re not going to suddenly decide to pour smoothies on one another, I think I’ll be alright.”

“Best date ever,” Maya proclaims proudly. She flicks at the jellybean still hanging on a chain around Riley’s neck before taking her hands, giving her a reassuring squeeze. “You will be fine. You guys have been on, what, a million and one dates? This isn’t any different.”

In her heart, she knows Maya is right. But there’s still this anxiety hanging over her, similar to the emptiness they’ve been running from all trip long but a lot more insidious.

She pushes it away. She pushes it deep down and buries it under the good emotions—excitement, affection, love. It’s her last full day with Lucas and that’s what she wants to focus on.

After another calming breath, she smiles. Maya nudges her forward to lead the way out to the hall, heading down the stairs where Lucas is waiting for her.

Just as Maya predicted, Lucas is speechless the moment Riley descends down the steps. He stops midway through his conversation with Pappy Joe and stares at her, his features soft. She can’t help but grin, dropping her gaze to the floor the rest of the way down until she comes to stand in front of him.
“God, Lucas, close your mouth. You all have seen each other a thousand times. This is just ridiculous.”

“Thanks, Maya,” he mumbles without looking at her, keeping all his attention on Riley. She smiles at him, pushing some hair behind her ear when he reaches forward to take her hand.

Pappy Joe clears his throat. “Well. I’m sure y’all will have a grand time.”

“Yep. You have a plan, right?” Riley says cheekily, raising her eyebrows at Lucas.

It takes him a moment to catch up with the rest of them. “Oh, yeah. Yeah. I do.”

“Good. Great. Fabulous.” Maya hops down the rest of the steps and drapes her arm around Riley’s shoulders. “Make sure to have her back before nightfall or I’m gonna have to get Pappy’s shotgun and chase you out of town.”

“I actually don’t have a shotgun on hand,” Pappy Joe corrects her.

“Whatever.” She steps back from Riley, putting her hands on her hips. “It’s less about her and more about me. I want you guys back before it gets too late because the three of us are going to do something fun on this last night together. Austin has to have a nightlife of some kind, am I right? And if I’m left here all alone doing nothing because you two can’t stop making googly eyes at each other I’m going to be real pissed.”

“And there’s the Maya we know.”

“My generosity only stretches so far. I have my limits.”

Pappy Joe and Maya usher the two of them out the door together, Riley grateful for Lucas’s firm grip on her hand as Maya practically shoves her onto the porch. Once the door shuts behind them and the two of them get a moment to regain their bearings on the situation, Lucas straightens up and gives her a smile. “Ready?”

“As I’ll ever be,” Riley chirps, following him as he leads the way down the porch steps. “What’s first?”

“Well, it’s a shame they put us out on the front porch because we actually needed to go out the back. We’re going to head back down to the stables first.”

Riley’s curious but doesn’t question him, keeping up with his pace as he leads her down the hill. Sheila barks at them from the house, clearly wishing she could come along.

Lucas makes his way over to the horse all the way at the other end across from Divine. He greets it cheerfully and pats the bridge of its nose, unlocking the gate in front of it and slipping into the pen. Riley waits uncertainly outside the gate, peering at the pretty golden horse in front of her.

“Who’s this?”

Lucas grins, glancing at her before continuing to wrangle up equipment. “You remember back in seventh grade, at the library, when I told you about how I helped deliver a Palomino?”

As if she would ever forget that night in the library. But now facing the reality of that conversation, looking at the baby horse who is definitely not a baby anymore, it doesn’t feel like a story anymore. Another piece of Lucas’s history suddenly feels a lot more vivid, more concrete, reminding her that he does in fact actually exist and he is, in fact, sharing his world with her.
She makes a note to get to work on that encyclopedia.

He comes back around to stand opposite her, patting the horse’s side gently. “Riley, this is Sandy. Sandy, meet Riley Matthews.”

She stares at Sandy, hesitantly reaching forward to brush her nose. “Hi, Sandy. I’m guessing your name has absolutely nothing to do with the fact that your hair is such a beautiful shade of gold. No, not at all.”

“I was twelve, okay,” Lucas says at Riley’s teasing tone, fixing a saddle on Sandy’s back.

“Hey, I didn’t say anything.”

He mumbles incoherently, shooting her a pouty glare. She cracks up, wandering around to join him inside the pen now that she’s sure Sandy isn’t going to trample her.

Although they joke about it all the time, Riley often forgets just how true the cowboy nickname is to Lucas’s roots. He maneuvers with the fastenings on the saddle and reins with expert precision, not a hint of self-doubt in the motions. It’s weirdly mesmerizing to watch. It isn’t until he’s hopped down off the apple box he was standing on and is facing her again that she snaps out of it.

“Riley? You ready?”


He smirks at her, raising his eyebrows slightly. “Good. I hope you’re okay with riding horseback.”

He turns around and preps to climb up onto Sandy, but he hesitates and glances at her over his shoulder. “But like, you know, tell me if you aren’t. I can figure something else out.”

“No, no. As long as you’re going to help me, horseback is perfect.”

Lucas grins, hefting himself up onto the saddle and gesturing Riley forward. She steps onto the apple box and takes his hand, managing to climb on behind him. She situates herself as steadily as she possibly can, wrapping her arms around him to keep from falling off. Knowing her and her klutz reputation, if it weren’t for him she’s pretty sure she’d tumble away with the first step Sandy takes.

“All set?” he asks her, glancing over his shoulder to look at her.

She nods eagerly, tossing some hair off her shoulder. Taking in his fond smile, it’s a little crazy to realize how much things have changed—how much they’ve changed and grown and matured—and how even so, many things are still the same.

“Look at us,” she laughs, propping her chin on his shoulder. He bows his head slightly, smiling in spite of himself. “Is there a specific reason we’re taking Sandy?”

“Glad you asked. It’s only because the place I want to show you isn’t accessible by the main road. Sandy is gonna get us there. That, and I have a reputation to uphold. What kind of cowboy boyfriend would I be if I didn’t make you ride a horse?”

Riley laughs harder, tucking her head against his back. “Alright,” she says when she lifts her eyes to look at him. “If Sandy’s ready, I’m ready.”

Sandy starts on her way out of the stable, trotting out onto the grass expanse around them. Riley tightens her grip around Lucas’s torso, eyes wide in awe as the world passes by around her in a
bouncy blur of green and gold. She shouldn’t be surprised at this point, but Texas has a funny way of reminding her again and again just how lovely the things around her truly are.

Lucas turns to grin at her over his shoulder, earning an instinctive beam back from her. He’s the one thing she doesn’t need a reminder about. She could never forget how beautiful he is, inside and out.

---

After about fifteen minutes of riding, Sandy comes to stop right at the top of a hillside and shifts on her hooves, whinnying expectantly. Lucas dismounts and speaks soothingly to Sandy, thanking her for the ride as he tethers her to a nearby stake. He reaches into a pocket on the side of the saddle and retrieves a small sugar cube, feeding it to the horse.

“Uh, Lucas?” Riley says softly, dangling her legs off Sandy’s side. It feels like a long jump to the ground.

He looks at her, breaking into a grin and laughing. “Hold on, I got you.”

Riley stretches her arms out to take his hands, gripping his shoulders as he helps her back down on her feet. When she touches the ground again she stumbles slightly, falling into him and causing him to tighten his hold on her waist.

She looks up to lock eyes with him, smiling shyly. He brushes some hair from her face. “Got you.”

“Man of your word,” she jokes.

What’s awaiting the two of them on the hillside is a picnic, with a view of downtown in the Austin glittering at them in the distance. Riley has to wonder how Lucas was able to prepare an entire meal in such limited time, but he gets her talking and distracts her quickly enough so she forgets about it.

“So, why here?” she asks, popping a grape in her mouth and tilting her head at him. “What is it about this place that you like so much?”

He shrugs, leaning back on his palms and gazing out at the scenery around them. “I’ve always liked it. The view is nice, obviously. It’s not easy to get to without a horse, so it’s like, never populated. It was kind of like my bay window growing up. Where I’d come to think and stuff.”

“Quiet,” Riley fills in for him.

He blinks at her, smiling lightly. “Yeah. Yeah, exactly.”

The conversation shifts as they finish eating, transforming into a game of asking each other questions. Once Riley concludes her explanation on why the Knicks are going to make a comeback within her lifetime, she lights up excitedly. “Ooh, okay, I have one.”

“All right. Hit me with it.”

“Okay.” She adjusts, tucking her legs underneath herself and clasping her hands together on her lap. “If you could go anywhere in the world, money and responsibility irrelevant, where would you go?”

Lucas exhales, making a face. “Anywhere in the world? Like, anywhere.”
She nods. He hums, thinking about it. His gaze drifts from the city in the distance to her, lingering on her for a long moment.

He tilts his head at her. “Where are you going?”

Riley’s stomach flips. She grabs another grape from the bag and rolls it in her fingers, narrowing her eyes at him. In the next second, she tosses it at him and hits him on the forehead. He gasps, ducking out of the way as she throws another one. “That didn’t answer the question!”

“You can’t throw food at me!” he laughs indignantly, dodging another grape and lunging forward to take her hands. She squeals and attempts to wriggle out of his grasp, cackling when he scoots closer and takes both her wrists in his hands.

He leans forward to kiss her, effectively distracting her. She continues to giggle against his lips, giving him another peck before pulling back on principle.

“Unfair strategy.”

“But it sure does work.” She scrunches her nose, keeping her hold on the one grape still left in her arsenal. She lifts their hands to toss it at him and he catches it in his mouth, wiggling his eyebrows at her as he releases her hands. “Tasty.”

“Answer the question,” she says adamantly, wishing she could hold back the stupid grin on her face. It would certainly help her be more convincing. “If you could go anywhere in the world, where would you go?”

“Paris,” he declares after a moment of consideration.

She raises her eyebrows, intrigued. “Paris? Really?”

“Yeah.” He squints at her. “You didn’t think that invitation in art class was just a joke, did you? No, we’re going to Paris. Count on that.”

He mimics the dumbfounded look on her face, causing her to break into another shy smile. Sure, it’s all just silly words. But as she very well knows, Lucas is nothing if not a man of his word.

When they get back to the stables and return Sandy back to her pen, Lucas leads the way back up the hill towards the driveway.

“I don’t see why Maya was so worried about us getting home before dark,” Riley comments, gesturing to the afternoon sun still high in the sky around them. “We were barely gone a couple of hours.”

“Oh, we’re not done.”

Riley stops by the porch, giving him a surprised look. He continues to head towards the pick-up truck parked next to Van Cory in the driveway, noticing she’s stopped following him. “What, did you think that was all I had up my sleeve? That was just part one. It’s time for part two.”

“Part two?” she says curiously, a small smile on her face as she treads after him.

“Uh-huh.” He unlocks the truck and walks around to pull open the passenger side door for her, helping her step up into the seat. He leans against the side of the truck, crossing his arms and
Riley looks up at her. “I figured, since you’ve shown me practically your entire world back in New York, I could do the same for you. I don’t know how much of the stuff from my childhood is actually going to still be there, but no shame in taking a look. You know, if that’s something you’d be interested in.”

Riley doesn’t think there’s a way to properly articulate how interested she is in that offer. She smiles excitedly. “If that’s something I’d be interested in? If? It’s like you don’t know me at all.”

Lucas laughs, closing her door for her and jogging around to hop in the driver’s side. He puts the key in the ignition, buckling up his seatbelt. “Let’s hope I remember where everything is. Roads change fast around here.”

“Gee. I sure do love dates where I get into car accidents and die. Nothing more romantic than death.”

“Oh-huh, okay, thanks Morotia,” he jokes, backing out of the driveway. She nudges his arm, reclining back against the seat and propping her feet up on the dashboard as they head onto the mean streets of Austin suburbia.

--

The first stop they make is the parking lot of an elementary school. Riley gets the feeling it’s a good thing it’s still summer break, or they probably wouldn’t be able to casually park on the property.

She joins him in front of the truck. “Is this your elementary school?”

“Oh, no,” he says, starting towards the back of the school. “This was built after I moved, actually. It’s what’s behind it that we’re here for.”

Riley allows him to take her hand, leading her around the side of the building and out towards the field behind it. A small baseball field emerges into view, vaguely familiar in her memory from the home videos as the field where Lucas played his little league games.

They stop at the pitcher’s mound, taking in the view around them. It’s been so long since either of them have been in the diamond—since Lucas quit the team in junior year he hasn’t been back on the field, so Riley hasn’t had any reason to be out there either.

“It used to just stand here on its own. People would have tailgates and stuff for the games, which is a little dumb if you think about it considering we were literally seven year olds but I guess that’s Texas for you. When I moved I remember Asher telling me they built the elementary school to back into it. I guess they technically own it now.”

Riley clasps her hands together in front of her. “It’s too bad we didn’t bring any equipment. We could’ve played.”

“With two people?”

“Oh, we could’ve managed.”

Lucas shakes his head at her, taking her hand again. They wander over to one of the two small sets of bleachers, ducking down to walk underneath them.

“Hopefully, if they didn’t replace the bleachers, there should be something really cool under here.” He examines each of the support beams they pass, his eyes lighting up when they finally stop at
the point where the two bleachers meet. “Check it out.”

She leans into him to get a better look at the beam in front of them. Scrawled all up and down the metal are engravings of initials, poorly written and obviously the work of much younger kids. In the midst of the scribbles, Riley points to a set of initials messily carved into the center of the beam. L.F.

“I didn’t realize I was dating a vandal.”

“Oh, you know me. Real troubled kid and all that.” She gazes up at him over her shoulder, mirroring his smile.

Running her finger over the engraving, she feels the metaphorical lightbulb pop up over her head. She swings around to the other side of the beam, where the metal is clean and untarnished. “Hey, do you have your Swiss army knife?”

“God, Riley. Who do you think I am? You think I just carry knives around?”

“No,” she says patiently. “But I think you’re a boy. And for some reason every boy has a Swiss army knife on their person at all times.”

Lucas looks like he wants to argue on behalf of the male population, but he sighs instead, reaching into his pocket and retrieving his keys. As she expected, a Swiss army knife is dangling from the chain.

She doesn’t get what the big deal about them is, but she’s never met a boy who doesn’t seem to have one on hand. Farkle claims it’s because it’s a multipurpose tool, but Maya told her Shawn said it’s just so they can look cool in front of girls.

“Thank you,” Riley chirps as he hands it over. She waits for him to step around and join her on the other side of the beam, nodding behind them. “Watch my back.”

“Don’t have to ask me twice.” He grins innocently as she glares at him over her shoulder, gesturing for him to turn around and be on the lookout for other people. Obediently, he crosses his arms and keeps watch.

It takes her a minute to figure out how to get the right blade to pop open. She’s tentative at first as she drags the blade against the metal, but once she figures out how the hell to hold the knife the right way it’s pretty easy to get the hang of it.

Riley Matthews, life of crime. She can only imagine it.

She puts the finishing touches on her masterpiece, proud that her script looks somewhat cleaner than the barrage of elementary schooler initials on the other side of the beam. She at least has that artistic credibility to her name. “Okay. Done.”

Lucas swivels around and jogs back up behind her, looking over her shoulder at her handiwork. R.M. + L.F.

He grins sheepishly, biting his lip to keep from laughing. “Your handwriting is a lot nicer than mine. I didn’t realize I was dating a vandal.”

“Oh, you know me. My boyfriend was a real troubled kid and all that.”
He presses a kiss to her temple, resting his chin on her shoulder. “If this is as far as your criminal acts go, then I think we’ll be okay.”

She runs her fingers over the new engravings. The ones on the other side of the beam have survived over a decade and are still going strong. These initials, she’s expecting to last forever.

--

Lucas pulls off the side of the road in one of the nearby neighborhoods, putting the car in park and hopping out. Riley glances around at the unfamiliar houses, climbing out after him. “Is this someone’s neighborhood?”

“Well, yeah. Dylan’s house is across the street over there. But we’re here for this.”

They’re standing in front of a chain-link fence, or what’s left of it. The fence stops abruptly a couple of feet down the road, and a new gas station has been implanted on the shoulder where it ends and civilization seemingly begins. Beyond the fence, Riley can just make out a small wooden building and what looks like a small stable. Both look abandoned.

Riley drifts closer to him, bumping her shoulder against his. “So, what’s here?”

“Now? Nothing. Except that gas station, I guess.”

She can tell from the mildly distant expression on his face that the memories here aren’t exactly pleasant. “What’s the story?”

He sighs, lifting his hand and showing her. She focuses on the hairline scar running the length of his palm, remembering the story she told him as to how he got it. Something about fences and bulls and getting Zay a date with Vanessa. Asher’s mom having to take him to the hospital to get stitches. The beginning of the bad period.

Riley takes his hand in both of hers, linking their fingers together. “So, at one point it was a bull pen. And things happened.”

“My blood is probably deep in the ground somewhere,” he admits.

“And now, it’s just another gas station.” She rests her head against his shoulder, peering out at the snapshot of his history and committing it to memory. “Funny how time changes things, huh? Stuff that seemed so important at one time suddenly don’t mean a whole lot. And things that maybe didn’t mean anything yet—,”

“Suddenly mean everything,” he mutters, tilting his head to gaze at her. “Yeah. Funny.”

The look on his face is far too soft to find anything humorous in that moment, but she gets exactly what he means. She leans up and presses a kiss to his cheek.

Still holding his hand in hers, she leads the way back to the truck.

--

Riley isn’t surprised when they pull up outside what Lucas explains is his old middle school, but she’s very unprepared when he claims they’re going to go inside. Standing at the back entrance, Riley watches over their shoulders as Lucas opens the staff entrance and gestures her inside.

The hallways are dim, everyone gone for summer holiday. Lucas is far ahead of her and she jogs to
catch up, ramming into him and holding onto his hand for dear life.

“Okay, I know you’re rebellious and all that, but are you sure we’re not going to get arrested?” she whispers into his shoulder.

He chuckles quietly, squeezing her hand. “Yes. I asked the janitor if he would leave the door open for me and promised we’d lock it up when we left. He and I got along really well back in the day. Also, he owes me.”

“Owes you? For what?”

“I was able to convince a couple of seventh graders to stop plastering bologna and mustard underneath the cafeteria tables. Middle school in Texas is truly the wild west, believe me.” He stops in front of the administrative office and pulls open the door, allowing Riley to slide in before him.

She takes a quick look around. It doesn’t look all that different from Quincy Adams. She supposes middle schools are pretty much the same across the board.

Before he can get too far away she trots after him, hesitant when they stop in front of a door labeled Records. She raises an eyebrow. “What are we doing here?”

“Now, we’re being rebellious.” He reaches up and plucks one of the Bobbi pins from her hair, winking at her.

She watches in a mixture of awe and horror as he uses the pin to jimmy the lock on the door, amazed when she hears it click and the door swings open in front of them. Her jaw drops open. “Oh my God. You’re a criminal. My boyfriend is a delinquent.”

“Eh, more like Nancy Drew amateur detective,” he argues, ushering her into the records room. “I promise, we’re not here to do anything dastardly. Just give me one second.”

The door shuts behind them and Riley leans over to switch on the small lamp on the desk in front of her, barely illuminating the tight space with dim yellow lighting.

Lucas immediately goes to the set of filing cabinets on the opposite wall, using her hair pin to pick yet another lock. Although this is a new and surprisingly shady side to him, Riley can’t help but find it endearing. So long as he’s not doing anything dangerous or illegal, she doesn’t see anything wrong with finding his daring side a little bit attractive. Very attractive. Just as attractive as the rest of him.

He clicks his tongue as he searches through the drawer, humming when he finds what he’s looking for. Standing across from her on the other side of the desk, he holds out a manila folder for her to take. “Here.”

She glances at him uncertainly, taking it from him and getting a good look at it. It’s heavy in her hands. All the front of the envelope betrays is his name, stuck on a label in the top left corner of the folder. Friar, Lucas James.

Hesitantly, she lays it on the desk in front of her and opens the front flap. Instantly, a lot of information is offered to her at once and it’s clear exactly what she’s looking at. The expulsion notice on the top of the stack makes it evident enough.

Riley lifts her eyes to meet his, searching his features. “Your permanent record?”
“You said you wanted to know what I did. It’s all there.” He locks his hands together nervously, trying his best not to pick at his fingers. “You can see it for yourself.”

She can imagine how quickly she would’ve snatched this opportunity up in eighth grade. How many times she wondered all the things she didn’t know about him, how bad they could possibly be, whether or not she’d ever actually know.

But standing here now with all the answers in front of her, she doesn’t want it. Or rather, she doesn’t feel like she needs it. No matter what may be in this envelope and stack of papers that she doesn’t already know, she doesn’t want some report to reveal it to her. Whatever she learns about Lucas Friar, she wants it to come from him.

She takes one last glance at his seventh grade school portrait paper-clipped to the inside of the folder. It strikes her how much anger is in those green eyes she loves so much. She’s grateful she never had to see them that way. She’s honored she’s part of the reason they aren’t so angry anymore.

Gently, she closes the folder and slides it across the desk back to him. “No.”

“What?” He furrows his brow, frowning at her. “Why not?”

“I said those things in eighth grade because I was scared. Scared that I didn’t know who you were, scared that things were going to change, scared that maybe things weren’t going to end up exactly the way I wanted them to. But I was wrong. And as you and I have both learned, sometimes change isn’t necessarily a bad thing.”

Riley makes her way around the desk to join him on the other side, picking up the folder off the desk and placing it back in the cabinet. She shuts the drawer, hearing it click locked again. When she turns back around to face him, she takes the Bobbi pin from his fingers and sticks it back in her hair.

“I know who you are,” she murmurs, stepping closer to him and taking his hands in her own. “A stack of papers isn’t going to change that.”

He examines her thoughtfully for a long moment, before dipping down to kiss her. When he pulls away, part of her desperately that wishes he wouldn’t.

“Thank you,” he breathes, nudging his forehead against hers. “For knowing who I am.”

By the time they get to Lucas’s last stop of the day, the sun is just finishing setting along the horizon.

It’s a small café just on the outskirts of the shopping district nearby—a cozy shop Lucas refers to as the “Texas Topanga’s” for him and his friends when they were growing up. Although the sign is closed, Lucas produces a set of keys and lets them both in.

“It used to be a burger place, but the owner changed gears when he figured coffee was more popular. He let me borrow these for the evening.”

“He owe you a favor, too?”

“Nah,” Lucas says with a shrug, flicking on a set of lights and revealing a staircase leading upwards behind the counter. “Just likes me.”
As they’re climbing the narrow staircase Riley takes the lead, chattering on about all the things they saw throughout the day and what she enjoyed about each one. The closer they get to the wooden door at the top of the stairs, the more she has to say.

“I’m just saying,” she says emphatically, stopping a couple of the steps above him and turning to face him. She leans down to taunt him, shrugging her shoulders. “I don’t see how you could possibly top yourself here.”

“Well, maybe if you kept walking—,” he trails off.

She shakes her head. “I don’t think you could do it. I’d be willing to bet right now that when I walk through that door, it’s not going to be any more impressive than anything else you’ve shown me so far today. I wanna place a bet.”

“Oh kay,” he agrees. “What do you want to bet?”

Riley tilts her head at him, giving him a challenging smirk. She hums, thinking. “Whoever loses has to kiss the winner. And of course, gets the satisfaction of being right.”

Lucas is thoroughly amused at her definition of a bet. “Okay.”

“You’re going to have to kiss me,” she taunts in a sing-song voice. She turns back around and continues up the steps.

The moment she opens the door and steps out onto the rooftop, she knows she’s lost.

Strung up above her are hundreds of twinkling lights, illuminating what may very well be the prettiest, most simplistic rooftop garden Riley has ever seen. She makes her way to the center of the patio, twirling around to take it all in and wandering over to the ledge. Just beyond the railing is the rest of Austin, all those lights and colors blinking invitingly at her.

A light breeze brushes by her, bringing the soft music playing somewhere on the patio to her attention. She vaguely recognizes the tune—although she can’t remember the exact song, she remembers dancing with Lucas during senior prom to this very tune.

She gazes up at the lights above her again, overwhelmed with how gorgeous they are against the starry Texas night. She drops her gaze to look at Lucas, still standing by the doorway with his hands clasped together in front of him and a tender expression on his face. She didn’t even notice when she walked out, but the ivy-covered archway behind him around the doorframe is now hard to miss.

Riley’s expression is appropriately embarrassed. “This is why you had to get up early. Isn’t it?”

“The horses are a lot of work, but they don’t require that much extra time.”

She meanders her way back over, making a point of looking everywhere but at him as she approaches. “Somehow I’m guessing Maya being so generous today wasn’t a sudden change of heart.”

“We may have worked it out ahead of time,” he admits, smirking at her. “I’m a very good actor. I don’t know if you knew that about me.”

She rolls her eyes, reaching out to take his hands the moment she’s close enough. Having lost the bet fair and square, she gazes up at him and stands on her tip-toes to place a soft kiss on his lips. The moment lingers, Riley tightening her grip on his hands as she drops back down on her heels.
He pushes some hair behind her ear, combing his fingers through it a couple of times. “Got anything to say?”

She hums thoughtfully, opening her eyes to match his gaze. She can’t help the small smile that creeps onto her lips. “I love Texas now.”

“You love—? Okay,” he giggles, smiling as he leans down to kiss her again.

They spend a good amount of time strolling the perimeter of the roof hand in hand, Riley pointing out each different kind of flower present in the décor and pinpointing what it is exactly that makes it unique and lovely. Lucas nods along to her explanations, spending a lot more time focused on her rather than the plants.

When they drift back to the center of the rooftop Riley asks about the music. She has this sneaking suspicion that the tracks playing are all a part of this playlist he supposedly has dedicated entirely to her, but she’s only heard about the “Riley playlist” in theory from Zay and Farkle and has never actually seen it herself. He doesn’t relent, distracting her from the question by pulling her into dancing instead.

Although she’s experienced plenty of evidence in the past couple days to prove otherwise, it’s in moments like this one where she can’t quite believe Lucas Friar is real. He’s this whirlwind of white horses and rooftop dances and jellybean rings—gentle kisses and warm hands and smiles that light up rooms.

But as the tearful home videos and angry school portraits convey quite clearly, he’s very much real and a lot more than a cookie-cutter prince charming. He’s scraped knees and picked locks and hairline scars, a war-torn survivor of his own personal hurricane. For each soft side to him that she loves there’s a jagged edge that he hates, that he’s desperately trying to perfect.

He’s all that, and somehow, he’s also all hers. There isn’t one angle of him she doesn’t absolutely adore, no matter how often he attempts to hide them away.

“Lucas?”

“Hmm?” he hums softly, leaning back slightly as she lifts her head from his shoulder. She gazes at him for a long moment, taking in his green eyes that are capable of so many emotions—anger, sadness, uncertainty. Feeling blessed that when he’s with her, more often than not they’re soft.

She doesn’t offer any words in response, simply wrapping her arms around his neck and kissing him.

He kisses her back, bringing his hands up to cup her face as he initiates another one. She takes his wrists and carefully leads them towards the outdoor futon pushed back by the archway, lowering herself onto it and pulling him down with her.

Lucas’s movements are soft, his thumbs brushing against her cheekbones. They share another long kiss and Riley sighs, feeling a shiver of anticipation run down her spine.

They break for breath and Riley immediately leans forward to place another quick peck on his lips, transitioning into briefer, lighter kisses. He accepts them as he slowly changes tracks, pressing one to the corner of her mouth. Then her cheek. The tip of her nose.

It’s an unwelcome shock to remember that these are the last ones she may get for a long time.

“The lights are beautiful,” she whispers, smiling at him when he pulls back to lock eyes with her.
She settles back against the futon, reaching up to comb her fingers through his hair. “You really didn’t have to wake up so early for all this.”

“I did,” he states, slouching against the cushions and gazing at her. He touches the chain around her neck, twirling the jellybean between his fingers.

She adjusts to cuddle up closer to him, allowing him to drape his arm around her. She gazes up at the lights and stars above them, smiling absentmindedly as he nuzzles his head against her neck affectionately. “The stars are great, too. Not quite like Kentucky, but with Austin so close I guess the light pollution has some effect.”

“I know,” he grumbles. “Farkle totally stole my idea.”

“Well, it had no adverse effect on your overall execution. Ten out of ten. Would date again.”

Lucas laughs, bumping his nose against her jaw. She grins, finding his hand that’s not resting on her shoulder and taking it in her own. Her mind wanders for a bit as she stares up at the lights and the stars, playing with his fingers while he presses kisses along her neck.

“You know, Maya used to always say that dating someone so early on in high school was a waste of time,” Riley starts nervously, dropping her eyes down to their hands instead. She swallows. “She just kept sort of casually saying that being in a relationship for so long didn’t make any sense, because how would we ever actually experience the world if we’d only ever been with each other?”

Lucas doesn’t comment straightaway, preoccupied with kissing just below her jawline. She takes a deep breath and closes her eyes, composing her thoughts and focusing on the feeling of his lips against her skin. When she opens her eyes again she tilts her head to look at him, forcing him to adjust and match her gaze. “You don’t feel that way, do you? Like we’re missing out on something. Like we’re wasting our time.”

He examines her for a moment. His features are as soft as ever. “No.”

Riley feels a huge weight lift off of her shoulders. Despite how certain she feels about long distance, how determined she is to make it work, everyone else’s doubt had started to creep up on her. It’s a relief to hear he still shares the same sentiments as her.

She smiles lightly. “Me neither.”

He mirrors her smile, leaning forward to brush his lips against hers. She starts another kiss, nudging their foreheads together. All things considered, she’s still hopeful for them, no matter how many miles are going to be between them.

--

It’s not hard to find Maya when they pull back into Pappy Joe’s driveway and hop out of the truck. She’s waiting for them on the porch swing, strumming her ukulele and singing to herself as she attempts to figure out a couple of chords.

Having settled on a song, she fumbles her way through it as Riley skips up the steps to join her. Lucas saunters up the porch steps after her, leaning back against the railing and smiling as he listens to them. Both girls warble along with the guitar and harmonize pretty impressively, something they’ve done many times since Maya decided to pick up a guitar all those years ago.

They keep the bit going until Lucas disappears into the house and returns with a harmonica, playing
along with Maya’s guitar long enough for her to lose her cool and burst into laughter. Once that performance is effectively over, she focuses on tuning her instrument instead. “How was your date?”

“Great,” Riley says happily, smiling at Lucas across from her. “Really great.”

“How was your date?”

“Oh, the sappiest.”

“Typical,” Maya sneers, dropping the ukulele on the swing next to her. “So, sappiness aside, it’s time to do something cool and interesting. Huckleberry, there has to be some harsh, older nightlife for us to explore as young adults of this brave new world.”

Lucas shrugs, thinking. “Well, considering you can’t drink yet, the bar is still pretty low.”

“Bummer.”

“But we can at least go see downtown, since Asher only drove us through it. If that’s something you guys would be into.”

Maya’s eyes are alight with her usual mischief. She jumps to her feet. “If you can get us there, I’m sure I can find the fun to be had. What do you say, honey? You up for a good ol’ Western adventure in the wild plains of Ranger Rick’s hometown?”

If it’s with the two of them, there’s no place Riley wouldn’t be up for exploring. She hops up as well, linking her arm with Maya’s and beaming. “Let’s ride.”

--

Despite Maya’s best wishes, downtown Austin isn’t nearly as dodgy or risqué as she hoped. It’s not all that different from New York with its bright lights and food dives and nightlife, lots of young adults barely older than them out and about. They blend right in to the crowd, another pocket of friends adventuring the evening away together.

It isn’t until they’ve eaten and are making their way along the streets to check out the establishments that Maya finds her mischief. She spots a building a couple doors down and immediately stops, her eyes widening and a grin growing across her face. She grabs Riley’s arm and yanks her towards the curb out of the way of other passersby, effectively yanking Lucas along with her.

“A warning next time would be nice,” Riley mumbles, rolling her shoulder.

Maya ignores her complaints, bright eyes on Lucas rather than her. “I’ve got a challenge for you, Hop-a-long. You game or not?”

“How about you tell me what it is before I agree to anything?” he says flatly, raising his eyebrows at her and crossing his arms.

She nods down the street, matching his tone. “We’re adults here. So there’s absolutely nothing stopping us from walking into that parlor right there and getting tattoos. Right here, right now.”

Lucas looks appropriately surprised. Riley is completely floored, her jaw dropping open slightly. “Tattoos?”

“Maya, you do realize tattoos are permanent, right?” Riley gives her a concerned look. Hair is one thing—it’ll grow back eventually. A tattoo is forever. “Like, you can’t just take it off when you decide you don’t like it anymore.”

“I hear you, honey, I do,” Maya assures her, raising her hand to shush her. Considering she isn’t looking at her, she ends up getting smacked haphazardly instead. “But I’m talking to Huckleberry.”

For all their similarities, nothing is more striking about Lucas and Maya than their nearly identical challenging looks. It’s supposedly why Riley is necessary, or so Maya has claimed before—the two of them need her to balance them out. Unlike Maya and Farkle’s mutually beneficial exchange of restless energy, the dynamic between Maya and Lucas has a tendency to go from restless to reckless to downright destructive. Something they’re both well aware of, if their car conversation she eavesdropped upon is any indication.

“Come on, Sundance. I dare you. I thought you weren’t scared of anything.”

“Maya, if he doesn’t want to—,” Riley begins.

Lucas interrupts her. “Fine.”

The agreement is enough to shake even Maya’s confident façade. Both she and Riley stare at Lucas, mildly stunned. “Really?”

“Really?” Riley echoes, examining him curiously.

He shrugs casually, tilting his head at Maya. “Sure. If you’re sure you’re up for it. But if you don’t want to, that’s fine too. I’m down with whatever.”

Maya narrows her eyes. “Game on. Let’s go.”

It takes Riley a moment to catch up with the turn of events and by the time she does she has to jog to keep up with her best friends, who are already well on their way down the sidewalk towards the tattoo parlor. Although there’s a moment of hesitation standing outside the door, all three of them step in together.

The inside is less intimidating than Riley expected it to be. She hangs back slightly while Maya confronts the man at the desk, arranging for her and Lucas to just go for it. It seems insane to Riley that they would decide to put something on their bodies that they can never remove without seriously considering the consequences first, but she supposes that’s one of the best things about Maya. She’s never tying herself down worrying about possible consequences.

As they’re being led to the back, Lucas glances over his shoulder at her. “You going to be okay, Riley?”

She nods, shrugging apathetically. “Oh, yeah. I’ll just wait here. Have fun.”

The two of them disappear with one of the tattoo artists into the back of the shop, leaving her alone to ruminate over the change in plans. Although she doesn’t want to feel this way, she’s a bit stung over the fact that Maya just assumed she wouldn’t be interested in participating. There’s no reason for her to think otherwise—something like this would be wildly out of character for Riley, and she is fairly certain she wouldn’t even know what to get if she was faced with the needle.

But the longer she stands there, looking at the body art displayed on the walls and trapped in her
own head, she suddenly finds herself feeling a little more reckless than usual. And surprisingly, she answers the question of what she would get relatively easily as she thinks about it.

Spurred by the creative energy of the parlor and the exciting energy of the nightlife around her, she finds herself approaching the desk and addressing the woman behind the counter who replaced the man from before. Krysta is emblazoned on her name tag, and the Simpsons tattoo on her upper arm is a definite eye-catcher.

“Out of curiosity, how quickly could you get me in and out so I could be finished before the two of them?” she asks innocently, gesturing to the doorway through which Maya and Lucas disappeared.

“Well, if they’re functioning as a duo, then presumably half the time.” Krysta lifts her eyes and scrutinizes Riley, a small smirk forming on her face. “Why do you ask?”

Taking a deep breath, Riley smacks her hands down on the desk. “Tattoo me up, baby. I’m dangerous and I’m here to mark my body forever.”

Krysta raises an eyebrow in amusement, nodding and gesturing Riley behind the desk to go through another door on the opposite end of the building. “You sure about this? You know you can’t just take this stuff off.”

“Trust me, I’m well aware.”

“Alright. You thought about what you’re going to get? You only get one shot here.”

Riley smiles to herself, glancing over her shoulder at the other doorway where Lucas and Maya are, exercising their reckless energy in constant competition with one another. Funny, how Riley is so fond of their carefree shenanigans. But she figures it’s because she knows how wonderful the rest of them are.

She nods. “I’ve got it.”

--

Riley jumps on Maya the moment they’re alone in the guest bedroom that night.

“Let me see it! Let me see what you got!”

“Alright, okay, Riles!” Maya cackles, shoving her off of her and raising her hands in surrender. “Do you really want to see?”

Riley nods enthusiastically. Maya rolls her eyes, holding up her hand and wiggling her ring finger.

Rather than her friendship ring with Riley, a different band is etched into the skin where her finger meets her hand, temporarily replacing the real one. It’s such a subtle change Riley didn’t even notice it before. She takes Maya’s hand and gets a closer look.

Mimicking their actual friendship rings, the tattoo goes all the way around her finger. At the center of the back of her finger, a tiny, intricate sun acts as the gemstone.

“It’s a sun,” Riley murmurs.

Maya nods, looking down at it. “A sun ring, to be accurate to the way I described it. I was just thinking about how one of the first things I learned about art—when I started actually thinking about it as a serious thing—was when I’d watch the sun in the bay window.”
“When we’d turn gold,” Riley offers helpfully.

“Right, exactly. I just felt like no matter how much I learn at art school, no matter how great an artist I become, I don’t ever want to forget that. I don’t want to forget where I came from and what I learned.” She smiles lightly, lifting her hand and showing it off to her. “I can never take this off, even after I die.”

“Good.”

Maya grins at her. The two of them get ready for bed in relative silence, and Riley debates telling her about her own tattoo but decides against it. For all the fun being mischievous is worth, a big part of the thrill is in the fact that she has this secret that neither of them know about.

Riley pulls on one of Lucas’s old baseball t-shirts, pulling the Bobbi pins from her hair. “Do you know what Lucas got?”

The amused smirk on Maya’s face isn’t what Riley was expecting. “I sure do.”

“Well?”

Maya opens her mouth to answer but hesitates, getting under the covers and shrugging. “Why don’t you go ask him?”

Riley frowns slightly, putting her hands on her hips. “Because you’re in here, and he’s over there. And it’s time for bed.”

Maya gives her an exhausted look. When Riley doesn’t immediately make a move one way or the other, she shrugs and collapses back against the pillows. “Whatever, Riles. You can stay in here all night if you really want to, or you could walk about five feet down the hall and spend the night with the person you actually prefer to sleep next to. It’s up to you, babe.”

“Aw, well, Maya, you don’t have to sound so wounded. I still like you.”

Maya grumbles incoherently into her pillow, making Riley laugh.

Grabbing her phone, Riley steps quietly into the hall and sneaks her way past Pappy Joe’s room. The lights downstairs are all out, indicating that everyone has officially gone to bed. Considering it’s well past midnight, it doesn’t surprise her.

She comes to a stop in front of Lucas’s door, steeling her resolve and knocking softly before pushing it open a few inches to peer inside.

Lucas is seated on his bed, dressed for sleep and jotting something down in a notebook. He raises his head to look at her, evidently surprised to see her but not necessarily disappointed.

“Thank God you’re awake,” Riley exhales, glancing over her shoulder before leaning against the door shyly. “Would it be completely blasphemous for me to stay here tonight?”

Lucas can’t help the smirk that ghosts over his lips. “I was kind of hoping you would,” he admits. “Yay!” Riley cheers in a whisper, stepping in and shutting the door behind her.

She takes a few moments to take a look around the space, having never been inside his childhood room before. Amazingly, it’s just about as impersonal as the bedroom in his apartment in New York—only a few photos and personal belongings scattered around the otherwise simple and
spotless room. Part of her resents that this is the way he’s always had to live, in this in-between space with no actual place to call his own. No place that really feels like home.

Riley touches the picture laying on his desk, an old photo of him, Asher, Zay, and Dylan. They can’t be much older than twelve in the photo. It’s probably one of the last ones they took before he moved away.

She looks over her shoulder at him. He’s drawn his focus away from the notebook in front of him, watching her explore his room instead. She leans back against the desk chair, nodding at the agenda on his knee. “What are you working on?”

“Oh, nothing,” he says offhandedly, shrugging down at it before reaching over to drop it on his side table. “Just a checklist for tomorrow. Trying not to forget anything.”

Riley wanders over and picks up the list to look at it, noticing how some of the words have been erased and rewritten more than a couple of times. No matter how cool he’s acting on the surface, this is enough to show her how nervous he actually is.

She chooses to change the subject for now, plopping down on the bed next to him and clasping her hands together excitedly. “So.”

“So.”

There’s a pause. He raises his eyebrows at her, causing her to lean forward and nudge his shoulder. “Are you going to show it to me or not?”

“I do hope you mean the tattoo.”

She rolls her eyes, but she can’t help the natural flush of her cheeks. “Yes. That’s what I mean.”

Lucas grins, but doesn’t make any sort of move to do so. Riley tilts her head at him, waiting impatiently. At his hesitance they share a tacit exchange, Riley raising her eyebrows until he laughs and dips his head down.

“I just don’t know if I should. It’s in… a place that’s not super easy to show off.”

Riley widens her eyes. “Oh my God, where did you get it?”

“Okay, nowhere that bad, you don’t have to wide-eye me! What, you think I got a tramp stamp?”

“You’re the one acting so shifty about it,” she giggles. “Where is it?”

He hesitates. “It’s on my shoulder. So to show it to you, I’d have to… remove a piece of clothing.”

“Okay.” She blinks at him. “And? Go on?”

For some reason, he’s still uncharacteristically timid. When she hums impatiently at him he laughs bashfully, raising his hands in surrender. “Look, I just don’t want to promote any sort of nefarious activity. I don’t know where your dad has eyes. Who knows what he’s seeing.”

Riley is thoroughly entertained, cracking up with a shake of her head. “Okay, if you’re worried about what my dad has or has not seen with his mysterious psychic vision then we are in way more trouble for things we’ve done before this point than you just taking off your shirt.”

He grimaces at the notion, both of them laughing awkwardly.
“Exactly. That’s what I’m saying! Now come on, I want to see it. Please?”

He squints at her, making a face. “You’re very hard to say no to.”

She bats her eyes at him innocently, grinning. He shakes his head, reaching to pull his t-shirt off and tossing it to floor by the bed.

Riley can’t help but feel a breathless at the sight of him shirtless. She supposes it’s one of those things she’s never going to fully get over. But she forces herself to snap out of it, crawling over to kneel behind him and get a good look at his shoulders.

Although perfectly concealed under his clothes, the small marking on the back of his left shoulder is hard to miss when his back is bare. She scoots closer to get a better look, vaguely recognizing the shape of it until she realizes exactly what it is.

“A sheep,” she says slowly, unable to help the snicker that follows her words. “You got a sheep.”

“Yeah, I did!” he says confidently, smiling at her amusement.

She continues to giggle, reaching forward to lightly touch the tattoo with her fingers. The familiarity stems from the fact that it’s not a very professional-looking rendition of the farm animal. More like a doodle. Precisely like the doodle she drew on him when he told her about the scar he got from falling off Judy the sheep, still present right next to the ink.

“I have my reasons, you know,” he says defensively.

“Oh, is that so? I just figured everyone was getting farm animal tattoos these days.”

“You’re laughing at me.”

“Me? No. No, no. Never.” He grumbles at her and she leans forward to hug him from behind, propping her chin on his shoulder. She tilts her head at him, placing a kiss on his cheek. “Tell me your reasons.”

“Well, for one, sheep have kind of factored prominently into my life. I don’t know if you knew that about me. But basically, I figured that it was sort of proof that there’s nothing I can’t pick myself back up from.” He pauses. “Also, it’s sort of a reminder not to take myself too seriously.”

Riley smiles. “Because you have a sheep on your shoulder.”

“Because I have a sheep on my shoulder, yes,” he says, turning his head to grin at her. “Besides. Sheep kind of remind me of someone.”

Riley knows he’s talking about her, but a part of her really wants to hear him say it. “Who?”

“You know who. I don’t have to say it.” She hums uncertainly, tilting her head back and forth. He raises his eyebrows at her and she scrunches her nose, making a face. “You really want me to say it out loud. Just for kicks.”

She nods eagerly and hides her head playfully against his shoulder, making him roll his eyes. But he’s smiling.

“Okay, okay.” He takes a deep breath, waiting for her to lock eyes with him. “It’s Maya.”

All things considered, she definitely had that one coming. She gasps anyway and shoves him lightly, earning a laugh from him. He shifts slightly and takes her face in his hands, kissing her
enthusiastically.

Riley’s giggles fade as she gets caught up in kissing him back, falling back against the pillows and pulling him down on top of her. It’s so easy to get caught up in him. She’s known that practically since she met him.

Lucas kisses her indulgently, finding her hand and linking their fingers together. She’s not sure how long they stay pressed together, exchanging long, soft kisses and exhaling into each other’s mouths when they have to break to catch their breath. With only so little time left, Riley feels like she has a million things she wants to say and yet no idea what to say at all. It kind of feels like there’s nothing left to say.

After a particularly drawn-out kiss, Lucas presses a kiss to her forehead. Riley sighs, closing her eyes and forcing herself to stay in the moment. No point in worrying about the future, no matter how close it may be. She wants to live in the present, safe with Lucas and absolutely no distance between them.

“You know how we were talking about those things that mean everything?” Lucas says softly, gently undoing the braids in her hair.

“Yeah.”

“Yeah,” he mumbles, gazing at her. His eyes are soft with sincerity. “Yeah.”

She smiles, touching his face idly and running the pad of her thumb over the corner of his mouth. She takes a deep breath. “Can I say something selfish?”

“Mhm.”

Riley hesitates, focusing on thumbing his bottom lip. “There’s so much I should say. I know it. But all I can think about is…” she trails off, figuring out exactly how she wants to phrase it. “I wish we could stay here forever. Here, in this moment. I know so many good things are going to happen but right now, I’d rather stay here.”

He shifts onto his side next to her. They exchange a thoughtful look. “I know.”

There’s nothing left to say. Both of them crawl under the covers, Lucas wrapping his arm around her and pressing a kiss to the crook of her neck. She closes her eyes, taking his hand and tracing patterns against his arm. Willing herself to focus on his familiar warmth and security and light, regardless of what tomorrow brings.

Pappy Joe runs the three of them through the game plan that morning, giving them instructions on the best way to get to A&M and promising he and Sheila will meet them there once they pick up Grace from the airport. Gearing up for one last ride, Lucas, Maya, and Riley pile into Van Cory and pull out of the driveway, back on the road towards another goodbye.

There’s a moment of hilarity as Maya takes a risk and puts on the radio, all three of them screaming when “No Place Like You” comes through the speakers.

“Turn it off! Turn it off now!” Lucas shouts, reaching for the controls as best he can from the backseat.

Maya takes her hand off the wheel to turn the volume up instead, scream-singing along with the
sickly sweet lyrics. “Everywhere I go I see your smile! Come on, sing along, I know you both know it! It haunted our eighth grade days, you’re never going to forget it!”

The rest of the drive is smooth sailing. Traffic isn’t bad, the sky is clear. There’s absolutely nothing stopping them from getting Lucas where he needs to go.

That is, until Maya suddenly pulls off onto the shoulder, startling both Riley and Lucas.

“What are you doing?” Riley asks nervously, glancing around them as cars rush by them. She exchanges a confused look with Lucas behind her.

“Something is wrong with the van,” Maya declares, unbuckling her seatbelt and putting on the hazard lights. “Something with the engine I think. We’d better check it out.”

Despite the lack of obvious issues, Maya is staunch in her belief that something isn’t right. She gets them all out of the vehicle and waits anxiously as Lucas checks under the hood, inspects the tires, listens to the engine. Riley crosses her arms,

Lucas closes the hood, holding his arms out. “I got nothing, Maya. I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Obviously, Huckleberry, you didn’t check thoroughly enough. Something is wrong, alright? I just know it.”

“Well, Maya, when we get to A&M there will be a lot of places we can go to get it checked out if that makes you feel better,” Riley offers diplomatically.

“No, we can’t just take the car in this condition,” Maya says frantically, shaking her head and marching over to the passenger side. She searches for the Triple AAA card. “We need to call someone. Wait for them to come check it out.”

“Maya, I can’t afford to wait for something that isn’t even worth checking. I’m telling you, nothing’s wrong.”

“Lucas needs to go, Pappy Joe is going to be waiting for him. We can’t just—,”

“He can’t go!” Maya snaps, her voice cracking. She stands up straighter and averts her gaze from them, swallowing hard and dropping her eyes to the concrete underneath them.

Riley freezes. She and Lucas exchange a look of realization.

“It’s not right,” Maya says shakily, shutting the passenger side door. “We need to wait.”

No one moves for a long moment. Riley nods at Lucas to head towards the driver’s side and start the car. She tentatively approaches her best friend, taking her arm gently. “We can’t wait, peaches. It’s time to move forward.”

Maya finally meets her eyes, taking a deep breath. She starts to glance at Lucas over her shoulder but decides against it. “Fine. Alright.”

Riley climbs back in the passenger seat as Maya gets into the back, silent but without further protest. Lucas glances at her cautiously. “All good?”

“All good,” she says supportively, patting his arm. “Let’s get you to school, college boy.”
When they arrive on campus, Riley is impressed with how large everything is. She knows everything is bigger in Texas, but their college campuses certainly don’t kid around.

Lucas takes an unusual amount of time to get his things from the back, emerging just when Riley comes around to check on him. “Everything okay?”

“Oh, yeah,” he assures her, giving her a smile. “Just had to check something.”

He shoulders his backpack and nods at Maya to come join them, the three of them walking onto the campus.

Lucas greets Pappy Joe and his mother when they find them by the residence hall, dropping his stuff by their feet and accepting a hug from Grace. The three of them exchange a few words before Pappy Joe picks up the bags and starts walking towards the dorms. Grace waves affectionately towards Riley over Lucas’s shoulder and turns to follow Pappy Joe.

Lucas wanders back over to stand in front of them, stuffing his hands in his pockets. Maya and Riley lock eyes before the former steps forward, exhaling loudly and slapping Lucas on the arm.

“Well, it’s been fun. I guess. Not always.”

“Yeah, definitely not always.”

Maya rolls her eyes, clasping her hands together authoritatively. “Now, there’s only one more thing I’d like to say to you here before you go off and face the world. It’s important, so you need to hear every word. You understand me?”

“Okay. Go on.”

She clears her throat, collecting her thoughts. “Huckleberry.”

“Oh, God.”


“Oh, thank you.”

“Ha-hurr!” she shouts, bowing her head respectfully once she’s done. “Okay. I’ve said what I needed to say. That’s it. See ya, sucker.”

Maya turns on her heel and starts to walk back towards Riley, before pausing in her tracks. The expression on her face shifts slightly, and she takes a deep breath. “Wait, I forgot one.”

Lucas opens his mouth to argue when Maya whips around and takes his shirt in her fist, yanking him towards her to hug him. He’s evidently shocked for a moment before he wraps his arms around her and hugs her back. Riley smiles affectionately.

“Stay good, Mad Dog,” Maya mutters into his shoulder, tearing up.

He laughs, hugging her tighter. “I will. Promise.”

She steps back from him, taking a shaky breath and flicking at the corners of her eyes with her thumbs. “Good. Well, then, that’s all I had to say. Officially. I’ll just, um,” she trails off, gesturing vaguely in Riley’s direction and walking away from him.
Riley passes her and squeezes her arm, approaching Lucas and coming to stand in front of him.

The two of them stand in silence for a long moment. She catches him picking at his fingernails and reaches forward to take his hands in hers. “No matter where you are, you’re still my boyfriend. Whenever anyone on campus asks me if I’m seeing anybody, or if I’m taken, I’ll be able to say my boyfriend is Lucas Friar. None of that changes.”

“Yeah, but we’re long distance now,” he murmurs, staring down at their hands.

“Yeah. But those are just words, Lucas.” She blinks at him, waiting for him to lift his head and match her gaze. “Words don’t change people.”

He examines her for a second, laughing sheepishly as she grins up at him. Trying to hold onto the light-hearted nature of the moment, Riley takes the opportunity to step closer and hug him, smiling into his shoulder as he automatically pulls her into his tight embrace.

It backfires. Because the closer they are, the harder it is to let go.

“You’re going to do so great,” she tells him eagerly, hating how her voice is shaking and hating the tears pricking the corners of her eyes. “You’re going to be amazing.”

He kisses her hair, hugging her closer. She doesn’t think she’ll ever be able to step back and let him go.

“Riles,” Maya says quietly. Lifting her head from his shoulder, she sees Pappy Joe returning to them from the dormitory.

“I have to go,” Lucas says breathlessly, a similar tremble in his voice. “I have to go.”

“I know,” Riley says, wishing she had more words but coming up empty. She squeezes his hands as she pulls back, giving him the most encouraging smile she can muster. She’s very aware of how both their hands are shaking. “I know. But you’re going to be fine. You’re going to be so fine.”

Lucas nods, dropping her hands to take her face in his hands and kiss her.

Just for that moment, everything stops. She’s grounded again. Time and responsibility cease to exist and it’s quiet. It’s just Lucas, her, and the quiet.

When he pulls away, she doesn’t want to open her eyes. But she knows she’ll regret it if she doesn’t.

She gives him a tearful smile, wiping the tear tracks from his cheeks. “Go be a veterinarian.”

Maya is at her side the second Lucas lets go of her hands, finally turning away and heading towards Pappy Joe. Riley watches as his grandfather wraps an arm around his shoulder and claps him on the back, bracing him as he heads off towards his new temporary home. Going off to do what he’s always dreamed of, ever since they were just kids studying at the library.

Numbly, Riley allows Maya to link arms with her and begin the walk back to the van. “Don’t look back,” she advises softly.

She knows Maya is right. It’s too hard to look back. But at the last moment, Riley throws one more glance over her shoulder at her boyfriend’s retreating form, an overwhelming mix of pride and devastation vying for dominance over her emotional state. They’re an equal match.
Finally, she manages to tear her eyes away, looking towards the path ahead.

What she misses is the moment where Lucas turns to take one last look at her, feeling the exact same things.
- SOPHOMORE YEAR -

Sophomore year is the year Lucas Friar learns about home.

He knows how lucky he is to have always had a place to live—a roof over his head and food in the fridge and a bed to sleep in. In fact, maybe he should feel triply lucky considering he’s had three different places like this in his life and never gone one second without one. He grew up in a perfectly fine house in Texas, he had his very own room at Pappy Joe’s ranch. The apartment they moved into when they got to New York is practical and he still gets his own room, so in actuality he has nothing worth complaining about. Nothing more to ask for than this.

But he also knows that a house is not a home. The two words have entirely different meanings and he’s pretty sure he’s never actually had the latter. He figures that if he had, he’d remember—it would be a feeling rather than a descriptor, a feeling so strong and so intrinsic that he would never, ever forget it. Home is supposed to be a place where you feel safe, where you feel at ease, where you feel like you belong and there are people around who share those feelings with you. It’s the place you want to come back to after a hard day and the place you hate to leave even on a good day.

He’s positive he’s never had a home, because he’s never had a problem with leaving.
Since having moved to New York, however, he feels like he might be getting closer.

Nothing is concrete yet, but the longer he stays in this one place and spends time with his friends the closer he gets to it. He knows because he gets the inkling of a feeling in the most random moments—that night at the library with Riley, the day of the seventh grade election, standing with all of them after middle school graduation. It’s not the feeling—he’ll know it when he feels it, he’s sure of that—but it’s something similar and that’s the closest he’s ever gotten to finding it.

When Riley almost moves away in the middle of freshman year, he almost loses it. He doesn’t get how you can lose something you never had in the first place, but he’s certain when he watches her disappear up the stairs with Maya that he’s suddenly much further from home than he ever was before.

Thankfully, that particular crisis was averted and Lucas finds himself back where he was before. Sensing that home is somewhere nearby, maybe even right in front of him, but he just can’t see it yet. Although it’s a special kind of torture—much like the hell that was triangle limbo where he was allowed to be with Riley but not actually be with Riley—he puts up with it anyway because he’s pretty sure that when he finally gets that feeling, when he realizes he’s home, that moment will be worth it.

Besides, there’s plenty of things to distract him in the meantime.

“Listen, I’m not saying there’s anything wrong with spending your free weekends babysitting with your girlfriend like it’s training day or whatever,” Zay says offhandedly one November morning before classes, grabbing his agenda from his locker and slamming it shut. Lucas wonders where the hell all his books are, but he doesn’t comment. “But I’m just wondering, are Cory and Topanga paying you for this? Like, they’re getting a hell of a lot of free labor out of you.”

Lucas cracks up, letting Zay lead the way towards the stairs. “No, they’re not. But it’s okay, I like doing it. Besides, they always end up feeding me while I’m there so I figure that might as well count.”

“Yeah, okay, but you do realize that those weekends you used to spend playing video games with your best friend—read, me—are now being spent with an eight year old. You’re replacing your best friend with an eight year old.”

“I could never replace you,” he assures him, earning an eye roll in response. They stop outside the chemistry classroom as Sarah pushes past them with Wyatt, both of them clutching a bright green workbook in their hands along with their textbooks.

All the sudden, Lucas has the sickening realization that he forgot something.

“Shit,” he mutters, checking his bag as Maya and Farkle approach from the other end of the hall.

“What?”

Just as he suspected, his workbook is nowhere to be found, still tucked away in his locker. “I forgot something.”

“Doesn’t look like it was just you,” Farkle says with an eyebrow raise. “Where’s your workbook, Zay? Where’s your textbook? Where’s… do you even own a backpack?”

Zay shrugs. “Sorry, Cory’s class has given me unrealistic expectations. I just show up and hope for the best.”
“Man of my own heart,” Maya hums in approval.

Although he respects the choices of his friends, Lucas can’t even imagine showing up unprepared. Farkle finishes telling them off and storms into the classroom, Maya on his heels. Zay starts to head in as well but stops when he realizes Lucas is heading the other direction.

“Lucas, where are you going?”

“I’m just going to go grab the workbook, it’ll take me like a minute.”

Zay gives him a look. “Man, it’s not that big a deal. People forget them all the time.”

“I know, I know, but my locker is just down the hall. I’m just going to go grab it. I’ll be back in no time.” Lucas turns around and starts down the hall, jogging lightly and skirting around the other students rushing to class the other way.

“The bell rings in a minute!” Zay calls after him, but it’s no use.

Lucas turns the corner to the history hallway and slides to a stop in front of his locker, spinning the combination in record time. His chemistry notebook is sitting on the top shelf, bright green and ugly and boasting the fact that he was almost late because of it.

Still, showing up just as the bell rings is better than showing up unprepared. He grabs it and slams his locker shut, glancing at the clock. He’s still got thirty seconds. He’s going to be fine.

At least he assumes so until he barrels into someone and nearly falls over, just barely managing to catch himself against the wall. The victim isn’t so lucky, stumbling and dropping the huge stack of papers they were carrying.

When he catches his balance and straightens up, Cory Matthews locks eyes with him and gives him a disdainful look. Overhead, the bell rings.

So much for being on time. With the disdainful expression on his favorite teacher’s face, he figures he’s got bigger problems to worry about.

“I’m so sorry, sir,” Lucas says hastily, immediately dropping to his knees and helping pick up the papers scattered across the floor. “I should’ve been more careful.”

“You know, as your history teacher, I’m inclined to assure you that it’s no problem at all,” Cory states, accepting the papers from him and rearranging the stack in his arms. He raises his eyebrows as Lucas gets back to his feet. “But as the father of Riley, who just so happens to be dating you, I have to say I’m not pleased.”

He knows he’s kidding, but Lucas still feels the need to make up for it. “Well, I am helping watch Auggie tonight. Doesn’t that save me some credit?”

Cory grumbles unintelligibly, waving his hand in the air to brush the thought away. He starts down the hall towards his classroom, in the same direction as the science hallway. “What are you doing out of class? I don’t think I’ve ever passed you at this time of day.”

“Forgot something,” he admits, holding up the cursed workbook for Cory to see. “I figured I was going to make it in time, but then, well, you happened, sir.”

Cory cracks a smile, nodding towards his classroom. “Come on, I’ll write you a pass.”
When he shows up at the Matthews apartment that night, Cory is clever enough to get a couple of jokes in about the hallway incident before Topanga drags him out the door.

Lucas has decided he doesn’t mind the teasing when it’s coming from the Matthews. He’s having a tough time trying to get Maya to see the line and realize when not to cross it, but nothing Cory or Topanga says ever feels like an actual jab. It’s all in good fun, he recognizes that, and considering the dynamic of the entire Matthews family it sort of makes him feel like he’s a part of it rather than an outsider. If getting picked on by Cory means he gets to pretend he’s one of them, he’ll take it without complaint.

Babysitting Auggie is never too big an ordeal. Like Riley, he’s not too much of a troublemaker, and Lucas is grateful that he seems relatively fond of him. At least nothing like what he’s heard about when Maya would help babysit which usually involved an argument of some kind, even if they resolved the conflict by the end of the night. Riley has made it very clear she appreciates how calm the evening is when he comes over to help.

In most cases, babysitting usually involves the three of them each getting a jumpstart on their homework at the kitchen table together, then dinner, then some form of televised entertainment to distract Auggie until Cory and Topanga come home or he falls asleep. Pretty manageable, and considering he gets to spend a whole evening with Riley, Lucas would babysit every night if the Matthews would let him.

That Friday evening is no different. Lucas sits across the table from Riley, working on his geometry assignment while she talks her brother through his history homework. Every once and a while she’ll glance up and catch him staring at her, which always gets him focused back on his math pretty quickly out of embarrassment.

She never seems to mind it though. The playful kick he gets under the table always makes sure he’s aware that she doesn’t mind at all.

“Please,” Auggie wails after another thirty minutes of New York history. “I’ve had enough. I’m starving. My brain is going to explode. Please, free me from this pain.”

Riley smiles, exchanging a look with Lucas before shrugging. “Okay. You know, mom left us money for pizza so we’ll order it if you go get cleaned up.”

“I don’t get how much longer I’m going to have to prepare for dinner. I’m eight years old. Aren’t I prepared enough? When will the ridiculous handwashing come to an end?”

“Not tonight, that’s for sure. Go,” Riley says, nudging him towards the hallway. Once Auggie disappears and the bathroom door slams shut, she waits a moment before turning her gaze on Lucas across from her.

He pretends not to notice, keeping his eyes on his homework. He only looks up when she kicks him softly again, crossing her arms and leaning forward over the table.

“Bet I can guess what you’re thinking,” she sings, starting the conversation game they play all the time. It started in ninth grade as a way to approach topics they wouldn’t otherwise be comfortable jumping into, but it’s developed more into an inside joke. The really crazy thing about it is how good they’ve gotten at playing it—most of the time when Riley claims she can guess what’s going through his head, she’s one hundred percent right.
He smiles instinctively, closing his history textbook and giving her his full attention. “Okay. Go ahead.”

She hums, taking a long moment to look him over. She’s one of the only people in his life whose gaze doesn’t feel scrutinizing—he doesn’t feel like he’s failed some kind of test the moment she looks away. “You’re thinking about what kind of pizza you’d like to have, but you’re not giving it too much thought because you’re not super picky and you’ll just eat whatever me and Auggie want.”

Riley is pretty good at reading his mind, but the one thing she always underestimates is how often he’s thinking about her.

He raises his arms in surrender. “You got me.”

“Which is exactly why I’m putting you on the spot here,” she declares, narrowing her eyes at him and reaching forward to poke his arm. “What kind of pizza do you want?”

He shrugs, grinning when she continues to poke at him. He catches her hand in his, holding her wrist gently and making her meet his eyes. “I don’t care. I really don’t mind, I’m fine with whatever.”

“So you always say.” Riley adjusts their hands and links their fingers together. “But I’m not asking what you’d be okay with, I’m asking what you would prefer. There has to be an answer to that.”

“Whatever you want, that’s what I want.” She rolls her eyes, but she’s smiling. “And I’m guessing you’re thinking that your boyfriend has to be the most obnoxiously agreeable person to ever step foot in the state of New York.”

“Wrong.” She mimics the sound of a buzzer, impressively well. “I was actually thinking my boyfriend has to be the cutest, most wonderfully agreeable person to ever step foot in the state of New York.”

He smiles, dropping her gaze and staring down at his textbook instead. Even though he knows he spends an inordinate amount of time looking at her all day, in moments like these he has to look away. Because Riley may be a hopeless romantic, but he knows that everything she says she absolutely means. It’s sort of like looking at the sun—when it’s shining it’s brightest, you have to look away. Otherwise, it’ll blind you.

Riley is definitely the brightest star in his galaxy, he knows that for certain.

“How come we never go to your house?” she says suddenly, breaking him out of his own head.

“Huh?”

She hesitates, glancing down at their hands rather than meeting his eyes. “We hang out here all the time. Obviously, I don’t mind that. But I feel like you know everything about my family and my house and I don’t know nearly the same amount about yours. We never go to your house.”

“That’s not true. We went that one time with Maya and Farkle. And that other time when we had to pick up—,”

“Okay, yes, I know I’ve been there,” she says insistently. “But only for a few minutes at a time. I’ve only ever really stood in your living room. I’d really like to actually see it, you know what I mean?”
“I guess,” he murmurs. He’s pretty sure his apartment is going to fall way below her expectations. If he’s anywhere near figuring out home when he’s with his friends, or at Topanga’s, or here with Riley in her apartment, going back to his own legal address is a big step in the wrong direction. “Why are you thinking about it? I mean, what prompted it?”

“I don’t know.” She preoccupies herself with tracing a pattern on the back of his hand with her fingers, furrowing her brow as she concentrates. “I think hearing Farkle and Smackle talk about it just sort of got me wondering. Farkle was telling me all about her place and what it was like, and I just realized that I couldn’t really do the same with yours. And that I really wanted to be able to.”

He makes a face. “It’s really not all that interesting. Nothing to excitedly tell Farkle about or anything.”

“Lucas Friar,” Riley says boldly, locking eyes with him and squeezing his hand. “I want to know everything about you. I want to be able to talk about any topic related to you and not have one moment of hesitation. You know how I ramble on about things? Yeah, I want to be able to do that. I’d like to be so prepared on the subject of you that I could teach an entire seminar.”

“That would a pretty boring seminar.” He laughs when she kicks at him again, swiveling in his seat so that his legs are out of range.

“I’m serious! I really want to. I want to see your apartment. I…” She hesitates, smiling shyly and speaking a little more softly. “I want to meet your family. I mean, I’ve met your mom, but I didn’t really get to have a conversation with her or anything. Honestly, I’m pretty sure my mom scared her off.”

“Yeah, Topanga definitely has that effect on people.”

Riley brings their hands up to her face, pecking the back of his hand and resting her lips against his knuckles. She doesn’t say anything else, but her pleading eyes get the message across loud and clear.

He doesn’t know what to do. There isn’t anything he wouldn’t do for Riley, and this is more than a reasonable request. He doesn’t want her to get the impression that he doesn’t want to show her off or that he’s ashamed of her, because God knows that’s not true.

It’s the other people involved in the request that he doesn’t exactly want to show off.

Riley has always been something good. Ever since he moved to New York and she fell onto his lap, things started turning around into something he could work with. She’s something special, his special thing, and he doesn’t want to do anything that may mix her up with the unpleasantness of everything else in his life. Zay was a narrowly dodged bullet that just managed to turn out alright. Going to Texas was a nightmare that they just barely recovered from. The deeper Riley gets into knowing him, the more he’s certain he’s somehow going to mess her up. He wants to keep her as far away from that as possible.

But she’s so earnest. She’s so earnest, and genuine, and wants so badly to know him just as well as he knows her. Considering how much he loves learning about her, he can understand the temptation. And she’s always been very hard to say no to.

“I’ll see what I can do,” he says slowly, not offering a promise but not denying anything either.

The grin that spreads across her face is already worth it. Just for a moment, he feels a flicker of something like that moment in the library and after graduation. A glimmer of that feeling that’s so
close to home it’s like he’s standing on the doorstep, but he doesn’t have the key.

For now, Riley Matthews’ smile is a good enough substitute.

--

Despite his agreement, it takes Lucas a couple of months to figure out the best way to bring up the possibility of meeting Riley to his mother.

It’s partially due to his own reluctance, but more so due to the fact that events at school keep both him and Riley heavily preoccupied. He and Maya reach a new level of irritation with one another and get into big trouble over their home economics assignment, and Riley doesn’t talk to either of them for a couple of days after getting literally caught in the middle.

Although he apologizes and Riley’s more than willing to accept it, the situation with Maya continues to get worse. It feels like there are more days where they’re at each other’s throats than not, which has never been Lucas’s favorite pastime. It’s exhausting, and he has more important things to focus on like schoolwork and baseball. It seems as though all Maya has to focus on is how many ways she can tear him down in the shortest possible amount of time.

He doesn’t talk to Riley about it, because it’s definitely not worth dragging her into it and he doesn’t see how anything he says won’t come back to bite him in the end. The fact of the matter is he doesn’t want this to reflect badly on Maya—he’s always said he doesn’t want to be the thing that comes between Riley and Maya, and he means it.

But if Maya keeps up like this, he’s just going to get angrier. He’s so sick of being angry all the time.

In any case, he pushes it aside. He’ll deal with it later. He figures maybe it’ll just go away if he ignores it long enough, even if the nagging voice in the back of his head repeating Maya’s insults doesn’t.

Besides, Riley is concentrating all her energy into the high school musical, an afterschool activity that she, Farkle, and Zay all decided to jump into together. Lucas has absolutely no interest in theater and has no idea what they’re talking about half the time, but it’s nice to see them all excitedly discussing it at the lunch table every day.

Rehearsals take up a lot of Riley’s time for those couple of months, so Lucas finds himself over at the Matthews for dinner even more so than before simply because that’s the only time they can hang out. He’s relieved that Topanga and Cory don’t seem to mind, but he starts to wonder if maybe he should find some way to pitch in.

Regardless, it isn’t until second semester is well on its way that he finally follows through on his word.

His mother enters the kitchen as Lucas is working on chemistry homework, accidentally bumping into him as she squeezes by to get to the sink. She’s dressed for a run, hair pulled back in a ponytail. She fills up a water bottle and leans over his shoulder to peer at his assignment. “What are you working on?”

“Chemistry.”

She makes a face, patting his shoulder bracingly. “Good luck with that.”

He nods over his shoulder at her, mirroring the friendly smile she offers him. She goes back to
filling up her water bottle, silence settling over them again.

Grace Friar has never had much to offer in the realm of homework help, and Lucas figures that’s because she’s never had much to offer in the realm of motherhood. She cares about him, sure, but it’s never felt like much more than friendship—maybe an older sister. Considering how often he endures the comment that there’s no way she could be his mother when she looks no older than him, he supposes it’s fitting.

Still, he appreciates her for what she’s worth and really appreciates that she takes the time out of her day to pay attention to him. After fighting for his father’s attention for twelve years, it’s nice to have at least one parent who’s willing to spare him a second glance without disciplinary action being involved.

He loves his mom, and he knows she loves him too. But he also knows the truth of the matter, which is that if she could’ve passed on having a kid, she would’ve. While she attempts to step up to the plate, he knows her life would be so much easier if he just didn’t exist at all.

She’s never told him this, but he knows it. And he knows she knows he’s aware. It’s an unspoken understanding they both expertly pretend isn’t important.

“Is there anything you feel like for dinner?” Grace skirts around the other side of the table and closes the bottle, standing by the doorway and pulling her phone out of her pocket. “I don’t know if Ken is going to be home—,”

“Actually, I was going to go to the Matthews,” Lucas fills in, twirling his pencil in his fingers anxiously. When his mother doesn’t immediately answer, he clears his throat. “You know, if that’s okay.”

“No, no,” she says, recovering quickly and giving him a smile. “Of course that’s okay. You know that’s fine with me.”

Despite her verbal approval, Lucas can’t help but feel guilty. He doesn’t think his mother necessarily wants to spend time with him in particular, but his father is rarely home before dark due to work and she doesn’t like eating alone.

If Grace is a lackluster mother, it makes perfect sense that he’s a lackluster son.

“You just spend an awful lot of time eating with them,” Grace says teasingly, smirking at him as she grabs her headphones from the counter. “Make sure to ask Cory if there’s anything I can do for them. Feel like I owe them something. Maybe I’ll bake them something for you to bring over some other time. Cookies, or something. At least that much.”

He smiles, even though he knows she won’t. “I’m sure they’d like that.”

“Okay, well, let me know when you’re on your way home. Especially if it’s dark.” It’s a request she makes of him often, but he can’t remember a time she actually noticed when he didn’t follow through. She starts to head towards the front door, selecting a song on her phone and popping one earbud in her ear.

“Would it be cool if Riley came over on Monday?”

Grace stops, turning to face him with confusion coloring her features. “Yeah, of course. She’s been over before, hasn’t she?”

“Well, yeah,” he stammers. He takes a deep breath, trying to rephrase the question to say what he
actually wants to say. The pencil has left his hand and he’s picking at his fingers instead, pinching
the skin nervously. “I mean, are you going to be around? On Monday? Riley really wants to meet
you.”

“We’ve met.”

“Yeah, I know. But more formally. She wants to actually talk to you.”

Lucas can see the gears turning in her head as she processes this request. Running a million and one
possibilities of how such a scenario could turn out. After a few moments, the ghost of a smile
passes over her lips. “She wants to talk to me?”

“That’s what she said.”

Grace shuffles on her feet, obviously somewhat flattered. She shrugs, gazing down at the floor. “I
suppose I could make sure to be home in time to catch her before dinner. Tell her I’d love that.”
She heads halfway out the door, before pausing and tossing a look to him over her shoulder. “I
don’t know if Ken—,”

“Mom, it’s fine,” he cuts her off, managing a smile. “I know.”

She returns the beam, blowing him a quick kiss and closing the door behind her. Lucas sighs,
swiveling back around in his chair and pulling out his phone to text Riley. If any of that
conversation was worthwhile, it’ll be in how she reacts.

So, musical is over. Got any plans on Monday?

Riley Matthews: Aside from hanging out with you guys, probably not. Why? What are you up to?
I asked my mom if she’d be around to meet you. She said, and I quote: “Tell her I’d love that.”

Riley Matthews: YAY!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

He grins, dropping his phone back on the table and forcing himself to focus back on his work. But
for all the smiles he and his mom threw around in the last few minutes, this is the first one that
comes naturally.

--

Riley is all smiles and excitement when they leave Topanga’s on Monday and take the subway to
his stop, rambling on and on about how pumped she is to see his place and how honored she is that
he actually took the time to arrange it all for her. He promises her it isn’t that big a deal, but she’s
always been into the small gestures he makes to show his affection towards her and it’s obvious
she counts this as one of them.

Lucas buzzes them in when they get to the building, holding the door open for her to step in. He’s
unnecessarily nervous. “The elevator’s there, if you want to take that. But the stairs aren’t so bad.”

“Which floor?”

“Fourth.”

Riley waves him off, pushing open the stairwell door. “We can handle that. Come on, cowboy, use
those feet.”
On their way through the halls Riley’s hand finds his and allows him to lead the way to his apartment, tucked away in the corner of the building. He attempts to unlock the door without dropping her hand, grateful that she’s distracted by gazing around at the corridor around them so that she doesn’t see him fumbling with his keys.

She breaks away from him the moment they step inside, already well on her way to exploring the space. He reaches over to flick the lights on, watching as she spins on her heel to take in the whole of the apartment. With the kitchen running right into the living room, it only takes her about a minute to get the whole experience. Lucas is pretty sure it isn’t what she was expecting at all. It’s sort of like if they took the Matthews apartment and shrunk it, took out all the good lighting, and made it feel empty.

That’s something that has always fascinated him about her apartment—even when no one is home, it still feels lived in. It never feels empty.

Even when all three of them are home, his place always feels vacant.

“It’s pretty lame.”

Riley shakes her head at him, doing another three-sixty rotation with a thoughtful expression on her face. “It is not. It’s very functional. It does what it needs to do, doesn’t it?”

“Mm,” Lucas hums. “Sounds inviting.”

She tilts her head at him, wandering over and holding out her hands. He takes them, allowing her to pull him towards her and place a kiss on his cheek. “Aren’t you going to show me your room?”

“I don’t know. Wouldn’t that be a bit nefarious? I don’t want your dad to get his Riley Senses set off and try to stab me at dinner.”

Riley cracks up, nudging her head against his shoulder before grinning up at him. “I’m pretty sure it’ll be okay. Come on, please?”

He hopes she realizes she’s infuriatingly cute and impossible to say no to. “Okay, okay.”

She hums happily, letting him guide her towards a small doorway back near the kitchen. It’s obvious she’s a bit surprised to see a staircase tucked away in the hall, leading the way up to an even more cramped second floor. It’s the definition of a shoebox upstairs, and when he ducks into his room and turns on the light he’s already counting down the minutes until they can leave it again.

Although he’s lucky to have a place to sleep, he’s never been a fan of his bedroom. It’s more like a glorified closet than a living space, the only reason it couldn’t be classified as such being the small window installed on the other end of the room. Aside from that, he has enough room for his bulletin board, his desk, and his bed, the rest of the space being taken up by the actual closet.

He never really bothered to decorate considering he never knew when he’d have to pack up and leave again, but his one claim to the space comes from the decision to push the bed as close to the window as possible so he can actually see the night sky when he’s lying in here doing nothing. There are a few pictures tacked to his bulletin board amidst the reminders and assignments, but otherwise it’s very modest. Certainly nothing like his girlfriend’s room.

Riley steps into the center of the space, absorbing the décor just like she did on the first floor. Lucas catches himself twiddling his fingers, stuffing his hands in his pockets instead. “Like I said, it’s really not that great.”
“It’s perfectly great,” she disagrees, clasping her hands together and staring wide-eyed at the room around her. “It’s cozy. And simple. Simple and understated.” She tosses a glance at him over her shoulder, her eyes twinkling. “A lot like someone I know.”

He thinks about arguing with her, but he knows it isn’t worth the effort. Riley can see the beauty in anything, even his dingy closet bedroom. She meanders over and sits on the edge of his bed, and suddenly the room feels brighter. With her in the picture, he decides he likes it a little better.

She lifts her eyes to meet his, giving him an earnest smile. “I love it.”

“Yeah, okay,” Lucas says slowly, squinting at her. “But you love everything.”

“Not true! False,” she chides, gesturing for him to join her.

He smiles sheepishly and crosses the room to plop down next to her. Trying to feel as comfortable here as he does when they’re in her room, he sits back and leans against the wall, stretching his legs out. She imitates this change in posture, slouching back with him and leaning into his side.

She drapes her legs over his and takes his hand, grinning when he automatically brings his other hand up to cup hers. “I do love many things. This is true. But I don’t just hand out my love willy-nilly. There are certain criteria that need to be met and I think this bedroom of yours meets those criteria well enough. And then there are like, levels to it.”

“Levels? You have love levels?”

“Yes. I have a love pyramid. Stuff like this is on the foundation level. And the most important, very loved things go in the upper sections. Pluto is definitely like, second tier.”

He raises his eyebrows, glancing up from playing with her fingers to look at her. “Only second tier?”

“Well, it used to be at the very top. But then some other stuff moved in and knocked it down a bit.”

“And what would that be?”

She tilts her head to lock eyes with him, resting her chin on his shoulder. “I’ll never tell. It’ll be a mystery forever. Something for you to ponder on while you lay here at night.”

As if he doesn’t spend enough time thinking about her.

They spend the rest of the afternoon sprawled on his bed, chattering on like they always do and watching the sun slowly disappear through the window. He’s shocked to realize that they’ve been so comfortably situated in his bedroom for so long, when he usually feels like he can’t stand to be in there for longer than absolutely necessary. It’s crazy, how Riley can make his room feel like a place worth being in with just her presence.

Riley perks up when the front door opens downstairs. Both of them hesitate, waiting in uncertain silence for an indication of who just stepped into the apartment.

“Lucas?” Grace shouts up the stairwell. “You here?”

Riley breaks into an eager grin and gets to her knees, crawling off the bed and standing in front of him. She reaches forward and takes his hands, pulling him into a sitting position impatiently. “Come on. Let’s go!”
He grumbles but obliges, climbing to his feet. Riley is already out the door and heading towards the stairs when his mother calls up to him again. “Lucas?”

“Coming!”

He catches up to Riley at the bottom of the stairs, nearly knocking her over from her perch on the last step. He grabs her shoulders to stabilize them both, catching the slight nervousness in her features as she hides in the shadows of the doorway. Despite her excitement, she’s a little insecure.

“She’s going to like you, I promise,” Lucas whispers, squeezing her shoulders and kissing the top of her head. She glances over her shoulder to smile gratefully at him. He really doesn’t see how anybody couldn’t like her.

Riley squares her shoulders and strides into the kitchen from the doorway, award-winning spirit back intact.

Grace is still dressed for work, her flowery sundress making her look even younger than usual. Riley’s evidently struck for half a second in remembering how unlike a mother his mother actually looks, but she recovers so quickly he’s positive she didn’t notice.

“Hi, Mrs. Friar,” Riley chirps, holding out her hand and bouncing slightly on the balls of her feet. Lucas can’t help but smile at how adorable she is. He’s not entirely sure his mother won’t die of shock at seeing an actual grin on his face, or if she even recognizes the difference. “Thank you so much for being so willing to take time out of your day to meet me. I’m sure you had much better things to do.”

“Oh, well,” Grace mutters bashfully, obviously uncertain what to do with all of Riley’s vibrant energy. She shakes her hand, smiling from her infectious bubbly personality. It’s one of the first genuine ones Lucas has seen from his mother in a long time as well. “It’s really not a bother. I actually brought you guys some cookies from that bakery across the street. Didn’t want to show up entirely empty-handed.”

She places a small light blue box on the table, flipping it open to reveal an assortment of freshly baked cookies. Not any of her own effort, but it’s certainly a start.

Riley slides into the seat nearest to her, giving Grace a thankful smile and reaching in to take one. “You didn’t have to do that.”

“Oh, it’s my pleasure. It’s on the way back from work, so.” Grace takes the seat across from her, Lucas taking the hint and pulling a chair around from the side to sit down next to Riley. “Make sure to bring the box home, give some to your folks. All that food they’re giving Lucas here, it’s the least I could do.”

“They don’t mind at all,” Riley assures her. She takes another cookie from the box and holds it out for Lucas to take. He wasn’t planning on having one, but he’s not going to refuse it from her. “Where do you work?”

“I co-run this flower shop a few blocks away. Which explains my wardrobe, mind you,” she says with a laugh, breaking her own cookie in half and taking a bite. “Kenneth is the breadwinner around here, you could say. I’m just working where I can. But at least the flowers are pretty.”

“I love flowers,” Riley chimes in. Lucas almost feels like he doesn’t need to be there, considering how easily they’re getting along. Not that that surprises him—it’s Riley. It takes a special kind of person to not get along with Riley Matthews. “So if you could work anywhere you wanted, where
would you work?"

Grace blinks, staring blankly at the cookie in her hands. It’s clear no one has ever asked her this question before. Lucas doesn’t even know the answer. She’s never made a point of talking about it, and he’s never bothered to ask. They don’t spend a lot of time discussing ambition in this house.

“God, I don’t know,” she says softly, giggling self-consciously.

“You must have some idea,” Riley prods gently, completely enthralled in the conversation. “If you could do anything, no restrictions or requirements involved, what would you do?”

Lucas is relatively certain his mother isn’t used to having someone be so attentively interested in her. He felt the same way when Riley talked to him in the library all those years ago. It’s weird when suddenly someone is actually listening.

“I really don’t know. It’s been so long since I thought about it, you know?” She exhales, her eyes widening as she seriously contemplates the question. She breaks off a piece of the cookie in her fingers, chewing it thoughtfully. “Well, I guess… okay, there’s maybe one thing. It’s so silly, though, I haven’t thought about it in ages.”

Riley’s eyes light up. “Trust me, if you’re talking about dreams, I’m the one you talk to.”

“She’s pretty good,” Lucas admits quietly, smiling at his girlfriend next to him before dropping his gaze back down to his hands. He feels her knock her foot against his, making him smile to himself.

Grace pauses, running her hands through her hair. She laughs nervously. “Okay. I don’t think I even told Lucas this, it’s literally been so long since I gave it a second thought. And it’s really so, so silly…”

“Tell us.”

She hesitates again, smiling timidly at Riley. “When I was in college, I was so convinced I was going to be a best-selling author. Or at least a writer of some sort.”

This is complete news to him. Not once has she ever mentioned writing in front of him. Or at all, he’s pretty certain. “You never told me about this.”

“I didn’t think I’d ever need to,” she admits with an embarrassed shrug. “And it really just felt so ridiculous. Especially back in Texas—I mean, what was I going to write about? The cows? Friday night football?”

“So that’s why you didn’t give it a shot?” Riley asks curiously, tilting her head at her.

Grace gestures speechlessly, searching for the right words. “Life just caught up to me. Had to grow up and grow out of it. You get married, you have a kid, all that stuff sort of just gets tossed to the wayside. Not that I’d do anything differently,” she says quickly, glancing at Lucas. Covering for that unspoken understanding they pretend doesn’t exist. “But life gets in the way. And it sure moves fast.”

Heavy silence settles over the three of them. Lucas pops the last piece of cookie into his mouth, hoping that Riley missed the tacit exchange he and his mother shared. They both know she’d be better off without him, but he’s not sure he wants Riley to catch onto that particular understanding they share. She may be the only person in the entire world who would disagree.

“Well,” she says finally, breaking the silence and giving Grace one of her signature encouraging
smiles. “The great thing about something like writing is it’s never too late, right? It’s never too late to pick up the pen again and see what happens.”

Grace smiles lightly, lost in thought. “No, I guess not.”

Smiling fondly at his girlfriend and his mother, he feels another flicker of that unfamiliar emotion. Only this time, it’s the actual feeling. It’s gone before he can register it, but he knows it was the real deal. Something about this scenario set it off—his mother talking about her dreams and Riley eating cookies at his kitchen table.

For a brief, breathtaking second, Lucas gets what it feels like to be home.

--

The downside to Riley having experienced his family and living situation, as nice as it feels to be sharing more things with her, is that she cannot seem to wrap her mind around the fact that his father is hardly around.

She understands the logistics of it, sure, but she claims she doesn’t understand how someone wouldn’t want to be home with Grace and him as often as they possibly could. Considering how outraged Riley is over this, Lucas figures it’s best not to mention the fact that he and his father barely exchange more than two or three words to each other, and that’s on a good day.

Still, in typical Riley fashion, she gets it in her head that she can fix it.

It’s exactly the type of scenario Lucas didn’t want to happen when he brought her into his world. All things considered, he wants his father as far away from her as humanly possible. If they never cross paths, it would be for the best. Not because he thinks his father would do anything, but rather he knows his father wouldn’t do anything, and that would only frustrate Riley more.

Nothing gets to her more than apathy, and Kenneth Friar holds the world record for being apathetic. If being apathetic was an Olympic sport, Lucas is sure his father would be a gold medalist.

He can tell that his concern over this is getting to him because even Maya notices his bad mood. While they’re stuck together after school making up their botched cake project for home economics, she feels the need to point it out. It’s unlike Maya to pass up the opportunity to point things out.

“What’s up with you, Sundance?” she says sharply, breaking an egg against the counter and dropping it into the bowl in front of them. “Crop cycle not doing so well this season? Don’t tell me one of the horses is unwell? Please, tell me it’s not good, old Snowball.”

“I’m fine,” he snaps. “And so is Snowball.”

“Oh, thank Jesus.”

“And when you crack an egg you need to keep the shells out,” he nags, reaching into the bowl and picking up the bits of shell scattered on the surface of the batter. “Otherwise we could just throw the entire egg in and call it a day.”

“Alright, alright. Sorry, Martha Stewart, I’ll try harder next time.”

Lucas ignores her taunts, grabbing the vanilla and measuring out a teaspoon.
Maya continues to glance irritably at him out of the corner of her eye, annoyed with the tense silence. “Oh my God, Huckleberry. What the hell is up with you? I know you’re not upset with me because if you were, you’d be angry. This isn’t anger. This is like, moping. You’ve got… how does Zay describe them? Sad cow eyes.”

“Gee, maybe it’s because we’ve spent almost three months on this one assignment and my partner is unbearable and I really don’t want to fail home economics, of all the classes I could fail in my sophomore year. Could it possibly be that?”

She waves him off. “Nah, that’s not it. And we’re not moving forward on said assignment until you spill about whatever is bothering you.”

Normally, talking to Maya is the absolute last thing Lucas would want to do when he’s feeling out of sorts. But considering the situation at hand, he wonders if maybe she would get it better than anyone else. She won’t be any help, he knows that, but she may at least understand.

He sighs, settling back on his stool and dropping the spoon into the bowl haphazardly. He stares at the table rather than Maya, pressing his thumbs together. “It’s Riley.”

“Riley?” She seems genuinely shocked, but he can’t help but notice the slight glimmer in her eye at the notion that there may be trouble in their relationship. “You’re having problems with Riley?”

“No. There are no problems with Riley. There are never problems with her.”

He resents the bit of disappointment in her features. “But you just said it was Riley.”

“Riley isn’t bothering me. It’s not that. She’s just…” He takes a deep breath, running his hand through his hair. “She met my family, which went fine for what it was worth. But now she’s trying to fix them.”

“Yikes. Been there,” Maya says, biting her lip. She gives him an intrigued look. “Wait. What is it about your family that there is to fix?”

He hesitates, keeping his eyes on his fingers as he picks at the skin near his fingernail. They’re bordering on more personal stuff, and he really has no clue how much he trusts Maya. That’s the thing he hates the most about their relationship—he feels like they are friends, to some degree, but he can never be certain how much because the moment he opens up, she uses it against him for her own personal amusement and he retreats further into his shell.

They’re definitely fire, alright—he has no idea when he’s going to get burned.

“My mom is fine. She’s cool, and all that. But she doesn’t quite get… she’s not exactly a mom, if that makes sense. But like I said, she’s cool, and I appreciate her. She loves Riley, by the way.”

“Who doesn’t?”

“Right. But the thing with my dad is just…” He trails off, trying to figure out the best way to explain it. “He’s physically there, but he isn’t emotionally. Never has been. Never wanted to be. And he makes that loud and clear by not doing anything at all.” He shrugs, clearing his throat. “I don’t know, I’m not making any sense. Forget it.”

“No, I get you,” she assures him. She’s averted her gaze down to her shoes, picking at the rubber sole and scraping some dirt away. “Makes sense why Riley is trying to play perfectionist.”

He nods. The two of them are quiet for a long moment, both lost in their own heads.
“I know all that stuff happened with your dad and everything,” Lucas murmurs. He swallows. “And I’m not saying that my thing is anything like that. It’s not the same and I totally recognize that. But to be honest, sometimes I wish my dad was gone. Would be easier than having him here but… not really here. At least I wouldn’t have wasted so much time.”

Maya nods stiffly. After a moment, she taps the table to get his attention, locking eyes with him. “I’m sorry, Lucas. That really sucks.”

Considering the lack of a condescending nickname, he knows she’s being sincere. He smiles tightly, nodding a thank you.

“Unfortunately, the thing with Riley going on a mission like this is you just have to ride it out,” Maya sighs, pulling the recipe back towards her and getting back to work. “She’ll realize eventually that it’s not something she can fix, but she has to get there on her own. It’s amazing how easily her good intentions can blind her logic and reasoning.”

“Yeah, so I figured.”

“It’s annoying, how she changes people for the better. Isn’t it?”

She’s being sarcastic, he knows. Because there are no better prime examples of this little talent of Riley’s than the two of them. If she’s the sun, then they’re both living off her light and energy. Lucas isn’t sure either of them would survive without it.

--

Despite Riley’s best efforts to fix his family, she ultimately gives up as Maya said she would. Although she’s a force of nature, the Friar family dynamic is something that requires far too much to put back in working order. As far as he knows, it’s never been in working order to begin with.

He spends most afternoons and evenings at the Matthews apartment these days, doing homework and hanging out with the group. Even though he’s mostly there for Riley, he finds a lot of enjoyment in interacting with all of them in different ways. He likes the way Auggie asks him for his opinion on things as if he actually cares what the answer will be. He likes the way Cory picks on him and treats him as more than just another student when the teacher gloves come off. He likes the way Topanga asks him about his schoolwork and wants to know about his game plan for the future and if he’s still keeping up with baseball.

He likes the fact that every night when they send him back to his place, there’s this unspoken assumption that he’ll be around the next day. He’ll be around again and they’re all perfectly okay with that.

When he’s not there, he spends most of his time hiding out in his bedroom, listening to his parents not interact and tossing a baseball against the wall while he wishes he was with the Matthews. Their apartment is only place he’s ever felt reluctant to leave every evening, and he finds himself daydreaming about being back there again as soon as possible.

He’s pretty sure he’s crazy. So he keeps his thoughts to himself.

By the time April rolls around and finals are right around the corner, Lucas reaches a whole new level of crazy.

He’s supposed to be studying, but his room is suffocating with its terrible lighting and the silence from his parents working downstairs is deafening. Unable to concentrate, he packs up his study materials and heads out the door towards the subway. Neither of his parents comment as he passes
them on the way to the front door.

He doesn’t question his actions until he’s getting off the subway and standing in front of the Matthews apartment building, remembering that Riley is out with Maya all day and there’s absolutely no reason for him to be there. He doesn’t live here, it’s not his place to just show up at whenever he wants—without Riley as his connection, he has no purpose being there whatsoever.

For some dumb reason, he rings the buzzer.

“Hello?” Cory’s familiar voice says through the speaker.

“Hi. It’s Lucas.” He feels completely idiotic, but he keeps talking anyway. “Can I come up?”

There’s no immediate answer, but the door buzzes and clicks as it unlocks. Lucas grabs the door and pulls it open before fate decides to take it back, slipping into the lobby and making his way up the stairs he feels like he’s walked a thousand times. He’ll probably take them a thousand more times before all is said and done.

When Cory pulls open the door, he looks understandably confused. “Riley isn’t here. She’s out with Maya.”

“I know,” Lucas admits. He hopes it’s clear that he doesn’t quite know why he’s there either. “Can I still come in?”

To his relief, Cory steps back without complaint, allowing him to enter the apartment and put down his bag. “I’ll be honest, I’m surprised you didn’t just climb in the bay window.”

“Would it even be open, if Riley’s not home?”

“As far as I know, that window is never closed,” Cory says, raising his hands in surrender. He crosses his arms, examining Lucas inquisitively. “Is there something I can help you with?”

He stands awkwardly by the couch, shrugging. He ventures for the truth in his own head. “I just wanted a quiet place to study.”

“There’s a library, you know? Public and everything.”

“I concentrate best here.”

Although he knows he’s not making any sense, he’s relieved when Cory drops the issue. “Well, be our guest. You know where everything is. Topanga will be home in a couple hours, she’s covering a shift at the café.”

Lucas nods, sitting down on the couch and reaching for his bag. “Auggie around?”

“In his room. Podcasting, I believe.”

With that, Lucas settles into work, having a much easier time of it in the new environment. He’s able to get a ton more accomplished. He doesn’t know what it is, but he’s simply much more at ease when he’s at the Matthews apartment. There’s a part of him that figures he’d get even more done if he was in Riley’s room, but he doesn’t want to push his luck with Cory.

By the time he’s finished studying for geometry, he reclines more comfortably on the couch and taps his pencil idly against his textbook, absorbing all the things he likes about the apartment. He appreciates how spacious the room feels even though it’s not so much bigger than his own place.
The natural light filtering in through the bay window is a noteworthy feature. He really likes how with the windows open and a light breeze blowing in, it actually feels like springtime.

“Lucas?” Auggie says, breaking him out of his own thoughts as he wanders in from the hall. “What are you doing here?”

“Hey, Auggie.” He shrugs absently. “Just studying.”

Auggie makes a face. “But Riley isn’t here.”

“Yeah, so I’ve been told.”

Lightning quick, Auggie disappears back into his room, only to reappear a few minutes later with a stack of his own homework. He hops onto the couch next to Lucas and plops the pile onto the coffee table, picking up the math workbook off the top. “It just so happens that I also need to get some studying done.”

“So I can see,” Lucas says in amusement, somewhat impressed with his monster stack of paperwork.

“Well, how about this,” Auggie says thoughtfully, as if an idea has just struck him. “You and I both have some work to do, it seems. So maybe, we’ll both work for another hour, and then when we’re done we can take a break and watch some TV. Does that sound like a good plan?”

Lucas smiles, nodding. “That sounds like a great plan. I’m in.”

Auggie holds out his hand, looking to seal the deal. Lucas shakes it firmly.

Topanga is surprised to see of them working so diligently on the couch together when she comes home a little while later, but she doesn’t seem particularly fazed. “Hi there, Lucas.”

“Hi.”

She hangs up her jacket, giving him an entertained eyebrow raise. “I’m assuming you’re well aware that Riley isn’t home right now.”

“It’s been brought to my attention, yes.”

“Mom, shh,” Auggie chides, holding up a hand in her direction without lifting his head from his homework. “We’re supposed to be studying.”

She raises her hands in surrender, tip-toeing away from them as Lucas focuses back on his chemistry textbook. He can’t help the grin on his face when Topanga ruffles his hair as she passes him.

Once Auggie declares they can be free from academics, Lucas kicks back and lets him pick what they watch. Much like his sister, Auggie is very talkative about things he’s interested in and has many opinions about the show onscreen, so Lucas nods along as he makes many compelling arguments over this and that. Cory relocates his paper grading to the kitchen table so he can chat with Topanga as she starts on dinner.

Lucas doesn’t feel one bit out of place. In fact, for once he feels like he actually fits somewhere.

The evening is only improved when Riley finally comes home just before dinner, Maya walking in with her as they gossip about whatever they were discussing on the subway back. Both of them
stop dead in their tracks when they see Lucas—Riley purely surprised, Maya disgruntled.

“What are you doing here?”

Lucas glances over his shoulder at them, shrugging nonchalantly. “Just hanging out with Auggie. Studying. Enjoying my weekend.”

Maya opens her mouth to comment, but Auggie shushes her. “Hello, trying to watch here!”

Riley’s got a peculiar expression on her face, but it’s not necessarily a negative one so Lucas takes it as a good thing. She can’t take her eyes off of him, even when Maya drags her across the room to dump their things in her bedroom. When she returns and the two of them lock eyes she smiles at him, that something peculiar still twinkling in her eyes.

He feels it in the moment she smirks, the food cooking on the stove and the breeze coming in through the bay window and Auggie commentating next to him tying it down long enough for him to recognize it.

Home.

--

Once he figures out that the Matthews apartment is more or less home, he has to start a game plan. Because he wants to be there as often as possible, but he doesn’t want to freeload off of them. Although his mother doesn’t quite get the situation, her instincts are right as far as feeling like she owes Cory and Topanga something. He doesn’t think he’ll ever be able to properly pay them back for everything, but he might as well start somewhere.

So the moment finals are over and summer is on the horizon, Lucas goes down to Topanga’s after school and asks for a job.

“Let me get this straight,” Topanga scrutinizes him across the counter, scrubbing a mug clean. “You want me to give you a job so that you can pay me back.”

“Yes. That sounds about right.”

Josh, who up to that point had been hanging by the coffee machine and eavesdropping, grins at them over his shoulder. “Trust me, man. You don’t want to work here. The boss is such a hard ass.”

“Very funny,” Topanga snaps as Josh passes by them, snapping a towel at him. She focuses back on Lucas in front of her, giving him a look. “What you’re saying to me is that you want me to hire you and give you a paycheck, only for you to then turn around and hand that money back to me. Do you see where I’m seeing a logistical error?”

Lucas makes a face, considering her very valid point. He shrugs. “Maybe I’ll just work for tips?”

At the end of the day, Topanga caves and allows him to work at the café starting in the summer. Josh shows him the ropes and goofs off with him when Topanga and Katy aren’t looking. He proves himself fairly adept at working with customers and making a decent cup of coffee.

“Hey, you know, if the veterinarian thing doesn’t work out, at least you have a promising career as a barista ahead of you,” Josh points out. He then proceeds to toss mini-marshmallows at him.
Less impressed with his coffee-serving skills are his friends. Farkle and Zay act as though him working is the funniest thing they’ve ever seen in their entire lives, and considering how badly their feud has escalated Maya takes absolutely any opportunity to ridicule him when it presents himself. That moment of mutual respect in the home economics lab feels like a distant memory. He’s not entirely sure he didn’t just imagine it anyway.

“Look at him go,” Zay says affectionately as Lucas leans over to pick up his smoothie glass. “So efficient. So diligent. And look at him in his little apron.”

“I know,” Farkle says, feigning pride. “I feel like I’m watching an early episode of *Friends*.”

Zay pats his arm. “You make a great Jen Aniston.”

Lucas shrugs him off, rolling his eyes as he returns the glass behind the counter.

“Okay, hold up,” Maya says indignantly. “We all know I’m the Jennifer Aniston of this friend group. And could we stop talking about Huckleberry and his stupid summer employment? I hate to break it to you all but he and his dumb apron are not that impressive.”

Riley gazes over her shoulder at him behind the counter, looking him over.

“I think the apron is cute,” she says defensively. Lucas smirks back at her.

“Of course you do,” Maya says harshly, making a face and taking a sip of her smoothie. Zay, Smackle, and Farkle exchange uneasy looks. Riley pushes some hair behind her ear and slouches a little lower in her seat, falling silent.

Lucas thinks about saying something, but he doesn’t think there’s much he can say at this point. He’s tried every possible angle with Maya, tried to openly communicate with her and get her side of the situation and understand why she’s acting the way she is, but she’s not budging. And every time he tries to do something about it, she just lashes out more fiercely than the first time.

It’s started to reach Riley too, and that’s the main reason he’s staying silent. He doesn’t want to be the cause of a fight between the two of them, but even more importantly he doesn’t want Riley being pulled into the crossfire and getting hurt. If it saves her a fight with her best friend, he’ll take Maya’s insults forever.

---

Forever turns out to be shorter than he expected. By the middle of July the whole fiasco finally reaches a boiling point, Maya and Riley facing off and laying everything out on the table. From what he can surmise from Riley’s texts that night the situation didn’t go all that well, but he’s not prepared for the look on her face when he climbs in the bay window the next afternoon.

She tries to play it off as no big deal, but all it takes is a couple of questions and genuine concern from him for her to launch into tears. They’re clearly not the first she’s shed over this either. He has no idea what to do but he does the only thing he figures he’s good for and holds her, letting her cry into his shoulder and kissing the top of her head. Just being there for her.

It’s the least he can do, considering he’s pretty sure this is all his fault.

He should never have told her how the Maya situation was making him feel. He shouldn’t have made a big deal about it, he should’ve just taken it and moved past it and not made a point of bringing her into it. He should’ve just kept his stupid mouth shut. Considering he’s done it successfully for sixteen years without an issue, he could’ve managed it.
“She thinks I’m choosing you over her, which isn’t what I’m trying to do,” she says shakily as she pulls back, wiping the tears from her cheeks with the heel of her hand. “I’m trying to do what I want, which is to have both of you in my life. But she wants it to be one or the other and that’s just not fair.”

Lucas doesn’t want to make this worse for Maya so he just nods along, taking Riley’s hand in both of his comfortingly.

“Not that I’m saying I wouldn’t choose you in a circumstance that… I mean, I did choose you. Back before, not in this particular scenario. But I’m not saying that if things came down to it that I wouldn’t—,”

“Riley, I get it,” he says softly. He hates the way she feels the need to constantly correct herself, to backtrack on everything she says and constantly appease someone else. He and Maya did that to her, and he hates it. “I get it.”

She takes a deep breath, frowning at him before falling into him again, tucking her head against his shoulder. He wraps his arm more tightly around her, stroking some hair from her face as gently as he can. “I can’t believe this happened. I can’t believe she left.”

“She’ll be back.”

Riley scoffs. “How do you know that?”

“I don’t,” he admits. All he knows that is if the situation were reversed, and it was him walking away from her for spending so much time with Maya, he’d come back eventually. Because he’s pretty sure he doesn’t want to live in a world without Riley Matthews, and considering he and Maya are two sides of the same coin he figures she’s going to arrive at the same conclusion. “I’m sorry, Riley.”

“What? Why are you sorry?”

“Well, generally, for this whole stupid situation.” He swallows hard. “But also because I just feel like if I hadn’t—.”

“No.” Riley cuts him off, pulling away from him and shaking her head adamantly. “No. This is not your fault. Don’t act like this is your fault.”

“But—,”

“This was going to happen eventually,” Riley says in defeat, her eyes watering again. “It had to happen. Maya and I couldn’t be perfect and put together forever. I think we both knew it. It just so happens that whatever the hell she was upset about in regards to you was the push she needed. Farkle seems to think that this’ll be good for us.”

Lucas frowns at her. “Do you think that?”

Riley shrugs, a couple more tears slipping down her cheeks. “I don’t know.”

He reaches forward and wipes the tears from her face, giving up and pulling her to him instead when she just cries harder. He’s never seen her like this, but it doesn’t surprise him that losing Maya would be the cause of such a reaction.

She may disagree, but he knows that he was partially to blame for all of this no matter how badly he tried to avoid it. And if he learns anything from this whole ordeal, it’s that he’s really better off
keeping his feelings to himself. When he lights a match and opens up, he always ends up burning the whole forest down. It’s just not worth it.

As he’s always known, it’s better when he keeps his mouth shut.

--

A couple of weeks before junior year, Lucas is working the closing shift at Topanga’s when she pulls him aside to talk to him, nudging him into the stool across the counter and clasping her hands together on the counter authoritatively.

“Lucas.”

“Topanga,” he says uncertainly, hoping whatever she’s about to tell him is good news.

She gives him a sympathetic smile, taking a deep breath. “You’re fired.”

Definitely not good news.

“Well, that’s not good.” He clears his throat. “Did I do something wrong?”

“No. Not at all. You were an excellent employee. In fact, we had quite the rise in females from your age range swinging around when you were working. Actually, we had more males in your age range too. Essentially, if I was really business savvy, I should’ve just used you for publicity.”

He manages a grin, but he knows he still looks confused. “So, why?”

“Look. Junior year is going to be tough. Much tougher academically than sophomore year. I want you to be able to focus on your studies and still have a social life without having this half-ass job to worry about on the side.”

“Okay,” he says slowly. He appreciates her concern, but he’s got new worries forming in the back of his mind. “But if I’m not making money here, how am I supposed to pay you back?”

“You’re not.” When he opens his mouth to argue she intensifies her gaze, clearly entering lawyer mode. “Lucas Friar, we fed Maya for nine years without asking for anything in return. You don’t think we can’t handle you for two more?”

He sees her point, but he still feels guilty. He shrugs, dropping his gaze to the countertop between them.

“Besides,” she says in a much gentler tone, waiting for him to meet her eyes. “Family doesn’t pay.”

Lucas isn’t completely sure he heard her correctly. He almost considers asking her to say it again, but he doesn’t want to jinx it so he just nods, smiling lightly and twiddling with his fingers.

“Funny that she says that,” Josh says, emerging from the back room and tossing Topanga a disdainful look. “Yet here I am working behind the counter all day every day.”

She swats at him, before pointing back to Lucas. “I need the apron back. Come on, hand it over.”

He gets to his feet, rounding the counter to join them. As he unties it and pulls it over his head, he makes a face. “Riley’s gonna be pissed.”

Topanga laughs. “I think she’ll live.”
Despite no longer being employed, Lucas helps Josh finish cleaning up, both of them walking out the door together and out into the warm August night. Before Lucas heads towards the subway he thanks Josh for being such a cool co-worker. He waves it off, but it seems like he appreciates the compliment nonetheless.

“Topanga said junior year was going to be tough.”

“Oh, yeah,” Josh nods, stuffing his hands in his pockets. “Usually is.”

Lucas takes a deep breath. “Any advice?”

Josh thinks on it, humming to himself for a moment. “Yeah. Don’t stress over it too much. Sure, it’s going to be tough. But if you go into prepared for the worst, knowing it could be bad but being aware of it, then it won’t feel nearly as scary.”

He gives him a pat on the shoulder and says goodbye before he turns and heads down the street towards the other station, leaving Lucas alone with his words of wisdom and junior year looming in the distance.

--

In spite of the uncertainty of junior year hanging over him, Lucas is very sure about Riley Matthews.

He finds it hard to believe there was a time where anyone had any doubt about who he would choose. He always knew it, really, and he’s really glad he finally had the courage to say it because it’s the only thing he feels confident about.

He and Zay are going in different directions, at least temporarily. He’s practically dead to Maya. He’s got the most difficult course load he’s ever had coming up, and he has to start really stepping up his game if he wants a shot of getting into UC Davis’s veterinary program.

All this, and being with Riley still makes him feel at ease. Even when the entire world feels like it’s up in flame, she can make him feel fireproof.

The fact that she’s a really good kisser is definitely a plus.

Ever since the summer began, the two of them have certainly experienced a shift in their relationship. He doesn’t quite know what caused it and he doesn’t quite remember when, but it happened. Not that he’s necessarily complaining.

Much of their developing physical relationship often occurs with a similar sort of serendipity. They’re rarely planning on doing anything—they’ll just be talking and laughing as they usually do when one kiss turns into a couple kisses, then a few more, then before either of them know it they’ve been kissing for like twenty minutes straight and don’t have any plans to stop.

Luckily, neither of them have any clue what they’re doing so they’re figuring it out together, which makes the whole situation a lot less embarrassing. Lucas considers himself extremely fortunate that Riley is very good at initiating things, because he doesn’t want to move forward without some sort of consent from her and she’s never vague about her intentions.

The weekend before the school year starts is no exception. What starts as a typical afternoon conversing about their first week of classes coming up somehow descends into a handful of kisses, both of them giggling and sweating in the summer heat.
Riley falls back against her pillows and pulls Lucas down on top of her, locking their lips together as she pushes his blue over-shirt off his shoulders. He smiles against her lips as she helps him pull his arms from the sleeves, leaving him in his plain white t-shirt as he tosses the other garment off the side of the bed.

“I want the record to show that you took that off, not me,” he murmurs, pausing to kiss her again before finishing his thought. “If your dad walked in here right now and asked who started taking off clothes, you’d have to say you.”

“You always have to bring him up,” she whines, pouting at him and crinkling her nose. He’s pretty sure at this point that she has absolutely no idea how cute she is when she crinkles her nose. “I’m fairly sure we’re not supposed to talk about my parents when we do this.”

“I’m just saying, you’re the one encouraging nefarious activity.”

“There’s no proof of that.” She hums, pressing a couple of quick kisses to his nose. “Maybe I just really want you to stop wearing blue.”

He gasps, dropping his jaw and earning a laugh from her. He shakes his head, humming disapproval into her mouth when she kisses him again. “Oh, no, you better take that back. You take that back right now.”

“I can’t. It’s already been said. It’s out there.”

Lucas narrows his eyes at her, pecking her forehead before climbing up off of her and facing away from her, lifting his hands in surrender. “Then I just can’t do it. I can’t in good conscience kiss someone who would drag my blue wardrobe through the mud.”

“No,” she complains, sitting up and reaching out to take his arm. “No, no, no—,”

“Yes. Yes, I’m sorry, but it’s who I am.” He knows his act would be a lot more convincing if he could stop grinning. “If you can’t handle me at my bluest, why should you get me at my best?”

“Okay,” she relents, climbing to her knees and wrapping her arms around his shoulders from behind. She presses a couple of quick kisses to his cheek, nudging her forehead against his temple. “I take it back. I love the blue.”

He tilts his head to meet her eyes as she leans over his shoulder, batting her eyelashes at him. “You love the blue?”

“You know I love the blue. Now come back and kiss me, please.”

Lucas pauses for a long moment, as if he really has to think about it. Then he twirls around and takes her face in his hands, clambering to his knees as he obliges. She giggles and wraps her arms around his neck, collapsing back against the bed and molding her mouth against his.

Both of them jump when there’s a knock at the bay window. Riley frowns indignantly and glances over his shoulder, her brow furrowing in confusion. “What the—?”

Looking behind him, Lucas easily spots the source of her confusion. Despite the knock, there’s no one at the window, at least visibly.

He exchanges a look with her before climbing to his feet, hopping off the bed and approaching the window just as a familiar, bony hand reaches out and knocks insistently. Lucas raises his eyebrows at Riley, who gestures for him to open the pane although she doesn’t seem very pleased about it.
Lucas unlocks it and lifts it open, clearing his throat. “Farkle?”

On cue, Farkle appears in the window, leaning on the frame and smirking at both of them. “Riley. Lucas.”

“Farkle.”

He nods at them, crossing his arms on the pane and giving them a knowing look. “What are you two up to this fine summer afternoon?”

“Is there something we can help you with?” Lucas asks, clasping his hands together.

Farkle hums, tossing his head back and forth. “Not really. Just figured I’d stop by and see what my two favorite people are up to. While they’re alone. Together.”

“That’s a lie,” Riley pipes up from the bed.

Farkle raises his eyebrows. “What makes you say that?”

“It’s a false statement. Smackle is your favorite person. We’re like, second and third.”

“And if you don’t have anything more to say, we’re very busy and really must be going,” Lucas informs him, shrugging apologetically and reaching forward to close the window.

“Wait!” Farkle says, holding out his arms for emphasis. He points up at Lucas, narrowing his eyes back and forth between them. “You think I don’t know what you guys are doing? You think all of us don’t assume what’s going on when the two of you decide to hang out alone? I don’t have to be a genius to figure it out.”

Riley exchanges a look with Lucas. “Good for you?”

“I’m just saying, you’re not slick. At all.” Farkle raises his eyebrow at Lucas. “You got anything to say about that, face?”

He hums, thinking about it. “I think this will sum it up.”

In the next moment, Lucas leans forward and shuts the window just as Farkle backs out of the way, locking him out. Farkle starts to say something but Lucas merely waves, reaching up and drawing the curtain shut.

Riley sighs at the ceiling. “This is what I get for being so generous. I open my bay window to them, and what do they do? They abuse it.”

“Yeah, sorry if that was too harsh for bay window protocol. Desperate times call for desperate measures.”

She smiles contently at him from her spot on the bed, shrugging and holding her arms out for him. He smirks and climbs back onto the bed, taking her arms and pulling her towards him as he collapses back against the pillows.

Her lips meet his as she settles comfortably on top of him, kissing him indulgently until they have to break for breath. She exhales into his mouth and rests her forehead against his, bumping their noses together. He continues to press assorted kisses to her face, earning a giggle when he brushes his lips over her closed eyes.

Riley’s searches the mattress until her hand finds his, linking their fingers and squeezing lightly.
When he pulls back and she opens her eyes again to gaze affectionately at him, there’s an echo of that peculiar look from all those months ago. Although since that time, he’s learned that apparently, that peculiar look is love. Love so important to her, it’s sitting at the top of the pyramid.

All the sudden, Lucas realizes that the feeling of home isn’t confined to one place. It follows him to Topanga’s, when Riley is laughing at all the stupid things their friends are saying. It follows him to his crummy, empty apartment when she’s sitting at the kitchen table getting his mother to talk about her long abandoned dreams. It’s here in the Matthews apartment when she walks through the door and here in her room when she looks at him like that.

She touches his face tenderly, pressing the pad of her thumb against the corner of his eye and tracing her way down to his jaw. “With the curtain drawn, all this does feel a lot more nefarious.”

He cracks up, combing his hand through her hair and bundling it in his fingers. “A little bit, yeah.”

She’s the safety and the ease and his sense of belonging. She’s the thing he wants to come back to after a hard day and the thing he hates to leave. His home isn’t a place at all—it’s a person.

Riley Matthews is home.

- J U N I O R Y E A R -

Junior year is the year Lucas Friar learns about weakness.

It’s a tough lesson to learn considering he has absolutely no prior knowledge of the concept to bring to the table. Growing up, there was never any sort of room to explore it. His father certainly wasn’t paying any attention long enough to teach him, and his grandfather reflected the attitude of the rest of his town—if you feel bad about something, you keep it to yourself. You fall off the sheep, you take it like a man and face the ridicule until you prove yourself able to conquer it. He can distinctly remember watching their elementary school teacher tell Asher to stop crying after he fell off the swings and sprained his wrist, because no one was going to take him seriously if kept it up.

It’s always been the way that if you face a problem too difficult to handle, you internalize it and keep working at it until you conquer it on your own. Considering he knows no one wants to hear him anyway, this has never been a hard concept for Lucas to follow through on.

When the school year starts, he takes Josh’s advice and braces himself for the impact. If he’s anticipating it, it won’t be so scary. That’s what he chooses to believe as he hits the ground running into a full course load including a couple advanced placement classes.

He’s prepared for it, but it still smarts when it knocks him off his feet and he’s looking at two Cs and one failing grade when he gets their first tests back in the beginning of the year.

Still, he’s not going to give up that easily. UC Davis is waiting at the finish line, taunting him with the promise of that dream he’s been chasing since seventh grade. He’s not going to let a couple of poor marks at the top of the semester derail him entirely. So he does what he always does and internalizes the hit, throwing himself harder into studying and understanding the material.

Despite his dedication to his studies, he’s still attempting to maintain a balance of everything else in his life with wavering degrees of success.

Although he sort of disappears from the Matthews place for dinners since it’s easier to be at his house and near his homework, he makes a concerted effort to spend a fair amount of time with Riley every week. They have time set aside every Sunday night for a date where they actually
leave the house and do something, and they still see each other every day during school. The only moments he really loses track of time and throws off the balance are the afternoons where they find themselves tangled up in his room, hot and out of breath and in varying stages of undress.

It’s time he really can’t afford to lose, but he gives himself a break because it’s Riley. It’s Riley and she’s such a good kisser and she may genuinely be the most breathtaking thing he’s ever seen in his entire life, so he’s going to take as much of her as he can get.

He still manages to carve out time for his baseball practices after school and a few hours a week to spend with his friends at the café. Considering they’re usually studying when they’re there, he considers it knocking out two birds with one stone.

The first indication that things are not going to go as planned comes when he can’t sleep.

He’s always been a night owl, and staying up late to study didn’t seem to present much of an issue for him until suddenly the hours get later and later. It starts with getting to bed by one in the morning, but the more quizzes he bombs and the more work is piled on him the longer he stays up, taking notes and typing up essays and reading and rereading his textbooks in a desperate attempt to figure out what it is he’s not getting.

There are more than a couple mornings where his mother comes in to wake him up after an hour or so of sleep, having fallen asleep on his AP anatomy textbook or with his AP biology notes in his hands. He doesn’t even have time to be upset about it because he has to rush to get presentable and get out the door without forgetting anything if he wants to be on time.

What makes matters worse is even when he’s done with his work at a somewhat decent hour, when he collapses into bed he’s unable to fall asleep. His body is exhausted but his mind is wide awake, nagging at him over things he still has to do and physics concepts he can’t seem to keep straight.

Long story short, even when he’s in bed with plenty of time to sleep, he still ends up staring at the ceiling and tossing and turning until he’s running up against those couple of hours before the school day. Just barely scraping together an hour or two actual sleep before he’s up and off to do it all over again.

Riley points out he looks tired every now and then out of concern but he assures her he’s fine. The insomnia and failing quiz grades he keeps getting back disagree, but it just encourages him to work harder and figure it out on his own. He’s definitely not going to drag Riley down into his studying when she has classes of her own to worry about, and he’s determined to fix it by himself.

Lucas is not going to let himself get thrown. He’s going to get through it on his own and prove he can conquer it.

--

He discovers one thing he really misses, however, is the company of his best friend.

Zay had agreed with him to sort of take a step back and share some distance this year, but he doesn’t see why that should mean they have to avoid each other altogether. Even though they’ve got drastically different schedules and seem to be walking in very different directions, Lucas isn’t going to let him drift away from him that easily.

“I’m just saying, we should do something this weekend,” Lucas says as he jogs to keep up with him, almost running into Wyatt when he and Sarah pass them. He apologizes offhandedly and gets a sour look in return, focusing his attention back on Zay walking ahead of him to get to Cory’s
“I know we’re doing the long game and everything—,”

“Did we not agree not to call it that? If you say long game one more time I swear I’m gonna walk right out that door and into oncoming traffic. You’re gonna murder me. You want that?”

Lucas grins, patting his shoulder. “Never. I’m just saying, I miss you.”

“Alright, alright, you sap,” he says, giving him a look over his shoulder and patting his hand before pushing it off his shoulder. “I miss you too, and stuff. But I didn’t figure it was worth bringing anything up, I mean, aren’t you like always busy?”

“Okay, I’m not spending that much time with Riley. Let’s not exaggerate.”

“Not with her, man. Studying. From what I hear from Farkle it sounds like all you do is stay holed up in your room and do homework. Which like, you know, to each their own. But that doesn’t sound like my idea of a hip and happening Friday night.”

He tries not to get stung over the fact that his friends are talking about him when he’s not around. “He’s overstating. Yes, I’m trying to focus on my grades but I could squeeze a break into my very compact schedule to spend some time with my best friend. What’s your idea of a hip and happening Friday night?”

“Oh, man,” Zay says, making a face as they settle into their desks in the back of the room. “Don’t say that.”

“What? You just said it.”

“Yeah, but it sounds ridiculous coming from you. Some things are just meant to be said by a professional, my pal. Proceed with caution.”

Lucas rolls his eyes, getting distracted momentarily as Riley enters the room with Smackle and slides into her desk at the front of the room. He knows if he lingers on her too long he’ll get lost in thinking about her so he forces himself to refocus, tearing his gaze away from her to lock eyes with his best friend across from him. “Anyway. Look, whatever you want to do this Friday, I’m down.”

Zay raises his eyebrows interestingly. “Anything?”

“Sure. Why?”

He hesitates as Farkle enters the room and slides into the desk in front of Lucas, starting up a conversation with Smackle. Zay grimaces as they exchange affectionate bops on the nose, shaking his head and getting back on topic. “There’s a party at Haley’s, and it’s going to be pretty radical. Apparently some of those rich kids from Haverford are going to be there which means it’s actually going to be lit. That’s the plan I have going currently, and you’re welcome to tag along if you feel so inclined.”

There is nothing Lucas would rather do less than go to a party. It’s not that he has anything against his classmates who choose to participate—drinking just isn’t his thing and the idea of losing control of his composure in front of so many people makes him so unsettled even just thinking about it for longer than a second. Regardless of whether or not his peers would be sober enough to remember it the next day, he simply cannot fathom willingly losing control of his inhibitions.

He barely trusts his emotions when he’s completely sober. He doesn’t even want to imagine what adding alcohol to his brain would do to him, and he never, ever wants to find out.
Being the only sober person at a party full of drunk people seems like a pretty pathetic Friday night, but it’s what Zay wants to do, and he really misses his best friend. After a moment he nods, twirling his pen in his fingers. “Okay.”

“Wait, seriously?” Zay says, eyes wide. “You’re actually going to come out?”

He shrugs. “Sure, if that’s what you want.”

Zay hoots, smacking the table and tossing a ball of paper at the back of Farkle’s head.

He whips around, raising an irritated eyebrow at him. “What?”

“Lucas is coming to the Haley party.”

Farkle breaks into an amused grin, leaning back in his seat to narrow his eyes at Lucas. “No way. You serious?”

“Deadly serious!” Zay snaps.

Lucas looks back and forth between the two of them, feeling like he’s finally doing something right. Sure, it’ll be a little uncomfortable, but if his friends are so excited over it then he figures he can handle a little bit of discomfort.

--

Already, Friday is off to a rough start when the school day wraps.

Lucas stares at the failing mark on his pop quiz in anatomy, the nerves from his evening plans not helping matters. Considering how long he spent working on this chapter, continuing to pull out failing grades is a truly unique kind of frustrating that he’s never experienced before. The comment from his teacher in bright red pen on the corner of the page under the subpar percentage stings particularly harsh.

Did you even try?

He exhales shortly, crumbling the paper in his hands and leaning over the side of his bed to toss it underneath. He’s got a small little collection of wrinkled exams growing under there, hidden away so he doesn’t have to face them. It’s become the place he throws every disappointing grade, every unpleasant thing that he doesn’t have the energy to deal with. He’s got monsters under his bed keeping him up at night, but they’re not going to go away when he turns on the light.

But he’s got places to be, so he forces himself to shrug it off. He’ll worry about it when he gets back from the party. For now, he just wants to focus on spending an evening with his best friend.

Lucas meets Zay, Farkle, and Maya at the subway stop down the street from Haley’s place, closer to the upper east side than any of them have ever ventured before. Farkle’s the wealthiest of the group of them, but he never exactly acts like it. Haley is wealthy and everyone is very aware of it. She makes sure it’s hard to forget.

Zay and Farkle greet him enthusiastically, dragging him along between them as they make their way down the street. Maya lingers behind, still not acknowledging him and icing him out. He’d be more concerned about it if he wasn’t so preoccupied with attempting to brace himself for whatever the hell he’s about to walk into when the four of them walk up the steps to the impressive testament to money of an apartment before them.
“This is the kind of place my father keeps saying I need to move into after college,” Farkle says, stuffing his hands in his pockets and squinting up at it. “I’m pretty sure he just doesn’t want me going to the other side of the world or something like that.”

It’s overwhelming from the moment they step inside, the lighting dim at best and the bass thumping so loudly Lucas can feel it vibrate in his bones. There room smells like smoke and sweat and what he’s guessing is vodka. He always figured party scenes on television were dramatized, but all the sudden he’s living one.

Maya disappears the minute they get through the door and he loses track of Farkle quickly after her, so he’s practically clinging to Zay as he leads the way through the crowd. They give a friendly wave to Haley as they pass.

“Always common courtesy to greet the host. I mean, they’re probably plastered so they won’t remember, but I like to display a semblance of etiquette before I drink all their liquor.”

“How thoughtful.”

Zay grabs a drink and offers him one but he passes, stuffing his hands in the pockets of his jean jacket and glancing around the room. For every familiar face there’s an unfamiliar one, either friends of Haley’s he’s never met or the kids from Haverford. It’s a little jarring to see all his classmates out of the school setting, even more so when taking into consideration all the substance they’re consuming.

In the corner of the room, he spots Farkle meeting up with some other kids in their grade, exchanging a handshake with them before taking hold of the joint they’re smoking and taking a drag for himself. The image is so surreal Lucas has to tear his eyes away.

He’s thankfully distracted by Zay nudging him and leading the way a couple of groups across the room, greeting a sleek, polished Haverford boy Lucas has never seen before. He looks a little bit like Charlie Gardner, only shinier and obviously richer.

Zay bumps fists with him, exchanging greetings with the other boys before elbowing Lucas next to him. “Y’all, this is Lucas.”

“Sure, I’ve heard about Lucas Friar,” the guy says, smirking and holding out his hand. Lucas shakes it awkwardly. “Legendary shortstop for the Abigail Adams JV team. Heard you made varsity this year.”

“That’s right.”

“Nice. It won’t be a big surprise if you guys beat us again this year since our baseball team sucks ass,” he laughs. “I’m Hunter.”

“Nice to meet you,” Lucas says politely, pulling his hand away and clasping them together. “How do you know Zay?”

“We’ve met through this old scene more than a couple times. Haley’s a good friend so she’ll take me along to some Abigail Adams bashes. I think Zay and I met… in August, maybe? One of those late summer ones. You know, this guy is so hilarious.”

Zay waves him off, finishing swallowing the remainder of his drink and making a show of being bashful. “Don’t flatter me, Hunter. It gets you nowhere.”

“So there’s that. How come I haven’t seen you around before today?”
“Because he’s a madman,” Zay butts in, rolling his eyes. “Always studying. I swear, this guy doesn’t do anything but focus on schoolwork.”

“That’s not true,” Lucas says in embarrassment, but the moment passes before he can save his reputation.

Maya appears behind them and whispers something in Zay’s ear, giving him an insistent glare and tugging him away. He salutes them. “Duty calls. See you guys around. Lucas, have some fun!”

With that, Zay leaves him stranded without a life preserver. Lucas clears his throat, hiding his hands in his pockets once again.

Hunter examines him interestedly, taking a sip of his drink and nodding at him. “So why all the schoolwork? There must be better things AA’s best shortstop could be doing on the weekends. Don’t you have other hobbies? You got a girlfriend, don’t you?”

“Yes, but that’s not the thing,” he says quickly, eager to turn the conversation away from Riley. For some reason, it feels wrong to bring her up here. “It’s just… my classes are just tougher this year. Gotta spend time working to make the grades, you know?”


Another Haverford boy gives him a disgruntled look from a little ways away, dancing with a girl from Abigail Adams that Lucas recognizes but doesn’t remember by name. Hunter makes some weird gesture and urges him forward. “George. Get George over here!”

Lucas crosses his arms and squints through the crowd, searching for Zay and Maya until Hunter nudges him, making him flinch slightly in spite of himself. He nods a thanks to some Haverford guy and raises his eyebrows at Lucas, holding out his hand as if he’s going to shake his again and placing something plastic in his palm.

When he pulls his hand away, Lucas is surprised to see a small Ziploc bag of little orange pills in his hand.

He blinks at them, a surge of panic rushing through him. He squints at Hunter, incredulous. “Is this… is this Adderall?”

“You look so shocked,” Hunter says with a friendly laugh. “No need to thank me, man. Consider it on the house. Any friend of Zay is a friend of mine. Look, you pop a couple of those before a study session or when you’re having trouble focusing and you’ll be an academic maniac. No more worrying about grades. Maybe you can afford to have a little more fun. Maybe spend a little more time with that girlfriend, yeah?”

Lucas feels like he’s going to throw up. His hands are suddenly very cold but he has no idea what to do other than stuff them in back in his pockets, taking the Adderall with them.

--

He spends the rest of the evening hovering uncomfortably and trying to catch sight of his friends, having lost them since his conversation with Hunter. Considering the size of Haley’s house, it feels impossible to navigate. Lucas didn’t even realize there were this many adolescents in this part of New York.

The first person he manages to find is Farkle, crashed out on the floor by the fireplace and staring
thoughtfully up at the ceiling. Lucas picks his way through the crowd of his intoxicated classmates and approaches him warily, not exactly sure what’s up with him or how much he’s had to smoke. “Farkle?”

It takes him a second, but Farkle shifts his gaze to focus on him, his eyes lighting up when he recognizes him. “Hey, Lucas! You having fun?”

“Sure. Have you seen Maya? Or Zay? It’s getting kind of late, don’t you think?”


He blinks uncertainly. “Yes?”

Farkle gestures him forward. Lucas crouches down next to him, scooting closer when he continues to gesture at him. He leans in like he’s gonna tell him a secret. “Lucas, it’s a party. It’s just begun. Time ceases to exist in this plane of reality.”

Lucas is pretty sure if he has to spend five more minutes in this house he’s going to lose it.

Farkle pats his shoulder bracingly, squinting to focus on him. “Just relax, Freakface. Have a drink. If you relax you’ll have way more fun.”

“Oh, sure thing, Farkle. Will do. Don’t overdo it, okay?”

He reaches out and takes Lucas’s face in his hands, narrowing his eyes and scowling as he examines him critically. “How? How the hell does your random arrangement of cells generate this? Human perfection is unattainable. It’s not fair. I don’t get it.”

“I’m going to go,” Lucas says gently, carefully removing himself from Farkle’s scrutinizing hold. “I’ll see you later, okay, buddy?”

“Yeah, yeah.”

He skirts his way through the crowd and makes his way towards the center of the room, hoping to catch Zay before he gets out of there. Instead, he spots Maya huddled in an alcove with some guy he’s not familiar with, some guy from the soccer team he’s seen in passing but never actually met. He knows Maya is probably the most capable of handling herself and that he should just leave her alone, but he sees the guy lean down to kiss her and her push him away slightly and before he can stop himself he’s making his way across the room to her side.

“Hey, hey, what’s going on?” he says protectively, lightly yanking Maya out of the nook and away from the soccer player’s grasp. He’s not going to get angry, but he’ll be damned if he sees something happening to one of his friends and doesn’t do anything to stop it.

To his surprise, it’s Maya who gets angry. She wrenches out of his grasp, giving him a scowl and shoving him away from her. “What is your issue?”

Lucas blinks, raising his hands in surrender. “You—you were pushing him away. I saw. I’m just trying to—,”

“Oh my God, Lucas, could you not be big bro for like five seconds?” she snaps in disgust. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

The soccer player looks appropriately confused. Lucas feels a similar sense of bewilderment. “Do you even know this guy?”
Maya rolls her eyes, shaking her head at him before reaching out to take the guy’s hand. “Come on, Brett,” she mutters, shooting Lucas one last irritated glare before leading Brett around the corner to a different part of the house.

He feels completely displaced, like someone has dropped him in this alternate universe where all of his friends aren’t who they’re supposed to be and he can’t protect them no matter how hard he tries. He anxiously tears at a piece of skin on his palm before shaking himself out of it and moving forward to find Zay, hoping to get out of here as quickly as possible.

It’s Dave who turns out to be the lighthouse pointing him in the right direction. He spots Lucas in the crowd and eagerly waves him over, in the process leading him to Jeff, Nigel, and Zay. All of them seem relatively excited to see him.

“Lucas!” Dave says, surprising him by giving him an unsteady hug. It’s obvious he’s had a good amount to drink. Lucas pats his back awkwardly, stabilizing him on his feet. “It’s so wild, we were just talking about you. Zay was just saying something.”

“It’s so cool to see you out, dude,” Nigel says with a grin. Jeff is too busy laughing at Dave to greet him properly.

Zay spins on his heel, stifling a laugh. “I was just about to tell them—oh God. Lucas, you have to tell them the Judy story. Like, I could tell it, but now that you’re here you may as well get into it.”

“Actually, I just wanted to catch you before I left. I think I’m gonna go.”

“What?”

“No!” Dave straightens up, holding onto Lucas’s shoulder for support. “No!”

Jeff is still chuckling at Dave’s expense. Nigel frowns. “But you just got here.”

He figures he could explain that he’s actually been here since Zay got here a couple hours ago, but he’s fairly certain trying to negotiate with drunk teenagers wouldn’t be a very rewarding or successful experience.

Zay frowns at him, furrowing his brow. “Did you even party, man? Did you have anything to drink? Didn’t Farkle at least get you high?”

“No, I’m fine. Trust me.”

Zay rolls his eyes and stumbles slightly, causing Lucas to shrug out from under Dave and reach out to stabilize him.

He pushes him away and stands on his own two feet, but the stumble was enough to get Lucas concerned. “How much have you had tonight?”

“No, I’m fine. Trust me.”

Zay frowns at him, furrowing his brow. “Did you even party, man? Did you have anything to drink? Didn’t Farkle at least get you high?”

“No, I’m fine. Trust me.”

Zay rolls his eyes and stumbles slightly, causing Lucas to shrug out from under Dave and reach out to stabilize him.

He pushes him away and stands on his own two feet, but the stumble was enough to get Lucas concerned. “How much have you had tonight?”

“Just the right amount. Thanks for asking, dad.”

Jeff cracks up. Lucas ignores the sarcasm and takes Zay’s shoulders, trying to get him to focus on him. “I’m serious. How much have you had? Maybe you should come back with me.”

He wriggles out of his grasp, knocking his hands out of the way and raising his own in surrender. “I’m fine. I didn’t bring you here to parent me. We came here to hang out and have fun, didn’t we?”
“Yeah, we did. Only I haven’t seen you the entire night.”

“Whoa, no need to get clingy.”

Lucas frowns at him, trying his hardest not to take anything personally. He knows he’s intoxicated, that’s there’s a very good chance he doesn’t realize he’s acting this way and that he doesn’t mean anything he’s saying. “We worked this out so that we could actually spend time together again. But all you’ve done all night is get wasted and ditch me with some sketchy Haverford guy. Did you know that Maya is making out with guys she doesn’t know? And I have no idea what Farkle is up to in the corner over there.”

“It’s called having a life,” Zay snaps, giving him an exhausted look. “I know you’re busy snuggling up with your girlfriend and your biology textbook, but not all of us are perfect, alright? Some of us just want to have a little fucking fun every once and a while. Forgive me for trying to get you to do the same thing. I forgot you already have everything you need.”

Lucas blinks, absorbing this blow. Nigel and Jeff exchange uncomfortable looks, taking long drinks and averting their eyes. Dave stares at Zay, jaw dropped open.

There’s a lot he could say in reply, but it doesn’t feel like there’s any use. This isn’t the Zay he considers his best friend, and he doesn’t know if wants to know this version. He raises his hands in surrender. “I can’t talk to you when you’re like this.”

“Who said I want you to?” he sneers in reply, holding out his arms.

Lucas presses his lips together, nodding slowly and starting to back away. “Fine. Whatever.”

“Oh, come on, Lucas. Don’t get like that.”

“Forget it. You do whatever you want, Zay.”

“I will!”

Lucas swivels away from them and pushes his way through the crowd, heading for the nearest possible exit. Despite not having consumed any alcohol, he feels a lot closer to throwing up than some of his heavily intoxicated classmates. Someone bumps him hard on the shoulder as he passes, Wyatt tossing him an unfriendly glare as he shoves past him.

He escapes out of the building and jogs down the steps, the cool October air hitting him like ton of bricks after the stifling humidity of the party. He inhales sharply, resenting the shakiness of his breath when he exhales.

He’s not going to crack. He’s not going let himself get thrown.

Instead, he heads towards the subway and goes to the only place he thinks he can handle existing at the moment.

He goes straight home.

--

Considering the late hour, Lucas is hesitant as he climbs the fire escape and crouches outside the bay window. He’s never shown up to her bedroom this late at night before, and he has no idea if she’s even going to be awake to contemplate letting him in. He can’t tell through the darkness if she’s there or not so he ventures a shot and taps lightly at the glass, swallowing his reservations.
Riley surprises him by appearing around the side of the window rather than from her bed, mirroring his astonishment as she reaches forward to open the pane. “Lucas? What are you doing here?”

“Can I come in?”

“Of course,” she says, stepping back as he climbs in upon her invitation. “You don’t even have to ask. But aren’t you supposed to be out with Zay right now?”

“Party’s over,” he mutters, stepping off the seat and wandering into the center of the room. He licks his lips, uncertain what to do now that he’s actually there with her. She’s already dressed for bed, probably just getting ready to go to sleep. He can’t remember the last time he went to bed before two in the morning.

He stuffs his hands in his pockets, twitching when his hand touches the Ziploc bag hidden away. He immediately moves to take off his jacket instead, dropping it on the back of the desk chair and taking a few steps away from it. He’d burn it if he could, but he doesn’t have a lighter handy and he wouldn’t risk setting the rest of her room on fire. He really likes her room.

Riley examines him curiously as she settles on her bed, wrapping her arms around her knees. She can tell he’s in a weird mood. “How was it?”

“Terrible.”

She hesitates, giving him a concerned look. “Did something happen? Was it—,”

“I don’t….” he starts sharply, stopping himself and pulling back on his harsh tone. He’s not upset with Riley, and he doesn’t ever want to take it out on her. He clears his throat, dropping his gaze to the floor. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

Her tone is soft when she speaks again, sitting cross-legged and clasping her hands together in front of her. “That’s okay. We don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to.”

He wonders if maybe he should tell her. She’s the only person who has ever actually bothered to listen to a word he says, and it’s obvious from her tone and posture that she’s completely open to it if he needs it. She’s brilliant in that way—so thoughtful and considerate and willing to help anyone who needs it. He could tell her, and she would listen without complaint.

But he doesn’t want to be angry all over again. He doesn’t want to relive his best friend looking him in the eyes and telling him he’d rather not talk to him anymore. Mostly, he’s just tired.

“I don’t know why I came,” Lucas murmurs, scratching the back of his head and shrugging vaguely. “You’re getting ready for bed and all that. I’ll just… I should go.”

“You don’t have to,” Riley says quickly, adjusting anxiously. She holds his gaze. “You don’t have to go.”

“I don’t want you to get in trouble.”

“It’s fine,” she promises him. She pats the spot on the bed next to her, waiting patiently until he walks over and settles down uncertainly. “If you’re more comfortable here, that’s where I want you to be.”

He forgot how comfortable her bed is. He glances down at his hands, scratching at a hangnail on his thumb. “What about your parents?”
“I’m sure we can get you out of here before they wake up tomorrow. It’s Saturday, they’ll sleep in late.” He’s caught off-guard when she takes his hand in hers, keeping him from continuing to pick at the skin on his fingers. “You don’t have to tell me what happened, but I can tell that something did. So if you’d feel safer here tonight, then I think you should stay here. I’d feel better if you did, I know that much.”

He debates with himself for a long moment, staring down at her hand joined with his. When he lifts his gaze to meet hers, he gives in. He lets out a sigh and pulls her into a hug, tucking his head against her shoulder and allowing himself to relax.

She rests her head against his, holding him securely and stroking the hair on the back of his head. They stay like this for a few minutes until Riley nudges him back towards the head of the bed, situating them more restfully.

“You look tired,” she comments in a whisper, brushing her thumb across his cheekbone.

His eyes are already closed, drifting into sleep. “You have no idea.”

It’s the first refreshing sleep he gets in months, and he’s reluctant to leave when the sun rises in the morning. But he doesn’t want to get her in trouble and he means it. She’s still half-asleep when he kisses her goodbye, grabbing his jacket off the desk and sneaking out the bay window before the sun peeks over the shortest buildings on the street.

When he gets back to his room, he drops his jacket on his bed and fishes in his pocket to retrieve the plastic bag. He has absolutely no idea what to do with it. He should get rid of it. He could pitch it, or flush it down the toilet. Something like that.

Instead, he shoves it under his bed with the failed quizzes. All the other things he’s trying to forget.

The further he gets into first semester, the heavier the weight on his shoulders seems to get.

He feels like he hasn’t slept in weeks. No matter how many hours he spends studying, his grades don’t seem to get any better. He makes a point of confining all his study time to his apartment, not bothering with the group at Topanga’s or at the Matthews apartment anymore. He loves his friends, and God knows he loves Riley, but they’re too much of a distraction and he’s sick of failing all the time. He’s so sick of being a failure.

What doesn’t help matters is how distracted he’s become at all hours of the day. He chalks it up to sleep deprivation, but his thoughts are always clouded and he finds himself accidentally zoning out a lot more often than actually paying attention.

When he is focused enough to take notes, he can’t help but get caught on little things like how one word won’t look quite right or how the sentence starts running off the edge of the margin in his notebook, so he’ll erase the whole sentence and start over until it fits. He erases the same word five or six times until he pens it down properly the way it’s supposed to look. By the time he’s fixed it he’s missed five minutes of lecture and has no idea how to catch up. There isn’t a class these days where he doesn’t feel miles behind.

Studying proves to have the same challenges. He spends more time getting frustrated with his own inability to comprehend anything than actually absorbing any material. It gets to the point where he’s slamming his laptop shut so often he might break it, so he keeps it far away from him most of the day. He can’t count the amount of pages he’s ripped out of his notebook.
He could count them, technically, but he doesn’t want to look under his bed if he can help it. The arrangement of failed assignments keeps adding up, and the Adderall is still under there haunting him since he can’t decide what to do with it. Every time he works up the courage to toss it, something stops him. This disgusting, ugly part of him that he tries so hard to ignore. This disgusting, ugly part of him that convinces him not to get rid of it, because if things continue the way they’re going, maybe he’ll need it after all.

As his ability to concentrate slips, it’s no longer just his science classes that are suffering. He watches his grade trickle down in physics, and despite his best efforts his algebra grade takes a nose dive after their latest unit test. Rather than motivating him to work harder, it simply feels like another fact he can’t dispute. Just another indication that he’s a failure, that there’s something inside him that’s weak and isn’t working properly.

He spends most of math class gazing out the window rather than looking at the board after that. One day in the middle of lecture, he’s shaken out of his daze when he hears Sarah whispering from the seat next to him.

“Lucas.” She tosses a pencil at him while the teacher’s back is turned. “Lucas.”

The pencil hitting him in the ear manages to get his attention. He scowls at her. “What?”

“You’re bleeding.”

He blinks, not quite sure he understood her. He shakes his head at her and she rolls her eyes, pointing subtly to his hands.

Glancing down at them, he’s surprised to find his thumbnail smudged with blood. He must’ve picked at a hangnail too hard, because the skin around his nail is definitely bleeding and there are specks of blood on his fingers and the notebook in front of him, ruining the perfectly blank page where he hadn’t been taking any notes.

It takes him a long moment to understand he did that to himself. He picked himself apart to the point of blood and didn’t even realize it. It didn’t even hurt. He didn’t feel it.

Unfortunately, considering how often and insistently his plays with his fingers, this becomes an increasingly common routine. He has to start bandaging them, partially to make sure they heal properly but mostly because he doesn’t want anyone else to notice and worry.

Ironically, the only one who seems to notice is his father. He glances his way as Lucas is seated at the kitchen table one day after school, taking a brief break from drilling physics equations into his useless brain to put fresh band aids on his fingers.

“You fighting again?”

That’s all Kenneth Friar has to offer. No greetings. No questions of concern. A simple question that indicates exactly what he considers most important about his son.

Lucas grits his teeth, concentrating extra hard on sticking the last band aid around his index finger. “Nope.”

He doesn’t even bother to question him further. Kenneth immediately goes back to his paperwork, almost as if the conversation never happened. Lucas resists the urge to peel away the band aids he just spent all that time sticking on, picking at a scab on his wrist instead.

Even still, he figures he’s doing a pretty good job of holding it all together considering he continues
to skate under the radar. No matter how bad things seem to get, he’s going to pull through on his own. He doesn’t want to worry anyone else.

Hence why it’s such a shock when someone finally seems to notice his weird behavior, and it’s not even someone in his immediate friend group.

While they’re waiting outside the math classroom one morning near the end of November, a soft, tentative voice catches his attention.

“Lucas, are you okay?”

He jumps, glancing over his shoulder. Jade Beamon is standing behind him, waiting as unassumingly as ever and gazing up at him curiously.

“How?”

She twiddles with the strap of her backpack, hesitating now that his eyes are on her. “Are you okay?”

“What? Yeah.” He remembers to smile, flashing his usual charming grin and giving her a weird look. “Of course I’m okay. What makes you ask?”

“Oh, uh, no reason I guess.” She shrugs. “Just checking.”

Jade’s not the only one who suddenly seems very interested in him. Farkle starts shooting him weird looks in class, like he’s trying to psychoanalyze him from five feet away. He gets a couple of weird texts from Dave out of the blue, asking if he’s “good bruh.” When he assures him he’s fine, Dave’s response text is always the same.

**Dave Williams: aight aight aight aight cool cool cool cool good looking out**

Riley’s always been hypersensitive of his moods, and he’s constantly having to work to be one step ahead of her to avoid the conversation of how stressed he is about classes or if something is bothering him. It’s a little less prevalent seeing as they’re not spending nearly as much time together since he’s trying so hard to bring his grades up, but in the time they do spend together he works his hardest to seem as put together as he possibly can.

He doesn’t want her to worry. The last thing he wants is for her to worry about him.

Even Topanga’s isn’t safe, but admittedly he brought it upon himself by dozing off after school one afternoon while studying. He doesn’t remember exactly what time he knocked out or what he was working on but he’s so exhausted he can’t keep his eyes open, and when someone shakes him awake hours later it’s dark outside and he’s gotten none of the work done he was supposed to in the time set aside. He jolts awake, feeling a rush of panic shoot through him for a second as he struggles to remember where he is and what’s going on.

Josh holds his hands up and waves him down, in the same way he used to calm the horses when they’d get skittish. “Easy there, cowboy. Settle down. Everything’s alright.”

Lucas blinks, sitting up straight in the armchair and rubbing his eyes. It’s funny how even though he just slept for an odd number of hours, his eyes still hurt all the time. Even when he rests, they’re still burning when he opens them again. “What’s going on?”

“You fell asleep. Like, four hours ago. I said we should wake you up but Katy seemed to think I should let you rest. She said you seemed ‘tuckered out.’”
Lucas curses under his breath, rubbing his face and starting to gather his things. Josh examines him inquisitively, squinting at him as he stuffs his textbooks in his backpack. “Are you okay, dude?”

“Huh? I’m fine.”

“You don’t really look fine. If you don’t mind my saying so. You look like, dead tired. And what the hell is up with your fingers?”

“I just didn’t get a lot of sleep last night.”

“That doesn’t explain the fingers.”

Lucas gets to his feet, slinging his backpack over his shoulder and taking a deep breath. He meets Josh’s eyes, giving him the best smile he can manage with his eyes burning so badly. “I’m fine, Josh. Thanks for the concern, but I’m good.”

For all his charm, Lucas fails yet again. Because it’s obvious Josh Matthews doesn’t believe a word he’s saying. “Sure. Whatever you say.”

Things really start to take a nasty turn when his grade starts dropping in history as well.

Cory’s class has always been a sort of safety net for Lucas and his friends, a course that doesn’t require a whole lot of effort other than showing up and participating in whatever convoluted scheme he cooked up that week. So when Lucas prioritizes his APs over an essay for his class and really bombs it, he’s not surprised when Cory requests to see him after class.

The rest of his peers shuffle out of the room when the bell rings. Riley gives him a kiss on the cheek and agrees to meet him by her locker, disappearing with the others as they all file out. Finally, only he and Cory are left in the classroom.

Lucas approaches his desk, knocking his knuckles lightly against the surface of the wood. “You wanted to talk to me?”

Cory glances up at him, looking unimpressed. He sorts through the stack of papers on his desk, pulling out Lucas’s failing grade and holding it out for him to take in again. “You want to explain to me what the hell this is?”

“It looks like an essay to me, sir.”

Cory is not amused. “Don’t get cheeky with me, Mr. Friar. I’m asking why you think I should accept this level of work from you.”

Lucas knows it definitely wasn’t his best assignment, but he’s a little pissed that Cory is choosing now to be so hard on him. It’s not as though he just turned in a blank piece of paper. It’s not as though he hasn’t always given this class his best effort for the last five years, no matter ridiculous it seemed. “I don’t see what the big deal is.”

“The big deal?” Cory stammers, pulling the essay back towards himself and flipping through it, scoffing. “The big deal is that this is a failing essay. You’re turning in failing work in my classroom all the sudden, and I don’t appreciate it.”

Lucas clenches his fist, trying his best to keep his emotions in check. With everything going on as of late and how cloudy his head has been, that’s been harder and harder to do. “So it’s not my
“Not your best? Look at this.” He makes the point of dramatically flipping through it again, shaking his head at it and plopping it onto the desk between them. “I mean really, Lucas, did you even try at all?”

Lucas swallows hard. He resists the urge to explain just how hard he’s been trying. He wants to go into every damn second of time he’s spent studying for AP biology, studying for AP anatomy, cramming all this information into his head only to feel like he’s lost it the moment he steps into the classroom. How he’s up every night because he can’t learn a damn thing, how he’s up every night because he can’t sleep, how he feels like the most useless, stupid human being in this entire school and how he knows Davis is never going to accept him so he’s just running towards absolutely nothing and killing himself in the process. How all he’s ever doing is trying his hardest and it’s still not good enough.

But he doesn’t. He clenches his jaw, gripping the strap of his bag and shrugging nonchalantly. “I guess I just didn’t care about the assignment all that much.”

Cory’s eyes flash dangerously—he’s crossed a line of respect. “Is that so? You just didn’t care?”

Lucas shrugs. Cory rises to his feet, pressing his fingertips against the desktop and giving him a disappointed glare. That stings more than anything he could possibly say.

“Well, you know what, Mr. Friar?” Cory is evidently offended, because the furious tremble in his voice is something Lucas has never heard before, even after five years of having him as a teacher. It’s something he never wanted to hear. “You better knock it off. Because I know you’re better than this. And I won’t accept this level of work or this level of disrespect. Do you understand me?”

As unreliable as his emotions have been, the anger is already gone and doesn’t give him any venom to bite back with. His hands are cold again and he chews the inside of his cheek, nodding under the dissatisfied glare of his favorite teacher.

“Good. You’re dismissed.”

Lucas escapes the classroom as quickly as he can, wondering how it could be possible that he hates himself even more than he already did. He knows he’s worthless, that’s not a secret to him, but all the sudden people he cares about are beginning to realize it too and he doesn’t know how to stop it.

---

Everything really falls apart the moment Riley realizes he’s way more messed up than she thought he was.

Turns out, the Adderall was not under his bed haunting him for the past few weeks. It wasn’t there because it was with Riley, who found it one afternoon a couple weeks back and took it from his possession not knowing what he was planning to do with it. When he finds out she has it, the two of them fall into their first serious fight they’ve ever had, and all Lucas can do at the end of it all is let her keep the drugs and storm out on his own.

The worst part isn’t even that she took them. At least they’re out of his hands.

The worst part is that he told her he wasn’t going to take them, that he never intended to take them, and he’s almost certain she doesn’t believe him.

He leaves to get some space from the situation and clear his head, but that’s an increasingly
difficult task for him these days. Eager for a distraction he forces himself to study instead, but his brain is so fuddled and all he can think about is how Riley now knows how despicable he actually is and that she really thinks he’s taking drugs and that even if he wanted to just so he could pass one of his classes he no longer has the option.

He knows he’s in trouble when the words on the page start swimming and his eyes keep glossing over. There’s this unpleasant throb in the back of his throat, and he starts pressing his fingers against the band aids where a ripped hangnail is still sore just so he’ll have something else to focus on. If he focuses on the sting from that, he’s less likely to start crying.

*No one’s going to take you seriously if you keep that crying up. You better knock it off. You fall off the sheep, you face the ridicule.*

He’s not going to get thrown. He’s not going to get thrown. He’s not going to get thrown.

Lucas jumps out of his skin when his phone rings from the desk on the other side of the room. He clambers to his feet immediately, hoping it’s Riley but not being all that surprised when it’s not. For one, it’s after one in the morning and she’s likely asleep, and more importantly he honestly wouldn’t blame her if she never wanted to associate with him ever again. He wouldn’t want to, given the choice.

He is surprised when he sees who is lighting up his caller ID however, accepting the call and lifting the phone to his ear. “Hello? Maya?”

There’s a long pause. He can tell something is off the moment she whispers back into the phone. “Lucas? Are you there?”

“Yeah. I’m here. What’s going on?”

The tone of her voice makes him nervous. She sounds scared, genuinely scared, and considering Maya Hart doesn’t scare easy he knows there has to be something seriously wrong. “I’m walking back from Sarah’s. Zay’s not good. And I think we’re being… we’re in trouble.”

“Where are you?”

“A couple of blocks from you, I think.” He keeps the phone pressed between his shoulder and his ear as he scrambles to put his boots on, grabbing his jacket and shrugging it on. “Near the CVS. You know what I’m talking about?”

“Yeah, I do. I’ll be there soon. If something happens before I get there, call the police.”

“Right. Okay. Sure.” She hesitates on the other end of the line, her voice cracking slightly. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know who else to call.”

“It’s okay. When I hang up, don’t act like I did. Keep talking. Pretend I’m still on the line. I’ll be there soon.”

“Right. I can do that.” Another moment of silence. “Lucas, I’m sorry—,”

“I’m coming. Don’t panic. I’m coming.”

The minute he hangs up he’s out the door, heading towards his friends without a second thought.
Although Maya and Zay managed to escape the evening unscathed, Lucas isn’t so lucky. The busted lip, bruised knuckles, and fresh bruises on his face aren’t easy to explain away, so he just doesn’t bother to explain them at all. The rumor mill churns just fine without his consent, and he’s too exhausted to correct every insane lie he hears about himself being passed around the halls.

Considering he’s not so fond of himself at that point, he figures maybe he deserves it.

The shock of the situation does seem to spur action from Riley though, who shows up at his apartment to apologize to him over the Adderall debacle. He’s more relieved than he could ever possibly express, and he appreciates that she doesn’t push him for the story of what the hell happened to him given all the bruises. She’ll wait for him to come around, like she always does.

While things seem to be improving with Riley, everything else continues to fall apart faster than he can put it back together. He gets so frustrated with his assignments he starts taking it out on the books themselves, throwing them across the room in the middle of the night when he can’t sleep but he can’t seem to retain basic information either. The closer he gets to tears of frustration, the faster the book is out of his hands and hitting the wall.

He has to listen to his parents actually interact for once, only this time they’re arguing over how they have to spend the money to buy him new textbooks since he accidentally ruined the first set. And they’re not entirely wrong—the broken spines and nervously ripped pages aren’t great spots on his track record.

Once the hushed arguing gets to be too much, Lucas comes out of hiding in his room and goes to confront them both, hovering in the doorway to the kitchen. He plans to say something real smart to his father, but when both of his parents turn their irritated gaze on him he wilts instead, losing his initial fire.

He used to be so good at being mad. Now he can’t even do that properly.

Kenneth looks him over indifferently, taking in the bruises on his face and the bandages on his fingers. “Not fighting, huh?”

He wants so badly to be angry. He wants so badly to lash out. He’s desperate to feel something, even if it’s the rage he spent so much time getting rid of in the past few years.

But all he feels is exhaustion.

“I’ll buy the books with my own money,” he says flatly, disappearing back up the stairs as silently as he appeared.

The truth behind his injuries remains a mystery until Cory confronts him about one day after school, on the last day before winter break officially begins. After receiving a midterm grade report that confirms his nightmares that he’s in danger of failing nearly half his classes, he doesn’t see how things could get much worse until Cory holds him back after class for the second time that semester.

He waits by Riley’s desk as Cory erases the board, taking his sweet time. Lucas clears his throat, pinching at the skin on his knuckles where the bruises are still healing. It’s still sensitive and hurts when he picks at it, but for some reason he can’t bring himself to stop.

Cory turns to face him, coming around to other side of his desk and leaning back against it. He clasps his hands together, raising his eyebrows at Lucas as he matches his glare. “You want to tell me what’s been going on?”
He shrugs. “Accident.”

“I know that’s what you told the nurse. I assume that’s what you told Grace.” He won’t stop staring at him, giving him the knowing teacher look. “So when are you going to tell someone the truth?”

“Why do you care?”

“Because I know where you came from, Lucas. Remember? I know what got you here in the first place.” When he doesn’t immediately respond, Cory continues. “But I also know the kind of kid you actually are. And to see this sort of behavior again? That concerns me.”

“It disappoints you.”

“No, it concerns me. There’s a difference.” Lucas lifts his head to lock eyes with him uncertainly. “Are you fighting again?”

“No.”

“Then where did you get the bruises?”

Lucas bites his lip, sitting on his hands to keep from picking at them. “A fight.”

“Now, do you see where I’m confused?”

“I’m not out here looking for fights,” he says defensively. He licks his lips, searching for the best way to explain the scenario without ratting out Maya and Zay. “A couple of my friends got in trouble. I had to help them.”

He’s got Cory’s attention now. He widens his eyes. “What kind of trouble? Who’s in trouble?”

“No one. Not anymore. It doesn’t matter who.”

“Then that still doesn’t explain how you ended up with all that,” Cory argues, gesturing to his face. “If someone was in trouble—,”

“It doesn’t matter,” Lucas says in frustration. He can feel that pain in the back of his throat and attempts to gulp it down, tripping over his words as he continues to ramble. “It doesn’t matter who was in trouble or what the trouble is because it’s over now. Okay? They’re safe and that’s all that matters and if you asked me if I regret it, I’m going to say no.”

“Lucas—,”

“The only thing I’m good for is protecting my friends, and if I can’t even do that then I’m not worth anything. My friends were in trouble, and so I did what had to be done to get them out safely. And they’re safe.” He cracks, raising his voice. “What was I supposed to do?”

Cory examines him for a long moment, not flinching in the slightest. Lucas swallows again, dropping his gaze down to the floor.

“So you’re not fighting.”

Lucas sighs, screwing his eyes shut. His mind feels startlingly blank. When he makes eye contact with Cory, all he can think is how desperately he just wants someone to believe him. “No.”

After a pause, Cory grabs his bag from behind his desk and slings it over his shoulder, nodding.
towards the door. “Come on.”

“What?”

“We’re going home. We’re going to talk this out as a family.” He waits in the doorway, raising an eyebrow at him. “I’m sure Topanga and Riley are dying to hear the actual truth.”

--

After a long, wearying dinner conversation where Cory helps Lucas clear the air over the whole situation, Topanga sits Lucas down on the couch and gets out her first aid kit. She dedicates the better part of an hour to checking his bruises in thoughtful silence, disinfecting them and taking extra care to clean his knuckles.

She lifts his hand to point at the places where he’d been picking at the wound. “You do this?”

“Not intentionally.”

“Well, stop it.”

“Okay.”

They fall into silence again while she finishes cleaning them up. Once she stops, she tilts his head in her hands to get one last evaluation done. “I’m glad I got to these when I did. If you’re going to play Western hero, you at least need to properly clean up after yourself.”

He doesn’t have anything to say. All he can think about is how he wants to hug Riley and crawl into bed and sleep for a thousand years. Maybe never wake up, if he can help it.

“I understand wanting to protect your friends. I do, and I admire it.” Topanga takes his face and forces him to look her in the eyes. “But they do not come at the expense of your own personal safety. Do you understand? Your safety comes first.”

Although he doesn’t have any regrets about stepping to Maya and Zay’s defense, the worry etched in Topanga’s features acts as an excellent guilt trip. It’s particularly effective considering he doesn’t think he’s ever seen that level of concern on either of his actual parents’ faces. He nods tiredly.

“Good.” She exhales, gently reaching forward and pulling him into a hug. “I don’t ever want to see you like this again.”

It’s not until Topanga is embracing him that he realizes how long it’s been since someone other than Riley did anything affectionate towards him. Once he remembers how he’s supposed to react he hugs her back, reveling in how it feels to actually have a mother take care of him and tell him she doesn’t want to see him less than healthy.

He feels tears prick the corners of his eyes, but he blinks them back.

He’s not going to get thrown.

--

When second semester starts up, Lucas emerges from the shelter of winter break and gets back to work on attempting to salvage his rapidly freefalling grade point average.

It’s suddenly more difficult than the previous semester. Although he’s fixed things with the
Matthews, he doesn’t feel much better and still can’t get any sleep. His mind seems to have two modes: frantic, where he has too many thoughts going on at once and he can’t concentrate on anything long enough to do anything productive, and numb, where everything is fuzzy and he feels absolutely nothing. Both are equally suffocating for very different reasons.

Riley finally convinces him to let Smackle know his grades aren’t where he’d like them to be, and she is more than willing to meet with him after school to study for anatomy and biology. Farkle is still in and out despite his triumphant return to them earlier in the school year from the clutches of the party scene, but she assures Lucas that he’s just keeping an eye on Maya to the best of his ability. Should he require it, she figures Farkle would be more than happy to help him study as well.

After she explains the concept of mitosis to him for about the third time that afternoon, he gives up and sets to working on their homework assignment instead. His pastry sits on the table untouched, a fact that Smackle doesn’t overlook as she examines him curiously.

“How much sleep have you been getting a night?”

He furrows his brow, lifting his head to be met with her analytical glare. “I don’t know. Enough. Why?”

“I just noticed you’ve got bags under your eyes. Not that it detracts from your overall physical appeal,” she assures him helpfully. “But that’s usually a common indicator of sleep deprivation. Perhaps, if your sleeping habits were better, your grades would show a positive response.”

He knows his sleeping habits are pure crap, but considering he’s practically an insomniac he doesn’t see what she expects him to do about it. “I’ve been having a little trouble sleeping, I guess. I don’t see how I could fix it though, so I think I’m just going to focus on studying and hope that’ll work instead.”

“Well, I took a psychology course last year,” Smackle reminds him.

He hadn’t forgotten—Smackle spent the entire school year psychoanalyzing all five of them with somewhat mixed results. Although she was completely wrong about most things, she nailed the growing conflict between him, Maya, and Riley.

“And they say that dreams can be a clue into what’s causing you stress. Aside from the obvious,” she says, gesturing to their classwork.

“Can’t they also mean nothing, though?”

“Yes. But there’s no reason we shouldn’t give it a go.” She clasps her hands together on her lap, giving him a timid smile. “Do you have any dreams you can remember?”

He’s got more than a few, including a couple of recurring nightmares he’s had since he was young that he doesn’t feel comfortable sharing with her. There’s also the dream featuring Riley that pays a visit every now and then, but he doesn’t plan to ever talk about that aloud with another human being so that one is out the window too.
“Okay,” he says with a sigh, dropping his notebook on the table and leaning back in the armchair, propping his feet up on the edge of the coffee table. “I guess there’s one I’ve had for the last year or so.”

“Go on.”

“Okay. So, I’m like, in this big space. It’s not really an actual location or anything. It’s just nothing. But I’m running. There’s nothing around but I’m definitely running with a purpose, but I have no idea if I’m running towards something or away from something. I just keep sprinting and sprinting. Then, when I get exhausted and try to stop, all the sudden I’ll hear someone. Sometimes it’s Riley. Or my mom. Or one of you guys. And you just call out to me, but it’s clear that it’s an encouragement to keep going. Like I can’t stop. A lot of things are riding on me not stopping.”

“They don’t say anything? Just your name?”

“Just my name. So they say my name and it snaps me out of it and I get this rush of adrenaline like, okay, gotta keep going. So I just keep going. And I keep going and going and going until I legitimately can’t go any further. Like, I collapse because I’m out of energy and literally can’t take one more step.”

Smackle takes a long pause. “Then what happens?”

“I pass out, I think. Or maybe I die. I don’t know exactly.” He shrugs, staring up at the ceiling. “Then I wake up.”

He doesn’t realize the words coming out of his mouth must sound insane until he lowers his gaze to look at Smackle again. Her curious nature is completely gone from her expression, uncertainty coloring her features instead.

“I know I don’t know a lot about this particular subject,” she says hesitantly, smoothing her skirt against her knees and avoiding eye contact with him. “But have you ever considered… talking to someone?”

He blinks at her. His built-in response is to smirk, laughing it off awkwardly. “I’m talking to you, aren’t I?”

“You know what I mean. Talking to a professional.”

Lucas suddenly feels very trapped. His mouth feels dry. He searches for words but nothing comes out of his mouth.

He shakes his head clumsily. “Why would I do that? I don’t need to do that. I don’t have anything to talk about.”

Smackle watches him, nodding slowly. “Of course. It was just a suggestion.”

“I don’t have anything to talk about,” he repeats adamantly, a hint of panic in his voice. He clears his throat to get rid of it. “I don’t need to talk to anyone. I’m fine.”

“Very well. I trust you to know better than I would.”

She drops the subject, but his sense of panic doesn’t go away. His chest suddenly feels tight and when he glances down at his hands, he’s weirded out to find them trembling.

He gathers his things. “I have to go. Thanks for the study help.”
“We barely covered anything,” she argues, frowning at him.

“Thanks for the help. I have to go.”

He makes his way out the door as fast as possible, not even sparing a second to feel guilty for leaving her without a proper goodbye.

On the subway ride back to his apartment, he’s scared to discover that his hands won’t stop shaking. He grips the bar so tightly his knuckles are white, but they won’t stop. They’ve got this constant quiver to them, no matter how firmly he presses them against the pole. Lucas wonders if maybe he’s actually going crazy, like something is seriously wrong with him and it’s going to destroy him if he doesn’t figure out what it is.

*Take it like a man until you prove yourself able to conquer it.*

“I’m not going to get thrown,” he whispers to himself, ignoring the judgmental look of the passenger next to him. He closes his eyes, pressing his forehead against the cold metal of the pole. “I’m not going to get thrown. I’m not going to get thrown.”

When he opens his eyes, his hands have stopped shaking. He exhales in relief, internalizing the fear and regaining control of his composure by the time he gets off at his stop.

---

Once they’re well into second semester, Lucas feels as though he has no control over his own mind anymore.

He can’t focus. He can’t sleep, he can’t study, he can’t do anything right. His fingers are more bandages than skin at this point. When he’s in class his thoughts are stuck on his friends, when he’s with his friends his thoughts are trapped in classwork. Smackle’s suggestion rattles around in the back of his skull, haunting him.

*Have you ever considered talking to someone?*

The notion doesn’t even seem plausible. There’s nothing to talk about, not really. And who would he tell? He’s not going to waste Riley’s time with his complaints that he’s tired all the time. As if she doesn’t have more important things to focus on.

Still, it’s Riley that’s on his mind as he stands waiting at his position between second and third base, waiting for Coach Heller to blow the whistle so they can run the play. Usually baseball practice is one of the few places he can shake off the melancholy and concentrate, but even the diamond doesn’t have that effect on him anymore.

“Come on, Ross, I didn’t put you at bat for you to practice bunts. I want to see a home run. I want an out-of-the-park here.” Coach paces the pitcher’s mound, pointing towards his corner of the diamond. “I want a hit that even Friar can’t catch. Do you hear me?”

Lucas zones out, losing his train of thought. Feeling frantic rather than numb, his thoughts feel less like concrete concepts at this point and more like shards of glass that keep exploding to catch his attention. He needs to do something about the fact that his own friends seem to think he’s a basket case. He needs to do something about the fact that his academic performance is so poor at this point that the only way Davis is going to accept him at this rate is if he sells his soul to the devil. He needs stop obsessing over everything and focus on the damn play.

“Friar? You listening to me?”
He blinks, straightening up under Coach’s scrutinizing gaze. Coach Heller had certainly warmed up
to Lucas over the past couple of years, but he’s well aware of the fact that that approval is upheld
under strict conditions. Like everything else in his life, if Lucas wants to maintain the acceptance,
he has to actually earn it.

“Sir,” he says with a stiff nod, adjusting the glove on his hand. Coach turns away from him and
barks orders at Dave, who had been crouched at the catcher’s spot for so long he falls over in
shock when the commands turn on him.

Lucas fidgets with the glove, glancing up at the cloudless sky above him and trying to clear his
head. Clear days are rare in New York. The sun feels brighter than usual. He squints and drops his
gaze back down to the dirt beneath him.

“Alright, let’s go. Play thirty-eight.”

All his teammates move to their positions. Lucas moves uneasily back to his usual space, confused
as to why his legs suddenly feel a little shaky. He chalks it up to nerves from Coach calling him
out, but that doesn’t explain the weird empty feeling in his head. He swallows hard and pounds
lightly at his gloved hand with his other fist, forcing himself to focus back on the field.

“Out of the park, Ross. You get me?”

He looks up, meaning to make eye contact with Dave across the field, but all the sudden the
bleachers start blurring slightly. He screws his eyes shut, taking a deep breath. It’s probably just
fatigue. It’s not a big deal.

“Prep the pitch. Wind it up, Fenley.” Coach starts a countdown.

Dan is going to throw the pitch. He’s going to throw the pitch any second now, and he has to be
ready to catch whatever Billy lobbs in his direction.

When Coach hits his last number, Lucas opens his eyes.

There’s a few startling seconds where his vision tunnels out, the edges fading to black. Then, his
legs buckle beneath him and he collapses.

Everything is dead air for an uncertain amount of time. Maybe a couple seconds, maybe a minute,
maybe an hour. He doesn’t know. But for at least one brief moment, everything is quiet.

“Friar? Friar, can you hear me?”

When his eyes flutter open again, he’s staring at the cloudless sky again. He’s on the ground and
he’s staring at the unusual New York sky and he has no idea how he got there. His whole body
feels cold. There’s pressure on his wrist, and it takes him a long moment to recognize that Coach is
pinning it, trying to get his pulse.

“Go, get the nurse. Did you not hear me? Livingston, are you a water boy or what? Get me some
damn water. Now!”

Lucas’s cheeks grow hot as he realizes all of his teammates are crowded around, staring down at
him. He nearly jumps out of his skin when someone drops to their knees next to him.

Dave rips his mask off, staring down at him with wide eyes. “Are you okay? What happened?”

“Hey, hey, step back,” Coach says authoritatively. “Give him some space. Back up!”
Lucas glances down at his hand. He can feel his own pulse pounding in his wrist. He can’t stop staring at the tremor in his fingers, how subtly his hand is shaking. He wants it to stop shaking.

“Friar. Can you hear me? Are you hearing me? Can you give me a nod?”

He swallows, nodding uncertainly.

“Alright. What’s your name? Do you know your name?”

“Lucas,” he starts, surprised with how weak his voice comes out. He clears his throat, attempting to calm his breathing. “Lucas Friar.”

“Did he hit his head? Is he okay?”

“Williams, did I not tell you to give him some space?” Coach glares at Dave until he backs off, stepping back with the rest of the team. Wyatt returns with a cup of water, standing by to hand it to Heller when he’s ready. “Can you tell me your birthday?”

“September third.”

“Position?”

“Shortstop.”

“Hometown?”

“Austin, Texas.”

Coach breathes a sigh of relief, releasing Lucas’s wrist. “Okay. That’s good.”

Lucas gulps, staring at the expanse of blue above him. No clouds to focus on. No distractions. He can feel himself growing restless, trying to piece together how he ended up here. He doesn’t even know how long he was out. All he knows is everyone is staring at him.

He makes a move to sit up but Coach is immediately on him, nudging him back down against the ground. “No. Don’t move. I want you to stay put. The nurse is coming with a chair. Don’t get up. Wyatt, give him the water.”

Wyatt drops down while Coach climbs back to his feet.

“When did Ross leave for the nurse? Ten eons ago? If I have to send someone after him, I’m benching him for the rest of the season.”

Dave takes the first opportunity available to reappear on Lucas’s other side, giving Wyatt a glare as he takes the cup from him and lowers it down for Lucas to drink from. “Are you okay? What the hell happened?”

Lucas shakes his head, although it’s unclear whether he’s refusing the water or expressing confusion. He has no idea what happened. He doesn’t remember how he ended up on the ground in the first place.

He was going to catch Billy’s out-of-the-park hit. Suddenly, he’s on the ground.

“Dude, come on. Drink some water. It’ll help.” Dave pushes the cup towards him again and Lucas takes it, more out of politeness than an actual desire to drink it. It feels strange going down his throat. Everything still feels a little fuzzy.
Billy returns at a jog, carrying a folded up wheelchair with nurse Holliday right on his heels. Coach Heller crouches down next to him again, giving him a hesitant look. “You think you can get up? You feel okay enough to do that?”

Lucas nods eagerly, desperate to get off the ground and prove everything is fine. Coach nods to Dave and together the two of them take Lucas’s hands, helping pull him unsteadily to his feet. It isn’t until someone else’s hand is touching his own that he realizes how clammy his hands have become.

Nurse Holliday approaches him as Billy unfolds the wheelchair. He lets go of Dave, stumbling in the direction of the school and pushing himself to stand up straight. Closing his eyes and taking a deep breath, he slips from Coach’s grasp and moves toward Billy on his own.

“Lucas?” Nurse Holliday examines him, waiting for him to meet her eyes. “We’re just going to go back to the office, okay? I’m going to check you out and then I’ll call your mom to come pick you up. Just take a seat. Billy is going to help get you back.”

“I can walk,” he insists, fighting the pounding in his head as he struggles to keep his nerves at bay.

“I’m sure you can. But protocol requires we wheel you back.” She takes his arm gently, leading him towards the wheelchair. “Just take a seat. Right there. Billy?”

“I can help,” a quieter, softer voice volunteers. Lucas looks over his shoulder to see Jade standing by Dave, holding her hand up uncertainly. He can vaguely remember her sitting in the bleachers when practice started. Just another witness to his humiliation.

Coach pats her shoulder, startling her. “Good plan. Billy needs to get back to practicing. Sandra, she’ll help you out.”

Jade steps around Dave and walks over to Lucas, avoiding eye contact with him as she moves behind him to take control of the chair. Nurse Holliday gives them a nod of thanks, leading the way back to the school. Behind him, Lucas can hear Coach shouting off instructions to the rest of the team.

“All right, back to your positions. Fenley, just like last time. Come on, shake it off, you guys! Game goes on!”

Lucas wants to shake it off. He’s been trying all year to shake it off, but nothing seems to be working.

--

If passing out on a field full of his teammates was bad enough, having Sandra Holliday interrogate him in front of Jade is another plane of embarrassing.

“No drugs? No alcohol?”

Her tone is serious, jotting down notes on a clipboard as he lays awkwardly on the plastic-covered clinic cot. He knows that Maya used to come here to take naps, but he doesn’t see how she could possibly find it comfortable. He just feels trapped.

“No. None of that.” At the skeptical eyebrow raise she gives him, he frowns slightly. “I’m serious. No.”

“How are your sleeping habits?”
“Fine.”

“When was the last time you ate and what did you eat?”

There’s a long pause. Lucas can feel Jade’s eyes on him from the chair next to the bed. He clears his throat. “I don’t remember.”

“You don’t remember what you ate or you don’t remember when?”

“Both,” he mumbles. Then, he shakes his head. He just wants to fall asleep. “Neither. I don’t know.”

Nurse Holliday gives him a critical look, taking a couple more notes. Then, she moves to take his blood pressure, not saying anything else. Jade sits silently as she always does, hands folded on her lap. When they lock eyes momentarily, she manages a shy smile.

“We called your parents. They’ll be here to pick you up soon. When you get home, eat something with protein and get some rest. Until then, you can wait here.” She tosses a nod to Jade before turning on her heel and heading back towards the front desk.

Lucas is very aware of how empty the clinic is at this time of day. Considering it’s after school hours and most students are gone for the day, it makes sense. Riley and Smackle are no doubt at Topanga’s right now. Who knows where Farkle and Zay are.

He attempts to change his train of thought, but the only other thing occupying his brain is the shock over the fact that he literally blacked out in front of his entire team, and there’s too much self-loathing involved there that he doesn’t want to stomach at the moment.

He clears his throat, catching Jade’s attention next to him. She lifts her eyes from the floor.

“You don’t have to stay here, you know,” he says with a friendly smile. It’s hard to manage, but he’s done it convincingly enough since he was a kid that it’s almost a natural response to just about everything at this point. “You helped enough. You should go.”

“No, that’s okay,” Jade says. Despite how much he wants her to leave, Lucas has always had an appreciation for how quiet she is. Even when she does speak, her voice is rather calming. Unassertive. Not trying to prove anything. “I want to make sure you get out okay and everything. It’s not like I was doing anything important.”

“I noticed you come to watch practice a lot. I’m sure Dave thinks it’s important.”

Jade smiles timidly. “He’s my best friend. I’m sure you’d do the same for your friends.”

“Yeah,” he says, forcing another beam. Considering the currently fragmented state of their friend group, how far they’ve all drifted apart, he isn’t sure that’s true anymore. “Of course.”

The clinic door bursts open and Dave comes sprinting into the back without waiting for approval from the front desk, flushed from practice and still in his uniform. He’s got his catcher’s mask tucked under his arm and he’s panting as if he ran all the way from the field. “Practice just ended. Any news?”

Jade shakes her head. Lucas is still trying to wrap his head around why Dave thought running all the way here was necessary.

Dave leans in close, examining him worriedly. “You good, man? You feeling better?”
“I’m good,” Lucas assures him.

For some reason, it doesn’t look like he believes him.

“Lucas? Your mother is here.”

He hesitates, knowing the question is going to sound weird but saying it anyway. “Which one?”

Predictably, Holliday gives him a weird look. “Mrs. Friar?”

It’s an undeniable relief that it’s not Topanga. He’s not ready to deal with her reaction to all this, to say nothing of Riley’s. He just wants to forget this ever happened. If no one else ever finds out about it, it’ll be for the best.

He nods, sitting up fully and swinging his legs over the side of the bed. Jade holds her arm out and touches his shoulder gently, surprising him. “You shouldn’t get up so fast.”

Dave offers him a hand to help him up. He smiles thankfully but doesn’t take it, pushing himself up on his own and grabbing his bag off the ground.

As he’s walking towards the front desk, Dave calls after him. “Lucas?”

He turns around to glance at them over his shoulder. They’re both gazing after him with matching looks of concern—Dave standing with his mask, Jade still seated in the chair. There’s genuine unease in their expressions. “Is there anything we can do to help?”

“Seriously,” Jade adds. “Like, anything at all?”

Lucas knows they’re not just talking about the incident on the field. He knows their worry is coming from a deep, sincere place. But all he can feel is resentment over the fact that they seem so stressed because of him. He’s always making things worse for other people, even when he’s trying so hard to do the exact opposite.

He gives them the most charming smile he can muster. Years of practice serves him well. “It’s okay, guys. I’m fine. It was just a fluke. Just… don’t make a big deal out of this, okay?”

He offers one last wave in their direction, before turning away and heading out of the clinic.

--

Lucas reaches a breaking point after he comes to the conclusion that the only thing he can do is quit the baseball team.

He has to keep working on his academics, and it’s the only thing he can sacrifice. The only other option is Riley, and he’d rather cut off his own arm than willingly let her go. Although in some ways, he feels as though he already did—he’s done a really great job of isolating himself to the point that he may as well not even be her boyfriend anymore. She barely sees him as it is, and when they are together he’s reclusive and won’t let her get too close.

If there’s some sort of award for worst boyfriend, he’s pretty sure he’d snatch it up in a landslide.

When he stops by Coach’s office after school on Friday, he doesn’t seem surprised to see him.

“If this is about the incident earlier this week, it’s really not a big deal. I’m sure if we consult with the nurse, she can recommend some dietary changes that’ll fix it right up. Maybe you’re low on iron, or something. That happens sometimes.”
He’s pretty sure her first suggestion would be to have any sort of actual diet at all. His eating habits are so scattered he’s amazed he hasn’t starved to death at this point, but even more amazing is the fact that he’s never hungry anyway. “Actually, that’s not why I’m here.”

Coach looks up from his papers, giving him an inquisitive eyebrow raise. Under his scrutinizing glare, it’s suddenly a lot harder to say what he has to say.

Lucas takes a deep breath. With the limited confidence he has left, the best he can manage is an unsteady murmur. “I have to quit the team.”

This really causes Coach Heller to take pause. He takes his glasses off, squinting at Lucas and giving him a perplexed look. “I’m sorry, can you repeat that?”

He forces himself to speak louder. “I have to quit the team.”

“So I did hear you right.” He drops his glasses on the desk. “Forgive me, Friar, but what the hell?”

“My grades have been slipping,” he explains timidly, gripping the strap of his backpack. “I need to focus on my academics. The time that I’m dedicating to baseball could possibly be better spent on studying to bring them back up—,”

“You are the best shortstop I have,” Coach Heller says matter-of-factly. “You realize how hard it’s going to be to replace you?”

Lucas gulps. “I’m sure you’ll be able to find someone.”

Coach examines him critically. Lucas wants to look away, but he manages to hold his ground.

“I just want to be absolutely certain that this is what you want. If you’re really standing here telling me that you’d rather drop baseball after having just made varsity this year, if that’s what you think is best, then of course I won’t stand in your way.” He raises his eyebrows. “Are you telling me that’s what you want?”

Of course that’s not what he wants. He doesn’t want to be dropping his favorite hobby. He doesn’t want to be failing all his classes. He doesn’t want to be isolating himself from his friends and pulling away from Riley and feeling empty all the time for no damn reason but he has no idea how to change it.

Lucas licks his lips. He hates how chapped they are.

“I need to focus on my academics,” he murmurs faintly, avoiding eye contact and picking at a stray thread on his backpack.

Coach Heller puts his glasses back on decisively, shrugging. “Alright then. I guess that’s that.”

Just like that, it’s done. No grand fanfare, no explosion, no commotion begging him to come back. Just like that, he’s off the team.

He starts to open his backpack hesitantly. “I have my jersey, if you need it back.”

“No,” Coach says sharply, glancing at him over the rim of his glasses. “That jersey, that number, it’s yours. You retire, it retires.”

Lucas nods distantly, closing his bag. He’s not sure what to do next.

Coach gives him a sympathetic glare. It’s one of the only times Lucas has ever seen him look
sincere. “Go clean out your locker. That’s all there is left to do.”

He follows orders, moving robotically as he pulls all his belongings from the small locker and stuffs them in his backpack. He pulls a photo of him, Zay, and Riley that Dave took on their first day of practice freshman year off the door and hides it deep in his bag, not wanting to look at it. It’s all fucked up now anyway.

Once he’s all cleaned out, he slams his locker shut and stands for a moment in the empty locker room. He sits down on the bench in front of him, dropping his bag on the floor and bringing up his legs up, hugging his knees and feeling the reality of what he just did hit him all at once.

He feels that familiar pain in the back of his throat and tears prick at the corner of his eyes. He wipes them away as quickly as he can but he feels like this time, he’s not going to be able to stop it. He’s been thrown, and the terrifying part is he has no idea how to handle it. He has no idea what to do if actually gives up and bends to his own weakness.

Thankfully, he’s startled out of his own head when he hears the rest of the team heading towards the locker room. Coming in for after school practice. He inhales sharply, stumbling to his feet and slinging his bag over his shoulder as quickly as possible.

Lucas barely makes it out of the hall and out of view before his teammates arrive, talking animatedly and goofing off with each other as they always do. Only he’s no longer a part of that team anymore. He’s not really a part of anything.

Feeling numb and terrified of how close he came to falling apart, he makes his way down the athletic hall and out the doors.

--

Lucas spends the rest of the afternoon hiding in his room, laying on his bed and staring at the ceiling. He knows he should be doing his homework, but all the sudden he doesn’t care so much anymore. Everything feels like such a mess at this point, it doesn’t necessarily feel worth the effort. He kind of feels like he doesn’t have any effort left to give.

He’s reached that point of the dream where he collapses. All there is left to do is pass out. Or die. Whichever one it is.

His phone buzzes on the bed next to him, pulling him out of his daze. In one text message, he suddenly finds the motivation to get up and running again.

Riley Matthews: Emergency.

Lucas is out the door in seconds flat, opting to run the distance to Riley’s apartment rather than take the subway. The train is a lot more convenient, but in circumstances like an emergency he can get there pretty quickly on his own two feet if he sprints hard enough.

He scales the fire escape and tumbles into a crouch in front of the bay window, knocking urgently and trying not to let his mind run rampant about what could be wrong with her. Trying not to process all the worst case scenarios.

To his confusion, she looks relatively put together when she opens the bay window to let him in. He clambers through, looking around for the source of the danger only to see everything as it usually is. Not one thing out of the ordinary.

He spins on his heel to look at her, completely out of breath. “What’s the emergency? You said
emergency.”

Riley gazes at him nervously. “It’s not exactly an emergency in so many words.”

“Are you kidding me?” he says incredulously. “Riley, you cannot just send stuff like this. I ran all the way here.”

“I didn’t know how else to get you to come here. I needed to know you’d come.”

“I’m over here thinking something terrible has happened! I’m out here thinking you’re dying!”

She cracks. “It feels like I am!”

“Well, you got me here.” He gives her a fatigued look, running his hand through his hair stressfully before dropping his arms to his sides in defeat. “What can I do for you?”

Riley makes a valiant effort to overlook his sass, standing her ground and maintaining eye contact with him. “When were you going to tell me about baseball practice?”

He hesitates, flinching slightly before recovering as quickly as he can. “What are you talking about?”

“Dave and Jade told me,” she says, inhaling shakily but doing an impressive job of holding her composure. “They told me about how you passed out at practice on Monday? And how you just apparently quit the team today? How could you not tell me about this?”

“They weren’t supposed to make a big deal out of it. It’s not a big deal.”

“Not a big deal?” Riley’s jaw drops open slightly, her eyes wide with disbelief. “Lucas, you’re collapsing out of the blue. That’s not good. That’s bad. And the fact that I had to hear about it from our classmates?” She takes a second to catch her breath, her eyes glossing over with tears. “Do you have any idea how humiliating that is? How humiliating it feels to have someone else tell you that your boyfriend is blacking out and you have no idea?”

Lucas picks fretfully at the skin on his palm, shaking his head in frustration. He can’t look her in the eyes. He can’t face the fact that she’s crying and it’s his fault. “I didn’t want you to worry.”

She actually laughs, completely overwhelmed with how ridiculous he sounds. “You didn’t want me to worry? Lucas, all I do is worry about you.”

“I know, and that’s what I don’t want.”

“So you think the way to fix that is to just not tell me anything? Tell me you realize how nonsensical that is. The less you tell me, the more I’m just going to stress over everything I don’t know. Like how I didn’t know about the Adderall, or the fight, and now this. How can you expect me not to worry when something is obviously wrong and you won’t let me in?”

He scoffs, trying his hardest to keep it together. That familiar, unwelcome pain is very present in the back of his throat. “How can you know something is obviously wrong?”

“Are you kidding me?” She points to him, her tone borderline hysterical. “Look at you! You’re tired all the time. You’re pale. You’ve lost so much weight. You think I don’t notice this stuff? Look at your hands. You think I haven’t noticed since you started picking at them months ago? You really think I haven’t spent all this time trying to figure out how to ask you about it?”
He swallows hard. “I’m fine.”

“No, you’re not,” she cries, shaking her head and stepping towards him. “No, you’re not.”

She reaches out to touch him and he shrinks away from her, backing towards the bay window and keeping his distance. Not because of her, but because he can feel the end of the world coming a mile away and he has no idea what he’s going to do when it hits. He’s only ever been good at emotions when he knows they’re in his control.

Riley looks after him, frowning tearfully as he backs away. “Let me help you.”

“You can’t.”

She takes a deep breath, wiping the tears from eyes with the back of her hand and attempting to pull it back together. He feels rooted to the spot, unable to see what the proper course of action is to take next and only having one built-in coping mechanism for a situation like this. Whenever things fall apart, all he knows how to do is leave.

She’s so good. She’s so genuine, and generous, and she’s standing there offering her entire soul towards helping him. And all he can do is push her away.

“Maybe,” he says shakily, feeling just as out of breath as he did when he arrived at the bay window minutes ago. He clears his throat, rubbing the back of his neck and dropping his gaze to the floor. “Maybe we should take a break, or something.”

She snaps her head up to lock eyes with him, all tearfulness replaced with stark horror. She blinks at him, actually absorbing his words.

“No,” she says blankly.

He presses his lips together and looks away, feeling the tears at the corner of his eyes again. He doesn’t want them, but he doesn’t know where else they’re going to go at this point. He’s so tired of trying to stop them.

He’s just so tired.

“No,” Riley repeats fiercely, closing the distance between them and coming to stand in front of him. She gives it one last tearful effort, her voice barely above a whisper. “Talk to me.”

“I can’t,” he whimpers, his voice cracking.

“You always can.”

“I can’t.” He shakes his head, tearing at the band aid on his finger subconsciously. “Because if I do, I don’t know what will happen.”

She frowns at him. “Lucas.”

He keeps his eyes on the floor. His hands start trembling again.

“Lucas,” she repeats, reaching up to touch his chin and gently tilt his head towards hers. She waits for him to meet her eyes, examining him sadly. “You’re allowed to feel.”

The moment he feels one tear escape down his cheek, he knows it’s over.

“Fuck,” he mutters under his breath, swallowing hard. He wipes his eyes hastily but it’s no use. He
frowns, his lower lip trembling. “Fuck!”

Riley reaches forward and pulls him into a hug just as he bursts into sobs. She lowers them onto the floor and leans back against the foot of the bed, tucking his head into her shoulder and allowing him to break down entirely.

---

When Lucas wakes up the next day, the first thing he’s aware of is how badly his eyes hurt.

From there, it’s a series of realizations as his memory comes back to him. He’s in Riley’s bed, but he doesn’t remember exactly when he ended up there rather than the floor. His head is killing him, but considering how much cried the night before it’s not exactly unexpected. He’s not sure how long he was in hysterics, but he knows it was hours.

He’s relieved when Riley pokes her head in a few minutes after he wakes up, giving him an affectionate smile. “You’re finally up. Give me one second.”

She disappears only to return a few moments later with a glass of water and a plate. As she climbs onto the bed next to him he makes to sit up on his side. Further inspection reveals the dish to be carrying a Topanga-specialty grilled cheese.

“Water first,” Riley advises, handing him the glass. “Your eyes probably hurt. It’s dehydration. So drink up, please.”

He complies, draining about half the glass before she allows him to focus on the food. He’s somewhat off-put by how hoarse his voice is when he speaks. “Topanga knows, I guess?”

Riley nods, impatiently tearing the sandwich apart and handing him one half. “She saw you in here this morning after I got up. I explained everything to her. She’s cool with it. Both of us were sort of wondering how long it would be before you woke up.”

“What time is it?”

“About three. We thought about waking you up earlier, but I thought you deserved the rest.” She nudges his arm lightly. “Eat, please.”

He does so obediently, finishing one half of the grilled cheese only for Riley to hand him the next as soon as he’s empty-handed. He downs that half as well, also finishing off the water. Before he can ask her any questions she’s out the door again, returning a moment later with a refilled glass.

She places it on the nightstand behind her, slouching down next to him and smiling at him. He manages to return it.

“How bad was it? Last night?”

“It wasn’t bad,” she corrects him, reaching forward and brushing some hair from his forehead. “It was long overdue, I think. Just with everything considered.”

“Sorry. That you had to deal with that.”

“Don’t apologize.” Her voice is stern, but her eyes are soft as she gazes at him. “Do not apologize.”

They settle into plaintive silence for a few minutes, Riley tracing patterns lightly across his face and Lucas trying to comprehend everything that happened in the last twenty-four hours. He feels
like he’s gone through an emotional exorcism, and even though everything isn’t completely as it should be he feels a lot better than he did the night before.

But he’s never been through something like this before, and he has no idea what to do next.

He takes her hand from his face, enveloping it in both of his own and taking a deep breath. “What happens now?”

She tilts her head, shrugging before reclining fully on the pillows next to him. He adjusts so that she can rest her head against his shoulder, smiling lightly when she nuzzles into him and presses a kiss to the crook of his neck. “We get through this year. See where everything stands once all of these classes are out of the way. So we craft a game plan to get you through the year and then reevaluate from there.”

“There’s no way I’m going to get through this year,” he says distantly, resting his head against hers and staring at the wall. “My grades are so fucked. They have been this entire time.”

“They’re messy, but not unsalvageable. You’re forgetting we have two geniuses at our disposal who happen to share these classes with you, and they’re both more than willing to work as hard as necessary if it means helping you fix your GPA. I talked to both of them this morning and they confirmed.”

He feels embarrassment color his cheeks. “Did you tell them about—?”

“No,” she cuts him off, anticipating his question. “They don’t know what happened. I just explained you were serious about saving your grades. They both said they were happy to make this a concentrated effort between the three of you.”

Lucas chews on the inside of his cheek. “I still can’t get any sleep.”

“You slept here pretty soundly.”

“Oh, yeah, but I’m not living here, am I?”

“My window is always open,” Riley states softly, gazing up at him through her eyelashes. She cups her other hand over his, bringing their hands up to rest against his chest between them. “If you need to be here to sleep, then you can come here to sleep.”

He figures there are more holes to this plan of action, but he can’t think of them. His mind still feels a little fuzzy.

“You’re going to get through this year,” Riley promises him, kissing the back of his hand.

It seems unlikely, but her optimism has always been infectious and the confidence in her voice makes him willing to believe it’s possible. With Riley at his side, he sort of figures anything is possible.

---

When Farkle and Smackle state they’re willing to help bring his grades up, they aren’t kidding around. For the rest of the semester both of them spend more than their fair share of time studying with him at Topanga’s, at their houses, at the Matthews kitchen table, figuring out new ways to approach the topics he’s really struggling with in a way he’ll understand them.

Smackle is definitely the more patient one, prepared to try all sorts of different tutoring methods
and repeat concepts as often as necessary until Lucas starts to show genuine understanding of what the hell she’s talking about. By the time all is said and done, he makes a point of telling her how much he values her help and how good a teacher she is. She brushes it off, but he can tell by the slight smile on her face that she appreciates it.

Painstakingly, he manages to bring his grades back up. They’re not as stellar as he’d like them to be, but they’re decent and if he can ace his finals they’ll be good enough to not render the entire academic year a waste of time. Davis may still give him the time of day after all.

The closer they get to the end of the year and finals, Farkle steps up to bat.

He’s nowhere near as thoughtful or constructive as Smackle, but he’s relentless. He always has been, and it’s that obsessive drive and determination that really gets all those last minute theories and facts to stick in Lucas’s brain. Not to mention Farkle isn’t one to give up on a project until he’s completed it to his satisfaction—Lucas can’t count the amount of nights he’s at Minkus International late into the evening, only going back to the bay window and collapsing into bed when Riley is already dead asleep.

One of those late nights, Farkle is polishing his final essay for Cory’s class while Lucas fills out the final unit review for AP Biology. Any time he completes one of the pages, Farkle takes a break from his editing and checks his work. If he finds an error, he takes the time to illustrate where Lucas messed up and waits for him to rework it and get it right. Then, they repeat the process until he’s finished the entire packet.

As they’re packing up their things, Lucas pauses to check his phone. He can’t believe how much time Farkle wasted on him. “Hey, sorry you had to stay up so late.”

“It’s fine,” he says nonchalantly, hitting save on his document and shutting his laptop. “I’m usually up around this time anyway.”

“Doing what?” When Lucas is up at this hour, it’s usually because he’s unable to fall asleep. Possibly repressing his emotions. Maybe both.

“Brainstorming theories, usually. Sometimes watching Pippin bootlegs. Smoking, occasionally.”

“Oh, right. Obviously.”

Farkle grins, leaning back in his armchair and staring at the constellations on the ceiling above them. “I know you’re worried about Davis, and that’s a valid reason to be so stressed about final grades. But you do know that when we get out of high school, none of it is even going to matter, right?”

Lucas slouches back, tilting his head at him. “What do you mean?”

“Look, I’m a genius. You know this. And I love grades because they sure do a great job of reasserting this fact. With all the As I have under my belt, no one is very likely to start questioning my intellect.” Farkle sighs, propping his elbows on his knees. “But even as a genius, I can admit that grades don’t matter. Like, yes, we need to focus on them now because colleges are looking at them and that’s how they’re going to determine whether or not to accept us. Our acceptance is conditional.”

Lucas is well aware of that. His acceptance from others has always been conditional. He’s known that since he was a kid.

“But that’s not all they’re looking for. They’re going to look at our extracurriculars, our community
service, our personal essays. They’re looking for statistics, sure, but they’re looking for people, too. What makes us who we are.” Farkle locks eyes with him, softer than he’s ever seen them before. Lucas didn’t think Farkle was actually capable of being tender. “I may have the grades, but that other stuff is where you’re going to outshine me. You’re a lot more than your grades, Lucas.”

Lucas smiles lightly. “So are you.”

Farkle doesn’t seem entirely convinced, but he nods anyway.

“Guess we’ll find out.”

The school year finally comes to an end, and Lucas manages to pull out passing grades in all his classes. In the courses where Farkle and Smackle really concentrated their efforts, he manages even better. Despite how many metaphorical trash fires he started at the beginning of the year, he somehow puts them all out before report cards come back at the top of the summer.

What’s concerning is that even though the stress is gone, Lucas still isn’t doing any better.

Sure, he’s gotten better at concealing it. Smackle stops looking at him suspiciously, going back to their usual dynamic and assuming that the lack of academic stress has fixed everything. Farkle never suspected anything in the first place, so he doesn’t notice anything is any different. So long as he eats at dinner and doesn’t show up with any more bruises on his face, Cory and Topanga consider the case closed. Lucas is all good. Nothing more to see here.

Considering that’s what he wants them to believe, he’s not complaining.

But he’s still having trouble sleeping. He still finds himself picking at his fingernails even when he’s not worried about anything in particular. His mind still goes back and forth between frantic and numb, the only difference between earlier in the year and now being that he’s basically gotten used to it. He’s just not working anymore. He doesn’t know if he’ll ever actually work right again.

Although he’s much more comfortable about being honest with his feelings around Riley, he still makes a concerted effort to get things back to the way they were before this whole mess ever started. He knows she doesn’t mind talking him through it, he knows she wants to help, but it’s not her job to fix him and all he’s really doing is bringing her down with him.

His latest plan of action is whenever she starts to ask him about it, he distracts her by kissing her rather than answering her questions of concern. He knows it’s a pretty transparent maneuver, but they’re very into kissing now after the hiatus due to his academic break down. It’s like they have a lot of catching up to do, so she never puts up too much of an argument before getting caught up in him and forgetting to push the issue further.

It’s not an ideal situation, but he’s surviving. He’s surviving and he figures that’s the best he can ask for so he does his best to make it work. If he can put up with the lack of sleep and handle the occasional near-faint every now and then, then he’ll get through.

Everything changes when he realizes how bad he’s let things get at the beginning of the summer.

Lucas helps Riley rearrange some of the things in her room, a ritual she’s started doing annually at the end of each school year. It simulates change in the most minor and controlled way possible, and it’s clear she likes having a piece of her life she can shuffle around without too much consequence.

Usually Farkle and Maya are around to help too, but the former is gone at an internship camp in
D.C., and the latter is completely off Lucas’s radar. Unless she calls asking for his help, they’re like ghosts to one another.

Riley chews her lower lip, tilting her head as she examines her room from the vantage point of standing on her bed. “I’m thinking desk to the left, swapping them out with the shelves. Then we’ll have to switch something up in the window, of course.”

“Naturally.”

Riley smiles down at him, accepting his hand as she hops down off the mattress. “I’m gonna go get the tool box. Can you get the tape measurer? I think it’s on my dresser.”

He nods and leans down to kiss her cheek, catching her by surprise. She grins at him, squeezing his hand before disappearing out into the hall.

Lucas wanders over to the dresser, searching the surface of the furniture and finding the tape measurer tucked back by the jewelry holder she has situated in front of the mirror. Although he’s pretty sure she knows exactly where everything is, he can’t believe all the random little knick-knacks she has strewn all over her room. Maybe that’s what happens when your bedroom actually feels lived in.

He gets distracted by glancing up at the photo board pinned up between the bay window and the mirror, taking in all the pictures she has hung up of their group of friends and her family. She has at least one picture of her with each member of their clique, as well as a few group pictures. She even put in the effort to print them on photo paper, so they look legitimately like photographs.

Despite the nice sentiment, something about the photo of the two of them feels off to him. After staring at it for a couple of long moments, he realizes the problem is that he doesn’t feel like he’s looking at a picture of himself at all.

He forces himself to stop obsessing, getting trapped in looking at his own reflection in the mirror instead. He doesn’t spend a lot of time glancing in mirrors if he can help it, but in this current moment he can’t bring himself to look away. Because even though he’s seeing his own reflection, he still doesn’t feel like he’s looking at himself. Neither the photo or the person in the mirror feel familiar.

Whoever he’s supposed to be, whoever he expects himself to be, whoever it is that Riley is so happy with in that picture—he’s not that person anymore. He has no idea what the hell he is now.

“Okay, got it,” Riley chirps as she reenters the room, making him tear his gaze away from the mirror and refocus. “You got the tape measurer?”

He scrapes together a smile, holding it out for her and trying not to fixate on the fact that he suddenly feels like a stranger in her apartment. He wonders if she’s choosing to ignore the reality that he’s not the same person she fell in love with or if she even realizes it at all.

“You sure your parents are okay with this year’s changes?” Lucas questions, settling down at the edge of the bed and watching with amusement as she surveys the area, squinting and sticking her tongue out. She looks like an artist prepping a blank canvas, going so far as to hold her hands up and frame corners of the room with her hands.

“They sure are.” She drops her hands, giving him a funny look. “I don’t know why people do that. I don’t get what it’s supposed to do.”

“Maya would know better than I would.”
Riley sighs, plopping down on the bed next to him. “But yes, they’re fine with it. It’s my room, after all. And the thing with my dad at least is that even if he seems to have pretty staunch opinions on something, he can be reasoned with. Like the first time I wanted to change the bay window. Or when I wanted to get my ears pierced. Or that thing with you earlier in the year. He’s quick to jump to conclusions, but he’s able to be reasoned with.”

“Wait,” Lucas says, giving her a confused look. “What thing with me?”

She blinks, running through her words in her head. Her face falls slightly before she recovers. “Nothing.”

“No, you said ‘that thing with me earlier in the year.’ What thing?” He stares at her, waiting for her to meet his eyes. “What thing, Riley?”

“Look, I promise it’s not a huge thing. There was just this period of time where he was worried about what was going on with the fighting and everything. He told me that maybe I should spend less time with you and I said no and we dropped it. That’s it. It doesn’t even matter.”

Lucas feels the floor drop out from underneath him. Regardless of whether Riley is downplaying the severity of the conversation or not, he now knows that there was a time where Cory considered him a serious threat. He was concerned enough about how his behavior may have impacted Riley that he wanted to keep her away from him.

In Texas, he went through a similar thing with his friend Dylan. Right around the time he started acting out and got expelled, Dylan’s mom told him that he wasn’t allowed to hang out with Lucas anymore. It wasn’t the worst mandate in the world since Dylan hardly listened to his mom anyway, but the reality of someone deeming him as something worth being protected from was a low blow he never quite recovered from. It was one of the motivating factors in his decision to turn over a completely new leaf when he came to New York. He never wanted to be thought of that way again.

Yet here he is, finding out that not only is he still that thing, but that one of the most important figures in his life thinks that way of him and sees it worthwhile to keep the most important person in his life out of his circle of influence. This is objectively a thousand times worse than Texas.

He’s always known Riley was better for him than he was for her. Now, he’s finally realizing that he’s not just worse for her, he’s legitimately bad for her. He’s worth taking action against to protect her.

“Lucas, he didn’t mean it,” Riley says at his silence, taking his hand and nudging his head to lock eyes with her. “It was before any of us knew what was actually going on. He said it in a moment of uncertainty but he doesn’t believe it and he would never suggest it now.”

It takes him a moment to respond. “Yeah, yeah, I know.”

She grips his fingers tightly, sincerity shining through her gaze. “He didn’t mean it.”

He nods distantly, giving her a smile. When she leans forward to hug him he doesn’t pull back, embracing her tightly as if it’s the last one he’s going to get. Because he doesn’t know exactly when or exactly how, but he suddenly has this feeling that for her own sake, he’s going to have to let her go.

---
It happens in the second week of summer.

He can feel himself getting bad again. His hands start trembling for no discernable reason, even when he’s with Riley and he’s supposed to feel fine. Despite how normally Cory and Topanga treat him, he can’t move past the reality of Riley’s confession. That they don’t really want him there, not really, and he’s better off just leaving them alone.

He hasn’t seen Zay in days. Farkle and Smackle wouldn’t notice whether he was there or not. He’s pretty certain Maya still considers him as good as dead.

Sometimes, on the worst days, he feels like he should be.

He has to get out. He has to get out or he feels like he’s going to suffocate so he books a last minute ticket and packs a bag and just leaves. He doesn’t think about telling anyone until he’s at the airport, picking at his knuckles which have finally finished healing and ruining them all over again. Before he gets on the plane, he sends one message to Riley because he knows he won’t be able to live with himself if he leaves her with nothing.

*I had to go. I’m okay. Don’t worry.*

When he shows up on Pappy Joe’s doorstep, he doesn’t ask a ton of questions. He makes commentary every now and then at breakfast about how a warning would be nice, but he lets Lucas mope around so long as he takes care of the horses like he usually does when he’s home.

Pappy Joe can tell something is wrong with him, like fundamentally, internally broken, but he doesn’t bother to figure out what it is. He’s never been a prier, and Lucas appreciates that. He just lets him stay broken and feed the horses.

He spends plenty of time with the horses, particularly Sandy. She kind of feels like his child, and ever since Sophia’s death earlier in the year he’s been anxious to get out here and make sure she’s alright. For all intents and purposes she seems pretty healthy, but he can tell she’s lonely by how often she paces the confines of her pen.

He tries not to show favoritism with the horses, but it’s always Sandy that he takes out to ride, going up to his favorite hillside to clear his head. It’s funny, because he doesn’t really feel like he has any mental space left to clear. Whatever is up with him, it’s taken up all vacancy. All he can think about is how badly he fucked up with Riley, and his health, and how he wishes he could think about anything else.

Even after a two-thousand mile jump and an hour time difference, he still can’t sleep. But at least the ranch is quiet.

The first couple of weeks he’s gone, it’s easy to ignore the calls and texts from his friends. He’s resolute that he’s doing the right thing for all of them by giving himself some distance, and even though each text from Riley makes him hesitate for a split second he’s ultimately able to restrain himself and maintain his isolation.

He expects it to get easier the longer he’s gone, but the opposite proves to be true. The more time passes, the more he misses all of them and the more he wants to go home. But he looks at the bandages on his fingers and feels the empty space in his head and remembers why he left in the first place. If he’s going to self-destruct, he doesn’t want any of them to be in the blast range.

The cycle of isolation works impressively well until someone he hadn’t accounted for breaks through the haze, coming down to find him at the stables a couple of weeks into his stay.
He looks up from braiding Sandy’s mane to see Asher Garcia jogging towards him, looking taller than he remembers and full of his usual positive energy. Upon seeing him in person for the first time in years, it’s impossible for Lucas not to break into a grin. “Oh my God.”

They collide in a hug, Asher patting his back bracingly and giving him a wide smile when they pull apart. “I just came by to drop off some stuff my dad borrowed and Pappy Joe said you were here. Imagine my shock. Way to drop a hint, bro.”

“Trust me, you aren’t the only one,” Lucas mutters.

“Well, you’re here now. And here I am. Have you had lunch? Let’s go eat. I’m starving.”

It shouldn’t surprise him considering how similar Asher and Riley are in personality, but it’s amazingly easy to talk to him over lunch. He’s also just as attentive a listener, and he picks up on his strange behavior not too long into eating.

Maybe it’s because it’s been so long since he talked to someone aside from his grandfather and the horses, or maybe it’s because he’s actually desperate to tell someone what the hell is going on with him and Asher feels removed enough, but he finds himself explaining everything to him. About the school year, about the Adderall and passing out and his freefalling grades. About Cory’s decision to keep Riley from him and the practically decaying state of his hands and how even though the school year is done he doesn’t feel any better and he doesn’t think he ever will.

Asher listens patiently, nodding along and giving Lucas all the time he needs to walk through his own thoughts. Considering the minefield his mental state has become, it takes a lot longer than one would expect.

When Lucas finishes explaining how he ended up here and takes a second to catch his breath, Asher examines him thoughtfully for a couple of minutes. Finally, he drops his fork on his plate and leans back in his chair, clasping his hands together. “Can I be honest with you?”

“Since I just spent the last hour being too honest with you, yeah, I think you’ve earned that right.”

“Well, firstly, there’s no such thing as too honest. I’m glad you told me about it. Seriously.” Asher squints at him. “But that aside, after all that, there’s really only one piece of advice I can give you.”

Lucas pauses, swallowing his reluctance to ask for help. “What?”

“Call Riley. Tell her what’s going on. Even if you don’t do that yet, just tell her you miss her. Because it’s pretty obvious you do.” He crosses his arms. “And from what it sounds like, if anyone is going to be able to help you figure out what the hell is going on it’s her. Sure, she’s no doctor or anything, but she’ll do anything and everything she can to point you in the right direction. So will her parents, even if they had a moment of indecision there.”

Lucas absorbs this, nodding slowly. “I guess.”

“Look, man. Whatever this is, it’s not something that’s just going to go away. I think you’ve figured that out at this point. But that doesn’t mean you have to let it take over your life. There’s ways to tackle it, isn’t there? I don’t know about around here, but I’m pretty sure New York is way ahead of us in all that shit.”

That night, Lucas makes a point of booking a flight back to Manhattan. He gives himself a little more time, about a week to prepare for all the patching up he’s going to have to do when he shows
back up. But he makes the plans.

Then, he works up the courage to call Riley.

It’s late and she’s probably asleep, so the call goes to voicemail. He thinks about hanging up but forces himself to power through, taking a deep breath and exhaling just as the inbox beeps at him to start talking.

“Uh, hey. It’s me. I’m sorry about everything. I’ll explain all of it, I promise, I just had to…” he pauses, licking his lips and trying to figure out what he wants to say with so limited space. “I’ll explain it. When I come back, I’ll explain all of it.”

He hesitates, wasting more of his valuable message space but not having any clue what he wants to say. He’s not sure there are any words to properly express what he wants her to know until he gets back.

“I just want you to know that… this is all me. There’s something wrong with me and I have to figure out what it is. It’s not your fault. I just want you to know that. And I…” He clears his throat, laughing nervously when his voice cracks on his next words. “I really miss you. I miss you and I’m gonna be back soon. I promise.”

Not trusting himself to say much else, he hangs up. He clutches the phone in his hands, bumping it nervously against his chin and hoping that even though he’s pretty sure that message was a hot mess that Riley gets the point.

He hopes she understands that no matter what’s going on with him, he’s never going to stop caring about her.

--

A week later, Lucas gets off the plane at JFK and heads back to his apartment to drop off his things. It feels weird to stand in his room and feel like everything has changed so drastically when nothing about this space has ever changed. It’s been the exact same since he moved here in seventh grade. It’ll be the same when he leaves it a year from now, even though he’s sure more is going to change in that time.

He doesn’t even bother to unpack, heading towards the subway and going straight home.

Considering the late hour, all the lights are off in the Matthews apartment when he scales the fire escape. If no one is awake to let him in he’ll try again in the morning, but he couldn’t call it a night without at least giving it a shot.

All he wants to do is see Riley and tell her he’s sorry. Whatever happens after that he’ll deal with it, but that’s all he’s wanted since he left a month ago.

He kneels in front of the bay window like he has a million times before. He has to work up the nerve to knock. She’s probably asleep and won’t answer, but he grits his teeth and taps lightly at the glass anyway. He doesn’t want to walk away without trying.

Riley sits up immediately in bed with a jump, looking towards the window and locking eyes with him. It’s obvious she was nowhere near asleep. The two of them stare at each other for a long moment, frozen in this uncertain state.

He has no idea if she’s going to let him in. If she didn’t, he wouldn’t blame her.
He exhales a breath he didn’t know he was holding as Riley climbs out of bed, jogging over to the window and unlocking the pane.

Things are going to change. Whatever happens, he knows that’s true. But he’s not going to be a victim to whatever the hell is happening in his own head. Weakness isn’t giving into his emotions—weakness comes from allowing himself to fall down and not bothering to pick himself back up.

Riley pushes open the pane. Lucas takes her hand and climbs into the bay window, leaving his fear on the fire escape behind him.

-Senior Year-

Senior year is the year Lucas Friar learns about perfection.

Or rather, it’s more like he learns about the opposite. In the time it takes him to survive junior year and work towards tackling whatever the hell is wrong with him, his Mr. Perfect façade comes crashing down pretty quickly. There’s nothing left for him to hide behind, no more excuses to make. All that’s left in the aftermath is the imperfect reality of who he actually is, and the steps he needs to take to make that reality something he can live with.

His first step is in talking to Cory and Topanga. With Riley’s help, he comes clean about everything that went down last year and how severely he’s allowed his mental health to deteriorate. Both of them listen courteously as he walks them through every angle, every bad decision, every unhealthy state of mind that got him to the point he’s at now. Although he makes it entirely clear that he recognizes his mental state doesn’t excuse any of the things he did, he hopes he’s making a fraction of sense and that they won’t just think he’s absolutely insane.

“I have no idea what’s wrong with me. And maybe I never will. But it has to stop. I don’t want feel like this forever.” He takes a deep breath, locking eyes with Topanga across the kitchen table and pressing his thumbs together nervously. The next words are almost physically painful to say, but he chokes them out anyway. “I need help. Will you help me?”

Topanga tilts her head at him, exchanging a look with Cory before reaching forward and patting his hand. “Of course we will. Lucas, we’re going to do everything we can. Thank you for telling us.”

As it turns out, Topanga’s first course of action is to help him explain the situation to his actual mother. She doesn’t let him go alone, accompanying him and sitting down at their drab kitchen table to give Grace the lowdown on everything that’s going on. Ultimately, she gets into the legal procedures of getting Lucas professional help and asks for her cooperation.

Grace nods along agreeably, obviously completely blindsided by this turn of events. It’s evident she had absolutely no idea anything to this degree was going on with him, and when Topanga produces some papers for her to sign in regards to therapy, Grace turns her unsettled gaze on her son and smiles weakly. “You never told me about this.”

Lucas’s mouth feels dry. He figures he could explain to her he didn’t exactly tell anybody, but that would be dishonest. Because he knows even if he was telling people, he probably wouldn’t have told her. That’s just never been their relationship. Part of that unspoken agreement they live by so easily.

Still, there’s a hint of hurt in her eyes as she cooperates with Topanga. That’s going to stay with him for a long time, even after he leaves for college and goes off on his own.

Before he knows it, Topanga has arranged for him to see a psychiatrist and with their help figure
out the best plan for tackling whatever it is that’s up with him. He doesn’t see how it’s going to make any difference, but he trusts her judgment. Topanga is the best problem-solver he’s ever known. If she thinks it’s going to fix things, he’ll take her word for it.

That’s how he ends up in the office of Dr. Han on a Thursday afternoon within the first couple of weeks of senior year, rather than off with the group on the first of their many senior year escapades they’ve got planned.

Over the summer, Zay, Farkle, and Maya compiled a list of all the things they want the six of them to do before they go their separate ways at the end of the year. They’re supposed to be starting on that list today, but instead he’s sitting in the leather armchair across from a matching one decorating the cozy office, chewing on his thumbnail and waiting for the psychiatrist to show up.

There’s a light knock on the door and a petite, neatly dressed woman steps into the room. She’s got her hair tied back in a ponytail and a determined expression permanently etched into her features, but when she sits down and offers her hand for him to shake her eyes are kind.

“I’m Dr. Han, but feel free to call me Michelle. Whichever is more comfortable for you.”

“Okay.”

“So,” she says, getting down to business and pulling out a notebook. She looks over the debriefing file she has on him, looking up briefly from jotting down a couple of things to lock eyes with him. “Why don’t you tell me why you think you’re here?”

He hesitates, sitting on his hands to keep from fidgeting with his fingers. “Where should I start?”

“Start at the beginning. Wherever that is.”

He proceeds to awkwardly launch into every point he thinks may be relevant, occasionally tripping over his words and backtracking to explain a detail even though halfway through he figures it’s probably not important and he should’ve just glossed over it. Michelle takes careful notes, only interrupting every now and then to ask a clarifying question. When he finally comes to an abrupt stop, throat dry and having run out of things to say, she clicks her pen and examines him curiously.

“So, what do you think you should do about it?”

He blinks. “Does that matter? I figured that was your job.”

She chuckles, shrugging amicably. “Sure, that’s true. As the professional I’m the one who can offer you guidance. But I like to keep my clients involved in their own recovery. You should have some say in how you handle what’s wrong with your own mental health.”

“Okay, but that’s the problem,” Lucas says in frustration, his voice cracking slightly. He clears his throat. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I have no idea what the hell is wrong with me.”

Michelle looks at him, tilting her head slightly. “That’s completely normal.”

Lucas opens his mouth to comment, but nothing comes out. He presses his lips together, willing himself not to cry on his first day of therapy.

“Most people who suffer from mental illness have no idea that’s what they’re dealing with. There’s a reason so many people go undiagnosed and never get treatment. You’re already taking the first step in figuring it out by sitting here talking with me. We’re going to figure it out and then work out the best way to get it under control. It’s not going to go away, but you’re going to be able to
handle it.” She raises her eyebrows at him. “Does that sound like a plan?”

He takes a deep breath, nodding. He’s going to learn how to handle it and get it back under control.

When he steps out of the office about an hour later, Riley immediately leaps up from the couch in the waiting room as he approaches her. “How did it go?”

“Okay,” he says quietly, locking eyes with her and managing a small smile. “Working on it.”

She smiles back, linking her hand in his as they leave the office together.

--

Although college applications offer a completely different kind of challenge than last year, his academics don’t seem nearly as daunting in his final year of high school. Still, Smackle has grown fond of studying with him and makes arrangements to work on AP Environmental Science assignments at Topanga’s while Farkle and Riley are busy working on the senior musical.

They’re not the most talkative duo but they enjoy each other’s company, particularly considering Lucas is no longer at the end of his emotional rope at all times. Just taking the smallest amount of action towards getting help has already made him feel loads better.

“I really admire you for taking control of whatever is going on in your life, Lucas,” Smackle tells him one afternoon, resting her APES textbook on her lap and examining him thoughtfully. “I don’t know what’s going on, of course, but I can sense that you’re working on it.”

Lucas smiles warily, tapping his pencil against his knee. “Trying, yeah.”

Smackle returns his uncertain smile. She hesitates, flipping a page in the text before speaking again. “I certainly can’t be considered an expert on anything you’re going through, especially considering I don’t know the specifics. But I know for me, whenever things get particularly stressful, it helps that I have certain safe places and safe people to go to when things get bad. It’s like a sanctuary for when other things get too overwhelming. Maybe you can use safe places like that, too.”

“I think I already do,” he admits, thinking about Riley and the Matthews apartment and the café they’re sitting in as they speak.

Josh wanders over and chides both of them for having their feet up on the coffee table, whacking Lucas on the head with his dish towel before clearing their glasses. Once he has ducked back behind the counter, Smackle speaks again.

“Like I said, I don’t know the specifics.” Her voice is timid. “But I hope I’m one of those safe people for you, Lucas.”

He lifts his head from his book to lock eyes with her, smirking. “You are.”

It’s obvious this sentiment means a lot to her. After a moment of hesitation she reaches forward and places her hand over his, just for a second before she decides to pull away. He knows how picky Smackle is about physical affection, so he takes the brief interaction to heart.

Although both of them may not have a lot to say all the time, the sentiment means a lot to him, too.

--
Desperate to really clear the air with one of his most treasured safe people, Lucas makes a determined effort to give Zay the full story as soon as he sees him again.

They go for a walk around Central Park, Lucas relaying the entire saga as they wander the New York terrain. Zay listens carefully, not bothering to make a snide comment or break in with a joke even when the situation presents itself. By the time Lucas catches him up to present day, his mouth is dry from talking so much and Zay looks completely thunderstruck.

“I can’t believe all that happened,” he says in disbelief, staring at the sidewalk as they meander along the path, avoiding bikers and joggers rushing past them. “Like, I can’t believe all of that was going on and I was out here getting drunk and calling you out like we were on *Real Housewives* or some shit. I had no idea.”

“I know,” Lucas assures him.

Zay shakes his head. His features betray disappointment, more in himself than his best friend. “I can’t believe I had no idea. I should’ve known. I should’ve been able to tell.”

“No, Zay, you couldn’t have.” Lucas stuffs his hands in his pockets, glancing at him. “I didn’t want people to know, so people didn’t know. And you had your own thing going on. You and I agreed we were going to take a year to figure ourselves out and I guess we sure did.”

Zay reaches out a hand and stops him from walking, taking a calming breath before turning to face him. “Maybe so. But listen to me. Listen to me good, alright?”

“I’m listening.”

“You are my best friend,” he states, expression deadly serious. “You’re my best friend, and you’re very important to me. If anything had happened to you… I mean, if something had gone wrong…”

He exhales, shaking his head again before reaching forward and pulling Lucas into a hug. He laughs, hugging him back tightly and ignoring the concerned looks of joggers that pass them embracing in the middle of the sidewalk.

“I think people think we’re breaking up. Are you crying?”

“No, I’m not crying,” Zay says tearfully. “Fuck you, man.”

After a couple of months of getting a grasp on the situation and considering all methods at their disposal, Michelle and Topanga get Lucas set up on medication. It’s not an easy decision, but after long discussions at the Matthews dinner table and careful analysis of all their options it’s the solution they ultimately arrive at when all is said and done.

He receives two different sets of pills—one for anxiety, another for depression. Although he’s a little hesitant to mess with his brain chemistry and still can’t quite believe he actually has either of those illnesses, he gives the treatment a chance and takes his medicine obediently. He figures if his brain chemistry is naturally a mess, then there’s no harm in messing with it a little more if it’ll make it better.

It doesn’t fix it right away, and it takes a couple of adjustments to figure out what exactly he needs from the dosage. But after about a month or so he starts to notice a difference. Slight, barely there, but he notices it. The weight on his shoulders feels a little more manageable.
One pitfall is that the medication makes him drowsy at the most random times, so he spends more afternoons than usual falling asleep in Riley’s bedroom or his room when they’re supposed to be studying.

Thankfully, Riley doesn’t find it irritating, in fact she finds it endearing and a little bit funny, so she’s never one to stop him from dozing off. In a lot of ways, he supposes she’s just as grateful as he is that the fatigue is coming from a logical source and that he can actually shake it off when he wakes up. He’s already miles ahead of where he was last year.

On a completely different but equally important note, he’s also grateful because usually when Riley decides to wake him up it doesn’t take them all that long to get caught up in each other since they’re already not studying anyway. Despite all the chaos, they’re still very into kissing, so they take advantage of the break.

It’s the routine they’re practicing one early evening in September, hidden away in Lucas’s room and taking advantage of the study break.

Riley breaks their kiss just long enough to nudge his t-shirt up his torso, helping him pull it over his head and descending into giggles as he falls back on top of her. He nudges his forehead against hers affectionately, grinning as she wraps her arms around his shoulders and locks their lips together.

Somewhere at the foot of the bed, his history textbook falls off the blanket and lands on the floor. They’re not studying anyway, so he doesn’t care so much.

Riley’s in one of her more affectionate moods, really taking her time with him as she kisses him. Their kisses are long and indulgent, and each one lingers on Lucas’s lips while he catches his breath before she pulls him into another one.

He has absolutely no complaints—she’s warm and her lips are soft and she tastes like strawberries, a flavor he thought he’d never like again after getting a smoothie dumped on his head but now he’s a big fan. He could spend the next one thousand years doing nothing but kissing Riley Matthews and somehow he’d be perfectly okay with that.

He’s just settling into sucking along her neck and thinking about the best place to start a hickey when she hums curiously, nudging him to get his attention.

“What’s this?” she asks, touching a spot touch above his left shoulder blade. When he hums indignantly against her skin, she adjusts to kiss his nose and nudges him again, encouraging him to sit up. “Come on, I want to see.”

“Well, I was sort of in the middle of something.”

“You’ll have plenty of time to mark me later, Casanova.” Lucas grumbles and she laughs, pushing herself into a sitting position as he climbs off of her.

She waits patiently for him to spin around and face away from her so she can get a better look at the small scar on his shoulder. He feels her gently run her thumb over the skin. “How’d you get this one?”

“There’s no super cool origin story or anything. I know I’ve got some cool ones up my sleeve, but this one isn’t all that exciting.”

“And that origin story would be?”
Lucas sighs, glancing over his shoulder to look at her. “Judy the Sheep.”

“This? From falling off of Judy the Sheep?”

“Yep.”

“What kind of child abuse goes on at the rodeo? Goodness gracious.” She gives him a bewildered look before breaking into a smile, rubbing his shoulder lovingly. “You have a pen?”

He smiles in resignation, knowing what’s coming. He nods, waving towards the desk. “First drawer.”

Riley hops off the bed, kissing the top of his head before wandering over and retrieving a drawing utensil from the desk. She slides back onto the mattress, kneeling behind him and holding his shoulders steady. “Stay still.”

Lucas nods agreeably, hearing the pen uncap and jerking away from her suddenly to throw her off. He grins mischievously as she whines grumpily at him. “Sorry. Couldn’t help it.”

“Hush. Don’t disturb the artist while she’s at work.”

He waits patiently while traces a doodle over the mark, a tradition she follows through on every time she discovers a new scar of his and asks to hear the story. It’s another one of those aspects to her trying to learn everything she can about him, and he’d be lying if he said he didn’t like that she’s so interested. As always, she knows how to make him feel like what he has to say is worth hearing.

“Okay,” she says slowly, poking him pointedly with the tip of the pen before capping it. “Done. Voila. A masterpiece.”

“You do realize that considering the location, I can’t actually see this masterpiece.”

Riley bites her lip, reaching towards the nightstand and picking up his phone. She slides the camera open and takes a photo, handing it to him. “Now you can.”

Lucas takes his phone and gets a good look at his new temporary tattoo. It’s a little blob of what he thinks is a supposed to be a sheep, not that Riley’s signature craftsmanship has ever exactly spoken for itself. He can’t help the stupid grin that forms on his face as he looks over his shoulder to lock eyes with her. “You drew a sheep.”

“Yeah, I did!” she says with a bashful smile. “Now you have a sheep on your shoulder.”

As usual, she finds a way to make an unpleasant memory into something lovely. Spreading her sunshine. He nods, taking the pen from her hands and tossing it and his phone on the floor.

“Now I have a sheep on my shoulder,” he agrees, cupping her face and pulling her back into a kiss.

--

By the time he’s standing in the midst of his last semester of high school, Lucas finally feels like he’s got a handle on things.

Some days are better than others, and there are still some rough nights where he finds himself tossing and turning until Riley can get him calm enough to get some semblance of rest. Considering he practically lives at the Matthews apartment at this point, he’s getting significantly
more sleep than before.

Although getting rejected from UC Davis is a harsh blow to take, after everything else he survived in the last nineteen years it just seems like another thing to look back on and hopefully laugh at when he’s a veterinarian fifteen years or so from now. Riley and Zay help him craft a game plan that leads him to accept his full ride to Texas A&M, ideally leading him to a graduate career at Davis when the time comes.

Seeing as he doesn’t want to owe his dad anything if he can help it, the full ride is a nice incentive.

Still, the realization that he can’t always get what he wants even when he puts in all the effort smarts, and it takes support from his friends and family to ease the blow. Cory gives him a lesson on expectations and how his own desire to be perfect is doing more harm than good for him. Farkle and Smackle point out that Davis is going to be worse off without him, whether they comprehend it or not. Although he knows it’s not true, he appreciates the kind words.

The greatest comfort comes from Topanga, who talks him through his feelings on the situation as they’re cooking dinner for the family one night. She breaks up her nagging instructions with words of encouragement, expressing her understanding of the situation with earnest sincerity.

“You think I don’t know what it feels like to want to be perfect? Lucas, dear, I invented near-perfection. There are imperfect grades from my high school career that I’m working on shaking off because I’m still unnecessarily bitter over them.” She stirs the contents of the saucepan in front of her and gives him a sympathetic look, an interesting expression paired with her intense eyes. “But you’ll come to find that it’s not what matters. Family, friends, good food. That’s what matters. I mean, I’m sure you’re already figuring that out.”

“Getting there, yeah,” he says, tossing a glance to Riley talking with Auggie in the living area.

“It’ll get easier. Especially once high school is done. Perfection isn’t achievable. Once you find that stuff that actually matters, you won’t even be worried about it anymore.”

Riley glances over at them, grinning at him before Auggie regains her attention. For all of Topanga’s wisdom, Lucas believes her.

--

Graduation comes and goes, and before Lucas knows it summer is coming to an end and he’s packing up his things for school. It doesn’t take a lot of effort, considering he doesn’t have a particular attachment to anything in his apartment.

He’s much more excited to help Farkle and Maya plan the road trip they’re going to surprise Riley with, offering to take on the bookkeeping and keep all the information organized. It’s a miracle that all three of them manage to keep it a secret from her through the duration of the planning stages, and even more impressive that all five of them keep her in the dark when the plan is shared among them.

He knows Riley is going to take some convincing, but he trusts that they’ll be able to get her to come along. She wouldn’t miss one last adventure with her favorite people, of that much he’s certain.

His mom finds him the night before he’s slated to hit the road, standing at the counter and pouring all his concentration into counting out his pills and sorting them by day for the trip. She nudges him playfully as she gets a glass from the cupboard, earning a smile from him.
“So, tomorrow? Right?”

“Yep.”

She nods slowly, turning on the faucet and filling her glass. “And I’m meeting you… at Texas…”

“At Texas A&M with Pappy Joe. Yes.”

“Right.” She grins at him, nodding affirmatively. “Right. That I can do.” She takes a sip of her water, gesturing to the countertop in front of him. “And you’ve got all your…?”

“Mhm,” he assures her, snapping the case shut and holding it up for her to see. It rattles obnoxiously, which seems to be good enough for her.

“Well. Then I guess I’ll see you in the morning before you’re off.” Suddenly she lights up, an idea hitting her. “Oh, wait a minute. Wait right here. There’s something I want you to have. Wait.”

Lucas makes a face, wandering over to sit at the table while his mother disappears up the stairs, returning a couple minutes later and sliding into the chair next to him. She holds up a folded up piece of paper, sliding it across the table for him to take. “I was hoping you could give this to Riley.”

“Riley?” he repeats in confusion, furrowing his brow and unfolding the paper. On it is what looks like a bunch of prose—maybe a short story or something. “What is this?”

Grace shrugs bashfully, clasping her hands together as she stretches out her arms across the tabletop. “It’s the first page of my new manuscript.”

Lucas stares at her, his jaw dropping open slightly. “You’re writing again?”

“Well, I was just thinking about how you’re going to be gone. Empty nester, and all that. And I’m gonna have all this free time all the sudden. So somehow, this just sort of came to me, and I couldn’t get it out of my head so I figured, why not take a shot?” She’s got this silly grin on her face, a kind of excitement on her features Lucas doesn’t think he’s ever seen before. “It’s not great or anything, but it’s a start.”

“It’s great,” he tells her, smiling lightly and leaning forward to hug her. “It’s awesome.”

She’s a bit surprised but returns the embrace, laughing when they pull away from each other. She shakes her head, running her hand through her hair. “That little girlfriend of yours really got me thinking.”

“Yeah, she’s pretty good at that.”

Grace nods. “So give her that. And tell her thank you. For many things.”

“I will.”

She smiles at him again, getting to her feet and ruffling his hair. “See you in the morning.”

Lucas waits until his mother disappears to bed to head up after her, turning off the lights and ducking back into his room for the last time. After this, he doesn’t ever have to come back if he doesn’t want to. He doesn’t think he’s going to miss it at all.

His phone rings on his bedside table just as he’s tucking his pills into his backpack. When Farkle’s name lights up the caller ID, he reaches over to pick it up. “Hello?”
“Hi. Maya made me call.”

“Real charming. Why didn’t she just call herself?”

“Because she’s driving,” Farkle says authoritatively. “We’re coming to pick you up.”

Lucas freezes, assuming for a terrifying moment that he’s forgotten something or made a huge mistake. “What? Farkle, we’re leaving tomorrow. I wrote it in the itinerary.”

“I know that. But there’s been a change of plans. Maya decided we’re leaving tonight.”

There’s a shuffle as the phone is passed back and forth, Maya shouting for him to hit speaker before she crashes the car. After a brief pause, Maya’s demanding tone talks at him through the phone.

“I know there was a plan. But now there is a new plan. Be ready to leave in five minutes and I swear to God, Ranger Rick, if you put up any sort of fight I will drive off to California without you. Your call.”

In the next moment she hangs up, leaving him very unprepared and filled with anxious energy.

He scrambles to make sure he has everything, unable to make a checklist like he was planning to do tomorrow morning. He takes one last sweep of the space and hopes for the best, turning off the light and jogging down the stairs with his stuff.

Lucas comes to a stop at the front door, pulling it open and pausing. It’s only for a moment, but he figures he should feel some sort of sadness at leaving behind the apartment he’s spent the last six years surviving in. Going to college is supposed to be this big, emotional thing where you say goodbye to your childhood home, breakaway and go off to be your own person.

But he doesn’t feel it. Because he’s not leaving home. Not yet.

He’s going to feel it when they get to Texas A&M and he has to say goodbye. That’s when it’s going to hit him, when he’s actually leaving home behind.

But he’s got numerous days and miles of road before then. At that moment, all Lucas feels is anticipation for the journey ahead.

His phone buzzes in his pocket. Shoudering his backpack, he grabs his things and steps out of the apartment without looking back.
The car has never been so quiet.

Maya takes the wheel first, turning on her music and giving Riley as much space as she needs. Even for all her resolve, she’s clearing her throat an awful lot for someone who is completely unaffected.

Riley huddles close to the car door, legs pulled up on the seat and arms wrapped tightly around her knees. Although Maya is obviously giving her this time to cope, she tries her hardest to cry as silently as possible, wiping her cheeks with the heel of her palm.

Lucas is going to be a veterinarian. She just watched him take the first steps towards accomplishing that goal, and in that regard she doesn’t think she’s ever been more proud. All things considered, she should be happy. Just like Smackle, and Zay, and Farkle, Lucas is going off to create his own galaxy and stand on his own. And in a lot of ways, she should consider herself lucky considering he’s probably the person she’s most confident will create a place for her in his new world.

But that selfish part of her doesn’t want to let him go. She felt it with each of these goodbyes, but this is the first time where she wants to go back. She wants to tell Maya to turn the van around and get back on that campus and pull Lucas back along with them for the rest of the journey. At least get in another goodbye. Hold him one more time.

But she knows if she did, she may not ever let go.

Once she’s stopped crying, she switches off with Maya at the nearest rest stop. They don’t say much. Maya puts her headphones in and forces herself to nap the moment they’re back on the highway, leaving Riley alone with her thoughts.

She tries to ignore the imposing presence of the empty seats behind her.

When they stop to switch drivers again, Riley reaches into the glove compartment and pulls out the
itinerary. It stings a little bit to see Lucas’s neat scrawl, but she forces herself to look at the actual words on the page and comprehend what they’re saying.

“Wow.”

Maya wanders back to the van with a soda from the vending machine, hopping into the driver’s seat just as Riley exclaims. “What?”

“I just didn’t realize we were so close to our next stop,” she says, holding up the notebook to show her. “We’ve already been driving for like five hours. I didn’t even notice. Guess I wasn’t paying attention.”

“Reassuring, since you were driving,” Maya teases, turning on the engine and adjusting the mirrors. “But change of plans.”

“What? What do you mean?”

Maya shrugs, gesturing for Riley to buckle her seatbelt. “We’ve barely covered any ground, and I don’t feel like stopping yet. I switched our reservations.”

“Barely covered any ground? Maya, we’ve been driving for—,”

“Five hours. I know. Whatever.” She brushes some hair from her face, taking a deep breath. “But we shouldn’t waste a day turning in now when there’s still daylight to burn and I’ve got places to go and energy left to drive.”

Riley tries not to let the dismissal from her best friend get to her. She knows they’re both a little sensitive at this point. “Okay. Where are we going?”

Maya avoids her eyes. “El Paso.”

Riley scrambles to swap out the notebook for the map, unfolding it and finding the city. Panic rises in her chest as she absorbs the distance.

“Maya, we cannot go all this way. It’s like eight hours away.”

“I’m perfectly ready to drive it.”

“We agreed we were stopping here,” Riley says sharply, waiting impatiently for her to look her in the eyes. “That’s the plan we agreed on. It’s not—,”

“Look, if you don’t want to drive, then don’t!” Maya snaps, buckling her seatbelt and backing out of the parking space. Riley opens her mouth to speak but she bulldozes over her, keeping her eyes on the road in front of her as she navigates back towards the main highway. Her voice is shaking slightly. “You don’t have to, but I’m fine driving so you can either help or not but that’s where we’re stopping. Unless you want to sleep in the van in the middle of the highway. Then I guess that’s fine.”

Riley wants to argue, but she can tell from the gleam in her best friend’s eyes that it’s not worth the effort. Maya’s never been the greatest at dealing with her emotions, and her response to the loss of their friends is to distract herself as long as possible. It’s stupid, and unreasonable, and a little dangerous, but Riley knows when she gets like this it’s hard to change her mind. Emotion makes Maya a force to be reckoned with.

She’s far more sensibility than sense. That much has always been true.
Riley swallows her reservations, bringing her knees up again and making herself as small as possible. “Fine. Just let me know when you want to switch off.”

“Great. Thank you.” Maya drives on without comment for a few more moments, before reaching forward and blasting her music again just to break the silence.

Riley stares out the window, lower lip trembling as she fights the urge to start crying all over again. She’s always had a solid understanding of her own emotions as well as her friends’, but for the first time it suddenly feels like too much. There’s too much emotion all at once, and she doesn’t know how to handle it. It’s a black hole, tearing through her galaxy and consuming everything she’s known and everything she wants to keep safe.

In just a few days, there isn’t going to be anything left.

--

They arrive at their new hotel in El Paso just before midnight.

Riley has never felt more physically and emotionally exhausted. The drive was painful enough, she and Maya barely exchanging any words as they swapped seats. Both of them seem lost in their own heads, grappling with the reality of being the only two left and bracing themselves for the inevitable conclusion coming just around the bend. They’ve always been comfortable talking to each other about things that are bothering them, but this feels impossible to discuss.

Riley gets the keys and the two of them make their way down the hall to their room. When they drop their bags on the beds, Maya collapses onto hers and sighs dramatically.

“Can you believe we get our own beds for the rest of this shindig?” she asks, inhaling deeply and flopping her arms out on either side of her. “I didn’t mention it at the time, but Farkle is a surprisingly twitchy sleeper. For every kick I got in I’m pretty sure he elbowed me at least twice.”

Riley manages a laugh, going through her string bag to pull out her charger. Maya notices the strain in her tone, sitting up and giving her a look.

“What? What’s up with you?”

“Nothing,” she says tiredly, plugging in her phone and staring at it to avoid looking at Maya. “Just… a lot to deal with from today. You know, saying goodbye.”

“Yeah, I know. But that’s not why you’re acting like this,” Maya says knowingly, crossing her arms. “What’s wrong? We don’t have a lot of time left to clear the air, so let’s not start new issues now.”

Even though there’s nothing she’d rather do than avoid confrontation, she knows in her heart that Maya is right. Just like Farkle and Lucas blowing up in Kentucky, if she holds in her feelings now she’ll only be hurting them in the long run.

Riley sighs, turning to face her. “You shouldn’t have changed the driving plan.”

“Wait, are you seriously mad about that?” Maya gets to her feet, giving her an incredulous look. “We were fine, weren’t we?”

“I am. I am mad,” she says, standing her ground and locking eyes with her. “It wasn’t fair of you to change the plans like that without at least asking me first. And it was dangerous. Driving more than ten hours isn’t safe for either of us. There’s only two of us. We can’t do as much. We could’ve...
gotten hurt.”

“Yeah, but we didn’t.”

“I understand why you did what you did,” Riley assures her, clasping her hands together in front of her. “I know this is hard. I know how you get with change. But you can’t do stuff like that. You just can’t.”

Maya holds her gaze, searching for some sort of defense. That’s how her best friend is—her initial instinct is to put her walls up and play defense, but usually with some time to process she comes around. Evidently, she still needs that time..

She exhales sharply and swivels away from her, opening her suitcase and pulling out a change of clothes and her toiletries bag. “I’m gonna take a shower. I’m sorry you’re upset. I didn’t mean to make you upset.”

“I know,” Riley says softly.

“Sorry,” Maya repeats brusquely, gathering her things in her arms and disappearing into the bathroom.

The moment the door shuts Riley drops onto the bed, rubbing her face and doing her best to keep it together. She is not going to spend the rest of this trip sobbing. She’s not going to let it end that way.

Thankfully, her phone buzzing on the nightstand distracts her.

Uncle Joshie: Hope Lucas got to school okay. Where are you guys now?

Riley shoots him a text back, somewhat amused by his dumbstruck reaction.

Uncle Joshie: EL PASO?????? How the hell are you in El Paso??

Uncle Joshie: Where are you going to be tomorrow? How does this affect your travel plan?

Uncle Joshie: This is some Maya stunt isn’t it?

Uncle Joshie: Please answer me and reassure me you’re not going to run yourselves off the road.

Riley cracks a smile at his overprotective antics, letting him know they’re fine and still heading towards Nevada tomorrow as planned. Once she’s convinced him she’s not going to be murdered by their own carelessness he says goodnight, leaving her alone with her emotions once more.

She hovers over her last conversation with Lucas, thinking about texting him but knowing she shouldn’t. It’s only been a day. She needs to give him a chance to settle in and get acquainted with his new surroundings. She doesn’t want to be a distraction from that.

Still, she can’t help but wonder if he’s thinking about her, too.

Riley forces herself to shake off the insecurity, getting to her feet and opening her luggage to get ready for bed. She’s confused by the new piece of clothing that’s stuck neatly on top of the pile, but after a couple of moments recognition hits her like a freight train.

She delicately lifts the worn dark blue sweatshirt out of the suitcase, unfolding it to find the Brooklyn logo staring back at her. For a terrifying second she wonders if maybe Lucas forgot it,
that maybe she should call him and let him know he left it behind, but a small piece of paper falls onto the bed as she unfolds it and catches her attention instead. Bundling the sweatshirt in her arm, she picks up the scrap and gets another glimpse of Lucas’s familiar scrawl.

*Stay warm in New York.*

More emotion, but this time it’s coming from a good place. Riley exhales a laugh in spite of herself and blinks back some tears, hugging the sweatshirt closer to her before pulling it on over her head. It’s not cold in the hotel room, but the soft cotton and familiar scent of pine and clean linen makes her feel warm in an entirely different way. Suddenly, she’s not so upset anymore.

He knew she would need it. He knew she would.

It’s silly to worry about whether or not he’s thinking of her when she knows in her heart he always is.

Maya emerges from the shower just as Riley is climbing into bed, tiptoeing around and getting into bed a few moments later. Normally when the two of them have sleepovers they talk for a while before falling asleep, but there’s still an uncertain amount of turbulence between them keeping them silent. Riley reaches over to turn off the light.

She’s startled by Maya’s voice just as she’s starting to drift into sleep. “Riles?”

“Yeah?”

There’s a long pause. Riley can just barely make out the sniffing and the tremor in her voice when she speaks again. The drive and anger has faded and now Maya is facing the rest of it—the emotion she loves to run from. “You know… you know that I never liked Lucas like that, right?”

Considering everything that happened in the last twenty-four hours, this seems wildly out of left field to Riley. The triangle feels ancient, old news that only comes back to haunt them as a joke at best. Certainly not something to be crying over.

Riley starts to respond but Maya tumbles on without waiting for a reply.

“I just… I didn’t. Not really. I mean, maybe I thought I did so in some ways I did, but never… I didn’t like him like that.” She takes a shaky breath, clearly attempting to keep her voice even. As if Riley wouldn’t recognize her best friend’s tears in an instant. “You guys are perfect for each other. I mean, really made for each other. I would never get in the way of that. I know I kind of did, for a couple years there in different ways. I’m sorry about that. It was such a mess and…”

Her voice cracks, causing her to stop for a few seconds and clear her throat. Riley debates whether or not to get out of bed and comfort her.

“I just need you to know that it wasn’t like that. And I’m so happy for you. Really.”

Riley stares at the ceiling, smiling lightly at the earnest nature of her words. Maya’s always struggled with her emotions, but when she vocalizes them it’s obvious she means them. That’s one thing Riley loves most about her.

“I know.”

Maya exhales, sniffing a little less subtly. There’s another brief pause. “Good. Don’t forget it.”

--
When Riley wakes up the next morning, she’s already in better spirits.

She allows Maya to sleep in for a while, taking a quick shower and pulling on some leggings and the Brooklyn sweatshirt before disappearing down to the lobby to grab some breakfast.

Her phone rings as she’s buttering an English Muffin. She expects it to be her parents—part of her wishes it was Lucas—but the name that lights up her caller ID is a complete surprise. She takes a bite of her breakfast and accepts the call, lifting the phone to her ear.

“Farkle?”

“Ah, good, you answered,” his matter-of-fact voice greets her from the other side of the line. Riley beams, imagining his happy expression. “I was hoping I wouldn’t call when you were driving or something.”

“No, no problem there. We made up a lot of road yesterday so we’re taking it slow this morning. I’m just here eating breakfast.”

“Wow. What do you mean by a lot of road?”

“Well, we got to El Paso, if that tells you anything.”

“Oh my God!” he exclaims. There’s a clamor as the phone slips from his hands, earning a giggle from Riley as he evidently scrambles to pick it back up. “El Paso? That’s like, a day ahead of schedule. How the hell did that happen?”

Riley chews quickly. “You know how Maya gets when she gets emotional. It was some sort of weird coping mechanism, I think. I told her off about it, but I could tell it was just… a lot to handle.”

“Huh.” Farkle clicks his tongue thoughtfully. “Dropping off Lucas was harder on her than she thought it would be?”

“I guess so.”

“Doesn’t surprise me. With me, she knew it was going to hurt because she’s always been openly fond of me. She’s never been vague about how important I am to her. She spends a lot of time knocking Lucas down and downplaying his importance, or at least she used to, so it probably hit her hard to realize how important he actually is to her. And emotions are more difficult to deal with when they hit you without warning.”

Although she figured all this out for herself, it’s weirdly comforting to hear her genius friend reaffirm her understanding of the situation. “Oh, Farkle, what would we do without your great wisdom?”

“Well, it’s been a few days, shouldn’t you know by now?” He pauses to allow her a laugh. “How was A&M?”

“Huge.”

“Everything’s bigger in Texas.”

“Yeah, that’s what I was thinking.” Riley knows she could elaborate, but despite her improved mood talking about that goodbye still feels like a sensitive subject. She switches gears instead. “Okay, please tell me you called to tell me about school. You have to tell me about it, I’m dying.
“How is St. Louis?”

“Yeah, yeah,” he says offhandedly, but she can tell from the slight tone in his voice that he’s excited to tell her about it. “Oh, before we get into it, I’ve been texting Smackle and before I called she told me to tell you that she hopes your travels have been safe since Maryland and that she is already organizing the Skype call for the six of us.”

Riley smiles, propping her chin on her hand. “Aw, good, ol’ Smackle. Tell her thank you. And that I miss her.”

Farkle agrees, before launching into a breathless explanation of his first couple of days on campus. The excitement in his voice makes it very obvious how happy he is, and it instills some anticipation in her towards her own first couple of weeks of college. She’s been so preoccupied with getting her friends to their respective schools, she’s barely given her own future any thought. She hopes she’ll talk about it with the same amount of enthusiasm as Zay and Farkle have so far.

“So, yes, that’s the bulk of it, I think.” He takes a pause to catch his breath. “Maya awake yet?”

As if on cue, Maya emerges from the food area, carrying a plate and approaching Riley sheepishly. She smiles in spite of herself. “Yeah. It’s almost like you summoned her.”

“Special talent of mine. She awake enough to say hi?”

Riley holds out the phone as Maya slides into the seat across from her. “Farkle.”

Maya’s eyes light up. She takes the phone eagerly, lifting it to her ear as she stuffs blueberry muffin into her mouth. “Farkle! My boy! Light of my life! How was your first day?”

Riley finishes off her breakfast as Maya gets a similar description, fond of the affectionate smile on Maya’s lips as she listens to Farkle ramble on and on. He’s always claimed he loves them both equally, but she wonders if he realizes that they both love him equally as much. That it is one hundred percent mutual.

“Yeah, okay. Go be a genius or whatever. Do you want to talk to Riley again?” Maya watches her curiously as Farkle responds. Riley waves her off. “Okay then. Yes. Yes, we are going to Facetime as soon as I move in. Don’t ghost on me. Okay. Bye, loser.”

Maya hangs up and hands the phone back to Riley.

“Can’t believe our little Farkle is all grown up.”

“I know. It’s wild.”

They exchange tentative smiles, Riley averting her gaze down to her plate. She thinks about taking it to the trash when Maya speaks again. “Listen, I really am sorry about yesterday. You were right, I shouldn’t have done all that. Especially without asking you.”

Some of the tension dissipates. Riley is grateful Maya chose to address it rather than pretending nothing happened, like they did for so much of their friendship when they were younger. “It’s okay.”

“It’s not. But I’m sorry, and it’s not going to happen again.” Maya sighs, blowing the air out through her lips and brushing some hair out of her face. “I think I just got so caught up in how weird it felt. You know? Just you and me left. When I was in seventh grade, all I wanted was the world to just be me and you.”
Riley smiles lightly. “I remember the feeling.”

“But then these weirdos come in and elbow their way into our lives and into my world and... it feels weird for them to suddenly be gone.” She makes a face. “Even Huckleberry.”

“But they’re not gone.” Riley gives Maya a reassuring smile, saying the words she’s been telling herself over and over again since they left Smackle in Maryland. “Miles between us, centimeters apart. Remember? No one is really leaving anyone.”

Maya smiles tightly, nudging her lightly under the table with her foot. “You’ve always got to come up with the right thing to say, don’t you?”

“Since the day we met,” Riley says proudly, kicking her back.

With the drama from yesterday behind them, the drive to Vegas is much more relaxed and full of conversation.

Riley can remember what is was like not to talk to Maya for a year between the ends of sophomore and junior year, and she never wants to experience it again. Although Lucas is the person she loves talking to about the important things, Maya is the person she can ramble on with about literally anything and never run out of silly things to talk about.

Even still, it doesn’t take long for the conversation to take a more serious turn. They go from discussing the possible reboot of Red Planet Diaries to Hollywood, which only leads them towards the topic of Maya’s new home in just a few days.

“Whatever,” Maya says offhandedly, keeping her eyes on the road with a smirk. “Hollywood’s a sucker for reboots if they think it’ll make money. It’s why like, every show our parents watched in the 90s are suddenly getting spin-offs. I think we have to wait a few more years before they seriously consider putting RPD back on air.”

“Well, promise me that if and when it comes back, we’ll watch it together.”

“Always have, always will,” Maya says confidently. “Even three-thousand miles won’t change that. We’ll just Skype while we watch. Granted our school Wi-Fi doesn’t suck. But yes. Consider it a plan.”

Riley glances out the window, tapping her fingers against her knees. “Who knows? Maybe when you’re a famous artist, you’ll meet some big influential producer at a cocktail party and convince him to pick up the show.”

Maya laughs. “Right, sure. And you know what? In the next moment, I’ll call over my spunky, cheery best friend and her stupid veterinarian boyfriend and introduce you guys. And it’ll be you who ultimately convinces the guy.”

“You’re inviting Lucas?” she asks, raising her eyebrows. “How sweet of you.”

“Well, I figure you two will be probably like, gross and engaged by then, so it’ll be hard to shake him off. It’s like when I named our group chat The OG Trio and That Cowboy We Can’t Shake Off in seventh grade. Still here. Still can’t shake him. Even though I’m trying.”

She makes a show of twitching her left leg, mimicking kicking him off. Riley nudges her playfully. “Keep your foot on the gas. Your theatrics aren’t worth death.”
Maya shrugs, making a face that turns into a grin. She shoots Riley a smile before training her eyes back on the road in front of her.

“It’s funny that we have these grand visions of the future. We can see it so clearly.” Riley twiddles her thumbs, gazing at Maya before staring out the dashboard window. “It’s like, you’re going to be this amazing artist. Lucas is going to be a veterinarian.”

“Yeah, so you’ve been telling me for the past however many years.”

“And then there’s me. The best friend.” Riley smiles, covering a grimace.

“What?” Maya raises an eyebrow. “What’s wrong with that? What’s that supposed to mean?”

There’s a moment where Riley hesitates, mouth parted open slightly. Then she decides better of it. The remainder of the trip is supposed to be about Maya—she’s not going to bring it back down with her own negativity. “Nothing, nothing.”

“Riley Erica Matthews, don’t make me ring power you for like, the tenth time on this trip.” Maya glances at her, concern coloring her features. “What are you saying?”

“I don’t know,” she says with a sigh, leaning her head back against the headrest. “It just feels like… everything is so clear for you guys. All of you have these beautiful, spectacular dreams and you’re going to go accomplish them. I know you will. You’re going to be an artist. Lucas a vet. Zay’s a dancer, Smackle’s an astro… whatever exactly it is. Farkle’s a genius.”

“A genius isn’t a career,” Maya comments.

“You all have these brilliant talents and you’re going to change the world using them. You have purpose.” Riley shrugs, brushing some hair behind her ear. “I don’t know, I guess I just kind of feel like I don’t have a reason.”

“Reason for what?”

She hesitates, trying to phrase her sentence correctly. It’s really not a huge deal, but she can tell the way she’s wording it is making it seem larger than it is. “Existing. Not like, in a life or death way, but in a purpose sort of way. Like, what am I here for?”

It’s a question that’s haunted her since she was in middle school. Everyone around her seems to know exactly what they’re doing. They have clear talents, clear goals, clear ambitions and interests and a pathway to get there. Riley has never had that sense of direction. She’s got a million different interests and no obvious talents and definitely no sense of ambition.

She wants to be driven, but she feels like she can’t until she knows which route she’s taking. Until then, she’s just idling and wasting another day.

Maya seems absolutely floored by this confession. “What are you here for? Are you seriously asking me that?”

“Forget it,” Riley says quickly, reaching to turn up the music instead. “Don’t worry about it.”

Maya swats her hand away, holding her arm out to silence her. “I’m serious. Are you really asking me what purpose you serve? Why you’re on this God forsaken Earth in the first place?”

“Maybe. I don’t know. Like I said, it’s nothing.”
“It’s not nothing.” Maya processes this turn of events, biting her lip and shaking her head slightly. “Riley, you have no idea how important you are. You inspire people. You change people for the better. You help people not because you have to but because you want to. Most people aren’t like that. I know I’m definitely not.”

“Yeah, but—,”

“I can’t believe… just look at us.” Maya’s genuinely dumbfounded, struggling to formulate her words coherently without emotion getting in the way. “Look at our friends. All of us are better people because of you. Because of the way you love us. You are… the gravity holding us all together. Without you, we wouldn’t exist. None of this would be happening. Without you, we’d all just… drift away from each other.”

Riley absorbs this, willing herself to believe it’s true. The idea that these people she’s so fond of need her just as sincerely as she needs them is a huge weight lifted off her shoulders.

“Don’t ever question why you’re here,” Maya says fiercely, shaking her head again. She glances at Riley, locking eyes with her. “Because no matter what the actual, scientific reason is, all I know is you’re here with me. And that’s the most important thing in the world.”

Riley feels tears prick at the corner of her eyes, wiping them away quickly. She smiles at her. “Noted.”

“Wild. Thinking you don’t matter. Just plain wrong.” Maya takes a deep breath, gesturing to the speakers. “Okay. Now, music back on. Please pick something that isn’t going to make me want to drive this car into a ditch.”

Riley resumes the music, the two of them settling back into easy conversation after a brief period of small talk. Even after the topic has long past, her heart feels fuller at the perspective of her best friend on what her purpose is in this big world. She makes a promise to herself not to ever forget it.

When they stop for lunch in downtown Phoenix, Maya and Riley peruse some of the shops before taking a seat at some outdoor seats at a local café. Riley brings the itinerary with them, taking a purple pen to Lucas’s neat dark blue and adjusting the travel plan accordingly.

“So we’ve got about four and half hours left until we get to—,”

“Vegas, baby!” Maya hoots, stuffing a forkful of pasta salad in her mouth. She holds up a finger as she chews. “We should get lit. Gamble some. What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas. Time to get those funds to pay for college.”

“Yeah, we’re not old enough to do any of that legally.”

Maya wiggles her eyebrows. “Who said anything about legally?”

Riley’s phone buzzes at the same time as Maya’s. They exchange intrigued looks, wondering who would be texting them both. “Who texted you?”

“Zayby,” Maya says matter-of-factly, unlocking her phone and reading the message. “Aw, he’s got his first dance academy crush!”

“What?” Riley leans over the table excitedly to get a look at the messages. “How can you tell?”
“Well, because he’s telling me about his ass, Riles. That’s how all great relationships start.”

She rolls her eyes, checking her own phone. Her message is not from Zay, but from Josh.

**Uncle Joshie: Where are you guys?**

Riley types a reply, telling him about how their drive shook out and that they’re in Phoenix. His response confuses her somewhat.

**Uncle Joshie: Okay, but where in downtown Phoenix?**

“Well, because he’s telling me about his ass, Riles. That’s how all great relationships start.”

She rolls her eyes, checking her own phone. Her message is not from Zay, but from Josh.

**Uncle Joshie: Where are you guys?**

Riley types a reply, telling him about how their drive shook out and that they’re in Phoenix. His response confuses her somewhat.

**Uncle Joshie: Okay, but where in downtown Phoenix?**

“Okay, I’m ready to bounce,” Maya says with a dramatic clatter of her fork on her plate, drawing Riley’s attention away from watching the typing bubble on the screen. “I’m refreshed, I’m renewed, I’m ready to get to California.”

“Someone’s excited,” Riley says with a smile, getting to her feet.

Maya’s right behind her, pulling her van keys out of her pocket as they start down the sidewalk. “That, and if I stop now I’m worried I may just melt right into the ground and never get up again. Fatigue is a fickle fiend.”

“Fickle fiend?” Riley laughs, linking arms with her. “Where’d you learn that one?”

“Farkle said it one time. I don’t actually know what it means. But it sure sounded good.” Maya bumps her shoulder against Riley’s. “Anything else you want to check out while we’re here?”

The bookstore across the street catches Riley’s attention, but before she can suggest it a car door slams behind them and a familiar voice calls out to them, startling them both. A voice that should be more than two thousand miles away.

“Riley!”

Maya whips around first, Riley spinning on her heel just as her Uncle Josh comes jogging down the sidewalk towards them. He looks ragged and exhausted, a travel bag slung over his back and his signature beanie stuck on his head. He doesn’t seem any different than he did when they saw him in Philadelphia, but considering how far they’ve traveled since then it feels like they’re all completely displaced. Like two worlds are suddenly colliding.

Josh comes to stand in front of them, fighting to catch his breath. Maya is speechless next to Riley, wildly unprepared for this turn of events as she takes in her panting uncle in front of them. Riley doesn’t think she’s ever seen her blue eyes so wide.

Considering the lack of preparation on Maya’s part and the lack of oxygen on Josh’s, Riley figures it’s up to her to break the silence. “What are you doing here?”

Josh laughs harshly, rubbing his face. “In some ways, I’m asking myself the same question. Do you have any idea how hard it was to catch up to you guys? I get off the plane in Austin, I’m thinking it won’t take me long to catch up. You’re only a couple hours away. But no. You go all the way to El Paso.”

“Austin?” Riley furrows her brow. “Why were you in Austin?”

He sighs, finally managing to catch his breath. Riley gestures them over to one of the open benches, Josh collapsing onto it with a groan. Riley sits between him and Maya, the latter still notably silent. Her eyes haven’t left Josh since he climbed out of the car.
“Don’t pop off, alright? But your dad sent me.”

“What? Why?”

“He always wanted me to go after you, like from the moment you guys left. He and Shawn were all freaked about what was going to happen to you guys but I stuck up for you. So did Topanga, obviously. Katy sort of flip-flopped depending on whoever was making the best argument, which, fair.”

Maya makes an indistinct noise, still out of words.

“So I said, alright, I’ll meet up with them after they drop Lucas off. I think Cory was really stressed about you guys driving all the way to California alone, so I offered to come after you and help you finish the drive. Easier with three drivers rather than two. But then you guys go and change the plan, and so I had to hitchhike all the way here after you.” He exhales dramatically, taking off his beanie and ruffling his hair. “You’re very lucky I’m pretty. I don’t know if strangers would’ve let me in their car otherwise.”

Although she doesn’t want to admit it out loud, she and her father share very similar concerns. Despite the surprise, she’s more than willing to take Josh’s help for the remainder of the drive.

“Well, even though I have no idea what exactly is going on, I’m glad you’re here. Welcome to the road trip, Uncle Josh.”

“Thanks, niece,” he says pointedly, slipping his beanie back on over his head. He clears his throat, leaning forward on his elbows and glancing in Maya’s direction. “Hey.”

Maya blinks at him, a thoughtful expression on her face. It becomes more prominent as the shock wears off. Riley can tell there are a million and one things running through her head and not all of them are good. But it’s Josh, and so Maya can’t help the small smile that ghosts over her lips.

“Hey, Uncle Boing.”

“I don’t know what your afternoon plans were,” Josh says diplomatically, “But if we’re not in a rush, what are the odds that you and I could talk?”

Maya hesitates, tossing an uncertain look to Riley.

Riley doesn’t know everything that happened between her best friend and her uncle in the last three years, but she knows they probably have lots to say. And with Maya staying behind in California and Josh coming back with her to New York, they’re running out of time to say it.

“Oh, no rush,” Riley assures him, getting to her feet and stepping out from between them. They both rise as well, watching her curiously. “I was just going to check out the bookstore across the street, but I think you could certainly chat for a while. That is, if Maya wants to.”

Maya examines Josh for a long moment before turning her twinkling eyes on her, giving her a light smirk. She turns her smile on him, nodding lightly. “Yeah. I’d like that.”

Riley steps back a bit as the two of them start down the sidewalk. Josh turns to face her, walking backwards and pointing in her direction. “You have your phone? It’s on?”

“Sure is. Just text me when you’re ready.”

Josh salutes her, Maya tossing her one last timid smile over her shoulder before the two of them head off together. Riley watches them for a couple moments, Josh stuffing his hands in his pockets and Maya clasping hers together in front of her, a shy, vibrant energy shifting between the two of
them. Josh is one of the only people Riley knows that can make Maya Hart bashful.

She remembers that feeling—she and Lucas spent all of middle school with that shy energy. And look at them now.

She smiles to herself, crossing the street and heading into the bookstore.

--

When Riley steps out into the Arizona sunlight almost an hour later, she drops down on the bench in front of the building and pulls out her phone. Part of her is itching to call Lucas, at least get their text conversation going again, but she knows she’s overthinking it and needs to just let it lie for a little while. Instead, she pushes past his contact and scrolls down further, picking another number entirely and lifting the phone to her ear.

Topanga picks up on the second ring. “You’re alive! Oh, thank God you’re alive.”

“Very funny,” she says, smiling in spite of herself. “Dad there too?”

“Yes, but he’s making a big show of acting like he couldn’t care less. A revenge tactic of some sort. I wish you could see it, I’m sure it’s much more impactful in person.”

“If you explain it, you ruin it!” Cory snaps.

Riley giggles, bringing her leg up on the bench to pick at the sole of her shoe. “I got the present you sent me. The family escort is very much appreciated.”

Cory hums. “I can’t tell if you’re being sarcastic or not.”

“I’m not. I was worried about the drive too. It’s nice to have someone from home with us.”

“How has the trip gone otherwise?” Topanga asks. “Everyone get to school on time? No outstanding injuries to report? Lucas get to A&M okay? I’m guessing we would’ve heard if he hadn’t.”

Riley wonders when the mention of leaving him behind is going to stop stinging. “Yep. Everyone is off to be successful, contributing members of society with higher education under their belts. And the trip has been really good. I’m really glad I came.”

“We’re glad you went, too,” Topanga admits. Cory makes a small noise of agreement, but it sounds mildly displeased.

“That being said,” Riley says pointedly, hoping to get her dad’s attention. “I’m glad to be coming home soon. I miss you guys.”

There’s a pause. Cory’s tone is much softer when he speaks again. “We miss you too.”

“Just a couple more days left on the road, and then you’ll be back.”

Riley thinks on this fact for a couple seconds, equally as relieved as she is reluctant.

She talks to her parents for a few more minutes until she sees Josh and Maya approaching her again from the direction they left. Although they’re disconnected by the time they’re close by, Riley swears they were holding hands when they rounded the corner. “Okay, I better go. More road to cover.”
“Drive safely! Don’t forget to check your speed.”

“Yes, mom.”

“And Riley?” Cory says, his tone gentle once more. “Tell Maya how proud we are of her. And that we can’t wait to see her again.”

Topanga hums approval. “Hug her so, so tight for us.”

“I will. I promise.”

She hangs up just as Maya and Josh reach her.

Maya raises her eyebrows. “Who was that?”

“Mom and dad,” Riley explains. She grins at Josh. “Had to thank them for the surprise.”

“Oh, of course. Speaking of which, it’s time for me to actually do my job.” He claps his hands together, rubbing them mischievously. “Time to get back on the road. Take me to the van!”

---

Despite his enthusiasm, Maya and Riley convince Josh to rest after hitchhiking after them all day. He doesn’t put up much of a fight, crashing in the back seat while Maya takes over driving again. It’s evident to Riley that emotions are motivating her actions again, but this time it doesn’t necessarily seem all that negative. There’s something else coloring her features this time around.

Riley waits until she’s sure Josh is dead asleep, his mouth hanging open slightly and beanie askew as his head bobs along with the road. Curiosity killing her, she turns the music down a bit and examines Maya interestedly. “So?”

“So.”

“What did you guys talk about?” She tries to keep her cool but breaks slightly, bouncing in her seat. “What’s going on with you two?”

Maya gives her a look, but she hasn’t been able to stop smiling since Josh showed up hours ago. She rolls her eyes at Riley’s pleading look. “Okay, okay. Puppy dog eyes aren’t necessary, thanks.”

“But they do their job.” Riley bites her lip anxiously. “So?”

Maya nods slowly, putting her thoughts together. When she speaks again, her voice is barely louder than a whisper. “We’re going to see what happens after first semester. See where we are at winter break. We sort of put everything out there but agreed that we didn’t want to jump into anything when emotions were running so high. If we still feel the same way come December, then we’ll give it a shot. A real shot.”

“So the long game goes on.”

Maya laughs, her eyes shining with that other emotion. Hope.

“Can I ask you something?”

“You know you can ask me anything. I don’t know why you always ask.”

Riley beams, hesitating before vocalizing her curiosity. “What did happen between you guys? I
mean, you were definitely hiding from him when we started the trip. But last I remembered, you guys were in a pretty good place senior year. I actually thought you were going to be official before we even left. So what happened?"

“Nothing on his end. It was me,” Maya says, staring out at the road to avoid eye contact. “It’s taken me a while to grapple with the whole three-thousand miles away thing. Even when we started this trip, I was still trying to get a handle on it. That much distance... feels easier to fade away. I figured Josh... he would just get over me. He’d just forget. I’d be so easy to forget being so far away.”

“He would never,” Riley states, speaking for herself as well as her uncle. “Maya, we’re not going to forget you no matter how far away you go.”

Maya locks eyes with her momentarily, blue eyes glittering with sincerity. “I know. I know that now. After having driven all the way here, it doesn’t feel nearly as huge. It’s all just miles. Miles between us, centimeters apart, like you said. I get that now. I believe it.”

Riley reaches out and squeezes Maya’s arm. She smiles at her, eyes glossing over.

“Stop making me feel things, I’m trying to drive.”

--

When they get to Vegas, Riley is simultaneously overwhelmed and underwhelmed all at once. It’s just as bright and fantastical as she imagined it would be, but it really is just one strip down the middle of the highway. For a few miles, there’s this gigantic spectacle, and then the normal stretch of road goes on forever on either side of it. Just like those tiny pocket towns in the middle of the South, Vegas is another galaxy all its own. It’s just much, much brighter.

Maya crashes the moment they get to their hotel room, the strain of two days of driving finally catching up to her. Josh and Riley debate hanging back with her but Riley is antsy, wired from the energy of the city around her and anxious to go explore. With a grumble of approval from Maya, Josh and Riley head out to navigate the huge casino resorts.

Although there’s not a lot she can participate in and Josh doesn’t seem all that interested regardless, just witnessing the beautiful architecture and crazy lights is fun in its own right. They walk through the interior of one casino decorated to feel like New York City, laughing at the camp aesthetics and feeling nostalgic towards the authentic New York Riley realizes she sorely misses. It’ll be a relief to return home to the noise and the bustle and the familiarity of her hometown.

Josh stops them outside one of the larger casinos, watching as a fountain show begins complete with music and lights. He jumps up on a railing nearby and gestures for her to clamber up to join him, laughing as he has to reach forward and keep her from falling off. In all her years, she hasn’t stopped being a little klutzy.

The two of them watch the light show in content silence, doing a little people watching all the while.

“So you enjoyed the trip?” Josh asks, shifting his gaze from the fountains to her.

“I did,” she admits, dangling her legs idly back and forth. “It wasn’t perfect, but I’m glad it happened. I’m honored my parents actually let me go, even with you as a caveat. It’s just been weird sort of... facing the reality of it all. That we’re all going to be in these different places.”
“I bet. I remember that from when me and my friends all went to college. Happens to everyone.” He examines the troubled expression on her face. “But you know what?”

“What?”

He crosses his ankles. “I made some pretty rad new friends. And I still see those original friends as often as I can. You saw it firsthand, in fact, before you ghosted me in Philly.”

“Oh, yeah,” she laughs. “Sorry about that.”

“Look, my point is, college changes things. Sure. But it’s not nearly as scary as you think it’s going to be. Everyone survives it, and true friendships aren’t just going to fade away because you’ve got some distance between you. And from what I’ve seen, your group is pretty true blue.”

Riley smiles, thinking fondly on her little orbit of favorite people. “Yeah. We are.”

They settle into silence for a while longer. Riley breaks the quiet next.

“So, you and Maya.”

Josh makes a face, furrowing his brow and smiling. Riley giggles. “I don’t know what she told you, but I’m going to take the safe route and not comment. Whatever she told you, I’m going with that.”

“She said you’re waiting until winter break to see where you stand. I think she’s happy with that. She doesn’t want to rush into things and ruin it.”

“Yeah,” Josh says softly, expression distant as he loses himself in thought. “Yeah, I know. I get that. I think it’s going to work out for the best.”

Riley nods.

“What about you and Lucas?”

“What about me and Lucas?” she says cheekily.

“Long distance, yeah?” Josh raises his eyebrows at her. “You feeling good about that?”

Even with the ache she’s felt all day, and the urge to text him she’s been warring with, her stance on this hasn’t changed. She nods confidently, tossing some hair off her shoulders. “I am. It’s not going to be perfect, but we care about each other. We both want it to work. So it will.”

Josh smiles, nodding in agreement. “So it will.”

--

When they get back to the room, Riley collapses on the bed next to Maya while Josh disappears to the bathroom.

“Sleeping,” Maya groans in annoyance. “Bother me later.”

“Oh, enjoy it while you can,” Riley says teasingly, snuggling closer and hugging her best friend tightly. “You only get one more night of this before you get to sleep in your lonely, cold dorm bed all alone.”

“Sure can’t wait.”
Riley rolls her eyes, kicking Maya lightly before rolling over to plug her phone in. Just as she does her phone buzzes, a shot of adrenaline rushing through her when she sees the contact name light up her screen.

**Lucas Friar ♥:** Okay, I know it’s so late but I didn’t want to go to bed without texting you. Today was crazy busy, but good. Can’t wait to tell you all about it. Hope the drive is going okay. Please be safe. I sort of hope you’re already sleeping and you probably won’t see this until you wake up and I should be sleeping too and now I’m just rambling so I’m going to stop here. Goodnight. Love you.

Instantly, she feels a million times lighter. All the stress she put into worrying about communicating with him was completely unnecessary—they’re the same as they’ve always been. Their feelings for each other haven’t changed.

All of them are going to be okay. No matter how far apart they are, no matter what their big purpose, no matter what new friends enter their orbit. Some things will change, but she knows these people and how much they mean to each other never will.

She reaches up to turn off the light as soon as Josh collapses into the other bed, willing herself to sleep and prepare for the final destination waiting just around the corner.

Chapter End Notes

hey everyone!! sorry for the long delay between chapters -- we should be back on track and heading towards the end of the road here! thanks for sticking with me and this story :)

Despite how exhausted she was the night before, Maya is alive with her vibrant energy come morning and very disgruntled that Josh and Riley decided to explore the Vegas strip without her.

“Of course I want to see it,” she says indignantly as Riley packs up her things, giving her an amused eyebrow raise. “You were the one that didn’t even want to come to Vegas. You were all ‘it’s illegal!’”

Josh cracks up, earning a derisive glare from Maya.

Riley smiles at her, shrugging. “I’m sorry, peaches, but you were knocked out. And obviously I don’t think it’s illegal for us to be here. I was referring to those other shenanigans you wanted us to partake in. The city itself is not a crime.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” Maya huffs, plopping down on the bed and crossing her arms. “I’m still pissed. I just want the record to show that this camper is not happy.”

Josh watches her thoughtfully, tossing a glance to his niece. “I wouldn’t mind taking a walk around again if you’re really desperate to see it. You know, if that’s okay with you, Riley.”

Riley thinks on it for a few moments, glancing back and forth between her best friend and her uncle. She’s not super anxious to take the full tour all over again, but she figures Maya and Josh are interested in spending some time alone together anyway. Certainly, she shouldn’t be the one to stand in the way of that. “Oh, yeah, I’ll be fine. I’m just going to pack up and make sure everything is accounted for. Gotta make sure everything is all squared away for tomorrow.”

“Ugh, don’t think about that yet,” Maya groans, jumping to her feet. She takes Riley’s arms, humming excitedly. “First, we’re gonna get to Los Angeles, and we’re going to do all that ridiculous tourist nonsense. We’re going to take the town by storm, you and me.”

“Hello? What about me?”

“You’re like, our entourage. You get to come along, but don’t hover.”
Josh rolls his eyes. “Inviting.”

Riley laughs and sends them off together, Maya taking Josh’s arm and leading him out into the hallway with her usual enthusiasm. Once they disappear around the corner, Josh aiming a playful kick at her shins after she nudges him, Riley closes the door and takes a deep breath.

It feels weird to be standing there alone. After almost ten straight days with constant human interaction, a moment of silence feels wildly out of place. She’s not sure whether it’s a relief or not.

However, it’s definitely a relief to be able to take her time with her morning routine. She allows herself a long shower, using as much hot water as she wants. She blow-dries her hair, putting in the effort to do it in a braided up-do simply because she can. Knowing Maya and their friendship, there will be many selfies taken in Los Angeles later tonight. May as well look presentable.

She opens the curtains and cracks the window, allowing some of the warm summer air to filter into the room. She completely reorganizes her suitcase, making sure all her clothes made it through the duration of the trip and refolding them for easy unpacking when she gets home in a couple of days. Before she can move onto the contents of her string bag, her phone buzzes on the nightstand.

The name that lights up the caller ID makes her heart skip a beat. That beat is all the time she needs to accept the call.

“Hello?”

There’s a brief pause on the other end of the line, before Lucas’s familiar voice meets her ear. “Okay, listen.”

Riley cracks up, more from relief than finding anything humorous. It’s only been a couple of days, but it feels like it’s been eons since she’s heard his voice. All at once, she feels relaxed. The tension in her shoulders from driving and organizing and stressing about their final destination disappears.

“Listen!” he laughs, obviously sharing a similar giddiness. “I told myself I wasn’t going to call. Like, I was going to give it some time to allow for the separation. I was going to be tough and pull through and at least wait until the trip ended. But then I just had so much I wanted to say about the last couple days, and you were the only person I wanted to tell it to.”

Riley wanders over to the armchair by the window, unable to hold back the smile forming on her lips as she plops into it. “The only person? I don’t know if I believe that.”

“Okay, fine. I thought about Zay too.”

“Knew it,” she teases.

“But you were the first person,” he assures her. “Anyway, we’ll get to all that. How was the drive? You’re not driving right now, are you?”

“No, no. Just sitting in the hotel, tidying things up. Maya was all riled up because she didn’t get to look around Vegas last night after driving all day and being tired, so Josh offered to walk around with her. So you couldn’t have picked a better time to call.”

“Whoa, whoa, wait.” He sounds surprised, just as she suspected he would be. “Josh? When did Josh get there? Were you expecting him?”

Riley takes a deep breath before launching into a recap of the last couple of days. Lucas listens as interestedly as he usually does, only interjecting to commentate on Maya’s rash behavior and that
he’s very grateful she didn’t get her killed. Even with the distance already between them, she’s relieved that it doesn’t feel like he’s far away at all. In fact, if she closed her eyes, she could pretend he was there with her. For all intents and purposes, nothing has changed.

“Well, that’s cool. Weird, but cool. Honestly, it’s a little bit of a relief knowing there’s someone else driving with you guys.” There’s a brief pause. “Not that I don’t think you two could handle it on your own.”


“Glad we’re on the same page. Your dad is a chill guy. You know I think so.”

She rolls her eyes. “Whatever. I’m trying not to think about him considering the theatrics I’m bound to get when I step off the plane at JFK. New topic! You called to tell me about A&M. Tell me about it!”

Lucas obliges, talking enthusiastically about his first couple of days on campus. He mentions Vanessa, and Riley’s grateful he already has a trusted lifeline there with him to face the new territory. She tries not to think about how she’s not sure she does. Sure, she has Josh, but he’s three years ahead of her and extremely busy. She’ll have Asher, but she doesn’t want to go into their friendship relying on him when they’ve barely spoken on more than one occasion.

She has a lot of high hopes, but nothing concrete to hold onto. All things considered, that feels like the scariest part.

Still, she can’t help but be effectively distracted by how happy her boyfriend sounds. He’s got the same amount of eagerness as Farkle and Zay did, but it feels even more important and significant coming from him. She knows more than anyone how hard the last couple of years of high school were for him. Hearing this level of excitement in his voice is like music to her ears. She never wants him to lose this spark again.

“But hey, I’m sure anything I’m describing isn’t nearly as cool as Vegas. How is it?”

“Trust me, you’re not missing out on much. Josh and I walked the stretch of it in like an hour. It’s a whole lot of spectacle and since I’m still underage it’s not as though there’s a whole lot I can do.”

“If you say so,” he says. “I wouldn’t know any better. I’m just the silly little cowboy you left back in Texas. You could be off to bigger and better things.”

She’s thankful that his tone is playful. “Stop that.”

“What happens in Vegas…”

“I promise you that if I was going to pull some wild stunt, you’d be the first to know.”

“How sweet.”

“It is pretty though. Especially at night with all the lights.” Riley kicks her legs over the armrest idly. “That’s all Josh and I did after walking around for a while. They had this really nice light show with all these fountains so we just watched that and talked.”

“That sounds very in-character of you. I’m glad to hear it.”

She hums, trying not to think about how she’s going to miss him again the moment they hang up. Luckily, he pulls her out of her own head when he makes a weird indistinct noise, catching her
attention. “What was that?”

“Sorry,” he says quickly. “Dropped something. I’m like, trying to organize my life in this dorm room while also talking to you and I’m trying not to accidentally drop thumbtacks all over the floor. You know, that’s just what I need for my first week. Foot full of tacks.”

Riley laughs. A small part of her feels like she should leave him alone—he’s already got things to be focusing on and she should really leave him to it. Regardless of how much she doesn’t want their conversation to end. “You can go, if you need to.”

“Um, over my cold, lifeless body,” he says emphatically. She hears the thumbtacks rattle in the background.

“I’d hate for you to get a foot full of tack. I’m not worth that.”

“Listen. I’d take a thousand thumbtacks right in the flesh if it meant I got to talk to you.” It’s such a outlandish statement, but Lucas has a weird way of making ridiculous sappy statements sound one hundred percent earnest and sincere. It’s one of her favorite little things about him. “Tack me up.”

“Oh my God,” she giggles. “You are so…”

“Charming? Amazing? Awe-inspiring?”

“Silly.”

He hesitates. “Alright, fair. Miss you too.”

They continue to chat for a while longer, talking about what feels like everything and yet nothing at all. Riley doesn’t even realize how much time has passed until she glances at the clock, figuring Maya and Josh should be back any minute now. As her eyes roam the room she lingers on her open suitcase, noticing the dark cotton of his sweatshirt poking out from under her clothes for the airport tomorrow.

“Oh, right. I almost forgot—why are you leaving your clothes with me?”

Lucas hums knowingly. “I’m assuming you found the sweatshirt.”

“Yes. I did. And I appreciated it,” she says sincerely. “But what about you? What if you need it?”

“Riley, the average low temperature for College Station in the winter is forty degrees. I have a jean jacket and two other sweatshirts. I think I’ll survive. You know what the average low temperature for NYU is?”

She raises her eyebrows. “Do you?”

“No,” he admits. “But way less than that. You’re going to need it more than me. That much I know.”

Riley stares at the sweatshirt, twirling the jellybean ring on its chain in her fingers. “Thank you. For thinking of me.”

“Of course.” There’s a slight pause. “Besides. Had to make sure you didn’t forget me somehow.”

The notion is ridiculous enough to earn an eye roll he can’t see. Even though she knows he’s being sarcastic, she still feels the need to refute such an accusation. “I will never forget about you.”
A longer pause. Lucas's voice is softer when he speaks again. “I know.”

“Josh and I talked about you, actually,” Riley says vaguely. “When we were watching the light show.”

“Oh, did you? That’s mildly terrifying.”

“Good things, obviously.”

“I’ll take your word for it.”

“We were just talking about long distance and everything,” she explains quietly. “He and Maya are figuring out some stuff too, and the distance thing is going to be an experiment for them this semester. He asked me what I thought about our situation and such.”

“Right, right.” Lucas hesitates. “What did you say?”

Riley tilts her head against the back of the chair. “We care about each other. We both want it to work. As long as that stays true, I don’t see how it could go wrong. And you know how strongly I believe in things.”

“That I do,” he agrees. She can’t see it, but she can imagine his soft smile. She beams instinctively at the thought. “And I don’t know, maybe it’s too early to say, but things don’t really feel different. Do you feel any different?”

“Nope.”

“Nice. Think we’re off to a solid start.”

Riley is startled when the hotel room door opens behind her, Maya striding into the room with Josh on her heels. She has to double-take when she realizes the signature beanie is situated on her friend’s blonde head rather than her uncle’s. She isn’t sure she’s ever seen anyone else wear it besides him.

“See? What did I tell you?” Maya says triumphantly, holding out her arms in Riley’s direction. “Just as I suspected. Who’s on the phone, Riles? Huckleberry calling in? How’s the reception from the good old tin can and wire?”

Lucas grabs her attention again. “Maya back?”

“Good guess,” Riley says with a grin.

“Wasn’t hard to deduce. My fight or flight instincts started kicking in even from a thousand miles away.”

“Whatever mean things he’s saying about me, he can continue it another time. Tell him goodbye, because we’ve got ground to cover. Only four more hours until the west coast!” Maya jogs over to her, leaning in close so she can speak into the phone. “Bye, Ranger Rick! Hope the cows are doing good! Don’t forget to lock up your tractor when you park it outside class so no one steals it!”

“Okay, now she’s just being petty.”

Riley cracks up, nudging Maya away and stretching to keep the phone out of her reach. “We’ll talk later. Maybe after I get home.”

“Sounds good. Fly safe. Text me before you take off.”
“I will.” Riley was hoping for a more substantial goodbye, but with Maya right over her shoulder it feels a little less genuine. “Love you.”


The call ends, Riley tossing Maya a disdainful glare as she climbs out of the armchair. Her best friend merely pouts back mockingly, throwing her arm around her shoulders. “Oh, come on now. No frowns. We’re off to the best coast, only smiles here!”

“Also, you’re not driving in one of the worst traffic cities in the world,” Josh says, slinging his bag over his shoulder and holding the door open for them. “You’re welcome.”

--

It’s a short four hours from Vegas to Los Angeles, a far cry from the double digit days they had been clocking in previously. Josh drives the entire way, claiming they’ve done enough hours and he’s barely gotten started. Riley doesn’t complain, watching amusedly as Maya plays D.J. and argues with Josh about his pretentious taste in music.

The moment they drop their bags at their new hotel Maya is calling an Uber, gearing up to head up to the Hollywood Walk of Fame.

Just as she predicted, the two of them take plenty of photos, Josh doing a very good job of playing photographer when they need someone to take a wide shot. Riley makes a point of offering to take pictures of them as well, but they both wave her off for the most part. Maya only breaks her cool façade to get a photo with him in front of one of the art installation pieces in downtown—pretentious enough for the both of them, Riley assumes.

Josh only breaks his cool façade long enough to nudge her to send the photo to him.

The day disappears far too quickly with all the exploring they get done, and before Riley realizes it they’re rolling back into their hotel room and the daylight has faded to night. Josh falls asleep fairly quickly considering the driving he put in but Riley lays awake long after they turn out the lights, thinking about her flight home tomorrow and everything that’s going to happen before that and everything that’s already happened in the past week and a half.

Maya’s whisper from the darkness next to her makes her jump in spite of herself. “Riles?”

“Yeah?”

She hears her best friend chuckle. “I was going to ask if you were awake, but now I don’t see the point. Can’t sleep?”

“No.” Riley twiddles her thumbs. “You?”

“Obviously not.” Maya sits up as quietly as possible, crossing her legs and giving Riley a tired look as her eyes adjust to the dark. She casts a thoughtful look towards Josh’s slumbering form, blonde hair almost blue in the moonlight. “Don’t want to wake him up though.”

Riley thinks to herself for a long moment, before a mischievous grin grows across her face. She sits up, tossing the covers off her and taking Maya’s hand. “Bay window. Bay window right now.”

“What? Bay window?” Maya allows herself to be yanked from the bed. “What are you—?”

Riley hushes her, scurrying to grab her shoes and handing Maya hers as well. Still in her pajamas,
she leads her best friend by the hand and out the door, jogging down the hall towards the stairs to the lobby.

“Sneaking out?” Maya gasps as she’s tugged down the steps. “Think I’ve been a bad influence on you.”

Riley tosses her a look over her shoulder, pulling the stairwell door open and peering out into the hall. Slipping past the front desk where an exhausted attendant sits waiting for late night arrivals, both girls step into the lounge area beyond the lobby.

In the morning, Riley knows the area will be filled with people eating their complimentary continental breakfast and preparing for the day ahead. In the late night hour, it’s deserted and dimly lit, the moon offering more illumination than the emergency lights set up along the foot of the wall.

Riley makes her way to the nook carved into the wall where the biggest window awaits them. She yanks some pillows off some nearby armchairs, placing them comfortably into the bench and gesturing for Maya to join her.

“Sneaking out and pillow rearranging,” Maya says with a click of her tongue, climbing onto the bench to face Riley and shaking her head. “I raised you so well. Can’t believe the bay window made it all the way out here, though.”

“The bay window has been with us this whole trip. Trust me.” Riley cocks her head at her affectionately, examining her curiously. “Excited?”

“Think so.” There’s a moment of silence as Maya nods slowly, glancing out the window towards the night sky. She smiles sheepishly. “A little scared.”

“Scared? Of what?”

Her eyes seem remarkably blue in the light. She shrugs, exhaling a sigh. “You know, back in New York and at Abigail Adams, I was the best of the best. I was one of the only artists in our class so I stood out. And obviously there was something worth looking into, because I got accepted and now here I am.”

“Exactly.”

“But now I’m just one of the pack,” she says timidly. “All the other kids in my class, they were also the best of the best in their hometowns. It’s like, if there’s so many of us, how do I stand out? How can my work be worth taking a second glance at if everyone I’m surrounded by has the exact same talent?”

Riley opens her mouth to argue, but Maya shakes her head.

“I know it’s dumb. I got in and everything. But I don’t know.” She takes a deep breath, her eyes glittering with tears. “I just don’t want us to have taken this giant trip for nothing. I don’t want to waste everyone’s time.”

“Maya,” Riley says gently. She reaches forward and takes her chin in her fingers, making her look her in the eyes. “You have talent. And yes, so do all these other students you’re about to spend the next four years complaining about your classes with and griping about all the art you have to make that you don’t want to make because it’s for school. All these other kids are just as talented and pretentious and obsessed with their craft as you are.”
Maya chokes out a laugh, dipping her head down bashfully.

“But you’re still unique. Your talent is your own, no matter how many other people have talents of their own to bring to the table.” Riley takes her hand. “Isn’t that what art is all about? All subjective and personal, how no artist can portray the same thing as another. And we know your perspective is one worth seeing. Hell, we fought the school board for the chance to save it.”

“Yeah, I guess.” Maya swallows. “I just want to be good enough.”

Riley gets the feeling she’s not just talking about her art. For all the years she’s known her, to her conversation with Lucas on the way to Austin, it’s obvious that her best friend isn’t nearly as confident in her own self-worth as she lets on.

“You are,” Riley says assertively. Maya locks eyes with her. “Maya, you are. No one changes that. Not even CalArts.”

A couple of tears slip down her cheeks. She wipes them away hastily, giving Riley a watery smile. “How is it you still have so much faith in me? Don’t you run out eventually?”

“Never. It’s like we always say.” Riley lifts their linked hands. “This is forever.”

Maya takes a shaky breath, nodding. Despite the glossy look in her eyes, her resolve seems stronger than when they sat down.

“Forever.”

--

The drive to the California Institute of the Arts is far too short.

Maya is alive with restless energy, practically bouncing in her seat the whole way there. She talks animatedly from the back seat while Riley and Josh humor her, asking her as many questions as they can come up with about what her first week is going to be like and what she’s going to do. Time passes almost instantaneously.

When they pull into the parking lot and hop out of the van, it feels like both a triumph and a tragedy to touch ground on the campus. The conflicting emotions of a journey coming to a well-earned end.

Josh helps them both grab their bags from the back of the van, Riley shocked to realize it’s the last time she’ll see Van Cory. Even beat up, rugged, and for all the times Maya referred to it as garbage on the open road, she’s going to miss it. For the past week, it’s been home.

Just another friend she’s leaving behind.

Katy and Shawn are waiting for them by the admissions building, both grinning eagerly as they approach. It’s obvious that even with the stunt Maya pulled the last time she saw them by bolting for the road without their consent, they’re both incredibly proud of her and awed to be standing there all the way in Los Angeles. Riley knows the feeling.

Maya drops her bags just in time to be suffocated with a hug from them both, smiling uncontrollably as they barrel her with a group embrace. Riley is hit with an ache for her own parents. Even if she never wants to admit it, she’s missed them way more than she anticipated.

Shawn pulls away from Maya, nodding at Josh over her head. He smiles at them, pointing to Riley.
“Your dad is going to kill you.”

“Don’t I know it.”

Katy braces Maya’s shoulders, wiggling excitedly. “Alright, baby girl. You ready to do this?”

“Sure am.” She glances over her shoulder in their direction. “Just give me a minute?”

Shawn steps back, holding his hands up in surrender. He wraps an arm around Katy’s shoulder, nodding Maya towards them. “Take as many minutes as you need.”

She nods gratefully to them, spinning around and walking back over to face Riley and Josh. Riley can’t quite believe how many times she’s watched her friends stand in front of her like this in the last few days. Every time, it doesn’t get any easier.

Josh steps forward, obviously uncertain with how to properly say goodbye given their uncertain relationship status. “Make sure to tell me about your first day.”

“Oh, count on it,” Maya promises him, smirking. “You’re going to get so sick of me.”

“Well, haven’t managed it yet. You’d think I would’ve learned by now.”

Maya rolls her eyes, moving forward to pull him into a hug. He sighs with relief, hugging her back tightly with the approval from her.

When they pull apart, Maya hesitates for half a second before pressing a quick kiss to his cheek. For all their sass, their bashfulness comes through again as the moment passes between them, Josh laughing awkwardly and breaking into a grin.

She smiles back, nudging him to defuse the tension. “Alright, get out of the way. More important business to attend to.”

“Of course,” Josh says amicably, bowing and stepping back. He pats Riley’s shoulder as she approaches, exchanging a nervous smile with him.

It’s surprisingly easy to look her best friend in the eyes and think about goodbye. Maybe she’s grown used to it by now. But the moment she opens her mouth to say something encouraging, nothing comes out.

Maya seems to be having a similar struggle. She smiles warmly, laughing in spite of herself. “I know there are a million and one things I should say. Really, trust me, I know this. But I’ve got nothing.”

“I get you,” Riley assures her. “I know exactly what you mean.”

Maya nods, dropping her eyes to the floor. When she lifts her gaze again to lock eyes with Riley, she raises her hand. The friendship ring has been put back on her finger, just covering the tattoo Riley knows is etched into her skin just beneath it. “Until I die. And then some.”

Riley smiles, mirroring the gesture and holding her hand out to her. “Thunder.”

“Lightning,” Maya responds, clasping their hands together.

There are a million and one things to say, but only one thought Riley knows she wants Maya to hear. She squeezes her fingers, smiling so hard the corners of her mouth hurt. Every part of her stings. She wonders if it’s possible to be so happy for someone it kills you.
“Go be an artist, peaches,” Riley says proudly. “Share your gift with the world.”

With all the tears she’s shed since the trip began, it doesn’t surprise Riley that it seems as though she doesn’t have any left to give.

Maya, however, is not so dried up. Her eyes gloss over before she disconnects their hands just briefly enough to pull Riley into a bone-crushing hug.

Suddenly, the reality of the situation hits her all at once. The moment she wraps her arms around Maya and hugs her back as tightly as she possibly can, she feels it more harshly than she’s felt it yet, like a sucker punch straight to the gut. She can’t breathe. She can’t move. All she can do is hold her and try to keep her balance as the weight of the world crashes down on her shoulders.

Because it’s not just Maya. It’s Lucas. It’s Farkle. It’s Zay, and Smackle. It’s every late night conversation and bay window session and bad idea and good lesson. All the goodbyes to be had and new worlds to explore. It’s every friendship in every little pocket town in this big, big world full of galaxies just as intricate and beautiful and sacred as her own.

For that brief second, the entire universe exists between her and her best friend.

She’s heavy with the gravity of it when she has to let go.

“I’ll tell you everything, I promise,” Maya says hastily. It takes Riley a moment to catch up, finally managing a nod. “Have an amazing trip back and make sure to tell me all about NYU. Don’t forget me.”

Even with the numbness, Riley rejects the notion on instinct. “I haven’t forgotten about Pluto, have I? You’re not going anywhere.”

Maya breaks into a grin. She gives Riley one more quick embrace that she barely has a chance to return before Maya is jogging back towards her parents, blowing a kiss over her shoulder.

Josh walks up to join Riley, stuffing his hands in his pockets as the two of them watch Maya stride up the stairs to the admissions building. Off to be something extraordinary, as she was always destined to be.

Riley manages to hold it together as she and Josh walk towards the edge of campus, but the gravity is a hefty burden to carry. She can feel her lower lip trembling as Josh calls an Uber. He’s talking to her, but she can’t hear it. She’s preoccupied with the pain forming in the back of her throat.

They’re gone. They’re all actually gone.

No amount of happiness, pride, and optimism could withstand the hurricane that hits when she realizes it.

“Should be here in about five minutes. Then we’ll—Riley?”

She lifts her gaze from the ground, locking eyes with her uncle. His look of concern triggers the last of her resolve to crumble.

Riley tries her best to keep it together but cracks, sputtering out a few tears before breaking into sobs. Josh calls off the Uber and guides her away from the sidewalk, dropping onto a bench near the sign welcoming them to campus. He attempts to console her at first but settles into simply holding her while she cries, overwhelmed by the sudden end of the road. No more friends to send off. No more miles to drive.
It’s the black hole, swallowing her entire galaxy until there’s nothing left.
- S O P H O M O R E  Y E A R -

Sophomore year is the year Maya Hart learns about jealousy.

It’s not as though she’s never felt it before.

She understands jealousy in its most basic form—resenting someone for having something you don’t have. Jealousy hung over her when she and Riley followed Josh to NYU and she saw him hanging out with older, more experienced college girls. Jealousy stung her when Lucas would make some lovesick comment about Riley and not her, even if the reason was more for being left out than her own desire to have Lucas be smitten with her. Jealousy used to haunt her every night when she younger, thinking about all the attention those beautiful, perfect kids must get from her father, who never spared a second thought towards her the moment he walked out the door.

Maya is no stranger to jealousy. In some ways, she feels like she knows it all too well.

The only reason sophomore year is any different is because for the first time, she feels like she’s losing something that has always been hers. That she figured she would never have to worry about not having.

The moment Riley and Lucas start officially dating she knows things are going to change. She’s not kidding herself here, and she knows how relationships work. But something about the shift in dynamic rubs her the wrong way and although she tries half-heartedly to keep herself in check, she can’t help the tiny bouts of venom that start to leak into her digs at Lucas.

Even still, she and him have always had a slightly antagonistic rivalry going, so no one comments much on it for the first few months of sophomore year.
Life proceeds as normally as it possibly could. The group meets after school to study at Topanga’s, where Maya keeps half her attention on her friends and half of her attention on the beanie-clad boy now working behind the counter. Cory continues to teach them weirdly specific lessons with very thinly-veiled ties to history. Maya gets her weekly sleepovers with Riley. For all intents and purposes, even with the six of them growing up and the group dynamic growing with them, there’s nothing to fear.

Everything changes the day Maya arrives at the bay window to find the curtain drawn, leaving her out on the fire escape in the November chill alone.

She’s not sure what it is about the window that feels so irreparable. Maybe because it’s always been her safe place, their safe place—somewhere always open for her to crawl into when things get rough. The bay window is something she and Riley share.

Riley has been that safe space for her for as long as she can remember. And she’s never had to share her.

Naturally, Maya’s forced to spend more time than usual with the exact person taking so much of Riley’s time when they’re partnered together in home economics.

The worst thing about being mad at Lucas Friar is that he makes it so difficult. He’s so positive, and friendly, and disgustingly agreeable. Even with all the ways she comes up with to tear him down, he doesn’t seem to let it faze him. He keeps on trucking, working with her as politely as ever and not even mentioning it unless it comes up in some other form.

Even worse, when the time finally does come where he confronts the issue, he’s so irritatingly earnest. It’s like he wants to fix their issues so sincerely it almost makes Maya contagiously want to fix them too. She digs her heels in harder just out of spite.

What does he want her to say, anyway? She knows her feelings aren’t necessarily valid, no matter how intensely she’s feeling them. She’s going to be angry about it forever, but she’s not going to try and act like she’s being reasonable with it.

The first attempt at tackling the issue arrives when their bickering results in them failing their assignment to bake a layer cake, meaning both of them have to stay after school to make up the grade. Maya’s already in a pissy mood considering Riley just told her earlier that afternoon that she had to cancel their weekend plans. Even though it’s not Lucas’s fault, spending more time with him than absolutely necessary is a dangerous requirement with her nerves so frayed.

Of course, that’s when Lucas decides to put his best foot forward.

“You know, you’ve been really on edge lately,” he points out, joining her at the lab table as he puts down the last of the ingredients from the pantry.

She glares at him out of the corner of her eye, making an effort not to shove him off his stool.

“Wow, thanks for the evaluation. It’s funny, I just can’t remember where I asked.”

“You know I didn’t mean it in any sort of way,” he says defensively, tossing her a look. Maya locks eyes with him for a brief second before looking away at the counter, tapping her feet against the lower bar of her seat. ‘I’m just saying that like, you’ve been sort of harsh with me lately and I wanted to know if I did something wrong.”

Maya rolls her eyes. “You? Doing something wrong? Please, Huckleberry, let’s talk with some realism here.”
“Then why are you acting like this?” he prompts. “Ever since the school year started you’ve been picking on me. Which, I know, that’s how we are or whatever. But it’s been a lot recently and I don’t think you plan to lighten up any time soon. Especially when we’re with the whole group. Riley noticed and we’re both concerned. So, what’s the problem?”

The mention of Riley hits a sore spot. But as she’s done her whole life, she gets angrier rather than more willing to open up. She pulls the recipe towards her, pretending like he’s not even there anymore. “Look, I just want to make this stupid cake. Can we just do that, please?”

Lucas raises his hands in surrender, but it’s obvious he’s frustrated with her. This makes her happier than she’d like to admit—it’s a lot easier to stay mad when the other person is irritable too.

The two of them work in tense silence for a few minutes, mixing all the dry ingredients. Maya pulls forward the vanilla and eggs while Lucas ticks off the instructions they’ve already completed. She resists the urge to spill vanilla extract over his perfect little checkmarks.

“I just think you’d feel better if you talked about whatever it is,” he says quietly, breaking the silence.

“Do you not know how to drop something?” Maya groans, picking up a cookbook from the corner of the table and holding it out for him. She smiles condescendingly. “Here, let me show you.”

She lets the cookbook hit the floor with a satisfying bang. Lucas stares down at it, obviously focusing on keeping his temper in check.

“Real mature. All I’m saying is you make things worse when you don’t talk about it. Especially when it involves other people. Like, if it’s your business and it’s something personal going on then I get that. I get keeping that to yourself. But if it involves me then I’d rather you confront me about it so we can work it out rather than put up with your—,”

“Jesus, Ranger Rick. Ever consider maybe everything isn’t about you?” She catches the slightly wounded look on his face. It makes her feel a little better. “Fine. You want me to do something about it?”

“Yes,” he says in relief. He turns slightly in his seat to face her, his eyes twinkling eagerly.

As if he can’t afford to have one thing in his life not be practically perfect in every way. Maya grits her teeth, fiddling with the lid of the egg carton when an idea suddenly hits her. It’s a bad idea, she knows it is. She’s only going to make things one hundred times worse. But she hasn’t been spending much time with Riley lately, so it’s not as if a bad idea should be completely out of character.

“Fine,” Maya trails off. Lucas waits patiently as she gets her thoughts together, nudging open the carton and pulling an egg out. It’s cold in her fingers. “Here’s what I’m thinking.”

She stares down at the fresh egg in the palm of her hand. Clean. Crack-free. Perfectly contained. Then, she turns to face Lucas next to her, giving him a tight beam before reaching up and breaking the egg on his head. The look of shock on his face for half a second before it turns to annoyance is more than worth the bad decision. She milks the gesture a little longer, making sure the last of the yolk drips onto the crown of his head before she tosses the egg shells to the floor.

“Wow,” she says with an exhale, breaking into a grin. “You’re right. I feel so much better.”

Maya grabs the vanilla and uncaps it, lifting it to her nose to inhale the comforting scent. Lucas
takes a deep breath, opening his mouth to speak.

“That’s the difference between you and me, Huckleberry,” she interrupts him, smiling contently at the bottle before reaching up to drizzle some of the extract over his head as well. He closes his eyes to keep egg from dripping into them, doing an impressive job of staying completely still while she pours vanilla all over his clothes. But she can tell from the way his fists are clenched that he’s angry. “You can have your conversations with Riley and talk about your feelings and do whatever you do to make yourself feel better. That’s fine, whatever works for you. But I’m a person of action and I don’t feel like just spewing my feelings all over the place.”

She drops the near empty vanilla bottle on the table. Lucas exhales, reaching up to wipe the yolk from his face.

“So maybe if you could just let it go, that would be awesome.”

Lucas presses his lips together in a thin line, nodding slowly. Maya smiles, kicking the discarded egg shells away from her shoes.

“Okay. I’m flexible,” Lucas says flatly. He picks up the container of flour, gathering some in his hand as he turns back to face her. She flinches when he flicks some in her face—minimal damage compared to her attack on him, but more than she was expecting to get back. She coughs, opening her eyes to glare at him. “We can handle this however you want.”

There’s an awkwardly tense moment where neither of them move. Then, both of them launch into action, grabbing whatever ingredients they can and going to war.

Maya grabs the egg carton and ducks behind the table as Lucas continues to toss flour at her, leaning around the wood to hit him with an egg whenever an opportunity presents itself. The second she runs out of ammo she scrambles to her feet, attempting to reach the other side of the room and the pantry when Lucas douses her with their cake batter, still just a dry mix of flour, sugar, and baking powder.

She gasps, freezing up slightly before scowling and launching over another lab table to grab the nearest ingredient she can find—in this case, vegetable oil. Lucas slides out of the way just as she uncaps it, sloshing as much towards him as she can muster without making herself much worse.

“How won’t you leave this alone?” she shouts, abandoning the oil for another round of eggs.

She manages to get him right on the torso, causing him to duck down behind one of the tables. He starts to answer when she launches another one at him, only speaking when he pops up again. “Because I’m sick of you coming after me all the time! What did I ever do to you?”

“Ugh, nothing!”

“Then what is the issue?” Lucas snaps in exasperation.

Maya can feel hot tears forming in the back of her throat and the corners of her eyes. She panics to keep them at bay, backing towards the display in the back of the classroom. Even still, her voice sounds choked when she yells back at him. “Riley is my best friend. She’s my best friend.”

“I know that!” he says, giving her a bewildered look. “I’m not trying to do anything to hurt that!”

“You don’t have to,” she spits, whipping away from him and coming face to face with the cooling rack.
On it are a beautiful arrangement of completed cakes—the work of their fellow classmates. Feeling trapped by the situation, Maya lets her instincts take over and reaches out to take one, brandishing it out in front of her and swiveling around to look at Lucas.

His eyes are wide. He holds a hand out warningly. “Maya, don’t.”

Finally, the upper hand. Without hesitation, Maya throws the cake as hard as she can in his direction. Lucas ducks out of the way just as someone else comes through the doorway to greet them. Maya realizes her mistake a second too late.

Riley is only halfway through an upbeat greeting when she gets a home economics cake straight to the face.

Lucas leaps back to his feet, whipping around and staring at his girlfriend in horror as Maya lifts her hands to cover her dropped jaw. There’s only a couple of seconds of tense silence, but it feels like an eternity.

“Riley…”

She lifts her hand to stop them, taking a painstakingly long time to wipe the frosting from her eyes. She licks her lips, taking a deep breath.

Maya moves forward first. “Riley, I’m so sorry—,”

“Don’t,” Riley says, her voice trembling. “Just don’t.”

She blinks tearfully at both of them before spinning on her heel and storming out of the classroom. Lucas glances at Maya before jogging out the door after Riley, leaving Maya standing in the culinary chaos she created.

If Riley wasn’t angry with her before, she certainly is now. Even when she’s so terrified of messing things up and losing what she cares about most, she finds a way to screw it up even worse than before.

She curses and stomps on a broken egg shell, crushing it under her foot.

---

Although the week-long sentences of detention and a cold shoulder from Riley are punishment enough, Maya’s surprised when the incident blows over without much commentary from any of them. She figures Lucas took the same approach she did and apologized to Riley on his own, neither of them making any effort to discuss it between the two of them. For all intents and purposes the baking disaster did bring one success—Maya doubts Lucas will ever try to talk things out with her again.

But the situation continues to escalate. Even though Maya knows she should leave him alone, that the best thing to do to maintain the status quo would be to let things lie, she can’t help her own bad mood and it starts to bleed into everything else.

She starts mouthing off to her parents, something Shawn is both very obviously unprepared for and hurt by. Smackle makes a point of staying quiet whenever she’s around, likely to avoid her wrath. Farkle and Zay don’t seem too fazed, but they do get noticeably uncomfortable whenever she lashes out at Lucas. The harsher she gets, the more things seem to fall apart.

She likes to tell herself their group is bound to fall apart naturally anyway, but it doesn’t make her
feel any better.

The bad blood between her and Lucas only gets worse. She’s finally riled him up to the point where he’s started snapping back, a fact that clearly makes the rest of the group highly uncomfortable. Riley is growing increasingly tired of being caught in the middle.

So tired, in fact, that she takes matters into her own hands. One night when tensions are high after Lucas and Maya start a fight over who was supposed to actually hang out with her that evening, Riley finally cracks.

“Oh my God, enough!” Riley shouts, leaping up from her spot on her bed while the two of them argue in the middle of her bedroom. It’s a scene they’ve played out too many times to count at this point in the semester. “I can’t take this anymore. I really can’t.”

“Good, I agree,” Maya says shortly. “Will you tell him that you and I were supposed to do our Red Planet re-watch tonight so we can be done with this?”

“Riley, will you please tell Maya that you and I are supposed to be working on our chemistry report and that was always the plan?”

Riley groans in annoyance, pressing her fingers to her temples before spinning to face them. “Not that! I’m sick of this. This stupid thing going on between the two of you. All you’ve done since the school year started is fight, and I’m always caught in the middle, and I can’t do it anymore. I just can’t.”

“This isn’t that big an issue,” Maya disputes. She glares at Lucas, crossing her arms. “If we can just come to the consensus that it’s my turn to hang out with you—,”

“Oh, yeah, of course. Because we always end up bowing to you and your opinion.”

“Shut up, Sundance.”

“I’m not a toy!” Riley shrieks, clearly at her wits end. She looks back and forth between her best and her boyfriend, tears welling in her eyes that she attempts to hold back. She straightens up, swallowing hard and clearing her throat. “I’m not some item that you two have joint custody over and pass back and forth. I make my own decisions.”

Maya bites her tongue. Lucas stuffs his hands in his pockets, dipping his head down to the floor sheepishly. If the two of them have anything in common, it’s that nothing impacts them more than Riley Matthews.

“And I love both of you, and want to hang out with both of you. But I can’t do this bad blood thing anymore. So you’re going to fix it.”

Maya scoffs. “How? How do you see that happening, Riles?”

“Because, I’m leaving,” she declares. She grabs her homework off her desk and backs towards her door. “You two are going to stay in here and work all of this out, so that when I come back you can tell me what the hell is going on. And then we can all move on. But I’m walking out.”

She steps out into the hallway. Lucas bites his lip, watching her leave. “Riley, this is your room.”

“I know what I’m doing,” she snaps, giving them one last glare before slamming the door behind her. The silence left behind is deafening.
Maya stands her ground, staring down at her feet and kicking at the carpet. Lucas sighs, walking away from her and collapsing onto the bay window.

“Don’t sit there.”

“Why not?”

“That’s where I sit.”

Lucas rolls his eyes, scooting forward and situating on the floor in front of the window seat instead. He gives her a disdainful look. “Better?”

Maya doesn’t offer a response, turning away from him and pacing the other side of the room. She can feel Lucas’s puppy dog eyes watching her, setting off her irritation like usual. She tosses him a harsh glare over her shoulder. “Stop.”

He holds his hands up, making a face.

She continues to pace, clasping her hands together and laughing in spite of herself. “Riley will have to come back eventually. What’s she going to do, sleep in the living room?”

“You’d really sit in here doing nothing all night rather than talk about this?”

“You wouldn’t?” Maya raises her eyebrows at him. “You want to have a heart-to-heart with me?”

“I just want this to stop,” Lucas says tiredly. He props his elbows on his knees. “I’m tired of fighting with you all the time. And I’m tired of Riley being caught in the middle. She doesn’t deserve it. I think even you can agree with me on that.”

“Of course she doesn’t,” she hisses. She crosses her arms for a sense of security. Being vulnerable is the last thing she wants, especially with him. “But that’s not the point. The point is that we’re not going to talk about this. I’m not talking about this with you.”

“Well, fine,” Lucas says flatly. He leans back against the base of the bay window. “But I’m going to talk to Riley.”


“Because I’m not going to keep putting her through all of this.” She wants it to be easy to be angry at him. She wants him to be dislikeable. If he was, she knows she’d feel less pissed at herself. “She deserves to know how I’m feeling about the situation. And I’m tired of hiding things from her, even the small things. I don’t want to have any secrets from her.” He tilts his head at her. “I thought you didn’t either.”

Maya feels guilt churn in the pit of her stomach. Because Lucas is right—she was the one who made such a big stink about not keeping things from Riley, and yet here she is. Bottling up her feelings about possibly losing her and lashing out at everyone else in the process. She should respect Lucas’s desire to be honest with Riley, if not understand it completely. In a lot of ways, she wants to do the same thing.

But she can’t, and he can’t either. Because she knows her behavior has been out of line, and unreasonable, and irrational. She knows it, and if someone points it out to Riley, she’s going to realize it too. And she’s going to lose her even more quickly than she already is.

“No.” Maya shakes her head frantically, swallowing hard. “No, you’re not going to do that.”
“We both can. We can just get all of this out and move on.” Lucas climbs to his feet, trying to meet her eyes. “Aren’t you tired of being mad all the time?”

“Will you shut up and listen to me?” She makes her glare especially harsh. Lucas goes quiet, gritting his teeth. The moment she has silence, she forces herself to start doing damage control. “None of us are saying anything. We’re going to act like everything is fine and go on as normal like we always do. You and I don’t have anything to talk about. I’m not saying anything to her. You’re not saying anything to her. We’re both going to keep our mouths shut—,”

“No,” Lucas shouts. “You don’t get to tell me what to do!”

For all the names she’s called him, all the digs she’s made towards him, all the ridicule she’s put him through, Lucas has never really raised his voice at her. She and Lucas are made of the same base components, most dominantly anger, so she knows he can be vicious. Zay’s told them enough stories. But she’s never been on the other end of it.

Now she has, and it’s enough to get her to stop barking orders. She stares at him, uncertain what to do next but stubborn enough to hold his gaze.

Lucas hesitates, obviously catching up with his temper. Maya knows that despite his intimidating stature he would never hurt her, no matter how badly she pissed him off. The way he’s mentally calming himself down proves it. She hates the fact that she doesn’t think she would do the same.

“You don’t tell me what to do,” Lucas repeats. He’s no longer shouting, but his voice is dangerously low. It’s almost more intimidating that way. “I let people tell me what to do all the time, and it ruined my freshman year. I’m not letting that happen again.”

Maya feels her eyes gloss over with tears. She blinks them away, chewing the inside of her cheek. “So, what?”

“We can still work this out. Whatever issue you have with me, you can work it out with me. But if we can’t, then I’m going to tell Riley my side of the story. I owe her that. You owe her that. If we’re going to continue to put her through this stupid feud, then I’m letting her in on what’s going on. I’m not keeping things from her.” Lucas exhales, locking eyes with her. His expression is almost pleading. “Talk to me, Maya. We can figure out whatever it is. That’s what friends do.”

She wants to. She wants to stop being angry and put the walls down and see if there’s some way to make this entire situation work out. If there’s some way to make her not feel as though Riley is going to leave her in the dust the moment she realizes she’s so much better than her, the moment she realizes how petty and pathetic and selfish she actually is. She wants to believe that things will work out.

But all she feels is resentment. Resentment towards him and his stupid perfect face, resentment towards Riley for obviously preferring him over her, resentment towards herself for not being good enough to deserve either of them and their friendship. So, she lashes out instead.

Maya takes a deep breath, looking him over as she preps her last plan of attack. “Who said we were friends?”

Lucas blinks, offering a half-smile that’s more like a grimace as he absorbs the hit. Regardless of how good of friends he figured they actually were it’s obvious the words hurt, which is exactly what she wanted. No matter what happens next, she feels a sick sense of victory in the fact that she at least got the fatal blow.
“You do what you want, Maya,” he says amicably, stepping away from her. “At least I can say I tried.”

With that, Maya watches as Lucas opens the bay window and climbs out, leaving her standing there alone in the ruins of her own destruction all over again. It’s funny that no matter how many times she finds herself standing in her own regret, she can’t seem to stop doing it when the next opportunity presents itself.

But she knows when Riley comes back through that door and sees her sitting alone, everything is going to explode. She spends the next hour or so bracing herself for the demolition.

--

As she expected, the confrontation with Riley goes less than stellar. She offers Riley an ultimatum she knows she can’t accept, and when all is said and done Maya walks herself right out of the bay window. She makes the decision to step out onto the fire escape and away from her best friend of almost ten years.

There’s a brief moment where she considers turning back, apologizing for everything and trying to fix everything she’s destroyed in the last couple of years. But she can’t face it, and the fact of the matter is, she’s not sure she can.

Whatever. Riley is better off without her. This, she’s always known.

Still, the tears are hot on her face as she takes off down the street and she doesn’t think she has anywhere to go. In the past, if a situation like this arose she would instantly find herself in the place she just stormed away from. Scrambling for another outlet, she takes the subway without thinking much and finds herself on the doorstep of Minkus International, staring up at the imposing building in front of her. Fitting, as she already feels two feet small.

She rings a buzzer to be let in by a doorman, wiping the tears from her face as she asks for the quickest way to find the youngest Mr. Minkus. He gestures her to the elevator.

Fourteen floors later, Maya exits the elevator and makes her way down a narrow hallway, knocking at the door at the end of the hall. It’s been painted black since she was last here. Despite how deeply she appreciates Farkle’s friendship, she suddenly realizes how little time she spends with him.

Amazing how quickly she’s learning what a terrible friend she is.

The bedroom door opens and Farkle is standing there in front of her, dressed for bed and giving her a confused look. “Maya? What are you doing here?”

She pushes past him without waiting for an invitation, wandering into the center of the room and floundering with what to do next. She feels her eyes well with tears again as she stares up at the ceiling of constellations above her.

“Did something happen?” Farkle wanders over to join her, much more interested in her than the ceiling he’s probably stared at a million times before. “It’s Riley, isn’t it?”

Maya drops her gaze to stare at him, wide-eyed. “How the hell did you know that?”

“Intuition. Figured something had to happen eventually.” He gestures to the foot of the bed, offering for her to sit.
Maya collapses onto it, frowning as she continues to wipe the tears from her eyes. Farkle crosses over to the lounge area to grab a tissue box, carrying it over and holding it out as he sits down next to her. She takes it begrudgingly.

“So, what happened?”

Maya shakes her head, huffing into the tissue and sighing. “It doesn’t matter. It’s done now. Riley’s done with me.”

“I doubt that’s true.”

“And you know, I don’t blame her.” She hesitates, attempting to keep her breathing even despite the crying. “I’ve been such a shit friend lately, I’m amazed she didn’t kick me out sooner. It’s not like some big surprise.”

“Tell me what happened. Back up.”

Maya exhales sharply, collecting her thoughts before launching into the best recap of the situation that she can muster. Farkle listens attentively, processing as she explains the fights with Lucas and the insecurity in her relationship with Riley and how important she is. How even though she would never want to leave Riley she’s pretty much effectively pushed her away. How all things considered, when it came down to it Riley chose Lucas over her, and how she feels like she can’t really blame her.

“I don’t think she’s choosing Lucas over you.”

“That’s literally what happened. I said, it’s me or him. And she chose him. So I went out the window. That’s what happened.”

“But I don’t think Riley sees you guys as anything to choose between,” Farkle rationalizes. He glances up at the ceiling, trying to figure out the best way to articulate his thoughts. “You see it that way because of how sensitive you are to the situation. Maybe Lucas does too, I don’t know. But to Riley, you guys have never been in competition. She loves you guys equally, albeit differently.”

Maya opens her mouth to argue but finds nothing to say. She closes it again.

“I’m guessing this was more about how she feels about you and your dynamic than anything to do with Lucas. I can’t speak for her, obviously, but that’s what I’d hypothesize.”

“So, what now?” She gives him a tearful look, crumbling the tissue in her fingers restlessly. “I’ve ruined everything for nothing?”

“Actually, I don’t think so. I think this is going to be good for you.”

Maya narrow her eyes. “You think being away from my best friend is going to be good for me? That I’m just magically going to be a better person? She makes me a better person, Farkle. I don’t want to know what I’m going to be like without her.”

“But that’s exactly my point.” She rolls her eyes and Farkle takes her arm, shaking her slightly to make her look at him again. “Maya, think about it. Ever since we were little kids you’ve based your self-perception on Riley. She’s been good for you, sure, I don’t dispute that. But you two have become so reliant on one another and your opinions of each other that you can’t think for yourself. You two need some time apart to figure out who you are when you stand on your own.”
Maya processes this. It feels impossible to believe, but suddenly the situation doesn’t seem so hopeless. “This is a good thing?”

“Honestly, I’m grateful it’s happening now. I figured it was going to happen before college and it was going to be this big last minute crisis.”

She decides to accept this, taking a deep breath. It’s the only way she thinks she can cope at the moment, and the more she thinks on it, the more curious she becomes.

Farkle seems to think there’s a way for her to be a better version of herself. That there’s more for her to be, that she can get there on her own. She figures if she can find that version of herself, maybe she’ll be able to fix things. It’s all she can do.

She has to try.

Maya nods, laughing in spite of herself and leaning forward to hug him. The first thing she’s going to do is make sure the people that are still in her life aren’t going anywhere. She wants them to know she’s glad they’re there. “Thank you, Farkle. Thanks.”

He hugs her back. “Always.”

Farkle walks her downstairs, calling her an Uber on his insistence despite how many times she’s walked home in the dark on her own. As she’s sitting in the back of the car, she starts to brainstorm the possibilities of what the future could hold for her. And she realizes she doesn’t want to do it alone.

“Hey, wait,” she says suddenly, leaning forward between the seats and catching the attention of her driver. “Could you take me somewhere else? If I give you the address?”

“It may cost you more.”

“It’s okay, I’m not paying,” she says offhandedly, pulling out her phone and looking up Zay’s address. “Here, it’s this one. Can you take me here?”

The driver changes the coordinates. Maya settles back against the seat, glancing out the window at the moon shining bright between the silhouettes of buildings in the Manhattan skyline.

She’s about to find out just who she is, for better or worse.

- J U N I O R  Y E A R -

Junior year is the year Maya Hart learns about independence.

She’s always thought of herself as a relatively self-sufficient person—won’t take nothing from nobody—but leaving Riley and her sense of self behind as she steps into the new terrain of eleventh grade is a completely new kind of test. All she’s got is the clothes on her back and the pride in her heart to hopefully guide her towards that better person she’s been told she can be.

Although not having Riley to help her stings, she’s very grateful she’s not completely alone. She and Zay agreed to take on the new year together, Maya surprised to discover that he too is taking a separation from his straight-laced, perfect best friend. Farkle is also still by her side, and although she knows he’s playing double agent and hanging out with Riley too she appreciates him being there for her. She doesn’t know what she’d do if she lost them both.

So with the two of them in tow, Maya dives headfirst into the social scene of junior year. No
looking back. No overthinking. No regrets.

Part of her is reluctant to bring Farkle along to the first couple of parties they go to, partially out of concern for his well-being and partially out of concern for the well-being of her evening. Although he’s not Riley by any means, Farkle can take on the same well-meaning nagging quality when the situation presents itself. Undoubtedly, a high school rager is definitely one of those situations.

Amazingly, he turns out to be surprisingly mellow about the whole thing. He also takes an interest in weed, a twist Maya never saw coming but seems pretty predictable in hindsight. In any case, Maya’s favorite parts of the week become the late nights where she’s out with her boys, drinking and laughing and dancing until it’s one in the morning and she can’t remember any of the bullshit that happened the summer before. Even if it does distract from her mission to find her best self, it feels like a suitable detour.

Also distracting is the sudden realization that everyone around her seems to be all about relationships, and she has the distinctly sour feeling of being left out.

She doesn’t know when the conversation in the locker room shifted from complaining about gym clothes to gossiping about sex, but the change is stark and she practically can’t escape it. The day she overhears Sarah and Darby giggling about Riley’s varied attempts to hide a hickey she almost considers cutting her ear off, Van Gogh style. The entire class she’s spent the last five years with are suddenly all tangled up in each other, even her straight-laced, perfect best friend.

For someone who hasn’t even had her first kiss yet, it feels sort of like a personal challenge from the universe. Maya’s never been one to back down from a challenge.

All of this combined with the confidence of alcohol is what propels her to kiss Brett Ryan at Haley’s Halloween party.

Maya’s always thought a first kiss would feel special. Different, somehow. Like sparks, fireworks, summer rain—whatever poetic metaphor fits best. It’s the reason she’d been holding out on it, because all things considered she’d only met one guy she had somewhat serious feelings for, and with her recent best friend separation she’s pretty sure that possible relationship is as good as dead. Stupid daydreams about beanies and alternative rock and fireworks seem downright ridiculous.

Kissing Brett Ryan is no summer rain, but it’s not terrible. He knows what he’s doing, at least, so she figures that’s a plus.

Before she realizes it, the first kiss quickly becomes a pattern. Once she’s gotten sufficiently buzzed enough, she has Zay help her get Brett’s attention so he’ll wander over and dance with her. Then she’ll make a move just to get him to kiss her, and they’ll spend the rest of the party together until Zay finds her to go home. It doesn’t ever feel like much, but she’s pretty sure the practice is good and it’s not like it feels bad so she just goes with it.

This whole adventure produces two uncomfortable results—on the one hand, while she supposes she should be grateful Brett never tries to push her to do something more than she’s comfortable with, he does try to do another thing entirely.

He tries to talk to her.

For whatever reason, he gets it into his head that maybe Maya’s looking for something more, so he tries to make conversation with her. Just in the middle of kissing, he’ll ask her some sort of small talk question like what tests she has coming up in her classes or if she has any hobbies. The thought is nice, but it’s not what Maya is there for. Especially not with Brett Ryan.
“Oh, no, we don’t need to talk,” Maya says sweetly, effectively shutting him up as she leans in to kiss him again. For the most part, that does the trick.

The other result from this exploration is that as most of their class attends these parties and sees her in action, rumors start flying about just how promiscuous she is or isn’t being. Maya’s never cared about what her classmates thought about her, but being the focus of new gossip isn’t pleasant since she knows how quickly it spreads. Considering all the rumors she’s heard about Lucas already this semester, she knows that being at the center of them can do some serious damage.

It’s what’s on her mind as she’s struggling to do her math homework one afternoon, tucked away in the armchairs in the nook of Topanga’s. The couch where she usually sat with the rest of the group is vacant, but she can’t bring herself to sit there. She already avoids the café whenever she can, but it’s one of the only places she can think clearly. She’s here out of necessity, not because she’s wanted.

“Working hard or hardly working?”

Maya glances up just as Josh approaches her table, carrying a refill of her hot chocolate. For a second she can’t believe he’s actually talking to her, but she recovers quickly. “I’ll plead the fifth.”

“Clever,” he says, handing her the mug. She takes it, offering a small smile in return. “How you doing? Feel like I haven’t seen you in forever.”

“And I’m sure the world just stopped spinning,” Maya says sarcastically, taking a sip of the hot chocolate. Josh scoffs, smirking in spite of himself. When she drops the mug back on the table next to her, she squints up at him. “Am I really supposed to believe you don’t know what happened?”

“I know you and Riley are going through some stuff,” he admits. “But I don’t see why you have to disappear off the face of the Earth because of it. Whatever is going on between you guys is your business. It doesn’t mean you can never step foot in a coffee shop again.”

“Gee, Boing, if I didn’t know any better I’d say it sounds like you miss me.”

Josh rolls his eyes, settling in the chair on the opposite side of the table. “Yeah, don’t flatter yourself. I’m just looking for an excuse to get off my feet for a few minutes.”

“How sweet.”

The two of them sit in silence for a minute or so. Maya drinks the hot chocolate just to have something to do. Although he claims he doesn’t get involved in Riley’s business, she figures he has to know all the terrible things she did. She doesn’t see how he could just ignore all that.

“So, how’s your year going? Anything interesting happening?”

Maya shrugs, nodding towards the math notebook on the table. “You consider pre-calculus interesting?”

“No. Definitely not.”

“Then there you go.”

Josh smiles at her, examining her for a long moment. He shifts in his seat, leaning his elbow on the table and speaking more softly than before. “Really though. Nothing to talk about? Farkle came in the other day and talked my ear off for like fifteen minutes. He mentioned you so I highly doubt you’re just sitting around doing math homework all the time.”
She’s suddenly on edge. Whatever Farkle had to say certainly can’t be good if Josh is taking an interest in her, but at least it explains why he’s bothering to talk to her in the first place. “What did he say?”

“I mean, I’m not sure how much of it is real. I’m not entirely convinced he wasn’t stoned. Has he been trying drugs?”

“What did he say about me?”

Josh eyes her curiously. She hates how it feels like he can see right through her. She hates that she cares so much. “Nothing bad. Would he have something bad to say?”

She doesn’t answer, watching the whipped cream slowly dilute into the hot chocolate.


“What do you think?” Maya snaps. “Is this the part where you judge me? Think we can skip that part?”

Josh pauses, maintaining his patience. “I’m not judging you, Maya. I wouldn’t do that. I just want to make sure you’re watching out for yourself. You know, your feelings in all this stuff. I mean, do you actually care about this guy?”

Maya blinks, biting her tongue as tears form in the corners of her eyes. She’s so sick of crying what feels like every five seconds. She doesn’t know what happened that made her suddenly care about everything to the point where she’s breaking up over it.

She raises her gaze to lock eyes with him. Although his eyes are kind, his expression feels critical. “Since when have you cared about my feelings?”

He looks a little wounded. “Maya—,”

“Look, I get it,” she says shortly, gathering her things and stuffing it into her bag at her feet. “You’re worried I’m spiraling. First I’m the bitch who turns on her best friend. Then, I start whoring around. What’s going on with Maya Hart? Has she lost her damn mind? Why is she such a slut?”

Josh rises to his feet the moment she gets up, genuine concern coloring his features. “I’m not saying that. That’s not what I’m trying to say at all. There’s no reason for you to think that.”

“Save it, Josh,” she huffs, slinging her bag over her shoulder. It hurts to look him in the eyes, so she averts her gaze. “Save your aged wisdom for someone who wants to hear it.”

“I’m just worried about you, Maya. That has nothing to do with whether you’re kissing guys at parties. I just want to make sure you’re okay.”

She swallows her reservations, falling back on pride instead. “I can take care of myself.”

Josh calls after her as she storms out of the café, but she doesn’t look back. She makes a promise to herself that she’s never looking back.

Maya’s quiet at lunch the next day, she and Zay eating on the lawn outside campus simply to avoid
the usual lunch table. Another place of comfort she can’t face on her own. Since the fight with Lucas at the one party they dragged him to, Zay isn’t so keen on sitting there anymore either.

She stares at the peanut butter and jelly sitting on its plastic bag, untouched. She doesn’t feel very hungry. “Would you call me a slut?”

“Nah. Administration might though for wearing those shorts that are one centimeter above your fingertips.” Maya shoves him lightly and he laughs. “I’m serious, I wouldn’t. That’s a dumb question. Why are you asking dumb questions?”

She shrugs. “Rumor mill does its job.”

“Okay, look,” Zay says flatly, stretching his legs out and giving her a look. “If some of our classmates want to call you a slut behind your back for kissing one guy a few times at a few parties, that’s their beef. What you need to worry about are the ones brave enough to say it to your face.”

“No one said it to my face.”

“Well, then looks like you have nothing to worry about, huh?”

Maya makes a face at him, smiling when he makes one right back at her. With everything sort of in constant disarray around her, she’s grateful for Zay Babineaux to a degree she doesn’t think she’ll ever be able to express in words.

“I don’t know,” she continues, squinting in the sunlight and managing to take a bite of her sandwich. She gestures while she chews, Zay raising his eyebrows at her. “I just feel like I’m doing this wrong. Like, I’m kissing people. Big deal. Isn’t that what everyone is doing? Why is it I’m the slut?”

Zay tilts his head. “People like to go after other people to make themselves feel better. That’s like, bullying one-oh-one. Don’t tell me Cory never taught you that in some convoluted history lesson.”

He probably has at some point. Maya just tries not to think about it, considering that’s exactly what she was doing last year when she went after Lucas all the time. She can’t reconcile the possibility that she may actually be one of those people, so she ignores it.

“I guess the main thing is why you’re doing it,” Zay goes on. “The kissing that is. I mean, do you like Brett? He a good kisser?”

“He’s aight.”

“Do you like him? Like, with feelings?”

Maya shudders, rolling her eyes. “Please. Brett’s pretty, but he has more romantic interest in his soccer ball than me. Don’t think I could ever come between that loving partnership.”

Zay snorts. “So then why are you making out with him all the time?”

Maya hesitates, searching for the answer. All can she manage is another half-hearted shrug. “I don’t know. Everyone else is exploring all this stuff. I don’t want to get left behind. And you know, it’s my body, I don’t see why anyone else should have anything to say about it.”

“Now we’re talking,” he hoots appreciatively. “Knew there was a little feminist in you somewhere.”
Maya flips her hair over her shoulder, raising an eyebrow dramatically. Zay smiles affectionately at her, nudging her leg with his foot.

“Don’t even worry about it. As long as you’re comfortable and not taking things too far, it’s not a big deal. Just ignore them. Besides, we’re going to get so trashed this weekend, it’s not even going matter. Who cares what people are saying about you when you’re drunk, right? That’s the way to live life, I think.”

“That’s called alcoholism, Zayby.”

Zay shrugs, stuffing the other half of her sandwich in his mouth. “To-mae-to, to-mah-to.”

The partying that weekend does little to alleviate Maya’s stress. As so many things seem to do in her life, the situation escalates when Zay gets seriously intoxicated and almost starts a fight with Wyatt in the middle of the party. She’s sure that whatever Wyatt said was idiotic and the violence was probably warranted, but all she can focus on is getting Zay out of there before the situation gets any worse. Dealing with that is sobering enough.

So much for not taking things too far.

“He’s so fucking stupid,” Zay spits as they’re stumbling down the street, his arm draped around Maya’s shoulder for support. She’s never seen him this drunk before, and she’s actually wondering if maybe she should take him to the hospital instead of home. It seems outlandish, but she practically hear Riley’s voice in her head telling her better safe than sorry. “Why is he always talking shit about people? Lucas doesn’t do drugs.”

“I know, I know,” Maya says soothingly, trying to keep him from falling over. If she can just get him back to her place, he’ll be able to crash and everything will be fine. She can handle this.

Glancing over her shoulder, she catches the eye of a couple of older guys hovering outside a club. Although there are a few other people out late at night and she’s not alone with Zay, she averts her gaze and starts to walk a little more quickly. Better safe than sorry.

She feels her heart stop beating for a second when one of them calls after her.

“Hey! Blondie, hey!”

Zay glances over his shoulder, frowning. “They talking to you?”

Maya nudges him, making him turn back around. “Don’t look.”

“Hey! Where’re you going so fast?”

“Do you know them?”

Maya takes a deep breath, trying her best to stay calm. She hears footsteps behind her and reaches down to pull out her phone, struggling to focus on it with one hand while keeping Zay steady with the other. “No. Focus on walking.”

“If you don’t know them, they shouldn’t be talking to you. I’ll stop them.”

“No,” Maya says sharply, tightening her grip around his waist and moving him forward. Her voice shakes slightly. “Do not say anything. Keep walking.”
“They’re following us. Why are they following us?”

They’re so far from her place. They’re not even near a subway station. Heart pounding in her rib cage, she scrolls through her contacts and tries to think of who to call. She knows she should call the cops, but it also feels like an overreaction to do so. She can’t call Riley, she’ll freak and she isn’t really talking to her anyway. She can’t call Farkle, she doesn’t even know where he is. In retrospect, she doesn’t know where she is either.

She glances at the street sign on the corner, vaguely recognizing it. As she glances down at the next contact on her phone, she suddenly remembers.

Pride keeps her from hitting the call button. But fear wins out when the men call after her again, one of them whistling.

It only takes two rings for him to pick up. “Hello? Maya?”

He sounds surprised to hear from her. She doesn’t blame him, considering the last time they spoke to one another she told him they weren’t friends. “Lucas? Are you there?”

“Yeah. I’m here. What’s going on?”

She hesitates, focusing on keeping her hands from shaking so she doesn’t drop the phone. She doesn’t want to sound too nervous, but she can tell she’s not succeeding. “I’m walking back from Sarah’s. Zay’s not good.”

Zay sort of mumbles in protest, but he’s getting less coherent by the minute. She’s worried he may just drop to the ground.

“And I think we’re being—,” she trails off, catching her breath. Forcing herself not to panic. “We’re in trouble.”

Lucas doesn’t question her. She can hear him shuffling around wherever he is. “Where are you?”

“A couple of blocks from you, I think. Near the CVS. You know what I’m talking about?”

“Yeah, I do.” There’s a pause. She hears something jingle in the background—keys, presumably. “I’ll be there soon. If something happens before I get there, call the police.”

“Right. Okay. Sure.” She takes another deep breath, not quite ready to hang up. She doesn’t want to be left alone. Part of her still can’t believe he even picked up in the first place. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know who else to call.”

“It’s okay.” From the tone of his voice, she can tell it must be obvious how scared she is. He’s speaking very calmly, but with authority. Like he’s talking to a skittish horse. “When I hang up, don’t act like I did. Keep talking. Pretend I’m still on the line. I’ll be there soon.”

“Right. I can do that.” When he’s about to hang up, Maya feels her guilt get the better of her. For everything he’s doing for her, she suddenly feels overwhelmed by it. “Lucas, I’m sorry—,”

“I’m coming. Don’t panic. I’m coming.”

The line goes dead, Maya’s apology hanging in the air. Incomplete.

She swallows it, keeping her phone pressed to her ear and talking to herself as she walks. She doesn’t know whether the guys are still behind her or not, but she’s too scared to check. She just
keeps her head forward and eyes on the sidewalk in front of her, holding Zay tightly and rounding
the corner as soon as she can.

When she tosses a glance over her shoulder and sees an empty street corner behind her, she exhales
so harshly she worries she may not be able to breathe in ever again. She can feel adrenaline in her
veins, pumping through her like electricity. She likes to think she could handle herself if she
needed, but with Zay she’s in a sticky situation. She’s not sure which of them would be in more
danger on the streets of New York alone at night.

“Maya, what’s going on?” Zay asks distantly. It’s obvious he’s basically out of it, but he can tell
she’s freaked.

“There you are,” an unfamiliar voice greets them, making Maya jump. She doesn’t have to turn
around to know it’s not someone she wants to see. She continues walking forward, not making any
effort to initiate contact with the strangers. “Where you headed?”

Maybe if she ignores it, like every other problem in her life, it’ll go away.

“You shouldn’t be walking around so late at night,” one of them says in a friendly tone. His voice
seems sincere, but that only makes her worry more. “How about we walk you home?”

“Yeah, me and Troy here are really good escorts. Promise.”

Maya maintains her stance on icing them out, but Zay isn’t so quiet.

“We’re fine, thanks,” he bites, casting a distrustful glare over his shoulder at them. Maya jostles
him back around. “What? They won’t leave you alone.”

“There’s no need to be rude,” the other one, Troy, says good-naturedly.

“I’m fine,” Maya assures him without turning around.

“Well, there’s rude and then there’s just plain bitchy,” Troy’s friend laughs. “It’s not so fun when
they’re bitchy, is it, Troy?”

“Come on, Blondie,” Troy tries again. Maya nearly jumps out of her skin when she feels his hand
grab her elbow. She wrenches away from him, but he’s quick and gets his hold back on her in no
time. “What’s wrong with a walking buddy?”

“Don’t touch her,” Zay says protectively, but his threat isn’t very convincing with the slur in his
words. Troy’s friend approaches as well and bumps Zay lightly. Considering his level of
intoxication, it doesn’t take much to send him stumbling away from them.

She feels tears prick the corner of her eyes again. Her whole body is shaking. “Leave me alone.”

Troy smiles at her, but it doesn’t feel friendly. It doesn’t feel welcoming at all. He opens his mouth
to speak when someone else talks over him, breaking the cycle of rejection.

“She said leave her alone,” Lucas says, approaching from behind Maya. The sight of a familiar
face is enough to offer her some relief.

Troy doesn’t look impressed. Maya doesn’t blame him—at first glance, Lucas isn’t the kind of
person you’d think twice about messing with, especially with those sad cow eyes.

But she’s seen the other side of him. She’s spent so much time riling him up, she knows when to
pull back. And that dangerous gleam in his eyes is definitely present.

“Yeah? What’re you gonna do about it? Who the hell are you, anyway?”

Lucas doesn’t entertain the questions. He comes across deceptively calm. “Let her go. I don’t want to have to make you.”

Zay stays out of the line of fire, watching the situation with his jaw half-open. Troy examines Lucas for a long moment, likely calculating his odds. After a particularly tense second, Maya feels him release her elbow.

She exhales, stumbling away from him in Zay’s direction. She helps him stand up straight again, focusing on making sure he’s okay to keep from facing the reality of what could’ve just happened to her. The what if of the situation makes her sick to her stomach.

Troy’s friend scoffs, egging him on. “Come on, Troy. You’re gonna let this kid tell you what to do? Since when?”

“Come on,” Lucas says to Maya, ignoring their taunts and standing protectively in front of her as she leads Zay back onto the sidewalk.

“Yeah, whatever,” Troy barks, holding his arms out and shrugging. “Go on and walk away then. Missing out, that’s all I’m saying.”

“ Fucking slut.”

Lucas faces them again, giving them a warning glare. “Don’t call her that.”

“Lucas, forget it.” Maya backs away with Zay at her side, avoiding eye contact with the harassers. “Let’s go.”

“Yeah, go on, bulldog,” Troy’s friend taunts. “Take your little slut friend and go already.”

“What you gonna do about it, anyway?”

There’s a moment where Maya worries Lucas is going to do something that’ll get them all in trouble, but he doesn’t. Riley’s been a good influence on him. He turns away instead, staring to head after her.

“I said, what are you going to do about it?”

Troy comes up after him and attempts to grab his arm, Lucas shoving him away in self-defense. Troy takes this as the aggression he was looking for, finally getting a fight by clocking Lucas right across the face.

“Oh my God!”

Troy’s friend cracks up as Lucas fumbles away from them, grimacing and gingerly touching his lip when the hit landed. He takes a second to compose himself before he straightens up and fights back, knocking Troy hard against the wall and stopping his friend when he starts towards Maya and Zay.

Maya feels frozen to the spot, watching the violence unfold but having no clue what to do or how to stop it. Lucas manages to handle a two-on-one impressively on his own, but he takes a couple of serious blows and backs off after he shoves Troy to the ground, his friend kneeling down to help
him. He jogs over to them.

There’s so much blood on his face. How is there so much blood?

“Come on,” Lucas says swiftly, draping Zay’s other arm around his shoulders and tugging them forward. “Maya, come on!”

She snaps out of her daze, tearing her eyes away from the Troy on the sidewalk. Together, she and Lucas hobble their way to the nearest subway station, Lucas smeared with his own blood and Zay nearly unconscious between them.

--

It’s a relief when she lays Zay down on her bed a half an hour later, but a minor one that she doesn’t feel she’s earned. It wasn’t her that really got him out of trouble, after all.

Maya turns her head to cast a glance at Lucas next to her. All of the aggression he showed off on the streets is gone, concern the only emotion dominant in his features as he watches her arrange Zay’s slumbering form as comfortably as she can on her mattress. He plays with a hangnail on his thumb nervously.

She can’t stop staring at the blood—bruising under his skin, smearing his lips, dribbled onto the fabric of his jacket. It’s so much blood, but he doesn’t even seem fazed by it. His focus is solely on his best friend.

“Why is he being like this?” he asks worriedly. Maya walks away from him, searching for something to clean the blood with. “How much did he drink? Why is he drinking so much?”

“I don’t know.” She finds a ratty John Quincy Adams middle school t-shirt in the bottom of her drawer, pulling it out and bundling it in her hands. She walks back over to join him. When she reaches up to dab the blood from his face he shrinks away from her, refusing the help.

“I’m fine.”

“You’re bleeding,” she says stupidly. As if he isn’t aware.

“I’m fine,” he repeats harshly, backing away from her. She sighs in frustration, crossing her arms. She doesn’t try to lessen the distance between them.

Lucas wipes at his lower lip, glancing blankly at the blood coating his fingers before staring at Zay. It’s clear he wants to help him, but has no idea how.

“It’s okay,” she says vaguely, trying to make the best out of a pretty pathetic situation. “He won’t even remember it in the morning, probably.”

“What’s wrong with him?” She can hear the pain in his voice, and she’s stunned he sounds more upset about Zay than his own injuries. “Why won’t he stop? He’s going to hurt himself.”

“I don’t know.”

“Why won’t he talk to someone?” Lucas’s voice cracks. “Why won’t he talk to me?”

“He can’t. Not now.” Maya takes a deep breath, keeping her eyes on Zay to avoid looking at him. “Not to you.”

Even without seeing it, she can tell how badly hearing this hurts him. They stand in silence for a
few minutes, watching Zay breathe as he sleeps. Lost in their own heads. It strikes Maya that they haven’t interacted this much since almost half a year ago—when she told him they were never friends and he left out the bay window.

Despite all the terrible things she said to him and the piss poor way she treated him, he’s still here. Helping her when she needs it. Further proof, she realizes, that he’s a much better friend than she’ll ever be.

“Thank you,” she murmurs after a moment. “For coming. You didn’t have to.”

“Of course I did,” he says sharply.

They exchange eye contact. Maya nods, averting her eyes. Tentatively, she holds out the worn t-shirt for him to take. After a couple of seconds he does, dabbing at his mouth and nose.

There’s not much left to say.

Lucas gazes sadly at his best friend, feeling the sting of helplessness. “You’ll make sure he’s okay? Right? You’ll take care of him.”

“Of course,” Maya says. It’s not even a question. “Of course.”

Lucas glances briefly at her, nodding a thank you. He places the ruined t-shirt on the edge of the bed, hesitating before walking out and disappearing into the hall. Like he was never there. Like nothing ever happened.

Maya closes her bedroom door gently behind him, changing out of her party clothes and into something more comfortable. Climbing over Zay and collapsing on the far side of the bed, she stares at the ceiling and contemplates everything that went down in the last few months—hell, the last few years. How she ended up where she is and how she’s certain she’s not where she should be.

She’s not that person Riley and Farkle and everyone seems so convinced she could be. That best version of herself.

If this horrible night did any good, she figures, it put her back on track. She’s going to be that better version of herself. No looking back. No more hiding.

No regrets.

--

Second semester offers a brighter outlook when the school year begins in January. She and Zay both decide to lay off on their wild sides and focus on finding their best selves, in whatever capacity that may be.

She’s relieved when Farkle accepts her apology for calling him a pothead, and she’s surprised to discover he’s taking a step back from the party scene as well. He also supports her goal to work towards being new and improved, as she knew he would be.

“New year, new Maya,” he proclaims, patting her shoulder.

She hopes he’s right.

Slowly, the year begins to wind down and the group starts preparing for junior prom and their final
year at Abigail Adams high school. Maya learns to her absolute horror that she still has an incomplete physical education credit, so she works out a deal to complete a summer program rather than having to be stuck in the gym during senior year. Seems like a cheap shot, but she’d rather suffer through swimming at the school pool a couple of hours a day during the summer than fail out thanks to one class credit.

Maya still plans on shocking the greater world when she graduates and goes off to be something amazing and note-worthy. Can’t do that if she flunks out thanks to physical education.

Still, all things considered she feels like things are turning around. Unfortunately, the rest of the student body doesn’t seem to have caught up with her change of heart.

She’s gathering her things for history when she overhears the conversation between Wyatt and Sarah, eavesdropping when she hears Zay’s name pop up.

“No, I’m telling you,” Wyatt says authoritatively, Sarah rolling her eyes in disbelief as she closes her locker door and turns to face him. “He’s got a serious alcohol problem. Why don’t you think he’s been to any parties recently? Boy’s got to go to rehab or something. For alcoholics.”

Sarah narrows her eyes. “Alcoholics Anonymous?”

“Yeah, that.”

“Good God, Wyatt.” Maya makes a face, shutting her locker for emphasis. Both of them look her way as she tosses them a disdainful glare. “Do you ever get tired of making shit up? Like, is it exhausting?”

“Well, of course you’d defend him,” Wyatt says pointedly, grabbing the strap of his backpack. “You’re probably one of his biggest enablers. Always partying with him and stuff so you can find someone new to hook up with.”

She shakes her head, giving him her most convincingly annoyed eye roll. “I just love how you’re always talking about things you know nothing about. Like you know everything.”

“Hey, I was right about Lucas.”

“What?” A crowd has started to form around them, students slowing down to eavesdrop as they pass. “How were you right about him?”

“He isn’t on the baseball team anymore. Pretty sure Coach kicked him off because of the steroids. It made him pass out during practice.”

This is the first Maya has heard of such a scenario, but she still doesn’t believe a word Wyatt says. “All you do is spread rumors, Wyatt. No one actually believes anything you say.”

“Yeah, whatever, Maya. Why don’t you go find Brett and see if he’s up for a quickie before history? That seems more like a priority to you then arguing with me about the logistics of whether or not Lucas is doping. Since you don’t believe me anyway.”

She rolls her eyes. “Jackass.”

“Slut.”

Maya opens her mouth to retort, but someone else beats her to it. It’s a voice she hasn’t heard in a long time, and it makes her heart ache when she does.
“Hey, Wyatt,” Riley says suddenly, closing her locker and turning to face him. “Why do you do that?”

He blinks at her, evidently unprepared for her to enter the conversation. Maya is similarly caught off-guard. Students have legitimately stopped walking entirely, watching the discussion unfold before them in prime time. “Do what?”

“You know what you do,” Riley says gently. There’s not one hint of malice in her voice, but that’s almost more intimidating. Maya has always thought of Riley as the definition of *kill ‘em with kindness*, and she’s on the warpath right now. “Talk about people. Tear them down. You know, calling a girl a slut doesn’t make you any more desirable to them. In fact, it sort of has the opposite effect.”

Smackle is frozen next to Riley, clutching her books and watching the confrontation with an uncertain gleam in her eyes. Wyatt looks appropriately stumped, floundering to come up with a response.

“You don’t have to say anything, Riles, it’s fine.”

“No, Maya, I think I do,” she says, not tossing a glance her way. Her kind gaze is trained solely on Wyatt. “Because this isn’t the first time he’s said something about somebody that wasn’t true. And I guess it won’t be the last. So I really do want to know, Wyatt. Why do you do that?”

He gulps, shrinking under her searching gaze. Sarah scoots away from him, trying to get out of the line of fire.

“I suppose you go after Maya because you find her attractive, but she won’t give you the time of day. That’s her prerogative. Not yours, certainly. But that doesn’t explain why you say so many nasty things about Lucas.” Riley tilts her head. “He’s been nothing but nice to you. I mean, I guess it could be that he is so nice. Nicer than you. Better ball player. Better looking, at least in my personal opinion. But I’m biased, obviously.”

Wyatt is speechless. The entire hallway around them has become motionless, everyone caught in this one moment of history as Riley reads him for filth. Maya finds herself wondering when Riley Matthews became a badass in her absence, but then she remembers she’s always been one. It’s one of the things she loved most about her.

“So you say all these things about people, spread all these lies based on speculation just to maybe for a few seconds gain some recognition. Have the upper hand. But doesn’t that leave you feeling empty?” Riley blinks at him, squinting slightly. “When the initial triumph fades, don’t you just feel the same? It’s not lasting, Wyatt. I don’t know why you keep doing it. Because it seems to me like all you want is for people to like you, but every time you spread a rumor you know isn’t true, you just push people further away.”

Dave is standing slack-jawed across the hall from Maya, completely dumbfounded at what he’s witnessing. She spots Darby with a similar expression on her face. Maya feels as though their entire class is there—save for Lucas. For all the bullshit Wyatt has been saying about him all year, she feels like he’s the only one who really deserves to be there and yet he’s nowhere in sight.

“Stop talking trash and just talk to people, Wyatt.” Riley gives him a condescending smile. “Let your personality do the friend-making for you. If that doesn’t work, then I don’t know what else to tell you, but your current plan really isn’t doing you a whole lot of good.” She shrugs. “Something to think about.”
The hall watches as she turns and practically floats away, Smackle scrambling along behind her. Farkle and Maya lock eyes from the midst of the crowd, trying to comprehend what they just saw.

“Riley Matthews for best smackdown in the history of Abigail Adams High!” Dave says enthusiastically as he approaches Jeff and Clarissa with Jade by his side. “Can you believe that? She’s such a legend. And I’m so glad she defended Lucas. He is better looking.”

“Yeah, we get it. Put your Lucas boner away, Dave,” Jeff mumbles.

Riley Matthews is a legend, that much is true. But all Maya can think about, standing there in the hallway surrounded by people, is how much she misses her.

After getting embarrassingly invited to prom by Brett Ryan, and making the mistake of saying yes, Maya escapes to Topanga’s and hides back in her nook. She dives into last minute math homework instead of focusing on her new romantic dilemma, shelving it with all the other issues she’s worrying about but not doing anything to fix.

Nothing more comforting than routine.

She’s surprised when a hot chocolate is set on the table next to her, raising her eyes to find Josh standing in front of her, apron and beanie-clad like usual. He raises his hands in surrender, pressing his finger to his lips and gesturing to her math homework. “Don’t want to interrupt.”

“No, it’s okay,” she says after a second, finding a smile creep onto her lips naturally. “I could sure use a break.”

“Oh, well then. Perfect timing.”

Maya nods enthusiastically, placing her folder on the table and swapping it out for the mug, taking a long drink from it. Josh starts to walk back towards the counter but Maya hums indignantly into the hot chocolate, causing him to hesitate.

“You really going to walk away?” she asks, raising an eyebrow at him. “After saving my life with this hot chocolate?”

“Well, you know, I do have other customers to attend to. A barista’s work is never finished.”

Maya makes a point of glancing around the otherwise empty coffee shop. “Yeah, you’re real swamped.”

Josh rolls his eyes, earning a mischievous grin from her. “Look, you wanna chat, come sit at the counter. I have a register to close up.”

He hops out of the nook and wanders back over to the counter. She stirs her hot chocolate for a minute or so, finally getting to her feet and bringing her things with her. When she hops into the stool across the countertop from him, he acts nonchalant but she doesn’t miss the small smile ghost over his lips.

“You’re here late.”

“Got a lot of math to do. You know how math is my passion.”

“Don’t I ever,” he laughs. The register drawer pops open as he clicks a few buttons, reaching in to
start gathering the money. “I heard you got asked to prom.”

“How the hell do you get this information?” she says incredulously, giving him a look of disbelief. He smirks smugly, shrugging. “Do you have like, intel on me or something? Little minions that follow me around and get dirt to report back to you?”

“Don’t flatter yourself.”

“No shame if you do. You know, just be upfront about it.”

“Riley told me,” he finally admits. “I think she saw a post on Twitter about it. I don’t question it, I just take what I hear. Is this that Brett Ryan guy?”

“It is,” Maya states, taking a long drink. Josh waits until she’s finished, raising his eyebrow at her.

“You into him? For real now?”

“It’s funny,” she says teasingly, twirling her spoon idly. “For someone who doesn’t care, you seem to care a whole lot about what’s going on in my personal life.”

He gives her a look. She smiles back cheekily, breaking his disdain and causing him to smile too in spite of himself. He shrugs. “Just looking out for you. As I do.”

“Right, yeah.” She pauses, clasping her hands together on the counter and fiddling with her friendship ring. “Sorry, by the way.”

“About what?”

“The way I talked to you last time we talked. Jumping to assumptions and saying all that stuff to you. I shouldn’t have done that. There was just some stuff going on and I was… overly sensitive,” she explains, keeping her eyes on the countertop.

“Hey, it’s cool,” he says reassuringly. “I didn’t think it was big deal. No need to apologize.”

“No, I do need to,” she insists. She forces herself to lock eyes with him. “I’m realizing that maybe I have a lot of apologies I need to give.”

He hums interestedly. “Change of heart?”

“Well, I’m all about trying to be the best version of myself, you see,” she says, downplaying the seriousness of the mission with her playful tone. “Thinking that’s going to be a big part of it. Once I figure out who that is, you know, I’m going to have to do a lot of damage control to fix all the stuff I fucked up before.”

“Got anyone in particular in mind?”

Maya tilts her head, blowing some air out through her lips. She focuses on the ring, pushing it up her knuckle and back down again. Lost in thought.

“Don’t know why you’re talking to me about this,” she mutters after a few moments of silence. “Shouldn’t you be on Riley’s side in all this?”

“It’s like I said,” he says diplomatically. “It’s your business. I’m just here to offer wisdom, no matter who needs it at the time. People don’t need to pick sides, Maya.”

Maya blinks at him, dropping her gaze before she gets lost in his eyes. She hasn’t thought about the
situation with Riley in months, aside from how badly she misses her. That, she feels like she thinks about every day. “I don’t see how she could forgive me.”

“No use in not talking to her. What do you have to lose?”

“I just… things felt so different back then. And even now, knowing that things I did and said were wrong, I don’t think it was necessarily all my fault.”

“Maybe it was, maybe it wasn’t.” Josh shrugs, slinging a washcloth over his shoulder after placing a clean mug on the counter in front of him. “Sometimes things happen and it’s nobody’s fault. Things fall apart, whether people cause them to or not. But you still have to take responsibility for it anyway.” When she doesn’t seem convinced, Josh continues. “But look. The thing is, whether you go see her tonight, or tomorrow, or a week from now—even years from now—Riley will listen to what you have to say. That’s who she is. She’ll always want to hear what you have to say.”

Maya absorbs this. Spurred into action, she nods, downing the rest of her hot chocolate and slamming the mug down on the countertop. “Right then. Gotta blast.”

He frowns, tilting the empty mug towards him. “Already? How did you drink that so fast?”

“Yes, yes,” she says, waving him off as she slings her bag over her shoulder. “Your wisdom inspired me. I know, I know, must be the first time.”

“You’re mean.”

Maya gives him a smile, saluting him as she turns to head out the door. When she opens it she hesitates, standing in the door frame and looking back at him over her shoulder. “Hey, Boing?”

He glances up at her from counting money.

“Thanks.”

When he smiles, it’s affectionate. Maya feels that age-old flutter in her stomach. In some ways, it’s a relief to feel it. She doesn’t know how she knows exactly, but she gets the feeling Josh is a big part of her better self. A very important piece.

“You’re welcome. Flip the sign closed on your way out.”

--

Topanga and Cory seem pleasantly surprised to see her when she arrives at their door about an hour later.

“Maya? What are you doing here so late?” Topanga asks from the kitchen table, obviously settling into some late night work.

Cory examines her curiously as he steps back to let her in. “It’s been a while since you’ve been around.”

She knows they must know all about everything that’s happened in the last year and a half. She’s thankful they don’t push the issue any more than that. Considering she’s hoping to make amends, she doesn’t want to run out of words to articulate herself properly. She needs to save all of those for her next apology. “I know. Riley here?”

“You know where to find her.”
Maya nods a thanks, clutching the strap of her bag and jogging back into the hallway. She hesitates outside Riley’s room, peering in through the half-open door before knocking lightly.

Her best friend looks up from her seat at her desk, eyes widening when she sees who it is. Obviously, not anyone she was expecting. “Maya?”

“Hey. Figured I should come in the proper way,” she explains, glancing over her shoulder at the hall she came through. “Can I come in?”

“Yeah, of course,” Riley says eagerly, scrambling to her feet and pulling the door open. Maya smiles, stepping into the room and hesitating for a moment as it hits her how unfamiliar the room feels. It’s been so long since she’s been there. Casting a glance at the bay window, it almost hurts to look at. The last time she sat there, she turned around and walked out the window without looking back.

But it’s the place Riley gestures to as she walks over to sit. Maya follows obediently. “What’s up?”

“Can we talk?”

Riley holds her hand out to the pillows around them. “We’re in the bay window, aren’t we?”

“Right, of course.”

Maya laughs in spite of herself, taking in Riley’s earnest expression. Just like Josh advised, she seems more than willing to listen. She takes a second to compose her thoughts, swallowing her pride and forcing herself to knock down her walls.

“I’m so sorry, Riley. For everything.”

Riley breaks into a smile, tears already forming in the corners of her eyes. She’s such a reliable crier. “Maya, you don’t have to apologize.”

“No, I do. I really do, and I need you to hear it.” Maya takes a deep breath. “I’m sorry for the way I treated you. We made such big talk about how great of friends we were, and I was never that friend for you. Not really. I mean, don’t get me wrong, you were always the best friend I could’ve asked for. But I definitely wasn’t. And it took me all this time apart and alone to figure it out. But I know it now, and I’m sorry.”

“I didn’t care. I don’t care.”

“I know that. Because you’re you, and you’re so good. Forgiving, and all that. But I care. I want to be the best friend we always claim we are. I want to be there for you, and give you real support, and listen when you tell me something is bothering you. I’m sorry for all the rude things I said and bad things I did and selfish bullshit you put up with. Really, genuinely sorry. I don’t think it’s possible, but I’m going to try my hardest to be the amazing friend you are to me.” She forces herself to lock eyes with her, biting her lip nervously. “You know, if you can forgive me.”

Riley cocks her head, smiling affectionately. “Always, Peaches. Thank you for apologizing.”

Maya grins, reaching forward and pulling her into a hug. Riley embraces her tightly, and for the first time in months Maya feels safe again. It was a difficult transition, and the work is far from done, but she’s safe and she’s with her best friend and she feels as though she’s on the right track towards that best version of herself. Being back with Riley is already a step in the right direction.

“Oh, wait a minute,” she says breathlessly, wiping a couple of tears hastily and smiling sheepishly
at Riley as she pulls her bag up from the floor. “I got you something.”

She looks appropriately confused. “Maya, you didn’t have to.”

“No, I definitely did.” She reaches into her backpack and pulls out a small package wrapped in tissue paper. “I couldn’t stop thinking about all those wonderful, thoughtful birthday gifts you got me every year and how I never really gave you anything back. I mean, saying I’m your present one year is fine and all—,”

“You were tight on money. I knew that.”

“Still.” Maya holds out the present for her, urging her to take it.

Riley gives her a curious look, excitement taking over her features. She knows her best friend, and she’s never one to turn down a gift. She unwraps it enthusiastically, opening the lid of the box. Her expression shifts slightly as she lifts the polaroid camera from its case, staring at it in awe.

“I didn’t actually buy it or anything. Shawn gave it to me.” Maya twists her fingers together nervously at Riley’s lack of words. “But I know how you love taking pictures, and I was hoping that we’d have a lot more memories to capture before school ends next year. I figured if anybody could get them all on film before the day is done, it would be you.”

Riley lifts her eyes to meet hers, glossy with tears. She leans forward and pulls Maya into another hug, voice shaking slightly with emotion. “I love it. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” she breathes.

They don’t break apart. Riley tightens her hold on her. “I missed you. I’m glad you’re back.”

“Good to be back,” Maya assures her. She’ll never know how genuinely she means it.

--

As junior year comes to an end and summer rolls in, Maya finds herself surprisingly excited for their final year of high school.

Sure, the year presents challenges of its own. Maya is completely floored to discover Lucas decided to go back to Texas without telling anybody, and she’s ready to get a plane and go after him just to tell him off but Riley begs her to let her handle it. Considering she figures Riley knows more about the situation than she does, she relents. In a way she’s glad, because she isn’t sure she has any right to tell Lucas off when she still owes him a massive apology.

It’s one on a list of many she’s crafted, determined to make amends in her quest for her best self before she disappears for college this time next year. Whether she goes a few miles away or all the way across the ocean, she wants to make things right before she goes.

No looking back. No regrets.

More of her summer than she’d prefer is spent at the school pool, clocking in laps to get that stupid physical education credit before the fall comes and she has one more round of credits to knock out. That’s where she is one July afternoon when Josh finds her, just finishing up a lap and coughing from swallowing an unpleasant amount of pool water.

“Whoa, should you be swimming if you’re hacking up like that?” he calls from the doorway, sauntering over with his hands in his pockets and a teasing smirk on his face. “No lifeguard on
duty. This is some risky business.”

She wipes the wet hair from her face, giving him a disgruntled look. She doesn’t get why he wears a beanie and long-sleeve jacket even in the summer. She hates that she finds it so endearing. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“Carpool. Cory’s caught up with summer school and Topanga is making dinner, which means I was slated to come chauffeur you around. It’s funny, I don’t remember signing a contract with Shawn and Katy that when they went out of town for the weekend I suddenly had to babysit you.”

Maya rolls her eyes, swimming over to the edge of the pool at his feet. She splashes at him, causing him to jump backwards. “Gee, someone doesn’t like water.”

“I’m wearing jeans. No one likes water when they’re wearing jeans. That’s the most uncomfortable combination in existence.”

Maya props her elbows on the concrete. “Fair enough. I just have to do one more lap. Think you can wait around for that?”

Josh sighs, crossing his arms and shrugging dramatically. “I guess I can take time out of my busy schedule to wait around.”

She smirks at him, inhaling deeply before disappearing under the water and swimming the length of the pool. When she makes her way back to the other side, he’s making a show of checking his watch, tapping his foot impatiently.

“Ha, ha. Very funny.” She holds her hand out. “Now come on, help me out.”

“Oh, no,” he says adamantly, holding up his fingers in an x-formation. “You think I’m going to fall for that? I’m not an idiot.”

She rolls her eyes, waving him off as she hoists herself out of the pool. “Yeah, yeah, you’re so smart. Could never fool you.”

“Glad you realize it—,” he starts, cutting off with a yelp when she shoves him towards the pool, sending him backwards fully clothed into the water.

“No one said this was a game of wits!” she shouts, laughing maniacally as he breaks from the surface, gasping for breath and looking dumbfounded. She runs forward and cannonballs back into the pool, still laughing when she rises to the surface again. “Look at your face.”

“Maya!” he says frantically. “I can’t swim!”

Immediately, the grin is gone from her face. She swims over, reaching forward to help him. “Josh, I’m so sorry—,”

Before she knows what’s happening he grabs her shoulders and shoves her under the surface. She can hear him laughing through the water, and when she wiggles out of his grasp and rises for air he looks positively amused. “Can’t believe you fell for that one. I can’t swim. That’s the oldest one in the book.”

“Okay, clearly, we’re playing very different games here.” She sloshes forward and splashes him, not able to keep the grin off her face. “You’re such a smug little—.”

“Oh, go on!” he challenges. “Finish that sentence. Do it.”
She resorts to continuing to splash at him instead, shrieking when he gets her back. The two of them playfully slap at each other and she starts to swim away, cackling when he grabs her arm until he takes her face in his hands and kisses her.

For a few seconds, it doesn’t even matter that they’re in the water or where they are or anything like that at all. None of that is registering. All she can think about is the fact that he’s kissing her and that she’s not dreaming and that he tastes like coffee and chlorine and how amazingly that combination doesn’t make her want to vomit.

And sparks. There are sparks.

This, she thinks, is what a first kiss is supposed to feel like.

Josh pulls away first, breathing uncertainly and opening his eyes to lock eyes with her. He takes his hands from her face, his expression thoughtful. “Uh, sorry. I don’t know why I did that.”

“It’s okay,” she says breathlessly. She wonders if she’d be just as breathless without the swimming involved. Somehow, she thinks she would be. “Really, it’s fine.”

He clears his throat, nodding sheepishly. “Come on, we should—,”

“Right, yeah.”

The two of them climb out of the water. Josh hands Maya the towel she set aside on the bleachers. She takes it gratefully, wrapping it around her shoulders and rubbing her face. Josh peels the soaked jacket off his shoulders, holding it out disdainfully and giving her a look.

“This is your fault.”

She shrugs, biting her lip and smirking. “Whoops.”

The two of them make their way dripping to the parking lot. Maya stays huddled in her towel, nudging Josh lightly as they walk. “Thanks, by the way.”

“What for?”

“All the advice you gave me about Riley. It really did help. Maybe your wisdom is worth a little something after all.”

He grimaces at the backhanded compliment, smiling at her. “Well, thanks. But I still don’t forgive you for ruining my beanie. It’s dry clean only.”

“You have a beanie that’s dry clean only? That’s just excessive.”

“I don’t need this from you.”

They don’t talk about the kiss. But surprisingly, Maya’s okay with that. Just like her college decisions, and better self, she’s fine with it being something to look forward to figuring out in the coming year. A year that feels full of possibilities and distinctly more hopeful than any year she’s lived before.

Even with all the changes coming on the horizon, Maya finally feels certain that the best things in life are ahead of her, not behind her. It’s up to her to decide whether she makes the most of it or not.

-S E N I O R  Y E A R -
Senior year is the year Maya Hart learns about forgiveness.

She learned about it back in eighth grade, yeah, but this is an entirely different animal. That kind of forgiveness is internal, personal, and she’s never had a problem forgiving herself since then. In fact, she’s had a lot more trouble blaming herself and taking responsibility for things she did wrong, and one of the biggest steps in being her best self is reconciling that.

So come senior year, she has a lot of amends to make. She’s determined to make them all.

The most important one is the one she tackles as soon as she can.

When Lucas enters Riley’s bedroom and finds Maya sitting in the bay window rather than his girlfriend, he looks understandably shaken. He stammers a few incoherent excuses before making a beeline for the doorway when Maya gets to her feet, calling after him.

“Huckleberry, wait.”

He glances over his shoulder at her, looking like he’d rather be anywhere else.

She knows she deserves the sad cow eyes. She takes a deep breath, clasping her hands together. “I wanted to talk to you. Can we talk?”

He clears his throat, approaching her apprehensively. “Depends on what you want to talk about.”

Maya steps back, gesturing to the bay window for him to sit. He gives her an apprehensive look, putting his hands in his pockets.

“You sure about this? I thought I wasn’t allowed to sit in the window seat. It’s yours, remember?”

“Will you just sit?” she says impatiently, crossing her arms.

He obliges, raising his hands in surrender. She climbs onto the seat across from him, crossing her legs and composing her thoughts.

“I’ve been unfair to you.”

“Look, Maya, we don’t have to do this.”

“No, we do.” She licks her lips, sitting up straighter to inspire some confidence in her words. “I do.”

Lucas lifts his gaze from the floor, eyeing her curiously.

“I was a bitch to you. Don’t tell me not to apologize,” she says, holding up a hand to stop him before he begins. “I was terrible to you, and you put up with it because that’s the kind of guy you are. I took advantage of that and tried to make you harsher and acted out at you because I was jealous and I’m truly sorry about that. I’m sorry I’m just making up for it now. You didn’t deserve it.”

He gives her a confused look. “Jealous?”

She nods slowly. She wants to look away, for fear of being too vulnerable, but she knows she needs to do this. She maintains eye contact to the best of her ability. “You and I are very similar, but we’re different too. You’re good, you know. Genuinely. I’m trying to be, but you are. And when I realized that Riley cared about you as much as me, I don’t know, I guess I got scared. I figured she would drop me because she had you.”
“She would never do that.”

“I know,” Maya admits, smiling lightly. “I know that now. I wish I had known it then, but this is how it is. But you still didn’t deserve it. All those awful things I said to you and manipulation I put you through—look, it was fucked up. I’m really, really sorry about it. I know it sounds lame but I really do mean it.”

He examines her for a long moment. “I believe you.”

“You have absolutely no obligation to forgive me. I would totally get it if you didn’t want to.” She takes a deep breath. “But I hope you do. Because even though I said we weren’t friends, I didn’t mean it. You’re one of my most important friends, Lucas. You’re a good guy, and I’m better when you’re there. I hope you know that.”

Lucas hesitates, obviously considering everything. She doesn’t blame him for having to deliberate—she’s not sure she’d forgive her either.

Finally, he smiles. A little uncertain, but sincere. “I forgive you. Really.”

She’s more relieved than she’d ever admit out loud. She nods, kicking him lightly across the seat. “Good. I mean, thanks.”

“And she’s back,” he says flatly, but he’s still smiling.

Finally, after years of being all over the place in all the worst directions, it finally feels like their dynamic is back to the way it should be. She wouldn’t have it any other way.

--

After the school year passes in a whirl of memories, Maya finds herself preparing for the last big event of the summer before they all go their separate ways for college—Cory and Topanga’s wedding vow renewal ceremony and reception.

She thinks it’s a pretty cheap trick for them to do it the same year all of them are heading off to college, considering they’re all going to be emotionally vulnerable and probably cry a lot more than necessary, but she’s also grateful for the festivities. It gives her an excuse to spend more time with her favorite people before she goes off to take on the world on her own. She wants as much time with them as she can get.

Some of that time comes in the form of practicing proper ballroom dance etiquette to prepare for dancing at the reception. Farkle claims the whole thing is completely ridiculous, but Zay is all over it due to the fact that he getting to boss them all around for hours at a time with his dancing expertise.

“Okay, here’s how we’re going to do this,” he says to the four of them, pacing in front of them in the Matthews living room. He holds his iPhone in his hand, hitting play and allowing a schmaltzy swing tune to fill the room. “You’re going to show me what you’ve learned, working in pairs obviously. When I call swap, you will thus rotate and switch your respective partners. Just so nobody gets too comfortable with one another. We wouldn’t want any mishaps.”

He casts a pointed look in Riley and Lucas’s direction, obviously alluding to laughable pregnancy rumor Wyatt started spreading at the top of second semester. Lucas gives him an exhausted look. “There is no baby!”

“Godfather!” Zay demands, pointing to himself before waving them off. Lucas gives up, tossing his hands in the air. Riley grins at him. “Alright, partner up and show me what you’ve got.”
Maya turns to Farkle, taking his hand and allowing him to take her waist. The two of them waltz surprisingly well together. She gives him a proud eyebrow raise.

“Look at you, Farkle. Looks like you’ve learned your stuff.”

“I’ve been told I learn quickly, yes.”

She spins under his arm, making a show of looking around the room. “I noticed Smackle isn’t in attendance.”

“Yeah, she couldn’t make it today. I promised I’d show her the rest of what we learned tomorrow.”

“Ah, I see,” Maya says, nodding slowly. “Private lesson. Got you.”

Farkle rolls his eyes. “It’s not like that.”

“Oh, no, of course not.” She shrugs, winking at him.

Farkle scowls at her. She knows she shouldn’t pick on him, but he and Smackle maintaining their stance they’re better off no longer romantically involved on the basis of statistics is so stupid she can’t help herself. “Zay!”

“Swap!” Zay calls, wiggling his index finger in a circle.

Farkle spins Maya away from him, Lucas just barely managing to catch her. The two of them hold each other at arm’s length. “Gosh, huckleberry. You’re a terrible dancer.”

“How can you know that? You’ve only been dancing with me for like three seconds.”

“I don’t need to experience it to know it. It’s intuition. And you have no sense of rhythm.”

Lucas’s turn to roll his eyes. “You can’t claim to know something without experiencing it.”

“Sure I can. I know that you’re a terrible dancer. I’m fairly certain us not kissing on that fateful day at the campfire in Texas was doing us both a favor because I’m pretty sure as far as kissing me, you’d be a terrible kisser. I could go on.”

“I don’t like where this is going.”

“I’m glad you sense that. See? Intuition.”

“Zay!”

“Swap!”

Maya spins away from Lucas, landing in front of Riley and taking her arms. “Hi there, honey.”

“Peaches!” she greets her cheerfully, dancing more confidently than either of their male friends. “How’s it going?”

“Pretty good. A little dizzy.”

From the other side of the room, the dance seems to have broken down. Farkle is standing in front of Lucas, obviously perplexed. He holds his arms out for emphasis. “How are we supposed to do this? Which one of us is supposed to be the girl?”
Zay points aggressively at them. “Dance has no gender!”

Farkle looks about ready to go off. Lucas has an amused grin on his face, reaching up to calm Farkle down and offering his hands for him to take. Maya wiggles her eyebrows at Riley, holding her arm up for her to spin under. Before they know it the two of them are dancing a jig entirely their own, twirling around each other and giggling.

“Hey, no freestyling in my ballroom!”

“Too late!” Maya says cheerfully, spinning Riley under her arm as she cracks up. When she pulls her back, Riley takes her waist and lowers her down.

“And, dip!”

Maya falls into a dip, leaping back to her feet as both girls lift their arms in the air—a grand finale. Lucas and Farkle have given up dancing, watching them swing together in fond amusement. Zay crosses his arms, shaking his head.

“Why do I even try?”

Just as she expected it would be, the wedding vow reception is one of Maya’s favorite nights of the summer.

It’s all the people she loves in one place, laughing and dancing and enjoying their time together. Celebrating the love two of them share with their love for one another. She spends the entire evening bouncing around with her friends, including a pretty radical rendition of Love Shack on karaoke with her boys Zay and Farkle, if she does say so herself.

Even still, she doesn’t forget the promise she made to herself at the end of last year. And when she sees Angela Moore talking to Topanga by the catering, she steels her resolve and makes her way over to her.

“Excuse me, Angela?”

Angela turns, blinking at her for a moment with a polite smile on her face. “Oh, hi. Maya, right?”

Maya can see exactly why Shawn fell in love with her. She’s beautiful, even over two decades later, and she has an infectious confidence emanating off of her. She was so preoccupied with her mom and Shawn when she first saw her, but now she’s clear-headed enough to appreciate her obvious charm. Not so blinded by selfishness anymore, she likes to think. “Yeah. Could I maybe talk to you alone for a second?”

Angela gives Topanga a look. She shrugs, winking at Maya before slinking away to join Cory on the dance floor. “Sure. Why not?”

Maya leads the way over to a more secluded corner of the room, aiming for at least a semblance of privacy. Angela eyes her curiously when they come to a stop. “What can I do for you?”

“Um, nothing, exactly,” Maya admits, twiddling her fingers together. She tilts her head slightly. “I just felt like I really owed you an apology.”

Angela seems genuinely caught off-guard by this. “An apology? For what?”
“I was so wrong about you,” she explains, tumbling over her words but wanting to get them out. Actually standing there in front of Angela, looking her in the eyes, it feels more important than ever. “I judged you based on my own selfishness. I painted you as this villain in my head just because I wanted Shawn with my mom, and I didn’t even know you. Sure, I was young, but it still wasn’t right. I’m sure you’re an amazing person, and I completely disregarded that and cast you off as this terrible person in my head because maybe things weren’t going the way I wanted them to go.”

Angela listens interestedly, cocking an eyebrow. Maya knows she must sound dramatic, but she barrels on anyway.

“I know this doesn’t mean much, and you have no reason to even listen to me. So I’m really thankful for you giving me the time of day. I just really wanted you to know that I don’t think of you that way. And I’m sorry I ever did. Truly.”

After a long moment of examining her, Angela smiles lightly. “You know, Shawn is real fond of you.”

“I know. He’s very fond of you, too. We’re very lucky.”

Angela’s smile widens. “Can I ask you a question, Maya?”

“Definitely. Anything.”

“I can tell this has been on your mind for a while, but I’m not sure I know exactly why you felt so strongly about it. I mean, I would’ve been just fine with or without it.” She gives her an inquisitive look. “So why is it so important to you?”

Maya gulps, getting her thoughts together. “You’re Topanga’s best friend. I know what it’s like to have a best friend.”

She hesitates, casting a glance out to the dance floor. She finds Riley, goofing around with Lucas. Spending a lot more time laughing than effectively dancing, at least.

“I would never want her kids to think of me the way I spent so much time thinking negatively of you. For all the wrong reasons. I would never, ever want that. And I don’t think you deserved it from me, either.”

Angela seems to accept this. She reaches forward and touches Maya’s shoulder, squeezing lightly. “Thank you for your apology. I appreciate it.”

Maya nods. She’s shaken out of her skin when someone rams into her from behind, only breaking into laughter when she realizes it’s Zay. “Hey there. Mind if I steal the blonde beauty here?”

Angela laughs, waving them off. “Go. Dance. Be merry.”

Zay bows a thank you, leading Maya onto the dance floor as a saucy swing number begins. Maya mimics his theatrics, imitating a perfect ballroom stance and allowing him to lead them in a circle around the floor.

“Look at you,” he says proudly, grinning when she smiles with faux bashfulness. “It’s almost as if you had a brilliant teacher.”

“Oh, please.”
The two of them dance together, making subtle commentary about some of the couples around them and cracking each other up.

Maya gets lost in thought when she eyes Lucas and Riley again, once again doing more laughing than actual dancing but looking just as happy as ever. Lucas leans forward to whisper something into her ear and she bursts into laughter, nudging her head against his shoulder as he grins, planting a kiss to the top of her head.

“You think we’ll ever find that?” Maya finds herself wondering aloud.

Zay has to follow her gaze to figure out what the hell she’s referring to. He makes a face. “That? Nah. And I think it’s probably for the best. Too mushy for me. Think I’d need shots of cynicism just to make it through the day.”

Maya glances to their other side, where Smackle and Farkle are dancing together. Despite not being together, it’s obvious they’re more comfortable in each other’s arms than anywhere else. “How about that?”

“Who even knows what the hell they are.” Zay narrows his eyes at them, before shrugging. “I think it’s sort of like people are always saying about Cory and Topanga. There will only be one Riley and Lucas. Same for Smackle and Farkle, I guess. If they count.”

Maya nods, absorbing this truth. Zay gives her a look.

“Besides, don’t you want something that’s entirely your own? Wait until you find that. That’s going to be a lot more satisfying than trying to be something else.”

As if on cue, or so Maya likes to think, Josh appears at their side to lightly tap Zay on the shoulder. “Mind if I cut in?”

Zay looks curiously to Maya. She nods him off, indicating it’s more than welcome.

He lets go of her hands, signaling Josh that he’s watching them before flitting off in the sea of dancers. Maya smiles after him before turning to face her new dance partner. She takes the hand he’s offering.

“Wow, Boing,” she says as they begin to swing with the music. “I have to say, you’re not bad.”

“Charmed,” he says flatly, twirling her under his arm. She grips his shoulder more tightly when she stops to regain her balance, having effectively closed some of the distance between them in the process. “What’d you think of the ceremony?”

“Very nice. Classic. Not that I’d expect anything less from Topanga. But I don’t exactly get it.”

“Get what?”

“The whole concept of vow renewals.” Maya doesn’t even notice the song change, so wrapped up in him and their conversation as their dancing slows considerably. They’re simply swaying, no longer attempting to keep up with proper ballroom steps. “Like, you already put all that dedication and devotion out there for the world to see. What’s the point of doing it again unless you’ve got like, a guilt complex or something?”

Josh laughs, shrugging. “You got me there. I don’t know. It’s different for different people, I guess.”
“Would you do it? Vow renewals?”

“Maybe,” he says nonchalantly. “If my wife wanted to. Then sure.”

“Okay, if you were going to, what would your reasoning be? Like, explain why you’d do it to me.”

He hums, thinking on it for a long moment. Without his signature beanie, his hair looks very soft in the glow of the lights from the dance floor. She forgets how much she likes his hair when it’s hidden away, but it’s always a nice thing when she remembers.

“Well, as I said, if my wife wanted to then I’d do it because she wanted it. But I guess if it were going to happen, I’d use it to really just, you know, affirm how I felt. That even after so many years, nothing had changed. Life’s a long game, you know. People get worn down. Sometimes, it’s just nice to have a reminder.”

She doesn’t know whether his use of the term they thrown around so often is intentional or not. But with his explanation, she suddenly sort of gets it. She could see herself wanting to remind the people she loves how much she cares about them as the years go on. She never wants them to forget.

Especially him. As stupid as it feels, she could see herself pulling a stunt like this let him know how much she still cares about him. Even after so many years.

--

“You really didn’t have to walk me home.”

“No, no,” Josh says pointedly, mirroring her grin as they walk up the steps to stand in front of her apartment building. “I think I did. These city streets can be tough. I just feel better, you know, making sure you get home okay.”

She knows the harshness of the streets better than anybody. She also knows better than anybody that he would walk her home. That’s the kind of guy he is, even five years later.

“Well, thanks,” she says, leaning against her door. Josh smiles back at her, the two of them settling into comfortable silence. After a minute or so, Maya looks up from his lips to look him in the eyes.

“Josh?”

“Yeah? What?”

She hesitates, lowering her voice. She suddenly feels shier than she did a few moments ago. “Are you going to kiss me?”

He’s cute when he’s caught off-guard. He murmurs under his breath, shrugging his shoulders and stuffing his hands in his pockets. “I may have been, you know, thinking about it. But uh, I wasn’t going—I wasn’t sure if—,”

“Because if you did,” Maya continues over his rambling, maintaining eye contact. She’s never had trouble looking him in the eyes. “I wouldn’t be mad.”

He trails off, looking her over for a second before breaking into a sheepish grin. She smiles back, feeling those butterflies in her stomach again when he reaches up to cup her face, gently brushing his thumb across her cheekbone. She closes her eyes when he leans in, holding her breath.

Still, nothing happens.
She opens her eyes, giving him a critical look. “You good there?”

“Sorry,” he says quietly. “I was just… I feel like you’re going to laugh at me.”

To his credit, it’s not an unfair concern. She’s been known to laugh at him before. But she definitely doesn’t feel like she’s going to burst out laughing in this moment.

She reaches up to hold his wrist, swallowing anxiously. “I won’t laugh.”

He squints at her, obviously not entirely believing her. She squints back and he breaks into a smile, licking his lips and glancing down at hers before leaning in to kiss her.

Turns out, sparks aren’t just reserved for first kisses. It’s sparks, and fireworks. It’s beanies and alternative rock and like falling and flying at the same time. It’s a thousand times more everything than kissing Brett Ryan.

Turns out, the who is a lot more important than the when.

Despite her promise, Maya giggles against his lips. He whines in reply, laughing because of her and breaking apart from her. “You said you weren’t going to laugh.”

“It’s not you,” she exhales with a laugh, opening her eyes and gazing at him. “It’s… I’m just really happy.”

He smiles warmly at her, brushing some hair behind her ear. She leans forward to kiss him again, wrapping her arms around his neck.

She doesn’t ever want this summer to end.

---

The closer August gets, the more Maya decides something needs to be done about the fact that in a few months they’re all going to be going off to different parts of the country—her more so than anybody else. Like usual, it spurs her into action.

She calls Farkle when inspiration strikes her one afternoon, holding the phone between her shoulder and her ear as she collects materials from her room. He picks up on the third ring.

“Hello?”

“Hey, don’t be busy. Cancel your plans. I’m coming over.”

Farkle scoffs, speaking sarcastically. “Thanks for asking. No, I’m free. Why do you ask?”

“Listen, you can berate me later. This is important. I’ll be there in ten. Lucas is coming too. Be ready for us.”

She hangs up without much more of an explanation. Lucas is equally confused when she shows up on his doorstep to pick him up in her shitty van, the piece of trash she’ll be taking all the way across the country her new ride for the summer as well.

He looks nervous as he climbs into the passenger seat. “Are you sure this thing isn’t going to explode? When was the last time it was inspected? I don’t see a sticker.”

“Oh my God, you are such a dad friend,” she groans, turning on the engine.
“What does that even mean?”

“No more questions. Don’t ask any more questions until we get to Farkle’s. All will be explained in due time.”

Lucas grumbles something under his breath, looking like an absolute nerd with the backpack she made him bring wrapped tightly in his arms in front of him. She doesn’t know why anyone ever thought he was cool or edgy.

She also doesn’t know why she ever hated him. She’s glad she doesn’t anymore.

“Have you named it yet?”

“What?”

“The van,” he explains. “That’s what you’re supposed to do when you get your first car. You have to name it.”

Maya makes a face. “The thought never occurred to me. Is that some kind of Texas thing?”

“I’m pretty sure it’s a universal thing. Not everything I talk about is a Texas thing.”

“Fine. But while we’re on the subject, can you explain Texas toast to me? Like, what’s the difference between that and regular toast?” Lucas rolls his eyes. “Are you telling me you don’t know the answer?”

He hesitates. “It’s in the bread. It’s cut thicker. Usually used for garlic bread.”

“Knew you’d know the difference. What a good little huckleberry you are.”

“I’m jumping out of the vehicle.”

“Don’t you dare take off that seatbelt,” Maya chides him, holding out a hand to stop him. “But to answer your question, no. It doesn’t have a name. Guess it needs one.”

Lucas hums, thinking about it. He looks over his shoulder towards the back, getting a good look around as he ponders the important decision. “Well, it’s certainly… been used.”

“You say that so affectionately. You can be mean to the piece of shit van, Hop-a-long. It’s okay.”

“Well, there’s nothing wrong with something being well-worn,” he says defensively. “It’s like that t-shirt that’s falling apart because you’ve worn it so many times or that baby blanket you’ve had since you were kid that’s basically splitting at the seams. But you don’t give it away because it’s well-loved. Like, you’re a little sick of it, but you appreciate what it gave you.Honestly, it’s kind of like having Cory as a teacher for the last six years. Worn down, but well worth it.”

Maya raises her eyebrows, giving him an amused look. He catches up to her train of thought a second later, mirroring her expression with one of horror.

“No.”

“Oh, yes.”

“No!”

“Yes!” Maya cackles, hitting her hand against the steering wheel. “You’ve done it, huckleberry.
You’ve named it. Meet Van Cory. This piece of shit, worn down, hunk of junk is officially Cory.”

Lucas shakes his head, leaning back against the head rest and closing his eyes. “If he ever hears that and you tell him it was my suggestion, he’s going to murder me.”

“Oh, no, he wouldn’t do that to Riley. May hold out on a blessing when you pop the question to her though. Better get on it fast.”

“I hate this conversation.”

“Or get her pregnant. Wait, don’t do that. That’s gross. Forget I said that. I’m shuddering.”

“I hate this conversation.”

“Can you believe the entire school heard Wyatt’s rumor and probably thought about you guys doing it?”

“I’m jumping out of the vehicle.”

--

When Maya explains the plan of a massive road trip to get all of them to their respective schools when August rolls around, both Farkle and Lucas are understandably skeptical. It takes a lot of negotiating and reasoning to get Lucas on board, and once he’s all in it’s a lot easier to get Farkle convinced as well.

Together, the three of them spend the next few days obsessively working out the details. Lucas takes very neat notes in a small notebook. Farkle manages the finances, working out a deal with his dad on the basis of preparing him for the real world. Maya acts as the woman with a vision, spouting out ideas until something sticks.

The night before their last day at home they stay up all night arranging last minute details at Farkle’s, dismayed when the sun starts rising. They drop their things and sit in the comfortable armchairs, watching the sunrise out the window and enjoying the content silence of hard work well spent. To Maya, she’s reveling how nice it feels to be with two of her favorite people, doing something for her absolute favorite person in the world.

Farkle lights a joint, taking a celebratory puff. Maya takes it when he hands it to her.

“You think she’ll do it?” Lucas asks, eyes slightly glazed over from exhaustion.

“Who?”

“What?”

“Riley,” he clarifies. All of their brains are a little fried. The drugs aren’t helping Maya and Farkle. “Do you think she’ll go along with it? Or did we plan all this for nothing?”

Farkle shrugs uncertainly, shifting his in seat. Maya bites her lip, shaking her head. “She will.”

“How can you be sure?” Farkle asks.

“Because,” she says with a sigh. “It’s Riley. For all her sense, she would do anything for her friends. They’re the most important thing in her world, and she’d never pass up an opportunity to be with us one last time before we all scatter. Trust me. She’ll come.”
Maya’s confidence is enough to alleviate the boys’ insecurities. They recline back more comfortably again. The room starts to glow gold, the sunlight just breaking into the space.

“It’s gonna be wicked,” Farkle says excitedly.

“Yeah,” Maya says proudly, glancing at the itinerary and road map laid out on the floor in front of her. All the little stars on the map representing them paralleling the stars in the ceiling above them. “Yeah, it is.”

Maya’s own sense of insecurity doesn’t hit until that evening.

She spends some time sitting with Shawn at their kitchen table, both of them working in content silence. She sketches idly while he edits some photo files for work, neither of them saying much but enjoying each other’s company.

After a while, Maya glances up at him and it hits her that tomorrow she’s going to be leaving him behind. She’s leaving him and he has no idea it’s coming.

In some ways she thinks it’s for the best—some goodbyes are easier than others. She said goodbye to her teachers and classmates no sweat. But she couldn’t bear the idea of saying goodbye to Josh, going so far away, so she just stepped back from him entirely.

Shawn, she knows, would be a hard goodbye.

“Can I ask you something?”

Shawn glances up from his computer. “Sure. Go ahead.”

“When you went to college, did things change? A lot? Like, you’re still friends with Cory and all that. But did it change a ton?”

Shawn pauses, contemplating the question. He lowers the screen of his laptop, clasping his hands together and locking eyes with her. “It’s not easy. Things do change, dynamics, whether you want them to or not. Sometimes it’s for the best, sometimes not the best. But it happens. You can’t stop that.”

Maya nods. She figured as much.

“But it really depends on how you handle it, I think. I disappeared out of Cory’s life for years because I was scared, not because he didn’t want me there. As long as you do everything you can to make it work, and the other person does too, then I don’t see why friendships won’t stay strong. How you handle them is all up to you.”

Although he’s not poetic like Cory, Maya has always appreciated Shawn’s frank advice. She smiles, realizing what she needs to do. “Right. Thanks.” She gets to her feet, pausing and doubling back to give him a kiss on the cheek. “Dad.”

He smiles in spite of himself, waving her off. She turns around and jogs up the stairs to her room, gathering her bags and Riley’s suitcase she successfully spent the last week secretly packing with a careful combination of lying and ferreting items out of her room. Everything accounted for, she waits impatiently until she hears Shawn head up to bed, grabbing her phone and calling Farkle the second his bedroom door closes behind him.
He picks up on the first ring. “Hello? What do you want, Penelope?”

“Hilarious!” She rolls her eyes. “Listen. Can you book a hotel for tonight?”

“I could, yeah. But I’m not going to unless you give me a good reason.”

“We’re leaving tonight.” She exhales, feeling the excitement of a new adventure. “Get your stuff ready and book a hotel for just inside Pennsylvania. I’ll be there in like fifteen minutes.”

“Wait. Maya, what’s happening?”

“I’ll explain everything. I promise. Just book that hotel, and make it quick. Be there soon.” She hangs up without giving him the chance to respond. In this case, she figures it’s okay to act first and ask for forgiveness later.

She gathers her things and makes her way downstairs. She’ll be damned if they get out on the road tomorrow without Riley, so she’s giving herself all night to convince her if she has to. It’s just a few hours earlier than they planned. Nothing they can’t work around.

As she’s getting into the driver’s seat after loading up the back of the van, she hesitates, glancing up at the apartment in front of her. It hits her that it’ll be a long time before she’s back again.

But she can’t feel sad. There’s so much to look forward to on the horizon, and she’s ready to get there. Nothing she and her friends can’t tackle together.

With a rush of mischievous energy, Maya breaks into a grin as she turns on the engine, backing out of the parking spot and onto the road.

Ready for the next journey to begin.
After two weeks confined in a beat-up minivan, sitting in coach on the flight back to New York is almost a luxury.

Despite her mini-meltdown at CalArts, Riley and Josh make it to the airport just in time to board the plane. Josh asks her if she wants to talk it out once they’re settled in, but she can’t bring herself to get into it. People are already giving her the side-eye as she sits in her window seat wiping her tears, and besides, she doesn’t want to burden Josh with her emotions. She knew it was going to be hard to say goodbye—for all intents and purposes, she should’ve expected this to happen.

No matter how much she anticipated, however, she never would’ve been prepared for that final goodbye. To actually step back and let them all go.

Josh backs off, catching her hints that she’d rather just move on from it. But he offers her one piece of advice before popping his headphones in and tuning out.

“You know, just remember you’re about to go off and do the same thing,” he says in a soft voice. He pats her hand, giving her a smile. “It feels so strange now because they’re all gone and you’re still where you’ve always been. In a few days, you’ll be starting your own journey too. Don’t forget that.”

Riley holds onto the thought the entire flight home, daydreaming about how happy her friends are and how hopefully, she’ll be off to do the same thing. Even still, it doesn’t do a lot to stop the tears.

When they land at JFK and meet her parents at baggage claim, both of them tackle her with a hug. It’s more of a relief than she expected to be back in their warm embrace, safe and familiar and worn from the trip. She’s exhausted in a way she’s never felt before, and it’s nice to be able to feel like she’s not responsible for herself for a second. For a brief moment, she can actually rest.

Her parents have a million and one questions, and Auggie’s queries are unending the moment she walks through the door and he barrels her with a hug. But she’s so tired, and Josh is able to distract their family long enough for her to sneak away to her room without too much of a fuss.
She collapses on her mattress, forgetting how cozy and relaxing it is to curl up in her own bed. Everything else—unpacking, reminiscing, coping—that can wait until the morning.

Riley thought it would be hard to fall asleep with the knowledge of her friends being so far away and the bed being empty beside her, but the exhausted does her a favor. It’s only a few minutes after she closes her eyes that she drifts into sleep.

--

When she finally rouses awake the next morning, sunlight is filtering in through the bay window and she feels like she slept for a thousand years. It’s not necessarily a good feeling.

Pulling herself out of bed, she ties her hair up out of her face and casts a disdainful glance at her very full suitcase on the floor. Unpacking has never been her favorite thing, but she’s dreading it even more this time around. Because she feels like if she puts everything away, if she tidies all the loose ends up and moves on, she’s admitting it’s over. She’s not ready for it to be over.

She sighs and steps out into the hallway instead, ignoring it for now.

Despite the late morning hour, Riley’s surprised to find only her mother seated at the kitchen table. She’s dressed casually but presentably as she always is, work spread out in front of her and a look of concentration on her face. Continuing on as normal. As if nothing is any different.

Riley knows that the world has continued spinning since she left Smackle in Maryland. It continued to spin when she left Zay in North Carolina and Farkle in Missouri. Even when she let Lucas walk away in Texas and let Maya go in California, the world kept on turning just the same.

Life keeps going. And life isn’t going to wait for her to catch up.

Topanga lifts her head to find Riley standing in the doorway, lost in her own head. It takes her mother’s voice to shake her out of it. “Good morning, sleepy head.”

“Oh, please,” Riley says, hopping down the steps and coming to sit across from her at the table. “It’s not that late.”

“It’s one in the afternoon.”

“Precisely my point. That’s only ten in the morning in west coast time.” Riley taps her temple. “Gotta give me some time to readjust here.”

Topanga rolls her eyes, but she’s smiling. She gets up from her seat to grab a plate from the countertop, sliding a couple of pieces of toast in her direction. “At least eat something now that you’re up.”

She obliges, taking her time to spread butter and jam on her bread while her mother works in content silence.

By the time she finishes one piece, it’s clear Topanga can’t hold back her curiosity any longer. She puts down her pen, folding her arms on the table and leaning forward interestedly. “So? How was the rest of the trip? Did you like Los Angeles?”

Riley knows she can’t avoid the questions forever. Better to get it over with now. And in some ways, she hopes maybe talking about it will help her shake off the melancholy.

“It was really cool,” she begins, taking another bite of her toast. She chews thoughtfully, trying to
get her brain in working order. “It was so sunny. Like, so much sunshine.”

Topanga cracks up. “So I’ve heard.”

Riley nods, crumbling a bit of crust between her fingers idly. “Maya’s going to love it. I mean, she already does, I think. But she’ll do amazing.”

Her mother examines her quietly, reaching forward and resting her hand on top of hers. She gives her a soft smile. “She sure will.”

Topanga is able to coax more stories out of her the longer they sit there talking, Riley loosening up the more she wakes up. She realizes just how much she missed her mom after a couple weeks away. She’s so grateful they were able to work out the insecurities in their relationship before she left for even longer a time in just a couple days.

Riley tells her all about the lodge and singing by the ocean and John Hopkins. She laughs over forgetting Farkle at the rest stop and waiting for the downpour to end. She explains all about haunted hotels and North Carolina and the Kentucky heat. The waitress with washed-up acting dreams and kind mechanics and pocket towns and the millions of stars twinkling over the Midwest.

When she gets to Austin, she hesitates. Glancing up to lock eyes with her mother, she licks her lips. “There’s something I have to show you. I did something.”

“What?” Topanga’s expression shifts from pleasant to uncertain. “You’re not in trouble, are you? Is this going to get legal? What evidence do I have to destroy?”

“No, no,” Riley assures her, giggling in spite of herself. She takes her mother’s hands, patting them soothingly as she rests them back on the table top. “Nothing like that. Please, relax. Come on.”

Topanga still looks hesitant, a suspicious glint in her eyes. “So, what?”

“When we were in Austin, we went downtown to see the sights. Maya dared Lucas to go into this parlor with her and get spontaneous tattoos, and I was just going to wait for them, but I don’t know. Something sort of came over me.”

Topanga raises an eyebrow. “You got a tattoo?”

“Yeah. Not a big one or anything. And somewhere where I would be able to cover it up, you know, nothing distasteful or anything. All three of us sort of followed that logic.”

She’s not sure what reaction she’s expecting, but Topanga doesn’t meet it. She seems unfazed, the ghost of a smile playing over her lips. “What did you get?”

Riley pauses, locking eyes with her briefly before letting go of her hands. She stands up, taking the helm of her shirt and rolling it up to just below her chest.

Carved into the skin over her ribcage is a tiny constellation, five stars connected by thin, nearly invisible lines. Although each star is distinct and slightly unique, it’s impossible to miss that the last two stars at the tail end of the constellation are the largest.

Riley brushes her fingers over it, heart pounding just above her hand as she waits for her mom’s reaction. The longer she looks at it, the more prominent the pain in the back of her throat feels. She feels tears pricking the corners of her ears, blinking them back.

“Stars,” Topanga murmurs, giving her an approving smile. “I’m guessing that layout of that
“constellation isn’t coincidental either.”

“They’re my universe,” Riley blurts out, dropping her shirt and taking a deep breath. She tries to find words but comes up with nothing, shaking her head and shrugging. She raises her gaze to the ceiling as tears blur her vision, frustrated with how poorly she’s taking it. “They’re my universe. And now they’re gone.”

Topanga rises from her seat, coming around to join her on the bench. She pulls her down into a hug and Riley accepts it, leaning into her mother’s comforting embrace and trying to control her breathing.

“They’re not gone, Riley.” Topanga holds her securely, brushing some hair out of her face. “Sure, they’re in a different place now, but the friendship you share isn’t just going to disappear. You love them, and they love you too. No one would plan a whole road trip for someone they don’t love.”

Riley exhales shakily, trying to absorb this information. To accept it as the truth.

“They’re not going to leave you behind. And you know what?”

“What?”

Topanga leans back a bit to lock eyes with her, beaming. “They’re a part of your universe, but space is infinite. And the amazing thing about college and everything that comes with it is that your universe is going to expand. It’s going to grow and expand with you and so many people are going to come in and out of it. More people are going to join that constellation.”

Riley meets her eyes, managing a watery smile. She inhales a shaky breath, wiping her cheeks with the heel of her hand.

“But no matter how many people come and go, those five are still going to be a part of it if you want them to be.” Topanga pokes at her ribcage. “You’ve got them forever now.”

Riley nods, reaching forward to hug her mother one more time. “Thanks, mom. Thank you.”

“You’re very welcome.” She feels Topanga press a kiss to the top of her head. “Now go unpack. I know you’re putting it off, but we’re going to be packing up the rest of your stuff in a couple days so you may as well get it all back in place while it’s still worth it.”

She groans playfully, making a face before kissing her mother on the cheek and jumping to her feet. When she’s at the doorway again she hesitates, turning around to face her again. “Mom?”

“Yes?”

“You didn’t seem all that upset about the tattoo,” she points out, tilting her head curiously. “Do you care at all?”

Topanga shrugs. “It’s your body. Not mine. But let’s not tell your father about it just yet.”

Riley smiles, nodding before disappearing back to her room.

She takes her unpacking slowly, making sure to put all her clothes in their appropriate drawers or in the hamper to be washed. She can’t even begin to imagine how she’s going to decide which pieces to take with her and what to leave behind. She’s only going a few miles away—she has no idea how Maya packed up a few belongings and went all the way across the country.
Once her luggage is completely emptied, she grabs her string bag off the floor and dumps the contents on to the bed. Her wallet, her phone, and her keys are all still exactly where she left them. But that’s all that comes out.

She glances at the blank space on her bulletin board to double check that she didn’t imagine putting the photo of the six of them in her bag. Panic creeps up on her as she reaches to check again, but her phone buzzing on the mattress distracts her.

Amidst the texts from her friends asking if she made it home okay, one message catches her eye. 

_Peaches sent a photo._

She unlocks her phone, pulling up their message thread.

To her surprise, the photo is of a different bulletin board—one three thousand miles away in California. And tacked to it is her photo of the six of them at graduation.

_Peaches: just finished decorating! hope you don’t mind I decided to borrow this – don’t worry, I left you something in return_ 

_Peaches: love you honey!!_

Riley frowns in confusion, staring at the six of them stuck on a board so far away. Rereading Maya’s message, she glances down at her string bag again. She pays more attention as she reaches inside it, feeling an admittedly sizeable, firm piece of paper in her fingers. When she pulls it out and gets a good look at it, she feels her heart stop beating.

It’s the photo of the six of them at graduation. But it’s more than that—it’s the sketch Maya spent all trip slaving away over, a redrawn replica of the photograph to replace the original. Her line-work is careful, neat, and obviously well-loved. Each little detail is painstakingly captured: the flick of her hair on Farkle’s face, the point of Zay’s ballet slipper peeking out from the robe, the joyful crinkle around Lucas’s eyes as he laughs.

Maya Hart is full of mischief, but when she puts it towards kindness, she does amazing things.

Riley laughs in spite of herself, brushing fresh tears from her eyes. But these are the best kind.

She flips the paper over, surprised to find another gift entirely on the back side. The page is sectioned off into five pieces by a ruler-straight pencil line, and in each space she recognizes the distinct handwriting of each of her friends. She plops onto the edge of her bed, chewing her thumbnail to keep from crying while she reads.

_Dear Riley,_

_I’ll be very impressed if Maya manages to pull off this little project without you finding out about it. She just slid this sketchbook to me while you’re asleep on the bed, so I’m attempting to write as silently as possible. And we don’t have much space, as you’ll soon see, so I’ll try to keep this as to the point as I can. Riley, there aren’t enough words in the English language to express how much I admire you. There aren’t enough words in any language, and there are thousands of languages out there in the world. I always have, and your spirit is one of the most fascinating subjects I’ve ever studied. What I’ve managed to conclude in my six year study in Riley Matthews is that there is no one kinder, more passionate, or who loves more fiercely than you. I feel honored to have met you and gotten to share in your world. I’m sure when you say goodbye to me later this afternoon, I will not have the words to express any of this and you’ll be too tearful to comprehend them anyway, so I_
I am grateful for the opportunity to immortalize my thoughts here.

Continue to inspire at NYU. I have no doubts that you will.

Sincerely,

Isadora M. Smackle

Riley grins, swallowing the waterworks. She hopes Smackle knows how mutual the admiration is, how much of that fierce love goes towards her.

She allows herself to drift to the next one.

Hey Riley,

Smackle made it impossible to follow her up, so I’m not gonna try and be all sentimental. I know I’ll suck, and maybe you need a laugh anyway. So, sugar! Pretty brunette! Smiley Riley! I owe you a lot for not completely stealing Lucas from me, especially because it gave me the perfect way to integrate myself into the group without you guys actually approving. I’m that a stray dog that you’re like, hey, how’d he get in here? Oh well, he’s here now, so I guess we’ll just keep him. Anyway, thank you for not throwing me out on the curb and for being, well, the person that you are. Lucas wasn’t exaggerating when he talked about how amazing you are. The way he described you, I didn’t think you were even necessarily real, but you spent every day of the last five years proving me very wrong. You’re as wonderful as he claimed you were, and I’m very lucky to have you in my life. I probably won’t say any of this in person, but know that I think it. And I sure believe it.

Destroy them at NYU. Make the godfather of your unborn children proud.

Deuces,

Zay

Riley laughs her way through his letter, admiring how his own brand of sentimental shines through despite his claims that he wasn’t going to be.

Dear Riley,

I know I’m not going to know what to say when you drop me off tomorrow. I’m sitting here in the bathroom at three in the morning writing this because despite what I say, I am scared for tomorrow. Who knows what college is going to be like? But I’m also excited because I know good things are going to happen. And I know that if I were to tell you this in person, you would have just the right advice and convince me that it was going to be great, and I’d be brave enough to confront it on my own. So I’m trying to convince myself of that, because you’re not going to be with me every step of the way and I need to learn from you to be that person for myself. But I wanted to thank you (even though I’m writing very small to fit this on this page, I hope you can read it) for everything. For putting up with my quirks, for not disowning me when I was a freakish seventh grader or an arrogant senior or any of the moments in between. I like to think I know what love is now, and it’s mostly thanks to you. I’m not going to forget your wisdom. Even though I’m supposed to be the smart one, I think in a lot of ways, you were always much wiser than me. So thank you, for being you and being my friend.

Tell me everything about NYU. I’ll work on the Pluto thing.

Your genius always,
Farkle Minkus

She’s given up on trying to hold back the tears, primarily focused on keeping them from dripping onto the page. She doesn’t want one bit of this to ever be tarnished.

Riley,

I’m writing this now even though we have a whole extra day together tomorrow, because I know I’m not going to know what to say then any more than I do now. I don’t know what to say. How am I supposed to say goodbye when it doesn’t really feel like goodbye? At least I hope it isn’t. I’m just splattering my brain all over this paper when everyone else said all these great things but – I hope you know how important you are. To me, obviously, but in general, too. And I hope you realize how much you’ve changed me. Made me better. Or maybe not changed, but you made me comfortable enough and confident enough to be the person that I wanted to be. Which in the end was better. You’ll probably see when we go out tomorrow (oh, yeah, Maya and I agreed that we could spend the day without her tomorrow. Didn’t see that coming), but it’s true. It’s so true and I’ll never be able to repay you for it so I hope that me trying to give all that support and love back to you is enough for now. This is just a bunch of words and I’m running out of space and there’s a million things I want to say and should say but I’m just going to go on the assumption that this isn’t the last you’ll hear from me. That I’ll be able to tell you everything I want to say and share with you everything for a long, long time. So, this is it for now. Thank you.

I don’t know how long distance is going to work, exactly, but I’m 98% sure I’m going to break and call you first. So just be prepared for that.

NYU is gaining someone really special. Keep being Riley.

Love,

Lucas F.

It’s hard to read with her vision so blurred, but she powers through and keeps going to the last section of the page. Maya’s messy scrawl is almost unreadable as it is, but with years of practice under her belt, Riley doesn’t have a lot of trouble.

So Riles (honey),

I know you were upset I didn’t show you what I was working on all trip, but I hope the way you’re feeling makes hiding it from you worth it. Getting the others to play along and write it when you weren’t around was so annoying, but they all love you so they clearly made it work. We all love you, so much, I think that much is clear. (I may have read the other messages. Lucas is so dorky). Even though we’re going to be on opposite coasts, I don’t think it’s even going to feel like it because you’re always with me. And I’m always with you. Don’t forget that.

Knock ‘em dead at NYU. Embarrass Josh when you can. For me.

Forever,

Maya Penelope Hart (peaches)

Riley takes a deep breath, holding the drawing close to her for a long moment. Turns out maybe Topanga was right, as she usually is—they’re always going to be her universe. And from the looks of it, it sounds like she’s going to be a central star in theirs for a long time to come.

When she moves into her dorm at NYU, the drawing is the first thing she hangs up. She keeps it on
the portrait side, but she knows what’s underneath and all the heartfelt words make the transition that much easier.

Her universe is expanding, across hundreds of fresh faces and thousands of miles and yes, it’s scary. But life is a little scary, and mostly all she feels is excitement. There’s an entire universe of unexplored territory to discover, and she’s still got these people by her side. Her gravity, keeping her from floating away.

Miles between them, centimeters apart.

- ONE MONTH LATER -

Maya Hart is deep in the process of painting a still life when her phone buzzes on the table a few feet away. Dropping the paint brush, she slides across the art room and checks the screen, recognizing the glint of her alarm app blinking at her.

Just on time. She’s got an appointment she can’t miss.

She gathers the art supplies and rushes to put them away as quickly as possible, nearly tripping over a stool and cursing in spite of herself. Once she’s all cleaned up, decently enough at least, she shoulders her bag and darts out into the California sunlight, jogging down the campus streets.

She sends a quick text, grinning to herself as she makes her way back to her dorm.

--

Farkle Minkus is engrossed in an experiment with his chemistry classmates, focusing intently on tipping just the right amount of salt into a beaker when his phone buzzes. He jumps, breaking his concentration and spilling some over. All of them react with noises of dread, Farkle yanking his hand away just in time to keep it from dropping into the solution.

“Jeez, Farkle,” one of his lab mates says, raising his eyebrows towards his phone. “Since when did you get popular?”

“More so than you,” he snaps back playfully, reaching across the lab table to check his screen.

Maya Penelope: t-minus twenty minutes!! powder ur nose!!

“Shit, I gotta go,” Farkle exclaims, grabbing his bag and slinging it over his shoulder. “Tell me what the results are. Or just update the spreadsheet. I’ll start crafting the report tonight.”

His classmates bid him goodbye as he pushes out the doors into the Missouri humidity, slapping his skateboard on the ground in front of him. He sends a quick text back to Maya and types a new one of his own, hitting send before pushing off and rolling towards the dorms.

--

Isadora Smackle is very busy tutoring when her phone buzzes on the desk, distracting her from a particularly gripping explanation on nuclear fission. Her classmate waits patiently while she checks the message, smiling in spite of herself when she sees the contact light up her phone.

Former Arch-Nemesis: Twenty minutes until call time.
Smackle gathers her things and schedules their next tutoring session before stepping out of the classroom and heading towards the main entrance of the science building. The sun has already started setting outside the doors as another text lights up her screen.

**Former Arch-Nemesis:** Also, hope you’re having a good day

Her grin widens as she steps into the dimming sunlight, shooting a text of her own before formulating a response to her boyfriend. She looks forward to talking to him all the way back to the dorms.

--

Zay Babineaux is dancing alone in the studio when his phone buzzes on the floor by the mirror, having just finished up a rehearsal with a few of his classmates. He stands up from stretching and slides over to the mirror, kneeling down to gather his things as he checks his phone.

**Izzy Smacks:** Fifteen minutes.

Zay smiles, switching off the lights to the studio and starting his walk across campus, the sun just starting to dip behind the tree line. He opens his messages and finds the contact he’s looking for, hitting the call button instead and lifting his phone to his ear.

“Hey, you ready?”

--

Lucas Friar is running across campus when he gets the call, Vanessa jogging along behind him with complete and utter amusement coloring her features.

“Yeah, yep,” Lucas says breathlessly, managing to skirt by other students without accidentally running them over. “Be there in no time.”

“Hi, Zay!” Vanessa yells, cracking up as she attempts to keep up.

Zay shouts back at Vanessa before refocusing on his best friend. “Oh yeah? You sound very confident about that. Well, confident or out of breath. How much time do we have?”

“Fifteen minutes. You just said.”

“Yeah. And how far away are you from your room?”

Lucas exhales, making a face. “Twenty minutes.”

“Run!” Vanessa laughs, pushing him forward.

Zay echoes her. “Run, man, run!”

Lucas swats Vanessa’s hand away and hangs up on Zay, launching into a sprint across campus. Vanessa cracks up, shaking her head as she watches him go, determined not to be late.

--

Riley Matthews taps her pen impatiently against her notebook in her afternoon lecture, keeping an eye on the clock as the minutes tick away. Fifteen minutes. Then twelve. Then ten.

Asher glances at her, giving her a smirk. “You’re going to bolt as soon as he ends class, aren’t you?”
Like, bullet.”

Riley bites her lip, trying to hide her smile as she nods. In the next moment, their professor ends the lecture and she jumps out of her seat, leaping over Asher and running towards the doors. He laughs after her, shaking his head at her energy.

When she makes it back to her dorm, it’s a relief to see that her roommate isn’t around. Normally she wouldn’t mind either way, but this afternoon is important and she wants to experience it all for herself. Powering up her computer, she pulls up the video chat and dials in, holding her breath as the application loads.

When her five best friends suddenly pop up on the screen in front of her, she feels the entire universe fall back in order. There they all are, smiling and glowing and sharing a call together just as they promised they would. She doesn’t even know what to say.

“Riley,” Zay snaps, slamming his hands down on his desk. “You’re late.”

She blinks. “What? No, I’m not.”

“It’s two minutes past,” Smackle points out. “Two minutes late.”

“Gee,” Lucas says teasingly, but his voice sounds a little off. Almost as if he’s winded. “You know, some of us have been waiting here for ages.”

“Shut up, huckleberry, Zay told me you were running all the way back home.”

“Yeah, we saw you collapse in front of your desk,” Farkle comments.

Riley gets lost in the conversation as the banter continues, propping her chin on her hand and enjoying the feeling of being with her favorite people in the world again. It’s almost as if they never left. In some ways, she knows they never really did.

“I’m just saying,” Maya finishes ranting, scratching at her nose. It takes Riley a second to realize she’s got a new piercing, a small, silver stud. “Winter break is going to be here faster than you all know and then I’m going to get my revenge.”

“Oh, that reminds me!” Riley chirps, sitting up straighter, unable to control her grin. “Secret Santa. We have to pick names!”

The entire group chat groans in unison, but all of them have small smirks on their faces that let Riley know they’re not at all opposed. The grimacing is just for show, and a little bit of tradition.

“There are programs online that’ll assign the people for us,” Smackle says matter-of-factly. Riley can see the reflection of her pulling up a website in her glasses. “I’ll set it up right now.”

Everything has changed in their lives in the last few months, but Riley now knows that some things never will. These people, her pocket of friends, her tiny orbit in the vast, expansive universe, is one of those things. Riley Matthews is certain of that, if nothing else.

They’re not going to float away from each other.

Chapter End Notes
hey everybody!!! it's not over yet!! one more chapter to go :) thanks for sticking with me on this wild ride!!
Sophomore Year is the year Riley Matthews learns about love.

Sophomore year is the year Riley Matthews learns about love. She likes to think of herself as a bit of an expert, at least in the theory of it. She’s never been afraid to express how much she cares about the important people in her life, and she’s never seen the benefit of holding back her affection. In a lot of ways, she figures she knows love better than most things. She considers herself lucky to not only give a lot of it, but receive just as much in return. In that regard, Riley is no stranger to love.

What she doesn’t anticipate, and what she’s just starting to figure out, is how different it can be. How this singular concept, this one core emotion, can develop into entirely unique sentiments with individual things and people in her life.

Just to keep track of it all, she starts thinking of it like a pyramid. There’s enough love to go around, but certain things elevate themselves to higher importance than others. Cheerleading, rabbits, science, her classroom acquaintances—those set up the foundation, the base of the pyramid upon which she stacks everything else. It would take her forever to list everything she loves and put everything in its place, but most objects of her affection arrange themselves in this design fairly easily.

Riley has absolutely no confusion about what occupies those uppermost levels.

She’s thinking about it as she sits in chemistry class, laughing at Zay and Maya’s commentary on the lab they’re supposed to be completing in front of her. At the table to her right, Smackle and Farkle are already well on their way through the procedure, not allowing their friends’ shenanigans to distract them.
“Mr. Babineaux, Ms. Hart,” Mr. Clemson says as he approaches their tables, giving the pair of them an eyebrow raise. “Certainly there’s nothing in the assignment that requires you to sit with your backs to the beakers. I’m sure you’ll be able to talk to Ms. Matthews and Mr. Friar when you’ve completed the lab.”

“See, you’d think we’d be able to,” Maya sighs, leaning her elbow on the table. “But they just decided this year they were going to be partners instead of our usual match-up.”

“He left me for her,” Zay adds.

“So we’re still adjusting from the separation.” Maya exhales dramatically, brushing her hair out of her face. “Sometimes, it’s like I can still feel her presence here beside me.”

“Maya, I’m right here.”

“So far away. It’s a pity.”

Mr. Clemson doesn’t humor their theatrics much longer, not having the same amount of tolerance built up for it as her father. Maya and Zay swivel around in their seats and begrudgingly focus on the project.

Lucas turns his amused smirk on her, twirling his pen in his fingers. Even though Maya put up a fit, Riley’s glad she decided to work with him in science this year. It’s a change, sure, but she wants to be less hesitant towards change, and she and Lucas rarely get to actually work together in class.

Maybe that’s a good thing, because him smiling at her makes her completely forget whatever assignment they’re supposed to be focusing on.

“I guess we should start with creating the solution,” Lucas says, snapping her out of it as he pulls the directions towards him to read them over. “We have the beaker, right?”

Riley hums affirmation, sliding the glass towards him. “Okay, but, safety first. You better put your safety goggles on.”

“Riley, we’re working with water and salt.”

“I’m only concerned for your well-being,” she argues, reaching forward and tapping the goggles sitting on the table in front of him. She figures she doesn’t need to elaborate on the fact that she thinks he looks adorable in them. “Come on, let’s be professional about this.”

He gives her a look, relenting as he situates the goggles over his face. When he turns to get her approval she can’t help but grin. “Better?”

She nods, clasping her hands together. “I can breathe easy again.”

“Oh God, please,” Maya groans, glaring over her shoulder at the two of them. “This is a classroom setting. Educational discussions only. All disgusting verbal displays of affection need to stay outside that door.”

Smackle and Farkle adjust to look at them, obviously intrigued by Maya’s irritated tone. Smackle smiles, also wearing her safety goggles. “Wow, Lucas. I’m impressed that you appreciate the seriousness of laboratory safety protocol.”
“Oh, well, you know me.”

Farkle shakes his head, giving Riley a knowing look before diverting his attention back to their lab. Lucas nudges her with his elbow playfully, earning a giggle from her as they settle in to actually completing the assignment.

These are her people. Her favorite people, who absorb so much of her love it’s a wonder she has any left for anything else. But she wouldn’t change it for the world. Years can go by, relationship statuses may change, but their friendship never will. Of that much, she’s sure.

--

Riley doesn’t even consider how different love can be until someone provokes her to think deeper.

It’s one of those rare days early in the semester where the group isn’t together in its entirety, she and Smackle occupying one of the smaller back tables at Topanga’s. Normally they’d sit at the center couch, but with only two of them it seems excessive, and Riley wants to keep the spot open for other friend groups that may want to take the space.

Today, they made the right decision. Where she and her friends usually sit is now filled with other friends from their class—Jade, Dave, Haley, Nigel, Clarissa, and Jeff. Surprisingly, they fit the space almost as naturally as she does with her people. She hadn’t considered there was another friend group as tight-knit as theirs in their grade.

“Riley,” Smackle says suddenly, pulling her out of observing the others. “Can I ask you a question?”

“You have a question for me?” Riley says interestedly, giving Smackle her full attention. “That’s a new one, isn’t it?”

“Well, not entirely. We both know you’re much more informed in the… emotional fields of knowledge.”

“I may dabble now and then,” Riley smiles, shrugging proudly. “What’s up?”

Smackle hesitates, staring down at her homework. It’s obvious that she isn’t exactly sure where to start, or whether she even wants to ask her question or not. Riley wonders if maybe she should prompt the conversation but finally Smackle clears her throat, tilting her head slightly. “I was just wondering how you know. How do you know when something you feel is more than simple affection?”

Riley’s excitement distracts her from effectively processing the question. “Would this have anything to do with Farkle?”

“I did not specify a particular recipient of said affection,” Smackle says vaguely, but Riley knows she’s right. Farkle is arguably the most important person in Smackle’s life, and they’ve been dating for almost two years now with no indication of splitting any time soon. It would be wild if she was talking about anybody else.

“Right, of course not,” Riley can’t help but smirk, glancing down at her notebook and finishing doodling a small cat face in the margins. “But I’m not sure there’s much to explain. You know me, I’ve always loved you guys. I can’t exactly say there’s a distinct moment of realization where I was like, wow, I sure do love these beautiful, unique human beings with whom I get to share my days.”

“That’s not what I’m referring to. I’m talking about more than that.”
Riley lifts her head to look at her. “What?”

“You know… more than that.” Smackle lifts her eyes to meet hers, linking her fingers nervously on the tabletop. “You feel differently towards Farkle and Maya than you do, say, your family. You feel differently towards Auggie than you do the rest of your family like Josh or Eric. You feel differently towards, say, me or Maya than you do… you know, Lucas.”

It hadn’t really occurred to Riley to think about it that way until now. Sure, she has her pyramid visual and it’s easy enough to sort the trivial things from the important things, but arranging the most important things even further feels like an impossible task.

But she knows that, objectively, Smackle is right. Turns out love is a lot more complex than she anticipated.

“I’m not sure,” she admits.

Smackle makes an amused face, raising her eyebrows. “Have I stumped the emotions expert?”

“Oh, please,” Riley waves her off. “I just need some time to compose my theory. That’s how science works, right? You conduct some research, I’ll conduct mine, and then we’ll report back and see where we stand. We can reach a consensus, I’m sure.”

After a moment, Smackle nods. “Agreed. I’ll see what I can find out.”

The two of them return back to their homework, but Riley’s left with this strange sense of displacement. She knew still had a lot to learn about the world, but being so floored on a concept she claims to know so well is a bit of a shock. Figures that the older she gets, the more complicated things are going to be—even the things she once thought she understood.

She focuses her attention on her geometry instead. Math, she’s never completely understood. There’s a comforting familiarity in that.

--

Despite the challenge Smackle has laid down on her, Riley doesn’t let herself get too caught up in obsessing over it. Sophomore year offers many other distractions, and she’s more than willing to take the question one day at a time and enjoy what else is going on around her. With her friends, and her classes, and her extracurriculars, she’s plenty busy as the school year picks up.

One of those distractions takes precedence early in November, when Riley prepares to go on her first solo date with Lucas.

It’s not like they hadn’t gone on dates before, having been together for a year already. But all of their previous plans had always been group affairs—going out with the group, spending an afternoon with Farkle and Smackle, even going out to dinner with her parents. There were always other parties involved, and this is the first time Cory and Topanga have authorized an entire outing for just the two of them.

Suffice to say, Riley jumped straight into planning mode the moment she got the okay. Although she has the whole date mapped out perfectly in her head, she finds herself nervous when the Saturday finally arrives. She’s fidgety while her mother attempts to braid her hair, nudging her lightly in an effort to get her to sit still.

“What’s got you all jittery?” Topanga asks, grabbing her shoulders and stabilizing her. Riley straightens up, focusing on sitting as frozen as possible. “Don’t tell me you’re nervous.”

Topanga finishes the braid, pulling on her hair playfully before settling on the edge of bed next to her daughter. She raises her eyebrows at her. “Of course you do. Now, why don’t you tell me what’s really bothering you? You and Lucas have gone on dates before. That’s the only reason your father approved for you to go out alone. We’ve given him the trial run.”

Riley rolls her eyes. “And how’d he do?”

“Very well. We’re quite satisfied. Don’t expect we’ll be returning him to the store for a refund.”

She smiles a bit in spite of herself, grateful that her parents are fond of her boyfriend rather than disapproving. Although, it is Lucas, so she doesn’t see how anybody couldn’t be fond of him.

“I don’t know,” Riley exhales, trying to get her thoughts together. Her mother reaches forward and smooths down the collar of her dress. “I’m sure it’ll be okay. Like, I’m sure we could just go down and sit in the café for an hour and everything would be fine. It’s just that, like, we are going to be alone. Just the two of us.”

“And that makes you worried?” Topanga gives her a concerned look. “Riley, if you’re not ready for this, we can figure out a way to postpone it. I can ground you, right now.”

“No, no,” Riley says quickly, swatting at her hands. “It’s not him that’s the problem. I like being alone with Lucas. He’s fine. I’m the problem.”

“How?”

Riley shrugs aimlessly, allowing her mind to jump to all the worst case scenarios. “What if he realizes I’m insane? What if being alone with me for such an extended amount of time makes him realize everything that’s wrong with me? What if I scare him so badly he like, jumps off the Bow Bridge?”

“Okay, okay, breathe,” Topanga advises. “No one is jumping off any bridges. I can assure you of that. Will you breathe for me, please? In. Out. In.”

Riley inhales deeply, playing along and matching her mother’s breathing techniques. When she exhales, she’s surprised to discover she does feel a little better. She makes a mental note to breathe more often.

“And out. There you go. And you know what?” Topanga tucks some fly-aways behind her ear, patting her cheek affectionately. “If I know Lucas like I think I do, then I’m sure he’ll have a great time just because he gets to spend some time with you.”

Riley knows in her heart that her mother is right. She knows it, because she knows that when all is said and done, she’s going to feel the exact same way. That no matter how extraordinary or average this evening turns out to be, she’s going to love it because she gets to spend a whole day with one of her favorite people in the entire world.

She nods, leaning forward to embrace her mom. “Thank you.”

“Just doing my job,” she says loftily, rising to her feet when they pull apart and holding out her hands. “Come on, then. You’ve got places to be.”

Riley takes her hands and lets her pull her to her feet. She slips on her Keds and reaches instinctively for the chain around her neck, making sure the jellybean is secured before she leaves.
the room.

When she and Topanga step into the living room she’s not surprised to find Lucas already there, sitting opposite her father and brother at the kitchen table. Whatever conversation they were engaged in grinds to a halt, Lucas turning to look at her and immediately going silent.

“What’s that thing people say?” Auggie pipes up from his spot at the table. “You’re gonna catch flies, Lucas. Close your mouth.”

One of Riley’s favorite things is the fact that even though they’ve known each other for three years and have been dating for a whole one, Lucas still gets flustered when he sees her. She still gets butterflies when he looks at her like that. All this time has passed and they’ve learned so much about each other, but in some ways it still feels brand new.

She grins, hopping down the steps and walking to stand in front of him. “Ready?”

Lucas scrambles to his feet, nodding enthusiastically. Topanga moves over to stand behind Cory, placing her hands on his shoulders. “And you’ll call us if anything goes wrong?”

“Yes.”

“And you’re going to be home—?”

“Home by nine,” Lucas fills in, eager to make a good impression. Riley finds it a little silly considering she knows her parents already like him.

She reaches out to take his hand, slowly backing towards the door. “Okay. We’re going now. So long. Farewell.”

“Have fun!”

She gives her parents a thumbs up, Lucas holding the door for her as she backs out of it. When they close the door behind them, she grabs his arm and makes him wait for a few moments.

He gives her a look. “What?”

She holds up a hand, listening carefully and counting to ten in her head. When nothing happens, she relaxes. She smiles instead, taking his hand again and leading the way down the hall with a slight spring in her step. “If my dad was going to run out here and stop us, he would’ve done it then. I just didn’t want to get my hopes up if the worst was going to happen. But it didn’t!”

“A November Saturday miracle,” Lucas comments, grinning at her.

“I’ll say so.”

They step out of the apartment building and into the crisp November afternoon, the sun still high in the sky. Lucas jogs down the steps and spins to face her, holding his arms out. “Well, I’m the one in the dark here. You’re the one with all the secrets, so you lead the way.”

Riley beams, skipping down after him and grabbing his hands as she leaps off the last step. “Gladly. Lucas Friar, you’re about to experience New York City like you’ve never experienced it before. How long have you been here? Three years?”

“Just about, yeah.”

“Imagine that. Three years and yet you haven’t properly experienced the city. We’ve let you down,
country boy.” They begin to make their way down the street, Riley bumping her shoulder against his. “Don’t worry though, we’re about to remedy that.”

Lucas makes a face, taking a deep breath. “I’m a little terrified, but I trust you.”

“Good.” She smiles up at him, crinkling her nose. “Let’s go!”

As she soon discovers, all of her worries about how the evening would go were completely unnecessary. From Central Park to Time Square, she has an awesome time with Lucas and they never run out of things to talk about. She knew they’d be fine deep down, but it’s still a notable relief when everything goes as planned.

She’s glad she wore her Keds, because she does more walking that day than she has in the entire previous week. Thankfully, Lucas is enough to distract her from the exhaustion, although he does offer to carry her if she gets too tired.

“I would never,” she assures him as they stop in the middle of the Bow Bridge. She spins and looks off towards the skyline, unable to hold back her smile as she looks at the view. There’s something about New York in the fall—the way the leaves are changing paints the scenery a gorgeous copper.

Lucas leans forward against the rail, glancing at her and smirking. “Bet I can guess what you’re thinking.”

“Oh, can you?” She cocks her head expectantly. “Go on.”

“You’re thinking that autumn is your favorite time of year. Here, at least.”

Although they started the thinking game as a way to talk about things that maybe they were nervous to bring up otherwise, Riley’s a little started by how good they’re getting at it. They’ve always been in tune with one another, but mind reading would be a whole other level. Still, she can’t help the warm feeling that spreads through her at how spot on he is.

She twirls the end of her braid in her fingers, shrugging. “Maybe.”

“I’ll take that as a yes,” he says, narrowing his eyes at her. She mimics the expression back to him, causing him to smile in spite of himself. “What is it about fall that you like so much?”

“Well, it’s fall and spring,” she admits. She lets her gaze drift back out to the tree line, marveling at the colors once again. “Those transitional seasons. Like, in the spring everything is fresh and the air is warm with those great light breezes and with all the green in the world it’s hard not to feel like anything is possible. But then with fall, everything is rustic and golden and enchanting. I mean, just look at the trees. It’s impossible not to admire them. Even though the world is wilting, there’s this feeling that it’s going to be beautiful even in the darker moments. And when the winter passes through, they’ll begin again. There’s always going to be a chance to regrow.”

Riley turns back to face him, surprised to see him taking a picture of her with his phone. She gasps, pouting at him before reaching out and taking the device into her own hands.

“Hey, hey!”

“No paparazzi!” she declares, taking a couple of shots of him as he attempts to get the phone back. He takes her hand and pulls her into his arms, causing her to crack up as he tries to pry it from her
fingers. She manages to stretch her arm out in front of her and angle the phone, smiling as brightly as she can as she captures a couple of pictures. “Smile!”

When he finally gets the phone back, she leans in close to look at the photos. The one he took of her against the changing leaves in the background is truly something else. Considering the last minute nature of them, the selfies really aren’t too bad either.

“Gosh, we’re cute.”

“Yeah, okay,” he says flatly, breaking into a smile when she turns her grin on him.

After dinner with some authentic New York pizza and seeing the city come to life as the sun goes down and the lights come up, Riley and Lucas take their time walking back to the apartment. Even though the sun has set, Riley doesn’t feel at all unsettled by the city at night. Partially because she’s lived here her whole life, but she figures it has more to do with the fact that he’s with her.

She never feels more safe than when she’s with Lucas.

She wasn’t counting on the chill, however. Even with her long-sleeved choice of dress, she’s got goose bumps. She crosses her arms to keep warm, only to be caught by surprise when she feels a heavy material drape around her shoulders.

Lucas, wrapping his jean jacket around her. She gives him a look. “Aren’t you going to be cold?”

“Me? Nah,” he says, waving her off as he stuffs his hands in his pockets. “I’m immune to weather. It’s a Texas thing.”

Riley knows she could argue, but he seems pretty set on being a gentleman and besides, she’s not going to pass up the chance to wear his jacket. She slips her arms through the sleeves, stretching her hands just past the rolled up cuffs. “I can’t wait until we get a snowstorm. See how immune you are then.”

“Yeah, I was wondering why winter wasn’t one of your favorite New York seasons.”

“Oh, well, every season is my favorite season. But the thing about winter is the beauty is so brief. Like, the snow is gorgeous for about a day. Then the plows come through and everything becomes oily and slushy and grey. New York won’t let winter be.”

Lucas hums, nodding along to her explanation. Riley gazes at him for a moment before stepping closer, linking her arm through his and waiting for him to pull his hand from his pocket so she can take it in hers. The bashful smile that blooms across his face as he watches their feet is worth the move.

“What about you?”

“Huh?”

“What’s your favorite season?” she asks, hugging his arm tighter. “Either in Texas or here.”

He hesitates, obviously thinking about it. “Summer is pretty cool in Texas. I mean, the heat sucks and all, but everything feels very… I don’t know. Alive, I guess. Seasons aren’t as dynamic there, but summer isn’t half bad.”

“I bet.”
“Who knows?” he says with a shrug, locking eyes with her. “Maybe someday I’ll get to show you. You can come to Texas and I’ll show you everything, just like you did today with New York.”

Riley isn’t sure when they’d ever get to go back to Texas, or if they’ll realistically be together long enough for it to happen. But she loves the idea of it. It’s something to be hopeful for, as she is in regards to everything related to him. And she certainly doesn’t plan on changing anything any time soon. “I’m looking forward to it.”

She buzzes them in and Lucas walks her all the way to her front door despite her insistence that he’ll just have to walk all the way down again and it’s really not worth the effort. They come to a stop at the end of the hall a couple of minutes before nine, Lucas checking his watch just to make sure.

“Right on time,” he says proudly. “Think that’ll make a good impression?”

“I don’t see why you’re stressed about that. You know my parents like you.” She smiles when he makes a face in reply, feeling a little hot before she realizes she’s still wearing his jacket. “Oh, you’re going to want this back.”

She starts to shrug it off but Lucas stops her, gently touching her shoulders. He pauses, licking his lips before fixing the collar. “Think I like it better on you.”

Riley gazes at him, waiting for him to meet her eyes. When he does, both of them break into shy smiles. The warmth is back in her stomach. Lucas glances down at her lips and for a split second she figures that if the world imploded in that moment she’d be perfectly fine. If Lucas kissed her, nothing else would matter.

The moment is effectively ruined when the door blasts open and both of them jump about five feet in the air, Riley’s heart pounding in her chest as she makes eye contact with her father.

Cory gives them an impressed smile, leaning against the doorframe. “Right on time. How proud I am of you both.”

Lucas clears his throat, managing a composed smile and clasping his hands together. “Of course. I was just leaving. Wanted to make sure she got in okay and everything.”

“How noble.” Cory nods. “Off you go, then.”

Riley knows her father is just giving them a hard time for kicks, but she still feels resentment as she slips off Lucas’s jacket and hands it over to him. “Thank you, Lucas. I had a great time.”

“Oh, me too,” he assures her politely.

Riley casts a glance towards Cory before holding out her hand, Lucas holding back a laugh as he shakes it. They exchange pleasant smiles until he pulls back his hand, catching Riley by surprise when he leans forward to press a kiss to her cheek.

She supposes it’s innocent enough, because her father doesn’t seem fazed. He smiles at Lucas as he backs away. “See you on Monday, Lucas.”

“See you then,” he replies, waving lightly one last time before jogging down the hall and out of sight.

Riley watches him go, narrowing her eyes at her father before stepping into the house. He laughs heartily and pats her shoulders bracingly, walking behind her as they make their way further into
the apartment. “Come on, Riley. You know I have to make things difficult. It’s my job as the dad.”

Topanga smiles at her from her spot at the table, work spread out in front of her. “Despite your father, did you have fun?”

Wiggling from Cory’s grasp, Riley hops onto the steps by the hallway and turns to face them. She makes a show of thinking it over. “I did. And now, I’d like to disappear and obsess over it for the next twenty-four hours.”

“As is your right,” Topanga agrees in amusement.

Riley disappears to her room and closes the door behind her, sighing as she leans back against it. She tries to focus on everything amazing about the day rather than smarting over her stolen kiss. She knows she’ll get another in the near future, but it’s hard not to mourn it in theory when the anticipation of the moment is still so fresh.

She’s shaken out of her melancholy when there’s a series of taps at the bay window.

Lucas is kneeling at the window, glancing over his shoulder and grinning at her. Her jaw drops as she darts over to open the pane, him gesturing her frantically as she fights with the lock.

“What are you doing?” she asks as soon as the window decides to cooperate with her, allowing Lucas to poke his head in.

“Look, I figure I have about sixty seconds until your dad comes in to check that I’m not doing exactly what I’m doing right now,” he says breathlessly. His smile is bright as he looks at her, eyes dipping down to her lips again before he leans forward to kiss her.

It happens too quickly. His lips brush against hers for a second, and she finds herself wishing a second was much longer. Or that they had more time so she could do it again. The familiar butterflies are back, but there’s a mix of something else too. Something a lot like love, the love she’s always felt for him, but all the sudden it feels a little different. A little more prevalent. A little bolder.

When they break apart, Lucas takes a long moment to gaze at her. His features are soft—it’s her favorite expression, she decides. When he’s a little breathless and his features are soft and he’s full of affection, mirroring her own towards him.

“Thank you for our date,” he whispers. “See you tomorrow.”

With that, he climbs to his feet and ducks around the side of the building, out of her sight once again. But she’ll see him soon enough. The kiss will hold her over for now.

She closes the window and locks it just as her father pops his head in, looking around curiously. Riley crosses her legs and gives him a pointed look. “Can I help you?”

“Just checking in,” he says innocently. “You all good?”

“All good in here.”

Cory nods slowly, heading back into the hall. Riley is surprised when he reappears a second later, a more thoughtful expression on his face. “Riley?”

“Yeah, dad?”
He gives her a smile. “I’m glad you had a good time.”

Just as she suspected, her father’s overprotective antics are mostly for show. And although she’d like to play rebel and act as though it wouldn’t matter to her either way, she’s happy that her parents are so supportive of her relationship. She’d hate to imagine what it would be like if they weren’t.

“He closes the door gently behind him, leaving her alone. She leans back against the window with a loud sigh, tilting her head against the glass. She’s unable to hold back the grin that blossoms across her face as she twirls the jellybean necklace between her fingers.

If this is considered research towards trying to figure out love, then she’s not making any complaints.

The rest of first semester passes by rather uneventfully. Smackle requests more time to gather data and Riley grants it, not in a particular rush to figure it all out.

Although she doesn’t have much to complain about as far as her sophomore year is concerned, she can’t help but notice the growing tension between her best friend and boyfriend. Maya has always picked on Lucas, and he’s never really expressed discontent, being as easygoing as he is. But the longer the year goes on, Maya starts to get harsher and the digs get more personal and Riley gets the feeling the situation is escalating in a way that isn’t going to end well if someone doesn’t get it under control.

So she does everything she can to try and calm the storms. She makes a concerted effort to split her time between them so that no one feels left out. She attempts to follow up Maya’s digs with something positive to lighten the mood. She plans more actual activities with Maya that gets them out and exploring, so that her best friend’s restless energy is satiated and she gets that Riley is still just as fond of her as she’s always been.

It usually goes well, Maya as vivacious and excited and fun as she always is—unless Riley makes the mistake of bringing up Lucas. Even if it’s just a general comment, one mention of him gets Maya all stiff and moody even if she doesn’t admit it. More than a couple of subway rides home have been quieter than usual for this mistake.

Riley wants to talk about it, to ask her what the big issue is and just work the whole thing out. But she knows she can’t if Maya doesn’t want to, and the best she can do until that point is work with what she has. So she continues to do what she can.

All that aside, she tries not to let it bog down her year. She and Farkle agree to go out for the spring musical, dragging Zay along with them to choreograph if nothing else. It’s some of the best fun she’s had since high school started, and despite how busy it makes her she adores spending time with two of her best friends. Considering how talented they are, getting to watch them show off their skills is a special kind of fun in its own way.

When Maya, Lucas, and Smackle run to greet them on opening night after they step out of the dressing rooms, Riley can barely register her affection before Maya tackles her with a hug. She does a double take when she catches Farkle and Smackle kiss as she greets him, but her shock doesn’t last long when she’s distracted by Lucas giving her a hug of his own, as well as flowers.
Although she’s not sure she understands it completely yet, she has no doubt in her mind that there are many layers to love at this point. Smackle was right about that much.

It’s what’s on her mind as she and Lucas are studying in her room one afternoon, sprawled across her bed and Lucas situated on the floor in front of her. Riley assumes the only reason they’re allowed to be left alone to study is because they actually do when they’re together—it’s quiet as they both scribble away at their homework, but it’s a content silence. Settled. Comfortable.

Riley glances up from her English assignment and watches Lucas work for a minute, holding her pen between her teeth. She likes the way he squints slightly when he reads, as if that’ll help him absorb the material more efficiently. She likes the way he twists his pen in his fingers subconsciously, like if he stops moving even for a moment he’ll lose the ability to focus. She likes how even though he’s not paying any attention to her she feels warm and safe and comfortable just because he’s sitting on her floor and sharing the room with her.

He’s the only person that makes her feel that way. He’s the only person that’s ever made her feel that way. It’s very complex and yet incredibly simple. It’s a completely different, unique kind of affection.

“Lucas?”

“Hmm?” he hums, tilting his head towards her and reading the end of a sentence before tearing his gaze from his book to meet her eyes.

She doesn’t think she’ll ever get tired of those green eyes. She lowers her pen away from her mouth, biting her lip as she hesitates.

“I love you.”

She can’t say why she never said it before. She can’t say why she decided to say it now. Nothing particularly changed, there was no instigator. She doesn’t know how she knows, but she feels it. She knows it’s true.

Lucas blinks, absorbing the words. Riley return the pen to her teeth, just for the sake of giving herself something to do. She watches him curiously as he takes it in, dropping his gaze back down to his textbook. After a couple of seconds, she’s relieved to see a shy smile bloom across his face.

“What?” she says softly, chuckling nervously when he smiles wider. “What?”

“I could say it back.” He lifts his head, pressing his lips together and glancing at the wall before turning his gaze on her. “I want to say it back. But I don’t want it to be one of those things where I’m saying it because you said it. I don’t want it to feel like that.”

She figured she’d feel vulnerable after saying it, but she doesn’t. If anything, she just feels more secure. And the way he’s reacting makes her more fond than worried. She raises her eyebrows. “So, what? Your moment gonna be your moment?”

Lucas shrugs pointedly, making a face down at his book before glancing up to smile at her again. Despite the teasing nature of the statement, she doesn’t doubt that if he’s going to wait for the right time to say it, he won’t disappoint.

As far as she knows, they’re not planning on changing any time soon. Riley’s more than willing to wait. As everything with him has been so far, she has a feeling it’ll be worth it.
Sophomore year doesn’t feel like it’s passing quickly until it’s nearly over. With finals wrapping up and summer just around the corner, Riley finds herself looking back on the spring with junior year looming in the distance ahead of her.

She’s not exactly worried, but she wouldn’t consider herself prepared either. All she’s heard from upperclassmen in the drama department and seniors in the feminism club and her own uncle Josh is that it’s a hell of a year. None of them ever quite explain why and no two explanation are ever the same, but it’s enough to give her a bit of a stomachache when she thinks about it. Still, she forces herself to stay calm and rational. It’s just another year of school, and besides, as long as she has her friends she knows they’ll be okay.

Instead of spiraling, Riley focuses her energies on enjoying the tranquility she has for the time being. It’s complicated considering the degree to which the feud between Lucas and Maya has escalated, but there are still aspects of her day that maintain a semblance of peace. Studying with Farkle and Smackle at Topanga’s. Dinner with her family. Quiet evenings babysitting her relatively mild-mannered brother.

Her mild-mannered brother who is getting ready to go into fourth grade. If she feels like time is flying, she can’t imagine how her parents must be feeling.

She flicks eraser dust across the table towards Auggie, catching his attention as he looks up from his book. He gives her a disdainful look and she grins, propping her elbows on the table. “You ready for school to be done?”

“Riley, I’m a kid,” he says matter-of-factly, holding his hand out to emphasize the point. “What kid isn’t ready for summer?”

She raises her hands in surrender. “You got me. You excited for fourth grade?”

“I guess so. But I’ve heard it’s a lot harder than third grade.”

“Trust me, we’re in the same boat in that regard.” She pauses. “So what are you gonna do about it?”

“I don’t know. Try my best. That’s what mom and dad would tell me to do anyway. As long as I try my best, then I can’t do too badly.”

Riley grins, poking at him and narrowing her eyes. “When did you get so wise?”

“Auggie shrugs, clasping his hands together on the table in front of him. “You’re always having drama of some kind. I’ve come to expect it at this point.”

Riley rolls her eyes, contemplating her current emotional state before deciding what topic to quiz him on. Even if she’s not looking for any wisdom in particular at the moment, she always enjoys hearing his strangely adept philosophy. “Alright. I guess I’ve been trying to figure out love.”

“Ugh, you and me both.”

She raises her eyebrows at him, trying to cover her amusement. “Oh, have you?”
“Well, you know. Marriage with Ava and such.”

“Oh, yes, that’s right,” she agrees. “So, what would you say are your thoughts? Share your aged wisdom with your naïve older sister.”

“Well, I don’t know,” he says, making a face. “I think it’s kinda different for everyone. I could tell you what it means to me, but it may not be the same to you. I think love is just one of those things that’s kind of like that.”

Sometimes, Riley is genuinely impressed by the precocious nature of her younger brother. She smiles lightly. “Fair point. Go on.”

“Love is weird. I don’t think anybody really gets it. But it’s something that you know about without, like, learning about it. I love mom and dad without being taught to. I just do. I love you. You love Maya. You love Lucas. It just happens.”

She definitely gets what he means. It’s exactly what she’s been thinking about in trying to reach a consensus with Smackle. Although both them admitted that they felt like they had feelings for their boyfriends stronger than any others they’d felt before—very scientifically, of course—neither of them knew exactly when it changed or how exactly they knew how. It’s been that way for all of Riley’s most important people. In that regard, Auggie makes perfect sense.

“You think I love Lucas?” she asks curiously, giving him an intrigued look.

“Well, if you don’t, then he’s sure in trouble. He’s been in love with you since like last year.”

For all his wisdom, she figures that’s another thing he’s not wrong about. Riley cracks up, nudging his arm lightly and gesturing him to get back to his homework.

--

Her stress about junior year increases monumentally the night Maya walks out of the bay window. The fighting between Lucas and Maya had reached a boiling point, and Riley just couldn’t take it anymore. It was bad enough to listen to the two most important people in her life constantly bark at each other and say rude things, but getting caught in the middle, sometimes quite literally, was too much to handle. If it went on like it was for the next two years, she was going to lose her mind.

When she left the two of them in her room alone to work things out, she didn’t know what to expect. Shouting, maybe. Possibly homicide.

What she doesn’t expect is to reenter the room and find Maya sitting alone, curled up on the bay window and gritting her teeth as she stares out the window.

“Where’s Lucas?” Riley asks insistently, marching into the space and placing her hands on her hips. “Did you guys figure it out?”

“He left,” Maya says flatly, not bothering to look at her.

Riley chews her lip, tapping her foot before crossing her arms. “He wasn’t supposed to leave until you guys talked about it. You guys just need to fix it. Whatever it is.”

“We’re not going to fix it, Riley,” Maya snaps, running her hands through her hair stressfully. “Nothing is going to fix it. There are some things you just can’t fix, alright? So you’re just going to have to deal with it.”
Riley pauses, trying not to let her harsh tone sting. “Lucas wasn’t supposed to leave.”

“Oh, wow, are you actually going to not take his side for once? That’s a new one.”

Harsh is one thing, but Riley can’t ignore accusatory. “What? What are you talking about?”

“Nothing. Whatever.” Maya huffs, blowing some hair out her face before crawling towards the window. “I’m just going to go.”

“Maya, wait,” Riley says, running forward and grabbing her arm to pull her back. Maya sits up and scowls, waiting as Riley settles on the seat next to her. “Tell me what’s going on. We can fix this. When has there ever been a problem we couldn’t fix together?”

“How about the fact that my dad is a deadbeat who walked out on me and my mom? How about the fact that we let a boy affect our friendship for an entire year and didn’t really resolve any of the problems from that? How about the fact that in two years we’re all going to be going our separate ways, and there’s no way to change that because time keeps moving and things keep changing whether we want them to or not? How about that, Riles?”

Despite the fact that Maya just threw about fifteen different issues at her to tackle at once, what really catches Riley’s attention is the comment about the triangle. Because she always felt that they didn’t actually talk about everything that happened, but she didn’t realize that Maya felt the same way. Maybe they can fix more than one problem if they actually confront it.

“If we tackle it, we can fix it. Let’s talk about it. What do you think we haven’t resolved? What’s going on with Lucas now? Does it still have to do with the triangle?” A chill runs through her veins. “Do you still have feelings for him, Maya?”

“What? God, no!” she shouts, disgust evident in her voice. “I don’t like huckleberry. Bets are off if I ever really did. In fact, if I could have it my way, I’d ship him back to the rodeo. I think I’d be doing all of us a favor. How many of our problems would just disappear?”

Although she wants to work things out, she can’t help the defensive anger she feels bubbling up inside her. “Hey, don’t talk about him like that. He’s my boyfriend.”

“Yeah, don’t I know it,” she hisses.

“What is your problem? You’ve been like this all year. What did he ever do to you?”

“Nothing!”

“Then why are you so mad at him?”

“Because he’s your boyfriend!” Maya groans in frustration, climbing to her feet to pace the floor. “Because he’s so perfect, and you’re so good for each other, and you just love him so much.” Although the words coming out of her mouth are objectively positive things, the tone with which she’s spitting them makes them sound like heinous crimes. “He’s just your favorite person in the whole goddamn world and I might as well not fucking exist.”

Riley blinks, totally confused and trying her hardest not to take things personally. “Maya—,”

“You like him more than me. And I know if you were honest with me, you’d admit that you like hanging with him more than me.” Maya’s voice cracks. She clears her throat. “You’re choosing him over me.”
“That’s not true.”

“You like him more than me.”

“I love you both!” she argues. “It’s just different. Of course I don’t feel the same way about him as I do about you. But that doesn’t make either of you more or less important.”

“God, Riley, just be honest with me.” She crosses her arms. Riley catches her lower lip tremble, feeling her own tears forming in the back of her throat. “You’d rather spend time with him. Just stop stringing me along like a fucking pathetic—,”

“Would you stop?” Riley retorts, hating how vulgar her best friend is being. She sort of feels like she doesn’t even recognize her, disguised in all her anger. “And yeah, when you’re acting like this, I don’t really like hanging out with you. If you want me to be honest.”

Some of Maya’s rage recedes, wounded by the truth of Riley’s words. She bites her lip, turning away from her.

“Maya, just talk to me,” Riley begs. “Whatever you’re feeling, help me understand. We can find the best solution for everyone. I’m sure there’s a way to work it out.”

“You’re right,” Maya says suddenly, walking back over towards her. There’s a determination burning in her eyes, which unsettles Riley rather than reassures her. The next words out of Maya’s mouth only confirm her uneasiness.

“Me or him.”

Riley isn’t sure she heard her correctly. She knows the words individually, she recognizes what they mean together in a sentence, but she’s not entirely sure they just came out of her best friend’s mouth. “What?”

“You wanted a solution. This is it.” Maya’s expression is deadly serious. “It’s me or Lucas.”

“I…” Riley trails off, tears blurring her vision. She swallows them back, trying to maintain control of her emotions. “I can’t choose between you.”

“Well, as we’ve seen, both doesn’t work. So it’s up to you. Me, or him?”

Part of her is screaming to choose Maya. If she just chooses her, then she’ll be happy, and they can all move on from this. Maya’s been with her since they were kids, she’s had her back, she’s loved her as fiercely as any human being can. She’s been her number one for as long as she can remember. If she gives her what she wants, then things will be alright again.

But it’s not fair. It’s not fair when she’s starting to figure out how different, and unique, and comfortable love can be. She’s starting to figure that out with Lucas, and she doesn’t want to give it up. She shouldn’t have to give him up. She already did once, and she swore to herself she wouldn’t let it happen again. He’s become equally important to her, and she knows how significant she is to him. It wouldn’t be fair to anyone, most of all him.

She loves Maya. She loves Maya immensely and she always will. But she’s not going to tear down the rest of her world for her. If Riley does anything, she decides it’s got to be to start sticking up for herself.

“I’m not letting go of Lucas,” she says softly, locking eyes with her best friend. “I’m not choosing you at the expense of him.”
There’s a cold silence. Maya’s expression becomes vulnerable for half a second before the rage takes over again, fire burning in those blue eyes. “Perfect. That’s fucking great.”

“I’m not choosing him, Maya,” Riley says defensively as Maya gets up to leave, heading towards the window. “I’m choosing myself. I shouldn’t have to choose between you when I love you both. And I’m not going to let you make me.”

“Oh, I know, I’m just the villain, aren’t I?” Maya tosses a harsh glare over her shoulder. Still, through all that rage, Riley can see the hurt. She can how severely her best friend is hurting. But she won’t let anyone help her. “Have a great time with your prince charming. I hope you have a long, perfect, happy life together.”

With that, Maya steps out the window and onto the fire escape, storming around the house without looking back. Riley starts out after her, stopping as she realizes there’s no point.

In the absence of making a choice, Maya made one for her. And now they have to live with it.

She crawls back inside, collapsing onto the seat as she closes the window and willing herself not to cry. She’s amazed when no tears come forward anyway.

Usually, love is comfortable. It’s exciting. It’s fulfilling. Sometimes it hurts. In rare moments, like in the aftermath of watching her best friend climb out of the window and presumably out of her life without so much as a goodbye, it’s neither.


--

Even with the absence of her best friend, as summer gets going Riley convinces herself that everything is going to be fine.

Junior year isn’t going to be so bad. She’ll be able to handle her classes. She still has Smackle, and Zay, and Farkle. She still has her brother with his infinite elementary school wisdom, and her parents with their unwavering support even if its occasionally clouded by other distractions. As multi-faceted as love is, she knows it’s what’s going to get her through the next couple of years.

Although she gave Lucas the gist of what happened with Maya, she didn’t tell him everything she said. She doesn’t want to him to think he had anything to do with her decision, and to be honest she doesn’t want to have to relive the fight any more than absolutely necessary.

Lucas doesn’t push her. In some ways, he probably feels better off not knowing the details.

Riley’s favorite season in New York has never been summer, but the more of it she spends with him, the more of a contender it’s shaping up to be.

“Why exactly are we doing this again?” he asks as they’re sitting on his bed in the middle of a hot summer afternoon, his singular open window not offering a lot of help in regards to the heat.

Riley smiles, gesturing to the small bowl of ice cubes situated on the mattress between them. It’s remarkable how quickly it’s beginning to melt. “It’s one of those challenge things, I read about it on *Buzzfeed*. And you know, it’s a rather warm summer day, I figured we could afford the chill.”

“Well, we know that *Buzzfeed* is just the epicenter of brilliant ideas. Don’t roll your eyes at me,” he says with a laugh, leaning forward to nudge her lightly before sitting up straighter. “Alright, tell me what to do. I’m ready.”
“Okay,” she says excitedly, adjusting and tucking some hair behind her ear. “So I’m pretty sure this is just an amalgamation of a bunch of challenges that already exist, but essentially from what I understand we’re supposed to put as many ice cubes as we can into our mouths for as long as we can.”

“Aren’t they just going to melt?”

“Look, I’m just following the rules. Do you dare question the authority of the Feed of Buzz?” She takes a cube from the bowl before he can argue and pops it into her mouth, shivering instinctively and holding up the bowl insistently. She hums for him to take one.

He smirks at her, shaking his head as he takes one for himself. “The things I do for you,” he murmurs, placing the ice on his tongue and closing his mouth.

Riley grins, adjusting the ice to her cheek to talk around it. “Okay, go for two.”

“This is so weird.”

She leans forward and presses a finger to his lips to silence his protests. He playfully shoves her hand away, both of them reach forward to take one, adding another round of cold against their taste buds. Lucas immediately goes for a third and Riley hums indignantly. He has to hold back his laughter as he pops it into his mouth, raising his eyebrows at her.

Riley furrows her brow and gives him a pout, grabbing two more just to one-up him and adding them to her current count. All is well and good until she feels a pain forming in the center of her forehead.

She grimaces, humming urgently and hopping to her feet. Lucas silently cracks up as she dances a circle around herself, breaking first and spitting out the ice as she claps her hand to her forehead. “God, brain freeze!”

Lucas raises a fist in victory, swallowing the ice left in his mouth and laughing. As fond as she is of his triumphant expression, she’s not quite ready to admit total defeat yet.

She can’t believe how hot it is, as the bowl of ice is half water already. Without thinking on it too much, she darts forward and grabs it, pouring it over her boyfriend’s adorable, victorious head.

He gasps and leaps away from it, shaking his head like a dog. “Cold! Oh my God!”

Riley breaks into hysterical laughter, reveling in how good it feels to be laughing so hard and feeling so at ease. Even when so much of her life has been modified in such a short amount of time, the way she feels when she’s with him is something she can rely on to be consistent.

Lucas pushes the wet hair from his forehead and tugs at the neck of his t-shirt, attempting to air it out. He raises his eyebrows at her. “You think this is funny?”

“Ridiculously!” she says emphatically, giving him a cheeky grin.

He narrows his eyes and starts towards her, wrapping his arms around her and hugging her against his freezing cold t-shirt. She shrieks and descends into cackling, dropping the bowl and holding onto his arms as he backs them towards the bed.

They collapse onto the mattress in a mess of giggles, Riley still tangled tightly in his arms. She wriggles around to face him, pleased to be greeted with a kiss on the forehead. Despite the summer heat, a different kind of warmth fills her stomach again. She’s become quite familiar with it as of
late.

“You’re cold,” she complains.

He cracks up. “And whose fault is that? You’re the worst sore loser ever.”

“Let’s call it a tie.”

“What?” he squints at her. “How on Earth was that a tie?”

“Well, you lasted longer, but I had more. Four to three.”

“Yeah, four that you proceeded to spit out all over my floor.”

“Ah, it’s just water. You’ll live.”

Lucas makes a face. “Yeah, but I don’t think my carpet is too enthused.”

“It was a tie,” Riley insists, pressing a quick peck to his lips in an effort to get him to relent.

It works like a charm. Lucas gives her a kiss back. “Okay.”

“Good.” Another kiss.

And another. “Great.”

Riley leans forward to press their lips together and continue the pattern, but she doesn’t pull away so quickly this time around. The kiss fingers, and in the couple of seconds it takes for her to catch up and process exactly what she’s thinking Lucas tentatively brushes his lips against hers again, nudging their foreheads together. Teetering the edge of an entirely different pattern.

It’s her move off the edge as she kisses him, slower than before. She doesn’t hesitate as she initiates another one, gently finding the front of his shirt and kneading it between her fingers. Something she can use as an anchor while she ventures away from the familiar.

It’s a little strange, considering their mouths are so cold from the ice. She can feel her heart pounding in her wrists, but she’s not sure if it’s from nerves or something else. Maybe both. She’s a little uncertain and a little overwhelmed and a little impatient to keep moving on this exploration, and it’s crazy to have all those feelings all at once.

But even with all that, she feels okay. She feels safe. Because it’s Lucas, and they’re going to figure it out together.

Lucas adjusts to hold her more securely, exhaling against her lips when they break from a particularly long kiss. It’s a new sensation she’s very eager to feel again. She feels her stomach flip.

“Riley?” he murmurs just as she’s moving forward to kiss him again.

Even though that part of her that’s desperate to explore is impatient, she forces herself to have some poise. She doesn’t want to rush anything. They’re experiencing this together, and she wants him to feel comfortable to say anything he needs to say. “Yeah?”

“I love you,” he says breathlessly.

She opens her eyes to look at him, surprised to find his eyes still closed. Almost as if he’s afraid
what will happen if he opens them. Although he made a point of acting like he just wanted to make a moment of it for himself, Riley figured that was part of the reason he hadn’t said it before, even if he felt it. Because despite how open and honest he’s been with her, he’s always had a natural hesitancy towards vulnerability. Because being vulnerable is scary, especially growing up in an environment where you get ridiculed for it.

It’s well worth the wait. It always is with him.

She gently pulls his arm from her side and links their fingers together, leaning forward to kiss him again. She doesn’t have to say it back, at least not out loud. Just like he didn’t when she first told him the same thing.

He breaks the kiss to exhale a nervous laugh, making up for it by starting a new kiss of his own with a little less uncertainty than the first couple. The hesitancy, Riley figures, will dwindle with practice.

She’s more than willing to wait.

Junior year isn’t going to be so bad. She’s got her friends. She’s got her family. She’s got the belief that things will work out, more than likely for the best.

More than anything, she still has Lucas Friar. The object of her affection that now sorts itself easily at the very top of the pyramid.

- J U N I O R  Y E A R -

Junior year is the year Riley Matthews learns about denial.

It’s certainly not a lesson she’s expecting to learn. No, going into the school year, Riley convinces herself that everything is going to be perfectly fine. Even without Maya. Even without Zay, who purportedly decided to take a separation from Lucas and in turn decided to stick with Maya instead. In some ways, it makes Riley feel better knowing that the two of them have each other. She hopes Zay won’t let Maya do anything too reckless.

Classes are harder, but she’s got nothing compared to the torture her friends are putting themselves through. Farkle and Smackle have schedules personally designed by the devil, and even Lucas is taking classes that give Riley secondhand stress from watching them work on the material. She wonders whether or not she should let Lucas know she’s worried about him, but she doesn’t see how she could get the message across without sounding bad.

It’s not that she doesn’t think Lucas is smart enough to handle it. It’s not that she doesn’t get why he’s doing it—UC Davis is the dream, and he’s going to do anything he has to in pursuit of it. She just doesn’t want him to run himself into the ground in the process.

To make things even more complicated, junior year introduces her classmates to the fascinating world of substance abuse.

Riley doesn’t mind so much that her friends are participating in mind-altering activities, even if it’s not something she herself wants any part of. Her own avoidance of the stuff doesn’t give her any sort of moral high ground to judge, so long as her classmates are being safe and recognizing their own limits and being smart about what they’re taking.

Of course, from what she hears thanks to the Abigail Adams rumor mill, it doesn’t seem like that’s turning out to be the case.
She knows a lot of the talk flying around is complete garbage, and she’s grateful for Farkle when she’s uncertain. In keeping his promise to look after Maya, he makes appearances at the party scenes and is able to fact-check any rumors she, Lucas, and Smackle hear about their best friends.

It’s somewhat of a tradition in the early weeks of the semester. She, Lucas, Farkle and Smackle will take their homework and go find somewhere new to study—more often than not, it’s been Central Park while the weather is still nice—and Farkle will give them the lowdown on everything he knows. It’s a comfort, having the people she cares about so close to her even when life seems to be moving so quickly around her. Just as she figured, she still has them.

Breathe in. Breathe out. Everything will be okay.

Still, the rumor mill does churn out some interesting stories. As they get well into the first month of school, she has enough tales of Zay’s drunken antics to count on one hand, which feels like far too many. She hears some strange stories about Maya that couldn’t be true considering her best friend hasn’t even had her first kiss yet, and for some reason there’s talk going around about Lucas hiding some sort of big secret. She can never keep track of the details and they’re always changing, but that’s the one she doesn’t let get to her.

Lucas wouldn’t keep a secret from her, especially ones like the rumors going around. And she likes to think that if he was doing some life-altering activity, she would notice. All she knows is he’s been stressed about classes and is more tired than usual. Considering his workload, that doesn’t surprise her.

Despite her insistence that things will work out, the fatigue must show on her face. Josh slides her a cup of tea across the counter as she’s up late working at Topanga’s alone, raising his eyebrows at her when she lifts her head from her workbook.

“Sorry, just thought you could use a pick me up. You look a little weary.”

“Oh, does it show?” Riley makes a face, taking a sip of the tea and nodding a thank you. “It’s just junior year. You know, lots of homework and stuff.”

“Right, right. Makes sense. I feel like I’m making more coffee for exhausted juniors than actual customers. At least they have interesting stories to tell.”

“You don’t say?”

Josh nods, leaning forward against the countertop. His voice drops low so that only she can hear, and she gets a little nervous as his usual mischievous expression gives way to concern. “Farkle just came in the other day and got to talking. Actually, he was a little too easy to talk to, if you get what I’m saying. And he was saying all this stuff about parties and drinking, which hey, to each their own. But I’m worried that maybe some of your friends are taking it a little too far.”

“And by friends,” Riley says slowly. “You mean Maya.”

Josh raises a hand in surrender. “Hey, she’s not the only one I heard about. Sounds like Zay is going a little wild too. And like I said, as far as Farkle is concerned, I don’t think he was drunk but he was definitely on something.”

Riley feels a rush of panic shoot through her. She runs a hand through her hair, chewing the inside of her cheek anxiously.

“I didn’t mean to worry you. I just wondered if you knew anything. Or if you had any idea what was going on.”
She isn’t sure what’s worse—not knowing anything, or knowing too much and having no idea what to do about it. Although she wants to help her friends, they’re not exactly looking for her advice. Maya hasn’t spoken to her since she left her in the bay window over the summer. And she knows if she tries to help when it isn’t wanted, she’s just going to drive herself crazy.

It’s a no-win situation. All it does is give her anxiety.

Everything’s fine. Everything will be okay.

“I don’t, but I’m sure it’s okay,” she says diplomatically, offering Josh a reassuring smile. She starts to gather her things. “Maya and Zay are more than capable of taking care of themselves. And I’m not involved, so you don’t need to worry about me or anything.”

Josh watches her pack up, frowning slightly. “Riley, I really didn’t mean to freak you out. You’re right. I’m sure things are fine.”

“Right. Yeah,” she agrees offhandedly, shouldering her bag and desperate to leave. “I’ll see you later, Josh. Thanks for the tea.”

“Well, you only drank about a third of it.”

Riley gives him an apologetic smile, darting out of the café and heading towards home. She can still feel the panic creeping up on her, starting in her chest and threatening to blow up into something much more serious if she doesn’t get her thoughts under control.

She forces herself to focus on her breathing. In. Out. In. Out.

The choices Zay and Maya make are out of her hands. As far as she’s concerned, the people in her immediate orbit are fine. She’s perfectly healthy. Smackle hasn’t said anything about Farkle. Her parents may be a little distant, but they’re okay. Lucas is tired, but he’s fine. Everything is fine.

In. Out.

Everything will be okay.

--

As the semester goes on, Riley becomes very good at training herself not to panic.

She spends more time focusing on her breathing than anything else. She throws herself into distractions, ignoring the rumor mill and diverting her attention towards other things. Planning events for the feminism club. Maintaining her grades in her slightly more difficult classes. Spending time with Auggie.

All things considered, Lucas is still easily her favorite distraction.

It’s been a little harder to get a hold of him the further they’ve gotten in the semester, but he’s certainly not absent from her life by any means. He’s busy with schoolwork—so much schoolwork, it feels like—but he goes out of his way to make time for her which is something she greatly appreciates. He’s the only thing that makes her feel completely at ease considering the chaos, and she’s going to take as much of him as she can get.

He’s familiar, he’s safe, and he’s one of the only things that isn’t seemingly falling apart.

The kissing is definitely a bonus.
She and Lucas have been diligent explorers since they started down this road earlier in the summer, and it’s slowly becoming one of her favorite pastimes. It’s something that she can put absolutely all her concentration into, and she’s not likely to think about anything else when Lucas’s lips are on her. It’s refreshing to experience something new and not feel completely overwhelmed or out of place. It’s adventure, but it’s comfortable.

That being said, it’s more than a distraction. Every time she and Lucas fall into this habit and get all caught up in each other, she feels a little closer to him.

It’s exploration, yes, but it’s also quiet hums and nervous giggles and the occasional laughter when it’s obvious neither of them know exactly what the hell they’re doing. It’s hot breath and soft lips and skin touching skin—being more uncovered than she’s ever been yet not feeling exposed at all. Being closer than ever before yet still not close enough.

For everything it’s worth, Riley’s well aware of the fact that in these moments she’s as close to Lucas as she’s ever going to get. That’s what she’s really obsessed with, and what she can’t get enough of. Despite the speed and nonchalance with which her classmates seem to be breezing through these first experiences, she’s grateful that she’s with someone she cares about so much.

She’s also grateful that Lucas is very patient, very understanding, and in seemingly no rush to breeze through the experiences either. He’s always waiting for a cue from her before trying anything, and is evidently mindful of her and her feelings. Although she’s not sure she’s ready to go all the way or anything yet, she’s confident that it’ll be worth it when she does. That when that moment comes, she won’t have any hesitation because it’ll be with him.

But for now, she’s more than willing to wait.

Riley sighs as they break for breath, adjusting to plant a peck on Lucas’s cheek as he shifts focus, slowly pressing kisses along her jaw in a trail down her neck. She hums contently, hooking her thumb absentmindedly in the belt loop of his jeans. When she opens her eyes, the darkness outside his window surprises her.

“What time is it?” she asks, knowing she should check the time but also not too keen to move. Although they’ve got places to be, time ceasing to exist and being stuck here with him wouldn’t be the worst fate in the world.

Lucas murmurs an indifferent reply, much more interested in sucking along her shoulder. She hopes he realizes he makes focusing on anything else nearly impossible.

“Come on,” she presses, although admittedly unconvincingly. “You really need to get a wall clock.”

He thumbs the strap of her bra, pushing it slightly off her shoulder to kiss the skin underneath. He hums disagreement. “I think that would ruin the simplistic aesthetic of the space. You know, interior design.”

Riley laughs, gripping the hair on the back of his head and nudging him to make eye contact with her. “Interior design? Your room has no design.”

“That’s not true,” he argues, sitting up on his elbow. “It’s minimalism.”

“Oh my God.”

“Okay, you’re right. Sorry. Minimalism and a little bit of self-loathing.”
“You’re ridiculous,” she declares, closing the distance between them. Although they’re still pretty far and few between, Riley’s noticed his self-deprecating comments are becoming more frequent than usual. She wonders if maybe she should talk to him about it, but it doesn’t feel often enough to be an indicator of a major problem, and she knows he’s tired. She doesn’t want to create drama that doesn’t exist.

Still, she puts concerted effort into kissing him as if that’ll be the solution. As if she’ll be able to transfer some of her own affection towards him into self-love for himself.

It’s a tricky operation, because as enjoyable as it is, she only loses track of time again. Riley relaxes into it and Lucas deepens their kiss just as she remembers why they were talking about minimalism in the first place, whining and sitting up slightly.

“Time!”

Lucas grimaces from having her shout right in his ear, relenting and rolling onto his side. “One of our phones has to be here somewhere.”

Riley sits up to search the mattress as Lucas climbs to his feet and hops off the bed, scanning the floor. She finally finds his buried in the blanket at the foot of the bed, holding it out to show him and clicking the lock button. She’d be lying if she claimed that seeing her as his lock screen didn’t give her a sense of pride.

“Seven. We have to meet Smackle and Farkle for dinner in like, fifteen minutes.”

“Or we could… not,” he says. He holds his arms out and shrugs, having perfected the innocent puppy dog expression. “What if we just… forgot? They couldn’t get upset over that.”

Riley gasps, giving him a faux-mortified look. “Lucas Friar.”

“I’m just saying.”

She smiles at him, holding out his phone for him to take. When he wanders over to grab it she takes his other hand, pulling him down towards her and giving him a kiss. “I think eating a meal would do both of us some good. What kind of girlfriend am I if I don’t feed you? Can you imagine? Death by starvation. Death by smooching.”

“Murder me,” he offers, taking her face in his hands and kissing her.

She’s trying very hard to stay strong and stay true to their commitments, but damn if he doesn’t make it difficult. She pulls away first, nudging their foreheads together and crinkling her nose at him. “Go put a shirt on, you heathen.”

He laughs, backing away and grabbing his t-shirt off the floor. “After you. Be back in a minute.”

Lucas disappears into the hall, leaving Riley alone to redress. She takes a moment to admire how content she feels, how settled and safe and put together everything is when they’re together. Then she jumps to her feet, picking up his button-up off the floor and slipping it on.

She’s just finishing fashioning his shirt into something presentable and tying her hair up again when she realizes she still hasn’t found her phone. She scans the floor and checks the covers again before she sees it poking out from under the bed, like it’s playing hide and seek. Dropping to her hands and knees, she lifts the covers away to grab it, only to find a lot more than just her phone hidden away.
It’s almost like a recycling bin under his bed, a practical heap of crumbled up papers tucked away out of view. Through the darkness she can just barely make out the grades on them, and they’re not exactly uplifting. Definitely not what she expects from Lucas. But that’s not what captures her attention.

She reaches forward and picks up a small plastic bag, sitting back on her heels as she examines the contents in the light. All at once, her blood runs cold.

Pills. A whole bag of pills.

Lucas doesn’t have any secrets. Lucas doesn’t do drugs. Lucas wouldn’t take pills to improve his performance in school. If he was having trouble, he would ask for help. If he was doing something like this, he would tell her.

But the bad marks hidden away and the bag in her hand tells a completely different story. And if he was going to take drugs, she’s suddenly not so certain she would be the first to know.

Thinking fast, she folds up the bag as small as she can and shoves it into her back pocket. Even if she has no idea what’s going on, at least if they’re with her he won’t be able to use them. In that moment, all she cares about is keeping him from doing any damage to himself.

Or any more damage. She has no idea if this is the first round or how long he’s been keeping this from her or if he’s keeping anything from her at all. All the sudden, she feels incredibly uncomfortable in a place where she’s supposed to feel at ease.

All the sudden, she feels like maybe she doesn’t know Lucas at all.

She gets to her feet just as he reenters the room, acting as if nothing is wrong. She plasters on her most convincing smile as he waits for her by the doorway, holding out a hand. “You ready?”

“Sure am,” she says confidently, a little impressed by her own ability to maintain grace under pressure. Part of her knows she should talk to him about it. It’s like she told Maya so many times before she walked out of her life—if they just talk it out, they’ll be able to fix it. “Lucas?”

“Yeah?”

She hesitates, examining him. Thinking about all the things she should say yet coming up with nothing. His eyes don’t betray anything, looking just as pretty and harmless as usual. It’s no wonder she was so sure he never kept secrets from her.


“Nothing. Nevermind,” she says, taking his hand and giving him a smile. As long as the pills are in her possession, she figures he’s out of trouble for now. “Let’s go eat. I’m starving!”

In the immediate aftermath of her discovery, Riley is sure she made the right decision. Knowing that the pills are stashed in her desk drawer rather than anywhere near him, she’s able to feel like everything is under control. She’s almost able to forget about it.

That is until the entire thing blows up in her face when Lucas finds them, checking her desk drawer for a pen when they’re studying one day after school.

“Riley?” he says slowly, lifting up the bag and showing it to her. “Where did you get this?”
She blinks, trying to remain impassive as panic creeps back into her veins. His expression is unreadable, which makes figuring out how to approach the situation a whole lot more difficult. “What?”

“What did you get these?”

As good as he is at being unreadable, she knows she’s terrible at it. Guilt must be written all over her face, because she doesn’t even get the chance to answer before realization is coloring his features. He stares at her for a long moment, a sentence caught on the tip of his tongue.

“You took these from my room,” he states blankly. She can’t tell if he’s upset or horrified or both. “Didn’t you? Riley, did you take these from my room?”

“I just found them,” she says defensively.

“You can’t just take stuff from me,” he argues back. Considering how quickly he jumped into snapping, Riley gets the feeling he’s turning the blame on her to keep the focus off of him. Like he’s trapped. “Why were you looking for them in the first place?”

“Why do you have them in the first place?” she retorts. She gets to her feet, so they’re at least speaking on the same plane.

As he hesitates. “That’s not important. It doesn’t matter.”

“It does matter,” she says in disbelief. “I only took them because I didn’t know what would happen if I left them there. I took them so you wouldn’t—;”

“What?” There’s an awkward pause. “You thought I was going to use them?”

Riley opens her mouth to argue but finds herself lost for words. As much as she adores those green eyes, they’re too hard to look at when they’re so intense. The hurt that flashes through them at her lack of a response doesn’t help.

“I wouldn’t do drugs. You know that.”

“I don’t know anything,” she says frantically. She tries to choose her words carefully but they just start tumbling out the more panicked she becomes. “I didn’t think Farkle would get into weed and yet that’s all he does. I didn’t think Maya and Zay were going to become alcoholics, and yet you’ve heard the rumors.”

“Okay, but you know me. I wouldn’t use them.” He picks at his fingers in frustration. “I wasn’t going to use them!”

Riley stares at him. Still out of words. Because she wants to believe him, she knows she should, but everything she thought she knew about her friends has seemed to be wrong in the last few months. And she saw the papers stuffed away under his bed. She knows how exhausted he’s been. For every reason she should trust him, there’s a doubt in the back of her mind that points out maybe she should think otherwise.

Her silence speaks enough for her. She hates the wounded expression on his face and that it’s all her fault.

“You don’t believe me.” He blinks. “Do you?”

She has to say something. She has to do something. The situation is spiraling out of control faster
than she can handle it and all she can do is stand there like an idiot with nothing to say.

He nods, accepting her muteness as confirmation. He presses his lips together into a thin line, turning away from her and grabbing his stuff. “I’m just gonna go.”

“Lucas—,” she starts. It comes out more like she’s choking than an actual word.

“Here, you can keep these,” he says flatly, dropping the bag on her desktop and shrugging on his jacket. He slings his backpack over his shoulder and raises a hand in surrender. “Wouldn’t want you to worry about me.”

She shakes her head, stepping forward slightly. Trying to scramble to fix the disaster but coming up with nothing. “Lucas, it’s not that I don’t trust you. I do. Just with everything that’s been going on—,”

“It’s fine, Riley. You believe what you want.” Lucas backs away from her, looking her over and doing his best to cover the hurt in his expression. She knows how good he’s gotten at it, having grown the way he did. “I know how strongly you believe in things.”

With that, he walks out and leaves her standing alone, reeling from how quickly things fell apart. A couple of tears slip down her cheeks before she can stop them. Breathing isn’t going to do her a lot of good now, but she attempts it anyway.

In. Out. Everything will be okay.

For the first time, she doesn’t quite believe it.

--

The rest of the semester turns about to be the perfect example of when it rains, it pours. For Riley, it feels like she’s caught in the middle of a hurricane.

The rumors about all of her friends only get more outlandish, and she has no trust in her own ability to determine whether they’re true or not. After everything that happened with Lucas, she’s not sure she should be passing judgment either way. Even if she was right to take caution against his possible bad decisions, she doesn’t think it matters so much. All she knows is that he’s more distant than ever.

Farkle doesn’t come to their park meet ups anymore. In a way, it’s for the best. The winter weather makes it too cold to enjoy anyway.

The worst part of the semester hits right around December, when a weekend full of partying puts three of her best friends in the center of some very wild rumors. None more so than Lucas, who comes to school sporting a black eye and a busted lip and absolutely no explanations as to how he got them.

Riley wants to ask him what happened, to get the full story and make sure he’s okay and make sure that nothing like it ever happens to him again. But she has no idea how to approach it, and they haven’t been seeing a lot of each other thanks to the Adderall. She thinks about asking Maya, who is somehow involved according to the rumor mill, but that’s an even longer freeze out that would take far more energy to thaw. She doesn’t have time to waste in figuring out what’s going on.

If something is wrong with Lucas, she wants to figure it out before it gets any worse.

Even Farkle, the person she’s always trusted to have an explanation and a reassuring word, doesn’t
have much to say on the matter. He claims not to know anything, but he hasn’t been telling them a lot lately anyway, so she doesn’t know how trustworthy his viewpoint really is.

Despite her lack of intel, it’s all she can think about as the first half of the school year winds to a close. Although she’s supposed to be studying for midterms her mind is far away, obsessing over drugs and bruises and her own broken belief system. What good is having strong beliefs if you’re believing in the wrong things?

“Riley,” Smackle says, breaking her out of her own head. Both of them are seated at the tiny table in Smackle’s kitchen, but only one of them is making any sufficient progress on their work. “You seem troubled.”

“It’s nothing,” Riley assures her with a tight smile. She drops her pencil against the table, grinding the eraser into the wood surface. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Certainly. Physics or pre-calculus?”

“No, not about class.” She pauses, collecting her thoughts. Smackle waits patiently, clasping her hands together in front of her and sitting up straighter. “Does it bother you that Farkle has been so out of it lately?”

“Oh,” Smackle says softly, obviously not expecting this topic. Her posture slacks a bit as she contemplates the question. “I’m not sure.”

“I mean, you know what he’s doing. At least there’s that. But there’s a lot of stuff that happens at those parties that we don’t know about. Do you ever feel weird about it? Like he’s keeping stuff from you?”

“Farkle himself? No, not particularly,” she says matter-of-factly. “I do not believe Farkle has anything to hide on his behalf. He enjoys marijuana—he doesn’t hide it. I think most of his secrets are ones he’s keeping on the behalf of others. Confidences that aren’t his to share.”

“And does that bother you?”

“His decisions are his to make. I can’t attempt to change his mind, and so long as he’s taking care of himself there’s not exactly anything for me to raise issue with.” Smackle presses her fingertips together, concentrating on staring at the grain in the wood rather than making eye contact. “I do miss him. It’d be dishonest for me to claim that I don’t resent all the time he’s spending with cannabis that used to be spent with me. Secrets or no secrets.”

Riley examines her, tilting her head. “Do you love him any less?”

“No.” Her response time is impressively swift. “At least, I don’t think so. I thought you were supposed to be the emotional expert in residence.”

“Well, sometimes even experts double check their findings.”

Smackle gives her a curious smile. She’s starting to catch onto the fact that this conversation may not be so directly about her and Farkle. “The way I understand it, Farkle is going to make his own choices. Whether or not they’re best for him is up for debate. The only thing I can do is be there for him when he needs me, and offer advice if he requests it. Believing, hopefully, that he’ll make the right decisions. Other than that, I can support him with the same amount of affection while he navigates the world on his own accord.”

Riley absorbs this, nodding along. “Right. Yeah. You’re right.”
“Well, it’s rare to find a time I’m not.”

“Of course.” Riley gets to her feet, gathering her things. “I have to go. Thank you, Smackle.”

“You’re welcome?” she replies uncertainly as Riley smothered her with a hug, catching her by surprise. “For what?”

“Just, thanks. And don’t be afraid to talk to Farkle about how you feel. I think you’ll be better off if you let him know you miss him.”

“Perhaps.”

Riley salutes her, stepping out the door and jogging down the street towards the subway. Talking things through helped her figure out what she needed to do, as it always does. And she’s on her way to do just that.

--

When she darts into the apartment and drops her bag on the couch, she’s expecting it to be a quick visit. In and out, back on the subway towards her destination.

Her parents have different plans.

“Riley.”

“Sorry, can’t talk,” she says breathlessly, jogging towards the hall. “I just stopped by to grab something. Then I have to—,”

“Riley,” Topanga says again, her tone more serious than usual. It’s enough to stop Riley in her tracks, gaining her attention. “We wanted to talk to you. I think you can spare a few minutes. It’s important.”

She hesitates, treading down the steps. The expression on both of her parents’ faces unsettles her. “Okay. Can we make it fast? Is something wrong? Is Auggie okay?”

“Auggie is fine,” Topanga assures her. She turns the tables to Cory, locking her fingers together and eyeing him expectantly. Whatever the issue is, it’s obviously more his conversation to be had than hers. “Cory?”

He clears his throat, eyeing Riley across the table. He gesture to the bench where she usually sits. “Why don’t you take a seat?”

“I’m fine standing.”

“Fine.” Cory tolerates the slightly impatient tone, rising to his feet instead. “We need to talk about Lucas.”

Riley cocks her head, confused. “Yeah, funny you should mention him. Kind of where I’m trying to go here. Hence, the rush.”

Cory and Topanga exchange a look. Riley narrows her eyes at them. “What?”

Topanga raises her eyebrows at her husband, encouraging him to speak. Speak, or forever hold his peace. Cory clears his throat, clasping his hands together in front of him and taking on his teaching
posture. “Your mother and I have been discussing his behavior as of late. We were thinking that maybe it would be best for you if you were take a few steps back.”

Riley blinks at them, hearing the words but not exactly processing them. “What?”

“Until we figure out what’s going on with Lucas, I think it would be best for you if you spent less time with him.”

There’s not a hint of uncertainty in his features. He’s one hundred percent serious. Her father is looking her in the eyes and telling her she would be better off without Lucas.


“No,” she says shortly, cutting Cory off when he opens his mouth to speak again. “No, I’m not going to do that. Especially now.”

“No,” he says patiently. She normally doesn’t mind his classroom tone, but at the moment it’s really grating on her nerves. “We don’t know what the situation is. The behavior he’s been displaying as of late is concerning.”

Yeah, it is. Which is why we should be helping him, not leaving him alone to face it by himself. If you were really concerned for him, that’s the advice you’d be giving me. Not to leave him to fend for himself.”

“I am concerned for him, Riley. And of course I would help him if I could.” Cory’s tolerance for her attitude is wearing thin. “But you are my daughter, and your well-being comes first. As much as I want to help all of your friends, you are my priority.”

Riley stands her ground, maintaining a strong stance despite the tears burning in the back of her throat. The adrenaline coursing through her veins helps. “Good. If you’re concerned about my well-being first and foremost, then you’ll recognize how important it is to me that he’s alright. And that I’m going to do whatever I have to do to make sure he is. You can fight that, you can ground me or whatever you need to if you have to. But I’m not going to step back from Lucas.”

Topanga looks back and forth between the two of them, expression neutral. Riley takes a deep breath, trying not to let the grief in her father’s features deter her from making her point.

“I understand where you’re coming from, dad. I respect it.” She swallows, staying resolute. “But you’re wrong. In this case, you’re wrong. And I really have to go.”

She turns on her heel and darts into the hall, ducking into her room before he has the chance to stop her. Although she hates disagreeing with her parents, the confrontation did solidify her resolve in what she needs to do next. No matter what happens in the future, she needs to at least right the wrongs she’s already made.

Grabbing the Adderall from her desk drawer, she climbs out the bay window and heads back towards the subway.

It’s weird to show up to Lucas’s apartment alone. He’s always with her when she enters the building, so it’s a little disheartening to jog up the four floors to his door on her own. But she reminds herself that’s exactly why she’s here. She’s going to remedy it.

In. Out.
When she knocks at the door, it’s Grace who answers. She looks surprised but not displeased to see her. “Riley! I didn’t know you were coming by.”

It’s always a bit of a shock to see Grace and remind herself that she’s Lucas’s mother. She’s nice enough, of course, but she barely has a presence in his life as it is and she looks so young. When he’s in a particularly bitter mood, Lucas says it makes sense that she doesn’t look like a mom considering she definitely doesn’t act like it.

It’s one of those things he’d only say to Riley when he desperately needs to vent. Never to his mother’s face.

“Yeah, sorry. I hope it’s not too much trouble.” Riley twiddles her fingers together, glancing around her towards the inside of the apartment. “Is Lucas home?”

“I think so,” Grace says, stepping back to allow her to step inside. “If he is, you know where to find him.”

It’s a little bit strange to Riley that she’s so nonchalant about the whereabouts of her only child, but she guesses she should get used to it. She tried to fix his family situation in sophomore year, and it didn’t procure any positive results. “Right. Thank you.”

She tosses a look over her shoulder to catch Kenneth sitting on the couch, working without casting a glance in her direction. Pretending she isn’t there, like he seems to do with most of the things that come in and out of his apartment.

Riley disappears into the tiny hallway and takes the stairs two at a time, coming to halt outside the door to Lucas’s room. Peering in, she can see he’s fully engrossed in his schoolwork, chewing stressfully on his thumbnail and not even noticing her standing in the doorway.

She taps her knuckles lightly against the door. When he looks up to lock eyes with her, it’s a gruesome surprise to be reminded of the bruises on his face. His eyes are wide.

“Riley.”

“Hi,” she says tentatively, hugging close to the doorframe. “Grace let me in.”

“Oh, right. Right.”

She hesitates, chewing the inside of her cheek. Her voice is quieter than she’d like it to be. “Could I come in?”

“Yeah,” he says quickly, closing his textbook. “Yeah, of course.”

She smiles gratefully and steps away from the hall, gently closing the door behind her and walking into the center of the room. She takes a deep breath before approaching him and pulling the Adderall out of her back pocket, holding it out in front of him.

He stares at it, becoming guarded. His voice is timid when he speaks again. “Why are you giving this to me?”

“Because,” she exhales, willing herself to be confident. “I was wrong. Even though I thought I was doing the right thing and protecting you, it wasn’t my place to take them. Regardless of what you were or weren’t going to do with them. I shouldn’t have taken them from your room and I shouldn’t have tried to hide it when I did. I’m sorry.”
When he doesn’t take the bag from her she kneels down and tucks it back under the bed, leaving them exactly where she found them. Putting the ball back in his court and trusting him to do the right thing, as she should’ve done in the first place.

She straightens up again, clasping her hands together in front of her. “Also, you were right.”

Lucas shakes his head. “Riley, you don’t have to—,”

“You were right,” she repeats, moving forward to settle onto the bed next to him. She tucks one leg underneath herself, giving him her full attention. “I do believe in things. Very strongly.” She feels tears welling in the corners of her eyes and wills her voice to stay even. “But there is no one and nothing I believe in more than you.”

Lucas glances at her, swallowing hard. She reaches forward cautiously and takes his hand, linking their fingers together. His gaze drops down to their hands, lost in thought.

“And if you tell me that you weren’t going to use them, then I believe it.” She squeezes his hand, taking a deep breath. “I believe you.”

There’s a long pause. Riley shifts her gaze to watch their hands as well, smiling lightly when his thumb brushes over her knuckles.

“Do you think you can forgive me?” she murmurs, almost inaudibly. She hates how shy she feels despite how sure of herself she needed to be for the situation.

“Of course.” Lucas lifts his head to lock eyes with her, shocked she’s even asking the question. The amount of disbelief in his voice makes her feel a little better. “Of course, Riley.”

She breaks into a relieved smile, only hesitating for half a second before leaning forward to hug him. He catches her, embracing her tightly as she tucks her head into his shoulder and exhales a sigh. It’s like the weight of the world is lifted off her shoulders. All at once, she’s safe again.

She reminds herself to breathe. In. Out. Suddenly, it’s a little easier.

It’s a little while before they pull apart, both of them smiling. Riley reaches up and touches his cheek affectionately, still a little startled by the bruises. Dying to know how he got them and if it’s something that needs fixing and desperate to help in any way she can. But she knows now that the best thing she can do is to simply be there for him. When he’s ready to tell her, he will.

He tucks a piece of hair behind her ear, making her smile even wider. She dips her head bashfully, glancing at the books on the bed next to them. “What are you up to?”

“Just bio,” he says apathetically.

She glances down at the textbooks again, taking note of the fatigue in his voice. It’s in his features too, even more prominent due to the injuries. She wonders if he’s had dinner today. She wonders if he’s eaten at all.

“Could you maybe take a break?” she suggests, tilting her head at him. The face he makes in reply isn’t exactly promising.

Riley gives him a look, leaning forward with a smirk to give him a long, drawn-out kiss. She’s not usually one to stoop to such negotiation tactics, but desperate times call for desperate measures. When she pulls away, the kiss lingers. It’s been a while, so it’s more effective than usual.
“Take a breaaak,” she sings quietly. He laughs at her musical attempts to convince him.

“I guess I could take a break.”

“Yay!” she whispers, kissing him quickly. She presses her forehead against his. “Are you hungry?”

He hesitates, making a show of thinking about it before breaking into a grin. “Oh my god, I’m starving.”

“Then let’s go eat!” she says cheerfully, climbing to her feet and holding out her hands to take his. He allows her to yank him to his feet, pulling her towards him and wrapping an arm around her shoulders as they head out the door.

---

After a brief reprieve thanks to the holiday season, second semester kicks off with just the same amount of stress as the first.

Riley’s friend group is in complete shambles, even if she won’t admit it to herself. She hasn’t seen Farkle since break ended. Maya and Zay are practically ghosts from her past, only coming around in her memories. She still has Smackle, but even their interactions are pretty limited considering how much coursework both of them are tackling. She feels lucky if she gets to have a satisfying conversation with her in the hallway between classes before she flies off to whichever AP class she’s battling at the time.

Lucas practically disappears when baseball starts up and absorbs the rest of his free time, but Riley still makes a concentrated effort to keep tabs on his well-being. When they do hang out, it’s usually her dragging him to a meal of some kind just to make sure he’s eating something during the day. Even though he assures her he’s just overwhelmed with classes and that there’s nothing to worry about, she can’t miss the bags under his eyes and the way his shirts are a little too loose. His hands are almost more bandages than skin at this point. Riley finds herself holding his hand less as a gesture of affection and more as a preventive measure to keep him from doing any more damage. She just wishes she knew why he’s tearing himself in the first place.

But any time she attempts to broach the topic, the conversation is always the same. *I’m fine. I’m fine. I’m fine.* Everything will be okay. In. Out.

Riley holds on tight to that belief that things will work out, especially as the semester wears on. In the dead of winter, it’s looking bleaker than usual.

Things really come to a head when Dave and Jade approach her one day after school, catching her by her locker just as the final bell rings.

“Oh, hey guys,” Riley says chirpily, shouldering her backpack. “Jade, I love your shirt. Yellow is such a pretty color on you.”

Jade fumbles over her words, unprepared for the compliment. Dave, however, has no such hesitation. “Riley, we really need to tell you something.”

For all intents and purposes, Riley has always really liked Dave Williams and Jade Beamon. They’re not obnoxious, they do their homework, and they’re more than willing to offer a wave when passing in the halls. She’s always liked them, but they’ve never been close, so she’s not sure
what exactly the three of them would have to talk about. The somber expressions on their faces
doesn’t make her feel any better about the situation.

“Okay.” She grips the strap of her bag, bracing herself for whatever they might say. “What’s up?”

Jade and Dave exchange a look, the former clearing her throat and linking her fingers together
nervously. “Has Lucas talked to you about practice at all?”

“Practice?” Just from the fact that she has no idea what they could be referring to, she knows she’s

Another tacit exchange between the two of them. It stings a bit to see a pair of best friends who
know how to read each other so well. It’s been so long since she had a moment with her usual
partner in crime.

Whatever it is, it must be bad, because neither of them make any move to speak. Reluctance is
written all over their faces. No one likes to be the bringer of bad news.

“Guys,” Riley says sternly, grabbing their attention. “What’s wrong?”

“Lucas passed out,” Dave blurts out. He swallows, searching her expression for a reaction of any
kind. “At practice the other day. Like, just straight up fainted. Coach sent him to the nurse and
everything.”

Riley figures they’re probably surprised at her lack of a reaction, but it’s only because she’s so
shaken by the information she’s having trouble properly processing it. She feels numb from fear,
and she’s sure it shows in the fact that she’s showing no response at all.

“What?” She forces herself to say something else, to offer a rational response. “Well, maybe he just
overworked himself. After a couple of hours of practice.”

“We’d only just started running plays. We’d been on the field for like thirty minutes. And Coach
was busy railing on Billy so we’d mostly been standing around. Definitely not exercising enough to
knock out.”

“We checked in with him afterwards. I was there to watch Dave,” Jade explains quickly. “We
checked on him and he just said not to make a big deal out of it. And we really didn’t want to. We
weren’t going to.”

“But then he didn’t show up to practice,” Dave tumbles on. His concern is evident from how fast
he’s talking, like he’s afraid he’ll lose the chance to get it all out if he doesn’t speak now. “Like, at
all. And we tried to ask Coach about it but he wasn’t saying much. But we’re pretty sure he may
not be coming back. So I grabbed Jade and now we’re here.”

“What do you mean? What do you mean he wouldn’t come back?”

“I think he quit, Riley,” Dave says. His voice is barely above a murmur, reluctant to say the words
aloud. “I think he quit the team.”

It doesn’t make sense. Baseball has always been so important to Lucas—it’s one of the few things
he doesn’t beat himself up over if it’s not perfect. It’s good for him. He would never willingly step
back from the game for the hell of it.

And that’s not even factoring in the health angle. Being tired is one thing. Passing out is something
else. Something seriously wrong.
Riley realizes she’s holding her breath when her vision blurs slightly, Jade’s sympathetic frown smudging at the edges. She forces herself to inhale, trying to remind herself how to breathe. After all the times she’s spent focusing on it, she wonders how the hell she could forget.

In. Out.

“I’m sorry. Maybe we shouldn’t have said anything.”

“We didn’t know who else to tell,” Dave mumbles, crossing his arms. “But I didn’t think he would tell you on his own. Someone has to know. Someone has to help—,”

“It’s okay,” Riley assures them, managing an encouraging smile despite how empty she feels. She reaches out and touches Dave’s arm, giving him a grateful nod. “I’m going to talk to him. I’ll figure it out.”

“How? He doesn’t want anyone to think it’s a big deal.”

Riley doesn’t have any bright ideas, but she’ll do whatever it takes. She’s already lost two best friends to the monster of junior year, and another has his foot halfway out the door. She won’t lose Lucas too, especially to something far worse than partying. Whatever it is, she can’t lose him too.

“I’ll fix it,” she promises them. She closes her locker door and starts down the hallway. “I’m going to fix it.”

--

Although the problem is far too monumental to fix on her own, Lucas finally opens up when Riley confronts him about it that evening.

It’s evidently been a long time coming, because when he opens up he really loses it. Riley couldn’t recall ever seeing him cry before, and now she doesn’t think she’s ever going to be able to get the memory of it out of her head. Watching someone cry is hard enough in general—watching one of the most important people in her life completely break down is downright painful.

In some ways, it’s almost like she’s spent all her life training for it. She puts all her comforting techniques to use, being there for him as best as she can and trying to keep him calm. Being as supportive and soothing as she can possibly be. As hard as seeing him that way is for her, she can only imagine how he must be feeling to experience all of it. To be so utterly and fundamentally worn to the point of melting down.

She doesn’t get much sleep once he finally dozes off, preoccupied with keeping an eye on him. After all the agony of the last few hours, it’s crazy how sleep can wipe all of that trauma away as if it never even happened. Lucas spent the better part of three hours in near hysterics and yet when he’s asleep, he looks at peace.

She can’t get over how soft his features are. She wishes they could be that way more often.

After a few spotty hours of rest, she’s wide awake when Topanga pokes her head in around nine in the morning. The two of them exchange a silent look, Riley feeling caught but not so guilty for having Lucas in her bed overnight. She’s only embarrassed on principle.

She opens her mouth to explain but Topanga holds up a hand, gesturing for her to follow her out into the hall.

Riley doesn’t want to leave Lucas alone, but she also doesn’t want to wake him up. He’s been so
sleep-deprived, she wants him to get as much rest as he can. She figures he won’t be up for at least another hour. She can risk a conversation with her mother.

She gently climbs off the bed and pads out of her room, shutting the door softly behind her.

Topanga is waiting at the kitchen table, preparing a breakfast plate for her. She lifts her head and gives Riley a soft smile as she wanders over to sit across from her, sliding the food in front of her. “I didn’t want to wake him up.”

“You knew he was here?”

“Well, most meltdowns aren’t exactly quiet,” Topanga says matter-of-factly, preparing a plate for herself. She smirks a bit at Riley’s look of dismay. “We knew he was here, yes. It was hard not to when you really got him to crack. Auggie was very worried about him.”

In all the drama from the night before, it had honestly never occurred to Riley how her family would perceive what was going on. They hadn’t even crossed her mind. All she cared about was Lucas and his spiraling mental state and trying to make sure he was okay. She just wants him to be okay.

“I’m so sorry. I wasn’t even thinking.”

Topanga waves her off. “We’re glad it happened here in a safe space. And we’re very glad he wasn’t alone. I wouldn’t have had you handle it any differently. Now eat your breakfast.”

Riley obeys, distracting herself with scarfing down her scrambled eggs. She twirls her fork in her fingers, glancing around at the otherwise quiet apartment. “Where is Auggie? And dad?”

Topanga gives her a look. “School, honey.”

“Oh, crap,” Riley says violently, dropping her fork. Another thing that slipped her mind. “Oh my God. I didn’t even—,”

“It’s okay,” Topanga assures her. “I called you both in. That’s the last thing I want you to focus on right now.”

Although sometimes they’re more strained than she would like them to be, Riley is once again reminded how grateful she is that Topanga Matthews exists and that she gets to call her mom. She’s not the easiest to please, but she’s always one to look out for her own.

“So,” she says slowly, taking a bite of her eggs and examining Riley inquisitively. “I’m guessing this was a long time coming, huh?”

“You could say that.”

“Did he say what’s been going on? Or what’s making him feel this way?”

The more questions Topanga asks, the less composed Riley feels. The longer she thinks on Lucas’s behavior, the more she realizes that he’s not the only one who’s been pretending like everything is alright when it’s evidently not. She thinks about how he’s literally out cold in her bed, broken down and thinking it’s no big deal. She thinks about how Farkle is out there playing secret keeper, trying to protect everyone but inevitably failing when it really matters. She thinks about how Zay is drinking himself to death and Maya feels unrecognizable—how they pass each other in the hallway like strangers.
All of her friends are here in her reach, usually no more than a few feet apart. But they all feel a million miles away.

The tears are welling up in her eyes before she can stop them, as if she didn’t shed enough last night while attempting to comfort Lucas. She wipes her eyes hastily but it’s no use.

“Oh God,” Topanga mutters, getting to her feet and coming around the table to join her on the bench. “Riley, sweetie.”

She shakes her head frantically, wiping her tears again as they continue to fall. Topanga wraps her arms around her and pulls her into a hug, shushing her and rubbing her back soothingly. “We’ve already had one breakdown here in the last twenty-four hours, are we ready for another one?”

“Things aren’t fine,” Riley croaks, hating the words but knowing in her heart that they’re true. Despite how much she resents it, a weight lifts off her shoulders by the simple act of admitting that’s the way it is. “I’ve been getting through this year pretending everything is okay and everything is going to be okay, but it’s not. My friends aren’t fine. Lucas isn’t fine. We’re not fine. I thought if I just believed it would work out it would. But obviously that’s not happening. We’re so not fine.”

Topanga hushes her, pulling back a bit and pushing some hair from her face. “Admitting it is usually the hardest part. I’m sure Lucas would agree.”

Riley hiccups, pressing her palms to her eyes and counting to ten in her head. She takes a deep breath, pulling herself back together.

“It wasn’t so long ago you felt a similar sort of stress,” Topanga says, taking her daughter’s hands and laying them against her knee. “Do you remember when you were going through all those things in eighth grade, coming back from Texas? All those new feelings to sort through?”

“And I thought that was the end of the world,” Riley mutters bitterly.

Topanga laughs. “Every part of your life will have its own challenges. But do you remember what you asked me? About what you do when you feel like life is knocking you down? Do you remember what I told you?”

Riley blinks, locking eyes with her mother. She nods timidly.

“You hang on,” Topanga states. “It’s what you did then, and it’s what you’re going to do now. No matter how dark things get, there’s always another end of the tunnel waiting for you. You are one of the strongest people I’ve ever known—you’re my daughter, after all. You will make it through this too, Riley. Believe me.”

She wants to. She feels like she has to, because she doesn’t know what she’ll do if she believes otherwise.

“Things do work out. Maybe not the way we’d like, or the way we expect them to, but they always work out in the end. This isn’t the first challenge you’ll have in life and it’s not going to be the last. But you’ll get through.” Topanga continues to brush the hair away from Riley’s face, tucking it behind her ear. She pats her cheek, tilting her chin towards her. “No matter how cold the winter is, spring always comes.”

--

Spring comes as promised, pushing out the chill and renewing Riley with a newfound sense of
Farkle finds his way back to them. Lucas puts all his concentration into his schoolwork, determined to make it out of the year alive. She’s not sure what they’re going to do when that crisis is averted and all that’s left is the aftermath of the emotional stress he went through, but just having been able to break down a little bit seems to have helped him loads. She hopes that once the year is done, things will improve on their own.

Riley finally snaps at Wyatt over all the terrible rumors he spread about her friends, although she is happy to hear a new one circulating around that Zay’s doing much better. Cory apologizes on behalf of his assumptions towards Lucas, and both of her parents put notable effort into helping her take care of him as the school year winds down.

Most importantly, Maya comes home to her eventually. They talk everything out, and Riley can’t help but feel like she survived the worst. It’s going to take a little time to feel like things are back to normal between them, but at least they’re together again. She’s back in her life. That’s good enough for now.

After passing final tests and enjoying a crazy prom in which Maya took Brett Ryan and she won prom queen by the good grace of her friends campaigning on her behalf, the hell school year is done. Summer is just around the corner, and Riley feels as though the worst is behind her. For the first time in months, she allows herself to believe that everything will, in fact, be okay.

Life, on the other hand, likes to throw curveballs.

“I’m not saying you have to apply anywhere,” Riley says diplomatically, raising her hands in surrender as Lucas sighs. It’s not the first conversation they’ve had about college applications, and she figures it probably won’t be the last. “I know UC Davis is your goal here and you know I wouldn’t get in the way of that. I’m just saying that there wouldn’t be any harm in applying to NYU as a back-up.”

Even though she hates confrontation and uncomfortable conversations like this one, she knows these are discussions she and Lucas need to have. Sooner rather than later. She’s also grateful that despite the personal nature of the topic and how vulnerable both of them need to be, they’ve reached a level of trust in one another that they can handle an emotionally heavy topic like this. It’s their futures, and they’re looking at them with the other in mind.

Still, for all their maturity and trust in one another, they’re far from perfect and they do sometimes run into walls. College has a particularly unique way of bringing that out in them.

“Okay, but we knew going into this that there was a good chance we weren’t going to go to the same school. Especially because I know you don’t have any interest in going to Davis. And I wouldn’t ask you to come all the way across the country with me when you have your own interests to pursue.” Lucas picks at a hangnail on his thumb absentmindedly, brow furrowed as he tries to choose his words as carefully as possible. “It just feels a little bit like you want me to apply to NYU so that if Davis doesn’t work out, I’ll just follow you there.”

“Of course I’m not saying that,” Riley says insistently, slightly hurt by the insinuation. “I just think NYU is a great school that’s nearby that it wouldn’t hurt to throw a few bones at just in case things don’t go the way you want them to. Who knows, I might not even go to NYU. But if you’re filling out applications anyway—,”

“I get what you’re saying. I’m just telling you what it sounds like to me.”
“I’m sorry. I’m really not trying to come across that way.”

“I know that. I don’t know why—,” Lucas shrugs, getting to his feet and pacing a bit. “Nevermind.”

“Look, Lucas, I know this is hard.” Riley gives him a sympathetic look. “Thinking about the future is scary and college is going to be different. There’s a lot to figure out, you know, where we want to go and what we want to do and if we want to try long distance—,”

“Is that a question?”

There’s an awkward silence. Riley blinks at him, feeling a bit guilty at the stunned expression on his face. It’s not as though she was anticipating a break up or that they wouldn’t consider long distance, she just wasn’t sure it was a set thing to be betting on so early in the process.

“I didn’t mean to say that we wouldn’t. I just didn’t know if we had even… you know, gotten to that yet. If we were even thinking about it. I didn’t want to jump to any conclusions.”

Lucas looks a little sick. “Right. Yeah. You’re right. I was just… yeah. Of course.”

“Lucas, I’m not saying I don’t want to try—,”

“No, you’re right,” he says, waving her off and wincing slightly. “Let’s not talk about it. We’re not ready to talk about it yet.”

Riley gets to her feet. She can feel herself getting frustrated at how roundabout this conversation tends to be between the two of them. Lucas’s avoidance to talk about anything relating to the future doesn’t really help matters. “Lucas, I don’t want you thinking I’m planning to just—,”

“Riley, can we please not talk about it?”

“I don’t want this to be something it’s not. If you would just let me explain—!”

“Riley!”

She frowns at his tone, not appreciating being snapped at when she’s trying to avoid a miscommunication. “What?”

“I’m sorry,” he says immediately. He swallows anxiously, staring at the floor and sounding strangely out of breath. “I just… I think I’m going to pass out.”

Riley’s irritation disappears instantly, transforming into horror. “What?”

“I think I’m going to pass out,” he repeats unevenly, gulping. He backs slowly towards the bed, attempting to keep his breathing steady as he lowers himself onto it. Riley can see his hands shaking.

She has no idea what to do. This panic doesn’t creep—it’s coursing through her like electricity, spurring her to do something despite her complete and utter lack of preparation for a situation like this. No one else is home. She has no idea how to stop someone from fainting.

She can’t handle this on her own.

“I’ll call my mom,” she says quickly, heading towards the hall.

“No!” Lucas cries out, shaking his head and closing his eyes. A lot of the color has drained from
his face. “Don’t call Topanga. Don’t call anyone. I can handle it. I just have to breathe.”

“Lucas, are you crazy? I’m going to call someone. If you’re going to pass out—,”

“Don’t,” he pleads, wringing his hands together and keeping his eyes screwed shut. Riley stands frozen in the doorway, torn. She knows she can’t handle this by herself, but she doesn’t want to do anything that may make him worse. “I just have to breathe.”


She steps away from the door, relenting. “Okay. I won’t. I won’t call her.”

Lucas exhales, nodding a thanks. He reclines into laying down and continues to breathe, picking at his fingernails fretfully.

“I won’t call her,” Riley repeats, hating how her voice keeps cracking. If she cries when he’s already in a state, she’ll never forgive herself. “But, Lucas, I’m not prepared to deal with this. I don’t know how to help you.”

“I just have to breathe,” he says in a whisper, more to himself than to her. His voice wavers. “I just have to breathe.”

This was supposed to stop when the school year ended. It was supposed to go away when junior year was done and he wasn’t under the stress of AP classes anymore. He was going to get better. But he’s still tired and he’s still miserable and he’s still on the verge of passing out at a moment’s notice. The pressure is gone, but he’s still the same.

And she can’t do anything to fix it. She doesn’t even know what’s wrong.

Holding back her own emotions, she pads her way over to the bed and climbs onto it, laying down next to him and staring at the ceiling. She can hear him breathing next to her, uneven despite his efforts to regulate it.

Riley searches the mattress for his hand, taking it in her own. She gently places both their hands over her heart, taking a deep breath and forcing herself to follow his lead, focusing on her breathing.

In. Out.

“What are you doing?”

“I don’t know,” she admits tearfully. “I know you’re scared. I guess I’m thinking maybe if your body realizes that someone else is just as scared as you, it’ll calm down. Or at least find something to ground to and get back on track.”

He huffs. “I don’t think that’s how it works.”

“I know.” She knows she’s no help, but it’s all she can do. “But you’re not alone.”

Lucas exhales shakily. “It’s beating really hard.”

Tilting her head to gaze at him, she catches a couple of tears slip from the corner of his eye, still closed to block out everything else. She instinctively reaches forward and wipes them from his cheek, earning an embarrassed laugh from him in spite of himself. In spite of the fact that he definitely doesn’t find anything funny in that moment.
The two of them settling into tense silence, save for Lucas’s uneasy breathing. She doesn’t know how long they’re going to be laying there—she doesn’t really care. All things considered, all she wants is for him to be okay.

In. Out.

When it rains, it pours.

**Lucas Friar ♥:** *I had to go. I’m okay. Don’t worry.*

The first couple of days after realizing that the text is serious and that Lucas is actually gone, Riley settles into a state of total shock. It doesn’t register that he’s truly absent from her life until she starts to feel it. When he’s not there next to her when she wakes up in the morning, when he’s not sitting with her family at dinner, when he’s simply not there when she turns to look for him.

It’s like he’s a ghost. Just gone, leaving an imprint behind where he used to be.

The first week is definitely the hardest to get through. It’s not only the absence of him, but the stress of not knowing *where* he is instead. It’s impossible not to worry. His text implies that it would be so simple, but Riley is obsessive over it.

She finally gets up the courage to call Pappy Joe, Topanga holding her hand and Cory watching her anxiously from the other side of the kitchen table. It’s a monumental relief when he picks up after a couple of rings.

“Yeah, he’s here, but he’s down at the stables right now,” Pappy Joe confirms. “Do you want me to tell him you called?”

Riley doesn’t know how much Pappy Joe knows, if it’s any more or less than she does, but she ultimately decides against it. For whatever reason, Lucas has made it clear he needs to be left alone. She feels like it’s going to kill her in the process, but she respects his silent plea for space.

The relief of knowing where he is, knowing he’s at least alive, only lasts until she hangs up the phone. That’s when the ache sets in.

The second week is easier because it’s relatively numb. Riley forces herself to put her focus into other things, but it’s hard when many of her favorite activities somehow remind her of him. Editing photos from the year proves to be unbearable, considering so much of her camera roll features him as a main player. She gives up on that project once it becomes too hard, which doesn’t take long.

Zay and Riley hang out early in the second week. It’s quiet. The absence feels too heavy. They don’t see each other much after that.

Farkle, Smackle, and Maya do their best to keep her busy. Maya has a snide comment to say about the situation every now and then, coping with anger rather than sadness, but Farkle proves to be relatively level-headed about the situation.

“I don’t know what’s up with him, but I don’t think he’d leave without a really good reason,” he explains one Wednesday afternoon, offering Riley his daily dose of rationalization. She really needs the pragmatism to combat her tendency to jump to the worst possible conclusions. “And he’ll come back. When he’s ready, he’ll come back.”

She’s starting to doubt that prospect until the end of the second week.
“Uh, hey. It’s me. I’m sorry about everything. I’ll explain all of it, I promise, I just had to… I’ll explain it. When I come back, I’ll explain all of it.”

Hearing his voice after so many days without it is both a relief and a special kind of torture.

“I just want you to know that… this is all me. There’s something wrong with me and I have to figure out what it is. It’s not your fault. I just want you to know that. And I… I really miss you. I miss you and I’m gonna be back soon. I promise.”

She doesn’t know how many times she replays it just to hear his voice. For the rest of the weekend, it’s practically on a constant loop.

Then, she doesn’t let herself listen to it anymore. In case that promise at the end is something he can’t keep.

--

At the end of the third week, Riley learns that Lucas Friar is as good as his word.

“You sure you don’t want to come, sweetie?” Topanga asks as she’s hauling her suitcase towards the door, dropping it next to Auggie’s and crossing her arms. “You never know, maybe seeing grandma and grandpa would make you feel better. And you know they’d be more than happy to see you.”

Riley smiles at the thought, ultimately shaking her head. “Really, I’ll be fine. Gotta start testing my big girl pants anyway, don’t I? Being able to stay home by myself for one weekend without burning the apartment down will do wonders for my college preparation, I’m sure.”

Cory jogs out of the hall and joins his wife by the door. “Come on, bubba! We gotta get on the road!”

Auggie comes tearing out after him with his backpack on his shoulders, making a beeline for the door before doubling back and coming to tackle Riley on the couch, giving her a hug. “How come you don’t have to go but I do?”

“Big sibling privileges. Someday you’ll understand.” She hugs him back tight, getting to her feet as they get ready to head out. “Text me when you get there.”

“Naturally.” Topanga gestures her towards them, both her and Cory smothering her in a sandwich of a hug and kissing her head. “Let us know if anything happens. And you know the emergency contact numbers.”

“Sure do.”

“Bye, Riley!”

Auggie waves goodbye as they finally get out the door, leaving her standing in the apartment alone. For all intents and purposes, it feels a little refreshing to get some time to herself. A little bit of space to actually breathe.

Still, there’s not much to do, so she takes her time loafing around until it’s acceptable enough an hour to get ready for bed. She takes her time with her evening ritual, cleaning her face and brushing her teeth and taking extra time floss effectively. She decides to paint her nails for good measure, and because it’s not like she has anything to lose. Two coats of purple later, it’s after midnight and her nails are as good as polished.
Climbing into bed, she resents the fact that while her eyes are tired, her mind is wide awake and promises to keep her up for a long while. She wonders if maybe it was a mistake to skip out on going to dad’s house in Philly for the weekend.

During the day, it’s not so hard being alone. When night hits, all she’s got are her thoughts, and they’re not always the most pleasant company.

All of that becomes irrelevant the moment she hears a tap at the window. Sitting up and squinting through the darkness, her heart stops beating as soon as she recognizes the person on the other side of the glass.

It takes her a minute to remind her limbs how to move. Hands shaking and eyes already brimming with tears, she gets out of bed and makes her way over to the bay window.

Lucas takes the hand she offers the moment she opens the pane, accepting the help as he climbs back into the room for the first time in weeks. The second his fingers link with hers, she feels like she’s finally stopped drifting aimlessly as gravity pulls her back down to Earth.

He came back.

There’s a long pause where both of them stand there in awe of each other, uncertain of what to do or what to say. It feels like there are a million things to say, but also like maybe nothing needs to be said at all. But this frozen state of energy is absolutely killing her.

Both of them move at the same time, embracing each other so tightly it almost hurts. Predictable as always, Riley feels a couple of tears slip down her cheeks.

“Oh my God.”

“I’m so sorry,” he croaks. It’s such a relief to hear his voice Riley cries harder, hugging him closer and burying her head into his shoulder. “I’m sorry. I’m going to explain everything, I promise.”

In that moment, Riley doesn’t care about explanations. She figures she will later, but for now all she cares about is that he’s back and he’s home and he’s with her. She can hear his voice and feel his warmth and that’s all that matters.

She pulls back from the hug for the sole purpose of kissing him. It’s a worthy trade-off.

Lucas kisses her back eagerly, cupping her face in his hands. She feels a little frantic, like if she doesn’t get as much of him as she can now she may never get to have him again. She figures it’s probably a taste of separation anxiety, but considering how emotionally overwhelmed she is she doesn’t have much of a capacity to care about anything but him.

He breaks apart from her first, catching his breath as he presses their foreheads together. It’s clear there’s a phrase on the tip of his tongue, but he gets distracted in kissing her a couple more times before he collects his thoughts.

“I should go.”

Riley gives him a bewildered look, shaking her head fretfully. “No. No, no. Don’t leave.”

“I don’t—,” he begins, cutting off unceremoniously as Riley pulls him into another long kiss. “I don’t want to get you in trouble. I just had to see you. Show that I came back. I don’t want—,”

“It’s okay,” she assures him, speaking as efficiently as she can in between kisses. She knows the
desperation is stemming from the emotional heaviness of the situation—nothing more emotional than a reunion—but there’s a little bit of something else mixed in with the rest of her emotions too. A slightly different kind of desperation. “My family isn’t home. They’re out of town.”

It takes Lucas a couple of seconds to comprehend what she’s saying. Riley figures her kissing him isn’t helping clear his head.

“You’re not going to get me in trouble,” she says breathlessly, keeping to the point. She takes the front of his jacket in her hands, locking their lips together again before exhaling against his lips. “Don’t leave. Stay. Please, stay.”

“Oh okay,” he agrees after a moment of hesitation, choosing to trust her. He presses his thumbs to the corners of her mouth, kissing her again. “Okay.”

Riley sighs in relief, laughing a little bit in spite of herself from how nice it feels to be with him again. How nice it is to know he’s going to stay.

Her hands move up from his jacket to his collar, starting to push the sleeves off his shoulders. He assists her in removing it, pulling his arms from it and letting it fall to the floor. Riley isn’t sure what the hell she’s doing or what’s motivating her actions at this point but she decides to bow to it, for once allowing herself not to overthink things. Allowing herself to live in the moment and let what happens happen without letting her own need to worry get in the way.

Lucas follows her lead as she guides them back towards the bed, hoping for a sense of balance that she’s definitely not getting standing up. Her knees feel a little weak, and she’ll be damned if she decides to pass out all the sudden.

Her hands are impatient as she nudges his t-shirt up his torso, appreciative when he takes the initiative to tug it over his head. She leans forward to kiss him as soon as its out of the picture, transitioning to quicker, needier pecks until she has to break to help him pull her own shirt off.

Everything is a bit overwhelming—all this heat and sweat and fingertips on warm skin—but she’s not nervous. For what it’s worth, internally she feels very at ease. Comfortable.

Riley gets the feeling she knows where this is going. As she suspected she would when the time came, it’s just a feeling she has in the pit of her stomach—the same part of her that flips when he smiles at her and feels all warm and fuzzy when he kisses her. Also as she suspected, she doesn’t feel the least bit hesitant at this turn of events.

She’s with him. As long as that’s true, there’s nothing to be afraid of.

Riley falls back against the pillows and brings him along with her, taking his face in her hands as he rolls over on top of her. She waits until they have to break for breath to speak, swallowing hard and licking her lips. “Lucas?”

“Yeah?”

She pauses, giving both of them a chance to catch up with themselves. Lucas’s breath is hot on her cheeks, his fingers delicate on her waist as he waits for her approval. “You know how we’re always talking about those moments we’re going to remember forever?”

Lucas locks eyes with her, searching her expression. Likely checking to see if he’s jumping to the right conclusion. They’ve always been impressively good at reading each other.

“I think,” she says slowly, inhaling deeply to maintain her confidence. “This might be one of them.”
He looks a little disbelieving. She decides to make her point by pressing their lips together again, putting all her courage into reaching down to unbutton his jeans. Despite her certainty, her hands are a little shaky.

Lucas breaks first, exhaling the urgent thought almost unintelligibly. “I have—,”

“Me too,” Riley assures him, pulling back to give him an encouraging smile. Truth be told, the moment they started exploring the physical aspect of their relationship, Riley made a point of asking Topanga for help on being as prepared as possible. Although she’s as covered as she can be on her end, her heart flutters at the fact that he’s just as thoughtful about protection as she is. “We’ll figure it out.”

He seems to accept this, nodding and leaning forward to kiss her again. They stay pressed together for a few moments, Riley just starting to get caught up in it, when Lucas pulls back again.

“Are you sure?” he asks timidly, adjusting to make sure she’s as comfortable as possible. She feels his fingers tap anxiously against her rib cage. “I don’t want this to be—I just came back and everything. I still have to explain everything. I want this to be good, you know, for you. I don’t want this to be something we’re doing just because you feel like we have to, or something.”

If anything, his dedication to making sure she’s ready on her own accord makes her even more sure.

“Lucas,” she says quietly, meeting his eyes. She finds his hand and links it with hers, situating more securely underneath him and giving him an affectionate smile. It’s one of the first genuine ones she’s given out in while. “I’m sure.”

He examines her for a long moment, gauging whether or not to believe her. His features soften considerably as he decides to trust her, nodding lightly before leaning forward to kiss her. It’s different than the previous ones—gentle, slow, a little bit shy—fitting for the situation.

He’s right, there’s a lot to explain and lots to talk about and a whole future of decisions to be made. But that’s not what she wants to focus on at the moment. In this moment, she just wants to focus on him. Him and her and how they’re as close as they’re ever going to be.

As for the rest, she’s more than willing to wait.

“Will you go to sleep?”

Riley crinkles her nose, making a face at the ridiculous notion. Despite her fatigue—emotionally, physically, and otherwise—she doesn’t want to miss a second of this time with Lucas. Everything has changed, but ultimately she can’t believe how stable she feels. The universe feels settled. The world outside her window could be up in flames, but here in this space with him, she’s perfectly safe.

She hums, as if she’s thinking about it. “No.”

Lucas gives her a disdainful look, but the amused smile on his face doesn’t make it very convincing. He gently combs his fingers through her hair. “You’re tired. Sleep. Whatever we’d talk about now can easily be said in the morning.”

Riley decides she loves everything about him. She loves the stray freckles on his collarbone. She loves the callouses on his hands and how he radiates warmth, more familiar to her now than ever
before. She loves the way he looks in moonlight—half shadows, half glowing in cool blue.

He’s always looked good in blue.

She adjusts on her stomach, burying her face into her pillows before tilting her head to peer at him. “Will you still be here when I wake up?”

The question is innocent enough, but both of them recognize the weight it carries. Although she believes he’ll have a genuine enough explanation for disappearing, it doesn’t mean she’s not somewhat terrified he may just do it again.

Lucas’s expression shifts slightly, soft as ever but a little more serious. He runs his hand along her shoulder, delicately rubbing circles into her skin. “I’m not going anywhere.”

For everything they’ve survived in the last year or so, she believes him.

--

Her subconscious isn’t so willing to forgive and forget. Not out of the ordinary for the last couple of weeks, a nightmare startles her awake a couple hours later. She can’t remember the context when she sits up with a jolt, hands trembling and breathing uneven, but she can still feel the ghost of it haunting her.

She rolls over back towards the window and catches her breath, part of her surprised to find Lucas still laying there next to her. He doesn’t look like he’s slept much, if at all.

He gives her a sympathetic look, accented with a little bit of guilt. “Still here.”

Riley exhales, brushing the hair out of her face. She collapses back down next to him and he adjusts onto his side, holding her securely as she snuggles into him. She tucks her head against his chest, closing her eyes and feeling a little safer when she feels him press a kiss to the top of her head.

Not alone, it’s much easier to fall back asleep.

--

When Riley wakes up naturally a few hours later, she’s much more rested. Lucas again proves himself to be as good as his promises, still by her side and wrapped up with her. He’s sleeping peacefully, the sun rising through the bay window painting him blue-grey with a hint of gold. Everything is surrounded with a little bit of gold.

If every view were as beautiful as this one, Riley thinks maybe she’d want to be an artist like her best friend. Trying desperately to capture this image so that the rest of the world could experience it for themselves. Maybe if she could, the world would be a little less harsh.

She allows herself a few minutes to enjoy the peace before making to get up, disentangling herself from Lucas and searching the floor for something to wear. She finds his t-shirt first and decides there’s nothing more appropriate, slipping it on and tip-toeing out to the bathroom.

Riley lets her mind wander as she freshens up, tying her hair up out of her face. Although she never doubted it, she’s impressed with how relaxed she feels in light of making such an important decision. She and Lucas took a step in their relationship that they can’t necessarily take back, so she’s glad that she has absolutely no regrets.
If she’s being completely honest with herself, she’s looking forward to continuing to explore that aspect of their relationship together. Like everything else, she figures practice will do them a whole lot of good.

Glancing at her reflection in the mirror, she doesn’t look any different. She doesn’t really feel different either. Just at ease, and proud of herself, and happy.

It’s a feeling that doesn’t go away as she reenters her room, Lucas just starting to wake up in her absence. He rubs the sleep from his eyes, catching her standing in the doorway and tossing her a sleepy smile.

Definitely happy.

She jogs over and leaps onto the bed next to him, crawling for to greet him with a kiss. “Morning!”

“Good morning,” he laughs at her enthusiasm, voice still raspy from sleep. That, Riley thinks, is something she could get used to. Her stomach flips right on cue.

She knows there’s still lots for them to talk about, but she’s not sure she’s ready to face it quite yet. For now, she wants to revel in the joy.

“I don’t know about you, but I sure am hungry. What would you say to some homemade breakfast?”

Lucas gives her an intrigued look. “I’d say that sounds pretty great. Only one problem.”

“What?”

“You stole my shirt,” he points out, playfully tugging at it. She laughs, making him smile despite the actual inconvenience. “I’m serious. As far as clothes go, I’m not exactly prepared. When I came over I didn’t think… well. I didn’t think this through very well.”

She shrugs innocently, reaching forward to tap his nose affectionately. “Who says you have to wear clothes?”

“Riley.”

She raises a hand in surrender, biting her lip as an idea hits her. “Oh, wait. Wait! I’ve got it.”

He gives her a confused look as she climbs over him and off the other side of the bed, crouching down in front of the mattress and reaching underneath. From the depths of under her bed she retrieves a small plastic bin, prying off the lid and revealing her stash of his clothes she’d accrued over the years.

Lucas sits up, eyes wide and jaw hanging open slightly. “Oh my God, you’re a hoarder.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing,” she teases, picking it up and plopping down on the bed next to him. She hands it over for him to look through. “You say that as if I’m not adequately prepared for such a situation as this.”

“You’re a very cute hoarder.”

“Why, thank you.”

Lucas takes his time going through the assorted items of his clothing, commenting over how he thought he lost most of them and stopping to ask how the hell she obtained half the pieces in her
collection. When he finds a pair of his sweatpants, he raises his eyebrows at her. “How the hell did you get these?”

“Winter in sophomore year. When it rained really hard when we were walking home so my jeans were all soaked and you let me borrow them. I just… continued to borrow them. For an indeterminate amount of time.”

He shakes his head, obviously impressed by her sneaky tactics. Either that or terrified.

Both of them redress, Riley pulling on a pair of sleep shorts before they head into the kitchen to make breakfast. As Riley sets to cutting up some fruit Lucas volunteers to mix pancakes, the conversation light and easy as it usually is. She gets him talking about the less serious aspects of his trip to Texas, grinning as he goes on and on about the horses and how they’re doing.

Standing there in the otherwise empty apartment with him, making a meal together and talking about everything and nothing at all, Riley realizes this is exactly how she wants them to be for the rest of her life. No matter what colleges they go to or how far away they’ll be during the school year, as long as they can come back to this, she’ll be okay. Long distance doesn’t seem nearly as daunting.

He finishes up describing how Pappy Joe got himself a dog to keep him company just as Riley starts up the stovetop. She gives him a smile, nodding. “Well, sounds like a full house. Don’t see how you could’ve missed me.”

Lucas stops what he’s doing, locking eyes with her and raising an eyebrow. “Did I miss you?”

Riley shrugs coyly, keeping her attention on the stove. She smiles in spite of herself when she feels his hand on her waist, pulling her into a hug. She melts into it, embracing him and resting her head against his chest. She can hear his heartbeat, focusing on it as he places a kiss into her hair.

“Every day,” he assures her softly, propping his chin on her head.

If it weren’t for the risk of burning down the apartment, Riley doesn’t think she’d ever pull away from him.

They spend the rest of the day lazing around and talking, only lapsing in conversation for a period in the middle of the day when Riley can’t resist the temptation to kiss him for more than a few moments at a time. All things considered, she doesn’t think some extra affection will hurt anybody, and they have the apartment to themselves so they may as well take advantage of it while they can. Lucas doesn’t have any complaints, taking her lead as he always does.

The conversation they spend all day avoiding does happen later that evening, after all other subjects have been exhausted. It takes some warming up to but Lucas finally comes clean, explaining how bad his mental state has gotten and how trapped he felt by his own head and everything that had led up to where they are now. It stings just as much as it did the night he broke down, and the day he almost passed out exactly where they’re sitting now. It stings that for all they’ve managed to survive, something is still fundamentally in disrepair.

“Thank you for telling me,” Riley murmurs. “I’m glad you feel like you can talk to me about it.”

He nods, playing with her fingers idly. Even though everything is out in the open, the solution still feels far away. And it’s not something that she can reach.

“You know how much I care about you,” she says slowly, trying to choose her words as carefully as possible. She doesn’t know exactly how to discuss a topic as important as this, but she’ll regret it
if she doesn’t try. “And you know I’ll do whatever I can to help. But I don’t think this is something that’s just going to go away on its own. It’s not something… I don’t think I can fix it.”

“I know,” he mutters, avoiding her eyes.

“I mean, I want to. I wish I could. But this is something that goes a lot deeper than… it’s more than just last year. It goes back a while. And it’s more than I can…” Her voice cracks, causing her to smile sheepishly in spite of herself. Always getting choked up just when she needs to be strong for someone else. “I can’t just love it away. I wish I could.”

“I know.”

She nods, brushing some hair from his forehead as they settle into thoughtful silence. She doesn’t mind the quiet. If it gives him the space he needs to think, then silence is something she’s more than willing to tolerate.

“It’s not just going to go away,” he agrees after a deep breath. He keeps their fingers linked together. “And it’s not going to get better if I don’t try to fix it on my own. Not by pretending it’s not there, but by actually trying to do something about it. I have to do it.” He hesitates, clearing his throat. “Because I don’t want to feel like this all the time. I’m tired of feeling like this.”

Riley nods. She can only imagine.

Lucas takes another deep breath, licking his lips before lifting his gaze to lock eyes with her. He gives her a tentative smile. “Will you help me?”

It’s not even a question. She knows she can’t fix whatever’s wrong with him, but she’ll do whatever she can to help him in the right direction. She returns the beam and wraps her arms around him, tilting her head against his.

“Every day.”

--

Despite being well into summer, her personal winter doesn’t come to an end until the night the six of them are reunited again.

Riley puts out a call for all of them to come to the bay window, and there’s a special place in her heart that comes back to life when each and every one of them show up. Smackle is there in record time, Zay not far behind her. Maya shows up just before Farkle climbs in the bay window and completes the group, the six of them back together for the first time in almost a year.

There’s a tentative silence as Riley takes them all in—Maya and Zay in the bay window, Farkle and Smackle hanging by the dresser, Lucas on the edge of the bed next to her. The smile that slowly blooms across her face is one she couldn’t hold back no matter how hard she tried.

“So,” she says, breaking the silence. “Been a while.”

There’s a couple of awkward laughs. Maya smirks at her, encouragement shining through her gaze. “Good to be back.”

Farkle smiles at her, looking back and forth between them before settling on Riley. Waiting for her to say whatever she’s going to say. Because they all know she has something to say.

“We’ve all been through some stuff,” she starts, clasping her hands together and collecting her
thoughts. All of them listen to her with rapt interest, hanging on her words. “I don’t think any of us would try to act like we didn’t make some bad decisions. Or said things we didn’t mean. Or got hurt. It’s been a long year. We can agree on that.”

Nods around the room. Zay exhales, raising his eyebrows to emphasize the point.

Riley smiles at him, pausing before continuing. She wills herself not to get choked up. Just this once.

“But we made it. We survived, and here we all are. I put the call out and you all answered it, even though you didn’t have any reason to. And I sincerely believe that if any of you had put the call out, if any of you reached out, we would’ve done the same. We would’ve showed up.”

Smackle nods in agreement. Lucas turns to look at Riley, exchanging a soft smile with her.

“Who knows what’s going to happen in the future. I sure don’t. I have no idea what’s going to happen next year, or when we move out, or twenty years from now when we’re all grown up and have jobs and live in the real world. I don’t know anything about all that, but what I do know is that you guys are my best friends, and I don’t want to go through senior year without you. We’re one of the best groups of friends this universe has ever seen, and I don’t want to give that up.”

No one outright says anything in agreement, but Riley can feel it from the energy in the room. There’s something about the way the atmosphere feels when they’re all together—like all the potential in the world is there at their fingertips. It’s a powerful feeling.

“I want this to be our year,” she concludes. She glances at each of them in turn, just managing not to get choked up by the amount of love she feels for them. “Together.”

“Together,” Farkle repeats, giving her a proud nod. Having her back, as he always does.


“Together,” Maya says sincerely. She nudges Zay, tilting her head at him expectantly.

Zay looks around at all of them, making a show of having to think about it. But his grin speaks enough for him. “What they said.”

Lucas smiles at him before turning to her, holding out his hand. “Together.”

Riley grins, looking around the room at all of them again. At her people. They’re always going to be in her orbit, tethered by some special kind of gravity that she doesn’t understand but she’s very, very grateful for.

She takes Lucas’s hand, nodding.

“Together.”

-S E N I O R  Y E A R -

Senior year is the year Riley Matthews learns about time.

More to the point, she learns how quickly it passes.

With everything back in place as she steps into her final year of high school, the days are filled with more good than bad. They always say time flies when you’re having fun, and Riley is realizing just how true the sentiment is. She thinks of the school year less in semesters and more by
seasons, as it’s the only way she can effectively encompass it all in her memory.

Still, even as early as September, things are moving in a blur around her. She forces herself not to fret over it, staying in the moment and enjoying each minute with her family and friends as fully as she can. She’s going to savor it until August comes around again and they all go their separate ways.

“Well, happy birthday, Lucas,” Topanga says cheerfully, lifting her glass slightly in a toast. “We’re all very blessed to have you in our lives.”

Riley beams at her boyfriend sitting next to her on the bench, fitting right in to the family dinner as he always does. It’s weird to try and remember a time when Lucas wasn’t a part of this mental picture, even though it wasn’t that long ago. He knits so effortlessly into the fabric of her life—like he was always meant to be there. She hopes he always will be.

After all that’s happened, she’s fairly certain he isn’t going anywhere.

Lucas smiles bashfully, nodding his head in her mother’s direction. “Thank you. And thanks for making dinner.”

“Birthday dinner,” Riley corrects, covering her addition with a cough. Lucas shakes his head at her.

“So, how goes the Davis application?” Cory asks, taking a bite of his mashed potatoes and diverting Lucas’s attention to the head of the table on his right.

He takes a deep breath, thinking on the question. Finally, he smiles, his eyes twinkling optimistically. Riley loves that twinkle. She can’t believe had to go almost an entire year without it. “Good. Really good, I think. All of my classes are exactly what they’re looking for, and my grades from last year actually came out alright. You know, considering.”

“You’re making sure to note your extracurriculars, right?” Topanga nags, pointing her fork in his direction for emphasis as she speaks. “Debate, environmental club. You’ll want to mention baseball too, even though you quit the team. They’ll be impressed to see your athletic achievement as well as your academic ability. Makes you a more well-rounded candidate.”

Sometimes Riley feels like Topanga wants Lucas to get into UC Davis even more than Lucas does, and that’s a high bar.

“Mom, I’m pretty sure he’s got to be the most well-rounded candidate there is.”

Cory nods, glancing at them both. “You’re both excellent students. I don’t see any trouble arising when it comes to college application process.”

“And yet you still won’t write Lucas a letter of recommendation,” Riley points out, tilting her head at her father.

He raises his hands in defense. “Father bias! Boyfriend of daughter. Not a good scenario.”

“Will I be as good a student as Riley and Lucas?” Auggie wonders aloud, taking a bite of his mashed potatoes and looking to his parents.

Riley locks eyes with Lucas, exchanging a small grin with him. Topanga pats Auggie’s head. “Of course you will. As long as you work hard and keep trying just like them.”

“Oh, that’s funny,” Riley laughs. “She thinks we work hard.”
Topanga waves her off, giving Cory a grateful smile as he gets up to start clearing dishes. “Okay,” she states, clasping her hands together. “Movie time. Lucas, it’s your birthday, you get to choose.”

Auggie looks offended, as according to the paper-plate wheel on the refrigerator, it’s his week to choose. Lucas glances at the appliance and the arrow pointing to Auggie’s name before shrugging nonchalantly. “It’s okay. I’m good with whatever.”

“Are you sure? You’re not just saying that because the kiddo here is giving you grumpy eyes?”

“No, no,” he laughs, raising his hands. “I’m sure. I defer my movie choice to Auggie.”

“Yes!” Auggie jumps from the table and runs over to the DVD shelf, well into the process of picking one to watch. It’s an extensive process, so they’ve got at least ten minutes before they actually sit down to watch anything.

“Oh, that reminds me!” Riley chirps, hopping to her feet as well. She walks around Lucas and tugs on his sweatshirt lightly, indicating for him to get up. “Come on.”

He gives her a look, rising obediently. “Yes?”

She reaches out to take his hand, his meeting hers halfway automatically. She adores many things about Lucas, about being with him, but the way their hands fit together perfectly has to be one of her favorites. They’re always pulling back towards one another.

Without further explanation, she gives him an enthusiastic grin and leads the way back to the hall. Stepping into her room, she allows him to move past her and closes the door, spinning on her heel to face him. “I still have one more present for you.”

She starts to move in his direction but he holds up a hand to stop her, his eyes wide. “Riley, wait. Should we really—I mean, your parents are like, right outside.”

It takes her a minute to catch up to his train of thought. She raises an eyebrow at him, smirking lightly. “Not that.”

“Oh.” He blinks, making a face. The blush that colors his cheeks only makes the situation more amusing. He rubs the back of his neck self-consciously. “Oh. Well. I just made this super awkward.”

She breaks into giggles, shaking her head and taking his hands again. She gently nudges him onto her bed and makes him sit, holding up a finger to silence him. “One second. Sit here. And don’t move. And don’t look. Stay facing this way.”

He doesn’t argue, only failing to follow instructions when she starts to move back towards the door and his gaze follows her. She clicks her tongue at him, gesturing for him to look the other way. “Close your eyes, if you have such limited control of them.”

Once he’s successfully following directions, she wanders over to her dresser and pulls open the third drawer from the top, making sure it’s all cleaned out. When she first had this idea back in the latter half of junior year, she was hesitant. What if it seems too forward? What if he wants nothing to do with it? What if it scares him away? Things were hectic, it felt too soon, it just didn’t quite feel right.

Now, looking at the empty drawer and thinking about all they’ve gone through together, she wishes she had offered this sooner. But now is as good a time as any. Better late than never. She’s heard that expression a million times, but after everything that happened in ninth grade to end up
with Lucas, she knows how true it actually is. Time is a weird concept, but if she’s learning anything it’s that she’s got to make the most of it.

“Riley, you didn’t have to get me anything,” Lucas says modestly.

“Hush,” she sings at him, humming as she strolls back over to him. Sitting there, with his eyes closed as requested and waiting so patiently, she can’t help but fall a little more in love with him. She has that feeling a lot—she wonders sometimes if there’s ever going to be a peak she can hit, or if she’ll continue to fall more and more in love with Lucas Friar until she dies.

Wouldn’t be such a bad way to go out.

She takes advantage of the fact that he’s not looking to give him a kiss on the nose, gasping playfully when his eyes flutter open in surprise. “Hi.”

“Hey,” he breathes, leaning forward to kiss her without missing a beat. It takes a lot of willpower not to get caught up in it.

“Hi,” she repeats as she pulls back, linking her fingers with his again. “Time for your present.”

“What? That wasn’t it?”

“All that set-up for a kiss on the nose? Gosh, who do you think you’re dealing with? Give me a little more credit.” She smirks at him, gently pulling him forward. “Come on.”

He allows her to guide him over to the corner by the door, where the dresser is waiting. Riley glances at their reflection in the mirror for a brief second before looking up at him expectantly. When he doesn’t put forth any sort of reaction, she gestures emphatically to the set of drawers, grinning widely and dancing a little bit in place. “Ta-dah.”

Lucas’s grin is caused completely by her little jig, and she knows it. He hasn’t caught on. “It’s... your dresser.”

She nods eagerly, not taking her eyes off of him. He examines her curiously, matching her expression as if doing so will help him crack the puzzle. But he can tell she’s excited, and he doesn’t want to put a damper on that by not understanding so he does a very good job of acting enthused. “Well, great! I mean, you know how I love... furniture... and all that.”

Riley cracks up, nudging him lightly and leaning into him, wrapping her arms around his. “It’s the open one,” she whispers, pressing her cheek against his shoulder at gazing up at him.

He narrows his eyes, matching her tone. “But there’s nothing in it.”

“Yet,” she admits, her voice still quiet. “It’s where your stuff goes.”

His expression shifts as realization washes over him, his features softening and puzzlement giving way to astonishment. He stares at the empty drawer for a long moment before locking eyes with her.

“You’re here all the time,” Riley begins, searching his face for any sign of fear. She rushes to explain before he has the chance to bolt. “You eat here. You sleep here. You practically live here. It’s your home as much as ours. I figured, if it’s your home, you should have a place to keep your things.”

He swallows. Although she loves every piece of him, she does wish he was easier to read. “You’re
“If you want it,” she says, trying to remember to breathe. “Then it’s yours.”

His eyes don’t move from hers for a long time. Slowly, his mouth quirks into a small smile. He pulls away from her momentarily, reaching up to pull the collar of his sweatshirt over his head. Once he’s removed it, he folds it neatly and places it tenderly in the drawer.

He pushes it closed, standing up straight again and locking eyes with her. He smiles shyly. “One item unpacked.”

Riley drifts towards him as he reaches out to pull her to him, embracing her. She tucks her head against his shoulder, pressing her hand between them and feeling his heartbeat through his shirt. Riley likes to live life by the mantra that every day is a good day for one reason or another, even if it’s sometimes hard to see—but today is one of her favorites because without it, Lucas Friar wouldn’t exist.

“Happy birthday, Lucas,” she murmurs affectionately.

She feels him press a kiss to the top of her head. “Thank you, Riley.”

He’s here, he’s alive, his heartbeat proves it. And by the good grace of the universe, and a special kind of gravity, he’s with her.

Considering how eternal the winter of junior year felt, Riley’s not upset when senior year’s passes by in a flash. Another Secret Santa, another round of midterms, and a snowstorm later, she’s facing the last semester with graduation just on the horizon.

Maya makes a point of getting them out and about more in the last semester than they have in the last six years combined, attempting to cross as many items off this wild bucket list as possible that she and Zay crafted. It’s a bit overwhelming, but Riley’s glad for it because it brings them all together. They’re keeping up on their pact to stick it through their final year as a team.

Even still, they’re not immune to the rain. The dynamic of the group is ruffled somewhat when Smackle informs her in late April that she and Farkle have broken up, opting not to risk their relationship in the face of long distance. It instills a fear in her that maybe Lucas will suddenly decide the same thing, or that all of her friends will realize they’re better off quitting before the real long game even starts, but none of them seem to have any such plans.

For what it’s worth, Farkle and Smackle don’t do separation very convincingly. Despite going along with the group to senior prom under the guise of friendship, when the opportunity to slow dance comes up Farkle doesn’t miss the chance to invite her to dance. Riley has to wonder if they realize they’re pretty terrible at being unattached, or if they’re convinced they’re doing a bang-up job.

“For a couple of geniuses,” Riley says, glancing at them swaying together on the dance floor a few feet away before gazing up at Lucas, “They sure don’t get relationships, do they?”

“Nope, they sure don’t.”

She smiles, tucking her head against his shoulder. With all her thinking about time, and thinking about how much of it has passed, she has to say she’s very pleased with their improvement so far as dancing together. Much better than seventh grade at least, although it did have its charms.
“Riley?”

She pulls back to meet his eyes. “Yes?”

“About… a lot of stuff has happened in the last couple of years,” he says uncertainly. He licks his lips, obviously trying to compose his thoughts so he says exactly what he wants to say. “And I know we talked about long distance earlier and everything, but there’s a lot to consider now. You know, with all the… stuff going on with me.”

“Right.” She tilts her head at him, waiting for the point. “And?”

“I’m just—,” he clears his throat, dipping his head down to stare at their feet rather than meet her eyes. “You know, I want you to know that you don’t have to deal with it. Considering all my bullshit and how far apart we’ll be and all that, if you wanted to… just break it off clean, I’d get that. Whatever you want, that’s what I want.”

She finds it ridiculous that he would ever think she wouldn’t want to stay with him. If they’re not meant to work out, then so be it, but she’ll be damned if they don’t at least give it their best shot. And all things considered, she’s not too worried. She’s always had a good feeling about him. She doesn’t see that changing any time soon.

“Who would’ve thought?” she laughs. “Turns out you’re just as clueless as the geniuses.”

He squints slightly, obviously lost. Her smile only grows, feeling that familiar fondness for him in the pit of her stomach.

“I’m very sure about long distance,” she explains softly. She reaches to straighten his tie, smoothing it out affectionately. “I’m very sure about you. ‘Stuff’ included. That hasn’t changed. I mean, if you’re thinking maybe—,”

“No,” he says quickly, shaking his head. “No, I’m not thinking we shouldn’t… no. That’s not what I’m trying to say. I’m sure about long distance, too.”

“Well, then, there you go.”

After a moment of uncertainty, he smiles. He holds her more securely against him, leaning forward to press their foreheads together.

“You know, this really only goes one of two ways. This relationship thing.” He pauses. “I mean, people either break up…”

“Or stay together. Yeah, that would be how this thing works.”

He makes a face at her playful tone, accepting the quick kiss she gives him. “I’m just saying, staying together without breaking up sort of implies a finality. A commitment. Not breaking up sort of means like, forever.”

“Forever is a long time,” Riley says thoughtfully, raising her eyebrows at him. “Guess we better get used to each other, huh?”

He breaks into a grin, tucking some hair behind her ear before dipping down to kiss her. She falls into it, gripping the front of his tuxedo jacket and smiling against his lips.

Maybe they’re forever. Maybe they aren’t. It’s the future, and so much of it is uncertain. But she likes her odds, and she’s willing to take her chances. She’s willing to wait and see what happens
As he’s proven time and time again, he’s more than worth the wait.

Graduation has to be one of the most bittersweet experiences of Riley’s entire life.

There’s a certain sense of melancholy in knowing that something is coming to an end. Even if it wasn’t always great, high school taught her a lot and she’s never going to forget the important lessons she learned while in the walls of Abigail Adams. The familiar faces she’s spent the last six or so years with will soon be going off to start their own journeys, and it’ll be a shame not to see them every day.

But that can’t compete with the joy she feels at watching each of her favorite people walk across the stage and accept their diplomas. She knows how hard they worked, what each of them went through to get there. Second only to joy is pride, so intrinsic and so strong that it’s a wonder she ever had any doubts about them in the first place. From where they started to where they are, it’s amazing how they’ve all grown.

Time, playing tricks on her again. Making her realize just how quickly it flies.

After the ceremony ends and the graduates are scattered around the lawn attempting to find their families, Riley catches a friend across the way as she’s exiting the building with Lucas in tow.

“Jade! Jade, over here!”

Jade turns around to search for who’s calling her just as Riley reaches her, enveloping her in a tight hug that obviously catches her off-guard. Dave, standing reliably at Jade’s side like always, grins at Lucas as he approaches. He looks like he’s about to pass out as Lucas offers him a hug as well.

“Congratulations,” Riley tells them, squeezing Jade snugly before pulling back and grinning at them both. “I can’t believe it’s been six years.”

“Yeah, you’re telling me,” Dave says, rolling his eyes. “Six years of listening to your dad give you and Maya best friend counseling.”

Riley nudges him playfully, Lucas nodding to him and Jade. “Thanks, you guys.”

“For what?”

Lucas smirks, shrugging nonchalantly. “You guys know what. Thank you.”

Dave and Jade exchange a look, another tacit exchange between best friends. Dave opens his mouth to say something when he’s suddenly tackled behind by Haley, causing him to scream and jump away from her in horror.

“Amazing,” Nigel says, laughing at him. “He’s such an easy jump scare.”

“Well, congrats, guys,” Jade says again, figuring their group is going to drag them away.

“Hey, you guys want a picture?” Haley suggests. “With you in your matching robes and everything.”

“Do I?” Dave declares, pulling out his phone and handing it over. Riley laughs as the four of them pose together, Haley lifting the phone to get the best shot. Nigel looks over her shoulder,
scrutinizing the angle and crossing his arms.

“Okay, smile! One, two, three!” She takes more than a couple, lowering her hands and nodding. “Got it. At least I think I did. I took like, a million photos.”

“Oh, great,” Dave mumbles.

“I took a burst. Many bursts.”

“I hate you.”

“Riley Erica Matthews!” Maya’s familiar voice shouts, grabbing both her and Lucas’s attention. They whip around to find her standing in the parking lot with the rest of the group and their parents, having successfully managed to corral everybody except the two of them. She gestures them forward aggressively. “Get your pretty little butt over here! Pronto!”

They say goodbye to their classmates and jog through the crowd to reach them, Riley falling into Maya’s arms with a giddy laugh. “We did it, peaches!”

“We sure did, honey,” she agrees, smiling proudly and pulling her into a hug.

“Alright, now you know what’s going to happen next,” Cory says from behind her. Turning to face him, all of the expected crowd is in attendance, cameras at the ready. “You all better line up and get ready to smile for a thousand years.”

“Don’t let my boy do anything mischievous,” Donna Babineaux chides, exchanging an amused look with Katy as she preps her phone. Her husband, Omar, shakes his head. “He hasn’t been able to take a decent picture since preschool.”

“I resent that accusation,” Zay snaps back, holding out his arms. “I have no tricks up my sleeve. Not a one!”

“Yeah, it’s just under your robe instead,” Farkle jokes, indicating his ballet slippers he’s wearing rather than traditional dress shoes. Zay elbows him in the ribs.

Santiago Smackle nods approvingly to Shawn’s camera, one of his more professional models. “Those photos will turn out nice, I’m guessing. You’ll have to get me a copy.”

“Ooh,” Grace Friar chimes in, raising a finger. “Copy me on that as well.”

“We’ll get the exclusive package of graduation souvenirs from Topanga as soon as she can organize them all together, I’m sure,” Stuart Minkus laughs, linking arms with his wife and looking admiringly towards the kids.

“Yeah, well, can’t do that without any pictures,” Topanga chides, gesticulating for the six of them to arrange themselves into something presentable. “Come on, smiles on. Don’t make me micromanage you.”

“A convincing threat,” Smackle mutters. Riley holds out her phone for Topanga to take, wanting to ensure she gets a photo of her own.

The six of them group together, playfully swatting at each other and giggling as they put their arms around one another and make themselves sufficiently presentable. Stuck between Maya and Lucas, with her favorite people surrounding her, she’s never felt more at home.
“Say cheese!”

Maya flips her hair dramatically over her shoulder just as they start snapping photos, hitting Farkle right in the face as causing him to gag in response. The rest of them fall into hysterical laughter, making for some truly candid shots in the bunch.

When Riley gets her phone back, she looks at the picture on her screen and feels a bittersweet pang right at the center of her chest. It’s certainly candid, the poses far from perfect. But then, so are they, and she loves them all the more because of it.

--

As fast as it flies, Riley also learns that time definitely doesn’t stop. As much as she makes of her last summer with her best friends, it comes and goes and before she knows it college is on the horizon. She’s relieved that she’s more excited than nervous, but she wishes she had more days left with her friends before they all go their separate ways. More adventures to embark on, more chances to say whatever there is left she needs to say.

But there isn’t. Summer is nearly gone and she finds herself lying awake in bed, lost in thought over the fact that Lucas is at his place packing, and Smackle is hitting the road tomorrow, and in less than a couple weeks they’ll all be off starting their own lives.

Figuring she’s not going to sleep any time soon, Riley climbs out of bed and wanders over to her desk, glancing at the graduation picture tacked up on her bulletin board before digging in her desk drawer for her senior yearbook. She smiles at the little notes from her classmates as she flips through the pages, finding the senior section and getting lost in the smiling faces of the kids she’s known almost all her life. Thinking about how much they’ve grown, and how they’re all about to make something of themselves.

She’s been preparing her whole life to meet the world and now it’s here, waiting for her to take the first step.

A knock at the bay window surprises her. Whipping around, she finds Maya pressed up against the glass, waiting impatiently for her to open the pane.

Riley scrambles to her feet, opening it to let Maya poke her head in. “What is it? Are you alright?”

“Please, come on.” She rolls her eyes. “Of course I’m fine. Do I look like I’m not okay?”

“Well, when you’re climbing in the bay window at one in the morning.”

“No, no, you’re mistaken,” she says with a slight shake of the head. “I’m not climbing in. You’re coming out.”

“No, no, you’re mistaken,” she says with a slight shake of the head. “I’m not climbing in. You’re coming out.”

“Maya, I’m not going outside. It’s late!”

She makes a face, mimicking Riley’s complaints softly. “Riley, we’re graduates now. We’re eighteen. We’re adults. We make the rules now. It’s our world. How many more clichés do I have to include? Just come on. And hurry up.”

In the next moment, she’s gone, the only evidence she was ever there the open window and the echo of her moving outside.

Although the prospect makes her nervous, Riley can’t help but want to go. Not only because she’s curious, but because the fact that this is her last week with Maya’s antics is making her unfairly
emotional. Rather than cry, she figures she should just go along with it. For one last time.

“Fine,” Riley relents.

Maya reappears, smiling triumphantly. “Atta girl. Bring anything you can’t live without.”

A strange request, but Riley takes it seriously as she quickly changes her clothes and puts some shoes on. She grabs her phone and charger, stuffing them into a NYU drawstring bag along with her wallet and keys. Instinctively, she pulls the photo of them at graduation off her bulletin board and puts it in there as well. She slings the bag over her shoulder.

As Riley’s climbing out the window and onto the fire escape, a wave of nostalgia hits her. She hesitates to touch the chain around her neck, making sure the jellybean ring is still attached and secured as she glances back in at the childhood bedroom she’s known her whole life.

She thinks back on all the lessons she’s learned, the challenges they’ve overcome, the friendships that she’s cultivated in that very bay window. Knowing that the moment she follows Maya, something new and unexpected will begin. Just like how in a few days, all of them will be facing something new and unexpected all on their own.

This one—whatever last mischief Maya has up her sleeve—she figures she can tackle with friends. Just for one last adventure.

Riley shuts the window and starts around the house after Maya, moving forward without looking back.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!