



Also by  
RACHEL LYNN SOLOMON

*Today Tonight Tomorrow*  
*See You Yesterday*  
*We Can't Keep Meeting Like This*  
*Our Year of Maybe*  
*You'll Miss Me When I'm Gone*

Past  
Present  
Future

RACHEL LYNN SOLOMON

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*For the readers  
who asked if there was  
more to the story*



Uh-oh, made it through the winter  
Uh-oh, summer too warm  
I wouldn't live anywhere else but  
Don't say you weren't warned!

—“I Love Seattle” by Tacocat

“I’ve never been the one. Not for anybody.”  
He closed the distance between them. “You’ll get used to  
it.” He tipped her face up to his, kissed her.

“Why? Why am I the one?”

“Because my life opened up, and it flooded with  
color when you walked back into it.”

—*Vision in White* by Nora Roberts







ROMANCE NOVELS DON'T talk about what happens when the heroine and hero go off to different colleges.

Of course, this is usually because both people are gainfully employed adults. Maybe they're lobbying for the same promotion, or one is an environmental activist trying to protect a park from a real estate developer—and its unfairly charming CEO. Or one is a governess to three wild rascals whose father is a grumpy, dashing rake with a hidden vulnerability at his core.

There aren't many rakes who attend small liberal arts schools on the East Coast.

"I can't believe I'm saying this," Neil starts, surveying my room with a grim expression, eyes narrowed behind his glasses, "but I think you might be bringing too many books."

I glance up from where I've been pleading with my suitcase's stubborn zipper. "If they're not close to me, how will I be inspired by them?"

Except he might be right, a statement I'd never have allowed to cross my mind until three months ago, because the suitcase is too

small and too full and there are still too many things I can't take with me. In my defense, most of my stuff is already packed and waiting in the hall downstairs. This is my last suitcase. The one I've been dreading, because of everything it symbolizes.

When the zipper doesn't budge, I dig a hand inside and extricate two pastel Nora Roberts paperbacks, weighing them for a moment before putting one back on my bookshelf.

Neil lifts an eyebrow. His arms are crossed over his chest, giving him the appearance of a stern, extremely cute statue.

With a groan, I add the other one to the shelf too.

"You said you needed help," he reminds me. "In fact, 'I need you to be ruthless' were your exact words when you sent me that SOS text this morning."

"Yeah, but not about *Nora*." I return my attention to the suitcase, and after an initial stutter, the zipper slides shut. "You know, I think I've been demonstrating extraordinary restraint." I walk over to my closet, nudging aside a few dresses to reveal the stack of mass-market paperbacks that don't fit on my bookshelf, most of them collected from garage sales and thrift stores.

Neil doesn't even look surprised. "Ah, yes. That infamous Rowan Roth restraint. She never exaggerates. Never bends the truth. Never romanticizes anything."

I give him an intense side-eye, and his faux seriousness finally cracks, gaze softening and mouth tilting into a grin.

Late-August sun arrows through my window, illuminating the freckles on his skin and the lovely golden undertones in his

auburn hair. This time of year, it doesn't get dark until after ten o'clock, and we've been taking advantage of those daylight hours as much as we can.

Most people seemed to think we wouldn't last the summer, but the past two and a half months have been the best of my life—and that's not an exaggeration at all. Some days Neil would hole up in the café where I work, sitting in a corner with an iced chai, busy with his own summer job—remote transcription for a local law office—and when Two Birds One Scone closed, we'd take unsold pastries to a park or sneak them into a movie theater. We'd bring his sister to the beach or skate park, double-date with Kirby and Mara, argue about *Star Wars* with his friends. A few days ago, we celebrated my nineteenth birthday with a ferry trip to Whidbey Island. We have eaten too much gelato and squinted too many times into the sun, picked out books for each other to read and mapped the entire city on foot. We've gotten great at pushing curfew, chasing sunsets, “just ten more minutes.” And then fifteen more after that.

The whole time, what we've really excelled at is putting off talking about the inevitable: the fact that tomorrow, I fly to Boston while he boards a plane to New York.

I turn away from the closet. “You like telling me what to do,” I say, placing the tip of my index finger on his sternum and slowly inching it upward. Teasing, which is still one of my favorite things to do to him.

He's already blushing, long lashes fluttering shut. At the

beginning of our relationship, I worried he might stop blushing altogether, and it's been the sweetest surprise that he hasn't, that he wears his emotions so plainly for me. "Only because there's no other circumstance under which you'd allow it."

The spark in my chest when I tug him closer by the collar of his T-shirt is a familiar little thrill. I intend for it to be a quick peck, but the moment my lips meet his, I dissolve.

His hands come up to my hair, deepening the kiss as I propel us backward, shoving at my suitcase to make room for us on the bed. Then I'm in his lap, his earthy scent altering my brain chemistry, each ragged exhale making me crave the next one. His fingertips on the waist of my shirtdress. My mouth on his throat.

There is something about this boy that undoes me every single time, and sometimes I still can't believe all of it is real.

As though perfectly attuned to what's going on behind it, there's a knock on my half-cracked door. Neil and I spring to our feet, smoothing our hair and pretending to be immersed in separate tasks: me, unzipping and reziping the suitcase, Neil, examining the mug on my desk where I keep my pens and pencils, the one with a watercolor splash of the Seattle skyline.

We've gotten good at that, too, almost as good as my parents are at knowing exactly when we're about to cross the line into PG-13.

It's become something of a joke, albeit a frustrating one: the fact that it's nearly impossible to find some alone time. When we slept together for the first time on the last day of school—or I

guess technically, the day after the last day of school, since it happened around four in the morning—neither of us had intended for the relationship to progress that far. I definitely hadn't woken up that day and imagined I'd be kissing my longtime rival Neil McNair, let alone sneaking him into my bedroom. But it had just felt *right*, the two of us being connected in that way. I had this new, persistent ache that I'd never be able to get enough of him; I wanted to have long, sometimes contentious conversations about the world just as much as I wanted to learn all the ways our bodies could fit together. Because even if we went from zero to one hundred in a single night, there's still plenty we haven't done, bases we've skipped that I've been hoping we can find our way back around to.

His sister just hit the age where their mom is comfortable leaving her home alone all day, and my parents work from their downstairs office. A few times, we tangled ourselves in the back seat of my Honda Accord, at least until a police officer banged on the window and it spooked us so much we haven't tried it since.

My dad steps inside my room and greets Neil with a wave before turning to me. "Ro-Ro?" he says, leaning against the doorframe. "You just about ready? We should leave soon if we want to get there by five."

Before answering him, I take a moment to gaze around the room. The bulletin board above my desk, where I've pinned photos of my friends and academic ribbons and a list Neil and I made on the last day of school: Rowan Roth's Guide to College Success . . .

and Beyond! My senior yearbook with his love confession in it, an item too precious to transport across the country because I'm not sure I could bear it if an airline lost it.

And Neil, standing there with an easy smile, one stubborn strand of hair refusing to lie flat.

Yes, and no.

Theoretically, I'm ready, but I'm also not sure how fearlessly I can let go.

"As I'll ever be," I say, and when I close the door, it somehow feels like I'm shutting away so much more.

My parents insisted on a send-off before I leave, a picnic at Green Lake with black-bean burgers and roasted corn. Kirby Taing and Mara Pompetti are already there, no doubt ready to gloat about their extra weeks of summer because the University of Washington doesn't start until the end of September.

Eager to have a job, my dad lights the grill while my mom passes out compostable plates. Neil's mom, Joelle, arrives with a Tupperware of cubed watermelon and a wide-brimmed sun hat. A family of redheads means a lot of SPF.

It's only mildly embarrassing for your parents to meet your boyfriend's mom, something I discovered last month when all five of us went out to dinner. It hadn't happened with my past boyfriends, felt too serious for those relationships. A strange kind of *So, how about our kids' raging hormones?* But they clicked instantly,

bonding over their opinions about the new Seattle waterfront (mixed) and whether the Seahawks have a chance at the playoffs this year (no).

We take a few minutes to settle in, exchanging hugs and hellos. All around us, people are playing croquet and walking their dogs and Rollerblading, the latter two occasionally done at the same time, Seattleites soaking up what might be the last nice day of the season. Because in this city, you just never know.

“If someone doesn’t promise me this isn’t the end, I might cry,” Mara says. Her wavy blond hair is in a loose bun, and a minidress emphasizes her calves, toned from years of dance.

With one eye, I watch Neil and my dad standing semi-awkwardly at the grill, as though they’ve decided that this is how they Bond as Men, though Joelle is the one to inform them that the burgers are starting to burn.

Next to Mara on the park bench, Kirby gives her shoulder a squeeze. “It’ll be okay. Just think, only one hundred and twenty-two more days until we’re all reunited.”

“That’s supposed to make me feel better? That’s an eternity.”

I reach for a passionfruit LaCroix and pop the tab. “Just think about all the times I’ve annoyed you over the years,” I say. “You’ll be too busy to miss me. How many credits are you taking again, Mara?”

“Only twenty-two,” she says innocently. “I just want to get all my prereqs done as soon as I can.” Kirby, long known for trying to get as much done with as little effort as possible, is taking

the recommended fifteen credits for freshmen, unsure what she'll major in.

"And I still think you should have decided to take Anthropology of Ice Cream with me," Kirby says. "Although if we don't actually get to eat ice cream, I may riot."

Burgers and corn are passed around while we talk more about our fall schedules. My creative writing class is the one I can't wait for, taught by a darling of the literary fiction world whose books I devoured earlier this summer. In college, I will be entirely unashamed of my dream career, and Miranda Everett's class—undeniably full of other aspiring novelists—will be where I take the first step.

Mara bites into her burger. "If your roommate is cooler than we are, please don't tell us."

"Speak for yourself," Kirby says, miming putting on boxing gloves. "Personally, I think it's more advantageous to know your enemies."

"I'm not replacing either of you!"

Neil slides in next to me with his plate of food, our parents immersed in a conversation about the rising cost of textbooks. His knee nudges mine. "Neither am I. Who else could mercilessly torment us about our relationship like you, Kirby?"

It's true: Even though my friends knew how I felt about him before I did, they rarely hesitate to joke about our four-year rivalry and the game that made us realize what idiots we'd been. Lovingly, of course.

Kirby beams. "I try my best."

“Seattle’s definitely going to feel smaller without both of you,” Mara says as Kirby sinks her teeth into her ear of corn, the kernels blackened and buttered, and it’s then that I realize something else: I’ve been so caught up in the logistics of packing, I’ve barely processed the fact that in twenty-four hours, I will no longer live here.

The place I’ve spent my whole life, the city that’s just as much a part of me as my troublesome bangs or my affinity for vintage clothes. Case in point: the lavender floral shirtdress I’m wearing now, plucked from a rack at Red Light last month.

I wonder if thrift shopping will be as fun in Boston without my best friends.

Just as the black-bean burger starts to turn uncomfortably in my stomach, my mom calls out to get everyone’s attention, lifting her can of seltzer in a toast. “Hear, hear,” she says. “To Rowan and Neil, and all the adventures you’re going to have next year on the other side of the country. We’re all going to miss you, but we know you’re going to do great things.”

Joelle holds her own can high. “That’s lovely, Ilana. To having new experiences and meeting new people, and then coming home and telling us all about it.”

“To trying a slice of real New York pizza,” Neil says.

“To exploring Boston’s independent bookstores,” I add, even as a lump forms in my throat. “And never being embarrassed to be caught in the romance section.”

Everyone toasts. Sips. The fizz settles my stomach, and I try my best to banish my nerves for the rest of the evening. Because in a

matter of hours, this—my life in Seattle—is really, truly ending. I thought I'd made peace with it, allowed myself to mourn while leaving space for all the excitement I'm taking with me to the East Coast. But now I'm just not sure.

Maybe that's how you're supposed to feel on the precipice of drastic change.

By the time the sun begins its descent in the sky, Joelle has to leave to pick up Neil's sister from a friend's house, and my parents, perpetual early risers, are starting to yawn, a fact we considered when we took separate cars. Kirby and Mara, realizing that Neil and I might want just a little more time to ourselves, hug us tight as I promise to text them the moment I land.

It's gotten chilly, but it's nothing that can't be solved by burrowing closer to Neil on the picnic blanket. I brought his heather-gray hoodie with me, the one I don't plan on ever giving back, but I left it in the car. His body heat is so much better.

"On a scale of one to ten, what do you think is the likelihood that our parents will become best friends while we're gone?" he asks, draping his arm across my shoulders and pulling me against his chest.

"At least a nine. It's cute, though. I don't want any of them to be lonely." When I let out a sigh, it sounds much more agonized than I'm anticipating. I'd hoped we could end the night without a therapy session, but apparently I was wrong.

"You're anxious. Do you want to talk about it?"

"Oh, just the usual fear of the unknown," I say. "I think the

worst part is that I don't know *any* of what to expect. Every single part of it will be new. I can visualize the campus, but not my dorm room or my classrooms. I don't know what Boston's transit cards look like or if my professors will like me or where I'll sit when I'm calling you."

"Is it unhelpful if I remind you that you don't have to have it all planned out right now?"

"No, but it doesn't change the fact that I *want* to," I say with a small whine.

For a few thoughtful beats, he lets his fingertips play through my hair. A gentle rhythm. "Do you remember," he says, "sophomore year, when honors English went on that field trip to see a modern reimagining of *Macbeth* and we wound up sitting next to each other?"

"Shhh! The Scottish play," I quickly correct him. As if I don't remember all of it. Every moment of the last four years. "The one where all the characters worked in a McDonald's, and Lady Macbeth kept trying to scrub ketchup off her hands? Of course. I should probably apologize, huh. I think I tried to get Sean to switch seats with me."

His laugh drums against my cheek, that sound I love becoming something almost tangible. "You asked, once, if I remembered when I started having feelings for you. And I think that was it. The whole time we watched, I could hear everyone else making fun of it, but you were so quiet. You paid attention because it was school, and the fact that it was a field trip didn't change that. When you

laughed, it was genuine. Sincere. The acting was terrible, but you took it seriously. And a couple times, you glanced over at me to see if I was laughing too.”

“You were,” I say, that seemingly trivial day coming back to me. A dark theater, my nemesis next to me. The pride that comes with getting the humor, obnoxious smart alecks that we were. Are. “At the same time, usually.”

“Right. And it made me feel so connected to you, the fact that you were curious if I found the same things funny. Plus . . . you smelled really nice. I went home and thought to myself, ‘This is it. This is the girl.’ I was done for.” His thumb travels down the length of my neck, and it would be so easy to close my eyes and fall asleep like this as the sky turns dark. Then he buries his nose in my hair, takes a deep inhale. “Still just as intoxicating.”

I laugh-yelp as he does this, pretending to push him away.

“You’ve been important to me for years,” he continues, as though he knows I need the reassurance, and I tuck those words right next to my heart. “The distance isn’t going to change that.”

We shift on the blanket, Neil sliding me on top of him while he kisses me, and it isn’t long before I’m pressing myself more firmly against his jeans, grateful the park has emptied out. I’ve given a little thought to missing him like *this*, the abject neediness of his breaths and mine. The groan when my lips settle in the spot where his neck meets his shoulder. His hands on my hips and mine on his face, as though if we just cling tight enough, we can make those weeks go by that much faster.

I never expected to fall so hard, so quickly for someone right before our lives split in different directions. Even if my feelings had been dormant for most of high school, that night in June put the past four years in such sharp, renewed focus. A rose-tinted filter. While I also never thought I'd be starting college with a boyfriend, I can't imagine how I'd feel if we'd given ourselves an expiration date, the way some couples in our graduating class did, determined to go to school with zero attachments. A few times, I wondered if we'd break up before August and wouldn't have to worry about it.

But the thing is, dating Neil McNair isn't actually all that different from sparring with him. We just get to make out afterward.

Being with Neil, I realized a few weeks into our relationship, is *easy*. Which naturally makes me more convinced the universe was playing a trick on us this summer, two and a half months of bliss before catapulting us into a long-distance relationship.

All my years of planning and daydreaming, the times I swore I'd be different and live more in the moment, and the imminence of it takes me completely by surprise. It's nerves and uncertainty and a touch of nausea knotted up in one twisted ball.

It's the fear that once I drive away tonight, we will never again have what we had this summer.

Eventually we have to head back to my car, one of the last ones in the parking lot after we circled and circled to find a spot hours ago. His hair is wonderfully mussed, my body still buzzing with a desperate electricity. As though my bones and muscles cannot bear to let him go.

The drive is too short—we pull up to his house after several detours and “just five more minutes” that somehow last almost thirty. With more effort than it’s ever taken, I shut off the engine and engage the parking brake, an ominous silence filling the car.

“We were too spoiled,” I say, staring directly ahead because if I look at him, I might not be able to hold it together. “Seeing each other nearly every day for the past four years.”

Neil shakes his head; I catch the motion out of the corner of my eye. “No, no, no. I was pining for most of those four years, absolutely tortured because the girl I liked couldn’t stand me. You were simply going about your life, vaguely annoyed by some guy with too many freckles.”

“Maaaaaybe. But before we got together, I couldn’t imagine not seeing you every day. Did I ever tell you that?” I turn to him, and the look on his face tells me that I did not. “The few weeks leading up to graduation, I’d get your texts in the morning and feel a little sad that they were coming to an end.”

A patented Neil McNair smirk. “And you, connoisseur of romance novels, didn’t realize you were madly in love with me.”

“Yeah, well. We all have our flaws.”

When he reaches for my hand, there’s no trace of humor in his expression. “I miss you already,” he says as we thread our fingers together. “Is that weird?”

“We’ll text and talk all the time. I already have my train ticket for the end of September.”

“And then I’ll be in Boston for Thanksgiving.”

“Why does that feel so far away?”

Suddenly I’m worried we haven’t discussed it enough, that we spent too much time living in the moment this summer when we should have mapped out call schedules with color-coded spreadsheets.

It’s what High School Rowan might have done, but I guess that’s not who I am anymore.

“We’re going to be okay.” His voice is solid, and his eyes on me will never not make me feel so wholly *seen*. “I can’t wait to show you New York. Assuming, of course, that I know my way around after a month.” A soft smile. “I love you, Artoo.”

The nickname has its intended effect: to remind me that all our history cannot be undone just because we’ll be in two different states.

“I love you too.” I hold him close. Inhale deeply. One more kiss, and then another. “Fly safe and don’t forget me.”

“Impossible.”

I try to stop the statistics about long-distance relationships racing through my mind as he opens the passenger door, kisses two fingers, and holds them to his heart. With a grit I honed over four years of trying to best him, I push aside the anxiety and replace it with a fierce resolve.

We’re going to be the ones who make it.

After all, overachieving is kind of what we’re known for.

Neil,

Hard to believe we're almost at the end of this.

I suppose in a way, I'll miss you, the same way you miss a pesky mosquito trapped between the window and the screen. You're not happy it's there, exactly, but when the buzzing stops, something just feels off.

I kid, I kid. You're much nicer than a mosquito, which is a strange thing to realize on the last day of school, but there it is. From elections to gym class contests, you've really kept me on my toes, too. Rude to find out that you're a decent human being underneath it all. Don't get a big head about this, but . . . I'm glad we teamed up today, even if we don't end up winning. (But how could we not?!)

Because I think, deep down, I might actually miss everything. Just a little.

Best of luck next year. HAGS! (Please know I mean that ironically.)

Rowan "Artoo" Roth



“PLEASE STOW YOUR tray tables and return your seats to their upright positions,” says a flight attendant over the intercom, and despite my grogginess, I’m quick to comply. An ardent rule-follower, even 2,415 miles away from home, according to the flight tracker on the screen in front of me.

Out the window, swaths of blue sky paint the horizon, barely a cloud in sight. I crane my neck to get a better view of the city taking shape beneath me, the island jutting into the East River—or is it the Hudson?—and buildings stacked like child’s toys. A topographical map come to life.

“It’s my first time in New York,” I explain to the middle-aged woman sitting next to me when I accidentally jostle her armrest, if my eagerness hasn’t already given me away. First time on a plane, too, but somehow that seems embarrassing to admit to a stranger. She just gives me a lift of her eyebrows and a mumbled “congratulations.”

I try to imagine taking this flight so frequently that the views cease to impress. Even if I make this trip one hundred times, I

am somehow certain I'll remain the overexcited passenger with his face pressed to the window, dying for a first glimpse of the destination.

Ever since I learned of its existence, I have dreamed of New York. My mom grew up outside Philadelphia and spent long weekends there in the summer as a teenager, and I've always wished we still had family on the East Coast so we'd have had a reason to visit. She talked about it like it was an amusement park, a one-of-a-kind sensory experience—the food and the energy and all the different languages she heard on the street, how you could never feel truly alone, no matter the time of day. I couldn't get enough of those stories. I pictured it the way it's shown in movies, with that famous, now-cliché shot of a New York City sidewalk: everyone in their own worlds as they bustle down the street to wherever they're going. Because everyone is always going *somewhere*, somewhere important, and I loved the idea of being caught in that tidal wave of determination. Of ambition.

Anytime I felt lonely, I simply reminded myself that one day I'd be swept up in that same tidal wave.

As I grew older, I set my sights specifically on NYU. We couldn't afford a visit, but that didn't matter—its top-tier linguistics program seemed a perfect match. I was certain I was meant to be there.

The only thing New York doesn't have going for it is the fact that Rowan Roth isn't in it.

Last night, I told her I missed her already, but the truth is that I have missed her all summer. Every moment she smiled, laughed,

gazed at me in a way that made my heart swell—so, approximately 99 percent of the time we spent together—felt like something to stow in a secret pocket of my suitcase and take back out when we were deep in winter.

*If we last that long*, a tiny voice always reminded me, but it's been easy enough to ignore.

Now, as the plane's wheels strike the ground and we hurtle toward a stop, that voice is a little louder.

I text both Rowan and my mom that I've landed, adjusting my watch to Eastern time while waiting my turn to wrestle my carry-on down from the overhead bin. While I'm sure a digital watch would be more practical, this one belonged to my grandpa on my mom's side, who gave it to me as a sixteenth-birthday gift. The silver has dulled and the band is worn, but it ticks like a champ.

My sister Natalie's already sent me a picture of Lucy, our nine-year-old golden retriever, curled up on my bed. *Make sure she doesn't forget me*, I message Natalie, and she replies *on it*, with a photo of Lucy posed with one of our old family albums.

The flight was smoother than I imagined, my motion sickness kept at bay with some Dramamine tablets and a series adaptation of one of my favorite books, *War and Peace*, that I'd always meant to get around to watching and Rowan loved to tease me about.

"You're a nineteenth-century nobleman trapped in an eighteen-year-old's body," she said last month before giving me another one of those looks. Deep brown eyes, one side of her mouth curving upward, pure mischief. "Guess I have a thing for older guys."

I navigate JFK with my shoulders high, masquerading as a seasoned traveler as I follow the signs to baggage claim. My mom initially planned to help me move in, but Natalie falling off her skateboard and breaking her wrist earlier this summer necessitated a hospital bill we couldn't have budgeted for. Over and over, I assured her that it was okay, that I would be fine on my own, but I could see the guilt on her face as I packed my suitcases and then as she spent most of last night's picnic talking to Rowan's mom, who's probably getting off the plane in Boston with her right now.

I spot my bags right away, which instills in me a sense of false hope that the rest of this transition will be just as easy. It's only after I haul them off the belt that I realize traversing the New York City subway system for the first time with two massive suitcases and an overstuffed backpack may be a bit of a challenge.

My eyes snag on the signs for rideshares and taxis, and the mental calculations begin. I worked through high school, and combined with loans and work-study and a generous financial aid package, I should be able to get through freshman year comfortably enough, while allowing myself the occasional splurge on meals out and other activities. Plus, there's the prize money from winning Howl with Rowan—our school's senior class game that also happened to bring us together, although she insists I was the true winner because I happened to be the one who crossed the finish line—most of which I haven't touched. I already have alerts set to notify me of the lowest prices for my trip home in December.

Even so, all of it sits heavy on my chest, not unlike the pressure I lived with throughout high school. *Do more. Work harder. It'll all pay off soon.* I've been able to ignore it most of the summer, but now that I'm surrounded by the unfamiliar, it pushes against my lungs, winds its way up my throat.

I've only been in New York for forty-five minutes. If I'm already worrying about money, I'll barely last a week.

With a determined set of my jaw, I grab the handles of my suitcases and make my way toward the AirTrain to Jamaica Station. Once I get out, though, I'm expecting the subway to be right there—and it's not. I blink back and forth between the signs that lead back to JFK and the ones pointing toward the street, with symbols for the E, J, and Z trains. Still, I don't entirely trust Google Maps and want to make sure I'm going to the right place.

"Excuse me, is this the—"

The guy blazes past before I can even get the sentence out. Face flaming, I approach someone else. "Sorry, hi, does this train go to Washington Square Park?"

The woman yanks an earbud out of her ear. "What?" she asks, and I repeat the question. "You'll want to take the E to West Fourth and Washington Square. Can't miss it."

"Thank you so much."

Eventually I find the platform, huffing from the effort, my T-shirt pasted to my back. A few minutes to catch my breath.

Neil: *Is it dorky if I'm not even in the city yet and already taking photos of the subway station?*

Rowan's response is immediate.

*yes, but the dorkiness is part of why I love you so much.*

I still can't believe this is something we do, casual texting that isn't laced with barbs or taunts. When I confessed my feelings in her yearbook, I never anticipated she'd do anything but laugh in my face. Or maybe she'd pity me—that would have been worse. But school was over, I rationalized, and I'd only have to live with the humiliation for a short time. I could probably get over her by the end of the summer, especially if I wasn't seeing her every day.

Then we danced together in that darkened library. Fought with frosting at Two Birds One Scone. She wore my hoodie and read her writing at an open mic and met me at the Museum of Mysteries for Howl's final clue. We argued—because of course we did—before she kissed me for the first time, a kiss that may have permanently rerouted my neurons, tattooed ROWAN FUCKING ROTH all over my prefrontal cortex. And then a handful of other things for the first time, too.

Twenty-four hours, and our relationship had completely changed.

Her text is enough to soothe some of the remaining tension in my chest as the E train roars into the station, everyone on the platform seemingly unaffected by the noise. I drag my suitcases inside and claim an empty seat, my whole body still pulsing with adrenaline.

A sudden grin takes over my face, a broad and ridiculous thing I don't even try to contain. I'm on the subway going into

Manhattan, where I'll be a freshman at my dream school. New York has always meant freedom, and now here I am.

Then a guy stumbles into my car, flings out an arm to catch one of the poles, and promptly throws up on the seat next to me.

New York may be eager to humble me, but I manage to get into the city without any additional catastrophes.

My dorm is a magnificent brick building on the western edge of Washington Square Park, somehow both imposing and welcoming, though the latter may be due to the violet NYU flags waving in the breeze. One of the things I loved most about NYU from my research is that there is no actual campus, technically. There's no tree-lined quad like other schools have, no central square. The city is the campus, dozens of buildings spread across blocks and blocks, most of them here in Greenwich Village.

"You're going to get kicked out if anyone hears you saying 'Green-witch' instead of 'Gren-itch,'" my mom warned before I left, and I promised her I wouldn't dare. Besides, like any good aspiring lexicographer, I'd already looked up the etymology of it years ago, learning it had come from the Old English word *Gren-ewic* and had most likely never been pronounced "Green-witch."

Somehow I'm not sure this fun fact will make me any instant friends—but if it ever would, this is certainly the place.

After I check in and get my keys, I wait for the elevator to take me to the sixth floor. The dorm is a flurry of move-in commotion,

most doors thrown wide open and the hallways crammed with more cardboard boxes than I've ever seen. And one detail I hadn't anticipated but probably should have: everyone is here with their parents.

Fighting off a too-early pang of homesickness, I make a vow to myself. Whatever it takes, I'm getting my mom back out here.

The hall is decorated with construction-paper cutouts of New York landmarks: the Statue of Liberty and the Empire State Building and the Brooklyn Bridge. And there's my name on the door to room 608: NEIL MCNAIR.

Over the summer, I'd made an appointment to legally change my last name but backed out before paying the fee. I hadn't been ready, even after I spent so long convincing myself I was. The idea of having a different last name from my sister when she'd been too young to remember everything that happened with our father—it held me back.

I told myself I could wait until I was truly certain, and even now, seeing my full name on the door, it doesn't seem strange to me. I thought I wanted to start college with no ties to the man who gave me that name, but I've been Neil McNair for eighteen years. It's on the academic awards and certificates of achievement and high school diploma. Yes, it's his name. But it's mine, too.

Before I see anyone in the room, I hear two male voices with thick New York accents having a loud but not angry conversation about either baseball or football, I'm not sure. I'm exhausted and sweaty and in desperate need of a shower, and my adrenaline has

given way to anxiety. I'll be sleeping next to a complete stranger for the better part of a year, which is obviously a very normal part of the college experience and yet suddenly seems like a hell of a lot to leave up to chance.

Gingerly, I knock on the door, despite having a key. I don't want to interrupt anyone. When it opens, I'm faced with two broad-shouldered guys nearly the spitting image of each other: brown hair and blue eyes, casual in jeans and T-shirts, though one is five inches taller and probably thirty years younger.

Skyler Benedetti is a Staten Island native I messaged on NYU's roommate app over the summer. I sent a paragraph; he sent back *awesome man can't wait!!* 🙌

"Hi, I'm Neil," I say with an awkward wave. I point to my name on the door, as though needing it to back me up.

"Hey!" Skyler straightens to his full height, so tall that I'm unsure these beds can contain him, and gives me a half handshake, half high five. He's in a New York Yankees T-shirt and has the most symmetrical face I have ever seen. "Skyler. Good to meet you!"

"Sorry, I hope I'm not interrupting—"

"Nah, my dad and I were just saying that I could handle living with a Giants fan but probably not a Mets fan." His face turns serious. "Don't tell me you're a Mets fan."

"I, uh, don't follow sports."

I take a moment to glance around the room. The two sides mirror each other: beds and wooden bookshelf-desk combos and

two tiny closets. Plain white walls, except for where Skyler's tacking up an NYU pennant. A plain blue comforter is draped haphazardly across one bed, a suitcase spilling open on top of it. I haul my largest suitcase onto the other bed.

"Probably the safest answer. You'll avoid a lifetime of disappointment that way," Skyler's dad says with a chuckle. He extends a hand. "Marc Benedetti. Your parents around here somewhere?"

I clear my throat. *Exhale*. This isn't a test. "I just flew in from Seattle. My mom wanted to come, but she couldn't get the time off work." It sounds better than *we couldn't afford it*.

"Lucky," Skyler says, so brazen even in front of his dad. Finished with the pennant, he extracts a sweatshirt from the duffel bag on top of his bed, STATEN ISLAND TECHNICAL HIGH SCHOOL blazoned across it, along with an image of a seagull. It doesn't escape my notice that his school's name is abbreviated as SITHS, which makes my inner *Star Wars* nerd—and probably outer *Star Wars* nerd, let's be honest—wildly jealous I didn't go there. "My dad's obsessed with reliving his glory years. He went here too."

"Those were some good times." Marc props an arm on Skyler's desk chair, his eyes lighting up. "Did I ever tell you about when my friends and I dared each other to go streaking through Washington Square Park at midnight?"

A groan from Skyler, indicating he's probably heard this story many, many times. "Unfortunately."

His dad holds a hand to his heart. "I met your mother that night. The most romantic night of my life."

“We can stop there,” Skyler says. “Dad. Please don’t scare my roommate away.”

I can’t help laughing at all of this as I unzip my suitcase, pulling out towels, pillowcases, extra-long twin sheets. For a moment I wonder about my dad’s glory years, whatever they might have been. I don’t allow myself to think of him often, but being confronted with the Benedettis right here in the space in which I’m going to live for the next nine months makes it inevitable.

I do know that for a while, my parents were happy. They met at work in their early twenties as cashiers at a home improvement megastore, but my dad had dreams of starting his own smaller shop one day, and my mom got pregnant with me after they’d been dating for a year. Although she had hoped to go back to school once she saved enough, she put that on hold, working nights while my dad worked days and her sister helped take care of me. Neither of them had big extended families—my mom’s parents, who moved the family from Philly to Seattle when my mom was sixteen, had been only children, and though my dad was rooted in the Northwest, his parents were much older and he didn’t have any siblings. They didn’t have a lot of money, but from everything my mom has told me about that time in their lives, it didn’t matter. They had each other, and they were building a family together.

Then there was the hardware store my dad opened that struggled to turn a profit. The drinking. The angry outbursts.

The night he caught a couple kids stealing when he was about

to close up, and the moment he grabbed a bat from behind the counter and changed our lives forever.

The felony conviction when I was just eleven years old, a mouthful of words that even a child who loved words could barely understand.

Assault in the first degree.

A fifteen-year sentence.

Our lives, entirely warped.

Most of it, I've compartmentalized. I've shrunk it and hidden it away until it's nothing more than a speck. Infinitesimal, and yet somehow always there. Even when I try to put it behind bars.

Marc leaves to get something from their car while Skyler continues unpacking, hanging up a few button-downs and lazily folding some T-shirts. One thing I've learned from years of altering my own Goodwill suits: those shirts are definitely going to wrinkle. But Skyler seems unbothered, humming to himself and every so often swiping a hand through his artfully floppy hair.

"So, you're from here?" I ask as I stretch a sheet over my bed, though the answer seems obvious.

"Staten Island born and raised. And proud of it." He says this last part as though worried I might fight him on it, and I'm getting the feeling that New York as a state is a crucial part of his personality.

"So I know who to ask if I get lost."

He waves a hand, casual. Everything about Skyler seems casual:

the relaxed slope of his posture, the way he talks with his dad, how he decides to plug in his mini fridge instead of charging his laptop before I offer him one of the two surge protectors I packed. “New York’s easy—most of Manhattan’s on a grid. Avenues run north and south and streets run east and west. That’ll help you out more than you might think.”

He unfurls a piece of art designed like one of those old motivational posters, with a kitten poised on the edge of a table, trying to bat a fish out of its bowl. In lieu of something inspirational, **HERE FOR A GOOD TIME, NOT A LONG TIME** is printed across the top.

“I’m in the Gallatin school,” Skyler says. “That’s the one where you design your own concentration—they’re really particular about not calling it a major. Pretty stoked about it, especially after I saw that someone last year graduated with a concentration in Orange. Literally just the color orange. What about you?”

“That’s really cool.” At NYU, you’re admitted to a specific program; very few people start undecided. “I’m linguistics, which sounds a lot less thrilling than Orange.”

“Oh shit. So I better watch my grammar around you, huh? Because if I’m being completely honest, I still have no idea when to use *lie* versus *lay*. Or *laid*.” Then he lifts his eyebrows, his mouth forming a smirk. “Unless we’re talking about very specific circumstances.”

Here is the thing. I don’t necessarily have low self-esteem, but there are some guys I can tell I’m going to have a difficult time bonding with, as though there is some kind of unspoken hierarchy

and I am not exactly at the top. And it has nothing to do with the correct usage of “lie” and “lay.” My closest friends from high school, Adrian Quinlan, Sean Yee, and Cyrus Grant-Hayes, are at UC Davis, UW, and Western. Last week, Sean sent a photo of his school’s new computer lab to our group chat and we all geeked out over it. We were the presidents of the student council, chess club, robotics club, and Anime Appreciation Society. We even called ourselves “the Quad,” short for quadrilateral, because—well, no big mystery, there were four of us. They’re great guys, but none of us were under any delusions of popularity. We didn’t talk about relationships and we very rarely made references to sex—largely because none of us were having it.

But even though Skyler Benedetti doesn’t strike me as the kind of person who’d have seamlessly fit into my friend group back home, maybe here in New York, none of that matters.

“Getting late,” Marc says when he returns with one last suitcase, peeking at his watch and then tapping the door. “You want to grab a bite with us, Neil?”

“I don’t want to intrude.” I glance at Skyler, waiting for some slight signal that maybe he wants this time with his dad to himself.

“Not intruding. By the end of the year, I’m sure we’ll be like brothers.”

I try to imagine myself integrating into this family of very tall, very confident men. I have no reason to say no, even if they’re just being polite.

“Sure,” I say after a beat. “Dinner sounds great.” And then,