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A Novel

Colleen Hoover

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About Colleen Hoover

This book is dedicated to the Avett Brothers, for giving me the motivation to “decide what to be, and go be it.”

*I'm as nowhere as I can be,
Could you add some somewhere to me?*

—THE AVETT BROTHERS, “SALINA”

KEL AND I LOAD THE LAST TWO BOXES INTO THE U-HAUL. I slide the door down and pull the latch shut, locking up eighteen years of memories, all of which include my dad.

It's been six months since he passed away. Long enough that my nine-year-old brother, Kel, doesn't cry every time we talk about him, but recent enough that we're being forced to accept the financial aftermath that comes to a newly single-parented household. A household that can't afford to remain in Texas and in the only home I've ever known.

“Lake, stop being such a downer,” my mom says, handing me the keys to the house. “I think you'll love Michigan.”

She never calls me by the name she legally gave me. She and my dad argued for nine months over what I would be named. She loved the name Layla, after the Eric Clapton song. Dad loved the name Kennedy, after a Kennedy. “It doesn't matter which Kennedy,” he would say. “I love them all!”

I was almost three days old before the hospital forced them to decide. They agreed to take the first three letters of both names and compromised on Layken, but neither of them has ever once referred to me as such.

I mimic my mother's tone, “Mom, stop being such an *upper!* I'm going to *hate* Michigan.”

My mother has always had an ability to deliver an entire lecture with a single glance. I get the glance.

I walk up the porch steps and head inside the house to make a walk-through before the final turn of the key. All of the rooms are eerily empty. It doesn't seem as though I'm walking through the house where I've lived since the day I was born. These last six months have been a whirlwind of emotions, all of them bad. Moving out of this home was inevitable—I realize that. I just expected it to happen after the *end* of my senior year.

I'm standing in what is no longer our kitchen when I catch a glimpse of a purple plastic hair clip under the cabinet in the space where the refrigerator once stood. I pick it up, wipe the dust off of it, and run it back and forth between my fingers.

“It'll grow back,” Dad said.

I was five years old, and my mother had left her trimming scissors on the bathroom counter. Apparently, I had done what most kids of that age do. I cut my own hair.

“Mommy's going to be so mad at me,” I cried. I thought that if I cut my hair, it would immediately grow back, and no one would notice. I cut a pretty wide chunk out of my bangs and sat in front of the mirror for probably an hour, waiting for the hair to grow back. I picked the straight brown strands up off the floor and held them in my hand, contemplating how I could secure them back to my head, when I began to cry.

When Dad walked into the bathroom and saw what I had done, he just laughed and scooped me up, then positioned me on the countertop. “Mommy's not going to notice, Lake,” he promised and he removed something out of the bathroom cabinet. “I just happen to have a piece of magic right

here.” He opened up his palm and revealed the purple clip. “As long as you have this in your hair, Mommy will never know.” He brushed the remaining strands of hair across and secured the clip in place. He then turned me around to face the mirror. “See? Good as new!”

I looked at our reflection in the mirror and felt like the luckiest girl in the world. I didn’t know of any other dad who had magic clips.

I wore that clip in my hair every day for two months, and my mother never once mentioned it. Now that I look back on it, I realize he probably told her what I had done. But when I was five, I believed in his magic.

I look more like my mother than like him. Mom and I are both of average height. After having two kids, she can’t really fit into my jeans, but we’re pretty good at sharing everything else. We both have brown hair that, depending on the weather, is either straight or wavy. Her eyes are a deeper emerald than mine, although it could be that the paleness of her skin just makes them more prominent.

I favor my dad in all the ways that count. We had the same dry sense of humor, the same personality, the same love of music, the same laugh. Kel is a different story. He takes after our dad physically with his dirty-blond hair and soft features. He’s on the small side for nine years old, but his personality makes up for what he lacks in size.

I walk to the sink and turn it on, rubbing my thumb over the thirteen years of grime collected on the hair clip. Kel walks backward into the kitchen just as I’m drying my hands on my jeans. He’s a strange kid, but I couldn’t love him more. He has a game he likes to play that he calls “backward day,” in which he spends most of the time walking everywhere backward, talking backward, and even requesting dessert first. I guess with such a big age difference between him and me and no other siblings, he has to find a way to entertain himself somehow.

“Hurry to says Mom Layken!” he says, backward.

I place the hair clip in the pocket of my jeans and head back out the door, locking up my home for the very last time.

* * *

OVER THE NEXT few days, my mother and I alternate driving my Jeep and the U-Haul, stopping only twice at hotels to sleep. Kel switches between Mom and me, riding the final day with me in the U-Haul. We complete the last exhausting nine-hour stretch through the night, only stopping once for a short break. As we close in on our new town of Ypsilanti, I take in my surroundings and the fact that it’s September but my heater is on. I’ll definitely need a new wardrobe.

As I make a final right-hand turn onto our street, my GPS informs me that I’ve “reached my destination.”

“My destination,” I laugh aloud to myself. My GPS doesn’t know squat.

The cul-de-sac is not very long, lined with about eight single-story brick houses on each side of the street. There’s a basketball goal in one of the driveways, which gives me hope that Kel might have someone to play with. Honestly, it looks like a decent neighborhood. The lawns are manicured, the sidewalks are clean, but there’s too much concrete. Way too much concrete. I already miss home.

Our new landlord emailed us pictures of the house, so I immediately spot which one is ours. It’s small. It’s *really* small. We had a ranch-style home on several acres of land in Texas. The minuscule amount of land surrounding *this* home is almost nothing but concrete and garden gnomes. The front door is propped open, and I see an older man who I assume is our new landlord.

come outside and wave.

I drive about fifty yards past the house so that I can back into the driveway, where the rear of the U-Haul will face the front door. Before I put the gearshift in reverse, I reach over and shake Kel awake. He's been passed out since Indiana.

"Kel, wake up," I whisper. "We've reached our *destination*."

He stretches his legs out and yawns, then leans his forehead against the window to get a look at our new house. "Hey, there's a kid in the yard!" Kel says. "Do you think he lives in our house too?"

"He better not," I reply. "But he's probably a neighbor. Hop out and go introduce yourself while I back up."

When the U-Haul is successfully backed in, I put the gearshift in park, roll down the window, and kill the engine. My mother pulls in beside me in my Jeep and I watch as she gets out and greets the landlord. I crouch down a few inches in the seat and prop my foot against the dash, watching Kel and his new friend sword fight with imaginary swords in the street. I'm jealous of him. Jealous of the fact that he can accept the move so easily, and I'm stuck being the angry, bitter child.

He was upset when Mom first decided on the move. Mostly because he was in the middle of his Little League season. He had friends he would miss, but at the age of nine your best friend is usually imaginary, and transatlantic. Mom subdued him pretty easily by promising he could sign up for hockey, something he wanted to do in Texas. It was a hard sport to come by in the rural south. After she agreed to that, he was pretty upbeat, if not stoked, about Michigan.

I understand why we had to move. Dad had made a respectable living managing a paint store. Mom worked PRN as a nurse when she needed to, but mostly tended to the house and to us. About a month after he died, she was able to find a full-time job. I could see the stress of my father's death taking its toll on her, along with being the new head of household.

One night over dinner, she explained to us that she wasn't left with enough income to continue paying all the bills and the mortgage. She said there was a job that could pay her more, but we would have to move. She was offered a job by her old high-school friend Brenda. They grew up together in my mother's hometown of Ypsilanti, right outside of Detroit. It paid more than anything she could find in Texas, so she had no choice but to accept. I don't blame her for the move. My grandparents are deceased, and she has no one to help her. I understand why we had to do it, but understanding a situation doesn't always make it easier.

"Layken, you're dead!" Kel shouts through the open window, thrusting his imaginary sword into my neck. He waits for me to slump over, but I just roll my eyes at him. "I stabbed you. You're supposed to die!" he says.

"Believe me, I'm already dead," I mumble as I open the door and climb out. Kel's shoulders are slumped forward and he's staring down at the concrete, his imaginary sword limp by his side. Kel's new friend stands behind him looking just as defeated, causing me immediately to regret the transference of my bad mood.

"I'm already dead," I say in my best monster voice, "because I'm a *zombie*!"

They start screaming as I stretch my arms out in front of me, cock my head to the side, and make a gurgling sound. "Brains!" I grumble, walking stiff-legged after them around the U-Haul. "Brains!"

I slowly round the front of the U-Haul, holding my arms out in front of me, when I notice someone grasping my brother and his new friend by the collars of their shirts.

"Get 'em!" The stranger yells as he holds the two screaming boys.

He looks a couple of years older than me and quite a bit taller. “Hot” would be how most girls would describe him, but I’m not most girls. The boys are flailing around, and his muscles flex under his shirt as he tries hard to maintain his grip on them.

Unlike Kel and me, these two are unmistakably siblings. Aside from the obvious age difference, they’re identical. They both have the same smooth olive skin, the same jet-black hair, even the same cropped hairstyle. He’s laughing as Kel breaks free and starts slicing at him with his “sword.” He looks up at me and mouths “Help,” when I realize I’m still frozen in my zombie pose.

My first instinct is to crawl back inside the U-Haul and hide on the floorboard for the remainder of my life. Instead, I yell “Brains” once more and lunge forward, pretending to bite the younger boy on top of his head. I grab Kel and his new friend and start tickling them until they melt into heaps on the concrete driveway.

As I straighten up, the older brother extends his hand. “Hey, I’m Will. We live across the street,” he says, pointing to the house directly across from ours.

I reciprocate his handshake. “I’m Layken. I guess I live here,” I say as I glance toward the house behind me.

He smiles. Our handshake lingers as neither one of us says anything. I hate awkward moments.

“Well, welcome to Ypsilanti,” he says. He pulls his hand from mine and puts it in his jacket pocket. “Where are you guys moving here from?”

“Texas?” I reply. I’m not sure why the tail end of my reply comes out like a question. I’m not sure why I’m even analyzing why it came out like a question. I’m not sure why I’m analyzing the reason why I’m analyzing—I’m flustered. It must be the lack of sleep I’ve gotten over the past three days.

“Texas, huh?” he says. He’s rocking back and forth on his heels. The awkwardness intensifies when I fail to respond. He glances down at his brother and bends over, grabbing him by the ankle. “I’ve got to get this little guy to school,” he says as he swings his brother up and over his shoulder. “There’s a cold front coming through tonight. You should try to get as much unloaded today as you can. It’s supposed to last a few days, so if you guys need help unloading this afternoon, let me know. We should be home around four.”

“Sure, thanks,” I say. They head across the street, and I’m still watching them when Kel stabs me in my lower back. I drop to my knees and clutch at my stomach, crouching forward as Kel climbs on top of me and finishes me off. I glance across the street again and see Will watching us. He shuts his brother’s car door, walks around to the driver’s-side door, and waves goodbye.

* * *

IT TAKES US most of the day to unload all of the boxes and furniture. Our landlord helps move the larger items that Mom and I can’t lift on our own. We’re too tired to get to the boxes inside the Jeep and agree to put it off until tomorrow. I’m a little disappointed when the U-Haul is finally empty; I no longer have an excuse to solicit Will’s help.

As soon as my bed is put together, I start grabbing boxes with my name on them from the hallway. I get most of them unpacked and my bed made, when I notice the furniture in my bedroom casting shadows across the walls. I look out my window, and the sun is setting. Either the days are a lot shorter here, or I’ve lost track of time.

In the kitchen, I find Mom and Kel unloading dishes into the cabinets. I climb into one of the six tall chairs at the bar, which also doubles as the dining room table because of the lack of dining room. There isn’t much to this house. When you walk through the front door, there’s a small

entryway followed by the living room. The living room is separated from the kitchen by nothing more than a hallway to the left and a window to the right. The living room's beige carpet is edged by hardwood that leads throughout the rest of the house.

"Everything is so clean here," my mother says as she continues putting away dishes. "I haven't seen a single insect."

Texas has more insects than blades of grass. If you aren't swatting flies, you're killing wasps.

"That's one good thing about Michigan, I guess," I reply. I open up a box of pizza in front of me and eye the selection.

"*One* good thing?" She winks at me as she leans across the bar, grabs a pepperoni, and pops it into her mouth. "I'd think that would be at least *two* good things."

I pretend I'm not following.

"I saw you talking to that boy this morning," she says with a smile.

"Oh, please, Mom," I reply as indifferently as I can get away with. "I'm pretty positive we'll find it no surprise that Texas isn't the only state inhabited by the male species." I walk to the refrigerator and grab a soda.

"What's inhabited?" Kel asks.

"Inhabited," I correct him. "It means to occupy, dwell, reside, populate, squat, *live*." My SAT prep courses are paying off.

"Oh, kinda like how we inhabited Ypsilanti?" he says.

"Inhabited," I correct him again. I finish my slice of pizza and take another sip of the soda. "I'm beat, guys. I'm going to bed."

"You mean you're going to *inhabit* your bedroom?" Kel says.

"You're a quick learner, young grasshopper." I bend and kiss the top of his head and retreat to my room.

It feels so good to crawl under the covers. At least my bed is familiar. I close my eyes and try to imagine that I'm in my old bedroom. My old, *warm* bedroom. My sheets and pillow are ice cold so I pull the covers over my head to generate some heat. Note to self: Locate the thermostat first thing in the morning.

* * *

AND THAT'S EXACTLY what I set out to do as soon as I crawl out of bed and my bare feet meet the ice-cold floor beneath them. I grab a sweater out of my closet and throw it on over my pajamas while I search for socks. It's a futile attempt. I quietly tiptoe down the hallway, trying not to wake anyone while at the same time attempting to expose the least possible amount of foot to the coldness of the hardwood. As I pass Kel's room, I spot his Darth Vader house shoes on the floor. I sneak in and slip them on, finally finding some relief as I head into the kitchen.

I look around for the coffeepot but don't find it. I remember packing it in the Jeep, which is unfortunate since the Jeep is parked outside. Outside in this absurdly cold weather.

The jackets are nowhere to be found. Septembers in Texas rarely call for jackets. I grab the keys and decide I'll just have to make a mad dash to the Jeep. I open the front door and some sort of white substance is all over the yard. It takes me a second to realize what it is. Snow? In September? I bend down and scoop some up in my hands and examine it. It doesn't snow that often in Texas but when it does it isn't *this* kind of snow. Texas snow is more like minuscule pieces of rock-hard hail. Michigan snow is just how I imagined real snow would be: fluffy, soft, and *cold!* I quickly drop the snow and dry my hands on my sweatshirt as I head toward the Jeep.

I don't make it far. The second those Darth Vader house shoes meet the snow-dusted concrete I'm no longer looking at the Jeep in front of me. I'm flat on my back, staring up at the clear blue sky. I immediately feel the pain in my right shoulder and realize I've landed on something hard. I reach around and pull a concrete garden gnome out from beneath me, half of his red hat broken off and shattered into pieces. He's smirking at me. I groan and raise the gnome with my good arm and pull it back, preparing to chuck the thing, when someone stops me.

"That's not a good idea!"

I immediately recognize Will's voice. The sound of it is smooth and soothing like my father's was, but at the same time has an authoritative edge to it. I sit upright and see him walking up the driveway toward me.

"Are you okay?" he laughs.

"I'll feel a lot better after I bust this damn thing," I say, trying to pull myself up with no success.

"You don't want to do that: Gnomes are good luck," he says as he reaches me. He takes the gnome out of my hands and gently places it on the snow-covered grass.

"Yeah," I reply, taking in the gash on my shoulder that has now formed a bright red circle on my sweater sleeve. "*Real* good luck."

Will stops laughing when he sees the blood on my shirt. "Oh my god, I'm so sorry. I wouldn't have laughed if I knew you were hurt." He bends over and takes my uninjured arm and pulls me up. "You need to get a bandage on that."

"I wouldn't have a clue where to find one at this point," I reply, referring to the mounds of unopened boxes we have yet to unpack.

"You'll have to walk with me. There's some in our kitchen."

He removes his jacket and wraps it around my shoulders, holding on to my arm as he walks me across the street. I feel a little pathetic with him assisting me—I can walk on my own. I don't object though, and I feel like a hypocrite to the entire feminist movement. I've regressed to the damsel in distress.

I remove his jacket and lay it across the back of the couch, then follow him into the kitchen. It's still dark inside, so I assume everyone is still asleep. His house is more spacious than ours. The open floor plans are similar, but the living room seems to be a few feet larger. A large bay window with a sitting bench and large pillows looks out over the backyard.

Several family pictures hang along the wall opposite the kitchen. Most of them are of Will and his little brother, with a few pictures that include his parents. I walk over to inspect the pictures while Will looks for a bandage. They must have gotten their genes from their dad. In one picture, which seems like the most recent but still looks a few years dated, his dad has his arms around the two boys, and he's squeezing them together for an impromptu photo. His jet-black hair is speckled with gray, and a thick black moustache outlines his huge smile. His features are identical to Will's. They both have eyes that smile when they laugh, exposing perfect white teeth.

Will's mother is breathtaking. She has long blond hair and, from the pictures at least, looks tall. I can't pick out any facial features of hers that were passed on to her boys. Maybe Will has her personality. All of the pictures on the wall prove one big difference between our houses—this one is a *home*.

I walk into the kitchen and take a seat at the bar.

"It needs to be cleaned before you put the bandage on it," he says as he rolls up his shirtsleeve and turns on the faucet. He's wearing a pale-yellow button-down collared shirt that is slightly transparent under the kitchen lights, revealing the outline of his undershirt. He has broad

shoulders, and his sleeves are snug around the muscles in his arms. The top of his head meets the cabinet above him, and I estimate from the similarities in our kitchens that he stands about six inches taller than me. I'm staring at the pattern on his black tie, which is flipped over his shoulder to avoid getting it wet, when he turns the water off and walks back to the bar. I feel my face flush. I grab the wet napkin out of his hands, not proud of the amount of attention his physique is getting from me.

"It's fine," I say, pulling my sleeve down over my shoulder. "I can get it."

He opens a bandage as I wipe the blood off the wound. "So, what were you doing outside in your pajamas at seven o'clock in the morning?" he asks. "Are you guys still unloading?"

I shake my head and toss the napkin into the trash can. "Coffee."

"Oh. I guess you aren't a morning person." Will says this as more of a statement than a question.

As he moves in closer to place the bandage on my shoulder, I feel his breath on my neck. I run my arms to hide the chills that are creeping up them. He adheres it to my shoulder and pats it.

"There. Good as new," he says.

"Thanks. And I *am* a morning person," I say. "After I get my coffee." I stand up and look over my shoulder, pretending to inspect the bandage as I plot my next move. I already thanked him. I could turn and walk out now, but that would seem rude after he just helped me. If I just stand here waiting on him to make more small talk, I might look stupid for *not* leaving. I don't understand why I'm even contemplating basic actions around him. He's just another inhabitant!

When I turn around, he's at the counter, pouring a cup of coffee. He walks toward me and sets it on the bar in front of me. "You want cream or sugar?"

I shake my head. "Black is fine. Thanks."

He's leaning across the bar watching me as I drink the coffee. His eyes are the exact same hue of deep green as his mother's are in the picture. I guess he did get a feature from her. He smiles and breaks our gaze by looking down at his watch. "I need to go: My brother's waiting in the car, and I've got to get to work," he says. "I'll walk you back. You can keep the cup."

I look at the cup before taking another sip and notice the big letters emblazoned on the side: World's Greatest Dad. It's exactly the same as the cup my father used to drink coffee from. "I'll be okay," I say as I head toward the front door. "I think I've got the whole walking-erect thing down now."

He follows me outside and shuts his front door behind him, insisting I take his jacket with me. I pull it on over my shoulders, thank him again, and head across the street.

"Layken!" he yells just as I'm about to walk back inside my house. I turn back toward him and he's standing in his driveway.

"May the force be with you!" He laughs and hops into his car as I stand there, staring down at the Darth Vader house shoes I'm still sporting. Classic.

* * *

THE COFFEE HELPS. I locate the thermostat, and by lunch the house has finally started to warm up. Mom and Kel have gone to the utility company to get everything switched into her name, and I'm left with the last of the boxes, if you don't count what's still in the Jeep. I get a few more things unpacked and decide it's high time for a shower. I'm pretty sure I'm closing in on day three of my granola-girl look.

I get out of the shower and wrap myself in a towel, flipping my hair forward as I brush it out.

and blow-dry it. When it's dry, I point the blow-dryer at the fogged up mirror, forming a clear circular area so that I can apply a little makeup. I notice my tan has started to fade. There won't be much lying-out here, so I might as well get used to a slightly paler complexion.

I brush my hair and pull it back into a ponytail and put on some lip gloss and mascara. I forget the blush, since there no longer seems to be a need for it. Between the weather and my brief encounters with Will, my cheeks seem to stay red.

Mom and Kel have already returned and gone again while I was in the shower. There is a note from her informing me she and Kel are following her friend Brenda into the city to return the U-Haul. Three twenty-dollar bills are on the counter next to the car keys and a grocery list. I snatch them up and head to the Jeep, reaching it successfully this time.

I realize as I'm putting the car into reverse that I have absolutely no idea where I'm going. I know nothing about this town, much less whether I need to turn left or right off of my own street. Will's little brother is in their front yard, so I pull the car up parallel to their curb and roll down my passenger window.

"Hey, come here for a sec!" I yell at him.

He looks at me and hesitates. Maybe he thinks I'm going to bust out in zombie mode again. He walks toward the car, but stops three feet short of the window.

"How do I get to the closest grocery store?" I ask him.

He rolls his eyes. "Seriously? I'm nine."

Okay. So the resemblance to his brother is only skin deep.

"Well, thanks for nothing," I say. "What's your name anyway?"

He smiles at me mischievously and yells, "Darth Vader!" He's laughing as he runs in the opposite direction of the car.

Darth Vader? I realize the significance of his response. He's making a crack about the house shoes I had on this morning. Not a big deal. The big deal is that Will must have been talking about me to him. I can't help but try to imagine the conversation between them and what Will thinks about me. *If* he even thinks about me. For some reason, I've been thinking about him more than I'm comfortable with. I keep wondering how old he is, what his major is, whether he's *single*.

Luckily, I didn't leave any boyfriends behind in Texas. I haven't dated anyone in almost a year. Between high school, my part-time job, and helping out with Kel's sports, I hadn't had much time for boys. I realize it's going to be an adjustment, going from a person with absolutely no free time to a person with absolutely nothing to do.

I reach into the glove box to retrieve my GPS.

"That's not a good idea," Will says.

I look up to see him walking toward the car. I make my best attempt to stifle the smile that's trying to take over my face. "What's not a good idea?" I say as I insert the GPS into its holder and power it on.

He crosses his arms and leans in the window of the car. "There's quite a bit of construction going on right now. That thing will get you lost."

I'm about to respond when Brenda pulls up alongside me with my mother. Brenda rolls down her driver's-side window and my mother leans across the seat. "Don't forget laundry detergent—can't remember if I put it on the list. And cough syrup. I think I'm coming down with something," she says through the window.

Kel jumps out of the backseat, runs to Will's brother, and invites him inside to look at our house.

“Can I?” Will’s brother asks him.

“Sure,” Will says as he opens my passenger door. “I’ll be back in a little while, Caulder. I’m riding with Layken to the store.”

He is? I shoot a look in his direction and he’s buckling his seat belt.

“I don’t give very good verbal directions. Mind if I go with you?”

“I guess not,” I laugh.

I look back toward Brenda and my mother, but they have already pulled forward into the driveway. I put the car in drive and listen as Will gives me directions out of the neighborhood. “So, Caulder is your little brother’s name?” I say, making a halfhearted attempt at small talk.

“One and only. My parents tried for years to have another baby after me. They eventually had Caulder when names like ‘Will’ weren’t that cool anymore.”

“I like your name,” I say. I regret saying it as soon as it comes out of my mouth. It sounds like a lame attempt at flirting.

He laughs. I like his laugh. I hate that I like his laugh.

It startles me when I feel him brush the hair off my shoulder and touch my neck. His fingers slide under the collar of my shirt and he pulls it slightly down over my shoulder. “You’re going to need a new bandage soon.” He pulls my shirt back up and gives it a pat. His fingers leave a streak of heat across my neck.

“Remind me to grab some at the store,” I say, trying to prove that his actions and his presence have no effect on me whatsoever.

“So, Layken.” He pauses as he glances past me at the boxes still piled high in the backseat. “Tell me about yourself.”

“Um, no. That’s so cliché,” I say.

He laughs. “Fine. I’ll figure you out myself.” He leans forward and hits eject on my CD player. His movements are so fluid, like he’s been rehearsing them for years. I envy this about him. I’ve never been known for my grace.

“You know, you can tell a lot about a person by their taste in music.” He pulls the CD out and examines the label. “‘Layken’s shit?’” he says aloud and laughs. “Is *shit* descriptive here, or possessive?”

“I don’t like Kel touching my shit, okay?” I grab the CD out of his hands and insert it back into the player.

When the banjo pours out of the speakers at full volume, I’m immediately embarrassed. I’m from Texas, but I don’t want him mistaking this for country music. If there’s one thing I *don’t* mind about Texas, it’s the country music. I reach over and turn down the volume, when he grabs my hand in objection.

“Turn it back up, I know this,” he says. His hand remains clasped on top of mine.

My fingers are still on the volume so I turn it back up. There’s no *way* he knows this. I realize he’s bluffing—his own lame attempt at flirting.

“Oh yeah?” I say. I’ll call his bluff. “What’s it called?”

“It’s the Avett Brothers,” he says. “I call it ‘Gabriella,’ but I think it’s the end to one of their ‘Pretty Girl’ songs. I love the end of this one when they break out with the electric guitars.”

His response to my question startles me. He really does know this. “You like the Avett Brothers?”

“I *love* them. They played in Detroit last year. Best live show I’ve ever seen.”

A rush of adrenaline shoots through my body as I look down at his hand, still holding on to

mine, still holding on to the volume button. I like it, but I'm mad at myself for liking it. Boys have given me the butterflies before, but I usually have more control over my susceptibility to such mundane movements.

He notices me noticing our hands and he lets go, rubbing his palms on his pant legs. It seems like a nervous gesture and I'm curious whether he shares my uneasiness.

I tend to listen to music that isn't mainstream. It's rare when I meet someone that has even heard of half the bands I love. The Avett Brothers are my all-time favorite.

My father and I would stay up at night and sing some of the songs together as he attempted to work out the chords on his guitar. He described them to me once. He said, "Lake, you know, a band has true talent when their *imperfections* define *perfection*."

I eventually understood what he meant when I started really *listening* to them. Broken bands, strings, momentary passionate lapses of harmony, voices that go from smooth to gravelly to all-out screaming in a single verse. All these things add substance, character, and believability to their music.

After my father died, my mother gave me an early present he had intended to give me for my eighteenth birthday: a pair of Avett Brothers concert tickets. I cried when she gave them to me, thinking about how much my father was probably looking forward to giving me the gift himself. I knew he would have wanted me to use them, but I couldn't. The concert was just weeks after his death, and I knew I wouldn't be able to enjoy it. Not like I would have if he were with me.

"I love them, too," I say unsteadily.

"Have you ever seen them play live?" Will asks.

I'm not sure why, but as we talk, I tell him the entire story about my dad. He listens intently, interrupting only to instruct me when and where to turn. I tell him all about our passion for music. I tell him about how my father died suddenly and extremely unexpectedly of a heart attack. I tell him about my birthday present and the concert we never made it to. I don't know why I keep talking, but I can't seem to shut myself up. I never divulge information so freely, especially to people I barely know. Especially to *guys* I barely know. I'm still talking when I realize we've come to a stop in a grocery store parking lot.

"Wow," I say as I take in the time on the clock. "Is that the quickest way to the store? That drive took twenty minutes."

He winks at me and opens his door. "No, actually it's not."

That's *definitely* flirting. And I definitely have butterflies.

The snow flurries start to mix with sleet as we're making our way through the parking lot. "Run," he says. He takes my hand in his and pulls me faster toward the entrance.

We're out of breath and laughing when we make it inside the store, shaking the wetness from our clothes. I take my jacket off and shake it out, when his hand brushes against my face, wiping away a strand of wet hair that's stuck to my cheek. His hand is cold, but the moment his fingers graze my skin, I forget about the frigid temperature as my face grows warm. His smile fades as we both stare at each other. I'm still trying to become accustomed to the reactions I have around him. The slightest touch and simplest gestures have such an intense effect on my senses.

I clear my throat and break our stare as I grab an available cart next to us. I hand him the grocery list. "Does it always snow in September?" I ask in an attempt to appear unfazed by his touch.

"No, it won't last more than a few days, maybe a week. Most of the time the snow doesn't start until late October," he says. "You're lucky."

“Lucky?”

“Yeah. It’s a pretty rare cold front. You got here right in time.”

“Huh. I assumed most of y’all would hate the snow. Doesn’t it snow here most of the year?”

He laughs. “*Y’all?*”

“What?”

“Nothing,” he says with a smile. “I’ve just never heard anyone say ‘y’all’ in real life before. It’s so cute. So southern belle.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” I say. “From now on I’ll do like you Yankees and waste my breath by saying ‘all you guys.’”

He laughs and nudges my shoulder. “Don’t. I like your accent; it’s perfect.”

I can’t believe I’ve actually turned into a girl who swoons over a guy. I detest it so much; I start to inspect his features more intently, trying to find a flaw. I can’t. Everything about him so far is perfect.

We get the items on our list and head to the checkout. He refuses to let me put anything on the conveyor belt, so I just stand back and watch as he unloads the items from the buggy. The last item he places on the line is a box of bandages. I never even saw him grab them.

When we pull out of the grocery store, Will tells me to turn in the direction opposite to the one from which we came. We drive maybe two whole blocks when he instructs me to turn left—onto our street. The drive that took us twenty minutes on the way there takes us less than a minute on the way back.

“Nice,” I say when I pull in my driveway. I realize what he’s done and that the flirtation on his end is blatantly obvious.

Will has already rounded to the back of the Jeep, so I press the trunk lever for him. I get out and walk to where he is, expecting him to have an armload of groceries. Instead, he’s just standing there holding the trunk up, watching me.

With my best southern belle impression, I place my hand across my chest and say, “Why! I never would have been able to find the store without your help. Thank you *so* much for your hospitality, kind sir.”

I sort of expect him to laugh, but he just stands there, staring at me.

“*What?*” I say nervously.

He takes a step toward me and softly cups my chin with his free hand. I’m shocked by my own reaction, the fact that I allow it. He studies my face for a few seconds as my heart races within my chest. I think he’s about to kiss me.

I attempt to calm my breathing as I stare up at him. He steps in even closer and removes his hand from my chin and places it on the back of my neck, leaning my head in toward him. His lips press gently against my forehead, lingering a few seconds before he releases his hand and steps back.

“You’re so cute,” he says. He reaches into the trunk and grabs four sacks with one hefty swoop. He walks toward the house and sets them outside the door.

I’m frozen, attempting to absorb the last fifteen seconds of my life. Where did that come from? Why did I just stand there and let him do that? Despite my objections I realize, almost pathetically, that I have just experienced the most passionate kiss I’ve ever received from a guy—and it was on the freaking forehead!

* * *

AS WILL REACHES into the trunk for another handful of groceries, Kel and Caulder run out of the house, followed by my mother. The boys dart across the street to check out Caulder's bedroom. Will politely extends his hand out to my mother when she walks toward us.

"You must be Layken and Kel's mom. I'm Will Cooper. We live across the street."

"Julia Cohen," she says. "You're Caulder's older brother?"

"Yes, ma'am," he replies. "Older by twelve years."

"So that makes you . . . twenty-one?" She glances at me and gives me a quick wink. I'm standing behind Will at this point, so I take the opportunity to reciprocate one of her infamous glares. She just smiles and turns her attention back to Will.

"Well, I'm glad Kel and Lake were able to make friends so fast," she says.

"Me too," he replies.

She turns and heads inside but purposefully nudges me with her shoulder as she passes. She doesn't speak a word but I know what she's hinting at: She's giving me her approval.

Will reaches in for the last two sacks. "*Lake*, huh? I like that." He hands me the sacks and shuts the trunk.

"So, Lake." He leans back against the car and crosses his arms. "Caulder and I are going to Detroit on Friday. We'll be gone until late Sunday—family stuff," he says with a dismissing wave of his hand. "I was wondering if you had any plans for tomorrow night, before I go?"

It's the first time anyone has ever called me Lake, other than my mom and dad. I like it. I lean my shoulder against the car and face him. I try to keep my cool, but inside I'm screaming with excitement.

"Are you really going to make me admit that I have absolutely no life here?" I say.

"Great! It's a date then. I'll pick you up at seven thirty." He immediately turns and heads toward his house when I realize he never actually *asked*, and I never actually *agreed*.

*It won't take long for me
To tell you who I am.
Well you hear this voice right now
Well that's pretty much all I am.*

—THE AVETT BROTHERS,
“GIMMEAKISS”

THE NEXT AFTERNOON, I'M PICKING OUT WHAT TO WEAR but can't seem to locate any clear weather-appropriate clothing. I don't own many winter shirts besides what I've already worn this week. I choose a purple long-sleeved shirt and smell it, deciding it's clean enough. I spray some perfume, though, just in case it isn't. I brush my teeth, touch up my makeup, brush my teeth again, and let down my ponytail. I curl a few sections of my hair and pull some silver earrings out of my drawer, when I hear a knock on the bathroom door.

My mother enters with a handful of towels. She opens the cabinet next to the shower and places them inside.

“Going somewhere?” she says. She sits down on the edge of the bathtub while I continue to get ready.

“Yeah, somewhere.” I try to hide my smile as I put in my earrings. “Honestly, I'm not sure what we're doing. I really never even agreed to the date.”

She stands up and walks to the door, leaning up against the frame. She watches me in the mirror. She has aged so much in the short time since my dad's death. Her bright green eyes against her smooth porcelain skin used to be breathtaking. Now, her cheekbones stand out above the hollowed shadows in her cheeks. The dark circles under her eyes overpower their emerald hue. She looks tired. And sad.

“Well, you're eighteen now. You've had enough of my dating advice for a lifetime,” she says. “But I'll provide you with a quick recap just in case. Don't order anything with onion or garlic. Never leave your drink unattended, and *always* use protection.”

“Ugh, Mom!” I roll my eyes. “You know I know the rules, and you *know* I don't have to worry about the last one. Please don't give Will a recap of your rules. Promise?” I make her promise.

“So . . . tell me about Will. Does he work? Is he in college? What's his major? Is he a serial killer?” She says this with such sincerity.

I walk the short distance from the bathroom to my bedroom and bend down to search through my shoes. She follows me and sits on the bed.

“Honestly, Mom, I don't know anything about him. I didn't even know how old he was until he told you.”

“That's good,” she says.

“Good?” I glance back at her. “How is not knowing anything about him good? I'm about to be alone with him for hours. He could be a *serial killer*.” I grab my boots and walk over to the bed to slip them on.

“It'll give you plenty to talk about. That's what first dates are for.”

“Good point,” I say.

Growing up, my mother did give great advice. She always knew what I wanted to hear but would tell me what I *needed* to hear. My dad was her first boyfriend, so I have always wondered how she knows so much about dating, boys, and relationships. She's only been with one person and it seems most knowledge would have to come from life experiences. She's the exception, I guess.

"Mom?" I say as I slip on my boots. "I know you were only eighteen when you met Dad. I mean, that's really young to meet the person you spend the rest of your life with. Do you ever regret it?"

She doesn't answer immediately. Instead, she lies back on my bed and clasps her hands behind her head, pondering my question.

"I've never regretted it. Questioned it? Sure. But never regretted."

"Is there a difference?" I ask.

"Absolutely. Regret is counterproductive. It's looking back on a past that you can't change. *Questioning* things as they occur can prevent regret in the future. I questioned a lot about my relationship with your father. People make spontaneous decisions based on their hearts all the time. There's *so* much more to relationships than just love."

"Is that why you always tell me to follow my head, not my heart?"

My mother sits up on the bed and takes my hands in hers. "Lake, do you want some real advice that doesn't include a list of foods you should avoid?"

Has she been holding out on me? "Of course," I reply.

She's lost the authoritative, parental edge to her voice, which makes me aware that this conversation is less mother-daughter and more woman to woman. She pulls her legs up Indian style on the bed and faces me.

"There are three questions every woman should be able to answer yes to before she commits to a man. If you answer no to any of the three questions, run like hell."

"It's just a date," I laugh. "I doubt we'll be doing any committing."

"I know you're not, Lake. I'm serious. If you can't answer yes to these three questions, don't even waste your time on a relationship."

When I open my mouth, I feel like I'm just reinforcing the fact that I'm her child. I don't interrupt her again.

"Does he treat you with respect at all times? That's the first question. The second question is, if he is the exact same person twenty years from now that he is today, would you still want to marry him? And finally, does he inspire you to want to be a better person? You find someone you can answer yes to all three, then you've found a good man."

I take a deep breath as I soak in even more sage advice from her. "Wow, those are some intense questions," I say. "Were you able to answer yes to all of them? When you were with Dad?"

"Absolutely," she says, without hesitation. "Every second I was with him."

A sadness enters her eyes as she finishes her sentence. She loved my dad. I immediately regret bringing it up. I put my arms around her and embrace her. It's been so long since I've hugged her that a twinge of guilt rises up inside me. She kisses my hair, then pulls away and smiles.

I stand up and run my hands down my shirt, smoothing out the folds.

"Well? How do I look?"

"Like a woman," she sighs.

It's seven thirty sharp, so I go to the living room, grab the jacket Will insisted I borrow the day before, and head to the window. He's coming out of his house, so I walk outside and stand in my

driveway. He looks up and notices me as he's opening his car door.

"You ready?" he yells.

"Yes!"

"Well, come on then!"

I don't move. I just stand there and fold my arms across my chest.

"What are you doing?" He throws his hand up in defeat and laughs.

"You said you would pick me up at seven thirty! I'm waiting for you to pick me up!"

He grins and gets in the car. He backs straight out of his driveway and into mine so that the passenger door is closest to me. He hops out of the car and runs around to open it. Before I get in, he gives me the once-over. He's wearing loose-fitted jeans and a black long-sleeved shirt that outlines his arms. It's the defined arms that prompt me to return his jacket to him.

"That reminds me," I say, handing him his jacket. "I bought this for you."

He smiles when he takes it and slides his arms inside. "Wow, thanks," he says. "It even smells like me."

He waits until I've buckled up before he shuts the door. As he's walking around to his side, I notice the car smells like . . . cheese. Not old, stale cheese, but fresh cheese. Cheddar, maybe. My stomach growls. I'm curious where we're going to eat.

When Will gets in, he reaches into the backseat and grabs a sack. "We don't have time to eat, so I made us grilled cheese." He hands me a sandwich and a bottle of soda.

"Wow. This is a first," I say, staring at the items in my hands. "And where exactly are we going in such a hurry?" I twist open the lid. "It's obviously not a restaurant."

He unwraps his sandwich and takes a bite. "It's a surprise," he says with a mouthful of bread. He navigates the steering wheel with his free hand as he simultaneously drives and eats. "I know a lot more about you than you know about me, so tonight I want to show you what *I'm* all about."

"Well, I'm intrigued," I say. I really *am* intrigued.

We both finish our sandwiches, and I put the trash back in the bag and place it in the backseat. I try to think of something to say to break the silence, so I ask him about his family.

"What are your parents like?"

He takes a deep breath and slowly exhales, almost like I've asked the wrong thing. "I'm not big on small talk, Lake. We can figure all that out later. Let's make this drive interesting." He winks at me and relaxes further into his seat.

Driving, no talking, keeping it interesting. I'm repeating what he said in my head and hope I'm not misunderstanding his intent. He laughs when he sees the hesitation on my face and it dawns on him that I've misinterpreted what he said.

"Lake, no!" he says. "I just meant let's talk about something besides what we're *expected* to talk about."

I breathe a sigh of relief. I thought I had found his flaw. "Good."

"I know a game we can play," he says. "It's called 'would you rather.' Have you played it before?"

I shake my head. "No, but I know I would *rather* you go first."

"Okay." He clears his throat and pauses for a few seconds. "Okay, would you rather spend the *rest* of your life with *no* arms, or would you rather spend the rest of your life with arms you couldn't *control*?"

What the hell? I can honestly say this date is not going the way any of my previous dates have gone. It's pleasantly unexpected, though.

“Well . . .” I hesitate. “I guess I would rather spend the rest of my life with arms I couldn’t control?”

“What? Seriously? But you wouldn’t be controlling them!” he says, flapping his arms around in the car. “They could be flailing around and you’d be constantly punching yourself in the face! C worse, you might grab a knife and stab yourself!”

I laugh. “I didn’t realize there were right and wrong answers.”

“You suck at this,” he teases. “Your turn.”

“Okay, let me think.”

“You have to have one ready!” he says.

“Jeez, Will! I barely heard of this game for the first time thirty seconds ago. Give me a second to think of one.”

He reaches over and squeezes my hand. “I’m teasing.”

He repositions his hand underneath mine, and our fingers interlock. I like how easy the transition is, like we’ve been holding hands for years. So far, everything about this date has been easy. I like Will’s sense of humor. I like that I find it so easy to laugh around him after having gone so many months without laughing. I like that we’re holding hands. I *really* like that we’re holding hands.

“Okay, I’ve got one,” I say. “Would you rather pee on yourself once a day at random, unknown times? Or would you rather have to pee on someone *else*?”

“It depends on who I’d have to pee on. Can I pee on people I don’t like? Or is it random people?”

“Random people.”

“Pee on myself,” he says, without hesitation. “My turn now. Would you rather be four feet tall or seven feet tall?”

“Seven feet tall,” I reply.

“Why?”

“You aren’t allowed to ask why,” I say. “Okay, let’s see. Would you rather drink an entire gallon of bacon grease for breakfast every day? Or would you rather have to eat five pounds of popcorn for supper every night?”

“Five pounds of popcorn.”

I like the game we’re playing. I like that he didn’t worry about impressing me with dinner. I like that I have no idea where we’re headed. I even like that he didn’t compliment what I was wearing, which seems to be the standard opening line for dates. So far, I like everything about tonight. As far as I’m concerned, we could drive around for another two hours just playing “would you rather,” and it would be the most fun I’ve ever had on a date.

But we don’t. We eventually reach our destination, and I immediately tense up when I see the sign on the building.

Club N9NE

“Uh, Will? I don’t dance.” I’m hoping he’ll be empathetic.

“Uh, neither do I.”

We exit the vehicle and meet at the front of the car. I’m not sure who reaches out first, but once again our fingers find each other in the dark and he holds my hand and guides me toward the entrance. As we get closer, I notice a sign posted on the door.

Closed for Slam

Thursdays

8:00–Whenever

Admission: Free

Fee to slam: \$3

Will opens the door without reading the sign. I start to inform him the club is closed, but he seems like he knows what he's doing. The silence is interrupted by the noise of a crowd as I follow him through the entryway and into the room. There is an empty stage to the right of us and tables and chairs set up all over the dance floor. The place is packed. I see what looks like a group of younger kids, around age fourteen or so, at a table toward the front. Will turns to the left and heads to an empty booth in the back of the room.

"It's quieter back here," he says.

"How old do you have to be to get into clubs here?" I say, still observing the group of out-of-place children.

"Well, tonight it's not a club," he says as we scoot into the booth. It's a half-circle booth facing the stage, so I scoot all the way to the middle to get the best view. He moves in right beside me. "It's slam night," he says. "Every Thursday they shut the club down and people come here to compete in the slam."

"And what's a slam?" I ask.

"It's poetry." He smiles at me. "It's what I'm all about."

Is he for real? A hot guy who makes me laugh *and* loves poetry? Someone pinch me. Or not. I'd rather not wake up.

"Poetry, huh?" I say. "Do people write their own or do they recite it from other authors?"

He leans back in the booth and looks up at the stage. I see the passion in his eyes when he talks about it. "People get up there and pour their hearts out just using their words and the movement of their bodies," he says. "It's amazing. You aren't going to hear any Dickinson or Frost here."

"Is it like a competition?"

"It's complicated," he says. "It differs between every club. Normally during a slam, the judges are picked at random from the audience and they assign points to each performance. The one with the most points at the end of the night wins. That's how they do it here, anyway."

"So do you slam?"

"Sometimes. Sometimes I judge; sometimes I just watch."

"Are you performing tonight?"

"Nah. Just an observer tonight. I don't really have anything ready."

I'm disappointed. It would be amazing to see him perform onstage. I still have no idea what slam poetry is, but I'm really curious to see him do *anything* that requires a performance.

"Bummer," I say.

It's quiet for a moment while we both observe the crowd in front of us. Will nudges me with his elbow and I turn to look at him. "You want something to drink?" he says.

"Sure. I'll take some chocolate milk."

He cocks and eyebrow and grins. "Chocolate milk? *Really?*"

I nod. "With ice."

"Okay," he says as he slides out of the booth. "One chocolate milk on the rocks coming right up."

While he's gone, the emcee comes to the stage and attempts to pump up the crowd. No one in the back of the room where we're seated, so I feel a little silly when I yell "Yeah!" with the rest of the crowd. I sink further into my seat and decide to just be a spectator for the remainder of the night.

The emcee announces it's time to pick the judges and the entire crowd roars, almost everyone wanting to be chosen. They pick five people at random and move them to the judging table. As Will walks toward our booth with our drinks, the emcee announces it's time for the "sac" and chooses someone at random.

"What's the sac?" I ask him.

"Sacrifice. It's what they use to prepare the judges." He slides back into the booth. Somehow he slides even closer this time. "Someone performs something that isn't part of the competition so the judges can calibrate their scoring."

"So they can call on anyone? What if they had called on me?" I ask, suddenly nervous.

He smiles at me. "Well, I guess you should have had something ready."

He takes a sip from his drink then leans back against the booth, finding my hand in the darkness. Our fingers don't interlock this time, though. Instead, he places my hand on his leg and his fingertips start to trace the outline of my wrist. He gently traces each of my fingers, following the lines and curves of my entire hand. His fingertips feel like electric pulses penetrating my skin.

"Lake," he says quietly as he continues tracing up my wrist and back to my fingertips with fluid motion. "I don't know what it is about you . . . but I like you."

His fingers slide between mine and he takes my hand in his, turning his attention back to the stage. I inhale and reach for my chocolate milk with my free hand, downing the entire glass. The ice feels good against my lips. It cools me off.

They call on a young woman who looks to be around twenty-five. She announces she's performing a piece she wrote titled "Blue Sweater." The lights are lowered as a spotlight is positioned on her. She raises the microphone and steps forward, staring down at the floor. A husky sweep of light sweeps over the audience, and the only sound in the entire room is the sound of her breath amplified through the speakers.

She raises her hand to the microphone, still staring down to the floor. She begins to tap her index finger against it in a repetitive motion, resonating the sound of a heartbeat. I realize I'm holding my own breath as she begins her piece.

Bom Bom
Bom Bom
Bom Bom
Do you *bear* that?

(Her voice lingering on the word hear.)

That's the sound of my heart beating.

(She taps the microphone again.)

Bom Bom
Bom Bom
Bom Bom
Do you *bear* that?
That's the sound of *your* heart beating.

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