

ALL THAT'S LEFT TO SAY

Emery Lord

Praise for the Book:

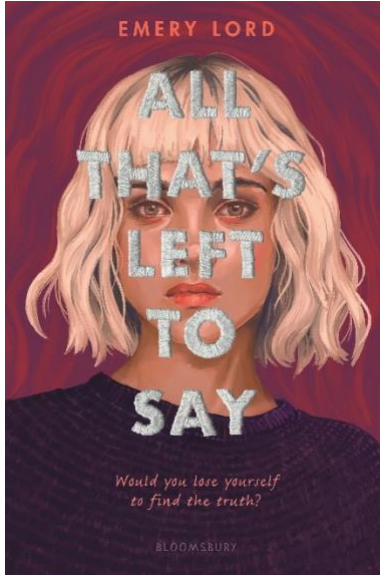
★“A tender, unsensational examination of what it means to love, to lose, and to live.” —**Booklist, Starred review**

“An engrossing, thoughtful depiction of a tragedy.” —**Kirkus Reviews**

“Lord convincingly conveys the grief that Hannah feels over Sophie’s death, depicting via Hannah’s charade the lengths to which one might go when seeking healing and closure.” —**Publishers Weekly**

“This compelling read also offers an unexpectedly poignant picture of grief and the impact of secret addiction on those left behind. . . . Hand this novel to anyone who likes their heroines smart, their romantic leads supportive, and their plotlines insightfully substantive.” —**BCCB**

About the Book:



She'll risk everything to find out what happened that night . . .

On prom night, Hannah MacLaren sits in the headmaster’s office in her fanciest dress, soaked to the bone. She is in huge trouble after pulling the fire alarm right as the prom queen was about to be crowned. But Hannah had her reasons . . .

One year ago, her cousin Sophie, who was also her best friend and the person she loved most in the world, died of an overdose. Drowning in grief, Hannah became obsessed with one question: Who gave Sophie those pills? Who is refusing to give her family the closure they deserve? Then she concocted a plan: enroll at her cousin’s fancy private school with a new look and a mouthful of lies, and finally uncover the truth.

But Hannah didn’t expect all the lines to blur. She didn’t expect Sophie’s friends to be so complicated. She didn’t expect to fall for her longtime enemy. Now, she must choose to either let herself really mourn Sophie and move on, or see her search through to its explosive end—even if it means destroying herself.

Dear Reader,

At the starting line of *All That's Left to Say*, I was carrying a handful of ideas to explore. I began with this: two once-close friends aren't speaking anymore—why? Hannah, my protagonist, is a fire sign burning with grief over her cousin's death. She's desperate to know what happened, and she'll set everything aflame—the prom, the school, her own life—to get answers.

From there, I was thinking about famous paintings, rivals-to-lovers, the grief surrounding opioids, wealth disparity and private school, an alternating timeline so present-Hannah could war with past-Hannah, and a “returning home with a new look and an agenda” plotline.

As people asked what I was working on, the “opioids” part sometimes got a surprised wince or an uncomfortable “...Oh.” We all know what looms over opioids from every angle: pain. And opioid use disorder is still so stigmatized, despite the fact that it's not rare—not at all. It's common. Often, the reason for not talking about it is the rightful fear of judgment. So, the pain continues to live in the shadows, and the cycle rolls on.

The surprise also might have been, in part, because I tend to write books with cute fonts and hearts on the covers. I create fictional worlds—small towns, sturdy friends—that feel like home to me. I like to lean on a little humor. The overall vibe is quite cozy, I think. Like a nice cup of tea.

That, to me, is the point. In real life, substance use disorder does live alongside paintings and school dynamics and rivals occasionally bickering their way toward romance. I think about art, opioids, love and pain every day, and that's not to say I have answers. But I want to talk about it all, even—especially—when it feels impossible to hold at once. Hannah's cousin, Sophie, is so much more than her use. Hannah is more than her grief. We're all more than our pain and how we try to cope.

The cup-of-tea coziness is so I feel secure enough to ask daunting questions—my own and my protagonist's. I hope it makes you feel safe enough to ask your own questions, too.

Thanks for being here.

Emery

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Open Road Summer

The Start of Me and You

When We Collided

The Names They Gave Us

The Map from Here to There

EMERY LORD

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TK

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May

Senior Year

This is my third time in the headmaster's office. Once, for a parent meeting before I officially enrolled. The essay incident—a misunderstanding, of course. And now, awaiting my fate on senior prom night.

I sit facing the desk, centered at a large window and framed by plaid curtains. The office doesn't have a globe, but it looks like the type that would. From somewhere I cannot see, an analog clock ticks away. I pace an inhale for four beats and hold it for the same count. My lungs ache or maybe my heart does—it's hard to tell anymore.

Somewhere, Headmaster Ryan is probably behind the wheel of her car, closing the distance between the Fairchild Hotel and her office. Cursing me, maybe, though I don't know her well enough to guess. Her first name is Elizabeth; she wears a wedding band. Does she live in a sleek apartment or a big old house? Does she host wine nights and do plucky group fitness classes with friends? Has anything ever rearranged her entire life and sense of self, the way this year has for me?

The door opens behind me, but it's only the freshman chem teacher tasked with ferrying me from the prom to the school for my sentencing. She hands me a school-issued gym towel, coarse and white. "Shouldn't be much longer. You need the restroom or anything?"

"No, thank you." I dab my hair, which has dried stringy by now. My gown sticks to every part of me, though the black fabric hides it well.

"I tried your mom's cell phone . . ." the teacher says tentatively.

"Yeah, she's at a show." Another would-be special memory that I've ruined tonight. "I'm sure she'll call back soon. Sorry in advance about that."

"Okay, then." What else can this teacher say? Not "I'm sorry"—this was my fault. Not "It'll be okay"—it might not. So she smiles wanly, and then I'm alone again.

The sweaty, shivery feeling of dread shoots through me. I haven't had enough time to process the events of tonight, to study my game board for moves. How much will I reveal to the headmaster?

I imagine my classmates, outside of this place, like dots on a scatter graph. Going home to shed their formalwear, maybe off to house parties. Some will come here to the school for After Prom. Everywhere, I'll be the central gossip. Did anyone film the fight or did it happen too quickly? Closing my eyes, I can see my own view of it.

The entire senior class was huddled in the hotel parking lot, ears still ringing from the fire alarm. We'd evacuated into a

misty rain, tux jackets held over smooth blowouts and careful curls.

The whisper that I had pulled the alarm spread through the crowd—anger and confusion and, finally, my resigned expression. “Why would you *do* that?” Zoe had shrilled at me, looking so betrayed that it physically hurt to withstand. “Why would you ruin this? Are you honestly that jealous?” Steeling myself, I’d locked eyes with Gabi, and I said, “Yep. That’s it. Guess I’m just that green with envy.” Surprise fell like a shadow on Gabi’s face, but I didn’t blink. “You really want to do this right here?” she muttered. Her stare was hard, but so was mine. She took a big breath. *Here we go*, I thought.

“She’s Sophie’s cousin,” Gabi said, projecting her voice now. “She’s been hiding that from all of you this year, like an absolute freak, and I let it happen because—hey! Grief does weird things to people! But you need *help*, Hannah.”

Every last student and chaperone turned to stare at me, as I stood there in my silence—no denials, no defense. The teachers recovered after that moment, moving to separate us and disperse the crowd. Catherine wrapped an arm around Gabi, looking over at me as she turned away. I saw Christian weaving through the crowd, and I gave him my best “stay away from me” face. My date was somewhere out of view, which I preferred. The sight of him would have hurt.

The door opens behind me again, and this time, it’s Headmaster Ryan. She’s wearing a rose tweed dress with a matching coat, demure as afternoon tea. Anger makes her face harsher—mouth drawn, eyes blazing. “Well, Hannah. In my

career, I have certainly seen promising students make foolish decisions. But never have I been quite so baffled by one.”

I look to my lap, trying to hold off tears. “I know. And I’m very sorry.”

It’s the truth. I really do wish I could have done this another way, but I had about two minutes to make a choice.

“I confess—I don’t even know where to start. The yelling match? The deception of your classmates?” She settles into her desk chair, and I wonder how many people have trembled here. It feels like facing an elder queen, well-installed on her throne. She flips through some paperwork, obscured from me, and I can feel her deconstructing my motive. Am I a foolish, grieving girl who got herself into a pickle? Am I misguided kid, angry at the world? Or something more nefarious than that? “Actually, let’s start with the crime you committed tonight, as you may well need a lawyer. The hotel manager is considering pressing charges. And I can’t say I blame him.”

Even through layers of makeup, I’m surely blushing with shame. I twitch my nose, which is throbbing the way it does when I’m about to cry. “Me either.”

“You’ve jeopardized so much for *what?*” she asks. Every word is perfectly contained, the rage boxed up neatly between the letters. “Pulling a fire alarm could be a class D felony. Was this a dare? Some kind of senior prank or hazing?”

A teardrop slips free, tracing a quick, straight line to my chin. I flex the muscles in my jaw. “Nothing like that.”

“Give me *something* to communicate to the hotel manager, Hannah. I told him that you’re Sophie Abbott’s cousin, and that at least gave him pause.”

God—of course. I wish Sophie could be remembered for her sneaky insistence on being herself, for her earnest environmental work, for her good and golden heart. Instead, her name is synonymous with dying by overdose. Opioids. She's the Ingleside Country Day School poster girl for *We just can't believe it. We had no idea.*

I press my teeth into my lower lip. "Soph would have been prom queen, you know. It's not just me who thinks that—everyone does."

Headmaster Ryan looks briefly sad for me and then closes her eyes for a good ten seconds, watching the puzzle pieces zap together. "Tell me you didn't pull the fire alarm to keep Gabi Reyes from being crowned."

"There's more to it than that."

"Did Gabi say something to you at prom?" she demands.

"No."

Nothing bad, anyway. She said, "Thank you" after I told her, "Nice suit." It was, too—smoky silver and tailored within an inch of its expensive life. With round, acid-green gemstones in her ears, she looked like the olive and the martini and the ice-cold glass.

For just a flash, the headmaster hesitates. "Is this . . . the fallout of a breakup?"

She means a romantic breakup—Gabi's been out for years, and Ingleside is the kind of place that prides itself on being progressive in a kind of watery way. "A friend breakup."

Headmaster Ryan stares in a way that feels like she's circling me, studying all the angles. "When you applied to

this school, Gabi Reyes provided you with a glowing peer recommendation.”

True. I stare down at my balled-up hands.

“I want to be very clear, Ms. MacLaren. Hotel aside, the school board may suspend or expel you,” Ryan says. I knew it coming in, but that doesn’t make it easier to hear. If it comes down to it, I will tell the truth of why I pulled the alarm. I’d just rather not. “So, if there’s a story here, then I suggest you tell me. Do you blame Gabi for what happened with Sophie?”

I look off to the corner as if a holographic Gabi flickers there awaiting my reply, nearly as present as I am in this room. I miss sitting together in her room, both of us barely surviving the irreparable, Sophie-shaped gash through our lives. Truthfully, I wish she could hear me now. “No. Different choices on her part might have changed something—or nothing at all. But that’s true for me, too. For her mom, for her sister. All of us.”

The headmaster’s eyebrows give her away, the tiniest flinch of sadness.

“It’s not like I hate Gabi or anything,” I add. That’s why the lie hurt so badly. But I’ve left even my anger behind. We wound up here, and that’s all there is. “It’s hard to explain.”

Headmaster Ryan’s patience is worn thin, a fabric about to split. “Try.”

July

Junior Year

The whole thing began with two white dresses. The first was tucked away in the trunk of Sophie's car on a late July afternoon.

A few hours into my solo study date at the art museum, someone plopped down at my makeshift workstation. I grimaced, eyes locked on my debate position research in the hopes that the person wouldn't make conversation.

"Well, this is a new low," a familiar voice said, cheerfully. Sophie gestured at the laptop, two open notebooks, and three well-employed stacks of Post-Its. "Homework, by choice, on the last week of summer."

"I've got that debate camp thing." I stacked my notebooks protectively, shielding them from criticism. "The director sent the topic yesterday."

"The debate camp thing," she repeated. "As in, you do a quick showcase for middle schoolers? You could do that in your sleep."

Yes. But the director's email also revealed that she'd invited my rival to act as opposition. I'd always been competitive, but

especially against him. “You could have texted. I’d have met you outside.”

“Eh, I was early,” Sophie said, gesturing around the museum. I studied here occasionally as a treat, wandering the galleries when I needed a break. “I wanted to see what the fuss is about.”

I lifted my eyebrows. “Curious enough to make an appearance in the polo?”

“I am a proud representative of the Parks department,” she said, chin lifted regally. As if she hadn’t complained about the shapeless, poly-blend uniform top for the first half of summer. “Be nice to me. I brought you lunch, despite your disgusting taste in sandwiches.”

“Tuna melt from Charlie’s?” I asked hopefully.

“Ding, ding. It’s in the car, smelling up everything.”

“You’re an angel.”

Sophie swept her strawberry blond waves back. “I try.”

She’d certainly landed the more cherubic genes in our family tree—a rounder, friendlier face and curvier body. I got the complexion and body type of a Popsicle stick, with light brown hair fit only for my too-long ponytail.

Sophie waved one hand at a nearby portrait while I finished packing up. “Like, what am I supposed to get from this? I have no idea who this person is, so I don’t even know if the painting looks like her. How would I know if it’s good?”

My interest in art started when I was a little kid desperate to connect with my dad. He’d lived in California my whole life, while I lived in Maryland with my mom. During our

video chats, he always lit up about painting, so I kept asking questions. Eventually, we went on virtual museum tours, and his contagious interest pulled me in. Any time we could scrounge up money for a visit, art museums were first on the to-do list.

“Well, realism isn’t necessarily relevant,” I said. “Does it make you feel anything?”

Sophie squinted. “Yes. Annoyed that I don’t get it.”

“Does she seem coy? Reticent? Proud? What is she asserting in the pose, the gown? Those are the kind of questions I think about. Then you can read the placard for some context.”

“Don’t you use your debate voice with me,” Sophie said, with a laugh. “So, you like it? The painting?”

“Not particularly. I was just making a point.”

“You?” she replied, sarcastic.

We traipsed out to the car, sharing the day’s annoyances and small triumphs. My mom once joked that the first thing I would do about a minor headache was text Sophie, then take some aspirin. But that was how it had always been: the two of us swapping every moment of mundanity, every childhood phase.

The late summer humidity had weight to it, a soft push from every direction. I grimaced, tugging at my white tee. “It’s disgusting out here.”

“I know,” Sophie said. “But guess how many volunteers showed up this morning.”

Her internship, which she’d imagined as gritty, robust environmental work, had mostly been making social media content for an office full of millennials. “Twenty.”

“Twenty-*nine*,” she said proudly. “And I doubled my ‘under 21’ turnout. More data points for my CV!”

Between the two of us, I’d always been the one obsessed with college—the grades, test scores, and debate numbers that would get me out of Maryland. But Sophie’s competitive private school had gotten to her in recent months. She was a smarter than half those kids, but she was a nervous test-taker and daydreamy in classes outside her interests.

My lunch was waiting on the passenger seat, beside a pastry bag from the bakery near Sophie’s house. I peeked inside to find my favorite, which always came with an agenda. Heart-shaped sugar cookies were for cheering me up. But pistachio muffins? And Sophie going out of her way for a tuna melt?

I rolled the rim of the bag back down. “Okay. What’s the favor?”

Sophie smiled over beatifically, turning the engine. “You’re my favorite cousin. Have I ever told you that? And you’ve been such a big help with my fundraiser speech. But you know what would help even more?”

“Being there when you give it.” In other words: putting on a dress to trot around the country club. I tipped my head up to the car ceiling and groaned. “The speech is great. You’ll nail it.”

“I need moral support!”

I’d been to the country club only once before—Sophie’s surprise eleventh birthday, in a room with parquet floors. All the other girls wore near-identical dresses, as if they’d planned it. Never before had I felt like the outlier in Sophie’s life. Usually, it felt like the two of us, and then everyone else,

orbiting outside our little world. “So, I’d have to dress up *and* go to the club . . .”

“Yes, but—”

“I won’t know anyone but you.”

“My parents will be there . . .”

I gave her a look, which I knew she could sense despite keeping her eyes on the road. “And you know Gabi!”

Not really. Sure, I’d been around Sophie’s school best friend before. We tiptoed politely, both clearly certain of our role as Sophie’s most important person. The jealousy was hypocritical; I had Lincoln, after all.

Sophie threw me a tentative smile. “Maybe your mom could come with you?”

That suggestion would have sent my mom into her loud, musical laugh, which sounded easily at rich people things. My aunt Ginny was a rich person, but my mom considered having some money to be an annoying hobby her older sister married into, as opposed to an identity.

I snorted. “When I went to that thing for your dad’s campaign, my mom suggested I wear a neon-yellow beach cover-up just to see your mom’s face.”

Sophie turned in delight. “*Please* do that.”

When Sophie turned onto Larkspur, my own school best friend was outside, cradling a lacrosse stick. His corner lot yard was the only one big enough to throw a ball around. Since the day I moved in, Lincoln had lived thirteen houses down on our long, jam-packed street. Sophie slowed the car, pulling over to a stop.

“What are you doing?” I demanded.

“Hey, Lincoln!” Sophie yelled, leaning over me. “Come here a sec!”

“Oh my God,” I muttered.

Lincoln trotted over, his shaggy blond hair bouncing. “What’s up?”

“Ignore her,” I warned.

“What are you doing next weekend?” Sophie asked. “I’m hosting an event with free food, and some Ingleside lacrosse guys will be there.”

Lincoln considered it for only a moment. “Sold.”

I shook my head, disappointed. “And here I was trying to spare you . . .”

“From free food and seeing the guys from lax camp?”

“You have to dress up.”

He shrugged. “I look good in a blazer.”

“Perfect.” Sophie smiled smugly, talking right past me. “How’s marathon training going?”

“Great,” Lincoln said, looking to me for a nod of confirmation. We’d worked up to a 10K in the spring, and then signed up for a fall half. Lincoln was in it for speed on the lacrosse field; I was in it for the rush of freedom I felt, going and going until I finally wore down.

“Well, see you next weekend!” Sophie called to him. Then, pulling back into the street, she added smugly, “There. One problem solved.”

“Bulldozer,” I muttered.

“*Mehhh*,” she said, in a low, bleating voice. “*Mehhhhhh!*”

I laughed despite myself. She always made that noise to signify a ram—my zodiac representative and apt stand-in for my stubbornness.

Sophie parked in my driveway and snapped her fingers. “I almost forgot. I brought that horrible gown for you to look at.”

I followed her to the trunk, where she unzipped the garment bag for the big reveal. My aunt—whose priorities seemed to be how her daughters looked, how her daughters behaved, and how many people saw Sophie and Maddie looking nice and behaving well—signed Sophie up for a ball in September. Ginny claimed it wasn’t a coming out event, and yet she insisted on a white dress. Sophie bartered by saying she’d only wear something secondhand, figuring Ginny would fold. Instead, she took Sophie to an upscale consignment shop, where the choices were outdated wedding gowns.

“It’s not that bad,” I said, weakly. “The fabric is really nice, actually.”

“Hannah.” Sophie gave me a dull look.

I examined the back. “I can fix it. Take the sleeves off, for sure, and change the neckline. We can pin it before my mom gets home.”

Though she would have agreed that cotillion is archaic and silly, my mom would not have agreed with blatant deception against Ginny.

Sophie tucked the bag under her arm, satisfied. “Expect another muffin in three to five business days.”

I retrieved my food from the front seat and walked up the little sidewalk to my porch.

“Hey,” I said, glancing to Sophie as I unlocked the front door. “I was always gonna go to your fundraiser.”

She smiled over at me. “Yeah, I know.”

July

Senior Year

I touch down on the last day of July, in the clear heat of late afternoon. As I exit the airport, I can almost see the specter of my two-months-ago self, walking in the other direction toward Departures. Nervous and tentative and so incredibly sad.

In the almost-year since Sophie died, grief has eaten through a part of me that won't regrow, and that's fine—it has to be. But this summer, new leaves began to sprout. Now, I'm a girl who has traveled out of the country, met new people, spent real time with her dad. I got to watch him at work, lighting a movie; I got to shadow the on-set tailor. I learned to love hiking; I changed my hair.

When I spot my mom in the pick-up line, I break into a run, suitcase wheels thudding behind me. She jumps out of the car, and we meet in a colliding kind of hug. After she visited Vancouver in late June, I missed her even more.

“Oh, honey.” She's crying a little, and I am too, inhaling the scent of her homemade lavender soap. Someone honks for us

to hurry up, and I feel my mom's hand leave my back. I know without looking that she's giving them the finger. My laugh rattles both our bodies.

"Look at you," she says, holding me out for examination. My haircut and dye job aren't new to her, but they're still startling—sometimes even to me. Since that first week in Canada, I've been a blond, with bangs and bob that hits just above my shoulders. "You bloomed, kiddo. You look like a flower that finally got water and sun."

We haul my suitcase into the trunk, laughing at the weight. I'd already sent home a box of local thrift finds and wardrobe department castoffs. My mom accused me of overrunning our home and helped herself to a vintage raffia purse as a tax on my goods. It suits her.

"How are you feeling?" she asks. "Hungry? Wiped?"

I clicked the passenger seat back a few degrees. "Extremely both."

My mom paused to check her blind spot. "So hypothetically, if there's a small welcome home celebration awaiting you, that would be . . . unwelcome?"

I swallowed down a groan. My fantasy arrival at home involved total sloth, pretending that the first day of school wasn't a week away. "No, that's great. Just the guys?"

"Just the guys. George and Elliott wanted one last grill-out before moving Lincoln in."

Lincoln and I left things fine, in the end, but my stomach still clenches up. We've been apart for months with minimal contact, and soon he'll be off to a college three hours away. "Perfect."

“You want to drive through campus to see the house?” my mom asks brightly.

I keep my gaze out the window, the highway rushing by. “No thanks.”

“Okay! Well, it won’t hurt my feelings if you close your eyes,” my mom says, reaching to pat my leg. “Rejuvenate before you ease back in.”

I read once that every time you revisit a memory, you warp it a little. That first remembrance—not the original event—becomes what you recall the next time, and so on. Before this summer, I’d rarely been far enough away from home to have to remember Larkspur Street. Sometimes, trying to fall asleep in my dad’s apartment, I saw my house like an illustration in a storybook.

The summer I turned ten, my mom landed an administrative job at Yardley and signed the lease on a tiny, ramshackle Victorian with crooked doorways and nicked wood floors. It was the first house either of us had ever lived in, after years of apartments. She hung tapestries and plants and, in a creative interpretation of the rental agreement, removable wallpaper. In my top-floor bedroom, the ceiling tapered down, so my bed felt nestled in the corner like a fort. I loved it so much that I fought my attachment, certain we’d be gone by August.

Once Mom had steady hours, I went to an elderly neighbor’s house after school, where I heated up dinners and learned how to sew.

I kept a pathetically hopeful lookout for potential neighborhood friends. At the corner house, I’d only ever seen

two men coming and going, but there was a kid-sized bike in the driveway. Of all the houses on our street, that one seemed the most likely to have the good candy bars on Halloween.

My first real memories of them were from our living room window. I watched while my mom sipped coffee on the porch and Elliott jogged in place, chatting. I remember George coming over to point at areas of the yard and talk gardening. Finally, a boy around my age, white and wiry with moppy yellow hair, strolled up our driveway one Sunday morning. I was on the porch step, with sidewalk chalk on my palms and an art book from the library open beside me.

I could tell he was nervous, which made me less nervous. “My dad is making pancakes. I’m supposed to invite you guys over.”

He meant George, but that was before I inherently knew which dad he met.

“I’ll go tell my mom,” I said, though I knew she’d be game.

That day, I found out Lincoln was one grade older and went to the neighborhood school a few streets over; he had just started playing lacrosse. He loved movies and a video game called *Stargazers* that I’d seen kids play at the library. He showed me the basics while our parents sipped coffee.

I unpacked my boxes.

My heart surges at the first sight of our house, with its mossy green exterior and the AC window unit surely wheezing away in my room.

“Garden looks good,” I tell my mom.

“The tomatoes turned out gorgeous,” she agrees.

Inside, I do a quick walk-through, soaking in the rightness of everything in its place—all but the Orioles cap on the kitchen table beside the mail stack. In trying to reassure me before I left her for months, my mom joked that she'd have six boyfriends by summer's end. She did wind up with one—Mitch, who sounds like a creation from Father's Day cards. He's really into sports and smoking meats, and I don't have to meet him until I'm ready. That's been the rule since I was twelve, after my mom's breakup with a man who wasn't quite as divorced as he'd suggested.

My mom grabs a salad she made earlier, and we trek down to the guys' house, following the side path to their deck.

I have no idea how Lincoln spent his summer, really. I texted at first, and I sent him a picture when I changed my hair, captioned *I asked for Atomic Blond*. He sent a photo from the shave ice truck and said: *Strawberry-rama misses her biggest fan*. Our friendship, proximal since day one, didn't easily translate to texting.

That's what I told myself, anyway. But maybe I needed to detach from every part of my life at home—let go of who I was and could never be again. And soon, Lincoln will be moving into a dorm room. No longer a two-minute walk from my front door.

But here he is—my friend, rising from a patio chair. His hair is considerably shorter, but he's wearing his same old West Grove lacrosse shirt, the color of dandelions.

“Hey,” he says, smiling hesitantly.

My throat aches, same as it did when I set eyes on my mom at the airport. “Hey.”

With a sheepish look, Lincoln holds out his arms, like *Are we're gonna do this as a hug type of thing or what?* Yes, we are—I step forward and squeeze his torso so hard that he laughs.

Any weirdness between us fades like landscapes on my flight home—a blur of a place passed over. When we pull away, I say, “So! Haircut.”

“You’re one to talk!”

“I know,” I say, ruffling my bangs. “Is it weird?”

“Nah. I mean, it kind of looks like a wig. But a wig that suits you.”

I might be offended if I hadn’t had the same thought. I bend toward Dorothea, the beagle mutt busily sniffing my feet. “Missed you too, Thea.”

Elliott emerges from the sliding door, balancing a tray of corn on the cob. “Well, well. Who is this sophisticate?”

George, filing out behind Elliott, leans to kiss my cheek while also reaching out a glass of white wine to my mom. “Look at you, Hannah Lou. A beauty.”

“She was always a beauty,” Elliott says.

“Of course.” George checks my expression for any hint of offense. “She knows what I mean. You look contented.”

“Thank you,” I say, and I ease into my usual seat.

In Vancouver, I *was* something resembling contented. The on-set tailor kept me hustling between garment bags and hemlines. My dad worked a lot, but we had plenty of time for cheap restaurants, local galleries, and hiking. Running didn’t feel as vital anymore. I’d already run all the way to Canada.

I used my alone time to explore or to toil over my college

applications. It felt easier, three time zones away from my previous life, to imagine a future where I'd moved on, even a little, from grief.

A few kids my age lived in the apartment complex, and we hung out every now and then. One of them became a summer fling, as simple at the end as it was at the start. We talked or we didn't, and it felt good to be with someone who had only ever known me on the other side of Sophie's death.

I'm quiet through dinner, which tastes familiar and right. I gulp George's iced tea like I can consume the feeling of knowing and being known.

"I'll do dishes tonight," my mom announces grandly. "You two should catch up."

Normally, Lincoln and I are on dish patrol while the adults polish off the wine. George and Elliott follow my mom to the kitchen, balancing plates, and I turn to Lincoln.

"So. You wanna tell me who you were texting with that shit-eating grin on your face?" I noticed earlier, his hands hidden under the table but clearly typing fast.

"Shit-eating?" he says, but the smile sneaks back up. "Parker."

"Oh my *God*." I tip my head back, my triumph lifted to the sky. She's a junior lacrosse player, and Lincoln has been denying his blatant crush for ages. "I *knew* it."

"It felt weird to tell you over text," Lincoln says. "But . . . yeah, for about a month officially."

"Officially!"

“Not great timing, with me off to school,” he adds. “But we’re gonna try to keep it going. You’ll like her.”

“I know I will.”

In the silence that follows, my imaginings of this year project out like movie screen. I’m not sure when I’ll be around Parker again. The usual scene—West Grove’s overcrowded hallways, permanently smelling of chicken sandwich breading—won’t include me.

Lincoln must be thinking the same thing, because he says, “You’re really going through with it?”

For years, I’d scoffed at Andrew and Ginny’s attempts to win me over to Ingleside Country Day School. I was already besting the academic game; why use a cheat code? But something changed last year. Well. A lot of things changed.

“I am. Yeah.” From Vancouver, I’d ordered a stash of uniform pieces to mix-and-match, wincing as I clicked the purchase button. I have less than a week to tailor them for the ways my body has changed with less running and more hiking. “Nothing to lose, really.”

Lincoln nods, with a smile he has to pry up at the sides. At his graduation, he had plenty of other friends to pose with. I’ve never fit in with West Grove’s ecosystem of giant, overlapping friend groups. But neither of us wants to drudge that argument back up. “If you say so.”

“Maybe I can hang with Parker when you’re home for fall break,” I say, and Lincoln looks pleasantly surprised. He’s gone out with girls before, and I had a boyfriend most of my

sophomore year, but we always did our own thing. “You feeling ready for school?”

“Yeah. It helps to know the lacrosse guys a little.”

I’m about to ask if we should pick school-themed movies for the last movie night before school starts. But I catch on something—will he still want to, after last year? Before I can decide how to bring it up, Lincoln adds, “I’ve got a couple more weeks until I leave. So, if you need a wingman for early Ingleside parties . . .”

I love him for this, though I hate that I’m still the girl whose mom always coached her to go say hi. “I met people this summer, you know.”

“I know,” he says quickly. “Just saying. You don’t have to do everything alone.”

Well. I sipped the last dregs of my iced tea. Some things, I do.

August

Junior Year

For Sophie’s fundraiser, I wore a white sundress, cotton and simple. I’d found it on a thrifting expedition, and my mom claimed, in a mocking British accent, that the dress was “perfectly suitable for such an event.”

Since I learned to sew years before, I’d loved clothing—the history, the construction, the craft. Hemming skirts for a busy, local tailor certainly beat a customer service job. But, in my own modest closet, I always wore black and white, from everyday T-shirts to my running clothes to my Debate Club suit. If fashion was performance, I worked on stage crew.

But despite alterations to my exact measurements, the dress still felt like I’d borrowed it from someone else’s closet.

I stepped off the porch, to where Lincoln was climbing out of his car.

“Hey,” he said, gesturing at his outfit. “Is this okay for the thing?”

“Yeah. You look nice. Great jacket.”

“Rude of you to sound surprised.” He shrugged off the blazer, navy with a windowpane plaid. “But thank you. It was my dad’s in college.”

I turned, showcasing a different angle. “Is there something weird about this dress?”

“Looks fine,” Lincoln said. “Just . . . quit standing like that.”

“How am I standing?”

“Like you’re a dog being forced to wear little shoes.”

“Linc!” I whined, though I did feel that way—like I’d forgotten how to hold my body.

“Look at you two!” my mom cooed, emerging from the side of the house in her floppy, truly embarrassing gardening hat. “I need a picture.”

“Mom.”

“You look so cute! The braid brings me back to your *Frozen* days.”

Lincoln laughed as he joined me on the porch, and I frowned at them both. Throughout elementary school, I’d always played contemplative Elsa, while Sophie was spunky Anna. We’d dressed poor toddler Maddie in an Olaf costume more times than I could count.

After the photo was taken, my mom squeezed my cheeks. “You’re a very good cousin, Bug, and you look beautiful.”

“Mmph,” I said, my lips squished together. “Send the least awkward one to Dad.”

“Sure thing.” She released me. “Tell Gin I’m making Nonny’s blackberry pie tonight in case she wants to pop by this week. If she’s currently eating carbs, that is.”

I shot her a *be nice* look, which she answered with an angelic smile. “Have fun!”

“Know where you’re going?” I asked Lincoln. He’d inherited this sedan when he turned sixteen. His dad Elliott’s cologne still lingered on the upholstery, balancing lacrosse bag smog from the trunk.

“I’ve got it in my phone,” he said. “Trying to avoid move-in weekend traffic.”

Our town—West Grove—framed the left side of Yardley College, a prestigious, mid-sized school older than the US Constitution. The route took us through Hathaway—the northern suburb with a Target and a lot of 1950s ranches—and into Eastmoore, where Sophie lived. On a green light streak, it took nine minutes to get from my house to hers. There, the lots widened around big white houses, full of beautiful, impervious children. Even the sounds changed. The roar of the highway faded into the *whick-whick* of built-in sprinkler systems.

Almost there, I texted Sophie.

Thank God, she wrote back immediately. *My mom is being very My Mom.*

Ginny hovered and nagged, but I’d never worked up the nerve to tell Sophie that I wished my own mom could be just two percent more like hers. For as long as I could remember, the refrain in my house was, “It’s your life, Bug.” I wanted to quit piano when I wasn’t good after three lessons? No problem. Decide what I watch, even if it gave me nightmares? Well, that’s how you define your boundaries. Sometimes, however pathetic, I wanted to whine: *I’m just a kid. Tell me what to do here.*

My mom and Ginny grew up a couple hours outside of LA, in a motel their grandmother ran. When I was little, I imagined it like a sitcom—cozy and quirky, with a rotating cast of surprising guests. The older I got, the more I understood that their stability was held together with packing tape and a prayer. They spoke of their Nonny like she was a mythical figure—the gray-haired mage shepherding them out of danger. If they spoke of their parents at all, it was with shadowy undertones.

After Nonny died, my mom moved to be with her pregnant older sister—in Maryland, where Ginny had moved for journalism school. A few weeks later, I showed up in the form of two distinct pink lines. My parents had broken up amicably in California, but my mom saw an opportunity to raise me alongside Ginny and the baby who would be my cousin. Though my dad supported the idea, neither of my parents wanted him to leave LA. He'd landed an apprenticeship in TV lighting after years of painting pet portraits, and he was four months into recovery from alcohol abuse disorder.

Sometimes I stared at my mom and aunt, wondering how two such different people could be from the same upbringing. My mom often rolled her eyes at Ginny's controlled, manicured life. But if anyone else criticized Virginia Farris Abbott, my mom would yowl like a wildcat, haunches back to pounce. Ginny, I think, would stay quiet if someone spoke ill of my mother, then plot a silent, thorough revenge.

The Eastmoore Country Club waited at the end of a long, tree-lined drive, tucked away from the mortal world. The main

building spanned wide and white as a sheet cake, with two-story columns lifting upward.

Lincoln slowed the car, leaning forward to get the full view. “They use this place as an exterior shot for movies, right? This is totally where the Rich Guy lives.”

Inside, we stood at the wide doorway, staring into an elegant room. The top showed a crowd that seemed to be almost entirely white people. Women in flamingo pink and palm green mingled; men in seersucker blue clapped one another’s backs. The bottom third became—abruptly, almost solidly—beige. Spray-tanned legs, khaki pants, taupe heels, pine wood floors. The scene looked like a framed watercolor that had been dipped in beige paint.

These people weren’t yacht-sailing, Fortune 500 rich. Anyone with that kind of money would live nearer to DC. But they were wealthy enough for the airs and the plumage.

I allowed myself a quiet groan.

“Speak for yourself,” Lincoln said. “Check out that appetizer lineup.”

As we walked in, a few girls glanced over, clearly assessing Lincoln and I as a couple. Our friendship was befuddling to some people, and they often landed on “Oh, you’re like siblings.” No. Like best friends.

Almost immediately, a voice called out Lincoln’s last name—a lacrosse bro summoning him. I waved at him to go, already on my path toward Sophie. She was huddled near the beverage station, taking a long drink of ice water. With her powder skin and peachy hair, Sophie always looked fit for a

Rococo painting, but especially in her sky-blue dress. My eyes traced down to her platform sandals as she gave a relieved sigh. “You’re here.”

“Is your ankle okay in those?”

“Oh my God, *Mom*. Yes,” she said, with an affectionate eye roll. “Can you please run interference with my actual mother? She keeps hovering, and it’s throwing me off. Gabi was trying to help, but—”

“On it.”

“Thank you.” Sophie nodded, businesslike. “Okay, back to mingling.”

Ginny was in the thick of the crowd, talking to a man around her age. I hung back, ready to engage if she headed toward Sophie.

The motivation for this event ran deep. Sophie could fundraise for her parks gig and acquire some event experience. My uncle Andrew could play supportive dad while gladhanding potential campaign donors. Virginia Abbott, meanwhile, could thrive as proud mother and wife.

Since my uncle announced his campaign, Ginny had all but created a future state senator’s wife character, who nodded solemnly and held hands in prayer pose. Ginny was a newscaster before staying at home with Sophie and Maddie. The hair remained—a teased blond, perfectly smooth and resting on the shoulders of her linen dress. She may have been a rural California girl, but Ginny looked as East Coast as hydrangeas.

I was slow-sipping a sweet tea when she spotted me. Her waving hand said “Come over here,” but her intent eye contact said “or else.”

“Hannah, you look lovely!” Ginny braced her hands on my shoulders. “And thank you so much for helping Sophie with her speech.”

“Yeah, of course.”

She gestured to the man she’d been talking to. “Marty, meet my niece, Hannah. She’s a nationally ranked debater.”

“Wonderful!” he boomed, low-ball glass shifting in his hand. “Ingleside or St. Anne’s?”

“West Grove High, actually.” I lifted my chin a little, as if to say *That’s right, Marty. Public school.* Ginny’s grip tightened.

“Hannah’s top of her class there, though I’m sure Headmaster Ryan would love to steal her away,” Ginny continued. “She’s planning on law school.”

“Is that right!” Marty said it like he might clap my shoulder. “I’m a Yardley Law grad myself, so me know if you have any questions. I can connect you with the alumni association folks.”

I almost laughed. I’d been here—what—five minutes? And lo, the network appears like the sheer lines of a sticky web. “That’s very kind. But I’m hoping to relocate to a bigger city. LA, ideally.”

Marty laughed again, for some reason. “Wonderful! Great to get the adventures in when you’re young.”

My aunt offered to show me my seat, which seemed impossible to refuse. I stalled, but she wriggled out of the conversation in several deft maneuvers. I’d settled in at the

table, aimlessly scrolling my phone, when a voice said, “Ginny evaded you too?”

I looked up at Gabi Reyes in a lavender jumpsuit, with two straps running parallel down her shoulders. Gabi had always been a study in symmetry, from the center part of her dark-brown hair to the faint chin dimple.

“She did,” I admitted.

Gabi took her seat on Sophie’s other side, leaning back. “Good summer?”

“Yeah, okay,” I said. Even the scar on her forehead—a short line across light-brown skin—was centered. “How about you?”

“Good. Busy.”

We traded thin, trying-our-best smiles. In the early middle school days, I knew her as “Gabi from soccer” in Sophie’s stories, but they quickly became a duo off the field, too. Sophie used to invite me along, but the three-person dynamic didn’t work. Does it ever?

Inevitably, I’d witness how easily she and Sophie wove between conversations and inside jokes. My competitive drive would kick up, and I’d vow, once again, not to be impressed by Gabi.

But Gabi Reyes is an impressive person. You can like her or loathe her, and it’s still going to be true.

“The speech is really good, by the way,” Gabi said.

I relaxed a little on our safe, common ground: Sophie. “Thanks. She practiced it for you?”

“About a dozen times. And, oh my gosh.” Gabi snapped her fingers as if just remembering. “The edits you made to Mr. Abbott’s stump speech? A big improvement.”

“Oh, thanks,” I said, less enthusiastically this time.

Gabi squinted briefly, noticing my dip in interest. This was what got me about her: the perceptiveness. “Not psyched about his foray into politics?”

“No, it’s fine.” *Don’t*, I told myself. “He’s well-meaning and competent, which is more than a lot of candidates can say.”

“Well-meaning and competent,” Gabi repeated, nodding. She propped her elbow on the back of Sophie’s chair, really settling in. “What traits would you prefer?”

“I’m just cynical about politics.” That should have been enough, but I felt like I was losing an argument—failure to provide evidence. I dropped my voice. “He hasn’t experienced, like, anything that the average person does. He’s always had a safe home and food and health insurance. So, he can talk about policy change, but will he really push?”

Gabi ruffled one hand through her hair, though it settled perfectly back into place. “Doubt it.”

I blinked at her. “Aren’t you volunteering for the campaign?”

“I helped Soph a few times.” Gabi was already a head delegate in Model UN and had lots of causes, many of which overlapped with Sophie’s. “I’ve mostly been shadowing the mayor’s chief of staff for the past few weeks, so I’m more focused on that.”

The jealousy stung like sunburn. I’d spent my summer monogramming initials onto custom baby outfits, squirreling away money for college. “That’s cool. Did you just, like, reach out about that?”

“Pretty much. My dad’s the advisor for Yardley’s Latine grad student group. Martina came to speak about local

government.” Then, with a quick eyeroll, Gabi added, “And my mom thought I could use a Chicana mentor that I ‘actually listen to.’”

My shoulders eased a little. Huh. Gabi—who always seemed so sure of herself—had a mom who accused her of not listening. “Does your mom want you to stay close to home?”

“Yeah, but I want to anyway—stay near my grandma, explore DC. What about you? I know law school, but any particular type of law?”

“Haven’t decided.” I knew from Sophie, who spent a lot of time at the Reyes house, that Gabi’s dad was a labor law professor. Her mom was a software engineer. I added, wryly, “One that gets me a benefits package?”

Gabi gave me a bewildered look. “That’s the priority?”

“Uh, kind of.” My tone had turned against my will, edging toward defensive. How would I ever pay off law school loans without a good job out of the gate?

“Okay.” She lifted one shoulder in a shrug. “You just strike me as someone who’d enjoy putting a few dents in the system.”

My jaw clenched. Sure, that would be great, except I’d spent most of my life watching my mom juggle multiple jobs to keep from being crushed by said system. I’d like to do deeply meaningful work as much as the next person. But until then, I wanted basic stability without owing anyone. “Just trying to be realistic.”

I scanned the crowd again, as if a subject change would appear like a vision. When I glanced back, Gabi wore a small, amused smile. “You hate all this.”

“No,” I said, a bit hotly. There it was: Gabi’s laser-bright perceptiveness. I wanted to seem like the supportive cousin who felt perfectly comfortable breathing rarified air. “I’m just not good at, like . . .”

“Faking it?” Gabi guessed.

My cheeks burned. Was she criticizing me? Or calling out the phony niceness of a crowd known for judgment and gossip?

“It’s not really my scene,” I conceded.

“Mm,” Gabi said, with a nod. But what was she affirming? That I don’t belong here? That it’s not her scene either?

“Hey.” Lincoln pulled up his chair. “Sounds like they’re about to start.”

Thank God. I directed my attention toward the podium, where Sophie stood with clasped hands. She wobbled a little in her introduction, but she recovered when outlining the pro-climate initiatives she’d worked on this summer. Andrew and Ginny kept glancing around, smiling as the world took in their daughter’s shine.

“I’d also like to thank my dad, Andrew Abbott, candidate for State Senate,” Sophie said. Hold for applause. “As we all know, individual action can be a meaningful pursuit, and consumer behavior can be a tool. But there’s no path to a healthy planet for my generation without significant government investment in green energy.”

I tucked my mouth under my hand, willing down a smile. She really did it—said the lines we’d left off the Ginny-approved written speech. Andrew’s position on climate was

okay, but not nearly good enough. Amid the uncomfortable, delicate applause, a few enthusiastic claps rang out and, from somewhere, a wolf whistle.

Afterward, the official event bled into an average country club evening. Lincoln went outside to throw the ball around, and I wandered a bit, studying portraits of waxy-faced old men and fireplace paintings of the hunt. The whole place breathed smoke—cigars and hunting rifles and champagne vapor curled from the bottle's mouth.

When the dress began to itch, I returned to find Lincoln and say our goodbyes.

“MacLaren?”

I froze at the entryway. Of course I'd expected Sophie's classmates to be here, but not Christian Dailey. When I turned, he was heading my direction, wearing what seemed to be the uniform here: navy blazer, khakis, simple tie—off-center, in his case. In recent years, he'd worn his hair long enough to push back in an act of preening vanity. I could never decide if he was attractive or simply so convinced of his own attractiveness that bystanders were lured into the illusion.

“Oh my God, of course you're a member here,” I muttered.

He leaned in, one finger to his ear. “What was that?”

I put on a false smile. “Hello, Dailey.”

He only had a few inches of height on me, and I wished I'd worn heels to close the gap. His skin, always with an olive undertone, held a tan well into late-season debates. While he'd never explicitly mentioned having a boat to take out all summer, I wouldn't be surprised.

“Hannah MacLaren,” Dailey murmured. “At a country club. Wearing a dress.”

“Nice to see they keep you sharp in the off-season.”

We’d always been the youngest people on our respective debate teams—natural rivals and, this year, the only juniors on varsity.

“Who are you even here with?” he asked, marveling. Of course, he’d want to know about my connections. This was the thing with Christian Dailey and his boat-shoed cronies.

“Counterargument,” I said sweetly. “How is that your business?”

“Guess I should have seen that one coming.” He slid his hands into his pockets. “So. How was your summer?”

I recognized this question for what it was: an entryway for him to regale me with internship stories. Pass.

“Amazing—spent most of it at the Vineyard.” I brought one hand back to sweep my ponytail. “It wasn’t all fun and games, of course! Mother stuck me with an SAT tutor, but I endured honorably.”

“Sarcasm! Thrilling.” Dailey shifted his weight, which was never a good thing. It meant he was finding his angle, a boxer about to deliver his blow. “Did you see I’m doing the debate showcase with you?”

“Oh, yeah,” I said, as if I’d forgotten. Dailey had only gone to debate camp for one summer, so I resented his inclusion. I usually spent the last Friday of summer hyping kids up for debate. This year, I’d have to share space with the demon prince. “Should be fun.”

He smiled crookedly. "Always is."

"And by 'fun,'" I said, turning away, "I of course mean 'unbearably tedious.'"

I walked off before he could get the last word. My eyes darted through the crowds, looking for anyone familiar to harbor me. When I spotted Soph, she was already looking my way, conspiratorial by a fireplace with Gabi like evil stepsisters at the ball. I slowed my beeline to them only when the stamp of my shoes drew disapproving glances.

"Um, hello?" I huffed, more to Sophie than Gabi. "You couldn't have bailed me out of that conversation?"

Gabi spoke around the tiny cocktail straw in her drink. "We were enjoying the show."

"It was like Animal Planet," Sophie said, "when the lions circle each other."

I touched two fingers to my temple, where the tap of my pulse was becoming a thump. "Sounds right. Male lions posturing while female lions do all the work."

"No," Sophie said, pushing down a smile. "We think you two are gonna bone."

Gabi laughed over the rim of her ginger ale.

"Oh, you're gross." I pointed to one, then the other, but they were snickering away at their little joke. "Both of you. *Gross.*"

"*Bone,*" Sophie mouthed.

"Do you not remember what he did? I hate him."

Sophie looked briefly chastened but then waved me off. "That was a hundred years ago."

“What did he do?” Gabi asked.

“Nothing,” I snapped.

Sophie gave Gabi an apologetic look that she did not need. It wasn't her business, and I probably would have said so if Lincoln hadn't appeared at that moment. He had his blazer slung over one arm, shirt rolled at the sleeves. “Hey. You ready?”

“No, stay!” Sophie pled. She gripped my arm and looked to Lincoln like maybe he could make me. “We're about to ride out to the ninth hole and hang for a while.”

“Won't your mom be mad if you bail?” I asked.

“She's already cold-shouldering me over my little 'stunt.'” Sophie gave me the lower lip, her last stand.

“You were amazing,” I said. “But I need to be in stretchy clothes within the half hour.”

“Fine, go.” She sighed, pretending to shoo us away. Then, smiling, “Thank you both for coming.”

“Nice to see you, Gabi,” I said.

“Yeah, you too.”

Sophie texted me before Lincoln and I even got to his car: *Thank you for coming, even though it meant a dress and the club ♥*

I'd do much worse for her, of course—same as she would for me. *Real love. (Of you and the pistachio muffins.)*

Once in the car, I slipped off my shoes and slumped back in the passenger seat. Lincoln plugged in his phone while I stared out the windshield. The wide, nectarine sun had almost dropped below the tree line and, around the side of the club, I could make out Sophie and Gabi's silhouettes in waiting.

A golf cart pulled up in front of them, and a tall guy with

red, swoopy hair—Warner, Sophie's friend and neighbor—climbed out of the driver's seat. He had a wine bottle hanging from one hand, and Sophie, presumably the only non-drinker in the bunch, took his place at the wheel. Gabi climbed onto the back with two others, completing what was clearly a well-honed routine.

Lincoln backed out of the parking spot as music rose up all around us. The golf cart became a dot in the distance.