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To my sweet, fierce friend Jeanine Pepler

—CB

For Baby Girl Colleran, who lived under my heart  
while this book got written

—KC

# ONE

“And *that*,” Mr. Beckett says, leaning against the edge of his desk in third-period AP English, ankles crossed and dark eyes shining, “is the story of how Hemingway and Fitzgerald became the most famous literary frenemies of the twentieth century. Full disclosure, it probably won’t be that useful to you on the AP exam, since for some reason they don’t test your knowledge of hundred-year-old publishing gossip. But you can keep it in your back pocket and use it to impress your friends at parties.” He grins, standing up and tugging a whiteboard marker out of the back pocket of his dark blue khakis.

“Okay,” he says, “let’s talk homework.”

We let out a collective groan, and Bex—which is what we all call him—waves us off as a bunch of bellyachers, then assigns the first forty pages of *A Farewell to Arms* for us to read that night.

“It’ll go fast,” he promises, twirling the marker between his fingers like a magician with a deck of cards. “One of the great things about Hemingway—and there are a lot of great things about Hemingway, and we’ll talk about them tomorrow—is that he’s not much for big words.”

“Well, that’s good,” cracks Gray Kendall, a long-legged lacrosse player who just started here back in September. He’s sprawled in his chair a couple of rows behind me, a dimple appearing briefly in the apple of his cheek. “Neither am I.”

Eventually the bell rings for the end of the period and we all shuffle toward the door, the scrape of chair legs on linoleum and the smell of chicken sandwich day in the cafeteria wafting down the hallway.

“You ready?” I ask Chloe, stopping by her desk at the front of the room. She’s wearing her signature red lipstick and huge hipster glasses, her yellow-blond hair falling in soft waves to her shoulders. A tiny lapel pin in the shape of a pink flamingo is affixed to the collar of her uniform blouse.

“Um,” she says, glancing over my shoulder at where Bex is erasing the whiteboard, elegant shoulders moving inside his gray cashmere sweater.

I raise my eyebrows at her blatant gawking, and she makes a face at me in return.

“Yeah.”

“Uh-huh. Right.” I offer her an exaggerated nod and sling my backpack over one shoulder; we’re just about to go when Bex looks up.

“Oh, Marin, hey,” he says with a guilty shake of his head. “I managed to space on your book *again* today, if you can believe it. But I’ll bring it in tomorrow for sure.”

“Oh! No worries.” I smile.

Bex has been telling me for the better part of two weeks that he’s going to lend me his copy of *The Corrections*, which he says I’ll love, but he keeps forgetting to bring it in.

“Whenever is good. Honestly, it’s not like I have a ton of time to read for pleasure anyway.”

“I know, I know.” Bex makes a mischievous face. “You’re all too busy posting unboxing videos to your YouTube channels, or whatever it is you people do for fun.”

My mouth drops open. “Not true!” I say, though my whole body is flushing pleasantly. “Getting buried in AP English homework is more like it.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Bex says, but he’s smiling. “Get out of my classroom. I’ve got lunch duty; I’ll see you down there.”

“Lucky you,” Chloe teases.

“Uh-huh.” Bex grins, setting the eraser on the ledge and wiping his hands on the seat of his pants. “You’re making fun of me, but joke’s on you because you’re underestimating how excited I get about chicken sandwich day. Now go.”

The cafeteria at Bridgewater Prep is actually a combination auditorium/gym, with a stage at one end and tables that fold down and slide into a storage room during phys ed periods. Ours is already crowded by the time Chloe and I show up, with the same slightly incongruous mix of honors kids from Bex’s class and lacrosse bros we’ve been sitting with since I started dating Jacob.

“Hey, babe,” he says now, tweaking me in the side by way of hello. “How’s your day?”

“You checking to make sure she’s not getting fat?” his buddy Joey cracks, reaching over like he’s going to give me a pinch of his own.

I duck out of the way and flip him the finger, rolling my eyes. “Shove it, Joey.” Then, nudging Jacob in the shoulder: “Defend my honor, will you?”

“You heard the lady,” Jacob says, which is admittedly a little bit weak as far as honor defending goes, but he’s pulling

me into his lap and pressing a kiss against my cheek, and for a second I forget to be annoyed. Jacob and I have been dating since last spring in AP US History, when we happened to be sitting side by side as Ms. Shah assigned partners for our final research project. I was hoping for somebody who'd let me boss him around and get us both As, which has been my strategy for group projects for basically as long as I've been doing them, but to my surprise, Jacob had actual opinions about which primary sources would be most useful to build a document-based question on the social reforms that led up to the Civil War. We argued for two full weeks before we figured out how to work together. When we got our A he lifted me up and twirled me around right there in the middle of class.

Now I sit down in my own chair and pull a turkey sandwich out of my bag, nodding at Dean Shepherd as he sets his tray down beside Chloe. The two of them went to homecoming together earlier this year and since then he's been not at all subtle about trying to date her.

"You going to this thing at Emily Cerato's on Friday?" he asks, cracking the cap on his bottle of Dr Pepper and offering her the first sip.

Chloe shrugs, peeling her clementine industriously. "I was thinking about it," she allows. "You?"

I miss Dean's answer—and, thankfully, most of Joey's ensuing monologue about how hot Emily and her dance team friends all are—catching sight of Bex perched on the stage at the far end of the room, next to Ms. Klein, a bio teacher who was new back in September. She's youngish, in her late twenties maybe, with curly dark hair and glasses and a wardrobe that seems to consist almost entirely of belted shirtdresses from Banana Republic. She's sitting with her ankles crossed inside a pair of boots with blocky wooden heels, eating a cup of fancy yogurt while Bex laughs at something she said.

Chloe flicks a clementine peel at me. "Now look who's gawking," she says, lifting her chin in Bex's direction.

"I am not!" I whisper-yell.

"Uh-huh. Wipe the drool, why don't you," Chloe says with a laugh.

I sigh dramatically. "I can't help it. You know I'm a sucker for a man in khakis." I glance back at Bex and Ms. Klein. "Do you think there's something going on there?" I'd be lying if I said Chloe and I aren't the tiniest bit obsessed with Bex's romantic life.

"What?" Right away, Chloe shakes her head. "No."

"Why not?" I ask. "Ms. Klein is cute."

"I mean, I guess." Chloe looks unconvinced. "In like, a



local newscaster kind of way.”

“I’d nail her,” Joey puts in helpfully.

“Nobody *asked* you, Joe.” I turn back to Chloe. “I’m just saying: long nights grading papers, romantic looks across the teachers’ lounge—”

“Oh my god.” Chloe pops a wedge of clementine into her mouth. “Are you sure that isn’t *your* fantasy?” she asks. “Maybe you should reconsider becoming a journalist. I feel like romance novels are your true calling.”

“This is journalism!” I protest, laughing. “Serious, investigative journalism into the never-before-seen love lives of America’s most important national treasure—our teachers.”

Chloe snorts. “You do that,” she says, tucking her clementine peel back into her brown paper lunch bag. “I gotta go though, I’ve got a dentist appointment this afternoon, so I’m leaving early. Are you good to run the meeting without me?”

Chloe and I are coeditors of the *Beacon* this year and spend basically every available moment in the office with Bex and the rest of the staff, hunched over the sluggish computers and sprawled out on the ragged, sagging couch.

“Yep, totally. I’ll text you tonight.” I wave goodbye and turn back to Jacob, who’s already finishing his second

chicken sandwich. “Do *you* want to go to Emily Cerato’s party?” I ask.

“Sure,” he says with a shrug, opening a cellophane pack of Oreos. “Why not, right?”

“I don’t know.” I nibble at a piece of kettle corn. “I was also thinking maybe we could do that movie I was talking about the other day, the one about the sisters who inherit the house?”

“The historical thing?” he asks with a frown. “Wouldn’t you rather see that with Chloe or your mom?”

I raise my eyebrows pointedly. “By which you mean you’d rather poke out your own eyeballs than sit through it?”

“I didn’t say that,” Jacob protests, handing me a cookie in an attempt at a peace offering. “If you want to go we totally can.”

“Yeah, yeah.” I know he means it too—Jacob’s a good sport like that—but there’s no point in dragging him to something I know he’s going to think is totally girly and boring. “You’re off the hook, dude. A party sounds fun.”

Jacob nods, then gestures over my shoulder at Bex, who’s making the rounds through the cafeteria like a groom at a wedding, coaxing easy smiles out of everybody, from debate nerds to the toughest bruisers on the football team.

“Your boy’s coming over here,” he tells me. “Should I ask him if he’s giving Ms. Klein the D?”

“Oh my *god*,” I say, tossing a piece of kettle corn in his direction, “that’s disgusting. And also *emphatically* not what I said he was doing.” Still, it occurs to me that if Jacob flat out asked Bex if he and Ms. Klein were dating, there’s a good chance Bex would tell us the truth. That’s one of the nice things about him—he’s not obsessed with maintaining some dumb veil of secrecy about his life outside school, like some of the other teachers. He’s an actual human being. Like, the other day in class he told us a story about getting a speeding ticket on the way to school after oversleeping because he was out late at a party in Boston for a friend of his who was publishing a collection of short stories. And on picture day he brought in his own senior yearbook so we could all have a laugh at his mid-aughts puka shells and spiky haircut.

Now he stops at our table for a minute, joking around with Dean and asking Jacob about a play from yesterday’s lacrosse game. It’s not even lacrosse season, technically, but the Bridgewater team is really good, so they have special permission to play in some indoor intramural league and still use the school buses for games. Everyone thinks the lacrosse guys are something special. Maybe I do too, though

frankly it always annoys me that they seem to know it.

“You get your chicken sandwich?” I ask Bex.

Bex nods seriously. “Sure did,” he says, then reaches over my shoulder and picks up my bag of kettle corn, helping himself to a handful.

“Excuse you!” I protest, though it’s not like I actually mind.

Bex just shrugs. “School tax,” he says with a grin. “Take it up with your congressman.”

I reach for the bag, but he holds it above my head playfully, laughing at my pathetic attempts to grab it, when we hear Principal DioGuardi clear his throat up on the stage at the far end of the cafeteria.

“Attention, ladies and gentlemen,” he says, hands fisted on his hips like a cartoon bodybuilder. Mr. DioGuardi was a PE teacher before he got into administration, and he still kind of looks it, with beefy forearms and a torso shaped like an upside-down triangle inside his maroon button-down. He wears a whistle around his neck, which he uses to keep us from getting too rowdy at assemblies and pep rallies and also sometimes randomly pops into his mouth when he’s thinking, like a baby with a pacifier. Last year every single member of the lacrosse team went as him for Halloween.

“If I can have a minute of your time, I wanted to talk