



WHAT IF I TOLD YOU IT WAS  
JUST A SUMMER THING?

# 13 SUMMERS

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Nichelle Giraldes





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# **1 Brand New Dress**

*And the tennis courts were covered up with some tent-like thing*

## **August**

*May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2008 - Prom Night*

“And the tennis courts were covered up with some tent-like thing,” August said, her face only inches from the mirror she had propped on top of her AP Chemistry textbook. She patted a gold eyeshadow across her lid, looking back and forth between her mirror and the YouTube video playing on her laptop.

“What does that even mean? Is it a tent or not?” Thea asked. She was lying on her stomach across the bed, her face reflected next to August’s in the mirror. They couldn’t have looked more dissimilar. Thea was sky-scraper tall with long tan limbs and a mane of black curls that entered a room just a moment before the rest of her. August was short, barely breaking five feet, with uninteresting features and hair that sat somewhere in the neighborhood of almost blonde.

“I mean, it’s not like a camping tent or a circus tent. It’s this big white thing,” August said. She was now tracing her

lashes with a gel liner that had cost the better part of last week's paycheck.

"I think they still call that a tent," Thea said, laughing and flipping a page in the magazine.

"Whatever you want to call it, they've got all these fairy lights hung up in there, and I think it's going to look so pretty tonight."

Subscribed

"Take lots of pictures for me," Thea said without looking up from her magazine page.

August twisted so she could look at Thea over her shoulder. "I can't believe you aren't coming," August whined. "Isn't there anything I can say to convince you? You still have time to get ready. Don't make me go alone." August stuck out her lip and pouted at Thea, who was in sweatpants, her curls wrestled into a claw clip. Thea shook her head.

"My mom won't let me wear the jumpsuit I picked, so I'm not going. It's a matter of principle. I can't let the patriarchy win this one," Thea said.

August rolled her eyes. "I don't think it was the fact that it was pants so much as the fact that the neckline dipped clear down to your belly button. Even if she let you wear it, there's no way you'd make it past the teachers checking tickets. I don't understand why you won't just wear the dress your mom bought for you." The teal ballgown was hanging in a garment bag on the back of August's door. Thea's mom bought it as soon as she discovered the jumpsuit and insisted Thea bring it today in case she changed her mind. The teal dress wasn't hideous, but it certainly wasn't Thea's usual style.

"And why can't I wear something with a deep V? The patriarchy," Thea said. "Also, that teal is very much not my color. It'll wash me out."

August groaned but didn't bother trying to fight Thea on the issue. Once Thea had made up her mind, there was little point in trying to change it. August went back to the mirror, moving her head from side to side, "Does my eyeliner look even to you?" she asked Thea.



Thea rolled off the bed and leaned against the desk. "Close your eyes," Thea said as she leaned in, resting her hand on August's bare shoulder. August could smell the mint from Thea's gum as she breathed against her cheek, her fingers resting against her temples, measuring the wings. "And open," Thea instructed. As August opened her eyes, she found Thea's hazel eyes staring back at her, still carefully examining her eyeliner. Then Thea's face broke into a soft smile as she gave a little nod of approval, "You look perfect."

"Thanks," August said, turning away to hide that her cheeks were turning pink under the thick layer of foundation. She started gliding on lipstick but continued to watch Thea out of the corner of her eye.

Thea didn't move back to the bed but stayed beside August, resting a hand on her shoulder. "You'll have fun without me. It's a good group," she said.

At that, August wrinkled her face. She wasn't sure if that was true. While she knew several of the other people in the group, she suspected that the only reason she had been invited to go with them was because of Thea. She and Thea had been a package deal since freshman year when Thea had eaten lunch with her under the bleachers after a particularly miserable math class.

Thea was the kind of pretty people just wanted to be near, hoping that some of her gold dust would brush off on them. August could attest that Thea's beauty wasn't contagious, but she was still grateful for Thea's friendship over the years, and not just because otherwise, she might very well be spending lunch in the library.

"I don't really know any of them," August complained. You should at least come to dinner with us, and then you could go home."

"Not a chance," Thea said in a sing-song voice, finally moving to her spot back on the bed. "Maybe I'll come to the after-party at Bee's."

August fussed with a piece of her hair and hummed an acknowledgment. She wasn't sure she would make it to the

after-party. Tonight seemed like it was going to be long enough with pictures, then dinner, and then the actual prom without adding on an additional party to the end of the night.

"At least it's no couples," Thea added.

August nodded. Tonight would be awkward enough without feeling like the third wheel to everyone else. "I still can't believe everyone agreed to that," August said. "Bee only made that rule because she and Mason broke up last month, and she didn't want to have to find a new prom date.

"Why do you care? You weren't going to bring a date anyway, so this whole no-couple thing works better for you. Go to a fancy dinner. Dance with everyone. Take awkward prom pictures that your kids will make fun of in a couple of decades. You'll have fun," Thea said.

"Not as much fun as if you were coming," August pouted again.

Not long after that, August was ready, and she slipped into the floor-length mint green dress that her grandmother had spent the last three months sewing for her. She smoothed over the seam on her left hip. This dress was the real reason she was going to prom. The moment Thea decided she wasn't going, August wanted to abandon her plans too, but Grams had spent almost every evening of the last few months at the dining table making this dress. It would break her heart if August didn't wear it.

"You look beautiful," Thea told her unprompted from the bed.

"Thanks, Thea. You don't think the hair is too much," August asked, contorting her body to get a better view of the back of her head in the mirror.

"No. It's perfect. You look perfect," said Thea. A bit of sadness crept into her voice, and August's throat tightened at the emotion suddenly filling the room. They had promised they wouldn't treat these last few months differently than the years before, but their separation was looming. August was set to attend Yale in the fall, and Thea was headed to

California. They only had a few months before their friendship became long-distance.

"No crying on me, Aug," Thea said, jumping from the bed and opening the bedroom door wide enough to stick her head out. "Grams," she shouted. "August is all ready. She'll be coming down the stairs in a minute."

"Hold on," Grams called back up. August could hear her pulling herself off the couch and shuffling to her purse. "Let me get my camera ready."

August shook her head as Thea turned and winked at her. "I promised I would warn her before you came down the stairs," she whispered. "She spent all those hours crouched over her sewing machine. She deserves a few good pictures of you."

"Okay, send her down!" Grams called. Thea smiled back at August one last time before heading down the stairs.

August briefly considered the merits of climbing out the window and saving herself at least twenty minutes of photos, but then Thea's voice rang out. "Are you coming down, or do I need to come get you?"

The moment she left her bedroom door, grandmother's camera flash went off immediately, and she pushed her lips into a smile. Thea stood next her grandmother at the bottom of the stairs, shouting words of encouragement and suggesting ridiculous poses.

After Grams was satisfied with the pictures on the stairs, Thea and August were shooed onto the front porch. Grams took more pictures, even wrangling Thea into a couple of photos. By the time Grams gave August the okay to leave, she was running ten minutes late, and her stomach hurt from laughing.

She was still smiling as she climbed into her car, Grams and Thea waving at her from the porch. Even if the rest of the night was terrible, at least she had made Grams happy. She sighed as she pulled away from the house, already dreading what came next.

## 2 Highest Heels

*But I'm still on my tallest tiptoes*

### **Bee**

*May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2008 - Prom Night*

Bee had spent the better part of the day in front of mirrors as various women twisted and pulled at her hair and painted her face, but here she was again, sitting in front of the mirror in her bedroom. She examined her face, cataloging each inch, turning so she could catch the light and trying on smiles. She bit her lip and watched herself blink. No matter how she twisted her face, she still looked sad.

She wasn't sad about the break-up. She had known Mason had been temporary from the moment she had kissed him on her front porch on their third date. They had gone to see some superhero movie, her pick. She didn't want him to try to impress her with something with substance. He was pretty enough. He wasn't a complete moron. She wouldn't have been able to tolerate him if he couldn't at least hold an interesting conversation. He was going to some school where both his parents had gone in the fall, and to be honest, she

couldn't recall the name of the university; it wasn't an Ivy. She was sure he'd get a business degree, get some vague consulting job, and start balding by the time he was thirty-five. He was fun and the perfect accessory for her senior year, but she had no interest in dragging him into something long-distance once they started college.

Her only regret was that he ended it before she could. He said that he felt like "their spark" had gone out, but Bee suspected that he wanted to spend his last few months sleeping his way through as much of the senior class as possible before they headed to college.

No, Mason's absence wasn't why she had to practice her smiles. Today was just one of those days washed in that vague gray that filtered out just a bit of color from everything around her. It was the kind of heavy sadness that whispered for her to crawl back into bed, but she had found over the years the weight was just as heavy when she was in sweatpants as it was when she was in heels, so tonight she'd wear her highest heels.

"Bee," a voice called out from her doorway, along with a soft knock on the frame.

She flipped around, and a slight, real smile lit her face. "Hey, James," she said. "Is it time already? Is anyone else here?"

She stood up, smoothing her dress. She really shouldn't have been sitting. The dress had probably wrinkled. She leaned down and checked her makeup in the mirror one more time. His face reflected above hers in the mirror.

He placed a hand on her bare back, her prom dress dipping low and showing off the knobs of her spine. His fingers were warm but still sent goosebumps up her spine. "I'm early," he assured her.

"Does my mom know you're here?" she asked.

"No, I came in the side door." James knew this house almost as well as Bee did. Like Bee, he had spent most of his summer days in the oversized colonial. His mother had been Bee's nanny for most of her childhood. Even now, though it

had been years since Georgia worked for them, Bee sometimes came home to find him already stretched across the couch, flipping through channels on the TV.

"How do I look?" she asked. She stood, and her face was suddenly just a few inches from his.

Her breath caught in her throat as his fingers trailed down her arm. "You look beautiful," he said, his voice softer than usual. She watched him as he spoke, mesmerized by how his Adam's apple bobbed.

Then his fingers were on her jaw, holding her face as if she were breakable. She lifted her eyes to meet his and held her breath. Her eyes fluttered closed as he leaned forward and let his lips brush against hers. Her hands moved to hold the lapels of his tuxedo, pulling him in. He still had her hand in both of his as he leaned in for another kiss, his lips more insistent this time, pressing into hers and molding them into his own.

She wanted this to have been her first kiss. She wished she could erase the boys she had kissed before, as if the memory of their lips on hers tainted this perfect moment. He kissed her like he knew her. Not the carefully practiced version of Bee, who made every decision based on where she wanted to be when she was thirty. He kissed the Bee he had laid beside in bed when she was too tired to pretend. The Bee who had a stick and poke tattoo of a pair of stars on her left hip. The Bee who had three serious boyfriends by the time she turned eighteen, but had never told a single one of them she loved them.

"Beatrice?" her mother's voice wafted into her room. James pulled away, his eyes wide, as he wiped his lips with the back of his hand. He leaned down to look in the mirror. Bee stood still, her mouth hanging slightly open, her hands still hovering in the air where they had been holding James's lapels.

She blinked again and then shouted back to her mom through the open door. "I'm still in my room." Her voice was shaky, and she held a hand up to her throat.

“Sorry,” James said, low enough that her mother couldn’t hear. His mouth started to move like he had more to say, but he couldn’t get words out.

A moment later, her mother appeared in the doorway. “Don’t shout in the house, please,” she said. Are you ready? People should be here soon, and you should be downstairs to greet them.”

“Almost,” Bee said. Her voice sounded weird; she was still catching her breath. She leaned back towards the mirror and worked slowly to uncap the lipstick on the middle of her vanity.

“James, why don’t you come downstairs with me,” her mother said. “Bee will join us in a minute.” Her mother ushered him out of the room, and she heard their voices grow to a quiet murmur as they descended the stairs. Bee recognized the second part of that statement as a threat but was still grateful that she had a moment alone. She looked up in the mirror, blinking, her eyelashes heavy with the weight of one too many coats of mascara, and a genuine smile slipped across her lips.

She slid on another coat of lipstick and checked to make sure that James hadn’t smudged any of her other makeup. She was almost surprised when she couldn’t see his fingerprints still lingering on her cheeks. After one more breath, as much time as she could take before she would have her mother up here yelling at her again, she headed down the stairs.

James was nowhere to be seen. In fact, the foyer was currently empty. Bee lifted the hem of her dress and padded across the cold marble of the entry, her heels still in her hands. Her dress was simple, a navy blue floor-length gown without any tulle or embellishments. Her mother had insisted upon something with “classic elegance” when they were shopping, vetoing anything that she deemed “too trendy,” a sign that the dress wouldn’t age well. Heaven forbid her prom photos looked dated and tacky in a couple of decades.

Bee peered out the window. She could just see the back end of James’s pick-up truck, the metal flecked with

rust. Another car started down the long drive. Footsteps echoed behind her, and Bee spun to see James walking into the room, flanked by her mother. He was carrying an ice bucket full of water bottles. "Bee, get the door for James," her mother said, gesturing towards her. Bee held the door, and her mother continued to give instructions to James, "Set that on the table to your left."

A red car had pulled in, and Ingrid, in a hot pink dress that Bee's mom would have definitely called "trendy," had tumbled out, followed by Courtney in a short and voluminous yellow dress. They teetered forward, moving as fast as they could while their knees wiggled back and forth, unaccustomed to balancing on heels. "Bee!" Ingrid squealed as she started up the steps. "You look so pretty!"

"Thank you," Bee said, welcoming them into the foyer. "I love that color." Courtney was just a few steps behind, her heels louder than necessary as they bounced off the vaulted ceilings. The three of them chatted for a couple of minutes, complimenting shoes and hair and lipstick, while they waited for the rest of the group to arrive. Bee kept an eye on James, who had stayed on the porch, leaning out over the railing watching their front yard, but there was no way she could subtly escape the conversation without drawing questions from Ingrid.

More cars started pulling into the driveway, and Bee greeted everyone as they came up the steps. James moved from his post and was chatting with Caleb and Josh. She caught his eye across the room, and he winked at her. Her cheeks heated to a pink, and she bit back the smile that threatened at her lips. He didn't bite back his wide grin; instead, he just shook his head and returned to the boys' conversation.

August's little blue car was the last to arrive in the driveway. After she was ushered into the house and poured over with the proper amount of compliments about her dress, they started in on photos. Bee's mom had hired a photographer, promising the other parents that she would make sure all the



photos got emailed out. Bee suspected it was less about the quality of pictures and more about Bee's mother not wanting half a dozen parents lingering in her house.

They were arranged over and over again. On the stairs. In the yard. Whenever Bee could, she tried to touch James, to let her fingers brush against his, and make sure it was his hands on her waist when they formed a line.

After they finished photos, she found James waiting for her in the foyer. Everyone else had already started piling into the limo, and their shrieks carried in through the open front door. "You ready?" James asked. He placed a hand on her back.

"Yeah. That went well, right?" she asked as they walked out the door together. His hand dropped once they were in sight of the limo.

"I don't know. We took some photos. It was fine."

"But everyone seemed like they had fun. Do you think Ingrid is mad about the no-couples rule? She's dating Josh." Bee made the rule before she realized that Josh and Ingrid were dating. Ingrid hadn't said anything, but Bee worried she was secretly annoyed.

James cut her off before she could say anything else. "I want to talk about what happened earlier."

"Yeah," Bee said. Her eyes slipped towards James and then towards the limo, where everyone was already in their seats, waiting for them. "But not right now." He frowned at her. "Everyone's waiting."

"Later tonight, then," James said.

Bee agreed with a nod. "Save me a dance," she added with a smile.

"Bee, you can have all my dances tonight, every last one if you want."

She was still smiling when she climbed into the car.

### **3 Red Lip Classic**

*What must it be like to grow up that beautiful? With your hair falling into place like dominos*

#### **August**

*May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2008 - Prom Night*

August was shoved in the back corner of the limo, between Courtney and Emily, the bright tulle of their dresses spilling over onto her knees. They whispered across her, comparing manicures and shooting her the occasional smile. She tucked her fingernails, short and bare, into fists against herself and hoped they wouldn't ask. She wasn't allowed to wear bright nail polish at work and hadn't even thought to put some on before she came out tonight. Although now she was annoyed at herself for not thinking about it.

It wasn't as if they were being rude; she barely knew them, even though she shared classes with everyone in this limo. August found it was usually easier to vanish into the background. That sounded sadder than it was. She didn't mind playing small most of the time. But tonight, she felt awkward and more nervous than she expected without Thea serving as her crutch. It was good practice. She wasn't going to have Thea at college in the fall. It would be a chance to reinvent herself and live life a little bigger.

Ingrid reached a hand over and clasped Caleb's, squeezing for a moment. August wondered if the no-couples rule applied once they arrived at prom or just for photo purposes. It was strange that they hadn't arrived together, and Caleb hadn't even gotten Ingrid a corsage. Bee and James climbed in a moment later. Bee sat on the other side of Emily while James jumped across Josh's legs to climb into the back of the limo.

Bee caught August's eyes and gave her a smile that could have proudly hung in the halls of every orthodontist office in the country. "Thanks for coming, August. It's a bummer that Thea couldn't make it, but we'll have fun without her," Bee said, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. Her shiny brown locks were twisted half up, and the rest was curled, perfectly falling into place around her face.

August smiled and searched for words. "Thank you for inviting me." The words sounded silly and a little desperate as they left her lips, and August wished she could reach over and snap them back up.

"Of course," Bee said, like leaving August off the guest list would have been the biggest oversight of the season. "You look incredible, by the way. I am just completely obsessed with that color. Where did you get your dress?"

"My grandmother actually made it," August said, smoothing down a slightly puckered seam along her waist and hoping that the dim light of the car would hide the growing blush on her cheeks. August hadn't felt weird about the fact that her grandmother had made her dress until now. It felt like another thing that set her apart from the other girls in the limo, who had probably all purchased their dresses at the mall while shopping with each other.

"That's incredible! Please tell your grandmother that she did an amazing job," Bee said, reaching over to stroke the fabric of the skirt. "It looks stunning on you."

"Thanks," August said. All the girls admired her dress for a few minutes before the conversation eased back into school and their last few weeks before graduation.

By the time they pulled into the Italian restaurant, August was laughing and chatting with everyone in the limo. Emily clutched at her elbow as they unloaded from the car. August thought it was just a move to steady herself, but then Emily leaned in close and whispered in her ear. "Okay, so which of the guys do you think looks the best tonight?"

"What?" August whispered back. "I don't know." She was surprised at how easily she had found a place with these girls and how quickly they had looped her into their conversations.

Emily ignored her hesitance and continued whispering. "Caleb looks great, but he's with Ingrid. Obviously."

"Do you think Ingrid knows that we all know that the two of them are together?" August whispered back, giddy at the thought of being inside this secret. The rest of the group had piled into the restaurant's entrance, and James held the door as they followed.

"I don't think she has a clue," Emily giggled. "She thinks they're being so sneaky. We all saw them holding hands in the limo, and Courtney saw them making out in the back of the movie theater two weekends ago. Anyway, he's off the table. Ryan is a total mess, so he's a no-go, although he does clean up nicely. So that leaves James and Josh. Which one are you going for?"

"Isn't James with Bee?" August asked, glancing at Bee, who was chatting with the hostess.

"No," Emily rolled her eyes. "I don't think they would ever get together. James and Bee are like siblings. They've known each other since they were like infants."

August tried to recontextualize all the glances and smiles exchanged between the two as mere friendship, but she didn't have long to dwell on it before they followed the hostess to a long table. The group shuffled around, and August sat between Emily and Bee.

The conversation quieted momentarily as everyone at the table flipped through their menus. August's eyes almost

popped out as she looked over the menu and saw the price tags. She swallowed and quickly scanned the table. No one else seemed phased.

"Have you been here before?" Emily asked, leaning in towards August. "You have to get the lobster ravioli. It's heavenly." She pointed, and August followed her finger to a price tag that equated to almost five hours of work at the country club. While August knew she wasn't as well-off as most of her classmates, her grandmother had worked hard to ensure August rarely felt the difference. But tonight, she suspected she was the only one at the table who wouldn't use her parent's credit card to pay for their dinner.

"I'm not a big fan of seafood," August said, hoping the words didn't sound like a lie.

Emily nodded and was thankfully sucked into a conversation with Ingrid a moment later. August went back to searching the menu for the cheapest items. She finally decided on a risotto that was technically in the menu's appetizer section but easily seemed like it could be a meal. It sounded fantastic, but what really sold her was the price tag, which was ten dollars less than the least expensive pasta dish.

"Did you decide what you were getting?" Emily asked as soon as August's menu was closed in front of her.

August nodded. "I'm getting the lemon and artichoke risotto," she said, pointing to it on the menu.

Emily scrunched up her nose. "That's an appetizer."

"I know. It just looks so good!"

"But the pasta here is so amazing, Aug! You need to get some," Emily said, adding on a nickname that August had never heard before coming out of Emily's mouth, and she wasn't entirely sure she liked it.

"The risotto looks fantastic," Bee cut in. "I think I'll get that, too, if you don't mind me copying you." She flashed a broad smile in Emily and August's direction, her hair slipping across the bare skin of her shoulder.

August shook her head. "Go for it," she half mumbled. Her face was red again—she could feel it—but Emily seemed

satisfied with Bee's judgment on the matter, and the table moved back into regular chatter.

The waitress came around and took orders a few minutes later, and August wound up ordering a salad, too, not quick enough with an excuse to be the only one at the table to pass. She added the cost in her head and grimaced.

The risotto was fantastic, and August spent most of the meal chatting with Bee about their shared English class and college plans. They both were attending Yale in the fall. Bee was a fourth-generation legacy, and August was on a full scholarship. Bee hoped to study English or maybe political science; she had plans to attend law school. August wasn't sure what she wanted to study, perhaps business or economics, and then onto an MBA.

Despite having shared AP courses for most of their high school careers, August had never spent much time talking to Bee. Part of her had always been a little frightened of Bee's polish. She had all the making of a future senator's wife without even trying. If August stopped trying... it wasn't really an option for her. But talking with Bee had been easy, fun even.

"I'm going to pop into the restroom to freshen up," Bee said, leaning down to whisper in August's ear.

"I'll come with," August said without a second thought. She would rather be with Bee than be left at the table to talk with Emily and Ingrid about their summer vacation plans to exotic locations that August could only dream about visiting.

Bee walked ahead of August, her steps confident in the heels that made August's feet hurt even looking at them. She stopped in the back corner, where their waitress was chatting with one of the busboys. Bee gave her one of her signature white-toothed smiles, reaching to touch the waitress's arm. "Is there any way I could give you my card and have you take care of my table?" Bee asked her. August tried her best to hide her shock. There were nine of them at dinner tonight, and by the time she added in the cost of drinks, salads, and

appetizers, it was at least fifty dollars per person, probably a lot more for most of them. But Bee seemed unbothered by the thought of dropping well over five hundred dollars in a single meal, not even bothering to ask for the total before handing over her card.

“Of course. Do you guys need anything else?” the waitress said, taking the card from between Bee’s fingers.

She paused for a minute. “We should do desserts.” She turned towards August, who just blinked back at her in confusion. “What do you recommend?” Bee asked, turning back to the waitress.

“The chocolate cake and tiramisu tend to be our most popular.”

“We’ll do two of each. I think that should be enough for the table to share?” Bee looked over at August for her approval. August wasn’t sure, but she nodded anyway.

“Perfect,” the waitress said. “I’ll get those right out for you guys.”

“Thank you so much,” Bee said with another smile.

“I can pay you back,” August said, taking long steps to catch up with Bee.

“Don’t worry about it. It’s my treat,” Bee said and stepped inside the bathroom. Bee stopped at the mirror and pulled a tube of red lipstick out of her purse. “Think of it as my graduation gift to everyone.”

“Thank you,” August said.

August hadn’t thought to bring her lipstick with her, so instead, she just looked at herself in the mirror next to Bee, wiping at the edges of her lips like she was fixing lipstick that was no longer there. She watched Bee out of the corner of her eye, contrasting their faces. Bee looked good on the worst days, but tonight she looked perfect, her skin tan and glowing, with a beautiful golden smokey eye on her lids. It made Bee’s make-up feel all the more unimpressive.

“Do you want some lipstick?” Bee asked. “I brought a nude shade if you don’t want to do the red.” She was digging

through the bag before August had a chance to protest. She passed over a gold tube a moment later.

August slipped it over her lips while Bee watched her through the mirror. It was an expensive brand. August could tell by how heavy the tube was. It felt nice against her lips, creamy with the slightest hint of vanilla scent. "It's a good color on you," Bee said with a little nod of approval as August finished. "You should keep it."

"That's so nice, but you don't need to do that." August tried to hand the tube back to Bee, but Bee held up her hands in refusal.

"I insist. It looks better on you than on me." Bee smiled and then slipped out of the bathroom.



## 4 *Where it All Went Wrong*

*Plus, I saw you dance with him*

### **Bee**

*May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2008 - Prom Night*

When they arrived at Ocean Oaks, prom was already in full swing. The sun was still setting, but it was dark inside the tent. The dance floor was already bursting with writhing bodies. Girls with glazed eyes, already drunk at eight p.m. on two hard lemonades and half a mouthful of tequila, danced against boys in tuxedos who they wouldn't speak to again after they graduated in three weeks.

They had passed around a flask of something on the ride between the restaurant and the club. Bee had let it splash against her lips but didn't drink anything. She would have a couple of drinks later when she was home, but it was too early to let the fuzz of alcohol blur the edges of her evening.

She steered the group into a quiet corner, waving at familiar faces as she passed. Later, she'd do a few rounds in the room, saying hi to everyone she knew, but for now, she wanted to

make sure everyone in her group was comfortable. Ingrid and Caleb had already drifted off. They swayed to their own rhythm, ignoring the rapid pulse of the pop song.

The rest of their group looked around anxiously, waiting for someone to give them permission to enjoy themselves as their shoulders swayed to the beat. The song shifted, and when no one moved toward the dance floor, Bee felt obligated to do something. "I love this song," she announced, her face breaking into a wide smile as she swung her hips from side to side and raised her arms over her head. Although she was vaguely familiar with the female voice coming through the speaker, Bee couldn't have named this song if a gun had been held to her head. Regardless, it worked; everyone in the groups started dancing in earnest now, giggles breaking out from Courtney's mouth.

James caught her eye from across the circle and shook his head, his smug grin matching her own. She threw her head back, aware of his gaze tracing down the long line of her neck. If she could have gotten away with it, she would have ditched everyone else and spent the night with James. He hated crowds and would probably spend a good chunk of his evening sitting outside rather than navigating the busy dance floor. But hopefully, she could snag a few dances with him before he disappeared.

She jumped as a hand brushed against her shoulder. "Do you want to dance?" Ryan asked with a sheepish grimace. Bee agreed and followed him to the dance floor, where she stayed for about a dozen songs, dancing with several different guys and groups of girls.

Bee scanned the crowd for James as she stepped off the dance floor. She had lost track of him somewhere around song six. She didn't see James, but August was standing alone in the corner, sipping on a glass of water.

"Hey," Bee said, trying to be loud even though she was breathless.

"Hey." August seemed to be having fun. Bee had been worried about her when she had been so quiet at the

restaurant, but she seemed to be doing fine. She danced with several different guys and jumped in a circle with Courtney and Emily during the last song.

"Are you having a nice time?" Bee asked, leaning down so her mouth was closer to August's ear, so she could be heard over the music.

"I am," August said with a little giggle.

"You sound surprised."

"I didn't think a high school dance was really my scene," August said. "I'm more of a movie night at home type of girl."

"I don't know if a high school dance is really anyone's scene," said Bee. "I would be worried about you if the place you felt most at home was a dance floor full of people grinding on each other to top forty music while their chemistry teacher stands in the corner. There's a reason adults only do this when they are drunk."

August laughed. Bee had thoroughly enjoyed her conversation with August over dinner. Despite the fact they shared several classes, Bee never really had much of a chance to chat with August. August was quiet, always sitting in the back row and rarely raising her hand. But Bee knew August was smart.

Bee would have made more of an effort to befriend August, but August was rarely without Thea, and Bee found Thea insufferable. Everyone else seemed smitten with Thea's ability to woo a room without trying. It wasn't as if Thea didn't notice that she was captivating and beautiful; she just didn't care. Thea didn't care if her teachers thought she was lazy or if the parents on the school board thought she was directionless. She didn't care if the boys thought she was hot or if the girls thought she dressed strangely. For Bee, who worked hard to cultivate an image that everyone would love, Thea's carelessness was grating. August seemed content to lurk in Thea's shadow.

But tonight at dinner, without Thea's overbearing presence, Bee had found conversation with August delightful,

and she had to admire that August had been the only one who had tried to pay her back for dinner. James would have tried, too, but they had had that fight too many times. It didn't escape her notice that he had left a small stack of bills on the table for the tip, even though she had already tipped twenty-five percent on her card.

Bee was just about to ask August about her summer plans when she felt a hand on her back, the fingers clammy in the heat of the room. She spun, a practiced smile already on her face when she recognized her ex-boyfriend, Mason.

"Mason," she said with what she hoped sounded like genuine delight. "How are you? You look great."

"Thanks, Bee," Mason said. His eyes moved from her face down her body in a way that felt far too invasive for a boy who had broken up with her in her driveway less than a month ago. "You look really hot."

"Thanks," she said as she grabbed August's arm. "Do you know August?"

"Yeah. We had bio together last year," he said, offering a brief smile toward August before his eyes snapped back to Bee's. "Will you dance with me?" Bee couldn't help the little breathy laugh that escaped her lips at the audacity of that request. "Look, I know we're over, but we were together for a long time, and it's prom," he said, as if that was a compelling reason.

Bee didn't say anything, her eyes tracing his familiar face. "One dance." Giving him one dance would be easier than risking a scene if she rejected him.

"One dance," he agreed, pulling her away.

Bee turned back towards August, standing there watching this unfold. "Are you okay?" she asked. Mason was still tugging on her arm.

"I'm fine. I need some fresh air anyway," August shouted as Bee was pulled into the crowd. Bee could only nod once until August had disappeared behind a wall of people.

Bee looped her hands behind Mason's neck, and he leaned in close to whisper in her ear. "I'm pretty sure you are the

most beautiful girl here tonight,” he said. His breath was hot, but he smelled nice. She recognized the aftershave she had gotten him for Christmas, mixed with the faintest whisper of whiskey on his breath. She had fallen into bed with the same smell countless times over the last few months. His words didn’t mean much; she would have bet money that he had said the same thing to multiple other girls that evening, but she smiled like she cared.

Her cheek came to rest against his shoulder as the music slowed, his hand slipping around her and pulling another inch closer. “I miss you,” he said against her hair.

She laughed again, unable to stop the sound from escaping her lips. “Sorry?” she said, not bothering to hide the snide animosity that leaked into her tone.

“Maybe we should talk. I think I made a mistake. We could have the whole summer together, Bee. Maybe we even try long distance during college,” he continued, unperturbed by her clear dismissal.

Bee continued swaying, not wanting to draw attention to them. “You did make a mistake, and I am nowhere near desperate enough to take you back after that. And honestly, Mason, there was never any chance we would date into college. I probably would have broken up with you after prom.” She spoke only loud enough so he could hear her. When she was done, she stepped back, her hands dropping from around his neck.

“Seriously, Bee?” he said, his hands clenching into fists at his side.

“Seriously, Mason,” she said, turning and walking away. “Have a good summer.”

## 5 Salt Air

*Wanting was enough, for me it was enough*

### August

*May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2008 - Prom Night*

August took a deep breath as she stepped out from under the tent. She hadn't realized how hot and humid it was until she could breathe air untainted by everyone else's sweat. She stood for a moment outside, the air still pulsing with the bass of whatever song was playing. A cold breeze rippled across her skin, and she shivered as goosebumps rose along her collarbones.

She headed down a familiar path towards her favorite bench that overlooked the golf course. After running her hand across the smooth wooden seat to make sure it wasn't wet, August sat down and closed her eyes. Tonight had been fun. She would have plenty to report back to Grams in the morning, but she wished she could go home now. The thought of her warm bed and a pair of pajamas made her toes curl in her shoes.

She was contemplating calling Thea to ask her for a ride home when a hand landed on her shoulder. “Sorry,” James apologized as August jolted back. She hadn’t realized anyone else was out here. “I didn’t mean to scare you. Do you mind if I sit?” He gestured towards the bench next to August.

She scooted over a few inches, scooping up her dress, and nodded. He sat down with a deep sigh and stretched his legs out in front of him, crossing them at the ankles. “So, how has your night been so far? Everything you hoped for?” he asked.

She shrugged, but he watched her, waiting for an answer. “I don’t know. My expectations weren’t exactly high. But I’ve had a nice time. What about you? Has it been everything you wanted it to be?”

He sighed, looking away over the grassy hills, barely distinguishable in the lights leaking from the tent. “Not really. I hate crowds.” He shook his head and sighed. “Maybe I’ve been watching too many movies, but I was hoping for some prom magic.”

“What do you mean? Like you were hoping for someone pulling rabbits out of hats in the corner?”

He laughed. The sound was warm, wrapping around August like a hug. “No, not a magician. Prom magic. I guess, like in the movies, prom is always this final triumphant scene. This moment that’s the culmination of the whole high school experience. But tonight has mostly been the same as any other night except people are dressed better.”

“The night is still young. There’s still time for some prom magic,” she said. His face was back-lit by the lights in the parking lot, so all she could see was the shape of him—the long slope of his nose, the curve of his chin, the line of his jaw.

He turned towards her. “August,” he said and then paused, a wide grin stretching across his face. “Would you like to find some prom magic with me?”

“Hmmm,” August feigned hesitation for a moment, but she couldn’t deny that she was eager to do whatever James wanted. Maybe it was all the dancing, or maybe it was just the

dimple on James's cheek when he smiled, but she would have done anything with that boy tonight. "What do you have in mind?"

He stood, hands on his hips, and assessed the dark grounds around him, pausing to look up at the main building. "Do you think we could get on the roof?"

August smiled. "Well, as it turns out, you're in luck. I know a girl, and by that, I mean I happen to have a key," she whispered even though no one was around to hear. She wanted this to feel like a secret that only the two of them shared.

"Are you serious?" James laughed again, just a little laugh this time. He probably hadn't even noticed it. It was just punctuation for his surprise.

"Yeah. I work here, at the club."

"What of the chances of all the girls I could have bumped into tonight, I'd find the one with the key to the roof. That is some real movie-style prom magic."

August smiled and felt it all the way to her toes.

James stretched out his hand for hers. "Lead the way." She put his hand in his. It was warm and rougher than she expected, his calluses scratching against the skin on her knuckles. They ran towards the front doors of the country club, August's dress crumpled up in the hand that wasn't in James's, her heels clicking against the path.

August's hands shook as she dug her keys out of her bag. James put his body just behind her, shielding her from any eyes from the parking lot. The key turned easily in the lock, but before she opened the door, she turned to whisper, "Sara is probably still here, so we have to be quiet."

James's fingers curled around her wrist, for the first time, hesitant. "Are you sure? We don't have to go in there. I don't want you to get in trouble."

August shook her head. "Sara is sweet. We wouldn't get in trouble, but she would probably kick us out."

He nodded. August held a finger up to her lips and opened the door. James grabbed her hand again and followed close



behind her as she walked past the front desk and turned the corner. A sliver of light was spilling into the hallway from a door at the end, Sara's office. James moved a little closer, his shoulder brushing against August's as she slid the door to the roof open slowly, praying that it wouldn't make a sound.

Neither released a breath until the door was safely closed behind them. James turned to her with a wide grin, but neither dared to speak. They started up the stairs, treading lightly so their footsteps didn't echo. The stairway wasn't completely dark; it was lit with several emergency lights, but it felt a little spooky. August was glad James had yet to let go of her hand.

They emerged onto the roof. The tent looked so much smaller from up here. It was glowing against the darkness that cloaked the rest of the grounds, flashing through a kaleidoscope of colors. The ocean breeze whipped around them, tugging at August's hair. The blank expanse of the sea was visible on the other side of the roof. August wrapped her arms around herself and took a step towards the railing.

She felt James come up behind her. His hands moved up and down her biceps, trying to rub warmth into them. She shivered, but not because she was cold. "I didn't realize prom magic would be freezing cold," August said, turning toward James.

He leaned down to rest his chin on her left shoulder. He wrapped his arms tighter around August, pulling her so she was flush with his chest. He smelled amazing. They stood for a long moment, staring out into the blackness in front of them, the sounds from the prom a muffled thrum. She would have stayed up here for the rest of the night with his arms wrapped around her. In fact, she could think of nothing more delicious than watching the sun rise over the waves with his hot breath on her ear.

The song changed in the prom tent to something slower. "August," James said, his voice low and breathy. "Will you dance with me?" He took a step away from her and held out his hand.

She took it, glad he wouldn't be able to see the color that she was sure had risen in her cheeks. He pulled her into his body. His hands wrapped tightly around her waist, as hers found a place on his shoulder and they began to sway. Even though they could hear the music, it was distant, not rattling the air as it did in the tents—the sounds of the waves louder than the song's melody.

August closed her eyes as she rested her cheek on James's chest. They swayed in the dark, neither speaking as the song played. She could hear his breath. The next song started, but James didn't let go, still swaying. "Why did your parents name you August?" James asked.

She paused for a moment. "My birthday is August first, and I think my mother was just a little lazy and uncreative," August said. She didn't really want to think about her mother now, didn't want the bitter taste of anger to taint this perfect moment.

"Hmmm," he said. They continued to move, his hand warm against her back. "I like it. August is a good month. The last blistering hot days of summer before everything starts to get cold and die in the fall."

"The beginning of the end."

"No. That's September. August is the moment before that, the moment where it seems possible that it could stay this way forever."

They slipped back into silence again, swaying through another song before it switched to something faster. August took a step back, dropping her hands from behind his neck. They had moved closer to the lights of the tent as they had been dancing, and she could see his face now.

James watched her; his eyes flickered toward her lips before meeting her gaze again. "Thank you," he said.

"For what?"

"For my little slice of prom magic."

They spent the rest of the evening on the roof. They started in two separate corners of the couch, but as the evening went on, August ended up tucked up against James's arm, her

head resting against his shoulder. The conversation was easy. James made her laugh and listened as she talked about her fears about graduating and leaving for college in the fall. James was taking a gap year to save money before heading to NYU. He was a writer and told her about his story ideas as his finger trailed mindlessly up and down her arms. August had never been in love before, but she had a feeling that this was how it started.

## 6 Get in the Car

*But do you remember? Remember when I pulled up and said,  
"Get in the car"*

### August

*May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2008 - Prom Night*

Bee's backyard was lit with rows of string lights draping back and forth, reflecting into the pool to create a second starry sky on the water. The house was gorgeous, something straight out of a magazine, but the backyard—with its enormous pool and view that overlooked a wide stretch of the ocean—felt more like a dream under the twinkling lights.

August was currently hiding. She had found a chair in a dark corner of the back porch and was pretending to drink a beer. She had texted Thea on the ride over to ask if she was coming but didn't get a response. Thea had probably already fallen asleep; it was late. She would likely leave soon but was rather enjoying observing the party from afar.

Their limo had returned to an empty house, but a seemingly endless stream of people had poured into the yard

over the next hour. The deck and area around the pool filled quickly with shouting men in tuxedos, jackets abandoned and bowties hanging loose, and women in brightly colored gowns, barefoot and make-up melting down their faces. But Bee still looked perfect. Her red lip was still precisely where she had put it after dinner. She floated from conversation to conversation, always a welcome guest, talking animatedly for a few minutes, laughter spilling from the rest of the group before moving on to the next. Bee had been nursing the same dark drink since they had arrived, and August would have sworn that the level of her drink hadn't moved an inch.

August was about to get up and leave when Bee plopped herself into the lounge next to her. "I think you have the right idea," Bee said, stretching back and crossing her legs at the end of the chair. Her heels were still strapped to her ankles. "How are you doing?"

"Fine," August said with a little smile. "Thank you for having me."

"You're welcome to spend the night here if you want," Bee said. Her eyes followed the crowds of people. "There's a couple of guest rooms and a ton of couches."

August shook her head. "Thank you, but I should go home. My grandmother will be worried."

Bee nodded. "I can't lie. I'm a little jealous. I wish I didn't have to stay at this party either."

August was surprised by the statement. She had never seen Bee this soft, her typically polished shine worn away to reveal the same skin and bones as any other eighteen-year-old. "Did something happen?" she asked.

"No," Bee said. She turned towards the crowd again, and the pool's reflection washed her face in ripples of light. "Tonight just wasn't what I hoped it would be."

"The night is still young. There's still time," August said, offering her the same promise that she had offered James a few hours before. They had stayed on that roof for a while. As soon as they were back in the tent, August and James got pulled in separate directions, but August smiled,

thinking about James and how his body felt next to her, up on that roof, warm and solid. It had been a perfect moment, even if it had only lasted for an hour.

Bee laughed, and the hard shellac fell back into place. "My night is over. I've just got to babysit these idiots for a while, make sure no one drowns or drives home drunk, and then I'm going to bed."

There was sudden shouting from the other side of the yard, and Bee rose, smoothing the line of her dress and still holding her glass. "I should go check on that. We should hang out sometime when we aren't surrounded by corsages and shouting boys," Bee said. "Have a good rest of your night."

August watched Bee's back, her navy gown swishing from side to side, her fist holding it just above the blades of grass, as she walked away. Her hair bounced until she was swallowed by the gaggle of people in the far corner of the yard. Then August stood and slipped around to the front of the house.

She passed a dozen people walking to her car, but none noticed her. The driveway was significantly more crowded than when she arrived almost eight hours ago, but luckily, no one had blocked her in. She climbed in, and the radio turned on. The low voice of some women offering advice filled the space. August didn't pay it much attention as she backed out of the driveway, careful to avoid the small collection of people who had stumbled into the front yard.

She felt a bit like Cinderella returning home after the ball. Tonight had felt almost magical. James had made her feel special up on the roof, asking her question after question and carefully listening to every answer as if it mattered.

Once she was clear of Bee's driveway, she passed dozens of other homes and their oversized brick facades and shutters. The neighborhood was quiet at this time of night, the pounding music from Bee's backyard fading into memory as she drove a few blocks down. August turned off the radio and enjoyed the silence. The street was dim, only lit by the glow of her headlights and the occasional bright porch light. She was surprised when she saw a figure dressed all in

black walking down the sidewalk in front of her. He was in a tux, and she slowed to see if she could recognize the face. Woodvale was a safe town, but she didn't feel great about anyone wandering the streets alone at this hour, especially if they weren't sober.

His head turned towards her car, and she recognized him immediately. She pulled to a stop next to him and rolled down the passenger window. "James," she shouted. He froze for a second, knees bent, ready to make a run for it before he recognized her, and his features softened into a smile, his dimple popping up on his cheek. "Need a ride?"

"Thanks, but I'm okay. It's not too far of a walk to my house."

"It's late," August said. The air pouring into her car window was cold, so she adjusted the heat. "Let me drive you home."

"I'm really fine. I make this walk all the time."

"James, get in the car," August said. She tried to make her voice seem authoritative, but based on the way James laughed, she wasn't sure it had the effect she had hoped for. But he sighed and rolled his eyes, and then he pulled on her car door handle.

"You're demanding," he said as he closed the car door and pulled his seat belt across his chest.

"What happened to your car?"

He was rubbing his hands and holding them up to the vents. "Nothing. My car's fine. But I had a few drinks, so I wasn't going to drive."

He didn't seem like he had been drinking, but she wouldn't argue with him. "Oh. Very responsible of you."

He nodded, acknowledging her statement, and August started back down the road. The car was silent for a moment before he spoke again. "Hey, August?"

"What?" She turned her head and found him watching her, dimple on full display.

"Before we go home, could I tempt you with a milkshake? My treat, of course."

August looked down at the clock. Her grandmother had insisted that August stay out as late as she wanted, and now that James was in the car, she was suddenly not tired at all, grateful for an excuse to extend their magical night for a little longer. "Sure."

"Perfect."

James directed her to the only drive-thru open at this time of night, where he paid for both of their milkshakes, his chocolate and hers strawberry. He insisted they drive to the beach, and August pulled her car to an empty parking lot overlooking the coastline. He opened his door, and the sounds of waves crashing against the shore and the smell of the salt air hit her.

He ran to her side of the car and offered her his jacket. She put it on top of her dress while he held her milkshake. It smelled warm, like a boy, like him. She inhaled deeply before taking her shake back from James. He shook his head. "Leave your shoes in the car," he said, nodding towards her heels. She noticed his bare toes at the bottom of his trousers.

Once her shoes were safely tucked inside the car, she followed James towards the wooden stairs. She walked slowly and clung to the railing. The steps were barely visible, only lit by the one light in the parking lot. James walked one step in front of her, holding out an arm in case she started to slip.

She relaxed as her feet sunk into the sand. They started walking, making their way down towards the water, where the sand was firmer and easier to walk on. August always forgot how noisy the ocean was, even now, when the beach was empty. The sound of the waves hitting the shore rattled her. It was a different kind of noise than the rest of the evening. That noise, the music and the people were busy, constantly asking something from you. The ocean needed nothing from her. August began to think about all the turns that her evening had taken to lead her to this moment, walking on a dark, empty beach, her prom dress dragging in the sand, with James McDaniels, drinking a strawberry milkshake.



"How's your milkshake?" James asked. The waves threatened to kiss their feet every few seconds, but so far, they had avoided the water actually brushing against their toes.

"Delicious," August said, and she laughed. She wasn't sure why. It hadn't been funny, but the noise had bubbled up out of her anyway.

"Let me try," James said, reaching his hand out for her cup. She extended it towards him, but instead of taking it in his hand, he leaned down and wrapped his lips around the straw, his fingers brushing against hers to steady her hand. She watched as his cheeks hollowed, and then his throat bobbed. He leaned back, the tip of his tongue darting over his lips. "You're right; it's delicious."

August giggled, but the sound came out tight and higher than usual. Something about the way his lips had curled around that straw and the sight of his tongue had made her insides tighten. They walked for a few more feet before August asked a question she was afraid to hear the answer to. "Do you take lots of girls for milkshakes and night walks on the beach?"

James paused for a second. "Never on prom night."

"But other nights?"

He didn't say anything for a minute. The hand not holding his cup was tucked into his pocket, and his pants were unevenly cuffed. "Milkshakes and the beach are some of the best parts of this town, so yes, I have. But I have never taken a girl on a night where we've already experienced prom magic. And more importantly, I've never taken you."

She rolled her eyes but smiled. "I'm on to you, James McDaniels. This is one of your moves." If he was trying to woo her, he needn't work so hard at it. She had been a giggling mess of butterflies from the first time he had taken her hand and asked her to find some prom magic with him.

"Is it working?" he asked. He stopped walking and turned towards her, his back to the ocean.

"I'm not sure," she said.

“Well, there’s one way to test it,” he said. He reached down and grabbed her loose hand, spinning her towards him. “If I asked to kiss you right now, would you say yes?”

James held her eyes, his thumb stroking the back side of her hand. She bit her lip, and her stomach flipped into her chest. “I would.”

His hand dropped hers and moved to cup her cheek. Her eyes fluttered closed as his lips pressed against hers. His lips were cold, tasting like chocolate and salt air. But it only took a few moments for them to warm up, heat now moving through every part of her as he kissed her again. She had been wrong before; their time on the roof had been fun and memorable, but this is what magic felt like.

## **7 After the Party**

*Peter losing Wendy*

### **Bee**

*May 4<sup>th</sup>, 2008*

When Bee woke up Sunday morning, she immediately rolled over and checked her phone. She had a half dozen incoherent texts from various girls, most of whom were still asleep throughout her house, but nothing from James. He had disappeared last night before she could talk to him. She read through the text messages she had sent and even checked her call log to confirm that she had indeed called James twice before she had given up sometime just before two. But there was nothing from him.

She knew he had arrived at her house after prom. She had seen him taking shots with the other guys from the group minutes after they had piled out of the limo, but she hadn't seen him again. His truck was still tucked in the corner of her driveway, but that didn't mean much; she knew he would walk home if he had been drinking. She had barely seen him at

prom, too. According to Ingrid, he had disappeared with August sometime in the first couple of hours, and neither of them had been seen again until the end of the night.

But James hadn't been with August at the party. She was sure he had gone home early. He hated crowds and drunk people, so last night was his nightmare, but she wished he had said goodbye to her or, at the very least, texted her back. It wasn't like him to completely disappear on her like that.

She opened her phone and typed out another message: "Hello? Are you alive?" She sent it and waited, staring at the screen for a few seconds, waiting for his reply to bounce back, but her phone was silent. She checked the time. It was early, and he was probably still asleep. It would do her no good to stay here and wait for her phone to ring. She changed into shorts and a sports bra and grabbed her iPod and a pair of headphones.

Unsurprisingly, the house was still quiet as she headed downstairs, everyone still tucked away into guest rooms or piled into oversized chairs in the theater. The party had wrapped up sometime around three, and it had been another almost hour before she had everyone put away in various rooms and the backyard back in an acceptable state. Even though she had only slept a few hours, her body still woke up just after seven. She could never manage to sleep in much past then.

She left through the back door, wanting to give the backyard another once-over in the light of day. She tossed a couple of beer cans that she had missed in the recycling bin and started down her long driveway.

Her feet and calves were sore from the hours she had spent in her heels yesterday. She wondered if you ever truly got accustomed to the feeling or if women across the globe were in a constant state of denial about their feet hurting. Her body was stiff, and her head throbbed dimly. It must have been from the lack of sleep because she had barely had more than a few sips of her drink last night.

Her parents didn't care if she threw parties at the house. They popped in earplugs and pretended they couldn't hear the dozens of drunk teens in their backyard. They would rather she partied at home, where they could better control the situation. There was, however, a series of rules that Bee had to follow when hosting "events," as her mother called them. The first was no one drives home drunk. This was, in general, a good rule, but her mother made it clear that Bee needed to enforce this, taking keys and putting people in guest rooms. A teen getting a DUI coming home from a party at the Spencers' house wouldn't look good. Second, there were no cameras and no photos allowed if alcohol was out. It didn't matter if you hadn't touched a sip of beer. If someone was drinking, there were no photos. Third, there should be no damage to the house or furnishings, so Bee tried to host outside whenever possible. Their outdoor furniture was markedly less fragile than the stuff inside. And finally, as the host, Bee was not allowed to get drunk under any circumstances. Her mother thought this was a good rule for all events but completely non-negotiable if you were the host.

Her peers had been to enough "events" at Bee's house that the rules no longer needed explaining, and Bee was grateful that she didn't need to do too much policing. She had to stop a tree-climbing contest last night, which would have certainly ended with a trip to the hospital, which, although not an official rule, was heavily frowned upon. There had also been a quick game of chicken in the pool—in full tuxedos—which Bee had closely monitored but went shockingly smooth.

Bee's body was warm now, her joints loosening as she found a comfortable pace and started moving up the hill to the top of her neighborhood. She wasn't planning on being out for long this morning. She'd be home again before anyone else started waking up, but she couldn't just sit and wait for the phone to ring. She wouldn't be that kind of girl, even for James.

While Bee had always separated James from the other boys in their school, in actuality, he wasn't that different; in fact,

some might say he was worse. He had dated at least seven of her classmates throughout their high school career, and she suspected he had slept with at least another handful of others, although she preferred that he kept the details of his bedroom life private. James liked girls, and girls liked James. The girls he dated swooned about him opening car doors, bringing them flowers, and impressing their dads.

Bee knew a different version of James. He was the one who always gave her one pop tart out of his pack and brought her grandmother red, white, and blue grocery store daisies, the dye still dripping off the stems every fourth of July. It wasn't that he was pretending to be something he wasn't at school. He was the same thoughtful and bright guy everywhere he went.

It wasn't as if she hadn't considered something romantic with James before that kiss yesterday, but it was a rare occurrence that both of them were single at the same time. More than that, their friendship was so sacred and rare that the thought of tainting it with something romantic seemed distasteful. But next year they were moving apart. Bee was off to Yale, while James stayed here for the year before heading to NYU. It was their last chance to give this a try.

And that kiss yesterday felt like nothing Bee had experienced before. It felt like sinking into the ocean. Not here, but in the Caribbean, where the turquoise waters were as warm as a bath. She wanted more of that. She wanted nights in her sweatpants, her hair a mess, tucked under his arm as they watched their favorite movies. She wanted one summer where she didn't have to pretend. A summer without the looming responsibilities of getting into college, internships, or summer conditioning for tennis. She wanted an easy summer with him.

The house was still quiet when she returned, and after checking to ensure no one was wandering around, she closed herself back in her bedroom and checked her phone. James had finally messaged back six minutes earlier. "Sorry. I didn't check my phone last night." No mention of his early exit from the party or an apology for not saying goodbye.

She thought about calling him but texted him back instead. “Missed you at the party. Are you busy later?” She waited, holding the phone in her hand for a long moment, hoping for a quick reply, but the phone screen stayed black.

She tossed the phone back on the bed and jumped in the shower, rinsing away the sweat and hair spray that had managed to cling to her hair, even after her shower last night. When James still hadn’t responded when she finished getting ready, she gathered a bag of school stuff and tossed her phone inside. On the way down the stairs, she poked her head into her parents’ room. It was empty, which wasn’t shocking. Her mom was likely having brunch at the club with her friends, and her dad was either in the office or golfing. She tiptoed through the main level of the house, not wanting to disturb anyone still sleeping, and made her way to the kitchen. She tossed her bag on the bench.

A large bag of bagels and several tubs of cream cheese were sitting on the island in the middle of the kitchen. Her mother must have picked them up while Bee was on her run. Bee pulled out a stack of plates and butter knives so people could serve themselves when they got up. She also started a pot of coffee and confirmed they had orange juice in the fridge.

She unpacked her bag, pulling a stack of textbooks and several rubber-banded piles of flashcards. She had her AP Biology exam on Thursday and would likely spend most of the day studying. After checking to make sure she hadn’t missed a message on her phone, she opened her textbook and started rereading her notes.

Just after nine, the first girls wandered into the kitchen, bleary-eyed, with mascara still smeared under their eyes. “Morning, Bee,” Emily said, her voice raspy and tired. She winced against the sunlight coming into the kitchen.

“Hey, Em,” Bee said. “There’s coffee and bagels. You’re welcome to whatever.”

“Thanks,” Emily said. She sat in one of the barstools at the counter and started digging through the bag of bagels.

Courtney walked over toward the kitchen table and sat across from Bee. "I can't believe you are studying. How do you look so pulled together after last night?"

Bee laughed. "Thanks. My body refuses to sleep in, so I've been up for a while. It's a wonder how much better a shower and bagel can make you feel."

The girls grabbed bagels and coffee and chatted with Bee. A few other people began to crawl out from wherever Bee had stuck them last night before they had collapsed, all in various stages of dishevelment. The kitchen was so full of bodies grimacing about headaches and reliving their memories from the night before that Bee almost didn't hear her phone buzz from across the table.

She flipped it open and peered down at the screen. A message from James: "I'm working today. See you at school."

"Come over after work," Bee sent back immediately, hoping that he was still on his phone.

This time, James' message arrived a few moments later. "Can't. I've got homework."

"You're the worst," Bee sent. She gnawed on her lip and thought for a moment. They did have a lot of homework as the final weeks of the school year came to a close, but that never stopped James from coming over. Throughout their high school careers, he had spent hundreds of hours doing homework spread across her bedroom floor, while she worked at her desk. Something was wrong, but she didn't have time to think further than that as another girl wandered into the kitchen.



## **8 Meet Me Behind the Mall**

*Now I'm waiting by the phone like I'm sitting in an airport bar*

### **August**

*May 4<sup>th</sup>, 2008*

August hadn't been able to sleep. She arrived home after dropping James off at his house just before three. They had stayed at the beach for a couple of hours, at first just walking up and down the sand and then sitting in August's car with the heater running when her fingers got too cold. He kissed her again one more time before he climbed out of the car. It was sweet and soft, a promise of more, or at least she hoped so.

Her lips were still buzzing as she tiptoed up the stairs, her heels in her hand. The house was quiet; her grandmother and brother were asleep in their rooms. She closed the door softly to her bedroom and fell back onto her bed as she recalled the moment when his lips had brushed against hers. It hadn't been a particularly aggressive kiss. His lips had been soft against her, his hand not straying from where he cupped her face, his thumb stroking over her cheekbone. She wanted more.

She stayed awake until her room started to lighten into a shade of gray. Her prom dress hung on the back of her door. The bottom was stained from dragging across the sand last night. She closed her eyes and smiled as she remembered the feeling of the water touching her toes and the scratch of his calluses against her palms as she fell asleep.

August woke to her mattress bouncing as someone landed on the other side of her bed. She groaned and pulled the covers over her head, still half-asleep. "August!" Thea shouted. She tried to pull the blanket down, and when that didn't work, she climbed under the covers next to August. "How was prom? Did you have fun?"

"I hate you," August grumbled. She sat up and yawned, realizing that any attempts to get more sleep would be fruitless. "What time is it?"

Thea turned to look at the clock on August's nightstand. "Nine forty-two."

"Ugh," August said, letting her head collapse back onto the pillow. I need to hire better security. I can't believe Grams let you come upstairs."

Thea propped her head up on her elbow and faced August. "So, how was it? Was it terrible?"

August rubbed at her eyes. "It was fun. I had a nice time."

"You've got to give me more than that. Was there any drama? Who danced with who? Did two girls come in the same dress and then fight over who had to change?" Thea asked. Her eyes were wide and lined with a bright turquoise eyeliner.

"I don't know," August said. "I was kind of busy with my own stuff." She couldn't meet Thea's eyes, and her face was hot as she bit back a smile. "I spent most of the night with James McDaniels."

Thea paused, and August watched as she processed the information. "James McDaniels?" Bee nodded. "And when you say that you 'spent most of the night' with him, what exactly do you mean?"

"He kissed me," August said.

Thea squealed and wiggled in the bed. “August Elizabeth Northam! Tell me everything. I want a minute-by-minute replay. Was he a good kisser? Did he smell nice? How did it happen?”

August spent the next several minutes recapping everything that had happened over the course of the previous night, from the limo ride where they had talked to dancing on the country club roof and finally to the milkshakes on the beach. Thea interrupted often to ask August to clarify details or sometimes just to squeal.

“When are you seeing him again? You are seeing him again, right?” Thea asked. She had laid back down on the pillow, and her hair surrounded her head in a fan.

“I don’t know,” August paused. “I mean... I really like him, but we didn’t make plans.”

Thea smiled at August. The kind of soft smile that reminded August of cloudy summer mornings before the fog burned off. “Then you should go after him. Call him or, at the very least, text him and ask him to hang out tonight.”

“Won’t that make me seem desperate,” August said. She was terrified that she would mess this up somehow. Thea had much more experience in the dating game than August. While Thea had never had an official boyfriend, she had a line of guys waiting to take her to dinner every Friday.

“Who cares?” Thea said. She sat up in the bed and loomed over August. “If he wants to play games, you don’t have time for him.”

August crunched up her face. “Give me my phone.” She reached out from under the covers, and Thea plopped her little black flip phone into her palm. “What should I say?”

“I don’t know, something simple. Don’t overthink it,” said Thea.

August huffed. “Too late,” she said. “I’ve already thought through every possible text message I could send him and decided they are all terrible.”

“Let me text him then,” Thea reached and tried to pull the phone out of August’s fingers, but August was too fast and

had already rolled over, tucking the phone between the mattress and her body.

"No way," August said, her voice was muffled slightly by the pillow.

Thea tried to worm her arm under August and, when that was unsuccessful, tried to use August's shoulder to roll her over. There was kicking and a little screaming, but they both paused when they heard a knock on the door.

"August!" Ollie's voice shouted. "Grams said you need to stop messing around and come eat breakfast."

"We'll be down in just a minute," August said. They listened as Ollie's footsteps pounded back down the stairs.

"Just text him," Thea moaned.

"No," August said. "We're going to give him at least twelve hours before I text him. Give him a chance."

Thea narrowed her eyes at the phone, and August clutched it tighter. "It's my life, Thea."

"Fine," Thea said. August still didn't entirely trust her and held the phone out of reach. They both climbed out of bed. August slipped a sweatshirt over her pajamas before they went downstairs, where they could hear Grams deep in conversation with Ollie.

"I have to study for the AP Bio test. Do you want to come to the library with me?" August asked Thea as they descended the stairs.

Thea grimaced. "I guess so."

"I'm sure you have homework to do," August said. Thea wasn't in any APs, but she still had finals in a couple of weeks.

"I do. That doesn't mean I'm looking forward to doing it," Thea said. "But I'm not leaving without finding out if that boy calls you." She said the second part in a whisper so that Grams couldn't hear it.

\*

By the time they arrived at the library, it was almost noon. Breakfast had taken ages as Grams had asked twenty thousand questions about how prom went. August answered as honestly as she could without talking specifically about James. While

Grams would be nothing but enthusiastic about the best parts of her prom night, she was sure that James was not ready for Grams.

They had stopped by Thea's house on the way, and now both girls had full backpacks with everything they needed to study for the next couple of hours. August plunked down at a table in the very back corner of the library, tucked into the stacks between the biographies and the travel books. August set her phone in the middle of the table, and both girls pretended not to stare at it openly.

The afternoon passed slowly. August was mostly unproductive, her eyes shooting to the little black phone whenever anything made any noise in the library. But still, she had gotten through three chapters of the review and had helped Thea write half an essay by three-thirty when her phone buzzed with a call in the middle of the table.

"It's James," August mouthed to Thea.

"Answer it!" Thea whispered.

August looked around the library at the other patrons working and browsing quietly in their corners. "You stay here," she said in a low voice to Thea. She didn't wait for a response as she walked quickly out of the stacks and towards the front of the library. She flipped open the phone before she was fully in the lobby.

"Hello," she said breathlessly.

"Hey, August. It's James," he said, and August thought she could practically hear that dimple over the phone.

"Hi, James. How are you?" she said. She found a quiet corner in the lobby and leaned against the wall.

"I'm good. A little tired, stayed up too late with this great girl," he said, and August giggled. "I was wondering... I had a really nice time last night and wondered if I could ask you a favor."

"Sure."

"Would you mind driving me to pick up my truck from Bee's house? And then I'd love to take you to dinner after," James said.

"I'd be happy to," August said. Her smile was huge, and she had to restrain herself from jumping up and down.

"Perfect. I'm at work right now, but I'm off at five. Would you be able to pick me up from there? It's the mechanic right behind the mall."

"Sure, no problem," August said.

"Okay, I'll see you then," he said.

"See you then," she said, and the line went dead. Once the phone was closed, she did a little dance. She was going on a date with James McDaniels!

She practically skipped back to the table where Thea was sitting. She was no longer working on her essay but instead scrolling on Facebook. She looked up as August sat. "So?"

"So... I'm going to dinner with James tonight," August said.

Thea smiled. "Where is he taking you? What time? What are you going to wear?" She rambled off a list of questions, her eyes getting bigger with each one.

August had started packing her things, and Thea followed suit, closing her laptop. "Well, I'm picking him up at five..." August started.

Thea held out a hand to stop her. "You're picking him up?"

"Let me finish," August said. "I'm picking him up at five so we can get his truck from Bee's house, and then he's taking me to dinner from there."

Thea narrowed her eyes. "He's making you run errands with him on the first date?"

"We're just picking up his car. It's not a big deal," August said. It hadn't felt like a big deal when she had agreed to it, but now that Thea had called it an errand, part of her had started to worry. Maybe this wasn't a date. He hadn't called it a date. Maybe he just needed a ride.

The worry must have been evident on her face because Thea sighed, linking her arm around August's. "Come on," she said, pulling August to her feet. "We need to get you home so you can get ready."



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