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THE SOULMATE EQUATION AND THE UNHONEYMOONERS

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SOMETHING

Wilder





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CHRISTINA  
LAUREN

# SOMETHING *Wilder*



GALLERY BOOKS

New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

*For Violet:*

*You asked for a book with horses.*

*We also included a woman who is brave and smart and  
industrious, a lot like someone else we know.*

*We love you very much.*

Au or's Note

JUST BEYOND MOAB, Utah, Canyonlands National Park is one of the  
most

spectacular places in the continental United States, with high desert vistas spliced by the Colorado River, Green River, and endless serpentine tributaries.

Lucky visitors get an eyeful of wide blue sky and the spectacular view of red rock

stretching for miles and miles. There are areas within the park that are remote

and nearly impassable, and there are other areas that are hikeable, drivable, and

wildly enjoyable for tourists.

After months of research and visits, we both became intimately familiar with

this landscape and terrain. We even hired an expert expedition guide to draw us

maps of a possible treasure hunt. But, dear reader, sometimes story must come

before accuracy, and so—despite all that we’ve learned about the geography of

this area... we made up a lot of stuff anyway. In some places, we have condensed

distances; in others we’ve created settings and structures where none exist.

All this to say: we wrote this book to be a fun, swoon-filled escape from the real world, not to serve as a guide to your own adventure. (If you follow our route, you will die, lol.) Of course, we’d love to think Leo and Lily’s love story

wil inspire you to get out in the wild and blaze new trails, but even if you're happier staying curled up in your reading nook, we hope we've given you one

hel of a good time.

With love,

Lauren & Christina

Prologue

*Laramie, Wyoming*

*October, Ten Years Ago*

LILY WILDER'S BOOTS crunched through smooth gravel as she made her way from

the barn to the lodge, surveying her favorite place on earth. Behind her, horses

stepped up to slurp from the water tank, thirsty after a long night out in the

pasture. Smoke drifted from the chimney of the big house and into the clear gray

sky. The dawn was cool, the sun just breaking over the mountains.

She'd already been up for hours.

On the porch, a long shadow waited for her, holding two mugs. Her heart

gave a heavy, infatuated jab at the sight of Leo—sleep-rumpled and grinning,

bundled up in sweats and a eece. Without question, this was how she wanted to

start every morning; she still couldn't believe that from today on, she would.  
Lily

jogged up the three rickety steps, stretching to touch her smile against his,  
feeling

like it had been days, not hours, since she'd last touched him. His lips were  
warm, soft against her wind-chilled ones. The heat of his fingers on her hip  
ignited bottle rockets inside her chest.

"Where is he?" Lily asked, wondering if her father had left the ranch  
without

saying goodbye. It wouldn't be the first time, but it would be the first time she  
didn't care.

Leo pressed a warm mug into her hand and nodded to the caretaker's cabin  
across the river. "He walked over the bridge to Erwin's," he said. "Saying  
goodbye."

Was it odd that she had no idea where her father was headed or how long  
he'd

be gone? If it was, Lily didn't let the thought penetrate very deeply; more  
demanding was the way her pulse banged out a celebratory blast of a song:  
her

life was finally starting, and somehow, this summer, while she'd learned how  
to

manage nearly every aspect of the ranch, she'd also fallen in love. It was a  
love

that surprised her—anchored and assured, clothes-shredding and fevered. She'd

spent the first nineteen years of her life being tolerated and planned around, but

here, with Leo, she was finally the center of someone's world. She'd never smiled

so much, laughed so freely, or dared to want so ferociously. The closest she'd felt

before was saddling her horse and racing across her family's land. Those moments were fleeting, though; Leo had promised he was here to stay.

She tilted her chin to gaze up into his face. He'd inherited his Irish father's build and his Japanese American mother's features, but the soul inside was all his

own. Lily'd never known anyone as quietly, firmly grounded as Leo Grady. She

still couldn't believe this steadfast man was willing to uproot everything for *her*.

She'd asked him "Are you sure?" a hundred times. Wilder Ranch was her dream; she knew better than to expect running a guest ranch year-round to be

anyone else's. It certainly hadn't been her father's, though at least he'd put in the

bare minimum to keep it solvent. For Lily's mother, the ranch was just another

thing she gladly left behind. Sometimes Lily felt like she'd spent every day of her

life waiting for the moment when she could make this ranch her forever. And

now it was here, with Leo to boot.

"I'm sure, Lil." Leo's free arm came around her shoulder, guiding her right up into his side, where he tucked her close and bent to kiss her temple. "You sure

you want a rookie like me here, though?"

"Hel yes." The words were loud in the quiet morning. In the distance, her new foal whinnied back. Leo looked at her with adoring eyes. He was new to

ranching, true, but he was also a natural with the horses, capable in a million tiny

ways, and a convenient top-hook-in-the-tack-room kind of tall. But none of that

was why she wanted him there. She wanted him there because Leo Grady was

undeniably hers, the first *hers* she'd ever had.

He smelled clean from the shower, and she curled in, pressing her face into

his neck, searching for some hint of his sweat, the intensely masculine scent she'd

felt gliding over her skin late last night.

"I made you breakfast," he murmured into her hair.



She leaned back, smiling hopefully up at him. “Your mom’s scones?”

This made him laugh. “You act like she invented them.” He bent, covering her mouth with his, and spoke around the kiss. “She usually makes us rice and

sh. Pretty sure these are Rachael Ray’s scones.”

Duke Wilder strode across the frosty grass and onto the porch, a small twitch of his bushy salt-and-pepper mustache the only indication he’d seen how pressed

together they’d been.

But then the moment passed, and his eyes brightened. Duke was always

happiest when he was on the cusp of leaving. When Lily was little, his work took

him as far as Greenland, but his radius of adventure had shrunk dramatically

when her mother left them seven years ago and Duke became anchored down by

a daughter and—in the summers, at least—the guest ranch in Laramie. Now she

was grown, and he was finally free to enjoy being a niche celebrity who was deeply fixated on his childhood dream of finding the piles of money some outlaws hid in the desert more than a hundred years ago.

Lily wasn’t the only one who was glad she was finally old enough to take on the burden of his family’s land.

He shifted his gaze over her shoulder, and Lily watched Duke's face as he carried on some silent exchange with Leo. Sometimes Lily thought she barely

knew her father; other times she could read him like a book. Duke had no love

for Wilder Ranch, but right then Lily could hear his thoughts as if he'd spoken

them aloud: *That kid doesn't look like a cowboy.*

Because Leo wasn't a cowboy. He was a college student, a math whiz, a New

York City boy who had come to the ranch for a summer job, fallen in love, and

upended his life to stay on with her in the off-season. Shy and quiet and

thoughtful, he was everything Duke Wilder wasn't. Only twenty-two, staring at

a fifty-year-old man with the local reputation of Indiana Jones and the

confidence of Captain Jack Sparrow, Leo Grady didn't shrink or shift at her side.

"We'll be fine, Duke," she said, snapping the moment shut.

"You'll look after her until I'm back," Duke commanded, eyes still fixed on

Leo, so he missed his daughter's exasperated grimace.

"I will," Leo assured him.

"I don't need looking after," Lily reminded them both.

Duke reached forward, mussing her dark hair. “Sure you don’t, kid. I left y’a

note in the dining hall.”

“Great.” A riddle. A puzzle. Some cipher for her to decode. Her father had raised her on the games he loved, always poking at her like a kid prods a beetle,

unable to understand how she ended up so different from him. A wrestling match between resentment and curiosity would ensue until necessity would beat

them both, and she’d finally sit down to solve whatever puzzle he’d left for her. It

was entirely possible that the note would translate into something asinine like

*See you later* or *Don’t eat all the oatmeal cookie dough*, but it was just as likely that

he’d left some critical piece of information just out of her reach that Lily would

require in order to run this place. Everything Lily had ever wanted or needed had

always been hidden somewhere complicated, sometimes miles from home, and if

she didn’t have the motivation to look, Duke had figured she hadn’t needed it after all.

Maybe today she wouldn’t bother. Maybe she and Duke would finally agree

that they didn't have to love the same things—they didn't even have to love each

other—to coexist. For the first time, that sat fine with her. Maybe Duke would go back to his world, where he hunted artifacts and dug up lost treasure, and Lily would stay at the ranch with her horses and her land and her love and ignore

the note on the table forever.

The tension stretched and then snapped when Duke took one last sweeping glance at the lodge, the barn, the rolling hills beyond. His parents had bought

this land and raised two boys here—Duke and his brother, Daniel. Daniel had

turned it into the Wilder Ranch, living here year-round and welcoming guests

each summer until he died two years ago. Lily and Duke kept the business limping along, but it was never his priority and always her dream to be here full -

time, to take it over, to bring it back to what it had been in the golden summers

of her childhood. Seventy-eight horses and two hundred acres of glimmering

Wyoming beauty were her idea of perfection, but Duke resented every single

fence on the property like he was a cat in a cage.

Her larger-than-life father t his cowboy hat on his head and nodded to the two of them. “Wel . I’m o .”

There weren’t hugs. Leo and Lily didn’t even step down from the wide porch. They silently watched the long, strong shape of Duke Wilder stride over

to his old hulking truck and climb in.

Lily turned to Leo, bouncing on the bal s of her feet, joy bubbling up inside her with a force that might shoot her o into the gray-blue sky.

“You ready for this, boss?” he asked.

Lily answered Leo with a kiss she hoped told him the things she sometimes stil struggled to say.

She let it al sink in. Right now, everything was exactly right. No one and nothing rushed her past this single, perfect moment. With the dust of Duke’s truck stil swirling in his wake, al that mattered was the love at her side and the

bejeweled galaxy of land around her. Her galaxy. She took a breath to speak but

was caught in a double take at the tender expression on Leo’s face as he looked

down at her. “Lovesick City Boy,” al the cowboys had cal ed him from that very

rst day he met her, ve months ago.

Laughing— *blissful*—Lily cupped his cheek and stretched to kiss him again.

“Promise me we’ll be happy here forever.”

He nodded and brought his forehead down to rest against hers. “I promise.”

## Chapter One

*Hester, Utah—Archie’s Bar*

*May, Present Day*

“IN HINDSIGHT,” LILY said, wincing, “I know better than to ignore a bar  
ght going  
on behind me.”

Archie extended a meaty hand, passing her a dripping cloth ful of ice. “I’m  
more concerned you took an elbow to the back of the head and barely  
inched.”

“Is that a joke about me being hardheaded?” She sucked in a breath at the  
shock of ice against the nape of her neck.

Archie leaned over the bar. “I’m saying you’re a tough little cowgirl, Lily  
Wilder.”

Lily shoved him away with a laugh. “Kiss my ass, Arch.”

“Any time you want, Lil.”

With an elbow resting on the scu ed wood, she held the ice in place and  
watched condensation track in slow, fat streams down her pint glass. But as  
soon

as she dragged a finger through it, the glass got muddy. All day long, wind worked the red desert dust into the creases of her clothing, into her hair. Hands,

arms, face. Thank God for showers and sunscreen. With the kind of crowd one

found at Archie's, though, it was never worth showering before coming in —

whether Lily was sitting at the bar with a beer or working behind it in the off-

season. The errant elbow to the back of her head was proof enough.

The door opened, briefly blasting the dim room with light, and Nicole

arrived in a flash of messy blond hair and checked red-and-blue apparel. Sliding

onto the stool beside Lily's, Nicole lifted her chin to Archie in both silent

greeting and beverage order. He pulled a lager into a questionably clean glass and

slid an even more questionably clean bowl of peanuts toward the women. More

starving than fastidious, Lily dug in.

Nicole gestured to the ice pack. "What the hell?"

"Petey and Lou were at it. I was collateral damage."

"Need me to kick their asses?" She moved to stand, but Lily stopped her with

a hand on the arm.

Nicole was taller and stronger than Lily, and her loyalty made her nearly feral

when provoked. Lily wagered that Petey and Lou would have a pretty fair fight

on their hands. If Lily gestured for Nic to go at it, she'd die trying. But Nic was

all she had, so Lily tipped her head instead toward the small stack of papers on

the bar near her friend's arm. "Is that the new group?"

Nicole nodded. "Arriving tomorrow."

"Dudes?" Lily asked. Their clients were almost always men coming out to hunt treasure and play at being outlaws. A group of women felt like a breath of

fresh air. Those trips were quieter, more easygoing. They almost made the job

worth it. Almost.

"Yeah. Four of them."

"Bachelor party? Birthday?"

Nic shook her head. "Looks like it's a group of friends just taking a trip together."

At this, Lily groaned. At least bachelor parties were on some kind of mission,

usually to sneak booze and have a week of debauchery they'd talk about for years



to come. But the groups that came to Lily's tourist expedition company, Wilder

Adventures, just to "get away" always needed more babysitting, more structure.

Sometimes that was ne—helping people enjoy a vacation on horseback had been Lily's joy growing up and was to this day—but right now she was running on fumes.

"Al of them signed the waiver?" Lily asked.

Nic scratched her cheek, hesitating. "Yeah."

Pointing, Lily asked, "What's that mean?"

"Wel ," Nicole said, "it kind of looks like they were al signed by the same person."

Lifting her beer to her lips, Lily muttered a quiet "Shit."

"Dub, it's a formality."

"Unless it isn't," she said. "I can't a ord a lawsuit."

"Girl, you can barely a ord this beer." When she ducked to catch Lily's gaze,

Nic's wild hair fel over half her face, leaving one glimmering blue eye free to

study her best friend. "How are you thinking this wil be our last trip out?"

Lily squinted down at the whorls in the scu ed wood bar. Truthful y, she had

been hoping more than anything that this would be the last hurrah for Wilder

Adventures. She *wanted* this to be the last time she took city slickers out into the

desert to team-build and “rough it” and hunt for fake treasure. She wanted to

put her dad’s journal away and never have to look at it again. She wanted to live

where no one asked her about Duke Wilder’s maps or his stories and she could

forget all about Butch Cassidy. Lily wanted to never again see a man wear

polished dress shoes while riding a horse or hear another woman wearing a Prada

“western” shirt complain how sore her ass was after a half hour in a saddle. She

wanted to be running a ranch, to tack up Bonnie at sunrise and wrangle her own

horses across sagebrush and frost-tipped grass that glimmered like diamonds and

crunched beneath hooves. She wanted enough money to move out of her dad’s

old run-down cabin and leave this dusty shit town. She wanted this to be her last

trip out more than anything.

But wanting didn’t get her anywhere. She’d learned that lesson a long time

ago. Still, quitting this gig consumed Lily's every waking thought; seven years into

this business and she felt trapped. She scraped by leading tourists around the

desert, but horses were expensive, and Lily needed horses to lead tourists around

the desert in order to scrape by. Chicken, meet egg.

"How did things go at the bank?" Nic asked, coming at it from a different angle.

Lily shook her head.

"Again?"

"Who's going to give someone like me a loan? What's my income going to be

if I stop leading treasure hunts?"

Nicole leaned in again. "Did you *tell* them that was your plan? What do they

even know?"

Lily looked over at her. "I didn't, Nic, but they're not dumb. The guy said,

'So if you buy some land and start up a new outfit, how are you going to make

money until it's solvent?' And I told him that it would take a couple years but

that I knew the area, knew the business, and knew what people wanted in a Wild

West vacation, but it didn't matter. It doesn't matter what I say; I'm not a good

investment."

Nicole blew out a breath and stared down at her hands. It was then that Lily noticed an envelope with her name poking out of the stack of mail and liability

waivers. She'd recognize the return address anywhere. It used to be hers.

Immediately, she was buried under a deluge of memories—the astringent, crisp punch of sagebrush; herding horses as the sun tipped its hat over the top of

the mountains; fat, warm butter biscuits in the mornings; the precise moment

she'd laid eyes on *him*, and, weeks later, the heat and fever of his body—

Rubbing the ache beneath her breastbone, Lily cut those thoughts off at the pass, pointing at the envelope. "What's that?"

Nic tucked the envelope away again. "Nothing."

"It's from Wilder Ranch. And it's got my name on it." She reached for it.

"Give it."

But Nicole slapped her away. "You don't want it right now, Dub, trust me."

*Right now?*

"Is it about the ranch?"

"Let it go, Lil."

A rare re ignited in Lily's veins. "Did you open it? I swear to God, Nic, you are the nosiest little—" She went for it again, but Nicole dodged to the side, evading.

"I said *no*."

Lily's blood turned to steam at the implication that she couldn't handle whatever was in there. Nic was the hothead; Lily was the measured one. But

suddenly, she'd never wanted anything more than she wanted to see the contents

of the nondescript white envelope.

Lily shoved Nic's arm, but Nic knew it was coming and leaned in, caging around the papers, unmoving. Diving for her midsection, Lily knocked Nic o

the stool and tackled her onto the oor. Suddenly paling in importance, the liability waivers rained around them, landing among the discarded peanut shells

in the layer of sticky beer on the oor. Behind the wrestling women, men hooted

and clapped, cheering them on. Normal y Lily would get up and take this argument elsewhere, but she had a singular focus, and it was to dig that envelope

out from under where Nicole had rolled onto her stomach, covering it with her

body.

“No fucking way,” Nic yelled into the door, even as Lily smacked uselessly at

her shoulders, tickled her ribs, and then began to punch her ass.

“It has *my* name on it, you dick.”

“You don’t want it!”

“You’re committing a felony!” Lily glanced over her shoulder. “Petey! You’re

a cop.”

“On duty,” he answered, laughing into his beer. “Punch her in the ass again.”

“I’m gonna punch you in the dick next if you don’t help me.”

“Honey, you’re welcome to hit on any part of me.”

With a savage growl, she dug with all her strength under her friend’s body, reaching blindly for the envelope. She got her fingers around it, tearing off a corner as she yanked it free. Lily scrambled up and away, hiding behind Big Eddie near the dartboard in case Nicole decided to come for her.

“I’m telling you,” Nic warned, “you don’t want it.” Defeated, she stood, swiping bar door grime from her cheek with the back of her hand. She returned

to her stool, and her beer, and the bowl of nuts. “Just don’t come pouting to me

when you see what it is.”

Back in the corner, Lily pulled the letter free. A barful of eyes lingered on her as she read it, at first uncomprehending—the words swam in swirls of black

and white—and remained glued to her face as she returned to the beginning to

start again. Sentences took shape, meaning coalesced, and all of the ache and loss

and empty blackness she'd packed into a solid brick in her chest broke free, becoming a swarm of horse flies.

The letter was from the man who now owned her family's land. A man she'd

met only once, barely a week after that other, brutal heartbreak. As much as Lily

hated Jonathan Cross, she'd wanted to read these words every day for ten years.

*... retiring... ranch up for sale... like to give you the first opportunity...*

It didn't matter how good a deal he was offering her. There wasn't a single thing she could do to get her family's ranch back.

Once something was gone, it was gone. Lily thought she'd dealt with her sorrow, her longing for that place, but she felt bruised all over again.

It took every ounce of physical strength she had to maintain her composure.

She tacked her lower lip to her teeth, nailed her jaw shut. She forced her

shoulders steady, working to keep them from rising up around her neck, to keep

her back from curling. No one alive—at least, no one in this room—had ever

seen her break. Finally, when everyone had lost interest or turned away out of

respect, she made her way back to the bar.

Nicole had already ordered her friend a fresh beer and pushed it over as Lily

settled onto the stool beside her.

“Told you,” Nic said.

“You did.”

“What’re you going to do about it?” she asked.

“I’m going to do a whole lot of nothing,” Lily said, and brought the glass to her lips.

## Chapter Two

*New York City*

*May, Present Day*

THE DOWNSIDE TO leaving for JFK at 8:15 a.m.: in the past twenty minutes, the

tangle of morning rush-hour traffic had not once moved faster than ten miles an



hour. Potential upside: Leo was free to answer the litany of questions his boss

could ask literally anyone else still at the office... but wouldn't.

When his phone chimed with the tenth text in five minutes, Leo closed his eyes, groaning.

"Just put it on silent," Bradley said, rolling the cab window down as far as it would go, then quickly rolling it back up against the plume of truck exhaust that

barreled inside.

Leo typed out a quick reply. "It's fine."

The phone immediately chimed again.

"Leo, this happens every year."

Typing, Leo said, "It's just how Alton gets when I'm going to be out of the office."

"Exactly my point. He acts like there's no one else in the tristate area who can

use a calculator."

This time, the phone rang in Leo's hand.

Bradley gave him a warning look. "Leave it."

Shrugging helplessly, Leo gestured to Alton's name on the screen. "They're making decisions about the VP role next week and I'm on vacation. I can't not

answer.”

“*Leave it.*”

Leo brought the phone to his ear. “Hello?”

Bradley groaned and leaned forward to tell the cabdriver—who absolutely did not care—“He never lets his boss go to voicemail.”

“I do,” Leo whisper-hissed before returning to Alton on the other end of the call and telling him, “The code for the Daxton-Amazon algorithm is in the C drive under the folder named ‘Daxton-Amazon.’”

Bradley turned and gaped at him, but Leo waved this off, continuing the call.

“That’s right. You can forward it directly to Alyssa or save it to the cloud \_\_\_\_”

Bradley yanked the phone from Leo’s hand and bent, pressing his mouth close and faking static. “Can’t”—*crackle*—“hear”—*crackle*—“tunnel”—*crackle*.

He hit End and slid the phone into his own coat pocket with a smirk.

Leo stared blankly at him. “Dude, seriously?”

“My year, my trip, my rules. Rule number one: no phones.”

Leo reached for it anyway, explaining, “He was calling to find out where the \_\_\_\_” Bradley slapped his hand away. “If your boss can’t find an algorithm named

Daxton-Amazon in a folder also named *Daxton-Amazon*, I really have no idea

how he ended up in a corner office.”

Leo turned to stare out the window, unable to argue. It was time to stop worrying about work anyway, and start wondering where Bradley was taking

them. This annual trip with his two best friends from college was his only time

away, and as their lives had gotten busier, the status quo had transitioned from

*It's my year to do the planning to Absolutely no details will be shared until we*

*arrive at our destination.* Knowing they were ying into Salt Lake City told Leo

nothing, and whenever it was Bradley's turn, the other two men were justifiably

wary. Bradley prioritized telling a good story down the road over personal comfort and common sense every time.

His phone rang again, and Bradley pulled it out, grinning when he saw who was calling. “It's your other boss.” He turned the screen around, showing Leo.

*Cora.*

Bradley swiped to answer. “Leo's phone, Uncle Bradley speaking.”

Leaning in again, Leo tried to take it from him.

But Bradley put his entire hand on Leo's face and pushed him away. “How

are you, darlin'?"

Leo could hear nothing but the tinny hint of his sister's voice through the line. Resigned, he de ated into the seat. Cora adored Bradley. Even if Leo managed to grab the phone, she'd just tel him to hand it back again.

"Congratulations on graduating, Cor. That's incredible." Bradley nodded, smiling at whatever she'd said. "Is that right?" He turned and looked at Leo.

"And Paris tomorrow? No, your brother absolutely did not tel me that he was

sending you and a friend to *Paris* for your graduation gift."

Shit. Bradley would be relentless about this.

"I bet," Bradley said, eyes widening as he stared at Leo in mock alarm. "That

does sound like a special night." He paused, listening. "I wil de nitely pass that

along. You have an amazing trip. Love you too, kiddo." He ended the cal and,

with a derisive grin, nal y handed Leo his phone. "That was enlightening."

Dropping it into his backpack, Leo leaned his head against the headrest. "Let

it go."

"Cora wanted me to let you know that she stopped by your place and got the

cash you left for her.” Bradley paused, stroking his ve-o’clock shadow. “I must

say I’m disappointed you didn’t invite me to her graduation dinner last night,”

he drawled. “Certainly one more person wouldn’t have broken the bank if you’d

already invited twelve people and are ying her to Paris tomorrow.”

The cab pul ed up in front of the terminal at JFK, and they climbed out, retrieving their bags from the trunk. “Cost wasn’t what kept me from inviting

you,” Leo explained as they made their way into the terminal. “Your habit of

hitting on my little sister’s friends was.”

“They’re legal,” Bradley reasoned.

Bradley was his oldest friend, the one who’d picked Leo up when his world fel apart a decade ago and stood by him while he found his footing again. He

was the teasing stand-in uncle and the joking, lighthearted counterbalance to

Leo’s overprotective and overcompensating tendencies. He was also a shameless

player.

“But stil ten years younger than you,” Leo reminded him.

“Ten years means less when you’re older.”

“It still means a fair bit, Bradley.”

He smirked at Leo. “You’re changing the subject. You spoil her.”

“A man wearing a Rolex and a Prada crossbody should be the last person giving me a lecture on spoiling someone. It’s not like you need a free meal, either.”

“No, but I’d *like* one.”

Leo laughed at Bradley’s winning grin. “Cora’s moving to Boston. You know

it was my job to get her through school.” Get her through school, yes, but also

be her brother, father, mother, and benefactor, and make up for every tiny bit of

adoration that had been robbed from his baby sister ten years ago.

“And you did that. Along with a weekly allowance, no student loans, and an apartment four blocks from the Columbia campus.”

“Which she shares with three other people,” Leo reminded him. “She’s not rolling around in a penthouse.”

Bradley waved this off. “Where we’re going, she won’t be able to call you.

Will she be able to function without Big Brother?”

Leo was already sick of this conversation. “She’ll be fine.” At least, he hoped she would. “She’ll be too busy enjoying Paris to worry about checking in

anyway.”

“But how will *you* be?” Bradley pressed.

“What do you mean?”

“Leo, this is the first trip we’ve ever taken where we can’t check work email or

take calls.”

Dodging around a family repacking a suitcase at check-in, he cut a glance at Bradley. “Don’t worry about me. I’ve been mentally preparing for isolation based on your horrible packing list.”

“Horrible?” Bradley repeated, feigning offense.

They stepped up together to the ticketing counter, handing over their IDs.

“I don’t own cargo pants,” Leo told him. “And ‘heeled boots’? Are we talking

*Purple Rain* or construction worker?”

“You know the rules. Don’t question, just pack.”

“I do know the rules,” Leo said, “but when I saw ‘hat with stampede string,’ I

didn’t even know what that meant.”

In fact, Leo knew exactly what it meant, but the thought of *why* he might need a heeled boot and a hat with a stampede string made his stomach turn.

Which was why he’d put off packing until this morning, when he finally—

frantically—shoved everything into his du el bag. Each of the three friends had

a set of rules for these trips, spoken and unspoken. For example, Bradley refused

to travel to Key West because the family of a woman he'd drunk-proposed to in

2012 owned nearly a quarter of the restaurants in town. Walter refused to visit

any state with a real possibility of tornados. Leo's unspoken rule had always been

*No horses*. Bradley knew better than anyone *why*.

So even if this vacation didn't take them to Wyoming, being near horses would undoubtedly take Leo back to a mental place he had—according to several ex-girlfriends—not emotionally unpacked.

The annual vacation tradition had begun the spring after he'd returned from Laramie, hollow and heartbroken. Bradley, acting on an equal number of good

and bad intentions, had planned a guys' trip hiking upstate while Cora was at

YMCA camp in Vermont. On that trip, Leo had laughed out loud for the first time in seven months.

The following year, the three of them went away again, on a road trip to Maine that Walter planned. After that, as their incomes improved, so did the



trips. There had been wine tasting in Oregon and cheese making in France. They'd swum with dolphins in Ensenada and kayaked through glaciers in Alaska.

Given that Bradley's last getaway, three years ago, was a week in Ibiza, when

Bradley had put "bail money" on the packing list—and good thing Leo and Walter had taken him seriously—they'd been mildly trepidatious about this year's plan.

Leo was pulled from contemplating this any further when a voice from behind them boomed, "*What's happening, pussies?*" They were surrounded by at

least a hundred other travelers, and there was no reason to assume these words

were directed at them, but Leo didn't have to look to know that they were.

While every traveler in the vicinity turned to see who had just shouted the word

*pussies* in the middle of a goddamn airport, Leo turned to gape accusingly at

Bradley.

"Seriously?" he hissed. "You invited him?"

Bradley immediately shrank back.

A reluctant glance over his shoulder revealed exactly what Leo expected:

Terrence “Terry” Trottell—a man who had never served in the military yet was

decked out in full camo gear and carrying a military-grade pack slung over his

shoulder—sauntering straight toward them. Tall, thin, impulsively tattooed, and

ineptly bearded, Terry was the kind of book that could be accurately judged by

its cover.

Bradley winced. “He asked me outright. I couldn’t say no.”

“You could, though. It’s easy: ‘No, Terrence. You’re not a part of this tradition.’”

Terry—Bradley’s roommate from freshman year—remained only tenuously connected to the group, given that he was absolutely the friend one had to apologize for, no matter the situation. Here was a man who once showed up uninvited for beers wearing a shirt that had a picture of a woman with a piece of

tape over her mouth and the words *Enjoy the silence*.

But although Bradley might give Leo shit about Cora and his job and his nonexistent love life, he didn’t do actual conflict; he was everyone’s friend. Leo

was the calm center of the group so Bradley could trash-talk in safety. In

contrast, Terry was a hothead, finding insult whether or not one was intended.

And here they were, about to be trapped with him somewhere clearly remote

enough to require the ability to live without cell service.

Awesome.

They pretended not to see Terry wave before he stepped up to the check-in counter a few yards down. While the agent tagged their minimal luggage, Leo

glared at Bradley.

“He didn’t use to be this bad,” Bradley argued under his breath.

In college, Terry’s version of weird had manifested as a penchant for collecting bottle caps and not washing his lucky shirt. Present-day Terry collected vintage ammunition and considered *feminist* and *terrorist* to be roughly synonymous. Bradley wasn’t wrong that Terry hadn’t always been this

bad, but it was moot, because Terry was definitely terrible now. Leo had already

been semi-dreading this trip, and now he was convinced it would be interminable.

“Walt sent me screencaps of some scary shit that Terry’s posted online,” he told Bradley. “Terry spends all day in some pretty dark corners of the internet.”

“I know. But when it’s all of us, he tones it down.”

Leo let out a one-syllable laugh. "Does he?"

Their agent handed over the tickets, and the two men stepped away from the

counter.

Bradley glanced to the side. "I think he'll be pretty chill."

"Because that's Terry?" Leo asked, pointing to where Terry appeared to be "educating" the airline agent on the correct way to tag his luggage. "Pretty chill?"

"Are *you* going to tell him no?"

"Bradley, he's checking in for the flight. Of course I'm not telling him no now."

Under his breath, Bradley mumbled, "I don't know why you're judging me. You won't even tell Cora no."

"I heard that."

"That's why I said it out loud."

They turned to make their way to the security screening, but when Bradley lingered to wait for Terry, Leo kept moving, making it through in only a few minutes. In the end, he was glad he went ahead, too, because Walt was already at

the gate and would need to be prepared for the Terry news. Specifically, if the

stress of Terry joining the trip was too great, Walter would want time to hit the

restroom before they had to board.

Walter sat with his backpack in his lap, headphones in, bopping happily to music. A gentle soul who rarely prioritized things like haircuts or replacing holey

T-shirts, he was always the first to call to check in on a friend having a hard time.

Put simply, he was the anti-Terry.

Leo hovered at the periphery, hating that he was about to ruin Walt's good mood. But when Walt looked up and over Leo's shoulder, his expression crashing, Leo realized he was too late.

Walter tugged out an earbud, staring wide-eyed at Terry's approach. "Wait, why's Terry here?"

Leo supposed there was one reason to be grateful for Bradley's nonconfrontational nature: with Terry along for the ride, at least there was something Leo was less excited about than riding a horse for the first time in a decade.

## Chapter Three

JOLTED ABRUPTLY AWAKE, Leo angled forward in the unforgiving bus seat, reaching

back to cup his neck.

“What happened?” Bradley asked, slowly straightening from his slumber across the aisle.

“We stopped.”

Bradley groaned. “Where?”

“No idea.” Al Leo knew was that the bus, which reeked of soil and ethanol, had just come to a hard, abrupt stop seemingly in the middle of nowhere.

“What the hel , dude?” Bradley cal ed to the bus driver, crossing his arms over

the seat in front of him. “How about a little warning the next time?”

The driver’s raspy response barely reached them: “This is as far as I take you.

Climb on out.”

Focusing his gaze through the window, Leo could distinguish nothing but vague shapes in the blue-black darkness. He would have sworn the sun was up

only a few minutes ago, but he’d drifted o somewhere outside of Green River,

Utah—worn thin from an unending travel day, including three hours delayed on

the JFK tarmac, a bumpy and crowded ight, and this bus ride to who knew where.

Leo felt like he'd slept crammed in a box, but despite the interminable travel

for whatever Wild West adventures might lie ahead, Bradley looked entirely untouched. For a man wearing leather driving shoes and a cashmere sweater, he

was surprisingly game for the great outdoors. Beside Bradley, leaning awkwardly

against the window and wearing an ancient green T-shirt that read MIDDLE EARTH'S ANNUAL MORDOR FUN RUN, Walt remained blissfully comatose, snoring

softly.

Behind them, Terry's perpetually flushed face split into an unsettling grin before he reached forward and sharply slapped Walter on the back of the head,

jolting him awake.

"Come on, man," Leo said. When Leo first met Terry, he thought he was perpetually sunburned, then Leo wondered whether he drank too much. Now,

of course, Leo knew Terry was just chronically pissed off. Worked up all the time, angry at women, socialists, his mom.

Leo shifted and threw Walt a commiserating *Wow, do I hate Terry* look before turning his attention down to his phone, mumbling, "One bar already?"

Did we drive to 1992?”

“Should’ve brought a satellite phone,” Terry said, stretching in the aisle.

“Cell

service is gonna be sketchy at best.”

“Come now, gentlemen.” Bradley stood, too, pounding his chest. His thick

blond hair fell away from his forehead in easy, travel-immune waves.

“Where

we’re going, we won’t need phones.”

Bradley led the group off the bus to collect their various bags. About twenty

feet from where they stood, Leo could make out a small, rickety wind shelter

cupped around a handful of weathered wooden benches. A tumbleweed

somersaulted by on the dry cement, a small cyclone of dust following in its wake.

As Leo’s eyes adjusted, the sky slowly turned purple; the ground was swallowed

up by shadows that seemed to stretch uninterrupted for miles.

The bus rumbled to life again, and the group of men watched it trail away,

the taillights fading into darkness.

Walter’s brows furrowed in worry. “Does he know we’re—I wonder if he  
—”

He looked over to Leo, stating the obvious: “We’re not on the bus with him.”