

The background features several abstract grey geometric elements: a large arc at the top right, a horizontal line with a circular node on the left and a square node on the right, and several smaller rounded rectangular shapes scattered throughout.

REWIND TO US

MOLLY MORRIS



WEDNESDAY BOOKS
NEW YORK

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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Part One

**BEFORE THE
REWIND**

CHAPTER ONE

The fundamental rule of Rewinds is that each member of the Mulligan family gets only one. The purpose of allowing just a single chance to redo a moment from the last 365 days is meant to encourage careful consideration, though some argue it's down to stinginess.

—EXCERPT FROM “REWINDS 101” BY FRANK MULLIGAN

Today is the day I'm going to tell Sawyer Cook that I love him.

Something I've wanted to do for months.

Something I should've done a year—maybe even *years*—ago.

I'm finally going to do it. I'm going to tell my best friend how I feel.

Today . . .

. . . the day I decided to dye my hair highlighter orange.

I blink at my reflection in the mirror that hangs above the bus station bathroom's avocado-green sink. “I look,” I say numbly, swallowing, “like a Troll doll.”

I pluck up the empty box of hair dye tipped sideways on the sink's edge so I can double-check the color for the eightieth time since I finished drying my hair underneath the hand dryer. Yes, the dye is officially named “Tangerine Scream,” but where the girl on the box has hair woven with warm streaks of auburn

and gold, mine is an eye-watering shade of candy-corn orange. Dying your hair any color of the rainbow is always going to be a risk, especially when you do it in a bus station bathroom, but it's not like I haven't done this before. It's been my ritual ever since I started spending my summers at my aunt's place in Cielo Springs, separating myself from my home in New York, marking myself as *California* Dixie. So how did the thought that I might look like the Cheeto Cheetah not occur to me when I agonized over the boxes of hair dye in Duane Reade for over an hour yesterday? That, even though I dye my hair a different shade of neon every summer, this time it might be smarter to go for something softer, like lavender, or a really pretty, delicate blue? Something that won't make Sawyer have to shield his eyes from me like I'm a supernova as I pour my heart out to him?

As I throw the hair dye box into the trash, my phone buzzes from my pocket. My heart immediately launches into my throat, but it's not Sawyer telling me he's outside, or even that he's on his way. I haven't heard from him since I sent him a copy of my bus ticket to Cielo Springs a couple weeks ago, and he responded with a thumbs-up emoji. This time, it's an email from my grandma. Or, more accurately, it's my grandma's newsletter. I know Sawyer will be here soon and I should be getting ready, but I'll take any distraction from my panic, especially if it means I don't have to look at my hair.

THE MULLIGAN FAMILY NEWS

Greetings from Puerto Vallarta!

Carol and I are having a fabulous time at the hotel. Two-for-one piña coladas! We lost the limbo contest, but our

spirits remain high. Carol thinks it might have something to do with the two-for-one piña coladas. Who can say?!

Due to the recent hack of Frank's email account, all Rewind-related paperwork will now be sent via fax. Apparently, the hacking has come from somewhere in Australia. I've tried to contact their local authorities, but the call waiting times are impossibly long. Five hours!! Due to popular demand, Frank has written a new series of informative blobs for the website about the Rewind, including a list of all the Rewinds our little clan has enacted over time (a little Mulligan family history, if you will!!), so have a look when you get a chance. If you have any questions, just email, call, or comment on the blob post and I will respond ASAP.

Carol and I will be back Stateside in a couple of days. Pat, did the doctor ever call you back? The hotel front desk said you tried to call, but I was taking a nap. In the meantime, I hope you're all having a great summer so far, or as they say here in Mexico, *¡Que tengan un buen verano!*

Love, Lois (Grandma, Mom, Auntie Lolo, Great-Aunt Lo, Sis, etc.)

My grandma's newsletter is accompanied by a picture of her and my great-aunt Carol sitting by their hotel's pool in Mexico, each holding two yellow cocktails topped with fat pineapple wedges. Somehow my grandma can write a surprisingly engaging email newsletter but still can't remember it's "blog" and not "blob."

When I glance up again and catch my reflection in the mirror, Grandma's newsletter still open on my phone, it only now occurs to me that I *could* technically take my hair color choice back. Use my Rewind to pick cotton-candy pink, or a sleek silver. But just as quickly as the idea enters my head, I toss it out again. Each member of our family only gets one Rewind in their entire lifetime, so enacting it is a really big deal. Plus, do I really want my family to see that I used mine to change my hair color from disgusting orange to pastel purple? Even if it is just on a post on my grandma's "blob," sandwiched between pictures of her video store's Christmas window display and her favorite Spanish-inspired breakfast recipes.

"Good afternoon," a bored voice says over the bus station's intercom, the sound ricocheting off the bathroom's yellowing tiles. *"The Cielo Springs bus station will be closing in five minutes. Anyone waiting for the six fifty-eight bus to San Diego is advised—"*

Five minutes. Sawyer will be here in five minutes.

With a brush I pluck out of my backpack, I scrape my hair into a high bun, hoping the fact that it's tight against my head means it won't catch the light as much. The fact that I didn't really sleep last night is alive on my face, in the dark circles under my eyes and the grayish tinge to my skin. Staring at myself in the mirror, I scrub my hands down my cheeks to give them some semblance of life, but now I only look like I've been slapped.

The lobby of the Cielo Springs bus station isn't much bigger or busier than the women's bathroom. The three wooden benches lining the walls are occupied by a sleeping man and a couple eating from the same bag of trail mix. Nobody seems concerned about the bus station's imminent closure. The walls are decked with 1920s-style tourism posters for Cielo Springs,

the “Gem of the Anza Borrego Desert,” speckled with cartoon cacti and adobe-colored hills. In the corner are two half-empty vending machines and a small ticket office, at which sits the owner of the bored intercom voice reading a NASCAR magazine. Like always, I wait for everyone in the lobby to turn to me as one, the people of this city that’s not even big enough to be a speck of dust on a map of California to somehow see straight through my neon mask, their pitying cringes at my ugly hair becoming open-mouthed stares. But when nobody does, relief trickles through me. I’m just a girl who made a poor hair-color choice. Nothing special.

Goose bumps prickle my arms as the air-conditioning vent above me sends down a frigid breeze. But the moment I shove open the glass door leading to the bus station parking lot, the cold evaporates, replaced by a blanket of hot air so heavy, it almost feels like water. Even though the sunlight is fading, heat clings to every inch of my exposed skin. I can already feel the sweat forming along my shoulders, under my armpits, and across my top lip. It has to be at least a hundred degrees, probably more, not a breeze or coastline for miles.

I shut my eyes and breathe in deep, the boiling air heating my lungs. *Home.*

From the way I see it, I’ve got two options as to when I can tell Sawyer that I am deliriously in love with him:

1. **Immediately. As in, the moment I see him.**

With this option, I can use the sort of nervous mania I’ve built up over my day of traveling to propel me

into getting it over with. Plus, if he laughs in my face, I'm already at the bus station, which means it won't take as long for me to flee the state.

2. **In a few hours, after we've had time to settle in.**

Even under normal circumstances, when Sawyer and I have spent the last year in almost constant communication, the first five minutes of seeing each other again IRL are always awkward, both of us so giddy to be reunited that we mostly swing between talking over each other and repeating the same questions before eventually relaxing into our usual, easy banter. Now that we've barely spoken since April, I don't know how things'll be. This way, I can give us some time to get back into *us* before threatening to ruin everything. Again. But on the other hand, the longer I wait, the higher the chance that I'll chicken out.

The unmistakable sound of the Datsun approaching cuts through my thoughts. The engine has this way of sounding like it's filled with marbles, but that Sawyer's uncle claims is completely normal for a car made in the '80s. It noses into the parking lot, its windshield caught in the sun so that I can't see the driver's face. All day, I've wondered what this moment will look like. Whether Sawyer will be cold, whether or not he'll pretend nothing happened between us. If I'll even recognize him. But when the Datsun stops in front of me and the driver's-side door swings open, I'd know that mop of dirty-blond hair anywhere.

"You're here," I say, too quiet for him to hear.

Only now that I can see him, here, in the flesh, do I even let myself admit to the other possibility that's been circling my

head all day—that he wouldn't show up at all. That no matter how much him picking me up from the Cielo Springs bus station at the start of summer has become a tradition for us, this would be the first year where I had to call my aunt instead, or get an Uber. Sawyer had never even said he would pick me up this time, not technically; I just couldn't acknowledge the possibility that he wouldn't. Because that would mean things between us were officially over.

But he's here. At the sight of him, a knot of tension loosens in my chest.

"Sorry I'm kinda late," Sawyer calls. He has this way of cutting through the niceties, as though his greetings are just implied. "Bubblemania ran out of passion fruit bubble tea, so I spent, like, twenty minutes trying to decide between mango and honeydew." He waves his arms, shooing the thought away. "It was all very stressful."

For reasons I can't describe, I do a tiny bow. "Hello to you," I say as he rounds the car. I want to say more, but at the sight of him, my mouth goes dry and I think I might hurl all over the sidewalk.

When he turns and sees me, Sawyer's eyes widen for a fraction of a second, as though he too can't believe I'm actually here. And after what happened a couple months ago, can I blame him? But when Sawyer reaches me, he opens his arms wide and pulls me into a hug. He's still an entire head taller than me, so my face buries into his chest and the soft blue fabric of his T-shirt. He smells of some boyish deodorant and buttered popcorn, his chin resting against my scalp. Being this close to him, feeling the sharp boniness of his arms wrapped around me, feels as good as I remember. I can hear the voice at the back of

my head whispering for me to choose option one. Just tell him how I feel right now. Get it over with, before I lose the courage to do it at all.

“So, were we going for jack-o’-lantern this summer?” he says before I can say anything, his jaw thudding against my skull. “Or fire? Or, like, jack-o’-lanterns *on fire*.”

I pull back, pretend to smooth down my hair. “I was actually going for traffic cone.”

Sawyer lets go so he can give me two thumbs up. “Oh my god, you nailed it,” he says as he reaches for my suitcase. “Truly. You’re like a talking roadblock. It’s uncanny.”

He opens the Datsun’s trunk and swings my suitcase inside as I slip into the passenger seat. Option two it is. It’s probably better this way, gauging the temperature of me and him *before* I hurtle the wrench that is confessing my undying love into the already delicate state of our friendship.

Sitting just below the emergency brake are two plastic cups, straws wide enough to suck up the dark purple, dime-sized tapioca pearls that are clumped underneath a layer of ice like fish eggs. Both drinks are identical, filled with a creamy yellow liquid. Greeting each other with bubble tea has been another of our traditions that started only weeks after Sawyer and I met that first summer in Cielo Springs, broken just once when it was his turn and he missed his alarm, so had to choose between picking me up late or skipping bubble tea duty. He picked wrong.

“Okay, don’t freak out, but I went for mango.” Sawyer drops into the driver’s seat and nods at the bubble tea between us. “It’s nowhere near as good as passion fruit, but I didn’t want to show up without bubble tea again after last time.”

I bite down on my lip, careful to keep my eyes on one of the cup's lids and the shaky *S* scribbled across the plastic. Last time? Does Sawyer mean the last time he didn't show up with bubble tea, or the last time I saw him? At even the idea of the latter, I clench my hands in my lap until my knuckles blanch.

Sawyer doesn't seem to notice, his eyes trained on the windshield as he eases out of the parking lot. The same tiny figures of people eating ice cream, their little plastic legs dangling over the car's digital clock, are stuck to the dashboard with Blu Tack where they've always been since Sawyer first got the Datsun.

Seeing them, I smile. "Rodney and Tamara are still going strong, I see," I say, nudging my fingernail against the dark hair of the woman eating chocolate ice cream. She's no bigger than half my pinkie finger, her features all mottled and melted from the sun.

"Rodney fell off after I hit a pothole a couple weeks ago," Sawyer says. "His foot is still somewhere on the floor down here, so I had to replace it with one off another little guy."

When I squint at Rodney's foot, I can see the almost invisible line where Sawyer has glued on the new boot. He's always been really good with the tiny figurines he collects for all the stop-motion short movies he films in his garage, Sawyer's fingers somehow just as nimble as they are delicate.

The bus station sits at the top of town, so once it's behind us, we're spilled immediately onto Cielo Avenue, which cuts straight through all the highlights of Cielo Springs. The city first popped up after being a popular campsite in the 1800s. It grew slowly in the beginning, just a few houses, a café, and a general store, but it exploded at the turn of the century when people from nearby cities realized the desert heat was good for

their pores. Restaurants and a library opened up. Eventually it became a full-fledged city with a tourism board and everything. San Diego is nearly two hours away and Los Angeles nearly three, so both are close enough for a weekend trip but far enough away so that Cielo Springs isn't ruined by their inhabitants' constant presence.

The sun has almost set completely, evening smashing down the last fragments of light behind the mountains on the horizon. Cielo Springs isn't usually this dark when I first arrive, but my flight from New York was delayed, forcing me to catch the later bus out to the desert. Sawyer gestures animatedly with bubble tea in hand at a new ice-cream place where the old dry cleaners used to be, a coffee shop with farm-style benches lined up below the front window. I nod along, taking slow sips of my drink. This is my fourth summer here, and so I know every inch of this town. But somehow, after barely speaking to Sawyer for the last few months and therefore not inhabiting it via his stories, Cielo Springs feels almost like something I remember from a dream. Familiar, and yet also suddenly foreign, something I need to relearn.

As we drive, a guitar strums quietly from the Datsun's speakers, a song I could recite in my sleep; it's from the soundtrack to Sawyer's and my favorite movie, *The Middle*, a classic rock song that was made for road trips along wide, dusty roads. I nibble the end of my straw, letting the bubble tea pool in my mouth. He's right, the mango isn't as good as passion fruit, the sharp tang of citrus stinging my tongue. I've barely said ten words since we got in the car, as though by opening my mouth I risk unleashing every thought that's been rushing through my head since spring break.

Sawyer, as if realizing this too, turns to me. “How was your flight?” he asks. “Did anyone try to sell you guitar strings?”

He’s referring to last summer, when a middle-aged guy tried to sell me strings that looked suspiciously like fishing wire for a guitar I didn’t have and neither did he. For two hours, he just stretched the fishing wire over an empty Kleenex box and pretended to strum out some Elvis song.

Sawyer stares at me with his eyebrows raised, waiting for my answer. If I want to tell him how I feel, we have to get back in our rhythm first, get over the weirdness of being apart for so long so that I don’t add an extra helping of awkward on top of my already uncomfortable. It’s occurred to me before that I could just surpass all this weirdness by using my Rewind, making it so we never had this weirdness at all, but I know I can still fix this thing with Sawyer. I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t.

I swallow hard. “It was shockingly boring,” I say, fighting to keep my voice even. “Which was disappointing, since the only movies the airplane had were Barracuda originals.”

Sawyer pretends to gag. “Barf,” he says. “Tell me you abstained.”

“Obviously I abstained,” I say, wrinkling my nose. “How dare you.”

As employees of the Triple Star Movie Theater—AKA the Trip, AKA Cielo Springs’s only cinema, AKA the single greatest place on earth, not least because it’s owned and managed by my aunt, Kate—Sawyer and I are generally suspicious of using streaming platforms for anything other than series. But now Barracuda, which was relatively small and unthreatening up until about a year ago, has taken things up a notch by essentially buying out directors and making themselves the sole

platform for whole cinematic empires. It's the kind of thing that can wipe movie theaters as we know them, including the Trip, off the map.

"So, what'd you do the whole flight?" Sawyer asks.

Think about you.

"I mostly watched the flight map," I say. "Did you know there's a North *and* a South Dakota?"

He snorts. "Homeschooling failed you."

As we pull up to a red light near the insurance office Sawyer's dad works at, I glance at him out of the corner of my eye so as not to make it obvious I'm watching him. He doesn't immediately look much different from last summer, but the longer I stare at him, the more I can see the months I've missed: he's let his hair grow out a little bit so it curls around his ears, and his cheekbones are sharper, his shoulders wider, muscles he didn't have before weaving along his arms. His long fingers curl around the steering wheel, and something about the way he flexes them makes my stomach flip. At that exact moment, Sawyer looks over at me. I try to glance away but he's already caught me, and so I smile weakly, trying to hide my blush. Sawyer returns the smile, and it's then I see he's blushing too.

By the time we reach my aunt's house, night has fully descended. The streetlamps are on, illuminating the empty sidewalk but leaving the rest of the houses along the cul-de-sac cloaked in darkness. When Sawyer turns off the car, the headlights dying, I can still make out the dusty off-white exterior of my aunt's house, the lawn covered not in grass but layers of stones and squat succulents. In the driveway is my cousin's homemade skate ramp, the one Sawyer and I helped him build two summers ago.

With the stereo off, the only sound in the car is Sawyer swishing his straw around the quickly evaporating ice at the bottom of his cup. We sit in silence for what has to be a full minute, Sawyer's eyes glued to his drink. I wipe the condensation from my hands along the tops of my thighs and swallow. It has to be now. I have to tell him now, before we go into my aunt's house and everything descends into chaos, all the welcome-back hugs and fresh, steaming boxes of pizza I know are waiting on the dinner table.

"Sawyer, I have to—" I start to say, just as he says, "Do you remember—"

We both smile at each other thinly, trailing into nervous laughter. "You go first," he says.

"No, no," I say, shaking my head. "You go."

He sets what's left of his bubble tea back in the cup holder and drums his hands against his thighs. I know I should be paying attention to whatever it is he's about to say, but I suddenly can't stop looking at his mouth, wishing I could just kiss him the way I've thought about doing almost every night for the past year. The way I know he wanted to too, because he'd told me. When I glance up, Sawyer is looking at me, his lips parted just a fraction of an inch, and it's in this moment where I realize, maybe I don't have to tell him I love him. Not yet. Maybe he's going to say it first.

"This is the part where you say something," I say, the air between us so thick I could bite it.

Sawyer shakes his head as though to wake himself from a dream. "Yeah," he says, laughing quietly, blinking. "Sorry, I just got kind of . . . distracted." I can almost trace the nervous swallow as it slips down his throat. "I feel like we should talk," he says slowly.

Oh god, here it comes. Everything in me is charged, like all my nerve endings are sizzling on the surface of my skin.

“Same.”

“What the hell are you two doing out there?” a voice calls from the front door. Sawyer and I startle in our seats, squinting as the security light on my aunt’s porch springs to life. I can just make out the figure of my aunt Kate standing beneath it, waving. “Get in here before these pizzas get cold!”

Sawyer smiles sheepishly, silence settling over us again.

“Did you,” I say, clearing my throat. “I mean, did you still want to say something?”

He glances out his window at Kate and bites his lip. “I feel like she’s gonna keep standing there if we don’t go in.”

I sigh. He’s probably right. The moment between us is gone anyway, at least for now.

“After dinner?” he says.

“Of course,” I say. He always stays over after dinner on my first night back so we can map out all the movies we’re going to watch over the summer ahead. “I made you a slideshow of this summer’s movie list, starting with *Black Widow*. There are seventy-two movies in total, six of which are from the Marvel universe, but if you just hear me out—”

“And, this is where I get out of the car,” Sawyer says as he opens his door and pushes himself out of the Datsun.

“You know you can’t avoid Marvel for long,” I shout after him. “Not when I’m here.”

I scramble out of the car as Sawyer retrieves my suitcase from the trunk. He’s got this weird prejudice against Marvel movies, as though they’re all still just about boring white dudes in capes. As I watch him wheel my suitcase toward me, I let go of a breath

along with whatever Sawyer and I might've said to each other. We still have later tonight. I can feel how close it is, that easiness between us, eating too-buttered popcorn for lunch, cartwheeling across the floors of empty screens at the Trip, watching movies on Sawyer's laptop until three in the morning on my bed. All I have to do is make it to tonight.

CHAPTER TWO

The first recorded Rewind was enacted in 1846 by Francis Mulligan, who wished so hard he could take back a trade for a new goat that one morning he awoke and it was so. Since then, the Rewind has become more official (i.e., more paperwork!), but the basic premise is still there—regret it enough, and you just might get your wish.

—EXCERPT FROM “A REWIND THROUGH HISTORY”

BY FRANK MULLIGAN

Sawyer and I met exactly four years ago to the day, that first time I visited Cielo Springs. His dad moved here when Sawyer was in seventh grade, but it wasn't until he and my cousin Bunny did theater tech together for their middle school's production of *Fiddler on the Roof* that they became friends. On my first night in Cielo Springs, my hair freshly dyed radioactive purple, Bunny mentioned that his friend, who would be helping out at the Trip over the summer, was joining us for pizza. Sawyer appeared on the doorstep a few minutes later in a white T-shirt with holes in the collar and brown corduroy pants. I knew instantly we'd be friends from the easy way we began teasing each other, as though we'd been hanging out for years. By the end of that summer, we were inseparable.

Before I can even make it inside the house, Kate is wrapping me into a hug. “There's my girl,” she says into the side of my

head. Her white-blond hair is tied loosely in a braid, jean shorts frayed around her thighs. If you squint and know what to look for, she looks exactly like my mom, same long arms and sharp shoulders. “Please excuse the shit show that is this,” she says as she leans back, gesturing to her torso. Tiny flecks of white paint are scattered across her pale collarbones and faintly lined cheeks. “We’ll get into it later.” She flicks the bun tied on top of my head. “Loving this, by the way. Very Beaker from *The Muppets*. I’m into it.” Before I can say anything back, she pulls me into the house, shouting down the hallway, “Benjamin, darling, she’s here.”

A door slams at the back of the house, followed by the sound of footsteps pounding against the tiled hall. Within seconds, a blur of white-blond charges toward me, cinching his arms around my neck in a bone-crunching embrace.

My cousin Bunny sucks in a big breath, his shoulder-length hair squished against the side of my face. “You smell like airplane food and nail polish,” he says wistfully, sighing.

Kate’s house is small, packed with a mixture of antique wooden furniture and bright yellow, red, and orange cushions. The living room walls are painted a deep green and covered almost completely in paintings, old movie posters, and pictures. The biggest one sits right in the middle above the TV, a picture of Kate and my uncle Rob standing in front of the Trip just after they bought it. Seeing the theater, the big pink *T* above the old-school marquee peeking out above their heads, sends into my chest the same swell of happiness I always get when I think about the Trip.

The house is remarkably cool compared to outside thanks to the gray tiles lining the floors of every room in the house, but Kate still has the air-conditioning blasting on high.

“I’m putting your stuff away, Dix,” Sawyer says over his shoulder as he disappears down the hallway leading to the spare room.

Kate gestures to the round wooden table just beside the kitchen. Its top is piled with three giant pizza boxes. “Sit down, sit down,” she says, pulling out a chair. “I just put out the plates.” She sets a hand on my shoulder, leans in close. “Do your parents know you made it?”

At the mention of my parents, my stomach clenches. “Uh, yeah,” I lie. “My mom called when I was getting my bags at the airport.”

That part isn’t a lie. My mom did call; I just didn’t answer. I don’t need to talk about the fight we had last night; that, and the fact that neither of my parents said goodbye to me before I left for the airport this morning. Though if anyone understands my relationship with my parents, it’s Kate. Ever since we moved to New York, she and my parents aren’t exactly close.

Bunny opens the top box of pizza, unleashing a cloud of steam he waves away with his free hand. “We got Nuclear Volcano, especially for our angel,” he says, batting his eyelashes at me. He slides two pieces of the pizza, layered so high with spicy sausage and jalapeños that I can barely see the cheese underneath, onto my plate. Nuclear Volcano, though so spicy it makes my taste buds burn, is my absolute favorite.

“Kate, the bathroom light’s out again,” Sawyer says when he reemerges, falling into the chair beside me.

“Are you serious?” Kate says, appearing in the kitchen doorway with four empty glasses. “I just changed the light bulb, like, last month.”

He shuffles the pizza boxes around to find Margherita—his favorite. “I know, I was here,” he says.

“Don’t even think about trying to take that whole ranch dressing for yourself,” Bunny says, crust from his slice of Super Sausage pizza hanging dangerously from the corner of his mouth. Sawyer blinks up at him just as he starts to tip the entire contents of a tiny pot of ranch onto his plate. “The guy would only give my mom two, so you have to share.”

Kate leans over me to fill Sawyer’s glass with lemonade. “Honey, we’ve got more in the fridge,” she says.

Bunny shoots her a look. “It’s not the same.”

To anyone else walking into this house, it might feel overwhelming: the noise, all the rushing around, the arguing that immediately ensues when Sawyer hands the ranch dressing pot back to Bunny and it’s not exactly half full. But I can feel my shoulders relaxing into my chair at the familiarity of it all, the ease with which I fit back into this table, as though I never left, as though it’s my actual home and not just my summer vacation.

“Okay, wait, wait, wait, before you start eating.” Kate finally takes her seat and levels a glare at Bunny, who has already wolfed down a slice and a half of pizza. “Considering you two”—her gaze flicks between me and Sawyer—“achieved your literal dream a few months ago, and now you’ll *both* be living in New York this fall, I believe a very cheesy toast is in order.” She’s referring to the fact that Sawyer and I got accepted into the film program at New York University, the dream we’ve both had for the last three years. Kate lifts her cup of lemonade and smiles, her eyes watery around the edges. “While Bunny and I are both deeply disappointed in you for choosing to live three thousand miles away, we’re also incredibly proud,” she says.

“But mostly we hate you,” Bunny adds. He lifts his glass a little higher and says cheerily, “To both of you failing.”

“To failing,” the three of us chorus.

Kate dabs at her eyes with the corner of her napkin, flashing a wink at me as Bunny rubs her back and Sawyer clears his throat, fingers drumming nervously on the table. My throat constricts, but I take slow sips of my lemonade until the feeling disappears.

“So,” my aunt says loudly. “I’ve been thinking about this summer’s movie night.”

The air in the room instantly shifts, the heaviness easing off again.

“Oh god,” Sawyer says, the two of us exchanging glances.

Every summer, on my last day in Cielo Springs, we put on an outdoor movie night in Kate’s backyard, projecting mostly old cult movies Sawyer has watched in his high school’s AV Club onto a cut-up sheet Kate hangs on one of the patio walls. We all get dressed up to a theme, eat food that goes with the film. It’s more or less the highlight of my year.

“I’m thinking we go fully cliché,” Kate continues, “like bad nineties, or a musical. I’m sick of all the weird, niche movies you two pick.” She points between me and Sawyer. “Where is my—”

“If you say *Grease*, I’m leaving right now,” I say.

My aunt knows every single word to that kitschy monstrosity, and has gone as Olivia Newton-John in her hot-girl phase for Halloween more times than I care to admit.

Kate gives me a look. “You know I’m gonna say *Grease*.”

“Barf,” Bunny, Sawyer, and I groan in unison.

“What’s wrong with *Grease*?” Kate huffs.

“Everything,” Sawyer says. “The songs suck, everybody looks like they’re forty, and the characters have the most basic, two-D

personalities ever. One girl's personality is just food. Literally. The only thing we know about her is she likes to eat."

"Yeah, but it's fun," Kate says. "Can't something just be about joy?"

I blow lightly on my pizza, whose heat radiates up against my chin. "Is it joyful that the literal message of the movie is change who you are or the hot jerk won't like you?" I say.

"It's set in the fifties," Kate says. "Things were backward then."

"You would know," Bunny says under his breath.

"The movie you made us watch last year was just so weird," she says. "Soaking . . . hot . . . summertime *thing*. Whatever the hell it was called."

"Aren't you supposed to own a movie theater?" Sawyer says.

Kate swats his arm. "I've blocked it out."

"*Wet Hot American Summer* is a classic," Bunny says between chews.

At the mention of the movie, the tips of my ears go hot and I shoot my gaze into my lap. Last year for the entire second half of *Wet Hot American Summer*, Sawyer held my hand underneath the thin pink blanket he and I shared. For the entire thing, all I could think about was the feeling of his fingers on mine, what it meant. We'd spent the whole summer leading up to that moment, something more brewing between us, something I was almost afraid to identify.

As I look up at Sawyer again, I can tell from the way he's examining the flecks of oregano speckling his pizza that he's deliberately trying not to meet my eyes, and I wonder if he's thinking about the same thing. How close we came. When his eyes flick over to mine for half a heartbeat and his mouth tips up in a small, embarrassed smile, I know he is.

“Okay, fine,” Kate says. “What do *you* snobby film critics want to watch?”

“*Rocky Horror?*” Bunny offers.

Sawyer shakes his head. “Overdone,” he says. “Plus, no musicals. The world does not need more singalongs.”

“I disagree,” Kate says.

“What about *Jaws?*” I say, finally braving a bite of my pizza. It’s spicy and sweet and absolutely perfect.

“No horror,” Kate retorts immediately. “Absolutely not.”

“*Jaws* isn’t actually horror—” I start to say back, but Sawyer splays his hands out on the table and widens his eyes, a look that stops me short.

“Okay, I’m going to say something very controversial, but just hear me out. What if”—he swallows, pausing for emphasis as his gaze sweeps around the table—“we finally watch *The Middle*.”

The grumbling from Bunny and Kate follows immediately. *The Middle* is mine and Sawyer’s absolute favorite movie of all time, a teeny-tiny indie that was shot in the late ’90s. It’s about this woman Stella and her husband, Sam, who she finds out over dinner in the very first scene has been cheating on her. On their way back from the restaurant, their car hits a deer, and in the next moment, they’re driving through the desert. They come upon a fast-food restaurant and a farmhouse across the street, but when they investigate and find neither place is actually real, it becomes clear that their car crash was fatal and threw them into limbo. From there, they have to figure out what their unfinished business in life was so they can move on, the story going back and forth between their time in limbo and significant moments from their relationship.

It was one of the first things that drew me and Sawyer

together, our love for this quiet, unassuming movie that most people our age had never heard of. Everybody always talked about the action movies and mega-budget psychological thrillers Charlie Roman, writer and director of *The Middle*, made in the years after, once he'd sold his soul to the studios and decided making money was more important than creating art that meant anything. But not me and Sawyer.

"Come on, me and Dix have been trying to sell you on this for years," he says, looking to me for backup. I don't remember ever begging to watch *The Middle* with my aunt and cousin, but I don't point this out. Sawyer throws a hand toward Kate. "You said so yourself, me and Dix are starting NYU this fall. This is our last summer movie night, at least like how it's always been." Sawyer's voice is strained with earnestness. "Just because Charlie Roman is a sellout douchebag doesn't mean he didn't also create what is unarguably a cinematic masterpiece." He lets out a sound of exasperation. "You guys, let me and Dix watch our favorite film on our last summer movie night as we know it."

Bunny's eyes meet mine over the table, his lips pressed together. Lately I'm not Charlie Roman's biggest fan either, but Sawyer does have a point. With summer internships and stuff, who knows when we'll get to do our movie night here again?

"It's a good guilt trip," I admit, shrugging.

Kate sighs. "It's a very good guilt trip." She and I lock eyes. "As long as you're okay with it."

I flash a smile I know is too wide around the table. "Of course," I say. "Let's do it."

Sawyer pounds his fists on the table and whoops. "You guys, this is gonna be so good," he says excitedly. "We can eat burgers, and wear—" But he stops, cut off when the doorbell rings.

The three of us sit up straighter as Kate stands and drops her napkin onto her chair. “That must be Claire,” she says before anyone can ask.

“Wh—Claire?” I say, frowning. “From the Trip?”

Sawyer’s head swivels around to follow Kate as she moves toward the front door. “Wait, what?” he says. “How? I thought she was babysitting tonight.”

I squint at Bunny, who’s cramming another slice of Super Sausage into his mouth, crust-first this time. How does Sawyer know what Claire’s supposed to be doing tonight?

“Yeah, down the street,” Kate says to him. “I ran into her when I was picking up the pizza, told her to swing by before she goes over there.”

For the last two years, Claire has been the Trip’s ticket attendant; Kate says it’s because she needs me and Sawyer to keep an eye on the projectors and make sure the screenings are running smoothly, but we all know it’s because Claire is nauseatingly sweet and puts on a better face for customers. Even though we’ve worked together for the last couple summers, I can’t ever bring myself to engage in small talk with her. The last time I did, I found out she went to Los Angeles for the midnight premiere of the *Cats* movie, a fact Sawyer and I would use to make each other laugh whenever a jerk customer put us in a bad mood.

The front door swings open, followed by the light tinkling of Claire’s laugh. The rest of us rise as one from around the table, Sawyer smoothing his hands down the front of his black jeans.

Kate leads Claire to the table. “You just missed the summer movie night argument, so your timing is perfect,” she says to her.

“Dixie!” Claire’s strawberry-blond hair spills across her shoulders as she leans over to give me a hug, but it just feels like I’m cradling a mouse. “Welcome back,” she practically squeals.

I try to return her smile, but I know it looks forced. My first dinner back is only supposed to be me, Kate, Bunny, and Sawyer. Claire’s presence feels all wrong, like an actor entering before their cue.

I glance over at Sawyer, anticipating his surreptitious eye roll. But when I do, Claire is there too. She sets her hands on Sawyer’s chest and smiles up into his face. “Hey you,” she says before she stands on her tiptoes and kisses him.