

AGAIN

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e. lockhart

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For Daniel

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PART I

1

A LOVE STORY

This story takes place in a number of worlds.

But mostly in two.

It was the third day of Adelaide Buchwald's summer job, the summer after her junior year at boarding school.

That summer she would fall in and out of love more than once,

in different ways

in different possible worlds.

In every world, she was consumed with the intense contradictions of her heart.

Adelaide wanted to be rescued and

she wanted independence.

She was inclined to laziness,

curiosity, and

magical thinking.

She was all charm and yet deeply miserable. She was a liar and she hated liars. She loved both truly and wrongheadedly. She appreciated beauty.

Her job was to walk five dogs, morning and night. They belonged to teachers who were on summer vacation.

EllaBella,
Lord Voldemort,
Rabbit,
Pretzel, and
the Great God Pan.

Those were the dogs. The morning she met Jack, Adelaide took them all to the dog run on the Alabaster Preparatory Academy campus. The run was a sandy space, fenced in and surrounded by trees. Looking through the leaves, she could see the spire of the Alabaster clock tower. She unleashed the dogs and sat on a bench while they frolicked. She listened to podcasts about stupid celebrities she didn't even care about, trying to stop thinking about Mikey Double L.

Adelaide threw balls for the dogs. She threw sticks. She collected poop in small plastic bags, then threw them in the trash.

EllaBella said, *You're a gentle human. Can I lean on you?* And Adelaide let the dog lean. She stroked EllaBella's shaggy head.

She texted her mom about the breakup with Mikey. She had already told her dad the little she thought he needed to know.

Adelaide and her father, Levi Buchwald, had moved to Alabaster Prep for her junior year of high school. Adelaide lived in a dormitory, and Levi in Alabaster faculty housing. His new home was a small wooden house on the edge of campus. It was furnished with flea-market buys and overloaded with books. He was an English teacher.

Adelaide's mother, Rebecca, and her little brother, Toby, had

spent the year together in a rental house in Baltimore. Toby was very sick. Rebecca was taking care of him.

Rebecca was a knitter. She used to own a store called the Good Sheep Yarn Shop, where she taught classes. Much of her home was dedicated to wicker baskets overflowing with skeins of yarn. And plants, which she tended semi-obsessively. Rebecca was a person who focused very intently on the people, plants, and yarn in front of her.

She texted Adelaide back immediately about Mikey:

Oh blergh. I'm sorry. You okay?

Adelaide lied.

Yeah.

What happened?

The last thing Adelaide wanted to do was tell her mother the story of Mikey Double L.

. . .

. . .

Well, I'm here if you want
to talk. Hug! ❤️❤️🐳.

Rebecca often used the fat, spouting whale emoji. Adelaide had no idea what it was meant to symbolize. She wrote back.

Breakup was probably for the
best anyway.

I was sad. But I slept it off and
had eggs for breakfast, and
now I'm feeling much better.

You're very mature. 🐼 🐼 🐼

Adelaide was not at all mature. And the breakup wasn't for the best. But she didn't want her mother to spiral into anxiety. That was something Rebecca was inclined to do, with Adelaide off at boarding school. She wanted to hear that Adelaide ate well, stayed hydrated, got regular exercise, and slept enough.

When Rebecca spiraled into worry, the result was a series of phone calls filled with urgent requests for reassurance and connection that ended in Adelaide yelling at her mother, so Adelaide had devised a plan of regular texts giving evidence of those desirable behaviors.

"But I slept it off and had eggs for breakfast, and now I'm feeling much better" was what Rebecca needed to hear. Not

"I'm puffy and dehydrated from crying and
for breakfast I ate two Hershey bars and
truthfully I feel
unlovable
and ugly,
stupid
and broken.

I wish I could get a giant injection that would turn off my thoughts.

I would let a creepy doctor with a secret basement lab shoot a

random glowing substance into my ear if I knew it would stop me from feeling the way I do.

Last night, I tried binge-watching baking shows and then

I tried binge-watching zombie shows and then

I tried listening to happy music and

putting on a ton of makeup. So much makeup. Then my

eyebrows (with their makeup) looked scary and

their scariness made me depressed.

I was depressed by my own eyebrows.

I would have tried smoking cigarettes if I'd had any, and

I would have drunk Dad's booze if he had any, but no luck on mind-altering substances, so

I passed out at three a.m. and when I woke up

I felt even worse and

my pillowcase was stained with lipstick."

No. She couldn't say that to her mother.

Adelaide just sent the text about the good breakfast and the night's sleep. She added a zebra emoji for good measure, thinking Rebecca would like it. Then she put her phone in her pocket.

The Great God Pan lay on the ground, releasing gas.

EllaBella stayed close, pressing against Adelaide's leg. *I am thinking you have dog treats in your pocket*, she said sweetly.

Lord Voldemort and Pretzel played chase. Rabbit growled at something on the other side of the fence.

And suddenly, a boy appeared. He was already in the run

when Adelaide saw him, standing under a tree. He had a fluffy white dog on a leash.

Adelaide recognized the dog. It was B-Cake. B-Cake belonged to Sunny Kaspian-Lee.

A beat later, Adelaide recognized the boy as well, though she was sure she'd never seen him at Alabaster. He had a sweet V-shaped face and full lips. He was broad in the shoulders, with a narrow nose, smooth-shaven face, delicate ears. His light brown hair was wavy and a little wild. He was the sort of person you'd see immortalized in Roman statuary, his skin a warm Mediterranean olive, his chin and neck strong. He wore a light cotton jacket, a blue T-shirt, loose jeans, and green suede sneakers with blue stripes. The sleeves of the jacket were rolled up. His hands had the slight squashy look of leftover baby fat.

She knew him. She was certain of it.

He nodded at her, walked over, and draped himself onto the bench. There was something unusual going on with one of his legs. He walked with a roll of his left hip, and the fabric of his jeans flapped around that leg.

She remembered his walk.

The boy released the clip on the leash. B-Cake zoomed over to Rabbit and Rabbit exploded into the air with an anxious yip.

The boy laughed, covering his mouth with his fist. "Poor puppy," he said.

"Hey, do I remember you?" she asked.

"Me? I don't know."

"I'm pretty sure I *do* remember you," she said. "From Boston. Two years ago. We met at a rooftop party when I was in ninth grade."

"A party on whose rooftop?"

"I don't know. A friend of my friend. It was cold and you let me wear your scarf. Remember?"

The boy shook his head. "I have a radically terrible memory. Sorry." Then he took out his phone. "'Scuse me, I've got to make a call."

"Hey, do I remember you?" Adelaide asked.

"Me?" he said. "I don't know."

"I'm pretty sure I *do* remember you," she said. "From Boston."

"I've never been to Boston," he said.

"Hey, do I remember you?" Adelaide asked.

"Me? I don't know."

"I'm pretty sure I *do* remember you," she said. "I'm pretty sure, in fact, that you took my number at a party two years ago and

you never, ever texted me, is what I'm

pretty sure of. I'm

pretty sure you're the kind of terrible human being who says

Give me your number
when he doesn't actually want the number, and I'm
pretty sure that's not the kind of human being I need to
talk to ever again,
especially not right now, when Mikey Double L is off to
Puerto Rico full of virtue and
my entire sense of myself is
quite frankly
on the verge of liquidation."
"Okay then," he said. "I don't need to make conversation."

"I'm pretty sure I *do* remember you," Adelaide said. "From Boston. Two years ago. We met at a rooftop party."

"Really?"

"You were writing in a notebook," she explained. "We started talking."

"What was I writing?"

Adelaide flushed. She

wanted to tell the boy the answer, and also, she
didn't want to tell him.

"We talked about dinosaurs, I think, and which ones we'd
like to turn into."

"Velociraptor, obviously," said the boy.

"That's what you said, but you're one hundred percent
wrong," said Adelaide. "Pterodactyl."

"Oh, you're right," he said. "Pterodactyl is better. Flight is
always better."

"I used to have a fear of plesiosaurs," she told him. "Do you know about plesiosaurs? They were like, giant naked turtles with sea-monster necks."

He laughed.

"At the rooftop party, you gave me your scarf," continued Adelaide. "A red and black one. You said I could use it but to give it back, because it wasn't even yours, it was your cousin's."

"Was I wearing a terrible leather jacket? Like a trying-too-hard jacket?"

"Yes."

"Then it was me," he said. "But I can't remember."

"My ride was leaving and I gave the scarf back to you, and you ripped a page from your notebook. You gave me the page and you had written me a poem:

*Cerulean dress and
wide eyes, like a lion.
A raging wave of disobedient hair.
She contains
contradictions."*

"I wrote you a poem?"

"You did."

Adelaide was sad he didn't remember. Maybe he gave poems to a lot of girls. Or maybe he just couldn't be expected to recall a party from two and a half years ago, when they would both have been only fourteen.

"I think poems, sometimes," she told him. "Often, actually. But I rarely write them down."

"Do you still have the one I wrote you?" he asked.

It was in her wallet. "Maybe somewhere," she told him.

Adelaide had asked people if they knew a boy of his description, a boy with a roll of his hip, a poet, a boy with soft-looking wrists and golden skin and bitten nails. She had looked for him again and again as she sat in coffeehouses, as she waited in line for a burrito. At parties or ramen places, she looked for his sweet, full mouth. She was holding on to the chance that something good might happen.

To Adelaide, the boy was a promise. He promised her that happiness could still exist, could still be hers.

And that promise seemed even more important once the bad stuff started happening with Toby.

Then the Buchwald family left Boston. They moved to Baltimore for Toby's treatment. Adelaide had accepted that she'd never see the boy in the leather jacket, ever again.

Now here he was.

He picked up a tennis ball that was lying in the sand. "Birthday! Come here, boy."

"She's a girl," Adelaide said.

"Come here, girl."

B-Cake ignored him.

"She doesn't fetch," Adelaide told him. "I know that dog."

The boy laughed. "Okay. I don't need to throw if she's not into it." He sat down.

"Did you hurt your leg?" Adelaide asked.

"No." He didn't speak for a moment. Then he said, "Actually, a plesiosaur bit me. I didn't want to tell you because you seem to have a phobia."

"Ha." She chewed her lip. "Was that rude of me, asking?"

"A little." He sighed. "I was born this way. It's a skeletal limb abnormality."

"I'm sorry. I asked without thinking."

"You're not entitled to the knowledge, is all. It's my personal info. You know?"

"Okay."

"Okay."

"D'you want to ask me something intrusive now?" she said. "You can. I feel I owe you."

"No thanks."

"Ask me."

"That's all right."

"Go on."

"Fine. Ah, besides plesiosaurs, what scares you the most? Really, truly terrifies you?"

"My brother," Adelaide said, the answer coming out before she had time to craft an amusing reply.

He picked up a tennis ball that was lying in the sand. "Birthday! Come here, boy."

"She's a girl," Adelaide said.

"Come here, girl."

B-Cake ignored him.

"She doesn't fetch," Adelaide told him. "I know that dog."

The boy laughed. "Okay. I don't need to throw if she's not into it." He sat down next to her. "I'm just taking her this weekend while the owner's out of town. Are all of these yours?" He was talking about EllaBella, Rabbit, and the rest.

"I just walk them."

He reached down to pet EllaBella, who was lying at Adelaide's feet. "This dog is my favorite," he said. "She has an excellent beard." EllaBella was a bushy black mutt, nearly fifteen years old.

"She's my favorite too," Adelaide whispered. "But don't tell the others."

EllaBella was owned by Derrick Byrd, a single teacher of history. He'd come to Alabaster last year. He still had unpacked boxes in his house, which was two doors down from her dad's.

"I never tell secrets," said the boy. She liked the way his mouth moved when he spoke. He had blue paint underneath his nails.

"What did you paint?" she asked.

"I have access to the art studio for the summer. I'm painting abstract shapes, I guess you'd call them. Things that look like other things but aren't those things."

"Like what?"

"This one I'm doing—don't laugh."

"I won't."

"Well, you can laugh. It's kind of a hippopotamus and it's kind of a car. And also, it's kind of a church. The meaning is what the viewer sees in it."

"Hm."

"I'm not getting the effect I want," he said. "A lot of them look like blobs, not church hippos or whatever. It's just the start of an idea."

"What year are you?" she asked.

"Rising senior."

"I've never seen you. On campus."

He told her he had just transferred in. "My mother died six months ago." She'd had leukemia. He and his father had just relocated from Spain. His dad used to teach at Alabaster and was now going to head the Modern Languages department.

"I'm so sorry," Adelaide said. "About your mother."

"Yeah, well. Thanks." Lord Voldemort came up and wagged his stubby tail. "How come you walk so many dogs?"

"The teachers go away on summer travel. My father teaches English, but this summer he's working in Admissions for extra money. I got the idea to collect people's dogs and take them out, morning and evening. I feed them, too."

"I'm gonna get Birthday to fetch," he said. "Watch me."

He chased after B-Cake, showing her the tennis ball. "You know you want it. Look at it, so yellow. Covered with awesome dog slime. Watch it, watch it!"

B-Cake ignored him. Finally, Pretzel leaped up and grabbed the tennis ball from the boy's hand, then took it off to a corner to enjoy.

Adelaide smiled for the first time since Mikey had broken up with her.

"What are their names?" the boy asked.

"The big black one is EllaBella. The small hairy one who took the tennis ball is Pretzel. The pit bull is Rabbit."

"Aren't pit bulls vicious?"

"They have a strong bite, but nah. If they're treated well, they have good personalities."

"Wait, isn't this one a pit bull too?" He pointed.

"Nuh-uh. The Great God Pan is a French bulldog."

"And that one?"

"Lord Voldemort is a bull terrier."

He shrugged. "Variations on a theme. Same basic thing."

"You said something similar when we met at the rooftop party."

He shook his head, not remembering.

"You said," explained Adelaide, "that all the roof parties were variations on a theme. You said the parties echoed each other. Warm summer nights, drinks in plastic washtubs and people in shorts. The same songs playing."

Remember me, she willed him.

Remember the party. And the poem.

Remember what you said. Then remember what I said.

"That dog is trying to jump the fence," the boy announced.

Adelaide looked.

Rabbit the pit bull was crouched, wagging her back end like a cat about to spring.

"She can't go over," Adelaide said.

"She's trying. Look at her try."

And Rabbit jumped.

Rabbit was burly and dark gray, with a white chest and white paws. Her mouth was that wide pit-bull mouth that looks like a smile, and her legs were short and stocky. Her neck was so thick it could not properly be called a neck at all.

She cleared the fence.

In a hot second she was followed by B-Cake. It defied the laws of physics.

Adelaide took a run at the fence and jumped herself over. The boy came out through the gate holding the leash. "Birthday! Come here, Birthday!" he called.

B-Cake and Rabbit were tumbling on the lawn, running in manic circles.

"She goes by B-Cake," Adelaide informed him, stopping her chase to rest. "Not Birthday. She won't even know Birthday is her name."

"Why wouldn't Kaspian-Lee tell me that?" the boy moaned.

Sunny Kaspian-Lee was Adelaide's teacher. She taught Design for the Theater, which was a class on costumes, props, and lighting. And Set Design. Adelaide had taken them both.

When they ran into each other on campus, Kaspian-Lee always said "Hello, Adelaide Buchwald," and Adelaide always said "Hello, Ms. Kaspian-Lee." The teacher wore sculptural clothes and had short bangs that stopped midway down her forehead. In cold weather, she'd be wrapped in a burgundy trench coat, with a black watch cap, walking B-Cake to and from the Arts Center. She often carried unwieldy bags full of poster boards, long wooden dowels, and once, feathers. She would hold them against her torso with both arms, with B-Cake's leash hooked around one wrist.

Now, as the dogs raced and tumbled over each other, Adelaide chased Rabbit. The boy threw himself across the grass to tackle B-Cake. He missed her, though, and she ran past him.

"She'll murder me if I lose her dog," he said, scrambling to his feet.

Adelaide took a dog biscuit out of her jacket pocket and whistled.

B-Cake and Rabbit ran over.

"Sit," Adelaide commanded.

B-Cake sat. Rabbit didn't sit.

Adelaide took a second biscuit out and held it up. "There's one for each of you. Sit."

The boy snapped the leash onto B-Cake. He bent down and took hold of Rabbit's collar.

Adelaide gave each dog a biscuit. They took the treats gingerly, being careful not to hurt her with their fangs.

"I like that you have dog biscuits in your pockets," said the boy. "It takes a certain kind of person to always be prepared with a treat."

Adelaide was the type to have biscuits in her pocket, and gum in her backpack, and ChapStick, and hand cream that smelled like apricots. That morning she had coffee with three sugars in a thermos. "I carry a *lot* of treats," she told him as they returned to the dog run. She pulled some warm toast, wrapped in foil, out her bag. "Want some?"

"What is it?" He bent over and smelled.

"Rye toast. With butter."

"I've never had rye."

"It's good. I mean, it's not bacon. But nothing's bacon." She handed him a piece and he ate it thoughtfully.

"My name is Adelaide, by the way."

"Jack."

She already knew his name. From the party. "Why are you walking B-Cake?" she asked.

"Kaspian-Lee went off for the weekend with Mr. Schlegel," he said. "She asked me to walk the dog. Did you know they're *lovers*?" He emphasized the word.

"I knew they were a couple. They've been to my dad's for dinner."

"She used that word. *Lovers*."

"Ew." They were quiet for a moment. Jack stood up. His mood seemed to have shifted. His eyes didn't meet hers. "I appreciate you saving me with dog biscuits," he said.

"Can I text you sometime?" Adelaide asked.

He shook his head. "I would say yes, but I'm super busy this summer. See you around, Adelaide. Fun chat."

Adelaide gave up on Rabbit and tackled B-Cake, rolling in the grass as the dog scrabbled with her paws. She hugged B-Cake to her chest.

Are we wrestling? asked B-Cake, switching immediately from recalcitrant to licky.

"Oh god, she's slobbering me," Adelaide called.

The boy loped over and bent to clip the leash on, but Rabbit had circled back and B-Cake lunged, pulling him as she leaped away. He kept hold of the dog but fell to the ground next to Adelaide.

Pushing herself up, Adelaide managed to grab Rabbit's collar

as she ran by. "These are rotten dogs," she said. "You're rotten dogs, did you know that?"

They didn't know. They loved themselves.

Adelaide took firm hold of Rabbit's collar, pulled the leash out of her pocket, and clipped it on. Rabbit grumbled, but Adelaide ignored her and lay back in the grass to catch her breath.

Jack lay back as well. His shirt rode up, and Adelaide could see a thick, puckered scar on one side of his abdomen. His ordinary skin looked unbelievably soft and vulnerable next to the wound.

"Well, that was a thrill," he said. "Good catch, there."

"Yeah, well," she said. "I am a professional dog walker."

He laughed and stood up, making his scar disappear.

He held his hand out to her. She took it and he pulled her up. His hand was warm and she wanted to touch him more, wanted to run her finger up his arm.

But he let go. "Thanks for the B-Cake capture," he said. "I should get her back home before something worse happens."

That was so fun, said B-Cake. *Rabbit is my best friend.*

"Will you be here tomorrow, then?" Adelaide asked.

"I might be."

"I'm here all summer," Adelaide said.

He smiled. She told him her phone number and he texted her, "Hello."

Then he disappeared down the path.

A moment later, he returned with a reluctant B-Cake under his arm. "Adelaide with the cerulean dress," he called. "I remember now."

*Cerulean dress and
wide eyes, like a lion.
A raging wave of disobedient hair."*

And with that recitation, Adelaide Buchwald gave Jack Cavallero her heart.

Impulsively,
gloriously,
openly,

she gave it to him, falling in love with someone she did not know, wondering at the curve of his cheek, and the wave of his hair, and the way his shirt draped over his shoulders.

He made her laugh. He dared to write poems. He risked looking foolish in order to create something beautiful or strange.

She wanted to know the story of the scar on his abdomen. How had he gotten that wound? How well had it healed?

She could see by looking at him that he had been
vulnerable.

That he had
lived.

Survived.

She wanted to see all his scars, see all of him, and she felt suddenly,
intensely
certain

that he was a safe person to show her own scars to.

She thought, *Maybe we have known each other always.
Maybe our hearts encountered each other somehow,
like two hundred years ago at a cotillion, with him in a frock*

coat and me in whatever, some kind of elegant and complicated dress.

Or maybe our encounter was in another possible world. That is, in one of the countless other versions of this universe, the worlds running parallel to this one, we are already in love.