

# 1.

YOU ARE ON a plane.

The plane is an Airbus. You don't know anything about planes but if you were going to draw an "Airbus" it would be more like the regular school bus, but with wings jutting out the sides. This is *definitely* not that. The seats are upholstered in blue-and-black fabric that looks new. There is a tiny screen attached to the back of the chair in front of you that shows where the Airbus is currently flying. It's a movie, starring you! (Or at least, your plane.) A tiny dashed line is superimposed over a map, illustrating where you have been and where you are going. You wish so badly that you could fast-forward along that path until you are home.

You are so totally over this already.

Your best friend, Kath, is sitting in the seat in front of you. Her hair occasionally pops into your line of vision. Kath never sits still. You can hear the tinny treble of the music she's listening to at full volume, even though the movie she's watching is something unrelated. On her screen, two British people start kissing. One of the people is Benedict Cumberbatch. He's your movie-star crush so you change the channel on your screen so you can watch it, too, with no sound. You don't need the sound. You've watched that movie before (eight times) with Kath, lying on her bed, throwing popcorn into each other's mouths—or more accurately into each other's hair. It feels like forever ago.

That was *before* Paris.

You wish you could go back to that, to undo Paris, to undo everything, especially the stupid fight you're in with Kath. But you can't.

Now you can *feel* her dancing, her chair back vibrating your table. She occasionally bumps the person next to her, who is named Max, but it's the wrong Max, not the Max she *likes*. This Max is the one with the ears that stick out, a huge collection of Star Wars stickers on his tuba case, and a nervous stutter: the *Other* Max. The Other Max would never have the nerve to tell someone as tall and pretty and powerful as Kath to stop dancing. The girl sitting in front of her has no reservations about it, though. She keeps kneeling up on her seat, turning around, and glowering. She is pretty and English with an angular face and a loud voice. "Stop kicking my seat, for the love of God," she says. "I've asked twenty times. I need to sleep."

Kath is either ignoring her or rolling her eyes. You can't tell from behind Kath's seat, but you're pretty sure she flips her off.

"Americans have no class," the girl says sharply, not winning any friends on a flight filled with Americans.

"England sucks!" someone yells.

"HEY," shouts Mr. Appleby.

Kath isn't sitting next to you because of the fight. "I'm not talking to you," she'd said. "It's over between us." You couldn't tell from her tone if she was half-joking or all-serious. Then she swapped seats with Josh Harris, which is a pretty huge favor to you, actually. You're really grateful. But you still glare at the place where her head moves to the beat, oblivious to how mad you are. She is in an anger sandwich, effectively, with you and the English girl both furious with her for different reasons.

Josh Harris is asleep. He is making a gentle breathing sound that you wish you could record to play back whenever you feel stressed or anxious. He even *breathes* better than most people.

You change your screen back to the map and trace the plane's path with your finger but before you can get to California, the screen interrupts itself with an ad for car rentals. *Rude*, you think, flipping it back to Benedict Cumberbatch. He's leaning against a wall, laughing. He's putting a toothpick between his teeth. Kath doesn't understand why you find him attractive when he's so ordinary. "Small eyes," she says. "Pinched mouth." But it's his ordinariness that makes him attractive. Anyway, he's number two. Josh Harris is, and

always will be, number one. You sneak another glance at him, at his perfectly straight nose, and at his ear, which is sporting a diamond stud. The plane lurches.

*Flying is a suspension of disbelief*, your dad said before you boarded to leave home. Now you know what he means. How does the plane stay up? It's ridiculous. Nothing makes sense.

You lean your head back on the headrest and try not to think about lice. The engine noise is louder than you remember from the flight over, but you were too excited and nervous that time to properly pay attention. Or maybe this time, because you are in the very last row with your back pressed up against the end of the plane with no way to tip your chair back, it just sounds different. Anyway, right now, everything is too loud: the roar of the engine and the voices of your classmates and the other passengers and the way Mr. Appleby keeps standing up and saying, "HEY," and then sitting back down again, as though his work is done. No one is quieter after one of his HEYs, which are completely ineffectual, except in getting the passengers who aren't in the band to look at him and then sigh, annoyed.

It's the return half of your first plane trip, first time out of the country, first time for a lot of things, but *nothing* happened, except the fight with Kath, which sucks. Paris should've been the backdrop for so many amazing things, but it wasn't. You did *not* get kissed for the first time or get Josh Harris to fall in love with you or even have any experiences that forced you and Josh Harris together, alone, where he'd have to notice you and realize how much he liked you. You'd

imagined it *so* clearly—you even drew it—that when it didn't happen, you felt ripped off, like somehow your comic should have created that perfect moment. And it didn't.

You'd drawn an earthquake. (Earthquakes do happen in France, after all, just not as frequently as in California.) You and Josh would be trapped in a safe but cut-off room for hours and hours, ideally with some wine and French bread. He'd slowly get to know you, then somehow there would be a bed and you'd fall back onto it, kissing. And all you'd have to survive on would be canned goods. Did they even have something as unsophisticated as ravioli in Paris? You drew some tiny tins, labeled LE RAVIOLI and LA SPAGHETTIOs.

Your next idea was an elevator breaking down, one of those tiny Parisian cage ones you've seen in movies, forcing you next to each other to wait for rescue. Driven together by fate and circumstance! Just you and Josh Harris, waiting endless hours alone together, surviving on breath mints and water, which you always carried in your bag, just in case.

All the comics ended with you and Josh Harris kissing. You never really went further than that, to *after*. To what would happen next. To *more*.

"There's more to being in love with someone than just kissing," Kath had pointed out. "*Kissing* is not a relationship. Boy, are you ever going to be shocked by the real thing one day."

"Like you're an expert," you'd said. "Because you dated Charlie Martin for ten minutes?"

"Well, duh," she'd said.

In reality, it didn't matter what she said, because you weren't *in* a relationship with Josh Harris, or anyone else for that matter. For most of the trip, Josh Harris hung out with Fitzy and all of those loud boys, same as at home, running down Paris sidewalks as though they were in the gym at the Y, high-fiving and generally being oblivious to you, Elyse Schmidt, staring moonily after him.

"Stop staring at him so *moonily*," Kath had said. "Either talk to him or don't, but all the mooning about it is doing me in. I *hate* mooning."

"*You* don't have to moon about it," you'd pointed out.

"But I kind of do," she'd said. "Your mooning is sucking me in. It's like falling into a tar pit. I'm practically fossilized from all your mooning for Josh."

"Josh *Harris*," you'd corrected her. "All-one-word."

"Whatever," she'd said, and rolled her eyes. "I love you, but you're a nut. Also, you're ruining Paris."

If you had to search for something nice to say about Paris, you'd say that the bread was totally up to your expectations: crusty and soft and perfect. A-plus for the bread, Paris! Way to go! Nice work on the carbs! And the river was pretty. The bridges that crisscrossed it were like a romantic movie come to life, especially at night when the lights came on.

A romantic movie featuring zero romance for you specifically, that is.

But the damp cool February air had crawled into your bones as you walked down the Champs-Élysées, and you ached like the old person that you sort of are inside. You've

had arthritis ever since you can remember. “Junior Idiopathic Arthritis.” Or, as you prefer to think of it, “Junky Idiotic Arthritis.” Your fingers ache now, just thinking about it. You want to get home to stick them in the paraffin bath, the warm heat sinking into your joints like a series of tiny gentle hugs, the pain slowly seeping away.

Not only was it damp in Paris, but everything stank: humidity and yeast and dog poop and all those clammy stone buildings. You missed the orchards at home, the peach trees undulating into the distance under the always-blue California skies, even though in reality, you’re sick of endless summer and living way out of town on the farm, which your mom hates (your parents are constantly arguing about it), and the way that peaches are a part of every meal. You suspect that deep down inside, you’re not a California person. A California person is all white teeth and easy smiles and highlighted blond hair and perkiness. You’re *definitely* not a peach person, which is all that, along with a sweetness that you 100 percent lack.

You’re a snow person.

You’re a person who has moods, who needs sharp, extreme seasons.

You’re sort of a sour person, if you’re being honest. More like a bitter cherry than a ripe peach, in any event. When you’re mad, you’re lightning or an ice storm, wrapping everything around you in a frigid, glassy blanket of electric fury.

You write *WYOMING* on your sketchbook and then draw a heart around it, and then some trees. You add a starry

night sky. A rolling field. A white horse galloping by. A mountain.

You exhale. If you had seasons, real seasons, and mountains and biting blackflies and cold streams and a real autumn, replete with rustling colorful leaves, then—and only then—would you be yourself. You don't know *why*. It's just the way it is. You just *know*.

*One day*, you think. *One day*.

The streets in Paris were not for you. They were too narrow and too tense and packed too full of shops and doorways and endless people, so many people, people everywhere. It made you feel trapped, closed in, suffocated. It made you miss the sky.

On your first day there, you bought a turquoise blue silk scarf with a pattern of peaches on it in a thrift shop from a very pretty, fine-boned man. (Very French!) Buying it made you feel like a more beautiful person, the grown-up version of your sixteen-year-old self. Someone who would know how to tie a scarf casually, like a Parisian, like an *adult*. The scarf cost way more than you thought because you did the conversion wrong and were too embarrassed to admit it. It was all you bought in Paris because it's all you *could* buy, you ran out of money right then and there. Sitting here on the plane, you wind the scarf around your thumb and tighten it until your thumb turns white, and then purple, strangled by peaches. It's so like you to go to Paris and buy a thing that reminds you of home, even if it's something you don't even *like*.

Josh Harris makes a snoring sound and smacks his perfect lips. You stare at him, willing him to like you back. Why

can't it be that simple? You want to explain to him about the peach scarf, about yourself, about how you're more complicated and more interesting than he even could imagine.

*Moony*, you think, in Kath's voice. You flip the page and make a new drawing. The same field, surrounded by wildflowers and mountains. You add a moon, full and glowing in the top corner, and begin shading in the sky with blackness. A shooting star. Then another. And another. You draw a plaid blanket laid out on the ground, two bottles of beer, a cooler.

You close your eyes and make a wish.

You wish that *something* would happen before you land, something that would make this trip worthwhile, after all.

A story you can tell, later, one that ends with, "And that's how me and Josh Harris got together."

Ideally, that is.

In the corner of the field, you draw Josh Harris, jogging toward the picnic. Sneaking a look at Josh Harris, you see his eyes are still closed, but you angle the page away, in case he wakes up. He can't know what you're thinking: him and you, a field and a starry night.

You blush furiously, the heat of it almost making you sweat. But you keep drawing. You draw yourself on the blanket, watching him. You might be able to make the story real if you want it badly enough. That's how it works, right?

That's what Kath says and Kath is one of those girls who know what they are doing, who don't stop and ask every ten seconds, *Is this okay? Am I okay? Am I doing it right?*

Not like *you*.

You press harder. The pen makes a divot in the page.