

time
after
time

TAMARA IRELAND STONE



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Hyperion
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san francisco, california

Nothing's changed. I was gone for three months, I've been home for three more, and still, everything here is exactly the same as it was before I left.

"You guys going to Megan's party next week?" Sam asks.

My gaze travels around the circle as everyone nods. Of course they're going. Summer is almost over and Megan's parents are loaded and never home, a combination that pretty much guarantees copious opportunities to drink and hook up.

"What about you?" Sam points at me with his chin. "You in, Coop?"

"Can't," I say, avoiding his eyes. "I'll be out of town." I tip my head back and down my Gatorade. The eight of us have been skating around Lafayette Park for the last hour and I'm parched.

"Again?" He reaches in for a handful of Doritos and then passes the bag around. "You missed her last party, and that

was epic.” Everyone nods again. Ryan parrots Sam with a “Seriously epic.”

I look away as I shrug it off. “I hate to miss it, but I promised my mom I’d go see my grandmother before school starts.” I feel a little guilty about these back-to-back lies: I probably wouldn’t go to Megan’s party, even if I was sticking around, and my mom has no idea that I’m going to see my grandmother.

Sam clears his throat and looks around the circle. “Who’s got the chips?” Drew takes a big handful and everyone keeps the bag moving until it eventually makes its way back to Sam. “You sure there isn’t another reason you’re leaving town?” he asks. The crunching stops as all the guys turn and look at us, waiting for me to reply.

I lean back on my skateboard. “Like what?” My heart starts racing, but I force myself to stay still. To look cool and unfazed. I push Anna out of my mind, hoping that will make me look more convincing.

A smile tugs at the corners of Sam’s mouth. I can feel the rest of the guys shifting in place around us. Sam suddenly reaches into the bag and chucks a chip at my head, and I duck out of the way as it flies past me. “I’m just giving you shit,” he says, and everyone laughs as the crunching sounds return.

Ryan pulls his phone from his pocket and checks the screen. “Break’s over.” He stands up, pops his board into his hand, and takes off for the flat cement area surrounded by NO SKATEBOARDING signs. He’s right. We’ve probably got another ten minutes before one of the neighbors calls the cops.

Everyone else takes off, but Sam and I hang behind. I hold the chip bag out to him, and just as he's about to take it, I tip my head back and shake the rest of the crumbs into my mouth.

"Here." I hand it to him.

"You suck," he says, but he's smiling as he takes the empty bag from me and stuffs it into his backpack. I can see him staring at me out of the corner of my eye, but then he shakes his head hard and looks away. "So," he says, intentionally making his voice sound lighter. "Lindsey and I ran into her at the movies the other night."

"Her?" I wipe the grease and chip dust from my mouth with my shirtsleeve. "*Her* who?"

He looks at me like he can't believe I'd ask. "Megan." Then he adds, "*Hot* Megan."

"The one who throws all the parties?"

"Yes, that Megan. How many *hot* Megans do you know?"

I shrug. "I don't know. At least"—I count on my fingers—"four." He rolls his eyes.

"Well, I don't know about the other three, but this one asked about you. Again. She told me to make sure I bring you to her party this time." He looks at me expectantly, as if I should leap up off the ground and hurry home to rearrange my flight. Instead, I stand up slowly and reach for my board.

"Sorry, I would, but—"

"I know," he says. "Your grandma. In Illinois. Who's sick."

"Exactly."

Sam stands up too, and steps hard on the end of his board so it flips into his hand. "Look, you've managed to avoid her all

summer, but when school starts next week, you won't have a choice. The way I see it, there is only one reason you wouldn't ask Megan out."

"Because she's kind of . . . vacuous?" She's a junior, a year younger than all of us, and I haven't spoken to her long enough to know if this is true or not. But I feel compelled to steer Sam away from his "one reason."

He looks back at me. "If you really don't like her, I get it. But she's Lindsey's friend, you know? The four of us could go out sometime. It might be fun." My mind flashes on an image of Anna, Emma, Justin, and me, walking into a movie theater, my arm draped over Anna's shoulder and Emma's arm threaded through Justin's. I already have a "four of us." Or at least, I did.

I run my hand through my hair. "I'll think about it, okay?" I won't, but hopefully I put enough sincerity in my voice to make him think I will.

"Don't think about it. Just ask her out. Because, seriously, she's nice and really cool and, in my humble opinion, not at all vacuous. And Lindsey likes her," he adds, knowing that could be a selling point.

The rest of the guys come back to grab their stuff and I'm relieved. They mutter good-byes and start down the path that leads to the bottom of the hill. Sam follows them, but then stops and looks back at me. "You coming?"

"I'm going to grab a coffee," I say, gesturing toward the Fillmore Street shops in the opposite direction. He gives me

a quick “See ya” and takes off with everyone else as I head the other way.

When they’re out of sight, I double back to the bench overlooking the bay and watch the sailboats skim across the water.

Nothing’s changed, but everything’s different now. Because Anna sat here once, right next to me, and handed me a letter that told me I’d meet her someday. I wish she’d warned me that once I had, I wouldn’t quite know how to be here without her.

When I reach our house at the top of the hill, I open the front door and toss my skateboard and backpack on the floor in the foyer next to the giant houseplant. I'm heading upstairs to my room when I hear something strange coming from the kitchen. It sounds like chopping. And . . . singing.

Dad shouldn't be home from work yet and Mom had a planning meeting for one of her fund-raisers tonight. I turn around and head for the kitchen, and that's where I find my sister, Brooke. Her hair is pulled back in a ponytail and she's standing at the island, surrounded by vegetables.

She's now humming under her breath as she brings her knife down hard and slides it through a bundle of asparagus.

"What on earth are you doing?" I ask, and she looks up wearing a smile and gives me a little wave with the knife. She goes back to chopping as I walk around the kitchen, staring at the mountain of fresh produce, assessing the situation.

“I thought I’d make stir fry for dinner,” she says proudly.

I stand next to her, leaning back against the counter. “Since when do you know how to make stir fry?”

She shrugs and continues chopping. “I don’t. I’m practicing for my new dorm-food-free life. Caroline texted me earlier and right this minute, as we speak, she is lugging boxes from her Prius into our new apartment. Shona will be there tomorrow.” She looks over at me. “One of us is going to need to know how to cook.”

Brooke sets the knife on the cutting board, then gathers up the asparagus and drops it into a bowl. Then she brushes her hands together. “In a few more days I’ll be back in Boulder, done with the dorms forever and settling into my new room.” She looks right into my eyes. “And I’ll be living with people I actually like again. Cool roommates. Like I had in Chicago.”

Brooke and I have spent most of our summer talking about the three months I spent in 1995 Evanston while she was stuck in 1994 Chicago. She told me about the two roommates she found through the *Sun-Times* and the loft they shared in Wrigleyville. How she spent her days waiting tables at a local restaurant and her evenings watching live music at the local clubs. Her roommates liked everything, from jazz to punk, and they saw it all. Even folk night every Tuesday, where a heavysset woman sat on a wooden stool with her acoustic guitar, playing old songs like “American Pie” and “Leaving on a Jet Plane” to a packed house that sang along. As I suspected she would, Brooke settled in just fine. And like

me, she would have been happy to stay where she was a lot longer.

But one Sunday afternoon, she and her roommates were hanging out on the rooftop deck, enjoying the sun and reading the paper, when one of them spotted a story about the city's plans to demolish the Chicago Stadium. Brooke's ears perked up. She hadn't been back in over two months—not since the night the two of us lost each other.

That afternoon she took an El train and two buses to the stadium. It was closed, but she walked around, peeking through the windows, trying to get a better view, and remembering how she watched me disappear before her eyes while Pearl Jam played on stage.

She made it all the way to the back entrance before she felt the stabbing pain in her stomach, and less than a minute later she was doubled over, screaming and squeezing her eyes shut. When she opened them again, she was crouched down in the same position, but the Chicago Stadium was gone, her Chicago roommates were gone, and she was alone in my room in San Francisco in the exact spot we originally left from.

“So . . .” Brooke reaches for the broccoli and goes back to chopping. “Are you still going to see Anna?”

There's no one else home, but I still take a paranoid glance around the kitchen before I answer. “Yeah. She gets back from her exchange on Saturday. I thought I'd go on Wednesday. Give her a few days to see her friends and get settled post-Mexico.”

“And what are you going to tell Mom?”

I shrug. “I already told her: I’m going on a climbing trip with Sam.”

Now it’s Brooke’s turn to scan the room and verify that we’re still alone. “You know,” she says quietly, “you’d make things a lot easier on yourself if you’d just go to Evanston and return back here as if you never left.”

I stare at her but she doesn’t look up. “And do three whole days over again? If *I* do those days over, I’m pretty sure that means *you* do, too. You really want to do over three entire days of your life?”

“That depends,” she says. “If I got another speeding ticket, that’d be a plus. But if I met some amazing guy and you wiped him out, I’d never forgive you.” Brooke glances up and shoots me a grin. “Not that I’d remember any of this.”

“Well, I have no idea what I’d wipe out the second time around. So, if it’s all the same to you, I’m going to stick with the climbing thing.”

Brooke clears her throat. “Of course, you could also make it easier on yourself by just telling Mom and Dad where you’re going.”

“You know I can’t do that.”

Brooke knows everything, but I’ve said very little to my parents about my time in Evanston. Surprisingly, they barely asked any questions, not even about my grandmother, Maggie. They just sat me down in the living room and told me that the traveling needed to stop immediately. That it’s far too dangerous, and I don’t have control over it. And that it’s time I

started “living in the present,” as Mom put it. “Like a normal person.” I don’t think Dad agreed completely, but he sat by her side and nodded anyway.



That was three months ago. I don’t even want to think about how furious Mom would be if she found out about all the concerts Brooke and I have traveled to this summer. Or that I went to 1995 La Paz last week. Or that, say, Anna Greene exists.

“I have an idea.” Brooke elbows me and says, “Take me with you,” like it’s no big deal.

I laugh.

“No way, Brooke.” She gives me a pleading look, as if that will have an impact on my decision.

“No,” I repeat, this time with a little more weight in my voice. “Besides, you’d blow my cover. Climbing trips require *camping*.” I raise my eyebrows and stare at her. “Mom and Dad would never believe you’d go camping.”

“I can camp!” She crosses her arms, tapping her manicured fingernails against her skin. “I can camp,” she repeats. I look at her sideways.

Then she brings her hands to her hips and looks me straight on. “Look, I’m your sister,” she says, her tone serious, “and she’s your girlfriend, and it’s not like you can bring her here, you know . . . *ever*. And you’re definitely not going to bring Mom and Dad there. So you might as well have the whole ‘meet the parents’ moment with me.”

“No. Way.”

“Please . . .” She presses her palms together in front of her. “You know she wants to meet *me*.” She looks at me out of the corner of her eye and shoots me the look she reserves for moments when she knows she’s right. And she is. When I brought Anna to present-day San Francisco, she got knocked back right away. She would love to know the people in my world the same way I know the ones in hers, but she never will.

I take off for the refrigerator but I can feel Brooke’s eyes boring into my back. Eventually she gives up and heads for the stove, and the room fills with the sound of sizzling oil. “Brooke?” I say, and she takes a quick look over her shoulder at me. She doesn’t say anything, but I know she’s listening. “If anything comes up, will you cover for me?”

“Again?” she asks.

“Yes,” I say. “Again.”

I see her nod. “Of course.” Things get quiet for a while, and then she adds, “What are you going to do with the Jeep?”

“What do you mean?”

“You can’t leave it in the garage if they think you’re going camping. They know Sam doesn’t have a car.”

“Hmm. Good point.” If I park the Jeep on a random street or in a parking lot somewhere, it will definitely get towed. I can’t leave it at Sam’s house without coming up with some complicated excuse. I can’t believe that the Jeep didn’t even occur to me.

“You know my friend Kathryn?” Brooke asks.

“Yeah.”

“She didn’t need her car at school, and her parents didn’t

want it taking up room in the driveway, so they rented a garage.” There’s a long pause. “They found it on Craigslist.”

“Thanks,” I say, making a mental note to hit the website after dinner.

“See? You kind of need me.” Brooke doesn’t turn around, but I think I hear smug satisfaction in her voice. Until she looks over her shoulder wearing a disheartened half smile, and there isn’t a trace of smugness in her expression. She just looks sad.

“Hey, what were you humming earlier?”

She thinks about it for half a second. “Coldplay.”

I pull my phone out of my pocket and do some speedy research. “Munich? In two thousand two? Looks like a small club.”

Her head whips around and she lets out a squeal. “Really?” she asks. Her hands are clenched into fists by her sides, and when I nod, she dances back and forth in place. She turns the dial on the stove so the blue flame disappears underneath the burner and looks around the kitchen. “Mom and Dad are going to be so pissed when they come home to this mess.”

“Yeah, but they’ll never remember it.” *This* we’ll do over. Messing with multiple days feels dangerous. Going back a few hours in time so we don’t have to tell Mom and Dad we were in Munich for a Coldplay concert feels like a perk I should capitalize on. “When we get back, you can pick right up where you left off. We’ll have dinner and pretend we’re a happy family.”

“We are a happy family.”

“Trust me,” I say as I navigate over to the club’s website, “That’s only because they’re so glad you’re back home, they’ve temporarily forgotten that they’re furious at me for losing you in the first place. As soon as you’re back at school, the three of us will be our usual bickering selves again.” I click around until I find an interior view, and I pan and zoom on the best photo I can find. I have no way of knowing if it looked like this back in 2002, but chances are, even if they’ve done a remodel or two, the bathrooms are still in the same spot.

“Okay, we’re set.” I steal a glance at the clock on the microwave and by the time I turn around again, Brooke’s standing in front of me, arms extended.

She looks down, assessing her outfit. “Am I good?” she asks, referring to her jeans, a plain-looking shirt, and a pair of flip-flops. I’m not so sure about flip-flops in March, but I don’t want to waste time waiting for her to pick something else.

“Yeah. You’re good.” As soon as I take her hands, she grips mine hard and gives her arms a nervous shake like she always does. Then she squeezes her eyes shut.

I close mine, and we’re gone.



On Wednesday afternoon, I pack up the Jeep with all my camping and climbing equipment, and then do one last check of the stuff that actually matters. The white plastic container is sitting on the front seat, and inside I’ve stored everything I’ll need when I return: a dozen plastic bottles of water, a Starbucks Doubleshot, and a Red Bull six-pack.

The music's on loud and I'm so lost in my thoughts, I jump when I feel a tap on my shoulder. I slam the cover closed and flip around to find Mom with her hand over her mouth, looking amused. "Sorry!" She yells so she can be heard over the music. "I didn't mean to scare you."

"It's okay. Hold on." I lean in through the open window to turn down the volume.

"How's the packing going?" She glances from the hood of the car to the back cargo area, now filled to the brim with camping gear and colorful ropes. The soft top is already off and secured in place.

"Fine. I think I have everything."

"Good . . . that's good." She stands there, nodding and smiling, like she's gathering the nerve to say something else. She distributes her weight onto both feet and roots herself in place.

"What?" The tone of my voice makes it pretty clear that I don't really want to know.

"Is there any chance I can get you to change your mind about this camping trip?" She folds her arms across her chest. "It's just that . . . Brooke is going back to Boulder this weekend and then you'll be starting your senior year, and these are the last few days we have together as a family."

I want to tell her that we've had a whole summer and we haven't done anything "together as a family" with a single second of it. I'm not sure what makes her think this is the week to start, other than the fact that I'm leaving town and she doesn't want me to.

"It'll be fine, Mom. I want to go climbing with my friends,"

I say, smashing my sleeping bag deep into the back of the Jeep so it won't blow away when I start driving. "It's only for a few days. I'll be back by Friday." That part's true, so I turn around when I say it.

"You won't have *any* cell phone coverage?"

"Probably not. You know how it is out there. You can try, but it's really spotty." Yeah. Mainly because my cell phone will be in the glove compartment of the Jeep, locked in a clown-car-sized garage I found on Craigslist yesterday.

"Bennett?"

"Yeah?"

"You're not traveling, are you?" she asks, her forehead creased.

I freeze, then force my expression to look relaxed. "You told me *not* to travel."

"Yes. I did."

I shrug and look straight into her eyes. "And that's why I'm packing up my car to go camping." Is that a lie? Technically it's not, but I'm pretty sure Mom wouldn't see it the same way. She stares at me and I wait. I don't know if I just said the right thing or the wrong thing, or something so in between the two that she can't quite figure out what to do with it.

She looks worried and, God, I wish she wouldn't be. If only she'd relax and trust that I have this whole thing under control, I could tell her *everything*—about Maggie and Anna and the Greenes. And then she'd know exactly where I'm going and when I'll be back and what's inside the box on the passenger seat that she keeps eyeing but hasn't asked about.

“Be careful, okay?”

“I always am.” I kiss her on the cheek. “You worry too much, Mom.” I want to say more, but I don’t.

I can tell from the look on her face that she has a lot more to say too, but instead, she just gives me a somber-looking smile and says, “You make it pretty hard not to, sweetie,” and leaves it at that.

august 1995



evanston, illinois

When I push the door open, the little cluster of bells bangs against the glass and a guy standing over at the New in Paperback table turns around and gives me a quick glance. I step inside and look around. I've never seen the bookstore so crowded.

I walk down the main aisle, looking for Anna between the bookshelves. I'm halfway through the store when I see her behind the counter. She's ringing up a customer, so I keep a bit of a distance and wait, and try to ignore my heart smacking against my rib cage.

Her hair is longer than I remember it, and it occurs to me that every time I saw her in La Paz over the summer she was wearing it up in a clip or a ponytail. It's even curlier now, and I feel the familiar urge to pull on one of those strands so I can watch it spring back into place. What's different about her?

She looks tanned and happy and . . . somehow even more beautiful than before.

She's making small talk with the customer, fingers flying as she punches numbers into the register, and then she takes his credit card and runs it through some loud contraption and hands his card back to him. And that's when she sees me.

I just smile. I watch as her expression changes, morphing into this perfect mix of surprise and relief.

Anna looks back at the customer and pushes the overstuffed bag in his direction. "Here you go," she says with giddiness that the moment doesn't call for. Her eyes keep darting in my direction.

"Thanks," he says.

"Any time. Have a good quarter."

Instead of reaching for the bag, he rests one hip against the counter and watches her, like he's expecting her to say something else. I wonder if he thinks that smile is for him. He is standing right in front of her, after all. But I can tell from this vantage point that she's not looking *at* him, she's looking *past* him. Anna has lots of different smiles, but the one she's wearing right now is one she reserves for me.

"Bye," she says, pushing the bag across the counter again, this time with more force, and he must get the message because he grabs it with both hands and heads for the front door.

She starts heading in my direction. "Shoot," the guy says, "I almost forgot." He turns around and struts back to the counter, and Anna returns to her spot behind the register, looking official again.

I watch her, picturing that surprised look she wore on her face just a moment ago. I think about how nice it would be to see it one more time.

No one's ever in the Travel section, so I take a chance. Ducking back behind the shelves, I hide from her view and close my eyes. I picture the row on the opposite side of the store, and when I open them, I'm standing in it. I take my backpack off and set it down by my feet.

I can still hear her voice at the counter but now I'm too far away to make out what she's saying. I stare down at the shelf marked with the word MEXICO, remembering the night I came in here last April.

I should have been studying, but couldn't stop thinking about her. All day, I'd been looking for a chance to get her alone so I could tell her the second part of my secret, but I never found one. So before I could change my mind, I fed my arms into the sleeves of my jacket and walked to the bookstore.

Her face completely lit up when she saw me walk in, and all I wanted to do was kiss her. Instead, I told her I was there to pick up a book on Mexico. She led me over here to the Travel section.

At first, we talked about our assignment, but then she stopped me in midsentence and said, "I want to hear the rest of the second thing." When I looked in her eyes, I knew she meant it. And so I told her everything. That I was born in 1995. That I'm seventeen in 2012. That I wasn't supposed to be here. That I could visit, but I couldn't stay.

And then, against my better judgment, I finally did what

I'd wanted to do since the day I met her. I came up on my knees and I kissed her, no longer caring about my rules or where and when I was supposed to be. Just as I was about to pull away like I knew I should, I felt her hands on my back, drawing me in until we were pressed against the bookcase and there was nowhere else for us to go but closer to each other. I kissed her harder.

The bells on the door jingle, snapping me back to reality.

"Bennett?" I hear Anna call from across the room.

I duck around the corner and press my chest into the end of the shelving unit, keeping my eyes fixed on the aisle and waiting for her to walk by. I don't see or hear her, so I stay silent as I listen for breathing and wait for her to come into view.

I'm just about to take a step forward when I feel her hands grip my sides. I jump.

"Gotcha," she whispers in my ear. Her forehead falls against the back of my neck and her arms wrap around me. I can feel her breathing.

"That's an understatement," I say, bringing her hands to my face, kissing her fingers.

"I didn't see where you went," she says.

"Yeah." I let out a small laugh. "Remember? I do that."

"Just to mess with me." I can hear the eye roll in her voice.

"Just to mess with you."

"Maybe you should start thinking about doing more with this little talent of yours than surprising your girlfriend."

"Say that last part again."

She laughs. Squeezes me harder. “Surprising your *girlfriend*.”

I smile. “I like the way that sounds.” I loosen her grip on my waist and turn around. Her whole face is lit up so bright, I swear we could turn off all the lights in the bookstore and still see each other perfectly.

“Hi.” I twist a strand of her curls around my finger.

“Hi.” She reaches up and musses my hair. “You’re here,” she says, but something in her voice makes her sound unsure.

“I’m here.” I bring my hands to her cheeks. “I’ve missed you like crazy.” She presses her lips together and gives me the slightest nod, and before she can say anything I tip her head back and kiss her, softly, slowly, savoring the feeling of being here in this room with her again. I kiss her harder. And just like that first night, she kisses me back, pulling me into her, like she still wants me here and still trusts me with her heart, even though she probably knows by now that she shouldn’t.

When the clock reads 9:02, Anna walks the perimeter of the store, shutting off lights and adjusting books as she goes. I flip the sign on the door from OPEN to CLOSED, and we step outside. She presses some buttons on the keypad by the door to set the alarm, and clicks the deadbolt in place behind us.

I reach for her hand and we walk in silence toward the end of the block. The familiar sounds from the coffeehouse grow louder with each step, and I take a big whiff of the air, inhaling the scent. We're about to pass the entrance when Anna stops. "Do you want to go in and get something? We could hang out for a bit."

I peer through the window. It's not nearly as busy as it is when bands play on Sunday nights, but it's still pretty crowded. All of the couches are taken and the only option I see is a high table in the middle of the room. I've hardly been

alone with her all summer, and I really don't feel like sharing her with anyone else tonight. "I was hoping for something a bit quieter."

She pivots so she's facing me and reaches for my other hand. "In that case, you have two choices: my room or yours. Who do you want to face first, my parents or Maggie?"

I make the sound of a game-show buzzer. "I don't like either of those. What's my third choice?"

She laughs and shakes her head slightly at me. "There's no third choice."

"Sure there is."

Anna raises her eyebrows and stares at me.

"We'll bypass the parents and just sneak up to your bedroom. No one needs to know I'm in town yet."

"Too late. I already told them you were coming tonight."

I snap my fingers and laugh under my breath. "Damn." Anna shakes her head at me again while I think about my options. "I'm not ready for Maggie yet," I say, and Anna gives me an understanding nod and drops my other hand. We continue walking toward her house.

"So, how did they take it?" I ask.

"My parents?" She shrugs. "Pretty well, I guess. Mom was cooler about you being back than Dad was, which kind of surprised me. Actually, he wasn't too upset until I mentioned that you came to visit me in La Paz. He wasn't at all pleased about that." Her head spins toward mine. "Oh, and I said you visited twice, not four times, so stick to that if he asks, okay?"

I silently hope he won't ask. I'm also silently disappointed that she's started lying to her parents. She didn't do that before I showed up.

"I can't tell what they really think," she says. "The other night, my mom came into my room to tell me that she likes you, and that she's glad we'll get to spend our senior year together. She actually looked giddy when she started talking about homecoming and prom and stuff." I feel the lump rise in my throat and I swallow it back down. "But then she and my dad must have talked about it again, because last night at dinner, they laid it on thick. I got this big lecture about making sure I continue to focus on my running and not let my grades slip because of you."

"Because of me?"

"I know, right?" She winks at me. "As if."

I raise one eyebrow. "As *if*?"

She shrugs again. "Come on, you're not *that* big a deal."

"Nah. Of course I'm not," I say, suppressing a grin.

She squeezes my hand. "You are, you know?"

I squeeze hers back. "You are too."

We pass the hedge that lines her neighbor's yard, and Anna's house comes into view. It looks exactly the same as it did when I left last May, with its wraparound porch and overgrown shrubs. There's a soft light glowing from the kitchen window like it always does at night.

Once we're inside, Anna leads me toward the sound coming from the living room. We turn the corner and I spot her parents. Mrs. Greene has her feet curled up underneath her

and she's resting her head on Mr. Greene's shoulder. They're watching some old TV show. Which, I instantly remind myself, probably isn't old at all.

Anna stops at my side and grips my arm with both hands. The movement must catch her dad's attention, because he suddenly looks up and sees us. His eyes grow wide and he gives Mrs. Greene a little nudge that makes her sit up straight. "Hi. We didn't hear you come in." He aims the remote at the TV and mutes the sound.

Mr. Greene stands up, extending his hand, and even though it feels overly formal for him—for us—I reach out and shake it politely. Anna's mom gives me a halfhearted wave from her spot on the couch. "It's nice to have you back," she says, but her voice sounds hollow and insincere. Then she adds the word "Finally." It's not an afterthought; it's more like it was the one word she was trying *not* to say, but couldn't quite keep from slipping out.

"It's good to see you both too," I say. Then I stand there, nodding and waiting for one of them to say more and feeling my stomach sink. I should probably be happy they aren't outwardly furious with me. After all, not only did I disappear on their daughter in the middle of a date, I disappeared from all of their lives in the middle of, well, *everything*. I know it would be too much to expect a motherly hug or a fatherly back-pat, and I was hardly expecting tears of joy at the sight of my face in their living room. But I was sort of hoping we wouldn't be starting from scratch. Or, as it appears to be, less than scratch.

Anna gives my arm a squeeze and I look over at her. Unlike her mom's blank stare, her expression speaks volumes. She's beaming at me, her eyes full of joy and wonder, like she can't believe I'm actually standing here. Without even thinking about it, I let out a relieved sigh and kiss her on the forehead; and she tightens her grip on my arm again and lifts herself up on her toes. She bounces in place a few times.

When I look over at her parents again, their eyes are locked on Anna. But then Mrs. Greene's gaze slowly travels over to me and the corners of her mouth turn up in a half smile, almost as if she can't help herself. I give her a grateful nod.

"How's your sister doing?" Mr. Greene's voice takes me by surprise and my head snaps in his direction.

"Um . . . She's good." I quickly come up with a way to phrase the rest of my response to give him as little information as possible. "It was touch and go for a while there, but she's back home now." I leave it at that and hope that he doesn't press me for more information, because if he does, I'll have to lie to him and I'd really like to stop doing that.

"All great to hear." He waits for a moment, and then it looks like he's about to say something else. "Ah, never mind, you probably don't want to talk about it."

"Not really," I say.

The cagey thing probably isn't winning me any points, but now that I think about it, that could be a good thing. If I'm starting at the bottom, I won't have as far to fall once they learn the truth.

"We're going to go upstairs," Anna says, jumping in with

a rescue. Before her parents can say anything else, she leads me out of the room. We've only climbed the first two stairs when we hear her mom yell, "Leave your door open." Anna stops, gripping the banister with one hand and hiding her face behind the other.

She shakes it off. "Follow me. I'm dying to show you something."



Not much has changed since the last time I was in this room. Anna's impressive CD collection takes up every bit of shelf space, broken up only by the dozens of racing trophies that hold the alphabetized jewel cases in place. The walls are plastered with paper race numbers that were once pinned to her jersey and photos of her breaking through finish-line tape.

The bulletin board over her desk still holds the same lonely Pearl Jam concert stub from March 1994, but next to it I spot something new: a framed photo of Anna, Emma, and Justin. Emma's mouth is open wide, like she's squealing. She's standing behind Justin with her arms wrapped loosely around his neck, and Anna's on his right, her head resting on his shoulder. The picture must have been taken last June, after I left town but before Anna took off for La Paz. They look happy.

"How's Emma?"

"Eh, not so good. I went over to her house right after I got home and she told me that she and Justin broke up over the summer."

"Really? Why?"

Anna turns her back to me, runs her finger along the jewel cases, and selects one. “I don’t know *why* exactly, because I haven’t heard Justin’s side of the story yet—I stopped by the record store the other day and he was too busy to talk—but according to Emma, he doesn’t think they have enough in common . . . that they’re better as friends.”

She drops the disc in her CD player, and when the music begins, it sounds familiar, but I can’t place the song. But then the lyrics begin and I instantly recognize Alanis Morissette’s voice. I’m trying to recall which album this is when Anna says, “Have you heard this before?” She waves the case for *Jagged Little Pill* in the air, and I nod. “I love her. I’ve been running to this CD all summer.” I wish I could tell Anna that she has a lot more Alanis to look forward to, but I keep it to myself. Instead I tell her that I’ll look up the tour schedule and take her to a concert.

I spot the map that takes up the largest wall in her room. I walk over to it and stand there, counting the number of little red pins Anna uses to mark her travels. Nine, including the new one at the bottom of the Baja peninsula. Five more than the first time I stood here, admiring Anna’s intense desire to see the world and enjoying the idea that I could give her a small piece of it.

I turn around and find her standing next to me. “Here.” She hands me a small bag and I peek inside. My Westlake student ID. A blank postcard from Ko Tao. The postcard Anna wrote to me in Vernazza Square. A stubby yellow pencil. A carabiner.

One of her pins. “You left them in your desk at Maggie’s. She thought I should hold on to them for you.”

“Thanks.” I remove the postcard from Vernazza, shooting her a glance as I run my finger across the edge. Anna’s watching me as I read it, and I feel myself suck in a breath when I get to the last line, *wherever you are in this world, that’s where I want to be*, and a wave of guilt washes over me. My chest feels heavy as I drop the card back in the bag and then toss the whole thing on the floor next to the door along with my backpack. “Is that what you wanted to show me?”

Anna’s eyes light up. “Nope.” She turns on her heel and crosses the room. She crouches down low, wrestling with something underneath her bed.

“Close your eyes,” she calls over her shoulder.

Less than a minute later, I feel her behind me, her hands on my waist, pushing me forward. “Keep ’em closed. A few more steps. Okay, stop.” I feel her next to me. “You can open them now.”

It takes a moment for my eyes to adjust, and I’m not exactly sure where I’m supposed to be looking. But then I see something lying flat on top of her bedspread, and I take a few steps closer.

It’s a photograph, printed on a huge sheet of thick-looking paper. I recognize the tall rocks and jagged cliffs immediately. “Is that our beach?” I ask, but I already know it is. That’s the spot where I found her in La Paz. The same place I’ve arrived off and on all summer to surprise her during her morning

runs. I lean in close to get a better look. “This is incredible. How did you find a print of the *exact* spot?”

“It’s not a print,” she says as she rests her hands on her hips. “I took it.”

I know nothing about photography, but it looks pretty impressive to me. I can see every tiny crack in the rock face, and the tall cliff is perfectly mirrored in the water below. “You took this?”

“Señora Moreno helped me.” I remember her telling me that her host mom in La Paz was also a local photographer. “I thought you could hang it on your bedroom wall.” She doesn’t clarify which bedroom and I decide not to ask.

“But wait . . . get this,” she says, holding up a finger. Anna undoes the Velcro on a black canvas bag and removes a 35-millimeter camera. Her thumb glides along the back and over the buttons. “Look what she gave me. I guess it’s pretty old, but I don’t care.” It looks ancient. I watch her twist the long lens, remove it from the body, and replace it with a fatter, stubbier one. She brings the camera to her face, and I can’t see anything but her mouth. I hear the shutter snap and a weird, motorized sound.

Throwing the strap over her shoulder, she reaches under the bed again and returns holding a large envelope. She plops down on the floor and motions for me to join her. We sit close together, our hips touching, and she shakes a pile of images onto the shag rug and tells me the backstory on each one. There are lots of beaches and rocks and vista point views,

but my eye goes straight to a close-up photo of a man with dark, wrinkled skin, holding a guitar and wearing the warmest smile.

“These are really good,” I tell her. “*Really* good.” I watch the flush creep into her cheeks.

“They have this darkroom in their basement. I spent hours in there with Señora Moreno and her daughter, learning how to develop film. It was incredible.” She shrugs. “When I told Dad, he said he might be able to build one for me in that old shed in the backyard.” She reaches for her camera and aims it at my face. “Until then, it’s one-hour photo. Smile. I don’t have a single picture of you.”

I reach around her waist and pull her down onto the rug next to me. “There’s no reason for a picture of me if you’re not in it.”

She laughs as she extends her arm as high in the air as she can and aims the lens at us. *Click*. She kisses me on the cheek. *Click*. She sticks out her tongue and I crack up. *Click*. And then, in one fluid series of motions, I take the camera out of her hands, set it on the floor, and roll over on top of her, kissing her like I’ve wanted to all night.

But the longer we kiss, the guiltier I feel. I promised I wouldn’t keep secrets from her any longer. “Anna,” I say. “There’s something I need to tell you.”

The knock is soft, but startling enough to send us scampering in opposite directions. The door was ajar as instructed and we didn’t have much time, but we move so quickly that by

the time Mrs. Greene's head pops in, Anna and I are already sitting up, a generous amount of shag rug between the two of us.

"Your dad and I are going to bed," she says.

"Okay. Good night," Anna says brightly.

Her mom clears her throat. "That means that Bennett needs to leave now."

"Mom—" Anna huffs.

"It's okay." I stand up quickly and cross the room toward my backpack. "I'll see you tomorrow," I say to Anna. I squeeze past Mrs. Greene and into the hallway, heading for the front door.

I'm just about to turn the knob when I hear Anna's voice behind me. "Wait a sec!" I turn around and find her halfway down the stairs. "Where are you going?" she whispers.

I shrug. "I don't know. I'll probably just go home and come back in the morning."

She looks around to be sure her dad's out of earshot. "What, like, home-home? San Francisco *home*?" She doesn't add *2012 home*, but I know that's what she means.

"Yeah, it's too late to go to Maggie's now. Don't worry. I'll be back tomorrow. I'll go over to her house and then we can go do something together."

She shakes her head hard. "No. I mean, you're here. You can't just . . . *leave*."

I don't want to leave, but I picture the look on Mrs. Greene's face a minute ago and think it's probably better not to push my luck tonight. I go could back to San Francisco, to the

tiny garage, and crash in the Jeep. Or I could go back to my room and hope my parents don't walk in and find me. Come to think of it, maybe Anna's right. I might be better off staying put. I could always sleep on the couch in the back room of the bookstore.

Anna holds up a finger. "Don't move. I'll be right back." Before I can say another word, she's gone, flying back up the stairs.

I stand in the foyer and look around. On my left, I see the built-in bench, and on the wall above it, a row of empty coat hooks. It reminds me of the first time I came to this house. Anna had stayed home from school, and when I showed up, she took my jacket and hung it there. Then I told her my secret, showed her what I could do. Took her somewhere warm and far away. I consider doing it again tonight.

I hear her bare feet padding down the stairs. She's holding an armful of bedding. "You're sleeping on the couch."

My eyes dart to her parents' bedroom door at the top of the stairs. "No way." I rub my forehead hard with my fingertips and think about the idea. "Your parents actually said I could sleep on your couch?"

Anna nods. "Just for tonight. They agreed that it was too late for you to walk home in the dark. I told them you'd call Maggie and tell her not to expect you until tomorrow."

"I can't call Maggie," I whisper in her ear.

"I know. Just pretend to do it." She gestures toward the kitchen and I see the phone hanging on the wall next to the microwave. I cover my face with my hand. I wish I'd just said

good night, gone outside, and *poof*, appeared back in her bedroom ten minutes later like I originally planned to.

“You can change in the downstairs bathroom.” She points to a door I’ve never noticed before. “I’ll go get you set up.”

I fluff up the pillow and twist around in the blankets. For possibly the tenth time in the last hour, I sit up, resting my hands on my knees and staring out the sliding glass door and into the Greenes' backyard. According to the clock on the mantel, it's a quarter after midnight.

The last time I sat on this couch, Anna and I were wrapped up in this exact corner while Justin and Emma curled up on the opposite side. We watched a movie and took turns reaching into an enormous bowl of buttered popcorn that her mom made for us.

I throw my feet onto the floor and stand up. I walk through the kitchen and into the hallway, stopping at the bottom of the stairs. Her parents' door is open a crack. Anna's is completely shut. I'm about to close my eyes and bring myself to her bedroom, when I think of the look on her parents' faces tonight. Sure, if they caught me in their daughter's room, I

could just go back five minutes, ten minutes, and do it all over. But going up there at all feels like a violation of their trust and I'm already on thin ice here.

There's no reason to rush things. I have plenty of time to see her tomorrow, the next day. I turn around, shuffle back to the couch, and collapse with my head in my hands. After a while, I settle into the pillow again and close my eyes, attempting to empty my mind. I finally feel like I'm about to drift off when I hear something that sounds like breathing.

I crack my eyes open, lift my head up, and see a silhouette in the doorway. "Oh, God. I'm sorry," Anna whispers. "I didn't mean to wake you."

"It's okay. . . . I wasn't sleeping." I sit up a little bit and gesture for her to come closer. She sits across from me on the coffee table. The sight of her, the sound of her voice in this room, fills me with relief. "What are you doing down here? What about your parents?"

"I checked. They're asleep. Trust me, once they're out, they're out."

She sweeps her hair away from her face and twists it around a finger, holding it against the back of her neck. "I couldn't sleep either. I've just been lying in bed, staring at my map, and thinking that, for the last few months, we've had all this distance between the two of us, you know?" She lets her hair fall, and then pushes it behind her ears. "And it suddenly dawned on me that tonight—finally—there was nothing between us but a door and a staircase, and it seemed"—she blinks fast—"silly."

I nod. “That’s definitely silly.” Even though the room is dark, lit only by the porch light on the back patio, I can see her blush. “I’m glad you remedied that.” I say.

“Yeah, me too.”

“But there’s still more, you know?”

Her eyebrows lower and pinch together. “What do you mean ‘more?’” she asks.

I stretch my arm out in her direction, angling it so my fingertip comes within a centimeter of her knee. “There’s this distance here—a whole arm’s length—which is really quite a lot if you think about it. This is, like, seventh-grade-dance kind of distance.”

She laughs quietly. “That’s not even silly. That’s just . . . unacceptable.”

“Right? And then there’s this,” I say, pinching a corner of the wool blanket she covered me with a little earlier. “What do you make of this?”

She reaches out, rubbing the fabric between her thumb and her forefinger. “Yeah, that’s definitely a problem.”

“Exactly what I was thinking.”

I start to pull the blanket back, but before I can, Anna moves from the coffee table to the couch, sealing the opening shut with her weight. “What did you want to tell me earlier?” Her dark eyes fix on mine and I feel a sudden chill that hits my core. I wasn’t expecting this turn in the conversation, and I’m trying to decide how to start, but she doesn’t give me time.

“You aren’t staying this year, are you?”

I shake my head no.

She rolls her shoulders back and looks up at the ceiling. “I knew it. Every time I’ve mentioned something about school, you’ve looked away and changed the subject.” Her gaze ping-pongs around the room. Now she won’t look at me. “Why not?”

“I can’t.”

“Can’t or won’t?”

“Can’t.” I sit up so I can face her straight on. “Look, I’ve been experimenting with this all summer. I even told everyone I was going on a two-week climbing trip and took off by myself. I pitched a tent where no one would find it and went to London. I wandered around, enjoyed the sights—missing you the whole time, by the way—but after three days, I was knocked back to the tent. The migraine was excruciating, but just like I did when I first got to Evanston, I immediately closed my eyes and brought myself back. It worked. I stayed another day, almost two. But then I got knocked back to the tent again. I kept bringing myself back, but each time . . .” I trail off, shaking my head, remembering migraines so debilitating I could barely open my eyes for nearly an hour. “The side effects got worse, not better. After a week, I closed my eyes and nothing happened.”

“Why could you stay last time?”

I shake my head. “I don’t know. I think it’s because Brooke wasn’t where she was supposed to be, you know? Like . . . things were off and once they were righted again . . .” Anna just stares at me, and I look at her, trying to figure out what she’s thinking. “The two must be connected, because once she

got back, I couldn't return here. And now it looks like my ability to stay here has changed too."

She still won't look at me and she clearly doesn't know what to say. She brings her hands to her forehead and rubs hard, like that will help the information sink in or something. "So, what? This is how it's going to be?" she asks.

"I don't know. This is the way it is right now."

I feel horrible. Back in the beginning, I prepared her for the fact that I couldn't stay here with her. I never should have let her believe that I could. I never should have let *myself* believe that I could.

"But I want to come back. A lot. I figure I can't visit too frequently or your parents will get suspicious, you know, but we can come up with, like, a schedule or something."

She doesn't say anything.

"If you think about it, this is how we always thought it was going to be, right up until Vernazza. Remember?" I stop one step short of saying what I'm really thinking: *You already agreed to be part of the most screwed-up long-distance relationship on the planet.*

She wrings her hands while she weighs the pros and cons of everything I've just said. We'll be together, but not every day, like we were before, and not on either of our terms. We won't go to the same school or hang out with the same people and, at least while we're both still living at home with our parents, we'll spend most of our days seventeen years away from each other. So many people take proximity for granted. We just want to be in the same place at the same time.

Her eyes are fixed on the carpet. “I can handle a lot, you know? I can handle everything about you and what you can do, but what happened last time . . . I can’t let that happen to me again.” She lifts her head and looks right at me. “I know you didn’t *want* it to happen, and I realize you didn’t do it on purpose, but you were here and then you were just *gone*, and when you didn’t come back, I . . .”

She grabs a strand of hair and twists it around her finger. I’m just about to speak when she opens her mouth and looks me straight in the eye again. “Here’s the thing. When you left, I sort of . . . fell apart.” Her shoulders hunch forward and she starts breathing faster. “I mean, I *completely* fell apart,” she repeats. “I don’t fall apart, Bennett, and I don’t want to *be* someone who falls apart and . . .” She inhales deeply and wraps her arms around her waist. “I can’t let that happen again.”

I look at her, bracing myself for what she’s about to say. What she *should* say. She wants me to leave. She doesn’t want me to come back here again.

“I need to think about it,” she says.

The words aren’t as bad as the ones I was expecting, but they still take me by surprise. “Yeah.” It takes effort to keep my voice steady. “Of course you do.”

She presses her lips together, hard, like she’s holding something in, and I realize she’s trying not to cry. But I wish she would. I wish she would just sit here and fall apart, like she apparently did when I left, because unlike last time, I could actually be there for her now. I could tell her everything I would have said then: That we’ll be okay. That this whole

thing is weird and twisted and unfair to both of us, but especially unfair to her, because it's always harder to be the one who's left behind than the one who leaves. And I'd tell her that I love her, and that I'll do anything to be with her, any way I can be.

"When are you leaving?"

I swallow hard. "Friday. I promised my mom I'd be home for the weekend. Brooke's heading back to college on Sunday." I start to tell her about our plans to take the boat out on the bay but I decide against it. "Then I start school on Monday."

She gives me a sad smile. "Me too."

We're both silent for a long time. She scoots back to her spot on the coffee table, and I think she's about to say good night and head back upstairs, but she doesn't move. I can tell she's contemplating what to do next, and I should probably stay silent and not say anything that might sway her decision to stay, but I can't help myself.

"I'm here now," I say quietly.

She looks up from under her lashes. Then her expression softens and a smile spreads across her face. "I'm glad." She reaches over, grabs the edge of the wool blanket, and rubs it between her thumb and her forefinger again. "There's still the matter of this, you know?"

My heart starts racing and I laugh, happy to follow her lead. "Is that *still* there?" I lift up the edge of the blanket and Anna climbs underneath, stretching out next to me. Her arms wrap around my waist and she wedges one of her legs between mine.

“Much better,” she says, sliding her hands under my T-shirt, up my back, kissing me. In a matter of minutes, we both seem to forget about the complications around this whole crazy thing we’re doing. For the rest of the night, it doesn’t seem complicated at all.

I wake to the faint sound of water running. I try to lift my head off the pillow to take a better look, but my movement is restricted by the weight of Anna's head, buried in the crook of my neck.

I kiss her cheek. "Anna," I whisper. "Wake up." She tightens her grip on my shoulder and, without opening her eyes, settles into my chest and lets out a happy sigh.

The water sound stops and it's almost instantly replaced by a light plinking noise. I'm trying to place it when I hear the unmistakable—and extremely loud—whir of a coffee grinder.

Anna jumps and her lids pop open. The second she sees me, she lets out a gasp. She lifts her head and scans the living room.

"It's okay. We just fell asleep."

"My *dad's* in there," she whispers, her eyes darting back and forth between the kitchen and me.

“I know. It’s okay,” I repeat, thinking she didn’t hear me the first time.

Her eyes grow even wider. “It’s not *okay!* He can’t find us like this. He’ll never—” She comes closer, within an inch of my face. “I’m dead.”

“Come on . . . just tell him we were talking and we fell asleep.” I try to look at the scene from her father’s point of view. Anna’s shirt is back where it belongs but I have no idea where mine is.

“He’ll never believe that.”

I start to speak but she covers my mouth with her hand. “*Shhh.*” The coffee grinder comes to a stop. She looks at me, wide-eyed. *Do something*, she mouths. *Please.*

It takes a second or two for understanding to kick in, possibly because I’m still a little groggy and she’s whisper-shouting at me in the near dark. “You sure?” I mouth back, and she answers my question with a quick, panicky nod.

I find the clock immediately—God knows I stared at it enough last night—and check the time. A little after six thirty. I slide my hands under the blankets, feeling for hers, and when I find them I grip them tight.

Her eyes are already shut.

I kick the blanket onto the floor and squeeze my eyes closed as I picture her room. When I open them, we’re on her bed, wrapped up in the exact same position we were on the couch—Anna curled up into my chest, our hands clenched together, our legs intertwined. I really don’t want to move, but I have to

twist away from her so I can read the clock on her nightstand. Six o'clock on the dot.

Minutes pass as we lie side by side, silent and unmoving. Then Anna bends her knees to her chest and starts quietly cracking up.

“See why you need to keep me around,” I whisper, still looking up at the ceiling.

She stretches out and throws her arm over her forehead. Her head falls to one side and she looks at me. “There are lots of other reasons to keep you around.”

I roll over on top of her, my legs straddling her hips, my face only inches away from hers. “So will you?” I kiss her. “Keep me around?”

She inhales sharply. “I’m still thinking about it.”

“Good.” I kiss her again. “How are you feeling?”

She crinkles her nose. “A little . . . twisty. But I don’t feel sick or anything.” She pushes my hair off my face but it just flops back down again. “How about you? How’s your head?”

“It’s good. But you know, I only feel the side effects on the return trip and only if I change time zones. I’m just popping back downstairs.” I look over at the clock and kiss her again. “Unless you keep me here too long.”

Anna glances at the time. “You should probably go. It’s already ten after.”

I plant a kiss on her cheek and then hop off the bed. I give her a little wave. She waves back. “See you downstairs,” I say, closing my eyes and picturing her living room.

My eyelids pop open and I'm standing next to the couch, staring at the jumble of blankets we left behind. I see my shirt on the floor and pull it over my head. Then I crawl back under the covers, where I belong.

Twenty minutes later, Anna's dad peeks around the corner. He sees that I'm already awake and gives me a wave. I wave back and wonder if he checked in here last time and saw something quite different.

I hear the water running. The coffee beans tumble into the grinder. The whirring sound starts and stops. I wait for a few more minutes and then head toward the kitchen, where I'm greeted by the sounds of dripping and percolating and an unmistakable aroma that makes my mouth water. Anna's dad is wrapping the cord around the grinder and returning it to its home in the cupboard when he sees me out of the corner of his eye.

"Good morning."

I lift my chin in his direction. "Good morning, Mr. Greene."

He leans back against the counter. "How'd you sleep?" He crosses his arms and stares at me, and I feel the adrenaline start racing through my veins.

I rest my hip against the counter opposite him, hoping I appear calm and not at all guilty. I look at him straight on. "Great," I say. "Thanks for letting me stay last night."

He stares at me for what feels like a full minute. I hold my breath and try not to move.

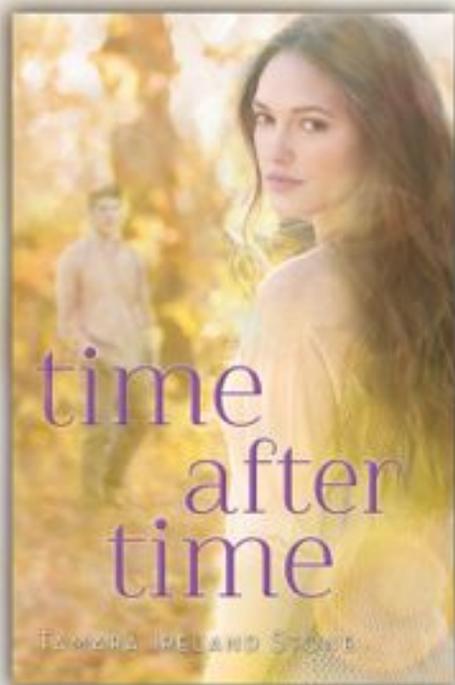
Finally he uncrosses his arms and says, "No problem. Glad

we could help.” His tone is friendly, and when he turns his back to me, I silently exhale.

He reaches into a high cabinet and pulls out two mugs. “Do you drink coffee, Bennett?”

“Yes, sir,” I say, and he reaches into the cabinet again and grabs a third.

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