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We know
books

This Girl

COLLEEN HOOVER



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We know
books

This Girl

1.

the honeymoon

IF I TOOK every romantic poem, every book, every song, and every movie I've ever read, heard, or seen and extracted the breathtaking moments, somehow bottling them up, they would pale in comparison to this moment.

This moment is incomparable.

She's lying on her side facing me, her elbow tucked under her head, her other hand stroking the back of mine that's lying between us on the bed. Her hair is spread out across the pillow, spilling down her shoulder and across her neck. She's staring at her fingers as they move in circles over my hand. I've known her almost two years now, and I've never seen her this content. She's no longer solely carrying the weight that's been her life for the last two years, and it shows. It's almost as if the moment we said "I do" yesterday, the hardships and heartaches we faced as individuals were meshed, making our pasts lighter and easier to carry. From this point on I'll be able to do that for her. Should there be any more burdens I'll be able to carry them *for* her. It's all I've ever wanted to do for this girl since the moment I first laid eyes on her.

She glances up at me and smiles, then laughs and buries her face in the pillow.

I lean over her and kiss her on the neck. “What’s so funny?”

She lifts her face off the pillow—her cheeks a deeper shade of red. She shakes her head and laughs. “Us,” she says. “It’s only been twenty-four hours and I’ve already lost count.”

I kiss her scarlet cheek and laugh. “I’m done with counting, Lake. I’ve had about all the countdowns I can handle for a lifetime.” I wrap my arm around her waist and pull her on top of me. When she leans in to kiss me, her hair falls between us. I reach to the nightstand and grab her rubber band, then twist her hair into a knot behind her head and secure it. “There,” I say, pulling her face back to mine. “Better.”

She was adamant about having the robes, but we haven’t once used them. Her ugly shirt has been on the floor since I threw it there last night. Needless to say, this has been the best twenty-four hours of my life.

She kisses down my jaw and traces a trail with her lips up to my ear. “You hungry?” she whispers.

“Not for food.”

She pulls back and grins. “We’ve still got another twenty-four hours to go, you know. If you want to keep up with me you need to replenish your energy. Besides, we somehow missed lunch today.” She rolls off me, reaches into the nightstand, and pulls out the room service menu.

“No burgers,” I say.

She rolls her eyes and laughs. “You’ll never get over that.” She scrolls the menu and points at it with her finger, holding it up. “What about beef Wellington? I’ve always wanted to try that.”

“Sounds good,” I say, inching closer to her. She picks up the phone to dial room service. The whole time she’s on the phone I kiss up and down her back, forcing her to stifle her laughs as she

tries to maintain her composure while ordering. When she hangs up the phone, she slides underneath me and pulls the covers over us.

“You have twenty minutes,” she whispers. “Think you can handle that?”

“I only need ten.”

THE BEEF WELLINGTON did not disappoint. The only issue now is that we’re too stuffed and too tired to move. We’ve turned the TV on for the first time since I walked her over the threshold, so I think it’s safe to say we’re due for at least a two-hour break.

Our legs are intertwined and her head is on my chest. I’m running my fingers through her hair with one hand and stroking her wrist with the other. Somehow trivial things like lying in bed watching TV have become euphoric when we’re tangled together like this.

“Will?” She pulls herself up onto her elbow and looks at me. “Can I ask you something?” She runs her hand across my chest, then rests it on top of my heart.

“I do about twelve laps a day on the University track, plus one hundred sit-ups twice a day,” I say. She arches an eyebrow, so I point to my stomach. “Weren’t you asking about my abs?”

She laughs and playfully punches me. “No, I wasn’t asking about your *abs*.” She leans down and kisses me on the stomach. “They *are* nice, though.”

I stroke her cheek and pull her gaze back to mine. “Ask me anything, babe.”

She sighs and drops her elbow and lays her head back onto the pillow, staring up at the ceiling. “Do you ever feel guilty?” she says quietly. “For feeling this happy?”

I scoot closer to her and lay my arm across her stomach. “Lake. Don’t ever feel guilty. This is exactly what they’d want for you.”

She looks at me and forces a smile. “I know it’s what they’d want for me. I just . . . I don’t know. If I could take back everything that happened, I would do it in a heartbeat if it meant I could have them back. But doing that would mean I never would have met you. So sometimes I feel guilty because I . . .”

I press my fingers to her lips. “Shh,” I say. “Don’t think like that, Lake. Don’t think about *what ifs*.” I lean in and kiss her on the forehead. “But I do know what you mean if that helps. It’s counterproductive thinking about it, though. It is what it is.”

She takes her hand in mine and intertwines our fingers, then brings them to her mouth and kisses the back of my hand. “My dad would have loved you.”

“My mom would have loved *you*,” I say.

She smiles. “One more thing about the past, then I’ll stop bringing it up.” She looks at me with a slightly evil grin on her face. “I’m so glad that bitch Vaughn dumped you.”

I laugh. “No doubt.”

She smiles and releases her fingers from mine. She turns toward me on the bed and looks at me. I pull her hand to my mouth and kiss the inside of her palm.

“Do you think you would have married her?”

I laugh and roll my eyes. “Seriously, Lake? Do you really want to talk about this right now?”

She smiles sheepishly at me. “I’m just curious. We’ve never really talked about the past before. Now that I know you aren’t going anywhere, I feel more comfortable talking about it. Besides, there are a lot of things I want to know about you,” she says. “Like how it felt when she broke up with you like she did.”

“That’s an odd thing to want to hear about on your honeymoon.”

She shrugs her shoulders. “I just want to know everything about you. I’ve already got your future, now I want to get to know your past. Besides,” she grins. “We’ve got a couple of hours to kill before your energy is fully replenished. What else are we going to do?”

I’m too exhausted to move right now and as much as I can pretend I’m not keeping count, nine times in twenty-four hours must be some sort of record. I roll over onto my stomach and prop a pillow under my chin, and then begin to tell her my story.

“GOODNIGHT, CAULDER.” I flip off the light and hope he doesn’t crawl out of bed again. It’s our third night with it being just the two of us here. He was too scared to sleep by himself last night so I let him sleep with me. I’m hoping it doesn’t become a habit, but I would completely understand if it did.

I still can’t wrap my head around all that’s happened in the last two weeks, much less the decisions I’ve made. I hope I’m doing the right thing. I know my parents want us to be together, I just don’t think they approve of my dropping my scholarship to make it happen.

Why do I keep referring to them in the present tense?

This is really going to be an adjustment. I make my way into my bedroom and drop onto the bed. I’m too exhausted to even reach over and turn off the lamp. As soon as I close my eyes, there’s a light tap on my bedroom door.

“Caulder, you’ll be fine. Go back to sleep,” I say, somehow dragging myself off the bed again to coax him back to his room. He has successfully slept alone for seven years; I know he’s capable of doing it again.

“Will?” The door opens and Vaughn walks in. I had no idea she was coming over tonight, but I’m thankful she’s here. She seems to know exactly when I need her the most. I walk to her and close the bedroom door, then wrap my arms around her.

“Hey,” I say. “What are you doing here? I thought you were heading back to campus today.”

She places her hands on my forearms and pushes back, giving me the most pitiful smile I’ve ever seen. She walks over to my

bed and sits, avoiding eye contact the entire time. “We need to talk.”

The look on her face sends a chill up the back of my neck. I’ve never seen her look so distraught before. I immediately sit on the bed beside her and bring her hand to my mouth and kiss it. “What’s wrong? You okay?” I brush a loose strand of hair behind her ear just as the tears begin to fall. I wrap my arms around her and pull her to my chest. “Vaughn, what’s wrong? Tell me.”

She doesn’t say anything. She continues to cry so I give her a moment. Sometimes girls just need to cry. When the tears finally begin to subside, she straightens back up and takes my hands, but still doesn’t look me in the eyes.

“Will . . .” She pauses. The way she says my name, the tone of her voice . . . it sends panic straight to my heart. She looks up at me but can’t hold her stare, so she turns away.

“Vaughn?” I say hesitantly, hoping I’m misreading her. I place my hand on her chin and pull her gaze back in my direction. The fear in my voice is clear when I speak. “What are you doing, Vaughn?”

She almost looks relieved that I seem to have caught on to her intentions. She shakes her head. “I’m sorry, Will. I’m so sorry. I just can’t do this anymore.”

Her words hit me like a ton of bricks. *This?* She can’t do *this* anymore? When did we become a *this*? I don’t respond. What the hell do I say to that?

She senses the shock in my demeanor, so she squeezes my hands and whispers it again. “I’m so sorry.”

I pull away and stand up, turning away from her. I run my hands through my hair and take a deep breath. The anger build-

ing inside me is suddenly coupled by tears that I have no intention of letting her see.

“I just didn’t expect any of this, Will. I’m too young to be a mom. I’m not ready for this kind of responsibility.”

She’s really doing this. She’s really breaking up with me. Two weeks after my parents die and she’s breaking my heart all over again? Who *does* that? She’s not thinking straight. It’s just shock . . . that’s all. I turn around and face her, not caring that she can see how much this is affecting me.

“I didn’t expect this either,” I say. “It’s okay, you’re just scared.” I sit back down on the bed beside her and pull her to me. “I’m not asking you to be his mom, Vaughn. I’m not asking you to be *anything* right now.” I squeeze her tighter and press my lips against her forehead; an action that immediately causes her to start crying again. “Don’t do this,” I whisper into her hair. “Don’t do this to me. Not right now.”

She turns her head away from me. “If I don’t do this now, I’ll never be able to do it.”

She stands up and tries to walk away, but I pull her back to me and wrap my arms around her waist, pressing my head against her stomach.

“Please.”

She runs her hands over my hair and down my neck, then bends forward and kisses the top of my head. “I feel awful, Will,” she whispers. “*Awful*. But I’m not about to live a life that I’m not ready for, just because I feel sorry for you.”

I press my forehead against her shirt and close my eyes, soaking in her words.

She feels *sorry* for me?

I release my arms from around her and push against her

stomach. She drops her hands and takes a step back. I stand up and walk to the bedroom door, holding it open, indicating she needs to leave. “The last thing I want is your pity,” I say, looking her in the eyes.

“Will, don’t,” she pleads. “Please don’t be mad at me.” She’s looking up at me with tears in her eyes. When she cries, her eyes turn a glossy, deep shade of blue. I used to tell her they were the exact same color as the ocean. Looking into her eyes right now almost makes me *despise* the ocean.

I turn away from her and grip both sides of the door, pressing my head against the wood. I close my eyes and try to hold it in. It feels like the pressure, the stress, the emotions that have been building up for the last two weeks—it feels like I’m about to explode.

She gently places her hand on my shoulder in an attempt to console me. I shrug it off and turn around to face her again. “Two weeks, Vaughn!” I yell. I realize how loud I’m being, so I lower my voice and step closer to her. “They’ve been dead for *two weeks*! How could you possibly be thinking about *yourself* right now?”

She walks past me through the doorway, toward the living room. I follow her as she grabs her purse from the couch and walks to the front door. She opens the door and turns to face me before she leaves. “You’ll thank me for this one day, Will. I know it doesn’t seem like it right now, but someday you’ll know I’m doing what’s best for us.”

She turns to leave and I yell after her, “What’s best for *you*, Vaughn! You’re doing what’s best for *you*!”

As soon as the door closes behind her I break down. I rush back to my bedroom and slam the door, then turn around and punch it over and over, harder and harder. When I can’t feel my