

Emmett





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FOR LESLIE



*who dealt with a condescending know-it-all*

*in high school, college, living together,*

*and even now,*

*as he dedicates a book to you*





## *chapter one*

I KNOW I'M BLESSED. I'M NOT RELIGIOUS AT ALL, BUT THAT'S THE best word for it. I'm good-looking by conventional standards, smart, and my dad has a lot of money. I don't mean all that to sound awful, I'm just stating the facts. I'm very lucky to have been born with all this. The least I can do is try to give back.

So I do that, and do it well: I help out at the food bank on Wednesdays after school, I tutor for free, and I try to make sure I'm a nice person. Which, when combined with everything I've already stated, makes me pretty popular. But that's a good thing, because when you're popular, you have more opportunities to be nice. Like by telling people not to be mean to someone, or setting an example. Or even something small, such as letting people sit with you at lunch, like I've been doing with

Georgia, even though, let's be honest, she's kind of *a lot*. But her best friend, John Feng, is doing the exchange student thing this semester, studying in France, and I guess she just gravitated to me as the most well-known gay guy, since she and John are copresidents of the Queer Alliance. So I let her sit with us at lunch, and talk and talk like she usually does, and I smile, because I'm blessed, and blessed people have to give back.

"John is having the best time in Paris," she says, sighing. She emails with him almost every day and gives us a full report, as though any of us are really friends with John, which we aren't. I know Georgia wants John and me to be a couple. We're both out, happy, handsome, and we vie for top spot in our class rankings, along with Miles. But we're not really great friends. I don't mind him—he's polite, maybe a little withdrawn, a talented pianist—but we're just not close. And besides, I don't do relationships.

"Has he gone to Notre-Dame yet?" asks Miles. "Did he send photos? I want to see how the restoration is coming." Miles is into ruins, old buildings, stuff like that. It's a weird thing to be into, I know. He printed out photos of all the old castles he saw when he went to Scotland, and postered them all over a wall in his room. He says it's a reminder that nothing lasts, which is cynical, but when he says it out loud, he means it happier than that. Almost romantically. He loves a memento mori, he says because they remind him to enjoy the moment.



“Not yet, but look, he went to the Eiffel Tower!” she says, showing him the photo on her phone. “Look!”

But Miles isn't really a romantic. He's like me, never seriously dated, except he's straight. I like to think he's not dating because of me, for the same reasons as me. The ones I convinced him were right. When I was young, my mother, a doctor, told me that your brain keeps growing, and I remember looking it up after she died, when I was fourteen, and discovering she meant it literally: the prefrontal cortex doesn't mature until you're twenty-five. Since then, I've felt a relationship before your brain is developed is silly. You're not in full possession of your impulses or understanding, so you can't promise yourself to someone else. Why get involved with something that's just going to end? Relationships ending are painful. Spare yourself. Simply don't date until your brain might be able to establish something that won't end.

And since Miles and I were closer back when I figured all this out, the way across-the-street-neighbor-kids-whose-moms-were-sorority-sisters are close, I told him that as soon as I decided it. And I think he realized I was right. That's something else I do that's nice—I educate people on why I do things. Even if Miles doesn't appreciate it like he used to. But I'm sure that's why he doesn't date. He's good-looking enough that he could date any girl he wanted. He's gone on a date here and there, but it's never turned into anything. I suppose he might be

asexual, but with two moms and a very accepting school environment, I think he would have told someone by now. So I'm sure it's just that he's had the good sense to follow my lead and wait until twenty-five.

"And here he is walking along the River Seine!" Georgia says to Miles, showing us photo after photo of the river, which is definitely beautiful, even if John's photos have diminishing returns on the "breathtaking" thing.

"Breathtaking," I say, hoping it will make her put the phone away. Instead, she turns to her side of the table, where Taylor and West are sitting, gazing into each other's eyes, holding hands and whispering into each other's ears. They giggle sometimes. It's cute. Just because I don't think a relationship before twenty-five is fair to either you or the other person, doesn't mean I'm horrified by other people having them. Taylor is, after all, my best friend. She's wanted a boyfriend since before she told us she was a girl. And I pretty much set her up with West, so I'm happy they're so happy. Even if it means she's been a bit absentee in the friend department. I think that's why Miles has been sitting with us lately. He hasn't really done that in a while, he usually sits with his friends from the debate team, but since Taylor and West hooked up, Miles has been here most days. I think to keep me company because he feels sorry for me, which is sweet, but also a little condescending. A very Miles combination.

I sip my protein smoothie and let my eyes drift away

as Georgia goes on about John in Paris: John at the Louvre, John at the Eiffel Tower, John eating a baguette. The lunchroom is packed, but it's been done up in very soothing off-whites, with low electric light, and large French doors, which are open to the quad, where more tables are set up for those who want to eat outside—I prefer not to, the breeze from the ocean sometimes knocks over water bottles. The chairs all have cushions, and the tables have tablecloths—checked in the school colors: canary yellow and robin's egg blue. Outside, by the doors, is a string quartet that the school brings in to play throughout the day when classes aren't in progress. Music, they say, calms the spirit and encourages learning. I like it when they do covers of pop songs best, but right now they're playing Einaudi's "Fairytale," which feels appropriate.

It all looks more like a country club than a high school, but that's the point of Highbury Academy: for everything to be, as the brochures say, "comfortable and agreeable, so the students can focus on learning and improvement." Even our uniforms are made of breathable cotton jersey, so we may look fancy, but we're not uncomfortable. Taylor says all the yellow and blue makes us look like we should be working in a candy shop, and she's not wrong. We're lucky we have the confidence to pull off the colors.

"You know," Taylor says, interrupting Georgia, "West's brother, Andre, is coming home for the holiday break

soon.” She says this looking very deliberately at me. I take a bite of my peach and don’t make eye contact.

“So what?” Miles asks. “Don’t all college kids come home for the holiday break?”

“Well, you know, his family moved here at the end of the summer, and then he went right back to college, so he doesn’t know anyone around here. I just think it would be nice if all of us could hang out, so he could make some friends,” Taylor says, still staring at me. Taylor’s disappearing into coupled bliss is a minor irritant, but her desire to set me up with West’s brother is somewhat more abrasive. She knows my opinion on relationships. Although she has shown me his photo and in fairness, he’s very attractive, in a film major sort of way, with the half smile and the dark eyes. I take another bite of my peach.

“I’m sure we’ll all hang out at some point,” I say.

Taylor claps her hands. “I’ll throw a party.”

Miles raises an eyebrow. “A party for your boyfriend’s brother?” His tone is skeptical.

“Oh, it’ll be fun,” I say so Taylor doesn’t have to defend herself, though she just looks amused at the question. “She just wants us all to be friends.” I don’t tell him he’s being condescending. That would be unkind.

“I’ll tell John!” Georgia says, already sending the email on her phone.

“Hey, Emmett.” I look up at Harrison, who’s walking over to us. His tie is a little loose. His tie is always a little

loose, but it suits him well enough. “Think you could come over after school and tutor me in chem a little? I need some help.”

I nod and take out my phone, checking my calendar. I add *tutor Harrison* after school. “Sure thing,” I say. “Do you need a lift after school?”

“Nah,” he says. “I have the car today.”

“Then I’ll see you there,” I say.

Harrison nods and smiles, walking away.

“You tutor juniors?” Georgia asks, still typing into her phone. “You are so nice.”



“You are so good at that,” Harrison says, panting, as he falls back on his damp sheets.

I grin. “Thank you,” I say, staring at his ceiling, letting all the postcoital hormones run through me, easing tension, creating happiness. I may think romance before twenty-five is pointless, but the hormonal teenage body has needs, and Harrison is good at fulfilling them. He’s attractive, enthusiastic, and very good with his tongue. He leans over me and starts kissing down the front of my chest and I can feel my body start to respond again already. Above us, his ceiling fan whirs softly. I glance at my phone on the nightstand, wondering if we have time for another round.

He stops kissing and I can feel his eyes on me so I bend my neck to look at him hovering over my navel.

“You ever want a boyfriend?” he asks. Immediately, all the good effects of the postcoital hormones flee my body. I can feel my heart rate quicken, my body tense. All the excellent results of the effort of the past hour and a half evaporate in a flash.

“No,” I say, sitting up and looking around the room for my shirt.

“Relax,” he says, pushing me back onto the bed. “I know we’re no strings. I’m just asking.”

He rests his head on my chest and I take a deep breath. At this point he owes me another round just to cancel out what he’s done. I run my hand down his shoulder, down his spine.

“I guess I just mean I think *I* want one,” he says, squeezing his arm around my waist.

I stop moving my hand. I like Harrison, but I absolutely don’t want him as a boyfriend.

“You do?” I ask. The more I turn the idea in my head, the more surprising it is. Harrison seemed a safe choice in the no-romance way. He was the one who propositioned me last year, after all. And he’s hot: broad and a little soft, with a nice ass and dark curls that fall over his green eyes and pearly skin. He asked me one day after an English class if I’d like to spend some time with him. That was how he phrased it, which I liked. I told him I didn’t date, and he said he knew that. He was new last year, but we knew each other in passing—there

are several out guys in school, and we're not all friends, but we all know each other on sight, say hi to each other in the halls. But I said yes to spending time with him, and since then, we've established a quick code: tutoring. With my other two gentlemen, we usually just texted. But they both graduated last year, so now it was just Harrison. And he, apparently, is looking for a boyfriend. I frown at the fan. It spins away, amused by my situation.

"I mean, yeah," Harrison says. "I think it would be nice, to hold hands in the hallway, go to prom with someone."

"I guess," I say, shrugging. I've never really thought much of it.

He laughs. "I know, I know, not for you. But just FYI, if I find a boyfriend, then our tutoring days are probably over."

"Of course," I say, wondering who's left to replace him.

"I think Robert might ask me out. You know him?"

I pause, trying to conjure up a face for the name.

"He's on student council with you, president of the environmental club?"

"Yes, yes, of course," I say. "I didn't think he was your type."

"What?" Harrison asks, turning to narrow his eyes at me. "What's my type?"

"Well," I say, looking down the stretch of my body.

"Oh." Harrison laughs. "Yeah, tall, blond, with broad

shoulders and a jawline you could cut someone with? That's everyone's type."

I laugh, blushing a little. "You didn't mention my six-pack," I say, tapping my stomach.

He leans down and kisses just above my navel again. I sigh softly, but he lies back on the bed and puts his arms under his head. "I mean, I don't think I really have a type," he says.

I think of him in the bed with Robert, instead of me. Robert is nice. Sort of thin, and his hair never seems to do what it's supposed to, but he's passionate about whales, I think, which is nice. Or maybe it's rain forests? Super important, whichever one, of course. There's no doubt he's a nice person.

But I like sleeping with Harrison. He's a sexual partner of quality, and that means if he *must* have a boyfriend, then that boyfriend should be of quality, too. And being a good person isn't enough; there need to be shared interests, that spark of special-ness. I saw it between Taylor and West. I just can't imagine it with Harrison and Robert.

"You could do better than Robert, I think," I say, pulling on my briefs.

"Better than?"

"Sorry, that came out rude. I just mean you shouldn't say yes to Robert just because you want a boyfriend. If he asks you out."



“But I do want a boyfriend,” he says, turning onto his side to look at me.

“Do you want it to be him specifically, though?” I ask.

“I mean . . . maybe?”

“Maybe isn’t very convincing,” I say, smiling at him, an idea suddenly bubbling in my brain.

“But I *do* want a boyfriend,” he says. “And Robert is—”

“Then I’ll find you one.”

He laughs. “What? *You* will?”

“What?” I say, kneeling on the bed next to him. “I set up Taylor and West, you know. And I know how . . . extraordinary you are, physically,” I add, stroking his chin. “I won’t have you settle. I’ll find someone deserving of you.” I reach down and pull on my socks. They’re blue, covered in little stethoscopes. Our socks are the one thing we can go crazy with without violating uniform rules.

“Who would you find for me, then?” he asks as I stand and pull my pants on. “Or is this just some complicated scheme to keep me single for our hookups?”

“I assure you, it’s not,” I say. I smile at him, but he looks a little offended. “I enjoy our rendezvous, of course, but I don’t want to stand in the way of you being happy. We’re friends. I want you to be happy.”

“We’re friends?” He smiles.

“Aren’t we? You eat lunch with me sometimes. We talk, we spend time at each other’s houses.”

“That last one doesn’t count,” he says, laughing. “But sure, okay, we’re friends.”

“Then let me do what I do for my friends and find you a perfect match.”

“Who else have you done it for, besides Taylor?” he asks, raising an eyebrow.

“Well,” I say, looking back up at the fan for a moment, “no one. Yet. But you’ll be next. I like it. I like making people happy.”

“Oh?” He pushes himself back up, his muscled shoulders supporting his torso as he brings his face close to mine. One dark curl falls over his eyes. “Well, until you make me happy that way, there are other ways you can make me happy.”

I glance at my phone again, then take my socks back off. I still have a little time before I need to be home.

