Could the boy of her dreams be her happily ever after?

It's midnight, it's sweltering, and I might be high on Vicodin, but that guy – that guy *right over there* – that's him.

The him.

His posture is as familiar as a recurring dream. Shoulders rounded down, head cocked to the right, nose an inch from the tip of his pen. Absorbed. My heart swells with a painful sort of euphoria. He's close, only two tables over and facing my direction. The café is boiling. The atmosphere is clouded with bittersweet coffee. Three years of desire rip through my body and burst from my lips:

"Josh!"

His head jolts up. For a long time, a very long time, he just stares at me. And then…he blinks. "Isla?"

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ISLA

and the



HAPPILY EVER AFTER

STEPHANIE PERKINS

USBORNE

For Jarrod, best friend & true love

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Chapter one

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"Josh!"

His head jolts up. For a long time, a very long time, he just stares at me. And then…he blinks. "Isla?"

"You know my name. You can *pronounce* my name." Most people call me Iz-la, but I'm Eye-la. Island without the *nd*. I erupt into a smile that immediately vanishes. *Ouch.*

Josh glances around, as if searching for someone, and

then cautiously sets down his pen. "Uh, yeah. We've sat beside each other in a ton of classes."

"Five classes beside each other, twelve classes together total."

A pause.

"Right," he says slowly. Another pause. "Are you okay?"

A guy who looks like a young Abraham Lincoln with a piercing fetish tosses a single-page laminated menu onto my table.

I don't look at it. "Something soft, please."

Abe scratches his beard, weary.

"But no tomato soup, chocolate pudding, or raspberry applesauce. That's all I've had to eat today," I add.

"Ah." Abe's mood lightens. "You're sick."

"No."

His mood darkens again. "Whatever." He snatches up the menu. "Allergic to anything? You kosher? Vegetarian?"

"Huh?"

"I'll have a look in the kitchen." And he stalks away.

My gaze returns to Josh, who is still watching me. He looks down at his sketchbook, and then back up, and then back down. Like he can't decide if we're still having a conversation. I look down, too. I'm getting the increasingly alarming notion that if I keep talking, tomorrow I might have something to regret.

But…as if I can't help it – because I *can't*, not when I'm

around him – I glance up. My veins throb as my eyes drink him in. His long, beautiful nose. His slender, assured arms. His pale skin is a few shades darker from the summer sun, and his black tattoo peeks out from underneath his T-shirt sleeve.

Joshua Wasserstein. My crush on him is near unbearable.

He looks up again, too, and I blush. Blushing. The curse of redheads everywhere. I'm grateful when he clears his throat to speak. "It's strange, you know? That we've never run into each other before."

I leap in. "Do you come here often?"

"Oh." He fidgets with his pen. "I meant in the city? I knew you lived on the Upper West, but I've never seen you around."

My chest tightens. I knew that about him, but I had no idea that *he* knew that about *me*. We attend a boarding school for Americans in Paris, but we spend our breaks in Manhattan. Everybody knows that Josh lives here, because his father has one of the New York seats in the United States Senate. But there's no reason for anyone to remember that I live here, too.

"I don't get out often," I blurt. "But I'm starving, and there's nothing to eat at home." And then, somehow, I'm dropping into the empty seat across from him. My compass necklace knocks against his tabletop. "My wisdom teeth were removed this morning, and I'm taking all of these medications, but my mouth is still sore so that's why I can only eat soft foods."

Josh breaks into his first smile.

Accomplishment puffs up inside of me. I return the smile as full as I can, even though it hurts. "What?"

"Painkillers. It makes sense now."

"Oh, shit." I tuck up a leg and smack my kneecap on the table. "Am I acting that loopy?"

He laughs with surprise. People always laugh, because they don't expect words like *shit* to come out of someone so petite, someone with a voice so quiet, so sweet. "I could just tell something was different," he says. "That's all."

"Side effects include the cruel combination of exhaustion and insomnia. Which is why I'm here now."

Josh laughs again. "I had mine extracted last summer. You'll feel better tomorrow."

"Promise?"

"Not really. But definitely in a few days."

Our smiles fade into a reflective silence. We've rarely spoken to each other at school and never outside of it. I'm too shy, and he's too reserved. Plus, he had the same girlfriend for, like, for ever.

Had.

They broke up last month, right before her graduation. Josh and I still have our senior year to go. And I wish there were a logical reason for him to show a sudden interest in me, but…there's not. His ex was tenacious and outspoken. My opposite. Maybe that's why I'm startled when I find

myself pointing at his sketchbook, eager to prolong this temporary state. This miracle of conversation.

"What are you working on?" I ask.

His arm shifts to block the exposed drawing, someone resembling a young Abe Lincoln. "I was just…messing around."

"That's our server." I grin. *Ouch.*

He looks a bit sheepish as he pulls back his arm, but he only shrugs. "And the couple in the corner."

We're not alone?

I twist around to discover a middle-aged man and woman, all the way in the back, sharing a copy of the *Village Voice*. There isn't anyone else here, so at least I'm not too out of it. I don't think. I turn back to Josh, my courage rising.

"May I see that?"

I asked. I can't *believe* that I asked. I've always wanted to look inside his sketchbooks, always wanted to *hold* one. Josh is the most talented artist at our school. He works in several mediums, but his real passion is the comic form. I once overheard him say that he's working on a graphic novel about his life.

An autobiography. A diary. What secrets would it contain?

I content myself with doodles viewed over his shoulder, paintings drying in the art studio, sketches tacked to the doors of his friends. His style is almost whimsical. It's melancholy

and beautiful, completely his own. The lines are careful. They reveal that he pays attention. People don't think he does, because he daydreams and skips class and neglects his homework, but when I see his drawings, I know they're wrong.

I wish he would look at me the way that he looks at his subjects. Because then he'd see there's more to me than *shy*, just like I see there's more to him than *slacker*.

My cheeks burn again – as if he could hear my thoughts – but then I realize…he *is* studying me. Have I overstayed my welcome? His expression grows concerned, and I frown. Josh nods towards the table. His sketchbook is already before me.

I laugh. He does, too, though it's tinged with confusion.

His book is still open to the work in progress. A thrill runs through me. On one page, Abe's face stares with boredom at the sketchbook's spine. Even the rings in his septum, eyebrows and ears seem dull and annoyed. On the opposite page, Josh has perfectly captured the middle-aged couple's studious, gentle frowns.

I touch a corner, one without ink, oh so lightly. To prove to myself that this moment is real. My voice turns reverent. "These are amazing. Is the whole thing filled with portraits like this?"

Josh closes the sketchbook and slides it back towards himself. Its pages are thick with use. On the cover is a blue

sticker shaped like America. A single word has been handwritten across it: WELCOME. I don't know what that means, but I like it.

"Thanks." He gives me another smile. "It's for whatever, but yeah. Mainly portraits."

"And you're allowed to do that?"

His brow creases. "Do what?"

"Like, you don't need their permission?"

"To draw them?" he asks. I nod, and he continues. "Nah. I'm not using these for anything special. This isn't even my good sketchbook. See? I can't remove the pages."

"Do you do this a lot? Draw strangers?"

"Sure." He reaches for his coffee cup with an index finger. There's a splotch of black ink near his nail. "To be good at anything you have to practise."

"Do you wanna practise on me?" I ask.

Pink blossoms across Josh's cheeks as Abe slaps down two dishes. "Chicken broth and cheesecake," Abe says to me. "That's all we had."

"*Merci*," I say.

"*De nada*." Abe rolls his eyes and walks away.

"What's with that guy?" I ask, shovelling in the cheesecake. "Ohmygod, sogood." I mumble this through a full mouth. "Youwannabite?"

"Uh. No, thanks." Josh seems flustered. "You look hungry."

I begin happily devouring the rest.

"So you live close by?" he asks, after a few moments.

I swallow. "Two minutes away."

"Me too. Ten minutes."

I must look surprised, because he continues. "I know. Weird, right?"

"That's cool." I glug my broth. "Ohmygod. This is incredible."

He watches me quietly for another minute. "So…you were serious? You wouldn't mind if I sketched you?"

"Yeah, I'd love that." *I love youuuuuuuuu.* "What should I do?"

"Don't worry about it. Just keep doing what you're doing."

"Ha! You'll draw me eating like a horse. No. A pig. I meant pig. Do I mean a pig or a horse?"

Josh shakes his head in amusement. He opens the sketchbook to a new page and looks up. His eyes lock on to mine. I'm dumbstruck.

Hazel.

The word adds itself to my internal list of Facts About Josh. Sometimes his eyes had seemed green, sometimes brown. Now I know why.

Hazel. Josh's eyes are *hazel.*

I float into a green-brown fog. The *scritch* of his pen mingles with the *scratch* of an old folk song coming from the speakers. Their combined tune is yearning and turmoil and anguish and love. Outside, storm clouds burst. Rain and

wind join the score, and I hum along. My head clunks against a window.

I sit up, startled. My bowl and plate are empty. "How long have I been here?"

"A while." Josh smiles. "So. Those drugs you're on. Good stuff, huh?"

I moan. "Tell me I wasn't drooling."

"No drool. You look happy."

"I *am* happy," I say. Because…I am. My eyes dim.

"*Isla*," he whispers. "*It's time to go*."

I lift my head from the table. When did it get there?

"Kismet is closing."

"What's Kismet?"

"Fate," he says.

"What?"

"The name of this café."

"Oh. Okay." I follow him outside and into the night. It's still raining. The drops are fat and warm. I cover my head with my bare hands as Josh stuffs his sketchbook underneath his shirt. I catch a glimpse of his abdomen. *Yummy*. "Yummy tummy."

He startles. "What?"

"Hmm?"

A smile plays in the corners of his lips. I want to kiss them, one kiss in each corner.

"Okay, Loopy." He shakes his head. "Which way?"

"Which way to what?"

"To your place."

"You're coming over?" I'm delighted.

"I'm walking you home. It's late. And it's pouring."

"Oh, that's nice," I say. "You're nice."

The traffic lights glow yellow on the wet asphalt. I point the way, and we run across Amsterdam Avenue. The rain pours harder. "Up there!" I say, and we duck underneath a city block covered in scaffolding. Weighty raindrops clang against the aluminium like a pinball machine.

"Isla, wait!"

But it's too late.

Scaffolding is generally ideal for escaping bad weather, but occasionally the bars will cross together to create a funnel, which can collect water and soak a person completely. I am soaked. Completely. My hair clings to my face, my sundress clings to my figure, and water squishes between my sandals and the soles of my feet.

"Ha-ha." I'm not sure it's real laughter.

"Are you okay?" Josh stoops under the scaffolding, swerves around the waterfall, and then stoops back in beside me.

I *am* laughing. I clutch my stomach. "Hurts…mouth… to laugh. My mouth. My mouth and my stomach. And my mouth."

He laughs, too, but it's distracted. His eyes suddenly,

pointedly move up to my face, and I realize he'd been looking elsewhere. My smile widens. *Thank you, slutty funnel.*

Josh shifts away, his posture uncomfortable. "Almost there, yeah?"

I gesture towards a row of gabled buildings across the street. "The second one. With the copper-green windows and the tiled roof."

"I've sketched those before." His eyes widen, impressed. "They're gorgeous."

My parents' apartment is located in a line of Flemish-inspired homes built in the late nineteenth century. We live in one of the only neighbourhoods that's nice enough for residents to have flowers on their stoops, and passers-by won't destroy them.

"Maman likes them, too. She likes pretty things. She's French. That's why I go to our school." My voice drifts as Josh guides me towards the entrance with the climbing pink roses above the door. Home. He removes his hand from the small of my back, and it's only then that I realize it was there in the first place.

"*Merci*," I say.

"You're welcome."

"Thanks," I say.

"*De rien*."

The air is heavy with the perfume of rain-dripped roses. I fumble my way inside the building, and he waits on the

sidewalk, statuesque. His dark hair is as wet as mine now. A stream of water cascades down his nose. One arm clutches the sketchbook against his chest, underneath his T-shirt.

"Thank you," I say again.

He raises his voice so that I can hear him through the glass door. "Get some rest, Loopy. Sweet dreams."

"Sweet," I echo. "Dream."