

RACHEL LYNN SOLOMON

Award-winning author of *You'll Miss Me When I'm Gone* and *Our Year of Maybe*



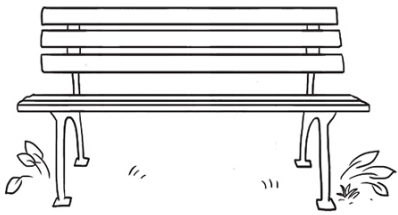
Today



Tonight



Tomorrow



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Tomorrow

RACHEL LYNN SOLOMON

SIMON PULSE

New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

*For Kelsey Rodkey,
who loved this book first*

MESSENGER

I see, lady, the gentleman is not in your books.

BEATRICE

No; an he were, I would burn my study.

—*Much Ado about Nothing* by William Shakespeare

I used to dream of you nightly

I would wake up screaming

—“Make Good Choices” by Sean Nelson



5:54 a.m.

McNIGHTMARE

Good morning!

This is a friendly reminder that you have three (3) hours and counting before suffering a humiliating defeat at the hands of your future valedictorian.

Bring tissues. I know you're a crier.

The text jolts me from sleep a minute before my 5:55 alarm, three quick pulses to let me know my least favorite person is already awake. Neil McNair —“McNightmare” in my phone—is annoyingly punctual. It’s one of his only good traits.

We’ve been text-taunting since we were sophomores, after a series of morning threats made both of us late for homeroom. For a while last year, I decided to be the mature one, vowed to make my room a McNair-free zone. I’d put my phone on silent before slipping into bed, but beneath the pillow, my fingers twitched with combative responses. I couldn’t sleep thinking he might be texting me. Baiting me. *Waiting*.

Neil McNair has become my alarm clock, if alarm clocks had freckles and knew all your insecurities.

I fling back the sheets, ready for battle.

oh, I didn't realize we still thought crying was a sign of weakness

in the interest of accuracy, I'd like to point out that you've only seen me cry once, and I'm not sure that necessarily makes me "a crier"

Over a book!

You were inconsolable.

it's called an emotion

I highly recommend feeling one (1) sometime

In his mind, the only thing you're supposed to feel while reading a book is a sense of superiority. He's the kind of person who believes all Real Literature has already been written by dead white men. If he could, he'd bring Hemingway back to life for one last cocktail, smoke a cigar with Fitzgerald, dissect the nature of human existence with Steinbeck.

Our rivalry dates back to freshman year, when a (small) panel of judges declared his essay the winner of a school-wide contest about the book that had impacted us the most. I came in second. McNair, in all his originality, picked *The Great Gatsby*. I picked *Vision in White*, my favorite Nora Roberts, a choice he scoffed at even after he'd won, insinuating I shouldn't have gotten second place for picking a *romance novel*. This was clearly a really valid stance for someone who'd likely never read one.

I've despised him ever since, but I can't deny he's been a worthy antagonist. That essay contest made me determined to beat him the next chance I got, whatever it happened to be—and I did, in an election for freshman-class rep. He turned around and narrowly edged me in a history-class debate. So I collected more cans than he did for environmental club, further cementing us as competitors. We've compared test scores and GPAs and clashed on everything from school projects to gym-class pull-up contests. We can't seem to stop trying to one-up each other... until now.

After graduation this weekend, I'll never have to see him again. No more morning texts, no more sleepless nights.

I am almost free.

I drop my phone back onto the nightstand next to my writing journal. It's open to a sentence I scribbled in the middle of the night. I flip on the lamp to

take a closer look, to see if my two a.m. nonsense makes sense in the daylight—but the room stays dark.

Frowning, I toggle the switch a few more times before getting out of bed and trying the ceiling light. Nothing. It rained all night, a June storm tossing twigs and pine needles at our house, and the wind must have snapped a power line.

I grab my phone again. Twelve percent battery.

(And no reply from McNair.)

“Mom?” I call, racing out of my room and down the stairs. Anxiety pitches my voice an octave higher than usual. “Dad?”

My mom pokes her head out of the office. Orange glasses lie crooked across the bridge of her nose, and her long dark curls—the ones I inherited—are wilder than usual. We’ve never been able to tame them. My two great nemeses in life: Neil McNair and my hair.

“Rowan?” my mom says. “What are you doing up?”

“It’s... morning?”

She straightens her glasses and peers down at her watch. “I guess we’ve been in here awhile.”

The windowless office is dark, except for a few candles in the middle of their massive desk, illuminating stacks of pages slashed with red ink.

“Are you working by candlelight?” I ask.

“We had to. Power’s out on the whole street, and we’re on deadline.”

My parents, author-illustrator duo Jared Roth and Ilana García Roth, have written more than thirty books together, from picture books about unlikely animal friendships to a chapter book series about a tween paleontologist named Riley Rodriguez. My mom was born in Mexico City to a Russian-Jewish mother and a Mexican father. She was thirteen when her mother remarried a Texan and moved the family north. Until she went to college and met my Jewish father, she spent summers in Mexico with her father’s family, and when they started writing (words: Mom, pictures: Dad), they wanted to explore how a child might embrace both cultures.

My dad appears behind her, yawning. The book they’re working on is a spin-off about Riley’s younger sister, an aspiring pastry chef. Pastel cakes and pies and French macarons leap off the pages.

“Hey, Ro-Ro,” he says, his usual nickname for me. When I was a kid, he used to sing “row, row, Rowan your boat,” and I was devastated when I learned those weren’t the real lyrics. “Happy last day of school.”

“I can’t believe it’s finally here.” I stare at the carpet, suddenly gripped by nerves. I’ve already cleaned out my locker and taken my finals breakdown-free. I have too much to do today—as student council copresident, I’m leading the senior farewell assembly—to get nervous now.

“Oh!” my mom exclaims, as though suddenly waking up. “We need a picture with the unicorn!”

I groan. I was hoping they’d forgotten. “Can it wait until later? I don’t want to be late.”

“Ten seconds. And aren’t you signing yearbooks and playing games today?” My mom cups my shoulder and gently shakes me back and forth. “You’re almost done. Don’t stress so much.”

She always says I carry too much tension in my shoulders. By the time I’m thirty, my shoulders will probably touch my earlobes.

My mom rummages around in the hall closet, returning with the unicorn-shaped backpack I wore on my first day of kindergarten. In that first first-day photo, I am all sunshine and optimism. When they snapped a picture on the last day of kindergarten, I looked like I wanted to set that backpack on fire. They were so amused, they’ve taken photos on the first and last days of school ever since. It was the inspiration for their bestselling picture book, *Unicorn Goes to School*. It’s odd, sometimes, to think about how many kids grew up knowing me without really knowing me.

Despite my reluctance, the backpack always makes me smile. The unicorn’s poor horn is hanging on by a thread, and one hoof is missing. I stretch the straps as far as they’ll go and strike a tortured pose for my parents.

“Perfect,” my mom says, laughing. “You really look like you’re in agony.”

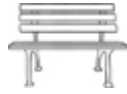
This moment with my parents makes me wonder if today will be a day of lasts. Last day of school, last morning text from McNair, last photo with this aging backpack.

I’m not sure I’m ready to say goodbye to everything yet.

My dad taps his watch. “We should get back to it.” He tosses me a flashlight. “So you don’t have to shower in the dark.”

Last shower of high school.

Maybe that's the definition of nostalgia: getting sappy about things that are supposed to be insignificant.



After showering, I wrestle my hair into a damp bun, not trusting it to air-dry into a flattering shape. On my first try, I draw a flawless cat-eye with liquid liner, but I have to settle for a mediocre little flick on the left side. My kingdom for the ability to apply a symmetrical face of makeup.

Last cat-eye of high school, I think, and then I stop myself because if I get weepy about eyeliner, I have no chance of making it through the day.

McNair, with his punctuation and capital letters, pops back up like the world's worst game of Whac-A-Mole.

Aren't you in that neighborhood without power?

I'd hate to mark you late... or have you lose the perfect attendance award.

Have they ever had a student council (co)president win zero awards?

The outfit I planned days ago waits in my closet: my favorite sleeveless blue dress with a Peter Pan collar, the one I found in the vintage section at Red Light. When I tried it on and dipped my hands into the pockets, I knew it had to be mine. My friend Kirby once described my style as hipster librarian meets 1950s housewife. My body is what women's magazines call "pear shaped," with a large chest and larger hips, and I don't have to struggle with vintage clothes the way I do with modern ones. I finish the look with knee socks, ballet flats, and a cream cardigan.

I'm poking a simple gold stud through one earlobe when the envelope catches my eye. Of course—I set it out at the beginning of the week, and I've

been staring at it every day since, a mix of dread and excitement warring in my stomach. Most of the time, the dread is winning.

In my fourteen-year-old handwriting, which is a little larger and loopier than it is now, it says *OPEN ON LAST DAY OF HIGH SCHOOL*. A time capsule of sorts, in the sense that I sealed it four years ago and have only fleetingly thought about it since. I'm only half certain what's inside it.

I don't have time to read it now, so I slide it into my navy JanSport, along with my yearbook and journal.

how have you not run out of ways to mock me after four years?

What can I say, you're an endless source of inspiration.

and you are an endless source of migraines

"I'm leaving, love you, good luck!" I call to my parents before shutting the front door, realizing, with a twinge of my heart, that I won't be able to do this next year.

Excedrin and Kleenex, DON'T FORGET.

My car is parked around the block, since most Seattle garages are barely big enough for our Halloween decorations. Once inside, I plug my phone into the charger, pluck a bobby pin from the cup holder, and plunge it into my mountain of hair, imagining I'm jabbing it into the space between McNightmare's eyebrows instead.

I'm so close to valedictorian. Three more hours, like his first message so helpfully reminded me. During the farewell assembly, the Westview High School principal will call one of our names, and in my perfect-last-day fantasy, it's mine. I've only been dreaming of it for years: the rivalry to end all rivalries. The velvet bow wrapped around my high school experience.

At first, McNair will be so devastated he won't be able to look at me. His shoulders will hunch and he'll stare down at his tie because he always dresses up on assembly days. He'll feel so embarrassed, this loser in a suit. Beneath his freckles, his pale skin will flush to match his fiery red hair. He has more freckles than he has face. He'll cycle through five stages of grief before arriving at acceptance of the fact that after all these years, I have finally bested him. I have *won*.

Then he'll glance up at me with an expression of utmost respect. He'll dip his head in deference. "You've earned this," he'll say. "Congratulations, Rowan."

And he'll mean it.



Meet Delilah Park TONIGHT in Seattle!



Delilah Park Publicity <updates@delilahpark.com>

to undisclosed-recipient

June 12, 6:35 a.m.

Good morning, lovers of love!

Internationally bestselling author Delilah Park's *Scandal at Sunset* tour continues this evening with a stop at Seattle's Books & More at 8:00 p.m. Don't miss your chance to meet her in person and take your photo with a ten-foot replica of the Sugar Lake gazebo!

And be sure to grab Delilah's new book, *Scandal at Sunset*, on sale now!

X's and O's,
Delilah Park's publicity team

6:37 a.m.

McNIGHTMARE

Ticktock.

Gray skies rumble with the threat of rain, cedar trees shuddering against the wind. Coffee is my first priority, and Two Birds One Scone is on my way to school. I've been working there since I turned sixteen, when my parents made it clear there was no way we could afford out-of-state tuition. While I've spent my entire life in Seattle, I always wanted to leave for college if I could. Scholarships will cover most of my first semester at a small liberal arts school in Boston called Emerson. My Two Birds money will cover everything else.

The café is decorated like an aviary, plastic ravens and hawks watching you from every angle. They're famous not for their scones but for their cinnamon rolls, which are about the size of a small baby, slathered with cream cheese icing, and served warm.

Mercedes, a recent Seattle U grad who works mornings so she can play in her all-female Van Halen cover band, Anne Halen, at night, waves at me from behind the counter.

"Hey, hey," she says in her too-chipper-before-seven-a.m. voice, already reaching for a compostable cup. "Hazelnut latte with extra whip?"

"You're wonderful. Thank you." Two Birds is small, a staff of about eight with two working per shift. Mercedes is my favorite, mainly because she plays better music than anyone else.

My phone buzzes while I'm waiting, Mercedes humming along to Heart's *Greatest Hits*. I'm positive it's McNair—but it's something much more exciting.

Delilah Park's book signing has been on my calendar for months, but in the midst of my last-day-of-school-isms, I somehow forgot that tonight I am going to meet my favorite author. I even stashed a few paperbacks in my bag earlier this week. Delilah Park writes romances with feminist heroines and