

CHAPTER ONE
ARTHUR
Monday, July 9

I am not a New Yorker, and I want to go home.

There are so many unspoken rules when you live here, like the way you're never supposed to stop in the middle of the sidewalk or stare dreamily up at tall buildings or pause to read graffiti. No giant folding maps, no fanny packs, no eye contact. No humming songs from *Dear Evan Hansen* in public. And you're definitely not supposed to take selfies at street corners, even if there's a hot dog stand and a whole line of yellow taxis in the background, which is eerily how you always pictured New York. You're allowed to silently appreciate it, but you have to be cool. From what I can tell, that's the whole point of New York: being cool.

I'm not cool.

Take this morning. I made the mistake of glancing up at the sky, just for a moment, and now I can't unstick my eyes. Looking up from this angle, it's like the world's tipping inward: dizzyingly tall buildings and a bright fireball sun.

It's beautiful. I'll give New York credit for that. It's beautiful and surreal, and absolutely nothing like Georgia. I tilt my phone to snap a picture. Not an Instagram Story, no filters. Nothing drawn-out.

One tiny, quick picture.

Instantaneous pedestrian rage: *Jesus. Come on. MOVE. Fucking tourists.* Literally, I take a two-second photograph, and now I'm obstruction personified. I'm responsible for every subway delay, every road closure, the very phenomenon of wind resistance.

Fucking tourists.

I'm not even a tourist. I somewhat live here, at least for the summer. It's not like I'm taking a joyful sightseeing stroll at noon on a Monday. I'm at work. I mean, I'm on a Starbucks run, but it counts.

And maybe I'm taking the long way. Maybe I need a few extra minutes away from Mom's office. Normally, being an intern is more boring than terrible, but today's uniquely shitty. You know that kind of day where the printer runs out of paper, and there's none in the supply room, so you try to steal some from the copier, but you can't get the drawer open, and then you push some wrong button and the copier

starts beeping? And you're standing there thinking that whoever invented copy machines is *this* close to getting their ass kicked? By you? By a five-foot-six Jewish kid with ADHD and the rage of a tornado? That kind of day? Yeah.

And all I want to do is vent to Ethan and Jessie, but I still haven't figured out how to text while walking.

I step off the sidewalk, near the entrance to a post office—and wow. They don't make post offices like this in Milton, Georgia. It's got a white stone exterior with pillars and brass accents, and it's so painfully classy, I almost feel underdressed. And I'm wearing a tie.

I text the sunny street picture to Ethan and Jessie. **Rough day at the office!**

Jessie writes back immediately. **I hate you and I want to be you.**

Here's the thing: Jessie and Ethan have been my best friends since the dawn of time, and I've always been Real Arthur with them. Lonely Messy Arthur, as opposed to Upbeat Instagram Arthur. But for some reason, I need them to think my New York life is awesome. I just do. So I've been sending them Upbeat Instagram Arthur texts for weeks. I don't know if I'm really selling it, though.

Also I miss you, Jessie writes, throwing down a whole line of kissy emojis. She's like my bubbe in a sixteen-year-old body. She'd text a lipstick smudge onto my cheek if she could. The weird thing is that we've never had one of those

ooey-gooney friendships—at least not until prom night. Which happens to be the night I told Jessie and Ethan I’m gay.

I miss you guys, too, I admit.

COME HOME, ARTHUR.

Four more weeks. Not that I’m counting.

Ethan finally chimes in with the most ambiguous of all emojis: the grimace. Like, come on. The *grimace*? If post-prom Jessie texts like my bubbe, post-prom Ethan texts like a mime. He’s actually not so bad in the group text most of the time, but one-on-one? I’ll just say my phone stopped blowing up with his texts approximately five seconds after I came out. I’m not going to lie: it’s the crappiest feeling ever. One of these days, I’m going to call him out, and it’s going to be soon. Maybe even today. Maybe—

But then the post office door swings open, revealing—no joke—a pair of identical twin men in matching rompers. With handlebar mustaches. Ethan would *love* this. Which pisses me off. This happens constantly with Ethan. A minute ago, I was ready to friend-dump his emoji-ambiguous ass. Now I just want to hear him laugh. A full emotional one-eighty in a span of sixty seconds.

The twins amble past me, and I see they both have man buns. Of course they have man buns. New York must be its own planet, I swear, because no one even blinks.

Except.

There's a boy walking toward the entrance, holding a cardboard box, and he literally stops in his tracks when the twins walk by. He looks so confused, I laugh out loud.

And then he catches my eye.

And then he smiles.

And holy shit.

I mean it. Holy mother of shit. Cutest boy ever. Maybe it's the hair or the freckles or the pinkness of his cheeks. And I say this as someone who's never noticed another person's cheeks in my life. But his cheeks are worth noticing. Everything about him is worth noticing. Perfectly rumpled light brown hair. Fitted jeans, scuffed shoes, gray shirt—with the words *Dream & Bean Coffee* barely visible above the box he's holding. He's taller than me—which, okay, most guys are.

He's still looking at me.

But twenty points to Gryffindor, because I manage to smile up at him. “Do you think they parked their tandem bicycle at the mustache-wax parlor?”

His startled laugh is so cute, it makes me light-headed. “Definitely the mustache-wax parlor slash art gallery slash microbrewery,” he says.

For a minute, we grin at each other without speaking.

“Um, are you going in?” he asks finally.

I glance up at the door. “Yeah.”

And I do it. I follow him into the post office. It's not even

a decision. Or if it is, my body's already decided. There's something about him. It's this tug in my chest. It's this feeling like I *have to* know him, like it's inevitable.

Okay, I'm about to admit something, and you're probably going to cringe. You're probably already cringing, but whatever. Hear me out.

I believe in love at first sight. Fate, the universe, all of it. But not how you're thinking. I don't mean it in the *our souls were split and you're my other half forever and ever* sort of way. I just think you're meant to meet some people. I think the universe nudges them into your path.

Even on random Monday afternoons in July. Even at the post office.

But let's be real—this is no normal post office. It's big enough to be a ballroom, with gleaming floors and rows of numbered PO boxes and actual sculptures, like a museum. Box Boy walks over to a short counter near the entrance, props the package beside him, and starts filling out a mailing label.

So I swipe a Priority Mail envelope from a nearby rack and drift toward his counter. Super casual. This doesn't have to be weird. I just need to find the perfect words to keep this conversation going. To be honest, I'm normally really good at talking to strangers. I don't know if it's a Georgia thing or only an Arthur thing, but if there's an elderly man in a grocery store, I'm there price-checking prune juices for

him. If there's a pregnant lady on an airplane, she's named her unborn kid after me by the time the plane lands. It's the one thing I have going for me.

Or I did, until today. I don't even think I can form sounds. It's like my throat's caving in on itself. But I have to channel my inner New Yorker—cool and nonchalant. I shoot him a tentative grin. Deep breath. “That's a big package.”

And . . . shit.

The words tumble out. “I don't mean *package*. Just. Your box. Is big.” I hold my hands apart to demonstrate. Because apparently that's the way to prove it's not an innuendo. By spreading my hands out dick-measuringly.

Box Boy furrows his brow.

“Sorry. I don't . . . I swear I don't usually comment on the size of other guys' boxes.”

He meets my eyes and smiles, just a little. “Nice tie,” he says.

I look down at it, blushing. Of course I couldn't have worn a normal tie today. Nope. I'm wearing one from the Dad collection. Navy blue, printed with hundreds of tiny hot dogs.

“At least it's not a romper?” I say.

“Good point.” He smiles again—so of course I notice his lips. Which are shaped exactly like Emma Watson's lips. *Emma Watson's lips*. Right there on his face.

“So you’re not from here,” Box Boy says.

I look up at him, startled. “How did you know?”

“Well, you keep talking to me.” Then he blushes. “That came out wrong. I just mean it’s usually only tourists who strike up conversations.”

“Oh.”

“I don’t mind, though,” he says.

“I’m not a tourist.”

“You’re not?”

“Okay, I’m not *technically* from here, but I live here now. Just for the summer. I’m from Milton, Georgia.”

“Milton, Georgia.” He smiles.

I feel inexplicably frantic. Like, my limbs are weird and loose, and my head’s full of cotton. I’m probably electric bright red now. I don’t even want to know. I just need to keep talking. “I know, right? *Milton*. It sounds like a Jewish great-uncle.”

“I wasn’t—”

“I actually do have a Jewish great-uncle Milton. That’s whose apartment we’re staying in.”

“Who’s we?”

“You mean who do I live with in my great-uncle Milton’s apartment?”

He nods, and I just look at him. Like, who does he think I live with? My boyfriend? My twenty-eight-year-old smoldering-hot boyfriend who has big gaping holes in his

earlobes and maybe a tongue piercing and a tattoo of my name on his pec? On *both* pecs?

“With my parents,” I say quickly. “My mom’s a lawyer, and her firm has an office here, so she came up at the end of April for this case she’s working on, and I totally would have come up then, but my mom was like, *Nice try, Arthur, you have a month of school left*. But it ended up being for the best, because I guess I thought New York was going to be one thing, and it’s really another thing, and now I’m kind of stuck here, and I miss my friends, and I miss my car, and I miss Waffle House.”

“In that order?”

“Well, mostly the car.” I grin. “We left it at my bubble’s house in New Haven. She lives right by Yale, which is hopefully, *hopefully* my future school. Fingers crossed.” It’s like I can’t stop talking. “I guess you probably don’t need my life story.”

“I don’t mind.” Box Boy pauses, balancing the box on his hip. “Want to get on line?”

I nod, falling into step behind him. He shifts sideways to face me, but the box looms between us. He hasn’t stuck the shipping label on yet. It’s sitting on top of the package. I try to sneak a peek at the address, but his handwriting sucks, and I can’t read upside down.

He catches me looking. “Are you really nosy or something?” He’s watching me through narrowed eyes.

“Oh.” I swallow. “Kind of. Yeah.”

That makes him smile. “It’s not that interesting. It’s leftovers from a breakup.”

“Leftovers?”

“Books, gifts, Harry Potter wand. Everything I don’t want to look at anymore.”

“You don’t want to look at a Harry Potter wand?”

“I don’t want to look at anything my ex-boyfriend gave me.”

Ex-boyfriend.

Which means Box Boy dates guys.

And okay. Wow. This doesn’t happen to me. It just doesn’t. But maybe the universe works differently in New York.

Box Boy dates guys.

I’M A GUY.

“That’s really cool,” I say. Perfectly casual. But then he looks at me funny, and my hand flies to my mouth. “Not cool. God. No. Breakups aren’t cool. I’m just—I’m so sorry for your loss.”

“He’s not dead.”

“Oh, right. Yeah. I’m gonna . . .” I exhale, hand resting for a moment on the retractable line barrier.

Box Boy smiles tightly. “Right. So you’re one of those guys who gets weird around gay dudes.”

“What?” I yelp. “No. Not at all.”

“Yeah.” He rolls his eyes, glancing over my shoulder.

“I’m not,” I say quickly. “Listen. I’m gay.”

And the whole world stops. My tongue feels thick and heavy.

I guess I don’t say those words out loud all that often. *I’m gay*. My parents know, Ethan and Jessie know, and I kind of randomly told the summer associates at Mom’s firm. But I’m not a person who goes around announcing it at the post office.

Except apparently, I kind of am.

“Oh. For real?” Box Boy asks.

“For real.” It comes out breathless. It’s weird—now I want to prove it. I want some gay ID card to whip out like a cop badge. Or I could demonstrate in other ways. God. I would happily demonstrate.

Box Boy smiles, his shoulders relaxing. “Cool.”

And holy shit. This is actually happening. I can hardly catch my breath. It’s like the universe willed this moment into existence.

A voice booms from behind the counter. “You on line or not?” I look up to see a woman with a lip ring raining down the stink-eye. No fucks given by this postal employee. “Yo, Freckles. Let’s go.”

Box Boy shoots me a halting glance before stepping up to the counter. Already, there’s a line stretching out behind me. And okay—I’m not *eavesdropping* on Box Boy. Not

exactly. It's more like my ears are drawn to his voice. His arms are crossed, shoulders tense.

"Twenty-six fifty for Priority," says Lip Ring.

"Twenty-six fifty? Like twenty-six dollars?"

"No. Like twenty-six fifty."

Box Boy shakes his head. "That's a lot."

"That's what we got. Take it or leave it."

For a moment, Box Boy just stands there. Then he takes the box back, hugging it to his chest. "Sorry."

"Next," says Lip Ring. She beckons to me, but I swerve out of line.

Box Boy blinks. "How is it twenty-six fifty to send a package?"

"I don't know. That's messed up."

"Guess that's the universe saying I should hold on to it."

The *universe*.

Holy shit.

He's a believer. He believes in the universe. And I don't want to jump to conclusions or anything, but Box Boy believing in the universe is definitely a sign from the universe.

"Okay." My heartbeat quickens. "But what if the universe is actually telling you to throw his stuff away?"

"That's not how it works."

"Oh really?"

"Think about it. Getting rid of the box is plan A, right?"

The universe isn't going to thwart plan A just so I'll go with another version of plan A. This is clearly the universe calling for plan B."

"And plan B is . . ."

"Accepting that the universe is an asshole—"

"The universe isn't an asshole!"

"It is. Trust me."

"How could you possibly know that?"

"I know the universe has some fucked-up plan for this box."

"But that's the thing!" I stare him down. "You don't actually know. You have no idea where the universe is going with this. Maybe the whole reason you're here is because the universe wanted you to meet me, so I could tell you to throw the box away."

He smiles. "You think the universe wanted us to meet?"

"What? No! I mean, I don't know. That's the point. We have no way of knowing."

"Well, I guess we'll see how it plays out." He peers at the shipping label for a moment and then rips it in half, wadding it and tossing it into the trash. At least he aims for the trash, but it lands on the floor. "Anyway," he says. "Um, are you—"

"Excuse me." A man's voice reverberates through an intercom. "Can I have your attention?"

I glance sidelong at Box Boy. "Is this—"

There's a sudden squeal of feedback and a rising piano intro.

And then a literal fucking marching band walks in.

A marching band.

People flood into the post office, carrying giant drums and flutes and tubas, blasting a somewhat off-key rendition of that Bruno Mars song "Marry You." And now dozens of people—old people, people I thought were in line to buy stamps—have launched into a choreographed dance number, with high kicks and hip thrusts and shimmying arms. Basically everyone who's not dancing is filming this, but I'm too stunned to even grab my phone. I mean, I don't want to read too much into things, but wow: I meet a cute boy, and five seconds later, I'm in the middle of a flash mob marriage proposal? Could this message from the universe be any clearer?

The crowd parts, and a tattooed guy rolls in on a skateboard, skidding to a stop in front of the service desk. He's holding a jewelry box, but instead of taking a knee, he plants his elbows on the counter and beams up at Lip Ring. "Kelsey. Babe. Will you marry me?"

Kelsey's black mascara tracks all the way down to her lip ring. "Yes!" She grabs his face for a tear-soaked kiss, and the crowd erupts into cheers.

It hits me deep in my chest. It's that New York feeling, like they talk about in musicals—that wide-open,

top-volume, Technicolor joy. Here I've spent the whole summer moping around and missing Georgia, but it's like someone just flipped a light switch inside of me.

I wonder if Box Boy feels it, too. I turn toward him, already smiling, and my hand's pressed to my heart—

But he's gone.

My hand falls limply. The boy is nowhere. His box is nowhere. I peer around, scanning every single face in the post office. Maybe he got pushed aside by the flash mob. Maybe he was part of the flash mob. Maybe he had some kind of urgent appointment—so urgent he couldn't stop to get my number. He couldn't even say goodbye.

I can't believe he didn't say goodbye.

I thought—I don't know, it's stupid, but I thought we had some kind of moment. I mean, the universe basically scooped us up and delivered us to each other. That's what just happened, right? I don't even know how else you could interpret it.

Except he vanished. He's Cinderella at midnight. It's like he never even existed. And now I'll never know his name, or how my name sounds when he says it. I'll never get to show him that the universe isn't an asshole.

Gone. Totally gone. And the disappointment hits me so hard, I almost double over.

Until my eyes fall on the trash can.

Okay. I'm not saying I'm going to dig through the trash.

Obviously not. I'm a mess, but I'm not *that* messy.

But maybe Box Boy is right. Maybe the universe is calling for plan B.

Here's my question: If a piece of trash never makes it into a trash can, can you even call it trash? Because let's just imagine—and this is totally hypothetical—let's say there's a crumpled shipping label on the floor. Is that trash?

What if it's a glass slipper?