The Kiss

Our fingers intertwined, the sun slowly fading behind the horizon. My eyes focused on both of his. It wasn’t awkward or sloppy. It was, as other girls would say, perfect. But I don’t believe in perfect. For me it was just good to be true.

Seattle, WA, 6 days before Australia

It had been five days since I had gotten the acceptance letter, and each day was a packing nightmare. My family was joyous that I had gotten into the top international exchange program in America, but for me it was just more stress in my already busy life. My parents had taken me out of school, which stopped homework and allowed me to take regular nightly showers, but my schedule was still packed. In order to stay fit and in shape which I needed since I would be working on a small farm, I had to boost the time to double in ballet in order to fit with cheerleading at school, then right after that I had to jog to track & field. That left me 3 hours of packing each day for five days, and then I was off.

Australia, present time

I turned around and walked up the porch steps attached to the small blue cottage. The light shown down over the front door, with moths fluttering around it. The screen door creaked on its hinges as I pulled on the rusted handle. I walked down the long hallway, feeling the summer air on my skin and hearing the rustling of feet outside. I stepped into my room, which was covered in flower wallpaper with a small pink bed in the corner. The small bedroom was organized, and it smelled of a soft lilac perfume. Not exactly my type of the interior design but it still felt like home. The minute I hit that bed, and took a whiff of that summer air, I was gone.

*   *   *

The smell of bacon and pancakes filled my nose as the sun escaped the cover of the floral shades. I made my way to the kitchen, where Mrs. Abbey was working feverishly over the stove.

“Hey, you slept in,” she said, as I sat in a nearby chair.

“Yeah, sorry.” I dragged a copy of the newspaper toward me, flipping through absent-mindedly. That kiss kept playing through my mind, and whenever I tried to push it out
of my memories, and tried to come across not as desperate as I actually am, it would just keep coming back, even more vivid and real than before. I knew this wasn’t going to end well, but my heart refused to agree. Mrs. Abbey talked on, but I was long gone, in my own world where no one was there but my thoughts and me.

**Seattle, WA, 3 weeks before trip to Australia**

This is it. I was excited beyond belief because today was the day I would either be accepted or eliminated. My last chance to go to Australia, where I could have an adventure all my own. Fifty-fifty. My patience was wearing thin, and after 3 months of anticipation, you would feel the same way. We had a half-day at Roosevelt High, so all I could do was chores or wait, and after accomplishing every chore I flicked on the T.V. and tried to unwind. My efforts were useless, and when the orange envelope fell in through the mail slot, I practically flipped.

**Australia, present time**

The sun baked the earth and the cows called for water. I had only worked at a horse farm for the summer in 7th grade so this was still sort of new. Mr. Abbey says I work better and harder than his son and three younger daughters combined and that I fit in quite well at the small ranch. I believe they rarely try to do a good job since the day I had gotten here, because I was doing practically everything there is to do on a farm. They took me in like I was their own daughter, though, and in some place in my gut I felt I owed them some how.

“CASSIE! YOU HAVE THE EVENING OFF!” Mrs. Abbey yelled from the shelter of the porch.

“REALLY?” I yelled, standing up and placing the bucket full of cow feed at my side.

“YEAH, LUKE WILL TAKE YOU TO THE CITY!” Just then I felt my heart leap and sink at once. Did Luke seem like the kind of guy that would remember some silly little kiss? Should I bring back the feelings, and hope he had them too? I ran to the house, hugged Mrs. Abbey, and then hurried down the hall to my room.

**Seattle, WA, Arrival of the Acceptance letter**

I held the envelope in my hands not having the courage to open it, yet wanting to rip it apart. My fingers slid to the top, making an incision then ripping the whole top half off. I sat on the steps, the door in front of me and the rest of the mail on the floor. I tipped the
envelope and the contents fell onto the last step under me. There on the top was a letter deciding for me what would happen next. Before I even glanced at the piece of paper, I riffled through the other items along with it, seeing if I could find a hint as to the answer. There was a coupon for Mongolian BBQ, not a good sign, and some other scraps of paper. I was about to give up when I saw a bumper sticker reading ‘I AM AN EXCHANGE STUDENT AND PROUD OF IT!’ This gave me the slightest bit of hope, and in a rush I had the letter and was skimming through. That was that.

**Australia, present time**

“You ready yet?” Luke stood in the doorway, hands in his pockets and a smile spread across his face. He was slightly tan, with straight, shaggy brown hair that curled at the end, which was about his ear, giving him a surfer beach type presence. His eyes were deep blue and always searching for something interesting. Judging by the looks of it, that “interesting thing” was me.

“Ah yeah, just about.” I got my wallet and sunglasses then followed him out of the house. We piled in the old pick-up truck that was parked in the drive, and then pulled away leaving a trail of dirt. It felt nice to relax and not have to have any of the stress of school on my shoulders.

“So how you likin’ Australia?” He glanced over at me, with my big sunglasses resting on my freckled nose and wind bowing through my auburn hair.

I flashed a smile before replying. “I haven’t had an experience like this before, that’s for sure.” He knew I was hard to understand and not partial to anything, so it was the best possible answer I could give.

“Just say it girl.” He gripped the wheel and pulled onto a city road, falling in line with the other cars. I watched the buildings and stores go by. It wasn’t much but it was nice.

“It’s not Sydney, but I like it. Where are we going?” I glanced around at the other cars passing by. It wasn’t like it was abandoned or anything, it was a city after all, but it wasn’t crowded either like New York.

“I’m in the mood for a smoothie, then maybe we could walk around town and talk a little.”

“I couldn’t think of anything better.” I glanced at him as he turned onto another road and kept going.
Seattle, WA, many months before acceptance letter

“So did you get that weird letter?” I asked my best friend, Amy.
“What letter?” She asked, jiggling the lock on her locker. I stood, waiting for her to get her books, then continued on down the hall.
“It’s a foreign exchange program, you know, those ones that take a student in one country then take one from the U.S and switch them for a certain amount of time?” I weaved through the crowd of people, gripping my bag as I did so.
“Oh yeah! No I didn’t get one, why do you ask?” She stopped, and pulled us into a nearby closet where we could actually hear each other and not be hit or separated by the flood.
“Well you’re smart so I just guessed.” I stumbled against a mop, almost making Amy fall into a bucket of cleaning solution.
“Nice, just because I’m smart.” She laughed then caught a roll of toilet paper that fell from a shelving unit above her.
“You get what I mean.” I turned, crashed into a broom, tripped over yet another bucket, then tumbled to the door where I re-collected myself and turned the knob.

Australia, present time

The smoothie felt cold as I gulped it down. Refreshing in the heat, but cold enough for me to feel the familiar sensation of a brain freeze. I took in my surroundings through my big glasses, hiding the sun with my hand once in a while.
“Wow! You can really drink, can’t you,” Luke said, patting me on the back and almost making me choke. “Slow down!” He grinned, but I kept drinking. Now that we were here alone, I didn’t know what to say. That kiss had happened so fast, we didn’t talk about it, and what if we never will. I took a couple gulps more then stopped, pulling the straw from my mouth.
“It’s a way to break the silence… I guess.” I looked his way, catching a glimpse of a small shop that had some nice pieces of clothing.
“So the kiss…” He started, still looking straight ahead.
“Lets just not talk about that okay? Not that I’m embarrassed or ashamed, just let’s have a nice afternoon properly getting to know each other.” I looked ahead as well, contemplating what I had just said.
“Let’s.” I felt his arm through mine and like that we were hooked, and he had no issue with it. No boy in New York would ever be caught dead arm and arm with a girl they weren’t affiliated with family wise. At that point I could basically see us skipping down the street, a smile plastered on his face and a skip in his step, arm and arm with the girl he loves. Charming, isn’t it?

**Seattle, WA, 1 year before the Australia trip**

“My God you can’t just deal with stuff can you?” James paced up and down his living room floor. I worriedly looked him to the door. I wasn’t too far… I could make it. His face was turning red and his fists clenched every step.

“Look, what you did wasn’t cool man,” I tried to keep myself calm and controlled when really my thoughts were in over drive. Why had I ever gotten into this situation? What were my options on a way out?

“Don’t call me man, I am your boyfriend.” I could tell he was going to burst at the seams any moment now and I was ready. I had it planned out in my head.

“I don’t know about that.” I looked at my hands, intertwining with each other, turning red as I furiously rubbed them.

“You can’t be serious, we are FINE.” He loomed over me as I sat on his leather couch, watching my every move and I couldn’t take it.

“Judging by your tone we don’t seem like a “Happy Couple”.” I said as I sprang up from the seat. I straightened my back and adjusted my shoulders to look as big as I could. He stepped back a little to give me my space but didn’t back down. It was on.

“I’m so sick of your CRAP! All your drunken days where you try to make a move, or the parties, or your pot addiction, what is wrong with you? THAT’S WHAT’S WRONG WITH YOU! And I’m done with it.” I looked him dead in the eye now; my hands still red but with anger, not worry.

**Australia, present time**

We sprawled out on the sand, the sun washed across the water, our smoothies long gone.

“You know there’s sharks in these waters.” Luke said, digging his feet in the sand.

“You know Australia is the deadliest place in the world?” I replied.

“You must be pretty brave.” he commented.
I smirked. Me, brave? Please, the deadliest thing I have had to deal with is the homeless people in town and my ex-boyfriend when he’s in one of his “moods”.

“So is this the perfect date you always imagined?” He continued.

“Ha. There is no such thing as a perfect date or a perfect relationship or even a perfect life.” I continued to gaze out, my thoughts still wondering to that day.

“So who hurt you?” he pressed.

I didn’t even bother to answer that.

“Her name was Jolie,” Luke said when he got the message. “She broke my heart. But it was for the better I guess.” Now if this were a prank or a movie set or some gushy love tale I would truly buy into it, but as he scooted closer I had this feeling. A mixture of desire, love, perfection, and fear. I would not let myself fall into another boy’s arms until I knew the truth about him.


**Australia, present time**

“Is that Sydney over there?” I pointed past the fires and the people huddled around them. Lights in the distance gave off an eerie glow, and I could almost make out the shape of the giant stadium on the coast, the white tarp sails aglow.

“Yeah. We aren’t far actually. My family would take Savannah and me there for concerts. That was before Eva and Isabel were born. I love them, but ever since Eva, we haven’t had the money to do “luxury” stuff like that.” Luke turned to a fire pit near us that was not in use then said, “I’ll be back.” And left. Luke had never talked about Savannah to me, but I knew her well. She is the person I was exchanged with. I knew that it was a sore subject; the Abbey’s barely having enough money to support a family of six. They say that Eva was a little gift that Mrs. Abbey thought she could never have another child, but there she is, live and well.

“Hey. I’ve been calling you.” Luke said as he took my hand and pulled me to my feet.

“Sorry, I was spacing.” I followed him to the campfire that was now blazing in the dark night.

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I woke up with the T.V blasting out the news. I gradually sat up, groggy headed and hurting from the night before and began to notice where I was. I was laid out on the couch
wearing last night’s cloths, with a blanket draped over me. Mr. Abbey, sitting in his cozy chair, was immersed in some “Breaking News” as the anchorman had announced. Isabel and Eva were content on the floor playing with their dolls.

“Finally!” Mrs. Abbey exclaimed while cleaning dishes and flipping pancakes.

“It’s about time you got up.” She glanced over her shoulder, a smile plastered on her face.

“Did I miss breakfast?” I slid my legs out from under the covers then proceeded to the kitchen.

“Yes darling, but I am making you pancakes.”

“Thank you.” I continued to rub my forehead, trying to recall last night’s events.

“Oh, and Luke is outside doing some chores. He said when you wake up he wants to talk.” She winked at the last sentence, flipping a pancake. I pushed my chair back then left the house. It was a cooler morning with clouds in the distance threatening of rain. The cows had already been let out for the day, the chickens fed, and the donkey’s stall cleaned, I found as I walked into the barn. I sat on a pile of straw near by to think of my conflicting emotions, before dozing off.

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CRACK! Lighting hit the world as thunder pierced the sky. I shudder from the significant drop in temperature in the past hour. This was a side of Australia that I had yet to experience. The barn doors were partially shut, but I could still see out to the land beyond, but still be protected from the gusting wind rattling the old structure. I snuggled into the hay to stay warm and continued to watch the sky. Rain began to fall and soon it was down pour and the smell of spring and new life filtered through the crack. It brought me home to the warm dribbling rains that we seemed to have a lot of.

“It seems I will be here a while,” I said to myself. I gripped the ladder leading up to the rafters and started to climb. At the top I found only old feed and some grain. My hope fading, I fished around to try to find a blanket or some other material to cover myself with. Peering back down I scanned the floor for a jacket in desperation. It was beginning to get very cold and I was considering running the half-mile back to the house. The Abbeys might not have been wealthy, but they inherited a fair amount of land. My trip was coming to an end, me only having the rest of today and tomorrow. I wasn’t sad, or mad, or really worried. I was afraid. Afraid of what will happen next. Afraid of what might happen or has happened
while I was gone. Afraid of the fact that I have to leave a place that contains the one person that I actually feel comfortable with. That one person I can truly trust.

“I heard you were looking for me.” Luke, soaked from head to toe, slipped in between the two doors.

“Oh, Hi.” The rain still raged on as it gave life to the dead patches of grass. This was good, I told myself. Everything else is living, can’t I? But when he stepped closer I felt as though I would be sick. I trusted him, he was that person, but I can’t be around him knowing it will end so soon.

“All I get is an ‘Oh, hi’! I ran all the way here.” He glanced around as if he had never entered this barn.

“You never had to do that.” I looked straight at him, trying to see his expression in the dark.

“Well my parents were worried.” He inched ever so closer with each word.

“We both know that wasn’t it. Your parents trust me, and I’m fine. I was just going to wait out the storm,” I peered behind him to look at the weather beyond. “And it looks like it will pass over soon.”

“You’re tense. What’s wrong?” Luke was looking at me now, full in the face, with his deep blue eyes that told of hard times, nothing that I have truly experienced. But I have a bad background just like everyone else.

“You know I’m leaving tomorrow. This will end.” I slumped onto the straw pile and awaited his response.

“Yeah it will. But that’s only if we let it.” I opened my mouth to argue, to say that it will end, that this was just a thing. But soon Luke had grabbed my hands and yanked me up out of my bad mood and my worries. Out of time. And as we danced, swishing from side to side, the thought that nothing could be perfect disappeared.