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"Fresh, witty, and utterly romantic." —Ali Hazelwood



# You, Again

*A Novel*

KATE GOLDBECK



PRAISE FOR

## *You, Again*

“Fresh, witty, and utterly romantic, this is the deliciously offbeat modern reimagining of *When Harry Met Sally* I never knew I needed. Kate Goldbeck is an absolute star!”

—ALI HAZELWOOD, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Love Hypothesis*

“This is a romance sung in perfect pitch! A spectacular debut!”

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“The humor is sharp, the dialogue is equal parts poignant and fun, and the romance will make you giddy.”

—TARAH DEWITT, author of *Funny Feelings*

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"EXCUSE ME, SIR?" ARI STANDS her ground, feet shoulder-width apart, on the sidewalk in front of the Brooklyn Museum. "I know that someone who waited ten minutes for a six-dollar cold brew has the time to stop and talk to me about protecting the second-largest bobcat habitat in New Jersey."

Always best to start with a provocation. None of that "do you have a moment?" crap. No pedestrian in this city has "a moment" for a canvasser.

The tall man in sunglasses, expensive jeans, and a dark sweater—slightly hunched from the weight of a large backpack—slows down, not quite to a full stop. He glances at her neon vest and binder, realizing his mistake a half-second too late.

"I'm on a fucking call!" he snaps, angling his body to route around her.

It's fine. Ari is used to people faking calls to avoid engaging with her. She takes a step to the right, blocking his path again. She needs one more donation to make quota, so Tall Sweater Nightmare Man can give her twenty seconds to make the case for the bobcats.

"Can I have a sip?" She reaches toward his cold brew cup with a minimalist Blue Bottle logo. "I've had a super long day out here." This trick—passed down from Gabe, her coworker-with-benefits—works about twenty percent of the time, which is a phenomenal success rate in the business of pestering strangers for (no) fun and (little) profit.

"Un-fucking-believable!" He lifts the cup out of her reach and jaywalks across Eastern Parkway, turning his head to look back at her and scowl.

Or maybe to ensure she's not following him.

When Gabe told their improv class about the "lucrative opportunities" with ProActivate, he'd assured them that they'd become accustomed to constant brush-offs, the lack of eye contact, the utter rejection. "It's good practice for comedy," he'd said. "And it pays better."

Everything pays better than comedy.

But at least onstage you can flop in front of dozens of people at once. Ten efficient minutes of agony. On the street, it's like extending your hand every

thirty seconds and getting one of those extra-painful envelope paper cuts in return.

*Something, something...the definition of insanity.*

Ostensibly, Ari moved to New York to pursue comedy. When she met Gabe, one of the charismatic leaders of the sketch comedy theater where Ari had planted her flag four months ago, he'd spun tales of casting agents frequenting open mics and late-night encounters with *Daily Show* writers. He'd become a hero and a crush.

What Gabe neglected to mention is that most of those encounters occurred while he worked the register at the noodle place down the block from the studio.

On the drizzly walk home, she keeps an eye out for one last chance to make her donation quota. The woman with the promotional umbrella, letting her Yorkie pee on a flower bed? The stocky man with a gingery beard and thick-frame glasses, waiting in the doorway of a bar on Washington Avenue? But neither feels likely. Resigned, Ari turns to head toward home.

When she responded to Natalie's posting on Craigslist, looking for someone to sublet the "cozy" second bedroom in her "Prospect Heights-adjacent" apartment, Ari quickly discovered it was actually a twenty-five-minute walk from Prospect Heights. "The room is technically considered a closet," Nat had explained when Ari came to look at it, "but there's already a lofted twin bed in there and a desk would totally fit."

The desk didn't fit. But living with Natalie was definitely preferable to Ari's last living situation, which was a futon in a friend's cousin's living room.

Especially tonight. Natalie spent the weekend in the Hamptons and she won't be back until late. The apartment will be luxuriously empty: the perfect opportunity for Ari to use her noisiest vibrator.

That was the plan, anyway.

"Guess who met quota standing outside Whole Paycheck?" Gabe is leaning against the front door to her building, under the awning, just out of the rain. He has the classic good looks of an Eddie Bauer catalog model or



someone who poses for stock photos, with his wavy-but-coiffed hair and twinkling brown eyes. “Like shooting fish in a barrel. How’d you do?”

Gabe pushes off the brick wall, his neon ProActivate vest tucked into the back pocket of his jeans. He’s always a big hit with the leashes-and-strollers crowd.

“One short,” Ari replies, fishing her keys out of her pocket.

“Bummer.” He holds up a Blu-ray of *Inception*. “Wanna finish it?”

It’s a flimsy pretense. They’ve been “watching” *Inception* for the last three weeks, in fourteen-minute increments. Last time, they’d paused after a particularly horny round of “Fuck, Marry, Kill.” (Ari: Hardy, Watanabe, Gordon-Levitt. Gabe: Cotillard, Murphy, DiCaprio.)

“Natalie’s out,” Ari says, forcing her key into the lock. “I was planning on —”

“Perfect.” He holds the door open. “I have a date in Boerum Hill later.”

When they get in the apartment, Gabe pulls off his shirt before Ari gets the disc in Natalie’s Blu-ray player.

It’s convenient, this thing with Gabe. He’s easygoing, open to trying new stuff. Proficient at undoing her bra with one hand. They both want sex and to *not* be boyfriend-girlfriend in equal amounts. He’s the first man Ari’s been with who doesn’t take it as a huge personal failing if she introduces a vibrator into the equation.

And after dealing with face-to-face rejection all day, it’s nice to be *wanted*.

At 1:06:47 into the movie and two pairs of underwear on the floor, the intercom buzzes in three shrill bursts.

“Did you order takeout?” Gabe asks, breathing hard. He flops back onto the sofa. “A sandwich actually sounds amazing right now.”

“How would I have done that?” Ari sits up. “With my third hand?” Two more buzzes trill through the apartment, followed by one sustained buzz.

Ari rolls off the sagging couch and stumbles to the intercom. She punches the TALK button: “Yeah?”

The response is a garbled mix of static, a low voice, “food,” and “Natalie.”

“Buzzer’s broken,” she says. “I’ll come down.” Ari tugs her tank top over her head. “Natalie orders these macrobiotic meals,” she tells Gabe, who’s already back on his phone. “Must be the delivery guy.” She picks his boxers up off the rug, scanning the floor. “Crap. Where did my underwear go?”

“Underwear is overrated.” Gabe heaves himself off the couch. “I’m gonna jump in the shower.”

Ari pulls on his boxers, shoves her feet into her sneakers, and jogs down the stairs to grab the meals from the delivery guy.

When she reaches the ground floor, she sees a hulking shadow through the window at the top of the heavy door at the entryway. But as she begins to open the door, the shadow takes on a familiar shape.

Tall Sweater Nightmare Man is standing under her awning, holding a reusable shopping bag of produce that looks like an eighteenth-century Dutch still life.

He’s pale and lanky—mid-twenties?—with dark hair and a longish face that’s oddly proportioned.

But not in a bad way.

His eyes move back and forth across the slice of her face that’s visible between the frame and the door.

Ari clears her throat. “Can I help you?”

He looks confused, but doesn’t answer.

“Are you here to tell me about your Lord and savior Jesus Christ?”

“I’m Jewish.” He peeks over her shoulder. “Are you Natalie’s roommate?”

He smells like expensive botanical aftershave.

“Maybe,” she says, raising an eyebrow. “Are these her gluten-free paleo meals?”

“This is olive oil–poached cod with mussels, orange, and chorizo,” he says, shifting his weight impatiently. “Did Natalie not mention I was coming?”

As if on cue, Ari’s phone chirps multiple times.

NAT 🍷: need huuuuge favor.

I got my days mixed up.

Josh is supposed to make me dinner tonight

NAT 🍷: the chef.

he's already on his way with all these groceries.

I'm on the earlier Jitney but still running so late

could you let him in? 😞😞

*Shit.*

This is typical Natalie bullshit, and she gets away with it because she has luminous skin and this amazing laugh and Ari has a crush on her in a way that's completely different from her occasional horny Gabe feelings. Namely, an inability to say "no."

"Wait, who are you?" Ari holds the phone screen to her chest, shielding it from his view.

"I'm Josh. Natalie's boyfriend." He doesn't phrase it in the form of a question. It's just a statement. A fact.

Ari spits back a fact of her own: "Nat doesn't have a boyfriend."



"YES, SHE *DOES*," he says with the confidence of someone who believes it to be true. Basically. "Me."

It's nearly imperceptible, but the roommate's brow wrinkles at the word *boyfriend*. Josh prides himself on noticing the details other people miss.

According to his schedule, in eight minutes Natalie should be sipping a glass of Sancerre, watching him supreme oranges with his Shun Dual Core Kiritsuke knife.

Instead, he's staring at a pink-haired stranger in men's underwear and a faded Obama HOPE T-shirt with the sleeves cut off.

"Nat's not here. She's running late," she says, not opening the door any farther. "I can put the food in the fridge. There's a bar down the block where you could hang out till she gets home."

Seconds of wasted time tick away in his brain, growing louder. Standing in the hallway, holding one hundred and seventy dollars' worth of high-end perishable groceries, he considers abandoning the plan. Calling an Uber. Rescheduling for another evening when all the elements of the concept can come together seamlessly.

But that would be failure.

"Absolutely not," he says. "This requires thirty minutes of prep plus fifty minutes cooking time. I need to get started now. And it's raining."

Tonight, after the mousse au citron, Josh Kestenberg and Natalie Ferrer-Hodges will transition from the confusing messiness of *casually dating-question mark* to *full-fledged relationship-period*.

*Exclamation point.*

No, *period*. More tasteful.

"If I do you this favor and let you in—"

"'Favor'?"

"—then you're going to atone for your rudeness earlier today and help me make my quota." The corner of her mouth tugs into the tiniest possible grin but her eyes are not smiling. A little dimple forms on the left side of her cheek. "I'll need a forty-dollar donation. I take credit cards."

"What the hell are you talking about?" It's not often that Josh feels three steps behind.

"Glad you finally asked! With the support of wildlife lovers like you, the Nature Conservancy is establishing 'Bobcat Alley,' a protected greenbelt



where native wild felines can roam and—”

“That was *you*?” Josh sets the grocery bag down on the stoop.

“Un-*fucking*-believable, right?” There’s a full Cheshire cat grin on her face now. Nothing coy about it.

“You’re extorting me?” He steps forward, towering over her. “Is this some kind of scam you pull?”

“Yes, I pretend to live in apartments all over Brooklyn in order to guilt my roommate’s angry trust-fund dates into making recurring charitable donations.” *Recurring?* Fantastic, he’ll be on a mailing list for the rest of his life. “Do you want to hear the talking points about the bobcats?”

“No.”

“Thank you for helping to build a future where bobcats thrive,” she recites by rote. She opens the door wider, letting him follow her into the building’s vestibule. “This is like the cold open of a *Law & Order* episode, letting a strange man into my apartment. You could tie me up with an extension cord and steal our laptops or something. But now you’ll be the last name on my donor log, so if I go missing, you’ll be the first suspect.” She stops for a breath at the foot of the stairs. “I’m Ari.”

“Josh Kestenberg.” His hand twitches in an automatic handshake response but he curbs the instinct. “I have a lot of prep to do, so you’ll have to tie yourself up with the extension cord.”

“Arianna Sloane,” she adds, like she gets extra credit for also having a surname. “And don’t threaten me with a good time.” She gestures at the stairs. “You first. I don’t want you staring at my ass the entire way up to the third floor.”

Josh rolls his eyes and starts to haul the bags up the first flight. As he passes her, he smells cheap weed that reminds him of his whiny vegan classmates in his anthropology seminars at Stanford. Josh takes the stairs two at a time, hoping to get far enough ahead of her to make further interaction impossible, but she’s right behind him.

“If you’re a cook,” she says, “shouldn’t you be at work right now?”

“I’m a *chef*. I spent the last two years in Europe. I develop recipes.” He’d freelanced at *Bon Appétit* on two occasions, thank you very much. “I just got back to New York.”

“I don’t know if I’ve seen Nat consume anything other than paleo bowls and Huel shakes,” Ari says.

“She hasn’t tried my food yet.”

“How long have you two been ‘together’? I mean, you’re a cook—”

“Chef.”

“—and you’ve never made her a meal; don’t you think that’s a little weird?”

“No.” He picks up the pace, like he’s trying to out-climb the accusation. *Is it weird?* “We’ve been seeing each other for six weeks.”

“Does six weeks of dating mean a relationship? I hooked up with this guy, Nico, for three semesters and he was *not* my boyfriend. His name is still in my phone with three eggplant emojis, though.”

Josh doesn’t reply. She seems to be feeding off his answers, so it’s best to cut off her supply. He’s also feeling slightly winded.

“How is she labeled in your contacts?” she continues. “As ‘girlfriend’? Is there a heart emoji next to her name?”

“No.” Good fucking grief, this woman probably makes conversation with cab drivers and cashiers. “I don’t need cartoon symbols to jog my memory about our relationship.”

Why is it nearly impossible to meet interesting single women but so easy to attract people who have the uncanny ability to point out the small details that he’s been consciously burying in his own mind?

When they reach the third floor, Josh turns to face her.

“Natalie never mentioned me?” he asks. It slips out, needy. Embarrassing.

“Let me think.” Ari fumbles with her keys. “Are you the guy with the really nice bathroom with the dual shower heads?”

“No?” *What guy with the—*

“Oh! Were you Mr. September in last year’s Babes of Bushwick calendar?” She looks him up and down.

“I don’t know what—”

Ari forces the apartment door open with her hip.

Josh shakes off her disorienting questions; she’s clearly just trying to fuck with him. He takes a cautious step into the living room, avoiding a pile of shoes by the door. He’s always hosted Natalie at his apartment, where he doesn’t have to account for unknown variables: surfaces that haven’t been properly wiped or hostile-yet-chatty roommates.

Out of the corner of his eye, he sees a scrap of lacy trim peeking out from under the couch.

Ari seems to follow his gaze. “*There* they are.”

Before she can retrieve them, an interior door swings open. A shirtless man bursts out, surrounded by a cloud of steam, belting a show tune. “Bring *him hooooome! Briiing* him home!” He pauses his overwrought serenade and nods at Josh, friendly and completely unbothered by his presence. “Hey, man.”

Ari makes no attempt to introduce them.

“Do I get my boxers back?” the guy asks her. “Actually, never mind, I gotta run.” Humming the tune with heavy vibrato, he pulls a T-shirt over his head. “Call me in an hour in case I need a rescue?”

“’Kay,” she responds, barely looking up. She’s riffling through her Nature Conservancy binder. “Enjoy.”

Josh watches him leave without kissing Ari goodbye.

As soon as the door slams shut, Ari appears at Josh’s left side, holding out her donation binder and a ballpoint pen.

After he sets down his bags and prints his credit card number in neat block letters, Ari gestures grandly and announces, “This is the kitchen. Don’t burn the apartment down.”

Josh tilts his head, looking past her. “A fucking electric stove?”

Ari glances at the aging unit that doesn’t even have a vent hood. “What’s wrong with it?”

“There’s no heat control, no subtlety, no flame. It’s either scalding or lukewarm.”

“I’m sure you’ll figure it out.” She shrugs. “Pretend you’re on one of those cooking competition shows where you have to start your own fire.”

He narrows his eyes at her and begins digging in his backpack, removing his supplies. There’s barely enough room on the granite-patterned vinyl counter to organize the ingredients and the equipment he’s brought. When he looks up, he’s surprised to see Natalie’s roommate opening the magnet-covered refrigerator door. He’d assumed she would make herself scarce.

“I’m also making dinner,” Ari explains, bending at the waist to grab a box of MorningStar Farms veggie corn dogs out of the freezer drawer below.

“You have a little bit of an accent when you’re ranting about appliances,” she says, setting two corn dogs on a plate. “Did you grow up here?”

“Upper West Side.”

She looks thoughtful as she shuts the microwave door. “Maybe it’s the transplant in me, but I’ve always been jealous of the weird accent. I like it.”

He blinks, unsure how to take the—well, it’s not technically a compliment is it?

He removes a crisply folded list of timings from his bag and centers his maple cutting board over a clean white dish towel. With the space back under his control, he can channel his energy into transforming organic carrots into identical batonnets.

For a few minutes, they manage to ignore each other despite the tight confines. Once the carrots look as if they’ve been processed at a tiny lumber mill, Josh places a small kabocha squash on his cutting board and retrieves his cleaver. Overkill, perhaps, but the kabocha has extremely firm skin and he hadn’t wanted to risk struggling with it in front of Natalie. Plus, cleaving anything provides a nice amount of drama. He gives the squash a small *thwack* next to the vine, covers the spine of the cleaver with a towel, and forces it down through the flesh.

“You didn’t mention you were wielding a cleaver when you asked to enter my apartment,” Ari says, removing her dinner from the microwave and



setting it on the counter. “Can I try it?”

He takes a breath, but not so deep as to inhale the aroma of corn dogs.

The automatic response is obviously *no*. He hadn’t planned on audience participation. But if he did hand her the cleaver, what could happen?

She could drop it. Dull the blade. Waste the squash by incompetently hacking away at it. He might need to demonstrate using a rocking motion. She would have to get close to him.

It’s a terrible idea.

To his own surprise Josh nods at the space in front of him. “Stand here. Grip the handle like—*no*, like this,” he says, moving her fingers.

“Are you always this bossy?” she mutters, setting the cleaver through the skin and pushing the blade down, leaning all her weight on it. “I mean, I’m not *not* into that.”

As a rule, Josh doesn’t let other cooks—let alone amateurs—touch his knives. He doesn’t want their grubby fingerprints on his equipment, selecting the tongs when a spoon is needed, sprinkling an unnecessary pinch of salt over his perfectly seasoned protein.

And yet...the way she’s touching something that belongs to him creates this strange, buzzy sensation on the back of his neck.

“I never learned to cook,” she says. She cuts the squash into an array of sizes and wedge shapes that Josh will have to trim in a few minutes. At least she manages not to chop off a fingertip. “I lived with my grandma, and her culinary skills began and ended with the microwave.” Ari rocks forward each time she presses the blade down and Josh is eighty percent certain that she’s not wearing a bra.

He clears his throat. “So you came to New York to work for a pyramid scheme that tricks college students into marketing scams disguised as do-gooder bullshit?”

“I came here to do comedy.” Josh makes a mental note not to ask a follow-up and risk being invited to a terrible open mic. “But I actually *am* an excellent canvasser. I’m very good at finding common ground with strangers.” She looks up from the cutting board. “Except for right now.”

He finds himself analyzing the details of her features. Round, flushed cheeks and a sharp chin, with a lower lip that's significantly fuller than the upper. There's some expression spreading over her face—confusion, if he's being optimistic; kindling annoyance, if he's honest. But he's always been better at arguing than flirting.

Not that he wants to flirt with her.

After a beat, Ari sets down the cleaver and pushes the cutting board toward him. He feels himself exhale.

"Thanks for the lesson." She wipes her hands on a towel and fills a water glass directly from the faucet. Josh makes a mental note to buy Natalie a filter pitcher. "But I guess it's the least you could do after interrupting my evening."

"I interrupted *your* evening?"

"Yes." Ari tucks a bottle of yellow mustard under her arm and returns to the living room, plopping down on the couch. "I had big plans for my night alone."

"But you weren't really by yourself, were you?" He pauses. "If you want privacy you could...go to your room?"

"It's sweltering in there. The window in my room is too small for an air conditioner." She reaches for the remote. "Why should I have to go anywhere? This is *my* apartment."



"ISN'T IT NATALIE'S apartment?" Josh grabs the handle of the saucepan and shakes it around. "Technically?"

“I pay half the rent,” Ari says, seething at the TV, unpauseing the movie from where she and Gabe left off, dipping a corn dog into a giant puddle of mustard.

A couple weeks ago, she had just started *The Grand Budapest Hotel* when Natalie got home from some underground supper club, wine-drunk but not quite sleepy. Ari pretended to pay attention to the art direction, while breathing in the subtle scent of the mysterious product that makes Natalie’s hair shiny and soft. She touched Ari’s thigh every time she laughed. If making someone laugh is the best feeling in the world, making someone laugh *while they’re touching your thigh* is like...the best feeling in the world plus a tiny hit of ecstasy. The arm touch was almost better than the orgasm Nat gave her ten minutes later.

Almost.

There have been two-and-a-half repeat performances of “movie night,” after which they each retreated to their separate rooms to sleep. Or, in Ari’s case, lie in her rickety lofted twin bed with a goofy smile on her face, staring at the remnants of some previous tenant’s glow-in-the-dark stars on the ceiling. Perhaps she’d stumbled on the perfect sexual relationship: reasonably satisfying and free of emotional turmoil.

But she hadn’t met any of Natalie’s dates until now. Why has Nat automatically granted this guy “boyfriend” status, while Ari is an uncredited cameo? What makes him lovable (seriously, *how?*) and Ari merely fuckable?

The sound of a sharp blade against the wooden cutting board resumes behind her, in steady, exacting strikes, like a constant audio reminder of his presence in her space. His assumptions. His opinions.

“So you’ve never even cooked Natalie breakfast?”

“We go out,” he replies, over the chopping. “Why? Do you usually treat your dates to Red Bull and Pop-Tarts when they finally roll out of bed?”

She lets out something between a laugh and a snort. “I’m long gone by the time they wake up.”

There’s a slight hiccup to the rhythm of his knife strokes. “What do you mean? You just get up and leave?”

“I like to wake up in my own bed,” she explains, polishing off the second corn dog. “It’s simpler.”

“Ah.” He resumes his knife work with a dramatic eye roll. “A true romantic.”

“You think it’s romantic sharing a bed with a stranger?” Ari stands up and walks her plate to the sink. “Either you wake up in a weird place in the morning or you have to kick someone out of your apartment. Anyway, I don’t participate in the romance industrial complex.” She scrubs the dish with enough vigor to leave scratches. “It’s a distraction that keeps women dependent on men for validation.” Maybe that statement is troublingly heteronormative but Josh is probably troublingly heteronormative, too.

She watches Josh place a pat of butter in a large pot on the stove. Upon closer inspection, he has the type of face that photos get wrong: a prominent brow, weak chin, serious dark eyes, and a long nose. His profile could’ve been chiseled into marble twenty-five hundred years ago. Handsome from some angles, harsh from others. The sort of person you meet once in passing but remember five years later.

Ari doesn’t have that *thing*—that distinctive quality. People glance at her and decide there’s someone more interesting to her left. Even dying her hair an outrageous shade of pink didn’t help her stand out in this city. After attending just one festival in McCarren Park, she concluded that at least one fifth of all women in Brooklyn also have pink hair.

“Did you form these opinions based on life experience?” He fiddles with the knob on the dreaded electric stove, lowering the heat. “Or a handful of readings from Intro to Women’s Studies?”

“Are you always this condescending?”

“Are you always this naïve?” He’s still crouched down, at eye level with the stove top.

She reaches across him for a dish towel, blocking his access to the stove. “It’s ‘naïve’ to buy into the patriarchal myth of monogamy.”

“The patriarchal *myth*?” He grabs the towel from the hook on the lower cabinet door and thrusts it in her direction. “Move so I don’t scorch my Le