

"PURE, STEAMY FUN, AND THE PERFECT SUMMER READ!" —ALI HAZELWOOD

SUMMER

IN
THE



CITY

A NOVEL

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ALEX ASTER

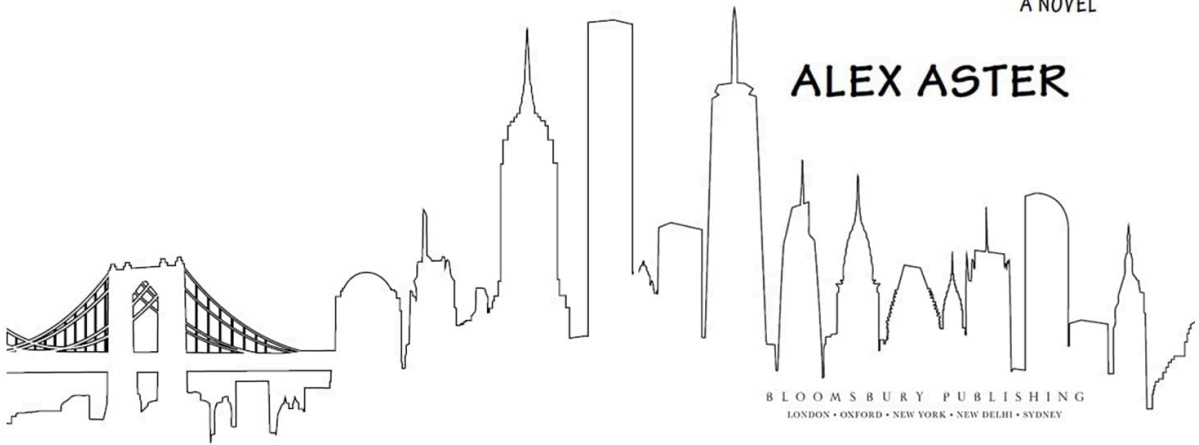
SUMMER IN THE CITY

For my love—you make every day feel like summer

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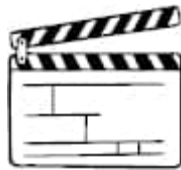
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CONTENTS

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31

Acknowledgments
A Note on the Author

1



IN NEW YORK CITY, EVERY WEEKEND IS A CHANCE TO LIVE IN A MOVIE. DRINKS on a rooftop in the shadow of a skyline cut like it was custom-made for you, glittering just for that highly saturated and Facetuned-within-an-inch-of-itself picture you're about to post. Dinner seated next to a celebrity who doesn't touch any of their food and loudly discusses gossip about a movie star that might make you choke on your gin and tonic. A party with drugs that look like pieces of candy, spread across a marble table in a penthouse that has back rooms for the staff and a Pilates studio as big as your studio apartment.

Unless, of course, you're like me, and a perfect Friday night looks less like mooching your way into the periphery of a table at Marquee, and more like watching Netflix in some ratty shirt that once belonged to your college roommate's ex-boyfriend. A shirt you might have stolen in one of your weaker moments, because you kind of pined for him as much as you pine for that weekly pint of Ben & Jerry's you *swear* you're only going to have a few scoops of, truly believing in your self-control, right up until the spoon bluntly hits the cardboard at the bottom.

"Sorry!"

I suck in my breath like I've been sucker punched, because some girl wearing stilettos with heels the size of knitting needles just stepped on my toe.

I had my wisdom teeth taken out without anesthetic by a dental student my mother really shouldn't have trusted.

This hurts more.

Just as I'm considering an intelligible string of profanities and wondering if it's possible to press charges against a heel, a gentle hand comes down on my shoulder.

Penelope, my best friend and former college roommate with the great taste in guys but not so great taste in the idea of a good night, sighs, looking down at me with the pitying look of a near-professional partier staring down a newbie. "That's why you don't wear open-toed heels to a club, Elle."

Taking a deep breath, my toe throbbing like a heart going into cardiac arrest, I say, "I don't *have* other heels. And I've never been to a club."

Penelope stares at me for a solid ten seconds before frowning. "You know, I can't decide which of those statements is more tragic."

I give her a look. "We've been here nearly two hours. Soon, I'll turn into a pumpkin. You have fifteen more minutes."

The only way I let Penelope drag me away from the comfort of my foams-like-a-cappuccino comforter was the promise that we would be here an hour, tops, and that we would get fries at the place around the corner that sells them only after midnight. Also, because tonight was supposed to be tamer. Some important business magazine rented the club out to celebrate the companies that made its list of Next Big Exits. Penelope's trying to network with a legendary VC who funds the company at the top of the list, Atomic.

It's technically a work outing.

"Fine, fine." She takes my hand and latches it to the corner of the bar, a captain tying a boat to a dock. The marble is as sticky as you would imagine. "Stay here," she orders. Then she seamlessly braids herself within the crowd with the ease of someone who has memorized the mazes of New York City's dark, sweaty, sticky underground.

I don't listen. There's a couple next to me that's grinding so hard, I wonder if their clothes will just burn away from the friction, escalating into full-on intercourse. And if that would be considered strange in a place like this. I try to make myself as small as I can, while shielding my body, elbows tucked in tight, before diving headfirst into the mess in a desperate attempt to find the bathroom to inspect the damage done to my foot.

As quickly as I'm sucked in, I'm spit out of the crowd, deposited into a far quieter corner of the club.

Quieter—but not much emptier.

There's a line snaking out of the single bathroom.

Single. I frown. Surely a club of this size has more than *one*.

I find a bouncer standing against the wall, scanning the club with the diligence of a Secret Service agent.

"Um, excuse me?" I poke an arm wider than my head. It takes three pokes for the giant to even register my presence. When he does, his eyes narrow, inspecting me like I might be in violation of some club rule.

Do clubs have rules?

Have I broken one in speaking to him?

I swallow. "Is—is there just one?" I ask, pointing toward the bathroom.

He grunts and nods, and I know how to take a hint to get out of a person's general vicinity, so I back away, back toward the line.

After five minutes, when it hasn't moved in the slightest, I decide to use my phone's light to study my toe.

It's fine. Which really is just a testament to my toe, because I was expecting a hole in it, or at least a broken nail.

Satisfied that I still have all my digits, I sigh and look at the time. Eight minutes. Penelope has eight minutes.

"Having fun?"

The voice comes from so far above me, I'm forced to look up—and up and up—to see the source. Another bouncer. Taller than the other one, decked out in the same all black.

I blink.

Is having fun a rule?

I internally roll my eyes at myself. *Don't be stupid, Elle.*

Though . . . maybe not so stupid. I can imagine exclusive clubs like these, the ones with a block-long line of gorgeous people in packs waiting in the rain to get in, would kick someone out just for *looking* like they weren't having fun. Wouldn't want a sourpuss ruining the mood, right? Maybe the magazine has strict orders to keep the ambience pleasant for all the entrepreneurs in their forties and fifties littering the dance floor, hiding their wedding bands in their pockets?

I shrug inwardly. Who cares? I'm leaving anyway—I glance down at my phone—in seven minutes.

So, I tell the truth. "No."

He raises an eyebrow. He glances around at the club, then at me, looking genuinely confused. "No?"

Do I look like the type of person who thinks all of this—the floor sticky with alcohol, my long dark hair wet with someone's drink it accidentally

dipped into, sweat sliding down the middle of my chest from all the proximity—is *fun*?

Interesting. The idea I managed to blend into this crowd is a little . . . thrilling? This completely foreign, wild—

The bouncer is still frowning down at me.

I sigh. “Look, if you’re going to kick me out, just do it already. Save the judgment.”

His frown deepens. “Kick you out?”

“Yeah.” I wave him up and down. “Aren’t you, like, a bouncer?”

“You think I work here?”

Now, it’s my turn to frown. “You don’t?”

His eyes glisten with something. Excitement, maybe. He bends down, so close I can smell the mint in his breath. “What gave me away?”

What, is he a secret type of security? Meant to blend in?

Wow, clubs are weird.

I shrug a bit haughtily, slinking further into my role of a New York party person, the type of twenty-five-year-old who talks to guys in dark corners of clubs. “Well, you’re huge, for starters.”

He seems to balk at the word “huge.” I roll my eyes.

“You’re, like, a foot taller than me. In *heels*. And . . .” I motion to his arms and find myself staring. His shoulders are so wide, they look like cliffs. And his arms, his *arms* bulging in his—I clear my throat. “And your outfit. The all black.”

He nods slowly, considering.

“If you’re supposed to be discreet, you should try to blend in more,” I say, high on my own confidence. Now I’m truly playing someone else. Someone who tells total strangers how to do their jobs.

His lips curl into a smile. He dips even lower, until his mouth is nearly at my ear. “Well, between you and me, this is my last night.”

“It is?”

He nods. “And *you* could be more discreet as well.”

My eyebrows come together. “With what?”

He raises a shoulder. “Everyone knows the types of people who come here, to this club, on nights like these. Who mill around the bathroom, where it’s quiet . . . Who come to party with naive tech millionaires.”

I’m genuinely confused now. And strangely intrigued. What kind of person does he think I am?

He continues. “Who wear heels like those”—his gaze travels up my legs —“and a skirt like that.” His eyes trail up my body, and it’s like they’re casting flames. Heat pools in my stomach. I’ve had a couple of drinks—which

might as well have been five, considering the strongest thing I usually drink is Penelope's kombucha—and the attention is even more intoxicating. How long has it been since someone has looked at me like this? How long since I've worn a skirt so short, I'm one wrong move away from showing my underwear?

There's another reason I agreed to go out with Penelope. This is my last night in New York City. Tomorrow, I'll be across the country. For good.

That's why I agreed to wear this outfit, to be out past midnight, to have a last chance at my own movie moment.

His eyes linger on my chest before finally finding mine. And I'm nearly knocked off my precarious heels at the intensity there. Pure want.

Like he's looking for his final chance at a movie moment too.

I'm not sure who moves first—but before I know it, we're in a stairwell. And I'm pressed against a wall. We're both breathing too quickly, my neck is craned up, his down.

And this isn't *me*, and this is a *stranger*, but it's the closest thing to a movie moment I've ever had, so I grasp it and his face, and suddenly, his lips are on mine.

It's a frenzy.

His mouth is hot against my mouth, my neck, my chest, and then he's lifting me, with an ease that makes me breathless, and my legs are wrapped around his middle. His giant hands are gripping my ass, and he's driving his hips into mine, and I'm seeing stars.

One of his hands is beneath my shirt. His rough fingertips gently trace the lace of my bra, then his thumb slips under it, right across—

I pull back, and it's like I've sobered up a bit in the last few moments. Or maybe it's the fact that the light here is brighter than in the club.

Because I can actually see him now, and he's *perfect*. Piercing green eyes. Dark hair that's a little too long, so it curls around his ears. Cheekbones like the panes of an emerald-cut diamond. Probably one of those models who work at clubs to pay their rent. Maybe it's his last night because he's finally booked something good.

"What do you want?" he demands, deep voice knocking me out of my thoughts.

Still breathless, I manage to say, "What?"

He's breathless too, but his eyes are surprisingly clear as they pin me in place. His hand trails back down my stomach, calluses scraping, making me shiver. "I want to take you home," he says very carefully, like he's making sure I understand every word coming out of his mouth. "What can I do to make that happen?"

He studies my body again, like he can't help himself. I stare too and see that my skirt is just a bundle of fabric around my middle. I gasp and meet his eyes again. He's waiting for my answer, looking at me so closely it's like he's trying to see through me.

"What. Do. You. Want?"

My heels clank as I unlock my legs, landing back on my own two feet, nearly falling over in the process. He steadies me, but I shove away his help. "What do you mean, *what do I want?*"

He shrugs a shoulder. "Everyone wants something." He looks unfazed by the anger building in my expression. "I want you." He motions toward himself. "Am I enough for you? Or . . . is there something else?"

For a moment I'm shocked by his words. I almost want to laugh.

Then I'm furious.

"You want to *pay* me?"

He gives me a look. "No. I don't pay for sex. But"—he sighs—"would you like me to take you to dinner? Or a helicopter ride over the city?" He looks completely serious when he says, "That's what you want, right? Why you're here?"

I blink. Though he's basically describing dating, I don't like what he's insinuating. I don't like that he's painting me as wanting anything from him beyond a good time.

I remember his words from before. About what *kind of person I am*. A person who could be enticed into someone's bed because of their money.

"So that's what this is? You think you can buy someone's affection? Take them on a fancy date and woo them into your bed?"

He lifts a shoulder. "I can buy anything I want."

I'm seeing red. *Who does this guy think he is?* "Clearly not," I say, before ripping the door open and walking back into the club.

Movie moment officially over.

The sudden blaring of music is temporarily disarming. I nearly trip in these stupid, *stupid* heels before a hand shoots out and steadies me. Penelope.

"I was looking everywhere for you!" she says, face panicked in a two-minutes-away-from-calling-*Dateline* kind of way. "What were you doing in the *stairwell*—"

The door behind us opens again, and the guy every single part of me was just completely pressed against walks through it.

Her eyebrows travel almost all the way to her hairline. "—with the CEO of Atomic . . . ?"

I blink. Turn slowly in the direction of the towering figure who I can still taste in my mouth. “The *what?*”

He looks unfazed. Raises an eyebrow. “Does that change anything?”

I almost do something I would certainly regret later. Would have, but Penelope takes both of my hands in hers, and all I manage to do is get really close to his face and say, “I hope this tech bubble pops and your stupid start-up dies a slow, *painful* death.”

We leave before we’re escorted out of the party by *actual* bouncers. And it’s only outside, under the lights of New York City at 2:00 a.m., a block away from the French fry place, and far enough from where I left my dignity, that I turn to Penelope and say, “I think that jerk called me a gold digger.”

2



TWO YEARS LATER

“YOU KNOW, IT’S PRETTY EASY NOWADAYS TO SELL A COMPANY FOR BILLIONS of dollars. It’s really not that impressive.”

I’m pressing my phone so tightly against my ear that I can hear Penelope sigh, even past the intercom voice telling me that *baggage and other personal items should not be left unattended*, the kid riding their robot suitcase into the bookshelf a few feet away, and the flight attendant at the closest gate berating passengers for flooding the boarding area before their group has been called.

“Keep telling yourself that, Elle,” Penelope finally says.

It’s been years, and the sight of those green eyes, looking at me from that same business magazine that had hosted that party—on the *cover* this time—still fills me with rage. He didn’t even attempt to look pleasant in the picture, staring down the photographer, and now *me*, with an apathy that hints at having been forced into doing the photo shoot.

Below sits a headline that makes me want to break my phone into tiny shards and completely discredits my ability to curse others into oblivion:

“Atomic Sells to Virion for \$10 Billion.”

“They’re calling him the Billionaire Bachelor,” Penelope continues, while I shove another magazine in front of the whole row of them, erasing him, and walk out of the Hudson News toward my gate. Because apparently, she didn’t get the memo that she’s supposed to hate him as much as I do.

When I tell her so, she scoffs. “We both agree, he’s a jerk. But you’ll never see him again, who cares?”

I care, I want to say, but I already sound pathetic enough for keeping this grudge for so long. So he lied about his identity and made out with me in a stairwell for a few minutes, basically accusing me of being some sort of money-grubber. Big deal.

Yes.

Big. Deal.

“Can we talk about something else?” I snap. “Like, maybe, how much you’ll miss me? How you won’t know what to do with yourself in LA while your best friend is forced back into the perpetual flash mob that is New York City?”

Penelope laughs. “First of all, *you* brought him up. Again,” she mutters, before smartly moving on. “And yes, Elle, I don’t know how I’ll survive these next three months without you. I’m definitely not going to do things you refuse to do, like go to the beach or the boardwalk, or on a hike, or literally anything that involves changing out of sweats.”

I wish we were on FaceTime so she could see the depths of my glare.

“Or . . . hang out with that hot surgeon who wears the scrubs with the drawstrings . . .”

I stop right in the middle of the terminal, earning myself a splash of burning hot coffee on my sleeve, from the person who just ran into me. “He called?”

I can almost see Penelope’s grin, can picture her sitting with her knees to her chest, making a shelf for her chin to rest on. “He didn’t just call . . . he showed up at my house. Said it took him hours to find my address.”

My head rearing back, I blink. “And . . .”

“Yes, Elle, I liked it. You know better than anyone that disturbing behavior is only really disturbing—”

“If you don’t think the guy is attractive. I know, I know. Like Edward watching Bella sleep in *Twilight*.”

Someone at the gate I’ve finally arrived at shoots me a strange look, and I stare them down until they look away.

“Okay, *then* what happened?”

Penelope sighs. “He brought prosciutto and prosecco from the same region of Italy my family is from—he found that information online somewhere too—and used his own set of expensive knives to slice the meat himself!”

I wince. “Okay, don’t take this the wrong way, but are you *sure* he’s not a serial killer?”

“He’s not a serial killer. He’s just committed.”

“Um . . .”

She clicks her tongue. “Don’t worry. I already did a full internet sweep of him. Followed all his past girlfriends with my shadow account. Put a Google Alert for his name. Verified his identity back to middle school—he went to a *really* good one, by the way. You know. All the normal stuff.”

I tilt my head and shift the phone to my other ear. “Okay, are you *sure* you’re not a serial killer?”

The guy is almost certainly not a serial killer, and not just because statistically, there are only about twelve active serial killers at one time (thank you, true crime podcasts that help me fall asleep).

No, I can pretty much guarantee he’s a *truly good guy*, which in LA is to be treated with the care and reverence of encountering an endangered species. Penelope has a habit of attracting the best men. It’s almost uncanny. She says it’s her freckles, they make her seem friendlier. I don’t know what the science on that is.

Whereas most people would have happily run off into the sunset with any of the men Penelope has been with, she allows each only a handful of months before calling it off. She leaves heartbroken men in her wake and never brings them up again.

She’s awful. She once broke up with a guy by Postmating him a giant cookie cake with a sad face on it and RSVP’ing no to his sister’s wedding.

She’s my best friend and I would protect her to the ends of the earth.

“Funny,” Penelope says. “They’re calling your boarding group, Elle. Wishing you a hot seatmate and minimal turbulence!”

Then she’s gone.

And I’m on a plane back to the city I swore I would never return to.

3



SUMMER IN NEW YORK CITY IS A HELLSCAPE.

It's hotter than my hometown in Southern California, and that heat is reflected off two-hundred-foot-tall glorified mirrors that shoot the sun right into your face. All the rich people flee to the Hamptons Friday afternoon like clockwork, and the *really* rich ones don't come back until September, when the heat has fizzled away and it's a comfortable, balmy, practically fall situation.

June is not that.

By the time I haul my suitcases into the building lobby, I'm drenched in sweat. My hair is stringy and stuck to my face, and my light gray lounge set is now dark gray with perspiration.

The doorman does his best not to wince.

"Oh, yes. *Elle*. We've been expecting you. Let me get those."

Before I can half-heartedly insist on carrying them myself, all my things are loaded onto a luggage cart and deposited, with me, into an elevator that's more spacious than the bathroom in my place in LA.

One of the top buttons is pressed.

There are just two units on this entire floor, and I'm about to spend my summer in one of them.

I unlock the door with my phone, already knowing with near certainty that I will get locked out one day because I'm terrible at keeping anything charged, and almost trip over the threshold.

The ceilings are twenty feet tall. Windows eat up the entire back of the room and show the city in a wider crop than I've ever seen it in. There's so *much* of it, unobstructed, and so high above buildings that would normally block the bulk of the skyline from view.

This is insanity.

Everything is relative. We think of things compared with other things. I learned that in a marketing class Penelope roped me into in college. Twenty-five dollars is expensive for lunch, but not for a dress. Two hundred thousand dollars is a lot of money for a wedding, but not for a house.

This apartment is big for an office, for a restaurant.

This is huge for a house *period*, let alone one right in the middle of Manhattan.

My luggage filled up a hefty fraction of the apartment I just left. It's a pathetic heap in this huge living room now.

Who needs this much space? I ask myself as I walk farther inside, feeling smaller and smaller with each step.

It's just not practical. This room alone would need an army of Roombas to keep it clean. I hope that's not a responsibility I'm meant to take on.

House-sitting during renovations. That's it. That's all I signed up for.

Rolling my shoulders and bending over with an impressive—and concerning for twenty-seven—crack, I go straight for my laptop, sticking out of my tote the way a baguette might if I were in some Netflix movie set in Paris. But I'm not in Paris.

Or in a movie.

I'm just writing one.

There's a blank page before me, and I struggle to fill it, flight-tired fingers working overtime to get the words out: small observations, little ideas, kernels I hope will pop into some movie-worthy popcorn. All about a city I hate. A city that smells way worse than I remember.

Right on cue, my phone rings, and I take a deep breath before smoothing my annoyance into a semi-agreeable "Hey, Sarah."

"Elle! Big summer in the city. How's it going so far?"

I stare at the time on the oven. "Um . . . I've been here two hours." And one of those hours was spent in an Uber that smelled like a sandwich was

decomposing under the seat.

She laughs, then sighs wistfully. “Still, the city slips on like a sweater, doesn’t it? So comforting, so fitting.”

“It’s ninety-two degrees right now.”

Sarah laughs again, like I’m the funniest client she has, and not a screenwriter who has a strict no-comedy policy. Then she gets right to business. “So . . . any ideas yet?”

I blink and am very close to repeating that *I’ve only been here two hours*, but Sarah is one of the top agents at CAA, and just like my rule for comedy, I also have a strict no-starving-artist policy.

“Not yet,” I say, turning to look at the city in question through the giant windows. “But . . . something will come to me. It always does.”

“*Always*,” Sarah emphasizes, and it makes my stomach sink.

Because I haven’t written anything meaningful in almost a year, and she has no idea.

Because I have only three more months to write a screenplay that could change my life.

Because I’m supposed to set it in a city I hate. A city I thought I had escaped.

She hangs up, and coffee—I need coffee. For the exact opposite reason people normally need it.

I need it to relax.

I force myself to take my laptop, thinking inspiration might strike between here and the closest Blue Bottle, then make my way out of the apartment, even though I know I look like garbage.

Honestly, in New York City, I *prefer* looking like garbage. Never have I once walked the streets of the city in sweats and been catcalled, or had my ear talked off by a barista, or even been *looked* at. And that’s how I like it. The few times I had to stop by a bodega dressed up after a dinner or meeting, you would have thought I was a dignitary or reality star or Instagram model. The seas of New York parted for me: suddenly, doors were being held open. The guy at the deli counter, who had been certifiably rude to me on every other occasion, didn’t even *recognize* me in a skirt, and I had to keep popping my earphones out and saying “Huh?” because he was trying to make conversation. It’s not even about looks, I’ve decided, because there are thousands of girls more attractive than me in New York. It’s almost as if men see a woman who has decided to dress up and immediately think she’s dressed up for *them*.

The city’s changed in two years. Some stores have been replaced by social media-friendly, pastel-painted cafés. Outdoor seating is apparently a thing

now. I don't recognize the names of any of the healthy fast-casual places that will likely be replaced by another concept in six months, then another, and then another, like some endless trendy reincarnation.

I'm picky with my coffee shops.

It's not about the coffee in most cases (though a smooth espresso certainly helps). It's about the stuff people probably don't care about.

The cups: I like a firm sleeve. I like the lids that have the transformer part that covers the drink spout and looks substantial, like a suitable hat for my drink. One that won't crinkle beneath my mouth or fall off.

The space: I like tables tiny enough that no one will try to share one with me, but big enough to fit my laptop and drink and inevitable pastry.

The pastries: I like baked goods that get sourced from bakeries that don't also supply Panera. I like variety. A single cream-filled doughnut. A flavor-ambiguous muffin. A big, flaky croissant that kind of looks like a crab.

The extras: Throw in toast. Bagels. Granola and yogurt.

I could spend my entire life in a good coffee shop, with just my wallet and laptop. Working in one feels like an indulgence, a college experience I got to keep. One of the best parts of my job is that a revolving door of coffee shops can always be my office.

I don't recognize any of these coffee shop names, so I judge the essence of the shops by the people I see inside them.

The ballet-pink one that has the word "matcha" in the name and has a line of aspiring influencers waiting to take pictures in front of a tiny mural that somehow incorporates both coffee *and* wings? Pass.

The hole-in-the-wall with suited-up Wall Street types and to-go cups I've seen at Costco? No thanks.

Finally, I end up in front of a rickety-looking wooden door. The windows are slightly glazed. I would have thought it was a bar if I hadn't seen a woman who looks a lot like me right now—messy bun, sweats, earphones in, laptop under her armpit—walk out eating the crème de la crème of coffee shop croissants: an almond one, dusted with sugar.

It's been the kind of day I'm going to try very hard to forget, but the moment I walk inside this place, I feel . . . at peace. It smells like coffee, cream, and sugar and perfectly steeped tea. There are a dozen tables sprinkled throughout a space with high ceilings and a *skylight*, and there are even couches and a pastry display.

I'm home. I've officially found the coffee shop I'm about to haunt for the next three months and hope they don't post a picture of me on the door with an X for how much I'm going to monopolize one of their tables.