

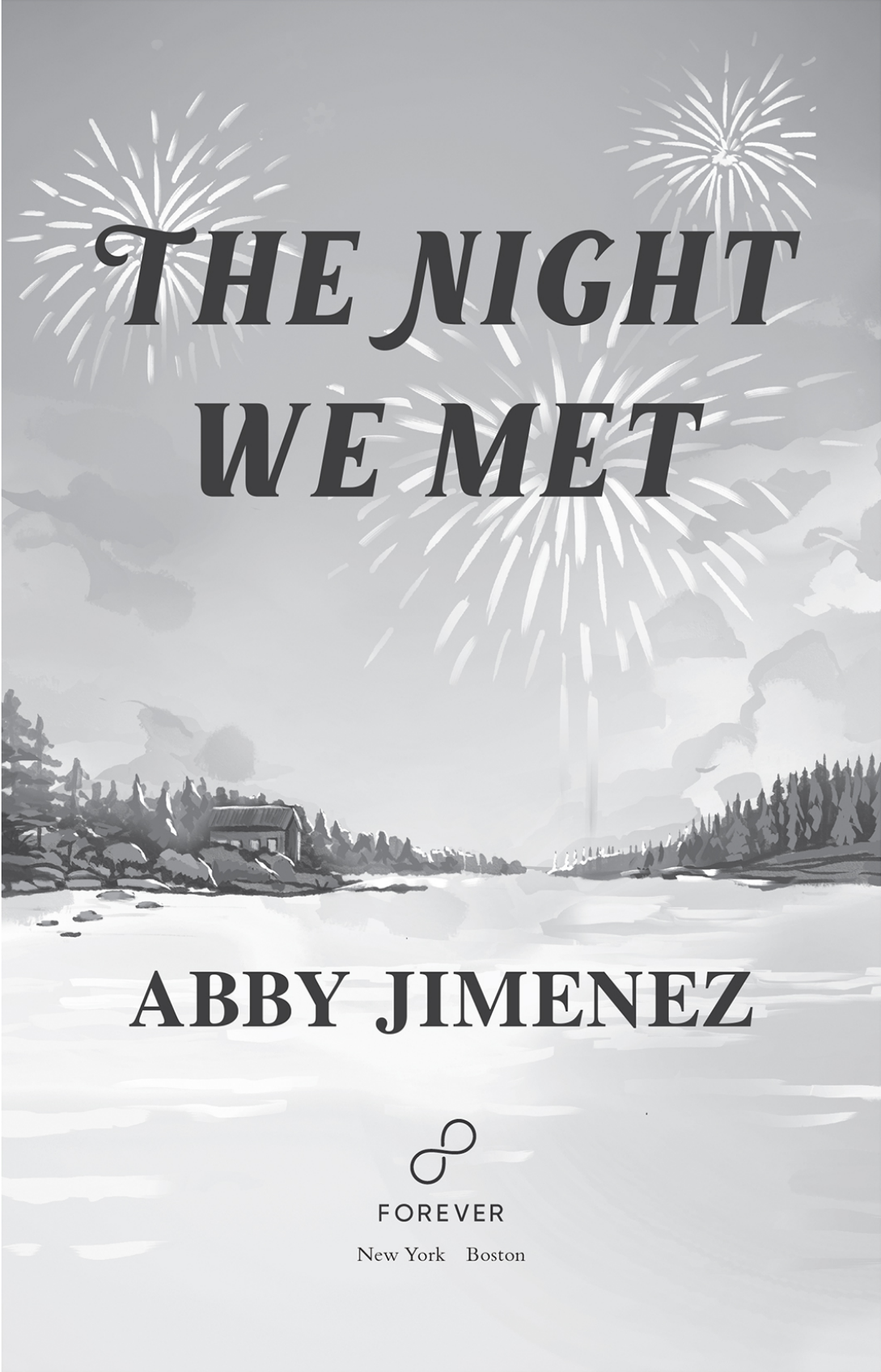
#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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THE NIGHT WE MET





THE NIGHT WE MET

ABBY JIMENEZ



FOREVER

New York Boston

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To my agent Stacey Graham, who has been with me for a whopping eight books and six book deals. Nine years ago, I sent you a query letter with a dick joke in it. The rest is literary history.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

While my books all have fun cartoon covers, there are some serious topics that may be inside. If you feel trigger warnings are spoilers, please skip the following paragraph and enjoy the book. If you'd like some potentially spoilery content guidance, proceed to the paragraph below.

Content warnings: alcoholism (secondary characters, past parental), mention of DWI, anaphylaxis (nut allergy), panic attack, PTSD, depression (secondary character), recent death of MMC's mother (died of cirrhosis of the liver because of alcoholism three months ago), physical assault, poverty/financial stress, identity theft, on page animal death of garter snake, off page mention of a dog killing a rodent and frog, incontinence (secondary character), diet culture (athlete diet), past house foreclosure (FMC's father stopped paying bills), past death of MMC's father (heart attack at eighty-three), hangover, cigarettes (secondary characters), reference to song about a fan who commits murder-suicide of pregnant girlfriend, a rough kiss without consent.

1

~

CHRIS

MY PHONE WAS ringing.

It was five fifteen in the morning.

Mike.

I was only half awake when I hit the answer button. “What.”

“Bro, I need you to do me a favor.”

I groaned. “What favor?”

“I need you to drive Larissa and her mom to the hospital.”

I squeezed my eyes shut in the dark.

My best friend was a lot of things. He was loyal to a fault. He’d give you the shirt off his back. He was hilarious, generous, and protective of the people he cared about. But he was also the most likely to call you at some ungodly hour with a request that started with “I need a favor.”

“I told her I would take them,” he said. “Her car’s in the shop and her mom’s car is stick and Larissa doesn’t know how to drive it. It’s her mom’s surgery today.”

I rolled onto my back. “And you can’t do it *why*?”

“I screwed up, man. I hit it too hard last night. I’ve got the hangover of the fucking century. I think I’m still drunk.”

“Mike, it’s my day off. I’m tired.”

“I know. Look, there’s nobody else to take them. Jesse took Becca down to Wakan for their anniversary. Xavier’s in town but he’s not picking up. I even asked my mom.”

“I don’t even know Larissa,” I said, pinching the bridge of my nose. “I only met her that one time.”

“Come on, dude. She’ll never get a lift this early in the morning.”

“Can’t her mom drive them there? They can get a rideshare back.”

“And leave the car in the parking lot? And then she’s gonna be there by herself while her mom’s in surgery. Don’t make me beg you. I need this. Please.”

I stared at the ceiling in the dark. *Fuck*. I kicked out of my blankets. “Why’d you drink so much if you knew you had to be somewhere early?” I turned on the lamp on my nightstand and winced at the light.

“It got away from me. Look, I’ll pay you back. I’ll wash your car, dude, I’ll do anything. It took me six weeks to get this girl to have coffee with me. She might not even talk to me after this if I leave her hanging. I like her so much, I can’t mess this up.”

I pulled a hoodie over my head. “You owe me big-time. I’m serious.”

He breathed a sigh of relief. “Hey, don’t tell her I’m hungover, okay? I’m gonna say I have a migraine.”

“Whatever. Just text me the address.” I hung up on him.

I stood in the middle of my room momentarily, too irritated to move.

This crap would annoy me on a good day.

I hadn’t had a good day in a while.

All I wanted to do was sleep and be left alone. Mostly the second one.

The guys insisted on hauling me out of my house as much as humanly possible—which I appreciated objectively because they were trying to help. But this situation was Mike being Mike. And who the hell was he out drinking with? God knows if the guys had gone anywhere last night, I would have been kidnapped and thrown in the trunk.

I dragged myself to the bathroom to get cleaned up.

Twenty minutes later, I was pulling in front of a small building in a not-so-great neighborhood. The Windsor Castle Apartments.

This place was the furthest thing from a castle I’d ever seen. The units had bars on the windows. The walkway was cracked and bulging, and there was a stained mattress on the curb out front next to a busted TV with rabbit-ear antennas. I threw the car in park and steeled myself for human interaction before I got out. The sun was barely up. Fucking Mike.

I did my best to keep my mood off my face and knocked on door 104.

After a moment, Larissa answered. She was in a gray hoodie, no makeup. Her blond hair was in a ponytail, and her blue eyes were bloodshot.

She waited tables at Donna's, Mike's mom's café. I'd seen her there a few times, but she'd never waited on me. I only actually met her once, two months ago for five minutes. It was after a concert I'd been forced to attend. She'd been barefoot and she needed a ride home. It had been between me and Mike.

She chose Mike.

It struck me again how pretty she was. It had struck me that night at the concert too. Me and Mike both.

She blinked at me. "Where's Mike?"

"He didn't tell you?" I asked.

"No..."

Aaaand of course he forgot to text her.

"Mike's got a migraine," I said. "He asked me if I could take you. I'm Chris. We met that one night."

"I remember..." she said tentatively.

She chewed her lip, then glanced over her shoulder before coming back to me. "I'm sorry," she said, her voice low. "I can call a rideshare."

"I was up," I lied. "I had nothing to do today," I lied again. "It's my pleasure. Really."

Someone came from behind her. A middle-aged woman in a beanie. She stopped when she saw me. "Oh. Where's Mike, hon?"

I smiled at her around Larissa. "Mike is sick this morning. I'm Chris, his best friend."

"Chris, this is my mom, Nancy," Larissa said, still looking uncertain.

"Nice to meet you." I reached for the duffel bag Nancy was holding. "Let me take that for you."

"Wow. Such a gentleman," she said, handing it over, giving her daughter an unsure glance.

Both women looked like they'd been crying.

I didn't know what kind of surgery Nancy was having. It was none of my

business, so I wasn't going to pry, but this was clearly something very personal taking place this morning and they'd trusted Mike enough to ask him to get them there, and he'd sent a stranger to do it instead. And didn't even call to let them know—probably because he was passed out.

I was so pissed at him.

"Should we get going?" I asked.

Larissa nodded. "Yes. Thank you."

They followed me out to the car. I put Nancy's bag in the trunk and opened the doors for them both. Larissa made her mom take the front seat. Her mom smelled like cigarettes.

It was a twenty-minute ride to Royaume Northwestern Hospital. I was thinking it was going to be a quiet one, but then Nancy turned in her seat to look at Larissa. "You know, the Lord gives his toughest battles to his strongest warriors."

"Mom, stop," Larissa said.

Nancy faced front again. Then she turned to me. "So how long have you known Mike?"

"Twenty-five years," I said, getting onto the freeway.

"Larissa, didn't you say there were a couple of them that night you all met? At the concert?" Nancy asked over her shoulder.

When Larissa didn't answer, I did.

"There were four of us," I said. "Xavier and Jesse are the other two."

"Are all of you so handsome?"

I choked.

"Mom!"

"What?" Nancy said, pivoting to look at her daughter. "He's handsome. Are we supposed to just sit here and pretend like we don't notice?"

Heat crept up my neck.

Larissa was behind me, so I couldn't see her in the mirror, but I could somehow feel her glaring at her mother anyway.

"So, do you have a girlfriend?" Nancy asked me wryly.

"Uh, no, not right now."

“Why not?”

“Mom...” Larissa’s voice was a warning.

Nancy let out a dramatic sigh, like Larissa was ruining her fun from the back seat.

“I’m just taking a little break right now from dating,” I said, changing lanes.

“Huh.” She sniffed the sleeve of her sweater. “This smells like soup. Larissa, are you cooking without the fan on again? All my clothes smell like onions.”

I didn’t smell soup. I did smell smoke, though.

“I didn’t cook anything without the fan on, Mom.”

She sniffed her sleeve again. “You probably smell like soup, too, if it’s on me. Smell your hoodie.”

No answer from the back seat.

I couldn’t tell you how I knew it, but I sensed that Larissa was about to cry.

“Do you like podcasts?” I asked, changing the subject.

“Sometimes...” Nancy said.

“You’ll love this,” I said, turning on the radio.

I put on a comedy series I sometimes listened to on the way to the pharmacy and I turned it up enough that her mom couldn’t keep talking. Thankfully it worked.

When we pulled up to the patient drop-off, Larissa’s mom got out and then Larissa leaned into the open door. “Thank you.”

“I’m just going to park the car and then I’ll meet you inside,” I said.

“Oh, you don’t have to do that.”

“Mike asked me to stay with you—”

“I’m fine. Really, I am. Thank you so much. I can get a rideshare back.”

Then she closed the door before I could argue and started walking her mom to the automatic doors.

I waited for a minute, watching her go like she might spin around and change her mind.

She didn't.

I know I should have been relieved that I'd just gotten my day back, but I wasn't. Mike had seemed adamant that he didn't want her alone. It didn't feel right leaving.

Part of me considered parking and going in anyway, but on the chance she didn't want my company, I opted not to. I didn't know her well enough, didn't want to force my presence on her.

I put the car in drive and was almost to the street when I realized Nancy left her bag in the trunk. I didn't have Larissa's number to text her to meet me out front. I had no choice. I parked and went in.