

SCARED  
LITTLE  
RABBITS

A. V. GEIGER'

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*To A and L, this one's for you.*

*Love, M*

AFTER...

*July 18*

*Winthrop Summer Maker Program—Day 18*

*We stand in a tight cluster, high above the lake. I couldn't say how long we've waited here. Minutes? Hours? There's no way of telling time, aside from the sun's descent toward the horizon and the growing ache in the arches of my feet. The breeze feathers my hair, but otherwise I remain completely still—as unmoving as the shelf of solid granite beneath my tennis shoes.*

*I shouldn't be here. Maybe I should go back down...*

*They warned us not to come, said not to leave our rooms. The program director's email declared the whole campus under lockdown, but we gathered anyway. One by one we made our way up the narrow trail to this forbidden spot—this place where beauty and*

*danger intertwine. Now, we stand shoulder to shoulder, watching and waiting. Nineteen summer students.*

*All but one.*

*No one makes a sound. Hushed words and nervous laughs have long since given way to silence. I can only hear the whisper of the wind and the crackle of the yellow caution tape fluttering against the rocks.*

*That tape wasn't there the last time I came to this place. Its presence feels unnatural—too bright, too glaring—slashing through my view of the white cotton ball clouds that fill the sky and cast their shifting shadows across the landscape.*

**///CAUTION///CAUTION///CAUTION///**

*The bold, black warning seeps its way into my consciousness. It reminds me of that feeling during a dream, right before you wake—that flickering ember of doubt that catches hold and slowly spreads before the dream goes up in flame, that little voice inside your head that whispers: “Hey, Nora... Nora? Nora! Has it occurred to you that none of this is real?”*

*If only my brain would say that to me now. I keep waiting for it to happen, but the sick feeling in my stomach tells me I won't get out of this nightmare so easily.*

*I'm toward the back of the group behind the juniors and seniors. I can't tell what's going on in the water below from my vantage point, but I have a view of Maddox's profile. For once, his eyes aren't covered up by glasses. He stares straight ahead, rigidly expressionless, casting his eyes downward over the cliff's edge. A tic vibrates at the corner of*

*his jaw. His face gives away no other hint of the emotions churning beneath the surface.*

*I wonder what that blank stare signifies. Hope? Fear? Guilt? I can't begin to guess. I hardly know him after all. The thought curdles inside my throat like sour milk. Last night, I thought I might be in love with him. What a joke. It's only been a few weeks since the day we met, the day I first arrived at Winthrop Academy.*

*The girl beside him clasps Maddox on the arm, her fingers digging into the flesh above his wrist. I press forward and go up on my tiptoes to catch a glimpse of the water down below, as a whisper runs through the group.*

*"They found something... What is it?... Can you see?"*

*We all inch forward, craning for a better view. The surface of the lake looks calm and unbroken, except for the presence of the boat. From this distance, it reminds me of a bath toy I used to play with as a kid—a white plastic replica of a powerboat with dark blue lettering across the hull.*

#### *POLICE*

*We're too far away to see the expression on the officers' faces or to hear the words exchanged. But we can see the search diver emerge from beneath the water in his black wet suit. His flippers disturb the pristine surface as he paddles his way toward the boat. He swims with one arm stretched before him, holding out the sunken treasure he's exhumed from the depths below.*

*"Is it..." the voices all around me murmur. "Is it...is it her?"*

BEFORE...



# 1

# INVISIBILITY

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*July 1*

*Winthrop Summer Maker Program—Day 1*

**NORA**

I lean my weight against my suitcase, with my back to the campus gate and its ivy-covered sign.

WINTHROP ACADEMY

FOUNDED 1813

*Why did I come here again?* I've been coveting a spot in this program since eighth grade, counting down the years until I was old enough to apply. Then counting down the days until my parents dropped me off, with hugs and kisses and orders to call home nightly.

Now here I am, waving at the red glow of their brake lights as they exit the U-shaped driveway and disappear over a rise in the twisting mountain road. My presence here is the most monumental thing I've ever accomplished. So why do I feel like a kid on my first day of kindergarten, trying desperately to hold it together before the other kids see what a crybaby I am?

I straighten my shoulders. *Get it together, Nora.* I'm not a baby. I'm sixteen years old, and I worked my butt off to earn a scholarship for this summer program. It's not like I'm moving here for life. The Winthrop Academy Summer Maker Program runs three weeks, and then my parents will be back to pick me up.

I'm here. I'm doing this...and it's going to be amazing.

With a shuddering breath, I turn my back to the road and make my way through the tall wrought-iron gates. The grandeur of this place doesn't do much to settle my nerves. I knew it would be fancy—one of the oldest and most prestigious boarding schools in New England—but I didn't expect it to be so *huge*. There must be twenty different buildings within the campus walls, interconnected by a web of gravel pathways.

I recognize the largest building straight ahead, with its brick façade and soaring clock tower. That image graced all the online application materials. It looked so welcoming on the website, pictured against a backdrop of clear blue sunny skies. But the reality before me is shadowed by a blanket of dark gray clouds.

I better figure out where I'm going before the rain starts. I grab my suitcase handle and march forward, choosing one of the angled paths at random. A pair of girls stand at the far end, and my spirits lift at the sight of them. Most of the Winthrop students have left for the summer, but the place isn't completely abandoned. I expect the girls to react to the sound of crunching gravel as I approach, but they don't turn toward me. It's weird. Can they see me? Both of them have their eyes covered by bulky sunglasses in spite of the overcast skies.

A confident person would go up to them and introduce herself. Smile. Get directions. Ask if they're part of the same program...

If only I knew someone confident like that. As for me? I turn down a different path and pull out my phone to look busy.

Maybe I can find a campus map online. I'm about to open my web browser, but something else distracts me. A new app, freshly downloaded, beckons from the bottom of my screen. At the sight of it, my whole mood shifts.

| InstaLove

I got it from the app store this morning, praying my parents wouldn't notice a new download in the last-minute chaos of packing. Not that they actively forbade me to get this app—but I know if I asked permission, they'd say no. Which is why I never bothered asking.

I'll delete it before they come to pick me up, but these three weeks away from home offer my best chance to join the game. I've been dying to try InstaLove since I first read about it on TeenHack.

## TEENHACK

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### RECOMMENDED APPS

#### **InstaLove™: Love's a game.**

Teens will fall head over heels for this location-based augmented reality game. To join, players simply download the app to their phone and upload a selfie on Instagram with hashtag #InstaLovesReal. Then get ready to play! The app will automatically generate a custom avatar and push an alert to other users nearby. When players encounter another InstaLover™ in real life, the app will superimpose their avatars and prompt both players with choices for how to interact. Users watch their InstaLovability™ Score increase with everyone they meet...[MORE](#)

Sounds good to me. My reality could use some “augmentation.” Not that I'm obsessed with boys, but it might be nice to feel loved at some point. Or at least liked... I'm pretty sure no one has ever liked me in a non-platonic way.

I scuff the bottom of my shoe against the gravel, sending light-gray pebbles scattering. *Trevor...* Why am I still thinking about Trevor Chang?

I was so sure he liked me. That's the thing. He didn't break my heart or anything dramatic. But I spent an entire school year overanalyzing every word the boy said, and all signs pointed to "LIKE." He offered to be my lab partner in freshman biology. He asked me constantly to help him with math homework, even though we had plenty of other friends in the same class. And when I asked him to join our school's Robotics Club this spring, he said yes. He *had* to realize that was only an excuse to hang out together in Maker Lab after school every day...

So how do you explain the look of total blankness on his face, followed by the soul-destroying thirty seconds of stammered apologies, when I finally scraped up the nerve to say something out loud?

*"Gosh. I'm sorry, Nora. Damn... I-I like you a lot. For sure. You're, like, the smartest person I know. I just never... I never really...saw you... I mean, not that way..."*

He never really *saw* me. Neither did those girls I passed back there. Are we sensing a theme yet? I don't know why, but people tend to overlook me. I swear if I had a superpower, I know what it would be: invisibility.

I dip my chin and return my attention to my phone. I should probably find my room and unpack before I set up my InstaLove account, but I'm in a rotten mood now. This game had better be as good as everyone says... I flick it open, and it welcomes me with a view of my own face.

Welcome to InstaLove!  
Snap a selfie to begin.

I turn my head from side to side, lifting the phone higher to find a flattering angle. My face stares back, but there's something different about it. Some kind of subtle beauty filter?

I like this app already.

I take a pic and follow the prompts to post it on my Instagram, not bothering to edit the default caption.

Love's a game. Who wants to play? #InstaLovesReal

I get a Like immediately, and an automatic wave of cringe-y awkwardness washes through me. Not someone from school, is it? They usually ignore everything I post. But no, to my relief, it's not from anyone I know. All part of the game.

♥ InstaLoveBot

It leaves a comment too.

InstaLoveBot: Upload complete. Your avatar is ready.

That was fast! I click back to the InstaLove app, and there I am. Or, not me. My avatar. An older, prettier version of me—like

a Nora 2.0, who knows how to use makeup and whose mouth isn't too wide for the rest of her face.

I smile for the first time since I got here. My fingers fly as I hit Accept and follow the rest of the prompts to register my account.

The camera switches angles, and the app shows a view of the path in front of me, with the back of my avatar's head visible at the bottom of the screen. I hold up the phone as I resume walking, wondering if I'll encounter other users.

Probably. InstaLove was born here, after all. I read all about that on TeenHack too. A student named Emerson Kemp created it here at Winthrop a few summers ago, and it went on to become the most commercially successful project ever to come out of the Summer Maker program.

Of course, the original concept behind InstaLove was much simpler than the game I downloaded today. The summer Emerson attended, the two most popular downloads in the App Store were Instagram and Pokémon Go—so he hacked the two together. The result was this weirdly compelling mix of social media and augmented reality. When Instagram users encountered each other in real life, his app would superimpose their profile pics over their real faces and prompt everyone to “Heart” each other's accounts. It went viral, and Emerson went on to start a software company with InstaLove as its flagship product. Now, he's this program's most famous alum. He'll be appearing here at the end of the three weeks as a guest judge for the Maker Fair, where this summer's crop of students will compete

with our own projects. The thought of meeting him in person—the *real* Emerson Kemp—after all the articles I’ve read? My insides go all hollow and shivery every time I think about it.

At least I won’t be invisible at Maker Fair. I’m not expecting to win a medal, but I have a solid plan for what I want to build. I included the proposal in my scholarship application, along with my school transcripts and programming samples.

I’ll worry about work later though. Right now, InstaLove beckons, and Nora 2.0 is on the prowl. I sweep my phone from side to side, searching for any sign of other avatars as I make my way at random around the campus. *Where is everyone? Forget avatars... Where are all the humans?*

I turn the corner around a building, and I nearly crash right into one.

An avatar materializes on my screen. Brown eyes. Dark hair. A name beneath his picture that I’m too startled to read. I click the app closed and look up at the actual boy before me. He’s wearing sunglasses like those girls before, but he takes them off and rubs his eyes. “That wasn’t one of the choices.”

“W-what?” This boy doesn’t need an avatar. He looks better in real life. He runs his fingers through his hair to push it away from his face, but it flops over his forehead again, half covering his eyes. Why is it that boys look so much cuter when they’re deliberately unkempt?

“You’re not supposed to turn it off until you pick a choice.” He nods at the phone in my hand. “It’ll drop your score.”



A flood of heat rushes to my face. Can he tell I'm totally new to this app? His own phone is nowhere in sight. He looks older than me, guessing by his tall frame and the breadth of his shoulders beneath his polo shirt. Probably a senior, playing this game for years.

He smiles—a burst of childlike mischief that contrasts against the squareness of his jaw—and I can't breathe.

"Where are your glasses?" he asks. "Reese will be pissed if she catches you using your phone."

*Who?* I stuff my phone in my pocket. Are phones not allowed? It didn't say so in the orientation packet. "I didn't know. I just got here."

He laughs. "Your secret's safe with me. I'm Maddox by the way."

"Nora," I reply, taking his outstretched hand.

He lifts an eyebrow. "Nora... That's not short for anything, is it?"

His question takes me by surprise. I can't remember the last time someone asked me that. I usually don't mention my full name. Not that I hate it or anything, but I've never felt like it suited me. "Eleanor," I tell him. "Why?"

"Uh oh."

He flashes that mischievous grin again, but his eyes slide past me over my shoulder, as if laughing with someone else behind me at some inside joke. Back to being invisible, I guess. For a moment there, I thought things might be different for Nora 2.0.

But no. This is the real world, and I'm still Nora.

"OK, well..." I move to step around him, rolling my suitcase

in my wake. It tumbles sideways. So much for my graceful exit. It would have yanked my arm out of its socket if he hadn't grabbed my suitcase handle to keep it upright.

"Do you need help? That thing is bigger than you are."

"I'm fine."

*I'm not fine.* He's staring at me now. I preferred invisibility. He lets go of the handle as I struggle to set the suitcase back on its wheels, wracking my mind for something else to say. What do you say to a boy who rescued you from a freak shoulder-dislocation accident? A beautiful boy with some weird x-ray-vision superpower that allows him to see invisible girls?

Ask for directions. That's what a confident person would do. *Right.*

"Do you know where Fenmore Hall is?"

"Oh!" He points toward one of the buildings behind me. "Over there. That's one of the dorms. The rest of us are staying in Grier."

I nod in thanks and pull the suitcase toward the building he indicated. That should have been the end of the conversation, but somehow it continues. To my delight (or possibly my horror), he strolls along beside me. "I'll tell Reese you're new," he says. "She'll hook you up."

"Is Reese the director?"

"No!" He laughs. "Reese is a student. She's working on an InstaLove mod for her Maker Fair project. It lets you play hands free. Full immersion!" He waves the glasses in his hand, and I realize

they aren't sunglasses after all. I know what those are. I've seen them online, but never in person. Augmented reality...AR glasses...

"Is that an InSight Visor?" I can't quite keep the awe out of my voice. "Don't those things cost, like, three thousand dollars?"

"They're pretty sweet. Reese and—"

He breaks off midsentence and pulls up short. Some instinct makes me look up. A girl struts down the front steps of the building we're approaching. She's the opposite of invisible, with ruby-red lipstick and dark blond hair floating in a cloud around her shoulders. Her face isn't so much beautiful, but *magnetic*. One of those people that everybody turns to look at the moment she enters any room.

Is that Reese?

"Hey Eleanor," Maddox says beside me. His easy smile fades. His face goes still, and I'm confused. Is he talking to me? Because his eyes are on the other girl.

"What are you doing?" she demands.

"Just helping out the new kid."

The girl narrows her eyes at me and spins away from us both, striding in the opposite direction.

"Eleanor! Wait!"

Maddox jogs after her, and I'm on my own again. Guess I'll find my dorm room by myself.

## 2

# MISSED CONNECTIONS

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### NORA

My narrow window looks out over the network of campus pathways down below. They're deserted. Like this room. I'm not sure what I expected in terms of accommodations, but it wasn't this—a sterile, empty dorm room, with worn out beige carpeting and featureless white walls. The place is completely unfurnished, aside from the low sleigh bed and the wooden desk stuffed in the corner.

No bunkbeds, then.

The disappointment lodges in my chest. I assumed I'd have a roommate for the duration of the program. That was one of the reasons I applied. Female bonding has never been my strong suit, but I figured this program would be full of other girls. Girls like me.

I scrunch my lips sideways. What made me so sure this

room would come furnished with an InstaBestFriend? I had all kinds of daydreams about my mythical bunkmate. Some girl my age, obsessed with TeenHack and WIRED, who would stay up half the night debating the relative merits of Java versus C++. A girl who spent her Saturday nights tinkering in the garage, figuring out how to retrofit her dad's lawnmower with a self-propelled motor and GPS navigation system. I'm not the only girl on the planet who makes robotic landscaping equipment for fun, am I?

Maybe I am. Heck, maybe that's why my "SmartMower" proposal got me accepted to this program. I bet the admissions committee read it and looked at each other all bug-eyed, like:

*"Hey, should we admit this freakish freak-girl for the summer?"*

*"I don't know, Bob. Robotic lawnmowers? This is some next-level freakishness right here."*

*"Her technical skillset is impressive though."*

*"Clearly, this applicant has nothing more normal to do with her time."*

*"Perhaps we could let her in but keep her quarantined from all the non-freakish kids."*

*"No roommate?"*

*"Safer that way. This degree of freakocity might be contagious."*

Ugh, the idea of people talking about me makes my skin crawl. I shudder, sinking down heavily next to my suitcase on the edge of the twin mattress. At least they didn't house me in a totally

separate building. I saw a resident advisor's suite at the top of the stairs, and I can hear the echoey sound of other girls laughing somewhere down the hall.

I should probably be brave and introduce myself, but I don't budge from my perch on the bed. What if that girl is there? The one I saw outside earlier, addressed by my first name. Eleanor. The other Eleanor. The *pretty* Eleanor. The kind of Eleanor who inspires cute boys to drop conversations midsentence and go chasing after them.

I press my hand against my collarbone. My lungs feel like a pair of popped balloons, thoroughly deflated. I can't imagine a girl like that scrolling through a tech blog—or having *anything* in common with me other than a first name. She looked way too perfect. Perfect hair. Perfect skin. Perfect clothes. Was she even in high school? She reminded me of those ridiculous twenty-five year old actresses they cast to play teenagers on TV.

Maybe it's a blessing I don't have to share my room. This way I have someplace safe to hide out when I'm feeling hopelessly insecure. Which is basically anytime I'm not hunched over my laptop editing code.

I unzip my suitcase to unpack. The laughter down the hall grows louder, and I glance uncertainly toward my door. I'll meet those girls eventually. My orientation packet mentioned a welcome dinner tonight at the program director's residence. That seems like a logical place to make introductions. Official

school-sponsored activities are my friend. Random socializing outside of school hours? Not so much.

I pull out the thick packet from my suitcase and look it over, although I must have reviewed it twenty times since it showed up in the mail last month. If only this program were more structured. Aside from tonight's dinner, the only other official gathering is the Maker Fair at the end of the three weeks.

The lack of routine makes my stomach hurt. I'm used to high school, with classes at set times and teachers guiding after-school activities. But this program is all about independent study and peer-based learning. In terms of faculty, there's only the program director, Dr. Carlyle, and a resident advisor living in each of the dorms. Otherwise, the students are on our own to work on self-directed projects, although we're supervised 24/7 from afar. It wouldn't be safe to leave a bunch of teenagers completely to our own devices. Surveillance cameras are everywhere on campus. I passed half a dozen of them earlier, including the one in the hallway outside my door. Nobody comes or goes without someone on campus security knowing about it.

At least I don't have to worry about my laptop getting stolen. My door doesn't have a lock, but I don't need one with the camera keeping watch.

I drop the orientation packet on my desk, considering what to do between now and dinnertime. My phone rests on my desk chair, and I pick it up. I'm still not sure how this InstaLove app

works. Does it keep records of all the other avatars I've encountered? There's only been one so far, but I wouldn't mind seeing that particular avi again. The mere thought of him pops a goofy grin onto my face.

I have to check. I can't resist.

I open InstaLove, and it shows a view of my empty room with various options arranged in a frame around the edges. The lower left corner shows a number:

-24

Is that my score? I tap it and an explanation fills the screen.

InstaLove (IL) Score: -24.

Show some love, Nora! There are currently 16 InstaLove users in your area. Find them and interact to raise your rating!

Yikes. A negative number? That should probably hurt my feelings, but I can't help but giggle. I guess Nora 2.0 is no more "InstaLovable" than plain old Nora. I didn't need a game to tell me that.

I don't take it personally. I know why my score sucks so much. Those were the first words Maddox uttered when I bumped into



him before. *“That wasn’t one of the choices... It’ll drop your score... You’re not supposed to turn it off until you pick a choice...”*

*Oops.* I wonder if I dropped his score as well when I froze up. There goes any chance of talking to Maddox again. Not that there was much chance of that anyway.

I flick back to the InstaLove home screen and choose a different option from the menu. My interaction history fills the screen, organized in a three-column display.

InstaFriends	InstaCrushes	Missed Connections
		Maddox

*Interesting.*

Maddox’s face looks different here. Am I imagining it, or did his avi change from before? No, I realize with a gasp. The avatars aren’t static. They’re like Animojis with different moods! My finger hovers over his lips, and his expression shifts when I touch the screen, from sad puppy-dog eyes to a knowing smirk.

His InstaLove score appears beneath his picture.

27,048

“Oh my God,” I whisper. No wonder he’s smirking. My -24 looks more ridiculous by the second. How long has he been playing this game? There must be some way to see more details. Like his history... Or his age... Or his shoe size... Or whether

he's straight, or gay, or otherwise inclined, or... Let's be honest. There's one thing in particular I really want to know: whether that girl who glared at me before is his girlfriend.

I lift my finger from his face and another text bubble pops up, prompting me (or taunting me?) to do something other than stare.

InstaLove requires interaction, Nora! What did you think of Maddox? Drag his pic to put him where he belongs:

**InstaFriends**

**InstaCrushes**

People you like

People you *like* like



Hint: don't worry, no one else can see your choice!

Check out our Privacy Policy.

I suck my lower lip between my teeth. Friend or crush? Obviously, I know the answer, judging from the way my pulse quickens at the thought of his easy smile and messy hair.

But I hesitate before I make my selection. Can I really trust InstaLove with all my secrets? It has to be secure, right? I mean, it has a Privacy Policy. And TeenHack recommended it. There's no way this app could get so popular if it made a habit of broadcasting everyone's secret crushes to the world...

*Right.* I grip my phone more firmly, annoyed by my own

nervousness. I downloaded this app for the same reason I came to this program: to do something different, experience something new. To shake myself out of my comfort zone.

“InstaLove requires interaction,” I mutter to myself. So what am I waiting for? What exactly am I so afraid will happen?

I press my index finger to the screen and drag his face to the second column: InstaCrushes. For a moment, his avatar smiles wide and his dark brown eyes are replaced by two red hearts.

Another text bubble emerges, but I don't have a chance to read the prompt. My head jerks up at the sound of footsteps in the corridor. They're coming toward my door. Maddox's heart eyes stare back at me, and a flush of guilty color floods my cheeks. I don't know how to exit this screen. It's too late to figure it out. Panicked, I click the phone off completely and shove it in my pocket as a knock rattles the doorframe.

*Who is it?*

I say the words inside my head. Not out loud. My lungs aren't functioning properly. I hold my breath as I reach for the doorknob. It's not Maddox, is it? The real Maddox? Did I summon him somehow?

I don't know why, but I have the weirdest feeling that it's him.