

Part One – When We Were Young

Chapter 1: The First Hello

A Chance Meeting

The first week of September always carried a feeling of possibility.

The university campus buzzed with excitement as students hurried between red-brick buildings, maps folded in their hands, backpacks slung over their shoulders, and dreams far larger than the suitcases they had unpacked only days before. Some arrived laughing in groups of old friends, while others walked alone, pretending not to notice the uncertainty that lingered beneath their confident smiles.

For Emma Carter, everything felt both thrilling and overwhelming.

She tightened her grip on a leather notebook that had belonged to her father. The corners were worn from years of use, its pages still smelling faintly of paper and cedarwood. Before she had boarded the morning train, he had slipped it into her hands with a gentle smile.

“Write your story,” he had said. “One day you’ll look back and realize this was where it all began.”

She smiled at the memory as she crossed the courtyard.

Emma had grown up in the quiet coastal town of Seabrook, where everyone knew everyone else’s name and life moved at the rhythm of the tides. She had never imagined herself in a city filled with towering buildings, crowded streets, and thousands of strangers.

Everything here seemed louder.

Buses rumbled past the university gates.

Students laughed beneath ancient oak trees.

Music drifted from open dormitory windows.

The scent of freshly brewed coffee floated from a nearby café.

It was exciting.

It was terrifying.

Taking a deep breath, Emma unfolded the campus map for what felt like the tenth time that morning.

“Science Hall...” she whispered.

The map might as well have been written in another language.

She turned it upside down.

Then sideways.

Nothing made sense.

“You know,” a warm voice said behind her, “I don’t think the map changes if you rotate it.”

Emma jumped slightly and spun around.

Standing a few feet away was a young man about her age, tall with dark brown hair that refused to stay neatly combed despite his obvious attempts. A navy sweater was casually draped over one shoulder, and an amused smile lit up his face.

His eyes were kind.

Not the kind of kindness that came from politeness.

The kind that made people feel comfortable without saying very much.

Emma felt embarrassed.

“Was it that obvious?” she asked.

“A little.”

He smiled.

“Maybe a lot.”

She laughed despite herself.

“I’ve been trying to find Science Hall for nearly twenty minutes.”

He glanced at the map before pointing toward a stone pathway lined with maple trees.

“You’re walking in the exact opposite direction.”

Emma looked at the path, then back at him.

“Oh.”

“I made the same mistake yesterday.”

“You did?”

“Twice.”

She laughed again, the nervousness beginning to melt away.

“I’m Ethan.”

“Emma.”

For a brief moment, neither of them spoke.

There was nothing remarkable about the silence.

Yet somehow it didn't feel awkward.

It felt... comfortable.

As though two strangers had unknowingly stepped into a conversation that had been waiting to happen.

Ethan nodded toward the path.

"I'm heading there myself."

Emma hesitated.

She had always been careful around people she didn't know.

Her mother had reminded her countless times, *Be polite, but be wise.*

Still, something about Ethan felt genuine.

"I'd appreciate the company," she said.

They began walking side by side beneath the shade of the maple trees.

Around them, the campus seemed alive.

Students hurried past carrying textbooks.

A guitarist played near the student union.

Someone raced by on a bicycle, apologizing as everyone stepped aside laughing.

Emma noticed Ethan slowing his pace without making it obvious.

"So," he said, "what are you studying?"

“Architecture.”

His eyebrows lifted.

“Really?”

She nodded.

“I’ve always loved old buildings. I like imagining the people who lived inside them.”

He smiled.

“Most people just see walls.”

“I see stories.”

He looked at her for a second longer than expected.

“I like that.”

Emma felt a warmth rise to her cheeks and quickly looked ahead.

“What about you?”

“Business.”

She laughed softly.

“So we’re complete opposites.”

“Maybe.”

He shrugged.

“Or maybe we’re just interested in building different things.”

She smiled.

“Buildings.”

“Companies.”

He grinned.

“Both need good foundations.”

She couldn’t help laughing.

The conversation flowed with surprising ease.

They talked about where they had grown up.

Their favorite books.

Music.

Childhood memories.

Even the terrible cafeteria food they had both heard rumors about before arriving.

By the time Science Hall came into view, Emma realized something unexpected.

She no longer felt like a stranger on campus.

Somehow, somewhere between getting lost and finding the right building, the city had become a little less intimidating.

They stopped outside the entrance.

“I guess this is where we part ways,” Ethan said.

“For now.”

The words escaped Emma before she had time to think.

For now.

Ethan smiled, as though he had noticed them too.

“For now.”

Neither of them knew that this simple meeting would become one of the defining moments of their lives.

Neither could have imagined the years of laughter, heartbreak, distance, and hope that lay ahead.

At that moment, they were simply two university students standing beneath a clear September sky.

One carrying a worn leather notebook.

The other carrying dreams that felt too heavy to share.

Neither realizing that destiny often begins with something as ordinary as asking for directions.

And that sometimes, the smallest moments become the ones that change everything forever.