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BIG SKY

NEW HORIZONS, BOOK ONE

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PREFACE

Just like that, she'd given me a resounding "No." Usually, I'd back down and try to keep the peace. But not this time. This was way too important for me. "Mom, please," I had implored, but she cut me off without hearing me out. Just to make sure that her words had registered and we were all on the same page, she'd declared, "You're not going to study in the US. End of story."

With that punch in the gut, my mom had proceeded to chop vegetables for dinner as if nothing had happened, as if she hadn't just thrown away my dream the way she was dumping the potato peels in the trash. I'd looked at my dad across the dining table, my eyes pleading with him to say something. He just shrugged his shoulders. *Great! Another battle I'd have to fight on my own.*

As I stormed up the stairs, I heard my mom's declaration of "NO" with each thump of my feet. I slammed my door like the immature teenager my mom had portrayed me to be and belly-flopped on my bed. And I just lost it. Anger, sadness, and frustration tore through me. This was so unfair. How could I explain to my fact-focused, scientist parents that I could do this, that in my heart I knew I *needed* to do this?

Evidence. That was the only way I would get anywhere with them. I had to find a way to prove to my parents that I was more than capable of making my dream come true. I would study at the University of Washington. The timing of my upcoming senior exchange trip to Montana could not have been better. This was my chance to show them I didn't need to be coddled and overprotected, but could make my own reasonable and responsible decisions.

I pulled the stack of college paperwork out of my backpack and flipped through the pages – again. Almost instantaneously,

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excitement coursed through my body. And just as I stuffed the paperwork back into my backpack, I pushed down my disappointment and anger.

Senior year would be amazing – no matter what, starting with this exchange trip. I had no doubt about it. What I could have never known, though, was just how much my decision to sign up for this trip would actually change my life.

CHAPTER ONE

I flashed Annie a huge grin. Her eyes were dancing with the same delight and excitement I felt.

"So this is it – two weeks in Ennis, Montana. Two weeks of American high school life," I said.

"I know! This is so awesome. Best decision we ever made. I can feel it," Annie replied.

I looked out the window and let my thoughts drift. I felt so lucky to share this experience with my best friend.

Annie and I had been friends since middle school. We lived around the corner from each other. One day during seventh grade, we met while unintentionally walking to school together. Completely out of character for me, I had overslept and was running late, and as I hustled out to school in a rushed panic, I ran into Annie. "Why the rush?" she asked me jokingly. "It's just school." We ended up chatting the whole way, and from that day on, we've not only been walking to and from school together every day, but we pretty much spend every single minute of our free time together. Our parents often wonder what we talk about all the time, but so far, we've never run out of things to say.

I pulled myself away from the window to look at Annie, who was digging through her purse. "What are you doing?"

"Looking for lipstick," she answered as she held it up victoriously. She took off the cap, twisted the pink stick out of its shell, and applied it generously. "How do I look?" She smacked her lips and gave me her brightest smile.

"Great!" *Typical Annie*, I thought to myself. Always wanting to look her best. Her little makeup kit was a must-have. She would rather forget her ATM card at home than her makeup. But I had to

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give it to her – as always, her choice of lipstick really brought out her dark brown eyes and worked great with her current hairstyle, a blonde bob with short bangs.

"Want some?" she asked. "You're awfully pale."

Annie was such a fashionista, which her makeup and clothes reflected, and she never went anywhere without being perfectly put together. After relentless efforts throughout our friendship, Annie had finally managed to rub off on me a little bit, getting me to apply some basic makeup once in a while in order "to make my blue eyes pop," and to do some simple up-dos with my long brown hair "to bring some oomph to my hairstyle." One day, she even dragged me to the mall to show me a few pieces that would "do my body type more justice." It was a whole "What Not to Wear" makeover kind of day. Most of it didn't stick, though. What can I say? I just have a no-fuss approach to clothes, hair, and makeup. I prefer my boot-cut jeans, solid-colored shirts, and comfy knitted sweaters or cardigans.

"I'm good, thanks," I declined with a grin, as usual. Even an almost day-long trip could not put a damper on Annie's bubbly, spontaneous, and outgoing personality, with which she often managed to pull my pragmatic and sensible self out of my shell and occasionally got me to try some things in the spur of the moment. I wondered why it was so hard for me just to take the offer for lipstick.

As with our flight from Vienna to Chicago, this plane ride to Bozeman, Montana had been going smoothly so far and there was a nice sort of lull on the plane. Most of the other passengers were sleeping or reading; a few were taking advantage of the entertainment system. Below us was a perfect formation of thick clouds, the kind that, as a kid, I had always imagined bouncing into and just lying on with my arms crossed behind my head. I heard

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wheels rattling and glass clanking down the aisle and spied the flight attendant with a beverage cart. *Perfect!* My mouth was dry and I could use a drink. I figured this would probably be their one and only round on this short flight.

"Are you on vacation?" the woman next to Annie asked us after we'd all gotten our choice of beverage and a bag of pretzels.

"Sort of," Annie said, taking a sip of her Diet Coke.

"No, we're on a school trip," I clarified.

"How exciting! Where are you from and where are you going?"

"We're from Vienna in Austria and we're on our way to Ennis," I answered.

"Oh, I've heard Austria is beautiful! I've never been, though," she said. "I just live a couple of hours away from Ennis. It's a cute little place. Famous for fly-fishing. But I assume that's not why you're on this school trip," the woman said, and nibbled on a couple of her pretzels.

Annie and I shook our heads and chuckled. Fly-fishing? No way! Annie would be too worried about messing up her looks, and I'd probably get entangled in the fishing line and land in the water. We couldn't catch a fish if we depended on it.

"No, thankfully not. We're on an exchange program with the local high school there," Annie explained. "There's the two of us and twelve other seniors – we're going to live with host families, attend school, and go on field trips. In return, the fourteen of us will host a group of American students in our hometown in the winter."

"Oh, my! That sounds like so much fun. I wish I could have done something like that during my school time. I'm sure you'll have a great time."

"We hope so," I said.

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"Well, cheers to your trip," the woman said, and raised her plastic cup.

Most of the girls, including Annie, saw this trip as a fun alternative to regular school. They didn't have to think twice whether they'd be allowed to go. I'd had to twist my parents' arms and legs to get to get their okay to sign up for this trip. My parents and I have traveled to big cities and remote places all over the world, but they never had allowed me to travel by myself, so this was a first. A teacher, my best friend, twelve other students, and a host family were barely enough for my parents to let me out of their sights. I am their only child, and I sometimes think that in my parents' minds, I stopped growing up somewhere around twelve. At least, that's how I felt they treated me. Regardless of how responsible and mature I acted, I never got credit for it. Still, I had continued to play by the rules, met my parents' expectations, and contently navigated life inside the box around me – the goody-goody, well behaved, *A* student. But it was time to break out of this mold and uncover whom exactly Emily Hoffman was. I was ready to spend some time trying new things and needed to forge my own path. This was the beginning of my senior year and I had a lot to prove to my parents – and to myself. I did have a dream, a plan for life after graduation, and this was my opportunity to see if it really was a good one, if I could really do this.

I could remember clearly the day Mrs. Hofer came into class with photos and brochures from her own trip to Montana. I was immediately fascinated by the beautiful scenery and was hanging on every word Mrs. Hofer told us about "Big Sky Country," the American school system, and different American traditions. Her love for everything American was apparent and mirrored my sentiments. The fourteen of us who had decided to go on this exchange trip

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were itching to meet American teenagers and spend time with them – and, of course, to meet a few cute American guys. We knew just about every popular American TV show, and were not only well read in classic literature, but also contemporary American chick lit, so we felt like we had some sort of a frame of reference. We figured a lot of things were cliché, but surely not everything – we were more than willing to test our ideas and find out.

"You should look out the window and get your first impression of Montana," the woman next to Annie said. "The view never ceases to amaze me."

We were breaking through the clouds, making our way to the ground. Annie and I squeezed each other's hands while looking out the window, and fully embraced our first glimpse of what would be our home for the next two weeks.

I noticed the incredible landscape that stretched below us. Impressive mountains, rugged and snowcapped, loomed into the sky and eventually gave way to soft hills, meandering rivers, and forests of such a density it was almost impossible to make out the individual trees. There was vast, untouched natural beauty all around. The sun had started to set, and everything around us looked like it had been dipped into buckets of the most vivid and rich hues of yellow and orange. The mountain range in the distance was ablaze in a brilliant golden glow. Amid this raw natural beauty, the expanse of crisp, clear sky took my breath away and left no question in my mind why Montana was often referred to as "Big Sky Country."

I imagined myself on a trail through the lush woods and enjoying the outdoors. Don't get me wrong, I was not very athletic or sporty – Annie had tried to get me to go for runs or long bike rides with her, to no avail – but I loved being outside. Once, I agreed to do the swimming leg in a triathlon together with Annie; I regretted my

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decision as soon as I completed the first set of breaststrokes, and only got through that nightmare by reminding myself that I was doing it for a good cause – the money I had paid to do it would be donated. It was beyond me, given that I don't have a competitive bone in my body, why Annie enjoyed all these activities so much. In short, I knew I wouldn't be doing any whitewater rafting, hiking, or rock climbing during my time in Montana, but I'd spend a lot of time in nature, basking in its magnificence and the endless views.

Bozeman Airport was a small airport. We arrived at Gate 5, and in no time, we located the stairs to the first floor where we could claim our bags. Along the way, we passed a few small shops. I spied a celebrity magazine I really liked but couldn't get in Austria, and tried to make out the latest headline. Next to the magazines, the candy bars caught my eye – hello Snickers, Mars, and Milky Way, and no more Milka, Lindt, or Maltesers for the next two weeks. When a few girls stopped at the nearest restroom, I took the chance to head to the water fountain and quench my thirst. A big plus – I much appreciated those water fountains! It wasn't something you'd find at the airport in Vienna, or in any public building in Austria, for that matter.

As soon as we reached the baggage claim area on the first floor, we spotted a big sign that said, "Ennis High School welcomes you." Behind it, I could make out a short, slender woman with chin-length gray hair and glasses. She smiled warmly when she saw our group and said, "Hi girls, how are you?"

She then shook Mrs. Hofer's hand, and continued, "I'm Mrs. Taylor, and on behalf of Ennis High School and all the host families, I'd like to welcome you. We're so excited to have you here. We have

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so much planned for you!" She motioned toward the baggage claim. "But let's get your luggage first."

As we were waiting for our luggage, Mrs. Taylor informed us that she was one of the English teachers at Ennis High School. "I hope to see you all of you in my class at one point or another during the next two weeks," she said. "You should already have your schedules. My classes are English Language 1 and 2 and English Literature."

After we got our luggage, Mrs. Taylor led us to the parking lot, where a school bus was waiting for us, which caused the first squeal of delight from one of the students. "Oh my God, this is like in the movies. I can't believe it!" she said. I caught a glimpse of Mrs. Taylor, who shook her head, but smiled. We got on the bus and I sat down next to Annie.

As we bobbed along in the bumpy bus, I took in our surroundings. It was a beautiful fall evening in Bozeman; the sun had set some more, and by now, the mountains were ablaze in deep shades of orange. It was a mesmerizing sight.

"This is way better than the pictures Mrs. Hofer showed us. This is amazing," Annie said, obviously struck by the beauty all around her as well.

The bus rolled steadily along the highway and I leaned my head against the window. It was dirty but I didn't care. The excitement was wearing off, giving way to exhaustion. I decided to close my eyes for just a moment. My body was aching and tired, and I actually had to make an effort to keep my eyes open so I didn't miss the majestic, forested mountains. At some point I heard a few "oohs and aahs," but by then my eyelids had drooped and I was in a nice lull. It was the slowing down of the bus and crunching of the tires on the gravel that helped me register that we had arrived at our destination – we had pulled into the parking lot of Ennis High School. I opened

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my eyes and squinted. Looking around, I noticed I wasn't the only one with droopy eyes. *No wonder*, I thought. We had been traveling for more than fifteen hours, including a layover in Chicago. Add the time difference of eight hours, and it wasn't surprising that we were all ready to fall asleep; after all, it was very early in the morning in Austria. Annie was stretching beside me.

"Oh, that little snooze was good, but I'm still dead tired," Annie said, and yawned.

"It has been a long day," I replied, feeling the exhaustion in every bone in my body. But as soon as the bus doors opened, my nerves were tingling with excitement and I was wide awake again. The moment we had all been waiting for was here – we'd finally get to set foot into Ennis High School and meet our host families.

CHAPTER TWO

Ennis High School was a simple one-story building and looked like it had seen better days. We all grabbed our carry-on bags and headed toward the bronze statue of two running mustangs that adorned the entryway, as if their wind-blown manes were pulling us in. The light-yellow wall paint had been stained by rain and looked dirty, and the green paint on the old, oversized wood windows was flaking; it must have been swept away by the same wind that had ruffled the mustangs' hair. I instantly felt welcomed, the imperfections of the building inviting me in. As our group approached, gravel crunching under our tired feet and clogging up our luggage wheels, I noticed a crowd of smiling, anticipatory faces through the glass entrance doors – the host families, I assumed. As soon as Mrs. Hofer and Mrs. Taylor opened the door into the fluorescently lit hall, my heart began beating with excitement.

"What if they're not nice? What if I don't get along with them?" I overheard Maria anxiously whisper to another classmate.

I had these concerns as well, but tried to stay calm. I wiped my sweaty hands on my pants. Luckily, there was no time to get caught up in any of these thoughts – the host families started clapping as soon as we stepped through the doors, each family holding a sign displaying one of our names. The teachers had made the matches a few weeks ago, so I knew I'd be staying with the Jones family, while Annie had been assigned to the Rayburns.

"Girls, meet your host families," Mrs. Taylor invited us. I immediately started scanning the room, looking for my name on one of the signs. I could feel my heartbeat in my ears and I held my breath. Now it was just moments until I would meet them – something I had been anticipating for months. I took in the families

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one by one, trying to guess which one might be the Joneses. Maybe they were the family with the beautiful dark-haired daughter and her little brother, who was busy playing a game on his cell phone? I could see myself fitting well into that family. I looked at the sign; it read "Annie Mayer." Annie was already making her way toward them. I overheard the warm welcome she received. "Hi! I'm Sarah, and this is James, Brooke, and Brandon."

They had stood out from the beginning. James was wearing jeans, a plaid, button-down shirt, a cowboy hat, and cowboy boots. Brandon was the mini-version of James. Sarah was wearing jeans as well and a plain white T-shirt, while Brooke wore a short denim skirt, a tank top, and cowboy boots. After they had all shaken hands, they headed for the door. Annie mouthed a quick "see you tomorrow" to me.

I gave the room another quick scan, and saw Maria being hugged by her host mother, a short, stocky middle-aged woman. Her two daughters were talking to Maria over the embrace. I was glad her worries seemed to have been unfounded. I was getting a little antsy. Where was my family? I gave the room another good look around. Nope, it wasn't going to be the mother-daughter look-alikes with their little dog; neither was it going to be the dad with his daughter, who looked no older than a freshman. I looked at the next family, and finally I found a sign with my name in the hands of a middle-aged woman with shoulder-length, blonde hair and bangs. A man and a young girl about my age stood with her. After all this wanting, all this speculating, here they were – the Jones family. I made my way toward them and extended my hand. Surprisingly, I was instead pulled into a hug.

"Hi, Emily! I'm Laura, this is my husband, Dan, and our daughter, Millie." Laura wore jeans, sneakers, and a sweatshirt. She

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had a warm smile and everything about her just made me feel comfortable and fuzzy. Dan, dressed similarly, stood a good bit taller than Laura, his brown hair thinned out, gray around his temples. He wore glasses, and his eyes had a shy smile when he stretched out his hand and said, "Welcome to the small but quaint town of Ennis."

"Thank you," I answered. "I'm so excited to be here. I can't wait to get to know you and explore Ennis."

"Well, you won't be occupied with that for long. Don't get your hopes up too high about this quaint little town," Millie added, her voice monotone and unenthusiastic. Her mouth was a straight line and her eyes barely met mine.

"Amelia!" Laura scolded, and Dan shook his head.

What was her deal? *Thank you for making a perfect welcome really awkward*, I thought to myself.

There were two things I noticed about Millie right away – first, her dark clothes; her black jeans and dark-gray shirt complemented her jet-black hair, but were a stark difference next to her parents' very colorful sweaters. Second, her eyes; they were light blue with little yellow specks. But what really stood out for me was the depth they carried. There was no sparkle in them, but rather a sort of weariness. The combination of both made her look very serious and older than I imagined she actually was.

Ignoring the sudden heaviness I felt in my stomach, I convinced myself that Millie and I would surely hit it off and enjoy our time together. Just because we appeared to be different at first glance – that didn't have to predict our future. With that, I told my gut to leave me alone, and followed the Joneses out the door.

We made our way to the parking lot, where the Joneses' black pick-up truck was parked. I have to admit, I was impressed by the car; the size alone was something I had never experienced before.

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My parents owned one car and it was tiny. I was one-hundred-percent positive I wouldn't get my own car once I passed my driver's test later that year. Instead, the three of us would share our teeny car. Which was fine, considering my plans to be in the US for college anyway. Millie and I climbed into the back seats. We buckled our seatbelts, and I rested my head against the window. As in the bus earlier, extreme exhaustion washed over my body once I hit the seat. A shower and a comfortable bed was all I could think of. We made a couple of turns, and before I had a chance to orient myself, Dan pulled up in front of a cute little brown rambler with white windows. There was an alcove window in the living room. The light was on and gave the home a warm, inviting glow. We got out of the car. Motioning to the house, Dan said, "Welcome to our humble abode!"

"It's a beautiful house," I replied.

"Come on, let's go inside," Laura said. "Honey, will you please bring in Emily's bags?"

"I'm already on it!" Dan said, pulling my bags from the truck bed.

I followed Laura through the well-manicured front yard. Amid patches of wildflowers, there was a huge hydrangea shrub with soft, white blooms, and a rosemary shrub, which made me think of the herb garden my mom had planted in our front yard a couple of years ago. The tiled path we had been walking on led to the front door.

"Our home is your home, Emily," Laura said, as she walked through the door without unlocking it, which took me by surprise. I didn't know anyone who didn't lock his or her doors. I made a mental note not to mention this to my parents. "We really hope you'll feel at home and comfortable while you're here. Isn't that right, Millie?"

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"Yup," mumbled Millie, who was standing behind me. I had nearly forgotten she was there; her silence allowed her to drift into the background.

I stepped inside, arriving in a big open living space, with a bench to the right. An antlered coat rack and pile of shoes rested by the alcove window that I had noticed from outside. A maroon wing chair and a small wrought-iron table with a stained glass shaded lamp nestled into the alcove. *I could spend hours here reading*, I thought. The wide windowsill was home to an assortment of fall-colored candles that were lit and exuded a fragrant apple-and-cinnamon scent, a scent that reminded me of the hot ciders and punches served at the Christmas markets in Austria and instantly made me feel at home. The open living space was roomy and had an elegant, yet cozy, feeling to it. There was a dining room to the left, with a big antique table and six chairs, and just past it, the living room held a couple of black leather couches, a simple oak coffee table with some magazines on it, and a flat-screen TV, which was mounted on the wall. In the very back of the room was the kitchen, which looked a little dated, but homey. A faint but delicious scent lingered in the kitchen and hinted at what must have been a tasty dinner – meatloaf, maybe, or possibly hamburgers. I noticed how the cabinets looked freshly painted in a light yellow, the original brownish-gray wood shining through. The knobs looked like they were modern brass ones. There was an island in the middle of the kitchen with a couple of mismatched wooden barstools around it. Instead of granite or marble countertops, the Joneses had covered their countertops with colorful tiles, which gave the kitchen a unique, special character. Next to the kitchen I noticed a staircase leading down.

"Well, as you can see, here is our family room, where we spend most of our time together," Laura explained as we took off our shoes and hung up our jackets.

"I love this alcove with the chair," I said.

"Anytime you want to read or just relax – "

"Or look at nothing happening outside," Millie interrupted.

Laura sighed and continued to walk through the living room. "Our bedroom is to the right here." She pointed to one of two doors down the hallway. "Over there," she motioned toward the other door, "is the bathroom."

We arrived in the kitchen.

"Help yourself to anything in the kitchen, anytime," Laura offered.

Millie passed Laura and led me toward the stairs. "I'll show you your room," she said, utterly unenthusiastic.

We padded down a flight of carpeted stairs. From the outside, I would have never expected there was another story to the house. But there was a fully finished basement. The focal point of the spacious living room was a big-screen TV on top of an old wooden cabinet that now functioned as a TV stand. A game console was lying around in front of the TV stand, with two or three games strewn across the floor. The black leather couch with its cracked material looked old and used – perhaps the one in the living room had replaced this one. How many years of stories did this couch hold? A green knitted blanket had been thrown across the couch and dangled halfway down to the carpeted floor. The basement was a stark difference to the neat and tidy upstairs area. Looking around the basement made me think of my mom and how she would throw a hissy fit if the blanket wasn't folded nicely on the couch, especially when guests were coming over. "Emily, what does that say about

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