

LAST SUMMER  
a SUMMER BOYS novel  
By Hailey Abbot

1.

“Congratulations, graduates!” cried the principal of Martin High, directly into the microphone. The sound reverberated out from the small stage and echoed across the June morning, over the heads of the seniors sitting in rows across the football field, and back up over the stands where the parents sat, applauding wildly.

On cue, the entire graduating class let out a long cheer. They weren’t allowed to toss their caps in the air, or they’d have to pay a penalty fee, but one brave—or crazy?—soul did just that.

Beth Tuttle knew it had to be her ex-boyfriend, George.

But, whatever. Beth tilted back her head and let loose a banshee howl of her own. Then she reached over and hugged the kid nearest her: Michael Tutweiler, to whom she had previously spoken exactly once in their entire twelve years of Martin, Massachusetts, public schooling. It had been at graduation rehearsal one week ago, and had consisted of exactly four words: *Is this my seat?*

But Beth didn’t care. And neither did Michael. The moment was bigger than either of them. She and Michael cheered wildly and pounded each other on the back.

“We did it!” Beth cried.

“We rock!” Michael replied at the same volume.

Then they let go of each other, and Beth grinned as Michael was swallowed up in the black-gowned crowd of seniors all around them.

*Never to be seen again*, she thought, *except maybe ten years down the road at a class reunion*. Somehow, though, she was ok with that. Michael Tutweiler would be her private graduation-day memory.

Beth pulled the black mortarboard hat from her head, shook her shoulder-length blonde hair free, and sighed.

High school was over.

After a moment, she turned to face the chaotic surge of her classmates back across the football field and toward the brick school building, where their families waited on the wide school lawn.

“Tuttle!” One of Beth’s younger swimming teammates launched herself at Beth. “What are we going to *do* without you next year?”

“Kick some ass,” Beth replied with a smile. “Life’ll go on, I guess.”

The other girl looked like she couldn’t imagine that, but Beth was already moving on, picking her way through the crowd of celebrating new graduates, looking for her parents.

Life *would* go on, Beth mused. She would meet new people, maybe become a new person herself—as if the eighteen years that had created the person she was right now were just a *base* for everything that would come after.

Beth was leaving for college in August. She knew that going to college meant changing her whole world. She’d watched her cousin Kelsi change in a major way this

year at Smith College. Beth watched the CW Network. She knew that high school was where people dreamed about things, and college was where people actually *did* them.

She almost wished she could go straight to college, without having the summer to wait and wonder about it. She wanted her future to begin *now*.

“Bethy!” cried her mother, and then Beth was swept up into her arms. Her mother couldn’t stop hugging and congratulating her. Her father stood to the side and snapped picture after picture: Beth with her mother, Beth with her diploma, Beth grinning and holding on to her braided gold tassel. Beth knew it was only a matter of time before these pictures were in frames all over their house.

“Okay,” Beth said when her eyes were dizzy from the flash, and her jaw was beginning to ache. “I have to return my cap and gown or they’ll charge me.”

“We’re so proud of you, sweetheart,” her mother said with a big smile, and then kissed Beth on the cheek. Beth hugged her mom back, hard.

“Take as much time as you need,” her father told her in a gruff voice.

Beth felt a surge of emotion as she looked at her parents, and tried to imagine *not* living with them anymore. She was an only child, and she had a relationship with her parents that was kind of different from the ones she knew her friends had with theirs. She knew it was dorky, but she *liked* hanging out with them sometimes. So thinking about going off to college and leaving them felt a little bittersweet.

“I’ll see you guys in a bit,” Beth murmured, feeling like she should say more, but not knowing how. The way her parents smiled at her, she thought maybe they understood.

She turned then, and headed away from them.

The past several months had been like this, Beth thought, making her way through the crowd once more. Different. Strange. Surreal. If she thought back to this time last year, it was like thinking about an alternate reality. She’d been Beth Tuttle, but a completely different version of herself.

A year ago, she’d still been with George. He’d been more than a typical boyfriend—he’d been Beth’s best friend. They’d inhabited a little world that was all about the two of them. Their own games, secret nicknames, a whole private language of jokes, dreams, and silliness. As Beth walked down the hallway of her school, she shook her head. She’d had no idea that last summer would tear them apart—that Beth would do the tearing herself—or that they’d break up for good at Thanksgiving.

Beth would have assumed, a year ago, that losing George would kill her. It nearly had, last summer. Then the autumn had arrived and they’d grown so far apart, and she felt like she needed to lose George completely in order to really live.

It still hadn’t been easy. It was like she had transferred to a new school these last few months—that’s how different things felt without George. But she’d concentrated on her college applications. She’d spent Christmas visiting her cousins, Ella, Kelsi, and Jaime, who were like sisters to Beth. Instead of treating the prom like a big romantic thing, Beth had gone with a big bunch of single girls—and they’d had a blast. She’d kept on swimming. She’d run track. She’d gotten into college.

“I did it,” Beth said out loud then, attracting the notice of one of the parents near her. She smiled when the man looked at her, mostly because she saw that he was the father of Steve Wilson, captain of the soccer team, and one of Beth’s old friends.

“Congratulation,” Steve’s father said to her politely, which made Beth want to giggle.

“Thank you,” Beth said very formally. She had to bite back a laugh at the look on Steve’s face, as his mother took what had to be the zillionth photo of him in his cap and gown.

“*Mom*,” Steve complained, “I have to find my friends.”

When she heard that, Beth admitted to herself that it felt the tiniest bit weird to finally be at graduation day without George. Well, not *without* him. She’d heard his name called during the ceremony, and it had surprised her how much she wanted to cheer and scream for him. Since she hadn’t really wanted to *see* him the past six months, it was a change.

Beth shrugged it off, then ran down the flight of stairs that led to the auditorium. Inside, the chaos was extreme. Kids were lining up to return their graduation outfits, but were using their last moments as classmates to branch off into groups, sign yearbooks, and make promises about staying close.

“Beth Tuttle! Come over here and sign my yearbook!” called a guy who Beth knew from track. His name was Paul, and he had the distinction of being both the tallest and fastest kid in their class.

“I have to return these,” Beth called back, indicating her cap and gown with one hand.

“Don’t think you can get out of it,” Paul warned, pretending to brandish his yearbook at her. “Remember, I *will* catch you!”

Beth was laughing as she turned back toward the line, and she definitely wasn’t paying attention.

So that was how she bumped into George.

Literally bumped into him. Like, with her entire upper body.

They both shot their hands out to steady themselves, and then dropped their hands abruptly when they saw who they’d collided with. It looked practically choreographed.

“Hi,” Beth said, diving right into the awkwardness. “Sorry. And, uh, congratulations.”

“You, too,” George said immediately, and more politely than she remembered him ever being. He ran a hand through his wild dark curls.

“Guess you made it after all,” Beth said, trying to smile, though it felt a little forced. Because they’d joked a long time ago that the numerous Enemies of George might bar him from participating in the graduation ceremony, simply out of spite.

Beth had a weird thought. Maybe *she* was one of the Enemies of George now. How depressing was that? She felt anxiety pool in her stomach. This was *exactly* why she’d been avoiding him for months.

George gave her a half smile. “Yeah. What a relief.”

“Uh-huh. So, what are your plans?” Beth asked quickly, aware that her face felt a little heated. She was embarrassed to be asking *George* such stiff questions, like they were strangers.

But maybe that’s what they were now. Strangers. It occurred to Beth that George probably didn’t know what her actual life plans were either. Because why should he?

“Oh, you know,” George said airily. “World domination, battling evil, an occasional dragon slaying, the usual. You?”

“Nothing quite as exciting as your Xbox,” Beth said, feeling a spark of her old wit as she raised her brows at him. “I’m going to Georgetown in the fall.”

George looked at her for a moment, and then his eyes warmed with that wicked humor she hadn’t seen in a long, long time.

“That just proves my theory, you know,” he told her.

“I’m afraid to ask what you mean by that,” Beth said, rolling her eyes in the way that only George could make her roll them.

“You shouldn’t be afraid, Beth. After all, you can’t help it. It’s only natural.”

“Help *what*?” she demanded.

“Once you go George, you never go back,” George said happily. “I’m going to think of you wearing Me Town sweatshirts for the rest of your life.”

Beth shook her head at him, but she couldn’t contain her grin. “How about you?” she asked. The *Georgetown* irony had nagged at her ever since she’d gotten her acceptance letter.

“After much consideration,” he replied solemnly, “I decided that Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, will be the lucky recipient of all that is George come fall. I’m going to Pitt.”

“Cool.” Beth nodded. She’d guessed that George might go there, since his older brother had as well. “What are you doing this summer?” she asked then, pleased that their conversation felt more normal now.

“It’s funny you should ask.” George pulled his graduation gown off, and folded it messily in his arms. Beth did the same and they stepped in the returns line together. “My friend Dean—“ He paused. “You don’t know him—we painted houses together last summer. He invited me up to his grandparents’ place, for a summer of total relaxation. It’s a cool little town in Maine. You might have heard of it. Pebble Beach?”

*Is this really my life?*

“It sounds familiar, yes,” Beth said drily.

George looked at her, then away. When he spoke again, his voice was lower.

“I didn’t want to just, like, appear in Maine. That’s your place. I wanted to respect that.” He shrugged. “I kept wanting to talk to you about it, but it never seemed like the right time.”

“Things have been weird,” Beth acknowledged.

“This is pretty much the first conversation we’ve had since . . .” George shrugged again. It was like he didn’t want to admit that it had been cold outside with snow on the ground the last time they’d spoken. Neither did Beth. “In a long time.”

“Things gave been *really* weird,” Beth clarified.

“Yeah, they have.”

They stood next to each other in the slow-moving line, quiet for a moment.

Beth thought about how tense and strange it had all been—the months of not talking to him, not sharing everything with him. Not sharing *anything*. She’d pretended not to see him in the halls. Ignored him in their classes. Acted as if they’d never had a history.

Which seemed kind of silly, now that it was all over. Now that high school was over, and everyone had to move on to something new, what did the past matter?

“I think you should go,” Beth said, tossing her hair back. “Pebble Beach wouldn’t be Pebble Beach without you.”

She almost said, *Look what happened last summer*, but thought better of it just in time. Why would she want to remind George that she'd fooled around with that lifeguard?

"Are you serious?" George asked, his dark eyes searching her face.

"Of course I'm serious," Beth said, not sure if she meant it entirely, but wanting to come off as the bigger person. "I don't think you should avoid the nicest place on the Maine coast just because I'll be there. Pebble Beach isn't *that* small. We might not even see each other."

"Like you could stay away from Ahoy Bar and Grill," George said, shaking his head at her. "I was having this recurring dream where you stumbled over me sitting at one of the booths." He shuddered. "Not pretty."

"Ahoy by definition is not pretty," Beth replied. "Try crowded and crazy."

"You love it there," George teased her.

"Can't deny it," Beth agreed.

They got to the head of the line, and had to split to their separate ends of the alphabet to return their armloads of graduation attire.

"Guess I'll see you in Maine," George called out, lifting a hand.

"See you," Beth called back, still dazed by the direction her summer had taken. So much for normal.