

A romantic scene of a couple sitting on a wooden dock by a lake at sunset. The man is shirtless and the woman is wearing a dark swimsuit. They are looking out at the water and mountains. The sky is filled with warm, golden light from the setting sun, and the mountains are silhouetted against the bright sky. The water is calm and reflects the light.

LIKE *i never* SAID

They tell each other everything.
Well... almost everything.

C.W. FARNSWORTH

LIKE

i never

SAID

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LIKE I NEVER SAID
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For anyone chasing dreams.

Don't forget to look back and appreciate how far you've already come.

Author's Note

Like I Never Said is the tenth book I've published. It's also the first full-length book I ever wrote.

When I finished the first draft back in early 2020, I had no idea what to do with it. So I set it aside and started working on a new idea, which turned into *Four Months, Three Words*. The story stayed in the back of my mind, though, and 2022 finally seemed like the right time to release it.

This version of the book has grown and evolved from the original, but at its heart Auden and Elliot's story has remained unchanged. The scenery of Canada I pictured and bits of dialogue I thought up while walking past D.C. monuments are what made me think I might be able to actually write a whole book. This novel will forever have a special place in my heart for that reason alone.

Preparing this book for publication has been a cathartic and at times harrowing experience. It's reminded me of how far my writing career has come and how second-guessing never goes away. It's hard to believe it's finally out in the world.

I hope you enjoy it.

All the best,
Charlotte

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About This Book

A lot can happen on a two-week trip to the Canadian wilderness.

Auden Harmon learns her parents' marriage is officially over. *Expected.*
Accidentally gifts a five-hundred-dollar pen to a stranger. *Unexpected.*

Neither event wreaks havoc on her life quite like meeting Elliot Reid does. He has eyes the color of the cloudy sky. A slapshot the whole country has an unhealthy obsession with. The uncanny ability to say the exact right thing, right when she needs to hear it.

They stay in touch after she leaves. Swap secrets. Become best friends. Tell each other everything.

Well...*almost* everything.

It's a thin line between love and hate. The line between love and friendship with a guy who makes mammoth-sized butterflies swarm your stomach?

Practically transparent.

But when he's made it clear friendship is all he has to offer?

You can never say it.

Part One

First Summer

Auden

I stare at the pen.

It's an expensive one, *obscenely* so, considering you can snag a cylinder filled with ink for mere pennies at a convenience store. I've never understood the allure of spending extra money on an object that can be purchased for far less and serves the same purpose.

I've also never lacked the funds for the fancier version, and maybe that's what tarnishes the appeal to me. That, or the fact that a high price tag doesn't make a gift any more meaningful.

For an ordinary, inanimate object, the shiny pen resting on scarred wood before me is a remarkably accurate summary of my parents and our relationship. Sixteen years of prolonged absences, interspersed with fancy dinners and expensive gifts representing the only way they know how to share affection. The black Montclair pen was a birthday gift I received two weeks ago. My father proudly proclaimed it to be a symbol of the path to academic success I am following him on, followed by a reminder that I should start prepping for college. I'd barely finished my sophomore year of high school. Until a couple of hours ago, that was the last time I talked to him. He returned to our beachside mansion for the first time in fifteen days so he and my mother could call me together to inform me they are getting divorced.

Ironic, if you really think about it. The end of a marriage doesn't usually bring people together. I think the last time all three of us were part of the same conversation was that birthday dinner. I mostly communicate with my parents through their respective secretaries. All it took was them getting a divorce to spend more than a few minutes in the same room together.

I grew up with the knowledge that my parents' relationship was far from conventional. By the time I was old enough to formulate some concept of what love is, I knew they weren't an example of it. They're excellent at acting as a united front in public. In private, their lives couldn't be more removed from each other. My father is a high-powered attorney, catering to the whims of the entertainment industry. My mother runs a successful fashion empire that frequently pulls her to all corners of the globe for shows, photo shoots, and meetings.

Quality time with my parents has never existed.

I'm not surprised they're separating—I'm surprised it's taken this long. Almost comically, I'm pretty certain their marriage has lasted until now because they're both so busy they're just finally getting around to it.

My parents are highly accomplished people. They're also cowards who only thrive on conflict if it takes place at work. The mystery of why I was shipped off to my aunt's house in the middle of nowhere, Canada, for two weeks was solved the second I picked up the phone twenty minutes ago—the same reason they decided a fancy pen was an appropriate gift for someone under the age of sixty and the proper pre-emptive apology for missing the rest of my birthday to handle work emergencies. I mostly use it to doodle.

Three days into my stay in a town you'd need a map and a magnifying glass to find, and I'm spending a second straight day in a coffee shop constructed mostly of dark wood and black metal. It feels like being inside a wood cabin that's been partially converted into a warehouse.

On my first day in Canmore, I occupied myself by reading in my aunt's backyard. Half the town is situated on a lake, with a view that rivals the multi-million-dollar one of the Pacific Ocean I usually wake up to. My aunt's place isn't waterfront, but you can see the lake from the deck that juts off the back side of the house. I occupied my second morning wandering around the few blocks that make up the "downtown" before ducking in here for a drink and a quiet spot to focus on my daily round of Wordle. Today, I returned—and brought schoolwork.

I pick up my pen, twirl it, and resign myself to rereading the four-page assignment I've already skimmed twice. The laidback, beachfront Californian high schools you see on teen television dramas are about as opposite from my academic experience as one could be. You don't skip class at Fairfield Academy to go surfing or shopping unless you want to earn a few weeks' worth of detention.

The thick stack of summer work sitting in front of me makes that clear. It also says my low expectations for this trip have already proven to be too high.

I'm doing schoolwork.

In *July*.

My mother's younger sister, Katherine, is the black sheep of the family. She moved north about sixteen years ago with a Canadian guy she met at college in Chicago who split shortly after she got pregnant. She ended up in Canmore and has lived here ever since, running a freelance photography business that seems to be successful, considering she's managed to make a living with it.

I could *easily* count the number of minutes I've spent with my Aunt Katherine up until she picked me up from the Calgary airport and drove an hour to the small town where she lives. They wouldn't add up to much. Aunt Katherine and my mother are about as opposite as two people can be. My grandparents' conservative, old-fashioned outlook on life didn't meld well with their younger daughter's life choices. And my mother followed their lead.

I doubted my mother's claim that handing me a plane ticket to Canada for two weeks was an attempt to reconnect with her family. She's more the double down type than one to extend an olive branch, not to mention the fact that I didn't see *her* boarding a plane bound for the northern wilderness. I knew there was more to the story; I just didn't consider that it was a choice to get me out of the house so my dad could move out.

I should have seen it coming.

The man sitting at the table next to me begins coughing. I slide my headphones out of my bag and connect them to my phone so I can listen to music. Adele's melancholy bellow begins crooning through the tiny speakers as I scan the other people choosing to spend a warm, sunny summer day in a dimly lit coffee shop.

I have yet to encounter a single Canmore resident under the age of thirty. I haven't wanted to offend my aunt by asking her—and she hasn't been around long enough for me to ask even if I wanted to—so I have no idea if that's due to the demographics of this town or just the clientele of this coffee shop. It would be a better question for my cousin Annabel, who is just four months younger than me. I haven't seen her since I was eight. She and Katherine came to my grandparents' for the holidays nearly a decade ago,

and based on the fact that it was a onetime occurrence, I don't think it was the smoothest of visits.

After sitting around the house for a day waiting to re-meet my cousin, I gave up on her as a potential ally. Two additional days of not so much as seeing her haven't exactly convinced me her absence is a coincidence. During the fifteen minutes she was home for yesterday, Katherine mentioned Annabel has "a lot of summer plans." I can read between the lines.

My phone buzzes on the wooden tabletop. I flip it over to see the screen is covered with messages. I had plans for this summer, too. They didn't involve a detour here.

The latest text is from my best friend Lana.

Lana: *How is it????*

I sigh and start to type a response. Then I delete it and start over.

Lana's father works with mine. If I confide in Lana—or any of my friends—about the real reason for this impromptu trip to another country in the middle of the summer, my parents will somehow hear about it. Until my father's law firm and my mother's company come to a consensus on how to handle the public relations implications of their marriage ending, I'm not supposed to tell anyone about the separation.

I deliberate for a couple of minutes, then finally reply.

Auden: *Boring but okay so far*

As soon as I send it, a shadow falls over the table. I glance up to see a blond boy who—shockingly—looks to be close to my age, picking up the pen I set down to reply to Lana. His lips are moving, so I pull out my earbuds during the bellowing chorus of "Hello".

"What?" I ask him. Rather rudely, but I'm having a crappy day.

He seems unbothered by my brisk tone. He's cute, and that often comes with confidence.

"I was asking if I could borrow your pen," the guy informs me, spinning the overpriced writing utensil between two long fingers. "We've got a bunch of posters to put up and one of these idiots messed up the time on them all."

He jerks a thumb back, indicating one of the two guys hovering a few feet behind him. One has ash blond hair and is holding a thick stack of papers as he stares out the window at the street, while the other guy, who has reddish-brown hair, is typing something on his phone. All three of them are dressed casually in athletic shorts and t-shirts.

"Oh. Uh, sure," I reply, caught off guard by the unexpected request. At

the sound of my voice, the two other guys shift their attention to me.

The one with reddish hair grins with obvious interest, while the blond looks at the papers spread out on the table.

“You’re doing homework?” the blond asks.

“Summer work,” I reply. “My high school doesn’t understand the concept of time off.” Do Canadians call it high school? I have no clue, honestly. My knowledge of the country I’m currently visiting begins and ends with prime minister memes and maple leaves.

“You’re American?” the redhead questions.

“Yep,” I confirm, surprised he can tell.

“Well, if you need a tour guide...we’re available.” The guy holding my pen grins at me. “I’m Josh, and these two fools are Oliver”—he nods to the blond—“and Lucas.” Lucas has the auburn hair. If he was being as friendly as Josh, I’d compliment him on the vibrant hue. I’ve always thought my own dark shade of brown is boring.

“Nice to meet you guys,” I respond. “I’m Auden.” I don’t reply to his offer to show me around. Would it be nice to have something to do and someone to hang out with? Absolutely. But I can’t recall the last time I was around guys who haven’t attended the same private school I have since kindergarten. It takes me time to warm up to people, and I’ll be gone in ten days. At least getting these school assignments finished means I can lounge at the beach for the rest of the summer once I get back home.

Josh opens his mouth to say something, but a new voice speaks before he can. “Seriously? How long does it take to put up a piece of paper, eh?”

I glance up...and my mind promptly becomes a mushy glop of half-formed sentences. There’s a fourth guy standing by my table now. The three others are all cute. Tall. Muscular. Cheeky smiles. The same could be said about the latest arrival, but there’s something different about him.

I’ve never just *looked* at someone and immediately known they have something special to offer the world. Until now.

This guy’s presence changes the energy around me, like he’s surrounded by a force field that won’t allow you to ignore it. Oliver and Lucas move out of his way as he approaches, suggesting he’s the leader of their group.

“What took you so long?” Josh asks him as he reaches the edge of my table. “Thought you ditched us to go to the lake.”

The new boy runs a hand through his short, dark hair, ruffling the longer strands on top, and the move emphasizes the sharp angles of his cheekbones

and jaw. His appearance is the very definition of the word hot, the sort of attractive you see on a stranger and can picture perfectly two years later.

“Notre Dame called,” he replies.

Oliver rolls his eyes at that response. “Jesus, Reid, if I could be you for just one day.”

Lucas laughs. “You’ve got to be the only sixteen-year-old they’ve ever recruited.”

“I am,” the boy says simply.

They begin talking amongst themselves, so I drop my gaze back down to my papers. I risk a glance up a minute later, only to find the new guy—Reid—already looking at me. His eyes are as striking as the rest of his appearance, the most memorable shade of blue-gray I’ve ever seen. They’re the exact color of an ocean wave reflecting a cloudy sky.

The left corner of his mouth curls up when our eyes make contact, and I’m momentarily seared by stormy blue fire. The heat that races through my body catches me completely off guard. Guys don’t typically affect me. Colton Rodgers—generally considered to be the most popular guy at Fairfield Academy—asked me to homecoming last fall. My body couldn’t be bothered to summon a single tingle.

“This is Auden,” Josh says, noticing the new boy’s attention on me. “She offered her writing utensil so we can save Luke’s ass.”

I finally join the conversation. “Offered?” I laugh. “You took it and *then* asked for permission.” I keep my focus on Josh. I can still feel the blue-gray eyes on me, and it’s incredibly distracting.

“That sounds like Hawley,” the boy with the ocean-colored gaze states, causing Josh to snort. “I’m Elliot, by the way.”

Reid must be Elliot’s last name, then? I’ve never understood why guys back home call each other by their last names, but clearly it’s an international trend.

I shift my eyes from Josh back to Elliot, prepared for the electric jolt that accompanies his attention this time. He’s holding a steady hand out. More formal than I expected, but it beats the way one of the other two guys—Oliver or Lucas, I can’t remember who’s who anymore—is looking at my bare legs. I study the tan, calloused skin of Elliot’s hand before slowly placing my smaller, paler hand in his. His warm palm envelops mine. I keep my eyes locked on his, attempting to ignore the stampede of mammoth-sized butterflies suddenly swarming in my stomach. Awareness sparks up my nerve

endings and sends shivers down my spine.

He's just a guy.

"I'm Auden," I inform him.

Elliot grins, wide and full. "That would have been my first guess," he replies, and I mentally cringe as I remember that Josh had already told him my name. I'm not normally this socially inept.

"I like to make my own introductions," I declare, attempting to play it cool. But also, who *am* I? A *mobster*?

Elliot's smile grows even broader at my response. He's either amused or thinks I'm the type of ridiculous that's entertaining. Good thing I don't care either way.

"It's almost two—we've got to get moving on the posters," Josh announces. I startle when he speaks. I temporarily forgot about the three other guys standing next to my table. Based on Josh's small smirk, he noticed.

"You mean *after* we fix them all," Oliver states, glancing at Lucas and rolling his eyes.

"Next time, don't leave all the work to me!" Lucas snaps defensively.

"C'mon, we can do it quickly," Josh replies. "Let's head over there." He points to an open table in the opposite corner of the shop.

Oliver nods in response. Lucas grumbles a "Fine."

"See you around, Auden," Josh says. "Tour offer stands. Thanks for the pen!"

I didn't realize he intended to keep the five-hundred-dollar pen, but I'm sick of staring at it, so I'm more relieved than annoyed. I just nod in response. Lucas and Oliver are already walking toward the table Josh spotted. Elliot is now talking to the older man seated at the table next to mine. The level of enthusiasm in the conversation appears to be one-sided.

Elliot is smiling, but it looks forced, not as carefree as the grin he flashed me moments ago. Josh inserts himself into the exchange, nodding and smiling before punching Elliot in the arm and jerking his head toward the table Oliver and Lucas are already seated at.

I'm not expecting Elliot to glance at me before following him over, but he does. I quickly look down at the table in an attempt to hide the fact that I was staring at him, trying to look busy as I shuffle around the papers detailing my summer assignments.

I don't put my headphones back in, which allows me to hear the

occasional laugh or jeer from the corner, but the hubbub within the coffee shop prevents me from making out anything the group of guys are actually saying. I keep my eyes trained down and do my best to focus on the list of assignments I'm slowly working my way through. If I keep this pace up, I'll finish everything by the time I board an airplane to return to Los Angeles.

I'm midway through outlining an essay when a shadow falls over my table again.

"Here to steal another pen?" I joke, lifting my head to look at Josh—only it's not Josh. My eyes collide with a shade of blue that suddenly seems familiar.

"Nope," Elliot says lightly, setting my black pen back down on the wooden table. "The opposite. My gramps has a thing about fancy pens. Pretty sure Hawley has no clue he just lifted a few hundred bucks from you." He takes a couple of steps backward, toward the door. The other three boys are already standing near the exit, eyeing us with interest. "Bye, Auden."

"Bye," I repeat, unnecessarily. He's already gone.

I stay at the coffee shop for another hour, in no rush to return to my aunt's empty house. Eventually, I toss everything back into my bag and stand up to clear my coffee mug before heading outside. The air is warm, but nowhere near as hot as I'm used to.

I trudge back to Katherine's slowly, dreading another evening spent watching a movie on my laptop or lying to my friends. It's six blocks back to my aunt's house, which is a modest white Colonial with a small yard.

Despite my reluctance to make this trip, I can't deny the little Canadian town of Canmore has an abundance of charm and character sorely missing from the suburban sprawl I grew up in. I reach the house, walk up the brick front steps, and use the key Katherine gave me to open the front door. I head for the kitchen first, suddenly starving. The assortment of pastries I consumed at the coffee shop have long since been digested.

My quest for food is forgotten when I realize the kitchen is not empty as I've come to expect.

"Hello?" I say hesitantly to a head of light blonde hair. I don't think the slender girl wearing skinny jeans and a pink tank top came here to rob the place. She turns around when I speak, and I hardly recognize the pigtailed eight-year-old I played Candyland with at my grandparents' annual Fourth of July party. Her hair is painstakingly straightened, falling in a perfect sheet. Her face is heavily painted with makeup that makes her look older than

sixteen—older than me.

“Oh. Hi.” Annabel’s voice holds the amount of enthusiasm one would greet a gnat with. “You’re here.” She couldn’t sound less enthused about that fact. I surmised that her disappearing act since I arrived indicated a lack of excitement about my visit, but I feel a fresh surge of disappointment as I’m presented with firm evidence.

“Yep. *I’m here,*” I respond, letting some sarcasm saturate my tone. Annabel simply turns back to her sandwich, but I soldier on, determined to at least attempt to connect with her. “So, it’s been a while...” *Try eight years.* “What have you been, uh, up to?” I receive no response, just a slight shrug that tells me she heard me.

The doorbell rings. Annabel brushes past me wordlessly and heads to the front entryway. Loud exclamations filter into the kitchen, and I glance around the corner to see a group of four girls standing in the hallway. They’re all dressed similarly to Annabel, sporting tight clothes and perfect makeup as they gush over each other’s appearance. Annabel stands in the center of the group, chattering away.

Obviously, I *should* be taking her ice queen attitude personally. The noise level in the hallway only continues to escalate, so I grab a granola bar from the pantry and head upstairs to the guest room—my current bedroom. I flop down on the bed, munching on the bar and staring at the ceiling.

The chatter grows louder again, indicating that the horde of girls downstairs has relocated to Annabel’s room across the hall. Realizing I won’t get any peace and quiet here, I roll off my bed and sift through my oversized suitcase for my running clothes. I can hear the girls’ shrieks continue as I quickly change into a pair of athletic shorts and a t-shirt, then grab my phone and headphones.

I open my door slowly, hoping to avoid running into Annabel again. The hallway is empty, so I tiptoe toward the stairs. I can hear the girls gossiping loudly. I can’t make out all of what they’re saying, just a smattering of words as I head down the hallway. It sounds like they’re talking about boys. I chuckle under my breath. While some of my friends turned entirely boy crazy come middle school, my closest ones have always remained fairly levelheaded. Although Lana *is* always trying to talk me into going to USC parties with her.

Hearing Annabel and her friends talking sounds more like a teen sitcom than anything I can relate to. It occurs to me that if *all* the boys in this town

look like Elliot and his friends, I could understand the inclination. I hurry the rest of the way down the staircase and out the front door, popping in my headphones as I begin to jog down the quiet, tree-lined road.

When I walk back through the front door forty-five minutes later, I'm unexpectedly hit with the mouthwatering aroma of roasting garlic and tomatoes. I walk into the kitchen to find Aunt Katherine pouring dry pasta into a pot of boiling water. A saucepan filled with bubbling red liquid sits on the stove.

"You're home!" I state the obvious, but I'm genuinely surprised. My last few dinners here have consisted of frozen pizza.

My aunt spins around from the stove, smiling. "I am! I'm sorry I've been so busy, sweetie. Summer is especially hectic with bookings."

"It's fine," I respond. "I'm the one who appeared on your doorstep out of nowhere." More like my parents dropped me here, but still—not her problem.

"Nonsense, I'm so glad you're here," Katherine replies genuinely. "I'm just sorry work is this crazy right now." She turns back around to stir the sauce. "How are you liking Canmore so far?" she asks over one shoulder.

I take a seat at the kitchen counter. "It's beautiful here. I found a coffee shop where I've gotten a lot of my summer work done."

"Summer work?"

"I've got tons of it, and not much else to do here, so I figured..." I trail off awkwardly.

"Nothing wrong with working hard." She pauses. "As long as you take a break when you need it."

I'm beginning to see why Katherine doesn't get along with her parents, not to mention mine. If you ask any of them, breaks are for the uninspired and mediocre.

Annabel emerges from her room for dinner for the first time since I arrived, which puts Katherine in an excellent mood. There's no sign of her friends who were here earlier. They must have left while I was on my run. The meal isn't as awkward as I feared. Katherine asks me a deluge of questions about my mom, California, and school, leaving Annabel to roll her eyes and pick at her pasta. I try to be polite, but mostly I just lie a lot.

We're almost finished eating when Katherine turns to her daughter and asks, "Isn't tonight the carnival?"

Annabel grunts in response. Katherine frowns.

"What's the carnival?" I ask, trying to ease the tension between them. Annabel and Katherine's dynamic is different than I envisioned. As far as I know, it's always just been the two of them, so I expected them to be close, not to mention the fact that Katherine seems to have the necessary qualifications for connecting with a child that my own mother lacks—like an interest in doing so.

"It's an annual Canmore tradition," Katherine replies. "It's a great event. People from all over come to town for it. I was hoping the three of us could go after dinner, but I had an engagement shoot get rescheduled, so I don't think I'll be able to make it." She gives me an apologetic look.

"It's fine," I'm quick to assure her.

"But Annabel always goes with her friends," Katherine continues. "I was hoping they'd include you."

"Mom," Annabel groans, ignoring the fact that I'm sitting directly across from her. "You can't *force* me to hang out with her. I have plans with my friends."

"Annabel Marie," Aunt Katherine scolds. "How dare you speak that way! Auden doesn't know anyone here. You should introduce her to your friends—you're practically the same age."

"It's fine," I jump in. I have no desire to defend Annabel, but the last thing I want to do is cause problems between her and my aunt. I also have no interest in attending the carnival with Annabel and her posse, even if I were welcome, so I quickly come up with an excuse. "My mom's supposed to call tonight, and I haven't had the chance to talk to her recently." Except for when she dropped that little divorce bomb earlier, though I'm not allowed to share that tidbit.

Katherine nods. "Okay. I should have checked with you first, Auden."

I guess I should be grateful for my mom's lack of communication with her sister right about now. If they were closer, there's no way Katherine would be buying my bullshit. My mom was headed to the airport right after the joint call with my father ended. I don't even know what time zone she's in at the moment.

The rest of the meal passes uneventfully. Annabel leaves to get ready for the carnival at a friend's house as soon as we finish eating. After saying

goodbye to me, Katherine leaves for her photo shoot.

Home alone. Again.

I shower off my run, then lie on my bed for a while, browsing through Netflix for something to watch. Eventually, I grow bored of the endless stream of options. I work on a watercolor painting I started on the plane, then grow sick of that, too. I change out of the sweatpants I put on after my shower into a pair of jeans and a t-shirt.

After locking up the house and sliding my phone into my pocket, I start walking down the street. Neither Annabel nor Katherine mentioned where the carnival is taking place, but I figure it must be in the direction of downtown. Eventually, I start following the foot traffic.

The event is set up in a park that overlooks the lake. I'm shocked by the size of the fair and the turnout. Every impression I've gotten of Canmore so far is that it's a sleepy, quiet town. The sudden appearance of crowds, lights, and noise is disorienting.

Loud, upbeat pop music streams through hidden speakers, mixing with the shouts of small children and the chatter of the hundreds of people milling about. I smile at the joyful scene as I walk under the balloon arch marking the entrance.

I pass young families, elderly couples, and several groups of teenagers. None of them include Annabel, and I'm glad. I'm certain she would just ignore me if she saw me, but I would rather avoid her entirely.

I buy an ice cream cone from one of the food trucks and then continue walking around, taking in the joy and excitement permeating the air around me. After a couple of laps around the carnival, I wander away from the commotion. I've been down to the lake's shore before, but never at night. I follow a footworn path to the start of the town dock, which juts out about thirty feet. When I reach the very end of it, I take a seat, kicking my shoes off and rolling up the ends of my jeans so I can dip my feet into the cool water. The lights from the houses that line the shore glimmer on the smooth, dark surface. Past it, the houses that encircle the lake are laid out in a map of sparks, with the dark mountains hovering in the distance.

It's a stunning view.

One I've never seen before.

But, oddly, it looks like home in a way California never has.

Elliot

My favorite part of Canmore is the lake. I spend most of the summer on or near the rippling water I'm staring out at. In the winter, it turns into a sheet of ice that's my favorite surface to skate on. The warm breeze ruffling the leaves on the trees lining the shore makes the arctic temperatures necessary for the lake to freeze feel pretty far away, though.

Lucas does a cannonball off the dock. I smirk as he hits the surface of the smooth water with more of a belly slap.

"Some things never change." Josh snorts as he takes a seat in the Adirondack chair next to one I'm slouching in. We both laugh when Luke breaks the surface of the water, wincing. "That'll leave a mark."

A couple of girls pass by us to grab drinks from the cooler on the dock, giggling as they glance over.

"You going there tonight?" Josh asks, nodding to them with a knowing smirk.

I lean back and stretch my legs out. "Nah, I don't think so. I'm headed to the rink early, so I'll probably call it a night fairly early."

Josh eyes me, appearing incredulous. "Dude, it's summer. I seriously thought you were going to chill out for once."

I scoff before taking a swig from the bottle of beer I'm holding. "I *seriously thought* you knew me better than that." The chair creaks as I stand.

Josh groans. "You're leaving already?"

"Nope. Just sick of talking to you." I laugh when he flips me off, then head back for the shore. I snag the sweatshirt I left by the other two coolers, shrug it on, and then wander toward the town dock.

Tonight is the annual Canmore carnival. The lights from the Ferris wheel

shimmer on the surface of the lake. Shouts and upbeat music sound in the distance. When I was a kid, I loved it. Like a lot of things, it's lost its luster as I've grown up.

There's already someone sitting at the very end of the pier. I walk halfway down the wooden planks anyway, my stomach grumbling when the wind blows the scent of fried food across my face.

I pause three-quarters of the way along, planning to turn back. The figure down at the end looks like a female one, and girls tend to think me approaching them means I'm looking for a girlfriend. Last year, I found the endless stream of attention flattering. I've only just completed grade 10, but I'm looking ahead to college. I've gotten interest from American universities: prestigious Division I programs that will all but guarantee me a one-way ticket to a professional career. No girl is worth messing that up for.

A pontoon boat chugs along to the left, and the figure in front of me glances at it. I'm surprised to realize I recognize her face, even more surprised when I act on instinct and keep walking to the end of the pier.

I like to be in control. Off the ice, I rarely make split-second decisions.

But I take a seat beside the girl from the coffee shop like I've known her for years. Because bizarrely, it feels like I *do* know her. I even remember her name. "Hey, Auden."

She glances over. Surprise then recognition flash across her face. "Elliot. Hi."

She remembered my name, too, and it gives me a small, silly thrill of satisfaction I'm not expecting.

"You check out the carnival?" I nod toward the lights and sound to our right.

"Yep. This town really knows how to party."

I smile at the sarcasm. "Where are you from?"

"California."

"So...palm trees and movies?"

She rolls her eyes. "Uh-huh."

"What made you trade all that for a visit to a small-town amusement park?"

Auden is silent—for long enough that I start to count the seconds. If the carnival's music were any louder than a muffled pounding in the distance, I'd repeat the question, but I know she heard me.

After twenty-seven seconds, she answers. "My parents are getting

divorced. I found out this morning.”

Sorry gets overused. I didn't break up her parents' marriage. I respond with “You don't seem upset about it” instead. Maybe that's an insensitive thing to say. A normal response would be *I'm sorry*, but I don't know her, and I sure as hell don't know her parents. What would I be apologizing for? I'd say *That sucks*, but again, she doesn't seem upset about it.

She doesn't seem offended by the observation. She flicks the water a couple of times with her bare feet. She's dressed casually, in jeans and a t-shirt, but her toes are painted pink, making me think she might be more of a girly girl than her casual outfit lets on.

“Yeah. I'm not. More annoyed?”

“Annoyed? Why?”

Auden sighs. “It's inconvenient. For me.” She glances at me. “I know that sounds terrible and selfish, but my parents aren't in love. They haven't been for as long as I can remember...I'm not sure if they ever were. I'm *fine* with them getting divorced, if that's what they both want. Their lives haven't changed at all, but so far it's gotten me shipped off to the Canadian wilderness, and when I get home... Well, I'm going to get a lot of questions from a lot of people that I don't want to answer.”

“Are your parents famous or something?”

“Or something. They know a lot of famous people,” she replies.

“I hope you know you've basically confirmed every stereotype I've heard about California.”

She laughs. Laughs aren't usually something I notice about a person. They simply register as sounds of amusement, but Auden has a laugh that sinks in. It's a sparkler in verbal form that fizzles and demands attention.

“Have you ever been to the States?” she asks me.

“Once. I... My dad lives there now.”

“Your parents aren't together?”

I shake my head. I can't remember the last time I talked to someone who didn't already know my family's backstory. I hate talking about my father. It's the one topic that manages to make me sad and piss me off simultaneously. Even so, I elaborate. The words fly out of my mouth without me thinking about them, the same way I sat down here and haven't moved since.

“No. My dad left when I was little.”

She doesn't offer an apology either. “Does he come back much? Your

dad?"

"Never."

"His loss."

"I like to think so." I lean back on my palms, adopting a more casual pose. "How come you ended up in this part of the *Canadian wilderness*?"

It's hard to tell in the dim light, but I think she blushes. "Um, sorry. Was that offensive? I just meant..."

I cut her off with a chuckle. "I'm not offended. Just curious."

"Oh. Uh, my aunt lives here?" It comes out like a question. "And my cousin. I was supposed to reconnect with extended family." She uses finger quotes around reconnect. "But now I'm thinking it was more an attempt to get me out of town so my dad can move out." She shrugs.

"You've never been before?"

"To Canmore? No. It's, uh...nice?" She laughs, then tucks a piece of dark hair behind one ear. I study her profile in the moonlight as she chews on her bottom lip. "Just quieter than I'm used to, and I don't really know anyone. Until you and your friends came in this morning, I thought I was in a retirement community."

I laugh. I can't remember the last time I was this amused by someone. "What about your cousin?"

Auden makes a face. "If you ask her, I'm not cool enough to hang out with."

"I seriously doubt that."

Rather than flattered, she appears amused. "You can tell that after one conversation?"

"Two," I correct. "And yeah. You can tell a lot about a person right away. Most people just pretend otherwise if they don't like what they see."

She mirrors my pose and leans back on her palms. "Oh yeah? What can you tell about me?"

I smirk at the challenge in her voice. "You're responsible." She raises both eyebrows. "You were doing summer work in July."

"Impressive work, Sherlock," she says sarcastically.

"You're an only child," I add.

"How'd you know that?"

"Lucky guess. You haven't mentioned any siblings." She breathes out a laugh. "And you're artistic."

Auden has blue eyes. Dark, almost navy. White surrounds the pupils as

she widens them at me.

“You’ve got paint on your hands,” I note.

“Oh. Um...yeah, sometimes.”

“You any good?”

She twists the hem of her shirt. “I’m my own worst critic.”

“Yeah, I get that.” No coach has ever told me something I hadn’t already yelled at myself about.

Auden pulls her feet out of the water, turns, and faces me, pulling her knees up under her chin. “Okay, my turn.”

I smirk. “Go ahead.” I know I’m a hard person to read.

Her eyes narrow, like she knows what I’m thinking. “I’ve done most of the talking,” she says. My smirk widens. “I think you’re *that guy*, the popular, cocky one who never had to think about where to sit at lunch or having a partner for a project.”

“That’s awfully—”

“I also think it bothers you,” she interrupts. “The man next to me in the coffee shop was all excited to talk to you. You ended the conversation as quickly as you could, and now, when you could be off at a party, you’re wandering around here by yourself instead.”

“Way to make me sound like a creep,” I mutter.

She half-giggles, half-scoffs. “You must do something that draws attention to you, something you like more than you dislike the attention.” She pauses. “You look like you could hit the hammer thingy at the carnival without breaking a sweat, so I’m going to guess sports. Hockey, since that’s the only Canadian sport I know.”

“Curling.”

“Huh?”

“Curling is another Canadian sport.”

“Oh.” She lifts her chin off her knees. “Do you play curling? Do you curl? Are you a curler? I don’t know what the proper terminology is.”

I laugh, then sigh. “No. I play hockey.”

Her face says *Ha!* “Damn. Maybe we should open up a detective agency.” She smiles widely. For some reason, this is the moment where it really registers that she’s cute—very cute. Auden’s hair is dark, long, and wavy. Her skin is clear and lightly sprinkled with freckles. And her lips look soft. Kissable.

“We’re a long way from any crime hotspots,” I say in response. The town

paper publishes an amusing assortment of stray cat calls and neighbor spats over fence lines.

“How’d I do on the other two?” she asks.

“Aside from making me sound like an antisocial douche?” I tease. She rolls her eyes. “Pretty good. I... Sometimes the attention is nice, flattering. It can also be really annoying.”

I don’t mention my dad.

“So, are you any good?”

She mirrors my earlier question, so I match her same response. “I’m my own worst critic.”

“No one’s ever seen my artwork,” she tells me. “I’m my *only* critic. Obviously, other people have seen you play hockey. You’re good, right?”

I nod.

“I took tennis lessons for a while in middle school. That’s really the only sport I know anything about. But one day when you’re a famous hockey player, I’ll be able to say I met you once back when you had to hang up your own posters.”

“Once?” I snort. “I think you’re underestimating how small this town really is. If you’re here for another week, we’ll probably run into each other at least four more times.”

“I’m here until next Tuesday.”

Ten days. Why does that sound so short?

“More than four, then,” I hypothesize. “Especially if we make plans to hang out.”

“Are you asking me out?” She sounds surprised, definitely. I can’t detect if there’s any positive or negative emotion underneath. It doesn’t matter either way.

“Nah,” I reply. “I like you too much to date you.”

Her nose wrinkles, and it’s kind of cute. “Uh, thanks?”

I chuckle. “I’m selfish. I have priorities, and girls aren’t high on the list. Anyone who pulled me away...I’d end up resenting them. The way my mom resented my dad. The way he resented her.” I shrug. “There’s an easy way to avoid that mess.”

“That’s awfully cynical,” she observes.

I shrug. “I’m a realist. Relationships usually end badly. Isn’t that why you’re here?”

She scoffs. “Thanks for the reminder.”

“Sorry.” I wince. I’m worried I’ve actually upset her, and *that* worries me—I rarely care what people think.

“It’s fine. You’re right.” She pauses, then puts one foot back in the lake, splashing the surface. “Well, I should go do...something.”

I’m not expecting the disappointment. More accurately, the panic. Despite what I told her, I’m oddly freaked out I’ll never see her again. Bizarre on many levels.

“What are you going to do? I thought you don’t have any friends here.”

She stares at me. “Dude, seriously? Have you talked to a girl before?”

I laugh harder than I have in a while. If she only knew. “Yeah, but they usually do most of the talking.”

“Imagine that.”

I grin. “You should come back to Josh’s with me. He’s got tons of people over.” She looks confused. “Josh? The pen stealer,” I add.

“Yeah, I remember. I just...I don’t really think I’m in the mood to go to a party of strangers right now.”

“I’ll be there.”

“I met you today.”

“So?”

“So that makes you a stranger. I don’t even remember your last name.”

“It’s Reid.”

“Elliot Reid *totally* sounds like a charming sociopath.” She doesn’t fully get the sentence out with a straight face.

“Uh-huh. Auden...”

She sticks a hand out like we’re about to close a business deal. “Auden Lane Harmon.”

I shake it. “You have two first names?”

“No. Lane is my middle name. My parents cursed me with a first name that has no nickname options, so some of my friends—because I do have some, thanks, just not here—call me Laney.”

God, I’m setting a record for number of laughs around this girl. “You have nickname options.”

Her eyebrows rise. “Name *one*.”

“Audie?” I suggest.

Her nose scrunches. “Like the car?”

“Denny?”

“Nice to know I remind you of a fast-food chain, Tim Horton.”

I laugh. “It suits you.”

Her eyes narrow.

My phone begins buzzing in my pocket. I have no idea how long I’ve been sitting here, talking to her, but I’m guessing it’s one of the guys wondering where the hell I am.

I shove myself upward and offer her a hand. “Come on.”

She takes it and I pull her to standing as well, but when I start trying to walk, she doesn’t move. “Here’s the thing: I may be from a big city, but I do terribly in strange social situations. I’ve known my best friend, and everyone else I go to school with, since we were all in preschool.”

“Trust me.”

“I don’t know you.”

“Yeah, but you will, and you can trust me, Auden Lane Harmon.”

She studies me, and I watch the indecision play across her face. This moment feels more important than getting a hot girl to hang out with me.

For some strange reason, what this girl thinks and does matters to me. She has one of those faces where you discover something new every time you look at it, one that draws you in more and more the longer you stare.

“Okay.” She starts walking, and I let out a breath I didn’t realize I was holding. “I’m trusting you, so don’t fuck it up. ’Kay?”

Girls don’t usually swear around me, though Josh has a dirty mouth and plenty of F-bombs get tossed around on the ice. It’s nothing I haven’t heard before, but it sounds different coming from a girl—from Auden.

“I thought Californians were supposed to be laidback, hippie types,” I tease.

“Not me.”

“Yeah, I’m getting that.”

We pick our way along the shore. The lights of Josh’s family’s house shine ahead, slightly illuminating our way. The campfire by the water has burned down, the embers barely visible from here.

I’m still holding her hand, and I squeeze it as we approach the group of people standing around the yard. She has nothing to be worried about. I may hardly know her, but I won’t let anyone be rude to her.

Plenty of people do double takes. Interest comes with the territory of having a famous father, and—as Auden pointed out—I’m not exactly a social pariah. My peers care where I go. What I do. Who I do it with. And I’ve shown up somewhere with a girl a grand total of...never.

They usually come up to me, and I indulge in the opposite sex plenty. I'm a straight guy, and I'd be lying if the fact that most girls I encounter are interested in me isn't flattering. But I don't have the time or the emotional capacity for a girlfriend, and I'll be living in Canmore for at least two more years. I've seen how pissing off a significant portion of the female portion has worked out for some of my teammates, and I've got zero interest in getting involved in that drama.

I tug Auden to the left, toward the Hawleys' private dock. Keeping a hold of her hand is convenient for steering purposes. It also sends a clear signal to every guy here. That's one thing my status is good for, I guess. No one will flirt with her if they know she's here with me.

"Auden?" Annabel Grant stands and takes a step away from the Adirondack chair she was just leaning against.

Two of my teammates, Johnny and Corey, are sitting with her and a bunch of other girls in our year. Corey's eyes are glued to Auden. He makes the mistake of looking away and meeting my gaze, and I give my head a sharp shake. *Off limits*. He nods in acknowledgement, leaving me to suffocate in confusion. *What. The. Hell?* I've never laid any sort of claim to any girl, let alone one I just met.

I shake off the strange inclination and shift to looking at Annabel. Her eyes are bouncing between me and Auden, obviously trying to assess the dynamic between us.

"What are *you* doing here?" She crosses her arms, adopting a confrontational stance.

"I got sick of sitting around an empty house by myself," Auden replies. Annoyance fills her tone as I put it together.

Annabel is Auden's cousin?

"You—how—you know Elliot?" Annabel looks at me.

Annabel and I have run in the same social circle for years, but I wouldn't call us friends. I feel more loyalty toward the girl next to me than the one with her arms crossed.

"Oh yeah. Me and Denny go *way back*," I reply before Auden can. Auden glances at me, surprise obvious on her face. "See you guys later." I nod an acknowledgment to my teammates, then pull her away. "Annabel Grant is your cousin?" I ask once we're out of earshot.

"Yeah. Do you know her?"

"Not really. We run with some of the same crowd." She's also flirted

shamelessly with me for years, but I've never gone there with her. Now I'm especially glad since that's not something I'd want to have to admit to Auden. Based on that interaction, she wasn't exaggerating about her lack of relationship with her cousin.

"So we go *way back*, huh? All the way to *this afternoon*?"

I smirk at her. "You ashamed of our friendship, Denny?"

"If you keep calling me Denny, absolutely."

That makes me laugh again. Definitely some sort of record. "It's catchy."

She rolls her eyes as we reach the dock. Josh is leaning against his parents' boat, talking to Lucas, and his eyes widen when he spots me and Auden. His lips curl upward and expand, forming a wide smirk. I shoot him a warning glance as we approach.

"Well, well, well. If it isn't coffee shop girl."

"Auden." She corrects him before I can.

"Yeah, I remember," Josh replies. More like he spent ten minutes after we left the coffee shop debating if he should have asked for her number. I was glad he didn't then, and I'll be pissed if he does now. I've seen the way he treats girls. She deserves better. Hell, for all I know she has a boyfriend. It didn't come up during our "get to know you" game.

"What brings you to Canmore, Auden?" Lucas asks. He's always been the friendliest and most easygoing of my friends. He's also eyeing her with interest.

Auden glances over at me. She holds my gaze for a minute before she answers. "Just visiting some family I haven't seen in a while."

Lucas smiles, accepting her answer. "Well, lucky us." He leans down to grab another drink.

Those blue eyes meet mine. I don't drop eye contact. She shrugs. It's a subtle motion, and infinitely more helpless.

She lied to Lucas. Withheld some truth, at least.

And that's the moment I decide I'll do everything in my power to shield this girl from anything—anyone—that might hurt her.

Especially me.

Auden

There's barely any evidence of the carnival left this morning. The rides and tents are gone. Any trash has been picked up. The only suggestion that something took place here is the matted grass. Even that has begun to disappear, the blades slowly drifting back upright under beams of sunlight.

"Morning, Denny."

I spin around to see Elliot walking toward me.

"Uh, hi. Hey." It was easier talking to him last night when his face was shadowed and his eye color less noticeable. *It's just genetics*, I tell myself. *Basic science.*

Good looks don't make you a better person or more worthy of anyone's time. A pretty painting is nowhere near as valuable as one packed with emotion. Just look at the Mona Lisa.

They do make it harder to form coherent sentences around a guy, though.

Elliot looks me up and down when he reaches me. "You're wearing shorts."

"It's summer?" I say the fact like a question.

He nods. "Yeah, I guess. Come on."

"Come where?" His text this morning was vague, just telling me to meet him here at ten.

He asked for my number before I left Josh's party last night. I didn't stay for long before trekking the few blocks back to Katherine's, uncomfortable under the glare of attention. I underestimated Elliot's popularity—by a lot—but he didn't leave my side until I left. Elliot is loyal. I have no idea what I did to inspire him to extend it to me, and neither did anyone else at the party last night based on the confused looks aimed my way. I'm not going to

question it, though. I don't have anyone else in my corner besides Katherine, who's been too busy to so much as show me around town, and the looks last night weren't just confused; they were envious. I think it's fair to say Elliot Reid has more clout in Canmore than my workaholic aunt.

Plus, I like spending time with him.

Elliot doesn't answer my question until we're halfway down the block. "I need coffee."

"And there's a strict dress code for that?"

He smirks. "No, but you'll be cold at the rink."

"The *ice* rink?"

"Yup." He pauses, as if something just occurred to him. "You can skate, right?"

"Yeah, but it's been a while. And it's summer."

Elliot looks amused. "You mentioned that already. The rink is open year-round."

"So...we're going skating?"

"Yeah." He glances over. "Unless you don't want to? It's fine if you don't."

"Does it make me sound lame to say I have nothing else to do besides summer work?"

He chuckles, and it makes me smile. I noticed last night that Elliot isn't someone who relies on expected responses. He's the only person I've told about my parents' divorce, but I somehow know anyone else would have said they were sorry, or noted how that must suck. His friend Josh made lots of jokes on the dock last night. Elliot only laughed at a couple, while everyone else laughed at them all.

I'm envious of his confidence. I usually feel forced to conform to the behavior people expect.

Elliot stops outside a brick building that's been painted white. He holds the door open for me, which I'm not expecting.

"Thanks," I tell him as I step inside. The interior of this coffee shop is about as opposite from the one we met in yesterday as it could possibly be. It's clean and modern, all sparsely decorated walls and white chairs. Potted plants are tastefully scattered about.

There's more than just the occasional middle-aged patron. Plenty of people who look like they're our age are here, clustered in groups. Several of the teenagers call out to Elliot as we join the line of customers waiting to

order. I'm worried I may end up in another uncomfortable interaction with strangers, but Elliot keeps his attention on me. No one approaches us.

"I tried looking you up on social media," he says while I'm pretending to read the chalkboard menu displayed behind the counter.

"You did?" I look over, surprised he did and even more surprised he's mentioning it. Is this what it's like being friends with a guy? They just tell you things instead of forcing you to scour subtext?

"Uh-huh."

"Oh. Well, I'm not on it."

He laughs. "Yeah, I know. I looked."

"Right." I shrug. "I don't really see the point of it. I keep in touch with the people I want to keep in touch with. I don't need to see ten different photos of avocado toast first thing in the morning."

"Avocado toast?"

"Yeah. Avocados on toast. It's a common breakfast food, sometimes lunch."

"If you say so," he replies. "Well, good for you."

"For..."

"For not being on it."

"I'm sure the insecurity and lack of self-worth will sneak up on me some other way."

He laughs. "Social media marketing might be your calling."

Following his lead when it comes to honesty, I ask, "Why did you look me up?"

"I was curious."

"About..."

"You. Since we're friends, I figured I should know if you post pictures of avocado toast."

"Well, I wouldn't."

"Okay." He grins, then turns to the cashier. I was so distracted I'm just realizing we've reached the front of the line. The guy behind the register knows Elliot by the sound of their conversation. I'm beginning to get the sense there isn't anyone in this town who *doesn't* know Elliot, actually.

I read the menu for real, trying to decide what to order. I'm having trouble focusing on the offerings, though.

We're friends. That's what Elliot just said. That should have made me happy, not sad. Out of everyone I've encountered in Canmore, there's no one

else I'd rather spend time with. I like him, probably more than I should. More than I've ever liked anyone within twenty-four hours of meeting them for the first time. We live thousands of miles apart. He doesn't want a girlfriend, much less me.

Friendships have a far higher success rate than romantic relationships. I need to rid my mind of the possibility that anything more might happen between us, yank it up like a weed before its roots sink any deeper. After I leave in nine days, there's an excellent chance I'll never see Elliot Reid again. I'm probably just looking for a distraction. A hot guy who's being nice to me is much more enjoyable to focus on than what's waiting for me when I return home.

"Auden?"

"Yeah?" I jerk my head to the right, looking at Elliot. Based on his amused expression, this isn't the first time he's tried to get my attention.

He nods to the guy behind the register. "You ready to order?"

"Oh. Yeah. Breakfast sandwich and an iced coffee, please."

"You got it," the cashier replies.

I pull out my card and hand it to him to pay.

Elliot starts to protest. "You don't have to—"

"I know."

He studies my face for a moment and then relents—temporarily. As soon as we move to the side to wait for our breakfast, he asks, "So how rich are you?"

I snort; I can't help it. "Who asks that?"

"You're a sixteen-year-old writing with a Montclair. What do those pens cost? Three, four hundred?"

"Five," I admit.

"Oh, never mind then. That sounds middle class to me."

I roll my eyes. "My parents both come from money, and they've been pretty successful, so yeah...my family is rich."

"What do your parents do?"

"My dad is an entertainment lawyer. He works with a lot of celebrities, movie stars. My mom works in fashion. She runs a huge company."

"Does it bother you? The money?"

I shrug. No one has ever asked me that before. Most of my friends and classmates are just as well-off financially. It ignites curiosity about Elliot's background.

“I feel guilty. LA has a huge homeless population. I get driven to school in a brand-new car, looking out at people who slept on the street and have a shopping cart’s worth of possessions. It feels selfish, and I guess it also bothers me that my parents spent more time earning that money than they ever did with me.”

“Some people aren’t meant to be parents.” It doesn’t sound like he’s talking about mine.

“What do your parents do?”

He hesitates before answering, making me think of the bitter note in his voice when his father came up. “My mom is a teacher. My stepdad’s a firefighter.”

“And...your dad?”

He gives me a small, rueful smile that makes me think the exclusion was purposeful, makes me think he was testing me, to see if I’d ask, if I’d remember our conversation on the town dock last night.

“Now? I’ve got no idea, but he used to play hockey. Professionally.”

“Ah.”

“It’s not like that. I’m not trying to be like him. I’m trying to be better than him.”

“Show him what he missed out on,” I add quietly.

“Maybe,” he admits. “But I’m not *that* bitter about it. I’m good. I love playing. If I get to live my dream and that doubles as a ‘Fuck you’ to my father, well then that’s just a bonus.”

“How old were you when he left?”

“Two.”

“And you haven’t seen him since?”

Elliot shakes his head. I don’t need to ask him if he wants to. The answer is evident in the harsh lines of his face.

Our food and coffee arrive, and I follow Elliot over to an unoccupied table in the corner. He asks me random questions as we eat, mostly about my friends and school in California, nothing heavy. It surprises me how easy it is to commiserate with him over standardized tests and compare school subjects, to discuss drama with friends and debate best bands.

Usually, I sort friends into clear categories. Lana Kraven is my oldest friend. We met in kindergarten and have been close ever since, but there are certain things I don’t discuss with her. I haven’t told her about my parents’ marriage ending, for instance. Her father works with mine, and that’s part of

the reason—but not all of it. At school, I have friends I sit with at lunch. Others I only talk to if we share a class. Some I talk to about things that matter. Some I don't.

I've never had a friend I talked to about both the heavy and the light. It's nice.

After we finish eating, I follow Elliot down the street. As soon as we reach the end of the block, I see the massive structure to the right with huge letters spelling out *CANMORE ICE RINK* above the front doors.

"We're seriously going ice skating? In *July*?"

"Don't Americans play baseball in the winter?" Elliot counters.

"Grass doesn't melt in the winter," I reply.

He chuckles as we make our way across the expansive parking lot. Elliot types something into the keypad next to the door before pulling it open and gesturing for me to enter. I walk inside and am immediately hit with a rush of cold air laced with the scent of sweat and coffee.

"Might be worth airing this space out once in a while."

Elliot grins. "Then the ice *would* melt. You'll get used to it." He tugs me to the side of the main entryway. There's a wide-open window displaying a room with shelves of skates. Elliot gracefully jumps over the counter, landing in the open space without so much as a stumble. I would probably break an ankle if I attempted a similar maneuver. "What shoe size are you?" he asks, surveying the shelves.

"Uh, 7."

He nods and hunts through a couple of shelves before grabbing a gray pair and vaulting back through the window with them in hand. He hands them to me when he's returned to my side. "Here, take these to one of the benches by the ice. I'm going to grab my skates from the locker room and then I'll meet you out there."

I retrace our steps to the entrance and make my way to the home team bench, hesitantly opening the heavy door to enter the sectioned-off space. The plastic makes a loud creaking sound as it's swung open. The sound echoes through the massive, empty building. It's humbling, being inside the cavernous space all alone.

Elliot reappears a couple of minutes later, a pair of hockey skates in hand. His other is clutching gray fabric. He changed, now wearing a pair of sweatpants and a sweatshirt. He takes a seat beside me and passes me the fabric, which unfurls into sweatpants. "Put those on over your shorts."

“Thanks.” He nods an acknowledgment as I pull on the sweatpants, slide off my sneakers, and lace up the borrowed skates.

Once I have them on, I hobble over to the door that leads to the ice. I step onto the glistening surface cautiously, surrounded by silence except for the rhythmic scrape of the metal blades against the frozen water. I manage a small lap around the center of the ice, reacquainting my body with the gliding motion. In elementary school, I had an ice princess phase perpetuated by the winter Olympics, and it seems more of the two years of lessons stuck with me than I thought. My movements grow more confident as I gaze around the deserted seats, imagining what it must be like to play in the arena when it’s full of screaming fans. I’ve never been to a hockey game, but I bet it’s loud.

“Pretty cool, huh?” Elliot’s voice snaps me out of my musings, and I startle, nearly losing my balance. He steps on the ice and skates effortlessly across the rink until he reaches me, coming to a crisp stop that sends a flurry of white dust flying. Yeah, he was definitely being modest last night. He’s more graceful on ice than most people are on solid ground.

I remain vertical—barely. Elliot’s amused grin tells me he saw me fumble during his approach.

“When was the last time you skated?” he asks, seeming surprised I managed to make it out into the middle of the ice.

“Birthday party a year ago,” I reply. He smirks, telling me he takes that as me saying I’m inept on ice. I pull in a deep breath of cold air. “Do you have a couple of hockey sticks?” I ask.

Elliot raises an eyebrow in surprise. I’m not delusional enough to think I’ll be able to beat him, but I feel fairly confident I won’t humiliate myself. He didn’t ask how many times I’ve skated, just the last time. Elliot’s initial surprise fades into an amused grin before he glides off to one of the benches wordlessly, returning with two sticks, two helmets, and a puck.

He hands me a helmet. I eye it dubiously, but a quick sniff reveals nothing but a clean, soapy scent. I pull my hair back into a sloppy ponytail and plop the helmet on my head, fastening the straps.

I take the stick Elliot offers, eyeing his casual posture as he plops his own helmet on. We face off in the center of the ice. He quirks a brow at me, blue-gray eyes twinkling as he drops the puck, holding his stick with one hand as he does. *Showoff*. I take advantage of the brief handicap, trapping the puck against my stick and taking off toward the opposite end of the ice. Any head start is only momentary, so as soon as I feel confident, I send the puck flying.

I watch nervously as the black blur sails across the white surface and feel a surge of relief when it slams into the back of the open net.

I circle around the end of the rink and turn back to the center, where Elliot stands with his mouth slightly agape.

“Well, shit,” he says, glancing between me and the puck in the net in shock.

“I might have slightly underrepresented my skating experience,” I tell him.

Elliot laughs. “You think?”

I’m relieved he’s not annoyed. Some guys I know would be. “I thought you were a hockey prodigy who would make me look like an amateur no matter what. I took figure skating lessons for a while.”

His lips quirk before he goes to retrieve the puck, and I smirk as we line up again in the center of the rink. I know he’ll be expecting the same maneuver this time, but if I allow him to get past me, I won’t have a chance of catching him.

When he drops the puck, I tap it between his open legs. I propel my body forward, colliding with him directly. He isn’t expecting the impact. I take advantage of his surprise to spin around, chasing the sliding puck until I’m close enough to send it into the waiting net again. I glance behind me and laugh at the astonished look on Elliot’s face.

“I’m going to take a wild guess and say you’ve never played hockey with a girl?” I taunt, grinning.

I skate the rest of the way to retrieve the puck and rejoin him in the center. This time I drop it, and he immediately swipes it away from me.

Rather than rush down to the net, he takes his time moving across the ice, executing a variety of spins and weaves while he keeps perfect control over the puck. I stay between him and the goal for the moment, though I know I have no chance of stopping it once he actually decides to take a shot, unless I want to end up with a bruise. He fakes left and I follow, both of us grinning like lunatics as I valiantly try to mirror his complicated moves.

“Just shoot it, Eli,” I finally say, rolling my eyes at his theatrics. He complies, a quick flick of his wrist sending the puck into the waiting net, cutting my lead in half.

“Lucky shot,” I grouse, retrieving the puck. I glance over at Elliot, who’s already looking at me, a small smile playing on his lips.

“What?” I ask.

“You called me Eli,” he replies.

“Elliot is kind of lengthy when you’re trying to heckle someone.”

He laughs. “No one’s called me Eli before.”

“Oh,” I reply, feeling shy all of a sudden.

“Come on, let’s keep playing.” He skates back to the center, breaking the moment.

We continue for a while longer, bantering back and forth as we move from one end of the rink to the other. The score shifts in his favor quickly, but I manage to slip a couple more past him. I’m confident he’s letting me take the shots, but I give it my all and appreciate that he doesn’t let me win or make it obvious that he’s taking it easy on me.

Eventually we call it quits, skating over to the home bench and stepping off the ice. The once pristine surface is battered and carved from the metal blades.

“Will anyone care that we messed up the ice?” I ask.

“No, the rink’s closed.”

“It’s closed?”

“I usually stay late after practice or show up early. The rink manager here, George, has known me since I was a kid. He eventually gave me the code, so I’d stop bugging him about keeping the rink open longer.”

“You have your own private ice rink,” I say, glancing around the massive expanse of ice again.

“It’s a good place to think,” he replies. I could see that. The white surface reminds me of a blank piece of paper. “So, any regrets?”

“Regrets about what?”

“Trusting me.”

He’s teasing me. But also...not. “No.”

My parents officially split up yesterday, but somehow, I don’t think that was the life-changing event that took place on July 20th.

I think meeting Elliot Reid was.

Elliot

There are two cars already parked outside the white Colonial when I pull up. Unfortunately, I recognize both of them.

I've only been to Annabel Grant's house once before now. She hosted a party last summer when her mom was out of town.

I sigh and turn the car off when I see the five girls gathered on the porch. There's no sign of Auden, but I'm not going to hide in the car like I'm ashamed to be here, even if it means I have to deal with more shit from Josh and the other guys. I mentioned that I went skating with Auden to them when I went over to Josh's last night and didn't hear about anything else up until I left.

"Hey, guys." I walk up to the porch and lean against the railing that lines the stairs.

Ava Harris replies first. "Hi, Elliot."

Annabel exchanges a look with Cassie Gordon, who's typically considered the most popular girl in our year. My social equivalent, I guess. "What are you doing here?"

The front door opens. "Crap, sorry. Have you been here long?"

I grin at Auden. "Just got here."

She's a mess. Tangled hair, flushed cheeks, and a too-large t-shirt that's falling off one shoulder. "Okay. Good." She walks to my side and sort of hovers there, like she's not sure what to do next.

Something about the deer-in-the-headlights expression makes me tease her. "You get dressed in the dark?"

She punches my shoulder. "I didn't see your text until ten minutes ago. I'm jet-lagged."

“Uh-huh. Sure.” There’s a whopping one-hour time difference between Canmore and California.

Auden rolls her eyes at me, then looks at Annabel. “I’ll see you later?”

When I glance at the girls, I find them all studying me and Auden like we’re specimens under a microscope.

Annabel glances at Cassie, then at me, before finally replying to Auden. “Maybe.”

“See you girls at Josh’s?” I ask. He hosts more parties than Hollywood, especially in the summer.

“If you’re lucky,” Cassie replies.

I’m tempted to roll my eyes. “You ready?” I ask Auden.

She nods. “Yeah.”

I start walking toward my car.

She follows, falling into step beside me. “I think you might have ruined the chances of me making any friends here.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, I’m kind of getting the sense that you don’t usually do this sort of thing.”

I smirk. “This sort of thing?”

“According to the grilling Annabel gave me last night, you—”

“Elliot!”

I pause and turn to see Cassie has left the porch and is following us. “Yeah?” I ask once she reaches us.

“Can I talk to you for a minute?” She glances at Auden. “Alone?”

I dig my car keys out of my pockets and hand them to Auden. “I’ll be right there.”

Auden nods and keeps walking.

“What the hell, Elliot?” Cassie asks as soon as Auden has walked away. “You show up at Josh’s with this girl, and I hear you got breakfast at Sydney’s with her yesterday? Are you *dating* her?” She says dating in the tone others might say dumpster diving.

“No, I’m not,” I reply. “But if I were, it wouldn’t be any of your business, Cassie. I know I was clear about what we were—what we *aren’t*.” She huffs and looks away but doesn’t argue. We both know I was. “I’ll see you at Josh’s later?”

She nods.

I do too then turn and head for my SUV. Auden is already in the

passenger seat.

She glances over when I climb into the car. “Ex?”

“No. I don’t date.”

“That seems to be a popular decision around here.”

I shrug. “I told you why.”

“Yeah, you did. You didn’t tell me why you’re doing *this*.” She waves a finger between us.

“This?”

“I don’t need pity, Elliot. That’s not why I told you about my parents.”

I sigh and stare out at the street. “It’s not pity. I... You were right the other night. I’m popular—because people *want* something from me. A hookup. Social status by extension. Dirt about my deadbeat dad. To show off the stats they memorized. But *you*?” I look over and hold her gaze. “I don’t feel like you want anything from me. Like I could tell you something—anything—without worrying that the whole town will hear about it. I could use a friend like that. And you...I know you have friends back home, but did you tell *them* about your parents? Why you’re *really* here?” Her face tells me the answer. “It seems like you could use someone to talk to, too.” Her face stays impassive. I hold a hand out. “So...what do you say, Denny? Friends? *Best* friends?”

I pull out the grin that has a pretty high success rate, especially with girls, and quirk a brow. *Your move*.

Auden doesn’t hesitate before she reaches out and presses our palms together. We shake on it, on our friendship and our mutual annoyance with parts of our lives. “As my *best friend*, I feel like you should know I *hate* getting up before ten a.m.”

My grin widens. “I’m a morning person. A decade plus of early morning hockey practices.”

“Great. You can get up early, play hockey, and *then* we can hang out.”

I chuckle. “You said you’re leaving Tuesday. I promise I won’t text you before ten when you’re back in California.”

“Is this—I mean, do you—”

“Our friendship doesn’t have an expiration date, Denny. Unless you want it to?”

“I think things end when they’re supposed to, not when you decide they should.”

“Now you sound like a California hippie.”

Auden rolls her eyes and snaps her seatbelt. “Shut up and drive, Reid.”

Girls call me by my last name all the time, usually followed by a flirty wink or coy smile. It’s never affected me—up until right now.

I shift the car into drive. We start moving.

“So, where are we going?” Auden asks. Being vague worked for me before, so I went for the same strategy when I texted her last night.

“You said you’ve never been to Canmore before, right?”

“Right,” she confirms.

“So that means you’ve never been to the lake.”

Auden shoots me a confused look. “What are you talking about? The lake is basically the only place I *have* been.”

“You’ve been to Canmore Lake,” I clarify. “Not Lake Louise.”

“Um, is there a difference? I mean, a lake’s a lake, right? It’s basically just a giant puddle.”

“Spoken like an American who’s never been to Lake Louise.”

I expect patriotic annoyance, or at least some feigned offense. Instead, she asks, “Aren’t *you* American?”

Pretty much the last thing I was expecting her to say. I tread carefully. “What do you mean?”

“I looked your dad up. I wasn’t sure if you have the last name...but you do. He’s American, right? Just played here for a bit. So that makes you...”

“You looked him up?”

“Yeah.” She bites her bottom lip. “Sorry? I was curious.”

“It’s okay.” Surprisingly, I actually mean it. “I’ve lived in Canmore my whole life. The only time I’ve been to the States was for a hockey clinic in Minnesota. But yeah...I guess if you want to get technical, I am.”

“That fancy pen I was using? My dad gave it to me for my sixteenth birthday, because he doesn’t know me well enough to get me something I’d actually like—and because all he cares about is that I get good enough grades to get into Stanford, where he went.”

I glance at her sideways. “You trying to start some shitty dad competition?”

“Just telling my *best friend* something.”

“Sorry about your shitty dad.”

“Sorry yours is shittier.” I’ve heard a lot of half-assed apologetic responses when my dad comes up. That tops the list as my favorite.

I chuckle, which I’m certain I’ve never done while discussing Andrew

Reid before. “Yeah. Thanks.”

“What are we going to do at the lake? Just, like, sit there?”

“Jeez. A little trust?”

“I don’t trust people I just met.”

“Just met? You just called me your best friend.”

“I thought Canadians are fluent in English, French, and sarcasm.”

I chuckle; I can’t help it. Something about this girl...I can barely keep a straight face with half the stuff that flies out of her mouth. “Sarcasm, yes. My French is iffy.”

“Say something.”

“Uh...nous sommes ici.”

“What does that mean?”

“We’re here.”

Auden looks away from me, out at the scenery. I turn right, down the dirt road that leads to the path that ends with access to the lake. It’s more crowded than I’ve ever seen it. I avoid coming here in the summer for exactly this reason. It’s packed with tourists who were already here for the carnival.

I park next to a food truck emitting the fragrant smell of frying meat. You can catch glimmers of the turquoise water through the trees, but you have to walk down to the shore to get the full effect.

“Come on.”

We weave through groups of stressed parents and sunburned kids. I must be making a face, because Auden asks, “Not a big fan of children?”

“Not at all.”

“Do *you* have siblings?”

“Three. My mom remarried. They’re all girls. Loud and obsessed with nail polish.”

She laughs. And then keeps laughing. “Sorry.” She finally stops. “I’m just imagining you sitting in the middle of glitter and pink tutus.”

I roll my eyes. “Do you like kids?”

“I guess. It would have been nice to have a younger sibling, someone to hang out with and take care of. There are times when my parents do something really annoying and I’ll think *I would never do that to my own kid.*” I seem to wear my emotions on my face around her, because she says what I’m thinking again. “You don’t want kids?”

“I’m trying to be different than my dad, remember?”

“You weren’t...planned?”

“No. Hell if I’m going to put a kid through that.” Part of the reason I’m the only one of my friends who has yet to have sex, but that’s a fact I keep to myself. Friend or not, there are just some things you don’t say to a girl.

“Wow.” We arrive at the lakeshore, and it puts an effective end to our previous conversation.

“Just another puddle, eh?” I tease.

“It’s so blue. I—wow. I kind of wish I could draw it, but I couldn’t do this justice.” Her eyes roam over the glacier-fed water framed by the craggy, snow-capped peaks of the mountains hovering in the distance. Straight, proud pines line the lake. Colorful canoes dot the rocky shore.

“Funny you should say that.”

I pull the pad of paper and package of colored pencils I stole from my youngest sister’s room out of the backpack I’m wearing and hold them out to her.

“What’s that for?”

“Draw something.”

“Here? Right now?”

“It’s not scenic enough for you?” I joke as I take a seat on one of the many benches.

“I don’t usually draw landscapes,” Auden replies as she sinks down next to me.

“Then draw me. Or the canoes. Or pull up a photo on your phone. Just draw *something*, Denny.”

She studies me. “Why?”

“Because I’m pretty sure it’ll be amazing, and I want to be able to tell you so.”

She snorts but takes the notebook and box of pencils. “What are you going to do?”

“Just sit here. Draw fast.”

Auden sighs, flips open the first page, and then snorts. “This yours?”

“No, my youngest sister’s. Why?”

She doesn’t answer, just turns so I can see the scribbled outline of a figure on skates holding a hockey stick. “Pretty sure that’s you.”

I say nothing, surprised and strangely touched. As the baby of the family, Izzie is more inquisitive than my two other sisters, but I wasn’t even sure she knew I play hockey, let alone drew a picture of me. Our age gap, lack of overlapping interests, and very different childhood experiences have all

ensured I have little interaction with my three younger sisters.

Auden doesn't push. She flips to a blank page and pulls out a few pencils. Seconds later, the scratch of pigmented wax against parchment sounds to my left. I suppress the urge to glance over and instead slouch against the wood backing, stretching my legs out and staring out at the lake. The first time my mom brought me here, I thought I was dreaming. In the winter, they set up a rink and wrap white lights around the pines closest to the water; one of those sights that just punches you in the gut. I spend most of my time in an artificial environment: the controlled temperature and neat lines of an ice rink. Maybe that's why natural, untrained beauty stands out to me so much. Sun filters down from the sky. A bird caws in the distance. Even the sound of children laughing and arguing becomes less grating.

I'm not sure how much time passes before Auden says, "Done," which is concerning. Usually, I get restless easily.

I glance down. A low, long whistle slips out. "Damn."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. You're good. *Really* good. I'm going to hang this on my wall."

"Well then." Auden tilts the pad back toward her and starts sketching again. A few minutes later, she drops it in my lap. She's added a shadowed figure to the perfect depiction of the lakes, trees, and mountains she drew before. It's a hockey player, a thousand times more detailed than the drawing Izzie did, but the same rough outline, with a stick outstretched. He's transparent, skimming across the surface of the turquoise water like a mirage. "There you go."

"You're better than I thought."

She snorts. "Thanks."

"It was a compliment, Denny. I already figured you're the modest type."

"Oh really?"

"I told you, you can tell a lot about a person right away."

"Yeah, I guess."

I tuck the paper and pencils back into my backpack. "Come on. Let's go."

"Where to? A watercolor studio?"

I shake my head as we walk to the canoe dock. "No. We're canoeing."

She glances at the colorful boats. "We can just *take them*? They're free?"

"You're in Canada—you don't have to pay for everything here."

Auden's eyes narrow. "You're going to keep up with the American jokes, huh?"

“Looks to be headed that way.”

“You mean you’re walking that way.”

I grin. Widely. I’m not sure how I got through life without Auden’s retorts until now, but I know it was far less amusing. “Ladies first.”

She eyes me skeptically but eventually steps forward and into the canoe. I have to bite the inside of my cheek to keep from laughing as she white-knuckles the edges and inches her way to the farther seat. “You’re not going to capsize it.”

“Shut up. I’m trying to focus!”

Canoeing—or climbing into a canoe—doesn’t require that much concentration in my experience, but I keep my mouth shut until she’s settled in the opposite end. I pull the rope off the post then climb in and push away.

“Showoff,” Auden mutters.

I grin as we move deeper onto the lake. Lake Louise is twice the size of Canmore Lake. We could paddle for a few hours and not reach the opposite end. Auden asks me a question here and there, but we mostly sit in silence. It’s nice. Most people—especially girls—seem to think endless babble is the way to keep my attention. The quiet fits the peaceful scenery and calm water. There are plenty of other canoes floating out here, but none are close enough to disturb the sensation of being alone.

“That was nice. Thanks,” she says when we return to the dock. Her tone is begrudging, making me think she likes to be in control of the plan. Sure, I’m the local, but she’s let me take control twice now. For some reason, it means a lot.

“You’re welcome.”

“You come here often?” she asks as I tie the canoe up.

“Hardly ever,” I reply truthfully. “Especially in the summer.”

“How come?”

“Eh...it’s a hassle. Crowded. Out of town.”

“You sound like a cranky old man.” I accept the comparison with a small shoulder shrug. “If I lived around here, I’d come every day.”

“Do you go to the beach much?”

“I don’t really have a choice.” Noticing my questioning look, she adds, “My family’s place is on the beach.”

“Oh.” Wow. I know she said her family is wealthy, but I have an idea of what real estate costs in California. A place on the Pacific? That’s got to be pretty damn pricey.

We reach the top of the path in the parking lot. “You hungry?” I ask, nodding to the hot dog stand. “Should make you feel right at home.”

“I’m a vegetarian, actually.” I smirk. “It’s not a California thing, I swear. My best friend Lana made me watch this slaughterhouse documentary with her, and I haven’t been able to eat meat since. She watched the helpless chickens getting shuffled to their death with me, but she was back to eating In ’N Out a week later. I still can’t stomach—you’re laughing at me.”

“No, I’m not! It’s just...I *really* wanted a hot dog.”

“Get one. It’s fine. I’ll eat later.”

“Nah, it’s fine. We’ll get something else.”

“Elliot, I’m serious. It’s fine. People eat meat around me all the time. No big deal.” I start walking toward the car, and she hurries behind me. “Did you hear me?”

“Yep,” I call over one shoulder.

“God, you’re stubborn.”

“I prefer persistent,” I say as we reach my car.

She huffs. “I’m serious. Get one.”

“I’m serious, too.” I smile, and she holds her serious expression for about two seconds before she cracks. “Come on, let’s find some wheatgrass to chew on.”

“You’re a jerk.” But she’s smiling as she says it. Slowly, the smile disappears. “I also think you’re right—we’re going to be best friends.”

“Look a little more depressed about it, why don’t you?”

Auden smiles again. “No, it’s not that—I just...” She shakes her head. “Never mind.”

I head for the driver’s side as she walks to the passenger side, half-tempted to push and half-worried I don’t want the answer. I have a feeling it might be related to the fact that I spent most of our canoe ride appreciating the thin strip of skin between her shorts and t-shirt. Auden is gorgeous, plain and simple. Girl-next-door, natural beauty with brunette hair and long legs that are nice to look at—and imagine wrapped around you. Vain as it sounds, I’ve heard enough cheesy pickup lines and locker room talk to know the general consensus among Canmore’s female population is that my muscles are good for more than just being the fastest guy on the ice.

Bottom line: I find Auden attractive. I’m pretty sure she finds me attractive.

That could complicate our *friendship*.

Josh's driveway is packed when I arrive at his house. Usually, he keeps a few spots by the garage open, but they're all full or blocked tonight. I resign myself to parking halfway down the street and hop out. It's fucking obvious there's a massive party happening at the Hawleys'. Their lot is huge, but lakeside real estate is coveted. The neighbors aren't *that* far away, but they have yet to call the cops on us.

Mr. Hawley does something in building materials I've never understood but appears to be extremely lucrative. Mrs. Hawley spends a lot of time at retreats and visiting friends. Josh acts like hosting parties every night all summer is his life's calling, but I'm guessing it bothers him and it's his way of playing it off. But maybe I'm just projecting my father's abandonment.

When I walk inside, every head swivels in my direction. Hockey thrust me into the spotlight a long time ago. It's a role I've grown to appreciate. I only thrive in it on the ice—that's when I *want* the glare of attention on me—but I'd be lying if I said being the most popular guy in town has a lot of downsides. If I felt like I had to play a part, it would be one thing. I just play hockey and hang out with my friends. Girls want to kiss me and guys want to talk to me. Life could absolutely be worse.

I wander through the living room, exchanging handshakes with a few teammates and flirty comments with Cassie and Ava, who both showed up despite playing coy earlier. Cassie and I have been dancing around each other for years. There's plenty of physical attraction between us, but not much else. I can't recall if I've ever laughed at something she's said, let alone lost track of how many times.

It's probably an unfair comparison, but it's one I can't help making—and I have the sinking suspicion it'll become the norm and I'll compare *every* girl I encounter to Auden.

When Cassie's touches and gazes linger even longer than usual, I realize I'm not the only one aware of how Auden's arrival has upended the dynamics of my interactions with girls. I keep moving, heading into the kitchen. Like a magnet seeking out the opposite pole, my eyes find Auden. She's hard to miss. For one, she's wearing a coral-colored dress. Secondly, most everyone in the kitchen is looking at her.

Stares ping-pong to me when I walk into the room, including hers. Auden glances at me and smiles then turns back to talking to Lisa Owens. I can't

recall the last time I talked to Lisa, but I've never heard anything negative about her, so I don't interrupt. I head toward Josh instead. He's leaning against the fridge, scrolling through something on his phone.

"Hey, man."

Josh looks up then shoves his phone in his pocket. "Reid! You're late."

"I know." I missed my morning workout to go to the lake with Auden, so I headed to the rink after I dropped her back off at her aunt's. "You're blocking the drinks."

"Beer is out on the counter."

"I just want a water."

Josh moves to the side so I can grab a cold bottle out of the fridge then slides right back over once I have. He glances at the flash of coral, cluing me in to what topic he's about to bring up before he actually utters a word. "So... Auden. Are you re-evaluating your stance on girlfriends?"

I gulp some water then snort. "Of course not. What are we, ten? I can't be friends with a girl?"

"You never have been before."

"I never met a girl I *wanted* to be friends with before. Auden's... different. I dunno—I just like spending time with her."

Josh shakes his head. "You can't be 'just friends' with a girl you want to fuck, Reid. Watch a rom com. It's not possible."

I scowl at him. "Who says I want to fuck her?"

"You're saying you don't?" I don't reply, hoping he'll drop it. He doesn't. "You took her to Lake Louise?" I don't reply. "She mentioned it to Luke when she got here. You hate going there in the summer."

I shrug.

He sighs. "Well...this should be interesting."

Understatement.

Part Two

Second Summer

Elliot

The kitchen is in complete chaos when I walk into it.

All three of my half-sisters are rushing about, frantically getting ready for school.

Five years after my father left us, my mom got married. Her husband—my stepfather—Jeff, is about as polar opposite to Andrew Reid as a man could be. Zero athleticism. Total dedication. Outside of his shifts at the firehouse, his sole hobby is bending over backwards to help my mom out and take care of my sisters.

He's a hard guy to dislike.

And I don't dislike him. I'm just detached.

My mother and father were never married. They had a brief relationship that my conception prolonged. I know my mom was essentially a single parent for most of their time together. My father was too busy living his glory days to pay attention to his girlfriend and kid. Hockey took precedence over everything for him.

I resent the hell out of him for the total disregard, for packing up and leaving when my mother told him she'd had enough and never looking back. But I'm also that little kid gaping at the lights and the sound and the excitement surrounding my father when he stepped on the ice at his home games. That level of importance, of *adoration*, is something few people achieve in their life. My father took advantage of it. Selfishness may be genetic, because I know I have more in common with him than just my skill on the ice.

Pursuing goals doesn't always leave room for other people's feelings. In fact, it usually doesn't.

The difference between me and him is I have no intention of dragging anyone along on the ride.

Mia, my oldest sister, eyes me as she walks over to the kitchen table with a bowl of cereal. “Can you drive me to school, Elliot?”

I drop my heavy backpack by the door and suppress a sigh. “Yeah. Sure.” A detour by the junior high is about the last thing I feel like doing on one of the few mornings I don’t have a six a.m. practice, but I’m not a total dick.

I don’t resent my sisters for the fact that they’re getting the idyllic two-parent childhood I didn’t. I’m just removed from it, looking in the window from the street. They feel more like acquaintances I happen to live with than siblings. Maybe it would be different if any of them were male. I have absolutely no common ground when it comes to pop music or dolls or nail polish. I’m like a long-term visitor, getting to know the rest of my family on a temporary basis.

Lucy pouts as she shoves her sandwich into her lunchbox. “Why does Mia get a ride? I don’t want to take the bus.”

My mom stops washing dishes and intercedes. “Your sister’s school is on the way for Elliot. Yours isn’t.”

I pour myself a bowl of cereal and take a seat at the table next to my youngest sister, Isabella, who’s scribbling on a piece of paper. Maybe it’s the fact that we share two favorite hobbies—sleeping and eating—but I spend the most time with her.

“What’s up, Izzie?”

She glances up, showing off the crooked smile that’s a result of her recently losing both front teeth. “Just drawing.”

“Oh yeah? What are you drawing?”

“The photo from your room.” Izzie nods toward the pile of Polaroids right next to her empty bowl of cereal. She got a Polaroid camera last Christmas, and I don’t think there’s a single inch of this house that hasn’t been photographed since. Mia and Lucy both steer clear of my room—I’m not sure if they think I’ll have a stack of *Playboys* lying around or something—but Izzie waltzes in and out when she pleases. “It’s a drawing of a photo of a drawing. Cool, eh?”

There’s only one drawing in my room. She’s replicating Auden’s.

“What drawing?” Mia asks as she plops down opposite us.

“The one his girlfriend drew,” Izzie sings.

“Izzie,” I admonish. Unfortunately, it’s difficult to stay mad at wide eyes

and rosy cheeks.

“What? You said she’s a girl and your friend.”

Yep, I definitely said that. “That’s different from a girlfriend.”

“How?”

“It just...is.” I’ll leave the birds and the bees talk to Mom and Jeff.

None of them say anything, but I can feel the spotlight of my oldest sisters’ attention on me, along with my mom’s. I haven’t mentioned the girl I met last summer to any of them, mostly for exactly this reason—they’re all too nosy about my love life as it is. *Any* girl, let alone one I’ve spent the better part of a year talking to every day, would pique their interest.

I shovel the remains of my cereal into my mouth and stand to stick my bowl in the dishwasher. My mom is at the counter, running through her planner for the day. Maybe I should actually thank Izzie, because she opened up the door for a conversation I wasn’t sure how to start.

“Hey, Mom?”

“Yeah?” she replies absentmindedly, scribbling something in Tuesday’s box then flipping the page to next week.

“Can you, uh, do me a favor?”

That catches her attention. The last time I asked her to do something for me was...well, I can’t remember. I doubt she does, either. I hate asking for help. I biked to the rink in a blizzard once.

She sets the pen down and focuses on me. “Of course.”

I shut the dishwasher and rub my finger along the edge of the countertop. “I have a friend flying into Calgary next weekend. Could you pick her up? Bring her to the rink?”

“Her?”

“Her.”

“The friend who’s a girl but not a girlfriend?” She makes the leap quick. Too quick.

“Meaning what?”

“You spend a lot more time on your phone than you used to.”

“So?”

She raises both hands then lets them drop. “Just an observation. I think it’s great, honey. Really.”

I narrow my eyes. “We’re just *friends*.”

“Okay.” Her agreement is too hasty.

“We are. I don’t want a girlfriend.”

My mom's face softens. "There's more to life than hockey, honey." Patronizing words don't sound any better delivered in an understanding tone.

"I know."

"Do you?"

I shrug and scoff. "Who knows? I got half his DNA, didn't I?"

"Elliot..."

"Can you drive her or not?"

"Yes. Of course."

"Great. I'll be home late." I stalk toward the door, scooping up my backpack up on the way. "I'm leaving, Mia."

I have time to pull my car out of the garage and flip through three different playlists before she emerges from the house with her backpack slung over one shoulder. She hops in the passenger seat and gives me a hard look.

"School doesn't start for half an hour."

"I've gotta get there early," I lie.

Mia sighs dramatically. "Only losers show up to school early."

"Guess that makes you one, eh?"

I feel her eyes on me as I reverse out of the driveway. "Was Izzie right? You have a girl who's a friend?"

"Yes." No use in lying; she'll meet Auden tomorrow.

"Tommy Deyer told me he wanted to be friends, and then he kissed me at the carnival last weekend. Is that a thing boys do?"

"Um." I press down on the accelerator harder, eager to get to the junior high. I'll take a speeding ticket over discussing boys and dating and kissing with Mia, who I still see as a chubby-faced toddler who ate nothing but Cheerios for a week, not a teenager. "Do you want me to talk to him? Tell him to stay away from you?"

"No. I like him. You'll freak him out. He's already worried you'll beat him up." I didn't really realize I had a reputation for violence among the junior high set.

"Okay then."

I pull up along the curb. "See you tonight."

She huffs. "Yeah, whatever."

You're welcome.

The secondary school's parking lot is just as empty as the junior high's was. I sit in my car and debate how to tell Auden my mom is picking her up until Josh bangs on my window, scaring the shit out of me.

I shut my phone off and grab my backpack. I'll just call her later. Knowing Auden, she'll insist on taking a cab. She didn't meet any of my family on her last visit here, and I've only met her aunt once—she did the team photos this year. In one of my more awkward conversations, I brought Auden up when it was my turn. It kind of makes me worried her aunt might have put together that Auden's return trip to Canmore has more to do with me than "continuing to reconnect with her family."

"Sup." I greet Josh as Luke wanders toward us from across the lot.

"How long have you been here?"

"A while."

Josh shakes his head. "I'll never understand your inability to sleep in like a normal teenager."

I'll be getting up even earlier if it means avoiding any more *I kissed a boy* conversations with my sister. I shrug. "I just wake up."

Josh makes a sound of disbelief as we head inside the school. Plenty of people call out greetings and good lucks. Next weekend's game isn't for the school team—that season ended months ago. It's for the country-wide junior hockey league that most of the guys try out for. Playoffs stretch well into the spring, with the finals taking place next weekend. We lost in them last year, making this year's faceoff an especially big deal. Big news in Canmore—in the whole country, really. Attention has ramped up now that I only have one year left before college.

The first few periods of the day pass in a haze. I'm not paying close attention to anyone or anything. Next week is the last week of school, with the finals and formal dance immediately following. Everyone seems distracted by at least one of those events. I don't get caught empty-answered in class, despite barely registering a word.

I make plans with Johnny Sparen on the walk from English to the cafeteria to meet up for some extra attack drills this weekend then head for my usual table. For as long as I can remember, it's always been Luke, Josh, Oliver, and me at lunch. We're all popular, all have plenty of other friends, but we're a tight-knit foursome to penetrate. None of our hockey teammates sit with us, or any girl we're dating, interested in, or hooking up with.

I'm the last one to arrive.

“Didn’t she already get asked?” Lucas questions as I take a seat.

“Fuck if *I* know,” Josh replies. “Ask *her*.”

“How many girls have asked you, Reid?”

“Huh?” I pull my lunch out and check my phone.

“To formal. Can you ask someone already?”

“Oh. I’m not going.”

Some food falls out of Luke’s mouth as he gapes at me.

I scootch as far away as the small lunch table will allow me to. “That’s disgusting, dude. Find some manners or a new table.”

“*What?* Why aren’t you going?” Oliver asks. “We’ll have a championship to celebrate.”

I never told any of my friends about the fact that I kept in touch with the girl from the coffee shop. More than kept in touch—I talk to her more than them. From the moment she mentioned she was going to try to visit this summer, I knew I was going to have to tell them. I bite the damn bullet. “Auden is visiting.”

“Auden? The chick you hung out with last summer? You’re choosing a *girl* over celebrating with us? Dude, that’s cold.”

“You don’t have boobs, Luke,” Josh explains unhelpfully.

I glare at him. “We’re just friends.”

Josh shakes his head. “You’re so deep in denial, man, it’s not even funny anymore.” He pauses and reconsiders. “Actually, it’s a *little* funny still. I never thought I’d see the day.”

I scoff. “I’m not in denial about anything.” It’s true. I’m well aware of how dateable Auden Harmon is, how she makes me laugh and gives the best advice. If I were to date a girl, it’d be her. But while I may be open to having a girl as a friend, my stance on girlfriends hasn’t changed, especially when it comes to Auden. She’s the last person in the world I’d ever voluntarily hurt, and that’s the only way a relationship would end—badly. I’ve hooked up with enough girls who said they were fine with it being a onetime thing...and then turned up heartbroken.

“Yeah, you are,” Josh refutes.

“Ease up,” Luke advises. “Elliot has never been friend-zoned before. Poor guy probably doesn’t even know how to get out of it.”

I clench my jaw. “I *chose* to be in the friend zone. I *want* to be in the friend zone.”

Oliver looks totally confused. “Is this a *thing*? How come I didn’t know

about it?”

“You’re oblivious?” Luke suggests.

“It’s a thing,” Josh confirms. “He texts her all the time. Probably what he’s doing right now.”

He leans over to glance at my phone screen. I quickly shut it off. Because yeah, fine, that *is* what I was just doing.

Josh grins. “Knew it.”

“Whatever” is my witty response.

“Bring her to the formal,” Luke suggests.

“Not happening. If she wants to, we’ll go to the party after,” I concede.

“If *she* wants to?” Josh shakes his head. “Yeah, you couldn’t care less, man.”

I clench my teeth and turn my phone back on. “I never said I don’t care.”

“Yeah, well, it’s pretty obvious you do.”

I crank my *I don’t want to talk about it* expression up to full blast. It seems to work...until lunch ends and Oliver and I head for our shared calculus class.

“Be careful, Reid,” he says as we walk toward the math wing.

I glance at him. “With what?”

“With this girl.”

I tense. “You don’t know what you’re talking about, Oliver.”

“Maybe,” he concedes. “But I’m not an idiot. She’s affecting you.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” I repeat. “We’re just friends.”

“Toss that line around all you want, but I know you have feelings for her. You think I didn’t notice she’s gorgeous? Why the hell do you think Josh went over to her table for a pen instead of the middle-aged dude at the register? If she acted interested in any of us, it would have just been a fling. We wouldn’t be texting every day a year later.”

Even hypothetically, I don’t like hearing Oliver talk about Auden and a fling. “A fling? Sure you’re not just pissed I have a new friend who happens to be a girl who wasn’t interested in you?”

He snorts. “Reid. We’ve been friends for as long as I can remember. You really think I’m not used to girls passing me over the second you show up? I haven’t seen you so much as flirt with one of them in months. What does that say, huh?”

“That you spend too much time paying attention to who I hook up with?”

“Joke around all you want. Things with this girl are good—now. You have a stupid-ass smile on your face every time you’re on your phone, which I now know has to do with her. You also seem just as excited for her to visit as the fucking *championship* game next weekend, which I never thought I’d say about *anything*. But what happens when things aren’t good? When she meets a guy who doesn’t live thousands of miles away? Far as I know, guys in California aren’t blind, just tanned.”

I unclench my jaw to say, “Oliver, seriously, I’m not stupid enough to hang my happiness on one person. She’s a *friend*. That’s it, and there’s a reason for that.”

He has the audacity to laugh at my assurance. “You think you need to kiss a girl to fall in love with her?”

“I haven’t kissed her.”

“Exactly.”

Auden

Waves crash against the shore. A seagull caws in the distance. Warmth from the sand radiates upward, tempering the breeze.

It's peaceful. Until... "He still hasn't texted me back."

I lift my head and look over at Lana. "He's not worth it."

"I really like him, Laney."

"Don't call me that." I sit up with a huff. "We're not kids anymore."

"Doesn't Elliot call you Denny? That's way worse."

"I made him stop." I haven't, but that's only because the stupid chain restaurant nickname has grown on me. I've never liked being called by my middle name.

"Uh-huh. Sure." Lana rolls her eyes.

"I did," I lie.

"You going to tell him you like him on this trip?"

"I don't like him. Not like that."

Lana lets out a disbelieving scoff. She badgered me into telling her Elliot's last name a few months ago, and if her response to stalking him on Instagram is any indication, he doesn't post unflattering photos of himself—if such a thing even exists. "I don't believe you."

I don't believe me either.

I *absolutely* like Elliot like that. I'm also thoroughly committed to pretending I don't. In the eleven months, three weeks, and five days since I left Canmore, he's become my closest friend. I've told him things I've never told Lana, who's been my best friend since kindergarten when we bonded over our mutual love of dolphins. We talk every day, often multiple times. I asked my parents to recreate the trip to a place I once viewed as a scenic

purgatory just to see him. But those are truths I'll only admit to myself.

"He has a girlfriend," I remind her. It's a lie I concocted after two months of her badgering me to tell Elliot how I feel, of her insisting no guy would text me that often unless he liked me as more than a friend.

"Whatever. He clearly likes you a hell of a lot more than his girlfriend." As if on cue, my phone buzzes. The photo I took of him when we went canoeing—while pretending to take one of the scenery, of course—flashes across the screen. "A *lot* more."

I roll my eyes before I answer the phone. "Hey, Eli."

"Hey, Denny. Your flight lands at two tomorrow, right?"

"Yeah..."

"Okay, good. I wanted to make sure I didn't tell my mom the wrong time." There's a loud crash in the background, followed by some raised male voices. "Hang on." There's more background noise, this time muffled, and then he's back on. "Sorry. I'm at practice. Some of the younger guys are being idiots."

"Uh-huh. I'm sure you taught them everything they know."

He laughs. "Maybe some of it."

"What did you mean about your mom?"

"Oh. Yeah. She'll be at the airport tomorrow."

"What? Why?"

"Because I asked her if she could pick you up."

He did what? "Your mom *definitely* does not need to do that. The airport is almost an hour away from Canmore!"

"It's done, Denny. Don't argue with me."

"Elliot—"

"I mean it. You're not taking a fucking cab." Clearly, telling Elliot my Aunt Katherine booked a wedding and couldn't pick me up from the airport was a mistake. "I asked her a week ago. I just waited to tell you until now because I knew this is exactly what you'd say."

It's a little freaky how well he knows me. I know him too, enough to know arguing will get me nowhere. "Fine. Tell your mom thanks."

"I will. See you tomorrow."

"See you tomorrow," I repeat. The words feel strange, sitting on the beach next to Lana in my normal life.

I'll see Elliot tomorrow.

I'm worried it will be awkward. I'm even more worried it won't be. If

I've developed this degree of emotion from hundreds of miles away, how the hell am I going to feel when I see him in person? We mostly text, occasionally talk on the phone, and rarely FaceTime. The few times we have were enough to assure me my memory doesn't really do his attractiveness justice.

"He's having his mom pick you up from the airport?" Lana asks.

"Yeah."

She mumbles something under her breath that sounds a lot like *You're in so much trouble*. I look back out at the water.

Canmore isn't large enough to have its own airport. I fly from Los Angeles to San Francisco, and then to Calgary. Eight hours of travel total. I smell like fast food and can barely keep my eyes open by the time I make it through customs and reach baggage claim. Luggage spins around the carousel, but there's no sign of the black suitcase I tied a yellow ribbon on early this morning. Everyone I recognize from my flight has come and gone by the time I resign myself to the fact that my bag is not going to magically appear at any minute.

There's no line at the desk being manned by an airport employee. The middle-aged man looks up when I approach. "Good afternoon, miss."

"Good afternoon," I reply. "Um, my suitcase isn't on the carousel. I'm worried it might have gotten lost in San Francisco."

The man nods then grabs a piece of paper off the desk. "Fill out this form, please. We'll be in touch as soon as we locate your luggage."

I sigh. "Okay." I was hoping he'd tell me they hadn't sent all the bags out yet or something. No such luck.

I fill out the form and hand it back to him then head for the sliding doors that lead outside. The afternoon air is chillier here than the early morning temperature back in California. I packed warmer clothes...in my suitcase.

My luggage delay ensures the sidewalk outside the airport is half-empty. Only a few cars loiter along the curb still. One is a silver SUV, which is what Elliot instructed me to look for. I approach the car cautiously. A smiling woman with shoulder-length dark hair climbs out as I walk over.

"Auden?"

“That’s me.” I give her a small smile. “It’s nice to meet you, Mrs...” *Shit.* I know Reid was Elliot’s father’s last name. He’s never mentioned his mother’s.

She solves my dilemma. “Call me Josie, please.”

“Nice to meet you, Josie.”

She smiles in approval then looks at my empty hands. “No luggage?”

“It got lost,” I explain.

“Oh, no. Is there anything the airline can do?”

“They’re supposed to call me once it’s tracked down.”

“All right. Do you need to stop and buy anything while we’re in town? Canmore doesn’t have many shopping options.”

“No, that’s okay. I should have everything I need at my aunt’s.”

Josie nods. “That’s right—Elliot mentioned you have some family in town. Katherine Grant, right?”

“Right,” I confirm.

“Her photos are just beautiful.”

“They are,” I agree.

Josie is easy to talk to, and the drive back to Canmore passes quickly to the soundtrack of her happy chatter. I stare out the car window as the scenery turns familiar. The sidewalk lining the street that leads to the rink is barely visible between the countless cars parked along it. I tap my fingers against my thigh anxiously with one hand, glancing at the clock on the dashboard of the car as I feel the anticipation build in my stomach.

My phone goes off in my lap, and I glance down quickly, hoping it will be the airline calling. Instead, I see *Dad* flash across the screen, so I quickly silence it. He’s not happy about this trip. He wanted me to be completely focused on college visits and preparation this summer, not “gallivanting around with your mother’s distant relatives,” as he put it. I refrained from pointing out that Mom’s sister isn’t all that distant, and I definitely didn’t mention the fact that I wasn’t even coming here because of my aunt and cousin.

“Any updates from the airline?” Josie asks.

“Unfortunately not,” I reply. “I’ll definitely be taking a carry-on next trip.”

Josie smiles in response as she navigates the SUV into the packed parking lot that surrounds the ice rink. After stopping at the end of a row in what seems to be a semi-legal spot, we climb out and head toward the front doors.

A gust of cold air greets me first. I experience a fresh burst of adrenaline as I walk through the entrance and hear the roar of the sold-out crowd. Grateful I at least wore jeans today, I rub my arms as the chill grazes my bare arms.

The game has already begun. They're no longer selling admission tickets, so we're able to walk straight through the entryway toward the massive rink that emerges in front of us. The noise grows deafening as we enter the main area surrounding the ice.

"This way," Mrs. Reid says, beckoning me to the left. I follow her after quickly glancing at the scoreboard. Canmore is winning 2-1 with 4:03 left in the second period.

We start to walk over toward the bottom row of seats directly in front of the center line. Josie heads straight for a middle-aged man sitting with three blonde girls who I'm assuming are Elliot's stepfather and half-sisters.

The man stands as we approach. "You must be Auden," he says warmly.

I nod. "Nice to meet you, Jeff."

Surprise flickers across his face. I know Elliot's not close with his stepfather. Did he not think Elliot would mention him to me?

"Are you Elliot's girlfriend?" One of Elliot's sisters followed her father over to me. The youngest, Isabella.

"Um, no. I'm a girl and his friend, but not his girlfriend."

She nods. "That's what Elliot said, too."

Okay then.

I don't miss the glance Josie and Jeff exchange.

After saying hello to Elliot's two other sisters, Mia and Lucy, I take a seat on the hard wood of the bleachers. None of Elliot's family asks me any questions, but I can feel them all studying me as I look at the ice. It feels strange to be sitting with them. I may know Elliot well, but these are total strangers. Unless I want to sit alone, they're my best option, though. The only people I got to know aside from Elliot during my last visit were his three best friends—Josh, Lucas, and Oliver—and they're all out on the ice with him right now.

The volume in the rink suddenly increases. A Canmore player streaks down to one end of the ice, and I know without looking at the number who it is. A flick of the wrist, then what sounds like the entire stadium erupts in chants of "Reid! Reid! Reid!"

I think I underestimated the local obsession with hockey—with Elliot.

The fast pace of the game and the enthusiastic crowd command my full attention. When the buzzer signaling the end of the second period sounds, I'm startled.

I'm even more surprised when my phone vibrates with a text from Elliot two minutes later, considering he's in the middle of a game. I figure he'd be listening to an inspirational speech from his coach right about now. Maybe I've seen *Miracle* one too many times.

Elliot: *You look cold.*

Auden: *Maple Leaf Airlines is dead to me*

Auden: *They lost my luggage*

One glance at my surroundings reminds me, this isn't the time to have a conversation about my lost suitcase. I never thought I'd be reminding Elliot to focus on hockey. I doubt it'd be possible to find a more dedicated player at any level.

Auden: *Stop texting me and score another goal*

Elliot: *You see the hallway to the left of the vending machines by the skate rentals?*

I scan the arena, spotting the row of vending machines by the main doors I came in.

Auden: *Yes*

Elliot: *Go in the last door on the left. I'll meet you there in two minutes.*

Auden: *What?*

Auden: *You're in the middle of a game!*

Auden: *Elliot??*

No dots appear. I huff a sigh. What am I supposed to do now? I glance over at Elliot's family. His sisters have all left, either to the restroom or for snacks. Josie and Jeff are talking to a couple seated behind them. Josie glances over when I stand. "I'll be right back," I tell her.

She nods and smiles.

I weave through the crowd in the direction of the vending machines. Passing them, I turn down the hallway and make my way to the last door on the left. I turn the knob and open it to reveal an empty locker room. It's small, with just a single row of lockers on the far wall separated by another door, and two wooden benches taking up the bulk of the room. The walls are painted a light shade of gray and littered with faded motivational posters. I've barely had time to register anything else about my surroundings when the door amidst the row of lockers swings open and Elliot appears.

“Hey, Denny.”

I’ve been nervous about this moment. Actually, that’s a *massive* understatement. Seeing him has been a constant worry in the back of my mind ever since I booked what turned into the plane ride from hell.

I’ve talked to Elliot Reid every single day since I met him. I can’t say that about another person on this planet. We text, we talk on the phone, we video-chat—but this is the first time I’ve seen him in person in nearly a year. I expected it to feel awkward. It doesn’t.

He doesn’t seem to think so, either. He walks straight to me and hugs me tightly. We simply stand like that for a moment, soaking in each other’s physical presence. Most people have to talk to me to elicit any reaction. Somehow, Elliot just being in the same room makes me happy. There’s no disconnect from the strangers we were in person before and the friends who talk about everything from his father’s abandonment to my vegetarianism.

Elliot draws back and grins down at me. “It is so fucking good to see you,” he says.

“Yeah, you too.” I was worried he might play it cool, but this is the guy who texted me twenty minutes after asking me for my number. I should have known better.

It’s because you’re friends, I tell myself.

I don’t think twice about how to act around Lana. She’s not a six-foot-two Canadian hockey player with a six-pack and a roguish grin, though.

“I’ve got to go. I’m kind of in the middle of something.”

I laugh. “Yeah, I noticed.”

“I just wanted to give you this.” He hands me a ball of gray fabric. “Getting treated for hypothermia is not part of the plan for this visit.”

He made a *plan* for my visit? Or is that just a saying? I figured he knows he’s the reason I came back, but I sure as hell didn’t tell him so.

“Thanks.” I unroll the material, which turns out to be a sweatshirt with *Canmore Hockey* on the front. I flip it over to see his name and number on the back.

“Um, you want me to wear *this*?”

“You’d rather freeze?”

I raise both eyebrows. Elliot raises his right back. He knows exactly what I mean; he’s the furthest thing from socially inept. “People will think...”

“I don’t care what people think, Denny. I’ll see you after the game, okay?”

I nod. “Good luck.”

The saying earns me a cocky smirk. “I don’t need luck. If you think there’s a chance we’re losing, you don’t know me as well as you think you do.”

I roll my eyes. “I didn’t say you’d lose.”

Elliot grins. “I’ll see you after, okay?”

“Okay.”

He flashes me another smile then disappears. I make my way out of the locker room and head back to my seat among Elliot’s family. There are only a few minutes left until the game resumes, and the spectators milling around are returning to their seats. Josie eyes the sweatshirt I’ve pulled on, but she says nothing.

A buzzer signals the imminent start to the beginning of the third period, and the players file back out onto the ice for a brief warm-up. My eyes are drawn immediately to Elliot, who circles Canmore’s end of the ice like a bird of prey in flight.

After a few laps, he joins his teammates at the center, and the drop of the puck signifies the beginning of the end of the game.

Watching Elliot weave and dodge between opponents effortlessly reminds me of our visit here last summer—mostly because it completely takes the wind out of my sails on that victory. He took it easy on me...*really* easy. I sit transfixed as I watch the non-stop activity, leaping out of my seat as Elliot scores another goal ten minutes later. With only two minutes left in the game, he sends the puck flying to Josh, changing the scoreboard to 5-1 and all but ensuring a home team victory. The pandemonium in the building builds as they continue skating throughout the final seconds until the final buzzer sounds, triggering an explosion of sound as the stadium erupts.

The small section of opposing fans remains seated while the rest of the spectators stand, screaming congratulations at the mass of navy jerseys huddled together on the ice surrounded by strewn helmets, gloves, and sticks. Eventually, the glob of navy separates as both teams form single lines to shake hands. Once the ritual is complete, Canmore regroups to take a team photograph, with each player taking a turn to hoist the championship trophy.

When it reaches Elliot’s hands, the din reaches a new pitch, a clear acknowledgement of his integral role in the Canmore victory.

Once congratulations have waned on the ice, the players begin filing off into the walkway, leaving the fans in the stands to continue celebrating as

Queen's "We Are the Champions" blasts through the building. I'm out of my element in more ways than one, but I'm also ridiculously proud of Elliot. This victory means a lot to him.

I trail along with his family over to the opposite end of the rink that houses the main locker rooms. Progress is slow. Elliot's mother and stepfather are repeatedly stopped by congratulations on his performance. By the time we finally make it over to the player's exit, I'm shocked by the crowd that has already gathered, waiting to see the teenagers who have delivered Canmore and the surrounding area the highest honor in junior hockey.

We reach the locker rooms right as a sudden roar sounds among the crowd, and I glance over to see Elliot and Josh have appeared at the end of the tunnel. Both are freshly showered, sporting wet hair, along with athletic shorts, t-shirts, and sneakers, with their duffle bags swung over their shoulders. They start to make their way through but are quickly stopped by fans clamoring to talk to them.

Elliot eventually gets over to his family. I hang back as he hugs Josie and shakes Jeff's hand. Isabella hugs his leg while Lucy and Mia talk to friends. His gaze lingers on me, but I pretend I don't notice. I suddenly feel shy. Out of place, for sure. The last time I was here, Elliot and I barely knew each other. That may no longer be the case, but it feels strange to be here in the midst of all these people wanting to talk to him and act like I have a right to. *Shake it off*, I tell myself. This is *Elliot*. I told him when I slipped down the stairs in my fuzzy socks two weeks ago and then proceeded to graphically describe the bruise on my ass.

He approaches me with a smirk I feel everywhere. "Told ya."

"I *never* said you would lose!" Both dimples appear. "Congrats," I tell him.

"You ready to head out?"

"Umm, sure. But if you want to stay, that's fin—"

"I don't want to stay. I want to hang out with you."

I try to act like that won't be on repeat in my head for a while. "Okay."

He grabs my hand and tugs me toward the door. I don't protest or pull away. There's no one I trust more or want to follow more than Elliot Reid.

And, yeah, that will probably end badly.

For *me*.

But some things are worth the potential for disaster.

At least, that's what I'm telling myself now.

Auden

“So...I was thinking.”

“Thinking about what?” I take a bite of my mushroom taco then wipe my face with a paper napkin.

Elliot leans back against the booth of the Mexican restaurant we came to after the game, the picture of ease. “Will you date me?”

I stop chewing and start choking. “Wh-wha—?” That’s how surprised I am—I can’t even finish the word what.

Can seventeen-year-olds have strokes? If so, I’m having one right now.

“I think we should date. *Pretend* to date, I mean.”

I stare at Elliot for a minute then finally swallow. *What. The. Fuck?* “You’ve hit your head on the ice too many times, Reid. I don’t want to date you.” Small miracles do exist, apparently, because there’s no false note in the words.

“I said *pretend*, Denny. It’ll be just like now, except people will assume we’re having sex.”

I choke a little. This is why most girls don’t have attractive, *male* best friends. Because topics—like sex—that are usually comfortable to discuss with good friends—over, say, strangers on the street or parents—become exponentially more *uncomfortable*.

Elliot mentioning *sex*—sex with *me*—prompts a hot flash to flood my skin, akin to opening an oven cranked to high.

“Please, Denny.” Elliot seems oblivious to any inner turmoil caused by his casual reference to us doing the naked tango. He leans forward and flashes me an *Aw, shucks* little boy grin. Except there’s nothing innocent about it. Paired with the dusting of stubble on his jaw, the angular lines of his

cheekbones, and the thin scar that bisects the end of his right eyebrow, it's a dangerous weapon. It should come plastered with *Don't drive a car or operate heavy machinery* labels. My mind goes blank for a minute.

"I have no doubt you could find an actual girlfriend, if you suddenly want one." I'm impressed I've managed to form words.

Elliot leans back with a huff. "I don't *want* a girlfriend. That's why this is perfect. I'm sick of telling girls I'm not interested."

I make a mock sympathetic face. "Oh, you poor guy. Too much female attention—you should see a therapist for that."

He rolls his eyes. "They don't want *me*. Just my dick." I start coughing again. Eyes watering, I reach for my water glass. "You okay?"

I nod furiously between gulps. "Yeah. Yup. Got some spice."

"There are only so many ways you can tell someone you're not interested. Or we hook up and then she gets pissed when I don't want a repeat, even though I told her that from the start. It's a lose-lose. I'm sick of it." He takes a bite of taco. "If I have a pretend girlfriend, I can just say I'm taken. Then I'm a saint for not cheating."

I shake my head. "They need to do more studies on the male brain. I think you're still in kindergarten, developmentally."

"It would be so easy, Auden. You wouldn't have to do anything."

He used my name. He's actually *serious* about this. "Yeah, I wouldn't have to do anything—except *lie*."

"Barely."

I scoff. "No. Absolutely not. Find someone else to drag into your web of deceit."

"There's no one else I trust. Besides, it wouldn't work with anyone else. I already know everything about you. You don't even live here. And you're not on social media!" He ticks the reasons off one by one. "You're perfect."

Under any other circumstances, hearing the guy I'm hopelessly crushing on utter those two words would make my day—my week, month, year. But that's the thing about me and Elliot: we are hopeless. I accepted—or am *trying* to accept—that we'll never be more than friends. I don't want to know what it's like to be his girlfriend, pretend or not. It's like waving a cocktail underneath the nose of an alcoholic. *Just imagine how great this tastes!*

Hard. Pass.

"You're insane," I inform him. "Other guys have successfully navigated the awkward situation of letting a girl know they're not interested in them for

centuries. You can do the same.”

“You don’t get it.”

“You’re right, I don’t. I don’t attract the same amount of attention. Thanks for rubbing that in, Eli.”

Elliot laughs, which I’m not expecting. I was anticipating an apology. An apologetic expression, at least. “Like there’s anything to rub in. It’s more than just that, and you know it. I’m a meal ticket.”

I roll my eyes. “You’re hot, Elliot. It has nothing to do with hockey.”

“You’ll think differently at Josh’s party tonight.”

“Well, you did just win a national championship. I know I’m *American*, but I kind of got the vibe it was a big deal.”

He laughs, then it turns into a sigh. “I also…” Mentally, I lean forward. Physically, I take another bite of taco. “I didn’t exactly tell the guys I kept in touch with you. Oliver and Luke and Josh, I mean.”

“Okay…”

“They all think I have a thing for you.”

I repeat “Okay” again. Internally, my mind is racing. His three best friends, guys he’s known his whole life, think he’s into me. Does that mean something? “So you want them to say *I told you so*?”

Elliot grimaces. “Yeah, it’ll go that way at first. But if I keep telling them we’re just friends, they’ll keep bugging me about it. If I say we’re dating, they’ll say *I told you so*—but then, what? That’ll be that, and when we fake break up, I’ll just let them know it didn’t work out and we can go back to being friends. I’m playing the long game.”

“This seems like a lot of effort to go to.”

“Aside from talking you into this, I’m exerting no effort at all.”

“Won’t they want…details? About us?”

Something fierce flickers in his eyes before he answers. “They’re not getting any.” I know Elliot’s a decent guy. I seriously doubt he doesn’t engage in locker room talk with his buddies, but I don’t press the issue. “Just think about it, Denny.”

The idea that I could do anything *but* think about it laughable. My moral center regarding lying isn’t all that strong. I’m hesitating because I’m worried about the damage pretending to date Elliot will do to the more-than-friendly feelings I already have toward him.

But I can’t tell Elliot that, though, so I just make a noncommittal sound and take another bite of taco.

As we get out of the car in the driveway, Elliot takes my hand and gives it a reassuring squeeze. Maybe the fact that I'm showing up with the most anticipated arrival should be comforting, but it's terrifying. Every eye will be on us. At least he hasn't brought up the whole *Let's pretend to date* proposition.

The sound of pounding bass is evident as soon as we approach the front walk of Josh's lavish lake house. I don't remember it being quite this huge last year. It would fit right in amongst my neighborhood. As we reach the front door, it's flung open and a group of girls stagger out onto the porch, laughing. They stop in clear shock at the sight of Elliot, their laughs switching to nervous giggles. They're all dressed up—*really* dressed up. I'm wearing a dress, but it's nowhere near as fancy. It's not even mine. When I explained my lost luggage predicament to Aunt Katherine, she went and pulled a few outfits from Annabel's closet. I'm sure Annabel will be here, and I'm a little worried about what her reaction will be to me not only being here, but showing up in her clothes. Just like my last visit, she's been a complete no-show so far.

"Is there a dress code you didn't tell me about?" I ask Elliot.

"Nah," he replies. "They're just dressed up from the formal."

"Formal?"

"Yeah, it's like a school dance."

"I know what a formal is, Elliot. But there was one tonight? And you didn't go?"

"Yes. And no."

I puzzle over that piece of information as we enter the massive foyer. The collective roar of noise as everyone realizes who the newest attendee is effectively puts an end to the conversation. But still, I wonder. Did he not want to go? If I hadn't been here, would he have? I doubt it, and that sparks a dangerous emotion: hope. Everything so far—having his mom pick me up, the sweatshirt, the tacos, bringing me here—has assured me that me coming wasn't the awkward mistake I feared, that Elliot really meant he wanted me to visit. They've also confirmed my other fear: that coming here is going to do more harm than good when it comes to my feelings for him.

The pop song that was playing is replaced by "We Are the Champions". I wonder if anyone else is getting sick of listening to that song. It doesn't seem

that way.

Elliot takes the attention in stride, smiling as he tugs me deeper into the house. Most people I see are as dressed up as the girls on the front porch. His friend Luke is standing in one corner of the living room, talking with a group of girls. As soon as Luke spots us, he says something to them and comes over.

“Fucking finally,” he declares dramatically. “I need you for beer pong, Reid.”

Elliot glances at me.

“Go ahead,” I urge, more confidently than I feel.

“Find someone else,” Elliot tells Lucas.

Lucas glances at me, looking surprised. I take the opportunity to reintroduce myself, because I’m not certain he even remembers who I am. “I’m Auden. We met last summer, in the—”

“Coffee shop,” he finishes. “The girl with the pen. Yeah, I remember.” He cocks his head. “I didn’t realize you’d be making a return trip.”

I shrug, trying to appear at ease. “Last trip wasn’t terrible.” I glance at Elliot, and he smiles. “I’ve got some family here, too.”

“Yeah. Annabel Grant, right?”

“Right,” I confirm.

“Not much of a family resemblance.”

I’m not sure how to reply to that. It could be considered a dig, since Annabel is undeniably gorgeous. It could be considered a compliment if she’s displayed any of the not-so-niceties around Luke that she likes to show me. Luke’s expression is blank, his tone neutral.

Rather than react, I ask, “Is there a bathroom in this place?”

“Yeah. It’s down the hall, on the right,” Luke answers.

I nod then glance at Elliot. “Go play.”

I leave the living room before he can say anything. *Down the hall, on the right* turns out to be vague directions at best. There are multiple halls veering off in all directions. I’m not sure if it’s my lack of formal attire, the fact that Annabel is several inches shorter than me so most of my thighs are on display, the fact that I don’t go to school with them, or who I showed up with, but I attract a decent number of stares. And by a decent number, I mean everyone is looking at me. It doesn’t help with the disorientation. Eventually, I stop wandering around and head upstairs. There has to be a bathroom upstairs, right?

There is, right at the top of the steps, and there's also a couple exiting it with mussed clothes and messy hair. I give them an awkward smile as I pass them by and enter the empty bathroom, eyeing the small space for any bodily fluids before using the toilet. I'm sure I've used a bathroom people have hooked up in before; I just didn't know it explicitly at the time.

People continue staring when I head back downstairs. I end up in the kitchen, surveying the space for a drink and a friendly face. There's no sign of Elliot, his friends, or anyone I even recognize from the couple of parties I attended here last summer. I focus on looking busy, heading over to the assortment of alcohol spread out by the fridge. I don't want to get drunk, but a little something to take the edge off would be nice right about now.

"Nice dress, *Auden*."

I turn to see a familiar face, just not a friendly one. Annabel is standing in front of me, leaning against the counter in a slinky minidress. Her blonde friend—Cassie?—is right beside her, looking no happier to see me. I've never asked him, but I get the sense she and Elliot share some history. As a general rule, he doesn't discuss other girls with me, and I don't discuss other guys with him. I'm not sure if that's normal or not; I have no other platonic friendship with a guy to compare it to.

"It's yours. My luggage got lost."

Annabel takes a sip from the cup she's holding, her perfectly lined eyes assessing me the whole time. "Maybe take it as a sign you're not welcome in Canmore."

I take a deep breath, trying to ignore the fact that this conversation is attracting some attention in the kitchen. *More* attention, I should say. I don't do well with confrontation in general. When it's with a family member in front of a lot of strangers? Even worse.

"Look, I don't know what your problem is, but—"

"My problem is *you*. You think you're so special," Annabel sneers. "Coming back, thinking people want you here—thinking *Elliot* wants you here." I don't move, don't react. That angers her even more, and I watch ugly emotions flash across her carefully painted face. "I know you're *American*, but surely you're not dumb enough to think you actually mean anything to him. He'll smile at any girl who gets down on her knees. He'll forget about you, just like your parents did."

I shouldn't react. Logically, I know reacting is exactly what she wants. But I'm sick of Annabel thinking she can walk all over me, can ignore me

most of the time and choose now for a conversation. She's trying to make a scene, so I decide to indulge her.

There's a plastic cup sitting unattended on the counter. I don't know what the contents are, but they're a dark crimson color. I grab it and toss it at her, soaking the sequined dress and the perfect hair and the painted face. The kitchen goes silent as the scent of cranberries hits my nose.

"You bitch!"

"Red is a better color on you than green, Annabel," I say. Fury blazes in her eyes as I take a step forward. "Stay away from me. Stay away from my boyfriend."

I go nuclear and blurt out what I know will really piss her off. *Shittt*. Annabel's eyes widen. *Welp, looks like I'm committing to the fake dating thing.*

"You're *dating* Elliot Reid?"

I nod, because my pride won't allow me to deny it now. "He dates *lots* of girls, though. Right? Probably doesn't mean a thing." My voice is mocking. We both know Elliot doesn't date.

Disbelief flickers across Annabel's face, still dripping with red liquid. "I don't believe you."

I grab an unopened can off the counter. "Then go ask him." I smile then turn on my heel and walk out of the kitchen, which is still silent. Once I'm in the hallway, I hear conversation start to pick up again.

I exhale, but not with relief. I'm angry at Elliot for planting this stupid fake dating idea in my head, pissed at myself for letting Annabel get under my skin and setting it in motion.

What the hell did I just do?

The hallway is just as crowded as the kitchen. I maneuver my way between bodies, ignoring the looks I'm getting. I walk out the front door. There's a group of giggling girls coming up the walk. They ignore me as they pass. I take a left across the lawn, headed toward the lake. Two figures are pressed against a tree by the hammock. I avert my eyes as I walk down to the water.

Josh's family's dock is just as nice as I remember. It's not as long as the town pier, but it juts out at least ten feet. I walk to the end and take a seat. The rough wooden boards scratch the backs of my bare thighs.

I crack open the can without looking at the label. Sweet liquid hits my tongue, followed by the sharp, lingering burn of alcohol. I feel it hit my

stomach and start swimming through my veins, a reminder that I never ate dinner. Katherine dashed home between the ceremony and the reception to greet me, but no food was involved. She was already upset about missing my arrival, so I didn't want to bring it up.

I sit there, staring out at the water, taking the occasional sip, and trying to bleach Annabel's words from my mind. I'm not sure how long I've been sitting here when I hear the sound of steps on the dock. As they near, I half-turn to see who it is, looking back at the lake when I spot the familiar sneakers.

"Figured I'd find you down here."

"I like the lake."

"Yeah. I do too." Elliot is quiet as he takes a seat beside me. Finally, "You okay?"

"Mmhmm."

He reaches out and grabs the condensation-covered can, studying the label for a minute. Then he tips it back and takes a drink. "Fuck," he sputters less than a second later. "That's terrible."

I smile. "I know."

"She's jealous of you, Denny."

"I know," I repeat. Silence lingers before I break it. "You, uh, you weren't with a girl just now, were you?" I keep my eyes on the rippling water as I feel his on me.

"No," he replies. "I was in the basement with the guys."

"Good...because you've got a girlfriend now." I glance over at him. "And don't you dare get annoyed. This was your idea, and if you changed your mind in the past four hours, I—"

"I didn't change my mind, Denny."

"Oh. Okay. Good." I don't know why, but I expected him to be more upset about this. Instead, when I glance over at him, he's grinning. "Who... who told you?"

"That we're *dating*?" His smile widens, dimples popping out. "Marcus was in the kitchen."

"I'm sorry. I should have talked to you about it first. She just...really pissed me off."

"Did you really toss a drink on her?"

I bite my bottom lip. "Yeah. It wasn't my finest moment."

"Sure sounds like it was."

A laugh bursts out of my throat. “Shut up.”

He reaches out and tugs me to his side. I go willingly, resting my head on his shoulder. His body heat seeps through the cotton of his t-shirt and through my dress, branding my skin.

“She brought up your parents?”

I sigh. “Yeah. It’s fine. Not like I didn’t already know I’m low on both of their priority lists.”

“Want to talk about it?”

“No.”

“Want to go get ice cream?”

My stomach rumbles. “We don’t have to leave. We just got here, and you just won the championship—you should celebrate. I just...needed some air.”

“I know we don’t have to leave, and I want to celebrate with ice cream. Do you?”

“Yeah,” I admit. “I do.”

He stands and holds a hand out. I grab the can before grasping it, letting him pull me up. He doesn’t drop my hand right away. “Thank you.”

Elliot nods, then grins. “What are boyfriends for?”

He drops my hand and heads for land, unaware of the way my heart has set off on a wild staccato.

I wish I could be as oblivious.

Elliot

I'm on my last set when they show up at the weight room. My eyes flick to the clock. It's not even ten yet. Josh rarely rises before noon in the summers, telling me this is a matter deemed highly important. I don't need three guesses to put together what that is. Oliver settles on the bench beside me and starts doing some reps. Luke and Josh hover on either side of me like sentries.

"Hey, guys." I keep lifting and lowering the bar.

"That's how you're going to play this, Reid?" Josh asks.

"Don't know what you're talking about."

"Yep, he is," Luke contributes.

I roll my eyes.

"We won the championship yesterday," Josh informs me.

"I know, I was there. Scored a hat trick, remember?"

"Well, do you remember leaving my place last night after less than an hour with a girl you swore up and down you weren't dating, after she called you her boyfriend in front of half our year?"

"I changed my mind about her, okay?"

"You *changed your mind*?"

"Yep. Sorry if you felt left out, but I wanted to spend time with my girlfriend." I barely choke the sentence out.

Josh blinks. Twice. "I don't believe you."

"Believe whatever you want. I saw her yesterday and realized you were right. I'm in love with her. So I asked her out, and now we're dating."

I saw her yesterday...and realized Auden Harmon is *stunning*. It was easy to separate her looks from her as a friend when we texted. Not so easy

conversing in person. I had a third, far less noble reason for asking Auden to pretend to be my girlfriend: I don't want to watch her hook up with someone else while she's here. Maybe I should feel guilty about that, but she didn't have to agree. Auden has no issue telling me no. She could have said no to this.

"Well...*I told you so.*"

I keep doing reps. "Yeah. Fine. You did."

"You going to blame her if you don't get a D1 ride?" Oliver enters the conversation for the first time since they all showed up.

"That's not going to happen." My voice is even and calm, but there's an underlying ripple of warning that he'd be wise to heed.

"We'll see." Oliver's tone is annoyingly superior.

"I'm still pissed you skipped out before the cake I custom-ordered, but I'm happy for you, man. It's obvious you're crazy about her."

I ignore the second half of his statement. I didn't expect to feel guilty about lying to my friends, but here we are. "You custom-ordered a cake?"

"Well, technically I had my dad's assistant do it, but I picked it up from the bakery."

"Is there any left?"

"Yeah...but I wouldn't eat it."

I can only imagine. "Enough said."

"We're headed to Sydney's for food, if you want to come?"

"Yeah. Sure. Let me just change and shower."

"Your *girlfriend* can come too, if you want."

"She won't be up yet."

"Late night, eh?" Luke waggles his eyebrows.

"Don't." I sit up on the bench. "We're not talking about that."

"Sounds like they haven't had sex yet," Josh observes, as if I'm not right the fuck here.

"She might—"

"I said, we're *not* talking about me and Auden. Our relationship is off limits, got it?"

Both grumble, but the conversation as we head to Sydney's is centered around the game yesterday, not a discussion of my sex life. When we arrive at the coffee shop, it's another story.

"Well...this should be interesting," Josh states as we step inside.

I realize his meaning immediately. This is the first time—ever—I haven't

been technically single. My aversion to relationships is, or was, well known.

It's not as crowded as I've seen it, but busy enough we have to wait in line for ten minutes to order. Plenty of teenagers from the party last night are already here, and there's no shortage of people shouting congratulations. But not a single girl approaches me.

"Guess no one wants to risk a vodka cranberry to the face," Luke comments. I give him a questioning look. "That's what Auden tossed on Annabel last night," he clarifies.

"Oh." I wish I'd been there for it. I've never been a big fan of Annabel's, and her treatment of Auden has far from elevated my opinion of her. Then again, I doubt Auden would have set the fake dating into motion if I had been there. For someone who's always viewed a relationship as a problematic complication that holds absolutely no appeal, I'm shockingly happy to be in one.

Honestly, I doubted Auden would go for it. When Marcus informed me she told half the house we were dating, I expected to regret ever bringing it up. But nope, I was just glad I did. Figure that out.

We order, then linger around the counter, waiting for our food. When it arrives, Josh suggests we head back to his place since his folks are gone, per usual.

It's strange, being in the Hawleys' huge backyard without crowds of people milling about. Every time I've seen my best friends lately has been hectic, either parties or hockey-related events.

It's strange in a good way. Eating the pile of food we ordered and bickering about random topics makes me feel a decade younger, back before we cared about girls or had the future breathing down our necks. I'm expecting the conversation to turn to at least one of those topics eventually, so I'm hardly surprised when Luke asks, "You're really dating her?"

I swallow the last bite of my breakfast sandwich. "Really."

"Why?" Seeing the look on my face, he's quick to add, "I mean, I get why. But why now?"

"I just realized I like her more than I thought."

"What about hockey?"

"If it becomes an issue, I'll break up with her and we'll go back to being friends."

Josh snorts. "Right. You'll be the first two people who go from friends to fucking back to friends, no problem."

I ignore the heavy sarcasm. “Exactly.”

He rolls his eyes. “Whatever. I still don’t believe you’re really dating. You didn’t kiss her after the game yesterday.”

“That was *before* we started dating.”

“Uh-huh, sure.” Josh shakes his head before he stands and stretches. “Come on, let’s take the boat out.”

When we return from the boat trip, which quickly turned into two-plus hours of waterskiing and tubing, it’s to discover that half the hockey team and a whole bunch of girls have shown up at Josh’s. The novelty of summer is still fresh, not to mention the excitement of yesterday’s championship runs high.

I spot one pissed-off face, though, belonging to Cassie Gordon.

“Good luck,” Luke stage-whispers to me. He pats my shoulder as she stalks toward us, then laughs when I flip him off.

“Hey, Elliot.” Lust overtakes her annoyance for a minute as she stares at my body. I didn’t bother putting my t-shirt back on, waiting until my trunks dry a bit. Her appreciative gaze does absolutely nothing for me. Neither does the short dress she’s wearing.

“Cassie,” I acknowledge.

“Congratulations on the game yesterday. You disappeared so fast last night I didn’t have a chance to tell you.”

I’m tempted to smirk at the passive aggressiveness, but I don’t. My strategy with this encounter is to get through it, not prolong it. She’s pissed about Auden, but she’s dancing around it, trying to test out how serious I am and if a continuation of our past is in the cards. “Thanks.”

She hesitates. Yeah, I’m not making this easy on her, but anything I say right now won’t go over well. This is exactly what the fake dating was supposed to avoid. Had I known half the school was about to show up, I would have texted Auden and told her to come over.

Auden chooses this moment to show up in the backyard. She’s wearing a pair of jean shorts and a white t-shirt I’m pretty sure must belong to her cousin, because both are a little short. Not that I’m complaining. A strip of Auden’s stomach and a lot of leg have every effect Cassie’s outfit doesn’t.

“Nice talking to you, Cassie.” I’m not sure if the few words we

exchanged could be considered a conversation and I definitely know she wasn't finished talking to me, but I walk away from her and toward Auden before I can talk myself out of it.

The logistics of our relationship didn't come up last night. We ate ice cream and sat on the pier and laughed. We didn't address how we would act like a couple, what it might consist of. I told her nothing would change between us besides assumptions, but that was naive. Most couples our age are all over each other. If I want girls, my friends, to take this seriously, I have to show them I'm serious. There's only one obvious way to do that.

I've also wanted to kiss Auden Lane Harmon since the day I met her.

But as I approach her, I second-guess myself. The easy nonchalance I normally experience around girls, even her, is glaringly absent. We may know nothing has changed between us, but no one staring at us does. What if she freaks out? It's probably a bad idea to spring this on her, although based on her reaction to this proposition yesterday, she'd freak out with advance warning, too. What if we have no chemistry? What if it's awkward and weird and we can't come back from this and return to just being friends?

I never overthink this much. *Pull it together, Reid. It's just a kiss*, I tell myself.

How many girls have I made out with? Dozens?

Easy to do when you don't go much further.

Auden sees me approaching. I watch her eyes dart behind me—could be at any number of people standing around, but I have a feeling it's Cassie—then come back to me. Her eyebrows rise as I approach. Her mouth opens to say something, but I don't give her a chance to. I'll lose my nerve if I hesitate. I'll talk myself out of this, and I probably *should*.

With one goal in mind, I march up to her the way I charge on the ice.

The world is suddenly silent around me. The chatter of voices has ceased. The lapping of water against the shore is muted. I'm locked in a world where only she and I exist—my favorite place to be.

I kiss her. I press my lips against my best friend's. The girl who knows every secret I have. Every goal I'm desperate to achieve. Everything that separates me from the other few billion people on this planet.

I've imagined kissing Auden a lot of times, but it was always the lead-up.

When she'd lean against me on the dock, I'd think about how easy it would be to bend down and touch my lips to her forehead.

When we'd play at the rink, I'd wonder what angle I'd have to twist at to

close the distance between my face and hers.

When we'd sit in my car together, I'd make guesses at the number of inches separating us.

The actual kiss was never part of the fantasy, because I know how to kiss a girl. It was just getting to the kiss that was an unknown.

But now I'm kissing her, and it feels like it's the first time I've ever been this close to a female. My heart pounds erratically. My vision blurs until I can't see anything. All the sound that disappeared is back, assaulting my eardrums in a rush of awareness. My palms are sweating and my blood is racing and I'm the furthest thing from having things under control.

I start to pull away, already compiling a list of excuses I can give her for why I did this. I don't need any, though. This is pretend—I told her so, because I'm every bit the idiot Josh called me out as this morning. I'm trying to put Auden and the emotions she draws out of me in a box, and they refuse to stay there. Or maybe I don't want to keep them contained.

I open my mouth to say something, but she leans forward and presses her lips back to mine before I can speak a single word—and she starts to kiss me back. Weaves her fingers through my hair and presses against me.

Holy fuck.

I'm drowning.

Dreaming.

Desperate.

I kiss her back to the pounding erraticism of my heart. Allow myself to register nothing beyond the fact that she's a girl and I'm a guy. I don't pull back until I'm out of oxygen and growing hard.

"Hi." Her voice sounds breathier than usual and her cheeks are flushed. I already got assurance that she was into the kiss—into me—just now, but it feels good to see the evidence on her face, too.

"Hey, Denny."

"That was...different."

"Apparently, us disappearing last night didn't convince anyone of much. I took drastic measures."

Auden mumbles something that sounds like "I'll say" under her breath.

"Hope it wasn't too terrible for you," I tease.

"It was okay." Auden has an excellent poker face. According to her, it's the product of a lot of uncomfortable social events with her parents.

I'm ninety-eight percent positive she's messing with me, but I'm not

certain. Most of the girls I fool around with act like everything we do is the most incredible thing they've ever experienced. It's good for my ego, sure, but it also makes encounters feel a little...empty.

"Okay?" I'm exaggerating my incredulity, but not by a lot. Because that was the best kiss *I've* ever experienced.

"Maybe you're not the hot shit you think you are."

"You called me hot yesterday," I remind her.

The flush darkens, but she holds her ground. "I was trying to prove a point. In retrospect, since we're—" She lowers her voice. "Fake dating anyway, I should have come up with a different adjective. Like infuriatingly cocky."

"That's two adjectives."

Auden sighs, but her lips twist like she's fighting a smile. "I'm going to get some food. All I had for dinner was spiked soda and ice cream and nothing for breakfast."

"What? Why?"

"Aunt Katherine didn't get home until three—four a.m., I think? I'm not sure if Annabel ever came home. Anyway, there's no food in the house."

"No, why didn't you say something last night? We could've gotten actual food, not just ice cream."

She shrugs. "I wanted ice cream."

I don't argue with that bulletproof logic. "What made you come over?"

She smirks, then raises both eyebrows, and I realize how it sounded.

"I just meant—"

"Relax, Reid. I know what you meant. Josh texted me, telling me to come."

"He did?" My brow furrows. I had no idea Josh had her number, let alone texted her. "Did you give him your number?"

"Save the jealous boyfriend act for when people can hear what we're saying. I'm going to eat something before I pass out."

She brushes past me and heads for the deck. Someone—likely Josh—must have ordered pizza, because people are stepping out on it holding slices. I spot my other best friend standing by the fire pit, talking with Ava and Annabel.

Auden's cousin focuses on me as I approach, but Josh and Ava are flirting obliviously.

"Hawley."

Josh spins and smiles. “Reid! Hell of a smooch. None of us missed it.”

He’s gained a beer since the last time I saw him, and based on the smirk on his face, I’d say there’s a chance it’s not his first. When Josh drinks, he drinks a lot. Luke, Oliver, and I have all talked about saying something to him, but I don’t think he has a problem. During the season, he won’t consume a drop. Some parties, too. He doesn’t need alcohol to be his usual boisterous self, but then there are certain nights where he’ll barely be able to stand. There’s no pattern or obvious tell; Josh is unpredictable, even sober.

“Can I talk to you for a second?”

“Sure. Excuse me, ladies.”

I walk about fifteen feet away. Josh follows.

“Need some sex tips?”

I study him, trying to figure out, one, how drunk he is, and, two, if he actually knows I’ve never gone all the way with a girl. “No,” I finally answer. “I’m wondering why you texted my girlfriend.” That word feels less weird every time I say it.

“Worried she’ll go for a guy who actually expresses his emotions?”

“*Watch it*, Josh.”

“I met her first.” He’s deliberately trying to provoke me. I’m not sure why, but I am sure it’s working.

“I’m serious, Hawley. You don’t want to push me. Not about this.”

“She’s head over heels for you, Elliot. Any idiot can see that. And whatever ridiculous dating experiment you’ve come up with, it’s going to break her heart.”

Something in my chest twinges. “I haven’t lied to her about anything.”

“False hope isn’t any better. And...do you have any idea how ridiculous it is to sit and hear you gripe about your perfect family and pro prospects and all the hot girls panting after you? Some of us have *actual* problems, Reid.”

“Like trashing Mom and Dad’s multi-million-dollar mansion every night?” I regret the words as soon as they leave my mouth. Josh doesn’t talk about it much, but I know his parents’ perpetual absence is a sore spot—one I just poked.

He scoffs and shakes his head. “I won’t text your girlfriend again. Unless she texts me first.”

Josh walks off, leaving me fuming. I storm off toward the deck, only stopping to pull a beer out of the cooler. I gulp half in one go.

“Whoa. What crawled up your ass?” Luke asks, appearing next to me.

“Josh is *being* an ass.”

“Pretty sure something must have happened with his folks. They weren’t at the game yesterday.”

“That’s no excuse for acting like a dick.”

“I didn’t say it was, Reid. What did he do that pissed you off so much?”

“Nothing,” I mutter, drinking more beer.

“Did this nothing involve Auden?”

“Maybe,” I admit.

He shakes his head, appearing amused. “You and this girl, man. Who would have known when I fucked up those posters?”

I shrug. *I* knew. Maybe not that we’d end up here or how, but I looked at Auden for the first time and knew there was something there.

“She’s looking for you.”

“Huh?”

Luke jerks his chin toward the lake. Auden has almost reached the dock. She’s balancing a full plate of pizza and glancing around. I’m not sure if she’s actually looking for me, but I leap on the opportunity anyway. I set my half-empty beer down and beeline toward her.

“Yeah, nice talking to you, too,” Luke calls after me.

Auden has one piece of pizza in hand and another in her mouth when I take a seat beside her on the dock.

“You found food, I see.”

She chews and swallows. There’s some red sauce on her cheek, but I don’t mention it—yet. “It’s like an Italian restaurant set up shop inside.”

“Yeah. Josh tends to go overboard.”

“No kidding.”

“No one said anything to you, did they?”

“Nope. I was given a *wide* berth.” Auden sounds upset about it. Annoyed at the very least.

“I’m sorry, Denny. I should’ve—”

She waves my words away with a slice of cheese. “Don’t apologize. I knew what I was getting into. Well, *almost* knew.”

I raise a brow. “I should have requested a preview of your kissing skills.”

I’m up to ninety-nine percent certain she’s messing with me, so I say, “You can request one right now.”

A smirk unfurls on her face. “Oh really? It’s an open offer?”

“Wide open.”

“Why?” she whispers.

I don’t have a good answer, so I make a joke. “I have a thing for girls with pizza sauce on their face.

“What?” She swipes both cheeks but misses the red spot.

I chuckle, then lean forward slowly. I can see her pulse hammering just below her jawline like a rhythmic miniature drum. At a pace akin to molasses dripping out of a jar, I swipe my thumb across the soft, smooth skin of her cheek. “Got it,” I murmur.

Her breath catches.

Auden kisses me first this time. She closes the two inches that separated our lips and presses them together. My hand is still on the side of her face and I use it to tilt her to the side and deepen the kiss. She doesn’t cede control, just like I knew she wouldn’t. Our tongues come into play, taunting and teasing and tangling.

I’m worried this is what it’s like—kissing someone you have feelings for. It’s not just the physical sensations. I’m hyperaware of everything. The way she smells like rosemary and mint; I know that’s the scent because I once called her when she was shampoo shopping and she got so distracted she left the store without it. The way she tastes like oregano and mozzarella from the pizza she’s been inhaling. And because it’s Auden, I’m also wondering what she’ll say when I pull back. She doesn’t disappoint.

“You’re getting better.”

I laugh. “Gee, thanks.”

“Uh-huh.” She takes a bite of her last slice of pizza. Despite her calm words, she’s fiddling with a loose string on her shorts as she eats, making me think—hope—she might be more affected than she’s acting.

We’re both silent as she finishes eating. Then, suddenly, she says, “Tell me something no one knows about you, something you’ve never told me.”

I stare out at the water, then shift my attention to her. There’s alcohol swimming in my veins. The slow simmer of heat, too. But I’m not drunk. The heady feeling is Auden Harmon. Nothing else makes me feel like this. Scared and powerful. Happy and sad. Overwhelmed and at peace.

“I don’t want to.”

“That’s a shitty answer.”

“You already know more than anyone else, Denny.”

“So?”

“So...I can’t give you everything.” There’s a double meaning to the

words, and I know she caught it when she replies.

“Did you ever consider dating...for real?” She pauses. “To keep the fans at bay, at least.”

I hear the vulnerability hiding behind the attempt at humor. “You’re the *only* person I’d consider it with.”

“Reid!”

Oliver chooses this terrible time to appear. I glance over one shoulder to watch him walk toward us. “Yeah?”

“I need your help inside. Someone smashed a vase and Hawley is MIA.” He pauses. “Hey, Auden.”

“Hi, Oliver.”

I glance at her and sigh. “I’ll be right back, okay?”

“I’ll be here,” she replies, giving me a small wave and a smirk that I’d find silly on anyone else but find sexy on her.

I smirk. “Okay.” When I reach Oliver, I mutter, “You’ve got shitty timing.”

“Oh? Were you in the middle of something?”

I glare at him. “I know you’re not a big flirt, Ollie, but you should know what it looks like.”

“Yeah, yeah,” he mutters.

I instantly feel guilty. Some things are unspoken in our friend group. We don’t talk about Josh’s drinking. We don’t talk about my dad. We don’t talk about the fact that Oliver doesn’t hang around girls, ever. I guess Luke is the only one of us without anything unsaid.

Oliver is shy and serious. I’m not sure if that’s the reason he shies away from female attention...or if he’s into guys. He’s never said a word, and none of us has brought it up. But I know Luke and Josh have noticed as well, and I know Oliver has noticed we’ve noticed. I’ve always shut down any homophobic comments from guys on the team. Canmore isn’t a crazy conservative town, but people would definitely talk. The only guy I know who’s out is Dennis Wheeler, and he’s practically Oliver’s opposite in every way. Loud, boisterous, energetic, and not the least bit athletic. He’s the guy everyone knows and likes. I guess that could be a hard act to emulate.

The living room is a mess. There are glass shards all over the floor. I start collecting the larger ones while Oliver goes in search of a dustpan and broom. It takes us at least fifteen minutes to clean it all up. Everyone is walking around in bare feet, adding to the danger. No one wants to call

paramedics to a house overflowing with drunk teenagers.

My phone rings just as I'm about to head back inside. I veer to the left, into the screened porch instead. I lean back against the wall and answer the phone. "Hey, Mom."

"Are you almost here?"

"Almost where?"

She sighs. "You forgot."

"Forgot what?"

"We're taking the train to visit Jeff's parents for the day."

"Since when?"

"We've been planning it for months, Elliot."

"I've been busy, Mom. The championship was yesterday and—"

"This meant a lot to Jeff." The guilt trip doesn't have any trouble coming through the phone.

"I'm not his son. They're not my grandparents."

"That's your choice, Elliot. Love makes a family, not blood."

I take a deep breath, then slowly release it. I'm so sick of hearing her say that. Why can't it be enough that *she* has a complete family now? "I'm sorry, Mom. I won't make it. I'll apologize to Jeff when I get home."

"Where are you?"

"At Josh's."

"You said you were going to the gym this morning."

"I did. I ran into the guys...and things devolved from there."

"What have you been doing?"

"Um, eating? Waterskiing?"

She sighs. "Be careful, Elliot."

"I will," I promise.

Another sigh before she hangs up. I do the same before I bang my head back against the wall I'm leaning on.

Auden

It's *really* inconvenient, knowing what a good kisser my best friend is.

I'm realizing I did not think this whole fake relationship thing through. Like, *at all*.

First off, there's no good reason I'm in one. Neither of us is fulfilling a relative's dying wish or trying to receive an inheritance from overbearing parents, or whatever other semi-legitimate reason there is for pretending to date someone you're really not. Is there one?

Secondly, it hasn't made me any friends here. Annabel hasn't spoken to me since I soaked her, and I have a feeling the piece of paper I scribbled *I'm sorry* on and slid under her door is likely in shreds or a pile of ash by now—if she ever even came home last night, which I'm not sure she did. Every other girl here has waves of animosity wafting off her strong enough to knock me over.

Third, I don't have to consult a single romantic comedy to know pretending to date someone you want to date for real is a bad idea. But like the fool I am, I accepted Elliot's assurance that nothing would change between us, aside from people assuming we're having sex, of course.

There was *no mention* of kissing. Yet here I am, lips tingling.

Worst of all, I'm the one who set this whole stupid thing in motion, so I really have no one to blame but myself.

Fuck.

My.

Life.

“Want to take her out for a spin?”

I glance back to see Josh approaching the dock. “The boat?” I clarify.

Stupidly, because what else could he be talking about?

He nods, not taking the opportunity to tease me for stating the obvious.

“Um...” I stall. Josh seems nice enough, but I barely know him. Is getting in a stranger’s boat any better than getting in their car? I guess jumping overboard into water probably hurts less than rolling out of an open door onto cement. Plus, he’s Elliot’s best friend, so he can’t be a complete psycho. I hope.

“Do you need to check with your fake boyfriend?”

My eyes fly to his. “He told you?”

Josh smirks. “No, but you just did.”

I grimace.

“Don’t worry, I won’t say anything to him. Luke and Oliver totally bought it.” His expression sobers as he studies me. “Elliot is...complicated.”

I bristle at the thinly veiled pity in his voice. Along with sniffing out the fake in our relationship, he seems to have sniffed out the real in my feelings. “I’m not interested in Elliot like that,” I’m quick to say. “We’re just friends.”

Josh’s lips twist up into a smirk before he closes them around the bottle of beer. “Uh-huh.”

“I mean it.”

“Yeah, I know you do.” He sets the bottle down and leans forward. “Just remember, people can’t change unless *they* want to. Not because *you* want them to.”

“He asked me to do this fake dating thing so he could focus on hockey. That’s it.”

“That’s not *why*, Auden,” Josh replies. “If he hadn’t kissed you in front of everyone? Yeah, I might have bought it, but he jumped on it like it was his only chance. He has feelings for you, and this fake dating bullshit is his way of dealing with it *without* dealing with it. Don’t let him get away with it.”

I let out a quiet scoff. Josh raises one eyebrow. I lift a shoulder in a small shrug, then let it drop. “We’re just friends.”

Josh shakes his head. “Fine. I tried. I’m still taking the boat out.” He climbs onto the sleek speedboat tied up alongside the dock. “Can you get the ropes?”

I eye the beer he’s holding. “Should you be driving a boat?”

“Probably not.” The grin he gives me is wolfish. “Come on, Auden. It’s like a car but with no one else on the road and no speed limit.”

I roll my eyes, but I climb aboard after I untie the boat.

Josh grins, then sprawls out on the bench seat behind the captain's chair. "Do your worst, Harmon."

I approach the wheel apprehensively.

"Come on, you must have some fire beneath that good-girl exterior. Reid has never gone for the please-and-thank-you type. Plus, I heard you got your cousin pretty good last night. Keys are in the ignition."

I'm really on a roll with questionable decisions lately, because I don't hesitate any longer. I take a seat, turn the key, and press the lever that I assume is the gas. The boat speeds ahead like a racehorse leaving the gate.

"Holy fuck," Josh exclaims as we speed across the open water. His dock is microscopic in seconds.

"I've never driven a boat before," I call back to him.

I'm pretty sure he says, "No shit," but it's hard to hear over the whipping wind.

It's fantastic. Euphoric. If I had a choice, I would never travel by any other mode of transportation but this ever again. The sun is sinking, casting dapples of orange across the surface of the water. The wind whips my hair back. There are no other boats in sight. It's like I'm competing in a Formula 1 race—alone. We fly across the water so quickly it feels like we aren't even touching it. Like we're hovering above the surface, moving too fast to even leave behind a wake. I'd look back to confirm, but I'm terrified to take my eyes off of what's right in front of me for fear of an island or lighthouse suddenly appearing. Do lakes even have lighthouses?

I don't touch the speed lever for several minutes. It quickly becomes addicting: the rush of wind and excitement and adrenaline. Any decrease will be a letdown. Once I spot the opposite shore, I finally pull it down, more slowly than I started it. The boat slows and slows and slows until we're barely moving at all. My heart pounds erratically.

"Nice work. Want a drink?" I glance back to see Josh lean over and open a small fridge tucked under the seat he's splayed out on. "We've got beer, hard seltzer, and wine."

"Is that allowed?"

"No. We're breaking about ten rules the Canmore Town Council takes very seriously right about now." He shrugs. "If anything happens, my parents will make it go away."

"I'll take a hard seltzer." I sit down beside him and open the can when he hands it to me. "Sounds like your parents would get along well with mine."

“Oh yeah?”

I take a sip of the fizzy alcohol. “Yeah, for sure. My parents have never met a problem money can’t fix—my dad especially. He paid six figures to store his sailboat at the Laguna Beach Marina. He’s never even been. It’ll probably get sold off in the divorce.”

“Your parents are getting divorced?”

“Yep. Been in the works for a year now. My dad handles a lot of high-profile divorces, but my mom refused to have it all go through his firm. That’s dragged things out a lot.”

“That sucks. I’m sorry.”

I shrug. “It is what it is.”

“Are you jealous of Elliot’s family?”

“Huh?” I’m taken aback by the question.

“I am. His mom is great. So is his stepdad, Jeff. You’ve met them, right?”

“Yeah.”

“I know the early stuff messed him up, and it’s not like he doesn’t have a right to be bitter about it, but sometimes I also just want to say *Look what’s right in front of you!* Supportive parents who care and want to be there for him. He just won’t let them—does everything by himself. It’s like that with you now, too. He won’t let himself have it.”

I stash that away for future analysis. “Did you know his dad?”

“Andrew? No. I met Reid when we started school. Andrew was long gone by then, back playing in the States.”

“What about your parents? Where are they?”

“My dad owns a building materials company his father founded. He likes to travel all over, overseeing sites, telling other people how to do their jobs. Bet a lot of them would love to tell him to piss off, but he’s the big boss. My mom likes spending the money, pretty much anywhere that’s not here. She sent a postcard from Paris a couple of weeks ago. Haven’t heard from her since.”

“I’m sorry, Josh.”

“It is what it is.” He repeats my words from earlier.

We both drink in silence for a minute.

“You’re easy to talk to,” he says suddenly.

I laugh. “Thanks.”

“I couldn’t figure it out, you know—Reid’s thing with you.”

“Oh?” I hope he’ll keep talking, and he does.

“I’ve seen him with a lot of girls. He usually flirts, sometimes takes it further, but he never *showed* interest. I saw it as soon as he came inside that coffee shop, so I mentioned asking for your number when we were fixing those posters, just to see if he’d react. He said you seemed too studious for me.” Josh chuckles. “Before that, he couldn’t be bothered to listen when I talked about girls with him, let alone express an opinion. I was barely surprised when he showed up with you that night.”

“He’s...compelling,” I agree.

“He doesn’t know how you feel about him, Auden.”

“Yeah, that’s the point.”

“You should tell him.”

“Why? So he can feel guilty about it? He told me, the very first day we met: *I’m selfish, I’m making it to the pros, I’m a fuckboy who just hooks up—* blah blah blah.”

Josh chuckles. “*Please* tell me he called himself a fuckboy.”

“I’m paraphrasing.”

“I still think you should tell him.”

“Why? It won’t change anything.”

“You don’t know that. You haven’t done *anything*, right? Use this fake dating mess to your advantage. Push the boundaries a little. See how he reacts.” It’s actually not terrible advice, and my face must say that. He smirks. “Bet you thought I was just a pretty face, eh?”

“No. I thought you were a rich kid with both mommy *and* daddy issues.”

Josh grins. “See? I knew you have some fire in you.”

We settle back into silence, both looking out at the water.

“So, is this what you do all summer? Just hang out at this lake?”

“Pretty much. What do you do, when you’re not tossing vodka cranberries on people?”

I ignore that comment. “Uh, not much. Brunch. Shopping. I work at an art gallery a few days a week. Tennis lessons. I have an SAT prep class starting next week.”

“Sounds like a lot to me.”

“I guess.”

“What’s the SAT?”

“Oh, I guess you guys don’t have it here. It’s a college admissions test. Your score can impact where you go for university.”

“I guess Reid was right—you *are* too studious for me.”

I snort. "Sure."

"You staying in the States for college?"

"Yeah. Stanford, assuming I get in."

"Will you get in?"

"Probably," I admit. I'm a legacy, not to mention a straight-A student.

"Interesting choice."

"It's a good school."

"I know," Josh agrees. "Ivy League, right? In California?"

"Right."

He says nothing for a couple of minutes. "Their team is terrible. He wouldn't even consider it."

It's my turn to be quiet. Have I thought about me and Elliot and college? Yes. Part of me would love to be in the same place as him. The rest of me knows it's a bad idea, worse than this fake dating one, because I *will* have to see him with other girls.

"We should head back. If the amount of buzzing going on in my pocket is any indication, we've been missed."

I pat my own pocket, then realize... "I left my phone on the dock."

"Wanna drive back?"

"No, I'm good." The recklessness from earlier has abated. I'm comfortable and relaxed, lounging against the seat, sipping on my hard seltzer. "As long as *you're* good to drive?"

He seems sober, but he's also drained most of the beer he brought.

"Yeah. I've driven after a lot more than that."

Hardly a comforting statement, but we're off before I can say anything else. The return trip takes longer. Josh doesn't take the same liberties with the accelerator as I did.

There are a lot more people on the dock when we approach than there were when we departed. One of them is Elliot, who helps with tying the boat up before standing with a furious expression that takes me completely off guard.

"What the fuck, Hawley?" He practically spits the words at Josh.

Unlike me, Josh doesn't seem surprised by Elliot's words. "Mad you weren't invited, Reid?"

"Oh, I'm fucking pissed, all right. You took the boat out drunk?"

"I'm not drunk," Josh retorts. "And we take the boat out with drinks all the damn time. It's *my* boat."

“I don’t give a shit what you do with your boat, as long as Auden’s not on it!”

Josh nods. “Yeah, I figured that. Never took you for the overbearing type, Elliot.”

“You could have *killed* her!”

“Not much to hit on the lake. Besides, Auden was the one who did most of the reckless driving.” He gives me a conspiratorial wink I’m too surprised to respond to.

“You think this is *funny*?”

“If you’re so worried about your *girlfriend*, maybe you should have been spending time with her. She was alone down here. I asked if she wanted to go out, and she said yes. End of story.”

Elliot opens his mouth to respond, but I jump in before he can. I wasn’t expecting this reaction. *At all*. If anything, I hoped he’d be happy I was bonding with his friends.

“It’s fine, Elliot. I’m fine. I wanted to go.”

“You should have known better, Auden.”

I rear my head back in shock. “Excuse me?”

“It’s practically dark out.”

“It’s *barely* dusk.”

“You’ve never even been on a boat before.”

“We went canoeing,” I counter.

“A canoe doesn’t have a motor that can chop your arm off.”

“You’re being completely ridiculous right now. You know that, right? I had fun, and I returned with all appendages still attached. I know for a *fact* you’ve done far stupider shit than go out on a boat with a beer at dusk, so get off your fucking high horse before you fall.”

He stares at me, eyes blinking with shock. Yeah, I sass him plenty, but I’ve never spoken to him like that before. I don’t apologize, though. If he thinks he can dictate what I do and who I talk to just because we’re *fake* dating, he’s in for a rude awakening in the form of verbal warfare.

I brush past him and start walking back toward the house. Plenty of people are staring at me, which I’ve learned to expect in Canmore. The annoyance and anger coursing through me are an effective deterrent to any self-consciousness, though. I’m more concerned about the other emotions Elliot’s response elicited in me than teenagers gossiping about me. Yes, I’m irritated with him. Yes, he completely overreacted. But...it was also sweet. It

preys on the dangerous hope that maybe things between me and Elliot aren't as hopeless as I've conditioned myself to believe.

Luke approaches me as soon as I enter the house. "How is your hand-eye coordination?"

"What?" I glance at him questioningly.

"I need a partner for ping-pong," Luke clarifies. When I don't say anything, he repeats his initial question. "So...how is your hand-eye coordination?"

"Um, decent?" I tell him. Years of tennis lessons should mean something, right?

"You seem like you're the modest type, so I'm going to take that to mean you're good," he replies. I shrug my shoulders since he's not wrong—about the modesty, at least. *I'm* not about to oversell my skills. Half of my serves still hit the net.

"Evans," Luke calls toward a crowd of people, and a guy with floppy brown hair makes his way over to us.

"What's up?" he asks.

"I got my partner," Luke replies. "You ready?"

"Sure," the guy answers, looking at me. "You're Reid's girl, right?"

Don't smile. You're mad at him. Don't smile. Don't smile. Don't—I smile. "Yeah. I am." At least he's not here to see it.

But minutes later, he appears. His eyes find me immediately, already in position next to Luke and across from Evans and a guy named Johnny, I've surmised is also on the hockey team.

Luke serves first. I don't really remember the rules for ping-pong, or more like I didn't know there even were rules, so I mostly follow everyone else's lead and try to pretend Elliot isn't still here, watching.

Evans and Johnny are both good. I feel like I'm holding my own, but the game is moving so fast I can hardly process anything that's happening. More importantly, I can't analyze or overthink anything involving Elliot Reid.

Luke and I pull ahead until we're only two points away from winning the game. A ferocious backhand from Luke makes it game point. I refuse to glance at Elliot again, but I can feel his eyes on me. Or I'm hallucinating.

Johnny serves. I hit it back quickly, beginning a long volley that ends when I manage a hit that sails between Evans and Johnny. They both freeze, stunned.

"Man, what's a hockey championship when you win at ping-pong?" Luke

jokes with them. Neither seem to find it very funny. Evans stalks off with an eye roll, but Johnny stays to “congratulate” us—well, to congratulate me, on my hand-eye coordination. Is that code for something sexual with guys? I’d have asked Elliot back before our relationship turned into...what it has. Whatever it is. Friends who fake date and real kiss?

When I tell Johnny I play tennis, his eyes light up. In addition to hockey, he apparently plays both soccer and tennis as well. When I suggest we go play soccer outside, his eyes dim and dart behind me. I don’t need to turn around to know what—or who—he’s looking at.

“So?” I press.

Luke chuckles softly beside me, obviously figuring out Johnny’s dilemma as well.

“Um, yeah. Sure.” Far from an enthusiastic acceptance, but I fall prey to the Elliot allure just as much, if not more than anyone else. I get Johnny’s reluctance to piss him off, especially seeing as he thinks we’re dating.

I make a point not to look over at where he was last standing as we head outside. Luke disappears, but Johnny ropes a bunch of other partygoers into playing as well. It’s both guys and girls, and none of them appear to be on Canmore’s soccer team, because I’m definitely not the worst one on the small, open stretch of grass that serves as the field. Aside from the occasional side glance, no one makes me feel like the outsider I technically am.

That changes when Cassie and Annabel stroll over with their group. I can’t remember any of the other girls’ names. There’s one with red hair who looks familiar. Ava, maybe?

Unfortunately—and probably uncoincidentally—the game wraps up quickly after that. Some of the guys head to jump in the lake. Most of the girls go get drinks. I walk right up to Annabel.

“Hey.”

She says nothing. This is when most people would probably walk away, and I’m tempted to, for sure.

Instead, I take a deep breath. “You know, I was mad about having to come here last summer. I had plans for July. I was going to road-trip up to San Francisco with my best friend. Instead, my mom’s assistant sent me a plane ticket here. I was upset—annoyed—but my parents weren’t around to watch me throw a tantrum. They’re never around to watch me throw a tantrum. So, I thought, *I’ll make the best of it. Canada’s cool. Bears and maple leaves and mountains.* And I stupidly assumed I’d have an automatic

friend here, an ally. Instead, I show up, and you don't appear for days. When you finally do, you treat me like gum on the bottom of your shoe. Your choice. We're cousins—family—but your choice. Last night? I went overboard. I'm sorry. But you've been nothing but nasty to me, and you've never apologized. And you keep it up...why? Because of Elliot? Because if you're mad or jealous about my relationship with him, you have no one but yourself to blame. He showed me around town. He hung out with me. He kept in touch. All the things I thought—hoped—you would do.”

Dapples of orange and pink sunset play across Annabel's face as she stares at me. She appears to be stunned silent. Not giving me the cold shoulder, not trying to make this more uncomfortable, just...stunned.

“Okay. Well—I'll, uh, see you, I guess.”

She gives me a small, barely perceptible nod.

I'm tempted to head back down to the dock, either to swim or stare out at the water, but I decide against it. The rapidly disappearing sun is already taking care of any flush from playing soccer, and I'm exhausted—mentally, physically, and emotionally.

I walk back to the house instead. The mood is devolving from playful to promiscuous. I pass several couples cozying up on the deck as I head into the house, and I spot Elliot immediately. He's leaning against the kitchen counter, talking to his friend Oliver and a brunette girl with a wide smile aimed right at him. His gaze locks on me and remains there.

I was considering just leaving and texting him goodbye, but I lose any motivation to do so as I stare at him.

Elliot says something to Oliver, then heads straight toward me. I tense as he approaches, trying to suss out from his expression exactly how upset he still is about earlier.

“Finally run out of sporting events?”

I scowl. “Just trying to take as many risks as possible. I hear a lot of ping-pong players suffer fatal accidents.”

Elliot smirks, then sobers. “I'm not going to apologize. I mean, I should have handled it differently, but it needed to be said. That was idiotic of Josh, and you should have known better.”

“Nothing happened, Elliot.”

“With the boat...or with Josh?”

I tilt my head to the side. “That's what you're worried about? That I cheated?”

Elliot glances around, confirms no one is in hearing distance, and then lowers his voice anyway. “We’re not actually dating.”

“Thanks for the reminder. I forgot, since you brought up this ridiculous idea just *yesterday*.”

He sighs.

“Look, I’m going to go. I’m exhausted, and the airline was supposed to finally drop off my suitcase. I just want to go back to Katherine’s and watch television in sweatpants, okay?”

“Okay.” He nods toward the door. “Come on. I’ll walk you back.”

“You don’t have to do that. It’s only a few blocks.”

“I know I don’t have to, Denny. Come on.” He heads for the door without another word.

I sigh and follow. It’s not that I’m upset about this development—the exact opposite. That’s what worries me. My emotions are all over the place. I don’t know what’s real or fake. Friendship or relationship. Meaningful or meaningless.

The walk back to Katherine’s from the Hawleys’ is silent. I almost open my mouth a couple of times, but then I reconsider. Elliot doesn’t seem to be having a similar problem. He’s perfectly at ease as we walk along the sidewalk, past house after house. Occasionally a dog barks in the distance or a car drives by, but it’s mostly silent.

My heartbeat quickens as we reach the white Colonial. We’re all alone. Does that mean he will or won’t kiss me? It’s happened under both circumstances now.

I’m temporarily distracted by the sight of a suitcase sitting on the porch, barely visible in the light cast by the street lamp. Katherine is off at a job—a birthday party this time, I think—so the porch light hasn’t been turned on.

“Thank God,” I say dramatically. “I won’t have to wear Annabel’s clothes anymore. They’re all too small for me.”

“Yeah,” Elliot replies. “I noticed.”

The words are innocuous; the way he says them isn’t. Like he *noticed* noticed.

Did he not read the *What Not to Say to a Platonic Female Friend* list? Or is he just throwing it out the window now that we’re “dating”? Is he testing me? Teasing me?

I’m not cut out for this fake dating shit. It’s going to give me an ulcer. “Okay. Well, night.” I head for the dark porch.

“You’re not going to invite me in?”

I spin back around. “I figured you were going back to the party.”

“Nah.” He takes a few steps forward, the distance between us shrinking back to a foot or less. “I’ll hang out with you or head home. But no one will be back for a couple of hours yet.”

“Where did they go?”

“To visit Jeff’s parents.”

“You didn’t go?”

Something shifts—hardens—in his eyes. “No.”

“I was going to shower, change.”

“Okay. I’ll text you tomorrow.” He starts to turn away.

“I didn’t mean it like that. Just that I’ll need a bit before we can hang out.”

He turns back toward me, looking like Christmas came early. *Goddammit, Auden.* “I don’t need a babysitter.”

When I enter the living room with wet hair and wearing clothes that actually fit, Elliot is already sprawled across the length of the wide sectional. The Colonial has an open floor plan. The kitchen is sectioned off by the stairwell, but the entryway, living room, and dining room are just one large space, divided by the back of the couch and the tables surrounding the oak dining table.

“You weren’t kidding about the lack of food,” he tells me as I sink down into the small space that remains.

“I know.”

“I found soda, though. And chips.” He’s spread them out on the coffee table, and I crack open a soda and take a long sip. I haven’t had anything to drink besides the hard seltzer several hours ago. “What do you want to watch?”

I set down the soda and smother a yawn. “Whatever.” Last night, I barely slept. I blame being in an unfamiliar bed, and the havoc last night’s events wreaked on my head and my heart. I can only hope I’m exhausted enough that today’s happenings won’t keep me up tonight.

We’re barely ten minutes into the spy thriller he picks when my eyes

begin to droop. I can barely keep the lids open, blinking excessively in an attempt to stay awake.

Elliot notices. "You should get to bed, Denny."

I shake my head. "It's way too early. If I go to sleep now, I'll wake up in the middle of the night."

"At least lie down, then. You look like one of those blow-up dolls at car dealerships that fall over and then stand back up."

"Gee, *thanks*."

I do as he says though, crawling up the length of the couch and lying down right beside him. This couch, while big, was not meant to accommodate two people lying on it horizontally. I can feel the heat radiating off his body, smell the mixture of sunscreen and soap on his skin. I'm *wide awake* now.

To distract myself, I keep taking sips of soda. I'll shift, drink, move back, and repeat. The third time, my foot brushes Elliot's leg. I yank away like I've been burned. He appears oblivious.

Until I finish my soda and knock the empty can over while I'm considering my next move. Bathroom trip, then go back to huddling at the end of the couch? Start crunching chips? I lean over to retrieve the can at the same time Elliot does, and I learn he's *not* oblivious.

He immediately moves away, and I blurt the first thing that comes to mind. "You're hard."

"I'm a guy, and you're a hot girl." He shrugs like it's no big deal. *Is it?* He's the person I would ask if a guy told me that.

Clearly he's a guy, and I know I'm not ugly—I've gotten enough envious looks from girls and admiring ones from boys. But I didn't know *Elliot* considers me *hot*.

I look at him and he looks right back, obviously wondering if I'm going to ask more questions. "So...what's the plan?"

"What do you mean?" he replies cautiously.

"With our pretend relationship. Do we fake break up after I leave?"

"What? No. The whole point of this was to last weeks. Months."

"Are you going to fake cheat on me? I mean, fake cheat on our fake relationship by actually hooking up with girls?"

He holds my gaze. "No."

"Won't that be...hard for you?"

He smiles, probably at my word choice, but it's short-lived amusement.

“Denny, sex isn’t like air or food. Any guy who tells you he can’t live without it is probably a liar and a cheater. I *asked* you to do this, and people think we’re dating for real. I’d never disrespect that—disrespect you.”

Damn him. For not killing the butterflies in my stomach but encouraging them. For never leading me on, for telling me from the first day we met that he didn’t want a relationship.

I have no one to blame but myself for falling in love with him anyway. I *knew* not to fall in love with him. My stupid heart just went and did it regardless.

It’s easy to fall in love with the wrong person, to get swept up in small moments, to read more into something than you should, to ignore what doesn’t fit in the fairy tale.

But what about when you fall in love with the right person at the wrong time? When it’s the guy who makes you happy when you’re sad and stands up for you and was blessed with that V of muscles that points to a place you wonder about touching?

There will be a day when Elliot realizes there’s more to life than hockey and besting his father isn’t the secret to happiness. I don’t know if I’ll be here for it. I don’t know if I can justify waiting around for that. For years? A decade? I’ve never met a guy I like as much as Elliot, but am I really looking anymore?

“Well, we’re ‘dating,’ right?” I make sure to use air quotes when I say dating.

“Right...” Elliot’s voice is cautious, his expression assessing.

He’s your best friend. He kissed you earlier. He just called you hot, I remind myself. I reach forward and tug his mesh shorts down. He was wearing trunks earlier, so he must have changed while I was avoiding him, but he didn’t put on any boxer briefs. Shock freezes his face as his dick springs free. It’s big, not that I have much—anything—to compare it to. Hunter Crawford ground up against me for most of junior prom this past spring, though, and there wasn’t much to rub up against.

Before I lose my nerve—before he has the chance to say anything—I reposition so I can lean down and take him in my mouth. Honestly, I’ve always found the concept of a blowjob to be kind of gross, demeaning. At least with sex, you’re getting something out of it, supposedly. I wouldn’t know for sure.

Watching Elliot’s eyes blaze with heat, I get the appeal for the first time. I

want to please him. I want him to enjoy this. I want him to forget every other girl who's touched him this intimately.

My mind races as I try to remember everything I've ever heard my friends say about doing this, the step-by-step instructions in the magazines Lana and I would read at coffee shops in middle school. But mostly, I just rely on instinct. When I suck the tip, he groans, so I do it again. When I trace the vein that runs underneath with my tongue, his hips jerk up, so I do that again, too. I grow bolder, using my hand to grip the base and play with his balls. I'm rewarded with a raspy "*Fuck.*"

It affects me more than I'm expecting it to. I've shared a lot of personal thoughts and feelings with Elliot, and this feels just as intimate. How do people do this with strangers? With people they don't even like?

"Auden. *Fuck.* Auden. I'm going to—" Hot, salty liquid hits the back of my throat before he finishes the sentence. I resist the urge to gag and swallow it before pulling away and lying back on the couch, resuming the same position I was in before that happened. Like it never happened. Except...I'm not sure I'll ever be able to forget it did.

The only sound is a woman's voice emanating from the television and Elliot's heavy breathing. I watch him tuck his cock back into his shorts out of the corner of my eye. His eyes are on me as I reach out, grab his can of soda, and take a swig. I'm not overly concerned about swapping spit with him after *that*.

"Auden."

"What?"

"I... That..." He doesn't know what to say.

"We don't need to talk about it. I don't *want* to talk about it, actually."

He rolls over so he's hovering above me and caging me against the cushions of the couch. "What *do* you want to do, then?" He leans down, ghosting his lips against the line of my jaw. I shiver. "Do you want *me* to touch *you*?" His voice lowers to a murmur. "Kiss you?"

I pull in an unsteady breath. "This was a bad idea."

"What part?"

"All of it."

He studies me. "Yeah, you're probably right." Then he leans down and kisses me. It's less cautious than the one earlier. This isn't for anyone else. He's more certain of my reaction this time, too. I kiss him back just as eagerly, feeling a surge of satisfaction when I feel him start to harden against

me again a few minutes later. He may not want a girlfriend, but he wants *me*.

Elliot's hand drifts down my back, over the curve of my ass, and grips the back of my knee. He hooks it over his hip, pulling my body flush with his. His tongue coaxes my lips apart. I let him take the lead, relaxing entirely. He keeps kissing me as his hand creeps back up, resting on my waist before it slides forward, down between my legs.

Holy shit does that feel—

Light floods the living room. "Oh!" I jerk away like I've been electrocuted, which places Katherine's stunned expression directly in front of me. She's standing just inside the front door, clutching her camera bag as she glances back and forth between me and Elliot.

"Hi, Katherine," I say. My voice is weak. Meek. "Uh, we were just..." I trail off, because I don't know how to categorize what we were just doing and I'm also certain she got a pretty clear picture of what we were doing. "This is Elliot. Elliot, this is my Aunt Katherine."

Elliot stands and straightens. I half-wonder if he's had experience with this, because he manages to go from kissing to composed a hell of a lot faster than me. "Nice to see you, Ms. Grant."

"You too, Elliot."

"I'll head out, let you two spend some time together." He leans down to grab the can we never retrieved and sets it on the coffee table. To my complete and utter shock, he kisses my forehead before saying, "I'll text you tomorrow," then heading for the door. It opens and shuts a few seconds later.

A small smile plays across Katherine's lips. "Boyfriend?"

"Uh...it's complicated."

She nods. "It usually is."

"You know Elliot?" He said it was nice to see her, not nice to meet her.

"I did the hockey team's photos this past season." Katherine pauses. "That boy has got a lot of pressure on him."

"Yeah, I know."

"He asked me about you."

"I like him," I admit.

"I got that impression, just now."

My cheeks flush.

"You have feelings for him," she surmises.

"Yes. Big feelings."

She nods, slowly. "Let me put my equipment away. Then I was thinking I

would make some tea. We can play a card game, or whatever you'd like?"

"That sounds perfect," I reply, truthfully.

"Great." Katherine smiles, then heads upstairs.

I sink back down on the couch. There's a chance Elliot has feelings for me. The problem is, I don't think he'll ever do a damn thing about it. And if I try to make him, I could risk losing him.

For good.

Part Three

Third Summer

Auden

I eye the gray water dubiously. Despite the warm air and sunshine, I know the smooth surface is simply masking the chilly water.

Elliot shrugs off his t-shirt. He's always been muscular as a result of his hockey training, but he's filled out even more since I saw him shirtless last summer. The bright sunlight throws each muscle into harsh definition.

Cassie and the rest of the girls on the boat aren't bothering to avert their gazes as they stare at Elliot. I do shift my eyes away from the tan skin. We officially "broke up" a couple of months ago, at Elliot's suggestion. I'm not sure if it was because he felt badly about how it came about to start or was worried it might turn us into more of a gray area, like the couch encounter we both pretended never happened. We didn't so much as kiss again.

I pull off the cotton dress I'm wearing as a cover-up over my bathing suit. I grab a life jacket from the floor, wincing as the cold lake water soaks into my bikini and drips down my stomach.

"Let's do this before I change my mind," I tell Elliot, grimacing.

He snaps his own life jacket into place. "Ready?" He grins down at me, excitement dancing in his blue-gray eyes. I'll do far worse things than jump into cold water if it means Elliot looking at me like that while I do. "If I jump, you jump," he teases.

I snort. "Titanic? Has that line ever worked for you?"

"You tell me," he replies, grabbing me around the waist and leaping into the lake, plunging both of us into its cold depths.

I'm quickly yanked to the surface by my life jacket and gasp from the chill and the shock. Elliot is bobbing next to me. I splash some of the chilly water toward his smiling face in retribution.

“Yeah, you were right. This is *super* fun,” I tell him sarcastically. The water is *cold*. Elliot laughs before he swims over to the tube floating a few feet from us. He effortlessly pulls himself up onto the surface, then turns around to offer me a hand.

I roll my eyes. “Now you decide to be chivalrous?” But I can’t pull myself up, so eventually I have to give up and grab it.

He chuckles but smoothly lifts me out of the water as soon as I place my hand in his. Rather than land on the tube like I expected, I end up directly on top of him. His body heat feels heavenly after the cold water, but I roll off him quickly. We haven’t been this close since...the couch.

“You guys ready?” Josh shouts in the distance.

Elliot flashes a thumbs-up at Josh and the motor roars to life, yanking us into motion through a spray of cool water. Wind combs through my hair. Air rushes past. Warm sun spills down and soaks into my skin. When I close my eyes, it feels like I’m flying. It’s magical—and like a lot of things I’ve experienced in Canmore, I wonder if it’s *what* I’m doing...or *who* I’m doing it *with*.

We skim along the surface of the lake for a few more laps. Eventually the engine quiets to a low sputter and the rope goes slack. Elliot lets go of the front of the tube and rolls onto his back, glancing over at me.

“That was the worst, eh?”

“If I don’t develop hypothermia, I’ll thank you later,” I reply.

He laughs, the motion moving his body closer to the side of the tube. I see an opening and pounce. He doesn’t see it coming, but I fail to consider the physics at play when weight spread evenly across a surface quickly shifts to one side.

Elliot is certainly surprised when he’s pushed into the lake, but I’m equally shocked when the entire tube capsizes, sending me right into the icy depths after him. I sputter as I reach the surface, greeted by the sound of Elliot’s uproarious laughter. I meet his eyes, trying to remain serious, but am unable to contain my own laughter.

“That was the best you could come up with?” he asks me once he’s finally stopped laughing. “Dunking both of us?”

I try to look as dignified as a bedraggled person can. “I saw an opening, so I went for it. Split-second decisions don’t exactly allow for a thorough assessment of potential outcomes.”

Elliot snorts and swims toward the boat, still chuckling to himself. “C for

effort,” he tells me, barely keeping a straight face. I splash some more water at him. We near the boat at the same time, and I giggle as he pushes me out of the way to climb up the ladder first.

I follow after him, and as soon as my body leaves the water, I shiver. Somehow, I grew accustomed enough to the cold water that leaving it feels like a real shock. I shed the waterlogged life jacket and grab a dry towel to wrap around my shoulders as Oliver and one of Cassie’s friends jump into the water and start swimming toward the tube. I sink back into the same seat as before. Elliot takes a seat beside me. I dry my arms and hair, then grab the tube of sunscreen and start spreading it on my skin. For a native California girl, I burn easily.

The boat lurches into movement again as I spread the white paste over my arms and behind my neck, stretching to get the elusive spot between my shoulder blades. Before I can reach it—or attempt to, at least—a warm, calloused hand takes over.

Butterflies—not one or two, but a whole flock of them—swarm my stomach.

I know who’s sitting next to me. I don’t need to glance over to confirm, but I do. Elliot appears unaffected, busy talking with Lucas, who’s sitting closest to him, about—what else? Hockey.

I’m not sure what there is to discuss since it’s summer and even my limited knowledge of the sport is enough to know the professional season ended weeks ago, but they’ve managed to come up with something.

The sunscreen cap gets twisted back on. I look out at the water, sparkling in the sunlight. I think I’ve become a lake person. The only thing I miss about the ocean is its salty scent and wavy whitecaps.

Glancing away from the water, I make the mistake of looking at the captain’s chair. Driving the boat hasn’t kept Josh from noticing where Elliot’s right hand is. He’s stopped rubbing the sunscreen in, but his fingertips are still pressed against my upper back, searing the skin like a branded burn. I look away from Josh’s smirk and return my gaze to the water, skimming over the envious stares of the three girls who obviously didn’t miss what just happened, either.

“Luke! Can you toss the front buoy out?” Josh calls. We’re headed back toward the shore as the sun drops, bathing everything in golden light.

“Yeah. Sure.” Luke stands and heads for the bow of the boat.

Elliot glances over at me as soon as Luke leaves, ending the hockey

conversation. His hand drifts upward, playing with the loose strands of hair the wind has tugged out of my ponytail.

My eyes widen with questions I'd ask if we were alone. He smirks.

Sometimes it hits me all over again, how disgustingly good looking he is. I know his face so well, yet there are still moments like these when I blink and it's just wow. Either he's just exactly my type, or I modeled my type after him. The short dark hair and haunting blue-gray eyes look the same as they did in that coffee shop. But he's changed—grown up, filled out. More of a man than a boy.

"You missed some spots." His voice ghosts over the back of my neck as his thumb traces my skin, raising goose bumps I hope he'll chalk up to the breeze, although I'm not under any delusions my acting skills are impressive enough that Elliot is unaware I'm attracted to him.

"My hair will cover them. I only put it up for the boat." I lean back, forcing him to move his hand up to the back of the seat. "Or I'll put my dress back on."

Elliot makes an *If you say so* sound before glancing away. I don't miss the flick downward first, though. I'm only wearing my bikini top. The life jacket was soaked, and I didn't want to get my dress wet.

He just got a good look at what I've got going on upstairs. They're far from double Ds but more than a handful. The few guys who have had the *privilege*—seriously, one guy used that word—of seeing me topless sure haven't complained. But none of those guys were Elliot Reid, and his opinion matters more to me than anyone else's—combined.

A heap of fabric lands in my lap. "Here. You can wear that."

"I'm wet." Elliot doesn't so much as smirk at the innocent innuendo any other guy would probably pounce on. He seems upset or bothered all of a sudden, and it's flustering me. "My *suit* is still wet. That's why I didn't put my dress back on."

"It's fine." It's *not*, though, because wearing Elliot's shirt means two things. One, everyone's attention will be on me, wondering if our fake relationship is fake back on again (minus the fakes). Two, if I'm wearing his shirt, that means Elliot is not. I don't want to stare at his abs, and I don't want every other girl here ogling his six-pack, either.

I feel like I can tell Elliot anything, but the mountain of what I don't say is piling up.

"Okay. Thanks." I tug his shirt over my head. It smells like his cologne:

woody and masculine.

Elliot nods, then gets up to help tie the boat to the dock.

He's my best friend.

He's also the guy I'm in love with.

We've danced around the subject since we met, since the night I asked him if he was asking me out and he told he liked me too much to date me. I get what he meant, but it doesn't exactly give me a whole lot to work with. I'm supposed to make him like me less?

To his credit, it wasn't a line. I've never seen him even act interested in another girl. Even if he didn't tell me himself, I have no doubt plenty of people in this town would take great pleasure in informing me.

As much as that would suck, it would be some closure. I wouldn't be hovering in this uncertainty, waiting and hoping he'll realize there's more to life than hockey— realize *he's* more than hockey.

About an hour later, we return to the dock, the scent of cooking meat wafting from the backyard patio that's surrounded by the expansive yard. The large crowd from earlier has somehow multiplied even further from when we arrived, the lawn swarming with bathing-suit-clad teenagers.

After several attempts, Josh maneuvers close enough to the dock that Elliot and Luke are able to leap from the boat to tie it up. As soon as we're no longer floating, everyone jumps up, eager to get off the boat and get food—or drinks. I lay my soaking towel over one of the white vinyl seats.

I'm the last one to disembark. Elliot is kneeling on the dock, securing the knot on the cleat. I step onto the solid wood, admiring the flex of his forearms as he deftly twists the rope. He stands after giving it a few jerks to confirm the boat won't be departing unexpectedly.

His short hair is in complete disarray from the wind, and he's still shirtless, only wearing a pair of black swim trunks. Both his shoulders and nose have a light pink tint.

"You need some sunscreen, Reid," I tell him as he walks over to me.

He smirks. Whatever was bothering him earlier seems to have been forgotten. "It must have all washed off when I got pushed off the tube."

I roll my eyes in response. "You started it. Want your shirt back?"

"Nah, it's fine. I'll grab one of Josh's later."

"Don't be ridiculous." I grab the hem and pull his shirt over my head, holding it out. Elliot isn't reaching for the shirt—he's staring at me. We're both half-naked: me in a bikini, him in swim trunks. Everyone else has

headed to the house. There's music and laughter and shouts in the background, but also just us.

"Fine. Thanks."

"Yeah." I pull my dress back over my head.

"I'm gonna head inside for a sec. You need anything?"

"No. I'm good."

"Okay." He starts walking toward the Hawleys' without another word, leaving me standing here staring after him.

After a minute, I follow. I skirt most of the groups of teenagers hanging in the yard. Aside from Elliot, Oliver, Luke, and Josh—and Annabel, I guess, though calling her out on her behavior didn't result in anything but uninterrupted silence—there isn't anyone here I've exchanged more than a few words with. Being Elliot's best friend and former fake girlfriend is a bizarre combination of being "in" and a social pariah. Plus, there's the fact that I don't go to school with anyone here. My presence is nothing more than an occasional occurrence, not worth acknowledging.

I end up grabbing a beer and leaning against the low fence that runs the border of the Hawleys' yard and whoever has the unfortunate fate of sharing a property line with them—unfortunate unless they enjoy watching dozens of tipsy teenagers wander about, which is exactly what I'm doing.

"Should I be worried?"

I glance over at Josh as he stops next to me. "About what?"

"You. Not only are you drinking beer, which I've seen you do *never*, you've also got a look on your face like you're about to wrestle a bear."

"You've seen someone about to wrestle a bear before?"

Josh chuckles. "Yeah—in photos. So?"

I look across the yard. "The blond guy, by the canoe...he's on the hockey team, right? Jason?"

Josh drags his gaze from me to the person in question, who's leaning against the side of the tipped canoe by the start of the dock, looking at his phone. "Dammit," he mutters.

I take a sip of beer. "Is he single?"

Josh leans over me and grabs a beer out of the cooler, cracking it open and draining a healthy—or unhealthy, if you read a study about alcohol consumption—portion in one sip.

"Is he?" I prompt when he swallows and still doesn't answer.

He sighs. "Just trying to get tipsy for when the shit hits the fan."

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“Reid isn’t going to like you flirting with another guy.”

“Yeah, well...” *That’s why I’m doing it.* “We’re friends, right? He should be happy if I get some action.”

Josh snorts and takes another long pull. “I told him this would happen,” he says under his breath. To me, he says, “Why don’t you just tell him how you feel?”

“I’ve given him...” *A blowjob.* “Chances. He doesn’t feel that way about me. Or at least, he won’t admit it to himself, let alone me.”

Josh doesn’t argue with that. “Joe is single, yeah.”

I shrug. “Well, I was right about the J at least.”

“If Reid asks, I did not tell you his name or that he’s single, all right?”

I laugh at the seriousness on his face. “Jeez. Have you always been this dramatic? He probably won’t even notice.”

Josh sighs. “Yeah, he will.” Then he walks off, in the opposite direction from Joe. Elliot is nowhere to be seen. He must still be inside.

I waver for a minute. This is stupid. Despite what Josh just said, I’m not confident Elliot will care if I talk to his teammate. I talk to Josh, Luke, and Oliver all the time.

The hops coating my tongue make the decision for me. The alcohol is slowly leaching away my inhibitions. This is a party. I’m single. I don’t need Elliot’s permission to do *anything*.

Joe doesn’t notice my approach, which isn’t fantastic for my ego. I compensate for the initial lack of interest by sitting closer to him than I was initially planning on.

“Hey. It’s Joe, right?” Belatedly, it occurs to me that Josh might have been screwing with me. I should’ve waited for him to introduce himself.

But he confirms it. “Yeah.”

“I’m Auden.”

He smiles, amused. “Yeah. I know.”

That’s all he says. I scramble to fill the silence. “Are you having fun?” *Seriously, Auden? That’s the best you could come up with?* I sound like a middle-aged party planner.

“I was.”

“Oh?” *Does he mean me?*

Joe slips his phone in his pocket, glances behind me, and then stares right at me. “Look, you seem nice, and you’re super hot. Sorry if this sounds harsh,

but are you fucking insane? I really don't want to end up with a black eye."

"I—*what?*"

"I don't know what you and Reid—"

"Elliot and I are just friends," I interrupt. "Now," I tack on. If you ask all of Canmore, we used to be more than that. I've never wished a rumor was true more.

He snorts, loud and obnoxious. "*Sure*. Well, if you're looking for a rebound, you've come to the wrong town."

"*Excuse me?*"

"Like I said, you're hot." He glances at my legs, barely covered by the cotton dress that's ridden up. "You've been coming here for...what? A few summers now, right? Has any guy in this town—hell, this whole *province* ever so much as flirted with you?"

"I mean..." *No*.

He nods, hearing my silent answer. "Reid made it clear you're off limits."

"He did *what?*" Anger mixes with confusion and embarrassment.

Joe keeps talking like I said nothing. "And *my* friends don't look that jealous when I talk to a girl." He nods behind me; I don't need to look to know at who.

I give him a tight-lipped smile. "*Great* talking to you." I stand and spin, eyes narrowing in on Elliot.

He's casually leaning against one of the Adirondack chairs that line the campfire by the house, talking to Josh, Oliver, and some other guys on the hockey team. Annabel, Cassie, and a few members of their posse are seated in the chairs, occasionally jumping into the conversation.

Elliot's eyes flick toward me and away a couple of times as I approach, eventually landing on my face and staying there. His expression remains impassive, but his knuckles tighten on the bottle of beer he's holding as I near.

Josh smirks at me; I glare back. I'm guessing he knew exactly how Joe would react when he sent me over there all *Don't tell Elliot anything*.

I look away from Josh and back to Elliot as I reach their huddle. "Can I talk to you?" I snap.

"About what?" He drawls the question, but I don't miss the tension that's spread from his hands to the rest of his body.

"Your buddy Joe mentioned a couple of interesting things just now."

His jaw works. "Oh yeah?"

Whatever the group was talking about before has fallen prey to silence. No one in a twenty-foot radius is making any attempt to act like they aren't hanging on to every word passing between me and Elliot.

"Yeah," I confirm. "What the fuck, Elliot? You decided I'm '*off limits*'? You don't own me. I can make my own damn decisions."

"Fine." His word and actions are a sharp contrast. An easy, acquiescing word paired with a tense posture and tight tone.

"Fine," I repeat.

We stare at each other for a minute before his expression shifts. "Denny..."

I shake my head. "Don't." Then, I brush past him and head inside.

Auden

“Auden.”

“What?” I keep my gaze on the water, studying the moonlight as it dances across the ripples. It’s peaceful, especially now that the backyard is empty and quiet.

He takes a seat beside me. “I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“I’ve seen how the guys act with girls, heard the way they talk about—I’m sorry. It wasn’t...” He huffs a sigh and looks out at the water. “I...I implied it once, that first summer. One of the guys was looking at you and I made it clear to him, knowing it would spread. I knew you had a lot going on with your parents, and I didn’t think you’d want to get hassled by horny guys. I can, uh, say something to Joe.”

“Don’t bother. I’m not interested in a guy who needs your *permission* to touch me.”

“If you like him—”

“I don’t even know him. I overreacted.”

“No, you didn’t. I don’t own you. We’ve never actually dated.”

“Right.” My voice is wooden, bereft of any emotion.

Elliot swears. “Denny, I’m trying to—”

“*Forget it*, Elliot. I had a couple of beers and wanted a hookup. Whatever.” He opens his mouth to say something, but I don’t give him a chance. I stand. “Let’s swim.” I yank my dress up over my head, leaving me in the bikini I’ve worn all day.

Elliot hesitates before he stands as well. I can feel his eyes on my body like a physical touch. They drift up my legs and over the bottoms, over my

stomach, lingering on the triangles of fabric covering my boobs before resting on my face. Wordlessly, he yanks his white t-shirt over his head, leaving him in just his black swim trunks.

There's a breeze drifting across the surface of the lake, but I'm feeling overheated. My arm trembles as I resist the urge to raise my hand and touch all the golden skin laid out before me like a perfectly proportioned map. Something shifts and sizzles in the air. I watch it register on his face.

"You trying to get over your aversion to cold water?" He's trying to lighten the mood, relieve the tension, dispel the awareness simmering between us.

I don't let him. "I'm *trying* to get over a *lot* of things."

His jaw clenches as my tone registers. "We should wear life jackets. It's dark."

I follow Elliot into the boat house at the edge of the dock. He flicks the light on, illuminating the small space inside. Two canoes sit on a rack attached to the wall. There's a neat stack of towels on one shelf, along with a bunch of bottles of sunscreen and a collection of sunhats. Elliot heads straight for the hanging row of life jackets, obviously familiar with the layout. I wander toward the canoes, running one hand along the curved, varnished wood. Oars are lined up against the wall. I grab one, testing the weight.

"Okay. Here you—"

Elliot's voice is right behind me. I startle, spinning around and dropping the oar. Elliot grabs me with one hand and the oar with the other. He sets it back against the wall and keeps me upright.

Adrenaline pumps through my system. In the tiny building, my breathing is all I can hear. "Nice reflexes," I finally manage to say.

Elliot flashes me the crooked grin that hits me right in the chest. Every. Single. Time. "Maybe you should—"

He doesn't have a chance to finish the sentence. I act impulsively—as impulsively as you can do something you've spent hours thinking about, at least. I stand on my tiptoes and press my lips against his. His mouth is slightly open, in the midst of saying something—probably teasing me about my lack of coordination. I use it to my advantage, slipping my tongue into his mouth and immediately escalating the kiss from fleeting to filthy.

I've kissed other guys before—I've kissed *Elliot* before—but the furthest I've gone was what happened on the couch in Aunt Katherine's living room. I'm pretty sure I'm much less experienced than he is, and I know he knows—

or at least suspects—that. Because he’s my best friend, not to mention a decent guy, it will make him hesitate.

So I make my intentions clear immediately, slipping my hand into his swim trunks and tugging out his cock while he’s still recovering from the shock of me kissing him. He’s rapidly hardening, the length of his dick poking me in the stomach. Liquid heat simmers in my veins.

Elliot pulls away with a muttered curse. “Auden, what the hell are you doing? Are you drunk?”

“Nope.” I pop the P for emphasis. “I just want to have sex with you.” Elliot is silent. I don’t think he was expecting me to admit it straight out like that. I have no idea where this burst of boldness is coming from. The buzz of alcohol is gone. The only thing I’m drunk on is him.

I raise my arms and start to untie the knot at the back of my neck. The straps of my bikini top fall down, baring my breasts to him. He hesitates, but he looks. My nipples pebble under his gaze. I undo the strap tied around my back as well, and the top falls to the ground, leaving me topless. I slip down my bottoms, and I’m completely naked.

Now what?

I have no idea what I’m doing, and the one of us who *does* know what he’s doing is not exactly being an active participant. Elliot is standing like a chiseled statue, just staring at my naked body. If not for his very obvious erection, I’d think he was completely unaffected.

Finally, he takes one step forward. Two. “You were drinking earlier.”

“I’m not drunk, Elliot. I don’t need any alcohol to want to have sex with you.”

“I don’t have a condom.” He’s not exactly jumping at the opportunity, but it’s a half-hearted excuse. I soldier ahead anyway, because I want this too much.

“I’m on birth control. You don’t need one...unless you, uh, think that you do.” I *really* don’t want to discuss who Elliot has been with, but I don’t want an STD either. I know the guys on the team get tested regularly; I’ve heard Josh and Luke making jokes about it. If Elliot tells me I can trust him on this, I will.

After a long, awkward pause, he replies, “No. I don’t need one. I’m clean.” Sweet relief rushes through me. “Auden, if we do this—”

“I know,” I interrupt. “It’s just sex.” He runs a hand through his hair, tugging the strands roughly. Uncertainty twists his handsome face. “If you

don't want to..."

"Of course I *want* to," he replies.

I grab three towels and toss them on the floor. "Then let's do it." I step toward him so our bodies are touching again.

He glances around. "This isn't where your first time should be."

"What makes you think it's my first time?"

I've never seen Elliot look more uncomfortable. "Um, oh. Sorry. I just—I guess I just—"

I put him out of his stuttering misery. "Relax, I'm kidding. I haven't had sex before. *Yet*."

"And you're sure this is—"

"Yes." The word is absolute.

"There's not even a bed, Denny."

I feel like sex is more who you're with than where you are, but I know I can't say that, not if I want a chance of this happening. "Get creative," I whisper, then I kiss him.

I feel the moment he decides, when he starts to kiss me back, to guide me toward the towels on the floor. He sinks down first, pulling me into his lap, right on top of his erection. It rubs against my center, and I moan. Electricity pulses through me as Elliot rolls me onto my back and hovers over me. He hesitates, then slowly starts to thrust forward. I tense involuntarily at the strange sensation. Then, it starts to hurt. The stinging pain intensifies, and I suck in a sharp breath.

It's a subtle inhale with a large impact. Elliot tenses, then pulls back, erasing what little progress he's made. He lies down on his back beside me, no longer touching me at all. His fists clench and unclench furiously. "Fuck. *Fuck*. I can't do this, Auden."

Embarrassment and anger war for real estate inside me. "Yes, you *can*. You just *won't* for some stupid reason." I know what those reasons are, and they're not stupid. He's worried this will mean something—mean everything—to me, and he's right. He's worried this will irrevocably alter our friendship, and he's probably right about that, too. All he's ever promised me is friendship, and he's more than delivered. I just underestimated my ability to not fall for the boy in the coffee shop. My sixteen-year-old self had no idea the havoc he would wreak on my life.

He turns his head to meet my gaze. Those beautiful eyes are tortured, filled with pain. "Denny—"

“Don’t,” I snap. “You don’t get to call me that right now, not while you’re in the middle of rejecting me.”

“Dammit. I’m not rejecting you. I want you—*obviously*.” He gestures toward his still-hard dick, which I’ve been trying very hard not to ogle. My memories from the couch last summer don’t really do it justice, probably because I was so nervous. Or maybe it’s grown since then? Guys go through puberty later than girls, right? And that’s why they’re so immature? I feel like this is not the right moment to ask Elliot if his penis is full size now, though.

“Fine. Whatever. Let’s go.” I start to sit up, but Elliot snags my arm and keeps me from moving far. We’re closer now. My thigh is brushing against his, and he’s not the only one who’s painfully aroused. At least mine isn’t as obvious.

“I was hurting you.”

“Yeah, because I’m a *virgin*, Elliot. You already knew that.”

He looks away and bites his bottom lip. “It just made me... This is a moment that should mean something to you.”

Fuck it. I’m physically naked. Might as well bare it all emotionally as well. He can’t be worried it will mean something *and* worried it won’t. “You’re an idiot. You’re the *only* person it *would* mean anything with.”

That truth affects him, even though he tries to hide it. His jaw tightens as he studies me. “Nothing’s changed. Everything I told you that first night we met...it’s still true. I’m so fucking close. I’ve got the draft coming up in a year. Everything I’ve—”

I raise my hand and trace his lips, silencing him. “I know,” I say simply. “I know you, Elliot.” I know things he won’t even admit, like that his dedication to hockey isn’t the only thing holding him back from us. He’s been burned by love before, and he knows it doesn’t come with any guarantees.

His face is still torn with indecision, but I made this decision a long time ago. I knew, from the moment I heard his voice in that coffee shop, that he was special, that he would have an impact on the world—on my world.

No warning—from him or anyone else—ever had the power to change that.

He’s a good person, more loyal and thoughtful and caring than anyone else I know, but he’s also a highly competitive athlete and a teenage boy filled with raging hormones. I prey on that, pulling my hand out of his grip and sliding it down his stomach. My fingers trace the ridges like a truck

traversing a bumpy road, riding up and down the muscles I was admiring all afternoon.

“If I don’t do it with you, I’ll do it with someone else,” I threaten, fisting his cock. He hisses as I move my hand up and down the smooth skin, either from annoyance or arousal. Or both.

“Auden.” He packs a lot into the five letters of my name. Lust. Irritation. Amusement. Confusion.

God, why can’t he act like any normal hormonal teenage guy and just take the sex I’m offering up on a silver platter? But that would break my heart in its own way; him acting like this means nothing, even if we’ll both pretend that’s the case.

“Maybe Josh? He gets with lots of girls, right? Joe said I’m hot. Or what’s the goalie’s name? Marcus? He’s cute, with all that shaggy hair. What do you guys call it? A flow?”

Elliot huffs. “*Dammit*, Auden.”

I’m still rubbing his cock, and I watch the tendons of his neck and shoulders tense as he tries to fight off the pleasure and think clearly. My motions are basically begging him, but it makes me feel powerful, not desperate. He is reacting to my touch. The slabs of muscle on his chest keep clenching, the distance between his abs constricting. The lines of his thighs tense as he resists the urge to thrust into my hand.

Some people are motivated. Others are disciplined.

Elliot Reid is the *most* disciplined person I’ve ever met. Motivation can come and go, can apply to certain tasks and not others. Discipline governs every action with firm principles and unyielding determination.

Once Elliot decides to do—or not do—something, that’s the end of it. He decided years ago that we would be “just friends,” and we may have danced on the line—a certain couch encounter and a bout of telling everyone we were dating come to mind—but we’ve never fully crossed it. Not the way this would.

He reaches down and grabs my wrist, stalling my hand’s movements. Then he rolls on his side so he’s leaning over me again. I don’t move, barely daring to breathe. The air rushes out in a gust when he drops my wrist to trace a line down my stomach. Goose bumps blossom everywhere he touches me, and I know it doesn’t escape his attention. One reaction I can’t hide.

“You’re sure?”

Excitement and surprise flood me. I was seventy-five percent certain I’d

be leaving this boathouse with my hymen still intact. I nod, twice. Then, in case that wasn't confirmation enough, I add a "Yes. I'm sure."

He nods and pulls in a breath I'm surprised to hear sounds a little unsteady. I've never seen Elliot act anything but assured. His hand moves upward, cupping my left breast and then playing with the nipple. My breathing turns erratic. I'm struggling to pull in enough oxygen, and I couldn't care less. My thighs fall open in a silent invitation. Elliot takes it, rolling over me. He rests most of his weight on his forearms, but we're pressed skin to skin from the ribs down. I can feel the firmness of the muscles I was just admiring pressed against my lower stomach and legs. The heat of his body seeps into mine. The head of his cock rubs against my wetness, sending sparks of pleasure racing along my nerve endings.

"Auden?"

"Yeah?" I tense slightly. I swear, if he says he can't do this after all, I'm done. Despite what the past few minutes have indicated, I have *some* pride.

"There haven't been any other girls. That's why you don't need to worry about me...giving you anything."

"What?" That's not what I was expecting to hear, *at all*.

"I've never had sex. Not *sex sex*, at least. I've done, uh, other stuff." A red flush appears on his neck. "Sorry. Really shitty time to mention that."

"You've *never* had sex. Ever? You're a virgin?" I sound like I'm in total disbelief, because I am.

"That's what I just said, Denny."

I don't correct his use of the nickname this time. "Um, wow. I had no idea."

"Yeah, I got that from your shocked expression."

"I'm just... I mean, you always have girls hanging around you. Most guys would take advantage."

"Yeah, well, I'm not most guys."

"Is that why you changed your mind before? Because we don't have to—I mean, it's okay, if you're waiting...or something." He's not religious. Maybe it's a superstitious athlete thing?

Elliot grins unexpectedly. "Come on, Harmon. You were doing such a good job of seducing me."

I roll my eyes. "You seemed to enjoy it just fine."

He chuckles. I feel it vibrate through his body and against mine. "*Just fine?* I'd get hard if you put a Band-Aid on me, Auden. You touching my

cock? With your hands? Or with this mouth, like you did last summer?” He rubs his thumb along the length of my lower lip. “I can barely see straight.”

I arch my neck up and kiss him. He groans into my mouth, running one palm down the side of my ribs and resting it on my waist. The skin is calloused and rough, scratching mine erotically. He’s masculine. Potent. Addictive.

More of his weight settles over me as I feel pressure at my entrance. He eases inside slowly but purposefully. Elliot doesn’t pause the way he did last time, keeps pressing in deeper and deeper. I focus on kissing him instead of the intrusion, on the wet heat of his mouth and the swipe of his tongue against mine. Our kiss is greedy and desperate and dirty. He’s possessing my mouth the same way he’s taken ownership of the rest of my body.

Elliot bites my bottom lip. Pain flares and then recedes, alerting me to the fact that I’m not in any pain anywhere else. All I’m experiencing is pleasure. He’s not pushing in; he’s fully inside of me. It feels foreign, but it doesn’t hurt anymore. I feel stretched and full.

“You okay?” he asks, moving from my lips to my neck. He sucks at the skin just below my jaw, possibly leaving a mark.

“Yes,” I whisper back. It’s just the two of us in here, so there’s no need to be quiet, but I feel an urge to protect this moment I’ll never forget: having sex with the only person I’ve ever wanted to be with this way.

“You’re sure?” Elliot’s voice is tight. Tense. He almost sounds like he’s in pain, even though I know he’s not.

I don’t answer; I kiss him. My hands are buried in his hair, but I let them slip. Down the back of his neck and over the bunched mounds of his shoulders, along the length of his back. Tendons shift and strain under my fingers as he holds himself up.

“Move,” I tell him, letting my knees fall all the way open and lifting my pelvis up, forcing some friction between us.

I hand Elliot Reid the final piece of my heart.

He starts moving, and I’m weightless. Thoughtless. I’ve never been more present in one moment than I am right now.

Maybe this is why people call it falling in love. Because when you’re falling, you can’t focus on anything else.

Elliot

I had sex with my best friend last night.

That's what I'm thinking as Josh goes on and on about how hungover he is. Luke is commiserating. I'm not. I've never been a big drinker, and I only had one beer. If I'd had more, I would have lost it the second Auden untied her bikini top. I can't stop thinking about it. Those triangles of fabrics falling. Her tongue in my mouth and her hands in my hair. The things she said. How hot and wet and tight—

I stand and head for the lake, leaving Josh, Lucas, and Oliver behind. The cold water and breeze help clear my head some. The sight of the boathouse does not.

I want her again. Once wasn't enough. Twice won't be either, but she's leaving tomorrow to visit her mother in New York for some fashion thing, and then she's returning to California, to start college on the opposite side of the country from me.

Fuck, what the hell was I thinking? I've been tempted to cross that line with her for years—since I met her. I've always known if there was one girl to make room for, it was her. I don't want to ruin our friendship, but that's become a flimsier and flimsier excuse. What would I have done if she'd met some other guy? If she'd done what we did last night with someone else?

College was a chance to erase the physical distance that's separated us for most of the time we've known each other. She could have picked a school on the east coast. I couldn't go just anywhere. I had coaches, rankings, rivals, teammates, and team funding to consider. We discussed college, but always in the vacuum of our own individual plans and hopes, never in relation to each other.

Auden never gave me the impression not staying in California was even a consideration.

I never so much as entertained an offer on the west coast.

Maybe she just wanted her first time to be with a friend. It's not like she said she's in love with me. There's familiarity and attraction between us. The attraction has always been there; the familiarity has built up slowly.

Or maybe I need to finally face the fact that Auden has more-than-friendly feelings for me, the same way I have more-than-friendly feelings toward her, and then figure out what the hell I'm going to do about it.

Josh sinks down beside me with a sigh. "I'm probably going to regret this, but do you want to talk about it?"

"I'm fine."

"You've barely said anything all day, and Auden hasn't been around at all."

"She's in Calgary with her aunt. She'll be here tonight." At least, I *think* she will. Both plans were made before certain events last night, and we didn't talk much after leaving the boathouse.

"This about what happened with Joe?"

I snort. "No, it's not about Joe. We, uh, hooked up last night. After."

Josh laughs, which isn't the reaction I was expecting. "Well, damn. Good for her."

"What?"

"She was flirting with Joe to make you jealous, Reid. *Obviously*, it worked." He tilts his head back and studies me. "She didn't think it would."

I scrub a palm across my face. "We're *friends*. I—fuck, we never *actually* dated before."

Josh just nods. "Yeah, I know. She told me."

"She *told* you?"

"Confirmed, I guess. I knew you were full of shit about it."

"It was a bad idea."

He snorts. "*You think?* She's in love with you, Reid."

"I didn't—she's never said anything."

"Yeah, and why the fuck would that be? You *love* relationships."

"You know why I don't want a girlfriend."

"You've basically got one, minus the sex. Or plus the sex, now."

"We're going to college three thousand miles apart. How the *fuck* is that supposed to work?"

“I’m pretty sure you’re the only one who didn’t see that problem coming *from* three thousand miles away.”

“Not helpful,” I snap.

“I knew I’d regret this,” Josh mutters. “Look, you put hockey first. For college, when it comes to everything. Auden knew that all along. She’ll meet someone else, someone who isn’t already in a long-term relationship with a sport.”

“I don’t want her to meet someone else.”

“Uh-huh. You’re *finally* admitting you’re in love with her?”

“I’ve known if there was a girl I—well, pretty much since I met her.”

“What are you going to do about it?”

I sigh. “I have no fucking clue.”

“You know, I’ve always thought you take hockey too seriously. You have girls lining up, and you barely take advantage. Although...” He glances over. “Maybe that had nothing to do with hockey. But...it’s who you *are*, Elliot. As long as I’ve known you, you’ve talked about playing professionally. Next summer...you only get the one shot.”

“I know.” I lean back on my palms. “*Fuck!*”

“I’ve never said this non-ironically before, but sucks to be you right now, Reid.”

I snort, then sober. “Yeah.”

Josh punches my shoulder gently, then stands and leaves.

The kitchen is packed. Heat and hormones swirl in the alcohol-scented air. Rap music pounds away in the background.

I check my phone again.

Nothing.

I worry my bottom lip. Should I text her? She would have told me if she wasn’t coming, right? I haven’t seen Annabel yet, and that was Auden’s supposed means of transportation. Maybe something happened between them?

Oliver and Josh are standing beside me, arguing. Last I listened, they were debating which girls to invite on the boat. When I shove my phone in my pocket and tune back in, I learn they’ve moved on to a new topic: *me*.

“...sick or something?” Oliver is saying.

“Nah,” Josh replies. “He’s just freaked because Auden isn’t here yet.”

I grit my teeth. “I’m headed outside. If you decide to take the boat out, let me know.”

“I’d stay inside if I were you,” Josh tells me.

“Why?”

He nods toward the door. “She just got here.”

My head whips around. Josh snorts.

He wasn’t messing with me. Auden has just walked into the kitchen. I inhale sharply. She’s wearing a navy dress that’s strapless and short. The curves of her shoulders and collarbone are fully exposed, displaying an endless stretch of creamy skin. She says something to Annabel, who nods. Then, she starts looking around the kitchen. Her eyes land on me, and we stare at each other.

Auden takes one step, two. I track her progress across the space more closely than I’ve watched anyone walk before. The foreign sensation of nerves swarms me, until she smiles. It’s a small, secretive, sexy one. Not the sort you give someone you regret sleeping with.

When she reaches me, I act on instinct. I wrap a hand around her waist and pull her body flush with mine. Then, I kiss her. It was meant to be an assurance—to her, that *I* don’t regret what happened between us last night. A claiming—to any guy who saw her talking to Joe and might have thought he has a shot with her. But mostly, I just want to. She initiated things between us last night, and I know her well enough to know that’s far out of her comfort zone. This is me thanking her for it, because I’m not sure I ever would have, and I know I’ll never regret it—no matter what happens next between us.

She kisses me back, and it rapidly escalates. I tell myself each swipe of my tongue will be the last one, but then she tugs my bottom lips with her teeth. My mind is a complete haze. Memories from last night assault my brain, mixing with the sensations of this moment.

Auden pulls back first. Her cheeks are flushed. It’s freaking hot in here, but I like to think I played a role, too. Her lips are swollen and pink and conjure lots of dirty images. “Hi.”

“Hey.” My voice comes out deeper than usual, so I clear my throat a couple of times before I speak again. “How was the museum?”

“It was fun. Annabel came, so she might no longer hate me. Although...” She smirks. “I didn’t mention this”—she gestures between us—“so I think

that will probably take care of any progress I made.”

“Hmmm.” I hum as I trail my fingers upward until I reach the bare skin exposed by her low-cut dress. I ghost along the smooth skin between her shoulder blades, same as I did on the boat yesterday afternoon. Her breath hitches.

She’s curled her hair, which I’ve never seen before. The loose ringlets just reach the top of her dress, dark strands contrasting with her pale skin. I play with it a little, and she steps forward, pressing up against me again. “What did you do today?”

I’m honest. “Thought about last night, mostly.” Auden blushes, and it’s my favorite sight in the whole world.

“What, uh...” She looks down at my chest, then back up. “What were you thinking?”

“That—” I look away from her for the first time since she appeared. Pretty much everyone in the kitchen is looking at us. “That it’s probably something we should talk about later. Just us.”

She follows my gaze, then looks back at me. “Right.” Her gaze flicks to the left. “Hey, guys.”

“Hey, Auden.” Luke replies first. “We were wondering how long it might take for you to realize Reid isn’t the only person here.”

She blushes again.

“You two coming on the boat?” Josh asks, smirking.

I look to Auden. She nods. “Sure.”

“Do you want anything to drink?” I ask.

She shakes her head.

“You’ve never asked me that, Reid,” Luke teases.

“I’m guessing she does some things for him you don’t.” Josh pauses. “Like laugh at his lame-ass jokes.”

I flip Josh off with one hand and grab Auden’s with the other. “Come on.”

It’s a relief to leave the crowded kitchen and step out onto the deck. There are plenty of people milling around the backyard, but at least the air temperature is twenty degrees cooler. I nod to a couple of people as they say hello to me but stay focused on navigating the stone path that leads down to the Hawleys’ private dock. It’s lined with little lanterns, but they’re more decorative than anything, barely casting any light.

Auden tugs me to the side about halfway down. There’s a group of people

standing about a dozen feet away. Most of them glance over as we stop, but none of them say anything.

I look down at her and raise one eyebrow.

“My flight leaves at seven a.m. tomorrow.”

“I know.” I do, and the realization settles in my stomach like a lead weight. She’s leaving. I might not see her for a *year*, if not longer. Will she continue “visiting her aunt” in college? I know that’s what she’s told her parents these visits are about. As far as I know, they don’t know I exist. They probably have some blond-haired, preppy douche in mind for their perfect daughter. The thought pisses me off—a lot.

“I want to enjoy the time I have left here. Enjoy...this.”

“You don’t want to talk,” I realize.

Auden raises and drops one bare shoulder. “Is there anything to talk about, really?”

She’s genuinely asking. She’s giving me a clean, easy out. I open my mouth, undecided about what to say. I’m warring with myself, which, honestly, I’ve been doing ever since the day I met her. Auden Harmon does something to me. I went sixteen years without knowing she existed. Now it’s hard to picture a single day of my life without her in it.

I used to pride myself on my discipline. I do more than what’s necessary without complaint and with dedication. But I’m not confident I have the willpower to walk away from her—even if I should.

“Reid! Auden! You guys coming?”

Josh, Luke, and Oliver are already down on the boat with a couple of our hockey teammates—former now, I guess—and several girls. I didn’t notice them pass—that’s how much Auden commands my attention.

“Yeah,” I call back, then look at Auden. “Look—”

“I just want to have fun tonight,” she tells me. “Okay?”

I search her face for any indication she’s lying and find none. “Okay.”

There are more stares when we step on the boat. For some reason, the attention has never bothered me this much before. The scrutiny didn’t feel this intense when we were fake dating. I’m not in the mood to talk to anyone but Auden. I pull her back to the bench seat where we sat yesterday. We were pressed close together then, but it’s not enough anymore. I take a seat and pull her into my lap.

My hand flirts with the hem of her dress. She said she wants to have fun tonight. I’d be lying if I said I’m not hoping for a repeat of last night. I’ve

been half-hard all day at the mere prospect, but maybe she's sore? I have no idea, and I'm not going to ask her now.

"Elliot."

"What?" I whisper. Oliver is cursing as he tugs at the ropes tying the speedboat to the dock. Normally I'd get up and help, but I don't feel like moving.

"You're acting very boyfriend-ly."

It's true. Everyone else on the boat is doing the tired dance of flirty comments and lingering glances. Auden and I are removed from it, pressed so close together I can feel her heartbeat.

"Do you like it?"

"I love it," she admits, leaning her head back so she's tucked underneath my chin.

"Good."

Neither of us say anything for the rest of the trip around the lake. I stare out at the smooth surface of the water, reflecting the full moon in rippling patterns of light, trying to recall the last time I felt this content.

I come up empty.

A flare of pain ricochets up my right arm. I look over and glare at Oliver.

"What the hell, man?"

"I've been trying to talk to you for five minutes!"

"What is it?"

He looks at where Auden is standing, talking to Lisa Owens, obviously noticing why I'm distracted. "We're playing cards out on the deck."

"I'm good here."

"Of course you are."

I glance at him. "You got something to say to me?" My tone is sharp.

"I'm worried about you, Reid."

"Don't be. I know what I'm doing."

"Oh-kay." Oliver makes it clear he doesn't believe me, but Josh has always been the confrontational one of our foursome. At most, Oliver will make a passive aggressive comment or two.

He leaves me standing here, staring at her. My phone buzzes with a text,

and I glance down to see it's from my mom. I sigh.

Mom: *What time will you be home?*

Elliot: *Late*

Elliot: *Might spend the night at Josh's*

Mom: *Okay...*

Mom: *Headed to bed*

Mom: *Be smart*

"Elliot Reid, the loner? Doesn't have much of a ring to it."

I glance up at Auden then shove my phone back in my pocket. "I'm not alone."

She moves closer. "*Apparently, you've been staring at me.*"

"Yep."

"Want to get out of here?"

"You mean..."

She nods. "Yeah. House this huge has got to have guest rooms, right?"

"It does."

Auden erases all the space between us. She's so close I can feel the warmth radiating off her skin, smell the rosemary mint scent of her shampoo. "I want to feel you inside me again," she whispers.

Fuck. "Aren't you sore?" I murmur back.

Pink paints her cheeks. "A little," she admits.

I can't keep having this conversation with her here. I grab her hand and pull her toward the stairs, acting like I don't see the envious stares from girls and jealous looks from guys. There's only one reason you head upstairs with someone at a party.

I pull Auden to the right when we reach the top of the steps. I know the layout of the Hawleys' house as well as my own. The biggest guest room is at the end of the hall, and Josh keeps it locked when he has people over. I fish the key out of the pot sitting on the end table and unlock the door, pulling Auden inside after me. I click the lock back into place. Drunk teenagers make stupid decisions, and I don't want anyone walking in on us.

Auden doesn't move away to explore the room. She turns once the door is shut, effectively pressing me up against it. Her hair has started to fall out of its curls, her dress is wrinkled, and she's never looked more beautiful.

"We don't have to do anything."

She laughs and steps away. One hand disappears behind her back; it doesn't register that she's unzipping her dress until I watch the blue material

slip down her body and pool on the hardwood floor. “We’d *better*.”

I look at her. She stares right back, brows quirking in a silent challenge.

“Get on the bed.” I pull my shirt off and over my head.

Desire heats her gaze as her eyes skim over the muscles that cover my torso. I don’t spend hours in the gym to impress girls—but it feels damn good to have her look at me this way. The sight of her mostly naked, looking at me with lust and heat in her eyes, twists my insides. I walk over to the edge of the bed, stepping between her legs. I lean over slowly, forcing her to lie down.

“You’re still wearing too many clothes,” she informs me as I unsnap her bra and palm her left breast. There’s a reddish-purple mark just above her nipple, and my dick hardens further. *Mine*.

Auden follows my gaze. “There’s one on my neck, too. I had to put concealer on it this morning.”

I smirk. “Sorry.”

“No, you’re not.”

“I’m not,” I agree, then I kiss her. She mewls against my lips, rocking her hips against mine in an attempt to force some friction. I focus on doing dirty things to her mouth: sucking on her tongue, nipping her lip, and making sure I thoroughly explore every inch. Her right hand slides down to the waistband of my shorts. I move before I won’t be able to, pulling back to study her pink, puffy lips. She looks thoroughly kissed.

I shift lower, kissing my way down the column of her throat and between her breasts. Gently—I don’t leave another hickey. I flick my tongue against the pink tips of her nipples, then suck. She arches against me, mixing my name with a series of desperate moans.

Coming in my shorts becomes a legitimate concern.

I speed up my descent, ghosting my lips down the tensed muscles of her stomach until I reach the edge of her underwear. They’re a lacy, light pink pair. Last night, she was wearing her bikini bottoms. I wonder if she normally wears this kind—or did she wear them for me? With any other girl, I wouldn’t care or ask, but this is Auden. So, I do. “Did you wear these for me?”

“Yeah,” she replies breathlessly.

I yank them down with one harsh movement, then trail my fingers from her stomach down between her legs. She’s wet. *Really* wet. I play with the nub of nerves for a minute, then shift my hand down to her upper thigh,

spreading her legs.

I've only done this once before, and it was over a year ago. It was more obligatory than anything—Sarah Simmons had just given me a blowjob, and I felt like I needed to reciprocate. There was no emotion behind it, and I mostly used my hand. The burning need to watch Auden writhe beneath me that I'm experiencing right now was entirely absent.

"Elliot, what are you—"

I press my lips to her center, exploring it as eagerly as I just surveyed her mouth. Her legs fall all the way apart as her hips rise, pressing up against my tongue. A mixture of groans and moans fall out of her mouth. I circle her clit, then suck, and I think her answering sound might be audible over the rap music downstairs.

My tongue moves again, and her breathing grows harsher, erratic. Pants turn to pleas. "*Fuck, Elliot. God. Please.*"

I'd be lying if I said her desperation and naked need aren't fantastic for my ego. I quicken my pace, simultaneously sliding a finger inside of her. Her inner muscles clench, then start to convulse as she comes. My dick hardens painfully against the mattress as I raise my head and look at her.

Auden's hair is spread across the blue comforter in a tangled stream of dark brown. Her teeth are digging into her bottom lip harshly enough to turn the pink flesh white. Her eyes are hazy and heated as she looks up at me.

I crawl up the mattress and flop down beside her.

"Wow. That was...wow." Her voice is breathy.

"Had you done that before?"

"No."

I'm expecting the flare of possessiveness—of relief. I want all her firsts. All her middles. And especially all her lasts. "Good."

She rolls so she's half on top of me. One finger traces circles between and over the ridges of my stomach. "I *think* you're trying to be a gentleman, but I don't want you to be."

"I don't think a *gentleman* would have just gone down on you, Denny."

Her lips quirk up. "Maybe not. But last night...I kind of feel like I forced you into it."

"You didn't. I wanted it." I didn't realize how badly until it happened.

"You want me now?"

I chuckle, because she's actually being serious. "Yes."

"*Prove it, Reid.*"

I trace my fingers down her bare back. “You said you’re sore.”

She holds my gaze. “Elliot.” All she says is my name, but she conveys a lot with it. Impatience. Lust. Vulnerability. No hint of hesitation.

She’s leaving tomorrow.

I want this just as much as she does, probably more. Telling her I thought about last night all day wasn’t a line. “Let me just…” I shift away so I can shed the rest of my clothes.

She doesn’t move, aside from her hand. Deftly, she tugs my shorts and boxer briefs down so my dick springs out. She grips it and squeezes as her hand glides up and down. I have to start reciting stats to keep it together. The tingly feeling at the base of my spine builds, indicating it’s a Band-Aid on a bleeding, unstitched bullet hole kind of solution.

“Roll over,” I instruct huskily.

She scrambles to comply, and I smirk at her eagerness. Not gonna lie, it’s super sexy that she’s not playing it cool, that she’s being bold and taking what she wants from me.

I kiss her. Just like earlier, it was meant to be a brief one. Instead, it deepens and escalates, turns sloppy and restless. I react instinctually, rubbing up against her. It’s not until she gasps that I realize I’ve begun to press inside her. Immediately, I start to pull away. Auden tightens her arms around my neck, anchoring me in place.

“No, it’s okay. It feels *good*.”

There’s no trace of pain on her face. Slowly, I continue to slide inside her, not stopping until I’m balls deep. I’m struggling to breathe properly; my heart is racing like I just finished a three-minute shift on the ice. She feels so fucking good. Tight, hot heat grips me as anticipation races through my veins. I stall in place, letting her adjust to my size and resisting the burning urge to start moving right away.

Our lips meet again. This kiss is leisurely, familiar, fated. It feels like we were meant to end up here—together.

Auden grows impatient first. Her nails scrape down and back up my neck, then move up to twist in the short strands of my hair. She wraps her legs around my waist. Her nose runs along the length of my jaw until her mouth reaches my ear.

“Fuck me, Elliot.”

I’m all tapped out on restraint. I draw back until only the tip of my penis is still inside her, then thrust back in again. And again. And again.

If I'm hurting her, she doesn't show it. There's nothing on her face but pleasure as I pump into her, chasing my release. I'm right on the edge, barely able to see straight. My world narrows to her. I sneak one hand between our bodies to rub the nub of nerves still slick with arousal. Finally, I feel her shudder. My dick swells, and I spill my release into her.

I don't want to move, but I can't stay inside her all night. I pull out, and some of my cum follows. It's the hottest sight I've ever seen. I've kissed—touched—girls I knew had hooked up with friends of mine. It never bothered me. Canmore is a small town, and my friend group is even smaller. We've all known each other for our whole lives.

I pass her some tissues from the bedside table, then lie down beside her. "This is going to make me sound like kind of a douche—"

"Wouldn't be the first time," Auden informs me.

"Shut up. Don't take this the wrong way—"

"Stop talking, dude. Seriously. Turn back now, while you still can."

I chuckle before I roll so I'm half on top of her. She shoves at me and giggles. I trace the slope of her cheek and the line of her jaw. Amusement drains away like water through a sieve. "I'm really glad I was your first. Not just because it's insanely hot, knowing no other guy has ever seen you like this or been inside you—not that I wouldn't have still wanted to if you had. I mean, I wouldn't care—I mean, I *would*, but..." I sigh. "Fuck. You were right. Forget it."

I lie down on my back. This time, she crawls onto me. "Why haven't you?"

"Made more douche-y comments?"

She doesn't crack a smile. "Had sex." When I don't answer right away, she adds, "I mean, I've seen the way girls swarm you. It was probably more work *not* to get laid. You made me fake date you!"

"I know."

"So?"

"I don't know."

"Bullshit."

"Why didn't *you*?" I counter. "You went to prom with what's-his-face? Hunter?"

"You remembered his name," she notes.

"It's a stupid name. Does he murder helpless animals? Some vegetarian you are."

“Did it have anything to do with me?” She ignores my mini rant and goes right for the jugular.

“I thought you didn’t want to *talk*,” I reply. The truth is, sex always seemed too messy. She’s right; I’ve never had any shortage of girls interested in me. My issue has always been convincing them I’m not trying to play hard to get, that I actually *mean* that I don’t want anything serious. Did Auden factor in after I met her? Maybe. She’s the only girl who’s made me second-guess anything. I don’t know if I should tell her that; don’t know *how* to tell her that and also the truth that nothing else has changed.

“Yeah. You’re right.” Her tone has changed, turned brisk and chillier than the air conditioning seeping out of the vents. She grabs her underwear and bra.

I sit up and pull on my boxer briefs. “Denny...”

“Don’t. I said you’re right. Just take the win.”

“I didn’t mean that—”

She pulls her dress up and zips it. “I’m ready to go.”

Annoyance surfaces. “What, I’m a fucking sex toy to you? You’re all *I need you inside me*, Elliot and then fifteen minutes later it never happened? I shift to chauffeur?”

“I kind of thought driving me home after I’ve flown all the way here for three summers just to see you was a reasonable request, but whatever. Someone else can take me.”

She turns to leave, but I jump up and grab her arm before she gets very far. “It’s not about the driving, Auden!”

Her eyes flash. “Then what is it *about*, Elliot?”

“Did you consider it? Boston?” I lock my gaze on hers as I ask the question.

Auden blanches. “My dad went to Stanford. All he’s ever wanted is for me to go there. It’s been the plan... forever.”

“The same dad who only acts like one when it’s convenient for *him*?”

“You’re one to talk. At least I’m not letting him dictate my *whole life*,” she snaps.

“What the fuck does *that* mean?”

“Hockey, Elliot. I’m talking about hockey and how you let it consume you. How you don’t let yourself relax and you don’t think about anything else and you deprive yourself of things I *think* you want.”

There is no need for clarification on what those are. “I need to know if I

can do it, if I'm better than him."

"I know." She sighs and looks away. "And then what? What happens when you get selected as the first pick, like we both know you're going to be? Are you still going to stay late after practice and watch game tape every night and wake up early for extra weight sessions? You *will*. We both know you will."

"Auden..." I don't know what to say.

I can't give up hockey.

I can't lose her.

"It's fine. You told me from the start." She lets out a small, sad laugh, then repeats the words, "You told me."

"The draft is next summer. This is just the *worst* time for...this."

"*Right*." She scoffs. "Am I—" Her voice catches. "Am I just supposed to wait?"

"I never asked you to wait."

"Yeah, well...you didn't have to. It's all I've done, Eli."

"I want this. You."

"Just not enough, huh?"

"That's not fair."

"You didn't even *look* at schools in California. You're really upset I didn't consider Boston?"

"You had more options than I did. You know that. The coaches, programs, offers—I had to consider all of that."

"So you're saying your future is more important than mine?"

"No. Stop putting words into my mouth!"

"Fine." She tries to move, but I don't loosen my grip on her arm. "Denny." I search her face.

There's moisture pooling in her eyes, and it makes my stomach lurch like I'm on a rollercoaster. "*Fuck*. I can't stop fucking this up."

"It's not your fault. I...I knew exactly what this was, and I pushed for more. Because I wanted it. I got it—I can move on." One tear escapes, sliding a trail down her left cheek. I swipe it away with my thumb.

"I wanted it too, Denny. I *want* it. But I'm going to school in Boston. You'll be in California. I don't know how to...I don't know how to play hockey any other way than I how play it."

"What's it given you?"

"Huh?"

“Hockey. You spend all this time playing it: training, watching film, lifting weights, practicing. *You* give it your all. What does *it* give *you*?”

I blink. “I love playing. The thrill. The excitement. Winning.”

“More than you love anything else?”

I look away. There was a time when I knew the answer to that question and could have replied instantly. I’m not sure the answer is yes, but I’m not sure it’s no, either.

“I’m leaving.” She turns and unlocks the door, then pulls it open. Noise enters the room as she leaves it...leaves me standing here.

She’s said those words to me before.

They sound different—more final—than before, and it *terrifies* me.

Elliot

Auden's question bothers me for the next few days. It boils over as I'm sitting by the campfire with Luke, watching Josh try to organize a game of Truth or Dare. I swear, he has the maturity level of a preteen.

"Why do you play hockey?"

"Huh?" Luke glances over at me.

"Hockey—how come you play?"

His brow furrows. "I dunno. Always have, I guess."

His answer doesn't surprise me. Luke is easygoing when it comes to hockey. He doesn't take it as seriously as Oliver and I do, though he also doesn't goof off the way Josh does and show up to practice late.

"Do you think I take it too seriously?"

Confusion turns to surprise. "I mean...yeah, probably. But you're *Elliot Reid*. You've always had the expectations, the talent. It's part of who you are. It'd be weird if you weren't."

I sigh. "Yeah."

"You asking 'cause of Auden?" I cock one eyebrow, and Luke snorts. "Come on, Reid. You two were all over each other on her last visit. You wouldn't have gone there unless you like her a whole heck of a lot."

"I'm gonna lose her. I can't half-ass it. If I tell her I'm in, I have to make room. I can't be selfish and push everything else out of the way. I can't be the most dedicated player out on the ice anymore, and I don't know if I can do that."

"You could probably play in half the games next season and still get drafted number one."

"Yeah, right. Carrington is spending the summer at some Russian camp."

Luke whistles at the mention of my main rival. We've faced off a few times at national clinics we've both attended. I'm better by him, but not by much. "Can't you just talk to her? Explain?"

"She knows how important it is to me—*why* it's so important to me." Shock passes across Luke's face. I rarely—and by rarely I mean never—mention my father, even indirectly. "I can't ask her to put her life on hold for a year."

"I don't think you'd need to ask, Reid. She's just as crazy about you—has been since you walked into that coffee shop. She didn't give Josh a second glance. I don't think anyone is under any delusions why she's visiting Canmore each summer, either."

"We're friends."

"That's it?"

"I don't want to be that dick who jerks a girl around, who never shows up when he says he will, who *can't* show up because I've got two practices, a film review, and a team meeting that takes all day. I want to be selfish and not feel guilty about it."

"So...stay just friends, then."

"I'm not sure if we can, if we will. Too much has happened." Namely of the sexual variety, but I don't say that. Based on the smirk that passes across Luke's face, he realizes what I'm talking about anyway.

"She knew what she was getting into with you. It's not like you haven't *always* been this crazy uptight hockey general."

"I'd say it paid off. We won the championship—twice. I got my scholarship."

"Yep. Yet you're sitting here, asking me if you take hockey too seriously." He pauses, and I realize the reason for his hesitation when he speaks again. "Do you love her?"

I'm not the *talk about my feelings* type. He's likely worried I might lose my shit. I plan to hedge or tell him it's none of his business. Instead, what comes out is "Yeah."

It surprises him as much as me that I'd admit it—although I don't think I've done a great job of hiding that I feel that way.

"So, tell her."

"I'm not sure if I should."

"Look, she knows how you are about hockey, right?" He pauses, waiting for me to respond.

“Yes.”

“Does she know you feel about her?” Another pause.

This time, I don’t respond right away. *Does she?* I’ve mainly been focused on the complications of a relationship, on making certain I don’t act like that’s something I’m equipped to enter. I mean, yeah, we’ve had sex, but people our age don’t necessarily equate that with anything serious. People not our age, too. I know guys who have been with more than one girl on the same night. I don’t think casual sex is a novelty in LA, either. She said sex with me would mean something to her. I didn’t say sex with her would mean anything to me, not because I was trying to play it cool or distant, but because I was fucking overwhelmed by the fact that her clothes were suddenly disappearing.

“I don’t know,” I finally reply, honestly.

Luke rolls his eyes. “Well, that’s probably a good place to start. Give her all the facts, then let her decide. You already make time to talk to her all the time—is that any different from being in a long-distance relationship? Unless you want to be able to hook up with other girls?”

“No,” I reply. “I don’t. That was the whole reason...”

“For your fake dating setup?” Luke laughs. Yeah, Josh didn’t take long to spill the beans on that to Luke and Oliver after Auden left last summer. I endured no end of ribbing from the guys and the general consensus was that I was an idiot, but I also think they all realized what I didn’t—I asked Auden to fake date me because I want to date her for real; maybe as much as I want to play hockey professionally and smash every record my father ever set.

“What are you guys doing over here?” Ava saunters toward us, dropping down on the arm of Luke’s chair.

“Just chilling,” he replies casually, slinging an arm around her waist and running his hand along her thigh.

Ava smirks at him. “Want to go for a walk?”

“How much physical exertion are we talking? Last time you asked me that, there wasn’t much cardio involved.”

I roll my eyes. How he gets laid as much as he seems to, I’ll never understand.

“I already went skating with Reid this morning.”

At the reminder that I’m here, Ava glances over at me. “Already practicing, Elliot?”

“Never really stop,” I reply. My tone isn’t unfriendly, but it’s not

welcoming, either. It sends a clear message: nothing is happening here.

Ava turns back to Luke. "I'll take it easy on you, Lukey."

Lukey? I mouth.

He flips me off. "Don't want that either," he replies, standing. "We good, Reid?"

"Yeah. Go *walk*."

He grins before taking off with Ava. I stand and stretch, then head inside. For once, we're not at Josh's place. Cassie is hosting tonight, which means the kitchen counter is spread with all sorts of fancy alcohol I can't even pronounce. I study it for a minute, then decide against drinking. Instead, I head for the front door. Right now, I just want to be alone.

I don't get very far, though.

"Elliot!" I turn to see Cassie herself walking toward me. She's wearing a plastic princess crown and a sash that says *Birthday Girl*. Belatedly, I realize that's why she's hosting tonight.

"Hey. Happy Birthday," I say when she reaches me.

"Thanks," she replies, twisting a piece of hair around one finger. The dress she's wearing is short and tight and doesn't leave a whole lot to the imagination, but I wasn't lying earlier. If her name isn't Auden, I have no interest. She's the person I wanted to figure sex out with. She's still the only person I want touching me that way; the person I want to touch.

"I've got to head out. Enjoy your party." I go to move, but she slides to the left, blocking me again.

"You haven't given me a present." She glances meaningfully at my crotch, then lifts her eyes back to my face. They're glassy—not that she needs to have any alcohol in her system to come on to me. It's definitely happened sober, but her inebriation is going to make this a more difficult situation to get out of. "Or I'll give you one."

Before Auden, I didn't let sex with girls go past oral. For lots of reasons, one being that it seemed less meaningful—a theory Auden sucking me off last summer immediately debunked. As the result of an accidental pregnancy, I'm also terrified of knocking a girl up. A few minutes of physical gratification aren't worth more than my future. The responsibility of having a child is something I'm in no way prepared for. I would resent the hell out of a kid for pushing my dreams out of reach—as if it would be his or her fault I couldn't keep it in my pants—and probably gain sympathy for my father that he doesn't deserve.

It bothers me that she's willing to take whatever scrap I'm willing to give her. It worries me that Auden might do the same, that if I tell her how I feel, she'll sacrifice what she really wants to take the small stretches of time and attention I can give, choosing that over a guy at Stanford with all the time in the world. Or more than me, at least.

"Listen, Cassie." I sigh. "It's not going to happen between us. Nothing is going to happen between us again. Not tonight, not ever."

"You've said that before."

Have I? I guess a onetime thing turned into a several-time thing, but I've definitely never told her what I'm about to say now. "I'm leaving for Boston soon. And...I'm in love with Auden Harmon. I'm not going to hook up with anyone else while I feel that way about her."

The L-word flows a little easier this time. Maybe I just need to tell thirty to forty more people before I mention it to Auden. By then, it'll slide off my tongue like taffy.

Cassie blinks twice. "You'll regret this, Elliot."

Telling her? Maybe. I doubt a single person here tonight won't hear about what I just said, including her cousin. Annabel is in the corner with a few of the other girls at the top of Canmore's social hierarchy, watching this interaction take place. I guess I should be grateful for Annabel's perpetual bitchiness when it comes to Auden. It's the reason Auden didn't have anyone to hang out with when she first arrived in town...and the reason Annabel hopefully won't mention what I just said to her.

"I don't think I will."

"Well...your girlfriend is in New York right now, at her mom's fashion show, right?"

"Yes..." I know she's in New York with her mom. I don't recall any mention of a fashion show, but I'm not confident I didn't just forget, especially if she mentioned it while naked.

"She didn't seem to get the *not hooking up with other people* memo."

I freeze. "What do you mean?"

"There are photos online of her at a restaurant with Adrian Blackford."

"Who?"

Cassie rolls her eyes at me. "You've never heard of *The Teenage Diaries*?"

"That surprises you?"

Another eye roll. "Well, he's super hot and famous, so..." She smirks and

strolls off.

I walk outside. A few people are coming up Cassie's front path. One girl calls out to me, but I walk across the lawn and hit the sidewalk. I keep moving, glad Cassie lives close enough to me that I didn't bother driving. I don't even want to contemplate how long it might take to maneuver out of the maze of cars parked in the driveway and on the street.

My house is in the opposite direction of where I start walking, though. My feet move on autopilot, taking me to the one place I've always relied upon, and that finally gives me the answer to Auden's question. What does hockey give me?

Happiness. Validation. Relief.

I don't associate anything negative with the sport, even though I probably should, thanks to Andrew Reid. I put a lot into it, sure, but what I put in is what I get back. There's a clear correlation between effort and results. If I work hard enough, I've never gotten anything less than a victory. Records, championships, television coverage—some might say they're meaningless in the grand scheme of life, but they'll remain long after I'm gone. Isn't that the polar opposite of meaningless? I turned hockey into a part of who I am. I don't know who I am without it. One day, I'll have to figure that out. It won't last forever, but I haven't peaked yet. I'm a long way away from peaking.

The rink is quiet and empty when I walk inside—exactly how I like it. I change into the sweatpants and sweatshirt I always keep in the locker room for this reason. Then I lace up my skates and stomp along the rubber mats before I step on the ice and transition to a smoother surface.

There's no sound aside from the metal of my blades carving up the ice. Sprays of shavings fly as I race around in circles. I already skated earlier, so the familiar burn appears sooner than usual. I push the pain away, coaxing more movement out of my muscles as the bleachers blur by. My lungs fill with cold air and my eyes begin to water. I feel alive. Invincible. Completely present in this place and in this moment. This has always been the place where I feel this way.

Except...I feel that way when I'm with *her*, too.

Auden

New York City is hectic. Busy. Loud.

Pretty much the polar opposite of Canmore.

I lost track of how many times I've been here a long time ago. When I was younger, it was exciting. It seemed like an exotic place with sweater weather and skyscrapers. A chance to spend time with my mother, even if she was mostly running around to meetings, leaving me to be babysat by one of her harried secretaries.

This trip, I'm apathetic. The activity level still hits me like a shot of espresso, but I quickly fall back into the muted annoyance I spent the whole plane ride simmering in.

I'm annoyed.

On edge.

Hint of heartbreak.

I knew it wouldn't end well, and I've never been more upset to be right about something before.

No matter how much you might want someone to love you, you can't make them. I seem doomed to learn that lesson over and over again.

I trudge through LaGuardia and out into the oppressive, hot, garbage-scented air.

As soon as I slide inside the dark interior, I'm hit with the familiar aroma of Chanel perfume. To my absolute shock, my mother is inside the black SUV when I climb into the back seat.

"Hello, dear," she greets, not looking up from her phone. She's glued to it, like usual, but she came to the airport to pick me up rather than just sending her driver. This is a first, and it ignites hope that maybe this trip will

actually consist of some quality time.

The driver opens the trunk. I hear my suitcase land with a thump, and then the door shuts.

“Hi, Mom.”

She glances up when I speak, nose wrinkling as she takes note of what I’m wearing. It’s a ratty ensemble: oversized sweatshirt, athletic shorts, and sneakers. In my defense, my mother has never picked me up from the airport. I didn’t think I’d see her until the show and would have time to change. Of course she is wearing a full face of makeup, a silk dress, and heels.

“How was Canmore?”

“Fine.” That’s all I say, and she’s already looking back at her phone. Sometimes, I’m tempted to blurt out something shocking to my parents, just to see how they’d react, test if they’re even listening. Like *I got expelled from Fairfield Academy* or *I’m going to climb Machu Picchu! Be back in a week.* Or in this case, *I had sex with a guy.* Things with Elliot are too raw to consider exploiting it for shock value, though. Too fresh. Too not funny.

I stare out the tinted window at the crowded street, enjoying the cold air being blasted from the vents as the car inches into traffic.

“You’ll enjoy the new line—you inspired it.”

I look over at my mom. “I did?” Aside from giving me samples from her collections, my mom has never actively encouraged any involvement in her work. To say I’m surprised I inspired *anything* is a massive understatement.

“Yes. I had Tomas focused on preppy, varsity, bold colors.”

“Oh. Okay.” None of those sound like me, but I’ve learned my mother’s way is the right way.

“For your freshman year of college, of course.”

“Right. *Of course.*” Her expression doesn’t change, so my mom definitely missed the sarcasm in my tone. “Did you enjoy it? College.”

My mom went to Stanford too; it’s where she met my dad, but while he lauds the university every chance he gets, my mom hardly mentions it.

“I suppose so.”

Hardly a ringing endorsement. “So, not really?”

“It wasn’t my first choice. I wanted to go to school in the south.”

“Really?”

“Really. I’m not even sure why. Just a silly idea I had.” She smiles. “Stanford worked out fine for me, though. I’m sure you’ll like it, too.”

By “fine,” I can only assume my mom means meeting my dad, having

me, and founding a multi-billion-dollar fashion empire. She had family money of her own, but it was mainly my dad's famous clients that sent her stock skyrocketing.

A couple of minutes later, my mother gets a call from her head designer that lasts the whole drive to the hotel. Once we arrive, the next couple of hours pass in a blur. Unsurprisingly, my mother deems the suitcase full of clothes I brought as unworthy of wearing to a fashion show and has her assistant fetch something for me. My hair and makeup are professionally done before we leave the hotel and head to the museum where the event is being held.

I've met more celebrities and attended more fancy events than I could begin to count. It's been a part of life for as long as I can remember due to my parents' respective careers, and it means I spend the three-hour fashion show more bored out of my mind than starry-eyed. You see one six-foot model with a stoic expression wearing an outrageous outfit ninety-nine out of a hundred people would not be caught dead in, you've seen them all, in my opinion.

It doesn't help that every time I sneak a glance at my phone, there's no text from Elliot. He didn't even check to see if I landed safely, which he's done every other time I've left Canmore. Sure, plane crashes are rare, but they happen. I could be at the bottom of one of the Great Lakes right now.

At least I wouldn't have died a virgin.

Things between us may be awkward—uncertain—now, but at least I tried. I went for it, and I'm still in shock that I did. I'm really not the seduce-the-hot-guy-I'm-into type. More the exchange-eye-contact-until-he-makes-the-first-move kind of girl.

My mom gets caught in all sorts of conversations after the show, and I perch in an uncomfortable chair backstage, awkwardly smiling at the models as they undress—*fully* undress, making me feel like I've stumbled into a nude drawing class—fighting to keep my eyelids open and quiet my grumbling stomach.

Finally, my mom announces we're heading to dinner.

We end up at a fancy sushi restaurant. It smells delicious inside, like teriyaki and rice vinegar. We're seated right away—at a table for *four*.

I level an accusing stare my mother's way. "It's not just us?" The only reason I agreed to this trip was I thought it'd be a chance to spend some time with her. So far, the extent of that has been the ride from the airport to the

hotel.

“You’ll like Paul. He has a son your age.”

“So this is...what? Some sort of twisted double date?”

My mother’s eyes flash. She leans forward and opens her mouth. Then, disturbingly, her expression completely transforms. A frown becomes a smile. Annoyance turns pleasant. “Hello! How are you two?”

“Not as good as the star of the New York Fashion Show,” a man’s voice replies.

My mother preens. I throw up a little in my mouth as a tall, middle-aged man leans down to kiss her cheek, then hands her a bouquet of flowers. A broody, blond-haired boy follows. With a start, I realize I recognize him. It’s Adrian Blackford. He’s one of the stars on the teen drama *Lana* is obsessed with. His father looks familiar, too. I’m guessing he’s involved in the fashion industry somehow.

“Auden. So lovely to finally meet you.”

“You, too...” Any goodwill my politeness earns with my mother is quickly washed away by my very obvious *Who are you?* Something she could have very easily rectified by so much as *mentioning* this guy to me more than thirty seconds ago.

To his credit, the man doesn’t seem fazed. “Paul Blackford.”

“Nice to meet you,” I lie.

“This is my son, Adrian.” Paul nudges his offspring, who gives me a forced smile I recognize from many an event I didn’t want to attend. Maybe he’ll be a kindred spirit.

“Hi, Adrian. I’m Auden.”

“Hey.” He takes the seat beside me, giving me a side look that’s half-assessing, half-admiring.

I start to get the sense this will be a long evening.

Paul orders half the menu, most of which is raw fish. When the waiter glances toward me and Adrian’s side of the table, I don’t waste any time. “Vegetable tempura. Just keep it coming, please.”

Adrian raises his eyebrows.

Paul smiles. “Not a fan of fish?”

“Meat,” I correct. “I’m a vegetarian.” Paul glances at my mother, like maybe this is a detail he should have known about me, a detail *she* should have known about me. “Probably just a phase, though,” I add sweetly.

That was my mother’s favorite line when I announced my new diet, and

the one she's reverted to any time it's come up in the past six years. Based on the way her lips tighten, she knows I'm not attempting to be magnanimous.

"It's good to try new things," Paul replies.

I'm tempted to respond with a snarky *Speaking of new things, when did you two become a thing?* but I bury the urge. It won't make this dinner pass any faster. Plus, Paul actually does seem nice. He asks me questions as I nibble on fried veggies, appearing genuinely invested in my answers. I almost feel bad for him. Since the divorce, my mother's attention span with men tends to be short. I could count on many hands the number of times I've met one for the first and last time.

Paul seems oblivious to that inevitable fate, or maybe just hopeful for a different outcome. Sadly, I can relate, and I also wish I'd inherited my mother's penchant for no emotional attachment. My personal takeaway from the past few days is that sex is fun and love sucks. I guess I get why one-night stands are so popular in college, but I can't picture sharing the intimacy I experience with Elliot with a stranger, either.

Looks like celibacy and I will become good friends again.

It's late by the time my dinner companions decide to call it a night. Paul did most of the talking. I hardly know anything more about Adrian than I did when I sat down; my mom didn't take the same interest in his hobbies that Paul took in mine. I might have initiated a conversation myself—Lana will be furious to learn I didn't—if not for the fact that he spent most of dinner looking at my boobs.

My mom and Paul get waylaid by another designer on the way to the door. I forge ahead, deciding the summer heat is preferable to the chilly restaurant and fake smiles. The temperature outside has cooled, barely. It feels good for about ten seconds. Like taking a sip of a hot drink in winter. Rather than cold air erasing warmth, humidity sticks to my skin and coats my hair. For once, I don't think it has a prayer against the professional-grade hairspray my mother's stylist used.

"Had your fill of the happy, blended family bullshit?"

I spin to see Adrian sauntering toward me, his hands shoved in his pockets. The product in his hair glimmers under the glare of city lights.

"You could say that."

He stops next to me and pulls a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket. "Want one?" He holds one out to me.

"No. Thanks."

Adrian shrugs. "Suit yourself." He lights up and takes a long drag, letting out an appreciative sigh as he exhales the smoke. "That's better."

"That's terrible for you," I inform him. The black, shriveled-up lungs we had to look at in health class still haunt me.

"So is a protein deficiency."

"I get plenty of protein."

"So...you're a fake vegetarian?"

I roll my eyes. "Sure."

He takes another pull of smoke. I watch it float away and dissipate as he blows it out. "You got a boyfriend?"

"Excuse me?"

"I'm trying to plan out the rest of my night."

"What does that have to do with me?"

"Well...if you're game, I'll factor you in." *I'll factor you in.* It's such a simple acknowledgement, and yet it's more than Elliot has ever offered me. Not when it matters.

"I have a boyfriend," I lie.

"Yeah...I figured."

"You did?"

"Yep. You haven't hit on me once."

I scoff. "You should probably get that ego checked out. It seems unnaturally large."

He grins around the cigarette. "I'm an actor, baby. Bigger the ego, bigger the star."

"You must not have met many athletes."

"Your guy is a jock?"

"Yeah."

"What sport?"

"Hockey."

He nods. "Respect. That's intense."

Mom and Paul finally appear, and I watch my mother glance at the lit cigarette dangling from Adrian's mouth. I know how much she hates smokers, but she doesn't say a word. Maybe she likes Paul more than I thought.

That theory is confirmed when she asks me what I thought of him on the drive back to the hotel. Apparently, there *is* a first for everything.

"He's nice," I answer honestly.

“And Adrian?”

“As a love interest or a future step-sibling?”

“Auden.” She sighs but doesn’t answer the question, I note.

“He’s not my type.”

“Since when do you have a type?” My mother sounds amused, and it pisses me off royally.

“Since I met someone.”

“You met someone? When?”

“In Canmore.”

She tsks. “Oh, Auden. You saw how that worked out for your aunt.”

“Katherine met Annabel’s father at Northwestern, Mom.” Technicalities aside, I’d say my aunt may have made out better than my mother. Sure, she’s never been married, she doesn’t run a giant company, and her daughter runs wild, but she’s definitely happier. Isn’t that what we should all be chasing? Happiness?

“End it. You’re about to start college. You know what your father would say.”

I glare out the window for the rest of the drive. We walk through the marble foyer in silence. It permeates the elevator ride as well.

“Busy day tomorrow. Be ready at nine.” That’s all my mother says before disappearing into her room.

I swipe my room key and walk into the sparsely decorated white hotel room. The only pop of color is a glass vase of pink peonies on the wooden dresser. I climb into the shower first to wash my face and rinse the product out of my hair. I slip between the crisp sheets after brushing my teeth, barefaced and with wet locks. The air conditioning is turned up to full blast, so I snuggle under the covers, grateful when they start to insulate my body heat. The bed is cozy and comfortable, yet sleep is elusive. I’m still awake when my phone starts buzzing on the table next to the bed.

I rub my eyes and grab the vibrating device, wincing as the harsh light of the screen burns my retinas. It’s Elliot.

I tap the green button and hold the phone up to my ear. “Hi.”

“Hi.” His low, husky voice sends shivers through me. In the quiet, dark room, it feels like he could be here in bed with me. I *wish* he were here in bed with me. We’re both silent. I listen to his soft inhales and exhales, thousands of miles away. “Where are you?”

“Back at the hotel. In bed. You?”

“I’m at the rink.”

Of course he is. “You’re skating?”

“Yeah. I was at Cassie’s earlier with the guys, but I left. Everyone else was hooking up, and I...” He sighs.

“You *what*, Eli?”

“You complicated things, Denny. You really fucking complicated things.”

“They were already complicated. We just stopped pretending they weren’t.”

“Yeah. Maybe.” He pauses. “How’s New York?”

“It sucks. I’ve barely seen my mom so far, and I got roped into dinner with her boyfriend and his son.”

“Yeah, I heard.”

“What? You *did*? How?”

“Apparently there are photos online of you and some actor at a restaurant. *Someone* thought it would be nice to show me.”

Cassie, I’m guessing. “You’re not...” Bothered? Upset? Jealous? I don’t know how to end the sentence, so I don’t, but I wouldn’t hate it if one of those words applied.

“Did you think I’d see them?”

“What? No, of course not. I didn’t even know there *were* photos.”

“You don’t seem surprised that there are.”

“Well, what did you want me to do? Pretend to faint on the floor from shock?”

He huffs a sound that could be a laugh or a scoff. “Do whatever you want, Auden. That’s what you’re doing now, right?”

“What does *that* mean?”

“I just...I don’t...Nothing.”

“Sure didn’t sound like nothing.”

“I just—I just wasn’t expecting to hear you went out with some guy.”

“I went out with my *mom*—*some* guy just happened to be there.”

“Fine.”

“Fine,” I repeat.

“I didn’t call to fight with you.”

“Why did you call, then?”

Silence. That stretches and expands. “I wanted to talk to you, Denny.”

I bite my bottom lip hard enough to taste blood. This is the problem when

it comes to Elliot Reid: he's heartbreakingly attractive—literally, just ask mine—and he also says things like that to me. But it always ends the same way. He pulls me in further and then I'm just left hanging here, wondering if it will ever end differently.

Spoiler alert: it won't. That's what the past few days taught me. I got a glimpse of what being more than his friend would really be like, and it was just as magical as I thought it would be. It also told me that while there are some lines Elliot will blur, there are others he won't.

"That doesn't really tell me anything."

"Like I said—"

"I want to know the things you never said, the things you thought and kept to yourself. Because...I have a lot. There were a lot of things I never said, and I'm sick of not saying them."

"Auden..."

"You want to be friends, right? We're friends. I'll always be here for you. I'll always support you. But you have lots of friends. Next time you need to talk, call one of them, okay? I need space. Time."

Another silence. "How much time?"

I have no idea how long it takes to fall out of love with someone. "Just focus on hockey, Elliot. You're really good at that, remember?" A little bitterness creeps into my voice, which tells me I need to end this conversation—soon, before our friendship takes a hit it can't recover from.

He hears it. "Nice, Auden."

I say nothing. Neither of us hangs up. I stare up at the ceiling and tap my fingers against my thigh under the covers, needing to expel some anxious energy. The sheets smell unfamiliar and feel stiff. My hair is still damp, the pillowcase can't absorb any more water, and the air can't reach the back strands. I roll over and stare at the curtains.

"I'm sorry," he finally says.

"I'm not. I wouldn't change it—any of it."

"You don't regret ever meeting me?" There's a sad, almost ironic note in his voice.

"Of course not."

"I wouldn't blame you...if you did."

"I don't. I just—" *Need to get over you.* "Need time."

"Okay."

I wish he'd fight me on this. Argue. But he doesn't, because he thinks it's

what I *really* want, not just what I *should* want; should be brave enough to embrace.

Once again, we're both silent. With anyone else, this would be awkward, but with Elliot, it feels simple, easy. I close my eyes and pretend he's lying right beside me, rather than a long way away—in more ways than one.

I didn't know one person could be both a salve *and* a sting.

Calming *and* riotous.

Make you feel happy *and* heartbroken.

His breathing is rhythmic. Relaxing. Reassuring. I can rely on another one coming a few seconds after the last one has ended. I never think about inhaling and exhaling—it just happens. Some portion of my brain knows I need to pull in oxygen and send out carbon dioxide to survive. Just like a chamber of my heart—or maybe all four—decided to extend its list of essential functions to not just pumping blood, but also loving Elliot Reid.

I'm not sure how much time passes. A thousand seconds. Twenty minutes. Two hours.

There's some muffled commotion on his end of the line. A clear "Reid!"

"I've got to go," he tells me. "Oliver and Josh just showed up at the rink."

"Okay."

"Okay," he echoes.

You can feel like you've told someone everything *and* nothing at all.

The call ends.

My wet hair is no longer the only reason the pillowcase is damp.

Part Four

College

Auden

I hear my name being called and turn around in my desk chair just in time to see Sadie push my door open and stick her head in.

“You busy?” she asks.

“Just finishing a paper,” I respond.

“We’re leaving in forty-five minutes.” I glance at the clock, surprised to see it’s after five already. “Okay. I’ll be ready.”

“Kay.” She smiles, then disappears. I type two more pages, then lean back in my chair to stretch and glance around my room. It’s half the size of my childhood bedroom but twice the size of the dorm room I lived in before I was accepted as a member of Alpha Pi Gamma.

I had absolutely no plans to join a sorority in college. I had no shortage of stereotypes in my head about it, but I met Sadie on the first day of the semester. We share an English class that fulfills one of Stanford’s general ed requirements, and I was immediately drawn to her bubbly, friendly personality. Enough so that I ventured to Greek Row on my first weekend on campus to a house party she invited me to. There was a lot less foam fights and lingerie on display than...Hollywood films, I guess, led me to believe.

When Sadie suggested I rush—and when I got a good look at the house—I decided why not? Two months into my first semester of college, here I am, moved in and pledged.

It’s nicer than Elliot’s place. Boston has dorms for its athletes, and only upperclassmen are allowed to live off campus. That’s basically been the extent of my discussions with him since he called me when I was in New York.

I know he’s busy with hockey—busier than ever. He’s got a new coach,

new teammates, a new facility, a new city, and he's in a new country. It's a lot to take in. But *before*...well, pick an event, *any event* since we met, pretty much...I have a feeling he'd have been texting me, making jokes about American customs, sharing stories about his teammates, and complaining about his classes.

He hasn't been, and that's partly on me. I asked for some space, and he's respecting it. I was also sort of hoping he might miss me as much as I miss him. That doesn't seem to be the case.

I spend another few minutes editing my essay but finally stop when I realize I'm simply rereading the same paragraph over and over again. I submit it then rise, stretching my arms over my head to relieve some of the tension that's built from crouching over my laptop. After rummaging through my drawers, I change out of the soft sweatpants. The leisurewear gets swapped for a snug gray V-neck Cashmere sweater and a pair of black skinny jeans I have to wiggle my way into. I tug my hair out of the messy bun it's in and grab my brush to smooth out the long, dark strands.

Before I leave my room, I type out a text to Elliot.

Auden: *Good luck.*

I grab my bag and head downstairs. It's in complete chaos, which I've come to expect. Not all the sorority stereotypes are false.

"Yay!" Claire cheers when I appear. "Ready to go?"

I nod.

"Want anything?" Claire asks, nodding to the counter as she pours herself a cup. "We've got to leave soon."

"I'm good with water," I tell her, helping myself to a glass and grabbing a banana I quickly eat as I listen to Maggie and Sadie argue over how to smuggle alcohol into the basketball game we're headed to.

Lauren, one of the other new pledges, bursts into the kitchen. "Let's go, ladies," she shouts. She's like a stereo with one setting: loud.

We all shrug into our jackets and head outside, the chilly air hinting at winter. While still in California, Stanford is farther north, with a cooler climate than I'm used to. We pile into the SUV, cramming in as many people as possible to avoid having to take multiple cars.

I end up wedged in the middle row between the door and Sadie. We've only just pulled out of the driveway and out onto the street when my phone buzzes, startling me. The tight quarters mean my right leg is pressed tightly against Sadie's, and she jumps at the vibration as well.

“Whose phone is that?” she asks.

“Mine,” I reply, shifting back and forth until I’m able to wiggle it out of my back pocket. Elliot’s name flashes across the screen. I unlock my phone to read his text.

Elliot: *We’re playing Stanford tonight.*

Fuck. I want to tell him I know, tell him I’ve had today’s date in my mind for weeks—months. I want to say how excited I am to see him play, make plans for after the game. I can’t do either of those things. That will undo any of the progress I’ve made over the past few months of short responses and *space*.

Instead, I shove my phone right back into my pocket without replying. I lean my head against the cool glass of the window and listen to the happy chatter bouncing around me—until I sit up and realize Sadie is parking the car in front of Stanford’s hockey rink.

Shit. “I thought we were going to the basketball game.”

“Change of plans,” Lauren replies. “They’re playing the University of Boston tonight. The temptation to see my brother get his ass kicked is too much for me to resist.” I forgot—or rather blocked out—that her older brother is on Stanford’s hockey team, probably because any reminder of the sport is a reminder of *him*.

I went to one football game a month ago. That was well-attended, but I’m surprised by the number of students milling around the hockey arena. The perimeter of the massive dome-shaped building is a sea of green and white supporters. The colors become a blur as I spiral into a mixture of relief and panic. I want to be here almost as much as I was grateful that I would miss it. Elliot has always been excellent at stirring up confusing, contrary emotions within me.

We walk in through the main entrance and flash our student IDs at the box office window to get our tickets. The pandemonium grows louder and louder with each step forward. I hang toward the back of the group, taking in the masses of exuberant students filling the gigantic building.

We all follow Lauren up one of the center aisles, claiming two rows of available seats. I end up in the higher row, seated between Claire and Sadie, and our group grows quickly as more familiar faces show up. For such a large school, I’m surprised by how many strangers-turned-friends I randomly encounter on campus—but this isn’t a random encounter. I knew Sadie was inviting Pat tonight, because she didn’t buy my *we-had-a-nice-time-but-I’m-*

not-looking-for-anything-right-now speech after our third date last week. I like Pat. A lot. I just don't think it's fair to date him while I'm in love with someone else.

Claire moves when the guys appear, and Pat takes the seat beside me with a smile.

"Hey, Auden."

I smile back. "Hey."

"Finish that paper?"

We share a class; that's how we met. On the second day, he sat down beside me and struck up a conversation. He's easy to talk to, easy on the eyes, and not on a sports team. Pat *should be* perfect.

"An hour ago," I reply. "You?"

He gives me a sheepish smile. "I'll finish it when I get back tonight."

I laugh. "Uh-huh."

"What number is he again?" a girl's voice behind me ask.

"I forget," another girl responds as I battle the urge to turn around. "I'll text Andrea. She's the one who's was talking about him earlier."

"You can just look up the roster online," a third girl says. After a pause, she adds, "Okay, he's number twelve."

"Wait, that's *him*?" one of the other girls chimes in again. "Andrea wasn't exaggerating—he is HOT."

"Wait, let me see," the first girl insists. "Holy shit, yeah."

"We're grabbing snacks," Pat tells me, interrupting my eavesdropping. "You want some popcorn?"

"No, I'm okay, thanks."

"Really? You said you never turn down popcorn."

I did say that. I spent a solid ten minutes babbling about why popcorn is the superior snack on our second date because I didn't know what else to talk about. The only other time I've spent any stretch of solo time with a guy was with Elliot, and that felt different.

"I know. I'm not feeling great, actually. The sandwich I had from the dining hall for lunch tasted a little funky."

Pat's face instantly transforms into concern. "Oh no. Do you want me to take you home?"

I hesitate before replying to the offer. Leaving is tempting...but I know I won't. That's always been the problem when it comes to Elliot: I know how it'll end, but I can't help but hope things will go differently.

“No, I’m okay. Just not hungry.”

Pat nods. “Okay.” He disappears with a couple of the other guys.

Sadie nudges my side and giggles. “Just let the guy buy you something next time, Harmon. You’ll make his night.”

I smile, but I’m barely paying attention. White jerseys have flooded the far end of the ice for the warm-up. I scan them, finally finding number twelve. Elliot isn’t skating. He’s standing by the side of the away bench, talking intently with a middle-aged man in a suit who must be his coach. Another man in a suit—maybe an assistant coach?—joins them, listening to whatever Elliot is saying. He laughs, then claps Elliot on the shoulder.

Elliot says something else before he shoves away from the bench, skating toward his teammates. They scatter, parting for him as he heads for the goal. He talks with the goalie for a minute, then beckons the rest of the team forward with a glove. They huddle around him, blocking my view.

“Scoping out the competition?” I startle at the sound of Sadie’s voice. “You haven’t looked away from Boston’s players since we got here.”

I shrug. The boys return, and she gets distracted.

The lights suddenly go out in the building, and the chattering ceases entirely. An eerie silence fills the air as we sit together in the darkness until a series of colorful lights flashes on the smooth surface of the pristine ice. A highlight video begins playing on the jumbotron set to upbeat pop music. This is my first college hockey game, so I have no idea if this is a regular occurrence or not.

The display garners an answering roar of appreciation from the crowd as a mass of first green and then white jerseys make their way out onto the ice. Each team stays on one end of the rink, skating in rapid circles before gathering around their respective benches. The flashing lights disappear, a bright spotlight taking their place as a group of girls make their way out and sing the national anthem.

The entire rink’s lights are reignited, and I immediately spot Elliot’s jersey. The speakers crackle to life as the announcer’s booming voice fills the arena, welcoming everyone to the game before introducing the away team’s starting lineup.

I watch as Elliot skates from where he’s been leaning against the boards to his position in the very center of the ice. He glides across the surface effortlessly, demonstrating his natural skill as he comes to a crisp stop in the very middle. The girls behind me start talking again, and I have to forcibly

block out their commentary.

The home team is announced. Stanford's first line takes their positions on the ice. The official skates out to the center and drops the puck between the two waiting sticks. Both teams leap into action as Elliot swipes the puck and passes it to the right winger, starting a sequence of passing that sets a rapid pace as the white and green jerseys circle and race across the ice.

The quick action continues for another fifteen minutes, until Elliot emerges from the pack of players and flies toward the green-guarded goal. A powerful swipe of his stick sends the puck into the back of the net.

The light behind the goal flashes. Elliot's tall frame disappears as he's surrounded by his teammates' celebrations before he skates alongside the bench so the rest of the team can congratulate him.

He looks happier than I've ever seen him.

Can I really resent him for choosing this over everything?

Over me?

When the final buzzer sounds two hours later, the scoreboard reads 5-1 in favor of the University of Boston. Elliot scored another goal in the second period and assisted on another one. It was a dominant performance, which everyone expected. I was well aware of Elliot's celebrity status in Canmore. I couldn't count the number of times we'd get food or go to the town pier and he would get stopped, and not just by people our age, but by people my parents' or grandparents' ages. Even if he had no athletic ability, I would still think he is something special. As I hear snippets of conversation while we progress down the bleacher stairs, I realize Elliot probably deserves more credit for the turnout tonight than Stanford's team. People came here to see *him* play, even though his victory meant our defeat. He's the type of athlete people want to see play now, before they have to shell out a significant sum to do so.

It's humbling. Shocking.

"Putnam's?" Sadie asks once we're all gathered together again out in the parking lot. The overwhelming consensus is yes, so the group migrates toward the parked cars.

The local bar is packed when we arrive, but we find a booth tucked in the

corner. Sadie and Lauren head to the bar to grab beer while I remain seated with everyone else. They're discussing the game, so I pretend to be looking at something on my phone.

When Sadie and Lauren return with pitchers of beer, the conversation turns to a party the guys' frat is hosting this weekend. I nod when they ask if I'm going, resisting the urge to pull my phone out and reply to Elliot's text. Should I tell him I was at the game? Would he care?

There's a roar from the front of the bar.

"Hockey team is here," Pat announces. He cups his hands around his mouth and shouts, "You'll get them next time, boys!"

"God, stop that," Lauren hisses. "They'll come over here."

"Hey, sis." Brian Joseph appears at the end of our booth, and his eyes light up when he spots the beer. He grabs a plastic cup and pours himself some. "Thanks."

"Come on, Brian," Lauren says. "Buy your own drinks."

"We just got our asses whipped—I need it. Thanks for coming to the game, though."

"That was rough, man," Jason says.

"Brutal," Brian says. "Coach chewed us out for twenty minutes. I know they're ranked first, but *damn*."

Lauren and Sadie switch back to discussing outfits for this weekend. I tune out the guys' conversation entirely until I hear *his* name come up.

"What was his name?" Jason asks.

"Reid. Elliot Reid," Brian replies.

"Right. I'm looking up his season stats. He's gotta be going pro, right?"

"If I had a slap shot like that? Be riding that right to the bank. He'll probably go first round. Maybe first overall, even. Maybe my old man would show up for a game if I played like that."

I slide out of the booth and go to the bathroom. The line is long, like always, and Brian is gone by the time I return. Twenty minutes later, we all head for the door. Putnam's is within walking distance of Greek Row, which is a large part of its appeal. Sadie is in training to become a campus tour guide, and she spends the three-block trip walking backward, spouting random trivia. Jason and Pat play along, asking her ridiculous questions. Lauren is on the phone with a friend. I'm lost in my own thoughts, so much so, I don't spot the figure on our porch until we're feet away. Jason and Pat's frat is just two doors down from Alpha Pi Gamma, so they're still with us.

He rises from the porch stairs as we approach. “Hi.” He’s wearing a *University of Boston Hockey* hoodie and a pair of sweatpants with his number printed on them.

“Hi,” I repeat, watching his eyes flick away and over my companions. There’s a soft gasp to my right that makes me think at least one of my friends has figured out who the guy in front of the house is. “What are you doing here, Elliot?”

“Trying to talk to you.”

“You could have called. Or texted.”

“You could have replied to me earlier.”

I flush.

“I’m holding up the whole fucking team, Denny. Five minutes. That’s all I need.”

I pause, but not because I don’t know what to do. Of course I’m going to talk to him. “Fine. I’ll see you guys later, okay?” Pat nods slightly as I aim the words at him. I feel a twinge of guilt, but we’re not dating. Even if we were, I can talk to whomever I want.

I walk across the yard and up the stairs. Elliot follows me inside and up to the second floor. He doesn’t say a word, even once we’re inside my room. He looks around the small space that feels far tinier with him in it, studying the papers spread out on my desk and the clothes strewn across my bed, the photos on my wall, many of which feature him.

“Talk, Elliot.”

“You dating one of those guys?”

“I—I’ve gone out with one of them. A few times.”

“Did you fuck him?”

I flinch at the shift in tone. “That’s none of your business.”

“That’s not a no.”

I close my eyes, inhale, and exhale. “Yeah, it is, actually.” I open them to see relief flash across his face. “But if I had, it wouldn’t be any of your business.”

“It felt like my business when you stripped in that boathouse, Auden.”

“I’m trying to move on,” I whisper. “That’s what time and space mean. Just...let me. Okay?”

He starts shaking his head even before I finish. “I can’t...” He sighs. “Imagining you with someone else pisses me the fuck off. Actually seeing you with that guy tonight?” He exhales deeply. “Look, I was wrong—that

night on the dock. I like you too much to do anything *but* date you, Auden Lane Harmon.”

Those words affect me, but I fight to act like they don’t. “Nothing has changed.”

“I’ve changed. As soon as I met you, I knew you would matter. I was fucking determined not to let you, to have you in my life and still stay focused. But I’m losing you, and I *can’t* lose you.”

“I don’t want you to fight because you’re worried about losing me to another guy, Elliot.”

“Do you know why I’m so focused on hockey?”

I nod. “Because of your dad.”

“Yeah. But why?”

“You want to be different from him,” I whisper.

He nods. “Yeah. My dad was good—great—at hockey, one of the best to ever step on the ice. But you know what he was terrible at?” I shake my head. “Telling people how he felt about them or showing up when it really mattered. Do I want to rub his face in the fact that I turned out *better* than him, *without* him? Yeah. Was I worried what happened with him and my mom screwed me up so bad I’d never want to let anyone in? Yeah.” He takes a step forward, those damn blue-gray eyes boring right into mine. “But I let you in, Denny. I let you in a long time ago. I’ll figure out some balance.”

Annoyance and happiness war within me. He’s saying everything I’ve waited years to hear, but I can’t trust it. I suck in a shaky breath.

“You’re going to resent me. You told me you’d resent anyone who pulled you away from hockey. When you don’t play well because you didn’t watch film or—”

“I said that *years* ago! I barely knew you then. I was just a kid with a chip on his shoulder the size of Canada. And I—” A buzzing sound follows that declaration. He pulls his phone out of his sweatpants and glances at the screen. “*Fuck*. I’ve gotta go.”

“Elliot, I—”

“I thought you trusted me.”

“I do! But I also *know* you. You can say you want this to work all you want, but you’re mad about Pat and me asking for space and you chose hockey long before you ever met me. I’m never going to be able to compete against that.”

Elliot’s phone buzzes again. He answers it this time, keeping his eyes on

me the whole time. “Yeah. I’ll be right there.” He hangs up. “I have to go.”

I stare at him, trying to come up with a way to part on slightly better terms. “You played really well tonight.”

He half-smiles. “Yeah, well...I hoped you were watching.”

I smile, but it collapses quickly.

He hesitates, then says, “Just...give me a chance to prove it to you, Denny. Don’t date the guy. Unless you want to, unless you’re into him. But don’t tell me that right now, if you are, okay? Because I’m about to get on a bus with twenty other guys who look up to me, and I really don’t want to cry in front of them.”

My eyes start to burn. I bite down on my bottom lip. “*Elliot...*”

“I never saw the appeal of a relationship. I saw how my parents’ fell apart, saw all the drama at school. And then...” He glances away, then looks back at me. “And then when I was sixteen, I walked into a coffee shop I’d only been to twice before...and I just *knew*.”

“You never...”

“Other guys on the team have girlfriends, Auden. We’re not striving for the impossible.”

“Do those guys stay after practice? Watch film on every single team? Did those guys score two goals and an assist tonight?”

His jaw works. “Winning isn’t everything.”

“I know that. I just don’t think *you* do.”

He opens his mouth right as his phone buzzes for a third time. Before he speaks, I know that will be the end of the conversation. “I’m sorry. I really have to go.”

“Right. Because of *hockey*.”

He shakes his head with a small scoff, then turns back and heads for my door. It opens and shuts, and then I’m alone.

I flop face down on my bed and start crying.

I thought falling in love with Elliot and not having him love me back was the worst way our friendship could end.

But it’s not. It’s *this*—him saying he’ll try when I know it’ll only end in heartbreak.

For him, not to mention me.

Auden

The seconds continue to tick by. I check the clock, and only two more minutes have passed.

Dammit.

I've been trying to finish a reading assignment for my American government course for the past hour, but I can't focus.

My interaction with Elliot since he left my room three nights ago has consisted of me texting him to make sure he made it back to Boston. He liked it, but he didn't reply and he hasn't sent anything back. He's angry. Or hurt. Or both.

Or busy playing hockey and not even thinking about me.

This isn't the longest stretch we've gone without talking, not lately. But if I don't text him in the next few minutes, it will be the first time I haven't wished him good luck before a game in years. As scattered as our communication has been of late, that's remained. Because I meant it when I told him he'd always have me as a friend. After our last conversation, I think it's a more important reminder than ever.

Thirty more seconds pass. I sigh and reach for my phone. I don't know why I bother having these arguments with myself. I always end up doing what I want to anyway, not what I maybe should.

Auden: *Good luck*

It takes him fifteen minutes to respond. Another stupid like, no response. But I'm more focused on when he sent it than what he said—or didn't. His game is supposed to start at seven. It's quarter to four here, meaning he should be on the ice for warm-ups right now.

I close out of the playlist I had up on my computer and pull up University

of Boston's website. The athletics page has a section for every sport. I click on *Hockey* then the link to stream today's game. Sports commentary replaces the music I was listening to. Boston's light blue home jerseys are out on the ice, but there's no number twelve.

"Auden?"

I startle, yanking out my headphones and glancing to the left to see Pat standing next to the table I'm seated at in the student center. "Hi. Hey!"

He eyes me, probably wondering why I'm acting so strange. "I've got a few minutes to kill before my last class. Do you mind?" He nods toward the empty chair next to me.

"Of course. Yeah." I grab my bag off the chair and my papers off that side of the table.

"What are you watching—oh." Pat chuckles lightly.

I close my laptop and give him a weak smile. When it came up, I told him Elliot is an old friend to explain his presence on my porch after the game. He was too nice to push for details, but I don't think he bought it.

"He, uh, he's not *just* a friend."

He smiles. "Yeah, I figured. The look he gave me and Jason wasn't all that *friendly*."

"It's...complicated."

"He's a lucky guy, Auden."

I give him a wry sort of half-smile that I think conveys the fact that I don't really want to talk about it, and Pat gets the memo. "Want to go through the PowerPoint from last week's class?"

"Yeah. That sounds great."

Brian and Lauren bicker for most of the drive to their hometown. It's nice. Makes me wish I had siblings.

When Lauren learned my parents bailed on Thanksgiving in favor of pursuing professional opportunities—my father actually used that phrase—she insisted I spend the holiday with her family. I don't know her all that well, but I've gotten the sense she's close with her mom but not her dad. She assured me both of her parents would be happy to have the company, though, so here I am, crammed in the back seat with the three bags of laundry Lauren

is bringing home. She offered me the passenger seat, but I let Brian ride shotgun. He's got several inches and plenty of muscle on me.

Lauren exits the highway and we roll through a small, peaceful town. The downtown section reminds me of Canmore, but the houses are more cookie cutter.

She glances in the rearview mirror. "Do you follow hockey?"

"Huh?"

"I mean, I know you have that hot friend who plays for Boston's team."

"What hot friend?" Brian asks.

Lauren doesn't answer him. "Our dad used to play professionally, so if you're some sort of major hockey fan, don't bring it up. Not unless you want a long recap of his glory days."

"Your dad played professionally?"

"Yeah." Lauren glances at Brian. "Apple fell far from the tree."

"You're the worst," he replies.

Her voice softens. "Did he call after last week?"

"No." He looks away, out the window.

We pull up to a three-story Victorian with a sprawling, manicured lawn and a brick path leading from the driveway where we park to the front door.

Lauren glances back again. "Anyway, just play dumb about hockey if it comes up. Otherwise you'll have to listen to the Andrew Reid highlight reel."

It's one of those moments in life you wish came with sound effects. I imagine a car squealing to a stop. Mouths gaping. Alarms blaring.

Oh.

My.

God.

I blurt the first thing that comes to mind, which could honestly be worse than what comes out. "Your last name isn't Reid—it's Joseph."

"Yeah, our parents got off to a rocky start. Our mom basically raised us for the first few years. Then they got back together and eventually got married. Anyway, fair warning. Let's go in, I'm starving."

Brian and Lauren climb out of the car. I do the same, on complete autopilot. Their mom and Andrew got off to a *rocky start*? Like another woman and child in the picture? They don't seem to know that, though. Lauren is a year older than me and Elliot, Brian is two years older. Does Elliot's mom know about them? Lauren definitely isn't aware the "hot friend" she's teased me about is her half-brother. Brian doesn't seem to know

the player whose performance he was praising at Putnam's is related to him.

Reid is a common last name, I guess? But I don't know. I don't know *anything* right now, aside from the fact that I'm smack dab in the most uncomfortable situation I've ever encountered.

We walk into an expansive foyer.

"You kids made good time." I turn toward the male voice and freeze. *Holy shit.* I'm looking at how Elliot will appear in twenty years. The dark hair, the broad shoulders, the *eyes*. Lauren and Brian don't resemble Andrew much. Elliot is practically his spitting image.

"Dad, this is Auden," Lauren says. "One of my friends from school. Her folks are out of town, so I invited her."

"Nice to meet you, Auden."

"You, too," I manage to say.

"Come on into the kitchen, you guys. Your mom's afraid to leave it unattended."

I follow Lauren and Brian in a daze. What the hell am I supposed to do? I don't think I can just sit across from the man who abandoned Elliot and smile while he carves a turkey.

Another horrifying realization occurs to me. *I have to tell Elliot.* I can't keep something like meeting his father from him. He'd never forgive me.

A smiling woman with light brown hair is standing at the stove when we enter the kitchen. She hugs both Lauren and Brian, then turns to me. Lauren repeats the earlier introductions. I take a seat at the kitchen counter at Jessica's—who solved my last name dilemma the same way Elliot's mother did, by insisting I call her by her first name—request.

I'm hyperaware of Andrew, who's taken a seat at the kitchen table to flip through mail.

"So you're from Los Angeles, Auden?" Jessica asks as she mashes potatoes.

"I grew up there, yes."

"Has the cooler weather up north been a shock?"

Andrew stands and moves into the kitchen.

"Not too bad. I have family in Canada."

"Oh, really? Whereabouts?"

I glance at Andrew as I reply. "Canmore." His hand stills on the bottle he was opening. "It's a small town. Very scenic. Have you heard of it?"

"No, I haven't. Have you, Andrew?" She glances at her husband, then

back at me. “He played hockey in Canada for a bit,” she explains, oblivious to the fact that I already know this.

Andrew isn’t. His blue-gray eyes are focused straight on me as he replies to his wife’s question. “I’ve heard of Canmore, but I didn’t spend much time there.”

“Not enough excitement for you?” It’s a struggle to keep my voice light and not let an edge seep in.

“Something like that.” The top of the bottle comes off with a *clank*. “I actually have a map of Canada that has Canmore on it in my office. I can show you, if you’d like?”

“Dad,” Lauren groans. “Auden doesn’t want to see some boring map.”

“No, it’s fine. Sounds interesting.”

Lauren sighs but doesn’t say anything else as her father walks out of the kitchen and into the hallway. I follow him past a couple of closed doors and into a small office. A desk takes up most of the space. A large, vintage map hangs behind it. Andrew doesn’t spare it a glance. He turns and looks at me.

“You know my son.”

I gather he’s not talking about Brian. “Yes.”

“Are you going to mention this to him?”

“Yes.”

Andrew nods. “How—how is he?”

“You haven’t been following his season?”

“Of course I have. I mean aside from hockey.”

I shake my head. God, the irony. “You don’t get to ask me that. Not only because you don’t deserve to know anything about the kid you abandoned, but because all Elliot has done for the past eighteen years is focus on nothing but hockey. Because of *you*.”

He doesn’t reply at first. When he does, it’s simply to say, “I can’t change the past.”

I scoff. “I’m going to go. This is too... I won’t say anything to your other family. I’ll make some excuse.”

“When you do talk to Elliot, you don’t need to mention Lauren and Brian.”

“Why? Because you don’t want him to know he has more half-siblings?”

He catches the more. “Good for Josie.” There’s no animosity in his voice. “But, no, because they’re not his half-siblings. They’re not my biological children. I knew Jessica growing up. We lost touch. She ended up in an

abusive relationship and needed help getting out. Lauren and Brian don't know, and I'd like it to stay that way."

Before I can reply, Lauren strolls into the office. There's no shock on her face, which I take to mean she didn't overhear any of our conversation. "It can't take this long to look at a map. Come on, Mom says the food is almost ready."

I don't miss a beat. "I'm so sorry, Lauren, but I have to go. My mom just texted—she made it home after all and wants me to meet her."

Lauren wrinkles her nose. "You're going to fly back to LA? On Thanksgiving?"

"She already bought my ticket," I lie. "I'm sorry. I really appreciate you inviting me. It's just...I haven't seen her in months." That, at least, is true. Not since New York. At least my dad has visited me at Stanford a couple of times.

She makes a face. "It's fine. I'm glad, just disappointed."

I step forward and give her a hug. "I'll see you back on campus in just a few days." Lauren nods, and I glance back at Andrew. "It was nice to meet you."

"You too, Auden."

I say goodbye to Brian and Jessica, order an Uber, and am on my way to the airport twenty minutes later.

Once I'm in the car, I tap Elliot's name.

Elliot

“Bullshit!” Josh shouts. “Any idiot could see that was a penalty.”

“Guess you’re an idiot then,” Luke responds. “They’re not going to call it.”

“Stop screaming at the television,” Oliver grumbles. “They can’t hear either of you.”

Luke flew back from McGill this morning to see Oliver, Josh, and me, who all ended up at American universities. We’re home for “Thanksgiving”, which was celebrated here weeks ago. So, we’re lounging around drinking beer and watching hockey while our new teammates consume turkey.

My phone buzzes in my pocket. I pull it out to see *Denny* flashing across the screen. I swallow a whole bunch of nerves. We’ve barely spoken since the conversation in her room at Stanford. I said what I needed to, and I have no idea where it leaves us, where it left us. I think the puck is in her zone of the ice, but I also think her hesitation stems from concerns about things I’ve said and done in the past, and it’s valid. We need to have a longer conversation without the threat of getting benched for a game looming over my head—which happened anyway—and it needs to be in person. Since one of our issues is that we don’t live or go to school close to one another, I have no idea when, or if, that’ll happen.

I rise from the couch, ignoring the look from Josh that tells me he saw who was calling me. I answer the phone as I walk out of the living room and into the Hawleys’ empty kitchen. It’s just the four of us tonight, no wild party. Maybe we’re growing up—slightly.

“Hey.”

Instead of heying me right back, Auden says, “I met your dad today.”

What? “What?”

“I went home with a friend from school for Thanksgiving. She said her dad played hockey, said his name, and then there he was. He—you look a lot alike. I knew it was him right away.”

Thoughts swirl and bounce in my head. “Where?”

“What?”

“Where does he live?”

“Oh. It’s a small town in California. Northwick. It’s just a couple of hours away from Stanford.”

“Wow.”

She exhales. “Yeah. I brought up Canmore on purpose. He realized that meant I know who he is—know you. He asked about you, said he’s been following your career. He also said they’re not your half-siblings, said they’re his wife’s and her ex’s. I...I think I believe him. They’re older than us, but I don’t know. It was all a lot, you know? Sorry. I’m babbling. I was nervous to tell you and nervous because of how we left things and I just... You’re not saying anything.”

I’m trying to figure out how I feel. And I feel...nothing. My father has turned into a story in my head, not an actual person. I’ve never considered looking him up. Never considered going to see him. Never considered letting him leave the past and enter my present or future. Yeah, I’d like him to know I’m a damn good hockey player, but that’s *all* I want him to know about me. I want him to have regrets about how he handled things back then, not offer forgiveness or closure. I don’t have any forgiveness to offer him, and I have closure—from when he closed the door after walking out of my life.

I have plenty of support. From my mom and Jeff. From my teammates. From my coaches. From my friends. From Auden.

“Okay.”

“Okay?” she echoes the word incredulously.

“Yeah. Okay. Thanks for telling me. Is there anything else you want to talk about?”

She pauses. “Why didn’t you play last week? In the game against Minnesota?”

I open the fridge and grab a water as I contemplate my answer. Whatever—I’m not about to start lying to her. “Because it was the first home game after our road trip.”

“That didn’t answer my question.”

“Because I held up the whole team from getting back for that home game.”

“Oh.” Noise erupts from the living room, almost drowning out the single syllable. The refs must have finished reviewing the call on the ice. She hears it. “Um, I’ll let you go. It sounds like you’re in the middle of something.”

“Josh and Luke are arguing calls on the ice.”

“They’re both back home with you?”

“Yeah.”

“Good, I’m glad.” She pauses, and I think—hope—she’ll say something about us, but all she says is, “Uh, bye.”

“Happy Thanksgiving.” I hang up and walk back into the living room.

I’m distracted for the rest of the game, but the guys are too focused on it to notice. Once it ends, Oliver and I head out. He lives a few doors down from me, so we tend to carpool anywhere that’s not within walking distance. In Canmore, that’s not much, but it’s dark and cold out.

We’re halfway through the drive back when Oliver’s phone rings. It’s connected to the Bluetooth, so the rap music that was playing cuts off. *Dean* shows up on the screen above the center console. Oliver quickly declines the call.

“Friend from school?” I ask, not recognizing the name.

“Yeah,” he replies, hesitating. “Maybe more than a friend.”

I freeze, then quickly realize that’s not the best response. “That’s great, Oliver,” I reply. “I’m happy for you.”

“Thanks. He, uh, asked me out, but I’m not sure if I’m ready for it.”

“I’m probably the *last* person who should be doling out dating advice, but if you like him, I think you should go for it. Better to regret the things you did than the things you didn’t and all that.”

“Yeah,” he responds quietly. “Thanks, Reid.”

“Anytime.” Oliver stops the car in front of my house. “We on for skating tomorrow?”

“Absolutely,” he confirms. “I talked to Johnny earlier. He said they were going to flood what they could this afternoon. Lake should be glassy tomorrow.”

“Perfect. See ya, man.”

“See ya,” he repeats as I climb out and head toward my house. Frozen tomorrow for sure—it’s fucking freezing out.

The house is quiet when I walk inside. Jeff was leaving with Mia and

Lucy for gymnastics right before I headed to Josh's, and they don't appear to be back yet. I walk upstairs, hearing my mom's voice mixing with Izzie's. It sounds like she's trying to talk her into a bath.

I grab my laptop from my room then head back downstairs, making myself a snack and settling at the counter to watch film of our opponents next week: Lincoln University.

My mom appears about fifteen minutes later. "Hey." She seems surprised to see me. "You're home early."

"Yeah." I pause the footage.

"You have fun at Josh's?"

"Yeah, it was nice to see the guys, catch up."

She smiles and heads for the fridge.

I watch her pull a pitcher of water out and fill the kettle on the stove for some tea. "Did you know Andrew lives in California? With a wife and two kids?"

My mom freezes. Yeah, it was probably shitty to blurt it all out like that, but he's not exactly an easy topic to ease into. "No," she finally answers. "I didn't know that."

"The kids aren't his. Supposedly. They're older than me. But if they're not...he cheated."

She walks over and takes a seat at the counter next to me. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"I just wanted to tell you."

"How did you find out?"

"Auden met his daughter at Stanford. She went to his house for Thanksgiving."

"He's not a bad man, Elliot." She lets out a long sigh. "Just complicated. If you want to...reconnect, he might be open to it."

"I don't. I'm not."

She studies my face for a minute. "Okay. That's okay, too."

"Do you regret what happened with him?"

She shakes her head. "No, I really don't, and not just because it gave me you. I learned a lot of important lessons. In a twisted way, I'll always be grateful for the pain he caused me."

"Me too," I tell her. And I mean it. I wouldn't be who I am today otherwise.

"Mom!" Izzie's voice echoes from upstairs.

“Sounds like she’s reconsidering bathing. I’d better...”

“It’s fine. Go. Really, I just wanted to tell you.”

“Okay.” She leans over and kisses the top of my head, something she hasn’t done since I was a kid. “I love you, Elliot.”

“Love you too.”

“I heard the lake froze.”

“Yeah, I’ll be headed there first thing tomorrow.”

“I figured.” She smiles and heads upstairs. I turn back to my open laptop like nothing ever happened.

It’s funny how the moments that put you at peace aren’t necessarily the ones you expect, how a quiet conversation in the kitchen can erase more resentment than years of memorizing a former player’s stats just so you know what numbers you need to beat.

Auden

The loudspeaker crackles to life, waking the many plane passengers who dozed off hours ago. Unfortunately, I was never one of them. I fidgeted and second-guessed and recited what I should say to him.

I raise the white screen covering the little window to my left to watch the sun rise over fluffy white clouds.

“Do you live in Calgary?” the elderly woman who’s my seatmate asks.

“Uh, no,” I reply. “Just visiting.”

She smiles. “First trip?”

“No, I’ve been here before. In the summer.”

“Only in the summer?” She eyes the thin jacket I’m wearing.

“Yes.”

“I hope you packed some warmer clothing than that, dear. It hasn’t been above zero here in weeks.”

“I did,” I assure her. I didn’t. And I know Canada uses Celsius, not Fahrenheit, but zero sounds pretty terrible.

The plane lands on the runway with a rough bounce, followed by a brisk braking. I look out the window as the flaps rise, slowing our rapid glide toward the bustling airport. Weirdly, it doesn’t feel like I’m arriving somewhere new. It feels like I’m returning home.

We reach the gate. Everyone stands and starts collecting their belongings, ignoring the flight attendants’ calls to stay seated and wait for the captain’s instructions. All I have for luggage this time is the small suitcase I packed for the two nights I was supposed to spend at Lauren’s house. Once I’m off the plane, it means I bypass the baggage claim and head straight for the exit.

I walk outside and feel like I’ve been slapped in the face. The woman

next to me was *not* exaggerating. My luggage may have made it here this time, but I don't think it'll do me that much good. I rush toward the first taxi I see and give the driver Katherine's address. He takes off eagerly, obviously happy about the total this trip will come to.

An hour later, he stops in front of the white Colonial. I pay the fare and drag my suitcase out of the back, then toward the front door. It's unlocked, but the house appears empty.

"Hello?" I call out, just to confirm. Maybe I should have asked the cabbie to wait for me to drop off my luggage. I guess I could call Elliot, but I'm sick of having all of our conversations be over the phone or over text. Now that we're both in the same place, I want to talk to him in person.

Footsteps sound on the stairs, and I glance up to see Annabel descending them. She looks completely different than the last time I saw her. Messy, wavy hair, no makeup, and she's wearing a holey, oversized t-shirt.

She yawns. "What are you doing here?"

"I figured you'd be at school." Last I knew, Annabel was going to the University of Calgary.

"I decided to take a gap year."

"Oh."

"So...what are you doing here?"

I hesitate. Elliot has been a sore subject in the past, and this is the most civil conversation we've managed since we were eight. Turns out, I don't need to say anything.

"Elliot?"

"Uh, yeah."

She nods. "He's not *here*."

I don't reply at first, too stunned that she appears to be *teasing* me. "Yeah, I know. I was just dropping off my suitcase."

Annabel studies the small bag. "You didn't pack much."

"I know. This was sort of...spontaneous."

"I guess so. Mom didn't mention you were coming."

"She doesn't know. I just got on a plane."

Both blonde eyebrows rise. "How unlike you. You must *really* love him."

"Uh, I just—"

"Relax. He loves you, too."

That's probably the last thing I ever expected to hear Annabel say to me. I have no idea how much of her resentment toward me was because of Elliot

and how much was due to our complicated family dynamics, but it's a shock either way.

"Uh, I don't—"

"I *do*. He told Cassie when she tried to hook up with him at her birthday party."

"He what?"

She rolls her eyes. "Let me get dressed and I'll drive you over there."

"Oh, no. You don't have to—"

"Mom left an hour ago for an all-day shoot. Unless you want to call a limo or something, I'm your best option."

I ignore the rich-girl dig because, for the most part, she's being nice. "Okay. Thanks."

Annabel heads back upstairs. I move my suitcase into the living room and open it, sorting through the clothes I brought. Options for cold weather wear are as limited as I was worried they'd be. I shrug off my jacket and pull on the one fleece I packed. Then I head into the downstairs bathroom with my Dopp kit to wash my face and brush my teeth. Unfortunately, I look like I flew all night. There are dark circles under my eyes.

When I leave the bathroom, Annabel is already waiting by the front door. She's changed into jeans, a thick sweater, and a heavy jacket. She also brushed her hair, but she didn't straighten it or put on any makeup.

"Sorry," I say as I put my toiletries away and grab my jacket. "I'm ready."

She eyes my outerwear. "You're going to be freezing."

"I'll be fine."

Annabel sighs, then walks toward the hall closet and pulls out a down coat. "Here." She hands it to me. "You can wear this."

"You're being nice to me."

"Yep."

"*Why?*" Aside from coming to the museum in Calgary last summer, Annabel hasn't shown any signs of thawing toward me until now.

She grabs a pair of keys from the hook by the door but doesn't answer. I debate whether I should push, but then she finally does respond.

"Look, you were right. Everything you said that night at Josh's was right. I should have acted differently when you arrived, but I didn't, and once I started acting that way, I was too stubborn to stop—not to mention most of us don't effortlessly fly to the top of Canmore's food chain tucked under Elliot

Reid's wing. That didn't earn you any favors with my friends. You were only here for a week or two, but I had to deal with everyone else the full year. I was jealous and insecure and blah blah blah. Can we fast-forward through the rest of this?"

"Yeah. Sure." I smile, offering an olive branch in facial expression form. I had a good idea of what fed Annabel's treatment of me and that it probably had very little to do with *me*, but still, it's nice to hear confirmation of it.

"Great. Let's go."

Annabel stops in front of what is apparently Elliot's house ten minutes later. I've never been here before—we always hung out at Josh's. I'd be a little worried she was messing with me if not for the fact that I see Josie, Izzie, and Mia walking out the front door and down the front path.

I climb out of the car and jog over. All three of them stop when they see me.

"Hi, Josie," I huff, slightly out of breath. I need to do more cardio. "I—uh—is Elliot home?"

She smiles. "No. He's at the lake, skating, I believe."

"Oh. Okay."

"I'm sorry, we're running late on getting to school or else I'd drive you there myself."

"Oh, no, it's fine. I have a ride." I hope. Annabel's generosity could run out at any moment. If it didn't feel like I was stuck inside a giant freezer, I'd just walk.

"Great. Good to see you, Auden. I didn't realize you were in town."

I smile. "Yeah, good to see you too." I wave at Izzie and Mia, then head back to where Annabel is thankfully still waiting.

"He's not home?" she asks when I climb back inside the car.

"No, he's at the lake. It's fine, we can head back to your place. I'll just text him."

"He's at the lake?"

"Yeah..."

She starts driving. I'm a little concerned about the gleeful look on her face. "Where are we going?"

"The lake."

"Why do you look so happy about it?"

"You know how everyone goes to Josh's place on the lake in the summer?"

“Yeah.”

“Well, this spot is like that in the winter.”

“You mean there will be a lot of people there?”

“Uh-huh.”

Nerves swamp my stomach. “I’ll *definitely* just text him then.”

“I’m sure he’s playing hockey with the guys. He won’t see it for hours.”

“That’s fine!” I’ll have time to shower, nap, and panic.

“You need to make a statement.”

“I’m here—that’s the statement.”

“Not to Elliot. Not to the girls who ply him with offers.”

“Oh. Well, we’re not together. He can take them up on it if he wants.”

Annabel shakes her head as she takes a left. Cars appear, indicating we’ve reached our destination. We’re on the edge of the lake, but it’s not the view I’m accustomed to. This section is partly wooded. Rather than blue water, the lake is a gray-white oval with lots of figures flying around on it. There are plenty of people huddled on the shore, too. A few fires have been built, and there’s a wooden shed off to the side that I watch a few girls walk into. There might be *more* people here than would show up at Josh’s.

Annabel maneuvers into a tiny space close to one of the fires, then hops out, taking the keys with her. “Come on, cuz.”

My options are to sit in the rapidly cooling car or climb out and face my fears. Annabel says hi to a few people as we head for the edge of the ice, but I don’t register who she’s talking to or what they’re saying. I’m scanning the blurs of color zipping around, looking for him.

There are some people skating off to the side of the lake, but the main action is taking place directly ahead. Boots are serving as goalposts as players weave and zag about. Wooden sticks echo across the frozen expanse as they hit the ice, the puck, and each other.

Finally, I spot Elliot. He’s wearing a gray beanie and a black jacket and paying no attention to anything that’s happening on the shore. He’s at least twenty-five feet away, maybe thirty.

“Well?” Annabel asks when we reach the ice. “You just going to stand here?”

I might have preferred when she ignored me. Now, I don’t even feel like I can snipe back. “Yes?”

She rolls her eyes. “I’m freezing, so should I come back for you in like three hours? Because that’s how long they usually play for.”

Shit. “Seriously?”

“Uh-huh. Stop being a chickenshit.”

I glare at her but cup my hands around my mouth. I hesitate for another second, then shout, “REID!” Nothing. “Reid!” Still nothing, although a couple of the guys he’s playing with glance this way. I try to ignore the fact that no one on the shore is having any issues hearing me—or pretending they’re not staring. “Dammit,” I mutter. The shit I do for this guy that I would never do for *anyone else*. I step one foot out on the ice, then another. I take slow, tentative steps. One of the guys doing slow laps gives me a *What the fuck* look as he skates past holding a girl’s hand. I make it past the ring of skaters, then try again. “ELLIOT! Are you fucking deaf?”

That works. I watch the player with the gray hat and black jacket freeze and glance over.

“Blue team timeout,” Elliot shouts. All the players in the game stop moving, except for him. He starts skating toward me.

“How come?” asks a cheeky voice I recognize as belonging to Josh. “Could it possibly have anything to do with the brunette yelling at you? Because—”

Elliot shoves his best friend on his way over to me. He *towers* over me in his skates, looking like a Roman statue. The hat makes his eyes appear more gray than blue.

He doesn’t really bother with pleasantries. “Is everything okay?”

“Yeah. I just wanted to see you.”

“I thought you were at...your friend’s place for Thanksgiving.”

“I couldn’t stay there. It was too weird. I was going to fly home, but then I flew here instead.”

“Oh. You should have given me a heads-up. I could have picked you up from the airport or something.”

I take a deep breath. “Can we talk?”

“We’re talking right now.”

“I mean *really* talk. About us.” He tenses. “You caught me off guard at school.” Silence. “*Really* off guard,” I stress.

“Can we have this conversation later? I’m in the middle of—”

“I should have said yes,” I blurt. “When you said you wanted to be together. Of course I want—I’m just scared, Elliot. You’re my best friend. This isn’t simple or straightforward for me. If this ends, it will hurt a lot. I mean...” I half-laugh. “I’ve been in love with you for *four years*.”

His eyes snap to mine. “What about the guy you were with?”

“You’re an idiot if you think I would choose him—choose anyone—over you, Eli.” I look away, because looking at him makes it hard to think. “I’ve always been terrified that telling you how I felt—feel—would ruin everything, but just as scared you’d meet someone else and fall in love with them instead.”

Elliot’s face is fierce. “I wouldn’t have.”

“You can’t know that.”

“Yeah, I can, because you can’t fall in love with someone when you’re already in love with someone else.”

I stare at him. “I... *What?*”

That signature smirk flashes across his face—the one that makes it hard to stand.

Focus. Breathe.

“You heard me, Denny.”

“You’re in love with me?”

“Can’t come as that much of a surprise. Everyone who knows me called it years ago.”

“It’s a surprise,” I manage to say. “I’m worried I might not be enough—”

He moves closer. “You are.”

“But—”

“I’ve never been with anyone else, Auden.”

“What?”

“I’ve fooled around with other women, yeah, but sex? No one but you.” He takes a deep breath. “I love you, and I know I’ve done nothing but fuck it up, but it’s true. I love that you make me smile when I’m mad. I love that you text me before every single game. I love the face you make when you’re trying not to laugh because you’re too nice to. I love kissing you.” He pauses. “And I’m sorry it took me so long to figure all of it out.”

I stare at him. Then, to my horror, I start to cry. Not a delicate, solitary tear streaking down one cheek—I’m sobbing. I genuinely can’t recall the last time I cried. I don’t ever remember having this level of breakdown before. Expressing emotions gives others power over you. That’s something I’ve always tried to avoid. Right now? I have no choice. It’s not just that he’s telling me things I’ve laid awake at night wondering and thinking about. It’s an explosion of relief and a release of anxiety. I can’t count the number of times I’d go to a party on campus, watch guys pick up girls and take them

upstairs, and picture Elliot doing the same thing thousands of miles away.

He didn't. Not once.

"Den..."

"I'm fine." I hastily wipe a cheek, well aware it does nothing to curb the flow of water. "Just overwhelmed."

He opens his arms, and I collapse against his chest. There are probably people staring at us. I don't care.

Once my snot situation is under control, I glance up at him. "I love you, Elliot. I want nothing to change between us, but I also want to be able to do this whenever I feel like it." I stand on my tiptoes and kiss him. "And I really want to have sex with you again."

He grins. It starts tender and turns dirty. "You could probably talk me into that."

"Oh, really?" I tease. "I was thinking it might be—"

His lips crash onto mine. I forget what I was going to say. Where I am. My own name.

"Reid! Reid!"

Elliot pulls away and glances behind him. "What?" he shouts back.

"Aren't timeouts only two minutes?" Luke's voice is filled with amusement.

"Fucker," Elliot mutters.

I laugh. "It's fine. Go play."

"You're sure?"

"Yeah. We can talk later."

"Talk or *talk*?"

I smirk. "Both."

Someone else calls his name. "Reid!"

Elliot grits his teeth but keeps his attention on me. "Do you want to get dinner tonight?"

"Dinner? Like a...date?"

"Yeah." He nods. "Exactly like a date."

"You're asking me out?"

"Yep."

"Okay. Uh, yes. I'll go out with you."

"Okay. You like steak, right?" I shove him, and he grins. "I'll pick you up at seven."

"Okay."

Elliot leans down and kisses me again before he skates off. I can feel the wide grin stretching my face as I carefully make my way off the ice.

I can practically feel the smugness radiating off of Annabel when I reach the brown grass. “Told you.”

“Yeah, you did.” I’m too happy to be annoyed. Plus, it’s nice—and unexpected—that she’s happy for me.

“Do you want to stay?”

I shake my head. “No, not unless you do. I’m freezing, and I’ll see him later.”

“We could head to Sydney’s? Get a coffee?” Annabel makes the offer casually, but there’s some vulnerability beneath the suggestion as well.

“Yeah. That sounds great.”

“Okay. Let’s go.” She heads for the car.

Before I follow her, I glance back.

Elliot’s already looking at me.

Epilogue

Auden

The onions hit the hot skillet with a sizzle, and I stir them with one hand while I shake spices into the bowl of meat. My phone buzzes on the kitchen table. I abandon both tasks to check who's calling, worried it's Elliot calling to say he got held up and he'll be back late. But it's not him; it's my mother.

I sigh and answer. "Hi, Mom."

"Hi, Auden. How are you?"

"Good. Just making dinner."

"Good, good." She's looking at something else. I can hear the distracted note I grew up with. "What were you saying?"

"*You called me*, Mom."

"Oh, right. Vanessa said she sent you some sketches to approve. Did you get them?"

We both know this is something Vanessa could have called about if I was expected to still be online at eight p.m. She's making an effort, so I indulge her. "One second, I'll check."

Working for my mother's company has been interesting, to say the least. I majored in business at Stanford to go along with my art electives, and Elliot encouraged me to apply to artistic jobs after graduation. Rather than have the opposite reaction and dissuade the idea, I was shocked when my mother offered me a job in her marketing and design department. I wasn't sure if it was the right decision at the time, but it's gone better than I expected. I enjoy the work, and it's resulted in more conversations with my mother than I've had in years. She still prioritizes work, but she seems to prioritize me more now that I'm associated with work. Baby steps, I suppose.

I log into my computer and scan the emails that have piled up since I

logged out three hours ago. “Yes, I got them. I’ll take a look first thing.”

“Good. I’ll let Vanessa know.” She pauses. “Is Elliot back?”

“No. Not yet.”

“Well, give him my best when he’s back.”

“I will.” I wouldn’t say either of my parents have embraced Elliot with open arms since first meeting him three years ago, but that’s just not who they are. They don’t say anything negative about him, which is their equivalent of a gold stamp of approval.

“All right. Night, dear.”

“Night, Mom.” I hang up and head for the kitchen.

I wash and chop the mushrooms for my tacos, then start them sautéing in another skillet. Elliot’s voice echoes in from the entryway. It sounds like he’s on the phone with someone.

I glance at the clock and smile. He’s home early.

Elliot enters the kitchen a couple of minutes later, still talking on the phone. He flashes me a grin as he saunters over to the stove and kisses the side of my head. “Mom, I’ve got to go. I’m home. I’ll try to give you more than three months’ notice on our summer plans.” He rolls his eyes at me as he grips the back of his neck. “Yeah, yeah. Okay. You, too. Bye.” He hangs up and tosses his phone on the counter. “Hi.” He steps forward, caging me between the counter and his hard body. He’s only wearing a t-shirt, and I can feel the ridges of his abs through it.

“Hi.” He kisses me, and I forget about the hard edge of granite pressing into the small of my back. Elliot’s tongue has the power to make me forget just about anything. “Dinner is going to burn,” I murmur against his mouth.

“Let it.”

“I’m making tacos.”

“Fine. I’ll kiss you later.” He kisses my forehead, then steps away and heads for the fridge.

I pull in an unsteady breath as I stir the onions.

Elliot grabs a bottle of water out of the fridge and leans against the island. “You get the heater figured out?”

“Yeah. It was the automatic setting, like you said.” I had to call him last night to get the heat working in our bedroom. “How was the flight?”

“Long. Dallas better not make it to the playoffs. I’m sick of flying down to Texas.”

“Aren’t they second in their division?” Elliot gives me a proud grin, and I

roll my eyes. “I can’t *not* absorb it if you talk about it all the time.”

His grin just widens. “You need help with dinner?”

“No, it’s almost done.”

He nods, then heads into the bedroom. Nerves take full flight in my stomach. This isn’t hypothetical anymore. He’s back. I have to tell him.

“It’s sweltering in here!” Elliot shouts. I smile, but anxiety chases it away quickly.

I add the meat to the pan and start heating the tortillas. Elliot reappears just as I’m assembling everything. He’s changed into nothing but a pair of black mesh shorts. We’ve been officially dating for almost four years and I’ve known him for nearly twice as long, but the sight of him barefoot and shirtless still makes me feel like a teenager with a crush.

I hand him his plate and we take seats at the kitchen table. Elliot dives in immediately. Tacos are his favorite meal, which is precisely why I made them tonight.

He’s halfway through his plate before he realizes I’m only picking at my mushrooms. “You okay?”

This is Elliot. I trust him more than anyone else in the world. I can do this. Three deep breathes later, I let what I need to tell him fly out with a whoosh. “I’m pregnant.”

He blinks. Stares. Chews.

“Knocked up.” Nothing. “Expecting.” Silence. “Bun in the oven.” He swallows. “With child. Eating for two.” I sigh. “I’m out of synonyms, so can you say something?”

“Wow.”

I try to laugh, but it comes out more like a scoff-snort mixture. “Yeah.”

“You’re sure?”

I hop off my chair, walk into the adjoining living room, and return with the plastic Ziploc bag I stashed behind the couch cushions.

His nose wrinkles as I set it on the table. “You hid that in the couch? Didn’t you have to pee on them?”

“Seriously? *That’s* what you’re concerned about? They’re in a bag!”

Elliot glances at the pregnancy tests again. “Are you supposed to take...” He counts. “Twelve of them?”

“I wanted to be sure!”

“How did you even produce that much pee?”

“Elliot! Forget about the tests! I just pulled them out for...I don’t know,

evidence.”

He laughs. “Evidence?”

“Are you in shock?”

“I’m *shocked*, yeah, for sure.” He stands and walks over to me. “Usually when I get back from an away series, it’s just to discover you reorganized the pantry or bought new lingerie—not that I’m going to be a dad.” My breath hitches, because him saying that makes this more real than anything else has. His hands settle on my waist. “How are you feeling?”

“Worried,” I admit. “About telling you, about how you’d react. I know what happened with your parents, and I don’t—”

“We’re nothing like my parents, Auden.”

“I know, but we’re young, and this wasn’t planned. We’ve never discussed...I mean, I don’t even know if you *want* kids.”

“Well, we’re sort of past that point now, right?” He’s teasing me, but I start crying. Instantly, his face transforms. “Shit. I was kidding, Denny.”

“I know,” I blubber.

He guides me over to the couch and pulls me into his lap. I lean against his chest while he rubs my back like I’m a little kid. “It’s gonna be okay, babe.”

I sniffle. “Easy for *you* to say. I’m the one who’s going to have to grow a person inside me and then push it out. Do you know what pregnancy does to your body? I did some research earlier, and it was graphic. You’re never going to want to have sex with me again.”

Elliot chuckles. “I can promise you that’s *never* going to happen.”

“Okay.” I take a deep breath. “Sorry. I was already freaking out and then it seemed like you were freaking out, so then I really started to freak out.”

“I was just surprised. When did you find out?”

“Yesterday. I realized I was late the same day you left for Chicago. I was going to wait until you came back, but then I was worried I might freak you out for no reason. Plus, I started crying at a Charmin Ultrasoft commercial two nights ago, so I was pretty sure I was.”

“Charmin? Like the toilet paper?” He sounds like he wants to laugh.

“It’s not funny. One of the bears got in trouble. It was a dramatic two minutes.”

“Uh-huh.” He keeps rubbing my back, and I melt against him. I barely slept last night, worried about how this conversation might go. “Hey, Denny?”

“Mmhmm.”

“I do want kids. I’ve thought about it before.”

“You have?” I open my eyes and shift so I can see his face.

“Yep, and I’m excited. I’m sorry I didn’t say that first.” I start crying again. “Jesus. Where’s a roll of Charmin when you need it?”

I let out a watery laugh before he leans down to kiss me. With the effortless dexterity of a professional athlete, he flips me so my body is beneath his on the couch. He kisses his way down the side of my neck as his hand sneaks underneath my shirt. I moan as he palms my breast. They’re more sensitive than usual, another indicator they weren’t twelve false positives.

Elliot suddenly lifts his head. “Wait—we can have sex, right?”

I laugh. “You think pregnant women can’t have sex?”

“I was just checking!” He sits up and tugs my shirt up and off. Heat sizzles in his gaze as he looks at my heaving chest. I’m wearing nothing except for a red lace bra that’s pretty much see-through. He lowers his lips to my stomach, then starts to kiss his way upward.

And then...there’s a knock on the door.

“Reid! Reid!”

Elliot blows out a long breath. “Are you fucking kidding me?”

“It sounds like Anthony.” One of Elliot’s hockey teammates lives in the same building as us. He usually comes over for dinner at least once a week.

“Yeah.” He sighs again. “I’ll be right back.” Elliot stands, adjusts his very obvious erection, and then heads for the front door of our apartment. I pull my shirt back on and pad into the kitchen. Bits and pieces of their conversation filter in from the hallway. It sounds like he lost his key—again. I hear Elliot head into our bedroom for the spare, then walk back to the front door. It closes a couple of minutes later.

“What are you doing?” He appears in the kitchen.

“Cleaning up.” I set another dish in the sink.

Elliot comes and stands directly behind me, then leans down and presses his lips against the hollow of my throat. “I wasn’t finished fucking you,” he murmurs against my skin.

“You didn’t start.”

I feel his laugh rumble in his chest. “Exactly.”

I turn around and he kisses me. It escalates instantly, the way it always does between us. He lifts me up and I wrap my legs around him, grinding

against his hardening dick. He carries me into the bedroom without walking into anything, miraculously, then lays me down on the bed. We kiss and kiss and kiss as our hands roam, unwilling to pull apart long enough to shed the rest of our clothes. I pull away first, panting.

“Move over.”

Elliot rolls off of me and pulls his shorts off. Lust pools in my stomach and trickles into my blood as I stare at him, sprawled naked on our bed. Sometimes, I wake up worried I dreamed it, until I see him right there beside me. In moments like these, my life doesn't feel real.

I pull my shirt up and off...slowly. When it clears my head and I can see again, I find Elliot's eyes laser-focused on me. He loves it when I strip for him. I think it's because it reminds him of our first time together. That's what I always think of.

I finish shedding the rest of my clothes. I try to be deliberate and sensual about it, but eventually I just start flinging socks. He's been gone for over a week. I don't know if it's that or pregnancy hormones, but my body is basically vibrating with need.

Elliot is just as worked up. He pretty much attacks me as soon as I'm on the bed.

“You know how I said not to make any plans for tomorrow night?” he asks.

It takes me a minute to form a word. His hand is between my legs. “Ye-yeah.”

“There's going to be a question component to the evening. Don't think it has anything to do with what you told me tonight, okay? Other people might think that, but I don't want you to. I've been planning it for months. I asked your dad weeks ago.”

I focus on him. “You mean...”

“Yeah.” He nods, as if the verbal confirmation wasn't enough. He seems almost nervous, and it makes my heart feel like it's bursting. “Unless...if you don't want me to ask...”

“No, I do.”

“Okay, good.” He kisses me again.

I kiss him back to the rapid beat of my heart as I luxuriate in one of the rare moments in life where everything is completely, impossibly perfect.

THE END

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About the Author

C.W. Farnsworth is the author of numerous adult and young adult romance novels featuring sports, strong female leads, and happy endings.

Charlotte lives in Rhode Island and when she isn't writing spends her free time reading, at the beach, or snuggling with her Australian Shepard.

Find her on Facebook (@cwfarnsworth), Twitter (@cw_farnsworth), Instagram (@authorcwfarnsworth) and check out her website www.authorcwfarnsworth.com for news about upcoming releases!



Also by C.W. Farnsworth

FAMOUS LAST WORDS

Harlow Hayes and Conor Hart attend the same college, but they're certain that's *all* they have in common. The future marine biologist and aspiring professional hockey player have no interest in looking past their mutual dislike...until an offhand request forces them to realize they might like each other more than they're supposed to hate each other.

FIRST FLIGHT, FINAL FALL

Saylor Scott is convinced only fools fall in love. She has no intention of ever making the mistake herself, until a summer soccer camp in Germany introduces her to the country's self-appointed kaiser, Adler Beck. Known for breaking hearts alongside records, Saylor soon learns that sometimes scoring is the easy part.

KISS NOW, LIE LATER

Falling for your brother's best friend is complicated. Maeve Stevens learns falling for your brother's worst enemy can be catastrophic when she meets Weston Cole, the rival town's quarterback. He's popular, conceited, obnoxious, and the guy everyone she knows hates. Unfortunately for Maeve, the more time she spends with Wes, the less she does.

THE HARD WAY HOME

A school project and some batting lessons force Lennon Matthews to reconsider the grudge she's held against town golden boy and star pitcher Caleb Winters ever since his arrival in Landry, Kentucky freshman year.

THE EASY WAY OUT

The sequel to *The Hard Way Home*, set three years later, during Caleb and Lennon's senior year of college.

FOUR MONTHS, THREE WORDS

A chance collision on the walkway of a college campus send the lives of the Lincoln University's star quarterback and an undercover student on very different paths than either expected to end up on.

COME BREAK MY HEART AGAIN

A second chance summer romance. Elle Clarke has to decide whether to pursue the perfect life laid out for her or risk everything for the only boy she's ever loved.

WINNING MR. WRONG

Recently fired, freshly single Embry Willis reluctantly (and drunkenly) agrees to go on the reality dating show her best friend nominated her for. Dating a stranger on television can't be worse than insulting the NFL's golden boy, Ryan Hastings, on it. Unless...this season's lead is Ryan Hastings. Then, it can most definitely be worse.

BACK WHERE WE BEGAN

A family secret sent Emma Willis running from the a coastal town in Maine. Nine years later, she returns to snip the sole remaining string, only to be reminded of all she left behind.

Who she left behind.

FLY BYE

Available April 19, 2022

Evie Collins gave up on her brother's best friend seeing her as anything but years ago. Moving back home after graduating medical school was supposed to be a fresh start free from any reminders of her unrequited crush on Gray Phillips. But when Gray returns home on leave from the Air Force, emotions no longer feel one-sided. Too bad it's temporary. He'll take off—literally.