

Chapter 1

It was only a few weeks ago, right towards the end of July, that Danny Mason started following me on Instagram. I was surprised he even knew who I was - or maybe he didn't? All I knew was that we were followers of one another - followers who had liked *all* of each other's posts, I'll have you know. It started when, just a few days after the initial follow request, he liked my most recent, then I his, then back and forth like that until there were no posts left to like.

It was an unexpected feeling, opening my phone to find he had liked some five to ten posts. It was exciting and a bit thrilling, but also a little anxiety inducing. What if he wouldn't like my posts back next time? I wonder if he felt the same way...

I doubt he was even the slightest bit nervous, though. He was about to be a junior, after all, and I was only entering into my freshman year. Hell, I was still a week from 14, and here I was, just a girl, doing a social media tango with one of the most popular boys in school.

I wasn't going to let it get to my head though, obviously. I'm sure he did that with all kinds of different girls. I'm sure a lot of them were taller and prettier than me, too. Besides, I shouldn't be worrying about all of this when me and Ali are going on six months already. Boys are just that after all: boys. At least that's what Ali says.

But it was summer, and I had middle school in the rearview like a distant memory already. It was time to reinvent myself - or rather, find out who Ava Falco *really* is. Maybe she's a confident go-getter girl with an attitude twice her size. Maybe she was about to become the talented, sophisticated woman she was always meant to be. She certainly wouldn't be the quiet, boring closeted bisexual girl who sits by herself and tells her mom her girlfriend is "just a friend."

I knew it was wrong to think about Danny so much, but I couldn't get over it. We had spent two years together in that same school, and even though I was usually in the middle school wing, I still saw him all the time, bouncing through the halls and shouting at his friends, always with that big, friendly smile on his face. And that voice; I swear every time he spoke everyone in the building could hear it. In his defense, it's a small school.

Of course, like most other girls I'm sure, I had given up any hope of him taking notice of me from the second I saw him. He was a big fish in this tiny pond, and a big fish can eat whatever it wants. That was kind of gross, let me rephrase: Danny didn't have to worry about trying or settling, he just had to be there and be himself and everyone would be all over him. If only he could be all over me...

"Aaavaaaa! Come on down, we have to go to the store!"

"Coming mom!"

Was she really making me go to the flower store with her *again*? She always said she needed my "artful eye," but I think it was just another excuse to torture me. I *did* enjoy flowers though, and I've spent the whole week in my room posting on Tumblr. It felt good to have an outlet where no one is on the other side listening. It was like a diary, but more *expressive*.

"Ava, COME ON!"

"COMING, MOM!"

Pulling myself out of bed, I threw on the first pair of shorts I could find and a loose dark gray tank top. After a quick touch up in front of the mirror and a couple hurried brushes of my hair I was ready to go.

Going down the stairs step by step, I absentmindedly braided my hair in two loose, lazy braids. It was the plant store, after all. It was all old people and hippies, not like I had anyone to impress.

"Are you ready now?"

"Yes, mom, I'm ready." I scoffed at her and rolled my eyes, but we both knew I didn't mind shopping for plants.

I don't know why I always put this front on for my mom. Maybe it was because I knew she did the same, just in her own way. That's the thing about parents: they always blame you for your attitude, but it would be a full-on ceasefire if we got at least a little clarity from them. Maybe once I moved away in four years we could finally be friends instead of weird frenemies.

"Maybe we could get one of the pies you like so much!" My mom always tried to strike up conversation in the car, even if I didn't want to.

"Only if they have the summer berry."

The drive to the plant store was only a few minutes, but finding parking took a little bit longer. It was a small operation, and the tiny parking lot was filled to the brim with cars and trucks from all over. It's crazy how many people pass through Blue Hill, it being such a teeny tiny town. But when you're selling plants like *this*, well who could stay away?

My mom and I waddled around the outdoor section for a decent while, mostly because it was so cramped and crowded. Finally, though, we found a real winner: a nice dense Dichondra in a big fibrous hanging basket. Go ahead, Google it right now. The long stems dangled all around the sides, the leaves bearing a bright silver center that made the whole arrangement look like a waterfall.

There was one problem though: the basket was three feet over our heads. We were both short, how were we supposed to reach that?

"Looking at the Dichondra, huh? That's a real winner. Here, let me get it down for you."

The voice came from behind, and I could tell at once who it belonged to. Turning around, my mother and I feasted our eyes on Danny Mason. He was wearing a worn pink T-shirt one size too large and baggy gray cargo shorts. His long legs propelled the wide-grinning face and bouncy gait towards us with impressive speed.

He was about a foot taller than the two of us, and leaning over our heads with ease he grabbed the bottom of the basket with a hand that was even more massive up close. Lifting the basket up a couple inches and gliding the hook from its perch, Danny lowered the Dichondra to a height at which we could see it up close.

"Oh my, it's beautiful! Thank you so much, really."

"It's no problem at all, ma'am."

As my mom picked at the plant for any dead spots, Danny turned his smiling face back to me. I held my hands together behind my back and grinned back up at him. Unable to express my appreciation in words, I hoped he would maybe initiate a dialogue between the two of us.

Instead, in the very moment he met my gaze his face went from bright and cheery to what could best be described as shocked. His eyes were staring directly into mine, as if he was trying to memorize their exact color. They were also very, very wide;

not like he was scared, but like was caught by surprise. His mouth was flat, and opened a slight crack such that his lips weren't touching.

I was worried at first: could he tell I hadn't showered in two days? Or did he think I looked different in person than on the internet - different in a bad way. Had I built this whole thing up in my head only to be disappointed? It was stupid to think that he would like me - let alone have the *time* for me.

My worries were soon put to bed, however. Danny's shocked expression only lasted two seconds, at which point it morphed instantly into an even wider and brighter smile. He gave me a head nod and continued staring into my eyes, this time with more poise and attention.

"Hey Ava, how's it going?"

Those were the first words Danny had ever spoken to me. He knew my name at least, that was for sure. There was no way he knew that before he started following me on Instagram. And yet, he was talking to me like he knew me. Like we shared the same unspoken secret. Maybe I was right. Maybe Danny Mason *did* feel the same way about me.

Unfortunately, I was still at a loss for words. I wasn't that much of a talker anyways, but I at least owed Danny the courtesy of a response.

"I'm doing goood, how are you?" God I must have been blushing so hard.

But it was ok - I could see Danny's ears prick up at the sound of my voice. He was cuter than I had remembered, and his arms had clearly been getting a solid workout this summer from all the basket lifting. Damn it, Ava! You're in a relationship, keep it platonic!

"Oh, ya know, I'm doing pretty good." He reached his free arm behind his head and scratched his neck. Why did he look nervous? Then I remembered - my mom is *right there*, getting all up in my business.

"Well, I think it looks just perfect! We'll take it." My mom turned to me and peered over her glasses, raising her eyebrows and smirking as if to say "who's this one?"

Brushing past our fellow patrons and struggling to keep up with Danny, we entered the small indoor area, where Danny stood still at the entrance, peering over the

crowd. There were only two registers, each of which had a line of some ten people behind it.

“Well, looks like you’ll have to wait in line,” he said, turning back to us and handing me the basket, which I struggled to hold close to my chest even with both hands. “Oh, sorry! They get heavy when they’re wet!”

Danny then gently touched my shoulder, pointing towards the end of the longer of the two lines. I could barely feel his long, firm fingers on my shoulder. He was touching me so carefully, like I was a porcelain vase.

“Here, get in this line and I’ll see you in just a second.”

Danny raced back to the registers as my mother and I took our place at the end of the line. I tried to peer around the people in front of me to watch Danny, but I could only see the other lady, moving even slower now that she had some help.

As the line moved forward, Danny’s fast moving figure gradually came into full view. He was moving like a torrent, placing plants into boxes with one hand and entering prices with the other. Every interaction was followed by a “thank you so much, have a good one!” It sounded a bit robotic, but something about it made me feel... adult.

After just a few minutes it was our turn with Danny, but this time it didn’t fly by nearly as fast as the other transactions had. Instead, he smiled at my mom and looked to me - again that shocked face! And the staring into my eyes... I knew *for sure* I was blushing again.

“Hey guys, nice to see you again. Can I get you a box for that?” Danny took careful time picking out the perfect box for our Dichondra, which once seated he pushed back towards us, still looking at me.

“Hey, Danny, I need ya for something.” The man who, supposedly, is Danny’s boss came around the corner and wrapped his arm around his shoulder, getting real close to his face as he continued. “Danny, I need you to make a delivery to Marshfield, is that ok?”

“Yeah, I can do that. But Jack’s not here, who’s gonna help me? It’ll take all day for me to do it myself.” Danny entered the price for our plant into the register as he spoke.

“Ava, maybe you could help out!” Danny and his bosses faces turned in unison to my mom, each wearing a similar look of surprise.

“Well sure, I’m sure she’d love to help out! Ava’s great with flowers.” Oh my God mom, *please stop*.

“Well, it’s not quite the kind of flower you’re thinking of...” Danny’s boss responded hesitantly.

“I think that’s a great idea.” Danny cut off his boss, smiling back to me. “I could really use the help, I don’t wanna spend all day there.” He wanted me to come with him?

“Does that sound good with you, Ava?” My mom looked back at me the same way she had when Danny got the plant down for us. Of course I wanted to go, but who sends there daughter off with an older boy? Not that I was protesting - after all, it was purely platonic.

“Well, I’m not payin’ her.” Danny’s boss turned and walked out the back, shouting as he went “It’s all loaded up for ya, just get the keys!”

“Have fun, sweetie!” My mom gave me a big hug, *right* in front of Danny. And of *course* she followed it up with a kiss on the forehead.

After she waddled back to the car, hanging basket in hand and held at shoulder height, I turned back to Danny. I must say, this isn’t how I expected my day to go. But I was thanking my lucky stars that I had agreed to go to the plant store with my mom today.

“You ready? Here, follow me.” Danny promptly left his post at the register without a moments hesitation. Come to think of it, I don’t think my mom even paid for the plant.

Danny grabbed a set of keys off the wall and turned as I caught up. He jingled them in the air when I got to him and chuckled. What a warm sound - was I dreaming? He matched my pace as we walked side by side to the delivery truck. I looked up at him as we went, his long hair blown back by the wind. This really was happening, wasn’t it?

“Here, I have to unlock your door, just a sec.” Danny led me to the passenger side of the truck, unlocking the door and holding it open for me.

“After you, m’lady.” He bowed like a Victorian servant, extending his arm out with a flourish. I laughed as I stepped up into the seat, and as I looked back I caught his

gaze for just a second. It's like he couldn't take his eyes away from me - maybe he shouldn't be driving.

Chapter 2

The drive to Marshfield was only a half hour, not long at all. But it felt even shorter. Once Danny got into the driver's seat he turned and looked at me like a dog about to be taken on a walk. Plugging his phone into the aux, he turned on the car and looked at me.

"Here, put on some music." He handed me his phone, which wasn't even unlocked.

"I don't know your password, stupid," I said teasingly to Danny. He laughed, this time kind of high, almost like a chirp. Did he really think I was funny, too? No, he for sure can't. Nobody ever laughs at my jokes, except maybe a couple of my close friends.

"Sorry, sorry, you're right. It's 2079." He actually told me his password? Maybe he told it to everyone, I don't know. He's definitely not a closed book, that's for sure.

Nevertheless, I had bigger fish to fry. Danny wanted *me* to pick the music? He was so cool though, and honestly I was hoping to hear some of the music that he liked. Just out of curiosity, no other reason at all. Either way, we were already on the road and I had to make a decision, so I went with a favorite EP of mine: *Prom Queen* by Beach Bunny.

"Holy shit, no way!" He caught me by surprise there - he really was an excitable one. But then again, I needed a bit of that in my life.

He continued, "I'm *obsessed* with her shit. Ahh man this is one of my favorite albums, no question." Well, that was good to know, looks like we already had similar tastes in music.

"Fuuuuck dude, mine too! What's your favorite song by them?"

"Oh, damn you! That's a good fucking question..." He was thinking really hard. Did he really care what I thought that much? "Definitely Painkiller, it's way too good. You?"

“6 Weeks, no question.” I’d be listening to that song a lot recently - it’s helped me a lot in wrapping my head around this whole Danny situation.

“That one’s *so good*. Damn, Ava.” He gave me a quick sly glance. “You got good taste, you know that?”

We kept talking about music for a lot of the drive, but at a certain point I could tell there was more he wanted to talk to me about. This was good - in fact, it was exactly what I was hoping for. It was kind of weird how he just liked all my posts and never actually messaged me, right? That was weird, I’m not being crazy?

“So you’re going into freshman year, right?”

“Yup. Gonna be a big high school girl now.” He laughed again, and I could tell they were genuine.

“That’s awesome dude. I can tell you for sure it’s better than middle school. First off, you’re not in the same classes with *fucking everybody*.”

“Thank God, I’m so sick of the people in my grade. They are so immature.”

“Yeah, your grade is so annoying.” It took him a second to realize what he had only partially insinuated. “But not you, obviously!” He was still a bit nervous. “You’re super chill.”

Good save, buddy. But really, he didn’t need to apologize. Was he just trying to make a good impression? This was starting to get a little too much for me, but I know I just need to stop reading into the situation so much.

“You don’t need to apologize, I totally agree with you.”

“Most people are annoying, though, if we’re being honest.”

“Oh, totally. Without a *doubt* most people are annoying.”

“Fuck school though.”

“*Right?* It sucks sooo bad. Why can’t it just be summer always?”

“Exactly! And in classes, you just try and have a conversation with your buddy and suddenly you’re ‘disrupting the other students,’” Danny started doing a dramatized and impressively animated impression of a teacher scolding him. Something about his face and his timing made me laugh so hard I could barely breathe.

“Seems like you’ve had a lot of experience with that, huh?”

Danny shrugged sarcastically. “What can I say? A guys got trouble payin’ attention to shit he doesn’t care about.”

I hated to say it, but my mom was right sending me off into the arms of Danny. It made me feel a bit better, like she knew he could be trusted. And I’m also sure she could tell I really wanted to go. She was certainly right to assume so.

Talking with Danny felt unreal and indescribable. It’s like I was having a conversation for the very first time - we kept bouncing back and forth, each of us having a response to what the other said without hesitation. And he was *still* laughing at my jokes, even if they weren’t supposed to be jokes.

But still, I could tell he was holding back a bit, for obvious reasons of course. Regardless of our acceptable two grade proximity, I was still only 13, and he was 16. It wasn’t outlandish, and believe me there have been plenty of bigger age gaps at our school. But people were judgy, and regardless of whether they were right or not, nothing about this felt wrong or gross to me at all.

But I could appreciate how respectful he was being. Sure he was being a huge flirt, and I know I had said “platonic” before, and yes I was reciprocating, but it all felt so innocent. And all the better; the feeling of comfort made the conversation that much better.

In fact, things were going so well that that half hour drive I mentioned was over in the blink of an eye. Before I knew it, we had arrived at the Marshfield Market and Danny pulled the truck behind the store and parked it by the back entrance. We got out of the truck, and for some reason he ran around to my side. It’s like he can’t leave my side - but that can’t be it.

“Alright Ava, are you ready?” Danny’s voice went lower, as if we were conducting some kind of business meeting.

“Ready as I’ll ever be.” I still didn’t know *exactly* what we were unloading.

Danny opened the back of the truck to reveal a wall of boxes filled with cucumbers, tomatoes, berries, corn, and shit ton more vegetables than I couldn’t name. It smelled really good, too.

“Alright Ava, here’s your job.” I turned to Danny, who was holding one of those tall loading cart things. “Your going to man the dolly, alright?” Dolly, that’s what it’s

called. "I'm going to load it up with shit, and you wheel it to that back door and the guy in there will take it from you."

"Awesome, I'm so ready." Danny looked excited, and for a second it looked like his eyes went back in to that shocked position from before. "Load me up, boss!" Oh my fuck! Why had I said that?

At least Danny was laughing. That was actually the hardest he had laughed this entire time. And the way he was looking at me as he laughed - somebody fill this dolly already!

Danny and I worked together really well. He was moving boxes faster than I could keep up with, but I was still moving super fast back and forth from the truck and the store. In fact, it only took us ten minutes to unload the entire truck. Even the worker at the store seemed impressed.

"Damn, Falco. You got that dog in you, huh?" Danny seemed impressed, too. He leaned against the side of truck with arms folded as he watched me walk back from the door to the market.

That look he was giving me, it hadn't changed a bit. My eyes weren't *that* special, were they? They're just brown eyes, just like most of the rest of the world. *His* eyes on the other hand were gorgeous. A thin rim of brown along the outside, which turned to a soft olive green and slowly transitioned into a deep blue which enshrined his pupils, which also kept dilating. Honestly, I could only get a good look at his iris when he was looking at something, or *someone*, else.

"You know what Ava, you did so good today that I think you deserve a reward." Danny stepped away from the truck, meeting me as I approached.

"Oh yeah, and what would that be?" What *would* that be, Danny? That boy better watch himself.

"Well, we're in Marshfield, right? The only civilization for miles, why don't we get something to eat?"

"Hm. I'll say yes. I could use some food after all that hard work."

"You're tellin' me, I'm absolutely starving. Boss man never lets me eat at work."

"What? Aren't there vegetables everywhere?"

“Holy shit,” Danny said, pretending to be genuinely surprised. “I never thought of that.”

We walked downtown and stopped at Brother Downer, a cute little restaurant overlooking the mighty river that ran through Marshfield. They had all kinds of games, which Danny and I immediately inspected, deciding on Clue as our entertainment for the afternoon.

“Who plays Clue with two people?” I said once we picked a table and started setting up the game.

“Insane people,” Danny answered. “Which we certainly are.”

“Well I’m glad this place has games, I hate waiting at restaurants.” I whispered the last part, as if I had said something taboo.

“Right?” Danny whispered back, but his whisper was more akin to a normal person’s inside voice. “And now we get to play a *thrilling* game of Clue.”

“Ok, but I’ll warn you, I’m an absolute *weapon* at Clue.”

“Well then, I’ll warn you that I’ve been known to *cheat* at Clue.”

“Ha! You can *sure try*, buddy.”

After lunch we took a slight detour and stopped in the park and said hi to each and every dog, some twice. I kept claiming each one was “that dog in me,” and Danny laughed every single time. I didn’t want to go back; hell, I never wanted the day to end.

It seemed like Danny didn’t either. He kept finding excuses for us to say, like “but I’ve only said hi to this dog twice!” Not that I minded. There was no place I would rather have been, but at the same time I still couldn’t help but wonder: why me? Why now? Why all of this? I was thinking too much into it again - the fact of the matter was I was having the time of my life, and Danny was enjoying himself too.

“You know, it would be a shame to make that drive without at least enjoying Marshfield a little longer.” Of course, growing up all of us had spent many a day in Marshfield. But this time it was different. Everything in this familiar neighboring town felt new today. Marshfield plus Danny was a pretty cool place.

“Well what do you propose we do, then?”

“Well there is *one thing*,” Danny said, pulling a joint from his pocket. “No pressure though, obviously. I can just save it for later.”

“No no, I’m totally in.” I had smoked weed a couple times before, it was no biggie. If anything, I was happy to know he thought I was cool enough to offer drugs too.

Danny stowed the joint back in his pocket and we set out to find a good smoking spot. Of course, the whole state was practically one big smoke spot so it wasn’t too hard to find a nice private spot by the river. Danny and I sat right next to each other, so close our hands were practically touching. I should point out that it was an absolutely gorgeous day weather wise, that nice 80 degree weather that transports you back to every happy summer memory you’ve ever had.

I watched as Danny lit the joint, taking one drag, then another, then handing me the joint as he blew out the smoke away from my face. What a gentleman.

“Damn, I’m high already,” he said, turning to me with glazed over eyes.

“Same here,” I said, passing the joint back to him. I coughed twice, although I tried to hold it in.

“Cough to get off, homie! Let it out! It’s supposed to get you higher.”

And so I let out all my coughs, Danny cheering me along the whole time. I started laughing between coughs, which caused him to start laughing too, which caused me to cough even harder. I’ve only smoked a couple times, go easy on me!

“Oh shit,” I heard Danny say as my coughing fit ceased. He was staring at the joint, which had burned down to the filter while we were messing around. He turned to me, eyes bright red, and said in a quiet, pitiful voice “it burned out.”

We stared at each other with blank expressions for a solid five seconds before breaking into the most heinous and uncontrollable laugh I’ve ever had in my entire life. We were toppling over each, absolutely dying even though nothing funny even happened. It was as all the fun and happiness of the entire day amalgamated into one perfect, cathartic moment.

As the laughter died down we sat back up in unison, facing each other as if we were one body. There was that shocked face again, but this time as I stared into Danny’s eyes, I could almost smell the attraction. He was looking at me like he didn’t think I was real.

Suddenly, we heard a car horn honk from the road. Just some motorist honking at another, but that one shrill objectionable sound shattered the moment and brought us back to reality, which just so happened to be a lot darker than before.

“Shit Ava, what time is it? Where’s my phone?”

He had left his phone in the truck, but I still had mine, and the time was- oh shit!

“It’s 8:30, oh damn dude, my mom probably expected me *hours* ago. Oh my god, I have so many texts from her.”

“Shit Ava, I’m so sorry. Here, let’s get back to the truck, I’ll bring you home.”

Danny helped me to my feet and we rushed back to the truck together, giggling back and forth the entire way.

“Hey Danny,” I said as the looming sun set forced us to pick up our pace. “I’m sorry if you get in trouble at work for this.”

“Don’t worry about it, dude. Hanging out just today alone was a million times better than any job could ever be.” He looked back at me, his face absolutely beaming. “I don’t regret it for a second.”

And neither did I, even though I fell asleep on the drive and Danny had to wake me up to ask for directions to my house. And I didn’t regret it either when my mom scolded me about not telling her when I’d be back. She wasn’t *really* upset though; she seemed happy actually, and maybe even a bit proud. Thank god for Danny’s eyedrops.

By the time I escaped my mom and finally got back in my room all I could think about was Danny and how crazy today had been. It was like my life was turned upside down. It was almost too much to think about - I’d never felt so stimulated by a person before, and sure I’d had adventures, but nothing had felt so *fulfilling* as today had been.

I laid down on my bed and took out my phone and opened Instagram, which for some reason caused me to, without thinking, navigate to Danny’s page. If only he had more posts for me to like! Despite all the fun we had had today, it seemed wrong to talk. I was in a relationship after all, and a good one at that! Ali was so sweet to me - but for christ’s sake, I hadn’t even thought about her once today.

But what was this? A new post on Danny’s page, posted just now - a real winner, if you will. There was Danny, standing atop the delivery truck with a cigarette in his

mouth and a bottle of fireball in his hands. The caption read: "Best day ever." I'll toast to that, Danny.

And there was someone tagged in the post, too? No way would he have tagged me in one of his posts. Taking a deep breath, I clicked the image, praying to see my handle pop up on the screen. But instead, there was another familiar name, the other girl I had forgotten all about today, the unofficial "Danny's Girl": Serena Jackson.