

we were heroes

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☉ author's note ☉

You're joking. What do you mean this is our third book? I am so very thrilled to have been able to share my work with you guys, and to be honest, it feels a little weird calling it work when I have so much fun doing it lol. As a disclaimer, I pour my heart into each of my books, and what I mean by that is that there's a little bit of me in every character, place, plot point. All of it. So, it'll be messy at times because I'm very messy. But my goal for this book is for these characters to be as *messy* as possible. I want them to feel as real to you as the people you meet on the street. You know? In like a totally not weird way. Anyway, I hope you love and hate and cry and laugh and sing as you read through this book because I'm doing the very same while writing! I can't wait to go on this journey with you guys. If you've been with me since we started, then know that your long-lasting loyalty and friendship have kept me more motivated and encouraged than you know. If you just got here and are skimming through this long-winded author's note, then no worries AT ALL. Welcome, and I love you lots, mwah. If you enjoy it, please drop a like, a comment, or a save, or just whatever to let me know, because your feedback and support really do mean a lot to me! If you didn't enjoy it, kind critique is always welcome!

AI was not used to generate any of the previous or following text (minus the copyright. I'm not a law student ok). It all came from the mind of moi. So, don't try to steal my stuff, please, or I will have to take action through legal ways heh. Also, I have plenty of angel girlies in my following on here who I love and know WILL in fact call you out for trying to take my stuff and claim it as yours. So, please, please, pretty please let's not go down that messy road, love, mwaha.

Now, enjoy!

Xoxo,

Parker

1

Pilot

Lana Dunnahy

I tugged at the tie knotted around my throat and sighed once again. This was a waste of time, I knew, but I refused to surrender to the scrap of red fabric that refused to be tied neatly around my neck.

“Geez, Lan, you look like you’re trying to strangle yourself,” my brother muttered from the doorway of my bathroom.

I huffed another sigh. “Maybe I am. At least then I wouldn’t have to go.”

“Please,” Isaac scoffed, snatching his toothbrush from the counter in front of me. “Mom would just drag your dead body there, anyway.”

The “there” he was referring to would be my brand-new school. Or I guess I should say, *our* brand-new school. For as long as I could remember, there were two different schools: an all-girls school and an all-boys school.

But last summer, when Matthew Rhylee was put up for office, he started making all these big promises about “uniting the community.” Of course, everyone—my parents included—got these big, gooey, heart eyes at the idea of Troye being one big happy family and cast their vote for him.

I didn’t really care either way. I mean, I liked the idea of having a younger mayor, but I also would’ve been fine keeping Bostick. He held office for as long as I could remember. He was the one who instituted our separate sex schools, and most parents loved it. They liked knowing that five out of the seven days of the week, their kids were safe from the hormone-driven attraction to the opposite sex that led to teen pregnancy and heartbreak.

My parents, while not advocates for teen pregnancy, didn’t like the idea of Isaac and me going to different schools. Mom thought we should be spending time with all sorts of people—loud ones, quiet ones, funny ones, serious ones, whether they were girls or boys. My dad mostly agreed, though he didn’t love the idea of me in a school with boys. But when Rhylee proposed joining the schools, they went berserk and stuck a poster of him on our *lawn*, telling everyone to vote for him.

I, on the other hand, started longing for old man Bostick. He didn’t do anything, sure, but he also didn’t do anything like this.

I liked my all-girls school. I didn't have to wear makeup, and then my skin was clearer for the weekends when I *did* want to wear makeup and go out with my friends.

"Relax," Isaac grumbled, spitting out his toothpaste into the sink. "You'll be fine."

"I'm not worried," I hurried to answer. I wasn't. I just wasn't excited. "Going to school with guys shouldn't be much different than when your pig-headed friends come over."

"*Hey.*" His brow furrowed. "At least they're not mousy airheads like your friends."

"Hey!" I pinched his arm. "My friends aren't mousy airheads."

"And mine aren't pighea—"

"Kids, please," my mother sighed from the doorway. "Stop arguing about who's a pig and who's a mouse."

I sucked in a big breath, shooting one last glare at Isaac before crossing my arms in reluctant surrender.

"We weren't arguing," Isaac assured her sweetly. "I was wishing her good luck before she so viciously attacked my friends."

My mom balanced a hand on her hip. “Lana, don’t be nasty about Isaac’s friends. They’re going to be some of your only boy friends at this school to start.”

Isaac bristled. “She’s not going to be like hanging out with my friends, Mom. She has her own friends. What’s their names again? Collin and the, uh, the redhead girl.”

“*Collins*, and Ada,” I corrected.

He just shrugged. “See, she has them.”

Her big blue eyes darted between both of us before a crease formed in her pale brow. “I want you two to stick together today.” Isaac groaned, throwing his head back. “I’m serious! You need to have each other’s backs. Especially you, Isaac. Make sure none of the boys are getting too rowdy about your sister. Don’t tolerate any of that kind of talk. And not just about your sister, about *anyone*. And—”

“I’ll look after her,” Isaac intervened quickly, and we shared a wary look.

If one of us hadn’t interrupted her, she would have gone on for another half hour about all the different ways we needed to look out for each other. Mom always meant well, but she was a little protective, to say the least.

She exhaled a sigh that was overflowing with relief. “Good. And, Lana? You’ll keep him in check, yeah?”

Isaac frowned. “I don’t need anyone to keep me in check.”

“Yeah,” I assured her, ignoring his comment and plowing ahead, forcing a smile on my face. “I’ll keep him in check.”

A wide smile spread across her face as she beamed at her only children. “Lovely. Now, carry on getting ready. You should be off by about six-thirty.”

Isaac nodded, and I gave her another smile before she shuffled back down the hall, scooping up a lost sock from the middle of the hallway (Isaac’s, no doubt).

“She’s psychotic,” Isaac mumbled as he ran a soaking wet hand through his hair. How he got my father’s dirty blonde hair, while I got my mother’s stark black hair, I’d never know, but I knew I’d always be jealous of it.

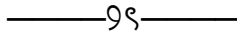
My best friend, Collins, had blonde hair, and it always looked like a little halo of gold. Mine felt more like some sort of dark symbol warning people off.

“She’s not psychotic,” I said with an exhale. “She’s just worried about us.”

“Yeah, yeah,” he said with a wave of his hand. “Well, I’m not. You’ll be fine. I’ll be fine. We’ll all be fine.”

I felt some of the nerves churning in my stomach relax at his words. *We’ll all be fine*. It’s just a new school. Just a new school.

“Yeah,” I agreed, nodding at my reflection.



It didn’t feel weird climbing on the same bus as my brother, like I thought it would. What felt weird was the dozens of male eyes that met us as we walked down the aisle.

“Dunny, over here!” one of the boys called, and Isaac gave him a quick chin nod of recognition.

“Come on,” Isaac muttered, nodding in the direction of the middle of the bus, where there was a horde of boys all talking loudly amongst themselves.

I wanted to shrivel at the idea of sitting there. “No way,” I whispered. “I’ll just find Ada. She takes this bus, I think.”

“Wait, Duffy’s baby sister?” Isaac asked, and I nodded, feeling panic build in my gut when I scanned the bus only to find that she was nowhere to be found.

“Duffy’s her last name,” I answered.

He sighed. “Yeah, whatever, I just mean Heath and Ada live on the other side of town. They take the other bus.”

My heart dropped to my stomach, and I bit back a groan. “Oh.”

“Find a seat!” the driver barked, and then Isaac was practically dragging me to the almost empty row where one of his friends had called him over earlier—Lincoln is his name, I think?

He shooed me into the row, and as soon as my butt hit the leather, he had his back turned to me, already laughing loudly at something one of the guys said.

I slouched down in my seat, crossing my arms over my chest. I missed my old bus, where I didn’t have to get dragged to my seat. I got to sit comfortably squished between Ada and Collins every morning while we all dove into ridiculous conversation. Now, I was squished between Possible Lincoln and my brother.

“Lana, right?” Possible Lincoln asked with a big, lopsided grin.

I nodded once, cheeks flushing wildly with heat. Possible Lincoln shouldn’t feel too special, though. Ever since I was little, I would blush at the direct attention from any stranger. It was extremely frustrating.

“Yeah,” I finally managed. “Lincoln, is it? Like the um, like the president?”

I wanted to burrow into the ground at my lame answer, but he just chuckled. “Yeah, sure, like the president, but I can’t promise I’m as well-behaved,” he said with a wink.

My eyebrows danced up, and I fought a laugh. “Really?”

The boys I had come into contact with were not nearly as openly flirtatious as I had a feeling the boys here would be. Possible Lincoln wasn’t a bad choice. He was funny and really cute—Hispanic with gloriously golden tan skin, winter or summer. He was lean but muscular, and he had really, really great hair. It was dark brown, and it stuck out all over the place.

He was always a little nicer to me than the other boys were when we were little. But I wasn’t really looking for a boyfriend. Last time was lesson enough. I suppressed a shiver at the memory, focusing back in on his amused eyes.

“Well, I can be persuaded into using my manners,” he said, leaning in a little closer. “But only if I’m rewarded richly for my good behavior.”

I held back a laugh, feeling both flattered and disgusted by his blunt flirting. It was always flattering to have a guy who looked like that to talk to you like that, but at the same time, it

was a little ridiculous. Lincoln was a shameless flirt, and everyone knew it, and there was nothing I hated more than being one of the many.

Just before I answered, Isaac reached over and smacked his arm. “Hands to yourself,” he ordered, and Lincoln just laughed.

“Relax, I was just saying hi to little Lana,” he said, and I frowned.

Little Lana? He sounded like he was one step away from giving me a knuckle sandwich and handing me a lollipop before sending me on my way.

“Yeah, sure,” Isaac said with an eyeroll.

“Wait, little Lana’s here?” another voice echoed, and I cringed.

No, no, no, no. I wiped a hand over my blushing face. I did not want to start off the school year as *Little Lana*.

“No way,” another exclaimed, and just like that, two more familiar faces were peering over Isaac to look at me.

“Hi,” Davis said with a little wave. He was also one of the nicer ones. He had messy hair, a confusing mix of blonde and

brown, always falling over his dark brown eyes as if he was trying to hide them.

“You grew up well,” Topher pitched in, his sharp blue eyes roaming over me just briefly enough to not make me uncomfortable. I’d seen him far less than the others, but he seemed nice enough.

Isaac rolled his eyes. “Seriously, Top, is there a single girl left on the planet that you haven’t flirted with?”

He shrugged, a sparkling grin on his face. “Stasia still won’t let me,” he answered, and this piqued my interest.

“Wait, like Stasia Taggart?” I asked, and when they all turned to me again, I regretted my jolt of confidence.

Topher grinned wider, flashing white teeth and two devastating dimples. “You know my Stasia?”

Lincoln scoffed from beside me, propping an elbow up on my headrest to turn his body towards the other boys. “*Your* Stasia? Last time I checked, she was still hooking up with Bowie.”

Isaac looked like he was biting back a laugh. “She passed you up for Finn Bowie? Yikes, man.”

Topher waved a dismissive hand. “For now.”

Now I laughed. I wasn't close to Anastasia, not like Ada was at least, but I knew her. When she set her mind to something, she stuck to it. And she had *set* her mind on Finny.

Lincoln laughed then, too. "See, even Little Lana knows you have a fat chance."

My laughter faded at the nickname, and I swallowed the urge to remind them that I was only a year below them all.

"Hey, where's Patrick?" Davis asked abruptly, his head swiveling around as if he were searching for someone.

Patrick, Patrick, Patrick. No, the name didn't ring a bell. "Who's Patrick?" I asked impulsively, feeling a little more confident now that I'd joined the conversation successfully already.

I'd half expected them to cut me out or turn their backs on me to subtly but surely push me out of the conversation. But aside from Isaac, they were all acting as if this was a normal occurrence. They were treating me like I was on the same level. Bare minimum, I know, but I didn't know what I expected. Actually, I did know. I expected the worst so anything better would be a pleasant surprise.

"You wouldn't know him, Lan," Isaac answered with a shrug.

“Come on, everyone knows Pat.” Davis turned to me.
“Patrick O’Shannon?”

I scanned my mind one more time before shaking my head.
“Nope.”

Top raised his eyebrows. “That’s a first.”

“What is he, like famous or something?” I asked, thoroughly confused by the baffled expressions on their face.

“Around school, yeah,” Lincoln said with a chuckle.

“He’s on the team with all of us,” Davis explained, and I nodded like that cleared everything up. It didn’t.

But if he was this popular, then I assumed I’d find out who he was sooner or later. “Gotcha.”

The bus screeched to a halt, and I deeply regretted not holding on to *something* or using a seatbelt because I ended up getting roughly thrust into the seat before me. Immediately following the impact, I got thrown back into my seat, practically falling on Lincoln’s lap.

“You okay, Little Lana?” he asked, big bronze hands reaching out to brace my fall.

I shimmied forward away from his hands. Kind gesture and all, but the whole *Little Lana* thing was still irking me.

“I’m fine,” I muttered, clutching my eye. Something must’ve been sticking out from the seat in front of me, because my eyeball felt like it was trying to swell out of my eye socket.

“Oh, shoot. I think you’re uh... Oh, no, I’m getting a full view now, and it’s for sure. You’re like *gushing* blood,” Lincoln said, stretching his mouth into a frown as his eyes hurried over my face.

I touched a hand to the back of my nose, only to find blood on the back of my knuckle. My eyes widened, and panic began to shoot through me.

“No, no, no,” I mumbled, and then to my horror, Lincoln began reaching for the collar of his shirt.

“Here, use this to stop the blood,” he said, and then he actually started to pull off his shirt.

“Keep your shirt on, geez, Linc,” Isaac interjected quickly.

Panicking further, I plugged my nose only for Isaac to smack my hand away. “Don’t back up the pipes!”

More blood flushed down over my mouth, and my eye was still on *fire*, practically screaming at me.

“Well, someone do something.”

“Here, Lana, take this,” David inserted, reaching into his bag and pulling out what looked like a practice shirt.

I shook my head, pinching the bridge of my nose. “No, no, it’ll get ruined.”

“Just take it,” Isaac said, snatching the t-shirt and shoving it against my nose.

“Boys, please exit the bus,” the driver ordered, sounding completely exasperated as if we’d been there for hours and not five minutes.

“Hold on a minute,” Lincoln said back, and then he and Isaac were hoisting me to my feet.

How was it possible to already be having such a bad day?
How? *How?*

I clutched the shirt to my nose, closing my eyes as they practically dragged me off the bus. Was it too late for me to run back home and change into my all-girls school uniform?

“Should we take her to the nurse?” Davis asked hesitantly from somewhere behind me.

I jumped into cognisance now. “I’ll just take myself. Thanks for the um...” I motioned awkwardly to the t-shirt muffling my voice.

Davis nodded, and I reluctantly caught the sympathy in his eyes. This day was starting off just... *great*.

“You sure you don’t want one of us to walk you?” Lincoln shifted to his feet as Isaac helped me to stand. “It’s not that far. We don’t mind.”

“Exactly,” I sighed, my voice all nasal. “It’s not that far. I’ll manage. Thanks, though.”

“If you’re sure...” Lincoln said, giving me a funny look as I stumbled away from the four of them.

“Good luck, Little Lana!” one of them called after me, and this time, I didn’t have the self-control to *not* roll my eyes.

Seriously, I’m seventeen. Little Lana was laid to her grave years ago. I waved a hand back in response before tumbling out of the bus. The nosebleed wasn’t so intense now, but my eye was still screaming at me like it was on *fire*.

“Excuse me—do you know where the nurse’s office would be?” I asked someone as they whizzed past me.

No answer.

I reached out to another person. “Excuse me, sorry, but the nurse’s office would be—”

No answer.

“Sorry, but—”

Surprise, surprise. No answer.

Left with no other choice, I began wandering the halls blindly, trying and failing to peek through Davis’s shirt wadded up against my nose. The bell rang shrilly and loud, and dozens of elbows and stomachs rammed against me from all sides until I was leaning against the wall, longing for my old school.

For a solid five minutes, I stood there, bleeding and enveloped by silence. That is, until loud footsteps began to pad down the hallway, getting louder and louder with each step.

“Slow down, now,” an authoritative voice hissed, and that’s when I noticed there were not one, but *two* pairs of footsteps.

“I thought you told me the principal needed to see me as soon as possible,” a deep voice snapped.

Then a gasp sounded from the first voice. “Oh, honey, are you alright—Patrick! Slow down. *Now.*” A hand touched my arm gingerly. “Are you okay? What’s happened to you?”

I opened my eyes, pulling the cloth away just enough for my blurry vision to focus in on the small eyes peering down at me.

“I’m fine, miss. Just—do you think you could point me in the direction of the nurse’s office? I—”

“Melissa Whelan, you’re needed at the front desk,” a crackling voice said through what sounded like a phone or a walkie-talkie?

The pale woman before me sighed heavily. “Of course, dear, just a minute.” She held the walkie-talkie up to her mouth. “I have a situation.” She eyed the tall boy sulking behind her. “Multiple, actually. Be down soon.”

“It’s urgent,” the voice shot back, sounding thoroughly impatient.

The woman who I quickly began to recognize as Davis’s mom looked at me with tender eyes. “I’m sorry.”

My brow furrowed. “For what?”

“For what I’m about to have to do,” she sighed. Turning to the boy behind her, she crossed her arms sternly. “As your first act of penance, you’ll walk her to the nurse’s office.”

He was practically rolling his eyes. “I don’t have time to—”

“I’m not asking, Patrick. Seriously. This year is a fresh start. Don’t start it off like this,” she warned, and his whole face tightened up, dark blue eyes swirling.

“Whelan, we need yo—”

“I’m coming,” she exhaled into the walkie-talkie, shaking her head and muttering something to herself as she hurried back down the hall, white skirt swishing around her ankles.

Then it was just me and the broody boy left in the silence of the empty halls.

I turned to him awkwardly. “Sorry about this,” I mumbled, and he shook his head.

“Nah, it’s no big deal.”

I swallowed a scoff, but the words, “It didn’t seem that way a second ago,” still slipped from my mouth.

“Yeah, well, I was in a bad mood,” he bit out.

“You aren’t any more?” I asked, eyebrows scrunching together as I looked up at him. This time, I decided to *really* look.

He was actually pretty nice to look at now that he wasn’t scowling so hard. Dark hair, almost as black as mine, falling over ridiculously blue eyes, accompanied by long, thick lashes. He had a good nose, too, and really good lips. Wow, he was seriously gorgeous, wasn’t he? And the rest of him was too. Broad, muscular shoulders and long, lean legs.

He shrugged then, and I was glad most of my eyes were covered so he didn’t see me shamelessly ogling him. “Well, I’m better now that there’s no one here riding me about my latest screw-up.”

“I guess that usually puts me in a better mood, too,” I agreed warily.

There was something very sharp about him. His eyebrows, his voice, the way he moved. He was like a blade.

“So, what happened to you?” he asked, starting down the hallway, apparently expecting me to follow.

I hesitated for half a beat before remembering I literally had no other options but to follow this stranger. Picking up my pace, I jogged to catch up with his long strides.

“Well, if I told you I’d have to kill you,” I joked, before cringing at myself. I didn’t even know this boy. It was really not the time or place to be using my bad humor.

He scoffed out a laugh. “Seriously?”

“You go first,” I said, hoping his experience was more embarrassing than getting a nosebleed from hitting your face on the back of a seat. “What’d you get in trouble for?”

He sighed, shaking his head. “You don’t wanna know mine, trust me.”

“Well, now you have to tell me.”

“Do not.”

“Mhm.”

“Nope.”

“Come on!”

“Why?”

I huffed a sigh. “Because, now I’m curious, and if you don’t tell me, I’ll have to imagine up an answer for myself.”

His lips curved into a reluctant grin. “Oh, yeah? Like what?”

I shrugged, feeling too much pain burning in my face to recognize the fact that I was rambling like an idiot. “Well, we have options. Stole from the school. Flashed a teacher. Made out with the lunch lady. Got into a f-”

He jerked to a stop, pivoting his big body to face me. “The *lunch lady*?” he cried, sounding so disgusted, I actually laughed out loud.

I nodded, smiling wide. “Yep, and if you don’t tell me the real reason, then I’ll have no choice but to assume that’s the truth. That’s how I’ll remember you.”

“As the guy who made out with our fifty-year-old lunch lady?” he asked, both black eyebrows raised high.

I nodded, biting the inside of my cheek so I didn’t bust out laughing at his horrified expression. “Your choice.”

He shook his head, smiling despite himself as he squinted down at me. “You’re sick. You know that, right?”

“And you’re evasive,” I countered.

“Well, if you get to make assumptions, then so do I.” He looked me over thoughtfully. “I think you got into a *full-on* fist fight.”

I scoffed, wanting to laugh at the idea of me in a fight. I would sooner die.

“Over what?”

He grinned devilishly, stepping close so I had to arch my neck a little to look back at him. “Over *me*.”

My mouth dropped open, and my cheeks flooded with heat. “You?”

“Yep.” He looked entirely pleased that the tables had turned now. “I’m totally right, aren’t I?”

“You’re totally delusional,” I said back, appalled by his overinflated ego.

“You’re totally in love with me.”

“You’re insane!”

“You’re head over heels.”

I shook my head with a shocked laugh. “You need help.”

He sighed like he was giving in to a needy fan. “Fine, we’ll get married.”

My stomach did a double backflip, and I nearly tripped on my own feet. But I only laughed.

“Oh, are you sure the lunch lady won’t mind?” I quipped, and his eyes danced with amusement.

“Jealous?”

“Repulsed.”

He grinned again. “I love it when you talk dirty to me.”

A laugh tumbled off my lips.

“But, before we get married, dear, I should really ask your name,” he teased, full on smiling now, and I rolled my eyes.

“How thoughtful,” I deadpanned.

“I’m Patrick,” he said, biting down on his bottom lip before sticking a big hand out.

That’s when the recognition came flooding back. “Wait, like Patrick O’Shannon?” He frowned, and I hurried on, realizing I sounded a little stalkerish. “My brother—I think he plays with you.”

“Plays with me?”

“Soccer! Plays soccer with you,” I clarified, shaking his hand as I spoke. “Isaac.”

He stared at me, looking just a little confused, before his eyes widened. “*You’re* Dunny’s sister?”

I frowned now. “Well, don’t say it like that.”

“No, it’s just,” he broke off. “Nothing, nothing.”

“Lana,” I stated, feeling oddly flustered. “Just so you know. I’m Lana. Not Dunny’s little sister.”

He dug his hands in his pockets. “Well, *Lana*, I guess I should actually get you to the nurse before Lissa comes back to strangle me.”

I assumed he was talking about Mrs. Whelan, but I didn’t ask, because my mind was crashing down on itself.

What was I doing? Standing in the hallway talking to a guy I don’t even know while class was going on? I needed to get a grip. It was the first day, and I was already getting distracted.

“Yeah, yeah. Good idea.”

2

The Bar

Patrick O'Shannon

Oh, I was so screwed.

Not only had I talked to Dunny's sister, but I had flirted with her. Like hard-core. Somehow, I'd gotten roped into walking her to the nurse's office. I was pissed about it for a good two seconds until I got a good look at her.

Sure, half her face was being smothered by a practice shirt, but her eyes were like mesmerizing or something. I don't know, but after a few minutes, I'd lost my head. I was rambling on about something or another, and then I was telling her we were getting *married*? Where the heck did that come from? I didn't want to get married! I was going to live alone and get fat and happy in a penthouse somewhere after my soccer career dropped off.

But it made her laugh.

And I found out that I actually really liked her laugh.

It wasn't the angelic kind. It was loud and messy and really adorable. *Adorable*? What was I saying? I didn't say crap like

mesmerising and *adorable*. I needed to get as far away from her as possible as soon as I could.

“So, it’s just up there and to the ri—” I started to say just as she said, “I think the bleeding stopped.”

That’s when she pulled away the shirt to reveal her face. My stomach dropped. She was so, so much prettier than I thought she was. Even with blood staining her full lips, she looked like an angel with smudged eyeliner and flushed cheeks.

“Is it bad?” she asked, stretching her mouth into an anxious frown as I stared down at her, probably looking like a psychopath.

I swallowed, shaking my head. “No, no, not at all. I mean, most people can’t pull off a broken nose, but it’s actually really working for yo—” her eyes widened so much, I couldn’t finish my sentence. Laughter tumbled off my tongue as she glared at me. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry.”

She glared even more angrily. “No, you’re not.”

“I am! I really am, and to prove it, I’ll even explain to the nurse that yes, you got into a cat fight, but it was for a good cause.”

“A good cause?”

“Well, of course. You won, so now you own me, right?” I drawled, and she rolled her eyes, despite her neck flaming with heat. “Sounds like a good cause to me.”

“Actually, I own you because I *lost*,” she countered with a smile. “But don’t worry. I’m sure if the lunch lady has a good enough offer this afternoon, I can trade you for a nice sandwich, and the two of you can live happily ever after.”

“Seriously, the lunch lady thing is grossing me out.”

I knew I should take her to the office now. I should’ve taken her straight there without a word, but I didn’t want to. She was fun. Talking to her was actually *fun*.

She was grinning up at me, big brown eyes warming with each passing moment. That’s when I noticed the bruise blooming beneath her right eye.

“Alright, come on,” I sighed, shoving my hands in my pockets instead of reaching out to guide her toward the nurse’s office.

I pushed open the oakwood door only to find our nurse, Miss Taggart, pushed against a wall, making out with Mr. Osby. I wanted to slap my hand over my eyes and flee the room like a little kid. It’s not that I hadn’t seen two people kiss before, but this was my friend’s mom. It felt wrong.

Knowing I couldn't abandon the girl beside me, I settled for clearing my throat sternly and squinting a little so I couldn't see so well. Their blurry figures exploded apart, and Miss Taggart turned a bright shade of cherry red.

"Patrick!" she exclaimed. "What are you doing here?"

"She needed the nurse," I explained awkwardly, nodding towards the small girl to my right.

I snagged the opportunity to look down at her again. Her dark hair had all these curls that were falling over her shoulders. It wasn't blonde or brown. No, her hair was *jet* black, and I *loved* it.

"Sorry, I, um," Lana started clumsily, cheeks flushing pink. "I busted my nose, and my-my eye got hit too."

"*Got hit?*" She turned to me. "Patrick O'Shannon, tell me you didn't. Tell me you did not *hit* this young girl," Miss Taggart bit out, crossing her arms, anger clearing out all previous embarrassment.

My eyebrows drew together fiercely as frustration roared to life in my ribs. "No," I growled. "I did not *hit* her."

I wasn't surprised that she assumed the worst of me, but I hadn't realized that the bar for me had dropped *so* low. "Well, forgive me for making sure when you waltz in an hour past first

period with a girl covered in blood and—oh, honey, is that a black eye? Sit down, sweetheart.”

She was fussing over Lana now like she was a Barbie doll, ushering her to sit down, all while Mr. Osby stood by awkwardly. He scratched the back of his head, dark face tense and clearly uncomfortable. My body felt heavy again now that reality was crushing back down on me, and I heaved a sigh.

“What happened to her?” Miss Taggart asked, shooting me a glare as she rummaged through her desk.

I rolled my eyes, leaning against the doorframe wearily. “She wouldn’t say.”

She inhaled deeply, shaking her head before muttering, “I don’t have time for this.”

“For doing your job?” I scoffed.

She had the audacity to accuse me of hitting a girl and then treated me like a villain when I told her everything I knew. See, that was the thing about this place. It didn’t matter if I fed them a plate of lies or bared the truth to them; they would *never* stop seeing what they wanted to see. Never.

“*No*. For dealing with your attitude and blatant disrespect for authority,” she stated, sounding both exasperated and angry.

Lana winced as Miss Taggart dabbed a cloth beneath her eye, and I clamped my jaw shut furiously.

I felt a frustrated pit carving out the flesh in my chest. “Seriously? I’m supposed to respect you?” I asked, raising both eyebrows as I shot a pointed glare at Mr. Osby, who was cowering away in the corner as if I wouldn’t be able to notice his massive frame. But the whole *if I can’t see you, you can’t see me* thing didn’t really work when he was over six feet tall.

Her face turned beet red. “If you’re not going to be of any help, then you can leave.”

I swallowed my next retort before pushing off the wall. “See you in Lit, Mr. Osby. As long as you’re not too *tangled up* at work here in the nurse’s office to show up,” I muttered, unable to help myself from having the last word before slipping out of the room.

I didn’t have to look back. I knew he was pissed and probably hissing a string of curse words directed at me. But I didn’t care. I was already on my way to the principal’s office, so I really didn’t have much to lose.

I shook my hand out at my side. Not only was I angry now, but I was also a little on edge.

Usually, when I was shipped off to Mory’s office, it was because I got in a fight or had too many absences, but not this

time. This time, I had no idea why I was getting called in. I hated that.

“Pat?” a familiar voice boomed from behind me, and I didn’t stop, but I slowed my pace. A hand clasped my shoulder from behind. “I thought that was you. I’d recognize that grouchy gate anywhere.”

I shook my head at Lincoln and swatted his hand away before he could ruffle my hair like a psycho. “I do not have a grouchy *gate*.”

“Well, there’s certainly no pep in your step this morning, my friend,” he said with a solemn shake of his head.

“Shouldn’t you be in class?”

“Why, I could ask you the same question.”

I sighed, trying to shake off some of my frustration for his sake. “I guess Mory missed me so much over the summer he decided to schedule a little visit for us as soon as possible.”

His smile faltered. “Pat, you’re not...”

My shoulders tensed up so dramatically that it looked as if I was flinching away from him. “No,” I shot back definitively.

“So then why?”

“I don’t know.”

“Come on. You can tell me if—”

“I said *no*. I don’t know,” I spat out, feeling completely helpless.

It really, *really* didn’t matter what I said, even with my own friends.

He held his hands up innocently. “I had to ask, man. Why else would he be calling you in for a chat on day one? I know you had lots of one-on-ones last year, but I didn’t think there was much bonding going on in any of those sessions. But who knows, maybe...”

I groaned, wiping both hands over my face. “For the love of everything good, Linc. I don’t know why he called me in, okay?”

“Huh,” he said thoughtfully, giving me a hesitant glance before shoving a slightly sunburnt hand through his thick curly hair. “Alright, alright. Well, I just wanted to find you and make sure you... you know...”

“Showed up?” I filled in, eyes dead set on the end of the hallway. “Well, I’m here in all my glory, Linc. So, seriously, stop stressing. I’m fine. Whatever the deal is with Mory, it’s probably just standard stuff.”

He nodded. “Oh yeah, for sure. I’ll see you at practice, then. Unless you want me to like come with or something?”

I coughed out a laugh. “I don’t need you to hold my hand to take me to the principal’s office. I can handle myself.”

“Whatever you say,” he said with a dramatic sigh. “Good luck on your date with Mory.”

He stepped back, giving me a mischievous grin before whirling around on his heels. He’s by far one of my weirdest friends, but I guess if I had to choose a few to stick with, he would make the list. He’s just being paranoid because he’s known me since I was nine, which means he’s seen it all. All of it. Thick and thin.

3

Advantages

Lana

By the time Miss Taggart had finished wiping all the blood up and rubbing some substance on my bruise, all my makeup was gone. So, when I walked into second period, not only was I twenty minutes late, but also feeling mildly insecure.

“Your name?” the woman, whom I assumed was my teacher, asked from the front of the classroom as I crept to the back of the class.

I stopped moving, reluctantly turning around to face her. “Lana Dunnahy,” I answered, forcing my hesitant voice to be loud and praying it sounded confident.

She only hummed in response, flicking through a stack of papers on her desk, small eyes scanning each page rapidly. “Ah, yes. You’re the one with the nurse’s note,” she sighed, and I just nodded uncomfortably. After a few moments of silence, she looked up at me like I had three heads. “Well, take a seat. There’s no need to distract the class any further.”

I cringed, shuffling to the back of the class, feeling my whole body relax a little at the sight of my redheaded friend waving to me excitedly. The moment I sat down beside her, she reached out and squeezed my hand.

“There you are,” she whispered. “Where’d you go? Your brother was being annoyingly cryptic.” She rolled her gray eyes.

“Of course he was,” I muttered, rolling my eyes right back. “He practically had an aneurysm after I sat with him and his friends on the bus.”

Her eyebrows danced up, and a little smile spread over her face. “Which ones?”

“Which ones what?”

“Which *friends*, duh.” She pushed a lock of wavy hair out of her face as she looked at me intently, like this was the most important piece of information I could ever deliver her.

“Um, I don’t know. Lincoln, Davis, and Topher, I think,” I explained. “Why does it matter?”

She was full-on *grinning* now. “You’re going to be *so* despised this year, Lannie.”

My heart accelerated, and my jaw dropped. “Why would you say that? Oh my gosh, why is everyone gonna hate me?” I whispered.

The two of us broke apart instinctively as our stick-up-the-butt teacher turned around. Her eyes scanned the room wearily before she turned back to the board. Technically, I think we were supposed to be doing some worksheet.

Like magnets, we pulled back together. “I didn’t mean it like a bad thing. I just mean, you don’t know the advantage you have, my friend.”

I raised an eyebrow. “*Advantage?*”

She gave me a big nod. “Oh, yeah. Lots of advantages, actually. Four to be exact.”

“Ada, I really want to follow along here, honey, but I need just a *little* more,” I coaxed, glancing over at our teacher to ensure we were still seeing her hunched back.

She sighed heavily. “Your disease of a brother is friends with every hot boy in this school. Topher. Davis. *Lincoln*—gosh, he’s gorgeous. And Patrick. You got to share lollipops with them and ride scooters when they had screwed up faces and high-pitched voices, and now that they’re all huge and hot, you have an in.”

“You’re disgusting,” I said in a hushed tone, fighting a laugh at her strange description of my life. “And shouldn’t your brother be on the hot boy list, too?”

Her whole face scrunched together in horror. “You did not just say that! Heath is a rodent. He-he’s a wart on the skin of the earth. He’s-”

“Hot. Like seriously attractive, Adie,” I finished with a grin, wiggling my eyebrows mischievously.

I wasn’t lying. Heath was tall and got some serious muscle to him after last summer. He had this cute little solemn thing going for him. Like Lincoln, he would be far from a bad boyfriend choice, but also like Lincoln, he’s not my type. I was just trying to get a reaction from her, and it was *so* working.

She shook her head. “I am *not* hearing this. The *point* is that all the girls here are gonna hate your guts because half those boys would do literally anything for you.”

“They would not,” I scoffed. “I barely even know them. I just see them around the house sometimes. But it’s not like I’m the only one who has a brother,” I reminded her. “Heath is friends with all of them, too.”

The teacher whirled around, and we severed, straightening our backs seriously. She eyed us through her thick glasses, a scowl

imprinted on her face. We had to wait an exceptionally long time for her to go back to whatever she was focusing on at the board, but when she finally turned around, we fused back together.

“Not true. Heath only ever has Patrick over, and he only goes to the other guys’ houses because Patrick goes.”

“Clingy much?” I joked, and she sighed.

“You have no idea. The two have been like brothers since they were like five. Frankly, I’m over it,” she groaned.

I tried to hide my tumbling curiosity at the sound of Patrick’s name. “So, you know Patrick then?”

She shrugged. “I guess. He’s just kind of a grump. And he’s like *super* quiet. My family barely gets a word out of him when he comes over.”

I frowned. “Really?”

He wasn’t quiet at all when we were talking. He was actually a pretty great conversationalist right up until we were in the presence of any adult. The second we walked in on the nurse, um... enjoying herself, he got all closed off and pissed again.

Sure, it wasn’t exactly a great experience for me either, but he was full-on verbally battling with Miss Taggart. There were

metaphorical blood and daggers flying everywhere. It was messy. Very messy. Then he was flying out of the room without so much as a glance goodbye.

“Yeah. He’s a pretty one, though.” She sighed dreamily. “But boys that pretty come with a thousand strings attached, and if you’re not careful, they’ll wrap around your neck and strangle you.”

My brow furrowed. “Morbid, much?”

She smiled. “Collins made me watch a horror movie with her last night, and I was feeling inspired.”

“Where is she, anyway?” I whispered.

Holding her chin in her palm, she shrugged. “Don’t know. Heath had to give her a ride this morning because her dad screwed up again, and I didn’t see her show up.”

I gasped dramatically, ignoring the slight pang in my chest at the mention of her dad. “He kidnapped her, didn’t he?”

I didn’t have a lot of people I couldn’t stand, but her father was one of them. He was always messing with her mind and dangling a relationship in front of her that she could never fully have because the one he had with alcohol had him in a chokehold.

“I’m sure he would just love that,” she sighed, and I tilted my head to the side curiously.

But before I could ask, she darted away from me, and I looked up just in time to see our teacher glaring at us. She held a finger to her nose, and I shrank back in my seat under the weight of her withering stare.

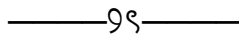
I glanced over at Ada when the coast was clear again to find her scribbling on a scrap of paper. It only took a minute for her to kick my foot and slip the note on my desk. I eyed her suspiciously before unfolding her note.

There on the page was a doodle of five stick figure boys on their knees around a poorly drawn stick figure girl who was rolling her eyes. Or at least I think she was? I couldn’t really tell, but I could make out the names corresponding to each stick figure perfectly. Apparently, the stick figure girl was *me*, and the boys on their knees were... *Heath, Lincoln, Pa-* I stopped myself there and huffed a sigh as I read the top line of the page. *Advantage.*

Ada was a sucker for a good drama, and she was always romanticizing our lives in one way or another, and today I was her victim. My eyes lingered on Patrick’s name before I crumpled up the paper and chucked it at her lap. I didn’t want any

advantages, and I certainly didn't have any. At least not in the form of my brother's friends.

They were all practically strangers to me. We only saw each other in passing. They didn't even really see me all summer up until today, when I so gracefully bashed my face in and fled the scene. I would call that a disadvantage more than anything.



When lunch finally rolled around, I was somewhere between being buzzed on the excitement of something so *new* and wanting to crawl back into my warm bed and never go anywhere else ever again.

“Seriously, where is she?” Ada huffed for the millionth time since we started to head towards the cafeteria.

She glared at the sparkly pink watch wrapped around her wrist like it had personally offended her.

“She’ll be at lunch,” I assured her, but I was half bluffing.

Collins was just a little bit of a wild card. Not her personality. She was always sweet as could be, but her presence in all of our lives was very... unpredictable. None of us blamed her, of course. But it was just a little frustrating at times. Times like now, when it

was the first day, and Ada was dying to throw up all of her news on Collins, and she wasn't here to receive any of it.

We pushed around a group of boys laughing noisily at something on one of their phones. One of them staggered backwards, practically doubling over as his backpack rammed into my shoulder. I tumbled into Ada, sending the two of us scrambling against the wall to our right.

“Does the head on your shoulders work, Finny? You nearly killed my friends,” a familiar voice growled, and I turned my attention to the blonde to my right.

“What friends?” the brunette boy asked, eyes roaming over Anastasia as he took her in. “You’re looking well today, my love.”

She rolled her eyes, smacking his arm away as he reached for her. “Am I, Finny? Gee, thanks.”

He only grinned like somehow her repulsion to him was a compliment of sorts. Of course, boys took any attention from a girl like Stasia as a compliment, I’m sure.

Stasia looped her arm through Ada’s. “Ignore him,” she muttered, guiding us into the cafeteria, acting as if there wasn’t a boy practically falling on his knees behind us calling after her.

“What’s his deal? I thought the two of you were *all in* now,” Ada said with a little smirk. Like I said, *sucker* for a good drama.

Stasia just rolled her eyes yet again. “Don’t remind me.” Then she leaned over Ada to look at me. “Lana,” she acknowledged. “I heard the ride here was a bloodbath.”

Ada’s eyebrows flew up in surprise. “What?”

“No, it’s nothing,” I assured her, cheeks flaming. “I just got a nosebleed on the way here.”

“A nosebleed?” Ada echoed, raising a suspicious brow. “What, did you get in a fight?”

“What? No!” I shook my head, running my hand over the swollen lump under my right eye. “Why does everyone keep saying that...” I added under my breath.

Stasia snorted. “Someone else seriously thought *you* got in a fight? That would be like brawling with Bambi.”

I groaned. “I really don’t want to talk about my Bambi brawl, actually.”

“Okay, fine,” Ada caved. “But I want details later. First, I find out you got sat with half the soccer team, and then you’re getting into fights? My, my, Lannie. How you’ve changed.”

“I did not get in a fight!” I cried helplessly, throwing my hands up desperately.

Ada threw her head back laughing, and Stasia just shook her head. “You seriously sat with those idiots?”

I shrugged, feeling a little pang in my stomach at her judgment. “My brother knows them,” I muttered.

I knew Stasia, but we weren’t close. We just never clicked that well. We would get closer, and then she would say something a little... blunt, and I would secretly get hurt about it and shrivel back into my shell like a baby. Then we wouldn’t talk so much. Then we would get closer and start again.

“Well, a little piece of advice? Steer clear. They seem harmless, but they’re *drama*. Every single one,” she exhaled wearily.

“They aren’t *all* like that,” I heard myself say, and both girls looked at me with surprised expressions wrinkling their brows.

Stasia just held her hands up. “Hey, listen to me or don’t. I’m just trying to save you some time.”

“Save me some time?”

“I just mean one of them is bound to suck you in if you don’t keep your guard up. So keep it up and don’t get hurt,” Stasia said simply, flicking a pin straight lock of blond hair over her shoulder.

I sucked in a big breath. Why had everyone been treating me like I was still the same little girl I was at twelve? I could think for myself. My lips parted, but Ada intervened warmly.

“Cynical, much? Geez, Stasia, you sound like a jaded old man. Lannie deserves a little fun, and *those* boys look like lots and lots of fun,” Ada drawled, nodding towards the table in the center of the cafeteria.

My heart swelled a little in my ribs when my eyes met his. Patrick’s, that is. Wow, he was even better than I remembered him to be. Of course, he was scowling again, slouching back in his seat with his arms crossed. Lincoln was right beside him, slamming his hand on the table as he laughed loudly, little crinkles around his eyes. Everyone else was laughing, too.

But not Patrick.

Nope.

His heated gaze snagged on mine, and my mouth was curving into a smile all on its own. Then, I was lifting my hand into a little wave. His eyebrows twitched once, but he didn’t give me any sort of acknowledgement otherwise. In fact, he looked at me like

he didn't even recognize me. *Ouch*. My swelling heart went *pop*, and its balloon-like remains just fluttered to the base of my hips painfully.

"You know him or something?" Stasia asked from my left, only deepening my embarrassment.

I swallowed. "No, no. I um, I thought he was someone else."

Ada just nudged my shoulder. "Well, come on."

"Come on, where?" I asked, finally tearing my eyes from the brooding brunette.

She laughed, taking my wrist and practically dragging me towards— "Ada, *no*. We are not sitting with them. Come on, let's find Collins and sit outside or over there or—"

"Nope," she laughed, popping the *p* sound. "Every other table's taken anyway."

There were probably three empty tables, but I didn't even bother telling her that. It wasn't that I thought it would be that big of a deal. I talked with the guys this morning, and it was actually kind of fun. However, I was still feeling the embarrassment of this morning, and having Patrick dismiss me was only making it worse. Which also made me mad.

Did he think I was coming on to him or something? I had a bloody nose. That's it. And besides, he was the one doing most of the flirting.

Stasia was muttering to herself as we approached the table, but the closer we got, the harder I clamped my mouth shut. We were about five feet away, and no one had noticed us yet. Until Topher lifted his head.

“Move over, Dav,” Topher ordered with a grin, eyes never leaving Anastasia.

“What? Why?” Davis asked, but he was already sliding his chair to the left.

Top nodded to where the three of us were standing. “Because Anastasia came all the way over here just to sit by me, and I just can't *stand* disappointing my favorite blonde.”

His dimples were indenting either side of his grin as he watched her, shifting his hips as he lounged back in his seat.

Davis's whole face warmed as his brown eyes landed on Ada. “Oh, yeah, sure. Let me get some um, some chairs.”

“Get three,” Stasia intervened, only deigning Topher's comment worthy of another eyeroll.

“Nah, we only need two,” Lincoln called after Davis before turning to look at me. “There’s a seat for Little Lana over here.” He motioned dramatically to the empty seat between him and...

“Perfect,” Ada chirped, giving me an evil little smile as she waved me towards the empty chair.

I scowled at her, but plastered on a smile as I made my way towards the middle of the table, where Lincoln was waving me over. I slid my bag underneath my chair before settling into my seat with a sigh. My traitorous eyes glanced to my left, but Patrick didn’t even bother looking at me as I sat down.

“Pat, you’ve met Lit-”

I interrupted him quickly, “Nope.” I was lying through my teeth, but if he wanted to be weird about teh whole thing, then I could be weirder about it.

“Well, Pat, this is Lana,” Lincoln introduced, slinging an arm around the back of my chair as he leaned over me to grasp Patrick’s attention.

Finally, he looked at me, and then my stomach did a little dip. Was it possible for boys to have pretty lips? Because he had them, and I hated that he had them. Not even a flicker of recognition crossed his face.

But he stuck his hand out anyway. “Patrick,” he said, and I looked between him and his outstretched hand once, before reluctantly taking it.

“Lana,” I introduced sweetly, before recoiling my hand as fast as possible.

I glanced to my left, looking down the length of the table to find Ada entertaining half the table with some story or another. Talking was her thing, and she did it well. Very well. She had funny anecdotes that she pulled out when things were quiet or awkward or just because she could. She had witty conversation skills that always gave her the quickest retorts, and she was just *happy*. She was a happy person, and I think that’s what made her so magnetic. That’s what drew me to her in the first place, at least.

“So, how you liking school so far?” Lincoln asked before shoving a triple hamburger in his mouth, devouring it in like three bites.

I shrugged. “It’s okay.”

He swallowed, Adam’s apple bobbing. “Just okay?”

“Well, starting off the day with blood gushing from my face wasn’t exactly ideal, but the rest of the day has been okay,” I explained, feeling myself relax into the conversation a little more.

But I could still feel that annoyed knot growing in my chest. Was he embarrassed about it? Was that it? Why was he being such a jerk about this?

“Well, you should come cheer me on at practice later,” Lincoln said with a wink, sipping his Coke while his green eyes locked in on me.

“Because cheering you on would make my day better?” I asked with a raised eyebrow.

He shrugged, leaning in a little. “Maybe my gratitude for cheering me on would make your day better,” he suggested, and my neck flushed with heat.

I laughed then, pushing him back playfully. “Well, you’ll have to find another girl to give your gratitude to,” I said with a shake of my head. “I have plans.”

“Plans?” he asked, leaning back in his seat and allowing me to reclaim my personal space. “Who knew Little Lana would be such a busy bee on her first day?”

My cheeks flushed a little. “I’m trying out for the school paper.” He grinned, and I frowned. “What?”

“Nothing,” he said, holding his hands up innocently. “That is just very you.”

“Very *me*?” I repeated, once again feeling like I was pre-knuckle-sandwich-lollipop combo.

He shrugged, taking a bite of his second burger. “Yeah,” he said around a mouthful before swallowing. “I mean, you always used to spy on your neighbors and take notes on them and stuff. You were like a little journalist.”

I breathed in deeply, inhaling a waft of Patrick’s sweet cologne and shifting my body away from him slightly. I was still butt-hurt about his harsh dismissal, and I didn’t want him to think I *chose* to sit next to him.

My frown deepened at Lincoln’s answer. “I didn’t *spy* on the neighbors. I had a theory that they were stealing from my playhouse, so I gathered information. And I was *right*,” I explained with a huff.

“Oh yeah, I remember that,” Davis interjected from across the table. “It was Jordan, right? He stole like four of Ike’s Nerf guns.”

“See!” I cried, throwing my hands up. “If not for me, Isaac would have never gotten them back.”

Isaac shook his head with a laugh. “You stormed his house and everything. Raided his room like a little psycho.”

My cheeks flamed as everyone's laughing eyes landed on me. They weren't laughing *at* me. We were all laughing together, but all the attention felt... wrong.

Patrick shifted from beside me. "I'm going to training," he muttered to the person on the other side of him before pushing out of his chair.

4

Free Falling

Patrick

I pushed out of my seat, ignoring the voices calling after me. I couldn't deal with this right now. Lincoln was pissing me off. He spent the entire lunch falling all over a girl he didn't even know. It was embarrassing. And desperate.

Seriously, I was getting second-hand from the number of times he *accidentally* hit her arm with his, and then him trying to get her to come to our practice? It was ridiculous, and it was pissing me off even more that she was so oblivious to it.

I exhaled heavily, running a hand through my hair furiously. I knew. I knew that Lincoln wasn't the reason I was so upset. *You need to tell us now... Come on, Patrick... Tell us the truth...* Principal Mory's words were pulsing through my veins.

"I am telling you the truth," I had gritted out.

Mory shook his head, pushing out a heavy sigh like my answer disappointed him. "I didn't want to start the year off like this."

I flew out of my seat then, sending the chair screeching behind me as the backs of my knees hit it violently. “You have no proof! None!” I roared, and the old man flinched.

Guilt twinged in my chest, but it was a grain of sand in the ocean of pain and anger screaming in my whole body. I’d been sitting there for thirty minutes listening to him lecture me over something I didn’t do.

“Sit. Down,” Mory demanded, but I held my hands up, refusing to do something I’d regret and choosing instead to backpedal toward the door.

“I don’t have to listen to this,” I’d muttered, shaking my head as I fumbled for the doorknob, hands shaking.

Mory stood then, slamming his hands on his desk. “Don’t paint me to be a villain, Patrick,” he stated coldly. “There is money missing from the safe, and I want to know if you know anything about it. That’s all. No one is accusing you of anything.”

“Everyone is accusing me of everything!” I cried, back against the door. “I don’t know what happened to your money or your funds or whatever your problem is. Just leave me alone.” I turned around, shoving open the door and storming out of the office.

I couldn’t stand listening to him try to coax me into fessing up to something I didn’t do. I’d done everything he wanted.

I spent the entire summer stuck in that awful rehab facility. I did the community service. I even wrote a really badly written apology letter to him. But there I was still holding the blame on my shoulders.

I stalked into the school's weight room, pushing past the pair of skinny guys doing more talking than lifting. I loaded the bar with a hundred thirty on each side before I slid on my back onto the bench. I settled beneath the cold bar, wrapping my fingers around it until my knuckles turned white.

"There you are, Pat," Lincoln called, and I could hear the grin in his voice as I pushed the bar off the rack.

"Superman's back to work already, huh?" Top drawled sarcastically.

Beneath my skin, something crawled across my flesh at the nickname. I barely managed a grunt of acknowledgment as I drew the bar to my chest.

"Who shoved a stick up your hole?" Isaac asked, blue eyes narrowed. "Seriously, man, you've been tense all day."

I pushed the bar back away from me harshly. "I'm fine." More footsteps filled the room, and I pushed myself harder. "We just need to focus. Our first practice is in like three hours."

“You already know you’re gonna do good. Relax,” Top said, stepping to stand right behind my head to spot me.

“I don’t need a spot,” I gritted out, ignoring his comment and pushing hard against the bar as I lifted it from my chest.

He scoffed out a laugh. “Yes, you do, idiot. You’re literally shaking right now.”

“Hey, Top! There’s a girl waiting outside for you,” one of the other boys announced.

Top sighed, but there was a smile on his lips. “Alright, you get your wish. No spot for you,” he mumbled before flying out of the room. “But only because I’m holding on to the promise of a *gorgeous* blonde waiting for me on the other side of that door!”

A set of footsteps grew louder until someone was standing right behind my head again. “Wanna talk about it?” Heath asked quietly.

“Not really.” Sweat dribbled down my brow. “Wanna talk about where you’ve been all day?” I countered on a heavy breath.

Heavy. Very heavy. I was benching double what I’d been doing at the start of last year—courtesy of my mother. Over the summer, she had forbidden me from using my phone, TV, car, and dirt bike. I had to use a bicycle to go anywhere, and even

negotiating her down into letting me use *that* was difficult. And even *then*, the only places I was allowed to go were training and Heath's house.

He shrugged. "Not really," he said, throwing my own words back at me.

His hands hovered beneath the bar as I struggled to lift it all the way to the rack. He was distracting me, throwing me off my game. I clamped my jaw shut, thrusting the bar back on the rack with one last push before leaping off the bench.

"I wanna get out of here, Heath," I said a little frantically, keeping my voice low as I paced in front of him. "I can't be here. I can't be with these people. I have to-I need to *go*. I need to *breathe*. I need to—"

He clasped a hand on my shoulder firmly. "Relax. You need to relax."

I shook his hand off, feeling hot frustration coil in my stomach. "I can't. I can't! Everything I did this summer. *Everything* I did—it was all a crap waste of time."

He narrowed his green eyes, crossing his arms like a pissed-off father. "It was *not* a crap waste of time," he said in a stern voice. "You did all the hard stuff, and you did it right. *You* did that. You

made the change. You saved yourself. That's never a waste of time."

I wanted to laugh in his face. *Saved myself?* I was barely hanging on to the thin thread holding my life together. He was just as brainwashed as my mom if he thought that I was a hero for following orders. I didn't think I would magically be all better by the end of the summer. I did think I would get what following those orders was supposed to get me—a so-called *fresh start* at school.

"Doesn't matter to them," was all I said. "Mory's still using me as his default answer to any and all of his problems."

"Screw him," he said breezily, but I could see what was spinning all over his face. Worry. Concern. Panic. "He'll see. Just give it time. Be *patient*."

He and Lincoln were the only people other than my family and specific faculty members who knew about everything that happened over the last couple years. Most of the time, I regretted ever telling them, but for *some* of the time, I guess it makes things easier...in a way. They both worried all the time, which was annoying as heck. Lincoln, while kind of sucked at the whole reassurance thing, knew how to distract me. But Heath? Heath knew me. He always knew what I was thinking and how to just *fix* it.

“Yeah, I know,” I muttered. Guilt began to creep up into my throat then for making him fix it again. “You okay? You never miss school.” He shrugged, but then he was... “Dude, are you blushing right now?” I asked, a small line of laughter falling off my mouth.

He pushed me back, shaking his head. “I’m not blushing, geez. It’s just hot in here.”

“What has you so freaked? Sneak off with a *girl* for the day?” I asked sarcastically.

Heath was the only guy in our group, except maybe Davis, who had never kissed a girl before. He’d never had a girlfriend or a crush or anything. So, the idea of him playing hooky with a girl on the first day of *school*, his like third-favorite place in the world, was a little laughable.

But he only blushed harder at my accusation. My eyebrows flew up. “Hold on. You actually—”

“It wasn’t like that,” he mumbled in his defense, rubbing the back of his neck uncomfortably.

“What’s her name?” I asked with a little nod, and his eyes darted around the room. His discomfort was really funny, don’t get me wrong, but this was all a little strange.

He shrugged again. “You wouldn’t know her.”

“Try me,” I said suspiciously.

He muttered something under his breath, and I stepped closer. “What?” He said it again, but I didn’t catch a single vowel. “Gosh, suddenly you’re a mouse. Say it one more time, Duff.”

“It’s Collins!” he exclaimed, annoyance rippling all over his features as he ran a hand through his hair.

“What’s wrong with my sister?” Topher asked, brow furrowing as he waltzed back in. He looked between Heath and me suspiciously. “Is she okay?”

Heath’s face turned even redder. “She’s fine.”

The concern fled Top’s face only to be replaced by a light sheath of anger. “Then why are you talking about her?”

“His sister wanted to know where she was this morning,” I lied easily, throwing in a shrug just for fun.

Topher looked between us again, sharp blue eyes swirling. “Why would Duffy know?”

I laughed coolly, swiping a sweat rag off the bench. “Because he’s friends with the girl’s brother?” I reminded him, and his shoulders relaxed a bit.

“Well, you can tell Ada I don’t know where she is,” Top answered with a suspicious glare.

Topher didn’t really talk about his house much or his family or any of that stuff. But he was really, *really* protective of his little sister. I mean, all the guys were over their own sisters, but he took it a step further. He’d always done his best to keep her close at all times, like he was scared something would jump out of the bushes and claw her eyes out.

He was the one who first suggested our team rule: sisters are off limits. I didn’t have a sister our age, so it didn’t really matter to me either way, but all the other guys seemed to agree. Which was fair. If my baby sister, Freya, were our age, I wouldn’t want my whore friends getting their hands near her either. But that didn’t mean the rule didn’t come back to bite me every once in a while.

Soft brown eyes flashed in my head, and I bit back a groan. She needed to get out of my head. *Now*. She was just another girl. But she was all over my mind. Her laugh was on my tongue. Her perfume was in my nose. Her eyes were there every time I closed mine. Her voice was still playing in my mind like a broken record, repeating over and over.

“Boys! Listen up,” Coach Deerborne barked from the doorway, drawing me from my Lana-filled thoughts. Like clockwork, the loud chatter quieted down, and every head turned.

He sighed, working a light brown hand over his stubbly jaw. “Practice ends thirty minutes early today.”

There were many groans and a couple of cheers that followed his news.

“Why?” Topher asked with a frown, stealing the question from my mouth before I could ask it.

Sure, skipping thirty minutes of conditioning sounded nice, but the first practice of the season was actually fun. We scrimmaged the entire practice to see where everyone was starting skill-wise. Top and I always got to show the new forwards who thought they were hot crap that we were twenty times better than them. Now we had thirty less minutes to do that.

Deerborne sighed, crossing his arms with a shrug. “Because you boys are getting *interviewed*.” Panic shot through me instantly.

“What?” Top balked.

“Like for the newspaper?” Lincoln asked with a grin, propping his elbows up on the machine behind him. “Are they going to do a whole photo shoot, too? Because if so, could you tell them to get my right side? It’s just—it’s usually my good side. I mean, my left is great too, and... you know, now that I think

about it, what the heck? There's no picture that can do me justice." He kissed his flexed biceps, then, like a psychopath. "But then again, a picture says a thousand words, right?"

Deerborne rolled his eyes. "It's for the school paper, Murphy. And they're taking one picture each, so pipe down." He was practically rolling his eyes as he said, "Apparently, they're opening a sports column, and they want to do an *exposé* of the varsity team."

"So, they're just gonna ask us about soccer then, right?" I asked, hoping I didn't sound as hesitant as I felt.

Interviews were bad. Mory drilled that in my head sophomore year, the first time he caught me alone in the locker room with a line of something no future collegiate athlete should've been putting in their body.

Even when I was fifteen, he said he *knew* then that I could have a real career out of soccer if I could get a grip. But I lost that grip for a year and a half, and while I was free-falling, I took a few more things to help me become blissfully unaware of just how hard I was going to land. Now that I'd peeled myself off the concrete and dragged myself back up to grab my future once again, I had to do everything I could to keep it. And that meant *no one* else could know about my failings.

No one could know *who* I turned to and *what* I turned to and who I turned *into*. No one could know. So, interviews where people were trying to dig into my past? Very bad.

“Yeah, soccer, and your lives,” Deerborne explained with a shrug. “Just be civil and cooperate so we don’t have to do this any longer than we have to.”

“Well, it’s just today, right, Coach?” Heath asked.

Coach sighed for the millionth time. “It’s a month-long *project*. They want it to be in-depth, and they want to hear each of your *perspectives* on the soccer program at the *new school*.” He was talking like he knew how dumb this whole thing sounded, but he wanted to keep his job.

“It's the same as it was at the old school,” I grumbled.

“Look, just humor them for a few weeks and get it over with,” he said sternly, giving us all a solemn glare.

5

Cherry Lollipop

Lana

The newsroom, I realized, was my favorite room in the entire school. It smelled like fresh ink and new books, and I had my *own* desk.

A few weeks before school started, we all had to submit an article to see if we would be able to have a significant role at the paper or not. So basically, to make sure we didn't suck, they had us write a long freaking essay. Once our work was reviewed, they sent out our assignments. And I was currently squinting at mine to be sure I was reading it right.

“Sports column, huh?”

I jumped, shooting a glance to my right to find a cinnamon-haired girl peering over my shoulder to read my sheet casually, like we were the best of friends. She had full cheeks and perfectly lined lips that were curved into a grin.

I smiled politely, holding up my sheet as I turned to face her. “I guess so. What'd you get?”

She grinned a perfect Barbie smile that held the hint of something devilish. “Gossip column.”

I coughed out a short laugh. “They let us have a gossip column here?”

She wiggled her sharp eyebrows mischievously. “They did once I convinced them it was a *social* column to keep us all familiar with our peers, and get lesser-known students recognized,” she recited, peering at me through bedazzled pink sunglasses that looked as if they’d been taken from the 2000’s.

Most people looked idiotic with sunglasses inside, but this girl made it seem like it was completely natural.

“Smart,” I applauded with a shy smile.

She stuck out her hand. “Delaney Whelan,” she introduced.

“Davis is your brother, right?” I asked, and she smiled wider.

“Thank you!”

A crease formed in my brow as I shook her hand. “For what?”

“For calling him *my* brother instead of me, *his* little sister. Very important difference, and everyone always forgets,” she explained, dropping her hand and crossing her arms over the

pink zip-up sweater she'd thrown on over her uniform. "But you didn't, so you have my eternal gratitude, chickie."

"Um, great, thanks," I answered clumsily. "I'm Lana, by the way."

"Yeah, yeah, I know."

"You do?" I asked with a frown.

She laughed, nodding towards the name card on my desk. "Kind of a dead giveaway." I laughed, wiping a hand over my embarrassed face and sighing. "Well, that and Davis has mentioned you a couple of times in his stories," she explained.

Before I could process what she said or respond to her, a voice shouted from the doorway, "If you're covering the sports column, please make your way to the boys' locker rooms."

My face paled. "We don't have to go like *in* there... Do we?" I asked her, and she shrugged, still grinning.

"Who knows? Go find out, and tell me every little secret you overhear. I need material for my column, too, so don't be selfish!" she called as I started towards the door.

"I won't," I called back, following the mass of other writers as they swarmed the hall.

I pulled the folded sheet out of my pocket and began scanning it in the hopes of finding a name—the name I was assigned to. I was hoping I would get someone I didn't know, because, believe it or not, that would be less awkward for me. At least then, it would be all professional, and I wouldn't get called *Little Lana* at any point during our interview.

Thankfully, we didn't end up going *into* the boys' locker room. We just huddled outside of it—writers on the left, players on the right. Miss Lavinia was in between, calling out pairs.

“Jane Coldwell and Topher Barnaby,” she called, and the two paired off. “Nick Darcy and Lincoln Murphy..” They joined the pairs. “Lana Dunnahy and...” she trailed off, and her eyes scanned the page. *Please, be a stranger. Please, please...* “Patrick O’Shannon.”

My heart dropped to my butt.

Just. My. Luck.

Our eyes met across the divide, and this time, there was a flash of recognition there and a spark of something else that made my stomach heat up.

I pushed down the physical reaction and sighed, squeezing through the group to meet him in the middle. His dark eyes flickered over my face, and for a moment we just stood there—me

looking up at him while he watched me carefully. His hair was wet like he'd dumped water over his head. A drop of water was clinging to the end of a dark lock of hair curling over his forehead. His eyes were heavy and warm, looking at me through thick lashes.

My word, he was hot.

The two of us turned in sync, walking to the end of the line of pairs without so much as a word. We settled beside each other, and his elbow brushed against mine as he moved in one burning motion.

Lincoln was right in front of Patrick, and he glanced back once. But when his gaze met mine, his lips curved into a lazy grin, and he turned around to angle his body towards me.

“Little Lana?” he asked, even though he knew who I was. “You’re gonna start hurting my feelings if you tell me you chose Pat over me,” he drawled.

Patrick rolled his eyes. “It was assigned, remember?” he reminded him wearily.

Lincoln cocked an eyebrow. “So, does that mean you would’ve chosen me if you could?” he asked, and I shook my head.

“No way,” I said with a little laugh.

He frowned. “Why not? I promise, I’d be a very interesting subject.”

“Because I wanted someone I’d never met before,” I said simply. “That way they could call me by my real name instead of—”

“Little Lana?” he filled in. “I guess you are pretty grown up now.” He winked then.

My face flushed, and Patrick sighed heavily. “Linc, can you keep it in your pants for one second, please? I can’t hear a word she’s saying.”

Lincoln laughed breezily, following Patrick’s line of sight to Miss Lavinia, where she was saying, “...for today. You may do your interview anywhere you want, but you need to be back here by six. You’re all dismissed.”

Everyone began to break off, including Patrick, who just started walking in the opposite direction from where everyone else was going. I frowned, quickening my pace to a jog as I rushed to catch up with him.

“Geez, slow down,” I mumbled, clutching my notebook.

“I’m just walking,” he muttered.

“Well, could you please *just walk* a little slower?” I asked, striving for politeness while my chest was burning with frustration.

He didn’t look at me. “I’m walking normally.”

I caught his arm, forcing him to whirl around and look at me. “Okay, what is your problem? I mean, *what* did I do to piss you off so badly?”

I wasn’t usually so blunt with people I didn’t know, but I was really looking forward to this project, and he was ruining it for me. And that was really pissing me off.

He huffed a sigh, looking to our right where everyone had just been. The space was empty now. Not a soul in sight. His chest rose and fell heavily, and when his eyes landed on me again, they were softer around the hard edges.

“You didn’t do anything,” he exhaled, slinging his hands low on his hips. “I’m just tired.”

“Well, that doesn’t mean you have to be a jerk,” I said, holding my notebook a little closer to my chest. “I’m getting whiplash from the mood swings, seriously.”

His lips tipped up into a reluctant smile. “I’m not the one who lied about knowing you and *reintroduced* myself.”

I gaped at him. “Well, I thought maybe it would jog your memory a bit if I reintroduced myself after you gave me such a *warm* welcome at lunch.”

He cringed. “Like I said, I was tired. Nothing personal.”

“Lack of sleep gives you temporary amnesia?” I asked, remembering just how cold his eyes were during lunch.

He stepped closer. “How about I make it up to you?”

I cocked an eyebrow, hoping I didn’t look as nervous as I was starting to feel. “How do you plan on doing that?”

“Food. I’ll take you to grab some food. On me,” he suggested, white teeth flashing a messy grin at me.

“I’m pretty sure when she said we could do our interview anywhere, she didn’t mean *off* campus,” I answered, tilting my head to the side and angling my head back a little as he stepped closer.

“Who said anything about doing our interview?” he asked, eyes twinkling.

“Hey, this may not be important to you, but I need this interview, okay? I have to prove myself at the paper, and the biggest story fell in my lap when I got your stupid name,” I told

him with a frustrated exhale. “Why are you so against the interview anyway?”

“Sure, you’re... not hungry?” he asked, dodging my question skilfully.

“I’m just gonna ask a few questions, Patrick. That’s all.”

“Because I’m thinking burgers. You’re not vegetarian, are you? I mean, no big deal if you are, but that just changes our options,” he said, still grinning down at me.

I exhaled heavily. “Fine,” I surrendered. “How about this? We can eat somewhere, but you have to answer at least five questions.”

He narrowed his blue eyes. “Three.”

“Four.” I tilted my chin up challengingly. “Final offer.”

“Alright, fine. Four questions and food, but nothing too touchy-feely or I’m out,” he said, and I rolled my eyes.

“So, *what’s your deepest darkest secret* is probably out then?” I teased.

He nodded, giving me an adorable close-lipped smile that made my stomach flip. “Yep.”

“You’re very evasive,” I told him begrudgingly as we started down the hallway. “Like extremely.”

“So, you always been into this stuff?” he asked, once again avoiding any form of confrontation.

“What stuff? Journalism?” I asked, and he nodded. “Well, yeah, I guess so.” As we walked down the hall, it kind of hit me that I was actually alone with a boy, going to eat with him by myself. *Was this like super dangerous?* I swallowed hard. “I’ve always liked writing and learning and stuff.”

“Learning? You’ve always liked learning?” he asked, both eyebrows raised as he looked at me with both shock and interest.

My cheeks flushed. “Well, not *learning* like I spend my every waking hour stuffed up in a library with my glasses shoved up my nose. I just like finding out new things about people and places and writing about them,” I explained, and he nodded as I spoke.

“I see,” was all he said.

Heat rushed to my neck on instinct. “It’s not as lame as it sounds,” I mumbled, regretting talking about it in the first place.

He looked at me then like he was just now realizing something. “Oh no, no.” He touched a hand to my elbow

sincerely. “No, I think it’s cool. If I could, I think writing about stuff would be fun.”

“Yeah?” I asked, a relieved smile crossing my face. “What would you want to write about?”

He shrugged, shoving his hands in his pockets as he looked up at the ceiling. “Stuff people don’t think about right, I guess.”

“Like what?”

“Like how everyone assumes the guy on the side of the road is an idiot meth head who wasted his life away until he ended up there,” he said, and my heart beat stumbled over itself. “When in reality, he has like a *whole* life he had before, you know?” He glanced at me through the corner of his eye and blushed just a little. “Or something like that. I don’t know.”

“Something like that, huh?” I answered, a little shocked by his answer. “No, that’s really cool, actually. I wanna do something like that eventually.”

“Why not now?” he asked, and something about his genuine interest in his voice made me want to tell him just everything he wanted to know.

“Well, that’s why this interview is so important,” I started, looking up at his gorgeous side profile. “I have to prove that I can

write well enough on this piece, so I can get my own column at some point. Then I can write whatever I want.”

“So, you’re using me? I’m a tool on your way up the ladder?” he asked, feigning offense as he tutted his tongue.

I laughed, reaching to push open the door only for him to beat me to it. “If it makes you feel any better, I promise you’re my *favorite* tool.”

He hummed in response as my shoulder brushed against his hard chest. “Yeah, yeah. I bet you say that to all your boys.”

“Ah, maybe, but I only mean it with you,” I said, ignoring the way my shoulder burned from the contact.

He dropped his head, laughing as he followed me into the parking lot. “Don’t I feel special?”

—————99—————

I swallowed the mouthful of fries I just shoved in my mouth before crossing my legs under me. “Okay, you’re telling me you would *seriously* rather Malcolm Todd over Jeff Buckley?”

He shifted his body to face me as he held his hands out seriously, moving them as he spoke. “Yes, obviously. Malcolm has

way more songs than Buckley, which means more variety in each concert.”

“Okay, maybe, but they all sound so similar, so it takes away the perks of them being technically different songs,” I argued, and he held both hands over his face.

“I am not hearing this. Did you really just say all his songs sound the same?” he asked, looking utterly appalled.

“Not *all*, but a lot of them do,” I clarified, crossing my arms defiantly.

“Well, Buckley’s songs are all about being obsessed with a girl who doesn’t want you back,” he accused, and I gasped, smacking his arm.

“Take it back!” I cried.

He shook his head, grinning like the cocky jerk he was. “I will not.”

“His songs are about *yearning*,” I groaned. “Yearning, Patrick.”

He held his hands up in defeat. “Fine. When we are both faced with the very realistic and life-altering question of what artist we

would choose to have endless concert tickets to, I won't save you a seat at my concert."

"Well, I'll be in the pit for Buckley, so I couldn't save you one anyway," I said with a sweet smile.

He laughed, tilting his head back to rest on his headrest. "How's the food?"

"Almost as good as your stalling skills," I shot back, taking the last bite of my double cheeseburger before wiping a napkin over my greasy fingers. "Seriously, we've only gone over one of my four questions. You're not going to argue me into forgetting about my job."

He slouched back in his seat, closing his eyes. "We have like a month. We don't have to get into everything now, do we?"

"We have to at least get more than what age you started playing," I said with a frown. "Now, come on. Be a good sport, and you'll get a prize."

His eyes cracked open, and he raised a brow. "A prize?"

"With a shiny bow. Now, can you please cooperate?" I asked, and he sat up straighter.

“Well, with the promise of a prize, how can I resist?” he deadpanned.

I swiped my black notebook off the floor of his car. “Second question,” I started, pushing open my notebook and clicking my pen. “Where did you grow up?”

He exhaled deeply, closing his eyes again. “Here.”

“In Troye?”

“Is that your third question?”

“Patrick.”

“Lana.”

I sighed. “Please, don’t be difficult,” I half-pleaded, half-demanded. He inhaled sharply, and I went on hopefully, “Did I mention the bow is really, *really* shiny?”

A beat of silence. “Yes, Troye. My parents moved my family here when I was six.”

I nodded eagerly, writing down every single word he said, not knowing how much more I’d be able to get from him. “Did you like it? Growing up here, I mean.” He didn’t answer at first. “This is the third question.”

He smiled triumphantly, but it was fleeting. “I liked it enough. It was better once I started playing soccer.”

I moved my pen across the page in swift, sweeping motions as I scribbled down his words. “Why’s that?” I asked, not looking up from my page.

I could hear him shifting, practically radiating discomfort. “I uh, I met most of my friends there—Heath and Linc and Top and all them.”

“Do you think you guys being so close makes it easier or harder to play together?” I shook my pen that was rapidly running out of ink as I wrote.

“Both. Mostly easier,” he answered uneasily. “We have better team chemistry than most of our competitors, which gives us an advantage.”

I gave a big nod, swiping my extra pen from my uniform’s pocket to jot down more notes and quotes. “And do you enjoy playing?”

“What?”

I looked up to find him and puffs of confusion clouding his narrowed eyes. “Do you enjoy it? Playing soccer, I mean.”

He tilted his head to the side like he was confused. “Yeah, of course, I do.”

“Was there ever a time yo—”

“Hey, hey, you’ve hit your limit plus a few bonus questions, because I was scared to lose my prize,” he said, leaning over the center console as he tried to peer at my page.

I snatched the notebook back to my chest, closing it with a little *slap*. “No peeking.”

His lower lip pouted out slightly. “It’s about me anyway. Kind of makes it my business, no?”

“Nope,” I said with a smile, closing my notebook before sliding it back under my seat. “Makes it confidential property of the paper.”

“So, does that mean we’re done now?” he asked, not sounding nearly as bored or exasperated as I expected him to.

“Not yet,” I said, pulling out one of the digital cameras we were all handed. “We need a picture first.”

He threw his head back again. “Seriously?”

“Oh, come on. It’ll be fun. You can pose however you want,” I said with a smile, giggling at the dread creasing his brow.

“Well, if I can pose however I want,” he mumbled, but he unbuckled his seatbelt and pushed open the car door.

“What are you doing?”

“Well, we’re not taking it in here, are we?”

He didn’t wait to step out before rounding the front of the car to pull open my door. “Ladies first.”

I hopped out of the car, camera in hand. “Okay, strike your first pose,” I stated, and he glared at me.

“Please, don’t make this any more painful than it has to be,” he groaned, wiping a hand over his face.

“Come on,” I coaxed, and he sighed, leaning against the side of the car and crossing his arms over his chest.

I raised the camera to my eye and clicked the top button. The camera beeped in response, and I didn’t bother looking at it yet. I knew it would look good. The sun was setting and bathing his tan skin in warm, golden light. He looked like he could work for a casual modelling agency, whatever that was.

“Okay, next pose,” I ordered, and he raised an eyebrow.

“Next pose, really? I thought we only needed one picture.”

I smiled. “I want options.”

“Bossy, bossy,” he said, but he was smiling.

“Put your hands in your pockets or something like you do when you’re brooding,” I said, and he raised an eyebrow.

“I do not *brood*.”

I laughed at that because his rejection of the truth was genuinely laughable. “Yep, you really, really do. And the fact that I know this and you don’t, and I met you *today*, is a little funny.”

“Just take the picture, Dunnahy,” he ordered.

“Well, well,” I murmured, holding the camera back up to my eye. “Look who’s being bossy now.”

Something about him had made me loosen up. My usual guards were down, and I was joking and laughing with him like we’d been friends for years.

“Okay, now some candid,” I told him, and he shook his head with a small laugh. He reached up to run a hand through his dark hair, bicep flexing through the sleeve of his black compression shirt.

My stomach dipped, and I cleared my throat. “Just a few. Don’t be camera shy.”

“See, if I didn’t have the promise of a prize, I would be revolting as we speak,” he mumbled, turning to the side like he was taking a mugshot.

When we finished our impromptu photoshoot and were back in the car, he looked at me expectantly. “Alright, here it is,” I said, reaching into my purse and pulling out the prize in question.

His jaw dropped. “This is my prize?”

I tilted my head to the side. “Don’t tell me you’re disappointed.”

“Bonus questions, Dunny. I gave you *bonus* questions for this?” he asked, taking the lollipop from my hands, fingers brushing against mine in a way that felt entirely intentional.

I sucked in a breath, praying for casualty while my stomach did dozens of flips and twirls. “C’mon. I gave you the best flavor.”

He unwrapped the lollipop, all the while keeping his eyes on mine. “Your favorite?”

I nodded, curling my knees to my chest as I watched him shamelessly. “Of course,” I answered quietly.

“Well, then it doesn’t seem fair to take your favorite all for myself,” he said softly, resting his elbow on the center console between us.

“What, you wanna split it in half?” I asked with a laugh, and he shrugged.

“We could always share,” he suggested, and while his voice was casual the slight smirk tugging at the corner of his perfect mouth told me he knew what he was doing.

He brought the candy to his lips slowly, drawing my eyes to his mouth. This was the moment I was rapidly reminded of the fact that I was alone with a boy I was painfully attracted to. *A stranger I was painfully attracted to*, I reminded myself. I didn’t know him, and I definitely had no business sharing lollipops with him.

But my heart was galloping in my chest, making my pulse so loud it drowned out every sensible thought left in my head. “Sounds like a fair deal,” I whispered, and he handed me the lollipop. “But I feel bad. I’m stealing half your prize.”

I focused on the flavor of the cherry lollipop in my mouth. And I didn’t think about the slight red mark on his lips from the lollipop in *my* mouth. Or the way his shirt fit across his chest

perfectly. I also *really* didn't think about the way his Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed, tilting his head to the side to watch me.

His gaze was heated, warming me from my hips to my heart. "That's alright. I think I'll find it in my heart to forgive you."

"What if," I started, passing him the lollipop and rolling my lips in once. "You got to pick the other half of your prize?" I suggested tentatively.

His deep eyes were smoldering now, and he smiled. "Oh, yeah?"

I took in a nervous breath. "Yeah. It only seems fair."

"Alright, well, I think I know what I want."

"Already? You don't have to, um, think about it at all?" I asked as he pulled the lollipop out of his mouth, revealing a devilish grin paired with even redder lips that I knew tasted like the lollipop in my mouth now. "Because you can." My habitual nervous nature was climbing back up my throat with each passing moment.

He shook his head. "Next time we do an interview, we do *three* questions, and I choose where we eat."

“You chose today,” I reminded him with a furrowed brow, but my pulse was hammering at the idea of spending more time alone with him.

He shook his head. “Yes, but today, I chose with you in mind. I didn’t want to take you somewhere you’d hate, so I picked a neutral place. Tomorrow, I wanna pick a non-neutral place.”

“That’s all you want?”

“That and the promise of your company, dear,” he teased, but it still made me smile.

I hadn’t realized just how close we were until just then, when I passed him the lollipop back, and suddenly I only had to move my hand a few inches to reach his big hand. My pulse was racing, and the air between us felt charged and heavy as his eyes dropped to my mouth. His face was just so... perfect. He had all these sharp, defined features and this dark freckle on the side of his jaw.

“I thought you didn’t like answering all my questions,” I breathed, somewhere between telling and asking.

He shrugged, eyes on my lips as he shifted just a little closer. “I don’t like answering your interviewer questions, but I can tolerate the rest.”

“*Tolerate?* My, my, take me now. I’m swooning,” I whispered sarcastically, suddenly unable to bring my voice any higher than a breath.

He smiled, tilting his head to the side curiously. “So, you’ll go out with me again?” he asked.

“You mean go out to *interview* you again?” I clarified, and before he could answer, his gaze snagged on something behind my head.

His eyes widened and panic flooded his features. “Shoot, shoot, shoot... Duck!” he muttered, and then he reached over and actually shoved me down in my seat, gently enough but still not very kindly.

I hid without thinking. “What’s going on?” I hissed, glancing up at him as he leaned back in his seat, waving casually at someone.

“Okay, um, all clear,” he said, at least having the decency to blush with shame. “Sorry about that.”

“What did you just...” I looked around the nearly empty parking lot, but all I saw was the backs of a couple of kids. I squinted, recognizing them as a couple from our school. That’s when it hit me. “Wait.. did you just hide me?”

“No! What? No, no, of course not! I didn’t hide you,” he said quickly, and I shook my head, a familiar frustration building in my stomach.

“You suck at lying.”

He reached to scratch the back of his neck. “I didn’t hide you! I was just waiting for you to be visible once the uh, once they passed us.”

I crossed my arms, buckling my seatbelt quickly and looking out the window so I didn’t have to look at his flushed face. “We’re ten minutes past. We should get back.”

“Don’t be mad,” he implored. “It’s not what you think. Trust me.”

“I *think* that you just shoved me under the seat so you didn’t have to be seen with me, and as vivid as my imagination may be at times, it seems like it’s lining up pretty close with reality here. Now, can we get back now? Please?” I asked exasperatedly, feeling both embarrassment and anger swirl in the base of my stomach.

“Fine, yeah. Let’s go,” he muttered, finally starting the car once again.

6

Silence. More Silence.

Patrick

She was mad. It didn't take a rocket scientist to figure that one out. We spent the entire car ride in silence. Dead silence. I tried turning some music on, but that only seemed to make things worse because my phone wouldn't connect, and I missed a green light, meaning we got stuck in the miserable ride even longer. I tried making conversation, but that only got me a few words in response before she went back to glaring out the window.

"I know you're upset," I started when we pulled into the parking lot of the school.

She turned to me now, smiling sweetly. "Where would you get that impression?" Her smile fell instantly, and she glared at me.

"I didn't mean to hide you, okay?" I lied, and she just went back to gathering her things.

"Okay."

“Lana,” I sighed. “C’mon.”

That was all I could say, because she couldn’t understand the thought process behind the jerk move of shoving her out of view.

She shook her head with a scoff. “See you tomorrow.”

Then she pushed open the door and practically fled. I watched as she jogged away from me, not looking back once.

I shook, frustration burning in my chest as I slammed my hands against the wheel. “Shoot!” I was screwing *everything* up.

I shouldn’t have taken her off campus. I shouldn’t have asked to take her out again tomorrow. I *should* have just walked into a stuffy classroom with her, answered her questions, and gone home. Except, I really, *really* didn’t want to. So, I took her out and shared a lollipop with her, and I really enjoyed it.

I was having so much fun that I actually started to let my guard slip. Until I got doused with the ice-cold bucket of water that was Johnny and his girlfriend walking past the car. What was I thinking? I couldn’t start dragging other people down with me. I already had enough people in my life who were at risk of getting into trouble because of me.

I barely knew her, but I had enough of a mind to know that she had something. And I didn't really understand it, but it seemed... special.

Which meant she needed to get as far away from me as possible. If anyone found out that we were spending any kind of time together outside of school, then it could get around to *him*, and anything special about her would get ripped away. Just like it could with everyone I care about.

I squeezed my eyes shut, shaking my head as if that would erase the memory.

"Relax," he'd drawled. "Get me the money, and you won't have to stress about this anymore."

Sweat laced my forehead. "I don't have it," I gritted out. "You know I don't."

His throaty, raspy voice rolled out a laugh. "You will."

"I can't. I can't get five thousand dollars by Friday," I exhaled, half shouting, half begging.

A string of silence spun over the line. "We both know you can swing it. C'mon, O'Shannon, daddy can't help you out? Or... does he also not know about our arrangement? I'd be happy to fill him and a few of the guys at Stanford in on the little uh," he broke off, laughing

harder now. *“The little ways you coped while they put your sister six feet—”*

“He knows,” I bit out, angry tears stinging my eyes at his cruel reminder. “But our deal... it has to stay between us. Just-just give me an extra week, and I’ll get it to you.”

“I’ll give you until Sunday,” he growled, his voice devoid of all humor. “Or maybe I’ll come and get it myself from one of Troye’s big five, huh?”

“What are you talking about?” I spat out, panic trembling in my veins.

“Troye Private School is lined up against the Warriors. With the Big Five sporting our starting lineup—Topher Barnaby, Isaac Dunnahy, Davis Whelan, Lincoln Murphy, and our school’s savior and hero, Patrick O’Shannon—it looks like we’ll be finishing the season undefeated. But don’t miss tonight’s game to find out.” There was a long pause as his words sank into my flesh like the vicious teeth of a tamed beast. “Ring a bell, O’Shannon?”

I knew what he was reading. It was one of the papers from the end of last season. “Don’t go there. I’ll get you your money,” I sputtered out, feeling like I was a helpless little kid as I begged him to leave my best friends alone.

That was supposed to be the last time I spoke to him.

That was two months ago.

We'd had three different transactions since then, each one preceded by a worse threat if I didn't give him what he wanted. No one knew about our deal. Not my mom or dad. Not Linc. Not even Duffy. That was another part of the deal.

The thought that anyone in my life could suddenly be attacked or hurt in some way by this blackmailing monster was *killing me*. Killing. Me. He was threatening to not only expose me to the media, therefore taking away any chance at collegiate soccer, but also, he was threatening to hurt the people I love.

And when someone starts marking the people you love like targets, you start realizing just how much you care about them. I really loved my family, and I really loved my friends, and I was really worried about them all the time. Which meant I had to stop loving any more people. I couldn't put anyone else at risk, and I couldn't handle having to worry about anyone else.

I couldn't let anyone else in.

And this girl? She seemed like she could get in wherever she wanted, and right now, with that little notebook and those wide eyes that stared *right* through me, it seemed like she wanted to get in my *head*. And I'd allowed myself to loosen up so much around

her that she actually started getting close to the walls of thick cement curving around my mind.

I raked a hand through my hair, pushing out a heavy breath. It's just a good thing those kids from school walked by. I needed that reminder. I needed to get my sanity back in place. And no one could know about my slip-up.

*If he found out. If he—*A knock sounded on my window, and I jumped, clutching my heaving chest. There in my window was the creeper himself, grinning like an idiot.

I rolled my eyes at Lincoln, who just mouthed, “Unlock the door, Shanny!”

Reluctantly, I sucked in one last heavy breath before reaching to my left to unlock the car. The second it *clicked*, he was climbing up into my car, tossing his duffle into my backseat, and moving his mouth at a mile per minute.

“You’re so lucky you got Lana, dude. I got stuck with some guy named *Nicholas*, and he kept sniffing. *Sniffing*, Shanny. I mean it. Every two seconds he was hacking up a loogie, rubbing his hair, or *sniffing*. And! And to make it worse, he did *not* get my good side. Not in the slightest. I mean, of course, the picture was still good, but it wasn’t the greatest... Did you catch my Billie

Eilish reference? But seriously, it *sucked*... Shanny? Hello, did I lose you there?"

"Still here, Linc. Still here," I sighed, wiping a hand over my eyes.

He laughed, slouching back in his seat. "Sorry, sorry," he said with a carefree grin. "How was *your* interview?"

"Fine."

"Fine? You got to be alone with Lana Dunnahy for thirty glorious minutes and all you have to say is *fine*?"

I reached over to smack him with a reluctant laugh. "You talk so weird all the time, and did you already forget that she's off limits?"

He frowned. "What? Says who?"

I cocked an eyebrow. It didn't really matter to me, obviously. I just didn't wanna deal with his broken heart act when their fling inevitably ended.

"Says the team rules, dipstick," I reminded him, swallowing the bad memories clogging my veins. "Sisters are off limits, and she's Dunny's sister, remember?"

He rolled his eyes. “We made that dumb rule in middle school. It hardly counts now.”

I scoffed out a laugh. “I think it counts even more now.”

“How do you figure that?”

“Because in middle school the most we’d do was hold hands with a girl and buy her a soda at a game,” I said, raising both eyebrows at him.

He smirked. “Speak for yourself, Shanny. While you were holding hands and playing nice, I wa—”

“Don’t,” I interrupted, holding a hand up before he could finish whatever dirty joke he had in mind. “Don’t finish that,” I exhaled.

He laughed, clearly pleased with himself. “Whatever. All I’m saying is that rules don’t make me blind and dumb. She’s funny, and she’s got the whole hot reporter thing working for her. *Gosh*, you’re so lucky. Fricking Nicholas...”

“I guess, but she’s not really my type,” I lied, shoving my car in reverse before pulling out of the spot I’d messily pulled into.

His obsession with her was really starting to get on my nerves. He didn’t even know her. I know what you’re thinking. I didn’t

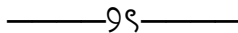
either, but still. You didn't see me losing my mind about her. She was *just* a girl. That's it. That's all.

He shook his head with a laugh. "You're insane."

"You should be thinking about practice right now," I reminded him, hoping to steer our conversation *away* from anything involving Lana. "We have a shot against Victoria if we actually start putting in the work."

He reached over and actually put his nasty little finger *on* my mouth. "Shh, shh. No soccer talk. Two-hour practices plus training is enough for me, okay?"

An hour and a half. We only had practice for an hour and a half every day for the next *month*. But still, I took one big breath. Lincoln was like a child, and yelling at a child was just mean.



When I walked through the door to my house that night, all I wanted to do was fall into my bed and go to sleep. But instead, I was greeted by my name being shrieked into the air and two little arms wrapping around my legs.

"Pa pa!" Freya cried around the pacifier in her mouth, resting her chin on my knee to look up at me.

I exhaled out a grunt as I dropped my duffel and scooped her up in my arms. “Hey, Freybee,” I answered, forcing my mouth to spread into a smile as I looked at her big eyes.

“Patrick,” my mom sighed from the kitchen. “There you are. Where’ve you been?”

“I had to drop Linc at his house,” I said, rubbing Freya’s back gently as she wrapped her short arms around my neck. “Sorry,” I added when my mom kept her frustrated eyes on my face.

“It’s fine,” she exhaled, smoothing her graying brown hair away from her wrinkled brow. She resumed stirring whatever sauce was bubbling in the pot in front of her, but it only took about ten seconds before she was turning back around. “I just thought we talked about calling? Calling if you’re gonna be home late, remember?”

“Yeah, okay, I’m sorry,” I answered, making my way towards the kitchen to snag one of the rolls on the island.

“It’s fine,” she answered with a wave of her hand, stirring once again.

Freya lifted her head frantically. “Dogga,” she whispered excitedly. “H-E Dogga.” She pointed towards the door.

I smiled, shaking my head. “We can go to H-E-B in a few days,” I answered. “Aren’t you hungry? We gotta get some dinner in your tummy,” I said, poking her potbelly.

Every Saturday, I ran a bunch of errands for my mom while she and my dad went to lunch with their friends. We went to H-E-B, and there was this huge dog that one of the workers kept around that Freya was obsessed with. We spent probably twenty minutes petting that dog every time.

She giggled, giving me her adorable little three-toothed smile. Then her smile fell, and she was looking at me seriously. She leaned forward like she was about to tell me something really important, brown eyes huge as they looked straight at me.

“Dogga,” she whispered, and then there was one beat of silence before I lost it, laughing so hard my shoulders were shaking as I plopped her back down on the floor.

She was laughing right along with me, holding her tiny hand over her mouth and matching my movements as she bent over in fits of laughter.

“You’re such a weird baby,” I told her, crouching down to fix the clip holding up the top half of her brown hair.

“Just a heads up, bud. That’s all I ask. A-a phone call or a text message or a note on the fridge,” my mom said, sauce

abandoned as she looked down at me with her arms crossed firmly over her chest.

I narrowed my eyes in shock. “Seriously, Mom. It won’t happen again. I said I was sorry.”

“Watch the tone,” she warned.

I stood back up, and Freya began waddling around the kitchen, completely unaware of the storm brewing above her head.

“Where’s Dad?” I asked on a heavy exhale.

“He’s stuck at work,” she answered wearily. “And you’ve got to stop doing that.”

“Doing what?”

She balked at me. “Honey, come on. Any time we start to have an honest conversation, you ask for your father like he’s your knight in shining armor, and I’m the big bad wolf.”

“I don’t do that,” I replied, looking up at the ceiling and praying for strength. “And what honest conversation? I got home late, and I already said I was sorry like a million times. There’s nothing else to it.”

She pushed out a sharp breath. “Are you sure?”

I bristled, my brow furrowing. “What do you mean?”

She wiped a hand over her forehead once again. “I just mean if you were somewhere else or if there was some other reason you were late then you need to tell me.”

I scoffed despite the pain twisting in my stomach. “Mom, seriously? I’ve been fine for months. You know I have!” I cried, losing any handle I had on my patience. “I can’t believe this! I expect to get crap at school from Mory, but not from my own family.”

Tears brimmed in her bright eyes. “Stop. Stop! I’m not accusing you of anything! I got a call from the school today that you had a visit with Principal Mory. On the *first day*, Patrick.”

“I didn’t do anything!” I shouted, stepping back. “It was all bull! He screwed up with accounting or something and lost some money, and he blamed me for it.”

“Fine! Fine, you didn’t do it, but you also didn’t tell me anything about this meeting! I had to find it out from Melissa and pretend like I knew exactly what she was talking about. I can’t defend you if I don’t know what I’m defending you from or if you’re innocent or—”

“I thought you said the school called you,” I intervened furiously.

Her face flushed. “Melissa works at the school.”

Miss Whelan was a narc. She was one of the few people on staff who knew about my issues over the past two years and the only reason is because she was there when I showed up to school with bloodshot eyes and my clothes from the night before. She lugged me out of the school before anyone could see me, and my mom had been so grateful and overwhelmed with Freya and me and everything that she’d broken down and spilled my entire life to her.

“When did you two talk?” I grit out.

She shrugged, looking a little guilty. She’d promised she wouldn’t tell Miss Whelan anything else out of respect for me, but I’d always suspected they still talked about me. I knew it was hard for my mom to deal with it all—with *me*—but she had my dad to talk to. She didn’t have to turn to one of my best friends’ *moms* for advice about me.

“I called her to ask how you were doing on your day back.” I threw my hands up, shaking my head, and she narrowed her eyes. “I was worried about you, and considering I am your *mother*, I think I have a right to be.”

“Geez, Mom. I thought you said you trusted me!” I cried, feeling pissed and betrayed and entirely naive all at once.

Of course, she didn't trust me. My own *mom* didn't trust me.

"I do! I do!" she shouted.

I didn't respond, and for a moment, we both just stared at each other. My chest was heaving. Fury had twisted her kind face painfully, but as the seconds stretched on it began to fall into something sad. Really, *really* sad. And I'm pretty sure my face did the same thing.

Because we both knew she was lying.

"I want to," she whispered around a thick sob. "I want to, honey. I swear, I do. I'm just *scared*. I'm scared you're not going to come home one night. I'm scared that when you tell me things you're leaving things out. I'm scared that-that I'll lose you, and I can't! I can't *lose* another..." she trailed off, and I suppressed a shiver at the raw emotion rolling through me.

I stepped back, squeezing my eyes shut as I turned my face away. "I think," I started quietly. "I think I'm just gonna head to bed." I turned towards the hallway entrance beside the fridge silently.

"Dinner's almost ready," she told me, and I could hear the tears still dampening her words.

I paused at the entrance, pressing my palm against the cool archway. “I’m not really hungry.”

Silence.

“Okay.”

More silence.

“Goodnight, Patrick. I love you.”

Painful silence.

“Goodnight, Mom.” I started forward before pausing again. “I love you too.”

“Pa tuh me in!” Freya cried, her little footsteps pittering after me as I walked down the long hallway.

I sighed, searching the darkness in my chest for some spark of light before turning around to crouch to her level. “Not tonight, Freybee. You still have to eat dinner, remember? That way you can grow *strong*—” I held up both my arms to flex “—and *super* tall—” I lifted her up as high as I could, stretching my arms long “—and *smart*.” I brought her back down into my arms, tapping her temple.

She giggled, and a faint smile laced my face. “Now, Pa has to go nigh nigh, okay?” She frowned, but I just kissed the top of her head. “Eat all your food, okay?”

She nodded before squirming out of my arms and running down the hall, pudgy arms shooting out all around her as she ran. I turned back to the end of the hallway and swallowed hard. But it didn’t work. My throat still felt swollen and rotten and my heart was rolling around in my chest, slamming against my lungs and making it hard to breathe.

I hated this.

This constant roll of punches the world was throwing me.

7

Deal

Lana

The first week of school went by quickly.

The girls and I were sitting with the boys pretty regularly now, and it was actually... fun. My project for the paper had been going pretty slowly, considering I hated the subject I was supposed to be adoring like everyone else in this school. Fine, hate is a strong word, but he irked me.

Patrick would barely spit a few words of an answer out when I asked him any question at all. Our first paper was supposed to be printed by next Friday, and I barely had a hundred words on him. It was infuriating. At first, I thought the silver lining was that I only had to spend half an hour with him each day. But then I realized he was literally everywhere I went.

In class, girls would whisper his name, and guys would go on and on about how he was going to perform this year. I swear, if I heard his name one more time today, I was sure I would scream. Which is the exact reason I was spending my free period hiding away in the newsroom instead of with my friends.

Delaney huffed a big sigh from her desk beside me. “There’s nothing exciting going on in this school,” she grumbled.

She and I were the only ones in here, and every few minutes she’d been sighing and mumbling dramatically. This was the first time, however, that she’d directed any of them at me.

“Nothing interesting for your column?” I asked, propping my chin up in my palm. I was in dire need of rescue from the blank page on my screen staring back at me.

She shook her head sadly. “Nope. Not even a sliver of *anything* remotely juicy.”

“Well, I heard you typing a second ago. What do you have so far?” I asked politely.

She stretched her mouth into a guilty frown and turned her laptop screen towards me. “Actually, I was searching up a One Direction fanfic.”

I snorted. Actually snorted. And then my face flushed bright red. “I’m so sorry,” I managed. “I was not laughing at you, I promise.”

Her mouth dropped into a big *O*. “You most definitely were! Can’t hide it now. Might as well own up to it.”

I swallowed, feeling heat flame my chest. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to—”

“Oh my gosh, I’m kidding! About being mad, that is, not about the fan fic,” she explained, a huge grin on her face that spread easily and naturally. Then she turned her screen back to her, looking at the ground as she spoke. “I um, I had a best friend in middle school, and it was kind of our guilty pleasure to read these fan fics together and laugh at them. It always cheered us up.” She smiled fondly, seeming to be seeing something I didn’t.

“Ah, I see,” I said, trying my best to give a smile back. I wasn’t the best at making new friends, and I was painfully aware of that every time anyone new tried talking to me.

“Well, anyway. I was hoping I could laugh my way into finding some inspiration for this article,” she said, looking back up at me with a sigh.

A couple awkward beats of silence skipped among us, and I swallowed. “You should talk to Ada.”

She tilted her head to the side. “Who?”

“Ada Duffy,” I clarified, waving a hand in front of me as I spoke. “She’s um, Heath Duffy’s little sister. She knows a lot of the ins and outs of everything, and she’d love your idea for your column.”

Delaney smiled even wider, if that was possible. Then she sprang up from her seat, squealing. “Perfect! Chickie, you may have just saved my column,” she cried, skipping over to bop me on the nose with her pinky finger. “Thank you, angel. Hugs and kisses, bye!”

And then she was flying out of the room. I exhaled, turning back to my empty page. If only I had an Ada of the soccer world. *Except I do.* My eyes widened, and I pushed out of my chair. But as I started gathering my things, the door to the newsroom flew back open.

Delaney was huffing and puffing from the doorway, clutching her chest. “I realized—” she held up a hand as she heaved. “I have not a fracking clue what Aiden looks like.”

I laughed, swiping up my notebook and pen before meeting her at the door. “Ada,” I corrected as I walked. “And I’ll help you find her. I have a source I need to get some intel from as well.”

“Mysterious,” she panted, pushing herself up to straighten her back and flick her long, straight hair over her shoulder.

I gave her a close-lipped smile, inhaling deeply. “I try,” I joked, and then somehow we were linking arms, waltzing down the hallway together.

Had I made a new friend? I couldn't really tell, but part of me figured Delaney could be friends with everyone. So, I was hoping that would overpower my talent of not being able to be friends with much of *anyone*.

It didn't take long for us to find Ada. She was on the quad, sitting on one of the picnic tables and thoroughly enjoying the attempt being made by the blond in front of her. He was leaning in and saying something in her ear that made her freckled cheeks turn pink.

I shook my head with a little laugh. "Is that her?" Delaney whispered loudly, and I nodded.

"Yep, that's Ada. She'll be done in a minute, and then I can intro—"

"Ada, darling!" Delaney called from probably ten feet away as she held out both arms like she was coming in for a hug. "I need your help desperately."

Ada gasped, matching her energy without a thought. "At your service, honey. Is our dilemma blond, brunette, or another dazzling redhead like myself?"

The blond boy in front of her frowned, and I jogged to catch up with Delaney. "Do you think it could wait? I had a couple

more things to talk to her about,” the boy mumbled, glaring between Delaney and me.

Delaney pouted out her lower lip, feigning sympathy as she perched her sunglasses on the top of her head. “I know, I know. I’m sure it’s hard to fit everything you want to say into the one hour you have free period, and your girlfriend doesn’t. I’ll be quick, promise.”

I gaped at her, jaw dropped. Not only was it a shocking thing to say, but she had said it with such ease and charm that I’d barely even noticed the shocking part of what she said.

His frown deepened, and Ada narrowed her green eyes furiously. She swiped the coke to her left as he babbled on about something or another in his defense.

“We’re not really toget—”

Ada flicked off the lid, and while he tried explaining himself to Delaney, she slowly but deliberately poured the soda on what looked like *brand-new*, very expensive shoes.

He shrieked, scrambling away from her, face bright red. “Are you insane? It’s not even like we hooked up or anything! Oh my gosh, you’re the *craziest* girl in this school!” he shouted, pulling off his shoes as he stumbled away like he was trying to flee.

“Spread the word!” Ada cried back, crossing her legs daintily as she leaned back on her palms.

“Sorry about that,” Delaney said with a frown as she plopped down beside her on the table.

Ava waved a dismissive hand. “Saved me two weeks' time, anyway.”

“Huh?”

Ada just laughed. “Don’t worry about it. What can I help you with?”

Ada had this problem where she met a guy, fell completely head over heels, and then two weeks in, when they popped the big *boyfriend* question, she split-bolted without another word, and moved on completely. She acted like it didn’t bother her, and most of the time, I believed her. But sometimes, she just looked really... lonely afterwards.

“See, I’ve been told by my little newsroom birdie that you’re the place to go for any kind of news around here,” Delaney said, wiggling her eyebrows mischievously.

Ada turned to me, a smile crossing her face. “Well, Lannie is my favorite little birdie, so I’m flattered.”

I smiled warmly at them. It was a little unnerving how quickly Ada was able to blend with just about anyone, and to be honest, I was a little jealous. I was happy for her, naturally, so my smile came easily, but it still hurt a little.

“Well, I’ll leave you two to it. I have my own research to do,” I answered, and Ada cocked a brow.

“Please tell me that involves an *in-depth* search on Patrick O’Shannon,” Ada groaned.

Delaney’s eyebrows flew up. “Are you shagging your case study?”

“No!” I cried instantly, waving my hands quickly. If the two biggest gossips in our school even got a *whiff* that I was somehow interested in him, I knew it would get around. They meant well, but they talked better. “I am not interested in him at *all*.”

“Why’s that? You don’t think he’s cute?”

“I didn’t say that, but—”

“So, you *do* think he’s cute?”

“No! I mean, yes, but *no*. Not in the slightest. At least not like that, but I do, but not in the sense-or the *way* that you—”

“Relax,” Ada laughed. “We’re grilling our birdie to a crisp, aren’t we?”

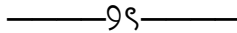
Delaney nodded with a sympathetic smile. “Forgive me?”

“Forgiven,” I sighed, relief flooding my features. “Because, for the record, that would *never* happen.”

“We believe you,” Ada assured me, lying straight through her teeth. She was just trying to make me feel better, I knew, but I smiled nonetheless.

“Thank you. Now, if you’ll excuse me,” I said, shaking my head at their antics as they went straight back to talking.

I had to find Lincoln.



Davis ended up being the hero of the hour. I’d already wasted ten of my remaining forty minutes wandering the halls aimlessly, looking for Lincoln.

“Davis!” I cried, jogging to catch up with him before he turned the corner.

He was bobbing his head slightly, walking on as if I didn’t exist. I frowned, jogging faster as he mosed on.

“Davis, wait!”

He turned the corner then, and that’s when I spotted the wired earbuds trailing from his ear to the front pocket of his jeans. *No, no, no.* I hated running. With a passion.

Still, I pushed myself to move faster until I was practically tackling him to a stop. I grabbed his backpack with both hands and flung him to a halt.

He startled, ripping one earbud out, alarm written all over his wide-eyed features. “Oh,” he exhaled, taking out the other earbud and slipping it in the front pocket of his uniform. “Hey, Lana.”

“Hey,” I panted.

“You okay?” he asked, touching a sensitive hand to my shoulder. “I mean, do you need like water or…”

“Water? What? No, no, I’m okay.” I waved my hands in front of me. “No, I just—whew, you are a *fast* walker—um, do you know where… Well, see—I have to find Lincoln. Do you know where he is?”

He nodded, and I realized he kind of reminded me of one of those big teddy bears you win at carnivals. He had big eyes and

the sweetest little smile. And light brown waves that were all messy and soft-looking.

“Yeah, for sure. He’s in the weight room right now,” he said, pointing to the door right beside the boys' locker room. “Are you sure you don’t want some water? Or... I have Liquid IV?”

He started digging through his backpack, and I shook my head. “No, no, I’m okay, really. Thank you, though, Davis.”

“Yeah, of course,” he answered, giving me a friendly smile before I whirled around, charging toward the door.

I had to get as much information from Lincoln as possible. He knew Patrick, and he would know about his soccer career so far. And if Patrick wouldn’t tell me anything or answer my questions, I would need help from somewhere else.

I pushed open the door to the weight room, and I was instantly hit with the smell of sweat, BO, and *boy*. I swallowed a gag, pushing through and scanning the room frantically. There were probably twenty different boys in the room, and while most of them hadn’t even noticed my presence, a few definitely were. Very slowly. Very long.

I swallowed, and *finally*, my eyes landed on Lincoln. “There you are,” I exhaled, making a beeline towards him.

He gave me a sloppy grin, leaning his big body against the squat machine to his right. “Little Lana? What are you doing in here? Didn’t take you for a gym rat,” he said with a little chin nod.

I waited until I was a solid foot in front of him before speaking. “I need your help.”

“Oh?”

I nodded, licking my dry lips once as stress rippled through me. “Yeah, um. It’s about Patrick.”

His smile faltered, but he was still grinning easily. “What’d Shanny do now?”

“No, no,” I said, coughing out a laugh. “No, I just need more for my piece on him, but he won’t give me anything. And—” I raked a hand through my hair. “And I need *something* here. You don’t have to tell me anything personal. I just need to know about his soccer stuff.”

He rolled his lips in thoughtfully. “I don’t know. I don’t think Pat would be crazy about this.”

I groaned internally, but pushed ahead. “I know, I know. I just—I need to finish the report for this week, or I could lose my spot on the paper. I just need to know about a few of his—”

“What are you doing here?” Patrick bit out from behind me.

I whirled around, feeling like a child being caught stealing something from the top shelf. Refusing to feel guilty, I narrowed my eyes.

“I’m trying to complete my assignment,” I answered, crossing my arms defiantly.

“By trying to dig up information on me from my best friend?” he balked, eyebrows high as he looked between Lincoln and me.

I shrugged, cheeks flaming with the guilt I promised I wouldn’t feel. “I had to do something.”

He scoffed, shaking his head. “My *life* is none of your business.”

“No, it’s not. But your *soccer* life is. That’s all I’m trying to find out about here. It’s not as big of a deal as you’re making it out to be. *You* agreed to do this!” I exclaimed impulsively, and he looked around the room full of people.

There were dozens of eyes locked on us, and my anger slipped into anxiety. What was I doing here? Asking Lincoln to give me information about his best friend? That was low. That was a little shady, too. I wasn’t that kind of reporter. I didn’t *want*

to be that kind of reporter—the kind who sacrifices people to get what they want.

He stepped closer, leaning down. “Let’s take this outside,” he said, and then he was stalking out of the room, leaving me no choice but to chase after him.

He didn’t stop moving until we were outside, between buildings, and completely hidden from view. “Look, I know you’ve been pissed at me since that thing in the parking lot, but—”

“You mean the thing where you were ashamed to be in the same car with me and hid me? No idea what you’re talking about,” I spat back, anger building in my chest all over again.

I knew I was in the wrong. I shouldn’t have done that, and I shouldn’t have yelled at him. But I was angry. I’d spent my whole life always fighting to feel like I mattered. Like I wasn’t just a little girl spying on the neighbors because she was *so* lonely. Then I get to school, and the first new friend I started to make was embarrassed to be friends with me.

He groaned, throwing his head back, backpedaling until his back was against the wall. “You don’t know everything, Lana. I wasn’t *ashamed* of you, geez.”

“Then why’d you do it?” I asked, throwing my hands up.

“It doesn’t matter,” he muttered.

It does matter, I wanted to say. But I didn’t want to let myself reach that level of pathetic. “Fine. It doesn’t matter. But you can’t be mad at me for looking for any crumb of information on my case when you have given me literally *nothing*.”

He pushed off the wall. “I answer all your questions. I may not do it *service with a smile* style, but I give you what you need.”

“You give me two-word answers. I can’t work with that, and you *know* it. Gosh!” I exclaimed, pushing my hair back with my hand in frustration. “Why are you so impossible to work with?”

“Why am *I* so impossible to work with?”

“Yes! You don’t trust anyone,” I said, poking his chest with my finger angrily. “It’s all a one-man show with you. I’ve seen it in your game tapes, and I see it now. You think you’re so above being nice and respecting other people, but really, Patrick, all you’re doing is missing it.”

He furrowed his brow. “Missing what?”

“Your life,” I said, throwing my hands up. “You’re so busy doing everything your way, you don’t see that you’ve got a lot of great people that, for some reason, *unknown* to me, actually like you. But all you do is blow people off! You’re mean to your

friends, and you're mean to me," I muttered, crossing my arms a little bitterly.

The sound of voices chattering to one another got louder and quieter as clumps of people passed by our little nook.

His eyes traveled over my face like he was figuring something out. "You don't know me," he finally said quietly.

"No," I exhaled, stepping closer. "No, I don't know the literal first thing about you. But if I can figure all that out from just watching you, then it's probably a pretty big freaking problem."

His mouth kicked up into a smirk. "Watching me?"

I rolled my eyes. "Okay, not like *watching* you watching you. I just-I *noticed*. It's not that hard to figure out, trust me."

He sighed, running a hand through his thick hair before looking back down at me cautiously. "Am I really mean to you?"

"Yeah," I scoffed, feeling my anger start to dissipate as our voices began to soften. "You kind of are."

He wiped a hand over his face before slinging his hands low on his hips. "Okay, here it is. I'll cooperate with the whole interview thing. Just... I can't be your friend or anything."

"What?"

That was all I could come up with to say in response.

“I can’t be your friend. That’s all,” he said simply, but he sounded off.

“Because a guy like you couldn’t possibly be friends with a girl like me?” I deadpanned, and he stepped forward as if I’d personally hit him in the chest.

“That’s not what I’m saying,” he said, dark eyes narrowed. “I just can’t be your friend. So take me as a cooperating project or nothing at all. Final offer.”

I swallowed a scoff and stuck out my hand. “Deal,” I said, all business as I stuck out my hand for a handshake to seal the deal.

He nodded, matching my expression. Except when he took my hand, something shifted in his eyes. There was a softness there around the edges that hadn’t been there before. His thumb glided over my knuckles slowly, and I inhaled sharply. My stomach was a wreck of butterflies and heat and nerves. My veins were literally humming from the feeling of his calloused hand in mine.

If holding his hand felt like this, I began to wonder how it would feel to be fully held by him. With both arms. Boldly and gently. His face was just as beautiful as always, but there was something especially sad lingering there that I hadn’t noticed

before. A slight glaze to his eyes. A little turn of his lips and flush of his face.

He tilted his head to the side, and I realized with another rush of buzzing blood that he was watching me the same way I was watching him. He was taking note and analyzing.

“I’m asking you more than three questions this time,” I said quietly, needing to break this odd moment passing between us. “It’s only fair.”

He frowned. “How is that fair? I apologize, and you get a reward?”

“You actually didn’t apologize. You just made another deal with me, and part of the deal is you cooperate with my terms. And my terms say six questions.”

He gaped at me. “Four!”

“Six.”

“Five.”

“Six!”

He was smiling just a little, but he shook his head. “I’m only doing five, Dunnahy.”

“Fine.”

That was the number I wanted him to give me anyway, but I thought it best to give him this win. He looked like he needed one.

“Deal again,” he said with a grin, still shaking my hand.

I started to pull my hand back to my side, but he held on regardless. “One more thing,” he started on a breath, bowing his head just a little so we were eye to eye. “No more going to my friends to get information on me.”

“Bossy.”

“Pleading, actually,” he corrected with a hopeful smile.

“Alright, *deal again*,” I answered, throwing his words back at him with a reluctant smile.

I didn’t get it. How could he be like this, and then also be so... not like this so much of the time?

He tilted his head to the side hopefully, and I caught the smile creeping over my lips before it could reach my eyes. Clearing my throat, I stepped backwards, as far away from him as I could get. This was a business deal. We weren’t becoming

friends. He told me so himself. He wasn't interested in anything I had to offer him.

My stomach dropped a little as that realization began to sink in. It was the cold douse of reality I needed, but it still stung a little. I'd always known I wasn't the kind of person who was naturally magnetic. I was awkward and clumsy, and sometimes my humor tripped on its way out of my mouth and just landed... poorly. But the thing was, I actually felt confident in myself when we talked.

I would never have yelled at someone the way I just yelled at him. Never in my life would I have done that, but he seemed to be able to access all the parts of me I'd never even tried to explore before. I was so overwhelmingly curious about him that I guess maybe that's why it hurt my ego a little to realize I wasn't half as interesting to him as he was to me.

But I swallowed my pride in one movement and smiled at him because, whether I liked it or not, I needed him.

So, when I looked up at his dark blue eyes and his perfectly relaxed grin, all I said was, "See you after practice, Patrick."

His dark eyes stayed on mine, and I sucked in a deep breath. Leaving him between the buildings, I let my shoulder brush against his chest as I moved past him.

“See you later, Dunnahy.”

8

Reality's Touch

Patrick

As I pushed my way past the lanky guys near the front of the weight room, I couldn't stop thinking. Over and over, our interaction replayed in my mind. I wasn't a mean person, was I? Maybe I didn't always use my manners when talking to screwed-up adults who thought they knew my situation, but I had never been mean to *her*. Had I?

There was this strange guilt lingering in the base of my stomach. I'd been putting some distance between us, yes, but that wasn't supposed to like... hurt her. Maybe that guilt was the reason I'd caved so easily and handed what she wanted to her on a silver platter. Five questions. I had to answer five of her questions.

I knew she probably wouldn't ask anything too personal, but I was still a little pissed that she actually went to *Lincoln* to get personal information on *me*. If she could do that, then I wasn't as sure as I was before about her limits.

But that smile. I swear, it made my nervous system fall into pieces. I couldn't breathe right when she looked at me like she did when she shook my hand. It was like she was trying to figure something out about me—like she was seeing right through me—and I hated it. I hated that she could, and I hated that a small, *small* part of me actually wanted her to. But that *smile* she gave me when I let myself relax enough around her almost made all my slip-ups with her worth it.

Gosh, she had a pretty smile.

“What are you grinning about?” Heath asked with a smirk as he took the weights from my hands.

I didn't even remember picking those up for him.

“Nothing,” I said instinctively with a shrug, brushing away any leftover images of her smiling eyes. “I'm just tired.”

Heath cocked an eyebrow, and Lincoln sauntered over to us, clearly having eavesdropped on our conversation so far. “Tired of what? Hot girls yelling at you?”

I shook my head, fighting the flush threatening to creep up my neck at the memory. “It wasn't like that.”

“You sure? You seemed pretty eager to take her off alone after that,” Lincoln said, wiggling his eyebrows.

I picked up one of the weights from Heath's feet and kept my elbow still as I curled them to my shoulder before slowly drawing it back down to my leg.

Pretending to be repulsed, I just said, "No way. Look, she was just yelling at me about something or another, and I said what I had to say to get her to chill. That's it."

I was lying through my teeth, and the thought of her hearing a single word I'd just said made me cringe a little. "So, you're not attracted to her, and you don't like her like that?" Lincoln asked, and I didn't like the way he sounded, like he was getting permission.

"Yep," I answered, popping the *p* for emphasis. "Not my type." I curled the weight faster, my form getting just a little sloppy.

"Really? I would've thoug—" Heath was harshly interrupted by me switching weights from my right to my left arm.

"Nope. I don't want her."

Guilt swarmed my stomach, and I couldn't help but glance around a couple times just to make sure she hadn't suddenly spawned back in the room just in time to hear me say everything I just said. I knew I kind of sounded like a jerk, and I knew my words were not lining up with my actions towards her at all.

I just... I couldn't let anyone get even the *slightest* idea that I liked her. In any way. Especially in here. The thing about not knowing who *he* was was that he could be anywhere. He could be listening to any conversation and using that as a tool against me in our next *transaction*, whenever that would be. I suppressed a cold shiver at the thought and pushed harder, keeping my elbow as still as I possibly could as I curled the weights harder and faster.

I was doing a good job, though. I'd patched things up with Lana while keeping her out of the limelight and out of my life. A small burst of relief shot out in my veins, making me relax just a little.

"Great," Lincoln said with a big smile. "I just had to be sure before I took her out this Friday."

And just like that, the burst of relief was gone, smothered by, "What the... Lincoln, it's like the second week of school."

"Yeah, isn't it a bit early for you to be going after just one girl?" Heath asked, sitting down on the edge of the weight bench and leaning his elbows on his knees.

He just shrugged, sweeping his water bottle off the ground to squirt its contents into the back of his throat. "Yeah, well, I know what I want."

“And what’s that?” Top asked, joining our conversation seamlessly as he scooped a couple of the weights up from beneath Heath’s bench.

Lincoln grinned shamelessly. “Lana.”

“Dunny’s sister?” Top balked. “Ballsy move.”

He frowned. “What’s that mean?”

“It means he’d go ballistic if he ever found out. Probably rip all your gelled up hair out your head,” Top said with a chuckle. “And, no offense, Linc, but I wouldn’t stop him.”

“Well, Heath would help me. Right, Duffy?” Lincoln asked, nudging Heath’s shoulder with his elbow.

Before Heath could respond, Top cut back in. “He wouldn’t either. It’s breaking team rules to go after one of the sisters.” Top nodded towards Heath casually. “Isn’t that right, Duffy?”

I was thankful for Heath’s sake that Top wasn’t looking at him, because his cheeks flamed bright red. “Yeah, yeah-um, it’s team rules. Sorry, Linc.”

Lincoln scoffed, waving a hand in front of his face. “We made those ages ago.”

The bell rang out shrilly, and Top groaned. “Jersi’s gonna kill me.”

Mr. Jersiwok had been battling it out with Topher since freshman year. Something about Top just really pissed off the old man, and that was thoroughly entertaining to Topher, which led to the cruel cycle that was their relationship.

“Good luck,” Lincoln said with a chuckle, slapping his hand on Top’s shoulder.

“Yeah, right back at ya,” Top said, shaking his head as he stood up.

Lincoln winked then, like a little freak, before he left the weight room in a flash. Had he already asked Lana out? Did she say yes? And if he hadn’t did that mean he was going to?

“Relax,” Heath sighed, clapping a hand on my shoulder. “First game is next week. You should be excited about that.”

I pushed out a big breath, trying and failing to release all the tension rippling through my muscles. “Yeah, yeah, I am. Who are we playing again? Warriors something or another?”

“Oh, no, they backed out. Too many guys from their team got injured or sick or something. I don’t really know. But they’re gone.”

“So, who are we playing instead?”

“Well, it’s not an official game, but we’re scrimmaging Victoria, I thought,” Heath said casually, and my spine snapped straight. “I thought you knew about this?”

It took everything in me to keep pressing forward. “Right, yeah... I must’ve forgot.”

Victoria? No, no, no. This wasn’t right. I was supposed to have more time. More time to get it together. More time to...

“Hey, whoa, you okay? You don’t look so good, Pat.”

“I’m fine,” I breathed, jerking the strap of my duffel bag onto my shoulder. “I just need to get to class.”

I started forward, quickening my pace. *I need more time. I can’t face him. I can’t face this yet. I need... Need more time. I can’t do this.* I stumbled into the guys' locker room, not stopping until my forehead was pressed against the wall opposite the door.

Breathe. Breathe. Breathe. I shook my head, squeezing my eyes shut to push out the memory, but it was too late. I was too weak, too panicked to fight it off.

“Shh, come on,” Jill had whispered.

No, no, no. Please, no. I couldn’t do this today.

I spun on my back, crumpling against the wall as pathetic tears burned the inside of my eyes. “Please,” I begged aloud, but it didn’t matter.

“Jill, wait for me!” I’d cried, but she was already running off with him.

“Just leave them be,” the guy next to me had laughed.

I’d hesitated. I flinched to go after her, but I didn’t. I didn’t go after her.

Why didn’t I go after her? Why didn’t I follow her and Nick? I clutched my stomach painfully, digging my fingers into my abdomen. There was air in my lungs now, passing through fine enough, but it burned. It *burned* my throat with each inhale, and it set my lips on fire with each exhale.

I should have gone.

I. Should. Have. Gone.

But I didn’t, and now I was alive, and my sister wasn’t.

I ducked my head between my knees, raking my hands back through my hair as a painful sob tore through me. My chest was trembling—I mean, each bone, each nerve, every cell in my body

was trembling. Tears were running down my cheeks in thin drops that stung my skin.

This wasn't right.

I shouldn't be here.

Reality had gotten all twisted, and I didn't-I didn't know how to set it right again.

I dug my nails into my forearm sharply. *I couldn't do this anymore.* I was tired of feeling like a thief all the time, living a life that wasn't mine to live—it felt *dirty*. *Gosh, I wish I could just crawl out of my own skin.* Blood trickled down my wrist, and I squeezed my eyes shut harder.

“Jill!” I'd called into the darkness, waving my hands through the icy water helplessly.

Another sob racked through me, and I braced my hands around the back of my neck.

Cold water swallowed my arms as I reached into the darkness.

I shook my head, fighting the demon that had lived under my skin for the past two years.

The door creaked open then, and I scrambled to my feet, shame flooding my senses as I turned my face away from the person in the doorway.

“Oh, sweetheart,” Melissa sighed. “Come here.”

She crossed the room in an instant, wrapping her thin arms around my body, somehow making me feel small—small enough to be held.

“Jill!”

Cold water.

“Jill!”

Silence.

“Jill!”

Arms pulling me out of the lake.

“Please, God!”

Sirens.

“Jill!”

I crumbled against her short frame. Pain was swelling in my veins so violently, it felt as if there was blood leaking from my

arteries, coating my bones and filling my lungs. I coughed out a breath, choking on another sob as I clung to her. I clung to her like it was me drowning instead of Jill and this small woman before me was my anchor.

She wasn't.

She was just another person who didn't believe in me, but right now, I needed *something*. I needed to feel reality's touch before I was so far separated from it that I couldn't come back again.

9

Friends

Lana

It's been ten minutes since our interview was supposed to begin.

Ten minutes may not seem like a long time, but when our interview time was only thirty minutes each day, it started to feel pretty long. I huffed a sigh, dropping my chin in my palms as I watched the slow turn of a bicycle's wheels. I'd been sitting on the front steps of the school for twenty minutes. I stupidly got here early, thinking maybe we would be able to get a head start on things and finish quicker.

We had agreed to meet here, right? I mean, maybe he thought it was somewhere else or... I straightened my back, running a hand over my damp forehead. I was doing it again, I realized with a shake of my head. I was making excuses for people I didn't even know.

We made a deal. It was up to him to stick to it. End of story.

My dad was always telling me that I imagined too much in people. He said I "fancied up some big, deep, moral reasoning behind everything" someone did that hurt me until it wasn't

about me anymore. Suddenly, it was because they had a troubled past or a fear of not being accepted or something along those lines when in reality, not everyone had those reasons. Sometimes, people just have a broken moral compass, my dad told me.

The thought made my skin crawl.

I would rather imagine up a deeper reasoning behind people's painful actions than assume everyone was just... broken. So, for the next ten minutes that he didn't show up, I let myself imagine up all the reasons he could have had for not showing up.

"Sorry," a deep voice mumbled, and I startled, jerking myself away from my thoughts in time to see Patrick descending the first set of stairs to meet me at the bottom step.

I stood up, breathing in deeply to regain my composure. "I thought we said 5:30?" I asked coolly, very proud of myself for the steadiness in my voice.

He ran a hand back through his hair. "Yeah, I think we did. Sorry."

He was apologizing. At least there was that. If I were smarter, maybe I would have just let it go, but I couldn't.

"Look, I get it. You have soccer. You have a life. I don't know you, but I have a life too. This paper is really important to me,

and you just keep-keep blowing me off! I really, really need this, Patri—”

“I know,” he cut in with an exasperated exhale. “I know, I know,” he repeated, wiping a hand over his face. He took a deep breath, chest rising and falling before he spoke again. “I had to practice later than the other guys because I showed up to practice late, okay? I came here as fast as I could.” He was speaking slowly and diplomatically, like he had a thousand other things rolling through his mind.

He wasn’t looking in my eyes, but other than that, I couldn’t really tell if he was sincere. I mean, his shoulders were dropped, he kept rolling his lips in, which I was beginning to peg as a nervous habit for him, and he wouldn’t stop running his hand through his hair. These all seemed like signs he wasn’t telling the truth, but for some reason...

“Listen, just relax, okay?” I finally said, touching a hand to his shoulder tenderly.

I don’t know what caused me to reach out like that. We weren’t friends, and we certainly didn’t know each other well enough for casual touches like that to be normal. He just looked so... strained, so tense. I felt like he needed some kind of reassurance that words couldn’t give.

He glanced briefly at my hand still on his shoulder, then back up at me, lips parted, brow slightly furrowed like he was trying to figure something out. I pulled my hand back quickly, embarrassment flushing my cheeks.

“Sorry,” I hurried to say. “Just–It’s fine. Just don’t be late again, okay?”

He nodded seriously, and then he offered, “You can still have the thirty minutes, you know.”

I looked up from my notebook that I was anxiously fiddling with. “Hm?”

“The thirty minutes. I owe you thirty, so you can take thirty,” he said with a shrug. “It wouldn’t be fair business otherwise.”

I felt a little lame as I asked, “Won’t we get in trouble?”

He laughed then. It wasn’t much, just a short laugh, but it was refreshing. “Well, if the big bad five-foot-tall teacher comes after you with his panties in a twist, I’ll take the fall, okay?”

“Alright,” I started suspiciously. “But I’m taking you up on that. Seriously, if I get in trouble, I’m telling them you kidnapped me and held me for ransom.”

A smile cracked across his face, and I felt myself smiling back at him as he said, “Okay, fair enough.”

We started forward, walking side by side in a slow silence before he caught my elbow with his big hand, gently pulling us both to a slow stop.

“And I am sorry, okay?” he emphasized.

He looked distraught—truly distraught—like he’d hurt me in some other way than just being late.

I exhaled, looking up at him with a polite smile, “I know,” I answered softly, touching a hand to his arm on yet another jolt of impulse.

He swallowed, rolling his lips in once, eyes a little wild as they looked between mine. “But you believe me?”

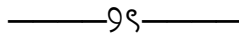
I held his arm a little tighter, concern bubbling in my nerves. “Patrick, is everything okay?”

He sighed, stepping back like he was regaining consciousness as he shook his head. “Yeah, yeah. I’m fine. I’m sorry.” He wiped a hand over his jaw. “Just forget it—”

“I do,” I started, not understanding his panic, but feeling just as panicked to do something to help him. “I believe you.”

He breathed a heavy exhale like a small weight had been lifted from his shoulders, but his body was still tense. “Thank you. I just...” he added the next part a little quieter, like it wasn’t necessarily for me to hear, “needed to hear that today.”

We kept walking then, acting as if nothing had happened, but I tucked the moment away in the back of my heart.



He was quieter today. On the way to the burger place, he’d kept his eyes on the road, only ever opening his mouth to mumble the lyrics to the old rock songs playing on the speakers.

Maybe that was why I had been procrastinating actually asking my questions. I didn’t want to make his sad mood any worse by asking him something he didn’t want to answer. So, we sat in silence for a while.

Until, I remembered that this was in fact my job. We weren’t friends. He said so himself. I shouldn’t feel bad for carrying out my only purpose in talking to him. So, I sucked in a big breath before mustering all the extroverted confidence I didn’t possess.

“Are you ready?” I asked him, pulling out my pen as I dragged my notebook on my lap.

He glanced over at me, eyes flickering from mine to the notebook in my hands. There was a flash of something in his eyes, but he inhaled, plastering on what I knew wasn't a real smile before saying, "Do your worst, Dunnahy."

I drew my feet up on the seat so I could push my notebook against my thighs. "Let's talk about your earliest soccer memory," I said, licking my lips once and looking up at him briefly. I was praying my awkward nature wouldn't make its appearance right now.

He sighed thoughtfully, squinting his eyes like he was trying to see something far away. It was a long while before he actually answered, but when he did, he said, "I guess that would be when I was... six? Yeah, I think I was somewhere around there when, um, when my... my family got me into it."

He paused, and I glanced up from my page. "Your family?" I prompted.

Nodding, he set his jaw tight. "Yeah, we all went to a family friend's game, and my si—" he broke off, and I finished my note with a little flourish before looking up at him expectantly. "We went to a game for our local high school, and I kept running onto the field, I guess, trying to join the game or something."

“You actually ran out on the field?” I asked with a laugh, picturing a tiny Patrick jetting out onto the field with a bunch of high schoolers. “In the middle of the game?”

He nodded, smiling fondly. “Oh, yeah, I was a cocky little kid, but obviously, I charmed the crowd with my dashing good looks, and the ref let me stay on for a few minutes,” he said with a grin. “The players all let me run around with the ball for a minute, and I was thinking I was grown and stuff. Man, they made me feel like I was like ten feet tall. I was just *flying*. I think they even let me score or something.” He shrugged, and the smile on his face made me eager to keep him talking.

It looked real and bright and *beautiful*.

“That sounds like a really nice memory,” I said on a gentle smile. His gaze drifted over to mine, and I savored the way his eyes were so *open*. He wasn’t hiding behind walls and muttering and lying. He looked lighter somehow. I don’t know. Maybe I was just doing what my dad always warned me against—seeing things in people that weren’t there.

“Is that where your love for the game started?” I asked, tucking a lock of hair behind my ear to keep it away from my eyes as I looked up at him, pulling myself away from my thoughts.

He shook his head, still smiling. “I think it was what came after that, actually. My, uh, my sister, Jill, she had so much fun cheering me on with my parents that we started making our own games at home. My parents would make little signs to cheer us on and we would play against each other with these little makeshift goals, and it was just so much...” he trailed off. “So much, uh...” he swallowed hard, and his jaw tensed up painfully.

“Fun?” I prompted quietly, and he nodded, swallowing hard.

“Yeah, I guess it was,” he whispered, eyes looking even further off than before.

I had already put down my pen, but I leaned a little closer, now, feeling eager for *more*. I let my notebook slide off my lap a little. “Is it still fun?” I asked curiously. “Like it used to be?”

I had never been one to play sports, but I always imagined it was a lot of pressure. If someone threw me on a court or a field in front of a bunch of people and told me I had to perform to my absolute best ability, then I think I would throw up. Repeatedly. But I also wondered if maybe after doing it your whole life it was easier, and maybe even a little... fun?

I had so much I wanted to know about him, and so much I wanted to ask. Well, so much I wanted to know about him as a *player*, that is.

He looked over at me, eyes wide. “I don’t know,” he whispered, and his eyes were so warm, so raw that it made my heart hurt. Then he blinked fast, turning away from me quickly. “You can’t put any of that in.”

My brow furrowed. “What are you talking about?”

“The article,” he said quickly, straightening his back. “You can’t put any of what I just said about her in there.”

“About who?”

“Never mind,” he mumbled, tapping his fingers against the wheel rapidly. “Just don’t put it in. I’ll make up some-some other story for you if you want, but you just—you can’t put that in the paper. I’m sorry.”

“Patrick,” I started, tilting my head to the side with a . “You’re killing me here.”

“Just make it off the record or something,” he suggested casually, but I could read the panic in his voice. “Come on. Please, Lana.”

I watched him closely, the way his eyes kept flicking between me and the road. “If it means that much, I won’t put it in, but you have to give me something else to work with,” I said on an

exhale, and the way his body visibly relaxed made my brow furrow. “Why... why is it so important to you anyway?”

He shrugged, pulling into a parking spot slowly. “I just don’t like people knowing my personal stuff.”

I hesitated, but my impulse got the best of me. “But you told me.”

He shifted the car into park. “I didn’t mean to,” he said simply, his voice quiet.

I rolled my lips in, studying his features carefully. He was difficult. He was closed off. He was really annoying. He didn’t really acknowledge me except when we were alone. He had a thousand red flags. We could barely have a conversation without him freaking out.

But I saw *something*.

I had no idea what it was. I didn’t even know if it would be worth searching for yet. Maybe I was just doing what my father always said I did—imagining something to be there that wasn’t. But I didn’t care. I was a journalist, and once something had piqued my curiosity, I had a really hard time letting it go.

He was just a project.

That's it.

He finally looked over at me, and when he did, my stomach dipped. "Can we start with something a little easier?" he asked, his voice a little raspy. "Just to start? I'm—" he motioned to himself like that would explain something. "I'm not good at this."

"At interviews?"

"At talking about myself when every word I say could get blasted to the whole school," he said, a crease forming in his brow as he spoke.

That one hurt a little. "Clearly you don't know me very well," I started softly. "I'm not looking for an opportunity to make you look bad. I promise. I'm just trying to complete my assignment and paint you in the savior-like light everyone else seems to see you in, okay?"

He looked my face over, but he nodded. "Alright." He was still eyeing the notepad in my hands—the one with notes on everything he'd just said.

"Now, let's start over," I said gently, ripping out the page before me and tearing it in half.

The logical side of me told me I was throwing away probably the most emotional story he'd give me all semester, but the other

side—the one that saw the way his whole body relaxed when I tore that page in half—knew I was doing the right thing.

“Favorite color?” I asked, and he gave me a raised eyebrow.

“Seriously?”

I smiled, bringing my pen really close to the page. “Baby steps, O’Shannon. We’re starting small.”

He smiled back at me now, and for the first time all day, it was genuine. It crinkled around his blue eyes and brought out the dimples indenting his cheeks.

“Brown,” he said easily.

I raised both eyebrows. “You’re seriously lying on the easiest question in the book?”

He held both hands up innocently. “I’m not lying.”

“No one’s favorite color is brown,” I argued. It was a dumb argument, but it seemed to be distracting him from whatever crap he’d spun himself around.

Shrugging, he slouched back in his seat. “Not brown like cow crap brown or mud. Like *warm* brown. Teas and coffees and trees and all that.”

“Warm brown,” I stated aloud, writing as I spoke. “I can work with that.”

He chuckled softly. “Oh yeah, story of the century right there.”

“As long as it’s about you, people are going to care, trust me,” I said absent-mindedly.

“Oh yeah?”

I looked up to find that stupid smirk on his lips, and my cheeks flushed with heat. “I just—I only mean because people like you.”

“Does *people* include you?” he asked, tilting his head to the side as his eyes poured into mine.

My lips parted in shock, but when that smile spread over his face, I shook my head. “You’re messing with me.”

“I’m not!” he cried, holding his hands up again. “I’m not, I promise. I was genuinely wondering.”

“Wondering what? If I’m part of your adoring fan club?” I asked with a smile, remembering the group of girls I’d overheard talking about him.

But he dropped his head, shaking it and smiling almost shyly. “I know you aren’t,” he laughed.

I almost didn’t say it, but at the last moment, I added softly, “Well, I don’t wholly dislike you, either.”

He picked up his head, eyes gentle and soft. “Yeah?”

I cleared my throat, cheeks burning. “I just mean-I don’t know you well enough to like or dislike you yet,” I clarified before I could feed his ego too much.

He rolled his lips in once like he was fully amused. “Maybe this will sway you,” he said, leaning back in his seat to push his hips forward as he reached into his pocket and pulled out a lollipop with bright red wrapping.

I gasped, biting back a squeal as I leaned over the center console to snatch it from his hands. “Is it cherry?” I asked, full of childlike excitement as I began unwrapping the lollipop.

“Try it and find out,” he said around a laugh.

I stuck the lollipop in my mouth, greeting the cherry flavor bursting over my tongue with a smile. “What’s the occasion?” I asked, and he shrugged, crossing his arms over his broad chest.

“I dunno,” he said with a shrug, smiling at me warmly. “I just saw one in line when I was grocery shopping, and I figured it would help make up for blowing you off last week,” he said casually, but my heart rate spiked.

Grocery shopping? Patrick goes grocery shopping for his family. Why was that strangely attractive?

I pulled the lollipop out of my mouth, smacking my lips for extra effect. “Well, well, well. Who knew Patrick O’Shannon could be thoughtful?”

“Part of my charm,” he said with a wink. “Make sure to put that in your piece about me.” He grinned, leaning forward on the center console to peek at my open notebook in my lap.

I rolled my eyes with a laugh. “Oh yeah right after *down to earth* and *extremely humble*.”

“See, and you said you barely had any stuff on me,” he teased, tilting his head to the side.

His dark hair was falling over his sharp eyebrows, almost marring the view of his warm blue eyes. “I’m ignoring that,” I murmured. “But here,” I held the lollipop out to him. “Because I didn’t bring anything for you today.”

His eyes moved between mine and the candy in my hands, and he cocked an eyebrow. “You’re really gonna share your favorite flavor?”

“Against my better judgement, yes,” I teased, but the way he was looking at me—*gosh*. My heart was going a mile a minute, hammering against my ribs like it was trying to leap out of my chest. Why did he have to look at me like that?

He kept his eyes on mine while his big hand enveloped mine and he bowed his head to meet the lollipop where I held it. I swallowed the sharp intake of breath my lungs fought for at the gentle touch of his hand. The light pressure of his fingertips on my cold hand was enough to make me feel all dizzy and lightheaded. I tried my best to keep an unaffected exterior, but my shallow breathing probably gave away the fact that I was very, very affected.

He lifted his head just enough so we were eye level. He swallowed hard, and I rolled my lips in once nervously. He hadn’t moved his hand. I wasn’t moving mine either. We were only a few inches apart, close enough that I could see the messy ring of light blue in his dark eyes. It was as if it had been watercolored in over his natural eye color at the last minute, but still managed to look perfect. It was beautiful. *He* was beautiful.

I opened my mouth to speak, but nothing came out. Part of me didn't say anything because I was afraid that a single word might shatter the space between us, but I also didn't even know what to say. I'd never been so affected by a boy the way I was when I was with him. It was easy and impossible to talk to him all at once. And maybe I was also scared that if I spoke, he would realize he'd been softly moving his thumb over my knuckles in slow sweeps and would stop.

His lips parted, and his heavy-lidded eyes dropped to my mouth briefly before returning to my eyes. I sucked in a sharp breath, and the movement seemed to wake him up from a sort of trance because he abruptly clamped his mouth shut and pushed off the center console. His palm slipped off my warm hand, and I felt my heart slide down my throat until it hit my stomach with a thud.

He seemed to be grasping to fill the silence mounting between us, clearing his throat before saying, "Alright, so what's the next question on our um-on the agenda?"

I tucked my hair behind my ear, pulling back to my own seat and gathering my notebook. "Yes! Yes, let's um- let's see our next question," I started, cheeks burning. "Let's see," I mumbled again, tutting my tongue as I scanned my notebook filled with nothing but doodles and a couple random questions that felt

insufficient now. “What do you... What do you like to do outside of soccer?” I finally asked, looking up from my notebook, pen ready to take note of his answer.

He ran a hand back through his hair thoughtfully. “Soccer’s my focus, really. I don’t do much outside of that,” he answered, but his voice wasn’t convincing me.

“You’re totally lying.” The words tumbled from my lips without me thinking, but it was too late to take them back now.

“Excuse me?”

I plowed ahead. “I know you do things outside of soccer,” I said simply.

“Oh right, I forgot, you’ve been *watching me*,” he teased, and I blushed profusely.

“I didn’t mean it like that,” I groaned, hiding my face in my hands so he couldn’t see my bright pink complexion.

His laugh rolled off his tongue easily, and I couldn’t fight the smile pulling at my lips. “I guess,” he started with a sigh. “I guess it would be uh, painting.”

My eyebrows flew up, and my embarrassment was long forgotten as I looked up at him in shock. “You actually paint?”

“I do.”

“You don’t!”

“No, I really do.”

“Really?”

“Nope,” he exhaled with a shake of his head. “I made the whole thing up.”

I laughed, pulling my knees against my chest. “Sorry, sorry, I just didn’t expect you to be a-an *artist*.”

“Okay, I never said I was an *artist*, I just like to paint a little if I have free time here and there,” he said with a shrug, but his cheeks were just a little flushed.

“You’re an artist,” I repeated with a grin. I couldn’t tell why exactly this piece of information was so adorable to me, but it was. It was also incredibly intriguing. “So, what do you paint?”

He tilted his head back against the seat. “Have you used your five questions yet?”

I smacked his arm. “Come on, this is light stuff, and I’m curious. Tell me,” I urged playfully, feeling oddly giddy about getting to hear about the things he’s passionate about, even if it’s only a semi-passion.

“I just paint whatever’s on my mind, I guess,” he said with a smile, glancing over to look at me suspiciously. “Why do you look so excited to hear about this?” he asked with a laugh. “There’s no way this helps with your article.”

“It adds depth, O’Shannon,” I said with a little roll of my eyes.

“Alright,” he said, holding his hands up as if saying *you’re in charge*. “Sometimes, I paint this uh, this old farm I used to live on, or a house I dreamt about. Half the time it turns out looking like crap, but sometimes it works well enough. I don’t usually do people. I just can’t really figure out a way to make them look... real, I don’t know. But...”

Then he talked. And talked. And talked. And I listened, taking in every word deliberately. He was a little choppy at first, tumbling over his own words a few times, but the more I listened and asked, the more he started talking naturally. His shoulders relaxed and his laugh came easier and more often.

“What are you working on right now?” I asked, propping my shoeless feet up on the dash as I slouched back in my seat.

His eyes lit up, but he just shrugged. “It’s nothing big,” he said with a shake of his head. “Freya’s birthday’s coming up—my little sister, that’s Freya—and I wanted to get her something she’d

like when she was grown up and stuff, so I'm working on something for her."

"Sounds like you guys are close," I said softly, and he nodded, keeping his eyes on the straw wrapper he'd been fidgeting with.

"But what about you?" he asked with a chin nod. "Who is Lana Dunnahy outside of the newspaper?"

I don't know. The thought was jarring, but I just inhaled deeply. "Honestly? She's not too exciting right now," I exhaled. "I've been so caught up in the paper I haven't really... thought about much else."

He hummed in acknowledgment. "Well, how about this... What if the paper didn't exist? What if we were just two random people sitting here and you didn't have a huge fat article to write? What would you want to do?"

Pushing a hand through my hair, I glanced over at him. "Maybe write."

He laughed, looking over at me with raised eyebrows. "We literally just said no newspaper."

"No! No, I mean, I would like to write about something from *me*. Like in a book I started when I was twelve but never finished

or maybe like poetry or something? I don't know, it sounds kinda stupid when I say it out loud."

He shook his head, smiling softly. "Not stupid."

"No?"

"Nope. Kinda cool actually."

We spent two more hours sitting there in his car just talking about everything. Anything. And the weirdest part was that it never felt... awkward or forced. To be honest, I forgot I was even talking to *him* him for most of the time.

It was really... nice. Maybe friendship with him wasn't as ungraspable as I thought.

10

The Web

Lana

I crept into the house, wincing at each floorboard that creaked beneath my feet. I was still in my school uniform, and that meant I was wearing my clunky black shoes that were just a little too ugly to be mistaken for Mary Janes. I pulled off the tie messily strewn around my neck, and shoved it in the pocket of my skirt.

Another creak.

I screeched to a halt, glancing around the pitch-black kitchen. My parents weren't strict per se, but they weren't exactly laid back either, which meant me creeping in at eleven when my curfew was ten would be *deadly*. Punishment was inevitable, but I was just *really* hoping I could put it off until tomorrow instead of dealing with it tonight.

A third creak.

I cringed as the light flicked on, and my mom's footsteps came shuffling into the kitchen. Her bright purple slippers were about to fall off her feet as she pushed the heels of her palms against her eyes.

“There you are,” she groaned, wiping her curly black hair away from her face. “Where have you been? It’s...” she glanced down at her wrist, but there was no watch there. Peering around the wall to glance at the time on the microwave, she sighed. “It’s half past eleven, Lana.”

She crossed her arms, and I couldn’t tell if he was squinting at me because it was bright or because she didn’t have her glasses on.

“I know,” I sighed, tucking a loose tendril of black hair behind my ear. “I’m sorry.”

“You know the rules, honey,” she said wearily, and that’s when I noticed the extra wrinkle in her brow. “We missed you at dinner. Made your favorite and everything.”

That’s why she looked so tired. She had to go through a family dinner without me, meaning she and Isaac took the brunt of it from my father.

Don’t get me wrong, my dad was a good man. He went to work. He took care of us. He bought my mom a present on their anniversary, and he tipped well at restaurants. He made nice conversation with cashiers and waiters, but when it came to his home, he took off that shell of kindness, and he was just... different. It was as if there was a little spider crawling around in

his brain that captured every interaction and spun it into an argument or something ridiculous—laughable almost.

Usually, Isaac and I were the ones caught flailing in the web like two helpless little flies, and our mom was the mediator, carefully untangling us and trying to appease my father by smiling and nodding at his rants and cruel jokes. But with one of us gone, my mom became one of the flies.

Another pair of footsteps came shuffling to us, and my back stiffened slightly.

“What is it?” my father asked, wiping a hand over his face as he came to stand behind my mother. His sharp eyes landed on me then, and his dark blonde brow furrowed.

“My interview went late,” I explained with a swallow.

My mom’s eyebrows flew up. “The one with that O’Shannon boy?”

“How did you—”

“Melissa let me know you two were paired up,” she intervened carefully. “Sweetheart, I really don’t like the idea of you spending time with him.”

“Relax, Trish,” my dad exhaled, exasperation thick in his breath. “She’s not the type for him.”

My mom narrowed her eyes at him. “That doesn’t mean it’s a good idea for her to be out at all hours of the night with a teenage boy, Kane.”

“It wasn’t all hours of the night,” I cut in quickly. “It was just a long interview, I promise. We’re not even friends. You could ask him, he’d tell you the same.” I was rambling, but I didn’t like the way the air around me felt—like it was warning me that I was about to fall into another web.

“Your mother is right about that,” my dad said, arms crossing now as his exasperation dissolved into anger. “You know our rules, and if all it takes for you to turn a blind eye to them is a little attention from a *stranger*, then you need to wake up, kid.”

“Kane,” my mom said quietly.

“What?” he said, holding his arms out to the sides. “I don’t want her getting all worked up just because he’s looking her way for the time being.” He turned to me. “You just can’t be so naive, honey. You’re what? Seventeen? To boys like him, you’re just another notch on the belt.”

“You don’t need to take that tone,” she ordered as if lowering her voice would keep me from hearing.

He shook his head, laughing as if he was shocked. “She’s old enough to handle the truth, *gosh*. If you keep trying to coddle these kids, Trish, I swear,” he shook his head. “You’re ruining them.”

You’re the one ruining us! I wanted to shout, but instead, my mom and I just shared a long, quiet glance while my father muttered something to himself. Then he was shuffling out of the kitchen without another word.

“Am I grounded?” I asked softly, hugging my stomach anxiously.

She pursed her lips in a thin line, and I realized she was hugging her own stomach the very same way I was. “No,” she exhaled wearily. “But you come home late again, and there will be consequences, okay?”

I nodded, and a small silence crawled between us. I stepped to leave, but she cut in quickly.

“He means well,” she finally said.

“I know.”

“He loves you both.”

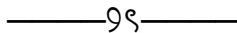
“I know that too,” I answered quietly.

She pursed her lips into a smile, but it didn't hold anything real. It was like the remnants of a smile—the way your mouth looks when you've just finished smiling for a photo, and the corners of your lips are starting to fall back into a line.

She held her arms open. “Come on, give me a hug before you go to bed.”

I tucked myself against her, and her warm arms slipped around me. I sucked in a big breath, breathing in the same smell of comfort that always followed my mom. “Goodnight, Lana Love.”

“Goodnight, Mama,” I whispered back, pecking a kiss to her cheek before slipping away to the comfort of my bedroom.



Patrick didn't show up to school the next day. Or the day after. Or the day after that.

It didn't matter. Like he said, we weren't friends, and I didn't expect one night of talking to magically make us close enough that he might send me a text or let me know why he was gone. Part of me knew that even if we were considered friends, he probably still wouldn't have done that.

So, instead of allowing myself to fall into my talent of imagining up reasons why he was gone, I put him out of my mind. At first, I focused my attention on the paper, but considering he was the focus of my paper, I kept that to a minimum.

“There you guys are,” I exhaled, slipping between where Ada and Collins were standing in the lunch line. “I haven’t seen you guys all day.”

Ada wrapped an arm around my shoulders, giving me a little squeeze. “Grouchy,” she teased.

“Not grouchy, just tired,” I said with a smile before turning to Collins. “And finally, you make an appearance. This is like the first time you’ve shown up for school in weeks.” The immediate flush to her cheeks made me want to pull my words back letter by letter. “Um, but it’s okay because you’re here now,” I added, covering my sloppy execution with a quick smile.

Collins exhaled, and the lines on either side of her smile were faint but still present. “I’ve just been um... busy.”

“Yeah, I feel like we haven’t all hung out in like a really long time. What if we all did something this weekend?” I suggested with a smile, hoping to clean up my mess as fast as possible.

Ada inhaled dramatically, practically squealing as she beamed at me. “A sleepover would be perfect!”

“Well, I meant just go shopping or something bu—”

“Well, now that you tossed the thought in my brain, we have to do a sleepover,” Ada said, pulling out her phone. “Okay, I’m texting a group now, but—*shoot*. We can’t do my house. My parents are having a bunch of people over for some big dinner. I don’t really know.”

We couldn’t do Collins’ house either. Not with the possibility of her dad stumbling in at any moment, blubbering drunk.

“Let’s do mine,” I offered impulsively. “We just cleared out the storage room and put a big projector in it. We could do movie night?”

Ada was smiling big. “I’ll be there.”

“Tonight?” I suggested with a shrug.

“Sounds good to me,” another voice drawled from behind me.

When I turned around, I found half the soccer team slipping into line with us, with Lincoln at the front.

Ada rolled her eyes, but she was smiling good-naturedly. “It’s a girls sleepover, dummy.”

“Never stopped me before,” he said with a grin, wiggling his eyebrows.

Ada smacked his arm with a laugh. “You’re disgusting.”

“A sleepover?” Isaac grimaced.

“Don’t tell me you’re trying to get an invitation too?” I deadpanned.

“Heck no,” he scoffed. “You can’t have it at our house, though.”

My eyebrows scrunched together. “Why not?”

“The guys are coming over tonight,” he explained, and behind him were the *guys* in question—Lincoln, Davis, Heath, Topher, and... *Patrick*.

My stomach dipped, and I tried to look him over discreetly. I didn’t know exactly what I was looking for. Maybe signs of *something* to tell me why he had been out of school for three days. He looked the same as always.

“Well, so are we,” Ada cut in, and I winced.

She was going to have a field day with this. What was more dramatic than a bunch of teenagers thrown into the same house for a night?

Isaac narrowed his eyes at her. “Well, have it at someone else’s house then, because there’s no way Mom’s gonna let this fly,” he said, switching his attention to me mid-sentence.

Davis stepped between Isaac and Ada casually, touching a hand to Isaac’s chest, “Hey, look, relax, man,” he said with an easygoing smile. “If your mom’s not cool with it, we’ll figure something out, just chill.”

“Yeah, yeah, sure,” he said, exhaling heavily. “But seriously, Lan, I’m not taking the fall if Mom gets pissed,” he whispered, and I nodded.

“Yeah, fine, I’ll take the fall,” I said around a heavy swallow.

This was going to be bad. My mom never let us have mixed company playdates as kids, so Isaac having all his friends two rooms away from all of my friends overnight would be her worst nightmare.

“I’ll text Del the details,” Ada said with a smile. “This is going to be so fun.”

My gaze snagged on Patrick's, and he shifted his eyes away from mine instantly, like I wasn't even there. *Ouch*. Heat spread over my stomach. This was really starting to be a cycle, huh? *He did tell you*, a voice in my mind reminded me. He told me he didn't want to be friends, and I guess he really meant it. I shouldn't have expected more. But isn't it fair to expect normal decency of acknowledging someone you know when you see them?

"Did you hear me?" Collins whispered.

I looked up from my shoes, realizing we were already walking to our lunch table, and I had a tray in my hand. "Sorry, what?"

"You okay?" she asked softly, linking her arm with mine.

I nodded, giving her a closed-lipped smile. I refused to be rattled by this guy. "All good," I answered quietly. "Now what were you trying to tell me?"

"Just that I really don't think your mom's gonna like this," she said, and I could feel the anxiety radiating off her body.

I huffed a sigh. "Yeah, I know, bu—"

"So, let's just not tell her," a voice cut in, and I looked to my left to see Stasia shrugging.

Stasia was coming?

“I’m pretty sure she’s gonna notice when there’s three new girls in her house,” I said with a nervous laugh that I was praying sounded more natural than it felt.

Ada held up four fingers with her eyebrows raised. “Make that four. I just texted Del, and she’s coming too.”

“Del?”

“Come on, you know Delaney,” Ada laughed.

I nodded, and the image of my mom’s pissed-off eyebrows all scrunched together flashed before me. This was starting to feel a little out of my control now. Who else was coming? Having Ada and Collins over and us all keeping quiet in my room while the boys kept quiet in theirs was one thing, but now having four girls over?

This was going to be a mess.