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The Homecoming Game

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THE HOMECOMING GAME

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THE HOMECOMING GAME

by

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THESIS

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PREFACE

What is the first thing you think of when you think of a story or novel about someone who is gay, or on the LGBTQ+ spectrum? The common answer would likely be, a story about the process of a queer person being in the closet, coming out. Are we as writers afraid of telling the stories of LGBTQ+ characters without coming out as the main topic? Is it about money, or is it about telling a story that is meaningful, that allows the LGBTQ+ community a glimpse into a character's life that looks like their own? By which I mean: are authors afraid of their books not selling if they are not a coming out story, a topic which has been very popular in YA literature? It could be: the trope works, and is something that has made a lot of money in the LGBTQ+ literature scene. But is a person's sexual identity really that important? Should it be all consuming? Is this the kind of story we really want to keep telling over and over again, or have we reached a point in society where sexuality does not matter, because it is only one part of the many different parts that make up who we are as humans?

When I was a teenager, I spent a lot of time confused about my own sexual orientation. Growing up in a strict Italian-Catholic household, the idea of a future dating or marrying a woman rather than a man was something I never imagined. Instead, I imagined walking down the aisle of my childhood Chapel in a beautiful white dress, to where a handsome man would be waiting for me. As I grew into a teenager, I started feeling things I had never felt before about girls in my school. Being a child of the technological age, I dove into the internet to research what I was feeling, and had myself convinced at various stages that I was a lesbian. Every day it was something different; lesbian, straight, lesbian, straight — my sexual identity was like a revolving door of denial. The worst part about it was that I felt like I could not tell anyone about

the war being waged inside of my mind; I felt painfully alone, confused, and like something was terribly wrong with me.

I was a voracious reader as a teenager, and the majority of the books I read were for and about cisgender, straight teenage girls who were hopelessly in love with boys who did not notice them. I identified heavily with these girls and devoured the books, reading one after another like they were my daily meals. Even now as an adult, I love diving into a good Young Adult Novel, although now my preferences are a lot different than they once were. The literature I had access to as a teenager never delved into sexual identity, or showed characters who looked like me. They were straight girls, living straight lives, dating straight boys — a far cry from the characters I needed at the time. So, a large portion of my teenage years were spent in complete denial of an inherent truth I refused to accept: I was (and still am!) bisexual, and that is perfectly okay.

Societal acceptance is something that Gen X and millennials worked very hard at achieving. In the same way that people of color no longer need books telling the world that racism is bad, I believe that LGBTQ+ people no longer need books that tell people being queer is okay. These types of questions led me to gain interest in and begin writing a Young Adult Novel. In my thesis, I wrote a novel about a young woman named Ellie who is bisexual, but that is only one facet of her character and her story. Her travails have nothing to do with sexuality; instead, Ellie is faced with the plagues of being a teenager, her father being an alcoholic, and so much more. *The Homecoming Game* is a novel about a teenager named Ellie who discovers her journey into adulthood is more than just choosing between a boy and girl to go to Homecoming with; similarly, recognizing that a person's sexuality is not the whole of who they are but instead a single fragment of a much more intricate system of parts is the key to normalizing the LGBTQ+ experience in Young Adult Literature.

Young Adult Literature is a genre separate from Children's and Adult Literature, consisting of books that are written for and about teenagers and characters between the ages of 12 and 18. These novels explore the teenage experience, and tend to have certain themes attached to them such as self-discovery, romantic relationships, and friendship. My understanding of this genre has been shaped by novels I have read including *Let's Talk About Love* by Claire Kahn, *Leah on the Offbeat* by Becky Albertalli, and *The Gentleman's Guide to Vice and Virtue* by Mackenzi Lee, and also theoretical books such as *Method and Madness: The Making of a Story* by Alice LaPlante, *The Storytelling Animal* by Jonathan Gottschall, *Writing Irresistible Kidlit* by Mary Kole, and *Writing Great Books for Young Adults* by Regina Brooks. Self-discovery, romantic relationships, and friendship are a common thread in each of these novels; the characters are at varying stages of being a teenager, however they all experience similar themes throughout. This differs from genres like Adult and Children's Literature which are both written for different age groups, and feature themes of different maturity levels than those within the Young Adult Genre.

In brief, these books were essential influences in my own thesis; *Leah on the Offbeat* by Becky Albertalli helped me develop themes of friendships and relationships, sexuality, self-esteem, and feeling like an outsider in my work. The main character, Leah, is not "out" as bisexual to all her friends — her mother is the only one who knows about her sexuality, and Leah struggles with accepting that she is bisexual and telling her friends. This was a huge factor for me when I decided Ellie was going to own her bisexuality rather than struggle with it. *Let's Talk About Love* by Claire Kahn helped with establishing a voice with a dynamic writing style that displayed the urgency of being a teenager, and not quite understanding one's own wants and desires. The book follows Alice, a young asexual college student who is struggling to accept

herself and figure out what she wants in her life. Alice's struggles helped me develop the struggles that Ellie went through, especially within her friendship with her best friend Trish. The theoretical books like *Writing Great Books for Young Adults* by Regina Brooks and *Writing Irresistible Kidlit* by Mary Kole were handbooks on how to attract young readers, keep them entertained, and how to portray young characters in a way in which they will be able to relate.

A seminal book that marked our society's understanding of young adult literature as a separate genre, one that could honestly and effectively explore topics that were uncomfortable for many adults to discuss, was *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret* by Judy Blume. When it was published in the 1970s, it laid bare topics that many in society saw as taboo. It was even banned in some school systems for having the audacity to mention girls menstruating. Girls getting their periods was not spoken about in public and was considered a very private matter. This book took something that was considered to be taboo and normalized it — and perhaps even inspired a few girls to become a little bit more comfortable with talking about what was going on with their bodies. In LGBTQ literature, especially of the Young Adult variety, we have gone through something similar to what happened with *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*. We busted out of our chains and talked about something that was taboo (coming out) and now it's time for us to move on and get comfortable with talking about being queer in the same way we are comfortable with talking about periods, because menstruation AND being queer are both normal things.

Some influential books for young adults that have addressed the LGBTQ+ community in similar ways are *Leah on the Offbeat* by Becky Albertali, the *Heartstopper* series by Alice Oseman, and *If I Was Your Girl* by Meredith Russo. While each of these stories are different in their own ways, they all approach the act of coming out in one way or another. Mentioned

previously, *Leah on the Offbeat* handles coming out as bisexual to your friends. *Heartstopper* also follows the coming out story of a main character named Nick, and *If I was Your Girl* traverses into the world of Amanda, who is the new girl at school and her journey of coming out to her friends there as trans.

As important as these seminal works were in forming social acceptance of queer teens, focusing on coming out stories instead of crafting stories about queer characters whose queerness is only one part of the kaleidoscope that makes up who they are does a disservice to where we are as a society, in the LGBTQ+ community. Not only have we moved past this ideal, but we have moved forward into a time where the queerness of everyday people is generally accepted in our larger society. So why should it not be accepted in our literature, too? Having brown hair, blue eyes, or freckles are all attributes that come together to make a person who they are, so being gay, bisexual, asexual, or lesbian should be considered and treated as such, too, especially in Young Adult Literature.

In fact, the “coming out story” has become somewhat of a tradition in queer culture, and especially queer literature. In many parts of the country, the traditions that the LGBTQ+ community once needed to feel and be accepted in society are a thing of the past or no longer necessary. So, what does this mean for a queer teenager, who no longer needs that kind of tradition to make them feel accepted? They need stories in which there are characters who look like them; stories where their queerness is just another element of who they are, not the main event of their person. It is possible to celebrate coming out, because it’s a huge thing for someone to do, but I don’t think we need to fully focus on it as a whole within our writing. Similarly, I do not think you even need to traditionally or even officially come out and have a story about being scared, in the closet, to be considered queer. It is okay to be queer and be

confident about it, and not have a story of how you struggled to come out. Is that not the whole reason why the queer community has been fighting to be accepted in society this entire time? Did we not do this *for* the future of queer teens, so they did not have to go through what we did growing up? I think it also has something to do with the generations of people who are parents now, too. Gen X and Millennials are the group of people who are parents or becoming them, and because of what we went through growing up, especially those of us who are queer, tend to be more accepting of our queer children.

These seminal works laid the groundwork for me to write a book that features a queer main character, but is not about coming out. Actually, there is only one moment where Ellie's sexuality is called into question throughout the novel. It happens when she and Trish are on the phone, discussing the fact that Celeste has asked her to Homecoming. Trish knows that Ellie is bisexual, but she asks if Ellie is a lesbian: "'Wait, so like...'" Trish starts. She's probably pacing around her bedroom, trying to calculate how she needs to change all her plans in popularity to fit Celeste into the picture. 'So like, do you like her? Are you a lesbian? Is this you coming out to me? Should I go get Charlie?'" (Daras 38). Ellie assures Trish that she is not a lesbian, nor is she coming out to her; she actually brushes it off quite easily and they careen into the next part of the conversation. This was done intentionally, because there was no need for me to delve into the "coming out" space at this point, or at all.

In her TED Talk "The Windows and Mirrors of Your Child's Bookshelf", author Grace Lin introduces a concept that books can be like windows looking out into the world. She continues, "A book can show you the world, but it can also show you a reflection of yourself" (Lin 1:00). Lin goes on to tell the story of how when she was a child, she never read books or saw movies with characters who looked like her. She became so ashamed of her Chinese heritage

that she pretended that she was not Chinese at all. It was not until much later in life, when she was studying art in Italy, that she realized she did not know anything at all about her Chinese heritage, or even the reason why her parents immigrated to America. It was then that Lin decided to study Chinese art, and eventually write Children's Literature about being Chinese, too.

As I was writing my novel, I found myself coming back to Lin's point on how a book can show you the world and a reflection of yourself. The world I chose to show my readers is one where Ellie, a bisexual teenager, goes through her life without having to justify her sexuality. There is a scene in my novel where Ellie confesses to her mom that she was asked by Celeste to Homecoming. Her mom is more surprised that Ellie was asked to Homecoming by someone other than Ian — the boy she likes very much — than she is that Celeste is a girl. As their conversation continues, her mom even corrects her as she speaks about her fight with Trish.

"I'm not cool enough, or interesting enough for Trish to keep hanging out with unless I have a popular boyfriend."

"Or girlfriend," My mom notes, rolling her eyes. "Look, Eleanor, I didn't raise you to think so bad about yourself. You are a beautiful person on the inside and the outside, and so authentically you, which Trish definitely can't say about herself." (Daras 101)

Here, we so clearly see that to her mother, Ellie is more than just her sexuality; her sexuality is only part of who she is, as a whole. As for the reflection, I certainly do see aspects of myself in Ellie, and there is also an element of wishful thinking there for me. Ellie's confidence and certainty of her own sexuality is something I wish I had when I was a teenager, confused about my own sexuality.

Lin articulates that we need both windows and mirrors into the experiences and lives of others in the literature read by our children, so they can see characters who look like themselves but also gain knowledge of the unique experiences other children may have. It can be argued that this concept of windows and mirrors in our literature should not end with Children's Literature; it should carry on further, especially into Young Adult Literature. The teenage years are formative, and reading pieces of literature in which they can see themselves and gain insight into other cultures, religions, orientations, and so much more is an important and much needed in our society today. Perhaps allowing teens to look beyond their own reflection will help create a more accepting society in the future in which being different is not an inherently bad thing, or something to be embarrassed about.

Can books about the LGBTQ+ experience be less about acceptance of their identity, and more about how they grow as up and coming adults? And for teenagers who may not already accept their identities, no matter what they are -- should we not be showing a normalization of the LGBTQ+ community so that they can grow confidence in who they are? So, the current teens in our larger society have an easier time coming out, so what? While it doesn't make the stories of our pasts any easier or any less painful, we should as a community be proud of the leaps and bounds we have made to create a welcoming, accepting, and loving community for the next generation.

When I was a teenager, I spent a lot of time confused about my own sexual orientation, but those questions I had about myself were only one part of the confusion of growing up. My own high school experience was less than normal; my father suddenly passed away when I was seventeen, and it blew my entire life up. Not only was I dealing with the fluctuations of my own hormonal and body changes, but my friendships were in various states of chaos, I had school to

worry about, getting into college, passing my midterms, worrying about SAT's — and then, my dad died. After the explosion, grief became an enormous crater that I curled up into a ball in; everything else went on hold. To be honest, there are large chunks of the last two years of high school that I do not remember at all, because of the trauma. This is just *my* experience as a teenager. There are so many other teens who have had harder mountains to climb, who also struggle with grief, loss, depression, anxiety — the list goes on. The teenage experience is not black and white, it is screaming color. Why do I want to write for teens? Because part of me wishes that I could go back and completely rewrite my teen story — and maybe this is me doing just that. The story of Ellie certainly is not clean cut; it is messy, and she experiences a lot of chaos in her home-life and her school life. Her bisexuality is merely an aspect of who she is, it is not the driving force of her story, or the reason why her story is being told.

When I talk about queerness being a mere part of a person, I cannot help but think about this method of therapy that my therapist and I found works best for me called Internal Family Systems Therapy. The basic understanding of IFS is that we as humans are made up of different parts that come together to create the “self”. This treatment is often used for people who have been diagnosed with childhood trauma, and Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. In the article “Internal Family Systems Therapy for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Among Survivors of Multiple Childhood Trauma: A Pilot Effectiveness Study” the authors explain, “IFS theorizes that the mind is a plural entity with numerous subpersonalities, coined ‘Parts,’ that comprise an internal system often organized around a traumatic experience. In addition, IFS holds as one of its core assumptions, that each person has an inherent internal capacity for healing, referred to as the Self, that acts as our intuitive, core emotional and intellectual center” (Hodgdon, Anderson, Southwell, Hrubec, and Schwartz). These different “parts” of traumatized people tend to be more

fragmented because of the things they went through, and so life becomes difficult for them. The whole point of IFS therapy is to heal these different “parts” so that they can all come together and bring the ‘self’ back to center.

This is not to say that every teenager is traumatized, but as I have progressed in my own journey with this therapeutic intervention, I realized that teenagers mirror this concept of being made up of different, fragmented parts. I became fascinated with the behavior of teens and questioned why they act the way they do. They take risks, act without thinking, and in a lot of ways have a bit of a “Superman” complex, thinking nothing and no one can harm them. For example, teenage boys typically pay more for car insurance than a teenage girl does. Why is that? I questioned it for a moment, and then remembered that when I was in high school, the boys in my grade decided it was fun to sit on the hood of a moving car. It was fun, until one of them fell off. Clinically speaking, the human brain is not fully developed until it hits around the age of 25 — this means until that point of our lives, our decision making, planning, prioritizing, and so much more falls short. And yet, teenagers are expected to make huge life decisions, such as where they want to go to college, and what they want to do with the rest of their lives before they have even reached the age of 20.

On a biological level, teenage bodies are experiencing major changes; hormones fluctuating, intense feelings, and urges — it is overwhelming, to say the least. Teenagers are made up of many different parts, and they are both chaotic and fragmented because they are going through constant change and are experiencing growing pains in real time. There is real pressure that these kids are feeling every single day, and it can come from many different directions in their lives. The concept of teenagers having many different parts was essential in the process of developing the characters within my thesis. I had to recognize that there is not one

singular thing that a teenager is going to be focused on in high school; instead, there are a multitude of issues that teens go through every day, and that had to be reflected on the page.

A teenager is, in and of itself, a highly complex character. Applying the basic ideas of IFS therapy to creating a teenage character allowed me to look at them in layers instead of a single-minded view. I began asking questions about the motives of certain characters, thinking deeply about why they made the decisions that they made, or what parts of their past influenced their behavior in the present. Ellie, for example, experienced domestic abuse from her alcoholic father when she was a child. Although he is now sober, she still has anxieties about him relapsing, but also deals with a lot of trauma related to her rocky childhood. These anxieties, as well as the trauma she experienced are things she deals with every day. At one point, she even experiences a Post-Traumatic Stress flashback in the middle of a chapter, which throws her into a panic attack. As she is practicing her driving skills with her father, her attack begins: “I try to breathe normally and just drive, but my palms are starting to get sweaty and I feel a little bit light headed and nauseous. Instead of making a U-turn like my dad told me to, when I reach the other end of the neighborhood, I stop the car, putting it in park. I can’t breathe, and no matter how hard I try not to, I’m hyperventilating” (Daras 64). Although Ellie’s parents view her as someone who is as they say, “wise beyond her years”, she is still very much a kid who has been traumatized, something I kept coming back to throughout the novel.

It is important to note that although she has had to grow up quickly in some ways, Ellie is still a teenager and those typical characteristics of a teenager come out often throughout the story. There is still a sense of urgency, and even some dramatics in her actions — for example, Ellie contemplates the reason why she now has to lock her bedroom door when she’s inside it, citing her rambunctious younger siblings as the main issue. She explains,

...one of the twins decided to come into my room and cut a piece of my hair off while I was napping. I never wanted bangs. I can't pull off bangs. But did I get bangs anyway? Yes. I ended up having to, because my mom couldn't watch my stupid younger sister for five seconds while I took a much-needed nap after an extremely long day of being an exceptional student at school. One thing I did learn from that, though, was that I actually could kind of pull them off, in an emergency. So now I lock my bedroom door when I'm in it (Daras 33-34).

Serious, traumatized parts put aside, Ellie is still a teenager. She still complains about her younger siblings and her parents, still has crushes on celebrities, holds grudges over her younger sister for cutting her hair into very ugly bangs years ago... she is still a child, one that was unfortunately forced to act more mature than she needed to be at a young age. These different elements of Ellie's character are reflective of the IFS mentality; that we are all made up of many different parts, all of which come together to create the self.

Digging deep into the psychology of characters with the theories of IFS therapy in mind allowed me to reach further into the story I wanted to tell. In *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human*, Jonathan Gottschall describes characters in fiction as “wiggles of ink on paper”. He writes, “They are ink people. They live in ink houses inside ink towns. They work at ink jobs. They have inky problems” (143). Gottschall's view of characters and the creation of them intertwines with my idea in which each character — especially a teenaged one — should be looked at in layers, or parts. There are no “perfect” characters so to speak, and so building them from one-dimensional into real people with real backgrounds, desires, motives, and so much more is paramount in Young Adult literature.

We must remember that teenagers are social creatures; they go to school, have extracurricular activities to attend, hang out with friends, and sometimes even spend time with their families. For the average teenager, reading may not be on their to-do list, and even if it is, we still must take into account that characters must be appealing and interesting to them. Teens want a story that excites them, with characters in whom they can relate. Not only that, it is important that these characters — namely the protagonist — seem like real people. In *Writing Great Books for Young Adults*, Regina Brooks delves into the nitty gritty of creating characters that appeal to teens. She argues, “You want your reader to feel sympathy, understand, and care for your protagonist as he becomes more finely nuanced. And the best way to get these attributes across is through your main character’s interactions with other characters” (26). Every interaction that a protagonist has with another character is important because it is giving further clues into the defining features of them. Their actions and words are going to say a lot about the protagonist, and the reader will pay attention to that. Readers can see this through the interactions Ellie has with the other characters in her books, whether they are romantic interests, or some of her friends. She is closest to and most comfortable with Trish, who she has known the longest.

This idea can even be shown in real life. We, as humans, determine who we want in our lives as friends and romantic partners based not only on if our likes and dislikes are similar, but with how they interact with us and other people as well. For teenagers, it is no different. The actions of teenagers and words they speak to one another are going to tell everyone in their everyday lives a lot about them, whether they like it or not. When they sit down and read a piece of Young Adult Literature, they will be judging characters the same way they judge their peers.

Leah on the Offbeat by Becky Albertalli has a host of characters within the story, each of whose lives interact with the protagonist Leah in various ways. I found this book to be very

helpful when it came to developing characters, because Albertalli put Regina Brooks' words into action. As the reader journeys along with Leah, it is easy to become enamored with her and her story. Leah is a likable character, a relatable one at that; she is sassy, confident, well-liked by her peers. Reading along with the story she tells, she offers some funny insights of her past such as when she came out to her mother. She confesses, "I mean, I do sort of tell my mom everything, to a degree that's almost pathological. I keep her posted on all the Tumblr gossip, and I tell her about most of my crushes. And of course, I told my mom I'm bisexual, even though none of my friends know. I came out to her when I was eleven, during a commercial break for *Celebrity Rehab*" (Albertalli 24). In this passage, Albertalli paints a vivid picture of the relationship Leah has with her mom, and also shows the reader how Leah acts when she trusts someone. There is a level of trust between Leah and her mother where she feels as though she can tell her anything — something she does not feel she can do with her friends. Why is that? What makes Leah nervous about telling her friends something about her that is important? What is really going on with Leah? These are all questions that Albertalli answers in her novel through each interaction Leah has with others.

In my novel, Ellie interacts with a multitude of characters throughout, but her main encounters are with the three other main characters: her best friend Trish, a boy she likes named Ian, and a girl she likes named Celeste. Although these characters have backgrounds of their own, the most important background is that of the protagonist Ellie, as it is her story that is being told. She is vulnerable with the reader and allows them into her inner-world just as Leah does, as she goes the journey of discovering her own self-confidence. The friendship troubles between Ellie and Trish are highlighted throughout the story, as they are a basis of the romantic struggles that Ellie is going through with Ian and Celeste. In almost every interaction between Ellie and

these characters, there is always an element of anxiety within her, as well as a lack of self-worth and self-confidence. As the story progresses, Ellie still has anxieties, but seems to find her voice. Some characters support her in this, and others do not.

Ellie, like Leah, is also very close with her mother. Her relationship with her mom and how they interact with one another gives a lot of insight into Ellie's character as a whole. With her mom, she allows herself to be her true self, whereas with her friends she has to pick and choose what parts of herself to show, depending on how close the friendship may be. Her mother, just like Leah's mother, knows a version of Ellie that no other character in the story does, because she raised her. In a moment of vulnerability after a panic attack, Ellie confides in her mom about her fears of her father relapsing and breaks down crying. To the reader, she admits, “-I can't help it. It's easy to pretend like I'm okay with everyone else, but with Mom, it's just impossible” (Daras 72). Ellie cannot pretend to not be sad or upset when she is around her mom, just like Leah cannot keep the details of her life from her own mother. Although Ellie comes off as guarded, shy, self-conscious, and a bit of a wallflower to her peers, she allows herself to be more sassy, funny, lighthearted, and vulnerable in moments of chaos with her mom.

Just as Gottschall said, the ink people in our stories have real lives, stories, and voices, and developing voice goes hand-in-hand with developing the very ink people who find their way onto the pages of them. When it comes to Young Adult Literature, a writer has to understand that the life of a teenager is chaotic at best. As previously mentioned, on a biological level, teenagers are going through major changes that affect them on physical, mental, and emotional levels. They feel and experience things in life with a certain urgency that is very new and very raw to them. Mary Kole, author of *Writing Irresistible Kidlit* explains, “There's something crucial that I

want you to remember about YA, and that's the all-consuming nature of being a teenager. It's that sense of possibility. That feeling of your heart welling so big it could explode" (20). This is a feeling that many of us know all too well, and one I noticed Claire Kahn achieved in her novel, *Let's Talk About Love*.

The protagonist in *Let's Talk About Love* is named Alice, a college-aged young woman who is sifting through the issues of her sexual orientation and what she wants to do with the rest of her life. Alice, like Ellie, is being pulled in many different directions and does not quite know how to handle it. There is a frantic energy to her, echoing the all-consuming nature of being a teenager; for even though Alice is in college, that sense of chaos of the teenager years does not simply end when you leave high school. There is a moment in *Let's Talk About Love* where, overwhelmed with an argument she is having with her best friend Feenie, Alice explodes with emotion, calling herself a victim, selfish, all while sobbing hysterically. She exclaims, "I don't know how to show someone I love them. I don't know how to make someone understand me. I don't know how to do anything right" (Kahn 246). This dramatic moment gives the reader a direct view into the emotionally charged energy a teenager can experience and is likely very relatable to them.

A mirror of what happened between Alice and Feenie in *Let's Talk About Love*, the protagonist in my thesis Ellie gets into an argument with her best friend Trish and finds the strength to finally stand up for herself. In this moment, internally, Ellie is completely melting down as she begins to realize everything that Trish has done. Even still, she is somehow able to garner the strength to stand up to Trish. She even manages to finally say out loud what she hasn't been able to this far, explaining "'I've never wanted any of this, Trish,' I continue, that familiar gurgle of anger bubbling away in my stomach. 'I don't even want to go to Homecoming. I never

did! We didn't go to Homecoming freshman or sophomore year of high school! What makes junior year any different?" (Daras 95). An argument between friends, especially one as emotionally charged as this one, is something that every teenaged reader can relate to. Because everything in their lives magnified (emotions included) these arguments feel like they are the end of the world.

The goal in creating characters and voice in a novel, especially a Young Adult Novel is, again, so that readers can have those windows and mirrors that Grace Lin talks about in her TED Talk. Teenagers should be able to pick up a book and see an array of characters, some to whom they relate and others they do not. In her TED Talk, Lin talks about how her peers made fun of her for being Chinese and how she looked different from everyone else in the school. They even told her she could never play Dorothy in their school's production of *The Wizard of Oz*, because Dorothy is white, not Chinese. Lin argues that the windows and mirrors will allow children to become more accepting of and more interested in other cultures, religions, and so much more, instead of being hateful towards them. What good would we be doing for the young adults of the next generation if we did not offer them windows into different cultures, religions, and viewpoints?

The same can be said about setting; the world we live in is enormous, and there are many different places a writer can choose to set their story in. For something like Realistic Young Adult Fiction, especially something that follows the lives of teenagers, the options of where to set one's story is narrowed down quite a bit, and so I had to ask myself what the true purpose of a setting is, and what I wanted the setting of my thesis to tell my readers. Regina Brooks explains,

The purpose of a setting is to create an environment so that readers can clearly visualize where and when the story takes place. This will anchor the characters in the reader's mind so that the story cannot happen anywhere else at any other time. When a reader recalls the story, he should be able to see the action occurring within the frame of the setting (Brooks 62).

To anchor the characters in my thesis in the reader's mind, I made the decision to have the basic setting of the story be a small town in Rhode Island. The timeline in which it takes place is the beginning of a school year, so of course the story begins at Miller High, the town's high school. There are a few different places within the town where the characters travel to within the story, but there is not a large amount of detail given because I wanted to allow the reader to immerse themselves in the writing and use their imagination — to create a town of their own, that maybe looks like their own.

This is something Brooks urges writers to do — she advises, “Use the minimum number of words to fire up the young reader's imagination and let him create the image of the setting in his mind. One of the great strengths of fiction is that each reader will see the story his own way” (Brooks 65). This piece of advice kept coming back to me as I developed the setting in my thesis. I realized that the way in which I imagine Miller High will differ greatly from the way another reader imagines it, and the same goes for something as simple as the church basement of the Alateen meeting Ellie regularly attends.

In scenes like the Alateen meetings, it was not necessary for me to droll on about the architecture of the church or how every piece of furniture was strategically placed in the room. Adding small, physical details allowed me to play with the reader's senses. “No judgment or anything, it's just that I'd rather be pretty much anywhere else. The church basement always

smells like a mixture of mothballs, cigarettes, and that blue stuff they put in the toilets to keep it clean” (Daras 11). In this scene, Ellie is waiting for Ian to come out of the Alateen room so they can leave together. It made me think: what would other people think of when they hear a church basement described as smelling like mothballs, cigarettes, and toilet cleaner? Personally, I picture the basement of the church I grew up going to as a child that had a checkered linoleum floor and smelled like dust-soaked Pine-Sol. We used to have middle-school dances there, and there were plenty of AA meetings held there, too. Every person’s imagination of that church basement is going to be different, and that is exactly what I intended to achieve throughout the entire thesis.

When it comes to the plot of a story, Mary Kole describes the writer as an art curator, not a security camera. She urges writers to stop focusing on each and every movement of their protagonist or various characters or let them simply record and relay these events to the reader. She says, “Instead, shape events and cherry-pick the ones that are going to be the most exciting and the most significant for your story” (Kole 156). The difficult part is that writing about teenagers can be quite interesting because of the chaotic energy they hold within themselves. In the process of writing my thesis, I went through many drafts of scenes and chapters that did not need to be included in the final product because they were not, as Kole puts it, exciting or significant for the story. At the end of the day, writing those scenes and chapters — even though they were eventually cut — was a huge benefit to developing characters, not the overarching plot of the novel.

My novel closely follows what Mary Kole calls the “Emotional Plot”, which she explains resembles an inverted Three Act. “With Emotional Plot, we are reading the protagonist’s stakes and mood as she sinks to her Rock-Bottom Moment right before the Climax and then see the

Resolution and Evening Out to the story” (Kole 158). The protagonist Ellie begins at a normal state, and the Rise of her story starts as her relationship progresses with Ian and rises more when Celeste asks her to Homecoming. As soon as she is asked to Homecoming by Ellie, the plummet to Rock Bottom begins as she is hit with having to make a decision about who to go with. The Climax is something that occurs between Ellie and Trish, an emotionally charged interaction that changes life as she knows it. Something in Ellie’s character shifts in that moment, and it all begins when she finally gets angry: “Lying there on Trish’s bedroom floor, it’s kind of hard to recognize the person in front of me. A lump is forming in my throat, and I feel anxiety start to pile on my chest. I feel angry too, a burning sensation deep in my stomach that I feel might explode out of my mouth if I open it too soon” (Daras 94). Directly after this moment, Ellie finally takes the opportunity to stand up for herself, something she has not been able to do thus far in the story. It is a huge moment for her, and the turning point of her development as a character.

Taking into consideration how dramatic the life of a teenager can be, Kole mentions that it is important to keep high stakes from turning into histrionics. While we all know teens can have the tendency to be histrionic, the display of outward emotion can be overwhelming and even unlikeable to the reader. Writers run the risk of their material becoming so dramatic that it borders on being unrealistic, something that should be avoided completely. The key is to keep the energy of the high stakes situation elevated while having your characters react and interact with one another in a relatable way. For example, instead of throwing a complete hissy fit or getting physical with Trish, Ellie decides that she has had enough of her, and simply leaves Trish’s house. “‘No,’ I say, pulling my backpack on. ‘No, if you were trying to do something for me, you wouldn’t have done this at all. If you were *actually* my friend, you wouldn’t have done

this at all. I have to go.’” (Daras 96). The intensity of the fight between them does not reach extreme levels, but there is a level of intensity there which drifts on until Ellie’s mom picks her up. This is an important moment of growth for Ellie; due to the trauma she went through as a child, she does not like confrontation, and often lets people walk all over her.

Writing for young adults, especially those of the LGBTQ+ variety has been an enlightening and empowering experience for me. I was influenced by the questions I had about the LGBTQ+ population of teenagers reading Young Adult Fiction, my own journey in high school, and the many seminal and theoretical books I read over time spent in this program at UTEP. All of this inspired me to write something that teenagers could read to see the windows and mirrors of themselves and others in. As I continued to read about writing about and for teenagers, the concepts of the psychological therapy Internal Family Systems became a part of how I began to develop the protagonist in my thesis, as well as the other characters within it. IFS allowed me to look deeper and ask questions that I may not have asked about the characters in my story before.

Books like *Let’s Talk About Love* by Claire Kahn and *Leah on the Offbeat* by Becky Albertalli as well as theoretical books such as *Writing Great Books for Young Adults* by Regina Brooks and *Writing Irresistible Kidlit* by Mary Kole were paramount in the creation of characters, voice, setting, and plot within my thesis. Each book brought me valuable insights into writing Young Adult Literature and what teenagers are looking for in the books they read, all of which was integral in me crafting a piece of writing that teens, especially those within the LGBTQ+ community would appreciate. Young Adult Fiction has always been a genre where I, as a writer and a reader, have always felt I belong. *Writing The Homecoming Game* has been a

process influenced by many books that I have read over the years, as well as my own real-life experience.

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PROLOGUE.

It's the beginning of the a cappella choir season and our first official rehearsal of the year. Our director, Mrs. Clark is already coming at us guns blazing for not having our music memorized. We're only two weeks in. Dana, the section leader of the altos is sitting with her face in her hands. I've never seen her so upset before in rehearsal. My heart feels like it's going to burst out of my chest, and I stand, walking quickly out of the room toward the bathroom.

I hear footsteps behind me but ignore them as I push the bathroom door open and step inside. Sucking in a desperate breath of air, I walk over to the sinks and start running some water to splash on my burning face.

"Hey, are you okay?"

I look over my shoulder at the tall, lithe figure standing in the doorway. It's Celeste. She's the section leader for the sopranos and stands right in my eye line during rehearsals. I've caught her watching me from across the room a couple times during rehearsals. She always smiles at me like she knows something I don't know. My stomach flip-flops, my heart still fluttering in my chest.

"I think. That was just..."

"Intense."

"Yeah, intense."

I lean over the sink and splash some water on my face, aware that Celeste is moving closer to me. She pulls some paper towels out of the holder and hands them to me. I press them against my face, drying it as she watches me in the mirror.

“Clark’s bark is worse than her bite,” Celeste says, smiling at me. “Just make sure you know your part and she’ll have no reason to get on your case.” She pulls a paper towel out from the dispenser and turns to face me. “You missed a spot.”

My mouth goes dry, everything shifts into slow motion as she dabs some water off my chin and cheek. Eyes wide, I gaze up at her, trying desperately to remember to breathe. Celeste is beautiful. More beautiful than most of the girls in choir or even in the school, and she’s... well, it’s pretty well known that she’s a lesbian.

“Th-thanks.”

“No problem, Ellie,” Celeste says. She reaches up and brushes a piece of my hair behind my ear. “You sure you’re okay?”

“Um... yeah, I’m - I’m good.”

She smiles again and nods her head, then turns and walks out of the bathroom, leaving me dumbfounded. What just happened?

CHAPTER ONE.

Being back at school after a long summer break can be really hard, mostly because basically every student, including myself, would much rather be doing nothing at all than sitting in a classroom listening to a teacher drone on about the history of pretty much anything. The problem with being in high school is that there are too many musts for the average student: you absolutely must be exceptional at school work, have a packed extracurricular activity schedule for after school, and have enough friends to make yourself look good in any given situation.

There are standards that teenagers need to live up to these days, and it can take a lot out of you. Last year, this kid Alicia Pembroke had a complete nervous breakdown during midterms that shook our entire class. Some people say that she tried to kill herself, and others say that she completely froze up and couldn't talk or walk around without bursting into tears. Whatever it was that actually happened, we may never know, because Alicia didn't come back to Miller High this year at all. Rumor has it that she transferred schools completely because she couldn't take the humiliation, or the stress.

Miller High is filled with exceptional students, who get exceptional grades, and have exceptional social statuses. So, you can understand the stress someone might have when school starts back up every September, along with every extracurricular activity known to man.

We're all meant to be great, here. What does being great even mean?

I personally think it's not worth all the anxiety. Thankfully, my mom and dad don't pressure me too much when it comes to my grades. As long as I'm doing my best, they're happy. There are plenty of other parents who don't feel the same way, and make that super obvious. Alicia's parents are obviously those kinds of people.

“Ellie, don’t forget your lunch!” My mom shouts from the garage. She’s already packed my three siblings up in the back of our purple minivan, which takes way longer than it does to drive me to school, but I don’t have my own car, or even my license to drive myself there. I know that’s kind of lame, being that I’m seventeen years old and all, but driving gives me a whole lot of anxiety.

I grab my lunch off the counter and make my way out to the garage, where mom’s waiting. Sliding into the passenger seat, I shut the door and let out a huge sigh. Mornings definitely aren’t for me.

“Thanks Mom,” I mutter, reaching over to sneak her travel mug. I take a sip of her overly sweetened coffee and wrinkle my nose in distaste. “Don’t you think this is a little too sweet?”

“I make it that sweet so you’ll stop drinking from my mug every morning,” Mom replies, backing out of the garage smoothly. “You know there are other travel mugs in the cabinet. It’s not that hard to pour yourself one.”

“I hate leaving it in my locker when I’m finished,” I tell her, setting her mug back into the drink holder. “It makes all my books smell like a stale coffee shop.”

In the back seat, my siblings Willa, Charlotte, and Theodore are all half asleep. Charlie and Teddy are the twins, and are almost two years old. Willa is four, and probably the wildest of the bunch. She never stops going, even when you think she might be too tired.

“Well, that’s too bad.” Mom says with a dramatic sigh, as if she really cares about my coffee-related problems. I know she has a lot of other things on her mind, like making sure my younger siblings don’t die or something. Watching little kids can be a lot; I know, because I constantly have to babysit them.

“Hey,” she adds, glancing over at me. “You’re going home with aunt Emma today. I’m on drop-off duty for Willa’s dance class this afternoon.” My aunt Emma just so happens to be an English teacher at Miller High, which is super convenient for my mom, who is constantly running around dropping off my little sister Willa to all her various extracurriculars. Who would have thought a four-year-old kid had such a busy schedule? I don’t think I was ever like that when I was little.

“Right,” I say with a yawn. “She’s not going to forget me this time, is she?”

“That was one time, Ellie.” Mom rolls her eyes and pulls into the school parking lot, into the line of parents dropping their kids off. “Let it go. No choir tonight, right?”

“No,” I confirm, shaking my head. “I have my meeting tonight, remember?”

“Oh, yeah. God, I can’t keep track of all the stuff you guys do. We need some sort of a white board or something.” Mom taps her fingers on the steering wheel and hums along to the song playing on the radio. “That’s not a bad idea, actually.”

I know full well that my mom will never put a white board to use. See, she’s all about figuring out ways to make her life easier with three little kids and a high schooler, but she never really follows through. We have a lot of unfinished projects she put together lying around the house, and I’m sure the whiteboard is the next one to join the pile.

“Whatever works for you, Mom,” I tell her, giving her a pat on the arm. “I can just get out here, I don’t mind walking.” She pulls up close to the curb, and I lean over and kiss her on the cheek. “Thanks for driving me.”

“You’re driving yourself tomorrow,” Mom says, looking over at me. “No excuses.”

“Fine!” I say as I hurry out of the car, slamming the door behind me. Mom rolls down the passenger seat window, and I wave.

“Have a good day, honey!” She calls after me as I walk quickly to the front doors of the school. There’s nothing quite as embarrassing as your mom yelling from the car out to you, in front of all your peers. Moms just don’t understand what it’s like to be a teenager, I think. It happened so long ago for them, that it’s probably all just a distant memory of the past.

“Ellie!”

The breathless voice of my best friend Trish interrupts my chain of thought as I walk past the cafeteria. Trish usually comes in earlier than most, and spends that time in the cafeteria perfecting her makeup until I get to school.

“Hey,” I say, stopping short to let her catch up to me. “Are you late or something today? I thought you’d already be in our spot.”

“I couldn’t get my eyeliner even. Do you think it looks okay?” She blinks her big blue eyes at me, turning her face so I can see each sharp line. It looks perfectly fine to me, and it probably did before, but Trish is very particular about her makeup.

“It’s perfectly even,” I tell her, rolling my eyes. “I don’t think anyone would have noticed if it wasn’t.”

“I’d know though, and that would drive me insane all day.” Trish tosses some of her shiny blonde hair over her shoulder, sighing deeply. “Do you know how hard it is to get a perfect cat-eye?”

“I do,” I say sympathetically. “That’s why I never use eyeliner. Remember the time I tried so many times that my eye started to swell up from all the makeup remover wipes I used?” Ugh, the mere memory of that makes me wince. Even though I wanted to stay home from school because of how horrible it looked, my mom made me go, and everyone looked at me like I had some sort of a disease the entire day.

“The struggle is real,” Trish agrees with a nod of her head. “Speaking of which, I have the perfect idea for our Homecoming issue.” She rubs her hands together as we begin to walk down the hallway together, toward our lockers.

“I told you I wasn’t even sure that I want to actually go,” I say with a sigh. “Why does everything always need to be planned out? I thought we could have a spa-night at my house and watch movies instead of going.” That is exactly what we always do on the night of the Homecoming dance, but for some reason Trish is determined to go with a date this year. No one has ever asked either of us before, so I’m not really sure why she thinks they’ll ask us now.

“We do that every year though, Ellie!” Trish whines. “Why can’t we just go have fun at the dance? The only thing we really need are dates -”

“And dresses,” I remind her, shaking my head. “I mean I have some that I could probably wear in my closet...”

“No, we’d definitely need new dresses,” Trish says thoughtfully. “I’ll look for some today during study hall. The most important thing is that we find dates first.”

“How are dates more important than dresses?” I ask. I mean, it’s a good question, right? There’s nothing like walking into a room in a shiny new dress, after all. At least, that’s what my mom says.

“Because we both need boys to look good for!” Trish says, swatting my shoulder as if I’m asking her the dumbest question on the earth. Lately, she’s been super obsessed with hanging out with popular people, especially boys. I mean, she’s always been pretty fascinated with boys, but it’s gotten even worse as of late. They’re all she thinks about, it’s kind of crazy.

“I don’t know,” I shake my head and scrunch up my face, looking at her. “I still vote for the spa night. It’s tradition. We’ve done it every year, Trish.”

“Some traditions are meant to be broken!” Trish exclaims. We stop at her locker and she quickly puts the code into her lock, and then pulls it open. Her locker is decorated with a lot of pink frills, photos of the two of us, magnets, and of course a mirror for her to check her makeup in, which she does as she pulls two books out. “And besides, we have spa nights like, all the time.”

That’s actually not true, and I’m about to say that when a bunch of girls pass by us, laughing about something or the other. They’re seniors, and I know that because Celeste Huang is walking with them, her long black hair in a braid that swishes back and forth as she walks.

“Hey, Ellie!” She says, a huge grin on her face. She waves at me, and I smile and wave back, feeling my cheeks heat up. Celeste and I are in concert choir together, and our school’s audition-only A Cappella Choir, which meets every Monday night for close to two hours.

“Hey, Celeste,” I say with a smile, feeling a little self-conscious.

“Good job last night at testing,” she says, brushing a stray piece of hair out of her face. “I meant to tell you before everyone left but I couldn’t find you. Your quartet did a really great job.”

“Oh!” I laugh nervously and nod. “Thanks. Yours did a great job too.”

“Thanks. See you at concert choir!” She waves one last time and then is off with her group of friends, laughing away at something one of them said. I blow out a breath of air and look at Trish, who’s staring at me with two raised eyebrows.

“You know Celeste Huang?” she asks, looking mildly impressed.

“She’s in choir, I told you that,” I tell her as we move to my locker. I unlock it and open the door, pulling out a history book. “Is that a big deal or something?”

“She’s only like,” Trish smacks her lips together after laying on a thick layer of lip gloss. “one of the most popular seniors at school right now. I wonder if she likes you.”

“What?” I whip my head around to look at her incredulously, laughing. “That’s the weirdest thing ever. I’ve known her through choir for like, three years now. She doesn’t like me.”

“Who randomly stops their entire friend group in the middle of the hallway just to say hi to another person?” Trish asks. She answers herself before I can even open my mouth. “Someone who likes that person. Duh. It’s like, common knowledge.”

“You constantly think someone has a crush on me,” I tell her, shaking my head. “Or you, for that matter. She’s just being nice.” I slam my locker door shut and pop the lock back on it, sighing deeply. “Has anyone ever told you that you’re far too peppy in the morning?”

“God, who peed in your cheerios?”

“No one,” I mutter, sighing. “Willa woke up a million times last night, and who do you think she went straight to?” I ask. We both know the answer, but I tell her anyway. “Me. She tried to crawl in bed with me every time she got out. Mom and Dad said I have to put her back in her bed when she does that, so I barely slept.”

“Why can’t they do that? They’re the parents,” Trish says, shaking her head. “I mean, that’s basically their job, isn’t it?”

“Kind of,” I agree. “But I usually don’t mind helping.”

“And now you’re pretty much half dead.”

“Exactly,” I snort.

“Well, if you want, you can sleep over tonight.” Trish offers. Honestly, sleeping over her house is kind of amazing. There are no babies that scream and cry in the middle of the night, and

no four-year-old that runs into your bedroom and launches herself into your bed because she woke up and felt lonely. It's nothing but quiet, peaceful sleep.

"I wish," I tell her, and I mean it. "I'd love to, but I have my meeting tonight, and it always gets out late." I let out a yawn, covering it with my hand. "Maybe later this week?"

"The invitation is always there, darling," Trish says dramatically. "Cary absolutely loves having you over."

Cary is Trish's mother. Trish loves to call her by her first name behind her back, because she's — well, she's just so *Cary*. Her dad's name is Larry, but Trish refers to him as Lawrence behind his back. I personally would never do something like that, because my mom would probably find out and get really mad at me. Trish somehow makes it chic.

"I'll let you know," I tell her just as the bell rings. "Text me later!"

"I will. Just think about the Homecoming thing, Ellie. It'll be amazing!"

Yeah, right. Since when has Homecoming *ever* been amazing?

CHAPTER TWO.

“My name is Fitz, and I’m an alcoholic.”

Yeah. It’s *that* kind of meeting. I’m here, in the basement of a church, on an old, beat up folding chair that is probably on its last leg. I’m not *exactly* at an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting, but Fitz is my dad, who *definitely* is at an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting, because he is one.

See, it all started when I was a baby. My parents were seventeen years old when they found out that my mom was pregnant. Mom was still seventeen when she had me, but dad had just freshly turned eighteen. They were still in high school. To say I had perfect timing is a little bit of an understatement. My grandparents took care of baby me while my actual parents both finished high school, and then my dad went off to college while my mom worked part-time. They lived with my grandparents until my dad graduated college and got his first real job, and then we were off to live on our own, in a small apartment.

Somewhere along the ride, my dad started drinking heavily, and didn’t stop until he had to. That’s why I’m here, in a church basement, listening to him talk about his story to a bunch of people like him. No judgment or anything, it’s just that I’d rather be pretty much anywhere else. The church basement always smells like a mixture of mothballs, cigarettes, and that blue stuff they put in the toilets to keep it clean. Everyone who goes to this meeting tends to hang out both before and after to smoke and talk.

Sometimes I wonder what it would be like to light up a cigarette and smoke it, but then I remember all the lectures that my mom has given me about not smoking, and how mad she was when she found out my dad had started smoking again after his last stint in rehab. That was a long time ago, but I’ll never forget how red her face got, and how loud she’d yelled at him.

“Hey, Ellie. You ready to go?”

Ian’s voice interrupts my thoughts about cigarettes and my alcoholic dad. Tearing my eyes away from the open door leading to the AA room, I look up at the tall boy in front of me. Ian Graham is what my best friend Trish calls “conventionally attractive”, with messy, slightly curly brown hair and green eyes. He has freckles on his face, and is always wearing his letterman jacket because he’s on the football team at our high school. Half of our grade has a huge crush on him, and it came as a pretty big surprise when everyone at school found out that he likes *me*.

“Thank God you’re here,” I groan, pulling myself out of the uncomfortable chair. “I was starting to melt into the chair. Don’t churches know that air conditioning is a thing?”

Ian and I met in the rooms. His dad is an alcoholic too, and he’d already been going to Alateen meetings for a few years before I started. Alateen is basically a support group for kids who have family members that are alcoholics or drug addicts. It’s supposed to help us “deal” with the behavior of alcoholics, and give us a sense of community or something.

“Sorry,” he grins, shaking his head. Leaning over, he grabs my backpack and swings it over his shoulder. “I told you I had to talk to my sponsor before we left. You know, you could have just gone outside to get some fresh air.”

“It’s hotter out there than it is in here!” I cross my arms over my chest, and frown up at him, then grin widely. “It’s okay though, I forgive you. You’re easy to forgive when you’re about to buy me ice cream.”

“I thought I was buying you coffee?”

“I had some time to think about it, and decided ice cream is a better option.”

I wave at my dad, who’s still standing at the podium in front of the large group of people talking about one of his many trips to rehab. He doesn’t wave back, but his eyes flash in my

direction and he gives a small nod, an acknowledgement that I'm leaving. Every Tuesday we drive to St. Paul's Church so that I can go to my Alateen meeting, and he can go to his Al Anon meeting. Alateen is typically an hour before Al Anon, but my dad just meets with one of the guys he sponsors right before his meeting so it works perfectly for us both. Mom insisted that I start going to Alateen pretty much as soon as I became a teenager. I think she figured it would help me work through having a dad who was a raging alcoholic through my entire childhood, or something like that.

"You change your mind too much," Ian says, unlocking his Jeep. He throws both our backpacks in the trunk, and then opens the passenger door for me to climb in. "This is just like the time where you ended up making me buy you Mexican food and Chinese food all in one afternoon."

"This is not just like that time!" I say defensively once he jumps into the driver's seat. We shut our doors at the same time, and I sigh in relief as the air conditioning starts blasting. "That time, you made me run the bleachers and I was profoundly hungry afterwards, and deserved a little treat."

To that, he snorts, and then fiddles with the radio until he finds a station that he likes. Ian is the type of football player every team wants. He's already being scouted by a bunch of different colleges to play for them, and will likely get a pretty big scholarship, if not full ride wherever he decides to go.

"Put your seatbelt on," he reminds me, and waits until I do to put the car in drive. "I didn't make you run the bleachers, Elle," he says. Whenever he uses that nickname for me, it makes my heart do weird things. "You complained to me that you weren't getting enough exercise and then told me that you could probably run up the bleachers faster than me."

Ian Graham has never been one to back down on a challenge. He'll pretty much do any dare anyone gives him, which if you ask me is pretty reckless. Teenage boys are idiots.

"Okay well," I start to say, clearing my throat. "You're a big guy, how was I supposed to know you're also weirdly fast and agile. And anyway, you ate and enjoyed the Mexican and Chinese food too."

He laughs, but instead of responding he starts humming the song that's on the radio, and rests his right hand on my thigh. Ian squeezes it gently, and I can feel heat rising from my neck, to my cheeks. My face is probably bright red, which is stupidly embarrassing.

I don't exactly know what Ian and I are. Sometimes I feel like these little outings we have are dates, and other times I feel like they're just us being friends. How am I supposed to tell the difference when sometimes he does stuff like this, but other times he doesn't?

We kissed once. It was on a night like this, after Alateen. This kid Corey's mom relapsed, and I think it may have reminded Ian of his own mom, a lot. I hadn't ever really told Ian about everything with my dad at that point, but that night I did. He told me about his mom too. We sat in his car silently for a long time, after that. When I finally turned to say something, he kissed me.

It never happened again after that, and we still haven't talked about it. So, I'm not sure. Maybe I'm a horrible kisser, and he doesn't ever want to do it again, or maybe he thinks I'm too much of a dork to date and wants to keep his reputation for dating cool girls intact.

Okay, maybe that was an exaggeration. He dated like, one cool girl named Cami last year. She's in my grade, and is, in my opinion, the most annoying person in the entire world. She's in the artsy crew, but they're also like the most popular right now, and she loves showing off how perfect and artistic she is. Also, when we were in fourth grade, she poured a jar of paint

on me “accidentally” during art and I’ve secretly never forgiven her for it. There’s no way she did that accidentally. No one pours a jar of paint on someone else accidentally! She ruined my favorite blue dress and the new shoes my aunt had bought me.

“So, ice cream it is,” Ian says as he pulls out of the church parking lot. “Probably better than getting coffee. I have to hit the weight room in the morning for football anyway. You want to come?” He tilts his head and glances at me, smirking because he probably already knows my answer.

“Absolutely not,” I reply, shaking my head. I wouldn’t be caught dead going to the weight room at 5:30 in the morning before school for two reasons: one, I value my sleep, and two, all the jock football players will be there, and I don’t need to give them any ammunition to potentially make fun of me until I melt into the filthy locker room floor in a giant puddle of embarrassment. “You know what I’m like when I have to get up early.”

He knows that because last summer, our Alateen group planned a beach day and we all got up at the crack of dawn to head out. I slept practically the entire trip there, and only woke up when we stopped for coffee.

“I figured I would ask, just in case you’ve had a change of heart on mornings. It’d probably give you more energy to start your day, you know.” Ian grins, coming to a stop at a stop light. He turns his head to look at me, and I roll my eyes at him.

“I get enough energy from the coffee I drink every morning.”

“Which is barely any, at all,” He snorts.

“Exactly,” I say, throwing my hands up. “If coffee can’t wake me up fully, then nothing can. Not even a little bit of exercise. *Especially* not exercise!” I can’t even imagine what that would be like. I’ve never been a particularly athletic person, which is part of the reason why I

can't understand why Ian likes me so much. Most football players date girls who either play soccer, softball, or volleyball. My only extracurricular activity is choir, which is more like a lifestyle at this point than an "extracurricular". I eat, sleep, and breathe choir.

Mom says that high school has changed since she was in it, though. The people who would have been unpopular (nerds and dorks - her words, not mine) when she was a teenager are now the people who are widely liked and accepted by everyone. Intelligence is looked at positively now, especially if you want to get into a good college, and pretty much everyone at my school is dedicated to that.

Maybe Ian liking me isn't that much of a surprise then, after all, if you're looking at it high school culture-wise. Maybe I'm just self conscious, and my best friend is utterly obsessed with becoming super popular and loved by everyone in our grade. That's probably it.

My phone buzzes in my pocket. It's Trish of course, speak of the devil.

TRISH: Did he ask you yet???

TRISH: Homecoming is a month away!

TRISH: He better get his shit together!

I swear, she's going to be the reason why my phone stops working completely one day. Trish is over-excited and hyper-focused on which boys are going to take us to homecoming this year. It's our sophomore year of high school, and she's convinced that it's going to be our big break and that we'll find our high school identities by dating popular boys, who will then elevate our social status.

Here's the thing: I don't really care about my social status at school, and I think it would be weird to have my classmates fawning over me like they do to Tawny Williams. Tawny is probably the most popular girl in our grade, and everyone likes her. She's hard to hate, because

she's really nice, pretty, and smart. Trish basically wants to be the new Tawny. Not only that, she also seriously hates Tawny's guts, for no real reason other than the fact that she's the most popular girl in our grade right now. It's kind of exhausting, to be honest.

"Is that your mom?" Ian asks, glancing over to me when we hit a stop sign.

"No, it's just Trish," I say, quickly pushing my phone back into my pocket. Trish won't like being ignored, but I'm not about to explain to Ian that my best friend has asked me every single day for the past month if he's taking me to homecoming, so that his best friend can ask her, and then she'll be made in the shade to be popular. We both will.

Ian doesn't respond to that. I'm not really sure that he actually likes Trish, because whenever I'm with him and she's around, he gets pretty quiet. Here's the thing though: Trish has been my best friend since we were little kids, and I don't really think I could just drop her for a boy. Not that he's asking me to or anything, but he makes it pretty obvious that she annoys him. Maybe he sees through her, and can tell that she basically just wants to use him to climb the social ladder, I don't know.

Ian pulls into the parking lot of Scoop Shoppe, the local ice cream place, and turns off his car. He turns to me, and for a second he looks like he wants to say something, then looks back to his windshield.

"Are you okay?" I ask, feeling my heart start to race in my chest. I want to reach out and touch his arm, but my hands are glued to my lap. I haven't even unbuckled my seatbelt, and neither has he. "Things at the meeting tonight got a little real when we were talking about Corey's mom again..."

"Nah, it's fine," Ian says coolly, unbuckling his seatbelt. "I'm fine. I feel bad for the guy, you know? But I don't want to put myself in his shoes too much in my head."

“Keep the focus on yourself,” I say in a sing-song-y voice, repeating what our meeting leaders always tell us. “I hate when those stupid slogans actually apply to life.”

“Right?” Ian laughs and shakes his head, then opens his car door. I unbuckle my seatbelt and do the same, and we walk together into the ice cream parlor. “It’s almost like it’s a tried and true system that actually works for people who want to get better.”

“That’s super corny of you,” I tell him as we walk inside. There are a few people waiting on line to have their orders taken, and behind the counter are a couple of people I recognize from school. When they catch sight of Ian, they call out his name and he nods in response.

“I mean, if it works it works, right?” He asks, looking back to me. “You’ve been coming to meetings for a while now and you’ve gotten a lot better.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I ask, arching a brow at him. He holds his hands up, signaling his innocence.

“I didn’t mean in a bad way,” He says as we move forward in the line. “You were just really angry when you started coming.”

Ian isn’t wrong. I was really angry when I first started going to meetings, mostly because my mom pretty much forced me into them against my will. I barely talked, and when I eventually did, I said a lot of shitty stuff about my dad that I wish I could take back. Well, sometimes I wish I could take it back.

He interrupts my thoughts by grabbing hold of my hand, holding it casually like it’s something he does every day - which I can assure you he definitely does not. Ian pulls me forward in the line, and suddenly we’re up to order our ice cream.

“Hey man,” he says casually to the kid behind the counter. “She’ll have two scoops of chocolate peanut butter swirl in a cone, but also in a cup with peanut butter sauce and whipped cream, and I’ll have cookies ‘n’ cream in a cup.”

“Sure,” the guy says, writing our order down. “For here or to go?”

“For here,” Ian answers before I can. Usually, we get it to go and sit in his car for a few minutes before he drives me home. The guy behind the counter nods, hands our order to someone else and then rings us up. Ian pays for the whole thing, and then leads me over to a small table in the corner of the parlor.

“Your parents won’t care if we hang out a little longer, right?”

“Um,” I fumble, pulling out my chair, and then sit in it before I can make a fool of myself even more. “I don’t think so, no. Mom is probably running around after the twins and Willa, and they put everyone to sleep when my dad gets home, so they probably won’t notice.”

“Cool.”

“Cool.”

God, why are things suddenly so awkward? My friendship with Ian kind of came out of nowhere, and we run in completely different groups socially, not to mention the fact that he’s a grade above me... The one major thing that we have in common is that we both have a parent who is an alcoholic, and that’s kind of it.

But I don’t know, for some reason I like him. It’s not because he’s a popular football player, or considered to be one of the hottest guys in school... that stuff has never really appealed to me, or made me any more interested in anyone for that matter. Since we became friends, Ian has always just sort of understood me. I mean, it definitely helps that he’s incredibly hot, let’s be real, but he’s more than what he looks like, or how well he plays football.

He's surprisingly really sensitive. When Corey told us his mom relapsed, he cried and actually hugged him. I don't think everyone really saw him crying, but I did. He remembers small, stupid stuff like what my ice cream and coffee orders are, and helps me with my math homework when I'm having a hard time with it. When he asks me how I'm doing, for some reason I feel like he actually cares about what I'm about to say.

If you ask me, I think it's because he has all sisters. Like, my little brother Teddy? He's the only boy in our family, and to be honest, he's probably going to have a really lucky wife someday. Having sisters is really beneficial, I think. Also, maybe because he's been in meetings and going to therapy since he was a kid because of his mom, too.

"I really like hanging out with you, El," He says, leaning back in his chair. My heart feels like it's lurched itself from my chest into my throat. His eyes meet mine, and we're both quiet for a moment, before one of the servers comes over with our order. He puts the ice creams down on the table, and we both thank him.

"I like hanging out with you, too," I admit, smiling. "Surprisingly."

"Surprisingly?" Ian laughs and shakes his head. "Man, am I that bad?"

"You're abhorrent."

"That's a good SAT word."

"I decided to start studying early."

I look down at my ice cream, super aware that my face has probably been turning bright red for the past couple minutes. With my spoon, I start crushing the ice cream cone until it's broken up into little bits, and then mix it in with the ice cream until it's a weird concoction of whipped cream, peanut butter swirl ice cream, chocolate sauce and cone bits. I can feel Ian's eyes on me. He thinks how I eat my ice cream is weird, but has come to accept it by now.

“I mean it though, Ellie,” Ian says as he scoops up some of his own ice cream. Before he eats it, he says, “I like you, a lot.”

Quickly, I shove the ice cream I’ve shoveled out of the cup into my mouth, because I’m not sure what to say. I like Ian a lot too, I mean how could I not? But for him to like me... I guess I just don’t get it. I’m not the most popular girl in school, or the smartest, or most athletic girl. The list could go on and on.

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Like what?” I ask, my mouth still half full of ice cream.

“Like I’m crazy or something.”

“Um,” Pausing, I swallow the rest of the ice cream in my mouth and wince; it’s super cold and kind of hurts going down, just because I shoved so much of it in my mouth. I clear my throat and tuck a piece of hair behind my ear. “I guess I just don’t get why.”

Admitting that is kind of hard. My therapist, Lena, says that I have self esteem issues and that I have to be more honest with people instead of pushing them away or something. I don’t know why, but it’s always been easier to be honest with Ian than it is with everyone else. Even with Trish, sometimes it can be really hard. She tends to get a little bit judge-y, and sometimes it’s just not worth the fight.

“You don’t get why?” Ian asks, looking confused. “You can’t be serious.”

“If I wasn’t serious why would I say that?!”

He runs his fingers through his hair, frustration clear on his face. I feel my cheeks start to warm again, an uncomfortable feeling sinking in my stomach. I know he’s not exactly mad at me for what I said, but I can’t help but feel a little anxious. I hate when people are upset with me, and I also hate being yelled at. It’s the absolute worst.

“Ellie, you’re amazing,” Ian says, exasperatedly. “You make me laugh, you’re smart, you have a great singing voice... And you’re beautiful, too.”

Ugh, now my face really is going to be bright red. I blink at him and then look down at the ice cream in front of me, poking at it with my spoon.

“Yeah, but you’re - well, you’re *you*.” I mutter, not looking up at him.

“What does that even mean?”

“I mean,” Anxiously, I stir my ice cream a little bit more. “You’re popular, and the star football player, and pretty much every girl at school wants to be your girlfriend.” That sounds pretty stupid now that I’ve said it. I seriously wish I could hit the rewind button on my life right now. Before I can stop myself, I finish off with, “I think probably everyone would judge you for liking me so much,” and immediately want to crawl underneath the table and disappear.

“That’s the dumbest shit I’ve ever heard,” Ian replies, rolling his eyes. “I don’t care what everyone else at school thinks.” Suddenly, he reaches out and grabs my free hand, squeezing it in his own. “I only really care about what you think.”

Wow. I don’t think I’ve ever had anyone tell me that before. Looking up at Ian, I can’t help but smile. That sinking feeling that was in my stomach before is gone now, and I feel like butterflies are flying around in there instead. How is it that he knows exactly what to say to make me feel like I’m completely and utterly exploding with happiness?

“Look,” He lets go of my hand and picks up his spoon again, scooping some ice cream out of his cup. “Let’s just eat our ice cream, okay? I like you, you like me, that’s enough for right now.” Ian grins and tilts his head. “I mean, I don’t want to give you a full-on heart attack at such a young age or anything.”

“Don’t be a jerk,” I whine, grabbing hold of my own spoon. Leaning over, I scoop some of his ice cream out of his cup and then slide it into my mouth. “It’s not my fault I have a chronic anxiety condition that you’re making worse.”

He laughs and shakes his head, then tries to take some of my ice cream. I swat at his spoon with mine, but then eventually let him try some of it.

“Hey, that’s actually not that bad,” He licks the remnants of my ice cream off of his spoon and then digs into his more. “You’re a little crazy, but you’ve got an eye for ice cream.”

CHAPTER THREE.

“*Well?* Did it happen yet?”

Sometimes I wish I could tape Trish’s mouth shut. We’ve been best friends since we were probably six years old, back when she still went by her full name, Patricia. God forbid anyone ever call her *that*, these days though. Apparently, the name Patricia is too formal and boring for someone who wants to be on Broadway someday. She’s so dramatic.

“Nope,” I reply, reaching into the bag of popcorn we’re sharing. I pull out a fist full of it, my eyes on the scene unfolding before us. We’re sitting outside on the bleachers watching the football team practice, something that we do at least three times a week so Trish can scope out who she wants to pin down for Homecoming. Ian has friends who are on the team, and Trish thinks it would be a really great idea if we both went to the Homecoming dance with football players. “For some reason I don’t really think he’s going to ask me.” I glance at Trish as I shove some popcorn in my mouth, chewing on it thoughtfully. She frowns at me.

“*Eleanor*, if we’re going to move up in the world, we both need to secure football players for the Homecoming dance,” Trish insists, a pained expression on her face. She looks back down at the field, pastes a wide grin on her face and waves over to one of the guys. I think his name is Matt. He waves back and she starts giggling obnoxiously. “I think I’m definitely going to go with Matt.”

“That’s great, Trish,” I say, rolling my eyes as she tosses her long blonde hair behind one shoulder, making heart eyes at Matt below. “I just don’t think Ian even *wants* to go.” Or maybe *I* don’t want to go. I don’t know. It just all seems kind of dumb to me, but I could never tell Trish that. She takes these things way too seriously.

Things between Ian and I have gotten a little intense after we got ice cream the other night. Not intense in the constantly-making-out-under-the-bleachers type of way, but just like... he started holding hands with me in-between classes, he's kissed me (on the cheek) in front of his friends, and he's asked me sit with him during lunch since we have the same lunch period. I guess that's not really *that* intense, but it's different for me. His friends have been pretty accepting of me, but his best friend Joey seems a little bit suspicious. Either that, or he just smokes way too much weed, it could be either or at this point.

Ian and I haven't really talked about homecoming at all, actually. Between my choir practice and his football practice, we haven't been able to spend any time alone with each other in a few days. He said he wants to go out this weekend, on like, a real date or whatever. I mean, I've never really had a boyfriend before, so this is all kind of new to me. We aren't even official, and I'm already getting glared at, at every angle when we hold hands walking down the hallway!

As Trish babbles on about the importance of making social appearances, I just nod and watch the boys slam their bodies into things below us. Ian shows off a bit, throwing the football longer and harder than anyone else. I don't really know much about football, but he loves it, so I listen to him as much as I can when he starts talking about it to me. He's tried to explain the concept of it to me so many times, but I just don't get it. There are so many rules, and plays, and it's confusing. It just seems so stupid compared to other things, like music. To me, it's far more fun and challenging to be in choir singing something than out in the cold freezing my ass off on a football field throwing a ball back and forth for no apparent reason.

Shivering, I pull my jacket closer to my body and look away from the football boys. The band is practicing on a small patch of land near the football field, and the color guard is nearby

practicing their routine. Celeste, of course, is the captain of the color guard team. Her long, dark hair is styled into a thick braid down her back that swings back and forth as she moves, and she's helping one of the new freshman on the team learn how to spin a flag. As if she can sense me looking at her, she turns and looks up, her dark eyes locking with mine. I can feel my face burn, and look away quickly. I think back to what happened the other week, during a rehearsal for A Cappella Choir, and how strange Celeste had been acting toward me. What does it mean, and why is she so focused on me?

“Helloooo? Earth to Ellie?”

“Huh?”

I blink and look at Trish, who's waving her hand in front of my face, looking annoyed. She points down at the field, then pulls herself up to stand on the bleachers.

“I said I'm going down to see Matt. They just finished practice and I *love* when he's all gross and sweaty.”

Ew. I don't understand how *anyone* could like that. Ian always smells like a twelve day old sock that's been dipped in dirty dish water after practice. I look down to the field at him, and my stomach feels like it's full of lead. It's not that I don't like him, because I do! I really like him. He gives me butterflies and everything. Plus, there's the whole thing that happened the other night after the Alateen meeting, and how he told me he really likes me and everything. He still hasn't asked me to be his girlfriend or anything, and I'm not really expecting him to right now. He told me he doesn't mind going slow, which I think was pretty nice of him all things considered.

“Okay, no problem. I'm going to head home soon anyway. I have to babysit while my parents go to therapy.” I roll my eyes. It seems stupid that they have to go to therapy, but at least

mom and dad aren't at each other's throats as much as they usually are these days. Trish gives me a knowing look and then begins to walk as noisily as possible down the bleachers, launching herself into Matt's arms when she arrives on the field.

"Hi."

I yelp, nearly falling off the bleacher I'm sitting on. Celeste is standing next to me, and I have no clue how she managed to get up here without me hearing. How is it that she looks so cool after practicing whatever it is that the color guard does? She barely even looks like she's been doing any physical activity at all, and she smells like... *really* good.

"You scared the crap out of me."

"Sorry," she laughs, grinning down at me, and then sits without even asking if she can. "I didn't mean to. Are you busy?"

"No," I tell her. This is strange, because Celeste doesn't usually go out of her way to talk to me unless it's choir related or if we're in the same group for a class project. Usually she just sort of watches me. "Do I have something on my face again?" I ask, rubbing at my cheek self-consciously. "You're looking at me weird."

"No, I just..." Celeste seems embarrassed, which isn't something I'm used to seeing with her. "I wanted to ask you something." She hesitates. I blink and swallow hard, suddenly feeling the way I felt that night in the bathroom. My heart is fluttering, and I feel weirdly like I'm going to throw up.

"Okay."

"Would you want to go to Homecoming with me?"

Wait - *what*? I stare at her for a second, and then look down at the football field. Ian is there, and he waves up to me with a dumb goofball smile on his face. I look away quickly,

pretending like I didn't see, and turn back to Celeste. She looks nervous, fidgeting on the bleacher.

I glance quickly back over to Ian on the field. He's now fooling around with some other boys, not paying any attention to me or Celeste. I look back up to Celeste, and swallow hard.

"Yeah - I mean..." I rub the back of my neck and glance over at Ian again, anxiously. "I actually wasn't planning on going at all -"

"Think about it, alright?" Celeste grins at me and tosses her long braid over her shoulder. "It'll be a fun date."

Suddenly, my mouth goes dry and I shift on the bleacher. A date? I open my mouth to speak, but she's already turned away and is running down the bleachers to get back over to her team. I blink, and glance back over to Ian on the field. I start to panic, feeling sick to my stomach. Did Celeste just ask me to go on a date with her?

From the football field, Ian waves up to me and I force myself to smile and wave back. Had he seen the entire thing happen? He doesn't *know*, does he? No, there's no way that he could possibly know what had just happened. Celeste and I were too far away for him to hear it.

"Pull yourself together, Eleanor," I whisper to myself, tugging my jacket closer to my body before pulling my backpack on my shoulder. I have to go anyway, and now is the perfect time. My mom is probably waiting for me in the parking lot and knowing her she's probably going to start text bombing me in a few moments if I don't show up soon. Quickly, I make my way down the stairs of the bleachers, not lifting my eyes from my feet. When I finally make it to the ground, I start walking away, toward the parking lot and don't look back.

The van is waiting for me in all its embarrassing glory, in the school parking lot. I'm sixteen years old and I have my license to drive, but my parents won't let me get a car until I'm a

senior, so I've gotta drive this embarrassing thing when my mom isn't using it. That means, I basically never get to drive anywhere, not that I would want to in *this* car.

When I get to the van, I pull open the passenger door and throw my backpack down on the floor, and then slide into the seat. My heart is still pounding in my chest, mostly because I basically ran all the way from the football field to the front parking lot of the school to avoid seeing or talking to either of them again.

"You don't want to drive?" Mom asks. She'd already taken off her seatbelt, and when I opened the passenger door, she looked like she was just going to get out.

"No, please just drive." I mutter, fastening my seatbelt and turning up the radio. "I just want to go home." I lean down and reach into my backpack to grab my sunglasses, and put them on, sinking as low as I can into the seat.

"Um." Mom looks at me expectantly. "Did something happen? Is there a reason you're hiding behind your sunglasses?"

"No," I say, crossing my arms over my chest. "Nothing happened, and I'm fine."

"Right, that's teen code for 'I don't want to talk about it, mom'," Mom mutters to herself as she buckles her seatbelt. "Well, if you do want to talk about it--"

"I know, I know. You're here for me."

My mom and dad had me when they were teenagers, which means my mom thinks she's one of those cool, hip moms who understands everything about being a teenager because it wasn't that long ago that she *was* one. She was only a year older than me when she had me, which is kind of insane to think about. She and dad stayed together, and lived with my grandparents while they went to college and got jobs and everything. They got married, and eventually, had three more kids, all of which are much younger than me. The twins, Charlotte

and Teddy are three now, and Willa is the youngest; she's barely a year. For two people that fight as much as they do, my parents really make it seem like they like each other.

"Here, can you give them each one?" She shoves two pacifiers into my hand, and I sigh, turning to hand my brother and sister a pacifier each.

"Aren't they a little old for this now?" I ask, turning back to my mom. I pick a plastic cup of iced coffee that she likely got on the way to pick me up, and take a sip, "I know it's the only thing that shuts them up, but none of the other kids in their class still use them."

My mom shoots me a look, and then pulls out of the school parking lot. I know she wants to mention that I had a pacifier until I was five or six, but she doesn't. Instead, she turns the radio onto one of those dumb kiddie stations for my siblings who are thankfully now quiet and drives toward home.

"Don't forget, you're watching the kids this afternoon." Mom says, glancing over at me. "I would have asked Aunt Penny, but she has that quiz bowl thing."

My Aunt Penny is an English teacher at my school, which is a little bit embarrassing. She's mom's youngest sister. Aunt Mina is in-between mom and Aunt Penny. We have an excruciatingly close family, which means everyone is constantly in each other's business. Aunt Penny is close to my age though, and we've always been close. Sometimes she feels more like a sister to me than an aunt. Weirdly enough, she's dating one of the math teachers at my school, Mr. Williamson. It's weird because my Aunt Penny *hates* math. It's also weird because everyone knows I'm related to her, and that she's dating him, and he's my math teacher. He definitely doesn't give me A's because they're dating, though, which is a total bummer.

"What time do you think you and dad will be back?" I ask, leaning my head against the side of the door. Mom and dad go to couple's therapy weekly because they're dysfunctional. I

think they love each other, but they fight a lot. Like, a lot, a lot. It was worse before Charlotte, Theodore, and Willa were born, and I'm actually glad that they won't have to grow up with the sort of memories that I do of my parents constantly screaming at each other.

"Not late. We're going to bring home Chinese food for dinner, so you don't have to worry about getting anything together." Mom says, turning the volume up on the radio. As she hits a red light, she rolls down the windows and starts singing the song that's playing at the top of her lungs. The twins start singing along too, clapping their hands excitedly. Out of the corner of my eye, I see a group of kids in my grade walking on the sidewalk toward the center of town, and I lower myself further into the seat, pushing my hair in my face so they don't see it's me.

"Mom, seriously?!" I reach out and lower the volume. "I know those people!"

"Oh, come on, Ellie," Mom snorts with laughter, shaking her head. "Loosen up, or you're going to get gray hair by the time you turn 20."

This is my mom. I have to endure her singing children's songs at the top of her lungs with the windows rolled down every single day. It's worse in the morning when she drops me off at school. She loves to yell out the window to me while I'm walking into the building, so everyone can hear. I mean, I love her and everything, but she's really gotta cool it with the embarrassing me stuff.

CHAPTER FOUR.

How had this happened?

Okay, well, I can tell you how it happened: Celeste asked me to go to homecoming with her, and then said it would be a date. I didn't exactly say no, and she told me to think about it and then ran off, and I'm pretty sure Ian was probably going to ask me to go to homecoming too. At least I think he might, and I'll probably say yes if he does, even though Celeste asked me first. Wait - if she asked me first, does that mean I have to say yes to her?

I feel terrible.

I really like Ian. He's really sweet, and he makes me laugh and smile and does nice things for me. But Celeste asked first, and I have to tell Trish. How is she going to feel about me potentially going to homecoming with Celeste? She's been so excited at the fact that we'd both be going to Homecoming with football players because almost all of them are super popular. Why does she want to be popular so badly?!

I mean, Celeste is kind of football-player-adjacent. She's in the colorguard. It's like, almost the same thing. Kind of, sort of. Okay, not really at all. They're two completely separate things, and I can just hear Trish now yelling at me about how this is detrimental to our status in our class. How else are we going to gain popularity?

The thing is, I've never really been into the idea of being "popular". Trish is obsessed with it, and she doesn't even need to be. Everyone already likes her. She's tall and blonde and knows pretty much everything about everyone and all the guys on the football team want a piece of her. The thought of that makes my stomach lurch. Some of the guys on the football team are real creeps. There's no way around it, really. They're either creepy or jerky, or both - and the

ones that are both are really the worst. Ian isn't either of those things, which is why I started to like him in the first place. Ugh.

My phone dings and I reach for it, squinting my eyes when the screen lights up. The lights in my room are dimmed and it almost hurts a little to read the text.

IAN GRAHAM:

What are you doing after school tomorrow?

I have football practice but I want to see you.

Double ugh. I throw my phone down on the bed and roll onto my stomach, groaning loudly into my pillow. My mom always asks why I lock myself in my room after dinner, and this is why. How else will I be able to scream into a pillow in peace? If I didn't lock my door, one of my siblings would probably throw it open every five minutes and ask me a bunch of stupid questions until I want to pull my hair out. And if I pull my hair out, that's on my mom, because she was the one who chose to get pregnant two times after already having me and giving birth to twins in one go and a crazy child in another. The twins came after the crazy child though, obviously.

It's not that I don't love my siblings, it's just that I'm a wholly mature teenager who deserves privacy and her own space. Those aren't even my own words, I literally heard my mom talking to her therapist on speakerphone (seriously?) one day after we got in a big fight when one of the twins decided to come into my room and cut a piece of my hair off while I was napping. I never wanted bangs. I can't pull off bangs. But did I get bangs anyway? Yes. I ended up having to, because my mom couldn't watch my stupid younger sister for five seconds while I took a much-needed nap after an extremely long day of being an exceptional student at school. One

thing I did learn from that, though, was that I actually could kind of pull them off, in an emergency.

So now I lock my bedroom door when I'm in it.

My phone dings again. It's just another notification that Ian texted me, and I don't want to open it or even acknowledge it. My stomach churns uncomfortably, and I'm left with no other choice; I know what I have to do and I don't like it at all. I reach for my phone and stare at the message. Sighing, I unlock it and tap to pull up the contact for my very best friend, Trish. I have to call her and break the news, and she's going to absolutely kill me. Swallowing hard, I press the call button and bring the phone up to my ear. It rings, and rings, and rings and then stops when she picks up the phone.

"Ohmygod I was just about to call you," Trish says breathlessly. I can hear her running up the stairs of her house, probably so she can go to her room to talk to me. "I just got a text from Matt, you know that football player I was telling you about the other day who's friends with Ian? He wants us to come to practice tomorrow to watch them and then get dinner after!"

One thing about Trish is that she speaks incredibly fast, like if she doesn't get every word possible in, either she or the world will explode. Sometimes I wonder if she'll accidentally suffocate herself or something crazy like that.

"Trish listen, about that—"

"I don't want to hear it, Eleanor!" Trish says, her voice rising just a bit. It's not that she's angry, she just gets very excitable sometimes. I mean, she's in the drama club. That should speak for itself. We've been friends for so long that I know Patricia like the back of my hand, just like she knows me like the back of hers. She sighs heavily at the other end of the phone, and I can

just imagine her pinching the bridge of her nose, draped artfully across the pink tufted couch in her bedroom.

“Fine, Eleanor, what is it?” she asks. I pause before saying anything, just in case she has anything else to blurt out about responsibilities and popularities and our social lives. When she clears her throat as if to nudge me along, I know that I have her permission to speak.

“Well,” I start, rolling my eyes at her bossiness. “I got asked to homecoming. I wanted to talk to you about it this afternoon, but I had to babysit the kids. My parents just got home.” I pause and squint my eyes, straining my ears to hear if there are any signs of them shouting at each other. Sometimes when they go to therapy, they fight when they get home. Other times, there’s eerie silence on the home front. Tonight, it kind of just seems like they’re acting normal. Is *that* normal? I don’t even know anymore.

“Wait, WHAT?” Trish screams into the phone. I wince, pulling it quickly from my ear. “You got asked to Homecoming and you didn’t even tell me?”

“Trish, it *just* happened,” I interject, sighing. “Can you just listen for one second?”

“I’m listening!” she says impatiently. “How did he ask you?”

I swallow hard, feeling my face start to heat up. Trish thinks it’s Ian who asked me to homecoming, and that’s definitely *not* the case. I’m not exactly afraid to tell her that it’s a girl who asked me, like, Trish has a gay older brother and is super into being an ally and everything. Well, maybe I am afraid to tell her that it’s a girl, because... that kind of changes everything. I still don’t even understand what’s going on. I’ve had other friends who are girls, and even friends who are guys. I’ve never had a boyfriend though, and I barely know how to handle Ian liking me and wanting to be around me and be seen with me. I feel like I have eyes on me everywhere, all the time.

Plus, I don't think I'm a lesbian. I've never been attracted to another girl before, and I think you kind of have to be exclusively attracted to girls to be a lesbian, if I'm not mistaken. If I'm honest, I haven't really been focused on having crushes or being in a relationship with someone because my life is kind of insane. I've been trying to focus on keeping my head above water for a really long time, and thinking about being someone's girlfriend has always made me feel like I'm going to puke. At the same time, I didn't exactly say no to Celeste. Why didn't I say no to her? She looked at me like she knew my answer was going to be yes, even though it was probably going to be a no, since I have this guy who likes me but hasn't asked me to be his girlfriend or his homecoming date yet. Why does everything have to be so complicated?!

"Well," I say, chewing on my lip uncomfortably. "It's not exactly what you think. Ian didn't ask me." I close my eyes and wait for it. Like clockwork, Trish gasps so loud and so deep that for a second I think that she might actually cause herself to pass out or choke on her spit. One or the other, really, but she doesn't. Instead, she makes this weird noise that's like a mixture of an excited scream and a freaky laugh.

"Waitwaitwait, WHAT?! Someone else asked you?"

"Yes."

"Who is he?"

"Well—"

"Is he popular?"

"I don't - I mean—"

"Is he on the football team?"

"Trish —"

“Is he a senior? I know, it’s Craig Huntington, isn’t it?” She squeals and claps her hands. “I totally knew he was checking out your butt the other day! I told you!”

“Trish!” I yell, sitting up straight on my bed. “It isn’t Craig Huntington, or a football player, or even a guy!” I glance anxiously at my bedroom door, and then lower my voice into a hushed, irritated whisper. “Celeste asked me to homecoming.” For once, Trish is completely silent.

I can hear her breathing on the other side of the phone, so I know she hasn’t hung up, but I think I might have scared her into a state of shock. She doesn’t speak for a long while, and neither do I. In truth, I’m nervous about what she’ll say and do, because you never really know with her. Celeste *is* popular, because she’s an incredible singer, is pretty much a star soccer player, a great dancer and the captain of the color guard team but... I know this is definitely not what Trish planned. She planned for us to go to homecoming with these stupid boys, and act like two cool girls who deserve to be popular and liked by everyone. Not that I’m going to go to homecoming with Celeste, since I didn’t even say yes.

“Celeste?” Trish asks, her voice a little strained. “Like, Celeste from choir?”

I lay down on the bed and nod even though I know Trish can’t see me. She takes my silence as an answer, I can tell. On the other end of the phone, she sighs. I hear some rustling, and then her bedroom door shutting.

“El, Celeste is a *girl*,” Trish says in a hushed tone. “She asked you to go with her to homecoming? Like, on a date?” She sounds confused, concerned, and I’m sure there are a million thoughts running through her mind right now, same as me.

“I-I—” I stutter, rubbing at my temple with my free hand. “I don’t know! I guess so? I’m so confused!” I groan and shake my head. “After you left, she came over to me and just

randomly asked, and I got so nervous, I didn't say yes but I didn't say no, and she told me to think about it and that it would be a fun date, and then she just like, ran away!"

"Wait, so like..." Trish starts. She's probably pacing around her bedroom, trying to calculate how she needs to change all her plans in popularity to fit Celeste into the picture. "So like, do you like her? Are you a lesbian? Is this you coming out to me? Should I go get Charlie?"

"No — *no*, do not get Charlie, Trish!" I shout into the phone. Charlie is her older brother, the one who came out as gay when he was like, ten years old or something. He's a freshman in college, but lives at home because he wants to save money. "I'm not a lesbian!" I lower my voice into a whisper, or more like a yell-whisper because sometimes yelling at Trish is the only way to shut her up. "I don't know what's happening, I didn't say yes to her!"

"Okay," Trish says. "Okay, it's fine. This is fine. Maybe it's just like, a weird crush or something? Like you're experimenting? I'm not saying it's just a phase because that's soooo homophobic—"

"I'm not gay though!"

"I know, I know, I'm just saying like..." Trish pauses. I can practically hear her thinking.

"Charlie always says sexuality is fluid..."

"Again, I didn't say yes!" I whisper yell again, sinking my fist into my pillow. "If Ian had asked me earlier, none of this would have happened, I could have said no to Celeste, and I wouldn't be in this position right now!"

"But honestly? Celeste is pretty popular. You could be the new it couple—"

"Trish!" I exclaim, huffing out a sigh. "I'm in the middle of a crisis right now! Can we forget about your popularity agenda for like, five minutes?"

“Okay, okay, okay,” she says, clapping her hands together. “We’ll figure this out. You didn’t give Celeste a definitive answer, and Ian hasn’t even asked you yet. What’s going on between you guys, anyway? You didn’t even come to say goodbye to him before you left.”

“Have you not been listening this entire time?” I ask Trish, annoyed now. “I ran away because Celeste asked me to go to homecoming, and I didn’t want Ian to suspect something weird. I got nervous, okay? And I ran away.”

“You didn’t do that weird laugh thing you do when you get nervous, did you?”

“Trish.”

“Okay, sorry,” She huffs out a sigh. “Look, we’re going to make this work. If you want to go with Celeste, go with Celeste. If you want to go with Ian, go with Ian.”

“I know, but this just got so weird,” I complain. “Things with Ian have taken a turn. People stare at us in the hallway when we walk to class because he keeps holding my hand, and he told me he really likes me the other night.” Rubbing at my eyes, I think back to the night at the ice cream parlor and start to feel my face heat up. “But he also said he’s okay with taking things slow.”

“Hey, that’s good!” Trish says excitedly. “He knows you have anxiety, and the way you talk about him to me... I don’t know, you just seem to really like him, and anyone who has eyes can tell that he likes you too, Ellie.”

Weirdly that doesn’t make me feel better about the situation at hand. I was still asked by a girl to homecoming, which in and of itself isn’t a big deal. Who cares if two girls go to homecoming together? Trish and I have been to homecoming together in the past, and we had so much fun. It’s just that I think Celeste may potentially have a crush on me, and she makes me really nervous because she’s kind of like, the most perfect human in so many different ways. I

almost feel like it would be way easier if it was Ian and Celeste who liked each other. They'd make one hell of a power couple at school.

Everything would be a lot easier that way. And I'd go back to being the weird girl from choir who no one notices, and no one bothers. I never once thought that I'd ever be involved in something like this, especially not with another girl involved. That kind of stuff just doesn't happen to me! It never has! It's not like I went through some crazy glow-up over the summer like girls do in those stupid high school movies or something. Although, I think my boobs did get bigger this summer, but that's beside the point.

This whole telling Trish thing isn't as hard as I thought it was going to be, though. Trish is usually really understanding, especially when it comes to this kind of stuff. It's just... my whole world feels like it's being turned upside-down, and I don't even know how to feel about it anymore.

"Like I said, we'll figure this out," Trish tells me after a few moments of silence. "If you like Celeste and you want to go to homecoming with her then that's what you should do." she pauses. "And if you want to go with Ian, go with Ian."

"What if I don't want to go at all?" I ask in a small voice.

"That's *not* an option, and you know it. I've already picked your dress out and everything," Trish sighs dramatically. "Don't be silly."

"I hate the dress you picked out for me."

"You haven't even seen it!"

"Yeah, but you said you wanted to get something to show my boobs off, and I'm not really sure I want to do that," Sitting up, I glance over at my closet. "I'm sure I have something that I can wear here—"

“That’s not happening,” Trish interrupts.

“Trish, come on,” I groan, slapping my hand over my eyes. “I can’t ask my mom to buy me that dress, and you know I can’t afford it on the money I make babysitting.”

“I already told you,” Trish says, probably rolling her eyes. “I’ll buy you the dress, it’s not that big of a deal-”

“Nope.”

“You’re way too stubborn.”

“I’m not letting you buy a dress for me.”

“Why not? I’d let you buy a dress for me.”

God, she is so annoying. If I let Trish buy me a dress, then I’d have to explain to my mom why I didn’t just ask for it in the first place. I’m not asking for it in the first place because it shows off a lot of boob, and my parents are not about to let me walk out of my house with my boobs on display for every human on the earth to see. I mean, my grandparents will probably want to take pictures of me on homecoming night (they’re *those* kind of people) - could you imagine my grandpa’s face when I walk down the stairs in a slinky black dress with a slit on the leg and my boobs out? No way. Not happening.

“Fine,” Trish mutters, clearly not ready to give up on her dress idea. “So have you talked to Ian since this afternoon? You know, since you ran away from him and everything?”

“He texted me saying that he wants to see me tomorrow, after he has football practice,” I say quietly, pulling a fuzzball off my comforter. “Do you think that means I’ll have to watch practice again? It’s starting to get really cold outside, like, why would I want to freeze my ass off on the bleachers every afternoon just to watch him run around the football field?”

“Um, because people would see you two together and it would elevate both of our social statuses to the next level,” Trish replies smartly. “But that’s not the problem here, El. You got asked by someone else to Homecoming. I mean yeah, she’s probably the coolest most popular lesbian in school, but—”

“You are *so* not being helpful here.”

“I’m just saying!”

“I get it, but that’s beside the point here.” I roll my eyes and look over at my bedroom door. Sometimes my mom likes to stand outside of it and listen to my conversations like a complete freak, but this time I can’t see any shadow coming from the bottom side of the door. I don’t understand why she thinks I can never tell when she’s doing it; I’m not dumb!

“Look, my mom is calling me for dinner but text me, okay? Don’t worry, we’ll figure this out. Kisses!”

And with that, she hangs up the phone and leaves me laying on my bed, wondering what the hell my next step is going to be in all this. After a few moments of ruminating in my own misery, my phone dings. I hold it up over my face to see who it is.

IAN TELLER:

How did you do on your math test today btw?

Ugh. Shit. I slam my phone down on the bed again and press my hands over my face. This is so complicated, and I don’t even know where to start with texting Ian back. Do I just text him back all normal and act like nothing happened, when something actually kind of huge happened?! It’s just Homecoming, though. It’s not like Celeste asked me to *Prom*! On the bright side, Trish is supportive, just like I hoped she would be. I mean, I knew she would be supportive. Sometimes she just gets a little bit too focused on her goal of stardom.

“Ellie, honey, it’s dinner!” My mom calls from the foot of the stairs. My stomach starts to grumble. Chinese food does sound *really* good right now.

CHAPTER FIVE.

“I’ll be back in an hour to pick you up,” Mom, from the driver’s seat of our navy-blue minivan says as I unbuckle my seatbelt. The twins are in the back with Willa, all in their car seats. Charlotte has her whole hand in her mouth, and Theodore jams one of his fingers into his nose. Willa babbles to herself, clapping her hands together and blowing spit bubbles. Ugh. She loaded them all into the car just to take me to my therapy appointment, because I don’t have my own car to drive. I asked if I could just take the car and drive myself, but she wouldn’t let me because she had to drop the twins off at a playdate halfway through my session. I’m so over having to get rides everywhere.

“Teddy, stop picking your nose,” I say, reaching back to push his hand from his face. “That’s seriously gross. Ew, mom, he’s going to try and feed Charlotte his boogers again.” I groan and turn to face her. “They’re so disgusting.”

“Just go,” mom says with a sigh, glancing at her rearview mirror. “If she eats his booger, she eats his booger. I’ll see you in an hour.”

Gross. But she doesn’t need to tell me twice. I open the car door and jump out, slamming it shut behind me. I don’t look back as I walk into the building, because I really don’t want to see my siblings eating each other’s boogers again. I see enough of that at home, and I really don’t want to have a bad taste in my mouth or a sick stomach when I go in to see my therapist. One time while I was in the waiting room, I saw this kid who was picking at his pimples and wiping them on the side of the chair he was sitting in. It ruined the entire afternoon for me.

The waiting room at my therapist’s office is brightly lit and pretty colorful. I think it’s because the practice is mostly for kids and teenagers, and they want everyone to feel welcome, but it’s a little much for me. There’s one kid playing with blocks in the corner while his mom

scrolls through something on her phone, and a guy around my age sitting across from me. He notices me looking at him, and his face starts to turn red like he's embarrassed to be seen at a therapist's office. Thankfully it isn't the acne kid. This guy is kind of cute. He has shaggy brown hair and glasses, and I think he actually might be in my fifth period physics class. Maybe that's why he looks so embarrassed?

The door to my right opens, and a girl close to my age walks out of it. I see her every week, but I don't recognize her from school. She's got long blonde hair, like, to-her-waist-long. Sometimes it's braided, but most of the time she wears it loose. In my head, her name is Aimee, and she goes to a private school and is super rich. That's why she always wears cool clothes and looks like a model every time she walks out of therapy, even though sometimes she's crying. I kind of feel bad when she walks out looking like she just cried the entire time.

"Ellie? You can come on back." My therapist, Lena, is standing at the door with a smile on her face. She's super tall, with really dark and perfectly curly hair. Her eyes are clear blue, which kind of freaked me out when I first met her, but now that I've been going to her for a while, I think they're kind of nice. She's pretty, actually, and super nice, and always wears really flowy, cool clothes.

I get up and follow Lena back into her office, and she shuts the door behind us. The room is painted sage green and has a really comfy couch for me to sit in and a cushion-y chair for her to sit in across from me while we talk. She always has candles lit that smell like lavender, and almost always has a cup of steaming hot tea on the little table next to her that she sips on during our session. I settle into the couch and pull a beaded pillow onto my lap, fiddling with the beads there for a few moments while Lena sits and gets her pad and pen ready. She takes a lot of notes.

“So, how has your week been?” She asks, tilting her head. “Last week we were talking about you and Trish. How have things been between you both?”

How has my week been? I almost laugh at that question. Lena has no idea, she has *no clue* how insane my week has been. Last week, I spent the entire session complaining about how obsessed with becoming popular Trish is and how much it was grinding on my nerves, so of course she’s going to ask me about how things have been between her and I. Honestly, there’s no changing Trish. Once she gets her mind set on something, she’s going to work hard at getting it done no matter what the consequence. But, her quest to make us popular has come to a halt, all because of everything that’s been going on with *me* lately.

“Well,” I start anxiously, looking down at the pillow. I run my fingers over one of the patterns that the beads come together to make, biting my lip. “Stuff with Trish is fine, I mean it’s better than fine, it’s great. She’s being really great.”

“Why do I feel like there’s a ‘but’ attached to that?” Lena asks. I look up at her and laugh a little, bringing a hand to my forehead to rub at it a bit. She raises her eyebrows. “Did something happen?”

“Kind of,” I shift in my seat. “It’s not bad, like, nothing terrible happened, it’s just... I got asked to the Homecoming Dance.” I can feel my face scrunching up in anxiety. Trish says that sometimes when I’m anxious and upset, my face scrunches up like an old frog.

“That’s great, Ellie!” Lena says, smiling. “Ian finally asked you.”

“No. Um, Ian didn’t ask me.”

“Oh?” Lena asks, looking surprised.

She doesn’t even have to push me to continue. I throw the pillow aside and put my face in my hands, groaning. I have to tell the whole story all over again, and it sucks. I never even

told her about Celeste in the first place, because I never really thought anything of it. Celeste is a senior and I'm a junior, and I didn't even think I was *gay*, I just thought she made me nervous because she's a really big figure in choir and also a section leader, which makes her basically like a boss. My boss.

"I was with Trish watching football practice the other day after school," I start with a sigh, leaning back into the couch. I look up at the ceiling, not wanting to look at Lena while I tell this story. I can feel her eyes on me, though. Watching. Waiting. "Colorguard practices at the same time as the football team, and so does the band. They're in different places, obviously. Anyway, Trish went off to flirt with some guy and left me on the bleachers, and just before I was going to go find my mom, the captain of the Colorguard team came up to me."

I chance a look over at Lena, across from me. She's writing something down on her notepad. I can't really tell what she's thinking; in fact, I never can. Lena has a really good poker face. I guess that's why she's such a good therapist. I mean, that and because she always gives good advice, and actually listens to what I have to say, and remembers everything that I tell her.

"Her name is Celeste," I continue, feeling my heart start to pound in my chest a little harder. "Um. She's a senior, and she's also in the A Cappella Choir. She's the soprano section leader." Ugh. I can't look at Lena anymore. I grab the pillow again and start picking at the beading on it to distract myself. "She asked me to go to Homecoming with her. I said I wasn't going to Homecoming, but she said to think about it because it would be a fun date."

Lena doesn't say anything right away. I wonder if she's waiting to see if I have anything else to say, but I don't exactly know if I should. I look over at her again finally, and watch as she writes something else down. God, I can only imagine what it is. Do any other people in therapy get self-conscious about what their therapists are writing about them?

“Is Celeste a friend?” Lena asks, looking up at me. I shake my head and sigh deeply.

“No, I mean — I don’t know.” How exactly am I supposed to explain Celeste? She isn’t exactly my friend, and isn’t really an acquaintance either — because what even *is* an acquaintance, anyway? I clear my throat and continue. “She’s this senior who is in the A Cappella Choir with me. She’s the soprano section leader, and everyone is basically obsessed with her because she’s pretty much perfect in every way, and I’m not just saying that. She seriously is good at everything she does.” I want to shove my face into this stupid pillow and scream. “She’s also like, a huge lesbian. I say huge because she’s out to the entire school and everyone is obsessed with how cool she is. She’s also really tall, but that’s unrelated.”

“Do you want to go to Homecoming with her?”

I stare over at Lena and sigh, remembering what happened the other night with Ian. He told me that he really likes me, and wants to go slow. Maybe that’s why he’s not asking me to Homecoming? Maybe he thinks it would be too much, too fast? Then there’s Celeste, who pretty much just asked me without a second thought. It would be fun to go with her because she’s so cool, but if I did that, I would hurt Ian.

“I mean, it would be fun,” I admit, shrugging my shoulders. “But things between Ian and I got kind of intense the other night after Alateen.” She looks curious, so I continue. “He told me he really likes me.” I cross my arms over my chest and look up at the ceiling. “And we got ice cream.”

“Has he given you any indication that he wants to ask you to be his girlfriend and go to Homecoming with you?” Lena asks. She reaches over to her mug of tea and takes a drink from it, and I sort of wish that I had some tea to drink, too. Maybe it would make this pit in my stomach feel a little better.

“I don’t know. I think so? He told me he wants to go slow,” I admit, pulling the pillow to my chest and squeezing it there. “Because, like, he knows about my anxiety and everything. It made me feel weird.”

“Weird?”

“Like, my heart was pounding and my brain felt all fuzzy and I had butterflies in my stomach, and I wanted to throw up and kiss him at the same time. But... I couldn’t..” I wrinkle my nose and sit up straight suddenly. “I got anxious, not because I don’t like him. I’ve only been kissed once, by him, and it was like five seconds long, and I’ve never had a boyfriend before. And now I’m pretty sure a girl likes me.”

Lena does something she’s never done before in one of our sessions. After she puts down her mug of tea, she sets aside her notepad and pen. Whenever I come in, she always pays attention to what I’m saying, but she stops to write down some stuff every once in a while. I seem to have captured her full attention. She smiles, and pushes some of her hair out of her face before shrugging her shoulders.

“Ellie, human sexuality is a spectrum,” Lena says, folding her hands in her lap. “You don’t have to only like boys, or only like girls. It’s possible to like and be attracted to both genders.”

“I mean, I know *that*,” I say, rubbing at the back of my neck awkwardly. “I never really thought of it in terms of myself. So what if Celeste likes me? She’s super pretty, but I don’t know her as well as I know Ian, and have only really been around her during choir. That’s why I was so confused when she asked me to homecoming.”

“Your relationship with Ian has been progressing for some time now,” Lena notes, giving a nod. “You started out as friends at Alateen, and then started spending time together. Do you think you want to be in a relationship with him?”

“I’m scared to be,” I admit, looking down at my hands on the dumb pillow. “I’ve never been someone’s girlfriend before, and I’m already almost seventeen years old. I don’t even have my driver’s license yet because I was too afraid to fail the test when everyone else was getting theirs. I’m like, way behind everyone in my grade. And Ian is a whole grade ahead of me!”

“You can’t compare yourself to others, Ellie.” Lena reminds me, tilting her head. “Everyone goes through life at their own pace, and you’ve been through a lot. It’s okay to take your time with these things, and Ian isn’t pressuring you into anything. Right?”

“Right.” I sigh, and roll my eyes. “I still feel stupid.” I know she’s going to probably ask me to elaborate on that, because that’s something Lena loves to do, but I don’t really want to. I feel stupid because I don’t want to be like this. I’m sure that everyone in school thinks I’m some sort of an innocent prude who is too afraid to do anything remotely fun, and that I’m leading on the most popular guy in school because I’m a bitch. I mean, I’ve heard some girls whispering like I’m not literally standing right there next to them. People can be so mean.

“Why do you feel stupid?” Lena asks, right on cue.

“Because,” I start, huffing out a sigh. “I should be doing these things. I should be driving my own car, going to fun parties with Trish, drinking even though I know I shouldn’t. I know I should be telling Ian that I don’t want to go slow, I want to go fast — I should be making out with him under the bleachers!” Slamming the pillow down on the cushions next to me, angry tears start to well up in my eyes. “I don’t understand why I’m like this.”

“Oh, Ellie,” Lena sighs, nodding her head. “Being a teenager is already really hard, and confusing, and I completely understand why you feel the way you do. Sometimes, our brains make us feel frozen because of all of the bad things we’ve been through. When you were growing up, your dad—”

“What does Ian have to do with my dad?” I interrupt, wiping away at my tears angrily. “What, because my dad fucked up my entire childhood, I’m running completely behind everyone in my life desperately trying to catch up? That feels really shitty.”

“It is really shitty,” Lena agrees. “There was a lot of turmoil in your house for a really long time, and even after your dad got sober things were rocky.”

“I know.” I sigh. Things were really rocky after my dad got sober, Lena is right about that. It took about a year and a half for my mom and dad to officially get back together. They wanted to do things right, for me or something like that. That’s when they started going to therapy, and when things started getting better mom and I moved back in with dad. After that, they got remarried in this big ceremony, and I was the flower girl.

Even then, though, I didn’t fully trust my dad. He’d done it all before - not to this extent - and then crashed and burned many times over. Little did I know back then, it would be his last time getting sober. He really got his life together, and even though mom and dad do still fight (they say they’re “passionate people”) mom never threatens to move out, and dad never picks up and drinks. Although, I can’t help but worry that someday he might. It’s one day at a time, until it’s not anymore.

“Ian knows everything about my dad,” I tell her, picking at the beads on the pillow again. “I mean, he knows it because of Alateen. I know all about his mom, too.” I glance up at Lena,

who watches me closely. “When he told me he likes me, I was stupid, and asked him how he could like someone like me when he’s — well, he’s him.”

“It seems like you were a little down on yourself,” Lena notes.

“I was, I can’t believe I did that.” I sigh and shake my head. “He told me I was being an idiot, basically, and that he doesn’t care what anyone thinks about me and him, and that we can go as slow or as fast as I want.”

“That’s good!”

“I mean, he has three older sisters,” I explain with a grin. “He told me that when he turned thirteen, they brought him into a dark room, tied him to a chair and forced him to watch a PowerPoint that his oldest sister made about how to treat girls.”

“That seems a little intense,” Lena laughs and shakes her head. “But good for them.”

“Yeah,” I laugh. “Maybe I should do that to Teddy when he’s a teenager. Except, I won’t tie him to a chair or anything, he’s too sweet for that. He’d probably just cry.”

“Ian seems like a really nice guy, Ellie.” Lena comments, nodding her head. “And if you end up wanting to go be with him, and go to Homecoming with him, I think that’s great!”

“I guess you’re right,” I sigh. “Sometimes it just feels like everyone is like, five steps ahead of me and I’m struggling to catch up. It doesn’t feel fair.” I think about Trish, who has multiple crushes and has been to multiple bases, many times. She and I are so different.

“It’s not a race.” Lena reminds me. “But how do you feel about him not asking you to Homecoming?”

“Honestly? I don’t know. Are guys just dumb?” I ask, rolling my eyes. When Lena laughs, I crack a smile and set the pillow down beside me on the couch, heaving out a dramatic

sigh. “Does he just also assume that because we’ve been hanging out and he told me he likes me, that we’re just going to go to Homecoming together? I think that’s bold of him.”

“I mean, guys can be dumb sometimes,” Lena admits, nodding her head. “But I don’t know, with everything you’ve told me about Ian, it seems like he might just be waiting for you to bring it up.” She tilts her head and is quiet for a minute. “If he did ask you, and asked you to be his girlfriend, what would you say?”

“I’d say yes,” I admit quickly. “I want to say yes, but it’s like when I go to say it, my throat feels like it’s closing and I can’t breathe, and everything is caving in. It’s not because I don’t like him, or want to be his girlfriend, or want to make out with him, though! I want all of those things.”

She nods, writing something down on her notepad. “And what do you want to say to Celeste, about going to Homecoming with her?”

“Uhhh,” I start, wrinkling my nose. “I mean, I don’t know. I don’t think I’d say yes. But I feel bad, because she’s so nice.”

“Sometimes someone can be nice, but not our cup of tea,” Lena points out as she reaches for her mug of actual tea, and takes a sip. “It’s okay to not be attracted to someone who is attracted to you. It’s okay to not like someone who likes you back..” She takes another drink, and then sets the tea back down beside her. “But, leading people on isn’t cool.”

“No, it’s not,” I sigh and rub at my forehead anxiously. “But it’s hard letting people down. What if I break her heart?”

“You might.”

“What?! *That’s* not cool!”

“It’s a possibility, though.”

I'm starting to think that maybe I should just crawl under my blankets in bed and stay there. This is way too complicated, and I don't think I have it in me to juggle all these different feelings inside of me. With Trish, things don't seem to be as complicated. She falls in love with a different guy like every single day, and never has a problem with telling someone if she doesn't like them in *that* way. Then again, she's the kind of girl that guys love to hang around, because she's funny, beautiful, and has a decent social media following going for her. She's convinced herself that she isn't popular, but doesn't really realize that pretty much everyone in school likes her. And me? I'm her loyal sidekick, destined to be in the background. And I'm *okay* with that.

All this attention is making me sick, and it's only from two people.

"You know," I say, collapsing back on the couch so that I'm now laying down. This all just feels like far too much for me, and my body just needs to rest for a minute. "Trish practically has a different boyfriend every month. How does it come so easily to her? It's like, she doesn't even care if she gets heartbroken or if she breaks someone else's heart. She cries for like three days straight after they break up, but other than that..."

"You can't compare yourself to Trish," Lena shakes her head. "You're a completely different person, with different beliefs, views, and preferences. And that's okay. Did you tell her about what happened with Celeste?"

"Yes," I grunt and put my hands over my face. "And you know what? She was excited about it, because Celeste is like, the official cool girl of the school. But she was also supportive, and said that if I want to go with Celeste, to go with Celeste, or if I want to go with Ian, to go with him." I add, not wanting to make my best friend look like an asshole. Sometimes she is an asshole, but this time she wasn't. I don't think Trish even means to be a jerk about some things. She's just super focused on her goals and everything, which I can respect.

“It’s good she was supportive,” Lena nods. “How did you feel about her response?”

“I mean, she’s my best friend. I don’t think she was going to be anything other than supportive,” I really mean that, too. There’s no way that Trish was going to get mad at me or anything like that. We’ve been best friends since pre-school. She knows everything about me, and I know everything about her.”

“That’s great, Ellie!” Lena says with a smile. She glances at her watch, and looks back at me. “It looks like we only have a few minutes left. We can continue this conversation next week, if that works?” she asks, and I nod my head. We’re *definitely* going to be continuing this conversation. Even though I feel a lot better after dumping all my feelings out onto Lena about what happened, I’m still really overwhelmed. At least now I know that it’s okay to be overwhelmed and that I can take my time trying to figure it out. Still, I have a lot to think about.

For now, maybe it’s okay to just concentrate on the fact that my mom is going to be pulling up to my therapist’s office in our ugly minivan with three children, and two out of the three are probably crying for some stupid reason.

CHAPTER SIX.

I auditioned and was accepted into my school's very prestigious A Cappella Choir last year when I was a sophomore. The choir is run by a very tall teacher named Mrs. Clark, but everyone just calls her Clark because it's easier. She's the kind of teacher who is both incredibly terrifying and absolutely amazing; some days she can scare the ever-living guts out of you, and other days she'll be in a really good mood and everything will be amazing.

The difference between A Cappella and the regular old choir is that A Cappella is audition only, which means that only the best singers in the school get into it. I'm not being a snob here, I really mean it. Clark is very particular about who she allows in. When I auditioned, I definitely didn't think I was going to get in because I completely screwed up the sight-reading portion of the audition, but I did. It sometimes still feels surreal to me because this choir is so competitive, but I'm glad that I got in. It was a really big achievement for me.

Regular choir is a class that anyone can join, whether you've got a great voice or a just okay voice. There are even some kids who are pretty tone deaf in choir, which can be kind of annoying, especially if they're standing behind you. If you're in A Cappella, it's a requirement that you also take regular choir during school hours, so basically your entire life becomes choir and a lot of the time you feel like you're drowning in sheet music. Oh, another thing about A Cappella is that you have to learn the music all on your own, and you get tested on it once a month. Testing is when you go up in front of the entire choir alone and sing your part, and it's absolutely humiliating. On testing nights, it's almost guaranteed that there are going to be people leaving in tears. Like I said, Clark can be brutal when she wants to be.

A Cappella is on Monday nights from 7:00PM to 8:30PM. Clark made it that late because some people have sports practices right after school, and it's the only time that really works for

everyone to get there. Everybody shows up exhausted from school and leaves even more exhausted - which almost always means that choir the next day during school hours is going to be filled with yawning vocalists and tone-deaf ones; a fabulous mixture. Speaking of tone deaf...

“Ohmygod.”

Before I can reach out to open one of the doors to the choir room, I’m intercepted by Trish, who is dressed head-to-toe in baby pink. Her blonde hair is pulled into a high ponytail, held tightly in place by a fluffy, feathery pink hair tie. She grabs me by the arm and pulls me aside, blue eyes wide, the stench of bubblegum on her breath.

“You absolutely *need* to call me after school,” Trish whispers loudly, glancing over my shoulder. “I received intel on you-know-who.”

“You-know-who?”

“Celeste.”

My mouth goes dry, and I quickly look around to make sure that neither Celeste nor any of her friends are around. The last thing I need is for anyone to overhear Trish and I talking about Celeste, especially now that she asked me to homecoming. I don’t want it getting back to Ian, because of my reaction with Celeste. I didn’t say yes, but I didn’t exactly say no, either.

“Trish, shut up,” I nearly slap my hand over her mouth, but she grins and lets go of me, clapping her hands together in excitement. “Someone might hear you!”

“Just call me after school!” She repeats. “I gotta go to Publications. Love you!” Quickly, Trish kisses me on the cheek and then disappears like a puff of pink smoke down the hall to her next class. It’s a really good thing that she both can’t sing for the life of her and doesn’t feel the need to take choir with me, because I’d strangle her right now if I could.

I walk into the choir room, where the noise is already off the charts. No one has started singing yet because the bell has yet to ring, so it's a free-for-all in here. There are some kids in the tiny room off to the side that's noise proofed and has a piano in it. A group of tenors are off in the corner singing some song from a Broadway show. Clark is at her desk writing something down while Celeste and another girl Tessa talk to her.

Swallowing hard, I bee-line it to the shelf on the far-right side of the room to grab my folder that's filled with all the music we're working on, and then walk to the back of the room to drop my backpack off behind the risers.

"Ellie!"

Turning my head, I look over my shoulder to a small group of girls sitting on the risers, in the alto section. Carolyn is the one who called me, a huge grin on her face. She's probably the nicest person I've ever met, and is pretty quiet unless you're actually friends with her. Even though she's sitting in the alto section, she's actually a second soprano, which means she's sort of in-between being a high soprano and an alto.

"Hey guys," I say as I move to sit down on the risers with them. There's five of us there now. Carolyn, with her super short brown bob and deep green eyes, Tina Wu, who wears a dress every single day no matter what the weather is, Katie, who's really tall and muscular, and then Nina. She's the only first soprano in our little group, but you wouldn't be able to tell at first glance. Nearly all the first sopranos are extremely loud and annoying with the exception of a few, Nina being one of them. She's tiny, with super curly hair and glasses, and is as quiet as a mouse. Katie and Tina are both altos, like me.

"Nina was just telling us how everyone in her section is complaining because Celeste is making them have two sectionals a week after the crappy scores they pulled at testing

yesterday.” Carolyn says, looking deeply satisfied. For a second soprano, she seriously likes to watch her sister voice-parts suffer. It’s kind of hilarious, since she’s so quiet and nice. Sectionals are rehearsals that section leaders hold at their houses with their voice part. We all get together and learn any music that we’re having trouble with, and practice. Honestly, most of the time my section, the altos, just talk through the entire thing. “I mean, they really did suck.”

“Most of them were too flat,” Katie agrees, rolling her eyes. “I think Nina and Celeste were the only ones *not* screaming or off key.”

Thank God. Relief floods me as I realize that word still hasn’t gotten out about Celeste asking me to Homecoming. I don’t really know why it would, but in choir, everyone is in everyone else’s business. There are literally no secrets. Anxiously, I look over to where Clark, Celeste, and Tessa are. Tessa’s talking animatedly to Clark, and Celeste is picking at the nail polish on her nails and nodding along like she agrees with whatever Tessa is saying. Tessa’s the soprano 2 section leader, and I can imagine she’s talking about their results from testing last night, too. They didn’t do as bad as the first sopranos, but they weren’t that great either.

“She’s having you guys do two sectionals a week?” I ask, still looking over at the pair across from me. Celeste looks up, as if she can sense me looking at her, and we lock eyes. She smiles at me, and my heart starts thudding in my chest. Am I sweaty? I feel sweaty. I smile back at her and then nervously look down at my folder, brushing some hair out of my face. “That kind of sucks, but you guys need it. Not you, Nina.”

“Yeah,” Nina says with a yawn, shrugging her shoulders. “I guess the more practice we have the better. Some of the other girls are just so distracted, you know?”

“They don’t take it seriously,” Tina complains, rolling her eyes. “And it makes the rest of the choir look bad! I mean, at least *we* did good.” She gestures to herself, me, and Katie. “The alto section is rarely bad, though.”

“That’s because you guys are all really focused,” Nina says. “And Dana is a little bit scary.” At that, we all start to laugh. Dana is the alto section leader. She’s a senior, and she actually is pretty terrifying if you don’t know her. She’s on the wrestling team, and looks very intimidating at first glance. Not many people know that she actually is like, really nice though. We have cupcakes and cookies all the time at our sectionals.

“Dana’s a teddy bear,” Katie says loudly, because Dana is literally standing about five feet away from us. “And the best section leader ever!” She adds as another loud afterthought. Dana spins around, looking amused.

“Are you guys talking about me?” She asks, feigning confusion. “That goes against Alto Code, you know.” Dana scowls, which scares some wild freshmen who are lurking around nearby, but her scowl quickly dissolves into a grin as she laughs, and turns back to her friends.

“Ellie, hey.”

Because I’d been distracted by the conversation, I startle to see Celeste standing right in front of me. When I look at her, immediately that weird feeling comes over me. She’s so beautiful, it’s insane. Today her hair is pulled into two braids, with colorful ribbon woven in. She’s wearing a pair of ripped jeans, combat boots, and this cute purple top that I don’t think I could ever pull off. She’s so cool, it’s actually kind of insane.

“Celeste!” I stand up quickly, smiling at her. “Hi.”

Hi? Oh my god, could I get any dorkier? She laughs a little and pushes one of her braids behind her shoulder, and then pulls a piece of paper out of her choir folder. It's a hot pink sticky note with some writing on it.

"I wanted to give this to you, so you have it." She says coolly, holding it out to me to take. I take it with what I'm hoping is not a shaky hand, and feel like I'm going to absolutely vomit all over the risers and my friends who are still sitting on them. "I'll talk to you later, hopefully?" She doesn't wait for my response, and walks right over to the first soprano section to take her place at the top of the risers.

"Um..." Tina is the first one to speak, her eyebrows raised. "What was *that* about?"

"Did she just give you her number?" Carolyn asks, standing on her tippy toes to try and see what's written on the sticky note. Without looking at it, I shove it into the back pocket of my jeans and shrug my shoulders, trying to look calm. I do not feel calm.

"I don't know," I say quickly, looking around desperately to see where Clark is. Yes! She's not at her desk, which means she's on her way to the podium. "Look, Clark is at the podium," I nod toward it, and the girls mutter about talking about this more after class, but move to their spots on the risers. Thank God for Clark, is all I have to say.

I look over at Celeste on the risers, and she smiles at me. I smile back, and I also want to turn around and throw up. Choir is supposed to be fun, not stressful!

CHAPTER SEVEN.

There are many things I'd rather be doing on a Wednesday afternoon, but practicing driving is not one of them. I have my learner's permit, mostly because my mom forced me to get it after going through a torturous month of driving lessons from an old man named Luigi. I pretty much forgot everything he taught me, because he basically just yelled at me through every lesson in a very heavy Brooklyn accent, thus fully traumatizing me from wanting to go out onto the open roads. I mean, I'm not allowed to go on the open roads by myself, because I haven't taken my driver's test, which is why my dad insists on giving me lessons as many times a week as he possibly can, because he loves to torture me.

"Just pretend like I'm not here," Dad says as we both reach to put on our seatbelts. He's sitting in the passenger seat of my mom's van, and I'm sitting behind the steering wheel, trying to remember to breathe. "Ellie, relax. You're shaking."

"Do I have to get my license?" I ask, looking over at him. "Like, genuinely asking here. Is it that big of a deal?"

"I thought you wanted to?" He asks, looking confused. "What happened to your dreams of driving yourself to school every day?"

"Luigi happened," I tell him flatly, sighing. "I mean, who names their kid Luigi anymore, anyway? Especially in Brooklyn?" It's just weird to me, because of the video games and everything. Did his mom not ever play Mario Kart?

"Luigi was just a grumpy old man. Turn the car on," Dad instructs. "Good, now put it in reverse-"

"You told me to pretend like you're not here!" I interrupt, glaring over at him. "Don't be a backseat driver, dad!"

“Okay, okay!” Dad replies, putting his hands up. “Just remember to look both ways before you make any turns, and ease yourself on the gas -”

“Dad.” I huff out a sigh and reach out to the radio, making it louder to tune him out. He nods his head and crosses his arms over his chest, finally shutting up. The man constantly complains that my mother is a back seat driver, and yet can’t shut up when he’s in the car with another person. I seriously don’t get it.

Closing my eyes for a minute, I breathe in deeply and let it out slowly. Carefully, I turn my head and look out the rearview mirror, before putting the car into reverse and backing out of the driveway. We live on a development, so there aren’t many cars that come and go past my house, which I’m grateful for. My anxiety usually spikes when we’re turning out onto a real road, where there are real people driving real cars, and the possibility of me crashing into them is really real as well. That’s usually when dad starts to tense up, and I can practically feel him wanting to shout out directions every five seconds.

“So, that Ian kid from Alateen seems nice,” he says, his eyes trained on the neighborhood road around us. It’s pretty empty; there aren’t even any kids running around, which makes me think that he might have put out a message on the neighborhood app telling everyone that we’re practicing driving, just to be safe. “Did you guys have fun at coffee?”

“We got ice cream,” I mutter in response. I drive carefully down the empty street, breaking when I come to the end of it. “Should I try a K-turn?”

“Yeah. Then drive down to the other end, and pop a you-ie.”

“Dad, people don’t say ‘pop a you-ie’ anymore,” I tell him as I slowly perform a pretty nice K-turn, if I do say so myself. “You’re making yourself sound old.”

“I am old,” he replies. “Great job, Belly, you didn’t even hesitate.” Dad is grinning, and I know he’s proud of me, but I hate when he calls me Belly. It just reminds me of the night that mom and I left him. He was crying that night, begging her not to take me from him. The thought of it makes me tighten my grip on the steering wheel, and an ache crawl into my chest.

I don’t say anything. I just drive to the other side of the neighborhood, carefully watching for any kids that might run out into the road after a stray ball, or any animals. That’s probably my worst nightmare, hitting an animal, or a kid. What would I even do with myself if I did something like that? Even worse, what if someone hit me? What if I’m just driving, minding my own business and someone flies out of nowhere and hits me? What if I break my neck, or ruin my mom’s car, or topple into a lake and can’t get out because the water pressure makes it too hard to open my door? What if my dad starts drinking again and drives drunk? Just thinking about it makes the ache in my chest start to get worse, and I feel like I can’t breathe.

I try to breathe normally and just drive, but my palms are starting to get sweaty and I feel a little bit light headed and nauseous. Instead of making a U-turn like my dad told me to, when I reach the other end of the neighborhood, I stop the car, putting it in park. I can’t breathe, and no matter how hard I try not to, I’m hyperventilating.

“Why did you stop? You were doing so good-” Dad turns and looks at me, concerned. “Belly, what’s wrong? Are you having a panic attack-”

. . . 7 Years Ago

It’s late, and I’m in my bedroom in our little apartment. Down the hall, I can hear mommy and daddy fighting... I’m sure the whole apartment complex can hear them fighting, they’re so loud. This fight started way earlier in the afternoon, when mommy and I got home

from playing at the park. Daddy was sitting on the couch waiting for us, and he smelled really bad. Mommy got really upset when she saw him, and she put me in my bedroom with a snack and then they started fighting.

My bedroom door flies open, and my mom comes in. Her eyes are red and puffy, like mine look when I cry. She takes my favorite bag that has teddy bears all over it, and starts throwing clothes in it, and Lolly my bear in it too.

“Come on, Ellie, we’re going to Grandma and Grandpa’s.” Mommy says, grabbing my hand. “Let’s go. Put your shoes on.”

“You can’t do this—” Daddy yells from the other room. “You can’t take my daughter away from me!” I hear something break, and then he starts to cry. Mommy’s hands are shaking. She lets go of mine, and walks out of the room after telling me to stay here for another minute.

“I can and I will!” I hear her yell back at him. “Look at what you’ve done. Look at what you’re doing — you expect me to keep our daughter here while you’re drunk off your ass, breaking shit everywhere? There’s glass all over the floor, Fitz. You punched a hole in the wall!” Her shoes crunch over broken glass. “Don’t — don’t *touch* me.”

“I’m not letting you leave.”

“I’ll call the cops again,” She threatens. “Let *go* of me, Fitz.”

I walk over to my bedroom door and peer out. From there, I can see the hallway and the living room. The living room has broken glass all over the floor. Some picture frames are smashed there, too, and I can see where daddy punched a hole in the wall. There’s blood all over one of his hands, and he’s holding mommy by the arm with the other.

Daddy sees me in the doorway. He drops mommy's arm, and she turns and sees me too, and rushes toward me, grabbing me by the hand. She pulls me into my bedroom, grabs the bag, and then picks me up.

"Belly—"

"It's okay, Ellie," she whispers, interrupting him. "We're going to Grandma and Grandpa's."

"Katherine, please—"

"Fitz. Don't."

He doesn't even respond. She storms out of the apartment, and the door closes behind us, leaving daddy in the apartment alone. Mommy walks quickly down a flight of stairs to get outside to the car, where she buckles me in and then gets in the driver's seat herself. That's the last time I ever see that apartment, and the last time I see Daddy for a long time.

The drive to Grandma and Grandpa's house is quiet, except for the radio which itself is really quiet. Mom doesn't say anything and neither do I, mostly because I'm scared to. I'm tired, and I don't understand what happened except, it seems like Daddy is doing something wrong again. When we get to their house, mommy silently gets me out of the car, and we walk together into the garage, and then into the familiar house I spent most of my childhood in.

My grandma takes me up to my bedroom, and tucks me in. I hear Mommy crying while Grandma helps me brush my teeth, but when she tucks me into bed and reads me a story, she makes sure to close my bedroom door. Even after she leaves, I can't fall asleep. All I can see is the picture of Daddy in my head, standing there with blood on his hands, and that sad and angry look on his face.

Present

“Stop calling me Belly!” I yell at him, not really meaning to, but I’m sweating and shaking, and I can’t breathe, and everything sounds far-away but really loud at the same time. “I can’t - I can’t do this.” Desperately, I claw at the seatbelt until it unbuckles, then throw the door open and get out. The chilly fall air feels good against my hot skin, but I still feel like I can’t breathe. Dad gets out of the car, looking a mixture of angry and concerned.

“Eleanor, what the hell?” he snaps at me. “You can’t just get out of the car with it still running, it’s not safe!” Dad runs his fingers through his hair and starts to walk toward me, and I can’t help but back away from him, the panic inside of me getting worse at his raised voice. He stops, his face falling when he seemingly realizes. “Ellie, I—”

“No,” I tell him, shaking my head. “Home, I-I’m going home.” I can’t look at him, I don’t want to see the hurt in his eyes I know is there. I turn around and start running, even though it hurts my chest even more, toward our house. I hear him get in the car behind me. He doesn’t start driving. I run up our driveway and into the house, slamming the door behind me as the tears start coming. Choking out a sob, I move toward the stairs.

“Ellie?” Mom calls from the kitchen. “What happened—”

“Nothing!” I yell, running up the stairs. “Leave me alone!”

It’s not lost on me that I’m acting like a typical teenager, but I’m having a full-blown panic attack and I don’t want my mom hovering over me, asking if I’m okay every five seconds while I try to calm myself down. I reach my bedroom and shut the door behind me, locking it securely so neither of my parents can get inside.

Unfortunately, I have a vent in my bedroom that goes straight down to the kitchen, so I can hear pretty much everything that anyone says down there. It can really come in handy when

my mom and aunts are down there gossiping about family drama, but right now I don't want to hear it. I sit down on my bedroom floor against my bed, bringing my knees up to my chest and bury my face there, letting out sobs that wrack my body and make me want to throw up.

"What the hell happened?" Mom asks once Dad walks into the house. "You guys were out there for all of ten minutes."

"I don't know," Dad says, tossing the keys on the counter. "Everything was going fine, and then she just freaked out, started hyperventilating."

"People don't just freak out for no reason, Fitz," Mom says.

"I didn't do anything, Katherine! I asked about her boyfriend, and -"

"Ian? He's not her boyfriend, she would have told me if he was her boyfriend. Hold Teddy." There's a pause, and Dad grunts a little. Teddy has gotten huge over the past few months. So has Charlotte, to be honest. "What did she say?"

"Nothing!" He exclaims. "I tried to help when I noticed her start to panic, but she screamed at me not to call her Belly and ran away."

I can't listen to it anymore. I reach my hand over next to me and turn on my sound machine, putting it up full blast to mask the sound of them talking about me downstairs. It's just too much - it's all just too much. I wish that I could be on another planet, doing anything else right now. Anything would be better than this. My entire body hurts, and I'm not sure I'd be able to stop crying even if I tried at this point. I don't really even understand why I had such a crazy reaction to my dad in the first place.

Everything just started to feel really overwhelming, and I couldn't catch my breath. And then I started to feel lightheaded, and like I was about to puke, and I just had to get out of the car.

I had to. It felt like if I didn't, I'd die, and I don't want to die. The thoughts kept piling up in my head, and everything became too much, and it's all because he called me Belly.

Hands shaking, I reach into my pocket and pull my cell phone out. I open the text between Ian and I, and hesitate before sending him a text.

ELLIE:

Are you busy? I'm kind of freaking out.

It feels stupid to send him something like that. He almost always messages me back right away, unless he's at practice, which he might be. They don't get a lot of days off, especially not around this time of the year. My phone buzzes in my hands, and I look down at the message he sent.

IAN:

Who do I have to hurt?

I can't help but laugh, and it sounds like a weird gurgling sound. He's always putting on this tough guy act, even though he and I both know he's got a very secretive sensitive underbelly.

ELLIE:

My panic attack??

My phone starts to ring moments after I send the text, and I stare at it for a few seconds. It's Ian calling, of course, his face lighting up my phone. I hesitate before answering, not wanting him to hear me all gross and soggy.

"Man, you're quick." I sniffle, rubbing some tears off of my cheeks.

"What happened?" Ian asks, sounding slightly out of breath. I can hear the clanging of lockers behind him, which means he probably just got out of practice when I texted him. "Are you okay?"

“Dad took me out to practice driving,” I explain, feeling my face start to get warm. “I freaked out again. But not even from driving, I was doing okay with that.”

“Okay well, that’s good, Elle,” he says. I can hear him taking off his shirt, and try not picture what he looks like in the locker room, all sweaty and gross from practice. I’m having a panic attack, not some sort of sexual fantasy, but the image is really distracting. “What made you freak out?”

“Ugh,” I shift until I’m lying flat on the floor, which is something my therapist has told me to do, to try and ground myself during anxiety or panic attacks. It helps sometimes. “It’s embarrassing.”

“I’m sure it’s not.” He tells me. “But if you don’t want to talk about it, you don’t have to.” I can hear some rustling, which means he’s probably putting another shirt on. I hear a bunch of people saying bye to him, and he tells them he’ll see them tomorrow, and then suddenly it’s a lot quieter. “Sorry,” he adds, clearing his throat. “I was in the locker room.”

“It’s okay,” I say as I stretch my legs out on the floor. I’m half on the rug, half off, so I can feel the cool wooden floor on the left side of my body, and the squishy rug on the right. Sighing, I shake my head. “My dad called me this nickname he used to call me a lot when I was little, and it just triggered something in me. I started panicking about driving, and then about him relapsing and driving drunk.”

“Man, I think Corey’s mom relapsing messed us both up.” Ian mutters. “Hold on, I’m getting in my car.” On the other side of the phone, I can hear him opening and closing his car door. He starts it up, and waits for a moment until his phone connects with it. “Can you hear me?”

“Yup.”

“Cool. So what happened after that?”

“Well,” I close my eyes and sigh. “I kind of started hyperventilating. And then he called me the nickname again, and I completely lost it and got out of the car. He got out too and kind of yelled at me because I just left it running. That just made it worse. I might have fully run away from him, back to my house.” I can’t get the look on his face out of my head, from after he yelled at me. He looked so sad, like it was all his fault. It wasn’t his fault, not really... He was just trying to be a normal dad. He was just helping me be a more confident driver.

“I’m sorry, Ellie.” Ian says. “We’re all afraid of our parents relapsing. I think it comes with the territory. It wasn’t cool of him to yell at you, though.”

“You should have seen the way he looked at me.” I swallow hard, a painful lump forming in my throat. I don’t want to start crying, but it’s not like Ian has never seen me cry before. I’ve cried in meetings, especially with some of the stuff I’ve shared. “It was really messed up. I didn’t mean to freak out, it just sort of happened.”

“It’s not your fault.”

“No, but it feels like every time my dad tries to be my dad, I flip out on him.” Okay, maybe that’s a little dramatic. It isn’t every time he tries to be my dad. Maybe Ian is right, maybe talking about Corey’s mom’s relapse at our last meeting made everything feel a little bit overwhelming or something. Maybe they’re just some feelings I need to let ride out.

Whatever it is, it sucks, and I know that I’m probably going to have to bring it up to Lena at our next session. Ian is probably going to tell me to bring it up at the next meeting, too, which is super annoying and I don’t really want to do.

“The other day,” Ian interrupts my thought. “I found my mom crying, looking at pictures from when we were kids. I got so pissed off, because she missed a lot of it from the shit she used

to pull.” He sighs, and I imagine him gripping the steering wheel tighter just like I did when I was driving in the car before. “I got so angry. I wanted to scream at her. How does she think I felt, when she was missing all my football games and boy scout meetings?”

“Exactly.” I mutter. “It’s like they don’t even think about how we felt, sometimes.” I open my eyes, and the sunlight streaming in my windows makes it hurt, especially after crying. Suddenly, I hear someone knocking at my door. From the sound of it, it’s probably my mom. The sound of her calling my name confirms my suspicion, and I sigh. “I gotta go,” I tell Ian, biting my lip. “My mom is at the door. I’ll text you.”

“Okay. Breathe, Ellie.”

I hang up and toss the phone on my bed, then slowly pull myself off the floor. My mom knocks again, and I move to the door, unlock it, and open it.

“I don’t really want to talk,” I tell her, wiping at my eyes with my free hand.

“Eleanor,” Mom pushes the door open, steps into my room, and shuts it behind her. “You had a full-blown panic attack, yelled at your father, and then ran away with the car still running. I think we definitely need to talk.”

I sit down on my bed, and mom sits next to me, pulling me into a hug. For a minute we just sit there in silence, until finally the dam breaks and I start crying again, into her chest. I can’t help it. It’s easy to pretend like I’m okay with everyone else, but with mom, it’s just impossible. She sighs and strokes my hair, rocking me back and forth like she used to.

“Oh, Ellie.” Mom rests her chin on my head. I can hear it in her voice; she’s trying not to cry, too. “What happened?”

“Nothing,” I tell her, wiping at my face and then wiping my nose on the sleeve of my shirt. “Nothing happened, I just freaked out. I was driving fine, and then he called me Belly, and I freaked out, and yelled at him.”

She’s silent for a moment, still stroking my hair, probably trying to figure out what she should say to me. What can she say, though? What is there to say? I’m completely screwed up from everything that happened with my dad when he was drinking. I know I am. Lena says that sometimes when we go through traumas, we can experience moments like what happened back in the car. They’re called flashbacks, and that’s what causes the panic attacks. Something triggers a traumatic memory, which triggers a panic attack.

“I started thinking about what would happen if he relapsed,” I whisper, closing my eyes tightly. Maybe if I keep them closed this tight, I won’t start crying again. It’s something to hope for, right? “I’m afraid of him relapsing.”

“Want to know a secret?”

“I guess.”

“I’m afraid too,” Mom admits, nodding her head a little bit. “I’m afraid of him relapsing too. We have to trust him though, Ellie. He’s worked really hard all these years.”

“So did Corey’s mom.”

“Who’s Corey?”

“A kid from Alateen,” I tell her, glancing up at her. “His mom relapsed two months ago, and is still using. She had 15 years.”

We’re both quiet for a long time, because that’s the reality of loving someone who has the disease of addiction. Sometimes, people with 15 years relapse. Sometimes people with 5

years relapse. Time sober doesn't mean anything, unless you're working the program - at least, that's what our group leaders have told us.

"Corey's mom isn't your dad," Mom tells me, brushing a lock of hair behind my ear. "He's going to meetings, and working the program. I know it's scary, but we have to try and stay in the right now. Right now, dad is downstairs feeling really bad for making you so upset. He's finishing making dinner for me, and watching the twins and Willa."

"It's not his fault that I freaked out."

"He feels like it is," Mom sighs. "I think you should probably talk to him, and tell him what you just told me."

I know she's right, but I really don't want to do that. I feel really embarrassed, and I'm mad that I got so upset in the car. Usually, I can hold it together pretty well and I haven't had a panic attack like that in a really long time, especially not about when I was growing up. Maybe Ian is right, and Corey's mom relapsing really did mess us both up.

"That kind of sucks," I tell her, making a face.

"Well, that's what we do in this family now," Mom gives me a look, and stands up. "We talk about what's going on with us, so it doesn't fester until it becomes rotten and we explode."

"It's stupid."

"Yeah, sometimes it is, kid. But that's life."

CHAPTER EIGHT.

The talk with my dad last night went alright. He felt really bad about what happened, and I even talked to him about my fears of him relapsing, and what happened with Cory from Alateen's mom. Turns out, he already knows about it because of his AA Meeting. Apparently, a bunch of parents of the kids I go to Alateen with are in that AA Meeting, and word got out after one of them about his mom relapsing.

Dad said he was sorry, even though he's said that a million times at this point. It always makes me feel bad when he says it, because he gets super emotional about it and usually cries a little, even now. This morning he decided he wanted to drive me to school. Actually, he asked if I wanted to drive myself to school with him, and I politely declined. After that, he said he'd drive me and we could stop at the drive thru coffee place on the way.

I've noticed that usually after a fight or a rough patch, Dad tends to do stuff like this. One time before the twins were born, he and Mom got into this big fight about where they were going to have Willa go to preschool. He ended up cooking dinner for an entire week after that to give my mom a break. Mom tends to do something similar when she feels bad, but that usually involves her buying someone clothes or skin care products, or makeup as an apology. I mean, that's not the worst thing in the world.

Dad and I got coffee and talked about how we could make driving less stressful for me, which honestly, if you ask me, isn't an ideal conversation to have so early in the morning. I had barely gotten the straw in my mouth before he started coming up with a dozen ideas, all of which were probably bulleted in the notes app on his phone. I mean, at least he's trying, right? To be honest, driving to school with him in the morning is way better than driving with mom. Dad goes to my favorite drive thru and usually gets me a donut with my coffee, and he never shouts how

much he loves me out the window at the drop off spot. Moms can be so embarrassing sometimes.

The linoleum floors in the hallway of the English wing are cold this morning, and make goosebumps rise on my arms when I plop down next to Trish. She's sitting primly on the floor, writing in a bright pink notebook in her swirly script, seemingly deep in thought.

"Morning," I say with a yawn, shaking my iced coffee to try and mix in the chocolate sauce. They drizzle it on the inside of the cup to make it look cool, which it does, but I'd much rather it be actually mixed in with the coffee. "What are you doing?"

"I'm trying to plan," Trish doesn't look up as she speaks. Usually at this point, she likes to scrutinize the outfit I'm wearing, and launch into a long-winded speech about how I need to look nice if I want our reputations to get boosted or whatever. "You know," she adds, finally glancing over at me. "In case you decide to jump on the Celeste train instead of the Ian train. I mean, either way our outcomes of popularity are looking pretty great."

"Trish," I sigh and shake my head. "How many times do I have to tell you that I don't care about being popular?"

"It's not just about being popular, Ellie!" Trish exclaims, putting down her pen. "I want people to notice us. We've been nobodies our entire high school career, and we finally have the chance to be seen!"

"I really don't think anyone couldn't see you," I blink at her, the vibrant yellow of her outfit burning my eyes a little, especially after having cried so much last night. "Not when you're the same shade as the sun."

Trish looks down at her outfit, and then back up at me. I can see a shade of hurt in her eyes, and it makes my stomach drop. You see, I know the real Trish, underneath all of the blonde

highlights and flashy outfits. She was just like me before - just Patricia - only, she wanted more. She wanted to be Trish, the girl that everyone liked. So she does everything she can to stand out.

“I didn’t mean it like that, Trish-“

“It’s fine!” She chirps, the look washing quickly from her blue eyes. “I just want to make the last two years of our high school career amazing.”

“Hey.”

The sound of his ridiculously masculine voice makes Trish and I look up in tandem. Ian is standing in front of us, his backpack slung over one shoulder. Next to him is his friend Joey, who eyes Trish, looking both intrigued and confused. I smile and take a sip of my coffee.

“Hi.” Seriously? That’s what we’re going with?

“I saw your dad drop you off when I was walking in,” Ian crouches down, making it a little less awkward to talk to him in the middle of a hallway. “You guys end up being okay?”

“Yeah,” I bite at my lip, a spike of anxiety flashing through me. I can feel Trish shift next to me curiously. After everything last night, I didn’t get a chance to text her and tell her what happened, and she’s probably going to grill me about it later. “Everything is okay. My mom made me talk to him.”

“Someone had to,” he says with a grin. “You’re a little stubborn, you know that, right?”

“It takes one stubborn person to know another stubborn person,” I point out. Ian grabs my cup of coffee and takes a sip of it, and then makes a face. He doesn’t like it as sweet as I do. “I mean, I don’t even know why you bother trying it at this point.”

“I guess the only sweet thing I like is you.”

Beside me, Trish chokes out a snort-laugh, and I elbow her. Still, I can’t help but grin at him. He’s so stupid sometimes.

“Okay, that wins at being the corniest thing you’ve said all week,” I tell him, snatching back my coffee. “You’re not allowed to try my coffee anymore.”

Ian laughs, shaking his head. “Text your mom and tell her I’m driving you home this afternoon. I don’t have practice.” He leans forward and kisses me on the cheek, and then stands back up. “I’ll see you at lunch, El. Later, Trish.”

Trish waves at both of the boys. I notice she and Joey lock eyes for a little bit longer than normal, and elbow her again.

“Are you making eyes at Joey?”

“Eleanor, please,” Trish sighs dramatically. “If I were making eyes at Joseph, you would know. I mean, he does have hunk qualities, although that mullet he got is absolutely horrible.”

“Yeah, Ian was going to get one, too. He backed out last minute.” I roll my eyes. “I think he realized how dumb he’d look with one. He just doesn’t have the face for it.”

“No, you definitely need a certain jawline for one.” Trish agrees, nodding her head. She’s quiet for a minute, and then looks at me. “What happened with your dad last night?”

Here it is. Like I want to re-hash everything all over again. Thing is, Trish was there for me when my dad was crashing and burning. She remembers what it was like when my parents got back together in the early days of his sobriety. How angry I was at mom, how I barely spoke to my dad for a while.

“I freaked out on him while I was practicing driving,” I sigh out, and then take another drink from my coffee. “Had a panic attack, ran away from him, the whole shebang.”

“Why didn’t you call me?” Trish asks, actually looking a little bit hurt. “You usually call me.”

“My mom came into my room before I could,” I tell her, only lying a little bit. “And then I honestly went to bed. I was really tired.”

“But you called Ian?”

Shit. I hate the look that Trish is giving me. It’s like she feels like I just broke her heart into a million pieces or something, and I turn my eyes to the coffee in my hand, shifting uncomfortably on the ground. In all honesty, Trish has no reason to be upset that I didn’t call her immediately yesterday. She’s been knee deep in her popularity planning, and has been socializing constantly. Sometimes it feels like she doesn’t have enough room for me in her life anymore. I have the girls from choir, but Trish has been my best friend since before we could read. That counts for something, doesn’t it?

“I called him because of Alateen,” I tell her softly, finally looking at her hurt face again. “I was going to call you after that but then mom made me have a heart to heart with her. It didn’t mean anything, Trish.”

She grabs my free hand and holds it tightly, looking at me firmly in the eye. For a second I wonder if she’s going to yank me up so we’re both standing and then punch me or something, but she doesn’t. There’s a weird look on her face - not one I’ve seen before in all the years of being her friend.

“No matter what I’m doing, I’m always going to answer the phone for you.” Trish tells me, which makes my throat tighten uncomfortably, and tears well into my eyes. “You’re my best friend, and nothing else matters but you.”

“Thanks, Trish.” My voice comes out thick, almost stuffy. God, I’ve been crying way too much the past few days, I really don’t need to start again. I’ve really had enough tears for an extended period of time now.

“Oh, don’t cry, you’re going to ruin your makeup!” She tuts, wiping off the stray tears from my face. Trish fans her hands at my eyes, and I shake my head, laughing a little. There’s the Trish I know and love.

“I barely have any mascara on or anything,” I tell her. I definitely don’t wear as much makeup as she does. With Trish, it’s full glam, all the time, or nothing. And there’s no way she’d be caught dead out and about wearing nothing on her face. “You don’t need to fan me.”

“Still,” She insists, fanning me a little more. “You should start using that eyeshadow I bought you. It’ll look amazing with your eyes, and I swear, just wearing a little gives a confidence boost!”

“I’m plenty confident,” I tell her, lifting myself up off of the floor. She snorts in response, shaking her head.

“Maybe if we keep on saying that, you’ll magically get more confident.” Trish picks herself up off of the floor too, and slings her backpack gracefully over her shoulder. “I have to go to class. Promise me you’ll call me if anything else happens with your dad?”

“I promise,” I tell her, smiling. “Now go, your class is all the way on the other side of school.”

“There’s something to be said about being fashionably late!” Trish calls out to me, and as she’s walking away the bell rings. I hear her squeak, and watch as she picks up her pace, darting off around the corner.

. . .

Lunchtime has finally arrived and honestly, I’m so tired that if someone told me I could set up a sleeping bag underneath one of the tables and take a nap, I probably would. Usually after

I have a panic attack, exhaustion sets in for basically an entire day. It's one of the crappier parts of having them, because for the whole next day you basically are constantly reminded of how you completely lost your marbles over something that probably wasn't worth losing them over. To be honest though, if I really think about it, I understand why I had a panic attack.

Things have just been really stressful lately. When they say your junior year of high school is your hardest, they really mean it. Between keeping my grades up, figuring out the colleges I want to apply to, staying present with my friends, and all the other crap that has to do with my family, sometimes I feel like I really just want to leave and check into a long term island resort somewhere, where it's just me and the dolphins in the ocean. That kind of sounds nice.

I walk into the lunch room, and like always there's a mixture of smells going on. From pizza, to bagels, to a concoction of vegetables that looks a little like vomit, the cafeteria has a little bit of everything. Unless I'm in a desperate situation, I try to always bring my lunch from home because nothing here looks remotely appetizing to me. The guys I've started sitting with at lunch, however? They pretty much eat whatever is in front of them, no questions asked, so of course they go with cafeteria food. There's nothing wrong with that! I just don't like vomit vegetables.

"Hey," Ian grins as I walk to his table. He pushes the chair next to him out for me, and I sit down, letting my backpack rest on the ground next to me. "Did you get through the first half of your day okay?"

"Yeah," I shrug and reach into my backpack, pulling out my brown paper bag lunch. "I mean, if struggling through Physics counts as getting through it."

"Dude, I don't miss Physics," Joey says, shaking his head. "That class was brutal. You have Dr. A though, right?"

I nod as I pull my sandwich out of the bag. Dr. A is one of the football coaches at our school, and he's probably one of the best teachers to have for Physics. He makes it a lot more bearable, especially if you're bad at math like I am.

"Yeah, I do. Thank God. I'd probably fail if I didn't have him." I tell Joey, and then take a bite out of my sandwich. "But either way, I always end up with a headache after that class, especially on lab days."

"You wouldn't fail, because I'd help you," Ian insists, nudging me with his elbow. His friends make cooing noises, making fun of him, and I can't help but laugh. "Guys, shut up, I'm being serious," Ian laughs, shoving one of them. "She's really bad at math, she'd die without me."

"Hey!" I glare over at him, and stick my tongue out. "I thought we were keeping that between the two of us. I have an image to uphold."

Ian grins and tugs at a piece of my hair. He pauses and interjects on another conversation some of his other friends are having, and then turns back to me once they're all distracted.

"You look tired," He says quietly. "If you don't want to hang out later, we don't have to."

"I'm tired, but I want to hang out with you," I take another bite of my sandwich and chew it thoughtfully. "You could go get me coffee during your free period, if you're feeling kind hearted. I'd get my second wind then."

"I'm literally always feeling kind hearted."

"Oh, right," Rolling my eyes, I steal a French fry from his lunch tray and eat it. "I forgot you're practically a saint."

"I'll bring you coffee, but you have to do something for me." He says, a grin on his face, and for a moment I start to think, this is it. This is the moment that Ian asks me to go to

homecoming with him. This is the moment that will fix all of my anxieties, that will make me feel secure in telling Celeste that I don't want to go to homecoming with her.

Or, even better, this is the moment he asks me to be his girlfriend! It has to be either one of those things, right? Because what else would he be asking me to do for him? Although, if I'm honest, Ian asking me to be his girlfriend in the middle of our lunch period isn't exactly ideal. I mean, I don't need him to pull a Romeo and Juliet on me, but I'd like it to be at least a little bit romantic.

Mom told me that when dad asked her to be his girlfriend, it was after the most important football game of the entire year. Mom was a cheerleader and dad was the star football player, it was all very cliché of them and it makes me want to absolutely vomit. Even the part where he gets her pregnant with me is cliché! Do you know how I feel about my entire existence being a cliché? Not great. I don't feel great about it.

"Well?" I ask him, raising my eyebrows.

"You've gotta stop stealing my French fries," Ian grabs my wrist, and guides my sandwich-holding hand up to his face. He then takes a bite out of my sandwich. "Or I'm going to be forced to retaliate."

"Ugh," I groan, pulling my arm out of his grasp. Disappointment settles into my stomach like a lump of lead. "Rude! I stole one French fry!" I say, trying to hide it. It's hard to, but I have to swallow down the gross feelings or I might start to cry again, and I swear I've cried in front of Ian too many times this week.

"You're a kleptomaniac," He accuses playfully, picking up a French fry from his tray. Ian holds it out to me, grinning. "All you have to do is ask for it."

Jerk.

CHAPTER NINE.

I know what you're thinking: there's still the Celeste problem that I have to deal with. Only, she's not a problem because I actually like her a lot, as a person. See, the problem is, when a gorgeous lesbian like Celeste asks you to homecoming, I think it's pretty much standard that you freeze up and act like a complete idiot in front of her.

You have to understand, Celeste is like a part of the Elite Choir Members Club, and I'm more like one of the minions that walks around supporting her. She's one of the best sopranos in our choir, and everyone is either in love with her or obsessed with her, and I can understand. Celeste is genuinely one of the nicest people in choir, and that's saying something because there are a lot of really jerky and dramatic people in it. Those people are mostly the theater people, though.

There are plenty of reasons why I should say yes to Celeste asking me to homecoming, and plenty of reasons why I shouldn't. First of all, she's just an amazing person. She's in all those like, super humanitarian clubs, she's an amazing singer, she's beautiful, smart, perfect in pretty much every way - the list could go on and on. Everyone has a crush on her, even straight people, and I can't really blame them. Even I've had a crush on her, and have been reduced to a babbling mess in front of her multiple times in and out of choir rehearsal.

Speaking realistically here, if Ian wasn't in the picture I would probably say yes to Celeste, and go to homecoming with her. Well, maybe, if I could pull myself together enough to not act like a complete bumbling idiot in front of her. There's this aura around the girl that makes it hard to think, I swear to God. Honestly, when I first met Ian I pretty much felt the same way. Then the aura kind of disappeared once I got to know him, which is why I'm a lot more comfortable around him now. Well, there's that and the fact that he's witnessed first hand my

absolute rage about my alcoholic father in Alateen. One time, I got up to share and pretty much cried through the entire thing. Full-on tears pouring down my face, snot dripping out of my nose... it was awful. Thankfully, Alateen is anonymous and we're all pretty much bound to that. Then again, it's not like there are the Alateen police watching your every move, making sure you're not giving anyone's identity away.

Regardless, I have to do something about Celeste. I don't want to hurt her feelings, or potentially break her heart or anything like that, but I do need to be honest with her. I've just been avoiding her like the plague, to the point where I practically run away from her every time I see her in choir. It's not great, but I just don't know what else to do.

The last bell of the day rings, finally signaling that we can all go home, and I can't help but feel relieved. I spent the entire period of choir hiding behind some of my fellow altos, hoping that no one would bother me - especially not Celeste. I'm not even sure why I'm making such a big deal out of this; it's just, I don't like feeling like someone is mad at me. I don't like hurting other people. Trish always says that I need to get more assertive, but what does she know? Sensitivity isn't a bad thing.

I feel weird walking out to the senior parking lot, like it's not somewhere that I should be - which technically is true, although it's not like I've parked my non-existent car in a spot I'm not supposed to or anything. Ian's parking spot isn't too far from the school exit, and he's already waiting in it by the time I get there. It got a little bit warm outside, so the air conditioning he has on is very much welcomed when I pull open the door.

"Hi," I say, jumping up into the Jeep. My legs are short, so getting in has always been a whole thing. "You know, you didn't have to drive me home."

“I figured I’d save you from screaming babies.” Ian lowers the radio and turns to look at me, grinning. “The one day I actually have off from practice. See? I can be nice.”

“You’re incredibly kind hearted.”

“Exactly.”

I shut the car door, tossing my backpack down in front of me. Ian’s car smells like a mixture of a gym bag, men’s deodorant, and some sort of cologne that he probably sprayed inside of it to try and cover up the gym bag smell. It’s not great, but it’s actually not that painful if he rolls the windows down, which he usually does. Don’t guys clean their gym bags out ever? I feel like if I actually went to the gym, I’d clean my bag out regularly because... isn’t that what you’re supposed to do? Maybe his car wouldn’t stink like gross boy if he did something as simple as that.

Buckling myself in, I lean back in the seat and let out a huge sigh. It’s a relief to be done with the day, done with conversations with my dad, being forced to have a heart-to-heart with my mom, and of course, school.

“Long day?”

“Long existence,” I reply, turning to look at him. “Do you ever feel like you just want to take a break from all of your responsibilities?”

“Sure,” Ian says as he drives off the school campus. “Sometimes I feel like it would be easier to just be a kid again.”

I try to imagine what Ian may have been like when he was a little kid. I remember what he looked like, but he was a grade higher than me so I never really spent time with him like I did with the boys in my own grade. I do remember basically all the girls in my grade having a huge crush on him when we were in sixth and seventh grade, though. Back then, crushing on the older

boys basically meant you were a part of the status quo. I had a crush on Luke Grant back then. He was in band, had braces, and a whole lot of acne but he was probably the nicest boy in our grade. He and his family moved away when we graduated from 8th grade, to Phoenix, Arizona which is like on the other side of the country.

Ian was cute when we were kids. He had sandy hair and blue eyes, and freckles all over his face. In the summer, he still gets freckles from being outside in the sun all day, and his hair gets a little lighter from the sun. Even now, he still has the freckles from summer sprinkled all over his nose, and under his eyes.

“Me too,” I sigh. “Wait, where are we going?” This isn’t the way to my house, I noticed right away. “I didn’t tell my mom if we were doing anything.”

“It’s fine, we won’t be long,” he tells me, reaching over to pat my knee. “Relax, we’re not doing anything crazy.”

“I’m relaxed!” That’s a complete lie, especially when I see that he’s pulled into a huge, empty parking lot. He laughs, and I turn my whole body to look at him. “Ian, I am not driving your car around this parking lot.”

“Yes, you are,” He replies simply, putting the car in park. Unbuckling himself from the driver’s seat, he opens the door and hops out, walking over to the passenger side. Opening it, he looks at me expectantly. “Come on. This is where I used to practice when I was learning how to drive. It’s not a big deal! It’s just a parking lot. No one ever comes around here.”

“I can’t drive a Jeep.”

“Yes, you can.”

“Not if it’s stick!”

“You know it’s not.”

“What if I crash it?”

“Into what? Air?”

Ian gestures around. He brought me to this random parking lot that has been abandoned for a few years, now. There’s a small building attached to it that isn’t used for anything; in fact, it’s pretty much covered in overgrown weeds, shrubs, and trees that probably once looked pretty beautiful. I think this place used to be a doctor’s office or something like that, I can’t really remember. Thankfully, the parking lot area isn’t as creepy as the small area around the building. Realistically, it’s perfect for what Ian is about to make me do.

“Fine,” I grumble, unbuckling my seatbelt. I hop out of the car, the soles of my feet hitting the crumbling pavement of the old parking lot, and stomp around to the driver’s side. He left the door open, so I get in. “But if I harm or maim anything or anyone, it’s your fault.”

“Adjust the seat, and your mirrors,” Ian tells me, flat out ignoring my words. He watches as I do both of those things, and then starts laughing. “You don’t have to make the back of the seat so straight.”

“I like to be alert!”

“Okay—” He laughs, holding his hands up. “Jesus. Adjust the side mirrors too.”

“I got it, I got it,” I insist, but I actually almost forgot to do that. He doesn’t really need to know that, though. Once I have everything settled, I look over at Ian and bite my lip. “I’ve never driven with anyone other than my parents, and I’m pretty sure what we’re doing is highly illegal.”

“It’s a little bit illegal,” Ian agrees, shrugging his shoulders, that cool grin still on his face. How does he always manage to look so relaxed, in basically like, every situation? It’s really beyond me at this point. I actually feel like I might throw up, because his Jeep is brand new and I

don't want to accidentally hit a curb and screw up the shiny blue exterior. "You've gotta relax, Elle. It's not that big of a deal. You're driving a car, and people do that every single day with no problem."

"Right." I nod and turn, looking back at the windshield in front of me. "I'm just driving a car, and people do that every day with no problem!" Except, people drive cars every day and also get into huge accidents that end up killing other people. But that's not the same as what's happening right now; right now, I'm in an empty parking lot with Ian so that I can practice driving without having a complete and utter meltdown, which would be a huge achievement. I'm trying to stay in the moment, like Lena tells me to almost every time I see her. I can't help that I worry about what might happen in the future. I mean, who doesn't worry about that kind of stuff?! Probably Ian. Ian is too calm for his own good.

"Okay," he says, nodding his head. "I'm not going to tell you what to do. You already know what to do and how to do it. Just trust yourself, Ellie." Ian turns the radio up a little. There's classic rock playing, which is what he pretty much always has playing in his car. I think his dad is a huge classic rock junkie or something. It actually makes me feel a little bit better that Ian isn't going to try and tell me what to do, and the music helps my nerves too. I have to just trust myself, like he's telling me to.

Slowly, I put the car in drive. I drive it down to one end of the parking lot, and then carefully, I start to do a K-Turn to turn my car around. After the K-Turn, I drive back to the other side of the parking lot, and do a U-Turn. I drive on the outside of the parking lot in a huge circle, feeling a little more confident, and then I pause, hitting the breaks.

"Um," I glance over at him. "I've only tried parallel parking once, and it was a disaster."

"No worries," Ian shrugs. "Do you want me to tell you how?"

“No,” I tell him, shaking my head. “I want to try first, and if I mess up you can show me.” To this, he nods, and then crosses his arms over his chest, waiting for me to start. “Wait! There’s no cones or anything. How am I supposed to parallel park if there’s no cones?”

“See the parking spaces at the edge here? Just use the lines on the ground as your guide. It’s not perfect,” Ian admits, “But it should be okay until I can snipe some cones from football.”

Okay. This will work. Actually, it feels like a lot less pressure without the cones there. I’m not at risk of hitting anything, or running one of the cones over and making my dad mad at me for ruining his perfectly good cones that he doesn’t use for anything. They literally just sit in the garage, ‘just in case’. Dads are so weird.

Slowly, I start to line the car up with the lines on the pavement. With a few jerky movements of both myself and the car, I start trying to pull into the parking spot Ian pointed at. It takes me a few tries, but I manage to get myself in, a little bit sideways. But hey, sideways is better than nothing, right?

“Okay, put it in park and let me go check it out,” Ian tells me. He waits until I do, and then hops out of the car. From outside, I hear him laugh, and my face starts to get warm with embarrassment. Quickly, I unbuckle myself and get out of the Jeep too, anxious to see how it looks.

“It’s not *that* bad,” Ian says, running his fingers through his hair.

“I heard you laugh!” I tell him with a snort, walking over to where he’s standing. “Oh, God. It’s horrible.” I groan, putting a hand over my forehead. The car is definitely sideways in the spot. Technically, I’m in it, but it would probably be a massive failure for me at the driver’s test.

“You got *in* the spot!” Ian insists, gesturing at it. “And it was your... kind of first try.” He starts laughing again, shaking his head. “Don’t beat yourself up. The first time I tried parallel parking, my dad used trash cans instead of cones and I ran over them both.”

“The only reason why I didn’t run anything over is because there was nothing to run over,” I point out, making a face at him. “I feel like you did that on purpose so I wouldn’t get upset.”

“Maybe,” Ian says thoughtfully. He pulls his phone out of his pocket and nods at his car. “Stand next to your parking job, I’m taking a picture so we can take another when you eventually nail it.” Holding the phone up, he waits for me to shuffle to the car, which I do begrudgingly. “Can you at least smile a little bit? You just drove around this entire parking lot like a complete badass, and didn’t freak out once.”

Okay, I have to give it to him, he’s right about that. The entire time I was driving, he didn’t boss me around or tell me I was doing something wrong like my dad does. He gasp every time I accidentally hit the break a little too hard like my mom does. He just sat there and watched me drive, and helped me through parallel parking without getting frustrated even once. So, I can’t help but smile as he takes the picture.

When Ian pockets his phone, I step toward him and slide my arms around his waist, hugging him. He seems a little surprised for a moment, but wraps his arms around me, hugging me tight against him. When I bury my face in his chest, I feel calm and warm, the scent of his body spray and the sound of his heart pounding in his chest giving me butterflies.

“Thank you,” I say into his chest, my voice heavily muffled by the flannel shirt he’s wearing, and also, well, his chest. He doesn’t respond, but one of his hands slides up to the back of my neck, and his fingers curl around it.

Ian pulls me back gently, and the cool air of the afternoon hits my warm face. Our eyes meet, and before I can even process what's about to happen, he kisses me. It's slow and surprisingly gentle, and *God*, Ian is a really good kisser. This time, when he kisses me, it doesn't happen when we're both stressed out and scared, faced with the reality that the sobriety of our parents is fragile, and can change in a second. This time, it's just me and him in the middle of an empty parking lot on a chilly autumn afternoon, and for the first time ever, I feel sure about something.

I definitely want to kiss him again.

CHAPTER TEN.

Sometimes, when I don't have to babysit my siblings, I'm able to go over to Trish's house to do homework with her and hang out. It's something we've been doing since we were little kids, except back then we did a lot more playing and a lot less homework. For some reason, junior year has become the hardest year of high school. The amount of homework we've been getting has been astronomical, and don't even get me started on the pop quizzes. It's like our teachers don't even realize that we have other classes we're supposed to be doing work for!

"I've been thinking," Trish says in a conspiratorial voice. We're sitting in her bedroom, which is painted a sickening shade of pink. There's so much fluff in this room that I think I might get lost in a sea of blankets and pillows. "You going to homecoming with Celeste could be amazing."

I look up at her, away from my math homework which is lying on the floor in front of me. I haven't told her about the kiss — in fact, she has no idea what happened with Ian in the parking lot at all. It's not that I don't want to tell her, it's just that Trish has been really invested in my romantic life lately, and it's kind of exhausting.

"What do you mean?" I ask, putting my pencil down and brushing some hair out of my face. "I thought you decided I could go with either of them." I want to roll my eyes, but I don't. Trish leans back in her desk chair and sighs dramatically.

"You don't need permission to go with anyone, Eleanor," she tells me. "I just mean, if we're coming at it from a social status angle, it could be a cool new identity for you. You'd go from someone everyone *barely* knows, to the girlfriend of Celeste Huang. She's super popular, is at the top of her class, and is a lesbian, which is an added bonus. It makes you different!"

Lying there on Trish's bedroom floor, it's kind of hard to recognize the person in front of me. A lump is forming in my throat, and I feel anxiety start to pile on my chest. I feel angry too, a burning sensation deep in my stomach that I feel might explode out of my mouth if I open it too soon.

"What about what *I* want?" I ask Trish quietly, crossing my arms over my chest. She has her back turned to me, and is writing something in a notebook. It could be her homework, or it could be a long and involved popularity plan she's been developing for me - I don't know for sure. I watch her shrug her shoulders and toss some of her pristine blonde hair over one of them.

"I've never wanted any of this, Trish," I continue, that familiar gurgle of anger bubbling away in my stomach. "I don't even want to go to homecoming. I never did! We didn't go to homecoming freshman or sophomore year of high school! What makes junior year any different?"

"You *should* want this," she says stiffly. "I mean, all this work I've done for the both of us to get you noticed by Ian *and* Celeste. They're pretty much like, the most popular people in school, and Bobby and I did a *lot* of work getting Ian to notice you in the first place."

"What?" I ask, dread filling me. "What are you talking about? I've known Ian for a few years. You aren't with Bobby, and I was the one who introduced you to him in the first place."

"I hooked up with Bobby *months ago* at Katie Richards' party." Trish tells me, finally turning around to face me. "And I was the one who talked about you around Ian whenever Bobby and I would hang out with him. He barely knew you existed before me. How long have you guys been hanging out, again?"

"A-a few months, but-"

“Right,” Trish cuts me off, shaking her head. “I did this for *you*, Ellie. So you wouldn’t be a nobody anymore. Don’t you get that? I’ve been telling Ian for *weeks* to ask you to homecoming.”

“I’m not a nobody!” I yell at her, tears welling in my eyes.

“You are,” Trish replies calmly, shaking her head. “I’m like, your only friend. And you’ve never even had a boyfriend.”

“That’s not true, or fair.” Blinking back tears, I cross my arms over my chest. Okay, maybe the part where I’ve never had a boyfriend is true. I haven’t. But the part about me not having any other friends is not true at all. I have a bunch of friends from choir, and they’re all great! Trish is just the friend I’ve had the longest. We’ve been through a lot together.

“It is true. You obviously don’t care about having an identity in our high school, otherwise you’d be grateful right now.” Trish tells me.

“I’m a lot of things, and grateful isn’t one of them,” I tell her angrily, clenching my fists at my side. “You had no right to do any of this.”

“I needed to, and you needed to have options.”

“Options?”

“Of who to take to Homecoming.”

I feel like I’m going to throw up. My heart is pounding in my chest, and I feel like I’m going to throw up all over this stupid fluffy white rug in this ugly pink bedroom that reeks like the flowery perfume Trish douses herself in every morning.

“So you did it with Celeste, too?” I ask, clenching my hands into fists. “How did you manage to get her to notice me?”

“She’s in the yearbook club with me,” Trish tells me, looking proud of herself. “We became friends. I didn’t think she was going to actually ask you to homecoming. That was a happy accident.”

Trish manipulated this entire thing. She manipulated my entire life, and I didn’t even notice it - not even a little bit. God, am I dumb? How did I not notice? There’s no way that two people as popular as Ian and Celeste could possibly notice me on my own, and actually want to be with me. How could they?

“I can’t believe you did something like this,” I tell her, reaching over to my homework. I close the math book and the notebook I’d been working in. Stuffing them both into my backpack, I start to shake my head. “My life isn’t a game for you to play around with, Trish.” I can feel tears burning in my eyes, and I blink them back, not wanting to cry in front of her.

“I did it for you!” Trish says, getting up from her chair as I pick myself up off of the floor. “I did it for us, Ellie.”

“You did it for *you*.” I tell her, shaking my head. “You did it for you, just like you always do.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” Trish asks sharply. I can feel her entire demeanor start to change, the same way it does when she’s around her mom. Trish and her mom don’t really get along, to say the least, and I’ve been in some really uncomfortable situations with her before. “I wanted you to *be* someone, Ellie! Instead of just being that girl no one knows the name of.”

“No,” I say, pulling my backpack on. “No, if you were trying to do something for me, you wouldn’t have done this at all. If you were *actually* my friend, you wouldn’t have done this at all. I have to go.”

“Well, you better decide who you want to go to homecoming with, before Celeste asks Meg Taylor.” Trish says nastily, her face starting to get red. “If it were me, I’d ask Meg and *not* you.”

“Good thing you’re not her, then.” That’s the last thing I say to Trish before walking out of her bedroom, and slamming the door shut behind me. Heart pounding in my chest, I quickly make my way downstairs, rushing out before either of her parents can see me. My house is nowhere near Trish’s, but there’s no way I can stay in this place any longer. I want to call Ian and ask him to come pick me up, but then I remember how Trish said she was the one who told him to start hanging out with me, so I don’t; instead I just walk down her street, toward the center of town. In my pocket, my phone buzzes. I pull it out and look at the screen.

UNKNOWN NUMBER:

Hey, it’s Celeste. Trish gave me your number!

Bile rises in my throat, and it takes everything inside of me to not throw my phone into the road so a car can run it over. It’s not that I don’t like Celeste, because I do, it’s just the fact that Trish did all of this work behind my back to push me onto the road of becoming popular that’s nagging at me. I honestly feel kind of betrayed.

In all the years of our friendship, Trish and I have gotten into a bunch of fights. I mean, I can’t exactly remember why we got into fights, but I remember that we’ve gotten into them. Growing up, she was pretty much like the only sister I ever had, and in a lot of ways still is. My own sisters are too young to even realize that I’m related to them. Trish didn’t always act this way, though. She hasn’t always been hyper-focused on becoming popular, and her own social status.

When she joined the drama club, something kind of changed in her. People started noticing her, and suddenly she had a packed social calendar and had plans with all these different people I didn't know. We stayed friends obviously, but she's been trying to get me to do stuff I just don't want to do for a while now. I don't have any desire to be a part of the popular crowd, or have every single person in the school know my name. That's never been my thing. I thought it wasn't her thing, either.

I swipe the notification off of my home screen as I walk down the sidewalk, and click on my mom's contact. With a sigh, I hit the call button and press my phone to my ear. It rings three times before she answers.

"Hey honey, what's up?" Mom asks, sounding a little bit breathless. I can hear the twins babbling in the background.

"Can you pick me up? I'm walking to the mini-mart down the street from Trish's house." I tell her, trying hard to fight the aching lump in my throat. I feel like crying, and it's definitely showing up in my voice.

"Did something happen?"

"Yeah," I say, my voice cracking a little. "I got into a fight with Trish, but I don't really want to talk about it right now. Can you pick me up, or should I call dad?"

On the other end of the phone, my mom sighs. I know she's probably biting her tongue right now, because she doesn't really like how Trish has been acting toward me lately. Not that Trish hasn't been supportive or anything, but mom just thinks she's turning into a spoiled brat. Her words, not mine. I might have heard her tell her therapist that too, on a phone call one night. I hear the jingling of keys, and start walking a little bit faster.

"I'll be there in a few minutes."

“Thanks, Mom.”

I hang up and swipe into my text messages. Trish has texted me five times already, probably trying to justify her actions, but I don’t open them. I don’t want to see her, or talk to her... right now, I want nothing to do with her. Instead, I stuff my phone into my pocket and continue walking towards the mini-mart, crossing my arms over my chest to keep warm, because on the way out of Trish’s house, I forgot to grab my coat.

By the time I get to the mini-mart, my mom is already there, sitting in the van waiting for me. From where I’m standing, I can tell that my siblings aren’t in the car with her, which is a little bit weird since they’re always tagging along to basically everything. I mean, they kind of have to, since they’re babies and everything.

I open the door and climb inside, thankful for the warmth. We’re both silent for a little while, but then my mom sighs.

“What happened?”

“I told you I don’t want to talk about it,” I tell her, buckling my seatbelt. “Trish is a bitch.”

“Ellie.”

“What? She is, and I know you think so too.” I cross my arms over my chest, feeling the tears well up again. Okay, maybe I do want to talk about it. Before I can stop myself, the words start pouring out of my mouth. “This girl Celeste asked me to go to Homecoming with her, and Trish told me today that I basically have to say yes to her because it would make me interesting and would make people notice me, since Celeste is so popular,” I blurt out, sniffing. “She told me that she orchestrated Celeste noticing me because she became friends with her in journalism

and talked about me constantly. And she gave Celeste my phone number, without even asking me if it was okay!”

I think mom is stunned into silence, but I don’t even want to look over at her to check and see. I sniffle. I swallow hard, trying to blink the tears away but they come anyway, and start pouring down my face.

“And,” I continue, not even waiting for mom to respond. “And she told me that she and Bobby Martin hooked up months ago, and when they were hanging out, she brought me up to Ian, and that’s why he started talking to me at Alateen.” I choke out a sob. “The only reason why he likes me is because Trish told him to, so I could become more popular.”

“So, Trish has basically been manipulating two people who like you?”

“I thought they liked me,” I say, shrugging my shoulders. “I thought Ian started talking to me because he liked me, not because Trish told him to. Same with Celeste, but apparently, I was wrong.” As Mom drives, I rest my head against the car window and close my eyes. “There’s no reason either of them would just randomly start liking me. Now everything makes more sense.”

“Ellie, that’s not true,” Mom insists. “You’re an incredible person, and anyone would be lucky to have you in their lives.”

“You’re just saying that because you’re my mom.”

“Not really,” she says. “You’re my daughter and everything, but if you sucked I’d probably have to tell you.” This makes me laugh a little bit, but on the inside. I’m way too upset to laugh out loud right now. “Come on, Ellie. You don’t really believe that, do you?”

“I don’t know anymore, mom.” I finally turn and look at her. “Ian wouldn’t have talked to me if it weren’t for Trish. Same with Celeste. How do you think that makes me feel?” I ask

her, wiping some tears off of my cheeks with the sleeve of my shirt. “I’m not cool enough, or interesting enough for Trish to keep hanging out with unless I have a popular boyfriend. ”

“Or girlfriend,” My mom notes, rolling her eyes. “Look, Eleanor, I didn’t raise you to think so bad about yourself. You are a beautiful person on the inside and the outside, and so authentically you, which Trish definitely can’t say about herself.”

“It still hurts,” I tell her as we pull up into the driveway of our house. Dad’s car is in the driveway, which means he came home from work early. Great, now he’s going to see that I’ve been crying and act all awkward, like dads do. “I feel like my guts have been ripped out of my stomach.”

“Of course it hurts, sweetheart,” Mom says with a sigh, putting the car into park. She grabs my hand and squeezes it. “What Trish did behind your back isn’t right, and she owes you an apology.”

“Yeah, right,” I say, unbuckling my seatbelt. “Like I’ll ever get that.”

Trish has the habit of never thinking she does anything wrong at all, which is pretty annoying. She can’t ever take responsibility for her actions, and always makes it out to seem like it’s the other person’s fault. I can’t wait to see how she spins this one.

“Maybe you need to take some time away from Trish,” Mom suggests as we both get out of the car. Before I can start making my way into the house, she grabs me and pulls me into a hug. “You deserve better than a friend who will manipulate you like that, Ellie.” She kisses the top of my head, and I bury my face into her chest, holding back more tears.

“I don’t even know if I can trust if anyone actually wants to be my friend, or if Trish has been in their ear,” I tell her, shaking my head. “How will I even know?”

“You’ll know.” Mom gives me a squeeze, and then releases me from her vice grip of a hug. “Come on, dad’s making dinner tonight. He decided to make his mac and cheese.” Holding my hand, she tugs me toward the entrance of the house. “I’ll tell him not to ask,” she adds, seeing my look of apprehension.

“Okay, fine.” I mutter, trailing inside after her. “I’m only going to come out of my bedroom for the mac and cheese, though.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN.

“My older sister is drinking again,” the voice of a kid who probably is just barely thirteen years old echoes in the stale church basement room. I’m here again, at another Alateen meeting. Ian is sitting across from me, but I can’t bring myself to look at him. We’ve barely been speaking, after everything happened with Trish the other day. Instead of looking over at him, I pick at some fluff on my sweater, and look back at the thirteen-year-old-girl at the front of the room.

She reminds me of myself at that age, but instead of her dad being the alcoholic, it’s her sister. I think her name is Julie. She’s angry, and I used to be, too. Maybe there’s a part of me that’s still angry, I don’t know.

I’m definitely still angry about what happened with Trish. I’m angry at Ian, even though I know he was just as manipulated as I was. I’m angry at Celeste, and I’m angry at Trish most of all, because she couldn’t take no for an answer, and decided to go behind my back. I’m angry that he hasn’t asked me to homecoming, even after Trish apparently told him constantly that he had to. If she was telling him to, why wasn’t he just asking?

“... I’m scared for her, but I know I can’t do anything to make her stop.” The kid continues. She’s up there practically crying, but I can’t even concentrate on feeling bad for her because I’m too mad. “My dad enables her, and that makes him and my mom fight so much, and everything at my house just feels bad right now. This is the only place I feel safe right now, so... um, thank you guys.”

The girl — Julie — snuffles and walks away from the podium, taking her seat once more. No one gets back up to talk more, so the group leader takes it upon herself to stand up and start making end-of-meeting announcements, which means that everyone is about to start socializing

and updating each other on their lives. Part of the Alateen session is dedicated to this, because they think we all need to have a sense of community or something.

When the leader ends things, I get up from my chair immediately and grab my things. A part of me wants to just run out of there and call my mom to pick me up, but something is nagging at me to stay and talk to Julie, the girl whose sister is drinking. Stealing a glance over at Ian, I notice he's distracted talking to one of the other guys, so I walk over to Julie and wave at her.

"Hi," I say lamely, trying to give her a smile. "I'm Ellie. I'm sorry about your sister." I brush some hair out of my face and sit down next to her. She wipes at her face and nods her head, and that nagging feeling inside of me deepens. "If you ever need anything, I'm here for you."

"Would you be my sponsor?" She asks, her eyes lighting up. "I know I've only been here a couple of months, but every time you talk about stuff with your dad it makes me feel better." Julie pauses, her cheeks flushing red. "I mean, only if you want to."

"I'd love to," I tell her, and I'm not lying, although I'm also not really sure what I'd bring to the table as her sponsor. "Um, here, I'll give you my number," I say, giving her a minute to take her phone out before reciting my number. "Just text me, and we can figure out a time to meet to talk about stuff."

"I'll ask my mom," she says, nodding. "But I think she'll probably be okay with it. She's been telling me to get a sponsor for a few weeks now, but I felt weird asking someone."

"Well, I promise it's not weird," I say, smiling. "We're all here to support each other. Sometimes it's hard, but that's why we have these meetings."

"Thanks, Ellie."

Julie hugs me, and then runs off to go talk to another girl around her age. I've seen them talking before after meetings. I kind of hope she doesn't tell the other girl to ask me to be her sponsor too, because that's just... a lot of responsibility. Plus, I don't really know if I'd even be a good sponsor to begin with!

"Ellie, hey."

Anxiety creeps up in the back of my throat. Ian reaches out and touches my elbow, and I turn, looking at him behind me. Quickly, I stand up and cross my arms over my chest, pursing my lips.

"Hi," I say shortly, looking down at the ground.

"Are you ready to go?"

"I was just going to walk home," I tell him as I grab my backpack from the floor. "It's not that far."

"That's like a 20 minute walk, Ellie, and it's dark outside," Ian sighs. "What's going on? You've barely been talking to me, or answering my texts."

"Can we not do this here?" I ask, finally looking up at him. He shrugs and nods, before leading me out into the hallway, and then eventually outside. There are still a few people smoking, so he starts walking over to his car and I follow him, because he's clearly not going to take no for an answer about me walking home, and my dad will probably get super mad if I walk home alone in the dark, too.

"Is this because I kissed you?" Ian blurts out, spinning around to look at me. "I know I didn't ask, but I thought--"

"What? No!" I sputter, feeling my cheeks heat up. "No, I... I liked that you kissed me." The memory of the kiss makes my face feel even hotter, and I wonder if he thinks I'm a bad

kisser or not. I mean, he hasn't exactly been beating down my front door to get me to talk to him.

"Then what the hell is going on, Ellie?" Ian asks, looking frustrated. "Usually when someone kisses you and you like it, you don't drop off the face of the earth and act like they pissed you off!"

"It's not that-"

"Then what is it, Ellie?" Ian asks, looking at me expectantly. I'm standing in front of his car, and he's in front of me, close enough that I can see his breath in the chilly night air. Ugh, I kind of want to kiss him right here and now, even though I'm angry and he's angry - what is wrong with me?! I think of Trish again though, and my own frustration builds.

"The only reason you told me you like me is because Trish told you to!" I shout at him. "I know that she hooked up with Bobby months ago, and I know she was telling you to go out with me, and that she's been telling you to ask me to homecoming for weeks!"

Ian stares at me silently for what feels like a million years. I can see his jaw is clenched, and there's fire in his eyes.

"Get in the car." He says, pointing to the Jeep. I blink at him, and he sighs, running his fingers through his hair. "Please get in the car, Ellie." His voice is a little bit softer now, and he reaches out to grab my backpack. I let him. He opens the back door and throws both our bags into the back seat, before getting into the driver's seat.

I look over my shoulder at the church for a second, wondering if I should turn around and run back inside, but my feet start moving without my brain even asking them to, and the next thing I know, I'm sitting in the passenger seat of Ian's Jeep, arms crossed over my chest.

"Seat belt," He reminds me.

“You’re being annoying,” I mutter, buckling myself in. I cross my arms over my chest again and look straight ahead instead of over at him.

“I’m being annoying? You’re the one who’s been ignoring me for two days,” Ian replies, starting his car. The heat blasts out of the air vents, hitting my already warm face.

“I haven’t been ignoring you.” I tell him, but that’s kind of a lie because I’ve barely been speaking to him. It’s just, I feel betrayed by everyone in my life right now and I don’t know how to deal with those feelings. It sucks, and it hurts, and I just want to be in my bedroom under a pile of blankets and not here right now.

“Ellie,” Ian sighs. “Yes, Bobby and Trish had some weird thing going on over the summer, and yes, she told me I should go out with you-”

“See?!” I interrupt, whirling around to look at him. “How is that okay?”

“Can you let me finish?” He asks, and I stare silently at him in response. Ian pauses, before continuing. “Trish was bugging me about hanging out with you. She saw me coming out of the meeting one time when she and her mom picked you up, and wouldn’t stop bothering me about it.” He grips the steering wheel so hard that his knuckles start turning white. “I started talking to you to shut her up,” He admits, and there’s a part of me that understands, but another part of me that is angry about that. I know how Trish can be, but still!

I stare at him silently, seething.

“I figured if I talked to you a little bit, it would get her off my back and that would be that, but I didn’t really expect you to be so cool.”

“What is that supposed to mean!?” I yell, throwing my hands up. “First Trish, now you - I honestly can’t do this-”

“Ellie!” Ian shouts over me. “Jesus, just let me talk!”

“Fine.” I say shortly, clenching my jaw. “Continue.”

“I’m trying to say, becoming friends with you was the best part of my summer. And then, I started to really like you, Ellie,” Ian admits. I glance at him quickly and notice he’s blushing a little bit, but he still looks angry. “That has nothing to do with Trish. I don’t *like* Trish, and I never have.” When he says that, it makes me feel a little bit defensive about Trish. She’s my best friend, after all. How can I not want to defend her?

“Once she found out that I started talking to you, she backed off. But then she started pressuring me into asking you to be my girlfriend, and to go to homecoming.” He runs his fingers through his hair and sighs.

“So why didn’t you?” I ask him, refusing still to look at him. “Why didn’t you ask me out, or to go to homecoming?”

“Because I knew you weren’t ready, and I know you don’t want to go to homecoming.”

His answer is simple. Honestly, it makes sense. My head is reeling about what he said about Trish, even though I know I shouldn’t be surprised or even feel angry over it, because of how angry I am at her. His version of the story kind of tracks. I wouldn’t put it past Trish to annoy the hell out of him until he did what she wanted, but it’s surprising that he kind of refused to pressure me into being his girlfriend, or go to homecoming with him.

“There’s something else,” I say, finally turning my head to look at him. “Trish did something else, too.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Not with you,” I say, biting my lip. “Um. Trish and I got into a fight the other day, because she told me that she basically told you to start talking to me. She said she’d been

working on this for months. On us, for months.” Just saying that out loud makes me want to throw up, and the anger I have for Trish starts to bubble in my stomach again.

“It’s not true,” Ian tries to reassure me, reaching over to touch my knee. “She has nothing to do with how I feel about you.”

“That’s not what I mean.” A bubble of anxiety floats in my chest. I think of Celeste, who apparently Trish told outright to ask me to homecoming. “Trish told someone to ask me to homecoming, and they did.”

His grip on my knee tightens for a second, and then it’s gone. I force myself to look over at him, and what I see makes me feel even more anxious. Ian looks angry, and even though I know he’s not angry at me per say, it feels uncomfortable.

“Who?” He asks, his voice quiet.

“Umm. Celeste Huang,” I tell him, reaching up to brush a piece of hair behind my ear. “She’s in A Cappella, and is in the yearbook club with Trish. They became friends, and apparently Trish told her to ask me. And she did.”

“When?”

“A week or two ago.” Suddenly, I feel really guilty, because I never told him.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” He asks, looking a little bit hurt. “What did you say?”

“I said I didn’t think I was even going to homecoming,” I tell him quickly. Tears start to well in my eyes, to my annoyance. “She just told me to think about it and that it would be a fun date, and then walked away.” Sniffling, I wipe a tear from my face with the sleeve of my shirt. “I didn’t tell you because I was confused-”

“Confused about what, Ellie?”

“I thought you were going to ask me! Or at least ask me to be your girlfriend,” I yell at him, accidentally. “And I thought, maybe if you asked me I would want to go. And when Celeste asked me, I thought maybe it would be fun to go with her, but she said it was a date, and...”

“You wanted to go with *Celeste*?”

“I just said I wanted to go with you!”

“Jesus, Ellie...”

I can’t help it now, I’m crying. Hot tears are rolling down my cheeks, and for the first time in a few days I just let them. I bury my face in my hands and cry, because my best friend completely betrayed me and set me on this path of having Celeste and Ian both being interested in me at the same time. Everything feels horrible, and I can’t be in this car anymore. I unbuckle the seatbelt and open the car door, slamming it shut behind me. I grab my backpack from his back seat, and then slam that door shut as well, and then start walking toward the church building, tears streaming down my cheeks.

Ian lets me.

CHAPTER TWELVE.

“I can’t go to school,” I say groggily, from underneath a layer of six different blankets. The sun is streaming into my bedroom, and it hurts my eyes every time I try to open them. I spent basically all of last night crying in bed after dad and I got home from his AA meeting, and now my eyes are sore and swollen, and my head is pounding. “I think I’m sick.”

“What do you feel?” Mom asks, setting her hand on my forehead. “It doesn’t feel like you have a fever.”

“Everything hurts.”

I’m not lying. Everything *does* hurt, and I don’t think I can face anyone in school today with the way I look. Not that they’d even notice me, because according to Trish, I’m a nobody. I haven’t heard from Ian at all after last night, and even thinking about that makes my stomach churn uncomfortably, and my head pound even more.

“Are you sure this doesn’t have anything to do with whatever happened last night?” Mom asks, tilting her head. Willa is perched on her hip, watching with her big blue eyes fixed on me.

“Ellie cried all night, Mama,” Willa says. “I hearded it through the wall.”

“Shut up, Willa,” I groan and roll onto my stomach, burying my face in my pillow.

“Ellie said a bad word!”

“Ellie,” Mom warns, and I roll my eyes internally. “We don’t say shut up in this house.”

“Okay!” Sighing deeply, I turn my head and peek over at them from beneath all my blankets and pillows. “I’m sorry for saying shut up, Willa.” I say to my sister, looking up at her.

“It wasn’t nice.”

“Fanks.” Willa says, and wiggles in my mom’s arms. “Let go, Mama!” She squeaks. Mom sets her down, and she runs off, out of my bedroom and probably down the stairs to go to the kitchen for breakfast. That just leaves mom and I in my bedroom, all alone.

“You don’t think you can go today?” She asks, sitting down on the edge of my bed. I shake my head and close my eyes, not even opening my mouth to speak the words. “Okay. Do you want to go to grandma’s?”

“I’d rather stay in bed,” I tell her, although going over to grandma’s house does sound kind of nice. Grandma is an artist, and the entire basement of her house is her studio. We’ve had a lot of fun with paint down there in the past, but I can’t really imagine getting myself out of bed at all at this point. Honestly, it would probably be better to just rot here. To lay in misery in my bed, and never leave it. That would be a lot easier than having to face everyone and everything at school.

“Okay. Come down for breakfast though?” Mom puts her hand on my shoulder. “You have to eat something.”

“Maybe after Willa goes to school.” I don’t really want to have any more small talk with the kid, mostly because she tends to blabber everything that I don’t want her to, like how I practically cried the entire night away.

“Alright. I’ll shout before I leave,” Mom tells me. She leans over and kisses me on the cheek. “I promise, even though it feels like it, whatever happened last night isn’t the end of the world. You’re going to be okay.”

I don’t reply, because I’m too busy swallowing the painful lump in my throat and squeezing my eyes shut so I don’t burst out crying again. My mom doesn’t really understand the depth of what happened last night, or what’s been going on for the past week. I lost my best

friend, and the guy I really like. The guy I want to be my boyfriend. All because of something my best friend did. This is probably the worst thing that's ever happened to me in my high school career. It literally couldn't get any worse.

She stands, and I listen as she walks out of my bedroom, shutting the door behind me, and then I start to cry again. Sobbing into my pillow, I pull my blankets closer to my body and imagine disappearing under there. Anything is better than feeling like this.

. . .

"Ellie?" My mom calls from the staircase, and her voice echoes up into my room.
"There's someone here to see you."

I've been in bed all afternoon, with no intention of ever leaving it. Thankfully, my bed is pretty comfortable, and I have a secret stash of snacks in a drawer of my bedside table that no one knows about. Do you know what a girl's best friend is, when she's feeling miserable? Chocolate. Chocolate is a girl's best friend.

"If it's Trish, I don't want to see her." I yell back to my mom. I hear her sigh, and then the stairs start to creak as she walks up them. "I'm serious," I add, rolling onto my side so that my back faces my bedroom door. "Tell her to go home."

"It's not Trish," Mom tells me. I glance over my shoulder to see her standing in my doorway, but I don't look for long because I can see the pity on her face, and I don't really want it. "It's Celeste."

Celeste?

My stomach lurches. How does she even know where I live? Sitting up on my bed, I look at my mom like she's crazy. Am I hallucinating this entire exchange? It doesn't feel real.

"What do you mean, it's Celeste?"

“Celeste is downstairs.” Mom says, lowering her voice. “She asked to see you.”

“So you invited her in?”

“Yes, that’s normally what people do.”

I close my eyes and breathe in deeply, just how my therapist Lena taught me. She said if I do deep breathing exercises, it should lessen my anxiety. As I exhale, I’m not exactly sure the exercise has helped at all.

“Fine,” I say, pulling myself out of bed. I’m wearing an old pair of sweatpants, a sweatshirt that has paint stains on it, and my hair is an absolute mess but at this point, I don’t really care. “I’ll be right there.”

Mom nods and heads back downstairs quietly, leaving me alone in my room. I look at myself in the mirror and cringe at my reflection. Crazy hair, swollen eyes; it’s all too much. Quickly, I pull my hair into a messy bun at the top of my head and grab my glasses off my dresser, slipping them on. The rest will just have to do.

When I finally make it downstairs, Celeste is standing there awkwardly. My mom is in the kitchen, but keeps glancing in our direction. If we stay inside, she’s definitely going to hear everything, and that’s something I definitely do not want to happen.

“Hey,” I say lamely. “Let’s go outside.”

“Okay.” Celeste nods, clearing her throat, and follows me out the back door, to our driveway. There’s a small bench there, that my mom sits on to watch Willa as she plays, and we both sit down. For a few moments, we’re both silent, and I’m a little worried about whether or not she can hear my heart pounding in my chest.

“So,” Celeste starts, sighing a little. “Trish told me what happened.”

Oh, great. Because that's exactly what I wanted to happen. I can only imagine what Trish said to Celeste; she probably made everything seem like it was my fault, even though it definitely was not. God, I could strangle her right now.

"She did?" I ask, instead. I glance over at Celeste and pause to study her face. It actually seems like she feels really bad, although it's not really her fault that Trish put her up to this. My former best friend can be really convincing when she wants to be, which is part of the problem. "What did she say?" I add, looking down at my hands in my lap.

"Just that she told me and Ian to ask you to Homecoming, not knowing which one would ask you first, or something like that," she replies, shrugging her shoulders. "I didn't realize you and Ian were a thing, otherwise I--"

"Celeste," I stop her, turning to look at her. "It's not your fault."

"I feel like I got between you and someone you really like."

"Trish got between me and someone that I really like," I tell her, shaking my head. "I didn't even want to go to Homecoming to begin with, but Trish was insisting on it because she thought if I went with someone popular like you or Ian, it would elevate our popularity status too." Saying that out loud actually makes me angry again. Why is it so important to Trish that we date popular people and become popular ourselves? "She and I usually have a spa-night for Homecoming instead of going to the dance. No one even cares about Homecoming, anyway. It's not like it's Prom."

"Is Ian mad?"

"Yeah," I say with a nod. "I told him you asked me."

"He got mad at that?" She asks, looking confused. "It's not like I knew he asked you."

“Well,” I cross my arms over my chest and sigh. “The thing is, he didn’t ask me. Trish has been telling him to ask me for weeks, and he never did. That’s probably why she told you to ask me.” Huffing out a sigh, I look down at the driveway, watching an ant carry a crumb of food toward his ant hill. “Ian got angry that I thought about saying yes to your invitation.”

I finally look over at Celeste again. Her cheeks are flushed red, and she looks surprised. I don’t know why she’s surprised; I think anyone would probably say yes to going to Homecoming with her. I’m pretty sure like, everyone likes her, and there are plenty of other girls who would be interested in going to Homecoming with her as a date. If I weren’t so wrapped up in things with Ian, I probably would too.

“You did?” She asks, her eyes meeting mine. I smile at her and nod.

“Of course, yeah,” I tell her, laughing a little. “You’ve always been nice to me, and I like talking to you. I’m pretty sure you wouldn’t have a difficult time finding a Homecoming date, though.”

“You’d be surprised,” Celeste mutters, shrugging her shoulders. “But I didn’t realize Trish thought I was such a hot commodity. It kind of sucks, I thought she wanted to be my friend.” I can hear the hurt in her voice, and it’s curious to me. Every time I’ve seen Celeste, she’s always been surrounded by a bunch of friends.

“Trish kind of sucks right now,” I agree, nodding. “I don’t really get why she’s so obsessed with becoming popular.”

“It’s definitely not all it’s cracked up to be.” Celeste tucks some hair behind her ear and wrinkles her nose. “I’m not even sure I really consider myself to be popular, anyway. I don’t really care about that stuff.”

“Me either! But it’s important to her.” I shake my head, frustrated. “Last time we spoke, we got into a huge fight. She called me a nobody, and said she had to have you and Ian ask me out so that I could have an identity.”

At this, Celeste lets out a snort that surprises me. She seems to think that idea is funny or something. When she became friends with Trish, I wonder if she realized that she can be pretty cruel sometimes. All through the years I’ve known her, Trish has always been very hard-headed, and when she decides to focus on something, she’s all in. Her obsession with becoming popular has been growing for some time. I don’t understand why she had to rope me into it, though.

“You have an identity, Ellie,” Celeste tells me, turning her body so we’re now face-to-face. I swallow hard and look at her, a sigh escaping my lips, and her gaze hardens. “Anyone who tells you any different is an asshole. Plenty of people like you, and want to be your friend, myself included.”

“You want to be my friend?” I ask dumbly, blinking at her. She nods, and I find myself nodding too, but I’m still trying to make sense of it. I don’t think I’ve ever had anyone blatantly tell me they want to be friends since I was in grade school, back when it was normal to just walk up to another random kid and tell them you were their friend. “I mean, we can be friends. I thought you wanted to go to Homecoming as a date?”

“I don’t really care about Homecoming,” Celeste says with a laugh, shaking her head. “Honestly, I usually just go with my friends. I figured for my senior year I might find a date, but like you said, it’s not Prom.” She grins at me and bumps my shoulder with hers. “If you do end up wanting to go, I’ll be there with some people from A Cappella. We’ll have fun, as friends.”

“I’m sorry if I hurt your feelings, or anything.” I tell her, suddenly feeling guilty. It seems Trish didn’t really think about all the variables when she was coming up with her genius plan to

get us both into the popular group. Ian and Celeste are real people with real feelings, and she just decided to meddle in their lives like they aren't, which isn't really that cool at all.

"You didn't." Celeste tells me. "I promise. I like you, Ellie. I think you're really talented, and funny too. I think you'll like the A Cappella girls, too; they're a lot of fun, and not a lot of drama, I swear." She's still grinning, and honestly looks like a huge weight has been lifted off her shoulders. It feels the same for me, too.

I have choir friends, of course, but I've always been super focused on my friendship with Trish, so I guess they kind of went to the wayside. Maybe it would be a good idea for me to give Celeste and her friends a chance.

"Thank you for coming by," I tell her, with a relieved sigh. "And I'm sorry for avoiding you so much, and for not responding to your text messages, and for being a jerk in general. Things have just been really intense lately, and---"

"Ellie, you don't have to apologize." Celeste tells me firmly, grabbing me by the sides of my arms. "None of this was your fault. Trish did a crappy thing." I know she's right, but I can't help but feel guilty, still. Especially about all the stuff that happened with Ian.

"Okay," I nod and exhale out a sigh. "How did you get my address, anyway?"

"The choir directory." Celeste says, looking mildly embarrassed. "Sorry, I know that's for emergencies only, but when Trish told me about everything, I felt like I needed to come see you in person. I wasn't sure if you'd answer a phone call."

Yeah, I probably wouldn't. I spent basically the entire day locked up in my bedroom in the same pajamas I went to bed in last night, crying and eating cheese intermittently. Cheese is kind of my comfort food. Ugh — my breath probably stinks from it. I back away from Celeste a little, and she lets go of my arms.

“I definitely wouldn’t have answered,” I agree. “I’ve been kind of a mess all day.”

“Yeah,” Celeste smiles at me. “I get it. Have you talked to Ian?”

Ugh. His name makes anxiety start to bubble up in my stomach. I shake my head wordlessly and look away, the scene from last night replaying in my head. How upset he looked... How he just let me walk away. Tears start to sting at my eyes, and I blink them away, looking anywhere but Celeste. She’s already seeing me at my worst, I don’t think she needs to see me cry, too.

“Nope.” I tell her quietly. “He hasn’t tried to call or text, either.”

“Well, maybe you should call or text him?” She suggests, raising her eyebrows. “I mean, it wouldn’t hurt to try. From what Trish said, you guys really seem to like each other.”

“I guess so,” I mutter. “But he seemed pretty mad at me last night.” I frown and look over at her. “I mean, maybe he’s cooled down by now, I don’t know. I’ll guess I’ll see.”

“It’ll be okay, Ellie.” Celeste says. She pulls me in for a tight hug, which surprises me. “I promise. Stick with me, okay? I’ve got your back.”

When she pulls away, I can’t help but smile. Even if Celeste and I aren’t going to Homecoming together as a date, I’m glad that now I have her as a friend.

“I should get going,” Celeste tells me while brushing some hair out of her face. “I have a lot of homework to do. Don’t worry about Trish, okay Ellie? Everything is going to work out fine.” She smiles at me, and in that moment, I really wish that she’s right, but there’s a nagging feeling in my stomach that won’t go away. Dealing with Trish in any situation, let alone one like this can be a lot. If Trish is going to treat me anything like the way she treats her parents, it’s going to be a really crappy next couple of days.

“Thanks, Celeste,” I say, trying to offer her my best smile. I’m sure I look like a complete mess, but hey, I’m trying my best here! It’s not every week that your best friend betrays you in every way and you’re left to pick the pieces up after her. I watch as Celeste walks toward her car and jump at the buzzing sound in the pocket of my pajama pants. Pulling my phone out of my pocket, I see a message on the screen.

IAN TELLER: We need to talk.

CURRICULUM VITA

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