

RULES
WE'RE MEANT
TO
BREAK →

NATALIE WILLIAMSON

Swoon READS

NEW YORK

A SWOON READS BOOK

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*For Danny, my partner in everything
I couldn't have done any of this without you*

*And for Gracie, the Buffy to my Amber
I'll see you on the other side of the rainbow bridge*

prologue

SEPTEMBER, FRESHMAN YEAR

I stare at the clock all through last period, willing time to speed up so the final bell will hurry up and ring. Today is Friday and also my birthday, and my best friend Hannah and I are going shopping for something to wear to dinner tonight. My mom and her boyfriend, Howard, are taking us to this fancy French place across town, so I want to look extra nice. Partly because of the restaurant, and partly because some of Howard's extended family will be there, including his nephew, Tyler.

Tyler, who came to watch his school play football against mine two weeks ago and made sure to sit next to me in the bleachers. Tyler, who slipped his hand into mine somewhere around halftime and didn't let go for the rest of the game. Tyler, who pulled me aside before I left and kissed me until I was breathless. Tyler, who I've seen three times since then, all of which involved more excellent kissing and hands in interesting places.

So, yeah. I'm a little excited about tonight. I haven't been able to keep the stupid grin off my face all day.

Finally, finally, the bell rings and I snatch my books off my desk and scramble toward the door. I'm moving so fast that I knock into someone on my way out of the room.

"Sorry!" I yelp, jumping back.

“It’s okay,” the guy says easily, and I look over and see that the person I almost knocked into is Jordan Baugh, possibly the hottest guy in all of ninth grade. He was my number-one crush this year before I realized Tyler liked me back, and I’m still not totally immune to him. I blink at him like an idiot, but he grins at me. “I was looking at my phone, anyway. Go ahead.”

“Thanks.” I stare at him a second longer before I duck my head and rush away.

I make a quick stop at my locker to grab my backpack and then go find Hannah at hers.

“Hey, birthday girl,” she says when she sees me coming. “I have to get one more thing and then I’m ready. Matt said he’d meet us at the car.”

“Cool.” Matt is Hannah’s older brother and our most frequent chauffeur since he got his license this summer. Luckily he’s pretty cool as far as older brothers go, and he doesn’t seem to mind driving us around most of the time. “Do you care if he drops us off at my place first? I don’t want to have to carry our backpacks around the whole time.”

“I figured,” Hannah says, slamming her locker door closed.

We find Matt in the parking lot and he lets me ride shotgun and insists that I pick the music again, like he did this morning. I go with Taylor Swift to see how he’ll react, and Hannah and I both crack up laughing when he lets out a defeated sigh, rolls down the window, and blasts the music.

“Only on your birthday, Richter,” he says, pointing a finger at me when he drops us off in front of my mom’s apartment building.

“Noted.” I grin at him as Hannah and I get out of the car.

We take the stairs to the third floor, still giggling about Matt as we come out into the hallway and head for number 304.

“And when he hit that high note!” I’m saying to her as I turn my key in the lock and push open the door.

“Right?” Hannah asks, following me into the apartment. But then she stops short and frowns at something over my shoulder. “Whoa. Where did your couch go?”

I whip around to look and freeze when I see my living room. The leather couch that used to be against the left wall is gone, the dents in the carpet the only sign that anything was ever there at all. I stare at it for a second, not understanding what this means. But then hot awareness creeps up my spine and I take a deep breath and blow it out as I drop my backpack on the floor and step further into the room.

Hannah stays frozen on the welcome mat as I move into the kitchen and open the pantry cupboard.

“Amber?” she asks, as I slam the cabinet closed again and start toward the bedrooms. “What’s going on?”

I don’t answer her. Instead I keep moving, stepping into my room to verify that yes, everything is the way I left it this morning. My bathroom is close to normal, but the scale in the corner is gone, and so are the guest hand towels. In my mother’s room, I find more dents in the carpet. One of the mismatched nightstands and the dresser are gone. Mom’s bras and underwear and workout clothes are stacked on the bed in neat piles, and a pair of her shoes is tucked against the far wall.

I close my eyes for a second and then head back out to the

main living space, ignoring Hannah's worried gaze. I go over to my backpack, pull out my phone, and call my mom's cell. She's at work this afternoon, and normally that means calls to her cell will go to voice mail. But she answers on the first ring, and that's how I know what she's going to say before I even ask the question. I still ask it though. Because there's a routine to these things by this point.

"Mom," I say, listening to her breathing on the other end of the line. "Why is all of Howard's stuff gone?"



Half an hour later Hannah and I are sitting on one of the benches in New Market, outside of the little boutique where I wanted to buy a dress to wear to dinner tonight. There's no point in buying the dress now, because dinner obviously isn't happening. But I wanted to walk, and New Market is the closest place to my apartment that made sense. So here we are.

"Did she say why?" Hannah asks me now, breaking the silence for the first time in a while. "I mean, I thought things between them were fine."

"I heard them fighting a few weeks ago. But only that one time, so I thought . . ." I stop and shake my head. "It doesn't matter what I thought. She always does this. She always ruins everything. Which is why I should've known. I should've seen this coming. I've had enough practice by now."

Howard is the third guy who's lived with us since my dad left when I was five, and none of them have ever lasted long. Mom didn't say much on the phone, but she said enough for me to know

that while Howard's move-out day wasn't her choice, him leaving definitely was.

"Amber," Hannah says, reaching out to put a hand on my shoulder. "No. Ugh, God. This sucks."

"Tell me about it." I shrug off her hand and get to my feet, my face hot. "But we're here and I have Mom's credit card to buy myself a dress. So we should still go shopping, right?"

"I don't know if that's—" Hannah starts, but I give her a look that shuts her up.

I try on a ton of shirts and dresses in the boutique, but nothing fits right and I can't stand to look at myself in the mirror right now because my face is blotchy and red and my mouth is a thin line. So we leave without buying anything and go to the bookstore, where I buy myself a hundred dollars' worth of horror novels. Normally romance is more my thing, but blood and guts sound a lot better to me right now.

"Where to next?" Hannah asks, shading her eyes and looking around. "We could go get something to eat. Or maybe look at the record store?"

"Let's go to The Pet Shop," I say, my gaze catching on the sign across the parking lot.

"Okay," Hannah agrees, linking her arm through mine and marching us in that direction.

I had a hamster named Neville in middle school who died before Howard moved in with us last year, but Mom wouldn't let me get another one since Howard is allergic to pet dander. Today seems like the perfect day to fix that problem. It is my birthday, after all.

I'm thinking about small mammals as we approach the store, trying to decide what to do. Should I get another hamster, since I loved Neville so much? Or a rat since they're supposed to be sweet but would probably freak Mom out more?

"Is there a puppy tied up to that tree, or am I imagining things?" Hannah asks.

I look where she's pointing and see she's right: There's a black and tan puppy tied up to the tree in the little planter in front of The Pet Shop. It's warm today, in the high eighties, but the puppy doesn't have a water bowl or anything nearby. Its little tongue is hanging out as it pants rapidly in an attempt to cool itself down.

Hannah and I exchange looks and rush over to the dog. It sees us coming and gets to its feet, straining at the leash tying it to the tree, tail wagging furiously. But then it chokes, and I realize the leash is one of those noose kinds that you loop around the dog's neck, not clip to a collar. "Hold on, baby," I say to the puppy, closing the rest of the distance between us and holding out a hand for it to sniff. Hannah goes for the leash on the tree while I pick the puppy up and carefully loosen the makeshift collar so that I can take it off.

"What kind of asshole would leave their puppy outside a freaking *pet store*?" Hannah says, untangling the leash from the tree.

I look into the little puppy's face and feel tears pricking the backs of my eyes as it licks me. "The kind of asshole who isn't coming back."

Hannah's face falls. "You think so?"

"If I had to guess, yeah. But let's go in and check."

We meet the owner of The Pet Shop, who introduces herself as Stephanie, and after checking with her employees and customers over the intercom, she confirms our suspicions that the puppy was dumped.

“It happens more often than you’d think,” Stephanie says, sighing and reaching out to scratch the puppy’s head as it laps up water. “People think it’s better to leave them here than at the shelter because they’ll be found quickly. They assume we can adopt them out. But most of the time, we have to call the shelter too.”

“You do?” I ask, looking from her to the puppy, who abandons the water bowl to come lick my legs.

“Yeah,” Stephanie says. “But don’t worry. This little lady won’t stay in a shelter long. Puppies find homes really quickly. It’s the older dogs I worry more about.”

I bite my lip and look down at the puppy’s sweet face, then reach down to pick her up. She looks like a shepherd of some kind, though it’s hard to tell for sure, and her big brown eyes suck me in as she snuggles into my lap.

“Oh no,” Hannah says, and I look over at her.

“What?”

She shakes her head and looks at Stephanie. “Don’t worry about calling the shelter. What all do we need to get so we can take this pup home?”



We have to call Matt to pick us up because we can’t carry the bed, toys, and twenty-pound bag of dog food back to my place. His

eyes widen when he pulls up to the curb in front of the store, but he gets out and helps us load everything without a word. I get shotgun again, and the puppy stays in my lap.

“Who’s this?” Matt asks, looking over at me as he starts the car back up.

“Buffy,” I say.

He reaches over to stroke a hand down Buffy’s back, then puts the car in gear. “Okay then,” he says, and he drives us home.

By the time my mom gets back from work at five thirty, Buffy is asleep on her new dog bed, which I set up along the blank wall where Howard’s couch used to be. Hannah and I are on the floor on either side of her in spite of the love seat and chair Howard left behind, and we’ve got season six of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* playing on the TV.

“Amber?” Mom says, looking at all of us, and I can hear the bite in her tone. She knew I’d be upset, but she obviously wasn’t expecting me to bring home a dog.

“Mom,” I say evenly, and we stare at each other for a long moment. I dare her with my eyes to ask me about the dog, to try telling me I have to let Buffy go.

Finally, Mom sighs. “Do you still want to go to dinner, or would you rather I order in pizza?”

“Pizza is fine.”

Mom blows out a breath and heads back to her bedroom to change. Her footsteps falter around what I’d guess is the doorway to her room, and for a second my heart squeezes in my chest. But I push that feeling aside, because I’m still angry right now and being angry is a lot easier than crying.

We eat pizza on the floor and then Hannah and I take Buffy for a walk around the apartment complex. My phone buzzes in my pocket as we're walking, and I pull it out to find a text from Tyler.

Hey. Uncle Howie told me what went down with your mom. I'm so sorry.

Hope surges in my chest and I hurriedly hand Buffy's leash to Hannah so I can text him back.

Thanks. Since we had to miss out on dinner tonight, do you maybe want to hang out tomorrow? We could go see a movie or something.

The little bubble showing he's typing pops up almost immediately, but it takes him a long time to reply.

I don't think that's a great idea. It'd be weird, you know?

Happy birthday though.

I suck in a breath, and Hannah holds out her hand.

"Show me." I pass over my phone. "Shit."

And that's when I start to cry.

Hannah guides me to one of the picnic tables by the pool and wraps an arm around my shoulders, waiting without saying a word until I've gotten everything out.

“This is the worst birthday ever,” I say finally, with a huge sniff.

“Yeah,” Hannah says. But then she leans down and scoops Buffy up, depositing her in my lap. “It hasn’t *all* been bad though. Right?”

I rub Buffy’s ears between my fingers and lean in so her little face is right next to mine. “No. It hasn’t all been bad. But I can’t keep doing this, Han.”

“Doing what?”

“Getting my hopes up. Letting myself believe that the next guy will be different. I was starting to really like Howard, you know?”

“I know,” Hannah says quietly.

“And Tyler . . .”

She sighs. “I know.”

We sit in silence for a while, long enough that the sky starts getting dark, and then suddenly I sit up straight.

“What?” Hannah asks.

“Maybe what I need,” I say, looking over at her, “is to start preparing for the next guy right now.”

She frowns at me. “What do you mean?”

“Well there’s always a next guy, right?” Hannah gives me a look like she’s not sure how to respond to that without sounding like a jerk, so I keep going. “And since I know that already, I should have known better than to get involved with Tyler, or even to start liking Howard in the first place.”

“I don’t know,” Hannah says. “It wasn’t all bad with them, right? There was some good stuff too.”

I shake my head. “Yeah, but they’re still gone, and today still sucked. If I make sure I don’t get attached to anyone next time, it’ll be better for me when things end. For everyone, really.”

Hannah doesn’t look totally convinced, but she doesn’t disagree with me out loud, so I’m calling that a win. I get to my feet and set Buffy down gently, taking her leash in hand.

“Come on,” I say to Hannah. “I want to do this now, before I forget.”

“Do what now?” Hannah asks, her brow furrowing as she gets to her feet.

“Write down the rules for next time,” I say.

“Rules? What did you have in mind?”



When everything is said and done, I end up with nine rules to follow for the next time one of Mom’s boyfriends moves in.

1. Always keep your eyes on the horizon.
2. Children of Mom’s boyfriends are roommates to be tolerated, not friends.
3. Get used to introducing yourself to strangers. It’s going to happen a lot. (Of course, if said stranger looks like a creeper, throw this rule out the window and run.)
4. Related, get used to spending holidays with strangers too, because that’s pretty much the norm.

5. Protect your plate at all large meal gatherings, holidays or otherwise.
6. Never ask Mom's boyfriends for help, unless it's a legitimate emergency.
7. Never get romantically involved with anyone connected to Mom's boyfriends or their families.
8. Don't get involved in any "family" drama, even if it's juicy and hard to resist.
9. Keep your real life separate from Mom's life with her current boyfriend.

Just reading through the list relaxes me, and I feel totally calm for the first time since Hannah and I got back to my apartment. I tuck the finished rules into my favorite book and hide it behind some of my new horror novels on the bottom shelf, and then I go out to watch another movie with Hannah and Buffy before we all go to bed.

The next morning I pull out the list to check that it's still there, and I find that Hannah has made a last-minute addition.

10. Remember you love your mom. I know it's hard sometimes. But do it anyway.

I debate scratching it out, but decide against it and tuck the list back into its hiding spot. Hannah meant well, and she's probably right. Knowing my luck and Mom's track record with guys, I'm going to need the reminder.

one

OCTOBER, SENIOR YEAR

Rule number one for surviving my mother's love life? Always keep your eyes on the horizon. That's why instead of putting my things away in my new bedroom, I'm alternating between writing an English essay that's not due for two weeks and obsessively refreshing the admission status page on KU's website. Good grades and a college two and a half hours away from here. That's what's on my horizon right now.

"Amber," a voice says, and I look up to see my mom standing in the doorway. She raises an eyebrow and looks from me to Buffy, my German shepherd, who is stretched out next to me on the bed.

"What?"

"You know what."

I sigh. Kevin, Mom's new boyfriend and the owner of this house and this bed, is not a pet person. He doesn't want Buffy on the furniture. Mom had to know I'd break this rule, but I don't think she expected me to do it on the first day. "Buffy, off."

Buffy shoots me a hurt look and slinks off the bed.

"Thank you," Mom says, her gaze flickering between me and Buffy and all the unopened boxes of my things. "Are you taking a break?"

"Uh, yeah." I dig my toes under the pillows at the head of

the bed and nod at my laptop. “Had to do some homework. I put all my clothes away, though.” I don’t mention that other than that and Buffy’s food and water bowls, I haven’t touched a thing.

Mom looks at the closet, her expression dubious. “What about your pictures and posters? Your books?”

I shrug. “I’m still trying to figure out where they should go.”

Lie. I just don’t see the point in unpacking when I’ll be leaving for college in ten months. Ten months really isn’t that long, and considering Mom’s track record with guys, we’ll probably be out of here before then anyway. The longest she’s ever been with someone was five years, and she hasn’t come close to that record in a while.

“Well,” Mom says slowly. “Okay. You can get your stuff put away on your own time. I won’t rush you.” Then she smiles and looks around the room, like the beige walls and puke-green curtains are the greatest thing she’s ever seen. “But isn’t this room nice, Amber? A king-sized bed and your own bathroom. Pretty cool, huh?”

It is nice, if you like that hotel room vibe. Which I don’t. “I still don’t see why I couldn’t keep my bed.”

“Because this one’s bigger,” she says, like that explains everything.

“I guess.” It may be bigger, but it isn’t *mine*.

Mom sighs, clearly frustrated that I’m not willing to buy into her enthusiasm. “Are you hungry? Kevin and I thought we could go to New Market to try that new salad place.”

Ugh. The last thing I want to do is go to dinner with Mom and Kevin. All they’ll want to talk about is where to put Mom’s furniture, and whether all her baking pans are going to fit in the

kitchen cabinets, and how life is going to be snowflakes and rainbows from now on. I doubt I'd be able to keep a straight face. Or keep myself from asking Kevin if he's aware that he's the sixth guy my mother has called The One.

"No thanks," I say, pushing myself upright. "I'm gonna take Buffy for a walk."

Mom starts to protest, but I've said the magic word: *walk*. Buffy's tags jingle as she pads over to the door. She looks back at me over her shoulder and wuffs softly, and I get up to grab a sweatshirt and shoes.

"Okay," Mom says, her mouth a thin line again. "I'll go back down with you."

Downstairs, I hear Kevin in the kitchen. "Just have him put wax on the end to get him through the night," he's saying, "and then we'll get that wire snipped first thing in the morning. Yup, come on in at eight. Uh-huh. No, I don't think so . . ."

Kevin is an orthodontist—he and Mom met when she decided to get Invisalign after her last breakup—and it seems like there is always some kind of crisis happening with one of his patients. This morning he got a call from a middle school girl in hysterics because her rubber band colors didn't match the dress she bought for her school dance tonight. He spent twenty minutes on the phone consoling her, and then left me and my mom to finish loading the U-Haul so he could go help the kid. Luckily we only had small-ish boxes left at that point, but it still sucked.

"Well is it really digging into his cheek?" Kevin says now, as I bypass the kitchen and head for the front door. "I think the wax will work, but if you want, I could—"

Bingo. Looks like I had the right idea about taking a walk

now instead of later. Something tells me Mom and Kevin's dinner is going to get pushed back awhile.

Buffy sits patiently while I clip on her leash. When that's done, I turn back to see Mom standing in the middle of the living room with her arms crossed tightly over her chest.

"I'll see you guys later, I guess," I say.

She nods. Opens her mouth like she wants to say something, then closes it. I wait a beat, to see if maybe she'll try again. But she doesn't. So I open the front door and go.



The air is crisp, cold for October, and the sky is already getting dark as Buffy and I set off down our new street. Buffy's ears are pricked forward and she's checking everything out, but I stop paying attention to where I'm going as soon as my feet hit the pavement. I know this neighborhood well, weirdly enough. My best friend, Hannah, and I drove through here all the time when we first got our licenses sophomore year. She had a huge crush on Will Hoefling, this senior who lived here, and seeing his car, in his driveway or elsewhere in the neighborhood, always gave her the ultimate thrill.

Those drives helped me learn pretty much all the twists and turns of this place, which I guess is a good thing since I live here now. Even after Hannah got over Will we still came through here every once in a while to check out our favorite houses, which were usually so big or so ridiculous that we couldn't imagine actual people living in them. Our absolute favorite, for both the bigness and the ridiculousness, was The Castle.

The Castle is just like how it sounds, complete with turrets and a tower and a porte-cochère over the driveway, with an iron gate that drops down to close it. It looks too big to be allowed. Like it was scooped up from some fairy-tale world and dumped here on a lot so tiny it doesn't even have a front yard. I didn't know this until a few weeks ago, when Mom was giving me the hard sell about us moving in with Kevin, but the other guy in Kevin's practice lives there. She said that they "do dinner" a lot and that we would probably be invited. The prospect is a little disturbing. I can't help wondering if I'll have to put on a big, poufy dress and a wig like old British royalty in order to be let inside.

I don't realize I'm heading toward The Castle until I'm turning onto the street. It's automatic, I guess, a route so worn into my brain that I don't even have to think about it. I stare at it as Buffy and I come around the bend and walk slowly around the cul-de-sac, wondering how much schmoozing I'm going to have to do in there before Kevin gets dumped.

Suddenly I notice a sound, different from the rest of the night sounds. Someone's dribbling a basketball. There's a pattern to it: three dribbles, then the swishing of the net. Like how my dad taught me to shoot free throws when I was little and he was still around. I look over my shoulder, trying to figure out where the dribbling is coming from, but before I can pinpoint it the pattern is interrupted. Instead of the swish I'm expecting there's a loud *bang*, and then a guy's voice is yelling, "Watch out!"

I duck on instinct and there's a whooshing sound as something large flies over the top of my head. A second later there's a rubbery *thwack* as that something—the basketball, I

assume—lands somewhere very close behind me and rolls off down the street.

“You okay?” that same voice asks as I straighten back up. “That was a close one.”

“I’m good,” I say, but it comes out strangled because I can see him now, standing at the end of the driveway to the left of The Castle, lit up from behind by the motion light hanging over the garage. And I know who he is. Jordan Baugh. I can’t believe I didn’t notice him before.

“You sure?” Jordan says, taking a step closer.

“Yup,” I say, nodding furiously and backing away. I jerk my thumb over my shoulder and say, “I’m just gonna go get your—ball.”

Oh my God, I am an idiot.

“Oh, it’s okay,” he says, and to his credit he doesn’t laugh at my weird stumbling over the word *ball*. “I can get it, just let me—”

But I don’t let him finish. I drop Buffy’s leash, say, “Chill,” and turn and run off down the street.

It takes me a while to find the ball where it’s gotten wedged under a neighbor’s car, so when I finally make it back to the end of Jordan’s driveway I’m half expecting him to have given up and gone back inside. He’s still there, though, standing next to Buffy, who hasn’t moved since I left except to lie down on top of her leash. She’s staring up at him and he’s looking back. As I watch he smiles down at her and says, “Aren’t you a good dog?” and it’s almost too adorable for me to handle.

God, forget that I can’t believe I didn’t notice him when I started down the street—I can’t believe I didn’t know he lives in

this *neighborhood*. That seems like something I should have known, at least through Hannah, who views it as her life's mission to keep track of the permanent residences of the hot boys at our school.

And Jordan *is* hot. He's one of those guys I've always noticed. He's got this sort of effortlessly cool thing going on—blond hair that can't decide if it wants to fall over his forehead or stick up all over the place, these light icy-blue eyes, and a pretty amazing set of biceps thanks to his tenure as the star shooting guard on the basketball team. I haven't seen him shirtless since he volunteered for the dunk tank during Spirit Week freshman year, but if his arms are any indication of what he's got going on under there, I wouldn't mind getting a chance to look again.

But wow, that is not what I need to be thinking about right now. Not if I want to act semi-human when I'm face-to-face with him again. So I take a deep breath and steel myself as I walk back over to him, basketball held out in front of me. He takes it and tips his head to the side, watching me now instead of Buffy. "Thanks. Did you just tell your dog to chill?"

"Um, yeah," I manage.

"Nice." It comes out like *Nice*. Like he's actually impressed.

"Thanks."

"Sure." He smiles at me and it's all too much.

I give myself a shake and bend to pick up Buffy's leash. When I straighten up, I clear my throat. "I'd better go. Sorry for interrupting you."

He shakes his head. "You're fine. I missed the shot, remember?"

“Right,” I say, taking a step back. “I’ll let you get back to it.”

“Sure,” he says, his smile fading a little. In . . . disappointment? That can’t be right. He doesn’t even really know me. “See you around, Amber.”

“See you,” I say, turning to leave. Buffy hesitates for a second before falling into step beside me.

I can feel him watching me as I walk away, and when I glance back after a few houses, he gives me a little wave. Heat rushes to my face as I wave back, then give a gentle tug on Buffy’s leash so we can pick up the pace. Still, I can’t help smiling to myself as we reach the end of the street and turn back toward Kevin’s house. This move may be a total disaster, but maybe, if I’m lucky, my new neighbor could be a silver lining.

two

The next morning I have to open at work, which for me is The Pet Shop in New Market. I've loved it since the day I found Buffy tied up to a tree outside, and I've been working there since I turned sixteen, so over two years now. I do a little bit of everything, but since my eighteenth birthday in September the biggest part of my shifts has been teaching dog obedience classes. Normally Sundays are pretty busy for me, but this is an off week, so this morning I just have a couple of private lessons. The first is an hour-long class with a college girl named Mia and her lab-mix puppy Ringo. Ringo is sweet, but he jumps like he's spring-loaded, and Mia is totally afraid to tell him no.

"Okay, Mia," I say, smiling at her as she comes into the glassed-off training area. "Ready to get some work done?"

She gives me a nervous smile, nods, and unclips Ringo's leash. He makes a beeline for me, his awkward baby legs moving at warp speed as he runs across the floor. He gets one half jump in before I say, "Ringo, *off*," turning my body to the side and stepping back so he can't make contact with my legs. And, miracle of miracles, he doesn't try jumping again. He just comes over to my feet and waits patiently until I give him a click and bend down to scratch his head.

“How do you get him to do that?” Mia wails.

“It’s all about the body language and the tone,” I tell her as I straighten up.

Ringo trots back over to her and starts jumping up on her legs. He gets high enough to lick her face. Mia shoves him away with a mumbled “No,” and I shake my head. Blushing, she stops and takes a deep breath.

“Show me that sidestep thing again,” she says, squaring her shoulders.

By the end of the session, we’ve made some good progress. Mia’s “off” command is much more powerful, and she’s getting better at using her clicker and bending down to pet Ringo so he won’t want to jump up and lick her face. Since I have a break before my next lesson, I walk up front with them when we’re done.

“You’re doing great,” I tell her, grinning, as we stop by the exit and I bend down to scratch Ringo’s head one last time.

“You really think so?” she asks, her tone eager.

“Really. You guys make a great team.”

She beams at me. “Thanks, Amber. Same time next week?”

I nod. “Yep. I betcha you’ll be even better by then.”

“We’ll try,” she says, and then she wraps Ringo’s leash tightly around her wrist and goes. Ringo makes it about three steps before he starts pulling so hard he could probably move a dog sled all by himself. I bring a hand up to cover my smile. We’ll definitely have to work on leash manners next.

On my way back to the lesson area, I pass by Stephanie, my boss, who’s out training a new cashier on register one.

“Any word yet?” she asks.

She means about KU. Stephanie is the one who told me about the behavioral science program I want to do there. She's been asking me if I've heard back every shift for the past two weeks, which is how long it's been since I applied. I shake my head. "Not yet. Rolling admissions don't roll as fast as I want, I guess."

"They never do," she says, laughing. "You keep me posted. And bring that dog of yours in soon, okay?"

Stephanie has always had a soft spot for Buffy and spoils her rotten whenever I bring her in. "Okay."

My last lesson ends at one, and my stomach is grumbling by the time I clock out and hang up my vest in the back room. I consider going back to Kevin's for lunch, but quickly squash that idea. I'm pretty sure he mentioned something about tofurkey sandwiches when I left the house this morning, and I have zero desire to find out if that was just a conversation topic or if it's something I'd actually be expected to eat. So instead of heading back to the house and a questionable lunch option, I walk across the parking lot to the sandwich place where Hannah works. She's on the clock today, which means I can probably get a smoothie for free.

There's still a decent-sized line when I walk in, but I spot Hannah right away, working behind the register closest to the door. I give a little wave and she grins when she notices me.

"How were the puppies?" she asks when I come up to her register a few minutes later, already ringing up my regular order. "Any cute ones?"

"Ringo," I tell her, handing over my debit card. "And Kitty." These two are Hannah's most recent favorites.

“Kitty. I can’t even,” she says, shaking her head and handing me back my card. She thinks it’s hilarious that I train a dog named Kitty, even though I keep telling her this one was named after the dog on the *Titanic*. “Get a booth if you can. I’m due for my break once this rush dies down.”

“You got it.” I grab a water cup off the counter and step aside so that she can wave the next customer forward.

A little while later Hannah comes out to join me, food and smoothies for both of us in hand. “Thanks,” I say, taking mine from her and immediately digging in to my sandwich.

“Of course,” she says, sliding in across from me. The restaurant is a lot quieter now, and the line that was snaking to the door when I got here is now completely gone. “Ugh, my feet are killing me.”

“Busy morning?”

She nods, reaching for her spoon and taking a bite of soup. “Totally wild. The post-church crowd always is though.”

“Amen,” I say, and we both laugh.

Then Hannah’s grin fades and she levels me with an expectant look. “So. How’d it go yesterday?”

And there it is. I’m surprised it took her this long to bring it up.

“Fine.” I reach for my sandwich again. “My room’s pretty big, and it’s on the opposite side of the house from Cammie’s, so that’s a bonus.”

“That’s good,” Hannah says, still watching me carefully. She knows how much I’ve been dreading this weekend, and even though we got into a fight over me not wanting her to help with

the move, she still wants to make sure I'm okay about it. Hannah has a big heart. It's one of the many reasons I've kept her around so long. "Was she there at all? Cammie, I mean."

I shake my head. "It was supposed to be her weekend with Kevin too. At least that's what Mom said."

"Awkward," Hannah says.

"Tell me about it."

Honestly, Cammie is the part of this whole move that's been stressing me out the most. Kevin is the fifth guy since my dad that we've lived with, the third who has kids of his own. But he's the first person my mom has dated who has a kid that goes to my school, and when you add in the fact that Cammie and I are only a year apart and that her parents' divorce was Big News last year, awkward doesn't even begin to describe it.

"Well," Hannah says, because there's really nothing else to say about this whole situation that we haven't covered ad nauseam in the last few weeks. "Is the unpacking going okay at least?"

I think of the maze of boxes I had to navigate this morning when I was trying to find my work clothes, and of the judgmental look Buffy gave me when I tripped over a stack of books on my way to get her more water from the bathroom. No way am I telling Hannah this though. It'd make her worry more, and she already does enough of that where I'm concerned. "Yeah. I mean, it's slow. But it's coming along."

"Good," she says, smiling now. "You know I'm always game to help if you need it, right?"

This last part comes out a little uncertain, and I get this prickle of guilt that she's still so clearly worried about our fight.

“I know you are. It’s just, you know the rules, Han, and you know why they matter more than ever now. I don’t want to mess with the status quo this early in the game.”

She nods, her smile fading a little even as a grim sort of understanding settles over her face. “Of course,” she says quickly. “I get it.”

Desperate for a change of subject, I reach for my smoothie, take a long drink, and then say the first thing that pops into my head. “Did you know Jordan Baugh lives in Harper Ridge?”

“What!” Hannah sits up straighter in her seat. “How did I not know this? How do *you* know this?”

“I saw him while I was walking Buffy last night,” I admit. “His house is next door to The Castle.”

“No shit?” she says, her expression gleeful. “Maybe he can be, like, your escape plan if things get too weird at home. You can walk Buffy over to his house all the time.”

“I think you’re getting a little ahead of yourself, Han. I don’t even really know him.”

“Yeah, but you’ve always wanted to *get* to know him.” She waggles her eyebrows at me. “So this new proximity can be your in.”

I shake my head at her, but I’m fighting a smile now. And I can’t help picturing Jordan how I saw him last night, lit up from behind, his expression earnest as he watched me leave. “Maybe.”

“You should invite him to my Halloween party,” she says.

Every Halloween Hannah has a *Buffy* viewing party at her house, where we eat tons of junk food, watch all of the Halloween episodes of *Buffy*, and generally have a fabulous time. Usually it’s only me, Hannah, and our friend Ryan and whatever girl he’s

dating, but this year Hannah invited Elliot, a guy from her physics class that she likes. I don't mind being the fifth wheel to the two of them plus Ryan and whoever he brings, but it could be nice to have someone there for me. "Hmm. I'll think about it."

"Deal," Hannah says, looking pleased with herself. "You know what else you need to think about? When we're going to Lawrence to visit my brother. He was texting me yesterday asking about it."

Just like that the warm, fizzy feeling I got from thinking about Jordan Baugh is gone. Hannah's brother Matt is a sophomore at KU, and he and his best friend from the dorms have an apartment off campus. Hannah made a few day trips to Lawrence last year with her parents, but now that Matt has his own place with a roommate their parents trust, the Spencers are cool with letting her make a trip by herself. She's been dying for me to come with, and I so wish I could make it happen. I'm not optimistic though. My mom is pretty anti-KU, especially since we filled out the FAFSA last week and found out I might not qualify for any Pell Grants. She wants me to stay in town for school and live at home so I can avoid taking out loans, but I want to go away and live on my own no matter how much debt it puts me in. Eyes on the horizon and all that.

"I haven't talked to my mom about it yet," I say, fiddling with the crouton on the table. "With the move and everything . . ."

"I get it," Hannah says quickly, but she can't totally mask the disappointment in her voice, and that disappointment makes me feel so guilty.

"I'll ask her soon. I promise."

"Okay," Hannah says, though I can tell by the look on her

face that she doesn't quite believe me. She looks like she wants to say something else, but then she glances over my shoulder and winces. "Shit. There's a line again and Vince is giving me the evil eye."

"But you haven't even finished your food," I say, looking down at her mostly untouched plate. We've been too busy talking to really eat much.

"I'll stick it in the fridge in the break room," she says, getting to her feet. "See you in the commons in the morning?"

"Yeah," I say, nodding.

"Cool," she says, grabbing her plate. "Tell your mom hi for me, okay? And seriously, Amber, ask her about our trip. She might surprise you."

"I will. Now go before you get in trouble." I shoo her away.

She grins and starts toward the kitchen, but before she disappears behind the counter she calls, "Be nice to Kevin!" over her shoulder at me.

I smile in spite of myself and shake my head at her retreating form. Typical Hannah. I thought we'd be able to get through a hangout without her reminding me to be a good person, but no. Of course we can't. Yet another reason why I've kept her around so long.

three

When I get back to the house, Mom and Kevin are in the process of organizing Mom's baking gear. She has so much that it won't all fit in the kitchen, so Kevin bought her some new shelves for the dining room to display all her nice pieces and fit all her extra gadgets. He's been in there trying to put them together since before I left for work, and judging by the muttered curse words I hear coming from there the second I walk in the door, I'd say it's safe to assume things are not going well. He might be skilled at aligning jaws and closing tooth gaps and all the other orthodontic things he does, but assembling furniture is clearly not Kevin's forte.

They're so distracted by the project that I manage to slip past them mostly unnoticed, with only vague hellos as I move to let Buffy out in the backyard. We stay outside for a few minutes and then I take her up to my room to finally start on the weekend reading for English class. We're in the middle of *Beowulf*, which I am so not enjoying, but it'll be a good distraction from the maze of boxes that is currently surrounding my bed.

I've been reading for maybe half an hour when I hear footsteps on the stairs. I close my copy of *Beowulf* around my finger to mark my place and sit up on the bed just in time for Mom to

poke her head in the doorway. Buffy is stretched out in my closet today instead of on the bed next to me, and the second my mom appears her tail starts thumping on the carpet.

“What’s up?” I ask, as a faint *Ouch!* echoes from downstairs.

“I, ah, couldn’t stop laughing at the situation downstairs,” Mom admits, which makes me snort in surprise, “so I decided it was time for me to take a break.”

We grin at each other for a second, and I wonder if I should ask her about Lawrence now, while she’s in a good mood. Maybe she’ll be more likely to say yes. But she clears her throat and speaks up again before I can get the words out.

“I also wanted to make sure you’ll be here for dinner tonight.”

I go still. “I was planning on it,” I say slowly. “Why?”

“That’s good. Cammie’s coming over,” Mom says. “We’d like for you to be here too.”

Of course they would. I wish I would’ve said I was going to Hannah’s, but it’s too late now. I can tell by Mom’s tone that this is not something I can get out of. So I nod. “I’ll be here.” And then, because it can’t hurt to ask for reinforcements, I say, “Can I invite Hannah?”

Mom shakes her head. “No. Tonight will be the four of us. Family.”

She doesn’t even stumble over that last word, though I can tell by the way she averts her eyes that she knew I wouldn’t like it and decided to use it anyway. Mom always wants to pretend like her boyfriends and their kids are our family. She doesn’t seem to get that family means permanence. That you can’t just go out and get new members when you get tired of the ones you have.

“Family. Right,” I say. She flinches, which is satisfying. I hold up my book. “I need to finish this. What time is dinner?”

“We’ll plan on eating at six,” she says, studying me.

“Okay. I’ll be ready.”

“Thank you,” she says, taking a step back into the hall. “I love you.”

I don’t say anything back.

Once I hear Mom’s footsteps on the stairs, I pat my hand on the bed and softly call, “Buffy.” Buffy, never one to turn down an invitation to get on people beds, comes right up next to me and curls into my side. She gently rests her head on my ankles and lets out one of her deep sighs, and I’m more glad than ever that I have her. At least when this thing with Mom and Kevin is all over, she’ll still be here. Just like she was last time.



“Oh my God,” Cammie says as soon as the door closes behind her a few hours later. “What is *that*?” I’m in the still-cluttered dining room setting the table, so I can’t see her face, but it doesn’t matter. Her tone tells me pretty much everything I need to know. So that’s why Kevin was so weird about having Buffy here.

“That’s Buffy,” Kevin says. His voice is very soothing, the way I imagine he talks to particularly freaked-out patients.

“Buffy?” Cammie echoes.

I bristle at the sarcasm in her voice. She either doesn’t know where the name comes from or she has bad taste in TV shows. I can’t decide which is worse.

“Buffy,” Kevin repeats. “She’s Amber’s dog. Very well trained.”

“Speaking of Amber,” my mother says. “Amber, honey, can you come in here, please?”

I sigh and dump the last of the silverware on the table, then go into the kitchen. Mom’s at the stove, stirring something that smells like onions in a skillet, and Kevin is hovering halfway between the island and the door to the garage, where Cammie is watching Buffy warily. Buffy’s a polite three paces back from her in a very nice sit, and she looks at me as I come into the room. Cammie follows her gaze and narrows her eyes at me.

“Can you get it away?” she asks, with her hands down at her sides like she’s two seconds away from making a shooing motion.

I think about saying no to spite her for calling Buffy an *it*, but I don’t want to make Buffy seem mean or bad. Plus my mom and Kevin are looking at me expectantly, clearly waiting for me to take care of this. So I sigh again and pat my thighs. “Buffy, here.” With one last glance at Cammie, Buffy gets up and trots over to my side.

Cammie doesn’t even say thank you. She just stalks past me and into the dining room, where she sits down with her back to me. I frown and open my mouth to say something, but Mom clears her throat. I glance over at her and she shakes her head at me, eyes narrowed. So I snap my mouth closed again and say, “Buffy, come on. Let’s go.” After one last sniff in Cammie’s direction, Buffy follows me out of the room.

I take Buffy up to my room and tell her to hang out there. She gives me a wounded look but stays when I leave, curling into a ball inside the doorway and watching as I head back toward the stairs. I wish I could stay up here with her, but I know that’s not

an option for me. Mom would be all over my shit if I did that, would accuse me of being antisocial and rude. Which would be true, but it would probably be better than me being rude in person downstairs.

The food's ready by the time I get back to the kitchen, and I help Mom and Kevin move the serving dishes over to the dining room table so we can eat. The shelves are assembled now but not all of Mom's stuff is put away, so things are cramped and awkward as we try to get everything ready. Cammie doesn't offer to help; she actually doesn't say anything at all. She stays in her chair, messing with her phone, until the three of us sit down with her.

"Cammie," Mom says, smiling at her and holding out the bowl of black beans, "would you like some beans?"

"No."

Mom's smile falters. "Oh, okay."

"I'll have some, Mom," I say, and she shoots me a grateful smile and passes me the bowl.

For the next few minutes, we don't say much. There's just the clinking of plates and cleared throats and quiet muttering to pass this or that. Mom looks like she wants to say something else but doesn't know what, so she's compensating by smiling so wide I can see all her teeth. Kevin's really focused on his plate, probably because Mom accidentally made his gluten free enchilada recipe with flour tortillas. I eat a lot of chips and guac, because the enchiladas are burned on the edges (a sure sign Mom is nervous, because she never burns things) and I don't like the sauce anyway. And Cammie watches my mother and me like we are aliens who have crash-landed in her life, which I guess in a way is true.

In the past, I've usually been the one eyeballing people like that at dinner, as Mom's boyfriends and their families sat at our kitchen table and fed us their own bad food. It's weird to be on the other side of things. I like it even less than I thought I would.

"So, Amber," Kevin says, shooting a hopeful smile across the table at me once the silence has stretched beyond awkward and into uncomfortable territory. "I noticed Buffy has a KU collar. Does that mean that's where you want to go to school next year?"

"Um . . . yeah." I glance at my mom in time to see the corners of her mouth tighten in disapproval. But Kevin starts talking again before she can change the subject.

"I'm a Jayhawk, did you know that?" he asks. I shake my head and he nods. "Undergrad. Class of '93."

"Oh. That's nice." I don't know what else to say except *I don't care*. Which of course I *can't* say, because that would go over about as well as the enchiladas.

"It is," he says, and he sounds like he really means it. Weird. "That's where Cam is planning to go for school too. Right, kiddo?"

Cammie gives him a dirty look across the table. "I guess." Then she turns to my mother. "Did you know these enchiladas are burned?"

We don't talk at all after that.

Finally, finally, we finish eating, and I start clearing plates off the table without any prompting from my mother, just to have something to do. I'm coming back to grab more when I hear Cammie say, "I'm gonna go."

Kevin's chair is facing me so I see his face as it falls. "But, sweetheart," he says, "we talked about this."

Cammie pushes her chair away from the table and gets up. Her added height is not very impressive since she's so tiny, but the way she's avoiding her dad's gaze is. "I changed my mind," she says. "I'm going back to Mom's."

She leaves without another word to any of us, slamming the door to the garage loudly as she goes.

I finish clearing off the table and start on the dishes, trying to ignore the tension in my mother's face and the hurt flashing across Kevin's. Rule number eight is to stay out of any drama with the boyfriend or his family, no matter how tempting it might be to get involved. So even though I wonder what Kevin and Cammie talked about, and why Cammie said she was going back to her mom's instead of going home, I don't let myself dwell on it.

When I'm done cleaning up I go up to my room and get Buffy. I tell Mom and Kevin that I'm going for a walk, but they're deep in conversation in the living room and I'm not sure they even hear me. So I scribble a note on the whiteboard Kevin keeps on the fridge and then head out into the night.

four

This time, I head toward The Castle on purpose. I haven't stopped thinking about what Hannah said earlier today about inviting Jordan to her Halloween party, and thinking about him is way more fun than replaying dinner on an excruciating loop in my head. So I lead Buffy in the direction of his house and tell myself that if he's outside, I'll at least talk to him again.

The walk goes by a lot faster tonight. It feels like one second I'm reaching the end of Kevin's cul-de-sac and the next I'm turning down Jordan's. This street is longer and curves around on itself, so Jordan's house and The Castle aren't visible from the main road. I don't hear any dribbling, but that doesn't totally kill the rush of anticipation I get as Buffy and I come around the bend. Anticipation turns to disappointment about a second later though, because his house is dark and quiet, and there's a little blue Honda parked right under the basketball hoop.

Well. At least walking here was a good distraction in and of itself. Hopefully Mom and Kevin will have gone to bed by the time Buffy and I get back.

I debate turning around and calling it a night, but Buffy gives me a look when I slow my pace. She will clearly be miffed if she

doesn't get a chance to sniff every single house on this block again. So we keep moving, a little slower this time. And even though I tell myself not to, I sneak glances at Jordan's house as we go.

I check out the car, too. It's not Jordan's—his Jeep is parked on the curb next to the mailbox—but I'm pretty sure I've seen it at school before. There's a sticker in the corner of the back windshield that looks vaguely familiar, and I squint at it in the semi-darkness as Buffy and I go, trying to make out what it says.

It isn't until Buffy and I are level with Jordan's driveway on his side of the street that I can see the main part of the sticker—a falcon, our school's mascot. A lot of the student athletes have the same sticker on their cars, so I'd guess this belongs to one of Jordan's friends from basketball or the dance team. I can't read the name and sport on the sticker, though, and without really thinking about it I take a step closer to the car. The motion light over the garage clicks on when I do, and I snap my gaze to Jordan's front door, worried someone will come out and catch me here creeping.

But the night is still quiet, and after a beat I realize no one is coming. So I blow out a breath, reach down to scratch Buffy's head, and look at the car again. It's bright enough now that I can finally make out the full sticker, but it takes me a second to process what I'm seeing.

Harper High Falcons CHEER, it says, in an arc above the mascot. And below, one word that makes me go absolutely still.

Henning.

There's only one person at our school with the last name Henning, and I just saw her about twenty minutes ago. Cammie.

Apparently she didn't go straight back to her mom's place. She came here. Which makes no sense to me, because I had no idea she and Jordan were even friends. They don't hang out at school. I would have noticed if they did, because as soon as Mom told me she was dating Kevin Henning, I did some covert recon on his daughter to figure out who I needed to avoid at school to keep the awkwardness and life overlapping to a minimum. Jordan was definitely not on that list. He and his friends hang out with the senior dance team girls, not the junior cheerleaders. And when Cammie's not with her cheerleader friends, she hangs out with show choir people, not basketball players.

But this is her car. No question about it. And the fact that she's here after that disaster of a dinner means he's important to her in some way. Which means he is officially off-limits to me. Rule number seven for surviving my mother's love life? Don't get involved with guys who are connected to my mom's boyfriends or their families. Even if said guys are mega-hot, like Jordan Baugh. I learned that lesson the hard way my freshman year and I have zero plans to go through anything like that again. So I tear my gaze away from Cammie's car and walk away from Jordan's house without looking back.



The next morning I text Hannah from the parking lot asking her to meet me at my locker instead of the commons, where we usually get a table and hang out with Ryan before the first bell rings. She's already waiting for me by the time I get there, and makes herself comfortable leaning against the locker next to mine while I switch out my books and binders for first period.

“Hey,” she says. “How’d dinner go yesterday?”

Dinner. Right. I forgot that I texted her about my impending “family” dinner yesterday after Mom dropped that bomb on me.

“It was okay.” I slam my locker closed and start off down the hallway in the opposite direction of the commons. “I mean, super freaking awkward, but not, like, worse than I expected, so at least there’s that.”

“Hear, hear,” Hannah says, taking a step after me. But then she frowns. “Wait, where are you going?”

Shit. I was hoping Hannah would go with it and follow me in the direction of my first period class, which just so happens to be in the opposite direction of the commons. The commons I’d like to avoid, since Jordan and Cammie and their respective friends usually hang out there before school too. I take a second to school my features into what I hope is an innocent expression before turning back to face her. “I, uh, figured since I’m running so behind I might as well go put my stuff down now.”

Hannah frowns. “But I haven’t gotten any caffeine yet. And also we still have fifteen minutes before the warning bell.”

“Oh,” I say, shifting from one foot to the other. “Right.”

Hannah narrows her eyes at me in suspicion. “I know what you’re doing.”

“I’m not doing anything!” I blurt, so panicked-sounding that it is basically an admission of guilt.

“Yes you are,” Hannah says, reaching forward and tugging me back in the direction of the commons. “You’re totally trying to avoid seeing Cammie after all the weirdness at dinner last night.”

“I mean, can you blame me?” I ask, wriggling out of her grip. “Besides, you know the rules.”

“I do know them, but you can’t let them keep you from living your life at school. We’ve talked about this.”

“I haven’t forgotten,” I mutter, because she’s right. We have talked about this, many times, mostly because Hannah thought my Cammie recon when Mom and Kevin first started dating was a little much. Apparently not, though. Because if I’d been thorough, I would’ve figured out Cammie’s connection to Jordan and known not to talk to him when I saw him Saturday night.

“Great!” Hannah says, clearly choosing to ignore the snark in my tone. “Then let’s go.”

I do a quick scan of the commons when we finally get there, and breathe a sigh of relief when I don’t see Jordan or Cammie anywhere. We find Ryan at a table near the edge of the room, reading a graphic novel and eating a giant bag of Peanut Butter M&M’s. While Hannah fishes quarters out of her pocket and heads to get in line for the vending machines, I plunk myself into the chair opposite him and reach for the chocolate.

“That’s my breakfast,” he says, not bothering to look up from his book.

“There are like twenty servings in this bag,” I say, grabbing a handful and sliding the goods back across the table to him. “I think you’ll be okay without one or two of them.”

He sighs, but I can tell by the smile tugging at the corners of his mouth that he’s not really mad. That isn’t surprising though, since Ryan is probably the most laid-back person I know.

“Rough weekend?” he asks, looking up from his book now. Ryan has a huge blended family and all the drama that comes

along with one, so a lot of the time he gets how I feel about my home life even better than Hannah does. I haven't talked to him about it too much, but I know he knows I've been dreading the move this weekend.

I shrug. "About what I expected."

"Yeah," he says, studying me carefully. "Still sucks though."

"It does," I agree, and when he nudges the bag of candy closer to me, I gladly take another handful.

We're munching on M&M's and Ryan is telling me about his graphic novel when Hannah comes back from the vending machines.

"You guys," she says, slapping her granola bar onto the table and sliding into the chair next to me. "I saw Bailey Whittaker in line for my drink and I finally got her to switch with me so Elliot and I can be lab partners this quarter!"

"No shit?" Ryan says, widening his eyes as he looks at her. I'm just as surprised. Hannah's been trying to persuade Bailey to switch with her since the beginning of the year, when her monster crush on Elliot started.

"What'd you have to do?" I ask, because there's no way Bailey agreed to this without any incentive.

Hannah fidgets in her seat for a second, and then she sighs. "I had to pay her twenty bucks and take notes for her for the rest of the semester." Ryan and I both crack up laughing, and she quickly adds, "But it was worth it! He still barely speaks to me but we've been making progress. I mean, he does at least use full sentences every time we talk now. So I figure getting to work on lab stuff together will help with the conversation part, right?"

"Oh, definitely," Ryan says, coughing a little.

“It totally will. And he did agree to come to your house on Halloween,” I add, taking a deep breath and holding it for a second to stop myself from laughing. Elliot is almost painfully shy and Hannah is most definitely not, so watching this whole thing between them unfold has been pretty entertaining. “That’s still happening, right?”

“Duh,” she says, sticking her tongue out at me. Her gaze catches on something over my shoulder, and her expression goes sly. “And *speaking* of my Halloween party, your hot new neighbor just got here. In case you were still thinking about inviting him.”

I absolutely should not look, but I do it anyway. Sure enough, Jordan is now standing at a table of his friends in the center of the room, grinning at something one of them said. He’s still grinning when he looks my way, and when he catches me watching him, his smile widens. Sucking in a breath, I whip back around in my seat, way too aware of the heat rushing to my face.

“What neighbor?” Ryan asks, looking between us.

“Jordan Baugh,” Hannah says. “He lives in Harper Ridge, apparently. And he is totally checking you out right now, Amber. You should go talk to him.”

I resist the urge to look back at Jordan and shake my head instead. “I’m good. And I’m not gonna invite him to your party, Han. The neighbor thing, it could get weird, you know? For the rules.”

Hannah pulls her head back and furrows her brow in confusion. “I’m sorry, what happened between yesterday and today that made you change your mind?”

“I thought about it more,” I say, gathering up my stuff and

stacking my books neatly in front of me. “And I decided this is for the best.”

Hannah’s mouth flattens into a line. “That is total bullshit and you know it.”

I sigh, because I can tell she’s not going to let this go. So I glance around to make sure no one else is paying attention to our table and say in a low voice, “Look, I found out he’s friends with Cammie, okay? And you know what that means.”

“What?” she asks, her eyes widening. “How do you know that?”

“Her car was at his house last night after dinner. I went over there to see if he was outside again to ask him about—” I cut myself off, take a deep breath, and start again. “Anyway, she was there. So please let this go, okay?”

“Shit,” Hannah says. She chews on her bottom lip for a second and then adds, “What if—”

But Ryan cuts her off with a shake of his head. “You heard her. Let it go, Han.”

I give him a grateful look. I haven’t been friends with Ryan for as long as I’ve been friends with Hannah, but he knows about my rules as well as she does. Or as well as she should, anyway, since she was there the day I wrote them.

“All right,” Hannah says, sighing. The warning bell rings a second later and she gets to her feet, offering me a hand as she does. “Come on. We’d better get to class.”