

TELL ME MORE,
TELL ME MORE

WHAT HAPPENED THAT SUMMER?

HOW WE BEGAN

The Day My Cousin Lost a Pint of Blood During My First Ever Babysitting Shift

It probably wouldn't have happened at all if I hadn't overheard Mom trying to convince Aunt Linda to do a day trip to Collinswood, North Carolina.

I was sitting in the kitchen with my guitar and laptop, trying to follow a tutorial. Even though it was stupidly early in the morning, the lake house was already about a million degrees. We were at the tail end of a heat wave, the sort that heats up the floors and walls, so you wake up feeling like you were very lightly cooked in your sleep, medium-rare style.

"It's not *that* far," Mom said by the refrigerator. "What are we talking, a three-hour round trip?"

"More like four," said Aunt Linda, who was leaning against a counter with folded arms.

"The kids can handle that!"

"Not in this heat. If you're volunteering to take Dylan in your car on the way back, by all means, but he would *not* handle the return trip well without a nap. He can scream like you would not *believe*."

She was talking about my cousin, Dylan. He was two and a half, and, yeah, fair. I hadn't seen one of his tantrums yet; we'd only been at the lake for less than a week, and the last time I'd seen him before this vacation he was still a legitimate infant. But I could remember his older sister, Crista's, toddler-tantrums when she was that age. Five years wasn't long enough to erase the memory of *that* volume.

"What are we going to Collinswood for?" I asked, resting my guitar on my lap. Mom and Aunt Linda turned around in surprise, like they'd forgotten I was there.

Collinswood was where Aunt Linda lived. We'd all met here for the summer, renting side-by-side lake houses, because it was the farthest Aunt Linda was comfortable going for a vacation. She had stage four cancer, and wanted to be within driving distance of her hospital, just in case anything happened. But from the urgency in their voices—or, more accurately, the lack thereof—this didn't seem to be any sort of medical emergency.

Mom waved a hand, then scraped her hair—chestnut brown and slightly wavy, like mine—into a ponytail. “Oh, there’s just some things Linda and Roy wanted to show me. Some new housing developments in the area.”

“You looking for an investment property?” I asked, drumming my fingers on the guitar.

“Maybe. Just looking around, at this stage.”

Well, as *thrilling* as that sounded, I wasn’t sure I especially wanted to spend the whole day traipsing around small-town North Carolina looking at half-built houses. Especially not when it was the first day that wasn’t *oppressively* hot this week. “Is this an opt-out sort of deal?” I asked. “I was going to head to the lake today.”

“Sure, sweetie,” Mom said absently.

“Maybe we should wait for another day to go over,” Aunt Linda said to Mom. “I think the kids were hoping to head to the lake today, too.”

“I could take them?” I asked casually, rewinding the tutorial to listen again from the start. I *just* couldn’t quite get the tempo-change right at the halfway mark. I glanced up to find Aunt Linda and Mom staring at me like I’d sprouted tentacles.

“I forgot you were old enough for responsibility,” Aunt Linda mused. “In my head you’re still twelve for some reason. No offense.”

“None taken.”

“Ollie, are you sure?” Mom asked. “We’d be gone for a while. That’s a big ask.”

“I’m sure,” I said, drumming my fingers on the guitar. “They’re good kids. What’s gonna happen?”

Mom and Aunt Linda glanced at each other, then back at me.

It turned out the kids had a much higher tolerance for finger-pruning than I did. I spent a solid hour playing with them in the water, but when I tried to entice them to get out for lunch, they flat-out refused. I wasn’t totally confident in this whole “discipline” thing, yet, either—like, did I insist, or did I go with a majority rules thing here? I mean, if they weren’t hungry, they weren’t hungry, right?

So, I settled for chilling on the shore, close enough I could keep an eye on them both. The lake was especially busy today—apparently everyone had the same idea we did now the

temperature had dropped from “even the best sunscreen can’t help you now” to “heat stroke is probably avoidable if you stay hydrated.”

My phone buzzed on my towel, and I glanced down for two seconds, literally *two seconds*, to check the message from my friend, Hayley. Then I looked up to see Crista lurching out of the lake toward me, tears streaming down her face and blood streaming down her leg.

Crap.

I jumped to my feet to meet her. “Hey, are you okay? What happened?”

She was sobbing too hard to reply. I took her hand and started leading her back to our things. “Dylan,” I called. “Come here for a sec.”

Okay, okay, there was a lot of blood. *So much blood*. What the hell did you do with this much blood? Mop it up?

Actually, yeah. That sounded right. Mop it up.

I searched the kids’ backpack and emerged with a questionably-hygienic napkin. With no better options, I pressed it against the blood, willing my stomach to stop turning at the sight of the cut.

“It h-h-hurts,” Crista moaned.

“Yeah, I bet it does. You poor thing.” I looked up to check on Dylan, only to see he was still happily frolicking in the shallows where I’d left him.

“Dylan, come out of the water *right now*,” I said, in what was supposed to be a “firm parent” voice. It had a tinge of panic in it, though, and was probably a touch too high-pitched to strike fear into anyone’s heart. I was torn between not wanting to take my eyes off him in case he drowned, and trying to watch what I was doing with Crista. It’s hard to delicately clean approximately twenty pints of blood from a mystery wound without glancing at your hands every now and then.

“No.”

“*Dylan!*” So help me God.

“Wanna play! Wanna swim!”

“Ouch, Ollie,” Crista yelped through her tears, pushing my hand away. “Stop.”

“I have to get the blood off.”

“You’re hurting me.”

“It’s only gonna sting for a second, I promise.”

“You’re not cleaning it right. You can’t clean blood with a *napkin*. It’s going to get sepsis.”

Well, a napkin was all I had. And how the hell did she even know what sepsis was? I ignored her, and turned back to the lake. “*Dylan Thomson, if you don’t come here in the next five seconds . . .*” I didn’t finish the threat, because I didn’t know what an appropriate punishment for someone who wasn’t even three years old was. This was only my third day here, and my first day looking after my cousins without an adult nearby. Usually I’d threaten to grab Aunt Linda or Uncle Roy. But they were two hours away with my parents by now. So here I was, trying to run a dictatorship while my two citizens were staging a coup.

The napkin began to fall apart. It was dark red, and so were my hands, and I was starting to think I might vomit. What the hell had Crista done? Should I take her to a clinic? Would she lose her leg? Should I call Aunt Linda? Or 911?

A shadow fell over us, and out of nowhere, someone was kneeling by my side. “Hey,” the someone said. “Do you need a hand? It doesn’t look like the napkin’s gonna cut it.”

Crista and I glanced up as one. Our Guardian Angel was a guy about my age, with thick dark hair that curled a little at the ends, light brown skin, and a first-aid kit.

I said something that didn’t even slightly resemble English.

“Dad forces me to bring the kit every time I take Kane here,” the guy said, unzipping the bag and fishing through various wipes and bandages. “That’s my little brother. He’s right over there, in the water. This is the first time the kit’s come in handy, though.”

Speaking of firsts, this was the first time I’d ever seen Crista shut up. She was staring at the guy like he’d ridden in on the back of a unicorn. I had a nasty feeling I was looking at him in the same way.

The guy held up a pack of disinfectant wipes. “Is this okay?” he asked.

Was water wet? Was the day hot? Were his freckles perfect? Of course it was okay. Nothing had ever been more okay in all of human history. Someone needed to write a ballad about how okay this was. I needed a picture of this, to submit to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, to substitute in for the definition of “okay.”

I think I managed a faint nod.

“What’s your name?”

He wasn’t asking me, unfortunately.

Crista was totally solemn. “Crista.”

“Isn’t that a pretty name? I’m Will. Crista, is it okay if I clean off your leg? It looks like it must hurt a lot.”

Crista also managed a faint nod.

Will glanced up at me. “If you wanted to go and grab Dylan, I can hold the fort here for a sec.”

Wait, did he know Dylan? Did he know me? Had we always known each other? Suddenly, I remembered how many times I’d screamed Dylan’s name across the shore. Right. That made sense.

“Yeah,” I choked out. “Thank you.”

Then we really looked at each other, and it was like being locked into place. Like I couldn’t have blinked if someone was offering me a winning lottery ticket in exchange. It wasn’t the first time I’d felt like this looking at a guy. But it was maybe the first time a guy had stared at me in the same sort of way.

“Anytime,” he said. And smiled.

There was a good chance Aunt Linda might kill me for leaving Crista alone with a strange teenage boy, but if my other option was to let her two-year-old son potentially drown in the lake, I was between a rock and a hard place here. So, keeping a close eye on Will and Crista, I darted into the shallows, scooped up a fleeing Dylan (who, luckily, couldn’t flee very fast just yet) and carried him kicking and screaming back to them.

Will had finished bandaging Crista’s leg already when I got there. Dylan kept squirming and shrieking in my grip, but I didn’t dare put him down in case he made a beeline for the water again. Which was a fair enough worry, given that he was threatening to do that very thing on a loop.

“I WANNA GO BACK IN I WANNA GO BACK IN I WANNA GO—”

“Your sister’s hurt, Dylan,” I tried to shout over him. “She needs you here. See how she’s got that bandage?”

“—IN I WANNA GO BACK—”

I glanced at Will in a panic. He said he had a brother, right? Maybe he knew how to handle this?

He caught my question and shrugged, grimacing. “Um, maybe try bribery?” he suggested.

“That’s illegal,” Crista said, running a hand over her bandage as though to smooth it.

“Not if you’re over sixteen,” Will said without missing a beat, so confident that Crista accepted it. If I wasn’t in the middle of wrestling an *extraordinarily* heavy toddler, it might have occurred to me to laugh.

“Dylan,” I tried, raising my voice. “If you calm down, we can go home and watch a movie?”

“NO MOVIE!”

“A hot dog?” I asked.

“NO HOT DOG!”

“Dylan,” Crista said, stretching out her leg. “How about some Nutella? Yeah?”

“NO NUTELLA!”

Will cleared his throat. “An hour on the iPad! Whatever you want to do on it!”

Dylan fell silent and turned to look at Will with an expression that could only be described as *I’m listening*.

I turned to him, too, with an expression that was probably a little closer to *want to get married?*

Will grimaced as he realized what he’d said. “That probably wasn’t up to me to offer,” he said to me apologetically. “It’s just our best weapon for Kane, so I figured . . .”

“No, nope, sounds great,” I said. “You wanna go home and play on the iPad, Dyl?”

He nodded brightly. All traces of tears and redness had vanished completely. If only adult problems could be solved that quickly, Apple’s already-criminal profits would triple overnight.

“You’re amazing,” I said to Will, placing Dylan on the ground. I kept his hand in mine, though. I might be a novice at this but I knew *that* much. “Thank you. You’re a lifesaver.”

“No pro—”

“Seriously, that is some God-given talent right there. Want to come and live with us? Because this is apparently not unusual behavior for him, and I did not have that under control.”

“It’s his age.”

“I’m serious. We can adopt you?” Which would make me and this extremely hot guy brothers. *What an excellent, not at all creepy suggestion, Ollie.* “Or their parents could. That’d probably make more sense. That’d make us cousins.”

Why had I thought that was *any* less weird? What was *wrong* with me?

“Oh, I assumed you were all siblings.” Will laughed. “I guess that explains the look of terror.”

“Look of terror?”

“Yeah. Yours.” He proceeded to do a distinctly unflattering impression of me, staring into his empty arms with bulging eyes and gritted teeth.

“Right.” I shrugged weakly. “Yeah, nope, cousins. Our parents are the ones who are siblings. Because that’s what . . . ‘cousins’ means . . .” Even as I said it, I knew it sounded like I’d never spoken to a fellow human in my life, but somehow I couldn’t stop myself. My heart thudded faster and faster, and I just kept *talking*. “I don’t have any brothers or sisters, so the only one who screams the house down is me. I guess if you’re the one throwing a tantrum, it doesn’t bother you so much. Not that I throw tantrums. Not, like, now. I meant when I was a kid. I don’t scream,” I assured him.

“Oh. Glad to hear it.” Will was looking at me with a very particular mixture of astonishment and amusement. I couldn’t blame him. Even I hadn’t heard myself awkwardly spiral this badly before.

And that was my cue to go before I embarrassed myself further. “Thank you again,” I said. “Let me know if you have a change of heart on the adoption thing. And, um, I might try to get one of those kits myself next time. Gotta be prepared, right?”

“That’s what my mom always says.”

“Yeah? My mom always says if you picture a white light surrounding your body before you go to sleep, demons aren’t allowed to possess you in the night.”

Oh, Jesus Christ.

Go, go, GO.

Will laughed out loud at this. Laughing *at me*, I guess.

“Have a good . . . rest of your day, Will,” I said. Crista hopped up and grabbed my other hand, ready to go.

“You, too . . . oh, you didn’t tell me your name, did you?”

I blinked. Didn't I? Hadn't I mentioned it at the start? No, that didn't sound right, because I needed to race to get Dylan, and then when I came back Dylan was screaming and we got distracted with calming him down. I should probably tell him, then. My name. My name, which was . . .

Even Crista was giving me a funny look now. "He's Ollie," she supplied.

I didn't give myself permission to reply, which was probably a good thing, because my brain had drafted "she's not lying" as a not-at-all suspicious response.

Will smiled, tilted his head to the side, and shoved his hands in his pockets. "Alright, then. Have a good day. Ollie."

That One Time the Potential Love of my Life Cornered Me by the Soda Fountain

About a week after the whole Crista-nearly-bleeding-out incident—which prompted Mom and Aunt Linda to give me a crash course in first aid in case I needed it again—we decided as a group one lunchtime to head to a restaurant Aunt Linda had been eyeing since we arrived.

It was one of those places that looks fancier than it is because the location and accompanying view seem like they come straight out of a magazine for the uber rich. The restaurant was built right on the water, with floor-to-ceiling windows covering the water-facing walls, so no matter where you sat you kind of got the impression you were eating lunch smack in the middle of the lake.

This morning, I'd been briefly excited at the thought of having a super-fancy meal, until I'd looked up the menu (to give myself ample time to decide on my order) and saw club sandwiches, nachos, and chicken nuggets. I mean, I liked a solid sandwich as much as the next person, but *really*?

"I *like* chicken nuggets," Crista said when I voiced this observation on the way into the restaurant, which was even fancier than I'd remembered.

"Nuggets?" Dylan asked hopefully.

"See?" I said to the adults, gesturing towards the kids. "It's practically a kid's menu."

"You sure you *weren't* looking at the kid's menu?" Aunt Linda asked, brushing a spot off Uncle Roy's shirt.

"I'm sure. I'm not complaining or anything, just gently suggesting you lower your expectations."

"I don't know about you, but mine have been raised, if anything," Dad said brightly. "You're telling me I get to eat nachos *and* admire a view like this? Has there ever been a luckier man?"

"Don't ever say we don't get to do what you want to," Mom said, squeezing his arm.

The host met us at the door while I scanned the room. The afternoon sun was streaming through the enormous windows and lighting the lake up in sparkles and rippling shimmers. Most

tables were taken, which, if nothing else, boded well for the quality of sandwiches and nuggets. Maybe I was too quick to judge the place.

Then my eyes landed on someone familiar, and my body reacted before I could process what I was looking at. In one fluid motion I crouched, darted behind Aunt Linda, and lowered my head so the guy who saved me the week before wouldn't see me. Why? Hard to say. It was a central nervous system thing, like yanking your hand backward if you accidentally touch the stove. As far as my instincts were concerned, I was in immediate threat of death if he noticed me standing here, for reasons unknown. And who was I to argue with millions of years of evolution?

Mom and Dad were too busy talking to the host to notice my behavior, but Aunt Linda raised an eyebrow at me. "Yes?" she asked. Like there was something *weird* about me plastering myself to her back and breathing down her neck. Some people and their insistence on things like "boundaries" and "personal space."

"Please don't acknowledge me," I whispered, and without hesitation she switched to dig through her handbag, like that was the whole reason she'd twisted around in the first place.

I'd be lying if I said I hadn't thought about this Will guy once or twice since I'd met him, but it had been in a fleeting, "damn, I wish I'd said *this* super-cool thing instead" sort of way. I'd even managed to convince myself he totally wasn't as good-looking as I remembered.

Seeing him now, though, made a couple of things very clear. One, he absolutely *was* as beautiful as I remembered. Two, I did *not* want a second chance to try to be cool and suave, because I was not prepared, and I was not chill, or cool, or suave, and if anything I'd only wreck any shred of a good impression I'd managed to leave on him the first time around.

But it was fine. He was eating with his family. He wouldn't give me a chance to embarrass myself. Hell, he probably wouldn't even notice me here. Or recognize me if he did. He'd probably forgotten all about the week before.

I convinced myself of this for a solid four seconds, until we walked to our table and he glanced up, eyes locking right in on mine.

Shit. Okay, but still. Even if he had noticed me, we wouldn't talk. I was fine.

Breathe, Ollie, fuck. Get a grip, you absolute embarrassment.

The voice in my head had a point, but, amazingly, lecturing myself didn't calm me down very much.

When we reached the table, I dove for the seat that put my back to Will and his family. Then I did relax a little. There. Now I wouldn't run the risk of accidentally glancing at him and getting caught. I could forget he was even there.

The plan worked for most of the meal. Through appetizers, and our school-cafeteria-quality lunch, the only thing that existed was food, the lake, and my family. Around the time I started the second half of my sandwich I actually did, one thousand percent, completely forget that my hot semi-savior was sitting twenty feet behind me.

Everything was going smoothly, right up until I ran out of Coke.

"Oh, it's serve-yourself refills here," Mom said excitedly, the same way someone might say "they're giving away free puppies at the door." "There's a soda fountain right over there."

"Can you please get me a glass, too?" Crista asked, handing her empty glass to me without waiting for an answer.

She'd said it so sweetly I didn't have the heart to drag her along with me so she could learn to refill her own drinks rather than treating me like a servant.

I would be a total enabler of a parent one day.

I'd assumed Will and his family would've left by now, but when I turned to locate the soda fountain, there they were, still at their table. He was deep in conversation with his brother, thankfully, so I didn't have to engage in the awkward "I'm pretending not to notice you there" dance.

I filled up one glass, then, as I finished the second, a voice said "hey" right behind me, startling me so badly I yelped and spilled Coke all over the floor.

Will jumped back out of the splash zone, eyes wide. "Sorry, sorry, I thought you saw me."

I gasped for air, heart pounding from both the shock and the realization that I was suddenly trapped in the exact situation I'd hoped to avoid. "Nope, you just appeared out of thin air, there."

One corner of his mouth lifted into a half-smile. "My bad. I just saw you and wanted to check in about last week. I only realized after you left, I had no way of seeing if you got home okay. I figured I might see you around, but . . ."

"I guess today counts as around," I said. "Better late than never." It wasn't the *very* smoothest thing I could've said, but at least it was English. This was a good start.

Go Ollie! Successfully interacting with a human, almost like you've been doing it your whole life.

"Yeah, it counts. I haven't seen you at the lake before, so I thought maybe you were just passing through when we met," he said.

"Nope, I'm here all summer, but it's my first time visiting. I'm from San Jose."

"That's a long way to come for a vacation."

I didn't want to go into the heavy details of *why* we'd come to North Carolina, but instead of saying something normal, like "My aunt and uncle live here and we're visiting," my brain decided to supply me with: "Yeah, my family is . . . enthusiastic about lakes."

Why?

Why?

And I'd been doing so well, too.

A quizzical smile crossed his features. "California's got some great lakes, though, doesn't it?"

"Well, we don't love those lakes. They suck. Anyway, this one's great. You come here often?"

Nailed it.

Will's reply was delayed by a beat—probably while he considered how to end this conversation and escape. "Every summer. So, I guess if it's your first time here you don't have many friends yet?"

At first, it didn't click why he would be asking me that, and I went straight into "don't look like a lonely loser" mode. "I have friends."

He brightened. "Really, who? I might know them."

Who. *Who, Ollie?*

Great question. I genuinely wanted to rip my own throat out.

"Oh, just people. You know. I've spoken to—like, I've met a few people. Around."

Why was he still standing here? Why didn't he just end this conversation, so I could be put out of my misery? There was no way in hell he still wanted to talk to me. I was talking literal gibberish at this point.

But instead of leaving, he smiled, gradual and knowing. "I'm only asking because I was meant to come here with my friend but he bailed on the trip, so I'm kind of bored. I know a few

kids our age, but I could always use more people to hang with?” He paused, and shrugged.

“Guess I’m a bit of an extrovert. I can’t stand my own company.”

“Totally, me too,” I said hurriedly. “Definitely could use . . . more.”

He pulled out his phone, and I took the moment of distraction to suck in a breath in a desperate attempt to force my brain to focus.

“Get up your profile,” he said, passing the phone to me. “Add yourself.”

Great. I would do that.

If I could just remember how to spell my name, I would definitely, one thousand percent do that.

“Here,” I said when I’d finally figured it out. He took his phone back, and his fingers brushed against mine. It was a complete accident, almost certainly, but it still set my fingertips alight. My mind, which was already barely hanging on by a thread, melted into mush and spat out a muddled, nonsensical thought.

Everyone in the room felt that.

But of course they didn’t. Only I did.

“Cool,” I said. Will smiled, but he didn’t move. It was like he was waiting for me to say something cool and suave, still. Bless his heart, the little optimist.

“Well, I should, um, get back,” I said, holding up the glasses of Coke. “So. Bye.”

He blinked in a taken-aback sort of way. “Okay,” he said with a laugh. “Bye, then.”

I almost apologized. Almost said I’d message him, or I’d see him soon, or *something* a little less abrupt than “so, bye.” But by this point I’d lost complete faith in my own free will. Better the devil you know than the devil that’s yet to burst out of your mouth. And I would no longer put it past myself to start speaking in tongues to Will in the middle of this restaurant. So, instead, I turned on my heel and almost ran back to the table, sitting with my back to him.

Aunt Linda jumped at my sudden arrival, and raised her eyebrows at me.

“Don’t ask,” I whispered rapidly, “don’t act weird, just talk to me about something normal. Quick.”

I could tell in her eyes that she very much wanted to ask, and to act weird, but—and I could’ve tackled her in a relieved hug then and there—she wiped the confused grin off her face. “We were just talking about the housing market in Collinswood,” she said, gesturing to my perplexed parents.

“Oh, yeah? This investment property stuff, again?”

“Yeah. It’s a buyer’s market, Ollie.”

“That is *fascinating*.”

“I *knew* you would think so.” Her eyes flickered to something behind me. Was she looking at Will? Was he watching us? Her gaze returned to me. “Prices are down by five percent this month.”

“*No*. Five?”

“*Five*, Ollie. He’s not looking anymore, by the way.”

“Oh, thank God.” I slumped in my seat and let out my breath in a heavy gush.

“Who’s not looking?” Mom asked.

“No one,” I said, and Aunt Linda shook her head in a dismissive way.

Mom lowered her voice and leaned forward while Dad grinned and looked to the ceiling.

“*Is it a boy?*” she asked. “*Is it that boy?*”

“No, Mom, *it’s no one, please*.”

“Personally, I was enjoying the housing market discussion,” Dad said.

“Not now,” Mom said.

“*Yes*, now,” I begged.

“Five percent!” Aunt Linda exclaimed, raising her voice. “You’d be irrational *not* to enter it at *these* prices.”

“Mom, stop *looking at him!*”

“I’m *not*,” Mom said, staring over my head.

I shrunk even smaller. Jesus, fuck, why couldn’t I be one of those kids whose family had no interest in their personal lives? Those kids existed, right?

Why did *they* get so lucky?

“Who are you looking at, Aunt Catherine?” Crista piped up. Okay, if Mom had even dragged the kids’ attentions away from their iPads, something was *seriously* wrong.

Before I lost my wits altogether, we were interrupted by the arrival of the dessert menus. The menu was enough of a distraction to get the table off-topic, and, other than the odd *meaningful look* Aunt Linda sent my way, I was able to fade into the background.

Moments later, I caught sight of movement in my peripherals. Will’s family, gathering at the counter to pay their check. My cheeks flamed, and I suddenly became *intensely* interested in

the dessert menu. Anything so I didn't have to make eye contact with Will after acting so bizarrely.

Bury me alive.

Then his family left the restaurant, and I relaxed. That was the end of things, then. I probably wouldn't run into Will again. And even if I did see him around, he *definitely* wouldn't come over for another chat after that disaster. Sure, I was humiliated right now, but in a few weeks—months—or maybe a year—the embarrassment would fade into an awkward memory I'd try to keep from popping up and bothering me at inopportune moments.

Then, as the waiters came with dessert, my phone buzzed on the table. The screen lit up with a simple notification. Short enough that I didn't even need to unlock my phone to get the full message.

Will Tavares started following you.

Will Tavares commented on your photo: If you walk between the two big trees on the left, next to that bush, and head straight for five minutes you'll see the remains of the fort I built once

You replied: Really? I'd check it out but I have no sense of direction. They'd never find my body.

Will Tavares has sent you a message: Maybe I'll show you. To be safe!

The Afternoon I Wandered into the Woods with a Stranger Without Telling Anyone Where I Was Going

Before Will met me on the edge of the woods that day, I googled breathing exercises.

Clearly, I had no hope of getting a grip on myself without professional help. I could've asked Mom—she was the endless fountain of knowledge about this shit—but that ran the risk of being trapped in the house while she gave me the full history on breathing techniques across cultures.

While I breathed in for four seconds, held for seven seconds, and breathed out for eight seconds, I gave myself a lecture. I could really use a friend, and if I could just ignore the fact that my new friend was impossibly beautiful, I could vastly improve my summer. There was no *reason* for my brain to implode every time I spoke to this guy. I'd been friends with hot guys before, plenty of times. Hell, even Ryan was pretty symmetrical.

Speaking of.

I sent Ryan a message while I waited and mindfully breathed.

How do you hang out with a hot guy without forgetting how to speak English?

Three dots appeared immediately.

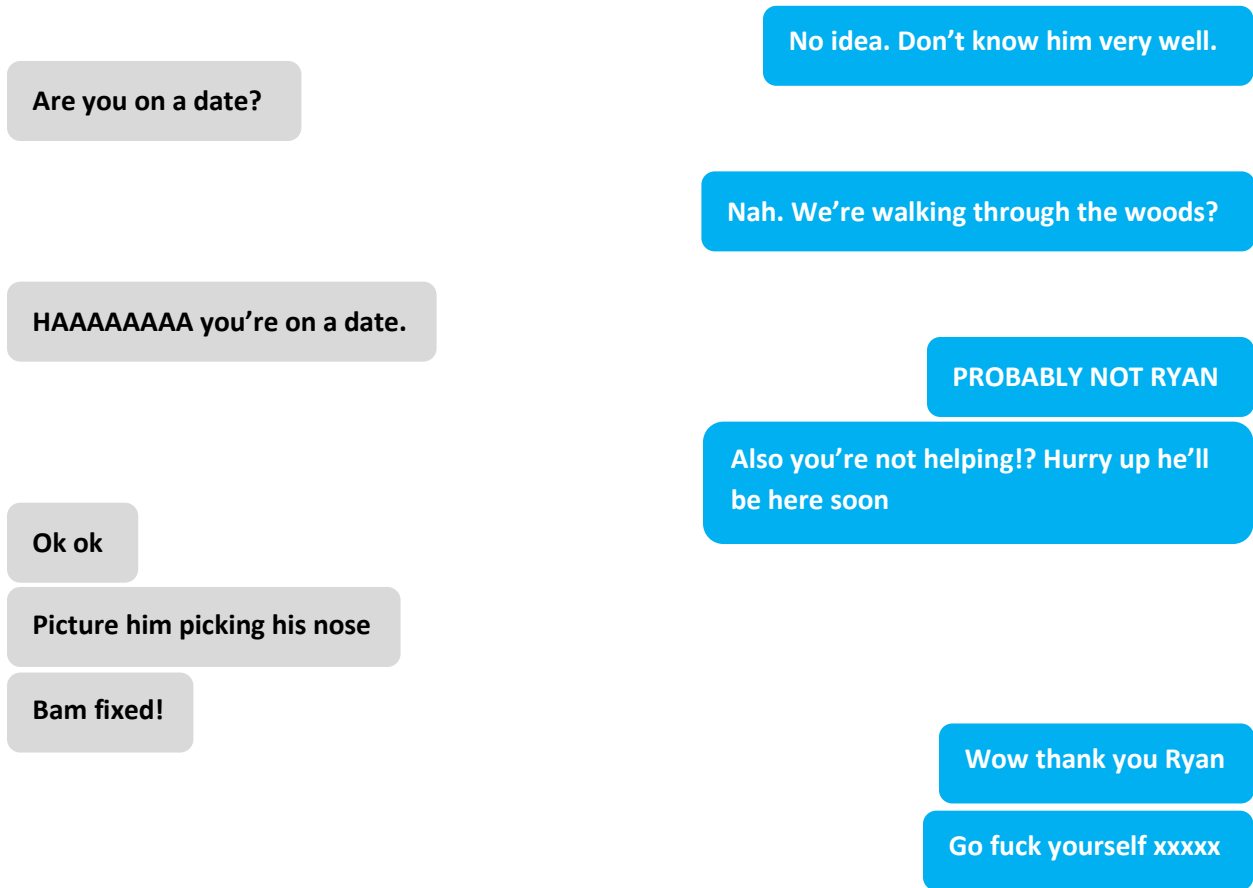
Idk how do you handle being around me?

You picked your nose for most of our childhood

That was my vaccine

Haaaaa fuck you.

Idk dude is he queer or nah?



A crunch of nearby footsteps alerted me to Will. I snapped my head up and shoved my phone in my pocket.

He was dressed in the colors of the woods—a green T-shirt that dipped below his collarbone, and a pair of tan shorts. His smile was easy and warm, dripping with the confidence and charisma of a person who'd probably never had to second-guess something he'd said in his life.

“Hey,” he said. “You been here long?”

Fifteen minutes. “Just got here. Good timing.”

“Great.” He waited, still beaming at me, and by the time it occurred to me he must be waiting for me to say something, he'd plowed onward. “So, the best way to go is right through here.”

Then he literally plowed onward, charging through the woods ahead of me. “Oh, shit, we're going, okay,” I muttered, darting after him.

“I didn’t make it myself or anything,” Will said over his shoulder. “There was a group of us who used to hang out every summer. Jack and Jayden and Autumn, mostly. But Jack’s moved, and Jayden’s got summer school, and Autumn’s here but she’s here with her boyfriend this year and they’re doing that thing where they forget everyone else in the world exists. You know?”

I picked up speed to arrive at his side. He was talking so rapidly I didn’t have time to get flustered. “Totally, my friend Ryan did that last year when he got a boyfriend.”

Will snapped his head around so quickly I was surprised he didn’t give himself a neck injury. “Oh, really?”

His reaction startled me into a nervous laugh. “Yeah. Then when they break up, suddenly it’s like nothing ever happened and they have time for you again, right?”

He had a bizarre expression on his face, and, for the first time, seemed to be struggling to think of a response. The only sound was the crunching of our footsteps over the blanket of dried leaves and twigs. “Right,” he said eventually. “I mean, I’d never do that to my friends. You can make time for both.”

Why did his voice sound so weird?

“I guess I get it,” I said, mentally running through my past relationships. “But I’m with you. I’d like to think I don’t ditch my friends? But now I’m doubting myself. Oh no, I think I might?”

“Terrible form. So, I have to cross my fingers you don’t meet a girl while you’re here or my only shot at socialization is lost?”

I barked a laugh before I could stop myself. “I’m not gonna date a *girl*, dude.”

His eyebrows shot up and his mouth fell open. Suddenly, my defenses went up. I was so used to this being common knowledge at best, and not a problem at worst in California. But we weren’t in California. We were in North Carolina, and we were deep in the woods, with no one around. And Will was not only taller than me, but he was awesomely fit.

Will was too nice to be a threat, though . . . wasn’t he?

Was he?

Had I just made a terrible lapse in judgement?

“So, you’re into guys?” he said, his tone getting weirder by the second.

My stomach dropped, and I stopped walking abruptly. “Is that a problem?” I asked, my voice flat. All traces of bashfulness were gone in one hit. My instincts took over, and I straightened up and raised my chin, facing him down defiantly.

To my relief, Will shook his head, aghast. “No, no, not even a little bit. I just don’t really know any gay people our age. But it’s not a problem, I swear.”

I nodded and started walking again. The scare was only brief, but it was enough to clear my head completely. I wasn’t going to be nervous around Will, because I didn’t know anything about him, and therefore it was totally irrational to give the slightest shit about him. He might have been our savior at the lake, but that didn’t necessarily mean he was an amazing guy. So, I definitely shouldn’t have a crush on him. He was just a good-looking stranger.

In fact, I was calm enough now to let a smirk cross my face. “Yeah, you do.”

“Do what?”

“Know queer people our age. You just don’t know they’re queer, yet.”

He tipped his head, quizzical. “How do you know?”

“Uh, statistics? They’re on my side.”

He nodded thoughtfully, and sort of quarter-smiled, *Mona Lisa* style. Then he beckoned and took a hard left. “It should be somewhere just around here . . . yes! It’s just up ahead. Isn’t it awesome?”

I didn’t know exactly what I’d been expecting. Maybe something closer to the underground bunker the kids in Stephen King’s *IT* had in the movie. But, now I thought about it, it was probably a bit unrealistic to expect a bunch of preteens to have built a professional-level dwelling.

What I was looking at was a bunch of sticks leaning against a tree trunk, covered in branches and pieces of bushes. There was maybe room for two *very* small children in the gap it formed. If they crouched.

I glanced sideways at Will, who was gesturing to it like it was the Eiffel Tower itself. I chewed on my lip, trying not to snicker. “It’s great.”

“Ridiculously incredible,” Will corrected, dropping his arms back to his side.

“‘Spectacular’ is actually the word I was looking for.”

“*Thank* you. You’re the first outsider to see it.”

“Really?”

“Other than all our parents.”

“So, that would make me the ninth outsider to see it? Roughly?”

“Wait, no, the tenth,” Will said as he brushed stray leaves off the fort. “I forgot about the year we let Creepy Callum hang with us.”

“Yikes. Please tell me Creepy Callum was a kid.”

Will snorted. “Yes. A kid with a ridiculous crush on Autumn. And he thought the best way to win her was to make sex jokes every second sentence. But, like, really *loaded* ones. And he’d *stare* at her like this until she laughed.” Will demonstrated, clapping a hand on one of the slanted sticks and widening his eyes at me until I broke eye contact, grimacing. “Right!” he said. “You see?”

“And you let him hang with you?”

“Only for a while. Then he and I had words and he got banished. Then I married Autumn right”—he walked to the base of a nearby tree and threw his arms out—“here. Just a small ceremony, nothing fancy.”

“That’s beautiful,” I deadpanned.

He gave me a solemn nod.

So, he’d fake-married a girl? That didn’t necessarily make him straight, but this, plus his weird reaction at me and Ryan not being straight, told me he probably was.

“To clarify, so when you said Autumn has a boyfriend, you were actually talking about an extramarital affair?” I asked.

“Oh my God. We never actually divorced, so I guess I am.” He crossed his arms. “Damn. That’s heavy.”

“I’m so sorry. Can I help?”

“No. Nothing can make this better.” He furrowed his brow, then lit up. “Actually, ice cream would.”

“Oh?” I laughed. He was already on the move again, so I jogged after him. I almost asked him why he’d dragged me all the way out here to see a pile of sticks, but then I realized I didn’t really care. Maybe all we’d done was look at some sticks, but I was suddenly having more fun than I’d had yet this summer.

“Have you tried the Frosty Penguin yet?” he asked as we walked. “They do homemade ice cream, it’s ridiculously good. The mint is mind-blowing.”

“*Mint*? Why don’t you just lick some toothpaste?”

He bumped his shoulder against mine and fake-gasped. “Take that back.”

The Frosty Penguin turned out to be a cart that set up near the shore about a five-minute walk from Aunt Linda’s. I’d passed it a few times, but hadn’t paid it much attention—Aunt Linda always kept tubs of Ben & Jerry’s in her fridge, and the kids were very particular about flavors, anyway.

Even though Will and I were hanging out as totally platonic friends, platonically, I decided to get my ice cream in a cup so I didn’t have to worry about making a mess of myself. Will, on the other hand, went for the waffle cone, and proceeded to beg me to try the mint.

“Absolutely not.”

“Come on, I *promise* you, you’ll be a convert.”

“I don’t like it!”

“Just one lick. *One* lick and I’ll drop it.”

I gave him a funny look. He wanted me to put my mouth on his ice cream? Straight or not, that seemed kind of . . . intimate? Boundary-crossing? Considering we barely knew each other.

Or was I just uptight about germs? Maybe I was the one being weird.

With a grudging eye-roll, I nodded. He held the cone up instead of passing it over—which *also* seemed weird to me—and I tried the ice cream.

“Good, right?” he asked.

I screwed up my face and stuck my tongue out, unable to stop my recoil. “Gross. Yuck. Awful.”

“I don’t believe you. You’re lying to win!”

I was *not* lying to win, as it happened. It was genuinely atrocious. “You just don’t want to accept you have mutant taste buds.”

Will sighed and returned to eating his ice cream, totally undeterred by the fact that my tongue had just been on it.

Maybe that was a small-town thing?

We wandered for a while, following the edge of the lake, just talking, before we settled down in front of a tree to finish our ice creams. The crowds had thinned and disappeared, giving us some privacy.

Rivulets of melted mint ice cream ran down Will's cone and over his fingers. He didn't try to lick them off, not even as they started to drip onto his knees. I stirred my spoon around my own cup until it made a chocolate soup, while Will finished off the last bite of his cone. How anyone could eat that fast without brain freeze was a mystery. "You're covered in ice cream," I said.

He looked down at himself and tried to wipe it off his leg. All he managed to do was spread it in a sticky mess around his thigh. "Shit. One second."

With that, he pulled his shirt off, took off for the lake at a jog and jumped straight in, spraying water all over me.

His head popped back above the surface, and he shook his head to dry himself off.

"You drenched me," I complained. Not to mention the rest of my ice cream was half lake water now.

"Well, you're wet now," he said. "You might as well get in."

Something about the thought of stripping down to my shorts and jumping in the lake with this guy I barely knew seemed illicit and thrilling to me. Even though I knew it was stupid, and he would probably freak out if he knew I was thinking about him like that. Chances were pretty strong that this was completely innocent. Still, it was fun to pretend. And with a guy this hot, who could blame me for fantasizing a little? Now that I was pretty sure he wasn't a murderer, and all?

But then, when my head emerged from taking my shirt off, I swore I saw Will stare at me. Only for a second, though.

I jumped in.

"You know, a lot of people back home can't swim," Will said, his head bobbing up and down. "I asked my friend, Matt, to come up with us but he bailed because of that."

"I don't think I've ever met someone who can't swim," I said. "What if your plane crashed into the ocean?"

Will burst out laughing. "*That's* your main concern?"

"Well, it's true! I mean, I guess you could just float."

He shook his head. "No way, floating's way harder than swimming. I can't do it at all."

"Seriously?"

"Yeah. I never learned how."

“It’s easy. You just kind of . . .” I launched myself on my back to demonstrate.

He tried to mimic me, and ended up flopping backward into the water like a finless whale. “I told you!” he said, snorting water out his nose.

“No, just try and . . . yeah, a bit more arched, though—no, *more arched*, Wi—here.” I put my hands at the top and bottom of his back and moved him into position. “Like that.”

His skin was warm under my fingers. “Oh,” he whispered, before swallowing. “Like that.”

Then he rolled inward to return to a paddling position. Which brought him about three inches away from my face.

He didn’t move back, though.

Our legs collided a few times underwater. My hands were still burning from where they touched his skin. He looked at me with an intensity that took me by surprise.

All at once, I realized he *had* been staring at me before.

With exactly this expression on his face.

I was just starting to hope when one of his hands found my waist, and he kissed me.

A small noise rose at the back of my throat, half surprise, half *want*. The sort of wanting that engulfed, and encompassed, until every thought evaporated and the only thing that existed—the only thing that had ever existed, or ever would—was this split second in time.

His lips were closed and gentle against mine. Not a peck, but not passionate.

Hesitant.

Just as I collected myself enough to reach for him, he pulled away. He scanned me with sunlight-honeyed eyes, searching my face for . . . something.

Somehow, my brain was both waterlogged and buzzing with activity. My synapses were all firing at once, a million frantic thoughts layering over each other until I couldn’t make out any of them except for a repeated, amazed “*what?*”

If I had to guess what he found on my face, I’m pretty sure I wore the precise, very attractive expression of a dead goldfish.

I let out a heavy breath in a gush, and almost went under as I relaxed. Water lapped icy and sharp at my lips—the lips that’d been kissing him only seconds before—and I clicked back into place. I kicked myself back up, keeping my eyes locked onto his. “*Will,*” I said, my voice thick and soft.

He stayed in place, motionless, his lips slightly parted. So I closed the space between us, my hand on the curve of his back, and he fell into me. This time, there was nothing hesitant about the kiss. Only fierceness.

As soon as we met, I parted my lips, eager to find out what he tasted like. Then his tongue brushed against mine, and I felt as though we could've sunk to the bottom of the lake at that very moment and it wouldn't have mattered. I didn't need oxygen. I didn't need anything else, ever again.

He hummed against my mouth and I pulled him in closer, kissing him again, and again, as we bobbed, weightless in the water. His skin was slippery against my fingertips as I traced them down his neck, then under the surface, following the curve of his spine.

When we broke apart, he gasped and turned his gaze to the water. His brow furrowed. "Whoa," he whispered to himself.

"Whoa," I repeated with a nervous laugh. Was that a good whoa? Like, holy shit, that was the best kiss ever, whoa? Or, holy shit, I just kissed a guy, what the fuck am I doing, whoa?

Then he stared at the water, and stared, and stared, and my stomach plummeted with a dawning horror. It was a bad whoa. He'd done that to explore something, and didn't like what he found there. Or, I'd misread his signals somehow, and he'd never wanted me to kiss him the second time. Or, it'd been a joke, and I'd missed the punchline. Or, or, or—

"Um," I said, swallowing and kicking backward to put space between us. "Okay. So. That didn't . . . have to . . . I mean, like, you don't have to . . ."

"Ollie—"

"—panic, or anything. Because it's—"

"Would you—"

"—fine. Really."

"—do that again?" He raised his voice over me.

"Do that again?" I repeated, weakly.

I had to have misheard him. Or, at the very least, misunderstood him. But he'd stopped staring at the water, and returned to looking intensely at me. He seemed to be having more difficulty than I was holding his head above the water—he was bobbing up and down pretty dramatically—but he didn't break his gaze.

"Please," he said. His voice was only a murmur. A whisper.

Tell Me More, Tell Me More

Every molecule in my body buzzed, from my heart through to my skin's surface. If the first kiss was fear, and the second kiss was passion, this kiss was something else entirely.

This kiss, this third kiss?

This one felt like a beginning.

When Will and I Became More Proficient in Speaking in Code than the FBI

Will Tavares

It should be illegal to force your son to do basketball drills, in NINETY-TWO DEGREES

I'm pretty sure it's illegal in California

California sounds like a goddamn paradise.

Can you fake an injury? That's how I get out of gym. Works 9/10 times

You get out of gym on purpose?? Why? It's the only good period!!!

Yeah so you're not actually allowed to ask that question if you get picked first to be on people's teams. That's another law we take very seriously

I never get picked first. Matt does.

OR SECOND

Tooshay

Will Tavares

Tips for getting a toddler to eat his lunch when he insists he's never liked carrot sticks in his life, despite eating half a bag of them three days ago?

Give him crackers and tell your aunt he ate carrot sticks. Foolproof

Will Tavares: babysitter of the year

That better not be sarcastic. I'm giving you GOLD here

And I appreciate you so much...

Then why did I read that in your sarcastic voice?

Sounds like a you problem

Will Tavares

Recommendation: Tacos from that shady stand. You know the one.

The one that's never open?

It was open TODAY!!!

WHAT!? Tell me everything!!

Will Tavares

Awkward question.

Shoot?

You said my fort was spectacular, but it's been days and you haven't brought it up once. I'm starting to wonder if maybe you weren't that into it. And I'd rather know. I can take it.

Your fort was totally spectacular. I was sort of waiting for the topic of the fort to come back up, but it never did

You might recall I mentioned it was the first time I showed the fort to an outsider. I'm not sure how it's supposed to work

I might've seen a few forts but every fort is different. I don't really know what I'm doing either. I'm glad you mentioned it

So if I asked you if you wanted to check out my fort again tomorrow, you'd say?

I'd say that, for the sake of clarity, I have no interest in seeing your actual fort again. Once was enough. But I'd like to hang out again? And I'd really like to kiss you again

Oh thank god. I thought that was going somewhere else for a second there.

The fort's good for one thing, though. Are you busy right now? And are you THAT against seeing it one more time?

Give me ten minutes and you can show me ONE more time. I guess.

He was leaning against a tree, chewing his nails. When he heard the crunch of my shoes on the wood's bed of leaves and sticks, his head snapped up, and his eyes crinkled at the corners.

Seeing him look at me like that made my stomach tumble.

Seeing him at *all* made my stomach tumble.

"Hi," he said, kicking off the tree and walking to greet me.

"Hello," I said wryly. "So, now you've dragged me all the way back to here, *again*, what—"

I stopped halfway through the sentence as Will picked up speed, threw his arms around my neck, and crashed his lips against mine.

HOW WE WENT

When We Started Getting Real Sick of Stolen Kisses

“You’re trying to play me,” Will said, darting forward to take the basketball from me. “You can’t be that bad.”

Said the captain of the basketball team. I hoped he was more encouraging to his team members on their off days.

It was my second time visiting his house, but the first time he’d roped me into playing basketball. I stepped back, trying to dribble the ball, but hitting the air instead as the ball lost its height. “I swear I’m not,” I said. “These skills are all innate. Couldn’t fake them if I tried.” Will lunged for the ball and I threw myself on it, burying it under my body. “It’s still my turn. Time out!”

“You’ve lost your privileges.”

“You can’t discriminate against me because I suck, Will.”

“I can do whatever I want, it’s my house. Come here, come on.” Will clapped his hands, and I got up, still clutching the ball. “Alright, okay. We can revisit dribbling later. Can you handle a pass?”

“Are you asking me if I can handle balls, Will?” I grinned, and he darted forward to wrench it from my grip. “Okay, okay, I’m sorry! That was bad. I’ll focus. Please, explain how one passes a ball.”

Before Will could figure out if my deadpanning was serious, his father poked his head around the side of the house. “Hey, you two. I’m heading to the store. Any requests for the grill tonight?”

Will took the distraction as an opportunity to reclaim the ball. Right from my hands. This guy’s parents had never taught him to play nice. “Mm, yeah, can we do hamburgers, Dad?” he asked.

“Sure thing. How ’bout you, Ollie?”

Will shot me a sideways warning look. I knew what it meant. Don’t even think about saying sausages. I almost did it, just to see his reaction. But I opted not to. Double entendres were funny when we were alone, but it’d be significantly less funny if his dad got suspicious and

banned him from seeing me for the rest of the summer. “Hamburgers sound great to me, Mr. Tavares.”

Mr. Tavares made a super uncool clicking nose and gave us finger guns as he left.

I turned to Will, shaking my head with a grin. “You always expect the worst from me.”

“Because I know you.”

“Details, minor details.”

Will shrugged, glanced behind him, and threw the ball backward over his shoulder. It went straight through the hoop. I couldn’t stop myself from cheering, legitimately impressed. “Holy shit! That was actually awesome.”

“Wait, did it go in?”

“Straight in.”

“No shit? Total fluke.” He spun around, pumping his fist.

“Check out the modesty on this guy.”

The car engine revved, and we turned around to watch Mr. Tavares pull out and drive down the street. Will’s mom had taken his younger brother, Kane, into town to see a movie, which meant we were alone.

I didn’t need to wait to be told. As soon as the car was out of sight I jogged to Will and threw my arms around his shoulders. He hoisted me up and I wrapped my legs around his middle as we kissed, hard. When we broke apart, he grinned against my lips and walked us backward. “I’ve been wanting to do that all day. It’s about time he left.”

“I swear parents can sense when you want space. That’s *always* when they decide to hang around. Every time.”

He pulled me flush against him and dropped slowly to his knees on a patch of grass. Then he lowered me onto the ground on my back and propped himself up over me. His eyes crinkled in the corners. “We *need* to find somewhere we can have privacy,” he said.

His hair tickled my forehead as he returned to kissing me, and he lowered himself to press harder and harder against the length of my body.

We’d spent several days together over the last week, sneaking in kisses whenever we could snatch an unseen moment. I was happy enough kissing him—frankly, if someone told me I couldn’t do anything else for the rest of summer except for lie in this very spot, kissing Will

endlessly, I would've cheered. But I got the feeling that Will was getting curious about what else there was to do, other than kissing.

As the friction grew, my heart rate started speeding up, faster and faster, and I knew I had to pull us back from the edge, *now*, before we got desperate enough to take a risk we'd regret. His dad was *not* going to be long at the store.

But how long would this *take*?

No. *No. Way* too risky.

"I promise," I said, pulling back and trying to steady my breathing. My blood was *pulsing*, so urgently I could practically feel my heartbeat throughout my body. "The second my parents leave me alone, I'll let you know."

Will groaned good-naturedly. "When will *that* be, though?"

"I don't *know*, but I do know if I start asking about it, they'll *never* leave me alone."

He kissed the tip of my nose and curled his fingers in the base of my hair. "We could go to the fort?"

"Oh, lying on twigs and dirt, *that* sounds comfortable." Suddenly, something occurred to me, and I raised an eyebrow. "Wait, is that why you brought me to see your fort?"

"What? *No.*"

"I can't believe you dragged me to your *sex fort* on our first date!"

"It's not a *sex fort*," he laughed.

"You did get married there."

"Sure, when I was *eleven*."

"Admit it! You took me deep into the woods to make the moves on me." I was half-teasing by this point, tracing a finger down the hollow of his neck.

"I did not. I just wanted to see you and I needed an excuse."

"So you took me *there*?"

"I didn't say it was a *good* excuse." He brushed my hair off my brow, smiling down at me fondly. "Plus, I dunno. I wanted to show you something personal. I guess I wanted you to know something about me most people don't? A little? Sort of stupid, now I think about it."

"It's not stupid," I murmured.

Our breathing had slowed by this point into a steady, synchronized rhythm. Will opened his mouth to reply just as the distant sound of an engine rumbled. We sighed in unison and he

rolled off me, then pulled me to my feet. “Good while it lasted,” he said as Mr. Tavares’s car pulled into the driveway.

We *needed* to figure out a better arrangement than this.

When Will Found Out about Aunt Linda

Aunt Linda's living room floor was covered in puzzle pieces.

I was looking after Crista and Dylan today while our parents all took a trip into town, and Will had decided to bring over one of Kane's thousand-piece puzzles to keep the kids occupied. It was a good gesture and all, but he'd apparently overestimated the visual perception abilities of two- and seven-year-old kids. Crista and Dylan had participated for all of five minutes before ditching us to play with Legos while Will and I tried to assemble the thing.

I set about grouping similar colors together while Will dived into lining up the edge pieces. "Mom and Dad used to do these with me every week," he said. "It was, like, compulsory family time. We stopped when basketball practice started taking over. Swapped it for hoop drills with Dad."

The expression on his face turned sour, and he pursed his lips. For the vice-captain of the basketball team at his school, he never exactly talked about basketball in glowing terms.

"Whose sick idea was it to include the night sky in this picture?" I complained. "There's, like, five thousand black pieces! We'll never get this done."

"It's only a thousand pieces total, Ollie, your math's a little off."

"Gee, well *that* changes everything."

Will took the piece I was currently rotating between two fingers and slotted it easily into its place near the top border. "See? You just have to look for the matching shape and pattern. You see how the stars are grouped closer together in these two? That's how you know that piece belonged over there."

"Did you bring this over for the kids, or to show off?"

Will raised his eyes from the puzzle and smirked. "*Los dos.*"

It was only through sheer luck that Crista started an argument with Dylan over the Legos at that moment and reminded me they were behind me, otherwise I would've been in danger of tearing off Will's shirt right then and there. He'd been joking about using the fort as a private make-out spot the week before, but it was starting to sound more and more appealing to me.

I picked up another piece and studied the puzzle, my brow creasing. Before I could place it, Will whipped it from my grip and slotted it in. "*Hey,*" I protested. "Eyes on your own work."

“Ollie, play guitar with us,” Crista said. Dylan had won their Legos argument, apparently, because she’d lost interest in the activity altogether and lugged my guitar case over from its resting place by the front door.

“We’re doing a puzzle right now,” I said.

She dumped my guitar on the ground next to me. “*We* aren’t doing a puzzle. *You* are.”

“I don’t perform on demand, Crista.”

“I’d like to see you play something,” Will said hopefully.

Oh. Well. In that case. “Okay, fine. Any requests?”

“What can you play?” Will asked as I unzipped the case.

“Most things. I’ve got a good ear.”

Will suddenly busied himself on his phone, then turned it on me. “Is it okay if I film you?”

I shifted into a more comfortable position and grinned. “Um, only if you don’t share it. Just for you, okay?”

“Promise.”

Well, if I didn’t have any requests . . . I settled for one of Ryan’s and my original songs. We’d played it live a few times now, and it always got a great response from the crowd. More importantly, it worked well with finger picking, and I kind of wanted to show off a little right back at Will.

All at once, my heart started thudding. It almost felt like stage fright. Which was impossible, because I’d played in front of dozens and dozens of people—friends, families, and strangers—countless times. I didn’t *get* stage fright.

But with Will sitting right before me, watching me intensely as I played, turned out I did.

I gave a nervous laugh, for no reason other than to let out some of the tension that was building in my chest. I couldn’t look at him anymore, so I turned my attention to my fingers. Tried to forget about Will, and the kids—who were also watching with interest—and Will’s phone. Just focus on the vibrations of the strings, and the invisible rhythm thrumming in the air, and the next part of the song. And the next. Then the next.

The tightness in my throat went away, and my heart returned to a pace more compatible with life. When I was sure I could handle it, I looked up again. Crista and Dylan had lost interest in the song, and had returned to their Lego blocks. Will, however, looked as though he hadn’t

taken a breath since I started playing. My eyes met his, and his soft lips spread into a smile. “You’re so hot,” he mouthed, and I ducked my head to hide my self-conscious but jubilant grin from the camera as my cheeks grew warm.

God, I wanted to drop the guitar, knock the phone out of his hand, and kiss those lips raw.

“So, you’re good,” Will said, out loud this time, as I finished. “Like, *very* good.”

Just as I opened my mouth to reply, my phone rang. Mom. “One sec, hold that thought, brainstorm more compliments while you’re at it. I’ve just . . . gotta take . . . hello?”

“Hi, sweetie.” Immediately, I could tell something was wrong. “Listen, don’t worry, okay, but something’s happened. Aunt Linda isn’t feeling well, and her doctor wants us to take her to the hospital to be safe.”

I stood up slowly, glanced at Will, then the kids, then headed outside to stand on the porch. “What do you mean? Is she okay?”

“Well, she’s in a bit of pain, Ollie. They just want to keep an eye on her.”

But there was something in Mom’s voice—a distant tone of fear—that set my skin prickling. A deep, instinctual knowledge that something was wrong. “So, she’s being admitted?”

“Probably. But hopefully not for long.”

“But I thought—she’s been doing okay. Hasn’t she? She’s been fine.”

“She’s not fine, sweetie. She has cancer.”

Right, but she’d had cancer for years. Long enough that it’d started to feel like something that would always be there. Like, Aunt Linda might just live to old age, with a touch of cancer accompanying her the whole time. There, but not too terrifying.

This was terrifying.

“Are you being honest with me?” I asked. “Is she really okay? Or could this be bad? Please, I just need to know.”

Mom sighed. “We don’t know what’s causing her pain, yet. It could be nothing. I’ll let you know when we know more, okay?”

“Okay.” I hesitated, then blurted out, “Could she die?”

“Sweetie . . .”

“*Mom?*”

“Probably not today,” Mom said. “It’s not as bad as all that.”

I sat down heavily on the porch bench. “Okay. Um. Okay. As in, probably not today, but maybe tomorrow, or . . . ?”

“No, that’s not what I mean. I mean don’t panic, and don’t worry too much, okay? But we will be a few hours late. There’s leftovers in the fridge. Sorry to spring this on you.”

“No, oh my God, it’s fine,” I said. “I’ll . . . what do you want me to tell the kids?”

“As little as possible. Keep it positive. There’s no need to worry them over this, okay?”

No, not really. Because I felt like I might burst into tears or start hyperventilating, because Mom wanted me to lie to the kids and make it sound better than it was, which might mean she was lying to *me* so *I* didn’t panic, but in reality I should be panicking, because something really bad was happening, and I could *hear* it in her voice, I could *hear* it, I could—

“I have to go, Ollie. I’ll keep my phone on me, though, so if *anything* happens, call or text. Okay?”

“Okay.”

“Love you, sweetie. I’ll see you soon.”

I hung up. Now was my cue to head back inside and calmly tell Crista and Dylan that their mom was feeling a little sick and wouldn’t be home tonight. But I couldn’t. I couldn’t do it. My head was somersaulting and my stomach was clenching and if I tried to speak, the words would only dissolve in my mouth.

“Hey?” It was Will, poking his head outside. “Everything okay?”

I balled my hands into fists and tried to force myself to breathe steadily. “Ah. You know what? Sort of no?”

He came out properly now, closing the door behind him so we could speak privately. I went on as he sat beside me on the bench. “So, Aunt Linda has cancer.”

“Wait, *what*?”

“That’s not the news. We’ve known about this for years. That’s the whole reason we came to the lake, actually. To spend the summer with her. Anyway, something’s happened, and I don’t really know what because I think Mom’s trying to downplay it, but they’ve all gone to the hospital, and Crista and Dylan don’t know yet, and I have to tell them, but I don’t know what to say, and I’m *freaking out*.”

“Okay. Okay.” He placed a hand on my leg. I focused on the weight of it to ground myself. There wasn’t any need to spiral yet. Nothing had fallen apart yet. Everything might still

be alright. It had to be. “What we’re gonna do is, you’re gonna take a minute, and come back inside when you’re ready. I’m gonna tell the kids we’ll be babysitting them for longer than we thought tonight, then try to burn up all their energy so they crash before they realize your aunt isn’t home tonight. That sound okay?”

I nodded, then changed to shaking my head rapidly. “No, you can’t . . . you don’t have to do that. You don’t have to stay.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, of course I want to stay. I’ll just message my parents and give them the heads-up I’ll be late. Are you good with the plan, otherwise?”

All I knew was that the idea of taking a minute to process and collect my thoughts before going inside to be all attentive and perky for the kids’ sakes sounded like a godsend, so I gave a grateful nod.

“I’ll meet you back inside. We can talk more when the kids are asleep, if you want to?”

I nodded again.

I probably owed him more. More gratitude, more direction, something. But my mind was firmly on strike.

He shut the door gently as he went inside, like he was being careful not to freak me out with any sudden noises.

Back when they first told me about Aunt Linda’s diagnosis, it’d bowled me over. Vision closing in, mind doing backflips before cutting to static, complete inability to form an English sentence.

But the weird thing about finding out someone is sick is that, for now, you still have them. I guess the human brain isn’t designed to be appropriately sad for too long, because my grief sort of flickered on and off. Sometimes, for days or even weeks at a time, I could be completely fine, like nothing at all was wrong. Then, without warning, my brain would shift to total awareness. Maybe I’d be watching a TV show and they’d introduce a cancer plotline, or a song about dying young would come on the car radio, or I’d be lying in bed for long enough for my mind to wander to dark places. Then a voice would whisper *you know she’s probably going to die, though, right?* and I’d be fighting tears and hyperventilating without warning.

Other days, I chose hope. I’d stem the urge to sob by searching for survival stories. I’d watch video after video of people who beat the odds, who were told they had six months to live seven years ago, who had participated in a trial treatment that happened to zap their tumor into

oblivion. If they could do it, why couldn't Aunt Linda? Someone had to survive to bring the mortality rate down below a hundred. Why not someone relatively young, who lived a relatively healthy lifestyle, and had done relatively few things throughout her life to make the universe turn on her?

Besides, she didn't look sick. Sure, she complained about the cold in the middle of summer, and she liked to sit down more than she used to, but she still had color in her cheeks and a wry smile and a steady grip. No one would look at her and think, "That woman has terminal cancer." So that meant something, right?

Never mind the fact that Google had told me over and over again that, often, terminal cancer patients didn't look significantly ill until the very end. Facts didn't count in this case, because it was Aunt Linda, so anything that gave me a reason to hope had to be believed and defended at all costs.

But right now, I didn't know if I could muster up any hope.

Right this second, all I felt was fear.

When I finally headed back in, I found Will sitting at the kitchen table with the kids, helping them fold paper airplanes. "We're having a competition," he informed me as I joined them. "Just make sure you color your plane in somehow so we know who's who."

Five minutes later, we were traipsing outside into the warm dusk, each armed with two paper planes (Will, who'd once had some sort of traumatic paper plane-related experience he declined to elaborate on, insisted on backups). We spent a good portion of the night in the yard with those planes. It turned out there were a number of events within a paper plane tournament, from your basic "who can fly the farthest," to "who can clear the most tree branches in five tries," to "fly the plane through the Hula-Hoop Ollie's holding because he's out of breath and needs a stationary role this round."

Will bounded around with such high energy, suggesting idea after idea, that even I found myself getting into it and having fun. Crista and Dylan were beside themselves with joy, and—as Will predicted—burned out earlier than usual after sprinting back and forth across the yard collecting the planes from the various spots they ended up in.

Together, Will and I got the kids through the whole dinner-and-bedtime routine—during which I texted Mom for instructions three separate times, because Crista kept trying out obvious lies like “Mama and Daddy let us drink ice cream soup at dinner” and “Mama lets me put on her exorbitantly expensive face creams before bed to make my wrinkles go away.” Then, finally, we got them into bed, and we collapsed, exhausted, on the couch.

Will put his arm around my shoulder and pulled me in to lean on him. “Thank you so much,” I said. “Really. You didn’t have to do all that.”

“No, it was fun. We should do it again sometime.” He paused, then rested his chin on my head. “But preferably under better circumstances.”

At that moment, my phone buzzed with a message from Mom. **Nothing to worry about. She’s staying overnight for monitoring, but the doctors don’t seem too concerned. Will be home in about an hour and a half.**

“Thank *God*,” I breathed. “She’s okay.”

Will wrapped his other arm around me now, pulling me into an embrace. “Good.”

I breathed him in, and his scent was like a lullaby. Safe, and calm, and slow.

“Are *you* okay?” Will asked.

“Yeah. Yeah, I am now.”

“Wanna talk about it?”

Maybe I should. On the porch, there had been so many thoughts swirling around in my head. How I was starting to realize that she could go, just like that, and I might not have any warning. That I was scared that maybe I had something growing inside of me silently, and that we wouldn’t find it until it was too late to remove it completely. Or that maybe my parents did, or Ryan or Hayley did, or *Will* did . . .

But I was so drowsy.

“I think, yes,” I said. “But maybe not tonight.”

I kept most of my weight against Will while he picked a movie to put on. A part of me wanted to shake myself alert and kiss him until we lost ourselves, if only because this was the first time we’d been alone together. It seemed almost wasteful not to take advantage of the privacy. But at the same time, even though everything was probably going to be okay, I was about as far from being in the mood as it was possible to be.

As the movie started, I kept expecting Will to try to initiate something. After all, he'd been kind of desperate for privacy for that exact reason. But he never did. Instead, he shifted into a lounging position so I could fully rest my head on his chest, and methodically stroked my hair.

My breathing slowed to match the timing of the strokes.

My eyes started drifting closed.

"Ollie. *Ollie*. They're home."

My eyes flew open. There was shifting, and movement. I was jolted abruptly, then rolled, and suddenly my warm, human pillow was gone, and I was lying facedown on the couch. I blinked, trying to process the situation, as the door opened.

Will was sitting on the hard, wooden floor in front of the couch, in about the least-natural position imaginable, given there was a perfectly good armchair two feet away from him. I guessed he figured that me lying fast asleep on his chest was a little too difficult to explain away as platonic, and had literally launched himself out of the picture in a last-ditch effort to look heterosexual.

Uncle Roy headed straight to check on Crista and Dylan, while Mom and Dad hovered in the living room.

"Was everything okay, tonight?" Mom asked.

"Yeah," I said, stretching and pausing the movie. "Will stayed to help out with the kids, I hope that's okay?"

"Well, sure, but it's late," Dad said. "Your parents okay with you being out this late, Will?"

"I messaged them," Will said. "It's cool. They got that it was a special situation."

"How about I give you a ride home?"

Will stood. "I mean, I was planning on walking . . ."

"At this time of night? No, please. I'd feel more comfortable."

"Oh. Well, okay, thank you very much. I'd appreciate that."

Will turned to me, and we exchanged a look that we were both becoming well-practiced in. A look that said *I had such a good time with you*.

I wish I could kiss you goodbye.

I wish I could breathe you in.

I'll message you the second I get home.

He always did. Message me the second he got home.

"See you later," I said, while my eyes said all the rest.

"Let me know when she's definitely okay, okay?"

"Okay."

With that, he headed after Dad toward the front door. Before he'd left the room, Mom wiggled her eyebrows at me and stage-whispered, "*He's a keeper.*"

Will looked back over his shoulder at us, and something flashed in his eyes. Panic.

"He's just a friend, Mom," I stage-whispered back hastily, and Will's posture visibly relaxed.

After he and Dad were both gone, Mom folded her arms. "He's just a friend, yet he spent all night here helping you look after Crista and Dylan?"

"He's good with kids," I said with a one-sided shrug.

Mom cupped her chin. "I like that in a man, too."

"*Mom.*"

"I know, I know, you're *just friends*." She said it in the annoying way adults sometimes did when they figured they knew *much* more about your own life than you ever could. "I just think that's *quite* a friend you've got there."

I couldn't meet her eyes.

That Day We Got the House to Ourselves and Promptly Ruined Everything

We didn't get another chance to see each other alone for almost a week. Even though Aunt Linda had come home from the hospital the next day looking more or less herself, our families kept things more low-key for a while, as though they thought their trip into town had been the trigger. Like if they dared have too much fun, something bad might happen.

Finally, Aunt Linda and Uncle Roy decided to take the kids into town to see a movie, and my parents both decided to follow them in to have lunch as a group, then go shopping during the movie. Which left me with a glorious, gaping window of at least four or five hours with absolutely no supervision.

When Will messaged me to let me know he was on his way, my nerves suddenly started prickling. I wanted this. I'd wanted this for a while now. But it suddenly felt very *planned*. Like, this was going to happen, and we both knew it, and what if I was terrible? I'd done more than kissing before, but only a couple of times, with my ex, who'd worked in my favorite music store. I hadn't exactly requested a detailed performance review, either. Did I have time to message Kai and ask for technical critique? No, probably not, and that was probably a really weird thing to do. Okay, scratch that.

There was a knock on the door.

Oh God. He was here. It was happening. It was happening. Stay calm. Be cool.

I almost tripped over my own feet in my scramble to get the door, but collected myself just in time to open the door and greet Will with an acceptably smooth, chilled-out demeanor.

"Hey. So, there's a new movie on Netflix I've been wanting to watch," he said, barreling into the house. "Do you like sports movies? My parents don't, and I don't watch movies alone. Do you? I find it awkward. Just, sitting alone, staring at a screen. I need someone else or I get distracted."

"Uhh . . ." I stared at him, trying to figure out if this was definitely Will, and not an alien masquerading in a Will bodysuit. Because this wasn't Will Tavares, high-energy and confident.

This was Will Tavares, rambling and jittery like Ollie Di Fiore is wont to do. Was he . . . nervous? “Yeah, sure. We can watch it on my laptop?”

“Okay. Cool. Cool, cool. That sounds good.”

In my bedroom, he was even stiffer. He sat against the bed frame at an almost 90-degree angle, with his hands clasped in his lap. Even as the movie went on, he stayed in that weird position, until I finally glanced at him. “Hey, Will?”

“Yeah?”

“Everything okay?”

I swore I saw him twitch. “Oh. Yeah, yeah, it’s fine.”

“You just seem very . . .”

“What?”

“Uncomfortable?”

“No, I’m fine,” he said. As though to prove it, he shuffled down to lie beside me, matching my posture, and promptly started gnawing on his cuticles. There was still a solid foot between us. Notable, because Will normally took any thirty-second opportunity he could to make contact with me the moment we were alone in a room.

“I’m going to say something awkward,” I said.

“That’s always a great conversation starter.”

“I know, so I’m gonna say it as quickly as possible, so sorry if I’m blunt. But, um, just because we’re home alone doesn’t mean we need to do anything if you don’t want to. We can literally just watch a movie then call it, you know? So.”

Will looked stunned for a second. Then, slowly, he started to smile, and it broke into a full-blown, toothy grin as he tipped his head back. “Ahh, I’m being really weird, aren’t I?”

“No. You’re not being weird. You just don’t seem like yourself, and I wanted you to know there’s no, like, pressure, or expectations, or anything.”

Will scraped his hands down his face, groaning. I thought maybe I’d said something terrible, but he was giggling when he dropped his hands. “I want to, actually. Like, I really, really . . . really fucking want to. But I’ve never . . . so, maybe you could, sort of, show me? Is that too weird?”

He’d never done anything with a guy. Right, of course.

Here I was thinking that Will must be a billion times more experienced than me, but obviously he was newer—and, unsurprisingly, more freaked out—than I was. The realization settled the fear that'd been swirling in my own stomach for the past half-hour.

“Well,” I said. “We usually start by kissing. It makes it a little less clinical, I’ve heard.”

“Oh, is *that* how you do it? I’ve been *really* messing it up the—”

I kissed the words from his lips. The sound of the movie droning in the background faded away, and then the rest of the room faded, too, until the only real thing left was Will. He rolled us over so he was on top of me, which suited me, because it gave me full range to run my hands underneath his shirt. Then he arched back, biting his lip, and I followed the implication, taking his shirt off.

Obviously, I’d seen him without a top a million times while swimming, but this was different. This was for me. I kissed the warm brown skin on his neck, then moved down to his collarbone. “You’re so fucking gorgeous,” I said between kisses.

Will’s breath hitched, and he pulled back to look at me, his eyes darting as he scanned me seriously. “No one’s ever said that to me before,” he said.

I scrunched up my face. “Come *on*.”

“No, for real.”

“Well, I can promise it’s not the first time someone’s thought it.”

He shook his head and shrugged weakly. Not the same as hearing it. Fair call. “It’s true,” I said, cupping his face. “You’re *so* fucking gorgeous. It’s, like, impossible how beautiful you are.”

I would’ve happily gone on, but he was kissing me again, with such fervor my mind went blank. As we kissed, I rose and took my own shirt off, pressing our chests together, skin on skin. His breathing became louder as I ran my fingers down to the waistband of his jeans, but I paused when I hit it. He said he was ready, but was I sure about that? Was it too fast for him? Should I wait for five more minutes? Ten more? Another day?

He kissed me deeper, then even deeper, letting out a small whine as he did. Before I could second-guess myself any further, he took my hand and cautiously guided it down. I pressed my left hand against his chest as he did. His heart was hammering as fiercely as mine was.

He helped me remove his shorts without hesitation, his breathing getting more urgent by the second. Then, to my surprise, he started to pull on the top of mine.

“You sure? You don’t have to,” I said, but he gave me a look that pushed all the doubt about his feelings right out of my mind.

Exposed in front of him like this, some of that fear came creeping back. But it was quickly smothered by an urgent, dizzying *need*.

I lay my head on Will’s damp shoulder as we braced against each other for balance, and closed my eyes, and gave into it.

When we finally ran out of energy, we lay sprawled on my bed tangled up in each other. My head was resting on Will’s chest while he dragged his fingers lightly over my back in a zigzag pattern.

“Hey, Ollie?”

“Mm?”

“Do you have any recordings of your band? I’d like to see.”

I dragged myself up in a groan and searched for my phone. I eventually found it under the bed. “I have a couple demos,” I said, grabbing my earbuds and handing one side to him. “We’ve gotten better since, though.”

“I’m sure it’s great.”

Showing him this recording felt a little like playing guitar in front of him had. I wasn’t usually especially self-conscious about my music. If anything, being onstage put me more at ease than being in a group situation ever did. But Will’s opinion mattered. Will still scared me a little.

I studied his face throughout the first half of the song, but it was impossible to tell what he thought. When he eventually caught me staring, he rolled his head to face me. “The song’s great, but my favorite part is the guitar player. That guy’s a musical genius.”

I made a pantomime of fake-punching him in the stomach, and he doubled over, laughing. “I’m being serious! I’m serious, *don’t*.”

It wasn’t until the song ended that I was able to relax again, lying down on the bed with my head right next to Will’s. Our fingertips were spidering around each other’s, our hands resting on my thigh. A new song came on, one of my favorites, and I made no move to turn off

the music. I actually wanted Will to listen to the music that shaped my day-to-day world. Showing Will which music truly made me *feel* was another step more vulnerable still.

To my pleasure, he seemed to be listening attentively, staring at the ceiling with an intense look on his face. “Who are these guys again?”

I bumped my phone to light it up for him. “Letlive. Good, right?”

“Surprisingly, yes.”

“Surprising because you’re a music snob?”

Will smiled, and touched his temple to mine. “Shut up.” His tone was all warm and tender. The way a guy talks to someone he really likes. I knew that tone. It was the first time I’d heard him use it, though. A part of me died with happiness. Straight-up curled into a ball and died. “I guess whenever I hear the word ‘punk,’ I think, like, Blink-182 or Fall Out Boy.”

“Both solid bands. You’d better not be knocking them.”

“I am a bit.”

“We can agree to disagree.”

“They’re a bit more . . . simple than this.”

“I guess. They’re pop-punk junk food.”

Will laughed. “I love that. That’s perfect. Pop-punk junk food.”

Rejuvenated, I started flicking through my albums. “If you like them, you should check out these guys. They have this thing they do with harmonies that’s just argh, and the drummer, God, I could listen to a whole album of just his solos. Hold on, I’ll find them— what?”

Will was staring at me with a funny little smile. “Nothing. It’s cute how passionate you get about music. I feel like you could convince Bach all he was missing was some heavy bass guitar.”

“I really like music, I guess. So sue me.”

“Yeah, well, I really like you. So sue me.”

I took the earbud out slowly. Will blinked. “What?” he asked.

“Nothing. You’ve just never said that before.”

“What? That I like you?”

I grinned in response, and Will shook his head in amazement. “Of course I like you,” he said. “*Obviously* I like you. You’re ridiculous.”

“It’s just nice to get a confirmation.”

With that, Will ditched the phone and earbuds and rolled on top me as I laughed. “I like you,” he said, “*so much*, Ollie.”

I wrapped my legs around his hips and kissed him. Hearing those words felt like floating. Like the only thing keeping me pinned to the earth was the weight of Will’s body against mine. If he rolled off me, I was sure in that second, I would simply rise and rise until I’d left the atmosphere—and I’d either die of hypothermia or suffocation on the way up because the sky was really quite a hostile place for a human—but I *would not even mind*. I could die happy, after feeling like this.

I’d never felt like this.

Maybe this was it. The moment that marked a lifetime of being giddy with happiness, and totally secure, and *wanted*, because I was special to a person that was special to me. Some people waited years—a *lifetime*, even—to find a fit this perfect, but every now and then someone found their person as a teenager, right? Maybe I was one of those people. Maybe there wouldn’t be a comedown. We would just stay happy like this, until . . . until . . .

“Hey,” I whispered suddenly, pulling back. “When do you leave? Like, to go back home, I mean.”

“Um, like, four weeks? Ish?”

“What date?”

“The twenty-third. In the morning. Why?”

The twenty-third. That wasn’t even four weeks away. More like three and a half.

I hadn’t been thinking about the summer being over, because up until just now it’d felt like a lifetime away. But suddenly, three and a half weeks didn’t seem long. Not long at all.

“What happens then?” I asked in the most casual, offhanded way I could manage, given the implications of the question.

Will opened his mouth, then stopped himself. He looked to the side, then blinked a few times in rapid succession, running his tongue over his teeth.

I forced a laugh. “I don’t mean, like . . . like, “oh, let’s date” or anything. I’m not suggesting anything. Just thinking out loud.”

But he was already climbing off me, and I’d ruined it, I’d ruined *everything*. Popped our happy little bubble with my careless, impulsive *insistence* of blurting out everything that ever popped into my mind . . .

“Come on,” I pleaded. “Don’t get all weird about it. It was just a question.”

“I’m not getting weird. I’m just thinking.”

I sat up. “Thinking about what?”

“I don’t know, because I can’t hear myself.”

There was a sudden edge to his voice, and I reeled back. “Okay. Sorry.”

We sat in a silence that grew louder with every second. The space between us started to feel like an elastic band. Stretching, and stretching, and growing tighter and tighter, and he wasn’t talking, and his eyebrows were drawn together, and he was going to break up with me, I was sure of it, because I’d gone and made it all too-serious, and tighter, and tighter, and—

“Will?” I asked finally.

Snap.

“Don’t take this the wrong way,” he said slowly. “But maybe we shouldn’t have done that.”

“Don’t take it the wrong way?” I echoed.

“Just think about it—”

“—what other way am I supposed to *take that*?”

“We obviously have to end whatever this is in a few weeks. Maybe we should slow down. That’s all.”

We obviously have to end whatever this is.

Obviously.

Stupid me for thinking for a second this might be more than a brief fling, right? Stupid me for bringing up a question that had such an *obvious* answer. I nodded, pursing my lips. Then I snatched my T-shirt from the floor and pulled it over my head.

“Don’t be mad,” Will said, shuffling to face me as I dressed. “I’m just being honest.”

“You *should* be honest,” I said, my face flaming. “Only it might have been nice if you’d realized this *before* we”—I waved a hand—“did all that.”

“I wasn’t really thinking, I guess.”

I froze in place at that one. Why didn’t he just gut me next time? He could’ve grabbed a kitchen knife and ran it right through me and it couldn’t have hurt as much as those words did.

“Right,” I said dully.

“I don’t mean it like *that*—”

“No, it’s fine, Will.” I forced a smile. “I said you should be honest.”

“This is coming out wrong. Ollie, I meant it when I said I like you. And if we lived near each other, I wouldn’t be saying this at all. But everyone says long distance is useless.”

“It’s fine, I agree,” I said. It was only half the truth, but he didn’t need to know that.

“Long distance sucks.”

He nodded, then moved to sit on the edge of the bed.

“So, we still have almost four weeks,” I said. “Let’s just make the most of them, and deal with the end when it comes. We don’t have much choice.”

“Yeah,” said Will, but he sounded distinctly unconvinced.

I sat next to him with a creak of strings, and we sat, side by side, in the awkwardness. Then he silently dressed while I replayed every moment of this conversation in my mind, trying to figure out if there was anything I could say, or take back, to return to five minutes before when all he wanted to talk about was how much he liked me.

Why hadn’t I just shut up and let him gush?

“Are you trying to figure out the best way to tell me you don’t want to see me anymore?” I asked eventually.

A deep sigh racked his body. “No. But I could use a day or two to think.”

About *what*? Why did he need a day or two to think about whether he wanted to keep making out with me? Was this his attempt at breaking up with me without having to say the words? How would I know it was over, then? What if he didn’t reach out after a day or two? Was I allowed to nudge him after a while? Or did that just make me desperate?

What if this was the last time I ever spoke to him?

But even though my heart was racing, and I felt like if I didn’t find out the answer to every one of those questions right now I might actually die of worry, I didn’t ask them.

Will was a good person. If he needed a day or two, he could have a day or two. I would just have to trust that he wouldn’t leave me in strangled silence for the rest of the summer.

So, I said, “Okay. Of course.” And I tried not to let my lip wobble, and I tried not to let my eyes go glassy, and I tried not to let my voice shake. I only marginally succeeded on all three counts. But I did rein it in enough that I didn’t burst into tears, so it was a semi-win, I guess.

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine.” When he still didn’t make any move, I rocked from side to side. “Maybe you should go, then?”

“Yeah.” Without meeting my eyes, he dressed as quickly as he could, then I walked him to the front door.

How had I managed to wreck things so badly since he walked through it two hours ago?

Before he left, he hesitated. Probably unsure if we should hug or kiss goodbye. In response, I folded my arms across my chest.

“I’ll text you soon,” he said.

Then he was gone.

And I was left standing alone, staring at the closed door, replaying the same line over, and over.

“We shouldn’t have done that.”

“We shouldn’t have done that.”

It turned out that not messaging someone with desperate apologies after they’d asked for space because you freaked them out was way, way harder than I’d hoped.

The next day was overcast and unseasonably cool, so all seven of us crammed into Aunt Linda’s lake house for an inside family day. At first, I’d hoped it would be a good distraction, but there was no dragging my thoughts away from yesterday. While I baked cookies from scratch with Mom and Crista, I replayed the part where I basically asked Will to be my long-distance boyfriend and got myself super rejected.

When we watched *Moana*—Dylan’s choice—I barely heard a word of it, because I was too busy analyzing every second of what we’d done together before that conversation. Maybe, I realized, I was actually really, humiliatingly terrible at it, and I’d put Will off me forever. Maybe he was secretly planning on never seeing me again when I’d brought up the future, and he’d gone quiet because he couldn’t believe I could think he’d want to be with me after that performance.

During our attempt to teach Crista Go Fish while Dylan napped, I couldn’t think of anything but my body. There was a chance that when Will saw me without a shred of clothing on, he’d noticed that I had too much hair in some places, and not enough in other places, and how I had absolutely no muscle definition, like, anywhere. What if he’d expected to

see one thing, and the reality of me hadn't lived up to it, and he was completely turned off by the sight of me? What if he'd kept kissing me out of pity? It was possible—no, *probable*, even—that when I brought up the future, he'd cringed with pity at the idea that someone like him would want to stay with someone like me.

The not-knowing was fucking agony.

All I wanted was to message him for reassurance, but that was the one thing I'd been specifically asked not to do. So I told myself to get through another hour. And another. Just one more hour.

Just one more hour and he'll message.

Surely.

Any minute now.

It couldn't be over, just like that.

Could it?

How Hayley Was Definitely Responsible For Me Cracking After 2.68 Days

Ryan

Awesome awesome awesome.

Changes needed or good as is?

Not every song needs a guitar solo Ollie.

I listened to the demo you sent. It's really good!

Great as is. Suggestion: guitar solo?

I know but this feels like a guitar solo sort of song

It's begging for me to get in there and go wild

Please

I need this today

I will allow you to *propose* a guitar solo

We'll put it to a group vote. Make it good.

I will make it spectacular.

Ps why do you need this today?

Is everything ok re your aunt?

She's fine!!!

I just screwed things up with that guy I was telling you about.

It's fine.

That sucks man. I hated him anyway.

You don't know anything about him?

Sounds like he sucks to me.

I can tell.

His loss man.

Thank you Ryan that is surprisingly sweet of you

Of course.

My advice for next time is every time you want to talk about your feelings with a guy, DON'T, and remove some of his clothing instead.

Like strip poker, but for emotions.

Keeps it from getting weird.

I'm gonna go ahead and not do that, but thanks

That's why you're single man

You're single too

Yeah but for me it's on purpose

Hayley

Tell me not to message him.

He still hasn't reached out!? What an asshole!

Do not message him!

He's not necessarily an asshole yet!

He did ask for a couple of days.

And how many days ago was that?

2.68

Or so

He's being an asshole. He should at least give you an update.

Right! So I should message him and ask for an update then?

Don't you dare.

Sophie Gonzales

Will Tavares

Hey. I'm sorry to intrude on your space.
But are we ok?

Hayley

Don't you dare.

Oliver.

OLIVER WHAT DID YOU DO.

Right! So I should message him
and ask for an update then?

Um

So.

I AM SICK OF BEING ANXIOUS OK?

I JUST NEED TO KNOW! EITHER WAY!

Oh god he's replying oh god oh god oh
god

Will Tavares

Hey. I'm sorry to intrude on your space.
But are we ok?

Can we talk?

No

No??

Ok??

I don't want any part in any
conversation that starts with can we
talk.

What if we just make it easy and say
it's over so we don't have to deal with
the tough stuff?

No.

No??

Hayley

I AM SICK OF BEING ANXIOUS OK?

I JUST NEED TO KNOW! EITHER WAY!

Oh god he's replying oh god oh god oh
god

What's he saying?

Will Tavares

What if we just make it easy and say it's over so we don't have to deal with the tough stuff?

No.

No??

It's not over.

At least not unless you want it to be. And I guess I understand if you do. I just have stuff I need to say and if I try to text it it won't come out right.

Want me to call?

My parents can hear.

Ok. So when do you want to talk, then?

I'm pretty swamped tomorrow but I have an hour free after lunch?

Want to come over?

I'm taking Crista and Dylan to the lake around then. I promised. I could do morning or evening?

Hayley

Oh god he's replying oh god oh god oh
god

What's he saying?

OLLIE?? Excuse me!?

Will Tavares

I'm taking Crista and Dylan to the lake around then. I promised. I could do morning or evening?

Morning I'm busy with Dad then I have to go to a buffet in town for dinner. It's Mom's friend's birthday.

Ok. Guess we'll do it another day then.

Sorry.

Seriously, I'm sorry for freaking out on you like that. I don't want to end this if you don't.

I don't? But I guess I feel like everything's a bit weird right now?

I know. That's totally on me and my ridiculous overthinking. I'll explain when I see you?

Ok. We'll find a time.

Hayley

What's he saying?

OLLIE?? Excuse me!?

Heeeellloooooo?

OH MY GOD HAYLEY WHY DON'T I
JUST ADD YOU TO THE CHAT NEXT
TIME SO YOU CAN WATCH IN REAL
TIME

I'm bored 😞

Learn some patience woman

Video call?

Yes. Just give me a minute to finish up in
the bathroom.

I am texting you on the toilet.

You were meant to be my entertainment.

Wow ok that is too much
information Hayley

Watch YouTube or something next
time

LIKE A NORMAL PERSON

The Afternoon Will Dragged Me Back to His Sex Fort

Will Tavares

I had the most ridiculous dream about you last night.

Was I good?

Not a sex dream!

Well now I've lost all interest.

There was a sea monster in the lake and it kidnapped you because you had magic powers, and there was an evil magician using mind control to make the sea monster do its bidding. And it was going to drown you so the magician could steal your powers but don't worry I saved you.

Admittedly not what I expected. What were my powers by the way? You'd better have given me cool powers. Least you could do after the last few days.

Being supernaturally good in bed.

???

Ok it might have turned into a sex dream at some point.

Oh my god

I'M KIDDING. But do you sort of forgive me now?

Subconscious me was willing to do a LOT for you, Ollie!! You should've seen it!

Ok then. Watch me.

Now you've put me in danger in your subconscious, then saved me, but still in your subconscious? Not really? But nice try, very creative

Sorry, I can only see the things that happen in real life. You know. Because they're real.

Watch you what? You can't put me in danger so you can save me in real life, it won't work and it's super illegal.

Will?

Hello?

Will still hadn't replied by the time I took Crista and Dylan to the lake, and by that point I figured he must be busy with his family and stopped checking my messages.

Truthfully, I was only teasing when I said I didn't forgive him. Don't get me wrong, the two and a half days of silence had *sucked*, but at the end of the day, he'd asked for space to think, and then he'd given me an answer. Even if it hurt my feelings that he'd almost bailed when I asked about the future, it still wasn't something he'd done *wrong*. How did you get mad at someone for not being as excited about you as you were about them? You couldn't. You just had to suck it up.

So I had to suck it up. I guess.

I buried my toes in the sand while the kids played in the shallows. It was one of those days where it was so warm the horizon seemed wavy and distorted. The sky was a darker, richer blue than usual, contrasting starkly against the fir-covered hills across the lake.

A shadow to my right told me I wasn't alone. Not that I was strictly alone to begin with—there were at least forty others scattered around, bobbing in the water, lounging on beach towels, perched at picnic benches. But none of them noticed me.

Will sat down beside me, staring out at the lake as he did, and I had to hide my surprise. I guess it should've occurred to me to ask him to meet me here after lunch while he was free. But he hadn't mentioned that he was planning to come to me.

Today he wore dark denim shorts and a crisp white V-neck that made his warm skin seem even deeper. "Those kids yours?" he asked, without glancing at me.

He was being cute. I kind of loved it. Not so much that the lingering twinge of humiliation and sadness vanished completely, but enough to decide to shove it down for now.

"Nope. Never seen them in my life," I joked.

"Oh. Excellent. Shall we go somewhere a bit more private, then?"

He was obviously still doing a bit. I bumped my shoulder against his, grinning. "Wish I could. I'm on duty 'til at least two or three, though."

He kicked off his shoes and settled in. "Good thing I've cleared my calendar for the day."

I brightened despite myself. "Yeah? Don't you have that buffet tonight?"

"Technically, I do. But I thought about it, and realized I'd rather hang with you. Hope you don't mind me imposing."

"Well, it's a bit of an inconvenience."

"You'll forgive me for it eventually."

Crista noticed him first, and she sprinted out of the water, with Dylan toddling closely behind her.

"Will! Will, you missed me before, I did a handstand."

"A handstand? Now I'm impressed. Do you think you could do it again?"

She threw herself into another one. Aunt Linda had taught her to do them against the wall the week before, and she'd taken every opportunity to show off her new skill since. It was better than anything I could do, though, so when I clapped and cheered it was completely sincere.

As the kids returned to the water, Will brushed his fingertips along the outside of my thigh. It was brief enough that no one around would've noticed, but the touch still set me on fire.

"So, can I have you after we're done here?" he asked, his voice dropping to a murmur.

To talk about the last few days, presumably. The idea of going somewhere private so he could explain exactly how uncomfortable he'd felt when I'd shown my hand made me feel like walking into the lake and refusing to come back out, but I also weirdly wanted to hear his side of the story. Maybe I was a masochist? "I guess I could spare an hour or two."

I meant it as a joke, but my voice came out a little colder than I meant it to. The thing was, I wasn't *totally* sure what we were doing was a good idea anymore. It obviously meant more to me than it did to him if the mere whisper of commitment had freaked him out *that* much. And even if I couldn't blame him for going as far as he did with me when he wasn't all that interested—that was on me for assuming he felt the same without defining what we were—that didn't mean I had to stick around to let myself get hurt or even worse.

But still. I wanted to hear what he had to say. Because even though I couldn't think of many excuses he could give that would erase the embarrassment and remove the hurt, I wanted to believe there was one. I wanted to believe he could—*this* could—be what I'd thought it was.

A fairy tale, I guess.

I let out a groan that bordered on a growl when Will told me where he was taking me an hour later.

"I've already seen your sex fort *plenty*," I complained.

"Not a sex fort. And can you give me the benefit of the doubt, please?"

I rolled my eyes, but let him lead me through the woods, swatting insects buzzing around my arms as we pressed on.

"So," he said, as we started to draw close. "I wanted to explain . . . the last few days." He turned to look at me, waiting for my consent. I nodded, and he took my hand as we walked. "The thing is, I like you, and I didn't mean to like you this much. Not when we have an expiration date."

The words "expiration date" ripped at my insides. He might as well have swung an axe at me.

"Right."

"That's the thing, Ollie. I don't *want* us to have an expiration date. I've been ignoring it. But when you started talking about me leaving in a little while, I realized it's true."

That was when my brain managed to push past the sting of “expiration date,” and hear what he was saying.

He hadn’t freaked out because I talked about the future, and he didn’t want a future. He’d freaked out because he wanted a future, but he didn’t think we could have one. The knot that had been constricting my stomach over the last few days suddenly slackened.

I hadn’t been too intense for him. I wasn’t more invested than him.

A high-pitched “huh” escaped my mouth, and Will glanced sideways. “What?”

I wanted to say that he’d just said one of the only things that could possibly banish the pain and discomfort right from my chest, but, for the sake of my dignity, I didn’t want to let on just how upset I’d been over the last few days. So instead, I said, “I did *not* think that’s why you disappeared. I figured I came on too strong.”

“*What?* For asking a reasonable question? Don’t be ridiculous, you didn’t do anything wrong. It was all me.”

He squeezed my hand, and I squeezed back, and all at once I was borderline giddy with relief. “So, to clarify, you freaked out because you . . . wish we didn’t have to be over so soon?”

“Yeah. Pretty much.” He thought for a few seconds, then slowed us to a stop. The sex fort was only a few feet away now. “Put it this way. Have you ever cliff-jumped?”

“It’s not one of my hobbies, no.”

“Well, put it this way, if you jump into the water from a diving board or something, the water doesn’t hurt you. But the higher you jump from, the more harm the water can do. You have to know what you’re doing if you cliff-jump, because you hit the water like it’s concrete. If you climb too high and you don’t land right you can break a bone, or worse. You might as well jump off the roof of your house at that point.”

“I’ll keep that in mind if I ever get the urge to swan-dive off a cliff.”

“If you want to learn, I can teach you sometime?” Will said.

“There aren’t any cliffs here.”

“I didn’t mean here.”

“Oh.” I couldn’t resist breaking into a grin at this. The reference to life beyond summer wasn’t lost on me. “Maybe. We’ll see.”

“Off-topic, though.”

“Were we? I thought the topic was cliff-diving.”

“No, the topic is us. When you said what you said, I just had this image of hitting the water wrong. I figured if we left it for four more weeks, at the rate we’re going, I didn’t know if I could take that jump at the end. But if I jumped *then*, maybe I’d get out of it okay. Before we got any higher. Does this make any sense at all? It made sense in my head.”

I ran my thumb across his palm. “It makes total sense. So, why did you change your mind?”

“That night *sucked*. It sucked *so much*.” He started walking again, tugging me by my hand. “And the next two days weren’t any better. They got worse, if anything. I had to keep telling myself that if I didn’t give in and message you, I’d stop wanting to pretty quickly. But I didn’t. Then you finally messaged me, and it was like . . . getting air again after you’ve been underwater for too long. That’s when I realized I left it too late. It’s going to hurt like a bitch either way, now.”

Okay, so, *I’m not breaking up with you because it’ll hurt like a bitch* wasn’t exactly the sweeping statement of devotion everyone dreamed of hearing, but, in Will’s weird way, it was actually sort of romantic.

Wait, did he just imply he felt like he was drowning without me?

Make that a lot romantic.

Maybe the most romantic thing anyone had ever said to me, now that I thought about it.

“You should’ve bailed way earlier,” I said.

Will gave me a wry smile and a slow, one-sided shrug. “I know. Like, before I kissed you, earlier.”

“That early?”

“Honestly, I needed to jump before you said you came to North Carolina because every lake in California sucks.” He barked a laugh. “I was screwed from then on.”

“That wasn’t even—I wasn’t even making any sense. I was all scrambled.”

“I know,” he murmured.

He just didn’t care.

Oh. So this is what it felt like for someone to see you, right down to your soul, and smile anyway.

We'd reached the sex fort. Will stopped us and dropped my hand to reach into his pocket. "I realized today I had something important to take care of before we went any further. Dad understood I needed to bail on him, luckily."

Divorce Certificate

This certifies that

William Jorge Tavares & Autumn Rose Roberts

Ended their marriage through divorce at: Autumn's living room

On 31st of July 2020

Magistrate: Betsy

Witness: Ben Perkins

At the bottom of the paper, under Magistrate signature, was a muddy paw print.

"Oh my God," I said in amused disbelief.

"Autumn's doing well," Will said. "Good to see she's still breathing. Ben was a bit pissed off to find out she was already taken, but we came to an understanding."

"You're . . ." I shook my head. "Ridiculous."

"Thank you." With that, he reached into his pocket again and pulled out a second folded piece of paper.

"I have some promises," he said.

"Wait, are those vows?"

"No, they're promises."

"Promises are vows. Is this a fake wedding? Is that why you got divorced?"

"Dude, we've only known each other a month. It's too soon to get fake-married."

I sniffed. "Well, what's the timeline on these things? I not going to wait forever."

"Ollie, *shh*." He cleared his throat dramatically and read aloud. "Oliver. If you forgive me for freaking out, I promise to be totally chill about the fact that in three weeks, I will be saying goodbye to you for a really long time. I promise that if we don't ever see each other again for whatever reason, I'll always remember this summer as the best one of my life. And I promise that I will make the absolute most of the time we do have together. In conclusion," his eyes flickered up, "you're worth any fall."

I swallowed. "I do."

Will dropped the paper to his side and tipped his head back. "Oh my God, Ollie, *shh*."

“I just saying I forgive you for freaking out! That phrase isn’t exclusive to fake-weddings, you know.”

He folded the paper, went to put it in his pocket, then, on second thought, handed it to me instead. “Also, your family. Do you trust them to keep it to themselves if they run into my parents?”

I nodded vigorously. “Definitely. I’ll hammer it into them.”

“Okay. Then I don’t mind them knowing we’re . . .” He broke off and twisted his mouth in confusion. “I don’t really know what to call us.”

I hugged my arms to myself. Every inch of exposed skin was covered in insect bites by this point, but I barely even noticed. “We probably don’t need to call us anything. We just are.”

He stepped into me and rubbed my arms, sending chills straight up to my shoulders and down my spine. “We’re just us?”

“Yeah,” I said. “We’re just us.”

HOW WE ENDED

When We Said “The End”

For the next three weeks, the last day hung before us like a signed death warrant with no chance of a stay. Even though we agreed to ignore it, in the end we could only pretend to. I’d brought it up, and now that we’d opened that can of worms, we couldn’t just magically forget that every day that passed brought us closer to saying goodbye.

The week of, I started to feel a weight on my heart.

The day before, my heart began to race whenever I looked at him, as some primal force within me begged: *don’t let him go*.

Then the last day arrived.

Will had told his parents in advance he was spending his last day alone with me, morning to night (as platonic, friendly friends often did—Will’s parents weren’t exactly detectives, apparently). We spent most of it hanging out by the lake, moving between the water and the shore, talking about everything but the countdown that’d started in our minds. We only headed inside briefly—to raid the refrigerator for a late dinner—and it was there that I remembered the enormous floating raft Aunt Linda had brought over with them. We’d used it once, at the start of the trip, and promptly forgotten to inflate it again. The moment we’d finished eating, Will and I fished it out of its box and dragged it to the lake’s edge.

“This is gonna take years to blow up,” Will complained. “You sure it won’t be quicker to head back to my house and grab our pump?”

“No way,” I said, plopping on the ground and dragging the raft into my lap. “I have an excellent lung capacity.”

“Oh, right, you’re in a band.”

I gave him a funny look. “Oh, yeah, all that time playing guitar really helped me with breath control.”

“Well, I don’t know, Ollie, I assumed you might sing sometimes! Don’t give me that attitude!”

“Ryan sings. If I tried singing at a gig we’d never get asked back.”

I started blowing up the raft and Will crouched down beside me, looking disappointed. “You don’t sing at all?”

I shook my head, still blowing.

“Oh. That *way* less hot.”

I knitted my eyebrows together indignantly, and he gave me a mischievous smile.

“Kidding. Mostly.”

He watched me blow for about five minutes, then offered to take over while I had a break. I was just starting to regret turning down the offer of the pump when the raft finally started looking less like crumpled plastic and more like a raft. I took one last shift once Will started panting between blows, and then it was done. There were four seats in total, with metal cup holders inserted in the middle. We climbed in opposite each other and kicked off as the sky started to turn peach with the approaching sunset.

I tipped my head back against the raft and frowned at the sky. Sunset meant night. I wasn't ready for what night meant. Not yet.

Will nudged my foot with his. “It's gonna be weird.”

I strained my neck up to look at him. “What is?”

He lifted a lazy hand. “Going back to real life.”

Real life. That was one way of putting it. Had this not been real? Was this, all this, just a blip? A detour? *We interrupt your regularly scheduled program?*

“You were better than real life,” I whispered.

Lying back like this, all I could see was sky. Violet and peach. Cloudless. Endless. There was nothing solid between us and the universe.

It kind of felt like the universe was staring back at me right now. What was it thinking? Did it find it funny to throw me into the orbit of the best person I'd ever met, only to rip me away on a different path? Or was it all unplanned? Were we just two figures bouncing around at random, only to collide and recoil? An action, followed by an equal opposite reaction?

“Do you ever feel like there's a bunch of versions of you?” Will asked.

I snapped back to earth. “Um. I don't know. What do you mean?”

“Like . . . I guess I feel like there's all these different Wills walking around. When I'm around my parents I'm who they want me to be. With my friends, I'm more fun, but we never talk like this. When I'm on the court, I'm all focused and competitive. You know?”

“Yeah, I know. I think everyone feels like that sometimes. People bring out different sides in us.”

He dipped a hand in the water and swirled it around. “Yeah. Exactly.”

I grinned up at the universe. “Which side do I get?”

“Well, that’s the thing. The person I am with you is the person I am when no one else is in the room. Like, I sound like myself when we’re talking, and we have the same sense of humor and stuff. I don’t think I’ve ever felt like that with someone before. I guess it feels like tomorrow I have to go back to only being that person when I’m alone.”

My heart started thudding in my throat. So, it was time to talk about tomorrow, then.

Now was the moment to be brave. The last time I’d brought up the future, I’d caused Will to go into meltdown. But that hadn’t been because he didn’t want a future. And in that discussion, it’d sort of been treated as a given that we had to end.

But we didn’t *have* to end.

Honestly, I wasn’t ready for it to end. Not because I was in denial. Because a relationship with Will that consisted of texts, and photos, and video chats in stolen moments of privacy, sounded far and beyond better than the alternative. I wanted Will in my life, whatever that looked like. Even if I could never have all of him again.

“Will,” I said carefully. I couldn’t bear to look at his reaction, so I didn’t lift my head. “I don’t want to try to forget about you tomorrow. I know we aren’t boyfriends or anything, but that doesn’t mean I can just switch you off, okay?”

Will sat up abruptly, rocking the raft in an alarming way. I propped myself up on my elbows to meet his earnest brown eyes. “What are you saying?” he asked.

“When you talk about only being this version of you when you’re alone, it sounds like you’re not planning on talking to me again. And that’s not what I want.”

“Ollie. Hey.” Will reached out a hand for me to grab, then pulled me upright to face him. “I don’t want that, either. Oh my God, you think I *want* that?” I shrugged, and he clasped my hand between both of his. “That’s ridiculous. If there was any way to keep you here, I’d do it.”

“But I’m not *going* to be here,” I said, jolting my hand—and, in the process, his—for emphasis. “That doesn’t change things for me, though. I want to put it out there, so we’re totally clear, that I still want to know you, Will. Even if it’s only online. Even if we never see each other in person again.”

Will was nodding frantically before I’d even finished speaking. “Yes. Of course, yes. Please.”

“Okay. Good.”

“And who knows. Maybe one day we’ll get a second chance.”

I couldn’t even entertain that. “Come on, Will. You won’t stay single for long.”

“Why *me*?”

I gestured from his perfect face down to his perfect body, and he rolled his perfect eyes.

“You never know. I might wait for you.”

I scoffed. “And why would you wait around for someone you’ll *probably* never live near?”

He stayed completely serious. “Well, because I’ve never met anyone I like as much as you.”

At that moment, I kind of hated the universe. This really was a sick joke. This really could’ve been perfect, in another life. Another time.

“What’s with the look?” he asked.

I blinked and forced a fake smile. “Nothing. I’m just, um. Going to miss you.”

The understatement of the century.

Will’s voice was hollow when he replied, “Yeah.”

It felt like there was more hanging just beneath his words. If we had more time together, maybe I would’ve been able to figure out what that something more was. But I had a feeling I’d never know. The secret of how Will really felt—what Will really meant—was going to leave with him. And all I could do was watch him leave, and be happy I ever knew him at all. And try not to resent the person who got to keep him around for good one day.

My gaze drifted past Will to the shore, then I bolted upright in shock. “Shit, Will, we’ve drifted.”

He turned to look at the shore, which was now so far in the distance I couldn’t make out the ages or appearance of the people gathered at the lake’s edge.

“Oh shit.” He grimaced, then turned to me with a hopeful glint in his eye. “You know, that means we can do whatever we want and no one will see?”

“And float to the other side of the lake in the meantime?” I asked.

“Thank you for your faith in my stamina!”

I hid a smile and started paddling in the water with only one hand. Will watched me with an amused expression as I tried this for twenty unsuccessful seconds before I slapped the water in disgust.

“Good try,” he said, and I splashed water at him in response.

“Well, what do *you* suggest we do? We don’t have an engine. Or a paddle.”

“I suggest we swim back. And next time you buy a floating toy, keep an eye out for one of the ones with engines, that sounds like great fun.”

“Freaking smart-ass,” I muttered, before climbing off the edge of the raft and plunging into the frigid water.

Will jumped in after me, and together we started yanking the raft back to shore. Even working together it was painstakingly slow, and before long we were shivering as the sun finished setting and cast us in increasing darkness.

“Wait, wait, wait,” he said as we started to draw near the shore. I paused, treading water and panting, and he pulled me closer. “This might be the last time I get to kiss you.”

The words hit me with a shot of nausea, and when his lips met mine, I felt like I was being pulled down beneath the water. Like a brick had landed in the pit of my stomach to weigh me down and drown me.

“When we get out, that’s it, isn’t it?” I asked through the nausea when he pulled away. We hadn’t talked about curfews tonight—I guess to avoid feeling trapped by another, more urgent countdown—but there had been something so final in his voice just now.

Time’s up.

“We have to leave really early,” Will said. “My parents wanted me home by sunset. I’m actually late right now.”

“No, totally. Totally.”

We bobbed, staring at each other. What did you say when words couldn’t fix a thing?

I kissed him one more time. Then again. Then again. But I didn’t feel it. My mind had already raced ahead, so fixated on the fact that the kiss would be over soon that I wasn’t present for it at all.

This was useless. It was already over. Time to rip the Band-Aid off.

“Okay, so,” I said, careful to keep my voice steady. “Let’s get you home.”

A few minutes later we'd finally reached the shore and deflated the offending raft. Laughter rang out in the far distance, but in the dark, no one was close enough to see. Which meant they couldn't see us.

In this light, I could barely see *Will*. So it took me longer than it should've to notice him wiping tears away with a clenched fist.

That set me off straight away. All the composure I'd held onto so proudly crumbled away, and my eyes burned with tears of my own. "It's okay," I said, wrapping my arms around his shoulders. My voice was trembling and thin.

"I don't want this. I don't—I don't—"

"I know," I said gently. His hair was smooth and thick against my fingertips as I ran them through it. "Me neither."

He took a deep breath, then started chewing on a cuticle. "Can we say 'see you around' instead of 'goodbye'?"

"Of course. Because we might, still. One day."

"We might. So." He tipped his head back and blinked rapidly. "See you around?"

"You don't want me to walk you back to your place?" I asked.

He shook his head. Of course. He needed to collect himself before he got to his house or he'd have to explain why he ended our platonic-friendly friends-time hangout session with tears streaming down his cheeks.

I went to reach for him—to stop him, or to hold him, I wasn't sure. But I thought better of it. If we dragged this on, we'd never let go.

"I'll see you around then," I said. He was nodding too rapidly, looking everywhere but at me. Then, with pursed lips and wide eyes, he gave me a searching look that gut-punched me with a visceral despair.

It was time to jump now. But how high had we climbed?

How far was this fall?

He turned and walked away into the darkness.

Only once I was sure he wasn't going to run back to me did I dare to let my tears fall. Luckily, unlike Will, I didn't have to cover them. I strode to my house and broke through the front door to find Mom and Aunt Linda talking quietly at the table. They broke off when they saw my face.

I lifted my chin and joined them sitting at the table, then laid my head in my arms, my face crumpling. Someone started rubbing my back, but I couldn't tell who.

"Oh, Ollie," Aunt Linda murmured. "It's so hard. I'm sorry."

"I just . . . why does he have to live *here*?" My voice was choked and muffled against my arms.

"It's not fair," she agreed. "But you never know. You could see each other again. Life takes you to strange places sometimes."

"Right," Mom jumped in. "Maybe he'll go west for college?"

"Sure," Aunt Linda said. "That's what I meant."

"Of course. I was just expanding."

I peeked up at them. "I know what you meant," I said. "That's just so far away."

"A year's nothing, kid," Mom said. She was the one who was rubbing my back. "You can do anything for a year."

"It's an *important year* for Ollie," Aunt Linda said.

"It is. But some things are *more important*."

I drew my brows together. I wasn't quite following. "So . . . I should wait for him?" I asked.

Both Mom and Aunt Linda looked confused by the question.

"Take it day by day," Mom said, dropping her hand. "Don't borrow tomorrow's problems. If it doesn't work out, he'll be a wonderful memory."

"I don't want him to just be a memory."

Aunt Linda's smile had a tinge of sadness to it. "We don't always get to keep people forever."

Mom glanced at her, and for a moment she looked crestfallen. I was pretty sure we weren't talking about Will anymore.

I cleared my throat. "What if I'm not ready for that?"

I wasn't talking about Will anymore, either.

Aunt Linda took my hand and squeezed it. "It's not the sort of thing you learn to be ready for. It's just one of life's worse inevitabilities. The only thing we can do is live in the moment with people while we're still able."

A horrible thought occurred to me. When we left this week, this might be the last time we said goodbye to Aunt Linda. There might not be any more moments.

Why couldn't I just wind back the clock to two weeks ago and live in that day for the rest of my life? Why did autumn have to come?

What if I didn't survive all these falls?

When We Said “Not Yet”

Will Tavares

Meet me in the lake. By the end of the jetty, to the right of your house.

He meant *by* the lake, right? *In* had to be a typo, didn't it? It was two o'clock in the morning. He was lucky I woke up when he texted me.

But there was no one standing on the jetty. There was, however, a pile of clothes barely visible at the end of it.

I stole a quick glance around to make sure I was definitely, certainly, totally alone, and hurried along the jetty. *Way to make me feel exposed, Will.*

He was treading water just beyond the edge of the jetty, a small, stark face smiling up at me from the black lake. “What are you doing?” I asked.

“Perfect night for a swim, isn't it?”

So much for ripping the Band-Aid off. “Don't you have to drive home in four hours?”

“I'm not the one in the driver's seat. I can nap then. I wanted to see you again.”

“Will . . .”

“Come in.”

“But it's dark,” I whined.

“I won't let anything eat you. I promise.”

I hesitated. For nobody but him. I swear, nobody in this world but Will would be able to convince me to strip off and plunge into an icy, dark lake of death during the freaking witching hour.

But I did it, didn't I?

As soon as I was in the water, his arms were around my shoulders, and his lips were on mine. He kissed me like he'd never get the chance to do it again. And that's damn well how I kissed him back.

"Screw tomorrow," I managed, when I pulled away.

Will traced a finger along my bottom lip. "It's gonna come, whether you want it to or not."

"I know. And you'll be gone, and you'll forget all about me in a few weeks." I knew I sounded needy and insecure, but it was a fear that'd been niggling at the back of my mind over the last several hours while I'd lay in bed, staring at the ceiling, consumed by fear. I just wanted to hear him say, one last time, that this was special. That this wasn't over.

Will laughed and shook his head. "I'll definitely never forget you. I don't think I've ever been this happy. That won't vanish just because we'll be—"

"On opposite sides of the country," I finished dryly.

"It could be worse. You could live in, like, Australia or something."

"I might as well."

He kissed me again. Goodbye kiss number seventy-six. "Promise me we'll find a way to see each other again."

"I can't promise that."

"Then lie. Please."

"We'll see each other again," I whispered into his mouth. He placed his hands on my waist and ran them down, thumbs pointed toward my center. "This wasn't a blip. You watch, something will happen, like you'll . . . have a surprise basketball game scheduled in San Jose—"

He snorted with laughter.

"—and I'll come see you, and we'll go to the beach, and you can meet my friends. You'd love it in California."

"I could live in California, I think," he said, his hands trailing lower. I pulled closer to encourage him as they did. "One day. I'm not ruling it out."

Thank God he'd texted me. Thank God I could keep kissing him, and touching him. Thank God the tears and the nods weren't the last moment we ever had.

Then his hands stopped their descent, and I started praying in a slightly different way.

He clasped a hand over my mouth, stifling me. “Shh! Not so loud.”

“Everyone’s . . . asleep . . .”

“Yeah, and I’d like to keep it that way!”

He pushed me ahead of him until my back hit one of the wooden pillars. This time, when he kissed me, he was able to press his body against mine using the pillar as a brace. The sheer amount of skin on skin almost made me lose my damn mind. “The weather’s better,” I forced out.

“Hmm?”

“In California. It’s . . . always lake weather.”

“Oh. Maybe you can show me one of those lakes you hate so much?”

“We’ll go one night. They’re best at night.”

“I’m starting to see that for myself.”

My breath hitched in response, and I lost the ability to reply altogether.

We stayed by the lake long after our fingers started to wrinkle, moving between the jetty and the shore and the water. This conversation was easier than any we’d had during the day; I guess now we’d had our heavy goodbye, the countdown had disappeared. We were on bonus time, now.

Sometime during our third return to the water, I started shaking from the cold. We’d been out in the open, throwing on clothing and tearing it off again, for somewhere between five minutes and five hours. Time didn’t really have a meaning.

Will wrapped his arms around me when he realized. “Oh my God. You’re freezing! Let’s get you inside.”

“I’m fine. Five more minutes. Then we can go.”

“Five more minutes because you desperately want to swim, or five more minutes because you don’t want to say goodbye yet?”

I shrugged, but I was sure he could see the answer on my face.

“If I said let’s go to your room for a while, would you get out then?”

I was off and paddling toward the ladder before he’d even finished the question.

We crept into my house as quietly as we could. Every step, every tiny floorboard creak, felt like a scream. Until the moment we made it through my bedroom door and closed it behind us, I was convinced Mom or Dad would appear in the shadows. Probably with glowing red eyes. But, amazingly, we made it.

While I flicked the lamp on, Will grabbed the blanket from my bed and turned to me. "Take your clothes off," he whispered.

"*Again?* Give a guy a second to recharge."

He rolled his eyes. "Your clothes are wet."

I did as I was ordered, and he wrapped the blanket tightly around my shoulders. "See?" he asked. "Better?"

I climbed onto the bed in my blanket-cocoon, and Will joined me. "You can come in if you don't bring *your* wet clothes," I said, opening the blanket.

He didn't need to be asked twice. Seconds later, he crawled into my cocoon with me. His skin was cool from the water and night air, and I pulled him against me until our pooled heat stopped both of our shivering.

"Hey, Ollie?"

I put on a serious face. "Yes, William?"

"There's something I actually wanted to do. While we still can."

"Yes?"

His eyes went darker, and he unwrapped the blanket, exposing us both. Then he backed up, so he was kneeling between my legs.

"*Oh,*" I forced out as my brain went into overdrive. Was he . . . ? Yes, no, I definitely wasn't imagining this. He definitely wanted to do that. And it wasn't something I'd ever done before. And even though Ryan and Hayley both called this third base, personally, I'd always considered this to be sex. I mean, the phrase was *oral sex*, after all. So, as far as I was concerned, this was a home run. A.K.A., my first time. Essentially, holy fuck, I was about to have my first time with Will Tavares.

Yes.

Yes, yes, yes.

Absolutely, hands down, the best proposition I'd ever been given in my life.

"Is this okay?" Will asked, his hands spread over my thighs.

Yes.

I laughed nervously. “Oh, no, terrible. Absolutely horrible idea.”

“Wait, really?” He pulled his hands back in and straightened, eyes wide.

Oh my God, Ollie, can you please not ruin this for yourself?

“Sorry, I was trying to be funny, because I’m actually very, very down for this, but that was *not* an appropriate moment for sarcasm. So, um, to be as clear as I possibly can, this is one thousand percent okay, it’s super, *very* okay.”

Will blinked, then sighed. “Shit, I’m gonna miss you,” he said softly. “So, we landed on ‘yes,’ yeah?”

“Yes. Yeah, yes. Yeah.”

With a snort, Will bit his lower lip and drew forward again. “Okay then.”

“You leave in an hour,” I said.

Will, who had his head resting against my bare chest, tilted his head up to look at me.

“Hmm.”

“One hour, Will.”

He made a face and traced a finger along my stomach. Our skin was dry now. If you didn’t know it, you wouldn’t have been able to tell we’d been in the lake thirty minutes earlier.

Thirty minutes ago, I’d never had sex. And now I had. With a guy who was about to walk right out of my life.

“Will you walk me back to mine?” he asked, as if on cue.

“You want me to sneak out of my own house at five in the morning, walk you around the other end of the lake, then sneak back into my house?”

“... Yes?”

“Of course I will. Don’t know why you felt you had to ask.”

It took us longer than it probably should’ve to get dressed—mostly because Will kept rudely interrupting the process to kiss my legs, and stomach, and arms one last time before I covered them back up—but eventually we managed to get ourselves looking kind of presentable. We slipped outside fairly easily, thanks to my silent front door, and then started walking through

the darkness. My legs felt like they belonged to a turtle. Everything weighed so much more than it should've.

It had gone too fast. All of this had gone too fast.

"Do you have to go?" I asked.

"Do *you*?" he shot back.

"Please visit," I said. Sure, we'd talked about visits, but they'd felt like hypothetical fantasies. The same as when you talk about what you'll do with your jackpot money when you win the lottery you never bought a ticket for. But I didn't want those visits to only be a story we'd told ourselves to ease the sting of what was coming.

He grabbed onto my wrist and stopped me from going any farther. "Seriously, we need to make a promise now, okay? One of us will make sure we visit the other as soon as we can."

"Okay."

"We can't just say it, though, we have to do it. I don't want this to be over. Maybe it doesn't have to be, right?"

I shrugged. I just didn't know the answer to that.

"We need to stay in touch," he said in a determined sort of way. He was gesturing in front of him, like he was laying down the law or something. "We need to keep talking, and we'll figure something out. Maybe I can get out there for spring break or something. Or maybe you'll come back to visit your aunt, and we can organize to meet up somewhere."

I had a horrible feeling I was about to cry again. All I could do was give a short nod.

Will cupped my face with one of his hands and stared at me with serious brown eyes. "Please don't lose contact, okay? I need to see you again."

"As long as you still want me to be, I'll be there," I said.

"I'll want you to be."

"Okay then." I drew a deep breath. "See you around?"

"Second time lucky," he said.

"Third, if you count the time you kind of dumped me a few weeks ago," I said quickly.

"Okay. Third time lucky, then." He kissed my forehead, then stepped backward. "See you around, Ollie."

This time when he walked away, I didn't cry. I felt weirdly okay. This didn't feel like an ending. Not just yet. Maybe we'd make this work after all. Maybe we'd stay in touch, and see

each other during the year, like he'd said. Maybe at the end of the year, college would bring us closer together, like Mom and Aunt Linda had guessed. There were a million maybes that ended with us together.

As long as there were maybes, there was hope. And I intended to hope until we'd run out of maybes altogether.

My phone buzzed in my pocket. It was a message from Will.

Good night.

Yeah. There was reason to hope.

Good night, I wrote back, before slipping my phone back in my pocket.

At home, I got through the front door without a sound. I tiptoed into the house, dodging the creaking floorboards, and made my way carefully to the hallway, where I came face-to-face with Dad leaving the bathroom.

I stared at him.

He looked back at me, clearly taking in the fact that I was fully dressed, shoes and all, coming in from the direction of the front door.

Okay, there was no way to talk my way out of this.

Dad's voice was a little angry, but it was mostly just tired. "Get to bed. We're talking about this with your mom in the morning."

I cringed. "Yeah. Okay. Good night."

He raised an eyebrow, then shook his head. There was a touch of a smile on his lips, though. "Good *night*, Ollie."

I made my way to my bedroom and collapsed onto the bed, kicking my shoes off where I lay. I pulled out my phone to message Will that I got caught, then thought better of it. If he was trying to get a thirty-minute nap in before he headed home, the last thing he needed was me waking him up.

I'd speak to him tomorrow.