

Daydream



HANNAH GRACE

Sunday Times bestselling author of *ICEBREAKER*

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Daydream

HANNAH GRACE



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For the eldest daughters in my life

I see you

I appreciate you and most important

I love you for who you are and not what you do for everyone

Playlist

ART | TYLA 2:29
DAYDREAMIN' | ARIANA GRANDE 3:31
HOSTAGE | BILLIE EILISH 3:49
LET ME GO | GIVÉON 2:57
WHAT MAKES YOU BEAUTIFUL | ONE DIRECTION 3:20
END OF AN ERA | DUA LIPA 3:16
MARJORIE | TAYLOR SWIFT 4:18
VALENTINE | LAUFÉY 2:49
NEVER KNOCK | KEVIN GARRETT 4:36
WE CAN'T BE FRIENDS (WAIT FOR YOUR LOVE) | ARIANA GRANDE 3:49
GIRL I'VE ALWAYS BEEN | OLIVIA RODRIGO 2:01
DON'T | BRYSON TILLER 3:18
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LITTLE THOUGHTS | PRIYANA 1:12
I MISS YOU | BEYONCÉ 2:59
HOW DOES IT MAKE YOU FEEL | VICTORIA MONÉT 3:36
TEENAGE DREAM | KATY PERRY 3:48
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DANDELIONS | RUTH B. 3:54

“But a Book is only the Heart’s Portrait—every Page a Pulse.”

—Emily Dickinson

A Letter from Hannah

Dearest reader,

I know you're eager to get started, but I just want to set the stage before you dive into Henry and Halle's love story. I said this would be a "quick note," but as I sit here and work out what I want to say, I can tell it isn't going to be, so buckle up.

Since I first published *Icebreaker*, I've received so many messages asking if Henry will receive a diagnosis to explain the traits that I've always called "neurodivergent coded." The short answer is no, he doesn't.

Some of you might be thinking, okay? Cool? I could have read the book to find that out... but I know many of you feel represented by Henry, or might be on a journey of your own, and knowing this ahead of time might be important to you.

I've always said I wouldn't write a diagnosis storyline, so this shouldn't be a shock to the ones who have followed me for a while. There are so many reasons why, but aside from the real-life obstacles Henry might face in the health-care system, the main reason is people live fulfilled lives every day without an explanation for why they feel different.

It doesn't make anyone, their wants, or their needs less valid to not have a medical diagnosis.

Henry and his actions have always been loosely based on my own and it's taken thirty years to receive my AuDHD diagnosis, something I did not have when I started writing Henry. When I was twenty like Henry, frustrated and upset because it felt like my brain just would *not* work properly and I was suffocating, at no point did anybody think it could be something more than the anxiety and depression I was diagnosed with.

I've been very honest that this book was difficult for me to write. I wanted to get it right for you all, and more important, I wanted to get it right for Henry.

I put a bit of myself in every character I create: Anastasia's anxiety, Nate's self-sacrifice, Aurora's need to be wanted, Halle's loneliness, and the internal scars Russ has because of his father's gambling addiction. I've spent a lot of time worrying about people understanding Henry for the parts of him—parts of me—that shut down or need to be alone. The part of me that exhausts herself mirroring those around her and soaking up their characteristics like a sponge. The part of me that tries so hard and still gets things so, so wrong.

Ironically, the pressure I put on myself to not let you all down was possibly the most Henry thing I could do.

I believe Henry is the character who has changed the most since I created him, but that's because I've changed so much since I gave you all Nate and Stassie.

I hope you read this story and see a man who *loves* the people around him, and when it comes to conflict, you watch through a lens knowing not everyone thinks the same way.

I *truly* hope *Daydream* was worth waiting for.

Get comfortable, she's a long one.

All my love,
xo, Hannah

Chapter One

HALLE

“I THINK WE SHOULD BREAK up, Halle.”

Will’s somber expression looks ridiculous against the backdrop of my kitchen. The frills and florals once picked by my nana, always too sentimental and nostalgic for me to replace. Lemon-yellow cabinets, a DIY project undertaken after she learned to mix dry martinis at home with Mrs. Astor from next door. Joy, the Ragdoll cat Nana bought to celebrate me moving in, snoozing on the breakfast bar surrounded by crochet fish. The smell of the second batch of croissants, because I always ruin the first.

It’s all too domestic. Too unserious. Too normal to warrant his rigidity.

His eyes follow my every move as I remove the This Is Me Baking apron he bought for my birthday, like he’s waiting for me to have some kind of dramatic outburst. The tightness in his jaw accentuates the sharp angles of his face, and he looks nothing like the laid-back guy I’ve dated for the past year, and even less like my friend of ten years. No, this Will looks very much like a man on the edge.

After hanging my apron on the hook beside the stove, I pull a stool toward me so we can sit opposite each other at the breakfast bar. When I rest my face on my palm, I’m not sure if I’m intentionally mirroring him or if this is the result of knowing each other so long.

He reaches across the counter and takes my hand in his, giving it a tight squeeze, an encouragement. “Say something, Hals. I still want to be your friend.”

I need to say something. What I lack in experience, I make up for in common sense, so I’m fairly confident that breakups are a two-way conversation. I squeeze his hand back so I at least *appear* to be engaging with him. “Okay.”

This isn’t how I imagined my first breakup would go. I never expected to feel... nothing? I thought I’d physically feel my heart crack in my chest. That the birds would stop singing and the skies would turn gray, and while there is the emptiness I once imagined, it’s somehow not the same. I’m not necessarily sure it’s normal to imagine your first heartbreak, but I thought mine would be the tiniest bit interesting at least. But sadly, in line with my love life as a whole, this is bland. Nothing shatters and the sky is the same blue it always is here in Los Angeles.

“You don’t need to hold back, Hals. You can be honest about how you feel.”

His encouragement to speak my mind almost makes this whole thing worse. Taking my hand from his, I press my palms into my thighs and weigh the best way to tackle this. “I’m not. You’re right; I don’t think we’re supposed to be more than friends.”

Will blinks twice, hard. “You agree? You’re not upset?”

I get the overwhelming sense that Will wants me to be upset, and I can't say I blame him. I'd be happy to be upset because at least if I was, I could believe that I'm capable of falling in love.

Because I really, really wanted to fall in love with him.

I'm not a person who struggles with words, but right now you wouldn't be able to tell that about me. I have no desire to hurt Will, which is why it's so hard to find the right thing to say. I'm honestly beginning to regret not faking an emotional outburst.

"It's not that I'm not upset; I just don't think we should drag things out if we're not working. I love you, Will. I don't want to compromise our friendship trying to have a relationship." *More than we already have*, is what I don't say.

"But you're not in love with me," he adds, the bitterness clear in his tone. "Are you?"

If I could kick myself, I would. "Does that even matter when you're in the middle of breaking up with me?"

It's like I kicked *him*. "It matters to me. Saying you love me and being in love with me isn't the same thing. But you're not, are you? You never have been, and that's why you're happy."

I can't believe he thinks that this is me happy. Does he know me at all?

To everyone but the two of us, Will Ellington and I were inevitable.

When my parents split up and my mom married my stepdad, Paul, we relocated from New York to Arizona for Paul's job. The Ellingtons lived next door and our parents quickly became best friends. I've lost track of the number of holidays and vacations we've spent together over the past decade, meaning Will and I had little choice when it came to spending time together.

However, there was never tension between us. No will-they-won't-they rumors, no lingering hands or secret moments. Just Halle and Will, neighbors who were good friends.

We survived high school together, and I watched him date everyone in our class without a "You Belong with Me" moment in sight. Then a year ago, when we were both home from college for the summer, Will invited me to be his date to a wedding. I'm pretty confident he had a first choice, and it wasn't me, but my invitation came in the form of pressure from his parents.

Ever the *traditionalists*, they didn't think it was healthy for a woman to spend her summer reading and writing, because I'd "never find a boyfriend hunched over a book." Even when my teenage sister, Gigi, told them the 1800s called and wanted their mindset back, they still insisted I accept the invitation.

It was at the wedding, after too many gulps from a wine bottle we'd stolen from one of the tables, that we had the kiss that sparked this whole mess.

It was exciting at first, and those two weeks before we went back to school, I saw our relationship in a whole new way. Will had always been popular, and as much as I despise admitting it now, I felt special that he wanted to date me.

He was the captain of our high school hockey team, a future NHL star according to those in the know. He'd always been handsome and charismatic; he could get himself out of any situation with that charming smile of his. College had only increased his confidence, and during my visits throughout our freshman year, it was clear he was as well liked there as he had been back home.

So, all things considered, why wouldn't I want to date him when everyone else did? He was my only friend. It made sense, right?

I was captain of nothing, with no need to get myself out of any situation because I wasn't doing anything of interest. There isn't a long list of complimentary adjectives that follow when people talk about me. So yeah, I was a little flattered.

Our parents were elated, naturally. Their dreams of wedding planning and shared grandchildren felt that much closer, and it didn't matter that I was going to be in Maple Hills and he was going to be in San Diego. It's only two hours away, and they were certain we'd be totally fine because I could arrange my schedule around Will's hockey commitments.

No. Big. Deal.

Their confidence gave me confidence, which was something I desperately craved after that initial buzz wore off the first time Will asked me to have sex with him. I told him I wasn't ready, and he said I was intimidated by all of the girls he'd slept with, but that I didn't need to worry. I, through a horrified grimace and the strongest urge to vacate the building, told him I didn't care about who he'd been with before and his sex life had no bearing on us taking that step or not.

I wanted butterflies and the unexplainable need to pop my foot up delicately when we kissed, but I got wasps. Nasty, uncomfortable things that stung me every time Will would slip his hand beneath my T-shirt. My gut told me something was wrong, but my heart told me I just needed to give it time. My head told me I already had all the answers, but I was just too much of a chicken to listen to them.

"Halle? Will you get out of your head for long enough to have a fucking conversation with me? Jesus," Will says harshly, raising his voice enough to wake Joy. She saunters across the table, brushing her tail along my chin before lying back down in front of me. The oven timer beeps, and Will mutters expletives under his breath while I turn it off and take out the croissants I now have no desire to eat.

"Nothing about this makes me feel happy. I feel like you're annoyed at me for saying okay instead of what? Screaming at you? Sobbing?"

He scoffs, bringing his coffee mug to his lips, smothering whatever he muttered. I've always hated the muttering. "I'm annoyed about all the shit I'm going to get for being the one to break up with you, when you're just too much of a fucking people pleaser to do it yourself.

"I'm going to be the world's biggest asshole for doing something you've been too much of a coward to do. It isn't fair. I want you but you don't want me, so I have to be the bad guy."

I was wrong. There are adjectives that follow when someone talks about me. Just not complimentary ones, I guess.

"I'm not being a people pleaser. I was trying to give us a chance to work things out. It's not like I wanted to suck at this."

"I wish you wanted to suck. Maybe that'd solve our problems," he mutters just loud enough for me to hear.

It's like he's poking a tender bruise. A metaphorical one that's there because of him in the first place. I want to roll my eyes and tell him how childish and pathetic he's being, but in reality, he's finally found something in this awful conversation that makes me hurt.

I don't know why my sexual urges disappear as soon as he's in the equation, and I *really* wish I did. I don't want to give him the satisfaction of letting him know he's gotten to me, so I sigh and cock my head. "You're being an asshole."

He folds his arms across his chest as he sinks into his chair to shrink himself. Pinching the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger, he lets out a noise that's somewhere between a sigh and a groan. "Sorry, that was low. I just"—he sits up straight again, his restlessness a contrast to his normal easygoing nature—"can't help but think things would be better if it actually felt like an adult relationship. I don't know how you can know you hate sex if you won't even try. I've been so patient with you, Halle, haven't I? More patient than another guy would be."

His need to break up with me right *now* suddenly makes more sense, given I said I still wasn't ready to have sex with him last night. If patient means stopping when I say stop, then yes, Will has been patient. If patient means repeatedly bringing up sex and interrogating me about my thoughts and feelings but becoming moody when I once again say I'm not ready, then sure, he's been patient.

I'm pretty sure neither of those things could be construed as patience, but I don't have the energy to delve into my mostly solo sex life during breakfast.

"We're two adults in a relationship—that's what makes it an adult relationship." As I've said a million times before. "And oh my God, for the last time, I never said I hate sex. I've only said I'm not ready and we compromised, I did the other stu—"

"Oh, because calling it a compromise makes me feel really great. Thanks."

I want to bash my head on the table. "Look, we're getting off topic. We can tell our parents it was a mutual decision. No bad person, mutual."

He shoots me a disbelieving look. "Like they'll buy that. What about Thanksgiving? Christmas? The vacation at spring break? You're naïve to think they'll drop it."

I can't pretend it's a stretch for him to be worried about how our parents might take the news. It's the thing I've been worrying about, too. Maybe he's right; maybe I am a coward and too much of a people pleaser, and I've forced his hand to save myself.

The summer we just shared back home made it very clear that without our hobbies or our family commitments to fill our time, we've outgrown each other. Will wants adventure with his friends until he starts his professional career, and I want to be a published author by the time I'm twenty-five. We're both driven, we're just driving in different directions. When you add the tension caused by my unwillingness to drop my panties on demand, this breakup was the only thing inevitable about us.

If I had any friends that I didn't share with Will, I'm sure they'd wonder why we were together in the first place. It's something I've thought about a lot over the past year, and the answer didn't paint me in a very good light.

I bounced between everything from being a people pleaser like I'm so commonly called, to having a late rebellion phase against my older brother, Grayson. He always hated Will, claiming he was too arrogant and our friendship was too one-sided. I was too well behaved to rebel about anything else going on, so not listening to my brother was as rebellious as I got. Even then, my rationale felt a little far-fetched.

In the end, I couldn't escape the truth: loneliness. Because if we split, who would I have?

Sure, our relationship wasn't perfect, but he called me every day and he wanted me around.

"I'll say I have the strongest urge to spend Christmas with Dad and Shannon. I think my brother will be there so I can use him to make it more believable. By the time we're both home in March for the spring break trip, everyone will be over our split."

“You sure?” he asks. I just offered him the best get-out-of-jail-free card in existence and he can’t even hide the happiness. God, this is nauseating.

“I’m totally sure.”

I watch as he relaxes. “If you’re not coming home, I also don’t think you should come to my games anymore.”

Albeit not unexpected, I wish he’d broken up with me *before* I decided to give up my book club and rearranged my class schedule to give me time to visit for his games.

I say *decided*, but since we’re not together now I guess I don’t need to spin things to make Will look better anymore. I can admit that Will begged me to all summer, even though I repeatedly said I didn’t want to, until I finally gave up arguing after he said that all the other girlfriends make the effort. I did it as soon as the school year restarted. I hated letting the bookstore down on such short notice, but they were so sweet about it, and one of their booksellers is excited to take over.

“Yeah, that’s fine. I don’t want to make our friends feel like they need to pick a side, and me not being there will probably make that easier.”

If I didn’t know Will as well as I do, I might have missed the way his eyebrows pinched together and he started to pout, but it *was* definitely there. That look of incredulity. “Ha, yeah.” He scratches at his jaw. “Everyone’s been telling me to end things for a while, so I don’t know how they’d be if you were there. Awkward, probably.”

For the first time since he uttered, “I think we should break up,” I feel like crying. Even though to me it was obvious that something wasn’t right between us, the idea that all his college friends have been weighing in and collectively decided he should end things makes my stomach twist.

I’ve always made an effort to go to the games I could drive to, even before we were a couple. I wore his jersey, sat with the other girlfriends, cheered him on. I looked up their interests, tried my hardest to fit in while they talked about people from their college I didn’t know, because my friends have always been Will’s friends. Even as kids, he was always introducing me to someone new.

His words are still stinging as I watch him finally finish the rest of his coffee. He looks so unbothered, yet I’m fighting the desire to find the nearest field and bury myself in it. “Not my friends anymore, got it.”

“They were never really your friends in the first place when you think about it.” He’s staring at me, waiting for me to say something, like he didn’t just throw my biggest insecurity in my face as casually as asking for the weather. “Do you ever wonder if you’d have your own friends if you didn’t live in a fantasy world?”

“God, you sound like your parents right now. People can enjoy reading and still maintain a healthy attachment to reality, Will,” I drawl. “I’m not a social pariah because I like fiction. Nobody has ostracized me from the Maple Hills social calendar because I read romance novels. Maybe if I spent more time in Maple Hills instead of following you around, I’d have my own friend group here.”

He snorts, and he’s one more arrogant action away from getting a croissant launched at his head. “Maybe if you were as invested in our relationship as you are in ones that aren’t real, I wouldn’t have just wasted a year of my life.”

It’s incredible how one conversation can change how someone looks to you. “I think you should head home now.”

“Don’t be so sensitive, Hals.” He stands from his seat and walks to my side. The arm that drops onto my shoulder feels ten times heavier than it should, and his kiss to the crown of my head burns like acid. “I’m just putting myself first. Doing things for me, y’know. It’s a fresh year and I deserve a fresh start. Hockey is get—”

His voice rumbles on in the background, but I can’t bring myself to listen properly because it’s taking every shred of my self-control not to launch into a rant about how I *do* know, because I’ve also been putting him first for as long as I can remember. Putting everyone first, in fact.

I’ve spent my entire life being encumbered by the tasks and responsibilities other people don’t want. I make sacrifices without question because that’s what I’ve always done, and at this point, it’s hard to know if it’s a true desire to help or just habit.

As my family blended and grew through my parents divorcing and remarrying other people, my list of people to help grew, too. Even though Grayson is the oldest, everything has fallen to me. For as long as I can remember, all I’ve heard is, “Oh, Halle won’t mind helping,” and not once, “Halle, do you mind?” or, “Halle, do you have time?”

I don’t remember opting in, and I’m tired.

I’d love to say my issues with people pleasing are limited to the people I love, but I know they’re not. Whether it’s Will, his friends, his parents, neighbors... strangers...

It feels like every single person who has ever come into contact with my life has somehow wriggled their way above me on my list of priorities, and look where it’s gotten me.

Single, no friends, no hobbies, and a schedule perfect for being the ideal hockey girlfriend but little else given I now have nothing to fill that time with.

I’m tired of being a passenger in my own life. So if Will is going to spend junior year doing things for himself, so am I.

Chapter Two

HENRY

IF TIME TRAVEL WERE REAL, I'd use it to go back and convince Neil Faulkner to turn down the opportunity to coach college hockey.

Despite my best intentions, and twenty long years of practice, I'm not always on the pulse when it comes to understanding people's motivations. I am, however, usually on the pulse of not getting on Coach's bad side. Which is why a knot of anxiety appears in my stomach the second I hear my name being yelled in Faulkner's gruff bark.

"Oooooooooo." Bobby's best attempt at sounding like a cartoon ghost causes a wave of laughter to rip through the half-full locker room. He misses the glare I shoot at him as he pulls his Titans T-shirt over his head. "Someone's in trouble. Whatcha done, Cap?"

"No idea," I mutter back as I pull my sweats up my legs. "Play hockey. Breathe. Exist. The possibilities are endless."

"It's been nice knowing ya, brother," Mattie says, patting me on the back as he passes in the direction of the showers. "Don't tell the others, but you were always my favorite."

"Am I a joke to you?" Kris shouts, launching what looks like a dirty sock at him. It bounces off the back of Mattie's head, ruffling his jet-black hair, and rolls beneath a bench.

And just like that, my tolerance for my teammates has reached its limit for the day.

"I'm sure it's fine." Russ attempts to reassure me, rubbing his towel against his wet hair. "If you're not back when I'm ready to go, I'll wait for you at my truck."

We're only a few weeks into the new school year and I already feel like what I imagine being run over is like. During the summer I spent a lot of time googling what makes a good captain, and while I don't feel like I have the exact answer, I'm trying to put into practice the few points I picked up. I'm the first one here and the last to leave. I've been making the effort to encourage the new, less confident players. I'm trying to be positive, which means not always saying the first thing that comes to mind. Being open to trying new things when it's in my nature to stick to what I know. I've been doing my full workout instead of letting myself get distracted by the perfect playlist. I don't spend practice daydreaming.

I'm doing a lot of things that go against my natural instincts, basically.

I didn't even drink at Anastasia and Lola's joint birthday dinner because I fell down an information wormhole about the ties between sports performance and alcohol consumption.

So the fact that Faulkner is angry with me about something when I'm trying really hard to do a good job makes me more than a little nauseated. My fist knocking against Coach's office door seems to echo around the room. "Come in," he yells. "Take a seat, Turner."

He points toward one of the worn mesh fabric seats opposite him and I do as I'm told. It's through me trying my hardest to pay attention to this man that I can clearly identify his three main states of being:

1. Irrationally angry and loud.
2. Irritated by a life surrounded by hockey players.
3. Whatever the word is to describe the way he's looking at me right now.

He taps his pen against the desk repeatedly, the plastic making a sharp clicking noise against the wood. It takes everything in me not to lean across and take it away from him to stop the noise. "Do you know why I called you in here?"

"No, Coach."

He thankfully puts the pen down and pulls his computer keyboard toward him. "I just received an email requesting a phone call to discuss you, because you failed your paper in Professor Thornton's class, and instead of going to Thornton to find a way to fix it, you went to your academic adviser to try and get out of his class. Do you have anything to say for yourself before I dial this number?"

Every single word I've ever learned evaporates from my head other than *oh shit*.

"No, Coach."

He runs his hand across the top of his head like he's brushing back a mane of hair. I've always wanted to ask why, considering he's bald, and according to the game tapes we've watched, has been bald for the past twenty-five years. Despite encouragement from some of the guys, Nate told me not to ask him that unless I wanted a world of misery, which I don't. But the question plagues me every time I watch him brush away his nonexistent hair. "Okay, then."

His chubby fingers practically poke a hole through the handset as he punches in the number and rests the phone between his ear and shoulder. I have no choice but to listen while he introduces himself then ums and ahs through the call. Nate always told us that Faulkner can smell fear, so you should never show him your weaknesses. Admitting I fucked up the semester before I've properly started it feels a lot like weakness.

He puts the phone down and stares at me so intensely it feels like he's staring at my soul.

"Ms. Guzman said she reminded you three times to schedule your appointment to register for your classes—"

"That's true."

"—and by the time you tried to register, the class you wanted was full. So you picked Thornton's class thinking you could get on the waiting list for something else and drop him during swap week."

"Yes."

"But you didn't add yourself to the waiting list and you didn't try to drop it during swap week."

I intended to. I truly did, but I've been so busy worrying about following Nate and being a good captain that everything else took a mental backseat. Every obstacle let me push things off, and I kept telling myself I'd fix it until it was eventually too late.

"Also true."

"So, you mean to tell me," he says, then pauses to take a long sip from his coffee mug just to make me extra miserable. "That despite ample opportunity to rectify the situation yourself, you didn't, and now you're here, disturbing the few sweet hours in a day where I don't have to look at your face, expecting me to help you?"

I want to point out that he invited me in here and I went to the adviser who is specifically employed to support student athletes for help, but I suspect he'd take that as well as he's taking me failing one assignment. "I guess."

"What's your grievance with Thornton?"

I think back to what Anastasia and I workshopped ahead of my visiting Ms. Guzman. I repeat her words like a parrot. "His teaching style and my learning style are incompatible."

"You're going to have to give me more than that, Turner." Faulkner sighs, leaning back in his chair. He clicks his mouse and stares at his computer. "You're excelling in everything else, and I know you're a hard worker. So what is it with this class that makes you think you need to quit?"

I'm trying to remember how I explained it to Anastasia and Aurora the day I came home from my first session with Thornton. I ranted for five minutes and then had to lie on the floor and stare at the ceiling for an hour. "I need to take a writing intensive class to meet the requirements of my major. Professor Thornton's syllabus is known for being a lot of reading and researching—it's why nobody wants to do it. He essentially teaches world history; it's barely even about the art. I struggle to focus on the material because there's so much that's irrelevant to what he wants... I think.

"And I don't love reading things I'm not interested in. I struggle to stay focused. I also don't understand what he wants most of the time. I've found myself in information black holes to only end up in the wrong place anyway, and then of course, failing."

Faulkner sighs again. I wonder if he does it at home or if it's something he reserves for this office. I wonder if it gives his family the same sinking feeling it gives me. "It says here you have a similar kind of class with Professor Jolly and you're not trying to drop that."

Jolly is a borderline hippie and believes the history of art should be something you learn about and feel in your soul. She hates the idea of grading people on how they interpret and enjoy learning about art, so her class is final exam only, and that's just because the department makes her. It's impossible to fail as long as you show up, and she doesn't have a class cap, meaning I could get in even though I signed up for classes later than everyone.

I love Professor Jolly's class not only because it's *actually* interesting, but because I understand what she wants from me. What I learn helps me with my practical work, and I don't leave her class feeling unprepared and lacking direction like I do with Thornton. It would have been the perfect solution, but it doesn't meet the requirement. "I work better under the pressure of an exam."

Faulkner starts tapping his pen again. "Have you talked to Professor Thornton?"

Professor Thornton is even less interested than you are, I want to say. "He was unwilling to hear me out."

“It’s out of my hands,” he says, giving me an uninterested shrug. “Should have come to me sooner so I could have helped you.”

Be more organized. Come to me sooner. I don’t know how to explain to someone who doesn’t live inside my head that they could have physically carried me to the office or glued a laptop down in front of me and I’d have still found a way to avoid the task. “What happens when I fail the class?”

I’m not even worried about my GPA because I dominate at things I enjoy, and I love everything else on my schedule for the rest of the year—assuming I register for the rest of my classes in time. It’s just *this* class and Faulkner’s obsession with team captain academic perfectionism.

After his professional career was cut short by an accident that left him unable to play, he’s obsessed with us having a backup plan. Yes, as student athletes we’re tied to achieving a certain grade point average to be able to keep that title, but what Faulkner wants is next level. I know there’s no point in fighting it, because no person who ever fought it before me won.

“We’re not talking about that. You’re the leader of this team, Turner. You don’t get to fail your classes and keep your title. Partner with a classmate, join a study group, use your academic adviser for something other than quitting... I don’t fucking care. You do whatever it takes to make it work. I don’t expect to hear about any more bad grades.”

Nate made it all look *so* easy, and I’m kind of mad at him for downplaying how much of a hard-ass Faulkner is in private. I’ve been told so many times that being captain is an honor, but as I drag my feet out of Faulkner’s office, it feels more like a weight around my neck. Leadership doesn’t come naturally to me; I’ve always been happier in solitude, but I’m trying as hard as I can. I don’t want to let my teammates down, or Nate and Robbie, who convinced Coach I deserved it.

Being captain is a lot like Thornton’s class. I’m expected to know so much that nobody has ever explained to me, and yet I’m supposed to just smile through it. It’s why I said no when I was originally offered the position. I expected it to be given to someone else and I could carry on living my life. But that didn’t happen, Nate and Robbie continued to reason with me.

They tried everything from comparing me to everyone I suggested would be a better captain to saying I’d be the first Black hockey captain at Maple Hills. They dropped the latter when I said it was a damning snapshot of opportunities for people of color in hockey and not the win they were making it out to be.

The more my teammates pushed, the more others started. My moms, Anastasia... so many people told me they thought it was amazing, and how excited they would be to see what I could do. In the end, even though I still had my doubts, I accepted.

I don’t give in to peer pressure, but this is the one time I did, and look where it’s gotten me. Not only do I need to stress about letting the entire team down, but I also need to worry about letting down everyone not on the team, who, through no fault of my own, believes in me. It’s so hard having supportive friends and family who don’t immediately assume the worst.

“ANY SUCCESS?” RUSS ASKS AS I climb into his truck in the now-deserted parking lot.

“I’m fucked.”

“I’m sure it’s not that ba—”

“He told me I don’t get to quit or fail my classes and to find a solution.”

Russ sighs as he navigates us out of the empty lot. “Helpful. Look, it might not be as bad as you think the more practice you get. I’ll help you as much as I can, and so will Aurora. Next time, we can get our codes to register for classes together.”

I rest my head against the window as we pull up to a red light and wonder how I can possibly put into words that don’t make me seem unhinged that, short of a perfect set of circumstances all aligning to allow me to feel excited about the prospect of organizing my schedule, I’ll probably be in this mess again in January. “Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it. Rory is at the house with Robbie waiting to hang out, but if you need peace, we can go to her place,” he says softly as we turn onto Maple Avenue. “I don’t mind.”

I like living with Russ because he always seems to interpret a person’s mood without many words. I think it’s a skill born from the constant state of fear he was in when growing up with a dad who wasn’t nice to live with, but I don’t think it would be okay to ask him if he agrees with me outright. Especially since his dad is trying to be better and Russ is trying to give him a chance to prove himself.

“You don’t need to go anywhere. I like Aurora.”

I lift my head from the window in time to catch the small smile on his face. “She likes you, too.”

Russ changed a lot this summer when he was working at a sleepaway camp. He met his girlfriend, challenged his dad’s gambling addiction, and, while I don’t think he’s ever going to be the loudest person in the room, he’s more confident than he was.

As for Aurora, she’s not who I was expecting for Russ, but I think that’s a good thing. Russ likes her because she’s generous and kind, and he spent a long time feeling second best before he met her. He’s her number one, which isn’t me making assumptions: she says he’s her number one to literally anyone who will listen. There’s no room for doubt in his head that he is important to Aurora because she tells him, and boy is she loud.

I don’t like to compare my friends because they’re all different, but she’s the only one who doesn’t talk to me about hockey, which puts her pretty high up on my list given it feels like the only thing people ever want to ask me about now.

Trying to remember the last time someone asked me about one of my other interests makes the trip home quick. Before I realize where we are, Russ is pulling into the drive beside his girlfriend’s car.

Aurora looks up when I open the front door, but her eyes travel straight past me and the widest grin spreads across her face when she spots Russ. I feel like we just shipped one lot of girlfriends out, and immediately gained more.

She’s conventionally attractive—average height and build, suntanned white skin with green eyes and blond hair—but I don’t think she’d be very interesting to draw.

Russ is obviously very attracted to her, but they make an effort not to be loud about it, which I appreciate. I loved when Anastasia was living here, but she should have been charged with disturbing the peace.

“Are you okay, Henry?” Aurora asks as I drop into the recliner opposite her. “You look extra pensive today. Brooding, like the tortured artist you are.”

“Coach found out I got an F on that French Revolution essay,” I say as Russ leans in to kiss her temple.

“That blows, I’m sorry. Did you try to charm him?” she asks.

“I don’t know how to charm people on purpose, and even if I did, he’d be immune just to punish me. He thinks I should have academic superpowers because I picked up a hockey stick fifteen years ago.”

“I think you’re incredibly charming,” she says.

“Who has superpowers?” Robbie asks as he rounds the corner from his bedroom. He stops his wheelchair in the space between the couch and recliner, looking right at me. “Faulkner called. Apparently it’s my fault you didn’t sign up for your classes. Because *apparently* I’m psychic and I’m to blame for you fucking your way through California all summer instead of prioritizing your education. Even though I was busy graduating and, y’know, being in a different state.”

Living with my friends is great. Living with my friend who is also the assistant coach is occasionally not as great. Occasionally being now, when I can’t even escape Faulkner in my own home because all he has to do is call Robbie.

“That’s dramatic,” I grumble as Robbie lifts himself into the recliner beside mine. I stayed local and I never told Coach about my summer. It wasn’t even intentional. I think I might have felt a little lonely while everyone was home or working.

I hadn’t thought of it that way until Anastasia asked me about it, and I realized I was keeping myself busy until my friends got back. I like my own company, prefer it even, but this summer I found that there’s a limit.

Plus, women like me a lot and I like having fun without commitment.

Robbie shakes his head, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Do me a favor, Casanova. Concentrate on not getting my ass beat this year instead of getting laid. You’re the supreme leader after all and you must lead the way in morality and dignity and all the other shit.”

I don’t think he’s being serious. Robbie always laughs right before he says something sarcastic that he doesn’t mean, but it still causes an uncomfortable prickle at the nape of my neck. “The only thing I know is I don’t know how to be a leader.”

Russ leans forward in his seat, looking right at me. “You’re doing a damn good job for someone who claims he doesn’t know what he’s doing. You’re good at everything, Hen.”

“Except revolutions,” Aurora interrupts.

“It’s fucking annoying if you wanna get into it. I’d be obnoxious as hell if I was good at everything the first time I try it,” Robbie adds. “Stay focused and you’ll kill it.”

“Who told you you aren’t obnoxious?” Russ says, quickly blocking the cushion that flies in his and Aurora’s direction.

“Why don’t we get you some books on leadership?” Aurora says, shuffling to the edge of the couch just like Russ is. It makes me want to move my chair back just to increase the space between us again. “I’m skipping book club this week because it’s only an icebreaker meeting and Halle has a boner for Austen that I can’t get on board with, but I still haven’t checked out *Enchanted* and it’d be nice to drop by to say hi... Why are you looking at me like that?”

Russ chuckles beside her, but I continue to stare at her blankly. “I don’t understand anything you just said.”