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How to Break My Heart

KAT T. MASEN

ATRIA BOOKS

This book is dedicated to my one true love that will never break my heart—incredibly delicious, so tasty, and makes me moan more times than I can count....

The almighty donut!

Playlist

"This Is What You Came For" by Calvin Harris & Rihanna

"Vampire" by Olivia Rodrigo

"Somebody to You" by The Vamps

"Photograph" by Ed Sheeran

"Cardigan" by Taylor Swift

"Atlantis" by Seafret

"Save Your Tears" by The Weeknd & Ariana Grande

"Never Be the Same" by Camila Cabello

"4ever" by The Veronicas

"Wings" by Birdy

"I Love You, I'm Sorry" by Gracie Abrams

"Birds of a Feather" by Billie Eilish

PROLOGUE

Eva

8 Years Ago

Did you hear that?"

Maddy tightens her grip on my arm, halting her steps as an owl hoots among the tall, overgrown trees. The haunting yet gentle sound echoes around us in the dark woods, while her hold on my arm is so tight she's nearly cutting off my circulation. You'd think she was about to be eaten alive by the harmless creature.

A small huff escapes my lips. "This was your idea, remember?"

I had better things to do tonight than sneak into a secret high school graduation party thrown by her older brother, Aston, and his jerky friends.

"I know," Maddy whispers, eyes wide as she scans our surroundings. She starts to move again, taking small, cautious steps. Glancing down at her sparkly teal cowboy boots, I wonder what she was thinking when she chose that footwear and shake my head. Maddy will use any occasion to dress up. "I refuse to miss out on the most *epic* party of the year just because we weren't invited."

I pause mid-step, shifting my gaze onto her while crossing my arms. "Madelina Eleanor Beaumont," I say, raising my voice. "You said we *were* invited, but your parents said no. Did you seriously just lie to me all because of some guy?"

Maddy forces a small smile. "I may have embellished the truth a little. Don't hate me, okay? Once we're there, you'll forget all about it, and we will have the best time. Besides, he isn't just *some guy*... Camden Winters is the *guy of all guys*."

It takes a lot of effort not to roll my eyes. She can be in love with Camden all she wants, but the guy has serious red flags. Of course, being my best friend, she chooses to

ignore my warning. The moment Maddy turned sixteen last spring, she suddenly got a case of boyitis.

"Maddy! You're going to get in so much trouble with your father. What if he grounds you over summer break? We can kiss all our plans goodbye. Have you forgotten our week in Europe with your aunt? I need to eat cheese in some ridiculously expensive castle in France."

"Will you just relax?"

"Says the person ready to shit their pants over an owl," I mumble.

I should have known Maddy was telling half-truths. Unlike my parents, who have no idea what the word *discipline* means, Maddy's parents are strict. Her father is the mayor, and God forbid Maddy or her older brother do anything to ruin his reputation. The mere fact I'm best friends with her is a problem. At least, it seems that way to me. Mr. Beaumont is always cold around me, as if I'm unworthy of his time or energy. My very presence is an inconvenience to him. But as my mom always reminds me, you can't please everyone.

It explains why this party is being held at the abandoned house by Peppermint Lake—no one will find us here. Rumor has it the place is haunted... but maybe now isn't the best time to remind Maddy of that fact, since she just held on to me tighter when something rustled behind the trees.

"We're almost there, according to my map," Maddy informs me, glancing down at her phone. The rustling behind the trees grows a little louder, and she casts a nervous glance over her shoulder. Suddenly, she lets out a terrified scream, breaking away from me, and begins slapping at her face. Her phone flies out of her hand, smacking into my chest.

I catch it, my eyes widening. "What the heck? What's happening right now?" I yell over her incessant shrieking.

"It's attacking me. Get. It. Off!"

With a quick swipe, I switch on the phone's flashlight. A tiny mosquito is buzzing around her face, and I can't help but burst out laughing. Reaching forward, I grab her flailing arms to calm her. "Maddy, get a grip. It's a mosquito."

She stops panicking, and a look of *what the hell* crosses her face. Maddy reaches out to take her phone. "I knew that. I was just messing around."

"Uh-huh, sure. Let's keep moving," I reply.

The first time my dad took my older brother, Elliot, and me fishing was to this exact spot. While the lake was beautiful, fishing was not. Still, there is something about this part of the lake that is mesmerizing. The water is crystal clear blue and shines in the moonlight, reflecting gentle ripples and sparkles that take my breath away.

That day, we sat on the rusty old pier, with our rods in hand, as Dad told me and Elliot this town would be good for us. It's destined to leave a mark on our soul, and our future will always come back to this humble place. He said it with wisdom in his eyes, but honestly, all I saw was this beautiful lake in front of me.

Elliot complained the town was boring, but of course he was older and ready for adventure.

I smile briefly at the memory, then suddenly get distracted by music.

The sound of the Calvin Harris and Rihanna song "This Is What You Came For" becomes louder as we finally step into a clearing. I reach for Maddy's hand and pull her through the bushes.

Tonight is a full moon—which my mother says symbolizes a time of release and completion, whatever that means—and it's so bright I can see the state of the dilapidated home from where we're standing. The roof appears intact, as does the large porch surrounding the house, but even from this distance, the broken glass, which was once stained-glass windows, exposes the flaws of this once-beautiful property.

Most of the kids, at least thirty, are gathered around the bonfire or dancing beside the large speaker, celebrating freedom. Suddenly, the idea of retreating back through the woods seems tempting. Senior girls can be cruel, even though I've avoided most of them at school, being in eleventh grade myself. There's this tension between the two grades, and frankly, I'm so glad they're graduating. Seniors always think they rule the school.

"Oh my God, can you see him? He's so beautiful," Maddy gushes.

I glance over to where Camden is standing. He's wearing his letterman jacket, arm around a girl, and drinking what I assume is beer since there's a keg only a few feet away. Sure, he's good-looking, but the guy is a 100 percent bona fide jerk. I have no idea why Maddy obsesses over him, especially since he's her brother's best friend. He does this thing with a toothpick in his mouth, chewing it like he's a badass, which annoys me, but Maddy finds it "5000 hot!" Her words, not mine.

My eyes wander toward where Aston is sitting. Unlike the other boys, he appears subdued. The girls around him try to touch him, but he's uninterested.

I hold my breath, watching him intently, trying to ignore the butterflies creeping in. Yeah, okay, Aston is hot. But not once has he shown any interest or spoken more than two words to me.

When I sleep over at their house, he stays in his room and ignores me. About two months ago, I ran into him in the bathroom when he'd just gotten out of the shower. He yelled at me, and given that I was still in shock from seeing him half naked, things got awkward from there.

A six-pack, a towel barely covering his lower body, and water cascading down his chest... I was speechless.

Before that, he was just Maddy's older brother.

I bite the corner of my lip, observing him quietly until Maddy tugs on my arm.

"C'mon," she pleads as we walk down the slight embankment toward the bonfire.

Aston immediately spots us, shaking his head in disapproval. As he stands, the girls clinging to him nearly tumble off. He towers over all of them, his stance intimidating.

Maddy rushes over with her arms crossed, ready for battle. "I know what you're going to say..." she begins. "But Daddy won't find out."

"He better not, or it will somehow be my fault. It always is," Aston warns her.

Maddy grins, then makes her way to the keg. One of the other guys hands her a red cup, but Aston quickly swipes it away from her.

"I'll let you hang. But... there's no chance in hell you're going home drunk. Deal?"

"Fine." She sighs heavily before turning to face me. "Eva, let's go get something to eat."

I avoid everyone's stares and have this sudden urge to chill by the snacks since no one else is there. It's not like I don't know most of the kids here from school, but seeing them here is a whole other scenario.

"Okay, we need a game plan," Maddy gushes through a mouthful of chips, and a few crumbs fall out the side. "How do I get Camden alone?"

"Alone for what?"

Maddy laughs. "Eva, what do boys and girls do alone? You can't be that naive."

Are we really having this conversation? I'm not exactly a prude, but losing our virginity should be memorable, not at some senior party with a douchebag and his annoying toothpick.

"I don't think you've thought this through..." I say gently. When did she become so careless? "This is a big deal, and Camden is... well, he'll just take what he needs, and that's pretty much it. Please don't tell me you think he's going to give up going to college and stay with you."

Maddy bows her head, and her brows furrow. "No. I'm not stupid."

"Okay, glad we cleared that up," I mumble. "Look, kiss him, fool around if you must, but don't make a big decision based on the fact that you think he's hot."

My reality check drives a wedge between us—I see it in her face.

Maddy wanders off to talk to some of the girls she knows, leaving me to mingle on my own. Some guy tries to carry on a conversation while stuffing his face full of pretzels, but it's obvious he's had too much to drink—he's been talking for a solid five minutes about the brilliance of the person who invented the shape of the pretzel.

This is why I'm single.

The boys at our school are so... *meh*.

Bored and ready to abandon this lame party, I walk toward the other side of the house and away from the noise. It's much quieter near the water, and as I slow my steps to take it all in, I trip on a small broken branch and fall onto the dirty ground.

"Crap!" I whimper as my knee begins to sting.

With great effort, I struggle to pick myself up, but a pair of black jeans appears in front of me. Slowly, I glance upward as Aston crouches to my level. His curly dark hair falls over his eyes, but he quickly slicks it back with his fingers to reveal his beautiful face.

"Already hitting the keg, huh?"

I shake my head, trying to cover my embarrassment. "I'm not Maddy."

"No, you're not my sister." His smirk is annoyingly sexy. "Are you hurt?"

"A little."

Aston extends his arm as I reach out for support. At a slow and agonizing pace, I manage to stand. Not only does my knee sting, but the fall also tore my jeans, so now there's a big rip exposing *a lot* of skin.

"Sit down here." He motions to a large log near the edge of the water. "Let me take a look."

I take a seat while Aston kneels in front of me. My pulse quickens at the smell of his cologne, making the simple act of breathing impossible. His deep green eyes trace my body, causing me to shiver. Then, his eyes gaze upon mine while a smile graces his lips. He has one of those smiles that lights up his entire face. Not that I've seen it often. Around me, he's usually annoyed.

"I think you'll survive. A little broken, but still pretty perfect."

"I never was perfect," I inform him as he takes a seat beside me. "Far from it."

"We all see things differently," he murmurs, then tilts his head slightly as if to better observe me. "Everleigh."

I'm not fond of people calling me by my full name, but the way he slowly drags it out leaves me speechless. As we stare out over the lake, I fidget nervously with my hands. Maddy told me her father insisted Aston spend the summer in London to work with a business associate before starting college in the fall. I decide to bring it up since London sounds pretty cool, and sitting here in silence is awkward as fuck.

"So, tomorrow is the big day, huh?"

His shoulders slump as he leans forward to rest his elbows on his knees. "Yeah, the big day."

"You don't seem too excited. I've only read about London, but it looks like a beautiful city."

"Well, when you're following your father's directions, it's hard to get... excited," he answers.

"I'm sorry."

"What are you sorry about? The fact that I'm his firstborn son and heir to our family's fortune? Or how he controls every aspect of my life for *his* benefit?"

I turn to face him, filled with this sudden urge to pull him out of whatever negative space he's in. London is amazing, but no one should be allowed to dictate your life. At least my parents always taught me to follow my own dreams.

"So... say no?" I blurt out. "What's the worst that can happen?"

Aston sighs dejectedly. "You underestimate my father's control over our family."

"That's because you let him." I raise my voice. "Come on, you have everything going for you. You're smart, a straight-A student without even trying. Coach loves you. Your athletic ability is the best the school has seen. I mean, I'm not one to watch lacrosse, but so I've heard. Not to mention, you're pretty. So tell me, why on earth do you think your father should dictate your life?"

"You think I'm pretty?" Aston cocks his head with a playful smile on his lips. "Unusual choice of words, Miss Woods."

"You know what I mean."

"I don't think I do."

"Handsome, hot, sexy. But that's beside the point. What I'm really trying to say is—"

Warm lips smash against mine, and I gasp. It takes me a second to realize Aston Beaumont's kissing me.

Oh. My. God!

Aston Beaumont is kissing me.

His tongue gently pushes through my lips, and my heart beats like a drum inside my chest. A million thoughts are running rampant through my head, but the only thing I can focus on is how he tastes like perfection.

We find ourselves in perfect harmony, slow, sensual kisses igniting my entire body. Then, he explores every inch of my mouth with desperation. Desire travels right between my thighs as his hand slides beneath my sweater and against my stomach. The tips of his fingers rub against my belly, causing me to gasp as he inches closer to the button of my jeans.

Am I about to lose my virginity?

I have only just lectured Maddy on being responsible, yet here I am, about to have sex with her brother. With a desperate need to ignore any rational thoughts, I reach out to caress his face. My bold move causes him to moan inside my mouth as the pop of my jeans button sounds between us. Savoring the touch of his skin, I try to bring him closer to me, but then he pulls away, out of breath.

"I shouldn't h-have..." he stammers, quickly rebuttoning my jeans. "I'm leaving tomorrow, and you're Maddy's best friend."

I shake my head slightly to bring myself back to reality.

But the reality is my best friend's older brother just kissed me, and we were moments away from something more.

I've been avoiding my feelings for the last year. Denial is a vicious game I play with my emotions, because it's easier than getting hurt. The moment I admit to myself that I have a crush on Aston Beaumont will be the moment my life changes forever.

Surely, if he kissed me first, he *must* feel something.

I can't be imagining all this.

And it's not like we're going to get married or anything.

Though we would make cute kids.

"It's okay," I barely manage to say, trying to catch my breath with this sudden burst of confidence. "I want this to happen. I think... um, I like you, Aston. I mean, I've had feelings for a while."

A gentle wave crashes against the sand bank, shifting my attention momentarily. This kiss, in this spot of all places, is something I will never forget. I want to savor it all—the way the water glistens under the moonlight and how, if you listen carefully, the frogs become quiet as if they are at peace listening to the thrum of my heartbeat.

"Everleigh..."

The warning in Aston's voice and the weight of his gaze make my heart stop abruptly, and suddenly the creatures surrounding us are loud and obnoxious. It's as if they know something is wrong and are warning me of what's about to come.

What the hell did I just do? Did I admit I wanted him to kiss me? Did I admit my feelings to the one boy who is completely off-limits to me?

Maddy would kill me if she found out.

Her stern words about Penelope Anderson ring in my head. After Penelope moved to Cinnamon Springs and insisted on becoming friends with Maddy, it didn't take long before she was showing up at all of Aston's games—and the truth came out. It was ugly, Maddy was furious, and to this day I don't know if Penelope successfully got with Aston. She ended up moving back to the West Coast before senior year, and we never heard from her again.

I'm far from a mean girl, but if someone befriends me just to get with my brother, the gloves are off and claws will be out.

It was all very dramatic, but still, those words stuck in my head and it often plays on repeat just to remind me my crush can go nowhere.

"I have to go."

I place my hands on my stomach to try to control this overwhelmingly bad feeling,

I stand and run back toward the bonfire before he can say anything else. Suddenly, I want to be as far away as possible from Aston.

No one seems to notice my flushed cheeks or my torn jeans. Everyone is happily dancing away, even Maddy, who's busy with some other guy now. And that doesn't seem to bother Camden, who is making out with a girl who had her hands all over Aston earlier.

I sit beside the fire with a soda can in my hand, staring into the flames.

Aston's lips felt like pure bliss. Every part of me ached for his kiss. My body felt like it was possessed, and nothing could stop me.

Until... Aston pulled away.

"Here he is." Jake, another senior, chuckles as Aston returns to the bonfire. He avoids my gaze, taking a seat in an empty chair. I steal a careful glance at him. He doesn't look happy.

"Are you ready?" Jake asks Aston.

"It's so barbaric," Tiffany, the girl kissing Camden, complains loudly.

"It's a ritual, and who are we to break tradition?" Jake moves toward Aston with a needle and a small bottle. Aston removes his shirt as I watch in confusion, with a sudden thickness in my throat.

"What are they doing?" I quiz the guy beside me.

"He's getting inked. To symbolize the end of an era."

With the needle in his hand and some ink beside him, Jake begins to carve into Aston's chest. Most of the girls are unable to look, squeamish at the sight of the needle grazing his skin. Aston doesn't flinch, not even when Maddy turns pale and almost passes out.

Instead, he is staring directly at *me*.

My weakness has always been his eyes, the same green eyes that consumed me and drew me into a kiss I'll remember for the rest of my life.

But something about his stare is worrying.

"Ready to leave this town, Beaumont?" Camden teases with an obnoxious laugh. "London has interesting women, not boring girls like this godforsaken place."

Tiffany smacks his arm. "I'm not boring. You're such a jerk."

"Sweetheart, you weren't calling me that ten minutes ago, when I gave you the best orgasm of your life."

What a fucking loser. Thank God Maddy didn't touch him. I glance over at her to make sure she's okay, and, judging by her relaxed smile, I think she's realized she avoided a walking STD.

"I'm done with this place," Aston declares with a look so cold it makes me shiver. "And you're right, I need a *real* woman. There's *no one* left for me here."

My lips begin to tremble, but I force myself to keep it together, refusing to show him just how much I despise him right now.

Aston Beaumont knew how to win my heart...

... and break it.

All in one night.

A mastermind, some may call him.

But not me.

He's the biggest asshole to ever exist.

I could leave this party right now and allow my tears to get the better of me, or forget Aston Beaumont ever existed.

Out of sight, out of mind.

Tomorrow, he'll be on a flight to London and gone from my life forever.

The perfect cure for my broken heart.

Eva

Present

Valentine's Day has to be the worst day of the year.

My usually peaceful café is filled with couples making googly eyes at each other while they share heart-shaped donuts filled with vanilla cream. Monetizing holidays seemed like a good idea, but the more I stand behind the counter quietly judging people, the more I regret my decision to partake in this ridiculous Hallmark holiday.

I close my eyes briefly, remembering my vision board and all the things I wanted to achieve this year, many of which involve money. Money that customers spend in my café.

It's been a slow season due to unprecedented snowstorms blanketing the town and roads, and the usual tourism trade is down this year compared to last. Many of the businesses in Cinnamon Springs are hustling to make ends meet.

Hence my idea to make a splash today.

A man sitting opposite his lady friend lifts the heart-shaped donut to her mouth, and she giggles before taking a bite. She follows by licking her lips, and I swear on all unholy gods, this is the beginning of an incredibly poorly acted porno movie.

I hear cheesy music playing in my head, and it's far from romantic.

"When did I become so cynical?" I ask mindlessly while Billie stands beside me, carefully restocking the glass display with fresh cinnamon twists. The warm, spicy and sweet smell is by far my favorite. It reminds me of my childhood, when my mom would make donuts for us every Friday after school. "All these people look so..." I trail off, unable to find the words.

"In love?" Billie laughs, closing the display to avoid any uninvited visitors. Given that we live in a small town surrounded by woods, pesky little suckers love our sweet treats. "I

love this day. There's something in the air—"

"Denial?" I cut her off.

Billie places the tongs back and then rests her hand on my shoulder. "It's time to start dating again. When was the last time you went on a *real* date?"

I scrunch my nose. Dating is *not* on my vision board and therefore isn't something I'm actively pursuing.

The last guy, Henry, was, um... nice.

That's just it—nice.

He would politely open the door, pull out my chair, and do everything to show he respected women. But, when it came to conversation, he was the single most boring person I have ever had the misfortune of dining with. I almost fell asleep during our second dinner date from all the wine I drank just so I could power through.

"Months, maybe. I've stopped counting," I mumble, finally answering her question.

"So, what you're trying to say is you're not getting laid, hence the attitude today?"

Billie is as laid-back as they come. We met in college when she was assigned to my room at the last minute. Maddy had been so indecisive about joining me at Cornell—she'd always wanted to study in California. It boiled down to this—separation anxiety. So, after many tears from Maddy and lots of reassurance from me that we would still be best friends, we took the leap and went our separate ways, so to speak. Insert me, an empty dorm room, and Billie, who coincidentally grew up just a couple of towns over from Cinnamon Springs.

I warmed up to her quickly. She loved to bake, and so did I, even though I wasn't as good as Billie, so our room was filled with all sorts of mini appliances as we experimented with different recipes. We quickly became the hit of the building, especially with the latenight-munchies crowd—though we did get a few warnings for pushing the limits of the fire code.

Thankfully, nothing ever burned down—though I am pretty sure the fire warden developed a nervous twitch.

With our love of baking and my business degree, it was a no-brainer—we set out to open our own café, Donuts Ever After. We put together a business plan and went to the bank for a loan after graduating from Cornell, but then Billie's mom was diagnosed with

a rare heart disease and needed immediate medical treatment. It meant Billie had to move back home to care for her mom physically and financially.

Our dream was put on hold.

But as if the universe knew we needed a lucky break, my parents decided to sell a piece of land they owned in Wyoming and gifted me and my brother a share of the profits. It was enough to start the café and hire Billie as a baker. It suited us both. She didn't need the added pressure of investing in a business, especially with her mother's medical bills piling up, and I needed her because she was a superstar in the kitchen. Without her recipes, we would have served only coffee and iced tea. Sure, I could bake, but no way was I as good as Billie.

The perfect place presented itself—Cinnamon Springs, where I spent most of my teenage years. It never occurred to me to go back, given I'd moved away for college.

My parents have always enjoyed being on the road. Growing up, we moved every few years, somehow making a journey across the country until one day my dad heard about this town that needed a horticulturist to focus on crop cultivation. It was kind of perfect in the end. Dad settled into a job he loved, and Mom worked the farmers markets every week. They would sell organic fruits and vegetables from our property, and quite often, Mom would bake cookies to give to the kids who accompanied their parents.

We moved to Cinnamon Springs when I started middle school. Of course, it didn't take long for my parents to get itchy feet again. After a lot of tears and begging, they agreed to stick it out until I finished high school.

Since then, my parents moved and my brother left for Europe, but something always pulls me back here. I'm not even mad about it. The moment my parents drove down Main Street all those years ago, I knew this place had something special. I still remember gazing out the window and admiring all the cute little storefronts. It looked like a movie set. Cinnamon Cones, home of the best ice cream in town; Betty's Bookshelf, the most popular bookstore within a twenty-mile radius; and the diner on the corner called Happy Days. Later, I learned it was owned by a couple who, no surprise, were obsessed with the TV show *Happy Days*. The husband, Al, even wore a leather jacket and styled his hair like Fonzie. Mom had to explain about the TV show since it aired well before my time—and when I say *well before*, I mean decades.

It all feels like a lifetime ago now.

Bringing myself back to the present, I turn to Billie with a grin. "A girl can please herself," I remind her.

"Sure, but a hot guy can do it better."

I purse my lips, crossing my arms beneath my chest. "And where are the hot guys?" Billie shrugs. "Not in this town, that's for damn sure."

We both find ourselves in this sudden slump, thanks to me. Billie is a beautiful woman, so it surprises me she's single. Guys always lavish attention on her. It's the ginger-colored hair, which falls effortlessly down her back like she's a modern-day Rapunzel, but instead of being trapped in a tower, she works for a grump in a donut shop.

That grump being me.

I'm not usually a pessimist, but this winter feels different. And not necessarily in a good way. The picturesque snow only reminds me of the wet puddles customers drag into the store. The hot chocolate I usually devour tastes too sweet, especially when you add marshmallows. And everyone knows they're the best part.

I don't know what's wrong with me lately. It's almost like all my dreams have been put on hold for no other reason but time. It gets away from me and refuses to stand still so I can just have a moment to breathe.

All this and it's only February. The hype of New Year's resolutions is fading into the distance along with my love of this cold season.

A chair creaks, and my attention shifts back to the couple. The guy leans in, whispers something into the woman's ear before she giggles again and runs her high-heeled shoe up his leg.

"You need to stop them," I warn Billie, cringing involuntarily. "I think she might give him a foot job, and I don't think I'll be able to sleep tonight if she does."

"Why me? You're the owner," Billie complains. "We had a deal. I make the yummy desserts, and you handle customers doing *foot jobs* in the store."

I let out a huff. "I don't recall this agreement. However, I will put an end to this for the sake of not having to bleach our brains."

I take a deep breath and approach the couple's table. They instantly pull away from each other when they realize I'm standing beside them.

A forced smile graces my lips as I ask, "Is there anything else I can get you lovebirds today?"