



FAKE SKATING



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#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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FAKE SKATING

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The way you are doesn't have to make sense to anyone else.

You are *exactly* how you're supposed to be.

YOU ARE PERFECT.

And you might not have met them yet, but there are people who are
going to love you

BECAUSE

of the way you are.



PROLOGUE

Alec

There was no way it was actually happening.

Dani Collins was moving to Southview.

“Impossible,” I muttered to myself as I stomped on the gas pedal.

An hour ago life had been normal. I’d walked through the front door after practice, inhaled a few bowls of goulash while my dad talked about his buddy’s new duck boat, and I’d been just about to leave the table when my mom gave me the news.

She’d excitedly filled me in on the details of how Dani’s parents were getting divorced and now Dani and her mom were going to move in with her grandpa. She squealed about how incredible it was going to be to finally have them close by.

Just imagine how often we can see them now!

I smiled and nodded like a good boy while trying not to lose my ever-loving shit at the thought of having to see her every day.

Dani Collins.

Was moving.

To fucking. Southview.

I made up an excuse to get out of the house as soon as possible, because I needed air—and music—while I tried to wrap my head around this unexpected turn of events. I had a cousin who neurotically made playlists for every waking moment of her life, and that slightly obsessive habit had rubbed off on me to the point that I couldn’t deal with the harshness of reality anymore unless I rolled it around in music first.

So I got in Burrito (my piece-of-shit '03 Olds Alero) and just drove, cranking “Escorpião,” the Brazilian song that I didn’t understand but fucking loved. I knew the translation was something along the lines of “‘I love you’ is bullshit,” so that seemed good enough for me.

But almost as if Burrito had a mind of his own, I found myself turning down the barely there dirt road that wound through the woods next to the pond. I drove over the snow-packed path until I saw the old, abandoned shed that had once been “our spot.”

What the fuck am I doing?

The night was quiet, the deep snow insulating the world so all I could hear was the crunch of snow under my shoes as I got out of the car and walked toward the structure. It’d always looked like it was five minutes from collapsing, and that hadn’t changed since the last time I’d been there.

The summer after seventh grade.

I pushed in the door of the abandoned shed and stepped inside, half expecting a pack of raccoons to fly at my face. It was darker than dark, but when I turned on my phone’s flashlight, it felt like I’d taken a puck to the chest because how could it still look the same?

The actual chairs we’d stolen from my dad’s shop to furnish our ridiculous little shed were still there, and so was the massive hole in the roof that we called our skylight.

Holy shit.

I swallowed and looked up at the moon. Everything about “our spot” remained the same. And, who was I kidding, so was the memory of her. Of Dani.

And the last time I saw her.

Five-ish Years Ago

“I don’t want to go home.”

I looked at Dani's profile as she stared up at the moon and couldn't believe she was already leaving. We were sitting side by side on a blanket in the pond shed and I uttered the understatement of the century when I said, "This sucks."

Dani and her mom came for one month every summer, one month where our mothers (best friends) hung out twenty-four seven and we got to do whatever we wanted, every single day. We rode bikes, went fishing, walked endless miles while debating *everything*, hung out at the pool... it was summer perfection.

It'd been an annual event for longer than I could remember.

Literally.

The reason for their annual visit was to see Dani's grandparents, but since she spent most of her time with me at our house (or in our shed hangout), it always felt like *our* vacation.

And it was hands down the best part of summer break.

Because for one month of the year, she was my best friend.

We screwed around and laughed our asses off for thirty days, and then she went back to whatever Air Force base her dad was stationed at until the next season of the fireflies.

But now they were leaving after only two days. This time their visit had been for her grandma's funeral, and this time her prickish dad—*the colonel*—had come with them.

Which was a big mistake, because his presence made everything blow way the hell up.

It was epic in the worst way.

Mick—Dani's grandpa—lost his shit on her dad after the funeral, saying it was Mr. Collins's fault that her grandma died of a broken heart because he took Dani's mom away and moved her all over the country.

Then Mick told them—in front of everyone—to go back to "wherever the hell you're stationed now" and get out of his sight.

Yep—nightmare.

And now they were leaving in the morning.

Which meant we wouldn't be walking to Kriz's Bakery, where we were supposed to sit at a sticky table outside and try to guess which donuts the customers were going to order by what they were wearing.

One of our (many) annual traditions.

"I know it makes me a garbage person," she said, looking at me with brown eyes that were too sad, "but I think I'm more bummed about not getting my month here than I am about the whole family-fight thing."

And then I saw it.

She had tears in her eyes.

Seeing anyone with tears in their eyes made me uncomfortable; I wasn't good with serious. But seeing the most sarcastic person I'd ever met, looking sad?

It was a little gutting, to be honest.

"Collins," I said, bumping her shoulder with mine, needing to nudge her back to a comfortable spot. "If you cry, I swear to God I will toss you out of this shed and into the pond."

She coughed out a laugh, and her voice was thick when she said, "Such a little badass, threatening me when we both know you couldn't, come on."

"You're so mean," I teased.

"And you're so short," she teased back, a painless joke because I wasn't short; she was just taller than everyone else.

"You're not a garbage person, by the way," I said, noticing that her eyes still had that emotional shimmer that made me want to kick her grandpa's ass for being a dick. "You're allowed to be sad that you don't get to stay."

She swallowed and bit down on her lower lip, like she was trying to hold it together.

"I mean, *I'm* sad," I admitted, my voice cracking because I *was* sad. How was I supposed to summer without running all over town with Dani?

"You are?" she asked, her voice so quiet it was almost a whisper. Her eyes moved all over my face. "Really?"

I nodded and felt a stabbing pain in my chest when I watched a tear escape, because Dani Collins couldn't be crying.

She *couldn't*.

Suddenly everything in the universe shifted, and I just needed her to stop. Immediately.

Everything was wrong if she wasn't happy.

Because Dani was sparkling eyes and contagious laughter. Dani was happiness.

Before I knew it, my thumbs were on her cheeks, brushing away the tears, and I struggled to swallow as she stared at me like she was trying to figure out what was happening.

"I don't know either," I admitted, because we'd always been able to read each other's minds, and I had no idea why I suddenly wanted to kiss her. "I don't know what this is."

"Same," she said, nodding. Her eyes went down to my mouth, and in an instant my pulse was pounding.

"Should we?" I asked—no, *breathed*—as I realized my thumbs were still sliding over her soft skin.

Did I seriously just ask (without saying it) if we should kiss?

What the hell is happening?

"I mean, we have to have our firsts *sometime*," she said, reading my mind about the kiss and getting that look of resolve in her eyes that meant she was all in on something.

No one committed to scheming like Dani. She was game to do nearly anything. I always wondered if that was just the "vacation" version of Dani, or if she was like that at home, too.

"So maybe we... should?"

She said it with a question in her voice, and I had no idea how we'd gotten here.

Holy *shit*.

"Are you serious?" I managed, my voice coming out a tiny bit strangled. *Should my hands still be on her face?*

What the hell?

Why did this sound like a great idea when it was *Dani*?

“I think I am,” she said, her eyes dancing, pushing away the sadness.

I might’ve been able to reverse it, to pretend for the sake of our friendship that we hadn’t contemplated it, but then she looked at me like *that*, and it was over.

She looked at me like she wanted me to kiss her. Like she was *waiting* for me to lean in.

And, God help me, I’d dreamed of kissing her far too long for me to be strong.

“Then come closer, Collins.”

• • •

I inhaled through my nose as my brain rewound crystal-clear memories of lying back on that blanket and losing my mind with her. The smell of the shed—a mix of dirt and cedar and nostalgic longing—wasn’t helping, either. The scents were so fucking familiar that it felt like I should follow the walls over to the tiny section in the corner where we’d written nonsensical bullshit with paint markers, just to see if our long-forgotten artwork remained.

But the second that popped into my head, I remembered the rest.

And then I didn’t want to remember at all anymore.

Because even though it’d been years, I was still pissed. Logically, it should’ve been water under the bridge by now. *I should be over it.*

But as I drove home, I realized that I wasn’t.

Like, at all.

We might be older, and it might be illogical, but I still hated Dani Collins for what she did after the night we kissed.

*“Te quero bem” é o caralho
Eu vou acabar contigo*

Or, in English:

*“I love you” is bullshit
I’m going to end you*

CHAPTER ONE

February—Senior Year

Dani

“Wake up—we’re here.”

I opened my eyes, but instead of seeing my bedroom, I saw snow and gray skies through the cold window that my forehead was resting on.

The same things I’d stared at for countless hours before finally falling asleep.

Damn it—it’s real.

“Remind me again why we’re moving here,” I said, leaning down to shove my feet back into my Chucks. We drove seven hours in a moving truck full of our stuff (that’d been incorrectly shipped to our old address in Minot—*thanks, Air Force*) so we could now live in a place where there appeared to be multiple feet of snow on the ground and the windchill was subzero—like, make it make sense. “I mean, why not California?”

“We’ve been over this. Too expensive, too hot in the summer, and you’re going to love living here,” my mom said, shutting off the truck and pulling the keys out of the ignition. “You loved it when you were younger, remember?”

The main reason I loved it was because of Alec.

My stomach instantly knotted at the thought of him and the reality that I was going to have to face him after he’d ghosted our long-distance friendship. I was dreading that awkward reunion with every fiber of my being, and still slightly pissed, but I was also hopeful that once the embarrassing moment passed, he’d be the best thing about the move.

Or at least he'd help it be... marginally less nightmarish.

Because Alec Barczewski had always been a hilarious ray of sunshine with the uncanny ability to make everything better. It'd been a long time and we were obviously different people now, but in my heart I knew that my dorky friend would somehow make this okay.

"Loving a place you visit once a year—in the summer—is totally different from living there year-round," I muttered, opening the door and jumping down from the truck, the icy wind slapping at my cheeks as I jerked up the hood on my jacket. "Especially when the winter climate is abysmal."

Dear Lord, it feels like there are shards of glass in that wind. Whyyyyyy do people choose to live in a place so cold? I'd lived in the cold before, so it wasn't new to me, but I'd somehow managed to forget just how harsh it felt.

"Quit complaining. I just drove through White Castle, so you've got a slider and fries in your bag," she said, coming around to grab my arm and loop it through hers after I shut the door.

"Seriously?" My stomach growled and I caught a whiff of onion as I looked down at my tote. "Perfect last meal before I freeze to death, thank you."

"And we are now officially residents of Southview," she proclaimed with a terrifying amount of finality in her voice. "Like it or not."

I sighed and thought *a thousand times NOT* as I pulled out a tiny burger and lifted it to my mouth. I took a bite and stared at the big white house in front of us, my stomach heavy with dread as I chewed.

Which kind of made sense, since the last time we'd been there, my dad and I had been loading the car in silence while my mom argued with my grandpa in the driveway.

You traded in your family and your entire life to follow that asshole from base to base—was it worth it? Do you like your rootless existence, where Dani doesn't even know what family looks like?

"He doesn't appear to be home," I said, taking in the closed curtains and empty driveway. "He knows we're coming, right?"

"Of course he's home," she said. "He's probably just parked in the garage."

“He never parks in the garage,” I corrected, taking two more huge bites and saying through a mouthful of food, “That’s where he keeps his tools.”

Or it was where he *used* to keep his tools before he decided to cut us out of his life.

“It’s been a few years—he could have cleaned it out,” she said. “And don’t talk with food in your mouth.”

“Then don’t engage me in conversation while I’m eating.”

But when we went up to the door, he wasn’t home.

My mom gave me a smile and acted like it was fine, but there was the telltale wrinkle between her eyebrows that let me know she was nervous. She dialed his number and raised the phone to her ear, nibbling on her bottom lip as she waited for him to answer.

“Oh. Dad. Hey,” she said, her words making puffs in the frigid air in front of her face. “We’re here with the moving truck—are you on your way?”

I crossed my arms, trying not to freeze to death as I watched her listen to his response.

This wasn’t good.

The wrinkles stayed on her brow, and she started pacing.

“Well, I know. Yes, that’s fine,” she said, “but we thought you’d be here to help.”

Fabulous. Grandpa Mick was AWOL on the moving. I’d be pissed, only I was too cold to feel human emotion anymore.

My rage was an icicle.

“Sure. I get that,” she said. “But you knew we were coming, right?”

Of course *he knew we were coming*, I thought. It was probably his way of giving us the finger.

God, I still couldn’t believe we were moving in with him.

To be fair, I had a childhood full of good Grandpa Mick memories. As quiet and surly as he was, the man had taught me to fish and skate and used to call me his “Danigirl” while giving me rides on his shoulders.

But those memories had all been written over the day he literally kicked me and my parents out of my grandma’s funeral when I was in middle

school.

In front of a crowd of mourners.

So it was still baffling to me that somehow, some-freaking-how, we were about to move our things into his house as if that nightmare never happened.

Technically, he'd built an apartment for us in the upstairs of his house—my mom loved to say this as if that made a huge difference—but I still couldn't understand why this was a good idea.

Yes, please, let's move in with the grumpy old guy who doesn't like anyone but especially not us.

It was going to be so much fun.

"Oh, okay," my mom said into the phone. "It's fine. There's nothing heavy, so we'll just get started."

She nodded and disconnected the call, but before I could open my mouth, her finger came up and she pointed at my face. "I don't want to hear a word, okay?"

"Oh geez," I said, shaking my head. "What's up? What'd he do?"

"Nothing," she said, shrugging like this was fine. "He just had to help a friend up in Minnetonka with his boat."

I waited for more, but that was apparently it.

"And...? How far away is that? How long is he going to be helping a friend with a boat?" As soon as the words came out of my mouth, I was irritated by how ridiculous it was. "Also, it's the freaking tundra out here—what could someone possibly be doing with a boat in this weather? Every drop of water in the place is frozen solid."

"Dammit, Dani, this is Minnesota," my mom snapped, her voice rising in frustration. "Boats are always in play!"

I opened my mouth but had no idea how to respond to that statement.

"I think I might've just come up with a kick-ass tourism slogan." Her forehead smoothed and her mouth turned up into a little grin. "Let's start moving our stuff, and he'll be here when he's done."

“We’re seriously moving all our stuff in by ourselves—is that what you’re telling me?” I burrowed my chin into the top of my coat, trying to block the icy wind.

“I will buy you a large cheese pizza and a freaking pony if you cut the sarcasm and just help me carry boxes into the house,” she said, pulling a key ring out of her pocket.

“Can I eat the pizza while riding the pony?”

“As long as you’re safe.”

“Fine, I’m in,” I said, watching her open the screen door. “But I really feel like I was just hitting my stride on the negativity.”

My mom used her key—*yes, the key from when she was a child still worked in the door*—and we went inside. The main level was like a throwback, everything seemingly unchanged from the last time I’d been there. The only difference was that it didn’t smell like cookies anymore; my grandma always made chocolate chip cookies when we visited.

But when we got to the staircase, instead of looking up and seeing the upstairs hallway like it used to be, we saw a pair of French doors. The glass was frosted, so you couldn’t see anything through it, but natural light shone from behind the doors and made them look like they were glowing.

“Wow,” my mom said, running up the stairs.

“Yeah,” I agreed, following. “Wow.”

The upstairs had been completely transformed. Warm wood floors and white trim made it feel sleek and contemporary, the polar opposite of the old-person vibes of the main level. Two of the bedrooms had now been made into a living room, the walls removed so it felt like it’d always been that way. Big windows made it bright—too bright with all that freaking snow—and a white brick fireplace was centered on a wall of white bookshelves.

“This is amazing,” my mom said breathlessly.

It was hard to even remember how it’d looked before.

The two remaining bedrooms were equally gorgeous, with new furniture and a huge shared bathroom, and the small kitchenette had everything the two of us non-cooking people could need.

And when my mom opened the second set of French doors next to the fireplace, we found a deck with stairs leading down to the garage behind the house, where we'd be parking.

It was actually an apartment with its own entrance.

"Are you sure he did all of this himself?" I asked, truly in awe of the transformation. I knew Grandpa Mick had a woodshop and liked to build things, but this was next-level.

"Positive," my mom said, and for a split second it almost looked like she had tears in her eyes.

But then she gave her head a little shake and said, "Okay, let's get moving."

We went out to the truck and started bringing stuff in, but with just the two of us it felt like it was going to take forever. There were so many boxes of random things—books and clothes and pictures and shoes, and taking them in one at a time was just depressingly slow.

"Dani?"

I turned around when I heard the voice, and it took me a minute to recognize the tall dude in the blazer when I saw him smiling at me, breath puffing out in clouds in front of his face. He was bigger and had a facial-hair thing going on now, but, holy crap—it was him.

"Benji?"

Benji had always lived next door to my grandparents. Well, actually, his *dad* lived next door to my grandparents, and Benji just spent random weekends there. His mother, who he lived with the majority of the time, was loaded and lived in a lakeshore mansion.

In an exclusive gated community.

Alec had always called him King Douche—long before we were old enough to even use the word "douche"—because he went to a fancy all-boys private school and acted like he was better than everyone else.

You got a bike for your birthday? That's hilarious. I got a racehorse named Titus.

“I go by Ben now,” he said with a funny smile. “And can I help you with that? Please?”

He gestured toward the saggy box I was holding, the box that appeared to be moments away from losing its bottom.

“Thank you,” I said as he reached for it, remembering the last time I saw him.

God, I’d completely forgotten about that day.

It was a couple of years ago, and we’d flown in so my mom could see Alec’s dad in the hospital after his car accident. We’d been days away from the move to Germany, so we literally only had a few hours to spend in the Twin Cities, and Benji had been on our flight from Minot.

I’d been horrified when he switched seats with a middle-aged guy so he could sit beside me, but after a few minutes we connected like the old friends we weren’t. Which was a total shock because Benji had always been such a tool to me and Alec when we were little.

But I was so lonely at the time that the mere fact he was kind to me was... well, *nice*, even if he was still a douchey rich kid (the guy showed me no less than fifty pictures of himself on his phone, doing things like riding a horse on the beach while shirtless in Bali). And Alec had disappeared from my life by then, which was why I opted not to join my mom at the hospital when we visited, because I was worried Alec didn’t want me there—for reasons I still wasn’t sure about. Benji was kind and warm and comforting. It was surprisingly wonderful.

I glanced over Benji’s shoulder and noticed the car that appeared to be idling at the end of my grandpa’s driveway.

“Wow, is that your car?”

I wasn’t into cars, but my dad was, so I definitely knew that was a Maserati Grecale.

Of course Benji had a hundred-thousand-dollar SUV.

“It is,” he said with a smile so proud, you’d think he *built* the vehicle. “Want to go for a spin around the block? Warm yourself up on my heated seats?”

Gross. "Sorry, but I have *this* whole thing going on."

And I pointed to the box he was holding.

"Oh yeah," he said with a disappointed smile. "This goes inside?"

"Yep."

"Excellent." He nodded and started walking toward the house. "What is the story with the boxes, by the way?"

"Oh, you know," I said, grabbing a floor lamp as I followed him. "We're kind of moving here."

"What? Are you serious?" He said it like he couldn't believe it, but in a good way. Like he was happy to hear the news. "You're moving to Southview?"

"We are," I said, reaching for the front-door handle and pushing it open for him. "My mom and I are moving in with my grandpa."

"No way," he said, walking into the house.

"Oh yes," I said, my stomach sinking because I just hated moving so much. I knew from experience that I was about to hate the next couple of months of my life, and after that it was TBD. Might get better, might get way worse. "Apparently, this is home now."

"Well, that is fantastic news," Benji said, smiling with his whole face. "Staying with Dad just got a lot more interesting."

I didn't really know what he meant by that, and to be honest, I didn't really care. When moving to a new place, I welcomed anyone who could be moved into the "ally" category, whether they were a harmless rich douchebag or not.

Too bad he went to a fancy academy, or I might've actually known someone at my school already.

"Thanks, and we'll stay off your lawn, I promise," I teased.

"Trust me, the last thing I'm worried about is my dad's little yard," he replied, his tone rich with condescension.

He'd always seemed to be embarrassed that his dad was a regular middle-class guy, which kind of made me wonder how his parents ever ended up together—even for the short term—in the first place.