

— BOOK 1 OF THE CAMPFIRE SERIES —

Chasing
the
Sun



— MELANIE HOYENGA —

Chasing
the
Sun

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Chasing the Sun

— MELANIE HOOYENGA —



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*For everyone longing for the time
when we could hold hands with abandon*

IT TAKES A BRAVE MAN TO ASK HIS EX-GIRLFRIEND FOR A detailed list of everything he did wrong in their two-year relationship, but that's exactly what Paxton Juarez, former love of my life, has done.

I slam the cupboard door shut and toss a bag of pretzels on the counter, then grab a couple sparkling waters from the fridge.

Elbows propped on the counter, my best friend Naomi McGinnis peers at me over her phone. "He seriously sent a list? Like specific questions?"

I open the email app on my phone, pull up his message, and lower my voice to impersonate Pax. "Am I selfish?"

Naomi nods, her red curls bouncing.

"Did I not care for you enough?"

"Duh."

"Am I possessive? What is wrong with me, mentally? Did I care for your mental state of mind? What kind of a boyfriend am I?"

She lets out a low whistle. "Holy spaceballs. Isn't it a little late for him to suddenly care how he treated you?"

I toss my phone on the counter. “It’s been a month since we broke up right after he graduated and I finally feel like I’m moving on. Why can’t he just crawl in a hole and stay there?”

“He’s still trying to control you,” she says, her gaze jumping between me and her phone. We’ve been down this road before, but it always leads to the same place: me feeling horrible and stupid and weak. Naomi’s house is filled with self-help books and she’s spent the first half of summer break trying to convince me that what Pax and I had was not love—it was abuse.

I didn’t want to hear that word at first, but she’s helped me accept it and try to move on. I used to be stronger. Could think for myself and knew what I wanted, or didn’t want, but now I’m left floundering.

My head drops to my arms on the counter.

“You’re not answering him, right?” Her tone holds a hint of caution, like she doesn’t want to tell me what to do but also doesn’t want me to write back. “Sage Winters, please tell me you’re not considering replying.”

I shrug, face down. “It might be cathartic. You know, finally show him that he doesn’t hold any power over me anymore.” I peek at her over my arm.

She’s smiling at my self-help speak.

“I feel so stupid.”

“You’re not.”

“You’d never let a guy turn you inside out.”

Her lips purse. “I’d like to think not. But that doesn’t mean I don’t let guys get to me.”

My head pops up. “Who?”

She brushes me off with a head shake and the corner of her mouth lifts. “It’s too soon to acknowledge.” The pretzel

bag crinkles as she grabs a handful. “Will you promise to wait before replying?”

I appreciate that she doesn’t flat out tell me not to. Because as much as I want to be rid of Pax, I’d also really love to have the final word.

Before I can answer, both our phones buzz with a text.

Naomi reads it before I can grab my phone.

“Ooh, Kit’s having a bonfire.”

“Tonight?” It doesn’t really matter when. I won’t go. I never go. And Naomi understands this.

At least I think she does.

“Later this week. For his new neighbor. Neb. Connelly I think.”

“Why do you know his last name?”

She shrugs. “I know things. So, do you want to go?”

I spin my phone in circles in time with my pounding heart. The unread text lights up the display, taunting me with a night of fun that should make me happy. It’s not like I’m doing something wrong considering it. My gut twists and the pressure in my chest makes it hard to breathe. A fun side effect of Pax controlling my every move is now I panic when forced to make a decision. Combined with my nervousness around crowds—like at a party—and my body shuts down.

My silence is my answer.

“Really?” she asks. “It’ll just be a few of us. Kit Cordero doesn’t have enough friends to have a legit party.”

I glance at the text.

Kit: welcome to the Neb-orhood bonfire Saturday!

I groan. “No, but Theo does, and he’ll invite half the school.” Naomi’s twin brother makes friends everywhere he goes and for some inexplicable reason he’s besties with Kit, who still has the sense of humor of a middle schooler.

She bites a pretzel in half and chews, thinking. “It could be fun. And you need to get out of the house.” She takes another bite. “Summer’s halfway over and you’ve barely been outside.”

I straighten. “I’ve been outside.”

“Your backyard doesn’t count.”

“But it’s a nice backyard.” My voice is as weak as my argument.

“Come on, it’s been months since you’ve gone OUT out. Just consider it. For me?” Her bright green eyes lock on mine and my resolve wavers.

“I’ll think about it.” I don’t bother crossing my fingers with the lie, and shift the conversation to something safer. “Where are you at with the vlog?”

Naomi flattens her hands on the counter and bites her lip. “Change of plans.”

“But I love the idea! You’ll be the perfect—” I wave my hand as I grapple for the right words. “Teen advice person.”

Her curls practically vibrate as she nods. “Oh I’m still doing it, but I’ve decided a podcast would be better. I want people to focus on what I’m saying, not what I look like.” With her pale skin, light dusting of freckles, and poof of red hair, there is definitely a lot to focus on. But all of it’s good.

“Do I need to pep talk you, Ms. Queen of Self-Esteem?”

She smiles and it brightens her entire face. “Nope. I’ve done a lot of research, and while video is undeniably the leader with online viewership, podcasts have a broader appeal.”

I shove a pretzel into my mouth, considering this while I chew. “But the rest will be the same?”

“Still called Three Good Things. Still a mix of self-help and dating advice.” She flicks invisible crumbs from her

shirt. “Even if my dating life is sadly uninspired. But I need help with episode titles, Ms. Star English Student.”

I blush at the compliment. Regardless of what’s happened with my personal life, school has always been something I could control. I still haven’t figured out what an interest in reading and writing means for a college major or a career, but I have all of senior year to worry about that.

“Hold that thought,” Naomi says before hustling down the hall to the bathroom.

As soon as she’s gone, my confidence wanes. My finger trails over the dark screen of my phone. No one will miss me. Like Naomi said, I haven’t been around all summer. Or really for the past couple years. One party isn’t going to change that.

I tap the screen and reply to the text thread.

Me: sorry, can’t make it. school shopping with mom.

Naomi bursts out of the bathroom holding her phone out like it scalded her. Her scowl turns to frustration, then concern, all in a matter of seconds.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “I just can’t.”

She sighs as she flops into the chair next to me. “So what are we doing instead?”

Before I can thank her for putting up with me, my phone dings with a text.

Unknown: I’m starting to get a complex that you don’t want to meet me

MY HAND HOVERS OVER MY PHONE, LIKE IF I CONCENTRATE hard enough I can take it back. Because that wasn't to the whole group—it was only to Sage—and I hit send without thinking.

Before I moved here, I was confident, outgoing. Before, I didn't think twice about going to a party or hanging out with friends, even if they aren't really my friends and it's a pity party because I don't know anyone. But now everything's different.

And Sage hasn't replied.

It's cool of Kit to help me meet people before school starts. When we were kids and I'd visit Mom on holidays and over summer break, we'd play in our adjoining backyards, but once we hit high school, our casual acquaintance-ship dissolved into shouted hellos from the driveway and promises to catch up.

Which we never did.

Until now.

This is probably Mom's doing. Her way of "showing she cares." She's been appropriately attentive since I moved in

last month, but she stopped being a full-time parent seven years ago and her skills are a bit rusty.

Sage: who is this?

My eyes close and I let out a groan. I'm such a dumbass. She never saved my number from the group text.

Me: sorry! this is Neb

Me: Kit's friend

If my bed would swallow me now, that would be great.

Sage: oh. hi. saving now haha

Sage: sorry I can't make it, but new clothes are very important

Despite her playful tone, the excitement I felt when I first texted fades.

Me: so I hear

I look down at my flannel that's so worn you can practically see through it. At my cargo shorts with a tear in the leg from a camping trip last spring.

Me: I should probably do that too

Sage: gotta make a good impression, right?

Did I misread her? She seemed down to earth, like she wasn't into the superficial crap like some of the girls I know, but maybe I was wrong.

Sage: my advice - don't try to turn yourself into someone you're not

Okay, this is what I expected from her. It's hard to get to know anyone from a group text, but she never seemed fazed by Kit and his friend Theo.

Me: so don't dye my hair blue and pierce my nose?

Sage: unless that's what you're into

Is that what she's into?

Me: blue hair does not suit me

Sage: and piercings?

Me: not for me

Sage: so what is?

I drum my fingers against my phone. What if she has blue hair and a nose ring and I inadvertently offend her? I don't want to dig myself into a hole, but I also don't want to play games.

Me: I'm into camping, outdoors, that sort of thing. I'm all natural

And now I sound like an ad for fricking granola.

Sage: and astronomy

A prickle of something—pride, and a little surprise—crawls through my chest.

Me: you picked up on that?

Sage: only after the first 50 times you mentioned it

Me: it was not 50

Me: maybe 20

Sage: it's cool

Me: what are you into?

I feel bad I haven't picked up on her interests from the group texts, but she tends to play off what others are saying instead of starting the conversation.

Sage: I like observing people. and reading

Sage: boring stuff

Me: I bet you learn a lot about people that way

There's a pause that stretches into a moment that twists into an almost awkward silence. I count to ten, one number with each breath, then try again.

Me: are you a senior too?

Sage: is Neb short for something?

Our texts come through at the same time and I smile. Then I take a breath. It's easy to get lulled into a false security when texting a stranger, but Sage doesn't seem like she's ready to go below the surface.

Sage: yes

Me: yes

Sage: lol, are you gonna tell me?

I smile again, and the tightness that's gripped my heart for the past month starts to loosen.

Me: it's short for Nebula.

Sage: like the woman from the Marvel movies?

My eyes roll skyward and I silently curse Dad and his obsession with astronomy. Just as quickly, my jaw falls open. That's the first time I've had a normal reaction to him since—

Me: thankfully no. call it a parental obsession with outer space

Sage: don't make me google

Me: a nebula is basically a giant cloud of gas and dust. in space

Sage: wow, that had to be rough growing up

Me: I went to the same school my whole life so most kids were used to it

At the start of middle and high school some people tried to make fun of my name—older kids flexing and all that—but Dad taught me to be proud of who I am and my name is part of that. When I didn't react, the jerks gave up. Plus nebulas *are* pretty badass.

Sage: I think it's cool. but I'm surprised no one calls you Starlord

I snort a laugh.

Me: my best friend Yoshi does

Yoshi calls me that but until now he's the only one who's ever made the connection.

Sage: so is that off-limits?

I adjust against my pillow. Over the years, I've learned people are gonna call you what they want, so her courtesy of asking is surprising.

Me: he wouldn't mind if you borrowed it

Sage: noted

Me: is Sage short for anything?

I'm guessing not, but maybe she's willing to share surface stuff.

Sage: actual lol

Sage: and no. just the boring plant. not much of a story except my parents thought it sounded pretty

Sage: not that I'm saying I'm pretty

Sage: I'll stop now

Laughter bursts out of me, bringing tears to my eyes.

Me: it is pretty

Mom's head pokes in the door of my room. Her long hair is pulled into a knot-thing near her neck and dirt streaks her clothes. A hesitant smile plays on her lips, like she doesn't want to interrupt but can't help herself. "I thought I'd never hear that sound again."

"What sound?"

Her smile slips to a frown. "You laughing."

And just like that, the heaviness crashes around me. The feeling like I'm slipping back into the darkness that's overwhelmed me all summer. The reality that Dad's gone filling every molecule in my body, making it hard to breathe.

She must see it in my face because she steps into my room. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to—"

I wave her off. "I know you didn't."

She nods at my phone. "Who are you talking to?"

The words 'just this girl' trip on the end of my tongue. Mom knew about Jennie because we dated for over a year. She inferred that we broke up because when I moved in, I never mentioned her. But I'm not ready to have her nosing around Sage and jumping to conclusions before I know what's going on. Or before we meet.

As if on cue, my phone buzzes with another text, but it's not Sage. It's Yoshi, saving me without even realizing it.

"Yoshi."

My phone buzzes again, texts from Sage and Yoshi filling the screen.

"Well, I'll let you get back to your friends." Mom sighs, and for a second I feel bad about lying to her. She's making an effort, and I haven't made it easy on her.

"Kit's having a bonfire later this week."

"That sounds fun." She picks at a fleck of paint on the door jamb like she wants to say more. We haven't talked about curfew or any other rules like that because I don't have any friends except Kit and he lives next door.

I glance at my phone as it buzzes again. Hopefully that's starting to change.

She waits a beat longer, then steps into the hall.

Ignoring the twinge of regret that hits me when she leaves, I scroll through the texts on my lock screen.

Yoshi: my princess, tell me ur not sitting home tonight

Sage: ::blush::

Yoshi: me and Rick are at the pit

Yoshi: everyone misses u

Sage: it must suck starting a new school senior year

My thumb hovers over their messages as I decide who to reply to first. I go with Sage.

Me: it's not great

Sage: and Kit's the only person you know

Me: he's been cool

The little dots bounce while she types, then disappear, then start up again like she's changing her reply.

Sage: I guess he can be nice when he tries

From what I know of Kit, he's the kind of guy who tries too hard to make people think he doesn't care. I doubt we'd

be friends in a different circumstance, but right now he's all I've got.

And Sage is clearly not a fan.

Me: Is that why you're not going?

Sage: maybe a little

Me: I'm hurt

Sage: I don't even know you. what if you're as bad as he is?

Me: ouch

Me: I promise we're nothing alike

Sage: well Theo's cool. he balances Kit's Kitness

I'd picked up on that in the group text but it's nice to have my suspicions confirmed.

Me: good to know

I take a deep breath and switch to Yoshi. He's the only friend from home who's made a point to text every day. Me leaving probably affected him more than anyone else and it feels good to know someone misses me. But I can't blame the others. I've heard from a few people, but I left the day after the funeral and since it was already summer break, I slipped out of town and out of their lives without a goodbye.

Me: for your information Luigi, this princess is going to a party this week

In addition to Starlord, Yoshi also calls me Princess Peach. He hates that he has the same name as one of the Super Mario characters, and when we were kids, he claimed Luigi. Since no one else was allowed to be Yoshi and Rick claimed Mario, I somehow ended up with Princess Peach. Now I can't escape it.

Yoshi: good for you man

Yoshi: any girls there

Me: none that I know

More like none that I care about. This girl Tara who's been borderline stalking me since I moved here will prob-

ably be there. She lives in the neighborhood and our moms are friends, and if they had their way we'd be a couple before school started.

Yoshi: dude it's been forever since j

Me: who's at the pit?

Yoshi: the usual. rick says hi

He ignores my deflection and tells me what I want to hear. About my friends from another life and the stupid but hilarious physical challenges they make up to pass the time. The pit is an old gravel quarry that's nothing to look at, but it has wide open spaces and plenty of ways for us to almost hurt ourselves.

Had.

Past life.

Now I've got a bonfire with a bunch of strangers and the one person I want to see won't be there.

“THIS SHOULDN’T BE SUCH A HARD DECISION.” NAOMI’S staring at the menu board of the café, arms crossed, brows furrowed.

I’ve already ordered my chocolatey coffee drink and am waiting at the end of the counter, trying to be patient. The café is tucked in a corner of my favorite bookstore and I’m itching to start browsing. “Go with caramel. It always makes you happy.”

“Good call.” She places her order and joins me. “How can you be so decisive about some things but not others?”

I raise a brow.

“Coffee. Done. Bonfire. Done. Deciding to put yourself out there for a boy who seems really nice...” She waggles her hands and scrunches her lips. “That not so much.”

My toe rubs against a crack in the tile floor. “You know why.”

“I do, but I don’t agree with it.”

“Sah-gee?”

It takes me a moment to realize the barista means me. “It’s Sage,” I say. “One syllable.”

He shrugs and sets my no- whip, all chocolate mocha on the counter.

I take a sip and the sweetness sweeps over my tongue, making me forget everything else. Today's going to be a good day—as long as Naomi doesn't pressure me to change my mind about the bonfire.

"You really won't change your mind?" Naomi asks.

I choke on my mocha, spraying the counter with coffee splatter. The barista gives me a dirty look and I quickly grab a napkin to wipe it up. "About the bonfire? No." I take another sip and fight off a cough. "Since when do you want to hang out with Kit, anyway?"

The barista sets down Naomi's drink with a smile and she smiles back before taking a sip. Eyes closed, she exhales slowly. "I don't want to hang out with Kit, thank you very much." She opens her eyes and gestures at the wide expanse of the store. I follow as she keeps talking. "He's at the house so much I don't get the chance to miss him. But a bonfire could be fun. And I'm curious about the new guy."

She watches me out of the corner of her eye and I pretend to be interested in a travel guide to Botswana.

"Don't tell me you're not a tiny bit curious."

Yes, part of me would like to meet the guy who's been texting me for the past several days. Our conversations haven't gone beyond basic interests and that kind of thing, but he's really easy to talk to and I miss that. "I would like to know what he looks like."

She stops in the middle of the aisle, one palm up. "Hold up. You haven't exchanged pics?"

Heat creeps up my cheeks.

"I'm not saying to text him nudes, but you've got nothing to be embarrassed about."

My fingers wind through my shoulder-length hair. Not

blond, not brown, just blah. “I don’t know. We thought it’d be fun to get to know each other without the added pressure of appearances.”

“Whose idea was it?”

“Mine.”

“If he stalks you, he’s only gonna see that ridiculous sage plant you insist on using as a profile pic.”

My smile drops and everything inside me chills. I’ve gotten so used to that picture that it hadn’t occurred to me to change it, but if I truly want to take my life back, that’s a good place to start.

Naomi’s walking again and doesn’t notice how her words affect me. She pauses near the self-help section. “Can I catch up to you in a few?”

“Sure.” I continue upstairs to the young adult section and shake off my unease. Pax and I broke up. There’s no reason for him to still have any kind of effect on me. I skim the new releases, trying to get lost in their promise to magically transport me to another world. The question is, which one? Mom and Dad fully support my reading habit, but my allowance is only enough for one or two books per month.

I pull out my phone and send a text.

Me: fairies or shapeshifters?

Neb: are these party guests or

A little spark flares inside me. Every time I’ve texted first, he’s replied almost immediately. Which could have more to do with his lack of a social life than an interest in me, but still. He hasn’t pressured me about the bonfire since the first day he texted me privately, and I get a tiny thrill that he’s subtly hinting at it now.

Me: books

Neb: ahh, then shapeshifters

Juggling my drink, I tuck the book against my chest and

start to type out a reply with one hand when a deep voice behind me turns me cold.

“I would have gone fairies.” Pax leans against the shelf, his casual smile doing nothing to mask the calculating look in his dark eyes. Day-old stubble shadows his olive skin and I’m torn between the impulse to stroke his cheek and bash his face into the shelf. The sharp angles of his face used to turn me into a dreamy schoolgirl, but now the feelings churning through me leave me frozen in place.

I somehow find my tongue. “Yeah, well, I’m in the mood for shapeshifters.” My voice isn’t as strong as I’d like, but my back straightens and I clutch the book tighter, like if I loosen my grip he might tear it from me. “And last time I checked, you lost your right to tell me what to do when we broke up.” I can almost hear Naomi cheering over the nausea bubbling inside me.

His eyes narrow and he pushes off the shelf. When my phone dings with a text, his hand flinches like he wants to grab it to see who’s texting. The way he used to.

I take a step back, hating myself for showing he still has power over me.

“What are you doing here?” Naomi’s voice is sharp, each word punctuated with the anger she’s yet to take out on him. I turn to her at the end of the row. She’s like a beacon saving me from the danger lying beneath Pax’s smug smile.

“You haven’t replied to my email,” he says, his focus on me.

Naomi joins me, her shoulder pressed lightly against mine. “Don’t you have a puppy to kick or something?”

His head tilts slightly and his jaw ticks. But if she struck a nerve, he doesn’t react. Not to her. He moves into my space and it’s like that movement, that closing of distance between us, sucks the air from my lungs and with it, any fight

lingering within me. A tremble starts in my hands and works its way through my body. My arm tightens around the book, the sharp corners digging into my chest, and the ice in my cup rattles. He's waiting for a response but my words crumble to dust in my throat.

Naomi steps between us. They're almost the same height and she glares into his eyes with the force of a thousand warriors. "I'm calling security if you don't leave. Now."

He finally looks at Naomi. "I'm just talking to her."

She shakes her head, red curls shaking like a halo of flames, and doesn't back down. "I don't care."

They stare at each other for a half second that lasts an eternity, then he drops his gaze and rubs a hand over his arm. Takes a step back. Looks at me. "Just write me back, okay?" There's a tenderness in his voice that reaches through my panic to the place in my heart that forgives him. That wants him back. That wishes it could change the way things ended.

And I hate myself for it.

At least I don't answer. But he sees the uncertainty in my eyes and gives me the smile he used to save for after. When the yelling stopped and he loved me again.

"Seriously," Naomi says. "Leave."

He finally turns away. He only looks back once as he heads for the exit.

Naomi pulls me into a hug and exhales against my neck. "You know I don't condone violence, but I really wish I could permanently remove that asshole from your life."

My body relaxes against hers and my eyes close, shutting out the bookstore. Not many people know what I went through with Pax—definitely not my parents—and having someone unconditionally on my side makes me feel a little less alone. A little less hopeless.

“Are you okay?” Naomi asks.

I nod against her shoulder. “I need a minute.” As if a minute will calm the emotions that resurfaced with his appearance.

“How did he even know you were here?”

My eyes open and I take a sip of my watered-down mocha. “I’ve stopped trying to understand how or why he does the things he does.”

She nods, eyes on mine. “That’s smart. Keep doing that. Or not doing that.” Her finger runs along the spine of the book in my arm. “I’ve heard this is good.”

“You’re not into fantasy.”

“No, but you are, and you keep saying how much you want to read it. If anyone deserves to escape this reality, it’s you.”

“Thanks?”

She wanders away from me, scanning the shelves. “You know what I mean. The less time you spend thinking about Asston, the better.” I roll my eyes at her preferred nickname for my ex. She spins on her heel and gives me a smile that makes me take a step back.

“What?”

“You really won’t consider the Neb thing?”

“I’m too screwed up to date.”

“We’re all screwed up in one way or another. The only thing you can do is not repeat the same mistakes.”

“Three Good Things About Dating a Narcissist?”

She sips her drink and nods. “Exactly.”

We leave the bookstore an hour later—me with the shapeshifter book and Naomi with a book on podcasts—and I still haven’t replied to Neb. I pull out my phone while Naomi drives us home. There are several texts about nothing, and the last one makes my heart sink.

Neb: well anyway, I hope you have a good day. talk soon

I could make up a lie about my phone dying, but I don't want whatever this is to start off on the wrong foot. Even if I'm sure he's only being nice.

Me: sorry! we got talking and I spaced. have fun tonight!

Neb: spaced. ha

I send a smiley face and feel a twinge of guilt for not going to the bonfire. There was a moment when we first got our drinks that I might have been convinced to go, but Pax ruined that.

Like he ruins everything.

KIT AND A GUY WITH BLACK HAIR AND A WICKED SUNBURN ARE standing over a smoldering smoke bomb when I arrive in Kit's backyard. Three logs the size of my thighs sit on a pile of embers that look left over from another fire. Kit's got a bandana tied over his close-cropped afro and is studying a bottle of lighter fluid like it holds the answers to the universe.

"Need some help?" I ask. I don't want to overstep, but if this is their plan, there won't be a fire tonight.

Kit glances at me, shoulders tense. At least there's no one else here to witness this.

"You can start fires?" Sunburn asks, stroking his chin.

I join them next to the fire pit. "I've been camping since I was the size of those logs."

Sunburn nods at Kit. "Hand over the lighter fluid."

Kit rolls his eyes and hands it to me, but I shake him off. "Do you have any kindling? Small twigs and branches. And maybe some newspaper?"

"I'll go look." He heads toward the house and unease twists in my gut.

"I'm Neb."

"Theo." He holds out his hand and I shake it. He's shorter than me, with green eyes that crinkle when he smiles.

"He's not mad, is he?"

Theo kicks at one of the logs. "Not at you. He's pissed he couldn't get the fire started. And I'm useless with all things outdoorsy."

"These logs will never burn like this." I grab one and my hands slip. "How much of that bottle did he use?"

"All of it?"

I toss the logs to the side and wipe my hands in the grass. "Do you think he has an axe?"

Theo raises a brow. "What, are you gonna play lumberjack?"

I smirk. "Just trying to help."

Kit returns with a pile of newspapers and dumps them at our feet. "There's probably branches around the yard."

"He wants an axe," Theo says, biting his lip.

Kit points at a door to the garage. "If you can find it..."

They gather sticks while I poke through Kit's garage, and when I return they've got a decent pile next to the newspapers.

"Can you bunch up some of the paper? Not too tight, then start a pile in the fire pit." I stand a log on its end and roll up the sleeves of my flannel.

"Oh, he really is playing lumberjack," Theo whispers loud enough for me to hear.

I can't tell if his teasing is friendly, but that doesn't change the fact that these logs need to be split. Kit busies himself setting up chairs and dragging a cooler closer to the fire, while Theo watches me swing the axe. The blade slices

clean through on the first try and I fight a smile. I'm not trying to show off but I'm really glad I didn't miss.

"So you just know how to do this?" Theo asks.

"My dad taught me. We used to camp a lot." The 'used to' almost gets caught in my throat. I rest the axe on the ground and wipe my forehead with the back of my hand.

"Kit told me," he says. "I'm really sorry."

"Thanks."

He nods at the wood. "I'd offer to help but..."

"You're good. This won't take much longer."

I'm starting on the last log when giggles drift into the backyard.

"Kit didn't tell us there'd be entertainment," Tara practically purrs as she walks toward me. Her low-cut tank top and shorts that barely cover her butt seem ridiculous for a fire, especially since it's already getting cold, but at least she has a sweatshirt hanging over her purse. "This is Ariana. Ariana, this is Neb. The guy I told you about."

Ariana gives a little wave and smiles. "Nice to meet you." On the surface, she and Tara have a lot in common. Same clothes, same long dark hair—although Tara's paler than I am—but Ariana doesn't look at me like she's planning something.

"You might wanna step back," I say, holding up the axe.

Tara slides her arm through Ariana's and licks her lower lip. "Don't let us stop you."

"Tara, leave the guy alone!" Kit shouts from the edge of the yard. He's carrying a pile of branches, some longer than my arm, and shakes his head. "We can't have a fire until he's done."

"Come on," Ariana says, tugging on Tara's arm. "Let's pick the best seats."

By the time I finish and get the fire going, more people

have arrived. They fist bump and head nod as they settle around the fire, and before long, it feels like a party. I sink into a chair and memories of last summer flood through me. Of Jennie and Yoshi and the rest of our friends sitting around countless campfires until the last embers burned out. None of them were into astronomy like I am, but they listened to my stories about the constellations and knew about the solar eclipse in a couple weeks. The eclipse that I've been planning to see for as long as I can remember.

The fire crackles and the laughter around me feels comfortable. Everyone introduced themselves before slipping into conversations with their friends, leaving me alone with my thoughts. Where I've spent far too much time lately.

I pull out my phone.

Me: maybe we can still figure something out for the eclipse

Yoshi: i've missed camping with my peach

Me: would you be up for a trip?

Yoshi: dude it's all we talked about for years. yeah

The familiar ache in my chest relaxes as I take a deep breath. My friends are still my friends. That part hasn't changed. Yeah, I need to make new friends here, but I'm not completely alone.

Me: that'd be great

"Who are you texting?" Tara sits in the recently vacated chair next to me and leans closer to look at my phone. Her cleavage presses against her arm and she smiles when she catches me looking. I'm not interested, but it's like looking away from an asteroid hurtling toward you.

"Friend from home." Another text comes through as I say it but I don't react.

Her head tilts. "Girlfriend?"

“Nah, my friend Yoshi.” Not that I need to explain myself to her.

She nods at my phone. “That’s not Yoshi.”

Sage: how’s the bonfire?

My heart rate picks up. No, it’s not Yoshi. If Sage isn’t going to be here, texting with her would be the next best thing. But I don’t want to reply until Tara goes away.

“Did you need something?” I keep my voice polite but distant.

Her lower lip pushes out and she tilts her head so she’s looking up at me through her eyelashes, even though we’re sitting side by side. “I’m just trying to keep you company. You’re not talking to anyone and I felt bad. We felt bad.” She hooks a thumb at Ariana, who waves awkwardly from the chair on her other side, then goes back to texting.

“You can reply,” Tara says with a glance at my phone.

It feels like a challenge. I’m sure there’s a right and wrong response, but I don’t care enough about her games to worry about it.

I take a picture of the fire and send it to Sage.

Me: burny

Sage: lol is that a technical term?

I smile, very aware that Tara is watching me from the corner of her eye.

Me: it is now

Sage: I’m impressed. I didn’t think Kit knew how to start a fire

Me: I helped

Sage: are there a lot of people there?

Me: not enough

Sage: ??

Heat builds in my chest. I can’t explain why I feel drawn

to this girl I've never met, especially when Tara's sitting right next to me, clearly interested, but I am.

Me: I was hoping to meet you

It's a lot easier to be honest when it's just words on a screen.

There's a pause before she replies, a beat that echoes through me. I'm about to make a joke to downplay what I said when her reply comes through.

Sage: sorry. I had that thing

Okay, so I need to back off.

Me: it's cool. we'll meet eventually

Hopefully before school starts.

Sage: I can't wait

"That seems cozy." Tara's leaning toward me again, but her smile feels less friendly.

I rest my phone facedown on my thigh and force a smile. Maybe Tara is only trying to be nice, and as Dad always said, I'm not gonna make friends staring at my phone all night. Kit's talking to a couple guys on the other side of the fire and when I hear "camping for a couple nights," my ears perk.

"Who's going camping?" I ask before my brain can remind me that maybe it wasn't an open invitation. Several heads turn my way. It's the first time I've spoken loud enough for everyone to hear me. I give a little wave. "Don't mind the new guy busting in on your plans."

Kit smiles. "Naw, man. It's cool. A couple teachers are putting together a camping trip to go see the eclipse in a few weeks. Apparently it's the first time in our lifetime—"

"That the total solar eclipse will be visible in North America," I say, sitting upright.

Now the others are staring.

"Nerd alert!" Theo shouts. He looks me in the eye and smiles to show he's teasing, but I don't even care. I've been

called nerd, science geek, space boy, you name it—although lumberjack was new—and I fully embrace the labels.

This trip could be exactly what I need. I'll get to see the eclipse and go camping, and hopefully make a few friends before school starts.

"So yeah," Kit says. "It's not an official school trip since it's the summer, but it's just for students."

And like that, my hope deflates.

He must notice the change in my expression, because his face grows serious. "If you're interested, I'll email Mr. Mauro and get you in."

"I'd appreciate that." Almost as an afterthought I add, "Are you going?"

He and Theo exchange looks. "As long as someone else pitches my tent," Theo says.

Tara runs a finger up my arm, pulling my thoughts back to her. "Camping sounds fun."

Choose your words carefully so she doesn't take it as an invitation. "Have you ever been?" If she has, I'm guessing it's not the type of camping I'm used to, where you hike miles into the woods and don't see another person for a week.

"Not since I was a kid. But I love nature and outdoors and all that stuff."

Ariana smirks next to her, and Tara swats her arm.

"What? I totally do!"

"Yeah, sure you do." Ariana rolls her eyes at Tara's platform sandals and I stifle a laugh. Seeing her knocked down a peg by her friend makes her seem more real.

"We're in a backyard. It's not like I'd wear these camping or whatever." She tucks her feet under her chair and her non-stop confidence seems to waver for a second.

"A group camping trip does sound kinda fun," Ariana says.

“I’ll go if you want to,” Tara says to Ariana, then she tosses her hair over her shoulder and winks at me, and in that split second I wish I could teleport to the other side of the fire.

“I bet I could get Naomi and Sage to go,” says Theo.

I try not to look too eager, but everything inside me sits at attention. “That’d be cool.”

Ariana leans closer to Tara. “If Sage goes, you know my brother’s gonna try to go.”

Tara turns away from her and whispers, “But they broke up.”

“I know, but he’s weird about her.”

Tara mutters something too low for me to hear, then gives a half shrug. “I’ll go if you do. My summer needs a little excitement.” She swivels her head and levels her gaze at me, lashes lowered so she’s looking up at me again. “Whaddaya say, Neb?”

My hands slide to the edge of my chair and I grip so hard my knuckles turn white. “I might be camping with some friends from back home that weekend.” It’s not a complete lie. We’ve talked about it for over a year.

She hooks her finger in the front of my flannel. “Isn’t it time you made new friends?”

I shift so her hand drops to her side. Kit’s laughing with Theo across the fire, and no one else is paying attention to us. Even Ariana is back to playing on her phone. I swallow hard, force a smile, and with a sigh I feel in my bones say, “Probably.”

SAGE

ME: THE ECLIPSE? REALLY?

Neb: what do you mean really?

Me: I mean, it's just the moon blocking the sun right?

Me: or am I missing something?

Neb: you can't see me, but my jaw is on the floor

Me: so I'm missing something

Neb: this is a once in a lifetime event

Neb: a total solar eclipse is like

Neb: I don't know what's happening

Neb: I'm at a loss for words

Neb: I've been looking forward to this since I was a kid

Me: okay, so a BIG deal

I stretch across my bed and grab a pillow to prop beneath my chest.

Me: and you also like camping, so extra big deal?

A smile lifts the corner of my mouth, and I imagine him smiling too. Which is tricky since I have no idea what he looks like, but the thought of making this faceless boy smile makes my heart race.

Neb: you could say that

Me: so you're for sure going?

Neb: 87% sure

I love the fact that he doesn't try to be smooth. That he just throws his geekiness out there and doesn't think twice about it.

Me: and tell me again why I should go camping in the woods with a bunch of kids I don't know?

Neb: you know them better than I do

Neb: and then there's the obvious

We would finally meet. But not just meet. Spend three days and two nights together. Well not *together* together, but all in the same space. Without parents.

Me: explain why I need to see this eclipse

I picture faceless Neb cracking his knuckles and taking a deep breath. Then he floods my phone with links to websites about the eclipse, followed by more facts than I learned in Earth Sciences last year.

Neb: sorry. I geek out on this stuff

Me: I think it's cool you're so into it

There's a pause and I imagine him in his room, door closed, thinking about me the way I am about him. Does he get excited when I text? He still replies in the group thread, but not like this. I feel like I'm getting to know him in a way I didn't think you could without seeing the person, and I like it. There's no pressure for my hair to be perfect, no games or calculated looks, just us getting to know each other.

Me: it would be fun to watch the eclipse with someone who knows all about it

Me: besides the teachers

Ugh, why did I add that? The first comment was perfectly flirty and I diluted it with—

Neb: so you're considering going?

I really really *really* like that he isn't pressuring me. That he's asking politely and letting me decide for myself.

Me: I'm like 56% sure

Neb: I'll take those odds

My face drops to my pillow and I smile into the pillow-case. I'm not imagining this. He's flirting with me too.

My phone dings and I lift my head to read his text, but it's not him.

Naomi: I'm here

Me: be right there

I scramble downstairs and shout "Naomi's here" before opening the door. Her red curls are twisted into a bun on top of her head and she adjusts her backpack on her shoulder. "Come on in."

She gives me an appraising look.

"What?"

"What were you doing?"

I press my hands to my cheeks. They're warm, which means they're red. "Nothing."

She follows me to my room. "Does this nothing have to do with a certain boy?"

"Maybe."

We settle on my bed and I grab my phone. As if on cue, I get another text.

"Don't let me interrupt."

"We're just talking. He's trying to get me to go on that eclipse camping trip."

"I think it sounds fun." Her bright eyes sparkle and she leans against my arm. Her head hits mine with a thud.

"Not you too."

She exhales slowly. "A weekend without parents. In the woods. And I heard there's gonna be a day trip into Portland. You know what that means..."

“Powell’s,” I breathe. The infamous bookstore is my nirvana. My parents took me there when I was a kid and my spotty memories have morphed the store into a land of unicorns and rainbows—but with books. Their social media posts keep my daydreams alive. Whoever manages the account has struck the perfect balance of event and book posts and other pics of the store that make me want to live there forever.

“You could spend *hours* there,” she says.

“I didn’t realize you were that into the eclipse.”

She shrugs, but it lacks her usual nonchalance. “The trip sounds fun.”

“You okay?” Something’s going on, but one thing I know about my best friend is she won’t share until she’s processed it on her own. But that doesn’t mean I won’t ask.

“Just thinking through some things.”

“About the podcast?”

“Yes.” Her eyes glaze for a second, then she shakes it off and smiles. “Yes. I’m working on a schedule and outlining content for the first dozen episodes, and I should be ready to start recording before school starts. Editing is going to be the hardest part since I’ve never done that, but I’ve convinced Theo to help.”

“It’s really cool you’re doing this.” Most kids our age spout off about all the things they *could* do, but never follow through. Naomi has some internal drive that pushes her to go after what she wants. “I want to be you when I grow up.”

She snorts.

“Can I help?”

“I’ll probably have you edit my outlines.” She flicks my phone. “Nice sidetrack. Are you going to answer that boy or what?”

“Let’s go help with dinner.”

Downstairs, while Naomi leans against the counter and Mom chops veggies and Dad carries a tray of chicken to the grill on the back deck, I check my phone.

Neb: no pressure

Neb: I just think it sounds fun

Neb: and I haven't been to Portland since middle school

Neb: I'll stop now ;)

The winky face at the end of his last text gets me. A flutter of butterflies stirs in my belly and heat races through me.

“What’s that smirk for?” Mom wipes the knife with a towel and turns on the stove, her eyes never leaving mine.

I slip my phone in my back pocket without replying. “Oh, nothing.”

She sets the skillet of veggies on the stove. “It’s been a while since I’ve seen that smile.”

“Right?” Naomi says. I shoot her a wide-eyed look but she cocks her head and returns her own wide-eyed look. “There’s this sort-of school camping trip in a couple weeks and we’re trying to convince Sage to go.”

“We?” I mouth. When did Neb become part of we?

Now Naomi is full-on ignoring me. “A couple science teachers are chaperoning. Ms. Kim and Mr. Mauro. It’s for the solar eclipse on the 17th so it’s, like, educational. And there’s a day trip to Portland so we can—”

“Go to Powell’s!” Mom’s smile grew wider as Naomi talked and now she’s clapping her hands. “Oh, sweetie, I’ve felt so bad we haven’t taken you back there. This trip sounds like a lot of fun.”

“What trip?” Dad asks, stepping through the open sliding glass door.

“The girls are going on a school-sanctioned science camping trip to see the eclipse!”

Mom's enthusiasm makes me laugh, but a bubble of panic fills my lungs. As much as I'd love to go to Powell's, going into a big city means being surrounded by people. Lots of people. "Won't it be crowded?" I whisper to Naomi.

She squeezes my hand. "I'll be with you."

Dad gives me a serious look. "Sweetie, it shouldn't be too crowded during the day. And Naomi will look out for you, right?"

Naomi nods, and the three of them watch me with measured concern. I appreciate that they take my phobias seriously, but in moments like this I want to hide in my room and never come out.

Mom steps closer to Dad and gives me a gentle smile. When they're standing side by side, it's easy to see where I get my light brown hair and brown eyes—MOM—but it's Dad's temperament that dictates so much of who I am. The three of us are the same height and I'm proof that mixing DNA takes parts of each person to create someone entirely different, but it's moments like this that prove how very different I am. Neither of them have anxiety or phobias or something that makes it hard to live their lives.

"I understand that you're nervous," Mom says. "But you haven't been yourself since you and Pax broke up. Maybe this trip will be good for you." They don't know the full story about Pax and I'm content to keep it that way.

Naomi waggles her brows at me and I snort despite myself.

Dad grins and gives Mom a side hug. "I think there's more to this story."

"There most definitely is not!" Heat flames my cheeks and they nod at each other. "Not really," I add unconvincingly.

"Just think about it," Naomi says softly.

If I truly want to be free from Pax and his mind games, I need to live my life. Seventeen-year olds aren't meant to hide in their house all summer. They're supposed to hang out with friends and have adventures and fall in love with people they barely know. Even if the thought of adventures and love terrifies me a bit. I take a deep breath. "It has been a pretty boring summer."

Naomi's eyes go wide. "Is that a yes?"

"It's an almost-yes."

She grabs my hands and dances me around my parents. Soon we're all laughing, smiling, having the kind of picture-perfect day that only exists in books.

Naomi sees through my smile to the thoughts brimming beneath the surface. "It'll be good. I'll make sure of it."

When Dad heads outside to get the chicken, I pull out my phone and send a text.

Me: 83%

And try not to think about why I'm so eager to tell Neb that I've almost decided to go.

ME: WHAT CHANGED YOUR MIND?

Sage: Naomi. my parents

The dots bounce as she types.

Then stop.

Then start up again.

Sage: you

I'm really glad she can't see me. It's been cool getting to know her without the pressure of looking at each other. We don't even know what the other looks like—not that I haven't tried. But her profile picture is a sage plant and the only hint Kit gave about her appearance is she's not super-model gorgeous, but also not a troll. So super helpful.

But right now I can't stop smiling. Yoshi's always making fun of me for not having a poker face, and if Sage were sitting across from me there'd be no denying that I like her.

I send her a smiley emoji, but as soon as I hit send, my smile drops. Yoshi and Rick started planning a camping trip the day after Kit's bonfire. Bailing on them for a girl I barely know feels like a mark against the bro code. If I believed in the bro code. If anyone would understand, it's

them, but is it stupid to blow them off for people I barely know? Yoshi would shrug and tell me to do what's right for me, and Rick always rolls with whatever happens, so I'm sure he wouldn't care. It's me. I'm the thinker. But I've been looking forward to seeing them and canceling feels like a dick move.

My thumb rubs the pendant hanging around my neck. Dad talked about the date of this eclipse for so long he engraved it on the back of the moon pendant that now hangs from my neck. It's a flat sphere—which is how the moon apparently looks when it's in front of the sun—with the familiar craters etched onto the front. Below the date is my name: Nebula.

Yes, they named me after a giant cloud of space gas and dust. I've gone by Neb for as long as I can remember and very few people know what it's short for.

The pendant hangs on a cord long enough to keep it close to my heart—and safely tucked inside my shirt. Because as much as I love all things space, I don't need people making fun of the one thing that makes it feel like he's still with me.

Dad would tell me the same thing as Yoshi—to do what's best for me—but he would make me explain *why* that's the best decision. No lazy answers in the Connelly household.

Seeing the eclipse is the obvious first answer, but since I would see it with either group, it cancels itself out.

Second: meeting people before starting at a new school my senior year. The last time I moved was after Mom and Dad's divorce and I met Yoshi my first week. Yes, I'm already friends with Kit, but high school is different.

And finally, Sage. I'm feeling a connection with her that I can't explain. She gets my jokes and seems interested in my ramblings about space. And even though it seems like she's

holding back, she's funny and thoughtful and makes me smile, something I thought I might never do again.

I run a hand over my face. As Dad would say, "Looks like you've already made up your mind." And I have. I should tell Yoshi and Rick now, and hope Sage goes from a maybe to a yes.

Me: I might have to bail on camping

I head downstairs while I wait for him to answer. Mom's stirring a red sauce on the stove and the scent of meatballs fills the air.

"Dinner's almost ready. Can you set the table?"

I grab silverware and plates for two people, something I did a million times with Dad, but it feels lonelier now that it's just me and Mom. More final. "Can I help?"

"You're good."

My phone dings and I sit at my place at the table.

Yoshi: u owe me \$20

Me: ??

Yoshi: rick bet you'd pick the girl over us

Heat prickles the back of my neck. Part of me is impressed my friends know me better than I know myself, but I feel like a jerk.

Me: it's not like that

Yoshi: i know man, just giving u shit

Yoshi: and u know my account info

A laugh catches in my throat. This is the longest we've gone without hanging out and I miss him.

Me: I feel like a dick

Yoshi: u gotta meet new people. i get it

Yoshi: me n Rick will keep each other warm in the moomoo meadows

This time I do laugh, a loud bark that echoes off the walls.

Me: please keep those pics to yourself

Yoshi: no promises

Yoshi: u tenting with her?

Me: umm no

Me: we haven't met in person

Me: and she isn't 100% sure she's going

Yoshi: so ur dumping us for a maybe

Me: I said might

Yoshi: maybe u should be upfront with her. that ur only going if she does

Is that true? I really do want to meet people and a group interested in the eclipse seems like a good place to start, but I'd be lying if I said it'd be the same without Sage there.

Yoshi: but still send me \$20 lol

Me: I'll make this up to you

Yoshi: i know man don't sweat it

"Dinner's ready." Mom sets a basket of garlic bread in front of me and I jump up to grab the spaghetti and meatballs. She waves a hand over the spread. "Sorry this isn't more exciting. Cooking was always your dad's thing."

"Mom, this is great. Really. I love pasta." I take a big bite and swallow before the sauce can burn the roof of my mouth. I follow it with a gulp of water, then smile at her. "And I can help with the cooking. Dad taught me how to make lots of stuff." A lump lodges in my throat and I take another drink of water, but it doesn't stop the tears burning in my eyes.

She reaches for my hand. It's awkward and a little forced, but she's trying. "We'll get through this."

"I know."

This may not be how I saw my life playing out, but it's where I am and all I can do is make the best of it.

Later, I take Yoshi's advice and text Sage.

Me: I don't want to pressure you

Delete.

Me: no pressure but

Delete.

Me: do you have a minute?

Send.

And wait.

Yoshi's right. If I'm considering ditching my best friends for the chance to hang out with her, it's only fair she knows that. Or maybe it's not fair and it'll freak her out.

Sage: what's up?

Too late now.

Me: my friends from home are planning a camping trip for the eclipse and I'm trying to decide which to go on

Sage: oh

Is that a sad oh? A disappointed oh? I take a deep breath and reply without overthinking.

Me: it'd be cool to see them, but

I stop. Does the pause in the bouncing dots drive her as crazy as it does me? If I'm going to be honest with her, I need to spit it out.

Me: it'd be cool to go with them, but I'd like to see the eclipse with you

I hit send and toss my phone on the bed. My heart thuds against my ribcage. The last time I put myself out there for a girl was with Jennie. Yeah, it went well, but this dating thing is like a foreign language for me.

My phone dings and I freeze. If it's another one-syllable answer, I can keep my twenty dollars and spend the weekend with Yoshi and Rick like I planned. But if it's not...

Sage: are you asking me on a 3 day date?

Now my heart's really pounding. My hands shake a little as I reply.

Me: I don't want to pressure you

Me: but I need to tell my friends what I'm doing

Sage: it does sound fun

The dots bounce as she replies, and I wait her out.

And wait.

When her answer finally comes through, I don't care that it's a one-syllable word.

Sage: k

Me: really?

Sage: yeah. I want to watch the eclipse with you too

Me: then it's a date

She replies with a smiley and once again I'm grateful she can't see me. Because I'm sure I look like a little boy who was just promised a trip to Disneyland.

Still smiling, I switch conversations.

Me: bad news Luigi

Yoshi: u forgot my account info?

Me: it's coming

Me: you sure you're not mad?

Yoshi: i'll get over it

Yoshi: years of foreplay with my princess and no payoff

Me: you'll need to explain that one

Yoshi: uv talked about the eclipse for years and now ur watching it with someone else

Me: you'll always be my number 1

Yoshi: i hope she's worth it

Me: I think she is

“I STILL CAN’T BELIEVE YOU CONVINCED ME TO DO THIS.”

Naomi pauses with her bag halfway in the trunk and raises her brows at me. “As if I’m the one who convinced you.”

Heat warms my cheeks. After I told Neb I was coming, our conversations stayed light, but an unspoken promise lingered between the texts. I’m still not sure what this trip means for him, but for the first time in as long as I can remember, I’m excited for the possibilities.

Even though I still don’t know what he looks like.

“I can’t get over the fact that you straight-up asked him if he was asking you on a three-day date.”

“It seems to have worked in my favor.” But the moment of boldness fled as soon as I hit send. I’m trying not to worry about everything that could go wrong on this trip. There will be a lot of people in Portland, and probably where we’re watching the eclipse, and if I think about it too long I start to freeze. When Mom dropped me off she made me promise to text several times a day, then chewed her thumbnail, watching me

like a mama bird witnessing her baby trying to fly for the first time.

Naomi slaps the roof of the car to get my attention. When I meet her gaze, she gives me a reassuring smile. “This will be fun. I promise.”

“I know...”

“And I promise to help if you need it.”

If, not when, even though we both know the odds of my panic rearing its ugly head is more likely than not.

We get in the car and she curses under her breath. “We have to be at school in twenty minutes.” She lays on the horn and I jump, then she yells out the window. “Theo! Get your butt out here!”

Moments later, the front door swings open and her twin brother jogs down the sidewalk toward us. They both have the same green eyes and pale skin with a dusting of freckles across their noses, but Theo got their dad’s black hair while Naomi was graced with their mom’s red curls.

He pushes his hair out of his eyes and hikes his backpack higher on his shoulder, coming to a stop next to my open window. “If Sage gets shotgun, I get to pick the music.”

“Not a chance, baby brother.” Naomi’s seven minutes older and never lets him forget it. “Hurry up or they’ll leave without us.”

He climbs in the backseat and she twists in her seat to give him a side-eye. “How are you gonna function when we’re at different schools next year?”

His bag lands on the floor behind me with a thump and he grins. “Maybe I’ll go to U-Cal too. I may not have my future mapped out, but I hear it’s a good school.”

Naomi rolls her eyes and starts the car. She’s had her heart set on studying psychology at the University of California in Berkeley since freshman year, while Theo and I

still have no clue what we want to do with our lives. “Even then, I won’t be responsible for getting you to class on time.”

“Aww, you know you will.” He leans forward to squeeze her arm, then reaches past her for the stereo. She elbows him away, and keeps elbowing him away, as she drives across town to our high school.

“Do you know how many people are coming?” I ask. *Or how crowded it will be?*

Theo shoves his narrow shoulders between the front seats. “Mr. Mauro said the campsite will hold twenty, and it was full last time I checked the group page, but people are getting amped for this eclipse. There could be lots more.”

Naomi pokes my side. “She only cares about one person.”

I swat her away. “Shut it.”

“I can’t believe neither of you has met him.” Theo pokes me in the same place his sister did. “He’s excited to meet you, too.”

Butterflies zip through my stomach and I try to swallow my excitement. “I’m afraid it’s going to be weird.” And not just because I can’t remember the last time I hung out with guys who weren’t Pax.

“You’ve been chatting for weeks,” Naomi says. “Why would it be weird?”

I pick at the hem of my shorts. “I don’t know.” I don’t want to say it out loud, but I’m worried that the easygoing banter I’ve had with Neb over texts will turn awkward once we finally meet face to face. When he moved here two months ago, I was nursing a broken heart and had no interest in ever speaking to another member of the male species again. But Naomi’s persistence has helped me realize that what I had with Pax wasn’t love—it was toxic—and that

I'm allowed to be friends with said members of the male species.

I'm not sure when my brain shifted from mild curiosity about the new kid to an excitement with each new text, but once I agreed to go on this trip, the anticipation nearly swallowed me whole. And now we're finally going to meet. And not just meet, but go on a three-day date with twenty of our classmates.

Naomi turns into the school parking lot and groans at the crowd gathered near the entrance. It's an odd mix of science kids, nature enthusiasts, and people who live on the fringe of other groups—like me. Not quite a jock, not quite a nerd, but friendly enough with most of the people trapped at school with me.

"It's weird being here on a Saturday," Theo says.

"And not weird being here during the summer?" Naomi asks.

"I'm just saying."

A dozen cars form a neat row pointing toward the exit and Mr. Mauro stands at the center, his bald head reflecting the early morning sunshine. He waves and points at the end of the line while Ms. Kim studies a clipboard. She's half the size of him, her straight black hair pulled into a high ponytail that makes her look more like a student than the hardest teacher at school.

"I don't see Kit's car," Naomi says, pulling behind a blue pickup truck. "It's gonna be hard to follow each other if they aren't even here." She turns off the engine and we pile out of the car to join the others.

Mr. Mauro's voice carries over the whispers and giggles. "We'll be stopping halfway to the campsite for a bathroom break. But before we leave, does everyone have at least half a tank of gas?" Everyone nods, and he smiles. "Excellent.

We're already off to a great start. We're at T minus ten minutes from launch, but we're still missing a few people so sit tight a little longer."

Theo wanders toward a pair of girls with long dark hair and my stomach drops when they turn around. They're both beautiful—one as pale as Theo and the other with gorgeous olive skin—and their matching T-shirts say, "These boobs are like an eclipse. If you stare too long, I'll blind you."

But that's not the problem. Tara, the one giggling and sticking her boobs out at Theo, hates me and the other one, Ariana, is Tara's best friend. And Paxton's sister.

My gasp is audible. "Why are they here?"

Naomi follows my gaze. "Shit." She grabs my arm and turns me so I can't see them, like that'll somehow make them disappear. Her eyes narrow as she watches them over my shoulder. "This doesn't change anything."

It one hundred percent does. I've learned to ignore Tara and her side-eye that followed me whenever we were both at the Juarez house, but there's no way I'll be able to relax around Neb if Ariana's spying on me the whole time.

Naomi grabs my shoulders and stares into my eyes, her face inches from mine. "It's gonna be okay. I promise. You've been dealing with those girls for years. What's a couple more days?"

My breakfast churns in my stomach but I force a bright smile that Naomi sees right through.

"Sage, you know I would do anything for you. If you want to bail, we can."

And that's precisely why I can't. "You're right. It'll be fine."

"Just think about your Science Boy and forget about them."

Tara squeals with laughter and we roll our eyes. "Easier

said than done,” I say.

“I’ll never understand what girls see in him.”

“That’s because he’s your brother and it would be weird.” I roll my neck from side to side, scanning the parking lot in a way I hope is super subtle, but Naomi snorts.

“It’s okay to be looking forward to this.”

My eyes close against the sun and I sigh. “I know. It’s just been so long since I’ve been...” I trail off, not sure how to describe this feeling that’s coursing through my body, like I’m finally seeing a crack of light after way too long in the darkness. As we’ve gotten to know each other, the idea of meeting up with him has slowly shifted from an impossibility to intriguing. But I’m scared to trust my instincts.

“Happy?” she finishes.

“Something like that. Optimistic?” Neb seems smart and funny—if that’s possible in a group text when everyone’s trying to outwit or out-gross the others—and when he texted me separately from everyone else, the ice around my heart warmed ever so slightly. Not melted into a gushing mess that could sweep me away, but a tiny crack that let in a glimmer of light. Of hope.

“I still can’t believe you haven’t exchanged pics.”

My head snaps to attention. “Is this stupid? This is dumb, right?” Either Kit warned Neb about my recent trainwreck of a relationship, or he’s so intuitive he picked up on my skittishness on his own. Our conversations hover at a safe level, never digging too deep, but his intelligence is obvious. That, and a quietness like he’s protecting himself, too.

She leans her shoulder against mine and smiles. “You deserve happiness. Stop letting Pax tell you that you don’t.”

My throat tightens. Pax swept me off my feet at the end

of freshman year—literally, he scooped me up after I twisted my ankle on the front steps of the high school—but that romantic beginning morphed into a never-ending manipulation that dictated everything I thought and did. “I’m trying.” While Pax never hit me, his mind games burrowed so far into my subconscious that I sometimes worry I’ll never be able to flirt and laugh like normal girls.

And now his sister will be here reminding me of him all weekend.

“Well, he’s not here. We’ve got three days of dirt and campfires and stars with this weird-ass group of people and I’m guessing by the time this trip is over, you’ll have forgotten all about that loser.”

I clink an imaginary glass against her hand. “Here’s hoping.”

A few more cars trickle into the parking lot, but there’s still no sign of Kit and Neb. I’m starting to worry they aren’t coming and that once again we won’t get to meet, when my phone buzzes with a text.

My stomach drops when I see the first couple words from Neb: I’m really sorry. I swipe to read the full message and my heartrate slows.

Neb: I’m really sorry we’re running late. let them know we’re still coming

Naomi peers over my shoulder. “Typical Kit.”

“Do you think they’ll leave without them?”

“Possibly. Mr. Mauro’s pretty strict when it comes to being late, and Ms. Kim is more of a hardass than he is. But hey, it’s not like they can’t still come.” She taps the side of my head. “Stop worrying. This is gonna be fun.”

But when they still haven’t arrived ten minutes later and the teachers shout for us to get moving, the dread I’ve worked so hard to forget settles in the pit of my stomach.

“DO YOU HAVE TEN BUCKS?” KIT RUBS HIS HAND OVER HIS head and pops the gas tank. We were supposed to be at the school five minutes ago but if I’ve learned anything in the past two months, it’s that Kit is never on time for anything.

I shove a ten dollar bill at him and clench my jaw.

“Calm yourself. She’ll still be there,” Kit says through the open window, his dark eyes locking on mine.

My gaze shifts to a guy filling the tank of his motorcycle. I hate relying on someone else but my car’s in the shop, plus this whole thing is with Kit’s friends. Right now he’s the only person I really know, but that should be changing this weekend. Kit’s friend Theo seems cool, and I don’t want to admit that I’m looking forward to meeting Sage almost as much as I’m looking forward to the eclipse.

“Don’t get all moody on me.” The car bounces as Kit climbs back in. Shocks are not a thing in his car.

“Blow me. I hate being late.”

He starts the engine and pulls onto the street, and my stomach flips. The high school is a mile up the road. She’s only a mile away. While I don’t care what she looks like, the curiosity

is driving me crazy. But it's her personality that's brightened the past couple weeks and made all these changes a little more bearable. It's been six months since Jennie and I broke up—she didn't want to spend all of high school dating one person—and I was beginning to think the only girl I'd talk to would be Tara.

But Sage seems different. The first time she asked why I had to move right before senior year I kind of freaked, and she's been chill about it ever since. Instead of getting into a ton of personal details that neither one of us seemed excited to share, we've talked about stars. Or I've talked, and she's added color commentary. She's witty and intelligent and hiding something she's not ready to talk about. Just like me.

My phone buzzes and my heart flips thinking it's her.

Yoshi: good luck on ur 3 day date

Me: it's not a 3 day date

Yoshi: keep telling urself that

Yoshi: i will say this - you go big

Yoshi: rainbow road big

Me: it might not even turn into anything

Yoshi: have faith bro

Me: you leave yet?

Yoshi: waiting for Rick

Me: I feel that

"Are you freaking kidding me?" Kit's outburst yanks me from my thoughts, and when my gaze lands on the empty parking lot, my groan matches his.

"This is your fault."

He unlocks his phone and fires off a text. "No worries. There's no way Mauro is going over the speed limit. We'll catch them."

"We better."

Minutes later we're back on the road, chugging through

the half tank of gas we just put in. “The fun doesn’t start ’til we get there anyway,” Kit says.

I swallow back my frustration. He didn’t have to come on this trip and I would have gone with Yoshi and Rick like we’ve planned for years. But now that I’ve been looking forward to camping with this group—and with Sage—even the smallest delay is torture. “No bigs. The eclipse isn’t for two more days.”

My thumb slides back and forth over my phone, and when we reach the highway, I give in and text Sage.

Me: I guess the anticipation is gonna build for a couple more hours

She’s probably laughing and having fun with her friends and won’t reply for—

Sage: this is becoming very dramatic

My mouth curls into a smile. I can’t help it. There’s something about her.

“There’s the smile I know and love.”

I punch Kit in the arm and the car jerks into the next lane.

“What? Sage is cool. If she cheers up your grumpy ass before you’ve even met, I can’t wait to see you once you’re in the same room. Or tent.” He waggles his brows and my breath catches. I’d be lying if I said I hadn’t imagined that, but it’s hard to picture making out with the sage plant in her profile pic.

We promised we wouldn’t stalk each other before we met, but I caved early on in a moment of weakness. All I found was her name and the plant because the rest of her account is locked down from public view. Now I want to ask about the plant, but that would require confessing that I broke my word and I don’t want to give her any reason not to

trust me. Because I've already learned that she doesn't trust easily.

I switch to the group thread.

Me: Kit says sorry we're late

Theo: sure he does

Me: how long have you been on the road?

Sage: less than 10 minutes

"We're only ten minutes behind," I say.

"We'll totally catch them."

Theo: Did anyone bring any sunblock?

Theo: get it? sun block

Theo: because the eclipse

Me: I've changed my mind about this trip

Sage: me too

Theo: come on! that's funny!

Sage: Naomi says PUNNY

With each text, Kit glances at his phone in the center console but doesn't grab it. "You gonna read these to me?"

"In a minute."

Theo: How can there be an eclipse with someone as bright as you around?

Sage: not to throw shade at your question but, who's that at?

Theo: my beautiful loving sister

Sage: you're not controlling the stereo

Is it weird to be jealous of Theo right now? Sage and I are counting down the minutes until we meet, but it doesn't feel soon enough.

Me: why didn't the sun go to college?

Me: it already had a million degrees

Theo: GROAN

Sage: why was the sun too embarrassed to shine?

Sage: because it got mooned!

Sage: for the record, Naomi is laughing

Theo: it's a pity laugh

I switch back to my private conversation with Sage.

Me: I thought that was funny

Me: and I'm bummed we were late

Sage: haha you must not expect much from me

Sage: that's Kit for you

I type out several replies before settling on the truth.

Me: you've already surpassed my expectations

“WHOA, THAT CRANKED IT UP A NOTCH.” NAOMI’S GAZE bounces between me and the road.

My heart pounds as I reread Neb’s text. “He can’t mean it. We barely know each other and we haven’t even met.” Although he’s been direct since the first time he texted me in the separate thread and I’ve grown more and more curious about him ever since.

“Trust me. He’s not going to be disappointed.”

“But still.” As much as I want to believe Neb, it feels too much like a line.

Trust is not an easy thing for me—THANKS PAX for peeling away my self-esteem until I assume everyone has an ulterior motive. He beat down my self-confidence until I believed no one could see value in me without him saying so, and now it’s a struggle to accept that people mean what they say and aren’t playing games.

Theo’s head pops up next to mine. “Neb doesn’t seem like a bullshitter. Although he might just be desperate for friends.”

Naomi slaps the side of his head. “Not helping.”

Theo holds up a finger. “Three Good Things About Dating the Nice Guy.”

“You keep suggesting episode titles and I’m gonna make you do more than edit.”

He stretches forward to look in the review mirror and strokes his cheek. “Then you’ll have to switch it to video because my face is too pretty not to share with the world.”

“Three Good Things About Not Being Full of Yourself,” she mutters.

“Theo might be right about Neb,” I say. “Yeah, we’ve made a connection, but it’s probably just the excitement or the mystery or whatever. When we meet it’s going to change.”

“Why can’t it change for the better?” Naomi asks.

That’s what I keep asking myself. Ever since Pax and I broke up, I’ve questioned everything I thought I knew about myself, including why anyone could possibly be interested in me. Naomi not-so-subtly loaned me a couple of her mom’s self-help books and I’m slowly learning to trust myself again. Because apparently, ‘I can’t trust other people until I can trust myself.’

“I’m seriously going to kick Paxholes’s ass the next time I see him,” Naomi says. She’s got a gift for reading my mind and knowing exactly what I need to hear.

“Thanks.”

“I mean it. You’re amazing and just because you wasted half of high school with him doesn’t mean you don’t deserve happiness.”

“Tell me how you really feel.”

She cracks a smile. “How long do you got?”

I wave at the caravan of cars in front of us. “At this speed, hours.”

Theo reaches between the seats to change the radio station and this time Naomi lets him.

“My Pax rage is amped. Read his email again so Theo can weigh in.”

“Pax is a waste of space,” Theo says.

“Well, yes. But listen to this,” Naomi says.

I read the email, cringing that, as Naomi said, I wasted two years of high school with him. But it didn't start badly. In the early months he was romantic and charming and made me feel special. It wasn't until he felt confident that I'd do anything he asked that he became controlling. That he trained me not to think for myself.

And now his sister's on this trip. She and I always got along well enough, but I can't shake the feeling that he's somehow behind her being here.

“He always seemed slimy,” Theo says.

I whip my head toward him and our foreheads smack. “Ow! Sorry.”

“Gah!”

I rub my head and level my gaze at him. “What do you mean, slimy?”

He rubs the side of his head. “I don't know, like he's up to something. Or he's got some evil plan.”

Naomi tightens her grip on the steering wheel. “Yeah, being a controlling jerk.”

“Did you answer him?” Theo asks.

“No. I mean, what the hell would I even say? Yes, he's selfish and possessive and made me feel worthless. But writing him back gives him the satisfaction of still making me jump through his hoops, and I'm done.” I'm not really a punch my fist in the air kind of girl, but thinking about the way Paxton used to make me feel has me fired up and my

fist shoots toward the roof of my car as if independent from my body.

“Yeah you are!” Naomi pumps her fist too and Theo flops against the back seat.

“Are we doing this the entire ride?”

“Yes!” We both shout, then burst into giggles.

“Theo, can you seriously not tell me more about Neb?”

He leans forward again. “I dunno. He was cool. Not really my type. Kind of serious but laid back.”

“No slimy vibes, though. Right?” Naomi asks.

“That’s not really the first thing I look for when I meet a guy, but no.”

Ahh, the perks of male privilege. To never have to be on alert, wary that the other person might not have your best interests at heart. Or worse, may not even be considering your interests.

“That’s super helpful, thanks.” My eyes roll even though Theo can’t see them.

“I thought you girls thought this was romantic?” he asks.

“It is,” Naomi says. “But she’d like SOMETHING to work with.”

Theo wedges his shoulders between our seats and makes a show of scratching his chin. “Let’s see. He seems to have English or Dutch heritage. He’s taller than me, I guess his hair is your color, and—”

“Me or Naomi?”

“You.”

“Okay.”

“And he looked like he belongs in Oregon.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Naomi asks.

“Lumberjacky. Flannel. Reusable water bottle.”

My fingers trace the cap of my reusable water bottle. Naomi tugs at the sleeve of my flannel but I brush her off.

“We live in Oregon. It’s pretty much required that you wear a flannel.”

“I’m just saying.”

“If you want my advice,” Theo says. “Be cool this weekend. Forget about Pax and his bullshit and enjoy the weekend away.”

Easier said than done with Ariana around.

“Did you hit up mom’s bookshelf again?”

Naomi and Theo’s mom has been on a self-help kick since we were in middle school—which I suppose negates the term “kick”—and as much as we like to make fun of her books, some of them actually have good advice. And Naomi’s interest in psychology and the podcast might not have happened without those overflowing bookshelves.

“Just telling it how I see it.”

“Well see this, little brother.” She hooks her thumb at the window and we both look over our shoulders. A car that looks a lot like Kit’s approaches in the left lane. My heart nearly leaps out of my throat when I realize it has to be Neb sitting in the passenger seat. But instead of pulling alongside us, Kit hovers in our blind spot.

“Is he cute?” Naomi asks. “I can’t see!”

The sun reflects off the windshield, making it impossible to see anything except a blueish-green flannel. Theo presses his face to his window and squeals. “He’s dreamy! His eyes are like heaven and his smile could stop wars.”

“Oh my god, Theo!” Naomi taps the brakes and he falls against the back of her seat, doubled over laughing. The sudden deceleration means Kit and Neb are now right next to us, but before I can see anything more than his flannel, Kit slows and the glare is back.

All three of our phones ding with a text.

Kit: not yet, lovebirds

"I'm going to kill Kit," I say.

"No texting while driving," Naomi shouts at the closed window.

Theo scrambles onto his knees and gives me a wink. "You might want to look away."

"Theo, sit down and put your fricking seat belt on." Naomi's voice carries a serious tone Theo calls her Mom Voice. Being older gives her an edge over him, and she uses the full authority of those seven minutes whenever she can.

"In a minute." His hands fumble with the waistband of his shorts. "Or you can watch," he says to me, then yanks his shorts over his butt and shoves his bare ass against the window. I once locked eyes with my neighbor's dog while she was pooping, and the determination and concentration that was on her face is the same on Theo's now.

"Oh my god, Theo!" I shout, covering my face with my hands like it can somehow erase the image from my brain.

"You put the idea in my head," he says.

Naomi taps the breaks again, but Theo must have himself wedged between the seats because he doesn't fall. "You are so cleaning that window."

"Can I look yet?"

"That's your call," Theo says.

"That's a no," Naomi says. "Theo, put your fricking pants back on."

"Technically, they're still on."

"I'm gonna technically throw you out of this car if they aren't on in ten seconds."

Fabric rustles in the backseat but I keep my eyes closed. He sighs and kicks my seat. "I don't know why the thought of me with my pants down is so horrifying to you."

I twist around to look at him. "You're like my brother.

And I most definitely do not want to see my brother's bits and pieces."

He presses a hand to his chest. "I'm hurt."

"And I'm scarred."

"Theo, in what world does rubbing your ass on my window make sense?" Naomi asks.

"It's a total eclipse of the fart."

I burst out laughing as Naomi says, "What?!"

"That's what Kit gets for being late."

"And what about Neb?" she asks. "What did that poor guy do to deserve your nether region in all its glory?"

He shrugs. "Collateral damage." Then he whistles the theme song from the movie *Annie* about the sun coming out tomorrow.

Kit squeezes into the caravan behind us, and I get my first glimpse of Neb. His hair is the same color as mine—a mousy brown that until this moment I've always hated, but now I realize is quite fabulous. A light scruff covers his jaw, and the sudden urge to feel his face beneath my fingers knocks my breath out of me.

"Talk to me, Goose," Naomi says.

"Isn't there some rule that says I'm supposed to wait a certain amount of time after one relationship before getting into another?"

"Ooh, so you're already thinking relationship," Theo pokes my arm and I swat him away.

Naomi sighs. "Theo, can you just not for two seconds?" She shoots me a look. "Obviously you don't want to jump into something if you're still hung up on your ex. But you aren't. You want nothing to do with that slimeball. So give Neb a chance. But more than that, give yourself a chance."

Theo laughs. "Cause I'm the only one reading mom's books."

She smiles. "Okay, so maybe they're helpful."

"Don't worry," Theo says. "You'll meet your Starlord soon enough."

My head whips to Naomi and she mouths 'sorry.' Because she's the only one who knows I call him that. My phone dings again but this time it's just for me.

Neb: please tell me that hairy ass wasn't yours

“I WISH THE SUN WOULD HAVE BLOCKED THAT MOON,” KIT says.

“I’d risk permanent blindness to get that image out of my head.” Looking directly at a solar eclipse can cause irreparable damage to the eyes, and that’s all anyone has talked about as the date of the eclipse got closer. Mom ordered a box of flimsy glasses “Guaranteed to Protect Your Eyes During the Eclipse” since she knows there’s no way I won’t stare at it for as long as I can, even if it could risk my eyesight.

My thumb skims my moon pendant through my shirt and a sense of calm grounds me.

Theo waves through the back window, but I’m looking past him at the girl in the passenger seat. Her hair is the same color as mine, but I can’t make out any other details. Kit refused to get close enough to let me see her face, and the anticipation is making me crazy. I sent the text about Theo’s ass before realizing how superficial it made me sound, and now that anxiety is piling on top of the rest. What if she does have a hairy ass? Does that matter? I

mean, people have hair and they can't control where it sprouts.

My phone dings, and I exhale.

Sage: yeah, sorry. I forgot to shave before we left

I burst out laughing and Kit rolls his eyes. I made the mistake of telling him that Sage and I have been texting, and now he snickers every time my phone buzzes.

Not that I'm gonna let that stop me.

Me: that reminds me of a joke

Sage: oh no

Me: how does the moon cut its hair?

Sage: I'm sure this will be awful

Me: eclipse it

Sage: Dead. I am dead

Me: I can't wait to meet you

I don't hit send on that last one. By now she has to know and I don't want her to think I'm a creeper, even though I've felt drawn to her right from the start. When I told Kit we were texting, he kind of shrugged it off and I got the feeling that her quick wit and sarcasm were too much for him. But she's the first girl I've met in forever who gets my jokes and can hold an entire conversation in memes—something we've done more than a few times.

And she's the first person who's made me laugh since Dad died.

My phone dings again, but my smile falls and dread grips my gut.

"Trouble in paradise?" Kit asks.

"Not exactly."

Tara: watcha up to?

I debate not answering. She's the last person I want in my head right now. I never told her I was going on this trip and I'm tempted not to answer, but ignoring her only makes

her more persistent, like a feral cat batting a mouse until it finally moves in for the kill.

Me: hanging with Kit

It's not untrue. She doesn't need to know where I'm going.

Tara: that sounds fun

Is she looking for an invitation? That's not happening.

Me: yeah

Tara: we should hang out before school starts

Me: I'm gonna be pretty busy

It might be overly optimistic to assume Sage and I will be hanging out, but that's all I can think about. Tara needs to dissipate like the gasses I was named after.

"So..." I say, and Kit glances at me.

"What's up?"

Kit isn't exactly a beacon of advice, but I don't know who else to talk to about this. "How well do you know Tara?"

"The one who drives by your house all the time and was climbing all over you at my bonfire?"

I groan. "Yes."

"I dunno. She's popular. Seems nice enough. And is into you." He waggles his brow, like that's supposed to imply something.

"Any ideas on how to make her go away?"

His brows keep waggling. "Like, away-away?"

I snort. "No. Like quit-stalking-me away."

"Good luck with that."

"Seriously."

"I am. She's one of those girls who always has a boyfriend. None of them seem to mind until they break up."

My head hits the window with a thump. A year ago, I never could have imagined how much my life has changed. Jennie and I had just slept together for the first time, Dad

and I were planning a version of the trip I'm on now, and I was already being wooed by colleges with top-notch astrophysicist programs. Now I'm living with a mother who thought she was done with the year-round caregiving phase of her life, about to start my senior year at a school where the only person I know is the kid I befriended when I was ten, and apparently being hunted by a girl who doesn't take no for an answer.

"So you have no advice?"

"It's probably easier to let her have her way, then dump her."

My skin crawls at the thought of being with someone I don't care about. Maybe that negates my bro-card or something, but I don't hook up to hook up. "That's not happening."

He laughs. "I don't get you."

My pulse quickens and my blood feels like it's on fire. It usually takes more than a cheap dig to piss me off, but I'm already on edge from leaving late. "If she's so great, why don't you go for her?"

He shifts in his seat and flexes his fingers against the steering wheel. "Not my turn."

I cock my head. "Your turn?"

"Until Tara decides she's interested in someone, they don't stand a chance."

"Well, maybe I need to reintroduce you."

"Nah, man. I'm good."

I roll my head from side to side, trying to relax the muscles in my neck, then don't speak again until we pull into the campground.

We crawl along the narrow road past campers and motorhomes that look like they've been here all summer, and slow even more at a stretch of empty campsites.

“Now what?” Kit asks.

I lean my head out the window. Two adults who I assume are the teachers hurry from car to car, pointing in one of two directions of the large open space.

“It looks like they’re directing traffic up there.”

“The tall bald dude is Mr. Mauro,” Kit says. “He’s cool. Ms. Kim can be a hardass.”

As soon as he says it, a petite woman with straight black hair and bangs that cover her eyebrows leans against Kit’s open window. “Hi, boys.” She looks at me and smiles. “I’m Ms. Kim. We’re setting up by bathroom rules.”

“Bathroom rules?” Kit asks.

“Whichever bathroom you use is where your tent goes. Boys on this side, girls over there. Mr. Mauro and I will be stationed in the middle.” She looks us both in the eye until we nod.

Kit raises a hand. “Boys here.” She runs to the next car and he smirks. “Two teachers is easy to sneak past.”

Heat warms my cheeks and I’m glad I skipped shaving so he can’t tell.

“Question is, whose tent are you thinking? Your text buddy or the sex buddy?”

I push out of the car, swallowing my irritation. He gets out and watches me over the roof of the car.

“I’m not trying to be a dick. I’m just saying. Tara’s a sure thing. Sage...” he holds out his hands like he’s balancing them. “She’s got baggage.”

“And the girl who sleeps with everyone doesn’t have baggage,” I murmur low enough that he can’t hear me, walking away from the car, away from Kit. I don’t stop until I reach the tree line at the edge of the campsite. A trail winds through the trees to a creek that looks like it runs along this side of the campground. I’m tempted to follow it now, but

another desire stops me. These past couple weeks have felt like an eternity once I realized I liked Sage, and now that we're finally in the same place, I'm hiding in the woods. But I don't want to meet her when I'm mad.

"Neb, come back!" Kit shouts, but I ignore him. If we're going to make it three days in the woods, I need to calm down.

After several deep breaths, I lean against a tree and let the steady movement of the water calm me.

Shouts and laughter ring through the trees as everyone unloads, and I start to feel guilty. It's doubtful that Kit would start setting up the tent without me, but I don't want to be a jerk. I pull out my phone to take a picture of the creek and it lights up with a new text.

Sage: what do you call road-tripping to the eclipse?

The shift in my mood is immediate. Kit and his obnoxiousness slide off my back and the sun peeks through the trees, brightening everything around me. Or maybe it just feels that way.

Me: tell me

Sage: going where the sun don't shine

That was one of Dad's favorites. My heart doubles in size, pressing against my chest, and I can't tell if it's because I miss him or if she's become that important to me—even though we've never met. What is it about her that makes nothing else matter?

I send back a laughing emoji and abandon my tree to help Kit.

Cars haphazardly line the edge of the road we drove in on and tents are in various stages of assembly. Kit's talking to Theo near his car, which means she's close. When I join them, Kit punches my arm.

"You know I didn't mean anything, right?"

“What’d you do now?” Theo asks.

“Nothing,” we both say, exchanging grins.

Yeah, I can get through this.

“Glad to hear it,” Theo says. “Because there’s someone I want you to meet.” He points to the girls’ side of the campground to a pair of girls holding a tent. The redhead seems to be in charge, pointing with one hand while tugging on the tent with the other, while the other girl, the one in a flannel and with hair the same color as mine, scans the other campsites like she’s looking for someone.

For me.

“SAGE, ARE YOU EVEN LISTENING TO ME?” NAOMI ASKS FOR the third time.

The corner of my mouth lifts in a smile. “No.” He’s here somewhere, and I’ll be no use to Naomi or anyone else until I find him. A sort of desperation filled me when we pulled into the campground and it’s only grown stronger since Theo ran off to find them.

She rolls her eyes and drops her end of the tent on the ground. “Let’s go.”

I freeze.

She laughs at the panic on my face. “Are you kidding me? You’ve been mooning over him forever and now you’re scared?”

“Mooning. Ha.”

“Omigod, Sage.” She huffs out a laugh and grabs my hand. “Come on.”

She drags me a few feet then stops to scan the campsites. “Over there.” And just like that we’re weaving around deflated tents and coolers until I see Kit’s car. I yank her hand to stop.

“What?” she asks, and I nod to where Kit and Theo are standing. And Neb. They don’t see us, and they’re laughing while Theo talks. “Me-ow,” she says.

Because Theo did not undersell Neb. He’s taller than I imagined, and he’s got a sexy lumberjack thing going on, with the flannel and the scruff and what seem to be strong arms crossed over his chest. As if he can feel our stares, he looks up and my eyes lock with heaven. My stomach does a slow roll and I can’t stop the smile that spreads over my face. Then he glances down and types on his phone.

My phone dings.

Neb: hi

Never in the history of the world have two letters caused such a reaction inside a person. It’s like one of the stars he’s always talking about exploded inside me, filling me with a warmth that reaches from my cheeks to my toes. With a very heavy pause below my belly.

I write back.

Me: hi

And when he smiles back, my earlier anxiety disappears.

“His smile really could end wars,” Naomi says.

“Mm-hmm,” I say.

“So are we gonna stare at him from over here or are you finally gonna collide with his asteroid?”

“What does that even mean?”

“I don’t know. Ride his jet stream? Come on.” She pulls me toward where they’re standing. This time I don’t resist, but as we approach, Tara bounces out of nowhere and grabs his arm.

His smile hardens into tight lips and a clenched jaw, and if I knew him better I’d say he wasn’t happy to see her, but

I've been familiar with his facial expressions for a whopping thirty seconds, so it's hard to say for sure.

"How does she already know him?" I ask, hoping the knife ripping through my chest isn't obvious in my voice. I've been around Tara enough to know that if she wants something, nothing—and no one—is going to stop her until she gets it.

"Theo mentioned she was at Kit's bonfire but I didn't think..." Naomi trails off as Tara clings to Neb's arm. "I mean, you can't blame her."

"Awesome." I'm frozen in place, my hands fisting around the bottom of my T-shirt, my feet like cement blocks on the hard-packed dirt.

Neb takes a step back, but Tara moves with him, batting her eyes and licking her lips in a way I could never pull off.

"If it helps, he doesn't seem interested. And you two have been talking for weeks. He's excited to see you, not her."

That may be true, but fighting for Neb's attention wasn't part of the plan for this weekend.

Neb does a head-tilt chin-jut thing at Kit, but Kit doesn't notice. Then Neb's eyes find mine. For a moment I don't breathe, don't blink, too afraid that if I do, everything I've built up in my head will come crashing down around me. Tara tugs at his sleeve but he rolls his shoulders and steps backward, effectively loosening her grip.

"That's a good sign," Naomi says.

But my throat goes dry. "I—I can't do this." The cement surrounding my feet loosens and I turn to flee. The sight of her rubbing all over him, with her tight shirt and short shorts and smile that promises a lot more than I can, burns in my mind and I will myself not to cry.

"Sage." Naomi's using her Mom Voice.

I pause.

“She has nothing on you. If you’d turn around, you’d see that for yourself, but instead you’re going to be—”

“Sage?” A deep voice behind me sends a shiver down my back.

“—surprised,” Naomi finishes.

A ripple of excitement bumps against my despair. I don’t know that voice, which can only mean one thing. I turn, and Neb is standing a few feet away. Theo and Kit are right behind him, and Tara is nowhere to be seen.

Well, honestly, she could be ten feet away and I wouldn’t notice because Neb’s eyes, which are focused on me and me alone, have an intensity that makes everything beyond a three-foot radius disappear.

This must be what it’s like to get sucked into a black hole.

His smile quirks.

Did I say that out loud?

Naomi elbows me. They’re all waiting for me to speak.

Theo clears his throat. “Aren’t you gonna say hi to your pen pal?”

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TO YOU, THE READER

I first got the idea for this novel on August 21, 2017—the day of the Great American Eclipse—but didn't start writing it until the fall of 2019. Then the pandemic changed the world so drastically that writers everywhere weren't sure what it meant for the future of contemporary novels. Slipping into the summer of 2017 was an escape for me, and I hope you had the same experience.

If you enjoyed Sage and Neb's story, please consider leaving a review on Goodreads or any online bookseller's website.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Multi-award winning young adult author Melanie Hooyenga writes books about strong girls who learn to navigate life despite its challenges. She first started writing as a teenager and finds she still relates best to that age group.

Her award-winning YA sports romance series, *The Rules Series*, is about girls from Colorado falling in love and learning to stand up on their own. Her YA time travel trilogy, *The Flicker Effect*, is about a teen who uses sunlight to travel back to yesterday.

When not at her day job as Communications Director at a local nonprofit, you can find her wrangling her Miniature Schnauzer Owen and playing every sport imaginable with her husband Jeremy.



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