Never Vacation with Your Ex

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VIKING

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An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC, New York

First published in the United States of America by Viking,
an imprint of Penguin Random House LLC, 2023

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.

Printed in the United States of America

ISBN 9780593326909

ScoutAutomatedPrintCode

LSCH

Design by Kate Renner
Text set in Elysium Std

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Never VACATION WITH Your Ex

PROLOGUE

Two Years Ago

THIS ONE WILL BE perfect.

I hold the volleyball out in front of me, visualizing the impeccable form I want for my serve. The precise height I have to jump, the spin I need to put on the ball by tucking my hand over the top, the curve I want to capture to send the shot down onto Malibu's pearl-white sand.

There's so much to remember. So much to get right.

I breathe in, preparing to exhale with the movement as I toss the ball up, and—

"I knew I'd find you here."

I smile despite the distraction, letting the volleyball drop in front of me. It's instinctive whenever I hear his voice, this flicker of warmth in my chest. Facing the direction of his words, I find Dean walking down the sand.

The night wind plays gently with his dark hair. His shirt hangs loosely on him, his pants cuffed. Where other guys in our grade haven't *quite* gotten used to teenagerhood—unshaven,

gangly from their growth spurts—Dean is uncommonly graceful. The moonlight over the ocean makes his face glow, or maybe it's just the smirk lighting up his features.

"Now"—he comes up to me, playfully scrunching his expression, pretending to unearth something deep from the recesses of his memory—"was I confused, or did we just spend pretty much the entire day, including dinner, at *someone's* favorite sushi restaurant, celebrating the news *someone* is going into her sophomore year the cocaptain of the varsity volleyball team, the youngest in her school's history?"

In my sheepish silence, the wind whispers over the peaceful water. Nighttime in Southern California is unimaginably serene. Except for me swatting volleyballs on the sand, of course.

Dean comes up next to me. "Kaylee," he says, sincere now. "It's nine p.m. on our summer vacation. Everyone's relaxing in the house. There's *no possible reason* you need to be out here training right now. I'm no . . . sports person, but I'm pretty sure you've just proven you're the number-one volleyball player in our grade. Probably our entire school."

"Yes, exactly!" I reply, half-indignant. He doesn't realize he's hit right on what compelled me to haul my volleyball bag dutifully onto the sand to hone my serve while our families play Pictionary in the house.

I *wish* I felt like I could just be proud of myself instead of ever-fixated on proving more, on being everything, but I don't. Not with the spotlight I feel following me every day. I love the warmth of it, the light, I do. But some days I wish I could escape the searing way it exposes every corner of my life, every choice, every uncertainty. Every insecurity.

"Everyone's going to doubt whether I'm good enough," I say. "Or if I only got the title because of . . . my mom," I finish.

When Dean doesn't reply, I pick up the volleyball, preparing to change myself into rhythm in motion, interlocking every detail of my form honed over practices since I could walk. Pulling my hand back, I bend my knees, preparing to jump—

He catches my fingers in his.

Instantly, I still. He's just stopping me from serving, I rationalize. Yet—for the first time since we were kindergartners crossing the street with our parents—Dean, my best friend, is holding my hand.

"No one could ever doubt how incredible you are," he says.

He drops my hand, nodding to the ball like he understands my mind is made up.

I hear his compliment echoing over the sea, but I straighten my posture, preparing to begin again. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Dean grin, then hold up his phone. "Can I photograph you?" he asks.

I feel my cheeks flush. Dean doesn't realize just how many people at our school would go weak in the knees at that question from him. But I know he's not flirting with me. Or not *just* flirting with me. He's gotten really into photography and is working on convincing his parents to buy him a real camera.

"I'd like that," I tell him. He raises his phone's lens.

With the memory of his hand lingering on my skin, I can't stop smiling.

One

I FROWN INTO MY fries.

Brianna picks over the remains of the wraps we got for dinner while I flick through the photos she took on the beach earlier today. Me, serving the ball while wearing one of the sweatshirts a local sustainable clothing company sent me to promote to my Instagram's half a million followers.

I quickly hide the stress beginning to stretch over my face, because this isn't Brianna's fault. She's not a photographer. She's my current sand volleyball partner—soon to be *former* sand volleyball partner since I'm a junior and she's a senior, about to graduate high school and move for college, which I can barely bring myself to think about. She'll be playing for Stanford next year instead of being my teammate.

We've been friends since I started on our school's varsity team in my freshman year. Though only in her sophomore year herself, Brianna was one of the strongest players. It meant the world to me when she instantly embraced her youngest teammate. Since, she's been the kind of world-class friend

who would drop everything to be my photographer for the day despite having no experience whatsoever. I didn't really expect her to pull off the perfect shot.

Still, I need something to post. People have expectations of sports photography, even unconscious ones. If I'm in the middle of crouching instead of springing up with sharp form for the serve, I'll look off-balance, ungainly, contorted. No one likes to see every frame of the effort involved. Just the perfect moments.

On instinct, I start mentally rehearsing my expressions of enthusiasm for Brianna, who is impatiently fiddling with the charm on the necklace her boyfriend got her, the garnet winking against the deep-brown skin of her collarbone. There's still some sand from the beach in one of her black braids. I press on through my camera roll, evaluating the photos with the eye I've trained over years of developing my social media presence.

They're . . . fine.

Swipe. Fine. *Swipe.* Fine.

Just okay. *Swipe.*

My head starts to hurt, pressure making my pulse race. I'm no longer very hungry for my fries, despite the small, cottagey Sun Spot Café near Easton's Beach being our favorite spot. The truth is, none of these photos are up to the caliber of my account.

Brianna must read the disappointment on my face. "I told you. You know what you have to do," she says dryly.

I look up, starting to see schedules, blocks of time shifting on my precarious calendar. "Try again after practice tomorrow?"

Bri rolls her eyes. "Call Dean," she says.

I feel my whole body stiffen. My schedules disappear, the calendar blocks vanishing under the wave of ridiculousness of what Bri's suggesting. Frustration pounds in my flushed cheeks. "*No*," I say.

Bri fixes me with a wordless stare.

"I *dumped* him," I go on incredulously. "Like, dropped him with hardly an explanation not three weeks ago, and you want me to ask him to photograph me in bikini bottoms as a favor?"

My friend just shrugs. "He's a great photographer," she says, like it's justification enough. Which it is not.

I frown—grimace, more like. Yes, he *is* a great photographer. My account saw huge growth when he started helping me with my content. It wasn't why we were dating, obviously. It wasn't why we broke up, either.

Honestly, I didn't give Dean a reason for why I ended our two-month relationship because I knew I couldn't explain this . . . feeling I get. This wound-up, suffocating spiral. In every relationship, it happens. The clenching cold fills me up, spreading from my chest into my fingertips, up past my eyes, until the only thing I see whenever I'm with the guy I'm dating is how I want out. It's kind of horrible, honestly. But it's the way it is.

Could I have done a better job of breaking up with Dean? Definitely. Have I done a better job of dumping guys in the past? On numerous notable occasions. But Dean was different.

Which was the problem. Is there a nice way to dump your childhood best friend after two months?

It's not like breaking up with people is easy. In media, you

only see the pain of being dumped. But where's my breakup song from the perspective of the dumper? It's its own special sort of heartache to hurt a nice, cute boy who did nothing wrong. I'm usually not one for excuses, for cheap outs like *It was hard* or *I didn't know*.

But . . . it *was* hard.

It's over now, though, and it's time to move on.

Brianna shrugs without remorse.

Studying the photos with every ounce of concentration I can muster, I feel a migraine coming on in the fuzziness of my phone screen. It's one of the early signs, the warping of the small, intensely colorized display. *Well, great.*

Deep down, I'm not entirely surprised. Between practicing nearly every day to set myself up to qualify for the Olympics after high school, growing my social media in order to attract sponsorships, and doing passably well in my classes, it's *possible* I'm taking on too much. Factor in the breakup with Dean, and "too much" is far behind me.

I pull my aspirin out of my sweatshirt pocket. While Brianna watches, I swallow them down with my Diet Coke. "I'm driving you home," she declares.

Grateful, I nod. I've had chronic migraines for the past few years, brought on by stress and my cycle. This isn't the first time Bri's been here to help when one knocks me out. "Let me choose the photo first," I say, restarting my review while the medicine begins to ease the pounding in my head.

It would be easy to pick something impulsively, to decide one post in thousands didn't matter much. I don't, though. I

force myself to evaluate each of Brianna's shots until finally I decide on one where I'm running back from the net, volleyball in hand. The sunset shines off the top of my dark blond ponytail, which is overdue for a color appointment to return it to a shiny yellow-gold I look tan, which is good—studying for finals turned my skin pale beige, but thanks to my mom's genes, one or two days outside returned me to bronze. In the photo, I'm mid-laugh, my expression offering no hint of the effort these photos took. I look casual. Carefree.

Which people respond to, I've noticed. While they engage with my sports content, they love the unguarded humanness, the reminders I'm a person. It's one principle I've learned on Instagram and found extends into real life—no one loves a princess who doesn't make it look easy.

"This one," I say. I hold out the phone to show Bri.

She doesn't look to see the photo I've chosen. "You really don't want to call Dean," she comments, her brown eyes on me.

Just like I did in the photos, I put on a smile as I begin editing. "Thanks to your excellent photo taking, I don't have to," I say, willing my headache to remain manageable until I get home. I work steadily, warming up the muscles I've developed from years of doing this. First, I change the contrast, then play with the saturation to keep this photo consistent with the color profile on the rest of my feed. I write my caption, tagging the local clothing company.

When I'm about to hit post, my phone buzzes. It's a text from my dad.

Remember we have to book flights for California tonight. I need to know what days you have practice.

Unexpectedly, the logistical reminder is exactly what I need right now. I let out a breath, immersing myself momentarily in the thought of Malibu, where my family goes for summer vacation every year.

The memory is enough to ease the pressure in my head. *Crystal water. Soft sand. California sun.* The trip coming up—three weeks in Malibu, between training and tournaments—will be my chance to unwind after the busiest year of my life.

I can't wait.

Feeling renewed, I post the photo. I set my phone on the table, then reach for a fry, finally ready to enjoy my dinner.

My phone vibrates to life once more.

When I look down, my heart stops. It's my dad. I read his message once, then over several times. Fighting past the zigzags in my vision, I start to hope the headache is making me see things.

The Freeman-Yus are getting into LA a day before us, so the earlier we can fly out the better.

"Crap," I say quietly.

Bri pauses expectantly, fry midway to the ketchup. I show her my phone, which she reads expressionlessly.

"Kaylee," she says calmly. "Tell me your dad means different Freeman-Yus."

I wish I could.

I thought it would go without saying. I thought it was obvious our vacation plans would change this year from the tradition of our California trip every summer with my parents' closest friends. Friends who they've known since college, who they settled down on the shore of Newport, Rhode Island, in part to be near—the Freeman-Yus: Terry Freeman, Darren Yu, their daughters, Jessie and Lucy, and their son, Dean.

Dean Freeman-Yu. Dean, who I've known and vacationed with in Malibu since we were in diapers.

Dean, my *very* recent ex-boyfriend.

"Tell me you're not going on vacation with the guy you just dumped," Bri prompts me.

I feel like I'm watching my Malibu escape go up in flames, their devouring heat licking my face. I shove my phone into my sweatshirt pocket.

"I absolutely am not," I say.

Two

MY HEAD IS FULLY pounding by the time Brianna drops me off in front of my house, but it's just bearable enough to get through what I have to do next.

Storing my volleyball bag in the hall closet, I walk through the entryway of the home where I've lived since seventh grade. While the Victorian-inspired design took me years to feel comfortable in, I eventually inscribed memories into the ornate banisters, the dark-wood furniture, the Newport coastline waiting outside.

In the living room, I pass the framed photo of my mom on her knees in the sand after winning her third consecutive Olympic gold medal. The shot is stunning. It never fails to pull complicated emotions from me, mostly good ones. I remember being there in the stands nearly a decade ago. It's her only Olympics I can remember. I was full of pride, inspired in a way I never forgot. It was one of the coolest days of my life.

I find my parents in the kitchen, seated on the barstools,

eating takeout. My dad is in slacks and a crisp blue button-down, which means he spent the day showing a house. He's one of the top Realtors in the state, the square-jawed face of John Jordan plastered out in front of the city's priciest historic coastal homes. In person, he looks just like his posters, with perfectly white teeth and no hint of gray in his chestnut hair.

I speak before they can turn to greet me. "You weren't serious," I say. "Right? Just one of your hilarious jokes? The Freeman-Yus aren't coming to California with us this summer because that would be an awful, terrible idea—*right*?"

My parents face me, eyes wide.

"Why wouldn't they come, hon?" my mom asks in honest confusion. She's fresh out of the shower, sun-bleached hair dripping down her shoulders, which show her intense sports bra tan lines, the streaks of pale white between golden brown. She retired from professional volleyball after her last Olympic win and has run a volleyball clinic here ever since.

I literally gape, met only with earnest, empty stares. "Because I, like, *just* broke up with Dean?" I remind my parents. "Did you forget?"

My dad laughs without sarcasm or spite. His charming good cheer never feels forced despite how often he reproduces laughter just like this for clients. "Of course we didn't forget," he says, prodding his salad.

I fold my arms in defiance of his easygoing amusement. I don't understand what game they're playing.

With my parents' perfect relationship and professional

lives—Judy and John Jordan, the Olympian married to the enthusiastic and entrepreneurial real estate king—it's easy to imagine they would change behind closed doors into ruthless, judgmental people. Instead, I'm fortunate to have the great relationship I do with my parents, free of the pressures and petty judgments I know my friends get from their families. Being their only child, I'm used to it being just the three of us, doing everything together. When I took up volleyball, it made them so proud. They've been friends, inspirations, mentors to me my whole life.

It's why I'm caught up short standing in my kitchen, looking from my pressed and polished dad to my tanned, limber mother, struggling to figure out why they're cheerfully conscripting me into the worst vacation plan in history.

"Okay," I say slowly, fighting my headache. "Then *why*?"

"We go to Malibu with the F-Ys every year," my mom explains gently, starting to look like she's worried I'm suffering from some sort of head injury. I'm suffering, but not from memory loss. "It's the whole point of the trip," Mom goes on.

I match her incredulous stare. Their confusion is starting to confuse me. I mean, I understand how traditions work. We *have* gone with the Freeman-Yus every year to California for two or three heavenly weeks in the house my parents own in Malibu right on the beach, except for the summer when we were ten and they visited Dean's grandparents in Taiwan instead. I've played countless games of cards with Dean's family in the living room and pickup volleyball with the parents on the sand in the shade of the cliffs. Dean's sisters feel like they

could be my own. I even suffered memorable humiliation in front of his whole family when I face-planted during the group surfing lesson we all did one year.

Still.

"Surely an exception could be made," I say sternly, "for, I repeat, the summer *right after* I broke up with Dean. Have you even thought about how awkward it's going to be? He's my *ex-boyfriend*."

My mom's face softens only slightly. "Kaylee," she says delicately. "Maybe you should have thought of this before you and Dean started dating?"

Despite her reassuring voice, I know there's no sympathy in her words. They close in on me like pillowed prison walls with my migraine pounding on them outside.

"In fact." My dad speaks up, squinting like he's recalling hazy historical details. I'm in no mood for his playful posturing. "*I* think I remember specifically warning you this would happen when you got together," he goes on. "I said, *Kaylee, don't date Dean because you're just going to dump him in two months and then Malibu will be awkward*. And what did you say?"

I frown. There is, unfortunately, no way I'm getting out of replying.

Mom looks down into her salad like she's letting me save face.

I sigh.

"I said, *You don't* know *we'll break up*," I grind out.

It hurts to remember in ways I don't think my parents understand. I'd reassured them not just because I'd wanted

to chase my romantic whims without considering the family consequences. It was because I believed it myself, because I really, *really* wanted it to be true.

I'd wondered if Dean would be different. With our family histories, with how long we've been friends—with the years, nearly the decades of memories I have of him growing from the bookish kid whose bar mitzvah party was Lord of the Rings–themed into my tall, leather-loafer- and beige-cardigan-wearing classmate never without his chunky black camera and over-the-ear headphones—I thought he might. He knew my likes, my dislikes, my secrets. I felt completely comfortable with him. He was my best friend.

I didn't set out to ruin our relationship. I *didn't*.

In fact, I wondered if maybe Dean could be my escape from my worst quality. I know I have a reputation as a heartbreaker. My unfortunate habit of dumping guys after a few months is well established at school, even on my social media. I play it off in public and in my head, pretending it's not the one ugly stain that separates me from the image of myself I want to live up to. What celebrity breakup ever made the stars *less* famous, right?

No matter how much I deny it, though, I can't hide from what it really means. There is something wrong with me.

I shouldn't get the suffocated feeling months into every relationship. With Dean, I'd started to convince myself I wouldn't. Maybe I was being impulsive. Maybe I was being rash. Maybe I was lying to myself.

But I really, really liked him. I wasn't planning to break up with him from the start. It just happened.

"If you never wanted to see your ex again, you shouldn't have dated the son of our closest friends," my dad says past his arugula. "I'm sorry, Kaylee, but we're not letting a teenage breakup derail decades of family tradition."

I resist stomping my foot like a toddler, though I very much want to. I know it's horribly clichéd to say they just don't understand. Still, stereotypical or not, they *don't* understand. I *need* this vacation.

But with Dean there, California won't be a vacation. He's been . . . pretty mad since we broke up. I pleaded with him for forgiveness and friendship in tearful late-night texts, only for him to block me. Wounded, I've let him be. I've gone out of my way to avoid him at school—but there will be no avoiding him when he's sleeping down the hall from me for three weeks of family beach days and dinners. Every sunny day will feel like a storm, every barbecue a battlefield.

Mom looks up. The sympathy in her eyes is sincere now. "However," she says, "no one is going to force you to come to California. If you're uncomfortable with Dean's presence, of course we would be devastated to not have you with us, but we'd understand."

I straighten up. It's a sudden light past the rubble of the collapsed cave of my summer. I can physically feel relief racing into me, lessening the pounding of my headache.

"Really? That would honestly be great," I say. "I could stay here and spend time with Brianna before she goes to college."

The idea fits into place in my head perfectly. I don't need crystal waters. I don't need backyard barbecues. I only need weeks with the friend I *didn't* just dump. The friend who isn't

furious with me. Instead of my Malibu vacation, I will have the perfect Newport *staycation*.

Wrapped up in the fantasy, I nearly miss the look my parents exchange.

And then, in unison, they laugh. Really laugh, like what I've said is just hilarious. The world-class punch line they never saw coming. I'm stuck standing here, glaring while my cheeks heat.

"No way we're leaving you on your own," my mom manages.

"But I'll be seventeen next month," I protest. "I'm plenty capable of surviving on my own for three weeks."

"It's not a discussion," my dad says, still smiling from the unexpected uproariousness of my very reasonable suggestion. "You either come with us, or you can spend the summer in Nevada with Aunt Caroline."

Staycation dreams shatter in my head. While I can't stand my narcissistic aunt, she's not the real problem. Summer in fucking Pahrump, Nevada, outside of *literal* Death Valley, is summer without volleyball. The heat makes it nearly impossible to go outside, let alone train like a professional athlete. It's not an option, and my parents know it.

"Please," I say quietly. Defiance, I realize, is getting me nowhere. "Could they just not stay at the house with us?"

"We already invited them, sweetheart," my dad replies. "They have their flights. You really want us to kick them out?"

I don't really need my dad to put the question explicitly for me to know the offer is impossible, or to feel horrible for even proposing it. Darren and Terry Freeman-Yu are practi-

cally family, and I know how much it would hurt them and divide our families if I were to pout until I get my way.

I close my eyes. The realization hits me with sudden forceful clarity—I shouldn't be behaving this way. This isn't me. I'm better than this. I call on the girl within me who doesn't make excuses. Who pushes through without letting the hardship show.

I can't keep the strain out of my expression, but I do smile. "Of course," I say to my parents. "I get it."

Without needing to hear more, I leave the room. I can do this. I can put on a brave face. No one will see me stumbling.

Malibu won't be a vacation, but no one has to know that except me.

Three

POUTING IN FRONT OF my parents is one thing.

Pouting in my room? Completely different.

I storm upstairs into my bedroom, which is one part volleyball shrine, one part yearbook. I've gridded photos of my friends, the beach, my games—everything, really—onto one wall with neat white lines separating them. It's eye-catchingly geometric. Bookshelf space, meanwhile, is reserved for my not inconsiderable collection of trophies.

Fuming, I ease myself onto my bed and close my eyes, ready to ride out the rest of this migraine.

But frustration and stress keep the pressure pounding in my head, refusing to let me doze off. On the one hand, I know I'm being spoiled about dreading a three-week vacation in California. On the other, my breakup with Dean was uniquely awful. He'd cried, which was new in my experience. Not that it's always me doing the dumping, but when it is, my exes in the past haven't shed a tear. Exactly the way I intended—

I purposefully keep relationships from ever getting serious enough for those sorts of emotions.

The truth is, I'm good at dumping people. I've practiced it unintentionally, but practice is practice, and practice makes pretty close to perfect. I've mastered making my breakups feel logistical, comprehensible, just the natural consequence of me having too much going on to commit.

But Dean was harder. Of course he was. It's why my parents warned me over and over about starting a relationship with him—how dating a friend could ruin a friendship, and dating a family friend could ruin a family.

Maybe I was vain to think we would be different, that he would be the exception to my string of short-term relationships. I've stayed friends with several of my exes, real friends, whether it's exchanging US history notes with Bryson or sending memes to Mark. Dean and I had the sturdiest foundation of friendship I could ever wish for, years of vacations and beach days and nights hanging out in his room while our parents talked for hours. I couldn't imagine our breakup shaking what we'd built.

Or, say, leveling our friendship like floodwaters. Which is what happened.

My headache is unrelenting. I roll onto my side, searching for relief. The cool of my pillow is small comfort.

I should've known. Should've known I would screw everything up. It was an open secret in our families that Dean had a huge crush on me. When we were six, he declared we'd get married, and, of course, everyone has teased us about it

ever since. Deep down, I knew what it meant when we got together. I knew dating him wouldn't be casual.

I'd wanted to anyway. And why not? Despite the deluge of guilt washing over me, this little fire of indignation hasn't gone out. It's unfair—that Dean was allowed to have his crush and not have to hide it away, but when *I* began to have a crush back, *I* was the problem. I was the one told *no*. The one told to *consider the consequences*.

Dean never had to consider the consequences, safe in the idea that his crush would remain unrequited.

But I liked him, too.

I flip over onto my other side, still hoping one of these poses will help ease the pressure in my head. Unfortunately, this new position puts me right in the eyeline of one of the photos on my wall—from California, with our families in the frame. Dean is right next to me, smiling, sunscreen sticking his wavy dark hair to his forehead. Since our breakup, I've removed the photos of just us from my room, but I kept this one because everyone's in it.

I'm regretting the decision now.

I settle for closing my eyes, flat on my back. Newport is quiet on the coastline where we live. I keep hoping the peace of the night will help me doze off.

Instead, memories keep me stuck in my sleeplessness. We had a good two months together—a *really* good two months. There were playlists shared. There were bike rides on Narragansett Beach. There were photoshoots overlooking the cliffs. There were kisses in this very room while my

parents, putting together "taco night" downstairs, definitely knew what was going on.

Then he told me he loved me and I said it back, and the next day, I broke up with him.

When he asked me why, I didn't have a good answer. I don't know if a good answer is even possible for heartbreak.

I can't fault him for how obviously pissed he's been on the few regrettable occasions when we've crossed paths, in class or in the halls. It hurts, but it's understandable. Inevitable. In fact—

My eyes fly open.

If there's one person who wants to go to California with our families less than I do, it might just be Dean. He hasn't said two words to me since our breakup. For all I know, he hates me, and our friendship is sunk like a shipwreck.

Dean is probably having the same conversation with his parents tonight that I had with mine, except Terry and Darren will be reasonable. *They'll* let Dean stay home. Sure, it'll still be awkward sharing a house with my ex's family, but it'll be better than Dean himself. He'll stay home, silently hating me from afar.

The thought is both comforting and painful, which I resent.

I sit up in bed, motivated by new hope, knowing what I need to do. No more hiding. No more fretting. No more dreading vacations or family events I should look forward to. I need to definitively get over this breakup.

Fortunately, getting over breakups is one thing in which

I have plenty of experience. My methodology is perfected. Tested by time, by frequency, by variety. I could probably teach community college courses on the subject if I wanted to. I can envision the flyers now—*Kaylee Jordan. Volleyball star, social media personality, breakup expert.*

Instead of moping, it's time I put my practice to work. One way of getting over someone? A rebound.

I reach for my phone. Thumbing through my contacts, I focus on the merits of this plan. It'll help me stop dwelling endlessly on why things went wrong with Dean, certainly. If I'm lucky, it'll possibly even give Dean the kick he needs to get over me. If he hasn't opted out of our vacation yet, maybe hearing I'm with someone new will make him hate me enough to bail on California. It's genius.

It's almost depressing how excited it makes me to have found this way of getting him to hate me. Instead of fixating on this thought, though, I force myself to continue through my contacts.

My fingers still on a name I programmed in as *Jeremy from Newport Fest*. I don't usually listen to the local music festival's *music*, instead just enjoying the summer weather, the wandering from stage to stage on the sand-flecked grass of the harbor mouth, and the obviously great photo ops. I remember Jeremy's band, though. They were good—they would be going-places good when they got older. This number is what I have for walking right up to him while they were leaving the stage from their set. I never texted him, though. School started and I got swept up in other things.

Time to change that.

Inspiration cuts through the painful fog of my headache. I start to type.

At Newport Fest last year, a very tall blonde asked you for your number after your set. She was extremely charming and had lips you definitely thought about kissing while you watched her from onstage. Ring any bells?

I put my phone down, pleased with the message. I'm not expecting him to respond immediately. When he sees it, though, he'll reply.

My phone vibrates only seconds later.

Kaylee, right? I definitely remember.

I smile as I reply, already feeling the rejuvenation of a rebound quickening my pulse.

I know this is, like, nine months late, but do you want to hang out?

Name a time and place.

Nine months is nothing, btw. You were worth the wait.

Four

I WALK ONTO CAMPUS on Monday tentatively hopeful. Over the weekend, I went out with Jeremy. First to the new bakery in town, then to the nearby beach park, where we sat near the shore. He was funny. His sung Harry Styles impression was legitimately impressive. In every respect, it went great.

While he's not my boyfriend *yet*, things are tending in that direction. I posted a tasteful if leading photo of the two of us to my Stories and told Brianna to help spread the word. It'll reach Dean eventually. He'll be pissed, but it'll help us both in the long run.

Except when I head toward my locker, I see him waiting for me in what was, for two months, our spot.

Dean. He stands out to me the way he has my entire life. For the visible reasons, of course—there's no ignoring the fact that Dean is handsome, with his face full of sharp lines, his contemplative lips, his keen, dark eyes set in golden-brown

skin. He wears hipsterism like he does everything, entirely without self-consciousness. On others, obscure music shirts or cuffed jeans or hair worn in a bun might be a posture, a costume. Not Dean, though. They're just what he genuinely likes. I know him well enough to be sure. His unreserved himselfness is inspiring, and magnetic.

But it's not the only thing I see when I'm with him. I've lived my entire life intertwined with Dean's, thanks to our families. He's inscribed with memories, context I share with no one else. Our every conversation, every passing glance, reminds me of our years of friendship. It's a melody of endless reprises, of new variations on the wonderfully familiar. It's like nothing else.

Until I ruined it, of course.

He's standing now where he used to wait for me in the mornings, then walk with me to my locker. Pre-dating, we didn't hang out much at school—I stuck with the jocks, Dean with the other art kids. But for the months of our relationship, this was where we brought our worlds together.

People wave to me in front of the locker hall, where the welcome morning sun reflects harshly off our campus's concrete geometry. Others call my name. I return quick smiles, hoping I don't look distracted, not wanting to be unfriendly.

As I approach Dean, I slow my steps. Surely he's not waiting for *me*. He hasn't so much as looked my way in the past few weeks.

Everything in his relaxed posture, his unreadable expression, says he's perfectly at ease. He's leaning against the

stucco wall, studying his shoes. *No*, I decide. *He's not here for me.* He's just here.

When I reach him, though, he pushes himself off the wall. He lifts his gaze from his suede chukka boots, which I only know the word for because of him. For the first time, his eyes lock on mine.

I wish I didn't feel the relief rushing through me. It is definitely *not* the way the Kaylee who's over this breakup would respond. The truth is, though, I've missed Dean more than I should.

Or maybe not more than I should. Maybe it makes perfect sense. I didn't just lose my boyfriend—I lost my best friend, too.

"Can we talk?" he asks.

Just hearing his voice, spoken to me, momentarily catches me up short. I falter, waiting for my capacity for speech to return. "Of course," I finally say.

He leads me past the planters outside the school's front entrance, where there's more privacy. The memory of how we used to use this privacy sits awkwardly in our silence. My heart is pounding like it does when I walk onto the court for every game. Dean, for his part, is expressionless, offering me no hint of what's coming. *Maybe*, I wonder with wild hope, *this is where we'll begin to put our ill-advised romance behind us*.

He doesn't leave me in suspense for long. "So, what?" he snaps. "You have a new boyfriend already?"

I blink, stunned by the heat of his anger. I knew word would reach him eventually—I'd counted on it, even. I just

didn't figure it would happen this quickly. "I'm not sure he's my boyfriend yet," I say, keeping my voice neutral. "But yeah, we're something."

Dean frowns. I have to ignore the wave of memories the expression summons. The Dean I know, the guy I'm hoping doesn't become the Dean I *knew*, grimaced just like this when we'd get out of movies he didn't like, or when social media platforms changed their interfaces or default fonts.

"I'm sorry if it hurts you," I say sincerely. "But I hope we *both* can start to move on." I search his expression, looking for signs he understands me. Understands I'm not moving on because I didn't care about what we had—but because I *did*, in ways I'm trying not to let destroy our friendship.

He refuses to meet my eyes now. It's not encouraging.

Nevertheless, I go on. "There are plenty of people who would love to call you their boyfriend."

Dean is bi, which didn't at all factor into our breakup. He came out to his family last year, and when he had his first kiss with a boy, I was the first person he told.

Back when we were best friends.

His expression changes, his resentment fading. "I *have* moved on," he replies. Reading my raised eyebrows, he goes on. "Don't look so skeptical. I've totally . . . moved on. I'm—moved."

I study him, the slant of his posture, the indecipherable quirk of his mouth. Despite the loud patterns he embraces on his short-sleeve button-downs, Dean is quiet, even shy, and doesn't open up to people easily. When he does, however, he's . . . every wonderful thing I've watched him become over

almost seventeen years. He's funny, smart, and completely charming.

He is not, however, careless, insensitive, easygoing, or jaded, like he's pretending to be now. I let the expanding silence say I don't quite buy this bravado.

"Okay." He eventually sighs in defeat. "So I'm not over you *yet*. I'm working on it, though."

I have to smile. His confessional honesty is—well, it's Dean.

"Don't smile at me. It doesn't help. I'm trying to be mad at you. Mad at you is an essential step in falling out of love with you." He says the last sentence like he's reading from the official medical journal of heartbreak.

It's a kick in the stomach. I don't know what hurts worse—the fact he's still in love with me, or how hard he's trying not to be. "So me hanging out with a new guy is helping, then?" I ask.

"It's definitely not making me *less* mad," he says, eyes flashing. "I think I just need closure."

I sigh. "We've gone over this. I don't know what more to say, Dean. I'm sorry."

He goes on like I didn't say anything. "You told me you loved me, then twelve hours later you dumped me, and now three weeks later you have a new boyfriend—"

"Technically not my boyfriend yet—"

"Not the point." He scowls.

I stare up into the cloudless sky, wishing we weren't dissecting the end of our relationship for the hundredth time.

It's not like I don't want to explain everything to Dean in clear, painless terms. "I don't have an explanation that will make it okay for you," I say in exasperation. "I just didn't want to date you anymore."

Dean's reply is immediate. It's the one I knew was coming. "You don't just fall out of love with someone. Not that fast."

"Well, I guess I'm different." I'm going for matter-of-fact. Instead, my words lose their footing. They land sadly on resignation.

Dean looks at me, his eyes searing with hope for something I just can't give him.

There's no graceful transition, but I decide to lead the conversation where I need to. "So about California . . ." I begin.

His brow furrows, his expression shadowing with suspicion. "What about it?" he asks. "Don't tell me the not-yet-but-probably-soon boyfriend is coming."

"Ew, of course not," I reply instantly.

When Dean brightens, I chastise myself for giving him something to hold on to. Just, of course I wasn't going to bring my rebound on vacation. In fact, it's gone unspoken in the decades of our families' vacation history—no one else comes to Malibu. Not when Dean became inseparable from Trent Paul in seventh grade, bonded over some online video game. Not when I spent freshman summer dating this guy who went on to star in the *Back to the Future* reboot TV series. No one else comes. Malibu is ours.

But just because you don't go on vacation with your new rebound doesn't mean you should with your ex.

"I tried to back out of the trip altogether," I explain. "But my parents wouldn't let me. Or, they *would* let me, but only if I stay with Aunt Caroline."

Dean grimaces. "Definitely not an option," he agrees.

"Right. You get it." I keep going, hurrying my words. "I wish I could have stayed home. I'm sure this trip will be . . . rough for you. I don't know what you're thinking, but . . ." I say it leadingly, hoping he'll pick up the rest of the sentence.

His stare is blank until the moment what I'm suggesting registers with him. I see it happen, the slight widening of his eyes.

"You want *me* to stay home?" he clarifies.

I feel waves pummeling the sides of my desperate hope. "*Want* isn't exactly the word I'd use. But, Dean," I say, leveling with him. "Do you really want to spend three weeks living with me?"

He laughs, the sound humorless, like stone scraping on stone. "I *want* to spend three weeks in California."

"Be serious, though," I insist. "Really consider it." Honestly, has he not? I look into his eyes, searching for reflections of the things I've imagined. The stomach-churning quiet of family dinners, the way each other's presence is certain to make the sand feel gritty and the sunshine sticky. How could he *want* to come?

Instead, Dean crosses his arms, looking . . . victorious. "Did you think I'd just volunteer to stay home? While my whole family takes a vacation without me? Just because *you'll* be there?"

I do not like the dark delight in his questions. "It's not as unreasonable as you're making it sound," I reply defensively.

Once more, he huffs a hollow laugh. "No, it is. You really have no idea how spoiled you're being. Look, I can't force you to love me again. I can't force you to explain why you stopped. But *you* can't force *me* to give up my summer vacation. I'm not thrilled with the circumstances either, but it's the way it is."

I'm proud of my capacity for patience. I've practiced it, honed it. Right now, however, my patience has just run out. I put a hand on my hip, not caring how childishly indignant I look. Fuck looking perfect when Dean is driving his foot into our summer.

"Fine," I say. "Well, I hope you do find a way to move on before the trip. Because I have."

Dean winces, and I wilt. My rebelliousness flies out of me instantly. I regret how mean that was. It's just, I'm not looking forward to my vacation becoming a sun-soaked living reminder of how I couldn't make it work with someone as great as Dean.

"Sorry, that was harsh," I say.

He rolls his eyes, but there's no anger in it. "Don't bother. I hope I move on, too."

I smile weakly. "Right. Well, am I at least making you mad?"

Dean considers. "A little," he concedes, sounding encouraged. "Maybe you could storm off?"

"Oh, good thinking. I'll do that," I reply, swallowing my smile with pursed lips. Spinning around, I take several decisive, angry steps away.

I hear Dean's voice over my shoulder. "So should I include you in our surfing lesson reservation?"

It's a pointed question and not Dean's first playful reminder of my memorable face-plant. I kind of don't mind the pleased flush it brings to my cheeks. I keep walking, smiling where he can't see.

Five

I LOVE DRIVING. I got my license as soon as I could, sick of my volleyball-famous mother dropping me off at my clinics and practices. I'm proud of my mom, but having her at every first introduction instantly set the bar imposingly high.

After class, I drive to the café near Jeremy's school where I said I'd pick him up. Dean's refusal to refigure the vacation situation stuck with me for the rest of the school day, leaving me hopelessly distracted, including embarrassingly spacing out in Spanish when Ms. Huerta called on me.

However, I remind myself I'm doing exactly what I need to. I'm getting over the breakup. I'm rebounding. I'm following my methodology. Hitting my marks. Doing what I've practiced. It's how I become the person I need to be.

If dating Jeremy doesn't work, I'll move on to one of my other heartbreak survival guide routines, like hobbies, maybe. In the wake of my freshman-year split with Isaiah Hunter, who's now varsity quarterback, I watched like thirty

seasons of *Survivor* in three weeks. I even filmed my own audition video.

I'll be okay, I reassure myself. I'll get over this. Unwinding for the few minutes I spend passing by the old-time storefronts on Newport's picturesque streets, I lower the window for the wind to play with my hair, which is back to its highlighted, sunny look.

When I pull up in front of the cute facade of Daylight Coffee, where I've accompanied Brianna in her pursuit of elegantly decorated lattes, Jeremy's waiting for me. I smile. This boy is rebound energy personified. Tall, limber, with long guitarist's fingers, brown waves of hair, one or two perfect freckles on sandy skin. He stands up from the wire-frame table—holding, I notice, two coffees. One for me.

The gesture is sweet. But the coffee will need to be, too, if I'm going to get the drink down.

Opening my passenger door, he gracefully folds his legs into the seat, which doesn't require much effort because my usual passenger is the six-foot Bri. Holding the coffees, he leans over the console to give me a kiss that's longer than a peck, if not a full-on make-out. We haven't graduated to pecking yet, the casual comfort of kissing hello.

Dean and I reached pecking pretty early. It wasn't unexpected, given how much romantic history it felt like we had because of how much *history* history we actually had. But despite the naturalness of our relationship, we would sometimes surprise each other, too, drawing the other in for long, heart-fluttering, knee-liquefying kisses. He—

No. I halt the train of thought. This is not about Dean. I'm here with Jeremy. Rebound Jeremy. Nice Jeremy, with the extra coffee I don't want.

I give him a bright smile. On our first date, he pointed out I'd seen *him* play, but he's never seen *me* play. The wordplay made me smirk, and I told him for our next date, he could come to a pickup game, which is where we're heading now. Brianna and two of our friends who now play for Brown are waiting down at Narragansett. It's probably my favorite place to play in my home state, though to be honest, the competition isn't crowded. Rhode Island isn't exactly a beach volleyball state, which is one reason I look forward to our California trip every year. I'm grateful for the friends I've made here, training my hardest on the East Coast's sand, but if my mom hadn't retired, I would still be spending winters in California like I did when I was little, before Mom stopped training year-round.

"Good day?" Jeremy asks as I'm pulling out of the parking lot.

"Better now," I reply.

"I got this for you." He puts the coffee for me into the center drink holder, like I hadn't noticed the cup's conspicuous presence.

When we pull up to the first red light, I sip hesitantly from the smile-shaped opening in the plastic lid. Honestly, I don't know what I'm drinking. It could be vanilla, or espresso, or pumpkin spice. To me, it all tastes like battery acid.

"Yum," I say.

Jeremy reaches for the cord to plug his phone in. I'm hit with more whiplash, remembering how Dean would play new songs he'd discovered for me on our drives to each other's houses. He was never pretentious, never preachy, never out to impress or intimidate me like music guys are. He just wanted to show his best friend what excited him.

I'm wondering if Jeremy's going to do the same when, once more, I stop myself. With the road winding through the New England trees toward the beach, I decide to be present with Jeremy, who says all the right things, who got me coffee, who just put on the same Harry Styles song he sang for me on our previous date. I'm not here to think about where things stand with Dean. The whole point of breaking up with Dean was to stop thinking about where things stand with Dean.

"So do you, like, want to play in the Olympics?"

His question pulls me out of my refocusing efforts. Glancing over, I find earnestness in his eyes. He's not prying like volleyball guys do, out of skepticism and competitiveness. He's really interested. He wants to get to know me.

I soften. "I'm going to try. Qualifiers are still a few years out, and I want to find the right partner first," I explain. "Most players go to college or play pro before trying. I'm not going to put too much pressure on myself."

Jeremy nods. "Your mom didn't play in college, though, right? I mean, I saw she has the record for volleyball gold medals. She went straight to the Olympics. I was just wondering if you wanted to do the same thing."

I fight to hide my grimace. My fingers involuntarily clench the steering wheel.

So Jeremy googled my mom. It doesn't mean he'll be weird about it. I need to work on not reading comparisons coded into every facet of my life. In fact, it's normal to have questions like this, I remind myself. Most people find it interesting when they learn I'm related to an Olympian. It's a nice, engaged, boyfriendly thing to discuss.

I repeat my reassurances in my head. *He's interested. He wants to get to know me.*

Instead of observations, they sound more like prayers. It's not helping. I dash them from my head, focusing on the road, which is curving toward the parking lot, revealing the sparkling ocean. "That's the plan," I say. "I'm not as good as my mom, though. I'm good, don't get me wrong. Really good. One day I *will* go to the Olympics. But I'm not going to break my mom's records, and I'm not trying to. I just love this sport."

I like the charge of conviction I feel in my words. They're the truth. I do love volleyball. The idea of being the best in my family is one I never let go of, because I never held it in the first place.

Still, not competing with my mom doesn't relieve the pressure her legacy places on my life. I want to do her name proud.

Jeremy looks impressed. "You're really mature about this," he says. His voice is gentle, not doubtful or wheedling. "I don't know if I could handle living in someone's shadow."

I hit the gas a little hard at the next green light. While I'm not looking to outdo my mom, Jeremy's phrasing grates

on me. It's not the nicest comment, but besides, it's not how I see things. I don't live in my mom's shadow. Shadows hide you in the dark, making it so you have to shine even brighter to be seen. Instead, I live in my mom's *spotlight*. Everyone is watching me. From professionals to jerks on Instagram.

In this world I'm committed to, I have a reputation before anyone has seen me play. It's a privilege, I know, even if the spotlight is sometimes searing.

Which is where Jeremy comes in. I need flings like these, free of consequences. I need flirty texting. I need front-seat make-outs. I need . . . freedom.

It's why, in some guilty yet desperately necessary way, Jeremy is good for me. With him, I can make mistakes and walk away. Escape expectations without having to play the Instagram-friendly, volleyball-famous role of Kaylee Jordan. I can unwind, then wipe the slate clean with someone new.

Not like with Dean. He was a mistake I won't make again.

I pull onto the sandy pavement of the beach parking lot. "It's not easy," I go on. "Which is why I need *someone* to help me have fun."

Jeremy grins. "That I can do."

When I park the car, he kisses me again. This time, I keep my mind on his smell, his thumb gentle on my jawline, the way our mouths move together. Him.