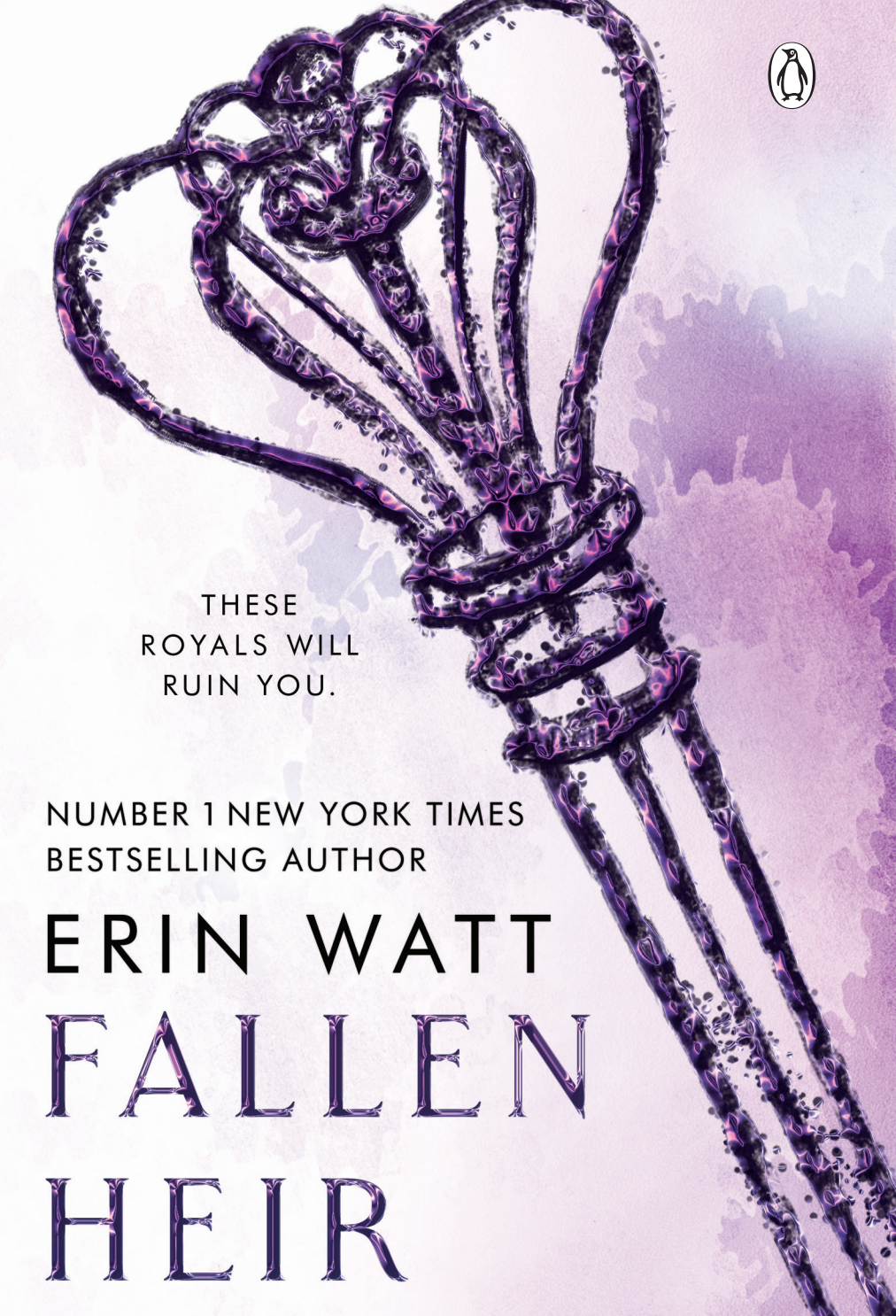


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A *New York Times*, *USA Today* and *Wall Street Journal* bestselling author, Elle Kennedy grew up in the suburbs of Toronto, Ontario, and holds a BA in English from York University. She is the author of more than forty titles of contemporary romance and romantic suspense, including the international bestselling Off-Campus series.

Jen Frederick is a Korean adoptee living in the Midwest with her husband, daughter and rambunctious dog. Under the pseudonym Erin Watt, Frederick has co-written two #1 *New York Times* bestselling novels.

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One

"REMEMBER THAT NO matter what function you choose, the sum of the differences is controlled by the first and last," Ms. Mann concludes just as the bell chimes to signal the end of class. It's the last of the day.

Everyone starts packing up. Everyone but me.

I lean back in my chair and tap my pencil against the edge of the textbook, hiding a grin as I watch the new teacher desperately try to hold the quickly disappearing attention of her students. She's cute when she's flustered.

"Parts one-A and one-B for tomorrow!" she calls, but nobody's listening anymore. They're all racing out the door.

"Coming, Easton?" Ella Harper pauses at my desk, her blue eyes peering down at me. She's looking thin these days. I think her appetite left her around the same time my brother did.

Well, not that Reed *left* her. Big bro is still head over heels for Ella, our kinda sorta stepsister. If he didn't love her, he would've chosen to go to some fancy college far, far away from Bayview. Instead, he's at State, which is close enough that they can visit each other on the weekends.

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"Nah," I say. "I got a question for Teach."

Ms. Mann's slender shoulders twitch as my words register. Even Ella notices.

"East . . ." She trails off, her pretty lips forming a frown.

I can see her winding up some lecture about how I need to clean up my act. But we're only a week into classes, and I'm already bored out of my mind. What else do I have to do but mess around? I don't need to study. I barely care about football. My dad has grounded me from flying; at this rate, I'll never get my pilot's license. And if Ella doesn't leave me the hell alone, I'm gonna forget she's my brother's girl and seduce her just for the hell of it.

"See you at home," I tell Ella, my voice firm. Ms. Mann has been flirting with me relentlessly since the first day of school, and after a week of exchanging heated glances, I'm going for it. It's wrong, sure, but that's what makes it exciting—for both of us.

It's rare for Astor Park Prep to hire young, hot female teachers. The administration knows there are too many bored rich boys in here looking for a challenge. Headmaster Beringer has had to cover up more than one teacher-student relationship, and I'm not even relying on the rumor mill for this, since one of those "inappropriate" relationships was mine. If you consider making out with my nutrition teacher behind the gym a *relationship.* I don't.

"I don't mind if you stay for this," I drawl to Ella, whose stubborn feet are rooted into the tile, "but you might feel more comfortable waiting in the hall."

She gives me a withering look. Not much escapes her notice. She grew up in shady places and knows shit. Or she just knows how deviant I am.

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"I don't know what you're chasing, but I doubt you'll find it up Ms. Mann's skirt," she mutters.

"Won't know until I look," I quip.

Ella sighs and gives in. "Be careful," she admonishes in a tone loud enough to carry to Ms. Mann, who flushes and stares at the floor as Ella walks out.

I tamp down a swell of irritation. Why the judgment? I'm trying to live my best life here, and as long as I don't hurt anyone, where's the harm? I'm eighteen. Ms. Mann's an adult. So what if her occupation is currently "teacher"?

Silence fills the room after the door closes behind Ella. Ms. Mann fiddles with her pale blue skirt. Well, hell. She's having second thoughts.

I'm slightly disappointed, but it's all good. I'm not one of those guys who has to bang every girl I meet, mostly because there are so many out there. If one girl isn't interested, you move on to the next.

I bend down to grab my backpack when a pair of pretty heels show up in my line of vision.

"Did you have a question, Mr. Royal?" Ms. Mann asks softly.

I raise my head slowly, taking in her long legs, the curve of her hip, the indentation at her waist where her prim white blouse is tucked into her equally modest skirt. Her chest heaves under my examination, and the pulse at her neck flutters wildly.

"Yeah. Do you have any solutions to my in-class problem?" I place my hand on her hip. As she gasps, I run a finger along the waistband of her skirt. "I'm having a hard time concentrating."

She takes another deep breath. "Is that right?"

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"Mmmhmmm. I think it's because every time I look at you, I get the feeling you're having problems concentrating, too." I smile faintly. "Maybe because you're fantasizing about getting bent over your desk while everyone in calc watches."

Ms. Mann gulps. "Mr. Royal. I don't have the slightest idea what you're referring to. Please remove your hand from my waist."

"Sure." I slide my palm lower, so that my fingers are dusting the hem of her skirt. "Is this a better place for it? Because I can stop altogether."

Our gazes lock.

Last chance, Ms. Mann. We're both acutely aware of how I'm ruining her skirt and possibly her reputation, but her feet are glued to the floor.

Her voice is hoarse when she finally speaks. "That's fine, Mr. Royal. I think you'll find that the solution to your concentration problem is in your hands."

I slide my palms underneath the skirt and flash her a cocky grin. "I'm trying to eliminate the problematic functions."

Her eyelids flutter shut in surrender.

"We should not be doing this," she chokes out.

"I know. That's why it's so good."

Her thighs clench under my hands. The naughtiness of this scene, knowing we could be caught anytime, knowing that she's absolutely the last person I should be touching, makes this a million times hotter.

Her hands fall to my shoulders and her fingers dig into the two-thousand-dollar Tom Ford–designed school blazer as she tries to balance herself. My own fingers work their magic. Small, muffled sounds fill the empty classroom until there's nothing but her heavy breathing.

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With a satisfied sigh, Ms. Mann backs away, smoothing her hands across her wrinkled skirt before lowering herself to her knees.

"Your turn," she whispers.

I stretch my legs out and lean back. AP Calc is absolutely the best class I've ever taken at Astor Park.

When she's done giving me my extra credit, a hesitant smile settles on her face. Her hair brushes the tops of my thighs as she leans close to murmur, "You can come over tonight. My daughter is in bed by ten."

I freeze. This could've ended in many directions, but I was really hoping to avoid this one. A dozen excuses race through my mind, but before I can get one out, the classroom door opens.

"Oh my God!"

Both Ms. Mann and I whirl toward the doorway. I catch a glimpse of ink-black hair and the navy Astor Park jacket.

Ms. Mann shoots to her feet and stumbles. I jump forward to catch her. She's weak-kneed as I help her brace herself on a desk.

"Oh God," she says numbly. "Who was that? Do you think she saw . . . ?"

Saw Ms. Mann on her knees, saw that my pants are undone and Ms. Mann's clothing is rumpled? Um, yeah. She saw.

"She saw," I say aloud.

The confirmation only freaks her out more. With an anguished moan, she drops her face into her palms. "Oh God. I'm going to get fired."

I finish putting myself together and reach for my bag, hastily shoving my stuff in it. "Nah. It'll be fine."

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But I don't say it with much confidence, and she knows it.

"No, it won't be fine!"

I shoot a worried glance at the door. "Shhh. Someone's gonna hear you."

"Someone *saw* us," she hisses back, panic filling her eyes and trembling in her voice. "You need to go find that girl. Find her and do your Easton Royal thing and make sure she doesn't say anything."

My Easton Royal thing?

Ms. Mann hurries on before I can ask what the heck she expects me to do. "I can't get fired. I *can't*. I have a daughter to support!" Her voice starts shaking again. "Fix this. Please, just go and *fix* this."

"Okay," I assure her. "I'll fix it." How, I have no frickin' idea, but Ms. Mann is two seconds away from a nervous breakdown.

She lets out another low moan. "And this can never happen again, do you understand me? Never again."

I'm totally cool with that. Her panic attack killed the mood, as well as any interest in a repeat performance. I like my hookups to end as pleasantly as they begin. There's nothing sexy about being with a girl who has regrets, so you gotta make sure at the start that she's fully into it. If there's any question about her interest, it's a no-go.

"Gotcha," I say with a nod.

Ms. Mann stares at me with pleading eyes. "Why are you still here? Go!"

Right.

I shoulder my backpack and exit the classroom. Out in the hall, I take a quick survey. It's more crowded than it should be. Why is everyone loitering in the halls? School's over, for Chrissake. Go home, people.

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My eyes skip over Felicity Worthington, who flips her platinum-blond hair over one shoulder. Claire Donahue, my ex, spears me with a pair of hopeful blue eyes—she's been itching to get back together since school started. I avoid meeting her gaze and move on to Kate and Alyssa, the Ballinger sisters. Neither of them has black hair. I scan the rest of the hallway but come up empty.

I'm about to turn away when Felicity leans over to whisper something in Claire's ear, and in the space previously occupied by Felicity's head, I spot *her*. The girl's face is in her locker, but her hair is unmistakable, so black it's almost blue under the fluorescent lighting.

I stride forward.

"Easton," I hear Claire say.

"Don't humiliate yourself," Felicity advises.

I ignore them both and keep walking.

"Hey," I say.

The girl looks up from her locker. Startled gray eyes collide with mine. A set of pink lips part. I wait for her smile—the response I get from ninety-nine percent of women, no matter their age. It doesn't come. Instead, I get a face full of hair as she whirls and sprints down the hallway.

Surprise stalls my response. That and I don't want to draw an audience. Nonchalantly, I close her locker before following her fleeing figure down the hall. Once I hit the turn, I run, too. With my much longer legs, I'm able to catch her in front of the locker rooms.

"Hey," I say, planting myself in front of her. "Where's the fire?"

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She stops hard, nearly falling over. I grab her shoulder to make sure she doesn't do a header into the tile.

"I didn't see anything," she blurts out, shrugging away from my steadying hand.

I glance over her shoulder to make sure we don't have an audience, but the hallway is empty. Good.

"Sure, you didn't. That's why you ran away like a kid caught with her hand in the cookie jar."

"Technically, you're the one with the hand in the cookie jar," she retorts. And then slams her lips together as she realizes what she admitted. "Not that I saw a thing."

"Uh-huh." What to do with this cutie? Too bad I'm supposed to scare her into silence.

I move forward. She edges sideways.

I keep going until she's backed up against the wall. I lean down until my forehead's about an inch from hers. So close I can smell the spearmint of her gum.

Fix this, Ms. Mann had said. And she's right. What happened in that classroom was supposed to be fun. That's all I want—to have fun, not ruin people's lives. It was fun doing something dirty and wrong. It was fun toying with the idea of getting caught.

But Ms. Mann losing her job and her kid being homeless? Not in the fun category.

"So—" I start in a low voice.

"Um, Royal, right?" the girl interrupts.

"Yeah." I'm not surprised she knows me. Not that I'm proud of it, but the Royals have run this school for years. Thankfully, I've avoided any leadership role. Ella's the Royal in charge now. I'm merely her enforcer. "And you are?"

"Hartley. Look, I swear, I didn't see anything." She holds up her hand as if pledging allegiance to the truth.

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"If that was true, you wouldn't have run, Hartley." I turn

her name over in my head. It's an unusual one, but I can't place it. Or her face, for that matter. Astor doesn't see a lot of new faces. I've been with most of these assholes for as long as I can remember.

"Seriously. I'm a monkey." Hartley continues her feeble defense, folding one hand over her eyes and another across her mouth. "See no evil, speak no evil. Not that what you did was evil. Or what you *may* have been doing. Not that I saw anything. Evil or good."

Charmed, I tap the hand over her mouth. "You're babbling."

"New-school nerves." She straightens her school-mandated blazer and juts out her chin. "Maybe I did see something, but it's none of my business, okay? I'm not going to say anything."

I cross my arms, my own blazer drawing tight over my shoulders. She looks like she wants to fight. I love it, but flirting with her isn't going to generate the results I need. I inject some menace into my voice, hoping fear will curb her tongue. "Thing is, I don't know you. So how am I supposed to take your word for it?"

The menace works, because Hartley visibly gulps. "I . . . I won't say anything," she repeats.

Instantly, I feel bad. What am I doing scaring a girl like this? But then the fearful face of Ms. Mann pops into my head. Ms. Mann has a kid, and Hartley is just another rich prep school classmate. She can handle a little warning.

"Yeah? And what if someone—Headmaster Beringer, maybe—asks you about it?" I slant my head in challenge, my tone getting more and more threatening. "What then, *Hartley*? What would you say?"

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Two

AS HARTLEY CONTEMPLATES my question, I mentally catalogue her. She's a tiny thing—probably a foot shorter than my six-foot, one-inch frame. There's not much to brag about in the boob department, and down below she's wearing a pair of really ugly loafers. Footwear is the only thing that isn't dictated by the school's dress code—the one expression of individuality we're allowed. The guys run around in sneakers or Timbs. Most girls opt for something fancy like a Gucci flat or red-soled heels. I guess Hartley's statement is *I don't give a fuck*. I can appreciate that.

Everything else about her is ordinary. Her uniform is standard. Her hair is straight and long. Her face isn't striking enough to draw the eye. Ella, for example, is drop-dead gorgeous. My ex, Claire, was recently named debutante of the year. This Hartley girl has manga-big eyes and a wide mouth. Her nose kind of tips up at the end, but none of her features are going to be gushed over in *Southern Coastal Quarterly*.

Said nose wrinkles as she finally responds. "Well, let's think about what I *actually* saw back there, right? I mean . . . technically, I saw a teacher picking up something off the floor.

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And a student was, um, holding her hair out of the way so she could see better. It was very sweet. And kind. If Headmaster Beringer asked, I'd tell him you're an upstanding citizen and nominate you for student of the week."

"Really? That's what you're going with?" The urge to laugh is strong, but I figure that will ruin the effectiveness of any threat I need to dish out.

"Swear to God." She holds a small hand over her chest. Her nails are short and missing the picture-perfect manicure that most of the Astor girls sport.

"I'm an atheist," I inform her.

A frown mars her face. "You're being difficult."

"Hey, I'm not the one playing Peeping Tom."

"It's school!" Her voice rises for the first time. "I should be able to peek into any classroom I want!"

"So you admit to watching me." I struggle to keep the smile off my face.

"Okay. Now I see why you have to get it on with a teacher. No normal girl would want to put up with you."

At her exasperated outburst, I give up on the intimidation because I can't hide my grin any longer. "You won't know until you try."

She stares at me. "Are you seriously flirting with me now? Hard pass."

"Hard, eh?" I lick my bottom lip. Yes, I am flirting, because as ordinary as she might look, she intrigues me. And, I, Easton Royal, am bound by the laws of the universe to pursue all things interesting.

There's a flicker of fascination in her eyes. Brief, but I've always been able to tell when a girl thinks I'm hot, when she's imagining what it'd be like to hook up with me.

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Hartley's totally thinking about it right now.

Come on, baby, ask me out. Take what you want. I'd love to see a girl grab me by the metaphorical and literal balls and tell me she wants me. Straight up. No games. But despite the whole girl-empowerment thing, I find that most chicks want the guys to chase them. Bummer.

"Ew." She tries to inch away. "Seriously, Royal. Move."

I plant both hands against the cool wood on either side of her head, effectively trapping her. "Or what?"

Those gray eyes glint, piquing my curiosity again. "I might be small, but I have the lung capacity of a whale, so if you don't move, I'm gonna have to release the oral kraken until the entire school is in this hallway rescuing me from you."

I crack up. "The oral kraken? That sounds pretty dirty."

"I'm thinking everything sounds dirty to you," she says dryly, but a smirk toys with the corners of her lips. "In all seriousness, I only opened that door because I'm trying to transfer into Ms. Mann's calculus class. But I'm going to keep your little secret, all right?" She spreads her hands wide. "So what's it going to be? Oral kraken or stepping aside?"

Threats aren't likely to work with Hartley, mostly because I don't think I could carry one out. Intimidating girls isn't my style—making them happy is. So I'm going to have to take her word for it. For now, at least. Hartley doesn't seem like the narcing type. And even if she does spill the beans, I can fall back on the wallet. Dad might have to endow another scholarship to get me out of the Ms. Mann mess, but he's already done it once for Reed and Ella. I think I'm due for a little bequest in my name.

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Grinning, I move aside. "Listen, if you want to take AP

Calc"—I gesture to the room at the end of the hall—"I recommend you talk to her now. You know . . ." I wink. "Catch her when her defenses are down."

Hartley's jaw drops. "Are you saying I should blackmail her? Tell her I'll only keep my mouth shut if she approves my transfer?"

I shrug. "Why not? Gotta look out for yourself, right?"

She studies me for a long, long moment. I'd give a lot to know what's going through that head of hers. She gives me nothing.

"Yeah, I guess so," she murmurs. "Later, Royal."

Hartley brushes past me. I amble behind her, watching as she knocks on the door and then enters Ms. Mann's classroom. Will she go the blackmail route? Somehow I doubt it, but if she does, her transfer will be approved in no time; Ms. Mann would do anything to stop Hartley from ratting us out.

Even though I've successfully executed my orders to "fix this" (or at least I think I have), I don't leave the hallway. I want to make sure nothing bad goes down between Hartley and Ms. Mann. So I cool my heels outside the classroom, which is where my friend and teammate Pash Bhara finds me.

"Yo," he says, rolling his eyes. "You're supposed to be giving me a ride home. I've been waiting downstairs for, like, fifteen minutes."

"Aw shit, man. I forgot." I shrug. "But we can't go just yet—I'm waiting for someone. You okay to wait a few more minutes?"

"Yeah, it's cool." He comes to stand beside me. "Hey, did you hear about the new quarterback they're trying to bring in?"

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"Really?" We lost our first game of the season on Friday,

and based on the way our offense played, we should get used to it. Kordell Young, our starting QB, busted his kneecap on the second play, leaving us stuck with two underclassmen who are in the running for Dumb and Dumber.

"Coach thinks with the injuries and all, we'll need someone."

"He'd be right, but who's going to come here after the season's started?"

"Rumor has it that it's either someone from North or Bellfield Prep."

"Why those schools?" I try to remember the quarterbacks from either school but draw a blank.

"They run the same type of offense, I guess? The guy from Bellfield is cool. I've partied with him a few times. Straight-laced but decent."

"I don't see a problem there. More booze for us," I joke, but I'm starting to feel antsy. Hartley's been in there a long time. It would take Ms. Mann all of five seconds to scrawl her name on the transfer slip.

I peer through the small window on the door, but all I see is the back of Hartley's head. Ms. Mann is out of view.

What's the holdup? There's no way that Ms. Mann doesn't immediately agree to Hartley's request.

"Agreed." Pash's gold-plated phone buzzes in his hand. He checks the text and then wiggles his phone at me. "You going out tonight?"

"Maybe." But I'm not really paying attention to him. I twist around to take another look in Ms. Mann's window. Pash notices this time.

"Dude, seriously? Ms. Mann?" he says with arched brows. "You tired of the Astor girls already? We can take your dad's plane to New York. Fashion Week is starting up and the city

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is gonna be thick with models. Or, we can wait for the new QB to come and hook us up with some locals. Although"—he nudges me—"there's nothing like doing something you shouldn't, right?"

Irritated that he guessed right, my answer comes out terse. "Wrong. She's too old."

"Then who is it?" Pash tries to peer past me as I use my big frame to block his view.

"No one. There's some chick inside and I'm waiting for her to leave so I can make sure I have the assignment correct."

"The assignments are online," he says unhelpfully.

"Ah, that's right." But I don't move.

Naturally, Pash is only more intrigued. "Who's in there?" he demands, trying to shove me aside for a look.

I decide to move and let him investigate, because otherwise he won't stop bothering me.

Pash presses his nose against the window, takes a long look, and concludes, "Oh. So you *are* here to see Ms. Mann."

"I said I was." But now I'm confused, because why was he so quick to dismiss Hartley as the focus of my interest?

He checks his phone again. "Okay, this is boring. I'll meet you downstairs in the parking lot."

As he starts to take off, curiosity gets the better of me. "Why not the other girl?" I call after him.

He turns around and, as he walks backward, says, "'Cause she's not your type."

"What's my type?"

"Hot. Hot, stacked. Hot," he repeats before disappearing around the corner.

"Wow," a dry voice remarks. "I'm totally crushed that your friend thinks I'm cold and flat."

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I nearly jump five feet in the air. "*Jesus.* Can you make a little noise when you move around?"

Hartley grins at me and adjusts the strap of her backpack as she walks. "That's what you get for lurking outside the door. Why are you still here, anyway?"

"Did you get everything taken care of?" I ask, falling in beside her.

"Yes." Hartley makes a face. "I guess she figured out it was me who saw you guys, because she was embarrassingly willing to do everything I asked. I feel bad."

"You shouldn't. Teach made a mistake, and now she's paying for it." It's meant to be a quip, but it comes off callous, and I recognize it the moment Hartley frowns deeply at me.

"She didn't fool around with herself, Royal."

"No, but that would've been hot," I try to joke again, but it's too late.

"Whatever." Hartley pushes open the stairwell door and ducks through it. "Either way, our business here is done. Nice chatting with you."

I hurry after her, practically chasing her down the steps. "Aw, come on, don't be like that. We're just starting to get to know each other. We were *bonding*."

Her snort bounces off the stairwell walls. "We were not, nor will we ever be, *bonding*." She quickens her pace, taking the steps two at a time in order to get away from me faster.

"Never? Why so absolute? You should get to know me. I'm charming."

She pauses, hand on the railing, feet ready to take flight. "You are charming, Royal. That's the problem."

And with that, she scampers down the rest of the stairs.

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"If you wanted to make me less interested, this is not the

way to go about it," I tell her retreating back. Her ass looks fine under her pleated Astor Park uniform skirt.

Only when she reaches the other side of the lobby does she stop to spare me an amused look. "I'll see you around, Royal." With a little wave, she waltzes out the huge oak doors.

My gaze stays glued to her petite body, and I find myself smiling at nothing and no one.

Yeah . . .

I think I'm going to bang that girl.

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Three

"ELLA TOLD ME you fooled around with a teacher today," my older brother says over the phone a few hours later.

I balance my cell on my shoulder as I strip out of my swim trunks and let them drop to the bedroom floor. I spent the past hour in the pool channeling my brother Gideon. Gid's the swimmer in the family, but I haven't been able to stop thinking about Hartley since I got home, and I was hoping a few laps or thirty would help clear my head. Didn't help at all. I'm still thinking dirty thoughts about that girl, except now I'm also wet and cranky.

"Easton," Reed growls. "You there?"

"I'm here."

"Did you do your teacher or what?"

"Mmmhmmm, I did. So what?" I answer flippantly. "I've hooked up with teachers before."

"Yeah, but you're a senior now."

"So?"

"So grow up. Ella's going out of her mind worrying about you."

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"She should concentrate on making sure you don't stray."

There's two beats of dead silence while Reed tries not to yell at me. His throat must ache.

I smirk into the phone. "Anyway, thanks for calling, Grandpa. It's nice to know I can count on Ella to narc me out if I do something wrong."

"East." His tone sharpens, then softens. "She cares about you, that's all. We all do."

"Aw, I feel so loved." Rolling my eyes, I grab a pair of jeans from my dresser drawer and yank them up my hips. "We done here, Reed? Dinner's ready."

"No, we're not done," he says, and even though I can easily hang up the phone, I instinctively wait for him to continue because he's my older brother, and I've always followed his lead. "How's the new QB working out?"

"He's not. That busted knee was worse than we thought—he's out for the season. And his backups are two sophs who can't throw a decent pass to save their lives."

"Shit."

"Yup. I had no idea that anyone at Astor who played sports could be this bad. Why didn't they just flunk Wade?"

"He would've left anyway. Is Val broken up?"

"Nah, she said he was her rebound guy. Besides, she doesn't think guys can be faithful when couples are separated." Can't blame the girl. Her first boyfriend did her dirty the minute he stepped foot on a college campus.

Reed's sigh is heavy in my ear. "I know. She's had a run of bad experiences. I hope her attitude doesn't rub off on Ella. Keep an eye on that for me, would you?"

"No can do. I have zero desire to keep tabs on Val Carrington. Besides, it's your responsibility to make sure that Ella's happy. Not mine."

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I hang up before he can say another word. Reed's always called the shots when it comes to the two of us, but he's not here anymore. He's got a fresh start at college, playing defensive end for one of the best college football programs in the country, and a girlfriend who adores him.

Me, I'm grounded here in Bayview. Literally grounded. Dad told the airfield that I'm not allowed to fly. He says I need to prove that I'm sober and responsible. It's my senior year of high school—what's the point in being sober and responsible? Besides, I'm not going to fly drunk. I know better than that, but he doesn't believe me.

Thanks to my grandparents, I have a trust fund big enough to buy a sleek little Cessna, but there aren't enough air traffic controllers who would cross my dad and allow me up in the air. It's a bitch of a situation and it puts me in a constant bad mood.

I'm stuck doing the same old shit—which includes walking downstairs to have dinner with my family, a tradition that stopped after my mom died and started up again when Dad brought Ella to live with us. After Ella's biological father, Steve O'Halloran, was arrested for murder, these family dinners became nonnegotiable. We're not allowed to skip them, even when it's obvious nobody is in the mood for quality family time.

Like tonight. We're all somewhere else. The twins, Sebastian and Sawyer, look exhausted, probably from a tough lacrosse practice. Ella looks preoccupied. Dad looks weary.

"You couldn't find a shirt in that big closet of yours?" my father asks politely. Since Ella joined our family, Callum Royal has perfected the Disapproving Dad look. He never cared about what we did or wore before, but now he's all over us.

I glance down at my bare chest, then shrug. "Want me to go up and find one?"

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He shakes his head. "No, you've kept us waiting long enough. Sit, Easton."

I sit. We're eating out on the patio that overlooks the huge, kidney-shaped pool. It's a warm night, and the breeze is nice. The table feels kind of empty with just the five of us, though. It's weird now that both Gid and Reed are gone.

"Looking a little pale there," Sawyer jokes. Despite being the younger twin, he always leads; Seb once said it's to make Sawyer feel better for being born last. Seb's quiet but has a wicked sense of humor.

Seb smirks. "It's his pecs. He's been skipping Chest Day, so he looks pale and small."

"You little shits. I'll show you who's small and weak." Grinning, I rise halfway out of my chair and shake my fist at the two twerps. "I've crapped out logs bigger than you."

"Yeah, well, there's two of us and—"

"All right, that's enough," Dad hastily intercedes before Sawyer can give us a rundown of the twins' bowel movements. "Food's getting cold."

The mention of food is enough to divert our attention. Our housekeeper, Sandra, prepared roasted potatoes, garlic carrots, and a shit ton of barbecue sauce–laden ribs. The twins and I dig in like the animals we are, while Dad and Ella take their time, chatting with each other as they eat.

". . . chance you'll have to testify at Steve's trial."

I'm not paying much attention, so when the conversation shifts toward Steve O'Halloran, I'm caught off guard. These days, Dad goes out of his way to not bring up Steve when Ella's around.

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At her seat, Ella's back goes stiffer than the flagpole on Astor Park Prep's front lawn. "I thought the lawyers said Dinah's

testimony would be enough." Dinah is Steve's shrew of a wife, which makes her Ella's shrew of a stepmother.

"Most likely, you won't be called to the stand," Dad assures her. "But when I spoke to the DA on the phone this morning, he mentioned it's still a possibility. I only bring it up because I don't want you to be blindsided if it happens."

The tension doesn't leave Ella's body. I don't blame her for being upset. The twins are wearing identical expressions of disgust.

Steve was charged with murder months ago, but he hasn't spent a second behind bars. He paid his five-million-dollar bond, surrendered his passport and flight license, and, unfortunately, has abided by the terms of his pretrial release. Money and good lawyers mean you don't serve a day until you're convicted and maybe not even then. Dad's lawyer says that as long as the judge is convinced he's not a flight risk, he's free as a stinkin' bird.

The whole innocent-until-proven-guilty thing is a crock of shit if you ask me. We all know he's guilty, and it drives us nuts that Steve's not in prison for what he did. Not just killing a woman, but also not stepping forward when the cops tried to pin it on Reed.

Granted, the victim was Brooke Davidson, the evil viper who was trying to take down my family, but still. Brooke was a bitch, but she didn't deserve to die.

"Hey, Dad?" Sawyer says warily.

Dad shifts his gaze to his youngest son. "What is it?"

"When Steve's trial starts . . ." Sawyer pauses for a second. "Are they gonna bring up all that stuff about Steve and, um . . ." He trails off and closes his mouth, deciding not to finish that sentence.

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Nobody else finishes it for him, but everyone's expressions become strained, including mine. Seb reaches over and squeezes his brother's shoulder. My dad takes Ella's hand in his. She closes her eyes and takes a few calming breaths.

I watch my family as they all try to get a grip on their emotions.

I hate thinking about my mother these days. After Steve killed Brooke, it came out that Mom cheated on Dad with Ella's dad. That's some incestuous shit right there.

Thing is, I can't even be angry at Mom for cheating. Dad was hardly ever around. He was too focused on Atlantic Aviation, the family business, and while he was away for long periods of time, Steve poisoned Mom's mind with ideas that Dad was cheating on her.

But I am angry at her for dying, for taking those pills. Reed says there's no way it could've been the same pills I was stashing in my room, but he doesn't know for sure. I was hooked on Adderall and Oxy back then. The stimulant prescription was completely legal at first, but when I needed more, there was a ready supply at school. My Adderall supplier suggested I take some Oxy as a way to escape. He was right. It helped a lot, but the high didn't last.

When Mom found my stash and threatened to send me to rehab if I didn't straighten out, I promised to right my ship. And I didn't question what she did with the pills. I handed over the bottles because I was a fifteen-year-old who would've cut off his arm if she'd asked. That's how much I adored her.

Chances are, I killed my mother. Reed claims I didn't, but of course he's gonna say that. He'd never tell me straight out that I killed her. Or rather, my addiction did. Is it any wonder that I'm a self-destructive screwup?

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I'm off the pills now. Mom's OD scared the shit out of me, and I promised my older brothers I wouldn't touch that junk anymore. But the addictions don't go away. It means I have to feed the thirst in other, safer ways—booze, sex, and blood. Tonight, I think I'll choose blood.

"Easton." I find a worried Ella studying my face.

"What?" I ask, reaching for my water glass. The subject of conversation has shifted away from the trial, thank God. Dad and the twins are now engaged in an animated conversation about soccer, of all things. We've never been a soccer family. Sometimes, I wonder if the twins are even Royals. They play lacrosse, watch soccer, aren't fans of fighting, and have zero interest in flying. That said, they have Mom's features and the Royal blue eyes.

"You're smiling," Ella accuses.

"So? Smiling is bad?"

"It's one of your bloodthirsty smiles." She sneaks a peek across the table to make sure Dad isn't paying attention to us. Then she hisses, "You're fighting tonight, aren't you?"

I drag my tongue across my bottom lip. "Oh yeah."

"Oh, East. Please don't. It's too dangerous." She presses her lips together in concern, and I know she's remembering the time Reed got stabbed at one of those fights.

But that was a total fluke that had nothing to do with the actual fight. Daniel Delacorte, an old enemy, hired someone to take Reed out.

"That won't happen again," I assure her.

"You don't know that." Determination gleams in her blue eyes. "I'm coming with you."

"No."

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"Yes."

"No." I raise my voice, and Dad's sharp gaze swings toward us.

"What are we arguing about?" he asks suspiciously.

Ella smirks, waiting for me to field that one. Dammit. If I keep arguing with her, she'll tell him I'm going to the docks, and we both know Dad's not too keen on that idea anymore, not since Reed was knifed down there.

"Ella and I can't decide what movie to watch before bed," I lie. "She wants a rom-com. I obviously want anything but."

The twins roll their eyes. They know bullshit when they hear it. But Dad buys in. His deep chuckle washes over the patio. "Give it up, son. You know the woman always gets her way in the end."

Ella beams at me. "Yeah, Easton. I always get my way." When I get up to fill my glass, she follows me. "I'm going to stick to your side like glue. And when you go to the fight, I'm going to make the biggest scene ever. You'll never be able to show your face there again."

"Can't you go pick on the twins?" I complain.

"Nope. You have my sole and undivided attention."

"Reed's probably throwing a party because he's not under your thumb." I hear her breath hitch, and I look up to see her cheeks turn from pink to white. Oh, crap. "I didn't mean that. You know he can't stand to be away from you."

She sniffs.

"Seriously. He was on the phone with me before dinner crying about how much he missed you." Silence. "I'm sorry," I say, and I am, truly sorry. "My mouth runs ahead of my brain. You know that."

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Ella raises one eyebrow. "You should stay in to make it up to me."