



## Chapter 1

Dad cleared his throat, tossing the mail on to the counter. A thick envelope slid its way over to me.

‘What’s that?’ I asked, mouth full of Cheerios.

Instead of answering me, he said, ‘Hey, Brad, why don’t you go clean up your room, huh, before you head over to Benny’s?’

‘But –’

There was no room for *buts*, though, because Dad just hauled Brad, my little brother, up from his stool at the breakfast bar with a grunt and set him on his feet. ‘Go on, bud, and I’ll let you off doing the dishes with Elle this morning.’

I was immediately suspicious. This summer, Dad had decided to give Brad more responsibility around the house. I’d already shown him how to fold laundry and how to make pasta. Dad had shown him how to mow the lawn properly on the weekend, and we’d just got into a routine where he helped one of us do the

dishes. Dad said it was because Brad was in middle school now and getting old enough to help out, but we all knew the real reason: I'd be starting college in the fall and wouldn't be around to do all those kinds of things any more.

My stomach twisted at the thought of it. In a few months, once I was in Berkeley, everything would change so much. It wasn't like the house totally fell apart without me – it was always fine when I spent time at the Flynn's' beach house for a couple of weeks every summer. But still. I *was* kinda worried about leaving them to fend for themselves.

Just a few days ago, I'd been on top of the world, walking across that stage to get my high school diploma, tossing my cap into the air with everybody else . . . I'd gotten into UC Berkeley with my best friend in the entire world, Lee Flynn, just like we'd always planned, ever since we were old enough to understand what college was. We'd spent our whole lives together and we'd be starting this next chapter of life as college students together, too. It was so perfect. It was exactly the way it was meant to be.

We had said senior year was going to be *our* year – and sure, it had been . . . a little bumpy, sometimes, but it had still been awesome. And college would be too. Apprehensive as I was about how different

everything would be, it was still exciting to think about.

‘What’s going on?’ I asked, narrowing my eyes at the envelope and then at my dad. I shoveled down the last of my cereal, wiped the back of my hand across my mouth and pushed aside the bowl.

Dad took Brad’s empty stool, tapping the envelope near me. ‘Maybe you’d like to tell me what’s going on. This came for you.’

‘For me?’

I picked up the envelope and turned it over.

*Ms R. Evans . . .*

It was marked with the Harvard University logo.

Oh.

*Oh, shit.*

My Cheerios threatened to make a reappearance and my heart was somewhere in my throat as I fumbled to open the envelope. This wasn’t happening. This was not happening. A couple of months ago, I had a letter telling me I was waitlisted, and that was supposed to be the end of it. Except . . . apparently, it wasn’t.

I shook the letter out and lay it flat on the counter to read it.

*. . . delighted to inform you . . .*

My head snapped up, mouth hanging open.  
‘I . . . I . . .’

I could not get my words out.

Impatient, his eyes looking a little crazed behind his glasses, my dad snatched the letter up to read for himself. I watched his eyes dart over the words a few times before he let out a hoot of laughter and shook his head.

I winced, knowing what would come next, and headed him off with a groan, slumping forward to bury my face in my arms. 'Please don't say it. Please don't say it.'

'You got into Harvard! My little girl got into Harvard! You –' Then he cleared his throat again. 'Honey, you didn't tell me you'd even applied. Is this . . . Is this because of Noah?'

I groaned again.

This was not supposed to happen.

The first college I'd applied to had been Berkeley – because, *duh*, of course it was. And then I'd applied to safety schools. Of course I had. That's what you did, right? That's what my guidance counselor told me to do. So, obviously, Lee and I had tried to pick all the same safety schools.

Lee had talked about applying to Brown when his girlfriend, Rachel, had applied there, and . . .

Maybe, sort of, in a moment of madness, I'd . . . sent off an application to Harvard. Where my boyfriend, Lee's older brother, Noah, had been for the last year.

It was madness because I was not supposed to get in. I never expected to and never thought I would. I mean, sure, I worked hard at school, and my grades were good, and I had a couple of extracurriculars, and I'd done well on the SATs . . . but . . . It was Harvard, you know? It wasn't supposed to be the kind of place you got into on an impulse.

It was madness because they were never supposed to say 'yes'.

'Kind of,' I told my dad now. I lifted my head up just a little, grimacing as I caught his eye. Ugh. He looked so damn *proud* of me. I wished he'd stop that. 'I just . . . I dunno. I thought it might be nice. Like how Lee wanted to apply for Brown, because that's where Rachel's going. I never mentioned it to anybody –'

'Wait – Lee doesn't know about this?'

Some of the pride started to dim in his expression. *Good*, I thought. A little parental disappointment was the least I deserved for keeping a secret from my best friend. The last time I'd done that was when I'd started dating Noah and I'd been worried about Lee finding out and taking it badly. And *that* hadn't exactly gone too great when he did find out, even if he forgave me in the end . . .

'It's not like I was trying to hide it from him,' I tried to explain. 'This wasn't like . . . you know, when I

started dating Noah. I just never thought I'd get in, so I didn't see the point in scaring him. I didn't think . . .' I let out a sigh. 'I got waitlisted. Which I thought was kind of cool, you know? But people who get waitlisted for Harvard don't actually get in.'

'Looks like they do.'

'Yeah,' I muttered.

A grin split across my dad's face and he came around the counter to hug me. 'Well, whatever you decide to do, I'm so proud of you, Elle. Harvard! I know I've had my reservations about you dating Noah, but, hey, if this is the kind of influence he's having on you now . . .'

'I didn't *just* apply because of Noah, you know. I mean – it's Harvard. Who wouldn't want to get into Harvard?'

'He's just the reason you picked that over, say, Yale.'

'Yeah,' I admitted. 'And I figured . . . I mean, I sort of . . . wanted to see if I could get in, you know?'

'Well, you kept it pretty quiet! Didn't even tell your old man!' He laughed as he sat back down opposite me, but then I watched his forehead crease and the smile slip from his face. He tapped the letter again. 'So, uh . . . you didn't tell Lee. Or Noah either, I'm guessing?'

'No. Nobody knows about it. I didn't want to get Noah's hopes up, and I didn't want Lee to think . . .'

I didn't want to hurt him. Make him think I didn't want to go to Berkeley.'

'Have you accepted your place there yet?'

I shook my head. I'd meant to. I just hadn't gotten around to it yet.

Maybe part of why I hadn't was because I'd held out some little, *tiny* piece of hope that I'd get off the waitlist at Harvard, but . . .

This was not supposed to happen.

Noah had mentioned, flippantly, one afternoon over the phone that maybe I should apply – he'd said it'd be nice to have me around, and spend more time together, and that he missed me so much. He hadn't meant for me to take it *seriously*, and I knew that, but . . .

It stuck. And I honestly had wanted to see if I could do it.

*Harvard. I got a place at Harvard. Me – Elle Evans!*

My mouth was dry and my stomach had coiled itself into knots.

'Any ideas what you're going to do?'

I stared at the letter from the admissions office, thinking of the one in my drawer upstairs that said much the same thing but had a Berkeley letterhead instead.

Lee and I had had our hearts set on Berkeley since

what felt like forever. It wasn't out of state, and it was where our moms had met and become such good friends. It felt special.

And even if you took Noah and our relationship out of the equation . . . well, Harvard was Harvard. It was the kind of college you were supposed to dream about going to and spend your whole life working towards.

(But, okay, the fact that Noah was there was a pretty strong pull, I had to admit.)

I looked from the letter to my dad, who just looked so damn proud of me that he might burst.

'Please don't tell everyone about this,' I said. 'Especially not the Flynnns. I need to . . . I need to think about this.'

I couldn't bear it if Dad let it slip to Lee and Noah's parents first in a crazy proud-parent moment, and that was how Lee or Noah found out. I didn't even know how Noah would react to me getting into Harvard, or what he'd say if I decided to go – maybe him saying it'd be nice to have me there had been a throwaway comment, something he didn't actually mean. Maybe he wouldn't *really* want me there anyway.

And Lee . . .

Lee would be so hurt if I turned around and told him that, actually, despite all our promises, and despite how put out I'd been when I'd heard he'd applied to

Brown, I'd done the same thing behind his back to be with Noah.

'Gonna have to decide soon, bud,' Dad said. He reached over to squeeze my shoulder. 'There's only so long Harvard will wait before they need an answer about this.'

Before I told Noah and Lee, I had to figure this out for myself first. And fast.

## Chapter 2

I spent the rest of my morning getting ready for lunch with the Flynn's. Lee's mom had organized for us all to go out for a fancy meal to celebrate our graduation. I usually wasn't one for dressing up, so there had been a few outfit changes and a slightly desperate video call to Rachel, who was also going to be there. It had been enough to distract me from thinking too hard about the two admittance letters that now sat in my desk drawer. And then, of course, Noah had come by to pick me up and drive me to the restaurant, so it wasn't *really* like I'd had the time to think about it . . .

'So,' Noah said, slinging his arm around my shoulder once we were out of the car. My hand moved up automatically, fingers locking with his. 'I've been thinking.'

'Careful. Don't wanna hurt yourself.'

He rolled his eyes.

'About?' I prompted, jokes aside.

‘I was thinking,’ he said again, ‘maybe this summer you could come with me to Boston. You could check out where I’m gonna be living. I can show you your dresser drawer.’

‘You saved a dresser drawer just for me? Awww,’ I cooed at him, turning my face up to his to bat my eyelashes. I pinched his cheek playfully. ‘Look at my boyfriend, the big ball of mush.’

He was *such* a big ball of mush. At least compared to how he’d been when we first started dating. Noah had been our school’s bad boy, with a reputation for hooking up with tons of girls (which he later told me was mostly untrue). He even had a motorcycle, and he used to smoke just to help him look the part. And here he was, talking about the dresser drawer he’d reserved for me.

I loved him so much.

‘It would’ve been so awesome if you’d been in Boston with me. Even if it wasn’t at Harvard. We’d have seen so much more of each other. Could’ve even, like, gotten an apartment together over the summer, or something.’

I stopped in my tracks, pulling my hand from his before he noticed how clammy it had become.

Noah stopped walking too, turning around with a laugh. His face was stiff, though, and he couldn’t quite

meet my eyes, looking past me at the parking lot instead. 'What, too mushy? I thought you wanted me to open up more, be more honest, not all macho-macho and never talking about anything emotional.'

I opened my mouth, but nothing came out.

Noah's cheeks flushed pink. 'I mean, like, you know. Elle.' He cleared his throat, rubbing the back of his neck. 'I wasn't serious. I mean.' *Gulp.* 'Moving in together'd be a big step. We're not there yet. I was just joking around.'

This should be where I told him I got in. Hell, this should be where I told him I'd actually applied in the first place on the impossible chance that I might end up in Boston with him. He had no idea, but here he was talking about how nice it would be to have me around, how we could *live together*.

The idea of Noah wanting to make such a big commitment and live with me should have made my heart do somersaults. I should have been squealing and throwing my arms around him and shouting, *Surprise! We can! I can come to Boston!*

This was definitely where I should tell him.

Especially when he looked so mortified that he'd suggested we live together in what was almost a throwaway comment, and thought I was horrified at the very idea.

'Elle?'

*Crap. Come on, Elle, say something. Tell him!*

I looked at Noah, focusing back on his face instead of staring right through him. And I said, 'I think I left my curling iron on.'

I didn't think he bought it, but he said, 'Text your dad. He can check for you.'

I quickly pulled out my phone and pretended to send my dad a text, typing it out and then deleting it straight away.

'C'mon, we're already late,' Noah said.

'Yeah,' I said, shooting him a look, but a smile crept back on to my face. 'And whose fault is that?'

'What, like it's *my* fault you looked so damn good?'

I fell back in step beside him and he bent to press a kiss to my neck. I laughed and pushed him off. 'Don't you dare! That's what made us late in the first place.'

'You know, *technically*, we wouldn't be late if we didn't show up at all . . .'

'Noah Flynn, don't even think about it. There is a big ol' ice cream sundae in there with my name on it, and not even you and your cute butt can get in the way of that.'

'My cute butt, huh?'

I didn't know how, even after over a year of being together, he could still make me blush for saying

something like that, but I blushed nonetheless. Noah chuckled, wrapping his arm around me to walk inside.

Dining out with the Flynns was a pretty regular affair, but usually when we went out for a meal my dad and brother were there, too. I'd thought it was a little weird that Lee and Noah's mom, June, had made a point of only inviting me out for brunch today, but maybe it was because she'd invited Rachel, too. Maybe it was less of an 'Elle' thing and more of a 'Noah's girlfriend' thing today.

Even after more than a year, me being Noah's girlfriend was still a new dynamic we were all getting used to.

The rooftop restaurant they'd picked out was gorgeous. I felt underdressed in my jeans, my gaze lingering on a group of women in their early twenties who were laughing and drinking mimosas. I was glad I'd let Rachel persuade me to leave my hoodie behind and put some effort into doing my hair.

We found the others easily enough, and, as June got up to hug me hello, I said, 'I'm so sorry I'm late. Traffic was awful, and I didn't realize we'd have to stop for gas.'

'It's fine,' she said, smiling warmly as we took our seats.

I heard Lee mutter, 'Traffic? Really? That's what she's going with?'

It was promptly followed by, 'Ouch!' as Noah stomped on his foot under the table.

Once we'd ordered, I looked out at the view of the skyline. 'This place is so perfect.'

'We wanted to finally take you guys out someplace special to celebrate your graduation properly,' Matthew, Lee and Noah's dad, said.

'Elle's right,' Rachel gushed. 'It's so amazing here. Thank you for inviting me.'

'I can't believe we've actually graduated,' Lee said, shaking his head. 'It's so weird to think we won't be going back to school in the fall. Like, *that's it*. And now we've got the entire summer ahead of us -'

'It'll go quick,' Noah told us. 'Believe me.'

'Yeah, you kids better make the most of it,' Matthew said. 'Any big plans for the summer?'

'You mean aside from the beach house?' Lee laughed. 'Actually, we were talking about going up this weekend, if that's cool?'

I looked at his parents with an expectant smile, waiting for them to nod and say, 'Of course!' Because why wouldn't they? Lee and I had been planning a long weekend at their family beach house for a couple of weeks now. I went there with the whole Flynn

family every summer, but Lee and I had thought, now that graduation was out of the way, it would be cool to go just us guys, sneak some beers, blow off some steam after the craziness and intensity of senior year.

But instead of smiling back and saying we could go, no problem, Matthew and June just looked at each other. June pursed her lips, looking worried. I watched her husband nod back at her and got a sinking feeling in my stomach.

I wasn't the only one who'd noticed.

'What's that look?' Noah asked. 'Is everything okay?'

'Everything's fine,' June said with forced breeziness and a stiff, too-wide smile as she looked around at us. *Uh-oh*, I thought. That wasn't a mom smile. That was more like the kind of smile she wore when she was taking a call from the office. She drew a deep breath. 'Actually, we have some news . . .'

A creeping feeling of dread prickled over my skin.

'We've decided to sell the beach house.'

No way.

This wasn't happening.

Today had already been a total rollercoaster, but this was the worst part so far – and it wasn't even one o'clock yet.

'What? Why?' Noah burst out, while Lee shot to his feet, crying, 'Hold on! What? Where's this coming from?'

‘Lee, please, sit down,’ his dad said firmly.

Lee did, but gawped at his parents. ‘Wait a second – was this whole meal just to soften the blow and butter us up before you dropped that bomb?’

‘No!’ June sat up straighter, then fiddled with her napkin. ‘Not . . . really . . . Kind of. Did it work?’

‘Using delicious meats and beverages to deliver bad news is wrong, Mom, just wrong. I thought we raised you better than that.’

Noah elbowed him, to quit with the jokes. ‘You guys are serious about this? You’re actually selling the beach house? We’ve had it forever!’

‘We’ve been talking about it for a while, now,’ said June. ‘It just doesn’t make sense to hold on to it any more, not with you kids going off to college. It’s like you said last year, Noah. You guys are going to start getting jobs, summer internships, moving around the country for college or to meet up with friends . . . A lot of things are changing, so it seems like the sensible thing to do.’

‘And we might as well tell you, because you kids will find out soon enough anyway,’ Matthew said, with a sniff, ‘the whole area is being redeveloped. If we sell up now, we could get four, maybe five times what it’s worth.’

‘You sound like a realtor,’ Lee grumbled, sinking in his seat.

‘Honey,’ June said, ‘I *am* a realtor. We didn’t make this decision lightly, you know. There are a lot of interested buyers and that land is just too valuable to hold on to.’

‘The land?’ Noah echoed. He leaned over the table, frowning. ‘They’re not going to knock it down, are they?’

Matthew shrugged. ‘It’s very likely. We didn’t take you for the sentimental type, Noah.’

He pouted, slouching in his seat. It made him look younger, and was an entirely un-Noah-like look. In fact, he looked distinctly Lee-like in that moment. ‘We spent a lot of time at that place. It’s – it’s just weird to think it might not be there any more,’ he added stiffly.

‘Where are we meant to watch the Fourth of July fireworks now? Going to the beach house together is *tradition*. We swore we’d always go there every summer! You might as well cancel Christmas, Mom.’

‘Lee . . .’

‘With the money we make from the sale, we could buy another,’ Matthew suggested, like that was anywhere *near* the point. ‘Some place where the paint isn’t peeling, and the pool filter doesn’t break every year.’

‘No!’ Lee cried. ‘I’m putting my foot down. You guys can’t sell.’

‘Yeah,’ Noah piped up, shifting in his seat and

crossing his arms just like Lee was doing. They'd always been so different, but, right now, anyone could tell they were brothers. They were a united front. 'I've gotta go with Lee on this one. That house has been in the family for – what, eighty years? It was your grandma's place, Dad! You can't just *replace it*. You can't sell it!'

'If we're voting here, I'm a solid no, too,' I said, raising my hand. The beach house felt like it was my place just as much as it was theirs. And Lee was right. It was tradition.

I shot Rachel a look, even though she'd only ever been to the beach house for a few days last year, and she waved a hand around awkwardly. 'Me, too.'

June sighed. 'I'm sorry, guys. It's already been decided.'

The waitress chose that moment to appear with our plates of food.

'Like hell it has,' Lee muttered to himself, but I heard him. He caught my eye and I didn't think I'd *ever* seen him look so determined.

If his parents thought we were going to let the beach house go without a fight, they were sadly mistaken.

## Chapter 3

I'd thought the whole 'Berkeley vs Harvard' thing was bad enough, but this?

Lee sulked through the rest of our main course – and, to my astonishment, so did Noah. They both pulled faces and scowled and grumbled under their breath, stabbed at their food and cast the occasional glare at their parents.

They looked so alike in that moment that it was almost funny.

Almost.

Rachel, for her part, tried to keep the mood up. She tried to talk to Lee a few times, and, when that wasn't working, she talked to his parents with an enthusiasm that bordered on mania as she tried to beat past the silence that had settled.

I was still trying to get my head around it all.

Selling the beach house? I hadn't ever thought that would even be an option. It was *the beach house*. It was

where we'd spent pretty much every summer of our lives. Some of my best memories had happened there. It was where Lee and I first swam without floaties! Where I got stung by a jellyfish when I was nine and made Noah give me a piggyback all the way back to the house. Where Lee got his first kiss, with a Latina lifeguard from upstate whose name *none* of us could remember now.

I glanced over at Noah, whose jaw was clenched. When we'd been growing up and Noah had suddenly got too cool to hang out with us any more, the beach house had been the one place where everything felt like it used to when we were still kids, where he'd hang out with us.

It was where we'd first drunk beer, snuck from a cooler one Fourth of July when we were thirteen – when Noah was starting to become a cool guy at school, breaking all the rules, but not so cool he couldn't include us in his little heist. (Although he had drawn the line at having us tag along to any parties he went to later on that same summer.)

They couldn't just *sell*. That wasn't how it worked. Not for a place like the beach house.

It was so much more than just a piece of land, a bungalow with peeling paint and a dodgy pool filter.

My phone rang. A flash of guilt shot through me for

not putting it on silent, but, instead of apologizing and shoving the phone back into my purse, I took the excuse to leave the table. 'I'm just gonna take this. I'll be right back.'

I tried not to run away from the sour mood hanging over our table.

It was an unknown number, but I answered anyway. 'Hello?'

'Hi. Is this Miss Evans?' a lady's voice asked curtly.

'Er, yes. Speaking.'

'Miss Evans, this is Donna Washington from the Office of Undergraduate Admissions at Berkeley.'

Oh, crap. *Crap, crap, crap!*

'Uh . . .'

I grit my teeth, my other hand coming up to clutch my cell phone, too. I cast a quick glance over my shoulder. Everyone was still sitting at the table, well out of earshot . . .

'I've tried to get hold of you several times in the last few weeks.'

My stomach squirmed. I wondered if I was about to puke my overpriced, fancy meal all over the wall in front of me. Gulping, I said, 'I'm sorry, I've . . . I've just been, like, insanely busy . . . You know, graduation, and – and stuff . . .'

*Wow, Elle, great answer. It's easy to see how you got into places like Berkeley and Harvard with excuses like that.*

'I'm sure you're already aware, if you've received my voicemails and our emails, that this call is to follow up on your decision regarding your attendance at Berkeley, starting in the fall.'

'Well, I . . . I was wondering if maybe – maybe it's possible to have a little extension . . .'

Donna Washington sounded like she was not taking any of my petty, indecisive BS today. Her already-curt tone became even more clipped. 'We've already granted you an extension beyond the usual deliberation period, Miss Evans.'

My hands began to sweat. 'I – I know, and I really appreciate that, but – please – I'm just . . . I just got off the waitlist somewhere else today, and I need the *teen-siest* bit more time. Please?'

'Miss Evans,' Donna Washington interrupted, striking absolute *terror* in me for a second, 'I need to inform you that you have until Monday to accept your offer. If we do not hear from you by then, we will have no choice but to offer your spot to a waitlisted student.'

She waited for my answer. I was a little surprised; I half expected her to hang up the phone after that last piece.

'I understand,' I told her in a small voice. 'Thank you.'

I stayed there for another minute after hanging up. My breathing was uneven and my palms still sweating. I wiped them on my jeans.

Until Monday. That only gave me three days, including today.

Just a couple of days to make a potentially life-changing decision. And fess up to Lee and Noah. Totally fine. I could absolutely handle that.

. . . Maybe I could flip a coin?

Back at the table, I could see our desserts had arrived. Lee was waving a spoonful of ice cream around, talking agitatedly at his parents – undoubtedly arguing about the beach house again. Beside him, Noah was nodding, pitching in occasionally to back his little brother up.

Shoving my phone into my back pocket, I returned to the others.

‘Back me up here, Elle,’ Lee said, interrupting himself mid-sentence to get me involved. ‘Berkeley isn’t even *that far* from the beach house. It’s not even in a different state! Even if we do get summer internships, or whatever, they’d probably be around here somewhere. We could totally still make it to the beach house. Right, Elle?’

‘R-right.’

A pang of remorse tugged deep in my stomach.

It lessened slightly when I realized Lee had two sundaes in front of him that he'd been digging into in equal measure. He pushed the strawberry one back in front of me.

'Who was that on the phone?' June asked me instead of replying to Lee.

'Oh, uh, just my dad. You know, the usual. Needs me to babysit Brad.'

'Mom, you can't -'

'Lee, please.' His dad sighed, rubbing a knuckle between his eyes. 'This isn't up for debate. You kids were saying you were thinking about going up to the beach house this weekend, right? How about we all go and start sorting some things out? We've gotta clear everything out, clean the place up . . . Might as well make a start sooner rather than later, huh? Rachel, Elle, we could do with your help too, of course.'

I bristled slightly at being lumped in with Rachel. Like I was just Noah's girlfriend. And not like I was a part of this family and had spent a bunch of summers at the beach house with them, too. Like they hadn't said to me a thousand times, 'It's just as much your home here as it is ours, Elle!' and like I hadn't treated it *exactly* like that for basically my whole life.

'Happy to help,' Rachel squeaked, sounding like she didn't have a lot of choice.

‘Oh, I’m gonna be there,’ I heard myself snapping. June put a hand lightly over mine for a second.

‘Fine,’ Noah barked.

‘But just know,’ Lee declared, ‘we are not happy about this.’

I glowered down at what he’d left of my dessert. *Yeah, that’s not all we’re not happy about.*

My cell was burning a hole in my pocket. *Forget the beach house, I wanted to say. What the hell am I going to do about college?*

My gaze slid between the Flynn brothers: Lee, grumbling to Rachel and pouting, looking more hurt than anything else; and Noah, who caught my eye and gave me a crooked smile.

Lee and Berkeley, or Harvard and Noah?

I had only three days to decide.

## Chapter 4

After our fancy meal, Noah dropped me off back home. I'd been quiet the whole ride, stewing over this new development about the beach house and my college dilemma. Noah, luckily, had been too busy sulking himself, so he hadn't asked what was up with me.

I wanted to tell him so badly.

But how could I? How could I break Lee's heart like that? And part of me felt like I should make this decision without either of them – but *especially* without Noah. If I went to Harvard, I didn't want it to ultimately be because I wanted to be with my boyfriend there, or because I let him persuade me into it for that very reason.

This was *college*. Wherever it was, it would send me down a new path, set me up for the rest of my life from here on out. Whether I picked Berkeley or Harvard, I couldn't base the decision solely on a *boy*.

Or, in this case, two boys.

Even though I didn't want his help to actually make the decision, I wished I could tell Noah. If only so he could hug me, offer some kind of advice, reassure me that it'd be okay, it'd all work out, Lee would understand if I *did* ultimately decline my place at Berkeley.

Noah put the car in park while I fidgeted with my house key.

'So I'll pick you up tomorrow to head to the beach house?'

I almost rolled my eyes and said, *No, silly, I'll be riding with Lee . . .* before remembering that wasn't how this went any more. Not because of Noah, but because Lee had a girlfriend to ride shotgun now, in my place.

As if reading my mind, Noah added, 'My parents are gonna be driving Lee and Rachel. I was gonna take the bike.'

I grimaced, but it was more playful than anything else. 'Oh, come on, you know I hate that two-wheeled death trap . . .'

'And you *really* hate having an excuse to cuddle up close to me . . .'

Noah murmured, the smirk I knew so well tugging at the corner of his mouth as he leaned across the center console toward me.

'Loathe it,' I confirmed. 'Utterly and completely.'

He turned his head, his lips brushing over my jaw, making me gasp. My eyes fluttered at the sensation,

my skin tingling where his mouth moved lightly up toward my ear. 'So I'll pick you up at nine?'

I nodded, twisting to catch his mouth with mine. I'd never tire of this, I decided. *Never*. (And, I thought, if I joined him at Harvard, I'd never have to be away from this feeling . . .)

Reluctantly, I pulled away eventually. 'Are you coming in?'

'Nah. I know Lee was heading home after taking Rachel back to her place, and I'd feel like a terrible son if I left my parents alone with him right now. Even if I'm on his side.'

I couldn't resist a smirk of my own, and I pushed his shoulder lightly. 'Look at you, Noah Flynn, all grown-up, making these mature decisions.'

Would I change this much after a year at college, too?

Would Lee?

His cheeks turned a faint shade of pink. 'Yeah, yeah, Shelly, get over it. Say hi to your dad and Brad for me.'

'Will do.'

We kissed again – this one not *quite* as long as the last – before I got out of the car.

I let myself in, Noah idling by the sidewalk in his car until I turned to wave him off, then called out that I was home.

‘We’re in here,’ I heard Dad call from the kitchen, where I found him and Brad playing a game of Uno.

‘Room for one more?’

‘Suuuuuure,’ Brad said, drawing the word out into about four syllables – making me immediately suspicious. ‘Come deal yourself in, Elle.’

They waited patiently as I dropped my purse, joined them on the other side of the table, and picked up some cards from the pile in the center.

‘It’s my turn,’ Brad announced. ‘And then it’ll be your go.’

‘Okay.’

He slammed down a card. ‘Pick up four! Change to . . . green!’

I groaned, dropping my cards facedown. ‘Oh, man, come on! You’ve gotta be kidding me!’

‘Them’s the rules,’ Dad said. ‘Sorry, bud.’

He didn’t sound in the *least* bit sorry that I’d swanned in at just the right moment to spare him from picking up four more cards when he was down to three.

He high-fived Brad under the table, the two of them snickering as I collected another four cards and searched for a green card. Which I absolutely did not have. I had to pick up three more from the pile before I got one I could play.

'Today is not my day,' I muttered, lamenting the sheer number of cards I now held.

'Something happen with the Flynns, kiddo?'

'Did you know they're selling the beach house?'

'Wait, what?' Brad cried. 'But – but they can't! You promised I could come hang out there this summer!'

'Huh,' Dad said, setting down a green card of his own. 'June mentioned they were redeveloping the whole area. I guess I can't say I'm surprised. It makes sense, with all you kids at college.'

'Uh, excuse me?' Brad protested. '*I'm* not in college.'

'You'll be packing up your stuff and moving into a dorm, too, before I can blink,' Dad said, though it sounded like he was speaking more to himself than to Brad.

'But Elle's only going to be in Berkeley,' Brad pointed out. 'And Lee. So that doesn't count, right?'

I cringed.

'You still gotta make a call on that one, huh, bud?' Dad asked me quietly, rather than asking outright if I'd talked to Lee or Noah about it yet, while Brad was deciding his next move.

*A literal call*, I thought bitterly, remembering my conversation with Donna Washington.

It wasn't *fair*. This wasn't supposed to happen. If I had just stayed on the waitlist another day, I never

would've put the decision off. Uptight Donna Washington would have called to ask about my decision, and I would have said *yes, I accept, I'll see you guys in the fall*, and everything would've happened the way it was supposed to, if only that damn letter from Harvard hadn't shown up this morning . . .

Maybe it was some kind of sign? That it had shown up when it did, just hours before Berkeley called wanting to know if I was in or not? Maybe it was fate telling me where I should go . . .

Dad seemed to be expecting me to answer, but I didn't want to dwell on college right now.

'We're heading up to the beach house tomorrow to start clearing the place out,' I mumbled instead. Brad played yellow. Luckily, I had a bunch of those to pick from, including a +2 card, which I immediately inflicted on Dad before he got to call Uno. 'But don't worry, I'll get back in time to babysit.'

'I don't *need* a babysitter,' Brad announced in a lofty voice, sticking his chin in the air. 'I'm *eleven*.'

I held up my hands, eyebrows shooting up. 'My mistake.'

Dad caught my eye and tried not to laugh.

'So how come you're out tomorrow night?' I asked him. I'd been forewarned this morning before the Harvard letter arrived that I was on babysitting duty

tomorrow, but I never got the chance to ask why. Dad didn't really go out on a weekend, so I asked, 'Is it something for work?'

'Actually,' Dad said, almost mimicking Brad in the way he sat up straighter and cleared his throat. 'No. I've . . . got a date.'

I stared at him for a minute – long enough that Brad kicked me under the table and said, 'Elle! Come on, your turn!'

I played the first blue card I saw in my hand and stared at Dad again.

A date?

Since when did Dad go on *dates*?

*Come on, Elle, don't be weird about this.* This was the first date Dad had been on in . . . ever. Since Mom. He was probably feeling weird enough about it without me adding to that.

So I said, 'Okay, so . . . how do you know her? What's her name? Tell us about her. Where are you taking her on this first date? *Please* tell me you're not gonna do something dorky like bring her flowers. Actually, maybe you should –'

'Her name is Linda,' Dad said. 'I met her through work. And if you *must* know, Elle, we've actually had a couple of dates already, and I did in fact get her flowers, and she thought it was very sweet.'

‘Whoa, hold up,’ I blurted. ‘This *isn’t* the first date? You’ve been out with her before and you didn’t tell us about it?’

Dad shrugged, but I could see he looked a little guilty. I didn’t want him to feel guilty. Or maybe I did. But I didn’t want him to feel *bad* about it. It was just . . . weird.

And then he said, eyes focused on his cards, ‘I don’t tell you guys about every date I go on, you know. But things have been going really well with Linda. I like her. And we’re just gonna see how it goes.’

Brad didn’t even seem fazed. Did he know? Did Dad tell *him* that he was going on dates but didn’t tell me? Did he not have anything to say about this?

‘Do you not have anything to say about this?’ I exclaimed, looking incredulously at Brad.

He glared back at me for a minute before sighing. ‘Is this the same Linda we met at that company picnic over spring break?’

‘Yep, that’s her, bud.’

‘Oh.’ He shrugged, studying his two cards again. ‘She was nice. She made good potato salad.’

Dad played a card. Brad went next, yelling, ‘Uno!’ and Dad made some joke at him about how he must’ve cheated. I watched the exchange, fumbling to play a card of my own before Brad kicked me under the table again.

Seriously?

This was *not the first date he's been on?*

And I was only *just* hearing about this?

How long had this been going on, exactly, if Brad had met her? I'd spent spring break on a cross-country road trip with Lee, driving to visit Noah in Boston for a couple of days. Who knew I'd missed so much by not going to some boring company picnic? Had they been dating all this time or was this a recent development? Did Brad not *get* what was going on here, or did he simply not care?

Did I care too much?

Brad won the game seconds later. While he jumped up to perform a victory dance, Dad congratulated him and collected the cards back up before shuffling them. 'Another round?'

'Duh!' Brad didn't need any convincing.

'Not for me. I've uh . . . I've got some stuff to do.'

Worry creased Dad's face and he looked at me over the top of his glasses. I repressed a sigh; I didn't want to be weird about the date, but I obviously already *had* been, or he wouldn't be looking at me like that.

Either that or I looked as exhausted as I felt. Today had been a lot. Actually – it had been way, way too much. I wanted to crawl into bed and pretend none of this was happening. It was way too much to deal with right now.

‘You okay, bud?’

‘Sure! It’s just . . . this college thing, you know? I have to call Berkeley on Monday.’ I shot a quick glance at Brad, not wanting to say too much in case he accidentally let slip something to Lee before I could tell him myself. I made an effort to smile and keep my voice light when I added, ‘And I *promise* I’ll be back in plenty of time for you to go on your date with the lovely Linda tomorrow. And obviously I’m going to have to give you a curfew, mister.’

He relaxed, smiling back at me. ‘Thanks, Elle.’

‘Any time.’

I kind of regretted making the offer as soon as the words were out of my mouth.

It wasn’t that I didn’t think Dad *should* date. It had been a long time since Mom died, and it wasn’t like he didn’t deserve to be happy, or anything, it was just . . . Well, he’d been a single dad for this long. Dating wasn’t something he *did* . . . except, evidently, it *was*, he just didn’t tell us about it.

I bit my tongue, thinking how dating in secret seemed to run in the family.

‘Look,’ I said later while on the phone to Levi, after off-loading on him about the whole thing, ‘I kind of get why he wouldn’t say anything. Maybe he was scared of