

HOW
TO GET
OVER
YOUR

(BEST
FRIEND'S)

EX

A YOUNG
ADULT
NOVEL

KRISTI McMANUS

B.W + S.L

H.T + S.L



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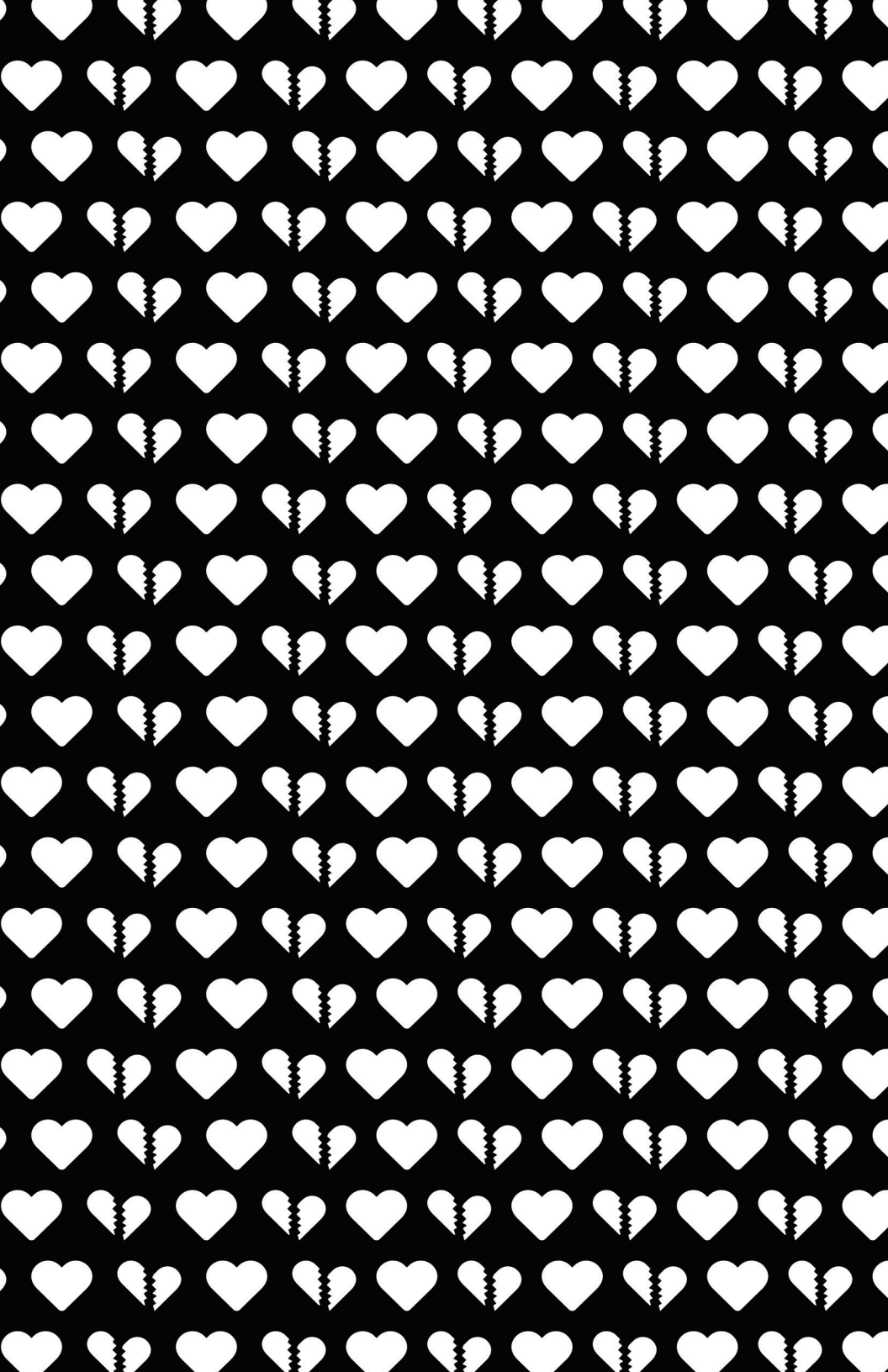
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FOR ALICE





THE RULES

*Learn the rules so you know
how to break them.*



CHAPTER ONE

The honk of a horn alerted me to her arrival long before my mom called up the stairs.

“Brae’s here!”

I rolled my eyes, frantically shoving the last of my items into my backpack. “I heard her horn, Mom!”

“No need for attitude, Hannah,” she called back, her “mother tone” heavy in her voice.

My only response was another eye roll as I bounded down the stairs and into the kitchen, heading straight for the bowl of fruit on the island. My mothers were buzzing around the kitchen, muttering to each other about who would be late for dinner and who would be responding to the wedding invitation still taped to the fridge. It was all so typical Middle America minus the whole “dad” thing.

Turning to me, my mom lifted her eyes from her phone. “Hannah, I have to stay late at school on Thursday. I’ve opened extended office hours, which means I can’t take your nana to her seniors meeting. Can you take her? I’ll be able to pick her up after work.”

I silently cringed as my mind traced over my calendar, already knowing what this arrangement would force me to miss. Thursday evening was prep sessions with my calculus study group to review before our next test. My stomach roiled at the idea of missing it. Calculus was my worst subject, and I relied on those study sessions to keep my head above water. But bailing on my nana and forcing her to sit in her apartment to watch

Wheel of Fortune instead of going to her club meeting was out of the question. The guilt that simmered in my core burned away any residual inclination to say no. I would just have to make up the study time another way.

“Sure, no problem,” I replied, tapping the change into my phone hurriedly.

Another honk of Brae’s horn sounded, her impatience ringing through.

Plucking a banana from the fruit bowl, I spun on my heels and headed for the door.

“You need more than that for breakfast!” Mom called.

“I’ll get something at school. I’m already late!”

I didn’t wait for a response before I was out the door and down the steps toward Brae’s little, white Jetta. The cool air jolted my senses, Tennessee caught in the clutches of spring as the chill of winter slowly loosened its grip. Sliding into the passenger seat, I threw my bag into the back, launching into apologies before I was even fully seated.

“Sorry, sorry,” I said quickly. “I slept in.”

“As usual,” she teased, raising a perfectly arched brow. A knowing smirk decorated her lips before she reached out her fist. Returning the smile, I met it with my own. We linked our pinkies together and shook our joined hands three times. It had been our official greeting since middle school, made up one afternoon on the playground, and somehow stuck long after things like secret handshakes were considered cool.

“Just shut up and drive.” I laughed as I released her hand, leaning my head against the back of the seat. Taking a deep breath, I glanced at her in all her perfect high school queen glory.

She chattered as we pulled out onto the street, the gentle breeze from the open window playing with her blond hair. Perfect beach waves cascaded in a way that made the style look effortless, and instinctively, I began to pull my dark hair through my fingers. I could never pull off Brae’s effortless beauty, even though I knew the amount of work it actually took to look as she did. Contouring and sprays and flat irons, all to look like you just rolled out of bed. Whereas I really *had* just rolled out of bed. Granted, she was the first to remind me that the grass wasn’t always

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greener, always telling me she wished she had my pale gray eyes because they were “unique.” But in overall comparison to her, I had accepted my aesthetic fate in the “cute girl next door” category long ago.

“So how did the calculus homework go?” Brae asked, glancing at me from the corner of her eye. Her well-manicured fingers stayed wrapped around the steering wheel, easily gliding us through the familiar streets.

The momentary ease that descended in her presence evaporated at the mention of calculus.

“About as well as can be expected,” I said, turning my head back to stare out the window sullenly. “Pretty sure I got every question wrong, but at least I finished it.”

Brae sighed at my self-deprecation. “You’re too hard on yourself. Quit putting yourself down or I’m kicking you out of the car and making you walk.”

I pursed my lips before the corners of my mouth twitched into a grin. I could always count on Brae to find the sliver of positive in my mathematical wallowing. She may have been right, but that didn’t change the fact that I hated every moment of that class, forced into academic purgatory by my moms’ in the belief that it would look good on my college transcripts.

“Yeah, well, I’ll probably bomb the next test, too, since I have to miss the study session on Thursday to take my nana to her seniors club.”

Brae’s face scrunched in distaste. “Why would you miss a study session? Hannah, those sessions are keeping you from drowning in a sea of ‘numerical dismay.’”

“My mom can’t take her anymore, and I didn’t want to say no. It’s just one session,” I explained dismissively, avoiding her judgmental gaze.

“If this was for anyone other than Nana, I would remind you that you need to learn to say ‘no’ more,” she said firmly before pausing.

I turned to give her a glare. “I do say ‘no.’ Sometimes.”

As expected, this earned me a scoff. “No, you don’t. You hate letting people down, even if it means putting yourself second. I mean, you took two extra shifts at Alley Scoops last week for that flake Jennie even though she didn’t give you a reason. You’re too nice sometimes, Hannah.”

“I could say ‘no’ to stuff if I wanted to,” I replied with false assertiveness.

“Prove it,” she challenged with a smirk.

“Not now,” I replied. “It’ll be a sneaky ninja attack you never saw coming.”

“Sure, sure,” she laughed with a shake of her head. “Never saw coming because it’s literally never going to happen.”

It didn’t take long for us to reach the school. Teenage voices riding on the breeze as I waited for the metamorphoses that over took Braelyn every morning. The moment we were out of the car, her smile was in place, waving at people as they called her name like a swarm of paparazzi and adoring fans. Slipping through the front doors, Brae turned on her ‘social butterfly’ persona like she was emerging from a cocoon, colorful, brilliant wings spread for all to admire. All eyes turned to her instinctively, and she knew it. She relished her popularity, treating it like a living being that needed constant attention and maintenance.

It was like we were under a spotlight, but the attention wasn’t on me. I wasn’t the one that people noticed, the one whose name everyone knew. I was *that* girl’s best friend; the quiet reclusive bookworm to Brae’s glamorous and captivating center of the universe. As opposite as two people could be, and yet neither of us doubted we had found our soul mate in each other at the age of six.

As we turned a corner, a sophomore girl almost collided with us, knocking Brae’s phone and notebook to the ground. The girl stumbled back, eyes wide in fear when she realized exactly who she had run in to, before stooping down to collect Brae’s fallen items.

“I’m so, so sorry,” she stammered, passing the items back to Brae with trembling hands. The girl’s dark eyes were alight with fascination and a hint of caution. Students of East River High knew crossing Braelyn Walker could mean social suicide and went to great lengths to avoid finding themselves on her bad side.

Brae always said popularity was about finding a balance and making sure people understood it. That she could be their best ally or biggest threat—which depended on them. But I suspected that distinction was determined by Brae and her whims.

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Brae's smile appeared genuine, but I knew better. "No problem, things happen," she said, her blue eyes roaming over the girl's clothing of a fitted vest top and pleated shirt. "Cute outfit."

The girl's mouth fell slack in surprise at the compliment, a pink tinge of happiness coloring her cheeks. "Thank you!"

Her smile widening, Brae waved before steering me around the girl and out of earshot. Leaning closer to me, she whispered, "ugliest outfit ever."

I sighed, shaking my head. "I thought the top was cute."

She gasped, appalled. "If I ever catch you wearing something like that, I'll disown you."

Stepping up to our side-by-side lockers, we settled in for another school day. Michelle and Erin were already waiting, books in hand, leaning against the neighboring lockers like sentries awaiting their queen. Immediately my eyes fell to Erin's socks . . . rainbow frogs today. They had decided that their new look for junior year would include eccentric sock choices, and it had become habit that each morning I assessed their choice. Catching my look, they lifted the leg of their pants to show them off.

"Going for bright and playful today," they smiled, their short, blond pixie cut styled into gentle spikes.

Michelle snorted, a grin toying with her lips. Bright purple eyeshadow swept across her lids, shimmering lightly despite the awful florescent lighting of the school. The cool tone against the warm brown of her skin made her dark eyes pop. "As opposed to grim and threatening like yesterday's skulls?"

Erin narrowed their eyes. "They had bows on their heads . . . still playful."

As they began to chat, I immediately started thinking of all the things I would have to rearrange around taking my nana to her meeting. I was so wrapped up in my thoughts, I didn't sense the figure slide up behind me until strong hands tickled at my waist. I shrieked, jumping away from his grip, earning myself a deep laugh for my reaction. It was clearly the one he wanted, as he beamed down at me before joining Brae's side.

“Morning,” Seth said, the corners of his eyes crinkling in a playful and stomach-flipping way before pushing his dark hair back from his forehead in a casual gesture. Even in his black T-shirt and jeans, he looked like he had stepped off the cover of one of those stupid romance novels my moms liked to read, and for once, I didn’t snort at the ridiculousness of the idea of someone being this attractive in real life. Tall, dark, and handsome are all painfully stereotypical adjectives, but they all describe Seth Linwood to perfection.

“Quit doing that!” I scolded, the flush of embarrassment coloring my cheeks.

He leaned against the locker beside Brae, gaze still on me, teasing.

“But it’s my favorite form of entertainment,” he stated matter-of-factly before turning his attention to Brae.

“Hi!” Brae chimed, hopping up on her toes to kiss his lips. The moment she pulled away, his gaze returned to me, my breath knocking from my lungs like it did any time he looked my way. I grinned before looking away, hiding within the confines of my locker, walking my tightrope of politeness so I didn’t plummet into the depths of romantic longing and despair.

As Brae launched into a tale of the latest gossip, I foolishly allowed myself to steal a glance in Seth’s direction like the masochist I was. His eyes were turned to her, a soft, placating smile on his lips.

That smile was what first captivated me when Seth Linwood entered my life in a flurry of black hair and green eyes, knocking the wind right out of me. Literally, since he knocked me to the floor the first time we met. Colliding into my back as I stopped to pick up the notebook I had dropped, he sent me sprawling onto the floor like hallway road kill. When I sat up, with every intention to cuss the person out and tell them to watch where they were going, all sass and indignation died off on my lips. The horrible school lighting seemed to glow from behind him like a beam straight from the heavens, his silhouette all sharp jawline and broad shoulders, and I swore I could hear angels beginning to sing in the distance. He reached down and plucked me off the tiles with ease, muttering endless apologies for not paying attention, stammering that he was new to school and was a

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little distracted. I meekly accepted his apology, captivated by the angles of his face, before escaping to my desk in embarrassment.

The mortification only intensified when he took the seat right next to me, throwing me another megawatt smile just as Mr. Hayes brought the class to order. I spent the next hour stealing glances at him shamelessly, my face flaming every time he would catch me staring. When Mr. Hayes partnered us together for an English assignment on *Wuthering Heights*, I was equal parts thrilled and horrified.

I had hoped, albeit foolishly, that Seth was a depthless hot guy. The type of guy that made you swoon but was as shallow as a puddle. Unfortunately for me, the more I got to know him during that fateful English class, I came to find he was the opposite. He was smart and insightful. Funny and kind.

I relished our time together; the stolen hours in the library, passing notes during class. We would spend hours on the phone at night, squabbling over the merits of hardheaded heroines and their kindred heroes. More than once, he showed up at Alley Scoops, the ice cream parlor where I work, and would lean on the counter and chat as if time had no meaning.

Once, when we were discussing the less than redeeming qualities of Heathcliff and Catherine's relationship, he asked what qualities would endear a hero to me. The question threw me, a wave of nervousness cascading over me while he stared. I brushed him off, spouting out a dismissive comparison to Catherine's toxic tendencies in partners, swearing a lifelong vow of spinsterhood. But that night, I let myself fantasize that he was asking not out of humor or bickering, but out of genuine interest in *me*.

That was when I realized I liked him. I liked him dangerously, because it was clear from that first classroom collision that he was way out of my league. And guys like him didn't date girls like me.

Guys like him dated girls like Braelyn.

When they first crossed paths a few weeks later as Seth and I walked down the hall, I should have known it was inevitable. As she turned on the charm with a confidence that I could never pull off, asking him question after question like a flirtatious form of the Spanish Inquisition, I fell all too easily into the role of quiet sidekick.

That night on the phone, she grilled me for information on him. Was he seeing anyone? What was he like? Why hadn't I told her about him? I answered with monotone despondence, praying her interest would wane.

"Would it be okay if I asked him out?" Her words slammed against me, rattling around in my skull as my stomach dropped to my feet. A voice in the back of my mind began screaming, my stomach twisting as I silently shook my head yes.

I shouldn't have been surprised that she was interested in him. If anything, I should have expected it the moment they met, confirmed the second she started asking me every little detail I knew about him. And yet, her question surprised me, terrified me, frustrated me.

I wanted to tell her yes, that I *did* mind. That I liked him; liked him so much, *too* much, and for the first time in my life, I was going to fight for what I wanted.

But I didn't say that. Because it didn't matter what I wanted. Not when there was no way my feelings would be reciprocated. Not when it meant that doing so would require me to put my heart on the line and risk rejection. So instead, my heart cracked as I choked out the words.

"Yeah. That's fine."

Seth found me the next day, telling me Brae had asked him out. I put on my best mask of excitement, one I had perfected over years of being the sidekick to the most popular girl in school.

"Are you okay with that?" he asked, his dark hair falling into his eyes in a way that made my stomach flip.

My throat ran dry, scorched as the Sahara, but I forced a smile. "Of course!" I squeaked, a little too high pitched to be natural. "Why wouldn't I be?"

Silence descended, each of us staring as if trying to read the other's mind. After a beat, he grinned and nodded. "Okay. Good. I mean, I wouldn't want to make things awkward for you."

I shook my head a little too fast. "Nope, all good. You have my blessing."

He smiled again, offering me thanks before heading down the hall. The moment he disappeared, my heart sank.

Plucking my biology book from the shelf, I silently chastised myself for longing after someone so unattainable even after all these months. But he was my guilty pleasure that I just couldn't seem to give up.

The warning bell for first period trilled through the hall, breaking me from my shameless gawking. Closing the door to my locker, I watched as Brae scrambled to collect her things in the few meager moments we had left.

"Babe, are we still on for the movies on Friday?" she asked, fiddling with the books in a disorganized fashion.

"Yeah, we're good. I just have to help my dad move a couch for my aunt, but I'll pick you up right after."

"Okay, well, just please don't be late," she whined gently. "We're meeting up with Matt and Sarah, and Chase might meet us later at The Diner."

"I won't be late," he said firmly, his charming smile still in place to soften the bite before sighing. "Do we have to meet up with everyone? I mean, we could always spend time just you and me."

Brae's lips pulled down into a pout, looking to Seth. "But we already have the plans, and you like Matt."

Seth shrugged in a noncommittal fashion before letting the topic slide. Of course Brae was oblivious to his gentle irritation as she closed her locker and slipped her arm through his. Turning to me, she tilted her head as if only then remembering my presence.

"Do you wanna come with us?" she asked, her face taking on a pitying expression. "We're seeing that new movie you wanted to see."

"No, that's okay."

"You should come! Seth, you don't mind, do you?" she asked, looking up to him with her big blue eyes. "It would be like a threesome." She laughed innocently with a suggestive raise of her eyebrow.

"Get a room," Erin muttered, rolling their eyes playfully at Brae's display.

My stomach clenched as my eyes flickered to Seth, who was thankfully smiling down at her and oblivious to my embarrassment at my best friend's lack of filter.

"Yeah, that's fine—" Seth started before I cut him off.

“No, seriously, it’s okay,” I said, hugging my books to my chest. “You guys go have fun.”

Brae sighed, her full lips pouting. “We really need to get you a guy,” she said, clinging on to Seth. “Then we could double date, and you could have someone to hang out with like we do. It would be great!” Her eyes widened as her excitement rose. “Oh my God, we should totally set you up!” Turning to Seth, she bounced on her toes. “Babe, who do we know that we can set Hannah up with?”

Michelle scoffed gently. “Yeah, because the dating pool at East River High is full of solid options?” Glancing to Seth, she waved a hand toward him. “Present company excluded, of course.”

Seth turned his concerned eyes to me, assessing my reaction quietly. I was pretty sure my wide eyes, flushed cheeks, and overall sense of mortification spoke volumes.

“I’m sure Hannah is perfectly capable of finding her own dates, Brae,” he finally responded after accurately determining my humiliation.

“Oh, come on,” she whined. “If that were true, she would have someone by now.”

Her words prickled like a bee sting, but my features remained unaffected.

“Okay, well,” I called, giving them a dismissive wave as I broke myself away from the little net of tragic singledom that Brae had thrown over me. “I’m going to take my single, dateless ass to class.”

“Aw, Hannah, that’s not what I meant,” Brae sighed, finally clueing in. “Don’t be mad—”

“I’m not mad,” I said, throwing her a smile. “I just don’t want to be late again.”

Reaching up onto her toes, she placed a quick kiss on Seth’s lips before turning to me with a regretful pout. “Well, I’m still sorry.”

“And it’s still fine,” I assured her, plastering on a reassuring smile just as Seth stepped up to my side like he did every morning. And just like every morning, a little thrill of excitement sang in my system in his proximity.

“Ready for English?” he asked, tucking his books under his arm as he looked down at me with a heart-stalling smile. Again, a flush of

embarrassment crept up the back of my neck as I remembered where my thoughts had taken me only moments before, rendering my voice mute.

Reaching his arm out in a gentlemanly gesture, he guided me down the hall toward our first period English class. As if fate hadn't dealt me enough of a tragic hand last term, it had somehow brought Seth and I back together in English yet again. Only this time, the stakes were even higher: paired up together the first week to rewrite a classic into a modern-day novella, which would be worth thirty percent of our final grade and due at the end of the semester. The ill-fated love of Romeo and Juliet took on a whole new meaning as we deconstructed it side by side.

The moment we were away from my friends, Seth launched into conversation.

"My dad and I went hiking at Hidden Lake this weekend. You were right, it's a great spot."

I smiled, my eyes remaining downcast. "Told ya."

I could hear the faint sound of his light chuckle over the din of chatter around us. A comfortable silence fell between us as we navigated the halls.

"I'm sorry for what Brae said," he said, his deep voice gaining my attention. "You know, single-shaming you."

I snorted a mortified laugh, looking away quickly as we stepped into the English room. It was meant to sound dismissive, like it didn't bother me at all, but came out more like a choke of panic to be discussing my tragic love life with Seth Linwood—the object of my desire and completely-off-limits dreamboat.

"It's fine," I assured him with the same well-practiced control I reserved for Brae. "She didn't mean it like that. Besides, it's not like it isn't true."

Seth frowned as he slid into the chair next to mine, setting his books on the desk.

"Why don't you date?" he asked curiously, turning his long, lean body toward me. The movement was intoxicating in its simplicity, and made my head swim. "I mean, not to be a jerk, but I just realized you haven't dated anyone since I've known you."

I shrugged, my eyes locked on the unicorn-adorned pencil in my hand. A gift from Brae.

“I told you. I took a vow of spinsterhood. And one does not just *break* such a vow.”

“Seriously,” he chastised. “Spinsterhood and toxic Heathcliff attractions aside.”

I pursed my lips, knowing I was not going to be able to avoid answering. But it didn’t mean I couldn’t lie through my teeth.

“I just haven’t met anyone I like that way, I guess. Plus, it’s hard to compete when your best friend is Brae Walker.”

He rolled his eyes. “It’s not a competition, Hannah.”

Now it was my turn to emit an indignant scoff. “Isn’t everything in high school a competition, though? Sports, grades, popularity? Interest from guys when the girl next to you is nothing short of high school royalty?”

The moment I stopped speaking, I chided myself for my honesty. It sounded like I was whining, when in reality, I was just being honest. Everything in high school *was* a competition, even if it shouldn’t be.

Seth was silent for a moment. Pushing my better judgment aside, I looked his way to find him watching me with a frown.

“They’re stupid,” he said firmly, turning to face forward again.

“Who?”

“The boys who aren’t asking you out. They’re morons. You’re awesome, Hannah. You’re like Beth in *Little Women*. Quiet, with a good heart, and everyone loves you. You deserve to be happy.”

I couldn’t suppress a little snicker as I shook my head. “Sure, compare me to a dead girl.”

“Technically, she’s a *fictional* dead girl,” he corrected firmly. “But it’s still true. And you shouldn’t compare yourself to Brae.”

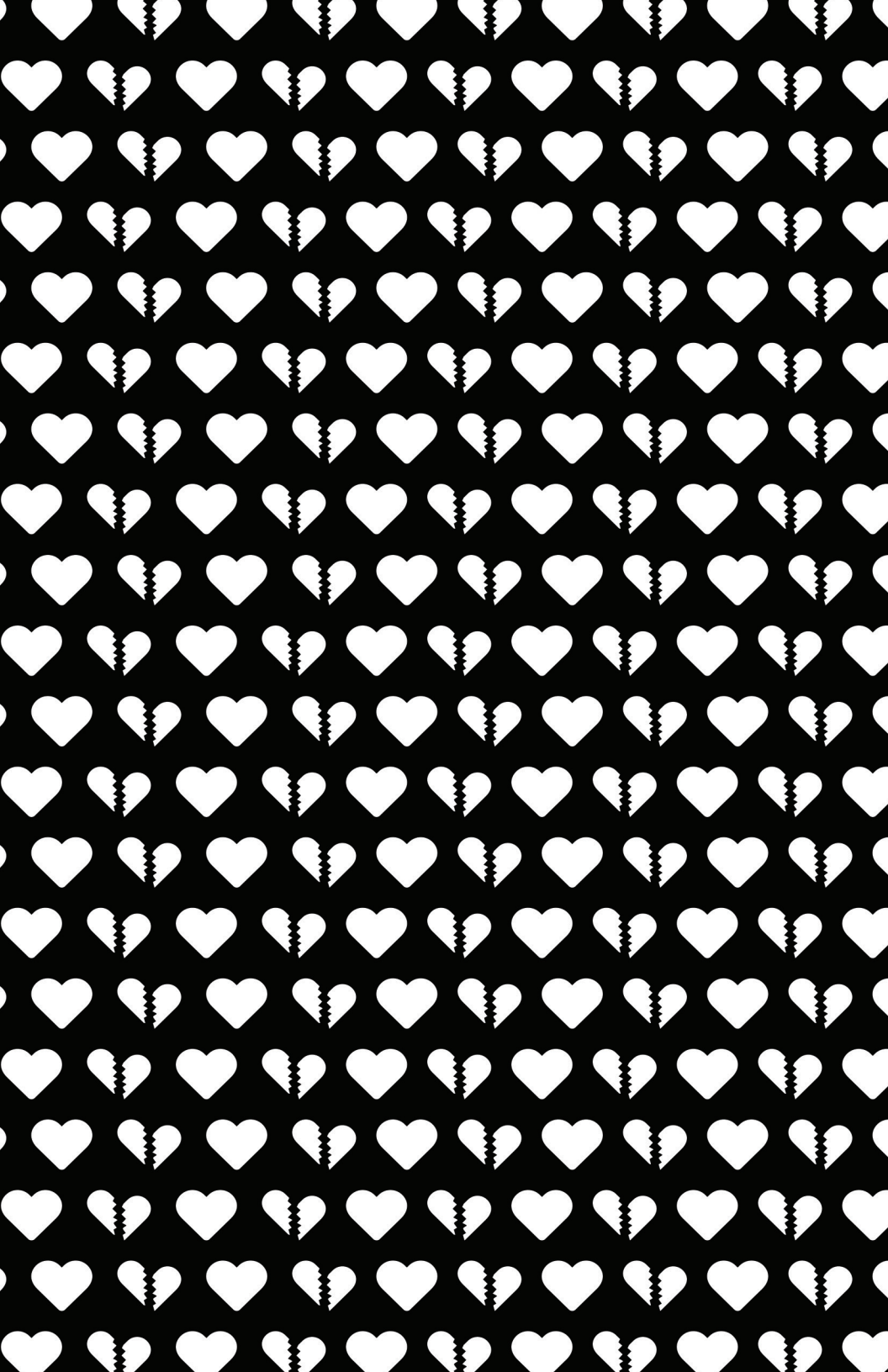
He didn’t look my way again as the teacher called the class to order, successfully ending our conversation. It left me in a myriad of emotions, ranging from guilt, to confection, to a tiny swell of happiness to know that Seth thought anyone who didn’t ask me out was a moron. Granted, he had never asked me out either when he had been free and able to do so. Not that I gave him any sign that I would welcome such an offer, but still.

For the next hour, I all-too-easily fell down the fantasy rabbit hole of *what if*.

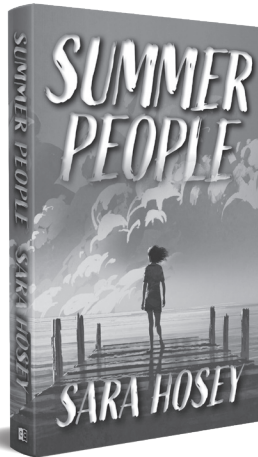
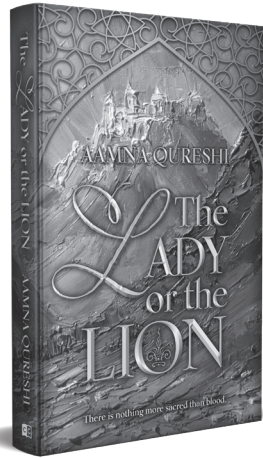
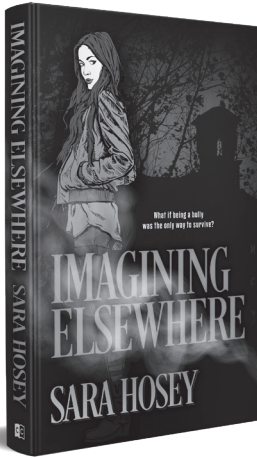
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What if I had had the courage to tell Seth how I felt all those months ago? Or tell Brae how I felt back then, knowing full well she wouldn't have dated him if she knew. The biggest reason I was watching from the sidelines as the first boy to ever make me feel this way belonged to someone else was me. And because of that choice, he was forever off limits. Because no matter what happened back then, and regardless of what happened in the future, Seth Linwood would always be tied to Braelyn Walker.

And you never *ever* dated your best friend's ex.



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FALLING IN LOVE ISN'T COMPLICATED . . . UNLESS IT'S WITH YOUR BEST FRIEND'S EX.

Hannah Taylor has lived in her best friend Braelyn's shadow all through high school. But when she meets Seth, the handsome and charming newcomer, she wonders if, for once, she might finally be in the spotlight. Until Braelyn and Seth meet, and Brae sweeps his attention away as only she can. Hannah is left to watch the first boy she's ever truly liked date not only someone else but her best friend.

When Seth unexpectedly breaks up with Brae months later, Hannah vows to help her friend get over the breakup while secretly trying to move on from Seth once and for all. Because even though Seth is no longer dating Brae, you never, ever date your best friend's ex. But getting over Seth is easier said than done when Hannah learns that she was the reason for the breakup, and Seth may like her back.



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