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A Letter from Hannah

Dearest reader,

I know you're eager to get started, but I just want to set the stage before you dive into Henry and Halle's love story. I said this would be a "quick note," but as I sit here and work out what I want to say, I can tell it isn't going to be, so buckle up.

Since I first published *Icebreaker*, I've received so many messages asking if Henry will receive a diagnosis to explain the traits that I've always called "neurodivergent coded." The short answer is no, he doesn't.

Some of you might be thinking, okay? Cool? I could have read the book to find that out . . . but I know many of you feel represented by Henry, or might be on a journey of your own, and knowing this ahead of time might be important to you.

I've always said I wouldn't write a diagnosis storyline, so this shouldn't be a shock to the ones who have followed me for a while. There are so many reasons why, but aside from the real-life obstacles Henry might face in the health-care system, the main reason is people live fulfilled lives every day without an explanation for why they feel different.

It doesn't make anyone, their wants, or their needs less valid to not have a medical diagnosis.

Henry and his actions have always been loosely based on my own and it's taken thirty years to receive my AuDHD diagnosis,

something I did not have when I started writing Henry. When I was twenty like Henry, frustrated and upset because it felt like my brain just would *not* work properly and I was suffocating, at no point did anybody think it could be something more than the anxiety and depression I was diagnosed with.

I've been very honest that this book was difficult for me to write. I wanted to get it right for you all, and more important, I wanted to get it right for Henry.

I put a bit of myself in every character I create: Anastasia's anxiety, Nate's self-sacrifice, Aurora's need to be wanted, Halle's loneliness, and the internal scars Russ has because of his father's gambling addiction. I've spent a lot of time worrying about people understanding Henry for the parts of him—parts of me—that shut down or need to be alone. The part of me that exhausts herself mirroring those around her and soaking up their characteristics like a sponge. The part of me that tries so hard and still gets things so, so wrong.

Ironically, the pressure I put on myself to not let you all down was possibly the most Henry thing I could do.

I believe Henry is the character who has changed the most since I created him, but that's because *I've* changed so much since I gave you all Nate and Stassie.

I hope you read this story and see a man who *loves* the people around him, and when it comes to conflict, you watch through a lens knowing not everyone thinks the same way.

I truly hope *Daydream* was worth waiting for.

Get comfortable, she's a long one.

All my love,
xo, Hannah

Chapter One

HALLE

"I THINK WE SHOULD BREAK up, Halle."

Will's somber expression looks ridiculous against the backdrop of my kitchen. The frills and florals once picked by my nana, always too sentimental and nostalgic for me to replace. Lemon-yellow cabinets, a DIY project undertaken after she learned to mix dry martinis at home with Mrs. Astor from next door. Joy, the Ragdoll cat Nana bought to celebrate me moving in, snoozing on the breakfast bar surrounded by crochet fish. The smell of the second batch of croissants, because I always ruin the first.

It's all too domestic. Too unserious. Too normal to warrant his rigidity.

His eyes follow my every move as I remove the This Is Me Baking apron he bought for my birthday, like he's waiting for me to have some kind of dramatic outburst. The tightness in his jaw accentuates the sharp angles of his face, and he looks nothing like the laid-back guy I've dated for the past year, and even less like my friend of ten years. No, this Will looks very much like a man on the edge.

After hanging my apron on the hook beside the stove, I pull a stool toward me so we can sit opposite each other at the breakfast

bar. When I rest my face on my palm, I'm not sure if I'm intentionally mirroring him or if this is the result of knowing each other so long.

He reaches across the counter and takes my hand in his, giving it a tight squeeze, an encouragement. "Say something, Hals. I still want to be your friend."

I need to say something. What I lack in experience, I make up for in common sense, so I'm fairly confident that breakups are a two-way conversation. I squeeze his hand back so I at least *appear* to be engaging with him. "Okay."

This isn't how I imagined my first breakup would go. I never expected to feel . . . nothing? I thought I'd physically feel my heart crack in my chest. That the birds would stop singing and the skies would turn gray, and while there is the emptiness I once imagined, it's somehow not the same. I'm not necessarily sure it's normal to imagine your first heartbreak, but I thought mine would be the tiniest bit interesting at least. But sadly, in line with my love life as a whole, this is bland. Nothing shatters and the sky is the same blue it always is here in Los Angeles.

"You don't need to hold back, Hals. You can be honest about how you feel."

His encouragement to speak my mind almost makes this whole thing worse. Taking my hand from his, I press my palms into my thighs and weigh the best way to tackle this. "I'm not. You're right; I don't think we're supposed to be more than friends."

Will blinks twice, hard. "You agree? You're not upset?"

I get the overwhelming sense that Will wants me to be upset, and I can't say I blame him. I'd be happy to be upset because at least if I was, I could believe that I'm capable of falling in love.

Because I really, really wanted to fall in love with him.

I'm not a person who struggles with words, but right now you wouldn't be able to tell that about me. I have no desire to hurt Will, which is why it's so hard to find the right thing to say. I'm honestly beginning to regret not faking an emotional outburst.

"It's not that I'm not upset; I just don't think we should drag things out if we're not working. I love you, Will. I don't want to compromise our friendship trying to have a relationship." *More than we already have*, is what I don't say.

"But you're not in love with me," he adds, the bitterness clear in his tone. "Are you?"

If I could kick myself, I would. "Does that even matter when you're in the middle of breaking up with me?"

It's like I kicked *him*. "It matters to me. Saying you love me and being in love with me isn't the same thing. But you're not, are you? You never have been, and that's why you're happy."

I can't believe he thinks that this is me happy. Does he know me at all?

To everyone but the two of us, Will Ellington and I were inevitable.

When my parents split up and my mom married my stepdad, Paul, we relocated from New York to Arizona for Paul's job. The Ellingtons lived next door and our parents quickly became best friends. I've lost track of the number of holidays and vacations we've spent together over the past decade, meaning Will and I had little choice when it came to spending time together.

However, there was never tension between us. No will-they-won't-they rumors, no lingering hands or secret moments. Just Halle and Will, neighbors who were good friends.

We survived high school together, and I watched him date everyone in our class without a "You Belong with Me" moment in sight. Then a year ago, when we were both home from college for the summer, Will invited me to be his date to a wedding. I'm pretty confident he had a first choice, and it wasn't me, but my invitation came in the form of pressure from his parents.

Ever the *traditionalists*, they didn't think it was healthy for a woman to spend her summer reading and writing, because I'd "never find a boyfriend hunched over a book." Even when my teenage sister,

Gigi, told them the 1800s called and wanted their mindset back, they still insisted I accept the invitation.

It was at the wedding, after too many gulps from a wine bottle we'd stolen from one of the tables, that we had the kiss that sparked this whole mess.

It was exciting at first, and those two weeks before we went back to school, I saw our relationship in a whole new way. Will had always been popular, and as much as I despise admitting it now, I felt special that he wanted to date me.

He was the captain of our high school hockey team, a future NHL star according to those in the know. He'd always been handsome and charismatic; he could get himself out of any situation with that charming smile of his. College had only increased his confidence, and during my visits throughout our freshman year, it was clear he was as well liked there as he had been back home.

So, all things considered, why wouldn't I want to date him when everyone else did? He was my only friend. It made sense, right?

I was captain of nothing, with no need to get myself out of any situation because I wasn't doing anything of interest. There isn't a long list of complimentary adjectives that follow when people talk about me. So yeah, I was a little flattered.

Our parents were elated, naturally. Their dreams of wedding planning and shared grandchildren felt that much closer, and it didn't matter that I was going to be in Maple Hills and he was going to be in San Diego. It's only two hours away, and they were certain we'd be totally fine because I could arrange my schedule around Will's hockey commitments.

No. Big. Deal.

Their confidence gave me confidence, which was something I desperately craved after that initial buzz wore off the first time Will asked me to have sex with him. I told him I wasn't ready, and he said I was intimidated by all of the girls he'd slept with, but that I didn't

need to worry. I, through a horrified grimace and the strongest urge to vacate the building, told him I didn't care about who he'd been with before and his sex life had no bearing on us taking that step or not.

I wanted butterflies and the unexplainable need to pop my foot up delicately when we kissed, but I got wasps. Nasty, uncomfortable things that stung me every time Will would slip his hand beneath my T-shirt. My gut told me something was wrong, but my heart told me I just needed to give it time. My head told me I already had all the answers, but I was just too much of a chicken to listen to them.

"Halle? Will you get out of your head for long enough to have a fucking conversation with me? Jesus," Will says harshly, raising his voice enough to wake Joy. She saunters across the table, brushing her tail along my chin before lying back down in front of me. The oven timer beeps, and Will mutters expletives under his breath while I turn it off and take out the croissants I now have no desire to eat.

"Nothing about this makes me feel happy. I feel like you're annoyed at me for saying okay instead of what? Screaming at you? Sobbing?"

He scoffs, bringing his coffee mug to his lips, smothering whatever he muttered. I've always hated the muttering. "I'm annoyed about all the shit I'm going to get for being the one to break up with you, when you're just too much of a fucking people pleaser to do it yourself.

"I'm going to be the world's biggest asshole for doing something you've been too much of a coward to do. It isn't fair. I want you but you don't want me, so I have to be the bad guy."

I was wrong. There are adjectives that follow when someone talks about me. Just not complimentary ones, I guess.

"I'm not being a people pleaser. I was trying to give us a chance to work things out. It's not like I wanted to suck at this."

"I wish you wanted to suck. Maybe that'd solve our problems," he mutters just loud enough for me to hear.

It's like he's poking a tender bruise. A metaphorical one that's there because of him in the first place. I want to roll my eyes and tell him how childish and pathetic he's being, but in reality, he's finally found something in this awful conversation that makes me hurt.

I don't know why my sexual urges disappear as soon as he's in the equation, and I *really* wish I did. I don't want to give him the satisfaction of letting him know he's gotten to me, so I sigh and cock my head. "You're being an asshole."

He folds his arms across his chest as he sinks into his chair to shrink himself. Pinching the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger, he lets out a noise that's somewhere between a sigh and a groan. "Sorry, that was low. I just"—he sits up straight again, his restlessness a contrast to his normal easygoing nature—"can't help but think things would be better if it actually felt like an adult relationship. I don't know how you can know you hate sex if you won't even try. I've been so patient with you, Halle, haven't I? More patient than another guy would be."

His need to break up with me right *now* suddenly makes more sense, given I said I still wasn't ready to have sex with him last night. If patient means stopping when I say stop, then yes, Will has been patient. If patient means repeatedly bringing up sex and interrogating me about my thoughts and feelings but becoming moody when I once again say I'm not ready, then sure, he's been patient.

I'm pretty sure neither of those things could be construed as patience, but I don't have the energy to delve into my mostly solo sex life during breakfast.

"We're two adults in a relationship—that's what makes it an adult relationship." As I've said a million times before. "And oh my God, for the last time, I never said I hate sex. I've only said I'm not ready and we compromised, I did the other stu—"

"Oh, because calling it a compromise makes me feel really great. Thanks."

I want to bash my head on the table. "Look, we're getting off topic. We can tell our parents it was a mutual decision. No bad person, mutual."

He shoots me a disbelieving look. "Like they'll buy that. What about Thanksgiving? Christmas? The vacation at spring break? You're naïve to think they'll drop it."

I can't pretend it's a stretch for him to be worried about how our parents might take the news. It's the thing I've been worrying about, too. Maybe he's right; maybe I am a coward and too much of a people pleaser, and I've forced his hand to save myself.

The summer we just shared back home made it very clear that without our hobbies or our family commitments to fill our time, we've outgrown each other. Will wants adventure with his friends until he starts his professional career, and I want to be a published author by the time I'm twenty-five. We're both driven, we're just driving in different directions. When you add the tension caused by my unwillingness to drop my panties on demand, this breakup was the only thing inevitable about us.

If I had any friends that I didn't share with Will, I'm sure they'd wonder why we were together in the first place. It's something I've thought about a lot over the past year, and the answer didn't paint me in a very good light.

I bounced between everything from being a people pleaser like I'm so commonly called, to having a late rebellion phase against my older brother, Grayson. He always hated Will, claiming he was too arrogant and our friendship was too one-sided. I was too well behaved to rebel about anything else going on, so not listening to my brother was as rebellious as I got. Even then, my rationale felt a little far-fetched.

In the end, I couldn't escape the truth: loneliness. Because if we split, who would I have?

Sure, our relationship wasn't perfect, but he called me every day and he wanted me around.

"I'll say I have the strongest urge to spend Christmas with Dad and Shannon. I think my brother will be there so I can use him to make it more believable. By the time we're both home in March for the spring break trip, everyone will be over our split."

"You sure?" he asks. I just offered him the best get-out-of-jail-free card in existence and he can't even hide the happiness. God, this is nauseating.

"I'm totally sure."

I watch as he relaxes. "If you're not coming home, I also don't think you should come to my games anymore."

Albeit not unexpected, I wish he'd broken up with me *before* I decided to give up my book club and rearranged my class schedule to give me time to visit for his games.

I say *decided*, but since we're not together now I guess I don't need to spin things to make Will look better anymore. I can admit that Will begged me to all summer, even though I repeatedly said I didn't want to, until I finally gave up arguing after he said that all the other girlfriends make the effort. I did it as soon as the school year restarted. I hated letting the bookstore down on such short notice, but they were so sweet about it, and one of their booksellers is excited to take over.

"Yeah, that's fine. I don't want to make our friends feel like they need to pick a side, and me not being there will probably make that easier."

If I didn't know Will as well as I do, I might have missed the way his eyebrows pinched together and he started to pout, but it *was* definitely there. That look of incredulity. "Ha, yeah." He scratches at his jaw. "Everyone's been telling me to end things for a while, so I don't know how they'd be if you were there. Awkward, probably."

For the first time since he uttered, "I think we should break up," I feel like crying. Even though to me it was obvious that something wasn't right between us, the idea that all his college friends have been weighing in and collectively decided he should end things makes my stomach twist.

I've always made an effort to go to the games I could drive to, even before we were a couple. I wore his jersey, sat with the other girlfriends, cheered him on. I looked up their interests, tried my hardest to fit in while they talked about people from their college I didn't know, because my friends have always been Will's friends. Even as kids, he was always introducing me to someone new.

His words are still stinging as I watch him finally finish the rest of his coffee. He looks so unbothered, yet I'm fighting the desire to find the nearest field and bury myself in it. "Not my friends anymore, got it."

"They were never really your friends in the first place when you think about it." He's staring at me, waiting for me to say something, like he didn't just throw my biggest insecurity in my face as casually as asking for the weather. "Do you ever wonder if you'd have your own friends if you didn't live in a fantasy world?"

"God, you sound like your parents right now. People can enjoy reading and still maintain a healthy attachment to reality, Will," I drawl. "I'm not a social pariah because I like fiction. Nobody has ostracized me from the Maple Hills social calendar because I read romance novels. Maybe if I spent more time in Maple Hills instead of following you around, I'd have my own friend group here."

He snorts, and he's one more arrogant action away from getting a croissant launched at his head. "Maybe if you were as invested in our relationship as you are in ones that aren't real, I wouldn't have just wasted a year of my life."

It's incredible how one conversation can change how someone looks to you. "I think you should head home now."

"Don't be so sensitive, Hals." He stands from his seat and walks to my side. The arm that drops onto my shoulder feels ten times heavier than it should, and his kiss to the crown of my head burns like acid. "I'm just putting myself first. Doing things for me, y'know. It's a fresh year and I deserve a fresh start. Hockey is get—"

His voice rumbles on in the background, but I can't bring myself to listen properly because it's taking every shred of my self-control not to launch into a rant about how I *do* know, because I've also been putting him first for as long as I can remember. Putting everyone first, in fact.

I've spent my entire life being encumbered by the tasks and responsibilities other people don't want. I make sacrifices without question because that's what I've always done, and at this point, it's hard to know if it's a true desire to help or just habit.

As my family blended and grew through my parents divorcing and remarrying other people, my list of people to help grew, too. Even though Grayson is the oldest, everything has fallen to me. For as long as I can remember, all I've heard is, "Oh, Halle won't mind helping," and not once, "Halle, do you mind?" or, "Halle, do you have time?"

I don't remember opting in, and I'm tired.

I'd love to say my issues with people pleasing are limited to the people I love, but I know they're not. Whether it's Will, his friends, his parents, neighbors . . . strangers . . .

It feels like every single person who has ever come into contact with my life has somehow wriggled their way above me on my list of priorities, and look where it's gotten me.

Single, no friends, no hobbies, and a schedule perfect for being the ideal hockey girlfriend but little else given I now have nothing to fill that time with.

I'm tired of being a passenger in my own life. So if Will is going to spend junior year doing things for himself, so am I.

Chapter Two

HENRY

IF TIME TRAVEL WERE REAL, I'd use it to go back and convince Neil Faulkner to turn down the opportunity to coach college hockey.

Despite my best intentions, and twenty long years of practice, I'm not always on the pulse when it comes to understanding people's motivations. I am, however, usually on the pulse of not getting on Coach's bad side. Which is why a knot of anxiety appears in my stomach the second I hear my name being yelled in Faulkner's gruff bark.

"Ooooooooo." Bobby's best attempt at sounding like a cartoon ghost causes a wave of laughter to rip through the half-full locker room. He misses the glare I shoot at him as he pulls his Titans T-shirt over his head. "Someone's in trouble. Whatcha done, Cap?"

"No idea," I mutter back as I pull my sweats up my legs. "Play hockey. Breathe. Exist. The possibilities are endless."

"It's been nice knowing ya, brother," Mattie says, patting me on the back as he passes in the direction of the showers. "Don't tell the others, but you were always my favorite."

"Am I a joke to you?" Kris shouts, launching what looks like a dirty sock at him. It bounces off the back of Mattie's head, ruffling his jet-black hair, and rolls beneath a bench.