

# Let Me Heal Your Heart

*Let Me Series: Book Four*

Lily Foster

Shorefront Books

Let Me Heal Your Heart By Lily Foster

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Let Me Be the One

Book One: Darcy and Tom's story

Let Me Love You

Book Two: Rene and Caleb's story

Let Me Go

Book Three: Kasia and Dylan's story

# Chapter One

Declan

He doesn't even like the radio on as we drive.

It's not that he doesn't speak to me at all—he does—but his overtures are function-driven. He asks me if I've eaten, do I have enough money, do I need the car this weekend.

I think to myself, maybe the interminable stretches of silence are what finally did her in.

As we pull up outside the dorm, he asks without looking my way, “Do you want me to help you carry your things in?”

*Fuck no*, my inner voice screams. I want out of that car a-sap. Smiling to myself, I imagine him not even stopping the car, just slowing down enough for me to jump out of the still-moving vehicle with my things.

He surprises me again when he actually touches me, places his hand on my arm and says, “Best years of your life, son. Study...but have your fun.”

So it's all downhill after this? Always a ray of sunshine, aren't you, Dad? It's not that I didn't appreciate the sentiment—I knew this was his version of trying—but it was just so little, so, *so* late. Instead of telling him this, or telling him how much it hurt to know that we no longer had any kind of a relationship, I managed a phony smile. “Thanks, Dad. I'll call you once I'm settled in.”

I wouldn't call him.

He wouldn't be calling me either.

I made my way into Grafton Hall, my new home. I moved past kids who were flanked by a mother on one side, a father on the other, each reluctant to let go of their baby. There were many hugs, moms speaking reminders about separating the darks from lights when doing laundry, dads handing over extra spending cash and reminders from both to eat right.

I walked into an empty room.  
More silence.

## Anna

“Did your father give you enough money, sweetheart?”

“I’m good, Aunt Margot. I have enough.”

She tucked an envelope into my bag as we pulled up outside the dorm and grasped my wrist firmly when I attempted to take it back out and return it to her. I was sure the envelope contained an ungodly sum. “Don’t you dare, Anna Banana. Trust me, you’ll need some mad money—clothes, parties, maybe some upperclassman will ask you to homecoming and you’ll need a dress.”

“You make this sound all very nineteen-sixties.”

She smacked my arm, playfully. “Sixties? Really, Anna? Try the eighties.” She sighed then and smiled. “I loved college. I want to go back.”

“You could be my roommate, Aunt Margot! You’d be heaps better than the potential serial killer I may be meeting in the next five minutes.”

“I’m sure you’re about to meet a best friend for life just like I met Bunny the first day of school.”

“If my roommate’s name is Bunny or Muffin I’m going to run out of that dorm screaming.”

“Don’t judge a book by its cover, Anna.” Margot grabbed my other small bag. She’d insisted on shipping most of my things. As we made our way from the car I noticed the look of derision Margot gave to one parent wearing—gasp!—mom jeans and running sneakers as she lugged several bags up the stairs at once like a pack mule. So much for judging book covers.

Margot Cole didn’t lug.

To my knowledge, Margot had never physically exerted herself. My aunt was the epitome of style and refinement. Today she was dressed college-campus-casual, and from her three hundred dollar driving moccasins to her five hundred-a-month highlights, she screamed *money*. She was, however, good to the core in my book.

Margot had taken me in at the end of my junior year in high school after my parents split up and were driving me to the brink of insanity. I was able to stay at the same high school, which made the idea of moving out a no-

brainer, as Margot and Uncle Vince lived only a few miles over. I like to think it served us both. After my cousin Dylan left for college, she hated the empty nest feeling and Margot got to dote on me like the daughter she'd never had. For me, having people who accepted me—I could be a temperamental little thing—meant the world. Margot and Vince didn't bat an eyelash at my fashion choices, piercings or hair color du jour.

Loyola 231. This would be my home for the next nine months. I was expecting a small room but this was one-quarter the size of my bedroom at home and I was sharing this space with another human being. It was going to be tight so I really hoped that I liked the person I was being stuffed in here with.

“No roommate yet, Anna. Let's get you settled in.”

We left the door open to catch the comings and goings in the hallway. Once every few minutes someone would glance in as they made their way to their own room, flanked by parents and siblings. I smiled and said hello to anyone who caught my eye. I hated being alone and wanted to make some friends here pronto.

I chose this school because of its academic reputation and architectural design program, but I struggled with the decision because my friends were all going to other schools, some of them going together in pairs. The one girl from my high school who was here, Vicki Knotts, was a prissy brat who had been in all of my honors classes since we were in junior high. Suffice to say that she and I would not be grabbing a latte together before class...ever.

Being alone was my worst nightmare. Since Will died I couldn't stand being alone, being in an empty house or silence in general. I think my friends even got tired of sleeping over but they indulged me, and Jonathan, who was practically a saint, understood this about me as well.

My fear of solitude was part of what drove my decision to leave home and go live with Margot. I guess my parents had always been self-absorbed, but their self-centeredness and immaturity became more noticeable after Will's death. Maybe I'm being unfair. After all, they say the death of a child is the most devastating event a person can endure. However, anyone with even an ounce of personal strength, a shred of moral decency, would have handled the situation better than either of my parents had.

My mother and my father essentially abdicated any responsibility they had for me and basically decided, each in their own way, to abandon ship. It's not that their marriage was perfect before the accident or that our home life was wonderful—it wasn't. But it was fine, it was normal. I had two parents, a stable home and I had Will.

Will's warmth and humor made up for a lot of what my parents did not contribute. Without him, our family was an already shaky house of cards bound to collapse.

And collapse it did.

## Declan

My door was already open so I turned, curious, when I heard knocking. I was hoping my roommate wasn't overly formal or weird in general. This guy looked ok, though, with his baseball cap on backwards, dressed like he'd just rolled out of bed. "You're Declan Banks?"

"Yeah," I answered as I stuck out my hand to shake his. I took in the guy's tight expression and wondered if I'd done something wrong. "What's up?"

"I'm Matt Parker, the R.A. for Grafton. It's good to meet you," he said as he shook my hand. "Look, man, I got some sad news when I got here this morning. Your roommate's father had a heart attack a few days ago, a major one. He's probably not going to be moving in anytime soon. He lives fairly close by so he's going to be commuting for a while."

"That's terrible. Is he coming by at all?"

"I don't think so. I think his father is still critical."

"Oh." I could think of nothing else to say.

"The bad news—I guess it's bad unless you like your own space—is that they won't assign you anyone else because his room and board is all settled and he may be back later in the semester."

I looked over at the unmade bed on the opposite side of the room. The walls were painted a cream color, but the surface underneath was clearly cinderblock. The striped cover on the mattress and the cinderblock made that side of the room resemble a prison cell.

I hoped I hadn't just traded one jail for another.

## Anna

God bless Aunt Margot. She was making sure, even though there was no Greek system here, that I had a sorority's worth of sisters before she left me today.

She bounced from my room to each neighbor's room, popping in, introducing herself to other parents, making connections with others out of thin air. Once Margot asked where they were from, she could conjure up a link. "You're from Westport? We have a summer place next door to Carrie and Mark Spencer on the Vineyard, do you know them? Oh, you wouldn't be related to Ken Richter, would you? You are? He works with my husband often." And so it went. Margot had made several friends before she took off late that afternoon and I had, as a result, befriended their offspring. She was a force of nature and I was grateful for her in ways that were too numerous to count.

My roommate materialized just around the time that I was beginning to worry about the prospect of spending the night in this room alone.

Fiona seemed shy and reserved when I introduced myself, with her overbearing mother answering questions on her behalf and correcting Fiona whenever she had the opportunity. "Speak up, Fiona." Mrs. Fields butted in before a second had passed, giving her daughter no time to answer my questions herself. "Fiona," the overbearing presence said as she rolled her eyes, "hails from Ogunquit, Maine. You *have* to come up in the summertime, Anna."

I felt pain on behalf of this girl. She looked as if she wanted to crawl underneath the flimsy twin bed frame and die right there and then. I smiled right at Fiona, ignoring her mother—I had the ignoring mothers thing down to a science—and took her hand. "Only if you let me drag you to Connecticut first, Fiona."

The corners of her mouth turned up slightly as she met my gaze. I think we both knew in that moment that we'd stumbled upon a friend.

Fiona's eyes were a rich, warm brown and her wild, brown hair hung in ringlets down her back. She had the kind of hair that other girls would kill for while the owners of said hair generally lamented their plight, wondering why they couldn't be born with stick-straight locks like every other girl in their grade.

Fiona said, “So, um, I met Sarah, the R.A., and she said we had to be at the dorm meeting really soon, right Anna?”

I checked my watch, noting that we had an hour, but then got her message clearly. “Oh my God, I lost track of time. Yeah, we have like five minutes. I’ll come down to the car and we’ll grab the rest of your things.”

Her mother sighed. “Did you hear that, Max? Because you took so long getting here, now I can’t even stay and help Fiona get settled.”

He was meek in her presence but I think Mr. Fields did his version of asserting himself when he said, “She’s eighteen, dear. I think she can make her own bed.”

She huffed, “All right then. Let’s get the rest of your things and we’ll be off.” Her tone indicated that she wanted Fiona to need her, to reassure her that she wanted her to stay longer. That would not be happening, I gathered from the look in Fiona’s eyes. Fiona looked as if she would positively wither underneath one more minute of this woman’s scrutiny.

Following some awkward hugs and admonishing words directed at Fiona, the Fields’ car finally pulled away from the curb. Taking in my gaping mouth and wide-eyes, Fiona smiled sheepishly and asked, “So, she’s as bad as I’d always thought?”

I put my hand on her shoulder and laughed. “Fiona, I’ve never been so grateful for my distant, cold, heartless mother as I am right now. At least she doesn’t bother with me.”

“Ugh!” she cried out as she looked towards the sky. “All she does is bother with me...*bother* me. It’s like my grades are her grades, my friends dictate her social status, my place on the cheerleading squad is her achievement, not mine. Sorry,” she laughed. “TMI for our first day?”

“No, vent away.”

“I feel bad sometimes because she left college during her sophomore year when she got pregnant with my brother. She wants to live vicariously through me and I feel like I need to let her do that.” When I nodded, unconvinced, she added, “And that’s my life story, Anna. What’s yours?”

“Parents divorced, self-absorbed and clueless when it comes to me. I actually live with my aunt and uncle now. I moved out when I was sixteen.” In response to her shocked expression, I added, “See, thought you had me beat in the nightmare-home-situation-department, didn’t you?”

By now we were back in our room, sitting across from one another on our twin beds. “I’m sorry, Anna.”

“Don’t be. My aunt and uncle are wonderful to me. You missed Aunt Margot. She left right before you got here. And my cousin, Dylan, is one of my best friends. My life is pretty great when I’m there.”

“So you don’t have any brothers or sisters?”

“I have a brother but he died three years ago.”

“Shit, Anna! I should just shut up with the twenty questions. I’m so sorry I brought it up, damn!”

I couldn’t help but smile in response to her reaction. “It’s ok, Fiona. We might as well get all the awkward shit out of the way, right?”

She smiled back. “I just met you and I think you’re pretty great, Anna.”

“Right back atcha, Fiona.”

As we made our way towards the common area for the meeting, I felt an old memory rising to the surface, a memory that warmed me from the inside out whenever I let it in. “Where in Maine did you say you were from?” “Ogunquit. It’s on the coast, York County.”

“Maine,” I said, wistfully. “I’ve never been.”

## Declan

After a week I was actually grateful for the few moments of solitude that my lack of a roommate provided. Basically, every door on my floor was left open twenty-four-seven and there was a constant flow of traffic between every room. Bonded is a girlie word but after spending the last seven days talking, drinking and laughing with these guys, it was the word that best described how I felt in their presence.

Right across the hall I had Brandon Carter and Jimmy Walsh. Next door was Terrence Healy and Colin Watters. On the other side lived Frank Collagrazzo and Simon Bennett. This was the pack I’d become closely associated with, while there were several other guys on the floor that I could easily flop down next to at lunch, join in their pick-up basketball games, or fall into easy conversation with as we walked to class. I felt more at home in this new place than I had in the house where I’d spent the past eighteen years of my life.

All of them knew I was an only child, that I was from Maine, that I played hockey and that I lived with my father. They drew their own conclusions about my mother's whereabouts. Only Brandon, my teammate and fellow finance major dared to ask, "So, did your mom die or just, like, leave?"

"She died." That's about as detailed as I was willing to get on that subject.

"I'm really sorry. That sucks."

Right then and there I decided that Brandon was just about the most eloquent and articulate person I'd ever met. What had happened to me that year did, indeed, suck. There was no other word in the English language that fit better.

Everyone had their shit, though, not just me. My phantom roommate, I'd heard through Matt Parker, was basically assuming the head of the household role in his family, as his father was incapacitated. Brandon had an older sister who, at age twenty, already had a three-year-old child and Terrence had hinted at his mother's alcoholism. It made me feel at ease to know that I wasn't the only one who came from a fucked-up background but I still couldn't help but feel that every one of these guys had it better than me.

I doubted that any of them went home to a house that was devoid of life in any form. My house was clean, there was food in the fridge, there were basic amenities and some luxuries, but there was no life. There was no music playing and if I played mine without headphones, I'd typically get a soft rap on the door indicating that I needed to cease and desist. There were no parties, no visitors. I avoided the place unless a shower, meal, or place to crash compelled me to walk through the front door.

I'd become a competitive hockey player thanks, in part, to my father's shitty parenting skills. I dreaded going home so much that I would play pick-up games every day after school no matter the age or skill level of my opponents. Because I hung around the rink so late, this often meant that at fourteen, I was playing against sixteen and seventeen year olds. The kind of rough around the edges boys who didn't have homes they were beckoned to at dinnertime, and where returning home with the faint odor of pot on their clothes was no biggie.

They were bigger and tougher than I was at the time, and seemed to believe that how hard you checked someone into the plexiglass was as

important as the number of goals scored. Playing with them made me skilled at evading checks, but as a result of the many I'd failed to duck from quickly enough, I became bloodthirsty to inflict at least some measure of pain on others as payback.

After they left to smoke and flirt with the disreputable girls who hung around the rink, I would stay. I would line up the cones that the figure skating coach left underneath the bleachers and make a narrow path leading to the net. With less than an inch of space to clear the puck on either side, I'd take slap shots from every angle. Line up the cones, shoot, repeat. For hours I did this, making me just about the most accurate wing in my town, able to shoot both left and right handed.

In Maine, like in every bitterly cold, godforsaken part of the world, hockey was a religion. My skill on the ice became well-known as I grew and packed on more muscle. The starting spot on my high school team as a sophomore was a nod of recognition that few others had bestowed upon them.

Aside from the rink, my only other haven was Tess. After my mother died, I'd pretty much tuned out of the high school social scene. Where I'd once been like every other jock, up for any and every social event, I changed into a quiet, sullen kid.

At the beginning of junior year, Tess moved to my town and she and I gravitated towards one another, kind of like two lost souls. Her father had lost his big job in Boston and the family had returned to live in a house inherited by Tess's mother. They had downsized in a major way and Tess had a hard time adjusting to the smaller house, small-town high school, and the quiet off-season life of a Maine coastal town. I grew up there and have to admit, it's an acquired taste.

Tess and I became a full-on couple by Christmas. We were pretty much inseparable, holding onto one another like drowning people grasp onto driftwood. We spent that winter at the rink where Tess would sit in the bleachers, on the far side away from those other girls, waiting patiently for me to finish. We would do homework holed up in her room or watch movies huddled up in my den, underneath the blankets, beginning to explore one another's bodies. That summer was spent at the beach, at my pool, and playing tennis at the courts down the street from my house— feeble attempts to teach a very uncoordinated girl to swim and to play sports that required

eye-hand coordination. For a long time, nearly an entire year, I had no need or desire to be with anyone else.

By senior year my outlook had improved a bit and I slowly started to feel a desire to become a part of my old life again. I let the friends that I'd all but cut out of my life back in, and I started to say yes more often when I was invited to parties.

Tess wasn't from here so I couldn't really blame her for being reluctant. Small town girls could be really nice or really bitchy and Tess never seemed to have much luck fitting in with the crowd. She preferred the nights when it was just us, no one else, and she resented when I tried to draw her out. She stayed close by my side at the bonfires held down on the beach every fall weekend and then begged off whenever there were house parties senior year on those cold winter nights. I wouldn't go without her and she knew it. Even though I had a slowly growing sense of resentment about it, there was a part of me that felt as if I owed her. Her warm, soft body had provided a comforting refuge to me when I was most in pain and in need of love. Yes, Tess was my first and when you're seventeen and in love, that is a powerful bond.

There was only one other girl I'd ever felt anything like love for before, and because my time with her had been so fleeting, referring to it as love seemed stupid, illogical. But what I'd experienced with her in those few days—in just that one night—had been pretty earth-shattering.

## Anna

“Hello, I'm waiting!”

“Easy, bitch!”

Fiona had clearly morphed into a new, free-spirited girl now that she was out from underneath her mama's watchful eyes. The girl cussed more than I did and *that* was saying something.

“Fiona, you take so long to get ready. C'mon, Danielle and Lauren have been waiting on us. I don't even know where this party is, so we need to go with them.”

“All right, I'm ready,” she said as she made a pouty face into the mirror, checking out her make-up.

“You’re beautiful, let’s go!”

“Hey, usually I’m the one waiting on you as you insert your...let’s see, *five* earrings,” Fiona said as she trailed her finger up my right earlobe. “Cut me some slack.”

Fiona and I had become overnight best friends. Like soul sister, attached at the hip kind of friends. We had several other great girls on our floor and I found myself loving being a part of this makeshift family we’d formed in our dorm.

All in all, college was a good fit for me. I was a student who never really struggled to make good grades, so that wasn’t what I’d feared. I was basically leery of moving again, of leaving what was familiar. Specifically, of leaving the emotionally safe, accepting cocoon that was my Aunt Margot’s home. For as composed as I seemed to my friends now, I bore the battle scars of a damaged little girl whose emotions could change directions as quickly as the wind shifted. The rash, impulsive decisions I’d made in those instances had resulted in no less than five changes in hair color and the multiple piercings I now sported.

I was a chameleon. It could be black hair, biker-bitch clothes and every hole on my ear lobe filled with tiny, tarnished silver hoops, or I could wear blonde hair—my natural color—swept over the empty pierced holes, pearl choker at my neck, Burberry ensemble head-to-toe. The auburn hair, dark brown with hombre tinged ends, or the rare, but occasional streak of crayon-colored hues were my in-betweens. Whereas after the accident, this hobby was a form of blatant rebellion aimed at my suck-ass parents, it was now just a more occasional tendency of mine to shake things up. Time had passed and I, to a certain extent, had less reason to rebel. I guess I had gotten better. I was healing.

Tonight I was somewhere in between. My hair was currently my natural honey-colored blond. Piercings were in but my outfit didn’t scream, “Back off or I’ll kill you.” I was wearing battered boyfriend jeans, a snug long-sleeved black t-shirt and some worn Vans. In other words, I blended in just fine.

Another thing I loved about Fiona was that she treated me the same, regardless of what cover my book was sporting that week. I couldn’t wait to drag her home with me on holidays, suspecting that Margot, Dylan and Fiona were like-minded, kindred spirits.

As we made our way through the woods, we were giggling, tripping over stray branches and teasing one another about the probability of a Freddy Krueger-type jumping out and slashing us all to pieces. Thank goodness we had Danielle leading the way. She had been hooking up with some guy Frank since the first week of school and he was running this shindig tonight.

Since we were underage, parties were relegated to far-off clearings in the woods behind the upper portion of campus where the freshman dorms were located. It had probably taken these guys the better part of the day to coordinate this, rolling kegs the quarter mile or so from the nearest road. We had been walking for over ten minutes so I was relieved when I saw a faint light in the distance and the sounds of people and music started to become louder. I'm sure the school knew what went on back here every weekend but turned a blind eye. It was fairly unrealistic to think that a bunch of college freshman, many of whom had been drinking since age sixteen, would be content to talk and dance at the non-alcoholic, on-campus "mixers" that were university sanctioned.

Frank lived in Grafton, which was the dorm where most of the freshman male athletes were housed. As a result, this party seemed especially rowdy, even at this hour. The shots were more readily available, there were some drunken wrestling matches in progress and the girls who were intent on snagging themselves a D-one basketball, football or hockey player were in nauseating abundance.

Being from Maine, Fiona had been around hockey players her entire life, her brother currently being a star senior defenseman at Northeastern. The puck-fucks, as she so kindly had dubbed them, were the girls who seemed to cling onto the hockey players, happy to wash their sweaty gear after practice or bandage their facial lacerations, all in the hopes of bedding them.

"Be nice, Fiona."

"I am being nice, it's just that they're disgusting. All of those girls," she said as her face curled into an unpleasant snarl. "I mean, just look at them. They have to be fairly intelligent to be at this school but they act like mindless, vapid females around those guys. From the looks of them, you'd think they couldn't do basic algebra or comprehend a fifth grade-level book. Are they afraid those guys won't be into them if they show their true colors and demonstrate intelligence?"

Lauren chimed in, “Most of those guys, sadly, aren’t interested in what’s in your head, only what’s in your pants.”

Danielle’s back was up. “Not true! I dated a football player in high school. He was great, a total gentleman. And Frank isn’t a douchebag either.”

“My brother is a good person,” said Fiona. “But I’ve seen the girls at his games, throwing themselves at him. I’m pretty sure he’s partaken in some of that.”

“Wouldn’t know and don’t ever care to know,” I said. “Jocks, in general, are not my thing.”

“Since when?”

“I shouldn’t say I’ve ruled them out entirely, Danielle, but I do seem to gravitate towards the non-violent, brainy types as of late.”

“What’s Jonathan like?”

“He’s...good.”

Lauren coughed, covering her hand with her mouth to murmur, “Sounds hot.”

I swatted at her playfully, nearly knocking the red cup out of her hands. “He *is* hot. Good, though, is the best word to describe him. He’s always been really good to me.”

She teased, “So when are we going to meet Mr. Jonathan Good?”

“Jonathan Wallace, you wise ass. He’s at Marquette. I don’t know if *I’ll* even see him before Thanksgiving.”

“I don’t know why you girls just didn’t come to college free and easy like I did,” Colleen, another girl from our hall who’d joined us, added.

“You’re easy all right,” Fiona teased.

As Colleen dipped a finger in her beer and then flicked it at Fiona, she said, “I mean it. I was in *love* my junior and senior years. We went to prom, had our last summer together and all, but Jason and I were realistic. He’s at Penn, I’m here. I knew he’d be tempted and so would I. I have no regrets about breaking up with him.”

“How did he take it?”

“His status was single last week and he’s now ‘in a relationship’,” she said, smiling. “So I’m gathering he’s ok.”

Breaking up with Jonathan had crossed my mind. Not just before leaving for school but once earlier this summer, once last fall, and—if I'm being completely honest—about one month into the start of our relationship.

Jonathan was like a comfy, well-worn sweater—familiar and warm. He was smart, supportive, honest, kind, didn't care if my hair was neon green or if I put a barbell through my septum. I hadn't, by the way.

I knew Jonathan before the accident and after it happened, he seemed to be the only one who knew what to do. While everyone else said, "Sorry about Will," as they grimaced uncomfortably, dying to get that over with and then get away from me, Jonathan said nothing. He hugged me tight at the funeral, not letting go for a solid minute. Then he moved my hair aside and kissed my cheek, slowly. It wasn't hot or carnal, no. It *was*, though, the most touching, tender gesture that I'd received. That crushing hug and that kiss sustained me for the interminable stretch of time following the ceremony.

I wasn't deemed fit to go back to school on the Thursday or Friday after the funeral, so I spent the time locked in my room. It's not like the locked door was necessary, as neither parent was seeking me out. They'd each decamped to their own corners of our cavernous house and were likely drinking themselves into a stupor while I was lying on my bed, unable to cry but utterly bereft.

Saturday morning Jonathan called me and asked if I wanted to go to the movies with him. I did. He took me to see some mindless comedy, took me out to lunch and then bought me ice cream. The next day I hung out at his house, his mother making us lunch and making small talk. He met me at my locker that Monday morning, sensing that being back at school would be difficult for me. He practically shadowed me that first week, making jokes, talking about everyday nonsense, and making certain that I didn't fall down the rabbit hole. He chastised anyone that treated me differently and even rallied my friends, coaching them into keeping things as normal as possible for me.

As a result, my life resumed. I returned to cheerleading at my teammates' insistence and went out for tennis later in the spring. I attended parties and even though I tended to cut out early, I maintained my place in the social strata of high school. That was all thanks to Jonathan.

Jonathan was incredibly patient with me and he was accepting to a fault. The fact that he'd remained friends with me, that he still continued

coming around after what I'd pulled at the end of that summer, said a lot about his character.

I had basically gone off the rails.

Following a month of hanging out with my girlfriends, spending days at Jonathan's house just lounging by his pool or getting spanked in tennis on his immaculately maintained backyard courts, my parents announced that I would be attending a two-week summer grief camp in the Berkshires. When they decreed this, I stood, mouth agape, staring down at the brochure on the dining room table. Heart Songs? What the fuck does that mean, even? *What a dumb name for a place*, I thought. Then I looked up to my parents, wanting to revolt but totally speechless. I noticed they were standing side by side, a united front. "Why?" was all I managed to say.

"Anna, sweetheart, we know this has been so difficult for you," my mother crooned. She was on painkillers, I'd surmised by her slow speech and saccharine sweet demeanor. And, the thought struck me, how would she know this had been difficult for me? She'd hardly seen me since Will's head had been blown off.

Dear old Dad chimed in, "We think you need counseling. This place is highly regarded. It's very pricey and upscale so you won't be forced to mingle with any...you know—"

"Common folk?" I'd intended for it to sound sarcastic. My father was a pretentious prick, which is fairly common among those who do nothing to earn their money. He seemed relieved, though, to think that we were, for once, on the same page.

"Yes, exactly. It's two weeks, Anna. Beautiful grounds, lots of activities. It will be good for you."

"What if I don't want to go?"

He looked to my mother, lips in a tight line, and then looked back to me. "We think it's best, Anna. You're going."

If they tried to pull that shit now—well, let's just say they wouldn't dare. Back then, though, as a fifteen year old honor student do-gooder who'd just lost the one person who mattered most in the world to her, I did not have the strength or desire to fight with them. Up until that time, disobedience had not been in my nature.

I held the tears back until I closed my bedroom door and flopped onto my bed. Even at that age I knew in my heart that I had been coping pretty fucking well and it was my mother and father who were in dire need of mental health services. After letting myself wallow in it for an hour or so, I got up, packed my largest duffel and then turned off my lights and went to bed.

A car was waiting to take me to camp at nine the next morning. I was not foolish enough to expect that either of my parents would drive me to camp. I was actually shocked that my mother was even home to see me off in the morning. She flitted about, which was her time-honored strategy of avoiding the act of actually talking to, or connecting, with anyone. *At least she isn't high*, I thought to myself as I sat on the couch waiting for my ride.

When the horn sounded, she met me at the door and held me in a stiff hug. "I love you, Anna. Be good, ok?"

I nodded and smiled at her before turning to walk out the door. She didn't walk me out. Says a lot, I guess, that she didn't even feel the need to introduce herself to the stranger she was about to let her teenaged daughter get into a car with.

I don't recall exactly when my relationship with my parents had withered to nothing. I guess it had been a gradual process. I remembered family vacations when I was younger, birthday parties, the trappings of family life. I do not remember, however, feeling a sense of warmth radiating from either my mother or father. I don't remember being hugged frequently by anyone other than Will, and he was the one I instinctively went to for comfort when I was upset. I didn't really notice how odd this was until I got a little older and became more observant. I saw how other mothers doted on their daughters, stroking their hair or hugging them when they walked in the door after school. I never, for example, recall opening my lunchbox to reveal a napkin with a heart-encased note like my classmates did.

The day I returned from camp, my relationship changed with my parents irrevocably. I no longer felt young, I no longer felt innocent, and I no longer felt capable of tolerating their bullshit attempts at parenting me.

## Declan

“Hi.”

“Hi, yourself. What are you doing up so late?”

“I can’t sleep. My roommate is annoying. She’s sleeping now with her earbuds in, like I can’t hear her music playing. She snores too. I should have insisted upon a single.”

“I’m betting the singles are a lot more money, though, right Tess?”

She laughed, ruefully. “Yes and extra money is something I’m constantly reminded that I do not have.”

“When I sign my NHL contract you’ll have a big house with as many rooms as you want.”

“Yeah, you’ll probably drop me for some bimbo groupie.” She paused. “You won’t ever do that, will you, Declan?”

I hated when she did that—said things that made me feel the need to reassure her, to pledge my love to her. Lately, I’d started to think I should hold back on making those pie-in-the-sky statements anyway. I meant them tongue-in-cheek and figured most girls would take it that way, laughing it off as a sweet intention and nothing more. Tess, on the other hand, seemed to take these as blood-sworn promises. When I was really at my lowest and she was the only light in the deep dark tunnel of grief I’d buried myself in, maybe I’d meant them as a commitment. Now, though, her insecurities felt like a weight bearing down on me.

“Never,” I reassured her. “I hate bimbos and groupies.”

“Speaking of, am I going to meet all of your friends this weekend?”

“Yeah, but don’t call anyone besides Brandon a bimbo, ok?”

“Right, like you haven’t met any cute girls at school yet, Declan. I’m sure they’re following you around just like they were in high school.”

I wished Tess had more confidence. She was beautiful and had a big heart. She had no reason to feel less-than compared to any other girl. Her constant demand for approval and reassurance pissed me off sometimes.

“Did I even notice them, Tess?”

“I don’t know if you noticed them. For all I know you were thinking about one of them while you were buried inside of me.”

“Cut that shit out, ok, Tess?” When my tone changed and she knew she’d gone too far, she’d backpeddle.

More upbeat, she said, “I’m just joking, Declan. I really can’t wait to meet your friends. I’m betting your campus life is better than the nonexistent social scene here.”

“Tess, you’re at Southern Maine, not some community college in the boonies. There have to be some cool girls and some things to do around there.”

“Not really. I feel like I’m in the middle of North Dakota. I wish we’d been able to go to school together.”

It went unsaid but she had neither the grades nor the money to attend here. Not that I’m a genius, but I didn’t struggle academically. I also had the added bonus of being a sought after hockey recruit. It didn’t matter if my SAT scores were just a little bit lower than what was typical at this school.

“So I’ll meet you at the bus on Saturday?”

“Three more days, Declan. I cannot wait to see you.”

“Love you, Tess.”

“I love you, too.”

I felt funny as we hung up. I was looking forward to seeing her. I’d missed the person I’d spent every last waking moment with over the past two years. I’d missed her in my bed too, if truth be told. It had been four weeks since we’d said goodbye and I had replayed that last night together out in my pool house over and over to sustain me.

The reason I felt unsettled, though, was that I was wary of mixing my two worlds. I’d made a nice little life for myself here. I’d made friends, mostly guys but some girls. They were only acquaintances but I knew that if Tess was witness to girls sitting with me at lunch or popping by to swap class notes, it would *not* go over well. It would result in cold resentment that could only be alleviated by groveling and pledges of my unyielding fidelity. I felt tired just thinking about it.

I decided my best strategy would be to avoid the Saturday night parties and instead, take Tess out for a nice dinner in town. Sunday I’d tour her around campus and then she’d be off again before my four o’clock hockey practice.

Wasn’t a good sign that I was planning Tess’s departure before she’d even arrived.

## Anna

“Danielle, are you ok?”

Last night we were at another party in the woods and Frank had proven that, yes, he did fall into the douchebag-jock category. Danielle had just done the deed with him the week before, after knowing one another for a total of four weeks. Some people considered that to be a respectable length of time and, Danielle asserted, he *had* proclaimed his love to her. Love must not be a word he reserves for women who are special in his life. Maybe Frank also bestows the term on things like cheese fries and XBox because “loving” Danielle did not prevent him from making out with some other girl right in front of her face just one week later.

After witnessing this shameful disregard for another human being’s feelings, we all decided to get wasted in an effort to show solidarity with Danielle. Now, the next morning, we were all paying the price.

“I am going to be sick,” Danielle whispered before bolting out of bed and running for the bathroom. I’m glad she made it there before unleashing because if the rest of us had been witness, there would have been a massive mess to clean. Never, I thought to myself, will I drink like that again.

I wasn’t a big drinker, smoker or anything else. My high school, located in one of the more affluent enclaves of New England, had its share of privileged kids with unlimited disposable income. Drugs and hard liquor were readily available at anyone’s home any day of the week and at every party. I wasn’t a total abstainer, but more kids did partake heavily than those who didn’t. Jonathan was no saint but he was careful, measured, never out of control, and that was fine by me.

Danielle crawled back into bed, still looking a little green.

“So, are you going to confront him?” Lauren asked.

“Not my style,” she replied, still only capable of whispering.

“I’d march right up to that asshole in the cafeteria and dump a plate of scrambled eggs right onto his head,” said Colleen as she filed her nails. She was the only one of us that seemed pain-free.

I knew it was a long shot but I had to ask, “Are you sure it was him, Danielle? It’s always so dark out there in the woods and there were like a hundred people. Could you have mistaken him for someone else?”

She looked at me, sadly. “I walked right up to him, Anna. I tapped his shoulder, looked right into his eyes.”

“He didn’t say *anything*, Danielle?” Fiona asked.

“He smiled at me. Like a lazy, friendly fucking smile! He was obviously drunk but it’s also pretty obvious that he isn’t into me.”

“Who was the girl?”

“Her name is Samantha, that’s all I know. I heard him say her name,” she said as she broke off crying. “I’m never doing that again. I’m never giving up the goods unless I know for certain that it’s for real.”

Colleen said soothingly, “Don’t beat yourself up, Danielle. He’s the jerk here. You did nothing wrong except trust a dumb-ass jock.”

Fiona said, “Well, I can say for certain the guy isn’t dumb. He’s in my bio class and he’s a science whiz.” She looked to Danielle. “A science whiz but an absolute dickwad.”

“Come on,” I said. “I have to put some food in this belly. I’m dying right now.”

Fiona and I went back to our room to change and then we all made our way to the cafeteria unshowered, dressed in sweats and t-shirts. When we walked into McCleary Hall, Danielle stopped in her tracks when her eyes immediately met Frank’s. He quickly looked away. Lauren whispered in her ear and nudged her reassuringly when she stood stuck in place, staring at him.

I didn’t really know Frank but I thoroughly disliked him. Since we were a month into school already and he had hooked up with Danielle repeatedly, you would think he would be well acquainted with all of her friends. This wasn’t the case, though, because Danielle was someone who Frank seemed to sneak off with at the end of the night, not someone he spent time with during the daylight hours. She had fallen for his bullshit and he had used her cruelly. I’d witnessed these one-sided relationships too many times to count while in high school and wondered why the girls didn’t seem to learn. Maybe I was smart, or maybe I was just shrewd and jaded from the environment I’d grown up in, but I knew that if a boy didn’t want anyone to know about me, didn’t want to make his desire for me public, didn’t want to hang out with me unless he was buzzing, then it was bad news. I felt sorry for Danielle but wanted to shake her at the same time.

We all filled our trays with greasy breakfast foods and sat surrounding Danielle at our table. She put on a brave face. Lauren and Colleen were

making jokes and prompting her to smile whenever they noticed Frank or one of his friends looking over in our direction. I sat with my back to the group of boys who were seated three tables over, but I could feel someone's eyes on me. I turned back once briefly but only saw Frank, looking our way for a split second before one of his ass-hat friends said something that made him and all of the other guys at the table erupt into raucous laughter. He clearly wasn't that broken up over what he'd done last night. I only hoped Danielle had learned her lesson.

## Declan

"Is it like this every weekend?" Tess groaned as she pulled the comforter over her head in an attempt to block out the noise coming from the hallway.

"Pretty much." It was *loud*. Guys and girls were carrying on, obviously drunk, laughing—the sounds of Saturday night on a college campus. Every so often, someone would bang on my door. "Banks, where the fuck are you?" Or, even better, "Oh, his girlfriend is here?" I heard Jimmy and Terrence then, affecting female voices, "Oh, Declan, do me, Declan!"

I thought Tess was going to freak. "Seriously, Declan? Are you in this shape every weekend too? Falling down wasted?"

"No!" I *was* definitely drinking more now that I was here, but I didn't go as hard as most of my friends did. I took my training seriously and although I could still perform after a night out, I didn't ever want to run the risk of showing up to practice dragging.

I turned on music in an attempt to drown out some of the noise coming from the hallway but it was useless. I was just praying that none of my friends who happened to be female decided to pop over tonight and say hello in a drunken state. I had been completely faithful but I did have girls whom I considered friends. That would not have been cool with Tess.

I rolled over onto Tess, caging her in between my arms in an effort to distract her, to make her happy again. "Come on, baby, it's got to be like this in your dorm too, right?"

"I guess. I just hate that you're here and I'm so far away. Sometimes, Declan..." she said, beginning to weep. "I just don't think I can take it."

“Hey, don’t say that.” I never knew what she really meant when she said things like that but anything along the lines of being unable to cope scared me, triggered me. I couldn’t bear to hear it.

I showered her with kisses and made love to her, trying to go back in my mind to that place where it was just us and she was all I needed. After, as I lie with Tess in my arms, I told myself I was happy. Whereas it once felt like this feeling that overwhelmed me every time I was with her, rode me high along the crest of a wave, now it was something I was telling myself, something I was trying to convince myself of.

That next morning, Tess and I were up earlier than the rest of my floor. I’d arranged for her to have the R.A. on the girl’s floor unlock the bathroom for her so she could shower and then we left to have breakfast. No one was in the cafeteria, except for a few stragglers who actually liked to get their day started early on a Sunday. After we ate, Tess and I walked all over campus. I showed her where my classes were, where she’d be coming to see my hockey games, and other places around campus, like the bookstore and library. “Well, you’re a great tour guide, Declan. What other fun things do you have planned for us? Am I going to get to watch you type a paper next?” she asked playfully as she pinched my ass.

I backed her up against a wall then and pressed into her. “Ok then, next time you’re here we’re hitting parties all weekend long. You asked for it.”

“Why didn’t you take me last night?”

“I don’t know. You were never into that kind of thing at home so I figured it would be torture for you going to parties if you knew absolutely no one.”

She shrugged it off. “So next time you come to see me.”

“Tess, we talked about this. I can’t leave with practices and training. I’m on scholarship; they practically own me.”

Her face was petulant. “So I’m going to have to come *here* all the time?”

“Only when you want to, Tess. I know you’re busy too. We’re in college now, it’s a little different.”

“Maybe I can’t do different, Declan. Maybe I need you more than you need me.” She looked so goddamn sad. “I think you really like it here.”

“I do but I love *you*, Tess, and I need you too.”

She nodded her head. Thankfully she wasn't up for a fight. "I love you too."

After she left, I felt badly, I felt guilty. The real reason I didn't take her to the party last night was because I was different here; I was closer to my old carefree, happy self. Day by day I was shedding the brooding, needy side of myself, the one that clung to his sadness like a lifeline.

Tess didn't know the 'me' that existed before my mother's suicide. I couldn't shake this odd feeling that she wouldn't really know what to make of that person.

## Anna

Another small gripe about college was the need to do one's own laundry. At home, my clothes magically made their way from the ball on the floor where I'd left them, to my closet, perfectly clean and pressed again. Didn't know when or how exactly it happened, it just did. Here, my clothes accumulated on the floor until I picked them up and my clothes got cleaned only after I hauled them to the laundry myself.

We all did our laundry in the basement of Fisk Hall. There were probably fifty washers there, as four dorms used this same facility.

I hated doing wash for several reasons. First and foremost? Clueless boys. I'd never operated a machine prior to coming here either, but you didn't see me sidling up to people, acting pathetic, asking for help. For crying out loud, they had stick figure drawings showing you how to turn the thing on. Did you *really* need to have some babe show you how to press the start button? Or show you to dump a capful of detergent in? Seriously, would these boys dump an entire bottle in if not *closely* supervised or would they dump the detergent on top of the machine *after* closing the lid, rather than in with the clothes? It was nauseating.

For the guys, the laundry room was a major hook-up spot. Some of the heaviest flirting on campus was done there. I wasn't having it. I mean, I resented having to do my own wash—I certainly wasn't taking on yours too. I also didn't like that I had to stay there and watch my stuff. There were some obnoxious people who couldn't wait and sat like vultures, ready to dump the contents of your washer or dryer into a bin the second it stopped. I certainly

didn't want some guy touching my undies, so I typically sat there with a book. And that—you guessed it—would leave me open to multiple overtures from clueless boys looking for either a hook-up or a wash maid. Ugh!

An hour and twenty-seven minutes later—but who was counting?—I finally finished up and was lugging a large, overloaded basket of my clean, folded clothes back across the lawn towards my place. It was a beautiful day and people were hanging out outside, reading and playing ball. I was calling out to a girl I knew when a Frisbee practically decapitated me. Stunned, I dropped my laundry, spilling the contents of the basket onto the grass. *Where's the asshole*, I thought as I looked around to see who had the bad aim. I saw some guy trotting towards me, cocky smirk on his face, and then another, who practically stiff-armed the first guy and said something that made him stop in his tracks. As he got closer, I noticed his build. He was tall and strong-looking. And his face? Well...face, body, smile...he was hot. As he came into better focus, he also struck me as familiar.

Holy crap.

It can't be him.

## Declan

It was a relief to get back to my routine after Tess left. Trying to shield her from what she might not like about my life here and trying to keep her happy and reassured in general, was an effort.

*I like it here*, I thought to myself one morning that week as I was getting dressed for class. I liked my routine, loved the camaraderie of my teammates and friends, and I liked the social life—simple things, like talking with people before class, eating lunch and dinner with my group of guys and girls. I even enjoyed study groups, as they were usually fifty percent study, fifty percent just hanging out. And despite what I'd told Tess, I loved the weekends, the parties, the lazing around on Sunday mornings.

During phone conversations, I only relayed stuff about classes and what went on between me and the guys on my team and in my dorm. Like I said, I had been faithful but there were girls that had expressed a not so subtle interest in me. Melissa was a friend of Brandon's from home and lived one dorm over. Melissa and her roommate Paige were often at our table at lunch

and we would often hang out with their crew of friends on the weekends. On two different occasions, Paige had all but mauled me after consuming a few drinks, to the point where I had to peel her off of me. Their other friend, Charlotte, was more subtle about it but I noticed the lingering looks and the frequent attempts to get my attention. I wasn't blind and wasn't completely unaffected. These girls were beautiful and they were also carefree and more fun to be around. I would stop myself then. It always felt wrong to compare these girls to Tess. It made me feel like a cheat. Technically I was doing nothing wrong, but in my heart I knew that having even a passing desire for someone else was cheating in its own way.

As I made my way home from class that day, I ran into Terrence, Jimmy, Colin and Brandon outside of our dorm. This campus was just how you would expect a quaint New England university to look: expanses of green lawn where Boden and J.Crew-clad coeds sat cross legged talking and laughing with one another, throwing Frisbees or reading underneath the branches of an ancient sycamore. The four of them were standing, Terrence holding a Frisbee, all of them looking in the direction of a girl. "See anything you like?" I broke in.

"Yes, me sees something me likes a lot."

Brandon chimed in, "Terrence has been talking up this girl from his advanced calculus class since the first day of school."

"Yeah," Colin added. "She's been the inspiration for his nightly jerk-off sessions. Do you know what it's like rooming with this guy? He's a fucking pig."

Terrence then served Colin with a low roundhouse kick, taking his legs out from under him and landing him on his ass. "Do *not* talk about my girl like that."

"Your girl," Brandon mocked. "You haven't even spoken to her."

"No, but I have admired her every day from afar. She is *hot*. She comes into class wearing these prim little hipster-girl clothes one day, then these rocker chick outfits other days and she has these piercings snaking up her earlobe. Makes me think she's a little minx in the sack."

We all laughed at that one. "What's her name?" I asked.

"He doesn't take attendance so I don't know."

"You don't even know her name?" Jimmy asked, laughing.

“Nope. I just know she’s beautiful. And I consider myself a math whiz but she blows me out of the water. Last week we got back a test that was just...brutal. I snuck a peek at her paper and she’d gotten an A. For some reason I find that kinda hot too.”

Colin laughed. “That’s ‘cause you’re practical, Terrence. You’re hoping she can fuck you *and* tutor you.”

“Enough of this bullshit,” Brandon said as he took the Frisbee from Terrence’s hand. “Incoming!” he shouted as he whipped the Frisbee right at the girl.

“I’m gonna kill you,” Terrence said to Brandon as the Frisbee whizzed by full speed, missing the girl’s face by a few centimeters.

“Oh shit,” we said collectively as the girl dropped a giant basket of laundry all over the grass.

“You’re an ass, Brandon,” Terrence said as he started walking that way.

When she saw him approaching, her angry glare stayed fixed in our general direction and for a moment her eyes met mine. *No way*, I thought. Before I knew it, I was breaking into a jog and when I caught up with Terrence, my left arm instinctively went out and knocked him back, stopping him mid-stride. “What the fuck, Declan?”

Absently, I said, “I know her,” as I continued to make my way, determined, to Anna.