

IF WE HAD NO WINTER



A Billie Dixon Novel

Book One

D. L. Pitchford

Straight on till Morningside Prints

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For my mother and father,
who were always there for me,
no matter how stupidly I behaved.

IF WE HAD
NO WINTER

*If we had no winter, the
spring would not be so
pleasant: if we did not
sometimes taste of adversity,
prosperity would not be so
welcome.*

Anne Bradstreet

One

“WHAT ARE YOUR PLANS TONIGHT, BILLIE?” JIMMY TURNS back as he pulls open the door to Bradford College’s most popular eating destination, and a smile spreads across his freckled pink face. “Do you want to study Whitman with me?”

Inside Rutherford Hall, the Eyrie is a small fast food restaurant with dark walls, spotlights on the tables, televisions blasting Comedy Central, and large neon signs. The line for the register is short, and Jimmy stops at the end, already pulling out his student ID.

I let out a short laugh as I fall into line behind him. “Not really.” I pause to tighten the tie around my long frizzy corkscrew hair. “Seriously, if I have to read one more section of ‘Song of Myself,’ I’m going to hurl.”

Jimmy laughs and pokes me good-naturedly. “They’re called cantos. If you’re going to pass the final, you should know the proper terminology.”

I send him a smile. “Whatever they’re called, there’s fifty-two of them, and it’s stupid. I don’t need to know that much about how the guy wants to ‘celebrate’ himself.” I roll my eyes.

“Fine.” He releases a melodramatic sigh. “I guess I’ll work on Chemistry. Do you know anything about ionic equations?”

My mouth contorts into a rueful smile as we move closer to the register. “Not any more than you do. Aren’t they easy? I think I got dual credit for that in high school.”

“Not everyone’s as smart as you are.” He turns back to me. “I only took Chem I. No dual credit for that.”

Before I can respond, Jimmy’s at the register, ordering a sandwich combo. He turns to ask if I want anything, and I pull out my own ID and wave it in his face. He huffs before turning back to the register and handing the female student worker his ID for payment.

As the girl behind the counter swipes and returns his card, Jimmy asks, “Hey, Rhonda, you working tomorrow? I’ve got the night shift.”

“On a Friday?” Her face forms a dark smile. “That sucks. I’m off, but I can check the schedule for you if you wanna know who’ll be here with you.”

“Nah, don’t worry about it.” He thanks her and steps aside, and Rhonda looks at me expectantly.

I force a smile and hand her my ID. “Just a fountain drink.”

She hands me a to-go cup and swipes my card at the same time.

Jimmy and I head to the drink station, where I fill my cup with Sprite. We find a couple seats while we wait for Jimmy’s food.

Wrapped around the white to-go cup, my hands are a ruddy ochre like clay, decidedly darker than they normally look. “I’m not that smart. It’s pretty basic math as far as I

remember.”

He laughs. “Basic math to you could be trigonometry to me.”

I quirk a smile and take another drink. Trig is basic math.

On the other side of the table, Jimmy pulls out his phone to check his messages, his thick brown hair falling in his eyes. He’s one of the few students who actually puts his phone away during class. He unlocks the device and flips through a few things before speaking. “Xander’s class got out early.”

I roll my eyes. There’s nothing that could make me care how early his idiotic roommate’s class released.

But Jimmy moves on, sliding his thumb across the screen. “And I’m to inform you that you’re supposed to check your phone more often.”

I frown and pull my phone from my pocket. Why would Xander say that? He never texts me. But when I look at my two messages, they’re both from Imogene. “Oh.”

He sets his phone down and looks at me. “Well, you should’ve gone home over break. The first real opportunity to visit and you stayed here. How many other people in our building were on campus for Thanksgiving?”

Aside from our RA and the foreign exchange students, who of course had no reason to celebrate the American holiday, it was only me and Xander. Of course, with Jimmy away, we’d been able to ignore each other as much as we wanted, which conveniently meant no dealing with Jimmy’s irritation during one of our more heated arguments.

“It was a short break.” I shrug. “You know I can’t afford to fly home for every four-day break from classes.” Even if it means disappointing my little sister.

He scoots his chair away from the table to get more comfortable and takes a sip of his drink. "I know, but you know my parents don't mind contributing if it means they get to see you."

I sigh and cast my eyes around the Eyrrie. Surely his food should be ready by now. "I'm not a charity case, Jimmy."

"No, but Imogene would've liked to know you were staying in St. Clare before I got home to tell her. That's something that sounds a lot better coming from your sister, not your neighbor." He sighs. "Even if you're not there to see it, she's still upset."

He's right, of course. He usually is. But I have far more cause to stay on campus than he does. Imogene is the only real reason to go home.

Luckily, Jimmy knows me well enough to realize when I'm ready to change the subject.

"Will you at least hang out with me while I do homework tonight? Xander isn't exactly good studying company."

"Maybe later." I take a drink. "I've got plans at five, and I'm not sure how long it'll take."

Jimmy's face transforms into a wide smile. "Does this mean you're finally going to spend time with your dad? You've been putting this off for too long, Billie. He is the reason you're at Bradford—you should at least pay him back by spending time with him."

I open my mouth, but at the pick-up station, the student worker calls out, "Eighty-two," and Jimmy rises from his seat to retrieve his foam to-go box. We refill our cups at the drink station before heading back into the cold.

The walk from Rutherford Hall to our dorm building takes less than ten minutes. The nice thing about a small

college like Bradford is how close everything is. The farthest part of campus is the upperclassmen housing, which takes up far more space than the three dorm buildings, Arthur, Coolidge, and my own, Lincoln Hall.

“Okay, sure,” I say as we begin the walk toward the dorms, “my father’s a professor here. That doesn’t mean I’m indebted to him. He doesn’t pay my tuition—his job just makes it cheaper.”

“The divorce papers went through over three years ago.” Jimmy tugs his coat zipper higher to block out the cold wind. “Attending Bradford is the first time you’ve seen him since he moved to St. Clare.”

“That was his decision, not mine. I’m not the one who stopped calling.”

“People make mistakes, Billie.”

I roll my eyes. This isn’t the first time I’ve heard this spiel. “Yes, well, three years’ worth of mistakes is a lot.”

With a sigh, he casts his gaze in my direction before looking across the expanse of Bradford College. “And I’m not making excuses for him, but he probably interpreted you attending his school and majoring in his department as an attempt to reconnect with him—and then you avoided him from the moment we arrived.”

I frown. “It’s not like he took the time to find me either.”

Jimmy smiles and runs a hand through his messy hair. “You finally got up the nerve to talk to him and made plans? I’m really glad, Billie. Nobody knows how upset you were when your parents separated better than me.”

I cast my gaze down to my hands. How can I tell him I haven’t? Especially when he’s so happy about it—happy for me. How can I say I haven’t said a word to my father

since the last time we had this discussion, since we arrived? How can I say I have no intention to speak to that man ever again?

Instead, I direct my attention to my drink and take a long slurp from the straw, but it's hardly enough of a distraction. I survey the sidewalk, uneven where Bradford's ancient oaks and maples have spread their roots. I push my glasses up my nose, play with the drawstring on my blue hoody, tuck a few coarse auburn strands behind my ear.

"Oh, no." When I look at him, Jimmy's face has fallen. "Have I made a fool of myself by making assumptions?"

I send him a sheepish smile.

"You're not meeting your dad, are you?"

"Not really, no." Somehow, he manages to make me feel guilty even when he's the one who made the mistake.

The disappointment is obvious, and I look away. But Jimmy moves on quickly. "Then what are your plans at five?"

I smile, happy for the turn in conversation. "I'm meeting someone for tutoring. I put up an ad on the school website last week, and someone took me up on it."

For a moment, Jimmy's silent, and when I turn to him, his bushy eyebrows have all but disappeared under his disheveled hair. "You're tutoring someone?" I confirm with a nod, and he erupts into laughter. "Sorry, sorry," he says through his chortles when I fix him with a glare, "but I can't imagine you being a teacher. You're not very patient—or, you know, good with people."

On the left, we pass Chapman Library, where in an hour and a half I will meet a fellow math student for our first tutoring session. The building is the picture of modern architecture with its use of glass and steel. The school is

quite proud of that particular feature, and it highly contrasts the rest of campus architecture, most of which is in the style of the 1800s.

I frown. “I can be professional, and I’m good enough at math to tutor someone in calculus.”

Jimmy grins. “I’m not at all skeptical of your ability with the subject matter, trust me. You’re the reason I passed math in high school.”

I cock an eyebrow and switch the drink between my amber-colored hands. I should’ve worn gloves. “But?”

He takes a drink and averts his eyes. “But we both know your social skills could use a little work. You’re, uh, kind of intense.”

“I’m determined.”

“Yes.” He nods. “And ambitious and talented—and a little short-tempered and stubborn. Besides, how are you not having a panic attack just thinking about this?” He sends me a worried glance. “Seriously, you freak out if I try to get you to leave the dorms for anything other than class.”

I heave a sigh and switch hands again. “I can do this. I know I can.”

Jimmy smiles, his eyes apologetic. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to screw with your confidence.”

“It’s fine.” I shake my head. “I’ll be fine.”

Let’s be honest, though. As much as I try to ignore the ache behind my eyes and tension in my neck, they’re there. I’m already anxious about the meeting.

We pass a couple parking lots and another campus building, and Jimmy says, “I’m going to have to study by myself then.”

“You have Xander.” I roll my eyes. I may not like the

guy, but they are roommates—and unfortunately, they’ve become quite close in the months since we started here.

“And that might be a comfort if we didn’t both know he’s going to spend the evening playing video games.”

I laugh. “I’ve never seen him do anything productive.”

“That’s because you sleep in till you’re almost late for class. He does most things in the morning, I think.”

I cock an eyebrow. “You think?”

On the left, before the Lane converges with Vallee Street, are the three dormitory buildings. Lincoln Hall is the farthest one.

Jimmy shrugs. “He’s always up before me—except on Saturday mornings.”

I snort as we cross to the opposite side of the street. On Saturday mornings, Xander’s too hung over to get up before Jimmy does.

“Well, if the tutoring doesn’t take long, I’ll join you in your room afterward. It’s not like I have anything else to do.”

After a short laugh, Jimmy sends me a sidelong glance. “Yeah, I know how much you want to go back to your own room.”

I groan. “Why in the world were we both stuck with awful roommates? Those compatibility forms were supposed to room you with someone you’ll actually get along with.”

But this is where I lose him.

“Don’t say that.” Jimmy shakes his head. “I can’t vouch for Val, but Xander isn’t that bad. You’re the only person who doesn’t like him.”

I purse my lips. “Well, I’m the only person who sees reason.”

Jimmy laughs.

“What? He’s an ass.”

He shakes his head. “I won’t say he’s the nicest person in the world, but he’s not terrible, Billie. And it works both ways. He’s not the only one who could be a little kinder.”

We reach Lincoln Hall, and Jimmy swipes his ID card across the gray panel next to the double doors to unlock the building.

“Elevator or stairs?” he asks once inside.

I pause to consider. Our dorm rooms are on the fourth and final floor. “Elevator.”

We turn to the left of the foyer, and I press the up arrow. The elevator opens immediately, and inside the tiny space, Jimmy presses the button for the top floor while I lean against the back wall.

I’m still frowning. “Whatever. I’m glad he’s a dick to me. That makes me the one girl he has absolutely no interest in boning, and that sounds perfect to me.”

The doors close, and the elevator rises.

Facing the semi-reflective metal doors, Jimmy smiles conspiratorially—though he’s definitely not conspiring with me. “Like you’d notice if he were into you.”

I glare at the back of his head. “What is that supposed to mean?”

He laughs and turns to look at me. “I’ve been your best friend for years, and I can tell you, I’ve never met anyone more clueless.”

I snort. “Right, because you’re great at understanding our fellow humans, strange creatures that they are.”

A loud chuckle erupts from Jimmy’s pink lips, and it echoes in the small chamber. “I may be awkward, but at

least I can tell when someone likes me. You have no idea how many guys had crushes on you in high school, do you?”

“Are you going to come to a point anytime soon?”

We pass the third floor, and the elevator stops at number four. It takes a second for the doors to open.

“My point is,” he says as we step off the platform, “not everyone’s feelings are as obvious as mine, and it’d be good if you tried to suss them out. Not everyone fits inside your perfect bubbles, Billie. I certainly don’t.”

I frown and look away.

Of course he doesn’t. Jimmy’s special. He’s my best friend and the only person who stayed by my side when my dad left. He never pressured me, never judged me when I retreated into the background, never stopped caring—unlike everyone else. I don’t know why he still puts up with me.

We turn right down our hallway and pass several rooms before separating. I unlock my door, drop off my backpack in the dark room, and walk across the hall to Jimmy’s open door.

Inside, their room is what Jimmy insists on calling an organized mess—I don’t agree with the term “organized,” though my own room is hardly better. On the left side, their beds are pushed into opposite corners. They each have a nightstand, and a desk and swivel chair sits between them. At the foot of Xander’s bed on the far side is a mini-fridge he brought with him. On the right is Xander’s massive 55-inch TV, accompanied by a myriad of gaming systems dating all the way back to the ‘80s. Beyond the television, a small door leads to the bathroom they share with the boys next door.

Jimmy empties his bag on his bed and chats with Xander,

whose animated voice stops the second I rap my knuckles on the open door. On his tawny face, the wolfish grin transforms into a scowl, and his blue eyes meet mine before he turns away.

Jimmy glances up. "Come in."

"Yeah, Dixon, by all means," Xander says, his voice an irritated grumble, "you're always welcome here." He moves away from Jimmy's bed and returns to the center of the room, where he sprawls across the floor with a pillow and a PlayStation controller in front of his too-big-for-a-dorm-room flat-screen. His loose black hair creates a halo around his head. He resumes his video game, and on the screen, a large white wolf dashes across a bridge. Uplifting Japanese music blares from the speakers.

I step inside the room, to-go cup in hand, and sit down on the edge of Jimmy's bed, ready to continue our conversation. "Your feelings are obvious because you shout them from the rooftops."

Jimmy laughs and organizes his textbooks from today's classes. "That's only because I've known you forever."

It's really not, but I move on. "Okay, I'm clueless. Why can't people say what they mean instead of hiding behind a facade all the time?" In the middle of the room, Xander laughs, but I ignore him. "That'd be much easier than doing ridiculous mating dances and manipulating each other."

Jimmy sits down in the swivel chair and casts a glance at the floor, where Xander is still laughing while playing his game. "That's a nice idea," Jimmy says, "but being that open makes you incredibly vulnerable." I have to strain to hear him.

I scowl as Xander's laughter increases in intensity, and

after a moment of staring at Jimmy, waiting to be able to continue our conversation, I turn my attention to the asshole on the floor. “What is your problem, Theroux?”

At last, he stops laughing and turns to me, a smirk on his olive-colored face. “It’s pretty rich hearing you of all people talk about how everyone should be honest and straightforward. You hide behind a facade every second of the day so you don’t have to be vulnerable.”

I try to prevent myself from crushing the cup in my hand. “No one asked your opinion.”

“Actually, I’m pretty sure you did.” He returns to his game and turns up the volume to drown us out, smirking.

I turn back to Jimmy, who frowns at his roommate and picks up the conversation, probably to distract me. “The fact is, Billie, you are clueless, and that can put you in some pretty awkward situations—sometimes dangerous—because you don’t know what you’re getting yourself into.”

I roll my eyes. “I’ll be fine. I don’t intend to date anyway.”

On the floor, despite his video game, Xander can still hear us. “Maybe if you didn’t dress like a dude, someone might want to date you—well, with your personality, they might settle for fucking you.”

I clench my jaw to prevent an overreaction, and Jimmy snatches a pen off the desk and chucks it at his roommate. “Don’t be a dick.” I smile victoriously as Xander grumbles in protest and rubs at the back of his head.

Jimmy turns back to me as if the exchange didn’t happen. “I know that, but anyone can take advantage of you, not just a boyfriend-type. You’re not very good with people.”

Xander snorts and mumbles something to himself.

I frown. “You don’t think I should do this tutoring gig,

do you?”

But Jimmy shakes his head. “That’s not what I meant. You could be really good at it. Just make sure you’re getting paid enough.”

I open my mouth to respond, but Xander pauses his game and twists to look at us. “Wait a second, am I hearing this correctly? Did you willingly sign up to tutor someone? Really?”

I glare down at him, but he doesn’t notice.

“Who’s the unlucky moron?”

Jimmy’s curious face is the only reason I answer, although grudgingly. “All I have is a name. Nelson something. I don’t remember.”

“And what in the world,” Xander continues, “makes you think you’ll be a good teacher?”

I square my shoulders. “Definitely not you.”

A smirk spreads across his face. “Is this your first job? How cute.”

I scoff. “I got a job the second I turned sixteen, thank you. What would you know? You’ve never worked a day in your life, rich boy.” Before he can counter, I add, “A blow-off job at the Eyrle doesn’t count.”

Xander lets out a short, humorless laugh and returns to his game, where he directs an enormous calligraphy brush across the screen.

I’m still staring at him when Jimmy speaks. “I’m sure tutoring will be fine. I mean, you’re good at everything you do—math, computers and coding, art. You’ll be great.” He’s trying to placate me.

I pull out my phone to check the time. There’s an hour till five, but I want to be as far away from Xander as possible.

“I should get ready,” I tell Jimmy, “and you need to work on those ionic equations while I’m gone. We can study for American Lit when I’m done.”

From the floor, Xander scoffs. “Make sure to take your Midol before you meet him.”

I stand up, gritting my teeth, and Jimmy rolls his eyes and sends me a short wave as I leave. “Later,” he calls after me. Even as I walk away, I can hear him move the swivel chair and call the attention of his roommate.



By the time I reach the library, the small pain behind my eyes is a full-blown headache, but despite that, I set up at the agreed-upon table a full ten minutes before five.

Beneath large fluorescent lights, the second story of Chapman Library is divided into three sections. At the top of the stairs, where I sit, an area is cordoned off for tables and chairs, each table with its own lamp, and the other two sections spread across each side with rows upon rows of books.

Across the table, I spread my calculus book, spiral notebook, and one-inch binder. On my right side, I line up the bottom edges of a black gel pen and a green highlighter. And when everything is organized, I cast my gaze around the library.

The top floor is nearly empty. Even two weeks before finals, it’s quiet at dinnertime.

He arrives seven minutes after five. Under the harsh fluorescents, his white skin looks translucent, especially beneath his jet-black hair. Sharp jawline, angular features, and he’s

slim and tall, visible on the stairs long before he reaches the top—he's at least six foot. He strolls up the stairs, one arm wrapped around a binder, the other hand inside the pocket of his Bradford hoody, and upon discovering me, stops at the table's edge, looming. "Uh, Wilhelmina?" He glances at the sticky note on the front of his notebook.

I grimace. "Billie."

"You're in my calculus class, right?" He tilts his head to the side. "Eight a.m. with Hodges?"

I've never noticed him in class, but I nod. I'm usually too engrossed in the classwork to pay attention to my classmates.

"I'm Zane." He leans over the table to offer me his hand. "Zane Nelson."

For a moment, I stare at the hand. It's pale like the rest of him, smooth and unused, but his nails are down to the quick. He's never done hard labor, and he possibly has an oral fixation. But more importantly, I don't like people touching me.

"Then you're in the right place," I say instead. I turn my attention to the table, push my thick-rimmed glasses up my nose, and move a large section of my coiled auburn hair behind my shoulder. "Let's get started."

Zane pauses before pulling his hand back, then he lays his textbook and notepad on the table and sits opposite me. "Hold on a minute. Aren't you a little young to teach me calculus?" He eyes me skeptically, eyebrows furrowed.

I frown. I knew this was coming, of course, especially after Jimmy's morale-boosting speech earlier, but the headache behind my eyes flares up. I push my fingers beneath my glasses and pinch the bridge of my nose. "Yes, I'm eighteen,

and yes, I'm a freshman." I pull back my hand and clasp my fingers together on the table. "That makes me no less capable than anyone else here."

"How good are you at math? Because I'm a senior and—"

"And you're only now taking Calculus. If you were good at it, you would've taken it sooner. This isn't an instance where you should save the best for last."

Unconvinced, he shrugs.

I lean closer to the table and focus on the edge of my notebook. This is easier if I don't look at him. "I took every possible math class in high school, five of which weren't required. I intend to major in Mathematics. This calculus class is going to be a cinch for me. If you don't want me to teach you, leave. You don't have to be here."

We sit in silence as he digests my words.

"Wait." He leans forward across the table to get a closer look at me. "You're Wilhelmina Dixon. Are you related to Dr. Dixon?"

I purse my lips. My father is the last thing I want to talk about right now. "No."

"You are!" A smile spreads across his face. "He's the Head of the Math Department. You must be good at it. Let's get down to it, Wilhelmina."

"Billie," I correct again, but he turns his attention to his notepad. "We need to discuss terms."

Zane looks up and raises an eyebrow. "I thought we already agreed on ten bucks an hour? Do you want more?" I shake my head and open my mouth to speak, but he laughs. "Alright, you can have eleven, and hell, if I get a good grade on the final, I'll give you a bonus. We have a lot of stuff to go over in the next two weeks."

“A bonus?”

“Yeah, whatever you want. Within reason.”

We sit in silence for a moment, our eyes locked. I doubt my skills as a teacher warrant that much, but would refusing imply I'm unprofessional or unqualified? I need this job. It's December now, and I haven't worked since arriving at Bradford in mid-August. If I don't find something soon, I won't have the money for next semester's books.

Finally, I turn to the textbook in front of me. “We should get started then.”

“Where do we begin?”

I take a deep breath. “How did you score on the midterm?”

With a small smile, Zane flips through his textbook until he finds one of the many papers sticking out. He removes the stapled sheets and shoves them toward me.

C-. It could be worse.

My phone chimes, and I reach into my bag to retrieve it. A text from Imogene: *When are you free? We should talk soon.* I frown and push the phone to the side. I haven't responded to her texts from earlier, but right now, my sister can wait. That conversation will require my full attention.

I thumb through the four sheets of paper, glancing over Mr. Hodges's corrections and notations. Zane has a good understanding of limits, but difficulty with derivatives. Differentiation needs a lot of work. No idea how he's processing integrals, since we started that Monday, but it probably needs improvement as well.

I clear my throat and lay his test on the table. “What's the definition of a derivative?”

Apparently, he expected more of a preamble. He floun-

ders for a minute before flipping through the book again, searching for the chapter. He's taking too long.

"This shouldn't be something you have to look up. It's an easy formula to remember, and it's essential to solving for the derivative of any function. Of course, as you should remember, we have plenty of shortcuts, but if you can't remember those, you need to know the definition to solve the problem."

"Um, it's f of x equals...something."

"If by ' f of x ,' you mean ' f prime of x ,' then so far so good."

Finally, he gives up and stares at me helplessly. "Okay, what is it?"

"Chapter 2.1, Zane. It should be on the first page. Let's look at it together."

He furrows his brow before turning back to the book to find the pertinent information, and I do the same with my own book and scoot closer to the table, swallowing down the nausea building in my nervous stomach.

Two

DESPITE THE THICK CONCRETE WALLS, VAL'S SHOWER IN THE en suite bathroom is still discernible. I glance at the clock on my phone. She's been in there for twenty minutes, and there's no end in sight.

On her side of the room, she's already laid out her clothes for the evening—a tight, plum-colored dress and a pair of gold hooker heels. Several pairs of earrings and an Egyptian-style pendant that reaches down to her navel sit on her desk. She's going out tonight.

I turn my attention back to my textbook and glance through one of the later chapters. Partial derivatives. We've already focused on derivatives where there's one variable, but partial derivatives have multiple. We won't study it in this class—probably not in Calc II either—but I already know all this. The class is a refresher.

With a sigh, I skip ahead to the next chapter and thumb through sections on relative and absolute extrema. I flip another page, and a *knock* sounds on the door, directly across from the foot of my bed.

I don't want to get up, but what else am I doing with my time? I'm not even studying—not really. I'm already caught

up on all my classes.

I force myself to my feet, leaving my calc textbook behind, and march to the door. “Yeah?”

Ugh. Xander.

“What do you want?”

He forces a smile. “Hello to you too.”

The sight of him makes me pause. Button-up shirt, shiny shoes, and sleek dark jeans. Aside from the leather jacket slung over his left shoulder, this is quite a change from his typical Batman and *Legend of Zelda* t-shirts and Vans. Nevertheless, he looks good in everything he wears—and he’s well aware of that fact.

I raise an eyebrow. “Sure, hi.” I return to my bed, but for some reason, he doesn’t go away. “I’m not joining you guys for dinner tonight. I’m studying.” I glance at my phone again. “Isn’t it a little late for dinner anyway?”

Xander laughs and collapses on my giant beanbag, letting his jacket fall onto the seat beside him. “I’m so not here for you.”

“Then why are you here?”

A smug grin envelops his face. “I have a date.”

“Why would I care?” I push a few loose strands of hair out of my eyes and try to ignore him. Where was I?

Right, relative extrema.

Xander interrupts before I can immerse myself. “You wouldn’t.”

Huffing, I look up at his stupid face. “Give me a straight answer or get out. Seriously.”

He laughs again. “I’m not here for you, Dixon. I’m waiting for Val.”

Nausea wells in my stomach, and I don’t bother hiding

the disgust from my face. “You two are perfect for each other. Congratulations.”

Another smug grin. “You know, now that you say that, I’m having serious second thoughts. Maybe I should go.”

“Please. You’re a distraction.”

“I’ll be quiet.” He leans back in the beanbag, the picture of relaxation, and zips his mouth shut with his fingers.

I roll my eyes and return to my book.

There’s barely any difference between working with one variable and two. It doesn’t change the definition of relative extrema. This is easy. It’s the only thing in life that is.

“What’re you doing?”

I glance up to find Xander’s eyes on me. He leans forward curiously to catch a glimpse of the book, but he’s too far away. When I don’t answer, he cocks an eyebrow expectantly.

Frowning, I look back to the book. “I’m reading about relative extrema.”

He snorts. “What the hell’s that?”

“You wouldn’t understand.”

He scoffs. “Do you have a test over it?”

“No.”

A small laugh bursts from his lips, and he scoots the beanbag closer, moving past the foot of the bed. “Is your Saturday night so boring you have to resort to reading about some stupid mathematical principle that’s not covered in your class?” He leans against the edge of the bed, smirking.

“I like math.” I shake my head. I don’t know why I bother talking to him. “You wouldn’t understand.”

Xander reaches over and snatches the book from my bed. “A function, f of (x, y) , has a relative minimum at the point of (a, b) iff of—okay, seriously, you read this shit for fun?”

I glare. "Give it back."

"Gladly." He pushes the book, open to the page I'm reading, across the bed. "I learned enough about functions in high school to last a lifetime."

"I'm impressed you know how to read it." I roll my eyes.

"That's not the only impressive thing I can do." I don't have to look to know he's smirking.

"I'm sure you'll tell my roommate all about your talents tonight."

Once she manages to get out of the shower. How much of her body does she need to shave in preparation for their date?

Xander scoots closer and rests an arm on the edge of the bed. "How long has she been in there? I told her eight, and it's ten after."

I grit my teeth and pull the textbook closer. I'm tired of this conversation. I really have no interest in their evening activities, especially considering it's no secret how often Xander's dates end in sex.

"Dixon, are you ignoring me?"

My eyes move down to critical points, and next to the bed, Xander groans.

"It's boring to make fun of you when you're ignoring me, Dixon. But I know you can't do it for long. You have to retaliate."

I narrow my eyes at the page. The words are insulting—mostly because they're true—and despite my better judgment, I shift my gaze to look at his irritated face. "What more could you possibly make fun of? You've already mocked my entire evening."

His face transforms into a grin, and he leans closer.

“There’s always more I can make fun of. You make it so easy—and tempting.”

I roll my eyes, but I’m saved from responding by the water finally shutting off.

Val exits the bathroom and waltzes into the room wrapped in a towel to retrieve her clothes and jewelry. She barely contains a shriek at the sight of Xander. “Go away!” He’s probably never seen her without makeup before.

Unfazed by her outburst, he shrugs. “I can close my eyes.” He places his hands over his eyes with a dramatic flourish.

I return to my notes as Val snatches the clothes off her bed and hurries back to the bathroom. When the blow-dryer starts a few minutes later, Xander gives up on covering his eyes to check his watch. “How much longer is this going to last?”

I send him a glare and keep reading.

“Forever, apparently.” He leans his head against his arm, resting on my bed, and shuts his eyes.

At last, Val returns and stands in front of him with her hands on her hips. Her attempt to play it cool isn’t very convincing with a quivering lower lip. “Okay, you can look now.”

Between the dress, the makeup, and her styled hair, she’s trying too hard, and Xander isn’t easily impressed. He barely gives her a once-over before standing and pulling on his jacket in one fluid motion. “Let’s go.” He leads her by the shoulders to the door, and Val scrambles to grab her purse.

As he closes the door, Xander calls over his shoulder, “Don’t wait up,” and he waggles his eyebrows at me suggestively. The latch clicks into place behind them.

Silence.

With a heavy sigh, I return to my textbook. They can stay out as long as they like.

By the time I finish the chapter on maximum extrema, I'm exhausted. It's only 9:30, but I'm always tired—one of the side effects of never sleeping enough.

I close the textbook and push it aside. I need something, anything, a distraction.

On my desk, my phone lights up, vibrating and blasting the opening bars of Weezer's "Troublemaker." Not exactly the distraction I was looking for.

I stand and grab the phone from the desk. Imogene.

My finger hovers over the 'Reject' button before sliding over to 'Accept.' She's talking before the phone is up to my ear.

"You didn't come home for Thanksgiving, Billie." Her normally bubbly tone is a cross between sadness and accusation, and I frown. I knew this conversation was coming. "You didn't call."

"You knew I wasn't coming, Mo," I say in a small voice. "Jimmy told you."

"Yeah, when he arrived Wednesday afternoon."

"I should've called, I know."

"Yes, you should have." But her tone quickly loses its bite. "I miss you."

My chest tightens, and I open my mouth. I want to tell her I miss her too, sorry I didn't call, but all that comes out is, "How's Mom?"

On the other side of the line, I can hear the clinking of a ball bearing as she shakes up a tiny glass bottle. She's

applying nail polish. “She’s been better.” Imogene chooses her words carefully. “She’s getting out of the house more. Doing a Latin dance class to try to keep her mind off things. I’m sure she’ll tell you all about it at Christmas. It’s all she talks about right now. She says the instructor is amazingly talented.” She pauses. “You are coming home for Christmas, right?”

I nod, though she can’t see me. “They do kick us out of the dorms over winter break.”

“Good, good,” she says absentmindedly. “How’re your classes? Not failing anything yet, are you?”

I let out a small, hollow laugh. “Won’t find out till the end of the semester, but my midterm grades were fine. Jimmy is in my American Literature class, and we work on our papers together. Not that he’s any better with English than I am.”

She leans away from the mouthpiece to blow. “Yeah, he mentioned something like that.”

I grab my wallet from my desk and head for the door, pausing when I open it. “Wait, what? Since when do you talk to Jimmy about that?”

Imogene huffs. “Since you barely communicate, Billie. I have to get news about your life from somewhere, and if that happens to be from our next-door neighbor and your only friend, so be it.”

My grip tightens on my wallet. “You can talk to me, you know. You’re just better at communicating than me.”

The short trek into the hallway to find the Coke machine is cold in a t-shirt and gym shorts. The vending machines are located at the end of the hallway, near the elevators and laundry room. Most of the rooms are closed, including

Jimmy's. With Xander out, Jimmy's usually studying or working a shift at the Eyrie. He's always been a shut-in like me—until Xander came into the picture.

On the left, across from the laundry room, David's door is open, and he sits on his bed, glancing up as I pass. He lifts an ebony-skinned hand to wave and smiles. Our RA.

"Everyone is better at communicating than you, sis." Imogene sighs. "Except maybe Dad."

And there's the segue.

The carpet in front of the vending machines is worn down from heavy foot traffic. I stand in front of the soda machine, push my quarters into the hole, and listen to the *clink clink* as it collects my change.

Out of Sprite. I settle for orange soda and wait for her to continue.

"Speaking of him," she says, her voice slow and unsteady, "what's it like being around him? It can't be easy."

No, the meticulous effort to avoid him at all costs hasn't been easy.

"It's alright. He's not that bad, though it's not like we see each other often."

The bottle is dispensed at the bottom, and I retrieve it before taking a glance at the snack machines. I don't remember the last time I ate.

"Billie, what's he like?"

I move closer to the machines and pick out a bag of chips. "What, you don't remember?" I grab it from the dispenser at the bottom and turn back toward my room.

"There'd have to be something for me to remember. Someone had to keep Mom company while the two of you were off gallivanting at the university and exchanging your

secret codes.”

I purse my lips as I walk down the hallway again. “We did not gallivant.”

She doesn’t respond.

“He’s the same as he was when we were kids. Quiet, listens to classical music, loves NPR. He rides his bike to campus every day. We really don’t see each other often. I’ve got loads of homework, and he, you know, has to grade loads of homework.”

“Yeah, I know.” Disappointment laces her voice. “When is your last day of the semester? When will you come home?”

“It’s a couple weeks away. I think my last final is on Thursday; I’ll fly out after that.”

I haven’t even thought about travel back to Missouri yet. Jimmy’s already booked his flight, and Xander’s flying out around the same time. They’re driving up to the Burlington International Airport that Friday afternoon since their flights are the following morning. Jimmy’s been nagging me to book mine so I can go with them, but I’m not particularly keen on an hour-drive with Xander.

“Okay.” Imogene sounds skeptical.

I reach my room and pause at the door. “I’ll let you know when to pick me up at the airport, alright?”

“Yeah. Mom and I’ll be there for you. Give us a little heads-up, though. I don’t want to rush over there because you forgot to tell us your arrival time.”

“Of course. I have to go, Mo.”

“Do you have plans?” Her voice bubbles again.

I almost laugh. “Does studying count?”

She scoffs. “Alright, fine. I’ll let you go.”

“Yeah, bye.” I pull the phone away, press ‘End Call’ when

the screen lights up, and reach for the doorknob.

To my right, the door to Room 421 opens, and the happy face of Prudence Marlowe peeks out. “Hi, Billie.” Her flowing brown hair bounces as she exits her room and locks the door.

I nod and turn the knob, but she calls out to me again.

“Can you believe how long Val’s showers last?” Prudence laughs. “I don’t think I’ve ever known someone who needs that much time to bathe.” She and her roommate Cynthia—otherwise known as the love of Jimmy’s life—share the bathroom with us, which means we see each other while getting ready every morning.

I shrug. “I wasn’t really paying attention.” Or at least trying not to.

“Did I hear something about her going on a date tonight?” Her face lights up with curiosity, then she glances down at the chips in my hand and smiles. “How do you eat that junk and stay so skinny?”

I raise an eyebrow. “Yeah, she has a date.” I push open the door and gaze at my bed before sending another look Prudence’s way.

“Really? With who?”

I don’t bother keeping the sneer off my face. “Xander, of course.” Honestly, I should’ve expected it sooner with the way Val’s been throwing herself at him during our seminar class all semester.

I turn back to the bed and take a step inside the room. “I’m going to turn in.” She’s still sending me warm wishes when I lock the door behind me.

I take a quick drink and open up my laptop to play the soft mellow sounds of the Foo Fighters. With Val gone,

I can listen to whatever I want without complaint. From beneath the stacks of textbooks on my desk, I withdraw my most recent sketchbook, pages torn and faded, ragged edges, nearly full, and a couple brush-tip pens. Maybe the flow of ink can help me get some sleep tonight.

Three

MR. HODGES FINISHES HIS LESSON, AND I PACK AWAY MY books.

On the other side of the classroom, Zane shoulders his bag and stands, ready to leave, but he pauses and locks eyes with me. Per usual, his straight black hair is falling in his eyes. He approaches, stopping next to my desk as I zip up my backpack and pull it on.

“I might be late tonight,” he says as we walk out of the classroom together. “I have a meeting with my adviser, and he usually runs late. But it’s in Mercier Hall, so that’s close to the library.”

“That’s fine.” We head up the stairs to the first floor of Stanley Hall. The math classes are located in the basement. “We can start later if that’s easier for you.”

Zane shrugs, and he pauses at the top of the stairs. “Oh, hey, I have something for you.” He rifles through his bag, and I stop beside him, glancing around the foyer of the building as the other students pass by. He pulls out a tattered envelope overflowing with cash. “We’ve done six sessions already, and I figured you’d like to get paid.”

He offers the envelope to me, and I look at him with a

raised eyebrow. I didn't realize we've spent that much time together already. I accept the envelope and flip through the contents. "Uh, thanks." I pocket it. Why does this feel like a drug deal?

He brushes it off. "It is the deal, Wilhelmina."

I frown. "Why do you call me that?"

Zane sends me a skeptical glance. "We exchanged emails and text messages for several days before we actually met. How was I supposed to know you go by something else?"

I suppose that would be my fault for not clarifying till we met in person.

"Right." I turn away from him, ready to move on. "I have class. I'm sure you do too."

"Yeah, whatever."

He follows me to the exit, but I trip as I fight with the zipper of my hoody. The bottom pins won't fit together. Finally, they catch, and I slide the zipper upward and collide with a figure in front of me.

"Mina?"

I look up. The man in front of me has wavy deep brown hair, smooth dark brown skin, wire-rimmed glasses, a five o'clock shadow—and hazel eyes to match mine. He looks professional with his navy dress shirt, khakis, and a bright blue bow-tie, but he stammers at the sight of me, eyes wide.

"Dad."

Behind me, Zane comes to a stumbling halt, nearly running into me, and observes the situation in silence.

My father clears his throat. "You look, uh, well."

"Thanks. You too." I slide the zipper all the way to my neck and glance toward the door before returning to those eyes. "I have class...in Cameron Hall."

“Of course.” A rueful smile spreads across his face. “You’re always welcome to stop by my office. Room 311 on the top floor.”

“Sure thing.” The forced excitement in my voice probably sounds more like sarcasm, but I take a step toward the door and turn to leave.

“Mina,” he calls after me, and I look back. He and Zane are both standing there awkwardly, watching me. The contrast between their skin tones, the former a deep umber, the latter so white he could be ill, is unmistakable under the fluorescent lights.

“Yeah?”

Dad takes a couple steps closer, and his lips form a thin line, the mark of determination. “I would like to see you. I have my tea at four o’clock and dinner at seven. Join me at my house tonight.”

For a second, I hesitate, but slowly, a response stumbles out of my mouth. “I have plans at five, and I don’t have the address.”

“I can email it to you.” He pauses, and for a second, his firm gaze falters. “Would you be able to make dinner?”

No. Of course I can’t. It doesn’t matter if it’s true, say no.

“I should be free then.”

“Then I’ll see you at seven.”

“Yeah.” I step toward the door, utter one last, “Goodbye,” and leave the building.

The door shuts behind me, and all at once, the wave of nausea hits me full-blast. I pause in front of the door under the awning and clench my eyes shut. Count my breaths, not my heartbeats. Swallow down the lump in my throat.

That wasn’t supposed to happen.

All I've seen in the past four months is glimpses. Him riding down the Lane on his bicycle, walking up the stairs of Stanley Hall to his office, packing a to-go meal in the cafeteria. There've been a million times I've seen him and turned the other way, hidden behind a bush or in the bathroom. Even so, surely he's seen me sometime during these four months. But he never pursued me, never contacted me, never showed any interest.

Why now? And worse, why couldn't I think of an excuse?

I tear open my eyes and kick one of the shrubs along the walkway. In the green space between here and the library, a couple students glance my way before continuing their trek to their next class, and I lean against the nearest awning support and bang my head against the metal. "Dammit."

"Are things really that hard with your dad?"

I twist my head to find Zane, standing outside the building doors, staring at me.

"Don't worry about it." I shake my head. "I have class."

He approaches before I can force my legs to move again. "I'm not worried. Just curious. I hadn't gotten the impression it was that serious during our sessions."

Wasn't that the point? My failed relationship with my father has absolutely nothing to do with my business arrangement with Zane.

"I have to go to class, Zane. I'll see you at five, right? When you're done with your adviser?"

He nods. "I'll meet you in the library."



Zane glances up at me from his notebook. "Don't you

need to wrap this up? We can finish later.” He pulls over his phone and lights up the screen. “It’s 6:30.”

I frown but square my shoulders and point to one of his homework problems with my pencil. “Make sure you use the chain rule for number twenty-one.”

“Sure.” He nods, but when I look at him again, he’s watching me. “Your dad said seven, didn’t he? How long will it take you to get there?”

Eight minutes, according to Google Maps.

“We need to go over more integration techniques.”

Despite the serious look on his face, Zane laughs. “Should we meet up tomorrow to catch up on this? Or do we just want to do one more session before the final?”

I sigh as my eyes peruse his homework between us. “Everything else here looks alright. You’re getting better.”

“No meeting tomorrow, then?” He pulls the notebook closer and closes it. “You ready for the weekend?”

I shrug and glance at my phone. It only makes the tension in my stomach worse.

“My frat’s throwing a big blowout Friday night for finals.” He grabs his backpack from the far side of the table and shoves his notebook and pencil inside.

“I guess we should call it a night.” I pile together my notes and books inside my own bag. “We’ll want our pre-finals session to be in-depth. We have to go through everything we’ve covered since midterms.”

He continues as if I haven’t said anything. “It’s the biggest party of the year. Blacklights and beer pong and dancing.” He zips his bag shut and slings it over his shoulder. “We hired the Finnick twins to organize it this year.”

I frown. “Why would you have a party before you know

if you pass your classes?”

Zane laughs. “To relax before hunkering down and studying like mad. Besides, everyone leaves campus some time during finals week, so most people are gone by the time every final’s over.”

“I don’t see the point.” I stand up, push in the chair, and head for the stairs.

He follows, running to catch up to me. “You have friends, right?”

“Something like that.” I take the stairs two at a time, and he straggles behind. “What makes you ask?”

“You could come to the party and find out. Bring your friends, hang out, see if you like it. What d’you think?”

I pause on the landing halfway down to the ground level and look back at him. “Why?”

He smiles, but the laughter dies in his throat when he realizes I’m serious. “I don’t know. I thought it’d be nice to get to know someone I’m spending this much time with, away from the textbooks and classwork. We spent an hour and a half together—and this was a short session—and I know nothing about you. Besides, based on this morning, I’d say you could use a relaxing evening.”

I grip my backpack straps and purse my lips in concentration. “Friday is tomorrow. I have plans.” Another step down the stairs. “Maybe you should’ve asked sooner.”

I still would’ve said no. An evening in a sea of drunken morons would hardly be relaxing.

Zane catches up to me. “Really? Because you don’t strike me as particularly social. I’ve never met someone who gives me quite as much cold shoulder. Are you always this tightly wound?”

“Are you always this invasive?”

He huffs. “Is it that strange for someone to want to know about your life? What do you do in your spare time?”

“I study and I do this. My life wouldn’t be that interesting to you.”

We reach the bottom of the stairs and head for the exit. With a furrowed brow and a frown, Zane pushes open the double doors to the courtyard outside and holds the door for me. “You’re making an assumption based on nothing—because you haven’t even tried to get to know me.”

“Aren’t you doing the same thing about me?” I pause on the steps outside the library, and he stands next to me. “I said no, leave it at that.”

“Fine. When do you want to study for the final?”

I sigh. “The final’s Wednesday at eight a.m. How’s Tuesday night?”

Zane nods, but there’s a sour look on his face. “Yeah, sure. I’ll text you.”

We turn our separate ways. He heads for the upperclassmen housing, and I cross the green space behind the library to reach Finchley Avenue and stop.

I’m supposed to head for my father’s house now. His email said it’s on Cherry, a couple streets over, but I’m unfamiliar with the area beyond Bradford. The only places I’ve visited off-campus are the local Walmart and Xander’s favorite coffee shop downtown.

My uneasy stomach wells with nausea, and I clutch my abdomen, pausing in the middle of the sidewalk. I’m going to throw up.

The streetlights barely illuminate the walkway.

I swallow down the lump in my throat, trying to calm

my quaking stomach. This is a terrible idea. Too soon. I don't belong in that house. I shouldn't go there.

I take a step toward Cherry, then turn to look farther down Finchley. The back of Lincoln barely sticks out from behind Arthur Hall. It looks particularly inviting right now.



Jimmy's door is open when I return to Lincoln Hall, and I poke my head inside, not bothering to drop my bag off in my own room. Inside, Jimmy is lying on his bed and tapping away at his keyboard. He pauses when he sees me and smiles. "Hey, come in."

Otherwise, the room is empty.

"You done with your tutoring session already?"

"Uh, yeah."

Thankfully, I never had the time to tell him about my dad's offer for dinner—let alone my acceptance of it. If he doesn't know, he can't be disappointed I chickened out.

"Where's Xander?" I ask as I enter and sit at the foot of Jimmy's bed. "It's Wednesday night. He's usually playing some stupid game." I incline my head toward the gaming systems.

Jimmy shrugs and returns to his laptop. "He's on another date with Val—or whatever you want to call it. Are you going to write your final essay on Whitman or Dickinson or...who are the other options?"

"Thoreau, Frederick Douglass, Louisa May Alcott," I list off. "I'm leaning toward Thoreau."

"I've started outlining mine on Whitman, but it all sounds stupid. I don't know what I'm talking about."

I shrug. “Mo continually tells me writing English papers is all about bullshitting. That must be why she’s so good at them.”

Over the glow of the laptop, Jimmy smiles. “She’ll do well in college. I’m pretty sure most papers are all about bullshitting.”

I laugh and scoot farther back on the mattress.

“Can we study for our American Lit final? I know it’s a week away, but we have the test and the essay, and if I put it off, I’ll forget.”

“I’m way ahead of you. I’ve been studying for the last week. Let me grab my note cards from my room. I’ll be right back.”

When I return to my room, I drop off my calculus book and grab my notes, *Norton Anthology*, and flashcards for American Lit, only to pause at the door. The calc book sits on the edge of my bed, a solid reminder of my own incompetence. I should at least gather the courage to let him know I’m not coming. It’s after seven now.

I close and lock the door again before walking back to Jimmy’s room. When I join him on the bed, his laptop is away, and he has his notes and *Norton* book laying in front of him.

“You ready?”

I pull out my phone, frowning. “Gimme a sec.” I open up my school email, locate my father’s message from when he sent his address this afternoon, and hit ‘Reply.’

Sorry I can’t make it tonight. Not feeling well. Can we reschedule? Best wishes.

Really, it’s the least I can do.

When I put my phone away and look up, Jimmy’s watch-

ing me curiously. “That looked serious.”

I frown.

“To be fair, serious is a pretty normal look for you.”

“Don’t worry about it.” I twist round to face him. “Let’s get to work.”

“How much of Emerson do you think it’ll cover? We read ‘Self-Reliance’ and ‘The Divinity School Address’ and...others.”

I laugh and lean against the wall to face the room as I flip through my book. “Well, we definitely need to remember the years each was written. I imagine the test will be like the midterm. We need to know author, title, year, and a general synopsis of all the pieces we discussed in depth.”

“Right...”

Jimmy continues, but I look up and pause at the sight of Xander’s empty bed.

“What did you mean?”

Jimmy stops mid-sentence. “Huh?”

“You said they’re on another date—Xander and Val—or ‘whatever you want to call it.’ What did you mean by that?”

He clears his throat and adjusts his position. “I don’t know, he doesn’t seem that into her anymore.”

I quirk an eyebrow.

“This is their third date, but Xander’s less excited than before. He doesn’t stay excited about anyone really. He has no problem sleeping with them, mind you—or telling me all about it afterward—but he doesn’t stay emotionally attached for long.”

I snort. It’s hardly surprising. “Why would he when he can fuck them and move on to his next mark?”

But Jimmy shakes his head. “If that were true, he

wouldn't try so hard to feel something in the first place."

I roll my eyes. "Whatever. Let's move on. I don't know why I asked."

"Morbid curiosity." He sends me a devious smile before looking back down at his *Norton Anthology*. "Anyway, back to Emerson..."