Love, Theoretically

ALI HAZELWOOD

SPHERE

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To all my readers, from the AO3 days to where we are now.
The Adam and Olive cameo is for you. 🖤

PROLOGUE

IN MY LIFE I HAVE EXPERIENCED REGRET, EMBARRASSMENT, maybe even a touch of agony. But nothing, absolutely *nothing* prepared me for the ignominy of finding myself in a bathroom stall, pressed against the arrogant older brother of the guy I've been pretending to date for the past six months.

It's an award-winning, rock-bottoming low. Especially when coupled with the knowledge that *Jack Smith* is saving *my* ass. When he picks me up by the waist to maneuver me around the cramped space, gravity-defyingly strong, I'm not sure what's worse: the fact that his hands are all that prevents me from crumpling like a scrunchie, or the mortifying amount of gratitude I feel toward him.

"Settle down, Elsie," he says against the skin of my cheek, terse as usual, but also incongruously soothing. He's close—too close. I'm close—too close. Not *nearly* close enough? The sweet oblivion of death. "And stop fidgeting."

"I'm *not* fidgeting, Jack," I say, fidgeting.

But after a second I just give in. I close my eyes. Relax into his chest. Feel the scent of him in my nostrils, anchoring me to sanity. And wonder which one, out of my millions of asinine life choices, led me to this moment.

1

WAVES AND PARTICLES

Twenty-four hours earlier

ALL THROUGHOUT MIDDLE SCHOOL, MY HALLOWEEN COSTUME was the duality of light.

I made it with a marker, drawing a bunch of circles and zigzag lines all over one of Dad's white undershirts I'd rescued from the trash can. In hindsight, the production value was so low, not even the physics teacher managed to guess what it was. I never minded, though. I'd walk around the hallways hearing Bill Nye's voice in my head, his beautiful explanation of the ways light could be two different things at once, depending on what others wanted to see: a particle *and* a wave.

It seemed like a winning idea. And had me wondering if I, too, could contain two—no, a whole multitude of Elsies. Each one would be crafted, custom tailored, carefully curated with a different person

in mind. I'd give everyone the me they wanted, needed, craved, and in exchange they'd care about me.

Easy peasy, photons squeezy.

Funny how my physics career and my people-pleasing career started around the same time. How I can draw a straight line from baby's first quantum mechanics concept to my current job. Actually, to *both* my current jobs. The day one, in which I earn next to nothing by hatching physical theories that explain why small molecules cluster together like cliques of mean girls during lunch hour. And the other one, in which . . .

Well. The other one, in which I pretend to be someone else, at least pays well.

"Uncle Paul will try to rope us into a threesome, again," Greg tells me, soulful brown eyes full of apologies, and I don't hesitate. I don't act annoyed. I don't shudder in revulsion thinking about Uncle Paul's sewage breath or his oily comb-over, which reminds me of pubic hair.

Okay, maybe I do shudder a little bit. But I cover it up with a smile and a professional "Got it."

"Also," he continues, running a hand through his messy curls, "Dad recently developed severe lactose intolerance but refuses to ease up on the dairy. There might be . . ."

"Gastrointestinal events." Understandable. I'd resist giving up cheese, too.

"And my cousin Izzy—she's known to become physically aggressive when people disagree with her over the literary value of the Twilight Saga."

I perk up. "Is she pro or against?"

"Against," Greg says darkly.

I love *Twilight* even more than cheese, but I can withhold my

TED Talk on why Alice and Bella should have left all those idiots behind and ridden off into the sunset.

Team Bellice 4evah.

"Understood."

"Elsie, I'm sorry. It's Grandma's ninetieth. The whole family will be here." He sighs, breath smoky white in the night air of this icy Boston January. "Mom's going to be at her worst."

"Don't worry." I ring the doorbell of Greg's grandmother's town house and offer my most encouraging smile. He hired me to be his fake girlfriend, and he'll get the Elsie he wants me to be: reassuring, yes, but also gently bossy. A dominatrix who doesn't like to wield a whip—but could if necessary. "Remember our exit strategy?"

"Pinch your elbow twice."

"I'll say I'm feeling poorly, and we'll duck out. And when the threesome offer comes, heavily imply that I have gonorrhea."

"That wouldn't deter Uncle Paul."

"Genital warts?"

"Mmm. Maybe?" He massages his temple. "The only good thing is that my brother's coming."

I tense. "Jack?"

"Yeah."

Stupid question. Greg only has the one. "I thought you said he'd be gone?"

"His work dinner got canceled."

I groan inwardly.

"What?"

Shit, I groaned outwardly. "Nothing." I grin and squeeze his arm through his coat. Greg Smith is my favorite client, and I will see him through this evening unscathed. "Let me handle your family, okay? It's what you pay me for, after all."

It really is. And I'm grateful every day that I've never had to remind him. Many of my clients wonder more or less openly what other services I might offer, even though the terms of service in the Faux app are pretty explicit. They clear their throat, stroke their chin, and ask, "What *exactly* is included in this . . . fake-girlfriend rate?" I'm often tempted to roll my eyes and knee them in the nuts, but I try to not take offense, to smile kindly, and to say, "*Not* sex."

I also—to answer the standard follow-up questions—don't kiss, frot, dirty talk, get naked, do butt stuff, give BJs, HJs, TJs, and whatever other Js might exist that I'm not aware of. I don't let them pee on me or fondle my feet, nor do I facilitate and/or allow orgasms in my general vicinity.

Not that there would be anything wrong: sex work is legitimate work, and people who engage in it are just as deserving of respect as ballerinas, or firefighters, or hedge fund managers. The point is: ten months ago, when I graduated with a Ph.D. in theoretical physics from Northeastern, I figured that by now I'd have a reasonably remunerated academic position. I did *not* imagine that I'd be paying my water bill by helping adult men pretend that they have dating lives at twenty-seven. And yet here I am, fake-girlfriending my way through my student loans.

Not to kill anyone's buzz, but I'm starting to suspect that life might not always turn out the way you want. An unavoidable loss of faith in happiness, given that there are only so many times one can be hired to project the idea that a client is a charming, well-adjusted, emotionally available human being capable of holding on to a medium-term relationship with an equally high-functioning adult, in order to . . . Well, it varies. I've never asked Greg why Caroline Smith is so obsessed with the idea of her thirty-year-old son having a significant other. Based on snippets of overheard conversations

within the Smith Cinematic Universe, I suspect it has to do with the massive estate that will come into play once the matriarch dies, and with the belief that if he provided the first great-grandchild, he'd be more likely to inherit . . . a diamond-studded water hose, I assume?

Rich people. They're just like us.

But Greg's nosy mom is still much better than his brother, who's bad news for a whole bunch of reasons that do not bear contemplating. Frankly, it's a relief that *she* is my target. It means that when the front door of Smith Manor opens, I can focus solely on her: the withholding, PVC-hearted woman who manages to air-kiss us, fuss with Greg's hair, and push two full glasses of wine into our hands all at once.

"How's life in finance, Gregory?" Caroline asks her son. He downs half of his drink in a single gulp—I suspect because I've heard him explain that he does not, in fact, work in finance. At least four times. "And you, Elsie?" she adds without waiting for a reply. "How are things at the library?"

Following Faux's guidelines, I tell my clients nothing about myself—not my full name, not my day job, not my true opinions on cilantro (excellent, if you enjoy eating soap). And that, in a nutshell, is what fake-girlfriending is about. It initially seemed sketchy that people would pay for a fake date in the age of Tinder and Pornhub, and that they'd pay *me*—unremarkable Elsie Hannaway of the medium everything. Medium height. Medium-brown hair and eyes. Medium nose, butt, feet, legs, breasts. Pretty, yeah, sure, but in a medium, nondescript way. And yet, my medium mediumness is the perfect blank slate to fill. An empty canvas to paint on. A mirror, reflecting only what others care to project. A bolt of fabric that can be custom tailored to—well. I'm sure everyone's tracking the metaphor.

The Elsie that Caroline Smith wants is someone able to fit in with people who use *summer* as a verb, not flashy enough to attract a better catch than Greg, and with the nurturing instincts to take care of the son she might love but cannot be bothered to know. Children's librarian seemed like a great fake profession. It's been fun scouring online forums in search of charming anecdotes.

"Today I found three Goldfish crackers in our best copy of *Matilda*," I say with a smile. *Or at least, Reddit user iluvbigbooks did.*

"That is *hilarious*," Caroline says without laughing, smiling, or otherwise displaying amusement. Then she leans closer, whispering as though her son, who's a foot away, cannot hear us. "We are *so* glad that you're here, Elsie." *We*, I believe, includes Greg's dad, who stands silently next to her, popping three cubes of colby jack into his mouth with the vacant smile of someone who's been dissociating since 1999. "We were *so* worried about Gregory. But now he's with you, and he's never been happier." *Has he, though?* "Gregory, make sure to spend lots of quality time with your grandmother tonight. Izzy is taking pics with her Polaroid to give her at the end of the night—make sure you're in *all* of them."

"I'll make sure he does, Mrs. Smith," I promise, weaving my arm through Greg's. I break that promise fifteen seconds later, at the end of the glitzy hallway. He downs what's left of his wine, steals two large gulps of mine, and then stage-whispers "See you in ten minutes" before locking himself inside the bathroom.

I laugh and let him be. I feel protective of him—enough to break Faux standard protocol and agree to repeat fake dates, enough to want to defend him from muggers and pirates and his extended family. Maybe it's that his first sentence to me was a panicky "My mother won't stop asking why I don't date," followed by a hesitant, frazzled explanation of why *that* wasn't going to happen anytime

soon—an explanation that hit too close to home. Maybe it's that he always looks like how I feel: tired and overwhelmed. In another timeline we'd be best friends, bonding over the unavoidable stress ulcers that will soon ravage the lining of our stomachs.

I find the empty kitchen, duck inside, and watch the red swirl down the drain as I pour what's left of my glass into the sink. A waste. I should have just refused it, but that would lead to questions, and I don't want to explain that alcohol is a dangerous, glycemic terrorist and that my struggling pancreas does *not* negotiate with—

"Not to your taste?"

I jump. And yelp. And almost drop the glass, which probably costs more than my graduate education.

I thought I was alone. Wasn't I alone? I *was* alone. But Greg's older brother is in the room, leaning against the marble counter, arms crossed over his chest. Those unique multicolored eyes of his are staring at me with the usual inscrutable expression. I'm standing between him and the only entrance—either I overlooked him, or he bent the space-time continuum.

Or I mixed him up with the refrigerator. They *are* similarly sized, after all.

"Are you okay?" he asks.

"I—yes. Yes, sorry. I just . . ." I force a smile. "Hi, Jack."

"Hi, Elsie." He says my name like it's familiar to him. The first word he ever learned. Second nature, and not just a bunch of vowels and consonants he's barely had reason to use before.

He doesn't smile, of course. Well, he *does* smile, but never at me. Whenever we're in the same room, he's an imposing, sky-soaring, stern presence whose main pastime appears to be judging me unworthy of Greg.

"Don't like the wine?"

"That's not it." I blink, flustered. There's a tattoo on his forearm, just peeking out of the rolled-up sleeve of his shirt. Because *of course* he's wearing jeans and a plaid shirt, even though the Evite specifically asked for semiformal.

But he's Jack Smith. He can do whatever he wants. He probably has a permit carved in those ridiculous biceps of his. Stamped on the blue quarter of his right eye, the one that sticks out like a sore thumb in the chestnut of his irises.

"The wine was great," I say, collecting myself. "But there was a fly in it."

"Was there?"

He doesn't believe me. I don't know how I know, but I know. And he knows that I know. I can see it, no—I can *feel* it. There's a tingle at the base of my spine, liquid and sparkly and warm. *Careful, Elsie,* it says. *He'll have you arrested for crimes against grapes. You'll spend the rest of your life in federal prison. He'll visit once a week to stare through the plexiglass and make you uncomfortable.*

"Izzy must be looking for you," I say, hoping to get rid of him. "She's upstairs."

"I know," he replies, *not* heading upstairs. He just studies me—attentive, calm, like he knows something secret about me. That I floss once a week, tops. That I can't figure out what the Dow Jones is, even after reading the Wikipedia entry. Other, scarier, *darker* things.

"Is your girlfriend here?" I ask to fill the silence. He once brought someone to a family thing. A geologist. The most beautiful woman I've ever seen. Nice. Funny, too. I wish I could say she was out of his league.

"No."

Silence, again. More staring. I smile to hide how aggressively I'm grinding my teeth. "It's been a while."

"Since Labor Day."

"Oh, right. I forgot."

I did not forget. Before today I met Jack twice, as in two times, one and then another, and they're both stubbornly wedged in my brain, as pleasant as spinach leaves stuck between molars.

The first was Greg's birthday dinner, when Jack and I shook hands and he nodded back at me tightly, when he spent the night giving me long, searching glances, when I overheard him ask Greg, "Where did you meet her?" and "How long has it been?" and "How serious is this?" with an inquisitive, deceptively casual tone that sent an odd shiver down my spine.

So Jack Smith wasn't a fan. Okay. Fine. Whatever.

And then there was the second. Late in the summer, at the Smiths' Labor Day pool party, where I didn't swim. Because there's no way to hide my pod in a bikini.

I'm not embarrassed to be diabetic. I've had nearly two decades to make peace with my overactive immune system, which has way too much fun destroying necessary cells. But for some reason, people's reactions to the knowledge that I must pump insulin into my body on the reg can be unpredictable. When I was diagnosed (at ten, after a seizure in the school gym that earned me the cruel but uncreative nickname of Shaky Elsie), I overheard my parents chat, low whispers behind the hospital room's divider curtains.

"Not this, too." Mom sounded exhausted.

"I know." Dad sounded the same. "It's gotta be on us. Lance is flunking out of high school. Lucas is going to be arrested for fist-fighting in the Walmart parking lot any day now. Of course the one easygoing kid we got turns out to have *something*."

"It's not *her* fault."

"No."

"But it's going to be expensive."

"Yeah."

I don't blame my parents: my brother Lance *did* eventually flunk out of school (and now makes an excellent living as an electrician), just like Lucas *did* end up being arrested (albeit behind a Shake Shack, and for possession of drugs that are now legal). Mom and Dad were tired, overwhelmed. A little poor. They'd hoped for a break, something easy for once, and I was truly sorry I wasn't it. To make it up to them, I've tried to make my health issues—and any other subsequent issues—as ignorable as possible.

I find that people like me better if they don't have to expend emotional energy on me.

That's why I didn't swim at the Smith Labor Day party, opting to sit on a blanket and eat a slice of cake, an artfully arranged smile on my face. Why I miscalculated the carbs I ate and the insulin I'd need. And why I stumbled across the lawn of the Smiths' Manchester-by-the-Sea vacation home high on glucose, vision blurry, head pounding, trying to remember where I'd put my phone so that I could adjust my bolus, and—

I walked right into Jack.

Literally. I didn't see him and stepped into his chest like it was a supermassive black hole. Which it wasn't. A black hole, that is. Plenty supermassive, though.

"Elsie?" *Ugh.* His *voice*. "You okay?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I . . ." *Am going to puke.*

He cupped my cheek, scanning my face. "Should I call Greg?"

"No nee—" Pain knifed through my head.

"I'm calling Greg."

"No—*don't* call Greg, please."

He scowled. "Why?"

"Because—" *Because good fake girlfriends are low maintenance. They smile, don't have strong opinions on cilantro, and never, ever drag you away from a pool party.* "Can you—I need to go to the restroom and—my phone—"

A moment later I was in a bathroom that looked like a luxury spa, purse in my lap. And I'd love to say that I don't remember how I got there, but there's a floating memory in my head, a memory of strong arms picking me up; of being carried, buoyant as a bird; of warm breath on my temple, murmuring words I cannot recall.

And that, unfortunately, was that. Was Jack kind and helpful? Yup. Did he believe the story I later made up about not wanting to bother Greg with my migraines? Doubtful, considering his skeptical, cold, insistent look. Maybe he suspects I'm on drugs. Maybe he's afraid I'll taint the Smith line with my weak headache genes. *Surely* he believes his brother can do better.

But it doesn't matter. Jack's not my target—his mother is. Which is good, because I don't have the faintest idea who the Elsie that Jack wants is.

It's unprecedented. I'm a pro at picking up cues, but Jack—he gives me *nothing*. I don't know what to amp up, what to tone down; what to hide and what to fake; what personality to sacrifice at his altar. It's like he's trying to puzzle me out without changing me—and that's impossible. That's not how people are, not with me.

So when he asks "How have you been, Elsie?" with a tone that feels just a touch too inquisitive, I smile as neutrally as possible.

"The usual. Fantastic." *Not about to collapse on you, for once.* "You? How are things at work?" He's some kind of PE teacher, Greg mentioned. Unsurprising, since he's built like someone who has a CrossFit decal on his car and drinks protein shakes while reading

Men's Health's powerlifting column. The other Smiths are lithe, insubstantial brunettes. And then there's this sandy-haired brick house, a foot taller than his tallest relative, all masculine features and cutting deep voice. My theory: overworked nurse, hospital crib switch-up. "Having a good semester?"

He grunts, noncommittal. "Haven't murdered any of my students. Yet."

A surprisingly relatable sentiment. "Sounds like a win."

"Not to me."

Shit. He's making me smile. "Why do you want to murder them?"

"They whine. They don't read the syllabus." Syllabi for PE? My gym teacher's entire curriculum was shame-spiraling us for failing to climb the rope. Education's making strides. "They lie."

I swallow. "Lie about what?"

"About several things." His eyes gleam, and his lips twitch, and his shoulders hulk under his shirt and—

I used to think—no, I used to *know* that light-haired guys weren't attractive. Middle school? Everyone went after Legolas, but I was an Aragorn girl. Draco Malfoy? Needs his nipples twisted, not in the good way. "Which *Game of Thrones* House Are You" BuzzFeed quiz? Never a Targaryen. I hate that I look at Jack Smith, with his good jaw and his good dimples and those good hands, and find him handsome.

Maybe I just won't look. Yes, excellent plan.

"Excuse me," I say politely. "I bet Greg's looking for me." I turn before he can reply, immediately feeling like I managed to free myself from a gravitational singularity.

Phew.

The living room's a couple of twists and turns away, large but crowded, pretty despite the overabundance of naval paintings and

aggressive leather furniture. I spend a few minutes reassuring Greg's aunt that we'll consult her before choosing a caterer for the wedding; pretending not to notice Uncle Paul licking his lips at me; amiably chatting with an assortment of cousins about the weather, traffic, and bad *Twilight* takes. The birthday girl is opening presents by the fireplace, telling one of her daughters-in-law, "A coupon for a mud bath? Lovely. It'll feel like practice for when I'm lowered in my grave and you all fight over my money."

It's on brand: the first time I met Millicent Smith, she put both hands on my shoulders and told me, "Having kids was the worst mistake of my life." Her eldest son was standing right next to her. I have yet to ascertain whether Millicent Smith is a malevolent hag or just unintentionally cruel. Either way, she's my favorite Smith character.

I wander away with a smile, winding up at the half-played Go board in the corner of the room. It's been here ever since my first visit, the wooden squares and porcelain stones incongruous amid the coastal decor. Greg is chatting with his dad, and I wonder if we'll leave soon. I have thirty-three Vibrations, Waves, and Optics essays to grade, which will surely have me wishing for a violent death. A Fundamentals of Materials Science Scantron exam to write. And, of course, a job talk to prepare. I want—no, I *need* to nail it. There's no margin of error, since it's my way out of spending my nights fake dating and my days exchanging emails with sexxxy.chad.420@hotmail.com about whether his chinchilla's gluten allergy should release him from the Physics 101 midterm. I'll have to rehearse it a minimum of eleven times—i.e., the number of dimensions according to M-theory, my favorite über-string version—

"Do you play?"

I startle. *Again.* Jack stands on the other side of the board, dark

eyes studying me. All his relatives are here—why is he wasting precious family time to pester his brother's fake girlfriend?

"Elsie?" My name, again. Said like the universe made that word for him alone. "I asked, do you play?" He sounds amused. I hate him.

"Oh. Um, a bit." Understatement. Go is mind twisting and punishingly intricate—therefore, many physicists' extracurricular activity of choice. "Do you?"

Jack doesn't answer. Instead he adds a few white stones.

"Oh, no." I shake my head. "It's someone else's game. We can't—"

"Black okay?"

Not really. But I swallow and hesitantly reach for the stones and set them down. My pride plays a nice little tug-of-war against my survival instincts: I won't conceal my Go skills and let Jack win, but for all I know losing will transform him into a fire-breathing bison and incinerate a load-bearing wall. I don't want to die in a house collapse, next to Jack Smith and his threesome-obsessed uncle.

"How's Greg?" he asks.

"He's over there, with your cousin," I say absentmindedly, watching him place more stones. His hands are stupidly large. But also graceful, and it makes no sense. Also makes no sense? There are two chairs, but we're not sitting.

"But *how* is he?"

In my humble experience, siblings at best tolerate each other, and at worst spit gum in one another's hair. (Mine. *My* hair.) Jack and Greg, though, are close—for undivinable reasons, given that Greg's a likable human disaster full of Sturm und Drang, while Jack . . . I'm not sure what Jack's deal is. There's a dash of bad boy there, a hint of mystery, a dollop of smoothness. And yet a touch of

hunger, a raw, unrefined air. Mostly, he looks *cool*. Too cool to even *be* cool. Like maybe in high school he skipped the school dance for a Guggenheim fellow's art exhibition and somehow still managed to get elected prom king.

Jack looks distant. Uninterested. Effortlessly confident. Charismatic in an intriguingly opaque, inaccessible way.

But he does care for Greg. And Greg cares for him. I heard him say, with my own two ears, that Jack is his "best friend," someone he "can trust." And I listened without pointing out that he can't really *trust* his *best friend* Jack that much, or he'd be honest with him about the fake dating—because I'm a supportive fake girlfriend.

"Greg's good. Why do you ask?"

"When we talked the other day he sounded stressed about Woodacre."

About . . . what? Is this something Greg's girlfriend should know? "Ah, yes," I fib. "A little."

"A little?"

I busy myself with the stones. I'm not winning as easily as I expected. "It's getting better." Everything does with time, right?

"Is it?"

"Very much." I nod enthusiastically.

He nods, too. Less enthusiastically. "Really?"

Jack's actually not *bad* at Go. How have I not wiped the floor with him yet? "Really."

"I thought Woodacre was in a couple of days. I figured Greg'd be upset."

I tense. Maybe I should have asked Greg for talking points. "Oh, yeah, true. Now that you mention it—"

"Remind me, Elsie." He takes a tiny step closer to the board,

towering over me like a towering tower. But I'm not short. I *refuse* to feel short. "What's Woodacre, again?"

Crap. "It's"—I try for an amused expression—"Woodacre, of course."

Jack gives me a *Don't bullshit me* look. "That's not an answer, is it?"

"It's . . ." I clear my throat. "A thing Greg's working on." The extent of what I've been told about Greg's job? That he's a data scientist. "I don't know the details. It's complicated science stuff." I smile airily, as though I don't spend my life building complex mathematical models to uncover the origins of the universe. My heart hurts.

"Complicated science stuff." Jack studies me like he's peeling off my skin and expects to find a banana rotting inside.

"Yeah. People like you and I wouldn't understand."

He frowns. "People like you and I."

"Yeah. I mean." I hold his eyes and put down another stone. "What even *are* numbers—"

I snap my mouth shut. We must have reached for the same square. My fingers brush against Jack's, and something electric and unidentifiable licks up my arm. I wait for him to pull away, but he doesn't. Even though it was *my* turn. Wasn't it *my* turn? I'm pretty sure—

"Well, if it isn't a draw."

I yank back my hand. Millicent is next to me, staring at the board. I follow her gaze and nearly gasp, because . . . she's right.

I just *not*-thrashed Jack Freaking Smith at Go.

"It's been a long time since Jack hasn't won a game," Millicent says with a pleased smile.

It's been a long time since I *haven't won a game.* What the hell? I look up at Jack—still staring, still furrowing his brow, still judging

me silently. My brain blanks. I panic and blurt out the first thing that comes to mind. "There are more legal board positions in Go than the atoms in the known universe."

A snort. "Someone's been telling me since he was barely out of diapers." Millicent glances shrewdly at Jack, who is *still. Staring. At. Me.* "You and Elsie make for a very good couple. Although, Jack, my dear, she should still sign a prenup."

I don't immediately understand what she's saying. Then I do and turn crimson all over. "Oh, no. Mrs. Smith, I'm—I'm dating Greg. Your *other* grandson."

"Are you sure?"

What? "I—yes. Of course."

"Didn't seem like it." She shrugs. "But what do I know? I'm a ninety-year-old bat who frolics in mud." I watch her shuffle toward the canapé table. Then I turn to Jack with a nervous laugh.

"Wow. That was—"

He's *still* staring. At me. Stone faced. Intent. Sectoral heterochromic. Like I'm interesting, very interesting, very, *very* interesting. I open my mouth to ask him what's going on. To demand a rematch to the death. To beg him to quit counting the pores in my nose. And that's when—

"Smile, guys!"

I whip my head around, and the flash of Izzy's Polaroid instantly blinds me.

"MY PARENTS' ANNIVERSARY NEXT MONTH SHOULD BE THE last time I need to take you along." Greg signals right and pulls into my building's parking lot. "After, I'll tell Mom you broke up with

me. I begged you not to. Serenaded you. Bought you my weight in plushies—all in vain."

I nod sympathetically. "You're heartbroken. Too inconsolable to date someone else."

"I might need to find solace in a Spotify playlist."

"Or frost your tips."

He grimaces. I laugh, and once the car stops I lean against the passenger door to study his handsome profile in the yellow lights. "Tell her that I cheated on you with the Grubhub delivery guy. It'll buy you longer moping rights."

"Brilliant."

We're silent while I think about Greg's situation. The reason he even needs a fake girlfriend. What he felt comfortable telling *me*, a stranger, and not his own family. How similar we are. "After this is done, if you need . . . if you *want* someone to talk to. A friend. I'd love to . . ."

His smile is genuine. "Thanks, Elsie."

I'm barely out of the car. Ice crinkles under the heel of my boot as I turn around. "Oh, Greg?"

"Yes?"

"What's the Woodacre thing?"

He groans. His neck tips back against the headrest. "It's a silent meditation retreat our boss is forcing us to do. We're leaving tomorrow—four days of no contact with the outside world. No email, no Twitter. He got the idea from a Goop newsletter."

Oh. "So it has nothing to do with . . . complicated science?"

He gives me a desperate look. "The opposite. Why?"

"Ah . . ." I close my eyes. Let mortification sink its fangs into my brain. "No reason. Have a good night, Greg."

I close the passenger door, wave half-heartedly, and let the frigid

air pop into my lungs. The North Star blinks at me from the sky, and I remember tomorrow's job interview.

It doesn't matter if tonight I made a fool of myself with Greg's punch-worthy brother. Because with just a sprinkle of luck, I might never have to see Jack Smith again.