

BOOK 3 IN THE SENSATIONAL DIMILY SERIES



Did I Mention I Miss You?
ESTELLE MASKAME ♡

CHAPTER 1 EXCLUSIVE

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1

The water is cold, yet that doesn't stop me from wading into it, only up to my ankles. I have my Converse in my hands, the laces wrapped around my fingers, and the wind is picking up, like it always does. It's too dark to see far out over the low waves, but I can still hear the ocean crashing and rolling around me, and I almost forget that I'm not alone. There's also the sound of fireworks, of laughter and voices, celebration and joy. I almost forget, just for a second, that it's the Fourth of July.

A girl runs past me, through the water, disrupting the calm and gentle flow. A guy is chasing her. Boyfriend, probably. He accidentally splashes water on me as he brushes past, laughing out loud before he grasps the girl and pulls her against him. I'm grinding my teeth together before I even realize it, my grip around my laces tightening. These people are around my age, but I've never seen them before. They've most likely come from out of town, from a neighboring city, to celebrate the good old Fourth of July in Santa Monica. I don't know why. The Fourth of July isn't anything spectacular here. Fireworks are illegal, which is the second-biggest bullshit law I've ever encountered in my entire life after it being illegal to pump your own gas back in Oregon. So there are no fireworks, only those from Marina del Rey to the south and Pacific Palisades to the north, which are visible from here. It's after nine, so both displays have just begun. The colors light up the sky far in the distance, small and out of focus, but they're enough to satisfy the tourists and the locals.

The couple are kissing in the water now, in the dark beneath the lights of Pacific Park. I turn my eyes away. I begin to walk away from the pier, wading slowly through the Pacific Ocean as I distance myself from all of the Fourth of July commotion. The crowds are much thicker up on the pier. Down here on the beach, it's

not so busy, so I have room to breathe. This year, I'm just not feeling the whole Independence Day excitement. There are too many memories attached to this day that I don't want to remember, so I keep walking, further and further along the coast.

I only stop when Rachael calls my name. Until that exact moment, I'd forgotten that I'd been waiting for her to return. I turn around in the water to face my best friend as she half leaps, half jogs across the sand toward me. There's an American flag bandana wrapped around her head and she comes bearing two sundaes. She disappeared to get them almost fifteen minutes ago from Soda Jerks, which, like most stores along the pier, is open later than usual tonight.

"I got there just as they were closing up," Rachael says, slightly breathless. Her ponytail swings around her shoulders as she comes to a stop and hands me the sundae, but not before she licks some of the overflowing ice cream from her index finger.

I edge out of the water to join her, thanking her with a smile. I've been quiet all night and I still can't bring myself to pretend that I'm okay, that I'm happy just like everyone else. So I take my sundae in my free hand, my red Converse still in the other—red footwear is as patriotic as I'm going to be today—and quickly run my eyes over the ice cream. It's called the Toboggan Carousel, named after the Toboggan carousel itself, which is inside the Looff Hippodrome up on the pier. Soda Jerks is on the corner. In the three weeks that I've been home, we've stopped by for sundaes more than once. In fact, I think we take an ice cream break more often than we take a coffee break these days. It's much more comforting.

"Everyone's up on the pier," Rachael reminds me. "Maybe we should head up." She sounds almost cautious as she makes the suggestion, like she's expecting me to

immediately cut her off and say no. She drops her blue eyes to her ice cream and scoops up a quick mouthful.

As she swallows, my eyes drift over her shoulder to the pier. The Pacific Wheel is performing its annual Fourth of July show, where its thousands of LED lights are programmed to display transitioning sequences of red, blue, and white. It started just after eight, at sunset. The two of us watched it for a few minutes when it first began, but it got very boring very fast. Holding back a sigh, I shift my gaze to the boardwalk instead. It's way too overcrowded, yet I don't want to test Rachael's patience any more than I already have, so I say sure.

We turn back and head across the beach, weaving our way through the people spending their evening down on the sand, and eating our sundaes in silence from our plastic to-go trays. After a few minutes, I stop to slip my Chucks back on.

"Did you find Meghan yet?"

I glance up at Rachael as I finish tucking my laces in. "Haven't seen her." In all honesty, I haven't been looking. Although Meghan is an old friend of ours, that's all she seems to be. Nothing more than that. But she's home for the summer too, so Rachael's making the effort to reunite our former trio.

"We'll find her eventually," she says, and then changes the subject almost immediately by adding, "Did you hear that the wheel is apparently programmed to the beat of a Daft Punk song this year?" She skips ahead of me, twirling on the sand and shimmying back over. She reaches for my free hand and pulls me toward her, her grin wide and dazzling as she spins me around. Unwillingly, I dance a little with her despite the fact that there's no music. "Another summer, another year."

I pull back from her, careful not to drop my sundae, and study her. She's still swaying, still dancing to whatever song is in her head. As she closes her eyes and twirls again, I think about her words. *Another summer, another year.* It's our fourth summer of being best friends, and despite a slight fallout last year, we're as close as ever. I wasn't sure if she'd ever forgive me for the mistakes I made, but she did. She let it go, because there were more important things to focus on. Like supplying me with ice cream and taking me on road trips around the state to distract me, to make me feel better. Desperate times call for best friends. Yet despite the fact that the time came for me to head off to Chicago, where I've spent the past year surviving my freshman year of college, we've still remained best friends. Now that I'm back in Santa Monica until September, we have months to hang out together.

"You're drawing a crowd," I tell her. The corners of my lips pull up into a smile as her eyes flash open, her cheeks flushing with color as she glances around. Several people nearby have been observing her silent dancing.

"Time to make our getaway," she whispers. She latches onto my wrist and starts to run. She yanks me across the beach, kicking up the sand beneath our feet, our laughter echoing around us as I'm given no option but to dash off with her. We don't run far: only a few yards, far enough to get her away from her spectators. "In my defense," she huffs, "you're allowed to look like an idiot on The Fourth of July. It's a rite of passage. It emphasizes the fact that we're a free nation. You know, 'cause we can do whatever the hell we want."

I wish that was the case. If there's anything I've learned in my nineteen years of breathing, it's that we most certainly *can't* do whatever the hell we want. We can't pump our own gas. We can't set off fireworks. We can't touch the Hollywood Sign.

We can't trespass. We can't kiss our stepbrothers. Of course, we *can* do these things, but only if we're brave enough to face the consequences.

I roll my eyes at Rachael as we ascend the steps up to the pier, the music from Pacific Park gradually growing louder the nearer we get. The Ferris wheel is still flashing with red, blue, and white. The rest of the amusement park is also illuminated, albeit not so patriotically. We're weaving our way through the upper parking lot on the pier, squeezing between cars that are parked way too close to one another, when I spot Jamie. He's with his girlfriend, Jen. They've been dating for almost two years now. Over by the corner of the lot, he has her pressed against the passenger door of an old, beat-up Chevy. They're making out. Obviously.

Rachael must notice them too, because she pauses alongside me and rests her eyes on the scene. "I've heard he's quite the troublemaker," she murmurs. "He's like a miniature blond version of his brother when he was that age."

I flash Rachael a warning glance almost automatically at the mention of Jamie's brother, who is also my stepbrother. We don't talk about him. We don't ever say his name. Not anymore. Rachael notices the sudden tautness in my face and the sharpness in my expression, because when she realizes her mistake she mouths a quick apology and then presses her hand over her lips.

Relaxing only slightly, I look back at Jamie and Jen. Still kissing. Rolling my eyes, I toss the remainder of my ice cream into a nearby trash can and then clear my throat, yelling, "Don't forget to breathe, Jay!"

Rachael laughs under her breath and playfully swats my shoulder. When Jamie glances up, eyes glossy and hair ruffled, I lift my hand and wave. Unlike Jen, who almost collapses dead with embarrassment the second she spots me, my

stepbrother only gets pissed off, the same way he always does whenever I try to say anything to him.

“Screw you, Eden!” he yells across the lot, his coarse voice echoing around the cars. Grabbing Jen’s hand, he turns and yanks her away in the opposite direction. He’s most likely been trying his best to avoid Ella the entire night, because when all you want to do is hook up with your girlfriend, the last person you want spotting you is your mom.

“He’s still not talking to you?” Rachael asks once she stops snickering.

Shrugging, I start to walk again as I run my fingers through the ends of my hair. It’s just below my shoulders now. I cut it back in the winter. “Last week he asked me to pass him the salt,” I say. “Does that count?”

“No.”

“Then I guess we’re still not talking.”

Jamie doesn’t particularly like me. Not because he’s seventeen with a serious attitude problem that came out of nowhere last year, but because he’s still sickened by me. And his eldest brother. He can’t stand either of us, and no matter how many times I’ve tried to convince him that there’s nothing to worry about anymore, he refuses to believe me. He usually storms away and slams a door or two in the process. I sigh with frustration as Rachael and I head over onto the main boardwalk, which is still as busy as it was hours ago. There are a lot of parents with small kids and a lot of dogs dodging the mass of strollers. There are many young couples, like the pair back on the beach, in the water. I can’t bear to look at any of them. Their interlocked hands and exchanged smiles only make my stomach knot. And not in the way that creates

butterflies, but in the way that physically hurts. Today of all days, here of all places, I despise each and every couple I see.

Rachael stops after a few minutes to talk to some girls she knows who were in her grade back in school. I remember them only vaguely from passing them years ago at school or at the promenade. I don't know them. They know me, though. Everyone knows me now. I'm *her*. I'm *that* Eden. I'm the girl who gets disgusted glances cast over me, the girl who gets sneered and snickered at wherever I go. It's exactly what's happening now. No matter how hard I try to offer these girls a warm smile, it's not returned. Both of them fire me a sharp glare out of the corners of their eyes and then angle their bodies away from me, stepping closer to Rachael and cutting me out completely. I press my lips together and fold my arms across my chest, kicking at the wood beneath my feet as I wait for Rachael to finish.

This is exactly the kind of thing that happens every time I come home to Santa Monica. People don't like me here anymore. They think I'm crazy and weird. There are the few exceptions, like my mom and Rachael, but that's about it. Everyone else just judges, but they don't know the full story. I think the worst was when I came home for Thanksgiving last year. It was the first time I'd come home since I left for college in September, and word had gotten out and had spread like wildfire in the mere month that I'd been gone. So by Thanksgiving, everyone knew. At first, I didn't know what was going on and why things were suddenly different. I didn't know why Katy Vance, a girl I shared some classes with back in school, put her head down and turned in the opposite direction when I waved at her. I didn't know why the young girl ringing me up at the grocery store laughed to her coworker as I was leaving. I had no idea why these things were happening, not until I was at LAX on Sunday waiting to

board my flight back to Chicago, when a girl I'd never seen before in my life quietly asked, "You're the girl that dated her stepbrother, right?"

Rachael doesn't talk for long. She glances warily over at me every few seconds, as though she's trying to gauge if I'm okay or not, and even though I shrug nonchalantly back at her in an attempt to reassure her that I'm fine, she still cuts the conversation short and tells the girls that we need to be somewhere, even when we don't. That's why I love Rachael.

"For that, I'm never talking to them ever again," she states once the girls walk off, her voice firm as she throws her sundae into the trash and hooks her arm around mine instead. She spins me around toward Pacific Park so fast that it almost gives me whiplash.

"Honestly, it really doesn't bother me anymore," I try to tell her. We're drifting through the crowd, which actually doesn't feel that thick once we're in the middle of it, and I let her pull me along the boardwalk.

"Uh-huh," Rachael says in a distant voice, like she doesn't believe me.

I'm about to argue my point even further, telling her that *no, really, it's fine, I'm fine, everything is fine* when both our attention is grasped before I've even opened my mouth. Jake Maxwell has come barreling toward us out of nowhere, sliding in front of us and stopping us dead in our tracks. He's an even older friend of ours than Meghan is, and we've already spoken to him tonight. That was a couple hours ago, when he was still mostly sober. The same can't be said now.

"There you guys are!" Reaching for our interlocked arms, he separates us and takes both our hands in his and places a sloppy kiss on our knuckles.

It's the first summer that Jake has come home from Ohio, and when we bumped into him earlier, for the first time in two years, I was surprised to discover that he's now sporting a beard and he was even more surprised to discover that I still live in Santa Monica. He had somehow gotten the idea that I'd moved back to Portland like forever ago. But beard and assumptions aside, he hasn't changed. He's still a player and he still doesn't try to deny it. When Rachael asked him how he was doing, he told us that it's not going too great, because both of his two girlfriends have recently broken up with him and he still doesn't know why. I could guess.

"Where do you keep getting the beer from?" Rachael asks, wrinkling her nose as she pulls her hand back from him. She has to talk over the sound of the music from Pacific Park.

"TJ's," Jake says. And in case we don't know, he rolls his eyes over his shoulder and points his thumb behind him, off into the distance. TJ has a condo over on the beachfront. Like I could forget. My stomach flips at the thought of it. "He's sent me over here to round up the troops. Are you guys down for an after-party?" His eyes light up at the word and I find it hard to take the tank top he's wearing seriously. It's got an eagle on it. Placed on top of the US flag. With "FREEDOM" written in block capitals across the eagle's feet. It looks totally ridiculous, yet not as crazy as the temporary eagle tattoo he's wearing proudly on his left cheek. I'm starting to wonder if he's buzzed from more than just beer.

"After-party?" Rachael echoes. We exchange glances and I can tell immediately by the look in her eyes that she's keen to go.

“Yeah, yeah,” Jake says, his voice overflowing with enthusiasm as he grins down at us through that beard. “There are kegs and everything! C’mon, it’s The Fourth of July. It’s the weekend. You gotta come. Everyone’s gonna be there.”

I frown. “Everyone?”

“TJ and all the guys, Meghan and Jared are already there, Dean’s coming by later, I think Austin Camer—”

“Pass.”

Jake stops talking and his grin twists into a frustrated scowl. He looks to Rachael, and for a brief second, I’m convinced he’s just rolled his eyes. When his bloodshot gaze focuses back on me, he gently grabs my shoulders and shakes me around. “Helloooooo?” He dramatically widens his eyes and pretends to scour every inch of my face. “Where the hell is Eden? I know I haven’t seen you in a hell of a long time, but surely you can’t have gotten *this* boring in the space of two years.”

Not amused, I shrug Jake’s grip off me and take a step back. Because he isn’t a close friend, or even a friend at all anymore, I don’t find it necessary to explain myself to him. So I remain quiet, staring at my Chucks and hoping Rachael will step in and save me as usual, because that’s all I’ve been depending on lately. I depend on Rachael to remind everyone that I never actually *dated* my stepbrother and that I never will. I depend on her to get me out of situations where I might bump into Dean. I’m still too ashamed to face him after everything that’s happened, and I doubt he wants to deal with me either. No one wants to deal with their ex-girlfriend, especially one that cheated on them.

As always, I hear Rachael tell Jake, “She doesn’t have to go if she doesn’t want to.” I continue to stare at my shoes, because every time Rachael comes to my rescue, I feel more weak and pathetic than I did before.

“You can’t avoid him forever,” Jake mutters. He suddenly sounds solemn, and when I glance up, I realize it’s completely obvious to him that the reason I don’t want to go to this party is because of Dean. I can’t deny it, so I only shrug and rub at my temple. There’s a second reason, of course. It’s the same reason my stomach has tightened. I’ve only been to TJ’s once before and that was three years ago. I was there with my stepbrother. Tonight of all nights, I really don’t want to head over there again.

“You go,” I tell Rachael after a moment of silence. I can see how desperately she wants to go to this party, yet I know she’ll most likely turn down the offer so that she doesn’t leave me alone. That’s what best friends do. But best friends also compromise, and Rachael has already spent her evening making sure that I’ve been okay on this dreaded day, so I really do want her to go have some fun. After all, the Fourth has landed on a Friday this year, so many people are making the best of it. Rachael should too. “I’ll go find Ella or something.”

“I don’t mind.”

Even I can tell she’s lying. “Rachael,” I say firmly. I nod toward TJ’s condo, off in the distance. “Go.”

Apprehensive, she pinches her lower lip between her fingers and contemplates for a short while. She’s hardly wearing any makeup tonight—she rarely does anymore—so she barely looks seventeen, let alone twenty. “Are you sure?”

“Positive.”

“Then c’mon!” Jake explodes, his overbearing grin back on his eagle-tattooed face as he reaches for Rachael’s hand, yanking her toward him. “We’ve got a party to get to!” He begins to pull my best friend away, hauling her down the boardwalk and away from the pier. She manages to wave goodbye just before they disappear through the crowd.

Once they’re gone, I check my phone for the time. It’s after 9:30. Both the Marina del Rey and Pacific Palisades firework displays are over by now, so there are a lot of people beginning to head home. I pull up Ella’s number and start to call her. Unfortunately, my mom and her boyfriend Jack are both working this evening, so only my dad and my stepmom are out here at the pier to celebrate the Fourth of July. They’re my ride home, so I’ve got no choice but to hunt them down. But what’s even more unfortunate is that it’s Dad’s turn to have me stay with him for the week. That’s the worst part about having divorced parents: being thrown back and forth between different houses. I hate staying at Dad’s place, and he loathes it even more than I do, mostly because it’s unbearably tense and awkward. Like Jamie, Dad only talks to me if it’s absolutely necessary.

Ella’s phone is busy, so the call is directed straight to her voicemail. I don’t leave a message, only hang up as quick as I can. I dread the idea of having to call Dad instead. I scroll through my contacts, pulling up his number and calling it. It starts to ring and I feel myself frowning as I wait for his coarse voice to answer.

Yet as I’m standing on the boardwalk with people milling around me and with my phone pressed to my ear, something catches my attention. It’s my youngest stepbrother, Chase. He’s lingering over by the Bubba Gump restaurant, and he’s alone,

when he shouldn't be. Despite this, he doesn't look too worried, mostly just bored as he paces slowly back and forth.

I hang up the call to my dad and head over toward Chase. He spots me as I approach and instantly he stops pacing and looks sheepish.

"Where are your friends?" I ask once I reach him. I glance around, searching for a group of soon-to-be freshmen boys, but I can't see them.

Chase twirls a thick lock of his blond hair around his index finger. "They took the bus to Venice, but I didn't go because—"

"Because your mom told you not to leave the pier," I finish, and he nods.

Chase's friendship circle is prone to getting into trouble often, but he's smart enough to know when not to break the rules. I'm sure his friends' parents don't want their kids sneaking off to Venice on the Fourth of July. It'll be pretty rowdy over there right now, so I'm glad Chase has chosen to stay behind. "Wanna hang with me?"

"Sure."

Throwing my arm over his shoulders, I pull him away from the restaurant and head toward Pacific Park. Chase loves the arcade games, but before we've even gotten within a twenty-foot radius of the Playland Arcade, I have to stop when my phone starts to ring. Picking up the call, I have to take a second to prepare myself mentally before I can answer when I see that it is Dad calling me.

"What did you want?" is how he greets me, his tone gruff. That's all it ever is these days.

Angling my body slightly away from Chase, I press my phone closer against my ear and tell him, "Nothing. I was just wondering where you guys were."

“Well, we’re at the car,” Dad shoots back, as though he expects me to know that already. “Hurry up and meet us here unless you want to ask your brother to give you a ride home instead, which I’m sure he won’t.”

With that, I promptly hang up the call without saying anything more. Most of my phone calls with Dad usually end like this, with one of us hanging up mid-sentence, and most of our conversations face-to-face end with one of us storming off. Admittedly, I’m the one who hangs up the calls. Dad’s the one who storms out.

“Who was that?” Chase asks when I turn back around.

“We’re heading home,” I answer, dodging the question. It’s not that Chase is oblivious to the fact that my dad and I can’t stand each other, it’s just easier to keep the tension to a minimum when it comes to the rest of the family. Whatever our family is. I pull Chase even closer against me as I spin him around once again, this time away from Pacific Park and back toward the city. “No arcade games tonight.”

Chase shrugs under my arm. “I already won a load of tickets earlier.”

“How many?”

Slightly smug, he grins and pats the back pockets of his shorts. They’re both bulging with yellow tickets. “Over seven hundred.”

“No way. What are you saving them for?”

“I’m trying to reach two thousand.”

We talk about the arcade games and the tickets and the Pacific Wheel and the fireworks and Venice as we make our way back down the boardwalk and out onto Ocean Avenue, tracing our steps back to the car. Parking on the Fourth is always incredibly hectic, and after spending a couple minutes disagreeing with Chase over where Dad parked earlier in the evening, I realize I’m the one who’s wrong. We’re not

parked north of the freeway like I'd thought, but south of it, down on Pico Boulevard and Third Street. It's a good half-mile away, so we walk pretty damn fast. Dad doesn't like to be kept waiting. Ever.

The Lexus is wedged against the sidewalk between two other cars when we reach it ten minutes later, and to my surprise, Dad's standing outside the car. Arms folded across his chest, foot tapping the ground impatiently, same ugly expression as always.

"Oh, good, you found your brother," he says sharply, emphasizing that final word. Jamie and Chase are never simply just "Jamie and Chase" anymore. For the past year, Dad has always referred to them as my brothers as though to prove a point. Jamie hates it as much as I do, whereas I don't think Chase has picked up on it at all.

I keep my cool and instead of growing irritated at Dad's disdainful tone, I glance over his shoulder, resting my eyes on Ella. She's in the passenger seat of the car, her body turned away from the window, but I can still see her phone pressed to her ear. Most likely still the same call she was engaged in when I called earlier. I look back at Dad. "Business?"

"Uh-huh." He leans over and raps his knuckles harshly and quickly against the window, startling Ella to the point where her phone almost flies out of her hand. She spins around in the seat and looks back at Dad through the glass, only for him to nod his head toward Chase and me. Ella nods back, moves her device back to her ear, murmurs something, and then hangs up. That's when Dad finally tells us to get inside the car.

Chase and I clamber into the backseat, pulling on our seatbelts as Dad slips into the driver's seat, fixing me with a firm glare in the rearview mirror, which I ignore. As he starts to drive, Ella cranes her neck over the back of the passenger seat.

"Don't you want to stay out a little later?" she asks me, blond hair framing her face. It's nearing ten by now, so I'm not sure what she was expecting me to stay out for. The last thing I wanted to do was go to that party at TJ's, so I'm happy to be going home.

"Not really," I tell her. I don't mention the party. Nor the fact that the entire night has sucked.

"What about you, buddy?" Dad cuts in, nodding to Chase in the rearview mirror. "I thought Gregg's mom was going to take you all home later."

Chase stops texting to glance up. He fires me a sideways glance, so I rack my brain for a second before telling Dad, "He didn't feel too good, so I told him to come home with us." To make it sound convincing, I look at Chase with fake concern and ask, "How are you feeling now?"

"Better," Chase says as he plays along, pressing the back of his hand to his forehead and rubbing it soothingly. "I think the Pacific Wheel was giving me a migraine, but I'm totally fine now. Can we stop for burgers? Please, Dad? I'm dying over here. You don't want me to pass out, do you?"

Ella rolls her eyes and turns back around in her seat. Dad only says, "Let me think about it."

With neither of them paying much attention to us, I curl my hand into a fist and rest it on the middle seat. He bumps his own fist against mine immediately, and

we subtly smile at one another. If Dad knew about the trouble that Chase's friends often got themselves into, Chase would never be allowed to see them again. It's always better not to mention it, even when Chase always does the right thing.

We end up dropping by the Wendy's drive-thru over on Lincoln Boulevard on the way home. Dad and Chase both get burgers. I get a vanilla Frosty. A large. I spend the rest of the car journey home eating it, staring out the window at the dark skies, listening to Dad and Ella talk over the '80s music they've put on in the background. They're wondering if Jamie will be home before his curfew at midnight. Dad reckons he'll be an hour late.

We're back on Deidre Avenue within ten minutes due to the traffic having eased slightly, where Dad parks up on the drive by Ella's Range Rover. With my empty cup in my hand, I push open the car door and step out once Dad switches the engine off. I'm about to make my way up to the front door when Ella catches my attention, calling my name over the roof of the Lexus.

"Can you help me get some groceries out of the trunk from earlier?" she asks in a firm voice, and gives the Range Rover a clipped nod. Because I like Ella, I make my way over to her car without hesitation. She follows me as she fumbles in her purse for her keys, and once she finds them, she pops the trunk.

I glance down, ready to reach in to gather up a bunch of grocery bags, but I'm perplexed to discover that the trunk is empty. Wondering if Ella's having a moment of forgetfulness, I arch an eyebrow and look up at her. Her eyes are suddenly wide and wary and she's surreptitiously peering around the car, watching Dad and Chase make their way into the house. Once they're inside, her eyes lock on mine.

"Tyler called," she says.

I take a step back, defensive. His name feels like a weapon. That's why I never say it anymore. That's why I never want to hear it. It always hurts far too much. Already my throat feels tight as I forget to keep breathing and a shiver runs throughout my body. The earlier call wasn't a business call at all. It was Tyler. He always calls Ella, once a week or so, and I'm perfectly aware of this. Several months ago, he started calling me too. I have yet to answer. Ella, on the other hand, desperately awaits his calls, but she never mentions them to the rest of us. Not until right now.

She swallows and glances back at the house before she talks again, fearful that Dad might hear her. No one is allowed to mention Tyler's name around me. Dad's strict orders, of course, and I think it's the only thing we've ever agreed on. Yet Ella continues, looking at me in a way that's both pitying and sad as she quietly says, "He asked me to wish you a happy Fourth."

The irony almost makes me laugh, but it angers me to the point where it's impossible to find it funny. The Fourth of July, three years ago, Tyler and I were in the hallways at Culver City High School during the firework display. That's where all of this mess really started. That's when I realized I was looking at my stepbrother in the way that I shouldn't have been. We got arrested for trespassing that night. The Fourth of July, last year, Tyler and I weren't at a firework display. We were in his apartment in New York City, alone in the dark as the rain drenched the city. He quoted a Bible verse. Wrote on my body, said that I was his. They were the other Fourth of Julys. Not this one. To wish me a happy Fourth tonight is almost like some sort of joke. I haven't seen him in a year. He walked out and left me when I needed

him by my side the most. I'm not his anymore, so how dare he wish me a happy Fourth of July when he's not here to spend it with me?

As my mind tries to process everything, I feel my temper flaring up. Ella's waiting for me to say something back, so before I turn around and storm into the house, I reach up and slam the trunk shut.

"Tell Tyler it's been far from it."