

Reflection

Chapter 1

AJ

“So this is how I die.” Mom chuckles even as her foot stomps an imaginary brake pedal on the passenger side of my pickup. “Watch that semi, AJ.”

“I got it, I got it,” I say, my tone breezy.

She tucks her fiery red hair, the same color as mine, behind her ear as her eyes search my freckled face. “It’s not too late to change your mind.”

I blow out a long-suffering sigh. “Mom, for the last time, I’m going, okay?”

My voice is gruff, but the mist in my mother’s jade-green eyes makes my heart twinge. Most of my friends think I’m totally warped for being so close to my parents, but as far as parents go, mine are pretty cool. And with every mile I drive away from our home in Hale Valley, a fresh wave of homesickness ripples through me.

On top of that, I feel like a total jerk for ditching my best friends for the whole summer. Soccer sucks up all my time during the school year, leaving next to nothing for Lexi and Theo, so every summer, I do my best to make up for being such a crap friend the rest of the year. Except this year. Thanks to my burning ambition to make it to the pros, I’m spending the summer before our senior year training at Cambridge Soccer

Academy up near Lake Loman. And what's even worse than spending summer break three hours away from my two best friends?

Spending it with my worst enemy.

Most people try to avoid their archrivals. Me, I don't have that luxury. Because my greatest foe also happens to be my best friends' sister. And not just their sister—their triplet. Which means there's no evading the sharp-tongued Melina Christopoulos, no matter how hard I try. And this summer, it'll be downright impossible. Because for the next twelve weeks, the Christopouloses' vacation house at the lake will be home sweet home . . . for both of us. And the fact that I've chosen to spend three whole months with my least favorite person on the planet proves how much my dream means to me.

Or that I'm completely out of my mind. I'd say the odds are about even.

To avoid Mom's watery gaze, I focus on the taillights of my father's Subaru as he leads me along a remote highway in the Pocono Mountains of northeastern Pennsylvania. "Cambridge is gonna be crawling with scouts," I say. "Only a fool would miss a chance to play in front of the top recruiters in the country. And my mother didn't raise me to be a fool."

"No, I did not," she says with a grudging chuckle. "But you haven't had your license long. I worry about you driving everywhere alone."

"The academy's only fifteen minutes from the lake. I'll be fine."

Dad's deep voice drifts through the Bluetooth speakers of my Dodge Dakota. "Maura, honey, AJ's been up here dozens of times with the Christopouloses. Blue Heron Lodge is like a second home to him."

"Still, I'd feel better if Lexi and Theo were staying with him."

“Me too,” I say, fighting off a fresh stab of homesickness, “but Theo’s shadowing one of his dad’s architects for the summer, and Lexi’s working in his office.”

“But who’ll do your laundry? Or cook for you?”

Dad chuckles. “Oh, you’ll still be doing his laundry—every time he comes home for the weekend. And he’s a teenage boy. He could live on grilled cheese and frozen pizza for months.”

Mom huffs. “Whose side are you on?”

“In this instance—AJ’s.”

She shoots the phone mounted on my dashboard a glare, as if my father’s ears suddenly have the magical ability to see. “Michael Hertz, I have half a mind to hang up and let you keep yourself company the rest of the way.”

“Ha! Not likely. You can’t get enough of your schmoopsie.”

Mom’s brows shoot up, then a soft smile creeps onto her lips. “Touché.”

I groan even as warmth spreads through my chest. After seventeen years of marriage, my parents are still crazy in love. Which, somehow, is both cringey and comforting at the same time.

“I can fend for myself,” I say, more to cut off their sappiness than to reassure my mother.

“But what if you get hurt during training?”

“Me?” I scoff. “No chance. I’m indestructible.”

“And Natalie will be there if he needs anything,” Dad adds.

My mother lets out a grumbly sigh, her lips pursed. I shoot her a smirk. “Now, now, if you can’t say anything nice . . .”

Mom wrinkles her freckled nose at me. She and Natalie Christopoulos—Theo, Lexi, and Lina’s mother—are polar opposites. To put it bluntly, my mom rocks and theirs, well, doesn’t. So I know the thought of Mrs. C playing surrogate mom to me all summer makes my mother’s skin crawl.

“I’ll survive, Mom. I promise.”

“But I might not. I still think I should stay up here with you for the summer.”

“Maura, the doc—”

“I know, Mike,” she blurts, then rubs my shoulder. “I’m just going to miss you so much, doodlebug. And Baxter will be lost without you.”

The mention of my bulldog makes my heart pang. “I wish I coulda brought him with me.” I can’t hide the sulk in my tone. “You know he wouldn’t have been any trouble.”

“No, but Natalie’s allergic to dogs.”

“But Lina’s been bragging for weeks about all the modeling gigs she has lined up this summer. She and Mrs. C won’t even be there most of the time.”

“Sorry, bud,” Dad says. “Their house, their rules.”

As we turn off Route 7, Lake Loman comes into view, its surface a mottled reflection of the orange and purple streaks in the sky above. Mom opens her window and tips her head out, pulling in a deep breath of mountain air. “Do you have any idea how jealous I am?”

I snicker. “Yeah, you’ve mentioned it a few times.”

“When I was your age, I would’ve given anything to spend the whole summer at soccer camp.”

“Sweetheart,” Dad says, “Cambridge is an elite training academy, not a camp.”

“Oh, Michael, what’s the difference?”

His laugh fills the cab of my truck. “About fifteen grand.”

My gut clenches. Cambridge Soccer Academy is the most exclusive—and expensive—training program in the country, and my family isn’t exactly swimming in cash. When I heard how much the summer session alone costs, I pretended I didn’t want to go, but Dad insisted. *We’re investing in your future, little man. You can pay us back when you hit the pros.* He was joking, but I

fully intend to pay back every dollar—plus a million more—they’ve ever spent on my soccer training.

We wind our way through the tiny town of Bishop, then turn into the gated entrance of The Highlands, a resort-like community on the shores of Lake Loman, the private lake at the edge of town. At the stone gatehouse, the security guard checks our guest passes, then opens the arched iron gates and waves us through.

I follow Dad onto Lakeshore Drive, which forms a meandering five-mile loop around the lake. Narrow lanes break off every quarter mile or so, with those on the left leading to the extravagant houses on the shoreline while those on the right snake up the hillside to the more modest—but still impressive—estates perched there.

When we turn onto Sweet Birch Lane, a smile tugs at my lips as a hundred memories from my childhood flicker through my mind. But it’s not the memories this sun-dappled lane holds that make my heart beat faster. It’s the little slice of heaven at the end of it.

Theo and Lexi’s father, Romanos Christopoulos, owns Infinity Custom Homes, a construction company catering to buyers with deep pockets and high-end tastes. Some of the most luxurious houses in The Highlands were built by Infinity, but in my eyes they all pale in comparison to Blue Heron Lodge.

The home is the perfect mix of rustic and modern design, combining glass, metal, wood, and stone in a way that somehow just works. The open-concept main level looks like a page out of a magazine, with gleaming marble floors, a linear gas fireplace set in a column of gray slate soaring to the cathedral ceiling above, and a towering wall of windows offering a panoramic view of the lush landscaping and quiet cove beyond. A bedroom wing extends off each side of the house, with the massive

owner's suite filling the one on the left and Theo and Lexi's bedroom suites and a sunroom in the one to the right.

The main level is a showstopper, but the lower level is more homey, with reclaimed wood floors, a fieldstone fireplace, and a cozy family room filled with overstuffed couches. There are three more bedroom suites, including mine—and, unfortunately, Lina's—and a tricked-out game room a guy could get lost in for days. The lakeside wall is lined with massive sliding glass doors that open onto a terraced patio with an outdoor kitchen, a built-in firepit, and a party-sized hot tub, all of which are gonna see some action at the big blowout I'm planning for my seventeenth birthday in July. But I probably shouldn't mention that to Mom.

"I'm sorry we couldn't afford to get you a room on campus," she says, slipping her feet into her flip flops as we pull into the circular driveway. "It would've given you a taste of what college will be like."

"Are you kidding?" I lift my chin at the sprawling lodge. "This beats a dorm any day."

I park behind Dad, then slip out of the truck. As I give my six-foot frame a stretch, he pulls Mom into his arms and plants an enthusiastic kiss on her lips. With a groan, I yank my bags out of the bed of the pickup. "Geez, you guys, get a room."

"We have one." His warm brown eyes sparkle. "Right next to yours."

"Ugh. Don't remind me."

Leaving my parents to their mushy reunion, I stride up the slate walkway to the front doors. As quietly as I can, I slip into the foyer, hoping to avoid Lina and her prickly persona for as long as possible.

Which, as it turns out, is about two-point-three seconds flat.

Chapter 2

Melina

A low wake ripples over the surface of the cove. I twirl a thick caramel curl around one finger as I watch the gentle waves splash against the stone bulkhead. The cove is shrouded in the magic of the witching hour, that ethereal window of time when the setting sun paints the sky and fireflies twinkle in the air. It weaves a spell that seeps into my bones and soothes my soul—until my nemesis steps through the door, a gym bag slung over one shoulder and an overstuffed duffel in his hand.

The very sight of AJ Hertz makes my heart seethe.

Blue Heron Lodge is my favorite little corner of the planet, and during the school year, I long for my tranquil lakeside retreat. My summer modeling schedule is always jam-packed with bookings, many of them in New York City, and since Lake Loman is three hours closer to the city than Hale Valley is, it only makes sense to use our vacation house as my home base. But the shorter commute is really just a convenient excuse I give my father for spending every summer break away from home. In truth, Lake Loman is my escape from Hale Valley and my mundane—and lonely—existence there.

But this year, my private sanctuary is being invaded. And by none other than the boy who turned my life upside down almost nine years ago.

When my triplets, Lexi and Theo, met AJ on the first day of third grade, they became best friends in a heartbeat. Lexi even let him call her Al, the nickname—short for Alexandra—only Theo was allowed to use before. From day one, they've been the perfect threesome . . . with no room for a fourth. And the

thought of sharing my home away from home with the boy who stole my triplets makes my stomach churn.

When AJ catches sight of me, his shoulders tense. He covers with a wry smile. “Honey, I’m home.”

I reward his attempt at humor with a steely gaze.

“Ah, Lina, as warm and welcoming as ever.” He jerks a thumb at the open staircase off the foyer. “I’m going down to unpack.”

I leap up and stalk across the room. “What do you mean, down?”

“That’s where I always stay.”

I cross my arms. “Not this time. I’m not sharing the lower level with you for the entire summer.”

He lifts his free hand. “But that’s where the guest rooms are, and I’m a guest, so . . .”

As he thumps down the stairs, I follow, glaring at the back of his coppery head. “Only because my father suffers from a chronic case of hospitality. As far as I’m concerned, you’re nothing but a squatter. And if you have any hope of making it through the summer without me suffocating you in your sleep, then there are a few ground rules you need to follow.”

He turns in the doorway of the bedroom next to mine, a sneer on his lips. “Such as?”

“One, do not—and I mean ever—go into my room without my permission. Which, in case you’re wondering, you’ll never get.”

With a scoff, he struts into the room and tosses his bags on the bed. “I’m heartbroken.”

“Two, no visitors—except your parents, of course.”

His malachite-green eyes glint. “And Lexi and Theo.”

I give my eyes a dramatic roll to hide any flicker of pain they may hold.

He opens his duffel with a loud *zzzp*. “This is their house too, Lina, and they’re gonna spend as many weekends with me as they can.”

“Oh joy,” I say, my tone laced with acid. “Three, no parties.”

His face goes flat. “You can’t be serious.”

“Oh, but I am. The lake helps me unwind between bookings, and that’s because it’s peaceful and private. So you and your super-jock buddies will have to live it up somewhere else.”

He yanks two pairs of cleats out of his bag and holds them up. “I’m not here to party, Lina. I’m gonna be busting my ass eight hours a day at the academy, remember?” He tosses the shoes into the closet and slides the door closed with a clunk. “And I’ve worked ten times harder than you to get where I am, so quit pretending you’re the only one whose future is worth a damn.”

My stomach clenches, but I offer him a bland smile. “Four, everything on the top shelf in the fridge is mine. So hands off.”

“Anything else, Your Majesty?”

“Yes, actually.” I straighten up to look him in the eyes, which—annoyingly—have been slightly higher than mine since sometime around my seventeenth birthday in March. “I know you can’t stand being alone, but I’ve grown accustomed to solitude over the last several years. And that’s thanks to you. So no matter how homesick and lonely you get, don’t come running to me.”

He blows a soft huff through his nose. “I wouldn’t dream of it.”

I take a step closer, my eyes cold. “I don’t want to see you. I don’t want to hear you. And I don’t want to talk to you. As long as you remember that, we’ll get along just fine.”

“Yeah, I get it. You hate me.”

I offer him a syrupy smile. “Good to know we’re clear on that.”

“Crystal.”

“Perfect.”

Pivoting on the ball of my foot, I flounce out of his bedroom and into mine. But when I catch a glimpse of my reflection in the full-length mirror on my wall, the ugliness staring back at me—the mask of anger and disdain I wear like a shield—stops me in my tracks. As I stare at the girl in the glass, I run my fingers into my long curls, massaging my scalp. Slowly, my jaw softens, and as my eyes clear, the real me comes into focus, the me most people never see.

“Perfect?” I press my forehead against the mirror, leaving a circle of fog on the cool glass. “Not even close.”

Chapter 3

AJ

As I empty my duffel into the dresser, Mom’s cheery voice drifts through my open door. “Lina! I thought you’d be working in Bali or Barcelona or some other exotic locale this weekend. Come give me a hug, sweet girl.”

Dad strolls into my room, and I roll my eyes at him. “I swear, she’d hug Hitler if he was still alive.”

“That’s why I fell in love with her.” A slight squint dims his warm brown eyes. “Y’know, I wasn’t always the guy I am today. But your mom—she saw the best in me. And, honestly, it’s the most valuable gift anybody’s ever given me.”

My chest twinges, but I let out a light chuckle. “You mean you weren’t always a dead-boring, goody-two-shoes college professor?”

His eyes shoot open, and he leaps on me with a battle cry. We tussle for a minute, then he catches me in a headlock and gives me a noogie until I call uncle.

Mom ambles in as we’re both finger-combing our hair back into place, breathless from laughing. “I swear, that girl has the most beautiful smile I’ve ever seen,” she says.

I snort. “It has to be—to hide her black heart.”

My mother’s eyes widen, a warning in their depths. “Aidan Joseph Hertz.”

My insides shrivel under her gaze, but I throw my hands wide. “Well, it’s hard to see any beauty through all the crap she throws at me.”

She steps closer, her voice a loud whisper. “You seem to view Lina as some sort of monster, but I find her perfectly charming.”

“Only ‘cause she’s sweet as pie with you. She sure as hell isn’t like that with me.”

Mom scowls at the curse, mild as it is. “Well, maybe the way she treats you is just a reflection of the way you treat her.” She tips her head, her brows raised. “You hear me?”

I drop my eyes, one corner of my mouth scrunched. “Yes, ma’am.”

“That’s my doodlebug.” She kisses my cheek with a loud *mwah*, then wraps her arms around me in one of her patented mama-bear hugs. Even though she’s just a smidge over five feet tall, she somehow manages to wrap all six feet of me in the safe, warm cocoon of her arms—my mighty mini mom, as Dad and I always joke. Behind her back, of course.

“I’m surprised to see Lina,” Dad says. “Since Natalie’s car is gone, I assumed they were out of town.”

“Lina says she’s out with friends, and she doesn’t expect her home until late. And from her tone, I gather that’s a common occurrence. Which reminds me”—Mom’s voice gets cagey as she pats my chest—“there’s one more thing we need to discuss about this summer.”

With a groan, I tip my face to the ceiling. “Not the sex talk again. We’ve already been through it, like, a dozen times.”

“Sorry, little man,” Dad says. “This situation calls for a refresher.”

“Situation?”

“You’re going to be living on your own for the first time. There are bound to be temptations.”

“Like what?”

“Drinking, partying, girls”—he lowers his voice—“including the beautiful model who sleeps in the next room.”

I grimace. “Lina and I can’t stand each other. Never have, never will. And besides, I have a girlfriend, remember?”

My mother levels a finger at me. “Who is not, under any circumstances, to visit you while you’re here.”

Dad’s tone gets heavy. “Just remember, AJ—”

“—sex is not a game. I know. You’ve been drilling it into me for years.”

He rests a hand on my shoulder. “We want you to enjoy your independence, but we still expect you to behave like the responsible young man we’ve raised you to be.”

Mom’s eyes sparkle. “And besides, we’ll be here in spirit, watching your every move. So keep that in mind if you start to get frisky with some sexy young thing.”

“Ugh, Mom, stop,” I plead, my face burning.

“Aw.” She pinches my cheek. “Did I embarrass you, doodlebug?”

“Thoroughly.”

“Mission accomplished,” she says with a wink. “Now, where can a girl get a s’more around here?”

**What happens when you discover the enemy
before you is really just a reflection of you?**

**Find out in *Reflection*, releasing on ebook
on March 31st!**