



Lonely Hearts Day

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Category: Romance, Young Adult

Description: It isn't that Scarlett Landry doesn't believe in love, her parents' relationship is perfect, after all. It's just that she doesn't think she should be forced to celebrate it. Forced to listen to terrible poetry and watch Valentine's Day roses being distributed to everyone around her at school. If there is a relationship status that deserves its own holiday, it's single-hood.

So, she enlists the help of her best friend, Jack Bowman, to throw a party for all the lonely hearts of their high school. She's known Jack for years. He's fun and nerdy and smart and will make the perfect co-host. There are two problems. One: the king and queen of school already throw a party on Valentine's Day. Have for the last few years. And they are not fans of being dethroned. Two: when you become known for throwing a party to celebrate singles, you probably shouldn't fall in love.

This fun, flirty YA contemporary romance novella, takes place over four Valentine's Days. It follows the ups and downs of friendship, family, and falling in love.

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Year 1

(Freshmen)

Chapter 1

“Jack,” I hissed as the fourth rose was passed out in our English class. And it was only first period. The group of five leadership students had come in, recited a poem that I could’ve sworn rhymed the words *finnick* and *you* picked me, then proceeded to hand out the roses while our teacher stood at the front of the room, arms crossed, waiting impatiently.

My best friend turned in his seat. “What?”

“Remember when I got sent home to change last week because a strip of my stomach was exposed?”

“Yeah.”

“This is more distracting than that ever was.”

“True. But your exposed stomach didn’t raise any money for the school so the hypocrisy will live on.”

“You’re right. Maybe that’s the key to changing dress code rules—somehow monetizing tank tops and three-inch inseams.”

“You should raise your hand and suggest that.”

“I should.” I looked toward the front of the room and started to raise my hand.

“Don’t, Scarlett.” He pulled my arm down by the sleeve. “I’m less bitter about the dress code and more bitter that I have to listen to that poem six times today,” he said quietly as the leadership group left, minus six roses.

“Of course you’re not bitter about the dress code. You’re a guy.”

The girl next to me, rose smashed up against her nose as she took a large inhale, said, “You’re both actually bitter because you’ll never get one.”

I rolled my eyes. She didn’t know us at all. The last thing we wanted was a school-bought rose. Even if someone did have a crush on me, I wouldn’t want them to give their hard-earned money to the school so that a stranger could hand me a rose in class.

Valentine’s Day was a stupid holiday as far as I was concerned. If someone had to be reminded to show their love for you, did they really love you in the first place?

“Are we going tonight?” Tessa asked at the locker next to mine. She wasn’t talking to me. She was talking to her boyfriend, Brady, who was helping her shove the oversized teddy bear he’d brought her today inside. It wasn’t fitting and every time they tried, her shoulder would bump into me. I was in the process of trading my math book for my history book because even though half the school thought learning ceased on this day, teachers still continued teaching. Or attempting to.

“Do you want to go?” Brady asked.

“It was fun last year.”

She was talking about the party that Micah and Cassidy—king and queen of the sophomore class—had thrown every year since they’d gotten together three Valentine’s Days ago. They weren’t the literal king and queen of their class—as in, they’d never been crowned at prom or anything—but everyone considered them couple goals. And they must’ve taken the title seriously because they threw awe are so in love and you should be tooparty that was attended by a lot of the student body.

I had never gone.

I shut my locker, having made a successful book transfer, and walked toward fourth period. Jack and I met in the hall halfway there. We had three classes together, history being one of them.

“You know what really needs its own special day?” I said. Jack was used to my antics; used to me pulling him into my thought process mid process. We’d been friends since the third grade when we’d both ended up in the same church parking lot on our bikes for a Pokémon raid. We didn’t play Pokémon anymore (well, rarely) but our friendship stuck. We liked the same things—anime and board games and discovering terrible bands that we could love-hate.

“What needs its own special day?” he asked now. “By the way, that poem is even more terrible than I realized. They rhymedfrieswithyour eyes.”

“That’s the only line I like. It makes me hungry though.”

He smiled his lopsided smile. Jack was stringy, his limbs too long for his thin frame, his hair too short for his oversized glasses. “I don’t know how the leadership students read it with a straight face. I couldn’t even read agoodpoem in front of the class. Not even to someone I liked,” he said.

“I would die to see you reading a poem in front of the class to some girl.”

He shuddered at the thought of it.

“Wasn’t it Elizabeth Bennett who said that one poor sonnet could kill love stone dead?”

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“She’s smart,” he said.

“Well, Jane Austen was,” I said.

“Same thing,” he replied.

I agreed.

“So what needs its own day?” he asked, steering us back on track.

“Oh! Singleness.”

“Singleness?”

“Yes, couples get celebrated all the time. They buy each other cute gifts for every arbitrary milestone. ‘We just hit six months, let’s have a dinner date. We know what color each other’s eyes are, here’s a basket of treats. We both said the words ‘bless you’ at the same exact time, we’re so connected; let’s make an Instagram post about it.’”

“I don’t think anyone has actually done that last one.”

“They’ve done the less hyperbolized version of it, and you know it.”

He laughed. “So you want to take back love? Turn it into hate?”

“No, not love. Just the day that’s been chosen to collectively celebrate it. Like I said,

love gets celebrated enough. We need a day to celebrate singleness. Because let's be real, there's just as much to celebrate on this side. I don't have to spend money on flowers. I don't have to keep track of pesky milestones. I didn't have to text anyone when I woke up!"

"You texted me when you woke up today," he said.

"But I didn't have to."

"True. You'd make a good ambassador for independence."

"You're right, I'm the most independent." When you're born seven years after your older two siblings, after your parents thought they were done, you're afforded a lot of freedom. "So are you with me?"

"I'm so with you."

"Good, invite all your single friends. My house. Tonight. Seven. We're having a party."

His eyebrows popped up. "You're throwing a party on the same day as the love-fest party?"

"It's not in direct competition."

"Same night, same time. Isn't that the definition of direct competition?"

"No, not at all."

"You just want to make Micah mad."

“I don’t!” But I did.

Micah had been our friend up until he hit the sixth grade, when we suddenly became too nerdy for him. We liked all the same things he liked. At least, we did until he decided those things weren’t cool enough. I could still picture his snide little face as he’d marched up to us on the playground that day.

“Want to work on the Death Star today?” Jack had asked. They’d been building Lego Star Wars together forever.

Some other kid had laughed, and Micah had narrowed his eyes at Jack and said, “Aren’t you too old to like Legos, nerd?”

Anger had rushed through my body, and I’d jumped up from the bench where I’d been reading and shoved Micah to the ground. He fell hard, landing on the cement path that surrounded the playground. That’s when I’d heard a sharp whistle from the yard duty teacher. She’d sent me to the office immediately, where I was suspended for two days. Worth it. While I was on suspension, Jack told me that Micah said he was too good to be our friend. That he wasn’t going to hang out with us anymore. I didn’t care about Micah, but knowing Jack did made me want to push him all over again.

The memory still filled me with a white-hot rage.

Jack was more forgiving than me, though, and said things like, let it go. He’s just insecure. But today wasn’t about that.

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“He doesn’t pay attention to what we do anymore. This party won’t even be on his radar,” I said. “This is a different kind of party. For the people who understand the beauty of alone time. The freedom of self-love. There will be food. There will be decorations. There will be a game of pin the crown on the single princess. And you will be helping me with all this preparation, too, by the way.”

“Of course I will. And I raise your pin the crown on the princess with a game of seven minutes in the closet alone.”

“Ooh, I like it.”

We reached history class, slipping inside just before the late bell rang. His comments about the other party and how popular it was were slowly sinking in. “Do you think anyone will come?”

“Even if it’s just us, that will be enough,” he said and I playfully punched his arm.

Chapter 2

There was a knock at my front door that afternoon. I was elbow deep in frosting. Not literally, but it felt like it.

“Come in!” I yelled from the kitchen.

I didn’t know why Jack still knocked, anyway. He was at my house all the time. I was pretty sure my parents considered him one of their kids.

My parents had three kids. My two older sisters had already moved out: one had just started her nursing career and one was a senior in college. And then there was me, the mistake baby. Born seven years after they thought they were done. They never called me a mistake baby, but when someone always uses the words surprise! when telling your birth story, that's what they really mean. My childhood was much different than my sisters' had been. They got a stay-at-home mom and parks. I got daycare and screen time. That was fine with me. It made me self-reliant. And I knew my parents loved me. They were just busier.

The front door opened and shut. Then Jack poked his head around the corner. I nodded from where I was adding powdered sugar into the mixing bowl at the island.

"What is happening?" he asked, stepping into the kitchen carrying a grocery bag. "It looks like a cocaine bomb exploded in here."

"Cocaine? Really?"

"First thing I thought of."

"Because you're a hardened criminal?"

He stepped up beside me. I could tell he was about to dip his finger into the bowl, so I smacked his hand before he did. "No. Bad."

He laughed. "I'm not a dog." He wasn't, of course, but sometimes he did things without thinking too much.

"At least wash your hands first."

"Fine."

“There wasn’t enough liquid in the bowl,” I said while he stood at the sink pouring dish soap over his hands. “Which produced the cloud of sugar you see here.” I gestured to the countertops and the entire front of me, all dusted white.

“Sounds delicious.” He dried his hands and picked up a sign I had made earlier to sit in front of the heart sugar cookies I was making. He read it aloud. “Its only job is to pump blood?”

“It’s a celebrating-singlehood party. The snacks need to reflect the theme. I’m also making beaker shaped cookies.”

“Beaker? What does that have to do with being single?”

I nudged the other sign I had made across the counter to him with my elbow.

“If there isn’t a risk of explosion, it’s not chemistry,” he read.

“Exactly,” I said.

“Be careful, or people are going to think you don’t believe in love.”

“I believe in love. I mean, look at my parents. But I don’t believe in being forced to celebrate love.”

“So it’s Valentine’s Day you don’t believe in.”

“Exactly. I thought we were on the same page here.”

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“We are,” he assured me. I gave him a sideways glance because I knew Jack and I could tell he was mainly doing this to support me. I was okay with that motivation. We did a lot of things that way—me supporting him or vice versa. He’d be fully on board by the end of the night.

“Channel the feelings you had while listening to bad poetry today.” I added red food coloring to the frosting.

“That will help.” He held up his grocery bag. “I brought stuff to make a veggie tray. Should I make a sign?”

“What would it say?”

He thought for a moment then said, “Eat veggies because love does nothing for your heart health?”

“Yeeesss! Write that.”

The garage door opened and my mom came in, her keys in one hand, a chai latte in the other. She paused, taking in the scene. “What is happening and why do you need a hundred cookies?”

“It’s not a hundred.” It was like fifty. “We’re throwing a party.”

“You two are throwing a party? Here?” It wasn’t that I’d never thrown a party before... well, actually, it was that. But I’d had plenty of friends over throughout the years.

“Is that okay?” I said. “I probably should’ve asked.”

“How many people are coming to this party?” Her eyes were on the stacks of unfrosted cookies again.

“Just our friends. I invited five. How many did you invite?” I asked Jack.

“About the same.”

“Probably only ten then,” I said. But maybe not even that.

“And it’s taking place in the basement?” Once my sisters were in school, my parents had turned the basement, which used to be a playroom, into something a wider audience could enjoy. Gone was the ball pit and slide I’d only ever heard stories about. My dad had replaced them with a couple of pinball machines and a pool table that turned into a board game table when fitted with its long wooden topper. There was a large television. There was even a kitchenette.

“Wait.” Something suddenly occurred to me. “Are you having a Valentine’s Day party here with your friends?”

“No, we’re not. We’ll be going out to dinner, though. Are the other parents okay with an adult-free party?”

“We’ll limit people to one alcoholic beverage a piece,” I said.

“Funny,” she said.

“Should I give your speech at the beginning of the party?” I asked.

“What’s my speech?” she returned.

“You know, the one about how youth is for having fun and how it’s hard to figure out who you are and what you want when you’re trying to impress someone else.” Maybe it was nerdy to like my parents and value their advice, but I really did.

She nodded. “Oh, that’s a good one. You can also include the ‘push yourself to try things out of your comfort zone’ part.”

“Like throwing a party?” I asked.

She smiled. “Like that. Have fun tonight.” She continued her walk through the kitchen. Before she reached the living room, she turned back. “Oh, there’s a cake pop on the center console of my car that I meant to bring in. If either of you want it, you can have it.”

Jack and I locked eyes then we both raced for the garage. He opened the door first but I shoved him into the frame and squeezed by him. I reached the car first but when I grabbed hold of the handle, he snaked an arm around my waist, twirled me around and deposited me behind him. I squealed but continued to try to wiggle into the open door that he was now blocking with his body.

“There’s cookies inside,” I said.

“Exactly. There are cookies inside.” His entire torso was in the car now and my head was smashed between his hip and the car door in my attempt to get inside. I could tell he was reaching for the treat, and I tried but failed to grab his arm.

“You are the biggest brat,” I said when I heard him take a bite.

“No,” he said through his mouthful, “I’m going to share.”

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I stopped struggling and when I stood, he backed out of the car and handed me half the cake pop.

“I’m surprised you didn’t eat it all in one bite,” I said, finishing it.

“You don’t know me at all,” he said.

I laughed.

A chocolate crumb clung to his bottom lip and I reached up and swiped it away. He went still, staring at me.

“What?” I asked.

He shook his head then pointed to his mouth. “Is there more?”

“Nope. You’re just a regular mess now.”

He gestured to the entire front of my shirt that was still dusted in powdered sugar.

“Yeah, I better go change.” I threw the cake pop stick at his head as I walked away.

“I shared!” he called after me.

My back was to him when I smiled. I was so lucky to have a friend like Jack.

Chapter 3

People came. Twelve to be exact. So with me and Jack, that made fourteen. We were only freshman, so most of our friend group hadn't coupled off yet. It didn't surprise me that they were looking for something to do today.

The group filled the basement decently. There was mingling around the food, where people dipped carrots into ranch while reading our pro-single signs. There was laughing by the couch where people listened to the power playlist I had curated that was now flowing through the speakers. There was even someone at the table where I had set up a game of solitaire. She was playing it. Alone.

It was going perfectly. I was standing by the couch observing the splendor of our creation, when Troy came up to me and said, "Let's play spin the bottle."

I didn't know him well. Jack and I shared most friends. But for some reason, when we got to high school, even though we'd been inseparable before, sometimes we found ourselves in different groups at lunch. He liked robotics, and I didn't. I liked musicals and he didn't. We had both joined clubs associated with those interests and found friends that didn't know one another. It felt wrong sometimes, like now, when Troy said something no friend of mine celebrating singlehood would ever say.

"We don't play games that encourage coupling off at a singles party," I said.

"Says who?" he asked.

"Says the person who is throwing this party." I jotted down the name Juliet on a yellow sticky note and stuck it to his head. Troy was handsome—a Black guy with a killer smile and smiling eyes. He wouldn't be expecting Juliet. "Try to get people to guess which famous person you are," I said.

"Am I still alive?" he asked me, catching on to the game quickly.

“Nope,” I said.

“Am I—”

“You can’t ask the same person two questions in a row.”

“Good rule.” He was a gamer, Jack had once told me, so I was sure he appreciated solid parameters to a game. He left me to go ask others while I wrote more names on papers and distributed them. Jack joined me, adding names of his own to pass out.

“Write one for me,” I said.

He nodded, wrote something then stuck the paper to my forehead with a little too much gusto.

“Ouch,” I said drily.

He cringed. “Sorry!”

“Have you been wanting to do that for a while?”

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“Smack you on the forehead?” he asked.

“Yes.”

He shrugged then laughed. “No, of course not; it really was an accident. No subconscious agenda going on.” He took me by the cheeks and kissed my forehead, right on top of the sticky note. “Better?”

I rolled my eyes and pushed him away. “Thanks, Dad.”

I wrote Jack from Titanicon a sticky note and reached up to attach it.

He jerked back. “No retaliation.”

“Give me your forehead.”

He took a resigned breath and held still. I gently placed the name right in the center.

“Great, now I feel even worse.”

“I can’t get you back when you’re expecting it.”

He laughed.

“You’ll appreciate this one, by the way” I said, pointing to his forehead. And not just because he had the same name but because when he and I had watched the movie together, Jack had said something like, If he hadn’t been so worried about Rose, he

could've found a door of his own.

"Am I real or fictional?" he asked.

"Fictional," I said. "What about me?"

"Real," he said, a smirk on his face.

I knew that smirk. "Did you write something stupid on mine? Is it someone only you'd know?"

"No, it's a good one."

We stared at each other, knowing we couldn't ask another question without asking someone else first. I could tell we both wanted to break that rule.

Troy walked by and Jack grabbed him by the arm, "Am I a guy?"

"Yes," Troy said. Then he pointed to his forehead. "Wait, am I a guy?"

"No," Jack said.

"Good to know," Troy said.

"What about me?" I asked Troy. His eyes went to my paper and then scrunched in confusion. "A girl?"

"You don't know?" I asked.

"I don't know that person."

Back to Jack I asked, “Is this someone I’ll know?”

“Yes,” he said. “Very well.”

“Do I know mine?” Jack asked.

“Yes,” I said. We stood, shoulder to shoulder, watching other people scurry around, asking questions about their mystery person.

“Are your parents going out tonight?” I asked.

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“No, my dad probably got home late.” Jack’s parents fought a lot, and I knew it bothered him. That’s why we spent more time at my house than his. “My mom most likely asked him why he didn’t bring home flowers or dinner or anything. He’ll suggest a movie and proceed to fall asleep on the couch.”

Maybe this was another reason I wanted to do this party. Because Jack didn’t need to see the same scene play out year after year at his house.

He pointed to his sticky note. “Better go ask around then.”

“Good luck.”

As he left, Sage joined me, crunching on a piece of celery. “I haven’t met him yet,” she said, waving the celery around like a wand.

“Jack? You haven’t met Jack?” I shouldn’t have been surprised. Like I said, he and I had a couple different interests and I knew Sage from Drama Club.

“I’ve seen him around with you, but no, we haven’t met. He’s cute,” she said.

I blinked. It wasn’t that I didn’t think Jack was cute. He was cute in a boyish, nerdy way. But I’d known him since we were kids, so I’d never thought of him as anything more than my best friend. The best friend I’d ever had. He was sweet and smart and funny, but there was never any sort of attraction.

“Will you introduce me?”

“Yeah, of course. But this is a singles party, we’re taking back Valentine’s Day, so don’t get any ideas.”

“I’ll save my ideas until tomorrow.”

I smiled. “Thank you.”

I wondered if Sage was Jack’s type. Neither he or I had ever had a serious romantic relationship. We often pointed out people we thought were cute, or pointed out someone we thought the other should date. And Sage was someone I would’ve picked out for Jack. She was cute: petite with short, dark hair and big brown eyes. Pretty much the opposite of me. I was tall, taller than most of the boys I knew, in fact. I had long strawberry blonde hair and gray-blue eyes.

Sage tapped her forehead where the name Maria/West Side Story was on her sticky note. “Am I from the present day?”

“No,” I said.

She looked at my note and smiled. “Who wrote that?”

“Jack. The one you think is cute.”

“He’s funny too? Even better.”

I was dying to take off my sticky note and look but I couldn’t cheat at my own game.

“This was a good idea,” she said. “This party. Are you going to do one every year?”

“I think so,” I said. “It’s nice to have choices. Not everyone wants to go to the love fest.”

“Exactly.” She looked at me expectantly, then her eyes traveled to Jack and I realized that she was waiting for the introduction.

“Come on.” I took her to where Jack was standing by one of the pinball machines watching Simon slap at the buttons, obviously not understanding the beauty of timing. I placed my hand on Jack’s arm.

“Am I annoying?” Jack asked, facing me.

I knew he was talking about the person on his forehead, but Sage let out a surprised, “Huh?”

“No, I don’t think so. You’re charming.”

“Charming...” He scrunched one eye in thought.

“But poor,” I added.

He released an indignant huff. “Poor is not the opposite of charming.”

“Just stating a fact. What about me?” I asked.

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“Only annoying sometimes. When you have inconsistent rules.”

Now I was even more confused. Who had he written? “Oh, this is Sage, by the way. She’s in Drama Club with me.”

He turned toward her. “Hi, nice to meet you. Am I in a movie?”

She finally caught on that we were talking about our forehead people. “Yes, actually. What about me?”

“Yes, but also other forms of media.”

“Other forms? Like books? Plays? Songs?”

“Yes,” he said.

“Wait, am I Cinderella?” someone called out from the couch.

“She should’ve stayed single?” someone else asked in obvious disagreement.

“Yes!” the trio of girls by the sugar cookies said.

Jack smirked at me like he thought Cinderella didn’t fit the criteria. I just raised my eyebrows at him: With a cardboard cutout option like Prince Charming, who couldn’t even recognize her without fancy clothes on, yes, she did.

The smell of melty cheese and pepperoni hit me before my dad appeared carrying

eight boxes of pizza. “Hey,” he said. “Thought you could use some real food.”

I rushed over to help him slide the boxes onto the game table. “Thanks, Dad.” Mom followed with a stack of paper plates and napkins. Our friends let out appreciative exclamations.

“You guys look nice,” I said, taking in their dressy attire. My mom wore a skirt and floral blouse. Her hair was in beachy waves and her lips were painted a rosy mauve. My dad wore some khakis and a polo. His hair was gelled and his beard was neatly trimmed.

“Thanks,” Mom said. “Also, why is my name on your forehead?”

I ripped off the sticky note and sure enough, in Jack’s scratchy handwriting was my mom’s name: Kelly Landry.

I shot Jack some narrow eyes but he wasn’t looking. “It’s just a game we’re playing,” I said to Mom.

“Guess your hero?” she asked with a wink.

“Something like that.”

“We’re heading out,” Dad said.

“You going to be okay here?” Mom asked.

I smiled. I wanted to remind her how much I did on my own. How I was basically an only child with two working parents. “Of course.”

“Good,” she said.

“Are you going to be okay out there?” I teased.

“We’ll do our best.”

“Enjoy the pizza!” Dad said to the room as they left.

The group gathered around the table, digging into the pizza boxes. I marched straight up to Jack, who was still talking to Sage by the pinball machine. I wondered what common ground they were finding. Maybe he was telling her about his favorite band. He had the animated expression on his face that always accompanied that conversation.

I held up my sticky note. “Really?”

He laughed. “It was funny.”

“My mom did not fit the criteria.”

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“What was the criteria again?” Sage asked.

“People who would’ve been better off single.”

She playfully smacked Jack’s arm like they’d been friends for ages. “Not cool,” she said. “Scarlett’s parents are great.”

“I know,” he said. “That’s why it’s a good joke.”

Troy held up an empty two-liter Dr. Pepper bottle. “I still think spin the bottle should be in play. What better way to celebrate singlehood than to kiss anyone you want? Multiple anyones.”

“No!” both Jack and I yelled at the same time.

We looked at each other and smiled.

“Fine,” Troy said. “Seven minutes in the closet then.”

He steered Jack toward the only closet in the room: a game closet by the bathroom. Jack must’ve told him we were playing that at some point. I followed, wondering if I needed to move anything to make room for a body. I opened the door only to have someone else shove me in along with Jack and shut the door behind us.

Chapter 4

I tried to open the door but obviously Troy—and whoever else was responsible for us

being in here—was also holding the door shut. There was giggling and shuffling outside as the door banged a few times against the frame.

It was very dark inside and very cramped. Not really a walk-in closet. Less than a foot of floor before the shelves, which were now digging into my back. Good thing I wasn't claustrophobic.

"I am the one who suggested this game," Jack said. "So it's only right that I ended up here, I guess."

I couldn't see him but our shoulders were smashed together in the tight space. "The alone part was the key to your suggestion."

I pressed my face to the crack of the door and yelled, "Save me a slice of pizza!"

"Your parents bought eight boxes for fourteen people," Jack said. "Pretty sure there will be plenty left. They're so proud of you for throwing a party. They never thought they'd see the day." There was a smile in his voice.

"It's pretty pathetic when your parents are cooler than you, isn't it?"

"Wouldn't know," he said. "Is it my brother?"

"What?" I asked, confused.

"The name on my forehead."

"No," I said. "Why would it be your brother?"

"Because you wish he was still single."

I gasped. One time. One! I had told Jack that his brother was hot. Because he was. And Jack was never going to let me forget it. “No, I don’t. Your brother is kind of a jerk. No offense. Besides, I told you that your person was fictional and you established he’s in a movie.”

“Oh, right. Is my movie a current one?”

“No,” I said. “Eighties? Nineties?”

He rocked back and forth on his feet. “But we’ve seen it?”

“Yes.” On one of our many movie nights.

“Is the actor who played me still relevant?”

“I mean... yes? To adults. He’s also in a Taylor Swift song.”

“Jake Gyllenhaal? Who has he played?”

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“No, not him.”

“Am I Jack? From Titanic?”

I grabbed hold of his forearm, surprised he got it. “Yes! Good job. Even though you cheated and asked me a bunch of questions in a row.”

“Pretty sure your mom told you yours.”

I laughed. “She was confused.”

“Wait... you don’t think Jack and Rose were a good couple? You think they’d have been better off single.”

“Hedied, Jack.”

I felt him shrug, his shoulder moving against mine. “But before that... they were soul mates.”

“Died,” I repeated.

“Aside from your parents... and Micah and Cassidy, of course...”

“Of course,” I said, playing along with the sarcasm of his second choice.

“Whoisyour gold standard?”

“Good question.” I searched my brain. I’d watched a lot of movies and read a lot of books and seen a lot of plays. Who was the ultimate?

“Rapunzel and Flynn Rider?” I said it as a question because I wasn’t sure that was actually my answer.

“You want to be trapped in a tower?”

“The after-tower stuff. I don’t know. I might change my answer. That’s just the first one I thought of.”

“It’s a good one,” he said.

I sighed, looking at the only light I could see, the glowing yellow strip at the bottom of the door. I’d left my phone somewhere out in the room, by the speaker, or the couch. “You have your phone for light?”

“I think it’s on top of the pinball machine.”

“Do you think they’re going to make us stay in here for a full seven minutes?”

“Troy’s probably starting a game of spin the bottle as we languish.”

“Is Troy your best friend?” I asked, curious.

“You’re my best friend.”

“Well obviously. I meant after me.”

He shrugged again. “I don’t know. I guess he’s in the mix with Simon and Mario. After you, I have to go a long way down to find someone else.”

“Same,” I said. Simon and Mario were mutual friends and I’d put them on my list as well.

The back of my calves were pressed against the lowest shelf and another one was digging into the small of my back. “If we turn sideways and sit would that be more or less comfortable?” I asked.

“I don’t know; we can try because the corner of a board game is stabbing me in the shoulder blade.”

I grabbed hold of his arm so I could feel his movements while we both shifted toward one another. My chin brushed his shoulder, or at least what I assumed was his shoulder. And then we were chest to chest. I took his elbows in my hands and he laughed and cupped mine.

“Are we going to try to sit simultaneously?” he asked.

“Yes, on the count of three.”

“One.”

“Two.”

“Three.”

It was not a smooth motion, our weights disproportioned. I tipped back. He attempted to save me, jerking me forward. My hand flew up for balance and whacked him in the face. He let out a yelp. I spewed apologies. And then somehow we were on the ground. My knees were shoved against my chest and most likely his. His knees sandwiched mine.

“Is it possible this is even less comfortable?” he asked.

“This closet was only made for seven minutes alone,” I said.

He chuckled. “Come here.” He took my feet and pulled them up and toward him, my butt sliding along the carpet. Then he placed them on the ground behind him. I was glad for the dark because suddenly my cheeks were on fire.

We were best friends. The best of best friends. We’d laid next to each other on countless couches and beds and floors for years. But I had never—never!—straddled him before.

“Better?” he asked.

After the initial shock, I could honestly say, “Yes, actually.” The fire in my cheeks was slower to accept this new position though. “What do you think of Sage, by the way?”

“Sage?” he asked.

“That cute Asian girl I introduced you to out there. She thinks you’re hot.”

“She does?” he said as if someone thinking he was attractive was an impossible occurrence.

“Yes,” I said. She probably didn’t want me to tell him that she thought he was hot but I was straddling my best friend. I needed to tell him something unrelated to our legs tangled together.

“You really think my brother is a jerk?” he asked, also a subject-evader.

Topher, his brother, was two years older. Probably at the other party happening tonight with his new girlfriend.

“I don’t like the way he talks to you.”

He treated Jack like he was a constant annoyance. Never wanted him around. And maybe Jack and I annoyed Topher when we were in elementary, but we grew up and he didn’t seem to recognize that. Okay... maybe we could still be annoying sometimes, like a couple months ago, when we kept knocking on his bedroom door and running. I smiled at the memory. It was funny. Topher could have fun if he’d just relax. He took himself way too seriously.

“You think I should stand up for myself to him?”

Sometimes Jack knew what I thought before I'd even thought it myself. My mind flashed back to shoving Micah onto the cement after his mean words directed at Jack.

"You're not a kid anymore," I said.

He took several deep breaths.

"You smell like sugar," he said, instead of responding to my statement.

"The powdered sugar bomb I set off earlier. It's probably still in my hair."

"Yeah," he said. His hands were resting on his ankles and I could feel them there, inches from my waist, the heat making my skin buzz. I could hear him breathing. Feel his chest rise with each deep intake.

Suddenly light flooded the space and I squinted against the brightness.

I couldn't see anything with my eyes stinging but I heard Troy's voice say, "This is a singles party, guys, no coupling up." As if he wasn't the one who'd shoved us in the closet together.

"Her cheeks are red," someone else said followed by laughter, which only made my cheeks more red. Jack was busy trying to untangle himself from me and I rocked back to help with the process. There was more space behind me than I had realized.

"We're going to pin the crown on the princess now," Sage said. "Do you have a blindfold?"

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I stood. “Yes, let me get it.” I avoided looking back at Jack and I wasn’t sure why.

Sage didn’t avoid him. She grabbed onto his hand and said, “I want to be first. Will you blindfold me?”

“Sure,” Jack said. I could hear the tightness in his voice. He was nervous. I shouldn’t have told him that Sage thought he was cute. Now he was going to close off, be awkward. He just needed to be himself and she’d fall for him.

The blindfold was on the television stand and I grabbed it and handed it to Jack, finally meeting his stare. He gave me the you okay? look. I nodded. Why wouldn’t I be?

“These are the crowns, everyone,” I said, holding up a stack of paper crowns. “The person who places it most accurately, wins.” I pointed to the outline of a person with an oversized head I’d drawn on the chalkboard wall where we normally kept game scores.

Jack was already tying the blindfold around Sage’s eyes and then spinning her while she giggled. As I placed a paper crown in her hand and she stumbled her way forward, people shouted directions that weren’t helpful at all. She ended up sticking the crown right where the crotch would’ve been had I drawn any details.

“Wow,” Troy said. “Save that placement for the prince.”

She took off her blindfold to inspect her handiwork. “I mean, they don’t call them the crown jewels for nothing!” she said.

I smiled and got myself a slice of pizza that was now lukewarm. I threw a party and everyone was having fun.

“You proud of yourself?” Jack asked, wandering over and taking a slice of his own.

“I am.”

“You should be.”

“We should be,” I said. “We have to throw one every year now, right? Make it bigger and better than its rival.”

“I thought you said this wasn’t a competition. You weren’t trying to stick it to Micah. That it was just an alternate choice.”

I thought about Micah’s smug, annoying face as he told Jack that his interests weren’t good enough for him, that Jack wasn’t good enough for him. “Maybe it’s just a little competition.” And I wanted to win. Bad.

Year 2

(Sophomores)

Chapter 5

“Are you trying to replace my party?”

I stood at the back of the line for the taco truck. One of the many food trucks that lined the frontage road of our school at lunch. I looked over at the questioner.

I saw her fur-lined, white snow boots first, then my eyes traveled up her white

leggings topped with a white pleated skirt. Her sweater was a Valentine's Day soft pink, and on her head was a white beanie with a pink pompom, which helped her perfect, dark curls sit right on top of her shoulders. Cassidy Dawson, the queen herself, wasn't much taller than me, but she was standing over me like some ethereal being.

I finally saw what she was holding: a paper invitation to my party. It was a single heart with a smiley face on it. Not two hearts, not a broken heart, but a fully functioning, happy single heart that deserved a day to celebrate. Okay, maybe I was expecting people to read into the symbolism too much, but that's what it stood for. I'd been handing them out all week. Not to the whole school or anything, just to people I thought would want the invite. So I was surprised to see one in Cassidy's hand. On the back was the information for the party Jack and I were throwing tonight.

"I'm not trying to replace your party," I said now. I had no problem with Cassidy aside from the fact that she was connected to Micah.

"What?" she asked.

"I'm not. We're not even in the same market," I told her. And I meant it. Getting back at Micah may have been one reason I wanted to throw the party, but it wasn't the only one. And if I was being completely honest with myself, I never thought I would actually accomplish that goal anyway. I never thought he would care. Maybe he still didn't. Maybe only Cassidy did.

"What does that mean?" she asked.

"It means that your party goers are celebrating love."

"And what are yours?"

“Singleness. No couples allowed at my party.” The line moved forward and I moved forward with it. The taco truck had decorated for the day. The crepe hearts that had been hung, fluttered, their edges furled and mishappen from the cold, causing a macabre vision of love.

“No couples allowed?” Cassidy asked.

“Right.”

She looked at the invitation again. I wondered how she got it. “Good,” she huffed. She held the heart out to me like it was a piece of garbage she no longer wanted in her possession. When I took it, she brushed her hands together with a sour expression on her face. That’s when Micah joined her, seeming to slither in out of nowhere. He hardly even looked at me. His hair was full of product and his snide face looked the same as it had in sixth grade.

“I talked to her already,” Cassidy said.

Micah looked at me. “Just because you’ve never been in love, Scar, doesn’t mean you have to make fun of the people who are.”

I recoiled, surprised by his statement. “I’m not making fun of you. I just want people on the other side of that equation to feel happy today too. Couples have dozens of celebrations all year round. We should getone.” Then the other part of his statement hit me. “You keeping track of my love life, Micah?”

“Just an educated guess.” With those words they left.

Jack was walking toward me. His gaze followed Micah and Cassidy and then he gave me his wide-eyed expression until he reached my side. “School royalty graced you with their presence? What did they want?” he asked.

Jack had changed a lot over the last year. He had grown like four inches. We’d always been about the same height before, but now I had to look up at him. His limbs,

which used to look lanky, fit his frame better, but the growth spurt had made him even thinner.

“They’re mad about this.” I held up the invitation. “And apparently well versed in my love life.”

“What love life?”

“Rude,” I said even though he was very right.

He cringed. “I didntmean for it to sound like that. But...”

“Well, that’s what Micah said too.” He may have ditched us four years ago, but apparently he was still keeping tabs.

“How would he know that?”

“We must still be squirming around in his brain somewhere, not giving him peace.”

A girl in line in front of me turned around and said, “Can I have that?”

I flipped the paper heart in my hand. “This?”

She nodded.

“Are you single?” I asked.

“Yes.”

I handed it to her.

When she turned back around, Jack chuckled under his breath. “You’re asking people that question?”

“Well, yeah... you’re not?” I asked.

“I’m using my intuition.” He paused. “I’m only asking people I know.”

I shoved his shoulder and he smiled. His hair had grown out and he’d gotten new glasses, both of which somehow made his smile seem even more smiley. I couldn’t explain it, but it did.

“Bob and Linda from Bob’s Burgers,” I said. We’d been doing this since last year. Stating our ultimate couples. They changed all the time.

“They’re a good one,” he responded. “Speaking of cool parents, do yours know that this year’s party is going to be, uh, bigger?”

“My parents have been asking me to throw another party since last year. They thought I had finally become social or something.”

“You’re pretty social.”

“Not party-throwing social though,” I said.

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“Only party-throwing-to-make-a-statement social.”

“The best kind of social.” I looked around. “Where’s Sage?” She had been hanging out with us more over the last year, but to my surprise, neither of them had made any sort of move to get together. At one point, I’d asked Jack about it and he’d said, we don’t like each other like that. I thought that was only true on one side of the equation, but whatever. Selfishly, it meant that Jack could still put on this singles party with me, not be forced to celebrate love today.

“I’m not sure,” he said.

“Is she coming tonight?”

“I think so.”

“Tell her to come early and help us set up.”

He narrowed his eyes. “Why do I have to tell her this? You talk to her too.”

I sighed. “Really? Nothing?”

“Stop trying to make that happen. You’re supposed to be champion of singlehood today. Especially after this year’s rose poem. They rhyme green grass with I’ll pass.”

“If I were in leadership, I, too, would try to make the current year’s rose poem worse than last year’s,” I said. “I saw you hiding your head in third period while they read it.”

“I couldn’t help it. Secondhand embarrassment is real,” he said.

We reached the front of the taco line and ordered, then walked back through the layer of snow toward the cafeteria. The whole school was bright today with the fresh powder that had blanketed town the night before.

“Charlie and Nick from Heartstoppers,” Jack said.

“I like them too. Hey, they started out as best friends,” I said.

He looked down at his taco, unwrapping it to take a bite. “They did.”

Chapter 6

“What are you doing home?” I asked when I walked in the front door. I paused in the entry to untie my boots and leave them to dry on the tile. I’d seen my sister’s car out front and now she sat on the couch, her phone held up in front of her like she’d been watching TikToks or reading emails or something.

“Hey, just came home for a long weekend.”

“I wouldn’t call Wednesday a weekend.”

“My Thursday class got canceled and I don’t have classes on Friday. Hence the long in my use of the word weekend. Good to see you too.”

I smiled then walked over and gave her a hug. “Hi!”

She hugged me back. My sisters and I weren’t necessarily super close. We weren’t distant, either, though. We were the something-in-between that was produced by a seven-year age gap. Evelyn was a senior in college; that’s why I was surprised to see

her. She usually didn't come home on a random weekday mid-semester.

"Did The Parents tell you I was throwing a party tonight?" I asked.

"They did. Your anti-love party?"

"Why does everyone think that? It's a pro-self-love party. Pro-singleness."

"Oh, gotcha," she said, but in a wink-wink voice like I really meant anti-love but didn't want to admit it.

"I'm pro-love," I grumbled. "Just anti-forced-celebration." And I shouldn't have had to constantly defend that.

She laughed. "Hang on to that pro-self-love attitude for the next month or so." Her eyes shot to the hallway then back to me.

I looked at the hallway too but it was empty. "Why the next month?"

"Because it's February," she said as if that answered the question.

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“O-kay,” I said. “Jack is coming in a minute, and I have so much to do.”

“Want help?”

“Yes, please,” I said. “I have decorations.”

“Jacky!” My sister said when he joined us in the basement. We were drawing designs on the chalkboard wall and filling the fridge in the kitchenette with drinks. “You got taller.”

“Evelyn,” Jack said, giving her a hug. “I didn’t know you were coming.”

“It was last minute. Ava’s coming tomorrow, too.” She looked at me for several beats then resumed drawing on the wall with her chalk. She was working on a cat—the mascot of singleness.

“She is?” I asked. “How come nobody told me?”

“You like surprises.”

“I hate surprises.”

“She does,” Jack said.

“Well, you should learn to love them. Life is full of surprises.”

“Why are you being so cryptic today?” I asked.

“Am I? I’m not trying to be.” She added a heart collar to her cat drawing.

Jack freed a bowl from the bag he was carrying. “I brought fruit.”

“Jack likes to bring health to our parties,” I said, like we’d had a dozen parties before this and not just one.

“I bring health to your life,” he said.

“What?”

“Yeah, I don’t know. It sounded better in my head.” He slid the fruit into the fridge.

“What’s new with you, Evelyn?”

“Not much. Last year of college. Then adulthood, I guess. What about you? How’s your family?”

“Same,” Jack said. They really were the same. His parents still constantly picked at one another, his brother still treated him like garbage, and he still chose to hang out with me most of the time.

I wrapped my arms around him and pulled him playfully against me. “Jack’s family is great. We had a picnic a couple weeks ago before the snow storm, we made spaghetti last night because Mom and Dad worked late, and we might ski next weekend.”

He chuckled and returned my hug. “Yes, my family is the best.”

Evelyn’s eyes darted back and forth between the two of us several times before she said, “What else do we need to do?”

I released Jack and went to the game closet, pulling open the doors. A memory of being in there last year with Jack flashed through my mind. Heat rose to my cheeks, surprising me. I ignored it and reached for the game I was looking for. “Let’s go through this box and pick out some truth cards for tonight. None to do with relationships.”

“We’re not playing the same games as last year?” Jack asked.

“Of course not,” I said. “Only subpar party-throwers do that. We are experts.”

“I think she’s been sleeping on a talent,” Jack said to Evelyn.

“A party-throwing talent?” Evelyn asked.

“Yes, it’s a skill and your sister has it.”

“I hear she’s your sister too,” Evelyn teased.

“She’s not,” Jack said quickly.

I passed him the box and pointed to the table. “No relationship cards.”

“She’s my boss,” Jack said.

Evelyn laughed.

“This one or this one?” I asked Jack, holding up two shirts. We were in my room after finishing up our prep for the party and I was trying to decide what to wear tonight.

“The blue one. You look good in blue.”

“Why thank you.” I tossed the shirts onto the chair in the corner and bowed.

“Why are you changing though?”

“I feel gross and sweaty from setting up.”

“What about me? Do I need to change? Am I gross and sweaty?”

I walked up to him and stuck my nose on his neck, inhaling. He laughed, his shoulder shooting up as if he was suddenly ticklish.

I stepped back and shrugged. “You smell like Jack.”

“Is that a good or a bad thing?”

“It’s good. It’s that green deodorant you always wear, plus those little scent balls you put in the washing machine.”

“Thatgreendeodorant?”

“It would be weirder if I knew the name.”

“Are you trying to say you’re not obsessed with me?”

“Oh, no. I definitely am.” I tilted my head to the side. “What about me? Smell me now?”

“I’m not going to smell you. Not after you told me you’re gross and sweaty.”

I stuck one arm in the air, exposing my arm pit in a threatening fashion.

“Don’t,” he said, backing up. The bed was behind him though. It hit the back of the knees, forcing him to a sit.

When I reached him, he took me by the waist and flung me onto the bed beside him.

I laughed and lowered my arm. “Fine. You’re safe this time.”

“Don’t pretend like I didn’t just win that.”

“Was it a game?” I asked with a smirk, rolling off the bed and to my feet. “Speaking of deodorant.” I went to my dresser, uncapped my stick of it and applied some.

“Are you nervous about tonight?” he asked. “Having more people here?”

“I don’t think so. Not yet. How are we going to know if we have a better turn out than Micah? Should we count? Should we send a spy to his party?”

“This is still about Micah?”

“He’s keeping tabs on my love life, Jack. Probably yours too. He needs to be humiliated in some way.”

“What’s that saying?” he asked. “The best revenge is living well? We should just have fun and not worry about him.”

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I narrowed my eyes, retrieving the blue shirt from the chair and taking it off its hanger. “Yeah, I don’t like that saying. I like the one that goes revenge is best served cold. It’s been four years. I think it’s cold enough.”

“Remind me not to ever get on your bad side. You can hold a grudge.”

I could hold a grudge. Especially when it came to someone hurting my friends. That, I rarely let go of. “Get out of here, I need to change.”

He walked toward the door.

“Hey Jack?”

“Yeah?”

“Don’t get on my bad side.”

He picked a scrunchie up off my dresser and flung it at my head as he left my room, heading for the basement.

Chapter 7

I walked down the hall after changing, heading back to the kitchen where I was going to retrieve the last of the snacks to take downstairs, when I heard loud voices in my parents’ room. I stopped and listened for a moment.

“This weekend is not a good one,” Mom said.

“We’re all going to be here,” Evelyn replied.

A tugging started in my chest, and I figured it was because I felt bad about eavesdropping. I knocked on the door and the voices stopped.

“Come in,” Mom said.

The door opened with a loud whine. “Hi,” I said.

My mom was in jeans and a t-shirt, her hair up in a messy bun.

I glanced from my sister to my mom. “Everything okay?”

“It’s fine,” Mom said. “You all ready?”

“Almost,” I returned. “You’re not, though.”

She seemed confused. “Do you need help?”

“No, aren’t you going to get ready to go out? For Valentine’s Day,” I added when she still wasn’t following. She and my dad always went out for Valentine’s Day.

“Oh,” she said. “No, Evelyn is in town.”

Evelyn huffed like she didn’t like that my mom wasn’t going out because of her.

“Plus, you’re having a party. It seems like there might be more kids this year. I felt like we should be here. Be responsible parents and all that.”

This time I huffed. I didn’t like that my mom was using me as an excuse either.

“We can go out next weekend,” she assured me. “It’s not a big deal.”

Evelyn crossed her arms. Maybe that’s what they’d been arguing about. Evelyn had this under control. I needed to finish up. People would start arriving any minute.

It was like my thoughts conjured the first arrival because there was a knock at the door as I came into the living room. Sage was standing on the porch when I answered. “Oh, hey, want to help me carry some food downstairs?” I asked.

“For sure.” She came inside and shed her thick jacket, hanging it on one of the hooks just inside the door. “It looks like it’s going to snow again.”

I stuck my head out the door, peering at the sky. The air bit at my cheeks and made my eyes cold. It smelled like snow, that smoky sharp smell. I shut the door while she stepped out of her boots, shoving them under the long bench against the wall.

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“Am I the first one here?” she asked, following me to the kitchen.

“Yes. Well, I mean, no, Jack is here. He came earlier to help set up. You couldn’t come earlier?”

“Was I supposed to?” she asked.

Crap. I’d forgotten I was supposed to invite her, not Jack. “No, no, you weren’t. My sister was here to help.” I handed her a few bags of chips and a large bowl, and I grabbed the rest of the cookies.

“No sign this year?” she asked, referring to the plate of cookies I held.

“It’s already downstairs.”

“Nice.”

The doorbell rang as we hit the top of the stairs. Sage reached for my plate of cookies. “I got this. You get that.”

“Thanks.”

On the porch were a group of three girls who came last year and two girls who hadn’t. “Hi, come in. Jackets here, shoes there and then head downstairs.”

As I was about to shut the door, Troy and another guy I didn’t recognize came bounding up the shoveled walkway.

“Troy, you’re here,” I said. “I thought maybe you found yourself a girlfriend in the last year.”

“You really thought that?”

“No,” I said.

He shoulder-checked me with a loud laugh and stepped inside. “We’ll both be eternally single.”

Apparently, hosting a singles party on Valentine’s Day made people assume you weren’t open to a relationship. At least, that’s the excuse I was going to use to explain why I hadn’t been asked out. And the reason I hadn’t asked anyone out? I needed to find someone I liked more than being single. I hadn’t found that person yet.

“I’m David,” Troy’s friend said, stepping inside as well.

“Hi, nice to meet you. Do you go to Lone Peak?” It definitely wasn’t the only high school around but it was where all my friends went.

“No, I go to Skyridge.”

“Oh, nice.” There were people from other schools here! That was the sign of a successful party, wasn’t it? I knew Micah’s party drew in all sorts of people though.

Troy and David disappeared downstairs and I decided to make a note for the front door, directing others to let themselves in. Then I joined the group.

Jack had already turned on my playlist and “Stronger” by Britney Spears filled the room. Jack and Sage were sitting on the long sofa, talking, and a few others stood around the counter. Troy had opened the doors leading to the backyard, like he owned

the place, and he and his friend stood on the patio. A cold stream of air flowed through the room.

Over the next hour people arrived by the handful, filling the basement and spilling onto the large patio.

I tried to get everyone's attention, but it was nearly impossible. Jack appeared at my side, turning off the music. Probably a good call. Then he whistled with his fingers. Everyone quieted down.

"I didn't know you could whistle like that?" I said under my breath.

"There are some things you don't know about me. I'm very deep."

I smiled and he went back to the couch where he'd been sitting with Sage.

I raised my hand. "Okay, everyone, we're going to play a game of—"

"Spin the bottle?" Troy yelled.

I rolled my eyes in his direction. "Still no."

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A couple people actually groaned as if disappointed. Was that a more popular game than I realized?

“No, we’re going to play a game of truth,” I held up the stack of cards that Jack had handpicked earlier.

“Truth or dare?” someone asked.

“Just truth.” I drew a card from the stack. “For example, Jack will start. What did the last text message you sent say?”

“Uh... I don’t remember,” he said.

“That’s why you get your phone out and read it,” I said.

He was giving his don’t make me do this look but I wasn’t sure why. How embarrassing could a text sent by Jack be? He was a very mild texter. Sometimes he’d text more than three words; most of the time he didn’t. Jack was the kind of person who opened up when face-to-face, but whose digital interactions were very dry.

But it was obvious he didn’t want to do it so I said, “I’ll go first,” and looked at my phone. “The last text I sent was to Jack and it says: Get your butt over here, you’re late.” I could see his response to me right below that. It said: On my way. Why couldn’t he read that out loud? He’d obviously sent another text, to someone else. I wondered who.

“Boring!” Troy said. “We want to know what Jack’s last text said. The people must know!”

A couple whoops of agreement followed his demand.

“Give me a truth!” Sage said from where she sat next to Jack. Was she saving him? Had his last text been to her? A text he didn’t want everyone to hear?

My throat tightened at that thought and I didn’t know why. I cleared it, then flipped over another card. “What’s something you would do if you knew there were no consequences?”

“Kill Troy?” Sage said and everyone laughed.

“The purge!” Troy said, not offended at all. Then Troy pointed his finger in the air. “I dare David to hide anywhere in or around this house and if we can find him in less than five minutes, he loses.”

I sighed. “We’re playing truth, Troy.” Dares were dangerous. Prone to make-out sessions and admissions of love. Not something that belonged at this party.

“But we should be playing truth or dare,” he said.

“Let him do it,” Sage said.

“It’s not a bad dare,” Jack said, taking Sage and Troy’s side. A sting of hurt zapped through me. We always took each other’s sides in public even if we didn’t always agree. Sometimes we fought it out later in private. Most of the time we agreed, though.

My skin prickled with irritation. I’d been overruled. “Okay, go hide. Don’t leave the

house or yard.”

David stood, gave us all a salute and took off.

“You have two minutes to hide!” Troy yelled.

“Don’t go in any of the bedrooms!” I called after him, thinking how my sister and parents wouldn’t appreciate a strange guy in their closets, or wherever he chose to hide. And I definitely didn’t want him in my bedroom.

Troy started a timer that he held in the air for everyone to see. When there were ten seconds left, everyone started a countdown. At zero, they ran upstairs or outside, through laughter and shouts.

A few minutes later, I found myself alone in the kitchen, looking in the pantry and cupboards for David when my dad walked in. “Sorry,” I said. “There are people all over the house.”

He smiled. “That’s kind of how parties work.”

“Is it?”

He filled a glass with ice then water.

“It’s not too late to take Mom out,” I said.

The smile slipped off his face and he glanced toward the living room where I could see the white glow of the television in an otherwise dark room. “She’s with Evelyn.”

“Is something going on with Evelyn? Is she okay?” I asked, suddenly worried.

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“Did she say something?” he returned.

That didn’t answer my question at all. In fact, it worried me more. “No.”

He placed his hand on my head then pulled me into a quick hug. He wasn’t exactly a hugger so that wasn’t a comforting gesture. “It’s fine. Everything is fine,” he said.

Someone shouted from the other side of the house. “Found him!”

Dad looked over. “Go be a hostess and try not to worry so much.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “Too late, but yeah...” A group of people passed us, David corralled in the middle, laughing as they herded him back downstairs.

When we were all crowded into the basement again, David said, “I get to dare someone now, right? Since I got the last dare.”

Jack gave me a look like he was asking for permission. When I didn’t say anything, he said, “Yes. You do.”

“I dare Troy to go sit in the neighbor’s hot tub. I saw they had one when I was looking for a hiding place.”

“Oh, I don’t—” I started to say when the group yelled, “Yes! Do it!”

Troy was already stripping off his shirt and jeans.

He burst through the back door and went running toward the neighbor's patio. We lived on an acre, and so did our neighbors. Our backyards weren't fenced in, so each property flowed to the next seamlessly. Snow blanketed the ground, and Troy's footprints made a zigzagging dark trail through the white, the off-kilter path representing him well.

Our neighbors, the Stillers, a sweet older couple, often let us borrow their hot tub. They would either think this was funny or call the police. It could honestly go either way.

"He's such a goof," Sage said from where a bunch of us stood on the dry cement, watching him. Some people had followed him over. I wasn't even sure the hot tub was heated. We always gave them a head's up when we were coming.

I could hear the splash and yelp from where we stood, echoing in the otherwise quiet night. "I'll go get him a towel," I said.

I climbed the stairs on my way to the linen closet.

"I told her nothing," Evelyn said, her voice tight.

"Good, because we talked about this," Dad said.

"You talked about this. I listened."

I tried to stay put this time, not caring that I was eavesdropping. I needed to know what was going on.

"Evelyn," Dad said.

"I know, I know. Tomorrow. I told you I'd wait. I will."

And then they were quiet. By the time I climbed the remaining stairs and reached the closet they were gone, like I'd just imagined the whole thing. I knew I hadn't and yet my body shook like I'd just had an otherworldly experience. A haunting.

I grabbed a towel—then a stack of them, certain more people had joined Troy in the venture—then I took them downstairs.

“That was refreshing,” Troy said when he came back, taking a towel off the stack I held. A drop of water hit my cheek with his action. “My turn! I dare the hosts of the party to sit in the closet for seven minutes!” He pointed to me, then Jack, who was inside the house.

The group cheered again.

“We did that last time,” I said on a sigh.

“And it was very entertaining,” he said.

Once again, I found I had very little control as I was pushed toward the closet. And once again, the door was shut behind us, my vision gone.

Chapter 8

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We both breathed heavily for a few moments before Jack broke the silence with “Are you mad at me?”

I was too preoccupied with the things that had happened upstairs to be mad at him. Besides, everyone seemed to enjoy the dares, so in the end, he’d been right to take Sage and Troy’s side.

“No,” I said.

“Then what’s wrong.”

“I don’t know. Something with Evelyn maybe? My parents are being weird. She’s being weird. I have no idea what’s going on.”

“And you asked them.”

“They said something about telling me tomorrow. They probably don’t want to ruin my party. If it would ruin the party, it must be bad, right?” My left shoulder was pressed against a game box. Judging by the size, probably Settlers of Catan or maybe Ticket to Ride.

“Don’t worry before you have to.”

“You’re right,” I said. “It’s fine. It will be fine.”

He brought me into a hug. Like my dad, I wasn’t much of a hugger, but I found myself relaxing against him. The shelves no longer dug into my side. But that meant

they were probably digging into his. I reached up to feel his shoulder where it met the wood.

“Doesn’t hurt,” he said, reading my mind like he always seemed to.

“What did your text say?” I asked, repositioning my hand back around his waist.

“What?”

“The one you didn’t want to read for the game.”

“I don’t remember.”

I could read him too. “You think you can lie to me? Was it to Sage?”

“Sage? No, it was to my brother.”

“Oh, were you rude?” I asked.

He released a long breath. “It wasn’t what I said, it was that I thought everyone might make me read the text that preceded it.”

“Which was?”

“Topher being Topher.”

“And you letting him.”

“Yes.”

“What did he say?”

“He called me a derogatory term, a gay slur, and I didn’t want David to think that I felt that way too.”

“Is David gay?” I asked.

“He is. He’s out; I’m not spilling his secrets or anything.”

“What was Topher on you about this time?”

“He couldn’t find something. Thought I lost it. I don’t touch his stuff.” We were still hugging and he squeezed me tighter. Tingles spread from where his hands rested on my back all the way to the top of my head. That normally didn’t happen during Jack hugs.

I took a step back, out of his hold. “How many minutes do you think it’s been?”

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“Not sure. Probably only like three. Should we sit again?”

“Because that went so well last time?”

“Back-to-back this time?”

There was talking and laughing outside the closet door. I almost said that, unlike last time, I didn't think people were paying attention. I didn't hear the heavy breathing at the crack of the door like I had the year before. We probably could've just left. Instead, I said, “Sure.”

We both turned around and I felt for his hands. I grabbed onto them as we pressed our backs together. If I thought this would feel less intimate than the hug from a minute ago, I was wrong. But this time I didn't step away. We pushed into each other, supporting our weight as we lowered ourselves to the ground. It went perfectly and now we sat, still glued together. Every breath he took moved along my spine.

“People seem to be having fun,” I said.

“They do. Probably way more fun than the people at Micah's party are having.”

I laughed. “Exactly. Valentine's Day is for singles.”

There was a smile in his voice when he asked, “What about you? Are you having fun?”

“The Evelyn thing is stressing me out but I feel more relaxed now.”

“In a closet? With me?”

“Exactly. My happy place.”

He chuckled and that vibrated against me, my hands and feet seeming to tingle to life. Then he leaned his head back against mine. I matched the weight and we sat there breathing with each other.

“Scarlett?”

“Yeah?” For some reason I was breathless and that scared me more than anything that had happened tonight.

In a perfectly timed moment of déjà vu, the closet door was ripped open and light flooded our space, blinding me for a moment. I was glad Jack didn’t say whatever it was he was going to say. I didn’t need anything else to worry about tonight.

“Boooooo,” Troy said. “Not as fun as last year.”

“Then maybe you should stop locking best friends in a closet,” I said, standing up and walking out. “You’re never going to catch us doing anything.”

“You sure about that?” Troy asked and that confused me.

“It’s snowing!” someone outside called.

I was in socked feet, but I stepped outside, the air feeling good on my hot cheeks. The snow fell from the sky in fat, floating clumps. Some people ran out in it, socks and all. I stepped just outside the covered patio and looked up. The white spots against the dark sky created tunnel vision for a moment. The snow that landed on my face immediately melted and dripped down my temples and chin.

The way it cooled me seemed to clear my thoughts. I needed to know what Jack was going to say in that closet. Did it have something to do with Troy's statement? I looked around for him. He wasn't in the snow. I stepped back inside, my wet socks squishing into the carpet. I reached down and yanked them off, balling them in my hand and searching the crowd for Jack.

Our eyes met across the room. He seemed sad, or disappointed or something. I couldn't guess from this far away.

What? I mouthed, looking at the closet, then back to him, hoping he could read my mind now.

He glanced at the closet too then started walking toward me, having to work his way around several groups. I attempted to meet him halfway when I was stopped short by my sister, Ava.

I let out a squeak of surprise. "Hi."

"I heard you were a throwing a party, but I had to see it for myself. Pretty impressive." Her eyes landed on the socks in my hand.

"They got wet," I said flatly.

She gave me a half smile. "Must be a rager."

"Evelyn said you weren't coming until tomorrow."

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She nodded toward the door leading upstairs. “I was worried they were going to have the divorce talk without me.”

Jack, who was now standing behind her, must’ve heard because he released a cuss word that I rarely heard him use.

My stomach dropped to the floor.

Chapter 9

An hour later, everyone was gone. They had left, clueless about my internal crisis, thanking me and telling me how much fun they had on their way out. Telling me we’d have to get together soon. Giving me suggestions for next year’s party. I didn’t remember the specifics, just that Jack had stood by me at the door, his arm hooked in my elbow. I wondered if he was holding me up or if it just felt that way.

And then he was getting his coat. He looked down at my hand and I realized it was gripping his arm. I quickly dropped it.

“Do you want me to stay?” he asked, letting go of his jacket.

“No, it’s fine. I’ll be fine.”

“You can ask me to stay if you need me.”

“It’s okay,” I said.

“I’ll stay.”

Relief poured through me. “Okay, only if you want to.”

He gave me a soft smile. “I’ll wait in your room.” He headed down the hall.

I turned, steeling myself for what was to come.

My family all sat stoic in the living room, the television off, but nobody talking.

Ava was the first to speak. “I’m sorry for messing things up. I thought you knew.”

“I still don’t know,” I said. Probably because I refused to accept what my heart was telling me. My brain couldn’t make sense of it. And hearts were such unreliable sources. “Who’s getting a divorce? Grandma and Grandpa?” That made more sense than the alternative even though they’d been married for fifty plus years.

Evelyn gave me the seriously?look.

“Not you guys,” I said, looking between Mom and Dad. “You’re perfect.”

“Nobody is perfect,” Mom said. “Have a seat.”

I was still lingering in the doorway. I didn’t want to sit down. Sitting down would make it real. But I did anyway. I sat on the open couch cushion between my sisters. My parents sat in separate armchairs like a terrible vision of the future.

“It’s just a separation for now,” Dad said. “A trial period.”

“That’s what people always say before a divorce,” Ava said.

“Why?” I asked. “I don’t understand.”

My parents looked at each other with a sad acceptance. Mom spoke first, “We just fell out of love.”

“Then fall back into it,” I snapped. That seemed like a flimsy excuse, not good enough to destroy an entire family.

“We’re like roommates,” Dad added. “Best friends.”

“And that’s a bad thing?” I asked.

“Imagine being married to Jack,” Evelyn said under her breath.

I shot her a dirty look. Whose side was she on?

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“I don’t get why you’re just giving up so fast,” I said. “Don’t you want to fight for this? You love each other.”

“Honey,” Dad said. “You have no idea how long we’ve been fighting for this. We’re tired and we deserve to be happy. We’ve waited until you were all grown.”

“I’m not all grown,” I said. They may have acted like that sometimes, but I was still here. They hadn’t finished their job yet.

“You know what I mean,” he said. “And because we respect each other we’re going to see if being apart is better or worse.”

“It will be worse,” I said, wondering why my sisters were so quiet in all this. How long had they known?

Ava reached out and placed her hand on mine and I yanked it away.

Mom stood and took a step toward me, offering me a sympathetic head tilt. “I guess we can embrace your version of Valentine’s Day.”

“Don’t.” I flew to my feet. “This isn’t a day for you.”

She reached her hand out, taking another step closer.

“No, I don’t want comfort. Comfort each other.” I pointed between her and Dad. “Not me. This isn’t over.” With those words, I fled from the living room, down the hall and to my bedroom where I shut my door and pressed my back against it.

Jack looked up from where he sat on my bed.

“No, no, no, no,” I muttered.

“Scarlett,” Jack said. He was in front of me before I uttered another word. He opened his arms and I stared at them, not wanting to accept comfort when everything was going to be fine. This had to be fine. He pulled on my crossed arms, bringing me against his chest and wrapping me up.

“I’m so sorry,” he said against my temple, holding me tight. “I’m so, so sorry.”

“This is what happens when people only celebrate love once a year. It dies a slow death.”

“Who needs love?” Jack said.

I choked on a sob I wasn’t letting out. “Love sucks.”

“Come here.” He led me to my bed where he pulled back the comforter and tucked me beneath it.

“Are you leaving?” I whispered.

He shook his head and climbed into bed beside me, pulling my back up against his front. We lay that way for a long time. If it meant I never had to leave this room again, face the reality of what had happened outside this door, I would lie this way forever.

“They’ll be fine,” I eventually said. My voice sounded flat, emotionless. “It’s just a separation. A trial period. They’ll see.”

“Remember that time we rode our bikes out behind the Edwardsons’ farm and we named all the cows?” Jack said, his voice soft in my ear.

I nodded.

“And you said your dream job was a farmer so you could wear overalls all day and ride in tractors?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“Is that still your dream job?”

“Are you trying to get my mind off what just happened?”

“Yes,” he said. “But also, I realized earlier, when you were surprised that I could whistle, that some things we know about each other are frozen in time. That we’ve grown and changed, like everyone does, but it has happened so subtly that maybe we haven’t even recognized some of those things. And that got me thinking, that the last I knew, you wanted to be a farmer.”

I knew he was trying to say something about my parents in his summary of us, but I didn’t want to hear it. “Your whistle was very impressive,” I said, gripping his forearm that was wrapped snugly around my waist. “How did you learn that?”

“YouTube,” he said.

“Really?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he said with a chuckle.

“I don’t know what I want to be anymore, but I look terrible in overalls.”

“I haven’t seen you in those in years, either.” His arm tightened around me, and hot tears pooled in my eyes. I blinked several times to keep them at bay, barely containing them. I was so glad that he’d kept whatever confession he’d almost made in the closet earlier to himself. Because right now I needed my friend and anything that risked losing that was not worth it.

I shifted, rolling toward him and burying my face in his neck. “Thanks for being my best friend.”

“Always,” he responded.

Year 3

(Juniors)

Chapter 10

I handed the girl a smashed and mangled box of candy hearts. She was sitting in her car with the window rolled down, probably waiting for whoever she was riding home with. I wasn’t even sure if she was single, but at this point, it didn’t matter. I’d been handing them out all week and I was trying to get rid of the last few I had. “Come to

my party tonight,” I said, pointing at the info written on the box.

“What happened to it?” she asked, holding it up by the corner and scrunching her nose. “Did it get run over by a truck?”

“That’s how it’s supposed to look. It’s a party celebrating singleness.”

Smashing and stomping a hundred candy heart boxes had been very cathartic. I knew how that sounded. How it made me come off. Bitter. Angry. This last year had been the worst of my life. But even so, I hadn’t lost the tiny sliver of hope I’d been clinging to that my parents’ separation would be a good thing. After all, it was still just a separation. The fact that they hadn’t made it permanent was a good sign... I thought.

Having to sit through another high school Valentine’s Day parade of roses today wasn’t helping though. It felt like even more people had gotten them this year. And this year’s poem was beyond atrocious. They rhymed fatal attraction with chemical reaction.

“Oh, you’re Scarlett,” she said. “The girl who throws the anti-love party. I was at Cassidy’s party last year and every time she heard someone was at yours she got angrier and angrier.”

“She did?” I asked. Why did that thought give me the first bit of excitement I’d had in a while? The last month I’d spent planning the party for tonight was the only thing bringing me any sort of purpose. “What about Micah?”

“He always has a sour face.”

“True. Oh.” I pointed to the invitation. “And it’s not anti-love. It’s pro-singleness.”

“I have a boyfriend.”

“Why?” I said. Okay, maybe I was teetering on the edge of the anti-love pit. “I mean, give it to one of your single friends?”

“Sure,” she said, throwing it onto the seat next to her. The box released a puff of powder when it landed.

“Scarlett!” I heard my name called across the parking lot and looked around, unable to find the source.

The girl I’d been talking to started her car and I walked around the front of mine to the driver’s side. That’s when I saw Jack heading my way from the school, his hand up in a wave.

I smiled. He was my only source of joy these days, it felt like, and I knew that was a lot to put on a person, so I tried to keep that to myself. Of course, he knew he was my best friend, but he didn’t need to know that without him I would be miserable far more often than I was. Okay, maybe he already knew that too.

“Hey,” he said. “We still going to get supplies for the party?”

“Yes.” I unlocked the doors with my key fob and he climbed in. We’d both gotten our licenses in the last year but I had a car and he didn’t so we carpooled to school and pretty much anywhere else we wanted to go.

“Sage asked me to go to the party tonight as her date,” Jack said as I started the car.

“To Micah and Cassidy’s party?” I joined the line of vehicles exiting the parking lot.

“No ours,” he said.

“Well, I hope you told her no.”

“I told her that I’d talk to you.”

“Why would you tell her that? This is a singles party. Besides, I thought you guys broke up.” They’d gotten together about six months ago and broke up two months later, both claiming that the anticipation of being together was more fun than actually being together or something like that.

“I was thinking about giving her a second chance.”

“You were?” I asked. Proof that second chances were a thing. The tiny flicker of hope grew in my chest.

“Do you think I should?”

“Probably, but tell her that second chances should start the day after Valentine’s Day.” Today, people were skipping around giving out cheap stuffed animals and even cheaper chocolate, making love feel worthless. “Don’t hate me.”

“I don’t hate you,” he said.

“Don’t be irritated with me. Tomorrow is a better day.” Today was the one-year anniversary of my parents’ separation. Today was hard for a lot of reasons.

“You know you can talk about it,” he said. “Get it out. Ask for what you need.”

“I talk about it.”

“You don’t. You never do.”

“But you know how I feel, and that helps,” I said.

He just offered me a grimace, as if to say that wasn’t the same thing.

“That girl is checking you out,” I said, pointing to the girl giving him a long stare as she weaved between parked cars. We were still waiting to exit. It took forever to get out of the parking lot after school. “Maybe you can ask her out for tomorrow too.” That came out snarkier than I meant for it to.

Jack had filled out a lot this year. He’d kept his hair long and updated his glasses again. I caught girls giving him double takes in the hall all the time. I wanted to scream,he still hunts Pokémon sometimes!

He gave me one of his head tilts, thinking.

“What?” I asked.

“It’s just... are you... never mind.”

“What?”

“Are you moving forward?” He pointed to the car length of space in front of me.

That wasn’t what he was going to say but I inched forward anyway and shut my mouth because there were a lot of mixed emotions swirling inside of me when it came to Jack, and I refused to acknowledge any of them right now; not today.

“I thought we were going to the store,” Jack said.

I slowed the car as we approached Cassidy's house. It was big. "I just want to see why people are still choosing their party over ours." I'd been checking out posts people had made from last year's party, but it was hard to see details from selfies.

"Because they're not single," Jack whispered. "And you're very strict about that rule."

"That's not why... well, maybe it is." I pulled along the curb across the street.

"Are you stopping?" he asked, slouching down in his seat. "Don't stop!"

"Just... just wait here." I turned off the car and reached for the door handle.

"Scarlett! What are you doing?" He pulled on the back of my shirt.

"I'm not going to knock on the front door or anything. I just want to look around back." A lot of the photos looked like they were taken outside.

"This isn't like you," he said.

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I shrugged. “I want our party to be the best.” It felt like the only thing I had right now. I needed people taking pictures at our party. Posting about our party.

I stepped out of the car and looked both ways before crossing the street. There were no cars in front of the house but they had a four-car garage so that didn’t mean nobody was home. I kept that in mind as I tried to casually make my way to the side of the house. Unlike mine, their yard was fully fenced in with white vinyl fencing. I stood on a retaining wall and was able to reach over and unlock the gate just as Jack came up behind me.

“Seriously?” he asked, making me jump.

“You scared me,” I said, swinging open the gate.

“You should be scared.”

I grabbed his hand and led him into the backyard.

“If the police come, I’m throwing you under the bus.”

“And leave me there, too,” I said.

He squeezed my hand. “Scarlett,” he said in a voice of chastisement.

“I’m just kidding.” We reached the edge of the house, and I peered around the corner. I was right; this was where the party tonight would take place. It was immaculate. There were long tables topped with pink and red heart décor. There were chaffing

dishes set out, waiting to be filled with food. In the distance I could see a fire pit, wood stacked nearby to keep it fueled. Lights were strung everywhere. “It is going to be hard to compete with this.”

“It’s not a competition,” Jack said. “Come on. Let’s go.” This time he led the way back toward the gate, holding my hand. I tried not to think about the fact that I liked it.

We’d almost made it to the car when the revving of an engine stopped us on the sidewalk. I watched in horror as Micah pulled up to the house. I quickly dropped Jack’s hand. Micah didn’t need more to gossip about.

He stepped out of the car laughing. “You’re a little early. Come back at seven.”

“Come on,” I said to Jack, not wanting to engage. I took several steps toward my car, but Jack didn’t move.

I turned to witness a stare-off between the two of them.

“Actually,” Micah said. “You better not come, you’ll feel out of place. Scarlett, you’re always welcome, though.” He wiggled his eyebrows at me.

“Maybe you should come to ours. It’s going to be way more fun than the party you have set up for forty-year-olds in the back.” I reclaimed Jack’s hand and pulled him to the car. When we were inside and driving away, I said, “Let’s have a bonfire tonight. A big one.”

Chapter 11

I studied the label on a container of frosting in the grocery store aisle. I didn’t have time to make cookies this year and I was trying to decide if I could live with the

store-bought alternatives. It had taken Jack several minutes to speak to me again after coming face-to-face with Micah. When he did, he'd said, "Can we agree that in the future, we won't be breaking into yards? Especially the yards of our enemies?"

I could tell he was half-joking, half-serious with that comment, but I'd said, "Only if the need arises again."

"Darcy and Elizabeth Bennett," Jack said now.

I plopped the frosting into our cart, knowing sacrifices in food quality had to be made in the interest of time. After seeing that yard, decorating had to take precedence. "I guess by the end."

"Luke and Lorelei?" he asked.

"They were soooo grumpy. Too grumpy."

He let out a frustrated sigh. "Your past Valentine's Day parties may have been celebrating singleness, but I think you've rounded the corner to anti-love now."

"No way," I insisted, even though I had admitted that very thing to myself not an hour ago. I didn't want it to be true. I was clinging to my flame of hope so hard I was choking it.

"The bloody cookies you plan to make and the game of pin the knife on the heart would like to take the stand to testify."

I added a second tub of frosting to our basket that already contained Jack's vegetable tray, heart-shaped sugar cookies, bags of chips, and various other supplies we'd gathered on our walk through the store.

“Scarlett,” he said.

I stopped pushing the cart and looked at him.

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“Name an iconic couple. You haven’t all year. It’s only been me. In fact, you get this disgusted look on your face every time I say an iconic couple.”

“I do not.”

“You do.”

“Romeo and Juliet,” I spit out.

He shook his head. “They both die in the end. They were on your better off single list the first year.”

“Were they?” I stared into his warm hazel eyes. They were so familiar and so comforting and I really could stare at them all day. I took a deep breath. “You and me.”

“What?” he asked, going still.

“We’re a pretty epic couple.”

He lowered his brow in curiosity. “What do you mean...?”

“Couples don’t always have to be in love to be epic, right?”

“Right,” he said and continued walking. “Are we done here? Do we need anything else?”

“I don’t think so,” I said. “Let’s make tonight epic.”

“It looks like a vampire threw up in here,” Jack said. “Is that the look you were going for?”

“It wasn’t, but I’m not mad about it.” He was right, the basement looked... bloody. Red everywhere. But not just red, dripping red. From the bloody heart decorations to drippy red frosting and bright red drinks, it was a vampire’s lair for sure. We’d also extended the party into the backyard. Strung lights, arranged patio furniture, piled wood. People would take pictures.

“I like it,” Jack said.

“Me too.” I unwrapped a package of red solo cups. “What did Sage say? About waiting until tomorrow for an actual date.”

“She said she figured that’s what you’d say.”

“Then why did she even ask?” I muttered, stacking the newly freed cups on the counter.

“What?” Jack teased. “Did you say something?”

“I said nothing.”

He stepped behind me and tickled my sides then pulled me up against him and spun around once. “That’s what I thought.”

I let out a squealing laugh and kicked my feet. Then I went quiet because he still held me and all the tension in my shoulders was seeping down my spine and to the floor. His breath in my ear had me relaxing back against him.

“It’s been a year,” I said.

He didn’t need me to explain what I meant. He nodded, his cheek moving against mine.

“I’m trying,” I said. “But today is hard.”

“I know,” he said, squeezing me tighter.

“I still believe in love,” I said, testing those words in my mouth.

“Good,” he said. “Because you’re very lovable.” I knew he meant that in the most innocent way. Like how you say a dog is lovable or a... best friend. And yet my body warmed with his words, from the top of my head all the way down to my toes.

That had been happening more and more with him over this past year and I was having a harder and harder time ignoring it.

It was scary. I couldn’t do something that would jeopardize my friendship with Jack. He was my everything. If I lost him after two months because—what was the reason that he and Sage had given?—the buildup was more fun than the actual relationship, I would lose everything.

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I stepped out of his arms with a little laugh. “Yes, I’m very lovable.” I pointed to the stairs. “I left something up there.”

“What?” he asked, seeming to know I was looking for an excuse to be away from him. To cool down.

“Your mom,” I said, rushing up the stairs.

I heard his laugh behind me and wondered if, like always, he knew exactly what just happened. If he did, would he say something? Would he tell me that he had felt nothing? That he’d stop hugging me if I was going to catch feelings? That my reactions were probably just in response to the year I’d been having anyway? I wanted none of those things to happen so avoidance was the only answer. I didn’t need another reason to hate Valentine’s Day.

His mom wasn’t at the top of the stairs, of course, but my mom was.

When my parents had separated, my mom stayed in the house. My dad moved into a little one-bedroom apartment across town that didn’t even have a room for me to stay in. Sometimes I slept on the couch, but for the most part, when we spent time together, we went out to eat or he cooked for me on that small apartment stove, and then I went home. I’d thought that having to live in an apartment alone would’ve had him reevaluating his feelings for Mom. But so far, it hadn’t.

He was thriving in that tiny space, it seemed. He’d tell me about some hike he went on. Apparently, he was a hiker now, something Mom didn’t like to do. I’d always point out that he could’ve done more things without her. Marriage wasn’t the death of

self. He'd say that priorities got in the way. I'd think, good thing you got your priorities in order now. I'd never say that last thing out loud because I wanted Dad to want to come home. There were only so many snarky things I could say in a visit before I'd drive an even bigger wedge between us.

"You ready for tonight?" Mom asked now, a smile on her face. "The food and decorations look good."

"Jack says it looks like a vampire threw up down there," I said.

She laughed.

"You're not going out tonight?" Maybe Dad had been waiting for tonight. For Valentine's Day, to make a grand gesture. It was a good day for those. The flicker in my chest grew stronger.

"No, honey," she said. "I'm not." If a grand gesture was in the works, she wouldn't know yet.

"Well, I just needed to grab the..." A stack of white napkins sat on the counter. Not the ones I bought for the party but I picked them up and held them in the air like they were exactly what I was looking for.

Instead of going back downstairs, I went to the bathroom, shut myself inside and breathed deep for a few moments.

"Hey, Scarlett," Mom said at the door. I thought maybe she was going to say something encouraging, comforting, but instead she said, "Jack's brother is at the door."

Topher and Jack couldn't have been more different. Topher was stalky and muscular

where Jack was tall and lean. Topher had light eyes to Jack's hazel and hair that looked like it belonged to a Greek god—all wavy and voluminous. Okay, they had similar hair. But Topher never smiled, and he was so negative. Always finding the worst thing to say in every situation. When Jack was around, I was relaxed, myself. With Topher I was tense, on edge. Like now at the door.

“Hey, loser,” he said. “Where’s my brother?”

“What do you need?” I asked.

“Not you,” he said, stepping past me and looking around.

“He’s downstairs,” I said, hoping this would be a quick encounter.

I followed him down.

Jack must’ve heard us coming because before we made it down, he said in his teasing voice, “Why did you run out of here?”

When Topher appeared, his smile fell from his face. Topher took in the room and barked out a laugh. “This is the infamous party? It looks like it was decorated by an eighth grader.”

Like always, Jack didn’t respond. He just patiently waited.

“Dad said he gave you money for some supplies. I’m supposed to get the change.”

“There was no change,” I said. “Don’t you have a job?”

He was nineteen now, graduated last year.

“Was I talking to you, Red?” He thought it was funny when he called me a different shade of my name.

I looked at Jack to see if he was going to say anything but he just gave me the expression that said, let it go. He was tense around his brother too. I could see it in his stiff shoulders and clenched jaw.

Topher walked over to the counter and picked up a cookie, taking a bite. “You have nothing?” he asked, spitting crumbs.

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Jack reached into his pocket and pulled out two one-dollar bills. Topher snatched them from him and left without another word.

“Don’t say it,” Jack said to me after we listened to him stomp up the stairs and let himself out the front door.

“How do you know what I was going to say?” I asked.

“I should stand up to him.”

“That’s not what I was going to say,” I said, even though that had been my first thought.

He sighed, looking defeated. “What were you going to say?”

“I was going to say, how are you so sweet when you have to live with that?”

“Sweet?” he asked like it was a bad thing.

“Such a good guy,” I said.

“A good guy?” he asked, like that was worse.

“What’s wrong with being a good guy?”

“Nothing,” he groaned.

Just when I thought I could read Jack like a book, he did things like this and I was left utterly confused.

Chapter 12

“Did you bring a date to my party?” I asked, walking up to where Troy was sitting outside on one of the logs Jack had helped me move earlier to form a seating area. Like I’d anticipated, the outdoor area was more popular than inside this year.

“I would never,” he said in an exaggerated denial. I narrowed my eyes at him.

“This is Laney,” he said, nodding to the girl sitting next to him.

“Nice to meet you,” I said. “Pretend like you’re not together tonight or my reputation will be ruined.”

“Or you could find yourself a guy and turn this into a co-ed party,” he said.

“It’s already co-ed,” I said.

“I meant co-ed as in both singles and couples.”

“That’s not what co-ed means, but I’ll accept your definition.”

“We started off at Cassidy’s party,” Laney said.

My eyes went wide. “Traitor!” I said, shoving Troy’s arm.

“You don’t accept couples,” he whined.

“And then?” I asked, curious how they ended up here.

She shrugged. "People were posting funny, bloody pictures and Troy said yours was better."

"Really?" I asked.

"What can I say?" Troy said. "You've grown on me."

"Plus," Laney added. "Something weird was going on with Micah and Cassidy. It got awkward."

“For real?” I asked. “What?”

“I’m not sure.”

Jack walked over, and my whole body buzzed to life when he leaned over and in my ear said, “Should we start the fire?”

I swallowed and nodded my head. “Yes, we should. Do you need help?”

“No, I got it.” He squeezed my arm and then was gone.

“I thought you said this was a singles party,” Laney said. “But you guys are allowed to be together?”

“We’re not together,” I said quickly.

She raised her eyebrows like that fact surprised her.

Troy chuckled. “He wishes.”

“What?” I asked, my heart racing.

“Nothing,” he said.

“No, what did you say?”

“He wishes?” Laney said. “That’s what I heard. Does he like her?”

“We’re best friends,” I said. Jack was the person who, above anyone, had been there for me unconditionally. How could I find out if we had something beyond friendship without the risk of changing everything? And did I want to? Maybe my parents had gotten it all wrong though—their reasons for separating. Maybe friendship was the best thing to have in love. The only way to keep it strong.

Troy just raised his hands in surrender like he’d said too much. Had Jack said something to him? I watched Jack pour some fuel on the wood across the yard. My throat tightened. His once awkward gait had become more confident. Was he noticing things about me he hadn’t before? Was he, too, keeping these things to himself for fear of ruining everything?

“He’s giving Sage a second chance,” I said. I couldn’t forget that.

“Is he?” Troy asked like this was the first he’d ever heard of it. Then he held up a box of matches. “He might need these.”

“How did you get those?” I asked, then saw Jack pat his pockets and turn a circle, looking at the ground.

Troy gestured to the empty spot on the log next to him. “He left them here earlier.” He extended them out to me.

I took them. “Maybe we should play spin the bottle tonight.” The words rushed out of my mouth.

Troy jumped up in excitement. “For real?” Then he followed my gaze to Jack. “For real for real?”

“Don’t make it so obvious,” I said. “And I didn’t suggest it.”

He pretended to zip his mouth shut.

Was I going to kiss my best friend tonight? On the day we'd dedicated to celebrating singlehood? In the year I'd decided that love might be the biggest disappointment of all? In front of everyone?

I walked across the yard. Why did I suddenly feel nervous? This was Jack. Maybe because I didn't trust anything happening inside of me right now.

I stepped up behind him. He had his phone flashlight on and was shining it on the ground.

"Did you lose something?" I asked.

"Yeah, I—" He stopped when he looked up and saw the matches sitting atop my extended palm. "Where were they?"

"Back by Troy."

He reached for them and I closed my hand around the box before he could grab it. He pulled his hand back and I opened mine again. He, once again, reached for the box and I closed my hand. His brows went down and he met my eyes.

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A slow smile spread across his face when he noticed mine. “Why are you being a punk?” he asked.

“Because Iama punk.”

“Can’t argue there.”

I play punched him on the arm and then handed him the matches. He took them, but in the process, closed his hand around mine, his eyes still intent on me.

“Please don’t set yourself on fire,” I whispered.

“That was my plan, but I guess I won’t anymore.” He finally released my hand. Then he lit a match and threw it on the logs. Nothing happened. He repeated the process until some of the pine needles and kindling toward the middle caught fire. With a little time and some strategic jabbing with a long stick, the fire grew. And like moths to flames, people began to gather around it. Jack and I continued to stand side by side, my body warmed by the flames, or maybe by his closeness. Either way, it felt nice.

“What’s he doing here?” Jack asked. An hour had passed. We’d eaten, pinned knives on hearts, and told dating horror stories around the fire. I had no horror stories to tell. I’d been on a total of two dates in my high school career. One was with a guy who asked me to the school play last year. It was unmemorable—both the date and the play. The second was right after my parents’ separation. I’d marched up to Cooper Morris, a guy I’d told Jack was cute a handful of times and asked him out. We’d gotten greasy burgers and drunk way too much soda, but he didn’t initiate a second

date.

“Who?” I asked, turning to follow Jack’s gaze to the patio doors. The smoke from the fire seemed to be blowing directly into my face now. I took several steps closer to the house but the only person I saw coming outside was Sage. My heart sank. I thought she had opted out of my party when I told her she couldn’t come as Jack’s date. Apparently not.

“This is not a date,” she said loudly as she hugged Jack. He hugged her back. I averted my gaze, trying not to register the stab of jealousy that shot through me.

That’s when I saw who Jack must’ve really been talking about, through the smoke: Micah. I walked over to him fast. People were greeting him as if he was a celebrity, patting him on the back and telling him how happy they were to see him.

When he saw me, he said, “So this is the party?”

What was he doing here? He had to know my invite earlier had been a joke.

“Singles only,” I said.

“You’re in luck, Scar,” he said, using the nickname Jack had given me in elementary school. “Iamsingle.”

“Does Cassidy know?” came flying out of my mouth without much thought.

He found that amusing. “She does. Broke up with me not even an hour ago.”

Why did he seem so unfazed by this? My familiar friend, bitterness, churned to life in my stomach again at his casual delivery of this news. They had been together for four years. That’s an eternity when you’re only seventeen. Maybe he was eighteen. But

still.

“So I told her I was coming here,” he said.

“You didn’t,” I responded. The last thing I needed was Cassidy Dawson showing up at my door somehow blaming me for this. “Leave me out of this.”

“I thought this was the place where singles went to celebrate.” He threw his arm to the side, as if putting my yard on display. The movement made him stumble.

“Have you been drinking?” I asked. Maybe he wasn’t as unfazed as I thought.

“Only after I drove here,” he said and then put a finger to his lips in a shushing motion.

“Micah, not cool.”

“It’s not cool at all.” His voice caught with those words and I noticed his eyes were glassy, emotional. “Are you going to beat me up again?”

“I didn’t beat you up. It was one shove. Five years ago.”

“I should go,” he said.

“Come here.” I steered him back toward the house by his shoulders. I took him to the nearly empty sitting area, grateful that most of the party was outside this year and sat him in the corner of the couch. “You can’t leave until you sober up. I’ll get you some water.”

I grabbed a bottle from the fridge and brought it back, opening it and placing it in his hand. And even though I didn’t want to, I sat down next to him, recognizing

brokenness when I saw it.

“Do you think she’ll come here?”

“I don’t know. I guess you want her to?” I asked.

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“She broke up with me, Scar. She’s my everything. What am I supposed to do?”

I wasn’t sure which I preferred, the casual attitude of before or the close-to-tears one now. Micah wasn’t my favorite person, not when he’d hurt my real favorite person, but like Jack had told me all those years ago, he’s just insecure; let it go.

I tried to channel Jack’s forgiving nature now as I took Micah’s hand and said, “You’ll be fine. Whatever happens, you can handle it.”

His eyes went to our hands, and his thumb traced a pattern across my knuckles. Was he flirting with me in the midst of his breakdown? Or was he a little tipsy and heartbroken and wasn’t thinking? I chose to believe the latter.

That’s probably not what Jack believed when, from behind me, I heard him say, “What are you doing here, Micah?”

I quickly took my hand back and turned in my seat. Jack and Sage stood there, staring. Sage curious, Jack fuming. I’d never really seen Jack fuming before, and it seemed to be directed at me, not Micah.

“Jack-Jack,” Micah said. “You actually speak. But you still haven’t locked this one down?” He put a hand on my knee.

I pushed it off. “That’s gross, Micah. Don’t say stuff like that.”

“The thought of being with Jack is gross?”

“You know what I meant,” I said. His word choice was gross, saying a person could belocked down.

“I don’t think I do.”

“I heard you and Cassidy broke up. Is that true?” Sage asked.

“It is. Which is why I’m here, right Scar?”

At that moment, Troy walked inside with a group of about fifteen people. He held up an empty two liter. “Hey, Scarlett. How about a game of spin the bottle?”

Chapter 13

“Seriously, Troy?” Jack said. “We’re not playing spin the bottle. How many times does she—”

“I’m game,” I blurted even though this had now probably become the worst idea ever. Apparently, there was still hope left somewhere in me that this could give me the answers I needed about me and Jack without ruining everything.

The look Jack shot me after my outburst made me think this was pointless, though.

The group Troy brought in—mostly people who had been coming to our party since the beginning—cheered.

“Good choice,” Troy said, shifting the coffee table in front of the couch so it was perfectly centered in the semicircle of seats. And then people sat. Too many for the space, smooshing me against Micah’s side. People even sat on the floor, in front of the television stand, to create a true circle.

Jack didn't sit. His eyes shot between me and Micah and then he looked at Sage and they turned to walk away. I started to panic when Troy hopped up, grabbed Jack by the arm and directed him into the circle. "Oh no you don't. You have to play."

I could've hugged Troy right now. Sage followed. Not as ideal.

It wasn't until Troy handed me the empty two-liter saying, "Host first," that I really thought about the logistics of this game. What were the odds that this landed on Jack? What were the odds that it landed on me again after this first spin?

I should've told Troy to shove us in the closet again. But then the kiss would have to be purposeful; I couldn't use the excuse that a game made me do it. I took a deep breath. This was still the best option.

I placed the bottle on the coffee table and spun. It turned quickly at first, nearly spinning off the table. Was there a way I could make it stop when I wanted it to without being obvious? My eyes darted to Jack who was sitting on the floor in front of the love seat. He was still fuming. I wanted to go hug him, tell him I was sorry for agreeing to this game. Tell him why I had agreed, but I was terrified. I'd already relied on him so much this year. Would this revelation be the one that drove him away?

The bottle slowed to a stop and I followed the line from the cap to the person. It was a girl I'd never met before.

She laughed. "Come get it."

I chuckled and walked to her, placing a small peck on her lips, then went back to my empty seat. Micah pulled me down by the arm, like we were now a couple or something. I sat but tugged my arm away from him. "I know how to sit," I said under my breath.

He laughed. “You always were stubborn.”

The girl I’d kissed got up and took her turn with the bottle. And so it went, on and on. Oohs and ahhs sounded after each bottle stop. More after each kiss. And the game became monotonous. Or maybe it just became that way to me because I wanted... needed... a certain outcome and it wasn’t happening. Everyone else seemed to be enjoying themselves.

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Many more spins and kisses later and the bottle teetered to a stop on Jack. My breath stopped in my throat as I watched one of my friends, Lydia, smile and walk her way to him. Even though everyone had been keeping the kisses pretty tame, I looked away when their lips met.

And then it was Jack's turn.

I watched his shoulders rise and fall as he put the bottle on the table and spun it. It was a perfect spin, the bottle staying centered on the table as it made its rotations. I watched it, unblinking, until my eyes watered. Then I blinked the blur away. Finally, the bottle was slowing, stopping. And I caught my breath when I realized where it was pointing, straight to me.

Someone let out a little moan of disappointment. Sage? I wasn't sure, I didn't look away. Jack in all his tall, perfect hair, beautiful eyes glory, looked my way. Then he was moving toward me, his confidence carrying him. I wanted to kiss him, I realized. And not just to see what it would feel like, but because I liked him. As more than a friend.

He reached the couch where I sat, sandwiched between Micah and a girl I didn't really know. I still hadn't released my breath. The air in my lungs was burning now and I let it out slowly as he leaned forward. I waited for his lips to meet mine but then I heard the girl on my right giggle and my eyes flew open. I hadn't realized I'd closed them.

Jack's lips were on hers.

My eyes blurred and my lungs were on fire again. For a different reason this time.

Then he straightened up, not even looking at me, and walked back to his place on the carpet. Troy let out a loud disappointed grunt. Sage, hooked her arm through Jack's and laid her head on his shoulder, obviously happy about that development. I just sat there and stared at the bottle that was still, obvious to everyone in the room, pointing straight at me. I tried not to cry.

It was fine. That was my answer, I told myself. I wanted to know how he felt about me and he let me know, loud and clear. I wasn't going to let this ruin things. He was still my best friend, and I should've been grateful that he'd let me know in a subtle way how he felt. Well, subtle in that now the whole room knew. I tried not to let the embarrassment cloud my thinking. I was grateful I knew. I just had to tell my stinging eyes and my aching chest that.

The girl next to me, who Jack had kissed, got up, and as she went to take her turn, I hopped up as well, mumbling something about using the bathroom. At least I thought that's what I said.

I found my mom upstairs in the living room and sat next to her. I just needed a minute. Needed someone to tell me everything was going to be okay.

"I'm fine," she said.

"What?"

"Go back to your party, you don't need to worry about me."

That's when I saw the large manila envelope sitting on the coffee table, papers on top and a pen nearby. "Is that...?" It was divorce papers. I didn't need to say the words out loud.

She let out a breathy laugh. “On Valentine’s Day and everything.”

I swallowed through the lump in my throat. That was his idea of a grand gesture? “I’m sorry.”

“I told you, I’m fine. I mean it. It’s for the better. He went on a date tonight. Now I can start dating.”

He went on a date tonight and told my mom about it? I held in my rage. “Right,” I said. “Glad you’re fine. Love you.”

Once again, I fled. I just wanted my best friend. Not the guy I recently discovered I had stronger feelings for. My best friend. The one who could talk me off any ledge. He was right, I just needed to ask for help when I needed it. And I needed it right now more than ever.

Downstairs the game had dispersed and people were doing their own things again. The music seemed louder. The laughter more obnoxious. I wanted a quiet night on a couch listening to a terrible band or watching an anime. The way I spent the rest of the year. I wasn’t a party girl, and I didn’t know why I had tried to turn myself into one.

I found Jack refilling the carrot sticks at the counter. “Hey,” I said. “Can we talk upstairs?”

“I’m in the middle of something,” he said.

“Right.” I took a step closer, opening the bag of celery sticks he’d pulled out and adding a few to the tray. “My mom got her divorce papers today. Do you believe that? On Valentine’s Day.”

He sighed. “Another reason for you to hate it, right?”

“What? I don’t. I mean, I didn’t. Now, I kind of do.”

“You’ve been this mooney, bitter version of yourself for a year. You’re going to have to decide if you always want to be her, because...” He trailed off, not finishing his thought.

“No, please, go on. Because what? You hate her? You’re tired of her?”

“Yeah, maybe I’m over it.”

“I don’t believe that out of everyone in your life, you’re choosingmeto stand up to?”

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“Yep, you’re right, I’m weak and pathetic and have never stood up to anyone until now.”

I blinked, staring at him.

“It’s been a year, Scarlett. Get over it.”

“You don’t understand because you wouldn’t care if your parents got a divorce. Their marriage sucks.” My mean-spirited words hit their mark. I could see it on his face. But I didn’t care, because his words had sliced right through my heart.

We must’ve gotten loud because suddenly Troy was next to us. Micah as well. “Mommy and Daddy need a time out in the closet,” Troy said. “Micah help me.”

“Not right now, Troy,” I said as Micah practically carried me to the closet.

Next to me, Troy was doing the same to Jack, who was struggling and protesting, saying things like, “This isn’t funny,” and, “Knock it off.”

The closet door was pulled open, and just as Micah carried me inside, Jack must’ve gotten himself freed, because he pushed the door shut without him in it.

“Are you an idiot?” I heard Troy say from the outside.

Micah still had his arms tight around my waist, my toes barely touching the floor. My hands were holding a shelf in front of me so that it didn’t hit my face.

“You can put me down now,” I said.

He did and I readjusted myself as far away from him as possible. I pushed my palms into my eyes, not caring about my mascara, but hoping the act would stop the inevitable tears.

“Should we make out?” Micah asked.

“Please don’t touch me,” I said.

“What’s wrong with you?” he asked.

“Everything,” I said to the darkness. I wiped beneath my eyes, not sure if that was going to fix the racoon makeup that I was sure I’d created, but it was the best I could do. I stared up at the dark ceiling, barely keeping the tears at bay.

“The fact that Jack’s a douche?” he asked.

“No,” I said. “He’s not. I mean, tonight he kind of is, but, I don’t know...”

“He’s just jealous you were sitting next to me.”

Was that the reason he was acting like this? Had jealousy caused his outburst? Had jealousy made him shove me in a closet with our enemy? Made him kiss the girl next to me during spin the bottle? “If we’re going to talk about douches, Micah, add yourself to the list. You were so mean to him in elementary school.”

“He hasn’t let that go?”

“He has. I haven’t.”

“He obviously hasn’t if this is how he reacted to me being here. To you talking to me.”

“Either way, you should still apologize to him.”

“Yeah, maybe,” he said. “But in the meantime, do you want to pretend to kiss to make him jealous? You can put your back to the shelves.” He stepped in front of me, his back to the door and sure enough, mine pressed against the shelves. “I can put my hands here.” His hands were on either side of my head, where I assumed they were holding onto the wood or pressed against a couple games or something.

“No, Micah, I don’t. Please stop.”

The sound of the handle turning had me attempting to back up farther, but I couldn’t. Instead, like I was becoming used to, light made me temporarily unable to see. I waited to hear who had opened the door because I knew what seven minutes felt like by now and that wasn’t it.

The voice that spoke wasn’t one I was expecting. “Micah! What are you doing?”

He wasn’t expecting it either because he whirled around. “Cassidy?”

Her eyes narrowed in on me. “How dare you!”

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“I didn’t—” I started to say but she was already lunging toward me.

Micah caught her around the waist. “Babe, she means nothing to me. It’s you.”

She shoved his chest. “I hate you!”

“Please don’t hate me. You’re my world.”

And then she was kissing him, and I was still stuck in the closet, forced to watch.

I pushed by them. Jack was standing behind the couch his arms crossed, his brow dipped. Unable to control myself, I flipped him off and left the party. And then the tears came.

Year 4

(Seniors)

Chapter 14

“Scarlett! What time is your party tonight?” She was the fifth person who had asked me that question so far and I had only walked from my car to my locker.

“I’m not having one,” I responded.

“Why?” the girl asked, obviously disappointed. How could I explain to her in one sentence or less everything that had happened over the last year? I couldn’t. It was

too much. It was everything.

The day after last years' party, Jack and Sage had walked around school hand in hand. Giving their love a second chance. Apparently, eight years of friendship didn't deserve a second chance, though, because he didn't text me after I flipped him off. I didn't text him either. Because he was the one in the wrong. He'd shut me in a closet with Micah. He'd kissed the girl next to me rather than me. He was a total jerk.

He was angry over Micah! He had thought I was changing allegiances and wanted to date or kiss or do something with his mortal enemy? He didn't know me at all. It was such a petty, unfounded thing to break off an eight-year friendship over, and just thinking about it made my blood boil. Or it had in the beginning. My anger was more of a simmer now, just hanging out in the background of my life.

Maybe if one of us had swallowed our pride in the weeks that followed, we could've smoothed things over. But neither of us had. And time passed. He broke up with Sage after a couple months. Still no text from him. I got accepted to the college we'd been talking about for years. Still no text from me. And now here we were, having not spoken for an entire year.

Even just thinking about it made my eyes sting.

I'd hung out with the drama club girls at lunch. I'd actually gotten close with Laney, Troy's girlfriend. We'd do sleepovers and movie nights. We'd talk about school work and graduating. She couldn't read my mind. Maybe best friends weren't supposed to be able to do that.

"But Troy is!" I called to the girl asking about the party, and opened my locker. "Go to his!" Troy had decided to take over my tradition this year, and he was going to do an excellent job.

“Hey,” Laney said now, leaning her shoulder against the closed locker next to mine.

“Hi,” I said with a smile.

“What was that about?” she asked, nodding toward the retreating girl.

“I was telling her about Troy’s party. I should’ve told her it was co-ed.” Troy’s definition of co-ed—a party with both couples and singles. Micah and Cassidy had graduated last year, so there was no longer any competition. Not that there would be even if they hadn’t. As soon as Micah left for college, he’d dumped Cassidy. I kind of felt bad for her, but the news hadn’t surprised me at all. It was very Micah of him.

Laney gave a little chuckle, then sucked her bottom lip into her mouth and chewed on it, her nervous habit, before saying, “I have news for you, and I don’t know if I should tell you or not.”

“Is it bad news or good news?”

“I don’t know.”

I shut my locker. “Will I hear it whether you tell me or not?”

“You’ll find out for sure.”

“Then I’d rather hear it from you.”

“Troy invited Jack to the party.”

My heart stuttered in my chest and I swallowed hard. I knew Jack and Troy still hung out, but he avoided talking about it when I was around. Of course he invited Jack. Why would I think he’d choose me over him?

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“Is that good news or bad news?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” I whispered, and I didn’t. It wasn’t a lack of opportunities that had been keeping me and Jack apart; I was sure about that. There were plenty of times where we could’ve been at the same place on the same day, and either he had avoided it or I had. It wasn’t like if we had ever been in the same room at the same time our friendship would’ve been magically repaired. I didn’t even know if I wanted it to be... no, that was a lie. I did know. I wanted it to be, but I didn’t know if it was possible and I was tired of heartbreak.

Sometimes things just changed, and I had to accept that.

I’d accepted my parents’ divorce. It had taken too long. But I had. They were happy. And that made me happy.

I’d accepted that Valentine’s Day could not be a holiday for single people. And that was okay. Lovers could have their holiday, and I was done trying to commandeer it. That took me too long to accept as well. I’d become too obsessed.

I needed to accept that I’d also lost my best friend.

But maybe, maybe before accepting that, I needed to actually try to fix things. Ask him for what I needed. Tell him how he’d hurt me. Be vulnerable. That was hard for me. I’d grown up being hyper-independent. I used to think that was a strength. It took me too long to realize it was actually a weakness.

It wasn’t that I had made zero effort with Jack this last year. I’d smiled at him a

couple times in the halls if we passed each other. He'd smile back. I liked a few of his posts. He'd done the same. We may have slammed shut the metaphorical door on each other but we hadn't locked it.

"Does he know that I'm coming?" I asked.

"I think so," she said.

"And he's still going to come?"

"I think so."

That made my heart beat faster. "Should I send him a rose?"

Her eyebrows popped up.

"With a really bad poem attached."

"What message are you trying to convey? That you're in love with him or that you want to be friends again."

"Uh..." I froze.

"Because you are in love with him, right?" she asked.

I took a deep breath in through my nose. Maybe she could read my mind.

"You get this longing look in your eyes when you see him," she said. "You immediately change the subject any time I've ever brought him up. Wait, is that also why when Cooper Morris made out with you over the summer, you ghosted him the next day."

I let out a breathy laugh. “I mean, that was mostly because his kissing style is very... wet.”

She curled her lip. “Ew.”

I hooked my arm in hers as we walked toward class. “So you think a rose is the wrong call?”

“I don’t know; you haven’t answered my question.”

“What was your question again?”

“What message are you trying to convey?”

“Right. I guess I need to figure that out.” If some miracle happened, did I want things to return to exactly how they were? Could I get over the simmering anger I’d felt for a year now? Could I even hope for something more?

When my entire world fell apart

You picked up the pieces of my heart

I know it’s been a whole year

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And I've faced my greatest fear

Of living in a world without you.

"Oh wow, that's the cheesiest thing I've ever read," Laney said at lunch, handing the paper back to me and opening a bag of chips.

We sat in a corner of the cafeteria. It was cold outside today and we didn't want to sit on the courtyard steps where we normally ate.

"And terrible, right? It has to be terrible for it to be worthy of our inside joke."

I only had two more periods to buy a rose and have the leadership students deliver it to him. They were walking around the cafeteria now with their basket and their cash box, trying to drum up business. I was starting to think this was a bad idea. I wondered if I was really just chickening out, letting my fear take over.

"You might need to add a color or two," Laney said. "The school poems always have colors."

"True." I squeezed my eyes closed, thinking, then took a pen to the last two lines, scratching them out. "How about instead of the greatest fear line: the sky is no longer blue/ In this world I've been living without you." I jotted those down.

She laughed. "Yes. How are you going to finish it? It needs a call to action. Putting the ball in his court and all that."

“Let’s redo spin the bottle/ And this time you have to kiss me,” Troy said. I hadn’t thought he was listening. He’d been sitting across from us on his phone, his elbows on the table, his hands clasped around the back of his neck, but with his suggestion, he looked up.

“That doesn’t rhyme,” I said.

“Let’s have a spin the bottle redo/ And this time I want to kiss you,” he said then raised his hands in the air. “I’m a genius.”

I laughed. “You are, but I’m not going to tell him I want to kiss him in a terrible poem.”

“You want to do that face to face?” Laney asked.

“Maybe.” I put pen to paper again. “How about just, Can we have a redo/ There’s so much I need to tell you.”

“He really is an idiot,” Troy said. “I told him last year you wanted to kiss him.”

“Wait, what?”

Laney reached over the table to shove his shoulder.

“You knew too?” I asked, turning to her.

“Troy let it slip at your party before Micah showed up,” Laney said.

“He knew I wanted to kiss him before Micah showed up?” I practically screamed, then clamped my mouth shut and looked around to see if anyone had heard me. And here I’d been thinking for an entire year that Micah showing up had been the problem.

That it had made Jack jealous, or angry with me. “Then why did he think I wanted to kiss Micah?”

“Because guys are idiots,” Troy said.

I shook my head. I couldn’t believe this. “Wait, so has he been avoiding me because he was jealous over Micah or because he found out I wanted to kiss him and didn’t want me to?” Either of those reasons made my stomach hurt.

“I’m not sure,” Troy said with a shrug, not helping at all. “He liked you for a while so I would think he’d want you to kiss him.”

“All this time he knew how I felt?”

“No, he couldn’t have known the extent of it,” Laney said.

I pinched the bridge of my nose. “This is a mistake. I’m just going to get hurt, aren’t I? He had all the time in the world to talk this out with me and he didn’t.” I crumbled the piece of paper in my fist, got up, and threw it away with my half-eaten lunch. “I’m going for a walk so you two can enjoy your Valentine’s Day.”

“We’re spending it with you!” Troy yelled as I walked away. “It’s tradition now!”

Chapter 15

I was doodling in the margins of my paper during seventh period when the door swung open and the rose crew walked in. I barely glanced up, bracing myself for the horrible poem that I’d already heard six times today. It was way worse than mine. They rhymed freesiawithplease ya.

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Back on my paper, I saw that I had been drawing hearts. They stretched from the top of my page to the bottom.

“It was a mistake.” The voice had my eyes darting back to the front of the room.

Jack stood there, holding a rose and staring at me, reciting a poem. He was tall and handsome. His hair was extra voluminous today, and he was wearing new glasses that brought out his hazel eyes. His cheeks were pink from embarrassment and yet he kept speaking.

I made a lot of them.

When it came to me and you.

I expected you to read my mind,

Like you always did.

It was unfair and unaware and underhanded.

I often was

When it came to me and you.

You expected me to be brave;

I never was.

You were incessant and invincible and infectious

You often were

When it came to me and you.

We expected to never spend time apart,

But we did.

It was excruciating and exhausting and extreme.

It sometimes was,

When it came to me and you.

I expect that in the end

It will always come back to me and you.

I hope it always does.

I was biting the inside of my cheeks. I didn't realize this until a metallic taste filled my mouth. I released the grip and blinked several times because my eyes were stinging as well.

Jack walked to my desk and placed the rose in front of me. The poem attached to it was in his handwriting. I wanted to say something. Like it was supposed to be a terrible poem. Or I don't believe you read that in front of the whole class. But my lips wouldn't move. My face was numb and my limbs were frozen.

The guy in the seat next to me broke the silence with “That was way better than the other poem.”

“I’m sorry,” Jack said in a barely audible voice.

“Me too,” I said.

And then he was gone. When the door shut, I shot out of my seat.

“Sit down, Miss Landry,” Mr. Collins said. “I have a class to teach. There have already been entirely too many interruptions.”

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And because I didn't want to have to stay after school for detention, I sat down. I could talk to Jack in forty-five minutes. I picked up the rose on my desk and brought it to my nose. Never in my life would I have thought a school-bought rose would mean this much to me, but it did.

I saw what Laney meant about declaring my intentions though. Because even though Jack's poem was beautiful, I had no idea if he was asking for our friendship back or for something more. And after hearing what Troy and Laney had to say today about what Jack knew and when he knew it, I wasn't sure what I wanted, either. But we owed each other a talk, at the very least.

After school, I searched for Jack. He was nowhere. I pulled out my phone to text him and was distracted by our last set of texts from Valentine's Day a year ago. Texts I'd read many times over the last twelve months.

Jack:I nearly died of embarrassment first period. They rhymed brown with around town.

Me:Maybe it's harder to write good poetry than we realize.

Jack:The problem is they're not writing the poem to anyone in particular. They're writing it to the faceless masses. There's nothing personal about it. There's no emotion. Poetry only works when driven by emotion.

Me:I didn't realize you were a poetry critic.

Jack:It's just common sense.

Me:I don't think it is. I'm going to nominate you to write next year's poem.

Jack:And then I will never speak to you again.

It had been a joke—the never speaking to me again thing. I knew it when I'd read it the first time. But the hundred times I'd read it after that had stung. After, it felt like foreshadowing, a sign. Now, the rest of the exchange was sinking in. Poetry only works when driven by emotion, he'd said. He was obviously feeling something today.

Where did you go?I texted now.I want to talk.

Me too,he texted back almost immediately.I had to go home to let the puppy out of the crate. I promised my mom I would.

You got a puppy?Why did that revelation make me want to cry? What else had I missed in his life? It felt like everything.

My dad bought it for my mom for Valentine's Day. Crazy, right? You know my parents.

I wanted to type:Can't we talk now? Don't you want to see me now?

I just typed:Crazy.

He returned with:You're going to Troy's party tonight?

Yes.

Me too.

So that was the plan? To see each other tonight? It felt like torture. But I'd waited a

year, I could wait a few more hours.

“What is that?” Laney asked as I approached her car in the parking lot. I was digging my keys out of my pocket to unlock my car door.

She was standing at the trunk, throwing in her backpack.

I smiled and pretended to hug the rose. “My very first school-bought Valentine’s rose.”

“From who?” she asked as I joined her at her trunk. It was full of Christmas decorations we had used in the school musical.

“You still haven’t cleaned out your trunk?”

“Don’t rush me,” she said. “It gives me a hit of dopamine every time I open it and see this festive display.” She shut her trunk and pulled my hand holding the rose toward her nose, taking a long inhale.

I flipped the card attached to it, revealing the poem.

“Don’t make me read that terrible poem for the seventh time today.”

“No, it’s not the school poem.”

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Her eyes scanned the card, reading each line. “Oh,” she said when she was done. “That’s actually...”

“Amazing,” I said.

“Very,” she agreed. “Jack?”

I nodded.

“He wrote that?”

“I mean, unless he had AI do it or something, but I’m pretty sure he wrote it.”

“That boy loves you so much.”

“Does he? Is this a love poem or a friendship poem?”

“You didn’t talk to him after?” she asked, as frustrated as I felt.

“He left, and you know Mr. Collins. We’re talking tonight.”

“What are you going to say?”

“Everything... I hope.”

Chapter 16

“How was school?” Mom asked, poking her head into my room as I was getting ready for the party. I met her eyes in the mirror in front of me, capping the eyeliner in my hand. She had a nervous look on her face like she knew how hard Valentine’s Day might be for me.

Having had two major relationships in my life blow up on Valentine’s Day, maybe I really should’ve just deposited myself in bed with a blanket over my head and waited for it to pass. Maybe Fate would make this year terrible as well. Maybe she was still trying to punish me for attempting to change the meaning of the day in my small little corner of the world. It hadn’t worked anyway, so Fate needed to leave me alone.

“It was fine. Good actually. I talked to Jack.” Talked, in the loosest sense of the word. We had made contact. After a year, that felt huge.

My mom must’ve agreed because she stepped all the way into my room, her expression changing to wary hopefulness. “And?” This last year, my mom and I had grown closer. I asked for her time more often. She offered it more freely.

“And it was good. Nice. We’re going to the same party tonight where we can talk more.”

She smiled. “You’ve missed him.”

I nodded, unable able to speak. My emotions were just below the surface, threatening to spill over and ruin my makeup. “What about you? Big plans for tonight?”

“A glass of wine, a rom-com.”

“That sounds nice. Except exchange the wine for a Coke.”

“You’re not invited.” She winked.

“Rude.”

“It’s okay to be scared, but don’t let that keep you from doing things.”

“I know,” I said with a sigh. “I won’t. I have to face whatever is going to happen tonight.”

“I’m proud of you. And whatever happens, try to have fun, okay?”

I nodded and as she started to leave, I said, “Hey Mom, are you happy? Like truly happy?”

She smiled at me. “Nobody is happy all the time. But yes, kid, I’m very happy. We made the right choice.”

“I’m glad. You seem happy. So does Dad.” I still didn’t see my dad as much—not all things worked out for the better—but when I did, he seemed lighter.

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She walked over and kissed me on the top of the head. “Love you.”

“Love you too.”

“Where is your game of pin the knife on the heart?” I asked Troy with a smile. He was pouring a bottle of Sprite into some sort of fruity mixture. I’d gotten there early, thinking I could help. But that was a mistake because all I was doing was watching the door.

“That game does not exist at a co-ed party. But I have an even smaller closet than yours that you and Jack can occupy for seven minutes. Just say the word.”

“Is that why you herded us in the closet all those times? Because you knew Jack liked me?”

“Not the first time,” he said. “The first time was to be funny. And it was. But after I saw how you both reacted then yes, it became about forcing one, or both of you, to admit your feelings.”

I looked at the front door again. Did Jack still have those feelings? Or had they died a slow painful death over the last year?

“He’s not coming until seven,” Troy said, calling me out.

“I know,” I said.

But he didn’t come at seven. Or seven-thirty. He didn’t walk in until seven forty-nine.

He was wearing a deep green, long-sleeved shirt with jeans. His hair was tamed, his black framed glasses were on, and he wore a large smile as he greeted the people sitting on the couch in the living room.

I couldn't hear what he said because Troy had the music on louder than I'd ever played it at my parties. And I was sitting on the back patio where a game of ping pong was happening next to me. Like actual ping pong with paddles. No Solo cups involved.

Jack hadn't seen me back here yet, and, considering he was forty-nine minutes late, I decided to stay in my seat and wait for him to come to me. Out of the corner of my eye, I watched him weave through the crowd until he found Troy at the table playing a real-life game of Guess Who. Players would each pick an unaware person in the room and then try to guess who the others picked. I sensed there were going to be some hurt feelings at some point when someone asked something like *Is your person always taking selfies?* Or *Does your person need to get a haircut?* But it wasn't my party, so I kept those opinions to myself. I didn't have to control everything.

Jack leaned close to Troy and said something then Troy pointed my way.

I quickly averted my gaze so he didn't see me carefully watching his every move.

I smelled Jack before I saw him. He smelled exactly like he always had: like that green deodorant and those little scent balls he put in the washing machine. He sat on the arm of my chair, his leg millimeters from my hand. I shifted in my chair to look up at him.

"Hi," I said.

"Hey," he returned.

“How’s the puppy?”

“Very needy. But I made Topher stay home tonight to watch him. That’s why I was late. It was a fight.”

I nodded. He stood up to Topher. That was new. Or it could’ve been a year old; I didn’t know. That thought made my throat tighten. He dug something out of his pocket and held it in his palm where I could see it was a wadded-up piece of paper.

“What’s that?” I asked.

He meticulously unfurled it, trying not to rip it in the process. When it was mostly back to its original shape, he held it up for me to see. It was the poem I had written and thrown away earlier.

“Where did you get that?” I asked, but I already knew the answer. Either Laney or Troy had dug it out of the trash and given it to him. I already knew they were traitors.

“When did you get that?”

“Troy chucked it at my head on the way to my car after school.”

“It’s supposed to be terrible.”

A smile spread across his face. “Mission accomplished.”

“It was a joke. To make fun of the ones we hear every year.”

“I understood the joke.”

“I wrote it before I heard yours.”

“Why did it meet such a terrible end?”

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The conversation I'd had with Troy while writing the poem flashed through my mind. How I had no idea why Jack had given up on us: jealousy? Unrequited feelings?

And just like that I burst into tears.

His entire demeanor changed from playful to worried. He stood and reached for my hand. Somehow, I had the presence of mind to give it to him. He helped me stand and then led me back inside. He quickly traversed the crowded living room, blocking my body with his. I could tell he thought about stopping in the hall, but that was crowded, too. Suddenly he was pulling open a door and ushering us into a coat closet. He moved some hangers aside, but, still, we barely had enough space to stand. When he pulled the door shut behind us, we were plunged into darkness.

Tears were still streaming down my face. They were hot and salty and—I assumed—black with mascara. I was glad for the darkness. I sniffled.

He felt for my shoulders and when they were in his grip, I melted against his chest. One of his hands went to my back, pulling me close, the other cupped the back of my neck, beneath my hair. A buzzing vibrated through my body, warming me from the inside out.

“I missed you,” he said.

“I missed you too. But you shut me in a closet with Micah then didn't talk to me for a year.”

“I know. I'm sorry. I was a jerk.”

“Why?”

The groan started in his chest before I heard it escape. “Because you’d been pushing me away all year, talking about how terrible love was. I thought that maybe you were trying to tell me to back off, to give you space. I thought I was taking a hint.”

I gulped in some air. That’s not what I was expecting to hear at all.

“I tried, Scar. I tried to be there for you, but you wouldn’t let me. Your bitterness only seemed to grow, and I started to wonder if I was helping to feed it. And that night, seeing you happy with Micah, it broke me. I thought maybe I was bad for you. I just wanted you to feel happy again.”

I swallowed hard. He was right, of course. How had I not seen that this was the actual reason he had to walk away? The perfectly valid reason. I had been closed off. For a whole year. Suddenly him taking the first step to mend things with that poem felt like the wrong order. It should’ve been me.

“Why didn’t you reach out to me?” His voice was soft when he asked it.

Now I felt ridiculous. Like I was the one who didn’t know him at all. “I thought you were jealous,” I said in a small voice. “Of Micah. I thought that you thought I wanted to kiss him or be with him.”

His body went still in our embrace.

“I’m sorry, Jack. I was embarrassed when you rejected my kiss. My pride was hurt and I let that fill my head with all sorts of reasons, except the real one apparently, of why you would walk away.”

He didn’t speak, but he didn’t pull away either. A jacket hanging behind him was

brushing against my arm and the closet smelled a bit stale, but I didn't want to leave.

"You're angry." I knew this because I did know him. Better than anyone. "And you have every right to be. We should've talked. I should've talked."

"I'm not angry," he said. "Well, a little. But I'm angry at myself too, because I probably did let jealousy play a role in my decision. Not jealousy over Micah, but jealousy that I couldn't be who you needed. But you seem better now... happier?"

"I am, but only because I've worked on myself, not because you left. You leaving..." I choked on a sob.

He adjusted his hold on me, pulling me closer. "I'm not perfect and I know you aren't either, but I want to be in your life. It wasn't the same without you," he said.

I closed my eyes, new hot tears forming. Not sad tears. Happy tears. I was so relieved. "I want to be in your life, too."

His mouth was inches from my forehead, his breath tickling my skin.

I rose up on the balls of my feet, pushing my forehead against his lips.

I felt the sharp inhale he took, his chest rising against mine, rather than heard it. He didn't pull away though, just let his lips brush against my skin, once, then twice.

A curious, questioning hum escaped him, but then his hold on me tightened. This time he made the first move forward, and it wasn't to connect with my forehead. His mouth met mine with an intensity that left no question about what he wanted from this relationship, and it was definitely more than friendship. His other hand joined his first, his fingers on the back of my neck, his palms cupping my jaw.

My hands gripped the sides of his shirt. I could feel the heat radiating off of him. His mouth was soft but sure as it moved on mine. He tilted my head, which was still in his hands, so he could deepen the kiss, his lips parting, his tongue brushing along mine. A jolt of electricity shot through my body and lit my insides on fire.

I moved my hands to his back, pulling him tighter against me as my tongue explored his mouth, tasting him. Then my back was against the door, and he was against me and I knew that we'd waited too long to do this. I should've known he would know how to make every nerve ending in my body sing. He knew me better than anyone. And maybe that's what this was about: not that he knew exactly what to do with his mouth and hands, which he did, but that I felt safe with him. Known. Secure. I felt loved and that made all the difference.

His lips moved from my mouth to my cheek, and then he was hugging me again, burying his head in the crook of my neck and wrapping his arms around my waist in a tight embrace.

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“Am I fired for kissing you on Valentine’s Day?” he asked softly by my ear. “Should I have waited until tomorrow?”

I let out a breathy laugh. “No, I have let go of my obsession with changing the day. I have accepted it for what it is.”

“Consumerism?”

I laughed again. “Well, that too. But no, it’s a day to celebrate love.”

“Love?” he asked, then straightened up.

“Isn’t it?” I wanted to see his face, his expressions, but I couldn’t, and I waited, breathlessly for his words in the dark.

“Are you still talking about Valentine’s Day?” he asked.

“No,” I said.

“You love me?”

“Of course I love you,” I said.

“As more than a friend?”

“I just kissed you, Jack.”

“I kissed you.”

“And it wasn’t weird,” I said.

He laughed. “It wasn’t.”

“I really liked your poem. I didn’t know you could write poetry.”

“Only for you.”

I slid my arms around his neck. “I’m glad we get more than seven minutes in the closet this year.”

Chapter 17

“At my parties,” Troy said to the crowd in the living room. “I allow the single people in the room to play spin the bottle. Because hopefully the magic of Valentine’s Day will help you find your true love, or at least someone to make out with for the night!” He popped his eyebrows in my direction. Jack and I were sitting next to each other at the table but hadn’t touched since rejoining the group.

After several more kisses with Jack in the closet earlier, I had said, “These coats are starting to make me claustrophobic.”

“And they smell musty,” he said.

“Totally,” I said.

“Yes, let’s go see what everyone is doing.”

We didn’t move. Instead, I’d stretched up to kiss him again. He obliged, kissing me several times, then saying, “I can’t believe I can do this now.”

We hadn't talked about what we were going to do or say once we were outside the closet, we just kept a foot of space between us as we walked. Maybe wanting to keep this to ourselves for a few more minutes, knowing how our friends would react.

But with the way Troy was acting now, holding a bottle in the air, I knew he had something planned.

"Who here is single?" he asked. "No, wait," he said as people raised their hands. "We'll start small and expand the circle."

Laney was suddenly at my side, pulling me from where I sat at the table in the kitchen nook next to the living room.

"No, I don't—"

"Just trust me," she said.

I sighed but followed. After directing me to the floor by the coffee table, she got Jack, who seemed equally resigned. She guided him to the floor directly across from me. I waited for her to grab more people, but she didn't. She just handed Jack the bottle.

Everyone in the room laughed and clapped.

He gave the slightest raise of his eyebrows in my direction, asking permission. I gave the smallest nod back. He placed the bottle on the table and spun. The cap definitely didn't point at me when it stopped, but still, the room chanted, "Kiss! Kiss! Kiss!"

He crawled around the table and stopped next to me. I shifted my whole body to face him, took his cheeks in my hands and pulled him to my mouth.

A cheer erupted around us so loud that I couldn't hear anything else until he moved his mouth to my ear and whispered, "I love you. Happy Valentine's Day."